

Kolomenskoe - Tsar Residence In Moscow

Kolomenskoye is located in a wonderfully picturesque spot, on a high, craggy bank of the Moskva River, with a spectacular view of Moscow and the surrounding broad valleys and fields, and of the Nikolo-Ugreshki Monastery on the other side of the river. It is one of the oldest populated areas in what is today Moscow: people have been living here since the VIII Century B.C.

The protective walls of some ancient settlements have been preserved around Kolomenskoye and the nearby Dyakov ravine, and the ravine still shelters the mysterious age-old Zmeiny Kamen (snake stone). In pagan times, it formed the center of a religious temple, and its legendary magical powers are remembered even now. Magic rites are still celebrated around the stone today.

In the XIV Century, during the time of Ivan Kalita, this area became the favored suburban residence of the grand princes of Moscow, and later of the Tsar family, and eventually a palace with all the necessary trappings and accoutrements was built here.

In 1530, in celebration of the birth of Ivan, the long-awaited heir to Tsar Vassily III, construction began in Kolomenskoye of the Church of the Ascension, which would later be hailed as one of the most perfect and poetic churches, not only in Moscow, but in all of Russia. Young Ivan meanwhile grew up to become Tsar Ivan IV, known to history as Ivan the Terrible. The Church of the Ascension was one of the first to be built in the emerging style just coming into fashion in Russia at the time. It is believed the architect was an Italian, who also directed the building of the fortress wall that surrounded Kitai-Gorod (walled city) in Moscow.

The church in Kolomenskoye is a giant tower, 62 meters high, built without internal supports or columns. The dynamics of the size, the symmetry, and the harmony of the entire structure evoke the image of a gigantic crystal growing out of a massive base. During the construction of the church, the high, steep bank of the river was built up, producing the effect of a natural pedestal blending into a cohesive whole that seems to grow out of the surrounding landscape, and creating an architectural dominance of the place, which can be seen easily for many miles around. The unique power of the Kolomenskoye church makes the modern mind think of a space ship poised for takeoff. This brilliantly conceived shape is an ideal match for the theme of the Ascension of Christ, to which this church is dedicated.

The walls of the church are extremely thick, reaching 2.5 to 3 meters in places. Inside is a staircase that ends at the base of the tower. A thin ribbon of a ladder descends from the cross, and leads to a circular chamber above the nave. In the XIX Century, local farmers would compete on holidays to see who was the speediest and most agile in climbing this ladder.

Atop a gallery on the eastern side is the Royal Palace, adorned with sculpted white stone, from which tsars watched the military maneuvers and falcon hunts that unfolded on the opposite bank of the river.

The Tsar Kolomenskoye residence was torched when the Tatar Khan Kaza-Girei invaded Moscow. Reconstruction did not begin until the late 1630s, under Tsar Mikhail Fedorovich Romanov, and the process stretched out over a thirty-year period. Only in 1671 was the new and luxurious residence, a veritable miracle of architecture, completed. The new structure was a complex of seven independent palaces built entirely of wood, and allocated to various members of the Royal Family. Countless galleries and chambers interconnected the individual palaces into a cohesive ensemble. Each palace was lavishly decorated, and each had an original roof in the shape of a barrel, a dome, or a cube. The roofs were covered with wooden tiles painted in green, and gilded in places. The tall domes were surmounted by Russian double-headed eagles or multicolored weathervanes. The numerous gilded cornices and lattice-work crests strengthened the impression of an endless variety of shapes. The palace had 270 rooms and 3,000 windows with mica panes, and jambs and lock-plates covered by complicated latticework and painted in brilliant colors.

The Kolomenskoye Palace played an important part in the life of Peter the Great. He was often brought here as a child, and visited frequently as an adult.

In the XX Century, Kolomenskoye became a historical museum and reserve, and boasts a splendid collection of Ancient Russian icons and folk art and a number of artifacts from the Tsar former residence. In the 1960s, several wooden structures, considered important from the architectural as well as historical points of view, such as wooden towers, barrels for the fermentation of honey, and an Arkhangelsk house in which Peter had once stayed, were shipped to Kolomenskoye from various parts of Russia. All these exhibits are on public view.

About the Author

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