

# Belarus Беларусь

Few people consider venturing into this hermetically sealed Soviet time capsule, notoriously ruled with an iron fist by its moustachioed megalomaniac, Alexander Lukashenko.

But that's exactly why you *should* visit. Only in Belarus – where the KGB still listens in to phone calls and people keep their politics to a low whisper – will you feel as if the Cold War never ended. Although getting a visa isn't a problem, the government isn't crazy about foreign influences and encourages xenophobia with all-pervasive propaganda. Westerners cool enough to come here are living, breathing examples that the world outside Belarus is not going to hell in a hand basket – at least not in the near future, anyway.

The capital city of Minsk – with its staunch, Stalinist buildings and orderly streets – is a testament to Soviet ideology, but sprouting up like stubborn weeds in the cracks of communism you'll find enough chic boutiques, cafés and nightclubs to keep you entertained and get you connected with the lovable locals, who are shy at first but intrigued and flattered by foreign visitors.

With almost no street crime, you are probably safer here than anywhere else in Eastern Europe, and foreign tourists are untouched the government's repressive ways. So why waste a visa application on a country that's trying to be like yours anyway? If you were born post-*perestroika* or never got to visit before the Wall came crumbling down, now's your chance to be back in the USSR. Until then, you won't know how lucky you are.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 207,600 sq km
- **Capital** Minsk
- **Currency** Belarusian rouble (BR); A\$1 = BR1639; €1 = BR2759; ¥100 = BR1930; NZ\$1 = BR1379; UK£1 = BR4040; US\$1 = BR2156
- **Famous for** dictatorial president Lukashenko, bearing the brunt of Chernobyl, Soviet time capsule, supermodel breeding farm
- **Official Languages** Belarusian and Russian
- **Phrases** *dobry dzyen* (hello), *kalee laska* (please), *dzyahkooee* (thanks)
- **Population** 10 million
- **Telephone Codes** country code ☎ 375; international access code ☎ 810
- **Visa** invitations/vouchers (US\$30 to US\$75), visas (US\$100 to US\$200) and proof of medical insurance required of most visitors (see p95)



## HIGHLIGHTS

- Gawk at grandiose Stalinist architecture, and settle into the cosy cafés of **Minsk** (p80).
- Stroll through the mellow pedestrian streets to the epic WWII memorial of **Brest Fortress** (p90).
- Spot an endangered zoobr (European bison) on a trip to the primeval forests of the **Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park** (p92).

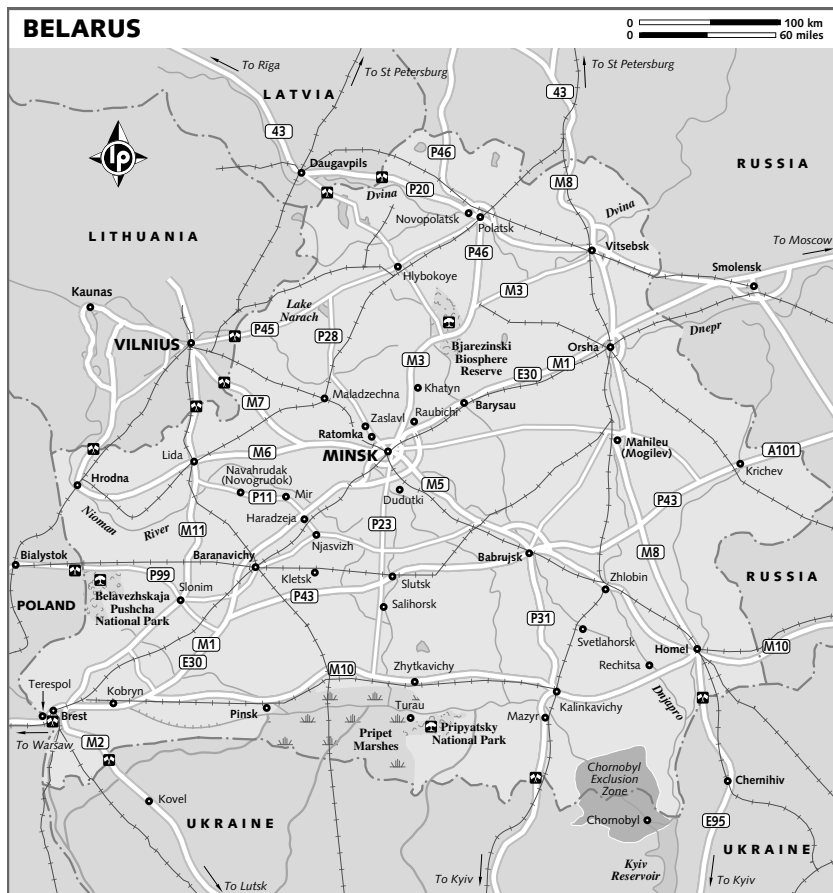
- **Three days** Give Minsk two days and a then take a day trip to Dudutki.
- **One week** Follow the three-day itinerary, then add a day in Brest (spend a couple of hours at the Brest Fortress) and an overnight visit to Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park before you return to the capital.

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Belarus has a continental climate. Average January temperatures are between  $-4^{\circ}\text{C}$  and  $-8^{\circ}\text{C}$ , with frosts experienced for five to six months of the year. The warmest month is July, when temperatures can reach up to  $30^{\circ}\text{C}$ , but the average temperature is  $18^{\circ}\text{C}$ . June and August are the wettest months.

## ITINERARIES

Belarusian cities and towns are not packed with tourist attractions, so you can count on each of these itineraries feeling rather leisurely.



Since Belarus is not visited by many tourists, you won't have to worry about when to go to beat the crowds. If you don't mind cold weather, the snowy winters can be very pretty, especially on sunny days.

## HISTORY

Once part of Kyivan Rus, Belarus was gradually taken over by Lithuania in the 14th century and became part of the Polish-Lithuanian Grand Duchy. It was to be 400 years before Belarus came under Russian control, a period during which Belarusians became linguistically and culturally differentiated from the Russians to the east and the Ukrainians to the south.

At this time, trade was controlled by Poles and Jews, and most Belarusians remained peasants – poor and illiterate. After the Partitions of Poland (1772, 1793 and 1795–96), Belarus was absorbed into Russia and faced intense Russification policies.

During the 19th century Belarus was part of the Pale of Settlement, the area where Jews in the Russian Empire were required to settle, so Jews formed the majority in many cities and towns.

## World Wars & the Soviet Union

In March 1918, under German occupation during WWI, a short-lived independent Belarusian Democratic Republic was declared, but the land was soon under the control of the Red Army, and the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) was formed. The 1921 Treaty of Riga allotted roughly the western half of modern Belarus to Poland, which launched a program of Polonisation that provoked armed resistance by Belarusians. The eastern half was left to the Bolsheviks, and the redeclared BSSR was a founding member of the USSR in 1922.

The Soviet regime in the 1920s encouraged Belarusian literature and culture, but in the 1930s under Stalin, nationalism and the Belarusian language were discouraged and their proponents ruthlessly persecuted. The 1930s also saw industrialisation, agricultural collectivisation, and purges in which hundreds of thousands were executed – most in the Kurapaty Forest, outside Minsk.

In September 1939 western Belarus was seized from Poland by the Red Army. When Nazi Germany invaded Russia in 1941, Belarus was on the front line and suffered greatly.

## HOW MUCH?

- **Half-litre of Belavezhskaja (herbal firewater)** US\$3
- **Bottle of Belarus Sineokaja vodka (750mL)** US\$6.75
- **Straw doll** US\$3-6
- **Plate of draniki (potato pancakes)** US\$1.50-3
- **Milavitsa brassiere** US\$9 (average)

## LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **Litre of petrol** US\$8
- **Litre of bottled water** US\$0.25
- **Half-litre of bottled Krynitsa beer** US\$0.56
- **Souvenir Lukashenko poster (size A2)** US\$0.51
- **Street snack (hot dog)** US\$0.70

German occupation was savage and partisan resistance widespread until the Red Army drove the Germans out in 1944, with massive destruction on both sides. Hundreds of villages were decimated, and barely a stone was left standing in Minsk. At least 25% of the Belarusian population (over two million people) died between 1939 and 1945. Many of them, Jews and others, died in 200-plus concentration camps; the third-largest Nazi concentration camp was set up at Maly Trostenets, outside Minsk, where over 200,000 people were executed.

Western Belarus remained in Soviet hands at the end of the war, with Minsk developing into the industrial hub of the western USSR and Belarus becoming one of the Soviet Union's most prosperous republics.

## Modern History

The 1986 Chernobyl (spelt Chernobyl in Russian) disaster left about a quarter of the country seriously contaminated, and its effects are still felt today, particularly in the southeastern regions of the country. See p864 for more information on Chernobyl.

On 27 July 1990, the republic issued a declaration of sovereignty within the USSR. On 25 August 1991 a declaration of full national independence was issued. With no history

**WORTH A TRIP**

If you're entering the country from northern Poland, or if you have extra time in the country, think about visiting **Hrodna** (Grodno in Russian). It was one of the few Belarusian cities that *wasn't* bombed during WWII, so it's rife with old wooden homes and, although it's a major city, it definitely has a 'great big village' sort of feel. By far the best hotel is privately run **Semashko** (☎ 375-152-75 029; www.hotel-semashko.ru/en; vultsa Antonova; s/d US\$50/60). Trains between Minsk and Hrodna leave five times a day (US\$8, six hours).

whatsoever as a politically or economically independent entity, the country of Belarus was one of the oddest products of the disintegration of the USSR.

Since July 1994 Belarus has been governed by Alexander Lukashenko, a former collective-farm director, from which his derogatory nickname, *kolkhozni* (a member of a collective farm owned by the communist state), is derived; his favourable nickname is *bat'ka* (papa). His presidential style has been autocratic and authoritarian, and the country was declaimed an 'outpost of tyranny' by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Lukashenko has on several occasions altered the constitution (using referenda widely regarded in the West as illegitimate), rendering the parliament essentially toothless and extending both his term and the number of times he can campaign for president. He has almost complete control of the media, and attempts at independently produced publications are easily quashed as media distribution is handled by the state. Online publications are all that is left for independent Belarusian media, and even those are on shaky ground.

There have long been talks of political and economic unification between Belarus and Russia. It's widely believed that Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin can't stand each other personally, and although Putin publicly supports Lukashenko's regime, he has also given serious consideration to cutting off the huge Russian gas subsidies that have long kept Belarus' command economy afloat. If he goes ahead with this, merging with Russia (and therefore being

able to buy Russian gas at domestic prices) could be the only way the country would survive economically.

