

## ОТКРЫВАЯ ДВЕРИ ВЕТКОВСКОГО РАЙОНА ГОМЕЛЬСКОЙ ОБЛАСТИ OPENING THE DOOR ON VETKA DISTRICT, GOMEL OBLAST

Робертс Найджел,  
Бромстроув, Великобритания.

Ключевые слова: туризм, Великобритания, Беларусь, Ветка, этнокультурное наследие, Ковид19.

Резюме. Рассматриваются ключевые факторы туристической привлекательности для иностранных туристов Ветковского района, Гомельской области. Дан обзор текущего образа Республики Беларусь в странах Западной Европы, а также влияние пандемии COVID19 на туристическую индустрию.

Keywords: tourism, ethnocultural heritage, Great Britain, Belarus, Vetka, COVID19.

Summary. Consideration is given to the key factors of tourist attraction of Vetka region, Gomel oblast for foreign tourists. An overview of the current image of the Republic of Belarus in Western Europe is given, as well as the impact of the COVID19 pandemic on the tourism industry.

### Introduction

The main topics and problems to be explored by the conference are these:

- The history and current problems of the development of ethnology in Belarus
- The preservation and updating of ethnocultural heritage in the Republic of Belarus by museum institutions and tourism organisations
- Peculiarities of teaching ethnology, museums, art history and tourism disciplines at the present stage

### Scope

Searching for a definition of the term *ethnocultural* produces broad consensus on its meaning in concise terms; for example 'relating to a person's ethnicity (= the particular group of people they come from) and culture' (*Cambridge English Dictionary*), or 'relating to or denoting a particular ethnic group' (*Google's English Dictionary* provided by *Oxford Languages*). This seems simple enough. However, searching and seeking to discover the characteristics of *the ethnocultural heritage of Belarus* in this or any other century is a singularly more complex task.

The profile of the ethnic and cultural identity of Belarus and its people is a study all of its own, and many scholarly treatises have been written on the subject. Many more have yet to be written. The debate is a long and complex one, and I venture to suggest that it falls largely outside the remit of this conference. Against that background, I shall confine my report to consideration of Belarusian culture and heritage in its broadest sense, by specific reference to a case study of the district of Vetka, Gomel oblast, a district that has made a huge contribution to my own personal development.

This report will consider specific and focused examples of culture, folk traditions and history to be accessed and experienced within the district, the tourism infrastructure there,

the likely target market within the United Kingdom, and finally the challenges of access, both generally and specifically in the post-pandemic world that is to come.

I have chosen to focus my attentions on this small district, first because the larger, more well-known sites across the country (*Mir, Njasvizh, Dudutki, Slavyansky Bazaar* are but four such examples) already receive a great deal of publicity and feature extensively in existing commercial tours; but secondly (and with equal importance) to shine a light on the wealth of the cultural experience to be had in a small, unknown district, far from Minsk, about which the travel market in the UK knows virtually nothing, other than as featured in the pages of my work. The time has come for this to change.

### **My Experience & Expertise**

I first visited Belarus in 2001 and since then I have travelled extensively throughout the country. For 15 years I worked on sustainable development projects with rural communities blighted by the Chernobyl catastrophe in Vetka district, Gomel oblast. A lawyer in a former life, the first edition of my *Travel Guide to Belarus* was published by Bradt Travel Guides in May 2008. There have been three subsequent editions, the last of them published in October 2018 [1]. A contract was signed with Bradt in March 2020 for the research and writing of a fifth edition, but everything is now on hold as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. I have written about my experiences and adventures around Belarus for a broad range of online and print periodicals, particularly on the subject of the close relationship I have developed with communities and families in the district of Vetka, and my work has been featured extensively on Belarusian broadcast media [2]. I have close contacts with the tourism industry in Belarus, with which I have worked extensively for many years on the promotion of incoming tourism to the country. In that time, I have also developed close relationships within a significant number of Government ministries, embassies, departments and agencies at national and local level. I am regarded as a Belarus specialist.

### **Vetka**

Situated on the banks of the river Sozh 22 kilometres north-east of the country's second city Gomel, Vetka was founded in 1685 by *Old Believers* who had fled persecution in Russia. A mix of the provincial Mother Russia of Tolstoy and Turgenev and the revolutionary USSR of the 1950s, Lenin continues to gaze with steely resolve from his *faux* granite plinth in Red Square. And ever since my very first visit in 2001, I have always stayed with the same family on Karl Marx Street, who welcome me back each time as a returning son of the soil. In spiritual terms, the town and district hold a very special in my heart. For a variety of reasons, Vetka and I simply fit.

### **Reasons to Put Vetka on the Tourist Map**

- the **Folk Arts Museum** located in a former merchant's house, with its stunning collection of ancient artefacts, books, manuscripts, traditional costumes, woven *rushniki*, and icons, many of them crafted by *Old Believers* in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This museum has a national reputation as an artistic educational centre, and research is undertaken here into the study of traditional Belarusian culture. I have meandered the rooms of exhibits many, many times. On every occasion I have enjoyed the treasures of this wonderful museum on my own, with no other visitors present. Staff are always eager to offer fully guided tours free of charge.
- The **school** in the nearby village of **Nyeglubka**, where students who are the descendants of traditional weavers are taught the skills and crafts of their forbears

on intricate wooden looms unchanged in design for centuries, and where the headteacher is pleased to welcome visitors to showcase the skills of the children.

