

TRAVEL IN THE GRAND DUCHY OF LITHUANIA: NOW BELARUS, LITHUANIA AND WARSAW

It is Monday, May 6 and I depart balmy Cyprus and arrive at my Warsaw layover (en route to Minsk, Belarus) at 6 am, 5 degrees C and sunny. I have hired professional guide Kasia for a four-hour walking/driving tour. During the 20-minute drive from the airport to the center she points out the huge parks and says Warsaw is the greenest capital in the EU. The Soviet-era avenues



are wide, reminiscent of East Berlin, but nowhere near as wide as in Minsk as I am soon to find out.

Our first stop is the 42-story Museum of Culture and Science, like a truncated Chrysler building which the Soviets “gave” to the people of Poland (sending Soviet workers to build it) in 1955. Warsaw-ites hate it but it is now a very active multi-purpose building including several theaters and cinemas, conference spaces, and a viewing platform on the 30<sup>th</sup> floor. So far, none of the new

high rises surrounding it are taller than the top of its spire.

This spot marks the edge of the ghetto created by the Nazi’s in November of 1940 into which 360,000 Warsaw Jews and 90,000 from other towns, were crammed in unlivable conditions. 100,000 died of disease and hunger and in 1942 300,000 were evacuated to Treblinka and murdered. By 1943 the ghetto was empty and razed in 1944.



We walked to the very pretty All Saints Church with a statue of Pope an important role in modern Polish commemorating the socialist party of the monarchy and before WWII.



Grzybowski Square in front of John Paul II, who played such history. Opposite is a rock the early 1900’s after the fall of



Adjacent to the square in the courtyard of a modern complex is the 2015 mobile installation “You and Me” by Israeli artist Eram Skakine. The 20-meter balance beam has a man at one end, and a woman at the other and takes 8 hours to reach its maximum height and 8 hours to descend again. The significance is time and love between two people. It reminded me of the very slowly pirouetting Ali and Nino sculpture in Batumi, Georgia.



The Old Town was surrounded by a brick wall that was completely rebuilt beginning right after the end of WWII (when 85% of Warsaw was destroyed) until the mid-1950’s. The



reconstruction of the Renaissance and Baroque merchants’ houses was so faithful to the original 14<sup>th</sup> C neighborhood that it was given UNESCO designation in 1980. Most of the construction is brick. I found this reconstruction so interesting in light of my visit to Dresden last year where during the Soviet era virtually no reconstruction occurred in an old town that was 90% destroyed.

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The main square was once a market but now houses restaurants. There were a lot of tour groups including students and preschoolers. Circling around this bell three times brings good luck. I thought it was peculiar that this restaurant had to announce that it served Polish food. On the other hand, Kasia and I stopped for coffee and cheesecake at a Viennese café!

Two notable churches in Old Town are the Archcathedral Basilica of St John the Baptist with its unusual façade and the adjacent Church of the Jesuits with its altar adorned with rosaries.



So why have I named this story “The Grand Duchy of Lithuania”? During the Middle Ages when Europe was composed of hundreds of small fiefdoms constantly fighting each other to gain

more territory, Lithuania became the largest state and encompassed today's Lithuania, Belarus, much of Ukraine, much of Poland and various other territories. Thus, it was that when the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was formed in 1569 (and lasted until 1791 when it was gradually divided among the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia and the Habsburg Monarchy), Warsaw was chosen as the capital, lying between Krakow and Vilnius the two prior capitals. The Royal Castle at the entrance to Old Town, first built in 1596 in Mannerist/early Baroque style, served as the seat of the monarch during this period. Following its WWII destruction, it was rebuilt beginning in 1971. Shortly before its demise, the Commonwealth



adopted a massive reform effort and enacted the May 3 Constitution – the first codified constitution in modern European history and the second in modern world history (after the United States Constitution). Today's European nation-states did not really start to emerge until the 19<sup>th</sup> C and Poland and Lithuania were not re-established as independent countries until 1918.

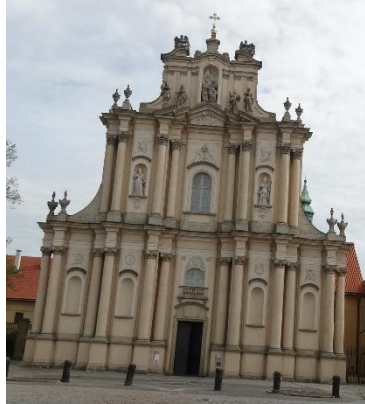
Exiting Old Town, we walked part of the Royal Route encompassing several streets and important buildings including the Presidential Palace. We saw the changing of the guard (hourly 365 days per year) at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Pilsudski Square, the largest square



in Warsaw.

Among the handsome university and other buildings on this route is the rococo Church of St Joseph of the Visitationists.

