

LITHUANIA

PREFACE

What a tiny drop of amber is my country, a transparent golden crystal by the sea. -S. Neris

Lithuania, a small and beautiful country on the coast of the Baltic Sea, has often inspired artists. From poets to amber jewelers, painters to musicians, and composers to basketball champions — Lithuania has them all. Ancient legends and modern ideas coexist in this green and vibrant land.

Lithuania is strategically located as the eastern boundary of the European Union with the Commonwealth of Independent States. It sits astride both sea and land routes connecting North to South and East to West. The uniqueness of its location is revealed in the variety of architecture, history, art, folk tales, local crafts, and even the restaurants of the capital city, Vilnius.

Lithuania was the last European country to embrace Roman Catholicism and has one of the oldest living languages on earth. Foreign and local investment is modernizing the face of the country, but the diverse cultural life still includes folk song festivals, outdoor markets, and mid-summer celebrations as well as opera, ballet and drama. This blend of traditional with a strong desire to become part of the new community of nations in Europe makes Lithuania a truly vibrant and exciting place to live.

Occasionally contradictory, Lithuania is always interesting. You will sense the history around you and see history in the making as you enjoy a stay in this unique and unforgettable country.

AREA, GEOGRAPHY, AND CLIMATE

Lithuania, covering an area of 26,173 square miles, is the largest of the three Baltic States, slightly larger than West Virginia. The country lies on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea at approximately the same latitude as Denmark and Scotland. Lithuania's neighbors are Latvia to the north, Belarus to the east and south, and Poland and the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation to the south and southwest. After a re-estimation of the boundaries of the continent of Europe in 1989, the Institut Géographique National (French National Geographic Institute) determined that the Geographic Centre of Europe is located at 54°54'N25°19'E. Institute have discovered that the geographical centre of Europe is situated just 25 kilometres north of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania more info at <http://www.balticervers.com/lithuania-centre-of-Europe>

A country known for its agrarian and wooded beauty, Lithuania is characterized by flat plains and rolling hills. The highest hill, Juozapine, is only 964 feet above sea level. Roughly one-fourth of the territory is covered by woodlands, consisting mainly of pine, spruce, and birch. One of the oldest oak trees in Europe, found in eastern Lithuania, is said to be about 1,500 years old. The

forests are home to a variety of animals including elk, foxes, and wild boar; hunting is a popular pastime. Lithuanians especially enjoy mushroom collecting and berry picking.

More than 700 rivers and creeks crisscross Lithuania. The largest river, the Nemunas, was once a strategically important shipping route through Lithuania. Its banks are dotted with castles and fortresses. There are numerous lakes, especially in eastern Lithuania, where the Aukstatija National Park is located. Three other National parks are located in Dzūkija, Žemaitija and Suvalkija.

Lithuania's climate is moderate. Summer brings average temperatures of 65°F and plentiful rain. July is the warmest month. Summer days are long, with only a few hours of darkness. Winters tend to be cold, damp, and overcast. Temperatures average about 30°F, and days are short. Average annual precipitation amounts to about 26 inches.

POPULATION

The Republic of Lithuania is home to 3,200,000 people. Approximately 83.7% are ethnically Lithuanian; 6.6 % Polish; 5.3% Russian or Russian-speaking; 1.3% Belarusian; and the remaining are Ukrainians, Latvians, Germans, Jews and other nationalities.

The capital, Vilnius, with 541,000 inhabitants, has an international flavor: 63,2% are Lithuanians, 16,5% are Poles, and 12% are Russians. It is believed that the name of Vilnius originated from the River Vilnelė, which had an original name Vilnia.

Other major cities are Kaunas, the interwar capital (362,000 inhabitants), the port city of Klaipėda (193,000), Šiauliai (129,000), and Panevėžys (116,000).

Sixty-eight percent of the population lives in cities and towns.

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

On the leading edge of the processes that led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Lithuania today faces great challenges as it builds a democratic state and struggles to rid itself of the legacy of 50 years of Soviet domination. The United States never recognized Lithuania's forced incorporation into the USSR and maintained continuous ties with representatives of the interwar government in exile. The United States resumed diplomatic relations with an in-country government in September 1991.

