

A YEAR IN KITEZH

Andrew Aikman, father of a grown up son and daughter, master carpenter and English teacher, is now into his 5th year living in Kitez. With no Russian and no previous experience of Russia, this intrepid traveller shares some of his experience of his first year with us:



“This habit of putting milk into tea, and not jam? And you westerners have such beautiful level lawns; but then England is such an organised place and you are all so polite.”

I arrived at perhaps a moment of change. I had expected to find a group of enthusiastic pioneers, hewing logs for their firewood, and counting the kopecks, carefully; something that wouldn't have looked out of place in an Oxfam news letter. Kitez is not destitute; food is not gathered from their own land; the children are not dressed in threadbare. But they are not displaying the latest fashion, there is no 'bling', no designer labels. They have been donated new winter coats, and other clothes are bought in the weekly local market. But this gives a false picture; Kitez is financially and in other ways, insecure. In the west, we are accustomed to continuous gradual changes. It's hard for us to comprehend the profound insecurity of Russian society, where power is exercised capriciously and change has been abrupt, profound, drastic. Half of the income to Kitez comes from the West; it's been good times recently; but for how long? The other half comes from the Russian state, often two or three months in arrears, sometimes much longer; and there are moves a foot to reduce expenditure on education and social services. (Russia is adopting western style government economics too, along with Macdonalds and get-rich-quick.)

The place has the appearance of happy children playing in an idillic village and busy adults scurrying in slight disorder, never quite catching up. From time to time some dramatic event occurs; a play is performed after supper in the dining room; a small group of children show some joint creative work; a dance; a child undergoes some initiation rite, blindfold, in the embrace of the entire community; a party. Celebrations; the Kitezans (perhaps all Russians) celebrate wonderfully! It isn't the Big Deal we make of it, they just do it, enjoy it, colourfully, enthusiastically, rapturously. They clear it all up and then soon they will do it (differently) all over again. Much of my time here has been in the woodwork shop. One afternoon, it was invaded by several teenagers asking for help and tools to make presents for a little girl about to become 12. It touched my heart to see the only coloured girl, (perhaps the only one in the region) the princess at the table of delicious goodies, and a carved wooden celebration plaque in the centre.

15th September: two girls sitting outside their window in the evening sun, on the warm of the porch roof. The live in a little octagonal house out of a fairytale, with a peaked hat roof and a tall spiked finial. In the garden, Mamma (the doctor) is cutting yet more huge marrows.

The histories of the children here contain everything you would want to protect a child from, and probably nothing that is unique to Russia. What is special and unique in Russia is the meticulously constructed holistic care and habilitation of the children. This has been developed over the past 15 years from their attention to their profound psychology. Almost all the children who come here are under 13 years old when they arrive. Kitez is a very small society, and sets out quite intentionally to present just one consistent coherent view of the world. They don't claim to have all the answers, and the issues of the teen years and how the young 'graduates' integrate into the wider world are much debated at this time.

16th April: Again I feel the painful solitude of the lack of communication. One of the most frustrating aspects of life here for me has been the absolute unreliability of the internet, communications with the world. The signal is received by the dish; aligned with the use of an orienteering compass, and a protractor cellotaped to the frame, with a plumb bolt on a string in the breeze. The bytes go from here, terrestrially; each one must be carried along the wire by a small tired bird ... and then there's the 'server' (?); the satellite; the dish; the weather; the internal computers and the network ... That it ever works at all is miraculous.

One of the greatest delights of life here in the Banya! Forget your Scandinavian saunas and your Turkish baths; the Banya's the ultimate! In a small wooden room, on tiered benches naked bodies lie glistening in the soft, knee level light, while they slowly roast. The brave and the insane inhabit the high deck, close to the ceiling, the rest lie like basking seals on the mid level. The bottom deck is for wimps! Some hearty fanatic throws a bailer of water into the oven which silently bellows a searing blast, scorching off the ears of the unwary. Heat penetrates to the marrow of your bones and then you are beaten with birch twigs, each stroke drawing down the scalding air, thrashing it into your back. In the winter you run and plunge into the deep embrace of powder-dry snow. It's -20°C. You roll and run back, snow still clinging to your body; and the hot room feels gentle, soothing. And after, the cooling room to sit around drinking tea, or beer, or whatever you prefer. Somehow it seems that conversation without clothes flows easily. And finally, total relaxation. When you lie abed, your skin is softer than the new-born.

