

Tourism in The New Eastern Europe
Global Challenges – Regional Answers

International Conference
Warsaw, 29-30 November 2008

Forms of and Prospects for the Development of Gulag Tourism in Russia

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INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has been undergoing a political, economic and social transformation. In the new post-Soviet reality, even tourism is being transformed and new types of tourism have emerged in addition to the many types that were already present.

One of these involves visiting the places where, for several decades in the twentieth century - from the 1920s to the mid 1950s- the Soviets maintained their labor camps. These correctional labor camps, commonly known as gulags, were established by the Soviet government as prison facilities, where prisoners were forced to undertake heavy physical labor. In later years, they were transformed into labor colonies; however, in many cases, they continued to fulfill their original purpose.

The main purpose of this case study is to present various forms of gulag tourism customized for different people, based on their limitations (their physical condition, availability, financial means, etc.). The study will also discuss the prospects for the development of gulag tourism. One of the main factors enabling this type of tourism to take place is the increasing access to photographs and statistics regarding Soviet labor camps. An equally important factor is the overwhelming interest shown by people who, although they are motivated for different reasons, want to learn about places about which little was known until very recently.

This study on gulag tourism will be supplemented with the results of the research carried out in the Magadan Oblast in the Russian Far East in 2004. The research was conducted in the Kolyma Region, governed by Dalstroy which also governed the easternmost region of the Soviet Union.

Only selected examples of activities that fall within the category of gulag tourism will be presented here. These examples are based on various regions in Russia but do not include all the places where gulag tourism is developing. Moreover, in order to point out the similarities and differences, two examples of gulag tourism outside Russia (i.e. in the Baltic Republics) have been included.

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NEW TYPE OF TOURISM IN EASTERN EUROPE – GULAG TOURISM

At the beginning of the 1990s, among those assessing the perspectives for, and odds against, the development of tourism in Central and Eastern Europe, only the “optimists” claimed that an increasing number of tourists would be interested in traveling East (Przeclawski K., 1997). Eastern Europe, including the former Soviet Union, is particularly appealing to tourists. Besides the many natural and anthropogenic attractions in the largest Russian cities (Moscow and St. Petersburg), tourists who were aware of the events that occurred during the Soviet era began to be intrigued by the gulags. However, the gulags remained an unattainable destination for many people from Western Europe and North America because they were impossible to get to.

Gulag tourism began to develop dynamically after the fall of the Soviet Union, when it became possible to obtain more knowledge about this element of Soviet politics. The barriers to the flow of information that had existed earlier, such as the laws restricting free movement throughout the country, the functioning of the so-called “closed administrative-territorial formations”, also known as “closed cities” or “closed towns” – successfully prevented people from obtaining information about what really happened in those years.

During the Soviet era, thanks mainly to publications by people who experienced Soviet repression, such as the books by Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov, international public opinion was able to learn about some of the facts that were concealed by the Soviet Union. At that time, however, it was impossible to go to those places and the existing aura of secrecy further fed foreign interest in these regions.

Gulags are correctional labor camps also called “zones” where ca. 70 million people were detained during the existence of the Soviet Union. However, it is difficult to estimate the number of victims of repression. Gulags that currently form part of the group of objects of significant tourist interest are the former prisons, places of isolation and, at the same time, places where people, social groups and nationalities were exploited. Gulags already existed before the Soviet Union came into being. In 1918, the Bolsheviks who were trying to remain in power answered with the so-called “red terror,” and tens of thousands of people who were opposed to them (i.e. the Bolsheviks) ended up in gulags. Most labor camps were established in the Northern part of the Russian Republic and were associated with the investments in transport and industry taking place in that part of the Soviet Union. More than 100,000 Gulag prisoners worked on the White Sea-Baltic Canal from 1931 to 1933 (Kalbarczyk S., 1993-1997).

'Gulag' is the name given to the government agency that administered the prisons (gulags) that met, thanks to prisoner labor, the biggest Soviet economic investment needs. The Soviets were only allowed one authorized view of the history of the twentieth century, and organized tourist excursions concentrated on those areas that fed Communist propaganda. Any important data that was made available was deliberately manipulated, whereas holding other views about issues related to the history of the Soviet Union was severely punished.