In the late 1980s, Gorbachev's policy of "perestroika" allowed the deeply hidden aspirations of the Lithuanian nation to surface. "Sąjūdis," a movement that began in support of perestroika, quickly snowballed into a full-fledged drive for independence. Despite warnings and threats from the Kremlin, Lithuanians, led by a distinguished musicologist, Vytautas Landsbergis, reclaimed their independence when the new, democratically elected Supreme Council voted on March 11, 1990, to reestablish the Lithuanian Republic.

The country persevered in its independence movement despite an economic blockade imposed by Moscow and Soviet Army operations that left 23 dead in 1991. The collapse of the Moscow coup in August 1991 led to international, including Russian, recognition of Lithuania's independence.

Lithuania's struggle to transform itself into a free-market democracy has been difficult but successful. As in other central and Eastern European countries, the society was buffeted by economic dislocation, weak markets, a crumbling infrastructure, a bloated public sector, and a shallow understanding of working democracy.

Accession to NATO and the European Union in 2004 cemented Lithuania's commitment to democracy and market economics, two values it now works to export to other former Soviet states.

HISTORY (15TH CENTURY – 1990)

Lithuanians have a long historical memory. They recall the glorious medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which reached its zenith under the rule of Grand Duke Vytautas the Great. It was he and Jagiello (Jogaila in Lithuanian), King of Poland, who led the joint Polish-Lithuanian troops to victory against the Teutonic Knights in the Battle of Tannenberg/Gruenwald (Zalgiris, in Lithuanian) in 1410 and stopped the medieval German drive eastward. Under Vytautas, the territory of the Grand Duchy extended from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

After Vytautas's death, the political importance of the Grand Duchy slowly declined. In 1569, to counter the growing strength of the Russian state, the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy were formally united in a Commonwealth. The head of that union was elected King by the nobility. Following a series of partitions in the 18th century, this Commonwealth was wiped off the European map in 1795 as Russia, Austria, and Prussia partitioned its lands. Most of Lithuania fell under Russian rule, while a smaller portion near the Baltic coast was appropriated by Prussia.

For the next 123 years, Lithuania experienced intense repression and Russification. Vilnius University was closed (1832), and the Latin alphabet was banned (1864). But as repression increased, so did the determination of a growing Lithuanian intelligentsia to retain Lithuanian culture, language, and traditions.

Taking advantage of the political turmoil in Russia near the end of the First World War, Lithuania declared independence on February 16, 1918. Wars to affirm this independence were fought against the Red Army, the Polish Army, and combined German-Russian mercenary forces, which plundered broad areas in the Baltic States. Polish occupation of the Vilnius region in 1920 was a breach of the Treaty of Suwalki with Poland, which confirmed Lithuanian rights to Vilnius. This step hopelessly strained Polish-Lithuanian relations between the wars. It rendered cooperation in the face of greater menaces in 1939 impossible.

During the interwar years of independence, Kaunas became the provisional capital. Lithuania reached a living standard equal to that of Denmark and had one of the most stable currencies in the world.

Lithuanian independence was to be short-lived. The secret Molotov-Von Ribbentrop protocols between Germany and the USSR led to Soviet occupation in June 1940. During this first occupation, large-scale repression took place, and about 40,000 people were exiled to Siberia. When Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, the Lithuanians attempted to

reestablish an independent republic by revolting against the Soviets. In the face of the German Occupation, this effort failed. Under Nazi control, more than 200,000 Jews were murdered (95% of the Jewish population of Lithuania), the highest proportion in Europe. This genocide wiped out a major center of Jewish culture and learning that had thrived in Vilnius (once known as the “Jerusalem of the North”) since the Middle Ages. Tens of thousands of Lithuanians were deported to the Reich for manual labor.

Soviet troops and terror returned in 1944. Another 250,000 Lithuanians were deported to the Siberian Gulag. Over 100,000 lives were lost in a guerrilla war against the Soviets that lasted until 1953. Virtually no family was left untouched by the horrors of the Second World War and the Soviet Occupation.

Lithuania spent the next 45 years as a Soviet Republic. The Soviets restored lands occupied by Poland and Germany in the interwar and wartime years. Lithuanian exiles in the West, especially the United States, kept the flame of an independent nation alive, along with Lithuania's culture and traditions. The Lithuanian diplomatic service continued to function in countries (including the United States) that refused to recognize Lithuania's incorporation into the USSR. Inside Lithuania, many Lithuanians attempted to resist Sovietization. Armed resistance (by the so-called “forest brothers”) continued sporadically until the early 1950s. Lithuania escaped Soviet-imposed industrialization, sparing itself the large influx of Russian workers that occurred in Estonia and Latvia. Despite these modest successes, life under the Soviets was hard. Moscow repressed any overt expression of Lithuanian national aspirations; however, with determination and perseverance, Lithuanians were able to preserve their culture, language, and traditions.

