



Cannon Blast

Classics

“BANYA” IS NOT JUST ANOTHER CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

By Bart Cannon

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do” may sound good in theory, but in certain cases, you may want to check that idea at the border—otherwise you might find yourself sitting with a bunch of naked guys in a Siberian log cabin.

Cleburne Bible Church’s mission team relaxed around our Siberian hosts’ dinner table listening to our leader, Dr. Nickolay Revtov, share about Siberian history and customs. In particular, he extolled the virtues of the ancient Siberian custom known as “banya.”

Nickolay cocked his head, positioned his hands in a modified prayer clasp and addressed us with the serious demeanor he developed as a university professor. According to Dr. Revtov, the Russian people began using banya centuries ago as a means of dealing with various ailments. “The early settlers had no doctors or hospitals, just banya,” he explained. They had no treatment for colds, “just banya.” Tums and Pepto Bismol weren’t available for a stomachache, “just banya.”

We nodded in agreement, even though none of us had any idea what this “banya” was that he was talking about. Finally, Nickolay fanned the flames of our curiosity into a consummate blaze by touting banya as a beneficial therapy for—of all things—a broken leg. In today’s world, every well-connected Russian either has his own banya or access to one through a friend, relative or other acquaintance.

At the end of Nickolay’s discourse, we all agreed that experiencing this “banya” would be a wonderful thing if our schedule permitted—which of course it didn’t. However, the next day, Dr. Revtov informed us that he had arranged for all the guys to accompany him for a Siberian cultural experience: banya.

Wednesday night, four Americans, two Ukrainians and two Russians traveled across Omsk to the home of a Baptist Association representative. Once inside the security fence, we tiptoed past a ferocious guard dog and stood in front of a small wooden structure. A tiny puff of smoke rose gently from the smokestack protruding above the tin roof. This must be it—a real banya.

We lined up in front of the banya like timid recruits receiving their first orientation at army basic training. Nickolay gave us our orders and divided us into three groups. I was in the second group with Nickolay’s son, Sasha, and Pat Linkenhoger from Cleburne.

When our turn came, we grabbed our towels and proceeded to the dressing room—or in this case, undressing room. Sasha poured water on the freshly heated rocks to fill the banya with a thick cloud of steam. We each took a turn working up a sweat in the steam, and then alternately beat each other from head to toe with a broom made of soaked birch limbs. After the beating, we doused ourselves with cold water and rested for a few minutes before repeating the process twice more.

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While we waited for the last group to finish, Nickolay told us more about banya. In the first banyas, large stones were placed in a circle around an open fire located in the center of the structure. When the fire went out, the rocks would be very hot. Men sat around the room, beat each other with brooms fashioned from birch limbs much like the one we used and ran outside for a dip in a hole cut in the ice or rolled in the snow.

Banyas later utilized brick ovens for cooking and banya. Dr. Revtov claims that banya cleans out a man’s blood vessels and improves circulation. He says doctors can’t explain why banya works, but somehow it does.

Banya is not just some novel cultural experience. Banya can permanently change a guy’s perspective. During a recent family vacation at the beach, I looked over the fitness facilities (whirlpool, weight room and sauna) and returned to our condo to report my findings to Momz. “Guess what they’ve got next to the pool,” I exclaimed. She said, “What’s that?” “Banya,” I replied, “Just banya.”



“Just Banya”

Bart Cannon and Tony Hilley
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