

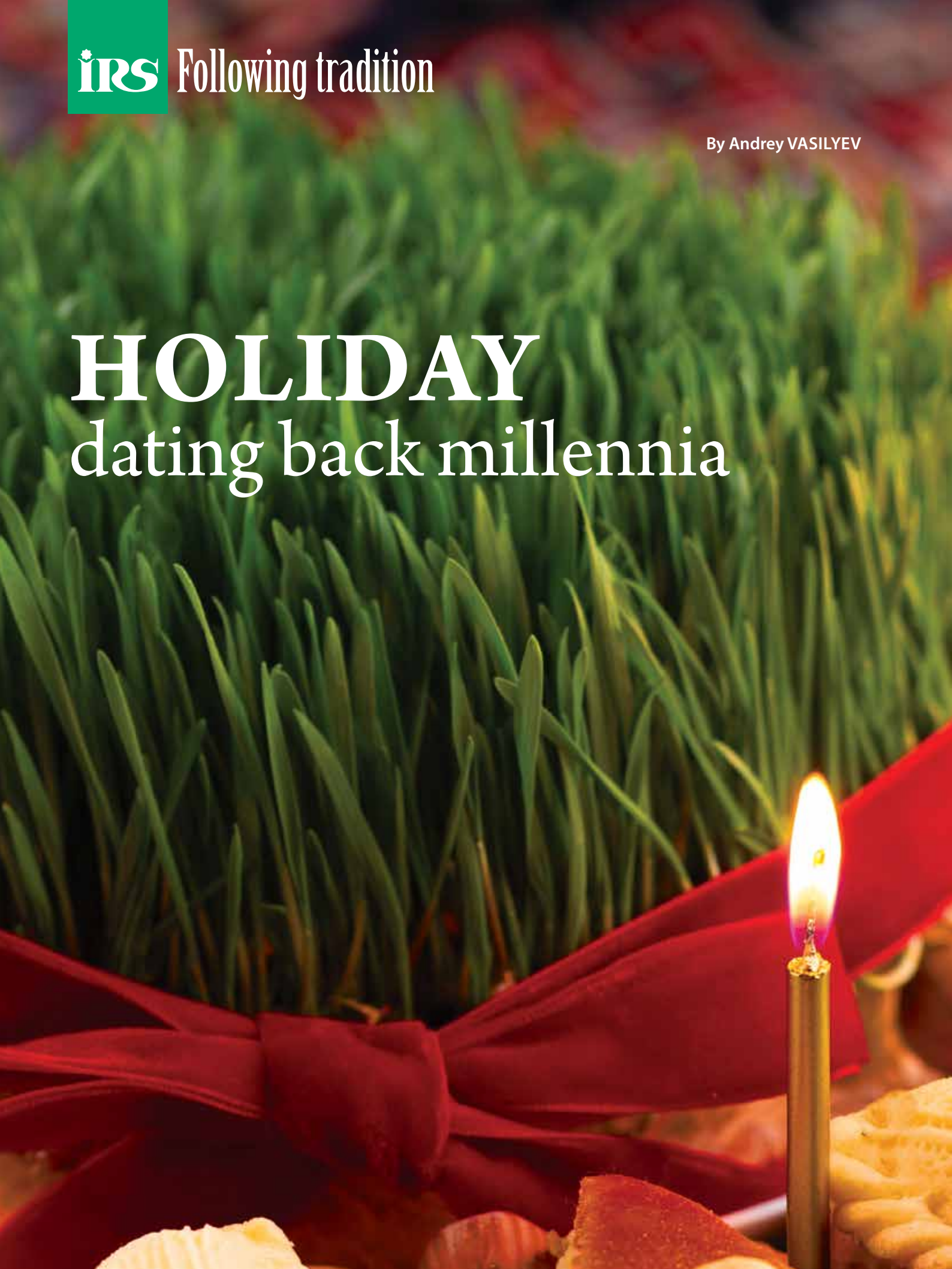


Following tradition

By Andrey VASILYEV

HOLIDAY

dating back millennia







There is a great variety of holidays celebrated by people around the world. **Novruz**, which has been marked for several millennia, **is one of the most ancient holidays that ever existed.**

Every national holiday is interesting as it reveals the distinct traits of nations and demonstrates the core of their significant customs and traditions in a relatively short period of time, along with their habits and preferences. Overall, if people set out to trace a general image of a country depicted with the use of bright and festive colors, they should definitely visit it over the holidays.

