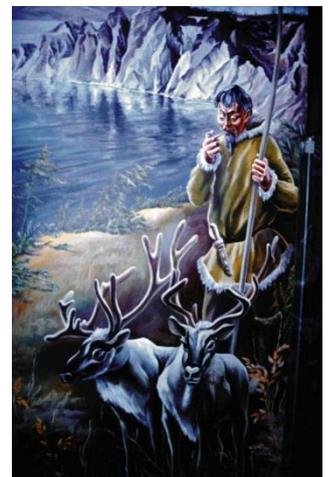


“Return of the Reindeer” Project Newsletter of April, 01, 2013 ®

### A Winter Trip to Tofalaria

A narrative of the scouting trip by Alexei Nikiforov, Absolute Siberia Ltd.

**Our announcement:** First of all, we are glad to inform you that through joint efforts of Tofa Community in Alygdzher, “Absolute Siberia” Events & Expedition Bureau and Irkutsk Regional Government, last month the major aspects of the Return of the Reindeer Project were included into the State Program of Russian Federation for the Economic & Social Development of the Far East and Lake Baikal areas. This factor will enable to construct ethno-cultural and visitor center in the village of Alygdzher in Tofalaria, will provide funds for making up and improving the system of trails and passages for reindeer herders during seasonal migrations as well as facilitate development of responsible and sustainable ethno- and eco-tourism. Though the funds envisaged shall, hopefully, reach the Tofa community only next year, inclusion of the Project into the Russian Federal program is a breakthrough aimed to efficiently assist the local communities in their transition from state managed and directed collective farming to the centuries old practices of their ancestors.



**A Winter Trip to Tofalaria** : Main tasks of the scouting trip a straight story of which you will find below were to further study of the resources and opportunities for sustainable and responsible tourism, choose location of the future ethno- and visitor center, learn better the current problems of present nomadic reindeer management, get closer introduced to the families of village of Alygdzher that may be willing to host Russian and foreign tourists in near future.

\* \* \*



I arrived in Nizhneudinsk from Irkutsk by an overnight train in the morning of March, 14, 2013, and before being picked up by Vladimir Lobchenko (head of the Tofa municipal community of Alygdzher in Tofalaria) I had time to have a fresh view of the place and take pictures of the historical locomotive and the railway terminal built on the eve of 1900.

Nizhneudinsk, located at 410 meters above sea level and 506 km from Irkutsk, with population of nearly 40 000 people is a central town of Nizhneudinskiy Rayon (district) that administratively lies within the territory of Irkutsk region, and occupies an area of over 50 000 square kilometers including that of Tofalaria.

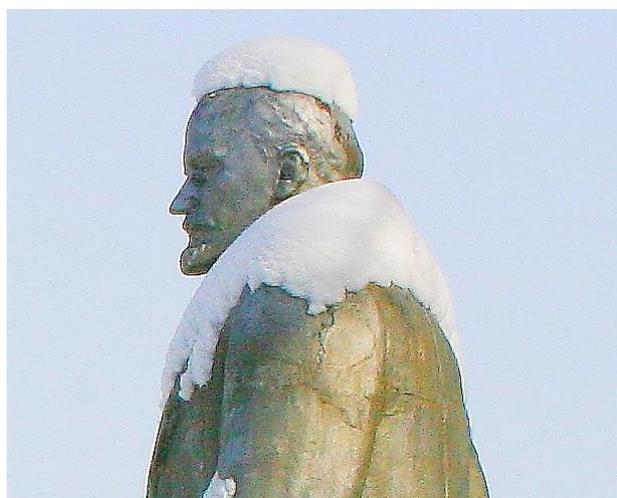
The town, founded by the Cossacks in 1648, is 13 years older than Irkutsk, still preserves a number of old wooden houses decorated with fancy fretwork and dating back to 18-th-20-th centuries. Laid on the Moscow Tract (highway) and local cross-roads of trade routes to the Lena river area and in close proximity to the Biryusa gold mining area, the town attracted in the past many merchants and tradesmen who resided here. In 1900 the construction of Locomotive Depot and Railway repair works in Nizhneudinsk facilitated its further growth.