On 19 March 2006, Lukashenko officially won another five-year term as president, with an unbelievable 83% of the vote and an even more unbelievable 98% voter turnout. (His opponents – the most popular being mild-mannered, European-styled Alyaksandr Milinkevich – were harassed and deprived of public venues throughout the campaign.) On the night of the 19th, thousands of protesters turned out on the city's main square for what was being termed as the *Denim Revolution* – a 'mini-maydan' echoing what happened in Kyiv 1½ years earlier. A peaceful tent city started, and hundreds of people, mostly students, withstood freezing temperatures for almost a week. But once international media left the scene to cover Ukrainian parliamentary elections, the riot police stormed in, arresting and allegedly beating everyone still on the square. Throughout the election process and as we go to press, thousands have been arrested – including Milinkevich and other political opponents. If you get a chance to make good friends in the capital city, you'll soon realise that a surprising number of Minskians have had a friend or family member jailed for political reasons.

For inside coverage of the fight against Lukashenko, check out [www.charter97.org](http://www.charter97.org).

**HOW YOU CAN HELP**

Visiting the country and spreading awareness about Belarus' political situation is probably the greatest way to help the country. But if you want to do more, pay a visit to the **Belarusian Popular Front Headquarters** (BPF; prasppekt Masherava 8), where you can buy Belarusian CDs and books (some in English), small nationalist flags, freedom-supporting badges and the like. Your money will go to the opposition's cause. Although they aren't used to accepting straight donations, you can ask about this possibility. Both the BPF and its office are legal, so you need not worry about the people in uniform hanging around outside – they're from the Academy of the Ministry of the Interior, which happens to be next door.

**VOX POP**

*Name, age, occupation?* Inna Buktshynovich, 26, civil-society worker.

*Dreams for your country?* It's sad, but Belarus is a forgotten country. Ironically, in Spielberg's *The Terminal*, a close-up shows Tom Hanks' character has a Belarusian driver's license. But the movie's supposed to take place in an imaginary Eastern European country that ceases to exist after a war. I hope Belarus has a different future, that it opens up its borders and gets more than a dozen pages in *Lonely Planet*.

*Favourite night-time hang-out?* London coffee shop, sipping mint tea with honey or enjoying live music at Graffiti.

*What would make you leave Belarus?* Another -25°C winter! Actually it is the impossibility of self-realisation that is wearing me down.

*How has Lukashenko's reign affected your life?* He basically ruined my friendships. My best friends left the country because they did not see any future in Belarus. They are happier to live in Moscow, Boston, Capetown, Bournemouth, Warsaw, Rimini, but not in Belarus.

*Best and worst moments of the 2006 protests?* Best: marching along the streets with other protesters and waving at the honking cars. Police were giving fines to the honkers, but that didn't stop them. Worst: the moment when I received a text message at 3am saying that police raided the tent city and arrested its inhabitants.

**PEOPLE**

There are approximately 10 million people in Belarus, of which 81.2% are Belarusian, 11.4% Russian, 4% Polish and 2.4% Ukrainian, with the remaining 1% consisting of other groups. This results in a rather homogeneous population. Prior to WWII 10% of the national population was Jewish, and in cities like Minsk, Hrodna and Brest Jews made up between one-third and three-quarters of the population. They now make up about 0.3% of the country's population.

Generally speaking, Belarusians are quiet, polite and reserved people. Because they tend to be shy, they seem less approachable than Russians and Ukrainians, but they are just as friendly and generous (probably more so) once introductions are made.

**RELIGION**

Atheism is widespread. Of believers, 80% are Eastern Orthodox and 20% are Roman Catholic (about 15% of the Catholics are ethnic Poles). During the early 1990s the Uniate Church (an Orthodox sect that looks to Rome, not Moscow) was re-established and now it has a following of over 100,000 members. There's also a small Protestant minority, the remnant of a once-large German population.

**ARTS**

The hero of early Belarusian literary achievement was Francysk Skaryna. Born in Polatsk

but educated in Poland and Italy, the scientist, doctor, writer and humanist became the first person to translate the Bible into Belarusian. In the late 16th century the philosopher and humanist Symon Budny printed a number of works in Belarusian. The 19th century saw the beginning of modern Belarusian literature with works by writers and poets such as Maxim Bohdanovich, Janka Kupala and Jakub Kolas.

The Belarusian ballet is one of the most talented in all of Eastern Europe. See p86 for information on how to attend a performance.

The band Pesnyary have been extremely popular since the 1960s for putting a modern twist on traditional Belarusian folk music. Acclaimed Belarusian rock bands (now banned by the regime) include **Lyapis Trubetskoi** ([www.lyapis.com](http://www.lyapis.com)) and **NRM** ([www.nrm.by.com](http://www.nrm.by.com)). See opposite for information on how to obtain banned Belarusian music and p87 for where to catch live performances by unsanctioned groups.

**ENVIRONMENT**

Belarus has an area of 207,600 sq km. It's a flat country, consisting of low ridges dividing broad, often marshy lowlands with more than 11,000 small lakes. In the south are the Pripet Marshes, Europe's largest marsh area. The marshland area known as Polesye, in the south of the country, is dubbed locally the 'lungs of Europe', because air currents passing over it are re-oxygenated and purified by the swamps. Around 6.4% of Belarusian land is protected.

Because of the vast expanses of primeval forests and marshes, Belarusian fauna abounds. The most celebrated animal is the *zoobr* (European bison), the continent's largest land mammal. They were hunted almost to extinction by 1919, but were fortunately bred back into existence from 52 animals that had survived in zoos. Now several hundred exist, mainly in the **Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park** (☎ 01631-56 122, 56 132), a Unesco World Heritage Site. It is the oldest wildlife refuge in Europe, the pride of Belarus and the most famous of the country's five national parks. The *pushcha* (wild forest) 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 (p93) here.

Trips to Belarusian national parks and biosphere reserves, including arranged activities and camping or hotel stays, are possible; contact a tourist agency in Minsk for all but the Belavezhskaja, which is best arranged with Brest agencies (p90). Also, try [www.belarus.ecotour.ru](http://www.belarus.ecotour.ru) or [www.belintourist.by](http://www.belintourist.by).

The 1986 disaster at Chernobyl has been the defining event for the Belarusian environment. The dangers of exposure to radiation for the casual tourist, particularly in the areas covered in this guide, are negligible. For more about Chernobyl, see p864.

## FOOD & DRINK

Belarusian cuisine rarely differs from Russian cuisine (see above), although there are a few uniquely Belarusian dishes. *Draniki* are the Belarusian version of Russian *olad'i* (potato pancakes); *kolduni* are delicious, thick potato dumplings stuffed with meat; and *klitsky* are dumplings stuffed with mushrooms, cheese or potato. *Manchanka* are pancakes served with a thick meat gravy.

*Belavezhskaja* is a bitter herbal alcoholic drink. Of the Belarusian vodkas, Charodei is probably the most esteemed (but can be hard to find). Other popular souvenir-quality vodkas are Belarus Sineokaja and Minskaja.

Although the cuisine is largely meat-based, and although the concept of vegetarianism (let alone veganism) is not exactly widespread, it is possible to find some dishes without meat, although eating vegan will be considerably more difficult. Restaurants with a decent choice of vegetarian options are listed in this chapter.

# MINSK МИНСК

☎ 017 / pop 1.78 million

Hands down, there is no city on earth like Minsk. Where else can you dine on sushi, dose up on *sake* and then cross the street to chuck a snowball at the KGB headquarters? All right, that last part is not recommended – but it's theoretically possible, and that's Minsk in a nutshell.

There's a palpable pride about the capital of Belarus: the pride of a survivor. In WWII, barely a stone was left standing, and half the city's people perished, including almost the entire population of 50,000 Jews. Stalin had the city rebuilt from scratch, and to this day the architecture and ambience reflects his grandiose aesthetic more than any other place in the former USSR. Today, President Lukashenko runs a tight ship, and you'll see the evidence of it in Minsk. The wide streets are clear of litter and low on chaos – you're unlikely to see even a jaywalker.

If it all seems just a little too perfect and ordered for you, don't worry. After spending the day in the shadows of Soviet architecture, you can spend all night in the strobe lights, text messaging the hotties on the dance floor.

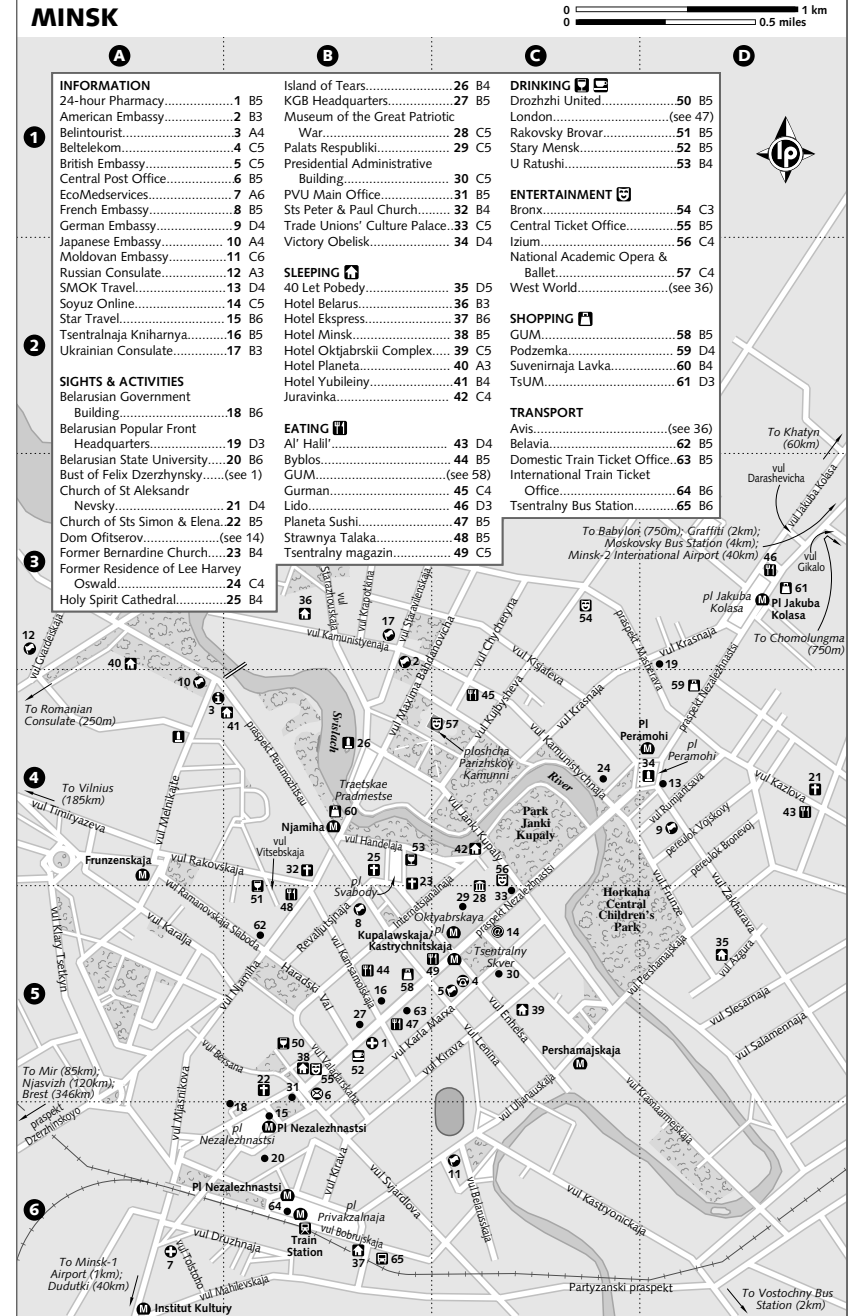
## ORIENTATION

Minsk's main thoroughfare, *prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi*, stretches over 11km from the train station to the outer city limits. The most interesting section is between the stubbornly austere and huge *ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi* and *ploshcha Peramohi*.

