

# Belarus Беларусь

Those who are aware of Belarus at all have probably heard nothing but negative reports: The last dictatorship in Europe! An 'outpost of tyranny!' A Soviet Union time capsule! Radiation and political oppression! Rusty tractors and tacky 1970s fashion!

True, the current government is backward and repressive in almost all ways, yet tourists will be undisturbed by its machinations. True, fashion police are the only kind of law enforcers *not* found on the streets of Belarus, but who's forcing you to go clothes shopping there? While Belarus' reputation as a living museum of the USSR should be tempered by the visible bursts of capitalism in Minsk, visitors can indeed get a better taste of what life resembled in the 'good old days' here than in Russia. The rule of law is more strongly felt here, and the clean city streets are lined with more Soviet iconography and statues than you can shake a sickle at. The capital, Minsk, is a shining testament to neoclassical Stalinist architecture but straining to become Westernised; its residents are urbane and savvy even as their government does its best to block all Western influence. It's communism with a cappuccino.

Friendly Belarus is a country with few traditional attractions to offer tourists. The best way to enjoy Belarus is to sample city life but spend as much time as possible in the countryside or in small towns, getting to know the locals. Some parts of the country retain a haunting beauty, especially when fields of birch groves are interspersed with wooden villages that seem frozen in 19th-century isolation. Urbanisation is a relatively new phenomenon for the country and the heart of the nation still resides in the least populated areas.

That said, Minsk offers thoroughly modern city entertainment but without the consumerist glut of Western Europe. Here fun is stripped down to the essentials: letting go, partying in kicking clubs, and getting to know interesting, attractive people – all in the KGB's shadow. This is Belarus – have fun!

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring the last truly Soviet capital, quirky and vibrant **Minsk** (p669)
- Discovering local art in Marc Chagall's cosy home city of **Vitsebsk** (p691)
- Plunge back into the 19th century (and sample some moonshine!) in the reconstructed village of **Dudutki** (p680)
- Chase after 1000-year-old healing stone crosses, ancient legends and rare wildlife in and around **Turau** (p693)
- Let your jaw drop in front of the monumental **Brest Fortress** (p684) war memorial



## HISTORY Arrival of the Slavs

Evidence of human presence in Belarus goes back to the early Stone Age. Eastern Slavs from the Krivichi, Dregovichi and Radimichi tribes arrived here in the 6th to 8th centuries AD. The principalities of Polatsk (first mentioned in 862), Turau (980), Pinsk and Minsk were formed, all falling under the suzerainty of Prince Vladimir's Kyivan Rus by the late 10th century. The economy was based on slash-and-burn agriculture, honey farming and river trade, particularly on the Dnjapro (Dnepr in Russian).

## Lithuanian & Polish Control

When Kyivan Rus was smashed by the Mongol Tatars in 1240, many Belarusian towns, left relatively unscathed by the invasions, became Tatar vassals. In the 14th century, the territory of modern-day Belarus became part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It was to be 400 years before Belarus came under Russian control, a period in which Belarusians became linguistically and culturally differentiated from the Russians to their east and the Ukrainians to their south.

After Lithuania became Roman Catholic following the uniting of its crown with Poland's in 1386, the Belarusian peasantry remained Orthodox but were reduced to serf status.

Lithuania nonetheless permitted its subjects a fair degree of autonomy, even using Belarusian as its state language during the early 15th century – an important fact for patriotic Belarusians today as proof of their historical legitimacy. All official correspondence, literature, doctrines and statutes at the time were written in Belarusian.

In 1596 the Polish authorities arranged the Union of Brest, which set up the Uniate Church (also known as Ukrainian Catholic or Greek Catholic), bringing much of the Orthodox Church in Belarus under the authority of the Vatican. The Uniate Church insisted on the pope's supremacy and Catholic doctrine, but permitted Orthodox forms of ritual.

Over the next two centuries of Polish rule, Poles and Jews controlled trade and most Belarusians remained peasants. Only after the three Partitions of Poland (1772, 1793 and 1795–96) was Belarus absorbed into Russia.

## WHY WHITE?

Belarus means 'White Russia'. What makes Belarusians 'whiter' than run-of-the-mill Russians? One version has it that the name refers to the people's fair complexions. Others point to the whiteness of traditional folk costumes. The most likely explanation, however, is that the term *bely* ('white', but also 'pure, clean') was applied to the peoples living on the only major territory of Kyivan Rus to be left relatively unscathed by the Mongol ravages.

## Tsarist Rule

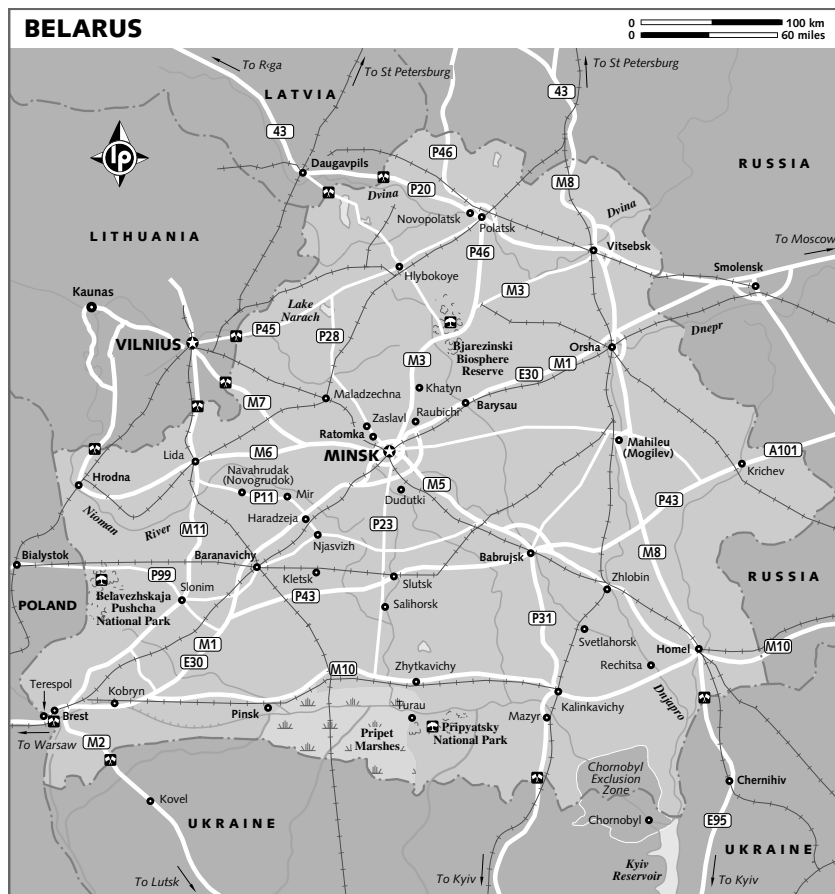
Under Russian rule a policy of Russification was pursued, and in 1839 the Uniate Church was abolished, with most Belarusians returning to Orthodoxy. The Russian rulers and the Orthodox Church regarded Belarus as 'western Russia' and tried to obliterate any sense of a Belarusian nationality. Publishing in the Belarusian language was banned.

The economy slowly developed in the 19th century with the emergence of small industries such as timber-milling, glass-making and boat-building. However industrial progress lagged behind that of Russia, and poverty in the countryside remained at such a high level that 1.5 million people – largely the wealthy or educated – emigrated in the 50 years before 1917, mostly to Siberia or the USA.

During the 19th century, Belarus was part of the Pale of Settlement, the area where Jews in the Russian Empire were required to settle. The percentage of Jews in many Belarusian cities and towns before WWII was between 35% and 75%. The vast majority of Belarusians remained on the land, poor and illiterate. Due to their cultural stagnation, their absence from positions of influence and their historical domination by Poles and Russians, any sense among Belarusian speakers that they were a distinct nationality was very slow to emerge. Nonetheless, Belarusian intellectuals were part of a wave of nationalism across Europe and it was in the 19th century that the concept of Belarusians as a distinct people first emerged.

## World Wars & Soviet Rule

In March 1918, under German occupation, an independent Belarusian Democratic



Republic was declared, but in January 1919 the Soviets declared the Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) in Smolensk and soon after the Red Army moved in and occupied most of present-day Belarus. The Polish-Soviet war of 1919–20 saw Polish forces occupy Minsk for over a year. The 1921 Treaty of Riga allotted roughly the western half of modern Belarus to Poland. Rough-handed Polish colonisation followed, in turn provoking armed resistance by Belarussians.

The Bolshevik-controlled area, the redeclared BSSR, became a founding member of the USSR in 1922. This small area, centred on Minsk, was enlarged a few years later with the transfer from the USSR's Russian

Republic of the eastern Polatsk, Vitsebsk, Orsha, Mahileu and Homel areas, all with large Belarussian populations.

The Soviet regime of the 1920s encouraged Belarussian literature and culture and supported the formation of many nationalist-tinged organisations, but in the 1930s under Stalin, nationalism and the Belarussian language were discouraged and their proponents ruthlessly persecuted. The 1930s saw industrialisation, agricultural collectivisation, and purges in which hundreds of thousands were executed – many in the Kurapaty forest outside Minsk. These purges effectively obliterated the nationalist elite and put a decisive stop to cultural development among Belarussians. While these

atrocities were unveiled in the late 1980s and the government in the early 1990s made an attempt to honestly confront them, President Alexander Lukashenka has undertaken a thorough cover-up of the issue.

When Nazi Germany began WWII by invading Poland in September 1939, the Red Army took the chance to seize a swath of Poland, now western Belarus. Belarus again found itself on the front line when the Nazis turned around and invaded the USSR in 1941. The resulting occupation was savage and partisan resistance widespread until the Red Army drove the Germans out in 1944. There were big battles around Vitsebsk, Barysau and Minsk, where barely a stone was left standing. At least 25% of Belarus' population (some three million people) died between 1939 and 1945. Many of them died in one of the more than 200 concentration camps; the third-largest Nazi concentration camp was set up at Maly Trostenets, where more than 200,000 Jews and others were executed.

Belarus remained in Soviet hands at the end of the war. In 1945 it became one of the founding members of the United Nations and afterwards had its own seat on the Security Council. Belarus was turned into the industrial powerhouse of western USSR, with major factories (most notably the Minsk Tractor Plant) set up there. As a consequence, it became one of the USSR's most prosperous republics, with relatively high standards of living in the cosmopolitan centres.

### Protest & Independence

The 1986 Chornobyl nuclear disaster left Belarus more affected than any other country (propaganda theorists and scientists alike say that Moscow had clouds seeded to keep radionuclides from falling over Russia proper), with one quarter of the country contaminated. This was one of the few issues that crystallised political opposition among a traditionally placid population of staunch communist supporters.

In 1988 the Belarussian Popular Front was formed to address the issues raised by the Chornobyl disaster, the discoveries at Kurapaty and the declining use of the Belarussian language. The leader of the Popular Front from its inception has been archaeologist Zjanon Paznjak, now residing in the USA after seeking political asylum.

In response to the growth of nationalist feeling, on 27 July 1990 the republic issued a declaration of sovereignty within the USSR. That same year, Belarussian was declared the republic's official language (the Russian language joined it in 1995). The leadership instituted its own financial system and state currency, and set about trying to establish an open, free market system.

After the failed anti-Gorbachev coup in August 1991, the Supreme Soviet (parliament) issued a declaration of full national independence on 25 August. The country's name was changed to the Republic of Belarus. With no history whatsoever as a politically or economically independent entity, Belarus was one of the oddest products of the disintegration of the USSR.

### Postindependence

Stanislau Shushkevich, a physicist supported by the Popular Front who had campaigned to expose official negligence over Chornobyl, was chosen as head of state of a new government which nonetheless remained dominated by the communist old guard. In December 1991 Belarus became a founding member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), with Minsk its headquarters.

With the communists regaining popularity during economically difficult times, Shushkevich came into increasing conflict with them. He was dismissed in January 1994 over trumped-up corruption charges.

In July 1994, in Belarus' first direct presidential election, Alexander Lukashenka, formerly director of a collective chicken farm (a common derogatory nickname for him is *kolkhoznik*, from *kolkhoz*: collective farm), won with a majority. Lukashenka campaigned on promises to reverse inflation, stop privatisation and move closer to Russia.

Lukashenka was the first to call himself autocratic and authoritarian; most of his 10-plus years in power has been about gaining ever-tighter control over all aspects of Belarussian society and shielding it from foreign influence. His first major move came in 1996, with what the West still regards as an illegitimate referendum which stripped the authority of the parliament, increased the length of his term and made the entire government subservient to the president. He's been busy accruing more power ever since.

Lukashenka won a majority in the 2001 elections, despite international criticism and opposition accusations of illegality. The next elections are scheduled for 2006, and seeing as he has the right to run for president for life (another referendum in 2004 handily gave him the right to remain in office without any term restrictions), he's widely expected to win. The fact that in the year preceding the referendum he raised pensions three times, raised the average wage for the first time in years, and tripled the price paid for wheat to state farms goes some way to explaining his sustained popularity among rural folk.

Politically, the country has become an isolated island in the centre of Europe. Belarus is the only European country without Council of Europe membership – it even lost its status as special guest due to its blatant disregard for human rights. Lukashenka's isolationist policies have shown little regard for what the 'outside world' thinks, save for Russia, with whom the president has been trying with, varying degrees of success, to forge closer ties (see p660).

Belarus has 'enjoyed' a higher international profile since the US administration seemed to suddenly notice the country's existence. In 2004 George W Bush signed the

Belarus Democracy Act, threatening sanctions against the country for continuing its undemocratic ways, and in 2005 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice named Belarus as one of the world's six 'outposts of tyranny.' This belated interest is probably due to intelligence about Belarus' arms sales to Iraq.

Arms sales are a major contributing factor of the Belarusian economy; for the last decade Belarus has been one of the world's top-ten arms exporters. Some of its regular clients have been Kosovo, Palestine and Libya. In 2004 Veranika Cherkasava, a journalist preparing an exposé of her government's dealings with Iraq, was brutally slain in her Minsk apartment (see [www.isn.ch/news/sw/details\\_print.cfm?id=10853](http://www.isn.ch/news/sw/details_print.cfm?id=10853) for astonishing details).

The list of acts which show the lengths the government will go to to protect itself is long and sadly astonishing (see boxed text, below). In the public sector, even cracking a joke about Lukashenka can get you fired.

Lukashenka has vowed to preserve his freedom, 'at whatever cost'. Worryingly, he passed into law in late 2004 amendments that essentially make his word law of the land. His commands to military and interior ministry troops are to be followed

in all cases at all times, even when they contravene international law, as during martial law or states of emergency. The use of weapons and military equipment is now possible under any circumstance, at the president's discretion, and soldiers are unable to refuse to, say, shoot unarmed civilians if so ordered. A Ukrainian-styled 'revolution' looks highly unlikely in the years to come.

## THE CULTURE

### The National Psyche

One of the first things foreigners notice in Belarus is the cleanliness of cities and towns. Even in Soviet times, Belarusians had a reputation of being exceptionally neat and tidy. Even tipsy teens assiduously use rubbish bins for their beer bottles. People are also loath to walk on park grass or cross streets where they're supposed to use an underpass. This undercurrent of respect for (or fear of) the law is felt in many aspects of society (as in the Soviet era, people are never quite sure who's working for whom), and this sometimes bleeds into a reluctance to do anything deemed out of the ordinary. It has also fostered a slight wariness of strangers, which may likely dissipate after a few beers.

Though the vast majority of Belarusian city dwellers deride Lukashenka and his oppressive policies, you might sense that the Belarusian people nonetheless are a tad on the passive side and like a firm leader; throughout history the Belarusian people have been the underclass in their own country, with little distinct culture or history of their own. Less demonstrative and approachable than Russians, they are just as friendly, if not more so, once their reserve is melted away in the joy of companionship.

In further comparison to their Russian cousins, Belarusians tend to be harder workers and more polite. However in the service industries you are likely to encounter blunt, even rude service. When you do – and you will – consider another fact: in a survey measuring happiness levels in 50 countries, Belarus was third in the world for declaring themselves not very or not at all happy – 54% saw themselves this way (Belarus was topped only by party-poopers Bulgaria and Moldova). In comparison, only 13% of their Polish neighbours saw themselves as unhappy.

Nonetheless, the Slavic gene for having fun often overrides daily concerns and you'll find Belarusians generous, genuinely helpful and giving of their time.

A certain level of anomie – social alienation – exists among Belarusians due to an uncertain cultural affiliation. Throughout the Soviet era, official policies tried to erase the notion that Belarusians were distinct from Russians. A brief burst of nationalism and revival of the Belarusian language in the early 1990s has been followed by continued erosion of a separate Belarusian identity on an official level. While this identity is kept alive by expatriates and passionate nationalistic groups inside Belarus (and also quietly by many others), the present government does what it can to diminish the sense of Belarusians as a separate people.

The language issue is a bizarre one for foreigners: no-one in cities speaks Belarusian in public; street signs are in Belarusian but all maps are printed in Russian. What to expect in a country where the president himself is famed for his embarrassing command of Belarusian?

