

Lithuania

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Vilnius** Beautifully baroque, with its cobbled streets and skyline of church spires (p726)
- **Trakai** Its stunning island castle is home of the rare Karaites people (p730)
- **Best Journey** Head to Šiauliai to hear the wind breathe between the thousands of crosses at the eerie Hill of Crosses (p732)
- **Off-the-beaten track** The high sand dunes, pure air and fragrant pine forests of the enchanting Curonian Spit (p733)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 65,300 sq km
- **ATMs** Plenty in all but the smallest towns
- **Budget** 80-120Lt per day
- **Capital** Vilnius
- **Country Code** ☎ 370; international access code ☎ 00
- **Famous for** basketball, baroque churches, *cepelinai* (stuffed potato dumplings)
- **Head of State** President Valdas Adamkus
- **Languages** Lithuanian, Russian, English, German
- **Money** litas; €1= 3.45Lt; US\$1= 2.69Lt; UK£1= 5.07Lt; A\$1= 2.02Lt; ¥100= 2.53Lt; NZ\$1= 1.90Lt
- **Phrases** *Labas* (hello), *ačiū* (thanks), *prašau* (please/you're welcome), *taip* (yes), *ne* (no), *viso gero* (goodbye)



- **Population** 3.45 million
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 2
- **Visa** None required for Australian, Canadian, EU, New Zealand or US citizens

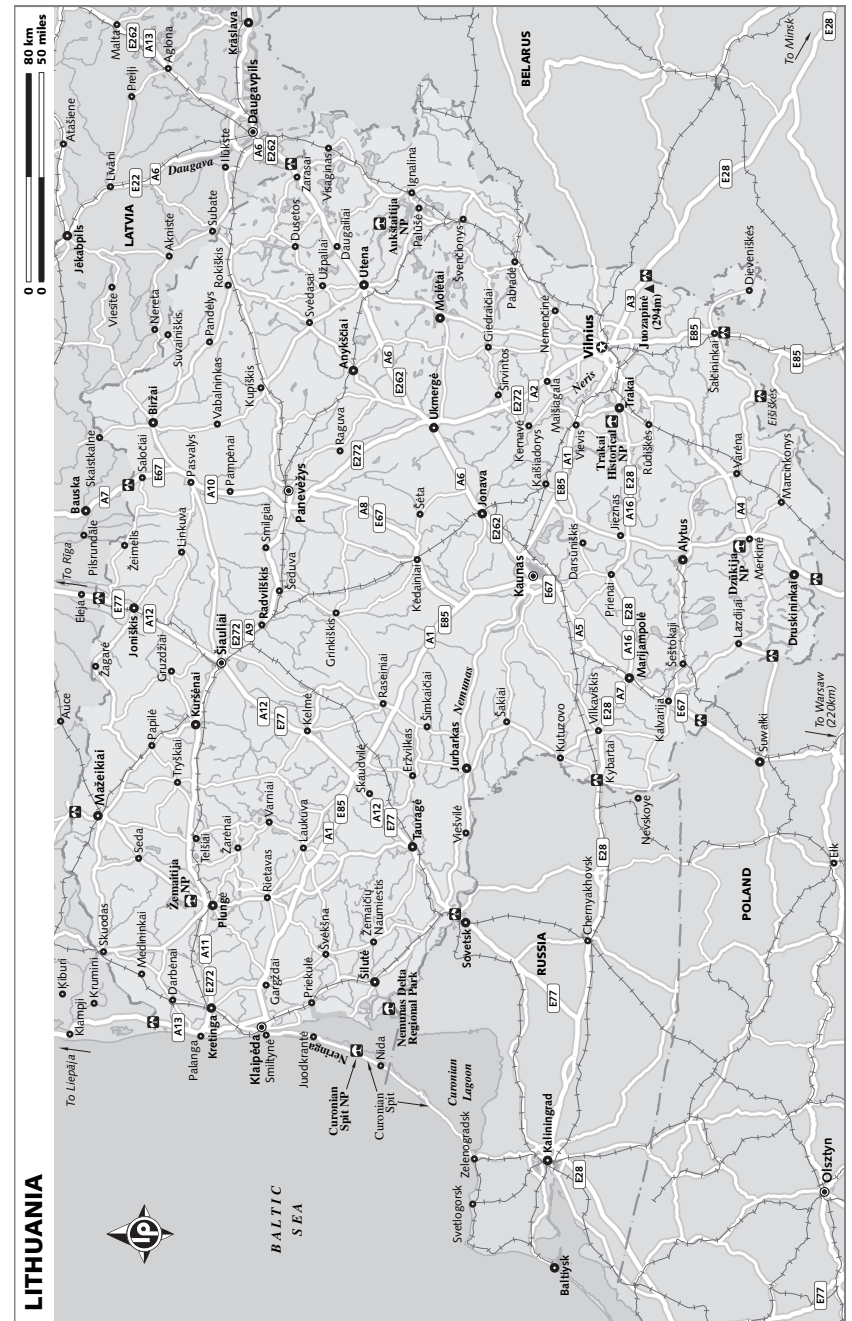
TRAVEL HINTS

Even in fancy restaurants, Lithuanian specialities like *cepelinai* are dirt cheap; wander into Vilnius' courtyards for glimpses of local life.

ROAMING LITHUANIA

After exploring Vilnius' treasures, head north to the Hill of Crosses then west to cycle or hike on the Curonian Spit.

The image of the reticent Balt quickly fades away when you enter iconoclastic Lithuania, a country dripping with history and boasting enough marquee sights to make Unesco drool four times over. It's so small you could almost miss it on a map, but Lithuania has done some big things over the years, most notably becoming the first country to formally declare its independence from the Soviet Union. Such large deeds bring to mind the large place Lithuania once was. In the 1400s the country extended all the way to the Black Sea. The good times wouldn't last, but even today Lithuanians brim with pride and confidence befitting their mighty heritage.



They have plenty to be proud of. From effortlessly charming Vilnius, to the eerie Hill of Crosses to the desolately beautiful Curonian Spit, there are plenty of delights to go around in this Baltic beauty.

