

# Home sweet home?

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is watery and chemical-laden.

In the early morning, with nothing but the stars to shine through the window to the stairwell, my aching arms lift the suitcases on a slight angle to softly move the wheels slowly, descending each wooden step. My roommates – who are also from the U.S. – are asleep because they have to do work in the morning. And it just so happens that old buildings don't have the luxury of an elevator.

As the key unlocks the tall cast-iron gate to exit the courtyard, my head rushes with a feeling of sadness and frustration because I knew this was my last time to say goodbye to Old Europe and hello to Corporate America.

I pull my belongings up Ausros Vartu, the "Gates of Dawn," portal where my eyes are fixated for the last time to the beautiful gold image of the Virgin Mary adorned with gold-shaped hearts, flowers and candles – where young and old people – no matter how much they are in a hurry – pause and pray for a minute or two before rushing off. I turned to look down the road – toward Town Hall Square – to the flashing red-colored Christmas tree – and soaked in all the memories of meeting up with friends to hang out.

The portal leads to a main road where the cab driver is destined to stop and pick up my luggage. The only noise to keep me company is a few laughs and a burst of off-pitch singing from some drunkards walking home in the distance. The cab arrives at 4:30 a.m.

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"Do you miss driving?" It was the first question my father asked me as I sat in the back on the car ride home from the Pittsburgh International Airport. I had

to reflect upon the question in my head over and over again, looking outside the car window, staring at the mass influx of cars zipping up and down the three-to-four lane parkway in the late morning. From side to side, buildings and roads pollute the vast and wide land.



And yet, I couldn't say a direct answer to father's question. The peaceful, serene streets, the sun reflecting against the brightly painted pastel buildings, the fully bloomed flowers, the trees, the smell of freshly cut grass, and the soft voices, the tip tap of shoes striking the cobblestone street and the sound of church bells in a distance were simply light distractions all shared on a July afternoon ... Take me back to Vilnius.

Whenever I arrived in Lithuania, July 2007, some of the U.S. expats told me that it's more difficult going back home than adjusting to life here. At first, I laughed because America is such a larger country with more capital, but as the weeks progressed, I knew they were right.

All of the sudden, life slows down. People take time for lunch. The weekends are meant to rest. The holidays last two to three months. Most stores close after 6 or 8 p.m. And, walking is a daily routine. It's silly to write this, but the first lesson I learned coming back to the U.S. is truth to the culture of order, gestures and dress.

## VILNIUS AT A GLANCE

During my first week, my boss took me on a tour of Old Town, and the weather was so hot and pleasant in mid-July that so many tourists and residents flooded the narrow sidewalks and streets to get some fresh air and bright sun. The movement in the U.S. is much different because at home, there are more cars, and if people who do walk, they stick to the sidewalks and a good 30 cm distance from each other. Since so many people are built different heights, walking is seen at all different paces, and a few, clumsily, despite being completely sober.

The way to walk in Vilnius, or in most of any old European town, almost takes a solid balancing act. My long legs had to get adjusted to moving daintily and lightly forward in such small spaces and tight corners. The moving cars hug so close to the sidewalks that just when it feels like you will get hit, only the soft whisk of wind tickles the skin and a faint rev of a car motor is left behind. Lithuanians are extremely cautious at the cross walks, too. No matter if there is clearly not a car in sight, left or right, Lithuanians obey the pedestrian-traffic signs. If you move too early, people give a startled look of surprise and almost a sense of wonder for making such a brave, bold move!

**Most people were fit and well dressed, too. In the U.S, it is a social norm for a fat person to walk around in sweats pants, gym shoes and a baseball cap in public places chomping on a bag of Doritos chips.**

In Vilnius, the only food people walk and eat was ice cream cones in the summertime. Many girls were the perfect models because they were all tall and thin. I noticed how they tried to carry themselves so gracefully with high heels despite the cobblestone streets and narrow sidewalks.

Lithuanian driving is scary. The cars zoom and rush over to different lanes and up hills in seconds and almost crash into pedestrians that I like to compare them to kamikazes. Tourists who try to navigate the maze of streets in Old Town would angrily put down their maps and give a long stare if a car would zip pass a narrow walkway.

