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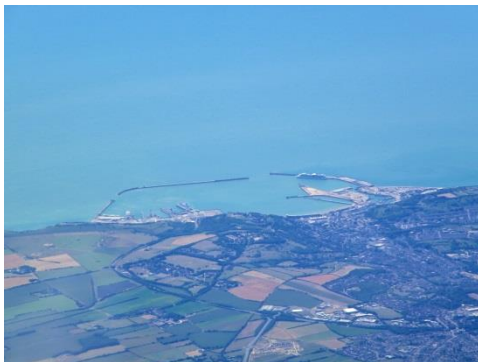
## Visiting the Baltics – Lithuania (E18A-1)

My first stop on a trip through the Baltics was Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, for a four-night stay. Lithuania is located on the Baltic Sea, just to the northeast of Poland. Lithuanian lands were first united under Mindaugas in the 1230s, and the Kingdom of Lithuania was created in 1253. In the next century Lithuania became the largest country in Europe, stretching from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south. It joined Poland in a two-state commonwealth in 1569. But Lithuania lost much of its territory by the late 1700s. It was annexed by the Russian Empire in 1795.

Lithuania regained its independence at the end of WWI when the Russian Empire collapsed and was replaced by the Soviet Union. After the Soviets and Nazis signed a treaty in 1939 that carved up spheres of influence in eastern Europe, the Soviets installed puppet governments in each of the Baltic States. Within days of one another, those governments voted to join the Soviet Union, beginning 50 years of Soviet occupation.

The Nazis occupied Lithuania for a few years during WWII, but the Soviets reoccupied Lithuania near the end of the war. As the Soviet Union's breakup neared, on March 11, 1990 Lithuania became the first Baltic State to declare its independence. The Soviet Union tried to reassert itself through an economic blockade and an attempted coup in which several Lithuanians were killed. The Soviets eventually withdrew, and Lithuania has since solidified its ties to Western Europe as a member of the European Union, NATO and the Schengen Agreement.

Vilnius is home to about 1/5 of the country's population. It features castle ruins on a hilltop above its medieval Old Town, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A folk festival was underway in the city while I was there, part of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of its 1918 independence.



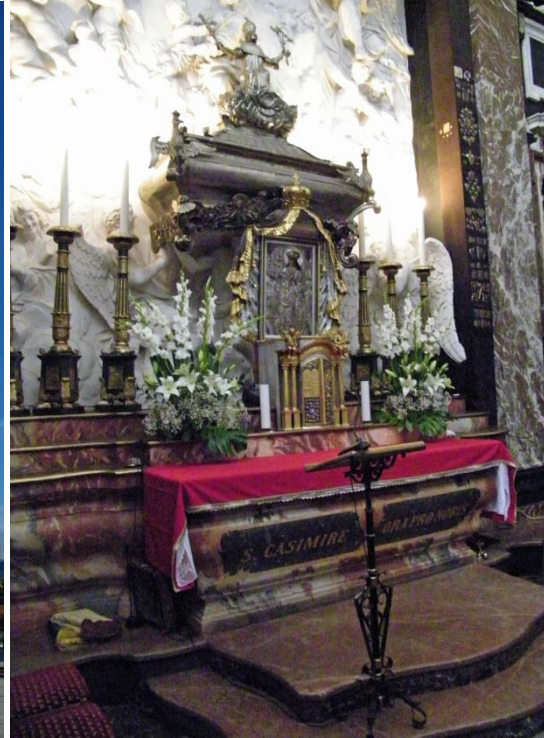
My flight from London to Vilnius (via Frankfurt, Germany) passed over Dover, England on the English Channel.



The remains of Gediminas Tower and related castle ruins, on a hill top above Vilnius' Cathedral Square and Old Town. It is named for Gediminas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania in the 1300s when Lithuania reached its greatest size. Alas, access to the tower and ruins was prohibited while I was in town due to some restoration work that was underway. Gediminas also resisted Teutonic Order Christian crusaders that had targeted the Baltic tribes, although Christianity started making inroads before he died.



The Cathedral Basilica of St. Stanislaus and St. Ladislaus of Vilnius on Cathedral Square, the heart of Vilnius. A cathedral was first built here in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. The current structure sits atop early catacombs and underground chapels. Grand Duke coronations were held here, and many historical figures were buried below. During Soviet Occupation the cathedral was converted to a warehouse, although masses resumed in 1988.



(Left) The Cathedral bell tower was first built in the 1500s

(Right) The cathedral's St. Casimir Chapel contains the sarcophagus of St. Casimir, the patron saint of Lithuania.

