

## 48 HOURS IN... VILNIUS

A WORLD AWAY FROM THE BUSY TOURIST CAPITALS OF EASTERN EUROPE, VILNIUS IS A STUNNING AND SOPHISTICATED MEDIEVAL CITY THAT'S ABOUT TO HIT THE HEADLINES. BY **EMILY O'SULLIVAN**

**Why go:** Vilnius might not be the first place that springs to mind when you're thinking of a city break, but it should be. Less busy than Prague, less sprawling than Budapest, the Lithuanian capital offers everything from elegant restaurants to a picture-perfect cobbled old town. This is a city on the cusp of something big – next year it's the European Capital of Culture, so go now and savour its style, romance and beauty before everyone else discovers the secret.

**What to see and do:** Vilnius's Old Town basks in effortless charm: the late afternoon sun gently warms the city's dusky pink, olive, and buttery yellow buildings; pretty church spires and shiny Orthodox domes peak above the skyline; the cobbled streets feel stopped in time with crumbly buildings and deserted little courtyards, and in the summer the city's parks are radiant and relaxed.

Crammed with churches from the Romanesque to the Byzantine, you're never more than stumbling distance from an eccentric chapel or a colourful Russian Orthodox gem. Wile away some time in the tranquil Jesuit Church of St Casimir (Didzioji 34); the ornate rococo and incense-filled Orthodox Church of the Holy Spirit (Ausros Vartu 10); and St Nicolas's Church (Sv Mikalojaus 4), the oldest church in Lithuania dating back to 1320. Whatever you do, don't miss the iconic 16th-century Gates of Dawn (Ausros Vartu 12), one of the symbols of Vilnius. Inside is a tiny chapel with a gilded painting of the Virgin Mary surrounded by beatific pilgrims.

A short walk (or a funicular ride) brings you up to Gediminas Hill with sweeping views of the city's terracotta-coloured rooftops on one side, and the small Higher Castle Museum (entrance 4lt) with a pint-sized exhibition and a few suits of armour.

Back on level ground, make sure to visit the compelling and heartbreaking Museum of Genocide Victims. Housed in the former KGB building (Auku 2a; muziejal.lt; admission: 4lt, audio guide: 8lt), the first two floors house an excellent exhibition on the victims of Soviet occupation; downstairs is a chilling, claustrophobic prison with cells, interrogation rooms, padded cell, and execution chamber. It's deeply moving stuff.

Wandering through the pretty tangle of medieval streets and dusty lanes is the real highlight of any visit to Vilnius. This is a city that craves discovery. Definitely worth an afternoon is the regenerated Uzupis area across the Vilnia River. Described as a "republic" of artists, the area is a quiet, ancient spot that over the years has been a craftsmen's suburb and a red-light district. Now it's one of the city's trendiest districts with a mellow vibe, delightful shabby old buildings, pretty courtyards and an utterly unique character.

**Aer Lingus flies to Vilnius**  
from Dublin on Tue, Thurs and Sat

**Where to eat:** Expecting meat-filled dumplings and pig's ears? Forget it. You could happily go table-hopping here without once being presented with a bowl of cold borscht, although if you want to sample some traditional Lithuanian dishes, then Hunter's Restaurant Lokys (Stikliu Str 8; tel: + 370 5 2629 046) with its boar meat, game sausages and beaver stew is the place to go. New to the scene is the cool and contemporary Bistro 18 (Stikliu 18; tel: + 370 677 720 91). Owned by a friendly Irish woman, it's a great choice with simple but well-executed mains such as pork tenderloin marinated in olives and sun-dried tomatoes, and super-tender rack of lamb. Vilnius does French food well, from the pretty provincial style of the evidently popular and romantic Saint Germain (Literatu 9/32; tel: + 370 262 1210) to the more homely but very delicious Les Amis (Saviciaus 7). Stop off for chargrilled steaks, pork and chicken at Zoe's Bar and Grill (Odminiui 3; tel: 370 212 3331), which as well as having great food has some of the friendliest staff in the city. The interior is 1950s retro meets 21st-century minimalism; here you can snuggle into one of the window-side booths and watch the world go by. For the style-conscious, Pegasus (Didzioji 11; tel: + 370 260 9430) is a good choice with a flamboyant white and soft-beige dining room, stunning views of Didzioji street and the Town Hall, and a varied menu that includes Asian classics and a few choice mains such as "smothered" rabbit (smothered in red wine, that is). After dark, a cocktail bar opens so you can seamlessly shimmy from your table to the bar.

