



TRAKAI AND VILNIUS  
DISTRICTS  
NATURAL HERITAGE





# THE DEVIL'S PIT

GPS: *54°36'41"N 24°30'55"E*

Address: Mergiškių kalvos forest, 3 km from regional road No. 221 Vievis–Aukštadvaris, Aukštadvaris eldership., Trakai district municipality

## ABOUT

Surrounded by legends, the Devil's Pit invites visitors to listen closely to the mysterious sounds coming from the earth. You might even manage to make out the tower of the sunken church down below. The Devil's Pit is the 'queen' of the Lithuanian pits, a special mythological sacral place. It has been proclaimed a geological natural monument of the Republic of Lithuania and is among the Top 100 of Europe's most-visited natural monuments. It hides deep in the forests of Mergiškiai Landscape Reserve at Aukštadvaris Regional Park. Aukštadvaris Region is known for its old and distinctive history and culture. The first people settled there as early as the 3rd and 2nd century BC. In addition to important archaeological monuments, wooden castles, hill forts, kurgans and ancient settlements, this territory has a uniquely beautiful relief. It is the highest part of the Dzūkai Highlands, rich in hills, valleys, pits, ridges and lakes. Four kilometres from the Devil's Pit is Gedanony's Hill and the place where the Verknė and Strėva rivers originate – a real unique natural treasure!

There are many pits in Lithuania. The Devil's Pit is the deepest: it is funnel-shaped and is about 40 metres deep. The regular circular upper pit diameter is 200 metres, the peat layer at the bottom of the Pit is about 10 metres tall bringing the total depth of the Pit to

about 50 metres. It is believed that in ancient times the Pit was even deeper.

The Trail of Secrets goes down to where a viscous swamp of 60 metres in diameter lies stagnant. In summer, it is tempting to wade in it, but people are advised to refrain from doing so as the swamp is very viscous and dangerous. It is believed that it is connected with neighbouring deep Škilietai lakes through underground tunnels. Tree anomalies are found in the area of the swamp and the loamy ridges surrounding it. The desire to explain this strange natural phenomenon attracts a lot of scientists. They claim that deviations of the energy field can be recorded around the Devil's Pit. In any case, it is a place distinct for the collision of strong geological biofields. People tend to experience strange sensations having visited the Devil's Pit and especially after going down to its very bottom. Devils have their midnight feast here. People say that they could hear the devils screaming and raving. That is the reason why this horrifying place was named the damned Devil's Pit. It is a truly mysterious place. Even its origins are a mystery to be solved.



## THE ORIGINS OF THE DEVIL'S PIT


Speculations, reasonings and legends have been passed on from generation to generation. The scientist developed some hypotheses.

One of them says that thousands of years ago, there was a glacier covered with rocks at this place. Another one states that a melting glacier formed a strong waterfall. Over time, the force of the falling water might have formed this deep pit.

It is also believed that the hollow opened up when the underground stream brought fine sand and sediment to a small Škilietai lake. Or, perhaps the Pit is the result of a fallen meteorite? The hypothesis of the meteorite crater is further supported by the relatively small and regular diameter of the Pit and various splintered boulders found on the steep slopes and around. Similarities can be found when data taken from other meteorite-formed crater pits are compared. Scientists are still looking for more evidence and are in no rush to confirm this theory.

## THE DEVIL'S FINGERS

In Lithuanian mythology, the Devil is often seen as a real creature, sometimes related to the world of the dead and sometimes to the giant behind the creation of nature. It is not surprising that in our country more than 400 natural objects bear his name. In the neighbourhood of the Devil's Pit one can find so called devil's fingers, smooth oblong stones. According to the belief of the ancient Balts, it is a magical stone, related to the god called Perkūnas, (Eng. Thunder). The stones of yellow, brown, blue, grey or black colour are also called thunder-bullets in the region. It can be worn as an amulet against devils, witches and other evil spirits. The house that has a thunder-bullet inside will never be struck by lightning. This stone is also used in folk medicine to be placed on the sore area or to be taken as a drink with ground thunderstone powder in it.

NEARBY: 

[WWW.ARP.LT](http://WWW.ARP.LT)



# THE SIGN-INSCRIBED STONE OF NIKRONYS

GPS: *54°33'15"N 24°35'47"E*

Address: Babrauninkai forest, near Lake Verniejus 3,3 km from a highway No. A 16 Vilnius–Prienai–Marijampolė (go through Nikronys village along Tiltlo and Ažuolų streets), Aukštadvaris eldership, Trakai district municipality

## ABOUT

The Stone of Nikronys is a dominant feature of the Babrauninkai Forest, between lakes Sienis and Verniejus. It is an amazing natural monument that attracts people with its coded riddle... It is a massive boulder of glacial origin on which up to 40 people can stand at any one time! The size of the stone, sometimes called the 'Great Stone', is indeed impressive with its length reaching 6.3 m, width – 3 m, and height – 2.2 m. A part of this irregularly shaped grey granite-coloured stone lies on the ground and could be between 14,000 and 16,000 years old. Geological studies show that the so-called Scandinavian stones represent a unique feature of Aukštadvaris Regional Park, originated somewhere in Scandinavia millions of years ago. Over the course of the last ice age, these boulders were rolled down to Lithuania.

The enigmatic boulder is surrounded by mystery and associated with Lithuanian history and ancient Baltic mythology. In ancient times, it was worshipped and considered a holy object. Maybe a long time ago ancient priests used to light a sacred fire here?

At the top of the stone there is a man-made 26-cm deep hole, holding at least a single drop of water at all times. It is believed that this water is sacred and has healing properties. Old men say that the site of the stone is a haunted place and sometimes lights

wander here at night, but they are visible only to those who are truly kind. Legends talk about the treasures hidden underneath the Stone of Nikronys. The remains of the treasure hunters' attempts indicate their countless efforts to find it...

