

Belarus**June 2009****Thomas H. Getz**

Belarus, formerly known as "White Russia," or Byelorussia, is located between Poland and Russia in Eastern Europe. (The Ukraine is to the south and Latvia and Lithuania to the north.) It is easily accessible by train or international bus from Vilnius, Lithuania or by longer overland routes from Warsaw, St. Petersburg or Moscow. After a rather expensive visa process that also required an "Invitation Letter" and prepaid hotel, my wife and I left Vilnius by train at 6:30 am for a four-hour uneventful travel to Minsk, the Belarus capital (population, 1.8 million, 3 million with suburbs). At the border, reached in about 45 minutes, immigration officials will have your visa photo and passport data on their hand-held computer. There was no luggage check, but the immigration process was lengthy and thorough. Even if you plan a short transit visit make sure your visa is in order.

The countryside looks much like the poorest areas of rural Baltic states, with old commune farm buildings, rusting industrial buildings, Russian tractors and drab farm houses. But nearing Minsk, we saw the first of many thousands of 10- to 15-story apartment or condo buildings, some quite modern and colorful, at least on the exterior. The Minsk rail station is centrally located with eating facilities, currency exchange (dollars, Euros, Russian Rubles preferred), but no tourist office. All signs are in Russian, and English speakers are rare. It is now after 11 am, and we decided to eat at a cafeteria/buffet, so we could just point to the food. Although I speak a few phrases in Russian and can read the Cyrillic alphabet, I mistakenly assumed most people would be speaking the Belarus dialect. Everyone you will come in contact here speaks Russian. After lunch we took a reasonably priced taxi ride to the Planeta Hotel, pre-paid for three nights.

The Planeta is a 310-room, 3-star 25-year-old Soviet style hotel with full facilities, including a Casino and an excellent restaurant. But looking around from the Planeta we seemed to be surrounded by vast parks. We are about two-miles from anything of tourist interest. The Yublienaya Hotel, closer in, would be more convenient. (The five-star Europe Hotel has the best location in Minsk.) The room was sparse and comfortable, and reasonable at \$95 including a full breakfast. We bought a Minsk map at the hotel kiosk, walked a half mile to "Belintourist," the successor of Intourist (the Soviet tourist office), and then continued walking another mile or two to see Orthodox churches, a very small rebuilt "old town," department stores, pizza and steak restaurants and even a McDonalds. Food prices are less than half most anywhere else in Europe, and Visa credit cards are widely accepted. There are few ATM machines but many currency exchanges. By 4:30, returning to the Planeta, we were hungry again and enjoyed a gourmet chicken dish with plums, ham, cheese, tomatoes; both rice and fries, plus vegetables, all for less than \$6.00. Belarus beer is also outstanding and reasonably priced. For dessert we had "balsam" ice cream with bananas and peanuts.

After a breakfast of fried eggs, pastries, crepes, yoghurt, cold cuts, cheeses, coffee, etc, we walked to Belintourist and signed up for a three-hour city tour and an all day Mir-Nesvizh tour, described below. Both tours are expensive (€180 for the all-day tour, even after bargaining--- a must), but we would have our own car, driver and English-speaking guide. Don't expect to meet other tourists and share costs. We walked along the banks of the Svisloch River to the central business area. Several Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches are open, including Cathedral of the Holy Spirit (1642), Archicathedral of the Saint Virgin Maria (17-18th centuries), and the Roman Catholic Church of St. Simon and Helen (1910). All churches and

historical buildings in Minsk, plus most everything else, were totally destroyed during WWII, but reconstruction is well done. Don't expect to see lavish onion-domed churches in Minsk, as are in St. Petersburg or Moscow, but there are good examples in smaller towns, such as St. Resurrection in the town of Borisov and St. Peter and Paul's Cathedral in Gomel. The church services are well attended, even overflow crowds, but the typical Belarusian is not religious. Before WWII, half the population of Minsk was Jewish.

The "Old Town" is a disappointment if you have seen those in Stockholm and the Baltic States, but the restoration is fine. Missing are the souvenir kiosks and stores. There are none in Minsk, except in department stores, a few items for sale at newspaper/tobacco and hotel kiosks. Its worth a walk along Pobeditelei Avenue to look at the architecture, movie plazas, and the fashionably dressed teens in front of the McDonalds. One could stop for a pizza and beer at the O'Sole Mio (menu in English), and browse in "designer" shops. The horizon everywhere in or around Minsk is dominated by high-rise apartments and condos. Driving in and out of Minsk one saw only a few dozen single family houses.

The afternoon three-hour city tour was more interesting for the guide's frank discussion of Belarus society's failings, than for the tour sites. Our guide talked about the failure of the Soviet government to warn or talk about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster (still causing cancer), very low wages and rapid inflation (average income about \$200/month), low life expectancy (men 74), a mafia subculture aimed at business competition, and details of the guide's personal life. The city tour includes monuments to the wars, plazas, parks, sports complexes, an unusual national library, churches, parks, university, medical facilities, circus, Troitskoe suburb, opera, theatre, ballet and other cultural facilities. We drove past factories and the brewery. Belarusians are proud of their export products: tractors, watches, washing machines and refrigerators.

Our all-day tour featured palaces of the Radziwills family, most under restoration, such as the Nesvizh Castle, (16th-18th century); Nesvizh Park with statuary, the Roman Catholic Church of the Apostolic God's Body (Farny) 1584-83; the Mir Palace and Castle, under restoration (prematurely on the UNESCO World Cultural registry); Mir Market Square, St. Trinity's Church and Burial Vaults of the Dukes Sviatopolkas of Mir. In Mir the remnants of Jewish culture were seen in an abandoned synagogue and rabbinical school (Yeshivah). Mir once had a diverse population of Jews, Tartars, Roma, Poles, Moslems, and Russians. We walked extensively, and gained some insight of the personal life of Belarusians from our open guide. Belarus is a government-run socialist dictatorship that has formed joint ventures with foreign firms (There are five McDonalds in Minsk), and allows token importation of foreign goods for the few that can afford such. Belarus is politically aligned with Russia.

We found it more convenient to travel by international coach back to Vilnius, Lithuania. There are more departures than by train. The fare and travel time are similar, but the bus stops in a few small towns. Belarus highways are good to excellent. Just before the border, a lady on the bus offered two or three packs of cigarettes to fellow passengers. The driver obliged as did a few passengers, but there was no reason for us to cooperate in her petty smuggling scheme. A summary of Belarus must include a quote of a clerk at the Belarus Embassy in DC: "Why do you want to visit Belarus? There is not much to see." But we did find it interesting, though a good deal less a "must" than say the Baltic states. It's one last chance to experience some of the old Soviet Union, and Belarus has enough modern architecture and history to keep one busy for about three days... *at the most.*