

BLOG PART 2

Michael and Norma's camper travels in Europe 2014

As our readers would have understood, Part 1 of this series simply described a series of transit runs through parts of northern Europe that were quite familiar to us already – although we took the opportunity to visit a few places we had previously missed. Our primary targets for this 2014 summer were the three small but important Baltic States, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

To make things easier, we have split our accounts of these countries into their three components. Although they share many characteristics, they are quite distinct in their differences. This part 2 of our blog describes our time and travels in Lithuania, the first of the three we visited as we moved generally northwards.

LITHUANIA

From Poland we drove on through the completely open and unattended border with Lithuania, the first of our Baltic States, and down into the country's far south corner and the town of Druskininkai. We had Belarus just to our south, Kaliningrad – a zone of Russia – to the north, and of course we've just come from Poland into Lithuania – quite a melting pot of cultures.



The camp site is run by the Tourist Information Centre, which we have never come across before, and is a pleasant little facility. We shared it with only three other tourers, all in small vans. We walked into town to get some local money and had a look around. A lovely little place, well off the tourist track, with a beautiful park round a lake and fantastic flower gardens which are only just recognising spring. The reason we are here at all will be apparent tomorrow.

Druskininkai has a reputation as a spa town, a health resort for those in the Soviet era seeking miracle cures. That's all toned down a bit now, seeking the tourist "wellness" dollar, but the latest Lonely Planet guide reports that the primary Druskininkai Spa "treats a mind-boggling array of diseases – cardiovascular, cutaneous, vestibular, endocrinal and more". In another spa you can get a body pummel with warm honey. The brochures for these places are very posh and published in several languages, so there's money to be made in this snake oil industry (as we well know in Australia!)

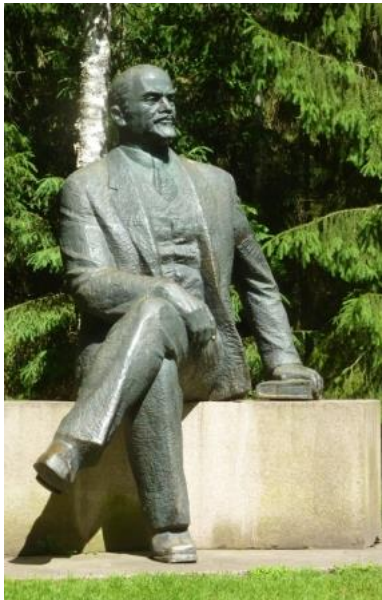
Monday 16 June

The main reason for coming here at all was to visit Gruto Parkas, or Grutas Park. This opened in 2001, and represents the efforts of Viliumas Malinauskas, the prosperous former head of a collective farm who was granted the use of all the Communist statuary that was being cleared out from parks and squares all over Lithuania after 1990 as the Soviet era ground to a close.

He has set out all the statues and a few other pieces of Soviet decorative art in a large park in woodland near a lake. Each of the most significant pieces has its own little clearing among the trees, with brief biographies (including English) out on the path that leads round the complex. All the heavy guns are

there, of course: Lenin prominently and presented in several examples, Engels, Marx, Dzerzhinsky, Stalin of course, and other Lithuanian Communist leaders less well known.

(In 2009, just outside Budapest, we had visited “Statue Park”, which has very similar origins but no hints of subliminal politics. In quite a small area were gathered together a rather different collection of Soviet-era statuary, not only including the usual suspects but also several generic triumphal figures, giant figures carrying flags in the wind, carrying with them the hopes and aspirations of the proletariat.)



In Grutas Park as you walk around there are also a couple of small museums with bits and pieces and lots of paintings. There are two large paintings showing happy peasants on collectives handing over their produce to smiling officials. Through these methods Stalin deliberately caused mass starvation in Ukraine in the 1930s. There are several paintings of Soviet notables, many being Lenin and Stalin, but interestingly, here and elsewhere, there was no mention or depiction of the old Bolsheviks, including Trotsky, Kamanev and Zinoviev. These three had essentially built the Soviet Union. In mid-1936 Stalin executed the latter two after show trials, and Trotsky stood no chance of returning from exile overseas because of Stalin’s promise to “mercilessly destroy” his opponents.