The milky way wraps its silken scarf around the night sky with a clarity which brings back the childish sense of awe at the infinite vastness. I haven't seen such night skies in Scotland for 50 years. Russians love nature, they have so much of it, the untidied wild flowers and uncharted forest, but in such a vast country they take it for granted. Roadside piles of rubbish and dead cars are common place; but then there's vast wilderness out there, still.

When I arrived in July, the village in a clearing in the forest was like a pond of blue and purple with wooden houses floating, and the floor of the forest seemed to change a little every day. The year was unusually wet. Much later than in Scotland we harvested black currants, buckets full of them from the bushes planted in the village and in a forest garden. Soon large jars of wonderful preserves gathered on the shelves, for the winter months. We searched for cranberries in a bog in the forest; a family with children, two couples, one old, one young drifted into our clearing to gather the abundant harvest too; there was more than plenty for all. And there were rybena berries in the Kitezh gardens. Marina, the doctor, gathered and dried the leaves of the many cultivated herbs, to make wonderful healthful teas. These are her delicious prescriptions of first resort for the colds and pains of winter. In the cool clear autumn afternoons, with bags, buckets and rucksacks we all trailed off between the birch trees to the neighbouring village of Kaskova, there to gather fallen apples from the old unpruned orchards. The crop was sweet, delicious and bruised. Some went to sugary apple jams; most were boiled up to make lovely sweet compote for lunch time drinks.

I was warned that the food was borsch, borsch, borsch, and gretchka (buckwheat). Throughout the winter, we had delicious soups, fish soup (salmon sometimes), vegetable soups, occasionally borsch and many other heart and body warming soups. One can get used to gretchka, and even like it. It's breakfast that takes a little adjusting to; oatmeal porridge made with milk and butter, and no salt (at the Pearly Gates, St Andrew will have his revenge on the cook!); similar millet porridge or rice pudding, or muesli drowned in hot milk (Eeeeeygh!), and bread & cheese. Sometimes there's yoghurt, and very sweet, high fat chocolate coated ... something like soft cheese. Oh, and there's tvorok, a sweet soft cheese, like sugared cream, or like semi-soft sweet cheese with raisins; delicious on the porridgy stuff on a cold winter morning. Russians like definite flavours; 5 spoons of sugar in the tea, salty fish, enough to make our eyes water. And tea, tea with everything. On cold days there's hot mud to drink too (I'm told it's a milk chocolate drink; even most of the children draw the line at that!) But then, for the brave, there's Pink Drink; truly it is pink. It's said to be made of potato starch; discretion is the better part of valour. Fruit is a rare treat, so I usually try to get some oranges in the market on Friday. Many of the children here have been brought up on the most basic of foods, porridge, bread, gretchka, and they're conservative; why should they change the habits of a lifetime? Stealing food from the table and hiding it in their bed is a phenomena common to almost all new arrivals; after all it's been a necessary mode of survival. But they learn quite soon that there is always enough, and there will always be enough tomorrow.

The question of stealing is a live and very important issue here. I was very careful to look after my property and to be aware of others too; but my experience has been that while my hat or my slippers may occasionally disappear, they always come back in a few days, as if by magic, to exactly the place they left. My penknife fell out of a hole in my pocket on 3 occasions (before I found the hole) and on each, it was returned to me by a child. After over a decade of experience of school teaching in Britain, the most remarkable aspect of the community of children is the absence of bullying, malicious teasing and fighting, and social stratification. Young children interact, play and tease the older ones, playfully; battles occur as a trial of strength where the weaker calls 'enough' and is immediately released. Older children who have 'graduated' to Mentors (the highest status within the complete therapeutic program), have specific responsibilities to help the younger. Patience is part of the culture. Of course fights, tantrums and foul-mouthed abuse occurs sometimes, but it is absolutely contrary to the 'culture' and is very much frowned upon and quickly curbed. For this and other misdemeanours, a court of children and the Kitezh parents is convened, usually after supper, in which the conduct is discussed and a suitable 'compensation' or sanction

is decided. My first experience of this process looked quite appalling. There is so much that is usually misunderstood, and we do not even know we have not understood. I took the time to talk to Dimitri, the founder, on a number of occasions, to ask searching questions. What I found was my prejudice and my ignorance.