**Where to drink:** Most bars in Vilnius serve food, which means that if you find somewhere you really like, you never have to leave! And while the quality of the food may vary wildly, the unique style of the city's watering holes will definitely leave you smiling. Unlike so many European cities that are flooded with minimalist bars filled with vacant-looking beautiful people, Vilnius's hotspots are varied, upbeat and delightfully quirky. Fabulous for a summer's day, Bar Tores (Uzupio g 40) is an exquisite venue with a sun-soaked back terrace that boasts sublime views of Gediminas Hill and the park below. Come here for an afternoon drink and you might just find yourself sitting in the same place at midnight. Another good one for a cold beer in Uzupis is Uzupio Kavine (Uzupio 2), a scenic bar with a deck so close to the river you'll want to jump in. Nip into the small-but-fabulous Bar BoBo (Traku 15) and Blusyene (Saviciaus 5) for a pre- or post-dinner drink. Blusyene has neat wooden tables packed tightly together and a Parisian feel, while BoBo is its naughty little sister with a boudoir-chic décor, black polo neck- >





The Baroque skyline of Vilnius



Holy Trinity Church



Vilnius old town



Pilies Street



Bell Tower



Holy Trinity Church



Gediminas Ave



Archway in the old town



Trakai





Cathedral Square



The Hill of Crosses



The church spires of the old town

wearing drinkers and a friendly little resident dog all packed into a jewel-sized space. From the outside, In Vino (Ausros Vartu 7) looks below-the-radar, but it's a brilliantly buzzing wine bar with a great selection of wines from around the world and a low-key but trendy atmosphere. Head outside to the beer garden, where the smokers of Vilnius congregate en masse. Finally, if you want to rub shoulders with the city's slinky hipsters, then head to the glamour-meets-grit interior of Mojito Naktys (Didzioji 33/2), one of the city's cooler cocktail bars.

**Where to stay:** Tucked down a quiet cobbled street, the Shakespeare (Bernardinu str 8/8; tel: + 370 52 665 885; [shakespeare.lt](http://shakespeare.lt); doubles from €174) has a cracking location a mere stone's throw from everything. Delightfully playful and romantic, this boutique hotel revolves around a literary theme so you can ponder philosophy in Voltaire or make like a modernist in Joyce. Rooms are filled with books and wooden beams, as well as terrifically large beds and friendly and helpful staff. To be right in the heart of the action, try Narutis (Pilies g 24; tel: + 370 52 122 894; [narutis.com](http://narutis.com); doubles from €210). It's housed in a stunning 16th-century building with beamed ceilings and timber-framed vaults.

**Staying Longer:** Trakai, the ancient capital of Lithuania, is 30km from Vilnius and is a beautiful spot with a storybook-style medieval castle and glassy lake. Tour operators offer excursions here for about €25, but if you want to do it yourself, you can get a bus from Vilnius Bus Station. The trip takes about 30 minutes (7-10lt).

**Top Tip:** Everyone speaks English in Vilnius, but try and remember thank you, at least. It's spelled Aciu and is pronounced "a-choo".

## ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

### From the airport

The best way of getting to and from the airport is in a taxi. A taxi to the city centre costs between 60 and 80lt. Buses run every 30 minutes to the railway station (bus no 1), about 10 minutes on foot from the old town. Tickets can be bought at newspaper kiosks or on the bus. There is also a bus that runs through the city centre to Seskinė every 10-20 minutes (bus no 2). Alternatively, there are minibuses that run through the city centre to the outskirts (nos 15, 20, 23 and 47). These run every 5-15 mins and tickets can only be bought on the bus.

### Getting around

Trolleybuses run from 4am to midnight. For timetables try [vilniustransport.lt](http://vilniustransport.lt).

### Costs

Although prices are rising, Vilnius is still a very reasonable city, and if you're careful you can eat, drink and sightsee for very little. On the other hand, in good bars and restaurants you can expect to pay upwards of €10 for a main, while the city's fine dining

spots will definitely make an impact on your wallet. Wine in general is expensive, while beer can range from €2 for a pint to €4 depending on your choice of establishment.

### Essential websites

Log onto the tourist board's website at [vilnius-tourism.lt](http://vilnius-tourism.lt), or the European Capital of Culture 09 site at [culturelive.lt](http://culturelive.lt)

### Further reading

Try the excellent *Vilnius In Your Pocket*. It's filled with hilariously descriptive reviews, which more often than not are bang on the money, of cafés, restaurants, hotels and museums. Available from the Tourist Offices and other selected outlets, 5lt.

### Currency

The unit of currency is the litas. The current exchange rate is €1 = 3.453lt

### Did you know?

Despite there being no real link between Frank Zappa and Vilnius, the city boasts a monument dedicated to the musician and composer. You'll find it on Pylimo Street, should you be interested.