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Maslenitsa Is a Week, Pancakes Are Forever

By Lena Smirnova

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A hungry Muscovite devouring a sour-cream-covered blin during a Maslenitsa celebration on Red Square. **Igor Tabakov**

Get ready to butter a tower of blini, slather on the sour cream and dip them in caviar. Maslenitsa, a week of festivities and a healthy dose of gluttony, is finally upon us.

In Moscow alone, more than 500 events are planned to celebrate the Slavic folk holiday, which this year takes place from March 11 to 17. The main events are set in the city's parks, museum clusters and estates, as well as along pedestrian streets.

Maslenitsa, also called butter or pancake week, is a traditional Russian folk festival with pagan roots that celebrates the end of winter and the start of spring. Traditional activities include sleigh rides, games and family visits. The holiday culminates with Forgiveness Sunday, when people forgive the wrongs done against them and burn the Maslenitsa mascot, a straw doll dressed in a female costume with a pancake in her hand.

Food takes center stage during Maslenitsa. In some folk tales, they say you must eat as many times as a dog wags its tail, a fair challenge if you consider that the main food groups during this time are the stomach-filling, sour-cream- and caviar-covered blini.

The blini, made every day of the week, are meant to symbolize the sun and its warmth. Plus, it becomes imperative to eat as many of them as possible during Maslenitsa, since what follows this bout of gluttony are the seven somber weeks of the Great Lent.

Fortunately for Muscovites, there won't be a lack in fun festivities ahead of the fasting period.

Each of the pedestrian streets in Moscow will be reformatted according to its individual theme during the celebration. For example, Kamergersky Pereulok will be turned into "Obzhorny Ryad" (Gluttony Row), where people will be able to try different types of blini. Children's events will be centered on Lavrushinsky Pereulok, while Stoleshnikov Pereulok will turn into an open-air gallery for 40 Maslenitsa dolls.

The pedestrian zones will also have handcraft markets, with some lots offering master classes on how to make the wooden toys, ceramics, origami and whistles.

About 400 street performers will entertain visitors throughout the week in these areas, with the activities building up toward the end of the week, culminating in a big folk and retro music concert on Saturday and a classical music concert on Sunday on Tverskaya Ploshchad.

Themed theatrical performances and parades will also take place on Red Square, starting at 5 p.m. on weekdays and at 3 p.m. on the weekend.

City park officials are working on their own programs for Maslenitsa. Gorky Park will have blini-tasting lines, contests and concerts. Babushkinsky Park will hold a contest for expert blini-makers, and Sokolniki Park ambitiously wants to set the Russian record for the tallest blini tower.

In the Moscow region, one of the most creative Maslenitsa celebrations will take place in Krasnogorsk. The biker club "Nochniye Volki" (Night Wolves) will perform the weekend after, and visitors will be able to take pictures with their motorcycles and even ride in sleighs pulled by motorcycles rather than horses.

As an alternative, there are many weekend tours offered from Moscow to the Russian countryside. These trips include all the usual attributes of Maslenitsa, including arm-wrestling matches, archery and rope-pulling contests in a more authentic setting. These tours can be found online.

If you prefer a more relaxing holiday, look into the special blini-packed holiday menus now featured in Moscow cafes and restaurants. Just remember that although you are allowed to eat fish and dairy products on Maslenitsa, meat is already off limits.

Those who are not in Russia for Maslenitsa shouldn't despair. Not only Russians abroad, but foreigners as well, are planning to celebrate the holiday.

Last week started off with a somewhat menacing video message, in which London Mayor Boris Johnson spoke in Russian to invite city folk to celebrate Maslenitsa on Trafalgar Square.

The celebrations will coincide with the “Russian Week in London” and include Russian food fare, craft bazaars and performances by Russian dancers, singers and theater troupes.

“Eurovision” runners-up Buranovskiye Babushki and the author of the unofficial Moscow hymn Oleg Gazmanov are among those scheduled to perform.

On Saturday, the Irish already launched their “Festival of Russian Culture” in Dublin, timed to coincide with the holiday. This is the third year that Maslenitsa is officially celebrated in Ireland, though this year the festivities were moved up the schedule so as not to cross over with St. Patrick’s Day, which takes place March 17.

The Maslenitsa celebrations in Dublin include photography and art exhibits by Russian artists living in Ireland, as well as lectures, film screenings and jam sessions. As if in response, Moscow will hold its annual St. Patrick’s parade and other themed events over the weekend.

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