Casimir, a son of King Casimir IV, was once in line to become King of Poland and Lithuania, and an attempted coup failed to install him as Hungary's leader. One brother went on to rule Bohemia and eventually Hungary and Croatia, other brothers ruled Poland and Lithuania at various times, and one became Duke of Silesia. Another brother was Primate of Poland. A sister became Duchess of Bavaria, and another became Duchess of Saxony. But apparently none of them were successful in computational linguistics.



Also on Cathedral Square is the reconstructed Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania. It originally dates back to the 1400s, but it was demolished in 1801 during Russian Empire rule. The current building was only recently completed. It houses a museum focused on the history of Lithuania.



The reconstructed palace sits atop the ruins of the original palace. Excavated ruins of the original palace can be explored on the lower level of the museum.



A statue of Lithuania's first and only king, Mindaugas, sits in front of the New Arsenal building that was once part of the palace complex. Today the arsenal houses the National Museum of Lithuania, a museum focused on the ethnic culture of Lithuania.



I saw a lot of these hand-woven ribbons and sashes while in Lithuania. They're routinely found on folk costumes.

In traditional times, girls wove several of these to use as gifts for their future in-laws. Brides also adorned crosses and trees they passed with these sashes on their way to their new homes.

The ribbons and sashes were also used to make headgear, to honor people on their birthdays, and to decorate funeral wreaths.

The Vilnius Old Town UNESCO World Heritage Site is one of the largest surviving medieval old towns in Northern Europe. At one point it was surrounded by medieval walls with access gates, but most of the old city walls are gone. The Old Town is home to Cathedral Square as well as a number of old churches and palaces, including the presidential palace. Vilnius University dates back to 1579.



The bell tower of the Church of St. John the Baptist, part of the Vilnius University campus.





Interior of the Dominican Church of the Holy Spirit.



The Church of St. Casimir was built in the early 1600s in memory of St. Casimir, Lithuania's patron saint. Originally a Catholic Church, it was converted to a Russian Orthodox Church when Lithuania was part of the Russian Empire. Germans occupied Vilnius in WWI and converted it to a Lutheran church. It became a Catholic church after WWI, but it was damaged in WWII. During Soviet occupation it was converted into a Museum of Atheism. It became a church again after Lithuania left the old Soviet Union.



Vilnius Town Hall on the town hall plaza.



View of the other end of the town hall plaza.





Old frescos had been plastered over in the Church of the Holy Trinity.



The Church of All Saints dates back to the early 1600s. It was built in the baroque style, and it features 18 Late Baroque style altars inside. Before some smart aleck asks “Who baroque it?”, I’d assume that it was the architect, but I haven’t tracked his name down yet.

During the Soviet occupation, the church was converted into a folk museum.



The Gate of Dawn is the only surviving gate from the city walls that originally surrounded medieval Vilnius. It is affiliated with an adjacent church chapel.



View into the center arch above the gate's passageway.



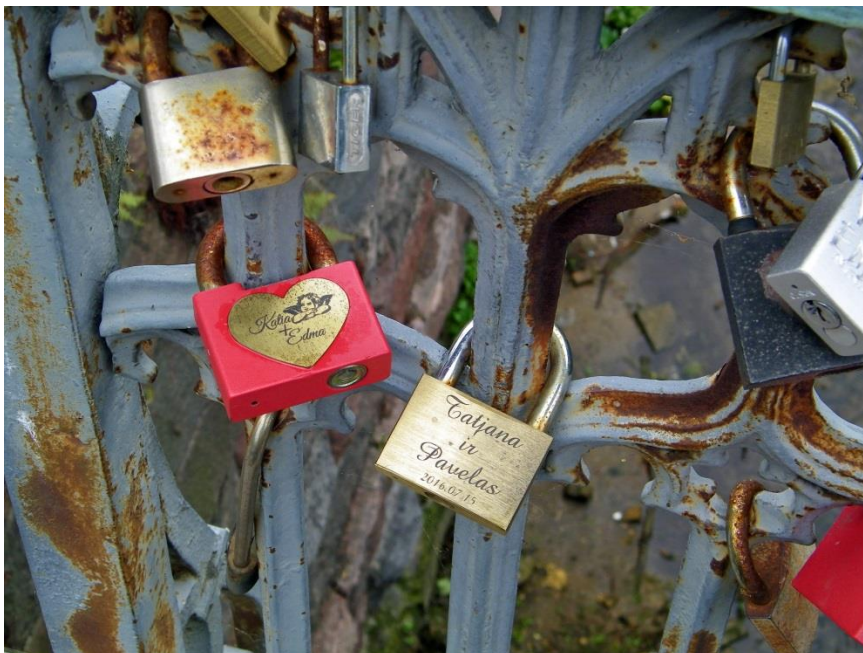
The Lithuanian presidential palace. I actually came across the Lithuanian president while exploring the Old Town, the first of two national presidents I'd see on this trip.



