

Lithuania

The image of the reticent Balt fades away when you enter iconoclastic Lithuania, a country dripping with history and boasting enough star attractions to make Unesco drool four times over.

It's so small you could miss it on a map, but it has done some big things over the years, most notably becoming the first country to formally declare its independence from the Soviet Union. It almost slew another superpower in 2000 when its basketball team came within a basket of beating the US 'Dream Team' at the Athens Olympics. The team settled for its third straight bronze – one of the greatest overachievements in sporting history.

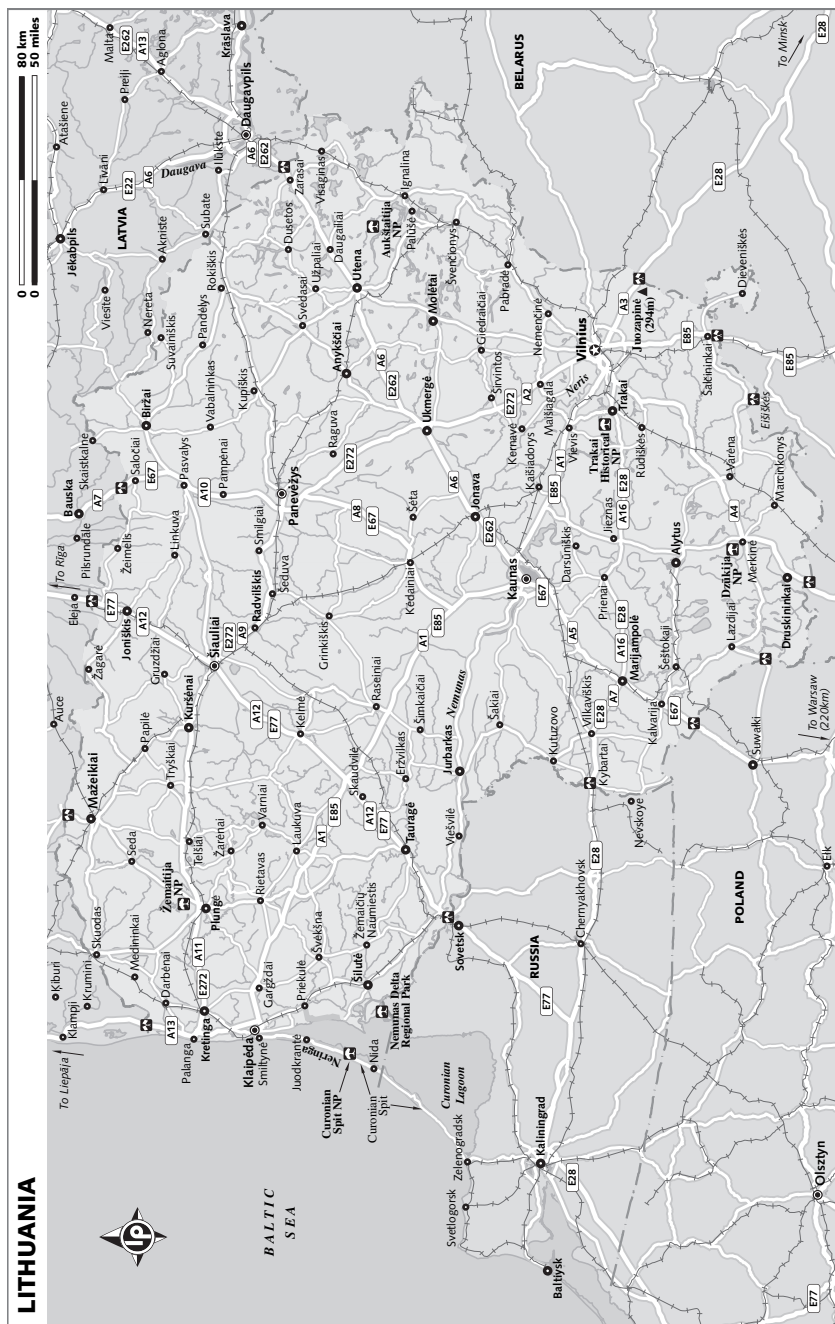
Such large deeds bring to mind the large place Lithuania once was. In the 1400s the country extended all the way to the Black Sea. The good times wouldn't last, but even today Lithuanians brim with pride and confidence befitting their mighty heritage.

They certainly have a lot to be proud of. For starters there's effortlessly charming Vilnius and its skyline of baroque spires. The eerie Hill of Crosses near Šiauliai is a truly unique experience. In the west thousands of migratory birds make the Curonian Spit their primary port of call. With the arrival of budget airlines, more tourists are likewise making Lithuania a port of call, but don't let that scare you away. There are plenty of delights to go around in this Baltic beauty.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 65,300 sq km
- **Capital** Vilnius
- **Currency** litas (Lt); A\$1 = 2.03 Lt; €1 = 3.45 Lt; ¥100 = 2.37 Lt; NZ\$1 = 2.03 Lt; UK£1 = 4.99 Lt; US\$1 = 2.70 Lt
- **Famous for** basketball, baroque churches, *cepelinai* (dough shaped like zeppelins, stuffed with meat and potato)
- **Official Language** Lithuanian
- **Phrases** *labas* (hello), *ačiū* (thanks), *prašau* (please/you're welcome), *taip* (yes), *ne* (no), *viso gero* (goodbye)
- **Population** 3.45 million
- **Telephone Codes** country code ☎ 370; international access code ☎ 00
- **Visa** none required for stays of up to 90 days for Australian, Canadian, EU, New Zealand or US citizens





HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring beautiful baroque **Vilnius** (p443), with its cobbled streets and skyline of church spires.
- Hearing the wind breathe between the thousands of crosses at the eerie Hill of Crosses in **Šiauliai** (p459).
- Breathing the pure air within the fragrant pine forests and high sand dunes of the enchanting **Curonian Spit** (p463).
- Checking out the stunning island castle in **Trakai** (p454), home of the rare Karaite people.
- Leaving people behind and chasing critters at **Aukštaitija National Park** (p455).

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Explore Vilnius for two days (p446), then day-trip to Trakai to explore its spectacular island castle and the homesteads of the Karaite people, stopping off at Paneriai on the way.
- **One week** Spend four nights in Vilnius with day trips to both Trakai and the Soviet Sculpture Park near Druskininkai. Go to Šiauliai to see the Hill of Crosses, then spend two or three days exploring some serious nature on the Curonian Spit. Head back east via Klaipėda and Kaunas.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Lithuania tends to have a beautiful but short summer, a crisp autumn, a long winter and a dreary spring. Summer is the ideal time for

forays to coastal areas and inland national parks. Vilnius is enchanting any time of the year, but is much less crowded in the winter.

HISTORY

Lithuania's history is a story of riches to rags and then back to riches again. It all started when ancient tribes fanned out across the Baltics to take advantage of the region's plentiful amber deposits. In 1009 those tribes were sufficiently assimilated for Lithuania to be mentioned for the first time in writing. Vilnius will open its reconstructed Royal Palace on the 1000-year anniversary of this event in 2009 (p447).

By the 12th century Lithuania's peoples had split into two tribal groups: the Samogitians (lowlanders) in the west and the Aukštaitiai (highlanders) in the east and southeast. In the mid-13th century Aukštaitiai leader Mindaugas unified Lithuanian tribes to create the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, of which he was crowned king in 1253 at Kernavė (p454).

It was the mighty Lithuanian leader Gediminas who pushed Lithuania's borders south and east between 1316 and 1341. In 1386 marriage forged an alliance with Poland against the Teutonic Order – Germanic crusaders who were busy conquering much of the region – that lasted 400 years. The alliance defeated the German knights in 1410 at the battle of Grünwald in Poland, ushering in a golden period during which Vilnius was born and Lithuania became one of Europe's largest empires.

But Lithuania was destined to disappear off the maps of Europe. In the 18th century, the Polish-Lithuanian state was so weakened by division that it was carved up by Russia, Austria and Prussia (successor to the Teutonic Order) in the partitions of Poland (1772, 1793 and 1795–96).

Vilnius was a bastion of Polish culture in the 19th century and a focus of uprisings against Russia. It also became an important Jewish centre; Jews made up almost half of its 160,000-strong population by the early 20th century (p448).

Lithuanian nationalists declared independence on 16 February 1918 with Kaunas as the capital, as Polish troops had annexed Vilnius from the Red Army in 1920. Lithuania's first president, Antanas Smetona, ruled the country with an iron fist during this time.

In 1940, after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Lithuania was forced into the USSR. Within a year 40,000 Lithuanians were killed

HOW MUCH?

- **Public transport ticket** 1.10 Lt
- **Loaf of bread** 1 Lt
- **Two-scoop ice cream** 2 Lt
- **Bottle of vodka** 10 Lt
- **Short taxi ride** 10 Lt

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **Litre of petrol** 2.5 Lt
- **Litre of water** 2 Lt
- **Bottled beer in store/bar** 2/5 Lt
- **Souvenir T-shirt** 20 Lt
- **Street snack (hot dog)** 3 Lt

or deported. Up to 300,000 more people, mostly Jews, died in concentration camps and ghettos during the 1941–44 Nazi occupation, many of them at Paneriai (p453).

The USSR ruled again between 1945 and 1991. An estimated 250,000 people were murdered or deported to Siberia while armed partisans resisted Soviet rule from the forests. The bloody period of resistance, which petered out in 1953, is chronicled in a brand-new wing of Vilnius' Museum of Genocide Victims (p449).

In the late 1980s Lithuania led the Baltic push for independence. The popular front, Sajūdis, won 30 seats in the March 1989 elections for the USSR Congress of People's Deputies. Lithuania was the first Soviet state to legalise noncommunist parties. In February 1990 Sajūdis was elected to form a majority in Lithuania's new Supreme Soviet (now the parliament), which on 11 March declared Lithuania independent.

Moscow marched troops into Vilnius and cut off Lithuania's fuel supplies. On 13 January 1991, Soviet troops stormed key buildings in Vilnius. Fourteen people were killed at Vilnius' TV tower and Lithuanians barricaded the Seimas (their parliament). In the wake of heavy condemnation from the West, the Soviets recognised Lithuanian independence on 6 September, bringing about the first of the Baltic republics.

The last Soviet troops left the country on 31 August 1993. Lithuania replaced the rouble with the litas, joined NATO in April 2004, and entered the EU a month later. True to form, bold Lithuania forthrightly ratified the EU constitution in November 2004, becoming the first of the 25 EU member countries to do so.

Lithuania's eager embrace of all things European hit a speed bump in May 2006 when the EU rejected Lithuania's bid to adopt the euro, citing inflation concerns. The country now hopes to adopt the common currency in 2009 at the earliest. But despite that, and despite an animated political climate that saw a president impeached over corruption allegations in 2004, proud Lithuania remains unabashedly optimistic about its future.

PEOPLE

Easily the most ethnically homogeneous population of the three Baltic countries, Lithuanians count for 83% of the total population. Poles form 6.7% and Russians 6.3%.

Lithuanians are an outgoing, cheeky bunch, especially compared with their reticent neighbours in Latvia and Estonia. That has led some to call them the 'Spanish of the Baltics'. Others call them the 'Italians of the Baltics', citing their fierce pride – a result of the many brutal attempts to eradicate their culture and the memories of their long-lost empire.

ARTS

Lithuania's best-known national artist will always be Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911), a depressive painter who also composed symphonic poems and piano pieces. The best collection of his paintings are in the National Čiurlionis Art Museum in Kaunas (p457).

Lithuania has a thriving contemporary art scene. Vilnius artists created the tongue-in-cheek Republic of Užupis (p449), which hosts alternative art festivals, fashion shows and exhibitions in its breakaway state. Other home-grown artists can be seen at **Europas Parkas Sculpture Park** (www.europosparkas.lt) at the geographical centre of Europe (19km from Vilnius; ask a tourist office for details).

Music is at the heart of the Lithuanian spirit, and Lithuania is the jazz giant of the Baltics, with its highlight the Kaunas Jazz Festival.

Lithuanian fiction began with the late-18th-century poem 'Metai' (The Seasons) by Kristijonas Donelaitis. Antanas Baranauškas' 1860 poem 'Anykščiai Pine Forest' uses the forest as a symbol of Lithuania. Literature suffered persecution from the tsarist authorities, who banned the use of the Latin alphabet.

Several major Polish writers grew up in Lithuania and regarded themselves as partly Lithuanian, most notably Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), the inspiration of 19th-century nationalists, whose great poem 'Pan Tadeusz' begins 'Lithuania, my fatherland...'

ENVIRONMENT The Land

Lush forests and more than 4000 lakes mark the landscape of Lithuania, a country that is largely flat with a 100km-wide lowland centre. Forest covers a third of the country and contains creatures such as wild boar, wolves, deer and elk. Aukštaitija National Park (p455) is one place where these beasts roam, although you are unlikely to encounter them without a guide. You're more likely to spot a stork –

Lithuania has Europe's highest concentration of storks, and their nests crop up in the unlikely places.

Environmental Issues

A huge amount of EU money is being sunk into cleaning up Lithuania's environment, which continues to suffer from years of Soviet mismanagement and indifference.

For years the hot potato has been the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, 120km north of Vilnius. One of two reactors similar in design to Chernobyl was closed in December 2004, and the final shutdown of the plant is scheduled for 2009 at a massive cost of €3.2 billion.

Other problems Lithuania faces include the threat of large-scale pollution from a recently discovered arsenal of decomposing chemical weapons. About 40,000 bombs and mines lie on the seabed 70 nautical miles off Klaipėda, where Soviet forces sank German ships, and the cargo from these ships could threaten the fragile coastline of the Curonian Spit. The spit is also threatened by oil rigs being built offshore by Lukoil (p733).

The Būtingė oil terminal, off the north-western coast near Latvia, continues to enrage environmentalists; it was the site of a 60-ton oil spill in November 2001.

To do your part for the environment, camp only in designated areas and, when required, keep to the marked trails on the sand dunes of the Curonian Spit and in other national parks.