## Lifestyle

With the majority of the population earning around US\$150 a month, there isn't much disposable income for leisure and extravagance. However, Belarusians are creative, innovative folk who know how to make their roubles stretch. Cafés, bars and pool halls are often full; people love to treat themselves by going out, but do so frugally. Even those without extra cash to frequent cafés gather in parks or in homes and expertly built a good time with few raw materials. Fancier restaurants and nightclubs are filled with people with lots of disposable income to spend lavishly and conspicuously.

Curiously, Belarusians seem not to be overly talented in selecting marriage partners. The country is always at or near the top of the list of highest divorce rates: one worldwide survey saw Belarus in first place, with 68% of marriages ending in divorce. Children tend to live with their mothers after a divorce, so the number of single-parent families headed by a mother is relatively high.

Gender role stereotyping remain rigidly traditional, from a Western perspective.

### 'OUTPOST OF TYRANNY' TOP FIVE

Selecting only five bizarre examples of Lukashenka-inspired repression over the years is a tall order. Some have been shocking, others merely absurd. Here are some of the more striking ones:

- September 1995. An air balloon manned by two Americans taking part in an international race accidentally drifted into Belarusian airspace and was shot down by a military helicopter. Both ballooners were killed. Lukashenka praised his country's efficient air force.
- June 1998. It's hard to close down a foreign embassy, but getting them to up and leave in a huff can be fun. Ambassadors from the EU and USA were locked out of their residence complex at Drozby, a quiet suburb of Minsk. Lukashenka said that the building was in need of repairs. This followed other neighbourly gestures such as welding shut the gate to the US ambassador's residence. The EU and US ambassadors packed up and left.
- July 2004. A Russian TV office in Minsk was closed after authorities accused it of broadcasting a report exaggerating the size of an antigovernment demonstration.
- December 2004. Opposition politician Mikhail Marinich was jailed for five years for allegedly stealing office equipment from the US embassy – even though the US had no complaint against him!
- January 2005. Radio stations were from then on forced to play 75% Belarusian music to spare locals' ears from poisonous 'foreign' music (including Russian!). Radio stations scramble for music to play as many top Belarusian groups are already blacklisted after having performed at an opposition rally in 2004. Listeners groan to the beat.



People are encouraged to act as their gender traditionally dictates, and you'll see a lot of public posturing on both sides of the gender divide, resulting in anything from amusing encounters to more serious problems (see p662).

### Population

The population of Belarus is 9.89 million and declining slowly. Ethnic Belarusians make up 81.2% of the population, 11.4% are Russian, 4% Polish and 2.4% Ukrainian. This results in a rather homogenous population, with many shared physical attributes such as fair hair and piercing, round blue eyes. The only sizable (10,000–15,000), non-Slavic minority in the country is the Romany, who live primarily in towns and cities in the south and southeast. Their presence is not well tolerated and there is virtually no mixing between the groups.

There was once a huge Polish and Jewish population as well as a substantial German minority – all of whom were either killed or fled during WWII, or were sent off to Siberia in its aftermath. Belarus lost one million citizens during WWI and some three million during WWII. There are approximately three million Belarusians living outside Belarus.

The country's population density is low at 48.2 people per sq km. As with other countries in the region, the death rate exceeds the birth rate: in Belarus it is about 40% higher. The average life expectancy for males is an unimpressive 62.3 years; for females it's 74.6.

### Government & Politics

In theory, Belarus is a democracy with an executive president, chosen in direct popular elections. The president chooses a prime minister, who is responsible for many of the day-to-day affairs of government. The country's parliament is the National Assembly, consisting of two chambers. In practice, however, the country is run by the sitting president, Alexander Lukashenka.

Aside from the fact that most of Lukashenka's opponents have either been intimidated into silence, sacked or have conveniently disappeared, opposition groups have done themselves no great favours by bickering among themselves, failing to elect a populist leader and allowing

corruption to seep into its midst by accepting generous handouts from various Western (mainly US) organisations. The general public, regularly treated to derisive reports about opposition groups on state-run TV, view these groups as unstable and uncomfortably anti-Russian. Moreover, participation in an unofficial protest (defined as a meeting of more than two persons) can lead to imprisonment or a heavy fine.

Lukashenka has cracked down on the media (in the past, open-forum websites have been blocked for 'technical reasons' during elections and referendums, and gay-themed sites have also been blocked), halted or reversed economic reforms, stifled political opposition, and isolated Belarus from the West and its 'corruptive' influence. Instead, he has been forging ties with such stalwarts of world democracy as Libya, Syria and Zambia. Russian president Vladimir Putin has several times publicly humiliated Lukashenka, partly for his unrealistic demands on Russia with regards to proposed reunification.

The country is divided into six administrative regions centred on the cities of Minsk, Brest, Hrodna, Vitsebsk, Homel and Mahileu.

### Economy

Belarus has one of the most restricted economies on the planet. Despite attempts at reform in the early 1990s, the country has devolved continually under Lukashenka's spectacularly unsuccessful attempts at 'market socialism'. The economy is largely state controlled and closed. The government has placed controls on prices and wages and greatly expanded the right of the state to intervene in enterprises. Starting any private enterprise involves months of paperwork, permission seeking and bribery – only to pay 18 kinds of taxes once it's opened. It makes more economic sense for people to find unofficial second or third jobs on the side to survive.

Inflation was such that for the 1990–2001 period, the country had the planet's fourth highest inflation rate overall (318%). During the same period, it's GDP growth rate was a mighty –0.6%. The inflation rate was 'down' to 28% in 2004.

On the plus side, the country has one of the lowest foreign debts on earth (under

US\$1billion), official unemployment is a low 2.1% (though underemployment is another matter), industrial output was up 13% in 2004, and the economy grew by 6.1% in 2003 with 8–10% growth forecasted for 2005. In part, this is explained by the state continually pumping money into key industries; there are hundreds of millions of dollars worth of products sitting in warehouses, but at least the workers are employed and production figures look rosy!

In early 2005 the average monthly wage was US\$170; workers in state institutions, the police and military make salaries of US\$400 to US\$500.

Industry contributes over 40% of GDP. Some of Belarus' major export items (aside from arms) include potassium fertilisers, chemicals, wood fibreboards, refrigerators, tractors and trucks. Belarus' biggest export partners are Russia (some 54%), Latvia, Ukraine, Lithuania and Germany. Russia provides 68% of all Belarusian imports.

The country is almost totally dependent on Russia for oil and gas supplies, and in part on Lithuania for electricity. It is rich in peat, which is used as fuel for power stations, and in chemical manufacturing. It also has substantial deposits of potassium salts, used in fertiliser.

Belarus' economy is almost completely state run. In 2005 Lukashenka announced that any private enterprise found not to be performing up to standard can be forcibly taken over by the state without explanation or compensation.

### Media

Lukashenka's administration has been battling the free press for years, forcing many independent papers out of business by refusing to grant operating licences, imposing exorbitant fines for supposed violations, and driving them out of their operating premises; however, several independent papers still exist. They regularly publish scathing critiques of the president, and articles are sometimes so venomous that many moderate readers find them off-putting.

State-run newspapers such as *Sovetskaya Belorussia* dominate the market, often featuring an impressive photo of Lukashenka on the cover, framed by headlines belittling how the country is following the right path. Popular among the independ-

ent press is *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazetta*, which features many articles about the sorry political path the country is actually on, and *Vecherny Minsk* (Evening Minsk), an apolitical paper with listings of cultural events.

With its fine tradition of harassing and arresting both domestic and foreign journalists, in 2003 Belarus was voted one of the world's ten worst places to be a journalist by the Committee to Protect Journalists. This honour didn't make the state TV news.

Newspaper kiosk vendors will inform you which papers are *gosudarstveniy* (government) or *nyezavisimiy* (independent). For English-language news of what's really going on in Belarus, check out the weekly *Belarus Today* ([www.belarustoday.info](http://www.belarustoday.info)). *The International Minsk Times* is a weekly which often sees Lukashenka in a favourable light.

The most popular station is FM 104.6 Radio BA, the first private radio station in the country. Also well liked is Radius FM (103.7 in Minsk). FM 106.2 is Belarus State Radio. Since a 2005 law forced all stations to play at least 75% made-in-Belarus music, there is little difference between stations anymore. And now you can satisfy all your desires to hear Belarusian radio stations live from your computer! Check out [www.tvradioworld.com/region3/blr/Radio\\_TV\\_On\\_Internet.asp](http://www.tvradioworld.com/region3/blr/Radio_TV_On_Internet.asp).

Most TV channels are from Russia. There is a national Belarusian TV channel, where you can see exciting reports following Lukashenka's every move (especially when he takes part in a ski or skating marathon: watch him win!), and there are a few local stations across the country as well, with a mix of Belarusian- and Russian-language programming. Belarus TV launched a satellite station in 2005, to broadcast its version of Belarusian news to other countries.

### Religion

Belarus, like Ukraine, has always been a crossing point between Latin and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, with Polish Catholics to the west and Orthodox Russians to the east. Some 80% of the populace is Eastern Orthodox. In 1990 the Belarusian Orthodox Church was officially established.

As a legacy of centuries of Polish rule, 20% of the population (about two million

## JEWISH BELARUS

Around the corner from Hotel Jubileynaja in Minsk, on the corner of vuls Zaslavskaja and Melnikajta is the haunting **Jewish Ghetto Monument** (Map p670), which marks the site of a pit where on 2 March 1942 – in one day – 5000 Jews were shot and buried. It depicts bronze figures, people of all ages, descending a staircase to face certain death.

There were just under one million Jews in Belarus before WWII, making up from one-third to three-quarters of the population of Minsk, Brest, Hrodna, Vitsebsk, Mir and other towns. Over 80% were exterminated in the 164 ghettos set up throughout the country – one of the largest in Europe was in Minsk (over 100,000 people lived there). Today there are some 25,000 Jews in Belarus divided into 10 orthodox and six progressive Jewish communities.

The Lukashenka administration has garnered the ire of local and international Jewish organisations for its refusal to return most historical synagogues to the Jewish community and for not cracking down on the desecration of Jewish monuments. In 2003 in Hrodna, construction of a sports stadium on the site of a 17th-century Jewish cemetery resulted in human remains being dug up and carelessly treated, mixed with dirt and used for road repaving. An official statement from a member of parliament stated that it's acceptable to bulldoze historic synagogues or mosques if they stand in the way of city planning.

Belarus' Jewish community dates from the 14th century, when Brest and Hrodna grew as cultural centres and when Jews were encouraged to settle in these areas by the liberal Lithuanian rulers. After control switched to Russia in the late 18th century, Belarus was part of the Pale of Settlement where Jews were forced to live. However, a series of brutal pogroms in 1881 and uncontained anti-Semitism and cultural persecution thereafter caused many to flee west.

Current attitudes towards Jews remain two-sided. While the average person professes tolerance, the official Orthodox calendar of 2003 printed as one of its holy remembrance days 20 May 1690, the day a young boy named Belostoksy was allegedly murdered by Jews near Hrodna in a religious ritual that required fresh, young blood. Such apocryphal tales of Jews as baby killers led to widespread pogroms that killed thousands of Jews across Eastern Europe. The church's prayer for that day refers to Jews as 'real beasts'.

For more information, contact the **Israeli Cultural Centre in Minsk** (☎ 017-230 1874; vul Uralskaja 3; ⓘ Ploshcha Peramohi).

people) are Roman Catholic, of whom 15% are ethnic Poles. Their presence can be especially felt in Hrodna, where they hold services in Polish.

In the early 1990s the Uniate Church – an Orthodox sect that looks to Rome, not Moscow – was reestablished and now has a following of over 100,000, many of them Ukrainians living in Belarus. There's also a small Protestant minority, the remnant of a once large German population. There are also small numbers of Tatars practising Islam, and Jews (see boxed text, above).

In 2002 the president signed into force a new law on religion despite international criticism. The Belarus Orthodox Church was given wide privileges while other groups' activities have been severely limited. Following in the footsteps of such beacons of democracy as Turkmenistan, Belarusian authorities use the law to harass almost every religious group in the coun-

try. Police have threatened to close Baptist churches and people have been arrested and fined for holding illegal gatherings – even prayer meetings inside private apartments!

## Women in Belarus

Local and international women's groups have identified domestic violence and workplace discrimination as social problems in Belarus: some 30% of women have experienced violence at home and 12% sexual harassment at work. There are other social problems which place Belarusian women behind their Western European counterparts: very few women occupy public positions of power (only 10% of female government employees hold managerial positions); women's salaries are on average 80% of men's; and women tend not to be land or business-owners (women own only 5% of all small and medium-sized enterprises). All this, combined with the high number

of single mothers, ensure that women are more prone to poverty than men.

There are signs of improvement, however. Since 1999 the government has made several legal amendments as well as set up a committee with the goal of ameliorating the social and economic situation for women.

## Sport

The state spends a lot of money on sports and on building new sports stadiums. As in the USSR, showing sports prowess is a way of suggesting political might.

Dinamo Minsk is Belarus' top soccer club and plays frequently in its home stadium in central Minsk, but there's no denying that ice hockey is the number one spectator sport in the country, especially since Lukashenka has gone all-out to help popularise it. Nearly every Minsk resident will tell you that Lukashenka practises three times a week and that his team always wins (security agents reportedly tell players from other teams to pass the puck the president's way whenever they can!).

After Belarus placed fourth in the ice hockey tournament at the 2002 Winter Olympics, the sport was given an extra boost. Cross-country skiing is another popular winter sport.

In Olympic events, Belarus has in the past been a major power in the biathlon, gymnastics, shooting and rowing. Vitaly Shcherbo, considered one of the world's finest gymnasts, is a six-time Olympic gold medalist and has won 14 world championship medals. In 2004 Belarus took home gold medals in judo and track and field and excelled in boxing and weightlifting. Two of the strongest men in the world, Alexander Kurlovich and Leonid Taranenko, are also Belarusian.

Sadly, even the world of sports has been affected by politics. In 2004 the sports minister Yury Sivakov was denied a visa to attend the Olympic Games in Greece as his name was linked to the disappearance of opposition figures.

## Arts

Without control of its own destiny, Belarusian cultural identity was, outside the rural framework, subdued and often suppressed, with only brief periods of revival in the 16th, 19th and 20th centuries.

## LITERATURE & DRAMA

The hero of early Belarusian literary achievement was Francyska Skaryny (after whom many main streets in Belarus are named). Born in Polatsk but educated in Poland and Italy, the scientist, doctor, writer and humanist became the first person to write a Slavic translation of the Bible: into Belarusian. This, as well as other editions by Skaryny between 1517 and 1525, was one of the first books to be printed in all of Eastern Europe. In the late 16th century, the philosopher and humanist Simon Budny printed a number of works in Belarusian, including controversial editions such as *Justification of a Sinner Before God*. The 17th-century Belarusian poet Symeon of Polatsk was the first writer to introduce the baroque style of literature to Russia.

The 19th century saw the beginning of modern Belarusian literature, with works by writers and poets such as Maxim Haradsky, Maxim Bohdanovich, Janka Kupala and, most notably, Jakub Kolas. Many of these writers were active in the influential nationalist newspaper *Nasha Niva* (Our Cornfield), which had to be published in Lithuania from 1906 to 1916, as nationalist literature in Belarus was banned by the tsar at the time. Haradsky's novel *Two Souls* (1919) and Kupala's play *The Locals* (1922) are poignant expressions of the repressed state of Belarus before and after WWI. Kolas is considered to be the pioneer of classical Belarusian literature, and both he and Kupala are revered for having promoted the literary and poetic use of Belarusian. You can read full versions of translated Belarusian prose and poetry from the 20th century at Belarusian Bookcase: [www.knihi.com/index-en.html](http://www.knihi.com/index-en.html).

A period of cultural revival in the 1920s saw the rise of many talented poets and writers, including Jazep Pushcha and satirist playwright Kandrat Krapiva. Another minirevival occurred in the 1960s, with works by Vladimir Karatkevich and Vasil Bykov, who wrote several books depicting the efforts of partisans. The modern literature scene in Belarus is not exactly bustling, partly due to government censorship of all printed material. Though local authors face censorship and have trouble getting published, a 700-page book glorifying Stalin was given a major release in bookshops in

2005. *To Stalin Bow, Europe* is no doubt an extension of Lukashenka's own fantasies.

## MUSIC

Belarusian folk music and shows are energetic and colourful. Modern folk music originated from ritualistic ceremonies – either based on peasant seasonal feasts or, more commonly, on the traditions of church music (hymns and psalms), which became highly developed in Belarus from the 16th century. The band Pesnyary have been extremely popular since the 1960s for having put a modern twist on traditional Belarusian folk music. Other modern bands that utilise folk songs as a base include Troitsa and Stary Olsa; both sing in Belarusian.

Classical music in the modern sense only developed in Belarus within the last 100 years, with composers such as Kulikovich Shcheglov and Yevheny Hlebov, the latter composing the operas *Your Spring* (1963) and *Alpine Ballad* (1967). Though you can't get more American than Irving Berlin, composer of *God Bless America*, *White Christmas* and *There's No Business Like Show Business*, he was born in Mahileu, Belarus, in 1888.