Recently, many archived documents that are marked "strictly confidential" have been made available in Russia, especially to researchers of contemporary history. Consequently, many publications have appeared uncovering many of the twentieth century's secrets. Their distinguishing trait is the variety of angles and points of view they have about the historical events that took place during the Soviet era. The opportunity emerged to introduce to the currently available tourist excursions, creative ways of bringing history closer to the people. It is important that the administrators of such projects not falsify the truth about what took place, but it is also important not to criticize the whole of the Soviet Union's history. References to the country, and the lives of the people from that era, which are not properly formulated can result in negative attitudes and judgments concerning traditional Russian society.

Ideological dogmatism has been absent from recent examinations of Russian history, and there is a desire to bring it closer to the people. This does not limit the creativity of the administrator of tourist excursions, however, it does increase his/her responsibility for the credibility of the sources that he / she chooses. To organize a worthwhile tourist excursion, full of credible data, it is important to make use of studies by scholars who specialize in such issues.

FORMS OF ACTIVITIES IN GULAG TOURISM

There are various forms of gulag tourism. One possibility is that of participating in excursions to sites commemorating the victims of Stalinist repression, often located at the former gulags. This is the most widespread and accessible type of tourist activity and is, therefore, frequented by the largest group of interested people. Tribute is paid to those who were forced to perform backbreaking labor, the victims of repression, by laying flowers and by occasional encounters at plaques or monuments commemorating the victims. These trips are often spontaneous and are not related to a particular ceremony. One example, is a day that has been commemorated each year in August since the fall of the Soviet Union, in the Solovetsky Islands. Former gulag prisoners, members of the "Memorial" association, and other interested people participate in the ceremony. In 2008, the ceremony was accompanied by a "Memorial Candle." Each participant lit a candle commemorating all those who died under Soviet repression, while bouquets of flowers and wreaths were laid on the Solovetsky Stone on Memorial Avenue. The participants also took part in a discussion concerning the opening of a virtual Gulag museum. Many participants agreed that there was a need for such a museum, however, no consensus was reached as to the place and form that commemorating the Gulag victims should take. Boris Bilenkin said the Orthodox Church hierarchy emphasized the Solovetsky Islands 500-year-old history, whereas the gulags only had a 25 year-old history.

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Examples of the development of gulag tourism in Vorkuta, the Perm and Magadan oblasts, and also two ventures in the Baltic Republics region have been described below and also the various forms it takes.

CONTROVERSIAL ENDEAVORS IN GULAG TOURISM

A project undertaken by the government of Vorkuta is one example of a venture in gulag tourism, although it has given rise to much controversy both in Russia and abroad. Igor Shpektor, the Mayor of Vorkuta wants to transform a former labor camp into a 'reality' entertainment park - "The Gulag Club."

Vorkuta is a city in European Russia, located ca. 2,000 km to the north-east of Moscow and 160 km above the Arctic Circle. The camp was founded after mineral deposits, including coal, were discovered there, and it was built by the prisoners. The number of labor camps changed throughout the twentieth century. Between 1932 and 1954, that is, during the largest expansion of the city and the most vigorous Stalinist oppression, ca. 130 gulags operated in the Pechorsky Basin area, of which Vorkuta is the center. According to historians, 2 million people worked in these camps at various periods of time, 200,000 of whom lost their lives. This region is considered to be one of the largest graveyards in the former Soviet Union. The convicts were killed by the exhausting labor, starvation, and adverse weather conditions (in winter the temperature often fell to -50°C, while in summer they were plagued by insects and mosquitoes).

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Vorkuta, like many other industrial centers in northern Russia, continued to have many problems related to the socio-economic transformations that were taking place. A large number of the mines were closed (8 out of a total of 13 coal mines), unemployment increased, and the living conditions of those who actually had jobs worsened rapidly. Life in the city is dependent on subsidies from the World Bank which even offers residents money in the form of relocation expenses to move out. Between 1991 and 2006, the number of residents in Vorkuta decreased from 217,000 to 120,000 (Kontorovich V., 2007).

Among the factors listed by the city's government justifying the need to create the "Gulag Club," are the economic benefits to be gained from such an investment. The city's Mayor wants to transform Vorkuta into a tourist center that brings in profits.