ARTS, SCIENCE, AND EDUCATION

“Folk art is the foundation of a nation's artistic tradition,” said Mykalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis (1875-1911), Lithuania's most renowned painter and composer. Lithuania's art reflects its agrarian heritage. It has a rich tradition of music, dance, folklore, architecture, wooden sculpture, and applied folk arts. Currently, there is intense research on authentic folk culture. Ethnographic ensembles, both professional and amateur, perform the music and songs that accompanied earlier generations of Lithuanians throughout life.

Song and music remain important means of expression for the Lithuanian people today. The struggle for independence from the Soviet Union was characterized by many as the “Singing Revolution.” Unarmed, the people faced down the military might of the Soviets by standing side by side, drawing strength from the lyrical songs of their forebears.

Throughout the year, there are a variety of cultural, folk and arts festivals, including jazz festivals. International performers, including jazz musicians from the States, regularly visit Lithuania, and Vilnius was the European Union’s “European Capital of Culture” for the year 2009.

In the Soviet period, cultural life was state-subsidized and censored. Even during that time, Lithuania achieved excellence in many of the performing arts, including classical music, opera, ballet, and theater. Released from the censor's shackles and responding more directly to the

public's tastes and needs, the fine arts and music scene has developed in independent Lithuania in new, different directions. Especially noteworthy are the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theater, the National Ballet and Opera Theater, the National Philharmonic, the Vilnius Little Theater, and the Kaunas Musical Theater. Theaters often offer simultaneous interpretation in English.

Lithuania has a high literacy rate, reveres poets and writers, and has an international book fair each year. Lithuanians also love to watch and make movies. Foreign film makers are also present, increasingly employing Lithuania as a locale for their productions.

Children enter elementary school at age seven, and education is compulsory until age 16. Lithuania has 15 state and seven private universities, including the Fine Arts Academy, the Academy of Music and Theater, a pedagogical university, and Kaunas Technological University. Another 16 state and 12 private colleges in Lithuania grant diplomas but not bachelor degrees. Vilnius University, founded in 1579 by Jesuits, is the oldest and largest higher education institution in the country, with an enrollment of over 23,000 students. Broad educational reform is now under review.

COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY

Lithuania is a nation with high average income. It is a member country of the European Union and is the largest economy among three Baltic countries. In 2011, the gross domestic product (PPP) was estimated at \$59.825 billion, while the per capita stood at \$18,278. Major industries include biotechnology, tourism, wood processing, paper industry, construction, real estate, and food processing. The country exports minerals, machinery, and chemical products, while the major imports include machinery, mineral products, and chemical or allied industry products. Russia, Poland, Germany, and Latvia are the principal trading partners. Today, the Lithuanian government, along with the governments of Estonia, Latvia, and Poland, plans to build a new nuclear plant to replace the old one. The Mazeikiai oil refinery produces refined petroleum products for domestic use and export. Crude oil is imported almost exclusively from Russia. In addition to electricity and refined oil products, Lithuania's exports include food (mainly meat and dairy products), machinery and parts, and light industrial products. Major imports include crude oil, gas, metals, chemicals, machinery, consumer goods, and feed grain. Trade has shifted dramatically to the West, which accounts for about 60% of Lithuania's foreign commerce.

Almost all enterprises in Lithuania have been privatized, with a few exceptions in the energy and transport sectors. Foreign investment remains modest. Poland, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Finland have been the largest sources of foreign direct investment. The United States is the eleventh largest foreign investor. Major U.S. companies active in Lithuania include Philip Morris, Kraft Foods, Masterfoods, McDonald's, IBM, AIG, Coca-Cola, Avon, Eli Lilly, Microsoft, UPS, and Ochocho Lumber.

TRANSPORTATION

Automobiles

The main roads and highways between major cities are serviceable. During the winter months, snow and freezing conditions also feature as driving hazards, as the roads are not well plowed. All weather tires are required, and front-wheel or four-wheel drive is recommended. Auto rental from private vendors for specific trips is available for those not owning a car. Both lower- and higher-octane unleaded gasoline is available nationwide. Prices are comparable to U.S. prices. Parts and repairs for U.S.-made vehicles are increasingly easy to acquire. Car dealerships found in Lithuania include Mercedes, Ford, Honda, Volvo, VW, and Mazda. Charges for maintenance and repair at the dealerships are high, and replacement parts are expensive. Crime is a concern for owners of late-model vehicles, especially expensive sport/recreation vehicles. Theft of such vehicles is not uncommon.

