

gor scares me. Not so much because he's grunting hard consonants and guttural *uh* sounds my way—who am I to judge another's language? Not because just minutes ago he sneered at me, then told my translator, Yulia, "If he has such unusual feet, you know, he should really own his own boots." Not because when I asked Yulia to translate "parabolic" for him, then to request those skis, Igor scowled darkly and made angry and phlegmy hawking sounds. Those things I can accept. I am a visitor here. What scares me is Igor slamming a metal ski pole on a table inches from my head. I am pulling on my boots; Igor is standing behind me slamming the ski pole inches from my head. This is not how I envisioned the beginning of my Russian ski trip. I raise an eyebrow toward Yulia. She gazes at me, grim, unperturbed, implacable. Her ancestors have witnessed centuries upon centuries of serfdom and suffering, famine and death, sieges and brutal repression. Apparently, she is not attuned to the subtle implications of a frightened American's raised eyebrow. I can accept that. Who am I to judge? So I waggle both eyebrows. I bulge my eyes out. Igor continues with the slamming. I furiously wrinkle my forehead. Just so Yulia doesn't misinterpret my international sign language, I also mouth the words: "What the...?"

Down and Out in **Krasnaya** Polyana

WILD PIGS, COLD-BOILED BEAR AND THE MONKEY IN THE JUMPSUIT—OR HOW I LEARNED TO SAY 'DA' TO BORSCHT AND TO LOVE SKIING IN THE MOTHERLAND

BY STEVE FRIEDMAN

Photographs by Joshua Paul



PUTIN ON THE RITZ Russian President Vladimir Putin plans to develop the Black Sea ski resort of Krasnaya Polyana into the "Russian Davos" in hopes that Western skiers will one day join Russians, such as this Moscow couple (right), on the slopes.

Yulia says something to Igor. He says something back. He continues saying something. The ski-pole slamming continues, along with an energetic, rhythmic string of phlegmy, chest-clearing shouting. I swear I feel spittle on my neck.

"He says not to worry," Yulia says.

It seems like he said an awful lot more than that. I'm paying Yulia good money. I really need to talk to her in private later about full and complete translations.

"Yeah, but..." I say.

"No problem, no problem," Igor spits, in English, slamming. For the next 24 hours, this will represent exactly one half of the English Igor shares with me. The other half will be "anything for you, baby."

As we depart Igor's rental shop toward the shuttle bus that will take us to ski, I smile at Igor. He frowns.

"Ask him to pray for us," I instruct Yulia.

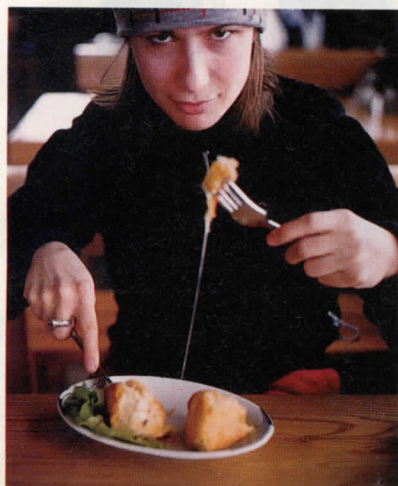
"I'm not saying that," she says. "This is an atheist country, you know."

And so, driving through an area of the world known more for fiercely independent separatists and Chechen terrorists than for powder, I sit in the back of our shuttle bus and offer a little prayer of my own. "*Pozhalusta*," I mutter, over and over. That means "please."

The pigs drew me. The pigs and the well-publicized (in Russia) intentions of Russian President Vladimir Putin to transform the area into the "Russian Davos." Davos is a Swiss mega-resort famous for its snow-capped peaks, its abundance of intermediate and expert runs, its impressive grooming, and its endless supply of nightlife and shopping.

This place, though, a clearing in the Caucasus Mountains called Krasnaya Polyana, well, in this place raw sewage is dumped into the river less than a mile from our hotel.