HISTORY

Lithuania's history is a story of riches to rags and back again. It all started when ancient tribes fanned out across the Baltics to take advantage of the region's amber deposits. In the mid-13th-century Aukštaitiai leader Mindaugas unified these tribes to create the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The country's golden era was in the 14th to 16th centuries. Vilnius was born and Lithuania became one of Europe's largest empires. But in the 18th century Lithuania, which had merged with Poland, was carved up by Russia, Austria and Prussia in the partitions of Poland.

Lithuanian nationalists declared independence on 16 February 1918 with Kaunas as the capital, as Polish troops had annexed Vilnius from the Red Army in 1920. Lithuania's first president, Antanas Smetona ruled the country with an iron fist during this time.

During WWII the Nazis murdered up to 300,000 people, mostly Jews, in Lithuania – many of them at Paneriai. Between 1944 and 1952 under Soviet rule, 250,000 Lithuanians were killed or deported while armed partisans resisted Soviet rule from the forests. Vilnius' Genocide Museum chronicles the resistance.

In the late 1980s Lithuania was the first Soviet state to legalise noncommunist parties, and on 11 March 1990 the new majority party declared independence. Moscow responded by marching troops into Vilnius and in January 1991 Soviet troops stormed key buildings in Vilnius, killing 14 people. The Soviets recognised Lithuanian independence on 6 September 1991 and the first ex-USSR republic was born.

Lithuania joined NATO in April 2004, and entered the EU a month later. But Lithuania's eager embrace of all things European hit a

speed bump in May 2006 when the European Union rejected Lithuania's bid to adopt the euro, citing inflation concerns. Despite that, and despite an animated political climate that saw a president impeached over corruption allegations in 2004, proud Lithuania remains unabashedly optimistic about its future.

THE CULTURE

Easily the most ethnically homogeneous of the three Baltic countries, Lithuania has a population made up of 83% Lithuanians, 6.7% Poles and 6.3% Russians.

Lithuanians are an outgoing, cheeky bunch, especially compared to their reticent neighbours in Latvia and Estonia. That has led some to call them the 'Spanish of the Baltics'. Others call them the 'Italians of the Baltics', citing their fierce pride – a result of the many brutal attempts to eradicate their culture and of memories of their long-lost empire.

ENVIRONMENT

Lush forests and more than 4000 lakes mark the landscape of flat Lithuania. Forest covers a third of the country and contains creatures such as wild boar, wolves, deer and elk. However, you're much more likely to spot a stork, as Lithuania has Europe's highest concentration of storks.

A huge amount of EU money is being sunk into cleaning up Lithuania's environment, which continues to suffer from years of Soviet mismanagement and indifference.

For years, the hot potato has been the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, 120km north of Vilnius. One of two reactors similar in design to Chernobyl was closed in December 2004, and the final shutdown of the plant is scheduled for 2009 at a massive cost of €3.2 billion.

TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air
Kaunas, to the northwest of the capital Vilnius, is the destination for most budget airlines, however most tourists landing in Kaunas don't linger there for long and immediately hop in a car, taxi or bus for the one-hour drive to Vilnius.

Wizzair (www.wizzair.com) has flights between Kaunas and Dortmund, Liverpool, London (Luton), Malmö, Paris (Beauvois), Stockholm (Skavsta) and Warsaw. **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com) flies between Kaunas and Dublin, Frankfurt (Hahn), Liverpool, London (Stanstead) and Stockholm. The website of **Kaunas International Airport** (www.kaunasair.lt) has updated timetables.

Most international traffic to Lithuania still goes through **Vilnius International Airport** (☎ 230 6666; www.vilnius-airport.lt; Rodūnios gatvė 2). Local budget provider **Lithuania Airlines** (☎ 252 5555; www.lal.lt) has direct flights between Vilnius and about 15 European cities. The schedule for **Air Baltic** (www.airbaltic.com) and a list of other European airlines flying to Vilnius is on the airport's website.

Boat

Klaipėda is the port of call for all international ferries bound for Lithuania. The vast majority are cargo ferries, some with room for a few passengers.

DFDS Lisco (☎ 46-395 050; www.dfdslico.com; bookings pfei@dfdslico.com) has a passenger ferry service between Klaipėda and Kiel (six weekly, 230Lt, 21 hours). Contact **Scandlines** (☎ 46-310561; www.scandlines.com; reservations ferry@scandlines.lt; Naujosios Sodo gatvė 1) for information on getting on their cargo ships to Aabenraa and Århus, Denmark.

Bus

International bus companies **Eurolines** (☎ 5-215 1377; www.eurolines.lt; Vilnius bus station) and **Ecolines** (☎ 5-262 0020; www.ecolines.lt; Vilnius gatvė 45) have offices in Vilnius and other main cities.

Eurolines or Ecolines have buses between Vilnius and Riga (45Lt, five hours, at least four daily), Kaliningrad (50Lt, seven hours, two daily), Tallinn (95Lt, 12 hours, two daily), Warsaw (97Lt, nine hours, three daily), Moscow (99Lt, 13 hours, daily), Minsk (30Lt, four hours, at least five daily) and Gdansk (110Lt, 10½ hours, nightly).

There are a couple that go weekly to a handful of Western European cities, including London and several German cities. There's a daily bus to Berlin (from 170Lt, 16 hours).

Car & Motorcycle

Coming from the south, you're looking at a 30-minute to one-hour wait at the two Polish

border crossings (Ogrodniki and Budzisko). Lines at the Latvian border in the north are smaller.

Train

Vilnius is linked by regular direct trains to Moscow (from 110Lt, 15 hours, two to three daily), St Petersburg (from 94Lt, 20 hours, daily), Kaliningrad (from 45Lt, seven hours, at least twice daily), Warsaw (from 85Lt, 12 hours, three weekly) and Minsk (40Lt, 4½ hours, at least five daily).

GETTING AROUND

Bus
There are frequent buses throughout the day from Vilnius to all main cities, including Kaunas (19Lt, 1½ hours), Šiauliai (32Lt, three hours) and Klaipėda (49Lt, 3¼ hours). To Kaunas there are also regular minibuses, which are quicker.

Car & Motorcycle

You can drive across Lithuania in a couple of hours. Modern four-lane highways link Vilnius and Klaipėda (via Kaunas), and Vilnius and Panavėžys.

