Alluring country of Bella Dvina

Bordering regions of Belarus and Latvia unite as single tourist area

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View on Braslav Lakes

By Viktar Korbut

What unites Mark Rothko, Yazep Drozdovich, Polotsk's St. Yevfrosiniya Monastery, Aglona Basilica, Disna's Batory Island and the crusader castle in Rēzekne? The sights of the bordering regions of Latvia and Belarus have merged within a common tourist space called Bella Dvina. The region is united by the great river Daugava, in Latvia, which becomes the Zapadnaya Dvina in Belarus.

Five routes for seven years

In late 2008, the Latvians and Belarusians discussed how best to develop their border regions, transforming them from suburbs to centres of tourism. Eighteen months later, routes for travellers have been developed, with guides on hotels, museums, cafés and churches published. Tourist won't be lost even in the forest or on the river; guesthouses and parking are always to be found nearby. Moreover, sights are scattered all over the region — like beads. Previously, little was known about village churches and reserves with rare plants and animals. It seemed our life was limited alone to large cities.

The situation has now changed, with places like Miory, Verkhnedvinsk, Osveya and Rossony known to Latvians, while Belarusians are aware of Dagda, Krāslava and Ludza. Additionally, twin-cities with similar names are situated on both banks of the River Dvina — Druya and Piedruja.

These days, our border regions are united under the common area of Podvinie. Five routes have appeared, connecting Vitebsk and Daugavpils: three envisage travelling by car (the historic 'Along Sacred Places' and 'Along Ancestors' Traces' and environmental 'Natura'); one is a river trip; and one is designed for cycling ('Round-the-World Miory').

Everything is just beginning, as the project runs until 2017, as part of the EU *Baltic Sea Region — Good Neighbourhood* Programme. This involves the Polotsk City Executive Committee, the Beshenkovichi, Verkhnedvinsk, Vitebsk, Gorodok, Miory, Rossony and Sharkovshchina districts of Belarus, and six Latvian districts. The heads of the Latvian Latgale region and Belarus' Vitebsk region have expressed their readiness to create a joint Bella Dvina trans-border region. "This is a common chance to attract tourists from Western Europe and Russia," stresses the chief specialist at the Polotsk City Executive Committee's Sports and Tourism Department, project co-ordinator Igor Zagrekov. The project has already been praised by visitors to international tourist exhibitions held early this year in Riga (*Balttour 2010*) and Minsk (*Rest 2010*).

How can the towns of Belarusian-Latvian Podvinie be characterised? Let's take an imaginary excursion through their most interesting sights.

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Old Braslav (in the Vitebsk region) turns into the centre of attraction for tourists

Polotsk: ancient capital

The city speaks for itself, being over a thousand years old and known for its Orthodox churches and monasteries (which date back to the years of Russia's earliest Christianity, in the 11th and 12th centuries). City authorities have published a convenient city map, indicating its architectural monuments, winding streets, museums, cafés, shops and currency exchanges.

Disna: little Venice

This smallest Belarusian city was founded by the Varangians. Disna housed the fortress of King Stefan Batory, from where he campaigned against the neighbouring lands of Moscow's Ivan the Terrible. The city is situated on a hill and is often flooded in spring — resembling Venice. It has preserved its appearance since the 19th century, with its bridge over the River Disna now a century old. Famous artist Yazep Drozdovich attended school there (in Telman Street); his works have aroused much interest from Louvre Director Henri Loyrette, who visited Belarus last year.

Rositsa: a living church

Legend says that the bricks used to build the local Roman Catholic church arrived initially by rail — at Bigosovo station; people then took them to Rositsa by hand, passing them along as a live chain. In 1943, the Nazis killed 1,600 civilians hiding in the church, in addition to local priests Antony Leshchevich and Yuri Kashira. In 1999, Pope John Paul II canonised them.

Braslav: meeting of two tribes

Zamkovaya Hill remembers a time when Belarus and Latvia had no border. A thousand years ago, the tribes of Latgal (the Latvians' ancestors) and Krivichi (the ancestors of Belarusians) lived shoulder to shoulder in the citadel of ancient Braslav. The name of the town also has different explanations: according to one version, it is rooted in Latgal's 'brasl' (ford), while the other version tells us that it was named after Polotsk's Duke Bryachislav. The icon of the Mother of God, at the local Roman Catholic church, is the first in the north of the country to be decorated with the Pope's crown, last August.

