

FATHER FROST



Our faith in Santa Claus never wavered until we went to Miskolc in Hungary a couple of years ago. During occasional December visits to England, we had noticed Santa Special flights advertised from even quite minor regional airports. All the way to Rovaniemi in northern Finland and back in a day! Just enough time to confirm that the old man with white beard and red suit really exists, have a chat with the elves, feed the reindeer, and still be home by midnight. But a chance encounter in Miskolc in early December 2003 sowed the seeds of doubt.

Santa Claus was posing for photographs against the fading Baroque façades of a Hungarian industrial town at the very time of year when he should have been up in northern Finland busying himself in preparation for the

upcoming peak season. But what was really troubling was that Santa Claus' appearance in Miskolc was evidently of far less consequence than the furore occasioned by the presence of a seeming rival to the short sighted old man from Lapland. For Father Frost and his Snow Maiden were in town, and when these two Russian celebrities eventually came face to face with Santa Claus outside Miskolc's crumbling Jewish orthodox synagogue, it was evident that, in terms of crowd appeal, the Russian duo won hands down.

Courtesies were exchanged between the old man in red with a sack, who had evidently left his reindeer in the local car park, and the glamorous impostors from the Russian North. Father Frost and the Snow Maiden, who was wearing too much make-up, introduced themselves by

the Arctic ocean. Veliky Ustyug, inaccessible but beautiful, sits comfortably on the far bank of the Sukhona, a calm ensemble of domes and wooden buildings. And the mosquitoes have not yet arrived.

Just as the last of the morning mist eventually clears, there is the unmistakable roar of distant jet engines, and within seconds the planes are overhead. The screech of two Russian military jets, unmistakable grey profiles of Su-24 bombers with their narrow fuselage and long pointed nose cones, intruders from another world that send a couple of grouse scurrying for cover in the boreal wilderness. Away to the north, the two planes dance a great arc in the clear spring sky, and then return, this time flying so low over Veliky Ustyug that children playing in the yard by the new school off the main shopping street, Uspenskaia, can even see the faces of the pilots. And then, audible even above the roar of the twin engine jets, there is another louder and more ominous sound, as both planes drop bombs with cold precision. The sharp thuds of detonation reverberate along the whole valley, and a great cloud of icy smoke rises in the distance.

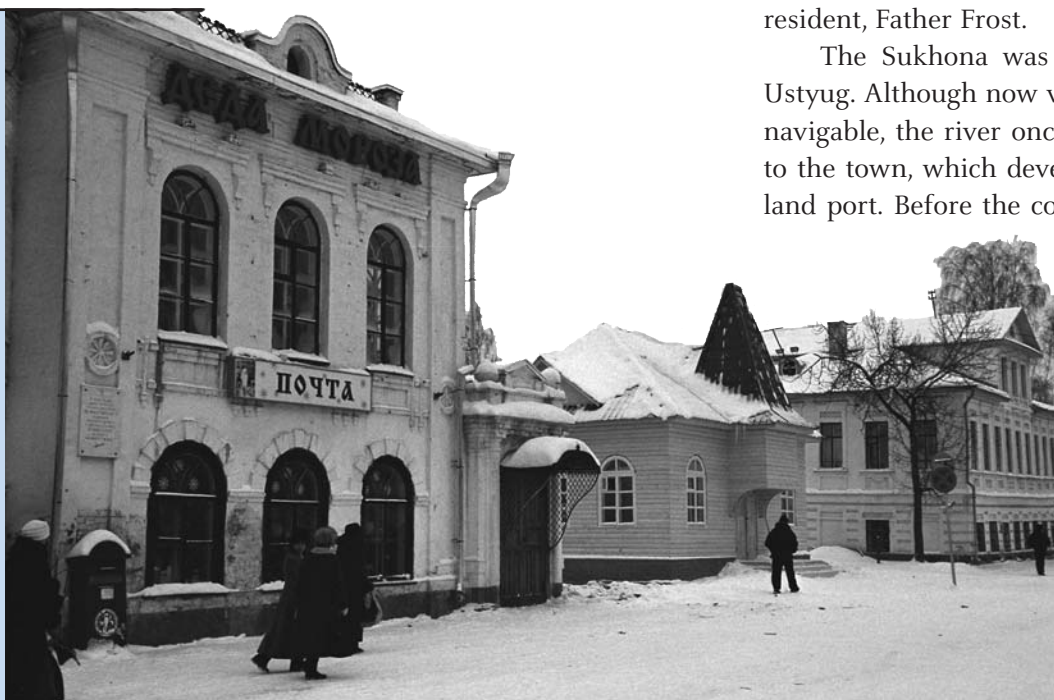
Father Frost, who lives in his wooden palace in the forests at Votchina (Вотчина) a few miles outside Veliky Ustyug is untroubled

