This book draws on a wide range of theoretical perspectives—from Chaney and Bourdieu to Berger, Sontag and Bakhtin—and from ideas about nostalgia to theories of consumption, nation, and ethnicity. The ethnographic detail in each chapter is impressive, and in my view is the real core of the book. It is a resource which will be widely used by Russian, Soviet and postsocialist specialists, by anthropologists, sociologists and geographers, and by anyone interested in cultural studies, material culture and consumption, and place and ethnicity.

—Dr. Frances Pine, Goldsmiths, University of London

Lifestyle in Siberia and the Russian North breaks new ground by exploring the concept of lifestyle from a distinctly anthropological perspective. Showcasing the collective work of ten experienced scholars in the field, the book goes beyond concepts of tradition that have often been the focus of previous research, to explain how political, economic and technological changes in Russia have created a wide range of new possibilities and constraints in the pursuit of different ways of life.

Each contribution is drawn from meticulous first-hand field research, and the authors engage with theoretical questions such as whether and how the concept of lifestyle can be extended beyond its conventionally urban, Euro-American context and employed in a markedly different setting. Lifestyle in Siberia and the Russian North builds on the contributors' clear commitment to diversifying the field and providing a novel and inventive insight into this vast and dynamic region.

This book provides inspiring reading for students and teachers of Anthropology, Sociology and Cultural Studies and for anyone interested in Russia and its regions. By providing ethnographic case studies, it is also a useful basis for teaching anthropological methods and concepts, both at graduate and undergraduate level. Rigorous and innovative, it marks an important contribution to the study of Siberia and the Russian North.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com
3. Lifestyle and Creative Engagement with Rural Space in Northwest Russia

Masha Shaw (née Maria Nakhshina)

When colleagues in town asked me upon my return from yet another fieldwork trip to the village: “Nu, i kak tam liudi zhivut?” (So, how do people live there?), they usually met my enthusiastic reply that life in Chavan’ga was generally very good with a sceptical distrust. While acknowledging that deterioration of the social and economic provision has occurred in many if not most rural parts of post-Soviet Russia, I offer an account of situations when people in Russia today make a deliberate choice to live in the village in order to achieve what they think is best for them. I look at people’s engagement with rural space as a lifestyle choice and a way of creative fulfilment of their desires and hopes.¹

Academic, media, and everyday discourse often associate lifestyle with diversity and distinction, as well as the availability of spare time and money. This implies that rural dwellers in Russia and elsewhere

¹ This study would not have been possible without the incredible support and hospitality of Chavan’ga’s residents. In particular, Anna Yakovlevna, Vera Yegorovna, Ol’ga Pavlovna, and Nikolai Aleksandrovich hosted me on a number of occasions and have become my true mentors. The deputy chairman of Chavan’ga kolkhoz, Pavel Alekseevich, helped a lot with fieldwork logistics and administration. Finally, I would like to thank the young people of Chavan’ga, who were a constant source of fun and inspiration, and generously shared their time to introduce me to local ways and wisdom.

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https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0171.03
might be more limited in their lifestyle choices compared to urbanites due to their limited access to cash, the onerous nature of work on the land and the restricted variety of available consumer goods and services. While this disparity has grown in most areas of post-Soviet Russia, the deterioration of the kolkhoz system and retreat of the state from peripheral regions in the course of postsocialist transformations have provided people in Chavan’ga with spare time. It has also given them the means to go beyond what is simply given and to invest in things they desire. Remote areas in Russia more generally have undergone cultural and symbolic transformations which made them more attractive to people. In the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union, many rural places took on new meanings, often rooted in values and traditions that the Soviet regime had tried to undermine (Humphrey 2001). These transformations have now offered new possibilities for personal fulfilment.

This chapter develops an idea of lifestyle as manifested in a particular way of engaging with place. It involves using a place’s specific affordances in such a way that corresponds to people’s values and aspirations, which in turn brings them personal fulfilment and satisfaction. Lifestyle is always creative, if we understand creativity as a universal fulfilling capacity rather than a privileged ability to produce something new and original (Evans & Deehan 1988; Pope 2005: 60–62). It is also intersubjective, in the sense that one’s own preferences and inclinations are in a constant dialogue with a world of commonly held ideas and attributes (Jackson 1998: 7). Individual lifestyles of contemporary Chavan’ga villagers are a direct manifestation of wider processes that have taken place during both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods in Russia, and shaped people’s aspirations and values.

Most literature on lifestyle speaks of it as a specifically urban phenomenon (cf. Chaney 1996: 100–03), with the exception of research on lifestyle migration from cities to the countryside (Benson & O’Reilly 2009; Hoey 2005). Such literature, however, usually approaches lifestyle from the perspective of affluent urbanites that aspire to a better quality of life in rural idylls, rather than from the rural population itself. A comprehensive recent study of urbanisation and counterurbanisation in contemporary Russia again focuses on the city as a starting point of people’s movement to the countryside (Nefedova et al. 2016). Within this approach, former villagers who come back to their rural places of
origin upon retirement or young people who return to the countryside after having tried their luck in the city seem to belong outside the realm of lifestyle migration. The two types of migration, however, are similar in nature. Both involve lifestyle choices, as they are an outcome of people’s pursuits of certain ideals and aspirations.

