

August-2006

Trip Report from Russia and Belarus

Part 1. Traveling to Minsk through Moscow

...I had almost convinced myself that Katya and DG just had a strike of bad luck in Sheremetyevo earlier this year.

Sure enough, my Aeroflot flight from JFK was delayed, but only for one hour, which was nothing comparing to a 7 hours planned stopover in NYC and 10 hours in Moscow. Maybe I should just give up on those free tickets purchased for frequent miles and start buying them for dollars as everyone else does...

Aeroflot's in-flight service is just fine, as long as you can understand monotonous pronunciation with strong Russian accent and accept the fact that you actually need to ask for ice in your Coke because it does not come by default.

And just as was predicted, the telephone card that I purchased in Moscow did not work with most of pay phones, but nevertheless it did work with one of them so I had managed to make a call and meet with my uncle and his family whom I haven't seen for years.

And sure enough, cab drivers were very annoying and asked obscene fare, but marshrutka (shuttle) to the nearest subway station was just 30 roubles - about one buck. In contrast to that, storing one bag for few hours had cost me 300 roubles. Go figure...

Anyway, I had met with my uncle and his family, went to see the Red Square and came back to the airport right on time for my next plane.

I almost started to believe that Moscow has finally changed - cleaner city, newer cars, richer and more civilized people...

However, as I learned soon, some things haven't changed and it spoiled the whole impression. When I was going through the security at the airport the officer discovered that in my check-in baggage I had a souvenir Sherpa's knife that I bought in India and was bringing it as a gift for my brother. It traveled with me safely from India to the US and then to Russia, but over there it suddenly became a "very dangerous weapon". So I was promptly taken with my bags to the police station at the airport.

Over there another officer explained me how badly I broke Russian laws and how grim my situation was. I had to be detained to fill out the "protocol" (police report), so, unfortunately, I would miss my flight; I had to pay a hefty fine after coming to the court; bla-bla-bla... I knew that it was mostly bullshit, but that son of the gun could definitely make me miss the plane - the last one on that day.

First I thought he just liked the knife so I asked him directly if that was what he wanted. But he proudly responded that he already had quite a collection and that the severity of my situation could only be remedied with a monetary contribution. Oh well, here we go again... I offered the usual \$20, but, as it turned out, increased cost of living cast its shadow even on the bribe price list, so the revered captain of the Russian police let me go only after I had dropped \$50 into an open drawer of his desk. I didn't care much about the money but I left with a very strong feeling of stepping into a big steaming pile of shit (or should I say "poop" to avoid the "R" rating for this essay? Nah, I have already used the BS word before...) After that the tricky thing for me was to figure out why he did not even let me throw the knife out and

put it back into my suitcase - and even sent another officer with me to the check-in desk to make sure that the knife flew with me to Minsk! The captain who detained me made a weird statement - "when they find the knife at the Minsk airport - and they will - don't tell them that we saw it here and let you keep it, OK?" Naturally, I was expecting a setup in Minsk and another bribe to pay, but in fact there was no security check on my arrival at all - just a regular baggage claim area as on domestic flights in the US.

So I safely made it to Minsk. My brother met me at the airport and soon I came at my parent's home and was trying to get asleep and overcome the jet lag.

Part 2. Minsk

Bureaucracy

Red tape is still as strong in Belarus as ever. Here is what it takes for a guy like me to replace a passport when there are no empty visa pages left in the old one.

1. Fly from the US to Belarus because the Belorussian consulate in the US does not offer passport replacement services.
2. Go to the OVIR (passport and migration department) to be redirected to the district office ("passportistka").
3. Go to the district civil office just to find out that they were closed on Friday but open on Saturday.
4. Go there on Saturday and get application forms.
5. Go to the branch of the State Bank to pay for passport replacement services and urgent processing (2 weeks instead of a full month).
6. Go to the bank again because first time it was closed "for technical reasons".
7. Go back to the district civil office.
8. Fill in the same set of forms 3 times because each time I made some little mistake (e.g. misspelled a word in Belorussian). Be yelled at each time and beg for replacement blanks that are, of course, "in short supply".
9. Beg again so that the office lady accepts my photographs that are not precisely 4 by 5 centimeters (more like 4.2 by 5.2).
10. Find out that my passport replacement procedure would start only in a week so even with emergency service it would take 3 full weeks - more than I had.
11. Find out that everyone but myself had "links" to the right people, so speeding up the processing was not a problem, as long as I agreed to pay a bribe.
12. Go to the passport office to get my old passport back while the new one was in processing.
13. Go to the OVIR to apply for a transfer of the stamp that allows traveling abroad.
14. Go to the office of the head of OVIR to find out how to transfer that stamp faster than in three weeks.
15. Go back home and get "trudovaja knizhka" (a relic from the Soviet era, an official record from all places where I worked at and for how long) to show the officer at the OVIR my job record for last 10 years.

