

**O`ZBEKISTON RESPUBLIKASI XALQ TA`LIM VAZIRLIGI  
NAVOIY DAVLAT PEDAGOGIKA INSTITUTI  
XORIJIY TILLAR FAKULTETI**

**INGLIZ TILI VA ADABIYOTI TA`LIM YO`NALISHI  
TALABASI NADORSHINA IRODANING**

**“HOLIDAYS AND TRADITIONS IN ENGLISH – SPEAKING COUNTRIES”**

**MAVZUSIDAGI REFERATI**

**Scientific adviser: Salimova N.I**

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## **Holidays and traditions in English – speaking countries.**

### **PUBLIC HOLIDAYS AND CELEBRATIONS**

There are only six public holidays a year in Great Britain that is days on which people need not go in to work. They are: Christmas Day, Boxing Day, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Spring Bank Holiday and Late Summer Bank Holiday. In Scotland, the New Year's Day is also a public holiday. Most of these holidays are of religious origin, though it would be right to say that for the greater part of the population they have long lost their religious significance and are simply days on which people relax, eat, drink and make merry. All the public holidays, except Christmas Day and Boxing Day observed on December 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> respectively, are movable that is they do not fall on the same day each year. Good Friday and Easter Monday depend on Easter Sunday which falls on the first Sunday after a full moon on or after March 21<sup>st</sup>. the Spring Bank Holiday falls on the last Monday of May or on the first Monday of June, while the Late Summer Bank Holiday comes on the last Monday in August or on the first Monday in September, depending on which of the Mondays is nearer to June 1<sup>st</sup> and September 1<sup>st</sup> respectively.

Besides public holidays, there are other festivals, anniversaries and simply days, for example Pancake Day and Bonfire Night, on which certain traditions are observed, but unless they fall on a Sunday, they are ordinary working days.

#### **1. NEW YEAR**

*In England* the New Year is not as widely or as enthusiastically observed as Christmas. Some people ignore it completely and go to bed at the same time as usual on New Year's Eve. Many others, however, do celebration it in one way or another, the type of celebration varying very much according to the local custom, family traditions and personal taste.

The most common type of celebration is a New Year party, either a family party or one arranged by a group of young people. This usually begins at about eight o'clock and goes on until the early hours of the morning. There is a lot of drinking, mainly beer, wine, gin and whisky; sometimes the hosts make a big bowl of punch which consists of wine, spirits, fruit juice and water in varying proportions. There is usually a buffet of cold meat, pies, sandwiches, savouries, cakes and biscuits. At midnight the wireless is turned on, so that everyone can hear the chimes of Big Ben, and on the hour a toast is drunk to the New Year. Then the party goes on.

Another popular way of celebrating the New Year is to go to a New Year's dance. Most hotels and dance halls hold a special dance on New Year's Eve. The hall is decorated, there are several different bands and the atmosphere is very gay.

The most famous celebration is in London round the statue of Eros in Piccadilly Circus where crowds gather and sing and welcome the New Year. In Trafalgar Square there is also a big crowd and someone usually falls into the fountain.

Those who have no desire or no opportunity to celebrate the New Year themselves can sit and watch other people celebrating on television. It is an indication of the relative unimportance of the New Year in England that the television producers seem unable to find any traditional English festivities for their programmers and usually show Scottish ones.

January 1<sup>st</sup>, New Year's Day, is not a public holiday, unfortunately for those who like to celebrate most of the night. Some people send New Year cards and give presents but this is not a widespread custom. This is the traditional time for making "New Year resolutions", for example, to give up smoking, or to get up earlier. However, these are generally more talked about than put into practice.

Also on New Year's Day the "New Year Honours List" is published in the newspapers; i.e. a list of those who are to be given honours of various types – knighthoods, etc.

*In Canada* New Year's Day has a long tradition of celebration. New Year's Eve in French Canada was (and still is) marked by the custom of groups of young men, to dress in colorful attire and go from house to house, singing and begging gifts for the poor. New Year's Day was (and is) a time for paying calls on friends and neighbours and for asking the blessing of the head of the family. The early Governors held a public reception for the men of the community on New Year's morning, a custom preserved down to the present day. While New Year's Day is of less significance in English Canada than in French Canada, it's a public holiday throughout the country. Wide spread merry-making begins on New Year's Eve with house parties, dinner dances and special theatre entertainment. A customary feature of the occasion that suggests the Scottish contribution to the observation is the especially those that couldn't be arranged for Christmas, are held on New Year's Day. New Year isn't such an important holiday in England as Christmas. Some people don't celebrate it at all.

