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BELARUS

“IN YOUR SPORRAN”

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About this guide

This series of downloadable NATA Mini “In Your Sporran” Guides has been designed specifically to save the hassle of printing out reams of NATA web pages in order to make sure you don’t miss something whilst wandering the back streets of your chosen destination.

This guide has been compiled almost exclusively by me (Paul Allison), and is based entirely on personal experiences and opinions. Please do not prejudice anything on my say so – not only am I quite warped, but many places were only visited once, and therefore may have been having a particularly good or bad day.

This guide is not intended to replace more traditional sources of information, such as the excellent Lonely Planet guide books or the indispensable “In Your Pocket” guides available local in many Eastern European cities (as well as the downloadable versions from www.inyourpocket.com, which have inspired this very guide). Instead, the idea is to supplement these more detailed, better researched and more balanced guides with my own ramblings.

These guides originally came about as people were forever asking for pub tips and the like for places I’ve been to – I soon grew tired of typing out the same emails every few weeks and opted instead to keep the information on the web on the NATA Online site.

All opinions expressed in this guide are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Netley Abbey Tartan Army.

- For more information about NATA (the Netley Abbey Tartan Army), including photos and diary accounts of many trips abroad with Scotland, as well as much more travel information and guides), please visit www.netleyabbeytartanarmy.com
- For more information on me, please visit www.paulallison.co.uk



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Belarus Introduction

Well, what to say about Belarus? I'm guessing that by reading this guide you've already pretty much made your mind up to go, as the country doesn't really attract many casual visitors! To be fair, it's not that bad, provided you remember to set your watch back 20 years when you arrive! I think it's fair to say that there is a fair amount of nostalgia for the old days around these parts!

Remember to check the visa situation well before you go. We secured our visas in January 2005, five months before our trip, and had no trouble whatsoever. Some braved it at the airport, but the situation changes.

Minsk 2 airport is a vast, empty communist-era behemoth many miles from Minsk itself. The going rate in June 2004 was \$20-25 for a trip into town, but this is only an indication. There is a bus, but it takes a loooooonnnng time, and sits belching dubious exhaust fumes until the driver judges it full enough to make it worth his while. Some flights (from Ukraine and the like) arrive at Minsk 1 – I've never been (our flight from Riga came into 2), but it's actually in the city limits and supposedly much smaller.

Other popular ways into the country include train from Warsaw or Moscow (a daily service actually runs all the way from Brussels) and busses from Poland and the Baltic countries. We left the country ourselves by train – a local service between Brest and Terespol on the Polish side: 18 minutes of pure cold war terror for the bargain price of 80p a ticket.

The police are everywhere in the country. And yes, they are watching you. And probably because you are foreign. The KGB was invented by a Belarussian (Felix Dzerhinsky), a fact the Belarussians are inanely proud of, and they have been keen to carry on his legacy. Secret policemen are still a fact of life, and whilst not usually intimidating to the traveller, the locals may have different view – under no circumstances should you try and engage the locals in a “And how mad is the guy who runs this country?” type discussion. The good news is, unlike other ex-Soviet states such as Moldova, the police we encountered were



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friendly, courteous, and above all, not corrupt enough to extract on the spot bribes from us.

Tourism is not particularly well-developed, however state-run tourist offices (“Belintourist”) are very helpful and can arrange most things for a small (i.e. reasonable) commission. The one thing the Brest branch struggled with was international rail reservations (Brest-Warsaw on one of the several direct trains), hence our ride in the cattle carriage.

Minsk Introduction

Minsk is a big, sprawling city with a real sense of poverty and desolation. It's not in itself pretty, however the views across the lake to the Holy Spirit from the front of the monolithic Hotel Belarus (i.e. not featuring the hotel itself).

This city is big. There is a metro, but it's not much use to be honest, and if you can work out the mibibus, normal bus and trolleybus routes then you're doing very well indeed. You will end up catching a cab, which is a shame, as the vast majority of them seem to go out there way to rip off us decadent westerners. If you know any Russian numbers, try and use them to thrash out a fare you're happy to pay before you get in the cab.

There are a wide choice of hotels – even 1,500+ Tartan Army didn't put too much of a strain on the city's beds. These range from fleapits inhabited by transient workers and traders near the station through to the alleged international class Hotel Minsk (in reality, just scraping in as a four star). A number of Soviet-era three star dinosaurs lurk in easy staggering distance from the city centre – the iconic landmark of the Hotel Belarus faces the Planeta and the Yubilyeny across the lake slightly to the north of the centre. The Belarus is not too bad, although some of it is badly in need of renovation. It does boast almost a dozen different drinking and/or dining options, so it's possible to go on a pub crawl without even leaving the hotel – something usually only associated with high-class resort hotels!

