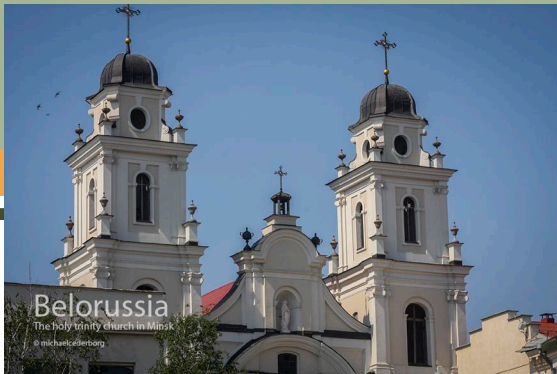
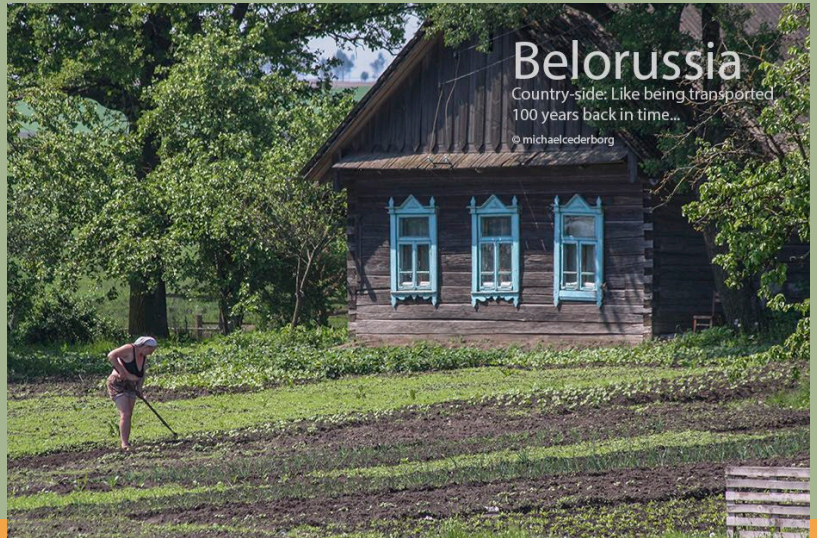


Belarus



Long weekend to Minsk, Belarus

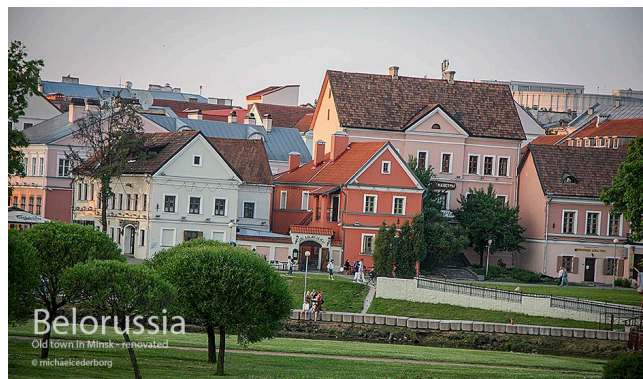
May, 2011

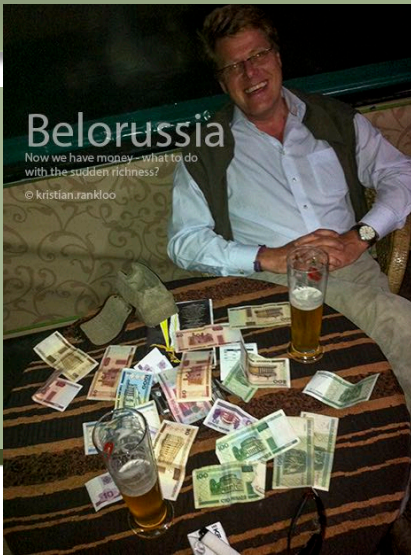


Minsk – all calm on the surface

Arriving at the airport it is immediately obvious; this country does not attract hordes of tourists. Even if the airport I newly built, it looks quite run-down and also in a Russian style architecture. There are only a few planes landing and taking off, I read from the electronic boards. It seems mostly to be Russian speaking travelers and a few business men arriving. To get to the city there are taxis, busses / metro available. It is painfully clear to me that I signal dollar-signs coming out of the airport and looking around assessing the options I have getting to the city. The starting price for a cab is 60\$, which rapidly comes down to around 35\$. I decide to take the local bus instead for 50 cents. I turns out the bus only goes as far as to the outskirts of Minsk where I need to get underground to catch a subway train. This is easier said than done, as all the signs are in kurlific. With some help however, I manage to take a train to the center of town, walking distance from my hotel.