The last owner of the land around the stone was Vladislav Odyniec, the owner of Nikronys Mill, one of the initiators of Aukštadvaris parish establishment and construction of the church. His daughter has confirmed that the Odyniec family coat of arms contained the image of a wild boar or a loner just like the one on the stone. A popular story suggests that Vladislav Odyniec hid his money in the ground underneath the stone and... then forgot its exact location! Allegedly, he spent much time looking for it, but all in vain. Some legends even link the treasures to Napoleon. In 1812, Napoleon was resting in Babrauninkai Forest when he decided to hide his golden coins and tableware. So, he ordered the soldiers to bury his precious possessions in the ground and put a massive stone on top of it! Today, no matter what the legends say, we know one thing for a fact. Recently, a local tractor-driver, who was working next to a neighbouring old cemetery, uncovered a pot of money. Today, everyone can take a closer look at it in the Trakai Castle Museum.



## MYSTERIOUS SIGNS

Letters and other signs on the stone inspire various stories, speculations and discussions. The first written source mentioning the Stone of Nikronys is the book by Petras Tarasenka *Footprints in the Stone* published in 1958 where you can find a detailed description of the appearance of the stone and the signs inscribed in it. About 35 cm tall letters 'MOPT' are inscribed on one side in a 2-m horizontal strip. Above the letters, an arrow or a pointing sign can also be seen. On the other side of the stone one can see an even-sided cross which is about 30 cm long. Written sources indicate that two crosses were inscribed here in the past. Another drawing on the stone resembles a coat of arms... According to locals, in about 1904-1905, the Stone of Nikronys marked the border between the state forest and the land of a noble lord. The landlord inscribed the 'MOPT' letters and the sign on the stone pointing towards his land. Maybe the mysterious 'MOPT' letters are the initials of the Polish phrase 'Moje pieniądze tutaj', which means 'My money is here'. In fact, it is believed that a hidden treasure lies underneath the stone. This is clearly evidenced by the remains of the attempted diggings left by treasure hunters.

Helena, the daughter of Vladislav Odyniec, has indicated that the letters 'MO' stand for Michal Odyniec. Documents secured in the

Aukštadvaris and Onuškis churches testify to the fact that he was a Trakai-based court official, a judge in charge of the land trials. Therefore, 'MOPT' might stand for 'Michal Odyniec Podkomorzy Trocki'. The residents of Aukštadvaris and other districts around Trakai have preserved the memory of the noble Odyniec family until the present day.

NEARBY:



[WWW.ARP.LT](http://WWW.ARP.LT)



# SINKHOLE OF STRĒVA

GPS: 54°35'13"N 24°41'55"E

Address: Spindžius forest, 700 m from a highway No. A 16 Vilnius–Prienai–Marijampolė, Trakai eldership, Trakai district municipality

## ABOUT

The Sinkhole of Strėva hides deep in the forest, surrounded by whispering old trees and ice-free springs. It is one of the unique natural and cultural attractions of Aukštadvaris Regional Park. It is a state-protected geomorphological site of natural heritage.

The Sinkhole of Strėva is also known as a failure or a doline. This mysterious place has inspired a number of legends and stories. It is located in the Spindžius Nature Reserve by Strėva Village. The spectacular abundance and diversity of flora and fauna gives the reserve a special status not just within Lithuania. The Reserve is also listed as an EU protected Natura 2000 site, attractive to the public.

Scientists claim that the Strėva Sinkhole is a doline of thermokarst origin and was formed about 18,000 years ago. When glaciers were retreating, various deposits and sediments blocked a piece of ice that had fallen off; this then melted and opened up a ravine in the ground. The estimated length of the ravine is about 150 metres while the width is 100 metres. A giant spruce trail leads visitors to a 20-metre-deep hole. There is a scenic viewpoint close to the ravine and a pedestrian ecotourism trail circling around it offers visitors an opportunity to have a closer look at this natural phenomenon from all sides with lots of lot of poisonous plants in

the area! The Spindžius Nature Reserve is the proud home to one of Lithuania's ancient forests. Very old trees adorn this territory including tall pine trees, oaks and other types of long-living trees. A part of the ancient forest's territory is dedicated to an untouched forest not affected by human activity, where there is a high probability of finding various endangered or rare vegetation species. Some plants that grow there are protected not only in Lithuania but also in the European Union.

There are more places linked to its name in the vicinity of the Strėva Sinkhole: Mūro Strėvininkų Village, the Strėva Hill Fort and a river. The word Strėva is closely related to the Sanskrit word *śravati* meaning 'flowing or flooding'. The Strėva is a marshy river with rather dense vegetation around it, linking together about 20 lakes and the mouth of the Strėva River holds uniquely beautiful natural riches with an abundance of lakes and streams. Powered by the spring water, the Strėva flows eastwards, i.e. against the rising sun. In Lithuanian folklore, this phenomenon symbolises the river's sacrality. From ancient times, the Strėva was considered a sacred and special river. Locals have always spoken highly of the clear stream waters flowing into the river.



## TREASURE HOUSE OF LEGENDS

According to one of the legends, the tavern that once stood on the site of the Strėva Sinkhole was a place for the devils to feast.

Once, devils decided to throw a wedding on a day of fasting. With the sounds of the first roosters crowing at dawn, the tavern went down into the ground with the devils still raving in it.


Today, at the bottom of the Sinkhole a roof ridge of a wooden house still sticks out of the ground. Locals say that sometimes strange and mysterious sounds can be heard near the ravine.

People also say that a high hill with a beautiful big crystal palace on top of it once stood here. Devils lived in harmony in the fabulous palace, and each knew exactly what his duties were. One day they started arguing and forgot their duties. The God Perkūnas (Thunder) became angry, so he threw thunders that shattered the castle and sent all the devils deep down into the ground.

## THE GREEN PATH

The Green Path going along the winding banks of the Strėva River circles around Spindžius Forest joining the Strėva Sinkhole as well as other important objects. The Hill of Streams, from which ice-free streams spurt, holds one of the surprises along the Green Path. It is a rather rare natural phenomenon that is valuable not only from a natural, but also from a cultural point of view. In ancient Lithuanian folklore tradition, ice-free streams were always regarded as sacred places, and their water was believed to have healing powers.

The Orchid Plantation deserves special attention. The hill is home to a collection of especially vulnerable variegated orchids including the Lady's-slipper orchid, which is protected on the territory of both Lithuania and the EU. Orchids, sometimes called *'the forest beauties'*, were considered magical plants. They were widely used in folk medicine and fortune telling.