All this talk of a city “centre” is a little misleading. There is no obvious centre, although the junction of Prasp Francyska Skaryny and Vul Enhelsa makes a pretty good claim for it (perhaps it's the McDonalds!). Skaryny is a big, scary motorway sized boulevard, and links Heroes



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Square, Oktyabrskaya (October) Square and PI Nezalezhnasti near the station, running for around 3 miles. Other areas to be aware of are Trinity Suburb (the barely reconstructed and conspicuously empty “old town”), and Rakov, home to an apartment block sized shopping centre, the country’s oldest church and an excellent brewpub.

Things to see and do

Minsk isn't really a sightseer's dream, but there are a few things to keep you going:

- **Hero Square** – Minsk is one of a handful of Soviet Hero Cities, a title it takes very seriously. There are a cluster of hero monuments just to the north of the Hotel Planeta, but the main action takes place down at PI Peramohi, where an huge star-topped column rises from a big roundabout. The underground passage also forms part of the monument.
- **Lee Harvey Oswald's Apartment Block** – the CIA's biggest patsy lived in Minsk for a few years, in a corner apartment block (at Kamunistychanaja Vul 4), but it really just is an apartment block that you can stand a stare at from the street. It is diagonally opposite....
- **The wee green house where the original Communist Party was founded.** This now houses a wee museum, but we never went in. Some neighbourhood, eh?
- **Museum of the Great Patriotic War** – in the top right corner of Oktyabrskaya PI is the jewel in the crown of the country's museums. Most things are in Russian/Belorussian, but you'll still get the gist of it.
- **KGB Building** – Large, imposing yellow building on Prasp Francyska Skaryny. You don't want to go in here.
- **River Svislach** – the river/lake that bends in front of the Hotel Belarus and twists its way past Trinity Suburb is quite picturesque in the summer. Pedal boats can be hired, and beers can be enjoyed in the summer beer tents along the banks.



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- **Holy Spirit Cathedral** – The big, white orthodox church at the top of the hill, looking down on the Svislach is worth looking in on, if you like that kind of thing. Head under the overpass to your left (as you look down) and cross the road to find the SS Peter & Paul Church, which is very old. Before you get there, there's a stunning Soviet façade on the first shop after the flyover.
- **Trinity Suburb** – Minsk's attempt at an old town is still pretty empty. You'll find it hemmed in to a small triangle next to the Svislach River, between the Hotel Belarus and the Cathedral.
- **Dinamo Stadium** – home to Dinamo Minsk and the national team, the Soviet-arched stadium is worth a look. It also plays host to a daily market, so you can stock up on cheap polyester tracksuits at the same time.
- **Mir Castle (out of the city, on the way to Brest)** – an old, well preserved Polish castle. Not worth a special trip, unless you're a big fan of old, well preserved Polish castles.

Places to drink

- Now we're talking. Minsk certainly isn't short of places to have a drink. It is conspicuously short of places to get rid of all the fluid once you've drunk it mind! Some bars don't have any toilets, some share, and some (like the riverside beer tents in the summer) rely on Glastonbury style portaloos. You have been warned.
- **Hotel Belarus** – dozens of drinking options, from the outside karaoke tent to the Billiards Bar on the first floor, via the ground floor posh Pierre Smirnoff restaurant to the top floor Panorama restaurant/bar/cabaret. There's even bars dotted around the upper floors where rooms would usually be, although we never actually braved these for a beer. Finally, the piece de resistance is the Westworld Club – see below for Rich's review.
 - **Heart Café** – walking between Rakov and Skaryny on vul Kamsamolskaya will take you past this camp little café.