FOOD & DRINK

Unbuckle your belts for the gastronomic delights of good, hearty Lithuanian cooking. The food was tailor-made for those peasants out working the fields so it's seriously stodgy comfort eating rather than delicate morsels. Based on potatoes, meat and dairy goods, it's not ideal for vegetarians so we've highlighted options for those who shun the pleasures of pigs trotters and pork knuckles.

The national dish is the hearty, jiggle-when-they-wiggle *cepelinai* (zeppelins): airship-shaped parcels of thick potato dough stuffed with cheese, *mesa* (meat) or *grybai* (mushrooms). It comes topped with a rich sauce made from onions, butter, sour cream and bacon bits. Another artery-hardening favourite is sour cream-topped *kugelis*: a dish that bakes grated potatoes and carrots in the

oven. *Koldūnai* are hearty ravioli stuffed with meat or mushrooms, and *virtiniai* are stodgy dumplings.


Lithuanians drink their share of *alus* (beer) and it's all pretty good. The most popular brand is *ųvyturys*, but try *Utenos*, *Kalnapiilis* and *Gubernija* as well. No beer is complete without the world's most fattening bar snack, *kepsta duona* (deep-fried black bread with garlic).

Midus (mead) originated in the Middle Ages but is making a comeback these days. It's made of honey boiled with water, berries and spices, then fermented with hops.

RELIGION

Lithuania was the last pagan country in Europe, explaining why so much of its religious art, national culture and traditions have raw pagan roots. Today the country is 70% to 80% Roman Catholic by most estimates, with strong Lutheran and Russian Orthodox minorities.

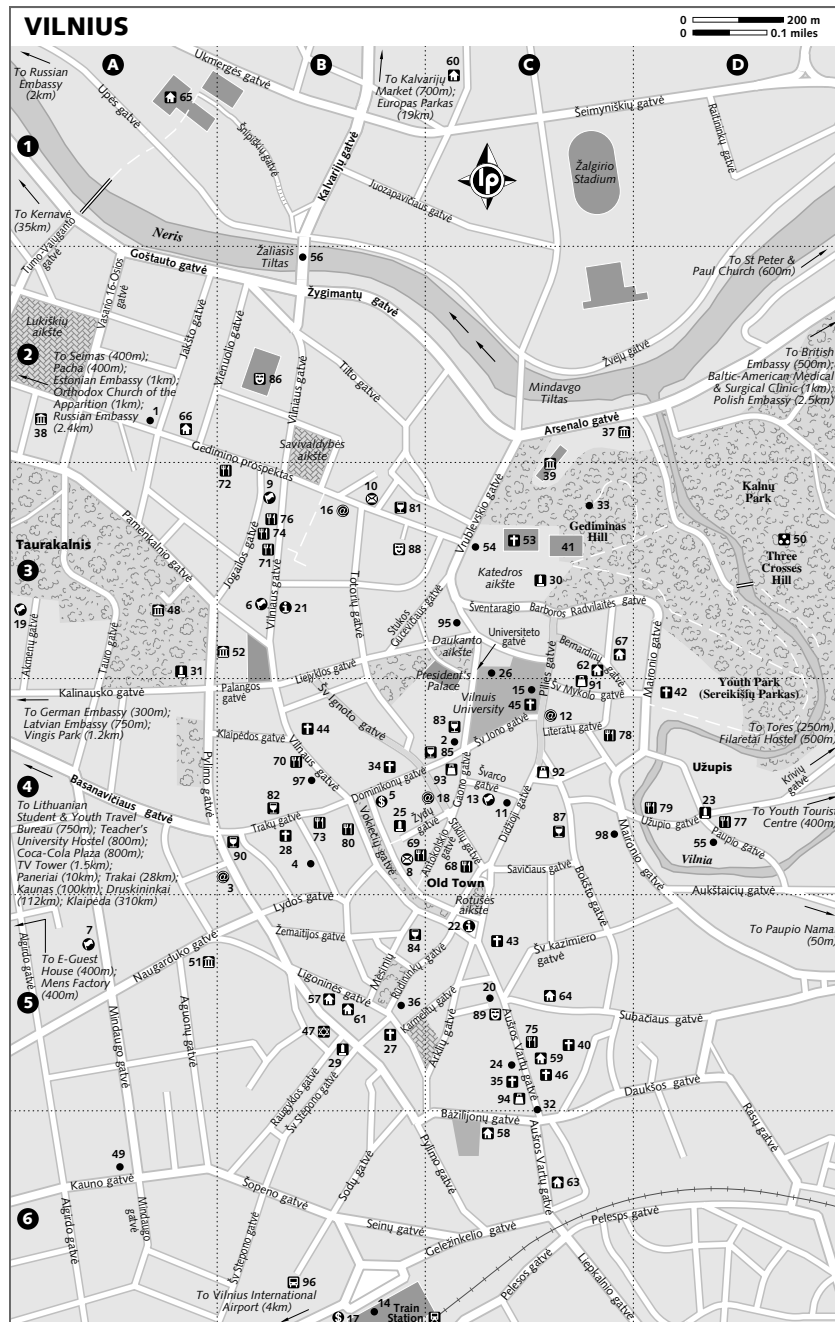
VILNIUS

 5 / pop 600,000

Picture the quintessentially quaint Old World European capital, and chances are you'll come up with something pretty close to Vilnius. A spider web of cobbled streets snaking amid some of the world's most fantastic baroque churches, its appeal is blatant, its charm intoxicating.

It is essential to avoid tunnel vision as you walk around Vilnius. Its churches, too numerous to count, are pleasantly prone to present themselves perfectly framed by narrow streets. Look down, too: Vilnius was built on a swamp, and many buildings, especially along *Pilies gatvė* and *Aušros Vartų gatvė*, have sunk up to a metre below street level. Perhaps that explains the city's quirky streak, epitomised by a number of strange monuments (see p447) and by a decidedly animated political scene.

Vilnius feels tiny, but that's a bit deceptive because the sprawling suburban jacket that surrounds the Unesco-listed Old Town is a fairly typical Soviet-style mess of snarled traffic, car shops and concrete. Unlike, say, Riga, there's not much reason to stray far from the Old Town, although the suburbs do support some mighty fine parks.



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ORIENTATION

Most of the action in Vilnius takes place in Old Town. Vokiečių gatvė is the most commercial street in Old Town; Pilies gatvė the most touristy. Old Town's northern border merges with New Town at Gedimino prospektas, a wide, part-time pedestrianised avenue that runs west-to-east from parliament to Katedros aikštė (Cathedral Square), the spiritual, if not the geographical, heart of Vilnius.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Akademine Knysa (Universiteto gatvė 4) Some translated Lithuanian works, and Lonely Planet travel guides.
Littera (Šv Jono gatvė 12) Inside Vilnius University courtyard; enter on Universiteto gatvė 3.

Cultural Centres

American Center (☎ 266 5682; www.usembassy.lt/irc.asp; Pranciškonų gatvė 3-6; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Fri) American media in a 14th-century monastery.

British Council (☎ 264 4890; www.britishcouncil.lt; Jogailos gatvė 4; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sat, closed 15 Jul-19 Aug)

Centre Culturel Français (☎ 231 2984; www.centre-francais.lt; Didžioji gatvė 1; ☎ 1.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat)

Internet Access & Telephone

Portions of Vokiečių gatvė, Pilies gatvė and Gedimino prospektas are free wi-fi zones.
Alderada (Pylimo gatvė 21; per hr 5 Lt, long-distance VOIP calls per min 0.12 Lt) Phone and internet.
Collegium (Pilies gatvė 22; per hr 8 Lt; ☎ 8am-11pm) Good location; terrible prices.

Omnitel (Gedimino prospektas 12; per hr 2 Lt; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Sat) internet access.

Renta Rentoma (Stiklių gatvė 16; per hr 2 Lt; ☎ 10am–7pm) internet access.

Left Luggage

Ask for the *bagazinė*.

Bus station (per bag per 24hr 3 Lt; ☎ 5.30am–9pm Mon–Sat, 7am–9pm Sun)

Train station (per bag per 24hr 3 Lt; ☎ 5.30am–9pm Mon–Fri, 7am–9pm Sat)

Media

Vilnius in Your Pocket (www.inyourpocket.com/lithuania/en) Quality city guide published every two months, available as PDF download or in bookshops, tourist offices and newspaper kiosks (5 Lt).

Baltic Times (www.baltictimes.com) English-language weekly with pan-Baltic news and listings of cultural events in Vilnius.

Medical Services

24-hour pharmacy (Gedimino Vaistinė; ☎ 261 0135; Gedimino prospektas 27)

Baltic-American Medical & Surgical Clinic (☎ 234 2020; www.bak.lt; Antakalnio gatvė 124; ☎ 24hr) English-speaking health care inside Vilnius University Antakalnis hospital, approximately 1km northeast of town.

Money

Vilnius is littered with ATMs and banks, and most offer the usual exchange, money transfer, travellers cheques and cash-advance services. Many are concentrated on Vokiečių gatvė.

American Express (☎ 212 5805, 24hr emergency 8-616 81255; www.amextravel.lt; Vokiečių gatvė 13)

Travel agency that replaces lost Amex travellers cheques.

Parex Bankas Currency Exchange (Geležinkelio gatvė 6; ☎ 24hr) Currency exchange with ATM; exit the train station and head left.

Post

Branch post office (Vokiečių gatvė 7)

Central post office (Gedimino prospektas 7)

Tourist Information

Vilnius Tourist Information Centres (www.vilnius-tourism.lt; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat & Sun); Town Hall (☎ 262 0762; Didžioji gatvė 31); Vilniaus gatvė (☎ 262 9660; Vilniaus gatvė 22); train station (☎ 269 2091) These friendly centres have a wealth of glossy brochures and general information. They also arrange tour guides, book accommodation (hotel reservation fee of 6 Lt applies), and rent bicycles for use in Old Town only.

Travel Agencies

Kelvita (☎ 210 6130; www.kelvita.lt; train station international hall, kiosk 30; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri) No-frills agency with the cheapest Russian and Belarusian visas.

Lithuanian Student & Youth Travel Bureau

(☎ 239 7397; www.jaunimas.lt, in Lithuanian; Basanavičiaus gatvė 30/13) Cheap fares for ISIC holders.

Vilnius City Tour (☎ 261 5558; www.vilniuscitytour.com; Aušros Vartų gatvė 7) Runs thrice-daily city tours and organises excursions outside Vilnius.

SIGHTS

Baroque churches are what Vilnius is most famous for, but don't get caught up in rushing from church to church. Savour the walk around Old Town instead. Pop your head into a courtyard behind a centuries-old façade for a glimpse of everyday life in Vilnius: an old lady hanging laundry; men hovering over an open car-bonnet; rogue teens sneaking a smoke. A walk around Old Town at night, with the steeples illuminated by soft flood lights, is truly magical.

Gediminas Hill & Cathedral Square

Vilnius was founded on 48m-high Gediminas Hill, topped since the 13th century by the off-rebuilt tower of ruined **Gediminas Castle**. There are spectacular views of Old Town from the top of the tower, which houses the **Upper Castle Museum** (☎ 261 7453; adult/child 4/2 Lt; ☎ 10am–7pm May–Oct, 11am–5pm Tue–Sun Nov–Apr). From here you'll also see the white **Three Crosses** on a hill to the east, erected in memory of three crucified monks.

At the base of Gediminas Hill sprawls Cathedral Square (Katedros aikštė), dominated

VILNIUS IN TWO DAYS

Spend your first day taking in the magic of **Old Town** (opposite). Start off – naturally – at the **Gates of Dawn** (p448), then spend a few hours snaking your way toward **Cathedral Square** (above). Climb **Gediminas Hill** (above) for sunset, and crown the day with a home brew at **Avilys** (p452).

On day two, devote some time to the **Museum of Genocide Victims** (p449) and take in another museum or two near Cathedral Square. Then either explore the old **Jewish Quarter** (p448) or cross the Vilnia River into bohemian **Užupis** (p449), where another fine sunset panorama beckons at **Tores** (p451).

TOP FIVE QUIRKY ATTRACTIONS

Vilnius has an undeniable mischievous streak, as the following attest:

- **Frank Zappa memorial** (Kalinausko gatvė 1) The world's first Zappa statue is oddly situated in a grim, graffiti-splashed courtyard west of Old Town. It was erected in 1995 by the local Zappa fan club.
- **Angel of Užupis statue** (Užupio & Malūno gatvė) This statue of an angel blowing a trumpet and standing on an egg is the oddball symbol of Vilnius' strangest district.
- **Egg statue** (cnr Šv Stepono & Raugyklos gatvė) This oversized egg on a nest of real twigs resided on Užupis' main square until it 'hatched' the Angel of Užupis in 2002 and moved to a grim square west of Old Town.
- **Žalioji Tiltas (Green Bridge)** The sculptures on this bridge are a blatant reminder of Lithuania's communist past – and yet weren't torn down like the rest of the Lenins and comrades because the locals adore them!
- **The ? building** (Kauno gatvė 5) This dilapidated building with an upside-down question mark dangling from its façade undoubtedly hides secrets behind its boarded-up windows.

by **Vilnius Cathedral** (☎ 7am–7.30pm, Sunday mass at 9am, 10am, 11.15am & 7pm) and its 57m-tall **belfry**, a Vilnius landmark. The square buzzes with local life, especially during Sunday morning mass. Amuse yourself by hunting for the secret *stebukas* (miracle) tile, which if found can grant a wish if you stand on it and turn around clockwise. It marks the spot where the Tallinn–Vilnius human chain ended in 1989.

The first wooden cathedral, built here in 1387–88, was in Gothic style but has been rebuilt many times since then. The most important restoration was completed from 1783 to 1801, when the outside was redone in today's classical style. The interior retains more of its original aspect. Its showpiece is the baroque **St Casimir's Chapel**, with white stucco sculptures and frescoes depicting the life of St Casimir (Lithuania's patron saint), whose silver coffin lies within.

At the square's eastern end is an **equestrian statue of Gediminas**, built on an ancient pagan site. The massive construction project going on behind the statue, at the base of Gediminas Hill, is the rebuilding of the **Royal Palace** (Valdovų rūmai). The palace buzzed with masked balls, gay banquets and tournaments in the 16th century. But in 1795 the Russians occupied Lithuania and demolished the palace along with the Lower Castle and city defence wall.