NEARBY: 

[WWW.ARP.LT](http://WWW.ARP.LT)



# SACRIFICE HILL

GPS: *54°38'48"N 24°56'16"E*

Address: *Kęstučio str. 4, Trakai town, Trakai eldership, Trakai district municipality*

## ABOUT

Sacrifice Hill marks the highest point of the Trakai Peninsula. It offers beautiful landscape views of Trakai Peninsula Castle and its surrounding lakes, a unique old history and an opportunity to embrace the atmosphere of medieval life. A hill fort, which is 17 metres above the ground on the west bank of Lake Luka (Bernardinai), is called Sacrifice Hill – although there is no known reason for the name. According to a well-known legend, the hill was used to make sacrifices to the pagan gods.

The main function of Sacrifice Hill, like most other mounds, was to protect the castle and the surrounding settlement. The locals as well as troops would gather on the platform (now it is 45 m long and 17 m width) at the top of the hill to defend themselves from attackers.

Additional protection of the castle was ensured by the construction of natural obstacles like man-made ground piles or ditches – a 18-metre-wide and 3-metre-deep ditch surrounds it. The height and steepness of the hill's slopes were important signs of the mound's inaccessibility. Climbing the 17-metre-high Sacrifice Hill can be a serious challenge. Fortunately, today you can use steps to climb the hill and enjoy the view.

Today, it is especially difficult to find a mound in Lithuania that would still have its original appearance. Often you need to use your imagination to picture their former steepness, ditches and barriers. Alternatively, try to imagine the significant weight of the armour and weapons that knights had to carry – they could weigh anywhere up to 40 kg!



## THE PENINSULA CASTLE

It is believed that the construction of the Peninsula Castle in the 14th century was carried out at the order of the Duke Kęstutis. Before that, Senieji Trakai Castle, located 3 km from the town of Trakai was the residence of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania. Under the rule of the famous Grand Duke Vytautas (15th century), the Trakai Peninsula Castle, also known as the Great Castle, was one of the Grand Duke's residences. It was an integral part of the defence complex of Trakai and the capital city of Vilnius. After the death of Vytautas, the Grand Castle became the residence of the Dukes Švitrigaila and Žygimantas Kęstutaitis.

Over time, the castle was abandoned by the dukes and was consequently used for different purposes. Interestingly, at the beginning of the 16th century, the messengers of the Grand Duke of Moscow and other high-ranking enemies or captives were imprisoned there. In 1655, the Peninsula Castle was destroyed. It was only two centuries later, at the end of the 19th century, with the revival of archaeological research, that restoration works of the defence complex began.

## THE MEDIEVAL FESTIVAL

Events held at the foot of Sacrifice Hill every summer in June attract thousands of visitors. Participants of these unique medieval celebrations compare the experience to one of being in a time machine taking them to the hustle and bustle of a medieval town. Lots of merchants and craftsmen sell the various creations of potters, blacksmiths, sculptors, jewellers and other artists. The Festival features a special coin mint which allows visitors to mint their own medieval coin. An open kitchen offers an impressive variety of cuisine choices. Street performers, knights showing their stamina, courage and serenity, sounds of old music ensembles and blacksmiths' hammers – all create a unique ancient spirit and bring the atmosphere of a medieval castle and city life alive.

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[WWW.SENIEJITRAKAI.LT/NEWS](http://WWW.SENIEJITRAKAI.LT/NEWS)



# VARNIKAI COGNITIVE WALKING WAY

GPS: *54°38'52"N 24°57'53"E*

Address: Varnikai forest, Ilgelis swamp, Trakai eldership, Trakai district municipality

## ABOUT

Walking down the Varnikai Ecotourism Path (Cognitive Walking Way) in the Varnikai Botanical-Zoological Reserve will revitalise you with the beauty of its ancient woods and the remarkable flora and fauna of Ilgelis Swamp. The winding 5-km long Tourism Path goes through the Varnikai Botanical-Zoological Reserve offering nature lovers an opportunity to enjoy the rich natural biodiversity found here. Trakai Forest Enterprise seeks to preserve it and, at the same time, to create favourable conditions for its expansion. The aim of the Ecotourism Path is to manage the flow of human traffic and to protect nature from uncontrolled visitation.

The Varnikai Reserve is located in the southern part of Trakai Historical National Park. It is in Lentvaris Forestry, and spreads across an area of 611 hectares, 450 hectares of which are covered with forests, while the remaining 207 hectares comprise the Ilgelis bog. In the northern part of the reserve, on the shores of Lake Skaistis, a 200-year-old oak tree forest grows proudly on top of a hill.

The Varnikai Reserve contains a dedicated area of forest habitat, i.e. an area not affected by human activity, which includes rare or specialised species of plants and trees. There are several sites on

the territory of the reserve that are included in the European Ecological Network 'Natura 2000'.

Varnikai Ecotourism Path leads visitors through beautiful forests and a meadow that enriches the diversity of the habitats of the reserve opening up a spectacular view over the Ilgelis Bog and lakes. There are gazebos and benches, three scenic viewpoints and ten rest stops in the most beautiful and hard-to-reach places of the reserve. The largest part of the path is a winding non-paved trail. However, a stretch of almost 1.5 km goes through hard-to-reach swamps! In order to ensure the safety of visitors and to provide a unique opportunity to take a stroll in this unique wild nature, a 1-metre wide boardwalk has been installed. Four lakes of remnant origin lie within this territory and include the Baluošas, Bevardis, Piliškių and Ilgelis lakes. It is said that these lakes are the remains of a single large lake.

Interestingly, all the Varnikai Reserve small lakes are closed: they are dependent on the surrounding bogs, where the water level is 1 metre higher than that of the Bernardinai (Luka) Lake. Thus, the excess water from the Ilgelis Bog flows into the lake.



## PROTECTED BIODIVERSITY

The Varnikai Botanical-Zoological Reserve is the most studied part of the Trakai Historical National Park. More than 600 different higher plant species were identified here, of which as many as 16 are included in the Lithuanian Red Book. An impressive 118 different species of moss can be found in the reserve, four of them are protected throughout the territory of Lithuania. Certain types of mushrooms found here are included in the Red Book.

