



Adventure Travel Destination: Gulag Prison Camp Perm-36

By [RJ Wattenhofer](#) | Submitted On December 16, 2011



The Gulag penal system goes down in history as the most inhumane and barbaric means ever utilized by the Russian authorities to punish Soviet criminals and dissidents. Millions of hopeless souls were transported across the desolate Siberian Hinterland and deposited in crudely constructed work camps spread across the frozen permafrost, never to heard from again. None was more infamous or inspired more terror in the proletariat than Gulag Prison Camp Perm-36.

Reminiscent of Nazi concentration camps, Perm-36 was the harshest work camp the Soviet officials could devise, specifically designed to house formidable political dissidents, outspoken writers, abstract artists and anyone else who was considered an immediate threat to the communist ideals touted by the Russian government. Once considered a death sentence to be sent there, it is now a carefully preserved memorial and reminder to the world of what governments are capable of when faced with open opposition to their regime.

HISTORY

World War II was finished and Stalin was now faced with the daunting task of reconstruction. Severe damage was inflicted on Russian cities along the Western border (the Nazi's referred to this as the Eastern Front during the war) and were in dire need of repair. Figuring he could kill two birds with one stone, Stalin ordered the construction of logging camps around the Perm region, approximately 1,400 km due East of Moscow, on the border of the Siberian Hinterland. Here, 150,000 undesirables were dispersed throughout one hundred fifty work camps and assigned the task of providing much-needed lumber for Western cities.

Known officially as ITK-6 camp, the notorious Perm-36 was quickly filled with one thousand of the "worst of the worst" offenders. The inmates were divided into four inhospitable sleeping barracks, where they were allowed seven hours sleep every night, the time spent freezing under thin blankets as arctic winds blasted through wide cracks in the wooden walls. Along with the barracks, the camp also had a headquarters building, a rudimentary hospital and a horrific punishment block, where dissidents were sent if the authorities felt that maybe they were enjoying their winter vacation a bit too much.

The reformatory camp had the most stringent work schedule of any of the Perm work camps. Prisoners were awakened each

morning at six a.m. sharp, given a meager breakfast and then promptly marched an hour and a half to the forest to begin logging. There they were forced to cut down massive aspen and oak trees with hand saws and then cart the timber to the Chusovaya and Kama rivers, which floated the timber Southwest to the Volga. After nine hours of non-stop labor, the dissidents were marched back to camp, given dinner and then sent to the barracks. Rinse and repeat. It is unclear if this rigorous schedule actually helped reform anyone, as a great majority ended up dead and the remainder were permanently damaged both mentally and physically.

The Soviet government, on the other hand, was quite pleased with the results. Feeling they were really on to something here, they formally named Perm-36 the official residence of the worst Soviet political prisoners and, in 1972, converted the Gulag into a fully functioning, modernized prison camp. Enemies of the state continued to be sent here to work and rot away until 1987, when it was finally closed.

The most famous dissident to be sentenced to the Gulag prison system was writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn. After his arrest for writing critical comments about Joseph Stalin, he was sentenced to eight years of hard labor. This terrible experience formed the foundation for his critically acclaimed works [One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich](#) and [The Gulag Archipelago](#), his searing account of Soviet labor camps.

THE AREA TODAY

Soon after Perestroika in the 1980's, the labor camps were systematically dismantled and the door quietly shut on this dark period in Russian history. The one remaining camp is Perm-36, chosen for preservation by human rights activists in the former Soviet Union because of its particularly diabolical nature. The site is now the Memorial Center Museum for the History of Political Repression, with all the original fences and buildings intact. Frozen in time, it is a vivid reminder of what lengths governments will go to repress the human spirit.

Ironically, because of the Russian government's practice of sending their best and brightest writers and artists to reside in the work camps, the nearby city of Perm has become a mecca for Soviet artists. Along with the prisoners, several theatrical companies also moved to the area during World War II to escape Soviet repression. This influx of creative individuals has turned Perm into a major center for the arts, hosting museums and galleries that rival those found in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

TRAVEL INFORMATION

You will need to book an international flight to either Moscow, Russia (DME) or to Nizhniy Novgorod, Russia (GOJ). From there, you will take a ninety minute flight to Bolshoye Savino Airport, located in Perm, Russia (PEE).

Car travel is the most expedient means of making your way to Perm-36. You can rent a car right at the Perm airport upon your flight arrival. Perm hosts modern hotel chains (such as the Hilton) for a comfortable stay in between your daily touring excursions. The Memorial Center Museum for the History of Political Repression is open every day from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and closed Mondays.

After your travels, I would enjoy hearing about your experiences, so feel free to contact me via the website below and send me an email.

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