



Shrine of Our Lady in Święta Woda, by Athantor / Wikimedia Commons

Introduction

The Green Velo Eastern Cycle Trail, covering 1980 km, is the longest cycle route in Poland. It goes through five regions in the eastern part of the country: Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Podlaskie, Lubelskie, Podkarpackie, and Świętokrzyskie Voivodeships. Just one glance at the map is enough to make one realise how many different regions the trail combines, and how diverse it is in terms of landscapes and culture. Among sea-side scenery and highlands, along lake lands, through primeval forests and big urban centres, Green Velo takes us on a journey discovering the most beautiful features of the lands inhabited for centuries by various communities: Poles, Jews, Germans, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Lithuanians, Armenians, and Tartars.

Cycling along Green Velo from Białystok to Niemirów, you experience an unusual journey accompanied by Orthodox church domes – wooden, copper, metal or shining with gold, as this land is the region with the largest Orthodox population in Poland. Along the route one may visit two beautiful primeval forests – the Knyszyn and Białowieża Forests – and the Supraśl River, an enchanting river that constitutes the watery axis of Białystok's surroundings. The trail goes through lowlands and slightly undulating areas, and higher hills are encountered around Grabarka and Mielnik.

Attractions along the trail

1. FROM BIAŁYSTOK TO HAJNÓWKA

Święta Woda. The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Sorrows in Wasilków (Święta Woda) is a famous pilgrimage site. The location of a cult established in the first half of the 18th century, it was officially proclaimed a sanctuary in 1997. Other attractions apart from the church include: a cave with a miracle-working waterhole (in 1719, Bazyli Samotyja Lenczewski bathed himself



The Buchholtz Palace in Supraśl, by M. Franaszek

Supraśl. Tourist Service "Bukowisko", ul. Piłsudskiego 64, tel.: +48 85 7102470, turystyka@powiatbialostocki.pl.

in it and was cured of blindness, which led to it being recognised as a sacred place), the Mountain of Crosses (where people spontaneously place votive crosses next to the 25-metre-long Millennium Cross), the Paths of Our Lady and other places with biblical names: Bethsaida and Siloam waterholes and the so-called Narrow Gate.

Supraśl. A small town beautifully situated by the river of the same name. It is also the location of an Orthodox monastery and the Church of the Annunciation and St. John the Evangelist – the so-called Lavra Supraska. This impressive complex of monastery buildings holds an Icon Museum, for example. However, there are many more striking places in Supraśl, e.g. Buchholtz Palace – the location of an art high school (with ideally preserved woodwork and an exquisite cast iron staircase inside), 19th-century wooden weavers' houses, the neo-Baroque Church of the Holy Trinity, and charming boulevards along the Supraśl River. A few cemeteries offer remarkable chapels, such as the neo-Gothic chapel of the Buchholtz family.

Kopna Góra. A small village on the Sokółka River, a right-hand branch of the Supraśl. The 1863 Uprising Memorial Arboretum was established here in 1988. Over its 25 ha you can admire not only various forest habitats



Arboretum in Kopna Góra, by Polimerek / Wikimedia Commons

in the Knyszyn Primeval Forest, but also many interesting plants from different parts of the world: for example, a ginkgo biloba tree or a dawn redwood. Next to the arboretum there is a mausoleum for the November Uprising insurgents killed in the Battle of Sokółka in 1831.

Kruszyniany. This small village by the border with Belarus is one of the major Tartar centres in Poland. Tartars were granted the right to settle in Kruszyniany by King Jan III Sobieski in exchange for their loyal service during the wars with Turkey. The Tartar lieutenant Samuel Murza Krzeczkowski – who saved the King's life in the Battle of Párkány – lived here. One can admire the historical wooden mosque from the end



Mosque in Kruszyniany, by Polimerek / Wikimedia Commons

of the 18th century, and a *mizar* (Muslim cemetery) with the oldest tombstones dating from the end of the 18th century. A true treat for tourists is the agrotourism farm, called the Tartar Yurt, serving guests traditional meals of Tartar cuisine from this region. The Podlaskie Tartar Trail goes through Kruszyniany (as well as Białystok, Sokółka, Bohoniki, Krynki, and Supraśl) allowing cyclists to better acquaint themselves with the culture of Polish Tartars.