The palace is currently being rebuilt, red brick by red brick, and will rise from the ashes on 6 July 2009 to mark the millennium anniversary of the first known mention of Lithuania in writing. Archaeologists are

digging up all kinds of ancient coins and other treasures as the project proceeds.

Exhibitions on the ambitious reconstruction project fill the must-see **Museum of Applied Arts** (☎ 262 8080; Arsenalo gatvė 3a; admission 8 Lt; ☎ 11am–6pm Tue–Sat, 11am–4pm Sun), in the old arsenal at the foot of Gediminas Hill. The museum also has many items from the original palace on display.

A little north of Cathedral Square, the **National Museum** (☎ 262 9426; Arsenalo gatvė 1; adult/child 4/2 Lt; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sat, 10am–3pm Sun May–Sep, 10am–5pm Wed–Sun Oct–Apr) has ethnographic exhibits, art and other displays looking at Lithuanian life up to WWII. Exhibits are in Lithuanian and Russian.

East of Cathedral Square, magnificent **St Peter & Paul Church** is one of Vilnius' finest baroque churches. It's a treasure trove of sparkling white stucco sculptures of real and mythical people, animals and plants, with touches of gilt, paintings and statues. The decoration was done by Italian sculptors between 1675 and 1704.

Old Town

Eastern Europe's largest old town deserves its Unesco status. The area stretches 1.5km south from Cathedral Square and the eastern end of Gedimino prospektas.

VILNIUS UNIVERSITY & ST JOHN'S CHURCH

The students of **Vilnius University** (☎ 268 7298; Universiteto gatvė 3; adult/child 5/2.50 Lt; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Sat Mar–Oct, 9am–5pm Mon–Sat Nov–Feb) attend school

JEWISH VILNIUS

Dubbed by Napoleon as the 'Jerusalem of the north', Vilnius had one of Europe's most prominent Jewish communities until Nazi brutality virtually wiped it out (with assistance from the Soviets).

The old Jewish quarter lay in the streets west of Didžioji gatvė, including present-day Žydų gatvė (Jews St) and Gaono gatvė, named after Vilnius' most famous Jewish resident, Gaon Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman (1720–97), a sage who recited the entire Talmud by heart at the age of six.

Jewish Vilnius is far too rich a topic to adequately cover here, but there are several excellent resources available if you want to dig deeper into Lithuania's Jewish past.

A good place to start your tour is at any of the three branches of the **Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum of Lithuania** (www.jmusem.lt): **The Green House** (☎ 262 0730; Pamėnkalnio gatvė 12; admission by donation; ☞ 9am–5pm Mon–Thu, 9am–4pm Fri, 10am–4pm Sun), dedicated to the holocaust in Lithuania; the **Tolerance Centre** (☎ 231 2356; Naugarduko gatvė 10; ☞ 9am–5pm Mon–Thu, 9am–4pm Fri, 10am–4pm Sun), which stages community events and exhibits the works of prominent Lithuanian Jewish artists; and another **branch** (☎ 212 7912; Pylimo gatvė 4; ☞ 9am–1pm Mon–Fri) that shares a building with the Jewish Community Centre. The city's Jewish population today numbers about 4000. The main **synagogue** (Pylimo gatvė 39) is near the Tolerance Centre.

All three museums sell the handy self-guide *Memorable Sites of Jewish History and Culture* (12 Lt). For a more casual glimpse of Jewish life, walk down Žydų gatvė to the memorial **bust of Gaon Elijah** (Žydų gatvė 3), imagining how life once was. There's a **map** of the two main Jewish ghettos during WWII at Rūdninkų gatvė 18, which used to be the single gate to the largest ghetto.

on a spectacular campus featuring 13 courtyards framed by 15th-century buildings and splashed with 300-year-old frescoes.

Founded in 1579 during the Counter-Reformation, Eastern Europe's oldest university was run by Jesuits for two centuries and became one of the greatest centres of Polish learning before being closed by the Russians in 1832. It reopened in 1919.

The library here, with five million books, is Lithuania's oldest. The university also houses the world's first **Centre for Stateless Cultures** (☎ 268 7293; www.statelesscultures.lt), established for those cultures that lack statehood, such as Jewish, Roma and Karaimic (Karaite) cultures, in its history faculty.

You need to go through the university entrance on Universiteto to access both Littera bookshop (p445) and **St John's Church** (☞ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat), a baroque gem. Founded in 1387 – well before the university arrived – its 17th-century bell tower is the highest structure in Old Town.

You can exit (but not enter) St John's on Pilies gatvė, the hub of tourist action and the main entrance to the Old Town from Cathedral Square.

THE GATES OF DAWN

Located at the southern border of Old Town, the 16th-century **Gates of Dawn** (Aušros Vartai)

is the only one of the town wall's original nine gates still intact. The gate houses the **Chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary** (☞ 6am–7pm) and the black-and-gold 'miracle-working' **Virgin Mary icon**. A gift from the Crimea by Grand Duke Algirdas in 1363, it is one of the holiest icons in Polish Catholicism, and the faithful arrive in droves to offer it whispered prayer.

When the Russians destroyed the old city walls in the 18th century, they spared Aušros Vartai, fearing bad luck if they tampered with the resting place of the Virgin icon. The Soviets likewise refused to touch it. Look up as you're exiting Old Town and you can spot the icon through the window of the chapel.

There are four stunning churches in the immediately vicinity of the Gates of Dawn. Catholic **St Teresa's Church** is early baroque (1635–50) outside and more elaborate late baroque inside. Roughly behind it is the big, pink, domed 17th-century **Orthodox Church of the Holy Spirit**, Lithuania's chief Russian Orthodox church and another fine baroque specimen. Directly across the street, through a late baroque archway known as the **Basilian Gates** (Aušros Vartų gatvė 7), is the dilapidated **Holy Trinity Church**. And further up Aušros Vartų gatvė on the eastern side is ravishing **St Casimir's Church**, the oldest of Vilnius' baroque masterpieces. It was built by Jesuits (1604–15) and under Soviet rule was a museum of atheism.

VOKIEČIŲ GATVĖ & AROUND

Vokiečių gatvė, Old Town's main commercial street, makes a good jumping-off point for explorations of the old Jewish quarter (opposite) and offers fine views of several churches. Peering north from Vokiečių you'll spot **St Catherine's Church** (Vilniaus gatvė 30) displaying Vilnius' trademark peach baroque style; to the south lies the unsung and similarly peach-hued **Church of All Saints** (Rūdninkų 20/1).

The **Holy Spirit Church** (Dominikonų gatvė 8) is Vilnius' primary Polish church (1679) and has one of the most elaborate baroque interiors you'll find anywhere. The recently reconsecrated **Church of the Assumption** (Trakų gatvė 9/1) is symbolic of the incredible renovation sweeping through the Old Town.

New Town

Vilnius' 19th-century New Town boasts a true European boulevard after its premier street, Gedimino prospektas, was given a face-lift between 2002 and 2003. It's a grand road with Vilnius Cathedral at one end and the silver-domed **Orthodox Church of the Apparition** (Mickėvičiaus 1) at the other. Much of Gedimino becomes a pedestrian street outside working hours, when fashionable types flock here to see, be seen and peruse the sundry Western brands on display in the shop fronts.

Lenin once stood on Lukiškių Aikštė, a square that used to bear the name of the levelled statue, which is now displayed in Druskininkai's Soviet sculpture park, Gruto Parkas (p455).

The building facing the square was the notorious KGB headquarters and prison, but is now the **Museum of Genocide Victims** (☎ 249 6264; muziejus@genocid.lt; Aukų gatvė 2a; admission 4 Lt; ☞ 10am–5pm Tue–Sat, 10am–3pm Sun). Called the 'KGB Museum' by locals, it is Vilnius' most important and most popular museum. It is best taken in with an English-speaking guide (30 Lt, reserve in advance) or headphone audio tour (8 Lt).

Names of those who were murdered in the former KGB prison are carved into the stone walls outside – note how young many victims were. Inside, inmate cells and the execution cell where prisoners were shot or stabbed in the skull between 1944 and the 1960s can be visited. Two new permanent exhibits recently opened: one documenting the post-WWII Lithuanian resistance movement, the other on the gulags.

At the west end of Gedimino prospektas is the **Seimas** (parliament) building. Further along lies pleasant **Vingis Park**, and beyond that the 326m-tall **TV Tower**, where wooden crosses remember the victims of 13 January 1991 (p442).

Užupis

The cheeky streak of rebellion pervading Lithuania flourishes in this district just east of Old Town. In 1998 the resident artists, dreamers, squatters and drunks officially unofficially declared this a breakaway state known as the **Užupis Republic**. The state has its own tongue-in-cheek president, anthem, flags and a 41-point constitution that, among other things, gives inhabitants the right to cry, the right to be misunderstood and the right to be a dog. Read the entire thing in English, French or Lithuanian on a wall on Paupio gatvė.

The best time to visit Užupis is April Fool's Day. Mock border guards set up at the main bridge into town and stamp visitors' passports and a huge party rages all day and all night. However, it's worth visiting any time of year for its galleries, craft workshops and bohemian vibe.

Just over the Užupis' northern bridge you'll find baroque **Bernardine Church** and pint-sized Gothic **St Anne's Church** essentially fused together like mismatched Siamese twins.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

See p465 for more festivals, and a comprehensive list is at www.vilniusfestivals.lt.

Vilnius Festival A month-long summer festival (May to June) of classical music organised by the Lithuanian National Philharmonic Society.

Vilnius Days Five-day celebration of carnivals, street theatre, dancing, masked parades and craft fairs in the streets, in September.

SLEEPING

For tips on booking accommodation in Vilnius, see p464.

Budget

Filaretai Hostel (☎ 215 4627; www.filaretaihostel.lt; Filaretų gatvė 17; dm from 31 Lt, s/d with shared bathroom 68/86 Lt; ☞) A recent renovation has added rooms and polish to this chilled-out hostel in arty Užupis. If you want more privacy, the doubles are a great value. Take bus 34 to the Filaretų stop.

Old Town Hostel (☎ 262 5357; www.lithuanianhostels.org; Aušros Vartų gatvė 20/10; dm 32 Lt, d per person 100 Lt; ☑) It's nothing special by world standards, but it sticks out in Vilnius because of its perfect location, two minutes from both Old Town and the train station. You'll have few problems finding a drinking buddy here.

Paupio Namai (☎ 264 3113; www.hotel.paupio.lt; Paučio gatvė 31a; dm/s/d with shared bathroom from 45/80/100 Lt; ☑) Vilnius' best 'hostel' is actually more of a pension or a guesthouse. The small singles are a phenomenal option for solo travellers wary of communal living but keen on a cheap bed. There's a small kitchen.

Litinterp (☎ 212 3850; www.litinterp.lt; Bernardinų gatvė 7-2; s/d 100/160 Lt, with shared bathroom 80/140 Lt; ☑) In year two of Lithuanian independence, the hotel gods looked upon the country's feeble accommodation selection and said, 'Let there be an unobtrusive guesthouse with bright pinewood floors that will forever remain the best deal in Vilnius,' and thus was born Litinterp. And it was good.

Domus Maria (☎ 264 4880; http://domusmaria.vilnensis.lt; Aušros Vartų gatvė 12; dm/s/d 75/179/249 Lt; ☑) Positively unique and immensely popular, this guesthouse-within-a-monastery captures the soul of Vilnius without capturing too much of your hard-earned cash. It stays true to its monastic origins with wide arched corridors and spartan white rooms. Laptop hire available for 50 Lt per day.

Other recommended hostels:

Teacher's University Hostel (☎ 213 0704; Vivilskio gatvė 36; d & tr per person with shared bathroom 24 Lt; deluxe d 120 Lt) Soviet through and through, but ultra-cheap. No self-catering.

Youth Tourist Centre (☎ 261 1547; vjtc@delfi.lt; Polocko gatvė 7; dm 26 Lt) Cheap, clean and basic alternative in Užupis if Filaretai is full.

Midrange

Ecotel (☎ 210 2700; www.ecotel.lt; Slucko gatvė 8; s/d from 159/169 Lt; ☑) Economy business-class rooms tend to be pretty abominable in Vilnius, but this 168-room property on the north bank of the Neris bucks the trend by offering squeaky-clean rooms with smart, simple furnishings.

E-Guest House (☎ 266 0730; www.e-guesthouse.lt; Ševčenkos gatvė 16; d/roost 180/260 Lt; ☑) If you're willing to roost slightly outside the centre, you'll have trouble beating the value of this quirky, tech-inclined nugget, where laptop rental costs 20 Lt and internet-ready

computers line the corridors. The rooms are airy, modern and crisp.

City Gate (☎ 210 7306; www.citygate.lt; Bazilijonų gatvė 3; s/d from 200/300 Lt; ☑) Friendly, warm reception area (think brick walls, cosy sitting room and big smile on the receptionist) gives a hint of the treats you are in for at this low-risk, high-return outfit between Old Town and the train station.

Ramada (☎ 255 3555; www.ramadavilnius.lt; Subačiaus gatvė 2; s/d from €81/100; ☑) Of all the fancy chain hotels in Vilnius, the Ramada delivers the best value. Discounting the strange art (Sailboats? Beaches?) in the somewhat small rooms, the hotel affects a 19th-century vibe, with cream colours and elegant curtains. Its location near Gates of Dawn is ideal.

AAA Guest House Mano Liza (☎ 212 2225; www.hotelinvilnius.lt; Ligoninės gatvė 5; d from 220 Lt) This quirky little guesthouse is a poor man's version of sumptuous Grotthuss next door, which is hardly an insult. The eight rooms have cheerful colours and flowery designs. It's a super deal in the low season.

Scandic Neringa (☎ 261 0516; www.scandic-hotels.com; Gedimino prospektas 23; s/d from 270/339 Lt; ☑) Delivers some of the finest service in town in a Soviet-cum-Scandinavian atmosphere. Dirt and dust – enemies No 1 and 2 – face instant eradication. Breakfast on the street terrace provides varsity people-watching. Steep weekend discounts make it ideal for weekend escapes.