### MINSK IN TWO DAYS

Take a walk down Soviet memory lane, *prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi*, stopping to take a guided tour of the **Museum of the Great Patriotic War** (p83). Finish your walk at **Lido** (p85) with a big cafeteria-style lunch. Next, pay a visit to the **Island of Tears** (p84) monument and the **Traetskae Pradmestse** (p83). Have dinner (make reservations) at **Strawnya Talaka** (p85), then cross the street to **Rakovskiy Brovar** (p86) for some killer home-brews.

Take a day trip to **Dudutki** (p88) for its open-air interactive museum and traditional meals.



## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

**Tsentralnaja Kniharnya** (☎ 227 4918; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 19) Large and central (hence the name).

### Internet Access

**Soyuz Online** (☎ 226 0279; 2nd fl, vulitsa Krasnaarmejskaja 3; ☎ 24hr) Lots of computers, helpful staff, all kinds of services (printing, scanning, gaming, etc) and a decent café. Go up the steps to the Dom Ofitserov (opposite); enter the far door, near the tank monument.

### Laundry

Most hotels offer laundry services for a fair price; if you're renting an apartment only pricier places will have a machine.

### Left Luggage

Hotels will hold your baggage for several hours after you check out. Downstairs at the **train station** (lockers US\$0.25, luggage room US\$0.50; ☎ 24hr) is a well-signed place. To use the lockers, put your stuff in an empty one, select a code on the inside of the door, put a token in, shut the door. Use your second token to open the locker again (see the boxed text on p84).

### Medical Services

**24-hour Pharmacy** (☎ 227 4844; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 16)

**EcoMedservices** (☎ 207 7474; vulitsa Tolstoho 4; ☎ 8am-9pm) The closest thing to a reliable, Western-style clinic. Dental services are here too.

### Money

ATMs abound, but there's often a small queue. Minsk really linger on the PIN pad. Many but not all ATMs offer US dollars or euros, if for some reason you need foreign currency (don't take out dollars or euros just to change them to roubles though; you'll pay the exchange rate twice). Hotels all have exchange bureaus, and a handful cash traveller's cheques.

### Post

DHL and UPS have offices based in the major hotels, including Hotel Yubileiny (p85) and Oktjabrskii (p85).

**Central post office** (☎ 227 8492; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 10; ☎ phone office 7am-11pm) There's an Express Mail office on the 2nd floor.

### Telephone & Fax

**Beltelekom** (☎ 236 7124; vulitsa Enhelsa 14; ☎ 24hr) Another convenient calling and fax centre.

### Tourist Information

Where is a free monthly English-language glossy with listings and a map. You can usually get a copy at London (p86).

There are no tourist information centres. Travel agencies can provide information but of course want to book tours.

### Travel Agencies

**Belintourist** (☎ 226 9971; www.belintourist.by; prasppekt Peramozhtsau 19A; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun & holidays) The state-run tourist agency does visa support, city tours and trips to Mir, Dudutki, Njasvizh and Belavezhszkaja Pushcha National Park – as well as to the Stalin Line open-air museum of 1930s military fortifications.

**SMOK Travel** (☎ 233 9569; www.smoktravel.com; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 40) A good option for visa support.

**Star Travel** (☎ 226 5882; www.starttravel.by; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 6) It looks like STA travel and acts like STA travel (deals with ISIC cards and student airfares) and sounds like STA travel. But it's not STA travel. The agency does provide free plane-ticket delivery and staff members speak English.

### SIGHTS

The ravages of WWII absolutely levelled Minsk, meaning very few buildings older than about 60 years remain standing. However, after the war the city was promptly rebuilt with a victorious, fiercely proud Soviet flair, and this is what is most visually interesting about Minsk. Be sure to take a slow walk down prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi, using the following walking tour to get the full effect.

#### CIRCLE 16

There is little graffiti on the streets of Minsk, but you may come across the circled number '16' spray-painted in somewhat obscure places. This is a sign of solidarity with Belarusian political prisoners, disappeared oppositionists and independent journalists. At 8pm on the 16th of each month, participants turn off their lights and put a candle in their window for 15 minutes. Sometimes people, including journalist-turned-activist **Irina Khalip** (www.time.com/time/europe/hero2005/khalip.html), turn up on Kastychnitskaja ploshcha with a candle and stand there until the police shoo them away or round them up.

### WHERE AM I?

Between the Soviet, post-Soviet Russian, and nationalist Belarusian names for streets and places in Minsk, things can get confusing.

To honour the great Belarusian renaissance man, the main thoroughfare was once called prasppekt Francyska Skaryny (prospekt Frantsiska Skoriny in Russian), but Lukashenko had enough of that nationalism and in 2005 changed it to 'Independence Prospect': prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi (prospekt Nezavisimosti in Russian). All variations are used colloquially.

Metro stop and town square ploshchad Lenina also goes by its post-Soviet name, which switches out 'Lenin' for 'Independence': ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi (ploshcha Nezavisimosti in Russian).

Metro stop and main town square Oktyabrskaya ploshchad (its Soviet, Russian name) is sometimes called Kastychnitskaja ploshcha (Belarusian).

Ploshcha Peramohi (Victory Square) is often referred to as its Russian variant, ploshchad Pobedy.

And just to make sure everyone was thoroughly puzzled, since 2005 vulitsa Varvasheni has been renamed prasppekt Masherava, and what was prasppekt Masherava is now prasppekt Peramozhtsau (prospekt Pobeditelei in Russian).

In this book, we've gone with the Belarusian names, as we'd like to support the nationalist cause, and as streets are usually posted in Belarusian, even though most people in Minsk speak Russian. Go figure.

### Walking Tour of Soviet Ideology

After it was obliterated in WWII, Minsk was rebuilt from the ground up, under the direction of Stalin. A walk down prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi is a testament to the grandiose monumentalism the Soviets were so famous for.

**Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi** (also called ploshcha Lenina) is dominated by the **Belarusian Government Building** (behind the Lenin statue) on its northern side, and the equally proletarian **Belarusian State University** on the south side.

Many of Minsk's main shops and cafés are northeast of the main square, ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi, including Soviet **GUM** (Government All-Purpose Store; see p87). An entire block at No 17 is occupied by a yellow neoclassical building with an ominous, temple-like Corinthian portal – the **KGB headquarters**. On the other side of the street is a long narrow park with a **bust of Felix Dzerzhynsky**, the founder of the KGB's predecessor (the Cheka) and a native of Belarus.

Between vulitsa Enhelsa and vulitsa Janki Kupaly is a square that is still referred to by its Russian name, Oktyabrskaya ploshchad (in Belarusian, it's ploshcha Kastychnitskaja). This is where opposition groups gather to protest against Lukashenko from time to time, and it's where they attempted the Denim Revolution in March 2006. Here you'll find the impressive, severe **Palats Respubliki** (Palace of the Republic), a concert hall. Also on this

square is the classical, multi-columned **Trade Unions' Culture Palace**, and next to this, the recommended Museum of the Great Patriotic War (below).

Across the street is Tsentralny Skver (Central Square), a small park on the site of a 19th-century marketplace. The dark-grey building is **Dom Ofitserov** (Officer's Building), which has a tank memorial in front, devoted to the soldiers who freed Minsk from the Nazis. Beyond this is the lifeless-looking, seriously guarded **Presidential Administrative Building**, where Lukashenko practises his bully routine.

Further north on prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi is ploshcha Peramohi, marked by a giant **Victory Obelisk** and its eternal flame.

### Other Sights

Don't leave town without visiting the **Museum of the Great Patriotic War** (☎ 277 5611; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 25A; admission US\$2; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), where Belarus' horrors and heroism during WWII are exhibited in photographs, huge dioramas and other media. Particularly harrowing are the photographs of partisans being executed in recognisable central Minsk locations. The big sign above the building (ПОДВИГУ НАРОДА ЖИТЬ В ВЕКАХ) means 'The Feats of Mankind Will Live On for Centuries'.

The faux Old Town, called **Traetskae Pradmestse**, is worth strolling through for its little cafés, restaurants and shops. At the end of a little footbridge nearby is the evocative

## QUIRKY MINSK

Just across the bridge over the Svislach River, on the west bank, is the **former residence of Lee Harvey Oswald** (vulitsa Kamunistychnaja 4); it's the bottom left apartment. The alleged assassin of former US president John F Kennedy lived here for a couple of years in his early 20s. He arrived in Minsk in January 1960 after leaving the US Marines and defecting to the USSR. Once here, he truly went native: he got a job in a radio factory, married a Minsk woman, had a child – and even changed his name to Alek. But soon he returned to the United States and...you know the rest.

Lovers of **old coins** should stop in at the train station's left luggage area, where there are lockers that (surprise, surprise) date back to the Soviet days – and they still only work with Soviet coins. Pay BR550 and get in exchange two locker 'tokens' –15-kopek coins from the USSR, some dating back to the 1960s.

Exerting complete control over a nation takes a lot of energy, so even an omnipotent dictator like Lukashenko needs to refuel after a hard morning at work. Every afternoon, around 1pm, he heads out from his offices to tuck into a meal. If you want to see the speeding, **black armoured-car procession** slam through the city streets, hang out around the McDonald's on prospekt Nezalezhnastsi around that time. He usually heads down vulitsa Lenina.

Afghan war memorial, **Island of Tears**. Standing on a small island connected by a walking bridge, it's built in the form of a tiny church, with four entrances, and is surrounded by towering gaunt statues of sorrowful mothers and sisters of Belarusian soldiers who perished in the war between Russia and Afghanistan (1979–89). Look for the small statue of the crying angel, off to the side – it is the guardian angel of Belarus.

Breaking the theme of Soviet classicism that dominates ploscha Svobody is the red-brick Catholic **Church of Sts Simon & Elena** (ploscha Nezalezhnastsi), built in 1910. Its tall, gabled bell tower and attractive detailing are reminiscent of many brick churches in the former Teutonic north of Poland.

