

## Nottingham Scouts—Pioneer Explorer Scouts—Russian Winter Expedition- February 2010



"Russia in February? You must be mad!" was most people's response to our plan. But encouraged by the survival stories of previous participants, an intrepid group of Explorer Scouts from Pioneer unit volunteered for the winter adventure of a lifetime.

Eight months of letter writing, cake baking, bag packing and quiz selling later, we had covered our costs, assembled our thermals, and were ready to go. Travelling to St Petersburg, we quickly got to know the rest of the party: a total of 16 leaders & Explorers from Nottingham, Cambridge and Peterborough.

Being met at the airport by our hosts was the first demonstration of the consistently warm welcome that we received throughout. Our first full day was spent with our new Russian friends leading us on a walking tour around the whole of the snow-covered city. Beautiful palaces,

spectacular churches, and signs of the communist past offered a fascinating contrast to the modern high-street shops and restaurants. Walking on the ice of the frozen river Neva proved a particular highlight, whilst the limitless opportunities for snowball fights ensured there was never a dull moment.

After two nights in a hotel, it was time for the real expedition to begin. We caught a train to Losevo and walked a few miles to the camp which would be our home for the week. A group of wooden huts each slept four people in bunk beds, while a larger hut offered a communal space for meals and indoor activities. We had lessons on keeping warm with a wood burning stove, where to find logs and the axes to chop them, as well as how to collect drinking water from the well. Special introductions were also required for the 3 dogs and 2 cats (at least!) who lived on site.

Hot soup and bread settled us straight into a daily rhythm of good food at every opportunity, provided with smiling efficiency by our cooks. Later that evening a roaring campfire bridged the gaps of language and cultural differences as we showed that action songs are truly universal!

The rest of the week was spent in a state of near constant activity. Issued with cross country skis, we spent many happy hours falling face down into the snow and laughing at others doing the same. Doughnut sledging (throwing yourself down a mountain on a rubber ring) also proved very popular. Outdoor challenges involving assault courses, maps, ropes and pioneering poles tested various skills and developed team work. Throughout, we were encouraged to share and challenge stereotypes by learning about different ways of life. Whenever the bitter cold started to take its toll (temperatures were regularly below  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) we warmed up with hot tea, coffee, cakes and the universally popular pr'janic or star biscuits. And in the evening, there was the searing



Late in the week, we faced our biggest single challenge – to spend a night under canvas. One 8 man tent between 15 people ensured things were cosy. But the key to survival lay in a small metal shoe box suspended from the roof, with a narrow tube running out from the box to a hole in the wall. This tiny box could hold a fire big enough to keep the whole tent and warm, whilst the outside temperature dipped towards  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The only catch was that someone needed to be awake at all times to feed it constantly with wood. A rota ensured that everyone took their turn during the night, and so working together kept everyone warm.

A Russian night of pancakes, folk music and dancing was reciprocated on English night with stew and mash, followed by trifle, angel delight and cheese and biscuits. On the final night, as we exchanged party games, stories, gifts and email addresses, we realised how much had been learned in one short visit.

Every participant had made new friends, gained understanding, grown in confidence and took away memories that will last a life time. Saying good bye to our friendly, generous hosts who had taken such good care of us, the question most frequently being asked was "When can we come back?"

*Karen Wood, ESL*



**Network Russia—Winter Expedition to Losovo, Russia – 2010**