Local Transportation

The local transportation system includes electric trolley buses and diesel buses. They run regularly during the day throughout the city. Mini-buses also run regular routes throughout the city and are inexpensive. Radio-dispatched cabs are available 24 hours. They are reliable but rather expensive (USD 10.00-30.00 to virtually anywhere in the city and averaging USD 40 from the airport into town). Calling a cab is almost half the price of a cab hailed on the street.

Regional Transportation

Intercity buses and trains are not renowned for comfort or speed, except the express train between Kaunas and Vilnius. "Eurolines" buses run between all the Baltic capitals, Warsaw, Berlin and some other European cities. The overnight train to St. Petersburg or Moscow is acceptable; reserving the entire compartment is recommended.

Air Baltic, Polish Airlines, Lufthansa, SAS, Finnair, KLM and Austrian Air offer regular service from Vilnius to major European destinations. Ticket prices are competitive. Ryan Air offers inexpensive flights from Kaunas to Dublin, Frankfurt, Liverpool, and London. A ferry connects Klaipeda with the German port of Kiel, and Denmark-to-Klaipeda ferry service is also available. Riga and Tallinn, four and eight hours by car, respectively, offer ferry service to Scandinavia.

COMMUNICATIONS

Telephones and Telecommunications

Long-distance calls can be made from home through Vonage, Skype, or other internet calling services. It is highly advisable to purchase mobile phones while in the country. The main three providers Omnitel, Bite and Tele 2 are recommended.

Internet

Several reliable Internet Service Providers are available for private residential use. Most residences use Teo, which is the largest provider in the country. Standard 56Kbps dial-up services typically cost an average of USD 35.00 per month, including local phone charges. ISDN services are available for an average of USD 45.00 per month, including local phone charges.

Mail

International mail is reliable with no reported cases of theft or pilferage. DHL, UPS and Federal Express services also deliver.

Radio and TV

Virtually all Lithuanian households own televisions, and nearly two thirds have cable. Lithuania has over 50 cable companies, many of whom offer English-language BBC, British Sky News, Cartoon Network, CNN International, The Animal Planet, Travel Channel, TCM Movies, MTV, and some sports channels. Digital television is available throughout the country. Lithuania uses the PAL system. Multi-system television sets can be ordered from European vendors or bought in Vilnius.

Lithuanian FM radio carries a wide range of news and music, including BBC in English. Out of the many public and privately owned radio stations in Lithuania, only ten reach a national audience. Of these, Lithuanian National Radio broadcasts three nationwide channels with news programs and commentary.

Newspapers, Magazines, and Journals

The top dailies are Lietuvos Rytas, Respublika, Kauno Diena, and Vakaro Zinios. Lithuania also has influential news magazines like Veidas, business publications such as Verslo Klase, Valstybe, and specialty magazines covering beauty and society. Locally published English-language weeklies, The Baltic Times and Lithuania Today, as well as some Western dailies and magazines are available either at newsstands or by subscription.

HEALTH AND MEDICINE

Medical Facilities

In Vilnius, most Western European medicines and treatments are sold in drugstores (“vaistine”). A number of spas and personal hygiene/cosmetology businesses have opened in the last few years.

Community Health

Periodic outbreaks of serious infectious illness strike the Lithuanian population. Hepatitis is a concern, especially when traveling. TBE (tick-borne encephalitis) incidents increase every year. Rabies incidents continue to occur and vaccination is necessary.

Preventive Measures

Fluoride supplements are recommended for children as the city water is not fluoridated. Vitamin supplements are beneficial, especially in the winter months. Although biological contamination in Vilnius is rare and drinking the water is safe, some individuals prefer filtered or bottled water because of the city water’s heavy mineral and metal content. Bottled water is recommended outside of the Vilnius area.

VILNIUS

Vilnius, the capital city, is situated at the confluence of the Neris and Vilnele Rivers in southeastern Lithuania. Vilnius is 180 miles from the Baltic Sea and just 21 miles from the Belarusian border. The city comprises an area of 100 square miles, of which one-third is forests, parks, and gardens. The city is surrounded by wooded hills.