The big international rental-car agencies are well represented at Vilnius airport, but you'll save a ton of money by renting from a local operator. Charismatic **Rimas** (☎ 277 6213, 8-698-21662; rimas.cars@is.lt) rents older cars at the lowest rates in town.

Local Transport

Lithuanian cities are generously covered by networks of buses, trolleybuses and minibuses. In most towns you must punch your bus ticket or you'll risk a fine.

Train

You can lumber between Vilnius and a few domestic destinations on Lithuania's clunky suburban trains. Destinations include Kaunas (11Lt, 1¼ hours, 13 daily), Klaipėda (40Lt, five hours, two daily) and Šiauliai (24Lt, four hours, five to eight daily).

READING UP

The Last Girl, by Stephan Collishaw, is a brilliant historical novel covering WWII to the 1990s, and brings Vilnius to life. *From That Time and Place* (Lucy Dawidowicz) is a heartbreaking memoir of a Jewish woman's return to Vilnius after WWII, and describes pre-war Jewish Vilnius better than any other book.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- Ambulance ☎ 03
- Fire ☎ 01
- Police ☎ 02

VILNIUS

☎ 5 / pop 600,000

Picture the quintessentially quaint Old World European capital and chances are you'll come up with something pretty close to Vilnius. A spider web of cobbled streets spinning amid fantastic baroque churches, its appeal is blatant, its charm intoxicating. Besides a Unesco-listed Old Town, Vilnius has plenty of cool bars and an undeniable quirky streak.

ORIENTATION

Most of the action in Vilnius is in Old Town. The northern border of Old Town merges with 'New Town' at Gedimino prospektas, a wide, part-time pedestrian avenue that runs west-to-east from parliament to Katedros aikštė (Cathedral Square) – the spiritual, if not the geographical, heart of Vilnius.

INFORMATION

Internet Access & Telephone

Alderada (Pylimo gatvė 21; per hr 5Lt, long-distance VOIP calls per min 0.12Lt) Phone and internet.

Renta Rentoma (Stiklių gatvė 16; per hr 2Lt; ☎ 10am–7pm) Internet access.

Media

Vilnius In Your Pocket (www.inyourpocket.com/lithuania/en; 5Lt) Quality city guide published every two months and widely available.

The Baltic Times (www.baltictimes.com) English-language weekly with pan-Baltic news and listings of Vilnius cultural events.

Medical Services

24-hour pharmacy (Gedimino Vaisinė; ☎ 261 0135; Gedimino prospektas 27)

GETTING INTO TOWN

From the airport to the centre take bus 1, which runs every hour, to the train station (1Lt, 20 minutes). You can also take the more frequent bus 2 to Lukiškių Aikštė on Gedimino prospektas in New Town. A taxi from the airport to the city centre should cost no more than 20Lt.

The adjacent train station and bus station are a five-minute walk from the southern edge of Old Town.

Baltic-American Medical & Surgical Clinic (☎ 234 2020; www.bak.lt; Antakalnio gatvė 124; ☎ 24hr) English-speaking health care, approximately 1km north-east of town.

Money

Vilnius is littered with ATMs and banks, most offering currency and travellers-cheque exchange.

American Express (☎ 212 5805, 24hr emergency ☎ 8-616 81255; www.amextravel.lt; Vokiečių gatvė 13) Replaces lost Amex travellers cheques.

Post

Central Post Office (Gedimino prospektas 7)

Tourist Information

Vilnius Tourist Information Centres (www.vilnius-tourism.lt; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat & Sun); Town Hall (☎ 262 0762; Didžioji gatvė 31); Vilniaus gatvė (☎ 262 9660; Vilniaus gatvė 22); train station (☎ 269 2091) Arranges tour guides, books accommodation and rents bicycles for use in Old Town.

Travel Agencies

Kelvita (☎ 210 6130; www.kelvita.lt; train station international hall, kiosk 30; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri) Cheap-est Russian visas.

Lithuanian Student & Youth Travel Bureau

(☎ 239 7397; www.jaunimas.lt, in Lithuanian; Basanavičiaus gatvė 30/13) Cheap fares for holders of International Student Identity Cards (ISIC) and a range of other services.

SIGHTS

Avoid tunnel vision as you walk around Vilnius as its myriad churches are pleasantly prone to present themselves perfectly framed by narrow streets. Look down, too: Vilnius was built on a swamp and many buildings, especially along Pilies gatvė and Aušros Vartų gatvė, have sunk up to a metre below street level.

Cathedral Square & New Town

Vilnius was founded on 48m-high Gediminas Hill, topped since the 13th century by the off-rebuilt tower of ruined **Gediminas Castle**. There are amazing views of Old Town from the top of the tower, which houses the **Upper Castle Museum** (☎ 261 7453; adult/child 4/2Lt; ☎ 10am–7pm May–Oct, 11am–5pm Tue–Sun Nov–Apr).

At the base of Gediminas Hill sprawls Cathedral Square (Katedros aikštė), dominated by **Vilnius Cathedral** (☎ 7am–7.30pm, mass at 9am, 10am, 11.15am & 7pm Sun) and its 57m-tall **belfry**. The

first wooden cathedral, built here in 1387–88, was in Gothic style, but has been rebuilt many times since then. The most important restoration was completed from 1783 to 1801, when the outside was redone in today's classical style. The interior's showpiece is baroque **St Casimir's Chapel**, with frescoes depicting the life of St Casimir (Lithuania's patron saint), whose silver coffin lies within.

The massive construction project going on at the square's eastern end, behind the **equestrian statue of Gediminas**, is the rebuilding of the **Royal Palace**. Demolished by the Russians in the late 18th century, the reconstructed palace will re-open on 6 July 2009 to mark the millennium anniversary of the first known mention of Lithuania in writing.

Exhibitions on the ambitious reconstruction project fill the must-see **Museum of Applied Arts** (☎ 262 8080; Arsenalo gatvė 3a; admission 8Lt; ☎ 11am–6pm Tue–Sat, 11am–4pm Sun), in the old arsenal at the foot of Gediminas Hill. The museum also has many items from the original palace on display.