Of course, there is much more to Warsaw than what Kasia and I were able to accomplish in four hours. But I was glad of the stopover to help fill in the history of the region I was visiting.



have health insurance that repatriation, or buy theirs.

Fortunately, my driver, completion of my visa formalities and my suitcase is still on the active belt (since LOT Polish only permits 8 kg for carry-on, I am a checked bag at 10 kg).



On the other hand, the good news for readers of this, if it continues, Belarus is now granting free visas for up to 30 days (mine cost Euros 180). You still also have to prove that you covers you while there and for

Anton, is waiting patiently for

It is rainy and foggy and is supposed to be so for my entire 6-day visit. I will have the driver and guide, Natasha, for my two-day visit to the north, return to spend Victory Day in Minsk on my own, and then have one more touring day. The route into town is mostly farmland and forests, but as we approach, I see one unique building to which I want to return. It turns out to be the National Library, opened in 2006 and its form, a rhombicuboctahedron was designed to maximize the volume available to house the extensive collection.



its 10 million population, not including the military.

The importance of Victory Day (May 9, celebrating liberation from the Nazi's at the end of WWII) becomes clear as I realize that not only did Hitler have a mission to eliminate Jews, but also Slavs, whom he termed a "subhuman" race.

Belarus was one of the most impacted areas, losing at least 30% of

Our first stop in the morning is Khatyn, a very moving memorial to the 628 villages whose residents were burned alive, 186 of which were never rebuilt.



Here 26 foundations with chimneys issuing smoke symbolize the homes of Khatyn's families, each with a bell that rings every hour honoring the victims. The graves represent the graves



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of all who died. There is a statue of Joseph Kaminsky, village blacksmith, the one adult who survived in this village, holding his dead son.



As we travel northwards towards Vitebsk it is clear that Belarus is a forested and agricultural country, producing grains, especially rye and flax, and beef and milk exported to Russia. The farms are still owned by the government, with farm workers having their own gardens and animals to supplement the low farm wages.



Health care and education are provided by the government. A high percentage of students continue through university with such a number of IT graduates that the majors Microsoft, Google, and Oracle have offices in Belarus, and there is a large sector of local outsourcing IT companies. Since the government pays for the education, the first two years after graduation must be spent working where the government sends you, plus all males must complete between 12 and 18 months of compulsory military service, depending on their education level.

Today is the 9<sup>th</sup> day after Orthodox Easter when families go to cemeteries to communicate with their ancestors and clean the graves, the results of which we will notice as we travel.



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Belarusians love the out of doors and head to the countryside during every free moment, with 40% of the territory in preservation status and numerous spa's and country dachas still operating. The national animal is the European bison (I didn't know there was a European version!) which became extinct from hunting by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> C but has been reintroduced to the wild from zoo stock and lives in the Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park on the Belarus/Polish border.



The stork is another Belarusian symbol and they are said to only nest in towns with good people. So, my guide says she will only shop in rural towns with stork nests. We found some near the island homestay that we visited the following day located in the Braslav area known for its numerous lakes. This farm has a wide variety of animals, hot tub, pontoon boat and multiple accommodations.



My objectives in Vitebsk were to visit the home and museum of Marc Chagall, long a favorite artist of mine, and whose paintings reflect the built environment of his native town as well as his Jewish upbringing. Despite the holiday, my tour company (Prime Tour) has arranged for the docent to open both facilities and give me a private tour!

Chagall was the oldest of 9 children in a poor family (father a herring seller, mother a shop-keeper in the front room of their small typical house) and was able to receive his education through efforts and sacrifices especially of his mother.



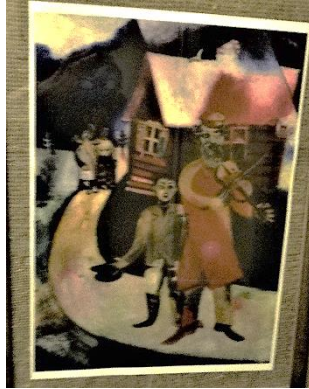
Vitebsk was a modest town, known as a Shetel, due to the Russian Empire's policy in the 19<sup>th</sup> C which restricted the locations where Jews could live to such secondary locations. As a result, Vitebsk's population was more than 50%

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Jewish during Chagall's childhood and he was exceptional in being able to receive an education beyond Jewish elementary school.

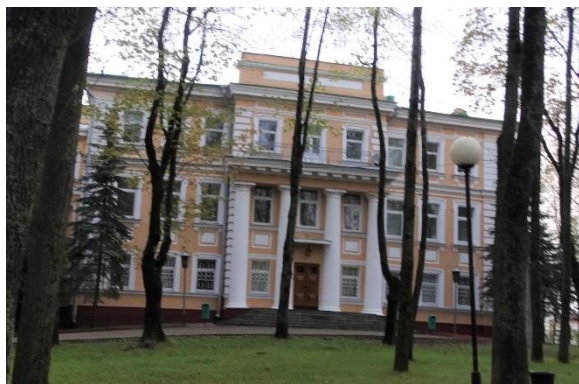


Many recurring symbols in his work include the goat, whose milk failed to cure his brother who died at age 19, blue cornflowers, Adam and Eve, and a violinist (perhaps his self-taught uncle?).



