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U.S. Cultural Tip: Don't Wear a Speedo. Ever.

By Jonathan Earle

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Jimenez-Bragdon, left, in glasses, leading teens in a game of gnomes, giants and elves during an orientation program at a Moscow region sanatorium. **Jonathan Earle**

Editor's note: This is the fourth in a series. For links to the first three articles, click here.

SABUROVO, Moscow Region — The group of 35 teens linked arms and formed two parallel lines.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight!" they shouted, stamping their feet.

"Let me see your Funky Chicken!" one line of teens said.

"What did you say?!" the other replied.

Passersby stared. It's not everyday that vacationers in the Moscow region stumble across a game of "Funky Chicken," in which participants variously pretend to be the Klitschko brothers, Michael Jackson and orangutans.

"We do this so that the United States won't be as shocking as it could be," said Jason Jimenez-Bragdon, a program officer with the FLEX program.

By "this," he means the PDO, program jargon for "pre-departure orientation" — the last chance to prepare this year's crop of Russian high-school students for their year in the United States.

FLEX, which celebrates its 20th year in 2012-13, is a U.S. State Department-funded study-abroad program that sends hundreds of teens from across the former Soviet Union to the United States for one school year. The students live with American families and study at American high schools, typically in rural towns, where they will be the first Russians that many of their peers have ever met.

Some will return to Russia with cowboy hats and southern twangs. But more important, program officials hope, they'll come back empowered and inspired to improve their home communities.

"The idea of the program is to gain an understanding of American culture and diversity, to teach Americans about Russia and Russian culture, to create long-lasting relationships with American people, and to understand American civil society, especially concepts such as volunteerism and the idea that American citizens can and do act at the grassroots level to deal with societal problems," Jimenez-Bragdon said in e-mailed comments. "Also, we want them to understand and respect the concept of rule of law."

This PDO, held at a sanatorium in the Moscow region, is the final orientation program that the group of 35 students will pass through before they leave Russia over the next six weeks. A total of 244 from Russia will study in the United States this year, and The Moscow Times is following them from when they first applied last November until they return in summer 2013.

For three days last week, the 35 students attended workshops, played games and listened to program alumni discuss the peculiarities of American life. The tips formed a jarring crash course on how Americans live.

"Use deodorant," said alumna Maria Shishkina, who spent her year in Hudson, Massachusetts. "You'll stand out if you don't shower, wash your hair, and change your clothes every day."

Other things to watch out for: Girls, wear high heels only on special occasions. Boys, no Speedo bathing suits. Ever.

"Is it OK to clean your shoes?" asked Maxim Kotov, 15, who wore large, Armani glasses.

The students gasped when they heard that it was normal for birthday party guests in America to pay for themselves.

They were less shocked when Jimenez-Bragdon told them that boys might not hold open

doors or carry bags for girls. American gender roles were covered during the last orientation program, held in April. "Repetition is the mother of learning!" Jimenez-Bragdon said, quoting a Russian proverb.

Only six of the 35 finalists in this group are boys, a fact Jimenez-Bragdon attributes to nature and nurture. "Girls reach maturity earlier than boys so they're more ready to commit to something like FLEX. The bottom line is this, more girls turn out for round one testing and more of them have high scores," he said in the e-mail.

It's also worth noting that boys are traditionally encouraged to pursue science and math, while the girls are pushed toward humanities, he said.

The students shifted in their seats when the conversation turned to making American friends. Even though they're predominantly outgoing and speak English, they're still nervous about starting from scratch.

"Don't expect to be a star. Don't expect everyone to hate you," advised Maya Klisho, who studied in Snohomish, Washington. "Just be friendly. Smile."

The students are excited. They're among the 1 percent of applicants who made it into the program. More important, they're ready to go.

They've been told again and again what to expect: winter depression, limitations on Internet use, small towns, the prominence of religion in many families.

"There are lots of rules to learn," said Tamara Revva, 17, from Saransk. "Program rules, placement organization rules, home-stay family rules, school rules, U.S. rules."

The group emitted a knowing snicker every time a program maxim is spoken, the most ubiquitous being, "It's not better, it's not worse, it's just different."

"Are there fat cheerleaders?" one girl asked. Answer: Yes.

Some students are already in touch with their host families. Daria Merzlikina, 15, is headed to Nashville, Tennessee. A native of Voronezh, she acknowledged that she doesn't know anything about country music, but she was looking forward to hearing it.

The afternoon wrapped up with a game of gnomes, giants and elves — a sort of group rock-paper-scissors in which the losing team flees the victorious one.

"Gnomes kill giants, giants kill elves, and elves kill gnomes. Got it?" Jimenez-Bragdon explained.

Controlled chaos ensued.

The teens took another group picture, and then another, before dusk brought biting flies that drove them indoors.

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