Aside from the car drivers, everything was so quiet. Even the conversations were soft. I noticed Lithuanians rarely talk on their cell phones in public unless it's for an appointment or directions. While riding on the bus, walking on the street or shopping at stores, people see talking on a cell phone in public as ill mannered and rude. Instead, most of the time, I hear the "ding" of a text message on a trolleybus or on the street. I conclude that people here rather prefer to use the cell phone as a business tool - for appointments, directions, and questions due to the expenses involved.



## OFFICE SPACE

Luckily, my cozy hotel was five minutes from my office at The Baltic Times. The building was concrete and situated next to residential apartments. What will it look inside? Warm musty air stuck to my skin and no lights were on in the lobby so to keep cool. A sign indicated the name of businesses and room numbers. No elevators. Marble steps were situated on the staircase, and tall, long walls displayed horizontal windows—about five or six—that were naturally shining the marble. At the top floor, a small 12-foot inscription shows the name of the newspaper and my key unlocks the door to my new job: Two rooms. A wall separates the office. Now, most of the living situation was OK, but there were some quirks. The first side had two IBM computers from possibly the early '90s – a copier, printer, fax machine and the second room had two computers. And low and behold, the Internet would lose connection several times a month and operate slowly. I used my laptop for much of the time, but still, a café was an alternative at some points of time.



Despite no air conditioning and electric fans, the windows were still closed. I would much rather let a flow of warm air inside than suffocate and sweat to death! The women insisted it would be more uncomfortable if opened. A water kettle was situated on a desk for coffee and tea. No refrigerator, no microwave for lunches. My colleagues kindly offered me coffee and tea – On a hot day like this? I didn't want to be rude. I learned from reading books on the country's customs if you decline food or drinks, it could be offensive. The coffee however, is treated so differently. The thin grinds are dumped in the cup and hot water is poured on top. Am I going to get sick? How is it healthy?

I remember taking my first sips and feeling the coffee grits trickle down my throat and trap in between my teeth. If I had to use the restroom, I was told to bring a roll of toilet paper with me. How funny it is to carry my toilet needs down the hallway! The lone single toilet and sink was unkind. When washing up, the sink faucet jetted out with cold water - no hot water - and no hand soap unless bring your own.

Smoke breaks outside was a daily ritual for many. I found the work environment to be casual, and yet, with official diligence to the tasks at hand. I learned that the majority of calls from 12 – 2 p.m. were unanswerable because everyone had a break for lunch.

When I heard people speaking on the phone, courtesy was highly enforced. If one of the advertising colleagues stumbled a word – there was a quick clearing of the voice and an “Astiprasau” (“Excuse Me”) and the conversation continues. The voice is humble, soft and polite. In the U.S. – it is “What do you want?” and butting into conversations. Here, people listen and allow each other time to talk – no matter how painstakingly long and difficult to understand in broken English. It's considered rude if you interrupt and chime in with comments.

I found the art of communication is so perplexing. I could easily be on the same page with someone explaining a concept in English, and then, sometimes it clashes. We could easily misinterpret each other, too. I constantly had to find a center ground with each person Lithuanian I met and measure the level of skill accordingly.

## A SECOND HOME

The month of August arrived so quickly. It is truly a blessing to have my Baltic Times colleague, Egle, willing to help and search for apartments. The rent system is a lot different in the aspect that once you call a landlord, you have to quickly make a dash to meet with the landlord the same day, or else another deal can easily be made.

Neringa, my landlord to my first Vilnius home, was a sweet woman in probably her late 20s. My living arrangements were situated in a Soviet style concrete building. The lobby entrance looked like a bomb hit it. It was hollow, paint peeled from the walls, and a

dim light was the only path to the stairs. Only a lone and empty desk was situated against a wall that was supposed to serve for the post. No mailboxes, just a desk. There were no main doors to lock and secure going in and out. No 24-hour security guard. I thought someone would just come around a corner and mug me at night, but actually, this was probably one of the safest neighborhoods outside of Old Town because of its proximity to a university and the bus line.

