

instant

MINSK

inyourpocket

2006



Introducing Minsk

Minsk where? Okay, so it's not the most well-known of travel destinations, but this city has a lot going for it – impressive, Soviet-style architecture, beautiful parks, friendly natives, goofy nightclubs ... oh, and let's not forget all those KGB informants poking their noses around, scribbling little notes. To make the most of your stay, keep your espionage activities to a minimum and check out these pages for the latest on what to see and where to go.

Restaurants
Bars
Clubs
Sights
Hotels
Transport

and a whole host of other useful information

Bargains

If you were hoping for a dirt-cheap tourist destination, sorry, you're about a decade late and a rouble short. The days of partying all night for US\$10 are long gone. That said, compared to most European countries, restaurants in Belarus are still fairly cheap, and you can certainly get around in taxis without breaking the bank. Other bargains to watch for are pirate CDs, vodka and caviar. Western imports, many of which arrive by way of Moscow, are fairly expensive here.

Borders

Belarus sees itself as surrounded (Latvia - 141km, Lithuania - 502km, Poland - 605km, Russia - 959km, Ukraine - 891km), or at least threatened on the west side, by evil capitalist states looking for any chance to do it harm. At most borders, this paranoia translates into long queues, thorough luggage searches, painstaking document checks and officials who welcome you to their country with all the charm of a prison guard. The border with Russia, with whom Belarus has much more bosom relations, is comparatively lax.

Communism

When the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, nobody bothered to tell the Belarusians. Or at least that's what you'd think given the abundance of Lenin statues and other Soviet-style flash that still decorates public squares throughout the country. For many visitors, this back-in-the-USSR panache is a big part of Belarus's charm, particularly the Stalin-era city centre of Minsk. Not all the holdovers from that period are as fun though – nearly all enterprise is state-owned, the KGB still harasses the population and bureaucracy is rampant. Expect to spend lots of time shouting at people through very small holes in very large windows.

Customs

The rules for what you can bring into and out of Belarus get more complicated the more officials you ask, so our advice is to keep your personal cargo straightforward and minimal to avoid surprises. According to the Belarusian embassy in Vilnius, non-residents can bring in, tax free: €1,000 in cash, 1 litre of strong alcohol, 1 litre of beer, 200 cigarettes or 200g of tobacco (if you're over 18), 5 pieces of jewellery, 1 watch, 3 pieces of leather clothing and 4 tyres (which you've presumably crammed into the pockets of your leather trousers). Pay attention to your booze – each extra litre of alcohol you try to bring in will be taxed €20, though why anyone would take alcohol into this paradise of cheap vodka is a mystery. When leaving, you can take out up to 500g of gold and 5kg of silver, so your bling-bling should be okay. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that you should avoid trying to take out icons, antiques or any works of art without the proper paperwork.

Driving

Driving in Belarus is generally something to be avoided, not least because of icy roads, potholes, greedy traffic police and the locals, who drive like – there's just no way to sugar-coat this – Moscovites. If you decide to drive anyway, here's what you should know: In Belarus you drive on the right, and pass on the left. Kids under 12 have to stay in the back seats, seatbelts are mandatory and there's a zero tolerance policy for drinking and driving. Your licence from the US or EU is valid in Belarus for 6-months, after which you have to apply for a Belarusian licence, a process that's said to be fairly uncomplicated.

Filling up The state-owned petrol monopoly has done a lot in recent years to install shiny, new stations, ready and willing to take your dollars and Euros. It comes in 92, 95 and diesel. The quality of the fuel, while better than the stuff in Russia, isn't quite up to Western standards, so you may want to think twice before poisoning your S-class. Speed Limits Cars 60-90-110km/h, buses 60-70-90km/h, motorcycles 60-90-90km/h in towns, country roads and highways respectively. All vehicles must drive no faster than 20km/h in small villages. Drivers who have passed their test in Belarus within the previous two years are restricted to a maximum speed of 70km/h on highways and country roads.

Demonstrations

Demonstrations have become a fairly regular feature in downtown Minsk – not surprising since the government clamps down on every other means the opposition has of reaching the public. Most of these gatherings are peaceful affairs where young people hold up signs while the police look on threateningly. That said, demonstrations have at times been met with swinging truncheons or worse, so be aware of the mood if you happen to be near one.

Electricity

The electricity is 220V AC, 50Hz, and barring lightning strikes, it's fairly stable. Nearly all sockets are now the standard, European two-pin variety, though some of the smaller, Soviet-style sockets can still be found. For these, an adaptor works far better than brute force, as you may find out when you try to take the plug back out again.

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ESSENTIAL CITY GUIDES

Instant Minsk

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Health

Unless you packed your lead underwear, you may want to limit the time you spend in the southeast corner of the country. This is where radiation from the 1986 Chernobyl disaster still covers much of the landscape. Short visits (a few days) won't harm you though, so long as you avoid locally produced vegetables, mushrooms, dairy products and the like. For those everywhere else, the biggest health concern is the tap water. Though many visitors drink it without problems, it's very capable of causing stomach problems.

Language

Russian and Belarusian both enjoy official status here, but in reality, Russian is by far the dominant language of daily life, particularly in Minsk. Just to keep things interesting though, street signs and metro stations are all posted in Belarusian, a language that few people here speak. So who actually knows this mysterious other language? Some people in the countryside, members of the intelligentsia and, very pointedly, those involved in opposition politics. In rural areas, Trasyanka, a mix of Russian and Belarusian, can also be heard.

Money

After years of hyper-inflation, the Belarusian rouble (abbreviated BYR) is now fairly stable, mainly thanks to strict government controls. In early 2006, the exchange rates were US\$1 = 2,150BYR, €1 = 2,580BYR with very little fluctuation from previous months. Banknotes come in denominations of 100,000, 50,000, 20,000, 10,000, 5,000, 1,000, 500, not to mention the nearly worthless 100, 50, 20 and 10 rouble varieties. Coins aren't used at all. Hotel prices listed in this guide (and those published by most hotels) are given in US dollars, but cash payments are always made in the local currency. Exchange offices dealing in major currencies can easily be found in the downtown area, and rates differ very little. ATMs are also common on the main downtown streets, though hard to find elsewhere. Nearly all will work with MasterCard; but you may have to hunt a bit to find one that will work with Visa. Most hotels and the more modern restaurants accept credit cards.

Police

What's the main ingredient in any police state? Police, of course. Without them, dictatorship just wouldn't be as fun. Belarus supposedly has one of the highest ratios of police to citizens in the world. Note however that Belarus's boys in blue are not the kind of friendly officials that you'd find in some other places, ready to help a lost tourist with directions and so forth. Rather they're underpaid, typically corrupt members of the state machine ...and they carry sticks.

Prostitution

Though it seems to be less rampant than it was just a few years ago, prostitution is a very visible part of life in Belarus, particularly in Minsk. It's not uncommon to see these denizens of the night hanging around certain parts of downtown, and thanks to clever coordination with most hotel receptions, they typically phone foreign guests late at night to offer their services. If you're someone who might take them up on their offer, keep in mind that AIDS is very widespread in this part of Europe. Take precautions or you might end up bringing home a very unpleasant souvenir.

Toilets

Public toilets and those in restaurants, etc, are still generally not as clean as those in Western Europe, but they've come a long way from the nightmarish chambers of foulness they were a few years ago. Don't automatically expect them to have toilet paper though. Just so there's no confusion, M marks the Gents' room, Ж marks the Ladies'.

Visas

Pretty much everyone needs a visa to enter Belarus. The exceptions are nationals of Armenia, Cuba, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Moldova, Mongolia, North Korea, Poland, Russia, Serbia and Montenegro, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. The visas are supplied by your nearest Belarusian embassy or consulate. The recommended practice, however, is not to deal with the embassy directly, but instead to go through a travel agency that specialises in Belarusian visas (in fact, some consulates only give you this option). The procedure, usually costing US\$40-80 for a single entry tourist visa, involves getting a hotel voucher or other official invitation, something that the travel company takes care of. In theory, it's also possible to get a visa on arrival at the Minsk 2 airport if you have your hotel voucher or invitation in-hand, but in practice, it's an expensive and risky option. We recommend getting your visa before you arrive. Once in the country, you have three working days to get your visa registered. Hotels will do this for you, but if you're not staying in a hotel, you'll have to register at your local OVIR (Office of Visas and Registration). If you don't register, you could have problems when you're trying to leave the country.

Basic data

Population (2005 est)

Belarus 9,800,100, Minsk 1,729,000, Gomel 492,000, Vitebsk 351,000, Grodno 312,000, Mogilev 362,000, Brest 296,000

Ethnic Composition (1999 census)

Belarusian - 81.2%, Russian - 11.4%, Polish - 3.9%, Ukrainian - 2.4%, Others - 1.1%

Territory

207,600km². Fertile lowland, with about 11,000 lakes.

Highest Point

Gara Lysaya 365m

Largest Lake

Narach 79.6km²

Longest River

Dnieper (aka Dnipro, or Dnyapro). One of the longest rivers in Europe, the Dnieper rises in the Valdai Hills of Russia, and flows south 2,285km through Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, before finally emptying into the Black Sea.

Local Time

Belarus is in the Eastern European Time Zone (GMT+2hrs), putting it in line with Finland, the Baltic States, Turkey and South Africa. Daylight Saving Time (GMT+3hrs) is in effect from the last Sunday of March until the last Sunday of October.

11th century 1067 First mention of Menesk (Minsk). The name allegedly derives from the Slavic verb "meniati" (to change) as Minsk quickly develops into one of the commercial centres of Eastern Europe.

16th century 1569 Foundation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Belarus ceases to exist as a national entity.

1588 Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

17th century 1772-1793-1795 After the third partition of Poland, the whole of Belarus is incorporated into the Russian tsarist administrative system. Minsk becomes the regional capital.

20th century 1918, March 9 In the chaos of the Bolshevik revolution, an ephemeral Belarusian Popular Republic is declared while the country is still under German-Austrian occupation. **1918, March 25** The independence of Belarus is proclaimed for the first time. **1919, Jan 1** Foundation of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). **1922, Dec 31** Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Transcaucasia form the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). **1937** Stalin's purges decapitate the intelligentsia. About 250,000 people are shot at Kurapaty before **1941. 1939, Sep 17** Under the Hitler-Stalin pact Western Belarus is reunited with the rest of Belarus. **1941, Jun 22** German troops enter Belarus and soon overrun Minsk. During the "Great Patriotic War" one out of every four Belarusian inhabitants is killed and 90% of Minsk destroyed.

1944, July 3 Minsk is "liberated" by the Red Army. **1946** Belarus becomes a founding member of the UN. **1961** Lee Harvey Oswald, alleged assassin of US President John F. Kennedy, lives in Minsk, where he meets his wife Marina. **1974, June 16** Minsk is awarded the Soviet title of "Hero City" for its sufferings in World War II and speedy reconstruction.

1986, Apr 26 The fourth reactor of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explodes in neighbouring Ukraine, polluting 23% of Belarusian territory.

Independence & Beyond

1990 July 27 A Declaration of Sovereignty adopted by the newly-elected Supreme Soviet creates a "neutral, nuclear-free state".

1991 Aug 25 Declaration of Independence adopted hastily after the collapse of the hardline putsch in Moscow. **Dec 8** Leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus sign an agreement to form the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Minsk becomes the administrative centre.

1992 May 20 Belarus introduces its own coupons to replace the Soviet rouble. On **June 1** Belarus leaves the rouble zone.

1994 March 15 The Supreme Soviet adopts a new constitution. **June 23** In the first free presidential elections former collective farm boss Alexander Lukashenko is elected president on an anti-corruption, pro-Russia platform, winning 80% of the votes. **Dec** The first major crackdown on the press occurs as two newspapers critical of the president are closed.

1995 May 14 First free parliamentary elections coupled with a national referendum: Over 75% of the electorate say 'yes' to Russian becoming an official state language alongside Belarusian; the return of old Belarusian Soviet insignia including the Soviet Republic flag (without the hammer and sickle); and the president being granted more power over the parliament. **Sep 12** Two American balloonists are killed by the Belarusian Air Force when their hot air balloon is shot down during an international race.

1996 Apr 2 Lukashenko and his Russian counterpart, Boris Yeltsin formally sign a controversial treaty calling for a political union between Russia and Belarus. The idea has already generated large demonstrations in Minsk, which increase after the signing. **June** The national flag and emblem adopted in **1991** is officially scrapped in favour of the old Soviet-style flag and emblem without the hammer and sickle.

