

# Introduction to Lithuania

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Lithuania is in Eastern Europe, closer to the North Pole than to the Equator. Its neighboring countries are Belarus, Latvia, Poland, and Russia. It is one of the more centrally located countries within Europe. In fact, the place identified as the “Geographical Center of Europe” is only a few kilometers away from Lithuania’s capital, Vilnius. It is in the Northern Hemisphere, coordinates 56 N, 24 E. It is 65,300 square km, which is slightly larger than the state of West



Virginia. Lithuania has 90 km of coastline along the Baltic Sea, but it is a mostly landlocked country. The geography includes many small lakes and fertile soil. The country is quite flat, with some hillier regions that were carved by ancient glaciers.



Vilnius is the capital of Lithuania. It is in the southeastern corner of Lithuania, near two rivers: the Vilnia and the Neris. It is on the opposite side of the country from the Baltic Sea coastline. It seems like a strange place to have the capital city, but that is because Lithuania’s borders have changed so many times throughout the centuries. At one time, Vilnius would have been centrally located within Lithuania. Other major cities include

Kaunas and Šiauliai, which are located in the center of the country, and Klaipėda, which is on the coast of the Baltic Sea.

Because of its central location within Europe, Lithuania has invaded or been invaded by other countries many times throughout its history. At one time or another its past includes forming a Commonwealth with Poland, being controlled by the Russians before World War I, being invaded by the Nazis during World War II, and being occupied by the Soviets for almost 50 years. The national symbol of Lithuania, a white

knight sitting on his horse and brandishing his sword, represents the people's struggle to defend their country from intruders.

The country is predominantly Lithuanian, with small percentages of ethnic groups representing the surrounding countries (Russians, Poles, etc.). Most people in the country (79%) are Roman Catholic. Lithuania has one of the most homogeneous populations in the Baltic states. This is partially because of its history; for example, Lithuania had a thriving Jewish population – Vilnius was, at one time, 30% Jewish – but almost all Jewish Lithuanians (95-97%) were killed during the Holocaust.

Lithuania's culture is influenced by the countries it invaded and the countries that invaded it. However, Lithuanians have their own national characteristics as well and take pride in their national customs. They love the outdoors, for example. Most Lithuanians live in small apartments in the city, but they tend gardens beyond the city limits and live in garden houses during the summer whenever they can. They have close-knit families and many unique customs. For example, at Easter dinner, each family member has to eat part of the same egg to show their love and dedication to each other. At Easter they also hang swings, either from trees if it's warm or barn rafters if it's still cold, and the young people swing to ensure a good harvest the next summer.

The geography of the country is reflected in hobbies like ice fishing and hunting, as well as in celebrations of the ocean and fishing culture in coastal regions. The flag of Lithuania is meant to represent the geography and culture of the country as well. The yellow represents the golden fields, the green represents the green countryside, and the red represents all the blood that has been spilled for Lithuania.



Lithuania has many national parks and UNESCO World Heritage sites. The Curonian Spit is a UNESCO World Heritage site with beautiful sand dunes, right on the Baltic Sea. Lithuania also has many cultural attractions that connect to its history. The Hill of Crosses outside Siauliai, for example, is both a representation of the importance of Christianity in the country and a form of protest against the Soviet occupation. Visitors can take tours to nuclear missile launch sites from the Soviet Era. Lithuania also has

many museums and monuments commemorating its invaders, such as the Ninth Fort, which is a monument about the genocide of Lithuanian Jews.

In 2004, Lithuania joined the European Union. In 2013 the president of Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaitė, received the Charlemagne prize, an important award for her work towards integrating Europe. She has also been successfully steering her country through the economic recession that has caused so many problems for other countries in Europe. It is a sign of positive change in this country that has endured so much hardship over the centuries. In fact Lithuania is changing very quickly. In 2013 it made "The World's 10 Best Ethical Destinations," put out by the organization Ethical Traveler. This means that Lithuania achieved high scores in environmental protection and caring for its people through good health practices, human rights, and other important measures. It also means that it is a wonderful place to visit!

# Cultural Report on Lithuania

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**Language:** The primary language is Lithuanian, and almost everyone speaks it. It is a Baltic language, related to Latvian and Old Prussian. It is a truly ancient language and retains features that are only found in ancient Greek and Sanskrit. Just like in the USA, people in different parts of the country have different slang and accents. It can be difficult for Lithuanians to understand their own countrymen if they are from a different region.

**Food:** Food in Lithuania reflects the country's location and wintery climate. Common foods include dark rye bread, potatoes, pork and sausage, radishes, beets, and cabbage. Gathering wild mushrooms and wild berries is popular in spring and summer; these are used for a variety of dishes. Seafood is more common along the Baltic coast or served smoked or prepared as gefilte fish. A favorite dish is potato dumplings, made out of grated raw potato that is filled with minced meat or cottage cheese and then boiled. Lithuanians love soup as well. The photo shows Lithuanian borscht (beet soup) and dumplings.



Holiday meals are an extremely important part of Lithuanian culture, and each holiday requires eating special foods. On Christmas Eve, for example, the meal is made of 12 meatless dishes, such as smoked eel, pickled herring, poppy seed biscuits, and beet salad. Easter dinner is the opposite, in celebration of surviving Lent, and every possible kind of meat is served. Lithuanians like to drink beer, tea, coffee, and several types of vodka. In summer Lithuanians like to drink something called gira, which is fermented from rye bread.



