

City focus - Vilnius

As Vilnius prepares to take up the European Capital of Culture mantle, **Suzanne Archer** discovers the Lithuanian city's creative influence is spreading into groundbreaking incentive and conference offerings



I'm standing shivering in a former Soviet bunker, five metres below ground level, being shouted at in Russian by a burly KGB agent. There's a German Shepherd snarling around my feet and I've just been forced to put on a gas mask and run along a dark corridor. Not quite what I had expected on my first visit to Vilnius, but this is a city full of surprises.

This 'psychodrama', a reconstruction of Soviet-era Lithuania called **1984 Survival**

Drama (tel: 00370 6 984 4220), is one of the first activities launched to mark Vilnius's status as European Capital of Culture in 2009. It illustrates just how far the country has come since it broke away from the USSR in 1990, and for corporate groups (of up to 40), it's certainly a team-building experience that will stick in the memory.

Elsewhere, you can flex your horticultural muscle and help groom the largest Japanese garden in Europe (book with **Agentura UPAS** on 00370 6 981 1611) or hold a wine-tasting event complete with rail 'robbery' aboard a train carriage (this one's organised by **Delta Tours**, tel: 00370 5 275 0770).

If such creative teambuilding ideas are anything to go by, Vilnius is more than ready for its year in Europe's cultural spotlight, and with Tallinn in Estonia taking up the Capital of Culture baton in 2011, it's clear the Baltic states will soon be recognised more for their sophistication than their stag nights.

My Saturday night wander through Vilnius Old Town – home to 40 churches, multi-hued houses and tucked-away courtyards – confirmed this. Smart Lithuanians (the city has a population of just 500,000) strolled the cobbled streets, with not a beery Brit in sight.

Artistic endeavours include the reconstructed and extended **National Gallery of Art** (tel: 00370 5 212 2997), which will re-open next year, complete with a 170-person multimedia auditorium, while a new Guggenheim Museum of contemporary art, designed by architect du jour Zaha Hadid, is scheduled for completion in 2013.

It's not just the cultural energy that is grabbing the attention of event organisers, though. Firms with

smaller budgets are also taking advantage of cheap flights with budget airline **FlyLAL** (tel: 00370 5 252 5555) and very reasonable rates in the city. Organisers have ample choice of venues located around two key areas: the atmospheric Baroque Old Town and the modern, Docklands-esque Right Bank of the River Neris, which cuts through the city.

The Right Bank is where you'll find the gargantuan exhibition centre **LITEXPO** (tel: 00370 5 245 1800) – February's Nato conference was just one of the high-profile events to take advantage of the 17,600sq m of conference space, including the city's only exhibition hall.

Five minutes' drive takes you to the more intimate **Forum Palace** (tel: 00370 5 210 3102), where meetings can be held for up to 300 in a choice of three attractively lit meeting rooms. The Galaxy arena lends itself to award ceremonies, with a trendy VIP suite for high-profile guests. The final property in this Right Bank trio is the **Reval Hotel Lietuva** (tel: 00370 5 272 6200), the city's tallest hotel at 23 floors. Its airy conference centre has 17 hi-tech multi-functional rooms, and a capacity of 600 theatre-style.

Those looking for a more authentic Vilnian experience may be drawn to the Old Town's mostly four- and five-star hotels. One word of caution though: don't rely too heavily on star ratings in Vilnius as they can be misleading.

There are two stand-out five-star options, however. The 17th-century **Stikliai Hotel** (tel: 00370 5 264 9595) is the only Relais & Châteaux property in the Baltic states, and, naturally, where Daniel Craig chose to take an apartment during the filming of his upcoming movie *Defiance*. Of the three 60-seater meeting rooms on offer, ask for the one next to the pretty conservatory and courtyard.

Rock heart-throb Lenny Kravitz, on the other hand, took a suite at the sumptuous **Narutis Hotel** (tel: 00370 5 212 2894) after his June gig in the city. There's another impressive courtyard, as well as three 16th-century halls, seating up to 80. Just up the street in a plum location, the five-star **Radisson SAS Astoriija** (tel: 00370 5 212 0110) is less luxurious, but still well-appointed with a stylish suite of six conference rooms. Coffee fans take note: bedrooms have their own espresso machines.

Across the square from the Radisson, the newest hotel in town, the **Ramada Vilnius** (tel: 00370 5 255 3355), has a trendy loft-style boardroom seating 15, alongside a larger conference room. The British-owned **Shakespeare Hotel** (tel: 00370 5 266 5885), Vilnius's best stab at a boutique destination, has bedrooms named after famous authors and three decorative banqueting halls.

For larger numbers, head for the **Artis Centrum Hotel** (tel: 00 370 5 266 0366), one of the largest conference centres in the Old Town with seven multifunctional rooms

Less conventional options include the **Town Hall** (tel: 00370 5 261 8007); the classical **Picture Gallery** (tel: 00370 5 212 0841) in Chodkiewicz Palace; and **Vilnius University** (tel: 00370 5 268 7001), with its 12 courtyards.

All are atmospheric backdrops for dinners, but it's important to keep culinary expectations in check. With traditional Lithuanian cuisine comprising of 'zeppelin' (a stodgy grated potato dumpling filled with meat) and cold beetroot soup, it's not surprising that former Vilnius resident Hannibal Lecter

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(author Thomas Harris recalls his birth there in Hannibal Rising) turned to cannibalism.

Drink enough of the excellent Lithuanian beer, however, and you may just find that dining on a couple of zeppelins or a smoked half-metre eel suddenly becomes a more palatable prospect...

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