

UPF Moscow, Russia celebrates World Interfaith Harmony Week

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Moscow, Russia—World Interfaith Harmony Week 2016 was marked by intense and interesting events from which Mister and Miss University participants could not stay away.

This year the United Nations-created week coincided with the Mister and Miss University pageant, an international event sponsored by the Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles (CARP), an organization that is affiliated with UPF. The competition was created to celebrate not only physical beauty but also moral character and artistic nature.

For the pageant contestants, the first week of February started with an excursion to the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center. The museum follows Russian history from the reign of Catherine the Great to the present day through the artifacts of culture and everyday life of the Jewish people. It is symbolic that this new historical and cultural center, established in 2012, is located in the Bakhmetevsky Bus Garage, the monument of constructivism built in 1927 by architects Konstantin Melnikov and Vladimir Shukhov.

The guests were amazed by the interior of this cultural center. Under the high arches there is a huge interactive exhibition that combines both historical exhibits and a myriad of interactive screens and objects. One could not only read but also observe, listen, touch: in short, receive information through all the senses.

And that's not to mention the fact that the first item on the three-hour excursion was the circular panoramic cinema with moving chairs, wind, water vapor and splashes (coming right from the seats), buzzing of insects, flashes of lightning—in short, all for the audience to remember in colors the beginning of the history of the Israel people.

The Tolerance Center is a very special place. Here one can feel deeply the live experience gained in the museum and evaluate it in terms of one's own system of values and guidelines. One can view videos and participate in various surveys and polls. The atmosphere of this place makes one think not only about the place and the values of the Jewish people, but also about the unity of all nations and nationalities which is quite relevant in our time.

Another important event of the week was an Azerbaijan-Russia Bridge of Peace ceremony, which was held at the Moscow House of Nationalities on Thursday, February 4. The initiator of the event was the Center of Russian-Azerbaijani Friendship (RAF) with the support of the Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP), another organization that is affiliated with UPF. The Bridge of Peace has proven the ability of representatives of two states to communicate freely in an atmosphere of mutual respect. The event was attended by Russian and Azeri residents of all ages—from the youngest to gray-haired veterans. A special bright feature of the event was a beautiful performance of national songs and dances, beauty, brilliance and originality of cultures of both nations, and their national characteristics. Of course, the highlight was when representatives of the two nations exchanged their good wishes and gifts, marked by sincere warmth and cordiality.

On Friday, February 5, the participants visited the Vysoko-Petrovsky Monastery, located in the center of Moscow. This is a beautiful, ancient monastery of the Russian Orthodox faith, first mentioned in the annals of 1317. Although the monastery buildings and services need restoration, nothing can disturb the centuries of spiritual sanctity, the spirit of peace and security within its walls. It seems as if one is not in the center of a big city but in a quiet and secluded desert where everything is subordinated to the idea of integrity and purity.

The monastery was founded in the 14th century by St. Peter, Metropolitan of Kiev and All Russia. It was he who moved the metropolitan cathedra, or bishop's chair, to Moscow from Vladimir, a city 120 miles (200 kilometers) to the east. This immediately made Moscow the spiritual capital of Russia and increased its authority.

Having survived during the centuries of its existence through a lot of adversity, the monastery appeared in not its best state. But it was clearly well preserved and stayed under repair obviously for the purpose of revival of this monument of architecture. Among the builders and founders of the monastery were such prominent figures as Prince Ivan Kalita and Dmitry Donskoi, Grand Prince Vasily III, Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich Romanov, Emperor Peter I, St. Filaret, and the Metropolitan of Moscow.

During the tour, the guests not only got acquainted with the history of the monastery, but also had a glimpse of the history of our country that passed through the walls and domes of all five temples of the Convent — Sergievsky, Bogolyubsky, Pokrov gate temple, the Church of St. Peter, and the Tolga Church.

The contestants walked around the territory of the monastery and learned a lot about the architecture, history, specifics of different symbols, observed the restored temples inside, and even the evidence of a recent miracle.

The highlight of the week was the roundtable discussion on "Interethnic and Interfaith Harmony as the Basis of Security and Stability in the 21st Century," which was held on Saturday, February 6, at the initiative of the Moscow chapter of the Universal Peace Federation and the organizers of the Mister and Miss University beauty pageant. The roundtable discussion showed that today's youth do not eschew the problems caused by disagreements between representatives of various religions, faiths and ethnic minorities. All participants of the roundtable had an opportunity to speak out and be heard. Was it not a step toward understanding and stability?

The participants expressed their concern for the current world situation. The youth of today, as showed by our roundtable, seek to stimulate a comprehensive dialogue with the purpose of rousing people of all ethnic groups and followers of all religious beliefs to eliminate prejudice and act for the common good.

Despite the official end of World Interfaith Harmony Week as planned by the United Nations, the Mister and Miss University contestants continued their research of different religions and cultures.

On Wednesday, February 10, together with a large group of like-minded people, they went on a tour of the Moscow Cathedral Mosque. This is not only the most important place for Muslims of the European part of Russia but also one of the most beautiful buildings in Moscow. The size of the building and its beauty, a fusion of historic architecture and modern technology, are dazzling.

But this is nothing compared with the openness toward all visitors. Every guest, regardless of faith or nationality, is welcomed in a very friendly manner. The tours explain about the mosque and Islam without exalting the Islamic religion above other religions, instead just seeking common ground and maintaining harmony.

The museum is located right in the prayer hall, and there are not so many exhibits, but the guide was able to shed light on many aspects of Islam, even for the followers of the religion or those engaged in its study.

Hopefully, today's young people, by learning about the culture and values of other religions and peoples, will become interested not only in coexisting but also in interacting effectively with people of other nationalities and religions, thus realizing the long cherished dream of all the nations of one world united under one God.