Vilnius is the heart of Lithuania's political, economic, cultural, and public life. The Old Town is one of the largest in Eastern Europe, encompassing 74 blocks, 70 streets and lanes, and over 1,200 buildings. UNESCO named it a World Heritage Site in 1994. The buildings in the Old Town were constructed over the course of five centuries, reflecting many styles of architecture. Unfortunately, the Old Town suffered from severe neglect for many years, and is just beginning the process of renovation. Like the Old Town, other sections of the city have recently undergone renovation, but many are still in need of repair, especially those built during the Soviet period. These neighborhoods are typical of the planned "micro-regions" of the Soviet era: very large apartment buildings, with stores, schools, and recreation areas nearby.

Gedimino Prospektas (Avenue), which leads from the Cathedral out of Old Town to the Parliament (Seimas), is re-establishing its position as the city's main shopping street. After constant renovation over the last few years, Gedimino now features several new shopping centers with western European retail chains along with coffee shops, bars, and international restaurants.

Large greenbelts, parks, and winding rivers make the city pleasant in the summer. Many restaurants set up outdoor seating areas in the Old Town squares.

History

Although archaeological findings show that the area was inhabited well over 2,000 years ago, the founding of Vilnius dates to 1323 when Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas established the city and made it his capital.

In the 15th century, Jewish immigrants fleeing persecution in Western Europe began arriving in Lithuania. By the 16th century, Vilnius had become such a center of Jewish culture and learning that it came to be known as the "Jerusalem of the North."

Foreign forces repeatedly passed through and ravaged the city in the 18th and 19th centuries. Predominantly under Russian rule during this period, Vilnius became a hotbed of dissent against the tsarist government.

The interwar period in Vilnius was much different from that in other parts of Lithuania. When Lithuania declared independence in 1918 at the end of the World War I, its borders were not well-defined; the same was also true of the newly restored Polish state. Skirmishes with Poland began almost immediately, and continued during the short but intense Polish-Soviet War of 1920. Following a separate truce and the signing of the Treaty of Suwalki, renegade Polish troops under General Zeligowski, with unofficial approval from the Pilsudski Government, invaded Vilnius and its surrounding territory. The League of Nations was not able to resolve the Polish-Lithuanian conflict, and Vilnius remained under Polish administration until 1939. During that time, the city was a multiethnic center with large numbers of Polish, Jewish, and Belarusian inhabitants. At the beginning of World War II, 30% of Vilnius' population was Jewish. After the

signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, Lithuania was subject to both Soviet and Nazi occupation. A treaty with the Soviets returned Vilnius to Lithuania in exchange for the placement of Red Army bases on Lithuanian territory. The first Soviet occupation followed shortly after in 1940.

The German invasion and occupation followed one year later in June 1941, and lasted until 1944. During this time, mass executions took place in the nearby Forest of Paneriai. One-third of Vilnius residents, including most of the Jewish population, were killed. The rich Jewish culture that had flourished in Vilnius since the Middle Ages was virtually annihilated.

The Soviets reoccupied Vilnius on July 13, 1944. By the end of the war, only half the prewar population remained. The city had no water, electricity, means of transport, or modern communications. All industrial enterprises had been destroyed, and 42% of the city's residential areas and 20% of its architectural monuments were in ruins.

Vilnius became the capital of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, and the population steadily grew as the city was rebuilt. The Soviets constructed huge apartment complexes and established new industries.

Until independence from the Soviet Union, Vilnius was home to the only university in Lithuania and to several other institutions of higher education. The city attracted students, artists, professionals, and workers. Many people from other Soviet republics were relocated to Vilnius to work. Vilnius also served as headquarters for units of the former Red Army, including the troops that assaulted the television and radio tower on January 13, 1991.

SECURITY

Lithuania is a relatively safe country with very little anti-American sentiment. Although Vilnius has a low level of crime, visitors should take standard precautions, as in any other large urban area. Crimes of opportunity – pick-pocketing, car break-ins and theft - are most common. Most crimes happen at night or in the early morning hours. After dark, visitors should stay in pairs, exercise common sense, and avoid isolated areas. Visitors are encouraged to leave any valuables in their hotel safes.

Recently, non-Caucasian residents in Klaipeda have been the victims of racially motivated crimes. Though such violence has been rare in Vilnius, non-Caucasians do stand out in this homogenous society and tend to draw attention. Though most of this attention is benign in nature, non-Caucasians should be aware that local inhabitants may seem inordinately interested in them.