Outside the museum is a sculpture of Chagall, "Vitebsk melody on a French violin" by Valery Moguchy. On his artist pallet in this sculpture can be seen buildings of Vitebsk and the Eiffel Tower (he spent much of his life in Paris and died in France). Another sculpture in town features his beloved wife Bela in flight above him, as frequently occurs in his works.

The building opposite the museum has an interesting history having served variously as the home of the Russian Governor, briefly Napoleon's HQ, then Nazi HQ and now the KGB.



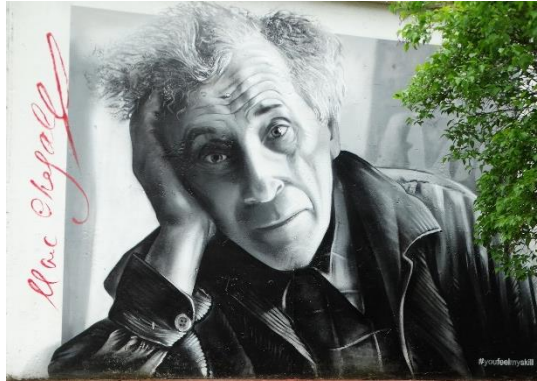
The obelisk

commemorates Russia's victory over Napoleon in 1812 with nearby memorials to the Swedish (Northern) Wars of the 1700's and liberation at the end of WWII. Due to its strategic location on the Dvina River Vitebsk was regularly razed and rebuilt during the 500 years of wars that plagued the region. At one point the city had 60 churches and as many synagogues, but when the Red Army reclaimed the City in June of 1944 only 15 of the city's most significant buildings and 186 civilians survived from a pre-war population of 170,000.



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Before departing the next morning to Polotsk we walked to two pieces of street art, one of Ivan the Terrible, depicted by the actor in a sitcom of him time-machining to the future, and the



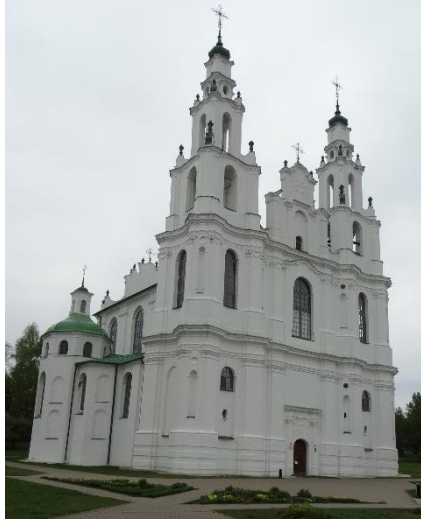
second of Chagall.

We also visited Annunciation Church with its magnificent painted interior which I couldn't photograph because a service was in progress. This photo is by Adam Jones, Ph.D. - Global Photo Archive at <https://flickr.com/photos/41000732@N04/27055266624>.



The adjacent Alexander Nevsky wooden church was built in 1992 during renovation of the church, intended as a temporary place of worship, but due to its popularity remains open.

Polotsk is a small city also on the western Dvina river where the Polota river joins it at the foot of the Cathedral of St Sophia. The city was one of the earliest Slavic settlements dating from 862 AD and was the major power from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries in the area now known as Belarus.



The cathedral, dominating the skyline above the river, was built from 1044 to 1066 resembling the St Sophia in Constantinople and to rival those in Kiev and Novgorod.

However, between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> C it recognized the Pope in Rome while retaining orthodox rites, doctrines and customs, which came to be known as the Uniate Church (or Greek Catholic Church in some other countries I have visited). After multiple destructions and re-buildings, the church is now mostly Baroque in style, with traces of its former structures remaining. It is a museum and concert hall.

During the Grand Duchy, Polotsk had self-determination status and then was a regional capital during the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It remains a charming city, although most areas are rebuilt.

Middle Ages scribes in this area and in Lithuania were creating hand-written books in Arabic. The Latin alphabet was in use for 200 years, but now Cyrillic is the script. In the printing museum I also learned that when ink pens were feathers, you needed to use quills from the left wing of the bird (often a goose) if you were right-handed for the ink to flow properly.

Despite the efforts of various regimes, the Belarusian language has survived. One of its features is the unique 22<sup>nd</sup> letter of its alphabet to which there is a monument on one of the city's lovely boulevards.



Slavic people.

One other important monument in Polotsk is the exact center of continental Europe (defined as the watershed west from the crest of the Ural and Caucasus mountains).