The main boulevard of Vilnius' 19th-century New Town, Gedimino prospektas, heads due west from Cathedral Square all the way to the silver-domed **Orthodox Church of the Apparition** (Mickėvičiaus 1), 1.75km away. Roughly halfway is Lukiškių Aikštė, formerly Lenin Square. The Lenin Statue that once stood here is now in Druskininkai's Soviet sculpture park (p731).

The building facing the square was the notorious KGB headquarters and prison, but is now the sobering **Museum of Genocide Victims** (☎ 249 6264; muziejus@genocid.lt; Aukų gatvė 2a; admission 4Lt; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sat, 10am–3pm Sun). Do not miss Vilnius' most important and most popular museum.

Old Town & Around

The main northern entrance to Old Town is just south of Cathedral Square along touristy Pilies gatvė, which leads to **St John's Church** (☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat), a baroque gem. Founded in 1387, its 17th-century bell tower is the highest structure in Old Town.

Entrance to the church is via the spectacular campus of **Vilnius University** (☎ 268 7298; Universiteto gatvė 3; adult/child 5/2.50Lt; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Sat Mar–Oct, 9am–5pm Mon–Sat Nov–Feb), featuring 13 courtyards framed by 15th-century buildings and splashed with 300-year-old frescoes. Founded in 1579 during the Counter-Reformation, it's Eastern Europe's oldest university.

TOP FIVE QUIRKY ATTRACTIONS

Vilnius has a undeniable mischievous streak, as the following attest:

Frank Zappa monument (Kalinauskos gatvė 1) The world's first Zappa statue is in a graffiti-splashed courtyard.

Angel of Užupis statue (Užupio & Malūno gatvė) The oddball symbol of Vilnius' strangest district.

Egg statue (cnr Šv Stepono & Raugyklos gatvė) Was in Užupis' main square until it 'hatched' the Angel of Užupis in 2002.

Žalioji Tiltas (Green Bridge) The communist-era sculptures here weren't torn down because the locals adore them.

Stebuklas (miracle) tile If you stand on this tile on Cathedral Square and turn around clockwise, your wish will allegedly come true. But first you must find it!

At the southern border of Old Town, the 16th-century **Gates of Dawn** (Aušros Vartai) is the only one of the town wall's original nine gates still intact. The gate houses a **chapel** (☎ 6am–7pm) containing the black-and-gold 'miracle-working' **Virgin Mary icon**, one of the holiest icons in Polish Catholicism.

There are four famous churches near the Gates of Dawn: early baroque **St Teresa's Church** (1635–50), the pink, domed 17th-century **Orthodox Church of the Holy Spirit**, the dilapidated **Holy Trinity Church** and, up Aušros Vartų gatvė, ravishing **St Casimir's Church**, the oldest of Vilnius' baroque masterpieces (1604–15).

Old Town's main commercial street, Vokiečių gatvė, offers fine views of several churches, including **St Catherine's Church** (Vilniaus gatvė 30) displaying Vilnius' trademark peart baroque style. This area used to be part of Vilnius' Jewish Quarter. Dubbed the 'Jerusalem of the north', Vilnius had one of Europe's most prominent Jewish communities until Nazi brutality virtually wiped it out.

Jewish Vilnius is far too rich a topic to adequately cover here, but there are several excellent resources available if you want to dig deeper into Lithuania's Jewish past. A good place to start is the main branch of the **Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum of Lithuania** (☎ 212 7912; www.jmusem.lt; Pylimo gatvė 4; ☎ 9am–1pm Mon–Fri), which shares a building with the Jewish Community Centre and sells a handy walking guide of Jewish Vilnius (12Lt).



INFORMATION	
24-hour Pharmacy.....	1 A2
Alderada.....	2 B4
American Express.....	3 B4
Australian Consulate.....	4 B3
Belarus Embassy.....	5 A5
Canadian Embassy.....	6 B3
Central Post Office.....	7 B3
French Embassy.....	8 C4
Kelvita.....	9 B6
Post Office.....	10 B4
Renta Rentoma.....	11 C4
US Embassy.....	12 A3
Vilnius Tourist Information Centre.....	13 B3
Vilnius Tourist Information Centre (Town Hall).....	14 C5
Vilnius Tourist Information Centre (Train Station).....	(see 9)
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
Zalasis Tiltas Statues.....	15 B2
Angel of Užupis Statue.....	16 D4
Egg Statue.....	17 B5
Equestrian statue of Gediminas.....	18 C3
Frank Zappa Monument.....	19 A3
Gates of Dawn.....	20 C5
Gediminas Castle.....	21 C3
Holy Trinity Church.....	22 C5
Museum of Applied Arts.....	23 C2
Museum of Genocide Victims.....	24 A2
Royal Palace.....	25 C3
St Casimir's Chapel.....	(see 31)
St Casimir's Church.....	26 C5
St Catherine's Church.....	27 B4
St John's Church.....	28 C4
St Teresa's Church.....	29 C5
Upper Castle Museum.....	(see 21)
Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum of Lithuania.....	30 B3
Vilnius Cathedral.....	31 C3
Vilnius Cathedral Belfry.....	32 C3
Vilnius University entrance.....	33 C3
Virgin Mary Icon.....	(see 20)
Wall containing Užupis Constitution.....	34 D4
SLEEPING	
Air Baltic.....	51 C3
AAA Hostel.....	35 B6
Bus Station.....	52 B6
Domus Maria.....	36 C5
Ecolines.....	53 B4
Frank Zappa Monument.....	19 A3
Litinterp.....	37 C3
ENTERTAINMENT	
Lithuanian Opera & Ballet Theatre.....	49 B2
National Philharmonic.....	50 C5
TRANSPORT	
Air Baltic.....	51 C3
Bus Station.....	52 B6
Ecolines.....	53 B4
Eurolines.....	(see 52)

The resident artists, dreamers, squatters and drunks of Užupis, due east of Old Town, declared their district an official, unofficial breakaway state in 1998. The state has its own tongue-in-cheek president, anthem, flags and a 41-point constitution which you can read in English, French or Lithuanian on a wall on Paupio gatvė.

