

Belarus Беларусь

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Minsk** The purest Soviet time capsule – apart from the funky cafés and clubs to keep things bubbling (p107)
- **Brest Fortress** Huge statues, eternal flames and people marching to epic music in period uniform make this WWII memorial memorable (p112)
- **Best journey** Discuss the dictator with locals over sausage and beer on the train from Minsk (p107) to Brest (p111)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 207,600 sq km (slightly smaller than the UK)
- **ATMs** At most banks, hotels and train stations
- **Budget** BR107,000/US\$50 per day
- **Capital** Minsk
- **Country Code** ☎ 375, international access code ☎ 8 + 10
- **Famous for** Being a Soviet time capsule
- **Head of State** Dictator/President Alexander Lukashenko
- **Languages** Russian, Belarusian
- **Money** Belarusian rouble (BR); A\$1 = BR1597, CA\$1 = BR1938, €1 = BR2736, ¥100 = BR1897, NZ\$1 = BR1349, UK£1 = BR3988, US\$1 = BR2137
- **Phrases** *Dobry dzyen* (hello), *kalee laska* (please), *dzyahkooee* (thanks)
- **Population** 10 million
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 2
- **Visas** Most foreigners need one



TRAVEL HINTS

At the train station's left luggage, pay BR550 and get two locker 'tokens' – 15-kopek USSR coins.

ROAMING BELARUS

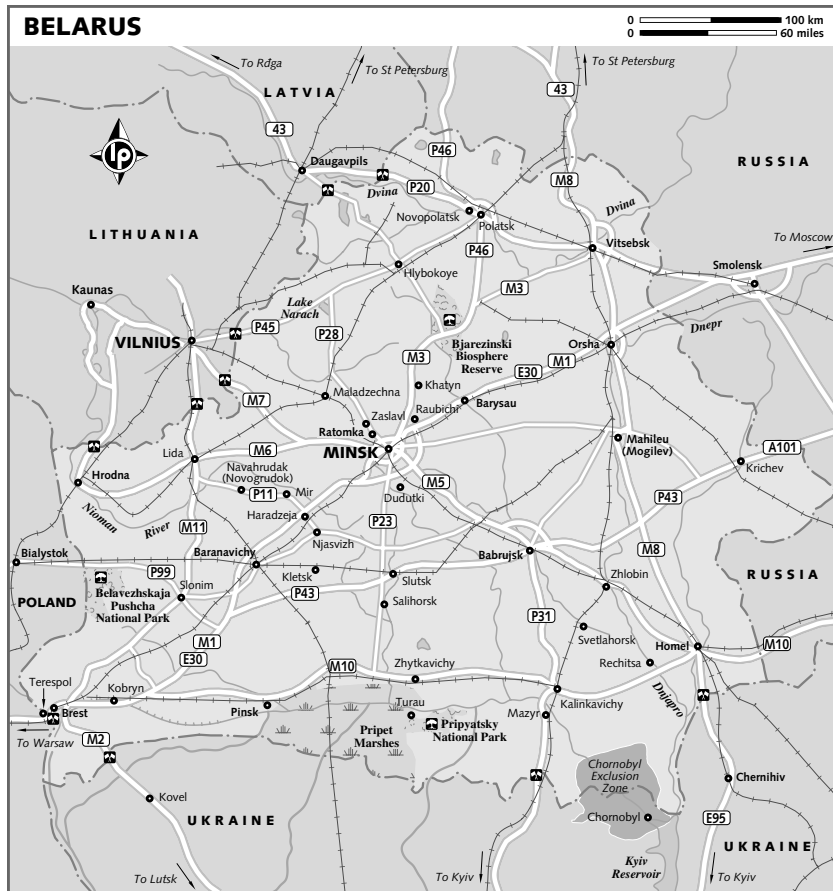
Give Minsk two days; if you have a couple of days more, get to Brest to see the WWII memorial.

Picture this: It's the year 2006, and the Berlin Wall never fell. In the centre of Europe is a land that perestroika forgot and glasnost glossed over. There, a tyrannical leader struggles to exert complete control over his country's mindset and media, quashing democracy, capitalism and any form of dissent with an iron fist, an almighty propaganda machine and a powerful secret service.