Scientists have noticed, however, that some types of lichens found here a hundred years ago can no longer be detected today. Actually, the majority of rare lichens indicate the forest's special value as they point to the key types of forest habitat. This type of endangered vegetation is protected throughout Europe.

There is abundant wildlife in both the forests and swamps of the Varnikai Reserve. Mammals found here include foxes, marten, meles, hare, deer, roe deer and boar. It is no surprise to catch a glimpse of a common European viper on a bright sunny day.

Fifteen varieties of protected insects and beetles are also detected in the Varnikai Reserve. You could also spot some rare types of butterflies and moths here. Common cranes and Eurasian hoopoes living in the reserve are protected throughout

the territory of Lithuania. The reserve also has many different types of singing birds such as woodlarks, thrush nightingales, true thrushes and golden orioles. There are plenty of predator birds in the area including various types of owls, hawks and falcons.

NEARBY:



[WWW.SENIEJITRAKAI.LT/NEWS](http://WWW.SENIEJITRAKAI.LT/NEWS)



# UŽUTRAKIS MANOR HOUSE

GPS: *54°39'35"N 24°56'37"E*

Address: Užutrakio str. 17, Trakai town, Trakai eldership, Trakai district municipality

## ABOUT

Užutrakis Manor House is one of the most prominent and best-preserved mansions in Lithuania. The restored manor and park ensemble on the shore of Lake Galvė will allow you to experience how the Lithuanian nobility lived in the 19th century.

Count Józef Tyszkiewicz and his wife Jadwiga founded the Užutrakis Manor Estate at the beginning of the 20th century. The Count was inspired by the unique landscape of Trakai, and the manor made the most of the area's potential.

The Palace, decorated with impressive Louis XVI style interiors, was created by Polish architect Józef Huss. It was complete with a terrace, crowned with open pavilions, offering a fabulous view of Trakai Castle. The park was designed by Édouard François André, a famous French landscape architect. He created a mixed style park decorated with copies of antique sculptures and a large number of plants. The park still contains nearly 100 different kinds and forms of trees and shrubs, more than half of which were individually transported here to complete the park.

Today, the estate is accessible by road, but the Count's family did not use it. It was only used for agricultural purposes and was known as 'the Potato Road'. The nobles used to reach the

peninsula by a ferry raft, crossing the isthmus between Lakes Galvė and Skaistis, and the rafter lived nearby. The Tyszkiewiczzes hosted numerous receptions, family reunions or friendly parties, but even then, their guests did not use the road either. The events were characterised by loud music, the tables were laden with French cheeses produced on the estate and the drinks were from the local distillery. More often than not, there was a locally grown roast pheasant in the middle of the table!

The Užutrakis Manor House belonged to the Count Tyszkiewicz family before World War II. During the Soviet occupation, the manor was nationalised and turned into a sanatorium, later it served as a pioneer camp, and then it became a tourist base. The manor was severely damaged: the original design of the Manor was destroyed, and the park was completely abandoned.

Today, Užutrakis Manor House is coming back to life. The manor is being restored and the park is being rebuilt. Concerts and exhibitions are often held here, and the Užutrakis Manor ensemble is now one of the most visited places in the region.



## HISTORY OF UŽUTRAKIS MANOR

The peninsula between Lake Galvė and Lake Skaistis was first mentioned in historical sources in the 14th century. In those days, it was called 'Algirdas Island' and belonged to the Tatar nobility. In the second half of the 19th century, the peninsula was acquired by Count Józef Tyszkiewicz (1835–1891).

The Manor Estate, which survived to the present day, was founded by his son, also called Józef (1868–1917), and his wife, Polish duchess Hedwig Światopełk-Czetwertyńska. The palace was built, and the park was created between 1896 and 1902.

During World War I, when the German army was approaching, Józef Tyszkiewicz and his family left the manor and moved to St. Petersburg. Before the beginning of World War II, the Manor was managed by the Count's eldest son, Andrzej.

During the war, the German army occupied the Manor, and after the war it was nationalised by the Soviet government.

## PARK

French landscape architect Édouard André arrived at Užutrakis in 1898. Here he developed an 80-hectare mixed style park in his characteristic style. In front of the palace, he designed parterres of regular shape with trimmed lime alleys, ornamental flower gardens, marble vases and sculptures. The architect skilfully exploited the contrasting landscape of the peninsula, highlighting its hills with compositions of artificial rocks, and strengthening the glow of the surrounding lakes with a complex system of ponds. More than 20 ponds were artificially dug, which interlinked with each other and the lakes, thus creating a unique park full of water reflections, where the boundaries between the land and water would disappear.

## THE RESTORED MANOR

The manor of the estate was not only luxurious, but it also allowed everyone to admire the spectacular scenery. In the second half of the 20th century, the palace was abandoned, but today it is being gradually restored. In 2008, the exterior, the first floor, the attic, the lobby and the staircases of the palace were refurbished. In 2010, the first restored chamber of the manor



was opened to the public. It was a representative dining room decorated in the style of Louis XVI. At the same time, the original design of the entire ground floor was restored, as was the delicate wall moulding. In the same year, the restoration of the Tapestries Chamber was also completed.

## NATURE

A great number of local and imported plants can be found in Uštrakis Manor Park. They include 38 species of indigenous Lithuanian trees, 54 species of imported trees and shrubs, and 400 species and forms of herbaceous plants. Many of these plants were planted by Édouard André.

The Park is home to seven species of bats, a number of squirrels and roe deer. The ponds and their surrounding areas create a habitat for rare species of frogs, smooth newts, the great crested newts and otters. The old trees in the park are frequented by woodpeckers, black woodpeckers and owls.

Areas surrounding the Park shelter the nests of goshawks and marsh harriers; the roof of the palace is cherished by mergansers, while the ponds provide food for herons and common terns.