July 5 Belarus loses its right to vote in the Council of Europe after failing to pay its dues. **Nov 28** The president signs his new constitution that extends his term of office from five years to seven.

1997 Apr 29 The Soros Foundation is accused of violating its charitable organisation status. Having provided US\$13 million to Belarusian hospitals, schools and libraries, it is now ordered to pay US\$ 3 million in fines. In **Sep** it closes its operations in Belarus. **May 24** Russia and Belarus sign a new unification deal. Basic principles include ensuring press freedoms, guaranteeing free activities for political parties and opposition organizations and inviolability of private property. The treaty goes into effect on **June 11, 1997**.

1998 March An economic crisis begins after the Russian Central Bank suspends trading in the Belarusian rouble, causing the currency to collapse. Lukashenko steps in and takes control of commercial banks, worsening the situation. **Dec 27** The president shuts down the only opposition newspaper.

1999 Sep Opposition figures Viktor Gonchar and Anatoly Krasovskiy are shot to death. Two years later KGB agents speak on videotape, admitting the murder.

2000 Oct Parliamentary elections held, most opposition candidates are barred from running. Voter turnout is so low in 13 constituencies that re-run elections have to be held the following **March**. November Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin sign an agreement to introduce a single currency by **2008**, later than previous agreements.

2001 Sep 9 Lukashenko is elected for a second term, reportedly having garnered 75.6% of the votes. The elections are widely condemned by Western observers and opposition as neither free nor fair.

2002 Aug Russia makes proposals for a union treaty that would essentially annex Belarus into Russia. Lukashenko rejects it. **Oct 30** A mass grave from the World War II era, containing 12,000 bodies, is discovered at Slutsk. **Nov** Belarus' poor human rights record and its banning of the OSCE prompt the US and 14 EU states to impose travel ban on Lukashenko and several government ministers. The ban stays in effect until the following **April**.

2004 Oct 17 In another highly suspect referendum, Lukashenko gets presidential term limits scrapped, paving the way for him to run again in **2006** elections. **Dec** Opposition politician Mikhail Marinich is sentenced to five years in jail for alleged theft of office equipment.

2005 Oct 2 A congress of opposition parties selects physics professor Aleksander Milinkevich to run against Lukashenko in the **2006** elections. **Dec 20** Lukashenko signs an amendment to the criminal code that would penalize anyone who makes statements that would discredit Belarus in the international arena. Making such statements is punishable with jail terms of up to two years. **2006 March 19** Lukashenko is returned to power with 82.6% of the vote in an election that opposition leader Milinkevich claims was fraudulent. Protesters occupy October Square.

Arriving in Minsk is easy. The hard part is arriving in Belarus. Whether doing so at one of its many land borders or by plane, the experience will most likely bring with it many memories to savour in years to come. Belarusian border delays are notorious, and promise to stay that way for at least the foreseeable future. Depending on the mood of the customs officials, you may or may not be asked to fill out a customs declaration form. A customs declaration form is a small piece of paper with some writing on it, usually in Russian, occasionally in German, and rarely in English. A customs declarations form is a very serious piece of paper, and should not be taken lightly. Neither should it be lost. Hang on to it. You may also have your bags searched, and if you're really lucky, get your passport intimately fiddled with by an abundance of large-hatted, suspicious officials. Expect this procedure to take anywhere from between five minutes to all day. Once approval to enter Belarus is granted, you'll rarely if ever encounter the authorities again until it's time to leave, when the entire ridiculous pantomime is replayed in reverse.

By plane

Minsk has two airports: The tiny, city centre Minsk I, which only handles a few flights, and the larger, farther Minsk II, where everyone else lands.

Minsk I Looking very much like a Stalin-era bath house, this box-shaped structure 3km south of the centre hardly qualifies as an airport. A currency exchange and café are the only services.

Getting to Town Bus N°100 will take you to the centre (it heads down Prospekt Nezavisimosti). Buy a ticket on board for 460BYR. Taxis outside may or may not be reliable. See 'taxis' in the Getting around section for details on how to spot which is which.

Minsk II The city's main international airport, Minsk II, is located 42km from the city limits. It was completely remodelled in 2005 to give it all the warmth of an abandoned hockey arena. Once you go through the usual customs torture, you end up on the ground-floor arrivals hall. The currency exchange, directly opposite, usually operates when flights arrive. Otherwise, head to the larger one on the second floor (open 09:00 - 13:00, 13:30 - 20:00). Those machines that look like ATMs in the arrivals hall aren't ATMs. A real ATM is inconveniently located on the third floor, next to departure gate 1. For public telephones, long distance phone service, internet and post, head to the post office on the third floor.

Tourist information

Tourist Information Prospekt Pobediteley (Masherova) 19, tel. +375 17 226 99 00. The only thing Minsk has that's remotely like a tourist information office is a counter run by the state tourist agency, Belintourist, attached to the Yubileynaya Hotel. Naturally it's closed on weekends, when tourists might come. ▶ Open 09:00 - 13:00, 13:45 - 18:00. Fri 09:00 - 13:00, 13:45 - 16:45. Closed Sat, Sun.



Getting to Town The taxi racket that used to fix prices here has thankfully been broken, but you'll still have to pay US\$20 - 35 for the hour-long ride to the city. If you speak Russian, your chances of bargaining the price downward are better. Otherwise you can resort to haggling with a pen and paper, but it won't be easy – if you don't want to pay that price, the next chump will. Don't go by the meter or you'll end up paying more. Your only alternative is to catch the airport bus, which costs only 3,540BYR (spring 2006), but runs infrequently.

By train

The gleaming new Minsk train station is a tribute to the modernity of Belarus, and proof that no matter how much money you spend, you can still come up with something just as chaotic as the old train station. It does have the welcoming look of a shopping mall though, and if you follow the pictographic signs, you shouldn't get lost. A currency exchange booth can be found at the top of the escalator. Find public telephones accepting chip cards on the ground floor and in the basement. The basement also contains public toilets and a large, 24hr left luggage room.

Getting to Town The station is in the centre of town, so walking could be an option. Otherwise, head to the basement level and follow the underground passage, which eventually leads to the entrance of the Ploschad Nezavisimosti metro station. (See Public transport for instructions on how to use it). Otherwise you can take one of the taxis parked in the immediate area. Naturally, many of these are waiting to bilk you (though it probably won't be by a horrible amount). To be safe, go for one of the yellow, state-run taxis or a private one with 007, 052, 057 or 084 displayed on the car. Be sure they turn on the meter.

By bus

Other than a pay toilet, some food kiosks and a pigeon, the only service offered by the Minsk Central Bus Station is left luggage (open 06:00 - 22:00). Luckily it's right next to the shiny new train station where anything goes (both good and bad). Head here for currency exchange, better luggage storage, telephone, public transport, plastic toys, etc.

Getting to town The bus station is in the centre, so you might be able to walk to your destination from here. See By train for further details.

By car

The most valuable tip anyone can give you about driving into Belarus is: don't. You'll have to contend with bad roads, on-the-spot 'fines' from traffic police and speeding maniacs in blacked-out BMWs, not to mention the fact that all signs and street markers are in Belarusian.

If you decide to drive in anyway: At the border you have to fill out a declaration on your car and you will have to buy Belarusian auto insurance (not surprisingly, most international insurers won't touch Belarus with a ten-foot policy). Luckily it's cheap, but be sure you have the cash (US dollars, Euros, Russian rubles). There may not be controls at the border coming in from Russia, but there could be sporadic checks. Once in the country, most of the main roads are well-maintained. You'll have to pay a US\$3 toll if you're using the Brest-Minsk highway (M1). Keep your speed to the posted limit to avoid subsidising the salary of Igor the gold-toothed traffic cop, and if you have motor trouble, phone 001 or 007.

The restaurant scene in Minsk is evolving (albeit slowly) with the old, overly-formal institutions being upstaged by a handful of more dynamic newcomers. Not that these are always an improvement - some are spectacular triumphs of idiocy. Still, it's encouraging that some experimentation is going on. Beware that many restaurants still ask you to order (and pay for) garnishes, like rice or potatoes, separately. Another local dining nuance is the 'show program' offered in many a dining room. This could be anything from a ludicrous, keyboard-backed singer to a stage full of heavily made-up dancers in skimpy costumes. In either case, the show is presumably designed to distract you from an otherwise less-than-inspiring meal.

Asian

Chzhungno-Mayshi Surganova 7 (Akademia Nauk Hotel), tel. +375 17 284 01 94. This tiny, somewhat frightening café in the lobby of a cheap hotel was the only Chinese place in evidence on our most recent visit. In past years it used to get the thumbs-up from expats, but judging by the smell, we had our doubts and decided not to risk it. A former Minsk In Your Pocket editor raved about this restaurant; we think part of him may still be here somewhere. ▶ Open 12:00 - 23:00, Sat, Sun 12:30 - 23:00.

Jomolungma Gikalo 7, tel. +375 17 280 53 88. Just the kind of Asian restaurant Minsk has been waiting for. Jomolungma is a well-orchestrated affair set in a cheerful room of explosive colours. The outstanding food is mainly Tibetan, with a few Nepalese, Indian and Thai choices thrown in. Hot towels precede your meal, and tea comes in a tiny pot set on a wooden platform. Then management ruin the experience by playing a synthesised rendition of 'Jesus Christ Superstar', just to remind you that you're still in Minsk. ▶ Open 12:00 - 23:00.

Uzbekiston Yanki Kupaly 17, tel. +375 17 227 73 14. One of the accidental benefits of slapping together the USSR was that fantastic cuisine from places like Uzbekistan got imported to places like Belarus. Expect touches of exotic, Central Asian ambience along with some pretty tasty food. The belly dancing might not be authentically Uzbek, but it's still cheaper than watching go-go dancers at a club. ▶ Open 12:00 - 24:00.

Belarusian

Pan Khmeliu Internatsionalnaya 11, tel. +375 17 226 78 74. A trip to Pan Khmeliu is like a time warp back to the 80s, the last time the place was remodelled and the last time the waiter changed his shirt. Still, this is a popular place to come for huge portions of excellent pan-Slavic food and all the live entertainment you can stand. Crowds keep it roaring until late into the night, though it may close before the stated 04:00 if the last customer passes out earlier. ▶ Open 12:00 - 04:00.

Stary Gorod (Old City) Bogdanovicha 19, tel. +375 17 286 05 08. It's safe to assume that any restaurant set in the town's recreated 'Old City' (as this place is named) has a certain tourist orientation, but Stary Gorod isn't one to write off. The classics of national cuisine arrive at your table on a hot griddle, and most are sanely priced in the US\$4 - 6 range. Dine on the relaxing back terrace in summer, otherwise check out seating in the funky cellar. ▶ Open 11:00 - 23:00.

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Straunya Talaka Rakovskaya 18, tel. +375 29 637 03 80/+375 17 203 27 94. An eclectic cellar restaurant with a hunting theme (stuffed bunny rabbits are among its décor victims), Straunya Talaka is one to seek out for its scrumptious food and unusual atmosphere. Tables are made from old beds, carriages and the like, and what's served on them is mostly potato snacks and skewered meats. A bit pricier than elsewhere. Reservations are a good idea since this small place tends to get booked up. ▶ Open 10:00 - 06:00.

Traktir na Parkovoy Prospekt Pobediteley (Masherova) 11, tel. +375 17 203 69 91/+375 17 203 82 51. It's supposed to look like 'grandmother's place in the country', which might explain the live rooster running around the yard or, at a stretch, the aquarium full of carp. But it doesn't really account for the screaming Gypsy band on stage, or the group of German tourists smiling politely and pretending to have a good time. If you want to sample the pelmeni, shashlyk and Belarusian national food served here, we suggest avoiding the 20:00 - 23:00 time slot when either the Gypsies or a Belarusian duet are inflicting brain damage on the customers. ▶ Open 12:00 - 24:00.

U Franciska Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 19, tel. +375 17 222 48 02. If you've been looking for the biggest tourist trap in Minsk, you've found it! It's not that there's anything wrong with this place - it's a cosy cellar restaurant with folksy décor and, it has to be said, good food. Just be prepared to pay high prices and expect to be charged extra for everything (sauce, rice, etc). A tacky, plastic-encased menu holds colour photocopies of each dish. The deruny (thick, potato pancakes) were excellent. If you're an alcoholic, you can order a 'metre of vodka', though it's presumably for more than one drinker. ▶ Open 10:00 - 23:00.

