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Entrepreneur Brings Holidays on Wheels to Russia

By Roland Oliphant

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Yuri Yelashkin's mobile home at the camper-van lot in Sokolniki park. **Roland Oliphant**

When Yury Yelashkin first encountered a camper van on holiday in Germany, it seemed like a somewhat alien concept.

"You know when you see a yacht or something, and there is a mental barrier saying 'That's not for me' — you just don't associate yourself with it," he said. "Then when I tried it — it was eye opening."

Since then, he has taken his family on camper-van — or recreational-vehicle — trips all over Europe and the United States.

Smitten with vacationing on the road, three years ago he decided to bring his newfound passion to Russia, founding one of the country's first specialist caravan- and recreational-vehicle dealerships.

Since then he has sold "about 150 vehicles," and says he is seeing sales grow each year.

Yelashkin said he sells more budget models, starting from 2.3 million rubles ($73,800), than anything else, but offers luxury vehicles with prices of up to 11 million rubles.

Whether you call them mobile homes, camper vans, or recreational vehicles, the holidays on wheels that are ubiquitous in Europe and North America are still rare in Russia.

Andrei Artyukhov, president of the country's small Caravan League, says his nascent organization has no more than 1,000 members across the entire country.

"It's still quite a young sector compared to Europe or North America, but in the past two or three years we've been seeing more and more interest," he said by telephone.

The market profile is quite distinct. "If in Europe and North America typical customers are pensioners, here it is the new middle class — people in their 30s or 40s, usually looking for something they can do with the family," Yelashkin said.

But it is not just the middle classes. He said his first customer was a high-ranking government official who needed a mobile office, though he asked The Moscow Times not to name him. He claimed a string of others in government have adopted the mobile-home concept too as a work tool.

"We have all sorts in our club — from middle-class families to hunters and fishermen," Artyukhov said.

But one thing holding back the sector is the lack of the extensive networks of purpose-built campsites that provide parking places, water and waste disposal facilities that support the pastime in Europe and North America.

Seeking to lead by example, Yelashkin, who has taken his own camper as far as Germany, France, Norway and Italy, could be found last weekend living on a small lot that his company has established in Sokolniki Park.

He says another is due to be opened in Kolomna, 100 kilometers southeast of Moscow, and that the Night Wolves, Russia's largest motorcycle club, is thinking of opening one to the west of Moscow.

Artyukhov, who was involved in the opening of a new 30-space camp site in Suzdal last year, believes such infrastructure will grow to meet demand. "There is great interest in this kind of vacationing, not just from Russians — we've had huge interest from European caravanning clubs who want to come here," he said.

While acknowledging that taking a holiday on Russia's terrible roads may not appeal to some, he said it was no deterrent to the adventurous. "There's appeal to the extreme of traveling through the whole country. We may not have the same infrastructure as in Europe. But we have many more people who go camping — and they're going to be a big market for these things."

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