

2 Dream trips

Pedal through a land of ancient castles and beautiful countryside

A cycling trip is the best way to see the many fascinating sights of Belarus, says **Tom Chesshyre**

We're cycling through a potato farm in Belarus. A chill wind whips across the remote landscape as we swerve to avoid potholes on a dirt track. On the horizon a tractor chugs in the direction of a pine forest (Belarus is big on tractors, being a key exporter to Russia and other eastern European nations). Ravens flap by. Our breath billows in plumes of steam. This is not your typical short break in Europe.

Nor is it meant to be. I've joined a tour of this little-visited former Soviet enclave, about the size of Britain but with a population of just 9.5 million, designed to appeal to those whose travel instincts are one step removed from Majorcan beach breaks, weekends in Rome and holidays to Florida theme parks.

Or perhaps more than one step. This short break, five days in total (taking advantage of a new five-day tourist visa waiver introduced last year), is to feature cabbage fields, clapboard villages, horseradish vodka nights, accordion music recitals, visits to forests that were controlled by partisans during the Second World War, backstreet rock venues, and a fair bit of time spent in the saddle, pedalling through countryside that cannot have had many tourists. We certainly don't see any others.

Our journey begins, after a flight to the capital, Minsk, with a stop-off at Mir Castle. This is about 60 miles southwest of Minsk, reached by a highway that slants across Belarus, connecting with Moscow to the east and Warsaw to the west; Belarus declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and has been run with an iron rod since 1994 by Alexander Lukashenko, who is not the biggest fan of a free press or political opposition. He's dubbed by some "Europe's last dictator".

A local contact tells me, anonymously: "For many years people have been afraid to talk out, although that is slowly changing. The media in Belarus has just about been killed off. Turn on the TV and every two or three hours the president will be on making an announcement." Belarus really is an oddity, and it

makes for a peculiar yet intriguing holiday. Aside from farmland, the country comprises great swathes of forest, much of it teeming with wolves and bears. Inside the enormous 16th-century Mir Castle — which has 75m-long walls and great red-brick turrets — rooms are strewn with wolf and bear pelts, while stuffed elk and deer heads adorn walls alongside mounted birds of prey and oil paintings of pheasants and rabbits bagged during hunts. Belarusians are keen hunters.

Rooms with ornate ceilings twinkling with crystal chandeliers lead to banquet halls with gigantic porcelain heaters and windows facing a lovely mirror-like lake. The history of the castle, explains our guide, is rich and troubled. During the war with Napoleon the castle suffered severe damage; it was the home of nobility until the Soviet Union took the territory from Poland in 1939 (when the nobles fled), and — tragically — was turned into a Jewish ghetto by the Nazis.

The cycle ride from Mir Castle to Nesvizh, home to another 16th-century castle, is about 25 miles along tree-lined roads and through bleakly beautiful farmland. We pause for breath at the occasional village, where the local shop may simply be a door in what looks like someone's house. Go in, however, and it's

with ornate Orthodox crosses poking up from some yards. Dogs bark, but fortunately don't chase us; should any do so, our guide advises us to "keep pedalling: fast!"

The interior of Nesvizh Castle has been restored to its glory days, when the wealthy Radziwill family lived here; they ran the castle from 1533 until the Red Army booted them out in 1939. Like Mir Castle, it's now a Unesco world heritage site, with a weapons hall with cannonballs and rifles, fabulous tapestries and a billiards room where only one table remains. The Nazis pilfered the other tables, but left this one because it was too heavy to move.

We are staying in the Palace Hotel in the castle's converted stables. This is a funny little hotel with small, cosy rooms, a fridge of beers in the form of an honesty bar by the tiny reception — and not much else.

We stroll into the sleepy town to eat at the brightly lit Skarbniša restaurant, where other guests are smoking cigarettes (smokers will love Belarus), settling in for a meal with bottles of vodka ordered to their tables (drinkers will love it too). Bottles are consumed at one sitting, in some instances more than one per table; Belarus, according to the World Health Organisation, is home to the heaviest drinkers in the world, ahead of Moldova, Lithuania and Russia (in second, third and fourth places). *Budżaće zdorovyja!* (Cheers!)

