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The old world charm and new world feel of Vilnius, Lithuania

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Old town, Vilnius

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A funicular takes you to the top of the Gediminas Tower, the crown of the great Castle fortress that once protected Vilnius. It's an amazing view of the city. One side shows off the old red tile roofs of the 18th and 19th century city. The other side looks across the Vilnia River, onto the modern city.

The Castle was built in the 14th century by Gediminas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania who, while hunting along the valley of the Vilnia River camped on top of a hill and dreamt he saw a howling iron wolf. His dream was interpreted as a sign that the hill was the location where he should build his fortress from where he'd rule his empire. The first wooden fortress was replaced in the 15th century with a more substantial stone version.

The legend also tells the story of the Vilnius Basilisk, a snakelike creature that could turn humans into stone with one look that lives under the Artillery Bastion next to the Gediminas Tower. Although there haven't been any sightings of the Vilnius Basilisk since the 18th century, students from the Vilnius University still pay annual tributes to the creature.

These days Gediminas is more known for Gediminas Avenue, the main artery through the city. It begins at the Cathedral Square, the center of the Old Town and continues past the Government buildings, Banks, the National Theater, blocks of quaint shops and restaurants and eventually ends up at the Museum of Genocide Victims, the location of the 20th century Soviet KGB prison.

The ground floor of the museum chronicles the Soviet repression with personal items and death statistics. The second floor has the spying rooms (all the cells were bugged) and the basement is filled with about 50 prison cells. Over 1,000 prisoners were executed in the basement here between 1944 and 1960. The Museum is a very powerful statement to the horrors mankind can inflict on humanity.

Vilnius has endured a very sad history. In the 19th century the Jewish population here was over 100,000, around 40% of the city's population. There were more than 100 synagogues in this city commonly known as the Jerusalem of Lithuania. In 1812, Napoleon said The Great Synagogue of Vilnius rivaled the Notre Dame of Paris. It once held over 5,000 people before being destroyed by Nazis and Soviets. The Great Synagogue was replaced by a basketball court.

The Moorish-Romanesque Choral Synagogue built in 1903, the only remaining synagogue in the city, still serves the remaining 2,000 or so Jewish residents of the city.

Although the fate of most of the Vilnius Jews is one of the saddest stories of the Holocaust, there was a hero who tried to save as many as possible. Chiune "Sempo" Sugihara, the Japanese diplomat to Lithuania and his wife Yukiko issued close to 6,000 letters of transit to Jews held captive in the Kovno ghetto. They accomplished this in 29 days between July 31 and August 28,

1940, Years after the war Sugihara was asked why he did it. He replied, "They simply needed help."

Vilnius has made a successful transition into a blend of Old World charm and New World appeal. Many come here for the amber jewelry. There are many Amber shops in Vilnius but it's always better to buy from a reputable gallery.

If you really want to get a better understanding of Amber, visit the [Amber Museum Gallery](#) in the Old Town that gives an insight on this 50 million year old resin.

Some come to Vilnius for the Baltic food; dark rye bread, cabbage soup, bliny/blintzes, beef rolls or Cepelinai, a meat and cheese filled pocket made of grated potatoes sometimes referred to as a Zeppelin, either because of it's shape or the way it hits your stomach.

Others come for the history and art. Vilnius has a wonderful art scene. In 1995, the city installed the first ever memorial bust of Frank Zappa, even though Zappa never visited the city or had anything to do with Lithuania. Zappa's roots are Sicilian, but that didn't dissuade Saulius Paukstys, a local photographer and President of the Vilnius Frank Zappa fan club who successfully petitioned the government to let them install the statue outside of the Vilnius Art Academy. The bust sits on top of a 16' stainless steel column at #1 Kalinausko Street in the city center. It was created by local sculptor Konstantinas Bogdanas, who's previous work in the city was limited to busts of Lenin and other Communists during the Soviet era.



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