Ethnographic research on rural Russia has for a long time remained focused on rural areas as spaces of production rather than on their potential to produce multiple spaces (Shubin 2006: 429): of work and leisure, collective and individual. In the context of strong ideological pressure from the Soviet regime, ethnographers often resorted to “ideologically neutral” areas of study, such as folklore and material culture. The end of the Soviet period opened up the borders for foreign researchers, and brought the overall liberalisation of Russian science itself. While this has introduced a whole array of novel topics, most of research in rural areas focused on political economy and/or resource use (e.g., Gray 2003, 2004; Humphrey 2001; Stammler & Ivanova 2016; Wilson 2016), whereas studies of leisure, popular culture, lifestyle and consumption were mainly reserved for urban areas (Puuronen, Sinisalo & Shvets 2000; Barker 2005), with a few exceptions (e.g. Bridger 1989; Il’in 2015). This chapter contributes to the body of literature that looks at the village as a space for leisure, lifestyle choice and self-fulfilment.

I bring together stories of three individuals from three different generations to explore reasons behind people’s deliberate choices to live in the village and to reveal connections between personal decisions and wider processes within Russian society. My protagonists include a woman in her mid-fifties and two men, one in his forties, and the other in his early twenties. I use their real names, with the permission of all three protagonists.

Both men have chosen to live in the village because the rural space allows them to have a high degree of personal mobility. There are different drivers behind these individuals’ desire to be mobile. The older man, Andrei, has an inquisitive attitude towards the world which makes him constantly seek for new opportunities to travel. These aspirations have roots in Andrei’s Soviet childhood as he grew up in a system that had a strong focus on educational and ideological power of organised tourism and excursions. The younger man, Anton, gave up an advantageous job in the city arranged by his relatives for a lower paid
job in the village. He did not like the city job because it submitted him to very rigid timetables and externally imposed regimes. His job in the village, on the other hand, allows him a high degree of freedom to follow his own rhythms and spend a lot of time outdoors. While many adults in the village find such behaviour careless and short-sighted, Anton’s choice reflects a current tendency among young Russian people to put a stronger emphasis on finding a job that is close to their aspirations than their parents’ generation did.

The third protagonist, Vera, decided to move to Chavan’ga for good after having lived for many years in the city because the village gives her moral and physical strength. Vera’s decision to move back to the village is a typical example of a recent phenomenon of urban-rural migration in Russia. After a mass exodus from the village to the city during the late half of the Soviet era, many people now move back to the countryside upon reaching retirement in order to reconnect to their rural homeland and to achieve personal comfort and satisfaction.

Many Chavan’ga residents expressed their content with life in the village. Many of them made a conscious choice to live in the countryside rather than in the city. The three individual stories presented in this chapter are not necessarily representative in terms of the reasons for their choices, as every villager has their own story about the choices they made. However, they are representative in terms of reflecting people’s general perception of the village as providing a better quality of life than the city and better opportunities to pursue their lifestyle aspirations. The contemporary Russian rural space allows for certain possibilities for personal fulfilment, such as realising one’s aspirations in work and leisure or living up to personal moral values. The lifestyles of all three protagonists are creative responses to these opportunities and to ever changing power dynamics, ideologies, economic developments, and infrastructures.

In what follows, I first comment on the essential role of kitchen table talk as a research tool when conducting fieldwork in the Russian countryside. This section also functions as an initial introduction to Chavan’ga as a place. I provide further details about Chavan’ga in the next section and speak about how its current affordances and limitations have made certain trajectories appealing and certain lifestyle paths possible. In the section after that, I present the life histories of
the three protagonists in Chavan’ga and reveal the kind of choices they have made in order to achieve what they think is best for them. In the final section of the chapter, I further develop an idea of lifestyle as a creative way of engaging with place.

Kitchen table talk as a research tool

When conducting fieldwork in Chavan’ga, one should be prepared for various forms of “liquidation of time” (Pesmen 2000: 125). Among them, drinking tea at the kitchen table proved to be the most prominent in my work. When I rented my own accommodation in the village, I would have on average three to four visits for tea and coffee per day. There were days when I had hardly any time to write fieldnotes as I had one visit after another. Visitors were predominantly local youth, with a group size ranging from one person up to half a dozen people. While it was all right for me not to have any food in the house, sufficient provision of tea bags, instant coffee, sugar and sweets or biscuits was my regular concern. A significant proportion of my luggage when travelling to the field consisted of chocolate and other treats, as the range of choice in the local shop was rather limited. I spent an equal amount of time at other people’s kitchen tables, our conversations ranging from idle talks to discussions on profound social issues.