It is hard to know what to make of all this. It comes over on reflection as a monument to the Stalin era. There have been efforts to create a “concentration-camp atmosphere”, with some weaponry, wire fences, camp observation and guard towers. There is a cattle car train truck and engine as used to transport victims to the Gulag and other camps. It’s hard not to suspect a sense of celebration of times past, especially given the sponsor’s background. Those who became rich through collective farming made it on the bent backs of the poverty-struck peasants. According to Wikipedia the park’s establishment faced some fierce opposition, and its existence is still controversial. Some ideas originally meant to be a part of the park were never allowed. Examples include transporting visitors in the Gulag-style train.

Anyway, it was interesting and a pleasant walk through the woods. They have added a small zoo, with a few largish animals such as camels and a zebra, and the biggest collection of different makes of chicken we have ever seen.

From there we drove up towards the capital of Lithuania, Vilnius. About 10 km from the city we took a deviation into the Paneriai forest, not without great difficulty because there was no obvious way to get off the major road we were on or any other of the highways it connected with. However, I had estimated the position of where we wanted to go with the help of Google Earth, and at least having some coordinates it gave Tomtom Kate a chance to work out a circuitous route.

The place we wanted to visit was the Paneriai memorial site. In June 1940 Stalin had seized control of Lithuania and the other Baltic States and incorporated them into the Soviet Union. The Soviets then deported about 21,000 people from Lithuania, including many of the elites. Thus, when the Germans invaded in June 1941 many in Lithuania welcomed the change – but not many Jews did. Some 200,000 Jews lived in Lithuania, about the same number as in Germany, and over 70,000 in Vilnius, the “Jerusalem of the north”. The Germans already had contact with Lithuanian sympathisers who agreed with the view that Jews were responsible for Soviet repression. By July there had already been bloody

pogroms, and Einsatzgruppe killers had all the help they needed in Lithuania. The unit assigned to kill the Vilnius Jews was Einsatzcommando 9 of Einsatzgruppe A.

The shooting took place here, in the Paneriai (also known as Ponary) forest. Pits had already been dug by the Russians for the intended placement of six or so large fuel storage tanks, and a Lithuanian auxiliary marched groups of 12 to 20 people at a time to the edge of a pit. They handed over their clothes and valuables, knelt and were shot in the back. Some 72,000 Vilnius Jews and about 8,000 non-Jewish Poles and Lithuanians, were shot at Paneriai between 1941 and 1944. These figures come from the outstanding work on non-combatant deaths in the Hitler-Stalin years, "Bloodlands", by Professor Timothy Snyder. He quotes a very rare survivor, a 19-year old girl, who had fallen into the pit from fear: "This the end. What have I seen of life?" Later, shot in the hand, she crept away: "I was barefoot. I walked and walked over corpses. There seemed to be no end to it".



And so on in to Vilnius, and to City Camping. This has been moved from a very inhospitable-looking concreted site nearby to a large field surrounded by trees, really very pleasant. The sun was shining, and it was even warm enough to sit out during the long evening. We decided not to go straight into the city the next morning but to start moving into slowcoach mode, now we had reached our main set of targets early if anything.

Wednesday 18 June

Wet start to the day and during the short bus tour of the city we had arranged. Picked up at the camp site by the bus and taken to the city for a once-over lightly for the main sights. The plan was to clarify what we wanted to see and do after the 90-minute tour. This worked quite well, as many of the sights we wanted to see, including major buildings and the old town were from the outside – and the rain continued throughout. The bus also enabled us to see the Parliament House and take a look at the outlook from a hilltop to the south-east, places at completely opposite ends of the city.