Buffet express

Krinitza Ekspres Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 18, tel. +375 17 227 16 08. Perfect for anyone with an iron stomach and a nearly empty wallet, this downtown cafeteria serves all the grizzly local favourites. Try the fish in jelly. Go on, we dare you. Cheap beer served upstairs. ▶ Open 11:00 - 23:00.

Lido Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 49, kor 1, info@lido.by, www.lido.by. Minsk truly needed a place like Lido. For those of you who aren't familiar with this successful Latvian chain, Lido's philosophy is to serve an absolutely enormous selection of foods - pizza, pork chops, ice-cream, you name it - all in a fun, folksy cafeteria set-up, and all for a bargain price. A staff equalling the population of Riga buzz around the dining room ready to whisk away your plate the instant the last morsel of food goes into your mouth. ▶ Open 11:00 - 23:00.

Maxi Bis Prospekt Pobedy (Masherova) 1, tel. +375 17 206 45 53. 'Bis' as in 'bistro', but they were too busy to finish the word. That tells a lot about this small, fast-paced eatery where sandwiches, draniki (potato pancakes) and meatballs are scarfed down by professionals on their lunch breaks. ▶ Open 08:00 - 23:00.

Café hangouts

Grunwald Café Karla Marksa 19, tel. +375 17 210 42 55. A swank atmosphere with hints of old European class makes Grunwald a popular choice for a nicer-than-usual night out. They're probably reaching a bit by charging US\$5 for a bottle of beer though. Service moves at a glacial pace. ▶ Open 10:00 - 23:00.

Kubik (Cubic) Volodarskovo 13, tel. +375 17 227 79 08. Just a friendly, funky little place with angular furniture, good prices and Lavazza coffee. The convenient location downtown is its biggest plus. Light meals also available. ▶ Open 10:00 - 24:00. [CC](#)

Matilda Kalinina 7, tel. +375 17 281 76 21. One of a scant few places in Minsk offering an intriguing atmosphere (in the positive sense) and amazingly affordable prices, this is one to seek out. The business lunch, served weekdays 12:00 - 16:00, is a particular bargain, but you can just as easily come here for coffee or drinks. The oak interior is truly relaxing, so we'll forgive them for playing a tacky recording of Zafir's Magical Pipes. ▶ Open 12:00 - 23:00. [F](#)

Presto Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 56, tel. +375 17 232 15 79, presto@iptel.by. The downtown location and huge assortment of coffees are the biggest plusses here, though credit should be given for Presto's elaborate lighting system. This is a modern, far-from-cosy affair, where disco music is blasted at deafening levels, even when the place is empty. That might be why the chameleon was mysteriously absent from his terrarium when we visited. Not surprisingly, Presto works as a cocktail bar by night. ▶ Open 12:00 - 02:00, Fri, Sat 12:00 - 03:00. [CC](#) [F](#)

Expat avenue

The three restaurants below, all of which are owned by the same company, cater to the tastes of Minsk's expatriate set and are probably the best places to come and rub elbows with the foreign crowd.

El Rincón España & Nemiga 36, tel. +375 17 227 23 31. As far as overpriced restaurants with absolutely no character go, this one takes the prize. It has all the charm of a generic hotel restaurant (without the hotel), and probably survives on its reputation as a 'safe' place for nervous, expatriate families to dine. The Spanish-ness seems to be confined to the menu, which offers things like Paella for two (US\$27). Other mains fall in the US\$12 - 21 range. To be fair, the salmon was tasty, but there was an extra charge for the little roll it came with. Your children will grow old and move away by the time you're served. If you get tired of waiting, there's a billiards hall downstairs. ▶ Open 12:00 - 24:00. [CC](#)

Il Patio Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 22, tel. +375 17 227 17 91. You really can't go wrong here - central location, friendly prices, efficient service, cosy brick décor ... what more could you ask? Formerly 'Patio Pizza', this popular restaurant and meeting place still serves some of the best pizza in town, though as the new name suggests they have plenty of other Italian dishes too. It also happens to have an all-you-can-eat salad bar, a real treasure in Minsk. ▶ Open 12:00 - 24:00. [CC](#)

Pechki Lavochki Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 22, tel. +375 17 227 78 79, www.belrosinter.com. The quintessential expat gathering place, Pechki Lavochki makes its mark by offering quality Belarusian (and European) food in a relaxed, slightly folksy atmosphere with sunflowers in the windows. Of course, being right smack in the middle of downtown doesn't hurt either. Prices are reasonable and the long menu even includes some vegetarian options. Like its sister restaurant, Il Patio, it has an all-you-can-eat salad bar. Opens early for breakfast. ▶ Open 08:00 - 24:00. [CC](#) [F](#)

Stary Mlin (Old Mill) Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 40, tel. +375 17 284 44 40. A long-time favourite, Old Mill is probably smaller than a real windmill, so exhale before you try to squeeze in here. Then head up the creaky staircase at the back and grab one of the little tables under the stuffed pig. Belarusian bar food is on offer. ▶ Open 11:00 - 24:00.

Cakes & Coffee

Air Grip Komsomolskaya 19, tel. +375 17 201 37 93, air_grip@anitex.by. There's a definite Italian-ness to Air Grip - after all, it has the same owners as the Voglia Matta restaurant. The emphasis here, though, is on ice-cream and cakes which are served in a kind of beer garden set-up. When the weather is warm, that's pretty much what Air Grip becomes. ▶ Open 09:00 - 03:00. [F](#)

Café Beze Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 18, tel. +375 17 206 64 09. Beze bills itself as 'a gallery of sweet masterpieces' and that's a fairly accurate summary of what this nice old-fashioned café is all about. It specialises in all kinds of Austrian desserts including strudels and the like. Inexpensive Belarusian meals are also served. ▶ Open 10:00 - 01:00. [CC](#) [F](#)

Salodki Falvarak Ulitsa Tanka 2, tel. +375 17 206 34 12. Belarusian-style cake, in its sugary glory, is served by the slice (US\$1 - 2) in this busy bakery-cum-bar. In summer you can also sip beer at the stand out front. ▶ Open 10:00 - 23:00. [F](#)

Salodki Falvarak 2 Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 37, tel. +375 17 284 30 79. The same basic 'cheap cakes for the masses' concept of the original is duplicated in Salodki Falvarak 2, but with a more modern and café-like interior. Blue, red and orange cubic patterns make it look like a children's playroom, but you're not allowed to take naps or drool. ▶ Open 10:00 - 23:00. [F](#)

Caucasian

Verba Kropotkina 51, tel. +375 17 234 69 95. A favourite place to come for shashlyk, that tasty, shish-kebab-like dish that originated in the mountains of the Caucasus (think Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) and became a culinary hit all over the USSR. Tiny, cosy and well worth a visit. ▶ Open 11:00 - 23:00. [CC](#)

Fast Food

Byblos Internatsionalnaya 21, tel. +375 17 289 12 18, solimart@bn.by, www.byblos.by. A bright, busy, noisy Lebanese kebab house where you can fill your belly without emptying your wallet. Along with the kebab and salad plates you can get a chicken shawarma plate with chips for 12,470BYR, or the chichtawook (chicken legs) for 6,000BYR. ▶ Open 12:00 - 24:00. [CC](#)

McDonald's Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 23. Far more than just a place to get a cheeseburger, the downtown McDonald's is something of a cultural focal point. Crowds of young people gather outside in the evening to mingle, gossip and argue about where to go next. ▶ Open 07:00 - 23:00, Fri, Sat 07:00 - 24:00. [F](#)

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Fun & Funky

Beatles Café Tomiryazova 65, tel. +375 17 209 01 48. All you need is love ... and maybe a taxi - the Beatles Café isn't quite in the centre. At its core, it's just a typical little café-bar and probably not worth a visit unless you're a true fan. Still, the concept makes this place a novelty and it does have a respectable number of oversized Beatles photos and framed album covers. The menu claims to offer the favourite dish of each of the Fab Four. We noticed Ringo Starr steak and Liverpool salad. It could do for a surreal night out. ▶ Open 11:00 - 23:00. [CC](#)

James Surganova 58, tel. +375 17 290 28 88, restaurant@james.by, www.james.by. That's James as in James Bond, and luckily you won't need top-secret clearance to get in. This is a slick restaurant-bar on two levels, decorated with neon light bars and oversized photos of the various Bonds. Sushi and grilled items are on the menu, but it's probably best to come in the evening to mingle with the cool, night time crowd at the bar. Here you can whisper playful innuendos while sipping (as if you couldn't guess) a vodka martini, shaken, not stirred. ▶ Open 12:00 - 02:00. [CC](#)

London Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 18, tel. +375 17 289 15 29. Once you see past the mountains of London souvenirs at this cheerful little café, you'll notice it has two narrow levels, it's decorated with red paint, and it has a spiral staircase at the back - just like those famous double-decker buses in Hong Kong! (er, and London). Drop in for a quick cup of coffee from Guatemala or head upstairs to lounge out. ▶ Open 10:00 - 23:00. [F](#)

German

Bavaria Odoevskovo 50, tel. +375 17 251 21 00, fax +375 17 205 03 77. It might be easier to fly to Germany than to trek out to this weird part of town. Still, the food at Bavaria comes recommended, and the barman only wears his lederhosen for the promotional photos. Mains like Schweine Fleisch fall into the US\$20 - 25 range, and are prepared by a German-trained chef. An over-40 crowd shuffles in Thursday to hear the electronic keyboard ensemble. ▶ Open 12:00 - 23:30. [CC](#) [F](#)

Westfalia Gazeta Pravdy 11, tel. +375 17 270 57 27. A perfect escape from the overbearing atmosphere - and fatty dishes - found elsewhere in the city, the restaurant attached to the IBB hotel/conference centre offers excellent, fresh food, a soft, modern interior and an overall unpretentious dining experience. The German chef cooks up a variety of both German and European fare. Try the Zurich veal or the speciality, pike perch Papillote style. Live jazz is performed here on Friday evenings; instrumental music is featured Saturdays and Sundays. Also note that the breakfast buffet here may be the best in town. ▶ Open 07:00 - 24:00. [CC](#) [F](#)

International

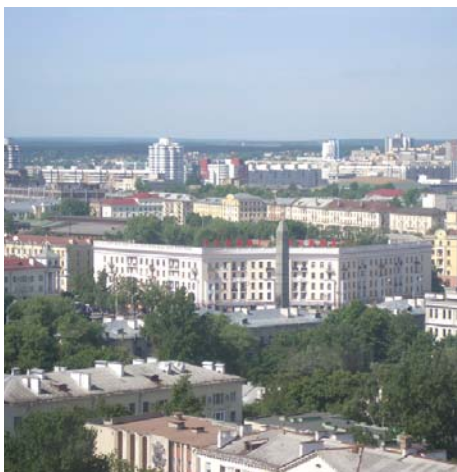
Akropol (Acropolis) Pl. Svobody 17, tel. +375 17 223 75 05. Somehow Akropol always appears on lists of Minsk's recommended restaurants, and always sends in Your Pocket reviewers running away in horror. In the past, it was the abysmal service and food that clinched it. On our last visit we were greeted by an old, snot-covered maitre d' in dirty jogging pants, and decided McDonald's might not be such a bad idea after all. ▶ Open 12:00 - 02:00. [CC](#) [F](#)

Gostiny Dvor Sovetskaya 17, tel. +375 17 206 64 17. It's slightly over-hyped, but don't be afraid to come here. This impressive cellar restaurant really deserves its place as one of the most respected dining places in Minsk. Friendly staff, amazing steaks and delightful desserts. ▶ Open 12:00 - 24:00. [CC](#)

Gurman Checherina 6/Kommunisticheskaya 7, tel. +375 17 290 67 74. The name means 'gourmet' and this cheerful cosy restaurant has for a long time been a favourite destination for expats in search of tasty pelmeni or spare ribs. A smaller branch at Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 47, tel. +375 17 284 70 78, is just as friendly, but the menu is smaller and they don't take credit cards. ▶ Open 08:00 - 23:00. [CC](#) [F](#)

Panorama Starozhevskaya 15 (top of hotel Belarus), tel. +375 17 209 76 99. The iconic City of Belarus is a record setter in so many ways - it has the city's ugliest bathroom tiles, sleaziest nightclub and best panoramic view. To take full advantage of this last gift, visit the hotel's top floor restaurant, where European cuisine is served up by the friendly staff. Surprisingly, the prices here aren't much different than the city average, with meals costing about US\$15. Still, you'll probably want to reserve a table and plan to visit before the 'ensemble' cranks up. ▶ Open 07:00 - 04:00. [CC](#) [F](#)





