

Souvenirs

EYE-CATCHING ART FROM A UNIQUE GALLERY, LITHUANIA

The setting of the family-owned Small Gallery recalls the kind of quiet suburban lanes and airy self-contained neighbourhoods found in countless European cities, well away from the noisy city centre. Yet this delightful gallery is located only a 10-minute walk from the Lithuanian parliament building in Vilnius, amid the colourful wooden houses of the Žvėrynas district. Although essentially just one room, its floor-to-ceiling windows create a sense of space and light so that it doesn't feel cramped, despite the sheer number of objects on display in their dazzling variety. In much the same way as the acclaimed Louisiana

Museum of Art in Denmark, in all seasons the clearly visible foliage outside adorns the art so that snow compliments sculpture, falling leaves grace canvas, ivy tumbles across vases. Familiar Lithuanian naif motifs such as angels and birds are outnumbered by far less familiar beasts – spiny turtles with four heads, walking fish with Egyptian masks, flying bronze horses, voluptuous ceramic doves. It's all very quirky, but tastefully so. Abstract and neo-expressionist paintings line the walls and lean against each other on the floor. Sprawling trays of handmade jewellery lie beside the cash register. It's virtually guaranteed you won't leave without buying something.

Small Gallery, Latvių gatvė 19a, Vilnius



PREMIUM VODKAS, ESTONIA

Though most people think of vodka as a tipple specific to Russia and Poland, here in the Baltics the age-old practice of distilling grain into a potent drink has been helping farmers stave off the winter chill since time out of hand. In recent years it has also become a source of national pride – a number of the nation's high-quality vodkas have been making a splash on the international scene, winning the praise of aficionados and becoming all the rage in New York clubs. For those who drink, needless to say, these vodkas also make great souvenirs.

At the high end of the market is Stön, which has the distinction of being named among the world's 10 best vodkas in an article in *Forbes*. Said to be 'distinctively smooth and slightly sweet', it's particularly popular in the US.

Other premium Estonian vodkas you'll find in the alcohol shops are Crystal, made by the same distillers as Stön, The Tall Blond, a super-smooth pick of vodka experts, and a relative newcomer called Saaga 1763, which claims to be so unlike other vodkas you can sip it like cognac at room temperature.

If you're taking home a bottle for a non-connoisseur, you can also go for one of the more typical Estonian brands, the kind that are the mainstay of every bar in the country. Your friends will find them just as exotic and they'll only cost around €14 a litre as compared to over €30 for the top-of-the-line labels.

The two most common are Saaremaa, and the somewhat more refined Viru Valge.

The latter can be found in attractive blue bottles celebrating the distiller's 110th anniversary, or gift boxes that also contain a set of shot glasses.

Whichever brand you choose, read the label carefully to make sure you're buying the standard 40 percent strength rather than the extra-powerful 80 percent variety, which has been known to cause spontaneous singing and spark peasant uprisings.

SPONGES, TURKEY

The sponge diving industry in Bodrum has existed for thousands of years, beginning with ancient Greek divers who dove naked to depths of up to 30 meters to harvest sponges from the sea floor. Although the shallow seas around the Bodrum peninsula are famous for their shipwrecks, for every famous wreck catalogued by archaeologists, a local sponge diver made the sighting first. During the 20th century over fishing nearly decimated the industry but the introduction of the synthetic sponge has reduced demand for the creatures and allowing a comeback. Today, Bodrum divers harvest sponges sustainably by only cutting parts of the organism and allowing it to regenerate. You can buy sea sponges from souvenir shops anywhere downtown. Turkish sponges are world renowned for their high quality. [Go](#)



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