Miory: under the star of Bethlehem

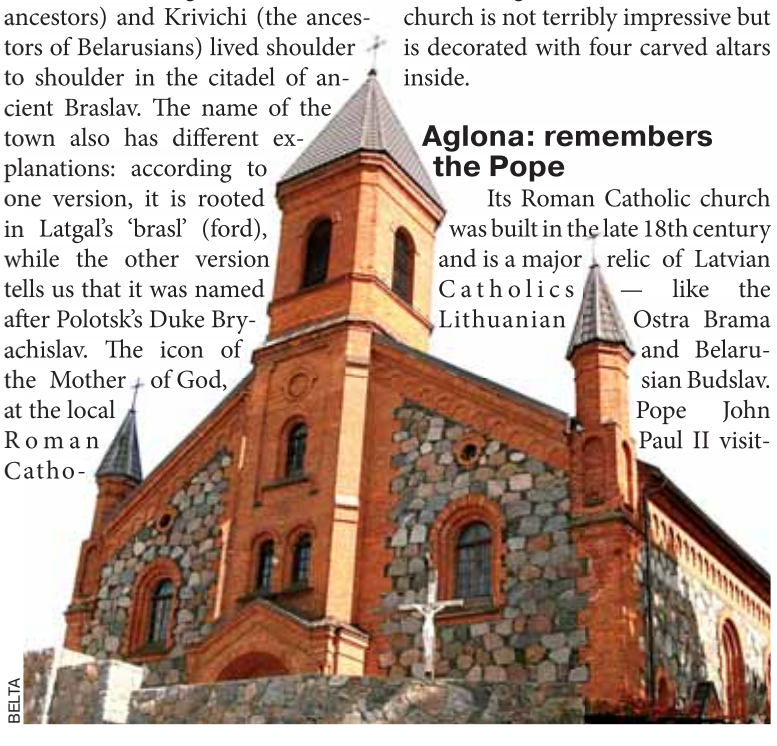
Each street in this town is an embankment, as Miory is situated on Miorskoe Lake — like St. Petersburg, stretching along canals. Each January, the town hosts the *Bethlehem Star* Christmas Song Contest.

Indrica: playing the organ

Its wooden Roman Catholic church has stood here since the mid-17th century and boasts an organ of the same age. From the outside, the church is not terribly impressive but is decorated with four carved altars inside.

Aglona: remembers the Pope

Its Roman Catholic church was built in the late 18th century and is a major relic of Latvian Catholics — like the Lithuanian Ostra Brama and Belarusian Budslav. Pope John Paul II visited the place in 1993 and gave 'Basilica Minoris' status to the church. The solemn ceremony gathered 380,000 pilgrims. To date, thousands of people have come to bow to the icon of the Holy Virgin, painted over 300 years ago.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Rēzekne: reflection of the past in shop windows

A wonderful Roman Catholic church is situated here — the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral, famous for its stained-glass windows depicting the baptists of Livonia (Latvia's old name): St. Maynard and St. Albert. Ruins of a crusader castle remain on Zamkovaya (Castle) Hill. The city is known for its church of Old Believers (Russian Orthodox). This Latvian region much resembles the bordering Belarusian lands, where the traditions of Catholics, Orthodox and Old Believers mix.

Daugavpils: view from Church Hill

In Latvia, Daugavpils' Baznīckalns (a hill dotted with four churches) makes it resemble Jerusalem. The churches of four confessions are situated on Church Hill — those of Orthodox, Lutheran, Catholic and Old Believers. The city is also known as the homeland of artist Mark Rothko, tango king Oscar Strok and actor Solomon Mihoels. The 19th century fortress remains on the site of an even older crusader castle.

Druya and Piedruja: at the crossroads

The city of Druya is situated on the border with Latvia, while its twin is across the River Dvina — Latvian Piedruja (or Piedrujas). In 2002, a stone was found in the water, originally placed on the border with Latvia in the 12th century by a Polish duke. It bears a cross and is inscribed with old Slavonic words. During the war, the Nazis killed almost every local resident — mostly Jewish people; beautiful gravestones in the Judaic cemetery stand in their honour. In 1944, an aviation bomb destroyed the symbol of the city — St. Trinity Roman Catholic Church. However, recently, this Baroque style masterpiece has been restored.

Best panorama of Bella Dvina region

The best view from the Latvian side is from Priedaine where the tallest wooden tower in the country is situated. A wonderful view over Daugava opens from its 32m height. In turn, the Braslav Lakes will amaze you, especially if you climb Mayak Mountain. In the early 20th century, a geodesic tower was erected here — to act as an orienting spot for tourists and as a symbol of the area.