## SCULPTURES

From the day of its foundation, the estate was decorated with many sculptures which included copies of works by Antoine Coysevox, a famous 18th century French sculptor. They would usually depict ancient gods and goddesses. Almost all of the sculptures were destroyed after World War II, but today attempts are being made to restore them and return them to the Park. The park also features a sculpture of the ancient goddess Diana, modelled after the mother of King Louis XV of France, Marie-Adélaïde de Savoie. This sculpture, as well as the sculptures of Flora and Hamadryad, are copies of original pieces on display in the Louvre. The works also include a statue of Bacchus, various busts and a sculpture of the Virgin Mary located on the lake's shore. The latter was the longest surviving sculpture of the Park.

This sculpture could still be seen by visitors in 1964. Later, it was thrown into the lake. In 1975, the damaged sculpture was found in Varnikai Village cemetery and moved to the church of Trakai parish. Today, there is a copy of the sculpture of the Virgin Mary in Uštrakis Park.

NEARBY:



[WWW.SENIEJITRAKAI.LT/NEWS](http://WWW.SENIEJITRAKAI.LT/NEWS)



# THE POTATO ROAD

GPS: 54°40'12"N 24°56'14"E

Address: Užtrakio str., Užutrakis village, Trakai eldership, Trakai district municipality

## ABOUT

Trakai region, with its many lakes, is famous for the abundance of its natural and historical heritage. This treasure is the location for Užutrakis Manor House with its luxurious palace, often called the white swan of Lake Galvė. The beautiful homestead nestled on the eastern shoreline of the lake is unique with its exclusive geographical locale and lovely history. Written sources first mention the peninsula in the 14th century when Tatar nobles called it their home. Peninsula territories, also called the island of Duke Algirdas, has belonged to different owners over the course of its history and the prosperity of the Manor is associated with Counts Tyszkiewicz. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries Józef Tyszkiewicz and his wife Jadwiga built a luxurious residence, a Manor House with a palace, decorated with impressive Louis XVI style interiors, an impressive terrace crowned with open pavilions and a lovely mixed style park.

In the old days, counts used to arrive to the Manor by water – a rafter transported them by raft through the strait of Lakes Galvė and Skaistis. Land travels were also avoided by honourable guests of Tyszkiewicz, who visited the Manor for frequent meetings, family get togethers and informal banquets. Užutrakis was often visited by Russian diplomats, military and highest-ranking

officials, because Count Tyszkiewicz earned his economical-military education in Saint Petersburg. A French chef and cheese maker worked in the Manor, so cheeses in Užutrakis were special, made according to French recipes and traditions.

The people who worked at the Manor House and homestead used the old 'Potato Road' which led through the fields towards the buildings of Užutrakis, but nowadays this road winds its way along the shorelines of Lake Galvė. When travelling along the shorelines you are presented with an excellent opportunity to enjoy the marvellous scenery that includes the view to the lake dotted with islands and an exquisite jewel – Trakai Island Castle. A pier has already been finished, so visitors are able to reach Užutrakis not only by water, but by boat as well. Užutrakis Palace brings you back to the beginning of the 20th century like a time machine. While restoring the Manor halls, every effort was made to preserve the luxury typical of the Tyszkiewicz family. Visitors can examine authentic furniture, sets of china, weapons, mirrors made of Venetian glass and other interesting artefacts related to the lives of the counts here. A variety of temporary exhibits are exposed in Užutrakis Palace and, following the traditions of the counts, you can frequently encounter music here.



## LOVE FOR THE FRENCH STYLE

Countess Jadwiga used to adore everything French. Józef Tyszkiewicz spoke French fluently, knew diplomatic protocol and was one of the very few in Lithuania who adhered to *savoir vivre*. Thus, no wonder then that Užutrakis Manor park was designed by a French man – Édouard François André. This world-renowned landscape designer created a unique water park with over 20 ponds of different sizes and shapes where hundred-year-old oaks and exotic plants brought in from abroad with linden tree avenues, ornamental flower gardens, marble vases and copies of world-famous sculptural works reflect in the water.

Although the land road formerly was used only for the needs of the farm, today the most convenient way to reach Užutrakis is by 'The Potato Road'.

## THE MANOR FARM

The Manor complex in Užutrakis was supported by a very well-run farm. The farmlands alone comprised about 800 hectares and a part of them were allotted to gardening and a mixed-style park. Pheasants were raised near the Manor. A pheasant specialist from Austria was brought in for this purpose. One of the most important buildings was the distillery, since the distillery was one of the biggest sources of income for the Manor. The farm area of the Manor House consisted of 19 masonry and wooden buildings: horse stables, a grain barn, a forge, cattle sheds, a warehouse and others. Ten of the former buildings have survived to this day. Written sources inform that the Manor House was served by about 60 servants and workers who reached it using the land road at all times. One can guess that the road got its name because potatoes were delivered to the distillery.

NEARBY:



[WWW.TRAKAI-VISIT.LT/EN](http://WWW.TRAKAI-VISIT.LT/EN)



# BRADALIŠKĖS HILL FORT

GPS: 54°49'31"N 24°56'37"E

Address: Bradeliškės village, Dūkštos eldership, Vilnius district

## ABOUT

Bradeliškės Hill fort is the biggest hill fort in the Neris River Regional Park. It has been extensively researched by archaeologists and very well adapted for tourists. It is located in the impressive Dūkšta Brook valley and with the help of modern technologies you can travel back to the times of our ancestors.

The first hill forts were built by the Balts in 2000 BC. There was a time when they comprised a very dense defensive complex. It is estimated that today there are nearly 1,000 hill forts in Lithuania – no other country in Europe has more hill forts than Lithuania!

Today there are ten hill forts in Neris Regional Park from different eras; the park is known for its magical splendour of nature and abundance of cultural heritage objects. A hill fort on the left bank of the River Dūkšta, not far from Bradeliškės village, is worthy of special attention. This was thought to be the earliest place inhabited by people and started being used for defensive purposes in 2500 BC. Local people were hiding here from enemies up until the 14th century.

As time passed, Bradeliškės Hill Fort has changed considerably. An informational display created in 2017 allow visitors to view the hill fort the way it looked several centuries ago. This three-dimensional stand shows us the once great, but now extinct steep

embankments of the hill fort, the hill's fortifications, and the River Dūkšta that followed a different route back then. Many centuries ago there stood a wooden castle that was protected by natural obstacles and defensive measures implemented in addition to that: ramparts and ditches. This hill fort was one of the two very important defensive points between two Lithuanian capitals, Kernavė and Vilnius.

