

Honi Pern Volunteer 2007 - 2008

I have had the good fortune to spend the best part of the last year in the Kitezh Children's Community, a year where I have learnt such an incredible amount, both from a practical and a more metaphysical point of view. I first arrived as a rather apprehensive third year university student, ready to spend a maximum of 3 months in Russia, before returning to the fairer climates of Western Europe. But the Kitezh spirit got under my skin, and I seem to not have been able to get enough of the place!

The end of my stay here is approaching at a ridiculous speed, and I am sitting in my favorite log-built room of Obitel 1, reflecting on the last year in an attempt to think up some wise advice to give to future volunteers and guests of Kitezh.

As it seems to be the case with the majority of volunteers, my first few weeks here were peppered with misunderstandings, mistakes and miscommunications, which sometimes led to my feeling nervous and unsure of myself, but mostly made all those involved laugh a lot. The Kitezhans are so used to us volunteers making all the mistakes that could possibly be made that they hardly bat an eyelid! They are there to help and guide us through our stay. And just as we believe we have come to help them, they help us to discover a different way of doing things, which you might find yourself realising is a better way of doing things! As Dima Morozov likes to stress, emphasize and repeat again, applying our 'western' views to Kitezh just doesn't quite work...



My stay in Kitezh took an interesting turn after my first three months, as it was then that I realised I should throw myself into every possible activity there, not as a volunteer, but imagining I was an actual resident of the community. Once I had stopped considering the children as 'poor, helpless, darling orphans', but rather as regular kids, who benefit just as much from an honest, frank or sometimes harsh word as from cuddles and games whenever they want them, something clicked deep inside me. Also the attitudes of the Kitezhans towards me changed, just as imperceptibly and slowly as the realisation of what this community is truly about dawned upon me.

What I found most helpful in this in-depth discovery of the community was taking part in each different step that constitutes the children's and adults life. So I started going to the small counsels meetings, to the 'small groups' meetings, to 'osoznanie' meetings etc... On top of this, Zhenia organised a series of question and answer sessions with a few of the adults, which are invaluable, as long as you come with some questions to put to them. Marina is the one to go to for understanding the actual motions of some of the therapeutic work, such as play- and gestalt-therapy, Max can tell you all about the pedagogical methods, and Serzh about the finances of the place. So somehow getting as rounded a vision as possible of the place is utterly essential, in my view. The Kitezhans, even though they don't show it much, value our interest, and value our understanding of the place extremely highly. At the risk of sounding repetitive of what has been said before by other guests of Kitezh, the more you give, the more you receive. I would like to say that as a leaving volunteer the lasting influence and effect of Kitezh are far more strongly imprinted on me than mine are on Kitezh.

As for technicalities: trust Ecologia's volunteer handbook, it is extremely accurate. From a clothing point of view, don't bring too many, as there is a 'boutique' full of clothes you can borrow for working outside in, or for extra layers. The school is pretty well-equipped with teaching materials, as the children follow a set curriculum. They all have their own text books, so don't worry about having nothing to teach them with. What is valued however, is any sort of materials used for arts and crafts sessions, like beads, painting kits, dream-catcher kits... anything that will keep the younger kids busy for a couple of hours! Also from an accomodation point of view, living in a family is a far more enriching experience at first, so do push for that if you wish to, and never be scared of asking Zhenia for anything. She is an absolutely fantastic volunteers coordinator, and although she may sometimes seem a little distant or busy, she will always see your requests get put to the right people.

I leave this place strengthened and inspired. I hope and wish you future visitors as fascinating an experience as mine. Respect the balance of give and take, love the children, listen to the adults, teach them what you can and be taught in return... And if it all seems a bit much at times, a walk in the beautiful surrounding woods or a cup of soothing herbal tea should help you find your inner strength again! Enjoy!!