

September, 2007

In 1991 the Soviet Union disintegrated, and 14 countries separated from Mother Russia. We've previously visited Russia, but this was our first trip to the former Soviet Republics of Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. All four countries have been trampled over the centuries by a parade of conquerors including Danes, Swedes, French, Poles, Germans, and of course, Russians. We came to find that in spite of having been dealt similar hands during the breakup 16 years ago, the results today are very different. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have joined the European Union and the citizens enjoy freedoms similar to Western Europe, but Belarus maintains closer ties to Russia. Our two-week journey covered seven cities in four countries, with four languages, four currencies and four very distinct cultures.



We flew from Detroit to Frankfurt to Minsk, the capital of Belarus to start the trip. Belarus has a bureaucracy similar to Russia and gaining permission to enter the country required about \$400 in assorted fees, filling out lots of paperwork, obtaining a letter of invitation from a Belarusian travel agent and having our passports couriered to the Belarusian embassy in Washington. More forms were filled out on our arrival in Minsk, and we had to take out Belarusian medical insurance policies for \$2/person for three days coverage. The \$400 that we spent on paperwork is more than the average Belarusian earns in a month.



Naturally, all of this bureaucracy discourages economic development and tourism. We expected Belarus to look like a Third-World country. We were wrong. Minsk is easily the cleanest big city that we've ever visited. There are large parks and the buildings are generally in good repair. There are countless concrete and brass monuments to great victories from wars of the past, but the memorial to those lost in the 1980's war in Afghanistan was most visited. Recall that the Soviet Union lost that war after the Afghans wore them down. Will the USA have a similar monument in the future? In a pleasant neighborhood we found the apartment where Lee Harvey Oswald stayed for two years and embraced communism before returning to the US to assassinate JFK. We hired a guide for a two-hour walking tour. To make this \$26 cash transaction official, six different forms were required, and we had to go with her to a bank to pay and have everything stamped. The government strictly controls all wages and prices.



Alexander Lukashenka, formerly manager of a collective chicken farm under the Soviets, is the current president of Belarus and has developed a reputation as being a dictator who is quite skilled at rigging elections. Belarus does not have a free press. Writing an article considered unflattering about the government is grounds for fines and expulsion. The KGB is still alive and well. Guards chase away tourists who try to take pictures of KGB headquarters in downtown Minsk. Jaywalkers also risk an instant fine in the tightly controlled society. Belarusians may not be allowed to express themselves politically, but the women have found an alternative form of expression. Countless young ladies spend a month's salary on the perfect outfit and expertly navigate the streets in painted-on jeans or miniskirts with fishnet stockings. All are complemented with extremely pointy-toed footwear with tall spiked heels. Some sections of the old town have cobblestone streets, but the women of Minsk make a difficult balancing act look effortless as they tap-tap down the streets and alleys.

Good jobs are scarce, and the freedom most important to the Belarusian men is the freedom to drink at any time; day or night. We had a few beers at a sidewalk cafe. Even at 75 cents/pint (1500 Belarusian Rubles) the prices were not cheap enough for many men who also snuck in bottles of vodka and pretended to hide them under the table. The bartender was just putting in her time and didn't seem to care. It was a pleasant late summer afternoon, and we enjoyed watching an old "babushka" attempt to shoo away pigeons and clean the tables with a filthy rag. We're not sure why anyone even goes to bars. Any place or time is Happy Hour in Minsk. One pleasant evening there were hundreds, if not thousands, of young people in the park downing mass quantities of beer and vodka. But they were well-behaved. No one was loud or the least bit rowdy. The predictable outcome is that the average lifespan for Belarusian men is shortening.

This is a clean orderly society, and people who accept the dictatorship and its rules can live a basic but comfortable lifestyle. The US government does not accept dictatorships and has imposed economic sanctions. The resulting inflation has made Belarusian coins worthless. It took a wad of bills to buy an ice cream at McDonald's.





In the former Soviet Union the roads are decent, but the drivers are not. We witnessed several fender benders. The drivers are very aggressive; it's as though they were trained on a video game where you get three lives for \$1. One theory for the recklessness is the old Soviet philosophy that safety is not an individual's responsibility; it's the police's problem. We had considered renting a car, but were glad that we chose public transportation instead. The buses that we rode were cheap, but varied somewhat in quality. They all ran exactly on time. It was a four and a half hour bus ride to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. Actually, it was a three-hour ride and the rest of the time was spent at the border crossing. The Belarusians first had to assure that our paperwork was in order before allowing us to depart. The real fun began at the Lithuanian side of the border. A gang of four middle-aged women were smuggling cigarettes and makeup out of Belarus. They asked other passengers to carry part of their stash through Customs, stuffed several cartons into hiding places behind the bus trim panels, and the last woman in line put a bag in a stall in the ladies room for the first in line to collect after the inspection. We read stories that this has been going on for years. The women were nervous and not very slick. The border guards must know what is happening. Nevertheless, the smuggled goods were never found, everyone on the bus passed muster and we were on our way to Vilnius with fifty undeclared cartons of cigarettes.