MIDDAY AT MIDMOUNTAIN The Caucasus Range provides an appealing backdrop to Krasnaya Polyana's on-mountain restaurant (top), which serves up somewhat less appealing delicacies such as fried cheese.



Villagers suffer in Appalachian-style poverty. And—here's the part that really grabbed me—pigs are said to roam the streets.

Still, Vail wasn't always groomed, either. Once upon a time, mountain lions and grizzly bears roamed the peaks there. Who was I to judge?

So I ignore the warning from the U.S. Embassy that says "visitors are strongly advised against travel in ... an area roughly between the Caspian and Black Seas." (Krasnaya Polyana is *exactly* between those two seas.) I steel myself for a 10-hour flight. I smile indulgently at Yulia when the taxi driver she has hired to pick us up in Moscow pulls over in rush hour traffic three times because his Soviet-era piece-of-crap car overheats as he tells us, "the airport is only one kilometer, it would really be faster to walk." I close my eyes on the three-hour Aeroflot flight from Moscow to the Black Sea resort of Sochi, a trip redolent of urine and cigarette smoke, a journey I endure in a kind of modified sitting fetal position while a fat lady in front of me keeps shoving her seat into my knees, a voyage where about a third of the

passengers (who not so incidentally seem to be glassy-eyed and drunk) sway their heads to what I can only characterize as ABBA-inspired Muzak, except with jittery accordions and aggressive, malevolent harmonicas. I say nothing as another cab driver takes us an hour from Sochi through a rocky, rubble-strewn landscape of twisting mountain roads and hulking, rusting construction vehicles that would be perfect if anyone ever wanted to remake *Nosferatu*, except set in 1941 with hard-hatted wraiths who looked like Stalin occasionally emerging from the darkness to glare at us as we drove by.

I do all of that, because if Putin ever succeeds in pumping a reported \$1 billion into the area, building new hotels, carving new runs, installing high-speed chairlifts and gondolas and otherwise making the area less like Dogpatch with snow and more like Zermatt, I want to be able to say that I skied here when. That I roamed

the mountain when pigs roamed the streets.

Speaking of pigs, they—and the raw sewage—worry me. I have a delicate digestive system. And though I fancy myself a powder enthusiast and a liberal Democrat, eager to carve down strange slopes and carry the olive branch to distant lands, I am also what we in the West call "spineless." But I am determined. And that's how I end up on the chairlift with Yulia.

"Why are we stopped?" I politely inquire.

"Who knows?" Yulia says.

Did I mention I'm paying Yulia good money? Green, American dollars. Shouldn't she at least try to find out?

"How 'bout asking that guy?" I suggest.

He sits in the chair facing us, coming down the mountain. We have been sitting for about 10 minutes or so. He is smoking a cigarette, staring into space. He looks

unperturbed, implacable, as if his ancestors had witnessed centuries upon centuries of serfdom and suffering, famine, etc. Yulia talks Russian to him. He talks Russian to her.

"He says he thinks one of the main electrical cables snapped this morning." She says this in the same tone of voice I might use to order oatmeal.

"What?" I say. Perhaps I shriek. I can't remember.

"You have to understand, this is Russia," Yulia tells me. "Power goes out. Things don't work. That's the way it is. People who complain, who can't stand inconvenience, really shouldn't come here."

Yulia, I'm sorry to say, seems to be developing what we in New York City call "an attitude."

"Ask him how long we're going to be stuck here."

She sighs, but complies, then delivers his answer.