SLEEPING

Teacher's University Hostel (☎ 213 0704; Vivulskio gatvė 36; d & tr per person with shared bathroom 24Lt, deluxe d 120Lt) It's Soviet through and through and 10 minutes from Old Town, but it's dirt cheap and the rooms are private. No self-catering.

Filaretai Hostel (☎ 215 4627; www.filaretaihostel.lt; Filaretų gatvė 17; dm from 31Lt, s/d with shared bathroom 68/86Lt; ☑) A recent renovation has added rooms and polish to this chill hostel in artsy Užupis. The doubles are great value. Take bus 34 to the Filaretų stop.

AAA Hostel (☎ 6-990 9903; www.aahostel.lt; Švč Stepano gatvė 15; dm from 31Lt, s/d with shared bathroom 62/87Lt; ☑) The basement dorm rooms here are big, albeit with noisy traffic overhead.

Old Town Hostel (☎ 262 5357; www.lithuanianhostels.org; Aušros Vartų gatvė 20/10; dm 32Lt, d per person 100Lt; ☑) You'll have few problems finding a drinking buddy at this popular hostel between Old Town and the train station.

Paupio Namai (☎ 264 3113; www.hotel.paupio.lt; Paupio gatvė 31a; dm/s/d with shared bathroom from 45/80/100Lt; ☑) Vilnius' best 'hostel' is more of a guest-

house. The small singles are a phenomenal option for solo travellers wary of communal living.

Litinterp (☎ 212 3850; www.litinterp.lt; Bernardinų gatvė 7-2; s with/without bathroom 100/80Lt, d 160/140Lt) This central, unobtrusive guesthouse with bright pinewood floors has been the best deal in Vilnius for years.

Domus Maria (☎ 264 4880; http://domusmaria.vilnensis.lt; Aušros Vartų gatvė 12; dm/s/d 75/179/249Lt, dm, d with shared bathroom 75Lt; ☑) This unique guesthouse stays true to its monastic origins with wide arched corridors and spartan rooms. The doubles with shared bathrooms are stunning value.

EATING

Finding affordable, mouth-watering curry, *cepelinai* or *kepta duona* (fried bread sticks oozing garlic) in Vilnius is a breeze.

Delano (Gedimino 24; meals from 10Lt) This greasy Lithuanian food buffet is reminiscent of the legendary, ubiquitous Lido chain of self-serve restaurants in neighbouring Latvia, only cheaper and not as good.

Ephesus (Trakų gatvė 15; kebabs 5Lt; ☎ 11-6am Tue-Sat, 11-1am Sun & Mon) Ravenous night owls can munch on kebabs into the really wee hours at this small Turkish joint.

Our pick: Balti Drambliai (Vilniaus gatvė 41; mains 10Lt; ☎) It's hard to choose the best feature of this vegetarian restaurant in the basement of a former Duke's palace: the smell of curry

LITHUANIA

LITHUANIA

wafting from the kitchen, the divine soups (3Lt to 4Lt), the 4Lt pints of *alus* (beer), or the exciting range of Indian, Middle Eastern and Italian dishes.

Zemaičiai (Vokiečių gatvė 24; mains 15-35Lt) Of the many brick-walled Lithuanian restaurants in Vilnius, this institution, famous for its pig's trotters, offers the most authentic experience.

Prie Angelo Kavinė (Užupio gatvė 9; pizzas 15Lt; ☒) Arguably Vilnius' best pizzas come served under the watchful eye of the Angel of Užupis.

Tores (☎ 262 9309; Užupio gatvė 40; meals 30-50Lt) The mountain lodge-style atmosphere here is brilliant, but the main reason to come here is for the stunning panorama of Old Town. Take it in from the outdoor patio while sipping 5Lt *vyturys* pints.

DRINKING & CLUBBING

Vilnius' riotous party culture centres around clubs in the cold months and outdoor cafés in the summer.

Cozy (Dominikonų gatvė 10; sandwiches/mains 8/15Lt) The basement DJ club here has all-night soirees on Friday and Saturday and smaller parties on Monday and Thursday.

Užupio kavinė (Užupio gatvė 2; mains 10-20Lt) This legendary spot is known for its arty clientele and good cheap breakfasts. Ask the bartender for a copy of the Užupis constitution in English.

Sole Luna (Universiteto gatvė 4; mains from 8Lt; ☒ closed Sunday) Italian-owned café near Vilnius University features outdoor dining and weekend dancing in a 16th-century courtyard.

Manu Kavinė (Bokšto gatvė 7; mains 10-20Lt) There's something for everybody here – an extensive tea list, great beer, good food, free internet access, and free darts and foosball.

Brodvėjus (☎ 210 7208; Mėsininkų 4; cover 10-15Lt; ☒ nightly) Hordes of expats and pretty young things flock here night after night to dance to 'I Will Survive', 'Mambo No 5' and the same tired-but-innocuous soundtrack.

Men's Factory (☎ 8-699 85009; Švencenkos gatvė 16/10; cover 5-40Lt; ☒ Wed-Sat) This gay club west of Old Town is wildly popular.

ENTERTAINMENT

In Your Pocket publishes a list of movie theatres as well as listings for opera, theatre, classical music and other big events.

Films are screened in English at the 12-screen **Coca-Cola Plaza** (☎ 265 6565; www.forumcinemas.lt; Savanorių 7) and dubbed in Lithuanian elsewhere.

The grand, gaudy **Lithuanian Opera & Ballet Theatre** (☎ 262 0636; www.opera.lt; Vienuolio gatvė 1) stages classical productions. Head to the **National Philharmonic** (☎ 266 5233; www.filharmonija.lt; Aušros Vartų gatvė 5; ☒ box office 10am-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-noon Sun) to see the country's most renowned orchestras.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

See the information under the Transport section (p725).

GETTING AROUND Public Transport

Unless you're heading well out of Old Town, the only really useful bus route is from the train station to New Town via Pylimo gatvė. It is serviced by trolleybuses 2 and 5 and by buses 26, 26a and 53. Tickets cost 1.40Lt at newsstands and 1.10Lt direct from the driver; punch tickets on board in a ticket machine or risk a 20Lt on-the-spot fine.

Taxi

Taxis officially charge 2Lt per kilometre (more at night) and must have a meter. Drivers often try to rip off tourists, especially if flagged down on the street. Order a cab by calling ☎ 1409, ☎ 1423, ☎ 1445, ☎ 1422 or ☎ 1800 (no code required).