This isn't science fiction, it's Belarus. And you can visit!

Don't worry, the KGB isn't interested in you and your backpack. But the people of Belarus are dying of curiosity, and tucked between the staunch Stalinist architecture there are plenty hip cafés, cool bars and tasty restaurants to keep your spirits high.

Wonder what life would be like if the Cold War never ended? Here's your chance to find out. But you'd better be quick. The country is landlocked by democratic, capitalist nations – and in a global economy, with internet centres and sushi bars, Belarus can't stay this way forever.



HISTORY

Belarus has an unhappy history. In the 1930s, under Stalin, hundreds of thousands of people were executed in purges here. The savage Nazi occupation during WWII was ended in 1944 by the Red Army, with massive destruction on both sides. At least 25% of the Belarusian population died between 1939 and 1945, most in the 200-plus concentration camps.

The 1986 nuclear accident at Chornobyl, just over the border in Ukraine, left about a quarter of the country seriously contaminated, and its effects are still felt today. On 25 August 1991 Belarus declared independence from the USSR. Since 1994, Belarus has been governed by Alexander Lukashenko. His leadership has been autocratic and authoritarian, and in 1996

he effectively made the entire government subservient to him. Numerous critics of the regime have been imprisoned or have disappeared. In March 2006, Lukashenko won another five-year term in presidential elections that were widely regarded as corrupt, and which were

READING UP

Get some insight into today's moustached megalomaniac by reading about two others who had a huge influence on Belarus: *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia*. And for something completely different, check out Lee Hogan's bizarre sci-fi novel, *Belarus*.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

At the **Belarusian Popular Front Headquarters** (BPF; prasppekt Masherava 8, Minsk), you can buy antiregime CDs, books and badges. Both the BPF and its office are legal, so don't worry about the people in uniform outside – they're from the Academy of the Ministry of the Interior next door.

followed by peaceful protesters camping out for a week before being hauled off to prison.

Politically speaking, the country has become isolated and largely ignored. It's the pariah of Europe.

THE CULTURE

The Belarusian population is 81.2% Belarusian, 11.4% Russian, 4% Polish and 2.4% Ukrainian, with the remaining 1% consisting of other groups. Prior to WWII, 10% of the population was Jewish. They now make up less than 1%.

Belarusians tend to be harder workers, more polite and less likely to swear than Russians.

ENVIRONMENT

Belarus is for the most part completely flat, with marshes and swamps in the south and lakes in the north. The 1986 disaster at Chornobyl (p1175) has been the defining event for the Belarusian environment, if not for the republic as a whole.

TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

International flights use **Minsk-2 airport** (☎ 006, 279 1300), 40km east of Minsk. Domestic flights and those to/from Kyiv, Kaliningrad and Moscow use the smaller **Minsk-1 airport** (☎ 006; vulitsa Chkalova 38), a few kilometres from the centre.

Belarus' national airline is **Belavia** (code B2; ☎ 210 4100; www.belavia.by; vul Njamiha 14, Minsk). The main international airlines with offices in Minsk:

Aeroflot (code SU; ☎ 227 2887; www.aeroflot.com/eng)

Austrian Airlines (code OS; ☎ 289 1970; www.austrianair.com)

LOT Polish Airlines (code LO; ☎ 226 6628; www.lot.com)

Lufthansa (code LH; ☎ 284 7129; www.lufthansa.com)

Bus

Minsk is connected by daily buses to Moscow, Riga, St Petersburg and Vilnius. Brest has daily buses to/from Warsaw and Lviv and weekly buses to/from Prague.

Car

International driving permits are recognised in Belarus. Fuel is difficult to find outside major cities. The Brest–Minsk highway is very well sealed, but there are several points at which cars with foreign license plates are charged US\$1. In the future, this could extend to other highways.

Train

See p1215 for an explanation of train classes. There are dozens of trains between Moscow and Minsk and once-daily trains connecting Minsk with Kaliningrad and Kyiv. Other destinations include Lviv, St Petersburg, Vilnius and Warsaw. Brest is well connected to Moscow, Warsaw and Prague, with trains at least once daily.

GETTING AROUND

Trains between major cities are moderately frequent and inexpensive – and the views are lovely. Buses are slightly cheaper but more uncomfortable and more likely to break down.