Guitar-oriented rock is king among local bands. Popular modern groups from Belarus include: the hard rock NRM; the equally hard but more melodic Palats; Krama, an excellent and versatile group which sings in Russian, Belarusian and English (check out their *Vodka on Ice*); the rock-blues champions Plan (their *Blues* is recommended); and the well-known Lyapis Trubetskoi, whose catchy light rock-pop has found many fans.

## ENVIRONMENT

### The Land

Landlocked and flat as a board (the highest point is just 345m), Belarus may not sound very appealing, but belying its dull description on paper, it boasts many pastoral landscapes of calm beauty, criss-crossed with rivers (the longest being the Dnjapro, which traverses through 700km of Belarus) and lakes (the largest being Narach at 79.6 sq km). There are some 10,000 lakes dotting the country. Europe's largest marsh area is here too.

At 207,600 sq km, Belarus is slightly smaller than the UK. It borders Russia in the north and east, Latvia and Lithuania

in the northwest, Poland in the west and Ukraine in the south.

## Wildlife

Marshlands make a perfect breeding ground for many animal species and as such, the most interesting wildlife can be seen in the southern swamp regions, along the Dvina River's northern marshes near Polatsk and in the thick forests of the Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park. As many as 74 species of animals including elk, deer, boars, lynx, wolves, foxes, squirrels, martens and hares can be spotted traipsing among the abundant silver birch groves, and mixed deciduous and coniferous forests which make up 45% of the overall territory.

The Pripet River is Europe's largest migratory circuit of waterfowl; some 250 bird species live, nest or pass through the region. White (and more rarely black) storks are visible in the villages in southern Belarus, and other commonly spotted birds include owls, hawks, grouse, woodcocks, cuckoos and partridges.

## National Parks

The Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park (p686), on the western border with Poland, is Europe's largest surviving primeval mixed forest. Once used as private hunting grounds for Polish and Russian royalty, the forest has always been renowned for its European bison, Europe's largest mammal.

The Pripyatsky National Park (p693) encompasses haunting marshland in the country's south. Excursions – from exotic sauna sessions to bird-watching – will convince anyone that swamps are more interesting than they sound on paper!

In all there are 903 areas in Belarus under protection – 100 more than in all of China – but they only cover 4.2% of the total land.

## Environmental Issues

The 1986 disaster at Chornobyl has been the defining event for the Belarusian environment, if not for the republic as a whole. While there are some heavily polluted areas in the country's southeast, some completely off limits, visitors will be unaffected by the disaster's aftereffects (see p694).

Since the USSR's break-up and the resulting closure of many factories, pollution levels have dropped steadily throughout the

1990s, though air in the larger cities, especially in the eastern sectors of the republic (for instance, around Polatsk) is polluted by emissions from ageing factories and outdated cars. The flipside is that most of the countryside is unspoiled, and old farmsteads have slowly been reclaimed by new forests.

Other problems of concern to European environmentalists are commercial logging in the Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park and a low level of transparency in government decision making. While Belarus signed many environmental agreements and treaties with its neighbours in the early 1990s, one of the only progressive steps of the Lukashenka administration was the 2000 ratification of the UN Framework Convention of Climate Change.

## FOOD & DRINK

In a word: potatoes. It's a stereotype – and slight exaggeration – that Belarusians eat potatoes with every meal, but it's not far from the mark either! The bumbling little veggie has found its way into the hearts and minds, folk songs, proverbs and plates of Belarusians for centuries. Yet dull as it may sound, this tips you off to an important element in Belarusian cuisine: tradition. A traditional country meal will be simple – and simply satisfying. A good rule to follow when ordering food in Belarus: keep it simple. Ordering fancy-sounding dishes will likely result in disappointment.

Otherwise, the kind of fare on offer in cafés and bistros throughout the country is very much like what you'd find in western Russia (can you say: *pelmeni* and *plov*?); the smaller the town, the more limited the choice. See p107 for more food-related insights, information and Russian phrases.

## Staples & Specialities

The Belarusians love their mushrooms; mushroom-gathering is a traditional exped-

### KNOW YOUR BEER

The most popular brands of Belarusian beer are Lidskoe, Krynytsa and Alevaria, in that order. Beer from local microbreweries is favoured. Half-litre bottles cost around BR1400. Russian brands like Baltika are often more in style than domestic brands.

### TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

Salo is usually what makes foreigners' noses wrinkle most in the food markets of Belarus. It's basically a huge lump of pig's fat, salted, spiced or smoked, which you then slice up and serve, ideally before the main meal, and usually with vodka. It's a Ukrainian national delight but is also found everywhere in Belarus. If you can get over the sight of these white, fibrous chunks – and imbibe enough vodka – they do have a charm of their own.

ition in Belarus. It's hard to avoid the fungus, as they pop up in one way or another everywhere. *Hribnoy sup* is a mushroom and barley soup, and *kotleta pokrestyansky* is a pork cutlet smothered with a mushroom sauce.

*Draniki* are potato pancakes – perhaps the Belarusian dish. When fresh, plump, lightly crispy and served with sour cream, they can be delicious. Unfortunately, in most restaurants they are often deep fried and greasy. *Kolduni* are delectable, thick potato dumplings stuffed with meat, while *kletsy* are dumplings stuffed with either mushrooms, cheese or – you guessed it – potatoes.

*Golubtsy* are cabbage rolls stuffed with meat and rice. *Matchanka* is pork sausages and pork steak served with sour cream atop a pancake.

There's more information about Belarusian cuisine than you could have ever imagined possible – including myriad pork and potato recipes – at <http://txt.knihi.com/kuchnia/cuisine.html>.

## Drinks

Try Belarusian *kvas*, a popular elixir ideally made of malt, flour, sugar, mint and fruit (though you might only find the regular, fermented bread variant).

Among the hard stuff, vodka and beer predominate, of course. Among the best of local vodkas are Crystal Luks and Belaya Rus. Belovezhskaja is a bitter herbal alcoholic drink considered the best of its kind; it's, shall we say, an acquired taste. There are also some local *balzams* (herbal infusions); among the best is Chyorni Rytsar. These are great on cold days.



**BELARUS TOP 5**

Here are our favourite places to wine and dine in Belarus! Head there now, thank us later!

- Dudutki open-air museum, Dudutki (p680)
- Khutorok, Minsk (p675)
- Taj, Minsk (p675)
- Jules Verne, Brest (p685)
- Vitebsky Traktir, Vitsebsk (p692)

**Vegetarians & Vegans**

Meat is ever-present on menus throughout Belarus. Most people don't consider it a meal if meat isn't part of it. That said, because of the love affair with the potato, there are always vegetarian side dishes available. Borsch is usually made with beetroots and potatoes only, though sometimes it has chunks of meat. Some *golubtsy* are stuffed with rice only. The increasing number of ethnic restaurants in the big cities has also given rise to a greater variety of vegetarian meals. Thus, while it's a bit of a challenge to maintain your vegetarianism in Belarus (not to mention veganism – medals should be awarded for those who manage that!), it's much easier to do so than even a few years ago.

**MINSK МИНСК**

☎ 017 / pop 1.7 million

Minsk is a mind-blowing experience. Ostensibly, it's a European capital, but officially, the city hearkens back to Soviet times: the KGB building is impossible to miss, and people speak about spies, wire taps and stool pigeons in their midst. Police and the military are everywhere. News is that Lukashenka is ready to send in tanks to squash protests. Yet never mind, a slick new nightclub is rolling out drum 'n' bass tonight. Before that, drop in to the new sushi bar.

Communist chic. Cappuccino communism. Minsk is a living oxymoron. When it all gets too bizarre to figure out – and it will – just abandon yourself and have a blast.

There's a palpable pride about Minsk, the pride of a survivor. It has come back

from the dead several times in its almost millennium of existence (the city's official birthday is 3 March 1067), each time triumphantly. Currently, it's the defiant capital of one of the few countries to actively snub US and European attempts at 'intervention', and the city which best approximates what life was like in the Soviet heyday of the 1970s: insular, cocooned, fun.

After Minsk was reduced to rubble during WWII, Moscow architects were given a blank slate to transform ruins into a model Soviet city. An excess of monumental classicism was to give the impression of a workers' utopia. The wide boulevards, expansive squares and grandiose proportions of the buildings in the centre do initially impress, but eventually they take on an oppressive weight. Aside from a minuscule reconstructed Old Town, the city has few cosy corners as antidotes to the concrete, colonnaded grandeur. Evenings, when buildings are beautifully illuminated, offer a softer view of the city.

Minsk, as a clean, safe city and with few tourist attractions, is best enjoyed as the locals do – hanging out in the parks and cafés, meeting people and trying to forget about what goes on behind the Presidential Palace's doors.

**HISTORY**

First mentioned in 1067 and capital since 1101 (first of the Minsk principality, later of the Belarusian province of the Russian Empire and more recently of an independent Belarus) Minsk has been pushed to the brink of extinction several times. It has been frequently destroyed by fire, sacked by Crimean Tatars in 1505, trampled to ruin by the French in 1812, and damaged by the Germans in 1918 and the Poles in 1919–20. Its greatest suffering came in WWII, when half the city's population died, including most of its 50,000 Jews. Virtually every building here has been erected since 1944, when Minsk's recapture by the Soviet army left barely a stone standing.

Over the past 50 years Minsk has watched its population triple with the pouring in of industry. Before independence, it was the industrial and economic powerhouse of the western USSR. It is currently the headquarters of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

**ORIENTATION**

Minsk stretches about 15km from north to south and east to west, the Brest–Moscow highway crossing it from southwest to northeast. The highway is the six-laned monster pr Francyska Skaryny, the city's main artery. The most interesting section is between the stubbornly austere pl Nezalezhnastsi and pl Peramohi. To cross the busier streets, there are often underground passageways, called *perekhodi*.

For information on getting into town from the airport, see p679.

**Maps**

Kvadrograph publishes a great map and 'panoramic' drawing showing every building in Minsk (BR1500). Trivium publishes a very detailed 1:27,000 scale Minsk map (with a 1:10,000 centre map), listing every city street (BR1600). These are easily found in kiosks and bookshops.

**INFORMATION****Bookshops**

**Dom Knih Znanie** (☎ 226 1090; vul Karla Marksa 36; ☎ 10am–7pm Mon–Fri, to 6pm Sat; ☎ Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja) Maps, postcards and souvenir books plus a used section with Soviet-era gems.

**Tsentralnaja Kniharnya Mahazin** (☎ 227 4918; pr Francyska Skaryny 19; ☎ 10am–8pm Mon–Fri, to 6pm Sat; ☎ Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja) The city's largest bookshop. Lots of dictionaries, souvenir books about Belarus and posters of Lukashenka.

**THE NAME GAME**

As we were heading to press, President Lukashenka unexpectedly decided to change the names of Minsk's two largest streets. As if the street name situation in the country weren't complicated enough! Minsk's longest street, *prasppekt Francyska Skaryny*, named after Belarus' main national hero and symbolising Belarusian language and culture, has been renamed *prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi* (Independence boulevard) and *prasppekt Masherava* renamed *prasppekt Peramozhtsau* (boulevard of the Victors). How original!

This name change set off street protests and a petition to cancel the change. While chances are good that the changes will be pushed through, local usage is likely to stubbornly stick to the original names, and the millions of references to them in books, brochures, websites, documents and on business cards will take years to be completely replaced. Therefore, we print all addresses here with the original street names. Here are the main changes.

**Previously**

*prasppekt Francyska Skaryny*  
*prasppekt Masherava*  
*vulitsas Varvashevi, Ierusalimskaja and Drozda*

**Now**

*prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi* (*prospekt Nenavisimosti* in Russian)  
*prasppekt Peramozhtsau* (*prospekt Pobeditelei* in Russian)  
*prasppekt Masherava*

**Cultural Centres**

**Goethe Institute** (☎ 236 3433; vul Frunze 5; library ☎ 9.30am–2pm Wed, 2.30–7pm Thu & Fri, 9.30am–3pm Sat; ☎ Ploshcha Peramohi) Well-stocked reading and lending library; also hosts events.

**Emergency**

**Ambulance** ☎ 03

**Fire** ☎ 01

**Pharmacy Infoline** ☎ 069

**Police** ☎ 02 – knowledge of English not to be taken for granted.

**Internet Access**

**Ploshadka** (☎ 226 4243; vul Njamiha 8; per hr BR1900; ☎ 9am–11pm; ☎ Njamiha) Friendly, can-do staff. Has printing and burning facilities.

**Soyuz Online** (☎ 226 0279; vul Krasnaarmejskaja 3; per hr BR2100; ☎ 24hr; ☎ Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja) The largest in the city. Has printing facilities and a smoke-infested café-bar. Look for the building with the tank out front and climb to the 2nd floor.

**Train Station** (per hr BR2000; ☎ 24 hr; ☎ Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi) On the 4th floor of the train station.

**Internet Resources**

**Andreas Haack** (<http://ahaack.net>) This home page has many quirky anecdotes about one person's multiple travels to Minsk and Belarus. Funny, invaluable information from that rare someone who repeatedly travelled to Belarus just because he wanted to! Find out why it's fun to do so...

**In Your Pocket** ([www.inyourpocket.com/belarus/minsk/en](http://www.inyourpocket.com/belarus/minsk/en)) A funny and well-written, if occasionally dated and

**MINSK IN...****Two Days**

Start with a walk down **prasppekt Francyska Skaryny** (opposite), pop into **London** (p676) for a killer coffee, tea or cocktail before visiting the **Museum of the Great Patriotic War** (p670). Unwind with a stroll along the river or in one of the parks, and a walk through **Traetskae Prodmestse** (p672) where you can have another cocktail at **Banana** (p676) before dinner at **Khutorok** (p675). Take your pick of clubs or bars for the evening.

The next day, head out to **Dudutki** (p680), and in the evening continue exploring Minsk, in the cafés and bars but also in the parks and side streets of the **Upper Town** (p672).

**Four Days**

Same as above, only add in a visit to some local **art galleries** (p673) and definitely more nightlife, like a visit to wild and friendly **Babylon** (p677) and a visit to **West World Club** (p677), just for the spectacle of it all. You'll also have time to visit **Mir** (p681) and **Njasvizh** (p681), or, on a hot summer's day, **Minskae Mora** (p673).

inaccurate, description of all the places you'll want and need to see in Minsk.

**Minsk in the Fifties** (www.data.minsk.by/minsk/fifties) Some brilliant Technicolour postcards of Minsk in its carefree heyday, when its population was a third of today's and everyone wore a smile – imagine!

**Laundry**

As in Russia, there are no laundrettes. Hotels usually provide a laundry service, or you can make a deal with the cleaning ladies.

**Left Luggage**

There are lockers at the central bus station and downstairs at the train station.

**Medical Services**

Medical service is, predictably, well behind Western Europe.

**EcoMedservices** (☎ 200 4581; vul Tolstoho 4; ☎ 24hr; 📍 Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi) No reliable, Western-run clinics operate, but this place comes the closest. Drop-ins are possible, but you'll need to reserve a time with a doctor. Consultations cost between BR10,000 and BR30,000. Also contact your embassy to see who they recommend.

**Minsk Emergency Hospital** (☎ 227 7621; vul Leitenanta Kizhevatava 58; ☎ 24hr)

**Money**

There are exchange bureaus in every hotel, in most big shops, lining major streets and inside bus and train stations. The most popular foreign currencies are euros and US dollars. Typically, exchange bureaus in main hotels offer the most varied services,

including cashing travellers cheques. ATMs are omnipresent (inside bus, train and metro stations, major stores and all hotels); the ones at Hotel Minsk (p675) and Zhuravinka (p675) dispense US dollars and euros. There's a 24-hour exchange bureau inside **Hotel Jubileynaja** (☎ 226 9024; pr Masherava 19).

**Post**

**Central post office** (glavpashamt; pr Francyska Skaryny 10; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun; 📍 Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi) Worth visiting if only for the impressive neobaroque, domed interior. You can also send faxes and receive them on ☎ 375-17-226 0530, upon presentation of your passport.

**DHL** (☎ 228 1108) Has offices in major hotels, including the Hotel Jubileynaja and the Hotel Complex Oktjabrsky.

**Express Mail Service** (EMS; ☎ 227 8512) On the post office's 2nd floor.

**UPS** (☎ 227 2233) Has offices in major hotels, including the Hotel Jubileynaja and the Hotel Complex Oktjabrsky.

**Telephone & Fax**

**Telegraph offices** (tsentralnyy telegraf; ☎ 7am-11pm) Inside the central post office, this is one of the numerous places where you can make national and international calls.

**Beltelekom** (☎ 236 7124; vul Enhelsa 14; ☎ 24hr; 📍 Kupalavskaja/Kastrychnitskaja) Another convenient calling centre.

**Toilets**

Outside Minsk, public toilets – when you can find them – are better left unfound, though in the capital they're pretty decent. Your best bets are at large hotels and res-

taurants. Always keep some spare tissues with you, as toilet paper can either be sparse or as rough as steel wool.

**Tourist Information**

There are no Western-styled tourist information offices anywhere in Belarus, so travel agencies are your best source of information.

