

LITHUANIA – Advice from Fulbright Alumni

The following are extracts from Fulbright Grantee Reports and are not meant to reflect the views of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), its cooperating agencies, or the U.S. Embassy.

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Cultural notes

Come to Lithuania expecting to immerse yourself in their culture. Language courses are available, and while learning the language is difficult, taking a course accrues much credit among locals. Also, take advantage of the performing arts venues. There are at least three in Klaipeda and more in Vilnius that run high quality programs, not to mention a vibrant jazz community and touring events. And bring mustard into the country with you because you can't get it here.

I found Lithuanians -- especially college-aged people -- to be invariably polite, inquisitive about the U.S., helpful and good humored. That is especially so in the cities of Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipeda. I did not go into the rural areas, so I can't speak for those citizens. They are strongly nationalist (though not in the in-your-face manner) but do not appear to have the religious fervor I expected from my prior research into social conditions. Many people told me they don't regularly attend mass or go to confession. All Saints Day is a two-day national holiday when many Lithuanians return to family graveyards to honor their ancestors. Thanksgiving is not celebrated in Lithuania.

I detected no serious ethnic conflicts within the country, probably because the great majority of the citizens are ethnic Lithuanians. But the relations between Lithuania and Belarus are very contentious. People are encouraged not to visit Belarus. I expected Lithuanians to hate Russians due to the 50-year occupation by the Soviet Union. Instead, there is a kind of practiced indifference to Russian (and Polish) visitors. Older people (40s and above) speak little English because they were forced to learn Russian during the "sovietization" of the communist party. I gradually became aware that many older people are quietly nostalgic for certain aspects of the Soviet era. They recalled that pay was low but paychecks always arrived on time! They say there was no unemployment. Now elderly beggars, especially pitifully ragtag women, can be seen kneeling on the streets, their hands cupped for spare change. The restrictions on daily life in Soviet times were many, and prospects were not promising for most people. But the predictability and orderliness seemed to be preferred by older Lithuanians, who like fish being unaware of the water had had no experience of life outside the decades of occupation. Museums reflecting the worst aspects of Soviet times, such as the Museum of the Victims of Genocide in Vilnius and the "Stalin Land" Grutas Park in southern Lithuania, are defended as a painful but necessary part of the country's history.

Personal Interactions

Take advantage of the many cultural events in your city, some of them a part of everyday culture--such as the markets. If at LCC, go to at least some of the flag-raising and Independence Day events for the many countries represented. You will learn much, and the students are grateful for your interest. Avoid the temptation to surround yourself with North Americans all the time; Lithuanian colleagues at LCC are intelligent, resourceful, and eager to help you to succeed. You will be enriched beyond measure.

Being friendly, open, and social was the best way to establish connections in Lithuania. Participating in social events ranging from birthday parties to nights at the opera to events hosted by the university afforded me the opportunity to meet many locals. Inviting people over for dinner or just sharing a casual cup of coffee goes a long way in building meaningful relationships.

Language

Learn at least a few phrases in Lithuanian; locals appreciate any effort.

University Life

I had a wonderful experience at the Centre of Oriental Studies at Vilnius University, but as each Faculty or Centre at the University seems to me to be very autonomous, I could see how someone's experience could turn out very differently than my own in another department. My identity was associated only with the Centre, but administratively I was not part of the university as such. In terms of the teaching culture, it is good to be aware that instructors in Lithuania are paid very little and most teach at several places to make ends meet. Shortages of things such as office space, photocopy paper, and other material goods are common. Library resources are minimal. That being said, the faculty is extremely well connected internationally, extremely active academically, and extremely well traveled. People find ways. In terms of the student culture, I would say that the average student at Vilnius studies primarily to pass exams. Students take 8 or 9 classes a semester. The majority of their courses are compulsory. Take attendance. Expect to have students show up at the exam whom you do not recognize. Most students do not pay anything for their education; most professors do not get paid much to teach. This is a very different environment than working at small liberal arts college in the US that charges \$50,000 in tuition and fees every year. Culturally, the Centre of Oriental Studies seems to be the centre of cultural diversity in Vilnius. It is far more culturally diverse than any place I have taught in the US. Personally, everyone was very hospitable, and I heard this from every other Fulbrighter in Lithuania.