The baroque, twin-towered orthodox **Holy Spirit Cathedral** (ploscha Svobody), built in 1642, stands confidently on a small hill. It was once part of a Polish Bernardine convent, along with the **former Bernardine Church** next door, which now houses city archives.

Across the vulitsa Lenina overpass is the attractively restored 17th-century **Sts Peter & Paul Church** (vulitsa Rakovskaja 4), the city's oldest church (built in 1613, looted by Cossacks in 1707 and restored in 1871). Now it is awkwardly dwarfed by the surrounding morose concrete structures.

Another red-brick one is the **Church of St Aleksandr Nevsky** (vulitsa Kazlova 11). Built in 1898, it was closed by the Bolsheviks, opened by the Nazis, closed by the Soviets and now it's open again. It's said that during WWII, a bomb crashed through the roof and

landed plum in front of the altar, but never detonated.

## SLEEPING

If you're staying more than a few days, it could be a good idea to consider renting an apartment. There are only a few online agencies that can help you; the best option is **Belarus Rent** (www.belarusrent.com). Rates range from US\$38 to US\$58. Another option is **Belarus Apartment** (www.belarusapartment.com). Stay in a hotel at least one night for visa-registration purposes. For upmarket, more Western-style apartments, contact **Valentin** (☎ 029 656 4010; rent2002@mail.ru). His remodelled, central flats range from US\$40 to US\$100.

## Budget

**Moskovsky Bus Station Dorms** (☎ 219 3627; vulitsa Filimonava 63; d with shared bath BR46,000) Out the back of the station, these are clean, quiet and watched over by a very serious babushka. However, they cannot register visas; you'll have to stay a night elsewhere to do that.

**Hotel Ekspres** (☎ 225 6463; ploscha Privakzalnaja 3; d without shower from US\$29) Dark and cheerless, the only things the Ekspres has going for it are the cheap prices and convenient location, smack bang between the central bus station and the train station. There are decent renovated rooms with shower, but they are way too overpriced.

**40 Let Pobedy** (☎ 236 7963; vulitsa Azgura 3; s/d US\$28/43) The name of this small hotel, which means '40 Years of Victory', is dated (it's now been 60 years since the end of WWII, which is what 'victory' always refers to in Belarus). The

surprise is that it's actually kind of pleasant here. Staff is warm and helpful to foreigners, despite the Lukashenko portrait on display at the front desk.

## Midrange

**Hotel Yubileiny** (☎ 226 9024; fax 226 9171; prospekt Peramozhstau 19; s US\$43-64, d US\$58-83; ☎) Because there's a sports stadium right across the street, Yubileiny keeps busy. Who knows, you might be able to have a drink at the hotel's bar with a foreign hockey player who has been paid to play against Lukashenko himself. It's been known to happen. The rooms are comparable to Hotel Planeta's.

**Hotel Planeta** (☎ 226 7855; www.hotelplaneta.by; prospekt Peramozhstau 31; s US\$57-82, d US\$62-88; ☎) Despite the photographs of Lukashenko displayed at the front desk, the staff at Planeta seem more West-oriented, attractive and cheery than the employees at other midrange hotels. The economy rooms have remodelled bathrooms, which makes them a good deal.

**Hotel Belarus** (☎ 209 7693; belarus@hotel.minsk.by; vulitsa Starazhouskaja 15; s US\$56-96, d US\$76-111) It's just one of many monolithic Soviet-era hotels, but Belarus is clearly the most well known. Rooms are run-of-the-mill *sovok* (Soviet-style), and the echoing old marble lobby, where guests sit in old leather chairs, seems like a weigh station for lost souls. Breakfast is served on the top floor, where there are panoramic views.

**Hotel Oktjabrskii Complex** (☎ 222 3289; oktyabr@tut.by; vulitsa Enhelsa 13; s/d/ste US\$54/91/115) The Oktjabrskii is time-capsule Soviet, and you may luck out and get a nice young person at the front desk, who can share with you a sense of humour about it all. It's a little overpriced for its category, but if you like the spooky, tense feeling you get from being right across from Lukashenko's high-security workplace, you couldn't pick a better spot.

## Top End

**Juravinka** (☎ 206 6900; minsenko@tut.by; vulitsa Janki Kupaly 25; s/d/ste US\$119/167/877; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The high-quality rooms at sweet lil' Zhuravinka give Hotel Minsk a run for its money, but book in advance: there are only 18 possible vacancies. It has a bowling alley on site (as well as a fitness centre and fancy restaurant), and it seems to be a hot spot for Belarusian elite, so it has a sort of bubbly, party feel to it. The presidential suite is ginormous and has its own swimming pool.

**Hotel Minsk** (☎ 209 9074; www.hotelminsk.by; vulitsa Nezalezhnastsi 11; s US\$144-185, d US\$185-206, ste US\$237-370; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) If you want no surprises and no hassles, you won't be disappointed with four-star Hotel Minsk, which has Western-standard, but not posh, chain-style rooms that are a bit on the small side. Service is everything it should be (polite and convenient), but nothing more.

## EATING

On weekend nights, many places are full, so consider booking ahead. There are some good, obvious places on or near Kastrychnitskaja ploschcha.

## Regional

**Lido** (☎ 284 8264; prospekt Nezalezhnastsi 49/1; mains US\$2-6) There are several cafeteria-style restaurants similar to Latvian-run Lido (see the boxed text on p424), but none are nearly as good. All food (a giant selection of Eastern European dishes) is on display, so it's easy for non-Russian speakers: just point at what you want. Lunchtime is packed, but staff will help you find a seat.

**Gurman** (☎ 290 6774; vulitsa Kamunistychnaja 7; mains US\$3-12) With its locally famous *pelmeni* (Russian-style meat dumplings) and its wide selection of Italian-style pastas, Gurman is worth the long (though pleasant) walk from the metro.

**Strawnya Talaka** (☎ 203 2794; vulitsa Rakovskaja 18; mains US\$7-25) This small Belarusian eatery is suitable for a romantic, intimate dinner amid sophisticated Slavic décor, although it can get a little smoky, depending on the other diners. It's a stone's throw from Rakovsky Brovar (see p86), if you are up for something a bit rowdier afterward. Reservations are required.

## International

**Al' Halil'** (☎ 285 2780; vulitsa Kazlova 14; mains US\$2-5) Don't let the hole-in-the-wall aspect of this Palestinian joint freak you – here you'll chow down on hot fresh *lavash* (soft flatbread) and all kinds of Middle Eastern treats: *dolma*, *baba ganoush* and several meat dishes. Note that what's on the menu isn't everything, and that some of what is on the menu is prepared in a 'Russianised' way (think mayonnaise). But talk to the staff members (they speak a little English) and let them know what you want. They're eager to please.

**Byblos** (☎ 289 1218; vulitsa Internatsjionalnaja 21; mains US\$3-6) This popular, inexpensive joint near the *ratusha* (town hall) serves up tasty Lebanese meat dishes and a soul-warming spinach-lettuce soup.

**Chomolungma** (☎ 266 5388; vulitsa Gikalova 17; mains US\$4-20) Wow. A huge menu with a wide range of prices and cuisines: Nepalese, Tibetan, sushi and Indian. There is only one tofu dish, but there is plenty more for vegetarians. It's well worth the 10-minute walk from metro Yakuba Kolas.

**Planeta Sushi** (☎ 210 5645; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 18; mains US\$5-30) Sushi? In Belarus? You bet. In fact there are now several choices for a bowl of *miso* and a plate of *nigiri*. Other Japanese dishes (*udon*, *tempura* etc) are offered as well. The place seems to have a surprisingly decent connection for fresh fish, but it could use a new avocado supplier.

### Self-Catering

**Tsentrálny magazin** (☎ 227 8876; 2nd fl, prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 23) A large, Western-style grocery store with plenty of fresh stuff for self-caterers.

### DRINKING

Be careful about drinking alcohol in public. You'll see other people doing it, but it's technically illegal and therefore you could be asking for trouble.

**Rakovsky Brovar** (☎ 206 6404; vulitsa Vitsebskaja 10) This jolly two-storey brewery is the most popular of its kind in Minsk. It's known for its good cheer and not its food, which is not bad but a little pricey. The huge menu of Belarusian and other European cuisine will at least help keep you from getting too drunk. There are often roving accordionists.

#### TOP FIVE PLACES TO TIE ONE ON

- Graffiti (opposite) – cheap beer and underground bands.
- Sary Mensk (right) – try the honey-sweet *krambambula*.
- Rakovsky Brovar (above) – a selection of home-brews in a rowdy atmosphere.
- Bronx (right) – favourite haunt of the beautiful people.
- U Ratushi (right) – multilevel bar with live bands and a let-loose crowd.

**U Ratushi** (☎ 226 0643; vulitsa Gertsena 1; ☎ 10-2am) Formerly called 'Nul Pyat', referring to the standard serving of beer (a half-litre), this multilevel pub-style restaurant, right across from the *ratusha*, is packed with a raucous, fun-loving crowd on weekends (there is often a small cover charge for live bands). Book ahead for weekends, or come really early.

**Drozozhi United** (☎ 200 5456; vulitsa Sverdlova 2; ☎ 9-2am) It's a strange name (*drozozhi* means 'yeast') and a strange location, but once inside, this Irish-style pub is all familiar.

The hippest cafés are the itty-bitsy **Sary Mensk** (☎ 289 1400; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 14; ☎ 10am-11pm) and its teeny-weeny cousin, **London** (☎ 289 1529; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 18; ☎ 10am-11pm). They both serve coffees and fresh teas, and whip up a mean hot chocolate. London has an upstairs area, but you'll have to order an alcoholic beverage to sit there. In summer, Sary Mensk puts on *batlejka* (traditional Belarusian puppet shows) – very nationalistic, and all right across from the KGB headquarters.

### ENTERTAINMENT Performing Arts

Just like they were during the Soviet Union, the performing arts here are of very good quality, and tickets are priced to make them accessible to the proletariat. Opera performances are held at 7pm on Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. Ballet performances are at 7pm on Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday.

To buy advance tickets or to find out what's on, head to the **central ticket office** (prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 18; ☎ 9am-7pm). There are more places for tickets in the underground crossing in the centre. Same-day tickets are sometimes available only from the venues.

**National Academic Opera & Ballet Theatre** (☎ 234 8074; ploshcha Parizhskoy Kamunni 1; tickets ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) The ballet here has a highly respected reputation; some think it better than Moscow's Bolshoi. Performances start at 7pm. There are several different operas performed each month.

### Nightclubs

If you read Russian, a great website for clubs and events is [www.mixtura.org/minsk/clubs.html](http://www.mixtura.org/minsk/clubs.html).

