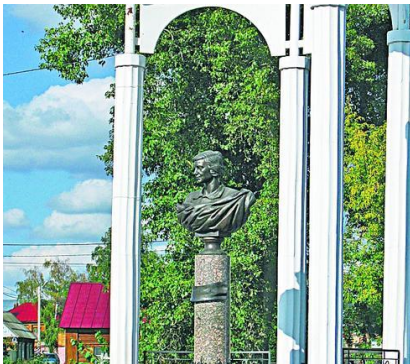


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## The five that came in from the cold



1,000-year-old Yelabuga in Tatarstan stands at the heart of a Russian fairytale. Photos: Deepa Alexander



Across the square lies her grave, but it is the house which exhibits Marina Tsvetayeva's few personal belongings.



The ladies' dressing chamber, the dining room and kitchen, and Shishkin's studio with nearly 50 lithographs have a quaint feel to them.



The staff at the Museum of District Medicine are dressed in vintage nursing uniforms and bustle about educating tourists.



City History Museum's souvenir store has some crafted wooden toys that are a must-buy.



Behind a palisade lies the stable of Nadezhda Durova, the first female officer in the Russian military and one of the most talented writers of her time.

## **Deepa Alexander lists five must-see museums in Yelabuga.**

Foreboding forests, burnished cupolas and cheery pastel-coloured buildings ... 1,000-year-old Yelabuga in Tatarstan stands at the heart of a Russian fairytale. A place full of museums, it has appreciably retained the charm of a provincial city of the 19th century. Its cobbled-stoned roads, medieval churches and parks with spindly trees that filter sunlight are filled with couples saying 'I do'. A favourite destination for those who want a wedding to remember, Yelabuga is also associated with some of the most outstanding figures in Russian culture — painter Ivan Shishkin, soldier Nadezhda Durova and poet Marina Tsvetayeva.

### **City History Museum**

Located on a street with Baroque buildings painted pale lemon, powder blue, lavender, creamy yellow and sugary rose, the museum houses treasures that trace Yelabuga's history from ancient to modern times. Pot shards from old burial grounds, dresses worn down the centuries modelled by waxen mannequins, the area's textile tradition, medals from the World Wars, faded photographs and a brilliant sound and light show throw the spotlight on what the city has been through over the years.

The museum's restaurant, 'Tavern', straight out of a children's picture book with printed menus and pretty illustrations, serves a three-course meal of Tatar delicacies. The souvenir store has some crafted wooden toys that are a must-buy.

### **Nadezhda Durova Memorial Estate**

It's a wooden house off a windswept, leaf-cluttered side street. Behind a palisade lies the stable of Nadezhda Durova, the first female officer in the Russian military and one of the most talented writers of her time. Durova, while disguised as a man, went on to become one of the most decorated cavalry officers during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815). The house is a horse-lover's delight. Wooden rocking horses in many colours crowd the landing. Scenes from the Patriotic War of 1812 line the stairs. A mannequin wears Durova's fading blue patrol dress with gold trimming. Her saddle and drum glint in the afternoon light and a lifetime of correspondence with Alexander Pushkin and the early drafts of her memoir, *The Cavalry Maiden*, penned in this house stand exhibited in glass cases.

Outside, at the stable where pink roses run riot over its walls, are Durova's carriage, crop and riding boots.

### **Ivan Shishkin's House Museum**

Shishkin, considered the father of Russian landscape painting, was born in 1832 in Yelabuga. Each room in his house is painted in hues we long ago relegated to the Easter egg — the red drawing room is filled with objet d'art becoming of a prosperous family of the 19th century, the pink parlour with its array of harpsichords and other musical instruments is where Shishkin's father who was mayor entertained family and friends. The ladies' dressing chamber, the dining room and kitchen, and Shishkin's studio with nearly 50 lithographs have a quaint feel to them.

But it's the view from the porch that can make even the museum-weary gasp. Rolling fields, grazing sheep and golden-brown haystacks that spur the imagination — the pastoral landscape is pretty much how it was in Shishkin's day. And it's bound to remain as bucolic for years to come as legislation prevents construction in this part of town.

### **Literary Museum of Marina Tsvetayeva**

The square of Tsvetayeva lies beyond a wooden bridge of locks. Considered one of Russia's greatest 20th century poets, Marina Tsvetayeva is often ranked alongside Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova. She lived a tragic life which she ended in 1941 but the sadness of it all did not end with her suicide. Much of her writing was banned and lay unpublished till the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s. Across the square lies her grave, but it is the house which exhibits her few personal belongings — a diary, book of poems and letters — that still draws the sighs.

### **Museum of District Medicine**

A warm, slow dusk floods the rooms with a soft glow. The unearthly light falls on the tableaux of patients waiting in Vladimir Bekhterev, neurologist and pioneering psychologist who was a famed doctor here. Bottled specimens line old medicine cabinets and medical apparatus fill the rooms. Museum staff dressed in vintage nursing uniforms bustle about educating tourists. But it's the incredible chamomile tea served by them in old handmade China at Bekhterev's waiting room that heralds the happily-ever after.