

Winter games in pushcha

Unusual folklore delicacies offered to festive season tourists

By Viktor Korbut

Belarus has done much in recent years to attract tourists from abroad. Naturally, most arrive in Minsk, so are keen to see festive customs and attractions close to the capital — in the Nalibokskaya Pushcha, in Rakov and in Volozhin, as well as at the Museum of Folk Architecture in Stročitsy, and in the Kopyl District's famous village of Semezhevo.

Lesovik draws over guests from Father Frost

"Each region needs its own Christmas character," asserts Inga Malashkevich, the Head of the Volozhin District Executive Committee's Department for Physical Culture, Sports and Tourism. "Father Frost has a home in the Belovezhskaya Pushcha while Zyuzya Poozersky has his residence in Postavy. In recent times, Lesovik has settled in the Nalibokskaya Pushcha, accompanied by Baba Yaga and fairy-tale animals."

The Adventures in a New Year For-



'Kolyady Tsars' folk custom organised in the Kopyl District's Semezhevo village

UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The tradition originates in the 18th century and is held on Shchedry Vecher (Generous Evening) — from 13th to 14th January.

Young men ('tsars') dress in white trousers and shirts, with a red embroidered Semezhevo sash across their chest, and a tall hat adorned with colourful paper ribbons. They process to villagers' houses, performing the *Tsar Maximilian* drama. Afterwards, hosts are traditionally congratulated, while the 'artistes' receive presents. As darkness falls, the 'tsars' light lamps, lending the event great charm.

Tatiana Shauro, Director of Semezhevo's Culture and Leisure Centre at the Kopyl District Executive Committee's Culture Department, notes that they began to restore the custom back in 1996. At that time, materials were gathered and senior residents were interviewed. In early 2011, the *Tsars* group from the Semezhevo Culture Centre was be-



Presentation of Wonders of Stankovo Forest New Year programme

est programme is organised in Volozhin, including a tour of the town and Nature Museum, viewing aurochs in open air pens. There is an entertainment programme at Lesovik Estate, with tourists invited to take horse-drawn carriage rides and try their hand at quad biking.

Until January 8th, three excursions are being organised daily. Lesovik can welcome a maximum of three tourist buses or 120 people each day. Everyone receives a gift of confectionary and a lovely dish of hot pancakes, served with tea. Of course, no one should miss watching the aurochs in the Nalibokskaya Pushcha (just as interesting as in the Belovezhskaya Pushcha).

Bethlehem galaxy

The *Following the Bethlehem Star* programme is being hosted by the Galaxy Sports and Recreational Centre in Rakov. Alongside a tour of Rakov, guests visit the museum on the World of Bees Estate, and are offered pancakes and herbal teas. A meal is later enjoyed at the Galaxy Centre, alongside entertainments. The five hour programme costs Br150,000; Belarusian Kolyady songs, performed by *Gastsinets* folk band, perhaps crown the day. Guests are also entertained by the Biblical characters of the three wise men and King Herod, as well as 'traditional' Father Frost and the Snow Maiden and the symbol of 2012 — the Dragon.

Rakov is known for its Folk Crafts

Museum, with exhibits gathered by painter Felix Yanushkevich. In the 1920-1930s, it was the meeting point for smugglers between Poland and the Soviet Union. Owners of agro-estates in the suburbs also organise various tours



Holiday at Pechersky woodland park

of the former Polish-Soviet border.

Rakov and Volozhin have kept the 'classical' appearance of a small Belarusian town from the early 20th century — with an Orthodox church, a Catholic church and low-rise houses once occupied by the lower middle class. You are truly transported back in time.

Spring along River Berezina

Other regions of the country are also keen to preserve Christmas celebratory traditions. The 'Drawing Kolyada to Oak' custom, from the Berezino District's Noviny village, is acknowledged as being part of the intangible cultural heritage of Belarus, being revived in the 1990s and organised each year since. The custom has been passed down the generations via the local folk band.

Celebrations start with the decoration of a Kolyada cart wheel, adorned with hay and a pot of kutia [porridge] or a wheat sheaf. Then, a cheerful procession heads to a tall oak tree, where the wheel is hung to protect the village from storms and to encourage storks to nest. Sometimes, the clay pot of kutia is broken with sticks once in place, so that it flies in various directions, bringing a good harvest. In some Berezino District villages, the hay is burnt to summon spring.



Kolyady in Belynichy District's Tekhtin, in the Mogilev Region

many Belarusian regions began setting aside their traditions; however, the Kopyl District retained them until the 1980s and, in the 1990s, they were restored again.

Over 20 locally woven mas-

stowed with a Presidential Award.

The Kolyady custom of the Kopyl District is arousing interest among Belarusian and foreign researchers. Last year, Norito Kunisu, Director of the Parisian Bureau of Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, arrived to see the unusual event.

Horse riding at a skansen

Visitors are welcome to take part in Kolyady customs in Stročitsy, near Minsk, which houses the Belarusian State Museum of Folk Architecture and Everyday Life. Such museums are called 'skansen'. Last year, it celebrated its 35th birthday.

The restoration of the Holy Transfiguration Church, in the Orsha District, and an ancient mill in the Khotimsk District, continues... even in winter. Over the last five years, 20 wooden buildings have been repaired using budgetary funds and those of sponsors. In total, the museum boasts 25 buildings, with an early 18th century chapel from the Vileika District being the most ancient.

The museum is soon to open shops, a hotel and cafes; even now, there are plenty of places to relax and soak up the atmosphere. The cosy tavern is never empty. Stročitsy is a place of artistic pilgrimages, regularly hosting folk festivals. Employees organise a Christmas programme, including excursions and theatrical performances, skiing and horse riding.

UNESCO recommends

The weaving traditions of the village of Semezhevo have been registered onto the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Belarus. These traditions remain not only here though, being once common countrywide. From the 19th century,

terpieces are well-known and the traditions are being kept alive via a weaving school set up in Semezhevo by the joint EU/UNDP *Sustainable Development at Local Level* project.

In 2009, the 'Kolyady Tsars' custom, also celebrated in Semezhevo, became Belarus' only one on the