

Russian Folklore Expedition -- What to Expect

Volunteer Requirements

Volunteers need no specialized skills or training, but bear in mind that life in rural Russia is not for everyone. Before applying, please evaluate yourself honestly as regards the following:

Physical requirements

Life and travel in rural Russia can be strenuous. Volunteers *must* be physically able to:

1. Walk a level mile (1.6 k) in 30 minutes
2. Carry all their own luggage, including up and down stairs
3. Use pit toilets with no seats
4. Adapt to local cuisine (see “Daily Life” section below)

Emotional requirements

Working with a team in unfamiliar surroundings can be emotionally strenuous. Volunteers *must* exhibit :

1. Flexibility and patience necessary for teamwork
2. Emotional stability, with no extreme highs or lows
3. Tolerance for lack of privacy and lack of certainty
4. Tolerance and respect for unfamiliar customs

Research Requirements

Please bear in mind that this is research, not tourism.

1. Respect for local customs is essential to the success of the research.
2. All information, data, and images shared or gathered during your expedition become the intellectual property of the American Friends of Russian Folklore. You are welcome to share your images and recordings with friends, local media or in a public forum; however, academic or business use require express written permission from AFRF.

Daily Life in the Field

Typical daily schedule:

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|-------|----|--|
| 9:00 | AM | breakfast |
| 10:00 | AM | daily briefing, outline of the day's plans |
| 11:00 | AM | walk or drive to a home or other recording location |
| 11:30 | AM | record and photograph interviews, music or dance performances |
| 1:30 | PM | walk to dinner location |
| 2:00 | PM | dinner |
| 3:00 | PM | break |
| 4:00 | PM | walk or drive to a home or other recording location |
| 4:30 | PM | record and photograph interviews, music or dance performances; or check English translations of song texts |
| 7:00 | PM | walk to supper location |
| 7:30 | PM | supper |
| 8:30 | PM | summarize results achieved during the work day |

Actual field conditions (milking time, road conditions, relaxed pace of village life) mean that that schedules are more like proposals than plans. Volunteers are advised to relax, let the staff worry about scheduling, and bring a book or other quiet activity to fill the inevitable gaps.

Volunteers' assignments:

The volunteers' primary responsibilities will be observing, recording and translating.

Informants (whether singing, dancing or telling their life stories) need a good audience. Expedition staff (who focus on maintaining personal contact with the informant) need someone to aim the camera and monitor the recording equipment. Expedition staff also need native speakers of English to polish their translations of songs and other folklore texts. In each of these three areas, volunteers play a crucial role.

Regular pauses for translation and explanation keep volunteers connected to the informants and to the performance.

Living conditions:

In the village, volunteers will stay in clean local homes. Rooms will be shared by three or four expedition members. Couples will have their own private space. In cold weather, homes are well heated with wood-burning stoves.

Beds, mattresses, and pillows will be provided, but volunteers need to bring their own linens (sheets and pillowcases) and be sure to take them along when they leave. Village laundry facilities typically consist of a bucket and a clothesline, thus it is very rude to impose washing chores on village hosts.

Pit toilets (no seats), in a small outbuilding, are the norm in the village. Squatting is required.

Village homes typically have electricity, refrigerators, and gas cook stoves. Some have running water, others require water to be carried in from the well. Showers are rare, but expedition staff can usually arrange a session in a local banya (Russian steam bath) every 3 or 4 days, plus swimming trips in the summer.

Meals:

In the village, team members will take turns cooking and washing up for the group. Meals will be eaten in one of the houses where team members are living. Volunteers need to provide their own cups, plates, bowls and flatware. Please be aware that village standards of sanitary food handling and storage may not measure up to urban Western standards.

In the summertime, expect lots of locally grown produce (potatoes, beets, carrots, cabbage, onions, apples, berries, wild mushrooms) plus eggs and dairy products from neighborhood hens and cows. These are supplemented by bread, grains, pasta, meat, poultry and sweets from the village store. Winter expeditions can expect less fresh produce and more pickled or canned vegetables. Tea is served at every meal.

Volunteers should not drink untreated tap water. You may drink boiled water, or buy your own bottled water (and other drinks) at the village store. These purchases are not covered in the expedition fee.

Please contact Yelena Minyonok about any special dietary requirements before submitting your application.

Cultural norms:

Volunteers need to be prepared for village norms of acceptable behavior. Some examples:

Names

Most adults are addressed by full first name and patronymic: not as “Tania”, but as “Tatiana Andreevna”.

Precedence

Men generally get served first at meals, get the first turn at the banya, are referred to first in conversation, and so forth.