Vilnius is awash with churches. St Anne's church is a fine example of 15th century Gothic, all spikes and curves – Napoleon reputedly liked it so much he wanted to take it back to Paris in the palm of this hand. Nearer the centre, and in the old town, the Church of Saints Peter and Paul is a splendid example of Lithuanian baroque, finished in 1674. It has a typical baroque exterior, but the interior is something special: decorated by an Italian team, it is an orgy in white, "a harmonious synthesis of architecture and sculpture and art", according to the church literature. There are about 2,000 figures in all, "arranged according to the principle of the world as a theatre", whatever that means. A marvellous sight, anyway. Under the crossing hangs a sailing ship modelled in crystal.

We were interested to pass by the open square where once stood the ginormous statue of Lenin, the one that had been pulled down and now stands in the woods of Grutas Park we had visited only a couple of days before.

Vilnius cathedral is in the centre of the city, and its main feature sits outside, a massive belfry tower standing separately from the church. During Soviet times the cathedral was turned into a picture gallery, and reconsecrated in 1989. Next to it is the Royal Palace, newly restored (but not open)



gleaming white with an austere façade. We walked from the main square up the main city drag, with all the department stores and posh shops, Gedimino Prospektas. This is named after Grand Duke Gediminas (1316-41), who was effectively the second ruler (after Mindaugas, who had brought warring tribes together to make a new country) of the new nation, Lithuania.

By this time it had stopped raining. We stopped outside the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre to admire the splendid statue of the Three Muses, with gold masks and black cloaks elegantly extending out over the footpath. Lunch then, at a typical office-workers' café, perfectly acceptable chicken patties with salad and what Norma thought was an intriguing dressing.

The Museum of Genocide Victims was a place we – or I, anyway! – particularly wanted to visit. It is housed in what was originally the courthouse of the Vilnius province of the Russian Empire in the early 20th century, but during Soviet times became the headquarters of the MGB-NKVD-KGB security regime. Ironically, during the wartime German occupation it was taken over as the headquarters of the Gestapo, before reverting to the Soviets in 1944.

The museum is dedicated to the thousands of Lithuanians who were murdered, imprisoned or deported by the Soviet Union from WW2 to the 1960s. The displays, in pictures, text and a few videos, well depict the realities of Soviet occupation, including what it was like to live as a deportee in Siberia. There is much information on the life and activities of the partisan groups who formed their own army of resistance in the 1944-1953 period, after the Soviet army had marched back into Lithuania.

In the basement is the KGB prison, established in 1940. Here are the cells where prisoners were held for interrogation, sometimes for up to a year, before being sent out to the Gulag. More than a thousand death sentences were carried out in the Execution Chamber, and remains of hundreds of victims were found in a mass grave in the north of the city. Also confronting are the torture cells and a padded cell complete with a straightjacket for restraint of the interrogated prisoner.



We took a while in this gloomy, ghostly building, and that was enough for day – but getting back to the camp site was a bit of a nightmare. We were a long way from the main station, where we could get a bus direct to the camp. The Tourist Office suggested we get a bus nearer to the centre, and change. All well there, including being ignored by ticket inspectors when they boarded. The problem was, not having come into the city by public transport we were not sure where to get off on the way back. First we went too far and had to get a bus back to where we thought was about right. Then we took a long deviant walk through some miserable run-down Russki tower-block suburbs, asking for directions, before finally making the site.

The main landmark overlooking the camp, and which had been our aiming point, is a tall television tower. In January 1991 Soviet special forces killed 14 or more people here, thus encouraging civil

unrest and hastening moves to independence. In September that year the USSR recognised the independence of Lithuania.

A note on present-day politics and foreign affairs in Lithuania

Noted throughout this account of our trip is the turbulent history of Lithuania and, by implication, the other Baltic States. Given the history of Sovietisation in these countries, how are Putin's adventures in Crimea and Ukraine viewed here, given his outspoken wish to re-establish Greater Russia?

An informal forum of experts was held in Vilnius in May, and reported in an English language monthly. The views there expressed do give some insights into local feelings and opinions.

