

THE NEXT BIG THING: LITHUANIA

Vilnius will be European Capital of Culture in 2009, but don't wait until then to visit Lithuania, says **Martin Li**

THE MORNING MIST rolls gently across a glassy lake lined by beaches and endless pine forests. Paddling a canoe towards the lake along a narrow river overhung by low branches, I can hear nothing but the paddles pulling through the clear water and the occasional chirping of birds. Shoals of small fish dart around the boat.

Through sporadic breaks in the trees, scattered wooden farmsteads stand silently on the riverbank, small boats moored beside their rickety jetties. Potatoes and cabbages grow on small plots of land, next to which lie ploughs and other ancient farming implements. We pass a pair of white goats and a grazing cow, but nothing else stirs.

Mooring the canoe at the far end of the lake, I climb the short distance to the summit of Ladakalnis Hill, a site once used to make sacrifices to a pagan goddess regarded as the mother of the world. Surveying the panorama

around me, I can count six lakes bordered by vast forests of pine and oak, in which lurk wild boar, wolves, elk and deer. Although I can see for miles around, there are no other people and not a sign of human habitation. In whichever direction I look, I am enveloped by the profound, unspoilt, watery stillness of Lithuania's Aukštaitija National Park.

UNSPOILT AND UNKNOWN

The largest and southernmost of the three Baltic republics, Lithuania was the first to throw off its Soviet shackles following a peaceful revolution in 1990. In the years that followed, Lithuania joined the EU and NATO, and is re-establishing its status as a thriving independent state.

Having only recently enjoyed the same level of promotion as its Baltic neighbours, Lithuania remains unspoilt, but also relatively unknown. Phil Teubler, owner, Baltic Holidays, says: "Of the three Baltic states, Lithuania is the least visited and Vilnius the least commercialised capital."

Many still think of the country as a Soviet backwater: poor, unattractive and unsafe. Teubler continues: "Many people think Lithuania is more backward than it in fact is. The main thing is to have the confidence to persuade people to go there and see for themselves just what a developed and attractive destination it is."

For travellers arriving in Vilnius, any negative preconceptions are likely to be dispelled in minutes. Vilnius is a beautiful, captivating and cosmopolitan capital bearing few scars of the Soviet architecture that blights many former communist cities.

Narrow cobbled lanes wind towards the heart of the medieval Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. All around stand beautiful university buildings, ornate churches and other splendid Baroque monuments. Atmospheric bars and restaurants, high-quality accommodation and a wealth of cultural and historical attractions demand

that visitors spend several days here, soaking up the relaxed culture and hunting for amber and linen bargains, the main local souvenirs.

Understandably, Lithuanians don't enjoy recalling the dark days of Soviet occupation. However, the legacies of that era will fascinate many visitors, in particular Vilnius's Museum of Genocide Victims, which, according to Teubler, "you'd be mad to go to Vilnius and not visit". The museum occupies the former KGB headquarters and the building's basement cells and torture chambers have been preserved largely as they were when they housed political prisoners, some of whom now act as tour guides.

The Užupis Republic, Vilnius's picturesque bohemian quarter, has little lanes and courtyards leading from its main street. Užupis also has its own flag and constitution (displayed on a wall in Paupio Street) and celebrates its 'independence' each year on April Fools' Day, when visitors to the quarter get their passports stamped.

Although invariably bracketed with Estonia and Latvia, Lithuania is quite different, not least because of its long history as an independent nation. In 2009, Lithuania will celebrate its millennium: 1,000 years since it was first mentioned in a Latin chronicle. That same year, Vilnius will be European Capital of Culture, the first post-communist bloc city to be awarded this title.

In addition to its capital's cultural claims, Lithuania also lays claim to be at the exact centre of Europe. The French National Geographic Institute calculated a point ▶

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▶ **NUMBER OF UK VISITORS:** Lithuania is fast growing in popularity with UK travellers. It received nearly 40,000 UK visitors in 2006, according to hotel statistics. This is a rise of 21% over 2005, which itself saw growth of almost 45% over 2004.

▶ **CONTACT:** Lithuanian Tourism Information Centre, T: 020 7034 1222, www.lithuaniantourism.co.uk

▶ **CAMPAIGN:** Vilnius will be European Capital of Culture in 2009 – the first post-communist city to gain this accolade. A celebration of arts, cultural and historical events will take place up to 2009. 'Let There Be Night' on 22 June 2009 will see Vilnius staging many events; parks will turn into cinemas and the river will become a concert platform.

▶ **GEOGRAPHY:** Lithuania has a flat landscape of low hills, rivers, lakes and forests. Its 60-mile Baltic coast offers fine sandy beaches backed by dunes.



