

Lithuania

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Vilnius** Beautifully baroque, with its cobbled streets and skyline of church spires (p740)
- **Trakai** Its stunning island castle is the home of the rare Karaite people (p747)
- **Hill of Crosses** On the outskirts of Šiauliai is this devotional mound of thousands of crosses (p749)
- **Off the beaten track** The high sand dunes, pure air and fragrant pine forests of the enchanting Curonian Spit (p749)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 65,300 sq km
- **Budget** 90Lt to 130Lt per day
- **Capital** Vilnius
- **Country code** ☎ 370
- **Famous for** causing the USSR to collapse, baroque churches, *cepelinai* (dough stuffed with meat and potato)
- **Languages** Lithuanian, Russian, English, German
- **Money** litas (Lt); A\$1 = 1.92Lt; C\$1 = 2.17Lt; €1 = 3.45Lt; ¥100 = 2.71Lt; NZ\$1 = 1.50Lt; UK£1 = 3.89Lt; US\$1 = 2.57Lt
- **Phrases** *labas* (hello), *ačiū* (thanks), *prašau* (please/you're welcome), *taip* (yes), *ne* (no), *viso gero* (goodbye)



- **Population** 3.4 million
- **Visa** none required for Australian, Canadian, EU, New Zealand or US citizens for stays of up to 90 days (see p751)

TRAVEL HINTS

Even in fancy restaurants, Lithuanian specialties like *cepelinai* (dough stuffed with meat and potato) are dirt cheap. Wander into Vilnius' courtyards for glimpses of local life.

ROAMING LITHUANIA

After exploring Vilnius' treasures, head north to the Hill of Crosses then west to cycle or hike on Curonian Spit.

The Baltics have a reputation for their dour ways, but this image fades upon entering rebellious Lithuania. It's a country blessed with boundless energy and studded with reminders of its colorful history that date back to the time when amber first gained the moniker 'Baltic Gold'.

In Lithuania, a country favoured by Mother Nature where pagan roots run deep and Catholic passion lives on, travellers aren't short of things to see and do. For starters, there's effortlessly charming Vilnius and its skyline of baroque spires. Witnessing the eerie Hill of Crosses near Šiauliai is a truly unique experience. In the west thousands of migratory birds make the unique Curonian Spit their primary port of call, while the coastal capital Klaipėda combines a German heart with a Lithuanian soul. More and more tourists are stopping in Lithuania, but don't let that scare you away – there are enough delights to go around in this Baltic beauty.

HISTORY

Lithuania's history is a story of riches to rags and back again. It all started when ancient tribes fanned out across the Baltics to take advantage of the region's amber deposits. In the mid-13th century Aukštaitiai leader Mindaugas unified these tribes to create the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The country's golden era was from the 14th to 16th centuries. Vilnius was settled and Lithuania became one of Europe's largest empires. But in the 18th century Lithuania, which had merged with Poland, was carved up by Russia, Austria and Prussia in the partitions of Poland.

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.

During WWII the Nazis murdered up to 300,000 people, mostly Jews, in Lithuania – many of them at Paneriai. Between 1944 and 1952 under Soviet rule, 250,000 Lithuanians were killed or deported while armed partisans resisted Soviet rule from the forests. Vilnius' Genocide Museum (p740) chronicles the resistance.

In the late 1980s Lithuania was the first Soviet state to legalise noncommunist parties, and on 11 March 1990 the new majority party declared independence. Moscow responded by marching troops into Vilnius and in January 1991, Soviet troops stormed key buildings in Vilnius, killing 14 people. The Soviets recognised Lithuanian independence on 6 September 1991 and the first ex-USSR republic was born.

Lithuania joined NATO in April 2004, and entered the EU a month later. The country's enthusiasm for the EU continues unabated. In a mid-2008 poll, 70% of the population still viewed EU membership optimistically. Many are gagging for the euro, but the EU currency won't be introduced until at least 2010. As with everything, EU membership has its downside: the country's younger generation are leaving in droves for the greener pastures of the UK and Ireland.

THE CULTURE

Easily the most ethnically homogeneous population of the three Baltic countries,

Lithuanians account for 85% of the total population. Poles form 6.3% and Russians 5.1%. The remaining 3.6% comprises various nationalities from Eastern Europe and further afield.

Lithuanians are an outgoing, cheeky bunch, especially compared to 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 of memories of their long-lost empire.

ENVIRONMENT

Lush forests and more than 4000 lakes mark the landscape of flat Lithuania. Forest covers a third of the country and contains creatures such as wild boar, wolves, deer and elk. However, you're much more likely to spot a stork, as Lithuania has Europe's highest concentration of storks. Come late summer and autumn, mushrooms and wild berries blanket the forest floor, creating not only a rich food source but also a means of income for many rural dwellers who sell them from roadside stores.

For years, the environmental hot potato has been the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, 120km northeast 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 sometime in 2009 or 2010 at a massive cost of €3.2 billion.

TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Kaunas Airport (☎ 37-399 307; www.kaunasair.lt; Savanorių prospektas), to the northwest of the capital, Vilnius, is the destination for budget airlines. Most tourists landing in Kaunas don't linger there for long and immediately hop in a car, taxi or bus for the one-hour drive to Vilnius.

Air Lithuania (TT; www.flylil.lt) flies to/from Antalya once a week in summer, while no-frills airline **Ryanair** (1); ☎ 37-750 195; www.ryanair.com) handles the bulk of the airport's traffic, operating flights to/from Birmingham, Liverpool, Dublin, Frankfurt, and London's Stansted Airport.