

Vilnius

Vilnius is the capital of Lithuania and lies in the Southeastern corner of the country, only some kilometers away from Belarus. Vilnius was built on a hill, close to the river Vilnia (which is assumed to be the base for the name Vilnius).

There used to be a fortification that was built to protect the village from the Germans. In 1975 Vilnius became a part of the Russian Federation and most baroque churches were turned into Russian-orthodox. The coming into existence of Vilnius also contains a legend. According to this legend Vilnius was founded by the Grand Duke Gediminas. He went haunting in the holy valley of Sventaragis. He was getting tired of the long hunt and it was getting dark so he decided to sleep in the valley. During his sleep he had a strange dream, a huge wolf was standing on top of the hill and cried so loud that he made the noise of 100 other wolves.

When he woke up he went to the pagan priest Lizdeika and asked him to reveal the secret of the strange dream. Lizdaika said that this dream was a request from the Gods. Gediminas has to build a castle on the place where he dreamed about. This castle would be famous, glorious and undefeatable. The place became the capital of Lithuania and its glory would echo around the whole world.

The old part of Vilnius is one of the biggest of Europe, although it has been neglected for decades it was added to the UNESCO list of World heritage in 1994. Today there are around 550.000 inhabitants in Vilnius, only the half of the population there is Lithuanian, other common nationalities are Polish (18.7%), Russian (14%) and Belorussians (4%). Before World War II Vilnius was an important centre for the Jewish culture, literature and science. The place were the Jewish centre used to be are now new buildings and streets. Around 50.000 Jews were killed by the Nazi's.

Churches

Vilnius owns around 100 churches and other holy places, all of them with their own identity and story. Vilnius has suffered from many occupations; this gives the city its multicultural view. There are many different kinds of churches and all are built in many different styles.

During the Soviet time catholic churches were turned into Russian Orthodox churches or they were given another purpose like warehouse or theater.

The cathedral

The original cathedral was built by King Mindaugas in the 13th century. He built it when he decided to become a Catholic. After his death it became a pagan temple and only in 1387 Grand Duke Jogaila changed it back into a Christen church. The Cathedral that became the symbol of the Lithuanian Christianity was restored 11 times.

The white cathedral has an impressive portal with 6 Doric pillars. On the top you can see the statues of holy Helena, Stanislaus and Casimir. These statues were destroyed during the soviet time, but replaced after the independence in 1997. In the front you can see the baroque statues of Abraham, Moses and the 4 evangelists.

The interior of the church is also very beautiful. The main altar is built in neoclassicism style and on the right side you can see some beautiful chapels. The most beautiful chapel is the baroque chapel of the holy Casimir. You can see the grave monument of King Alexander and Ladislaus IV. People belief that Casimir, the patroness of Lithuania, could make miracles happen. You can see the presents that have been given; people gave limbs made of silver in the hope to be relieved from their diseases.

You can also see 40 works of art from the 16th to 19th century. There is also an exposition about the history of the

cathedral.

In 1985 there was a fresco found on the wall of the tomb. The fresco is from the end of the 14th century and is the oldest one of the country. During the Soviet time the cathedral was used as a printing office.

The belfry is 52 meters high and is built on the original foundations of the castle that used to be there. The tower is not open for the public.

If you look up the hill from the theater square you can see Trijs kryžis kalnas (hill of 3 crosses). It was placed in the end of the 17th century as a remembrance to the 7 monks that were killed. During the Stalin period the crosses were removed. The current crosses were placed in the end of the 80's and are copies of the original ones. On that place there used to be a castle too but it was destroyed by fire in 1390 and never rebuilt.

Church of St. Anna

Šv. Onos bažnyčia (St. Anna church) is one of the most beautiful examples of gothic architecture. The church is built with brick, it uses 33 different shapes of brick that were used to make this beautiful church. The original chapel was built in the 16th century, the church doesn't have any foundations and it rests completely on alder wood. The interior of the church was destroyed many times and is not very special. They say that Napoleon Bonaparte was so impressed by the church that he wanted to take the church in his palm and place it next to the Notre Dame in Paris.

Church of the Holy Spirit

Šv. Dvasios cerkvė (St. Spirit church) is the only Russian monastery that was allowed to stay open during the Soviet time. Although the church was built for the Russian Orthodox community the architecture is definitely inspired by Catholic churches.

In the church you can see a glass coffin in front of the altar. Inside there are the well maintained bodies of the holy Antonius, Ivan and Eustachius. They were tortured to death under the command of Grand Duke Algirdas in 1347. During the Christmas period they are dressed in white garments, during Abstinence in black, on other days in red. It is said that on the 26th of June the bodies have miraculous powers so on that day they are naked. It is not allowed to take pictures of the bodies.

You also notice that there are not a lot of chairs in that church, it is because people pray on the floor on their knees. The floor is cleaned every day because deep believers kiss the floor while praying.

