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## The song of the Volga boatmen



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Scenes from Bolgar. Photos: Deepa Alexander





## **Bolgar's ruins hold the key to Tatarstan's grand past, writes Deepa Alexander**

Andre swings the Mercedes out of Kazan to a road that seems to lead to the outer limits of geography. The countryside is a gentle roll of birch and pine, log houses sheathed in leafy darkness and church steeples with gilded cupolas that glint in the autumn sun. The Volga and Kama rivers, menacingly deep, flow alongside. This is the road Alexander Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy journeyed on, and centuries before them the marauding horsemen of the Golden Horde.

I arrive in Bolgar, a city dotted with buildings that tell tales of sword slashes and arrow strikes, its epic cycle of affluence and ruin as a constant target of a cavalcade of races — Bulgars, Bilyars, Chuvash and Mongols. Known to the medieval world as the Northern Mecca, Bolgar was founded on the banks of the Volga at a special moment in history when the Tatars embraced Islam in 922 A.D. No longer the domain of warlords, Bolgar's vast and serene horizon now beckons travellers.

The Museum of Bread, a tribute to the generations of farmers who made this land the granary of the world, is a wooden marvel. Barns, a rotating windmill, a pond with ducks, and a wrought-iron bridge replete with locks placed by couples in love lie scattered behind huge wooden gates. A farmyard with clucking hens, grazing horses and sunning cats stands behind the house of a grain merchant. The mansion has icy blue-framed windows behind which lace curtains sway

gently to reveal how prosperous merchants lived in the 19th century. I leave my muddy boots outside and walk through the house in plastic slip-ons. Room after room showcases cots, jewellery, clothing, headgear and samovars.

The museum displays a variety of wheat, barley and rye, plough and chaff cutters, models of farmhands, ovens, and platters of bread, croissants, pumpernickel and baguettes. Lunch at the grandiosely-lit restaurant is as varied, served with the warmth and the spirit of a merchant's hospitality.

Across the road stands the White Mosque, with its high vaulted ceiling and stained glass windows that admit spears of multi-hued sunlight. Save for three old women in scarves praying, the mosque is quiet and comforting betraying little of its glorious days. A procession of arches on either side is reflected in the long pool at the centre where a pair of fat sparrows splash about.

Behind a wooden stockade is a grassy esplanade where lie the ruins of ancient Bolgar. This is holy ground where, year after year, Tatars congregate to remember the day they embraced Islam. In a pit, coated in fine dust, are three handsome young archaeology students shovelling away at straw and mud. An array of kaleidoscopic tiles in abstract patterns emerges, hinting at the shades that once made this a splendid courtyard.

At the end of a pathway stands the Bolgar State Historical and Architectural Reserve with four floors of exhibits, models and interactive screens that display the city's past. Paintings of horsemen in full gallop watched by a bejewelled Khan adorn one wall while scenes from everyday life decorate another. Pot shards, marble columns and metal cups jostle for space with turquoise robes and fine china. The ground floor opens to the riverside station where passenger boats on the Volga disgorge tourists.

Ahead lies a gold-topped mosque with one of the largest Qurans in the world. The book has a stone-studded jacket, and its parchment pages are filled with exquisite calligraphy. High above it hangs a chandelier designed like a beehive and below it in a maze of corridors are a series of paintings including the grandly portrayed and colourful 'Adoption of Islam by Bolgars' by R. Huzin.

Across a huge span of velvety grass stands the green-roofed Assumption Church built in 1712 on the ruins of a mosque. It's locked and barred and I wander off to the ruins of the Khan's mausoleum that sits peacefully by the bulrushes. Little boys in tubeteikas run past its tawny walls covered in ivy.

In the hope of the perfect picture I follow them to the Khan's palace on the sharp cliff near the water's edge. A cool dim passage leads to the bathing rooms that overlook the river. A lone boatman sails on it. The sky is the colour of peaches and cream and the water is awash with pink. In it I see the panorama of Bolgar's ancient skyline, its glories still accessible. And in the silence I hear the Song of the Volga Boatmen.

*(The writer was in Russia at the invitation of Ministry of Youth Affairs, Sports and Tourism, Republic of Tatarstan)*