16 June  
Arrival.

Finally we reached our destination. The journey was hard and tiring, but fun. Despite lack of sleep and weight lifting we had enough energy for the first excursion, which was a two-hour tour of the monastery. It covered the whole history of the monastery.
We were in a furnace, in a huge dining room, in many churches, in a laundry and in a prison.

We were most impressed by the stories of prisoners. Some of them were outstanding people, but not all. There was one inventive peasant, who tried to escape three times, but failed and spent 63 years in prison as a result.
Then we had tasty lunch and went on an excursion to mount Sekirnaya. The view from the top of the mountain was absolutely breathtaking: we could see miles around. There is the biggest lighthouse on the White Sea on top of the church. In the terrible years
of GULAG prisoners were kept there in terrible conditions. Now it is a beautiful Ascension Church with St. Michael’s church on the ground floor. We also saw the «Staircase of Horror». We counted the stairs on our way down, but all got different figures. At the ponds it was so windy that we couldn’t hear a word of our tour guide. But the dam and the nature were so beautiful that they took our breath away. The way back was bumpy but fun and a lot of mosquitoes travelled with us on the bus. We were happy because the bus took us straight to the canteen.
18 June, Bolshoi Zayatsky Island.

In the morning we went to Zayatsky Island by boat. The weather was rainy, windy and cold. The nature of the Island is special. It is tundra. The trees are small and there is a lot of moss and short bushes. The Island has ancient labyrinths. People protect the nature of the Island. They built an ecological footpath for tourists.
There’s St. Andrew’s Church, which Peter the Great built in 1702. Nowadays people don’t live on the Island but about 400 years ago monks came to live there and they built a house, a church, a kitchen house and a fridge. Only hares, a fox and a lot of birds live on the Island now. Once in 1854, when the English attacked the Island, there was a goat-hero they couldn’t catch and it became famous. People wanted to paint its horns gold. Despite rainy weather we enjoyed the trip.
The fourth day of our trip was the hardest so far. The fog was so thick that the captain couldn’t navigate and we had to wait for an hour for the start of our trip. We sailed and sailed through mist and rain but it was fun because we were playing word games on the way. Finally we reached our destination. Our first stop was Golgofa Mountain. There we went into a chapel and the Church of Crucifixion. Down the hill we saw the Birch-Cross, had a picnic and went to Trinity Hermitage. All the way the weather was rainy
and we were soaking wet and tired but we went to the Sacred Well. After that we set off back to the ship. The stories from our guide were very interesting and informative.

The way back was much shorter and the scenery was fantastic. When we reached the port the taxi took us to the restaurant and we ate up all the food there. We were tired but happy.
On the fifth day of our stay we went to the Botanical Gardens. We met Gardens’ Director and she was also our guide. First, the girls and the teachers combed and mowed the grass. The boys put the grass into wheelbarrows and took it to the compost pit. Other boys chopped the wood. We worked very hard. Although we were tired, we were very happy. After the work the director gave us an excursion around the Gardens. There are eight trees and plants which were planted more than 400 years ago by the monks. We saw Siberian pines of unusual form, a maple bush, apothecary Garden and a lot of flowers. In 2002 the Alley of Solovky Friends was started. A lot of famous people planted trees there. Prince Charles
was among them. In Botanical Gardens there is a Cross, Arhimandrids’ Summer Residence and two chapels. There used to be a Candle Plant at the bottom of the hill. Then after the excursion on top of the hill we tasted herbal tea. It was delicious and unusual! And we bought some tea to take home. At the end of the excursion the Director gave us some presents: maps of the Solovetsky Islands. It was one of our best days!
21 June  GULAG and St. Philip’s Hermitage

On 21 June we had a long and difficult excursion. It was about GULAG - the biggest system of concentration camps. It was a terrible time. It was like hell on earth. A lot of different people were kept there as prisoners. There were common people, children, priests, political leaders, intelligentsia, criminals but most of them were so called traitors and were unfairly accused. Some of them were tortured and beaten. Many people died from cold, injuries and diseases. Unfortunately, in that terrible time there were informators - people who informed supervisors about other prisoner’s plots and their relatives and friends, who were arrested after that. We must learn from the past and never forget about those horrible events.
After delicious dinner we went to St. Philip’s Skete. There we met with Friar Sevastyan, who gave us an interesting talk. We talked about people’s names and what they mean, about monks, confession and he told us some things about his life. We were very impressed by this talk. It was valuable experience for everyone.
22 June. Sea Cadets` School, War Memorial Day, The Saints of Solovki Excursion, A Lecture on Archeology

On the 22 of June 1941 at 4 o`clock in the morning the Great Patriotic War started. It is a very sad day for everyone in our country. On this day we remember people who died in the War. We and our teachers met in the conference hall and talked about our relatives who took part in the War. After that we put the wreath to the monument to Sea Cadets who fought in the War. In the morning we went to Sea Cadets` Museum and learnt a lot about sea cadets and their heroic life. They were 14-15-year old boys who came from different parts of the USSR. Their dream was to get to the front and they studied and worked very hard
in difficult conditions. Many of them became heroes and many died in the War.

