

Folk festival shares its legacy

Belarusian Polesie brings together various forms of European folk culture at its *Call of Polesie* Festival

By Veronika Dovlatova

Pripyat Polesie differs from other places, having remained unique, preserving its traditions for centuries. Its rapid pace of progress hasn't destroyed its identity, with its landscapes, lifestyles, crafts and spiritual values as pure and beautiful as ever. Its residents recently shared their rich heritage at the 2nd National Festival of Folk and Cultural Traditions, *Call of Polesie*, bringing together over 10,000 guests.

The event was hosted by the agro-town of Lyaskovichi, in the Petrikov District, welcoming visitors from Belarus, Russia, Ukraine and Poland. Alexander Lukashenko opened the event, emphasising, "There is no other festival in Belarus which rivals its spirituality, so rooted in the past and founded on the land of true Belarusians."

About three years ago, Mr. Lukashenko supported the idea of holding the festival in Lyaskovichi and noted his continuing reverence and admiration for the town. He asserted, "Everyone has some place where they love to return. For me, Polesie is one of those hidden gems. Those who visit it even once are captivated by its beauty."

Despite its modest biography, *Call of Polesie* has already outgrown the framework of a regional festival and has been offered international status by the President. He told those present, "I address foremost the delegations of Russia, Ukraine and Poland. Let's make this festival international. The third time will be a charm; we'll start with the third."



Director of *Drigovich* folk group, from Pripyatsky National Park, Nikolay Kotov, takes part in festival

Scientific approach

The Republican Festival *Call of Polesie* was not only impressive in scale but rich and diverse, including films about life in Polesie (*Garden of Polesie*). An open air wooden sculpture, *Wooden Miracle*, was unveiled by the President to mark the opening of the unique Museum of Nature at Pripyatsky National Park. It is obvious that nothing similar exists in any neighbouring European country. An international confer-

ence was also held within the event, gathering researchers from those countries bordering Polesie; all are keen to see local traditions thrive and remain accessible to all at Pripyatsky National Park's Nature Museum. Two years ago, Polesie residents asked Mr. Lukashenko to build the museum, which now stands in the centre Lyaskovichi.

The first day in the modern building was certainly busy, with visitors fascinated by all it has to of-

fer. There is a map of the waterways of Polesie, guiding fishermen to the best spots (with the help of museum staff) and halls exploring local archaeology, the history of the waterways and Polesie folk traditions. There is even a recreated house.

What purpose does a 'tseber' serve?

The Festival saw Polesie residents (from 11 districts in the Gomel and Brest regions) dem-

onstrating their creative achievements, including the singing of harmonised songs on the main stage; over 30 amateur choirs from the provinces entertained the audience with ancient folk songs and modern ballads inspired by the past.

Meanwhile, the 2km of Poleskaya suburb saw every courtyard filled with rare crafts: weaving, embroidery, bee-keeping, pottery and carving. 'Polesie Corner' — organised by the Pripyatsky National Park — boasted a blacksmith, working his forge to create red hot horseshoes. On asking to try my hand, he willingly gave me his seat. Of course, it has taken years for him to learn his craft, but he patiently showed me the basics and I created my own horseshoe — for good luck. A couple of metres away, a courtyard run by the Yelsk District offered barrels to suit every taste. I was told, "This is *dezha* for dough, and this is '*tseber*', used for salting meat. Small barrels are taken to the fields, filled with water which remains cold from morning to evening."

A crowd soon gathered, asking if they could buy them, but the owners explained that few such barrels exist, due to a lack of craftsmen. At the next festival, they promise to teach beginners and make barrels for sale.

The Festival may be over but its legacy lives on. The town has its own Festivalnaya Street, whose masters are now not just famous but in demand, with orders from Minsk, Moscow and Warsaw. In the villages, new courses and craft centres are opening, inspired by the famous festival and the special land of Pripyat Polesie.