**Travel Agencies**

**Belintourist** (☎ 203 1143; www.belintourist.by; pr Masherava 19A; ☎ 8am-8pm; 📍 Njamiha) The agency mainly deals with groups, but individuals can be accommodated with some convincing and wrangling. A city tour runs at around US\$50 per group; trips to Khatyn cost around US\$65. They organise a wealth of country tours, can help with visa support and can get discounts at the huge concrete hotels they usually do business with.

**Sakub** (☎ 209 4250; www.sakub.com, in Russian; pr Masherava 17; 📍 Njamiha) Sakub are flexible when it comes to individual requests, and offer creative, thematic tours throughout Belarus. They also offer visa support.

**U Zheni** (☎ 211 2605; www.uzheni.com/en; vul Kamsamol'skaja 8/18; 📍 Njamiha) Offers Jewish-themed tours (plus others) of the country, ranging from a few hours to several days. Its staff are extremely resourceful and helpful, and can also get discounts at some Minsk hotels.

**DANGERS & ANNOYANCES**

Run-ins with the authorities can be unpleasant, so don't do things to antagonise them! Do not overtly photograph the Presidential Administrative Building, don't carry the white-red-white national Belarusian flag in use before Lukashenka came to power, and avoid participating in opposition rallies and protests, unless you're willing to chance being arrested or questioned – or just photographed for the KGB archives!

Minsk has relatively little street crime, unless you count jaywalking, for which the police will quite eagerly fine you!

**SIGHTS****Prasppekt Francyska Skaryny**

Minsk's main thoroughfare impresses in its sheer girth. Hectic and huge, it tripled in width when it was rebuilt after WWII and extends over 11km from the train station to the outer city. The busiest section – with the best architectural examples of Soviet monumentalism – is sandwiched between pl Nezalezhnastsi and pl Peramohi, with the block between vul Lenina and vul En-

helsa doubling as a popular evening youth hangout.

The stubbornly austere and expansive **ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi** (Independence Square; ploshchad Nezavisimosti in Russian) is dominated by the **Belarusian Government Building** (behind the Lenin statue) on its northern side, and the equally proletarian **Belarusian State University** on its southern side. A massive, underground shopping centre was built in 2005 in front of the one element that breaks the theme of Soviet classicism dominating the square: the 1910 red-brick Catholic **Church of St Simon & Elena** (Red Church; vul Savetskaja 15; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm).

The church's tall, gabled bell tower and attractive detailing are reminiscent of many brick churches in the former Teutonic north of Poland. Used as a cinema studio in the Soviet era, it became a key opposition meeting place in the last years of the USSR. The interior is dark, lavish, mysterious, and downstairs is a small exhibition hall and Polish library.

Northwest of the square are many of Minsk's main shops and cafés. An entire block is occupied by a yellow neoclassical building with an ominous, temple-like Corinthian portal – the **KGB building** (pr Francyska Skaryny 17; 📍 Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi). On the opposite side of the street is a long, narrow park with a **bust** of terror-monger Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the KGB's predecessor, the Cheka. The downing of his statue in Moscow was one of the defining moments of the breakup of the USSR in 1991; this is one of the world's last remaining statues to the person responsible for much bloodshed.

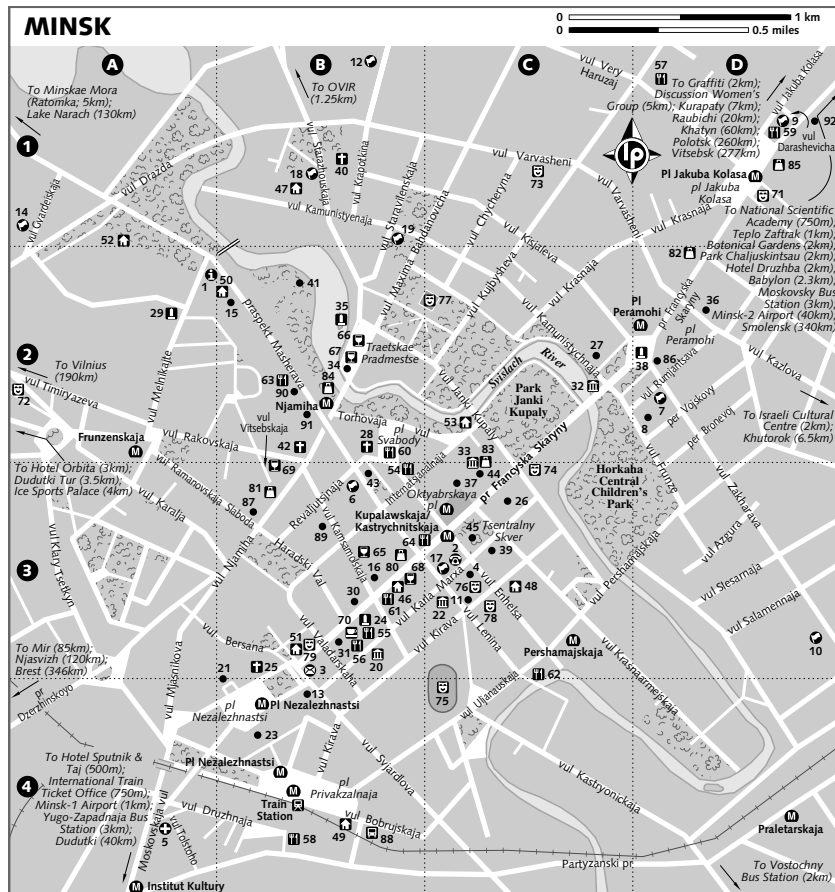
Between vul Enhelsa and vul Janki Kupaly is the city's busiest square, still referred to

**LONG LIVE MINSK SLOGANS!**

Want to know what those large letters looming over your head mean?

- Above the Museum of the Great Patriotic War: ПОДВИГУ НАРОДА ЖИТЬ В ВЕКАХ (The Feats of the People Will Live Forever)
- Across two buildings on pl Peramohi: ПОДВИГ НАРОДА БЕССМЕРТЕН (The Feats of The People are Eternal)





by its Russian name **Oktyabrskaya ploshchad**. Here you'll find the impressively severe **Palats Respubliki** (Palace of the Republic; ☎ 216 2098; www.palace.by; Oktyabrskaya pl 1; M Kupalawskaja/Kastychnitskaja). The city's premier concert hall, it resembles a massive mausoleum on the outside, and is decorated in 1960s-style gaudy splendour inside.

Also on this square is the classical-style, multicoloured **Trade Unions' Culture Palace**. Next to this is the highly recommended **Museum of the Great Patriotic War** (☎ 277 5611; pr Francyska Skaryny 25A; admission BR5000; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun; M Kupalawskaja/Kastychnitskaja). The 28 well-designed rooms display the horrors of WWII and go a long way towards explaining Belarus' apparent obsession with

the war, which transformed the land and the people of the country. Particularly harrowing are the photos of partisans being executed in recognisable central Minsk locations. The museum also graphically depicts the Nazi atrocities against Jews during the war, giving special attention to the Maly Trostenets concentration camp where more than 200,000 Jews from Minsk and surrounding cities were murdered. All the texts are in Russian and Belarusian but it's still worth a visit.

Across the street is **Tsentralny Skver** (Central Square), a small park on the site of a 19th-century marketplace. People gather around the small statue of a boy and a swan, play guitar and drink beer until the last metro.

#### INFORMATION

Belintourist office Белдинтуррыст	1 A2
Betelekom	2 C3
Central post office Глаупаштаміт	3 B3
Dom Knih Znanie Дом Книгі Знанне	4 C3
EcoMedServices	5 A4
Express Mail Service	(see 3)
French Embassy	6 B3
German Embassy	7 D2
Goethe Institute	8 D2
Latvian Embassy	9 D1
Lithuanian Embassy	10 D3
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	11 C3
Ploshchadny	12 B1
Polish Embassy	12 B1
PVU (Main Office) ОВПС	13 B4
Russian Consulate	14 A1
Sakub	15 B2
Soyuz Online	(see 26)
Telegraph offices	(see 3)
Tsentralnaya Kniharnya Mahazyn	Центральнае Кнігарня
Магазін прафсаюзаў	16 B3
U Zheni У Жэні	(see 89)
UK Embassy	17 C3
Ukrainian Embassy	18 B1
US & Russian Embassies	19 B1

#### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Belarus National Museum of History & Culture Беларускае дзяржаўнае краязнаўчае музей	20 B3
Belarusian Government Building	
Дом ураду Беларусі	21 B4
Belarusian State Art Museum Дзяржаўны мастацкі музей Беларусі	22 C3
Belarusian State University Беларускае дзяржаўнае ўніверсітэт	23 B4
Bust of Felix Dzerzhinsky	24 B3
Church of St Simon & Elena Касцёл Сымона і Елены	25 B3
Dom Offitserov Дом Афіцэраў	26 C3
Former Apartment Building of Lee Harvey Oswald	27 C2
Holy Spirit Cathedral Свято Духов сабор	28 B2
Jewish Ghetto Monument	29 A2
KGB Building	30 B3
Mastatskiy Salon Мастацкі Салон	31 B3
Museum of the First Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party Дом музей 1-й з'езда Расійскай сацыял-дэмакратычнай партыі	32 C2

Museum of the Great Patriotic War Музей гісторыі Вялікай Айчыннай Вайны	33 C3
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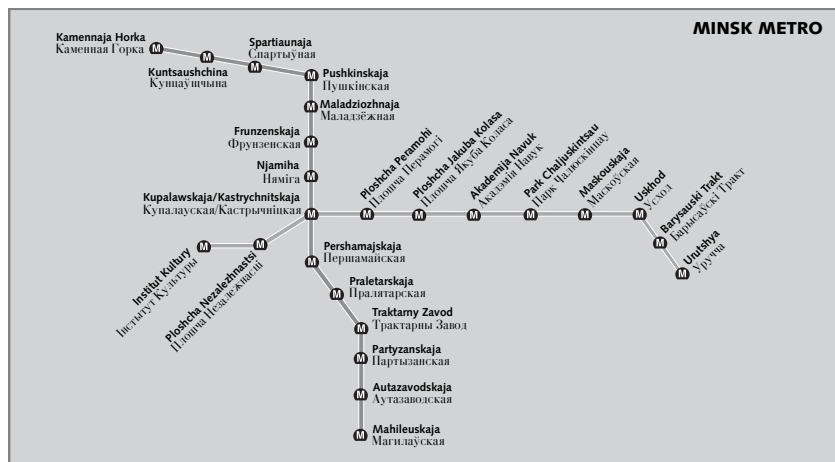
The dark grey building on the far side of the square is **Dom Offitserov** (Officer's Building) – you can't miss the tank outside it, a memorial to the Soviet soldiers who liberated Minsk from the Nazis. Behind Tsentralny Skver, well lit and peering through the trees, is the **Presidential Administrative Building**, where Lukashenka makes most of his wise decisions. It's also his residence and as such is well guarded. It's best seen from afar.

As pr Francyska Skaryny crosses the Svislach River, it passes two of the city's main parks; **Park Janki Kupaly** on the southwestern bank opposite the **circus** (p677) and the larger **Horkaha Central Children's Park**, where there's a section with rides, attractions and fast-food kiosks. Just across the bridge, in a green wooden house by the banks of the river, is the **Museum of the First Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party** (☎ 236 6847; pr Francyska Skaryny 31; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Thu-Tue; M Ploshcha Peramohi), where the

Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party – Russia's original Marxist party – held its illegal founding congress in 1898. Today, you can wander around the small museum inside, just as Fidel Castro did in 1972.

Diagonally opposite is the **apartment building** (Kamunistychnaja vul 4; M Ploshcha Peramohi) where Lee Harvey Oswald – the alleged assassin of US president John F Kennedy – lived for a few years in his early 20s. Few locals know or are interested in this fact, though the building – and Oswald's stay in the city – remains a curiosity for most tourists. He was lucky enough to have lived on one of the city's prettiest streets, excellent for riverside strolling.

Just 100m northeast of here, **ploshcha Peramohi** (Victory Square; ploshchad Pobedy in Russian) is hard to miss. A giant **Victory obelisk** rises up from the centre of the busy intersection, the eternal flame at its feet. Parades on 9 May (Victory Day) and



7 November (Anniversary of the October Revolution) often end up here. The eternal flame is accessible from the underground passageway.

Further north is **ploshcha Jakuba Kolasa**, another expansive square, this one softened by pleasant parkland and a sitting area near the elephantine monument to the Belarusian writer.

Pr Francyska Skaryny continues north-east, becoming a bit of a student ghetto around metro Akademija Navuk; various faculties of the state university are located nearby, as well as the impressive, multi-columned **National Scientific Academy** (Akademija Navuk; pr Francyska Skaryny 66). Beyond the hum, 96-hectare **Botanical Gardens** (☎ 284 1484; pl Kalinina; admission BR1000; ☎ 10am-6pm early May-late Oct; M Park Chaljustkintsau) and the adjacent, sprawling **Chaljustkintsau Park** (another major summer hangout and site of outdoor concerts and festivities) the prasppekt's shops, cafés and commercial buildings give way to residential buildings.

### Upper Town & Old Town (Traetskae Prodmestse)

The congested overpass that now carries vul Lenina over vul Njamiha near the Njamiha metro station was the site of Minsk's main marketplace in the 12th century. In May 1999 the metro entrance was the site of a brutal stampede in which 53 people died. The tragedy occurred when hundreds of young people ran into the pedestrian tunnel

to escape a sudden thunderstorm at a beer festival. There is now a touching memorial at the metro entrance, with a bronze rose for each of the people who died.

**Ploshcha Svabody**, to the southeast of the overpass, bordered by vul Lenina, became the new city centre in the 16th century. The surrounding area is known as Upper Town (Verkhny Garad). The baroque, twin-towered Orthodox **Holy Spirit Cathedral**, off the northern end of the small square, stands defiantly on a small hill overlooking its rather bleak surroundings. It was once part of a Polish Bernardine convent (founded in 1628) along with the former **Bernardine Church** next door, which now houses city archives. The former monastery buildings further to the right (east) have been restored and now house a music academy affiliated with the classical-looking conservatory building at the far southwestern end of pl Svabody.

A new **Town Hall** was quickly constructed in 2003 on the square using old photographs and drawings to replicate the long-destroyed original. A general reconstruction plan for the Upper Town has been drawn up which will see many buildings in the area repaired, restored or rebuilt.

There are several side streets in the triangle formed by vuls Lenina, Torhovaja and Internatsjanalnaja, on which some houses remain from the pre-WWII period. They are in poor condition, but their old-world charm offers a welcome respite in a city whose past is little felt.

Across the vul Lenina overpass sits the attractively restored 17th-century **SS Peter & Paul Church** (vul Rakovskaja 4; M Njamiha), the city's oldest church (built in 1613, restored in 1871), awkwardly dwarfed by the morose concrete structures surrounding it. It's worth dropping in to see the unusual icons.

A minuscule area on the eastern bank of the Vuslakh River, bordered by vul Maxima Bahdanovicha, has been rebuilt in 17th- and 18th-century style to recreate the look and feel of what much of Minsk once looked like. This Old Town is known as **Traetskae Prodmestse** (Trinity Suburb). It is the city's most photographed area, and there are a few cafés, bars, restaurants and craft-gift shops to tempt you for a lazy hour. By the river banks is the **Ostrov Slyoz** (Island of Tears), in memory of Belarusians who lost their lives to war. There sits a fantastic monument in the shape of a chapel, ornamented with mourning female figures; nearby a guarding angel weeps for having failed to protect his charges.

The nicest small church in the city is about 600m north of here near Hotel Belarus. The attractive little **St Mary Magdeline Church** (Tsarkva Svyati Mary Magdaleny; vul Kisjaleva 42; M Njamiha) was built in 1847 in the ancient Orthodox style, with a pointed octagonal bell tower over the entrance and a single sweeping dome over the cruciform plan.

### Other Museums & Art Galleries

There is so much history and culture at the **Belarus National Museum of History & Culture** (☎ 227 3665; vul Karla Marxa 12; admission BR7000; ☎ 11am-7pm Thu-Tue; M Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja), most visitors leave with their head spinning (Belarusian-only explanation panels don't help). It takes you on a journey into the turbulent history of the nation, and features a replica of the printing press used by national hero Francyska Skaryny.

More interesting is the **Belarusian State Art Museum** (☎ 227 7163; vul Lenina 20; admission BR5000; ☎ 11am-7pm Wed-Mon; M Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja). Here you'll find the country's largest collection of Belarusian art, in two rooms devoted to works depicting the depopulated agrarian bliss of the 1920s and 1930s. There are also impressive works by Arkhip Kuindji, Nikolai Ghe, Ilya Repin, Isaak Levitan and Konstantin Makovsky.

A cool place to hang out in is **Palats Mastatsva** (Art Palace; ☎ 213 3549; vul Kazlova 3; admission free; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun; M Ploshcha Peramohi). There are several exhibition halls showing modern art, used book and antique stalls and a general buzz of free-spirited activity. The **Mastatsky Salon** (Art Gallery; ☎ 227 8363; pr Francyska Skaryny 12; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat; M Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi) also features rotating exhibits of local artists and overpriced souvenirs.