I understand there are also sites claimed in Ukraine and Lithuania as well as a more "precise" location about 20km from Polotsk which I also visited and which additionally commemorates the

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May 9 is Victory Day, celebrating the end of the “Great Patriotic War” 1941-1945, known to us as WWII. Minsk was almost completely destroyed by the Nazis, the population decimated from 300,000 pre-war to 50,000 and had housed up to 100,000 Jews in its ghetto during the war.

In Minsk, Victory Monument has been surrounded by bleachers for the ceremony which will feature wreath-laying, a speech by President Lukashenko, and hundreds of participants carrying



photos of their relatives who served. A few WWII veterans were on hand at the center of the ceremony and we could watch everything on large screen tv's which occasionally panned to the crowd. A few blocks before the monument I passed through security, a pat down by a female officer. Until the President and entourage arrived the crowd quietly stayed on the sidewalks, then were permitted to surround the bleachers with their signs and banners.

Lukashenko has been the only President since independence from the USSR, elected to his fifth five-year term in 2015.

Following the ceremony, gun salute and releasing of balloons, there were musical performances and then the crowd gradually drifted away, mostly towards the riverfront activities.

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The route to the monument along 8-lane Nezavisimosti (Independence) Ave took me past the



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Circus, with its whimsical sculptures, and the Palace of the Republic concert hall on its huge plaza. The Svislach river winds through the center of town with parks on either side and many types of boating activities. Interestingly, everything was closed in the center of town, except the



Apple store!

Along the river the approximately 2 km to Victory Park were food tents, many types of artisans selling their wares, and several stages for performances.



The first stage was near Holy Spirit Cathedral where a military band was playing. Further along at a large plaza opposite the Isle of Tears traditional singers and dancers were performing with

a wartime photo montage background, and then another stage with contemporary pop music.



When I reached the park, where a running competition including climbing over tanks, was in progress, we were entertained by cheerleaders dancing to YMCA (in Belarusian of course) and later ladies in 1940's garb singing music of the era.

The nearby multi-story mall was open and very busy!

The overall atmosphere was one of families enjoying a relaxing day off.



I had reserved an early dinner at the restaurant View on the 28<sup>th</sup> floor of the BSB tower in order to enjoy the view and still return to my nearby hotel in time to watch the fireworks.



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On my final day we took a driving tour around town. Belarus places a huge emphasis on sports, from early childhood onwards. The numbers of arenas and specialized facilities, including Olympic training centers, were too numerous to count.

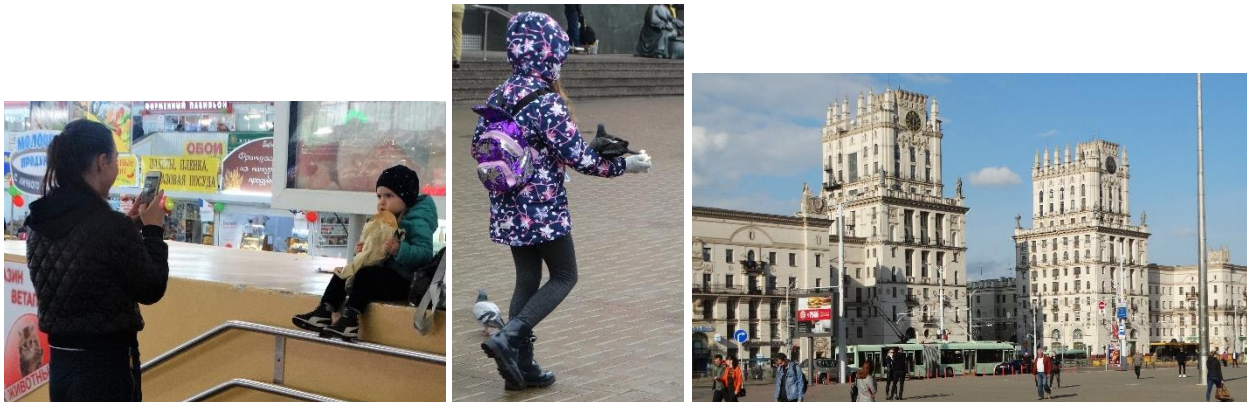


Thus, after the Netherlands withdrew, and Minsk was contracted (in late 2017) to host the 2<sup>nd</sup> European Games (I was in Baku just after they hosted the 1<sup>st</sup> European Games in 2015), there were very few new facilities required. The games took place about six weeks after my visit with 50 European nations and 4000 athletes participating (housed at the University).



The slogan for the games was “Bright Year Bright You” after the international abbreviation for Belarus, BY.

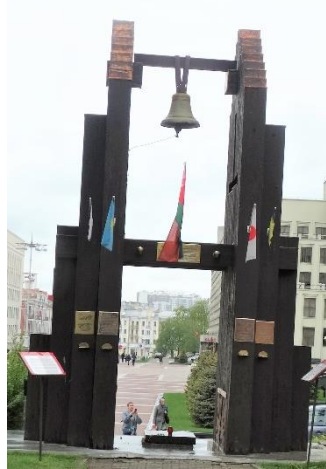
There is a large covered market, Komarovka, where a mother was photographing her son and a young girl was taming pigeons. It is a feast, even if only for the eyes, of all the local foods.