The project to create a 'reality' entertainment park in a place where hundreds of thousands of people died during the Soviet era gave rise to controversy. The tourist center would make use of the camp infrastructure – it would be

surrounded by barbed wire, with watchtowers at the corners. A few reconstructed barracks would be continuously patrolled by soldiers with watchdogs. The soldiers would be dressed in historic uniforms. The gulag architects would allow only one compromise – the barracks would be equipped with heaters due to the low temperatures outside. The tourists – prisoners - quartered in the barracks would be fed rutabaga soup just like the real prisoners were during Soviet times.

One of the planned attractions that was highly criticized was that of enriching the tourists stay with paintballs – the guards would shoot at the ‘escaping’ tourists from the watchtowers with colored paint bullets. Former prisoners of the Vorkuta camps were particularly opposed to this scheme, pointing out that those who were killed should be remembered, whereas such investments did not take into account the former gulag’s moral and ethical function. Every year on 1 August, the residents of Vorkuta and former prisoners of the labor camps who are visiting, commemorate the victims of Soviet repression and remember real historical facts.

The city’s government contends that in present-day Russia, each year there are fewer and fewer people that remember these tragic events, whereas the planned investment would remind Russians as well as foreigners about the labor camps in a way that books cannot. Since the administrators would expect mainly foreign visitors, they believe that the attractions offered should meet the expectations of even the most demanding tourists, who would also be paying a substantial amount of money to participate in such an excursion. It is planned that the minimum stay necessary to truly experience the camp would be three days, at \$ 150 to \$ 200 per day.

According to the administration, the less pronounced interest shown by domestic tourists could be due to the fact that these events are still too fresh in people’s memories for them to be able to experience them in this way. The greater interest shown by the foreign tourists is explained by their desire to participate in an excursion that can be categorized as extreme tourism.

One factor blocking the commencement of this venture is not the protests from various groups, but the lack of investments necessary to begin the project. The Mayor of Vorkuta believes that with time it will be possible to offer tourists additional attractions. Besides visiting the labor camps, the tourist services could also include hunting and fishing trips.

In the opinion of observers, the project to create a ‘reality’ entertainment camp in the former labor camps is not the first controversial project to have been put forward by the authorities in Vorkuta. In 2001, the Mayor put forward a proposal to create the first public house in Russia in the former labor camps. The idea was criticized not only by the residents of Vorkuta, but also by politicians who oppose the legalization of prostitution.

GULAG TOURISM IN THE PERM OBLAST

Another example of an organized tour to the former labor camps, that has been professionally prepared, is the project undertaken in the Perm Oblast.

Kutchino, a small village 100 km north-east of Perm, was the site of the harshest imaginable Soviet prison camp, “Perm-36”. It was built under Joseph Stalin in 1946 and initially functioned as a timber production camp. In 1972, the government converted the camp into the main prison for people charged with political crimes. “Perm-36” was one of the last camps in the Soviet Union to detain political prisoners - it was only closed in 1987.

This tour to the Perm oblast, dedicated to the history of political repression, is based on the specific experiences of the residents of the settlement units located along the tour route. This tour route, called the “Perm Gulag”, is an example of cooperation between the administrators of the tourist movement and experts who deal with issues related to labor camps (historians, political scientists). The tour ends at the only Museum of the History of Political Repression in Russia, “Perm-36”. This museum is a vivid reminder of Communist terror. All the buildings in the camp are unique, and include the living huts, the cells, the punishment cell, the inner-camp prison, and the remains of the fences, which have either been preserved or have been restored.

Near the “Perm-36” camp, is the town of Ogonyok, where a different kind of museum is located – an outdoor Museum of the History of the Chusovaya River - dedicated to the natives of 300 years ago and the crusade of Ermak (who was from the Chusovaya area) and his conquest of Siberia. The museum contains mostly buildings from those bygone years, including the watermill and the chapels. The project, which was prepared by tourism experts from “Permtourist” and employees of the Museum of the History of Political Repression “Perm-36”, is very educational. It provides access to places related to gulag tourism and to earlier events in the history of this area in just one visit (Stepanova N.P., Ševyrin S.A., 2005).