*During the Soviet times construction of mica processing factory, confectionery, mechanical repair works , brick factory, meat processing and furniture factories have turned Nizhneudinsk into an average Soviet provincial town. Probably, mostly noted it was for its brewery, local handicrafts and picturesque Ukovsky waterfall located 18 km from the town. And certainly, it was and still remains to be the main gates to Tofalaria, the country of the ancient reindeer herders.*

had been placed into the rooms. But the facility still is, what we call, a Soviet-nostalgia type hotel. However, there's no lack of running hot and cold water, the hotel is very clean and well kept. A cozy small cafeteria of the hotel caters for the guest needs and treats them to homemade, just cooked foods (I just loved those stuffed pancakes served there!).

The Uda hotel is located in the very downtown, and across the street from the well-preserved and well-kept Statue of Lenin that stands at the corner of the local communist party building. Throughout 20 years' experience of my extensive travel in the former Soviet Union I have seen, probably, more than a thousand Lenin's statutes, monuments and bas-reliefs. But this one in Nizhneudinsk, in my view, for its uniqueness can be brought into line with such monuments to Lenin as one-of-a-kind Giant Head of Him in Ulan Ude. Not because of its size, but due to facial features of the Lenin: I have never seen before any of the Lenin's monumental faces have such a sharp nose (Lenin's veins through his ancestors collected the Chuvash, Tartar and a bit of Jewish blood). When I managed to focus the attention of several pedestrians-residents of the town- to such a unique facial feature of this Lenin, they would, first, get much surprised to hear such a claim of mine on the Lenin's nasal sharpness. But after a fresh look, having stared for certain time at their Lenin, they would become even more surprised than just a minute before, and then confess that the Nose had really been so unusually sharp, for Lenin, at least. These adult residents, now in their late 40-s or 60-s, had been so much used to their Lenin from the Soviet era, having spent hundreds of times around this statue during pioneer, Komsomol or Communist gatherings/demonstrations...and never would notice the unique features of this Lenin.



So, the Statue of Lenin with the Sharpest Nose in Nizhneudnsk can be considered as one of the politico- historical highlights of the town.



Our meeting schedule in Nizhneudinsk this day besides visiting Local Lore Museum was also to meet 2 local "celebrities"-famous persons well-known throughout certain Russia. The first one to meet was Alexei Uskov, the founder of the "Canyon" Trekking & Rafting Club, a Merited Traveler of Russian Federation, a poet and an artist ( see his great amateur paintings on his web [http://www.kanjon.ru/sayanskiy\\_landshaft\\_na\\_holstah\\_hudo](http://www.kanjon.ru/sayanskiy_landshaft_na_holstah_hudo)).

Great enthusiast of Tofalaria land, reindeer people way of life and culture, Alexei once wrote in his diary: "Tofalaria with its Matter is a major workshop for the treatment and shaping of human souls. Tofalaria is a spiritual book with unlimited number of pages; it is a splendid palette of indescribable colors. Tofalaria is a biological magnet for the human world. "

Hikers, rafts men, other sort of travelers who ever were lucky to spend a few days with Alexei Uskov while on the active or leisure outdoor trip would often recall those days as some of the most interesting in their life. Being a gifted story-teller he is definite to sweep his audience along with him. And I personally love Alexei's approach to and ways of description of the logistics of the trips he offers to and operates for people. For instance, speaking about



delivery of tourists by helicopter or army trucks to the start of the white-water rafting on a remote river of Tofalaria he would say: "In itself, the conveyance of a traveler to the river spot is not the major goal – the aim is to deliver this traveler's soul into the core of the high Tofalaria ..."

Later Alexei's followers chose some of the above sayings as a preamble to their activities within the club.

We went to see Alexei at his home which is also the major "Canyon" club's premises. During warm meeting discussed were the issues of near future development of moderate level water rafting tours through Tofalaria, combining features of an active trip with nature/wildlife and ethnography learning. The expertise of Alexei Uskov in these issues again proved to be unsurpassed.