Gródek. Previously a town, now a larger village, Gródek is another example of a multicultural Podlaskie settlement. Before WWII wooden synagogues dominated Gródek, as half of its population was Jewish. According to documented sources, 1380 of them were killed in Treblinka concentration camp. Today the Jewish cemetery is the only reminder of the former Jewish commu-



Orthodox church in Gródek, by Athantor / Wikimedia Commons

nity in Gródek. Currently, the village is heavily populated by members of the Orthodox community – their place of worship is the Orthodox Church of the Birth of the Holy Mother of God. Every year the Basowiszczka Young Belarus Music Festival is organised in the park nearby – the Boryk Sacred Forest.

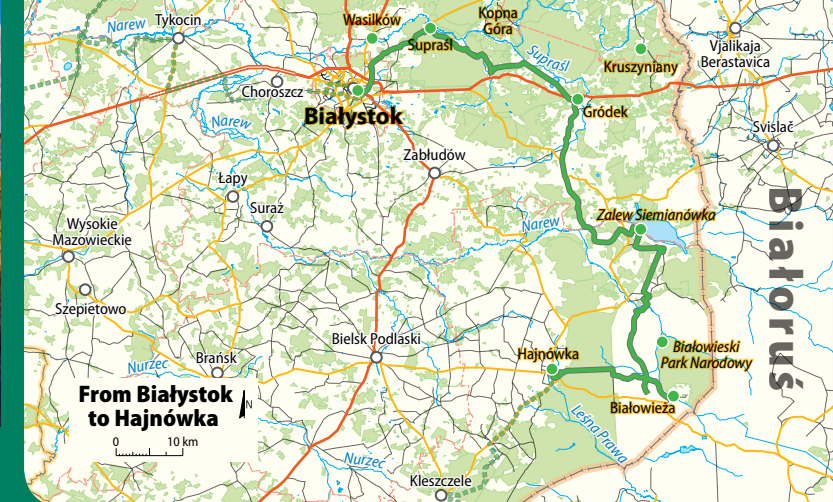
Siemianówka Reservoir. The reservoir, built in the years 1977–90, is located near the northern part of the Białowieża Primeval Forest. Water accumulated here protects the Narew National Park in the low water season, and it is also used for field irrigation in this part of the Podlaskie region. In Siemianowickie Lake there are many fish species, and its shores form habitats for 164 species of birds, including many endangered and protected species in Poland

Siemianówka artificial lake, by Wojsyl / Wikimedia Commons

(e.g. the great egret, white-tailed eagle, and little grebe). The lands by the reservoir are also home to elks. Moreover, a scene from the film *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was shot in Siemianówka – the scene where children were chased across the lake.

Białowieża. This fairly large village with an atmosphere of a town is the headquarters of the Białowieża National Park. Here one can admire the European Bison Reserve, visit historical temples (an Orthodox and a Catholic church), see secular buildings (e.g. those containing the Centre for Nature Education), or have a pleasant time in the Palace Park, established at the turn of the 20th century near a hunt-

Orthodox church in Białowieża, by M. Franaszek



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Gate of the National Park in Białowieża, by M. Franaszek

Białowieża National Park. This park of over 10.5 thousand ha protects the best-preserved fragment of the Białowieża Primeval Forest, the last natural deciduous and broadleaf primeval forest in the European lowlands, unaltered by human activity. The European bison is the park's symbol. Both the Białowieża National Park and its Belarusian counterpart have been added to the UNESCO Heritage List. A historical narrow gauge railway runs through the Park from Hajnówka to Topiło.

