



Siberian Intercultural Bridges, Inc.

Formerly Musical Bridges, Inc.
Since 1993

Access, Opportunity And Good Neighbors Through Cultural Exchange

A 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to bringing access and opportunity to isolated communities in Siberia and Russia's Far East
Corporate: 604 Rood Pond Rd., Williamstown, VT 05679---Tom Dickinson direct: 3212 18th Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55407
Email: tom1664@usfamily.net
Website: www.siberianbridges.org

Last summer's service/adventure tour thrills the Polakoff family

This issue of the newsletter chronicles the grand tour to Chita and Lake Baikal by the Polakoffs--Phil, Nancy, Elliott (age 15) and Camilla (age 13)--of Berkeley, CA. Pianist Tom Dickinson, SIB's founder, led the trip, performing his first concerts there in 10 years.

Siberia: It Keeps Calling You by Nancy Pfund

Along with being mother to Elliott and Cammie, and married to Phil, Nancy is Managing Director at JP Morgan, Bay Area Equity Fund, San Francisco.

Why settle for just a vacation when you can experience a high adventure?

This was our family mantra before, during, and after our journey to Siberia last summer with SIB. Siberia in all of its complexities brought our mantra to life.

First, there is the vastness. Siberia's natural beauty--its mountains, forests and rivers--knows no likeness, not so much for its drama, but for the fact that its vastness goes on and on. If the Alps take your breath away as in a sprint, Siberia's beauty creeps up on you more like a marathon, enveloping you on a scale almost too big to comprehend. It keeps calling you long after you are out of its physical reach.

And then there are the people. Understandably, Siberians revere their land, and are proud to share this bond with visitors. Whether it is picking wild mushrooms during a hike for a lunch in the mountains, sharing the cleansing power of mud in natural hot baths, or cooking the native-only-to Lake Baikal *umul* fish umpteen different ways, the Siberians' connection to

nature permeates every interaction visitors have with them. What they sometimes lack in creature comforts, Siberians more than make up for in their efforts to help you understand how fulfilling is their relationship to their land and lore.

If only the Siberians' bond with their government could be so rewarding. There is a shared wistfulness from a sense that political agendas far away--be they tsarist, Stalinist, or any other 'ist'--have for too long shaped their lives and thwarted the realization of their dreams. Through all of

this, the hope and strength of the Siberian people shines through, but is tinged with burnt edges. These edges could be alcohol abuse, tobacco addiction or a certain lawlessness borne more out of numbness than any malicious intent.

Finally, there is the spirit. During the community-service portion of our trip--certainly not to be missed!--the spirit of the Siberians came into full view, leaving us to cheer for their future as we winced at their present circumstances. Our children sang, taught English, and played with Siberian youth at an overnight camp built by Stalin and at day camps for orphans in the Chita region. The warmth and generosity of these children, their excitement at interacting with Americans, and their desire to live in a less isolated world all struck our children in power-



Nancy, Phil, Elliott and Cammie Polakoff at Lake Baikal



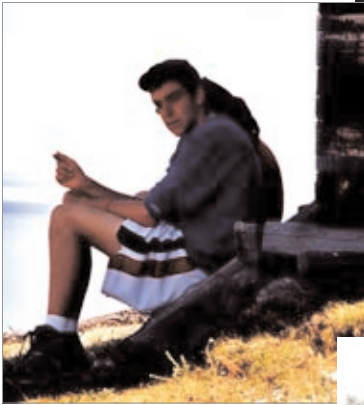
A visit to an "Old Believers" village

ful and moving ways. Similarly, when Phil and I met with environmentalists and businesspeople, the creativity and vision of these people to increase the sustainability of their approach to the land and to promote more economic growth showed us that there is a whole new future available to Siberians, one that they want passionately but can not as yet reach. Instead of selling their timber and minerals to China at rock bottom prices, for example, they dream of exporting their expert knowledge of natural remedies and wellness products to Western markets that would pay premium prices. The spirit of the people to do this is so strong, and yet the region's remoteness to Western markets and position as a bargaining chip between Moscow and Beijing threatens to extinguish this spirit.