From a completely different era are the “Gates of the City”, twin 11 story towers attached to long 5-story apartment blocks from the 1950’s in the style that came to be known as “Stalin Classicism”. These are directly opposite the main train station from which I would depart later in the evening for the short trip to Vilnius.

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Before that, however, we visited the nearby “Red Church” built in 1910 by a Belarusian-Polish businessman in memory of his two children who died before reaching adulthood. Adjacent is the Bell of Nagasaki, created in 2000 in memory of all victims of nuclear blasts, including Chernobyl, which in 1986 affected parts of Belarus and about which, according to my guide, the people were not informed for two days.



Because my guide had learned that I love street art we lunched in the Oktyabrskaya Street district where beginning in 2014 the Brazilian Embassy in Belarus sponsored major street art works by Brazilian and Belarusian artists.

Among my favorites are “Love of Frida Kalo & Vincent Van Gogh” by Brazilian Rogerio Fernandes and “Legends of Belarus” by Belarusian artists Jevgenij Cowek and Julija Stratovic, which was also popular with at least one pair of newlyweds.



Perhaps the largest work by a single artist is the 3000m2 collage of



endangered animals of Belarus including the deer and bison by Ramon Martins.



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I also liked the piece above the bust of Lenin.

We finished off the afternoon by joining a Russian tour group at the privately owned/operated Dudutki Museum of Old Folk Crafts and Technologies (40 km from Minsk) where artisans are actively



practicing many local crafts

including

pottery, blacksmithing, straw weaving, wood carving and, most



interesting - instrument-making.

There was also a traditional still where we were served a dram of vodka accompanied by dark bread covered with local honey and pickles – an unusual but tasty combination!

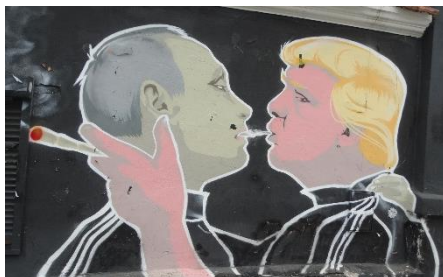


On the property is a very beautiful wooden Orthodox Church of John the Prophet, appropriately with straw insets on the iconostasis.

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A two-hour train ride and I am in Vilnius, Lithuania. My hotel is close to the station (inter-city bus terminal also), the covered market and some famous street art!



It is just a short walk to Old Town where I join a free walking tour by locals on my first morning. One immediately feels a totally different, high energy vibe here from Belarus, whose people I found generally low key.

The Vilnius architecture is primarily baroque which is always enchanting for me. Our guide,

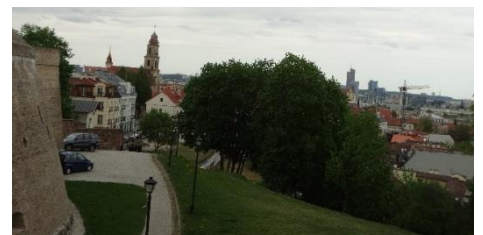


Aminas, starts off by showing a series of historic maps that every Lithuanian child learns about the expansion to become the Grand Duchy stretching from the Baltic to the Black Seas, accomplished mainly through the marriages of Grand Duke Gedminas' seven sons and at least five daughters! By the time of his death in 1341 Lithuania was bordered only by the Teutons on the west and the Tatars on the east. At that time Lithuania still practiced a pagan religion, traces of which remain in the country's folklore today. But it became a Roman Catholic country by marriage to the Queen of Poland in 1386, further solidified at the time of its joining with Poland to form the Commonwealth in 1569. Throughout history it has had large Orthodox, Protestant and Jewish communities, with Lithuanian culture preserved primarily in the rural areas.

To contrast the vibrant, prosperous city of today, Aminas told the story that when Pope John Paul II came to visit in 1993, just two years after independence from the USSR, Lithuania didn't have a good car to deliver him from the airport and Mercedes sent a car. The country did not possess a helicopter to transport the Pope from city to city (see map below of his itinerary) so they borrowed one from Poland! The Pope did preach from the Gates of Dawn, where an icon of the Virgin Mary, a major pilgrimage site, is believed to produce miracles. This is also the only remaining gate of the city's



original nine. There is now a project underway to unearth and recreate some of the other historic walls and it is from this highpoint that I was able to get partial overviews of the Old Town and new city.



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The holocaust statistics here are as horrific as elsewhere, with the Jewish community having been the largest single ethnic group in the city on the eve of WWII, and Vilnius often referred to as “The Jerusalem of the North”. However, the city was in general not as physically destroyed in WWII as others I have visited, which may contribute to its particular charm. I do love Baroque architecture, but I also love the Art Nouveau of Riga!

