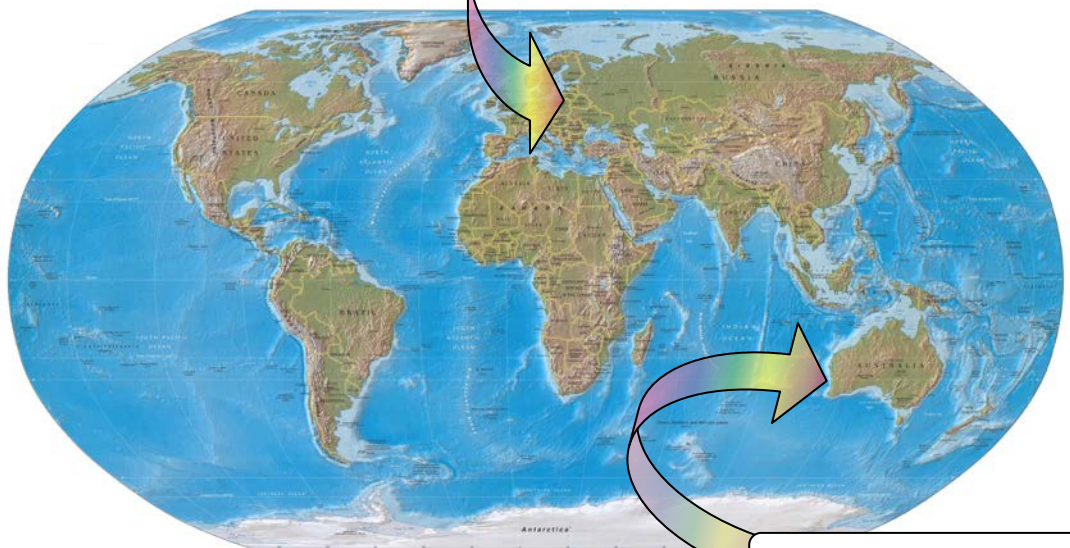


BELARUS



We were there



Now we are here

FACTS:

- **Population:** 9.8 million (UN, 2005)
- **Capital:** Minsk
- **Area:** 207,595 sq km (80,153 sq miles)
- **Major language:** Russian, Belarusian (both official)
- **Major religion:** Christianity
- **Life expectancy:** 62 years (men), 74 years (women) (UN)
- **Monetary unit:** 1 Belarusian rouble = 100 kopeks
- **Main exports:** Machinery, chemical and petroleum products
- **GNI per capita:** US \$2,760 (World Bank, 2006)
- **Internet domain:** .by
- **International dialing code:** +375

Belarusian Community in WA

Belarusian Association in Western Australia

43 Drynan Street Bayswater WA 6053

Overview of cultural groups

Ethnic Belarusians make up more than three-quarters 81.2% of the country's population. The next largest ethnic groups are Russians, many of whom migrated to the Belarusian S.S.R. in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. Most of the remainder of the population are Poles 3.9% and Ukrainians 2.4% with a small number of Latvians, Lithuanians and Tatars. Before World War II, however, Jews constituted the second largest group in the republic, more than half the urban population. The genocide of European Jewry and postwar emigration nearly eliminated Jews from the republic.

Belarusian culture is the product of a millennium of development under the impact of a number of diverse factors. These include the physical environment:

- the ethnographic background of Belarusians (the merger of Slavic newcomers with Baltic natives)
- the paganism of the early settlers and their hosts
- Byzantine Christianity as a link to the Orthodox religion and its literary tradition
- the country's lack of natural borders
- the flow of rivers toward both the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea

and the variety of religions in the region - Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Judaism and Islam.

Language/dialects spoken

Both Belarusian and Russian are official languages. Belarusian is spoken at home by 62.8% and Russian by 36.7%. Belarusian, considered as a central to the concept of national identity, is an East Slavic language related to both Russian and Ukrainian with dialects that are transitional to both. It is written in a Cyrillic alphabet and has words borrowed from both Polish and Russian which is reflective of the region's history. Minorities also speak Polish, Ukrainian and Eastern Yiddish.

Dietary preferences

Belarusian's cuisine consists mainly of vegetables, meat (especially pork), and breads. Foods are usually either slowly cooked or stewed. A typical Belarusian eats a very light breakfast and two hearty meals, with dinner being the largest meal of the day. Wheat and rye breads are consumed in Belarus, but rye is more plentiful because conditions are too harsh for growing wheat. To show hospitality, a host presents an offering of bread and salt when greeting a guest or visitor. Popular drinks in Belarus include Russian wheat vodka and kvass, a soft drink made from malted brown bread or rye flour. Kvass may also be combined with sliced vegetables to create a cold soup called *okroshka*.

Babka is also a dish popular in Belarus and Lithuania, where it is called "bulvių plokštainis." It is made from grated potatoes, egg, onions, and smoked bacon. It is baked in a crock, and often served with a sauce of sour cream and unsliced bacon. Depending on how it is cooked, and the recipe, it may be a flaky potato pie, or a heavy potato pudding.

Religion/spirituality/observances

Most Belarusians who profess a religion adhere to Eastern Orthodoxy. There is, however, a large number of Roman Catholics and the Eastern-rite (Uniate) church is experiencing something of a revival after centuries of persecution under Tsarist Russia and the Soviet government.

