
KITEZH THROUGH THE EYES OF VISITORS: IMPRESSIONS, EXPERIENCES, TRANSFORMATIONS

This year we have had a lot of interesting and varied visitors to Kitezh. It is gratifying to read the feedback from volunteers and visitors of all ages and interests and to know that they all feel welcomed and appreciated and receive an exceptionally deep and rich experience at Kitezh. Here are snippets from some of them to give you a flavour of their experience:

I recently had the pleasure of joining an Ecologia tour group that visited both Moscow and Kitezh. It was my first return trip to Russia since 1990. Although I loved revisiting Moscow's delights, the real point of my journey though was to see Kitezh. I was frankly humbled by it. The joyful exuberance of the children, and the 24/7 dedication of its staff touched me deeply. When I chose to speak appreciatively of the place on my last night, I found myself overwhelmed with emotion, principally by the respect and love the children exhibit for their minders and mentors. The place has managed to create a culture of bona fide 'transformation' in which self-esteem and respect for others tangibly deepen during the children's time there. Not bad at all for kids removed from orphanages or unhappy families. Respect!

It was also personally gratifying to feel the depth of love and gratitude everyone extends to Liza, which she reciprocates totally. Her work with Ecologia serves quite literally to keep Kitezh operational when the government fails repeatedly to pay staff salaries. Hence, I encourage all who care about Kitezh to keep up your support accordingly.

**Roger Doudna, Scotland,
Tour, April 2005**



Roger makes a herb dryer for Marina

My first impression when I arrived at Kitezh was that I had come to Camelot. For the adults and the kids, Kitezh must feel like Camelot. The kids were happy and were thriving emotionally. The atmosphere was filled with love. It was good to see that my contributions were used wisely.

Arthur Stracinski, donor, USA



Kiril and Arthur (right)

Arriving in Kitezh late at night we walked to the church for Easter service. On the path to the wooden church under a velvety sky full of stars I had a sense of the vastness of nature. There was stillness. In the church there was a contrast of light with bright icons decorating the walls. Everyone had grouped together quietly to commemorate a spiritual event.

I enjoyed the birthday party of two young people. We all helped with the games including old favourites such as Pin the Tail on the Donkey and Pass the Parcel. I was amused and impressed by the children who stood up at the birthday table to salute the birthday boys in a toast and a speech. Even the younger children presented as posed and articulate and aware of the contribution of others in the community.

Visiting a World War two battlefield was instructive since Victory

Day, noting the 60-year end of WWII occurred during our visit. I had not fully appreciated the contribution of the Russian people and their huge loss of life during the war.

In Kitezh there is a sense of focus on the children and on collective values and decision-making that was a contrast to the UK. The people I met valued learning and achievement and I found the young people commendable in their behaviour.

**Margaret Charleton, England,
Tour, April 2005**

Our second group from the Prince's Trust had a winter experience this year, and from all accounts they loved it and Kitezh loved them. Emails have flowed back and forth between them and the children. These, they said, were the highlights: TRACTOR SURFING; Snowball fights and other games with the kids; The football match in the snow; the banya. English lessons; Baryatino market; visiting families, good fun and quite challenging because of the language barrier; learning simple Russian words; making symbolic traditional Russian craft souvenirs. The fact that Kitezh is in a world of its own, cut off from money worries and other stresses at home. Without exception they all said they would love to return.



Tractor Surfing



Volunteers, April 2005 (from left): Claudia Vlaar, Amy Teitelman, Tom Disney & Adam Lewis

I did a little bit of everything: teaching English, French, theatre classes, playing accordion, working in the kitchen, cleaning. I very much liked the 'sitting with children' in Tamara's house especially the feeling of a small triumph when you've succeeded to put seven children to sleep in a peaceful way. It's great to spend time with children because they give so much. The way they look at the world is so innocent and interesting. When working with children with problems it's so important that there are many people around them who care and act out of love. I learned a lot about the young generation, what they like and what they think what is important. I loved the discos. And I got to know a lot of beautiful Russian music. I think it's very important to come here with an attitude of, I'm willing to try to do everything that's needed and not, I want to do everything that I'm very good at. A big thank you to everybody in Kitezh for taking care of me and making me feel so much at home and giving me so much trust and space. I think Kitezh is a great place and I love the way people work and live there.

Claudia Vlaar, Holland (33)

I had an amazing time at Kitezh, it is such a wonderful place and I'm already planning my return (if Kitezh will have me back!) I've travelled to

other places but Kitezh really has been the best place I've been to; the level of involvement that you get there makes it unique. There's only one thing that I wish I did differently; I wish I had asked to stay for longer. I have loads of fond memories but some stand out as my favourites: Going to chop wood with the kids for the first time, thinking it would be easy and actually finding it really difficult. Going to the banya for the first time and rolling around outside in the snow when it was about minus fifteen! Seeing the kids' faces when I translated the name of the recipe 'toad in the hole' into Russian and told them that was what the volunteers were cooking for the English evening. Watching *Grease* performed by the kids. Staying up all night for Mayovka (May 1st) to plan games for the kids. Drinking tea all the time and everywhere. An important point is how much Kitezh gave to me. I went there to give, but I received so much from Kitezh. Now I want to study Russian, and I also have much more of an idea of where I want to go in terms of a job. It also taught me a great deal about what I can do.

**Tom Disney (19), England,
break between school & university**

I feel I owe Kitezh a great deal. On the most prosaic level, I'm now certain that I want to work in some way with children after university and I am now considering taking a further degree in child psychology after I graduate. But Kitezh has shown me far more than my future career path. Without wishing to sound too high-flown, I think I've gained a new optimism in the future of society, particularly in Russia. Whilst there exist people like those who live in Kitezh, there is still hope that a social state will emerge from this wild and cruel phase of Russian

history. There is a spirit in Kitezh which is really unique. I've found it almost impossible to convey to my friends what it is, but I know I will always carry a spark of it within me.

**Alex Nice (22), Cambridge
University, England**

Being in Kitezh definitely helped me to mature. I went straight from being at school to being a teacher which was strange but taught me a lot about working with children and being inventive. Constant exposure to people who speak a different language has made me much more patient and improved my communication skills. Most importantly I have made some very good friends, both volunteers and people who work in Kitezh.

**Natasha Doff (18), Edinburgh
GAP Year student**



Scene from *Grease*

Apart from growing in communication skills, dealing with children, learning to work, reading a lot, I have to say that Kitezh really changed me and the Kitezhans noted the same on my departure. Kitezh showed me a way of life that is by far more active and energetic than the life I led before going there.

Thomas Beekers (19), Holland

FRIENDS & GODPARENTS TOUR, APRIL 2006

Due to the great success of our tour this year, we are planning another one next year. Three days in Moscow followed by a week at Kitezh. Come and meet the children you have been supporting.

For more information and booking contact: info@ecologia.org.uk