Italian

Bergamo Kulman 37, tel. +375 17 234 45 56. Though it has been around for a while, Bergamo is still a contender for the 'best Italian food in town' title. Its ability to attract Italian embassy staff is fairly telling. ▶ Open 10:00 - 24:00. Closed Sun. ☑

El Pomodoro Kirova 6, tel. +375 17 226 10 20. Friendly, downmarket and popular. The Tomato is a busy restaurant near the train station that's perhaps one step up from fast food. Here you ask for 'el menu', then order 'el pizza' and 'el salad', which aren't 'el spectacular' but still decent enough. Kebabs and breakfast are also served, though not necessarily at the same time. Pizza can take 15 - 20 minutes during the lunchtime rush. ▶ Open 09:00 - 23:00. ☑

Voglia Matta Pl. Svobody 17, tel. +375 17 203 87 86, air_grip@anitex.by. Walls lined with sheet metal and an overall futuristic/industrial interior might qualify this restaurant for the boldest interior in Minsk, but the novelty wears off after about ten minutes (five if you've seen Alien 3). Pizzas and pastas served here are decent, beware though of things being added to the bill that you didn't necessarily order. ▶ Open 12:30 - 04:00. ☑

Latin American

Novaya Galereya Kozlova 3, tel. +375 17 284 73 08. This dingy, rock-lined ashtayr advertises itself as serving 'Latin American cuisine'. There's even a little cactus on the sign. Besides the 'Cuban steak', however, the menu is almost entirely made up of pasta dishes which tend to be undercooked. To be fair, one guy behind the bar did look a little like Ché Guevara, and the DJ played a rapido salsa version of 'Let it Be'. You'll forgive us for not sticking around for the dance show. ▶ Open 12:00 - 02:00. ☑

Mexican

Kanyon Tolbukhina 3, tel. +375 17 281 62 71. What, you were really expecting decent Mexican food this far into Eastern Europe? Ha, ha, ha, haaa (...cough, choke). The best they do here is some piped in Paula Abdul and a disco ball. Burritos come at a pricey 20,000 - 25,000BYR and are about as Mexican as Borsch. ▶ Open 12:00 - 02:00.

Upmarket

Juravinka Yanki Kupaly 25, tel. +375 17 206 68 86, www.juravinka.by. For overblown formality, Belarusian style, the grand restaurant in the Juravinka business complex takes the prize. That's not to say you won't have a quality experience here – top-notch chefs, silly dance numbers and all. They probably even have doctors standing by when they give you the bill. (If they don't, they should.) But you don't have to spend through the nose to have a good time here. You can throw a few gutter balls in the bowling club downstairs, or try the more affordable dining in the Lasunak café (also a decent drinking place), which has picture-perfect riverside seating when the weather is warm. ▶ Open 19:00 - 03:00, Fri, Sat 19:00 - 05:00. Closed Mon. ☑

Krynitsa Lenina 2, tel. +375 17 227 08 04. Gleaming with marble and wood opulence, Krynitsa is a reminder of the pre-1917 days when a touch of glamour was still considered a good thing. European and local treats on offer include steaks, fish, snails and the ubiquitous potato pancakes. Even if you're not eating, it's worth a visit just to cosy up to the long marble bar – possibly the nicest spot in town to guzzle a beer. ▶ Open 10:00 - 23:00, Fri 12:00 - 24:00. ☑

Renaissance Pl. Svobody 23, tel. +375 17 227 09 91. If Bill Gates and Al Capone wanted to do lunch in Minsk, this is where it would happen. Built in a former monastery print shop, Renaissance is a haven of beautiful columns, soft lighting and carpets, all working to create a level of opulence that will drive many of you into fits of nervous laughter. Specialities like filet mignon in cherry sauce and lamb with cognac sauce are served to the sound of tinkling piano music. Guests can also escape to the billiards room or sink into a leather sofa in the cigar room. To get nearly the same experience without such a heavy financial impact, come for the business lunch, served weekdays 12:00 - 05:00. ▶ Open 12:00 - 02:00. ☑

Middle-Eastern

Kasbar Vokzalnaya 23, tel. +375 17 200 81 55, fax +375 17 200 25 91. Kudos to this 'Syrian' restaurant for its bubbly atmosphere and colourful, Arabian-inspired décor. The menu is heavy on the shashlyk – a staple fallback for any Minsk restaurant with a 'southern' or 'Oriental' theme. That's not to say there's anything wrong with it. The main attraction, though, is the loud bellydancing show that happens in the dining room. You might as well sit back and enjoy it – a 5,000BYR/person charge has already been added to your bill for 'entrance' to the show. ▶ Open 12:00 - 02:00. ☑

Pizza

Freski Pl. Svobody 23 (entrance from Internatsionalnaya), tel. +375 17 227 81 72. This cheerful pizzeria has the same owners as the super-lavish Renaissance restaurant next door, which explains its bright beautiful interior and all those luxury cars parked out the front. The 23 varieties of pizza on offer come in two sizes, and range from about 13,000 - 25,000BYR. Non-pizza items like fish and draniki are available too. Huge dessert selection. ▶ Open 10:00 - 01:00. ☑

Teatro Bogdanovicha 6, tel. +375 17 234 13 52. Artsy photos, black tables, women in dark sunglasses whispering into their mobiles – eating at Teatro is almost a film noir experience. Apart from that, this pizzeria opposite the Bolshoy Theatre (from where it gets its name, presumably) cooks up quite servicable pizza, which comes in 43 sorts. Small (23cm) cost 9,000 - 15,000BYR; large (30cm) range from 13,000 - 20,000BYR. ▶ Open 10:00 - 23:00. ☑

Tempo Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 78, tel. +375 17 284 04 92/delivery: 205 84 83. The name says it all – this is a fast – paced pizza café that's popular with students from the nearby academy. Small, packed and highly recommended. ▶ Open 08:00 - 23:00. ☑

Zio Pepe Zolotaya Gorka 14, tel. +375 17 293 72 01/delivery: 276 45 25. Zio Pepe is fairly established as Minsk's favourite pizza chain. Since its other downtown branch shut, this low-key outlet is now its biggest representative. Some pasta dishes (tagliatele) are also served. It closes the first Thursday of the month for cleaning, so at least we know it gets cleaned. ▶ Open 11:00 - 24:00. ☑

Steaks

Steakhaus Prospekt Pobediteley (Masherova) 13, tel. +375 17 223 28 10. A small downtown restaurant made to look bigger through clever use of mirrors and whitewashed brick. Slide behind one of the tables and order any of a wide array of steaks from the smiling staff. Prices are equally friendly, making it good value for this amount of protein. ▶ Open 12:00 - 23:30. ☑

Sushi

Brigantina Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 42, tel. +375 17 284 53 04. Evidently some effort went into making the inside of the restaurant look like a fishermen's wharf (street lamps, ships' rigging and the whole lot) but it still seems about as homey as an airport bar. Tiny pieces of sushi are served to the sound of Western pop music, and as you bite into them, chew on the fact that each one costs about the same as a beer elsewhere. Beware that you'll also be charged an extra 3,240BYR for 'Japanese Garnish', i.e. a couple of ginger shavings and a dollop of wasabi sauce. ▶ Open 10:00 - 02:00. ☑

Mon Café Melnikaita 2-4, tel. +375 17 203 99 57. It's hard to decide whether this is really a café, a sushi bar, a nightclub or none of the above. In any case the open two-floor plan certainly makes it loud and echoey when the DJ starts cranking up the volume. Mainly it's a hangout for young hipsters and anyone in need of the advertised 'most affordable (sic) sushi' (7,500 - 23,000BYR per set). Indeed this is cheaper than elsewhere. ▶ Open 12:00 - 23:00, Fri, Sat 12:00 - 02:00. ☑

Planeta Sushi Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 18, tel. +375 17 210 56 45, www.planetasushi.by. Run by Rosinter, the same outfit that brought you the expat-oriented Il Patio and Pechki Lavochki, this elaborately decorated sushi house provides a similarly foreigner-friendly dining experience. Eight-piece sets range from 10,000 - 35,000BYR. Head upstairs if you like things quieter. ▶ Open 12:00 - 23:00. ☑

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A night out in Minsk requires a bit of planning and a good sense of humour – even after you escape the cheesy cabaret acts and sleazy discos at the hotels, you're likely to find bars and clubs that suffer from either overblown formality, overpriced tackiness or overly-friendly Natashas. The city is too big for pub-crawling, so read this section and head to the places that seem to fit your idea of fun.

Bars

Drozhzhi United Sverdlova 2, tel. +375 17 200 54 56. Every Eastern European capital has its 'genuine Irish pub', and in Minsk, it's Drozhzhi United. With dark wood booths and a menu offering pigs ears with peas, this one may have gone a bit overboard on the Irish pub ambience. On the other hand, it's a welcome escape for anyone willing to shell out US\$5 - 6 for a pint of Guinness. At least the pints are real pints (0.56 litres). Live Irish folk music supposedly happens on weekends. The staff otherwise play Falco at ear-splitting levels. Shoot me Amadeus! ▶ Open 09:00 - 02:00. ☑

Galereya Vin Prospekt Pobediteley (Masherova) 23, tel. +375 17 226 63 90, diakonie@brm.by. Wine Gallery is actually a wine shop, but it has a small bar in the back and a handful of wooden tables where you can enjoy a nice vintage by the glass. A very civilised alternative to the flashy casinos and beer gardens that surround it. ▶ Open 11:00 - 23:00, Mon 11:00 - 19:00.

Kopi Gabana Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 71, tel. +375 17 292 02 08. Yeah, that's really the way they decided to spell 'Copa Cabana'. Even more strange is the complete lack of anything remotely Brazilian or Latin American here. Basically, this is just a friendly, medium-sized pub with a pizza menu, and it manages to attract a crowd on weekends. The location makes it a convenient warm-up spot for the Max Show club, next door. ▶ Open 08:00 - 02:00. ☑

Korchma Starovilenskaya 2, tel. +375 17 289 37 54. The barman evidently learned customer relations from a Siberian camp guard, but if you manage to look past this small contribution to the overall feel-good spirit of Minsk nightlife, Korchma can be a pleasant place to sip a brew or two. The restored house on the edge of the Old Town is a cosy enough venue. Korchma really comes into its own though in spring and summer when visitors flock here to sit out by the riverbank and enjoy the magnificent view. ▶ Open 09:00 - 24:00. ☑

Lasunok Yanki Kupaly 25, tel. +375 17 206 69 13/+375 17 206 69 89, www.juravinka.by. The chic, starry, dome-roofed café above the Juravinka restaurant is a fine place to settle in and start numbing your brain on a Friday night. Then you can test your motor skills at the bowling club downstairs or, if it's a warm enough time of year, convalesce on the outdoor terrace and watch the silly show dance troupe. ▶ Open 13:00 - 03:00, Fri 13:00 - 05:00, Sat 11:00 - 05:00, Sun 11:00 - 03:00. ☑

Rakovski Brovar Vitebskaya 10, tel. +375 17 206 64 04/+375 17 206 65 25, www.brovary.by. The ultimate Minsk drinking experience, this enormous tavern-style restaurant and brewery has it all – two floors of wooden tables and benches, a sport-themed corner, an accordion player ... what more do you need? But wait, there's more! What really makes it a hit is the excellent home-brewed beer. Try the light *Grashovoe* (11%), *Pilzenskoe* (13%), or the highly-recommended, dark *Staravilenskoe* (13%). ▶ Open 12:00 - 24:00. ☑

Clubs

Alcatraz Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 25, in the Trade Unions Palace, tel. +375 17 227 59 82. Once a real novelty on the local club circuit, the prison-themed Alcatraz is nowadays just another medium-sized club with not much happening. To be fair, things get slightly livelier when the 'go-go support' arrives on stage, and the electric chair is kind of cute. In general though, you should consider bringing your own crowd. ▶ Open 12:00 - 06:00. [CC]

Blindage Timiryazeva 9, tel. +375 17 219 00 10. Pronounce it 'blind-azh' with a slight French accent, meaning a kind of cover used in trench warfare. Actually, don't pronounce it at all – the music is cranked up so loud nobody's going to hear you anyway – including the bartender, so point to the menu to order your drink. At least you can sit back and admire the elaborate, military décor. The clientele seem to be mainly teenaged boys waiting (probably in vain) for the teenaged girls to show up. ▶ Open 22:00 - 06:00.

