

Crimea Peace Camp MIR

'If you want to make Allah laugh, tell him your plans for the future,' a participant of the MIR Camp said last year. This year we found out!

Our plan was to do a three day retreat in the Derwish Tekke, that baraka laden fifteenth century monastery of the Mevlevi dervishes in Efpatoria, Crimea. Then a day rest in between and then the camp. A few weeks before it all was supposed to happen, organizer Amina wrote us Alifia, the caretaker of the tekke, had forgotten our appointment and it wasn't sure how many hours per day we could use it, if at all.

Next came a letter from Russia that Murshid Saul was doing St- Petersburg the weekend prior to our retreat. We created space for Murshid Saul by shortening and moving the retreat, so people could follow both.

So with our tickets already bought, we on Friday suddenly found ourselves in Efpatoria with five free days ahead of us to prepare a two day retreat back to back to the camp. If the retreat would happen at all. We couldn't do anything yet, for without an interpreter we couldn't talk to Alifia and our Russian friends were only coming on Wednesday, the day the retreat would start.

Before the retreat



the mosque

In the evening of our first full day we walk on the boulevard and were drawn by the call of the muezzin. We gather ourselves together and enter the mosque to join the evening prayer and ending of the daily fasting, as it was Ramadan. Ariëne finds herself sitting right next to Alifia, Wali joins with the men. A wonderful and intoxicating experience, a deep wish of ours to share the Islamic prayer in an Islamic community coming true. Allah indeed is a trickster, sending us all the way to Efpatoria on what seemed a wild goose chase and now treating us with the hospitality of the mosque.

The next day inspiration flows and we work on the dances, mainly on words of Hazrat Inayat Khan and decide to again visit the mosque. By now word had spread and people know us. After the prayer again a meal is served and again we join, regretting we can't exchange more than a few words in Russian, as virtually nobody in the whole of Efpatoria seems to master any other language. Every evening Wali joins

the men, facing Mecca and every time Alifia takes Ariëne (and only her) upstairs to pray on the balcony with her.

The mosque gives us our daily rhythm and the whole stay feels like a retreat for two, connecting the outer world with the inner world. We cannot but feel grateful for the course of events, even though with the uncertainty of the retreat we can't do any concrete preparation work.



Jewish celebration

So we walk around on this old and fertile soil, both agriculturally as religion wise. Traditionally Efpatoria is inhabited by Jews, Karaim (Jews that follow the Torah, but don't acknowledge the Talmud), Islamic Tatars and Orthodox Russians. The Mosque, the Synagogue and the Cathedral are within a hundred meters from each other.

We visit the synagogue and admire the many pictures of the different Jewish celebrations.

We are fortunate to witness a wedding in the Russian Orthodox church. At the moment supreme the priest is giving his blessings to the couple and the amplified voice of the neighbouring iman joins forces with the priest with his Allah ho Akbar! A wonderful moment of synchronicity. Merging, not competing, we conclude.



Alifia with Wali's tasbeeh

On Wednesday we finally have our talk with Alifia: we can use the tekke as much and as long as we like, so we settle for doing the morning practices at 'home' in our living room, followed by a

long morning session in the tekke from 10 am to 1:30 pm and another from 2:30 to 5 pm (after five it is too dark in the tekke that lacks electricity), to again conclude in our living room from 5 till 8.



The tekke

We have written about the tekke before. It is an amazing place with the strongest energy we ever experienced, making it almost impossible not to enter the spiritual realms. We saw quite a few tourists who were quite capable of ignoring the atmosphere, but we saw also many that to their own surprise were captured by the tekke.

Tourists? Yes, complained Alifia, there are only three of these old 15th century Mevlevi tekkes left. This one, one in Turkey and one in Egypt. However the tekke is seen as a museum, not a holy place, so she is appointed museum director and lodging and eating is not permitted on the premises.

Right next to the tekke is a venerable old mosque in ruins. By the look of it, the ruins must have been there for ages, but Alifia shows us a picture of the same mosque from 1978 in full glory. We are astounded: the Soviets tore it down, as they did with so many churches, following Marx' dictum that religion is opium to the people. They also tried to break down the tekke, but the walls were too thick. So they tried dynamite. The dynamite would not explode and after a week they brought the dynamite outside the premises where it spontaneously did explode, actually killing some people in the process. Such is the power of the tekke, declares Alifia with a mixture of pride and awe.