One of the most heart warming experiences of spending a year here has been to witness the changes in children who arrived during my stay. To see a frightened, defensive 10 year old grasp his 'new' mother as if he was afraid of losing her out of his sight; to see him giggle like an infant when his 'new father' scoops him up under his arm as he comes into the house, brings tears to the eyes. The child sucks in the affection of his foster parents like one drowning and gasping for air. To see the fear in the eyes gradually fade, and to see him risk just a little cheeky remark to one of the bigger boys is much more wonderful than watching the magic of flowers opening in the spring sunshine. Then begins the trouble. I have been told it can sometimes be as much as two years of constant testing, testing, testing the new parents, defiance and non co-operation until the child really feels secure enough to trust, completely. The bond of love is created through fire, and this I have seen too; the real love between (foster) parent and teenager/young adult. This ability to truly love a child that is not your own but has come to you by this tortuous route takes so much courage and patience and dedication. It is for these reasons and more that this work is undertaken in a community designed to give mutual support, to provide a holistic and 'total' supportive environment. It is simply too demanding, too testing for most mortals to undertake alone.

21st April: I noticed Sandra still likes to play the piano after supper, but she's losing what she learned last Autumn. She needs a consistent teacher. She still struggles to believe that she is a beautiful child, but since she moved to Masha's care, she has adopted a much more mature hair style. In Tamara's house she was constantly confronted by her uniqueness, living in a house where all the other children are natural siblings or the natural child of Mamma.

Not long after I arrived I noticed a small 8 year old boy who was briefly the centre of attention for some disciplinary matter. It was suggested that he might be interested in woodwork. For some weeks, nothing was said, nothing happened. One day when I thought he had got used to seeing me around, I invited Vadim to come to the workshop. His eyes lit up, a little warily. I asked him again the next day, and he came after lunch. He appeared to have no previous experience of any woodwork, but with a few words and gestures, we got stuck into making a box. I was amazed at how quickly he grasped the techniques I was showing him, and how much real determination he had to 'get it right'. "Iss no good", so I'd try to do it for him. "No! I, I, I," pointing at himself. After two hours, "Hvateet?" (enough). "No, more!" He made his box, he sold it at the internal Kitez' market', and he got the admiration of his friends. He came back for more and soon gathered a little stack of orders; a box for his mother, one for the recorders, a tool box. Out of such a small thing grew shoots of self confidence; and for me it was an extraordinary pleasure to see the characteristics of determination and meticulousness that make a master craftsman in such a young child. I call him "Moy malinky droog" (very bad Russian for 'my small friend') and he gives me such a wonderful hug whenever we meet after I have been away for a few days.

Snow arrived on 30th October. It was beautiful, and like winter in Scotland, it went again in a few days, under the shroud of a wet, leaden sky. Through November, December and most of January, grey mist, grey rain, grey mud dragged the feet and spirits. In the papers, it was said the Moscow had not experienced a Christmas without snow for almost a century. Normally there is a ceremony on about 19th January when the strong men of the village hack a hole through the ice on the lake, and the brave (= insane) plunge into the holy (on that day) water. They could have rowed out, if there had been any will to do so.

Liza arrived on 24th January; "I only come for the snow." So Mother Russia gathered her skirts and obliged. Six weeks was a very short winter Russian winter, but within that time, the temperature only once rose above freezing; it fell to -24°C, and -12°C was regarded as 'mild'.

In Britain, we have brief chaos-spurning sprinklings of wet stuff like white soggy cornflakes (referred to by transport companies as 'the wrong sort of snow'). Snow in Russia falls gently, endlessly, in tiny feather-like crystals; it doesn't often drift, and it's absolutely dry! It gathers in little heaps in the corners of the porches, and remains there, undisturbed, unmelted. And the houses are warm, sometimes almost too warm. People wear knee length felt boots to get about, and the traffic continues to flow, a little more slowly. Markets continue, shops remain open and everyone wears a hat, but not always gloves. At -20° it was fine to be out, so long as I didn't breathe; then my face hurt. We think of snow as silent, muffling the steps; 'real snow' squeaks. It piles up, imperceptibly, fills the ditches and levels all. It covers the fields knee deep, but on the paths it is compressed into a hard supportive platform. It sparkles, twinkles in the sunshine and in the moonlight. In the morning, it sifts out of a cloudless sky, a morning mist of ice crystals. Winter is magically beautiful. But in the cities it's carted away and dumped, and great blackening ramparts line the sides of the

motorways. Some mornings the birch trees were covered with frost, breathtaking in the morning sun; sometimes every bough and twig was laden, white-larded, and it all remained.