Aušros Vartai

In the end of the 15th century Vilnius was in danger by the war between Lithuania and Russia, between 1503 and 1522 they built a stone defense wall around the city. The wall had 5 entrance gates, the wall surrounded 85 hectare. The gate used to have a moat and drawbridge. The name of the gate used to be the Medinikai Vartai because it was the route to the castle of Medinikai, Minsk, Smolensk and Moscow. Later they changed the name to Ausros Vartai (the gate of sunrise).

A nearby monastery said to own a special icon of the Holy Virgin and that the icon possessed amazing powers. In 1671 they built a chapel above the gate for this icon. Local blacksmiths covered the icon completely in silver and gold, only the hands and head are left uncovered.

The gate of sunrise is an important pilgrim place for Catholic people. Pope Johannes Paules II visited this place in 1993 and spoke and prayed from the chapel to the people.

Every year there is the church festival of the Holy Virgin Marie. This event is organized in the third week of November and lasts for 8 days

Church of St Casimir

This church is the oldest baroque church of Vilnius and is named after the patroness of Lithuania: Prince Casimir Jagiellon. He was the son of the Casimir IV of Poland. The crown on the roof is the symbol of his royal background. The church was founded in 1604 by the Jesuits after the canonization of Casimir. The building is designed according to the lines of the Gesu church in Rome and was completed in 1618.

The monastery was built between 1604 and 1615, it had a library and a hospital. A lot of important Jesuits lived in this monastery.

It was rebuilt in the middle of the 18th century. In 1812 the building was damaged because Napoleon used it as grain warehouse. In 1831 the Russians used the church as the Russian Orthodox church of St Nicolas and the crown was replaced by a cupola. When the Russians prohibited the Latin language in 1684 the church received the status of cathedral.

During the German occupation from 1915-1917 the church was used by Protestants and later given back to the Catholics.

The church has 3 baroque alters; the first gymnasium was located in the monastery (1915-1919) after that there was a school for monks.

In the Second World War the church was seriously damaged but during the Soviet time it became the museum of atheism and history of religion. In 1989 there was the first time in one and a half century again a Catholic worship

De Kenessa temple

The Karaites are, with around 150 people, the smallest religious group in Vilnius.

They are in Lithuania since 1397. They came to Lithuania with the Grand Duke Vytautas to protect and serve him. They were with 400 people and settled themselves in Trakai, where Vytautas lived. At the moment there are around 150 Karaites in Vilnius and 250 in Trakai

The Karaites still speak their own language, it is a variation of the Turkish language. Their religion has some elements of the Jews and the Islam. The word "Kartaite" means 'I read (the bible)'

The temple was built in 1922-1923 in Moor style. During the Soviet time it was used as a warehouse but now it is open again.

Things to see

Gediminas tower

In the historical documents of Vilnius they speak of 3 castles; the higher castle, the lower castle and the castle against the Gediminas hill. Such hills are typical for Lithuania; they are formed in a natural way. That castle was built on the hill of 3 crosses; those white crosses can be seen from up the tower. There are no remains of that castle.

In the time that Gediminas ruled the country (1315-1341) they built a wooden castle. After that the Capital of Lithuania was moved from Trakai to Vilnius and Gediminas moved to the Higher castle.

In the second half of the 14th century the castle was destroyed by fire due to an attack of the crusaders. It was only during the time that Vytautas ruled the country (1392-1430) that the castle was rebuilt. They made a defense wall around the castle (320m) with 3 towers. Inside there was the Gothic palace of the Grand Duke, a chapel and a few other buildings. In 1610 they added a prison. The castle survived 8 attacks of the German knights, who were enforced by English, French, Italian and Flemish knights.

Despite the thick walls, the castle was seriously damaged during the war with the Czar of Moscow, Aleksei Mikhailovich, between 1655 and 1661.

During the resistance of 1831 the Russian Czar ordered to add the hill of Gediminas to the fortress. Everything was reinforced and they made a castle moat.

Between 1956 and 1960 the tower was renovated and used as historical museum.

The western tower of the higher castle is called the tower of Gediminas. It has an eight-angular shape, with a stone wall and foundation in Gothic style. Near the tower you can find the remains of the palace. The palace used to have walls that were 4 meters thick. Around the castle you can also see some remains of the defense wall.

From the tower you have a beautiful view over Vilnius.

The tower of Gediminas is an important historical symbol of Vilnius and Lithuania. On October 7 in 1988 the people from the independence movement hung the Lithuanian flag on the top of the tower as an attempt to restore the Lithuanian state.

You can reach the tower by foot; the path starts on the backside of the cathedral. From the Arsenalo Street you can also take a lift.

In the tower there is a small museum, the museum shows models of the castle of Vilnius in the 14th and 17th century. You can also see some weapons, art and suits of armor.

The university

One of the most impressive buildings in Vilnius is the university. This university was built in 1579 and is the second oldest university of Middle and Eastern Europe (the university of Krakow was built in 1364). The church of St John is part of the university complex.

In the courtyard 'bibliotekos kiemas' you can find the entrance to the library of the university (1570). In this library you can find around 5 million books of which there are around 180.000 old manuscripts from the 13th till the 16th century. They also possess the first book that was ever written in Lithuanian language. It is not only Lithuanian books but also from Poland, Russia, and other Slavic countries.