Putin is compared to Hitler, with his aggression threatening changes to European borders and upsetting the post-WW2 world order. His propaganda efforts – directed towards the Russian people - are comparable with those of Goebbels. The patriotic enthusiasm he has released in Russia follows two decades of post-Soviet humiliation. The issue must be to stop this Hitleresque recollection of history and of Russian lands. In the Baltic States Putin is now managing powerful propaganda programs, with imperialist sentiment a revenge for the Cold War.

The Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Linas Linkevicius, called Russia's recent aggression a moral threat, not just a military or political one. He warned that existing bonds are breaking in Europe, and that a new wall is being built between east and west. However, increasing freedoms in Russia made defeat of the Putin regime possible through western dialogue. That sounds a bit diplomatic to me, and an academic responded that it was not possible to have a constructive dialogue with the Kremlin. Territorial expansion is a new phase in post-Soviet Russia and is being achieved through openly inciting civil war in Ukraine. The response of the west has been confused and slow. Others agreed, saying that while dialogue had to happen, it has been tried for centuries and Russia's invasion of Crimea is a flagrant breach of international law.

The stakes are higher than just shown by Ukraine, because Russia is also threatening areas outside the former Soviet Union, and the pretext started by Russia in Ukraine means global security is at stake. The prediction: Putin will go as far as he is allowed. The west wants peace at any cost, but is probably overestimating Putin's power – because of that, he may have already won. The west's weakness is his strength.

Western intelligence failed to predict Russia's 2008 war with Georgia, just as it did this year's move into Crimea. Both were planned, in the same way the Soviet Union's move into the Baltic States in 1939 was planned.

All of this makes for uneasy reading. The Baltic States do see themselves in a possible future firing line, and are not convinced either that the west can forecast what's going to happen next or that the west is prepared to anything much about it. This may all be a bit pessimistic, but pessimism breeds paranoia and unpredictable, possibly violent, over-reaction.

Thursday 19 June

Yet another cold night but dry. Only a short run today, so a relaxed start. The first stop was for much-needed supplies, and we tried the first "supermarket" we had seen, one of the Iki chain. It was awful, but Norma did her valiant best. We should have driven straight away when we saw it, in a very downmarket suburb surrounded by decaying tower blocks, because a short distance later we would have seen a big new Maxima supermarket!

After this start we had a pleasant run west to Trakai. The little town sits on a peninsula extending north into a complex interconnecting system of lakes and islands. The sun was out by then, displaying this very picturesque national park area to its best: blue waters and skies, dark green trees, and many brightly-coloured wooden houses – not to speak of the lovely Island Castle, the main point of the visit.

A short walk then to the first of the two castles, this one being the Peninsula Castle, now ruined except for a bit with a museum. It has a history of continual conflict from the 14th century until its destruction in the 17th century.



At the end of the peninsula lies the Island Castle, a gorgeous location on an island on Lake Galve, reached by a long footbridge – which is when we first came across the hordes of tourists, mostly from buses parked on the west side of the peninsula, which we had inadvertently avoided.

The castle probably dates from about 1400, when Grand Duke Vytautas built it as a defensive supplement to the earlier Peninsula Castle. Vytautas is something of a hero in these parts. He was the turbulent cousin of King Jagiello of Poland, who was grandson to Grand Duke Gediminas and had forged the 400-year alliance of Poland and Lithuania. The joint armies of Jagiello and Vytautas finally defeated forever the Teutonic Knights at the battle of Grunewald (now in Poland) in July 1410.

The Island Castle has been marvellously reconstructed inside and out. In bright red brick, it shines across the lake on this sunny day. The complex absorbs the hundreds of visitors well, aided by the many babushkas who guard the route that must be travelled. Having crossed the water we entered the outer courtyard, and then a bridge took us over the moat into the inner courtyard, main tower and associated buildings. There is an impressive great hall, with a vaulted ceiling, and some nicely-done displays of weaponry, clothing and domestic apparatus.

Leaving the castle we had a pleasant walk along the lake front back to the van. Good visit, good castle. Driving away, we joined the main road on the west side of the peninsula, and saw for the first time just how many buses there were (and where we had been supposed to park!).