In true Belarusian style, we order beers, honey-and-chilli vodka shots and "beer snacks", which include sliced lard and various hams, as we peruse the menu and opt for a *solyanka* soup starter, described in the English translation on the menu as "hodgepodge with meat". This is a delicious spicy pork soup, which we follow up with potato pancakes with pork and mushrooms served with a rich sauce in a large pot. Calories are easy to come by in the last dictatorship in Europe.

Also available are "appetisers for Men [sic] with cheese, mayonnaise, garlic and tomatoes"; "herring in a fashionable fur coat, with beetroot, carrots, apple and salmon"; and "chicken breast with hineapple [sic]" — all washed down with "drink from grain raw materials: 42 per cent". Belarusian menus can make fun reading.

Our next day's gentle cycling, luggage transported in a vehicle (the tour is rated "easy", suited to casual cyclists), takes us through yet more potato fields for nine miles to the village of Lucynka, where we have lunch at an



Mir Castle. Left: Tom Chesshyre passes some traditional Belarusian transport. Below: a war memorial in Minsk

agro-tourist farmstead named St Martin's Goose, in a building with wooden walls and a blazing fire. Here, over yet more *solyanka* and stuffed *draniki* (potato, salt pork and sauerkraut), we learn of a remarkable, internationally famous, local story.

We are on the edge of Naliboki Forest, in which hundreds of Jewish and Polish partisans evaded the Nazis during the Second World War. Alexander Bely, who runs the farmstead with his wife, Ludmila, explains that the forest is "the size of Luxembourg", which made it difficult for the Nazis to search down those who were hiding out. "It was one of the largest areas of resistance during the war and the most important in Europe," Bely says. Many atrocities were carried out — earlier in the day we had stopped at a clearing in the forest with a chilling memorial to more than 800 Jews who were massacred at the spot — and towards the end of the war many Polish partisans fled to Warsaw to join the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. A large number, having hoped to help to take the city before Stalin arrived, died at the hands of the Nazis. The 2008 film *Defiance*, starring Daniel Craig, tells much of the



story of the partisans of Naliboki. Between 1939 and 1945 at least a quarter of the country's population perished; more than 200,000 Jews and other prisoners died at the Nazis' third-largest concentration camp, Maly Trostenets, on the edge of Minsk.

The 20th century was not kind to Belarus. Bely goes on to explain how Soviet collectivisation, in which individual farmers were forced to join together in villages, was "in effect a return to serfdom — a terrible step back to the Middle Ages". Lives were ruined and there is little affection among locals for their former Soviet masters.

And then we drive to Minsk — via a jolly traditional music show in a hamlet featuring accordions and (very strange) Belarusian bagpipes — for the last stage of the tour. The outskirts of the capital are a shock to the system: row upon row of concrete apartment blocks, so vast and relentless they're somehow

Six unusual cycling holidays in Europe

Adventure in northern Cyprus

Cycle through lemon and olive groves on an eight-day adventure in northern Cyprus with Explore (01252 884723, explore.co.uk). The itinerary covers the rarely visited Karpaz Peninsula, where churches and mosques stand side by side, medieval Famagusta and Kyrenia. The average daily distance on this "easy to moderate" trip is 22 miles. The price is from £945pp, including flights, seven nights' B&B, bicycle hire and guide. Group size: 10-16.

Pedal through the Albanian Alps

Freedom Treks has a Highlights of Albania cycling tour starting in the capital, Tirana, then weaving through the gorges of the Albanian Alps (01273 224066, freedomtreaks.co.uk). The ten-day trips, which cost from £919pp and are suitable for "confident" cyclists, include eight days in the saddle, covering 295 miles (average of 37 miles a day). Full-board hotels, transfers and bike hire are included. Flights are extra.

Balkans road cycling tour

Visit Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro on a guided

eight-day journey organised by KE Adventure Travel (01768 773966, keadventure.com). The trip, which costs from £1,075pp excluding flights and bike hire, covers 295 miles (37 miles a day), beginning in Dubrovnik in Croatia. It passes through Kotor and Lovcen National Park in Montenegro and on to Bosnia-Herzegovina, cutting back to Croatia and the island of Korcula before returning to Dubrovnik. The price includes seven nights in hotels, full board. Maximum group size: 16.



