

# 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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.

*Nigel Roberts*

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# **The Growing Power of the**

# Belarusian Orthodox Church – Belarus Photo Digest

According to official statistics, 59 percent of Belarusian citizens are Orthodox Christians. Yet many Orthodox churches stand empty, and as few as 18 percent of Orthodox believers [regularly attend](#) religious services.

Due to such low levels of religious fervour among the general public, state support has become key to helping the Orthodox Church maintain its dominance in Belarus's society.

Prosecuted during the Communist period along with other religious denominations, the Orthodox Church has become one of the important pillars of the state ideology in modern day Belarus. Other denominations exert no comparable influence in the country. In 2004, the Orthodox Church signed an [agreement](#) with the government, allowing it to obtain exclusive rights of influence in education, health care, and crime prevention.

At the same time, the Belarusian Orthodox Church remains fully subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church. Following the onset of war in Ukraine, the Belarusian Church has voiced interest in [self-governance](#) and separation from Moscow. Unsurprisingly, Russia does not see eye to eye with Belarus on the issue.



A representative of the Orthodox Church is receiving an Honorary Citizenship award from the state at the 75th anniversary of the Minsk region in January 2013.



Infant baptism at an Orthodox Church in Maladzechna.



A woman is kissing the cross at a cemetery in Turau, Homel region.



Commemoration of the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River (Epiphany) in the woods next to the village of Damanava, Vilejka district. The men are about to plunge into the holy spring.



Traditional Orthodox icons are decorated for Epiphany. In the absence of a donation box, believers put monetary contributions on the shelf with the icons.



The Belarusian Orthodox Church follows the Julian calendar and celebrates Epiphany on 19 January.



Parishioners are lighting candles in preparation for the Easter celebration in Zaskavichy, Minsk region.



Easter service in Zaskavichy.



A believer holds a decorated cross during the Easter service in Zaskavichy.



Easter Celebration in Zaskavichy.



Easter Celebration in Zaskavichy.



Belarusian Orthodox Priest in the church of Kreva, Hrodna region.



Maslenitsa celebration during the last week before the Great Lent in Vitsebsk region. Women are “burying an old man,” according to a pagan tradition, marking the end of winter. A greedy and salacious priest is one of the traditional participants in the ceremony.



An old Belarusian woman prays and lights a candle.



All Saints Church in Minsk, completed in 2008. President Lukashenka, who once identified himself as an “Orthodox atheist”, has attended several holiday celebrations in this church with his youngest son.

*About the photographer: Siarhei Leskiec is a freelance photographer whose work focuses on everyday life, folk traditions, and rituals in the Belarusian countryside. Originally from Maladzieczna region, he received a history degree from the Belarusian State Pedagogical University.*

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## **Minsk – Getting to Know the ‘Hero City’**

By any known measure, Minsk paints a vivid tableau of itself as a major European capital city. Vibrant and buzzing with activity, a visitor can nevertheless feel instantly relaxed and at ease upon arrival without even knowing it.

Almost two million people live here. Business and commerce are thriving. Opportunities to experience culture, the arts, entertainment and sport for young and old, visitors and residents alike are everywhere to be found. And at the same time, the atmosphere and ambience suggest a universal feeling of tranquillity.

Visitors need fear no risk of claustrophobia from overcrowded and overbearing buildings closing in on top of each other. Instead, the vista from horizon to horizon presents huge skies, with a real sense of open space. Why is this so?

## Rebuilding the 'Hero City'

For the answer, look no further than the events of the 'Great Patriotic War', when Nazi hordes swept across the country, laying waste to everything and everyone in their path. When the Red Army liberated the city on 3 July 1944, virtually no building was left standing. Every element of the social and transport infrastructure had been eradicated. The pre-war population of 300,000 had been decimated. Only 50,000 shell-shocked and battle-weary residents remained, living hand-to-mouth in the bombed-out ruins.



The initial plan to abandon the city and move the capital east to Mahiliou was soon dismissed and instead, in 1945 a major programme of rebuilding and renovation on an unprecedented scale began.

The result is today's Minsk, the best example of post-war Soviet Union urban planning on a grand scale and one of the most impressive cities in all of the republics of the former USSR.

Many first-time visitors from the West realise soon after arrival that it's unlike any capital city they have ever visited before. And it's less than three hours away from London by air.

# Getting to Know Minsk

Information about what to do and see is now increasingly easy to find, particularly online. But a new visitor's search for the heart of a place is best begun with a process of orientation. And by far the best way to do this is to **walk the streets**. Because only by *physically* connecting with one's surroundings is it possible to feel the buzz and the vibe; the sights, the smells, the sounds, the people, the weather and the seasons. An added advantage is that no money changes hands in the process. It's all free!