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.

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 this 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.

The capital's stark, imposing buildings are a testament to Soviet ideology, c 1950. In WWII, barely a stone was left standing in Minsk, and half the city's people perished. Stalin had the city rebuilt from scratch, instilling his grandiose and intimidating aesthetic from block to block down the city's main drag, prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi. Today, it's President Lukashenko who holds the reins. He runs a tight ship, and nowhere is this more apparent than on the well-policed, clean and orderly streets of Minsk.

ORIENTATION

Minsk's main thoroughfare, prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi, extends over 11km from the train station to the outer city limits. The main drag is a vivid testament to Stalin's vision of grandeur.

INFORMATION

Where is a free monthly English-language glossy with listings and a map. You can usually get a copy at London (p110). There are no tourist information centres. Travel agencies can provide information but of course want to book tours.

Downstairs at the train station is a 24-hour left-luggage place (see p105).

ATMs abound, but there's often a small queue: Minsk really lingers on the keypad. Hotels all have exchange bureaus, and some cash traveller's cheques, but an ATM is the smartest way to go.

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

Beltelekom (☎ 236 7124; vulitsa Enhelsa 14; ☎ 24hr) A convenient phone and fax centre.

Central post office (☎ 227 8492; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 10) Around the cnr from the main entrance, another door on vulitsa Svjardlova leads upstairs to an Express Mail Office, which is better for international mail. The phone office is open 7am to 11pm.

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

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

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

Emergencies (☎ 003) There is no Western emergency service; this is the state's.

Soyuz Online (☎ 226 0279; vulitsa Krasnaarmejskaja 3, 2nd fl; ☎ 24hr) Go up the steps to the Dom Ofitserov; enter the far door, near the tank monument.

Star Travel (☎ 226 5882; www.startravel.by; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 6) Student airfares at this STA spin-off.

Tsentralnaja Kniharnja (☎ 227 4918; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 19) Bookshop with Lukashenko posters.

SIGHTS

The post-WWII rebuilding of Minsk has given the city a victorious, fiercely proud Soviet flair. Walking the streets is like taking a tour of Soviet ideology.

Ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi is dominated by the **Belarusian Government Building** (behind the Lenin statue) on its northern and the **Belarusian State University** on the southern side.

