

Ryazan and Yelatma trip report: snapshot impressions

20 – 23 May 2010

Joanie Speers, trustee

Executive summary

Pushing

Rocking

Inching

Crying

Exiting

Laughing

Entering

Staring

Smiling

Pre-trip apprehension

- Russia – you must be kidding
- Will be terrifying
- Won't be able to cope
- Won't know what to do
- Will be depressing
- The country will be soulless
- Lots of traveling in a very short time
- What about BA and volcanic ash

The reality, step by step

The travelling

- Generally hilarious
- The drive was scary with Anatoly tailgating and overtaking in a more than imaginative way
- Fantastic (Chekhovian) birch and evergreen forests
- 'Strip development'
- Amazing traditional decorated wooden 3-window houses
- 1st (and last) McDonald's meal in 30 years – but worth it for the French fries and the very very small smile from the girl behind the till

Ryazan – the city

- Much bigger than expected (not good prep on my part)
- Jerry built high rises and dirt roads (and a sprinkling of those wonderful wooden houses)
- Street lights only on main roads
- No flowers or flowering trees/shrubs – except the occasional iris (!)
- Hot, very dry and very dusty
- The flat was enormous with typical Russian décor

Ryazan – ThePromise

Community

- Natasha, our student translator, was intelligent, sensitive, engaged, funny, generous (and arrived on the dot of 8.30am)
- Anna, the Ryazan University community portage worker, was bright, interesting, committed, compassionate, and good at her job

- Nikita, the 5yr old autistic boy, was exactly that, clever, manipulative, busy, disengaged, entertaining
- Irina, the mother, was welcoming, loving, devoted and so pleased with Anna's involvement and the already positive results after 1 ½ months: Nikita washed his face (sort of) and brushed his teeth (kind of), and took round pieces out of a puzzle, but didn't want to do much else
- The area – the southern part of the city – according to Natasha, not a safe place, particularly at night with no street lights and lots of drinking

University – Department of Psychology

- Walked through centre of town and through the University – lovely neoclassical buildings plus a couple old big traditional wooden buildings (for the first 3 years of university, all students have to take 2 hours of energetic exercise every morning and ski in the winter)
- Elvira was lovely, welcoming and so professional and proud of Nastya and her portage team and the success of the Pavlova Conference
- The team was excellent – all very young, all very committed and excited about their work, and looking forward to the next portage training which will include 10 or so medical students

Baby Home

- Bigger, cleaner, more modern than expected
- Olga was enthusiastic, welcoming and passionate about portage and ThePromise
- Babies were mostly napping, but did get to play with a few and see some in their beds; none in the garden; felt very quiet and empty
- No portage to observe
- Tatiana was attractive and official

Council dinner

- Luba – so lovely and compassionate and dedicated
- Sveta – so young; very nice
- Elvira – lovely again
- Music – a bit loud
- Gin – powerful
- Mosquitoes – vicious
- Food – grilled
- Love Russia – interesting to meet another agency

Yelatma – the town

- Another impressive, intelligent translator, Tatiana
- Beautiful with amazing vernacular wooden buildings
- Grand hotel, met a Russian metal prospector and saw his finds
- Nice flat (smaller version of Ryazan; same décor)

Yelatma – ThePromise

- Orphanage was much smaller than expected (again, poor prep)
- Maria is a true saint and her team is wonderful
- Room 4 were in the summer house
- Portage was magical, lots of smiles, dancing, some tears and stillness
- Time with the children inside and outside – wonderful to recognize so many of them, but total failure of name recognition
- Lots of time putting up and painting Barbara's house and playing with Galya and Pasha
- The team provided a Feast for us – toasts and compliments and heartfelt addresses: Maria said that when Sarah first visited, she had cleaned the orphanage and prepared the

children and felt very proud. But when she saw the horror on Sarah's face she immediately knew that something was seriously wrong; she is so glad for the children that ThePromise arrived.

- Heavy duty mosquitoes
- Lovely evening walking through the town, letting the children 'sink in'

Yelatma – the farewell

- 1 hour on the final day to play and sing (badly) with the children
- The most moving time, but haunting and fascinating, angry making and surprisingly uplifting
- Then 1000 hours of driving and flying back to another reality

Thoughts/feedback

- Amazingly well organized and planned (thank you, Wendy)
- Extremely important to be there
- Brought to life all that I had read and heard beforehand
- Extremely important for those in Russia to meet those from the UK from ThePromise, giving them a growing sense of support
- Too short to really understand portage, as not enough to observe, but maybe enough as an introduction
- Phenomenal work being done and amazing progress with the children
- Too much filming and photographing (for me), inhibiting more hands-on time or time to reflect with the children
- Exhausting
- Thank you, Sarah