My personal recommendation for a **walking tour** follows more or less a straight line bisecting the city in a north-easterly direction. It begins in **Privakhsalnaya Square** in front of the impressive railway station and follows **Nyezalyezhnastsi Avenue** all the way to **Victory Square**, taking in **Independence** and **Oktyabrskaya Squares** along the way.

Each square has its own distinct characteristics, but my personal favourite is **Independence Square**. The sense of space and air here is breathtaking. Many pre-war Stalinist buildings survive, and the old master **Lenin** remains master of all he surveys from his plinth in front of the **House of Government**, a building of glorious yet simplistic symmetry.



The iconic and very red **Catholic Church of St Simeon and St Helena** can also be found here. Look also for the **Central Post Office**, with its imposing clock.

**Nyezalyezhnastsi Avenue** is the city's main thoroughfare and the axis around which the great works of reconstruction were designed after the war. Walk north-east from the station along one side of the Avenue to Independence Square, then re-trace your steps back to the station along the other side. Avoiding street furniture and fellow pedestrians, and without stepping

into the traffic (!) be sure to gaze up and around the whole time.

There is so much for you to see. Look particularly for the **KGB Building** and the **GUM store**. For the best souvenirs in town, shop at **Central Bookstore (Tsentralnaya Knigariya)** at 19 Nyezalyezhnastsi Avenue, where you can find a wonderful selection of glossy pictorial guides, maps, postcards, posters and calendars, all at very reasonable prices.

If the weather is dry, indulge in one of my very favourite pastimes in Minsk – promenading and people-watching. Try **Gorky Park, Alexandrovsky Public Garden, Yanka Kupala Park, Central Botanical Gardens, Chelyuskintsev Culture and Leisure Park** and my own personal choice, **Pobyedy Park**, where you will also find the impressive and newly relocated **State Museum of the Great Patriotic War**.

## Food, Drink and Sustenance

If you're out walking for hours on end, you're going to need sustenance and regular rest to recharge your batteries. These are my recommendations.

For breakfast or just coffee and cake, try **Maya Angliskaya Babushka** at 36 Karla Marksa Street. 'My English Granny' will of course appeal to many UK visitors! For lunch and while promenading in Gorky Park, visit **Family Club** restaurant, where the pizza is particularly good.

For dinner, **Kuchmistr** at 40 Karla Marksa Street is a good option for traditional Belarusian food. And for beer and a good night out, many of my Minsk friends speak very highly of **Gambrinus**, centrally located at 2 Svobody Square. The food is also good here.

For a slightly off the wall halt amongst the bustle, a visit to the attractive historic **Troitskoye (Trinity) suburb** down by

the Svislach River might include a rest-stop at the **Barzha floating restaurant**. It tends to be overlooked and is never busy, but the food and service here are consistently good.

These recommendations are all personal ones based on my own experiences. You may perhaps discover better options for yourselves. Right there is the beauty of travel. Go to Minsk with an open mind. You may be surprised by what you find.

*Nigel Roberts*

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## **Space and Identity in Modern Belarus: Assessing the “Minsk Phenomenon”**

“Minsk Phenomenon” was the title of a 2013 Russian-language translation of University of Giessen historian Thomas Boehn’s book, which addressed the dominance of the city of Minsk in the development of contemporary Belarus.

In many ways the Belarusian capital is a symbol of modern identity in a country that is often labelled “Soviet,” but is perhaps more accurately described as “postwar Soviet” because it bears little resemblance to Minsk of the interwar years.

Arguably, the physical appearance of Minsk and its culture not only have maintained some Soviet traditions, but also they manifest and symbolise the post-Soviet identity of the state, which has been structured with minimal changes at a time when

the capital has asserted its massive influence over the rest of Belarus. This development has been heightened under Aliaksandr Lukashenka who associates himself with past traditions that continue to glorify Soviet achievements.

### **Building a Socialist Utopia**

The prominence of Minsk for Belarus is unique to post-Soviet states, particularly vis-à-vis its neighbours, where there are cities that often compete with the capital: St. Petersburg against Moscow, for example; or Lviv and Donetsk against Kyiv. Minsk's domination is also consolidated by a stark fact: while the population of Belarus is declining, that of the city of Minsk is increasing. Soon it will comprise a quarter of the population.

✘ Boehn focuses on the obliteration during the Second World War of both the buildings and the population of Minsk. Existing traditions, much of which centred on the former Jewish population, were simply liquidated.

