

St Petersburg and Solovki

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When you enter St Petersburg for the first time it takes you a while to adjust to the feeling of being there. Jumping into a taxi to the hotel (without my luggage, something that caused much angst and frustration throughout my stay but I am determined not to mention this again), I was aware that this place was different, at first I couldn't say why, just that it was different, maybe the signs with the funny looking letters or the difference in general interaction with Russian people. I got to my hotel no problem and was shown my room; to my delight there was WIFI, which for some reason surprised me.

The next morning arrived and I met some more group members, it was interesting to hear them all swapping stories about travelling immense distances across Russia. I became very aware that apart from being the youngest on the tour, I was also the only person who didn't speak any Russian, nerves and excitement wrestled each other to take prominent feeling in my already sleep deprived head. After a brief shopping trip with Kate to gather essentials for a 16 hour train journey, I was on a mission to see at least a little more of St Petersburg before leaving for the north, thankfully I bumped into Mark who helpfully offered to be tour guide for a few hours before our departure.

I tried to take in as much as possible of the city and all the interesting facts that Mark was describing as we started an epic circle around some of the main attractions. It was over whelming; the beautiful architecture, the history, the canals, I could go on. After such a whirl wind of an evening the night before, the rush to find clothes that morning, it was too much to take in and process, I just hoped that my thoughts and feelings would catch up with me soon.

After a dash across the city to get to the train station, we boarded the train that would be 'our home' for the next 16 hours. Having settled in our cabin, the food and drink came out, the rest of my group were definitely more experienced at Russian train journeys than me. There was plenty of time for talk, getting to know each other and chatting about research, however I spent much of the journey staring out of the window at the vast forest which was speckled with remote villages and occasional bodies of water. It was fascinating talking to Alexey who spoke of the Northern people as 'Forest People' and the traditions involved in being a northern Russian (Excuse my ignorance of context, but it rang a chord with the song 'tradition' in the 1971 production of Fiddler on the Roof, I was once the fiddle player in a school production of this play). Later on in the journey, the train pulled into a stop I can't remember the name of, where we had chance to get off and stretch our legs, it was a surreal, wolf like dogs chasing scraps of food, a lady selling fish and berries and a sort of haze covering the platform.



Finally, after a short bus journey from Kem station, we made it to the port, where breakfast in a restaurant welcomed our arrival. Next mode of transport was a ferry, which was something I had no problem adjusting to; once aboard it almost felt like I was back on the west coast of Scotland (where I had been no more than 48 hours previously on holiday). It was not just the boat that rang chords of familiarity but also the landscape. Scattered islands dotted the



horizon, rocky shorelines and the call of seagulls screeching at children who were tossing pieces of bread to them.

Trying to peep over the top of the boat, we finally saw our first glimpses of Solovki and were not disappointed. The monastery clearly stood out amidst the felt like covering of forest, its round onion like cupolas impressive against the bright blue sky and its walls reaching out across the entrance to the harbour. The monastery and the landscape seemed to dissolve into one another, difficult to tell which one had been designed first, where one ended and the other began. It welcomed us aboard Solovki, and it promised to be an interesting and steep learning curve of a visit.



After a quick freshen up in our hotel and lunch of borsch soup (which would become a staple of my Russian diet) at a nearby restaurant we were given a tour around the monastery by Alexey. It wasn't what I expected, from afar it looked striking and intimidating, once through the thick stone walls, it was clearly visible that its long, difficult history had taken its tolls on the infrastructure. Scaffolding masked two of the cupolas, paint was peeling off the walls and piles of rubble sat in the corners of the main courtyard. However, this did not take away from its beauty; a good imagination got you past the extensive renovations and told you of past impressiveness. Devout pilgrims and locals milled around, crossing themselves multiple times before entering the chapel, I felt out of place, maybe because I didn't speak the language or perhaps due to feelings of being an intruder. I soon left the worshipers and went outside to sit in my own thoughts.



That evening, we took a stroll around the main village which resembled something from a history book. A dusty square was surrounded by bunkers that had been converted into shops, cafes and what I had not expected, an abundance of souvenir shops. Although, on the surface Solovki seems to be stuck in a simpler time (in the past?), if you look closer, flashes of modern western culture are evident,

moulded into the 'traditional' look. Skirting round the village we joint the coast and were spoilt with the most spectacular sunset.



Wednesday bought a day of excursions, first stop the Botanic Gardens, the northernmost botanical gardens in Europe. Thanks to the favourable microclimate, a special heating system and the skills of the horticulturalists, plants you wouldn't expect to find this far north, flourished but with slight differences that allowed them to tolerate the colder climate. Think of a spruce tree, you would normally think of a Christmas tree shape, wide at the base small at the top, however on Solovki, top branches reach out wide to mimic their roots struggle to find nutrients and water in the soil beneath.