Before WWII the city was primarily Polish and Russian (it was not the capital of Lithuania then, Kaunas was) and it was only after WWII during the Russification period that rural Lithuanians came into the city to replace other lost populations. The populations of both Lithuania and Belarus are now substantially (>80%) people of their own ethnicity.

The walking tour was quite comprehensive and I enjoyed a couple of days later just wandering



the various narrow streets of Old Town. It is actually quite large. I also took the hop on hop off bus tour to get me to the outer parts of town. There is a small high-rise zone across the river.



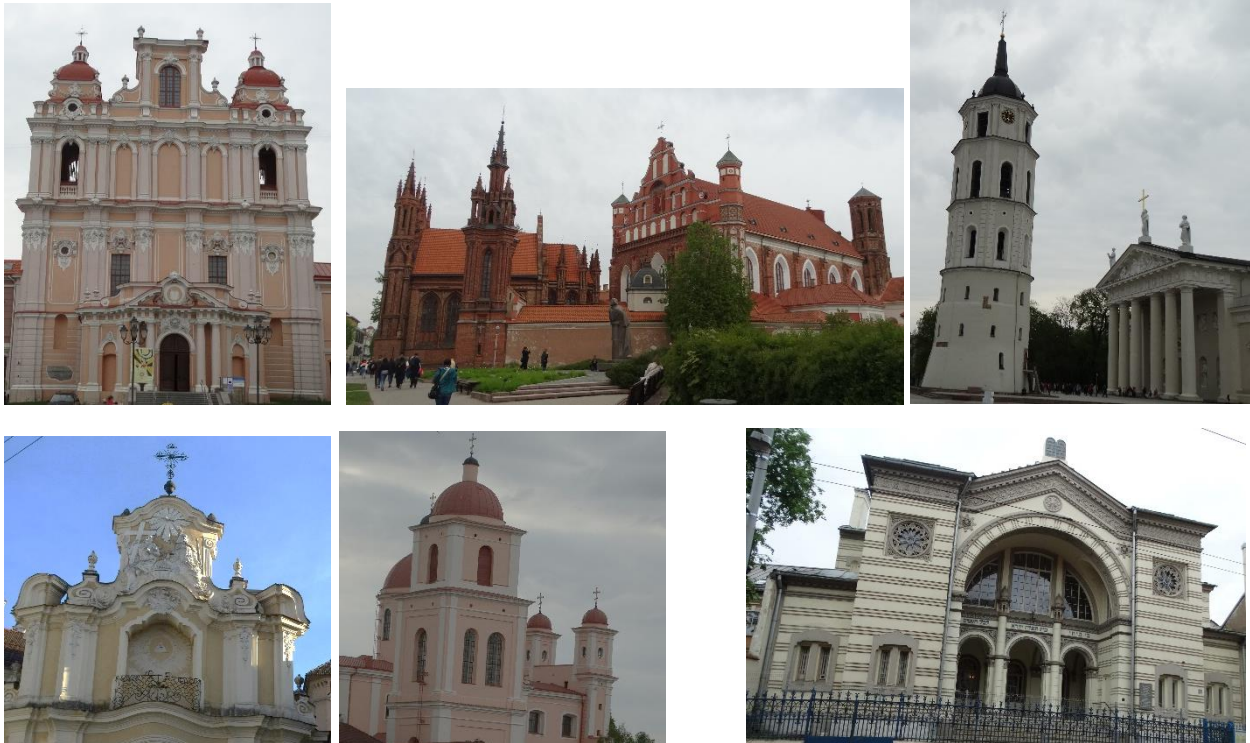
The city is in serious competition with Estonia for their position in the upper levels of European cities with internet, human and electronic resources. It turns out that the rankings of DESI (Digital Economy and Society Index), put S Korea #1 globally, the top four of the EU (Finland, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands) #2, Japan #3 and USA #4. Estonia and Lithuania are ranked high followed by the EU on average, which is an important EU policy initiative. Of course, there are many technology ranking systems and Singapore is usually #1 for highest speed internet connections.

A few words about the “Singing Revolution” that led up to independence in 1991 of the three Baltic countries from their USSR status. Rather independently, nationalistic movements had been growing in all three countries as under Gorbachev beginning in 1985 the USSR began a policy of Perestroika (restructuring) and Glasnost (openness) hoping to stimulate productivity and consumer goods consumption. Instead, festering frustrations began to bloom and in each

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of the three Baltic countries nationalistic movements escalated. Other Soviet economic and environmental policies specific to each country contributed to the unrest. The years from 1987 until independence in 1991 came to be known as the “Singing Revolution” as people openly performed their traditional national music, as contemporary music was created speaking directly to the issues and as “Western influenced” music made inroads. A sort of culmination was the August 23, 1989 human chain of at least 2 million people holding hands across 420 miles of the three countries peacefully seeking independence. After the first free democratic elections to the Supreme Soviet in each country in March 1990 the pro-independence parties were elected and independence from the USSR followed in 1991.

