

# Smiling face of a city that has seen so much sorrow

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feel so strongly about any threat perceived or otherwise that we may or may not pose to their existence.

To emphasise the sad past, just down from the hotel is a monument to those lost in the ill-judged Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It is called the Island of Tears and it is a very sombre place. Like much of Minsk though, it is clean and tidy, with some pretty impressive statues.

Later I went to Victory Square to see the main memorial to those who died in the Great Patriotic War. It is an

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impressive monument and dominates the square, which is actually more of an ellipse these days.

A day or so before my visit, England fans had laid a wreath which bore the legend Never Forget, in English and Russian, at the memorial.

Interestingly, this wreath-laying does not seem to have been reported in the English press, but you will find mention of it on an official web site in Belarus. I spoke to Alan Green on BBC Radio Five about this and he hadn't heard of the wreath-laying, despite having been in Minsk to commentate on the match.

**Cathedrals, churches and religion**

I am an atheist, but that doesn't mean that I have no interest in religion and the buildings in which it is practised. Minsk has several large churches and cathedrals; some of which are Eastern Orthodox and some of which are Roman Catholic.

The Cathedral of the Holy Spirit is stunning and one of the last surviving monuments in Old Minsk, whilst the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Saint Simon and Saint Helena is not so impressive, but it sits iconically to the north of Independence Square. They are two of several impressive churches and cathedrals in the city centre.

On the morning of the match I walked out from the city, explored a few sites and then caught the Metro back. Buying a ticket is simple in that you just hand over 600 roubles, which is about 15 pence, and they give you a plastic coin, which you enter into the ticket barrier.

The exquisite little Orthodox Church of Saint Alyeksandr Nyevisky, surrounded by a well-kept cemetery, was one of the places I visited on my walk through the city.

**A city of statues**

Minsk is a city of statues and I took many pictures of them; you might find a ballerina here, more dancers there or in one case there was a carriage and two horses outside what could have been an art gallery. There were no signs to tell me.

But there is one difference between those in Minsk and those that you will see in the UK or Western Europe. None of the works are titled and the artists are not credited.

But some of the statues are much more serious and draw you back to the awful past of Belarus.



TRIBUTE: The wreath England fans laid at the memorial to the war dead in Minsk, a moving event that went unrecorded by the media



WELL-DRILLED: The Belarus Militia on duty in the stadium before the match



MOVING: An exhibit in Museum to the Great Patriotic War recording the bravery of Jelena Valendovitch, who helped save a Jewish mother and child from certain death by hiding them from the Nazis

My father's ancestors were probably Jews called Müller, who came over from Germany or Eastern Europe in about the 1820s to work in the fur trade in London. If they weren't Jewish, they were certainly German, but my father always maintained that they were Jewish, although he was very much an agnostic. He was also proud that he'd fought Oswald Mosley and his black-shirted fascists at the Battle of

Cable Street in 1936. Interestingly, he was a left-wing Tory all his life, so although the battle is claimed by communists and socialists as their own, it was very much one fought by all of those who detested Mosley and his aims.

But what happened in the East End of London was fame compared to what happened in Minsk.

A total of over 700,000 Jews were

AN ENGLISH ICON: David Beckham, who made an appearance as a substitute in England's victory over Belarus in the crucial World Cup qualifying match



SMILES AND STILETTOS: Young women in a Minsk park



SOMBRE: The Zaslavskaya Jewish Memorial was built on the spot where 5,000 Jews were killed in 1942

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killed in Belarus during the war years. Many in Minsk were murdered by the 12th Lithuanian Police Auxiliary Battalion, who are thought to have killed more than 42,000 Jews, partisans and Communist Party members.

The Zaslavskaya Jewish Memorial stands on the spot where 5,000 Jews were killed in March 1942.

Like the Island of Tears, it is immaculately kept.

**Eating gluten-free in Belarus**

I did not want to be adventurous with my eating in Belarus.

As a coeliac, there is nothing worse than having to travel on a plane or drive down the motorway, with your guts telling you in no uncertain way that they are unhappy with the gluten.

Your best course of action when this happens is to sit near a toilet. Or sometimes permanently on it!

I had prepared by bringing a good box of supplies with me of Trufree crackers, fruit and sesame bars. If the worst had come to the worst then I could have existed on them, plus a few bananas, other fruit and a salad or two.

The Belarus Hotel has a Panorama restaurant on the twenty-second floor with expansive views of the city and I decided that I'd try it on the first night in Minsk.

I thought I'd be careful and only have a main course with a glass of wine. At least the menu had an English translation and there seemed to be a lot of choice.

I'd also brought one of CeliacTravel's excellent menu cards in Russian, so I gave it to the waiter and asked if a pork dish was OK for me. He took the card solemnly and checked with the kitchen.

I was getting a bit apprehensive, but when the meal arrived, I had no worries. The pork had obviously been cooked without any sauce and it came with some excellent onions, peppers and tomatoes. They did bring a cup of tomato sauce to go with it, but I decided that as I was ahead I'd stay there.

I had no reaction to the meal at all. The card had done its trick.

