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Russia Invaded By Clowns

By Justin Lifflander

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Patch Adams clowning around at Sheremetyevo Airport arrivals on Sunday. **Natalia Lifflander**

A platoon of amateur clowns descended on Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport on Sunday to kick off the 32nd annual Patch Adams humanitarian clowning tour of Russia.

The group, consisting of volunteers ranging in age from 19 to 76 and representing nine different countries, will be joined by a squad of Russian volunteers from the Moscow-based non-profit Maria's Children Arts Center. The combined unit will spend two weeks seeking out and eliminating loneliness, sorrow and solemnity at a range of targets in Moscow and St. Petersburg — including orphanages, hospitals, veterans' homes and homeless shelters.

The clowns' enthusiasm is undiminished by potential xenophobia in Russia. "It's important that so many friendly people are coming here from countries that are supposedly not so friendly. They help change our mentality," said Maria Eliseyeva, founder of Maria's Children.

The band arriving from New York was led by Patch himself – an unmistakable 2-meter tall

figure with a blue mustache, waist-length multi-colored ponytail and a stuffed chicken perched on his cap. At 71, Patch Adams, made famous by the eponymous 1998 movie starring Robin Williams, spends 300 days a year on the road guiding clown trips and raising money to fulfill his dream of building a free medical clinic in West Virginia.

Despite the discouraging geopolitical situation, Russia is one of his favorite destinations.

"The love I find here is enough to make me feel I can deal with anything," Patch said.

Guillaume Vermette, a full time humanitarian clown from Montreal, Canada, is on his 15th trip to Russia and firmly believes that clowning is above geopolitics.

"I work with kids all around the planet, facing various problems and injustices. They are beyond politics, religion and economics. They are just kids who need to play and be loved," he said

Some of those who spend their days toiling at the airport took inspiration from the colorful band. Lyosha, the "official" taxi dispatcher who lurks just beyond the doors to the customs zone, said he would happily give such merry passengers a significant discount.

The clowns' week in Moscow will culminate with a charity ball to raise funds for Maria's work, to take place at the Metropol Hotel on this Saturday. Then the clamorous crew will head to St. Petersburg for another week of spreading joy.

For more information about the organization and Saturday charity ball, go to www.mariaschildren.ru

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