LITHUANIA

NATACHA 22

Discovery

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YOU, CYCLISTS WHO LIKE TO CLIMB, DISCOVER IN THESE FEW PAGES WHAT MAKES ALL THE RICHNESS OF THE NATIONAL LIST OF THIS COUNTRY.

Lithuania

Lithuania has many points in common with the Netherlands: a similar area (65,000 km² vs. 41,000), a landscape made of plains and hills, a highest point around 300m (294m at Aukštėjo kalnas and 322m at Drielandenpunt), they are close to the sea (Baltic Sea and North Sea) and a main stream or two cross the country (the Nemunas River for the one, the Rhine and the Meuse / Maas for the others).

It's surrounded by Latvia in the north. How to locate the Baltic countries on a map in relation with each other? Easy, in alphabetical order from north to south: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania. Belarus is located to the east and south-east, Poland is in the south-west and Russia (Kaliningrad, ex-Königsberg) in the south-west as well.
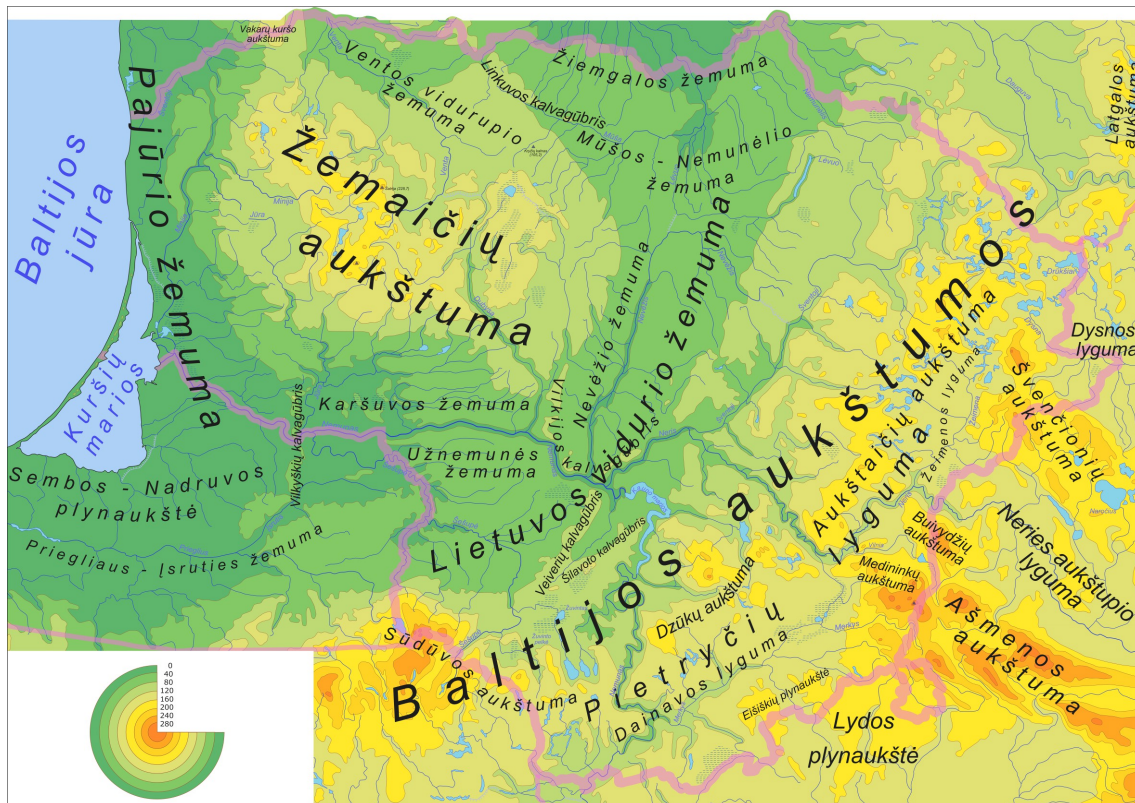

The Suwałki gap is a very strategic corridor in the European geography. From north to south, it makes the connection between Lithuania and Poland, that means between the Baltic countries and the rest of the European Union, but from north-west to south-east it links Kaliningrad to Belarus. The control of this line would allow Russia to open up Kaliningrad. 029-Keliaukim protėvių takais and 035-Snow Arena in Druskininkai are the closest climbs to this place under high tension.

