

Lithuania is an undiscovered gem of Eastern Europe, says **Scott Armstrong**

So cool, it's Baltic

Imagine a place where time slows until you can see the wings of a humming bird. Then imagine within that place you are sitting on a boat in the middle of a serene lake, with your wife, your glass of wine, and the only sound is the occasional fish leaping.

Can you imagine that? Then you are just about in Esperanza mode in Lithuania.

Hewn from cedars, this five-star resort sits in a beautiful forest setting, with ecological friendliness woven into to every strand, so you can feel good about enjoying yourself.

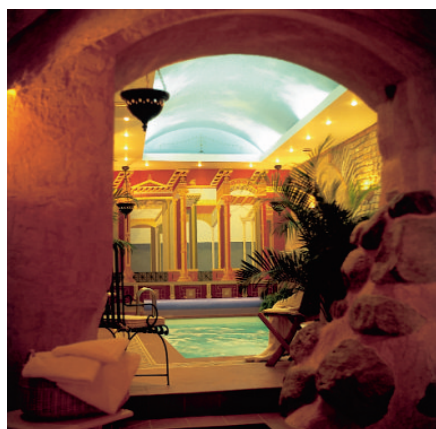
After two busy days in Vilnius, a vibrant city and one of Europe's best-kept secrets, Esperanza is the perfect way to relax and fall still more in love with Lithuania as a tourist destination.

A blissful Thai massage, from a Thai masseuse, followed by that row out onto the lake was the precursor to an evening at the star in Esperanza's crown, its restaurant.

This wasn't a meal, it was an education in fine dining with Renatas as our professor. He is one of a select band of rock-star waiters at this resort who know their food and drink inside out. With every mouthwatering dish he

not only chose an amazing wine; he told you the story of the wine and how it had come to be so special.

Most of the vegetables and fruit that accompany the dishes come straight from the resort's organic garden. There can be few sweeter pleasures than sitting with great company on the deck of this restaurant watching the sky turn red and the stars emerge over lake and forest.





Next morning Esperanza gives you plenty of opportunity to work off your dinner, cycling through the woods, breathing the crisp clean air; swimming in the lake or the pool, playing tennis, five-a-side football, 10-pin bowling, basketball. You can walk the nature trail, hit the pedalos or simply help pick fruit and vegetables in the garden.

Rather like Esperanza itself, Lithuania remains a relatively undiscovered gem; a place where character, difference and charm are not faked or manufactured, or part of a marketing drive to get tourists in.

While Baltic neighbours such as Poland's Prague or Latvia's Talin are well-known, Vilnius is less so. Twisting medieval streets of the Old Town provide a wonderful backdrop to an afternoon's city meandering, happening across sophisticated little bars, cafés, galleries as you do.

Vilnius doesn't try too hard. It doesn't have to. It's almost as laid-back as Amsterdam (but far safer) while quietly having that cosmopolitan European vibe of Barcelona. Yet unlike either of those, its smaller size makes it totally unimposing; you instantly feel comfortable in this city. Walk into any restaurant and they'll smile and greet you in English, but try a little of the language and you'll get a bigger smile.



That lack of pretension extends even to Vilnius' definition of a five-star hotel, such as the Stikliai Hotel, buried in the heart of the Old Town, which has an unashamedly traditional view of what makes a place special to stay.

Not a Swarovski crystal in sight; instead, indulgence fabrics, dark rich woods and intimate lighting made this feel very much like a boutique hotel. However, like London's Dorchester, all your tech needs are there, they are just discreetly tucked away. The same goes for the swimming pool and sauna, which provide much-needed relief from sightseeing.

The Lithuanians are immensely proud of their Lithuanian menu, their Lithuanian beer, their Lithuanian vodka. All three are a massive part of their cultural identity, and all are tremendous. Their musicians still write songs about the Unesco-recognised beauty of their green countryside, dotted with lakes and fields of yellow.

Lithuania has a history of being different. Its language shares no common root with its neighbours. It was the first country to break away from the Soviet Union; essentially, it prides itself on being unique.

And that's what you get when you visit: a uniquely special experience which will linger long in the memory.



OUT AND ABOUT IN VILNIUS

Vilnius is awash with bars and restaurants of all cuisines, but look to eat in at least one Lithuania kitchen and order yourself a Svyturys beer (which has won numerous European awards) or even a Vilkmerges (darker real ale). Cozy, in the heart of the Old Town, near Stikliai, on Dominikonu street, stands out, it's small but perfectly formed with excellent food, and the cellar bar underneath is supercool too. Or for a fantastic birdseye view of the city head to the Radisson Blu's Sky Bar: the cocktails aren't bad, either. There is a host of bars around Gediminas Prospect, which is Vilnius' more modern high-street district.

VISIT: About a one-hour drive from Vilnius is Druskininkai. This charming riverside town is again a little jewel. One could argue its main claim to fame is the Aquapark, a kind of mini Center Parcs which has great little rides for the children and more importantly (depending on your view) an adults-only spa with 20 saunas and steam room, plus pool with swim-up bar. The salt-rub steam room is amazing. However this town's beautiful lake also provides a relaxing and peaceful evening walk, or morning jog.

VISIT: Trakai Castle is half between Esperanza resort and Vilnius and this beautiful fortress by the lake is a perfect photo opportunity, a real step back into history. Take a cruise around the moat and keep your camera ready.

VISIT: Palanga is a three-hour drive from Vilnius and is a lively seaside resort by the Baltic Sea. During peak season this one of the spots the Lithuanians flock to at the coast and its promenade has the feel of British seaside resorts at their peak decades ago. Families out walking, restaurants with live musicians and singers, and an energetic community buzz especially at the pier where crowds gather to watch the sunset. If you are looking for a five-star stay the Palanga Hotel and Spa sits close to the beach and is well worth considering.

VISIT: Nida is the principal settlement on the Lithuanian half of the Unesco-protected Curonian Spit, a stunning series of dunes which are a haven of peace. Much quieter than Palanga you'll again get some beautiful pictures and merits a day trip at least.

• **Scott stayed courtesy of the Esperanza resort and the Stikliai.**