Quite close by, on the northern shore of Lake Galve and looking back south to the Island Castle, we came to Camping Slenyje. This again is on a little peninsula, but because the complex is surrounded by banking and chalets, the water cannot be seen from within it. Nevertheless we settled into a sunny spot and sat out for a little while. We were told by some of the artists that there would be some folk singing at a villa up behind us, and we went up at about 7:00 pm as advised. However, we had to sit through addresses by all the dignitaries who were involved in this University-backed concert, which must have been a small part of a major youth festival which would be running over the coming week.

Once started it was a charming little concert, although we had no idea of where any of the folk songs had originated – we did understand that there was an Asian influence, and Turkistan was a place that had been mentioned. It did sound like that. The best act, we thought, was a brilliant young player of a piano accordion, quite outstanding.

Back at the van it appeared that we were going to be surrounded all the fun and games enjoyed by hordes of young people, part of the youth festival. We moved to a quieter part of the site at about 10:00 pm. A thing you can't help noticing about the Lithuanian young is how tall they are. This could explain why their national pastime, and the international sport for which they are famous, is basketball.

Friday 20 June

Not nearly so cold overnight this time, and we didn't need our heater in the morning, but the sun had left us. The facilities are pretty limited, so Norma didn't do any of her intended washing and we spent a quiet morning before the rain returned in earnest soon after lunch. Later, session on internet in reception – finally convinced them that they should reset their router, then all was well. We are finding that access to the internet is generally better here than we have ever encountered in our travels.

Saturday 21 June

After a very cold night and morning, the first priority was provisioning, and having pulled away on a reasonably fine morning we called in at a mid-size Iki supermarket. Sufficient, is I suppose is all that can be said, and of course a few minutes after leaving we again passed a Maxima, a chain that looks a lot better. Also pulled some cash out of the bankomat, trying to balance cash, credit card and fuel usage to ensure we don't get left with cash when we leave the second of three countries with different currencies.

We drove then to Kernave, a World Heritage site since 2004, to see some old castle mounds and the remains of a medieval town. It is supposed to be the place where Mindaugas, who brought together the warring tribes to create a unified Lithuania, was crowned in 1253. We don't know where we went wrong, but nowhere in or around the town could we find any evidence of, or signs indicating ways to, any of this. After two circuits we gave up.

Pleasant enough but rather boring run, then, past the big and very down-market Russki-looking towns of Ukmerge and Panevezys, through the southern suburbs of Saiuliai and into the Kurtuvenai Regional Park. As part of what was a private manorial complex there is a small camp site in a glorious position. Directly in front of us was a small lake or large pond (from which carp were occasionally caught), beyond which is a broad valley of farmland split by waterways and marsh, all backed by a low line of wooded hills. All this was very pleasant in the late stages of a sunny afternoon, although barely warm enough to sit out for a short while.

Followed qualifying for the Austrian GP on the iPad, over a slightly flaky internet connection, wi-fi all over the site.

Sunday 22 June

Another cold night, followed by showers and rain off and on all day until late afternoon. Walked to the nearby cemetery, which dates back a long way. It is in two parts, either side of the road; on the other side there is a small 13th century wooden chapel. All the graves except the oldest are tended carefully, and relatives were out there attending to the little garden at each grave site.

The cemetery is at the top of what passes for a hill in these parts, and the topography becomes clearer. This was once glacial country, which created the ridges, meandering streams in long wet valleys and collections of lakes. The Russian Empire in 1825 to 1831, which owned Lithuania at the time, thought it was a good idea to build a canal along these waterways to the Baltic, bypassing the Prussian access to the sea at the Nemunas delta. Their own rebellion in 1831 stopped that, but traces of the work can be seen.