Cammie and Nancy test the waters of Lake Baikal

So much hangs in the balance for Siberia--a world resource on every level and in every sense of the word--and yet, will the world ever let Siberians control their own destiny?



Elliott takes a break during a hike.

Visits to Siberia by Americans under the auspices of SIB constitute important steps toward self-determination by empowering Siberians and Americans alike to challenge their assumptions and expand their sense of what their combined futures can look like. This awareness, together with Siberia's staggering beauty, rewards visitors with one-of-a-kind memories and almost infinite visions of Siberia's future.

And as for the logistics, this was truly a well-designed and executed adventure of a lifetime! We found the enthusiasm and expertise of the SIB network to be without rival--and we have been on a dozen or so adventure trips before this one. Our family would recommend this journey without reservation to anyone with a firm resolve and a free spirit.



Chita's new cathedral rises over increasingly busy streets

Why In the World Would You Go *There*?

by Elliott Polakoff

Elliott is in 11th Grade at University High School in San Francisco

Before my sister and I went on our trip to Siberia, there was a sense of uneasiness that spread throughout our minds. From the little information that we had known before the trip, this definitely didn't qualify for the term vacation. We went to a place that had below-average housing, below-average food, below-average sanitation, etc.

So how do you add all these characteristics of Siberia up and get an above-average result? Simple, the people who reside in the territory. Even when we felt miserable and were constantly craving a hamburger, everyone, but more importantly, the kids made us feel appreciated and left us with the notion that we had actually done something good for this poor subsection of Russia, whether it was singing to orphaned children or playing with young adolescents at youth camp.



Cammie and Elliott sharing folksongs at camp

The trip informed us of what it was like not to be able to have what you wanted most of the time, and the lessons learned throughout the trip will stay in our minds for the rest of our lives.

Every time we tell one of our friends about how we went to Siberia this past summer, they always ask "Why in the world would you go *there*?" They will never know what they missed out on.



Phil with guide Pasha rafting on the Tiya River



Umul drying by Lake Baikal

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www.siberianbridges.org

Your Whole Perspective Will Change

by Camilla Polakoff

Camilla is in 8th Grade at the Bentley School in Oakland, CA

One step in Siberia and your whole perspective of the world will change.

With its wooden cabins halfway underground and interesting food, Siberia is a unique place that a person would only understand if they went there. With the dill on top of every food, you were bound to know that every food there will have the same taste but different texture.

Seeing the rural villages was a sight that I will never forget. The houses were built with few windows in order to preserve heat, sinking into the ground as the earth froze and thawed over the ages. The traditional dress of bright flowing silks and babushkas was a style that only Russians could pull off.

Siberia is one of the many places that you would never guess to go to, but in the end, a trip definitely worth the while.



At Mt. Alkhanai National Park with its founder (center)

Service-Tourism Is A Gateway To Siberian Culture

by Tom Dickinson

I had not seen Chita in five years. Expecting some change, I was not prepared for the transformation I saw. In the city's center, sidewalks were in good condition, planted with flowers and arbors, and manholes that once were left open and unguarded are now covered.

Restaurants and cafes have sprouted up, and much of the selling that went on along the sidewalks is now indoors, though the main outdoor market is still lively. Cars crowd the streets and noticeably more women are driving than five years ago. And Chita now has supermarkets. Previously all food shopping was done at the farmer's market or at stores where you were required to point at what you wanted, receive a slip, take that to the cashier and pay, and then return with the receipt to pick up your goods. Now you can stroll the aisles with your cart and take what you want!

I asked one of my most critical Chita friends if what I saw was just surface change or if things really were better. She put it this way: "Yes, things are better. We've always had a kind of inferiority complex here, being so far from Moscow, but that seems to be waning. Increasingly there is pride of place."

All these encouraging changes to take in! But at least one thing stayed the same. Visits to Chita by Westerners are still so rare that the arrival of the Polakoff family got television news coverage, and my piano recitals were a front page item!

Perhaps my favorite moment on the trip was during a visit to the tiny Buryat village of Uzon (pop. 1000) where we've sent teachers for the past four years.