Up to the second floor, I was greeted with rubber mats as carpeting down the hallway. I thought for sure my room was going to be like the lobby. Instead, it was bright and sunny with brand-new furniture. A small kitchen counter served for storage, but the sink was only half finished and when I was living there, there was no plan to get it done and no explanation was made. Then, it came to my attention that the reason why the sink wasn't finished is because everything was communal living. I thought, 'Why would someone labor for one room if every tenant will want a sink?' Across the hallway, I had a public restroom, washroom, one shower and one kitchen. Washers are expensive to buy, so like everyone else, it became second nature for me to hand wash my clothes on the concrete floor and take them outside to the drying racks on the porch.

The process was long - and laborious at times with the jeans - and it made me appreciate the small things in life like washers and dryers. The shower, which had rusty pipes and a tile floor, had a window without any blinds. I always felt uncomfortable thinking someone will look in from the porch.

Despite the cold appearances, the community was very warm and friendly. Coming home from work, children played outside in the yard and laughed. When I'm in the U.S. do I ever see children exercising and blowing off energy - or do they sit and play video games all day? I highly doubted these children owned Wii.

The first Lithuanian friend I made - outside of my small office team - was Rasa. A student in her 20s, she was petite, frail and rather pale. The day I met her, I couldn't figure out how to work the stove to cook. The gas would not turn on. She was going in and out of the kitchen and she showed me how to strike a match and light the gas pilot without blowing the place up. She smiled and continued on with cleaning up. She must think I am a stupid American with no concept for everyday things!

In the cool nights, it was always nice to come home and have fun talking broken English with her on the porch as we unclipped the dry clothes off the racks and went to the kitchen to check on our homemade vegetable soup. Rasa taught me the ins and outs to making a delicious bowl of that soup and finding the right ingredients at the market on Sunday mornings.

## BUYING FOOD AND GOODIES THE LITHUANIAN WAY

The market: An incredible, attractive nuisance. I love it and at the same time, I hate it. If you go early morning, you are bound to get the freshest vegetables. Rasa led me through rows and rows of tables with farmers who showcase their jewels from the earth proudly. Tents congest each aisle with sellers hanging shirts, pants, coats, and purses. In one aisle, I almost lost Rasa because a line of clothes blocked my view ahead. Next to the fruits and vegetables, eggs were stacked up against windows in a shack. Here, people bring their egg cartons and choose different assortments. The whole concept of a farmer's market is such a beautiful example of fair trade and good bargains.





My first time in Maxima -- the largest grocery chain -- was a different experience. An automatic door swings opened up below to the aroma of fresh sweet bread. To the fridge section: Packaged raw fish with oil? A chunk of bacon fat? I looked to see if there were any people buying it. I was grossed out. The place had no deli counter for sliced ham or turkey for deli sandwiches. The homemade Baltic breads made up for the differences. It took me so long to decide which bread to buy because everything looked so delicious and healthy -- hearty dark bread and some sprinkled with sunflower and flax seeds.

At the counter, the cashier quickly took my items and pushed them to side. In my embarrassment and confusion, she pointed to the bag and said it was my responsibility. Meanwhile, the person in line behind me was moving along and more items were being pushed aside. It took practice to master this quick pack-and-go skill! What's funny is the store allows the elderly and farmers to sell their produce outside, too. A mysterious old man would hide a dozen or so eggs in a black bag and cradle a single one in his hand so people know. Several other people flock to the bread stand like birds and ask for prices. Some others sell off-the-counter drugs from Belarus and Russia. It's illegal, but here they are. The only trade that yields favorably in the U.S. outside a grocery store is your local Girl Scouts selling boxes of cookies for a fundraiser.

## BOLD AND BRAVE TRANSPORTATION AT YOUR SERVICE

Since I had lived too far away from my office, I quickly had to learn the bus system. Take bus 11 work. And, good luck with navigating the rest of the places. The tickets were purchased at a newspaper stand for 30 cents cheaper than on the bus. I heard that bus drivers don't expect to handle tickets, only to drive, so they charge higher for the "extra duty." Upon entering, I had to immediately punch my bus ticket in one of the metal clamps or scan it through one of the digital boxes to validate my trip. If not, the transport police could pull you out of the bus and make you pay huge fines. I unfortunately learned the hard way as I was taken off the bus by an officer and had to give him cash right away!