by the morning bombing raids, and, although his house and workshops vibrate with noise, work continues to its usual diligent routine. He and the Snow Maiden have grown accustomed to the bombers. They mark the coming of spring in the Sukhona valley. Not every year, but when the winter has been especially harsh, and ice dams on the river impound dangerous reservoirs of water upstream, then the Russian air force is called in to blast great holes in the ice dams and so allow the water to flow again. The Yug and the Sukhona rivers, which converge just upstream of Veliky Ustyug, have sometimes wrought havoc through the region, as in 1998 when ice dams suddenly broke and caused catastrophic flooding. Nowadays, a few carefully positioned bombs, before the build up of water behind the huge barriers of ice becomes too threatening, reduce the risk of a repeat of 1998.

Veliky Ustyug is one of the oldest towns in Russia, a place that history somehow left behind. From a distance, it is untouchably beautiful, the sort of place that should only figure in films. Close up, its charms are offset by last year's rubbish and a social malaise that is so common in rural Russia. It is a place that history forgot, and a place that forgot its own history. It is only in recent years that Veliky Ustyug has found itself in the limelight again, and that only because of its most famous resident, Father Frost.

The Sukhona was the making of Veliky Ustyug. Although now very shallow and barely navigable, the river once brought great wealth to the town, which developed as a thriving inland port. Before the construction of the great

railway routes into the Russian interior, river trade was all important, and Veliky Ustyug's prime lo-



the post office in Veliky Ustyug must surely be one of the busiest in all Russia (photo courtesy of the Vologda Oblast government)

cation near the confluence of two great rivers gave the city a powerful role in controlling commerce. Goods from England and Holland were taken by ship to the northern port of Arkhangelsk (Архангельск), and then river barges would make their way up the rivers, travelling for days through the taiga forests. And in return, produce from central Asia, India and the Orient bound for Europe would pass through Veliky Ustyug. It is said that the merchants on the Sukhona river knew a dozen uses of cinnamon long before it was ever seen in Moscow. Chinese ink was the norm in Veliky Ustyug at a time when its use in western Europe was restricted to a privileged few. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 put paid to the river trade and the whole river and land route from northwest Europe to northern China. Veliky Ustyug languished. As did hundreds of other communities across Russia that thrived on trade with China. Who now remembers Kyakhta (Кяхта), the nineteenth century border post between Russia and China where merchants from east and west would gather to trade? From the west came linens, furs and leather, and from the east great bales of tea, silks, porcelain, ginger and musk.

There are hints of the past throughout Veliky Ustyug. In one square there is a monument to Dezhnev (Дежнев), the seventeenth century explorer born here. He was the first European to discover the Bering Strait between Asia and Alaska. This is a fine historical detail that goes unremarked in the modern town on the Sukhona river by the men with their vodka bottles who gather each day at the Dezhnev monument. And though the merchants have long gone, the Severnaia Chern workshop on Uspenskaia perpetuates a remnant of the town's former exotic trading connections. There, patient craftsmen still produce fine niello silverwork of a kind not seen anywhere else in northern Europe — delicate black alloy inlaid on engraved silver in a style more commonly associated with Egypt, Thailand or the hill villages of Dagestan. But the high waters of 1998 brought in another kind of trade. Father Frost set up for business in Veliky Ustyug, bringing unprecedented trade to the town's handsome white post office, its one hotel



Father Frost (Ded Moroz) and accessories in Veliky Ustyug (photo courtesy of the Vologda Oblast government)

and to the various local entrepreneurs who now organise day trips out to Father Frost's estate at Votchina.

In the competition for the seasonal affections of Europe's children, Santa Claus has one key advantage over Father Frost — accessibility. Santa and his elves live bang on the Arctic Circle just beyond the end of the runway at Rovaniemi airport, little more than three hours flying time from most European capitals. Father Frost is not thus blessed. Veliky Ustyug has no airport, and even its attractive little railway station seems curiously devoid of trains. While it is no longer necessary to travel for days on a barge up the river from Arkhangelsk, the daily train from the northern port to Kotlas, the nearest railhead for Veliky Ustyug, takes nineteen hours for the eight hundred kilometres journey through Russian wilderness. With no dining car, limited creature comforts and forty three stops en route, this is not a journey for the faint hearted. For more sensible ways of reaching Veliky Ustyug, see our information on routes (box overleaf).