**Bronx** (☎ 288 1061; www.bronx.by; prasppekt Masherava 17/1; cover free or US\$8-18; ☎ noon-5am Thu-Sat, noon-2am

### AUTHOR'S CHOICE

The place to go if you want to hear the latest Belarusian musicians or to see some live theatre is **Graffiti** (☎ 266 0154; www.graffiti.avilink.net/afisha.html; per Kalinina 16; cover US\$3-5; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Sat). The underground club is small (get there early if you want in) and not conveniently located (best take a taxi), but the bands and the troupes are often on Lukashenko's shit-list, and this is the only venue in town where they get away with performing (at least most of the time). Bar snacks and beer are tasty and super cheap (a big draft beer for under \$1.50!).

Sun-Wed) Without a doubt, the Bronx is the hippest nightclub in town. Special guest bands and DJs from abroad show up at the sleek, ultramodern warehouse-style space, where there are billiards, dance floors and fashion shows.

**Izium** (☎ 206 6618; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 25; cover US\$3-8; ☎ noon-2am Sun-Wed, to 6am Thu-Sat) Splashy and chic, Izium has a high-tech design, fusion food and live music nights. Apart from the dance area, there are two dining halls – one is particularly fancy, the other is just hip. Flat-screen TVs at many tables show music videos, if that gives you any idea of what to expect. Service is gracious but slow.

**Babylon** (☎ 8-029 677 0445; vulitsa Tolbukhina 4; ☎ 10pm-6am Tue-Sun) The city's main gay-friendly locale, 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.

**West World** (☎ 239 1798; vulitsa Starazhouskaja 15a; cover US\$4-8; ☎ 1pm-5am) Because of its circular shape, locals call this place *shaiiba* (hockey puck). It's quite a scene, with erotic dancing, flashy nouveau riche, Eurotrash wannabes and prostitutes aplenty, as well as visiting Turks, Azeris and Georgians. Sometimes 'face control' is exercised, so shy away from wearing jeans and trainers, just in case.

### SHOPPING

Because of a dearth of tourism, you won't be blown away by what's offered as Belarusian mementos. One favourite purchase is a pho-

tographic portrait of Lukashenko, available in Tsentralnaja Kniharnya (see p82). At many grocery shops you'll find candies with old-fashioned wrappers steeped in nostalgia for a Soviet childhood – check out the tabletops at Sary Mensk (see opposite) to see some favourites.

Belarus is also known for its straw crafts, which include dolls and wooden boxes intricately ornamented with geometric patterns of the stuff. Linens and other woven textiles unique to Belarus are also popular handicrafts. These are easily found in city department stores, hotel lobbies and in some museum kiosks.

**Suvenirnaja Lavka** (☎ 234 5451; vulitsa Maxima Bahdanovicha 9; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat) Excellent quality, and helpful and patient service here; staff speak some English. You'll find straw crafts, wooden boxes, lots of beautifully embroidered linens and Belarusian vodka – as well as Belavezhszkaja.

**Podzemka** (☎ 288 2036; www.podzemka.org; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 43; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) This underground bohemian shop-cum-art-gallery sells all sorts of goodies you be hard-pressed to find anywhere else; for example, 'Women of the War' calendars, funky artistic pieces, photographs and handmade jewellery.

The Belarusian company **Milavitsa** (www.milavitsa.com.by) sells stylish lingerie for a fraction of what Westerners pay. Check the department stores, such as **GUM** (☎ 226 1048; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 21) and **Tsum** (☎ 284 8164; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 54) for souvenirs and Milavitsa products. There are no dressing rooms.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY Air

International flights entering and departing Belarus do so at the **Minsk-2 international airport** (☎ 006, 279 1300), about 40km east of Minsk. Some domestic flights as well as those to Kyiv, Kaliningrad and Moscow depart from the smaller **Minsk-1 airport** (☎ 006; vulitsa Chkalova 38), only a few kilometres from the city centre.

### Bus

There are three main bus stations, and you can buy tickets for anywhere at any of them. You'll probably only be leaving from the Tsentrálny (Central) station, but to be sure, ask which station you're departing from (v ka-kom av-toh-vak-za-le ot-prav-lye-ni-ye?).

**Moskovsky** (☎ 219 3622; vulitsa Filimonava 63) Near Maskouskaja metro station.

**Tsentralny** (☎ international 227 0473, CIS destinations 227 4083; vulitsa Bobrujskaje 6; M) Ploshcha Lenina) By the train station.

**Vostochny** (☎ 248 0882; vulitsa Vaneeva 34) To get here from the train station (or metro Ploshcha Lenina), take bus 8 or trolley 20 or 30; get off at 'Avtovokzal Vostochny'.

## Train

The Minsk train station is relatively modern and safe. Food and left-luggage services are available here. Nothing is in English yet, but there are picture-signs. You can buy tickets at the train station, but the ticket offices have shorter lines. At the station, there are ATMs and exchange offices, but the lines are often long.

**Domestic train ticket office** (☎ 225 6124; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 18; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun) Tickets for domestic and CIS destinations.

**International train ticket office** (☎ 213 1719; vulitsa Babrujskaja 4; ☎ 9am-8pm) Advance tickets for non-CIS destinations; located to the right of the train station.

**Minsk train station** (☎ 005, 596 5410) Domestic and CIS tickets.

## GETTING AROUND

See p97 for information on car rentals.

## To/from the Airport & Train Station

From Minsk-2 airport, a 40-minute taxi ride into town should cost \$25, but you'll be lucky to get it for under \$40. There are buses (\$1.30, 90 minutes, hourly) that bring you to the Tsentralny bus station, not far from the centre and metro station Ploshcha Lenina. There are also about eight daily minibuses that make the trip in a little over an hour and cost \$2. From Minsk-1 airport, take bus 100 to the centre; it goes along prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi.

If you arrive by train, you're already in the centre, at a metro station even (Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi).

## Public Transport

Minsk's metro is simple – just two lines with one transfer point – and operates until just after midnight. One token (*zheton*) costs \$0.25.

Buses, trams, trolleybuses and the metro cost \$0.25 per ride and operate from 5.30am to 1am. Minibuses (*marshrutki*) cost about

\$0.50 and are a quicker way to get around once you know their routes. Popular Bus 100 comes every five to 15 minutes and plies prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi as far as Moskovsky bus station. You can buy a ticket from the person on board wearing a bright vest. Once you get the ticket, punch it at one of the red buttons placed at eyelevel on poles.

For taxis, ☎ 081 is the state service and almost always has cars available, while ☎ 007 is private, the cheapest and has the best service (less likely to rip off foreigners) but cars are sometimes not available during peak times. You can also hail one from the street. Private cars don't stop for passengers.

## AROUND MINSK

If you're going to be in Minsk for more than 48 hours, a day trip to an outlying town is in order. On a road trip out of the busy capital city, you'll take in barely undulating plains as far as the eye can see and pretty clutches of birch forests. You'll hum by worn wooden houses and catch glimpses of old women riding bicycles and old men chopping wood. Getting a taste of pastoral Belarus helps to correctly balance the visitor's image of the country – after all, only one-fifth of the population lives in Minsk, where anti-Lukashenko sentiments are strongest.

If you have extra time, consider trying out Valeria's (of Dudutki) association of B&Bs. It's a somewhat new operation but already has dozens of homes on offer, throughout the country. Visit [www.ruralbelarus.by](http://www.ruralbelarus.by).

If you do decide to get to these places using public transport, keep in mind that Sunday evenings are often booked in advance for the return trip to Minsk, as people are returning from their country homes.

## Dudutki Дудуткі

☎ 01713

Tasting delicious farm-made sausages, cheese and bread is only a small part of the experience of a visit to the **open-air interactive museum** of Dudutki, located 40km south of Minsk. This completely self-sufficient farm offers horseback riding, sleigh rides, demonstrations of ceramic-making and blacksmithing and more. You'll be offered fresh *salo* (tallow) with garlic, salt and rye bread; pickles dipped in honey; and homemade moonshine – even the ficklest eater should try them. All are scrumptious.

There are three daily buses (one hour, \$1.50 each way) to/from Dudutki from Minsk's Tsentralny bus station; they leave at 10am, 12.35pm and 5pm and return at 11.15am, 1.50pm and 6.05pm. Otherwise, contact Valeria's **Dudutki Tur** (☎ 251 0076; dudutki@telecom.by; vulitsa Dunina Martsinkevicha 6, Minsk).

## Njasvizh Нясвіж

☎ 01770 / pop 15,000

Njasvizh, 120km 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 owned by the mighty Radziwill magnates.

The **Farny Polish Roman Catholic Church** was built between 1584 and 1593 in early baroque style and features a splendidly proportioned façade. Just beyond the church is the red-brick arcaded **Castle Gate Tower**. Constructed in the 16th century, the tower was originally part of a wall and gateway controlling the passage between the palace and the town. Here there's an **excursion bureau** (☎ 54 145; vulitsa Leninskaja 19; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) where you pay to enter the fortress grounds (\$4.50). **Guided tours** (☎ 53 132; vulitsa Geysika; US\$22.50; ☎ tours 8am-5pm) for one to 25 people last about 1½ hours and are available in either Russian or Belarusian (\$19).

Further on is a causeway leading to the **Radziwill Palace Fortress** (1583), the main sight in Njasvizh. In Soviet times it was, unfortunately, turned into a sanatorium. Although nothing was under way during research, it's said the building is being renovated.

From Minsk's Tsentralny bus station, there are five to six daily buses to/from Njasvizh (\$4.50, 2½ hours).

## Mir Mip

☎ 01596 / pop 2500

About 85km southwest of Minsk is the small town of Mir, where the 16th-century **Mir Castle** sits overlooking a pond. It was once owned by the powerful Radziwill princes and has been under Unesco protection since 1994. Today the castle is under restoration, but one tower is already open as an **archaeological museum** (☎ 23 610; admission US\$5, guided tour in Russian for 1-10 people US\$9.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun). The tight, steep, stone spiral stairwell that carries you from floor to floor is the most thrilling part of visiting the museum, which is otherwise a little dull.

The small, friendly **Hotel Mir** (☎ 23 851; ploshchad 17ogo Sentybrya 2; s/d/ste US\$36/28/48) is the only place in town. Suites can theoretically sleep four. You'll find it in the town centre, across the way from the bus station.

From Minsk's Tsentralny bus station, buses to Navahrudak (Novogrudok in Russian), Lida, Svitsiaz and Zel'va stop in Mir (\$4, 2½ hours, 10 daily).

## Khatyn Хатынь

☎ 01774

The hamlet of Khatyn, 60km north of Minsk, was one of many villages that was burned to the ground by Nazis on 22 March 1943. Of a population of 149 (including 85 children), only one man, Yuzif Kaminsky, survived. The site is now a sobering **memorial** (☎ tours in Russian 55 787; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sat). More information can be found at [www.khatyn.by](http://www.khatyn.by).