UTILITIES

Electricity is 220v, 50-cycle, AC. Occasionally, voltage may waver plus or minus 5%. Transformers and surge protectors are necessary for American 110v appliances, especially computers and other sensitive equipment.

FOOD

Grocery stores in Vilnius have improved markedly in the last few years, and food prices are still lower than in the United States in most cases. Almost everything is available, though fresh produce is seasonal and can occasionally be hard to find. Most food imports come from the EU.

CLOTHING

Lithuania is a northern country with a generally cool climate. Most of the country's houses are heated with natural gas, while inner-city apartments have electric or steam heat. In spring, the city steam heat is turned off, and apartments on the city heating system can get cool. The heating system is turned back on in fall, usually after the first freeze. Bring comfortable, warm clothes to wear in the house. In winter, space heaters boost the heat level where needed, but are usually not necessary.

Although many winter clothing items are available locally, many visitors prefer to bring winter wear, including thermal or silk underwear, from the United States.

SUPPLIES AND SERVICES

Supplies

Almost any goods available in Western Europe are available in Lithuania, though the price may be higher. There are large grocery store/mall complexes, and more are under construction. Many, but not all, prescription drugs are available. For unusual or continuous-use prescription drugs, it is best to have a supplier in the United States. Over-the-counter drugs can be found locally, but if you prefer Tylenol-based products they must be ordered via the internet. Seasonal items such as Christmas and birthday decorations and wrapping paper are available in most supermarkets or specialty shops.

Basic Services

Dressmakers and tailors offer good service, and prices are slightly lower than the United States. You should, however, bring patterns and photos. Dry-cleaning is readily available, although at prices higher than in the States. Barbers and hairstylists are omnipresent. Ask around among the community for salon recommendations. Automobile service and repairs are easily accessed. Some specialty items for autos may have to be ordered from the manufacturer, which can be difficult and expensive to arrange.

RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

Lithuania is a predominantly Roman Catholic country. Vilnius also offers Russian Orthodox, Jewish, Lutheran, Baptist and Reformed services. English-language Catholic, International Protestant, Baptist, and Latter-day Saint services are held every Sunday.

EDUCATION

Dependent Education

The American International School of Vilnius was founded in 1992. It currently has over 100 students from 20 different countries in grades pre-kindergarten (age 3) through 10th grade (<http://www.aisv.lt/>). Other schools in Vilnius include Vilnius International School (<http://vischool.lt>), and local Montessori schools (children from age two and up).

RECREATION AND SOCIAL LIFE

Sports

Lithuania offers many opportunities to play or watch both outdoor and indoor sports. Basketball is the national pastime; Lithuanians love to watch and play basketball. Soccer and baseball are also popular, especially for kids. Tennis courts are available. Fishing is possible year-round, and good riding stables are just outside of town. Many people also enjoy cross-country skiing. The Hash House Harriers are active in Vilnius; hashes are run every other Sunday.

Touring and Outdoor Activities

The Old Town of Vilnius is very attractive, with exquisite examples of gothic and baroque architecture such as the Church of St. Anne. It is said that when Napoleon passed through Vilnius on his way to Moscow, he was so impressed with the small church that he wanted to "carry the church back to France in the palm of his hand."

The 475-year-old Vilnius University is a wonderful ensemble of buildings and beautiful courtyards. All of the different architectural styles seen in Vilnius are represented here. The neoclassical cathedral and its bell tower (a perfect meeting place) stand at the foot of Castle Hill. From the top of that hill, the famous Tower of Gediminas dominates the skyline from Old Town. In October 1988, the national flag of independent Lithuania was raised above the tower in place of the Soviet Republic banner.

Trakai, the medieval capital of Lithuania, is 18 miles southwest of Vilnius, situated in a beautiful area of recreational lakes, forests, and hills. This stronghold and former residence of Lithuanian Grand Dukes has been meticulously restored. The whole complex stands on an island. Trakai is also home to a small minority of Karaites, a tribe of Turkic people, who were brought to Lithuania by Grand Duke Vytautas in the 14th century to serve as his bodyguards.