16. Go to the bank to pay for another "emergency service".
17. Go back to the OVIR to give them a proof of payment and application forms.
18. Come back again next week to check if passport was ready.
19. Meet with the OVIR's head to get a permission to keep the old passport for 3 months (I had a valid Indian visa in it).
20. Go back to the office that issues new passports.
21. Go to the bank again to pay for yet another "computer service".
22. Finally, after one more trip to the OVIR I became a happy owner of a new Belorussian passport! Yeehaw!

Naturally, each trip meant a long wait in a line with other martyrs...

To give the bureaucrats justice, I must admit that the entire procedure was over in exactly two weeks without pulling any strings - faster than ever before. But next time I will just pay the "right" people some extra money to save my time and get the job done without all those exhausting office visits.

Nightlife

As I was told, the most upscale night club in Minsk nowadays is the "White Tower" ("Belaya Vezha") - I am sure many will laugh at me but hey, I am just a tourist now so how am I supposed to know?! So I decided to check it out and took a few of my friends with me.

The club was completely dead at 11PM (so dead that there wasn't even music playing) but fully packed and raving by 2 in the morning.

"Upscale" in Minsk means flashy, elite, snobbery - any word that can be used to describe people that want to separate themselves from the "peasants". In Minsk "upscale" people are mostly uptight, especially girls. It almost looked like a dog pedigree show, only instead of puddles and chihuahua's there were young people demonstrating their outfits and "cool" dance moves.

Me, myself and Masha (the only girl that was in our company) wanted to dance, so we just went crazy - luckily, without causing any danger to ourselves. The only incident happened when we climbed one of the mini-podiums and were immediately asked by security to step down because it was reserved only for "exotic dancers".

My main impression from that night was that the crowd was too uptight and self-reflecting, but the music was OK (although quite monotonous for the taste of my Belarussian friends who were not used to a full night of the trance music). Drinks were cheap but the variety at the bar was quite limited - mostly because of the Draconian import duties on alcohol. Oh, and if you ever go there, here is a word of precaution for you - don't ever try their Margarita. This joke of a drink is made with a lemon juice, lots of salt and cheap substitute for real tequila, so it tastes worse than any other Margarita I ever tried, including the mix from a grocery store.

On a different day we went to another place that still operates in a typical post-Soviet style: lots of vodka, remixes of popular Russian tunes from 80's and 90's and slow music a.k.a. "myedlyak" as a main mechanism for men to meet women by taking them to dance and grabbing their butts in the process.

City

As usual, Minsk is under reconstruction. Streets and sidewalks are being repaved everywhere. However, there is a fair amount of changes, mostly on the positive side. One of the latest architectural additions is the National Public Library - diamond-shaped large building made of concrete and glass that glows in the dark like some weird Christmas tree.

City center is lovely and has some good restaurants and interesting people. If you happen to be there, look out for scattered remaining signs of the old Communist era, such as statues of Lenin or ornament that include Soviet symbols.

The biggest segment of the population, as it seems, are young gorgeous girls with perfect bodily proportions. (Could it be caused by some special form of a filter in my brain? ☺ Well, then why didn't it work the same way in Moscow?)

Unfortunately, once you leave the city center and move closer to the suburbs, everything changes drastically. Drunken people are everywhere. Restaurants are almost non-existent and the food in them is prepared in accordance with the worst Soviet traditions - in other words, it is yucky. I ordered a pizza in one of them and once I saw it I regretted my choice instantly. It was more like a lump of half-baked dough with shreds of a chicken leg and tomato pasta spread across it ☺

As for the shopping experience, I think nowadays Minsk has to offer most of what you can get in Europe. I am not a big shopper myself but I bought few trendy designer clothes that would be very hard to find in the US, at least for the price I paid for them.

The cultural scene in Minsk is not too impressing. There are few museums and theaters but they are nowhere near level of Moscow or St Petersburg. However, sometimes interesting events happen - for example, a concert of The Cardigans on August 27th.

(Note: I did go to that concert. Its organization and the sound were mediocre. The crowd acted retarded, so the band had a trouble performing at full craze. Nina Persson even yelled at us from the scene: "you are so quiet!")

Random Thoughts of the Moment

...Every day I walk in Minsk I catch myself thinking that there are so many perfect-looking girls in this city - it is practically insane, especially comparing to the average look of the male part of the population. Where are they going to find enough millionaires in this city? ☺

...I used to think in English half of the time, but as soon as I reached Russian borders somehow my thoughts switched to pure Russian. I suspect that if I stayed there a bit longer I could forget English or at least lose fluency in it quite easily. It was more than just remembering words - there is a big difference in a way how Americans and Russians put their thoughts together. (Note: I've got my English back in full on the next day after coming back to the US. I guess it was just a mind flux.)