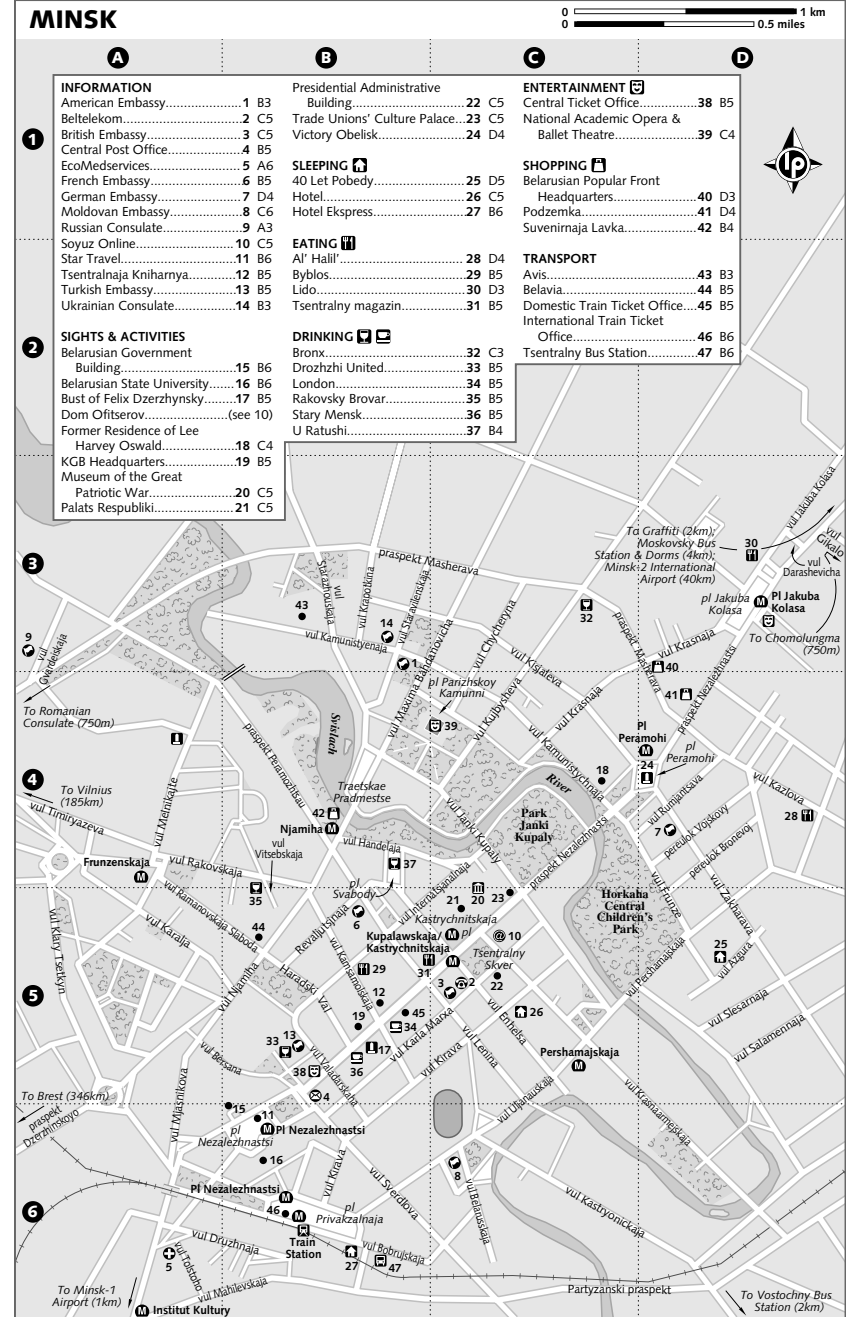
An entire block at No 17 prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi is occupied by a yellow neoclassical building with an ominous, temple-like Corinthian portal – this is the all-too-fully-functioning **KGB headquarters**. Opposite is a **bust of Felix Dzerzhynsky**, the founder of the KGB's predecessor (the Cheka) and a native of Belarus.

Between vulitsa Enhelsa and vulitsa Janki Kupaly is Kastychnitskaja ploshcha (October Square) where the attempted Denim Revolution of March 2006 and other opposition protests take place. On the square is the impressive, severe **Palats Respubliki** (Palace of the Republic), a concert hall and the multicoloured **Trade Unions' Culture Palace**. Next door is the harrowing **Museum of the Great Patriotic War** (☎ 277 5611; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 25A; admission BR5000; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun).

Across the street and up the stairs is **Dom Ofitserov** (Officer's Building), which has a tank memorial devoted to the soldiers who freed Minsk from the Nazis. Eastward is the seriously guarded **Presidential Administrative Building**, where Lukashenko practices his bulky routine. Every day, an armoured-car procession slams through the city to take him to lunch; hang out around the McDonald's on prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi around 1pm.

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

To the south, ploshcha Nezalezhnastsi is dominated by the **Belarusian Government Building** (behind the Lenin statue) to the north and **Belarusian State University** to the south.



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 January 1960 and went native – got a job in a radio factory, married a Minsker, had a child – and even changed his name to Alek. But he soon returned to the United States...and you know the rest.

SLEEPING

For apartments, try www.belarusrent.com or www.belarusapartment.com. Valentin (☎ 029 656 4010; rent2002@mail.ru) is a guy with remodelled, central flats.

Moskovsky Bus Station Dorms (☎ 219 3627; vulitsa Filimonava 63; d BR46,000) In the back of the station about 5km from the centre, these are clean, quiet and watched over by a very serious babushka.

40 Let Pobedy (☎ 236 7963; vulitsa Azgura 3; s/d BR60,000/92,000) The women on staff are kind and motherly, and the hotel is small and kind of mothy.

Hotel Ekspres (☎ 225 6463; ploshcha Privakzalnaja 3; d/tr/q with shared bathroom d BR62,100-80,000, tr/q BR100,000/160,000) It's dark and cheerless but cheap and convenient, smack dab between the central bus station and the train station. There are more expensive – and quite honestly, overpriced – rooms (including singles) with private bathroom facilities are available as well.