Back to Vilnius, itself. As I review my photos, I realize I could include literally dozens of street views with beautiful buildings. And then there are the most important churches



and the one remaining Synagogue (of the previous 100). Importantly, archeologists are now unearthing the former Grand Synagogue which was destroyed by the Nazi’s and then the Soviets built a school on top of the site.

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For a moment I will focus on the Republic of Uzupiz. A part of Vilnius that formed its own



government on April 1, 1997.

When you cross the Vilnia River you agree to be bound by their philosophy and they have an extensive constitution translated into 23 languages, posted on mirrored panels on a street. The tongue-in-cheek approach to reality seems to be a reaction to the city's turbulent history.



This area was mostly a drug and criminal infested area before certain artists started to make friends and gradually move in during the 1990's. Although similar to Christiania in Copenhagen, the Uzurites proclaimed themselves an independent Republic, although as far as I know no country has recognized them. Artistic embellishments are everywhere and the buildings vary widely from upgraded to not. The symbol of the hand with a hole in the middle means no



corruption. Examples of articles from the Constitution are: "Everyone has the right to love and take care of the cat", "Everyone has the right to be lazy and do nothing", "Everyone has the right to hot water", "Everyone has the right to die but it is not an obligation".

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As in the rest of Vilnius (as our guide advised us) venturing into courtyards can



a very rewarding experience.

Another neighborhood contrasting with Old Town is Zverynas, which means wild animals and was historically a hunting area, with a large park still remaining. The wooden cottages there are now protected and this is becoming a trendy area.



These little buildings, in the re-created “Old Town” of Minsk, as well as Vilnius open up to be



little shops.

I ate good meals from a wide variety of cuisines and even had an authentic Traditional Thai Massage. In short, Vilnius is a very cosmopolitan city.

On Sunday I took a bus to Trakai, former capital of the Grand Duchy, and site of an Island Castle built around 1400 and restored during the 1960's.

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It was presidential election day so many town residents were heading to the Post Office to vote. The then-current female president had served two five-year terms which is the limit in Lithuania. Of the several candidates on the ballot no one received more than 50% of the vote so a run-off occurred two weeks later between the top two vote-getters, a man and a woman, both independent candidates and both economists. This time the man,

Gitanas Nausėda was elected President.

The 3 km walk into town from the bus station was on a lovely street



passing services underway at the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.



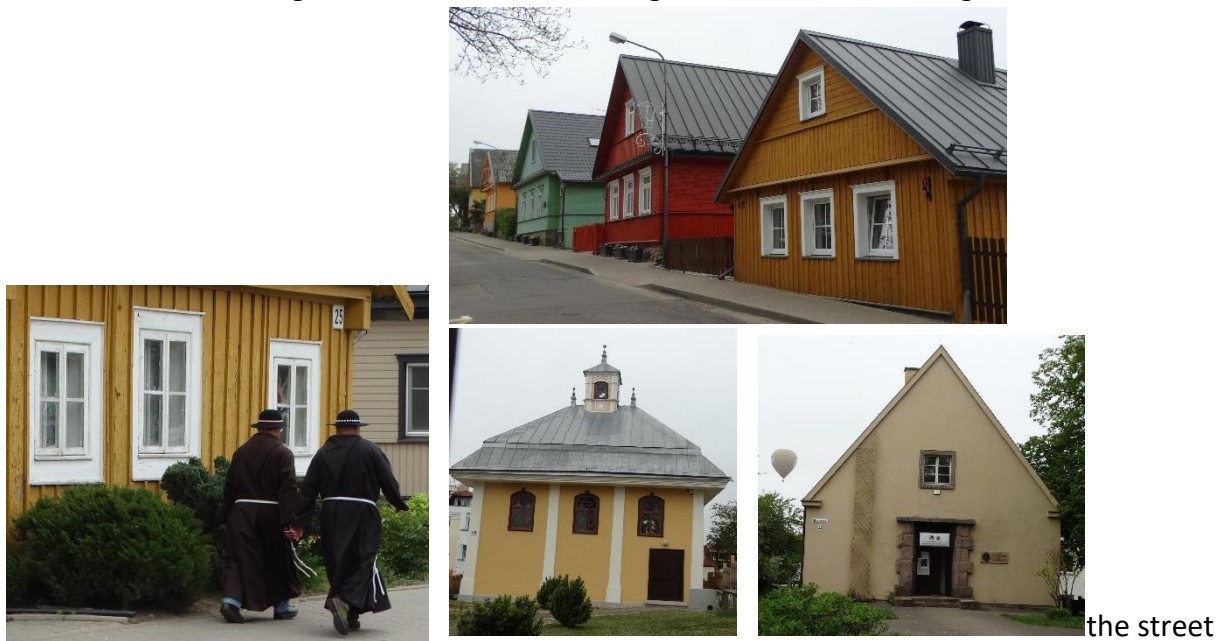


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Then, surprisingly, I began to see hot air balloons, which I doubt is an every-day occurrence!