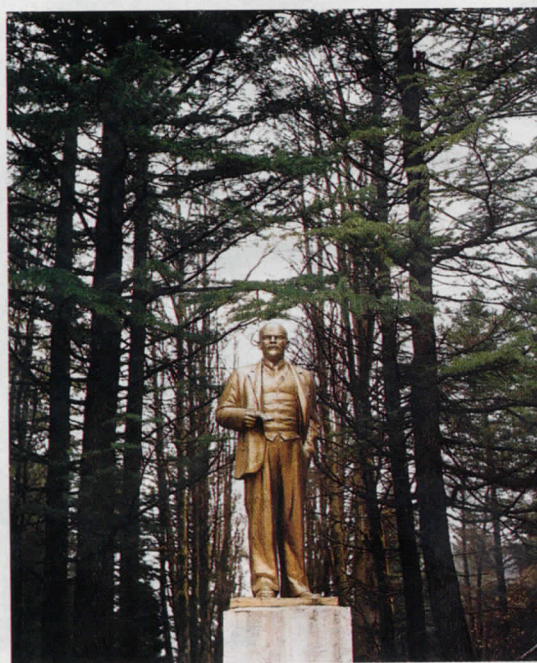
"Maybe three minutes," he says, "maybe three hours."

It's a beautiful day, sunny, bright, chilly but not freezing. Above us, the Russian sun shines, imperturbable and implacable, witness to centuries upon centuries of suffering, etc., but also bright and friendly. Ahead of us and on both sides, snowy peaks and long steep runs. Down the road just a little ways, ravenous and godless pigs who for all I know have developed a taste for human flesh and who lie in wait, oinking hungrily for any soft and tasty Westerner who happens to wander the mean streets alone after dark. Below us, descendants of serfs, great-grandchildren of peasants, the hardy and hard-bitten gene pool of purge-survivors who have recently been freed from the yoke of Communism and are now spending their hard-earned rubles slicing between moguls. In the parking lot, a small monkey dressed in an orange jumpsuit who will gladly pose for a photograph with you if you hand over 50 rubles to his greedy and not entirely pleasant owner. Just over the mountains, merely a short trek, armed-to-the-teeth Chechen rebels in woolen face masks and night-vision goggles who are planning a predawn sortie and will be overjoyed to find a lazy and entitled American to take hostage...I must stop this.

"Ask him about the pigs," I suggest to Yulia.

"No pigs," she says, after a brief consult. Too brief, I suspect.

"But," I say.



TOURIST ATTRACTIONS? Souvenir photos with Krasnaya Polyana's unofficial mascot (top) will set you back 50 rubles a pop; pictures of the Soviet-era monument that still stands in the local town square are free of charge, comrade.

blackberry wine, cognac and 46-proof grape vodka called *cha cha*. Russian moonshine.

When Klavetz sees me looking with fascinated dread at her wares, she says something to Yulia. "Aged in bottles of oak," Yulia dutifully informs me. As if on cue, three young male skiers come clumping across the road, singing, "*cha cha cha*," then buy

"No, Steve, no pigs." And then we're moving again.

The skiing is...well, at the moment it's OK. Wider and longer than some of the Eastern resorts I've been to, a bad joke compared to anything in Colorado or California or Utah. On top of Lifts 2, 3 and 4 (there isn't enough snow to ski the bottom half of the mountain) are stands—actually, old card tables—that sell cigarettes and five different kinds of vodka and mulled wine and cognac and chipped ceramic plates loaded with dangerous-looking cold cuts covered in cellophane.

Until this place turns into Davos, après-ski consists of two restaurants at the base of the chairlift, and a string of flimsy wood and corrugated-tin shacks across the road. (To get there, you have to walk on a creaky wooden footbridge that spans a ditch.) At one of the shacks, a woman named Marina Klavetz tries to sell us honey-soaked walnuts, jam made of walnuts, walnuts dipped in grape juice, flour and sugar and walnuts mashed up until they're the consistency of taffy then served on a string (a Georgian treat),

★ HAVE YOU EVER FELT JUST THE TINIEST BIT ALARMED BY OUT-OF-CONTROL SKIERS OR THE MORE THUGGISH OF SNOWBOARDERS? SPEND A FEW SECONDS IN THE COMPANY OF RUSSIANS CHUGGING GRAPE VODKA. YOU'LL BE CURED.

and down shots of the grape vodka. Have you ever felt just the tiniest bit alarmed by out-of-control skiers or the more thuggish of snowboarders? Spend a few seconds with some Russians chugging grape vodka. You'll be cured.

