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Vilnius's Hill of Three Crosses, main; crypt under the cathedral, top; Old Town, above; cathedral and bell tower, below left

Downtime in Vilnius

Below the surface in Lithuania's historic capital

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Busy Cathedral Square lies at the heart of the UNESCO-inscribed Old Town in Vilnius, Lithuania. From the belfry, walk south to explore cobblestone streets full of shops, museums and cafes; southeast to reach the crumbling grand facades of the bohemian district of Uzupis; and west to find the former headquarters of the Gestapo for a grim reminder of Lithuania's recent past.

Yet to fully understand Vilnius, you need to descend many metres underground, to layers of the city that remain concealed well below street level and the thousands of feet that crisscross its surface every day. Dating back to medieval times, Vilnius was buried and built over due to wars, fires and the passage of time. And a tour titled Underground Vilnius offers unparalleled access. "This is a side of Vilnius that most tourists never see," says my guide, Emilija.

We first descend via stairs leading several metres underneath the grand floor of Vilnius Cathedral. The temperature drops; the smells of damp earth and stale air grow stronger. This is a restricted area, accessible only in the company of a local guide. A couple of stray tourists try to follow us, rattling the locked gate as they go, but Emilija pays them no heed. She is absorbed in telling me how the cathedral has been destroyed and rebuilt several times over the past seven centuries. During one of its restorations, the altars of a pagan temple dedicated to Perkunas, the Baltic god of thunder, rain, mountains, oak trees and the sky, were discovered on the site. Sacrificial animals, including snakes, goats and roosters, were kept here, along with an eternal fire maintained by virgins who would be put to death should the flames go out.

Indeed, there are many reminders that Lithuania was Europe's last pagan state. Just outside the cathedral is a monument to the founder of the city, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, Gediminas. Legend has it that Gediminas consulted a pagan priest about an unusual dream he'd had of an iron wolf at the top of a mountain, howling loudly at the moon. This, the priest explains, represented the fame of the future city that Gediminas was to establish, with a reputation that would spread far



IN THE KNOW

Qantas flies to Singapore and connects to a Finnair codeshare flight via Helsinki, and then on to Vilnius. The newly opened 104-room Pacai Hotel is reconstructed from the ruins of a 17th-century baroque palace.

■ vilnius-tourism.lt/en
■ hotelpacai.com
■ qantas.com.au
■ finnair.com

and wide, "as far as the howling of the mysterious wolf".

We step carefully through low-slung Gothic arches to a display of relics and other items uncovered during archeological digs, such as shards of handcrafted pottery, arrowheads made from bone and iron, gold rings and gilded pins. There are also fractured tombstones, clay tiles, candlesticks and coffin holders.

At least 27 known crypts lie here, the final resting places of ancient nobles and clerics. The oldest burials, dating from the 13th and 14th centuries, were discovered at the level of the earliest floor, more than 3m below ground, and some of these coffins can still be viewed in the echoing halls.

Archeologists continue to unearth fresh discoveries. Last year, the ruins of ritual baths, used by congregants of Vilnius's large Jewish community, were found. Nazi soldiers had razed these and other buildings, includ-

ing 12 synagogues, schools and a library, when they occupied the city in June 1941. It's clear that this nation of three million is still recovering after almost 50 subsequent years of Soviet occupation. It declared its independence as recently as 1990. As such, the scars remain fresh; the wounds still raw.

We explore the Jewish Ghetto as part of the Vilnius Tourist Information Centre's shorter two-hour walking tour. Our guide is moved to tears as she describes mass shootings, imprisonment, slave labour, starvation and exile. Descending steep concrete steps to the basement underneath the Jewish Centre of Culture and Information provides a small but eerie glimpse of what life was like for those forced into hiding. I'm taken briefly into a tiny, airless room, pitch black, sparsely furnished. Deep within the damp earth, it's easy to see how some suffocated to death, while others were driven mad by the darkness.

We visit many other buildings in the centre of Vilnius Old Town that contain hidden basements that once functioned as living spaces, workshops, storage areas or hiding holes.

The Amber Museum-Gallery, one of many places where Baltic amber may be purchased, houses a 15th-century kiln and earthenware on its lower ground floor. Here, Perkunas again rears his head as he is connected with the story of local amber. According to legend, enraged by his daughter's love for a fisherman, Perkunas sent a bolt of lightning to kill him, and to destroy his daughter's amber palace. It's said that fragments of amber washed ashore following Baltic Sea storms are the tears of the still-grieving goddess.

I also happen upon another basement when I circle back to where my day started, Cathedral Square, to treat myself at Kempinski The Spa, located underneath the Kempinski Hotel. I slip into a robe and explore the subterranean pool, spa and lounge area. There is something womblike about this steamy, warm, windowless space, and it's tempting to linger — but I'm soon ushered into a treatment room for the spa's signature Amber Experience.

Many believe that Baltic amber, the fossilised resin of ancient pine trees, possesses therapeutic properties. The presence of body heat supposedly causes amber to release oils high in succinic acid, which stimulates skin cell renewal, calms the nervous system and regulates metabolic processes. I have no idea if that's true. Yet lying in this softly lit room, being scrubbed into somnolence with amber powder, and knowing a massage and facial will follow, it's hard to argue otherwise.

MORE TO THE STORY

Basement dining? Saula Food Cellar (pictured) is located in the midst of Vilnius's tourist district but its unassuming facade does little to invite exploration. There's no menu out front, the word "restoranas" is barely visible on the front glass door, and there's no telling what's at the bottom of the flight of stairs. What I find, though, is a stylish basement restaurant with whitewashed brick walls and blond wood tables carved from Lithuanian oak in a space once occupied by a 16th and 17th-century bazaar. Saula's menu celebrates contemporary Lithuanian cuisine, and features a joyful shout-out to individually named local farmers. Dishes include beef tongue served with rye bread, cream and goat's cheese salad; or fried catfish with potatoes and cauliflower puree, followed by unusual desserts such as buckthorn panna cotta or chocolate cake made with porcini mushrooms.

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