Top End

Reval Hotel Lietuva (☎ 272 6272; www.revalhotels.com; Konstitucijos prospektas 20; s/d from €120/140; ☑) The burly, bustling Reval is the antidote to Vilnius' plethora of quaint boutique hotels, with well-appointed business-class rooms, the best casino in Vilnius and a rare fitness centre that's worthy of the name. The top-floor Sky Bar has the city's best views.

Grotthuss (☎ 266 0322; www.grotthusshotel.com; d from €128; ☑) There's nary a hair out of place in this classy and opulent gem, which the German-baroness owner has managed to make fit for a baroness without being too aristocratic and stuffy. The scents wafting up from the kitchen of Le Pergola restaurant – arguably Vilnius' finest – are to die for.

Shakespeare Boutique Hotel (☎ 266 5885; www.shakespeare.lt; Bernardinų gatvė 8/8; s/d from 360/600 Lt;

☑) This jewel of a boutique exudes old-world elegance and culture from every pore. Each room pays homage to a different writer, and a beautiful rug, huge impressionist-style painting or gorgeous antique comes into view at every turn.

EATING

Whether it's curry, *cepelinai* (gut-busting meat and potato zeppelins) or *kepta duona* (fried bread sticks oozing garlic) you want, Vilnius has a mouth-watering selection of local and international cuisine.

Amatininkų Užiega (Didžioji gatvė 19/2; mains 15-20 Lt; ☎ 11am-5am) This perfectly located spot is a great place to sample country Lithuanian fare or grab a steak in the wee hours of the morning, and meet a random character or two at the bar.

Žemaičiai (Vokiečių gatvė 24; mains 15-35 Lt) Of the many brick-walled, old-style Lithuanian theme restaurants in Vilnius, this institution, famous for its pigs trotters (14 Lt), offers the most authentic Lithuanian experience.

Saint Germain (Literatų gatvė 9; mains 20 Lt) Paris is the inspiration behind this shabby-chic wine-bar-cum-restaurant with modern art splashed on the wall, groovy French lounge music and funky handwritten menus. Advance reservations for its street terrace are essential.

Aukštaičiai (Antokolskio gatvė 13; mains 20-50 Lt; ☎ 8am-4am) Occupying half a length of a quaint old Jewish quarter street in the warm months, it's a bit pricier than most Lithuanian-food establishments, but then again the food's better. It serves a mean breakfast.

Medininkai (☎ 266 0771; Aušros Vartų gatvė 8; mains 30-50 Lt) Dine amid vaulted ceilings and ancient frescoes in this gorgeous space in the prettiest part of town. The delicious European cuisine only enhances the ambience.

Fans of Italian food have two good options near each other on Vilniaus gatvė. The

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Balti Drambliai (Vilniaus gatvė 41; mains 10 Lt; ☎) It's hard to decide what we like best about this maze-like, dirt-cheap vegetarian restaurant in the basement of a former Duke's palace: the smell of curry wafting from the kitchen, the divine soups (3 Lt to 4 Lt), the small library with chess and other games, the pints of *alus* (4 Lt) or the eclectic range of Indian, Middle Eastern and Italian dishes. To top it all off, because of the recent smoking ban, you can actually smell those curries.

cheaper restaurant, **Pomodoro** (Vilniaus gatvė 15; pizzas/mains from 8/15 Lt), may be a chain but it's pretty good with a great atrium seating area within the Centro Pazažas mall. The more upmarket **Da Antonio** (☎ 262 0109; Vilniaus gatvė 23; mains 25 Lt) has the best homemade pasta in town, served up in a cosy classical space.

Quick Eats

Delano (Gedimino prospektas 24; meals from 10 Lt) This big basement cafeteria-style eatery is a great place for budget travellers to fill up on greasy Lithuanian food. It's reminiscent of Lido in Latvia (see p424), only cheaper and not as good.

Ephesus (Trakų gatvė 15; kebab 5 Lt; ☎ 11-6am Tue-Sat, 11-1am Sun & Mon) Ravenous night owls can munch on kebabs into the really wee hours at this small Turkish joint.

Self-Catering

Fresh fruit, honey, smoked eels and cheap staples can all be found at **Kalvarijų market** (☎ 7am-noon Tue-Sun), located north of the Neris River. There are two branches of the small supermarket **Ikiukas** (Pylimo gatvė 21; Old Town (Jogailos gatvė 12).

EATING IN UŽUPIS

There are few eateries in bohemian Užupis, but most of them are noteworthy. Mountain lodge-style **Tores** (☎ 262 9309; Užupio gatvė 40; meals 30-50 Lt) has good food and atmosphere, but the main reason to come is for the stunning panorama of Gediminas Castle and the Cathedral across Vilnia River valley. Take it all in from the outdoor patio while sipping Švyturys pints (5 Lt).

Užupio kavinė (Užupio gatvė 2; mains 10-20 Lt), right on the river as you enter Užupis, is a legendary spot known for its arty clientele and good cheap breakfasts. Ask the bartender for a copy of the Užupis constitution in English. Lastly, **Prie Angelo Kavinė** (Užupio gatvė 9; pizzas 15 Lt; ☎), on the main square, fires up what may be Vilnius' best pizzas.

PUFFERS SNUFFED OUT

From 1 January 2007, smoking in all restaurants and bars was banned in the whole of Lithuania. Lithuania is among the first of the EU countries to introduce this ban, but they sure won't be the last.

DRINKING

Vilnius' riotous party culture centres on clubs in the cold months and outdoor cafés in the summer.

On the weekends, many cafés turn into clubs and many restaurants turn into raucous bars.

Cozy (Dominikonų gatvė 10; sandwiches/mains 8/15 Lt) Cozy has excellent lunch specials (15 Lt) by day and draws an alternative student crowd from nearby Vilnius University by night. The basement DJ club has all-night soirees on Friday and Saturday, and smaller parties on Monday and Thursday.

Sole Luna (Universiteto gatvė 4; mains from 8 Lt; ☎ Mon-Sat) Students love the cheap food at this Italian-owned café near Vilnius University, but the main draw is the outdoor dining and weekend dancing in a 16th-century courtyard.

Skonis ir Kvapas (Trakų gatvė 8; mains 15-20 Lt) Now this is how a café should look: original frescoes on the ceiling and walls, working fireplace and a worn wooden floor. Vilnius' best tea list comes presented on an mock hand fan.

Avilys (Gedimino prospektas 5; pints of beer 7-8 Lt) 'Beehive' draws a refined crowd to sample its excellent home brew – the dark and honey beers especially – and a variety of dishes cooked in beer.

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Manu Kavinė (Bokšto gatvė 7; mains 10-20 Lt; ☎ 11-2am) This bar has something for everybody: an extensive tea list; a wide selection of beer on tap, including Guinness; and an exceptionally priced menu with delights such as German sausages (12 Lt), and salmon wrapped in tin foil (16.50 Lt). It would be enough to stop there, but the amiable owner throws in complimentary internet access on two computers and – get this, sports fans – free darts and foosball in the backroom sports bar.

ENTERTAINMENT

In Your Pocket publishes a list of movie theatres as well as listings for opera, theatre, classical music and other big events. Most such venues break for the summer. The tourist offices also post events listings. Check www.cinema.lt (in Lithuanian) for movie listings.

Cinemas

Films are screened in English at the 12-screen **Coca-Cola Plaza** (☎ 265 6565; www.forumcinemas.lt; Savanorių 7) and are usually dubbed in Lithuanian elsewhere.

Classical Music

Lithuanian Opera & Ballet Theatre (☎ 262 0636; www.opera.lt; Vienuolio gatvė 1) Classical productions in a grand, gaudy building near the river.

National Philharmonic (☎ 266 5233; www.filharmonija.lt; Aušros Vartų gatvė 5; ☎ box office 10am-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-noon Sun) The country's most renowned orchestras perform here.

Theatre

National Drama Theatre (☎ 262 9771; www.teatras.lt; Gedimino Prospektas 4; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 11am-6pm Sat & Sun) stages national and international productions in Lithuanian.

Nightclubs

With cover charges increasing by the month, crowds at most Vilnius clubs are increasingly bling-bling and the velvet-rope policies increasingly obnoxious.

Brodvėjus (☎ 210 7208; Mėsinių 4; cover 10-15 Lt) Every big city in Eastern Europe has one – a place where hordes of expats and pretty young things flock night after night to dance to 'I Will Survive', 'Mambo No 5' and the same tired-but-innocuous soundtrack until way past bedtime. Brodvėjus is a classic example of the genre.

Pabo Latino (☎ 262 1045; Trakų gatvė 3; cover 30 Lt; ☎ Thu-Sat) This was the best club in Vilnius until its growling bouncers were charged with stepping up face control. Still, there's always hope that it will return to its vibrant salsa-infused glory.

Pacha (www.pacha.com) The legendary chain of Ibiza fame promises to reinvigorate the Vilnius club scene when it opens its doors in 2007.

Men's Factory (☎ 8-699 85009; Švenčenkos gatvė 16/10; cover 5-40 Lt; ☎ Wed-Sat) This wildly popular gay club west of Old Town draws plenty of straight club-goers, too.

SHOPPING

Amber Museum-Gallery (☎ 212 0499; Šv Mykolo gatvė 8; ☎ 10am-7pm) Exquisite pieces for sale plus displays on the history and chemistry of amber.

Craft market (meeting point of Didžioji & Pilies gatvė) Traditional crafts and amber in abundance at this daily market.

Devyni du penki (Stiklių gatvė 12) Sells gorgeous chunky silver jewellery, some embedded with amber.

Jonas Bugailiškis (☎ 261 7667; Aušros Vartų gatvė 17-10) The place to buy authentic Lithuanian-style wooden crosses, toys and traditional folk instruments.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

For information on international and domestic flights, bus, train and ferry services to Vilnius, see p466.

The **train station** (☎ 233 0087/6; Geležinkelio gatvė 16) is a five-minute walk south of Old Town. The **bus station** (☎ 216 2977; Sodų gatvė 22) is across the street from the train station.

GETTING AROUND

To/From the Airport

Vilnius International Airport (☎ 230 6666; www.vilnius-airport.lt; Rodūnios gatvė 2) sits 5km south of the city.

Getting from the airport to the centre of Vilnius is a doddle: just hop on bus 1, which runs every hour to the train station (1 Lt, 20 minutes).

Alternatively you can take the more frequent bus 2 towards Lukiškių Aikštė. on Gedimino prospektas in New Town. Minibus 15 (2 Lt) also plies this route.

A taxi from the airport to the city centre should cost no more than 20 Lt.

Car

For tips on car rental see p468. There's a huge **free parking lot** (Maironio gatvė) on the western edge of Old Town, and numerous guarded paid car parks around town.

Public Transport

Unless you're heading well out of Old Town, you won't have much need for public transport in Vilnius, although the route from the train station to New Town via Pylimo gatvė is handy. It is serviced by trolleybuses 2 and 5, and by buses 26, 26a and 53.

Tickets cost 1.40 Lt at news kiosks and 1.10 Lt direct from the driver; punch tickets

on board in a ticket machine or risk a 20 Lt on-the-spot fine.

Taxi

Taxis officially charge 2 Lt per kilometre (more at night) and must have a meter. Drivers often try to rip tourists off, especially if flagged down on the street. You can phone a **taxi** (☎ 1409, 1423, 1445, 1422, 1800), or queue up at one of numerous taxi ranks. Popular spots are outside the train station and at the southern end of Vokiečių gatvė.

AROUND VILNIUS

Paneriai

During WWII the Nazis, aided by Lithuanian accomplices, exterminated three-quarters of Vilnius' 100,000-strong Jewish population at this site, 10km southwest of central Vilnius.

From the entrance a path leads to the small **Paneriai Museum** (☎ 5-260-2001; Agrastų gatvė 15; ☎ 11am-6pm Mon, Wed, Fri & Sun Mar-Dec), near which there are two monuments – one Jewish (marked with the Star of David), the other one Soviet (an obelisk topped with a Soviet star).

Paths lead from here to grassed-over pits where the Nazis burnt the exhumed bodies of their victims to hide the evidence of their crimes.

There are about 20 suburban trains daily from Vilnius to Paneriai station (1.20 Lt, 20 minutes). From the station, it is a 1km walk southwest along Agrastų gatvė to the site.

Trakai

☎ 528 / pop 6,110

Talk about your perfect day trip: Lithuania's ancient capital, just 28km west of Vilnius, has a little bit of everything, including bucolic lakes, two castles – with one that will truly make your jaw drop – and a rare Middle Eastern religious sect.

That sect is the Karaites, named after the term *Kara*, which means 'to study the scriptures' in both Hebrew and Arabic. The sect originated in Baghdad and practises strict adherence to the Torah (rejecting the rabbinic Talmud). Grand Duke of Lithuania Vytautas brought about 380 Karaite families to Trakai from Crimea, in around 1400, to serve as bodyguards. Only 63 remain in Trakai today and their numbers – about 280 in Lithuania – are dwindling rapidly.

This area has protected status as the **Trakai Historical National Park** (www.seniejitrakai.lt). The

tourist information centre (☎ 51934; www.trakai.lt; Vytauto gatvė 69; ☹ 8am–5pm Mon–Thu, 8am–3.45pm Fri–Sep–Apr; 8.30am–4.15pm Mon, 8.30am–5.30pm Tue–Fri, 9am–3pm Sat May–Aug) sells maps, books accommodation, rents bikes (24 Lt per day) and has information on fishing, sailing, scuba diving, horse riding and a range of other activities.

SIGHTS

Trakai's trophy piece is the fairytale **Island Castle** (☎ 53946; adult/student 10/5 Lt; ☹ 10am–7pm May–Sep, 10am–5pm Tue–Sun Oct–Apr), occupying a small island in Lake Galvė. The painstakingly restored, red-brick Gothic castle dates from the late-14th century when Prince Kęstutis, father of Vytautas, once ruled the area. Vytautas completed what his father started in the early 1400s and died in the castle in 1430.

