

Clash of swords and armour

Minsk's State Palace for Children and Young People recently hosted the Challenge Cup International Tournament for Historical Medieval Fights. With swords clashing, 21st century knights struggled for victory in a contest organised by Living History (a public youth association).

By **Sergey Pimenov**

The tournament was taking place in Belarus for the third time, gathering around a hundred participants from Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, Israel and elsewhere. Medieval combat featured a range of armour, shields and weaponry, while knights were also allowed to use hands and feet for punching and kicking. There were no 'theatrical' fights, with the strongest winning the day. Each bout lasted 2-3 minutes, with points scored for strikes to specific zones.

Maxim, from Minsk, chatted to us while helping a friend put on his armour. "It weighs up to 50kg on average," he explained, fastening the special belts. Clearly, it would be difficult to don single-handedly. Vizards are worn to protect the face, which is also a prohibited zone for striking, although the head is a viable target, being protected by a strong helmet. "It's not painful, believe me," smiles Leon, from the Savage Hunt club, who works as an electrician at Minsk's Sports Palace. "I've been taking part in historical reconstructions for three years."

Team fights (of five knights facing another five) simply require members to remain on foot. "There are no scripts or theatrical staging: just true wins and losses," cries the host, as the knights assemble. Some attempt to knock their rivals down while

others begin with strong kicks. It looks ruthless, but the warriors have no real desire to hurt their opponent. "Technical skills are vital," explains German (known as Artem in ordinary life), from Minsk's Lyutsern club. "I've been fond of chivalry since childhood and now train several times a week at the club."

The most spectacular

show features 21 knights on each side, battling within the tilting yard. Anyone not involved cheers from the sidelines, encourage friends with cries of 'Bugurt!' (translated as 'to beat' from Old German). The clank of metal and crack of wood is quite deafening. Meanwhile, guards use shields behind the fence to contain anyone pushed

through by their opponent. Sudden falls result in the audience stepping back in fear and a brief break is announced.

"Our fights aren't really violent — unlike football!" jokes Igor, from Odessa. "I take part in 15-20 tournaments annually, having been to Lida, Molodechno and Grodno."

Fans cry out the names of their favourites and adrenaline and emotions reign. Some knights fall in exhaustion, overcome by the heat. It's not easy wielding your weapon while wearing armour.

"We've come to Minsk from Kaliningrad, by a special bus able to cope with our heavy items," explains Beda (aka Yevgeny Bedenko), from

the Western Tower military-historical club. "After the tournament, we'll mend and clean our armour. I'm a lawyer but make weapons by hand."

Despite being almost fit to drop, the knights line up once more and ambulance doctor Ruslan Novikov tells me, "We've not had any serious injuries during the tournament — just a few minor grazes. I also take part in military-historical reconstructions, focusing on secular costumes. My knight name is Gugo and I've sewn six costumes so far — for friends and for myself."

The fighting ends and photos are taken during the awards ceremony. Diplomas and medals have been especially made for the event, cast in bronze and brass. These are presented to the accompaniment of music by British rock band Queen. "I'm taking home three awards," says Morgul (aka Mikhail Morgulis) proudly. He has travelled from Israel's Petah Tikva. "This is my first time in Belarus but my third tournament. It's an expensive hobby, since you need to pay to travel to events, but it's worth it. I've loved Minsk and would come again if possible."

The Challenge Cup is over, so the knights remove their armour, evaluating losses and sharing impressions. They'll next meet at the Legacy of Centuries International Festival in summer, giving them time to rest and train for new victories.



Challenge Cup International Tournament for Historical Medieval Fights held in Minsk

Villages show rural attractiveness

Villages are becoming ever more popular as places in which to settle permanently, as well as destinations for relaxing holidays. The latest trend is for city dwellers to set aside the hustle and bustle of urban life for quiet contemplation of the countryside.

Almost 2,000 agro-eco estates are registered countrywide (up from 1,500 in early 2012). A decade ago, our neighbours led the way; now, Belarus surpasses Lithuania's 1,000 estates and Latvia's 500.

Naturally, running a business in the countryside is unlikely to make you a millionaire, as Andrey Nizhnik

admits. The owner of Zarechany estate explains, "We're open to visitors from Friday to Sunday and it's hard work, which is why we rest on Monday and Tuesday. On the other days, we maintain the property, rebuilding, and purchasing items to make visitors feel comfortable."

In fact, to be successful, you need to live and breathe your business. Valeria Klitsounova, who chairs the Rest in a Village Society, views village life as a cornerstone of Belarusian identity. Mr. Nizhnik adds, "Your neighbours notice your efforts and it inspires them also. Where we beautify our environment by digging a pond or laying



Kolyady celebration in the Minsk Region: 'Pull the Kolyada Up the Oak' rite

a road, people are driven to emulate our efforts. In this way, we are reviving the village together."

Over the past 10 years, the Rest in a Village Society has attracted about \$1m

of investments. Several international festivals of culture and everyday life have been organised — such as the famous Motol food festival — and once forgotten villages have joined tourist

routes. Visitors from as far away as the USA, Australia and New Zealand have stayed in our rural idylls, receiving fond memories to take home and share with friends and family.

Rural holidays become ever more popular

Revenue from rural tourism doubled in Belarus last year

Within the European Union, ecotourism accounts for around 20-25 percent of the total income of the tourist industry, giving Belarus a goal to aim for. With 20,000 rivers, 10,000 lakes and one third of our territory covered by forest, it's surely an attainable target.

Favourable conditions have been created, with rural hosts gaining tax breaks and access to loans for improvements. The visa procedures for tourists have been eased and further plans are afoot to encourage visitors, including changes to existing legislation.