Nancy Ries considers talk “an especially meaningful arena of value production and negotiation among Russian-speakers” in late Soviet and post-Soviet Russian society and acknowledges the special status of kitchen table talk: “there, over tea or vodka, people could speak their minds, tell their stories, and spill their souls openly” (1997: 20–21). The situation when “the only places to talk are kitchen tables and analogous ones in workplaces” (Pesmen 2000: 95) has been changing rapidly ever since Russia embraced free market in the 1990s, especially in the city with its proliferation of public places for people to meet and socialise. In the village, however, the role of kitchen table talks in producing and transmitting local values remains very strong.

In a village as small as Chavan’ga there are no places for either eating or drinking out; people’s houses are thus the main built spaces where socialising takes place (Nakhshina 2013). Public built spaces where people can interact with each other are limited to the kolkhoz office, the
social club, the shop, and the helipad once a week. Opportunities to socialise during work are limited because work places are generally scarce, and because many forms of common labour such as hay making or harvesting have virtually ceased to exist. Fishing, which is the main kolkhoz activity in Chavan’ga, makes an important exception as it often involves spending long hours collaborating with other people.

Like in numerous rural settlements throughout Russia, there is a social club in Chavan’ga. However, the former role of this institution as a centre and initiator of various social activities has diminished significantly in the course of post-Soviet transformations (Habeck 2011). Chavan’ga social club’s functions are currently reduced to hosting celebrations of public holidays such as New Year or Victory Day and local holidays such as the official Day of the Fisherman, and to providing a physical space for people to socialise indoors on a regular basis. The social club is open from Wednesday to Sunday from about 6pm until 1am, after which time electricity in the village is turned off. It is largely up to visitors themselves to organize their activities in the club on regular days. There has been a significant revitalisation of the club’s attendance recently when they acquired entertainment and sports equipment such as a pool table and table tennis table. The pool table is the major pull factor that attracts both young people and adults to the club, generating sometimes rather long queues of players. I spent many hours socialising in the social club; yet, the most revealing discussions and soul openings always took place during kitchen table talks.

There are a few methodological implications of the role of kitchen table talk when conducting fieldwork in Chavan’ga. First, I had to allow for much more time for tea drinking than I had imagined, not only because this was the major way of getting local news and gossip, but also because I was actually expected to regularly participate in tea drinking sessions both as a guest and host. Next, tea drinking at the kitchen table was virtually the only space where I could socialise with some people in the village, as there were no other occasions for us to cross. Furthermore, participation in tea drinking was often a way for me to be accepted as svoia (one’s own), as well as an indicator of such acceptance. Some people in the village never invited me for tea, and they tended to be the people with whom I socialised least, if at all. Last but not least, taking part in kitchen table talks in a village of Chavan’ga’s
size can be very political. As the place is very small, people usually know whom one visits, for how long and how often. The very houses that one visits often define one’s wider social circles in the village and determine instances of further communication.

There is a major difference in the contemporary meaning of tea drinking and kitchen table talk in rural versus urban contexts. Those living in a city might see this “liquidation of time” as an unattainable luxury. In villages on the White Sea coast, however, these idle and profound, joyful and solemn kitchen table talks belong not so much to the realm of leisure as to the tapestry of everyday life.

Ethnographic material in this paper originates mainly from kitchen table conversations and is supplemented by data received through other methods, such as participating in local activities and working with regional newspaper archives. I spent several months in Chavan’ga during different seasons of 2011–2012. My research was part of the team project “Conditions and Limitations of Lifestyle Plurality” carried out by the Siberian Studies Centre at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (see the Appendix).

(Dis-)empowered by the state: lifestyles of (im)mobility

Life in a small fishing outpost: livelihood and transportation

Chavan’ga is a village on the Terskii Coast of the White Sea coastline in the Kola Peninsula in the northwest of Russia. Administratively it belongs to Terskii Raion (district) of Murmansk Oblast. The Terskii Coast is a historical name of the north-western and northern part of the White Sea coastline: as people from other regions of Russia came in several waves to settle along the White Sea coast over a span of several centuries, different parts of the coastline received their individual names. Settlers’ main occupation became fishing and hunting sea mammals, which made them distinct from the rest of the Russian people who were mainly involved in agriculture. Due to their proximity to the sea and a livelihood based on extraction of marine resources, people living in the White Sea area have been traditionally called Pomors, from the Russian po moriu (by the sea).
Like many other Russian villages, Chavan’ga has experienced a steady outflow of people to the city throughout the second half of the twentieth century and until now. There were eighty people registered as permanent population in the village at the time of my fieldwork, although the number doubled during the summer when many of those who had moved to cities came to the village on holiday. Chavan’ga’s demographic composition is rather typical for the contemporary Russian countryside, with middle-aged and elderly people constituting the population’s majority and young people being the minority. Among the rural youth, boys significantly outnumber girls, which reflects a continuing tendency of recent decades when women are more prone to leave the Russian countryside than men (Bridger 1989; Schweitzer et al. 2015: 143–44). This is reinforced by Chavan’ga’s main economic activity — fishing, which has been a predominantly male occupation. Salmon fishing allows people to earn much money over a short period of intensive labour, leaving the rest of the year free for other activities.

