

Lithuania

Of Knights and Crooked Castles

Icy wind stung the faces of the black-hooded knights as they urged their horses northward across the barren plain. Their next mission field was the vast and mighty empire of Lithuania. The Knights of the Teutonic Order had recently received their new assignment: Convert the last pagan nation of Europe to Christianity or die trying. This religious mission was a daunting

one—Lithuania was the largest and fastest growing kingdom in Europe during the thirteenth century. Her pagan roots ran deep out of old tribal customs, Viking terrorism, and barbarian beliefs.

The irony of the knights' mission was not lost on these black and white clad knights carrying the emblem of the cross on their tunics, flags, and shields. The Teutonic Order was established



Crooked Castle rises above the capital city of Vilnius. Photo courtesy of Pixabay.



The Battle of Grunwald painted by Артур Орлюнов. License CC BY-SA 3.0.

to save life, not destroy it. These knights were originally sent to ravaged Israel to build hospitals and attend to the wounded, nursing Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike back to health. Yet their new marching orders were clear: Convert the pagans to Christianity or destroy the nation of Lithuania. With the recent death of the fierce King Mindaugas of Lithuania, leaving the empire leaderless, the knights hoped their takeover would be swift and the Christianization process easy.

The Teutonic knights of Germany, along with cavalries from several other European kingdoms, congregated and planned their attack from the medieval fortress of Malbork in the neighboring country of Poland. The plan was simple: The horde of knights would swoop down *en mass* across the Polish plain into Lithuania using the “shock and awe” tactic of complete and utter surprise.

They were wrong. The knights’ surprise attack against Lithuania turned into an all-out war, lasting over 200 years. In 1410 after the Battle of Grunwald—one of the largest and bloodiest



Teutonic Knight at the Carpathian Reenactment Festival taken by Silas. License CC BY-SA 3.0.

battles in medieval history—Lithuania emerged victorious, spelling the end of the Lithuanian Crusades. Lithuania came out of the war stronger and more confident than ever before. She continued her dominance in the north, conquering the surrounding nations until ultimately, she became one of the largest countries in Europe.

In the 600 years since the Battle of Grunwald, Lithuania is no longer the largest country in Europe. In fact, she is one of the smallest. Nestled alongside the chilly Baltic Sea between Poland and Latvia, Lithuania is one of only three Baltic States. But while her land may be small, her history and culture are immense.

This great nation is where we begin our journey around the countries of the northern realm of Europe. Each of these places once served as a Viking stronghold during the Middle Ages.

So, lace up your hiking boots, strap on your backpack, and grab your camera. We have much to see and do in the beautiful, historic land of Lithuania. Let's go!



Take a peek out your airplane window. Do you see all those blue lakes? The small country of Lithuania contains over 3,000 lakes, located mostly in the east and southeast regions of the country. The capital city, Vilnius, is located in the southeast corner where the Vilnia and Neris Rivers merge and is within easy walking or driving distance of many of these lakes.

From this high altitude, you might also notice the many forests stretching beyond the horizon, covering over one-third of the countryside. The forested landscape gently rises and falls along the low rolling hillsides. Most of the country is comprised of low rolling hills, none of which are very high in elevation. In fact, the tallest mountain in the “highlands” region of Lithuania is a hill at just 965 feet. It is called the Aukštojas Hill. At less than 1000 feet, Lithuania's tallest peak is shorter than most city skyscrapers and about 100 feet shorter than the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France.



Walkway up to the top of the sand dunes at the Curonian Spit. Photo by Wojsyl. License CC BY-SA 3.0.

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However, none of this compares to Lithuania's arguably most unique geographical feature. You can't see it from here, but soon you will have the chance to see it up close. Lithuania borders the Baltic Sea and half of its coastline sits along the Curonian Spit. A **spit** is a narrow finger of land that projects out into the water. However, this particular spit stretches from the northern coast of Kaliningrad, the Russian **enclave** that is Lithuania's southern neighbor, to the northern coast of Lithuania, forming a **lagoon**. The long spit is covered in white sand dunes—dunes high enough to slide down on sleds. Sandboarding (AKA sand sledding) is a favorite pastime for Lithuanian children and is something you might enjoy as well.

Time to buckle up and prepare for landing. We'll be arriving in Vilnius in just a few short minutes.