*In USA* many people have New Year parties. A party usually begins at about 8 o'clock and goes on until early morning. At midnight they listen to the chimes of Big Ben, drink a toast to the New Year and Sing Auld Lang Syne.

*In London* crowds usually gather round the statue of Eros in Piccadilly Circus and welcome the New Year.

There are some traditions on New Year's Day. One of them is the old First Footing. The first man to come into the house is very important. The Englishman believes that he brings luck. This man (not a woman) must be healthy, young, pretty looking. He brings presents-bread, a piece of coal or a coin. On the New Year's Day families watch the old year out and the New Year in.

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## **2. HOGMANAY CELEBRATIONS**

Hogmanay is a Scottish name for New Year's Eve, and is a time for merrymaking, the giving of presents and the observance of the old custom of First – Footing. One of the most interesting of Scottish Hogmanay celebrations is the Flambeaux Procession at Comrie, Perthshire. Such processions can be traced back to the time of the ancient Druids. There is a procession of townsfolk in fancy dress carrying large torches. They are led by pipers. When the procession has completed its tour, the flambeaux (torches) are thrown into a pile, and everyone dances around the blaze until the torches have burned out.

### **THE NIGHT OF HOGMANAY**

Nowhere else in Britain is the arrival of the New Year celebrated so whole heartedly as in Scotland?

Throughout Scotland, the preparations for greeting the New Year start with a minor "spring-cleaning". Brass and silver must be glittering and fresh linen must be put on the beds. No routine

work may be left unfinished; stockings must be darned, tears mended, clocks wound up, musical instruments tuned, and pictures hung straight. In addition, all outstanding bills are paid, overdue letters written and borrowed books returned. At least, that is the idea!

Most important of all, there must be plenty of good things to eat. Innumerable homes “reek of celestial grocery” – plum puddings and currant buns, spices and cordials, apples and lemons, tangerines and toffee. In mansion and farmhouse, in suburban villa and city tenement, the table is spread with festive fare. Essential to Hogmanay are “cakes and kebbuck” (oatcakes and cheese), shortbread, and either black bun or currant loaf. There are flanked with bottles of wine and the “mountain dew” that is the poetic name for whisky.

In the cities and burghs, the New Year receives a communal welcome, the traditional gathering-place being the Mercat Cross, the hub and symbol of the old burgh life. In Edinburgh, however, the crowd has slid a few yards down the hill from the Mercat Cross to the Tron Kirk – being lured thither, no doubt, by the four-faced clock in the tower. As the night advances, Princes Street becomes as thronged as it normally is at noon, and there is growing excitement in the air. Towards midnight, all steps turn to the Tron Kirk, where a lively, swaying crowd awaits “the Chaplin o’ the Twal” (the striking of 12 o’clock). As the hands of the clock in the tower approach the hour, a hush falls on the waiting throng, the atmosphere grows tense, and then suddenly there comes a roar from a myriad throats. The bells forth, the sirens scream – the New Year is born!

Many families prefer to bring in the New Year at home, with music or dancing, cards or talk. As the evening advances, the fire is piled high – for the brighter the fire, the better the luck. The members of the household seat themselves round the hearth, and when the hands of the clock approach the hour, the head of the house rises, goes to the main door, opens it wide, and holds it thus until the last stroke of midnight has died away. Then he shuts it quietly and returns to the family circle. He has let the Old Year out and the New Year in. now greetings and small gifts are exchanged, glasses are filled – and already the First-Footers are at the door.

The First-Footer, on crossing the threshold, greets the family with “A gude New Year to ane and a’!” or simply “A Happy New Year!” and pours out a glass from the flask he carries. This must be drunk to the dregs by the head of the house, who, in turn, pours out a glass for each of his visitors. The glass handed to the First-Footer himself must also be drunk to the dregs. A popular toast is:

“Your good health!”

The First-Footers must take something to eat as well as to drink, and after an exchange of greetings they go off again on their rounds.

