

Tourism in Belarus: Things to Do

More than 70 thousand tourists are heading to Belarus ahead of the [2014 IIHF World Ice Hockey Championship](#). Many plan to take advantage of [the temporary visa-free regime](#) this May.

Though numerous wars and rebellions have resulted in the destruction of many architectural landmarks, Belarus has plenty of tourist attractions undiscovered by mainstream tourists from the West.

Belarus Digest prepared an interesting list of places that you need to see in order to say that you truly experienced Belarus. One can reach these places by bus or car from Minsk – distances from Minsk appear in brackets.

Most Popular Destinations

Once in Belarus take the opportunity to visit Mir and Niasvizh. Both are included in the UNESCO World Heritage list and probably have the best tourist facilities in the country. You will find it easier to find detailed information in English and plenty of souvenirs there.

Mir (100 km) is a small town with cafes and an old Catholic church adjacent to the famous castle complex built by the Duke Yuri Ilyinich in the 16th century. Its architecture represents a harmonious mixture of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque styles that embodies the volatile history of the region, one located at the crossroads of different cultures. If you have ever wanted to spend a night in a castle, you can take advantage of their on-site accommodations.



A system of underground tunnels supposedly connects Mir with the beautiful Niasvizh castle located just 60 km from Mir. The legend goes that the noble Radziwill family hid th

eir treasures in these tunnels.

This prosperous family played a major role in the history of **Niasvizh** and the politics of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania which kept its state archives in the castle. Many prominent Radziwills are buried in the family vault located in the 16th-century Corpus Christi Church just opposite the castle complex's main entrance. This unique domed basilica with a Baroque facade was the first of its kind in the world and the first Baroque building in Eastern Europe.

Tourist Sites near Minsk

Those who prefer to stay closer to Minsk may find it interesting to visit some small cities and museums in its neighbourhood.

One of them is **Zaslauye** (24 km) that can easily be reached by the same modern city trains that operate between the Minsk-Arena and the Chy Zhouka-Arena. According to the Chronicles, Vladimir the Great from Kyiv founded the town for his wife Ragneda and their son Izyaslau in 985 AD.

Though the current state of Zaslauye does not fully represent its rich history, it is nevertheless a worthwhile tourist attraction. Beautiful landscapes surround the 16th-century Saviour Transfiguration Church which was formerly Calvinist. It reflects [the protestant segment](#) of a multi-religious Belarusian society.

Those interested in the history of WWII may also be willing to visit the **Stalin line** (30 km). Though many dispute its

historical value and original location, the memorial is nevertheless interesting for its large collection of Soviet military equipment (tanks, artillery, etc), which visitors can explore.

Two other landmarks are the ethnological museums in **Strochycy** (5 km) and **Dudutki** (50 km). They both offer an introduction to the old life of rural Belarus, but they each have a different focus.



Strochycy exhibits the folk architecture of 6 distinctive Belarusian ethnographical regions over a large area. A visitor can see authentic houses and windmills that museum organisers have brought together into one location outdoors from different parts of the country.

In contrast, Dudutki prioritises an exhibition of rural cuisine, traditional crafts and culture. One can taste homemade butter, bread, cheese and even samogon – a traditional variety of alcohol which is usually made illegally in villages and towns throughout Belarus.

Cultural Landmarks for More Adventurous

Some farther Belarusian landmarks require having a car or taking a regional train to visit them which can be a challenge in a country where it is hard to find good English speakers outside Minsk. However, such a trip would allow to see the cultural heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – [a medieval Belarusian-Lithuanian state](#).

Hrodna (290 km) is a good place to start. The city experienced a significant expansion in terms of its size and role during the times of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Every third general Sejm of the Commonwealth (parliament convention) took

place in the city, so it held the unofficial status of a third capital after Warsaw and Vilnius. Hrodna currently has the most preserved historical centre among all Belarusian cities with landmarks of different architectural epochs.

These include the magnificent Baroque St. Francis Xavier Cathedral and the 12th-century Kalozha church which is the only monument of Black Ruthenian architecture that has survived.



The Old Castle near Kalozha, which was one of the main residencies of Lithuanian and Polish rulers such as Vitaut the Great and Casimir IV Jagiellon, is also found here. A 300-year-old arch bridge connects it with the New Castle. The building hosted the last Sejm of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth before Russia and Prussia partitioned the country in 1793.

Synkovichi and **Muravanka** (250 km from Minsk) represent an original variety of Orthodox fortified churches located in the same region. The adjacent Brest region contains several prominent palace ruins currently under reconstruction.

The Sapieha noble family chose the **Ruzhany Palace** (230 km from Minsk) as their main seat. At one time it kept the arsenal and state treasury of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.



The neo-Gothic **Kosava castle** (220 km) overlooks Merechevschina – birthplace of the American, Polish and Belarusian hero Tadeusz Kościuszko. He enjoyed a close friendship with Thomas Jefferson and advanced the ideals of freedom and human rights in the American Revolutionary War.

Ecotourism and WWII Memorials

Belarus officially aims to develop ecotourism and has many precious natural assets, such as an extensive system of lakes in the north-west of the country that includes Narach and Braslav lakes.

If you have plenty of time, a trip to another UNESCO World Heritage site, the **Belavezhskaya Pushcha** (360 km) might be worth a visit. Shared by Belarus and Poland, this national park is home to a rare species of European bison and 450-year-old oaks. In addition, it contains the hunting estate **Viskuli** where Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian leaders signed Belavezha accords that declared the Soviet Union effectively dissolved in 1991.

Just outside the Belavezhskaya Pushcha is the well-preserved **Tower of Kamyanyets** erected in the 13th century which attracts many tourists and offers beautiful views from the top.

You can continue your trip through this region by visiting the famous **Brest Fortress** located not far from the Pushcha where Soviet soldiers fought against the Nazi invasion for more than a month in 1941.



Not many people are aware of its presence, but there is also an interesting archaeological museum just near the fortress

where one can see the excavations of the 11-13th-century historic town of Bierascie.

Every fourth Belarusian died during the course of WWII and the country suffered immense damage as a result, so [many WWII monuments can be found throughout Belarus](#). One of the most important sites to see, and definitely worth a visit, is the **Khatyn memorial**, a site that commemorates the tragedy of an entire village burned alive with all of its citizens.

Tourism for Many Persuasions

Belarus is yet to be discovered by tourists from Europe and North America. Once you reached Minsk, do not limit yourself only to ice hockey arenas and Minsk's museums, restaurants and night clubs. Belarus is a very safe country to travel.

Friendliness of people and very low prices will compensate possible problems with communicating in English outside Minsk and at times rudimentary customer service at tourist destinations. Being the only foreigner around will make it an interesting experience.

You can enrich your experience, engage [Belarusian life](#) and develop a more profound understanding of the national culture if you go to smaller places and visit the country's historical landmarks.

They demonstrate how different Belarus was before the Soviet period and how today the country balances its Soviet heritage and deep European roots.

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