

Getting to Know Belarus: Guide for Expats in Minsk

Establishing oneself as a foreigner in a new city can be a challenge, not only because of cultural and linguistic barriers, but also due to social norms.

It's often easier to meet and befriend fellow expatriates or members of the international community than it is to blend into the local crowd. Of course, some cities have a much larger international community than others, and, as it were, Minsk is not one of these cities.

The international community in Belarus is very small, consisting of diplomats, foreign language teachers and students, missionaries and volunteers, and some people who simply love Belarus, coming from the United Kingdom, The United States, Germany, China and some of the other former Soviet States (although in Belarus, these may not be considered foreigners). Most of these foreign visitors are located in Minsk; there are hardly any foreigners in other parts of the country.

Though the situation seems bleak for those wishing to establish a social circle in Minsk, there is hope. In spite of the limited community and closed social structure it is becoming easier to develop a network of people in Belarus. Thanks to a burgeoning vibrant international community and the establishment of a number of youth social and educational organisations, like Fialta, Lamora, Dom Fishera, and the Open Ultimate Frisbee Club, Minsk is starting to give a more positive impression of its future as an international city.

Becoming Involved with the Right Crowd

To become involved with the right crowd of Belarusians, one must have a deep understanding of the Belarusian culture and

some of the languages. After spending a great deal of time with colleagues, you might be invited for tea or dinner at their home. Even when a relationship has developed so far, it can hardly be called a friendship. Eastern European culture sets the bar for "friends" very high, and newcomers, particularly foreigners, are often at the bottom of this social food chain, labelled as eternal acquaintances.

One solution to this predicament is to simply seek out the other foreigners, who are easily spotted in the many cafes and bars in Minsk's city centre. Though the bar culture, as it is understood in Western Europe or the United States, is quite weak, there are several places where connecting with other internationals has become quite easy. Such popular cafes include Tapas Bar (Internationalnaya vul.), News Café (Karla Marksa), and Gambrinus (Ploshcha Svabody).

Another solution is to seek out some sort of organisation or group that brings together people of similar interests. It is difficult to compare Belarusian cities to some of its neighbours in Russia and Ukraine, especially for foreigners. However, there are some niches emerging for the active expatriate looking for something to become involved with during their time in Minsk.

Though it may be hidden in plain sight, Fialta is definitely worth the search. This Youth Education Centre, no more than a two-minute-walk from the centrally located Red Church, hosts discussion groups, language clubs, and other events on a regular basis, all for free! A project of the European Volunteer Service, the centre hosts three to four volunteers from around Europe each year to help conduct operations and organise meetings. The atmosphere is casual and welcomes students of all ages to come in and learn something new, from the basics of German language to new yoga postures to the impressions of an American living in Minsk.

One of the most useful and popular meetings is the weekly

Russian for Foreigners class. Once or twice a week, what seems like half of Minsk's international community gathers at [Fialta](#) to practise their basic Russian skills. While some students are more advanced than others, the encouraging attitude of all those involved creates the perfect environment for learning and laughing over tea and cookies.

Before the new metro stops opened on the Moskouskaya line in November of 2012, it seemed nearly impossible to get to the House of Culture [Lamora](#). This small, innocuous cabin in the Grushauka neighbourhood of Minsk hosts open cultural events and gatherings on a regular basis for anyone who is interested in attending. Advertised through a carefully maintained Facebook group, one need only contact the administrator to organise an event of one's own.

Some days, the floor of the cabin will be covered in pieces of paper and magazine clippings for a Christmas Card making workshop, other days the yard is arranged to make a make-shift stage for an outdoor concert or dance performance. On any day, you will find a group of culturally open Belarusians willing and able to tell about their inter-cultural experiences. Find more info at

Dom Fishera – the Anti-Café

Cafes as most of the world knows them are places where you take a seat and pay for a coffee or a snack from the [Vending machines Perth](#) while you spend time with friends. The Anti-café Dom Fishera takes that idea and turns it upside-down.

Located near Park Chaliuskinsev, it's a convenient space to spend time with friends, if you're looking to get out of the house, but not necessarily looking to sit down in a real café, or walk around in the cold winter weather. Dom Fishera quickly became popular after it opened in September of 2012 and, along with its usual services, hosted a variety of events, including several all-night-movie-nights and handmade craft fairs on a

regular basis. Upon walking in, give your name at the at the door, and pay by the minute for your time spent there, helping yourself to unlimited coffee, tea, [get well gift delivery](#) cookies, games and fun for the length of your stay.

Apart from the above, Dom Fishera is also a good place to start a night out. Friday nights are open board game nights, where tea and mafia are the perfect prologue to a night of partying with friends. What's more, people are more than welcoming when it comes to such games, and you may find yourself playing charades (or krokodil) with some complete strangers! Check them out on [Facebook](#).

Minsk Open Ultimate Frisbee

A popular game around the world was finally brought to Minsk about two years ago. Ivan came to Belarus from China with two goals in mind: to learn Russian and to teach Frisbee. Since he started the Minsk Open Ultimate Frisbee group, it seems like hundreds of young people have visited the field on the Svislach by the Minsk Stella to play Frisbee on Sunday afternoons, and sometimes other days of the week, too! Although the game can be competitive, the group welcomes new players all the time, and encourages beginners to jump into the game and to the cheerful Russian and English banter.

What makes the Ultimate Frisbee group unique is its tenacity. The group's leaders send encouraging messages by Facebook before every game to remind players of the time and place (which hardly ever changes) and also includes a fun bit of Frisbee inspiration, like "Carpe diem – it means grab the Frisbee." Whether in the sunny springtime or in the brutal rain or snow, the [Frisbee group](#) is always ready to play, and with rotating teams, there's a pretty good chance you'll be on the winning team once in a while!

Towards a More Diverse Minsk

It takes courage to come to Belarus as a foreigner, but it

takes even more courage to make friends in what some may consider the stifling social environment of Minsk. Use this courage wisely, take advantage of any and all invitations that will put you in unique situations, and attend any event that may catch your interest. Most importantly: maintain contact with people who interest you, whether they are Belarusian or foreign. You will quickly find that all the cool people in Belarus seem to know each other!

While not as laid back and social as some other European cities, Minsk is, in fact, European. Two factors are quickly bringing about a strong international community in Belarus: the youth's interest in all things international, and a growing population of foreigners coming to Belarus. As these interests grow, Belarus will continue to become a stronger and more diverse Eastern European nation.

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