Trakai's island castle

15 miles north of Vilnius — now marked by a large sundial — to be the geographical centre of the continent, although not everyone (particularly from rival countries for this title!) accepts these calculations.

Lithuania isn't a large country (it's total area is 40,389 sq m), so many attractions lie within easy reach of Vilnius. Trakai, briefly the national capital, lies on a narrow peninsula between forests and lakes, 15 miles from Vilnius. The town is famous for its dramatic island castle and the many watersports that can be enjoyed in the surrounding lake. During Trakai's Medieval Festival, you can eat roast suckling pig, drink sweet mead and watch knights fighting in the castle courtyard.

Trakai's main street is lined with the colourful wooden houses of Karaite (Karaim) settlers. This small community of Turkish origin maintains its own traditions, language and faith, and traces its roots back to the eighth century. Nearby, local operators provide off-road driving experiences and air boating excursions into swamps and streams. Swamp walking (wading at night without torches through chest-high swamps) is supposedly very popular with 'extreme' Russian tourists, although it might take longer to catch on among British visitors.

FAMILY APPEAL

Lithuania offers excellent value for families, but doesn't compete with ultra-cheap package resorts like Benidorm. "Lithuania attracts a

middle-class market," says Baltic Holidays' Teubler. "It appeals to people who have done a fair amount of travelling and are looking for somewhere unique, refreshing and only a couple of hours away."

With its safe environment and plenty of activities for children, like cycling, trekking, watersports and rural activities, Lithuania is ideal for families. The Aukštaitija narrow gauge railway offers superb entertainment for all ages. Music, food, folklore and romantic journeys to an 18th-century monastery will appeal to adults. All ages will enjoy the lively tours of the railway museum led by jocular enthusiasts, picnic or barbecue journeys and mock train robberies suffered at the hands of the Lithuanian Robin Hood.

COASTAL ATTRACTIONS

The Baltic coast is only four to five hours' drive from the capital. A fine sandy beach backed by dunes and forest runs its 60-mile length. Although the summer season is short, the Baltic Sea is shallow and warms up quickly. Palanga is Lithuania's premier beach resort and during summer, its population can swell more than fivefold as Lithuanians flock to its round-the-clock party atmosphere.

Much more relaxing is the beautiful fishing village of Nida, one of four villages that line the lagoon (eastern) side of the Curonian Spit. This narrow sandbar stretches from the border of the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad to the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda, 30 miles

away, and offers some of Lithuania's most enthralling landscapes.

For even greater relaxation, Lithuania's spas offer pampering at only a fraction of the cost of comparable treatments in the UK. Virtually the entire town of Druskininkai, two hours south-west of Vilnius, is a sanatorium. Visitors descend on its famous fountain on the banks of the Nemunas River to splash in its healing water. Outside the summer months, the party capital of Palanga also offers refreshing spa breaks and peaceful relaxation.

Back in Aukštaitija National Park, I dream of paddling further into this watery wilderness. There are 127 lakes here, mostly inter-connected by small rivers and channels. It is possible to paddle for miles, even to the Baltic Sea, without getting out of your canoe.

With wide open spaces, few people and limited English signage outside the main cities, travelling in Lithuania retains a pioneering feel. This is a feeling I plan to experience again in this pristine corner of the Baltic.

SAMPLES

► **Baltic Holidays** offers an eight-day Lithuania Highlights tour, including Vilnius, Kaunas and Aukštaitija National Park, from £759 per person twin share, including flights, accommodation and excursions. T: 0845 070 5711. www.balticholidays.com

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ROOMS

Vilnius offers high-quality accommodation, with several fine hotels — new or recently renovated — in and around the Old Town. Rural standards are lower, though farmsteads offer traditional charm.

► **Holiday Inn:** Vilnius. High-quality modern hotel 10 minutes from the Old Town. T: 00 370 5210 3000. www.holidayinnvilnius.lt

► **Mabre Residence:** Vilnius. A converted 13th-century monastery that oozes character, with attentive staff, a fine restaurant and gorgeous courtyard. T: 00 370 5212 2087. www.mabre.lt

► **Stikliai:** Vilnius. Probably Lithuania's finest hotel, with facilities, service and dreamy Old Town setting to make your stay feel like a state visit. T: 00 370 5264 9595. www.stikliaihotel.lt

EATING OUT

It's easy to find food at reasonable prices, including Vilnius diners serving main courses for around £1.50. The emphasis is on meat and fish, and while traditional Lithuanian dishes can readily be found, urban menus tend to be eclectic.