### 3. ST. VALENTINE’S DAY – FEBRUARY 14

*I’ll be your sweetheart, if you will be mine,  
All of my life I’ll be your Valentine ...*

It’s here again, the day when boys and girls, sweethearts and lovers, husbands and wives, friends and neighbours, and even the office staff will exchange greetings of affections, undying love or satirical comment. And the quick, slick, modern way to do it is with a Valentine card.

There are all kinds, to suit all tastes, the lush satin cushions, boxed and be-ribboned, the entwined hearts, gold arrows, roses, cupids, doggerel rhymes, sick sentiment and sickly sentimentality – it’s all there. The publishers made sure it was there, as Mr Punch complained, “there weeks in advance!”

In his magazine, *Punch*, as long ago as 1880 he pointed out that no sooner was the avalanche of Christmas cards swept away than the publishers began to fill the shops with their novel valentines, full of “Hearts and Darts, Loves and Doves and Floating Fays and Flowers”.

It must have been one of these cards which Charles Dickens describes in *Pickwick Papers*. It was “a highly coloured representation of a couple of human hearts skewered together with an arrow,

cooking before a cheerful fire” and “superintending the cooking” was a “highly indelicate young gentleman in a pair of wings and nothing else”.

In the last century, sweet-hearts of both sexes would spend hours fashioning a homemade card or present. The results of some of those painstaking efforts are still preserved in museums. Lace, ribbon, wild flowers, coloured paper, feathers and shells, all were brought into use. If the aspiring (or perspiring) lover had difficulty in thinking up a message or rhyme there was help at hand. He could dip into *the quiver of Love* or *St. Valentine's Sentimental Writer*, these books giving varied selections to suit everyone's choice. Sam Weller, of *Pick wick Papers* fame, took an hour and a half to write his “Valentine”, with much blotting and crossing out and warnings from his father not to descend to poetry.

The first Valentine of all was a bishop, a Christian martyr, who before the Romans put him to death sent a note of friendship to his jailer's blind daughter.

The Christian Church took for his saint's day February 14; the date of an old pagan festival when young Roman maidens threw decorated love missives into an urn to be drawn out by their boy friends.

A French writer who described how the guests of both sexes drew lots for partners by writing down names on pieces of paper noted this idea of lottery in 17th century England. “It is all the rage,” he wrote.

But apparently to bring the game into a family and friendly atmosphere one could withdraw from the situation by paying a forfeit, usually a pair of gloves.

One of the older versions of a well-known rhyme gives the same picture:

The rose is red, the violets are blue,  
The honey's sweet and so are you.  
Thou art my love and I am thine.  
I drew thee to my Valentine.  
The lot was cast and then I drew  
And fortune said it should be you.

Comic valentines are also traditional. The habit of sending gifts is dying out, which must be disappointing for the manufacturers, who nevertheless still hopefully dish out presents for Valentine's Day in an attempt to cash in. and the demand for valentines is increasing. According to one manufacturer, an estimated 30 million cards will have been sent by January, 14 – and not all cheap stuff, either.

“Our cards cost from 6d to 15s 6d”, he says, but “ardent youngsters” want to pay more.” They can pay more. I saw a red satin heart-shaped cushion enthroning a “pearl” necklace and earrings for 25s. Another, in velvet bordered with gold lace, topped with a gilt leaf brooch, was 21s (and if anyone buys them ... well, it must be love!).

There are all kinds:

The sick joke – reclining lady on the front, and inside she will “kick you in the ear”.

The satirical – “You are charming, witty, intelligent, etc.”, and “if you believe all this you must be ...” – inside the card you find an animated cuckoo clock.

And the take-off of the sentimental – “Here's the key to my heart ... use it before I change the lock”.

And the attempts to send a serious message without being too sickly, ending with variations of “mine” and “thine” and “Valentine”.

So in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when there are no longer any bars to communication between the sexes, the love missives of an older, slower time, edged carefully over the counters by the publishers and shopkeepers, still surge through the letter boxes.