A footbridge links the Island Castle to the shore. Inside the castle is a branch of the **Trakai History Museum** (☎ 53946; www.trakaimuzejus.lt) in which the history of the castle is charted. In summer the castle courtyard is a magical stage for concerts and plays.

The museum has two other branches in town: an **Exhibition of Religious Art** (☎ 53941; Kestučio gatvė 4; adult/student 4/2 Lt; ☹ 10am–6pm Wed–Sun) and the **Karaite Ethnographic Exhibition** (☎ 55286; Karaimų gatvė 22; adult/student 4/2 Lt; ☹ 10am–6pm Wed–Sun). The latter provides a good introduction to the fascinating Karaite culture. Karaimų gatvė No 30 is a beautifully restored early-19th-century **Kenessa** (prayer house) of the Karaites.

The ruins of Trakai's **Peninsula Castle**, built from 1362 to 1382 by Kęstutis and destroyed in the 17th century, are at the northern end of town.

SLEEPING & EATING

Kempingas Slėnioje (☎ 53880; www.camprakai.lt; Slėnio 1; camping per person/car/tent 16/5/6 Lt, cottage 250 Lt, r in summer house/guesthouse from 70/120 Lt; ☹) This sublime complex is 5km out of Trakai on the northern side of Lake Galvė. You can pitch your tent by the lake or stay in wooden cabins or the spectacular guesthouse with lakeside balconies. Activities include horse riding, canoeing and hot-air balloon rides.

Sport Centre (☎ 53200; www.sc.trakai.com; Karaimų gatvė 73; s/d 144/156 Lt; ☹) Rooms here are basic but big and clean, and half have wonderful lakeside views. As the name implies, it doubles as a mighty fine activity centre.

Apvalaus Stalo Klubas (Round Table Club; ☎ 55595; Karaimų gatvė 53; pizzas 15 Lt, mains 35 Lt; ☹) A lovely waterside French restaurant with separate pizzeria and stunning sunset views.

There are two good options for trying out Karaite food – especially *kibinai*, meat-stuffed pastries that are similar to empanadas. Prices at both will seem refreshing after Vilnius. **Kibininė** (Karaimų gatvė 65; kibinai 2.50–5 Lt) has a dreamy location right on the lake, while **Kybynlar** (Karaimų gatvė 29; meals 15 Lt; ☹) has a more Turkic feel. The writing on the wall is in the endangered Karaim language.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are at least two buses hourly to/from Vilnius (4 Lt, 45 minutes), plus seven daily trains (4 Lt, 45 minutes).

Kernavė

Deemed an 'exceptional testimony to some 10 millennia of human settlements in this region' by Unesco, which made it a World Heritage site in 2004, Kernavė is the 'Pompeii of Lithuania' and a must-see. Thought to have been the spot where Mindaugas (responsible for uniting Lithuania for the first time) celebrated his coronation in 1253, the rural cultural reserve comprises four old castle mounds and the archaeological remains of a medieval town.

Unfortunately, the **Archaeological & Historical Museum** (☎ 382-47385; www.kernave.org; Kerniaus gatvė 4a) is undergoing renovation and won't reopen until the spring of 2008. However, you can still explore the grounds and observe ongoing excavations in the pleasant, 194.4 hectare **Kernavė Cultural Reserve** (www.kernave.org).

To reach Kernavė, 35km northwest of Vilnius in the Neris Valley, follow the road through Dūkšvos from Maisiagala on the main road north to Ukmergė.

EASTERN & SOUTHERN LITHUANIA

The mythical forests and famous spas of eastern and southern Lithuania make easy day trips from Vilnius – although outdoor enthusiasts should not hesitate to spend more time here camping, cross country skiing, canoeing, hiking, bird-watching or berry-picking.

AUKŠTAITIJA NATIONAL PARK

☎ 386

Lithuania's first national park (founded in 1974) is a 400-sq-km wonderland of rivers, lakes, centuries-old forests and tiny villages steeped in rural tradition. Around 70% of the park comprises pine, spruce and deciduous forests, inhabited by elk, deer, wild boar, storks, and white-tailed and golden eagles. Its highlight is a labyrinth of 126 lakes, the deepest being Lake Tauragnas (60.5m deep).

The park is mainly for outdoor lovers, but there are also some cultural attractions, including several settlements that are protected ethnographic centres. For those interested in getting deeper under the skin of this enchanting area, the **Aukštaitija National Park Office** (☎ 47430; www.tourism.lt/nature/parks/aukshtaitija.html; ☹ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–6pm Sat) in Palūšė has everything you need to know. Another good resource is the **Tourism Centre Palūšė** (☎ 47430; www.paluse.lt), which also runs a camping ground.

To get here jump on a train from Vilnius to Ignalina (10 Lt, two hours, seven daily), from where you have to walk, hitch or take a taxi to Palūšė.

DRUSKININKAI

☎ 313 / pop 20,000

Druskininkai, 130km south of Vilnius, is Lithuania's most famous health resort. In recent years it has gained notoriety as the home to the somewhat controversial Soviet sculpture museum known as Grūto Parkas.

People have been taking in the incredibly salty waters in this leafy riverside town since the 18th century. Today there's a mix of both Soviet-style and more modern treatments to be had if you're in the mood for pampering. At **Druskininkų Gydykla** (Vilniaus gatvė 11; per cup 0.30 Lt) you can sample several types of genuine Druskininkai mineral water, which tastes downright foul but promises eternal beauty.

The **Tourist Information Centres** (www.druskininkai.lt; town centre ☎ 51777; www.druskininkai.lt; Čiurlionio gatvė 65; ☹ 10am–6.45pm Mon–Sat, 10am–5pm Sun; old train station ☎ 60800; Gardino gatvė 3; ☹ 8.30am–5.15pm Mon–Fri) can help you out with accommodation and information on the town's dozens of spas. The branch at the old train station also runs an excellent camping ground with a few no-frills mobile homes for rent (from 70 Lt).

But chances are you are here to see **Grūto Parkas** (☎ 55511; www.grutoparks.lt; adult/child 10/3 Lt; ☹ 9am–sunset), 8km west of town in the village

of Grūtas. The park has been an enormous hit since it opened to much fanfare in 2001. The sprawling grounds contain dozens of statues of Soviet heroes, exhibits on Soviet history and loudspeakers bellowing Soviet anthems. The statues once stood confidently in parks or squares across Lithuania.

There are nine daily buses between Druskininkai and Vilnius, and 10 daily buses to/from Kaunas (both 20 Lt, two hours). If you're going straight to Grūto Parkas, ask to be let off at the park turnoff, then walk the final 1km walk to the park.

CENTRAL LITHUANIA

Most view Lithuania's nondescript interior as little more than something you must cross to get to the west coast or Latvia, but it does offer a few worthwhile diversions, including the country's signature tourist attraction, the Hill of Crosses in Šiauliai.

KAUNAS

☎ 37 / pop 378,900

Lithuania's second city remains stubbornly provincial, but holds some appeal for those willing to scratch beneath its hard-edged surface. That appeal lies mainly in its attractive Old Town, a seemingly endless central pedestrian street, its wide range of museums and its red-hot basketball team, Žalgiris.

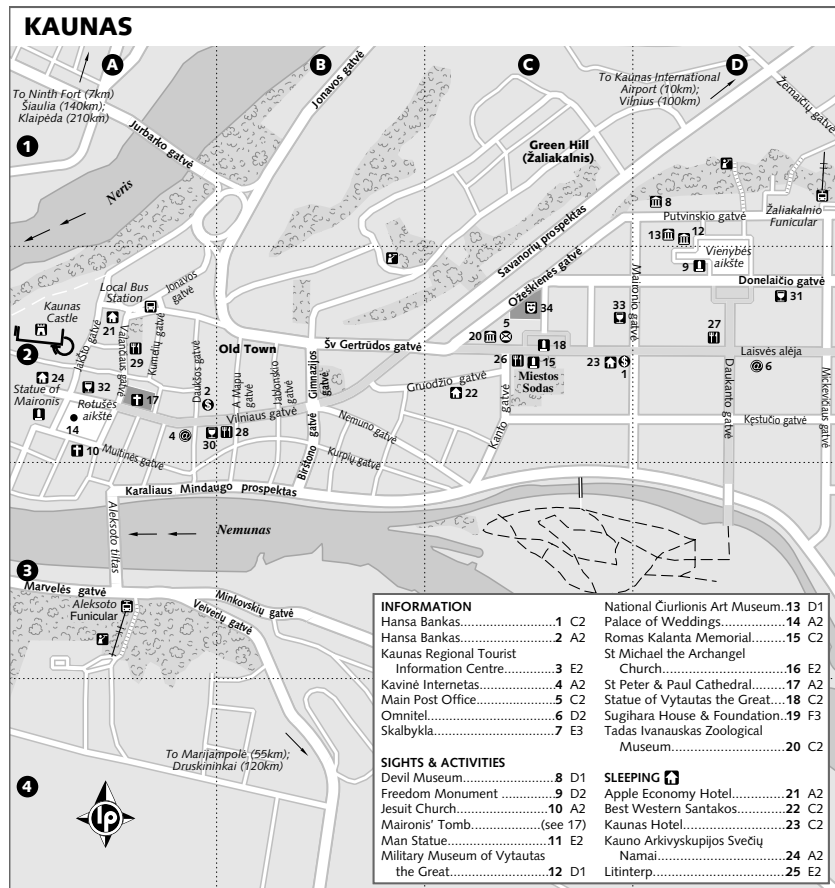
The capital of Lithuania in the dark days between the two world wars, Kaunas is enjoying a renaissance of sorts as several budget airlines have made it their Lithuanian hub. But its hotels and restaurants need to improve if it is to lure more than a fraction of those who use its airport, most of whom head straight to Vilnius.

For now, Kaunas is a convenient overnight stopover and, in the warmer months, a decent place to experience the real Lithuania away from the crowds of Vilnius. A great time to visit is in April when the city comes alive during the four-day **Kaunas Jazz Festival** (www.kaunasjazz.lt).

Information

Casinos have 24-hour currency exchanges. All major banks cash travellers cheques and have ATMs.

Hansa Bankas Old Town (Vilniaus gatvė 13); New Town (Laisvės alėja 79) Both branches have an ATM.



Kaunas in Your Pocket (www.inyourpocket.com)

Annual city guide sold in hotels, art galleries and news kiosks for 5 Lt.

Kaunas Regional Tourist Information Centre

(☎ 323 436; <http://visit.kaunas.lt>; Laisvės alėja 36; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat, 2–4pm Sun Jun–Aug; 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–3pm Sat May & Sep; 9am–6pm Mon–Thu, 9am–5pm Fri Oct–Apr) Books accommodation, sells maps and arranges bicycle rental. There's a travel agency in the same office that sells bus, plane and ferry tickets and can obtain visas.

Kavinė Internetas (Vilniaus gatvė 24; per hr 4 Lt; ☎ 8.30am–11pm) Good internet café that serves drinks.

Main post office (Laisvės alėja 102; ☎ 7am–7pm Mon–Fri, 7am–5pm Sat)

Omnitel (43 Laisvės alėja; per hr 3 Lt; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat) internet access.

Skalbikla (laundromat; Gedimino gatvė 11; per kg 4 Lt;

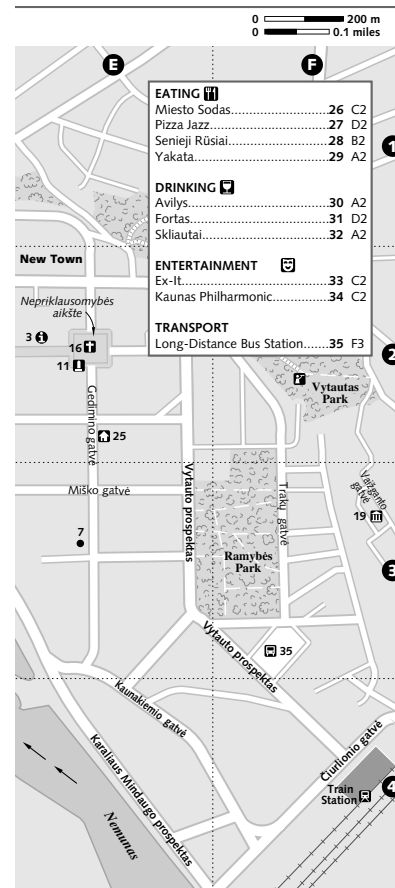
☎ 8.30am–5pm Mon–Sat) Same-day service available.

Sights

OLD TOWN

Start any trip to Kaunas wandering through its lovely little Old Town, where most streets lead to Rotušės aikštė (Central Square). Surrounding the square are 15th- and 16th-century German merchants' houses. The 18th-century, white, baroque former city hall is now the **Palace of Weddings**. The southern side of the square is dominated by an 18th-century twin-towered **Jesuit church**.

St Peter & Paul Cathedral (Vilniaus gatvė 1) on the northeastern corner of the square, owes much to baroque reconstruction, but its early-15th-



century Gothic-shaped windows remain. **Maironis' tomb** is outside the cathedral's south wall.

NEW TOWN

Kaunas expanded east from the Old Town in the 19th century, giving birth to the modern centre and its striking 1.7km-long pedestrian street, Laisvės alėja, which today is lined with bars, shops and restaurants.

Near the western end you'll find Miestos Sodas (City Garden), where a **memorial to Romas Kalanta** – a Kaunas student who set himself on fire on 14 May 1972 in protest at tyrannical communist rule – takes the form of several stone slabs.

The **Tadas Ivanauskas Zoological Museum** (☎ 229 675; Laisvės alėja 106; adult/child 5/3 Lt; ☎ 11am–7pm

Tue–Sun) contains 13,000 stuffed animals to amuse and educate children of all ages. Nearby stands a **statue of Vytautas the Great**.

The blue, neo-Byzantine **St Michael the Archangel Church** (1893) dominates the eastern end of Laisvės alėja from its position on the adjacent Nepriklausomybės aikštė (Independence Square). On the same square, the **statue of man**, modelled on Nike the Greek god of victory, caused a storm of controversy when his glorious pose exposing his manhood was unveiled.

