

The 550th anniversary of the miraculous Zhirovichi Icon of the Mother of God and the 500th anniversary of the founding of the stavropegic Holy Assumption Zhirovichi Monastery

In 2020, the Republic of Belarus will celebrate the 550th anniversary of the miraculous Zhirovichi Icon of the Mother of God and the 500th anniversary of the founding of the stavropegic Holy Assumption Zhirovichi Monastery located in the Slonim District of the Grodno Region.

The central date of the celebrations will be the Day of Remembrance of the Zhirovichi Mother of God, which is annually celebrated on May 20. Traditionally, on this day, pilgrims from all over Belarus and other countries visit the Zhirovichi monastery to bow to the miraculous icon.

History of Slonim District

The Slonim district within the modern administrative borders is only part of its historical district, which was part of the Novogrudok Voivodeship of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, therefore a number of historical monuments closely associated with the Slonim region are located in neighboring districts today. Most of the manor complexes of the region belonged to representatives of various aristocratic families (Oginski, Puslovski, Ordy, Slisni).

The presence of a number of architectural monuments in Slonim and its suburbs, as well as a rich historical past in itself makes the city attractive for domestic and foreign tourism. Its historical heritage is of undoubted interest both for citizens of neighboring and foreign countries. The life and work of a number of state and cultural figures of the era of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Leo Sapieha, Michal Casimir Oginski) are closely connected with the city.

Until now, the left bank castle has been preserved in the center of the modern city, where in the XVI-XVII centuries there was a small wooden palace (the so-called Upper Castle). Slonim was not just the administrative center of the district and the starostwo ("eldership"), but also a place where in 1597-1685 passed General sejmics ("local parliaments") of the szlachta ("nobility") of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Senators and ambassadors gathered at them for the General Sejm (Parliament) of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from all the country of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. At the congresses, the positions of all lands on the most important issues, considered at the General Sejm, were agreed upon, and instructions were issued to the ambassadors which they should adhere to when making decisions at the General Sejm.

Tourism in Slonim district

The Slonim district is a territory with unique traditions and historical sights. The attractiveness for tourists and guests of Slonim is due not only to cultural and historical buildings, architectural monuments, natural sites, but also to a vibrant and eventful festival life, showing restored traditions, developing infrastructure.

The tourism infrastructure of the Slonim region includes hotels, travel agencies, cafes and restaurants, railway and car stations, objects of historical and cultural heritage (castles, churches, memorial complexes, old manors, monuments, palace and park complexes), museums, theaters, cinemas, zoo, entertainment centers, farmsteads, outdoor activities (sports complexes, swimming pools, fitness clubs, gyms), wildlife sanctuaries, hunting complex, youth tourism center with camp sites in the city of Slonim and in the village of Shilovichi.

The most popular tourist attractions in the Slonim district and its city are the Holy Assumption Zhirovichi Monastery, Albertin (the former residence of the large landowners Puslovski), Transfiguration Cathedral, St. Andrew's Ensemble.

Every year, club cultural institutions of the Slonim district hold many cultural events, including the open regional festival "Polonaz", the regional festival "Khristoslav", the open festival "Zhirovichi fest" in honor of the celebration of the appearance of the Zhirovichi Icon of the Mother of God, the festival of crafts "From From eternal sources of beauty", the regional festival-competition "Good day, neighbors", the festival "Pavlovsky karavaj", the regional festival of exemplary theater groups "Miracles of Slonim" and others.

The network of bike paths in the Slonim district has a total length of about 40 km.

Also on the territory of the Slonim district there is a tourist route "The Golden Ring of the Slonim district" passing through: Bolshyje Shilovichi - Zhirovichi - Rusakovo - Partizanovka - Novodevjatkovichi - Mizhevichi - Seljavichi – Velikaja Krakotka - Ozernitsa - Klepachi - Synkovichi (Zelvensky district) - Porechje - Derevnaja - Petralevichi.

Holy Assumption Zhirovichi Monastery

The stavropegic Holy Assumption Zhirovichi Monastery of the Belarusian Orthodox Church is located in the agricultural town of Zhirovichi, Slonim District, Grodno Region. This is one of the main centers of Belarusian Orthodoxy and the country's largest architectural ensembles of the XVII-XVIII centuries.