Arriving across the broad steppes we noticed a surprisingly large number of cars. It happened that our visit coincided with a visit to Uzon and the nearby Mt. Alkhanai National Park by a Rinpoche (Revered Teacher) from the Dalai Lama's home in India. Five years ago I was proudly shown Uzon's new temple, built entirely with local funds. Now, this temple and the Park are destinations for this important teacher's international tour.

In Uzon I met the Vice-Principal of the lower school (grades 1-8) whose modest but passionate words moved me enormously. She spoke about Whitney Lawson and Noel Becker, our teachers sent to Uzon, and Uzon's first longterm foreign visitors. Their devotion to teaching and to their students transformed English education. Showing us the English room, she pointed to a picture of a girl saying she was now a college English major, Uzon's first, and that she was currently studying abroad in Turkey. The Vice-Principal said they formed a music school and wanted SIB to send them a piano teacher. And she said that none of these developments would have occurred without SIB's teachers and example.

My two piano recitals were a personal joy. The first one, at the fine arts museum, was arranged as an experiment, since, as everyone knows, no one plans concerts during August when everyone is away!

But the expected 70 blossomed to 120 as the museum was ransacked for more chairs. The next was nostalgic for me as it was in the same hall at the Central



Tom Dickinson performs at the fine arts museum

Music School where I first performed 16 years before.

Here is a compelling sidebar to the trip. I learned that not one person involved with the Chita portion, with the exception of our SIB representative, Michael Shipley, received any remuneration for all their many hours spent arranging meetings, interpreting, solving logistical issues, processing bureaucratic needs, etc. One was offered a fee, but she returned the money as a donation to SIB! For me, that largesse attests to the great desire for visits and contact, never said in so many words, but projected loudly through that great Russian means of non-verbal communication: hospitality.

Even as the trip continued, its success so encour-

continued on back

aged us that we began planning for Summer 2006. This year's service-tour will focus on Chita Region, its people and nature. I will again lead this 3 week trip. The Service portion will consist of meeting people of Chita--including professionals, students and teachers--in formal and informal situations, speaking to groups, sharing a little of our lives with them as they share with us. The Nature part includes day trips from Chita and a sojourn to the Krasny Chikoi district, famed for its scenery, archeological sites and its fascinating Old Believers community. See the box for more details.



Summer at the dacha

Finally, big thanks to Michael Shipley for his effort, enthusiasm, thoughtfulness and skill arranging our trip last summer; to the wonderful people on Lake Baikal and in Chita who made their portions so warm and personal; and special mention to Tatiana Sukhanova who took over for Michael toward the end so he and his family could make their trip to the U.S. to visit his folks, whom they hadn't seen in three years.

Join our 2006 Service-Tour to Chita!

August 19 - September 9, 2006

- ✓ Tour of Chita including the Decembrist Museum, the Museum of Natural History; tour of Krasny Chikoi including the Old Believers village and archeological sites, canoeing and camping (optional); learn about Russia's Buddhist minority centered here, and visit Genghis Khan's old stomping grounds; enjoy a home-stay including a day at a dacha and a Russian bath; enjoy Siberia's glorious nature during the long northern midsummer days
 - ✓ Broaden your perspective in a forum on Russian-American understanding and cooperation; meet students and teachers in class; visit local NGOs to learn about Chita's situation firsthand
 - ✓ Tell us your interests and we'll tailor the trip to you
 - ✓ Extend your trip with a visit to Lake Baikal afterwards for an additional fee
 - ✓ Should be in good health, but no special abilities are required: adventure tourism for normal people!
 - ✓ Trip includes all meals, hotel, travel and tourism, guides, interpreters and arrangements
 - ✓ Estimated cost from Moscow to Moscow: \$3900
 - ✓ Reservations due May 1st. Deposit (50%) due July 1st
- Prices, schedule and itinerary subject to change.*

Siberian Intercultural Bridges

604 Rood Pond Rd.

Williamstown, VT 05679

MN office:

3212 18th Ave. S.

Minneapolis, MN 55407



Blini in Lyuda's kitchen (with lingonberries and Russian sour cream! Oy! And Lyuda, too!)