After this useful and pleasant meeting we went next to see and take pictures of exhibition at the Local Lore Museum the funds of which store over 7000 various items (see some photos on pages 9-10). This local studies museum occupying quite a small wooden carved building has an excellent collection of exhibits on display relating to ethnography of native Siberians and culture of Russian in Siberia, featuring some really unique items of shamanism religion and natural phenomenon such as the original Kastarma river pebble stones (see page 9 for a photo). The museum also carries on educational activities such

as providing thematic lectures for school children.



Then we went to visit the oldest Orthodox Church of Nizhneudinsk that still functions and has daily services – St. Nicolas-the-Miracle-Worker Church. Built in 1905 in memory of workers killed at the mines during the Lena river public unrest, the church managed to survive through Soviet times when it had been used, first, as a young communists' club, then a canteen and finally as a library.

An Orthodox priest of this church, Father Alexander, is a good friend of Vladimir Lobchenko who was accompanying me during the whole day. There's an interesting story how the two of them made friends...

Father Alexander, married and raising 2 children, few years ago was over a 100 kilos heavyweight human. Once while on his mission to Tofalaria he met with Vladimir and asked for the permission to join him on horseback trip to the remote reindeer herders' camp. Vladimir did not mind that. However, both the horse carrying the Father and its rider himself felt very uncomfortable during the first kilometers of horseback ride. The body of the Father and his bag were too much heavy for the horse to ride at same pace as that of Vladimir's, on one hand, and the Father was so big that his feet hindered him from smooth horse riding since the soles would always touch the surface of steep mountain slopes. Father Alexander couldn't make it that time to the camp, and had to rerun back. But from then onwards the Father would always love the idea of joining, when possible, Vladimir on some of his long walking trips to the taiga-woods to stalk animals. And these were not leisure hikes since they had to carry some backpacked loads for quite a distance in the highlands...So, step by step Father Alexander started losing his body weight, and now looks so slim and graceful as one can see him on the left



photo.

After seeing the Father Alexander who was kind enough to invite us to tea, we went to the Master of the Birch Bark – Mr. Anatoly Antipenko, who is well-known as, probably, the best craftsman specialized in hand made production of various utensils and items of birch bark. His is the pride of this part of Siberia, at least.

Antipenko's works and items are displayed at various exhibitions, and gained general recognition both as real pieces of art and practical household items and utensils as well. Some of the items are masterpiece of handicraft art.

Mr. Antipenko offered us his warm hospitality and was very nice to tell about his crafts: the way he produces his items, how he prepares the bark, where and when he picks it, the way it should be stored and used for different purposes.

When we came in he was working on a birch bark Samovar that can be used as an average samovar so that water can be boiled in it to make then tea! Fascinating and one-of-a-kind Samovar made entirely of birch bark if not to count the only 2 metal appliances or parts of this Samovar which are cords with socket to supply the electric current and the heating unit!!

Anatoly said to us that that there will be only two of such kinds of samovars in the world. The first one made by Antipenko went as a gift of one governor to Cyril, the Patriarch of Russian Orthodox Church (see p. 13 for more photos of birch bark items made by Mr. Antipenko).

We bid our farewell to Anatoly Antipenko, having agreed to meet again in the summer time. And we will certainly advise guests of Nizhneudinsk to visit the exhibition of Mr. Antipenko, see him at work or during his classes.

We still had some time before dinner to see more of the public life in this town. We went to the local House of Culture to find out there that since the Soviet times they would still continue running several hobby groups for children such as choreography, choir singing and painting.

At the end of this very fruitful day we were invited for dinner at the home of one of Vladimir's friends, where besides eating tasty homemade Siberian meal served with a few shots of vodka, we discussed the plan for the upcoming days. Tomorrow we will have to drive nearly 300 km on the ice frozen surface of the Uda River. It can take the average of 15 hours even though there're very experienced and knowledgeable persons in our team going to Alygdzher – the central settlement of Tofalaria, the land of the Tofa people – the ancient reindeer herders of the world...



