

Western Belarus: What To See and Do

For many first-time visitors to Belarus the limit of ambition and adventure often extends no further than the boundaries of inner city Minsk, yet a voyage of discovery exists elsewhere in the other major cities, museum towns and the natural world.

This article, the first of a two-parter, introduces a number of these treasures in the Western half of the country, where the elegance of Hrodna (also spelled Grodno), the frontier bustle of Brest, the palaces and castles of Mir, Niasviž and Navahrudak and the natural beauty of Bielaviežskaja Pušča National Park all await the curious traveller.

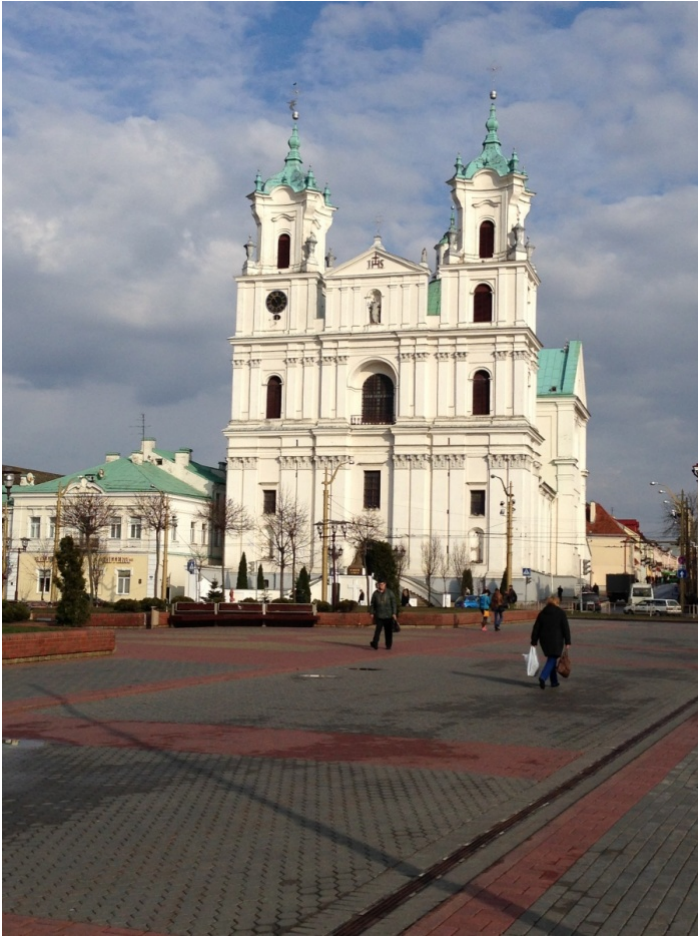
Cities: mediaeval and Soviet heritage

In strategic and geographical terms, Belarus played a number of important roles as the most Westerly of the former Soviet Union's republics and it comes as no surprise that this feature continues to dominate its attractions today.

Nestling in the north-western corner lies the city of **Hrodna**. Just 20 kilometres from the Polish border and only 40 kilometres from Lithuania, its cultural and administrative importance within the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania and later in the time of the influential Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth goes back over 750 years.

Catholic and Polish influences abound here, as most notably exhibited in the form of the majestic 17th century Jesuit **Farny Cathedral**, located centrally on Savieckaja Square. The

exquisite high Baroque altars, one of which is 21 metres high, should not be missed.



Only a few hundred metres away, the frontage of the lovely **Bernadino Church and Seminary** high above the Nieman river affords fine views across the lower town, framing the unusual **Drama Theatre**, the **Fire Tower** and the **Old and New Castles** in the foreground.

Beyond and well worthy of a visit stands the **Kaložskaya Church of St Barys and St Hlieb**, the oldest remaining building in the city. Probably the only surviving example of the ancient style of **Black Ruthenian** architecture in the country, much of the original stonework of this lovely church dates from the 12th century.

Almost due south and 232 kilometres away in the south-western corner of the country lies the city of **Brest**. Situated on the pan-European E30 highway and the main Berlin to Moscow railway

line, Hitler unleashed Operation Barbarossa here in 1941.

The 19th century [fortress](#), one of the country's major visitor sites, withstood a fearsome onslaught for six weeks. The title of **Hero-fortress** was bestowed after the Great Patriotic War to honour the heroism and self-sacrifice of the defenders during the early months of Barbarossa, the city itself also being honoured as **"Hero City of the Soviet Union"**.

Today, travellers with an interest in 20th century European affairs will find much in this somber and moving place to fire their imagination. And the **Biarescie Archaeological Museum** in the grounds of the fortress should not be overlooked.

Only a handful of kilometres from the European Union, this city has all the hustle and bustle of a true border town. Closer to Warsaw than to Minsk, Western cultural influences predominate.

Fairy-tale castles and palaces

160 kilometres due east of Hrodna on the M11 motorway lies the town of **Lida** with its mighty **castle**, boasting huge walls and a high level walkway connecting two of the imposing corner towers. Construction began in the middle of the 14th century. The site measures 80 metres square, making this one of the largest castle complexes in the country.

