

## **UI team gives tourism tips to Russian city**

**By GREG KLINE© 2005 THE NEWS-GAZETTE**

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State-run trade unions used to pack tourists into buses for vacation and ship them off to see the ancient churches and other classic architecture in Vladimir, Russia.

If you ran a hotel or a restaurant, you could count on a government-generated clientele, no need to advertise, let alone do it in English. No need to offer clean restrooms either.

But Vladimir is in a different game now, and the community is getting some tips on competing from University of Illinois Professor Bruce Wicks and his students.

They're working in conjunction with a program run by an Illinois State University professor in Vladimir. Former Springfield Mayor Karen Hasara also is involved.

"It's a great city," said Katya Lakshanova, a Russian native and former master's student of Wicks, a UI recreation, sport and tourism professor. "Its architecture is just amazing. I think this city has a lot of potential."

After the breakup of the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s, ISU Professor Ron Pope got a program going that brought American farmers to Vladimir, which had just become a sister city of Bloomington-Normal.

The program eventually resulted in an American-style demonstration home being built in the Russian city. But it never became the engine for investment and trade organizers had wanted.

The "American Home" has become a center for teaching English to Russians and Russian to foreigners, primarily Americans, as well as being used for other purposes, such as organizing student and law enforcement exchanges.

Pope, a Russian politics professor who runs the American Home program on the side, still wanted to do something of an economic development nature, however. He settled on the possibilities for tourism in Vladimir and its neighbors.

A city of about 335,000, two hours northeast from Moscow on the Klyazma River in a Russian region known as the "Golden Ring," Vladimir is one of Russia's oldest communities and boasts ornate churches and other distinctive white stone architecture dating from the 1100s.

The area also is attractive for reasons other than old buildings, Wicks said.

"This is a great side trip for international travelers," he said. "There are many outdoor recreational opportunities. There's a great deal of potential there beyond just looking at churches."

The area also is home to traditional artisans, dancers and musicians, attractions that haven't to date been well marketed, if they've been marketed at all, Pope said. "We want to help them explore these opportunities," he said.

Pope originally lined up some Illinois State faculty members for the tourism effort, but when they fell through he went looking for help elsewhere.

A friend in the Illinois tourism business pointed out an Internet post by Pope to Lakshtanova, who took it to Wicks, and Pope also drew the interest of Hasara, who saw the same message.

Hasara became interested in Eastern Europe on trips there as a state legislator and through a project Springfield had with the Ukraine when she was mayor. She's also an advocate for "citizen diplomacy" efforts that bring Americans and people from other countries together to advance international understanding.

"I've always found that these exchanges and personal relationships in other countries did more to promote good relations than government programs did," she said.

She brought experience promoting local attractions in Springfield to the table as well, along with contacts that could generate grant funding.

Hasara, Wicks and Lakshtanova ended up visiting Vladimir on a Sister Cities International-funded exploratory trip last summer. Pope already was there with a tour for American social studies teachers in conjunction with the UI Russian, East European and Eurasian Center.

Wicks and his students have worked on promoting agricultural tourism in rural Illinois and also done a joint project, largely via the Internet, with students in Korea, in which the UI students planned a trip in the United States, including a stop in Champaign-Urbana, for their Korean peers.

He likes the foreign projects for expanding his students' horizons and giving them a taste of a tourism business that's increasingly global, which made Pope's idea attractive. "They (his students) said: 'I don't know anything about Russia.' And I said: 'That's good,'" Wicks said. "This just seemed like an interesting challenge."

It also helped that he had Lakshtanova, who was finishing her master's in tourism development, available. She took over the retooling of Vladimir's fledgling tourism Web site, including an English-language version. "If you don't have a Web site these days, people don't take you seriously, a good Web site," Pope said.

Wicks and his students also are working on projects ranging from designing a tourism office operation tailored to the area to developing ways of promoting cottage businesses in arts and crafts.

Meanwhile, Pope is organizing a trip this fall for people willing to provide feedback on their experiences that can be used to make improvements. Anyone interested in going can find out

more at [www.serendipity-russia.com](http://www.serendipity-russia.com) or e-mail Pope at [RonPope42@cs.com](mailto:RonPope42@cs.com).

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