The Islamic people in Efpatoria are Tartars, descendants of the old hordes of Genghis Khan who later converted to Islam. They also don't 'recognize' the tekke

When Alifia after long journeys finally arrived back in her home town, she immediately went to the mosque, saw the people and declared they were not in for religion but only for power and money. Can you imagine we felt the resemblance with Murshid SAM and his Zen-like confronting haqq approach? It was not the only resemblance between the two. Alifia is too old (approaching 80 maybe?) to be bothered to decorum or appearances. 'In the religion is no compulsion,' we say at some point. 'But in present day Islam there is!' she fulminates, accepting us Western Sufi's – even though we don't pray five times a day nor fast during Ramadan – as more genuine than the clique of the mosque, headed by the largest wine and vodka distributor of the whole Crimea with his nephew as imam.



minaret of the mosque

Alifia was trained as a historian, reading the old manuscripts of Rumi and Hafiz, led the life of a dervish and slept in the streets of Efpatoria when she must have been over sixty already. At some point was fed up with it all politics and power games. She found some allies and just took the tekke by force and started living there. Now she is the museum director, fulminating at everyone who comes for a nice cultural treatment and talk about the Mevlevi and Rumi, meanwhile ignoring the sacredness of the place.

For six years she didn't leave the premises of the tekke, staying inside the gate. Last year she broke with her habit and went to Konya for a Rumi Conference. After this she went to Mecca for the hajj. It has changed her and made her even more adamant in realizing her vision for the tekke. She presents Wali with a hat from Mecca and Ariënne with some amber perfume from Mecca. She tells us her tasbee is broken and we tell her this means big changes are in store for her. Or is it a token of the changes she has gone through?

The end of this year her contract expires. It is uncertain if it will be renewed, so she has a master plan: she is in the process of founding the Mevlevi Derwish Sufi Order and asks us to join. The more foreigners, the more weight and importance, so the more pressure she can put on the country council. Lets' hope she succeeds. We at least will also write to the city council, using all the titles we have (which is still important in these former Soviet states). Alifia tells us that as long as she is alive, the tekke is ours to use at all times.

We meet again at the closing day of the Camp to have our final session in the tekke before flying to Istanbul.

Alifia presents Ariënne, Shahodat and Amina with a scarf. Made in India, but bought in Mecca! Moved, Wali presents her his amber tasbee – a present from our first trip to Russia – and much to our surprise, she produces another tasbee from Mecca, for Wali. A small iron symbol with three round holes, symbolizing the ritual sacrifice of a ram, shows its Meccan origin.

Who can think of a more colorful woman? Let's hope one day someone will write her biography.

The retreat

We planned the retreat because we wanted to bathe and work in the baraka of the tekke. Also – as we ask no honoraria for the retreat – it is a way to financially support the tekke. In the end we all pay, the organizers, the interpreter, us, and leave the tekke with some € 300,= that Alifia can use for her travels to Turkey in search for sponsors. We knew the outside circumstances would be anything but ideal for a retreat, as we slept elsewhere in different buildings and had dinner in a café (yes, they turned the television set off). The evening program and the morning practices to start the day were in our living room. Also – as said above – the planned five days (one day arriving, three days retreat, one day leaving) were brought down to one evening and only two full days.



living room

We realized it would be impossible in these circumstances to ask the twelve participants to keep the silence, so we decided to do long sessions, as we needed to regain the retreat mode every time again and make the best of it. This worked really well.

To summarize, we started with a sessheen-like approach, which opened the space for longer sitting sessions with wasifas and guided meditation. In the afternoon we repeated and deepened the wasifas with the walks and more sitting and

guided meditations.

During the retreat we find out Allah has pulled another trick out of his high hat: the St Petersburg weekend with Saul hasn't happened at all. His visa application was turned down.

Nonetheless, the gratitude for our five days stay in Efpatoria with 'nothing to do' due to the miscommunication (or non communication) still has the lead in our feelings.

But Allah is a trickster!

The Camp

After the retreat and the tekke, the site of the camp felt modern, alien and highly unspiritual. We were dancing more or less outside in the over roofed dining space and the first evening was extremely cold and it was hard to keep the concentration (or play guitar for that matter).

The night was even worse. Every room had a spate air conditioning device and the first night it was impossible to sleep, as the back wall of the rooms worked as a soundboard for the machines. 'What have we put ourselves into?' we thought. Luckily more people hadn't slept, so in the morning pow wow we all agreed to have a curfew on air conditioning. The next night we had

to remind four people out of our block of seven, but after that we finally could sleep. For sleep you need after such an intense retreat.

At the end of the camp, the same site felt like a home, with all participants as one large and intimate family. Galia, our hostess, had danced with us the previous year, so was familiar with the dances. Her female approach with flowers everywhere and her Russian sense for beauty had helped us getting into the family feeling, as had the number of participants (some odd thirty) and the mix of ages (at least 6 or 7 were under 35 and there was one baby). See below for more details on the camp

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