

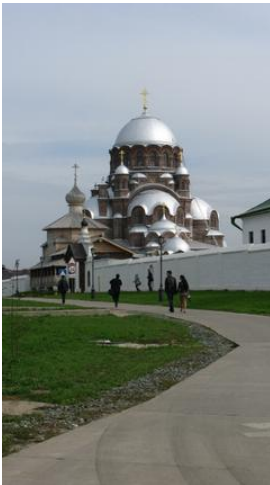
February 21, 2014

## The phoenix of Russia



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Dormition Monastery at Sviyazhsk. Photos: Deepa Alexander



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Cathedral of Our Lady and Trinity Church in the foreground at Sviyazhsk.



Houses at Sviyazhsk.



The churches of St. Konstantin and St. Elena at Sviyazhsk.



The altar at Trinity Church.



At the smithy.

## **Sviyazhsk, with its origins in the dark heart of Tsarist Russia, now stands illuminated by the light of the Winter Olympics Torch Relay, finds Deepa Alexander**

The past is never past in Sviyazhsk. It waves from the flagpoles and buntings that festooned the route of the torch rally to Sochi. It finds refuge in the Communist era monuments and museums. It even simmers in a pot of tea.

An island fortress of Tsar Ivan the Terrible, a Gulag during the Stalin years, Sviyazhsk is now better known as a venue for an open tournament in archery. It has paid the price of being located at the crossroads of history — Sviyazhsk has been taken and lost by every power that has ruled the Russian steppes. And yet it has risen from the proverbial ashes every time. The island has even survived the onslaught of mass tourism; despite the hordes of day trippers it continues to remain a ghost town, where one can almost hear the clash of warriors who fought to rule it through the ages.

It's a day of brilliant sunshine as I drive the 25-odd miles from Kazan to Sviyazhsk. A causeway connects the highway to the island, and high on a bluff, accessed by a stairway, stands the wooden fortress built in 1550. Far below flow the dark roiling waters of the Volga and Sviyaga rivers. Above stands the copper-domed gateway to the Dormition Monastery. Women in headscarves cross themselves on the green lawns. Monks work inside the black-topped churches now gleaming in restored splendour. But the monastery's past has been far from peaceful. The building that houses the monks has been renovated seven times since it was built in the 17th Century. Used as a prison of the Gulag, its quiet rooms housed a psychiatric ward until the 1990s. A lonely thrush sings in the corner of the courtyard where stand the graves of political dissidents and a stone monument to the monks who were executed during the Great Purge of 1937-38.

Sviyazhsk's violent past had its roots in the face-off between the Kazan Khan and the Moscow-based Tsar over four hundred years ago. Kazan was an impregnable fortress that had shrugged

off many attempts by the Tsar to capture the upper reaches of the Volga. On one of his retreats, Ivan the Terrible decided to make Sviyazhsk his base and raised the fortress within a month. And so, for nearly three centuries, it was a prosperous county town, a remote frontier of Christianity in a Muslim province.

Across the road from the monastery stand old houses, weathered and listing — remnants of the time of Lenin and Trotsky. Some of the houses, lovingly restored, have pictures of the forced labour camps under Stalin. Schoolboys sit astride the cannon outside the museum, while others ride horses at the corral. What were once stables have now been converted into an interactive village centre. Visitors try their hand at the smithy, fawn, over-embroidered clothes and gulp down great quantities of borscht. The Russian Orthodox Church took over the island's many churches only in 2010. Pilgrims make their way from the wooden Trinity Church built during the course of a day. But it is the compellingly beautiful silver-topped cathedral of the Mother of God that draws me in. A priest in grand robes stands at the gilded entrance. This is the place to pray if one feels the world is too much with him. Classical lines of the Renaissance meld into the poetic curves of the Baroque. On the vaulted ceiling, colour greets the eye and the walls are emblazoned with heraldic coats of arms and Byzantine portraits of saints. A sliver of light falls across the floor and illumines a concentrated collection of lamps.

Further down the road, framed against the river, stand the twin churches of St. Konstantin and St. Elena. The aisles are quiet except for the wind that whispers the tales of three agitated centuries. Beside, on a spit of rocky land, wreathed in roses, stands a monument erected to those who were executed on the island. Streets run in grids here past the mournful ruins of houses. I sit on a garden bench and talk to Georgy Andrazhov, who is excited when he realises I'm from the land of the Kapoors and the Khans. In the distance, beyond the crenelated walls, barges sound their departure. There is a stirring in the little cottages as the locals light the evening fires. As I leave the bells toll the hour and inadvertently recount the history that once rumbled through these lands.

*(The writer was in Russia at the invitation of Ministry of Youth Affairs, Sports and Tourism, Republic of Tatarstan)*