We can see for ourselves how drastically different today's scenery is: a large part of the hill has slid down to the brook that runs along the foot of the hill, the defensive rampart suffered erosion and wooden fortifications that stood on the upper platform have disappeared altogether. Now it is well adapted for visitors. Wooden stairs lead to the very top of the 16-metre high hill fort. There is one interesting detail about the hill fort – the hill's surface area equals that of a football pitch and spans more than 110 metres and is 60 metres wide! Once on top, visitors have their breath taken away by the magnificent views of the Dūkšta landscape. Autumn is an especially picturesque period of the year for this is the time when the many forests of the valley burst out in many colours.



## BUIVYDAI HILL FORT

Buivydai hill fort stands less than half a kilometre from Bradeliškės, also on the left bank of the River Dūkšta. It is known for its steep 40-metre high embankments. Today there is an observation deck in place of the former castle platform which serves as an open vista to the impressive view of the Dūkšta valley.

Buivydai hill fort is called the most curious mystery in Neris Regional Park. Due to the lack of archeological findings it is not possible to confirm that the site was the site of a small ancient castle.

Two sides of the hill fort border the River Dūkšta and a ditch which is fed with waters from the brook and snow runs along the other. On the side free from natural obstacles Lithuanians once built an elaborate defensive system that consisted of three ditches and three ramparts.

Address: Buivydai

GPS: *54°49'19"N 24°56'25"E*

## KARMAZINAI HILL FORT

The strange small, pyramid-like Karmazinai hill fort stands in the vicinity of the junction of the Neris and Dūkšta. According to archeologists it is about 2000 years old which, as time passed, lost its defensive capabilities and became a sacrifice hill. A sacrifice hill was an ancient sacred place, where pagan Lithuanians held ceremonies to honour their gods. Today there is an altar and bonfires are lit on special occasions; wedding and other ceremonies are also held here as well. Karmazinai hill fort, also called Viršupis Sacrifice hill, is entwined in many legends. It is said there once stood a stone idol and the hill itself was surrounded by two circles of 18 mighty large oak trees. Another legend tells us a church was built here, but suddenly disappeared. That explains midday bell rings coming up from deep down.

Address: Karmazinai

GPS: *54°49'09"N 24°55'52"E*

NEARBY:



[WWW.PILIAKALNIAI.LT](http://WWW.PILIAKALNIAI.LT)



# MAIŠIAGALA HILL FORT AND THE MONUMENT TO GRAND DUKE ALGIRDAS

GPS: *54°51'58"N 25°03'50"E*

Address: Algirdo str., Maišiagala town, Maišiagala eldership, Vilnius district

## ABOUT

Maišiagala settlement, located about 28 km north-west of Vilnius, offers guests a rich history. Maišiagala was mentioned in the written Prussian Annals as early as the 13th century. Later, these lands belonged to the Grand Duke of Lithuania, Algirdas. However, it is likely that the first settlements appeared here in the first part of the first millennium AD: this is evidenced by the hill fort and the remainders of a settlement at its foot.

Lithuanian hill forts never stood alone and formed a solid and rather tight network of state defence castles. Maišiagala's wooden castle probably belonged to the inner ring of Vilnius castles. Historians believe that the golden age of Lithuanian hill forts was the time of Algirdas' reign, when fierce battles for freedom and religion took place. In about 40 years, the Knights of the Tectonic Order held 96 crusades against Lithuania and destroyed 22 castles! In response, Lithuanians attacked the Order 50 times and destroyed 17 of their castles. These were the achievements of Algirdas, the last pagan Grand Duke of Lithuania, and his brave men.

The wooden castle of Maišiagala was repeatedly burnt down and then rose again from the ashes. The turning point came in the 15th century, when the Tectonic knights burnt the castle to the

ground, and captured and led away more than 1,000 prisoners. The castle has never been restored since. In 1992, Maišiagala Hill Fort, located on the right bank of the Dūkšta Stream, was recognised as an architectural, historical and monumental landmark.

Ten years later, a monument in honour of Grand Duke Algirdas was erected at the south-west base of the hill fort. Algirdas was sometimes called 'The Victorious Warrior'. During his reign, he encouraged urban growth, trade and culture, and made Lithuania a stronger and more centralised state.

Each year, at the beginning of autumn, an annual celebration to honour Algirdas is held in Maišiagala. Following a service at the local church, guests are invited to march towards the Hill Fort. There they enjoy performances of various musical ensembles, theatrical concerts, national celebrations around the bonfire, etc.



## MAIŠIAGALA HILL FORT

The impressive 18-metres high hill fort is sometimes called Queen Bona's (Bona Sforza) Castle. The oval-shaped look-out deck at the top of the hill fort is 60 metres long and 40 metres wide. In order to strengthen the defence, back in the medieval times a ditch 4 metres deep and even 30 metres wide was dug and a dyke that was 4 metres high and 25 metres wide was formed. Today, the natural character of the hill fort has changed (like that of the majority). The naturally changing environment as well as ongoing archaeological excavations were behind these changes.

Archaeological excavations revealed a considerable cultural layer inside the hill fort: ductile ceramics, a variety of metal items, tools and jewellery, fragments of burnt wooden houses, and remains of animals were discovered. All of that proves that Maišiagala Hill Fort's history dates back to the first millennium AD. A settlement spanning over 1 ha was located at the foot of the Hill Fort. At the beginning of the second millennium, a wooden castle was erected, which was a serious threat to the Tectonic Order knights advancing towards Vilnius in the 13th and 14th centuries.

## MONUMENT TO GRAND DUKE ALGIRDAS

According to an ancient Lithuanian tradition, the Grand Duke Algirdas had to be burned in Šventaragis Valley in Vilnius. However, in 1377, the city was attacked by the crusaders and was severely damaged. It is possible that the Temple was also damaged. The solemn burial of Algirdas was held in the holy wood of Kukovaitis, nearby Maišiagala Castle. The last pagan Grand Duke of Lithuania was burned alongside his finest horse. It is said that they were both decorated with precious stones and pearls. In 2002, the year of the 625th anniversary of Grand Duke Algirdas' death, a monument in his honour was erected at the foot of the Maišiagala Hill Fort. A composition made using field stones was created by the sculptor Domas Čiapas.