Two of Rich's great-grandparents emigrated from Lithuania, either to avoid the draft or persecution or perhaps evade prosecution. Time has made the details fuzzy. In any case, we saw many similarities in the faces of the Lithuanians and Rich's relatives. We stopped at the archives in Kaunas to see if there were any records of his ancestors but they were unable to help without knowing the specific parish from which they came.

The Lithuanian countryside is very similar to the Midwestern United States with fields and forests. It's mostly flat with lakes and the occasional castle. We understand why the Lithuanians would feel very much at home in Ohio or Michigan. This area is over 1000 miles farther north than Detroit, but the summer is only a little shorter. The fall colors were just starting to appear and were at peak when we ended our trip. We took a side trip to hike in the forest and on some sand dunes at the Baltic coast.



We expected that the freedom of the Lithuanians would result in much better living conditions. Unfortunately, freedom seems to include freedom to litter and freedom to graffiti. The formula of the cities we visited was about the same; an old town that was in pretty good shape surrounded by crumbling, concrete Soviet-era apartment buildings, and some quality new housing on the city edge. The Lithuanians cannot compete with the girl parade that we saw in Minsk. Not only were the heels shorter, but many Lithuanian women even wore tennis shoes. Gasp! Moreover, the women of the former Soviet Union do not age well. Most elderly women cut their hair short and dye it a hideous shade of red or orange that could make even Bozo the Clown avert his eyes to avoid retinal damage.





Lithuanian tourism has doubled in the past two years. In Minsk we often asked in Russian "Vi Gavrite pa angliski?" or "Do you speak English?" 95% of the time the answer was a polite "Nyet" with a sheepish smile. Half the Lithuanians spoke a little English. Rooms are fully booked in the summer, but we had no problem in late September. Speaking of late September, we were in Lithuania for Talk Like Pirate Day. (<http://www.talklikeapirate.com/>) We were up at midnight and may have been the first people in the world to celebrate. Aarrghh!!

We moved up the Baltic coast into Latvia. We were the only foreigners on the bus. They held everyone on the bus for ten extra minutes while they examined our American passports, but the hassle was nothing like the Belarusian border. Outside of the capital of Riga, Latvia is in need of a little TLC. People are leaving for other parts of the EU, and as the population shrinks, many houses are rotting, crumbling and in need of some paint. Latvia is said to be ten years behind Lithuania in its redevelopment.



The food in each of the countries was very similar. There are lots of meat dishes, potatoes, beets, potatoes, mushrooms, potatoes, five flavors of rye bread, potatoes and berries. Many of the older people head into the woods with rubber boots and emerge several hours later, covered in spider webs and pine needles, wearing big smiles and carrying plastic buckets brimming with fresh mushrooms. Tipping is not customary, and the service in the bars and restaurants was indifferent. Each town has a favorite local beer and Belarus has 20 flavors of vodka.

Each Friday and Saturday the town squares are crowded with limousines and wedding parties. We crashed half a dozen weddings to take pictures with the bride and were often invited to join the celebrations with drinks and chocolate.



We left the Baltic coast and spent two very pleasant days in the Latvian capital of Riga. The bustling old town is clean and well-maintained. We visited the central market and several parks. There are countless churches and very ornate buildings. It's clear that Riga is the only place in Latvia to make money. Beer prices steadily increased during this trip and were about \$4 in Riga sidewalk cafes. In the town square we asked a young woman for directions. Nadia told us in excellent English that she could not help because she was not from Riga. She rides a bus 50 km each day to study business administration at the university and then works at a "night bar" (strip club) from 8:00 PM until 6:00 AM. We're not sure when she sleeps. She has never left Latvia and dreams of visiting America some day. The next day Cheryll headed back to the market shopping for new boots.



The word "Estonia" brings to mind thoughts of Fred, Wilma and Bedrock. But Estonia is definitely not in the Stone Age. Of the four countries that we visited, Estonia has done the best. The per-capita income is six times that of Belarus, but only half of that in the USA. Prices are about the same as in the USA. Apart from the obligatory and well-maintained old town, the capital of Tallinn has a nearby new town with several modern skyscrapers. We had lunch at the yacht harbor used for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. There was a regatta with two dozen serious racing yachts out sailing in a nice breeze on the sunny fall day. The reason for Estonian success seems to be good leadership. Estonia's government emphasizes higher education and information technology. They successfully held the world's first internet-based elections. Citizens can log on to file their tax returns.





There is still tension between the ethnic Estonians and the Russians who moved there during Soviet times. The Estonian community remains somewhat separate from the people of Russian origin. Citizenship is only granted to people who speak Estonian fluently and sign an oath of loyalty. There had been some minor riots in April, 2007 sparked by the Estonians moving a Russian WWII monument from the city center to an outlying cemetery. Lots of Russians are moving back to Russia from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

We watched some TV on our last night and found a Russian remake of "Married with Children". The Russian version of Al Bundy was also a miserable shoe salesman with a manipulative red-headed wife and two bratty teenage kids who bear a striking resemblance to Kelly and Bud from the American 1980's sitcom. The only major difference was that, instead of a single family house, the Bundski family lives in a Soviet-style concrete block apartment building. Is this a major rip-off or did the American "Married with Children" show rip off this Russian prototype version? There is definitely a lesson in the fact that this message plays well in both continents and economic systems. Underneath, we are more similar than we recognize.