Another interesting aspect of Trakai is the Karaite community, a branch of Judaism. About 300 people remain of the several hundred families originally brought around 1400 from the Crimea to be the Duke's elite guards. Their wooden cottages are distinctive having three windows on



and entrances on the side. There is a Kemessa prayer house and an ethnographic exhibition. I was also fortunate to see two men in their traditional clothing.

People show a lot of creativity in their yards, further enhancing the charm.





The town is surrounded by forests and lakes which have been preserved into a national park.

I had a delicious lunch at a traditional Georgian restaurant on one of the lakes.



My next visit was to Kaunas, the second largest city with a population of about 300,000 and which was the capital in the interwar period when Vilnius was part of Poland. I was able to get an early bus in time to join the walking tour by locals on a rainy morning. My guide is a graduate student in IT from Baku who appreciated the fact that I had visited her home city! The other visitor was an Italian man working in Finland who had come to Vilnius for a Finnish coworker's marriage to a Lithuanian woman, probably one of the weddings I saw in Vilnius on Saturday. Interestingly, the low-cost airlines flights were between the second cities of the two countries, i.e. Kaunas and Turku, which I had also visited. Also interesting was a billboard encouraging women into technology – Labas means hello in Lithuanian, and is the greeting we use in Morocco for hello, how are you!



En route by inter-city bus we passed lots of agriculture including fields of rapeseed.



Kaunas has many fine museums, architecture (especially interwar modernist), parks, plazas and walking streets. But what blew me away was the art – street art and sculpture, everywhere. When reading up on the rich history of street art in the city I realized that I had only scratched the surface with what I had seen, since many of the largest walls were just beyond the areas I had walked. But last year the tourism office produced a map called wallographer’s notes,



which I was only able to obtain in Lithuanian but exists in English. You can see the huge number of citations just in the central (old and new) parts of the city. As the city prepares to be a European Capital of Culture in 2022 for sure there will be many new additions.

Some that I did see included “Untitled”, incorporating already-existing graffiti,



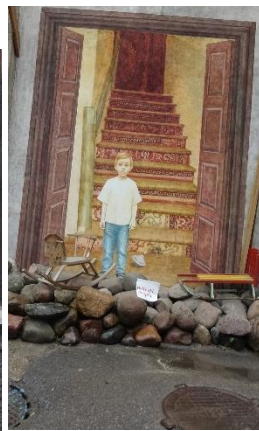
“Cabin”, “Contemporary Ladies”, and the “Pink Elephant”.



“Princess on a Horse” was taken from a seven-year-old-girl’s drawing.



In the “Yard Gallery” an artist has honored the histories of the former Jewish occupants of the building through photographs, memorabilia, crochet and other art forms.



One of the first items our guide showed us were the smiling cat symbols turning up frequently.



I read an interview with their anonymous creator and he (or she) said there are several messages. “First, the cats on unexpected surfaces surprise you, they also lift your mood when you’re waiting for a bus or when you’re not having the best day. Some of the people think the cats are sleeping, but in fact, they’re just resting, letting you know it’s all good.”

There is also sculpture everywhere, from a sculpture park near the art



school, to commemorative to whimsical.



One that really spoke to me was the mother teaching her child to read the book hidden behind her loom, emphasizing the efforts of the Russian Empire, later the Nazi's and then the Soviets to exterminate any vestiges of local culture and language.

Among the many notable buildings are St Gertrude's Church, one of the oldest surviving Gothic buildings in the country, probably built during the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> C.



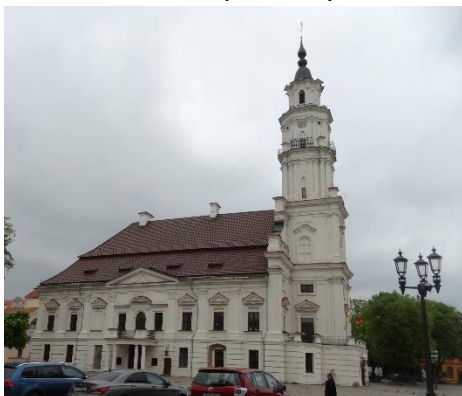
In total contrast is the art deco Christ's Resurrection Church.



It was also an interesting part of the history to take the funicular, installed in 1931, up the hill to the church.



The Town Hall is probably the other most recognized Kaunas building.



And as the city is modernizing its trolley fleet, they have permitted the cars that will be retired at the end of the year to be decorated, further adding to the color and spirit of the city.



May 2019

I learned that Lithuanians are passionate for basketball and Kaunas is home to the national team.

The final country of this trip is Romania. I fly to Bucharest on Aeroflot through Moscow but no layover time for a repeat visit.

