

Wanted: Peat

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It wasn't meant as a joke, but Yevgeny seemed to think that no one in their right mind was going to buy his peat so they could burn it.

“Who's going to buy peat to set fire to it when it's on fire everywhere around?” he said irritably.

That was the idea, actually, but he explained that nobody burns peat in houses in this town.

That probably explains the singularly negative reaction to the burning air around us as the peat bogs surrounding Moscow continue to send their noxious fumes into the city. By now, the smell has crept in through the windows and sunk into the sofa like an unwelcome relative settling in for a month or two, inducing that oddly comforting feeling as you look out the window and see nothing of the apocalypse drawing in as the fog curls in at night.

Nevertheless, for me, on that first morning when the smell rolled in, it was more of a sweet nostalgic moment of Ireland before the tiger started roaring — last seen hanging from a parachute off Galway, I believe — when the smell of Irish countryside was burning peat.

Well, it was for the two weeks of a summer I was there. If the smell is matched with 40 days of nonstop rain in Moscow, I'll start looking for cowpats to jump over on Tverskaya Ulitsa.

Now that I know that breathing Moscow air is the equivalent of smoking two packs of Java cigarettes while sucking on a KamAZ exhaust pipe, the smell is not quite so romantic — although again, somewhat reminiscent of previous experiences spent in smoky Moscow bars.

There are quite a few people advertising and selling peat out there, but most are offering it for mixing into soil rather than for burning.

The woman at Rustorf.ru was rather rude when asked if their turf would burn in an oven. Perhaps if I knew the Russian word for “cooking range,” she wouldn't have hung up so quickly.

That's 970 rubles (\$33) a kilogram — for a 10-kilogram minimum purchase — that she is not going to get.

The peat was going to be a gift, as it seems unfair that the city's mayor, Yury Luzhkov, and his lovely billionaire wife — currently out of town on their holidays — will not have that sweet nostalgia in years to come of the fog and the odor of burning, thousand-year-old turf to remember August 2010 by.

Unless of course, they are holidaying next to one of the peat burning power stations that they have in Finland.

If so, the burning peat present sent to a villa in Switzerland is a somewhat misdirected gift. Apologies.

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