

Workcamp report "W4U-19" by Thomas Przibylla

I guess YOU read this to get to know if you should participate in a workcamp in Russia respectively Nizhni Novgorod. Well, I would really recommend you to.

I am Thomas, a 23-year-old student from Germany and the workcamp I did in Nizhnij Novgorod (=N.N.) from 08.07. until 30.07.2002 was my second one. The information I got before the camp were little but ok. I knew I would help to renovate a school and work together with 16-year-old pupils.

You should apply for a camp in Russia as soon as possible because you need an invitation to apply for the visa and the costs for the visa, at least in Germany, depend on the time you can wait. The faster you need it the more you pay (For Germans: Check information on www.russische-botschaft.de AND the table with the costs on www.bonn.russische-botschaft.de/Visa_Trif.htm#Visumsbearbeitungsgebuehr).

All the volunteers met on the 8th of July in the World4U-office in Moscow and because of the registration I needed to arrive one day before. I got my registration in the youth hostel I stayed in (otherwise you need to go to a special office). The next day I got to know the other volunteers: Elien from the Netherlands, Olivier from France (Simone from Belgium came later) and our funny campleader Lena from Moscow. After some first impressions in the Russian capital (Cyrilic letters, a lot of people, beautiful and full metro stations, Lenin everywhere,...) and an introduction into Russian sweets by the kind people from the office we took the night train to N.N.

A normal day in the workcamp looked like this: We got up at quarter to eight, had a meeting with the principals, teachers and pupils where the mighty principal told us what to do this day. After the breakfast we started to work for about four hours, had a shower outside (only cold water but it's fresh after the work) and then lunch. In the afternoon we often had some excursion with the kids, going for a swim, visiting the city or an interesting place around. Otherwise we had some free time to discover the surrounding, play in the gym, check emails in an internet-cafe or just to have a rest. In the afternoon we had tea&cookies and in the evening dinner. We did so much these days that they seem to be longer than in Germany. It was really fun, especially to get to know all the nice people and this strange and in a way 'hidden' country. During work we carried furniture, dragged the surface of tables and chairs, painted them and filled out wall holes. Often we started to sing, to play with water or filling paste, we taught each other some words in our languages or answered questions about life in Europe. The work was ok, it was organized well and there were always some tools so nobody got bored. And although we had sometimes doubts about the aim of moving tables from one room to another the whole work always made sense. The exchange with pupils was easy, especially with those who spoke English. If they didn't there was always somebody to translate, a pupil or Lena. Anyway, I think all the volunteers were really glad having her as the campleader and there were even some rumours about her to be the best campleader of the world! She seemed to not need a lot of sleep and always woke up as the first person. She cared all the time about us, our stomachs, souls,... But nevertheless we always considered her to be an equal member of our group and not a leader.

In my opinion N.N. was a perfect place to make a camp. I didn't want to participate in one in Moscow or St.Petersburg because on the one hand I would visit them after the camp anyway and on the other hand I think they are not representative for Russian culture. In a way they are already very Western. N.N. has about two million citizens so there are enough nightclubs, internet-cafes, pubs, a kremlin, cathedrals,... But nevertheless it was not very touristic and you could watch

normal Russian life, people not as much in a hurry as in Moscow. And it was also a good starting point for outings. On two weekends we visited other camps which were situated on the countryside. We got to know the beautiful Russian nature (included mosquitoes; repellent!!!), old villages, the Banya (Russian sauna), different wodkas and of course a lot of nice people. Have you ever cleaned your dishes in the middle of the river inside a canu? It was fun.

But we had also a lot of fun with the kids at school. Besides the work we played cards (Uno rules.), played sports or had some disco nights, fun even without alcohol or smoking. The kids were really enthusiastic and all of us took part in a lot of games which western teenagers would probably laugh about. But instead of laughing about each other we laughed together.

'What about' accommodation and food? Well, after we had slept two nights in a classroom where we had meetings in the daytime, we decided to move to a room where we would have some privacy and would not have to tidy up all our things every day. We moved to another class room and everything was fine (And after the weekend in the forest camp we could only smile about the few mosquitos in the night). The food was a real discussion topic. At first, as a vegetarian I was lucky that I didn't have to starve and I felt that the cooks really cared about me. Most of the time the food was ok. But for three weeks it was too similar; after some days I really didn't feel like tomatoes and cucumbers anymore. The food was also not very balanced. We often had the same and there seemed to be a lack of vitamins so we sometimes bought some fruits by ourselves. Of course, we all were aware of the poorness and the limited possibilities the school had. But the government e.g. bought a lot of sweets for the camp so we almost had some every meal. I think it would have been better if they had bought at least some fruits instead.

But anyway, it was a great camp and I will definitively participate in another workcamp, considering it to be the best way to get to know a different culture, a different country and different people.