

Everyone knows the road to the library

National Library of Belarus is no mere treasure-house, or museum, but a place of activity and, illuminated by night, is visible from space



A bird's eye view of the library

Book treasury welcomes guests

The first building you see on arriving in Minsk from the Moscow road is the 'diamond', sparkling from every angle. You can't help feeling proud of the new National Library building, which was built from public funds generated during subbotniks (working Saturdays) and from TV marathons. It's one of Europe's top book treasuries, holding over 9m books and holding up to 2,000 readers simultaneously in its reading halls.

With the latest equipment, it's the envy of the world's most advanced libraries. With automated, computerised search and supply systems, every request for books is processed within minutes: barely enough time to have a cup of tea. In Paris, readers wait for over an hour. You can also order books online, on registering at nlb.by.

The library's archive even contains volumes published in 1830: editions by Pushkin and Gogol, printed while the authors were still alive. People come not only to read or thumb through old newspapers but to view the modern arts on show. "At the moment, the Labyrinth Gallery is hosting an exhibition by sculptor Maxim Petrulya," comments Lyudmila Klimova, the chief librarian of the Special

Fund's Service Department. "It's extremely busy in the evening, when people come to stroll after work."



Books on shelves to suit every taste

Children are also welcome. You can hear their happy voices, but it doesn't annoy anyone. Staff supervise them in the playroom, while adults prepare for exams and study. The children are happy watching cartoons and playing educational games.

There's a concert hall on the second floor, where silence is actively discouraged. Anyone can play the piano there and music lovers can visit the neighbouring room, filled with scores and audio-visual documents. The 17,000 vinyl records stored there include Debussy's Moonlight and Michel Jackson's 'golden' discs.

Another room, many times used for top-level guest negotiations, features a huge tapestry, covering the whole wall. Actually, many rooms in the National Library have historical memories already, having hosted summits of CIS member states, sessions of the EurAsEC Interstate Council and press conferences with the Belarusian President.

Meanwhile, the observation level is a great hit with tourists, who love to take photos of the city panorama. Open from midday to 11pm, entrance costs Br30,000. Address: 116 Nezavisimosti Avenue.



Books to appeal to every age

Secrets of antiquity

Ms. Klimova is rightfully proud of the National Library, telling us, “Where else can you see a Bible printed by Belarusian Frantsisk Skorina, in Prague, 500 years ago? Only at our library! We have several editions dating back to 1830.” Folios from the Radziwills’ collections are also kept at the library. The magnates of the Rzecz Pospolita’s richest family brought the best books to Nesvizh, and spent much time writing, studying and drawing. Their literary heritage is among UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register. Among the treasures is the original score of Anton Henry Radziwill’s Faust opera.

The antique books department is always full of people eager to view editions bound in wooden board or leather, gospels written on moire cloth and decorated with golden clasps, collections of Old Believers’ songs and manuscripts in Arabic. Several shelves are devoted to miniatures, which require a magnifying glass to view; those containing works by Pushkin and Kolas are the most popular. The hall regularly hosts important events, including international, but is open to all visitors at other times.

MT REFERENCE:

Receiving a library card

Belarusian and Russian citizens may request a library card, on presentation of their passport. However, anyone can enter the reading halls, using a single-time card from the socio-cultural centre, on presenting identification.

Interesting facts

Next year, the National Library will celebrate its 95th anniversary of first foundation.

Its book shelves stretch 90km.

The building aims to be included in the Guinness Book as the world's largest polyhedron.

The library is named the 'diamond' or 'crystal' although its geometric figure is actually a rhombicub-octahedron.

The library is among the world's top 50 most unusual buildings, placed 24th, ahead of Beijing's National Stadium, a Las Vegas casino and the largest tower in Barcelona.