

Accommodation in Belarus: Where to Stay

Until a decade or so ago, the choice of hotels here was limited to one out of one; Soviet-style brutalist concrete monoliths, crumbling and ill-cared for, often with brutalist standards to match.

Yet as Belarus reaches out to establish a foothold in the Western tourism market, so consumer choice has increased.

This article presents details of the options available and adds a few tips based on my own experiences. Choices are there to suit all tastes. For me, staying with friends always comes first, although for others less inclined or unable to do so, there are plenty of other options.

Luxury to Budget: Hotels and Hostels

Throughout 2013 and into early 2014, every visit to Minsk saw more and more new hotels under construction at breakneck speed in the run-up to the World Ice Hockey Championships.

Today, a full range of accommodation is on offer, from luxury to budget. Most bookings can be made online, directly with each hotel, and payment is made either in advance or at the conclusion of the stay by credit/debit card. However, some hostels will accept payment by cash only.

Currently the most expensive establishment is the imposing  Hotel Europe. Oozing opulence and ideally situated for the city's best restaurants and sights, just off Svabody Square, a single room with breakfast will cost \$270 per night, which

compares very favourably indeed with prices elsewhere in Europe.

At the other end of the scale, a night at Hotel 40 Let Pobedy behind Gorky Park and within walking distance of many of the city's sights will cost \$50.

Between these two extremes still sit a number of 1970s concrete blocks of the type visitors to the former Soviet Union will remember either with fondness or horror, such as Hotel Jubilejny. Overlooking the Svislač River and only a few moments walk from Park Pobedy and the newly-relocated Great Patriotic War Museum, I find the homage it pays to 'the old days' irresistible. A night in a single room here with breakfast costs \$89.

Outside Minsk hotels like Jubilejny abound, but increasingly it is possible to find something upmarket and out of the ordinary. In Brest, the Hermitage Hotel offers elegant décor and high standards of customer service to match, all for \$92 per night. Meanwhile in Homiel, Zamkavy Hotel is rated easily the best in town. Staff go the extra mile to ensure high-class service and at \$55 per night for a single room, excellent value for money can be found here.

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There is, however, one specific word of warning with hotels everywhere in the country; beware the lure of low-cost 'non-refurbished' rooms.

On a research trip outside Minsk I once decided to sample one such room in a major hotel, at a cost of \$22 per night for bed and breakfast. A nightmarish experience ensued. The room was filthy, with holes in the wall and doors hanging off cupboards, while the crumbling and rusting balcony did little to put me at ease. And the hot water supply was cut off for three days.

To keep accommodation costs low, do your research and go for one of the new breed of hostels. Clean, friendly, secure, well-appointed and often close to a city centre, they cannot be beaten for value.

In Minsk, try the excellent Revolucion hostel, right in the heart of the city, where a bed in a dormitory sleeping 4, 6, 8 or 10 persons will cost \$26 per night (breakfast extra). In Viciebsk, a bed in X0 hostel, just metres from the majestic Uspienski Cathedral of the Assumption, will cost \$19 per night without breakfast.

And in Brest, a bed in a single room at 5 Kaliec (within the Dynamo Brest football stadium and only a stroll away from the Hero-Fortress) will cost \$23 per night, also without breakfast.

Renting Apartments & Hosting

The number of apartments for rent in all of the major cities has risen exponentially in recent times. More and more agencies are plying their trade on the Internet, where a one-bedroom apartment in Minsk with separate living room can be secured for as little as \$55 per night (\$330 per week), in a central location or close to a Metro stop.

If you can stay with friends, then so much the better.

For even better value, the classified section in the local newspaper will list columns of private rentals, where the deal is struck directly with the owner. This is only possible if you speak the language or are travelling with a Belarusian friend, of course.

However you do it, a rented apartment gives you the chance to live the life of a local, easily the best opportunity to understand what makes a country and its people tick. If you

can stay with friends, then so much the better. You get all the fringe benefits and more, but without the cost!

Websites offer travellers around the world the opportunity to connect with other like-minded travellers interested in homestays. For example, www.couchsurfing.com currently markets over 21,000 local people in Minsk and within a 50-kilometre radius that have registered to offer hosting services.

The registration process is simple and sensible, offering reassurances to both hosts and visitors alike. And as with renting apartments or staying with friends, you will very much feel like a local, with access to hot tips on what to do and see (either going solo or with your host).



Living the Good Life: Rural Homesteads

Following a presidential decree in 2004, there has been a real move to promote ecological and agro-tourism in rural areas, offering visitors a glimpse of rural life as it has been lived for centuries in the form of a stay on a farmstead.

The risk is that it can be difficult to tell whether what is on offer is a realistic portrayal or an invented cliché of a bucolic idyll. The database maintained by the Association of Agro- and Ecotourism 'Country Escape' (www.ruralbelarus.by) lists a selection of properties and all major tourist agencies will have access to this and others. Expect to pay around \$50 per person per night to see life 'down on the farm' (breakfast extra) in Minsk region. Prices elsewhere in the country are comparable, though breakfast is usually included.

Whatever the choice of accommodation, foreign visitors should

remember to comply with the requirement for visitors to obtain [the necessary stamp](#) on their migration form.

Perhaps old habits die hard, even for travellers seeking to discover a new destination like Belarus. But for those with an open mind, an increasing number of choices present themselves.

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