Hotel Complex Oktjabrsky (☎ 222 3289; oktyabr@tut.by; vulitsa Enhelsa 13; s/d BR121,910/152,380) Right next to the Presidential Administrative Building, Oktjabrsky is spitting distance from the dictator.

EATING

Tsentralny magazin (☎ 227 8876; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 23, 2nd fl) is a large grocery store with plenty of fresh stuff for self-caterers.

Lido (☎ 284 8264; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 49/1; mains BR4000-13,000) This is the best cafeteria in town.

Al' Halil' (☎ 285 2780; vulitsa Kazlova 14; mains BR4000-11,000) Find fresh *lavash* (soft flatbread) and all kinds of Middle Eastern treats at this hole in the wall.

Byblos (☎ 289 1218; vulitsa Internatsjonalnaja 21; mains BR6000-12,000) Lebanese meat dishes and a soul-warming spinach-and-lentil soup.

Chomolungma (☎ 266 5388; vulitsa Gikalo 17; mains BR8000-30,000) A huge menu with a wide range of cuisines: Nepalese, Tibetan, sushi and Indian (some vegetarian).

DRINKING

Be careful about drinking alcohol in public areas, such as parks, squares or streets. 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) A jolly two-storey brewery with food and roving accordionists.

Graffiti (☎ 266 0154; per Kalinina 16; cover BR6000-10,000; ☹ closed Sun) Banned music and cheap beer. Don't miss it. Take a taxi there (early, it's small).

U Ratushi (☎ 226 0643; vulitsa Gertsena 1; cover BR5000-10,000) Formerly called 'Nul Pyat', referring to the standard serving of beer (500mL), this place is packed with a raucous weekend crowd dancing to live bands.

The hippest cafés are the itsy-bitsy **Stary Mensk** (☎ 289 1400; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 14; ☹ 10am-11pm) and its teeny-weeny cousin, **London** (☎ 289 1529; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 18; ☹ 10am-11pm).

ENTERTAINMENT

Performing arts are shockingly cheap; try the **National Academic Opera & Ballet Theatre** (☎ 234 8074; ploshcha Parizhskoy Kamunni 1). To buy advance tickets or to find out what's on, head to the **central ticket office** (prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 18); there are more places for tickets in the pedestrian underpasses in the centre. Same-day tickets are sometimes available only from the venues.

SHOPPING

Get your Lukashenko posters at Tsentralnaja Kniharnya (see p108 for more information).

SPLURGE

For a glimpse of the bold and the beautiful, Belarusian style, dress in your best and head for **Bronx** (☎ 288 1061; prasppekt Masherava 17/1; www.bronx.by; cover free or US\$8-18), the flashiest place in town.

CIRCLE 16

There is little graffiti here, but you may come across the circled number 16 spray-painted in obscure places. It's a sign of anti-Lukashenko solidarity. At 8pm on the 16th of each month, participants turn off their lights and put a candle in their window for 15 minutes.

Suvenirnaja Lavka (☎ 234 5451; vulitsa Maxima Bahdanovicha 9) Straw crafts, wooden boxes, embroidered linen and Belarusian booze.

Podzemka (☎ 288 2036; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 43) An underground bohemian shop-cum-art gallery.

GETTING THERE & AWAY**Bus**

There are three main stations, and you can buy tickets for anywhere at any of them. You'll probably only be leaving from the Tsentralny (Central) station, but ask which station you're departing from (v ka-kom avto-h-vak-za-le ot-prav-lye-ni-ye?) to be sure. There is at least one bus service operating daily (BR15,000 to BR21,000, five hours) to Brest.

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

Tsentralny (☎ international destinations 227 0473, Commonwealth of Independent States destinations 227 4083; vulitsa Bobrujskaja 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'.

Car

Avis (☎ 234 79 90; belideal@avis.solo.by; vulitsa Starzhouskaja 15) In Hotel Belarus; rents cars (and drivers) for BR128,000 to BR256,000.

Train

Minsk train station (☎ 005, 596 5410) Sells domestic & Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)-bound tickets.

Domestic train ticket office (☎ 225 6124; prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi 18) Tickets for domestic and CIS destinations.

International train ticket office (☎ 213 1719; vulitsa Bobrujskaja 4) Advance tickets for non-CIS destinations; located to the right of the train station.