...I've been drinking 200-300 ml of vodka at least every other day... I did not intend to do so but it turned out that I have more friends who still remember me than I had imagined. So my typical day involved drinking till 3AM, then sleeping till noon, than hangover, then shower, then erase and rewind (thanks, Cardigans!) :) Definitely

this was not fun from a typical American point of view, but - when in Rome...

26 Aug 2006 2:30 AM. Another drunken thought: so what is a key to be a happy little tourist in Minsk? You drink, you observe craziness of the local life and have fun.

What is your biggest potential setback? You drink, you observe local craze and you find it disgusting. It's all in your head, my friend ;)

Next morning: scratch that. Don't EVER drink! Or at least don't smoke when drinking. It hurts too much afterwards!

Part 3. Trip to St Petersburg

It was raining hard when we were leaving from Minsk to St Petersburg. Some streets were so flooded that it took our cab quite a while to reach the railway station.

Upon getting there we quickly boarded our "luxury" train and soon it started its steady puff-puff from the station, where a live marching orchestra that was brought specifically for our departure (!) was playing "The Farewell of the Slavic Woman".

One of the "luxuries" on our train was a meal. I could choose from dinner, breakfast or snack - but only one or another. Ordering dinner AND breakfast, even for the extra fee, was out of question. That was weird and troublesome.

But I also had impressions on the brighter side: e.g. there was a toilet paper in the toilet - actually, for the first time in my travels on Russian trains.

Anyway, the train actually wasn't bad. It was clean; there were different drinks and snacks on sale and no drunken people in our sleeping car (at first). I found it to be a pleasant and nostalgic way of getting to the city of my dreams.

"Peter", as Russians sometimes call Sankt Petersburg, gives an impression of an oversized Venice. Neva looks like the Grand Canal, only quite wider. Some other parts of the city, together with the cathedral of St Isaac, slightly resemble Florence or even Rome. You can definitely see strong Italian touch there. All in all, the city is majestic and in my opinion there is much more to see there comparing to Moscow. Its center is full of tourists speaking in all languages. Most of the streets are designed to give a visitor the best view at its numerous cathedrals and palaces. The city is built largely on water with many canals, so you can take one of various inexpensive boat excursions.

We were staying at the Renaissance hotel located next to the St Isaac square. By Russian standards, the hotel is quite upscale. The prices are high - e.g. breakfast for one is about 25 US dollars and the USA Today newspaper is \$6. Speaking of breakfast, however, I must say it is worth the money because you are getting some of Russian delicacies such as red caviar and honey on a honeycomb, all you can eat.

The rest of the city (at least the center) also offers quite a wide variety of food with prices slightly lower or equal to the American range.

I was warned by some of my friends that the city was unsafe. However, I did not get such impression myself. I saw people with expensive cameras (including my Canon 5D) with hardly any attention drawn to them. Lots of foreigners walked around all by themselves, relying only on their English when they needed to ask for directions. I

am sure there is a certain level of crime there, as in any big city, but with simple precautions and common sense the biggest threat would be overpaying for souvenirs and cab rides.

The city is full of museums, but most of them (excluding the famous Hermitage, of course) will be more interesting to people familiar with Russian history. For example, I went to the Pushkin's museum located in the house where the most celebrated Russian poet spent last months of his life. Not being too sentimental, I almost had tears coming to my eyes when I heard all the details of his last duel and death and saw different things that belonged to him. I am sure I wouldn't feel the same if I did not study his poems for so many years at the school.

Bottom line: St Petersburg has impressed me with its grandeur and elevated cultural level. It is definitely one of the architectural jewels of the world.

My home city - Minsk - is in the different league but I still like it quite a lot for its simplicity and more laid back life style, not to mention much lower price tags. Besides, drivers in Minsk always stop to let pedestrians cross the street. At St Petersburg they just drive through the walkway at full speed no matter if there are any people on it.

Part 4. Coming Back to America

When I was flying to Minsk I was afraid that 3 weeks would be way too long and I would be bored to death. But as it turned out, my trip was too short and I did not have enough time to do everything I planned - even though on most days I went to bed no earlier than 2AM.

Of course, I got quite tired because of such nocturnal life style and excessive drinking, but what the heck - I had a lot of fun visiting my old friends and family and simply hanging out in the city with a camera and watching people.

Moscow again: Sheremetyevo is a real inferno. Somehow I did not have such acute feeling of that when coming from America, but on my way back I compared clean empty all-granite-and-marble Minsk airport to the dirty overcrowded shady SVO and came to a conclusion that the latter is nonsense and a shame of the Russian nation.

Last note: after 26 hours of traveling I am back at my house in Florida. Everything feels quite unreal. I am tired and frustrated because of the delayed flight from JFK. I already know that my next trip is going to be to Ohio next week. America welcomes me back to the rat race...

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