In the west, the Curonian Spit is a 100 km narrow (maximum 4km) strip of land (half Lithuanian, half Russian) that separates the Curonian Lagoon from the Baltic Sea. It's a National Park and also a UNESCO site that we'll visit thanks to 3 climbs of the Challenge: 005-Žaliasis kelias in Juodkrantė, 006- Urbo kalnas and 007-Parnidžio Kopa in Nida.

So, the topography of Lithuania is made of plains ('žemuma' and 'lyguma' on the map below) and highlands ('aukštuma' and 'aukštumos').

The Žemaičių aukštuma lies in the north-west. It's 234m at its highest point (021-Medvėgalis) and it houses the Žemaitija National park (001-Plateliai).

Medvėgalio kalnas

Plateliai Lake in the Žemaitija NP

The Baltic Uplands (Baltijos aukštumos) form an arc from north-east to south. That's where the most part of the 'higher than 200m asl' summits are located and, in particular, the highest points of Lithuania:

In the north-east: 020-Būdakalnis (272m), 018-Pratkūnai (223m), 019-Vilkakalnio kalva (213m) and 015-Pakalnės (202m) ;

Around Vilnius: 072-Tuputiškių serpantinas (216m) and 070-Rokantiškės (214m). We didn't select Laimio kalnas (235m), because the car traffic is too important ;

South-east of Vilnius, near the border with Belarus: 075-Aukštojas kalnas (294m), 073-Kruopynes kalnas (293m) and 074- Ančeriškės (277m) ;

West of Vilnius: 061-Jokūbiškės (211m) and Jovariškės (205m) ;

In the south: 029-Keliaukim protėvių takais (229m).

The Uplands at Aukštojas

and seen from Vilkakalnio kalva (Ignalina)

The hydrographic network is very dense, it's made of lakes and many rivers, the Nemunas in particular.

The north-east, near Latvia and Belarus, overflows with lakes, often highlighted by regional parks (Gražutė, Labanoras, Asvejos, ...), and even national (Aukštaitija).

Elsewhere, two other National Parks are centred on lakes: Trakai and Žemaitija.

Lūšiai Lake in the Aukštaitija NP

One of the 32 lakes in the Trakai NP

The Nemunas is a major axis of the Lithuanian challenge. It's more than 900km long from Belarus, it crosses Lithuania (Alytus, Kaunas), flows along Kaliningrad and into the Curonian Lagoon. Almost 1/3 of the climbs start from the Nemunas (24 sur 75).

Rambynas on Nemunas

The Neris below Verkiai Palace

The Nemunas appears two times in the Napoleonic History. On July 7, 1807, the first Treaty of Tilsit (nowadays Sovetsk in Kaliningrad) was signed by Napoleon I and the Tsar Alexander I on a raft in the middle of the river, after the Battle of Friedland.

The Russian campaign starts on February 24, 1812 when Napoleon I crossed the Nemunas. In Kaunas, a commemorative plaque was installed on the mount 'Napoleono kalnas', located near the foot of 053-Kalkinės gatvė.

The two emperors on the Nemunas

Napoleon I's Rubicon

The Neris is 500km long. It rises in Belarus as well, passes through Vilnius and flows into the Nemunas in Kaunas. 9 climbs of the challenge start from it.

The Dubysa is a small 130km long river that flows into the Nemunas in Seredžius (#027). It concerns half a dozen climbs.

The Vilnia meets the Neris in Vilnius, at the foot of the Three Crosses and the Gediminas Tower. It also flows below the Tuputiškių serpantinas and Kalno gatvė in Naujoji Vilnia.

