

## Į gamtą!\*

BY JENNIFER VIRŠKUS

One of the greatest benefits of living at 54° north is a long summer evening spent *gamtoje* (in nature). A holiday weekend thanks to King Mindaugas Day (July 6) and a summer training camp for the kids I coach, took me to



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Ignalina for four days of mountain biking, rollerblading and swimming. We stayed at the Lithuanian Winter Sports Center ([www.lzsc.lt](http://www.lzsc.lt)), and shared training facilities with Lithuania's national teams for cross-country skiing and biathlon. Each morning while the thin Nordic skiers dressed in spandex did laps around the 7.5 km. asphalt track on rollerskis (short cross-country skis on two wheels), our young alpine skiers ran sprints, did strength conditioning and played football.

After lunch, I led mountain bike rides through the maze of soft forest tracks surrounding Ignalina. Though Lithuania is not the first place one would think of when planning a mountain biking trip, the topography is anything but flat. The choice of trails is extensive, ranging from single and double-track, to forest paths and dirt roads winding through fields of purple *lubinai* (wild lupines) nearly four feet high and delicate *ramunės* (daisies). The weather was cool and humid, the chance of rain always on the horizon. As I pedaled my bike, I briefly closed my eyes and breathed in the damp air, and just for a moment I could imagine I was high in the Rocky Mountains. Climbing through evergreen forests, on a surface of moist black

dirt covered with dry needles, the only sound was that of the birds and the crunch of fallen pinecones under our wheels. Occasionally our trail would cross a small brook and there would be a chorus of screeches from my pre-teen girls.

Covered in mud, sweat and bug spray, we returned to camp ready for a refreshing swim in Šiekščio lake. The lake is over 40 m. (131 ft.) deep and fed by underground springs, making the water usually several degrees colder than other nearby lakes, and also much softer. Mothers relax on the grassy banks while their children jump over and over off the old orange dock into the blue-green water. After swimming, there are peddle-boats with fun names like "Uodas" (mosquito) for rent at the bargain price of 5 litas (\$2) per hour. At camp, the only thing more difficult than getting the kids to bed is getting them out of the lake!

One of my favorite reasons regardless of the season to visit the Winter Sports Center is the café by the lake, and more specifically, their wonderful omelets. They are greasy, salty, packed with slices of *šoninė* (bacon), and always delicious. Served with slices of fresh cucumber and tomato and pile of rye bread, they are the perfect way to start the day, especially sitting outside under an umbrella gazing across the sparkling lake on a crisp summer morning.

Driving back to Vilnius on Monday evening, my girls discussed how happy they were to be back

in the city after trips this summer to Italy, the Baltic Sea, grandma's *sodyba* (summer house), and yes, Ignalina. Having not as much free time as these very lucky girls, I scolded them for complaining about their "hard lives."

Later on in the evening, I met a friend for dinner at "Zoe's Bar and Grill." We sat outside and ate chicken Caesar salads – the best in Vilnius – with a glass of cold white wine. Nearby, small children played in the fountains and leaves on trees rustled in the breeze. As the bells of the Cathedral rang for the beginning of evening mass, the thick clouds parted and a warm evening light engulfed the Cathedral turning the impressive white walls a shade of fresh salmon. I looked up just at that moment, and thought, "It's not so bad to be back in the city."

The next morning, still on camp time, I got up as close to dawn as I could ever manage and went for a run to loosen up my sore muscles. On the soft paths of Sereikiškių Park behind the Cathedral, I ran along the Vilnelė river, my shoes wet from the fresh dew. It was silent except for the singing of the birds, the occasional clang of a caretaker emptying trash cans, and the crack of my steps. Under a tree on a soft grassy knoll a man was practicing *tai chi*, and I admired the sparkle of the sunlight through the green leaves. It's always nice to get out into nature, and sometimes it's even nicer when nature is so close to home. **LH**

\* Into nature!

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**Jennifer Virškus** is a Lithuanian American photographer and journalist from Colorado. She has lived in Vilnius for four years and works as photo editor for the Lithuanian editions of *FHM* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines. She enjoys travel, skiing and cycling in her spare time, and is the head coach of the "Kalnų Ereliai" children's ski team.