Thus for the Soviet authorities there was an opportunity to construct a model Soviet city, with typical Stalinist era spacious streets, vast central squares, and formidable looking high storey structures combining neo-classicalism with gigantism.

Scholars Larissa Titarenko and Anna Shirokanova note that in 1991, when Belarus became independent, it was necessary to "build a nation out of the city's socialist space." As such the country emerged as a post-Soviet republic on the Soviet model, but with no space for the indigenous nation. This was a consequence of related factors.

First, there was the city's appearance in its postwar version. Old buildings were discarded rather than being resurrected. The area of Castle Hill was removed, as well as the site of the historical river Niamiha, which is now underground. The Jewish quarter of the same name has disappeared and been

replaced by the now familiar Sports Palace.

Monuments appeared all over the city, mostly dedicated to the war or else to Soviet-era figures, such as the former nominal head of the Soviet government Mikhail Kalinin (who was actually from Tver, Russia). And of course the dour Lenin appeared in Independence Square, while its most impressive building is the ornate KGB headquarters on Independence Avenue and the most notable the modern National Library in the eastern reaches of the city, which looks like a giant space capsule but still contains a certain socialist realist ambience.

### **Urbanisation means Sovietization**

Second, together with rebuilding came urbanisation, and today Belarus is the most urbanised of the former Soviet states, with over 75% of its 9.3 million people living in cities and towns, 1.9 million of them in Minsk. Migration from the villages and the transfer of the rural population to the city has helped attain this status.

✘ Yet rather than bringing Belarusian traditions, culture, and language to the capital, the opposite occurred. The rural migrants became Sovietized and lived in an almost exclusively Russian-speaking environment. The policy ensured that Stalin's attacks on Belarusian culture and the national elite during the purges continued in the later Soviet era.

Boehn notes, however, that the Soviet authorities were unable to control the flow of migrants into Minsk so that in the 1950s and 1960s it became fluid—he uses the term “quicksand” society, a term coined by the noted scholar Moshe Lewin. In a discussion on the topic, Siarhei Khareusky, comments that the inflow was limited for some time because until 1960, Belarusian peasants were not permitted to hold passports, so were confined to their collective farms. Thus modern urbanisation started in the 1960s.

## **Modern Belarus Builds on the Old**

The current post-1994 regime followed another Soviet tradition, namely maintaining state control over factories in what was termed the “Belarusian economic model,” which hoped to build on the success of republican industry in the later Soviet era without privatisation or shock therapy.

✘ In fact most of the successful Belarusian companies in the modern era derive from the Soviet period: the Naftan oil refinery in Navapolatsk, which started in 1958; the Mazyr oil refinery (1975); Belaruskali (Belarus Potash), which is based on the Salihorsk potassium enterprise founded in 1963, and reorganised together with two other factories in 1970; and the Belshina tire plant, built between 1963 and 1972.

The combination of living space with industry, and the presence in Minsk of first the leadership of the republican Communist Party organisation and today Lukashenka’s presidential administration has transferred the postwar development neatly to the present. Its progress is linked tightly to a cordial relationship with Russia and with the prosperity of the larger neighbor. Today it has begun to unravel largely because of problems related to the Russian economy and Belarus’ failure to modify its industrial and economic paths.

### **Minsk Phenomenon: Stability without Stagnation**

The “Minsk phenomenon” brought stability and allowed for a form of nation building around the rebuilt capital, which became noted for its spotless central streets as it expanded into neighbouring suburbs and settlements.

It is a magnet for Belarusian youth, which, escaping the ghost villages, has tried to create its separate creative space within a city that still exudes authoritarianism and seems to stifle individual space because of its deep and innate connections to the Communist past. None of this is to suggest

any form of stagnancy. Minsk is vibrant and thriving, but largely in spite of its late Stalinist façade rather than because of it.

*David Marples, special to Belarus Digest*

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## **Construction Boom in Minsk: Happy Businessmen and Unhappy Public**

On 13 March, Belarus hosted a high level guest – Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić. Nikolić and Serbian businessman Dragomir Karić symbolically launched a new construction project near national library. Today Serbian company Astra Investment is one of the largest investors in Belarus development sector.

Development remains one of the few industries foreigners eagerly invest in Belarus because of high and quick profit. Meanwhile, Belarus authorities struggle with other problems of urban development. They fail to properly regenerate the Old Town of Minsk and their policy of compaction of districts in already densely populated city causes protests of locals.