The university was founded by Stefan Batory, after he became king of the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom in 1575. It used to be an institution for higher education for the Jesuits, 9 year later it became a university.

The first book that was published in the Lithuanian language was published by the university in 1753.

The university was the centre of culture and science for more than 200 years, until the Czar closed the university in the 19th century. Only in 1919 the university was opened again, at that moment Poland took over Vilnius and the university was renamed.

In 1939 the university belonged back to Lithuania, but only for a short time, in 1940 the university became under control of the Russians. The university grew strong in that period. In 1988 it became Lithuanian again.

Nowadays there are 12 different faculties, 8 institutions and 10 study and investigation centers, the oldest library, 3 university hospitals, an astronomic observation area, a botanical garden, computer centre and the St John's church. There are around 24.000 students.

The small entrance on the Northern side of the university is open for visitors (paying).

Town hall

In 1387 Vilnius received its city rights from the Lithuanian Grand Duke and Polish King Jogaila. Some time later they started to build the town hall. The town hall suffered a lot from the wars and fires, from this time, only the foundations in Gothic style remained. In the town hall you can see a picture of the building from 1572, there the town hall has high tower.

In the 17th century the town hall had a court, a office for the mayor, an workspace for traders, archives, armor room, a prison and a even pillory in the middle of the plaza.

The town hall has known a lot of misfortune. Several wars destroyed the building and between 1610 and 1748 it was destroyed 2 times by a huge fire. The famous architect Jonas Kristupas Gliubi ius rebuilt the town hall. The tower was also rebuilt. When architect Tommaso Russelis completed the work in 1769 the tower appeared not to be stable. They asked the famous architect Laurynas Stuoka-Gucevi ius (1753-1798) for help. Unfortunately his help came too late; just after the renovation started the tower collapsed and damaged again the town hall. In 1788 they renovated it again; it was completed in 1799, just after the death of Laurynas Stuoka-Gucevi ius. Between 1810 and 1924 the building was used as a theater.

From 1936 to 1939 the torn pillars were replaced and there was some more decoration added. The building was completely renovated after it was given back to Vilnius in 1939. From 1941 the Soviet used it as a national museum of art. The museum of art was moved to the Chodkevi ius building, so that the town hall could be given back to Vilnius in 1998.

Nowadays the town hall is used for official ceremonies, concerts and expositions, a part of the building is used as a restaurant.

Presidential Palace

You can find the presidential palace at the Simono Daukanto Plaza in the old town of Vilnius.

Because of fire and theft a lot of the old official documents were lost. The beginning of the history of this building is on February 17, in 1387. Christianity was introduced and Grand Duke Jogaila gave the order to build a Catholic church. The first bishop of Vilnius Andrius Vasilas (1388-1398) built the palace on the place where the presidential palace is now. Each generation made the palace bigger and more beautiful. Until the middle of the 18th century, in 1737 and 1748 the palace was destroyed by fire. After that it was restored by L. Stuoka-Gucevi ius. After that Lithuania was part of the Russian federation, the building was used by several Russian Czars. Also King Louis XVIII of France slept in the palace. Later it became the official residence for Russian Generals like Nikolaj Muravjov. Some other known people slept in the palace, in 1812 the Russian Czar Alexander and Napoleon stayed in the palace.

The second reconstruction was in the period 1824-1834. In the beginning of the 20th century the building was used for the Ministry of foreign affairs. Between World War I and World War II the palace had some official functions. After that it was used by the Soviet army.

After the independence of Lithuania the palace received again some official functions. The embassy of France also used to have a part of the building. But since Lithuania has a president, this became his official residence. For this the palace is completely restored and renovated. The current palace has 2 floors and is built in neoclassic style. The beautiful building has several pillars that have a Greek character.

During archeological diggings in 1995 they found several objects from the 14th till the 17th century.

Artilerijos Basteja

Here you can see the last remains of the city's defense wall, there used to be the Suba iaus gate. This used to be the strongest gate in the city. It is probably designed by the military architect Friendrish Getkant in the first part of the 17th century, to protect Vilnius against the attacks of Russia and Sweden. The wall was partly destroyed during the war with Moscow, the war lasted from 1655 till 1661.

In the 18th century nobody took care of the place and it was in a bad condition. In the 19th century it was reused as orphanage, but later also as dumping ground. Because they used it as dumping ground the ceiling collapsed. During World War II it was used as hiding place and munitions storage.

The biggest part of the city wall was revealed between 1965 and 1970. In 1985 and 1986 a big part of the wall was restored. In 1987 they made a museum about the castle and the weapons. If you walk down the long stone stairs you will see the place where the cannons used to be.

You can see the 2 parts of the wall remained intact. A piece of around 30 meter in Suba iaus street and Strazdelio street and a much bigger part of around 150 meter in Bokšto street. Further you can also see the original tower of the city wall, the cannon room and a gangway that is connected with the tower.

From the Artilerijos Basteja you have a beautiful view over the old town, the hill of Gediminas and the