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#### The City of Basketball, Beer And Bohemians



**Two decades after the end of Communist rule, the Lithuanian capital is attracting more visitors than ever. Matthew Lee samples the buzzing bars, basketball culture and art scene of today's Vilnius. Photography by Alexander Short**

The secret is out. Growing numbers of tourists are discovering Lithuania's beautiful and beguiling capital, from its museums and growing culinary scene to its lively nightlife. But while the magnificent churches, cathedrals and castles dotted around one of Europe's largest old towns explain the city's history, they don't tell you much about modern life in a place that's changed dramatically over the past two decades. This is, after all, a town where they tore down the statues of Marx and Lenin and replaced them with Frank Zappa. There's nowhere quite like Vilnius, but to understand it you must indulge in three thoroughly Lithuanian obsessions - drinking, basketball and radical art. Which is exactly what I did.

## State of Fluxus

It seems improbable that the former Ministry of Health, a huge building right at the heart of downtown Vilnius, would be handed over to artists and anarchists by the local authorities. But not every city has a mayor like Arturas Zuokas, who shot to worldwide fame in summer 2011 after releasing a video that showed him driving over a Mercedes in a tank, shouting "this is what will happen if you park your car illegally!". The car, it turned out, was purchased specifically for the stunt, and the distressed owner of the crushed vehicle was played by an actor. Maybe his fondness that kind of prank helps explain why Zuokas has opened a building dedicated to Fluxus, the radical art movement of the 1960s and 1970s led by Lithuanian-born George Maciunas.

Fluxus artists used humour, performance art and a strong sense of mischief to spread their anarchic, anti-authoritarian ideas. A distrust of conventionality, a DIY attitude to production and a warped sense of fun mean that, like the movement itself, the Ministry of Fluxus (27 Gedimino Pr) is positively anarchic. Every inch of wall space is covered in art and graffiti; some brilliant, some not - it doesn't seem to matter. Living and working among the abandoned shopping trolleys, broken musical instruments and oddly shaped furniture, a group of local artists uses the building as both HQ and muse. Don't be scared to open doors and wander around freely - the word "fluxus" is, after all, Latin for "flow".

For a gentler introduction to Lithuanian art, visit the Contemporary Art Centre (2 Vokieciu, tel: +370 5260 8960, [www.cac.lt](http://www.cac.lt)) in the heart of the Old Town. It features a permanent exhibition on the Fluxus movement - although you've probably had enough of all that by now - and stages a new cutting-edge exhibition every couple of months.

To purchase arts and crafts made by Vilnius's up-and-coming talents, visit the Sunday flea market (39 Vilniaus, 12-4pm) in the courtyard of perennially hip bar Vasaros Terasa (look out for the angel cows). Here you'll find vintage, bric-a-brac, books, jewellery, old postcards and posters, and one-off creations by local designers.

## Beer, beer and more beer (and some non-alcoholic options)

Little known fact: for every Lithuanian citizen there are seven Lithuanian breweries. OK, that's less than true, but about 300 local beers are on sale at Bambalyne. Beer Bar (7 Stikliu G, tel: +370 5240 5670), a preposterous tally for such a small country. Dark beers and hearty ales dominate the drinking at this moody underground cellar, so expect distinctive, assertive flavours and equally strong reactions. Some brews here are as potent as red wine. You'll need to work your way through a few bottles to even consider stomaching Bambalyne's traditional Lithuanian drinking food - smoked pig's nose. The snout is sliced and served up with a dash of horseradish. Who'd have thought cartilage could be so chewy?

You've got to admire the cheek of a bar that calls itself Gringo (31/1 Vilniaus, tel: +370 6549 0541) and then busts its gut to appeal to a foreign clientele - Premier League on the TV, a wide range of imported beers, free wi-fi, menus in English. But perhaps because of its backstreet location, it's not touristy. Instead, it's the place to meet long-term expatriates and Lithuanians wanting to practise their English. Despite its name, the fearsomely cool bar/club/hangout Gorky (34 Pilies, tel: +370 6521 8035) seems to have less to do with the golden age of Soviet literature than it does with the golden age of Soviet boozing. The liquor of choice here is Trejos Devynerios, also known as 999, a long-standing herbal concoction in the spirit of Jägermeister that's luminous enough to take to the dance floor if you've accidentally left your glow stick at home.

For more conventional (and nonalcoholic) drink, head to Europe's least conventional neighbourhood, Uzupis, which has declared itself an independent republic with its own currency, flag, constitution, president and army of between 12 and 17 men, depending on who's available at the time. On the main drag you'll find Thierry Kepykla (19 Uzupio, tel:

+370 6766 0889), a Parisian bakery selling croissants, baguettes, cakes and - most importantly - authentically frothy French coffee. It's run by a Frenchman who moved to Lithuania six years ago to work with street kids. Kepykla fell in love with the country and is now giving this bohemian neighbourhood even greater claim to being considered the Montmartre of the Baltics.

If you've been taking full advantage of some of Europe's cheapest and best beers, then head to homely, hippyish Sulcius (15 Totoriu, tel: +370 6035 3102) for a tailor-made recovery drink. At this impossibly cute juice bar (motto: "for those that don't drink beer"), the resident squeezers will combine fruit, vegetables, herbs and spices to conjure up delicious and healthy liquids. The ginger and cinnamon juice is very, very, very gingery, but you'll feel reborn afterwards. Vegan snacks such as cookies and samosas are on hand if you're feeling peckish.

## Hoop dreams and slam dunks

Lithuanians aren't joking when they describe basketball as the country's second religion, so for a surefire conversation starter in a Vilnius bar, just mumble something about rebounds and assists. Just be careful on the sensitive topic of the national team's showing in last summer's European championships though. If basketball is a religion, the humiliating defeat to minnows Macedonia in the quarters was enough to spark mass apostasy, especially since the event was being hosted on home soil.

Now all the tears, jeers and recriminations are in the past, Lithuanians have returned to squabbling over domestic rivalries - namely that between Vilnius challengers Lietuvos Rytas and Kaunas top dogs Zalgiris, who between them have won every single championship since the Lithuanian league began 20 years ago. If Lietuvos are playing on your visit, get a ticket for a game at the 11,500-capacity Siemens Arena (14 Ozo G, tel: +370 5 247 7576, [www.siemens-arena.com](http://www.siemens-arena.com)).

If it's sold out, the next best thing is an evening at Stars & Legends sports bar (Sarunas Hotel, 4 Raitininku, tel: +370 6140 0099). Owned by Saru -nas Marčiulionis, one of the all-time Lithuanian basketball greats, the bar comes alive on game nights - a frankly intimidating number of TVs guarantee a great view wherever you're sitting. To really fit in, learn the lyrics to Lithuania's basketball anthem *Trys Milijonai* (search for it on YouTube), order a plate of fried bread and pig's ears, and avoid all mention of Macedonia.

## Fast facts

### GETTING THERE

Vilnius airport is located just 7km from the city centre, and buses 1 and 2 provide a quick service into town, costing 2.5LTL (€0.70). Trains also run directly to the main railway station for the same price. Taxis are available, as are hire cars from Hertz ([www.hertz.com](http://www.hertz.com)), Ryanair's exclusive rental partner, offering special rates for Ryanair passengers when you book your flight.

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