The next type of tourist activities that can be categorized as gulag tourism in Russia are cruises to the former gulags along the Russian rivers. Apart from the most popular routes (Moscow – St Petersburg, Moscow – Astrakhan), tourists are becoming increasingly interested in cruises during which they can reach sites related to Soviet repression. The most popular routes chosen by foreign tourists include cruises from St Petersburg to the Solovetsky Islands and over the Siberian rivers such as the Yenisei and Ob. In both cases, the cruise stops at the former gulag colonies, which is an important feature of the trip. Cruises that feature aspects of gulag tourism are more highly priced than the regular tourist cruise destinations. The price of the cruise does not include the flight, for example, from Moscow, to the starting point of the cruise. One tourist agency “Bridges” recommends Yenisei cruises, and the price depends on the commencement date of the voyage. A ten-day cruise that starts before 10 August costs \$ 740 per person, while for cruises that start at a later date, the cost decreases to \$ 590. The cruises that feature visits to the former labor camps, contain one constant element in their schedule that increases the appeal of the voyage – i.e. the stopovers of varying lengths of time.

GULAG TOURISM IN THE MAGADAN OBLAST

A notable region that features several types of gulag tourism is the Magadan Oblast in the Far East of Russia. This region was part of the Khabarovsk Krai until 1953, and currently is often referred to as Kolyma, stemming from the name of the river that passes through it.

The rise in population in this region was due to the discovery of gold and metals in the upper Kolyma basin. A work force, consisting of prisoners living in the new labor camps, was brought in to help exploit the lodes. The capital of the region, Magadan, and the Kolyma Highway that runs from the Sea of Okhotsk, deep inland, was erected thanks to the labor of the exiled prisoners. This route, which is over 1,500 km long, is called the "Road of Bones" because the bodies of those who died while it was being built were used in the road foundations.

160 camps functioned in the Kolyma region, occupied by various numbers of exiled prisoners (135,000 in 1949). During his explorations in 2004, the author had an opportunity to reach his selected sites that are considered gulag tourism attractions. In Magadan, in several Tourist Museum rooms, is a collection of the remains of the gulags that once functioned here. The exhibits are not expansive, but what is important is that these few mementos have been preserved for descendants and they serve as a reminder of the tragedies that occurred under Soviet rule. The museum employees claim that around 200,000 people died in Magadan and the surrounding area, although some investigators believe that the Kolyma region took the lives of around 2 million victims of Soviet repression.

Another element that can be categorized as gulag tourism is the monument that towers over Magadan. Those who opposed its construction claimed that the city did not need a monument commemorating the victims of Soviet slavery, because the entire region, including the city itself, served as a memorial to the victims. Tourists who want to honor the victims can lay flowers at the monument called "The Mask of Sorrow" which resembles a human face with tears. The tears are reminiscent of the faces of those who died. The monument was the work of a world famous Russian vanguard sculptor and the producer of works with a religious theme, Ernst Iosifovich Neizvestny. His works can be found, among others, in the Vatican Museum.

At 30 meters high, the monument has a bell that tolls whenever the wind blows, as a reminder to the tourists and the residents that they are at the site of one of the most 'tormented' areas in Russia.

Another form of gulag tourism, are the excursions to one of the former labor camps that has been preserved until the present time. This type of activity requires a lot of determination on the part of the tourist to get to the camp. No camps have been preserved near Magadan, hence the need to organize an expedition to a place that is farther away. One of the best preserved gulags in the Kolyma region is the Dnieper Camp that is located 320 km from Magadan. This gulag was built in 1941 and functioned, with a few interruptions, until 1955. It was used to exploit the lodes of metal ore. The camp is located in a mountain valley, which means that it is protected from strong winds, while the great distance from the human settlements that are currently located along the Kolyma Highway, meant that it has survived in good shape until the present day.

The lack of any traces of the existence of labor camps in many areas in the Kolyma region is not due to decisions by the administration to destroy these signs of Soviet repression, but rather the residents' need for firewood. Expeditions to sites where remains of the gulags have survived to the present day are expensive, and often dangerous, due to the difficulties that have to be overcome in order to get to them. Environmental conditions dictate the time of year when such expeditions are possible (Wites T., 2007).

PICTURE 1
PRISONERS' QUARTERS IN DNEIPIROVSKI CAMP



PICTURE 2
MONUMENT OF GULAG VICTIMS AT MAGADAN



GULAG TOURISM OUTSIDE RUSSIA

In the regions that were part of the former Soviet Union, there are many structures that are reminders of Soviet repression. In many areas, no initiatives have been undertaken to remind people of the repression. However, some of the regions where memories of the past are still alive are in the Baltic states such as Latvia and Lithuania, especially in the context of regaining their independence in the early 1990s.

