

Russia's Summer Folk Head Out to the Dacha

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Got to move around between food courses. [TsDin / Flickr](#)

Дача: country cottage

Visitors to Moscow and other large Russian cities will notice two curious things in the summer: enormous traffic jams leading out of the cities on Thursday and Friday evenings, and empty cities on the weekends — with the exception of die-hard football fans, that is. This, ladies and gentlemen, is the Grand Dacha Exodus.

The дача (country cottage, more or less) appeared as a word and concept in the 17th century. It first meant a gift (дар) and is related to the verb давать (to give). The tsar gave land outside the cities as a reward for service. It was only in the 20th century that the middle class started to rent дачи, and the tradition of getting out into nature for Russia's three short, glorious months of summer began.

In Soviet times the notion of getting a дача as a gift was revived: most people were offered plots of land in communities set up by their employers. The standard plot of land for most folks was шесть соток (six hundred square meters – a сотка is a hundred square meters), just enough for a little house and garden. But, like in pre-Revolutionary years, the gift of land got bigger in accordance with service to the nation. Ministers and their deputies, full professors and factory heads got up to a full hectare of land (about 2.5 acres) in picturesque settings, often with running water, gas, and electricity.

These days if you are invited на дачу (out to the dacha) you might inquire politely about the mod cons. Some cottages are now like suburban houses, but others are not. Chances are there will be electricity. You might be told: Вода – из колодца, но прямо на участке (There's water, from a well, but it's right on the property!) Or: У нас большой дом и летняя кухня (We've got a big house and a summer kitchen, that is, a separate open structure with a stove and – sometimes – source of water.)

Water, lights and gas made it to these communities before sewage lines, so even very nice houses have септик (a septic tank) which requires откачка (pumping out), performed with admirable speed by big trucks with hoses and a pumping system. How do дачники (summer

folk, dacha owners) know it's time to call the pump truck? Подпахивает. (It's beginning to smell.) Пахнет. (It smells.) Воняет! (It stinks.)

But you might be told: Удобство на улице (The facilities are on the street), which is to say: У нас сортир на участке (We have an outhouse in our yard.) Don't panic. They are often clean, with electricity and no smell thanks to the wonders of modern science — порошок с микроорганизмами, которые разлагают содержимое и устраняют запах (microorganisms that decompose the contents and eliminate the odor). The drawback at night is that outhouses are always set far from the house. Возьми с собой фонарик (Bring a flashlight).

Most of the time you will get this kind of invitation: Приезжайте на шашлык! (Come out for shashlik – grilled meat!). This is as much as an event as a meal. First someone will hand you an axe. Once again, don't panic. Рубить дрова! (We have to chop up the firewood.) Once that is done, the next step is: Зажечь костёр (Light the fire). Of course, now you can buy charcoal, but a serious griller will say: Зачем? Лучше на дровах! (Why? It's better on a wood fire.)

All of this takes several hours, lubricated by something cold and alcoholic. Finally, the command comes: Накрываем стол! (Let's set the table.) This means squeezing dozens of dishes on the table: салаты, колбаса, пирожки, травки, сыр, морс, сок, хлеб и водка (salads, cold smoked meats, pies, greens, cheese, fresh fruit drink, juice, bread and vodka).

When the шашлык is brought to the table, you raise your glass and say: За хозяев! (To our hosts!) За тёплый приём! (To our warm welcome!) Or just: За Вас! (To you!).

And dig in.

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