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Where old meets new

By Pól Ó Conghaile

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There are now three airlines offering direct flights from Irish cities to Vilnius. So what's worth seeing in the Lithuanian capital?

YOU MAY not notice it from day to day, or flight to flight. But the way we travel is changing. Museums, galleries and historic buildings are no longer the beall and end-all of city breaks. More and more, we're craving experiences over facts and figures.

"Art may be a particularly good medium for distilling and reflecting the characteristics of a nation, but contemplation of it does not give us the vivid and visceral experience of them that we may crave," as Alain de Botton wrote recently in BA's Highlife magazine.

"We're learning that what we might really want to do is to talk to people," the philosopher continued, with his usual — and irresistible — knack for nailing ideas so simple you wonder why nobody had nailed them before. "This is remarkably hard."

Our increasing desire for stories, for the sweet sensation of living and breathing a city rather than digesting its historical data, hit me afresh in Vilnius.

Lithuania's capital is a gem. Its Old Town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It was a European Capital of Culture in 2009. It's a small place by any measure, but one spilling over with Gothic, Baroque and Renaissance churches, town halls and other buildings.

Yet none of these things puts the hook in me. What puts the hook in me is the moment I wander into a small chapel above the Gate of Dawn to find a wedding underway. An older couple exchanges vows —

she in a cream bonnet, he with a bouquet of blooms under his arm and trousers bunching around his ankles. A Handycam is propped atop of the organ.

Beneath vaulted ceilings, a priest in a golden robe takes a step backwards. The couple leans in together and delivers a quick, bird-like kiss. The small crowd around them claps.

And there it is. Interesting and all as the 16th century Gate of Dawn is, or the fact that its famous icon of the Virgin Mary is said to have healing powers, or that Pope John Paul II took time to say the rosary here in 1993, the strongest memory I'm taking away is of that little kiss.

That moment in time. That stolen insight into two Lithuanian lives.

There's no shortage of churches in Vilnius, of course. There is St Theresa's. There is the double-header of St Anne's Church and Bernardine Temple. But however impressive the buildings, it's the quirky details rather than the architecture that draw you in.

Inside St Theresa's, I find frescoes of the saint's visions are splashed all over the ceiling. St Anne's was used as a warehouse during the Soviet occupation, I learn. And Napoleon wanted to take the Bernardine Temple back to Paris "in the palm of his hand". Alas, he could not, so he used it as a horse stable instead.

Locals like to point out that the multitude of church spires poking from their skyline, like twigs from an elaborate nest. One reason there are so many, it seems, is that Vilnius is situated on the boundary of two ancient civilisations — Latin to the west and Byzantine to the east.

This plum location at the heart of Europe hasn't always been a good thing. Lithuania has also been occupied by Tsarist Russia, Poland, Germany and the Soviet Union. Independence came as recently as 1991, when 14 people lost their lives defending the TV Tower.

"We have spirit," I'm told. "But usually spirit comes from suffering."

The Museum of Genocide Victims, housed in the city's former KGB headquarters, provides a sobering insight into the Soviet years — as much through hard information as grim details like the bullet holes in the wall of the basement execution cell.

Another grotesque period in the city's history came during the Second World War, when fully 94% of its Jewish population was "liquidated". Prior to the violence, Vilnius had been known as the Jerusalem of the North. Today, it's home to just a few thousand Jews.

"We didn't have concentration camps. They were shot," a guide says, before adding the gloriously obscure detail that Monica Lewinsky's grandfather was a Litvak.

Again, it's not the facts and figures that get me. It's the memories, the guide's insights, the fact that as we're looking at a statue of Dr Tsemakh Shabad, the kindly character said to have inspired the story of Dr Dolittle, a gentleman approaches with a old film camera.

Dressed in black, he introduces himself, and points to the statue, which depicts Dr Shabad bending over to talk to a girl carrying a cat. The girl was sick, the man tells us, and so poor that she was cradling the animal to her neck to keep warm.

The more I explore, the more Vilnius starts to reveal its secrets. In fact, some 80% of the city's houses, bars and businesses are hidden away in courtyards. I step into one and find a buzzing beer garden, full of bantering buddies, clinking glasses and candles jammed into wine bottles.

Then there's U the self-proclaimed Republic of U.

Just over the Vilnia River in the Old Town, this bohemian neighbourhood is crammed with artists who, in 1997, clubbed together with free-spirited residents to declare a Republic, along with its own flag, president, cabinet, constitution and army... of 11 men.

The constitution includes articles like "everyone has the right to idle" and "a dog has the right to be a dog", reminding me of the laid-back, anything-goes atmosphere of Christiania in Copenhagen. It even has its own guardian angel, courtesy of sculptor Romas Vilciauskas. Vilciauskas is also the artist behind the famous U Mermaid, which sits on the River Vilnia embankment nearby.

Vilnius has a pretty sparky nightlife, and doesn't seem as overrun with stag parties as other Eastern European cities.

It didn't escape the Soviet claw unscathed, however — as well as pretty churches, you'll find plenty of concrete monstrosities, customer service that is often curt and sometimes comically bad, and weirdly aggressive drivers.

"We have friendly people... until they start driving," one local shrugs.

Vilnius is a small place, and there's no real reason to explore it other than on foot. Plus, you've got to love the fact that the same city that tore down statues of Lenin after Independence erected one of Frank Zappa — a cult musician with no Lithuanian connections whatsoever.

There's more. I thought Ireland was obsessed with spuds, but did you know Lithuania has some 300 different potato dishes? Or that on December 22, the darkest day of the year, an old stump is dragged through city courtyards to collect the troubles of the year gone by?

Alain de Botton should visit. It's not at all hard to get talking to Lithuanians, and once you do, the experiences can get vivid and visceral indeed.

HOW TO GET THERE

Flights

Ryanair (Ryanair.com) and Wizz Air (wizzair.com) fly direct from Cork to Vilnius, with departures on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Ryanair and Aer Lingus (aerlingus.com) fly direct from Dublin. Fares from Cork start from €33 one-way.

Where to stay

Stikliai Hotel (stikliaihotel.lt) is a Relais & Chateaux property, with rooms laid out around an enclosed courtyard in a former glass blowers' factory. Doubles from €171. The cosy, family-run Grybas House (grybashouse.com) is another option, with doubles from €87.

Where to eat

Decent service may be hard to come by, but you'll find pretty much any food in Vilnius. For traditional Lithuanian fare, try Lokys (lokys.lt), set in evocative old cellars beneath a 15th century townhouse. Tores Restaurant (tores.lt) is a good place for views over the cityscape and surrounding hills.

For more options, see inyourpocket.com.

Christmas crackers

Vilnius's Christmas fair runs from Dec 15 through Jan 6, with numerous concerts, exhibitions, markets and other events scheduled for the Old Town. The markets take place in Odminių Square. For further information, visit Vilnius-tourism.lt.

What to see

If you have a couple of days in Vilnius, a trip to Trakai is worthwhile. The 15th century castle and museum is set in the middle of Lake Galvė, some 29km west of the city, and surrounded by souvenir stalls and fairytale forests. See trakai.info/en for more.

Where to shop

Unless you're a Baltic amber aficionado, you probably aren't travelling to Vilnius to shop. Nevertheless, browsing the Old Town for souvenirs can be fun, and you'll find a reasonable selection of designer labels and books on Gedimino Street.

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