

# Kolyady in Pogost

CNN advises watchers to celebrate Christmas in Belarusian villages

Victor Karafa

The leading American TV company — CNN — has compiled a list of the ten best places to spend Christmas and the New Year, with Belarus placed third. The authors of the monthly *CNNGo* programme — recently launched — believe that Belarus may be an interesting destination for Christmas holidays, due to its Kolyady festival (a winter pagan custom which later combined with Christian Christmas and New Year). CNN advises viewers to particularly visit the village of Pogost, situated on the Pripyat River between Gomel and Kiev.

The hit parade author, Tiffany Lam, places Boston in tenth position for Christmas and New Year celebrations, recommending lobsters bought from the Christmas market. Ninth place goes to London, where the festive mood is supported by walking alongside Charles Dickens' characters. Eighth place goes to San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico, which earns its place for having the longest festive period (from November to mid-January). Hong Kong is placed seventh, primarily due to its 30m tall fir tree decorated with Swarovski crystals. On the other side of the world, the Rockefeller Centre Christmas tree is the most famous, illuminated by almost 8km of lights. Fifth position is devoted to Sydney, where Christmas occurs during mid-summer. Salzburg is ranked fourth for its historic city centre (on the UNESCO World Heritage List), with its famous Christmas market. Belarus' Pogost is placed third, while Nuremberg is second, welcoming almost 2m guests to its Christmas fair annually, from all over

the world. According to *CNNGo*, Reykjavik is the most festive winter destination for New Year and Christmas.

"Foreign tourists might face difficulties in visiting Belarus but the country's inaccessibility is compensated for by its impressive Christmas traditions," believes Ms. Lam. "The essence of the Belarusian festive period is focused on Kolyady, which has its origins in pagan celebrations. It was only later combined with Christian Christmas and New Year. In such villages as Pogost, young people entertain audiences with folk games on Kolyady. Local residents dress as animals, wearing animal masks on sticks as they go carol-singing to neighbouring villages."

Valeria Klitsounova chairs the Republican Public Association Country Escape, coordinating agro-ecotourism development in the country. She believes Pogost is a special place, "The local Orthodox Exaltation of the Holy Cross Chapel has a stone cross which was brought upstream to Belarus from Kiev a thousand years ago — when



REUTERS

Belarus interesting for tourists at Christmas, owing to its folk customs

Eastern Europe first adopted Christianity. However, Pogost is more well-known for its local customs. In 2004, 'Karagod' (a round dance) was the first custom in Belarus to gain the status of an intangible cultural treasure, taken under state protection."

On entering the village, 'Karagod' attributes are clearly on show: a hook, a round loaf, sprays of twigs and a rushnik (an embroidered towel) on top. However, this custom has no link to Kolyady; it is rather part of the spring holiday of Yuria. People go to the fields to inspect the winter crops and then perform a round dance through the village to bring luck to every house.

Hosts cook eggs and girls of a certain age are initiated into womanhood by being invited to join the female dancers. There is even a saying: 'a mother takes her daughter to the round dance once she fills her blouse'. Having joined the dance, young ladies can start searching for a husband. The Karagod custom is unique to the Turov district.

At present, the custom is performed by the local *Mezhdurechie* group — known for preserving old traditions. Every year, they gather to perform the ceremony exactly. *Mezhdurechie* comprises Pogost villagers and those from neighbouring villages; it shall soon celebrate its 30th

birthday, with all participants taking part voluntarily, for fun.

Pogost villagers welcome guests for Kolyady annually, with visitors often staying at a hotel in neighbouring Turov (the oldest city in the country, dating back many thousands of years) which is 5km from the village, or at the National Park Pripyatsky.

Belarus' Culture Ministry tells us that Kolyady customs exist in dozens of villages, with Pogost one among many. Semezhevo (in the Kopyl district, not far from Minsk) has its 'Kolyady Tsars' custom, which joined the World Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2009. According to Natalia Khvir, the Chair of the Historical and Cultural

Heritage Protection and Restoration Department of the Culture Ministry of Belarus, this custom is on the State List of Historical-Cultural Treasures of the country, and is unique in uniting elements of Kolyady and the people's drama *Tsar Maximilian*. Young men (the 'tsars') dress in white trousers and shirts, with red embroidered Semezhevo belts tied across their chests, and high caps adorned with colourful paper ribbons. Their procession at 'Shchedry Vecher' (generous evening) takes place on the night of January 13th to 14th, as they visit villagers' houses and perform 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.

Belarusian tourist firms are ready to organise trips to see these ancient customs, promoting these oldest of European traditions.

## The MT reference:

The name of the village — Pogost — has an interesting origin. 'Pogost' (or 'pahost' in Belarusian) has several meanings. Initially, it was the name of an inn welcoming dukes, clergy and merchants. Later, the word referred to villages collected together into administrative groups and, eventually, the village cemetery became known as a pogost.



Old Kolyady customs preserved in dozens of villages

## Guide book released

By Andrey Anikeev

### First French guide book on Belarus released jointly with National Tourism Agency

The edition has been prepared by the Petit Fute Publishing House, with several thousand copies released in French, targeting exclusively French speaking readers.

Belarus is presented in the guide book as an interesting destination, as yet unstudied and untouched by tourists, making it even more attractive. "The French authors have especially

noted our rich Belarusian nature, our friendly and hospitable people and the diversity of our culture," notes Valery Boldyrev, the Head of the National Tourism Agency's Department for Marketing and Publishing Activity. "They believe that all these should be seen with one's own eyes on visiting Belarus."

The edition describes the most interesting sights country-wide, providing plenty of practical information. It also has a small dictionary and bright photos, which should attract the attention of French tourists.

## Ancient folio in new form

By Tatiana Kiryushchenko

### Belarusian scientists to study *Life of Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya* via digital copy

The 16th century book is part of the Pogodin Collection, held by the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg. However, it has been copied by the Belarusian Exarchate Publishing House, at the request of scientists from the National Academy of Sciences.

*The Life of Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya* is an outstanding monument to the ancient Eastern Slavonic written language, believed to have

been written in the late 12th century in Polotsk. Over 180 Belarusian manuscripts from the 16th-18th century are kept abroad (in Russia, Lithuania and Ukraine), making work with these ancient books difficult.

"The electronic copy of the manuscript gives the opportunity for further study, by scientists and by anyone interested in our past and in our written legacy. It is a gift to all Orthodox believers in Belarus and a gift to Polotsk in particular, from where Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya — our duchess and mother superior — hailed," notes Elvira

Yermolenko, a senior research officer at the Yakub Kolas and Yanka Kupala Language and Literature Institute's History Department of the National Academy of Sciences.

The copy will allow all those wishing to familiarise themselves with the *Life* to do so. In future, this material can be used in creating an archive of Old Church Slavonic manuscripts, which were widely spread on the territory of ancient Belarus.

Work has already begun, with the text of the 16th century Slutsk Gospel restored and its language studied.