

Belarus Беларусь

Europe's outcast, Belarus lies at the edge of Eastern Europe and seems determined to avoid integration with the rest of the continent at all costs, taking its lead from the Soviet Union rather than the European Union. Yet this lies at the heart of its appeal – while the rest of Eastern Europe has charged headlong into capitalism, Belarus offers a chance to visit a Europe with almost no advertising, litter or graffiti. Far more than just the 'last dictatorship in Europe' – Condoleezza Rice's phrase has come to haunt Alexander Lukashenko's democratically challenged country – Belarus is a land of earthy humour, friendly people and courage in the face of bleak political adversity. Outside the capital, Belarus offers a simple yet pleasing landscape of cornflower fields, thick primeval forests and picturesque villages. While travellers will always be subject to curiosity, they'll invariably also be on the receiving end of extremely warm hospitality.

While the country's flattening in WWII means that there's relatively little of historic interest to see, Belarus' three most appealing cities – Minsk, Brest and Vitsebsk – offer a surprising amount to visitors – from nightlife and cosmopolitan spark in the capital, to the tragic remnants of the Brest Fortress, and the childhood home of painter Marc Chagall in Vitsebsk. The country also offers two excellent national parks, both well worth a visit. Europe's largest mammal, the zoobr, or European bison, can be seen at Belavezhskaya Pushcha National Park, while the Pripyatsky National Park, the 'lungs of Europe', offers great birdwatching in its vast wetlands.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 207,600 sq km
- **Capital** Minsk
- **Currency** Belarusian rouble (BR); €1 = BR3780; US\$1 = BR2773; UK£1 = BR4012; A\$1 = BR1916; ¥100 = BR2894; NZ\$1 = BR1555
- **Famous for** president Lukashenko, bearing the brunt of Chernobyl, being a 'Soviet time capsule'
- **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** required by nearly all visitors; see p95



HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoy 'communism with cappuccino' in the trendy cafes of **Minsk** (p76).
- Spot a European bison, a brown bear or a wolf while deep inside the primeval **Belavezhskaya Pushcha National Park** (p90).
- Stroll through the mellow pedestrian streets of cosmopolitan Brest to the epic WWII memorial that is **Brest Fortress** (p88).
- Discover the charming childhood home of painter Marc Chagall in the old city of **Vitsebsk** (p91).

ITINERARIES

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

- **Three days** Spend two days getting to know Minsk and then take a day trip to Dudutki and Mir to get a feel for the countryside.
- **One week** Begin with two nights in Brest, including a day trip to the Belavezhskaya Pushcha National Park, then take a train to Minsk and follow the three-day itinerary there before continuing on to historic Vitsebsk.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

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

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

HOW MUCH?

- **Ride on the Minsk metro** BR600
- **500mL Belavezhskaya (herbal firewater)** BR6000
- **Straw doll** BR6000 to BR14,000
- **Plate of draniki (potato pancakes)** BR4000
- **Souvenir Lukashenko poster** BR1000

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- **1L petrol** BR2230
- **1L bottled water** BR600
- **Beer (Krynitsa)** BR1000
- **Street snack (hot dog)** BR6000

weather, the snowy winters can be very pretty, especially on sunny days.

HISTORY

Arrival of the Slavs

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

Lithuanian & Polish Control

Belarus means 'White Russia', a name determined by the fact that it is the one part of Rus that, while conquered by the Mongols in 1240, was never settled by them. The term 'white' refers therefore to the purity of the people, who unlike their Muscovite cousins, never intermarried.

In the 14th century, the territory of modern-day Belarus became part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It was to be 400 years before Belarus came under Russian control, a period in which Belarusians became linguistically and culturally differentiated from the Russians to their east and the Ukrainians to their south.

CONNECTIONS: MOVING ON FROM BELARUS

Belarus has excellent overland links to all its neighbouring countries. Daily trains from Minsk serve Moscow, St Petersburg, Vilnius, Warsaw (via Terespol) and Kyiv; see p85 for more detail. Bus services, which tend to be less comfortable, connect Minsk to Moscow, St Petersburg, Kyiv, Warsaw and Vilnius; Vitsebsk (p93) to Moscow and St Petersburg; and Brest to Terespol in Poland.