Then, there is the constant morning people-traffic. Each trolleybus is literally stuffed like a can of sardines. I am short from holding onto a railing. People push and bump each other and I feel my shoulder ache from the weight of my laptop bag. Ironically, in such an uncomfortable situation, soft classical music -- sometimes opera -- pumps in the air from a radio station. Oh, Vilnius -- The Capital of Culture 09.

**I had stood holding the railing, I looked at the reflection from the driver's mirror and I too, looked tired and sad. I was lifeless, like something sucked all of the energy from me. What happened to the bright and cheery faces from arriving here in July?**

My friend from France, Sandrine, and I were riding home on a Friday or Saturday night from the mall and we both exchanged a small French conversation to avoid people understanding us: "The girls look like they will cry, don't you think?" Yes, all of the girls our age and younger had gloomy eyes. Are they in deep thought? Are they bored? What were they thinking, if anything?

As I walk, I glance at the trolleybus and see a sea of sad and pale faces -- young and old -- quickly escape from me as the electric cables snap and jerk the bus wheels push forward again.

## MAKING FRIENDS ... FINALLY

It took almost a good two months to build a circle of friends. Rasa and I had different schedules so it became difficult to meet. It's quite a humorous way to introduce oneself on a random street, but I was so glad to hear two young men speaking English, it was being rescued on a deserted island. The expatriate story unfolds after meeting them. The two had stemmed from a whole underground expatriate community in Vilnius. They had consisted of Germans, Scandinavians, American students and interns, native Lithuanians and backpackers. Old Town started to look like an entire playground for us. Town Hall Square was designated a meet-up point for everyone. We would go out on summer evenings – it didn't matter what night of the week - and we let the good times roll. I let beer flow into my bloodstream more often than I had ever done so. Every Thursday night, we would have a large "expatriate" hangout at the Uzupis café and then spend more time at the SMC café until it closed at 2 a.m. Then, half-sober, we laughed and walked home in the early morning with the street lamps to guide our way.

The conversations with the expatriates gave me an outlet to hear what people think of the Iraq War and 9/11.

**The Scandinavians were highly disgusted with President Bush. I couldn't blame them at all. I had to reinforce the issue that the majority of Americans oppose the Iraq war and Bush. We had formed an international crisis, sadly, and the rest of the world is frustrated.**

As a follow-up question, the Scandinavians said: "Who do you think will win the next presidential election? Hillary Clinton? Barack Obama?" At the time, I said Clinton has a better chance. Some were intrigued that Americans base their votes on "moral values" and "feelings." I tried my best to explain, but it was even difficult for even myself to figure out!

As for socializing with a group of Lithuanians, I found the girls to be somewhat quiet at first. They study you first and see how you behave. Then, they will open up and like you for who you are. I found Lithuanian girls to

be so helpful, hospitable and kind. Many try to enjoy life without taking it too serious. One cold autumn night, I went to a house party in my little neighborhood. The group of 6 or 7 mostly talked in Lithuanian. One of the girls – Milda – was a singer/songwriter. She was our entertainment for the evening. She cradled her guitar and plucked the chords and sang alto to a beautiful love song – despite my lack of understanding of the lyrics! Afterward, my friends took what was left of the wine and we all shared it on our way to an after-party club several streets away and danced to techno until 4 in the morning!

## TALE OF TWO CITIES

Lithuanians had told me Kaunas is nothing like Vilnius. I had to see it for myself. My friend Zivile is from Kaunas. She would go to group meetings with backpackers in Vilnius and that's how we had met. After almost 3 hours on the bus, the city is much smaller in population and has fewer places to visit. She lives in a good old-fashioned Soviet style apartment complex, in a neighborhood where all the buildings consist of the same gray color and square-cut windows. I had a chilling feeling over me because it seemed so lifeless. A sad history fills the town – for so long, the residents did not have their own identity. But slowly, the town is reviving.