#### 4. PANCAKE DAY

Pancake Day is the popular name for Shrove Tuesday, the day preceding the first day of Lent. In medieval times the day was characterized by merrymaking and feasting, a relic of which is the eating of pancakes. Whatever religious significance Shrove Tuesday may have possessed in the olden days, it certainly has none now. A *Morning Star* correspondent who went to a cross-section of the people he knew to ask what they knew about Shrove Tuesday received these answers:

“It’s the day when I say to my wife: ‘Why don’t we make pancakes?’ and she says, ‘No, not this Tuesday! Anyway, we can make them any time.’”

“It is a religious festival the significance of which escapes me. What I do remember is that it is Pancake Day and we as children used to brag about how many pancakes we had eaten.”

“It’s pancake day and also the day of the student rags. Pancakes – luscious, beautiful pancakes. I never know the date – bears some relationship to some holy day.”

The origin of the festival is rather obscure, as is the origin of the custom of pancake eating.

Elfrica Viport, in her book on Christian Festivals, suggests that since the ingredients of the pancakes were all forbidden by the Church during Lent then they just had to be used up the day before.

Nancy Price in a book called *Pagan’s Progress* suggests that the pancake was a “thin flat cake eaten to stay the pangs of hunger before going to be shriven” (to confession).

In his *Seasonal Feasts and Festivals* E. O. James links up Shrove Tuesday with the Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday) festivals or warmer countries. These jollifications were an integral element of seasonal ritual for the purpose of promoting fertility and conquering the malign forces of evil, especially at the approach of spring.”

The most consistent form of celebration in the old days was the all-over-town ball game or tug-of-war in which everyone let rip before the traditional feast, tearing here and tearing there, struggling to get the ball or rope into their part of the town. It seems that several dozen towns kept up these ball games until only a few years ago.

E. O. James in his book records instances where the Shrove Tuesday celebrations became pitched battles between citizens led by the local church authorities.

Today the only custom that is consistently observed throughout Britain is pancake eating, though here and there other customs still seem to survive. Among the latter, Pancake Races, the Pancake Greaze custom and Ashbourne’s Shrovetide Football are the best known. Shrovetide is also the time of Student Rags.

#### 5. ST. DAVID’S DAY

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of March each year one can see people walking around London with leeks pinned to their coats. A leek is the national emblem of Wales. The many Welsh people who live in London — or in other cities outside Wales — like to show their solidarity on their national day.

The day is actually called Saint David’s Day, after a sixth century abbot who became patron saint of Wales. David is the nearest English equivalent to the saint’s name, Dawi.

The saint was known traditionally as “the Waterman”, which perhaps means that he and his monks were teetotalers. A teetotaler is someone who drinks no kind of alcohol, but it does not mean that he drinks only tea, as many people seem to think.

In spite of the leeks mentioned earlier, Saint David’s emblem is not that, but a dove. No one, not even the Welsh, can explain why they took leek to symbolize their country, but perhaps it was just as well. After all, they can’t pin a dove to their coat!

#### 6. MOTHERING SUNDAY (MOTHERS’ DAY)

Mothers’ Day is traditionally observed on the fourth Sunday in Lent (the Church season of penitence beginning on Ash Wednesday, the day of which varies from year to year). This is usually in March. The day used to be known as Mothering Sunday and dates from the time when many girls

worked away from home as domestic servants in big households, where their hours of work were often very long Mothering Sunday was established as a holyday for these girls and gave them an opportunity of going home to see their parents, especially their mother. They used to take presents with them, often given to them by the lady of the house.

When the labour situation changed and everyone was entitled to regular time off, this custom remained, although the day is now often called "Mothers' Day". People visit their mothers if possible and give them flowers and small presents. If they cannot go they send a "Mothers' Day card", or they may send one in any case. The family try to see that the mother has as little work to do as possible, sometimes the husband or children take her breakfast in bed and they often help with the meals and the washing up. It is considered to be mother's day off.

### **7. ST. PATRICK'S DAY**

It is not a national holiday. It's an Irish religious holiday. St. Patrick is the patron of Ireland. Irish and Irish Americans celebrate the day. On the day they decorate their houses and streets with green shamrocks and wear something green. In large cities long parades march through the streets. Those who aren't Irish themselves also wear green neckties and hair ribbons and take part in the celebration.

### **8. EASTER**

During the Easter Holidays the attention of the progressive people in Great Britain and indeed throughout the world is riveted first and foremost on the Easter Peace Marches, which took place for the first time in 1958 and have since become traditional. The people who participate in these marches come from different sections of society. Alongside workers and students march university professors, doctors, scientists, and engineers. More often than not the columns are joined by progressive people from abroad.

