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Business Booms as Mayan Apocalypse Looms

By Lena Smirnova

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Workers decorating Chillax Hostels in central Moscow on Wednesday for an end-of-the-world party with costumed extraterrestrials and free lodging. **Igor Tabakov**

The clocks are ominously counting down the few hours left remaining until the world will plunge into the Mayan scenario of the apocalypse. Fortunately, some Russians appear well set to survive the date of doom, or at the very least enjoy the pre-party.

According to some interpretations of the Mayan calendar — and contrary to the boisterous proclamations of Russian politicians, including Emergency Situations Minister Vladimir Puchkov and chief sanitary doctor Gennady Onishchenko — the world is supposed to end Friday at 10 a.m. Moscow time.

Some resourceful Russians have chosen to get on the Mayan wavelength and take advantage of the numerous offers on the end-of-the-world market.

Entrepreneurs at the company Paritel, whose tag line is "confidence in every day," are selling tickets to spend Friday in a 65-meter-deep bunker near Taganskaya metro station. Construction of Bunker-42, which is now a functioning museum, started in the 1940s under Stalin's directives, and in the 1960s it was outfitted with all the equipment needed to withstand a nuclear blast.

Guests will arrive at the bunker at 11 p.m. Thursday and stay there until 2 a.m. Saturday, said Paritel's general manager, Rinat Arslanov.

Tickets are selling for 50,000 rubles each ($1,620), although last week the prices went up to 500,000 rubles for standard customers and 1.5 million rubles for those wishing to get VIP treatment. To make up for the high price, organizers offered to return 50 percent of the ticket price if the Mayans disappoint in their calculations.

The earlier prices were a marketing maneuver, Arslanov explained. He added that most of the 80 spaces available in the bunker have already been snatched up.

Panic and Fun

Guests in the bunker are promised an apocalypse in comfort, with regular TV updates about life on the surface and a Wi-Fi connection. Security guards and doctors will also be on hand to provide support in case any of the guests' last requests get out of hand.

"There is no panic," Arslanov said to explain why doctors were invited to the bunker. "Most of the people are going there with a sense of humor, to have a good time. But yes, there are a few individuals who are serious about it."

Arslanov himself prefers not to take a stand in the debate.

"Whether the world will end or not, that question is not for me," he said.

Next door in a different compartment of the bunker, there will be a competing effort to survive the apocalypse, this time organized by the museum itself. The staff decided to hold the event in response to numerous requests from patrons, one organizer said.

Up to 300 people will descend into the bunker Thursday night for 30,000 rubles each. They will be given water and "special food packages" ranging from posh dishes to canned preserves. The food supplies would be enough to last half a year, said Nikita Lytkin, marketing coordinator at television station Moskva-24, which is helping to organize the less expensive event.

Demand for the event has been overwhelming. Museum staff declined to say how many tickets were sold, but Lytkin said Moskva-24 received more than 1,500 requests for its free ticket raffle Sunday. In the end, the computer randomly picked one man and four women.

"We think we have already made our contribution to the continuation of the human race," Lytkin said.

A team of journalists from Moskva-24 channel will broadcast live from the bunker every two hours. Their televised updates as well as apocalyptic movies will keep the guests entertained

while they wait for the end.

Not to be excluded, Russians on the surface will be able to choose from their own lineup of themed movies, including Mel Gibson's "Apocalypse" on REN TV, "2012" on STS 21 and the crime-fiction movie "Doomsday" on NTV.

Last Call

Although only a select few will retreat into the Soviet-era bunker, entrepreneurs won't abandon the remaining Muscovites to spend their final day sobbing in solitary confinement. Instead, they are using the grim occasion as a reason to add another celebration to the 2012 holiday party calendar.

"If people are determined to mark this day, we want to add positive emotions to it," said Chillax Hostels co-owner Alexei Kourinov. "This is black humor, but if the end of the world is coming, we need to celebrate it with a blast!"

Chillax Hostels, in Moscow's center, is offering travelers free night stays on Dec. 21 and Dec. 22. On these nights, administrators will throw a party complete with themed decorations and contests, such as a makeshift flood with buckets of water and the arrival of costumed extraterrestrial beings who speak in different languages.

The organizers, who expect to have at least 50 guests come to the party, allotted 15,000 rubles to finance the event and even agreed to make themselves up into zombies.

As an alternative, Muscovites can bask in "a sea of positivity and romance" at the end-of-the-world party at Base Che in the Moscow region. Party organizers are promising to provide good food, drink, music and access to a banya for up to 50 guests. Each ticket costs 1,000 rubles.

Party organizers from the Excursion Center Varyag, near Chistiye Prudy, are offering "a unique opportunity to save yourself from the apocalypse in the most shocking place in Moscow as well as to find out all 'pravda' about the end of the world," according to their coupon advertisement.

For 1,800 rubles, or 930 rubles with the discount coupon, clients get an excursion and access to "the last party in the life of the planet" at an unspecified club, where they will be served champagne, wine and fruit and entertained by foreign musicians.

Given the dire state of the economy, most people are understandably unwilling to spend much money on a party — even if it does turn out to be their last one. Online forums are teeming with suggestions on how to celebrate the occasion within a reasonable budget.

One blogger with an account on NoNaMe encouraged Russians to celebrate the end of the world at a dacha with a bonfire and a candlelight dinner of simple food and drink.

"Modest, cultural and European," was how the blogger described the recommended mood, adding that this scenario would also work for Stalinists who want to mark the Soviet leader's birthday, which coincides with the world's-end festivities.

Though spending the apocalypse boisterously among friends and family seems to be the trend this year, some are still choosing to meet the day in a more somber environment. Call centers for the Moscow-based company Spetsgeoproekt, which makes "defenses from threats of the modern world" such as private bunkers, have been flooded with requests in advance of the Mayan deadline.

The Russian business elite in Altai have been particularly keen to buy the bunkers, which are reportedly able to withstand tsunamis, earthquakes and floods, according to a local branch of the Communist Party.

Shopping with Sensibility

Millionaire or not, preparing to survive the end of the world should not be so costly. This is the principle that some companies are sticking to in their efforts to gear Russians for the final hour.

Art Studio in Novosibirsk is offering a 61 percent discount on its package of "the most needed things in case of apocalypse." The items include household soap, rope, crackers, a postcard, a detailed instruction booklet, candles, matches, an identification card, heart medicine and playing cards.

"Make your friends happy! The set 'хуже не будет' ('it can't get worse') is an original, fun and highly useful present," according to the Art Studio advertisement.

Curiously, the coupon for the set, which costs 1,500 rubles, is valid for a week after the expected apocalypse.

The Moscow-based company Tsog-Trade has another tempting offer for celebrants. It is having an end-of-the-world sale on bimetallic plates, seamless pipes and steel radiators. Free shipping of these supplies is guaranteed until Friday.

Planet Elektrichestva has also tried to help ease the burden of Russians' fatalistic preparations with a discount on its flashlights.

Even if all hope of survival is exhausted, one website offered to absolve its clients of all their sins for 500 rubles. Absolution was to be provided by Italian clergy. Paying customers would get a 100 percent guarantee of going to heaven, according to the site's administrators, although that site is no longer available.

As far as managers of Planet Fitness are concerned, the world will not end on Friday, so Russians should still get gym memberships for the following year. To make the news more bearable, they are having an end-of-the-world sale allowing people to get two gym memberships for the price of one.

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