This makes life in a village like Chavan’ga rather attractive for men. Women, especially young girls, who are usually confined to housework indoors, often prefer the city with its domestic amenities. The situation might be different in other rural parts of Russia where there is a mixed Russian and indigenous population. Gernet (2012: 283) observes that most young indigenous women in villages in central Kamchatka prefer to remain in the village and not migrate to urban areas (as most non-indigenous young women do). From their perspective, the life in the village enables a middle way between an existence in the forest or tundra and existence in the city, as it combines elements of urban infrastructure with proximity to nature (ibid: 284, 286).

Salmon fishing has historically been an important occupation and source of income for the people of the White Sea area. Before the Soviet period, fishing was done mainly by self-organised groups of individuals within a community and by monasteries (Laius et al. 2010). In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Soviet government eliminated private enterprises and established collective farms (kolkhozy) instead. All fishing was now done by kolkhoz brigades; individual fishing for salmon was prohibited. Fishing was also supplemented with vegetable and dairy farming. The collective farm in Chavan’ga survived into the post-Soviet period. With currently more than forty employees, the cooperative is
the major provider of jobs in the village. The main activity of the *kolkhoz* is fishing which includes inshore salmon fisheries in the White Sea near the village and trawling in the Barents Sea near Murmansk. While the former provides employment for villagers, the latter sustains the *kolkhoz* financially.

Most *kolkhoz* workers are men, whereas women occupy the majority of positions outside the *kolkhoz*: in the service sphere, leisure and education, which have been traditional locations of female labour in Russia since the Soviet period. *Kolkhoz* jobs include an accountant, welder, cleaner, manual workers, truck and tractor drivers, fish processing workers, a chairman, and his deputy. Non-*kolkhoz* occupations include a librarian, social worker, post officer, shop assistant, primary school teacher, social club manager, and telecommunications engineer.

There was no permanent electricity, and no internet or mobile connection in Chavan’ga at the time of my fieldwork. There is no official road to the village and the fastest and probably the most comfortable way to get there is by helicopter that goes once a week from the town of Umba, which is the administrative centre of Terskii Raion. Time in Chavan’ga is counted in helicopters. It is not rare to hear that somebody is going somewhere in two helicopters’ time, or that something happened before the last helicopter. The demand for seats on the helicopter outstrips the supply. While the bench style seating results in a certain “flexibility” of ticketing, it is the combined weight of people and luggage that determines the number of passengers. This means that if people have too much heavy luggage, someone might not get a seat on the flight. This makes it difficult for people to plan their travel to and from Chavan’ga.

There is also a ship that comes from Murmansk three times a year during summer navigation. While it can take a very large number of passengers, it is not a very reliable mode of transport. The sea along the Terskii Coast is too shallow for the ship to come close to the shore. Villagers therefore have to come out on small boats to take passengers off the ship. If the weather is bad and visibility is very poor, the ship would not stop at the village and would go back to Murmansk. This again makes Chavan’ga hard to access. Transportation is somewhat easier in winter when people can travel by snowmobiles. Since most jobs in the village that involve driving a vehicle have been traditionally performed
by men, the latter are more mobile and less dependent on officially provided transportation as they have skills, knowledge and connections required to get access to means of transport. Women’s opportunities to have their own means of transport are limited, which makes them more bound to travel by public transport and more dependent on other villagers who have their own transport.

The main reason why there is no proper road to Chavan’ga is that there is a big river in the way. The official road goes all the way along the Terskii Coast from Umba up to the River Varzuga. There is no bridge across the Varzuga and one has to use a boat or ferry to get across and travel further. This geographical divide is reflected in the way people in villages on two sides of the river refer to the urban centre. In the last village before the river, when somebody goes to town, people say poekhat’ v goroda (to travel to cities), while in the village after the river people say poekhat’ na bol’shuiu zemliu (to travel to the mainland); the two villages are only fifty kilometres apart. This verbal distinction shows that people in Chavan’ga might feel isolated, or somehow cut off. There is a rudimentary unpaved road to the village now, which appeared about ten years ago. This makes it possible to reach Chavan’ga by truck during summer but the road is still very challenging.

Individual mobility is not an easily available resource for people in Chavan’ga. One has to have the right connections or invest a considerable amount of effort in order to achieve a high degree of personal mobility. There is a strong desire among people in the village, especially men, to obtain their own means of transport, such as a truck, motorbike, or snowmobile. To have one’s own vehicle is a matter of prestige and independence, even if it only allows mobility in the close vicinity of the village. Many male villagers occasionally like to escape to the forest on fishing and hunting trips that can last a few days. Without their own transport, they are confined to the village space. If a young man’s parents already have a snowmobile, he would still try to save money to buy his own. If someone regularly borrows a vehicle from others, they might be criticised for not investing in their own means of transport.

A very large part of families’ incomes in Chavan’ga goes into procuring transport and fuel to allow travels within the village and Terskii Raion, often at the expense of travels over larger distances. When I asked a girl from Chavan’ga why her family would not go on holiday
and get out of the village at least for a short period, her answer was that they cannot afford any travel because their snowmobile broke and now they have to save money for a new one.