- **Jewish Vetka**, with a selection of sites that include a **memorial** to the Jewish dead of the district in the Great Patriotic War, **the old cemetery**, and the **display** of materials and documents relating to the Jewish Community in **School Number One**, which also houses a splendid **museum** of items and information relating to local history, including hand-drawn Red Army maps from local engagements in the Great Patriotic War, Soviet Union memorabilia, and rare religious treasures. Again, as at the weaving school in Nyeglubka, the head teacher and staff are delighted to welcome visitors.
- **The city of Gomel**, with its museums, palaces, parks, hotels, restaurants and infrastructure as befit its status as the second city of the republic.
- Slightly further afield but within easy reach, **Pripyatsky National Park**, deep within the mystical region of **Polyesye**, the unique historical land of ‘fogs and bogs’.

### **Profile & Demographic of the Likely UK Incoming Market**

For many in the West and in the UK, Belarus remains an unknown, mysterious destination. I have been writing about the country for 13 years now, and I regard this lack of understanding as a failing on my part, and a matter of the greatest frustration. Very little is known about the country other than the stories appearing in mainstream media, which are almost exclusively negative in tone. The key characteristic of this significant demographic of the likely market, therefore, will be a desire to experience something new, ‘off the beaten track’, authentic and without the ‘makeover’ often associated with pre-planned groups that can sometimes be viewed by independent travellers as ‘sanitising’ real life for the purpose of presenting an image of a destination that the destination itself and the tourism industry there would like to display. Families with children are unlikely to be interested. For the most part, they will look elsewhere (for example to the beaches and resorts of the Mediterranean) for rest, recuperation and quality time as a family unit. Thus the likely age bracket with curiosity and an open mind, on a quest for knowledge and new experiences, will be 25-50 (singles, couples or small groups), whose key preference will be to travel independently, without the constraints of a set itinerary, and without the need to be chaperoned, or guided around.

Against that background, there will be challenges, and formidable ones.

### **The Challenges**

- I know many individuals and organisations within the tourism industry in Belarus, all of them highly professional, and all of them bright, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and committed to ceaseless, imaginative hard work on behalf of their country. Over a number of years, I have witnessed the emergence of a cadre of young professionals with enviable pride in their country, and unconditional enthusiasm for showcasing its wonders to incoming visitors. Yet whilst the tourism infrastructure within Belarus for travellers from abroad has taken great strides forward in the last few years, institutionally the country still has some way to go in facilitating the visitor experience for independent travellers

- Whilst the availability of information in English has become much more wide-ranging in that time, it remains difficult for independent travellers to gain a truly authentic experience without the benefit of some knowledge of the Russian and/or Belarusian languages, particularly on public transport, and when travelling in the regions and districts further from Minsk, such as Vetka.
- In both of the above instances, the challenge for the tourism industry is to facilitate opportunities for independent travel, without removing the sense of adventure that is so important to independently minded visitors.
- The coronavirus pandemic has decimated the travel and tourism industries across the world. In keeping with every other destination, Belarus will need to re-build these infrastructures (and demonstrate that it has done so) before incoming visitors can feel confident about returning.
- There can be no place for politics in the promotion of culture, ethnocultural affairs, history, the arts, the great outdoors, ecology and the showcasing of communities and the lives of peoples in foreign lands. But equally, political realities cannot be ignored. At the present time, tensions between the governments of Belarus and Western democracies are acute. I make no comment whatsoever on the reasons for these tensions. It is not my place to do so, and I have no interest in politics. But it is an indisputable fact that media coverage in the West of all and everything concerning Belarus is less than positive. Even assuming the current travel restrictions arising first from the pandemic and secondly from political tensions are removed, there is a huge, overwhelming amount of public relations work to be undertaken to address the negativity of media stories. Put bluntly, the reality of travel restrictions and the image of the country in the minds of potential incoming visitors combine to make Belarus a country to which few from abroad will currently have any inclination to travel, to discover for themselves all the wonderful things to be experienced here. There is a broad consensus that travel to Belarus is unsafe. For this travel writer and Belarus specialist with over twenty years' experience of travelling all around the country, with a firm and longstanding commitment and passion for showcasing the riches the country has to offer, and with many years' experience of working closely with the Belarus tourism industry to promote incoming tourism from abroad, this is a thoroughly depressing state of affairs.

### **Conclusion**

The challenges are many and there is much to be done. No matter how passionate and committed personnel in the travel and tourism industry may be, they cannot solve problems that arise as a result of political tensions between nation states. Only politicians and diplomats can do this. But with firm resolve and resilience, both inside and outside Belarus, the tourism industry and those with a professional interest in promoting the country as a destination of positive choice *can* give a lead that will demonstrate a commitment and intention to see that these challenges are overcome. The ultimate prize is one of harmony and mutual respect through the media of curiosity and an unquenchable

thirst for knowledge and understanding between the peoples of different cultures and national identities. In the name of humanity, it is one to which all must aspire.

#### References

1. Roberts, N. Belarus / N. Roberts. – Bradt Travel Guides, 2018. – 252 p.
2. Roberts, N. Articles about Belarus [Электронны рэсурс] / N. Roberts // hidden europe – Рэжым доступу: <https://www.hiddeneurope.eu>. – Дата доступу: 19.05.2021.