

right:  
Distant view of  
the monastery  
from the  
botanic garden



## HERMITAGE TRAVEL

### A Royal Visit to the Solovetsky Archipelago

Photography by Artyom Parshin



left:  
The monastery  
complex

right:  
His Royal  
Highness on  
the plane

bottom right:  
The Prince of  
Wales talks to  
one of the first  
monks to return  
to Solovki



A whistle-stop tour of northern Russia by His Royal Highness, The Prince of Wales, last July included two special highlights: a banquet in the Winter Palace, jointly hosted by the Hermitage and the Mariinsky Theatre, and a pilgrimage to the monastery island of Solovki, one of the most sacred and bitterly abused sites in the Northern Hemisphere.

In 2000 the Prince of Wales's International Business Leaders Forum commissioned landscape architect Kim Wilkie to visit the island and prepare a report on the cultural landscape of Solovki, with a special emphasis on how it might be developed as a tourist destination without disturbing the sanctity of the site or its flora and fauna. Here Wilkie, who accompanied the Prince on his trip to Solovki last summer, describes the island environment and gives his personal view of how its future might best be assured.

The debate over Solovki is already a vivid issue in Russia. In May 2003 an international symposium on 'Solovki: A Look into the Future' was held on the Solovetsky islands. It was attended by representatives of the four principal parties most concerned with the future of the archipelago: the Solovetsky District Administration, the Solovetsky Monastery, the Solovetsky Museum-Reserve (the local arm of the Ministry of Culture) and the Solovetsky Forest and Timber Company. Among the international participants were representatives of the Norwegian Friends of Solovki Society – the first foreign Friends society, established in 2002 – and the Prince of Wales's

International Business Leaders Forum. The symposium put forward a proposal to organise an International Friends of Solovki Society, building on the experience of the Norwegian Friends. Its goal would be to develop international awareness and support in resolving current problems relating to the preservation and development of the Solovki cultural and historic heritage.

In 1992 Solovki was recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site and in 1995 the archipelago was included by Presidential decree in the List of Exceptionally Valuable Sites of the Cultural Heritage of the Peoples of the Russian Federation. The initiative at Solovki will restore one of the most remote, sacred and environmentally sensitive parts of the world.





## Kim Wilkie writes

The Solovetsky archipelago covers 300 square kilometres of islands set in the White Sea north west of Archangel, close to the Arctic Circle. It is a remote and magical place that has been sacred for more than 7,000 years. Neolithic labyrinths and burial mounds survive alongside one of Russia's greatest monasteries, founded in 1429. During half a millennium of monastic occupation, churches, hermitages and sketes have been built in key positions on the islands.

In 1923 Solovki was commandeered by the Bolsheviks as a forced labour camp. The islands became notorious as the first in what Solzhenitsyn called The Gulag Archipelago. On this sacred site political prisoners were murdered in their thousands or simply died from famine, disease and exhaustion. The camp was closed in 1939, and in 1990 the monks finally returned to Solovki.

The islands form a landscape of great natural beauty and cultural complexity. The fragile environment of the far north supports a rich variety of flora and fauna, not only on the islands themselves, but also in the surrounding sea and the interconnecting network of fresh water lakes. The monastic ethic has led to the stewardship of the islands in a sophisticated and innovative system of sustainable land and water management. A mosaic of habitats has been created and, until the last century, man was living in an easy balance with nature.

The monastery is placed at the confluence between the natural harbour and the outflow of the fresh water lakes. Approaching in a calm sea, the white towers of the cathedral are revealed before the island. They seem to rise directly out of the water. Gradually the long, low form of the islands comes into view and the kremlin and cathedral grow in prominence. To the east, the

silhouette of Peter the Great's 1702 church stands out on the Zayatzky islands, with their neolithic labyrinths and burial mounds. To the west, the beacon of the chapel on Sekirnaya Hill catches the eye. The massive 8m thick boulder walls, which incline up to the domes, crosses and bells, are reflected in the still water.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Solovki was feeding and accommodating up to 20,000 pilgrims a year. Producing food, power and fresh water for such numbers in a fragile environment is challenging. The monks evolved a system of land management from the fifteenth century onwards, which was a model of carefully balanced sustainable development. Vegetables were grown within the kremlin walls and around most dwellings and sketes. Bogs were drained into the network of 550 lakes, many of which were linked by canals to provide a flow of pure drinking water and hydro-electric power to the monastery. Hay meadows were cultivated on the drained bogs to provide winter feed for 300 cows and horses. The animals in turn produced manure to supplement the soil for vegetable gardens. Although this balance of man in nature was destroyed during the twentieth century, the cultivation patterns are sufficiently well recorded that it should be possible to reinstate the historic management of the landscape.