The afternoon walk was around the local precinct, centred on an old manor homestead built by the family of a nobleman. On a mound was privately built in the 18th century a big white church, looking massively out of proportion in the tiny settlement. The manorial complex has been extensively renovated, including a splendid and apparently unique baroque barn, fronted by arcades and balconies. In the complex there is also a large riding facility, for both professionals and tourists, and the park office. Archeologists

have been digging away at the several tumuli, a big group of these mounds being only a few metres away from us.

Successfully followed Austrian GP on the iPad. Nice weather there, apparently. I suppose we never did think this trip would be a hot one!

Monday 23 June

After another very cold night, fine and sunny first thing – but clouds starting to build by the time we left for the Hill of Crosses, a bit north of Siauliai, and we had very heavy rain before arriving. The bewildering variety of weather and its speed of change continue to amaze us. The multi-layered clouds arrange themselves in strange, windy-looking patterns. Weather forecasting is a waste of time – all the forecasts indicate some sun, clouds and showers, temperatures 7-19 (if you're lucky) degrees. The prevailing NW wind, with Arctic influence, is cold. We have now passed mid-summer's (longest) day, but still await any kind of summer weather.

The Hill of Crosses is an extraordinary place, inspirational for those of a Catholic turn of mind. The "hill" is actually two conjoint mounds in a large field. It is approached by paths lined by crosses, and the number multiplies as you approach the hill. On the way up the whole face of the hill is a solid mass of crosses, not that anyone could possibly count them. They range from large carved affairs, through simple versions, down to small simple bits of wood – and crosses are piled upon crosses, with the little ones simply hung on the



bigger ones and so on up. Most are inscribed with a name or a message, or a photograph or picture in case of a deceased.

No-one knows how to explain the Hill of Crosses. The making of crosses goes back to pagan times, but later became linked with Christian ceremonies. Crosses first appeared here in the 14th century and became associated with anti-czarist protests. During the Soviet era planting a cross was an offence, but crosses were still planted in memory of the deported. Catholicism was by this time a symbol of nationalistic, anti-Soviet fervour. The Soviets bulldozed the hill and tried to destroy the whole site in 1961, but overnight more appeared. By 1990 there were apparently over 40,000 of them, and there are possibly ten times as many now. In 1993 Pope Paul II celebrated mass here and planted a posh cross of his own, with the message: *“Thank you, Lithuanians, for this Hill of Crosses which testifies to the nations of Europe and to the whole world the faith of the people of this land”*. Lithuanians came late to Catholicism, though, given their current fervour – the country was the last pagan land in Europe and did not fully embrace the faith until 1413.

West, then towards the Baltic and the Zemaitija National Park. This is another collection of picturesque low-lying lakes scattered plentifully and widely among pine forests. It does include an unusual place, now termed a “Cold War Museum”. This is actually one of the sites in the former Soviet Union’s complex of ballistic nuclear missile silos. From 1963 to 1978, four medium-range SS-4 missiles, with thermonuclear warheads, were deployed here. All missiles were targeted at Western European cities.



The base is underground, and surrounded symmetrically by the four dome-headed silos. It was built in secret in 1960, taking eight months to dig out the 25-metre-deep silos. During the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, rockets were deployed from here to Cuba, and the base was on red alert in 1968 during the Warsaw pact invasion of Czechoslovakia.

With a mandatory tour guide and a group of local youngsters we descended into what was the control centre, where navigational programming, fuelling and maintenance were undertaken. In the various rooms there are displays of small arms and pictures of Soviet armaments, propaganda messages of the time, a brief American film of the effects of an atomic explosion and some pictures of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There was an amusing exhibition showing what was issued as official advice at the time, on how to avoid the effects of a nuclear explosion, including a picture of a suitably armoured pram!

The main point of the visit is to visit one of the (empty) silos and peer into its depths, pondering the power of the weapon it once housed and the fortunate circumstances that have led to its never being armed again. No-one knows what happened to the missiles that were once set up here . . .

Relieved to be back out in the sun, we drove a short distance past Plunge and to Zemsodis camping, a large open site attached to a restaurant/chalet complex – nearly deserted, but obviously more likely to be busy weekends and holidays. Joined only by one other van, German.