Although vehicles are expensive, and official employment opportunities are very limited, many people in the village can regularly obtain cash from informal economic activities. The deterioration of established systems of state management and control in post-Soviet Russia have allowed people in villages on the Terskii Coast to earn extra cash from informal fishing activities (Nakhshina 2012a, 2012b). People either fish themselves or provide tourists with transportation, accommodation and guidance to fishing places. Such informal sources of income can provide people in Chavan’ga with enough money to invest in their own means of transport. It is mainly men who can earn a sufficient amount of money from fishing, partially due to their initial possession of skills, knowledge, vehicles, and other equipment, which reinforces women’s dependence on official transportation or on other villagers who have their own transport.

Double twist of (dis-)empowerment

People in Chavan’ga today seem to have more freedom to follow their own regimes of mobility rather than those imposed externally, compared to the situation during the Soviet period. Factors that have allowed for that include growing ownership of one’s own means of transport; deterioration of the kolkhoz system with its binding working regime; the weakening of state control in rural areas after the collapse of the Soviet state; and the households’ ceasing to keep their own cattle that would tie people to the place and restrict their mobility.

At the same time, there are strong limitations to Chavan’ga villagers’ freedom to move. First, it is within the village’s immediate surroundings and district that people move most. There is not much movement over larger distances, mainly due to the lack of means and insufficient infrastructure. Second, many of those trips that people make are in a way forced upon them because they are caused by the retreat of the state from the area. Many services that used to be available to people in rural areas during the Soviet time are not there anymore, and therefore people have to travel out of the village, usually at their own
expense, for things like medical care or various administrative reasons and secondary education (secondary and in some cases primary schools have been closed in most villages on the Terskii Coast). In this light, state policies continue to condition people’s mobility to a large extent.

On the one hand, life in Chavan’ga is empowering because people have more freedom to move and follow their own rhythms; on the other hand, it is disempowering because they have to spend a lot on travel for services that the state no longer provides, which in turn means there is less money available for other things, including holiday-making or other leisure activities. This double twist of empowerment and disempowerment is characteristic of life in many villages on the Terskii Coast.

The high degree of freedom to structure one’s daily routine has made certain lifestyles possible in Chavan’ga. In the next section, I introduce several individuals with whom I sat at the kitchen table particularly often and spoke about the choices and decisions they made in order to fulfil their hopes and aspirations.

Life histories over “liquidation” of time

Andrei: a curious explorer

I usually visited Andrei’s family in the evening when he and his wife were back home from work. I would come with a genuine intention to pop in for an hour, and end up leaving around midnight. Their incredible hospitality never ceased to impress me: every time they would invite me to join them for a family meal, and then magically squash in an extra chair by the tiny table in the very confined kitchen space.

Andrei loves travelling along the Terskii Coast and seizes any opportunity to vanish on his snowmobile or motorbike. He enjoys the beauty of the coast and often takes a camera with him to record a spectacular dawn or a giant pile of foam thrown against the rocks by the storm. Andrei has an extended digital archive of landscape photographs on his computer at home; showing them to me, he would not stop commenting on the beauty of the local landscape and how many interesting places there are in the area. Before marriage, he would often embark upon spontaneous trips, leaving the village unexpectedly,
satisfying his impulse to travel. This caused him occasional arguments and complaints from some villagers, he admits.

Fig. 3.1. Tundra selfie. Terskii Coast, Murmansk Oblast, 2010. Photo: Masha Shaw’s interviewee (with permission), CC-BY-ND.

Andrei has always been particularly interested in history. He says that his “unhealthy attraction to museums” started after his trip to a pioneer camp in Ukraine at the age of twelve. Participation in regular excursions to cities and fortresses in Moldova, Belarus and Ukraine organised by the camp allowed Andrei to develop a deep aspiration towards visiting historical places and acquiring new information. Since then, the thirst for knowledge has become a decisive factor in Andrei’s travelling.

The Soviet state recognised the educational and ideological role of tourism from the very beginning. It established a “Central Museum and Excursions Institute” and a “Scientific Research Institute of Excursions” already in the early 1920s while Russia was still emerging from the civil war (Sokolova 2002: 202). The new Soviet government saw tourism and excursions as an effective method of building socialism. Other goals of state-organised tourist and excursion programmes included the advance of citizens’ cultural level, encouragement of communication among peoples of the USSR and promotion of patriotic feelings towards the socialist motherland and interest in local history (cf. Chapter 4 in this volume). A special institution was established in 1970 to coordinate excursion activities of schools, colleges and out of school organisations.
Andrei’s school years were in the 1980s, which was the peak period of excursion activities in the USSR (Sedova 2004). Andrei’s trip to a pioneer camp in Ukraine was a perfect example of the Soviet tourism factory at work: it contributed to nurturing Andrei’s patriotism, interest in local history and desire for knowledge.