Documents indicate that the first church on the site of the appearance of the original icon of the Mother of God of Zhirovichi was founded in 1493 by the owner of the Zhirovichi, Ivan (Soltan) Alexandrovich. Perhaps the church was rebuilt immediately after the fire of 1520, in which the icon itself burned down. The building of the stone church began in the 1560s.

After the sale of the Zhirovichi estate in 1609 to the famous publicist Ivan (Jan) Meleszka, he transferred the monastery to the Uniat Church in 1613, and along with a number of lands and valuables. In the same year, the monastery received rich land awards from Dominic Soltan and Leo Sapieha. The latter also conveyed the famous Zhirovitsky Gospel of the XV century to the monastery. After the fire in 1655, most of the buildings were destroyed and later recreated from stone.

Gradually Zhirovichi became one of the largest religious education centers. There was a seminary and a school for secular people at the monastery, and also a rich library. Kings Vladislav IV Vaza, Jan Kazimir Vaza, August II and Stanislaw Augustus Poniatovsky came to worship the icon. The patronage of noble persons and the coronation of the icon in 1730 further increased the glory of the monastery.

From the architectural and historical point of view, the Assumption Cathedral with the XVII century iconostasis is of great interest in the monastery, as well as the Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, which is unique to Belarus because of a copy of the Roman Santa Scala – the Holy Stairs leading to the papal chapel of the Holy of Holies.

At the end of the XVIII – beginning of the XIX century the Zhirovichi Monastery was the residence of the Uniate Bishop of Brest and then of Lithuania. In 1828, a seminary was opened in Zhirovichi to prepare the Uniate clergy.

After the liquidation of the Uniate Church in 1839, the Zhirovichi Monastery became Orthodox. In 1845, the theological seminary was moved to Vilna, and a religious school was established in Zhirovichi, which operated until 1915.

During World War I, in 1915, when the German-Russian front approached the Zhirovichi, the values and property of the monastery were

transferred to Moscow. The Zhirovichi miraculous icon was stored in the Intercession Cathedral (St. Basil's Cathedral) in Moscow.

After the end of World War I, the Zhirovichi monastery began to be restored. However, after the conclusion of the Riga Peace Treaty in 1921, it became part of Poland. In 1924, the Polish authorities placed an agricultural forestry school in the monastery buildings, which existed there until 1939. At that, 10 monks lived in the monastery.

In 1938, for the first time in the history of the monastery, the Zhirovsky miraculous icon was removed from the cathedral and transported to a parish of the Grodno diocese in a specially arranged cart.

In the post-war years, the monastery also remained operational, and in the early 1960s it gave shelter to the sisters of two closed convents – of the Holy Nativity of the Mother of God in Grodno and of the St. Euphrosine in Polotsk.

In the XX century, prominent hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church lived in the Monastery: in 1912-1915 – Bishop Germogen (Dolganov), from 1965 until his death in 1978 – Archbishop Hermogen (Golubev).

In 1945, theological and pastoral courses were opened on the territory of the Holy Assumption Zhirovichi Monastery, transformed in 1947 into the Minsk Theological Seminary. Beginning from 1959, the enrollment of students in the seminary ceased, and in 1963 the seminary “self-destructed”.

On April 21, 1988 the diocesan congress of the clergy and laity of the Belarusian Orthodox Diocese was held in the monastery on the occasion of the 1000th Anniversary of the Christianization of Rus’.

In 1989, thanks to Metropolitan Filaret (Vakhrushev), now the honorary Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus, the theological seminary was reopened. In 1991, the Minsk Theological Seminary was granted the status of a higher theological school.

In 2007, the ensemble of the Holy Assumption Monastery in the agricultural town of Zhirovichi as part of the Assumption Cathedral, decoration of the Assumption Cathedral (painting on the conch, ornamental decoration on the vaults, iconostasis, side altars), Church of the Epiphany, Holy Cross Church, bell tower, seminary building, residential building, farm buildings was given the status of historical and cultural value of the first category.

The monastery complex includes five churches and adjacent buildings: the Yavlensky and Holy Cross Exaltation churches, the Assumption Cathedral, the belfry, the winter church in the name of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, the church in honor of the Great Martyr George the Victorious, the seminary building, the residential monastery complex, the refectory and outbuildings.