AROUND VILNIUS

PANERIAI

During WWII the Nazis – aided by Lithuanian accomplices – exterminated three-quarters of Vilnius' 100,000-strong Jewish population at this site, 10km southwest of central Vilnius. From the entrance a path leads to the small **Paneriai Museum** (☎ 5-260 2001; Agrastų gatvė 15; ☒ 11am-6pm Mon, Wed, Fri & Sun Mar-Dec). There are about 20 suburban trains daily from Vilnius to Paneriai station (1.20Lt, 20 minutes), from where it's about a 1km walk southwest along Agrastų gatvė to the site.

TRAKAI

☎ 528 / pop 6,110

Talk about your perfect day trip. Lithuania's ancient capital, just 28km west of Vilnius, has

a gaggle of attractions to satisfy the pickiest of travellers: bucolic lakes, a jaw-dropping castle and a rare Middle Eastern religious sect.

That sect is the Karaites, named after the term *kara*, which means 'to study the scriptures' in both Hebrew and Arabic. The sect originated in Baghdad and practises strict adherence to the Torah (rejecting the rabbinic Talmud). Vytautas the Great brought about 380 Karaite families to Trakai from Crimea around 1400 to serve as bodyguards. Only 63 remain in Trakai today and their numbers – about 280 in Lithuania – are dwindling rapidly.

The **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 51934; www.trakai.lt; Vytauto gatvė 69; ☒ 8am-5pm Mon-Thu, 8am-3.45pm Fri Sep-Apr, 8.30am-4.15pm Mon, 8.30am-5.30pm Tue-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat May-Aug) sells maps, books accommodation, rents bikes (24Lt per day) and has information on fishing, sailing, scuba diving, horse riding and a range of other activities.

Trakai's trophy piece is the fairytale **Island Castle** (☎ 53946; adult/student 10/5Lt; ☒ 10am-7pm May-Sep, 10am-5pm Oct-Apr Tue-Sun), occupying a small island in Lake Galvė. The painstakingly restored, red-brick Gothic castle dates to the late 14th century. Inside the castle, the **Trakai History Museum** (☎ 53946; www.trakaimuziejus.lt) charts the history of the castle.

Kempingas Slėnyje (☎ 53880; www.camptrakai.lt; Slėnio 1; camp sites per person 16Lt plus per tent/car 5/6Lt, cottages 250Lt, summer house/guesthouse r from 70/120Lt) is a sublime complex 5km out of Trakai, where you can pitch your tent by the lake or stay in wooden cabins or a spectacular guesthouse with lakeside balconies.

Sample *kibinai* (meat-stuffed Karaite pastries similar to empanadas) at **Kibininė** (Karaimų gatvė 65; kibininai 2.50-5Lt) or **Kybynlar** (Karaimų gatvė 29; meals 15Lt; ☒).

There are at least two buses hourly to/from Vilnius (4Lt, 45 minutes), plus seven daily trains (4Lt, 45 minutes).

CENTRAL LITHUANIA

KAUNAS

☎ 37 / pop 378,900

Lithuania's second city remains stubbornly provincial, but holds some appeal for those willing to scratch beneath its hard-edged surface. That appeal lies mainly in its attractive Old Town, a seemingly endless central

WORTH A TRIP

Mildly controversial **Grūto Parkas** (☎ 313-55511; www.grutoparks.lt; adult/child 10/3Lt; ☒ 9am-sunset), 125km south of Vilnius near the spa town of Druskininkai, has been an enormous hit since it opened in 2001. The sprawling grounds, built to resemble a Siberian concentration camp, contain dozens of statues of Soviet heroes, exhibits on Soviet history and loudspeakers billowing Soviet anthems. The statues once stood confidently in parks or squares across Lithuania.

There are nine daily buses between Druskininkai and Vilnius, and 10 daily buses to/from Kaunas (both 20Lt, two hours). Ask to be let off at the park turn-off, then walk the final 1km to the park.

pedestrian street and its red-hot basketball team, Žalgiris.

Information

Kaunas Regional Tourist Information Centre

(☎ 323 436; http://visit.kaunas.lt; Laisvės alėja 36; ☒ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat, 2-4pm Sun Jun-Aug, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat May & Sep, 9am-6pm Mon-Thu, 9am-5pm Fri Oct-Apr) Books accommodation, sells maps and arranges bicycle rental.

Kavinė Internetas (Vilniaus gatvė 24; per hr 4Lt; ☒ 8.30am-11pm) Internet.

Sights

Start any trip to Kaunas wandering through its lovely Old Town, where most streets lead to Rotušės aikštė (Central square), dominated by the 18th-century white, baroque former city hall, now the **Palace of Weddings**. On the northeastern corner of the square, **St Peter & Paul Cathedral** (Vilniaus gatvė 1) owes much to baroque reconstruction, but the early 15th-century Gothic shape of its windows remain. **Maironis' tomb** is outside the south wall of the cathedral.

Kaunas expanded east from the Old Town in the 19th century, giving birth to the modern New Town and its 1.7km-long pedestrian street, **Laisvės alėja**, which today is lined with bars, shops and restaurants. North of Laisvės alėja, Vieniybės aikštė (Unity Square) contains the **Freedom Monument**, which was hidden during the Stalin era and put back in place on 16 February 1989. There are several museums surrounding the square.

Sleeping

Kauno Arkivyskupijos Svečių Namai (☎ 322 597; http://kaunas.ln.lt/guesthouse; Rotušės aikštė 21; s/d/tr with shared bathroom 50/80/100Lt) This squeaky-clean jewel is enviably located in an old monastery wedged between two ancient churches. If it's full, ask if there's room in its similarly priced hostel on Dauksos gatvė.

Litinterp (☎ 228 718; www.litinterp.lt; Gedimino gatvė 28-7; s/d 100/160Lt, with shared bathroom 80/140Lt) Much like the Soviets once did, the Litinterp folks manage to make all their properties look identical down to the last light switch – only their stuff works.