East of here is the **Sugihara House & Foundation** (☎ 332 881; Vaižganto gatvė 30; admission free; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Fri, 11am–4pm Sat & Sun May–Oct; 11am–3pm Mon–Fri Nov–Apr) tells the story of Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese consul to Lithuania (1939–40), known as 'Japan's Schindler'. He saved 12,000 lives by issuing visas (against orders) to Polish Jews who faced being forced into Soviet citizenship.

North of Laisvės alėja, Vienybės aikštė (Unity Square) contains the **Freedom Monument**, which honours 16 February 1918 – the day Lithuania declared independence. It was erected in 1928. It was hidden during the Stalin era, and put back in place on 16 February 1989.

Two museums share the large building on the north side of the square. The **Military Museum of Vytautas the Great** (☎ 320 939; Donelaičio gatvė 64; adult/child 2/1 Lt; ☎ 11am–6pm Wed–Sun) recounts Lithuania's history from prehistoric times to the present day. The **National Čiurlionis Art Museum** (☎ 221 417; Putvinskio gatvė 55; ☎ 11am–5pm Tue–Sat) has an extensive collection of the romantic symbolic paintings of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911), Lithuania's beloved artist and composer.

Nearby is the bizarre **Devil Museum** (☎ 221 587; Putvinskio gatvė 64; ☎ 11am–5pm, closed Mon), which contains more than 2000 devil statuettes. Note the satanic figures of Hitler and Stalin, formed from tree roots, and performing a deadly dance over Lithuania.

Leaving town, the 19th-century **Ninth Fort** (☎ 377 715; Žemaičių plentas 73; adult/child 5/3 Lt; ☎ 10am–6pm Wed–Mon Mar–Nov, 10am–4pm Wed–Sun Dec–Feb), 7km from Kaunas, was used by the Russians in WWI to defend their western frontier against Germany. During WWII the Nazis murdered an estimated 80,000 people, mostly Kaunas Jews, here. Take bus 35 or 23 to the IX Fortas bus stop, then walk for 1km.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Kauno Arkivyskupijos Svečių Namai (☎ 322 597; <http://kaunas.lcn.lt/guesthouse>; Rotušės aikštė 21; s/d/tr with shared bathrooms 50/80/100 Lt) Kaunas is suddenly budget-friendly thanks to this squeaky-clean jewel in an old monastery, wedged between two ancient churches. Each pair of rooms shares a bathroom. You will be hard pressed to find a better big-city deal than this in all of Europe. If it's full, ask if they can put you up in their similarly priced hostel on Dauksos gatvė.

Sleeping

Litinterp (☎ 228 718; www.litinterp.lt; Gedimino gatvė 28-7; s/d 100/160 Lt, with shared bathroom 80/140 Lt) Much like the Soviets once did, the Litinterp folks manage to make all their properties look identical down to the last light switch. Unlike the Soviets – and unlike many budget hotels – their identical stuff always works. Budget paradise.

Kaunas Hotel (☎ 750 861; www.kaunashotel.lt; Laisvės alėja 79; d from 320 Lt; ☎ ☒ ☒ ☒) This centrally located hotel is as dependable as they come in Kaunas, with airy if nondescript rooms and a host of business-traveller treats like free wi-fi and one of the best hotel fitness centres in Lithuania.

Apple Economy Hotel (☎ 321 404; www.applehotel.lt; Valančiaus gatvė 19; s/d from 135/190 Lt; ☎ ☒ ☒ ☒) Fans of minimalism will crave a stay at the quirky Apple. Spot the green-apple motif on your pillows and on the silk wall hangings that add a splash of colour to the otherwise white rooms.

Best Western Santakos (☎ 302 702; www.santaka.lt; Gruodžio gatvė 21; s/d from 360/480 Lt; ☎ ☒ ☒ ☒) Kaunas' swankiest hotel by a long shot feels nothing like a chain. The enormous rooms in the old wing boast opulent bathrooms with swinging double doors and a generously furnished sitting area fit for a small party.

Eating

It's no Vilnius but Kaunas' restaurant scene is gradually improving, and food tends to be cheaper than in the capital.

Pizza Jazz (Laisvės alėja 68; mains 10–20 Lt) Sure it's a chain, but it's still one of the best cheap-eating options in Kaunas. Has a lively bar on one side and a surprisingly posh-feeling restaurant on the other.

Miesto Sodas (Laisvės alėja 93; mains 15–20 Lt; ☎ 11am–midnight) Kaunas' trendiest eatery has more than passable steaks and, rarity of all rarities, a salad bar. Service can be snail-slow. Siena nightclub in the basement is a great place to watch Žalgiris basketball games.

Yakata (Valančiaus gatvė 14; sushi boats 32 Lt, mains 20 Lt) A cosy, tastefully done little Japanese place with superb chicken teriyaki, OK sushi and well-priced beer (5 Lt).

Senieji Rūsiai (Vilniaus gatvė 34; mains 25–35 Lt) Easily the tastiest restaurant in Kaunas, this candlelit 17th-century cellar offers European specialties such as ostrich and beefsteak flambéed at your table.

Drinking

Skiautai (Rotušės aikštė 26) A cool basement café that creates instant fans with its Old Town courtyard patio and arty crowd.

Avilys (Vilniaus gatvė 34; mains 15–25 Lt) Expect the same fine food and award-winning home brew produced by this brew-pub's Vilnius branch (p452).

Entertainment

Fortas (Donelaičio gatvė 65; mains 10–25 Lt) The best bar in town has an Irish feel and draws rowdy college kids to hear DJs or live music upstairs most nights of the week.

Ex-It (☎ 202 813; Maironio 19; cover 20–100 Lt; ☎ Fri & Sat) Many vote this pulsating, multichambered dance cathedral the best club in Lithuania.

Kaunas Philharmonic (☎ 200 478; www.kaunofilharmonija.lt; Sapiegos gatvė 5) This is the main concert hall for classical music.

Kaunas Musical Theatre (☎ 200 933; www.muzikini-teatras.lt; Laisvės alėja 91) This 1892 building hosts operettas from September to June.

Getting There & Away

AIR

For information on international flights, see p466).

BUS

International routes to/from the **long-distance bus station** (☎ 409 060; Vytauto prospektas 24) include St Petersburg, Kaliningrad, Riga (45 Lt, 3½ hours, one daily) and Tallinn (110 Lt, 12 hours, one daily).

Domestic routes include Vilnius (19 Lt, 1½ hours, three hourly), Druskininkai (24 Lt, two to three hours, six buses via Alytus), Klaipėda (38 Lt, three hours, 10 daily), Palanga (40 Lt,

3½ hours, 10 to 15 daily) and Šiauliai (23 Lt, three hours, 15 daily).

TRAIN

From the **train station** (☎ 221 093; Čiurlionio gatvė 16) there are 13 trains daily to/from Vilnius (11 Lt, 1¼ hours) and an incredibly slow overnight train to/from Klaipėda (25 Lt, six hours).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Kaunas International Airport (☎ 399 307; Savanorių prospektas) is 10km north of the Old Town in the suburb of Karmėlava. To get there take minibus 120 from the big stop at Šv Gertrūdės gatvė (1 Lt).

ŠIAULIAI

☎ 41 / pop 147,000

Lithuania's fourth-largest city is usually just a stopover for peeps making the pilgrimage to the legendary Hill of Crosses, 12km to the north. But a recent facelift on its main pedestrian walkway signals that it's preparing for bigger things.

Once home to the USSR's largest military base outside Russia, Šiauliai today is a symbol of Lithuania's determined westward push, as it provides a base for the NATO forces policing Baltic skies.

You can get your bearings at the **tourism information centre** (☎ 523 110; www.siauliai.lt/tic; Vilniaus gatvė 213; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–5pm Sat, 10am–4pm Sun).

Sights & Activities

Recently renovated **Vilniaus gatvė** is the city's main drag and is a great place to stroll or plop down in a street-side café and watch the world go by. It's also a free wi-fi zone.

The city's quirky symbol is a bizarre golden **sundial** (cnr Salkausko gatvė & Ežero gatvė), topped by a gleaming statue of an archer. It stands on the shore of Lake Tal os, about five minutes' walk north from the centre.

Zoknia Military Airfield, with runways large enough to land a space shuttle on, can be visited by guided tours arranged at least one week in advance through the tourism information centre. Many of the 50 or so Soviet aircraft hangars (which once housed MiG-29 fighters) remain, as does the subterranean command post sturdy enough to survive a nuclear attack. About 120 NATO personnel and four F-16 jet fighters are currently stationed at Zokniai.

HILL OF CROSSES

Lithuania's most incredible, awe-inspiring sight is the legendary **Hill of Crosses** (Kryžių kalnas). It is a two-hump hillock blanketed by thousands of crosses. The sound of the evening breeze tinkling through the crosses that appear to grow on the hillock is indescribable and unmissable. Each and every cross represents the amazing spirit, soulfulness and quietly rebellious nature of these people.

Legend says the tradition of planting crosses began in the 14th century. The crosses were bulldozed by the Soviets, but each night people crept past soldiers and barbed wire to plant yet more, risking their lives or freedom to express their national and spiritual fervour. Today Kryžių kalnas is a place of national pilgrimage.

Some of the crosses are devotional, others are memorials (many for people deported to Siberia) and some are finely carved folk-art masterpieces.

This strange place lies 12km north of Šiauliai – 10km north up highway A12, then 2km east from a well-marked turnoff (the sign says 'Kryžių kalnas 2'). You can rent a bike from the tourist information centre (first hour 3.50 Lt, per additional hour 2.50 Lt) and pedal out here, or take one of eight buses. The bus schedule is in the tourist centre. A round-trip taxi with a half hour to see the crosses should cost 30 Lt.

Sleeping & Drinking

Šiaulių Kolegijos Youth Hostel (☎ 523 764; adminis@siauliaikolegija.lt; Tilžės gatvė 159; s/d/tr/q with shared bathroom 50/60/75/100 Lt; ☎ ☒ ☒ ☒) It has spick-and-span rooms at incredibly low prices – and even throws free wireless internet into the mix.

Saulys (☎ 520 812; www.saulys.lt; Vasario 16-osios gatvė 40; s/d from 180/250 Lt; ☎ ☒ ☒ ☒ ☒) Šiauliai's swankiest choice has all the mod cons and a decent fitness centre. If that's not enough activity for you, they organise paragliding and parachuting expeditions.

Arkos (Vilniaus gatvė 213; mains 15–20 Lt) Good bar with passable munchies in a brick cellar.

Getting There & Away

Šiauliai is roughly 140km from both Kaunas and Riga. With your own wheels you could feasibly visit the Hill of Crosses as a day trip from either.

Services from the **bus station** (☎ 525 058; Tilze gatvė 109) include Vilnius (32 Lt, three hours, nine daily), Kaunas (23 Lt, three hours, 15 daily), Klaipėda (23 Lt, 2½ hours, six daily) and Rīga (20 Lt, 2½ hours, 10 daily).

From the **train station** (☎ 430 652; Dubijos gatvė 44) there are trains to Vilnius (26 Lt, four hours, five to eight daily) and Riga (16 Lt, 2½ hours, at least one daily).

WESTERN LITHUANIA

Lithuania's lively left coastline is only 99km long but it packs plenty of fire power, with a thriving port city, a thumping party town and its crown jewel, the starkly beautiful, sand dune-infested Curonian Spit – a Unesco World Heritage site. Toss in a few fine festivals, add a dollop of German history and there will be plenty to keep you occupied in this wonderful part of the world.

PALANGA

 460 / pop 19,550

Downright dull by winter, beachside Palanga, just 25km north of Klaipėda, explodes into Lithuania's undisputed party capital in the summer months.

The **tourist information centre** (☎ 48811; www.palangatic.lt; Kretingos gatvė 1; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3.30pm Sat & Sun May-Aug; 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Sep-Apr) adjoins the tiny bus station, east of Palanga's lengthy main artery, pedestrian Basanavičiaus gatvė.

For a peaceful escape from the crowds of Basanavičiaus gatvė, walk or cycle south along Meilės alėja, the main beachfront path, to Palanga's **Botanical Park**, where you'll discover lush greenery and swans gliding on still lakes. The park's highlight is the **Amber Museum** (☎ 51319; Vytauto gatvė 17; adult/child 5/2.50 lt; 🕒 10am-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-7pm Sun), inside the sweeping former palace of the noble Polish Tyszkiewicz family.

Sleeping & Eating

Room rates change by the week in the summer. Litinterp in Klaipėda (p462) can arrange B&Bs in Palanga. For cheap digs try haggling with one of the dozens of locals who stand at the eastern end of Kretingos gatvė tout-
ing nuomojami kambariai (rooms for rent). Expect to pay 25 to 100 Lt per head.

Two fabulously designed hotels located across from each other and sharing an owner


are the **Palanga Hotel** (☎ 41414; www.palanga-hotel.lt; Birutės gatvė 60; r from 500 Lt; **P** ☒ ☒ ☒ ☒) and the **Vandenis** (☎ 52987; www.vandenis.lt; Birutės gatvė 47; d/stc from 250/300 Lt; **P** ☒ ☒ ☒ ☒). The refreshingly unique Palanga is the snazziest hotel in town, while the up-and-coming Vandenis has live tunes nightly in its large, flashy music bar.

There are scores of eating options along Basanavičiaus gatvė. One that stands out is rustic **1925 Baras** (Basanavičiaus gatvė 4; mains 15-20 lt), which has a less carnival atmosphere than many Palanga restaurants.

Getting There & Away

For details on summer Palanga–Vilnius flights see p467. There are regular daily buses to Vilnius (52 Lt, four hours, six daily), Kaunas (40 Lt, 3½ hours, five daily), Klaipėda (bus/minibus 1.50/3 Lt, 45 minutes, every 20 minutes) and Riga (40 Lt, five hours, two daily).

KLAIPĖDA

 46 / pop 194,000

Gritty Klaipėda is Lithuania's main port city and gateway to the lush natural beauty of the Curonian Spit. It boasts a fascinating history as the East Prussian city of Memel, and many Germans enjoy visiting to dig into Klaipėda's Prussian past and waltz among the few buildings still standing from that era.