Having a curious mind himself, Andrei encourages the same attitude in his children: his five-year-old son once asked him what a zebra is, which made Andrei determined to go on holiday to visit a zoo. Andrei’s family has relatives in St Petersburg which determined his final choice of a destination for a zoo trip: “In St Petersburg there are relatives, there is a zoo, although I think probably it would have been better to travel to the zoo in Moscow”. Relatives’ place of residence often plays an important role in villagers’ travel patterns. During the late Soviet period when the transportation system was very affordable, family members travelled thousands of kilometres to visit their relatives in other parts of the country.

Andrei’s father comes from the south of Russia and Andrei remembers that throughout the 1980s his family often travelled by plane and train to visit their relatives there. Looking back at those trips today, Andrei says that making those long-distance journeys was absolutely normal for him; it was no more exceptional than to visit his grandma at the other end of Chavan’ga. Regular trips for long distances since childhood have made Andrei fearless towards travel. Andrei dreams of making a trip to Kamchatka one day. He has several cousins from his father’s side living there. They have recently resumed their communication via the social networking site VKontakte. Kamchatka is in the Russian Far East and the vast distance is the main factor that prevents Andrei from travelling. However, when I made a joke that it is indeed too far to travel by snowmobile, Andrei replied that where there is a will there is a way, and that it could in fact be possible to reach Kamchatka by snowmobile via Yakutia.

Andrei’s freedom to travel has been largely due to his job in a local branch of a big telecommunication company. He worked in the kolkhoz as an unskilled labourer before. The kolkhoz job was binding and physically demanding, and the salary was too low for Andrei to purchase his own vehicle and fulfil his travel aspirations. After Andrei left the kolkhoz for the telecommunication company, he was soon able to
save some money and buy himself a motorcycle first and a snowmobile a bit later. Andrei regularly buys second hand vehicles or spare parts and assembles things himself. He has accumulated so many cars and spare parts that a number of them remain unused and stand outside his house, open to wind and precipitation — a fact that has not gone unnoticed by other villagers.

What makes Andrei stand out in the village is his love of travelling just for the sake of it rather than out of necessity. Some people in Chavan’ga find Andrei’s investments into vehicles and travel highly unpractical and his spontaneous trips irresponsible. For Andrei, however, such travels are an ultimate expression of his aspirations as they satisfy his inquisitive attitude towards the world and his love of the place he lives in. Andrei says his family were the first in Chavan’ga to take their children on holiday to the seaside in the south. Andrei, his wife and their children regularly go on vacation together: this usually implies travelling over long distances which costs a lot of money for a large family with modest means. Andrei’s next dream for a family holiday is to go abroad once their children are a bit older.

Such travelling for leisure is something that very few families in Chavan’ga do. It took Andrei years to persuade his friend in the village to take his family on holiday to a resort in the south of Russia. The reason for villagers’ reluctance to go on holiday is not always the lack of means but also a particular attitude that travel has to be utilitarian in order to be considered worthwhile.

One couple in the village finally decided to go on holiday outside Chavan’ga after many vacations spent in the village. Their children advised them to go to a sea resort somewhere abroad. The couple’s final choice, however, was a health spa in a town nearby. They rejected the idea of an overseas resort on the grounds that lying on the beach was a waste of money; at least a trip to a health spa allowed them to conduct a useful holiday and ultimately feel good about the money spent. Every time the couple talked about their trip they felt they had to justify their “luxurious” expenditure by stressing its use and health benefit.

People in the city have always been subject to more pressure and incentive to travel for leisure, due to a higher degree of their exposure to media and stories about other people’s travels, higher average incomes, and better access to spare money and infrastructure. At the same time, it
remains rather an exception for the rural population in Russia to travel regularly for leisure. It therefore requires a particular stance towards travelling to lead a life such as that of Andrei, in a social environment that does not necessarily approve of the choices and behaviours involved. My next protagonist had to put up with even stronger disapproval of his lifestyle choice by the local community.

Anton: a cool ranger

My kitchen table conversations with Anton mainly happened at my place. People in Chavan’ga do not lock their houses during the day, and I was prepared to hear a knock on the door at any time. Anton, like many other young people in Chavan’ga dropped in on a daily basis, sometimes several times a day, for a quick catch up or cup of tea. The spontaneous nature of those visits was something I missed most when I was back in the city.

Anton was born in Chavan’ga in the early 1990s and has lived in the village most of his life apart from a few years in a boarding school in the centre of the raion, three years at a vocational school in a regional town, and a few months of employment in a city. The most frequent story that people in the village told me about Anton is that relatives had arranged a good job for him in the city as a mechanic in a big company that cooperates with foreign countries and involves opportunities to earn good money and travel abroad. Anton worked there for a few months and came back to the village for good. He now works in the kolkhoz, doing various seasonal jobs. Everybody from whom I heard this story disapproves of Anton’s choice not to stay in the city.