### **Thriving Capital**

Although Belarus experiences economic stagnation and resists market reforms, the intensity of development and construction

makes an impression of a thriving area. Indeed, development presents one of the few sectors that foreign companies readily invest in Belarus.

In this most cases foreign does not mean western, as investors come from Arab countries, Russia, Iran, Turkey and China. Serbian Astra Investment serves perhaps the biggest investor at the moment. Its projects, Majak Minska (Lighthouse of Minsk) includes a shopping and entertainment complex and several housing projects.

Construction especially flourished after 2009, when the International Ice Hockey Federation chose Minsk the venue for the 2014 championship. The event seems especially important for regime's image and international legitimation, therefore authorities do their best to prepare the capital for the upcoming championship. The amount of work is substantial – Minsk definitely lacks tourist infrastructure.

However, as it usually happens in Belarus, people do not know how the deals are made. This behind-the-scene politics causes discontent of the public. This discontent is fairly justified – very often good pieces of Belarusian land go to president's friends without asking people's opinion.

For example, in 2012 an official document with a mark "confidential" appeared in Belarusian Internet. According to it, Aliaksandr Lukashenka ordered to grant Qatar state (in fact its ruling family), lands near Minsk for building residence and open-air hunting cages. Expensive lands near the capital should be granted for free for 99 years. Such generous presents of course are a part of bigger deals that the authoritarian leader makes with his Arab counterparts.

### **The Tragedy of Minsk Old Town**



Regeneration of old building remains a disaster in Belarus.

Denationalised Belarusian bureaucracy does not realise the value of architectural heritage and do not want to stick to legislation on urban development during the restoration of old buildings.

Most famous cases from recent decade include reconstruction of Old Town in Hrodna, a town with old European architecture in Western Belarus.

Authorities conducted reconstruction with numerous violations. They did not conduct archaeological excavations and damaged a layer of remnants of the mediaeval city; changed traditional planning of Old Town; destroyed some buildings and built them from modern materials instead of restoration. As a result, the biggest Old Town in Belarus turned into typical town of Lukashenka period.

Minsk is in a similar situation now. Poor reconstruction of Old Town of Minsk started in USSR already. Today, in independent Belarus the authorities continue to destroy the historical face of the city for reasons of quickness and minimization of cost. The 2014 ice hockey world championship makes the authorities hurry in their preparations.

Among the biggest problem of renovation experts name the destruction of former planning of the streets and buildings. While a single wrongly erected building can be destroyed and restored, the rebuilding of the whole planning seems hardly possible and will be extremely costly in future. Another task during regeneration is to preserve the past cultural landscape, but Belarusian authorities prefer to turn Minsk Old Town into a business-centre.

According to historian Zachar Šybeka, one of the best experts on Minsk history, normally the Old Town becomes conservation zone, where new construction is prohibited. In Belarus, he says, such norms do not exist in law. As a result, modern buildings appear in the centre. They overshadow the historical

architecture and make the whole view ridiculous.

Sadly, authorities even abuse religious monuments like church complexes. Instead of giving them back to church, officials use buildings for state purposes. In one case, they even presented a plan to turn a former monastery building into hotel with casinos.

## **Compaction of Housing**



Rapid growth of construction results in the lack of free space in the city. Notably, Lukashenka prohibited the spread of the city and building on agricultural lands. Authorities offered an alternative solution – to boost “satellite towns” that lay near Minsk. Citizens that need housing can build it in those towns now.

However, new elite housing and business and shopping centres mushroom in the city, and somehow authorities manage to find land for them. Clearly, those projects are highly profitable and Minsk authorities do not miss a chance to earn some more cash and report to the top about their success.

The government promotes policy of compaction of some communities to create new places for profitable projects. This policy sparked social tension and protests of city dwellers. Politically indifferent Belarusian may become very active and aggressive when the deal concerns their property. Take for example the case of Uručča conflict.

In spring 2012 dwellers of Uručča district protested against building of several houses, some of them were assigned for riot police families. This fact stirred up the discontent with authorities because Belarusians perceive police as a part of the regime. Still, dwellers had no chance to win in this case.

Similarly, owners of the housing in the central district resist the plans of authorities to evict them or rebuild the part of houses and implement other projects. Such sporadic protests appear here and there and authorities have to compromise. They organise civil discussions, where experts, architects, officials and citizens discuss the construction plans.

So far, the discussions appeared not quite fruitful, as sides do not want to listen to each other and retain their positions. Nevertheless, authorities accept that such protests indeed prevented some projects or changed them. "Prevention of social tension", the term that authorities use, shows that even in today's Belarus people can effectively defend their interests if they organise.