

Frozen: Photos capture remote Arctic city

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The entrance to the “Golgotha” memorial overlooks the city of Norilsk, Russia. Visitors who pass through the wooden church gate can ring a bell in memory of Gulag prisoners buried in the common grave. (Photos by William Brumfield)

Tulane University Russian professor and renowned photographer William Brumfield is finally warming up in New Orleans after a bone-chilling trip to the Arctic Circle, visiting the remote Siberian mining city of Norilsk to speak at a conference on museums of the far Russian north.

And of course, he used his camera to preserve images of the St. Petersburg-inspired

city and its monuments to political prisoners who built the city on the permafrost.

“God, it's cold,” [Brumfield](#) said of the city. “The wind chill â?¡ it's almost impossible to imagine the conditions. It's like another planet, really. They have 10 months of winter” and polar nights leave the city of 176,500 people in darkness 45 days a year.

A prolific author and photographer who has documented historic churches and other Russian architecture, Brumfield is professor of Slavic studies at Tulane.

Inviting someone from the West, particularly an American, to Norilsk is unusual, he said, because of its strategic importance to Russia. The city has the world's largest deposits of nickel and copper, with a massive mining and metallurgical complex that was built by Gulag prisoners starting in the 1930s. By 1942 it was providing nickel to vital defense industries.

“It's one of the most polluted places on earth,” he said, with over two million tons of sulfur dioxide released annually into the air. Little vegetation remains in a 20-mile radius around [Norilsk](#); soil samples reveal high levels of copper and nickel. “It's big business,” he said.

While there, Brumfield spoke at a conference sponsored by the Norilsk history museum, which is in the forefront of memorializing political prisoners whose forced labor created the city. He took extensive photographs of areas commemorating concentration camp victims from the 1940s and 1950s.

Brumfield plans to publish his Norilsk photos later this year in his online series with [“Russia Behind the Headlines.”](#) The photos also will be included in his archive at the [National Gallery of Art](#).



In his recent trip to the Siberian city of Norilsk, Russian professor William Brumfield spoke at the city's museum of history, at right. He said much of the Norilsk architecture is in the monumental style of St. Petersburg.

'It's like another planet, really.'—William Brumfield, Russian professor