Eating

Pizza Jazz (Laisvės alėja 68; mains 10-20Lt) One of the best cheap-eating options in Kaunas, it has a lively bar on one side and a surprisingly posh-feeling restaurant on the other.

Miesto Sodas (Laisvės alėja 93; mains 15-20Lt; ☎ 11am-midnight) Kaunas' trendiest eatery has more than passable steaks and, rarity of all rarities, a salad bar. Siena nightclub in the basement is a great place to watch Žalgiris basketball games.

Drinking & Clubbing

Fortas (Donelaičio gatvė 65; mains 10-25Lt) The best bar in town has an Irish feel and draws a college crowd to hear DJs or live music upstairs most nights of the week.

Ex-It (☎ 202 813; Maironio 19; cover 20-100Lt; ☎ Fri & Sat) Many people vote this pulsating, multichambered dance cathedral the best club in Lithuania.

Getting There & Away

There are direct buses between Kaunas and Vilnius (19Lt, 1½ hours, three hourly), Klaipėda (38Lt, three hours, 10 daily), Šiauliai (23Lt, three hours, 15 daily), Rīga (45Lt, 3½ hours, one daily) and Tallinn (110Lt, 12 hours, one daily).

SPLURGE

Senieji Rūsiai (Vilniaus gatvė 34; mains 25-35Lt) Easily the tastiest street terrace to dine, drink and soak up the Old Town, this candle-lit 17th-century cellar offers European specialties such as ostrich, beefsteak flam-béed at your table, and a funky chicken fillet with fruity curry sauce.

There are 13 trains daily to/from Vilnius (11Lt, 1¼ hours) and an incredibly slow overnight train to/from Klaipėda (25Lt, six hours).

The airport is 10km north of the Old Town. Take minibus 120 to Old Town.

ŠIAULIAI

☎ 41 / pop 147,000

Lithuania's fourth-largest city is home to the country's most awe-inspiring sight, the legendary **Hill of Crosses** (Kryžių kalnas). It is a two-hump hillock blanketed by thousands of crosses. The sound of the evening breeze tinkling through the crosses that appear to grow on the hillock is indescribable and unmissable.

Some of the crosses are devotional, others are memorials (many for people deported to Siberia) and some are finely carved folk-art masterpieces. The crosses were bulldozed by the Soviets, but each night people crept past soldiers and barbed wire to plant yet more, risking their lives or freedom to express their national and spiritual fervour.

This strange place lies 12km north of Šiauliai – 10km north up highway A12, then 2km east from a well-marked turn-off (the sign says 'Kryžių kalnas 2'). You can rent a bike (first hour 3.50Lt, then 2.50Lt per hour) from the **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 523 110; www.siauliai.lt/tic; Vilniaus gatvė 213; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) and pedal out here, take a taxi (30Lt) or ride one of eight daily buses.

Điaulių Kolegijos Youth Hostel (☎ 523 764; administracija@siauliaikolegija.lt; Tilžės gatvė 159; s/d/tr/q with shared bathroom 50/60/75/100Lt; ☎) takes care of all your lodging needs, with spick-and-span rooms at incredibly low prices.

To get here take a bus from Vilnius (32Lt, three hours, nine daily), Kaunas (23Lt, three hours, 15 daily) or Riga (20Lt, 2½ hours, 10 daily), or a train from Vilnius (26Lt, four hours, five to eight daily).

WESTERN LITHUANIA

KLAIPĖDA

☎ 46 / pop 194,000

Gritty Klaipėda is Lithuania's main port city and a gateway to the lush natural beauty of the Curonian Spit. It boasts a fascinating history as the East Prussian city of Memel and a few buildings from that era still stand. The city celebrates its nautical heritage each July with a flamboyant **Sea Festival**.

The **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 412 186; www.klaipedainfo.lt; Turgaus gatvė 7; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun May-Aug, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri Sep-Apr) arranges accommodation and tours, and has two computers for internet surfing (2Lt per hour).

Klaipėda Old Town Hostel (☎ 211 879; guestplace@yahoo.com; Butkių Juzės gatvė 7/4; dm 32Lt, linen 2Lt; ☎) is poorly located. If you can, splurge on a room at the always reliable **Litinterp** (☎ 310 296; klaipeda@litinterp.lt; Puodžių gatvė 17; s with/without bathroom 100/80Lt, d 160/140Lt).

There are buses to Klaipėda from Vilnius (49Lt, 3¼ hours, 14 daily), Kaunas (38Lt, three hours, 10 daily) and Šiauliai, (23Lt, 2½ hours, six daily).

To get to Smiltynė on the Curonian Spit, board a ferry at the **passenger terminal** (Žvejų gatvė 8) due west of Old Town. Ferries leave every half-hour in the high season and cost 1.50Lt (10 minutes). Vehicles must use the **old ferry terminal** (Nemuno gatvė 8), 2.5km south of the passenger terminal (per car 32Lt, at least hourly).

CURONIAN SPIT

☎ 469

This magical pigtail of land dangling off the western rump of Lithuania hosts some of the world's most precious sand dunes and a menagerie of elk, deer and avian wildlife. The fragile spit, which Unesco recognised as a World Heritage site in 2000, is divided roughly evenly between Lithuania and Russia's Kaliningrad region in the south.

Lithuania's share of the spit is protected as the **Curonian Spit National Park** (www.nerija.lt), which has two **visitor centres** Smiltynė (☎ 46-402 257; Smiltynės plentas 11; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat, 9am-2pm Sun Jun-Aug, closed Sat & Sun Sep-May); Nida (☎ 51256; Naglių gatvė 8; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun May-Sep) with abundant information on walking, cycling, boating and lazing activities.

Smiltynė, where the ferries from Klaipėda dock, is administratively part of Klaipėda and is jammed on summer weekends with city slickers flocking to its beaches. You're better off heading south to laid-back Nida, where you'll find some fine guesthouses and several brilliant hikes with great views of the dunes. Ask at the **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 52345; Taikos gatvė 4; www.visitneringa.lt; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun Jun-Aug, 10am-6pm Mon-Fri Sep-May) in Nida for details. When observing the rapidly eroding dunes, it is vital to stick to the marked paths.