The Belarusian government sponsors annual cultural festivals such as the Slavianski Bazaar in Vitebsk, which showcases Belarusian performers, artists, writers, musicians, and actors. Several state holidays, such as Independence Day and Victory Day, draw big crowds and often include displays

such as fireworks and military parades, especially in Vitebsk and Minsk. The government's Ministry of Culture finances events promoting Belarusian arts and culture both inside and outside the country.

Public Holidays:

Date	English Name	Local Name
January 1	New Year	Novy Hod
January 7	Orthodox Christmas	Kalady pravasłaŭnyja
March 15	Constitution Day	Dzień Kanstytucyji
July 3	Independence Day	Dzień Niezależnasci
December 25	Catholic Christmas	Kalady katalickija
Movable dates	Catholic Easter	Vialikdzień katalicki
Movable dates	Orthodox Easter	Vialikdzień pravasłaŭny

Customs/traditions

The traditional Belarusian dress originates from the Kiev Rus period. Because of the cool climate, clothes, usually composed of flax or wool, were designed to keep the body warm. They were decorated with ornate patterns influenced by the neighboring cultures: Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Russians, and other European nations. Each region of Belarus has developed specific design patterns. An ornamental pattern used on some early dresses is currently used to decorate the hoist of the Belarusian national flag, adopted in a disputed referendum in 1995.

The main pagan festivities are:

Spring Greeting - a plentitude of spring greeting songs -"Vesnavyya pesni" exists, including "Yur'ya". Yur'ia is related to calling Yaryla (Yur'ya), the Sun-God, to bring out the keys and open mothers Nature womb - to let out the grass and flowers and animals.

Kupalle (Solstice, June 21) - is the most loved and cherished pagan holiday in contemporary Belarus. It is a hedonistic summer celebration of fertility in the name of a female God - Kupala. It seems like she is considered a lunar Goddess by some pagan sources, although direct translation of the name is "She Who Bathes". Lately it was renamed into a Christian celebration of a male saint - Ivan Kupala. Kupalle usually involves youth going into the forests and the meadows, wearing flower and grass garlands (see these modern pictures of Belarusian girls in wreaths on Kupala night), dancing in karagods (circles around fires), jumping through fires, competing in strength and a lot of eroticism.

Dzyady - is celebrated twice a year in April and in late October - it's a celebration of dead, bringing bread and drinks to their groves etc. Unlike Halloween it's a light holiday of commemoration of the dead.

Kaliady (a week before Christmas) - pre-Christian celebration of the end of year. Later it was very nicely adopted for Christmas celebration by Orthodox and Catholic churches. Still they have a problem to explain the meaning of spruce (evergreen - eternal life returning) and people dressed as animals and fantastic beasts carrying the sun and the goat's head in their hands.

Recreational activities

There are 27 state theatres, including opera and ballet theatres, 16 drama theatres, a musical comedy theatre, 7 puppet theatres, a theatre of young viewers. The Ministry of culture has 128 state museums under its supervision. The museum stock numbers over 2.5 million exhibits. The sports facilities include 228 stadiums, 31 indoor stadiums, 238 swimming pools, 4,813 gymnasiums and 10 thousand outdoor sports grounds. In 2000 all regional centers had Ice palaces and skating rinks.

Physical culture and sports are paid much attention to in Belarus. This is one of the key guidelines of the State policy. To make sports accessible to all age groups a special system was created covering

preschool, secondary school and higher educational establishments, youth sports schools and enterprises specializing in commercial sports services. Today there are 228 stadiums, 218 swimming pools (not counting mini-pools at preschool institutions), 4,813 gymnasiums, 31 athletics centre, a number of Palaces of Sports, Tennis, Ice Palaces, over 9.8 thousand open-air sports grounds. And certainly, Olympic training centres in Stayki, Raubichi and Ratomka. 25 thousand experts in physical training and sports are employed in this area.

The Raubichi centre is considered one of the best biathlon training centers in the world. No wonder that biathlon is one of the most popular of sports in Belarus. Other sports enjoying popularity with Belarusian activists of healthy life-style are gymnastics, track and field athletics, football, hockey, tennis, fencing, wrestling, volleyball, handball, swimming, chess and checkers.

Environment

Belarus is landlocked, relatively flat, and contains large tracts of marshy land. According to a 1994 estimate by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation, 34% of Belarus is covered by forests. Many streams and 11,000 lakes are found in Belarus. Three major rivers run through the country: the Neman, the Prioyat, and the Dnepr. Belarus' highest point is Dzyarzhynskaya Hara (Dzyarzhynsk Hill) at 345 meters, and its lowest point is on the Neman River at 90 meters. The average elevation of Belarus is 160 meters above sea level. The climate ranges from harsh winters, with average January temperatures at (-6°C), to cool and moist summers with the average temperature of 18°C. Belarus experiences an average rainfall of 550 to 700 millimeters. The country experiences a yearly transition from a continental climate to a maritime climate.

Belarus' natural resources include peat deposits, small quantities of oil and natural gas, granite, dolomite (limestone), marl, chalk, sand, gravel, and clay. About 70% of the radiation from neighboring Ukraine's 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster entered Belarusian territory, and as of 2005 about a fifth of Belarusian land (principally farmland and forests in the southeastern provinces) continues to be affected by radiation fallout. The United Nations and other agencies have aimed to reduce the level of radiation in affected areas, especially through the use of cesium binders and rapeseed cultivation, which are meant to decrease soil levels of cesium (-137).

Belarus is bordered by Latvia on the north, Lithuania on the northwest, Poland on the west, Russia on the north and east and Ukraine on the south.

Your Notes and Comments: