

Ancient and Modern Pottery in Siberia

Siberia: Siberia conjures up endless snowy plains, political exiles and the Gulags of Stalin's time. Not a bit of it. In winter it may be 40c below zero but in summer 40c above and a beautiful holiday destination with sparkling rivers, stunning flowery meadows, wild camping and the dramatic Altai mountain range. We enjoyed all of that as well as Russian bath houses, saunas, beating with birch twigs and cold rivers. It's the Russian approach to relaxation but it helps if you are a masochist.

At Gorno-Altaysk we visited the National Museum which contained a collection of artefacts from the Stone Age onwards. It explained the ethnic history of the Altai peoples from the Scythians through to the 1917 revolution and then post glasnost. The Scythians were nomads in 4th-3rd BC who were skilled in making gold jewellery and objects made of leather, cloth, felt and wood and clay. Excavations of burial mounds have revealed Egyptian like tombs, lined and covered with wood with well-preserved mummified warriors in wooden coffins accompanied by mummified horses intact with harnesses. Around them were weapons, personal jewellery and other objects for the afterlife. These included beaker type coiled pots with rope marking decorations. Our knowledge was increased by visiting other museums, archaeological sites and burial mounds.

So, when our itinerary said we were going to an Artisan village to visit potters and painters we had visions of bearded old potters with home-made wheels and woodfired kilns.



Reconstruction of a Scythian burial



A Scythian burial mound and our ex-military bus for the rough roads



Scythian pot



Traditional Altai house

Not so. Although living in a charming traditional house, Vadim Zaharov, our host, lost no time in showing us his brand-new electric kiln. It turns out that potters have not featured much in this part of the world, presumably because of the weather and a lack of suitable clay. However, there is a renewed interest and people are keen to learn.

Vadim and his wife were very welcoming. They had a small shop and each had a studio. His wife used earthenware clay and made beautiful ocarinas which were burnished and unglazed. Some were reduced to a shiny black. Vadim threw his work on a small electric wheel and most of it was also burnished and after bisque firing reduced in a tin box with wood shavings in the electric kiln. We were intrigued with some unglazed brown pots with black markings. These pots had been partially coated with full cream milk and, when fired to about 300c produced this effect; probably similar to the Obvara technique. After some people had a go on his wheel and others including myself chatted about firing methods we were invited into his garden where he showed us a traditional self-made samovar and served tea.



Beautiful ocarinas



Modern potter, Vadim Zaharov



Pots made by Vadim



Traditional Samovar made by Vadim

Later in the trip we visited another potter who worked from home and sold her pots on a stall in the town. She made colourful glazed earthenware and necklaces decorated with imprints of the local petroglyphs. They made lovely clay stamps for using on my pottery here in the UK.

We all came home with several examples of work from our fellow potters in this fascinating part of the world.

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Milk fired pots. I have tried the technique and it works.



Local designs on earthenware pots



Clay necklaces with petroglyph designs



Siberia—worth a visit