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- **Rakowski Brovar** – Very posh, Germanic-style brew-pub set in a suburban backstreet behind a huge shopping centre/apartment block. Not the easiest thing to find, but worth it when you get there – it's in the suburb of Rakov, which is actually just behind the Hotel Yubileynaya and very close to the SS Peter & Paul church. Loads of food, very good beer, and the cream of the country's waiting staff. None of this comes cheap (for Minsk), but you'll easily forget which country you're in whilst here.
- **Shopping Centre open air bar** – A summer arrangement, on the first floor terrace of the huge apartment/shopping monolith; rows and rows of outside bars, perfect for getting some fresh air (and exhaust fumes) and watching the world pass by in their polyester tracksuits. The problem comes when you need to find a toilet – they're downstairs and to the far left.
- **Air Grip** – a popular pizzeria/café, sharing a roof (and a set of toilets) with a cinema on vul Kamsamolskaya. Very busy.
- **Stary Mensk** – On Skaryny itself, this small bar was bigged up in the Lonely Planet as having an excellent terrace from which to spy on the KGB monolith over the road and a cosy interior plastered with old world pictures of Minsk. What they didn't say is that it's the size of a newspaper kiosk (the beer fridge doesn't even fit inside!), which inexplicably, has no toilets whatsoever. Anywhere. Your best bet is either the Hotel Minsk (500 yards one way) or the next nearest bar (500 yards the other way). Coupled with the torrential downpour getting spray under the plastic tent of the street terrace, it's fair to say this place was a disappointment!
- **Patio** – best restaurant we found, further up Skaryny and opposite the second-best (McDonalds). Patio does pizzas, steaks and salads, and also manages a decent wine and beer list. Expensive for Minsk, but believe me, you won't mind!
- **Alivarya Brewery pub** – the second brewery tap is a more utilitarian affair. Strip lit, with trestle tables (and bizarrely, the only non-smoking section we found in the city), it knocks out Alivarya bottled beer to an audience of willing and eager local jakies. Go in here, by all means, but do it with your eyes open!



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- **Banana Café** – in the heart of Trinity Suburb, opposite the back door of Stary Goard (below). It's fair to say this is one of the most incongruous pubs I've ever been in. A genuine Arabic hookah café (owned by a genuine Arab, replete in flowing white robes), with a handful of low tables surrounded by cushioned seats, Heineken on draught and Amazonian beauties swaying to the ethnic beats. Let Rich take up the story (he was in on a different night): "Just minutes after I arrived (and without any prior warning) a beautiful Middle Eastern belly dancer came spinning out of a side door and performed for the clapping masses... All 16 of them! Do you find sultry Middle Eastern women attractive? Worth a visit if you time it right."
- **Minsky Brovar** – Halfway down vul Kisjaleva to the north-west of the centre, just when you given up hope of finding a large industrial brewery in a leafy residential street, is the Alivarya Brewery (the red and yellow insignia can be seen all over town). The Minsky Brovar is one of the two brewery taps, and by far the nicest (my favourite bar in the whole town, I'd say). Thick wooden tables and an old world atmosphere are complimented by good food and an excellent unfiltered beer (ask for "nyefiltra piva") that I didn't find anywhere else. Also has nice toilets. Shame it closes at 10pm, however right around the corner is...
- **Stary Gorad** – on the southern edge of Trinity Suburb, this popular restaurant/bar seemed nice, but we didn't stay too long. Has a back terrace overlooking the Banana Bar.
- **Café Mistral** – on a street leading from Skaryny to the stadium, this downstairs bar is pleasant enough, if a little empty during the day. Has it's own toilets, which is always a bonus!
- **Grunwald** – more of a posh restaurant than a bar, they were happy enough to serve us beer as it was the middle of the day. Popular with the local mafia molls, by the looks of it. On Karla Marxa, which runs parallel with Skaryny.
- **Traktir Na Marxa** – just along from Grunwald, this is the more down-to-earth drinkers option. Nothing special, but worth a visit if walking past.



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- **Staravilinskaya** – riverside bar on the edge of Trinity. Two large covered riverside terrace areas as well as an interior we never ventured into. Like something out of a fast show sketch, we were entertained by a genuine Peruvian pan-pipe band whilst drinking here.

Rich's Nightclub Guide

Here's our resident creature of the night's view on all things down and dirty...

- **Alcatraz** - Located in the basement of the Trade Union's Culture Palace (next to the Museum of the Great Patriotic War). Small but quirky due to the cell doors on the seating booths and entertaining thanks to the group of local girls who invited me into their cell to engage in the national obsession of downing shots of vodka. Proceedings were then interrupted when the music was stopped, the dance floor was cleared and a compere appeared to host a few rounds of 'Mr and Mrs' before introducing four lads who danced in their vests, cut-off baggy jeans and big trainers and who seemed to believe that they were the New Kids on the Block. If nature is calling (or if you simply can't stand the idea of having to watch such shite!) for Gods sake don't attempt to head for the gents by walking along the edge of the dance floor during their routine for this causes a security alert on a truly epic scale with staff moving swiftly to ensure you return to your seat. Once the 'New Kids' have finished, the compere returns to the fold and toilet visits are again permitted. On my return I was immediately led up to the dance floor by one of my newfound friends and my reward for merely walking to the centre of the room was a free cocktail! After having to sit through the 'New Kids' things were later evened up when some lassie danced around a chrome pole with her puppies out.

