

**БЕЛОРУССКОЕ ЭТНОКУЛЬТУРНОЕ НАСЛЕДИЕ В ТУРАХ ДЛЯ  
ИСЛАНДСКИХ ТУРИСТОВ: ПУТИ ПРИМЕНЕНИЯ, ОПЫТ,  
ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ**  
**BELARUSIAN ETHNO-CULTURAL HERITAGE IN TOURS FOR ICELANDIC  
TOURISTS: WAYS OF USE, EXPERIENCE, PERSPECTIVES**

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Ключевые слова: туризм, Исландия, Беларусь, этнокультурное наследие

Резюме. Авторы анализируют восьмилетний опыт организации туристических поездок в Беларусь для исландских клиентов. Рассматриваются различные варианты демонстрации и интерпретации белорусского этнокультурного наследия для туристов из Скандинавии.

Keywords: tourism, ethnocultural heritage, Iceland, Belarus.

Summary. The authors analyze eight years of experience in organizing tourist trips to Belarus for Icelandic clients. Various options for the demonstration and interpretation of the Belarusian ethnocultural heritage for tourists from Scandinavia are considered.

Modern history of organized Icelandic travels to Belarus started in 2012, with the first tour of «Soguferdir» (History Travels) company. That was a beginning of the developing of various itineraries all around Belarus. Every year new programs were designing according to the interests and tastes of Scandinavian travelers. Traditional culture and rural way of life were always in focus of these tours, but the way of showing them was usually different. Since the beginning of COVID19 pandemic in 2020, tours stopped, but it is important now to analyze the mistakes and strong sides of that experience to use in future for a re-start of Icelandic-Belarusian tourism.

There are no researches on this topic in Belarusian or Icelandic historiography, beside several publications of the Icelandic guests like Helgi Laxdal. The author was in the second group, visited Belarus in 2013 and expressed his experience in several articles in Icelandic magazines [1, 2].

History Travels Ltd. or Söguferðir as it is known in Icelandic was founded in 2007 by Dr. Thorleifur Fridriksson, historian and CEO of History Travels. The company has since its inception organized number of trips, mainly focusing on Eastern Europe but also to countries that Icelanders often define as exotic [3]. Based on the experience of these travels Dr. Fridriksson published in 2016 a book in Icelandic «Hidden nations of Europe – a journey through foreign societies». In this monography he wrote about Belarus in general and Polesye region in particular as an example of an authentic traditional culture [4, pp. 19, 24, 290-292].

History Travels offers organized education about countries, cities, nations and cultures. The main purpose of this activity is to create itineraries with people, not to sell ready-made package tours. History Travels are in part a company that individuals, associations or groups can turn to when planning a trip or trips. The company then seeks to provide guides with knowledge of the proposed destination, an individual who is well qualified to share knowledge and prepare travelers so that they can enjoy the trip more than otherwise. He points out interesting places, tells the history of the place, culture of the people who live there and can advise on interesting things that that is good to get to know before setting off. When the draft of itinerary is ready, they continue in collaboration with a tourist company from the area to which the trip is intended. The idea is basically this:

- To provide education on different aspects of culture and history.
- To assist in planning a trip.
- To provide tour guides who meet strict requirements for knowledge and other skills.

The main purpose of this activity is to get acquainted with the great spectrum of culture, history and nature, which can be found almost everywhere. Such trips therefore

increase the understanding of cultural and natural diversity on the planet Earth. They reduce prejudice and increase the joy of life. The name Söguferðir (History Travels) is a descriptor of the main goal when travelling with a company. It is not sunny beaches and luxury hotels but rather education. Their customers are driven by curiosity concerning history, culture and nature.