The character of the marches has changed over the years. The high-point was reached in the early sixties; this was followed by a lapse in enthusiasm when attendance fell off during the middle and late sixties. More recent years have seen a rise in the number of people attending the annual Easter March, as global problems have begun to affect the conscience of a broader section of the English population.

### **LONDON'S EASTER PARADE**

London greets the spring, and its early visitors, with a truly spectacular Easter Parade in Battersea Park on Easter Sunday each year. It is sponsored by the London Tourist Board and is usually planned around a central theme related to the history and attractions of London. The great procession, or parade, begins at 3 p. m., but it is advisable to find a vantage-point well before that hour. The parade consists of a great many interesting and decorated floats, entered by various organizations in and outside the metropolis. Some of the finest bands in the country take part in the parade. At the rear of the parade is usually the very beautiful Jersey float, created from thousands of lovely spring blooms and bearing the Easter Princess and her attendants. It is an afternoon to remember.

### **9. APRIL FOOLS' DAY**

April Fools' Day or All Fools' Day, named from the custom of playing practical jokes or sending friends on fools' errands, on April 1<sup>st</sup>. Its timing seems related to the vernal equinox, when nature fools mankind with sudden changes from showers to sunshine. It is a season when all people, even the most dignified, are given an excuse to play the fool. In April comes the cuckoo, emblem of simpletons; hence in Scotland the victim is called "cuckoo" or "gowk", as in the verse: *On the first day of April, Hunt the gowk another mile*. Hunting the gowk was a fruitless errand; so was hunting

for hen's teeth, for a square circle or for stirrup oil, the last-named proving to be several strokes from a leather strap.

## 10. MAY DAY IN GREAT BRITAIN

As May 1<sup>st</sup> is not a public holiday in Great Britain, May Day celebrations are traditionally held on the Sunday following it, unless, of course, the 1<sup>st</sup> of May falls on a Sunday. On May Sunday workers march through the streets and hold meetings to voice their own demands and the demands of other progressive forces of the country. The issues involved may include demands for higher wages and better working conditions, protests against rising unemployment, demands for a change in the Government's policy, etc.

## MAY SPRING FESTIVAL

The 1st of May has also to some extent retained its old significance — that of a pagan spring festival. In ancient times it used to be celebrated with garlands and flowers, dancing and games on the village green. A Maypole was erected — a tall pole wreathed with flowers, to which in later times ribbons were attached and held by the dancers. The girls put on their best summer frocks, plaited flowers in their hair and round their waists and eagerly awaited the crowning of the May Queen. The most beautiful girl was crowned with a garland of flowers. After this great event Bere was dancing, often Morris dancing, with the dancers dressed in fancy costume, usually representing characters in the Robin Hood legend. May-Day games and sports were followed by refreshments in the open.

This festival was disliked by the Puritans and suppressed during the Commonwealth, 1649 — 60. After the Restoration it was revived but has gradually almost died out. However, the Queen of May is still chosen in most counties, and in many villages school Maypoles are erected around which the children dance. The famous ceremony of the meeting of the 1st of May still survives at Oxford, in Magdalen College. At 6 o'clock in the morning the college choir gathers in the upper gallery of the college tower to greet the coming of the new day with song.

## 11. TROOPING THE COLOUR

During the month of June, a day is set aside as the Queen's official birthday. This is usually the second Saturday in June. On this day there takes place on Horse Guards' Parade in Whitehall the magnificent spectacle of *Trooping the Colour*, which begins at about 11.15 a. m. (unless rain intervenes, when the ceremony is usually postponed until conditions are suitable).

This is pageantry of rare splendour, with the Queen riding side-saddle on a highly trained horse.

The colours of one of the five regiments of Foot Guards are trooped before the Sovereign. As she rides on to Horse Guards' parade the massed array of the Brigade of Guards, dressed in ceremonial uniforms, await her inspection.

For twenty minutes the whole parade stands rigidly to attention while being inspected by the Queen. Then comes the Trooping ceremony itself, to be followed by the famous March Past of the Guards to the music of massed bands, at which the Queen takes the Salute. The precision drill of the regiments is notable.