Their initiatives have been met with mixed opinions on the part of the citizens in both countries. The administrators of the proposed projects argue that there is a need for people to remember, especially the young, about the methods of repression used on local communities by the Soviet government. Only moderate tourist interest is shown in these projects, although the owners claim that the lack of profits is unimportant and argue that these projects should be treated as "a gift to the future generations."

The first project is Grutas Park, which was completed in Lithuania in 2001 by Viliumas Malinauskas. On the fifth anniversary of the opening, the founder of the park noted that it received more than 200,000 visitors each year, and that the number was increasing each year by around 20,000 people. Even though he does not believe the investment is profitable, he says that profit was not the main motivation behind the scheme. Instead, he points out that the park employs 80 persons.

Grutas Park, commonly known as the "Stalin World", is a quirky theme park dotted with relics of Lithuania's communist past. It has become a major tourist attraction in this former Soviet republic. Every year, the park welcomes visitors who follow two miles of wooden walkways, similar to those in the Siberian prison camps, to get from one exhibition to the next. Statues of Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin and other Soviet leaders glower at the visitors and the barbed wire fences and guards at the towers surrounding the park help to give it the feel of a Soviet gulag.

The second site in the Baltic republics that can be categorized as gulag tourism is the camp in the town of Lepaya in Latvia. This site that is currently a tourist attraction was used for interrogations, and to murder political prisoners and deserters. In Soviet times, the camp was the headquarters of the Soviet security agency, the KGB, where the many enemies of the Soviet Union were interrogated. Ultimately, this place ceased fulfilling its primary function in 1997, only after Latvia regained its independence. For 5€, present day tourists can be "locked up" in the former KGB prison, witness scenes of torture, and spend the night without sleep or food. Naturally, those opposed to this project argue that making a tourist attraction spot out of a place where people were murdered for their beliefs is unethical and inappropriate.

RISKS AND CHALLENGES FACING GULAG TOURISM

The materials obtained by the tourists influence their perception and experience of the camp. These materials should, therefore, build an objective, consistent and correct understanding of the historical events that are the background to the rise of the gulags.

In order to properly guide the tourists' experience during excursions to these places, the tourist administrators need to be educated about the facts and be historically conscious. Lack of proper knowledge on the part of the administrators can cause the trips to gulags to become yet another expedition that can be categorized as extreme tourism.

In gulag tourism, knowledge should help with the difficult task of collecting the sensory material needed for objective learning about the visited place and in order to perceive the co-dependent factors that determined the existence of the gulags. Proper knowledge should be gained before taking part in the trip as it is the factor that shapes the course of such an excursion. The participants should also be aware of how the institutional barriers that were in place (until less than two decades ago, when they were lifted) successfully prevented people from gaining access to places related to the gulags. Lack of proper knowledge, based on scholarly research, causes the tourist experience to become a collection of unattached impressions and perceptions that do not become organized and interpreted (Turos L., 1996). Consequently, a visit to a gulag becomes a subjective experience that does not allow the individual to objectively experience the visited place based on the historical facts that determined its existence. A visit to a site of former Stalinist repression should provoke inquiry, therefore it should be a source of deep moral satisfaction. Such feelings result from the tourists' belief that as a consequence of the excursion, they have enriched their spiritual lives, clarified their view of society, and learned to notice elements of the reality that they were unable to perceive prior to the visit.

Gulag tourism creates many natural opportunities for the conscious shaping of one's personality. It also allows people to seek and understand the motives that guide others in their conduct – the innocent passive gulag participants, and the perpetrators, administrators and the executors of the repressive system. Gulag tourism creates many opportunities for self-education. If the tourist decides that his or her knowledge of the place and its history is superficial, insufficient and uncoordinated then he or she can make a decision that forces him or her to acquire historical and cultural knowledge.

One serious issue that faces gulag tourism is the risk that the administrators will only perceive the economic benefits to be gained from such activities, although since 1991, the increasing tourist activity has in many cases helped to support troubled local economies during the post-communist transformation. Gulag tourism could help to develop places that are still reticent about their past history and its connection with gulags.

