

Travelling from Porechie to Grodno

150 years ago — on December 15th, 1862 — the first train passed through Belarusian territory, covering 30km from Porechie to Grodno (as part of the St. Petersburg-Warsaw route). Since then, hundreds of thousands of carriages have passed the same route, carrying millions of passengers. The country's oldest railway is still operational so, to see what has changed since its opening, I made the journey.

By Ivan Pimenov

Porechie is situated beside picturesque Lake Molochnoe, 7km from the Belarusian-Lithuanian border. The village was first mentioned in 1660 and, since then, the past and present, old and new have become closely intermixed. Porechie was chosen for the rail route in the mid-19th century due to having a large timber processing plant. Naturally, the railway allowed timber to be exported more easily to Europe, generating revenue.

Tsar Nikolay I, who ordered that the railway be built from St. Petersburg to Warsaw in 1852, decided to include Porechie on the route — despite the need to lay rail through forests and marshes. In fact, work was quickly done and, in October 1862 (as archives state), the line was almost ready. It was the second most important in Russia, after the St. Petersburg-Moscow line.

Carriages were in short supply, so were purchased from abroad (no domestic production existed) and no railway stations were erected. The station at Porechie was constructed several dozen years after the first train became operational and retains its original appearance, having been restored 17 years

ago. It's now undergoing further renovation on its first floor to create hotel rooms (not long ago occupied by station workers). The bay windows have been replaced and the columns revamped while the round



New electric train near Grodno railway station

balusters on the roof and facades of the boiling room and sub-station have been modernised. Outside, old asphalt has been replaced by paving slabs and trees planted in the grounds; it's sure to look beautiful in spring.

Looking at my watch, I decided that it was high time to board my

train. We can only guess at who travelled the route 150 years ago; today, it's popular among local residents, as well as those going mushroom picking and fishermen. The countryside is wonderfully unspoilt, which

draws holidaymakers. Two sanatoriums are situated in Porechie, as well as a leisure complex and children's recuperative camps.

My ticket to Grodno cost just Br 2,220 for 30km — incredibly good value for the



hour long journey. During the trip, I read more about the history of the line: 150 years ago, a 250km trip from Grodno to Warsaw cost 9 Roubles and 2 Kopecks (travelling first class) — enough to buy two cows! Meanwhile, first class travel to St. Petersburg cost 30 Roubles and 19 Kopecks. I paid the equivalent of the cost of a cup of milk...

My trip to Grodno by diesel train passed through Losevo, Pereseltsy and Bogushovka, with the main road stretching parallel. Little known villages, dense forests and marshes passed by, as they did a century and a half ago. The railway station in Grodno is Belarus' oldest, constructed just six years after regular railway routes were launched. Two passenger trains and one postal train travelled daily in the late 19th century, with the number rising over time. Speeds have increased from an initial 35 hours from Warsaw to St. Petersburg to today's 23 hours by express train. Among the most popular routes were those connecting Grodno with Bialystok and Vilnius, while cargo-passenger trains connected Warsaw and Vilno.

The walls of Grodno's railway station are permeated with a unique spirit of the past, despite having been torn down in the mid-1980s. The original station was thought to be too small, so a new one was built. Passengers still lacked space, as over 1.5 million passed through annually, taking trains connecting to Paris, Warsaw, Leningrad and Vilnius. The number of passengers and destinations has since fallen but Grodno railway station is being revamped, receiving a new facade and lounges, as well as hotel rooms and a café. A lift for those lacking full mobility is also being installed. The railway station's square is receiving a face lift; it won't be complete in time for the jubilee but quality is more important than speed.

I disembark in Grodno, yearning to travel further. How wonderful it would be to take the train from St. Petersburg to Warsaw, as they did 150 years ago. Sadly, I cannot — even by fourth class — as the route is no longer complete; part of the line was dismantled in the 1990s, in Lithuania.



Restored stations in Porechie

Life brings temptation to splash out

On what do Belarusians spend their money

By Vasily Kharitonov

The question of how we spend our money always arouses great interest and is the subject of a whole science, with data monitored and analysed by state, commercial and international organisations around the world. Such knowledge is worth its weight in gold. Trends in consumer spending allow enterprises to react promptly to changes in taste, inspiring us to keep spending our money!

In Belarus, the National

Statistical Committee traditionally monitors consumer spending and recently issued results from the third quarter of 2012, having polled households country-wide. Belarusians have been spending 37-42 percent of their disposable income on food, varying by region; utility bills comprise just 2.9-3.5 percent of all expenditure.

Around 79 percent of total income is available for consumer spending. Just 1.6 percent is spent on household maintenance while 2.9 percent is put aside for taxes



Household appliances are in demand

and other payments. Slightly over 10 percent is dedicated to savings: up to Br500,000

monthly per family — to be used for a rainy day or for big purchases. Around

Br300,000, about 6 percent, is spent on miscellaneous extras, such as newspapers or DIY materials.

Belarusians do spend a high percentage of their income on foods, being ranked 33rd (out of 36) in the Rating of European Residents' Expenses for Meals in 2011 — recently compiled by RIA specialists. One of Europe's most successful countries, Luxembourg, has the best ranking, with residents spending just 8.5 percent of their income on food and non-alcoholic drinks. Sec-

ond place is occupied by the UK (9.1 percent), followed by Austria (9.9 percent). Ukraine is ranked 36th, while Kazakhstan is 35th and Moldova 34th. Their residents spend 51, 44 and 42 percent of their incomes respectively — higher than in Belarus. The average Russian resident spends 29.5 percent on food products while the Lithuanians (ranked 28th) spend 25 percent. Those in Latvia spend 20 percent, the Poles 19 percent and Estonians around 20 percent.