Dubrovnik and its harbour, Croatia

Slovenia, from capital to coast

From Saddle Skedaddle is an eight-day self-guided cycling tour that begins in Ljubljana, Slovenia's capital, and continues into Italy, passing Trieste on the way to the

Slovenian coast (0191 265 1110, skedaddle.co.uk). The route ends in Piran. Departures are from March 17 to October 13, from £700pp, including B&B, route notes and luggage transfers. Flights and bike hire are extra. You cover about 30 miles a day.

Through the Baltics on a bicycle

Explore Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on Intrepid Travel's 11-day trip that begins in Tallinn, Estonia's capital, and ends in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, via Saaremaa, Riga (Latvia's capital) and Klaipeda. The trip costs from £1,670pp, including accommodation, bike hire and breakfasts (0808 2745111, intrepidtravel.com). Flights are extra. Maximum group size: 12.

Across Transylvania by bike

Ride into the Transylvanian Alps, passing Dracula's Bran Castle, on Explore's nine-day Cycle Romania trip (01252 884723, explore.co.uk). The guided tour, for "moderate" cyclists, passes through the Piatra Craiului Mountains. From £1,065pp, including flights, eight nights in hotels, some meals and bicycle hire. The group size is 10-16.

mesmerising. This is brutalist Soviet architecture of the first order. We drive in our support mini-van down a six-lane boulevard with the occasional 24-hour McDonald's, flashy neon casino (many tourists from Russia, where gambling is restricted, visit Belarus) and Gym Fight, which seems to be a chain. Belarusians are a tough lot.

We are staying at Hotel Yubileiny, a concrete tower with a casino close to the Svislach River and the grandiose Belarusian State Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War (full of tanks, guns and military memorabilia). After an evening out that starts with a meal at the fabulous Traktir traditional restaurant, where your "meat" main course is served sizzling on a skewer with a sparkler attached and vodka-fuelled diners start dancing to the live music early in the evening, we head to Revoliutsionnaya Street for the TNT Rock Club. Beers and horseradish vodkas are downed as live rock music blasts in the cavernous redbrick space. There's a brilliant vibe. What a great night.

In the morning we clear our heads with a stroll around Independence Square, which features a statue of Lenin in front of Government House and a copy of a church bell from Nagasaki — donated by the Japanese city as a gesture of sympathy after Belarus suffered from the fallout from the Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster in neighbouring Ukraine in 1986.

Independence Square is remarkable in that a full-blown shopping mall lurks beneath its paving stones. Lingerie, Swarovski crystal and vodka shops (some vodka is sold in bottles shaped like Kalashnikov rifles) are to be found along with Burger Kings and canteens serving cheap *solyanka*. All quite unexpected because there is no indication of all the bustle from above.

Our final cycle ride is a fascinating one, along the Svislach River passing delicious-smelling chocolate plants and massive bicycle and tractor factories; manufacturing is responsible for about a third of Belarus's economy. We pedal 16 miles, stopping for coffees at Laiki, a café on Brazil Street, which is plastered with striking, colourful graffiti art and has become the Minsk version of Shoreditch, much loved by Belarusian hipsters.

We take a look at the National Library, an extraordinary structure shaped like a giant, tilted Rubik's Cube, where there's another café at the top and stunning city views. Then we pull up at Hotel Yubileiny, where we attempt — wearing Lycra and looking sweaty — to venture into the casino, but are told by serious-looking bouncers, who seem very dubious about us indeed, that we need US\$50 each in gambling cash. Which we don't have, so we're not getting in.

Go to Belarus — Europe's last dictatorship is an adventure, especially if you go off the beaten track by bike: casinos with thuggish bouncers, medieval castles deep in forests the size of small countries, Stalinist architecture, brilliant rock clubs, tractor factories, war museums... and a fair few vodka bars along the way. *Budżaće zdorovyja!*

Need to know

Tom Chesshyre was a guest of Explore (01252 883761, explore.co.uk), which has a five-day Cycle Belarus Short Break from £890pp, including bikes, direct Belavia flights, transfers and hotels with breakfasts, plus two lunches