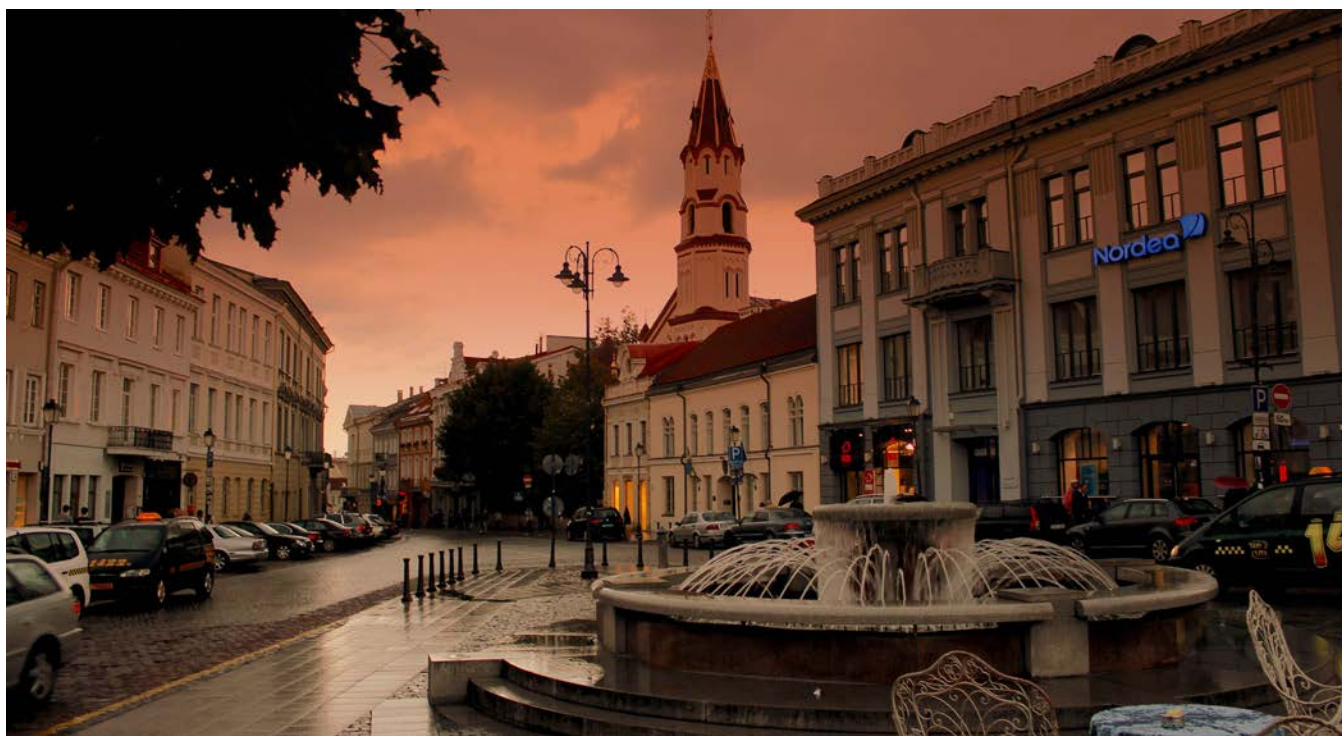


Our adventure starts in the Old Town of Vilnius. This old medieval center inside the capital

city is preserved as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**. This means that the cultural and architectural elements are protected from destruction or misuse so that current and future generations can appreciate what medieval Lithuania was like.

We'll enter through the Gate of Dawn, the only gate remaining of the nine original gates located along the medieval stone wall that once encircled this fine city. Most of the buildings inside the wall are considered new by Lithuanian standards, having been built in the last 500 years. Before that, the town's buildings were made of wood, which meant the buildings were vulnerable to fire. The entire city center burned to the ground twice during the Middle Ages. Now the buildings are constructed with stone to better withstand natural disasters.

Interestingly enough, most of the original buildings had basements or cellars, so while the re-built structure above ground may only be a few hundred years old, the basement below is



Vilnius Town Hall Square at dusk. Public domain image.



Vilnius castle tower at night. Photo taken by Mantas Volungevicius. License CC BY-SA 2.0.

often much older. Many of these cellars have been converted into hip restaurants and pubs.