Housing

We were housed on campus (in a dorm apartment) and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Our wing was populated with only staff and faculty, but we were able to have as much interaction with students and other colleagues as we desired.

Housing is not good. I would recommend just finding some temporary housing and then looking for a place on your own. I could recommend the Lininterp on Bernardinu for a short-term stay. Be prepared to be shocked by rental prices. The bare minimum for a small tumbledown place is around 1,200 litas (about \$500US) per month in Old Town. I didn't hear of too many happy housing stories in Vilnius. Be prepared to be even more shocked by the cost of heating--about 600 litas per month minimum, if you're

really careful. This is expected to skyrocket next year. You need heating 8 months of the year. Be sure to get an apartment that has its own heating system.

I found that the flats in Old Town are much more expensive than those 5km away. Because I wanted to be close enough to walk to work and near the university, I took a flat on Gedimino Prospektas, one of the livelier streets in Vilnius. Many flats are sparsely furnished; a lot of studios have a sofa bed. Try -- though it is difficult -- to rent a place with utilities included. Otherwise, depending on the condition of the building, you may find heat to be a large part of your budget. I was lucky enough to live in a place with excellent central heat, so I rarely turned on the radiators in my flat (an extra cost). Cable TV is available in Vilnius from three different providers. It is cheap -- about 25 litas, compared to the monopolistic American services. Lithuanian public radio and three public TV stations are available, along with a majority of programs in English. Other TV channels in Vilnius are from Russia, Poland, Germany and France; in all, about 70 channels are available. Kaunas has far fewer channels, including one or two in English.

I found the web site www.skelbiu.lt a useful portal for apartment hunting. You can search for short-term rental options by city. Much of the text is not in English but from the pictures you can find some options and there is a map to show you their locations. Once you have narrowed your list to a few options, I would recommend forwarding the links with contact information to your local host to enquire about availability, pricing etc. You may or may not be asked to sign a lease but in either case you want to establish the price ahead of time. They will likely require a deposit to hold the apartment and this can be sent by international wire. An important point: find out whether the apartment has its own autonomous (i.e., self-contained) heating system. This is highly desirable as otherwise you are at the mercy of the city or landlord as to when and how much heating they provide (note that Lithuanians have a higher tolerance for cold temperatures indoors than do Americans).

Communications

Wireless connections are available everywhere in Old Town, but connections are erratic, even in the "Internet cafes."

Health and Safety

I found Latvia to be very safe. Women of all ages feel completely safe walking unaccompanied the downtown Viulnius streets at 3 or 4 a.m.

Health care is grim. Stay healthy and take all necessary medicines and vitamins with you. You can, however, get a lot of prescription medicines over the counter at any pharmacy. You just don't know which ones until you get there. But they are expensive in any event.

Vilnius is very safe, and I routinely walked home at all hours. Never heard of any incidents.

Food

Experiment with local foods. Shop at a turgus -- sort of downscale farmers' market with local produce, meats and some foodstuffs you won't recognize. Visit as many bakeries as possible.

The cities have more restaurants and coffee shops than one could possibly visit in a semester! Service can be slow by American standards, but the meals almost always make that worthwhile! The cuisine is

quite varied. In fact, the best Indian meal I've ever eaten was at Sue's Raga in Vilnius! Menus are usually in English as well as Lithuanian. Some younger people seem somewhat embarrassed by their traditional foods, such as cepellinas, cold beet root soup and cabbage rolls (all delicious to me); but that is because they have so many pizzerias to choose from. The idea that Lithuanians subsist on a diet of potatoes, cabbage and gristly sausage is totally wrong! Fresh vegetables, breads and smoked meats are widely available at outdoor markets. Lithuanians appear to love breads and sweets. A typical "chain" grocery like Rimi, Iki or Maxima offers at least 30 different varieties of bread. The people also love their alus (beer), which is all homemade like microbrewery products in America. Lithuanians readily admit that due to climate and soil conditions, no "decent" Lithuanian wines are available. The wines are mostly from Spain, Argentina, Chile and Germany. Don't expect to find many American wines.

Food is the same or is more expensive than the US. Restaurants are cheaper. Most consumer goods are at least double what they are in the US, and quality is bad. Lithuania is not a consumer heaven. There is only one large grocery store near Vilnius Old Town: Maxima on Mindaugo. One of the weirdest culture-shock experiences I had on return to the States was going to a large US grocery store and being completely overwhelmed by all the choices.

