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Minsk – is it your kind of town?



I always look for redeemable features on the occasions I travel to cities which fail to feature on most people's visit lists.

The younger you are, probably the more enthusiastic your expectations Abroad, as the naïve like to say, is just like that.

In 1986, I visited the Belarussian capital Minsk, then in the Soviet Union, as part of a UK group of students studying Russian.

My preparations were scarce - the organisers told us to take tampons and razors if required, and some Vitamin C if prone to scurvy, but the British Embassy in Moscow on our stop off was more doctrinaire.

Don't deal on the black market - you could get ten rubles to the pound from some sleazy trench coat-wearing brill creamed spiv and they were plentiful - when the official rate was one to one if you threw in a pair of jeans.

The might of the British government will find out and ensure you never get a job. Don't abuse their flag (a female student made a dress out of a hammer and sickle flag she stole from Red Square and was locked up for two nights in the Lubyanka (KGB HQ).

And for god's sake don't marry a local; t's a bureaucratic nightmare for us getting them out of here (meaning, they only want a visa and will abandon you at the airport if they ever get out, or a few weeks after bleeding your parents dry).

In Moscow, we had already seen the Soviets' hobby of erecting helpful exhortations providing helpful life guidance on top of their official buildings in two foot tall words

We arrived at Hostel no.3, a ramshackle 9-storey pile of student rooms surrounded by mud and broken glass, but opposite a tram

stop which took us to the first redeemable feature of the city, which was the Pedagogical Institute of Minsk.

I understand it retains its worldwide reputation as an centre of excellence for language and teacher training.

A typical gloomy Stalinist almost post-gothic architectural style with limited technical resources, but fantastic teachers and - hallelujah - a shop across the road selling stodgy cakes and a tiny Turkish coffee shop next door.

Apart from the rather empty local market, where you could get delicious Georgian shashlik and pomegranates at about 9 rubles apiece, these were our food providers.

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"Slava trudu" ("Glory to Work") was a common command. But the Institute beat them hands down with "Pobyed Naroda Besmyerten" ("The Victory of the Proletariat is Immortal").

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Commands came thick and fast. We were asked what we wanted to see in Minsk apart from the Post Office, which was de rigeur - considered an architectural masterpiece just like every other Stalinist building of brutalism ornamented with hammers and sickles.

We asked for a trip to a tractor factory but that was turned down - perhaps there weren't any.

We were, however, taken to a kolhoz (collective farm) quite far outside Minsk. We emerged travel sick from the suspension-free

Intourist bus.

The first thing we heard was singing - I use the word loosely - that came from a large barn on the farm. The Red Army Choir it was not.

It was raucous, discordant and, one couldn't help suspect, alcohol-fuelled, despite then leader Mikhail Gorbachev's attempt at the time to improve the USSR's productivity by making prohibition work. It didn't.

A grinning gold-toothed farmer issued us with plastic bowls and issued a command in an impenetrable patois, but it was clear he was saying, "get picking". Which we did.

The crop appeared to be wrinkly dates, but we realised they were in fact shrivelled aubergines, which we duly harvested in the back-breaking sun.

The singing never stopped. Their four week plan had been met in an afternoon by a bunch of docile foreign students, so back to the potato stills for the next lubricated fortnight. Lucky them.

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To be fair to Minsk, the city, it is geographically unfortunate. A flashpoint for every advancing and retreating army probably since Genghis Khan and his hordes, which means it has been razed to the ground and destroyed on far more occasions than what you expect to be the average of misfortune.

When I was there, there were some signs of efforts to rebuild and embellish (40 years after WWII).

I had a look on Google Images recently, and it seems they have created a colourful islet of houses on the Svislach river.

But the rest of the city looks ominously familiar: the "actor's resting house" which we

were banned from entering; the circus we boycotted because we heard they put muzzles on bears. And not to forget the KGB/FSB training centre.

My six weeks - it was meant to be three months - in Minsk ended badly. One evening we watched the Soviet news, Vremya, then, as now, state-controlled and a short item towards the end caused some consternation, from the locals as much as from us.

There had been a "small accident" at a nuclear power station in northern Ukraine, called Chernobyl.

Initial reports were dramatic and terrifying. The Finns had detected a massive unexplained rise in their radiation levels

The next couple of days were an unholy combination of blind panic and surrealism as we scrambled for an atlas and listened to the BBC on a short wave radio one of the Brits had smuggled in.

Initial reports were dramatic and terrifying. The Finns had detected a massive unexplained rise in their radiation levels, the Danes had run out of iodine to counteract the effects of nuclear poisoning (we tried that one: iodine was considered a medical panacea in the USSR so, unlike food and freedom, it was widely available).

Unfortunately we bought "the wrong kind of iodine", and most of us just threw it back up.

The BBC reported huge numbers of deaths and a mass exodus of thousands of local people.

It finally got wind that a few British students were holed up in a hostel a few hundred kilometres downstream of some of the nastier elements of the periodic table raining down on

us.

This frightened our parents and eventually, whether in the form of propaganda coup or genuine concern, the British government managed to get a message to us via the Moscow Embassy that we would be evacuated.

The evacuation involved a failed tram trip to Minsk train station. It was impossible to move for locals trying to buy tickets to Moscow - perhaps in panic - but possibly, although deeply unlikely, to get to the annual May Day parade.

"No tickets to Moscow". We couldn't afford to bribe them, but finally, the Institute came to our rescue and got us on an overnight train to Moscow, to the sneering of the more, shall we say, propaganda-aware fellow Belarussian students who pitied us for falling for Western lies and attempts to make the Soviet Union look bad ("not really a challenging task", I snapped at one of them).

After a stint in a Moscow polyclinic with a few routine tests including our first experience of being "geiger-counterred", they let us fly home.

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But cities are ultimately about their people. Here is a list of famous Belarussians: actor Kirk Douglas, artist Marc Chagall, Olympian champion gymnast, Olga Korbut, and, if you follow the plethora of theories about the Kennedy assassination, Lee Harvey Oswald was a graduate of the Minsk-based KGB training establishment, where he might or might not have learned to shoot at an awkward angle from upstairs in a school repository in Dallas in 1963.

All these luminaries are, however, currently eclipsed by the first and only President of Belarus, Alexandr Lukashenko, a leader not well known outside politically curious circles until recently.

He may or may not be offering shelter or exile to the notorious Yevgeny Prigozhin unless the mercenaries' champion is busy thrashing his operatives in his Moscow troll farm or jetting around Africa plundering resources and murdering people.

Although he looks like the manager of a third league football team losing sleep over the prospect of being sacked for bad results and over-fawning to his club owner who has a better palace in Moscow, Lukashenko is a deeply cruel dictator.

Lukashenko certainly does not care that he presides over the least visited and second worst remaining dictatorship in Europe

His tactics for his successive "democratic" elections to the Presidency include ritually locking up his opponents, officially removing their children from their care and making life appalling for the average Belarussian.

From what I have read in biographies, he was bullied as a child and made the natural progression to bully as an adult, sensitive to any question over his power and strength.

He certainly does not care that he presides over the least visited and second worst remaining dictatorship in Europe.

If Prigozhin is hunkering down under Lukashenko's hospitality, it would be fun to imagine a conversation between them.

Do they sit at opposite ends of a huge mahogany table breakfasting on caviare, blinis

and vodka, attempting to outdo each other
with blood curdling anecdotes of machismo
and score settling?

A trilateral full and frank exchange with Putin
would be even more fun - a triptych of not
such strange bedfellows. Meantime, we can't
but speculate - or fantasise - about how this
will all end up.