In August 2012, Söguferðir organized for the first time a group trip to Belarus. The preparation for that trip was years in the making. They had tried to get a contact with a Belarussian company or person they could trust, which was harder than expected. Company received answers but they tended to arrive either late or they were incomplete. It was in 2012, by bit of luck and the help of Professor Dzmitry Samakhvalau, that we got in touch with Belarusian inbound tour operator «BelAgroTravel/Zapadny Trakt». The groundwork was laid for mutual trust, interest in the subject, knowledge and ability to share knowledge – a foundation which a successful tourism needs to be built up on.

Travel from Iceland to Belarus meant that travelers have to fly to Vilnius and drive from there to Minsk. Another possibility is to fly to Warsaw and from there to Minsk. Both of these routes provide a good opportunity to explore three cities that have all had a long historical connection but are in many ways very different. Before Dr. Fridriksson came to Minsk, he was well acquainted with the two other cities, Vilnius and Warsaw. Shortly before the first group left in early August 2012, he contacted an acquaintance who had studied in Moscow for some years. He told Dr. Fridriksson that he did not have detailed knowledge of Minsk as he had only had a brief layover there once. What he was able to tell though about the capital and Belarus was that it was "such a typical Soviet peripheral town". Ergo, with other words, it was not very interesting. On the evening of August 8. 2012, when a group approached the capital of Belarus that it was what Dr. Fridriksson was expecting. It was in the twilight, the sun casting its last rays on a white city, and at the same moment he sensed that the information he had got was based on ignorance and possibly some prejudice that has been connected to Minsk like a ghost from the past.

One of the main themes of most of Icelandic tours is a city tour, a view of the man-made environment in time and space. These cities, mentioned here, were all the scene of a terrible events in the first half of 20th century. What a story these streets could not tell if... But streets do not speak. Neither does the book, but we can read. The street is a part of man made environment which can be read – the story of architecture and cultural heritage. The three-before mentioned cities are excellent examples of interesting urban complexes that, despite common past, have taken different paths, not least after the horrors of World War II. The people of Warsaw and Vilnius chose a similar path when they faced the ruins of their old city centers; collecting old stones for rebuild the old part of the city as accurate as possible in the style it was in the 17th / 18th century. Those houses are imitations; yet are a story of human dignity and great ambition.

When Mr. Halldor Kiljan Laxness, Icelandic Nobel prize winner in literature 1955, traveled around Poland in 1958, he did not understand this peculiarity, – to build an entire city in the style of the 18th century bourgeoisie. He would rather have seen the Poles rebuild their place in accordance with the demands of the class that now rules the country and the level of technology in housing construction that our century stands on... The Icelandic writer would probably have seen his idea come true if he had visited Minsk 1958. The people of Minsk took a completely different path in rebuilding their city than the people of the other two capitals. Instead of collecting old stones in ruins of Minsk they

erected large, spacious house in a style sometimes referred to as the “Stalinist Baroque”. But people did not stop there and built another kind of mansion and boulevards that Dr. Fridrikssons’ acquaintance mentioned earlier considered to be an example of a Soviet “peripheral city”.

Dr. Fridriksson himself was completely of the opinion that the Polish way, was the only right one and the Icelandic Nobel laureate had been blinded by his belief in boulevards and funky houses. The evening Dr. Fridriksson drove into Minsk for the first time completely changed his attitude and since then he have become even stronger in the conviction that both ways are possible. The Polish way of collecting old stones and building new-old houses by narrow streets, and the Belarusian way of building new and large ones along boulevards, but at the same time keeping unique old buildings as a reminder that the city has a long and remarkable history.



**Pic. 1 17th century animation in Minsk. June 2013.**

Difficult to find any other city that has managed to do this as tastefully as Minsk, a method that is not limited to Stalinist baroque houses, which are now the city's magnificent landmarks. They did not stop there. No, they created a holistic cityscape that is characterized by with a kind of play with form and colors of big buildings that are widely lit at night. Icelanders who have stayed in Minsk have been impressed by how bright and clean it is and many of them have mentioned that Icelandic architects and construction contractors who often lead the way in creating a man-made environment in their capital could learn a lot from Minsk.