Guests are always heartily welcomed here

From our hearts, we say 'Welcome to Belarus!' and meet them with sincere joy

By Vladimir Khromov

The *Welcome to Belarus* project — run by one of our leading TV channels — chose its name with good reason. Six families from China, Germany, South Korea, Spain, France and the USA arrived in Belarus for the first time, eager to learn more about our nation, its traditions and culture. They spent five days touring accompanied by ONT's film crew.

Alexander Lukashenko met the project participants at the National Library, enjoying a friendly atmosphere from the very first. Naturally, the foreign guests were full of impressions as they saw the sights, visited leading enterprises, tasted our national cuisine and enjoyed the beauties of the countryside. Their smiles proved their true pleasure at the trip and, really, could it have been otherwise? Belarusians have always been known for their hospitality and spirituality.

"Belarus is an open country," Mr. Lukashenko told the group. "We are a peaceful, sincere nation, keen to make friends with anyone — through trade, tourism and meeting freely. We have no alien attitude towards anyone. We

wish only kindness, happiness and prosperity to all." He stressed that the guests' fresh impressions are of special value.

The guests were of various ages and occupations, including teachers, businessmen, musicians and housewives.

German businessman Gerd Sommer was first to share his views. Accompanied by his wife Sabina and son Christian, travelling through the Mogilev Region, their trip was a true revelation, as Mr. Sommer admitted. He noted, "We've visited many countries but have never been welcomed with such hospitality as in Belarus. Sadly, we have little information on Belarus in Germany. We're impressed by your people, your cultural sites, your wonderful landscapes, good roads and tasty cuisine. Belarus has only been developing as an independent state for twenty years but your infrastructure development is worthy of respect. There are many construction sites in the country and you can construct well; however, we're ready to propose new technologies and would like to offer constructive co-operation after this trip."

Mr. Lukashenko thanked the German for his invitation to hunt on his



Guests during the meeting

own estate, adding that a lack of information on Belarus in Germany is bemusing, since thousands of Germans cross through Belarus annually — all with good impressions, even when only transiting. Such 'public diplomacy' stands high.

There's no doubt that the trip will remain in the guests' memories. Edgar Romeo Gadea, Elena Iskerdo Puebla and their four year old daughter Paula, from the Canary Islands, love our Belarusian lakes and forests, so will surely be dreaming of them on their return home. As Edgar admits, they had never before seen anything of the kind. Chi-

nese Weiwei Lan, his wife and ten year old son are now keen to publish a book about Belarus in China, to familiarise as many people as possible with its beauty. During his trip, Weiwei sent dozens of photos to friends by email; the Vitebsk Region's landscapes inspired his family to artistic endeavours: they drew a picture, presenting it to the President.

The trip coincided with the honeymoon of French Erve Giyo and his wife Lerans, who loved the Grodno Region for its architecture, culture of industrial production and, naturally, its hospitable and generous people. Lerans Boba Giyo believes the Belarusians

and French share many values: 'family, work ethics, culture and pride in our country'. The guests from South Korea were impressed by Brest Fortress and the Belovezhskaya Pushcha. "It seems that I've travelled back to my childhood for a while," smiled Kyung Seok Om, after meeting Father Frost in the Pushcha. They also shared a love for some of our traditional dishes, enjoying *draniki* (served with soya sauce rather than sour cream).

Robert James Brennan, from the USA, will certainly recollect Belarusian Polesie's natural beauty on returning home. He saw first-hand Belarusian diligence, industry and ambition. "Less than twenty years ago, you experienced a complicated period of transformation. It's hard to believe this on seeing how you live and are developing now," he said. Robert's musician son John, 22, promises to compose a song about Belarus which may inspire thousands of his countrymen (knowing nothing of Belarus) to see it with their own eyes.

Of course, such opinions are valuable since they can be used to help us assess our homeland more objectively, realising that we have much of which to be proud.