Lyduvenai Bridge above the Dubysa

Gediminas at the junction of Vilnia and Neris

Tourism in Lithuania
46 climbs of the list are connected to a place of interest (green triangles).

http://www.parks.it/world/LT/Findex.html

Most of them (2/3) are located in green areas. In 2022, Lithuania has 5 national parks, about 30 regional parks and many nature reserves. They occupy 15% of the territory.

In the challenge, 7 climbs are in 4 of the 5 national parks:
-Žemaitija: 001-Plateliai
-Curonian Spit: 005-Žaliasis kelias, 006-Urbo kalnas (lighthouse) and 007-Parnidžio Kopa (obelisk).
-Dzūkija: 033-Merkiné and 034-Liškiava
-Trakai: 121-Jovariškės

Urbo kalnas Lighthouse

Parnidžio Kopa Obelisk

18 summits belong to 11 different regional parks:
-Anykščiai: 014-Vaitutiškiai and 057-Kavarskas
-Aukštadvaris: 064-Aukštadvaris (Road 4703)
-Dubysa: 036-Paltupiai, 037-Bedančiai, 038-Daugodai and 039-Betygala
-Kurtuveniai: 011-Sodeliukai
-Meteliai: 032-Nakrūniškė
-Nemuno kilpų (Loops of the Nemunas): 55-Bagrėnas
-Panemuniai: 025-Naujokai, 026-Veliuona and 027-Seredžius
-Pavilnys: 070-Rokantiškės and 072-Tuputiškių serpantinas
-Rambynas: 023-Rambynas
-Verkiai: 066-Verkių rūmai
-Vištytis: 029-Keliaukim protėvių takais

Meteliai Regional park

Seredžius on the Nemunas

The loops of the Nemunas

The Minija

5 summits are located in nature reserves ('draustinis'):
-Ažušilė: 020-Būdakalnis
-Kruopynė: 073-Kruopynes kalnas
-Minija: 008-Akmenskinė
-Pakalniai: 015-Pakalnės
-Pratkūnai: 018-Pratkūnai

Many historic sites are witnesses of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1236-1569):
-Gediminas was Grand Duke of Lithuania from 1316 to 1341. He built on the heights above Vilnius a wooden castle that became the Vilnius Castle, of which remains today only the Gediminas Castle Tower (#068).

-Kernavé (#60) was the first known capital city of the Grand Duchy. The archaeological site belongs to the UNESCO World Heritage. We find there, in particular, five fortified hills. The city was destroyed by the Teutonic Knights in the end of the 14th century.

The Gediminas Castle Tower

Kernavé's fortified hills

-Medvégalis (#021) was one of the most important forts of the Grand Duchy, in the region called Samogitia (nord-west of Lithuania). In 1329, it underwent a siege and the same Teutonic Knights forced the 6000 inhabitants to convert to Christianism.

-Šatrijos kalnas (#009) also housed a wooden castle, contemporaneous with the previous. Before the Christian period probably existed a pagan temple. As 'šatra' denotes a 'twig from a besom', the legend links the hill to the witches of the region.

-The Trakai Castle (UNESCO site) was built in stone in the 14th century on an island in the middle of the Lake Galvė, but the modern architecture dates from the Sovietic period. We'll get close to it thanks to 062-Jovariškės.

Šatrijos kalnas seen by witches

Trakai

-The Medininkai Castle (in 075-Aukštojas) was rebuilt in the 2010s, it depends on the Trakai Historical National Park and houses an archaeological permanent exhibition.

-The 14th century is also involved in the Three Crosses in Vilnius (#069). In 1636, three wooden crosses were erected to honour the memory of seven Franciscans murdered in the 14th century by inhabitants of the pagan Vilnius. The present crosses date from 1989, they commemorate the victims of the Stalinism and the Deportation in 1941.

Verkiai was of course a property of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania. Afterwards it became the summer residence of the bishops of Vilnius since the end of the 18th century. Then, the castle was rebuilt in neoclassical style and called the 'Versailles of Vilnius'.