Anton says he really likes his current life in the village, where he can go hunting, fishing, or travelling in the forest and tundra with other men. He cannot stay indoors for too long and needs to regularly escape to nature. At the same time, he emphasises that he can move to the city at any time once he has had enough of the village. Anton enjoys the ease and freedom of life in the village. People in Chavan’ga often told me that one needs less money to live a decent life in the village compared to the city. As boys in the village put it, problems start as soon as they arrive in the city: they have to buy more clothes and deal with various bureaucracies. In the village, on the other hand, they can get by with one
pair of trousers and live without having to deal with any paperwork for years. Anton is on good terms with the *kolkhoz* chairman, which allows him to enjoy a certain flexibility in his work regime. He is one of very few young men among *kolkhoz* workers, and the chairman encourages his enthusiasm and passion by often assigning him tasks that involve his favourite pastimes.

Anton believes that a job should be primarily for pleasure and not just for money. He quit the promising job in the city because the schedule was too rigid and because life in the city would not allow him to enjoy the kind of activities he is most passionate about. This speaks to two interrelated phenomena that characterise life in contemporary Russian society: young people put stronger emphasis on finding a job that is close to their aspirations compared to their parents’ generation; work and leisure merge into one another as boundaries between them start to blur.

Older villagers often say that young people these days are irresponsible, lazy, and are after easy money. What is not taken into account in these observations is the idea that many young people might in fact be after a job that is close to their heart rather than just any job. To be able to choose a desired job in today’s Russia is only partially a structural privilege in Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) sense of people’s choices.
being conditioned by their class positions within the society; it is also very much, and increasingly so, a matter of one’s values and aspirations. The ever-growing prominence of the role of leisure in contemporary society might further affect young people’s attitudes towards work, making them more fastidious in their job choices.

Leisure and work were not strictly differentiated in pre-industrial society. Leisure as a mass phenomenon emerged as a result of industrialisation towards the end of the nineteenth century, when working days were shortened and workers subsequently had more free time; in this period, work became strictly differentiated from leisure time (Kucher 2012: 45). The last few decades have seen a growing tendency for work and leisure to merge again, albeit on different grounds. In pre-industrial society, life for most people was primarily work, while leisure activities were interwoven into it; in post-industrial society, leisure activities often become a decisive factor in one’s choice of work. Increasingly people in Russia take on jobs as a result of choice rather than their structural positions within society; this has further blurred the boundary between work and leisure.

Anton combines work and leisure in a way that brings him satisfaction and contentment. He knows what he wants, what is important for him and is very explicit about it. He settled in the village not because he has adopted “a taste for necessity which implies a form of adaptation to and consequently acceptance of the necessary, a resignation to the inevitable” (Bourdieu 1984: 372). He made a deliberate choice to move to Chavan’ga because it allowed him to pursue a lifestyle he desired. While some adults in the village might not approve of his choice to move back to the village, “at least he is doing something” — as one villager put it — “instead of ruining himself with drink”. Always keeping busy is an aspiration of my next protagonist who finds moral comfort and satisfaction in being constantly active.

Vera: active leisure as moral commitment

I visited Vera more than any other person in Chavan’ga. No matter how busy she was, she would always make a break to sit down with her guests: a kettle would be put on and everyone would gather around the kitchen table for a good couple of hours. There was never a shortage
of visitors in Vera’s house: guests of all manner seemed to feel equally comfortable and welcome.

Vera was born in Chavan’ga and lived there until she was about fifteen when her family moved to Murmansk. After school she went to a college in a big city in the south of Russia and then returned to work in Chavan’ga after graduation. A year later she got married to a man from Moldova and they both moved to his home country. Six years later they came back to Murmansk and lived and worked there until retirement.

Vera tried to come to Chavan’ga at least every other vacation while they lived in Moldova, and then every single year after they moved back to Murmansk. The north had always appealed to Vera and she decided to eventually move back despite an attractive opportunity to live and work in a city in the south with a more favourable climate and better access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Vera started to think of moving to Chavan’ga for good when her parents died and there was nobody left in the village to look after the family house. It took Vera a few years before she could realise her dream, the main obstacles being her husband’s poor health and her young daughter still needing support. She then moved spontaneously when an employment opportunity came up in Chavan’ga. Vera’s decision was a shock for many of her friends and relatives. She was already a few years into her retirement; and moving to a harsh climate to live in an old, poorly insulated house in a hard-to-reach place at her age sounded like a reckless idea.

Yet, Vera was prepared to realise her dream. She came back to Chavan’ga in the hope of doing something purposeful for the village. She feels very strongly about preserving Chavan’ga for future generations. She sees a way to do it through preserving her own house and through fostering love towards the village among her own children and grandchildren. Vera firmly believes that for children to love the village, there must be a house for them to come to. The more well-maintained houses there are in the village, the better the chance of a long-term future (Nakhshina 2013: 220–21). Vera took up a job in Chavan’ga to save some money to repair the house — a first step towards realising her goal.
Chavan’ga has always been a source of moral strength for Vera: simply being there, taking regular walks along the seacoast, seeing familiar objects all take her worries away. If she were going through difficult times, she would often come to Chavan’ga to be healed from her troubles. Chavan’ga serves as both the inspiration for Vera’s outlook on life and a means to live it. Vera feels she needs to repay her moral debt to the village by preserving it for the future: Chavan’ga gives her moral and physical strength, and if she maintains her house, then maybe someone else in the future can live there and benefit from Chavan’ga’s healing power.