At night, we had walked in the town's main street where so many cute boutiques and shops fill the center. Couples held hands – something I don't see often in the U.S. I also had an overwhelming sense of nostalgia of the heydays when America used to have mom-and-pop stores instead of mega-giant Wal-Mart. And yet, there were other streets where abandoned lots and buildings destroyed the beauty. St. George's Church had broken windows, boards, and metal gates blocking the entrance. Long ago, the Moscow army destroyed the church and it had been converted into a military warehouse.



## AN INNER PEACE

I had also coordinated a trip to Siaulia to see The Hill of Crosses with two expats - a spooky, almost cryptic site – is a tribute to those who had perished during the Russian Empire and the Wars of Independence. Lithuanians used the site to pray for peace, for their loved ones, who died during Soviet occupation.

**Millions of crosses - from all different sizes - were stacked, hung or situated in the ground. As the wind blows, all you can hear is the crosses striking against each other - the sound of hollow bones playing a melody - to the lost souls, grieving families, poverty and hardship.**

However, this serene, lonely time of reflection was pushed up against what's supposed to be the most celebrated time of a person's life – a wedding! Young brides and grooms distracted our time - the whole wedding parade - posing for pictures! How bizarre! Why would you have your wedding pictures at one of the most depressing places? The families were in good spirits and the bride lifted her dress so lights to pass the dirt path and avoid knocking over crosses on her way to the photo shoots. In my conclusion, I see that was a deeply spiritual fanfare for the families – almost an honor, or dedication – to their ancestors. I learned Lithuanian verbal folklore touched the human spirit and stimulated thinking. The pagans dominated the country. Nature, health, beauty and family were the bounties of a good life. There were songs for every occasion in life – marriage, death, birth, the changing of seasons – and intertwined with art, dancing and music. Much of my heart was drawn to the tales and symbols.

My mind drifted back to conversations in a café with church friends, and how we were all lifting our human spirits up with our own stories to share. The Vilnius International Church had a small group – maybe 10 or 12 – and they were all from the U.K. and the U.S. The reverend became a mentor and friend, and he held coffee breaks after the worship service with all of us. In almost six months here, I still struggled with the communication without a translator to decode stories of impact for the newspaper. But it also seemed as though Lithuanian media would let the government

control the information to people—just like mainstream media in the U.S.

All my friends saw me look tired, worn and out of luck. They told me I need a happier, healthier experience. I wanted to stay, I wanted to find stories, and use journalism as a source of truth. But perhaps it was time to go seek a new adventure.

## HOME SWEET HOME?

At a U.S. airport, a large, buff passport control officer – who looked more like an Army GI with his tattoos on his muscular arms - had sat behind a desk and took a stern analysis of my passport stamps. He noticed my Lithuanian visa. "Lithuania. What were you doing there?" I told him I was working. He smirked and asked: "Do you plan to go back?" I replied with a simple "No." And he gave me his proud-All-American-fighter-bleed-red-white-and-blue smile and slyly said: "Now you know why." And stamped my passport to proceed. It was so bold, so offensive. I wanted to turn around and say, "Well, it just so happens that I may go back!" to defend my own self, my heritage, my culture.

Now I am living in Washington, D.C., and working for a newspaper. I am always fighting traffic, eating lunch at my work desk and striving to stay strong in this damn competitive field of journalism. People quickly tap the computer keys, phones ring, the fax machine pushes out press releases, and editors swarm the newsroom with wild ideas. CNN is in full blast. I had become so used to the slower pace in Vilnius. Now I'm forced to go fast-forward, again.

Needless to say, I am doing my best to adjust back to the American culture, but I still can't see eye-to-eye with America. Everyone is loud, demanding and selfish. Food tastes so artificial and the produce is watery and chemical-laden. The best part of knowing I was in Corporate America is when the grocery cashier – so focused on the job – would quickly say, "Do you have your Safeway card?" so I would be sure to not to forget my coupon. But, there isn't a day that goes by I think about Vilnius. It seems like a dream – so far away and unimaginable. I keep my Baltic amber necklace – a gift from a friend - close to my heart, wearing it everyday to never forget part of my heritage, the people and the journey.

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