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Moscow Park Goes Yankee for a Day

By Matthew Luxmoore

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U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul posing with revelers at a U.S. Independence Day celebration Saturday.
Vladimir Filonov

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The Krasnaya Presnya park transformed into a slice of Americana over the weekend, with U.S. flags and hamburgers, a treasure hunt for the U.S. Constitution, and appearances by the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Elvis Presley and Mickey Mouse.

U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul — wearing arguably one of the United States' biggest contributions to the world, blue jeans — officially opened the annual U.S. Independence Day celebration Saturday afternoon alongside Andrew Somers, president of the event's organizer, the American Chamber of Commerce in Russia.

A considerable crowd then gathered to watch a much-anticipated Revolutionary War re-enactment held in a large wooded clearing alongside a bank of the Moscow River.

One of the re-enactment participants, Alexei Proshkin, said he had been taking part in similar events for more than 20 years.

“I have no particular interest in America,” he said with a broad smile. “I just love the idea of playing a part in history.”

But Americophiles were not hard to spot among the thousands of visitors. Wielding a huge star-spangled flag in one hand, Vitaly Sokur explained that he had been attending the event for the past eight years and regularly plays baseball.

Staff at the restaurant stalls also eagerly embraced the stars-and-stripes atmosphere. Clad in an outfit straight out of the “Grease” musical complete with a daring hairstyle, Oksana Veselova, marketing manager at Beverly Hills burgers, said business was going well.

Indeed, business appeared to be flourishing. After McFaul’s speech, the biggest line formed immediately outside the Beverly Hills burger stand, whose staff kept a constant flow of coin tricks going to entertain those waiting.

In the line for the drinks stand, amid screams and laughter coming from the nearby mechanical rodeo bull run by Pony Express, U.S. citizen Tricia Mack enthusiastically said she had brought two friends along to witness the festivities.

“It’s my second year here, and the music’s great as always, although I’d appreciate not having to wait so long for a mojito,” she said, laughing.

The musical acts Chas-Pik and the Moscow Ragtime Band blasted out a repertoire of cover songs from the 1980s on an impressive sound stage overlooking the food court.

The lottery stand also enjoyed a considerable amount of interest, with people vying for a pair of round-trip business-class tickets on Delta Air Lines to any U.S. destination, which constituted the top prize.

More adventurous visitors — incidentally, mainly Russians — congregated at an edge of the park for a treasure hunt for a copy of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, which the winning team found in the trunk of a vintage muscle car parked near an imposing Lenin statue.

Ambassador McFaul readily posed for photos with visitors, while Charlie Chaplin and Elvis Presley look-alikes supervised photo sessions of their own throughout the day.

Children found refuge in the enormous play area, where an ever-present Mickey Mouse slam-dunked miniature basketball hoops while joining in every ping pong game being contested. At dusk, he could be seen engaged in an intense game of magnetic darts with a rather bemused but competitive 10-year-old opponent.

Once the summer sun finally began to cease shedding light on the grounds and the supplies of corn on the cob and bamboo beer drew to an end, tired but contented revelers made their way home by car or free shuttle buses to the metro.

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