

Resorts with rural colour

Local rural estates visited by thousands of tourists last year — mostly Belarusian

By Svetlana Likhovtseva

Despite rural tourism having only really existed here for the past decade, it is proving very successful. As of early October, 1,917 rural estates were operational in Belarus, welcoming 145,000 visitors over a 12 month period. The figure is up almost 25 percent on the previous year, with Belarusians comprising the greatest number. Foreign guests were mostly from Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland.

Country of felt makers

It's no surprise that new projects are afoot to launch Belarus' first agro-tourist resort; the Volozhin District may be chosen, since it already boasts an agro-tourist cluster, an information centre and the 'Valozhynskiya Gastinsty' route. Valeria Klitsounova, the Chair of the Country Escape Public Association, tells us, "Over the course of time, agro-tourist resorts may appear in the Kopyl, Shchuchin, Dribin and Rossony districts, uniting estates owned privately and by agricultural enterprises, working in clusters. Each would need a distinct identity. For instance, the Dribin District could be marketed for its felt making, since it has preserved its hand-



Kholmogory agro-estate impresses journalists with traditional pastimes and old-fashioned comforts

made production of felt boots."

Many owners of rural estates are offering a great number of additional services, like mini tourist agencies. Anatoly Ganets, who runs Ganka agro-estate, explains, "To at-

tract tourists for stays of more than a day, we need to offer a diverse entertainment programme. This has led us to develop 'green' routes, create tourist clusters and build partnerships with local museums,

culture departments and craft centres. Besides organising evenings of classical, folk and jazz music, we run a museum of beekeeping and brewing, and invite guests to go fishing, hunting and bike riding.

You can tackle an assault course or take part in team building exercises, as well as many other activities. You can also rest and recuperate at Isloch spa, with whom we've signed an agreement."

Touching history with your own hands

Anniversary of 1812 War is an occasion to remember events which affected all European history

By Victor Andreev

Few recall that, on December 5th, Napoleon, fleeing the Russians, passed command of his French troops to Marshal Murat near Belarusian Smorgon, so that he might depart promptly for Paris. Late that evening, despite his aura of invincibility, 'the great emperor' admitted that the war was lost. Of course, it would have been better for events to have never crossed Belarus but facts cannot be avoided; we can only hope to learn from the past.

Smorgon's Local Historical Museum has an exhibition until December 5th detailing the events of 200 years ago, including

manuscripts and art reproductions donated by the Chairman of the National Commission for UNESCO, Vladimir Schastny, an honorary citizen of Smorgon. The National Art Museum has lent works by German graphic artist Christian Wilhelm von Faber du Faur, who served in Napoleon's army, capturing episodes from those war years.

Some private donors also have amazing items to contribute. Collector Juris Cibuls has brought an interesting object from Latvia, for donation to Grodno's Regional Library (named after Euphemy Karsky):

his collection of ABC-books — including a rare grammar book for soldiers, from 1812. Meanwhile, Borisov's restored estate of Ivan Kolodeev boasts one of the largest libraries about the events of 1812.

Small museums can be among the most wonderful, since they are more likely to allow visitors to touch and handle exhibits. The Bivouac Estate, near Borisov, is long established, preserving the memory of events of 1812. Nearby is Brilevskoe field, where many soldiers fell. Some attempt to dig illegally, under cover of the night,

but Sergey Tolstik, the owner, only displays things found on the surface.

Of course, some love to look at curiosities in museums and search for historical facts on yellowing papers but it's not for everyone. Some prefer to go horse riding like a hussar or hike in the footsteps of the armies of Napoleon and Alexander I. Bivouac offers horse riding while wearing the uniform of a soldier from the Russian Imperial Army, in the village of Studenka, where Napoleon attempted to cross the Berezina River, losing his army and his treasures. Altern-

tively, you can dance a traditional 19th century polonaise, mazurka, waltz, cotillion, quadrille or contradance. Of course, 200 years ago, there was love and romance as well as battles and grief: think of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

To truly 'feel' history, why not visit the village of Zemin; it's said that Napoleon slept in the local church after the tragic crossing of the Berezina.

Over the past 200 years, many artefacts have been lost, but many remain; even after the anniversary of the 1812 War, enthusiasts will continue to explore historical paths and travel agents will organise excursions.

