

In land where woods and lake remain calm

Braslav Lakes National Park pursues its mission to protect environment as well as delighting nature-lovers

By Yelena Smirnova

On the shore of Lake Drivyaty, the biggest in Braslav, you feel your problems drifting away, becoming at one with nature. The sun shimmers on the water, which is adorned with delicate water-lilies.

Yury Kozlovsky, the chief forestry officer for the Braslav Lakes Park, tells us that his staff love their jobs but tend to take the beauty around them for granted, being surrounded by it all day. He adds, "We no longer react the same to the beauty of nature or the sight of a lone fisherman on a pier. In fact, our first thoughts are simply of how to prevent any harm coming to the environment and its plants and animals. We have to protect the woods and lakes from poachers and others who would cause damage."

His clear understanding of his mission is, of course, patriotic. The Braslav Lakes are a true pearl, attracting ten thousand tourists annually, so it's no wonder he believes in preservation.

Local relaxation with European prices

The Park covers 220,000 hectares of hunting grounds, 62 lakes and 12,000 hectares of fresh water. At one time, it can accept about 200 tourists, so it's easy to find a tranquil spot. Four recreation centres — Drivyaty, Zolovo, Leoshki and Slobodka — provide facilities and information. Over the last three years, they've employed an extra 40 people.

"It was originally decided to 'space out' several modest facilities," says Mr. Kozlovsky. Priorities have since changed, as it's too difficult to maintain infrastructure scattered so far apart. Tourists want to enjoy modern comforts, including Wi-Fi access, so it makes more sense to expand the existing centres and raise efficiency. Besides hunting and fishing, the Park offers steam-ship cruises and open-fencing viewing areas of animals, as well as catamaran sailing and bicycle hire, with various paths for cyclists to enjoy.

Summer is busy, with most visitors coming from Russia. They admit to feeling a sense of nostalgia for Soviet times in Belarus and they appreciate the warm welcome from local residents, alongside good roads, and beautiful landscapes. Those from the Baltic States, Germany, France and the Netherlands are also regular guests, with most paying about Br350,000 (\$40) for accommodation per night. Hunters pay more, usually seeking greater comfort and a high calorie diet, to compensate for spending the day outside.

Visitors tend to return time and again, relishing their relaxation in an atmosphere of tranquillity. The fresh air and crystal clear lakes can surely revitalise the more tired of souls! It's a



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place to recharge your urban batteries. The recreation centres annually receive about 6,500 people, of whom about 5,000 are foreigners. Only 1,000 used to come a few years ago. Also popular is camping, which costs just Br15,000 (\$2) per night; designated areas exist near lakes.

Hunting wild boar

It's thought that Braslav's woods are home to at least 3,200 wild boar, about 750 elk and 1,300 roe deer, besides other wild animals, so it's no surprise that hunters are attracted. Last year, 80 hunting tours were organised for foreigners: over 260 hunters from abroad bagged a total of 63 elk, 920 wild boar and 104 roe deer.

According to the chief of the hunting department, Sergey Turonok, every day, 8-10 hunting applications around via the Internet. Of course, certain documents and weapon import licences are required but hunters can rely on local experts to take them to the best 'game spots' where it's simply a case of being patient and lining up your shot. It's not a sport for everyone and is quite costly: 1,200-3,000 Euros to gain a permit to shoot a wild boar. Moreover, you only have three shots to try your fortune.

Unfortunately, poachers also exist, so close supervision is essential, with all those caught prosecuted. Ivan Tyshkevich, who heads Nature Protection, tells us that, since the be-

ginning of the year, there have been about 500 raids, with 300 breaches of the environmental law discovered. Most involve illegal fishing for eel and other fish. About half a kilometre of networks and other devices have been confiscated.

By autumn, a new observation platform will be operational, allowing visitors a wonderful view of the local wildlife. The original mini-zoo was established about 15 years ago, featuring open-air cages inhabited by roe deer, fallow deer, a wolf, a fox, a raccoon and, even, a bear.



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Variety of opportunities for relaxation at Braslav Lakes National Park