Dear Julia,

You did everything with a smile, with gentleness, quietly and calmly, with bright face. We felt that everything you did for us and for the whole group was genuine and heartfelt. You have certainly invested a great deal of thought, time and worry that this week will remain in our memory/ We will always remember Ural. All this gave us the feeling of home and family.

In Israel we tell with exciting what we saw, what we ate, where we visited, who we met, what we heard and more. We only say good things about you and everyone who was with us a week.

Nurit Elvia Finkel and Shulamit Elvia, Israel

Dear Julia, I say thank you for your generosity and cordial hospitality while we were in the Russia meeting. The meeting was very perfect. You were well done. We had a great and happy time. It will an unforgettable memory for me.

TAEGILL RYU, South Korea

Dear Julia

Thank you for everything.

It was wonderful event, very well planned, very well arranged and your personal care of me and others.

Wonderful meeting. Accommodation was the first class. It was good that we were 6 in one room it allowed us to talk, exchange views, communicate and etc.

KIRAN OZA, India

Thank you so much Iuliia. You arranged a really fantastic week for us. We just loved it and it inspires us to visit Russia again. Such delightful, warm hearted and generous people. Thanks to all the villagers who made us so welcome and all the others who helped out. Great to see and take part in so many traditions, games, songs and of course all the wonderful dancing. An absolutely unique experience - thank you again.

Maureen Sturrock, Scotland

Hi Iullia

I talked with many friends and every one said me that enjoyed every day. Thank you for your very good job .

Paolo, Italy

Dear Iullia,

Thank you for your great effort arranging a most memorable Servas meeting for all of us.

Anne from Finland

We keep an excellent "souvenir" of our stay in Ural and all the people we met.

We thank you for all you did to organize this beautiful Servas meeting. We will be happy to meet you again in our country.

Maurice & Jacky from France

Servas Russia International Gathering in the Urals region, May 25-30

Russia intrigued us as somewhere to visit, so the invitation to join the first Servas Russia International meeting with its full programme of cultural activities was irresistible. Despite the current tensions between the UK and Russia and challenges in navigating the visa application process, we accepted the invitation to meet the people of the Ural region (on the border of Europe and Asia) where we joined 36 Servas members from 12 European and Asian countries. We were the only folk from Servas Britain.

We started in St Petersburg where we “did the tourist trail” in this stunningly beautiful city, blessed with unseasonably good weather to enjoy the “white nights”. Despite some apprehension, we always felt perfectly safe wandering about alone and using the very grand metro system late at night. People spontaneously stopped to offer help when we looked lost.

We were fortunate to meet Cate and her daughter Sonja, Servas hosts living in the lovely town of Pushkin. On our first evening we did an exciting roof top trail above the main thoroughfare in the city centre and ate together afterwards. Another day we travelled to Pushkin where we ate with them at home and walked in the nearby Catherine Palace grounds, accompanied by a Corncrake calling.

We then travelled, for 37 hours, over 2500 kilometers, on the trans Siberian railway. A chance to relax and read after the frenetic sightseeing in St Petersburg with tea on tap from the samovar always on the boil at the end of the carriage.

In Ekaterinburg (where the last Tsar and his family were massacred) we were met by the Servas Russia National Secretary, Iiullia Mezenina, for a transfer to our eventual destination in Krasnoufimsk. Despite the lack of Servas hosts in her area (most are concentrated in the north west of Russia), Iuliia had prepared a very full programme with the cooperation of her extensive networks in the community including the local authority who provided various forms of support including meals in schools and the use of the outdoor centre where we stayed.

We had a fantastic translator for much of the time, Dasha Merkureva, a very mature sixteen year old schoolgirl who spoke excellent English. We also had a walk and picnic with local school age English language students who impressed us with their willingness to engage with us in English as well as their singing.

Three days consisted of visiting local villages to meet people from the three main ethnic groups in the region, each with its own language: Russian, Tatar (majority Muslim) and Mari (Pagans). Each gave us welcome concerts in their traditional costumes with stirring singing, musical virtuosity and dancing. We also learnt about their arts and crafts which included highly decorated clothing and knitwear. One of the many highlights was the welcome we received at the school in the Tatar village where, after being greeted on the steps by some of the children, we were treated to a lunch of local dishes prepared served by the teachers who explained that the school drew on pupils and teachers from all three ethnic groups.

Each evening, the group was entertained by dancing and singing with local people. We also enjoyed the company of the group, some of whom spoke about Servas in their own countries or introduced us to songs and dances

Each evening, the group was entertained by dancing and singing with local people. We also enjoyed the company of the group, some of whom spoke about Servas in their own countries or introduced us to songs and dances.

Our final day in Ekaterinburg included a brief tour of the city and a visit to the mine shaft where the Tsar and his family were thrown after their deaths, marked now with 7 memorial chapels and a monastery where we ate.

This was a very fascinating insight into the Ural region, brilliantly well and a great example of Servas and Russian hospitality. We hope that it will be a springboard for more people joining Servas Russia and encourage future travellers to visit. It certainly dispelled our preconceptions of Russia and we were impressed by the warmth, generosity and willingness of people in the Urals to engage with us despite language barriers. Contrary to recent news reports, Russian people smile a lot.

Many thanks to Iuliia and all the local people who contributed to making the gathering a resounding success.

Bob Turner and Maureen Sturrock, Scotland