A house in the village requires a lot of work. Whenever I visited Vera for tea, she was never idle. She says she is not used to being at rest and doing nothing. Even during her vacation, she would always work hard. She gets very tired by the end of the day in the village. Yet, when she sits down in the evening, she enjoys this overall pleasant feeling of tiredness, as she feels that she has done something useful: another day has passed with good reason.

Vera has never been on a beach holiday: leisure for her is imbued with moral value and she has to be active even during rest periods in order to feel good and useful. Chavan’ga is the perfect place for such a lifestyle of moral leisure as life in the village requires a lot of work.
Many villagers think that the city, on the other hand, spoils, corrupts and makes one idle and even ill.

For Vera, keeping busy is more than just performing everyday physical tasks: it is a way to pursue her aspirations and moral values. By putting all her free time and resources into the house, which is actually shared between her and her numerous siblings, she lives out her ultimate dream of serving Chavan’ga and preserving it for future generations.

I miss the long cosy hours I used to spend around the kitchen table in Vera’s house. Warm and welcoming homes such as hers guarantee that Chavan’ga will indeed continue into the future, as having visited once, people will want to come back.

Conclusion: lifestyle as a creative engagement with place

The limitations of the kolkhoz system during the Soviet period, and later the post-Soviet deterioration of provision of state care and services in rural areas accompanied and partially fuelled Soviet urbanisation, which has overall contributed to an unattractive image of life in the countryside in Russia. Able-to-work people who stayed in the village, or left for town and then came back to the countryside, are widely perceived to have somehow failed in life, or reduced their chances to succeed. The idea that those who live in the village — especially young people — have missed out on opportunities that modern life has on offer prevails among contemporary Russian city dwellers.

The life stories presented in this chapter suggest a more optimistic view of contemporary rural Russia. Andrei, Anton, and Vera all hold very strong views on why they have chosen to live in the village and are very explicit about their choices. They deliberately followed their values and aspirations, rather than simply ending up there by default. Chavan’ga has served as both an initial inspiration and ultimate means for achieving their goals. Their lifestyles are manifested in distinct ways of engaging with place, ways that bring them personal fulfilment and satisfaction.

One’s strive for self-fulfilment is always creative. This implies a particular understanding of creativity which is profoundly different
from a mainstream approach. The latter understands creativity as producing something new and original and thus sees creation as an achievement (result) (for an overview of this approach, see Pope 2005). An alternative view sees creativity as self-fulfilling and therefore understands creation as a process. Peter Evans and Geoff Deehan (1988) refer to the root of creativity in the Greek verb krainen (to fulfil). They suggest that “by this definition, anyone who fulfils his or her potential, who expresses an inner drive or capacity [...] may be said to be creative” (Evans & Deehan 1988: 21).

Chavan’ga provides a rich field of dynamic potentialities to its dwellers. Andrei, Anton, and Vera actively use their native place’s specific affordances to pursue their values and dreams. Their expressive lifestyles are an outward manifestation of their creativity, as they allow these individuals to follow an inner drive and fulfil their ultimate potential. Lifestyle is often seen as manifested in external attributes, such as appearances or pastimes. But lifestyle can also be expressed in the way someone engages with the place they live in, when this engagement is an articulation of their ultimate values and aspirations.

The choices that Russian rural dwellers are making cannot be understood in isolation from the globalising trends that are transforming Russia as a whole, including its urban populations. The lifestyles of Andrei, Anton, and Vera are intersubjective as they speak to larger processes (Jackson 1998) that have been affecting Russian society and shaping people’s aspirations and values: from the Soviet focus on the educational and ideological role of leisure to a more recent trend among younger generations to put more emphasis on finding an occupation that resonates with their aspirations.

Another important factor is the changing nature of Russian remote areas more generally. Caroline Humphrey speaks about new qualities that Russian remote areas have acquired in recent years. Remote places in Russia can now exercise a wide variety of previously hidden or non-existing relations of attachment: to landscape, human and non-human beings, legends as well as relations that open up new possibilities (Humphrey 2014: 9). As the Russian administrative grip has loosened in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union, many small places have received an opportunity to be more independent in evaluating their own history and determining their future development. Many remote places have
now become some kind of reservoirs of all those values that the Soviet machine tried to undermine: traditions, “authentic” ways of life, sacred places, or ancestral graves (ibid: 14–15). These transformations made remote places in Russia more attractive to people as they now offered new possibilities of personal fulfilment.

What brings the stories of my three protagonists together is that their native village allows them to be masters of their lives. It allows them to pursue their true values and aspirations manifested in their distinct lifestyles. There is a common perception that lifestyles happen in the city with its abundance of available goods and services, while the village has far too many limitations in terms of such consumables. At the same time, the life stories of Andrei, Anton, and Vera suggest that a remote place in the countryside can offer unlimited lifestyle opportunities, if we approach lifestyle as a creative process of achieving self-fulfilment rather than as the disposal of final consumable products.

References