I ask Klavetz if she thinks this will be the Russian Davos.

"We got natural gas a month ago," she says, "and there are good prospects for the future."

The pigs? Yulia scowls at me. I insist.

"There are wild pigs in the mountains," Klavetz says, "but around here the pigs are afraid, with all the hotels. And there's another chairlift scheduled."

At a second booth, Nadia Fukalova demonstrates the ecological sensitivities of the new Russia.

Everything, she assures us, is "totally environmentally pure." The *faivah*, a mash made from walnut-sized berries that grow by the sea, has iodine and is good for your heart. The raspberry vodka is very tasty. The chestnut honey comes from bees that she herself keeps.

"And those pills?" I point to a small blue bottle.

"Bee milk," she says.

"Bee milk," I repeat.

"We have special devices for milking the bees," she says. "It is like ginseng, but it works on the cellular level."

"I guess with enough of those, you can slug back a lot of that raspberry vodka," I say. Yulia neither smiles nor translates.

Igor, it turns out, is Jewish. I know this because I hear him say "Israel." A bonding opportunity. My ticket to better skis and less ski-pole slamming. I convey to Igor that we are linked in ways that Yulia cannot possibly understand. I convey this by shouting, "Jew, Jew!" and pounding my chest and yelling, "Babushka, Ukraine, Odessa, Jew!"

Yulia rolls her eyes, but Igor gets it.

"The best, baby," he assures me. Hmm, a new sentence from Igor. Then, with the accompanying gesture, the universal signifier of acceptance and love: "High five, baby."

How was I to know that moment would mark the high point of my trip? How was I to realize that after my first high five with Igor, many, many things would happen to me, none of them what we in the West would call "good"?

A little guy who looks like Stalin and who has had too much



UP WITH CAPITALISM Skiers stop for coffee and vodka at the peak of the first chair (top), while more exotic local products are on offer in a row of makeshift shops at the mountain's base. Russian tourists (right) capture the view from the summit.

cold cuts and soups loaded with animals that eyeball me and salads whose primary ingredient is mayonnaise. The hotel dinner entertainment is a musical duo. He plays the saxophone. She pushes a button—a single button, once—on an organ that summons up violins, a brass section and woodwinds. They play *The Shadow of Your Smile* and *Misty*. Between songs, they squabble furiously. She pokes him in the chest.

cha cha plucks at my sleeve one afternoon outside Fukalova's booth and invites me and Yulia for "brochettes." The more I shake my head and edge away, the more he plucks. Finally, I narrow my eyes and wag my finger in his face. "*Nyet*," I intone. "*Spacebo*, but *nyet*."

That makes little Stalin grab my shoulder. To escape, we have to clump across the rickety bridge over the ditch, which he can't navigate. "That was good, Steve," Yulia says, which makes me proud.

On the way back to the hotel, our cab driver, after I ask about the pigs, offers—actually kind of insists—to drive us to a game preserve, where we can see not only pigs, but wolves and deer. This will cost us many rubles, of course. Again, I sternly invoke the "*nyet, spacebo, nyet*" routine. Again, it just makes him more insistent. He only leaves us when we escape into the hotel lobby. Yulia takes a walk alone and reports back that she saw pigs, but I suspect she's lying, so desperately does she want me to shut up about the pigs.

At mealtime, I regard platters of greasy fish and plates of indeterminate

★ AT MEALTIME, I REGARD PLATTERS OF GREASY FISH AND PLATES OF INDETERMINATE COLD CUTS AND SOUPS LOADED WITH ANIMALS THAT EYEBALL ME AND SALADS WHOSE PRIMARY INGREDIENT IS MAYONNAISE.

★ INTERNET ACCESS? ICE FOR MY ANKLE? WHY IS THERE A GAS MASK IN MY CLOSET? TO ALL OF MY REQUESTS, MARGARITA POINTS HER ARM ACROSS THE DRIVEWAY AND SHOUTS, IN FURIOUS ENGLISH, 'RESTAURANT!'