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# STRUVĖ GEODESIC ARCH POINTS IN MEŠKONYS AND PALIEPIUKAI

Meškonyš GPS:  $54^{\circ}55'50''N$   $25^{\circ}19'00''E$  Paliepiukai GPS:  $54^{\circ}38'03''N$   $25^{\circ}25'44''E$

Addresses: Meškonyš village, Nemenčinė eldership, Vilnius district; Paliepiukai village, Nemėžis eldership, Vilnius district

## ABOUT

Meškonyš and Paliepiukai, small villages of Vilnius region, have just a few dozen inhabitants. However, both are famous for the World Heritage Sites of outstanding universal value: triangulation chain points of Struvė Geodesic Arch. The Struvė Geodesic Arc is 2,820 metres long and illustrates unique achievements in the field of Earth Sciences. The aim of the project, which took place at the beginning of the 19th century, was to study and determine the size and shape of the planet Earth as accurately as possible. Thanks to close collaboration between scientists and monarchs from different countries, a significant and globally important goal was achieved: the longest section of the Earth's meridian arc was precisely measured.

The Struvė Geodesic Arc represents a measuring instrument specifically designed to calculate certain parameters of the Earth, i. e. its form, size and the meridian length. It stretches from the historic city of Izmail at the delta of the Danube River by the Black Sea to the Fuglenes Lighthouse in Norway on the coast of the Arctic Ocean and goes through ten modern states. Interestingly, the shape of the Arc closely resembles the line separating Western and Eastern Europe. Triangulation (lat. *triangulum* – a triangle) is a specific method used to find the location of geodesic

points for the formation of triangular chains of the land areas to be measured. It is a specific method used in geodesy for the formation of maps and topographic plans. The Struvė Geodesic Arc is a chain that stretches for about 2,820 km and connects 258 fragments of the triangulation networks. In 2005, it was put on the World Heritage List of the UNESCO World Cultural and Natural Heritage Convention. Three of the 34 Struvė Geodesic Arc Points on the list are located in Lithuania: in Meškonyš (Nemenčinė municipality, Vilnius district), in Paliepiukai (Nemėžis municipality, Vilnius district), and in Gireišiai (Rokiškis district).

Struvė Geodesic Arc is named after the astronomer Frederick George Wilhelm Struve, who developed a method for measuring the meridian arc. The oldest section of the triangular network chain was formed in Vilnius Governorate between 1816 and 1821. In 1822-1831 F. G. V. Struve himself organised the formation of the triangulation network in Estonia and Latvia, systematised research results and detailed them in his work 'Arc du Méridien 25°20'. These calculations were not only the most accurate at the time, but also served as the basis for further calculations. For a whole century onwards this triangulation method was used for the calculation and adjustment of the parameters of the Earth.



## EXCEPTIONAL UNIVERSAL VALUE

In 2005, thanks to the efforts of ten cooperating countries, the Struvé Geodetic Arc Points were inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List as having an exceptional universal value. According to the World Heritage Convention, an exceptional universal value is a special cultural and/or natural value of a heritage site that is not limited to national borders, i.e. it is important in the international context and is relevant not only for today, but also for future generations.

National or regional landmarks are not automatically put on the World Heritage List. Exceptional universal value of the Struvé Geodetic Arc was recognised on the basis of three out of ten world heritage criteria established by the Convention Committee.

According to criterion II, it exhibits an important interchange of human values uniting scientists and monarchs from different countries to collaborate in the interest of scientific progress. The results of the study of the Geodetic Arc are the first calculations that helped determine the exact size and shape of the Earth.

According to criterion IV, it is a unique technological ensemble created with the help of a special measurement methodology,

which determined the development of the Earth Sciences. The Geodetic Arc points are considered a real and intangible part of this measurement technology.

According to criterion VI, the Geodetic Arc and its points constitute a direct and obvious testament to humanity's interest in the world. It also highlights the connection with the Newtonian theory of the Earth's geoid, which prompted the search for precise measurements of the Earth's parameters.

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# THE GEOGRAPHICAL CENTRE OF EUROPE

GPS:  $54^{\circ}54'17''N$   $25^{\circ}19'08''E$

Address: Girija village, Nemenčinė eldership., Vilniaus district

## ABOUT

The search for the geographical midpoint of Europe has been ongoing for over 200 years. Astronomers, geographers, mathematicians and physicists provide quite different estimations. As a result, monuments marking the geographical midpoint of Europe are also located in Poland, Slovakia, Belarus, Hungary, Estonia, etc. In 1989, researchers at the French National Geographic Institute determined that the true geographic centre of Europe is located in Lithuania, 26 km North of Vilnius (in the direction of Molėtai), between the villages of Purnuškės and Bernotai. The scientists used the *method of gravity centres* in their estimations, which had not been used before.

In 1997, in order to mark the geographical midpoint of Europe, a giant boulder of 9 tons was placed on the hill in accordance with the determined coordinates:  $54^{\circ}54'N$   $25^{\circ}19'E$ . The territory of the Geographical Centre of Europe covers 912 ha providing visitors with an opportunity to admire the beautiful Lithuanian landscape. The territory the following sites, worth visiting: a boulder with the exact coordinates inscribed on it marking the geographical midpoint of Europe, oak trees planted by leaders of the Republic of Lithuania, marble-paved square marking the four corners of the globe, monument dedicated to the EU created by sculptor

Gediminas Jokūbonis, Bernotai Hill Fort and the Sacred Hill, Lake Girija, etc.

The information centre is located in a wooden log house at the bottom of the hill. Those who want documented proof of their visit to Europe's Centre can purchase a certificate to testify the fact. In 2004, to mark Lithuania's accession to the EU, a monument created by sculptor Gediminas Jokūbonis was placed on the hill. It is a white granite column surmounted by a gold-plated crown of stars. The crown has twelve stars to symbolise the member states of the European Union. The outdoor display can be visited in any season at any time of the day.

