

By Dymphna Byrne, The Mail on Sunday. May 2005. article focussing on Vilnius.

We were shopping on our last day in Vilnius - it was time to buy presents. The amber necklaces on the market stall in the tiny square at the southern end of Pilies, the most engaging street of the Lithuanian capital's old town, glowed deep and translucent in the warm sun.

In an adjacent elegant shop, patient assistants spread amber jewellery before us. More was to be seen in the nearby tiny amber museum and gallery run by crafts people who work this richly coloured petrified pine resin. We were also tempted by the local linen, including tableware and delectable clothes.

Pleased with our morning, we walked across the bridge to Uzupis, the city's nascent Bohemian quarter, and drank a final cup of Lithuania's powerful coffee in the dappled shade of a riverside table at Uzupio Kavine, a bar on the wooded banks of the Vilnia, one of the two rivers in Vilnius. The sun shone on the white facade of an Orthodox church on the opposite bank. It had been a city break like no other.

We had walked everywhere in the mainly traffic-free old town entranced by its spires, domes, towers and classical facades.

The palaces, churches and monasteries, the tall town houses - some plain, some ornate, others pastel pink, green, grey, lemon or deep yellow - were a delight. The occasional in-fill of ugly concrete buildings, a legacy from Soviet times, will, it is hoped, disappear in time.

We heard Turandot in the fine modern opera house and visited a number of churches, including St Anne's, much admired by Napoleon and popular for weddings today.

But best of all was our visit to the Orthodox Church of the Holy Spirit. Curiosity drew us into the quiet courtyard after an evening stroll to see the famous Gates of Dawn, once part of the city's fortifications and now a shrine to the Virgin Mary. Inside the vast church we were transfixed by the quality of the unaccompanied singing of the monks and the astonishingly vivid green of the immensely high iconostasis - the screen hung with icons.

We ate well at good restaurants for very moderate prices - grilled salmon for around £5, fillet steak about £6. Tasty traditional Lithuanian dishes of meat and potato patties, sausages, pancakes or bacon and potato pudding were about £2.50. Beer, the national drink, was excellent and inexpensive, wine about the same as in the UK.

On our first day we had got our bearings by climbing the tight spiral staircase of the 14th Century castle on the hill behind the cathedral. We saw the 16th Century university in the heart of the old city, historically a force in European intellectual life, and the vast presidential palace where Napoleon stayed before he marched on Russia. After his retreat from Moscow, captured dramatically in Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture, he again passed through the town.

We saw river walks and a wooded hillside close by and, to the west, Lithuania's tallest building, the TV tower, surrounded by bleak blocks of Soviet flats. Here, on January 13, 1991, after the Kremlin had refused to acknowledge Lithuania's legitimate break from the Soviet Union, troops suppressed a peaceful demonstration, killing 14 unarmed civilians.

Later we went to the tower's revolving coffee shop, all dark Seventies decor. A display of black-and-white photographs records the event that shocked the world. We also visited the

haunting and terrible KGB museum in the basement of a handsome 19th Century courthouse in Gedimino, the main boulevard of the new town. With independence, the resilient Lithuanians, who had endured the Tsarist regime in the 19th Century and German and Soviet occupations in the 20th, began a vast programme of restoration, particularly in Vilnius.

Repair work began on churches used as warehouses during communist rule and the three saints on the pediment of the classical cathedral, destroyed at the same time, were replaced. It will take longer to complete the restoration of the adjacent Old Palace, the magnificent home of Lithuania's Grand Dukes, which was partially destroyed by the Tsarist regime.

As work goes on in the old town, the chink of chisel on stone rivals the mobile phones of the cheerful and elegant young people who throng the streets.

With its old town a World Heritage Site and a good choice of quality hotels, restaurants, bars and shops, Vilnius is as vibrant as any European city.

On the way to Trakai Castle, set in a historical national park west of the city, we passed the Gariunai market, a vast sprawling site that claims half-a-million shoppers a day, including some Britons.

Once *the* place in Eastern Europe for secondhand cars, it now sells cheap consumer goods, clothes, food - anything and everything. Quality is not guaranteed.

Trakai, a once strategically important village of traditional houses, sits on the edge of Lake Galve. With its boating, swimming, fishing and walking, this delightful park of lakes and forests is a popular weekend escape. The picturesque medieval castle, complete with moat and drawbridge, is the pull for first-time visitors.

Partially destroyed in the 17th Century wars with Russia, it was, most surprisingly, restored by the Soviets in the Fifties. Inside are displays of Lithuanian life and history.

Vilnius is all set to join the A-list of European city breaks. Go now to enjoy its vibrant fresh charms before it gets too popular.

Travel Facts

b>Baltic Holidays (40 Princess Street, Manchester M1 6DE; 0161 920 9713, www.balticholidays.com) is an independent company specialising in tailor-made holidays and arranges guides and hire cars.

Accommodation in Vilnius is mostly in the old town and ranges from top-grade hotels to comfortable guesthouses. A three-night winter break in the top-range Narutus, a beautiful 16th Century building in the old town, costs £299; two nights in the Mano Liza, a delightful guesthouse on a quiet cobbled street, is £299. Prices include return flights from Gatwick and B&B accommodation. Lithuania's currency is the litas. Change cash at Vilnius airport or one of the many city banks. The conversion rate is around five litas to the pound. English is spoken, especially among young people.