Bronx Varvasheni 17/1 (entrance from Chicherina), tel. +375 17 288 10 61, www.bronx.by. You don't necessarily need to hire a limo, but you'll definitely want to dress to impress – and bring a lot of cash – if you plan to visit the city's hottest, most chic night spot. You won't be sorry you did, as the laid-back venue attracts some of the most beautiful faces ever seen this side of the Playboy Mansion. ▶ Open 12:00 - 05:00. Admission approx US\$19.

Madison Timiryazeva 9, tel. +375 17 226 77 49. A baffling door policy meant our shoes, because they had laces, kept us out of this club. Likewise, it was explained, anything else the doorman considers 'sports clothes', including shirts with or without sleeves, can get you barred. If you manage to pass muster, you'll find (according to reputation) a fairly tame disco that also offers ten bowling lanes and a video arcade. Not everyone's idea of a romantic night out, but who are we to judge? ▶ Open 22:00 - 06:00. Closed Mon. Admission US\$7 for women, US\$12 for men. [CC]

Max Show Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 73, tel. +375 17 232 00 38/+375 17 237 38 05. This round, blue and popular club in the Oktyabr Cinema puts particular emphasis on its erotic show programmes - meaning go-go dancers in various states of nakedness take to the stage just about every night. In a surprising display of egalitarianism, it also caters to the ladies by offering a male striptease review some nights. ▶ Open 22:00 - 06:00. Admission US\$5 - 12.

Reaktor Very Khoruzhey 29, tel. +375 17 288 61 60, www.reaktorclub.com. Hands down, the best nuclear-themed disco on this entire block! Legend holds that there's actually a reactor in here somewhere (we don't recommend looking for it), which gave rise to all the cool, radiation-inspired décor. Don't worry too much about the dosage though, the pulsing music here will make you sterile first. Reactor is mainly filled with teenagers wearing sunglasses and staff who are far from cuddly. ▶ Open 22:00 - 06:00. Admission US\$3 - 4.

Triklini Karla Marksa 14, tel. +375 17 218 25 73. A crisp, sushi restaurant by day, Triklini turns into a low-key club after the sun dips below the housing estates. A young, civilised and well-to-do crowd makes it friendly enough, but there just isn't much going on. At least now you know where it is, in case someone wants to meet you here. ▶ Open 12:00 - late. Admission US\$7 after 23:00. [CC]

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Westworld Club Storozhevskaya 15a, tel. +375 17 293 17 98/+375 17 293 17 17. Huge, sleazy and always good for a laugh, Westworld is the place where apathy and recklessness meet for tequila shots. Locals have dubbed it 'Shayba', meaning 'hockey puck' – a fitting description of this riverside building attached to the hotel Belarus ... and maybe half of the people inside. There's something for everyone here: Girls in miniskirts wiggle around the dance floor while being shot with lasers, foreign men with moustaches stare intently at the prostitutes lingering at the bar while everyone else gets lost in the sheer absurdity of the whole scene. ▶ Open 20:00 - 06:00. Closed Mon. Admission US\$9 - 12. [CC] [F] [A]

X-ray Internatsionalnaya 27, tel. +375 17 203 93 55. It's hard to tell whether Xray is actually a club, a bar or just some kind of big, funky diner, but in any case, it's worth checking out. Food, including the ever-popular sushi, is served here by day at the tables and booths that fill the interior. At night, especially in summer when the terrace is open, it takes on a more club-like aura, with special parties and live bands scheduled. ▶ Open 12:00 - 02:00, Fri, Sat 10:00 - 04:00. [F]

Yula Surganova 26, tel. +375 17 292 80 71. One bald, English tourist kept raving about all the 'tarts' here. He must have meant pastries, because this place was completely devoid of women – or anyone else for that matter. Maybe he scared them all away. You can play billiards in the foyer while waiting for the crowds, which may or may not show up eventually. ▶ Open 20:00 - 05:30. Closed Mon. Admission US\$5 - 8.

Zhuravinka Bowling Club Kupaly 25, tel. +375 17 206 69 09. Eight lanes that go all ultraviolet in the evening, making for some interesting and illuminating night-time VPL spectacles. If you don't want to take the skinheads, go on a Friday night and meet an interesting collection of mildly tanked-up expat bowling aficionados and their friends. Zhuravinka bowling is also notable as having the best swivel-chairs in the Former Soviet Union. ▶ Open 14:00 - 05:00, Sat 11:00 - 06:00.

Adult entertainment

With more money being tossed around than the average factory worker can drink in a year, it's not surprising that going to strip clubs in Minsk is considered an elite activity. Customers bring fistfuls of cash which they dole out to the dancers in increments of 5,000 or 10,000BYR. This is the standard tip for the up-close dance routine that happens at the tables as a matter of course. But you won't even need to set foot in one of these places to get your fill of go-go dancing in Minsk - most mainstream nightclubs will have at least one pole with a semi-naked body twirling around it.

Tekhas Prospekt Pobediteley (Masherova) 19, tel. +375 17 226 63 90. A small, shady club in the Jubileynaya hotel, made all the more classy by oozing prostitutes vamping the lobby outside. This one decided to give itself a Texas theme. Maybe Oklahoma was taken. In any case, the effect isn't too thrilling. ▶ Open 22:00 - 04:00.

Grandiose Soviet-era architecture, a few magnificent cathedrals, and the river are the essence of the Minsk tableau. Truly historic sights are hard to find - the city was almost flattened during World War II - so visit the museums to get a glimpse of the Minsk of old.

Animals & Vegetables

Central Botanical Gardens Surganova 2a, tel. +375 17 289 44 84. Set up in 1932, this 80-hectare garden belonging to the National Academy of Sciences has thousands more plants than you could ever sneeze at. It may be hard to actually get in, but your best bet is to try during the May - September period.



Minsk State Circus Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 32, tel. +375 17 226 10 08/+375 17 227 22 45. Check your political correctness at the door and revel in the spectacle of midjet acrobats, dubiously trained bears and other leftovers from the 19th Century. The impressive building itself, dating to 1958, shows how much this was a staple of Soviet-era distraction. Most performances begin at 19:00, with some weekend shows at 15:00. Often sold out, so buy your tickets ahead of time. ▶ Box office open 09:00 - 12:00, 12:30 - 16:00, 16:30 - 20:00. Tickets 6,500 - 18,000BYR.

Minsk Zoo Tashkentskaya 40, Chizhovka district, tel. +375 17 240 23 97. Like a Soviet gulag, but for animals. ▶ Open 10:00 - 17:00, Fri 10:00 - 18:00.



Museum of Nature Karla Marksa 12, tel. +375 17 206 69 56. Located in the bowels of the Museum of History and Culture (see Museums), this small museum is the most exciting place in town to see dusty mammoth bones and stuffed bears. Don't miss the institution's pride and joy - a nice pile of potatoes. ▶ Open 11:00 - 18:00. Closed Wed. Admission 7,000BYR.



Churches

Minsk's two most famous churches are listed under 'Essential Minsk'. Readers interested in more churches should check out the ones below:

Cathedral of St. Peter and Paul Rakovskaya 4. Built in 1613, the 'yellow church' is the oldest surviving church in Minsk. Though Orthodox, it was looted in 1707 by Peter the Great's Cossacks. The building was closed by the Bolsheviks at the beginning after the October revolution, reopened by the Nazis, closed again by the Soviets in 1944 and reopened once more in 1992.

Maryinsky Cathedral Svobody 9. This Roman Catholic cathedral survived all the century's wars, but in the 1950s its two towers were knocked down and a Stalinist facade thrown over the front. The twin towers have since been restored, with copper domes sparkling more impressively than the Holy Ghost across the road.

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St. Aleksander Nevsky's Church Kozlova 11. A splendid little red brick affair with two golden onion domes. It was built in 1898 to commemorate the victory of the tsar's armies over the Turks, closed by the Bolsheviks, reopened by the Nazis, then closed by the Soviets. During the war, a bomb crashed through the roof and landed in front of the altar, but did not explode.

Essential Minsk

Stalinist city centre



If there's one defining feature of Minsk, it's the funky, imposing, Stalin-era architectural ensemble that stretches through the downtown area. To see the best bits, start from the mostly pre-war Independence Square (Ploshad Nezavisimosti) with its Government House (1934), statue of Lenin, and Belarusian State University building. The construction cranes here are building an underground shopping complex. Then head down Prospekt Nezavisimosti (formerly Prospekt Fransiska Skoriny) to see some 1940s gems including the Main Post Office (1953) and GUM Department Store (1951). Continue to October Square (Oktyabrskaya Ploshad), where you'll be dazzled by the Trade Unions Palace of Culture (1954), now home to two nightclubs, and the more modern Museum of the Great Patriotic War. Buildings near the train station are equally impressive, particularly the twin 'City Gates', just opposite.

Svisloch river It's 327km long, it's polluted, and it flows through Minsk. Beyond those basics though, the Svisloch is the romantic heart of the city and the setting for many a picture postcard. In summer, a stroll along its banks, particularly near the Old Town or opposite, is almost a legal requirement for starry-eyed couples. In winter, after the dubious ducks flee and the surface freezes, locals poke holes through the ice and pull out God knows what.



Old Town west bank of river, between Bogdanovicha and Starovilenskaya. The more official name of this quaint, riverside area is Troitskoe Predmest'ye (Trinity suburb), but mostly it's referred to as the 'so-called Old Town' because it's not really old and it's not much of a town. Though the area itself is indeed historic (the site of settlements that go back to the 12th Century) this small collection of cobblestoned streets and buildings you see now is actually a 1980s recreation of the area's 19th-century look. Still, it's worth a visit and makes a nice break from the imposing architecture on the opposite side of the river. If you want to see some more authentic, pre-20th-Century houses, duck behind the concrete towers on Nemiga and make your way down Rakovskaya street.

Island of Tears On the Svisloch, near Storzhevskaya. A small footbridge leads from the Old Town to the Island of Tears, a memorial set up in 1988 to commemorate Belarusian soldiers who died in the USSR's disastrous, 9-year war in Afghanistan (1979-1988). The centrepiece of the memorial is the chapel, with haunting figures of grieving mothers, sisters and widows at its base.



A nearby fountain features the boy-like figure of an angel, rigged up to cry teardrops. You may notice (if you happen to be looking) that a certain part of his anatomy is shinier than the rest. This is explained by the Belarusian tradition of newlyweds visiting war memorials on their wedding day, and a modern folk belief that if the bride gropes this poor young lad's privates, she'll be guaranteed children.

than the rest. This is explained by the Belarusian tradition of newlyweds visiting war memorials on their wedding day, and a modern folk belief that if the bride gropes this poor young lad's privates, she'll be guaranteed children.

Cathedral of the Holy Spirit Kirila i Mefodiya 3. One of the most instantly recognisable symbols of Minsk is this magnificent, gleaming, two-towered Orthodox cathedral in the heart of the downtown area. Built in 1642 to serve Bernadine nuns, the convent's consecration was delayed for 40 years because of the Muscovite invasions. In 1741 the original structure was damaged by fire but later reconstructed. The convent was liquidated in 1852 and the building given to the Russian church for use as a monastery - but half a century later it was closed altogether by the Bolsheviks. Today after renovations, the church is an essential stop.

Gorky Park along Nezavisimosti, between Yanki Kupali and Frunze. The city's oldest park is still its most popular green area (except when it's covered with snow). Visitors stroll around the pathways eating sticky candy and spending their money on carnival rides. The biggest attraction is the enormous Ferris Wheel, with its wisely closed cabins (think of winter) and views of the city. This was installed in 2003, replacing the scary decrepit one that used to stand here.

Church of St. Simon and Helena Sovetskaya 15, tel. +375 17 220 44 15. Better known as the 'Red Church', the city's best-known Catholic church was built by a noble Polish family in 1908-1910 upon the premature death of their two



veloping Independence Square.

Victory Square (Ploshad Pobedy) Crossroads of Nezavisimosti and Zakharava. A huge, round 'square' right in the middle of downtown's busiest street, Victory Square is proof that when it came to World War II monuments, nobody ever matched the USSR. The monument, with its star-topped spire and eternal flame, was originally installed in 1954. An underground passage circling its foundation, and an underground 'Victory Hall' were added in 1985. Don't miss the bas-relief on the base of the spire, or the one in the Victory Hall that lists the names of 566 soldiers who were posthumously awarded the Star of the Hero of the Soviet Union.