Let's walk to the top of Bleak Hill—also known as the Three Crosses Hill—where Crooked Castle stands overlooking the Vilnia River. Remember, all the hills are gentle here, so it isn't too strenuous of a hike. The castle is called "crooked" because its layout is awkward and misshapen. Back in 1390, Welsh raiders stormed the castle using a demolition weapon known as the **Welsh Cat**. According to surviving documents, this wooden weapon was pushed close to a defensive wall and then, with its movable arm, the "cat" clawed away at the castle wall, hence the name.

Not far from here is the surprisingly beautiful Church of St. Peter and St. Paul. While it is pretty on the outside, the exterior doesn't hold a candle to what you will see inside. If you've come along on our travels in earlier volumes of *A Child's Geography*, then you've seen many cathedrals. After a while, they may all start to look the same.

But this one is unique. There is no other church in Europe that looks like this. Let's go inside!

What is perhaps most surprising about the interior of this church is its near blinding whiteness. It almost feels as if you have ascended into the clouds when you enter the **nave**. Most of the decorative elements in the church are white, punctuated by the occasional brightly colored painting. In fact, there are thousands upon thousands of pure-white stucco figures and ornamental finishes decorating the entire interior of the church. The masters who created this incredible artwork were Italian renaissance artists, both named Giovanni. Although designed by Italians, the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul is considered a Polish-Lithuanian masterpiece of the Baroque period.



I don't know about you, but I'm famished. The only thing we've eaten today is a little package



The Gate of Dawn taken by David Iliff. License CC BY-SA 3.0.

of cookies on the airplane. Let's step into this sidewalk cafe and order something to eat. The name alone is worth the stop. We should take a photo of ourselves outside the Little Bakery of the Fairies and then see what fanciful creations they have inside. I've heard they serve the best cappuccino in town, but maybe they'll also offer something more substantial for lunch.

The menu board reads that they serve the traditional menu of Lithuanian fairies—puff pastries, yeasty buns, **kybyns**, crepes, soups, salads, and pizza. I'll have the pizza. How about you? The seating is limited, so we'll have to share a table with an older couple who are waiting for their meal. In many cultures, it is not unusual to share a table with people you do not know, especially if the seating is tight.

"You look like a happy lot of adventure-seekers! What's the most interesting thing you've seen today?" asks the woman in a clear British accent.

Surprised that she speaks English, we rattle on about the Crooked Castle and the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul.

She and her husband smile at the excitement we share with them.

"What brings you here to Lithuania?" I ask.

"Oh, our daughter and son-in-law live here, and we have been visiting with them and our grandchildren this past week and a half. We head home to London tomorrow."

After mentioning that we have just arrived, Mr. Scott, a European history professor, asks us if we'd like a little history lesson about the country of Lithuania.

"Yes, please!" we answer in unison as our food arrives at the table. The pizza is piping hot, so it looks like we've got plenty of time.

"Lithuania is a very old country with an exciting past." He smiles and continues animatedly, "Not much is known about Lithuania from the Dark Ages, except that it was inhabited by barbarian Baltic tribes. At that time, a powerful warlord named Mindaugas united the fragmented tribes into one country and was crowned the first King of Lithuania on July 6, 1253. He ruled for only 10 years before he was **assassinated**. This was a tragic blow to the Lithuanians who now found themselves without a leader.

"Remarkably, things got worse. After the fall of Jerusalem in 1291, the crusaders set their sights on Lithuania, the last pagan territory in Europe, and now vulnerable without a strong leader. The goal of the crusade was to subdue Lithuania and convert her subjects to Christianity. That didn't turn out to be easy. Then, in 1385, almost a hundred years later, Jogalia, a Christian, was crowned King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. Now allied with Poland, Lithuania was finally able to defeat the Teutonic Knights at the Battle of Grunwald.

"Unfortunately, Lithuania's victory did not lead to peace. Surrounding countries, like Norway



The Church of St. Peter and St. Paul. Photo taken by David Iliff. License CC BY-SA 3.0.

and Sweden, felt threatened by the Polish-Lithuanian alliance and attacked in 1655. This series of battles became known as the Northern Wars. Less than 150 years later, there was another war—the Great North War—involving many of the same neighboring countries. And this time, Lithuania did not win. The Swedish army destroyed the land and destroyed the economy. A famine followed these two wars, then the **plague**, and then another war. Lithuania's population was reduced by 40%. Nearly half of her citizens died from battle, sickness, or starvation. Lithuania was left weak and vulnerable.