Public Transport

Minsk's metro operates until midnight. One token (*zheton*) costs BR500; buses, trams and trolleybuses cost the same (mini-buses BR1200). Bus 100 plies prasppekt Nezalezhnastsi.

Taxi

For taxis, call ☎ 081 for the state service which almost always has cars available. A cheaper and more reliable (less likely to rip off foreigners) private service (call ☎ 007) sometimes doesn't have any cars available during peak times. You can also hail a taxi from the street. Private cars don't stop for passengers.

BREST БРЭСТ

☎ 0162 / pop 290,000

Snug up with Poland, Brest is one of the busiest road and rail border points in Eastern Europe. Aside from its laid-back pace, charming side streets and the friendliness of its locals, Brest will dazzle you with a true wonder of the Soviet era: Brest Fortress, an astounding war memorial.

ORIENTATION

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. A taxi into town should be no more than BR6000.

INFORMATION

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 & long-distance calls.

GETTING INTO TOWN

From Minsk-2, a 40-minute taxi ride into town should cost US\$25, but you'll be lucky to get it for under US\$40. There are buses (BR2800, 90 minutes, hourly) that bring you to the Tsentralny bus station, which is next to the train station metro. There are also regular minibuses that make the trip in under an hour and cost BR5000. If you arrive by train, you're already in town.

City Emergency Hospital (☎ 23 58 38; vulitsa Lenina 15)

Post office (ploshcha Lenina)

SIGHTS

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; ☎ 9am-6pm). Epic monuments, solemn reenactments and sombre music played over loudspeakers pay tribute to the regiments who defended the fort for an astonishing month when the Germans invaded in 1941. It's at the western end of prasppekt Masherava, about a 20-minute walk from the centre.

The **Museum of Confiscated Art** (☎ 20 41 95; vulitsa Lenina 39; admission BR2400; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun) displays art pieces – mostly breathtaking icons – seized by border guards.

Trainspotter or no, you'll get a kick from the **Museum of Railway Technology** (☎ 27 47 64; prasppekt Masherava 2; admission BR6000; ☎ 9am-5pm Wed-Sun).

SLEEPING

Hotel Buh (☎ 23 64 17; vulitsa Lenina 2; s/d/tr BR56,000/85,000/123,000) It's on the dreary side, but the rooms are spacious and the building is interesting. There were plans to close for renovations when we visited.

Hotel Belarus (☎ 22 16 48; bresttourist@tut.by; bulvar Shevchenko 6; s BR77,000-88,000, d BR109,000-132,500) Yes, it's a Soviet-style hotel, but bathrooms are modernised and staff are sweet.

Vesta Hotel (☎ 23 71 69; hotelvesta@tut.by; vulitsa Krupskoi 16; s/d BR105,000/158,000) Privately owned Vesta is peaceful, cosy and small. Some singles have fold-out couches; pay extra to sleep two.

EATING & DRINKING

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

Pizzeria (vulitsa Pushkinskaja 20; pizza BR6000-13,000) It's not well signed, but you can pretty much follow your nose into the building and down the stairs. The pizzas are great; salads and fries are available too.

Jules Verne (☎ 23 67 17; vulitsa Hoholja; mains BR9000-30,000) The focus is on seafood, but there are also Indian, Thai and vegetarian dishes – a sort of *Around the World in 80 Days* theme.

Pub House (☎ 21 93 46; vulitsa Hoholja) Small and smoky, with 12 tap beers and plenty more in bottles, served with a smile.

Matrix (☎ 23 82 39; vulitsa Savetskaja 73) Bowling, billiards, bars and babes – it's all here.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

See p111 for information on getting to/from Minsk. The **train station** (☎ 005) has on-site customs. When taking a train from Brest, note the platform nearest the city centre is for eastbound trains; the other is for west-bound trains. The **bus station** (☎ 004) is in the centre of town.

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

BELARUS DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Standards here tend to be lower than in the West, but they are still generally acceptable. Foreigners are charged more than Belarusians for rooms (as well as museums). Hotels don't have cooking facilities, but some have in-room fridges.