There's no public transport to Khatyn from Minsk, but a taxi will cost around \$33 for the return journey. Pricey trips are organised by Belintourist (p82).

## BREST БРЭСТ

☎ 0162 / pop 290,000

You'd never believe that with its laid-back vibe, colourful wooden houses and quiet, pedestrian-only streets, Brest is home to one of the busiest border points in Eastern Europe. Right up at the influential edge of Poland, the city and its outgoing locals have a sort of breezy charm that's easy to enjoy. You can visit Brest just to enjoy the quaintness of it all, but don't leave without visiting the Brest Fortress, a moving WWII memorial. And if you have time, pay a visit to the nearby primeval forests of Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park – maybe you'll spot an endangered zoobr (European bison).

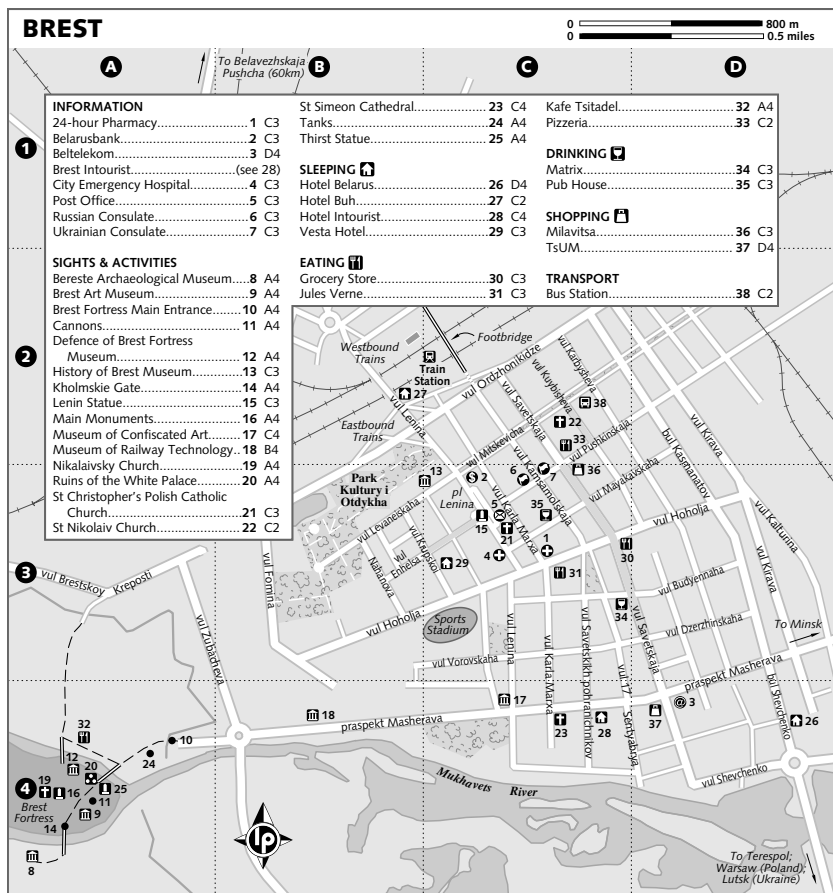
## ORIENTATION

Central Brest fans out southeast from the train station to the Mukhavets River. Vulitsa Savetskaja is the main drag and has several pedestrian sections. Brest Fortress lies between the Buh and Mukhavets Rivers meet, about 2km southwest of the centre down prasppekt Masherava.

## INFORMATION

**24-hour pharmacy** (☎ 23 80 28; vulitsa Hohlja 32)  
**Belarusbank** (ploshcha Lenina) Currency exchange, Western Union and a nearby ATM.





**Beltelekom** (☎ 22 13 15; prasppekt Masherava 21; per hr US\$1; ☎ 7am-10.30pm) Internet access and long-distance calls.

**Brest Intourist** (☎ 22 19 00; www.brest-intourist.com; prasppekt Masherava 15; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Inside Hotel Intourist; the super-friendly and English-, Polish- and German-speaking staff can arrange city tours (including 'Jewish Brest') and trips to national parks, including overnight hotel stays or camping trips in Belavezhskaja Pushcha. **City Emergency Hospital** (☎ 23 58 38; vulitsa Lenina 15) **Post office** (ploshcha Lenina)

## SIGHTS

### Brest Fortress

If you are going to see only one Soviet WWII memorial in your life, make it **Brest Fortress** (Brestskaja krepost; ☎ 20 03 65; prasppekt Masherava;

admission free). It's at the western end of prasppekt Masherava (which is lined with Soviet monuments and plaques), about a 20-minute walk (3km) from the centre; the hourly bus 17 travels between here and Hotel Intourist.

The fortress was built between 1838 and 1842, but by WWII it was used mainly for housing soldiers. Two regiments bunking here when Germans invaded in 1941 defended the fort for an astounding month.

The **Brest Fortress main entrance** has a sombre sound presentation, and as you leave a short tunnel, on the left and past a small hill, you'll see some **tanks** and, straight ahead, the stone **Thirst statue**. After you cross a small bridge, to your right are the brick ruins of the **White Palace**, where the 1918 Treaty of

Brest-Litovsk – which marked Russia's exit from WWI – was signed. Further to the right is the **Defence of Brest Fortress Museum** (☎ 20 03 65; admission US\$3; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun). Its extensive and dramatic exhibits demonstrate the plight of the defenders. Near this museum is Kafe Tsitadel (p92).

On the other side of the fortress, you'll see a collection of **cannons**, which kids like to climb on (makes for cute pictures). Behind this area is the entrance to the new **Brest Art Museum** (☎ 20 08 26; admission US\$1; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Sun), which holds art done by Brest citizens and some local crafts.

Heading to the **main monuments** – a stone soldier's head projecting from a massive rock, entitled Valour, and a sky-scraping obelisk – you'll see an eternal flame and stones bearing the names of those who died (several are marked 'unknown'). Sombre orchestral music is pumped into the area, and there are often men and women in period military uniforms marching to the music.

Behind the Valour rock is the attractive, recently renovated Byzantine **Nikalaivsky Church**, the oldest church in the city, which dates from when the town centre occupied the fortress site. It holds regular services.

To the south is **Kholmiskie Gate**; its bricks are decorated with crenulated turrets and its outer face is riddled with hundreds of bullet and shrapnel holes. Beyond the Kholmiskie Gate is the **Bereste Archaeological Museum** (☎ 20 55 54; admission US\$2; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Tue-Sun), which has several old log cabins found on nearby land.

## Other Sights

Arguably the most interesting museum in town is the **Museum of Confiscated Art** (☎ 20 41 95; vulitsa Lenina 39; admission US\$1.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun). The collection of once-stolen icons and other precious items is unlike anything else you'll see in the country – the smugglers definitely went for the cream of the crop.

New on the scene is the **Museum of Railway Technology** (☎ 27 47 64; prasppekt Masherava 2; admission US\$2.50; ☎ 9am-5pm Wed-Sun). Tours are only in Russian, and it is pricey, but train buffs will love it even if they don't understand the guide. If that fails, just walking by and seeing the trains through the cast-iron fence is interesting enough.

With its gold cupolas and yellow-and-blue façades shining gaily in the sunlight,

the breathtakingly detailed 200-year-old Orthodox **St Nikolaiv Church** (cnr vulitsa Savetskaja & vulitsa Mitskevicha) is one of many lovely churches in Brest. On ploshcha Lenina, a **Lenin statue** points east towards Moscow, but it appears more to be pointing across the street accusingly at the 1856 **St Christopher's Polish Catholic Church** (ploshcha Lenina). The peach-and-green **St Simeon Cathedral** (cnr prasppekt Masherava & vulitsa Karl Marx) was built in 1865 in Russian-Byzantine style (the gold on the cupolas was added in 1997).

In a pretty white building, the two-storey **History of Brest Museum** (☎ 23 17 65; vulitsa Levanetskaha 3; admission US\$1.25; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun) has a small exhibit on the city in its different guises throughout history.

## SLEEPING

**Hotel Buh** (☎ 23 64 17; vulitsa Lenina 2; s/d/tr US\$26/40/58) It's on the dreary side, but the rooms are spacious and the building is interesting. If your room faces the main street, it'll be noisy. Because renovations are scheduled for autumn 2006, it may be temporarily closed.

**Hotel Belarus** (☎ 22 16 48; bresttourist@tut.by; bulvar Shevchenko 6; s US\$36-41, d US\$51-62, ste US\$90) Yes, it's a Soviet-style hotel, but staff are smiling and helpful. All rooms have modernised bathrooms and a good amount of floor space. A great-smelling bakery and restaurant are on the premises.

**Hotel Intourist** (☎ 20 20 82; www.brest-intourist.com; prasppekt Masherava 15; s/d US\$42/69) Similar to Hotel Belarus but less modern and less friendly at the front desk. Brest Intourist (opposite) is in the building – and they're friendly and English-speaking. Rooms are remodelled very well – in the economy rooms, only the bathroom hasn't been redone yet.

**Vesta Hotel** (☎ 23 71 69; hotelvesta@tut.by; vulitsa Krupskoi 16; s/d US\$49/74, ste US\$94-186) Privately owned Vesta is peaceful, cosy and small. It has cheerful, helpful service (apart from the upstairs café), a well-manicured lawn and sunny rooms done up in tan and gold. Some singles have an additional fold-out couch, so it's possible to share the room for an extra fee.

## EATING

For self-caterers, there is a decent **grocery store** (vulitsa Savetskaja 48; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-8pm Sun) in the centre. Along the pedestrian-only part of vulitsa Savetskaja, there are lots of little cafés that serve hot, inexpensive food.

**Kafe Tsitadel** (Brest Fortress; mains US\$2-4) If you're starving and stuck at the fortress, Kafe Tsitadel is your only hope. Surly staff tosses *pelmeni* (dumplings) and chicken Kiev in your general direction, but it would be better to stick to the Snickers or crisps sold behind the bar.

**Pizzeria** (vulitsa Pushkinskaja 20; pizzas US\$2-6) It's not well signed, but you can pretty much follow your nose into the building and down the stairs. Really yummy thin-crust pizzas are made to order – try the 'Mexican'. Salads and fries are available as well.

**Jules Verne** (☎ 23 67 17; vulitsa Hoholja; mains US\$4-14; ☎ noon-midnight) This is a true anomaly. The focus is on seafood, but there are also Indian, Thai and vegetarian dishes – apparently a sort of *Around the World in 80 Days* theme. Ironically, your bill is delivered in a miniature treasure chest.

## DRINKING

**Pub House** (☎ 21 93 46; vulitsa Hoholja; ☎ 9am-11pm) Small and smoky, with a sort of faux wood and faux brick interior, ye olde Pub House offers 12 tap beers and plenty more in bottles, served up with a smile from the cute young women behind the bar.