The ceremony ends with the Queen returning to Buckingham Palace at the head of her Guards.

The Escort to the Colour, chosen normally in strict rotation, then mounts guard at the Palace.

## 12. MIDSUMMER'S DAY

Midsummer's Day, June 24th, is the longest day of the year. On that day you can see a very old custom at Stonehenge, in Wiltshire, England. Stonehenge is one of Europe's biggest stone circles. A lot of the stones are ten or twelve metres high. It's also very old. The earliest part of Stonehenge is nearly 5,000 years old.

But what was Stonehenge? A holy place? A market? Or was it a kind of calendar? We think the Druids used it for a calendar. The Druids were the priests in Britain 2,000 years ago. They used the sun and the stones at Stonehenge to know the start of months and seasons. There are Druids in Britain today, too. And every June 24th a lot of them go to Stonehenge. On that morning the sun shines on one famous stone - the Heel stone. For the Druids this is a very important moment in the year. But for a lot of British people it's just a strange old custom.

### **13. LATE SUMMER BANK HOLIDAY**

On Bank Holiday the townsfolk usually flock into the country and to the coast. If the weather is fine many families take a picnic-lunch or tea with them and enjoy their meal in the open. Seaside towns near London, such as *Southend*, are invaded by thousands of trippers who come in cars and coaches, trains, motor cycles and bicycles. Great amusement parks like Southend Kursaal do a roaring trade with their scenic railways, shooting galleries, water-shoots, Crazy Houses, Hunted Houses and so on. Trippers will wear comic paper hats with slogans such as "Kiss Me Quick", and they will eat and drink the weirdest mixture of stuff you can imagine, sea food like cockles, mussels, whelks, shrimps and fried fish and chips, candy floss, beer, tea, soft, drinks, everything you can imagine.

Bank Holiday is also an occasion for big sports meetings at places like the White City Stadium, mainly all kinds of athletics. There are also horse race meetings all over the country, and most traditional of all, there are large fairs with swings, roundabouts, coconut shies, a Punch and Judy show, hoop-la stalls and every kind of side-show including, in recent years, bingo. These fairs are pitched on open spaces of common land, and the most famous of them is the huge one on Hampstead Heath near London. It is at Hampstead Heath you will see the Pearly Kings, those Cockney costers (street traders), who wear suits or frocks with thousands of tiny pearl buttons stitched all over them, also over their caps and hats, in case of their Queens. They hold horse and cart parades in which prizes are given for the smartest turn out. Horses and carts are gaily decorated. Many Londoners will visit Whipsnade Zoo. There is also much boating activity on the Thames, regattas at Henley and on other rivers, and the English climate being what it is, it invariably rains.

### **14. HAPPY HAMPSTEAD**

August Bank Holiday would not be a real holiday for tens of thousands of Londoners without the Fair on Hampstead Heath!

Those who know London will know were to find the Heath – that vast stretch of open woodland which sprawls across two hills, bounded by Golders Green and Highgate to the west and east, and by Hampstead itself and Ken Wood to the south and north.

The site of the fair ground is near to Hampstead Heath station. From that station to the ground runs a broad road which is blocked with a solid, almost immovable mass of humanity on those days when the fair is open. The walk is not more than a quarter of a mile, but it takes an average of half-an hour to cover it when the crowd is at its thickest.

But being on that road is comfortable compared with what it is like inside the fair ground itself. Here there are, hundreds of stalls arranged in broad avenues inside a huge square bounded by the caravans of the show people and the lorries containing the generating plants which provide the stalls with their electricity.

The noise is deafening. Mechanical bands and the cries of the “barkers” (the showmen who stand outside the booths and by the stalls shouting to the crowds to come and try their luck are equalled by the laughter of the visitors and the din of machinery.

The visitors themselves are looking for fun, and they find it in full measure. There are fortune-tellers and rifle-ranges and “bumping cars”, there are bowling alleys and dart boards and coconut shies. There is something for everybody.

And for the lucky ones, or for those with more skill than most, there are prizes — table lamps and clocks and a hundred and one other things of value.

A visit to the fair at Happy Hampstead is something not easily forgotten. It is noisy, it is exhausting — but it is as exhilarating an experience as any in the world.