Tuesday 24 June

Cool and windy morning. Good water-filling facility and nice clear water, so filled our nearly empty tank. First into the only town of any substance nearby, Gargzdai, for provisioning. Iki supermarket

again, a reasonably good one, but as usual we passed a sign to the better-looking Maxima five minutes after leaving! Then continued towards the coast, through flat, low-lying marshy country, with sad-looking farms scattered around.

It got a little bit more fertile as we approached the promontory of the Nemunas Delta. The sluggish Nemunas river has its origins in Belarus, and on the way it has collected vast amounts of alluvial silt. When it comes to the sea the silt and sand is trapped offshore by the Curonian Spit, which arcs about 100 km from Lithuania's only port city of Klaipeda to the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, some 10 to 20 km from the mainland. There is a border crossing about half way. The combination of NW prevailing winds and the deposits from the river have built up the spit to a massive string of dunes and pine forests, now a National Park and prime tourist destination. There are similar spits with similar geological histories all along the Baltic and Black Sea coasts, but nothing as big as this one, enclosing such a vast lagoon.

Passed where the official guide said the camp site was, but nothing there, but decided anyway to press on down to the point at Ventes Ragas ("World's Edge") and the ornithological station there. Parked and walked right out to the end, but the whole area was being rebuilt, including the station and museum. The cold nor-wester was honking out of a generally sunny sky, rustling the muddy brown waters of the lagoon into a million small whitecaps – the entire lagoon is only 2-3 metres deep.

The delta is famous for its bird life, especially storks and seabirds. As well as being a breeding ground it is on the Arctic-European-East African migration path. Hundreds of thousands of birds fly over each year, and the ornithological station – when operational – nets thousands of them each year as part of its research. Right now shut down, however, there are few catch nets at the point, and after Norma's close inspection she thought it was a long time since they had caught a bird.

We checked in at the quite pleasant Camping Ventaine site, part of a now very quiet holiday camp complex, and walked down to the side of the lagoon. Sure enough, there were several varieties of seabirds sheltering on the "beach", including pintails, large birds of the duck family. Quite sunny and warm out of the wind late afternoon, with white clouds scudding overhead.

Wednesday 25 June

Grey overcast this morning, wind down. Decided to have a look at Minge (or Minija after the river that runs through it), a supposedly typical old village of the region. It took a long drive down one of the worst washboard gravel surfaces we have encountered, and found a marina on the river with some wooden houses along the waterfront that are meant to be of heritage significance but looked like holiday cottages to us. The river splits the village and can only be crossed by boat, and is thus absurdly referred to (probably only in the guide books) as the "Venice of Lithuania".

There was an interesting aerial photo at the marina, though, showing the land under flood conditions, sheets of water intersected only with causeways.

Faced another long run along dreadful gravel roads before meeting an easy main road up to Klaipeda. This is Lithuania's port city, open to the Baltic, and also where the only channel runs from the Curonian lagoon to the sea. Norma tasted the lagoon water yesterday, and confirmed that it was fresh, perhaps with a hint of brackishness. As she pointed out, if the water was salt, all the fields and pastures round here would be dead.



Klaipeda is a big port city that we had decided we did not need to explore, but we were intrigued by the Martynas Mazvydas Sculpture Park. This was the city's main cemetery until 1977, and is now parkland laid out in a pine plantation. It is scattered with 20th century sculptures, mostly of the 70s and 80s, many very appealing but few to be called attractive. We especially liked one showing a family seated around a games table: father, mother, son – and dog!

Battled the traffic out, as usual in a strange city, and then a short distance north we came to a pleasant, quite new camp site tucked away in a pine forest. This was recommended by our favourite campervan travel writer/bloggers (Paul and Sheila, www.langdale-associates.com), but whereas (in early July 2011) they were too hot and welcomed the shade, we spent some time looking for a patch of sun among the trees to warm the van and dry the washing!

The following day we drove across the open border to Liepaja, in Latvia and yet another country, to be described in the next episode.