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Lithuania

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Introduction

Lithuania, a land where the primeval forests of Northern Europe sway beside rolling fields and thousands of sparkling lakes, is a country balanced between remarkable historical depth and an eager gaze toward the future. Held between larger powers and vast empires, Lithuania has preserved an identity that is both distinctively Baltic and uniquely its own. Today, it stands not only as a geographical bridge between East and West but also as a symbol of survival and resilience—its narrative echoing from ancient tribal beginnings to the country's vibrant participation in the modern European community.

At first glance, Lithuania's story may be marked by its borders: to the north with Latvia, to the east and south with Belarus, southwest with Poland and the Russian Kaliningrad exclave, and a western glance to the cold, open waters of the Baltic Sea. Yet its true boundaries are drawn by the memory of pagan forests, grand medieval fortresses, songs carried by generations, and the resilience built over centuries of invasion, union, occupation, and independence.

This book serves as a wide-ranging portrait of Lithuania, drawing together the threads of geography, history, culture, and contemporary experience. Readers will trace the arc of Lithuania's earliest settlements, the rise and splendor of the Grand Duchy, the remarkable union with Poland, and the subsequent centuries of occupation and struggle. The complex journey to restored independence at the close of the twentieth century is a defining chapter, deeply felt in the country's collective memory and visible in its cultural institutions and political life.

Yet to understand Lithuania fully, one must also explore its everyday life—kitchen tables scented with dill and rye bread, forests alive with the call of foragers and birds, ancient midsummer rituals, and the solemn presence of centuries-old wooden crosses dotting the countryside. The enduring strength of the Lithuanian language, the vividness of folk art, the fervor of Catholic tradition alongside the echoes of paganism, all paint a kaleidoscopic image of who Lithuanians are and how they see their place in the world.

In the pages that follow, you will find insights into Lithuania's present: the rapidly modernizing economy, educational ambitions, the political stance at the crossroads of Europe, and the environmental challenges and triumphs of a country where nature is as beloved as history. Whether you are planning a journey, seeking understanding of your own roots, or simply curious about this Baltic nation, this book is both a doorway and a companion to discovering Lithuania in all its complexity and beauty.

Ultimately, “Lithuania: Portrait of a Country” invites you to journey beyond the headlines and maps. Here, you will encounter a living nation—one shaped by ancient forests and tumultuous history, by resilience and renewal, by traditions fiercely held and a future ever in motion.

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CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Climate

Lithuania, officially the Republic of Lithuania, holds a unique position in the Baltic region of Europe. As the southernmost and largest of the three Baltic states, it anchors itself on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea, its coastline a relatively short stretch that nonetheless holds significant maritime importance. To its north, Lithuania shares a border with Latvia, while its eastern and southern flanks meet Belarus. Poland lies to the south, and the curious Russian semi-exclave of Kaliningrad Oblast forms its southwestern boundary. Across the Baltic Sea to the west, Lithuania also maintains a maritime border with Sweden.

At 65,300 square kilometers (25,200 sq mi), Lithuania is a country of comfortable size, often compared to the American state of West Virginia. To put it in European perspective, it confidently surpasses the land area of nations such as Belgium, Denmark, Latvia, Estonia, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia, or Switzerland. The landscape, largely shaped by the colossal glaciers of the last Ice Age, presents a predominantly flat, gentle expanse. Moderate lowlands give way to equally moderate highlands, creating a subtly undulating terrain that is both picturesque and practical for agriculture. The highest point, Aukštojas Hill, barely scrapes the sky at 294 meters (965 ft), nestled in the eastern reaches of the country.

One of Lithuania's most enchanting geographical features is its abundance of inland waters. The country is speckled with an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 lakes, a testament to its glacial past. These aquatic jewels are not scattered haphazardly but tend to concentrate in the east and southeast, forming a network of serene blue within the verdant landscape. Complementing these lakes is a web of rivers that crisscross the nation. The mighty Nemunas River reigns supreme, serving as the main and largest waterway. Its numerous tributaries, including the Merkys, Neris, Nevėžis, Dubysa, Jūra, Minija, and Šešupė, feed into its expansive flow. The Nemunas, along with some of its larger tributaries, even accommodates internal shipping, providing a navigable backbone to the country's interior.

The Baltic Sea coast, while brief at approximately 108 kilometers (67 miles), is nonetheless crucial. A significant portion of this coastline is gracefully sheltered by the Curonian Spit, a remarkable natural wonder. This thin, roughly 60-mile (100-km) sandspit acts as a natural barrier, forming the tranquil Curonian Lagoon. It is at the narrow mouth of this lagoon that Klaipėda, Lithuania's primary warm-water port, strategically sits, serving as a vital gateway for national transport and trade.

Lithuania's climate is a fascinating blend of influences, leaning towards temperate with both maritime and continental characteristics. Under the Köppen climate classification,

it falls into the humid continental (Dfb) category. However, the narrow coastal strip hints at an oceanic climate, offering a milder edge to the otherwise distinct seasons. Average temperatures along the coast hover around -2.5 °C (27.5 °F) in January, while July brings a pleasant average of 16 °C (61 °F). Venture inland to the capital city of Vilnius, and the temperatures shift slightly, averaging about -6 °C (21 °F) in January and a warmer 17 °C (63 °F) in July.

Summers in Lithuania can be surprisingly warm, with temperatures occasionally soaring to 30 or even 35 °C (86 or 95 °F). Conversely, winters can be quite formidable, with temperatures regularly dropping to -20 °C (-4 °F) almost every year. The eastern parts of the country have even recorded extreme lows of -43 °C (-45 °F), a stark reminder of the continental bite. Snow is a common sight throughout the colder months, typically gracing the landscape from October through April. Annual precipitation varies across the country, with the coast receiving a generous 800 mm (31.5 in), while the eastern regions tend to be drier, recording around 600 mm (23.6 in).

Forests are undoubtedly one of Lithuania's most valuable natural assets, blanketing over one-third of the country's territory. This verdant expanse is not merely for aesthetic pleasure; timber-related industrial production contributes significantly to the national economy, accounting for almost 11% of the country's industrial output. Beyond timber, Lithuania possesses a range of other natural resources. These include sulfates, most notably gypsum, along with chalk, limestones, dolomites, and various types of clays, sands, and gravels. Peat deposits are also found, as are some iron ore and phosphorites. The country is also blessed with mineral waters, often bottled and enjoyed.

Perhaps one of Lithuania's most evocative natural resources is amber, the fossilized tree resin, which is found along the Baltic Sea shore. This "Baltic gold" has played a significant role in the region's history and culture, prized for its beauty and believed to possess mystical qualities. While not a major energy producer, Lithuania also has detected oil deposits in offshore regions and in the western part of the country. However, only a handful of wells are currently in operation, indicating a potential but largely untapped resource. These geological underpinnings contribute to the diverse character of Lithuania's landscapes and economy, providing both a foundation for industry and a source of natural beauty.

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