Novruz is a special occasion in Azerbaijan. According to historians, this holiday has a history spanning over 5,000 years. **Spring equinox, i.e. the onset of spring and the awakening of nature, was celebrated as early as the ancient Babylon period.** In fact, one should apply imaginative thinking in this regard as this holiday is of the same age as the Sumerian civilization. Perhaps, it began to be celebrated even earlier, dating back to the ancient times when people worshipped not gods, but forces of nature, such as soil, air, fire and water. Relevant customs, rites and traditions have been passed on by generations of people and observed in Azerbai-

jan and neighboring countries in the past five millennia.

The advent of spring is marked throughout the world in different ways. Therefore, it is no coincidence that **Novruz was included in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in a multinational nomination.** The decision was passed at the fourth session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage held from September 28, 2009 to October 2, 2009 (Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan). On February 19, 2010, a resolution recognizing March 21 as the International Day of Novruz was enacted at the 64th session of the United Nations General Assembly.

In Azerbaijan, people are particularly fond of the festivities and start preparations a few weeks ahead of Novruz, which means "a new day". **Every Tuesday is celebrated with a special ritual dedicated to one of the four natural elements, i.e. water, fire, wind and soil, over a month-long timeframe preceding Novruz.**

On the first Tuesday, people come by a river or spring, fill a jug with fresh water after sunrise and sprinkle it over all the rooms at home. This is followed by cleans-



ing with fire on the second Tuesday. A bonfire is lit in the courtyard and people take turns to jump over it. On the third Tuesday, a bunch of dry grass is thrown up to the air as people address the wind, saying, “*May your force suffice only to dispel this straw in the new year.*”

The last Tuesday before the holiday is celebrated solemnly. All pertinent rites are observed again and a festive table is set. A plate with *samani*, green sprouted wheat girdled by a little red ribbon, is the main decorative feature on the table.



The festive spirit is sensed in the morning on the very first day of Novruz and marches with people wearing costumes are organized on decorated streets. Makeshift stages for singers and musicians are set up on public squares in cities and villages, along with ancient travelling shows slated for the popular “Kos-Kosa” performance. Acrobats, magicians and jugglers perform alongside wrestlers who display their power and prowess to the public. People celebrate by singing and dancing as well.

Interestingly, Novruz does not end on the day it is celebrated. **The first day following the onset of Novruz symbolizes spring, while the second one signifies summer and the third and fourth ones mark the remaining two seasons of the year in due order.** Perhaps, this is not exactly a scientific method of forecasting, but in case of sunny weather, people tend to rejoice, realizing that a friendly, warm spring is on its way.

During the spring holiday people across Azerbaijan are used to presenting gifts to each other, in accordance with a tradition called “*a Novruz share*”. A dish with “*samani*” is placed on a big silver or copper tray with sweets, nuts, dried fruit, dyed eggs, as well as candles, and it is handed over to the neighbors. Such **a tray with festive items**, called “*khoncha*”, is traditionally returned with reciprocal gifts to ensure an abundance of food in every household.





There is a multitude of colors and fragrances on the festive Novruz table. Women decorate it with various sweets, including *baklava*, *shekerbura*, *badambura*, *sheker-chorek* (cookie-like items translated as “sugar-bread”), as well as fruit and nuts.

Festivities always start with a festive mood. However, it is certainly wonderful to hear cheerful music on the street, enjoy delicious food and exchange holiday gifts. But that is not the whole story either. People usually count days in anticipation of the holiday, pleasantly noticing the signs of its imminent onset. **People should prepare for the holiday by cleaning the house and sorting through their clothes** to choose the best items for hosting visitors and shopping to buy specific items that would please their loved ones to the greatest possible extent. Afterwards, they wake up in the morning in a good mood, thinking, “Here we are, our holiday has arrived!” But first and foremost, everyone should have fun at the festive table. After all, the better people celebrate Novruz, the better year lies ahead of them. 🌱