Jewish Minsk

Israeli Cultural Centre Uralskaya 3, tel. +375 17 230 18 74, fax (+3, merkaz@open.by.

Jewish Memorial Zaslavskaya. This sculpture representing a group of people descending a slope commemorates some 5,000 Jews from the surrounding ghettos who were led into this pit, shot, and buried - some still alive - in 1942.

Synagogue Kropotkina 22, tel. +375 17 234 22 73.

Museums

Ancient Belarusian Culture Museum Surganova 1/2, tel. +375 17 284 27 32/+375 17 284 24 97. Archaeology and ethnology fans will wet themselves at the prospect of seeing the collection of folk garments here, not to mention the remains of an ancient boat dug up a few years ago by a forester from the silt of the river Sozh. Be sure to arrange your visit ahead of time or you won't get in. ▶ Open 09:00 - 17:00. Closed Sat, Sun. Admission free.

Fire Museum Kozlova 28, building 8, tel. +375 17 236 91 22. The fascinating history of Minsk's fire brigade, with tours conducted by grinning firemen. Visits must be booked in advance, and keep in mind that tours are in Russian language only. ▶ Open 09:00 - 17:00.

Great Patriotic War Museum Skoriny 25a, tel. +375 17 227 56 11. To truly understand the profound effect World War II had on this nation's history - and continues to have on the national psyche - a visit to this sombre museum is a must. Elaborate displays on its three floors are captioned only in Russian (no English excursion currently available), but you don't need a translator to understand the large dioramas of Nazi concentration camps or the disturbing photos of people being hanged in Minsk parks. To round out your visit, be sure to check out the vintage tanks and planes parked behind the building. ▶ Open 10:00 - 17:00. Closed Sun. Admission 5,000BYR.

children. The towers house three bells named after the church's founder, his father and his dead son. When the Bolsheviks came to power, the church became a cinema then a film studio, and later became a popular meeting place for the opposition in the 1980s. Now once again used for its original purpose, the building with its distinctive red tower is a nice, historic touch near the rapidly de-

Literary History Museum Bogdanovicha 15, tel. +375 17 233 99 32. Belarusian prose, including repressed works from the 1920s and 30s, is the focus of this museum, where school children are herded in by their teachers. If you don't speak the lingo, you might as well skip this one. ▶ Open 10:00 - 18:00. Closed Mon. Admission 5,000BYR.

Maksim Bogdanovich Literature Museum Bogdanovicha 7a, tel. +375 17 234 13 57. You probably won't need to claw your way through mobs of Bogdanovich fans queuing for entry to this apartment/museum. If you want an excursion though, phone 234 42 63. ▶ Open 10:00 - 17:00. Closed Mon. Also closed Sundays in summer. Admission 5,000BYR.



National Museum of History and Culture Karla Marksa 12, tel. +375 17 227 43 22. Artefacts from the history of Belarus, from cave-men to Communism, are sprinkled throughout this creaky, stuffy museum. Axe-heads, swords, portraits and even a printing press like the one Skoriny used. Naturally, there's no text in English. ▶ Open 11:00 - 19:00. Closed Wed. Admission 7,000BYR.

Oddities

National Library Nezavisimosti, just past Filimonova, http://newbuilding.nacbibl.org.by. Some say it looks like a diamond. We say it looks like the Death Star. In either case there's no denying that the colossal, new home for the National Library now being constructed on the city outskirts is an example of the Soviet 'bigger-is-better' school of architecture. Worse yet, this pet project of Lukashenko's is partly paid for by money donated 'voluntarily' (meaning not voluntarily) by students and school children. When completed, it'll be big enough to house a whopping 15 million books.



Out of Town

Kurgan Slavy Memorial Complex (Mount of Glory) 30km north of Minsk, at junction of Moscow and Minsk II highways. This 70m high conical hill topped by a spiky monument was constructed in 1969 to commemorate the spot where four Soviet armies joined up before going on to drive out the Nazis near the end of World War II. Now it's a popular place to bring kids, who love to climb on the row of old tanks parked at the bottom.

Museum of Folk Architecture Main office: Chicherina 1, village: Pashkevich 3, Ozertso, 15km southwest of the Brest highway, tel. +375 17 234 02 31. A charming, tiny village situated on the picturesque banks of the river Ptich. ▶ Open 10:00 - 15:00.

One look at the rather, shall we say, 'retro' look of the city will give you a clue that Minsk is not exactly at the cutting edge of the information revolution. Hardly any hotels have LAN or WiFi internet access, or even websites for that matter. One the other hand, the postal system and phones, including mobile networks, work fine.



Express mail

DHL Brestskaya 18 (Head Office), tel. +375 17 278 11 08, www.dhl.by. Also they have express centres at Masherova 5, tel. +375 17 289 30 68, and XXI Vek Business Centre, Skoriny 169, tel. +375 17 228 73 60, both open 09:00 - 13:00, 14:00 - 18:00. Closed Sat, Sun; and at Central Post Office, Skoriny 10, tel. +375 17 227 25 33. ▶ Open 08:00 - 19:00. Closed Sun.

EMS Nezavisimosti 10, tel. +375 17 222 65 11, www.belpost.by.

FedEx (M&M Militzer & Münch) Zhukovskogo 15b, tel. +375 17 226 99 09, callcenter@mum.by, www.mum.by.

TNT Platonova 10, tel. +375 17 236 80 00, info@tnt.by, www.tnt.by. TNT at Minsk-2 airport +375 17 279 11 86.

UPS Muzykalnyj 3, tel. +375 17 206 55 80, minsk@tut.by, www.ups.com.

ISPs

Belarus Yellow Pages www.b2b.by. Very useful place for those not speaking Russian at all.

Beltelecom Engelsa 6, tel. +375 17 217 10 05, info@main.beltelecom.by, www.beltelecom.by. Main internet provider in Belarus.

Network Systems 2-aya Shestaya Liniya 9, tel. +375 17 283 17 11, info@nsys.by, www.nsys.by. ADSL internet connection, web hosting, web design.

Open Kontakt Kalvriyskaya 17a, tel. +375 17 211 01 21, admin@ok.minsk.by, www.ok.by. Internet providers and online magazine in Russian www.open.by. ▶ Open 09:00 - 17:00. Closed Sat, Sun.

 **The Minsk**
telephone code is +375 17

Mobile phones

BelCel Zolotaya Gorka 5, tel. +375 17 282 00 18, www.belcel.by. "Dialog" service providers. Also at Zolotaya Gorka 16, Surganova 476. ▶ Open 09:00 - 21:00, Sat, Sun 10:00 - 18:00.

Velcom GSM Melnikayte 14 (Head office), www.velcom.by. The first GSM provider in Belarus with a very informative website. The information number is +375 17 229 49 01 for all offices, or just 411 from mobiles. Also at Kalvriyskaya 4, Skoriny 60, Skoriny 105, Partizansky 12, Varvasheni 73. ▶ Open 09:00 - 21:00.

Post

Central Post & Telegraph Office Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 10, tel. +375 17 226 06 82, www.belpost.by. Head straight through to the main hall in the back to send letters, buy postcards and make photocopies. For telephone and telegraph services, head to the 'peregovorni punkt' in hall 1, on the left (open 07:00 - 23:00). Also on the left is the internet centre, where people queue to use 12 terminals. ▶ Open 08:00 - 20:00, Sat, Sun 10:00 - 17:00.



Public internet access

Central Post Office Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 10, tel. +375 17 222 48 92. Hall 2 of the main post office runs a 12-terminal internet centre, popular because it's dirt cheap. Here you'll have to queue and pay at least part of the fee beforehand. 1,000BYR should more than cover it. There's a 31BYR minimum. ▶ Open 08:00 - 23:00.

Kompyuterni Tsentri (Computer Centre) Internatsionalnaya 9, tel. +375 17 203 76 15/+375 17 226 57 11. Kind of a shabby place for gamers, but at least it's open late. 1,800BYR/hour. ▶ Open 08:30 - 07:00.

Ploshchadka Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 58/4, tel. +375 17 239 38 74, www.pic.by. A busy place with 39 machines (1,500-2,600BYR per hour). ▶ Open 24hrs. ☑

Ploshchadka Nemiga 8, tel. +375 17 226 42 43. The smaller of the Ploshchadka venues has 26 terminals. ▶ Open 09:00 - 23:00. ☑

Soyuz Online Krasnoarmeiskaya 3, in the Central House of Officers, tel. +375 17 226 02 79, info@soyuzonline.by, www.soyuzonline.by. Wow! It's open 24 hours, they speak English, serve pizza and even let you pay by credit card! What more do you need? The granddaddy of Minsk internet cafés had 55 terminals when we last visited and were planning to add a few more, expanding the VIP hall. Rates depend on the time of day, but it's still cheap, around US\$1 - 1.50. ▶ Open 24hrs. ☑

Accommodation is usually the biggest budget-buster in this otherwise dirt-cheap city. Prices can be truly out-of-whack; people often end up paying an arm and a leg for a room that hasn't been renovated since Brezhnev's time. Part of the problem is the state's near monopoly on the industry. Another part is the discriminatory pricing system where foreigners are charged twice as much as Belarusians and CIS residents for the same shabby, cigarette-burned hovel. Luckily things are changing, and if you shop around a bit, you can usually find a reasonable deal on a decent room, sometimes even one with up-to-date furnishings.

Prices we've listed here are in US dollars, but in almost all cases, hotels only accept payment in Belarusian roubles (or credit cards). Another local nuance you should be aware of is the prevalence of prostitutes. Don't be surprised if you get a phone call late at night offering you 'company'.

Upmarket

Internationale Bildungs-und Begegnungsstätte Gazety Pravda 11, tel. +375 17 270 39 94, fax +375 17 270 39 95, ibb@ibb.by, www.ibb.by. Hang on, is this Minsk? Once you're inside the IBB, you'll have your doubts. The modern complex was built in the mid-1990s for the German Association for International Education and Exchange, who thoughtfully attached smart guest rooms to their 5-hall conference facility. It's quiet and a bit far from the centre - near the southwestern edge of town - but having breakfast buffet served in the spiffy Westfalia restaurant is probably worth the cost of the taxi rides. ▶ 35 rooms (singles US\$79, doubles US\$109). ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑

Juravinka Yanki Kupaly 25, tel. +375 17 206 69 00, fax +375 17 227 55 42, contacts@juravinka.by, www.juravinka.by. Spoiled, decadent Westerners welcome! This small but smart downtown hotel attached to the Juravinka business and recreation complex is a tough one to beat. Its single and double rooms are comfy affairs, and even come with an unheard-of bonus: adjustable climate control. If you have money to burn, you can dip into the realm of the surreal by booking the presidential suite, which has its own glass-covered swimming pool. ▶ 18 rooms (13 singles US\$120, 4 doubles US\$170, 1 suite US\$870) ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑

Minsk Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 11, tel. +375 17 209 90 76, fax +375 17 209 90 80, hotelminsk@pmrb.gov.by, www.hotelminsk.by. Score a victory for central planning! Builders took what used to be downtown Minsk's most Soviet of Soviet hotels and turned it into this sparkling, four star dream that could satisfy even the most finicky Western travellers. The only large hotel of its class in the city, the revamped Minsk opened in 2004 with a marble lobby, conference hall, business centre, smart coffee-coloured rooms and fitness centre. Oddly, management seemed to gloss over these frills to boast about the hotel's strip club, around the back. ▶ 258 rooms (singles \$130 - 170, doubles \$170 - 190, triples \$340, suites 210 - 840). ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑

Parkovaya Gvardeyskaya 10, tel. +375 17 206 39 89/+375 17 206 39 91, fax +375 17 206 39 92, mail@hotelparkovaya.com, www.hotelparkovaya.com. A small, luxury hotel for anyone with a yearning for privacy and a lot more cash than the average tractor driver. Built in 2001, this smart facility is actually part of an ordinary, renovated apartment block. Décor is Russian style, leaning to faux antique, and rooms come with minibars, big baths and bidets. There's also an opulent sauna/pool and swank little restaurant. ▶ 13 rooms (singles US\$123 - 128, doubles US\$135 - 213) Breakfast US\$21. ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑

Apartment rental

Short term apartment rental can be a hell of a lot cheaper than springing for a hotel, especially for longer stays. This option comes with its own risks though - a lot of the agents out there will happily take your money just to put you in touch with an apartment owner, who charges his own fee. Also, make sure the agency can get you that all-important visa registration stamp - usually provided by hotels.