One of a handful of sculptures in a small sculpture park that I stumbled upon. I wasn't terribly impressed by this shoe – after all, I wear Size 15 myself.



The “Republic of Uzupis”, a somewhat artsy neighborhood just outside the old city walls but still generally regarded as part of the Old Town.



Some years back, loving couples started attaching locks with their names on them to bridges, presumably as a testament to their love. Not necessarily to their love of bridges, however, as the locks have often damaged and in some cases destroyed historic bridges. This bridge crosses the Vilna River, connecting Uzupis to the medieval center of Vilnius.



Outside of Old Town, this building originally served as a regional court. The Germans used it when they occupied Lithuania during WWI. The Soviets turned its basement into a prison for political prisoners when Lithuania was first occupied by the Soviet Union, and then it served as Gestapo headquarters under German occupation in WWII. After the war until the end of Soviet occupation the Soviet Union's KGB had offices, a prison, interrogation center and execution chamber here – the KGB executed more than 1,000 prisoners in the basement chamber. Today the building is home to the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights.



One of the KGB's prison cells.



Some of the prison cells had basic toilets – stand or squat as needed. Other cells only had a bucket which was emptied just once a day.



Some prisoners were punished in cells like this. They had to stand on that round plate as the area around them was filled with ice water.



The KGB prison's execution chamber. Plexiglas on the wall to the right covers several bullet holes in the concrete wall.



Most of those executed in the KGB prison were buried on the grounds of Tuskulėnai Manor a couple miles away. After the end of Soviet occupation the grounds were excavated and 706 bodies were recovered and interred in a columbarium built underground at the site. This memorial was constructed on the manor grounds, now Tuskulėnai Peace Park. The site is affiliated with the Museum of Occupations.



The museum also has two floors of information and displays covering the years of Soviet and Nazi occupation, starting with the pact between the Soviets and Nazis that first led to Lithuania's being occupied by the Soviet Union.

Other displays focus on Lithuanian resistance fighters who kept up the fight for several years after the Soviets re-occupied Lithuania.



Mementos and propaganda marking the 50<sup>th</sup> and 70<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the founding of the Soviet Union.





The Lithuanian Parliament Building



Months after Lithuania declared its independence from the collapsing Soviet Union, the Soviets attempted to stage a coup. But Lithuanians from across the country came to Vilnius to protect the parliament building. Part of the barricade that they constructed is preserved as a memorial.

Lithuania was once home to one of the largest Jewish populations in Europe, more than a quarter million Jews in 1939, once earning Vilnius the nickname “Jerusalem of the North”. But the Nazis first segregated the country’s Jewish population into ghettos and then proceeded to murder about 95% of Lithuanian Jews. This was the highest Jewish casualty rate of any country targeted in the Holocaust. Two Jewish ghettos were established inside the Old Town of Vilnius.



This was once the site of the main gate used to enter the Small Jewish Ghetto.



The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum Tolerance Center features information on Jewish history in Lithuania and artwork inspired by that history.



The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum Holocaust Exhibition focuses on how the Holocaust was carried out in Lithuania. This is a reconstruction of an attic hiding space.



Some Lithuanians collaborated with the Nazis, participating in establishing the Jewish ghettos and implementing the Holocaust. A headstone from a destroyed Jewish cemetery was reused here, cut into a whetstone by one of those participants.



Vilnius once had more than 100 synagogues. The Choral Synagogue, built in 1903, is the only one that survived the Nazis and Soviet occupation. Only a few thousand Jews live in Lithuania today.



The Stolpersteine (cobblestone) Memorial Project has embedded tens of thousands of markers like these in the sidewalks in front of sites where Jews once lived before the Nazis sent them to the Death Camps. I've seen a lot of these in a number of cities in Germany. Stolpersteine have also been installed in twenty-one other countries including Lithuania.



(Left) The city's bird market was once located near this spot, now commemorated with this decorated egg sculpture.

(Right) A tribute to musician/artist Frank Zappa, who was embraced by Vilnius' artists community after the end of the Soviet occupation, but who otherwise had no connection to Lithuania.



The Palace of Sports and Concerts, one of a number of abandoned Soviet-era facilities.



I lucked out with the timing of my visit, as a major Lithuanian folk festival was underway in the city center during most of my stay in Vilnius, so I got to see a side of Lithuania that I hadn't expected to see.