After dinner, I find a gas mask in my hotel closet, with instructions. I wake up late at night with a splitting headache and—forgetting all about the wild pigs and the raw sewage—drink copiously from the bathroom tap.

The next day I ogle some Russian actresses shooting a movie in the hotel lobby. In mid-ogle, I step in a hole in the driveway and twist my ankle, which quickly swells to the size of a grapefruit and turns eggplant-purple. I also develop some unpleasant and better-left-vague digestive ailments. The tap water? The honey-soaked walnuts? The Georgian flour on a string? I spend much of a cloudy, late-winter day at the hotel, hopping between the lobby and my bed and the bathroom, considering the many and varied places that amoebic dysentery might frolic and multiply in the Russian Davos. I hobble outside for some fresh air and encounter Igor.

"High five," he shouts, then high fives me, almost knocking me to the ground. "The best, baby."

"The best, baby," I reply weakly, almost weeping. "The best."

Yulia wants to visit a restaurant, and though I can barely walk, and am sure I won't eat, I comply. I don't want to be left alone at the hotel, especially because Margarita, the tall, shapely, blue-eyed-but-cruel clerk, is on duty. To any and all of my requests, she points her arm across the driveway and shouts, in furious English, "Restaurant!"

Internet access? Ice for my ankle? Pepto-Bismol? Why is there a gas mask in my closet? The question matters not, the answer is the same with Margarita. "Restaurant," she commands, flinging one long and imperious and perfectly manicured finger toward the greasy fish and mayonnaise palace. So I go for dinner.

Our cab driver looks like Stalin, except bigger, and he has a cruel knife scar cascading from his hairline to his jaw, on the right side of his face. Did I mention that people here drive about 80 miles an hour on curving roads that would be unsafe at 40, and that none of the seat belts work?

The restaurant is pine and glass, modern enough to have an English-language menu and the bad ABBA harmonica stuff and a waiter with dyed hair.

Alexander, our waiter, tells us that Putin ate here. He tells us that Muscovites are buying up the land around the resort, because the tunnel from Sochi will be finished soon, and prop-



BABUSHKA Local residents profess optimism about the planned improvements to Krasnaya Polyana. And a few of them are actually friendly toward an outsider.

erty values will soar. He confirms that the monkey in the jumpsuit does change costumes, spending much of the season in a Russian Santa's Snow Maiden outfit, and a few special days as a little devil with horns. He opens my menu for me.

"Salad Crab in Love," I read. "Interesting," I think.

"Young Deer in Rum," I read. "Brutal, but who am I to judge?" I think.

"Boiled Calf Tongue with Mushrooms," I read. "Cold Boiled Bear. Cold Boiled Deer."

I ask Yulia to ask Alexander where the bathroom is.

Three flights (down) later, trying to clutch my

stomach and stand on one leg, I behold a hole in the floor.

"*Nyet*," I whimper. "*Nyet, nyet, nyet*."

After, I ask Yulia to ask Alexander about the pigs and she refuses. "Stop with the pigs," she says. I'm too weak to argue.

My last night at the next Davos, I don't sleep too well. I awake at dawn, pack, watch some Russian women's volleyball on television, avoid the tap water and think of the stories I will tell my friends. I don't know what draws me to the window. Perhaps the Creator that Yulia doesn't believe in. Perhaps it's merely the light.

Outside, rooting in the soil just outside the hotel fence, is the sight I've been seeking. One, large and white, the other, sleeker with black spots. And a pink little piglet.

I watch for a while, trying to envision a day when the porkers will be replaced by rich French people and jewelry shops. I can't imagine it's going to happen anytime soon. And if and when it does, I can say I was here when.

"Hey," I say with gratitude and affection and a completely out-of-proportion sense of sadness and loss quite possibly brought on by amoebic dysentery and dehydration as well as a desperate yearning to be back home.

I turn to limp to the bathroom. Before I do, though, I take one last look—at the gates around the hotel, the mountains beyond, the beasts trying to get in.

"*Dosvedanya*, pigs," I say. ♦