The center of the ensemble is the Assumption Cathedral, connected by covered walkways with the seminary building and residential building, on the ground floor of which there is an arched passage. The seminary building forms

the front yard in front of the apse of the cathedral. Near the eastern wing of the seminary is a rectangular courtyard surrounded by one-story buildings. To the south-east of the cathedral is the Yavlensky temple. In the eastern part of the territory of the monastery complex, the Holy Cross Exaltation Church dominates the ensemble.

Assumption Cathedral as the main temple of the monastery was built during the years 1629-1680. It is the monument of architecture of the Baroque and Classicism styles. It is a stone 3-nave cross-domed basilica (length over 55 m, height about 40 m) with a semicircular apse. From the north and south sides the cathedral is adjoined by the aisles of the Protection of the Holy Mother of God, the Nativity of John the Baptist.

The cathedral was originally built in the Baroque style. On the main facade there were corner towers. After the reconstruction of 1828, the temple acquired the features of classicism: the towers were dismantled, the shape of the light drum and the dome was replaced, the Doric order was used in the decoration.

The interior of the cathedral has retained its baroque character. The central oval dome is supported by massive pillars in cross section shaped like a cross. In the northwestern part of the temple on the monumental 3-span arcade there are choirs, the parapet of which is decorated with a Doric frieze. Under the apse, a crypt with a spring is placed.

The main decorative element of the interior is a 3-tier wooden iconostasis of the XVII century, the constructive basis of which is the tiered colonnades of the Corinthian order. The baroque decorative design of the iconostasis includes voluminous gilded images of the heads of cherubs, various shells, garlands, vine and leaves. The wealth of ornamental carving stands out the gilded royal gates. In the side naves there are smaller iconostases, made in the second half of the XIX century. To ensure its safety the iconostasis icons were transferred to the National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus.

An annex from the north of the Assumption Cathedral houses the **winter** church in the name **of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker**, which was originally called Onufrievskaya, has a rectangular plan. In 1847, the iconostasis inscribed under the arch arch was installed in it.

The earliest image of the XVIII century is in the dome, on the vaults and in the apse. On the western wall there is an art composition "The Last Judgment". On the walls and 4-sided pillars are installed full-length images of saints, apostles, prophets. The oil painting of the interior was done at the beginning of the XX century, it covers the more ancient painting.

The **Church of the Epiphany** (Church in honor of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary) is located behind the cathedral in the center of the

monastery territory. It was built in 1672 of bricks on the site of a wooden church that had existed since the XVI century. In 1796 it was rebuilt.

It is a baroque architecture monument. It belongs to the type 1-hall temples without tower. The main facade has the shape of a shield that extends beyond the boundaries of the main volume. A stone is used as an altar in the temple, on which, according to legend, the Mother of God appeared. In 1881, the Minsk Archbishop M. Golubovich was buried in the crypt of the church.

The **Holy Cross Church** is located at the highest point of the monastery. It was built in 1769. The church symbolizes Calvary. Immediately from the door of the temple begins a staircase – a symbol of the one on which Jesus Christ climbed to the court of the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate. The staircase occupies half of the temple, previously had an illusory continuation on the altar wall, which created the impression of the depth of the interior. Climbing led to the image of the “Crucifixion” (not preserved or plastered), as well as the images with the sufferings of Christ have not been preserved on the walls. Now the interior is plastered and whitewashed, the apse is highlighted by a flat partition of the iconostasis. It is a rococo architecture monument.

The **St. George's (Yuryevsky) temple** was built in the XVIII century in the form of a rectangular log house made of wood. The temple is located in the old cemetery, on the northwestern outskirts of the Zhirovichi, on the so-called “Yuryeva Gorka”.

The events of the period of the Northern War of 1700-1721 are associated with the emergence of the cemetery and the construction of the temple.

The temple is the simplest type of structure with a five-sided apse-cut. The temple is covered by a gable roof. The western facade has a small drum with a dome. This decorative element highlights the main facade of the building. The apse is highlighted by a small protrusion. The decorative accent of the interior is the iconostasis with false thread.

The temple is a monument of folk architecture with baroque features. Ashes of the famous writer, archpriest Plakid Yankovsky (1810-1872) are buried under the floor of the temple.