Street Life

Bars stay open until 5 a.m. or later. The legal drinking age is 18. Many people who appear much younger than that throng the downtown streets at night, drinking, talking loudly, and breaking into songs or chants. At least they are "friendly drunks"; I never observed or read about stabbings, shootings or gangs.

People tend to walk very fast on sidewalks and to go arm-in-arm three or four abreast. The women especially are well dressed. They do not give way as they walk right toward you, so you need nimble feet to avoid collisions. Or they will walk right up to you then cut away at the very last second. I don't consider this rude behavior, but I rarely heard anyone say "atsu prasome" (excuse me). One unfortunate aspect of life is the overwhelming (at least to this nonsmoker) use of tobacco, especially among young people. Everyone seems to smoke, and they are oblivious to the health risks. I was told many times that marijuana and other illegal drugs are not used widely.

At the street markets (Vilnius had one every Sunday) try to haggle with the sellers. My rule was never to pay full price for anything. But learn the metric system!

Clothing

Be aware that clothes dryers in Lithuania are virtually nonexistent -- though many flats have towel warmers! Nor are there any laundromats. You dry your clothes on a wooden rack; downtown rules prohibit any hanging of clothes on windows or balconies.

Money and Banking

Money in the local currency is readily available as ATM machines are widespread in the cities. Many places will also accept credit cards but note that most cards now charge an appreciable fee with each transaction that includes a fixed cost plus a proportion of the amount charged. For this reason, it can be expensive if you rely on your credit card for regular purchases (groceries, restaurants, etc.). I found it more economical to withdraw a larger sum from my bank account at less frequent intervals and to use

cash most places. I have been told that Credit Union fees are lower and this may be your best option if you are a member.

ATM's are easy to find; use a debit card for cash for almost any purchase.

For money, I just used my bankcard at ATMs, which are everywhere. Never a problem.

I generally paid cash (but keep track of everything for tax purposes) rather than credit cards to avoid the 3% international surcharge imposed by the banks. Warning; the ATMs often give large bills (100 & 200 litai), and many small vendors, coffee shops etc. don't like to take them. Save the nearly worthless aluminum coins (1, 2, 5 litai) to bring home as gifts to schoolkids.

Visas and other Logistics

I got my visa in a few days by taking all relevant documents in person to the Lithuanian Consulate in NY. No problems.

The postal service of Lithuania is notoriously slow and unreliable. It takes two to three weeks for a letter to reach the U.S. On the positive side, postal workers will wrap and label packages for a reasonable fee. Very importantly, buy electric currency converters after you arrive. They are much cheaper in Lithuania than in the U.S.

Transportation

Most people in Vilnius' Old Town walk or take a bus to work. Drivers always stop to allow pedestrians to cross the street at crosswalks! Many cars are parked on sidewalks or at crazy angles jutting out into the streets. City buses can be very crowded but the "trolley buses" never seem to get caught in traffic.

Traffic signs and rules are obviously different in Lithuania. Spending the time to learning the local driving rules and customs will mitigate the risk of driving improperly or having an accident.

Trains and buses can take you almost anywhere in the country. If in Lithuania in the winter, you will frequently walk on ice. We did well with stabilizers on our boots, but those with any mobility issues should consider the dangers.

Living in Klaipeda is quite inexpensive, perhaps half those of the US for most things (this is less true of things like electronics that are imported). Buses in the city are frequent, and you can get most places on them easily. Taxis are cheap in the city. Between cities, the recommendation is that you travel by bus or train (I prefer the train where available). Buses and minibuses run regularly to both Vilnius and Riga and to lots of small towns. Trains run less frequently. Both are clean, inexpensive, and run on time. Minibuses tend to run full and can get a little close. Air transport is best arranged from Vilnius or Riga, each of which is about 4 hours from Klaipeda by bus. Trains also run to Vilnius. Kaunas offers some discount airline travel. Flights to and from Palanga are infrequent and expensive. Though Riga is in Latvia, Air Baltic, their national carrier offers good prices to the west. You can also schedule ferries to various places on the Baltic and in Scandinavia from Riga. Klaipeda has a more limited array of those.

