The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Defying Gravity: Russia's First Trapeze School

By Joseph Birch

June 06, 2016



It's a sunny day at Luzhniki stadium and the river embankment is packed with cyclists and rollerbladers. But look up and you're in for a very different sight. High above the crowds a dazzling acrobatic show is in full swing. Performers leap from moving bars, weave gracefully through swathes of suspended silk and somersault through the air to land on the safety nets far below. This is Russia's first flying trapeze school and it's challenging Muscovites to experience the aerial sport for themselves.

Founder Leo Kassil, 28, heads the operation. Ever since he first tried flying trapeze 20 years ago at a U.S. Club Med resort, Kassil dreamed of opening his own trapeze school in Russia. After stints in marketing, public relations and a business venture with tennis star Maria Sharapova, Kassil decided to make his dream a reality. One year later, the Trapeze Yota School and Show opened for business and began drawing crowds.

Families in Russia have been enjoying outings to the circus for centuries. But for many spectators the only way to try their hand at breathtaking acrobatics was to sign up for a four-

year course at circus school.



Yota Trapeze School and Show

Yota Trapeze School and Show is based at Luzhniki stadium and offers Muscovites a new way to get fit in the fresh air.

Kassil's primary aim is to make a discipline that has captivated audiences for years accessible to the general public. "We offer a great balance of sport and fun in a beautiful location for relaxing with friends and family," said Kassil. "With us, you can enjoy a unique experience that you can't recreate anywhere else."

Professional circus has gone through many changes over the course of its history. Shows featuring exotic animals are increasingly rare, while theatrical performances popularized by the likes of Cirque du Soleil now reach global audiences. "Circus is modernizing before our very eyes and we are really keen to share the joy and positivity of this huge step forward with our future students," said Kassil.

Flying Trapeze is certainly an unorthodox pastime, but Kassil believes people shouldn't be put off by their instinctive fear of heights — a team of three professionals works with each participant to ensure their absolute safety. Budding trapeze artists are attached to a harness from the moment they climb the ladder to the moment their feet touch solid ground. In the event of a mid-air mistake, the harness ensures a gentle descent to the net. While technically challenging as a discipline, beginners can expect to learn a variety of impressive maneuvers after just a few attempts.

Trapeze expert Itamar Elzair trained Kassil's team in Israel. Elzair has opened trapeze schools across the world and was formerly the head of trapeze for Club Med. Employees at the school include a mixture of circus performers and professionals who began as trapeze amateurs.



Yota Trapeze School and Show

Even trapeze rookies can expect to learn new skills after just a few attempts.

Although trapeze is the star attraction at the newly opened school, those keen to acquire other circus skills can try the aerial hoop, silk acrobatics and juggling. Meanwhile, thrill-seeking children from the age of four are catered to by a number of onsite activities and classes. The club aims to lure more people into enjoying sports in the fresh air.

"People's attitudes toward both health and sport have changed and audiences are keen to try out what they have been watching," said Kassil. The club received the backing of the Yota telecom provider, Club Med and sportswear giant Puma, to expand its "new wave of circus."

The Moscow club is doing so well that Kassil is already negotiating the opening of two additional sites in Russia — a second in Moscow and a one in Krasnaya Polyana, Sochi. Yota Trapeze's plans stretch even further afield, with two more schools in the pipeline for Shanghai and Hong Kong.

For those unsure about giving trapeze a go, Kassil has a compelling message: "This is a totally unique experience. To anyone who has always wanted to soar or to shake off the stresses of office life, this is for you. Once you've had your first training session with us there are no limits to what you can achieve."

Trapeze Yota is open every day from 08:00 — 22:00. 24c17 Ulitsa Luzhniki. Metro Sportivnaya, Vorobyovy Gory. trpz.yota.ru

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https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/06/06/defying-gravity-russias-first-trapeze-school-a53183