### ACTIVITIES

Wintertime, join the crowds of skaters strutting their stuff in front of the Palats Respubliki on the gigantic **skating rink** (adult/child skate rental BR5000/3000; ☎ 8am-10pm; M Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja). Year-round, you can drop in on expat Friday nights at the bowling alley inside the Zhuravinka (p675) hotel. See also p678 for more sporting options.

There's swimming and beach fun at **Minsk-kae Mora** (Minsk Sea), an artificial reservoir 5km north of the city (buses leave regularly from the central bus station). There's a free public beach (plus a nudist beach!), and pedal-boat and catamaran rental. By car, head north along the P28 and watch for the signs after the village of Ratomka.

### MINSK FOR CHILDREN

Let's hope the kids aren't too fussy when it comes to entertainment options. Definitely head to the circus (p677). The **State Puppet Theatre** (☎ 227 0532; vul Enhelsa 20; M Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja) is one of the other few places

### FREETHINKING MINSK

When the novelty of wondering if your hotel room is bugged wears off, try spending time at these relative oases of freethinking. Cosy, liberal and as 'alternative' as you'll get, these are the places in which you might feel like you're in another country!

Enjoy the city's best coffee and tea selection at both **Stary Minsk** (p676) and **London** (p676) before relaxing with a waterpipe at **Banana** (p676) or taking in a kick-ass live show in the inimitable **Graffiti** (p677). Hanging out at **Podzemka** (p678) will do the trick when all those government department stores start weighing heavy upon you!

you can bring your children, and the National Academic Opera & Ballet Theatre (p677) often has performances geared towards kids on weekend afternoons. Otherwise, your best bet is the Horkaha Central Children's Park (p671) where there's a children's amusement section and occasional planned activities, as well as the sprawling Chaljuskintsau Park (p672).

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Minsk's biggest party is on **City Day**, September 11. Celebrations (with parades, concerts and many organised events) often stretch over several days. The **Belarusian Musical Autumn** in the last 10 days of November is a festival of folk and classical music and dance held in various locales.

## SLEEPING

With few exceptions, hotels in Minsk follow a predictable mould – unremarkable and overpriced. Budget travellers face a meagre choice, but those willing to dent their credit cards can enjoy full splendour.

## Budget

**Bus Station Dorms** (dm BR23,000) Moskovsky Bus Station (☎ 219 3651; M Maskouskaja); Vostochny Bus Station (☎ 247 6374; M Partyanskaja) For a small *gostinitsa* (hotel) with super-friendly staff that is kept spotlessly clean and is surprisingly quiet, head to either of these two bus stations. Rooms have a sink and mirror but share toilet and showers in the corridor. There are lockers to keep your valuable Minsk purchases safe. These are the city's cheapest beds – but note that they do not register your visa (p720).

**Hotel Sputnik** (☎ 229 3619; vul Brilevskaja 2; s US\$28-42, d US\$50-63; P; M Institut Kultury) This place has been well known for years for its very cheap accommodation and its off-the-scale rude service. Well, it's not that cheap anymore, but at least other things haven't changed! The rooms are spacious and unmemorable. However, there's a great Indian restaurant in the same building (Taj, see opposite) and bus 100 quickly whisks you up to pr Francyska Skaryny.

**Hotel Ekspres** (☎ 225 6463; pl Privakzalnaja 4; dm/s/d/ste BR33,000/94,000/168,000/200,000; P; M Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi) Attached to the eastern end of the train station, this is OK as a budget affair only if you take the dorm doubles (no

## AUTHOR'S CHOICE

While there's romance in them there cracked walls of cheap hotels and eccentricity in what passes as elegance in more expensive places, we say your best bet is to avoid them all – and rent your own flat! These are furnished, clean apartments in central residential buildings, where you need not deal with goonish doormen and can enjoy your privacy. The friendliest and most reliable agency to organise this for you is **Belarus Rent** (☎ 227 8290; www.belarusrent.com; pr Francyska Skaryny 18-85; M Kupalawskaja/Kastychnitskaja), which predictably doubles as a dating agency. Prices range from €25 to €70 per day, with discounts for longer stays. They can also arrange visa registration.

showers at all though), but the singles and doubles are way overpriced for what you get. All rooms have toilets.

## Midrange

**Hotel Belarus** (☎ 209 7537; belarus@hotel.minsk.by; vul Starazhouskaja 15; s US\$46-80, d US\$60-90, ste US\$170-410; P; M Njamiha) There are several renovated floors with such amenities as new carpets, but aside from having great views (ask for a room facing the centre), there is nothing noteworthy about this otherwise stodgy 23-storey giant. There are three restaurants, including a top-floor one with panoramic views.

**Hotel Druzha** (☎ 266 2481; vul Tolbukhina 3; s/d/ste US\$40/50/70; M Park Chaljuskintsau) Near the leafy Chaljuskintsau Park, Druzha has spartan rooms and a slightly seedy atmosphere, but at least it's a quick 10-minute trip to the centre.

**Hotel Orbita** (☎ 252 3208; pr Pushkina 39; s US\$45-60, d US\$50-90; P; M Pushkinskaja) Rising above a concrete suburb, Orbita boasts friendly, attentive service (something you'll end up appreciating) and dull but decent rooms. Hop on the metro heading north from the Kupalawskaja/Kastychnitskaja station; this tall hotel can be seen as soon as you exit the Pushkinskaja station.

**Hotel Planeta** (☎ 226 7855; pr Masherava 31; s/d US\$92/110, ste US\$140-160; P; M Njamiha) Planeta has a pretty, marbled lobby and the rooms are decent sized but dull. Each room has slightly different furniture and bed sizes –

ask to see a few before you choose, but go for one with a park view. It prides itself on its business facilities, offered via a Swedish business centre on the ground floor.

**Hotel Complex Oktjabrsky** (☎ 222 3289; vul Enhelsa 13; s/d/ste from BR158,000/210,000/280,000; P; M Kupalawskaja/Kastychnitskaja) For years considered the tops in Minsk, this hotel has a rather humorous, starchy formality to it, perhaps due to its location right behind the Presidential Administrative Building. Rooms are conservatively tasteful.

## Top End

**Hotel Minsk** (☎ 209 9074; www.hotelminsk.by; pr Francyska Skaryny 11; s US\$130-170, d US\$170-190, ste US\$210-840; P; M Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi) Where the diplomats and rock stars stay. Its four-star rooms are formal and on the wee side for the price (single beds in the single rooms are Lilliputian!), but all are fully furnished. Access to the gym, Jacuzzi, saunas, and business centre, as well as a buffet breakfast and secure parking, are included in the price. It's wheelchair accessible and has two rooms for handicapped guests.

**Zhuravinka** (☎ 206 6900; vul Janki Kupaly 25; s US\$170-190, d US\$210-230, ste US\$800; P; M Kupalawskaja/Kastychnitskaja) All 12 rooms overlook the river in this super-modern, gleaming complex sporting a bowling alley, pool, fitness centre and restaurant where you can hobnob with the Belarus elite.

## EATING

Quality has improved along with choice over recent years, though don't hope for too much authenticity in the city's 'ethnic' restaurants. 'Peasant food' has become quite a back-to-roots fad in Belarus' big cities. Expect a high level of stiffness and formality in many places: you'd be forgiven for thinking that you're disturbing the staff by entering. You can also find decent food in the places listed under Drinking (p676).

## Restaurants

### BELARUSIAN

**Staroe Ruslo** (☎ 217 8470; vul Uljanauskaja; mains BR2000-18,000; ☎ noon-11pm; M Pershamajskaja) Don't be fooled by the lacklustre exterior, inside is some of the best food in town. There are several soups to choose from, and lots of cheesy or mushy dishes.

**Pivnoi '0.5'** (☎ 226 0643; vul Herzena 1; mains BR8000-16,000; ☎ 10am-2am; M Kupalawskaja/Kastychnitskaja) Beer is accented here, and as such the meals are hearty, heavy and manly. Their Belarusian specialities include *machanka* (pork, sausage, egg and pancake all combined into one). The interior is lavish and modern but in a traditional beer-hall style.

**Traktir Na Parkavoi** (☎ 223 6991; pr Masherava 11; mains BR7000-15,000; M Njamiha) A good bet for Belarusian favourites, this pleasant early 20th-century country kitchen is tucked behind a row of cement blocks.

**Café Traktir Na Marxa** (☎ 226 0361; vul Karla Marxa 21; mains BR3000-7000; M Kupalawskaja/Kastychnitskaja) Another excellent choice serving decent Belarusian food such as *draniki*. The relaxed atmosphere in this cellar café-cum-bar is more authentic than the food, but then again, you can't beat the prices. It's also a good place to hang out and have a few beers.

## INTERNATIONAL

**Taj** (☎ 229 3592; vul Brilevskaja 2; mains BR12,000; ☎ noon-midnight; M Institut Kultury) Where Buddha statues meet wooden Russian *matryoshka* dolls! The North Indian food here is sublime and provides a welcome explosion of spices. The dhal and samosas are fantastic, and vegetarians will find heaven here (veggie dishes around BR6000). The menu has English explanations and photos.

**Teplo Zaftrak** (☎ 205 8483; pr Francyska Skaryny 78; mains BR8000; ☎ 8am-11pm; M Akademija Navuk) This bistro-style restaurant sets itself apart from the competition with friendly service, a menu boasting 37 different kinds of pizza (and other Italian fare), a full – yes, full –

## AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Of all the folk-style traditional restaurants in town, this one takes the prize. Set south-east of the centre, **Khutorok** (☎ 299 6194; pr Partizansky 174; mains BR7000-14,000; M Mahileuskaja) has several thematically decorated rooms to choose from, a leafy summer terrace and a menu filled with meat-heavy country cooking (their shashlyk is among the city's best). It's either an 800m walk east of metro Mahileuskaja or a BR5000 to BR6000 cab ride from the centre.



breakfast menu (a rarity in these parts) and client-friendly specials like free coffee with breakfast.

**Planeta Sushi** (☎ 210 5645; pr Francyska Skaryny 18; mains from BR10,000; ☎ noon-1am; 📍 Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja) A great alternative to meat and potatoes is this little slice of paradise. Options range from very affordable sushi to decadent, intricate meals, and the interior is perfect for both a quick lunch or a relaxed meal.

**Grunwald** (☎ 210 4255; vul Karla Marxa 19; mains BR12,000-26,000; ☎ 10am-11.30pm; 📍 Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja) A great place for a splurge. The décor is lightly medieval, the atmosphere relaxed, and the superb food a mix of European and Belarusian (delicious soups and *draniki*, filling enough for a meal). There's a dazzling array of inventive fish and meat dishes.

Also recommended:

**Byblos** (☎ 289 1218; vul Internatsionalnaja 21; mains BR4000-7000; 📍 Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja)

Pseudo-Lebanese food and icy service (waitresses as icy as Hitchcock heroines!) but good for a quick kebab.

**Kasbar** (☎ 220 8155; vul Vakzalnaja 23; mains BR7000-20,000; ☎ 10am-2am; 📍 Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi) Not quite the Kasbah, but the Persian food on offer is decent, if not terribly spicy and served in teeny portions. Smoke a waterpipe for additional flavours. There are several vegetarian options. Their nightly exotic dance shows are an eye-ful.

### Quick Eats

**Lido** (☎ 224 2729; pr Francyska Skaryny 49; mains BR5000-11,000; ☎ 10am-11pm; 📍 Ploshcha Jakuba Kolasa) This Latvian restaurant injects vitality into the local restaurant scene. It's sprawling (but always jam-packed) self-serve food emporium is done up like a country village, waterfalls and all. The food's on the heavy and greasy side, but you can point to or grab what you like, and the choice is staggering.

**Express Krynitsa** (☎ 226 1708; pr Francyska Skaryny 18; mains BR3000-10,000; ☎ 11am-11pm; 📍 Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja) The Soviet *stolovaya* (cafeteria) tradition meets modernity here in this huge place where all the food, happily swimming in grease, is visible (a pointer's delight). People-watch out the large windows.

### Self-Catering

**Kamarowski Rynok** (vul Very Haruzaj 6; ☎ 8am-7pm Tue-Sun; 📍 Ploshcha Jakuba Kolasa) Northwest of pl Jakuba Kolasa is this immense minicity of market mayhem. Inside you'll find nuts,

spices, breads, honey, dried fish, meat carcasses, CDs – the lot.

There are dozens of grocery shops throughout the city; one of the best stocked is **Tsentralny Universam** (☎ 227 8876; pr Francyska Skaryny 23; ☎ 9am-11pm; 📍 Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja).

### DRINKING

**Stary Mensk** (☎ 289 1400; pr Francyska Skaryny 14; ☎ 10am-11pm; 📍 Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi) Spy on the KGB building across the street! Similar menu and atmosphere as at London (below), with a bit more space and more books. Highly recommended.

**Banana** (☎ 289 5079; vul Staravilenskaja 7; ☎ 10am-2am; 📍 Njamiha) The Turkish-style so-called VIP lounge on the 1st floor is the city's best place to relax with a cocktail and smoke a flavoured waterpipe (*sheesha*). The pillowed couches and dimly-lit interiors make it one of the city's cosiest corners.

**Rakovsky Brovar** (☎ 206 6404; vul Vitsebskaja 10; 📍 Njamiha) This is the best place for a Belarusian pint. Because of its four brewed-on-site beers, both light and dark, this is the city's most popular place for suds-lovers. Its food is largely unsurprising, however.

**Air Grip** (☎ 201 3793; vul Kamsamolskaja 19; ☎ 10am-1am; 📍 Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja) By day it's a hangout for wealthy foreigners enjoying the excellent Italian espresso and *gelato* (the specialties here), by evening it's one of the city's premier meeting points for a younger, rowdier crowd. This place has the right attitude: to try to reduce the billows of smoke from their customers, they sometimes offer free coffee for those who actually don't smoke!

**Karchma Stavavilenskaja** (☎ 289 3754; vul Staravilenskaja 2; ☎ 11am-midnight; 📍 Njamiha) In

### AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Charming, eccentric and crammed with trinkets, the miniscule café **London** (☎ 289 1529; pr Francyska Skaryny 17; ☎ 10am-11pm; 📍 Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja) is an oasis of laid-back cool, just one step off of the city's main drag but another world entirely. It's the city's best tea and coffee selection is right here too, plus a bevy of creative cocktails to be enjoyed in the upstairs 'lounge' and a small but very tasty food menu. It's where Minsk's intellectuals, artists, DJs and generally cool folk meet.

the Old Town along the riverfront, this café has a breezy summer terrace and a low-key interior. Its food is good, if overpriced, but it's the beer and coffee that most head here for.

### ENTERTAINMENT Nightclubs

Discos are widespread, but as prices are prohibitive for ordinary Belarusians (cover prices range from BR5000 to BR20,000), most of them boast a predictable crowd – leather jackets, short skirts, wads of cash. You're almost guaranteed an 'erotic show' around midnight too, and many hotel clubs are filled with sex workers. Check out [www.mixtura.org](http://www.mixtura.org) for the latest club happenings and pics from past events – it's all in Russian, but makes Minsk look like Europe's party central.

**Babylon** (☎ 8-029 677 0445; vul Tolbukhina 4; ☎ 10pm-6am Tue-Sun; 📍 Park Chaljustkintsau) The city's main gay (now gay-friendly) club, and probably the least pretentious and most fun-spirited club in town. Here people of all persuasions gather just to have a down-to-earth good time. It's on the 3rd floor of a commercial building – just walk in the open door and follow the music.

**Bronx** (☎ 288 1061; vul Varvasheni 17; ☎ noon-5am; 📍 Ploshcha Peramohi) Though it's definitely a place for Minsk's moneyed crowd (count the Mercedes out front and sip on their US\$12 bowls of soup in the restaurant downstairs!), the two-floor club isn't wash in pretentiousness; it attracts some of the city's best DJs, plays some of its most progressive music, has the city's nicest pool hall, and is tastefully decked out in 1930s American-gangster chic.

**Blindazh** (☎ 219 0010; vul Timiryazeva 9; ☎ 11pm-6am Wed-Sun; 📍 Fruzenskaja) Boasting the city's best sound system, this club is strong on techno and house and has a stylish, neon-bathed interior. Attracts a young crowd with energy to burn. Take a taxi there (2km).

**West World Club** (☎ 239 1798; vul Starazhouskaja 15; ☎ 8pm-6am; 📍 Njamiha) Because of its circular shape, locals dub this place *shaiba* (hockey puck). Visiting it once is part of the quintessential Minsk experience. Here, the city's dubiously nouveau riche and prostitutes aplenty mingle with innocent (or not-so-innocent) foreigners. The doormen alone must be seen to be believed.

### AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Don't try to find **Graffiti** (☎ 266 0154; per Kalinina 16; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Sat; 📍 Park Chaljustkintsau) yourself – take a cab (it's 2km to 3km from the centre). On the ground floor of a student dorm, this is as underground as Minsk gets – a cosy, red brick interior that's garage meets army surplus, cheap drinks, and incredible live bands after 7pm (Wednesday – jazz, Thursday – folk and rock on Friday).

