

Automobiles, Trains and Buses – Getting Around Belarus

For the first-time visitor from the West, a scheduled flight to Minsk provides the most direct means of access to Belarus. Some venture no further than the capital itself, yet getting out of Minsk and beyond the façade of tourism offers the traveller a glimpse of the way of life of ordinary Belarusians.

Whether sharing food and vodka with strangers on a five-hour train journey from Minsk to second city Homiel, or helping the driver collect fares on a local bus ride from village to village, leaving the capital behind can make a genuine traveller out of a tourist.

Travelling By Air

Situated 25 miles east of the city on an extension of the M2 motorway, **Minsk National Airport** has been greatly refurbished of late. A glorious monument to brutalist Soviet architecture, all is now bright and shiny.

A number of options provide access into the city. A forty-minute taxi ride costs around \$50. Buses run by carrier Minsktrans (www.minsktrans.by) depart from outside the terminal building to the city's central train and bus stations, with limited stops along the way. The journey takes around one hour with a fare of \$2. A train service also now operates, but the journey still takes around an hour, with a necessary short bus ride from the terminal to the airport railway station. Expect to pay a fare of \$1.5.



Within the city itself, travel by metro, bus, tram and trolleybus is extremely cheap, reliable and safe. Each journey costs around \$0.25. Tickets can be purchased onboard and from kiosks, shops and post offices all over town. Contactless smart cards are now available for multiple journeys. Full information on Minsk transportation can be found on the Minsktrans website.

There are currently no domestic flights within Belarus.

Behind the Wheel

Travel by road offers a generally stress-free experience and motoring represents no more risky an enterprise than elsewhere in Europe. The M1 motorway from Brest to Minsk forms a section of the pan-European E30 highway from Ireland all the way to Russia, so expect very heavy freight along this route, with the occasional hazard of extravagant (indeed, reckless) overtaking manoeuvres.

One particularly charming route can be found on the back roads north from Brest to Hrodno along the Western border of the country. A journey of 150 miles through ancient villages, the route skirts the eastern edge of the magnificent **Byelovyezhszkaya Pushcha National Park**.

Hand-in-hand with a major road improvement programme that is still work in progress comes the advent of a state-of-the-art electronic system for the collection of tolls ('BelToll'). Full information is available on the system's helpful website (www.beltoll.by). Local domestic vehicles less than 3.5 tonnes are exempt from payment.

Car hire presents no difficulty. Expect to pay anything from \$300 to \$600 for a week's hire, dependent upon the size of vehicle. A number of major international operators have desks at Minsk International Airport, with more at several of the city's hotels (particularly the new ones). All offer online booking facilities in advance. When collecting your vehicle, be sure to produce not only your national driving licence but also an international driving permit.

Once on the road, you will need to pay before filling up at the gas station. Fuel costs are around half of the price payable in the UK.

Officers of the local militia rigidly monitor speed enforcement. They are particularly enthusiastic out in the country. Wherever you are, stick to the limits. If not, a spot fine and rigorous scrutiny of your documents awaits.

Riding the Rails

As in the days of the Soviet Union, trains in Belarus still leave on time but are often slow and rickety, particularly (and perhaps surprisingly) on the major lines between cities. For example, the journey from Minsk to **Homiel** can take over five hours (eight on the overnight sleeper). The journey to **Brest** takes between three and a half and five hours. The fares are cheap, starting at \$6 for a single ticket on the Minsk-Homiel route, and \$5 on the route to Brest. This represents the art of slow travel at its very best, with opportunities to gaze out of the window for hours on end as you slowly rattle across the landscape.



A night journey on the inter-city sleeper affords an excellent way to meet people. You will likely be sharing a four-berth compartment with people you don't know, but you can also expect to share stimulating conversation and company, as well as your fellow travellers' food and vodka. Ensure you have something to offer in return. Staff will offer bed linen for hire at very cheap cost.

The route between Minsk and **Vilnius** now offers an all-together more modern service. At between two and a half and three hours, journey times have been almost halved and the new rolling stock boasts much enhanced comfort. The cost of a single ticket is \$16-20. With a number of budget airlines offering fares to Vilnius from various locations in the UK that can be as little as 35-40% of the cost of a flight from London Gatwick to Minsk with state airline Belavia, this provides an attractive alternative for entry into Belarus.

For information on timetables and schedules operated by the Belarusian state railway service, go to www.rasp.rw.by. To buy advance tickets online, visit www.poezd.rw.by.

Travelling by Bus

Inter-city and suburban bus routes operated by state enterprise Minsktrans depart from a number of bus stations in Minsk. By way of example, the journey to **Brest** takes around

five hours and a single ticket costs \$9. **Homiel** is also five hours away and a single ticket costs \$8. The journey across the border to Vilnius (and access to budget flights) takes three to four hours and a single ticket costs around \$14.

If you are sitting at the front of minibus, expect to be kept very busy collecting fares and dispensing change for the driver

Information on national services and the 23 international routes departing from Minsk's Central Bus Station can be found at www.minsktrans.by. Tickets can be purchased in advance on www.ticketbus.by, though these pages are in Russian only.

Suburban and rural bus services are operated by state-owned Minsktrans and other local providers, side-by-side with services by private minibuses (marshrutka). Tickets can be purchased at the bus station of departure or onboard in the case of marshrutka. A minibus will often stop wherever it is flagged down on suburban roads and between villages. If you are sitting at the front, expect to be kept very busy collecting fares and dispensing change for the driver, as wads of notes are passed over the heads of passengers.

Bus travel often feels crowded, hot and claustrophobic, particularly by marshrutka, and for this reason my own preference is to travel by train. That said, a ride on a packed minibus will get you closer to feeling like a local than any other mode of public transport. Official statistics show that around the country, 4.3 million passengers travel by bus each day along 4,290 routes. Do not be surprised if it feels that all 4.3 million are riding the same bus as you ...

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