

'Frost' blows into Moscow

RUSSIAN ICON A FAVORITE WITH CHILDREN

By ALEX FRIEDRICH
Knight Ridder Newspapers

MOSCOW — Santa Claus had it easy.

He's already kicking back after his Christmas delivery. If the fat man in red wants a lesson in hard work, he ought to check out his Russian cousin.

Hustling since November, Grandfather Frost is just now entering his big holiday push — New Year's, Russia's biggest gift-giving holiday, followed by Jan. 7, the Russian Orthodox Christmas.

Grandfather Frost's minions are answering tens of thousands of children's letters. And Grandfather Frost is touring Russia by train, where he meets some of the little authors and invites some of them home for a visit.

Grandfather Frost, a more regal version of Santa Claus with a priestly red robe, gold crown and scepter, has long been a Russian fixture. He brought children Christmas presents before the Bolshevik Revolution put the Communists in power. When the Communists banned Christmas and made New Year's Eve the big celebration, they promoted Frost as the holiday icon because he's a pagan figure.

The current promotional campaign is the work of the city of Moscow's government as part of a 5-year-old project designed in part to buck up the Russian spirit and perhaps the country's tourist industry.

Grandfather Frost has been given an official home in remote Veliky Ustyug, a quaint, snow-covered town of about 40,000 residents that's located 600 miles northeast of Moscow. All year, actors take turns playing Frost, inhabiting the town's municipal-run estate and theme park and playing host to busloads of tourists.

Under the program, special mailboxes are set up in 17 Russian cities and towns, and late each icy November, kids start dropping in letters — about 120,000 pieces a year. Volunteers answer many of the letters and select the children who'll receive small gifts or the big visit.



KRT

Grandfather Frost and his sidekick, Snegurochka the Snow Maiden, hit Moscow on Saturday in their Frostmobile.

No greedy wish lists allowed here. Staffers look for letters like the one from 10-year-old Katya Lunina of Moscow.

"I just told him about myself and my family, and I wanted him to know that I believe in him," she said.

Such charm won Katya a whirlwind three-day trip to Veliky Ustyug earlier this month. She and dozens of other children toured the town, danced and played games with Grandfather Frost and his granddaughter, Snow Maiden Snegurochka.

Grandfather Frost arrived in Moscow on Saturday as part of a regional train tour. He's scheduled to stay for days, visiting town squares, schools and the homes of some of kids who have written him.

Meanwhile, dime-store Frosts

are out in force, fresh from Moscow's Grandfather Frost Academy, a weeklong city-run seminar that taught them how to sing and act like the real McCoy.

The current swirl around Grandfather Frost owes much to Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. After marveling at Veliky Ustyug's winter beauty during a trip in the late 1990s, he decreed that Grandfather Frost must have come from there.

He formed a partnership with the town and helped build the estate where Frost lives. Now Moscow spends millions of rubles a year to buy gifts, answer letters, arrange visits and hold the academy.

Editor's note: Alex Friedrich is a reporter for The Monterey County Herald on temporary assignment with Knight Ridder Newspapers' Moscow bureau.