**Religion and mythology:** The Baltic tribes, which include Lithuania, were the very last peoples of Europe to be forcefully converted to Christianity in the 1300s. Today most Lithuanians are Roman Catholic, but many of their pagan traditions and customs have survived and become part of their Christian traditions. For example, St. John's Day, named after Saint John the Baptist, is also known as Midsummer or Dew Day. The traditional activities are all from the pagan origin of this holiday and include singing and dancing until the sun sets, searching to find the magic fern blossom at midnight, jumping over bonfires, washing the face with morning dew, and young girls floating flower wreaths on the water of a river or lake.

Many Lithuanians celebrate their Saint's Day as well as their birthday – in other words, if your name is Thomas, you might celebrate July 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle, as well as your birthday. Other saint days, like St. Agnes Day in early February, are celebrated in some parts of the country. St. Agnes, shown in the picture, is the patroness of fires. Special bread is consecrated on St. Agnes Day. According to tradition, if you kept this bread in your house, your house wouldn't burn down. If sons went off to war, their mother might give



them a piece of the St. Agnes bread to keep them safe.

**Customs and Etiquette:** Lithuanians like to follow tradition. By American standards, they are a reserved people. They typically do not make an effort to talk to people they do not know, and people on buses or trains generally do not look directly at each other unless they are friends. It is considered polite to give up your seat on a bus or train to an elderly person.

When you meet someone, the most common way to greet them is to shake hands, make eye contact, and smile. Even if you know someone well, follow their lead on how to interact. Lithuanians may hug to greet a very close friend, but this is less common than in America. When speaking to someone, use their title and their last name, also known as a surname. Do not use first names unless you are invited to do so.

If you visit someone's home, bring a small gift (like candy, a bottle of wine, or flowers). If you bring flowers, bring an odd number (an even number of flowers is only used for funerals). Avoid white flowers, which are associated with weddings, and avoid chrysanthemums, which are associated with funerals. Typically, gifts are opened as soon as they are received.

Hosts tend to be generous and do whatever they can to make a guest comfortable. Table manners are relaxed compared to other places in Europe, but wait to be told when to sit down. Use "Continental" table manners (put your fork in your left hand and your knife in your right when eating) and keep your hands visible during the meal, resting your wrists on the edge of the table. Your napkin should stay on the table, not your lap. Keep in mind that you will be offered second helpings, so don't take too much when things are first offered, but make a point of trying everything. When you are finished eating, place your knife and fork across your plate with the prongs facing down and the handles facing to the right. If you cross your knife and fork on your plate, that means you are not finished eating.

Toasting is usually done with hard liquor, not wine or beer. The host will offer the first toast, and you should respond with your own toast later in the meal.

**Special Events:** Lithuania has 15 public holidays. Lithuanians love to celebrate! There are patriotic national holidays, and towns have their own holidays that celebrate the saint to whom the local church is dedicated. Lithuanians celebrate all of the traditional Christian holidays, like Christmas and Easter. They celebrate Shrove Tuesday, the day before Lent begins, which is like Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Their traditions are different, though—more like Halloween. Children (and sometimes adults) wear masks and go door-to-door singing a song that asks for baked goods and something warm to drink (see photo).



All countries cherish their cultures and celebrate them in different ways, but culture is especially revered in Lithuania. Adults remember what it was like to become independent from Russia, because it happened in 1991. So being able to freely celebrate all aspects of being Lithuanian is a privilege and a testament to the strength of the Lithuanian people.

# Attractions of Lithuania



Go kayaking, cycling, or fishing in **Zvemaitija National Park**. Keep an eye out for rare species of birds or animals like the lynx and the ermine. Explore the remains of ancient settlements or take a guided tour of a nuclear missile launch site from the Cold War Era.

Visit the **Hill of Crosses**, just outside the town of Siauliai. It is literally a hill covered with thousands of crosses, some of them more than 100 years old. Cross crafting is a unique Lithuanian art, and this site was named a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.



Explore the archaeological site at **Kernave**, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Explore the mounds left by some of the earliest Lithuanian peoples or participate in events like the International Festival of Experimental Archaeology, pictured above.



Attend the Sea Festival in **Klaipeda**. Listen to great concerts, shop in the open air market, and watch the regatta of boats.



Explore the sand dunes of the **Curonian Spit**, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of Lithuania's most beautiful locations, known as "the pearl of the Baltic Sea."



Check out the **Devil's Museum** in **Kaunas**. Believed to be the only collection like it in the world, this museum has over 2,000 different representations of the Devil, from the funny to the frightening.

The **Ninth Fort**, also in **Kaunas**, serves a reminder of the real evils that can happen in the world. A military fort that was used to transport Jews and other prisoners to concentration camps during World War II, it is now Lithuania's most important monument to genocide.

Kernave

Vilnius

Trakai

Kaunas

There are many things to do in **Vilnius**, Lithuania's capital city, but don't miss the chance to explore the city's **Old Town** section, a UNESCO World Heritage site. You can view magnificent architecture from several different historical periods and explore famous Lithuanian buildings like Vilnius Cathedral and the Palace of the Grand Dukes. There are many charming restaurants in the Old Town section, and for the truly adventurous, try a tour of the catacombs that lie under Old Town Vilnius.

Just a few miles outside Vilnius, the **Park of Europe** is one of the continent's most visited open air museums. More than 100 different sculptures and art installations from artists all over the world exist side-by-side in this park. For a truly memorable experience, book one of their nighttime tours.

Visit the **Trakai Island Castle**, a beautiful castle surrounded by water on all four sides. The Castle now houses a museum and plays host to many special events.