The school term continues until the end of December, Christmas being celebrated in this relatively secular country, in January, on several occasions. For Russians, almost anything will do as an excuse for a celebration, especially in the winter. New Year was an occasion for individual and group performances, much singing and dancing and sharing the warming cup (amongst the adults). The really memorable festival was the coming of spring (celebrated in the depths of winter, of course) when the custom is to wear bright cloths, clown-like red cheeks, colourful hats and scarves, and share a hearty meal of hot soup and spicy dishes and of course pancakes, all served outside. Then the fun begins, tug-o-war, baton fights, snow fights (dry snow doesn't ball), pillow fights, skipping rope games, blindfold feeding your friend and lots more. All ended with the burning of the winter princess, traditionally a straw figure, but now, just an old dress & hat on a wooden tee piece.

The wind changed, it snowed and rained and the temperature crept up. The supportive platforms of the white paths collapsed, icicle curtains dropped daggers into the snow banks. It roared off the roofs and everywhere was water, the peri-glacial times. Paths maintained between knee high banks became ribbon lakes, nothing was solid. The iron hard road became soft like a partially inflated tyre and the tar fragmented like a loose jigsaw puzzle. And now it felt cold! Winter came and went, and went again. 24th March; the clear sound of birds song and children's voices; the sun sets between the bare stems of the forest, reflected as through a mist, in the pond which will slowly dry to a bright grass carpet. 8th April Snow again today but it didn't all melt. Clear night, sky full of stars, crunchy under foot. 12th April. T-shirt weather, almost. 22nd April, woke up to see heavy snow falling on the crocuses; it looks like the October snow, falling on the green, then not yet dead grass. But this time, instead of the tiny frozen crystals drifting down, this is falling in flakes, like maritime snow. 1st May. 15cms snow over night, but all gone by evening; it's very cold.

On 23rd February, Russians celebrate Men's Day. The women prepared a sumptuous meal in a lavishly decorated dining room; in their seductive glad-rags they served the men at table and provided entertainment, cabaret, dancing; comic animations of us men in which I starred as a foreign spy (move over, Connery!). They decorated the banya appropriately (imaginatively) and left us tea, beer and extras. There was, of course, much competition; the men were not about to allow themselves to be seen as less than equal to the challenge. So on 8th March, the men and boys from the youngest to the oldest, coalesced to celebrate our women folk. The team work in the kitchen was a joy to participate in, as we created a wonderful breakfast and laid the trays for the handsome youths to serve, dressed in the best waiter's costumes we could procure. And so it went, with The Adams Family as the theme of the day. (Alas I can not describe the celebrations of the evening as I was laid low by migraine on that day.)

I have been joined many by other volunteers from the West, some staying for several months, some for just a few weeks. Most have been students, some on their 'gap year', some students of Russian doing the required year abroad, and some recently graduated. There have been a few 'older' people too. Quite a mixed bag; everyone finds the initial integration difficult to varying degrees (not speaking Russian is a major problem I have had to confront), but everyone plunges in 'at the deep end', and works hard to support Kitez in whatever way they find they can. Some have returned for a second 'tour', or a brief revisit.

I would like to extend a huge thank-you to everyone who donated to the tool fund which brought about a total transformation from a miserably un-equipped shed to a pleasant productive, reasonably well equipped joinery workshop. We have been able to produce doors, windows, staircases, shelves, boxes, cupboards, a bed, swords, bows and boats. We might get a lathe next year and I am hoping for a new workshop where woodwork can be taught safely to more than one or two students at a time. My star apprentice, Dima, has decided next year he will train to become a master craftsman with the aim of setting up his own business. He says proudly, 'I will be the First craftsman in my family!'

Like all the western volunteers, I have been involved in teaching English. When I arrived, it appeared to me that the children acquired English more by accident than design, so as almost the only person to have any training in teaching English, I have been working with the school director to get a consistent system and agreed syllabus. I will return to Scotland in June, but for me, this is the beginning, not the end. I intend to return for another year, the second of what I hope will be many. I might even learn to speak the language!