

# Drift to foreign shores

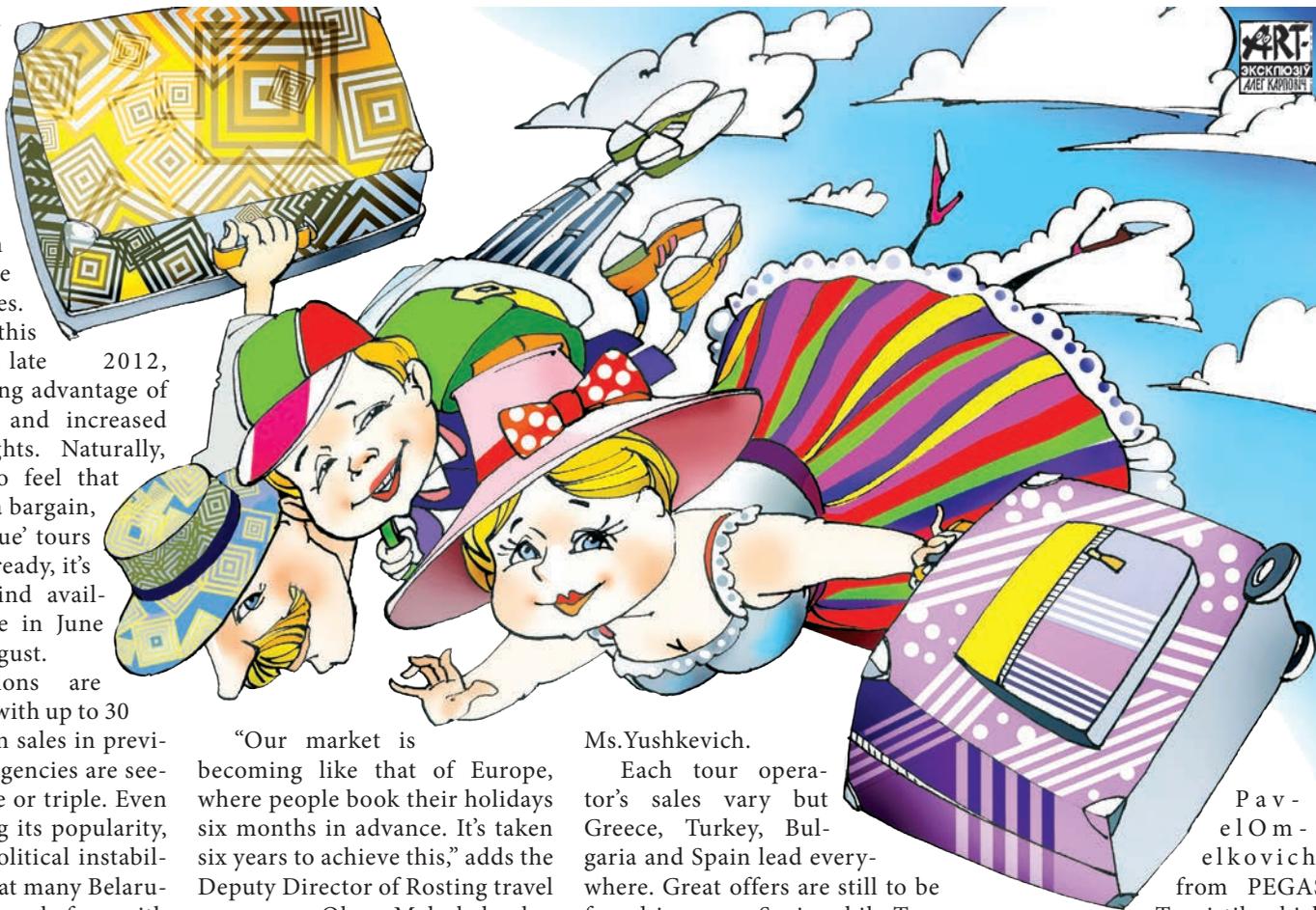
Large numbers of Belarusians already booked on summer holidays abroad

By Maria Drukovich

Tour operators note that plenty of Belarusians will be taking foreign holidays this year, in search of sunshine and sea breezes. Bookings for this summer began in late 2012, with citizens taking advantage of early-bird offers and increased numbers of flights. Naturally, everyone likes to feel that they've acquired a bargain, with the 'best value' tours soon sold out. Already, it's a challenge to find availability for Greece in June or Bulgaria in August.

All destinations are proving popular, with up to 30 percent growth on sales in previous years. Some agencies are seeing figures double or triple. Even Egypt is regaining its popularity, despite ongoing political instability and the fact that many Belarusians have been there before, with flights booked as early as November-December 2012. Last minute deals are becoming more rare.

January and February were extremely busy for travel agents, ahead of the traditional March rush. "Tourists are planning their holidays well in advance, appreciating the advantages of booking early. I think we'll see the same situation in 2013, keeping the trend of the past two years," emphasises the Head of TEZ TOUR Sales Department, Yelena Yushkevich.



"Our market is becoming like that of Europe, where people book their holidays six months in advance. It's taken six years to achieve this," adds the Deputy Director of Rosting travel company, Oleg Malashchenko. "Many hotels have no rooms available or are now fixing high prices."

