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Russian hand-crated cabin being shipped to Minnesota Zoo

By **JOY POWELL**, Star Tribune

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In northwestern Russia, Andrey Eltsov and his workers hand-crafted the traditional Russian log home by hand, as their forefathers have built them for centuries.

For nearly three months they worked on this *izba* -- an old log farmhouse -- in a land of fishing villages and thick pine forests, in the Republic of Karelia.

Using a tool called a scribe, they marked where they would cut notches and grooves to fit logs together so tightly that a knife blade couldn't be slipped between them. When the building was done, the workers numbered each log, then took them apart for shipping.

Now, that hewn and chiseled work of art has been reassembled as a log cabin in the Minnesota Zoo's new Russia's Grizzly Coast exhibit, which opens June 7 in Apple Valley.

It's not only the bears, sea otters, boars and other creatures that will be on display.

"The idea of using a real Russian-made cabin as part our new exhibit is really an extension of our overall strategy, which is to as accurately as possible represent all of the elements of the Russian Far East environment," said Lee Ehmke, director of the Minnesota Zoo.

"The geology, the plants, and of course the animals are all a part of the story, but so are the people and their interactions with the landscape. For instance, the cabin."

The "Ecolab Conservation Science Cabin," as it's now called, has a 10-by-6-foot window with a view of an exhibit that will soon house Russian Amur leopards, the rarest big cats in the world. At the opposite end of the cabin is another window with a view of the leopards' natural prey, Russian boars.

Eltsov said he and his crew are excited.

"Our log homes are a part of Russian cultural and architectural heritage," he said from Sortavala, Karelia. "So we are proud of our log houses. And we are greatly pleased that the millions of people in your country will get acquainted with the best traditions of Russian log-building process."

The \$23.6 million exhibit is the first of its kind featuring a region whose landscapes and animal combinations are largely unknown to most Americans: the Russian Far East.

It's one of Earth's last true wildernesses, home to a surprising diversity of animals, including some of nature's biggest predators. The animals and their environment, though, are endangered. There are, for example, only 35 or so Amur leopards left in the wild.

Ehmke and the Minnesota Zoo intend to educate the public and promote conservation of Russia's Far East.

Building the real thing

In the summer of 2005, the zoo officials planned to build a cabin that would "look Russian," said Robert Chambers of River Falls, Wis. An expert in log home construction worldwide, he was a consultant for the Portico Group, a Seattle-based zoo architect.

Then came the decision to build a genuine Russian cabin. In July 2007, Chambers traveled to Karelia, territory much like the Boundary Waters. There, at Ladoga Log Homes, he met Eltsov and his crew.

"They were very proud of their log-building traditions, so they felt privileged to build a copy of an old Russian *izba*, a farmhouse, and that it would be seen by people in America," Chambers said.

That sweltering summer, they used a mechanical wench and peaveys, which are shafts with a metal point and hinged hook near the end, to move the big logs. They grabbed them with Swede hooks, or carriers. They used chalk boxes, chisels, small sledges and lightweight chainsaws.

The craftsmanship shows most in the "scribe-fit." This art was invented in Scandinavia, or perhaps Karelia, more than 2,000 years ago. They used the scribe -- a divider or compass but with a pen in both legs -- to mark where to cut grooves and notches for a tight fit.

Once the log home was completed, it was disassembled and each log was coded and carefully wrapped. They were loaded into a 40-foot open-top container and began a long journey.

From Karelia, the cabin pieces went to St. Petersburg by truck. They sailed by ship to Hamburg, Germany, and on to Montreal. From there, they rode by train to St. Paul.

Duane Sellman, who owns a log-building company in Forest Lake, reassembled the cabin.

Workers painted one end to make the logs look old and dark, as if it was a weathered *izba*. The other end of the cabin is made of lighter logs and resembles a new addition.

Inside, there are boxes of artifacts to be put out, including a rifle and a Russian camera. The smell of freshly cut pine lingers, and the plank flooring is solid.

An interactive display in the cabin will allow visitors to donate money and hear information, narrated by WCCO-TV newsman Don Shelby, about the need to protect this wilderness and its animals.

In Russia, paint is expensive and used sparingly, so only the ornately designed shutters were painted bright Russian blue, here in Minnesota.

Ehmke and company had scoured the world for exactly the right animals, but they went beyond that to create an authenticity that will help immerse the visitors in a new cultural experience, Chambers said.

"To me, what this exhibit shows is the Russian rural landscape and the Russian farmers who would be living in an *izba* like this one," he said.

"This is a cultural gem. And as far as I know, this is the only one in America."

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