We left the beauty of the botanical gardens and were driven to the foot of the highest hill on Solovki, Sekirnaya Hill. After being asked to cover our heads, we started the ascent. At the summit of the hill stood the Church of Ascension, which served dual purpose as it also doubled up as a lighthouse, was striking against the backdrop of endless woodland.

We were led to a Commemoration Cross, in front of which monks were leading a service to a small crowd of people and to information boards where the guide stopped us. I didn't catch most of what she said as the group were listening intently, however I managed to get the gist of the talk and read up on the history later. During the Soviet years, the islands were turned into a concentration camp and Church of Ascension was a site of experimentation into the worst methods of punishment.

I'm not sure if it was due to the snippets of translation I was receiving or the silence that had been adopted by the group as they listened to the guide but the feeling here was different again. I've heard and read the phrase "Archipelago of Contrasts" used to describe Solovki many times and on Sekirnaya Hill it rang true. The breath-taking beauty of the landscape and architecture, and peacefulness and spirituality of the church, were in stark contrast to the terror and cruelty of its past.





A highlight of my trip to Solovki was a boat trip through a series of canals and lakes. The lakes in Solovki are a remnant from the last ice age carved out by the weight of the ice, however no rivers were created. In the 19th Century, inhabitants of the monastery dug out a network of canals connecting the lakes and creating transportation links for fish and other products.



On Thursday, we were treated to an excursion to Great Hare Island (translated). On arrival to the small island I was struck again with the similarity to the islands of the west coast of Scotland. Low lying foliage covered the flat island which had a soft ridge running through the centre creating a natural setting for a small church, a familiar cupola prominent against the sky. This wooden church is thought to have been a reassuring land mark for pilgrims and travellers on their journey to Solovki.



Great Hare Island is home to a number of 1st or 2nd century labrythns; historians are still not completely in agreement about the purpose of these structures, but there was a common theme of spirituality and mans intricate connection

with nature. In addition to the labrynths, a number of graves or cairns are clearly visible from the board walk.



Walking around the nose of the island Katia, our guide, pointed out an orthodox cross which had been sculpted into the ground by Christian monks. She explained that this was used to mark the divide between pagan and christian settlers, also to introduce (maybe force) 'new' Christian ideas onto the inhabitants and to show their domination and control over the natural landscape.

The connection between people and the landscape is mirrored in Kilmartin, Scotland. Kil Martin, in the heart of Mid Argyll, is one of Sctoland's richest prehistoric landscapes and is home to over



800 historic monuments including cairns, standing stones, stone circles and rock art. Nearby is the hillfort of Dunadd, where a footprint marks the inaugural spot where the Gaelic kings were symboliccally married to the land they ruled over. Where the cross on Great Hare island showed the monks domination and control over nature, in Dunadd, kingship brought expectations, that a new king would bring fertility and bountifull seasons.



Our last day on Solvoki allowed us a trip to the Gulag musuem, I didn't want to disturb the rest of the group who were reading the information boards so I quickly went through the exhibition and sat watching a crackly video. Once the rest of the group had caught up, a few of us went on a bike ride, however the previous evenings rain had turned the road into a river so I quickly turned

around and decided to have a wonder through the villages souvenir shops. Catherine took me to a cosmetics shop just outside the main square where all the products were made out of seaweed. Saying goodbye to Catherine, I had a bit of time to explore on my own for the first time, which I was a little apprehensive about because of my inability to speak Russian. However, entering a little souvenir shop I picked up some momentos of my trip to Solovki and I was relieved when the shop attendant spoke to me in English. In broken conersation, she spoke of a few trips she had taken to London, what I was doing on Solovki and that I had bought a little wooden spoon to give to my parents back in England. I was really grateful to her for speaking to me in English and it was lovely chatting to a local.

My views of Solovki changed with each conversation, with each visit to a different location and my own personal reflections. My first impression on Solovki, I didn't appreciate the true connection between history, nature, religion and society. How the people of the monastery understood their environment that allowed them to make the 'water roads' to allow transportation of goods and people, how the camp prisoners shaped the land in the Botanical Gardens and how the land provided for the people (in what I can only gain from pictures of Solvoki in the winter) in even the severist of winter conditions. Having never been to Russia, let alone Solvoki and not speaking the language, gave me a unique opportunity to form my insights purely on my impressions, observations, reflections and snippets of conversations with members of the group. I was constantly shocked by the contrasts and similarities Solovki presented; the disparity

between the past torture of thousands of people in the Gulag and the quiet serenity of present worship, the resemblance of the landscape to familiar locations back at home and the feeling of a constant internal battle between past traditions and culture, and the wave of modernity thanks to the influx of tourists, pilgrims and 'modern' goods and services. When people ask me what my trip to the far north of Russia was like, I can never give them a straight answer or the same answer twice, as it completely depends what part of my journey I am thinking about. Maybe ask me in ten years and my thoughts and reflections will be much more coherent than they are now.