Smoking

Women smokers should smoke in private, as public smoking is considered inappropriate. Staff will assist in finding a suitable location.

Alcohol

Alcohol, especially vodka, is deeply ingrained in Russian life. Volunteers are not forced to drink, but must make their peace with the fact that they will be invited to drink, repeatedly. Volunteers who wish to avoid alcohol should consult with staff to find ways to politely decline.

Privacy and personal time

Younger volunteers especially may find themselves centers of attention, with local young people coming around to visit after the volunteer has put in a long day of recording and interviewing. If you find this overwhelming, expedition staff can work out an arrangement to accommodate your needs for personal time and the work of the expedition. Volunteers should never accompany locals on a social outing without a staff member in attendance.

Language:

Expedition working languages are English and Russian. Staff are fluent in both languages. Interviews, song texts and conversations are all translated into English. Thus, no knowledge of Russian is required of volunteers.

Still, a few Russian phrases can go a long way. Consult any good Russian guidebook for expressions such as “yes”, “no”, “hello”, “goodbye”, “thank you”, “excuse me”, “I don’t understand”, etc.

Volunteers who do speak Russian will find their skills put to good use, and must be patient with the necessity of translations for others.

Medical Emergencies in the Field

Most villages have a rudimentary medical center staffed by personnel with basic medical training and access to limited medical supplies. Serious cases will be transported by Emergency Response car to the nearest hospital, typically 30 minutes to an hour away. First aid is provided free of charge to foreigners, but we recommend that volunteers obtain travel medical insurance and consider medical evacuation insurance.

Preparing for Your Trip

Money and credit cards:

Allow about \$100 US for souvenirs, museum admission, alcoholic beverages and sundries while on the expedition. Do not plan on exchanging currency or using credit cards anywhere except large cities. Consult a current Russian guidebook for detailed information about currency exchange, ATMs, etc.

Packing checklist for summer expeditions:

Documents

- this expedition briefing
- passport & visa
- photocopies of passport, visa, credit cards, packed separately from originals
- certification of inoculation (if required)

Clothing (please, no revealing or extreme clothing)

- Well broken in, comfortable walking shoes or hiking boots
- long sleeved shirts
- short sleeved shirts
- sweater or jacket
- raincoat
- men and women: jeans or pants (no shorts please! Shorts are appropriate for children only.)
- women: skirts or dresses about knee length or longer--required for entering Orthodox churches and cemeteries.
- women: head covering – also required for entering Orthodox churches and cemeteries
- sandals, slippers or thick socks to wear inside the house
- summer-weight pajamas

Field supplies:

- insect repellent
- small daypack/ rucksack
- drybag or sealable plastic bag for protecting cameras, recorders, etc. from dust and moisture
- water bottle
- flashlight/torch and extra batteries (for night trips to the outdoor toilet)

Linens

- towel
- bed linens (sheets and pillow case – sleeping bag NOT recommended)
- earplugs and eye mask for sleeping

Personal supplies

- spoon, fork, knife & unbreakable cup, plate, bowl
- personal toiletries (recommended: biodegradable soap and shampoo)
- roll of toilet paper
- antibacterial wipes or lotion
- personal first aid kit (anti-diarrhea pills, antibiotic ointment, antiseptic, itch-relief, pain relief, bandages, moleskin, etc.)
- sun screen SPF 30 or higher
- any prescription or non-prescription medications you might possibly need

Miscellaneous

- a song to sing that represents your country
- spending money
- small umbrella
- camera, film or memory cards, extra batteries

- audio recorder (not mini format)
- pictures of your family, home, city, workplace or school to share with villagers

Optional

- swimsuit
- small gifts for villagers: colored sewing thread, flower seeds, scarves, souvenirs from your hometown; caps and small toys for children

Packing checklist for winter expeditions:

Russian buildings are very well heated in the winter, so the main concern is keeping warm outside. Consequently, pack as above, but

leave these at home:

- insect repellent, umbrella, swimsuit, raincoat

and add these:

- warm hat and gloves of wool, synthetic fleece or fur
- warm overcoat (about calf length is best)
- boots with good treads as well as warm lining or room for extra socks
- winter-weight pajamas or long underwear

Visas, electricity, ATMs, telephones, etc.

Travel to Russia requires a visa, and visas require an invitation. We will provide the written invitation, but volunteers must arrange and pay for their own visas.

Any standard Russian guidebook and many websites (such as gotorussia.com, waytorussia.net) provide the details of obtaining a Russian visa. They also cover topics such as adapting western equipment to Russian electricity, traveling with minor children, exchanging currency, using Russian ATMs, adapting cell phones, etc.