**Matrix** (☎ 23 82 39; vulitsa Savetskaja 73; ☎ noon-midnight) Bowling, billiards, bars and babes – it's all here. There's dancing too. The cover ranges from US\$4 to \$7.

## SHOPPING

Souvenirs can be bought in a pinch on the 1st floor of the city's **TsUM** (☎ 20 57 44; prospekt Masherava 17), although there's not tons of goodies to choose from. Just in case you missed your bra-purchasing opportunity in Minsk, there's a branch of **Milavitsa** (☎ 26 64 69; www.milavitsa.com.by; vulitsa Pushkinskaja 21) in Brest as well.

## GETTING THERE & AROUND

The **train station** (☎ 005) has on-site customs. Trains leave for Minsk (1st-/2nd-class US\$10/7, four hours) several times daily. When taking a train from Brest, note that the platform nearest the city centre is for eastbound trains; the next one is for trains heading west. To get to the city from the train station, you'll have to mount a steep flight of steps from the platform; once you're up, go right on the overpass. If you're exhausted or have a lot of luggage, a taxi into town should be no more than \$2.50.

The **bus station** (☎ 004) is in the centre of town. There is at least one daily bus between Minsk and Brest (US\$7 to US\$10, five hours).

To get to Belavezhskaja Pushcha on your own, you can take a minibus from the bus station (US\$2, three daily except Wednesday). They are marked 'Kamjanjuky'.

What's covered here is all walkable. For a taxi, call ☎ 061 or have your hotel call for you.

## AROUND BREST Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park

A Unesco World Heritage site some 60km north of Brest, **Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park** (☎ 01631-56 122, 56 132; admission US\$10) is the oldest wildlife refuge in Europe and the pride of Belarus. The park is co-administered by Poland, where the other half of the park's territory lies.

Some 1300 sq km of primeval forest survives here. It's all that remains of a canopy that eight centuries ago covered northern Europe. Some oak trees here are over 600 years old and 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).

## SLEEPING & EATING

There are a few different options for overnight stays, all of which are best arranged through Brest Intourist (see p90). Camping requires permission but costs only about €5 per person. Indoor options include **Kamjanjuky** (s/d US\$24/28) in the eponymous village just outside the national park (rooms are remodelled, have bathrooms and include breakfast) and

**Dom Grafa Tushkevicha** (5-/9-person accommodation US\$85/280), a guesthouse better for families or other small groups. For a little history (p80) choose the **Viskuli Hotel** (s US\$48-72, d US\$52-76). Meals can be arranged.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

The national park rarely sees individual tourists, but Brest Intourist (see p90) says it's entirely possible to do so, although a bit more difficult if you don't use their help – especially if you don't speak Russian. However, you can take a *marshrutka* there (US\$2). They leave at least four times a day from Brest's bus station (the destination is Kamjanjuky). A guided group tour costs from US\$50 to US\$100 for up to 40 people. They'll include visits to historical spots along the way to the park, and can fix a summer picnic in a lovely area, as well as arrange overnight accommodation in the park itself.

# BELARUS DIRECTORY

## ACCOMMODATION

Farmers and villagers are generally generous about allowing campers to pitch a tent on their lot for an evening. Outside national parks you may camp in forests and the like, provided you don't make too much of a ruckus. Camping in or near a city is asking for trouble from the police.

While budget and midrange accommodation standards in Belarus tend to be lower than in the West, they are still generally acceptable and often better than in Russia or Ukraine. Top-end places, of which there are few, are for the most part equal to what you would expect from a top-end place in the West. Prices are elevated as much as five times higher for non-CIS citizens.

A fledgling B&B association was started by the woman who runs **Dudutki** (p89; www.ruralbelarus.by).

## ACTIVITIES

In winter, Kastychnitskaja ploshcha is turned into a public ice-skating rink, and you can rent skates for under US\$5 (bring your passport).

Belarus is flat, but it's not so flat that you can't find some places to enjoy skiing. About 20km from Minsk is the Raubichy Olympic Sports Complex, where you can enjoy some great cross-country skiing, while downhill

skiing and snowboarding is possible at **Logoisk** (☎ 0177453 758, 53 000; www.logoisk.by, not in English) and the newer **Silichy** (☎ 01774 50 285; www.silichy.by, not in English), both about 30km from Minsk. Belintourist (p82) does skiing and other activity-related tours.

## BUSINESS HOURS

Lunch is usually for an hour and anytime between noon and 2pm. Offices are generally open 9am to 6pm during the work week, with banks closing at 5pm. Shops are open from about 9am or 10am to about 9pm Monday to Saturday, closing on Sunday around 6pm (if they're open at all that day). Restaurants and bars usually open around 10am and, with unfortunately few exceptions, close between 10pm and midnight.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES Belarusian Embassies & Consulates

Belarusian embassies abroad include the following (if your country doesn't have a Belarusian mission, contact the nearest one to you). If you are trying to get a visa in a neighbouring country, see that country's chapter in this book for Belarus embassy information.

**Canada** (☎ 613-233 9994; canada@belembassy.org; 130 Albert St, ste 600, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5G4)

**France** (☎ 01 44 14 69 79; www.france.belembassy.org; 38 Blvd Suchet, 75016 Paris)

**Germany** Berlin (☎ 030-536 359 0; www.belarus-botschaft.de; Am Treptower Park 31, 12435); Bonn (☎ 0228-20 113 10; www.belarus-botschaft.de; Fritz-Schaeffer Str 20, 53113)

**Japan** (☎ 813-34 48 16 23; www.belarus.jp; 4-14-12 Shirogane, Shirogane K House, Minato-ku 108 0072, Tokyo)

**Latvia** Riga (☎ 371 732 3411; fax 371 732 2891; latvia@belembassy.org; Jezusbaznices iela 12, 1050); Daugavpils (☎ 371 541 0086; fax 371 541 0883; email latvia@belembassy.org; 18th November street 44, 5403)

**Lithuania** (☎ 370 5 213 2255; fax 370 5 233 0626; consulate@belarus.lt; ul Muitines 41, 03113 Vilnius)

**Poland** Warsaw (☎ 48 22 742 0710; fax 48 22 842 4341; poland@belembassy.org; ul Wiernicza 58, 02-952, Warsaw); Bialystok (☎ 48 85 744 5501; fax 48 85 744 6661; konsulat@bialystok@sitech.pl; ul Elektryczna 9, 15-080);

Gdansk (☎ 48 58 341 0026, 341 8088; fax 48 58 341 4026; gdansk@belembassy.org; ul Waly Piastowski 1, pok 905, 80-958)

**Russia** Moscow (☎ 7 095 624 7095; fax 7 095 628 7813; consular@embassybel.ru; Armyanskii per., dom 6, 101990); St Petersburg (☎ 7 812 273 0078; fax 7 812 273

4164; st\_petersburg@belembassy.org; 8/46 Naberezhnaya Robespiera, kv 66)

**South Africa** (☎ 2712-430 76 64; sa@belembassy.org; 327 Hill St, Arcadia, Pretoria 0083)

**Sweden** (☎ 8-731 5744; www.belembassy.org/sweden; Hersedsvagen 5, 4 tr. 181 34 Lidingö/Stockholm)

**The Netherlands** (☎ 070-3631566; www.witrusland.com; Anna Paulownastraat 34, 2518 BE, Den Haag)

**UK** (☎ 020-7938 3677; www.belembassy.org/uk; 6 Kensington Court, London W8 5DL)

**Ukraine** (☎ 38 044 537 5203; www.belembassy.org.ua; ulitsa M Kotsyubinskogo, dom 3, 01031, Kyiv)

**USA** (☎ 212-682-5392; www.belarusconsul.org; 708 Third Ave, 21st fl, New York, NY 10017)

### Embassies & Consulates in Belarus

There is no representation for Canada, Australia, New Zealand or The Netherlands. Unless otherwise indicated, the listed missions are in Minsk.

**France** (☎ 017-210 2868; www.ambafrance-by.org; ploshcha Svabody 11)

**Germany** (☎ 017-217 5900; www.minsk.diplo.de; vulitsa Zakharava 26)

**Japan** (☎ 017-203 6037; fax 210 2169; 7th fl, prasppekt Peramozhtsau 1)

**Moldova** (☎ 017-289 1441; vulitsa Belarusskaja 2)

**Romania** (☎ 017-203 8097; pereulok Moskvina 4)

**Russia** Minsk (☎ 017-222 4985; fax 250 3664; vulitsa Gvardeiskaja 5a); Brest (☎ 0162-23 78 42; fax 0162-22 2473; brestcons@brest.by; vulitsa Pushkinskaja 10)

**UK** (☎ 017-210 5920; www.britishebassy.gov.uk/belarus; vulitsa Karla Marxa 37)

**Ukraine** Minsk (☎/fax 017-283 1958; vulitsa Staravilenskaja 51); Brest (☎ 0162-23 75 26; vulitsa Pushkinskaja 16/1)

**USA** (☎ 017-210 1283; http://minsk.usembassy.gov; vulitsa Staravilenskaja 46)

### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The night of 6 July is a celebration with pagan roots called **Kupalje**, when young girls gather flowers and throw them into a river as a method of fortune-telling, and everyone else sits by lake or riverside fires drinking beer.

Another festival worth checking out is **Bely Zamak** (White Castle; alterego@tut.by), usually held at the end of March in Maladzechna, 80km from Minsk. It's a medieval-themed festival, where costumed folk engage in tournaments and contests.

### GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexuality is not tolerated in Belarus. Officially, the government retains a confrontational and intolerant attitude towards gays and lesbians; Belarusian state TV even uses the image of two men kissing as part of its repertoire of 'scare' tactics to encourage xenophobia. There are a few gay-friendly clubs such as Babylon (p86), but no official ones. Gay websites have been blocked on Belarusian servers, and most people keep their orientation largely a secret.

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### HOLIDAYS

**New Year's Day** 1 January

**Orthodox Christmas** 7 January

**International Women's Day** 8 March

**Constitution Day** 15 March

**Catholic & Orthodox Easter** March/April

**Labour Day** (May Day) 1 May

**Victory Day** 9 May

**Independence Day** 3 July

**Dzyady** (Day of the Dead) 2 November

**Day of the October Revolution** 7 November

**Catholic Christmas** 25 December

Note that Independence Day is the date Minsk was liberated from the Nazis, not the date of independence from the USSR, which is not celebrated.

### INSURANCE

All visitors to Belarus are required to possess medical insurance from an approved company to cover the entire period of their stay. It is probably unlikely you will ever be asked for it. If your coverage is not accepted, insurance is also sold at entry points and is relatively cheap; see www.belarusconsul.org for costs and details. Note that medical coverage is not required for holders of transit visas (see opposite).