“Foreign powers swooped in, divided the territory into thirds, and doled it out to Russia,

Prussia, and Habsburg Austria. Most of Lithuania was swallowed up by Russia to the east. Unhappy with their lot, the Lithuanians protested and revolted against the Russian government. Russia fought back by closing Lithuanian schools and banning Lithuanian newspapers. The Russians believed that if they could keep Lithuania ignorant and isolated, they stood a chance at keeping her down. But their attempts to subdue the Lithuanian people failed. An underground network of book smugglers was formed, and Lithuanians began homeschooling their children in secret. How cool is that?”

We smile, because homeschooling is a topic we are familiar with.

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“That’s really cool! You know, some of us homeschool as well,” I pipe in. “It’s great to have the freedom to choose how we learn rather than being forced to keep it secret.”

“Really? Good for you. Then pay attention, because this is when the ping pong match starts.” Mr. Scott smiles, knowing he has captured our attention again. “Lithuania was passed back and forth between Russian and German control for the next two hundred years. Yes, that is a long time. It continued right up through the 20th century, the two world wars, and the **communism** of Eastern Europe. This was perhaps the darkest season of Lithuanian history.

“The ping pong match continued until 1990 when East Germany declared an end to communism in their country and the people of Lithuania were encouraged to do the same. After decades—even

centuries—of oppression, Lithuania declared her independence on March 11, 1990. The Soviets tried to squelch the succession but failed. Iceland was the first nation to recognize Lithuania's independence, but the United Nations recognized the newly independent nation of Lithuania the following year."

“That’s quite a history, now, isn’t it?” Mr. Scott sighs, but in a satisfied history professor sort of way. He and his wife begin to stack their dishes.

As they stand and prepare to leave, Mrs. Scott smiles. "I hope you weren't too bored by a couple of old fuddy-duddies like us! We've certainly got the gift of gab."

We wave goodbye and decide that it's time we, too, get on our way. We've got tickets to a basketball game tonight. The Lithuanians are world renowned for their basketball teams,



Lithuanian basketball team wins the World Championship game in 2010. Photo by Christopher Johnson. License CC BY-SA 2.0.

having won several medals in recent years at world events, including four silvers in the summer Olympic Games. After the game, we'll spend the night in a small historic hotel in the town square. Tomorrow, we'll take a train west to the coast so we can see those pristine, sparkling sand dunes of the Curonian Spit for ourselves.



Chasing away dreams of knights in crooked castles and pastries with fairy wings, the sun peeks its cheery face over the horizon. We are ready for another exciting day in Lithuania. Within an hour, our packs are on, maps are handy, and tummies are full of the delicious complimentary breakfast served downstairs. Let's ask for directions from the hotel host so we can make the most of our day.

Before stepping through the door, our host kindly tells us which train to board, which station to get off, and the best place to rent sandboards and sand sleds. Then he wags his finger at us and warns us sternly, "Now keep your eyes and your mouth closed tightly when you sled down the dunes. Otherwise you will spit sand at the sand spit." He chuckles at his English-language pun, points us in the direction of the train station, and we are off on our next adventure.

Lithuania is a fascinating country of contradictions—old and new, somber and friendly, fiercely independent and yet blending well with the surrounding nations. Lithuania is still actively creating her own identity as a small but free country, with a unique culture and language all her own.

"*Sudie*, goodbye, Lithuania! It has been a pleasure getting to know you!" ■



Tell me what you remember about Lithuania:

- ◇ *Why did the Teutonic Knights invade Lithuania? Was their mission successful? Who won the Battle of Grunwald?*
- ◇ *What is one of the most remarkable geographical features of Lithuania? What is a popular pastime that people enjoy there?*
- ◇ *What makes the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul in the city of Vilnius so different from the "average" cathedral?*
- ◇ *Lithuania is world famous for which sport?*

Further Explorations:

- ◇ *Kids at the Crossroads: Crusades* by Laura Scandiffio
- ◇ *The Boy Knight: A Tale of the Crusades* by G.A. Henty
- ◇ *Usborne Young Reader Series: Crusades* by Rob Lloyd Jones
- ◇ *Taste Lithuania* by Beata Nicholson (cookbook)
- ◇ *The Baltic* by Michael North (for high school and up)