

From Russia, With Love

Exchange student gets taste of life in a different country

By Debby Schoeningh

Photos of Russia often depict people clad in fur-lined coats and boots, and the trademark ushanka (fur hat). Alex Xeros of Baker City recently found out this stereotypical image is not so much a fashion statement as it is a necessity. Russia can get darn cold!

As a Rotary Exchange student, Alex is in Blagoveschensk, in the Amur region, southeast of the Russian Federation. About two months into his stay, Alex felt compelled to don the traditional Russian attire. The average winter temperature in the Amur region is -22°F .

Alex, 17, arrived in Russia September 1, 2006, sponsored by the Baker City Rotary Club. Eight months into his stay, he reports via e-mail to family and friends and says he has learned much about the area, its people, its culture and swimming in “cold, cold water.”

After picking out a hole in the iced over Amur River, Alex followed the lead of Blagoveschensk Rotarian and cold swimming club member Alexsei Balandin and plunged in. The water is around 34°F , just barely above freezing.

“Swimming in the water is an old tradition, and it also has to do with Christian beliefs,” says Alex. “When you go swimming in the cold water you dunk your head three times for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It’s like being re-baptized every time you go swimming.”

Alex says after getting out of the water and breathing in the cool air, which lasted all of about 30 seconds, he did manage to participate in a brisk, but short, run with Alexsei be-



fore reaching for his fur coat.

Although not a teeth-chattering event like the swimming, Alex says attending a Russian wedding was also interesting, and much different from an American wedding.

“There is no priest, and it’s very quick,” he says. “They basically just sign the papers and then go have a toast in this very pretty wedding palace. Then the couple leaves the palace and has a reception somewhere else. Many people get married there instead of at church, because they don’t know how the church wedding works, since religion was banned during communist times.”

Alex has witnessed a communist demonstration at Lenin Square, visited Moscow’s famous Red Square, and has appeared in three Russian newspapers and did an interview on television with a local news station.

He has learned Russians have their personal views about Americans.

“Some people are interested in America, and a lot of people question the stereotypes that they have of Americans,” he says. “They see us as busy people who are always checking

our watches, always smiling and eating lots of hamburgers. I have had to discredit those stereotypes.”

Besides immersing himself in the local culture and sightseeing, Alex says school takes up a large portion of his time. Although it did take a little time for the students at his school in Blagoveschensk to warm up to him, he says they gave him a nickname the first day of school—Sasha, which is a Russian nickname for Alex.

The Russian school system has 11 grades. Alex is in the eleventh grade there. He says school in Russia is much more intense.

“Although it’s shorter, most days I’m in school five hours, only on Tuesday it’s four hours,” he says. “They don’t have a real lunch break like we do, and there are no fun assemblies or pep rallies.”

“There are no sports teams or clubs after school. They are way ahead of us by the time they finish high school. I went through every textbook to try and find something familiar and I finally found it in a seventh-grade textbook. I’m doing seventh-grade math and it makes me feel a little dumb.



Above, Alex Xeros, right, swims in the Amur River with Alexsei Balandin a Rotarian in Blagoveschensk. Opposite page, Alex visited Red Square in Moscow. The building is a museum.

“After school most kids have even more lessons and private tutors to help with the subjects they struggle with in school.”

In Russian schools, all subjects are mandatory. There are no electives. They also are required to learn the different classes of soldiers in the Russian army and the signs and marks on their uniforms.

Alex has been invited to school dances called “discoteks” and is enjoying many of the same things teenagers do here, except driving and dating, which are forbidden by the Rotary organization. The Rotary also forbids the use of drugs or drinking alcohol.

“I’ve recited the four D’s to my friends every time they offer me alcohol or try to hook me up with some girl,” he says. “I haven’t seen any drugs yet, except smoking, but most of the people I hang out with don’t smoke.”

His Russian home life is simi-

lar to his home in Baker City. He helps around the house cooking and cleaning. He says the only difference is that he has to do his own laundry.

“At my home my mom does the laundry,” he says.

His first host family in Russia, Viktor and Larisa Patlays, made him feel very welcome.

“The first day I got here, even though she didn’t speak any English, my host mom looked up in the dictionary and put together the sentence, ‘You are at home now and you are our son,’” says Alex. “She even bugged me about cutting my hair, which I wanted to do, but then again didn’t—Especially after my host dad recommended a mullet, which is for some reason very popular over here.”

He is now living with his second host family.

Alex says he is becoming increasingly confident with the language, and communication is no longer

difficult.

“Even though it’s bad (speaking Russian), I can understand much better and I’m starting to understand the structure and the verb conjugations,” he says. “I still haven’t dreamt in Russian, although I know I’m getting closer, even though it is still a little frustrating at times. I just try to be patient and keep working at it.”

Alex also is getting better at finding his way around Blagoveschensk, which has a population of 250,000, taking advantage of the public transportation system.

“I feel totally safe and comfortable going places by myself,” he says.

However, he did get lost once and had to call for help.

Alex is scheduled to return to the states July 11, but until then he will continue to keep friends and family updated, signing his e-mails in the fashion of James Bond from a well known movie in America, “From Russia, With Love.” ■