### LANGUAGE

Belarusian is closely related to both Russian and Ukrainian. Today Russian dominates nearly all aspects of social life and has been the second official language since 1995. There is little state support for keeping Belarusian alive and flourishing. While much of the signage is in Belarusian (street signs, inside train and bus stations), usage is indiscriminate, and speaking it in public attracts attention. There is a small but strong and growing group of student nationalists who are working to support the use of Belarusian, and it is now considered to be the country's language of the intellectual elite.

### MONEY

Belarusian roubles are sometimes dotingly referred to as *zaichiki* (rabbits), as the one-rouble note, first issued in 1992, featured a leaping rabbit. The bunny money's wide spectrum of bill denominations is overwhelming to the newcomer (there are 10s, 20s, 50s, 100s, 500s, 1000s, 5000s, 10,000s, 20,000s and 50,000s). Thank god there are no coins.

ATMs and currency-exchange offices are not hard to find in Belarusian cities. Major credit cards are accepted at many of the nicer hotels, restaurants, and supermarkets in Minsk, but travellers cheques are not worth the effort. Some businesses quote prices in euros or US dollars (using the abbreviation YE), but payment is only accepted in BR.

### POST

The word for post office is *pashtamt*. Posting a 20g letter within Belarus costs US\$0.08, to Russia US\$0.17 and to any other country US\$0.28. Airmail costs US\$0.42. The best way to mail important, time-sensitive items is with the Express Mail Service (EMS), offered at most main post offices.

### TELEPHONE & FAX

Although many if not most businesses here use mobile numbers for contact with the public, numbers listed here are land phones; if a mobile number is given, you'll see the three digits listed before the main number.

Avoid using payphones in Belarus; they require special phonecards and are a hassle. It's better to find the local Beltelekom, a state-run company that opens late. You can access the internet, place international and domestic calls, and send and receive faxes at these offices. Domestic calls cost less than US\$0.01 per minute within a city, and about US\$0.03 per minute to elsewhere in the country. International calls are much cheaper after 9pm and on weekends and holidays (to the UK it's US\$0.28 per minute, to the USA US\$0.32, and to Canada US\$0.39).

To dial a Minsk land-line number from a Minsk land line number, just dial the number;

#### EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- Ambulance ☎ 03
- Fire brigade ☎ 01
- Police ☎ 02

from a local mobile phone, press £ or ☎ 8 017 or ☎ +375 17 and then dial the number.

To dial from one Minsk mobile number to another, dial ☎ 8 029 for Velcom, MTS and Diallog (the most common providers) or ☎ 8 025 for BeST.

To make an intercity call from a land phone, dial ☎ 8 (wait for the tone), the city's area code (including the 0) and the number; from a mobile, do the same, and if it doesn't work, try dialling ☎ +375 and the area code without the 0, then the number.

To make an international call from a land phone, dial 8 (wait for the tone) 10, then the country code, area code and number; from a mobile, press + then dial the country code, area code and number.

If your local mobile phone is on roaming, call a Belarusian land line by dialling ☎ +375 and the area code without the 0; to call a Belarusian mobile, dial ☎ +375 29 and the number (or ☎ +375 25 for calls to BeST phones).

To phone Belarus from abroad, dial ☎ 375 followed by the city code (without the first zero) and number.

For operator inquiries, call ☎ 085 (it's serviced 24 hours); a few of the staff speak English.

It's not possible to get a prepaid SIM card – probably just another way to keep the flow of information in Lukashenko's hands – just a contract one. To get a contract, you need to bring your passport and visa registration to the provider. Some foreigners have a Belarusian friend get the SIM card for them to avoid getting their passport involved. There are now a few providers in Belarus, but by far the most common is **Velcom** (☎ 222 4901; www.velcom.by; Melnikayte 14; ☎ 9am-9pm). A basic package starts at about US\$3.50 a month after a one-time US\$7 activation fee; local calls cost US\$0.05 to US\$0.20 per minute.

### VISAS

Belarusian visa regulations *change frequently*, so check with your embassy first. The Belarusian US embassy website, at www.belarusembassy.org, stays pretty up to date.

### Who Needs One

All Western visitors need a visa, and arranging one before you arrive is essential. Point-of-entry visas are only issued at the Minsk-2 international airport, but you still need to get an invitation in advance. (People do it

**AT YOUR OWN RISK**

As we went to press, there was effectively no border between Russia and Belarus. In theory, it's possible to enter Belarus by train and leave it for Russia – or go to Russia and back from Belarus – without going through passport control, and therefore without needing a visa for the country you're sneaking into. However, a hotel won't take you without a visa, so you'd have to stay with friends or rent an apartment, and if your visa-less documents are checked on the street (unlikely unless you're a trouble-maker or a person of colour), you will be deported.

this way, usually without trouble, but if the authorities decide to deny your application, what then? Better to do it in advance.)

Citizens of 13 countries, including UK, Canada and South Africa, do not need an invitation to receive a tourist visa; they merely need to complete an application and submit a photo at a Belarusian embassy or consulate (visit [www.belarusembassy.org](http://www.belarusembassy.org) for more details).

**Applications**

To get a visa, you will need a photograph, an invitation from a private person or a business, or a confirmation of reservation from a hotel, and your passport. There are three main types of visas: tourist, issued if you have a tourist invitation or hotel reservation voucher; visitor (guest), if your invitation comes from an individual; and business, if your invitation is from a business. There are also transit visas, if you are passing through and won't be in the country for more than 48 hours. Visitor and tourist visas are issued for 30 days (tourist visas can be multi-entry); business visas are for 90 days and can also be multi-entry.

By far the simplest – although the most expensive – way to get a visa is to apply through a travel agency. Alternatively, you can take a faxed confirmation from your hotel to the nearest Belarusian embassy and apply for one yourself.

Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius have numerous travel agencies specialising in Belarusian visas. In Vilnius, the most convenient point to jump off, try **Viliota** (☎ 370 5-265 2238; [www.viliota.lt](http://www.viliota.lt), in Lithuanian; Basanavicius gatvė 15), where you can get

a visa hassle-free with a photo of yourself and between US\$50 and US\$100.

Getting an invitation from an individual can be a long, complex process. Your friend in Belarus needs a *zaprashenne* (official invitation) form from their local passport and visa office and should then send it to you. With this, you apply at the nearest Belarusian embassy.

Visa costs vary depending on the embassy you apply at and your citizenship. Americans pay more, but typically single-entry visas cost about US\$50 for five working-days service and US\$90 for next-day service; double-entry visas usually cost double that. Business visas are more expensive than tourist visas. Transit visas typically cost from US\$20 to US\$35.

**Registration**

If you are staying in the country for more than 72 hours, you must have your visa officially registered. Hotels do this automatically, sometimes for a small fee. They'll give you small pieces of paper with stamps on them, which you keep to show to customs agents upon departure if asked. In theory you'll be fined if you don't provide proof of registration for every day of your stay; in practice, proof of one day is good enough.

If you've received a personal invitation, you'll need to find the nearest *passportno-vizovoye upravleniye* (passport and visa department; PVU, formerly OVIR) or try to convince hotel staff to register your visa for the cost of one night's stay. The **PVU main office** (☎ 017-231 9174; vulitsa Nezalezhnastsi 8) is in Minsk.

**Transit Visas**

All persons passing through Belarusian territory are required to possess a transit visa, which can be obtained at any Belarusian consulate upon presentation of travel tickets clearly showing the final destination as being outside of Belarus. The possession of a valid Russian

**HIDE THIS BOOK**

Lonely Planet's coverage of Belarusian politics has been honest and ongoing enough to warrant attention from the authorities. Before letting you go on your way, customs officials may politely take your LP guidebook from you if they happen to see it. Just keep it out of sight, and for Pyotr's sake, don't list it on your customs form.

visa is not enough to serve as a transit visa. Transit visas are not available at the border.

## TRANSPORT IN BELARUS

**GETTING THERE & AWAY****Air**

There is no departure tax in Belarus. See p87 for information Minsk airport. In Eastern Europe, Belarus' national airline **Belavia** (code B2; ☎ 210 4100; [www.belavia.by](http://www.belavia.by); vulitsa Njamiha 14).

The following are the main international airlines with offices in Minsk.

**Aeroflot** (code SU; ☎ 017-227 2887; [www.aeroflot.com](http://www.aeroflot.com) /eng)

**Austrian Airlines** (code OS; ☎ 017-289 1970; [www.austrianair.com](http://www.austrianair.com))

**El Al** (code LY; ☎ 017-279 1939; [www.elal.co.il](http://www.elal.co.il))

**LOT Polish Airlines** (code LO; ☎ 017-226 6628; [www.lot.com](http://www.lot.com))

**Lufthansa** (code LH; ☎ 017-284 7129; [www.lufthansa.com](http://www.lufthansa.com))

**Land****TRAIN**

Train is usually a more comfortable way to travel than bus; to Vilnius, the *electriczka* (electric train) to Vilnius is cheap and quick (\$7, four hours).

**BORDER CROSSINGS**

Long queues at border crossings are not uncommon. The most frequently used bus crossings are those on the quick four-hour trip between Vilnius (Lithuania) and Minsk, and the seven-hour trip between Minsk and Bialystok (Poland). Buses stop at the border for customs and passport controls.

**CAR & MOTORCYCLE**

If you're driving your own vehicle, there are 10 main road routes into Belarus via border

stations, through which foreigners can pass. International driving permits are recognised in Belarus. Roads in Belarus are predictably bad, but main highways are decent. On inter-city road trips, fill up when existing the city; fuel stations may be scant before you hit the next big town.

**GETTING AROUND**

There are no flights between Brest and Minsk.

**Avis** (☎ 017-234 7990; [belideal@avis.solo.by](mailto:belideal@avis.solo.by); vulitsa Staravilenskaja 15, Minsk) rents cars and even drivers for between US\$60 and US\$120 per day from Hotel Belarus (p85) in Minsk; English is spoken.

Hitching is practiced by young locals quite a bit. But it's never entirely safe in any country in the world, and Lonely Planet doesn't recommend it.

The Brest–Minsk highway (Brestskoye shosse; E30/M1) is an excellent two-laner, but have a supply of new US\$1 bills for the frequent tollbooths (they only charge cars with foreign licence plates).

With spare parts rare, road conditions rugged and getting lost inevitable, driving or riding in Belarus is undeniably problematic, but is always an adventure and the best way to really see the country. Know that signs are almost always in Cyrillic.

Drivers from the USA or EU can use their own country's driving licence for six months. Cars drive in the right-hand lane, children 12 and under must sit in a back seat, and your blood-alcohol should be no higher than 0%. Fuel is usually not hard to find, but try to keep your tank full, and it would even be wise to keep some spare fuel as well.

You will be instructed by signs to slow down when approaching GAI (road police) stations, and not doing so is a sure-fire way to get a substantial fine. You may see GAI signs in Russian (ГАИ) or in Belarusian (ДАІ).

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