The Three Crosses

The Verkiai Palace

The Kaunas Fortress is made of ten forts scattered on the heights of the city. Its construction started in 1882 under the reign of the Tsar Alexander III of Russia, in order to protect the empire on its western border. During the First World War, it resisted eleven days to the German attacks. More than 50,000 people were executed by the Nazis during the Second World War. A museum and a memorial were erected in the Ninth Fort. In the challenge, we've selected the Tenth (#047), its is unachieved, not the most interesting in historical terms, but very steep.

Darius and Girėnas attempted a transatlantic flight in 1933, from New York to Kaunas, but their plane crashed 400 miles short of Kaunas. At the top of 051-Prodos kalnas, a memorial pay tribute to them.

Memorial in the Ninth Fort in Kaunas
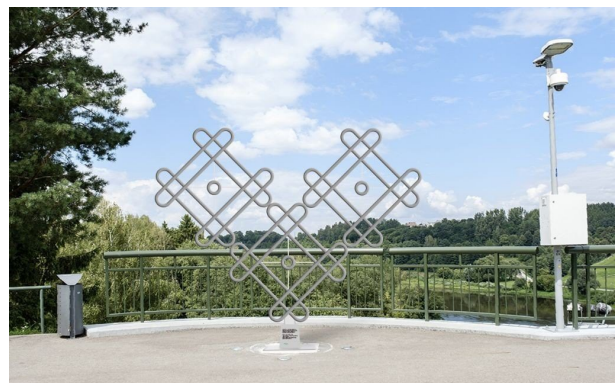

Memorial Darius and Girėnas

Also in Kaunas, the 'Owl Mountain' (#050) at the top of which statuettes of owls stand on the park railings. The hill gave its name to a Lithuanian movie (Pelėdų kalnas, directed by Audrius Juzėnas in 2017). It's a historical drama that shows how the Lithuanian people rebelled in vain against the Soviet authorities between 1947 and 1953.

Let's leave History. In Alytus, the Baltosios rožės tiltas ('White rose bridge') is an old railway bridge rebuilt for the exclusive use of pedestrians and cyclists. It's 38m high and 240m long above the Nemunas. On the bridge we find a heart-shaped metal sculpture ('Roželių širdelė'), that is the start of the short but steep #031.

Baltosios rožės tiltas

Roželių širdelė

The Snow Arena in Druskininkai welcomes the Nemunas as it leaves Belarus. There is a 460m long indoor artificial ski slope and also one outdoor. The #035 climbs around it.
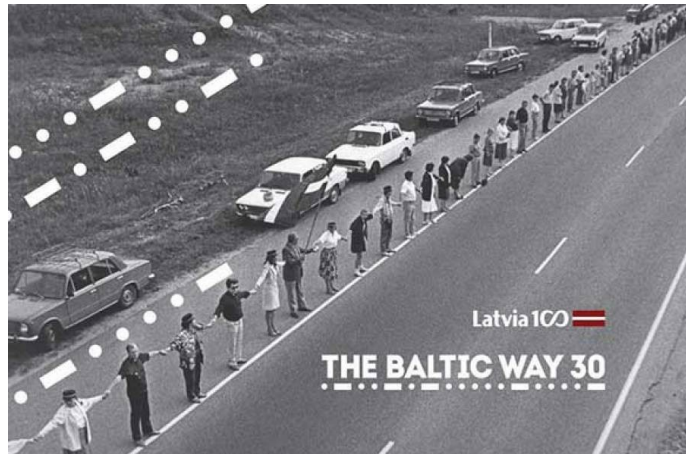
Cycling races in Lithuania

The **Baltic Chain Tour** was created in 2011. It's a stage race that links the three Baltic countries, and sometimes Finland. The 'King of the Mountain' aren't many and no climb is part of the Challenge. One significant name on the podium: Van der Poel won in 2014.

https://balticchaintour.com/

The name of the race refers to a human chain created on 23 August 1989 by more than two million people between Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn, in order to claim the independence of the Baltic countries from the Soviet Union.