Hotel Planeta (possibly 2-stars) is only a 10-minute walk from where I get off. This is a typical Russian style hotel and cost me 40\$ / night for a room including breakfast. The service is quite OK. The staff is very helpful with any questions I have. They can arrange tours, taxis and recommend restaurants and so forth. The currency just lost half its value which makes it still very difficult if not more so, since the inflation is 16%.



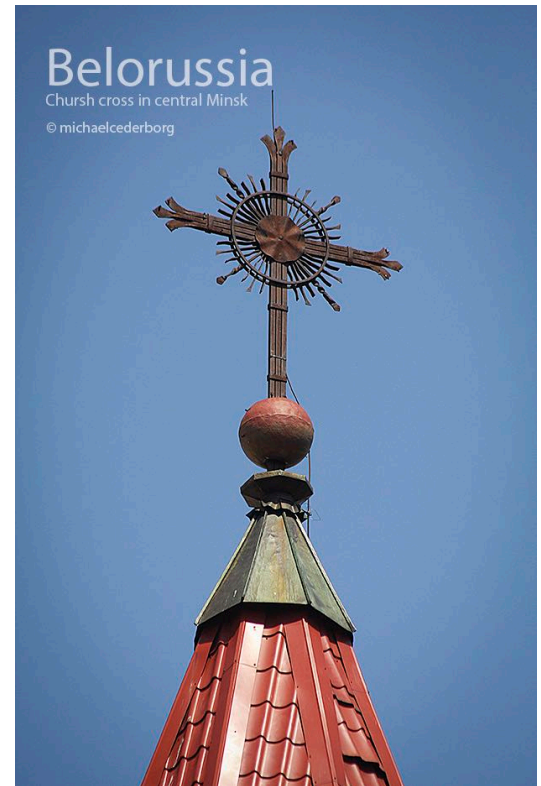


Exploring the capital

I can't stop thinking about the first impression I get from this, on the surface at least, clean city, well-dressed people, houses renovated from the old days and newly constructed buildings etc. Is it just my preconceived and prejudice ideas of this country that had led me to expect something altogether different? The central parts of Minsk are easily assessable by walking around, and it is these areas which also give me this impression. It is no coincidence of course – this is exactly the idea the regime wants to have of Minsk and Belarus these days. Well kept, in order, people seemingly OK. Kids are cycling on mountain bikes and people are quite well dressed. How is this possible with an average monthly income of let's say 2-300\$?

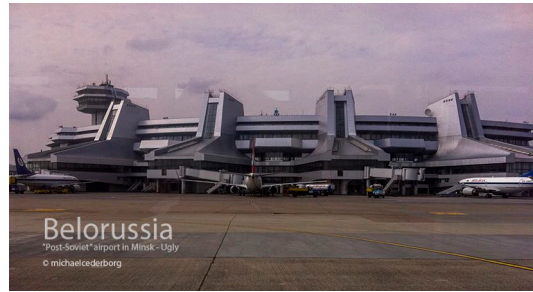
Mixed with the old type of boutiques you will also find luxury boutiques with Boss, Gucci, Hermes brands at western prices. I also find a replica of the GUM of old (ref. Moscow) in the midst of it all. This is filled with anything from electrical appliances, food to lower quality of clothes and souvenirs. This is also where the Belarussians are shopping, more so than tourists it seems. I find also Mc Donald's here represented door-to-door with local establishments.

Minsk, was almost completely destroyed during the 2nd world war. Only a few buildings survived and have now been restored. The mixture of Stalinistic buildings with the betony ghettos, typical of Russia are everywhere to be found. The infrastructure on the surface at least seems to be well working with good roads, street lights etc. It is apparent that they want the visitors, who mainly see the center of Minsk and not much more, the impression of a well-functioning state. At the same time, you see and feel the presence of the police and military everywhere. When you talk to the few Belarussians who dare comment on the situation, it is obvious that there is a lot going on below the surface. People are not content and happy with the regime of Lukajenko.





