



8 days from £849

June & September

## Lithuania – Vilnius, Kaunas & Klaipeda

*Lithuania is a land of folklore and legend which, towards the end of the Middle Ages, was one of the largest countries in Europe, stretching from the Baltic down to the Black Sea, encompassing what is now Belarus and Ukraine. Modern Lithuania is just half the size of England, and this holiday is an exploration of the country from its Baroque capital, Vilnius, across to Klaipeda on the coast, and the medieval and Art Deco city of Kaunas in the centre. You'll also travel down the remarkable Curonian Spit as far as the border with Russian Kaliningrad, and visit the emotive monument of the Hill of Crosses.*

- 3 nights bb in Vilnius, 2 nights bb in Klaipeda, 2 nights bb in Kaunas • 3 lunches • City tours of Vilnius, Klaipeda and Kaunas
- Excursion to Trakai Castle • Tour of the Curonian Spit • Visits of the Palanga Botanical Gardens, and the Hill of Crosses

### PROGRAMME

**DAY ONE:** Flight to Vilnius or Kaunas. Transfer to your hotel in Vilnius for three nights' bed and breakfast accommodation. Transfer times are 15 minutes from Vilnius airport and 1 hour 15 minutes from Kaunas airport.

**DAY TWO:** Half-day sight-seeing tour of Vilnius. A panoramic tour by coach includes a visit of the Baroque Church of St. Peter and St. Paul. This is followed by a walking tour of the atmospheric Old Town and its countless Baroque buildings. The cobbled streets are a delight to explore. The colonnaded Cathedral, like St. Peter and St. Paul, is built on a former pagan site of worship (Lithuania was the last country in Europe to convert to Christianity). Entrance is included to Vilnius University. Housed in a collection of court-yarded precincts, the old university, dating from the 16th century, is among the world's top-ranked.

**DAY THREE:** Half-day excursion to Trakai Castle. Just sixteen miles from Vilnius, set on an island amid a beautiful wooded lake district, is Trakai Castle – symbol of Lithuania's former military dominance. The castle is reached via a 300-metre wooden walkway across the water from the town of Trakai. The renovated castle was originally built in the 14th and 15th centuries and consists of defensive walls with red turrets surrounding a huge central keep. After a guided tour, you return to Vilnius where the afternoon is for you to enjoy shops, cafes and museums of the lively capital.

**DAY FOUR:** Depart for Klaipeda, 195 miles away. You leave the flatlands of the east and cross rolling plains on your way to the Baltic Sea. On arrival in Klaipeda you have an included lunch in a local restaurant before checking-in to your hotel in the early afternoon for two nights' bed and breakfast accommodation. In the late afternoon, there is a guided tour of Klaipeda. Both the history and geography of Klaipeda is complicated. If you sense a Germanic feel to the town, it's because it was part of Prussia in its various forms, and then part of Germany until the end of WWI, and re-annexed by Hitler in 1939. An old Hanseatic port, Klaipeda (or Memel, as it was known) has always been the region's major maritime gateway. Although it is still an important industrial hub, the compact Old Town has a vibrant café scene, restaurants and museums. As for the unusual geography of the region, you have to wait until tomorrow!

**DAY FIVE:** Full-day tour of the Curonian Spit. Unique in Europe, the Spit is a 65-mile long, narrow strip of sand dunes, formed over the millennia by the wind and sea, creating the lagoon between the coast proper and the Baltic. It stretches from Klaipeda to the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad and is dotted with small resorts and fishing hamlets. The whole peninsula is a UNESCO-listed site. The top half as far as Nida belongs to Lithuania and is a protected National Park. The day starts with a ferry hop across to the isthmus for the drive down to Juodkrante, a genteel resort now known for its sculpture park, the Witches' Hill. The wooden exhibits portray Lithuanian legend and folklore, reminding us of the region's relatively recent pagan past. A short stop is then made by a cormorant and grey heron colony before continuing to Nida near the Russian border. An old fishing village with wooden houses, Nida has been a popular seaside retreat since the 19th century. Thomas Mann had a summer home built here in the 1930's. The sand dunes around Nida are particularly impressive, with the Pamidis dune rising to 165 feet. After an included lunch, you have an hour-long cruise on the lagoon for wonderful views of a wondrous landscape. Return to the hotel in the late afternoon.

65 miles round trip today.

**DAY SIX:** Depart Klaipeda for Kaunas. The first stop is Palanga, Lithuania's largest resort seventeen miles up the coast. Here you visit the Botanical Gardens, landscaped in 1897 by Edouard Andre who designed city parks in Paris, Bulgaria, and Madeira – an early masterpiece being Sefton Park in Liverpool. You'll also visit the fascinating Amber Museum in the Tyskiewicz Palace in the Gardens before continuing eastward for an included lunch on your way to the Hill of Crosses. The traditional folk art of 'cross-crafting' in Lithuania has been passed down the generations and you'll see many intricately carved crosses as you travel across the country. But nothing can prepare you for the Hill of Crosses. This mound may have had a mystic significance in the pre-Christian era, but the first crosses probably started appearing in the 1830's as a focus for Lithuanian identity and remembrance. The Russians bulldozed the hill three times during the Soviet occupation, but the crosses just re-appeared. There are now in excess of 20,000 crosses on the hill. After your visit, you continue to Kaunas for two nights' bed and breakfast accommodation. 225 miles today.

**DAY SEVEN:** Morning city tour including the Old Town and the Ninth Fort. A UNESCO City of Design, Kaunas has a remarkable mixture of architectural styles ranging from Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque through to Modernist and Art Deco. With water on three sides, picturesque Kaunas Old Town has an impressive Town Hall surrounded by churches, museums and merchants' houses. The New Town is bristling with architectural gems from the inter-war years when Kaunas was the temporary capital. On the outskirts of the city, the Ninth Fort has been reconstructed as a museum. Built during the occupation by Tsarist Russia, it became a prison and, later, a Nazi death camp.

**DAY EIGHT:** Departure transfer to the airport for your flight home. Transfer time: 15 minutes to Kaunas, and 1 ½ hours to Vilnius.

### YOUR HOTELS

**RADISSON BLU LIETUVA** ★★★★★, Vilnius (three nights)

Situated in the popular Snipiskes area just over the river from the Old Town, the hotel has a restaurant, lobby bar and rooftop bar with views over the river to the Old Town, fitness centre and free wifi throughout the hotel. Bedrooms have bath/shower, tea and coffee making facilities, hairdryer and safe. ([www.radissonblu.com/en/lietuvalhotel-vilnius](http://www.radissonblu.com/en/lietuvalhotel-vilnius))

**RADISSON BLU KLAIPEDA** ★★★★★, Klaipeda (two nights)

The hotel is set just off the busy Manto Avenue in the New Town. It has a popular restaurant, lobby bar, fitness centre and free wifi throughout the hotel. Bedrooms have bath/shower, tea and coffee making facilities, hairdryer and safe. ([www.radissonblu.com/en/hotel-klaipeda](http://www.radissonblu.com/en/hotel-klaipeda))

**PARK INN by RADISSON** ★★★★★, Kaunas (two nights)

Close to many of the city's landmarks, museums, and shopping area, the hotel has a restaurant, bar, spa centre, and free wifi throughout the hotel. Bedrooms have bath/shower, tea and coffee making facilities, and hairdryer. ([www.parkinn.com/hotel-kaunas](http://www.parkinn.com/hotel-kaunas))