BUSINESS HOURS

Offices are generally open 9am to 6pm during the week, with banks closing at 5pm. Shops are open from about 9am or 10am to about 9pm Monday to Saturday; some are open Sunday until around 6pm. Restaurants and bars open around 10am and close around 10pm to midnight.

Lunch is for an hour sometime between noon and 2pm.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies & Consulates in Belarus

There is no representation for Canada, Australia, New Zealand or The Netherlands. Unless otherwise indicated, these missions are in Minsk (city code ☎ 017)

France (☎ 210 2868; www.ambafrance-by.org; ploshcha Svobody 11)

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

Moldova (☎ 289 1441; vulitsa Belarusskaja 2)

Romania (☎ 203 8097; pereulok Moskvina 4)

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

Turkey (☎ 227 1383; vulitsa Valadarskaha 6, 4th fl)

UK (☎ 210 5920; www.britishembassy.gov.uk/belarus; vulitsa Karla Marxa 37)

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

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

Belarusian Embassies & Consulates Abroad

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

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

Germany Berlin (☎ 030-536 35 90; www.belarus-botschaft.de; Am Treptower Park 31, 12435); Bonn (☎ 022-820 113 10; www.belarus-botschaft.de; Fritz-Schaeffer Str 20, 53113)

Sweden (☎ 08-731 5744; www.belembassy.org/sweden; Herserudsvagen 5, 4 tr 181 34 Lidingo/Stockholm)

The Netherlands (☎ 0703-63 15 66; www.witrusland.com; Anna Paulownastraat 34, 2518 BE, Den Haag)

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

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

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The night of 6 July is a celebration with pagan roots called **Kupalye**, 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.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Traditional gender roles are upheld in Belarus. Homosexuality is not accepted. People keep their intimate lives private.

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

INTERNET RESOURCES

For the inside scoop on current events as told by the opposition, check out the website www.charter97.org.

MONEY

There is no coinage in Belarus, but notes range from five to 20,000 roubles – quite a span. ATMs are easy to find, and exchange offices are in hotels. Cashing traveller's cheques is possible at a few hotels (primarily in Minsk), but ATMs are an easier and more dependable method of getting cash.

POST

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

Use a Beltelekom office for calls, not a phone booth. To call, pay in advance, go to your assigned booth and hit **otber** (the answer button) when the person you're calling answers.

To dial within Belarus, dial ☎ 8 (wait for tone) + city code + number. To dial abroad, dial ☎ 8 (wait for tone) + 10 + country code + city code + number. To make an intercity call, dial ☎ 375, followed by the city code (without the first zero) and number.

To dial a Belarusian mobile number from Belarus, dial ☎ 8029 or ☎ 8025 and then the number.

For operator inquiries, call ☎ 085; a few of the staff speak English.

VISAS

Belarusian visa regulations *change frequently*, so check the website of the Belarusian embassy in the USA at www.belarusembassy.org.

Visitors are technically required to possess medical insurance. It's unlikely you'll ever be asked for it. See www.belarusconsul.org for costs and details. Medical coverage is not required for transit visa holders.

All Western visitors need either a 'tourist' or a 'transit' visa. Transit visas (see p114) are for 48 hours. Tourist visas are for 30 days and can be single-, double-, triple- or multi-entry.

Citizens of 13 countries, including the UK and Canada, don't need an invitation to receive a tourist visa; they can just apply at a Belarusian embassy. All others need to get an invitation first; try www.belarusrent.com or www.smoktravel.com/en_services/en_welcome1.html. Point-of-entry visas can be issued at the Minsk-2 international airport – although it's

AT YOUR OWN RISK

As we went to press, there was effectively no border between Russia and Belarus. In theory, by train, it's possible to enter Belarus and return to 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 passport is checked on the street (which is unlikely unless you're a troublemaker or a person of colour), you will be deported.

more expensive and your visa could potentially be turned down, so best to consider this a last resort – but if you require a visa invitation, you will still need to get that in advance.

Americans pay much more, 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. Transit visas typically cost from US\$20 to US\$35.

Your visa must be registered if you are in-country for more than 72 hours. Hotels do this automatically, sometimes for a fee. Keep the small pieces of stamped paper for customs agents upon departure. 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're asked.

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 Belarus. The possession of a valid Russian visa is not enough to serve as a transit visa. Transit visas are not available at the border.