Women in traditional costumes singing.



Teens joined the adults in traditional folk dancing.

Who needs a disco beat when you've got accordions and bandoneons?

(Bandoneons were German-made but were popular primarily in Lithuania and Argentina – where they figured prominently in tango music.)



Young people mastering "high" tech.



Šakotis, a traditional Lithuanian spit cake.



A floury-meringue-like batter coats a wooden spit, which is rotated over a fire. As the coating bakes, the cook dribbles more and more batter on it, which eventually leads to growing cooked batter spikes, or branches, all around it. The result is a šakotis. Šakotis is an important part of Lithuanian celebrations.

I took a day tour from Vilnius to my next destination, Riga, Latvia. The tour made short stops at five popular destinations along the way, including three in Lithuania.



The restored Trakai Island Castle was started in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It originally served as a fortress and then as a royal residence. It was later used as a prison but eventually fell into disrepair. Restoration began during the Soviet occupation.

Much of Lithuania is wooded. The town of Trakai features a number of old wooden buildings in addition to the castle. Trakai is just 17 miles from Vilnius and thus is a common day trip destination.



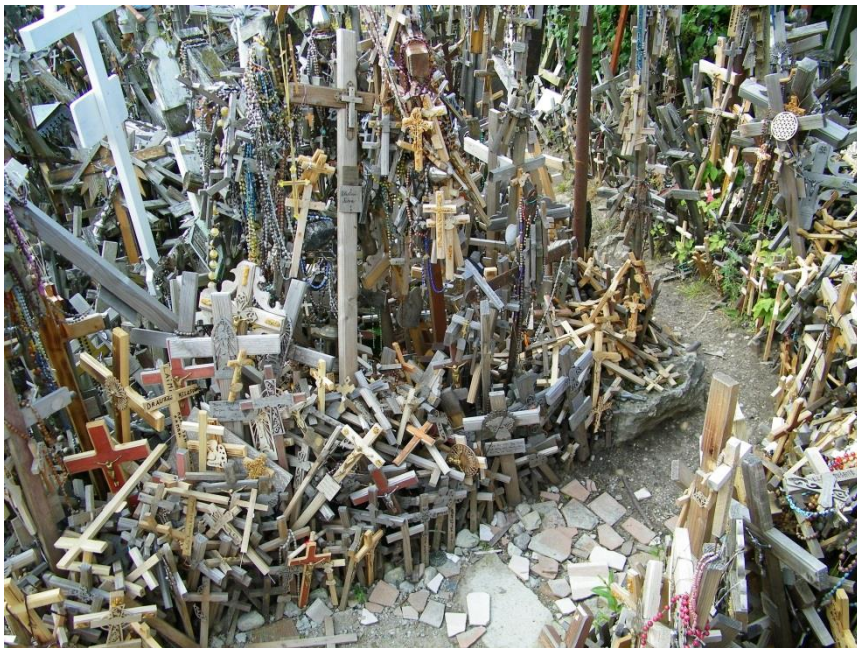
Kaunas is Lithuania's second largest city, and it served as the country's capital during a period when Vilnius was under Polish rule.

Little survives of Kaunas Castle, which dates back to the 1300s.



The Kaunas Town Hall, located in the center of the square in the heart of Kaunas Old Town.





Just north of Siauliai is the Hill of Crosses. It is believed that the first crosses were placed here following a failed uprising in 1831 against Russian Empire rule. Over the years it became a pilgrimage site for Lithuanians praying for peace for their country and eventually for those killed in its 1918 fight for independence. The site took on additional significance during the years of Soviet and Nazi occupations, with crosses added to recognize Lithuanian identity and heritage, a form of peaceful resistance. The Soviets, however, didn't like it and regularly removed the crosses, and they bulldozed the site at least three times. Even with Soviet surveillance and threatened punishment Lithuanians continued to plant crosses here. Since Lithuania's renewed independence Lithuanians and tourists have added tens of thousands of crosses to the Hill of Crosses.



If only.... I got a chuckle out of this bar sign. I don't understand the fascination with taking selfies. Some people seem to do nothing but take selfies when visiting some destination that they travelled halfway around the world to see.

On this trip I ended up tour/visiting five countries, four of which where I didn't speak the language (4 ½ if you consider the peculiarities of British English). So how do I get by? I learn a few key words like Yes, No, Please and Thank You; I know how to read a map, and I have a good sense of direction; and I pay attention to how others move about, queue up, buy things, and so on.



And of course knowing some basic algebra comes in handy, helping me find my Vilnius hotel room.