During the first trip of Icelanders to Belarus, reporters from a Belarusian television were curious to hear the impression from these exotic guests. The first question was exactly the same as Icelanders usually asks foreign visitors – “How do you like Iceland?” – “How do you like Belarus?”



The person who became a spokesman during that interview was an older man who answered the question saying that – “The trip was wonderful and there was a lot to see, but here in Belarus there is no landscape” [5]. That answer came probably as a shock to the reporter, but not to Icelanders who define “landscape” from their home made limited perspective that for landscape to be defined as landscape it must include mainly high mountains, lava fields, deep valleys and rock belts.

The Belarussian landscape defies meager Icelandic definition of a landscape. The landscape in Belarus is very different from what characterizes Iceland in the North Atlantic. But it is truly beautiful even though Icelanders find no mountains there. In fact, it is almost certain that no Icelandic travels to Belarus to explore mountains, but to get to know the way of life, history and culture of Belarus.

The countryside and villages in Belarus are truly something that is different from what Icelanders are acquainted to. The villages are, in fact, a unique significant cultural heritage that Belarus should preserve and even, from Dr. Fridrikssons’ point of view should be on the UNESCO World Heritage List. What makes them special is the joyful brightness of colors, color spectrum which seems to be based unlimited on joy but at the same time on conservative tradition and certain bright shades of colors, green, red, yellow and blue.

Since the first trip to Belarus «Soguferdir» have had one destination in different itineraries that was always the same. A beekeeper outside the hustle and bustle of the capital. There, visitors have the opportunity to get to know the live of honey farmer and work and tradition of beekeeping. This part of the trip, which is always associated with a traditional Belorussian dinner with great food, drinks and traditional music and folk dance, has always been one of the highlights of each trip.



**Pic. 2. Traditional games in Borok village («World of Bees» rural farm). June 2013.**

However, there have been many "highlights" during many trips to Belarus. The national park «Belavezhskaya Pushcha» and Berezinski Biosphere Reserve, not to mention Polesye region have all been unforgettable for Icelanders. A unique phenomena in the European flora and fauna.

In terms of history, culture and folklore, Belarus has a lot to offer to Icelanders and other Scandinavians. One is the history of work through millennia like the one from the former mentioned honey farmer. At the same spot guests got acquainted to Belarussian gastronomy culture as well as music and they even got some dance education. Introduced by the people in national or regional costume from the countryside. The street theaters that have appeared and surprised passengers bring great joy and leave bright memories. This tradition is unique in Europe. The same can be said about the puppet theater tradition of Belarus (Batleyka).

Although Dr. Fridriksson has been to Belarus many times in recent years, each trip was different and there was always something new that caught his eye. Every new place Icelandic groups visited called for a return. It is easily list a large number of places where they had got to know cultural diversity such as the bagpipes (duda) in the village of Rakow (Todar Kashkurevich house) and the national costumes, food traditions and herbal remedies in the village of Strelno, "Karavai" rite in Motol, summer solstice festival (Kupalye) near Kobryn [6], participation in different workshops of local artisans.. Not to mention the unforgettable village of Kudrichi near the Pripiats National Park where unique culture has survived in peace from the outside world, protected by rivers and swamps.

During the first tours in 2012 and 2013 inbound tour operator «BelAgroTravel/Zapadny Trakt» back to 2013 tried to rely on ethnographical museums as many as possible to reveal a folk heritage of Belarus. In all further tours, based on the feedback from guests (mostly senior people), more authentic, alive villages were included to itineraries, instead of museum institutions. Contact with real people in common rural communities was obviously more valuable for Icelandic travelers.

Whoever participates in a journeys such as those we have mentioned which aim to reduce prejudice and increase joy of life come back rich with memories and the knowledge that our existence on this planet is, in spite of everything, a wonderful opportunity to cultivate our quality that is sometimes hidden but links us all, curiosity which eventually spawns tolerance.

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