The seminary building is located on the northeast side of the Assumption Cathedral. Built in the XVII-XVIII centuries. In 1870, it was reconstructed by the Lithuanian diocesan architect T. Savic. It is a baroque architecture monument, 3-storey U-shaped building. The architectural decor is modest. The layout is gallery, corridors and cellars are covered with cruciform arches.

The **farm building** is located on the northwest side of the monastery. The monument is of a baroque architecture of the XVIII century. It has a one-storey U-shaped structure.

The **bell tower** is located opposite the Assumption Cathedral. It was built in 1828 of bricks. It is an architectural monument of late classicism, has a

square plan of 2-tier structure, logically connected with the cathedral by a single elongated planning axis. It ends with a hemispherical dome similar to the cathedral.

The **fraternal building** (residential building) is connected to the cathedral from the north-western side by a passage above the gate, has an elongated volume.

Zhirovichi icon of the Mother of God

The Zhirovichi Icon of the Mother of God is one of the main Christian shrines, the patroness of Belarus, is among the 100 most revered Orthodox icons. This is the smallest of the icons of the Mother of God.

The icon is made of a round jasper stone with a relief image of the Virgin with a baby in her arms, just a few centimeters (5.6 x 4.4 cm) in size, scorched by a fire, cracked a little by fire and time. It is located to the left of the Royal Gates of the Cathedral, consecrated in honor of the Assumption of the Virgin.

Among the Belarusian miraculous icons, Zhirovichi icon is the only one executed in a flat relief on a stone. The Zhirovichi icon belongs to the iconographic type of the Virgin of Tenderness.

According to legend, in 1470, young shepherds, grazing herds of boyar Alexander Soltan, went far into the forest and among the branches of a wild pear saw a wonderful radiance emanating from a small icon. They carried the image to the house of Soltan, telling him about the circumstances of the find. The nobleman did not pay attention to the story of the shepherds and put the icon in the casket. In the evening, receiving guests, he told them about the find of the shepherds and wanted to show the icon. But, after opening the casket, he did not find it. The next day the shepherds came to their former place and again saw on the pear the same icon in radiance. As on the eve, they carried it to the nobleman, who built a wooden church on the site of the appearance of the icon.

Around 1520, a severe fire occurred in the village, during which the miraculous icon disappeared. According to legend, after some time, the children saw the Mother of God on a stone: in her hands was an extinct icon. Hastened to the place of occurrence, people found a miraculous icon on the stone. This event is considered the second appearance of the Zhirovichi miraculous icon of the Mother of God.

A new temple was built on the site of the burnt temple, where the shrine was placed. At the same time, the grandson of Soltan, Ivan Alexandrovich, began the construction of a new large stone church.

After the founding of a monastery in Zhirovichi in 1520, the icon was constantly stored within its walls. In the second half of the XVII century, it was well known and revered among believers, and the monastery, subsequently,

became one of the main places of pilgrimage to the Commonwealth. Starting from King Vladislav IV, who made a pilgrimage to the miraculous image of the Mother of God on December 9-10, 1644, there is a tradition to come to worship the Zhirovichi icon on the eve of important events in the life of the state. King Jan Casimir made a pilgrimage to Zhirovichi in 1651, going on a campaign against Bohdan Khmelnytsky, and King Jan III Sobieski with his son - April 29, 1683 on the eve of the battle with the Turks near Vienna. In the XVIII century, Kings August III and Stanislaw Augustus Poniatovsky came to Zhirovichi to worship the miraculous icon. After the coronation on September 8, 1730, the Zhirovichi Icon of the Mother of God became the fifth of the crowned icons in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

In 1915, the Zhirovichi icon in a silver setting, along with other valuables, was evacuated to Moscow and stored in the Cathedral of the Protection of the Holy Virgin on the Moat (St. Basil's Cathedral on Red Square), and after its closure, in the Catherine's Monastery in Vidnoye Moskovskaya area. In January 1922, through the efforts of the abbot of the Zhirovichi monastery, Archimandrite Tikhon (Sharapov), the icon was returned to Zhirovichi. In 1938, with the Zhirovichi icon, crowded religious processions took place in cities and villages of Western Belarus.

The Day of Remembrance of the Zhirovichi Mother of God is celebrated on May 20. On this day, pilgrims from all over Belarus and other countries visit Zhirovichi to bow to the icon.