### Theatre, Opera, Ballet & Circus

If you like the performing arts, you're in for a treat. Some of the best ballet in Eastern Europe takes place in Minsk. During Soviet times the Belarusian Ballet was considered second only to Moscow's Bolshoi Ballet. Ballet costs from BR2000 to BR12,000 and performances are at 7pm on Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. Opera only costs between BR2500 and BR6000 and performances are held at 7pm on Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

**National Academic Opera & Ballet Theatre** (☎ 234 0652; pl Parizhskoy Kamuni 1; 📍 Njamiha) Ballets and operas are regularly performed at this bulky theatre (it's more attractive inside, fear not), whose main season runs from September to April.

**Belarusian State Philharmony** (☎ 284 4427; pr Francyska Skaryny 50; 📍 Ploshcha Jakuba Kolasa) Also has an excellent reputation – it features folk ensembles as well as a symphony orchestra, and performs everything from classical to jazz.

To buy advance tickets or to find out what's playing in Minsk, head to the **theatre ticket office** (teatralnaja kasa; ☎ 288 2263; pr Francyska Skaryny 13; 📍 Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi); tickets for pretty much every performance in all theatres, with some exceptions, can be bought here. There are other ticket sales points scattered along pr Francyska Skaryny and in the underground passageways. Same-day tickets are usually available only from the theatres.

Another popular theatre is the **Janka Kupala National Academic Theatre** (☎ 227 1717; vul Enhelsa 7; 📍 Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja), which stages plays mainly in Belarusian. Those needing their trapeze fix should check out the **circus** (☎ 227 7430; pr Francyska Skaryny 32; 📍 Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja).

## Sport

Dinamo Minsk, Belarus' top soccer club (often appearing in European competitions), plays at the 55,000-capacity **Dinamo Stadium** (☎ 227 2611; vul Kirava 8; 🚶 M Pershamajskaja). The **Ice Sports Palace** (☎ 252 5022; vul Prititskoho 27; 🚶 M Pushinskaja) and sometimes the **Sports Palace** (☎ 223 4483; pr Masherava 4; 🚶 M Njamiha) host stellar ice-hockey matches.

About 20km northeast of Minsk is the large **Raubichi Sports Complex** (☎ 598 4447; Raubichi village; 🔄 year-round). It's at its busiest during winter, with cross-country skiing and ski trampolines for practising aerial skiing; local and world championships are held here, too. During summer, there's swimming, tennis courts and small-boat rentals.

## SHOPPING

Folk art is the main source of souvenirs, which include carved wooden trinkets, ceramics and woven textiles. Unique to Belarus are wooden boxes intricately ornamented with geometric patterns composed of multicoloured pieces of straw. These are easily found in city department stores and in some museum kiosks. Most days, a small outdoor **souvenir market** (🕒 9am-6pm) operates in the small space between the Trade Unions' House of Culture and the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, just off pr Francyska Skaryny. Breeze past the cheesy paintings and you'll find crafts in the back. **Suvenirnaja Lavka** (☎ 234 5451; vul Maxima Bahdanovicha 9; 🕒 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat; 🚶 M Njamiha) is another good bet for souvenirs, vodka included.

Even if you're not in the mood for shopping, pop into **Podzemka** (☎ 288 2036; pr Francyska Skaryny 43; 🚶 M Ploshcha Peramohi). Here you'll find local art and sculptures which could make creative souvenir gifts, as well as locally-designed clothes and blessedly cheap CDs and DVDs (not that we're suggesting you buy anything pirated, mind you!). Another place for local art is the relatively expensive **Mastatsky Salon** (☎ 227 8363; pr Francyska Skaryny 12; 🚶 M Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi).

It can be fun to wander through one of the big department stores to see what's for sale. Try **GUM** (☎ 226 1048; pr Francyska Skaryny 21; 🚶 M Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja), **TsUM** (☎ 284 8164; pr Francyska Skaryny 54; 🚶 M Ploshcha Jakuba Kolasa), and the **Na Nemige shopping centre** (☎ 220 9747; vul Njamiha 8; 🚶 M Njamiha). Here you can also get good-quality, inexpensive lingerie made by

the Belarusian company Milavitsa (www.milavitsa.com.by).

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Most international flights use **Minsk-2 airport** (☎ 279 1032), some 40km east of the city off the Moscow highway. A few shorter flights to neighbouring countries use **Minsk-1 airport** (☎ 222 5418), at the end of vul Chkalava, about 3km south of pl Nezalezhnastsi. Flights to Moscow and St Petersburg use both. For more information on international flights to/from Minsk and the contact details of airlines serving Belarus, see p745.

Belarus' national airline, **Belavia** (☎ 210 4100; www.belavia.by; vul Njamiha 14; 🚶 M Njamiha), has an office near Na Nemige shopping centre. For international flight information call ☎ 225 0231.

### Bus

Minsk has several bus stations.

**Central** (tsentralny avtovokzal; ☎ 004, 227 3725; Babrujskaja vul 12; 🚶 M Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi) Most buses for international destinations leave from here, just east of the train station. No matter what station you leave from, you can buy advance tickets from here.

**Moskovsky** (☎ 219 3622; vul Filimonova 61; 🚶 M Maskouskaja) About 600m northeast of metro Maskouskaja.

**Vostochny bus** (☎ 248 0882; vul Vaneeva 34; 🚶 M Partyzanskaja) About 3km southeast of the centre; bus 8 and trolleybus 20 travel between the central station and Vostochny.

**Yugo-Zapadnaja** (☎ 226 3188; vul Zheleznodorozhnaja 41) To get here, take bus 1, 32 or 41 from vul Druzhnaja at the central bus station. Get off at Yugo-Zapadnaja Stantsija.

See the boxed text, opposite, for the major domestic and international bus services from Minsk's four bus stations.

## Car & Motorcycle

Brestskoe sh, the road from Minsk to Brest (E30/M1), is one of the best in the country – an excellent two-laner all the way. Minsk to Smolensk has a few narrow, slow stretches, and patches of forest alleviate its tedium.

Car-rental agencies in Minsk include **Avis** (☎ 234 7990), upstairs at Hotel Belarus and at Minsk-2 airport, and **Europcar** (☎ 226 9062; pr Masherava 11; 🚶 M Njamiha). Rates start at around

## DOMESTIC & INTERNATIONAL BUS SERVICES FROM MINSK

Destination	Frequency	Duration	Cost	Station
Brest	5 daily	5½hr	BR22,000	Central
Dudutki	3 daily	1½hr	BR7000	Yugo-Zapadnaja
Homel	4-6 daily	7hr	BR23,000	Vostochny
Hrodna	20 daily	4-6hr	BR25,000	Central
Kaunas	2 daily	6hr	BR30,000	Central
Lake Narach	10 daily	2½hr	BR8000	Central
Mahileu	8 daily	4hr	BR18,000	Vostochny
Minskæ Mora	dozens daily	45min	BR5000	Central
Moscow	2 weekly	14½hr	BR34,000	Central
Paris	2 weekly	41hr	BR432,000	Central
Pinsk	2-3 daily	7hr	BR23,000	Vostochny
Polatsk	2-3 daily	5hr	BR20,000	Moskovsky
Prague	9 weekly	23hr	BR142,000	Central
Rīga	daily	10hr	BR45,000	Central
St Petersburg	weekly	19hr	BR50,000	Central
Turau	3 daily	4-6½hr	BR13,000	Vostochny
Vilnius	3 daily	4hr	BR18,000	Central
Vitsebsk	7 daily	4-5½hr	BR23,000	Moskovsky
Warsaw	2 daily	11hr	BR49,000	Vostochny

US\$55 per day, and cars can often be hired with drivers for an extra fee.

## Train

The train station is an impressive, super-modern construction with full services on all its four floors, including left luggage in the basement.

Times in red on station timetables are for weekends and holidays only; those in black are daily. Major domestic and international destinations from Minsk's main train station (prices are for *kupeyny*, 2nd-class, travel):

## Destination Frequency Duration Cost

Brest	8 daily	4½hrs	BR24,000
Homel	3 daily	4½hr	BR25,000
Hrodna	5 daily	6½hr	BR13,000-17,000
Kaliningrad	2 daily	13hr	BR77,000-130,000
Kyiv	daily	12hr	BR45,000
Moscow	20 daily	11hr	BR66,000-104,000
Holatsk	2 daily	6-8hr	BR18,000
Prague	daily	24hr	BR240,000
Riga	3-4 weekly	7½hr	BR98,000
Smolensk	15 daily	4hr	BR31,000
St Petersburg	daily	16hr	BR113,000
Vilnius	daily	4½hr	BR32,000
Vitsebsk	2-3 daily	4½-6hr	BR12,000-18,000
Warsaw	3 daily	9-11hr	BR94,000-120,000

## RESERVATIONS

**Ticket counters** (pl Privakzalnaja; ☎ 005, 596 5410; 🚶 M Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi) are on either side of the main entrance hall of Minsk's train station. However, for non-CIS international destinations such as Prague and Warsaw, counter 13 sells tickets only on the day of departure (open from 8pm to 8am daily). Ask at counters 14 and 15 for train information. Tickets for the slow electric trains to suburban destinations are sold in the smaller building just west of (to the right if facing) the train station.

To save a trip to the station, and to book international tickets in advance, book through any of the city's travel agencies (p669), or at the **international ticket office** (☎ 225 3067; vul Voronyanskoho 6; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat; 🚶 M Institut Kulturny). To purchase tickets for domestic and CIS destinations, you can also use the convenient **ticket office** (☎ 225 6124; pr Francyska Skaryny 18; 🕒 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 7pm Sat & Sun; 🚶 M Kupalawskaja/Kastrychnitskaja), much quieter than the train station.

## GETTING AROUND To/From the Airports

The taxi drivers who lurk around Minsk-2 airport (outside terminals five and six) are vultures who all want about US\$40 for the

40-minute ride into the city (it should cost around US\$25, what you'd pay to get to the airport from the city). You can try to bargain them down, or else wait for one of the hourly buses that cost BR3000 (80 minutes) and take you to the central bus station. Better are the regular *marshrutky* that make the trip in under an hour and cost only BR5000. Both the buses and *marshrutky* head to/from the central bus station. Bus 100 runs regularly between Minsk-1 airport and pr Francyska Skaryny.

### Public Transport

Public transport operates from about 5.30am to 1am daily and serves all parts of the city. You will find trolleybuses 1, 2 and 18 plying pr Francyska Skaryny between pl Nezalezhnastsi and pl Peramohi. The frequent bus 100 is among the most convenient, running northeast along pr Francyska Skaryny to Akamedija Navuk. There are also many *marshrutky* zipping around the city, with their routes displayed in Russian on signs in their windows.

Minsk has two metro lines. Note that some stations still have their Russian names on signs – namely Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi, in places alternatively marked as Ploshchad Lenina; Ploshcha Peramohi, marked as Ploshchad Pobedy; and Kastychnitskaja, which is almost always referred to as Oktyabrskaya. The metro closes around 12.30am.

### TICKETS & PASSES

Individual tickets (or *zhetony*, plastic tokens for the metro) for all modes of transport cost BR360. Except for on the metro, they can be bought inside the vehicle from the person on board wearing a bright vest. Get the ticket and validate it by punching it through one of the red punching machines on the poles. Ten-day and monthly passes are also available for one or all modes of transport. A ten-day/monthly pass on all modes of transport costs just BR8840/25,200. These can be conveniently bought at metro stations.

## AROUND MINSK

### DUDUTKI ДУДУТКИ

Near the sleepy, dusty village of Dudutki, 40km south of Minsk (15km east after a cut-off from the P23 highway), is an

**open-air museum** (☎ 213-7 2525; unguided admission BR9000; 🕒 10am-8pm Tue-Sun May-Oct), where 19th-century Belarusian country life comes to life. Guided tours are offered for BR33,000 per person; an English-speaking guide costs US\$25 per group. If you only make one day trip from Minsk let this be the one.

Traditional crafts, such as carpentry, pottery, handicraft-making and baking are on display in old-style wood-and-hay houses. You can wander around the grounds, taking in the fresh air, spying on a working farm as it was a century ago. Nearby is a working windmill which you can climb. You can also go horse riding or just rest on bales of hay.

Best of all though is the meal you can order, prepared on site using traditional recipes and techniques. Homemade cheeses, bread, *draniki*, *kolduni*, and pork sausages all go down so well, especially with a shot of local *samagon* (moonshine) – make sure you're not the one driving home! A scrumptious meal will cost only BR25,000 to BR35,000.

### Getting There & Away

Public transport to Dudutki is iffy. About three daily buses go to Ptich from Minsk's Yugo-Zapadnaja bus station, letting you off at the village of Dudutki, a 2km walk from the museum complex. Hailing a cab from central Minsk and convincing the driver to wait for you for a few hours there will cost about BR75,000. While all travel agencies organise trips there, **Dudutki Tur** (☎ 017-251 0076; dudutki@telecom.by; vul Dunina Martsinkevicha 6) in Minsk is your best bet. Their prices are practically the same as at the museum, plus they can organise transport (US\$50 there and back for up to seven persons), sauna (US\$40 per hour), snowshoeing (US\$13 per hour) and other activities.

### KHATYN ХАТЫНЬ

The hamlet of Khatyn, 60km north of Minsk, was burned to the ground with all its inhabitants in a 1943 Nazi reprisal. The site is now a sobering memorial centred around a sculpture modelled on the only survivor, Yuzif Kaminsky. Also here: the Graveyard of Villages, commemorating 185 other Belarusian villages annihilated by the

Germans; the Trees of Life (actually concrete posts) commemorating a further 433 villages that were destroyed but rebuilt; and a Memory Wall listing the Nazi concentration camps in Belarus and some of their victims.

Khatyn is about 5km east of the Minsk-Vitebsk road (M3). The turn-off is about 15km north of Lohoysk, opposite the village of Kazryr. There's no reliable public transport out there, but a taxi will cost around BR70,000 for the return journey from Minsk. Pricey trips organised by **Belintourist** (p669) cost US\$70 for two people, US\$90 for three to nine people.

### MIR MIP

☎ 01596 / pop 2500

About 97km southwest of Minsk and 8km north off the Minsk-Brest road is the small town of Mir where the 16th-century **Mir Castle** sits overlooking a pond.

Once owned by the powerful Radziwill princes, the castle is now under Unesco protection. Built predominantly out of stone and red brick, it's a walled complex with five towers surrounding a courtyard. The exterior detailing was intended to be aesthetic as well as defensive. Though most of the decidedly ho-hum complex is under reconstruction, one tower is open as an **archaeological museum** (☎ 23610; admission BR5000, guided tour in Russian BR20,000; 🕒 10am-5pm Wed-Sun).

From the central bus station in Minsk, some 12 buses a day head to the town of Navahrudak (Novogrudok in Russian) and stop in Mir (BR7000, 2½ hours) shortly after they turn off the main highway. For an alternative way of getting to Mir, see right.

### NJASVIZH НЯСВІЖ

☎ 01770 / pop 15,000

Njasvizh, 118km southwest of Minsk, is one of the oldest sites in the country, dating from the 13th century. It reached its zenith in the mid-16th century while run by the mighty Radziwill magnates, who had the town rebuilt with the most advanced system of fortification known at the time.

Over the centuries, war, fire and neglect diminished the town's status and today, it's a random mix of painted wooden cottages

and bland housing, but with enough fine pieces of 16th-century architecture and a great park to happily occupy you for a few hours.

There's a small but interesting **Local History Museum** (☎ 55874; Leninskaja vul 96; admission BR5000; 🕒 8am-5pm), a healthy 2km walk from the bus station, with everything from farm tools to maps and photos depicting life over the centuries in Njasvizh.

From the bus station, walk southeast (to your right) down Savetskaja vul for five blocks to the 16th-century **town hall**, one of the oldest of its kind in the country. Two blocks south is the impressive **Farny Polish Roman Catholic Church**. Large and sombre, it was built between 1584 and 1593 in early baroque style and features a splendidly proportioned façade.

Adjacent to the Farny Church is the red-brick arcaded **Castle Gate Tower**. Built in the 16th century, it was part of a wall and gateway controlling the passage between the palace fortress and the town. There's an **excursion bureau** (☎ 54145; admission BR5000, Russian-language guided tours BR40,000; 🕒 8am-5pm) in the gate tower, where you pay to enter the palace fortress grounds; the staff can help organise guided tours.

Further on is a causeway leading to the **Radziwill Palace Fortress** (1583), designed by the Italian architect Bernardoni, who was also responsible for the Farny Church. In Soviet times the fortress was turned into a sanatorium, and there are vague plans to turn it into a full-fledged museum. Only a few halls have been preserved.

Unesco protection and money would be better going to this fine architectural ensemble, rather than Mir; the splendid, lush parkland and nearby lake make for fitting surroundings. Across another causeway, you can reach a lazy picnic area by the sleepy banks of Lake Dzinkava, where you'll find pedal and rowboat rental.

### Getting There & Away

From Minsk's Vostochny bus station, there are four to six daily buses to Njasvizh (BR10,000, 2½ hours).

There are two buses daily running between Njasvizh and Mir, making it possible, though tricky, to visit both from Minsk in one day.