**Narrative of the 2-nd part of the scouting trip to be continued next week**

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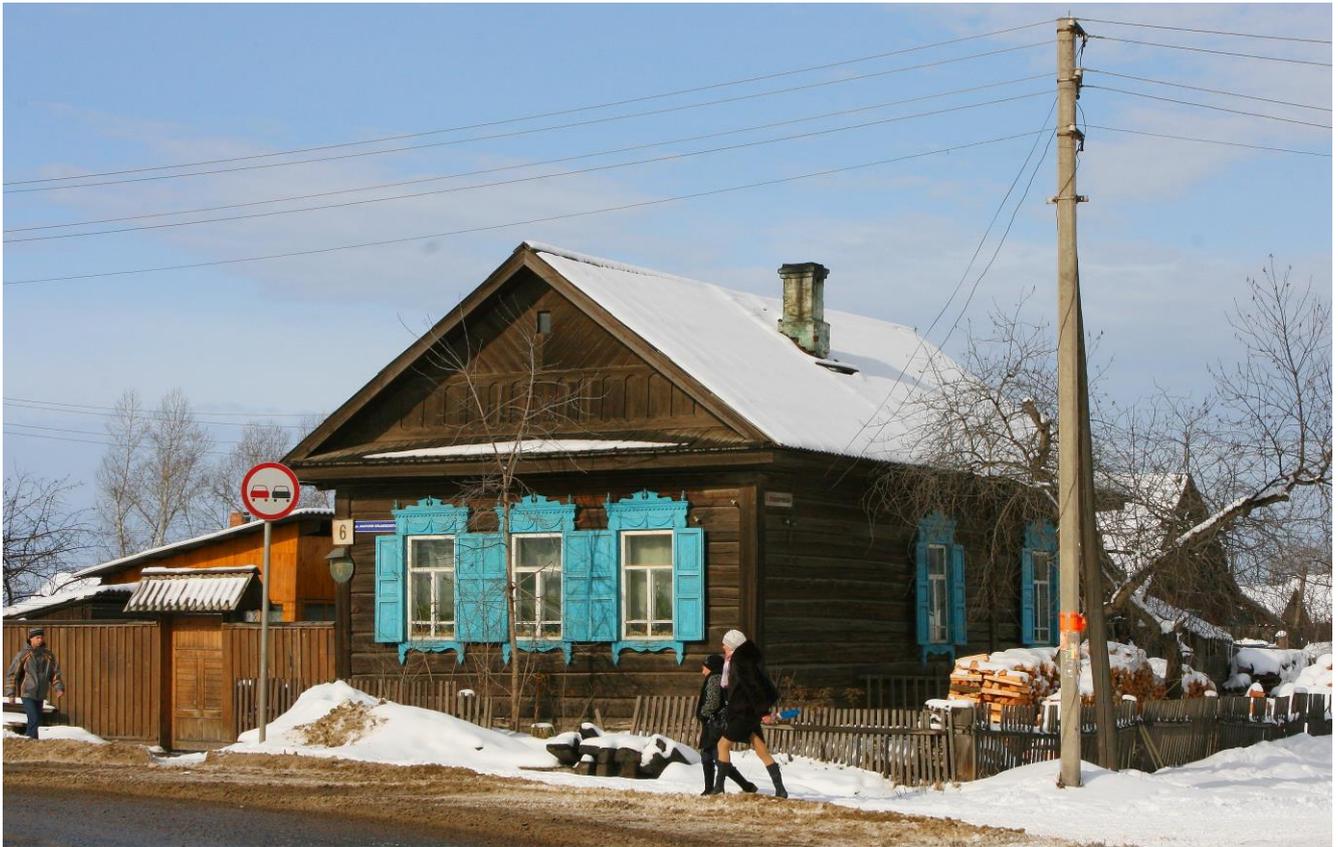
Cozy cafeteria (above) and lobby with reception desk (below) of the UDA Hotel





The Monument to V.I. Lenin opposite the UDA Hotel (above) and a wooden house decorated with fretwork (below)