Don't be afraid to use public transportation. It's cheap, always on time and clean (although sometimes crowded). Unlike my travels to post-Soviet Central Asia, I didn't need to carry my passport (although I

did keep a photocopy in my backpack) except when I was visiting the U.S. Embassy, flying or traveling to Latvia and Estonia by bus.

Cabs are plentiful in Vilnius, but I urge you to avoid them at all costs. If the drivers think you are a foreigner, they will double or triple their prices. They contend that the fare is metered, but one can never be sure. A ride to the airport can cost 20 litas or 40 litas. You can try to negotiate a price, but most "hacks" charge what they want anyway.

Travel

With easy and inexpensive train and intercity bus travel, grantees should explore the country, and not just the major tourist sites. If you are directionally challenged like I am, you'll see even more than you expected, although not necessarily everything that you did expect. I stopped into a lot of religious institutions (Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish) to see their art and architecture and experienced several worship services, and museums large and small. I also highly recommend experimenting with cultural events, whether or not you understand the language -- among other things, I attended an opera, an adult puppet show and the "Sound of Music" in Lithuanian, a concert in Yiddish, and a little-known and somewhat outdated Broadway show in Estonian (on a side trip to Tartu), Stroll around the street festivals and crafts fairs. Accept invitations to visit people at their homes.

Check out local cemeteries for the stories they tell. And if you're in Lithuania on All Saints Day, visit a cemetery at night when relatives have lit candles and placed flowers on the graves.

Travel to Lithuania is easy as the major airports in Kaunas and Vilnius are well-linked to airports throughout Europe. Note that flight options for budget carriers such as RyanAir may not turn up in searches on web sites such as Travelocity. As I was based in Klaipeda I found it very convenient to fly from the US east coast to Copenhagen and then take a short flight directly to Palanga. Travel within Lithuania is also easy by train or bus and these, as well as taxis, are inexpensive by US standards. Rental cars are available but are relatively expensive not only due to the cost of the rental, but because of the price of gas.

I recommend that you budget money for travel within the country. The wonderful Lithuanian railways connect all the major cities; the trains are modern, quiet and clean; they run on-time; and they are inexpensive (usually 18 litas -- about \$8 U.S. -- from Vilnius to Kaunas, with at least five trains (including the faster "express trains" each day. There is one daily train to St. Petersburg, but it is a 22-hour overnight trip. You can take buses to anyplace in Lithuania, although their on-time departure and arrival record is spotty. Flights out of Vilnius airport to other European cities, i.e., Stockholm, Helsinki, Brussels, are cheap on Baltic Air or Ryan Air. Many people make the relatively short drive to Riga, Latvia, for even more destinations. A slow ferry crosses the Baltic Sea to the coasts of Sweden, Estonia and Finland. It is possible to board the ferry in Klaipeda, the only port city in Lithuania; again, most go to Riga to board. When visiting another city, use the Web to find the cheapest rates. Many hotels charge as much or more than similar U.S. hotels. Lots of people stay in the cheap and plentiful hostels in the big cities.

Websites and other helpful resources

Vilnius in your pocket is good. Available online. Otherwise, a lot of tourist info written about Lithuania seems to be created by twenty-something people who have never visited a city before. Before leaving for Lithuania, I also did a little background reading, but soon found the material was full of stereotypes in serious need of deconstruction.

Klaipeda in your pocket, Vilnius in your pocket and Lithuania in your pocket are useful as is Travel Advisory. I would be happy to provide web addresses to cultural venues for people coming to Klaipeda.

The tourism office staff in Kaunas proved helpful with directions, maps etc. In addition to the 2 guidebooks I brought, the In Your Pocket series (free on line for a lot of cities including Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipeda, Tartu, Riga and Tallinn) is excellent--events, hostels, restaurants, getting-around advice, sightseeing.

The Baltic Times is a weekly in English that was somewhat helpful in keeping up with "Americanized" news, but you have to subscribe to see full-text. (By the way, I learned that Bing translator and Google translator are surprisingly inept. Many of my students laughed at the translations, explaining the programs do not reflect an understanding of Lithuanian grammar and syntax. Any government agency, and most businesses such as restaurants, has its own Web site. Almost all of the text can be translated into English. I used Skype (free) to avoid prohibitive costs for international calling. I never mastered the local cell phone calling system, so I rarely called anyone outside the university. Your American-made phone will not work in Lithuania, so plan to get one made in Europe.