After lunch we had an excursion around the monastery. The excursion was about the 20th century Saints of Solovki. It was so interesting because the guide was very enthusiastic and knew a lot about those great people. She told us real life stories about the Saints. We were impressed by how they managed to remain happy and not to lose their Faith in God.

In the evening we listened to the lecture on archeology of Solovky. Professor Martynov told us about ancient times of Solovky and showed us the boats he made. The boats are similar to ancient boats. Alexander Martynov sailed the White Sea in these boats. It was a very exciting day packed with events.
Today we had the most interesting excursion. It was a boat trip along the Great Lake System. There is also the Small lake System, but it is not so wonderful and much shorter. Although our tour guide didn’t give us a lot of information, his stories were exciting, instructive and funny. We went in 6 boats with 4 to 5 people in each. Every boat had 3 oars; 2 long and 1 short.

We were impressed by the transparence of the water and by the fact that no one drops litter there. The water is so clean that people drink water from the lakes.
and we drank it too. It is so tasty. When we covered half of the distance we had a great picnic, which consisted of cheese, ham, bread, cookies, tea and sweets. Then we sailed back. The sun was shining, the weather was getting better and better, the seagulls travelled with us all the time during the trip. The way back seemed much shorter and the scenery was fantastic. We enjoyed the trip.
24 June Treasure Hunt and Muksalma

Today in the morning we took part in a game called “Treasure Hunt”.

Two captains of our teams thought of this game. They wrote parts of a poem on the small pieces of paper and hid them in the different places. Each team had to go around the village to find these bits of paper. The captains of each team helped the other team to find pieces of the poem, which we read to the jury.

Облаком волнистым
Пыль встает вдали;
Конный или пеший –
Не видать в пыли.
Вижу, кто-то скачет
На лихом коне,
Друг мой, друг далекий,
Вспомни обо мне!

A cloud of dust
Far away
Walking or riding -
Can’t say.
See the rider
On a wild prad,
Recall me
My far friend.
After lunch the jury announced the result! There wasn’t a winner and there wasn’t a looser, because both teams coped with the tasks very well.

In the afternoon we visited the island of Bolshaya (Big) Muksalma. It is the third largest island after Bolshoi (Big) Solovetskiy and Anzer. There are two ways to get to Muksalma. The first one is on foot, the other one is by boat. We chose the second one, as it takes less time than on foot and also the path to Muksalma is full of marshes and peat bogs so it’s hard to walk there. The journey was only 40
minutes long, but most of time was spent on passing through the Strait of Iron Gate. It was called so, because getting through it is as hard as opening monastery wrought iron gate. Luckily, the sky was heaven blue and we were enjoying the beautiful scenery of the White Sea sitting on the deck and embraced by the rays of the sun. Long before we reached the island we could see the main feature of it – the hand-made boulder dam more than kilometer long. The most grandiose hydraulic engineering facility of Solovki was built in 1859-1866 by the 400 workers and monks to move the livestock from Muksalma to Bolshoi Solovetskiy island fast. Muksalma is rich in food resources for farm animals, so at the beginning of the 16th century a farm was built there. During the excursion we sampled kelp and sea grapes, which taste like cucumber. Also we visited St. Sergius’ Skete, which is being restored. Muksalma is one of the most amazing places we have visited on Solovki islands.
25 June  

*Wooden Cross Workshop*

At three o’clock we went to Wooden Cross Workshop. There we were told how the wooden crosses are made. Our guide was Georgy who is the founder of the workshop.

He is a talented and skillful craftsman as well as a philosopher. We learned what types of wood crosses are made, how they are designed and how long it takes to make a cross. He explained us the meaning of the cross, its monograms and ornaments.

We saw a seven-metre Solovetski cross which is being made.

Excursions like this are very unforgettable, because they are thought-provoking.
Today early in the morning we went to Kuzova Archipelago. These are giant uninhabited islands which look like giant tortoises.

The sea was rough and it was raining. When we reached the islands we had to climb down a very steep ladder to get off the ship. But it was only the start of our adventures. The islands are mostly cliffs covered with moss and sparse vegetation. So to walk around the islands you need to be physically fit and not to be afraid of heights.

We climbed up and down steep stony slopes and listen to our guide Sergei who gave us an interesting talk about the history of the islands and their nature. The view from the top was breathtaking. We could see miles and miles around. On the top of the island we saw strange figures and monuments made of stones by ancient people. These monuments are called Seids. They are said to have Scandinavian origin but know one
knows for sure what they were used for. Surrounded by this outlandish landscape we took the picture of our group and had a picnic. The way down was even harder but we managed to safely reach the ship. We were tired, happy but sad because it was our last excursion and tomorrow at 4 o’clock we are boarding Vasily Kisaykov which will take us to Kem.

Then we get on the Murmansk-Moscow train. So it’s the end of the exciting, interesting, informative, educational and unforgettable trip to the most special and unforgettable island. We are already planning to come to Solovki many more times in future.