Riders who like gravel will appreciate the '**Most Epic Gravel Ride Ever**'. The longest distance (200km) has 1400m elevation gain in the northeastern part of Lithuania (start and finish in Zarasai). Unfortunately, the road is not available :

https://www.facebook.com/mostepicgravel/

The **'Lietuvos plento tauré'** Challenge gathers a few races, with climbs included in our list.

The most interesting is a trilogy, the first part of which is a 2,9km hill climb with the hairpins of the 072-Tuputiškių serpantinas. The third part is another hill climb (0,5km-11% average) to the 069-Three Crosses in Vilnius:

https://www.plentotaure.lt/virtualios-dviraciu-lenktynes-trys-kryziai/

The Three Crosses, 200 beats per minute:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nm6IyECVHEk

The hairpins downhill, in slow motion with music:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vKSyNzKdAg

The **GP of Šakiai** uses the wall of 028-Plokščiai and its hm at 16%.
From 2.00 : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogkgvn7pN-U

Perkūno kelias climbs the southern side of 061-Jokūbiškės, and also the first part of the SW, the cobbles of 'Basanavičiausstraat' in Semeliškės :

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30Fu_Ksw1Fo

The **Lyduokių krašto turas** and **Molėtai-Ukmergė** pass through 059-Paželviai.

Difficulty

4 summits are higher than 250m asl: Aukštojas (294m), the highest point of Lithuania, Kruopynes kalnas (293), Ančeriškės (277m), the three are located in the south-east, and Būdakalnis (272m) in the north-east. The 4 summits belong to the Baltic Uplands.

Aukštojas

Ančeriškės

The best elevation gain (182m) is in the south, 029-Keliaukim protėvių takais (Liubiškiai), after a 20km very slight slope. 5 other climbs have more than 100m EG: 073-Kruopynes kalnas (118m), 061-Jokūbiškės (116), 020-Būdakalnis and 075-Aukštojas (112), and 070-Rokantiškės (110).

Towards 029-Liubiškiai

Jokūbiškės-SW

7 climbs are longer than 5 km: 029-Keliaukim protėvių takais (20,4km), Aukštojas (12,1), 061-Jokūbiškės (9,2), 001-Plateliai (7,5), 073-Kruopynes kalnas (6,8), 021-Medvėgalio kalnas (6,1) and 010-Kietkalnis (5,9).

The roads to Plateliai
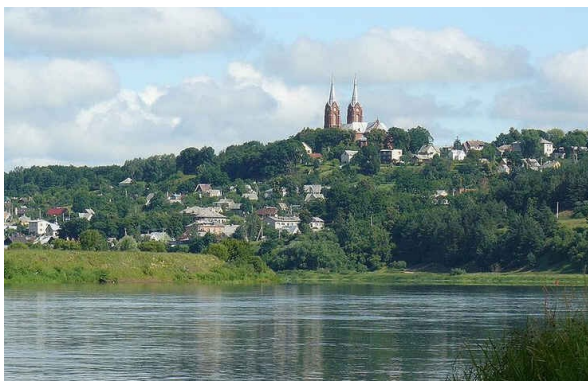

and to Kruopynes kalnas

The 069-Three Crosses (Trijų Kryžių paminklas) in Vilnius is the most difficult in europoints (82). 4 other climbs exceed 50 points, they are short and steep: 043-Vilkija (64) on Nemunas River, 031-Roželių širdelė (58) in Alytus, 049-Kapsų gatvė in Kaunas and 068-Gediminas Castle Tower in Vilnius (52).

Close-up of the terrible cobbles in Kapsų gatvė

6 climbs are cobbled. Besides the 049-Kapsų gatvė, 004-Žemaičių plentas (Kalniškė), 039-Dubysos gatvė (Betygala), 057-Kavarskas (Road 1218), 068-Gediminas Tower and 071-Kalno gatvė (Naujoji Vilnia).

Finally, 5 climbs have a bomb higher or equal to 25: 031-Roželių širdelė and 069-Three Crosses (32), 043-Vilkija (26), 012-Zakeliškiai, thanks to its rare hm at 19%, and 049-Kapsų gatvė (25).

Vilkija-on-Nemunas

Zakeliškiai