Two wooden houses with fancy fretwork above windows



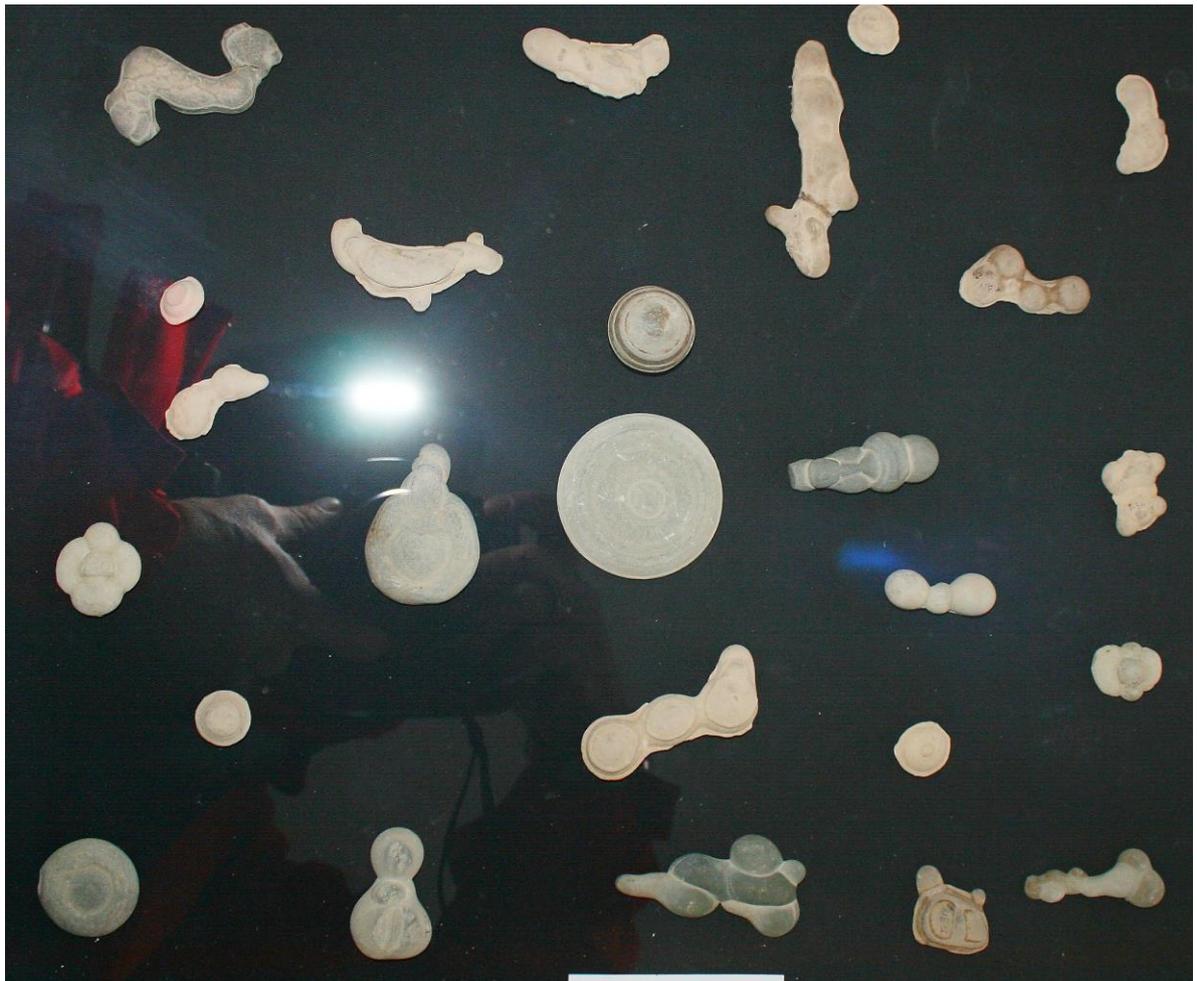


St. Nicolas –the Miracle-Worker Orthodox Church territory enclosed by a fence



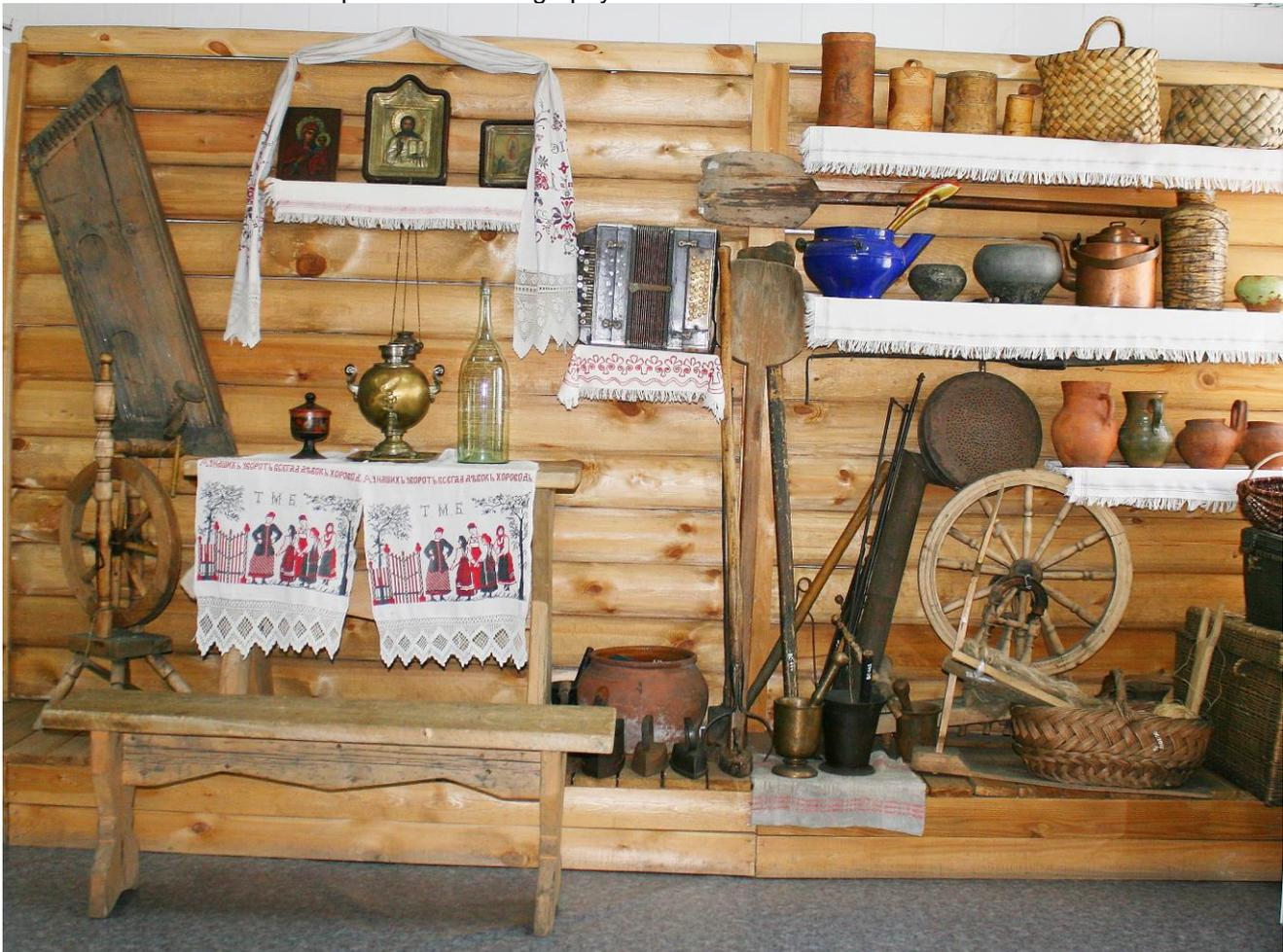


Local Lore Museum building ( above) and unique naturally and variously shaped Kastarma river pebble stones ( below)





Exposition of ethnography section of the Local Lore Museum





Alexei Uskov – a multi-gifted person, arduous enthusiast of Tofalaria, and Merited Traveler of Russian Federation



Father Alexander – slim, deeply versed in theology, but an easygoing priest of the St.Nicolas-the-Miracle-Worker Church



Anatoly Antipenko showing his apprentice how to make a nicely decorated salt-,tea or berry-box out of birch-bark (above) , and a few examples of his birch-bark mugs ( below)





The House of Culture (above) and kids at the folk choreography classes