Interestingly, more tourists are ready to pay for higher quality hotels, preferring 4 or 5 star accommodation. Of course, early booking brings discounts but cheap tours have less scope to reduce prices. "A 3 star hotel is normal for Bulgaria while those heading for Spain need 4 stars to enjoy good service. Even in choosing a 4 star hotel, tourists aren't choosing the cheapest options," explains

Ms. Yushkevich.

Each tour operator's sales vary but Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria and Spain lead everywhere. Great offers are still to be found in sunny Spain while Turkey has slightly increased prices, due to rising service levels. Bulgaria appears quite attractive but, of course, those travelling to Spain and Greece have the option of so many island destinations. "Belarusians also love Tunisia, as no visa is required to travel there. Many view this country as an alternative to Turkey. Morocco is also enjoying popularity but the need for a visa deters some. Egypt is popular all year round, regardless of fear of terrorist attacks, the heat or Earthquakes," stresses

Pavel Omelkovich, from PEGAS Touristik, which

liaises with agencies.

TOP TOUR admits that its clients seem to be playing safe, choosing Jordan. Meanwhile, families are going for Croatia's flat shores. Belarusians also love Montenegro. "The Italians don't tend to offer large discounts on

early booking, so sales are just starting to this destination," notes Rosting. New destinations this season include the Neapolitan Riviera, the south of France (Nice, Cannes and the Cote d'Azur), Portugal, Greek Peloponnese and Corfu, the Canary Islands and Vietnam. Tours to the islands of Mauritius and Sardinia are quite expensive (as even the Italians believe of the latter).

Interestingly, an increasing number of Belarusians prefer to travel south in autumn and winter. TOP TOUR's Anna Polyakova reveals that up to 40 percent more bookings are evident. "People are seeking out the sun in Egypt, Thailand, India and Sri Lanka. Naturally, such exotic destinations are much dependent on convenient connections for flights. Tourists tend to avoid spending the night at an airport." She adds that mountain skiing is gaining popularity and that a regular Minsk-Barcelona flight is now taking Belarusians to Andorra. "In addition, our clients are keen to tour Italy, go to Greece to buy a fur coat and to make pilgrimages to Israel. They also like celebrating New Year in Europe. Pleasingly, our flights successfully went to plan last season."

It seems that the world is our oyster and that agencies are only too delighted to satisfy any wish, if clients have the money.

## The MT's reference

In 2012, around 500,000 Belarusians took holidays abroad; 1.5 times more than in 2011. Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Greece, Egypt, Spain, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Turkey and the Czech Republic were the most popular destinations (accounting for 90 percent of all tours).

## Present day hotels to suit everyone's taste in vogue

Major hotel projects announced on eve of World Championship of 2014

By Timofey Komarov

Naturally enough, hotels are being built in preparation for Minsk's hosting of the Ice Hockey World Cup in 2014. According to Colliers International, Minsk can already sleep 4,400 people, with the suburban Robinson Club Hotel and Comfort Apart-Hotel having recently opened. Four new hostels launched last year, joining the existing two, and several international hotel chains have announced a desire to open in the Belarusian capital.

There are always some businessmen who won't come to a country unless their favourite network of hotel is present — such as Hilton. The Director and Partner of Colliers International in Belarus, Andrey Aleshkin, tells us, "At least a dozen chain hotels



Hall of Minsk's Europe Hotel

should appear. The market needs to continue developing after the World Cup, with room prices settling, as rates are currently rivalling Moscow." The reason is obvious: lack of supply. The building of more 4 and 5 star hotels,

including for the World Cup, should bring prices to a more reasonable level, although it's hard to say how hotels with fewer stars will compete.

There are 34 projects in various stages of implementation and construction

across Minsk, with about 12-15 due to be completed in time for the 2014 World Cup and most managed by international chains. A number of projects were announced last year but are still at the level of declarations of intention.

According to Colliers International, last year, hotels in Belarus and Minsk raised occupancy by about 3.5 percent (on 2011), bringing this to 68 percent in Minsk and 43 percent countrywide. It is expected that Belarusian hotels will continue integrating into international reservation systems, allowing booking online from anywhere in the world. Needless to say, major international operators have certain criteria which must be met in order to inspire their building of hotels in the capital and across regional cities.

## Sculptural monument to honour literary treasure

**Culture Ministry of Belarus announces contest to create exclusive monumental and sculptural composition dedicated to the Barkulabovskaya Chronicle, in Mogilev Region's Bykhov**

The contest ties in with the Day of Belarusian Written Language, celebrated in Bykhov on September 1st. Professional sculptors and architects are invited to create a monument to the Barkulabovskaya Chronicle: a Belarusian historical masterpiece, hailing from the Bykhov

District's village of Barkolabovo. The chronicle covers the period between 1545 and 1608 and exists in one copy only, kept in the 17th century collection at the State History Museum of Moscow. Although small in size, its attentive tracing of the country's political and religious life makes it invaluable as an historical source. The author recollected the introduction of the new calendar and wrote about the calling of sejms and councils, while including excerpts from a variety of documents, letters and notes written by his contemporaries.

## Rarities on wheels to be brought together soon

**Unique museum of retro-vehicles opening near Grodno**

Vehicles retired from service are to become exhibits at the new museum, thanks to an initiative by the Grodno Regional Executive Committee. A three-hectare site has been chosen, near the Garadzanski

Maentak agro-tourist complex, in Korobchitsy, ready to exhibit old cars, trolley buses and agricultural machinery from various decades. The administrative building of the original museum is almost complete, while the number of proposed exhibits is calculated in dozens.