

A STUDENT CAN ALSO BE A TOURIST: I STUDIED IN VILNIUS

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Abstract Studying abroad is considered by many to be an adventure. Going somewhere as a student, without a care in the world, sounds exciting. Most of times students choose more “exotic” destinations, but I chose Vilnius in Lithuania. Vilnius may sound boring, but as I found out, it has more than meets the eye. Beautiful landscape, history, architecture, food and drink, and it has character. Vilnius, and perhaps all of the Baltic states, are hidden gems. These are the places where history is combined with myths and religion. When you travel, you always find something new and unexpected. I learned to love these places, and also returned a couple of times. I am also happy to call the people I met and studied with, friends. Students should study abroad and maybe experience a different life. The experience is something that will stay with you for the rest of your life.

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Why did i go to Vilnius?

If you are a foreign student, are you a tourist? I still remember leaving Slovenia and going to a foreign country to finish my exams in the study of Tourism. Surely my purpose of travelling was academic, but I travelled and got to know the wonderful country of Lithuania and other Baltic countries. So, besides being a student, I was also a tourist.

It was my last year of studying in the coastal city of Portorož when me and my two friends decided to go and study abroad and experience something new. After talks and negotiations, we decided to go to Lithuania and its main city Vilnius. Everybody questioned this decision, and they were right, because Lithuania is not a primary destination for Erasmus students. We decided to go solely on the basis of a few searches on the internet, where we found out that the prices are low and the girls are beautiful.

So, on the first of September, only two of us got on a plane and went to Lithuania. The third colleague decided not to go. For me, it was a difficult and challenging trip, because, just 5 days before, I lost my wallet at the shopping centre, and with it all of my credit cards. Luckily I still had my passport.

It has been a while since I last visited these countries, but I still remember the first time I arrived. It was night, and we were greeted by two of the Lithuanian students, who are now friends. We boarded the bus and went to the student's home at Giedraciu street 81. Our room was not prepared and the first night we slept on the mattresses.

Our student dorm was small and there were just foreign students. My roommates were from Germany, Hungary, Portugal, Turkey, Finland. We were all students of Tourism. We had a great time and we still talk from time to time.

Our street had a great "strategic" position. It was near the shopping centre, gym, Siemens arena, which is the biggest sport hall in Lithuania, and Kalvariju turgus – the main market in Vilnius.

Exploring Vilnius

Vilnius is the capital of the country of Lithuania, where it is also its largest city with a population of 570,806. It is also a city of great history of almost 700 years, which is shown in the buildings. The centre contains many historical buildings, which are connected with marvellous pebbly streets. Walking and exploring the city is easy, but be sure to buy some kind of guide. I bought the Vilnius in your pocket guide, which is a new and interesting way to explore the city with the information gained by the locals.

The first few weeks of exploring were dedicated to getting around the area. First I walked a lot, since I did not use any means of public transport, but once you get used to the public transport, getting around is easy.

So what to visit in Vilnius? The centre is very historic and full of monumental buildings. First we went to the National Museum of Lithuania. It was a school trip the day after we arrived. According to Vilnius Tourism Office, The National Museum of Lithuania is the largest depository of Lithuanian historical cultural heritage in the country. It is the oldest museum in Lithuania, dating back to 1855, when the Museum of Antiquities was established in Vilnius. Authentic exhibits help to recall the history of Lithuania and its national culture and customs.

The authentic displays of the Museum represent the history of Lithuania, and present traditional Lithuanian culture, and customs. The Old Arsenal is situated nearby. There is a funicular from the closed courtyard of this Museum to Gediminas Hill. A majestic monument to King Mindaugas stands next to the Museum. Mindaugas is the first, and the last, Lithuanian King. He was crowned in 1253. Mindaugas united Lithuania's lands into a State and won international recognition of Lithuania. The whole presentation was very interesting, especially for me, since my hobby is reading historical books. Our next stop was, of course, the Gediminas tower of the upper castle. Besides being a Fort filled with historical information, it is also a nice place for a walk, and offers a nice view of the entire city of Vilnius. But, before walking you have to try and use the railway system, which takes you to the tower. The attraction was opened in 2003, and it is a nice way to enjoy the view over Vilnius and the river Neris. Worth visiting is also the central Basilica Square with the tower

and the Cathedral of St. Stanislav and St. Vladislav. Walking and admiring the old building on the Gediminas street also leaves you speechless if you like history.

Vilnius was occupied during World war 2 and all of their Jewish population was eradicated. There are many places where you can learn more about the tragic story during the great war. I visited the Big ghetto, where 29,000 Jews were living from 1941 to 1943. A large part of the history are also various cemeteries and statues. The best part of the tour I took was visiting the Museum of Genocide Victims. It is situated in the former KGB headquarters building. The building is filled with all of the information and artefacts of the great war. The best part of the experience is when they take you to the basement and you see part of the old Jewish prison, where more than 1,000 people were murdered.