2. FROM HAJNÓWKA TO NIEMIROW

Dubicze Cerkiewne and Kleszczele. These two villages at the south-western corner of the Białowieża Primeval Forest are home to remarkable examples of Orthodox Church architecture. In Dubicze you can see the Orthodox Church of the Our Lady of Protection, built after WWII – a wooden temple covered in blue paint (a reference to the region's tradition) and richly ornamented. Next to it there is a parish cemetery with

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blue tombstones. In Kleszczele you can find the brick Orthodox Church of the Dormition of Our Lady with whitewashed walls and a blue roof. Other attractions include: an Orthodox church (a former Uniate bell tower), a historic Catholic church and a wooden railway station building.

Czeremcha. In this large village near the border with Belarus one can find the modern and quite large Orthodox Church of the Loving Mother of God. Other attractions in Czeremcha include: the Local Cultural Centre and the Private Historical Tradition, Regional Memory and Railway Hall, where one can see many elements of hut equipment and objects related to the Podlaskie historical railway infrastructure. There is also a folk band from the village called Czeremszyzna, known as the "Keepers of Podlaskie's Living Music".

Orthodox church of the Dormition in Kleszczele, by M. Franaszek



Siemiatycze. This town by the Kamionka River, a branch of the Bug, is full of unique historical places and monuments. One can see here an old missionary monastery, an old synagogue, the brick Orthodox Church of Sts. Peter and Paul the Apostles from 1866 and classical houses. Eye-catching elements include statues

Church in Siemiatycze, by Proch / Wikimedia Commons



of sphinxes standing at the site of the old entrance gate leading to the palace of Duchess Anna Jabłonowska.

Drohiczyn. This town on the Bug River is one of the cultural gems of Eastern Poland. At its height i.e. the first half of the 17th century, the town had three Catholic churches, one Orthodox church, one Uniate (Greek Catholic) church, and four monasteries of different religions, not to mention a hospital and a school. Currently, the most valuable attractions include: the former monastery complexes of the Jesuits, Franciscans, and Benedictines, and the old Uniate Saint Nicolas Church with its stunning interior. Other places worthy of recommendation are the two museums (the Diocese Museum and the Regional Museum) and a fortified castle at the top of Castle Mountain.

Grabarka. This small village east of Siemiatycze is the most important site for the Orthodox Church in Poland. The history of the Holy Mountain goes back to 1710, when a cholera epidemic took its toll on the Podlaskie region. According to legend, one local citizen had a vision that protection against cholera could be found on Grabarka Hill. The survivors built a wooden chapel as a sign of their gratitude to God, and which was soon converted into an Orthodox church. On the Feast of the Transfiguration on 6 August, thousands of pilgrims gather here with votive crosses. These crosses have been placed around the Orthodox church for three centuries, creating a real



View of Góra Zamkowa (Castle Mountain) in Drohiczyn, by J. Bryła / Wikimedia Commons

"forest"; thus Grabarka is often called the Mountain of Crosses.

Mielnik. This former town in the Podlaskie gorge region of the Bug River is another place with a large Orthodox population. Castle Mountain offers a remarkable view of the picturesque river valley. From the peak, one can see the remains of a fortified settlement from the 11th-12th centuries, a brick chapel –



Ferry on the Bug river, by J. Świerad

Holy Hill of Grabarka, by M. Franaszek

Drohiczyn. Tourist Information, ul. Kraszewskiego 13, tel.: +48 85 6557069, info.drohiczyn@interia.pl. **Mielnik.** The Mielnik Land History Centre, ul. Brzeska 71, tel.: +48 85 6577100, odzm@mielnik.com.pl.

a monument to Alexander Nevsky from 1865, and the ruins of the 14th-century royal castle and its church. Fortunately, some places have survived the turmoil of history, including the Orthodox Church of the Nativity Mother of God, the neo-Baroque Church of the Transfiguration of Jesus, and a synagogue, in which an art gallery is currently located. Mielnik is also with the location of the only open-pit chalk mine still in operation, which tourists may view from a recently built observation platform.

PODLASKIE VOIVODESHIP GREEN VELO EASTERN CYCLE TRAIL

Section 1: from Białystok to Hajnówka
Section 2: from Hajnówka to Niemirów

A chain of attractions



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