Savetskaja is the main drag and has several pedestrian sections. Brest Fortress lies at the confluence of the Buh and Mukhavets Rivers, about 2km southwest of the centre down pr Masherava.

## Information

**Belpromstroi Bank** (pl Lenina; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, to 6.30pm Sat, to 5.30pm Sun) Has a currency exchange, Western Union and nearby ATM.

**Beltelekom** (☎ 221 315; pr Masherava 21; ☎ 7am-10.30pm) Long-distance calls can be made from here, plus there's Internet access for BR1800 per hour (pay first at Booth 2).

**Brest Intourist** (☎ 200 510; pr Masherava 15; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Inside Hotel Intourist, this office is superfriendly and highly recommended. They offer 90-minute tours of Brest Fortress with a translator for US\$25 for up to four people. They're also your best bet to get to Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park (p686) and to get discounts for Hotel Intourist.

**www.brestregion.com** English-language news about the city, plus photos and discussion boards to help you get excited about your visit.

## Sights

### BREST FORTRESS

If you are going to see only one Soviet WWII memorial in your life, make it **Brest Fortress** (Brestskaja krepost; ☎ 204 109; pr Masherava; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Tue-Sun). The scale of the fortress is so massive and the heroism of its defenders so vast, even the giant stone face and glistening obelisk are dwarfed in comparison.

Between 1838 and 1842 the entire town of Brest was moved east to make way for this massive fort. During the interwar period it was used mainly for housing soldiers and had lost most of its military importance. Nevertheless, two regiments bunking here at the time of the sudden German invasion in 1941 defended the aged fort for an astounding month. The whole structure withstood incredible attacks, including at least 500 cannon fires and 600 bombs. What is left of the fortress is too overwhelming to be poignant, but too emotional to be gauche.

At the **main entrance**, a looped recording of soldier songs, gunfire and a radio broadcast informing of the German attack echo from a large, star-shaped opening in a huge concrete mass on top of the old brick outer wall. Just inside to the left is the harrowing **Thirst statue**. Across a small bridge and to

your right are the ruins of the **White Palace**, where the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed. Further to the right is the **Defence of Brest Fortress Museum** (☎ 200 365; admission BR2100; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Tue-Sun). Its extensive and dramatic exhibits demonstrate aptly the plight of the defenders.

The centrepiece of the fortress ensemble is the huge **Valour monument**, a stone soldier's head projecting from a massive rock. Adjacent is a sky-scraping obelisk, with an eternal flame and stones bearing the names of those who died. There are often men and women in period military uniforms marching to sombre orchestral music.

Behind the Valour rock is the attractive Byzantine **Nikolaiivsky Church**, the oldest in the city, which dates from when the town centre occupied the fortress site. Once part of a large monastery before being turned into a soldier's garrison club, it was gutted during the 1941 siege but has since been restored and now holds regular services.

Heading south, to your left, there's the **Brest Art Museum** (☎ 200 826; admission BR2100; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Sun), which showcases local arts and crafts. To the right is the unmistakable **Kholmiskie Gate**; its bricks are decorated with crenulated turrets and its outer face is riddled with hundreds of bullet and shrapnel holes. Beyond the gate is the small **Bereste Archaeological Museum** (☎ 205 554; admission BR2100; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Tue-Sun) which exhibits several log cabins found on land nearby.

To get to the fortress, walk to the end of pr Masherava (about 2km from the centre); or wait for the hourly bus 17 which starts at the bus station and goes along pr Masherava.

### OTHER SIGHTS

The city's most interesting museum is the **Museum of Confiscated Art** (☎ 204 195; vul Lenina 39; admission BR2100; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), a display of valuable international art pieces (paintings, sculptures, ceramics) seized by Brest border guards as they were being smuggled out of the country. It is no doubt the most eclectic art collection in Belarus. It often has great temporary exhibits.

In the **History of Brest Museum** (☎ 231 765; vul Levatevskaha 3; admission BR2100; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun) there's a small exhibit on the city in its different guises throughout history. Check the painting of Brest-Litovsk in medieval

times to see what a vibrant European city it was then. The quiet neighbourhood around the museum, lined with quaint wooden houses, is worth strolling through. Just behind the museum is the sprawling **Park of Culture and Leisure** (Park Kultury i Otdykha), with a few children's rides, sculptures and a great restaurant (right). The **Regional Museum** (☎ 239 116; vul Karla Marxa 60; admission BR2100; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat), has an odd exhibit on the history of science, and a small display on the Chernobyl disaster.

With its gold cupolas and yellow-and-blue façades shining gaily in the sunshine, the finely detailed 200-year-old Orthodox **St Nikolaiv Church** (cnr vuls Savetskaja & Mitskevichka) is one of several lovely churches in Brest. On pl Lenina, a **statue** of Lenin faces east towards Moscow, but it appears to be pointing accusatorily across the street to the 1856 **St Christopher's Polish Catholic Church** (pl Lenina). Just a block west of Hotel Intourist is the peach-and-green **St Simon Orthodox Cathedral** (cnr pr Masherava & vul Karla Marxa), built in 1865 in the Russian Byzantine style (the gold on the cupolas was added in 1997).

## Sleeping

**Hotel Vesta** (☎ 237 169; vul Krupskoi 16; s/d €33/50, ste €64-137; ☎) A bit pricier than the rest, but head over heels better too. Pleasant, quaint and as comfy as your granny's home (all rooms have TV and fridge), the hotel is surrounded by peaceful, green streets.

**Komnata Otdykha** (resting rooms; ☎ 273 967; dm BR11,000) For true and proud penny-pinchers, this is a sort-of hostel on the 2nd floor of the train station's main building. It's among Belarus' cheapest places to stay, so don't expect showers – you're lucky to get a toilet! It's kept tidy, however. The colourful characters who stay here make this inappropriate for lone female travellers.

**Hotel Intourist** (☎ 202 082; www.brest-intourist.com; pr Masherava 15; s/d BR78,000/106,000; (P)) Set in a typical 1970s Soviet building, with all the expected rigid formalities. Staff are helpful and rooms are spacious and bright.

**Hotel Buh** (☎ 236 417; vul Lenina 2; s/d from BR78,000/106,000) This stately building with neoclassical entryway and pagan-themed murals has seen better days (we hope). On the dreary side, but the rooms are spacious and have a certain old-world charm. If your room faces the main street, it'll be noisy.

## Eating

For self-catering, head to the well-stocked **Central Market** (cnr vuls Pushkinskaja & Kuybisheva; ☎ 8am-6pm).

**Jules Verne** (☎ 236 717; vul Hoholja 29; mains BR8000-20,000) Despite the maritime décor and seafood slant at this fabulous restaurant, the menu is a dizzying and odd combination of Indian and Chinese – but it works. Best is that everything from nan bread to dim sum is mouthwatering and sumptuous. A highly attentive staff (who appear from nowhere to refill your water glass) adds to the dining pleasure. Vegetarians will find plenty to purr about.

**Traktir U Ozera** (☎ 235 763; Park Kultury i Otdykha; mains BR6000-20,000; ☎ noon-11pm) This wins hands-down for best location, perched as it is by a pond in the city's prettiest park. The terrace sits under willow trees. Inside the spacious, country-style dining hall, you can feast on simple shashlyks as well as tasty, more elaborate fish and grilled meat meals.

**Café Rondo** (☎ 264 134; vul Savetskaja 45; mains BR3000-6000; ☎ 11am-11pm) An exotic trip back to the USSR is assured in this café, where there's a shot glass set at every place, waiting to be filled with cheap vodka. A great place for an inexpensive, quick fill-up on standards like *pelmeni* (Russian-style ravioli), bliny and borsch.

**Magellan** (☎ 236 292; vul Kamsomolskaja 36; mains BR2000-6000; ☎ 10am-11pm) Where Soviet cafeteria meets modern fast-food bistro. A slick and comfortable place where you can point to what you want before ordering. Nothing fancier here than meat *kotlety* (cutlets) and salads but all perfectly tasty. Come evening, it's a barlike hangout for young people before they hit the clubs.

## Entertainment

Good bars in Brest are few and far between; most locals chill at the many all-purpose places listed here and under Eating – restaurants or clubs which also double as bars (or casinos, or cinemas...).

**Matrixa** (☎ 238 245; vul Savetskaja 73; billiards ☎ 9am-1am, club ☎ 9pm-5am) In a gleaming, hypermodern building is this entertainment complex, with a huge pool hall and hyperhip nightclub, expertly decorated to recall every second person's favourite film, *The Matrix*.

**Zio Pepe** (☎ 205 053; bul Shevchenko 4; ☎ noon-6am) One of the country's many all-purpose

hangouts, this is a nightclub (after 9pm), bowling alley, bar, casino and eatery all rolled into one. If the chrome-and-black lights don't give you indigestion, the thin-crust pizzas are very good, as are the other Italian dishes.

**Brest Drama & Music Theatre** (☎ 266 440; vul Lenina 21) Puts on government-approved pieces and classics.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 004, 238 142; vul Mitskevicha) is in the centre of town, next to the city's main market. There are about six *marshrutky* and buses a day to Hrodna (BR25,000, four to six hours). There are also four buses daily to Warsaw (BR52,000, five hours) and services several times a week to various cities in Germany.

### TRAIN

Brest's impressive, classical **train station** (☎ 005, 273 277) is a busy place. There are at least three daily trains to Warsaw (BR70,000, four to five hours). Seven daily trains head to Moscow (BR80,000, 12 to 15 hours), and one a day to St Petersburg (BR90,000, 19 hours). There are two daily trains to Berlin (BR197,000, 12 hours) and one to Prague (BR240,000, 16 hours).

Domestic trains include a daily train to Hrodna (BR19,000, 8½ hours), two a day to Vitsebsk (BR27,000, ten to 20 hours), and two a day to Homel (BR27,000, 12 hours).

Moscow, St Petersburg, Sverdlovsk and Vitsebsk-bound trains also stop in Minsk, as well as four other daily trains (BR19,000 to BR40,000, four to 10 hours). The slowest train does the trip overnight, saving you a night in a hotel. Generally, the trains with final destinations other than Minsk are the most expensive.

For all trains leaving Brest for Europe, you have to go through customs at the station, so get there early. Tickets for trips outside Belarus are purchased from the *mezhdunarodny kassi* (international ticket windows) in the main hall of the ticketing building.

Tickets for domestic electric trains (to Minsk, Hrodna, Homel or Vitsebsk) are sold in the *passazhirskiy pavilon* (passenger train terminal) behind the train station, away from the city.

## AROUND BREST Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park

A Unesco World Heritage Site some 60km north of Brest, **Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park** (☎ 01631-56370, 56396) is the oldest wildlife refuge in Europe and the pride of Belarus. The reserve went from obscurity to the front page in late 1991 as the presidents of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine signed the death certificate of the USSR – a document creating the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – at the Viskuli dacha, now the occasional residence of Lukashenka. The park is coadministered by Poland, where half of the park's territory lies.

Some 1300 sq km of primeval forest survive here. Today it's all that remains of a canopy that eight centuries ago covered northern Europe. Some oak trees here are more than 600 years old, some pines at least 300 years old.

At least 55 mammal species, including deer, lynx, boars, wild horses, wolves, elks, ermines, badgers, martens, otters, mink and beavers call this park home, but the area is most celebrated for its 300 or so European bison, the continent's largest land mammal. These free-range *zoobr* – slightly smaller than their American cousins – were driven to near extinction (the last one living in the wild was shot by a hunter in 1919) and then bred back from 52 animals that had survived in zoos. Now a total of about 2000 exist, most of them in and around western Belarus, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine.

There's a nature museum and *volerei* (enclosures), where you can view bison, deer, boars and other animals (including the rare hybrid tarpan horse, a crossbreed of a species that was also shot into near extinction).

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

The national park rarely sees individual tourists, partly as the area is a border zone and visitors not in a prearranged group need special permission to be there. However, you can take a *marshrutka* (1½ hours, BR5500) there – they leave regularly throughout the day from Brest's bus station; the destination is Kamjanjyky. You are unlikely to be asked to show special permission, however to avoid problems it's best to book an excursion through Brest In-tourist (p684). It's about US\$50 for a small

group, generally under five persons, and they can custom-make tours according to budget. They're a fun bunch to go with, and also include visits at historical spots along the way to the park, can fix a summer picnic in a lovely area, and arrange overnight accommodation in the park itself for roughly US\$30 per double room.

## HRODNA ГРОДНА

☎ 0152 / pop 310,000

Hrodna (Grodno in Russian) in many parts has the look and feel of an overgrown village; it's hard to believe that this is one of the country's largest cities. As in a big village, there's not much to do here other than hang out, watch life go by, peer across the Nioman River and check out some fine churches. Hrodna survived the war better than elsewhere in Belarus and has some picturesque corners, yet oddly enough these are more impressive in photographs than in person.

A novelty for foreigners is how un-Western the city looks and feels, sitting in Europe yet as if capitalism passed it by. Devoid of Western advertisements and shops or any sense of a customer-gear industry, Hrodna really does feel 'far away'.

Hrodna has been tossed back and forth between major powers for its entire existence. Settled since ancient times and first mentioned in 1128, it was an important town under the Princedom of Polatsk and was a crucial outpost on the fringes of Kyivan Rus until it was absorbed by Lithuania in the late 14th century. Russia took over in the 1770s. After being overrun in WWI, the city found itself back under Polish control until 1939.

During WWII, Hrodna's large Jewish contingent was wiped out. Today, Hrodna has a substantial Polish Catholic population, whose presence gives it a welcome whiff of multiculturalism.

## Orientation

The city centre is about 1km southwest of the train station and occupies an elevated portion of land overlooking a shallow bend in the Nioman River to the south. The mostly pedestrianised vul Savetskaja is a favourite strolling venue. At its northern end is the city's main department store, and its southern end spills into the wide, hectic pl Savetskaja, which in turn extends towards the river.

## Information

**Belpromstroj Bank** (vul Telegrafnaja 8;

☎ 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat) Currency exchange and ATM.

**Beltelekom** (☎ 730 061; vul Telegrafnaja 24; per hr BR1900; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun) Fast computers and phones for long-distance calls in a modern setting.

**Main post office** (☎ 441 792; vul Karla Marxa 29;

☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat)

**Ranita Book Store** (☎ 721 705; vul Mastovaja 33)

Sells city maps.

## Sights

The sight in Hrodna is the **Catholic Farny Cathedral** (☎ 442 677; pl Savetskaja 4; ☎ 7.30am-8.30pm), one of Belarus' most impressive churches. Inside is a row of splendidly ornate altars leading to a huge main altarpiece constructed of multiple columns interspersed with sculpted saints. The sense of space and history inside is almost dizzying. It was built up from the late 17th century and throughout the 18th century, as foreign masters (especially Kristof Peykher from Königsberg) designed altars and drew frescoes. Another church once stood on the opposite side of the square. It was damaged in WWII and later razed by the Soviet regime; fragmented **foundation ruins** now mark the spot.

The 16th-century Catholic **Bernadine Church & Seminary** (Parizhskoy Kamuni 1) was built predominantly in the Renaissance style, and the bell tower was redone with a defiant baroque flair 250 years later, and again after WWII. It stands atop a hill opposite the bizarre, spiderlike **Drama Theatre** (☎ 453 428; vul Mastovaja 35), looking much like a spacecraft about to lift off.

Near the train station is the attractive 1904–05 **Pokrovsky Cathedral** (vul Azhyeshka 23), a candy-striped house with blue-and-gold domes. Nearby is the **Museum of Garadnitsa History** (☎ 721 669; vul Azhyeshka 37; admission BR2100; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat). This tiny city history museum has almost nothing in it, but it's pleasant to walk around the 18th-century wooden home it's housed in, and they sell curious handcrafted items and souvenirs.

About 400m west of the bus station is the **Pobrigitski Monastery** (vul Karla Marxa 27), built in 1651, which has some lovely ornaments on its façade, as well as some 18th-century wooden buildings inside the complex.





as that of the country's national hero, Francyska Skaryny, who published the first Bible in a Slavonic language in 1517–19. Today, however, its lovely monastery and cathedral are the only sights of interest to tourists.

The Princedom of Polatsk, first mentioned in 862, was one of the earliest Slavic settlements. It was absorbed by the Kingdom of Lithuania in 1307 and later by Poland, which introduced Catholicism. Polatsk prospered as a river port, but was continually flung back and forth between the feuding Muscovy tsars and the Polish crown, being reduced to rubble more than once. Ivan the Terrible had his day here in 1563 when he had the entire city council drowned or impaled for daring to show too much independence. The new city of Novopolatsk, a grey concrete industrial centre, has grown up right next to Polatsk, making the immediate surroundings rather unattractive.

### Orientation

The centre lies 1km south of the train and bus stations (along vul Hoholja). The main axis is the east–west pr Karla Marxa, which has pl Francyska Skaryny at its eastern end and pl Lenina at its western end. The oldest and most interesting area is along vul Lenina, parallel to and one street south of pr Karla Marxa.

### Information

**Belarusbank** (pr Karla Marksa 7; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 2 to 3pm Sat) Currency exchange and 24-hour ATM.

**Travel Bureau** (☎ 491 745; vul Pushkina 21/31; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri) Organises local excursions, translation services and accommodation.