Krantas Travel (☎ 395 111; Teatro gatvé 5) sells ferry tickets to Kiel. **Omnitel** (☎ 412 360; Manto gatvé 18; per hr 3 Lt; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat) has internet access.

The **tourist information centre** (☎ 412 186; www.klaipedainfo.lt; Turgaus gatvė 7; per hr 2 Lt; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun May-Aug; 9am-6pm Mon-Fri Sep-Apr) arranges accommodation and tours and has two computers for internet surfing.

Sights

What little remains of Klaipėda's **Old Town** (most of it was destroyed in WWII) is wedged between the Danė River and recently renovated Turgaus gatvė. There are several well-preserved old German half-timbered buildings in the vicinity of Teatro aikštė (Theatre Square), which is Klaipėda's spiritual heart.

The square's dominant building is the **Drama Theatre** (Teatro aikštė 2), where in 1939 Hitler stood on the balcony and announced the incorporation of Memel into Germany. Occupying the middle of the square is the much-loved **statue of Ännchen von Tharau** – a

AUTHOR EXPERIENCE – THE LEGENDARY VIKTORIJA

Creaky Soviet-style hotels manned by snarling babushkas are a dying breed in the Baltics, yet there's a true classic of the genre defiantly hogging real estate in downtown Klaipėda. Sentimentalists might call the **Viktorija Hotel** (☎ 412 190; Šmikaus gatvė 2; s/d/tr with shared bathroom 45/68/90) a masterpiece. Modernists would call it an abomination. As many travellers do, I ended up calling one of its single rooms home for a night after failing to find a remotely better deal in Klaipėda.

'Positively ghastly' is how one local city guide describes the Viktorija, and quite frankly that's being kind. My room featured hideous Soviet furniture, pockmarked walls covered (barely) by 1970s wallpaper, broken windows and a solitary sink spitting rusty cold water. The bed sagged almost to the floor and groaned loudly at the slightest hint of movement. Deafening street noise streamed through the broken windows. But what truly made the room stand out was the stench, a surly mix of stale cigarette smoke, mildew and human sweat that uncannily grew worse as the night progressed. Quite simply, it rendered sleep impossible.

Surely the Baltics' most authentic Soviet experience, the Viktorija really has to be experienced to be believed. But experience it with caution.

character from a love poem thought to be written by the 17th-century German poet Simon Dach. The statue is a replica of the original destroyed during the war.

West of Old Town are the remains of Klaipėda's old moat-protected castle. The **Klaipėda Castle Museum** (☎ 410 524; Pilies gatvė 4; adult/child 4/2 Lt; ☎ 10am–6pm Wed–Sun Jun–Aug, 10am–6pm Tue–Sat Sep–May) inside the one remaining tower tells the castle's story from the 13th to 17th centuries.

The city celebrates its nautical heritage each July with a flamboyant **Sea Festival** that draws crowds for a weekend of concerts, parties, exhibitions and nautical manoeuvres.

Sleeping

Klaipėda Old Town Hostel (☎ 211 879; guest lace@yahoo.com; Butkų Juzės gatvė 7/4; dm 32 Lt, linen 2 Lt; ☎ ☎ ☎) A friendly but generally unexceptional hostel, poorly located next to the bus station.

Litinterp (☎ 310 296; klaipeda@litinterp.lt; Puodžių gatvė 17; s/d 100/160 Lt, with shared bathroom 80/140 Lt; ☎) While it's not for everyone, those who subscribe to the pinewood-heavy, breakfast-on-a-nightstand formula here wish there were Litinterps scattered throughout the world.

Preludija Guesthouse (☎ 310 077; www.preludija.com; Kepelių gatvė 7; s/d from 160/180 Lt; ☎) While the big boys charge big bucks for half the quality, this six-room Old Town offering has minimalist, spacious L-shaped rooms in a charming old house. Breakfast costs an extra 17 Lt.

Radisson SAS Klaipėda (☎ 490 800; www.radissonsas.com; Šaulių gatvė 28; s/d €125/135; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The shipshape rooms here have candy cane-

patterned bedspreads and a tasteful nautical theme. It finishes many lengths ahead of the pack in the regatta to be Klaipėda's best hotel. Rates go down big-time on weekends.

Eating & Drinking

Kinų Virtuvė (Tiltų gatvė 15; mains 10 Lt; ☎ 11am–2am) Hole-in-the-wall Chinese resto provides some of the only cheap eats in Klaipėda.

Anikės Teatras (Sukilėlių gatvė 8–10; mains 20–35 Lt) For more upmarket dining try this European food palace with a plump terrace right on Teatro aikštė. Its sister restaurants serve Lithuanian and Chinese food.

Kurpiai (Kurpių gatvė 1a; mains 15–20 Lt; ☎ noon–3am) Eat fresh seafood to the sound of saxophone at this legendary jazz bar where the dance floor is jumping every night of the week.

Memelis (Žvejų Žvejų gatvė 4; mains 15–20 Lt) The first floor is a microbrewery and the 3rd floor a salsa-infused nightclub in this character-laden old storehouse.

Getting There & Away

Klaipėda bus station (☎ 411 547; Butkų Juzės 9) welcomes daily buses from Vilnius (49 Lt, 3½ hours, 14 daily), Kaunas (38 Lt, three hours, 10 daily), Liepāja (14 Lt, 2½ hours, two daily), Šiauliai (23 Lt, 2½ hours, six daily), Palanga (bus/minibus 1.50/3 Lt, 45 minutes, every 20 minutes) and Kaliningrad via Nida (25 Lt, three hours, three daily).

For international bus schedules see p467.

The **passenger terminal** (Žvejų gatvė 8) for ferries to the Smiltynė ferry landing on the Curonian Spit is near Klaipėda Castle west of Old Town. Ferries leave every half-hour in the high

season and cost 1.50 Lt return (10 minutes). Vehicles must use the **New Ferry Terminal** (Nemuno gatvė 8; per car 32 Lt), 2.5km south of the passenger terminal. Services depart at least hourly.

The **International Ferry Port** (☎ 395 050; www.spk.lt; Perkėlos gatvė 10) is another 5km south of the New Ferry Terminal. Take bus 1 or 1a (1 Lt) to both the New Ferry Terminal (10 minutes) and the International Ferry Port (30 minutes).

CURONIAN SPIT

This magical pigtail of land, dangling off the western rump of Lithuania, hosts some of the world's most precious sand dunes and a menagerie of elk, deer and avian wildlife. Just 3.8km at its widest point, the spit looks positively brittle on a map, but in person it seems much sturdier, thanks to the pine forests that cover 70% of its surface. A few dunes rise high above those forests, creating a surreal effect.

The fragile spit, which Unesco recognised as a World Heritage site in 2000, has faced a number of environmental threats over the years, beginning with the clear felling of its forests in the 16th century. Lately the dunes have been eroding rapidly and tourism is exacerbating the problem. When observing the dunes, stick to the marked paths.

The entire Curonian Spit was Prussian territory until WWI. These days the spit is divided roughly evenly between Lithuania and Russia's Kaliningrad region in the south. Lithuania's share of the spit is protected as the **Curonian Spit National Park** (www.nerija.lt), which has two **visitors centres** Smiltynė (☎ 46-402 257; Smiltynės plentas 11; ☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Fri, 9am–4pm Sat, 9am–2pm Sun Jun–Aug, closed Sat & Sun Sep–May); Nida (☎ 51256; Naglių gatvė 8; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Sat, 9am–2pm Sun May–Sep) with abundant information on walking, cycling, boating and lazing activities.

Administratively, the Lithuania side is divided into two regions: the township of Smiltynė, which is part of Klaipėda; and the Neringa municipality, which contains the townships Alksnynė, Juodkrantė, Pervalka, Preila and touristy Nida.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get to the spit you need to take a ferry or bus from Klaipėda or take the Kaliningrad–Klaipėda bus (see opposite).

From Smiltynė, buses and minibuses (7 Lt, 1¼ hr) run regularly to/from the **Nida bus station** (☎ 54859; Naglių gatvė 20) via Juodkrantė.

Smiltynė

☎ 46

Smiltynė is where the ferries from Klaipėda dock. The visitor centre here is a good place to plot strategies for forays south and has a small nature museum.

On summer weekends Klaipėda residents cram Smiltynė, flocking to its beaches and to the **Lithuanian Sea Museum** (☎ 490 740; adult/student 9/5 Lt, dolphin/sea lion show 13/3 Lt; ☎ 10.30am–6.30pm Tue–Sun Jun–Aug; 10.30am–5.30pm Wed–Sun May & Sep; 10.30am–4.30pm Sat & Sun Oct–Apr), which contains an aquarium with seal and sea-lion shows.

Neringa

☎ 469 / pop 2600

South of Smiltynė the crowds begin to thin and you enter Neringa, which slinks majestically southward all the way to the Russian border. The fresh air and scent of pine grow headier as you get further and further away from civilisation.

JUODKRANTĖ

Juodkrantė has a few rather strange attractions and is a popular place to engage in one of Neringa's trademark activities: buying and tasting freshly caught and smoked fish, which is sold from several wooden houses along the main road, Rėzos gatvė.

Top of the strange sights list is the **Raganų Kalnas** (Witches' Hill), a spooky sculpture trail through gorgeous forest with large, fairytale Lithuanian wooden carvings.

Less than 1km south of Juodkrantė is one of Neringa's must-see attractions: a massive **colony of grey herons and cormorants**. Wooden steps lead from the road to a viewing platform where the panorama of thousands of nests amid pine trees – cormorants to the north, herons to the south – is breathtaking. In March and April the air is thick with birds carrying huge sticks to build their nests; in May the cacophony rises to a deafening crescendo as the chicks are born.

In Juodkrantė stay at the marvellously rustic **Vila Flora** (☎ 53024; www.vilafloara.lt; Kalno gatvė 7a; s/d/tr 220/250/300 Lt; meals 30 Lt; ☎ ☎), which also serves up some of the best food on the spit.

NIDA

Neringa's southernmost settlement is Nida, a charming resort town that slumbers much of the year but in the summer becomes Neringa's tourist nerve centre. It truly is a special

place that somehow manages to maintain its charm and laid-back feel even when the crowds pick up.

Hansabank (Taikos gatvė 5) has an ATM. The **tourist information centre** (☎ 52345; Taikos gatvė 4; www.visitneringa.lt; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun Jun-Aug, 10am-6pm Mon-Fri Sep-May) books accommodation and stocks loads of useful information on walks, bike rides, fishing boat trips etc.

Sights & Activities

An excellent way to see the spit is on a **bicycle**. A flat cycling trail runs all the way from Nida to Smiltynė, and you stand a good chance of seeing elk or other wildlife at any point along that path. There are bicycles for hire on almost every street corner in Nida; some allow you to leave your bike in Smiltynė and bus it back to Nida.

The Curonian Spit's awe-inspiring sand dunes are on full display from the smashed granite sundial atop the 52m-high **Parnidis Dune**. The panorama of coastline, forests and the spit's most stunning dune extending into Kaliningrad to the south is unforgettable. You can walk up here from town on a nature trail (ask at the tourist information centre for a map) or drive via Taikos gatvė.

Back in Nida, check out the **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 52372; Naglių gatvė 4; admission 2 Lt) and the **Thomas Mann Memorial Museum** (☎ 52260; Skrudynės gatvė 17; adult/child 2/0.50 Lt; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) in the Nobel Prize-winning German writer's former summer house.

Another of Nida's many highlights is its **architecture**, a mix of classic German half-timbered construction and quaint wooden houses with frilly eaves and intricate façades.

Sleeping & Eating

The tourist information centre or Litinterp (p462) in Klaipėda can help arrange accommodation in private houses, but contact them weeks in advance in the summer. In the winter expect steep discounts on listed prices here.

Medikas (☎ 52985; Kuvertų gatvė 14; dm/r from 30/130 Lt; ☎) They're nothing fancy, but the cheap bare-bones rooms at this Soviet place will satisfy bargain hunters.

Vandeja (☎ 52742; www.forelle.lt; Naglių gatvė 17; d/apt from 120/350 Lt; ☎) Just one of many exceptional little guesthouses in Nida, with huge, extraordinarily comfortable rooms and all the mod cons you could want. Has an enviable location down by the water.

Misko namas (☎ 52290; www.miskonamas.com; Pamario gatvė 11-2; d/ste 110/250 Lt; ☎) Another charmer – every room here has its own fridge, sink and kettle and a couple have balconies. Self-cater in the cosy communal kitchen. Take note of the 180-year-old twisting wooden staircase.

LITHUANIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Vilnius has a serious room crunch so book ahead in the high season. The tourist information offices can help in a pinch, but they tend to utilise unexceptional midrange hotels. Coastal locations such as Palanga and the Curonian Spit are popular with Lithuanians as well as foreigners, and rooms fill up months ahead in the summer.

Vilnius has no shortage of excellent top-end lodgings. Many fine business hotels reduce their rates at weekends. Good budget accommodation is scarce in Vilnius and most other cities; the few deals that exist are highlighted prominently in this book. Vilnius has a few hostels; none are state-of-the-art, but expect that to change in the near future. Outside of Vilnius most hostels are grim Soviet affairs, but in rural areas you can find perfectly fine hotel rooms at hostel prices. Most camping grounds are cheap and basic (10 Lt to 25 Lt for a camp site), but they are gradually improving.

For a double room in Vilnius in the May to September high season you'll pay about 150 Lt for budget lodging and up to 600 Lt at the top end. You'll pay much less in the regions, where good budget rooms start as low as 50 Lt.

If you can't find a room somewhere, check with the local tourist information office for help. **In Your Pocket** (www.inyourpocket.com) has complete hotel listings for Vilnius, Kaunas, Šiauliai and Klaipėda.

ACTIVITIES

Lithuania is conducive to any activity revolving around its gazillion forests: hiking, mushrooming, berry-picking, picnicking and bird-watching are at the top of the list. Lakes are also abundant, especially in the wilderness of Aukštaitija National Park (p455), where both hiking and boating activities abound.