Belarus Rent info@belarusrent.com, www.belarusrent.com. One of the best developed of the city's apartment agencies, Belarus Rent offers central, one-room to four-room apartments for US\$36 - 67/night, available for both short-term and long-term stays. The company also arranges visa support, airport transfers and will provide you with a local GSM account for your mobile if you need. Contact them by email or by ICQ 25000100. ▶ ☑

Private Apartments www.belarusapartment.com. Several apartments of different standards in Minsk and other major Belarus cities.

Mid-range

40 Let Pobedy (40 Years of Victory) Azgura 3, tel. +375 17 236 79 63/+375 17 236 73 13, fax +375 17 236 73 13. They could just as well call it 40 Years of Tac-kiness, but this place isn't quite that old and the way things are going, it might just get tackier as the years march on. In a building that could easily be mistaken for another apartment block, it offers rooms of various quality (hence the strange price structure). Cheaper rooms are shabby with no TV. Apartments have spa baths, bidets and a strange common area with sofas and UV lights, which looks exactly like a mafia hangout from an 80s action film. Breakfast isn't served, but you can buy something in the cheap, lobby café. ▶ 50 rooms (singles US\$56 - 58, doubles US\$43, apartments US\$280) ☑

Belarus Storozhevskaya 15, tel. +375 17 209 76 93/+375 17 209 76 50, info@hotel-belarus.com, www.hotel-belarus.com. Looming over the Svisloch like a concrete bat, the city's trademark hotel is a defining part of the Minsk skyline and offers such classy amenities as a mini water park and a dodgy nightclub. Economy class rooms are done up in Soviet Ghastly, with tiling installed by drunken trolls. That said, two business class rooms have been 'Euro-remodelled' and reception here is quite helpful. ▶ 520 rooms (singles US\$46 - 80, doubles US\$60 - 90, suites US\$90 - 390) ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑

Oktyabrskaya Engels 13, tel. +375 17 222 32 89, fax +375 17 227 33 14. A perfect example of Soviet practicality, the amenity-packed October offers a billiard bar, gift shop, tourist agency and even a hairdresser in case you ladies want to go for that classic 1980s rocker look that seems to be all the rage here. The interior also dates from that era, with dark corridors and a mysterious smoke odour that couldn't be identified. One the other hand, there's plenty of closet space, in-room fridge, satellite TV and wallpaper with weird swirly flower patterns. Paranoids will appreciate the well-guarded downtown location right next to the president's office. ▶ 103 rooms (45 singles US\$59, 56 doubles US\$74 - 107, 2 triples US\$138) ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑

www.inyourpocket.com

Orbita Pushkina 39, tel. +375 17 206 77 81/+375 17 257 14 20, reservation@orbita-hotel.com, www.orbita-hotel.com. Another concrete colossus inexplicably named after something to do with space, Orbita inhabits an area of huge, cookie-cutter apartment blocks slightly out of the centre. A quick metro connection to downtown makes it fairly convenient. Thankfully some forward-thinking managers have smartened it up and exorcised all the Soviet demons, though the cheap remodelling in some rooms is starting to peel at the edges. The business class rooms at US\$89 are fairly nice and have newer bathrooms. ▶ Singles/doubles US\$59 - 280.

Planeta Prospekt Pobediteley (Masherova) 31, tel. +37517 203 85 87/+375 17 226 78 53, fax +375 17 226 77 80, booking@hotelpaneta.by, www.hotelpaneta.by. Not your typical Minsk monstrosity, Planeta has done a lot to pull itself out of the socialist-era duldrums, though it probably went a bit overboard with all that marble in the lobby. The selection of modern services here includes a Swedish Business Centre, Hertz car rental office, travel office and laundry facilities. Rooms come in a confusing array of quality levels and prices. 'Economy' are old, worn, and clean; 'unimproved business' are slightly better; 'improved business' are Western standard. US\$700 will get you into the massive VIP apartment where Julio Iglesias once stayed. If you're not a fan, you can always drop into the 'Night Bar' here where there's some kind of cheesy erotic show on offer. ▶ 309 rooms (singles US\$57 - 82, doubles US\$62 - 88, 39 suites US\$133 - 143, 6 apartments US\$175 - 700)

U Fontana Amuratorskaya 4, tel. +375 17 203 09 58/+375 17 203 58 18, fax +375 17 203 14 74, email@ufontana.com, www.ufontana.com. At last, a healthy refuge in this vodka and potato pancake culture. Opened in 2005, this tiny hotel attached to a fitness centre is perfect for aerobics bunnies and muscle-heads. It even has its own 'sports restaurant'. That said, even a slob with a beer gut or an In Your Pocket editor is welcome here, and will definitely appreciate the sparkling, high-quality rooms, relatively central location and spa bath. ▶ 18 rooms (singles US\$51, doubles US\$70 - 132)

Yubileynaya Prospekt Pobediteley (Masherova) 19, tel. +375 17 226 90 24, fax +375 17 226 91 71, info@hotelyubileiny.by, www.hotelyubileiny.by. As far as huge, institutional downtown hotels go, the Yubileynaya is one of the busiest, most hectic, and most full of surprises. Of the wide range of services offered in the lobby, most are legal. Others should really consider shaving. Cheaper rooms are the typical, well-kept, grim Soviet variety, while the more expensive 'business class' rooms are brighter, with carpets and newer bathrooms. ▶ 238 rooms (singles US\$42 - 68, doubles US\$57 - 82, lux doubles US\$96 - 126, 2 apartments US\$228)

Low budget

Agat Karbysheva 25, tel. +375 17 263 11 08, fax +375 17 264 84 27. Sure, it's kind of cool how this wedge-shaped building rises out of the forest like a Mayan pyramid, but Agat is so remote that even the most persistent archaeologists might miss it. You probably won't want to stay here unless you have your own transport to the centre, or are staying in, recovering from cosmetic surgery, etc. Its main clientele are groups of athletes, who don't want any downtown distractions anyway. Still, it's friendly enough. Rooms are of the typical Minsk variety with little fridges, TVs and blinding flower patterns. ▶ 144 beds (singles US\$24 - 26, doubles US\$58, lux triple US\$65). No breakfast.



Akademia Nauk (Academy of Sciences) Surganova 7, tel. +375 17 284 27 01, fax +375 17 284 18 71. No longer the incredible bargain it once was, the Academy of Sciences' little hotel is nevertheless still friendly and accessible, offering a basic, central place to stay with easy metro access. Otherwise, don't expect too much of this place, and try to get one of the rooms with the renovated toilet. Trust us. The lobby houses a Chinese restaurant, which you can try at your own risk. ▶ 40 rooms (singles US\$28, doubles US\$63) No breakfast.

Aquabel Logovskiy trakt 50, tel. +375 17 237 92 22/+375 17 237 91 19, fax +375 17 237 91 22, hotel@aquabel.by, www.aquabel.by. Wow, free enterprise... vive la difference! One of only a few privately owned hotels in Minsk, Aquabel is a world apart from its stodgy, grey, state-owned competition. Rooms are comfy and colourful (the ones on the top floor even have skylights) and the reception will help you order travel tickets, etc. The facility, which was built in 2002, has a business and internet centre, but beware that use of the sports club next door is pricey. The drawback to all these Western-style trappings is the remote location. A taxi to the centre will cost you about US\$5 - 6. ▶ 80 rooms (singles US\$37, doubles US\$45 - 68, suites US\$97 - 153) Breakfast US\$3.50.

Beltransgaz Staroborisovsky trakt 4, tel./fax +375 17 237 01 16, hotel.max@belg.gazprom.com. Belarus' state gas company VIPs needed a nice place to stay, so this simple little hotel was recently built to provide it. It's also a good option for any traveller wanting to avoid the whole 'Soviet hotel' experience... and who doesn't mind the fact that it's quite a ways from the centre. Rooms are respectably large, and each comes with a TV, fridge and even a bidet to keep you fresh and clean. No breakfast is served, but the same building houses a shop and a café. ▶ 30 rooms (singles US\$42, doubles US\$59, triples US\$75) No breakfast.

Druzhba Tolbukhina 3, tel./fax +375 17 280 16 71. Staff certainly seemed friendly here at the Hotel Friendship, but their supposedly 'remodelled' rooms looked just as worn as any leftover from the Soviet 1970s. Red carpets line the creaky corridors and rooms come with TVs, fridges and phones. Beware that those cheap triple rooms lack showers. Downstairs you'll find the Canyon restaurant, proof that Tex-Mex just doesn't work in Eastern Europe. ▶ 49 rooms (singles US\$40, doubles US\$50 - 70, triples US\$33)

Sputnik Brilevskaya 2, tel. +375 17 229 36 19. Once again our plot to see the rooms at Sputnik was foiled - this time by a receptionist who became completely flustered when a guest needed, of all things, to pay by credit card. Judging by the lobby though, some remodelling may have been done in the last five years, and the place seems to be popular with budget tourists from Russia. One definite plus is that Minsk's Indian restaurant, the Taj, is located in the same building (see Where to eat). ▶ 162 rooms (singles US\$31 - 46, doubles US\$44 - 78, lux rooms US\$78 - 122).

Turist Partizansky Prospekt 81, tel. +375 17 295 40 31/+375 17 295 40 05, fax +375 17 295 41 45, office@hotel-tourist.com, www.hotel-tourist.com. Tourist is your typical, large-scale Minsk hotel where Al Bundy look-alikes in cheap suits follow you around and bark at you when you turn down the wrong corridor. Still, the ladies at reception are friendly enough, and the quick metro ride (4 stops) to the centre makes this one of the best deals in town. The lobby has currency exchange and a buffet. If you get thirsty, try the bar in the second floor casino rather than the over-priced restaurant, which is usually booked by a drunken wedding party anyway. ▶ 173 rooms (singles US\$32 - 53, doubles US\$43 - 85, triples US\$51 - 68)

Dirt cheap

Eastern Bus Station Vanevaya 34, tel. +375 17 247 63 74. This well hidden hostel on the Eastern Bus Station's top floor is really meant for long-haul bus drivers in need of some shut-eye, but it also provides cheap beds to anyone savvy enough to find it. Go to the right at the top of the stairs and knock on the door that says 'Komnata otdykha voditeley' (Drivers' rest room). Don't expect luxury - the place is well worn and toilets/showers are shared, but each room comes with a wash basin. Backpackers are advised to book early, especially now that it has shrunk down to just five rooms. More space is usually available after 6pm, when drivers head out. ▶ 5 rooms (3 doubles US\$21/person, 2 quads US\$11/bed).

Express Provokzalnaya 4, tel. +375 17 225 64 63. The location, between the train and bus station, is convenient for travellers and pickpockets alike, but before you get excited about these prices you should be warned about the conditions here. Frankly, we couldn't get a peek at the rooms, but judging by the condition of the lobby, we fear the worst. Also, you may find it hard to book a room here. Until recently foreigners weren't allowed to stay at all, and the '24-hour' reception is closed most of the time. Expect absolutely no services. ▶ 50 rooms (singles US\$10 - 16, doubles US\$37 - 57, triples US\$28).

Zhelon Odoyevskovo 52, tel. +375 17 252 94 27, fax +375 17 252 04 59. The Agriculture Ministry's dormitory is in an out-of-the-way area that's next to the Bavaria restaurant, some dogs and not much else. That said, the ladies who work at reception are friendly enough, and the scent of cooking noodles (the cleaning ladies' lunch) wafts through the corridors, covering the otherwise musty smell. Rooms are basic and worn, with each two sharing shower/WC. The more expensive 'pol-lux' rooms are defined by having a TV, phone and some kind of fridge-like apparatus. ▶ 44 rooms (singles US\$20, doubles US\$20, triples US\$30, lux US\$50 - 70). No breakfast.

**1,000BYR = €0.38; GBP£0.26;
US\$0.47
(25 March 2006)**

Airlines & Airports

Air Baltic Minsk-1 airport, tel. +375 17 222 51 61, www.airbaltic.lv. Also at Bogdanovicha 11, tel. +375 17 234 34 76. ▶ Open 09:00 - 18:00.

Austrian Airlines/Swissair Prospekt Pobediteley 19, tel. +375 17 276 89 70, www.aa.com. At Minsk-2 airport, tel. +370 17 279 15 39. ▶ Open 09:00 - 17:00. Closed Sat, Sun.