► **Tores:** Vilnius. This Bohemian quarter institution offers traditional meat and fish dishes and sublime views over the Old Town. T: 00 370 5262 9309. www.tores.lt

► **Vilnius Basteja:** Vilnius. Elegant fine dining in a series of caverns once used as warehouses by Napoleon's army. T: 00 370 5212 7452. www.vilniusbasteja.lt

► **Kybynlar:** Trakai. Cosy restaurant offering tasty Karait specialties. T: 00 370 5285 5179. www.kybynlar.lt

► **Vichy, the biggest water entertainment park in the Baltics, has opened in Vilnius, accommodating up to 1,400 visitors per day and 400,000 per year**

WHAT'S NEW

► **Water park:** Vichy, the biggest water entertainment park in the Baltics, has opened in Vilnius, accommodating up to 1,400 visitors per day and 400,000 per year.

► **Hotels:** Kempinski is developing a new hotel in a historic building in central Vilnius, with the opening set for mid-2008. Preserving the elegant 19th-century facade, the hotel will offer high-level facilities for both business and leisure travellers.

► **Golf:** Capitals Golf Club, Lithuania's first professional golf club, opened last year and offers challenging, uncrowded play over a varied course containing natural lakes, streams and woods.

► **Music:** The World Lithuanian Song Festival returned to Vilnius after a four-year break; it included the second city Kaunas for the first time. More than 30,000 performers, including more than 400 choirs, took part.

► **Tour:** Baltic Holidays is launching a Soviet Legacy tour, which includes visits to a nuclear missile site (where missiles were once primed on London), the Museum of Genocide Victims and the array of Soviet era statues in Grutas Park, such as Lenin and Stalin. ■

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

WHEN TO GO

Mid-May to late August is the best time. Winters are long, which is perfect for ice fishing and the famous horse sled racing over ice at Sartai.

► **CURRENCY:** Litas (Lt), tied to the euro at €1 = Lt3.4528 (£1 = Lt5). Credit cards are widely accepted in towns and cities, where ATMs give easy access to the local currency. Withdraw cash prior to heading out into the countryside.

► **TIME:** GMT +2.

► **INTERNATIONAL DIAL CODE:** 00 370.

► **LANGUAGE:** Lithuanian is an archaic language derived from Sanskrit, with 32 letters. Many people, especially younger, urban Lithuanians, speak excellent English. Some Lithuanians also speak Russian, Polish and/or German.

► **HEALTH:** No immunisations are necessary to visit Lithuania.

GETTING THERE

► Lithuanian Airlines flies daily from Gatwick to Vilnius.

► Air Baltic flies daily from Gatwick to Vilnius.

► Ryanair flies daily from Stansted and Liverpool to Kaunas.

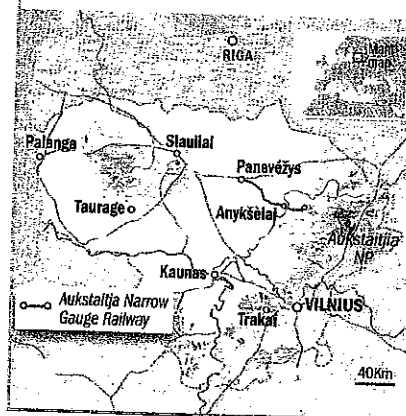
► **AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME:** Gatwick-Vilnius 2hrs30m.

GETTING AROUND

► Buses provide the foundation of Lithuanian public transport — from modern, comfortable cross-country expresses to ancient bone rattlers in rural backwaters.

► Hiring a car is unnecessary in cities, but can be a good idea for reaching rural attractions that are inaccessible or time-consuming to travel to by public transport.

► As Lithuania is a largely flat country with only gentle hills, cycling is a great way to explore its countryside. For a superlative wilderness trip, visitors can canoe through unspoilt rivers and lakes, stay at rural farmsteads and maybe even catch fish for supper.



► **CAPITAL OF CULTURE:** Captivating Vilnius will be placed firmly on the map as it approaches 2009 — its year as European Capital of Culture.

► **HISTORY:** "Although Lithuania is a relative newcomer to the EU, the country has a long history and deep, unique traditions, and is one of the oldest countries in eastern Europe," says Indre Trakimaite, director, Lithuanian Tourism Information Centre.

► **RURAL:** Travelling the shortest of distances outside the capital can deposit you in unspoilt countryside where you will meet few people and those you do meet maintain centuries-old rural lifestyles.

► **WILDERNESS:** Many visitors will delight in Lithuania's unspoilt wilderness. "The whole feeling when visiting Lithuania is one of quietness and quaintness," says Baltic Holidays Teubler. The sense of wide open space is further enhanced by the countryside's seeming lack of fencing, which invites walking, cycling and horse riding.

► **LOCALS:** "Lithuanians are naturally friendly and outgoing and possibly the most open of all the Baltic people," says Teubler. Don't be surprised to visit a Vilnius bar or restaurant and soon afterwards find yourself among a group of delightful new friends.