Belorussia
Old wooden church at Dudutki
© michaelcederborg



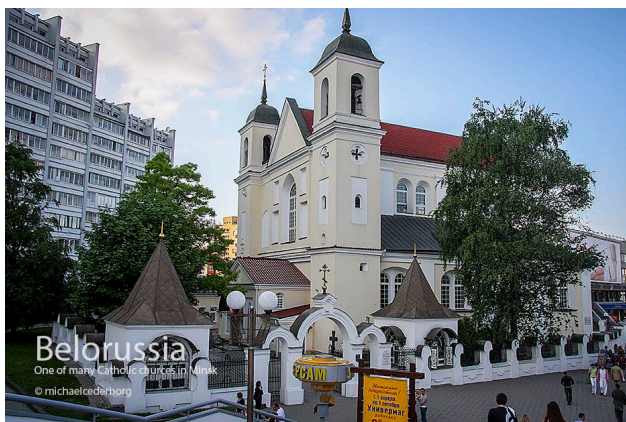
Belorussia
"Post-Soviet" airport in Minsk - Uly
© michaelcederborg

Dudutki and Khatyn

I arrive a couple of days before my traveling mate. He missed his connecting flight and had to wait a day for the next flight before making it to Minsk. This means I have time to explore Minsk on my own. I find a large group of people congregating at one of the main cathedrals in Minsk. There is some kind of ceremony today. This gives me opportunity to take photographs and just enjoy all the people having put on their best Sunday clothes and come out.

Many Russians come here and purchase their cars and import them to Russia where the import duties for directly imported cars from the west is much higher. This is big-business here and many people seem to have this as their main business set-up. You still see a few old Vaz or Ladas on the streets, but mixed up with expensive imports of BMW and Lexus SUV. The companies who operate here all have to be approved by Lukajenko and his layers of officials whom all seem to have a piece of the business according to people we spoke to.

We make a day-trip out to Dudutki located ca. 40-minute drive outside of Minsk. Most of this old cooperative is newly build and seems more geared towards the tourists. Not so interesting. Khatyn is also worth a stop ca: 60 km from Minsk. This is the village which was completely erased by the Nazis during the war. This, they are less interested in showing to visiting westerners. We did stop also on our excursion to see some of the old farmhouses and the "real" farming. This was interesting to see.



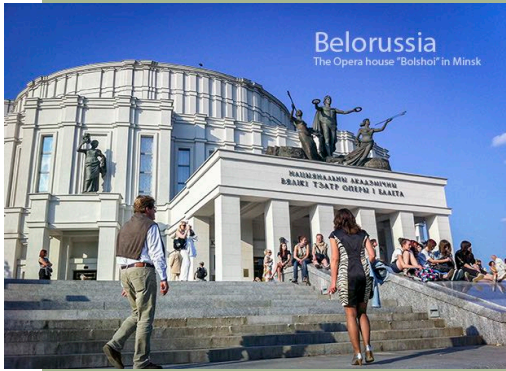
Belorussia
One of many Catholic churches in Minsk
© michaelcederborg



Belorussia
At the Mass Procession in Minsk
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Belorussia
One of many churches in Minsk
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The Bolshoi Theatre

The Museum of the Great Patriotic War and the KGB is worth seeing, although none of it is in English. A picture tells more than a thousand words rings true here. Loads of photographs and memorabilia from WWII. Lee Harvey Oswald, the alleged murderer of JFK, is said to have lived a number of years in Minsk before he returned back to the USA. KGB (NKVD today) is said to still have a very active role in Belarus.

There are quite a few restaurants to choose from in Minsk. We were recommended and tried Grand Café, opposite Hotel Europa on Lenina 12. Really good menu and prices. There is also a good sushi restaurant, which I tried more than once. A few local alternatives include Brovár (The brewery) opposite Vitebskaya 10. Across the street is also a cozy place, can't remember the name, but it is in the basement and seem to attract many locals.

We managed to get tickets to the State Theatre and Opera house – The Bolshoi. We say Aida, by Verdi at the cost of 5\$, top seats and champagne included. This was a really nice experience and highly recommended activity if they have something showing of course. There are ATM's available in various locations. Well worth a long-weekend visit. I have been back since again.