An excellent way to see the spit is on a bicycle. A flat cycling trail runs all the way from

Nida to Smiltynė, and you stand a good chance of seeing elk or other wildlife at any point along that path. Keep an eye out for one of Neringa's can't-miss attractions, a massive colony of grey herons and cormorants, about 1km south of Juodkrantė, where there's a breathtaking panorama of thousands of nests amid pine trees.

There are bicycles for hire on almost every street corner in Nida; some allow you to leave your bike in Smiltynė and bus back to Nida.

The Nida tourist centre or Litinterp (p729) in Klaipėda can help arrange accommodation. The cheapest option in Nida is **Medikas** (☎ 52985; Kuverto gatvė 14; dm/r from 30/130Lt), a bare-bones Soviet relic that nonetheless gets the job done.

Getting There & Away

To get to the spit you need to take a ferry from Klaipėda to Smiltynė (see left). Buses and minibuses run throughout the day between Smiltynė and Nida. (7Lt, 1¼ hours).

LITHUANIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Vilnius has a few hostels, but none are state of the art. Expect that to change in the near future. Outside of Vilnius most hostels are grim Soviet affairs, but in rural areas you can find perfectly fine hotel rooms at hostel prices. Most camping grounds are cheap and basic (10Lt to 25Lt per camp site), but they are gradually improving.

Vilnius has a serious room crunch so book ahead in the high season. The city's tourist information offices can help in a pinch, but they tend to utilise unexceptional midrange hotels. Rooms at coastal locations such as the Curonian Spit fill up months ahead in the summer.

In Your Pocket (www.inyourpocket.com) has complete hotel listings for Vilnius, Kaunas, Điauliai and Klaipėda.

ACTIVITIES

Lithuania is conducive to any activity revolving around its many forests: hiking, mushrooming, berrying, picnicking and bird-watching are at the top of the list. Lakes are also abundant, especially in the wilderness of Aukštaitija National Park (not covered in this book – see www.paluse.lt for details).

Cycling is becoming more popular in flat Lithuania. Most towns and cities have several outlets that rent out bikes. A great place for an all-day ride is the Curonian Spit left).

BUSINESS HOURS

Most shops open at 9am or 10am and close around 6pm on weekdays and Saturday. Banks are generally open between 8am and 5pm on weekdays. Restaurants tend to open around 10am and close around 11pm, but many stay open much later on weekends.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies & Consulates in Vilnius

Australia (☎ 5-212 3369; emergency 8-687 11117; australia@consulate.lt; Vilniaus gatvė 23)

Belarus (☎ 5-266 2200; www.belarus.lt; Mindaugo gatvė 13)

Canada (☎ 5-249 0950; www.canada.lt; Jogailos gatvė 4)

Estonia (☎ 5-278 0200; www.estemb.lt; Mickevičiaus gatvė 4a)

France (☎ 5-212 29 79; www.ambafrance-lt.org; Švarco gatvė 1)

Germany (☎ 5-210 6400; www.deutschebotschaft-wilna.lt; Sierakausko gatvė 24/8)

Latvia (☎ 5-213 1260; embassy.lithuania@mfa.gov.lv; Ēiurlionio gatvė 76)

Poland (☎ 5-270 9001; ambpol@tdd.lt; Smėlio gatvė 20a)

Russia (☎ 5-272 1763; www.rusemb.lt; Latvių gatvė 53/54)

UK (☎ 5-246 2900; www.britain.lt; Antakalnio gatvė 2)

USA (☎ 5-266 5500; www.usembassy.lt; Akmenų gatvė 6)

Lithuanian Embassies & Consulates Abroad

Australia (☎ 02-9498 2571; 40B Fiddens Wharf Rd, Killara, Sydney, NSW 2071)

Canada (☎ 613-567 5458; 130 Albert St, Suite 204, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5G4)

France (☎ 01 40 54 50 50; 22 Blvd de Courcelles, 75017 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-890 68 10; Charitestrasse 9, 10711 Berlin)

New Zealand (☎ 09-336 7711; 28 Heather St, Parnell, Auckland)

UK (☎ 020-7486 6401; 84 Gloucester Pl, London W1H 3HN)

USA (☎ 202-234-5860; 2622 16th St NW, Washington, DC 20009)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

There's no better time to observe Lithuanian culture than during its stupendous Unesco-honoured **national song festival** (www.lfcc.lt in Lithuanian), held every four years in July in Vilnius. The next one is scheduled for 2007.

The pan-Baltic **Baltica International Folklore Festival** takes place all over Lithuania every three years. Lithuania will host the 19th festival in 2008.

Vilnius' two main festivals are the **Vilnius Festival** (May to June), a month-long summer festival of classical music; and **Vilnius Days** (September), a five-day celebration of carnivals, street theatre, dancing, masked parades and craft fairs.

HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day/National Flag Day 1 January

Independence Day 16 February (anniversary of 1918 independence declaration)

Restoration of the Independent Lithuanian State 11 March

Easter (Good Friday and Easter Monday) April

International Labour Day 1 May

Feast of St John (Midsummer) 24 June

Statehood Day 6 July (commemoration of Grand Duke Mindaugas' coronation in the 13th century)

Feast of the Assumption 15 August

Vytautas the Great's Coronation 8 September

Constitution Day 25 October

All Saints' Day 1 November

Christmas 25 and 26 December

MONEY

Lithuania's plan to adopt the euro in 2007 fell through, so the litas (plural litai; Lt) will remain the country's currency for at least a couple more years. All but the smallest Lithuanian towns usually have at least one bank with a functional ATM. Most big banks cash travellers cheques and exchange most major currencies. Credit cards are widely accepted.

Waiters and bartenders definitely appreciate a 10% tip.

POST

Sending a postcard/letter abroad costs 1.20/1.70Lt.

TELEPHONE

To call other cities within Lithuania, dial ☎ 8 followed by the city code and phone number. To make an international call dial ☎ 00 before the country code.

To call a mobile phone within Lithuania, dial ☎ 8 followed by the eight-digit number.

Payphones – increasingly rare given the widespread use of mobiles – are blue and only accept phonecards, sold in denominations of 9Lt, 13Lt, 16Lt and 30Lt at newsstands.

VISAS

Citizens from the EU, Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand and the USA do not need visas for entry if staying for less than 90 days.

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