



February 10, 2012

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Destination: Lithuania

Making the right connection

Little Lithuania increasingly cosmopolitan

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By BARBARA KINGSTONE, Special to QMI Agency

Some countries can be read like a manageable road map. It's easy to figure out where you are, learn about the history and politics, and navigate from one dot to another. Lithuania is not one of these.

With its history of political twists and turns, domination by various countries, shifting borders, and imposed ideologies, connecting the dots in Lithuania is complex. When likened to reading a map, even the most directionally adept person would beg for aspirin.

Considered Europe's geographic centre, Lithuania is bordered by Belarus (east), Latvia (north), Poland (south-west) and Russia (west). Relationships with neighbouring countries have not always been friendly but the small country has managed to exist since the 10th millennium BC. And in 1990, after years of Soviet domination, Lithuania regained its independence.

Vilnius, the capital and largest city -- 560,190 of Lithuania's 3,575,439 citizens live there -- is neatly divided by the Neris River. The commercial-industrial area and its landmark Europa Tower is on one side while the Old Town -- once the largest in Europe and populated by artists, cafes and boutiques -- is on the other.

On a recent visit, I was surprised how cosmopolitan Vilnius has become in the past 20 years. Internationally known shops have mushroomed, hip young women wear the latest fashions -- tight jeans, cropped jackets and over the knee boots -- while their male counterparts dress like Brad Pitt. Declared a 2009 Centre of Culture, a highly literate population places heavy emphasis on education with a large percentage graduating from university.

While touring the Old Town -- a UNESCO Heritage site -- my guide Loreta impressed me with her driving ability and courage as she navigated narrow, curvy, cobblestone streets. Charming as these are, if you're walking, these uneven surfaces are a hazard so sensible shoes are a must. As I traversed the ancient streets, it boggled my mind to see svelte young women in sky-high stilettos rush by without a wobble. I also saw several brides being photographed in the picturesque streets.

Outside the city I saw another wedding tradition: A wire fence filled with locks engraved with the names of bride and groom. The keys are thrown away, signifying the couple will be forever united. (I was unable to find out the divorce rate, and if the locks are removed if couples divorce.)

Despite its ancient roots, Lithuania is quickly evolving into a "new" country. Newly paved four-lane highways and efficient public transit were unexpected surprises. Although locals complain about traffic congestion, in many places

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GET DEALS

wide city streets
make rush hour
easy.

To my dismay,
familiar voices --
Celine Dion, Lady
Gaga -- emanate
from cars and
cafes. (I had longed
to hear some lovely
Eastern European
music.) And
enormous shopping
and entertainment
centres -- called
Akropolis -- offer
one-stop shopping
with huge food stores, cinemas, and shops that sell everything from pencils
to cutting-edge fashions. There is even a year-round skating rink!



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Offbeat sights were common, too, such as a huge bronze bust of singer Frank Zappa in a Vilnius park. Zappa doesn't have Lithuanian roots but fans gained government approval for the project anyway.

A new Guggenheim Hermitage Museum, designed by renowned architect Zaha Hadid, is planned. It will showcase the country's largest collection of Lithuanian art.

Unfortunately the awful architecture of Soviet times still clouds the city-scape -- deteriorating grey concrete apartment boxes stand next to beautiful renovated 17th-century buildings. While some inhabitants try to overcome the ugliness with window flower boxes, nothing short of demolition will remedy the situation.

Another "leftover" from Soviet times is Vilnius' Green Bridge, with bronze statues of hardworking Russians at either end. Along with the nearby pedestrian-only White Bridge, these landmarks facilitate getting around the city.

In contrast, wonderful Baroque, Neo Classic, Gothic and Renaissance architecture, hints at the city's past glory. There are 65 churches in Vilnius, including its Neo Classic Cathedral, without doubt the most famous landmark. Also beloved is the "flamboyant" Gothic St. Anne's.

A darker history is the brutal treatment of Lithuania's Jewish citizens, who had contributed so much to the country's culture and commerce. Some 265,000 Jews once lived in Vilnius and there were more than 100 synagogues. An estimated 94% of the city's Jews were murdered during the Second World War.

Today, there are only 4,000 Jews in the entire country, and these are mainly immigrants from Russia. And, in Vilnius, only the Choral Synagogue is still active. (It's strange to learn Vilnius was once called the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" because of the number of Talmudic scholars the country produced. There is a memorial stone dedicated to Lithuanian Jewish life on Mesiniu St.)

Venturing outside the city, we encountered the eerie Hill of Crosses. From a distance it looks like a strange forest but the "trees" are actually 200,000 large crosses "planted" to commemorate weddings, births, birthdays, deaths -- even hope for a miracle. Each large cross holds many tiny ones attached by friends and family. Legend says the Hill of Crosses dates to the Middle Ages but there is no evidence to support that claim. Soviet ruler Joseph Stalin tried to abolish the site but it continued to "grow," especially after his death, when crosses in memory of Lithuania's war dead increased.

An unspoiled landscape broken by fertile farmland makes for a pleasant drive to Trakai, once the capital of Lithuania and home to the story-book-like Island Castle. Surrounded by a moat with a drawbridge, the German-Gothic structure provides a glimpse into the lifestyle of the time.

About six hours by car from Vilnius is Klaipeda, the country's only port. Almost destroyed during the Second World War, the harbour is bustling today. Visitors can take a ferry to Curonian Spit, a national park and summer getaway for Lithuanians. From its high sand dunes, the largest in Europe, one can see the long stretch of Russian territory that extends into the Baltic Sea.

We stopped at a popular restaurant for a lunch of cepelinai -- shredded

potatoes stuffed with meat, rolled into balls and then boiled -- and potato pancakes.

In Lithuania, potatoes are served with every meal. Considered comfort food by some, for me it was more -- probably the most a consistent and easily understandable bit of information about this small country with its erratic historic background.

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