The food and drink

First, I have to say that Lithuanian food is very different from Slovenian. While we like our food a little saltier, the Lithuanians prefer their food sweet. I never back down from a challenge of trying food and drink when I am abroad. You have to try local food and drink, it's a way of exploring.

Šaltibarščiai, or cold beetroot soup, is something not of the ordinary. The name speaks for itself. Although as some people don't want to eat it after hearing the name, I found it enjoyable. The next local cuisine I tried was Cepelinai. The name is simple, with the food being shaped like the zepelin. They are basically potato – meat dumplings, covered with nice gravy. I ate the zepelinai only once, and they were not totally fresh. It is best to eat them when they are made and smoking hot. Lithuanians like their meat, which is usually served next to some potato dish, and, of course, sweet salad. But, being there in the winter you get the idea why you have to eat a food that is a little heavier – it is cold and the body needs it.

The one thing I liked, and still make it at home, is Kepta Duona. Fried bread infused with garlic and dipped in a cheese and sour cream sauce. It goes together perfectly with friends and beer, and Lithuanians love their beer. Local pubs are filled with many varieties of local beers. I preferred Svytoris baltas. It is a wheat beer with a bit of citrus taste, and for additional taste they add a piece of lemon in the drink. Pair this with the fried bread and you have a nice evening with your friends.

Lithuania was once a part of the Soviet Union and, until now, it has had an estimated 5% of Russian population. Vodka is still very popular and, according to the reviews, quite good. The locals like to drink it together with a soft drink like orange juice, and also with tomato juice, which I found strange.

There are, of course, also non-alcoholic drinks. Kvass and Gira are classic cold drinks meant to be drunk in the winter months. They are made from rye bread, and their taste is enhanced by adding various fruits.

Night life

All big cities are filled with night life and Vilnius is no exception. The centre of the city is filled with bars and dance clubs. You can choose for an easy going dinner in a local bar, trying their food and local drinks, or going to dance at a club. I am not a person who likes to dance, but we nevertheless visited many different clubs. The proximity of the Siemens Arena was also a huge plus during my stay in Vilnius. I am a fan of any kind of sports, so we visited basketball games played by the Vilnius team. Lithuania is a basketball country, and not visiting a game between Kaunas and Vilnius would be a shame. The Siemens Arena also hosts a lot of concerts and events. My favourite event was a dance spectacle Sensation White, which is hosted by many DJs, and all of the participants have to be dressed in white.

Visiting other sights and countries

During my 4,5 months of staying in Vilnius I often chose to visit some other sight in Lithuania and neighbouring countries. Sure, Vilnius is big and worth exploring, but going to other places is a must when you are a foreign student.

Usually it was me and my roommates boarding either a bus or train and going somewhere for the whole weekend. I come from a spa town and visiting spas has always interested me. That is why we visited Druskininkai. It is a spa town filled with small hotels and spas. The nature there is really nice with rivers, hills, forests. The area is perfect for relaxation and hiking. The architecture of the city reminded me of Rogaška Slatina, and, by tasting their water, you can find some resemblance to Donat.

When you're in Vilnius visiting Trakai is a must. It is a place little more than 25 km from Vilnius, and it is the only historical national park in Europe. The historical city and the lake resort is a town built on islands surrounded by lakes. The main attraction besides the lakes is the famous Trakai castle. Trakai was once the capital of the country, and it is said that it is the cradle of Lithuanian statehood. People called Karamies live in Trakai. They are of Turkish decent and still speak the language. My roommate was Turkish, and she led us to a restaurant in Trakai. I ate the best traditional kebab in my life in Trakai.

My favourite place is called a hill of crosses. It is a very monumental place, and a major site for Catholics in Lithuania. It is a hill where people leave the catholic crosses, crucifixes and statues. The estimated number of crosses is more than 100,000. Later in life I returned to this site with my girlfriend, now wife, and a couple of my friends. We were backpacking through the Baltic States and I just had to visit the hill of crosses again. We took a photo and sent it to Mladina magazine. In the next issue we were on the cover of Mladina magazine.

Last thoughts about Lithuania

My rather unorthodox way of choosing my Erasmus studying destination proved to be right. I am glad I visited Lithuania and Vilnius and learned something new. I live in a little town, and also studied in a little city, so living in a big city for me was quite hard in the beginning. Once I learned how to use the transport system and accepted my way of life in Lithuania it was easy. Vilnius, and perhaps all of the Baltic States, are a hidden gem. These are the places where history is combined with myths and religion. Due to their hard history of occupation, people tend to be cold at first, but once you get to know the locals you see they are quite nice. Local cuisine is surely not perfect, especially for a Slovenian, but there are things you like and thing you learn to like. Lithuania only has a population of 2,8 million and it is twice the size of Slovenia, so there are a lot of hidden places I still have to visit, and a traveller has to take a lot of time to experience the whole of Lithuania. Natural wonders like Trakai lakes, water from Druskininkai park in the city of Vilnius make you feel comfortable and feel the urge to explore even more. After I finished my studies I returned to Lithuania two more times. Lithuania offers you more than you expect and you feel like you never finished exploring. As for my studies, of course I finished all of the classes.