In 1822 Archimandrite Makarii created a hermitage with a vegetable garden in a gentle micro-climate four kilometres to the north west of the monastery. The site is protected by three small hills, which open south on to one of the lakes. It was a perfect spot to grow plants and the garden expanded to support a small botanic garden, complete with fruit trees and bright flowers, not permitted in the vicinity of the cathedral. The garden became much loved and visited.



right:  
The new  
iconostasis in  
the church

bottom left:  
One of the  
remote sketes

bottom right:  
Monastery  
courtyard







Remarkably, exotic plants, such as melons, could be grown up here so close to the Arctic Circle. During the gulag period, eminent botanists and zoologists, imprisoned on the island, worked in the garden and developed the botanical interest. The Prince of Wales continued the long tradition of walking out to the garden from the monastery and planted a Siberian fir to commemorate his visit.

A number of initiatives for the restoration and management of Solovki are already well under way. Restoration of the main buildings is making good progress, but repairing the general despoliation of the landscape has barely started. The population of the island is at its lowest for centuries and there is a unique opportunity to remove the worst post-war eyesores, create decent and attractive housing for the island residents and restore the wild landscape setting. The most effective financial returns from tourism may well come from smaller numbers of cultural and educational visitors, attuned to the historical patterns of pilgrimage in the fragile environment, rather than from maximising tourist volumes.

The Prince's party was shown the monastery by the Archimandrite Joseph, the Director of the Museum Reserve, Mikhail Lopatkin, and the Governor and Vice Governor of Archangel, Anatoli Yefremov and Svetlana Gorlanova. Also accompanying the visit were Susan Causey of the Prince of Wales's International Business Leaders Forum and Artyom Parshin of the Moscow Apothecary's Garden, whose illustrated *Guide to the Solovki Botanic Garden* will be published in English and Russian later this year.



far left:  
Corner of the  
botanic garden

left:  
Planting a  
Siberian fir

## BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE HERMITAGE



Photograph: Astoria Hotel

The Hermitage may have 10kms of galleries and 150,000 works of art on show, enough to keep a determined visitor busy for weeks, but the fascination of seeing what goes on behind the scenes remains. A fleeting glimpse of some of the 2,850,000 items in storage or the sight of an old and damaged piece being carefully restored in one of the museum's specialist workshops can be the most memorable feature of a visit. It brings alive the process of caring for artworks, of passing an artistic heritage from generation to generation, which is what a museum is all about.

The staff of the Hermitage and the nearby Astoria Hotel have now got together to satisfy this craving. The Astoria offers its guests the opportunity of booking a "Hermitage Behind The Scenes" tour. It is available only for groups of more than six people and fewer than 15 – the maximum number of visitors allowed into a Hermitage store – and lasts for four days, including the day of arrival and departure. On the first night you meet staff from the Hermitage and are briefed on the museum – as well as eating caviar and drinking champagne. Then you have two intensive days exploring the Hermitage and sightseeing in the city; there are no scheduled visits for the departure day.

Tours start at 9.30 am, an hour before the general public is admitted. On the first day, the two-hour tour includes the State Rooms of the

Winter Palace and the famous Impressionist and Post-Impressionist pictures; the second day focuses on the Old Masters. Getting behind the scenes may mean looking at the Arsenal – one of the greatest collections of arms and armour in the world, which is not open to the public – or watching restorers at work with organic materials (wood, leather, fur).

Or you can take one of the special tours offered by the Hermitage Tourist Department, which include visits to storages and restoration workshops, and offer a plethora of choice: classical art in the Hermitage collections, Scythian treasures, Byzantine antiquities, the Great Silk Road, masterpieces of the Renaissance, Flemish and Dutch Old Masters, Rembrandt and his school, French painting of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Western European bronzes, masterpieces of glass, tapestries, embroidery, watercolours, Russian interior decoration, Russian porcelain, the Western European painting storage, restoration of icons, restoration of murals, restoration of fabrics and the Hermitage theatre.

The Astoria Hotel was built in the early 1900s in the era of Art Nouveau. It has belonged for the past six years to the Rocco Forte Hotels group, based in the UK, which has transformed it into a luxurious five-star hotel. The original Art Nouveau interior has been restored to its former glory and presents a magnificent venue for lavish parties and entertaining, with many private rooms available for either business meetings or private events. "Behind The Scenes" tours with single accommodation cost US\$1,243, or with double accommodation US\$1,751.



Photograph: Astoria Hotel

above left:  
St. Isaac's  
Cathedral  
the Astoria  
the Moika

left:  
View from  
Astoria hotel