



Belarusian winter landscape proves attractive to those seeking relaxed holidays

Travelling Starovilensky Tract

Unique network of rural guesthouses in Volozhin District

By Viktor Krotov

Two roads once linked Minsk and Epimakhi village: you could either take the Grodno road or ancient Starovilensky Tract. I chose the second, having had it suggested to me by Anatoly Ganets, Chairman of the Volozhin District's Public Council on Agro-ecotourism. He owns Ganets rural guesthouse, located near Epimakhi.

Embraced by fir trees

Narrow Starovilensky tract is surrounded by snow-covered fir trees, as in the Russian folk fairy-tale *Morozko*. You find yourself embraced by the Belarus of the past and present. Of course, the region is rich in history. On our way, Mr. Ganets tells me, "Do you see those ruins? A tavern once stood there. According to legend, Soviet intelligence arrested White Guard Savinkov there. It would be nice to develop the site."

Many such unusual sites are to be found in the Volozhin District. Until recently, ancient pagan boulders with magnificent inscriptions stood near Epimakhi. However, one of the former chairmen of the local agricultural cooperative buried them in the earth. People say that, afterwards, his family faced a turn in fortune. Are these just superstitions... or is the land truly mystical?

Mr. Ganets drives me along an avenue of young fir trees, planted for half a kilometre himself. Within a few years, they'll create the same 'fairy-tale' effect as Starovilensky Tract.

Guesthouse clusters share ideas

Several dozen agro-eco-estates in the Volozhin District have united in a cluster, offering joint excursions to explore the past and our great future.

"A cluster encourages co-operation between rural guesthouses, as well as with local authorities and other sites of historical-cultural and tourist value," Mr. Ganets explains. "Cluster' is translated as a branch or bush."

Most rural guesthouses are situated closer to the village of Rakov



Anatoly Ganets

than the district centre of Volozhin, so the second name for the agro-ecosystem is Rakovsky Kust (Rakov's bush). The cluster's major aim is to collaborate at a local level, to allow hosts to compete at a global level.

"For example, if you stay for a week at any rural single guesthouse in the Volozhin District, you'll soon become bored," explains Mr. Ganets. "The host can then suggest a range of tourist routes and services provided by other rural guesthouses. By collaborating, a wide cultural programme can be offered."

The Chair of Country Escape's Board of Directors, Valeria Klitsounova, notes that the Belarusian model copies those abroad, "In Israel, hosts unite into clusters, creating a single information resource to advertise each, as well as their villages. You can plan a programme in advance by visiting several estates, giving a more diverse holiday. Some offer wonderful cuisine while others have horse riding or handicrafts. Everyone in the cluster benefits, as it is run as a joint stock company. It's profitable to advertise your neighbour as well as yourself. The cluster model could make a huge difference in Belarus; already, over 1,500 rural guesthouses have registered countrywide."

Touching the past

The ancient Orthodox and Catholic churches are worth seeing in Rakov, as is the Jewish cemetery. The museum, founded by painter Felix Yasnushkevich, is filled with unique items of local history — such as hand-written manuscripts and weaponry used by 19th century rebels, in addition to rarities from the Soviet age and the time of Hitler's occupation. No period of history is missed, so it's easy to be transported into the past.

Martinova Gus agro-estate, in the village of Malaya Lyutinka, is constructed near the former house where 19th century Belarusian writer Win-



Master class in folk crafts

centy Dunin-Marcinkiewicz used to stay. Driving towards Rakov, you see a chapel near the road, by an ancient Catholic cemetery, which houses his grave.

The name of the estate echoes with the family of Dunin-Marcinkiewicz and his family coat of arms — 'a swan'; dishes made from goose are tradition-

al on St. Martin's Day (celebrated on November 11th) — the patron saint of the estate.

The owner is historian Ales Bely; he has written much on the history of traditional Belarusian dishes. He has co-ordinated the *Our Food* project for many years, aiming to revive our national culinary traditions. There's no better place to taste 'szlachta zrazy' (meat balls stuffed with rice, dried apricots and plums), mushroom soup with knishes (dumplings) or Duke Tyshkevich's 'koldunys'.

Bagpipes beyond Scotland

The Ivenets Museum of Traditional Culture is a centre of crafts for the Volozhin District, showcasing works by folk masters. Tourists can make their own souvenirs in Belarusian national colours. The museum even organises such festivals as *Clay Call*, *Free Air*, *Musical Workshop* and *Candy Fest*. All involve the playing of traditional Belarusian instruments.

If you want to find out more about local music, outside of festival days, you should visit Ales Los, at his

Belarusian puppet theatre (batleika), and likes to gather folk songs, dances and instrumental music.

His work is preserving our priceless heritage of traditional folk culture for future generations. He is the country's only master still able to make bagpipes and lyras, copying 19th century models. Unsurprisingly, his rarities are proving popular abroad.

Where honey is spread

The World of Bees Eco-museum in Borok village is one of the 'sweetest' places in the Volozhin District. Guests are welcomed with pancakes served with honey and herbal tea. Even in winter, when the bees sleep, you can learn a great deal. Vasily Frolov, the owner of the museum, organises a performance telling the unique story of the life of bees and their relationship with all that surrounds us. He tells of the hierarchy within the hive, and how they eat and work; even adults' eyes sparkle with delight.

Another place where nature and people can find a common language is Malpaland amusement park (the Belarusian word 'malpa' means monkey). You can climb ropes, to compare your skills with those of the primates, and 'dive' into the life of our ancestors by visiting a Stone Age settlement, learning how people lived several thousand years ago. Meanwhile, in late January, the site hosted Zavirukha dog sledging, which aroused great interest among foreign guests.

"You should come to the Volozhin District in summer, to take a baidarka trip along the River Isloch; it twists through a narrow canyon, among coniferous forests," explains Mr. Ganets. "The sinuosity of the river and its natural obstacles (bars and rapids) are absolutely thrilling. You experience a real adrenaline buzz and take home unforgettable memories."

I didn't have time to visit every estate within my single day in the Volozhin 'cluster' but, on returning to Minsk via Starovilensky Tract, have decided that I must return to this haven.