It is essential not to miss this great opportunity that has appeared since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Every effort should be made to develop this type of tourism and to promulgate the historical facts that enabled Stalinist repression to function for so long. Taking into account the objectives of this type of tourist activity, the administrators should suppress their desire to be governed solely by the profit they may reap and they should not violate any ethical standards.

Public interest in the remnants of the Gulag system should be made use of in a competent manner and should not only be exploited for profit and to increase the income of the settlements located in the vicinity of the camps. It is paramount to educate Russian society and make them aware that the labor camps scattered around the former Soviet states are part of their history and that they can be the source of valuable lessons and should not be forgotten. In particular, it is important that the profits that are to be reaped from the development of gulag tourism do not obviate the need to sharpen peoples understanding of Russia's past and shape people's attitude towards it. Most of the victims of the forced labor camps believe that lack of respect for the often nameless victims that gave their lives carrying out the slave-like labor is sacrilegious. The existing forms of organizing gulag tourist activities, which vary in concept, should inspire international debate on this chapter in Soviet history. Many outside observers claim that contemporary Russia is not ready for such debate and that its politics, that disregards the need to relate to recent history, is a conscious choice. In the new reality, during the period of transformation, many people still believe that what has not yet been discovered or examined should be left to rest, or be used in a unanimous strategy to judge these events in the Soviet Union era.

The low level of interest that Russian citizens show in such tourist activities probably results from lack of information and understanding of their history. The dynamically developing gulag tourism has mainly attracted the interest of foreign tourists. In Russia, however, there are conflicting opinions about whether the sites should be made available for foreign tourists. Those who are used to a policy of secrecy and confidentiality, believe that foreigners should not be allowed access to the former labor camps.

As far as the citizens of the former Soviet states are concerned, it should be remembered that the participants in the tourist activities may adopt a personal or multifaceted approach to the visited sites. Consequently, what constitutes an attraction for a foreigner could be viewed as being sacrilegious and as desecrating the place where thousands of victims of Soviet repression perished.

The lack of a concrete classification for such excursions, with clear reference to the historical nature and ethical issues involved, prevents the attractions that are offered from being acceptable to both the local residents and the visitors.

Many local residents, however, are aware of the opportunity that has been created to quickly improve their economic position by offering a series of services that can be categorized as gulag tourism. Many administrators of such excursions are not properly prepared to meet the challenges, or else they believe that their previous experience in organizing excursions, for example, bringing people closer to the natural beauty of area, is sufficient to undertake the organization of gulag tourism. Some tourism administrators see the preparation of excursions to the former labor camps as a quick way of making money. One of the reasons for the high prices is due to the limited accessibility of the sites and the massive interest shown. Furthermore, due to the formalities that have to be completed, the administrators are able to ask prices that are higher than the quoted ones for such excursions. Consequently, there is the risk that contemporary gulag tourism may become a form of individual tourism and not mass tourism.

SUMMARY

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This case study has presented various forms of gulag tourism customized for different people based on their limitations (their physical condition, availability, financial means, etc.). In its basic form, gulag tourism consists of visiting museums, memorials, and monuments commemorating the labor camps that used to operate in a given region. For a narrower group of participants, it is also possible to participate in an excursion to regions where the gulags still exists. Certain of the initiatives that are considered to be controversial, especially abroad, claim to belong to the gulag tourism category; these include survival camps, organized at the former gulag sites, during which the participants take part in activities such as paintball. This paper has discussed specific examples of such activities that were initiated at the turn of the twentieth century.

Gulag tourism, which began to develop less than two decades ago, faces many risks and challenges. It is very difficult to meet these challenges, but it is crucial to the process of self-education and to forming an objective view of reality. Without a proper understanding of history, it is not possible to direct the education of the gulag tourists.

The administrators of gulag tourism activities must have the right ethical attitude in order to guarantee that the places that are visited are properly presented and do not cause offence to the people who remember them and recognize the intense suffering of the gulag victims. Gulag tourism, more so than other forms of tourism, is conditioned by the awareness and ethical attitude of the participants. For many foreign tourists, especially those who participate in controversial projects that are categorized as gulag tourism, contact with the place, where a labor camp operated for many decades, does not constitute an ethical experience that leads to contemplation and that demands respect for certain norms.

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