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Vodka, Banya and Bears as Seen By Foreign Eyes

By Aliide Naylor

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Belgian-born Dieter Deswarte took a journey across Russia to direct his short film about Lada car stereotypes. **Yulia Glukhova**

When I met the collective of 25 young people who traveled across Russia in one month and had just arrived after a three-day train trip from Irkutsk, they were, understandably so, at first more preoccupied with eating dinner, washing, shaving and finishing their film edits.

These young people are documentary filmmakers from 16 countries whose mission in Russia was to unravel the reality behind the country's biggest stereotypes as part of the Cinetrain, or Kinopoezd, project, which previously took place in 2008 and 2010.

The idea for Cinetrain came from the 1930s journeys of specially equipped film trains, which traveled to the far corners of Russia on anthropological expeditions.

The filmmakers' fast-paced tour kicked off at the beginning of January. Over the course of the

month, they created seven different shorts exploring the main stereotypes people ascribe to the country and its people: Russian winters, bears, banyas, vodka, women, Lada automobiles and the Russian soul.

Alongside this impressive feat, they created a "Making Of" film to document their journey, which included trips to such faraway places as Murmansk and Olkhon Island in Lake Baikal.

While the films touch on the day-to-day lives of their subjects, the lens of stereotypes allows them to be captured with a very specific concept in mind. For example, "The Bear Question" explores a "Russian idea of a bearlike person" rather than bears themselves, director Tristan Daws said.

Each of the strong, rugged men in the film tells an old fairy tale, lending a certain childlike quality to their fierce characters.

Henri D'Armancourt, sound director of the documentary about local winters, includes this coexisting fierceness and friendliness in his perception of the Russian soul.

"One moment a man can be your friend, drinking with you, and the next, he could want to beat you up. Then he'll get you a drink and start trying to hit you again, and then offer you a cigarette ... while he's beating you up!" D'Armancourt said.

The legendary alcohol consumption in Russia is another national stereotype the filmmakers focused on.

"We didn't really want to drink so much sometimes, but sometimes you have to because you want to meet people," said Xavier Thieulin, sound director for the film about vodka.

Someone in the group quietly mentioned a serious practical problem they encountered: blackouts. That drew a loud collective laugh.

"We tried to make some days without," Thieulin said.

"On a superficial level, it's very easy to find that the stereotypes are true," said Luca Giberti, director of photography for the team that produced "The Russian Bath."

The general attitude in the group was that while the stereotypes exist for a reason, they are not necessarily applicable to everyone in the country. Pronounced differences were found between the villages and the cities.

Fyodor Druzin, director of the banya short, is from St. Petersburg yet had always wanted to go beyond the European side of his native country and explore Siberia.

There was a consensus among the group that people in the eastern villages are friendlier than those in the cities. Druzin said village residents are also more accommodating of smaller ethnic groups.

"Anthropologically, there are minute cultural differences that I catch," he said, adding that he was amazed by the efficiency and administrative competence he witnessed in Tomsk.

As foreign filmmakers, they were received with a mixture of interest and apprehension.

"They're suspicious of cameras and microphones, especially if you go to remote places," said Stefan Bookas, director of photography for "The Bear Question." "Russia has a very strong history of having, maybe, at least one person in their family being in prison. However, this is only an initial reaction, and people were happy to open up so long as the filmmakers explained clearly and thoroughly what they were doing and wanted."

The winter weather also proved to be not just a stereotype but a real challenge for the filmmakers, who were sometimes forced to shoot in temperatures below minus 20 degrees Celsius.

"I had a funny e-mail exchange with an engineer at [Carl Zeiss International] asking about how the equipment would function," Giberti said. "I was told, 'We don't know because we only tested it up to these temperatures but not beyond,' and time constraints prevented the tests they offered. It's basically anyone's guess whether something works at these temperatures."

Thanks to the cold, the filmmakers identified a feature they found to be very prevalent in the Russian soul: adaptability and endurance.

"The thing that I picked up was the survival instinct in harsh conditions," said John Craine, director of photography for "The Russian Soul."

"It's so normal," added Cristina Picchi, director of the film about winter stereotypes. "There were stories of people sinking in the lake in their car. They were just like 'Yeah, we got out.' It's just everyday life. There's a thin line between living and dying in the winter, and it's seen as so common that it's almost nonexistent."

This endurance seems to be something the crew members grasped onto and assimilated. Despite hindrances from the extreme weather, last-minute changes to their films and time constraints, there was a great deal of the Russian ***avos*** — just hoping it's going to work out — in the process, too.

The seven short documentary films will have a pre-premiere at 8 p.m. on Feb. 6 at the Multimedia Press Center at RIA-Novosti, 4 Zubovsky Bulvar. Free admission with prior registration through DOC Documentary Film Center. www.cdkino.ru.

Contact the author at artsreporter@imedia.ru

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