It is important to know that when establishing the coordinates of a particular location the unit of seconds should also be used. Therefore, in 2004, scientists from the same institute have provided more detailed calculations measuring at  $54^{\circ}50'45''N$  and  $25^{\circ}18'23''E$ , i. e. to the north of Vilnius, close to Pašiliai Village.



## BERNOTAI HILL FORT AND THE SACRED HILL

Only six people live in Bernotai village today, which is located right next to the Geographical Midpoint of Europe. However, the surrounding areas have been inhabited for centuries. The hill fort with parts of a castle, remains of the village and local cemetery, all are testimonies to that. The Bernotoniai Hill Fort is one of the oldest mounds in Lithuania. Archaeological findings, discovered next to the hill fort, testifies that people have been living here since the 1st century A.D.

A hill fort is a naturally-formed hill containing a defensive structure located at the top and a cultural layer. There are at least 7 other hill forts in a 20-km area around the Geographical Centre of Europe! There are about 1,000 hill forts around the country.

The Bernotai Hill Fort is oblong, about 12-metre high, surrounded by Lake Girija, a lake-originated stream valley and a protective grove. It is likely that a defensive castle stood on top of it in the past. Archaeological research teams found samples of ceramic pots and burnt metal elements testifying to human life.

There is a Sacred Hill in the village as well. It is one of the most commonly found types of sacred places in Lithuania, a place of

cult. Such hilltops were equipped with an altar, where the eternal fire was protected by young virgin priestesses. Such sacred sites were usually erected next to holly woods or rivers.

The word 'alka' is related to the word 'alkti' (Eng. *get hungry*). It points to the concept of sacrifice or the idea of 'feeding the Gods'. Bones of the deceased found nearby testify that these were the places of sacrifice and burial.

Even after the official introduction of Christianity, people would go there and ask for good health and a good harvest, leave sacrifices, child shepherds would imitate ancient rites around such places, and so on.

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# THE HILL OF AUKŠTOJAS

GPS: 54°31'36"N 25°37'33"E

Address: Juozapinė village, Medininkai eldership, Vilnius district

## ABOUT

The numerous valleys and hills of the Medininkai Highlands invite you to enjoy a breathtaking landscape and to visit Lithuania's highest summit, the Hill of Aukštojas. Aukštojas Hill, which is at the Juozapinė Geomorphological Reserve near Medininkai village, is 293.84 metres above the Baltic Sea level. A large stone rolled to the top of the hill and a concrete geodesic sign show the name of the hill as well as its height. The terrain in this area is quite different from other Lithuanian highlands and is considered to be one of the oldest in the country. It was formed during the penultimate ice age and, as the result of the last ice age, was deep-frozen for many years. About 10,000–15,000 years ago, the entire territory of the country was covered by a glacier. Various moraine sediments accumulated around its edges. Powerful glacier waters polished the surface of the highlands making it fairly flat and this is why the view that opens up from the observation tower still leaves you wondering whether you are really looking at the landscape from the highest point in Lithuania. There are no lakes in the Medininkai Highlands. There used to be some earlier, but flowing glacier waters drained the lakes and flattened the shores. For a long time, Juozapinė Hill had been officially regarded as the highest point in Lithuania. It is also

located on the Medininkai Highlands, about 1 km from Aukštojas Hill. Only in 2004, specialists measured the elevation difference between the two hills: it was about 1 metre. Thus, Juozapinė Geomorphological Reserve can be proud to have the two highest points in Lithuania. Aukštojas Hill has a symbolic meaning for Lithuania and is now a tourism and culture site. Various projects and artistic events are held here. Additional events, such as annual celebrations of Mindaugas Coronation Day (6 July) and International Earth Day (20 March), the World Lithuanian Games as well as various ecological, ethnographic and other cultural events are planned to be celebrated annually on this hill. In 2006, a solemn celebration on Aukštojas Hill gave start to an incredibly important gratitude programme. Altogether 300,000 "Thank you" signatures of Lithuanian citizens were gathered and made their way to Iceland in order to thank the country that was the first to recognise Lithuanian independence! The ceremony of gratitude took place on the highest Icelandic peak *Hvannadalshnukur* (2,120 m) where a handful of Lithuanian soil was spread. Visitors to Aukštojas Hill are invited to take a look at the beautiful pine forest, oak forest as well as a special artistic feature decorating the mountain called the Balts' Sun Circle.



## AUKŠTOJAS IN BALTIC MYTHOLOGY

Aukštojas is the name of the chief deity of the Balts mentioned in written sources from the 14th century as the supreme heavenly deity, the creator of the world and the protector of the principles of morality and justice, the first, eternal and the one with no beginning. Ancient Lithuanians gave him different names such as Praamžius, Sutvaras, Vaisgamtis, Labdarys, Gyveleidis, Ukopirmas...

Aukštojas existed before the creation of the world, when darkness still prevailed. He was believed to take on the image of a pigeon and fly around the world dividing it into parts. He scattered the darkness with light and opened up a path.

While walking on it he spat to his left side and saw a human-like creature appear from the water. God commanded the creature to dive into the water and bring him the seeds of the earth. On the third dive the man came back, his mouth and ears filled with seeds. Aukštojas sowed the seeds and soon saw growth on the land.

## THE BALTS' SUN CIRCLE

In 2012, Dalia Matulaitė's sculptural composition was unveiled on the top of Aukštojas. The sculptural composition not only fits in beautifully right at the top, but also serves as a symbol that connects the hill with the history and faith of ancient Lithuania. The Balts' Sun Circle symbolises an ancient altar. Its centre contains an image of a crown that is elevated above Lithuania. The crown is surrounded by the granite heads of four horses. The horses that look at different sides of the world protect the crown and spread the news about Lithuania to all corners of the globe. It is the place where all descendants of the Balts can light the fire of unity. On 22 September the fire was lit as a symbolic message to be sent to the Baltic brothers and sisters in the neighbouring countries. The sculptor hopes that the sculpture created specifically for this unique place will unite and bring together the Baltic tribes.

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TEXT COMPILED BY

Rūta Paulionytė

TRANSLATOR

Aleksandras Federas

LANGUAGE EDITOR

Siobhán Denham

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PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Lukas Jonaitis

Donatas Petkevičius

Žilvinas Petkus

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