Father Frost and the Snow Maiden have brought colour and commerce to Veliky Ustyug. No other man in this part of northern Russia walks round town with such a dashing red gown, richly embroidered with silver and pearls, and such a striking crystal staff. Add in the Snow Maiden, with her ample supply of rouge and cheeky smiles, and you have a winning formula that should have Santa Claus

Visiting Santa Claus is easy. Both Finnair (www.finnair.com) and Blue1 (www.blue1.fi) operate regular direct flights from Helsinki to Rovaniemi. In the weeks running up to Christmas, about sixty extra flights per week land on the runway that is bisected by the Arctic Circle, the great majority charter flights from Britain bringing hugely gullible day trippers in search of elves, reindeer and that all important encounter with Santa Claus. This is, it has to be said, scarcely the best first encounter with Lapland. But, for those with the money, day trips operate from many UK airports with prices from about €550 (www.santadays.co.uk).

For a similar outlay, visitors could have an entire week in northern Russia visiting Veliky Ustyug for a much more exotic encounter with Father Frost and the Snow Maiden. With discount airlines now including Moscow in their schedules, getting to Veliky Ustyug has never been easier. Direct trains from Moscow's Yaroslavsky station take upwards of eighteen hours to Kotlas, whence it is an hour by bus to Veliky Ustyug.

In Veliky Ustyug, the Hotel Sukhona offers doubles from €17 and excellent suites from €25 per night. *Na Uspenskoi* is the place to eat. Father Frost and the Snow Maiden operate a year round business, but naturally things are at their most feverish in the run-up to the New Year.

looking to his image makers. Never has Veliky Ustyug's post office been as busy, and, in the closing weeks of each year, dozens of local residents secure some much needed income by writing replies to the thousands of letters mailed to Father Frost.

Day trips are out of the question, given Veliky Ustyug's outback location, but for those with time and a taste for eclectic travel, a visit to Father Frost and the Snow Maiden surely beats a day trip to Lapland. Sadly, Father Frost and the Snow Maiden rarely venture outside Russia. Their journey to Miskolc in Hungary, where we first met them in December 2003, seems to have been something of an exception. But this year, as the snow falls softly all around, if we do catch a glimpse of a silhouetted figure leaving presents for us, we'll check more carefully than in the past. If it is just an old man in red with a sack over his shoulder, we'll not be displeased. But we would like to think that just possibly it might be a much more regal figure, a tall man in red robes trimmed with the down

of swans from the Sukhona river, a man of stately bearing with a crystal staff. And accompanied of course by the Snow Maiden. We shall leave out a drop of vodka just in case!

Lapland to Russia

CONTEXT

For truly dedicated disciples of Father Frost and Santa Claus, there is splendid news this autumn, with the restoration of the direct air link from Rovaniemi to Arkhangelsk. Take a Santa Special flight to Rovaniemi by all means, but instead of just visiting Santa, his elves and the reindeer, why not continue on to Arkhangelsk and check out Father Frost on the same trip? There is surely no better way to secure real street cred and stand out from the crowds of day trippers who will visit northern Finland this Advent.

The wonderfully provincial Rovaniemi to Arkhangelsk air route was pioneered by Arkhangelsk Airlines in the mid nineties, but somehow dropped out of the schedules. But now it is back, flown by Aeroflot Nord (Аэрофлот-Норд) using old Antonov turboprops for a four hour flight that includes a touchdown at Murmansk en route. Departures from Rovaniemi are twice weekly, which means that those with an appetite for unusual travel and a Russian visa can visit Santa Claus in northern Finland on a Thursday, then take the 6 pm flight from Rovaniemi to Arkhangelsk. Overnight there, take the Friday slow train to Kotlas, and be at Father Frost's place by dusk on Saturday. Such tenacity in travel would surely warrant the warmest of greetings from the Snow Maiden, and *hidden europe* would love to hear from any reader who makes this journey. Details of the Aeroflot Nord flight on www.avl.aero and train connections can be found on www.poezda.net. ■

hidden europe's thanks goes to the Vologda Oblast government and especially to Ольга Тропина (Olga Tropina) for her assistance in providing photographs of Veliky Ustyug and Father Frost. Without Olga's superb command of English and generous help, unravelling the tale of Father Frost would have been much more difficult.