The two breakfasts that I ate in the hotel were fine too. But then with a buffet, you can usually be fairly careful about what you eat. I stuck to fruit, cold meats and vegetables.

So would I be more adventurous if I went to Belarus again? Probably, especially if I went with someone, who understood their cooking better than I do!

As a postscript here, much of the cooking in Belarus is based on potatoes. They even make pancakes that way. So if you're careful, it isn't one of the most difficult places to eat gluten-free.

But you'll have to take your own biscuits or bread!

**Museum to the Great Patriotic War**

This is a sombre place tucked away in the Central Square.

If you go to this museum prepare to be shocked. But then if your country loses so much of its population, then you have the right to tell the truth exactly as it is, without any mellowing of time.

A lot of England fans visited the museum and I think that fans often get stereotyped as drunken morons.

Some might be and I did see some very hung-over fans in the morning, but as I wandered the city, I kept coming across fans enjoying everything that Minsk had to offer.

As an aside, I'd tried several times to see Leonardo's last supper in Milan, but I'd always been defeated by the queues. I finally got to see the painting, when Ipswich played Inter Milan in the San Siro, as that trip was very much outside the tourist season. Never had the painting been visited by so much blue as that Thursday!

I was very much moved in Minsk by one of the human stories in the museum. Jelena Valendovitch, was a resident of Minsk, who helped save a Jewish mother and child from certain death, by hiding them from the Nazis.

This is just one of many stories that you can read about the atrocities of the Nazis and the heroism of those that fought them. I think living in the UK, we have our views of the horrors of war, but they are small compared to what went on in mainland Europe.

On a lighter note, I found a small section of the museum devoted to printing of newsletters and propaganda by the partisans, who fought the Nazis. As I was virtually brought up in a printing works by my father, it was fascinating to see how letterpress printing differs when dealing with Cyrillic rather than Roman characters. But they still have a character layout in the case that is based on letter usage, rather than alphabetical order.

The Great Patriotic War Museum in Minsk opened the eyes of many of the England fans to just how unbelievably terrible the last war all was.

Gardens and girls in Belarus

I may have given the impression that because of the past history of the country, Belarus is a grim and very sad country. It is not!

As I walked out of the city on the morning of the match, I walked through Yanka Kupala Park, which lies close to Victory Square and the River Svislach. This group of girls, probably in their late teens or early twenties, were playing with the leaves, throwing them in the air and taking photographs of each other.

They are typical of many of the girls and young women you see in the city; well-dressed, well-groomed and nearly always in stiletto-heeled boots. That is not to say that the men aren't well-dressed either! I think it is true to say that I hardly saw a pair of unpolished shoes!

Just as the people tended to be immaculate, so were the gardens.

The picture below shows the gardens by the River and in front of the Belarus Hotel. Remember, that at this time of year, it's starting to get cold and it is not a good time for gardening. All of the



fountains had already been emptied for the severe winter.

But one thing that has to be said about the young women of Minsk. There are so many.

But then for every 100 women in Belarus, there are only 88 men. So perhaps, they have to be smart...

**Belarus 1 – England 3**

When I went with Ipswich to play in the Olympic Stadium in Moscow in 2001, the security was heavy and humourless. I also heard stories of fellow England supporters, who said that when England had played in Moscow a couple of years ago, they had not been any better.

But the actions of the Belarus Militia were probably nearer to those of the Suffolk Constabulary than anybody else.

They were professional, well-drilled and dressed for the coldish weather rather than trouble. There were smiles and laughs too. The only English word I heard from the Militia was "please"!

Was there any trouble?

The details from Sport Options just said that we were to make our way to the stadium for 7pm.

We all walked down more or less in small groups and I certainly didn't hear anything untoward at all. It was the same on the way back.

Afterwards, we didn't hear of any trouble, whilst we were there and it would appear that there were no reports in the papers, on the radio or on television.

It was a good result for everyone, in many more ways than could have been expected.

**A Russian Supporting England**

Sitting next to me in the stadium was a Russian. And he was a fully paid-up England fan too, complete with a large St George's cross.

We chatted, exchanged cards and he took the photo of me on page 5.

I mentioned this story to others and apparently there are a couple of Dutch fans who also support England.

But then I also remember when Ipswich played in the Olympic Stadium in Moscow in 2001. The Town fans were augmented by large numbers of ex-pats living and working in Moscow. There were Dutch, Germans, French and Italians to name but four nationalities.

On the other hand, look up St George and you will find that he's the patron saint of many places including Greece, Catalonia, Genoa, Lithuania, Palestine and Istanbul for a start. Moscow is also on the St George list.

But then again he is also the patron saint of lepers, horses, herpes, riders, armourers and syphilis.

Hmm!

**Looking Back**

So was the trip worthwhile? Was it fun? Would I go on an England trip again?

I know the answer to all these is yes. Perhaps, I'll go to the Ukraine or Kazakhstan. And I won't dress like Boris!

It might even be more fun to do the Ukraine overland in my 1990 Lotus Elan. After all Kiev has strong links with Haverhill and lots of people I know have been and enjoyed the trip.

To drive all the way would really be an adventure.