Cycling is becoming more popular in flat Lithuania. Most towns and cities have several outlets that rent out bikes. Good places for long day-rides include the Curonian Spit (p463), and Druskininkai (p455).

In hoops-mad Lithuania it's not hard to find a pick-up basketball game at any time, anywhere. Palanga (p460) is popular for kite surfing.

BUSINESS HOURS

Most shops open at 9am or 10am and close around 6pm on weekdays and Saturday. Banks are generally open between 8am and 5pm on weekdays. Restaurants tend to open around 10am and close around 11pm, but many stay open much later on weekends, especially in cities.

DISABLED TRAVELLERS

Lithuania is not the most friendly country for disabled travellers; the cobbled streets of Vilnius' Old Town make it difficult for wheelchair users and the visually impaired. However, public transport in Vilnius has disabled access and most of the nicer hotels in Vilnius and other cities do have a room or two kitted out for mobility-impaired guests.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Lithuanian Embassies & Consulates

Check www.urm.lt for a full listing of Lithuanian missions abroad and foreign missions in Lithuania.

Australia (☎ 02-9498 2571; 40B Fiddens Wharf Rd, Killara, Sydney, NSW 2071)

Canada (☎ 613-567 5458; 130 Albert St, Ste 204, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5G4)

Estonia (☎ 2-631 4030; Uus tänav 15, Tallinn)

France (☎ 01 40 54 50 50; 22 Blvd de Courcelles, 75017 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-890 68 10; Charitéstrasse 9, 10711 Berlin)

Ireland (☎ 01 6688292; Merrion Rd, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4)

Latvia (☎ 2732 1519; Rūpniecības iela 24, 1010 Riga)

New Zealand (☎ 09-336 7711; 28 Heather St, Parnell, Auckland)

Russia Moscow (☎ 495-785 8605; Borisoglebsky per 10, Moscow 121069; Kaliningrad (☎ 401-2-957 688; ul Proletarskaya 133, Kaliningrad)

UK (☎ 020-7486 6401; 84 Gloucester Pl, London W1H 3HN)

USA (☎ 202-234-5860; 2622 16th St NW, Washington, DC 20009)

Embassies & Consulates in Lithuania

The following embassies and consulates are in Vilnius:

Australia (☎ 5-212 3369; emergency 8-687 11117; australia@consulate.lt; Vilniaus gatvė 23)

Belarus (☎ 5-266 2200; www.belarus.lt; Mindaugo gatvė 13)

Canada (☎ 5-249 0950; www.canada.lt; Jogailos gatvė 4)

Estonia (☎ 5-278 0200; www.estemb.lt; Mickėvičiaus gatvė 4a)

France (☎ 5-212 29 79; www.ambafrance-lt.org; Švarco gatvė 1)

Germany (☎ 5-210 6400; www.deutschebotschaft-wilna.lt; Sierakausko gatvė 24/8)

Latvia (☎ 5-213 1260; embassy.lithuania@mfa.gov.lv; Čiurlionio gatvė 76)

Poland (☎ 5-270 9001; ambpol@tdd.lt; Smėlio gatvė 20a)

Russia (☎ 5-272 1763; www.rusemb.lt; Latvių gatvė 53/54)

UK (☎ 5-246 2900; www.britain.lt; Antakalnio gatvė 2)

USA (☎ 5-266 5500; www.usembassy.lt; Akmenų gatvė 6)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

There's no better time to observe Lithuanian culture than during its stupendous Unesco-honoured **national song festival** (www.lfcc.lt), held every four years in July in Vilnius. The next one is scheduled for 2007.

The pan-Baltic **Baltica International Folklore Festival** takes place all over Lithuania every three years. Lithuania is due to host the festival in 2008.

HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day/National Flag Day 1 January

Independence Day 16 February (anniversary of 1918 independence declaration)

Restoration of the Independent Lithuanian State 11 March

Easter (Good Friday and Easter Monday) April

International Labour Day 1 May

Feast of St John (Midsummer) 24 June

Statehood Day 6 July; commemoration of Grand Duke Mindaugas' coronation in 13th century

Feast of the Assumption 15 August

Vytautas the Great's Coronation 8 September

25 October Constitution Day

All Saints' Day 1 November

Christmas 25 and 26 December

INTERNET ACCESS

Vilnius has surprisingly few internet cafés – and none that are open 24 hours – but several main streets are free wi-fi zones, as are the airport and scores of cafés and hotels. Most

reasonably sized provincial towns have at least one place to log on. The entire country is growing increasingly wi-fi-friendly.

LANGUAGE

Lithuanian is the older of the two surviving Baltic branches of the Indo-European language group.

English is widely spoken in Vilnius but is not well understood outside the capital. Most Lithuanians over the age of 25 speak fluent Russian, while German is a popular second language on the formerly Prussian west coast.

MONEY

Lithuania's plan to adopt the euro in 2007 did not pan out as the country could not meet its required inflation targets. Thus, the litas (the plural is litai; Lt) will be the country's currency for at least a couple more years. The litas is divided into 100 centai. It is pegged to the euro at the rate of 3.45 Lt per euro.

All but the smallest Lithuanian towns usually have at least one bank with a functional ATM. Most big banks cash travellers cheques and exchange most major currencies. Credit cards are widely accepted.

POST

Sending a postcard/letter abroad costs 1.20/1.70 Lt. Mail to North America takes about 10 days, and to Europe about a week.

TELEPHONE

Lithuania's digitalised telephone network is run by **Lietuvos Telekomas** (www.telecom.lt).

To call other cities within Lithuania, dial ☎ 8 followed by the city code and phone number. To make an international call dial ☎ 00 before the country code.

To call Lithuania from abroad, dial ☎ 370 then the city code, followed by the phone number.

Picking up a local prepaid SIM card allows for pain-free and relatively cheap calling

and texting. Mobile companies **Bitė** (www.bitė.lt), **Omnitel** (www.omnitel.lt) and **Tele 2** (www.tele2.lt) sell prepaid SIM cards; Tele2 is the only one to offer pan-Baltic roaming with prepaid cards.

To call a mobile phone within Lithuania, dial ☎ 8 followed by the eight-digit number; to call a mobile from abroad dial ☎ 370 instead of ☎ 8.

Public telephones, which are increasingly rare given the widespread use of mobiles, are blue and only accept phonecards, which are sold in denominations of 9 Lt, 13 Lt, 16 Lt and 30 Lt at newspaper kiosks.

VISAS

Citizens from the EU, Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland and the US do not require visas for entry into Lithuania if staying for less than 90 days. South African nationals are required to obtain a visa. For information on other countries and obtaining a visa, visit www.migracija.lt.

TRANSPORT IN LITHUANIA

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The Europe-wide budget-airline explosion has hit Lithuania with a vengeance. Kaunas, not Vilnius, is the destination for budget flights, but most tourists landing in Kaunas immediately hop in a car or bus for the one-hour drive to Vilnius. Flights to Kaunas land at **Kaunas International Airport** (☎ 750 195; www.kaunas-air.lt) about 12km north of the centre. Its website has updated timetables.

Most international traffic to Lithuania still goes through **Vilnius International Airport** (☎ 230 6666; www.vilnius-airport.lt; Rodūnijos gatvė 2). See the airport website for updated timetables and a full list of airlines flying to/from Vilnius. Local budget provider **Lithuania Airlines** (☎ 252 5555; www.lal.lt) runs some seasonal flights in and out of **Palanga Airport** (☎ 460-52020; www.palanga-airport.lt). **SAS** (☎ 460-52300; Palanga airport) flies to Palanga from Copenhagen.

Air Baltic (www.airbaltic.com); Old Town (☎ 234 0618; Universiteto gatvė 10-7); airport (☎ 235 6000) runs direct flights between Vilnius and about a dozen Western European destinations.

Major international carriers with direct flights to Vilnius include the following:

Aeroflot (code SU; ☎ 212 4189; www.aeroflot.ru)

Austrian Airlines (code OS; ☎ 279 1416; www.aa.com)

British Airways (code BA; ☎ 720 7097; www.britishairways.com)

ČSA (Czech Airlines; code OK; ☎ 215 1503; www.czech-airlines.com)

Estonian Air (code OV; ☎ 273 9022; www.estonian-air.com)

Finnair (code AY; ☎ 261 9339; www.finnair.com)

LOT (code LO; ☎ 273 9020; www.lot.com)

Lufthansa (code LH; ☎ 232 9290; www.lufthansa.com)

SAS Scandinavian Airlines (code SK; ☎ 235 6000; www.sas.lt)

Land

BORDER CROSSINGS

Crossing into Latvia or Poland is painless: just present your passport for stamping and you'll most likely be on your way.

If you're planning on crossing into Russia (Kaliningrad) or Belarus in a rental car, check your rental conditions very carefully – most rental companies forbid this. For all road crossings into Russia (Kaliningrad) or Belarus, see the boxed text on p299.

BUS

The main international bus companies operating in Lithuania are **Eurolines** (www.eurolines.lt; Vilnius bus station ☎ 5-215 1377; Kaunas bus station ☎ 37-202 020; Klaipėda ☎ 46-415 555) and **Ecolines** (www.ecolines.lt; Vilnius ☎ 5-262 0020; Vilniaus gatvė 45; Kaunas bus station ☎ 37-320 2020; Klaipėda ☎ 46-310 103; Šiauliai bus station ☎ 41-399 400).

Eurolines, Ecolines or one of a few smaller carriers have services between Vilnius and the following destinations in Eastern Europe: Riga (45 Lt, five hours, at least four daily), Kaliningrad (50 Lt, seven hours, two daily), Tallinn (95 Lt, 12 hours, two daily), Warsaw (97 Lt, nine hours, three daily), Moscow (99 Lt, 13 hours, daily), Minsk (30 Lt, four hours, at least five daily) and Gdansk (110 Lt, 10½ hours, nightly). A few of these bus services continue westward to Kaunas and/or Klaipėda; some northbound buses stop in Šiauliai.

There are a couple of weekly buses from Vilnius to Kyiv and a handful of Western European cities, including London and several German cities. There's a daily bus to Berlin (from 170 Lt, 16 hours).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Coming from the south, you're looking at a 30-minute to one-hour wait at the two Polish border crossings (Ogrodniki and Budzisko). Lines at the Latvian border in the north are smaller. Have your passport, insurance and registration documents ready.

TRAIN

Vilnius is linked by regular direct trains to Moscow (from 110 Lt, 15 hours, two to three daily), St Petersburg (from 94 Lt, 20 hours, daily), Kaliningrad (from 45 Lt, seven hours, at least twice daily), Warsaw (from 85 Lt, 12 hours, three weekly) and Minsk (40 Lt, 4½ hours, at least five daily). You'll need a Belarus visa for the Moscow train. There is also sporadic service to Lviv and Kyiv in Ukraine, but these also go through Belarus.

Sea

Klaipėda is the port of call for all international ferries bound for Lithuania. The vast majority are cargo ferries, some with room for a few passengers.

DFDS Lisco (☎ 46-395 050; www.dfdslico.com; bookings: pfe@dfdslico.com) has a passenger ferry service between Klaipėda and Kiel (230 Lt, 21 hours, six weekly). Book through Krantas Travel (p460).

Scandlines (☎ 46-310561; www.scandlines.lt; reservations: ferry@scandlines.lt; Naujosios Sodo gatvė 1) has limited passenger space on its twice weekly cargo ferries between Klaipėda and Aabenraa (Denmark; adult/student €136/120, 32 hours) via Århus (Denmark; 17 hours).

GETTING AROUND

Air

Lithuanian Airlines (☎ 252 5555; www.lal.lt) has three to seven weekly flights from Vilnius to Palanga and return from May to September only.

Bicycle

Get everything you need to know about bike touring in Lithuania from the website of the **Lithuanian Bicycle Information Centre** (www.bicycle.lt). Lithuania is flat and its once-disastrous roads are gradually improving. For more on bike riding see p465.

Bus

Timetables for local buses are displayed prominently in most train stations. From Vilnius

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- Ambulance ☎ 03
- Emergency ☎ 112 from mobile phone
- Fire ☎ 01
- Police ☎ 02

you can get to/from the following destinations by bus:

Destination	Cost	Duration	Frequency
Druskininkai	19 Lt	2hr	11 daily
Kaunas	19 Lt	1½hr	2-3 hourly
Klaipėda	49 Lt	3¼hr	14 daily
Palanga	52 Lt	4hr	7 daily
Šiauliai	32 Lt	3hr	9 daily
Trakai	4 Lt	45min	2-3 hourly

To Kaunas there are also regular minibuses, which are quicker.

Car & Motorcycle

You can drive from any one point in Lithuania to another in a couple of hours. Modern four-lane highways link Vilnius–Klaipėda (via Kaunas) and Vilnius–Panavėžys.

The big international car-rental agencies are well represented at Vilnius Airport. Try **Avis** (☎ 232 9316; www.avis.lt), **Budget** (☎ 230 6708; www.budget.lt) or **Sixt** (☎ 239 5636; www.sixt.lt). You'll save a ton of money by renting from a local opera-

tor. Charismatic **Rimas** (☎ 277 6213, 8-698-21662; rimas.cars@is.lt) rents older cars at the lowest rates in town and just might invite you ice fishing.

The speed limit in Lithuania is 50km/h in cities and 90km/h to 110km/h outside the city and on highways. Headlights must be switched on at all times and winter tyres must be fitted between 1 November and 1 March.

Local Transport

Lithuanian cities are generously covered by networks of buses, trolleybuses and minibuses. In most towns you must punch your bus ticket or you'll risk a fine.

Train

You can lumber from Vilnius to a few domestic destinations on Lithuania's clunky suburban trains. Destinations include Kaunas (11 Lt, 1¼ hours, 13 daily), Klaipėda (40 Lt, five hours, two daily), Paneriai (1.20 Lt, 20 minutes, 23 daily), Šiauliai (24 Lt, four hours, five to eight daily), Ignalina (10 Lt, two hours, seven daily) and Trakai (2.50 Lt, 40 minutes, seven daily).