- **WestWorld** - You all know about this one don't you!?! WestWorld is somewhere that I didn't truly appreciate at the time but right now, whilst I'm still in my post-tartan-army-away-trip depression, I'm longing to return to Minsk – If only for one chance, just one chance to visit WestWorld again.



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- **Bronx** - Had it on my list before I got to Belarus and then had it recommended to me as a 'disco' by my hotel reception. My advice... If you're ever in Minsk again, don't bother. Although it is very refined and very nicely done out, Bronx is little more than a pool and billiard bar. Umpteen tables, two bars and overlooking the tables, a large balcony-type second floor that on another night may or may not be the location of the elusive disco I was looking for!
- **Madison Club** - A nightclub (and bowling alley) with a reputation for being one of the finest in Minsk. Décor wise, an odd fusion of Zebra Crossing clashing with the tones of Timmy Mallet! Despite that, worth a visit - although I'd recommend you do so only on a Friday or Saturday night as it was a bit quiet when I was there on the Thursday. Not far from the city centre but opt for a taxi over walking it.
- **Nightstar** - Décor aside, not too dissimilar to Madison Club in my opinion but whereas Madison is away from the city centre, Nightstar is located just a stone's throw behind the Hotel Minsk. Try to pay your entrance fee at the tiny kiosk windows outside (I say try because the sullen cow on the other side didn't want to take my money and slammed the window in my face before the bouncer intervened and got me in). To be honest, my memories of the rest of the night are a little vague after being invited over to a table by seven locals (3 couples and a fat burd) and what was to become our mutual friend, a bottle of vodka. Nothing particularly special about the place but of what I do recall, a decent enough club and worth a visit if you're in town. *Warning: The door staff insisted that I leave my camera in the cloakroom safe. Don't do what I did and walk out without it.
- **Reactor** - Allegedly a former boxing club, the raised, square dance floor in the middle of the room attempts to recreate a ring (minus the ropes). Pay at the door, go through the metal detector and when faced with the very young crowd, you could be mistaken for thinking you had stumbled into a youth club. You can't help but laugh at the number of kids wearing sunglasses, strutting their stuff and throwing their shapes in front of the panoramic mirrors either side of the room – and the lads were worse than the lassies!



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- **X-Ray** - There are those who have and those who do not and those who have come to X-Ray. Slick, cool, slightly pretentious and a place for the beautiful people. A bit of thought has gone into the design of the stylish interior, although it's a rather small space. However, for the summer months a temporary structure is erected in order that you can enjoy those hot nights outside with another bar, more seating and more room to dance. By far the most expensive place I visited at BR8000 - BR11000 (£2 - £3) for a Heineken Export (no local or Russian beers available).

Brest

There are two things that prevent Brest from just being another bleak garrison town on the edge of the erstwhile Soviet Empire: the stunning Brest Fortress (Brestkaya Krepost) and the castle-like railway station, a major crossing point from Europe en route to Russia.

The train station is a loose collection of marble-like halls, complete with a full passport, customs and duty free hall for those heading across to Poland. Most of the Warsaw-Moscow trains (including a daily train all the way from Brussels! Did you know it's possible to travel all the way from London Waterloo to Moscow with only one change of train?) pass through, and I've heard this described as a pretty efficient transfer point, with airport style shopping and no crowds. On the other hand, we splashed out 60p each to travel cattle class on the 18-minute shuttle with all the local smugglers (including the train staff!) that runs into Terespol on the Polish side of the border, where only the front door of the front carriage actually reaches the platform and the machine gun-toting guards make sure no-one tries to jump the queue! Don't let any of this faze you - it's all character building stuff. Just make sure you allow plenty of time!

The fortress is almost certainly what you're here for. The heroic defence against the advancing Nazis elevated Brest to Hero City status (alongside Belarus), and the fortress is now a memorial to this resistance. The huge star-shaped entrance is pretty breathtaking. The large man-shaped rock and tower are also awe-inspiring, and the



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museum is well worth a look, even if almost everything is in Russian. We walked to the fortress in around 25 minutes (past an open-air train museum that was unfortunately closed), but opted to come back by bus. Allow a good couple of hours to wander about.

Downtown Brest is pretty uninspiring. The main street is littered with small bars and restaurants, and there is a Papa Joes pizzeria/nightclub/bowling alley that was empty when we were in there (6pm on a Saturday night). I was also full of a summer cold at the time, so we didn't stay out late to see if the locals painted the town red of a weekend evening (or simply left it in a state of dirty grey). Not a place to go out of your way for (unless you're a real Eastern Front history buff), but well worth a stopover if passing through.

Was this guide useful? Please let me know:
paul@netleyabbeytartanarmy.com



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