### Sights

#### ST SOPHIA CATHEDRAL

Atop a small hill past the western end of vul Lenina is the finely moulded façade of the St Sophia Cathedral, its twin baroque bell towers rising high over the Dvina River. It's the oldest surviving monument of architecture in Belarus and one of two original 11th-century Kyivan Rus cathedrals (the other is in Novgorod) modelled and named after the St Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv. Its original appearance, however, has long gone. Damaged by fire in the 15th century, it was turned into an armoury which was subsequently destroyed by retreating Russians in 1710. About 40 years later the

Poles reconstructed it – inside and out – as a baroque Catholic cathedral.

The interior is a **museum** (☎ 445 340; vul Zamkovaja 1; admission BR3000; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun), and parts of the 11th-century foundations can be seen in the vaulted basement. Out front is a large stone on which a cross was carved in the 12th century by Prince Boris, who etched Christian symbols on every formerly pagan rock or stone he could find.

#### ST EFRASINNIA MONASTERY

This **monastery** (☎ 445 679; vul Efrasini Polotskoi 59; admission free; ☎ noon–4pm) was founded in 1125 by St Efrasinnia (1110–73), Belarus' first saint and the first woman to be canonised by the Orthodox Church. She was the founder of the city's first library and had a strong independent streak, shunning numerous offers of marriage to establish her own convent here and to commission the Holy Saviour Church. Still standing, it's one of the finest examples of early 12th-century religious architecture in Belarus, and the small, dark interior is mesmerisingly beautiful, with haunting frescoes. The saint's embalmed remains are in a glass-covered coffin inside.

The small **Church of the Transfiguration** (Spaso-Preobrazhenski Sabor), on the right as you enter the grounds, was originally built in the 17th century, although the current façade dates from 1833.

In the centre of the ensemble stands the large **Kresto-Vozdvizhenskom Cathedral** (1897). The impressive interiors, where most services are held, contain, in finely gilded cases, the sanctified remains of 239 saints, as well as miracle-performing icons. The monastery restarted religious services in 1990 and today, there are 90 female monks living here.

To get to the monastery, you can either walk due north from pl Lenina on vul Frunza for a brisk half-hour, watching for the complex on your right, or take the infrequent buses 4 or 17 three stops from the northern end of pl Lenina. The monastery is used to accepting visitors into its grounds outside official opening hours, but not all of its buildings may be open.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Dzvina** (☎ 442 235; pr Karla Marxa 13; s/d BR48,000/60,000) This is the only hotel in town, with average but adequate rooms. Its res-

taurant serves a mediocre meal, which will do nicely in a pinch.

If you're really stuck for cash, there's a converted **train wagon** (☎ 446 237; BR7000) at the train station, with no showers. **Bratchina** (☎ 490 769; vul Lenina 22; mains BR3000–7000; ☎ 10am–11pm) is a decent little café serving standard fare at low prices.

### Getting There & Away

The modern-looking building next to (east of) the older train station sells long-distance train tickets, while tickets for the five daily electric trains connecting Polatsk and Vitsebsk (BR8000, two hours) are sold inside the train station itself. Most long-distance routes are served by through-trains.

Two trains a day run to Minsk (BR18,000, six to eight hours), and one train daily goes to Moscow (BR62,000, 13 hours) via Smolensk (BR40,000, five hours).

The bus station is 100m east of the train station, with two or three daily buses to Minsk (BR20,000, five hours) and Vitsebsk (BR8000, two hours), and one daily to Homel (BR32,000, 12 hours). Left-luggage lockers are available.

### Getting Around

Getting around this town is an easy stroll, even with a moderate backpack; the half-hour walk out to the monastery will be as far as you'll need to go.

### VITSEBSK ВІЦЕБСК

☎ 0212 / pop 350,000

Vitsebsk (Vitebsk in Russian), 277km north of the capital, is in some ways the most intriguing and dynamic Belarusian city outside Minsk, mainly due to its artistic heritage. Marc Chagall was born here, studying under an unheralded master, Yudel Pyen, who opened the country's first art school here in 1897; the artists Vasili Kandinsky, Ilya Repin and Kasimir Malevich also spent some time in what was then a dynamic city.

Aside from this, the city boasts what even Minsk cannot – a sense of the past. Several small areas of pre-WWII houses lend a delicate elegance to the relatively hilly city sitting at the confluence of three rivers, the dramatic Dvina, and the smaller Vitba and Luchesa.

Its past, however, is as painful as that of other Belarusian cities. Its history goes back to the 6th-century Varangian explorers from

Scandinavia who settled here. Part of the Princedom of Polatsk, Vitsebsk was also pulled into the sphere of Kyivan Rus, then fell under the Lithuanian and Polish umbrellas before being finally pinched by Moscow.

It was burned to ashes by Ivan the Terrible in the mid-16th century, and was savagely razed in WWII, when only 118 people out of a prewar population of 170,000 survived. Each year on 26 June, the city celebrates the day in 1944 when the Red Army liberated it from the Nazis. Though less developed than Minsk, Vitsebsk has a down-to-earth quality that visitors will appreciate.

### Orientation

The remnants of the old town lie along a picturesque, steep ridge about 2km north-east of the train station and across the Dvina River. Heading due east from the station is the main thoroughfare, vul Kirava, which becomes vul Zamkovaja after it crosses the river, and vul Frunze after it crosses vul Lenina, the main north–south axis.

### Information

There's a 24-hour ATM inside a kiosk on the northeast corner of vuls Lenina and Zamkovaja.

**Internet Club** (☎ 372 966; per hr BR1900; ☎ 24hr)

Handily located on the 2nd floor of the train station.

**Sputnik** (☎ 240 556; vul Smolenskaja 9) Friendly travel agency which can organise city and regional tours.

### Sights

Immerse yourself in what distinguishes Vitsebsk from other Belarusian cities: art. Nowhere else in the country will you get such a concentrated dose of quality art! Absolute musts are the Chagall-related museums (see boxed text, p692). The grand halls of the **Art Museum** (☎ 362 231; vul Lenina 32; admission BR3000; ☎ 11am–6pm Wed–Sun) are decked out with mainly local art, both old and new. There are numerous 18th- to 20th-century works, including those by Repin and Vladimir Egorovic Makovsky. A highlight is the collection of very moving realist scenes of early 20th-century Vitsebsk street life by Yudel Pyen. Of the 793 paintings he donated to the city before he died, only 200 have survived, most of them held here.

A few houses away, past the **town hall** distinguishable by its clock tower, is the **Regional Museum** (☎ 364 712; vul Lenina 36; admission

BR3000; ☎ 11am-6pm Wed-Sun), where you are guaranteed something interesting and thought provoking. There are up to five temporary exhibitions (usually paintings and photography) plus a permanent one full of 11th- to 14th-century artefacts from the city and region.

From here, taking a walk up vul Suvorava and exploring the surrounding side streets is a pleasant way to experience what's left of old Vitsebsk, with some fine 18th and 19th-century buildings and a laid-back old-world ambience.

The **Museum of the Belarusian Army** (☎ 223 972; vul Voinov Internatsionalistov 20; admission BR3000; ☎ by appointment), set up by veterans of the Afghan War, has some touching exhibits on the history of war on Belarusian soil from the 6th century, as well as of Belarusians participating in foreign wars. The museum is difficult to find on your own; take a BR8000 taxi from the centre.

While Vitsebsk does not have many churches of note, there is a pair of very different **Orthodox churches** on the eastern bank of the Dvina, near the main bridge on vul Zamkovaja. These are reconstructions built in 1998 of 10th- (wooden) and 13th-century (white stone) styles. Both hold regular services; the atmospheric wooden church is especially worth visiting.

### MARC CHAGALL

One of the most important names in 20th-century art, visionary Marc Chagall (1887–1985), often grouped in with the surrealists, was born in Vitsebsk on 7 July 1887. He spent from 1897 to 1910 in what is now the **Marc Chagall House Museum** (☎ 363 468; vul Pokrovskaja 11; admission BR3000; ☎ 11am-7pm Tue-Sun), now charmingly kitted out with early-20th-century Jewish knick-knacks and photos. To get there, turn left when exiting the bus or train station, walk one block, then turn right onto vul 1-ja Krasina. After a block you'll see a fanciful **monument** to the artist; turn left here onto vul Pokrovskaja.

Chagall left Vitsebsk to go on to greater fame in St Petersburg and Moscow, finally settling in Paris from 1923, where he lived until his death, churning out fantastically poetic and often humorous murals and artwork. Many of his pieces reflect the Jewish country life of his childhood, largely influenced by his beloved Vitsebsk.

Nestled in a pretty park, the **Chagall Museum** (☎ 360 387; www.chagall.vitsebsk.by; vul Punta 2; admission BR3000; ☎ 11am-7pm Tue-Sun) has two floors filled with 300 original, colourful lithographs (all donations), as well as reproductions of some of his famous paintings, including the infamous murals he did for the Moscow Jewish Theatre, considered so mesmerising that they were banned from the stage for distracting the audience.

There would be more originals at the museum had Soviet authorities accepted Chagall's offer to donate some to the city of his birth; they didn't think much of his art and declined. To get to the museum from Vitsebsk's Regional Museum, head north along vul Suvorava to vul Uritsoho, make a left and walk to the end; the museum will be on your right.

### Festivals & Events

Belarus' best-loved cultural event is held here; the immensely popular **Slavyansky Bazar** (Slavic Bazaar) in mid-July brings together dozens of singers and performers from Slavic countries for a weeklong series of concerts. The annual event attracts tens of thousands of visitors, creating a huge citywide party.

### Sleeping

**Hotel Dvina** (☎ 377 173; vul Ilinskoho 2; s/d BR32,000/45,000) This enormous student residence on the western banks of the Dvina is a great deal. The *Shining*-like endless corridors are creepy, but all rooms have toilet and showers (leaky though they may be).

**Hotel Eridan** (☎ 362 456; vul Savetskaja 21/17; s/d/st BR141,000/159,000/267,000) In the quiet old town, this is intimate and upscale. Extremely comfortable and modern, the hotel also boasts an excellent (and expensive) restaurant.

**Vetrzh** (☎ 217 204; pr Chemiahovsky 25/1; s/d BR72,000/90,000) With 300 beds and the classic concrete look of a huge bomb shelter, the Vetrzh is a standard post-Soviet hotel just south of the city centre (tram 4 from the bus and train stations goes there).

### Eating & Drinking

**Vitebsky Traktir** (☎ 362 957; vul Suvorava 4; mains BR6000-9000) Hands-down the best place in

town – once you try it you'll not want to bother looking any further. It boasts charming, cavelike rooms, friendly service and a diverse menu, chock-full of inventive, tasty dishes such as gachpacho.

**XXI Vek** (☎ 364 913; vul Lenina 40; mains BR4000-9000; ☎ 11am-3am) With a reputation for being alternative, this restaurant has a slightly underground look and feel, and decent, if unexciting, food. After 11pm on weekends, the place turns into a fun disco with that retro, secretive Eastern European feel that foreigners love. It's also the city's only gay-friendly establishment.

**Kafe Teatralnaja** (☎ 369 966; vul Zamkovaja 2; mains BR6000-12,000; ☎ noon-6am) This cavernous, pseudomodern restaurant-disco (after 11pm) has artistic pretensions and attracts a well-to-do over-30 crowd. Its menu is as large as the place itself, and the service slightly starchy.

### Getting There & Away

Vitsebsk is on one of the major railway lines heading south from St Petersburg into Ukraine. There are two or three daily trains to Minsk (BR12,000 to BR18,000, 4½ to six hours) and one to St Petersburg (BR95,000, 13 hours). On even-numbered days of the month trains run to Kyiv (BR56,000, 16 hours). There's also a daily train to both Moscow (BR40,000, 11 hours) and Brest (BR25,000, 16 hours), and on odd-numbered days to Hrodna (BR20,000, 12 hours). Domestic electric trains connect Polatsk and Vitsebsk (two hours, BR8000) five times daily, but most southbound or westbound trains also stop at Polatsk.

There are at least seven daily buses and *marshrutky* to Minsk (BR23,000, four to 5½ hours). Buses head two or three times daily to Polatsk (BR8000, two hours).

### Getting Around

While Vitsebsk is larger than most other regional centres, the city is pleasant to explore on foot. Buses ply the 1.5km main drag from the bus and train stations into town; get off just after crossing the Dvina and you'll be just 500m from the Art Museum.

### TURAU ТУРАЎ

☎ 02353 / pop 2000

At first glance this tiny speck on the map may seem like a dusty village-cum-town; one main road, on which cows and chickens

vie for space with tractors and cars. Hard to believe that this was once the seat of the great Principality of Turov, one of the first and main principalities in ancient Kyivan Rus. Here once stood an elaborate fortress, 70 churches, six monasteries and four cathedrals; Turau (Turov in Russian) was a major cultural and educational centre.

Most visitors come here as part of a tour of the nearby Pripyatsky National Park (below) – or to see the town's two magic crosses. In a cemetery near the site of the ancient fortress is a **small cross** that is supposedly rising from the ground at a rate of 1.9cm a year. It's also apparently widening at the same rate, which leads locals to believe that the cross has magical powers. Locals and people from far away now visit the cross to heal themselves or pray.

Another stone cross stands inside the **Vesvyatskaya church** (vul Leninskaja 95). It reportedly floated upriver from Kyiv and planted itself upright in the Pripet River in Turau 1000 years ago. The cross' unusual appearance inside the wooden church adds an almost pagan touch to the Russian Orthodox surroundings.

The **Regional Museum** (☎ 75375; vul Kirava; admission BR500; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Wed-Sun) is a good source of information on Turau's history. Informal town excursions can be booked from here (as well as from the Pripyatsky National Park, who can also find you a translator; see below), and there is a lovingly designed exhibit on Turau's grand history. This is your best source for the myriad legends about the region – there are enough to fill a book and their mysteriousness will add exponentially to your visit.

The Pripyatsky National Park (below) can arrange accommodation in town, either in a private home or in a guesthouse. See p694 for information on transport to and from Turau.

### ПРИПЯТСКИЙ НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫЙ ПАРК

The 82,460 hectares covered by this **national park** (☎ 75644, 75173; vul Leninskaja 127, Turau) offer a unique chance to explore a vast, relatively untouched swath of marshes, swampland and floodplains. As unattractive as 'swamp' might sound, the landscape here is striking, even haunting, and provides a welcome



## CHORNOBYL

Most of us don't remember where exactly we were on 26 April 1986. Yet everyone in Belarus, Ukraine and western Russia old enough to remember knows exactly what they were doing when news came that the fourth reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear plant, just a few kilometres south of the Belarusian border, exploded.

Some 70% of Chernobyl's released radioisotopes fell on Belarus (primarily in the Homel and Mahileu districts in the south and east, but caesium-137 fallout was registered in many other regions of the country), contaminating about a quarter of its territory on which 2.2 million people lived. Most continue to live in these regions.

Compounding the lack of proper response by the authorities at the time of the accident and the reports underestimating its dangers, the percentage of Belarus' state budget dealing with lingering aftereffects has been more than halved under Lukashenka's rule, to under 8%. Financial benefits to people living in contaminated areas have been gradually cut, and the government encourages resettlement of effected areas. Scientists and officials who dare speak out about continuing consequences have been intimidated and jailed on trumped-up charges. Fewer children who suffered from the fallout (or whose parents did) are being sent abroad for treatment; Lukashenka has stated that Belarus' children need not be poisoned by Western culture.

The dangers of exposure to radiation for the casual tourist are negligible, even for those who visit areas that experienced fallout (these regions are not covered in this book).

contrast to the stretches of flat, dry fields that cover most of Belarus.

Locals dub the area the 'lungs of Europe' as air currents passing over wetlands are reoxygenated. Flora and fauna particular to wetlands are found here, including more than 800 plant species, some 50 mammal species and more than 200 species of birds.

At the **park headquarters & museum** (☎ 75644; vul Leninskajaja 127) you can tour a great display of the flora and fauna specific to the area, and make all the arrangements you need. Excursions range from one day to a week, and can include extended fishing, hunting and boating expeditions deep into the marshlands. Cruises on the river are particularly recommended.

Park staff can also put you up at one of their guesthouses in town, arrange accommodation in a private home or, even better, put you up in the middle of the park's nature itself. Several comfy cottages have been kitted out with kitchens and saunas and are set in sublimely peaceful settings. The park

organises winter ice-fishing expeditions (followed by vodka and sauna, of course) and many summer activities. Prices vary, but generally a person need only spend about €60 per day, including accommodation, three meals and guided tours.

From the UK, a yearly, eight-day trek throughout the national park can be organised for about £1000 per person via **Nature Trek** ([www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)).

## Getting There & Away

Transport is tricky. Two buses each day (BR13,000, 6½ hours), plus one early morning *marshrutka*, (BR22,000, four hours) make the long trip to Turau from Minsk's Vostochny bus station. By car, take the P23 south from Minsk until the end, drive east on the M10 for 26km, south on the P88 for 25km, then head west for 6km to Turau. Staff at the park headquarters can also arrange private transport to or from anywhere in Belarus, though it might end up being pricey.