Kaunas, the second largest city in Lithuania, is 60 miles west of Vilnius at the fork between the country's two largest rivers, the Nemunas and Neris. It is said that Napoleon Bonaparte stood at that fork and said, "Here begin the great steppes of Russia." Kaunas served as Lithuania's interwar capital. With Lithuanians making up 89 percent of its population, Kaunas often claims to be more "Lithuanian" than Vilnius. Kaunas' Old Town is charming and boasts a pleasant Parisian-style walking mall. Museums there include the Ciurlionis Gallery and the Devils' Museum. The former is a shrine to an early nationalist composer; the latter contains hundreds of depictions of devils celebrating Lithuania's Christian and pagan folk art past.

Rumsiskes, located between Vilnius and Kaunas, has an open-air museum of Lithuanian peasant life. Although Lithuania is a small country, it is divided into four distinct regions: Zemaitija (lowlands), Aukštaitija (highlands), Dzukija, and Suvalkija (south, near Poland). The museum's exhibits, brought to Rumsiskes from all over the country, are representative of these four regions. Easter is an especially good time to see the thatched farmhouses, take part in the Easter Egg Roll (like marbles, but with decorated eggs), and sample the simple cooking of Lithuania's past. In summer, the Rumsiskes Folk Music Ensemble creates an authentic country atmosphere and encourages spectator participation.

Siauliai, a three-hour drive from Vilnius, is home to the Hill of Crosses. This shrine is located on a small hill, upon which thousands of Christian crosses of all sizes have been placed on top of one another. Over the centuries, the Hill of Crosses has come to signify the peaceful endurance of Lithuanian Catholicism and nationalism despite the threats it has faced throughout history. Erecting Latin crosses on the hill was forbidden by the Czarist Russian Orthodox authorities in 1800s. In the twentieth century, the Soviet authorities also forbade such explicit religious symbols. In 1961, 1973 and 1975, the hill was bulldozed and the crosses burned by Soviet authorities. Despite Soviet prohibitions, Lithuanians continued to place crucifixes and crosses on the hill. Pope John Paul II visited the hill during his visit to Lithuania in 1993 because it exemplified anti-Communist Catholic resistance. Visitors to the Hill of Crosses may place their own crosses on the hill.

For nature lovers, Lithuania offers the striking contrasts of the Baltic sand dunes of Nida, the seemingly infinite forests and lakes of the east, and the spas of Druskininkiai and Birštonas.

Entertainment

Cultural life in Lithuania is rich and varied. One has only to look at the schedule of events at the Opera and Ballet Theater or the Philharmonic to plan for an evening well spent. When the weather turns cool, operas and ballets offer respite from cold, grey skies. The Academic Theater, State Youth Theater, Russian Drama Theater, and Little Theater of Vilnius all produce plays by internationally known playwrights. Some knowledge of Lithuanian or Russian is necessary to follow the action. There are several movie theaters, all of which show films in their original language.

Folk music lovers will not be disappointed in Lithuania. Every year in May, a weeklong celebration of folk music takes place in Old Town. Tangible, lasting expressions of Lithuanian folk culture are captured in ceramics, textiles, and leather goods. "Daile" (art) galleries are abundant in the cities.

NOTES FOR TRAVELERS

There are no direct flights from the United States to Lithuania. Several European airlines, including SAS, Lufthansa, and KLM, offer service to and from Vilnius to the United States from major European air hubs. The most popular route from the Washington area is to fly from Dulles to Frankfurt via United/Lufthansa, and then continue to Vilnius via either United/Lufthansa or Air Baltic.

CURRENCY, BANKING, AND WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

The unit of currency is the litas, which since 2002 has been pegged to the euro at the exchange rate EUR 1:LTL 3.45 under a currency board arrangement. Credit cards are accepted at more and more businesses. ATM (automatic teller machines) are located in all the larger cities of Lithuania.

Lithuania uses the metric system.

RECOMMENDED READING

These titles are provided as a general indication of the material published in this country. The Department of State does not endorse unofficial publications.

Hidden, John and Patrick Salmon. *The Baltic Nations and Europe: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Twentieth Century.*

Iwaskiw, Walter R. *Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania: Country Studies*

Lieven, Anatol. *The Baltic Revolution Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence, Revised and Update*

Laimonas Briedis. *Vilnius: City of Strangers*, book discussion, Rizzoli Bookstore, New York, NY, 2009

Misiunas and Taagepera. *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence.*

Snyder, Timothy. *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999*

Vardys, Vytas Stanley and Sedaitis, Judith B. *Lithuania: The Rebel Nation (Westview Series on the Post-Soviet Republics)*