



# Travails, Trips and Travels

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## Vilnius: 2009 European Capital of Culture

**E**very year a city in Europe is chosen by the EU to be the European Capital of Culture. Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania currently holds the coveted title. The designation allows the city to showcase its cultural life and cultural development for a year. Thus, it is the best time to visit since it has a lot to offer to its guests.



Culture Capital 2009

My trip to Vilnius was the best occasion to experience the place at its finest. I happen to be there having been invited to be a speaker in an AIDS conference. A first glimpse of the city upon my arrival gave me a good impression at once. I couldn't wait to finish my conference and discover all the facets of its culture. I had a good view of the city since I stayed in one of the tallest and luxurious hotels, Reval Hotel Lietuva, situated on the bank of the River Neris. I enjoyed looking at the city from my room both day and at night when the city glimmered with lights.

It was always pleasant to walk in Vilnius since it is not really a big

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Old town



Neris River



Vilnius at night

(Travails.... from page 30) city. Even the airport is within reach. One will not get lost since there are many landmarks including the beautiful River Neris which meanders through it. Of course, I had my good friend, Marius Poškus, a Lithuanian friend I have known a few years back who was also a good source of information. Marius works in the city but lives in a farm with his horses, one of which is named 'Don'. He was a gracious host who made my stay pleasant.

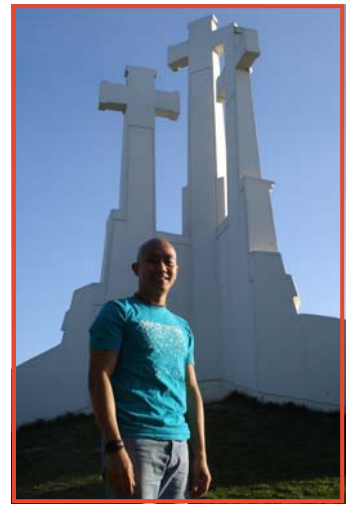
The medieval Old Town is the best place to start one's walk. There is a high concentration of interesting landmarks to see in this area. Given the religious history of the country, there are lots of churches to see. One of the most prominent is the Vilnius Cathedral built in 1251. It is the main Roman Catholic Cathedral of the country and the heart of the religion's spiritual life. The green Russian Orthodox Church in another part of the



Marius Poshkus, my Lithuanian friend

Old Town is also significant. It was built in 1913 to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Romanov Dynasty.

One knows that he is in the centre of the Old Town upon seeing the Vilnius Rotušė (Vilnius Town Hall). This building built in the 18th century has a long history. At present it is the centre of city celebrations just like the rest of the town halls of Europe. Near the Town Hall is the Lithuanian National Philharmonic which is another prominent edifice and showcases the country's musical culture.



Hill of Three Crosses

One of the major museums of the country located in the Old Town is the National Museum which houses an extensive ethnographic collection of the country's culture. It showcases the history of the people of Lithuania from the 13th century to the present. There are more museums one can visit featuring other themes such as amber, archaeology or modern art.



National Museum



Vilnius Rotušė

Towards the hill is one of the famous symbols of Vilnius, the Three Crosses. It is believed that seven Franciscan monks were crucified here thus the crosses symbolize Lithuanian mourning and hope. From this vantage point one can have an excellent view of the Old Town.

I think I walked a number of times all over the city to shoot pictures and to gaze at marvellous structures. The city has a mixture of buildings from various periods. Many of them are well preserved. It is good that Vilnius was never a major site of war during the turbulent years of the European history. In between these walks I took time to taste the exquisite Lithuanian cuisine in many restaurants all over the city.



Vilnius Cathedral

Lithuania has a small population of 3.6 million. It became a member of the European Union in 2004 thus making it easy for Schengen Visa holders to travel. It recently elected, Dalia Grybauskaitė, its first female President in 2009. It is also amazing to know that Lithuania is the geographical centre of Europe and a landmark designates its location. The country has a significant role since it borders with Belarus and the enclave of Russia, Kaliningrad.

I have all praises of the city having enjoyed its wonderful culture and its warm and beautiful people. Many of my photos were just post-card perfect given the beautiful sights and landscape. It was a good summer when I flew to the capital. I say thumbs up to the 2009 Culture Capital of Europe. Sveikinu!

