

Solovetsky – from spirituality to coercion. And back...

There are more than six months since I spent four wonderful and inspiring days in Solovetsky archipelago. After all this time, there are few images that still remind me about the beauty and the significance of this place in the history of humankind. You'll find below the photos representing somehow all those images. It is not about an outstanding beautiful natural environment, I'm sure all of us have seen before more impressive landscapes. It is about something more subtle related with the human history, with the impact of this place on the life of so many.

As we have learned from various presentations, discussions and documents, Solovetsky monastery has been founded in the XVth century, in an attempt of few orthodox monks to escape from the 'civilised world' and to colonise the extreme north of Tsarist empire. The monks established here a monastery that had become not only a spiritual centre but an important commercial centre of the White Sea. After few centuries of existence we can see now normal people praying in a reconstructed church, surrounded by the walls that once protected it against enemies – the Swedes and the Britons attacked the monastery, or even against its own state – during an uprising against the reforms of Russian Orthodox Church, same walls that in the XXth century had kept imprisoned the victims of the Soviet regime.



Solovetsky wasn't the only monastery turned into a prison or a concentration camp in the XXth century. But here it was created the prototype model of the gulag, the 'business model' for the extensive network of camps that managed to eliminate socially and physically an unknown number of prisoners. This remote place, surrounded by natural resources was used by the young Soviet state to set up the *Solovetsky Lager' Osobogo Naznachenia (SLON)* – Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp. A museum organised in one of the former camp's barrack revealed many documents, photos, and even footages from that time.



Finally, the last photo requires some explanation: in the last day an excursion had been organised to the dam that connects Bolshoy Solovetsky and Bolshaya Muksalma islands. The dam was built by the monks.

The excursion had begun as a pleasure biking trip and had ended as a challenging competition with everybody's resources to reach the destination. And like in many East European jokes, only an American, few Russians and a Romanian did it. But the Russians were playing at home...



It seems the time of mass tourism has arrived in Solovetsky. Brave campers willing to experience not only the wilderness of the archipelago but the historical heritage have started to invade this space. I'm not very sure that this new invaders from Russia or elsewhere will bring good things to Solovetsky. But I believe that nobody can stop this trend, and I'm very glad I arrived here before KFC...