

Amber allure

Lithuania is a gem of a place, not unlike the golden resin that seems to emanate from the country

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The guide waved us over excitedly: "Take a look!"

I peered through the magnifying glass at a small column of amber. It spun round to reveal something inside: A head, followed by a pronged foot, then a sinuous body and a long, curved tail. About 50 million years ago, this tiny lizard had been running up a pine tree when its feet had got stuck in resin oozing from the bark.

"He must have been sick or weak," my guide, Mykole Kasperaviciute, explained, "because usually, lizards could run away."

Instead, the reptile is now entombed, preserved to become one of the most prized amber exhibits in the world. And it's on display in the dimly lit basement of the Centre For Baltic Amber in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania.

A RESIN-ABLE EXPLANATION

In case you don't know, Lithuania is all about amber. Along almost every street in Vilnius, among buttery-coloured churches and Baroque and varying degrees, to the resin. Polished nodules hatch out of eggs in art galleries, rough necklaces loop over stands in the market place, you can buy bags of resin by the kilo, or amber beads that cost anything from 20 to 2,000 litas (S\$920), or better yet, a carved amber elephant for up to 25,000 litas or an ornamental carriage for 50,000 litas. Or if you prefer, there are galleons, dragons, bracelets, brooches and chess sets.

The resin has been washed onto the country's shores for years. Fishermen still gather it (under licence, of course) after it is torn from the seabed during storms. In a country that didn't embrace Christianity until the 14th century, many believed the resinous chunks were the tears of the sun or pieces from the palace of the sea goddess, Jurate.

In Lithuanian, amber (gintaras) comes from "ginte" meaning "to protect". It's used to treat ailments ranging from epilepsy to sore throats, and is added to drinking water, herbal tea and spirits in the belief it promotes good health.

"You should take this everyday," Mykole said, handing me a generous tippie of "amber brandy". It had a slightly resinous taste. "It's good for you. It'll cure your warts."

"But I don't have any warts," I said.

"That doesn't matter."

ANGLING FOR AMBER

While Vilnius provides a good introduction to amber, the coastal town of Palanga with its squawking gulls and painted cabin houses is where amber aficionados head to. I strolled along the beach, under the L-shaped pier, keeping an eye out for odd-looking stones on the sand. A path through the dunes leads to the town's botanical gardens and the former 19th century mansion of Count Feliksas Tiskevicius, set among lakes and pine trees.

The mansion houses the Palanga Amber Museum, the largest collection of amber in the world. Among its 29,000 exhibits is the Sun Stone - a chunk of amber weighing nearly 4kg.

But it's the museum's collection of inclusions that's the main attraction. To the accompaniment of booming music reminiscent of a film score, I gazed with grotesque delight at spiders with splayed legs, contorted wasps, cockroaches and ants - all suspended in time, in globules flecked with gold.

Albertas Petkevicius, the chairman of the Palanga Guild Of Amber Masters, has a workshop next to the park. He showed me how amber is cut, ground and polished, while warning me, at length, about fakes.

He told the story of a woman who recently paid €12,000 (S\$19,070) for a lump of resin at a trade fair, only to realise it was worthless.

"She'd worked in the industry for 10 or 12 years and was still caught out!" he said. "There's a lot of money involved. Faking has become big business."

While we were chatting, a young man knocked on the door of the workshop. He'd just bought a necklace from the market and offered Petkevicius 100 litas to tell him if it was real or not. The craftsman didn't even take the beads out of the man's hand. He just shook his head.

The best way to tell if amber is genuine is to put it in salty water (one part salt, nine parts water). If it floats it's real. Otherwise, rub it until it's warm. Even if the beads are polished there should still be a whiff of resin.

But the Lithuanians have more uses for amber than just as a decorative piece. Back in Vilnius, I had an in-your-face encounter with amber - literally. A therapist at the town's Amber Massage Spa sprinkled fine resin on my face and rubbed it into my cheeks with perfectly smooth amber balls. The massage stimulated blood flow while the powder acted as a cleanser and antiseptic. A faint, smell of pine filled the room as waves broke gently against the shore. Although I knew the sound of the sea was coming from a CD player somewhere, for a moment I was back on the beach, looking for amber in Palanga.

Perhaps there's something about amber that just sticks with you, that resin-ates with you (pun fully intended) - other than it being pleasing to the senses, of course. Or perhaps, it just makes a great excuse to visit Lithuania again.

For more information about travelling around Lithuania, visit www.vilnius-tourism.lt

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