Similar to Lida in design and style, the 16th century [Mir Castle and Fortress](#) is one of the country's UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Only 90 kilometres from Minsk, this sympathetically renovated fairy-tale castle of sublime décor and sumptuous exhibits easily repays the close attention of visitors.

Just half an hour away by road stands another UNESCO site, the historic settlement of **Niasviž** with its glorious [palace](#). Surrounded by a charming lake and beautifully landscaped grounds, opportunities to promenade abound at this splendid site, one of the finest historical locations in the entire country.



A visit to ancient **Navahradak**, once the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, splendidly complements a visit to these castles and palaces. Around 45 minutes' drive from Mir, the 14th century **castle** now lies in ruins, though renovations are under way.

Its location atop a hill 323 metres above sea level, one of the highest points in the country, dominates the town and the surrounding area, making it easy to appreciate its strategic value in times of medieval warfare.

The town also has a number of sites (including an interesting museum) devoted to the life and works of [Adam Mickiewicz](#), national poet of Belarus, Poland and Lithuania, who was born here and christened in the church on the hill below the castle.

The beauty of nature

Only 70 kilometres north of Brest, the magnificent [Bielaviežskaja Pušča State National Park and Biosphere Reserve](#), a third UNESCO World Heritage site, should be considered one of the country's 'must see' sites. It came into existence as a park over 600 years ago, though its original status as a playground for Polish princes and Russian tsars has now far been exceeded. The first class Museum of Nature presents a fine guide to the history of the park as well as comprehensively describing current attractions, while tourist trails on foot, on horseback and by bicycle abound outdoors.



Several hundred **European bison** inhabit the park and eagle-eyed visitors should have no difficulty in securing a sighting from roads and paths. Another noteworthy resident, the 'real' **Grandfather Frost** also lives here. I have visited his dacha and was privileged to meet the grand old gentleman himself. He certainly convinced me of his credentials ...

European Union visitors entering the park from Poland no longer require a Belarusian entry visa, although the process of applying for exemption presents no less a challenge than the visa application itself!

Four **hotels** await in and just outside the park, each with decent facilities for nourishment and relaxation. I have stayed at **Hotel Number Three**, just inside the park gates. Although a little shabby (dating as it does from the Soviet era), visitors to this place of peace and beauty will doubtless be seeking to return to the simplicities of life and nature. In that context, expect to find the rooms basic but clean. All have en-suite facilities.

I have one word of caution if visiting here though; do think carefully before stepping inside the **Valeri animal enclosure**. All of the animals and birds in this section of the park are caged. Many of them appear to exhibit distress and in particular, I found the sight of two brown bears in a state of considerable discomfort outside their natural environment particularly upsetting. Although the only negative experience in an otherwise delightful place, it remains a significant one.

Belarus has so much to offer beyond the attractions of its capital city. Those with an open and enquiring mind who step outside the boundary of the Minsk orbital road will not be disappointed by all they find there.

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A Guide to Eastern Europe's

Most Tedious Arguments: Vilnius / Wilno / Vilnia

Edward Lukas in the Economist writes about the most contentious issues in Eastern Europe. The contemporary city of Vilnius is certainly one of those issues.

Very few people realise that as a result of the 1939 Stalin-Hitler agreement deviding Europe Lithuania got a seizable piece of land predominantly populated by Slavs – Belarusians and Poles.

Fortunately, the dispute between Lithuanian, Polish and Belarusian historians over Vilnius is peaceful. In early 1990-s Belarus and Lithuania had virtually identical courts of arms. Belarusian President even shared a [story](#) of his Lithuanian counterpart paining it to him that Belarus was using "their" symbols.

Lukashenka was happy to give up the more glorious version of the Belarusian history in exchange for oil and other benefits from Russia. Russian historiography had always supported the myth of ethnic Slavs being prosecuted in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – one of the most influential states of mediaeval Europe.

But as a matter of fact, for centuries the only official language of that state was old Belarusian and Lithuanians constituted only around 5 percent of the Vilnius region population according to a 1931 census. Edward Lukas writes in the Economist:

All the arguments below are a) historically plausible and b) strike most outsiders as quite mad. ... Not many people realise this, but most of the people speaking Polish and Belarussian in the area in and around Vilnius are not really Slavs but polonised Lithuanians, the legacy of centuries of forced

assimilation. That is a terrible fate, so the right (and kindest) thing to do is to depolonise these people and relithuanianise them. A good way to start is to make sure that they do not get trapped into using foreign Polish letters and silly spellings when writing their names. It is Adomas Mickevicius, not Adam Mickiewicz. Let nobody forget it.

Read 'You say Lwów, I say Lviv' in [the Economist](#).

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The Economist: The Borderlands of Europe Should not be Left Behind

None of these claims can be definitive; finding Europe's middle depends on what you count as its edge—the Azores? Iceland? The Ural mountains? The methodology of some claims is unclear. The more exotic ones bear as little relation to geography as the Loch Ness Monster does to aquatic biology. In other words, their purpose is to attract tourists. But at least for the Ukrainians visiting Dilove to be photographed by the monument, this is as far west as they can get. “Where Europe Ends”, a powerful new film by Alina Mungiu Pippidi, a Romanian scholar and activist, shows the effect of the European Union's expansion in dividing Europe. [Read the full story](#)

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