



Over the Nieman River agro-estate, in the Lida District, attracts tourists inventively, offering an interesting cultural programme

Urbanisation yet to arrive

Map of agro-ecoestates released, with routes covering natural beauty spots and historical sites across Belarusian provinces

By Viktor Korbut

There's no need to search blindly for Belarusian agro-estates anymore, as a comprehensive map has been published in English (with transliteration of names).

Map indicates the way

According to Valeria Klitsounova, the Chair of the Country Escape Association's Board, guests to our country should find the map invaluable in planning their route and places to stay. She explains, "The map will aid independent travel through Belarus for those arriving for the first time."

The addresses and telephone numbers of over 500 rural guesthouses are to be found on the reverse of the map, while sites boasting a certificate from the European Centre for Ecological and Agricultural Tourism (ECEAT) are indicated with a 'green swallow'. Travellers can thus see where the environment is being cared for, with high quality services offered. Meanwhile, signs are being installed directing guests to 68 agro-ecoestates across the Gomel Region.

Rural estates awaiting guests

The number of rural guesthouses continues to rise throughout the country, as Vadim Karmazin, the Head of the Sports and Tourism's Department for Tourism, notes. "By late 2011, there were 1,576 operational guesthouses, while the number of those registered exceeded 1,800. The Vitebsk Region (boasting 359) takes the lead, un-

expectedly followed by the Gomel Region (332), with agro-ecoestates appearing even in areas which may be viewed as having eco difficulties. The number of tourists preferring to travel to the countryside has also increased. In 2010, there were 125,000, rising to 144,000 last year. The majority come from Belarus, followed by residents of Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Moldova, the USA, Switzerland and Vietnam."

Hosts of rural guesthouses have initiated several popular festivals in the Republic which have already become famous abroad. The *Motol Delicacies* Culinary Fest attracts guests from Poland, Israel, the USA and Russia while *Annenski Kirmash* (named after St. Anna) in Zelva and the Festival of Flowers in Zheludok are also

popular. Now, agro-tourist villages are being developed in the Brest Region's Korobie and Kudrichi and in the Grodno Region's Dokudovo.

Directions of green routes

Four 'greenways' have been laid between agro-ecoestates — bicycle and horse riding paths leading to nature and history sites: 'The Nieman Route', 'The Blue Necklace of Rossony', 'Igumen's Horse Tracks' and 'The Land of Yellow Water Lilies and Grey Erratic Boulders'.

'The Blue Necklace of Rossony' is Belarus' first 'green' route, uniting two nature reserves — Krasny Bor and Sinscha. Their major sites include the Fomino cranberry reserve and an open air museum of partisan life in the village of Rovnoe.

'The Nieman Route' starts in the village of Dokudovo, in the Lida District, bringing travellers to the banks of the River Nieman. You can't help but be impressed by Dokudovo Church, the beaver dams, the ancient settlements and the Struve Geodetic Arc (registered on UNESCO's World Heritage List).

'Igumen's Horse Tracks' is the country's first equestrian route, covering 30km from Minsk via Smolevichi — the homeland of painter Chaïm Soutine — a peer of Marc Chagall. Meanwhile, 'The Land of Yellow Water Lilies and Grey Erratic Boulders' is a 155km route

through the Lepel District, offering wonderful opportunities for studying folk customs. Tourists can visit 1st-4th century Baltic tribe settlements on Lepel Lake island and see stone crosses in Old Lepel, as well as cult boulders from pre-Christian times.

Eco-routes between Poland and Belarus are also being developed. One connects the Avgustovskiy Canal and the Belovezhskaya Pushcha while others are being laid in the Nalibokskaya and Lipichanskaya pushchas.

Making handmade pots

The Country Escape Association aims to promote knowledge of our intangible cultural heritage, with the help of owners of rural guesthouses. Experts have organised seven expeditions to learn about unique customs existing in small settlements and villages, assessing their potential to become part of excursion programmes.

'Yorauski Karagod', in the Zhitkovichi District's village of Pogost,

dates from ancient times, when peasants would go to the fields in festive clothes to dance and sing ritualistic songs. Meanwhile, 'Rusalle', celebrated in June in the Lyuban District, uses a square shaped fire and a 'Rusalnaya Yaechnya' (mermaids' scrambled eggs) dish.

The Stolin District's Gorodnaya village is famous for its pottery, currently operating Belarus' only pottery school. Tourists can admire items and try their own hand at the craft. The Ivanovo District's village of Motol has 'The Wedding Karavai', which isn't linked to any particular day. Its pavilion with huge stove is specially equipped for tourists, able to welcome several dozen guests at a time.

Over the last five years, the number of agro-ecoestates has increased from several dozen to almost 2,000 countrywide, helping promote interest in rural customs. Urbanisation has almost destroyed the traditional rural way of life in many Western European countries, yet Belarus combines such customs from the past with modernity, giving them a second life.



A mill at the Nikolin Ostrov agro-estate