Aviakassa Karla Marksa 29, tel. +375 17 227 62 54. All airline tickets. ▶ Open 08:00 - 20:00, Sat, Sun 08:00 - 18:00.

Belavia Nemiga 14, tel. +375 17 210 41 00, info@belavia.by, www.belavia.by. ▶ Open 09:00 - 18:00, Sat, Sun 09:00 - 17:00.

El Al Israeli Airlines Pervomayskaya 3, tel. +375 17 236 35 42, www.elal.co.il. Also at Komsomolskaya 8/18, tel. +375 17 211 26 06. Partisansky 6a, tel. +375 17 229 81 58. ▶ Open 09:00 - 18:00. Closed Sat, Sun.

Estonian Air Bogdanovicha 11, tel. +375 17 269 05 54, www.estonian-air.ee. Also at Minsk-2, tel. +375 17 234 23 76. ▶ Open 09:00 - 18:00.

flyLAL (Lithuanian Airlines) Bersona 3, tel. +375 17 220 74 12, info-belarus@lal.lt, www.lal.lt. flyLAL (aka Lithuanian Airlines) are represented in Belarus by the travel agency 'U Zheni', Komsomolskaya 8/18, tel. +375 17 206 38 60.

LOT Masherova 7, tel. +375 17 226 66 28, www.lot.pl. Also at Minsk-2, during take-offs and landings. ▶ Open 10:00 - 17:00. Closed Sat, Sun.

Lufthansa Nezavisimosti 56, tel. +375 17 284 71 30, www.lufthansa.by. Also at Minsk-2, tel. +375 17 279 17 45, and at Lufthansa City Centre, Pushkina 39 (Orbita Hotel), tel. +375 17 257 06 39. ▶ Open 09:00 - 17:30, Sat 09:00 - 13:00. Closed Sun.

Minsk-1 Chkalova 38/2, tel. +375 17 225 08 77/222 52 31, www.avia.by. Technically it's an international airport, but Minsk I only handles a scant few of the flights from CIS countries and some domestic flights. Find it just 3km from the central Prospekt Nezavisimosti.

Minsk-2 42km from city limits, tel. +375 17 225 02 31/279 13 00, www.airport.by. A complete remodelling job in 2005 has failed to erase the factory look of the city's main airport, but if you've dragged yourself out here, at least that means you're leaving the country. The departure area is on the third floor, where you'll also find some dubious souvenir shops, the VIP lounge, and the CIP (commercially important person) lounge, where for some unspecified whopping fee, somebody else will take care of all your paperwork while you wait. The post office on the same floor sells phone cards and lets you pay to surf the internet. airBaltic, Lufthansa and Belavia all have offices here. Registration closes one hour before the flight. If you don't want to spring for the expensive taxi ride out here, you can buy tickets for the airport bus at the Central Bus Station, main hall, for under 4,000BYR.

Buses

Central bus station Bobruyskaya 6, tel. +375 17 227 37 25. It's disgusting and it smells like... well, a bus station. But at least it works. Tickets to domestic destinations, the Minsk II airport and most CIS destinations have to be bought in one of the main ticket hall windows on the ground floor, where there's usually a crush of people. Thankfully, tickets for Eurolines buses, which serve the main international routes, are sold in a saner, separate office on the third floor (open 09:00 - 22:00). International buses leave from platforms 14 - 18, on the opposite side of the building from the domestic buses. For information on all bus times (in Russian), phone 004. ▶ Open 05:00 - 01:00, Sat, Sun 05:00 - 23:00.

Eastern bus station Vaneyeva 34, tel. +375 17 248 58 21. Tickets for destinations within Belarus are sold at the first floor ticket booths. For tickets to cities in Western Europe, look for the 'Mizhnarodnaya Kasa', window N°11. There's a small café on the top floor to keep you caffeinated while you wait. ▶ Open 05:30 - 23:00.

Car rental

Auto Arsenal Orbita Hotel, Pushkina 39, tel. +375 17 257 63 84. ▶ Open 09:00 - 17:30. Closed Sat, Sun.

Avis Hotel Belarus, Storozhevskaya 15, tel. +375 17 234 79 90, fax +375 17 239 16 13, belideal@solo.avis.by, www.avis.by. ▶ Open 08:00 - 17:00, Sat, Sun 09:00 - 16:00.

BelRentAvto Kuybysheva 40, office 1, tel. +375 17 202 12 70. They rent Skodas. ▶ 24hrs.

Europcar Stuokos-Gucevičius 9, Vilnius, Lithuania, tel. +370 5 212 02 07, www.europcar.lt. The Europcar office in Lithuania can help you with your transfer to and from the airport in Minsk. ▶ Open 09:00 - 18:00. Closed Sat, Sun.

Hertz Hotel Planeta, Masherova 31, tel. +375 17 226 67 85, fax +375 17 226 73 83. ▶ Open 09:00 - 18:00. Closed Sat, Sun.

Lada Avtoprokat Serova 1, tel. +375 17 275 18 05.

Taxi

To avoid hassle, look for either the banana-yellow state-run taxis, or those run by one of the reliable, new private competitors - 007, 052, 057 or 084. These numbers not only show the company affiliation, they're also the short phone numbers of the dispatchers, so use them if you want to order by phone. The going rate per kilometre is around 800BYR.

Trains

Central station Privokzalnaya 4. At the brand new Minsk train station, tickets to domestic destinations are sold in the two narrow halls that flank the main entrance. International tickets are still sold in the old train station building (open 09:00 - 20:00), to the right as you face the new building. Call 213 17 19 for information about international trains, or 005 for any train-related enquiries. When looking for your train, keep in mind that there are platform numbers and track numbers, so there could be two trains on the same platform.

Domestic ticket office Skoriny 18, tel. +375 17 592 62 72. Also at Voronyanskovo 6, tel. +375 17 213 17 19. ▶ Open 09:00 - 20:00, Sat, Sun 09:00 - 19:00.

International ticket office Voronyanskogo 6, tel. +375 17 213 17 19. ▶ Open 09:00 - 20:00.

Travel agencies

Alatan Tour Kupaly 21, tel. +375 17 289 14 36, www.alatantour.com. Visas, accommodation, trips.

Belarus Tour Service Rozy Luxemburg 89, Office No 8, tel. +375 17 200 56 75, service@welcome.by, www.belarustravel.by. Friendly, reliable people helping to meet all needs with hotel booking, car rental, guides and other services during your stay in Belarus.

Belarustourist Masherova 19a, tel. +375 17 226 94 85. Actually helpful and friendly. ▶ Open 08:30 - 17:30.

Merlintoour Masherova 5, tel. +375 17 226 97 79/223 59 06, www.merlintoour.com.

Smok Skoriny 43, tel. +375 17 233 95 69/284 69 69, www.smoktravel.com.

U Zheni Komsomolskaya 8/18, tel. +375 17 200 98 98/211 26 05, www.uzheni.com.



Banks

Belarus National Bank Skoriny 20, tel. +375 17 219 23 03, www.nbrb.by.

Belarusky Narodny Bank Tanka 1a, tel. +375 17 226 78 83, www.bnb.by.

Belvnesheconombank Myasnikova 32, tel. +375 17 238 12 15, www.bveb.by.

Commerzbank Chicherina 21, tel. +375 17 210 11 19.

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) Engelsa 34a, tel. +375 17 210 47 87, www.ebrd.com. ▶ Open 09:00 - 18:00.

Prior Bank Very Khoruzhey 31a, tel. +375 17 289 90 87, www.priorbank.by.

Ukraine Starovilenskaya 51, tel. +375 17 283 19 90, info@ukraine-emb.by.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Kirova 17, tel. +375 17 227 48 76, www.un.minsk.by.

World Bank Gertsena 2a, tel. +375 17 226 52 84, www.worldbank.org.

Business connections

Belarusian Chamber of Commerce Masherova 14, tel. +375 17 226 91 27, www.cci.by.

European Commission's Delegation to Belarus, TACIS branch office Internatsionalnaya 21, tel. +375 17 206 66 13, tacis_eudel@infonet.by, www.delblr.ccc.eu.int.

International Monetary Fund (IMF) Volodarskogo 6, tel. +375 17 200 25 33, www.imf.org. ▶ Open 09:00 - 18:00.

Foreign representations

Armenia Kirova 17, tel. +375 17 229 30 72.

Bangladesh Kupaly 7-100, tel. +375 17 227 68 15.

Bulgaria Bronevoi 5, tel. +375 17 227 55 00.

China Berestianskaya 22, tel. +375 17 285 36 82, zbesg@telecom.by.

Cuba Krasnozviioznaya 13, tel. +375 17 200 03 83, embacuba@belsonet.net.

Czech Republic Muzycny 1/2, tel. +375 17 226 52 43, minsk@embassy.mzv.cz, www.mzv.cz/minsk.

Estonia Doroshevicha 6a, tel. +375 17 217 56 70, consulate.minsk@mfa.ee.

France Svobody 11, tel. +375 17 210 28 68.

Germany Zakharova 26, tel. +375 17 217 59 00, germanembassy@mail.belpak.by.

Greece Engelsa 13 (Hotel Oktyabrskaya, room 515), tel. +375 17 227 27 60.

India Koltsova 4, tel. +375 17 262 93 99, amb.minsk@mea.gov.in.

Israel Partizansky 6a, tel. +375 17 230 44 44.

Italy Karl Marx 37, tel. +375 17 229 29 69, http://sedi.esteri.it/minsk.

Japan Masherova 23, tel. +375 17 223 62 33.

Kazakhstan Kuibysheva 12, tel. +375 17 288 10 26, kazemb@nsys.by.

Kyrgyzstan Starovilenskaya 57, tel. +375 17 234 91 03, manas@nsys.minsk.by.

Latvia Doroshevicha 6a, tel. +375 17 284 72 77, embassy.belarus@mfa.gov.lv.

Lithuania Zacharova 68, tel. +375 17 285 24 48, embassy.lt@belsonet.net.

Moldova Belaruskaya 2, tel. +375 17 289 14 41.

Netherlands Vostochnaya 133, office 503, tel. +375 17 262 53 23, nedcons@gtp.by.

Peru Prityskogo 34, tel. +375 17 216 91 14.

Poland Rumiantseva 6, tel. +375 17 288 21 14, amb-minsk@nsys.by.

Romania Moskvina 4, tel. +375 17 223 80 97, romania@nsys.by.

Russia Starovilenskaya 48, tel. +375 17 250 36 66, webmaster@cis.minsk.by. Consular section, tel. +375 17 222 49 85, fax +375 17 222 49 80.

Serbia and Montenegro Razinskaya 66a, tel. +375 17 226 34 92, jugoslav@anitec.by.

Slovakia Vostochnaya 133-168, tel. +375 17 216 15 63.

Switzerland Krasnoarmeyskaya 22a-20, tel. +375 17 227 18 42.

Tajikistan Kirova 17, tel. +375 17 222 37 98.

Turkey Volodarskogo 6, tel. +375 17 227 13 83. Consular, tel. +375 17 227 14 08. Commercial, tel. +375 17 227 16 93.

United Kingdom Karl Marx 37, tel. +375 17 210 59 20.

United States Starovilenskaya 46, tel. +375 17 210 12 83.

Vatican Volodarskogo 6, tel. +375 17 289 15 84.

Insurance

Belgosstrakh Libknechta 70, tel. +375 17 259 10 21, www.belgosstrakh.by.

Belingsostrakh Masherova 19, tel. +375 17 223 58 78.

Officials

Ministry of Foreign Affairs Lenina 19, tel. +375 17 227 29 22, www.mfa.gov.by.

Minsk City Executive Committee Skoriny 8, www.minsk.gov.by.

Pharmacies

Belfarmatseya Nezavisimosti/Skoriny 16, tel. +375 17 227 83 40. Also at Bulvar Schevchenko 11, tel. +375 17 288 97 43. ▶ Both open 24 hours.

Photography

Focus Nezavisimosti (Skoriny) 18, tel. +375 17 206 55 96. Express service. ▶ Open 10:00 - 20:00, Sat 10:00 - 19:00, Sun 10:00 - 18:00. [cc]

Fota Tsentr Kirova 1 (opposite train station), tel. +375 17 225 62 25. 1-hour service. ▶ Open 09:00 - 20:00, Sun 10:00 - 18:00.

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