

instant

BIRŠTONAS

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Introducing Birštonas

If Birštonas was any more relaxing they'd have to put it in a jar and sell it under the counter. You'd have to have a prescription to go there. And, while it's certainly therapeutic, it does maintain enough of a pulse to leave you fresh and tingly and well enough to drive home slowly, safely and serenely while more stressed-out people flip their lids behind you trying to get past.

Basically, the little town is nestled in an elbow of the Nemunas, and hence affords plenty of river views and lovely riverside walks. It's the sort of place where you can suck in lungfuls of clean air and feel all zippedy and healthy even if you smoke a pack a day and had a hard night. Of course with such beautiful natural surroundings, and some magical local mud to boot, it's not surprising that a bit of a SPA resort has developed in this gorgeous little town. So in addition to all the outdoorsy stuff that you'll read about in these pages, you can get bathed, massaged, buried in mud, irrigated, exfoliated, elongated (probably) and otherwise de-exasperated.

What's more, in the past couple of years, some rather fine hotels and restaurants have popped up, making Birštonas an ideal destination for a romantic weekend. You can also often see lots of wedding parties queueing for photos at the top of the hill that overlooks the town. The beaus and brides there may act as either encouragement or contraceptive during a naughty weekend, but they're certainly pretty.

Then there's the option of winter sports. Skiing, snowboarding falling over and so on – it's all doable and delightful here in Birštonas. So, whatever the season, this little nook of a town has plenty of options and is well worth a day trip or a weekend break – especially when you consider that it's so close to Kaunas.

Restaurants
Bars
Clubs
Sights
Hotels
Transport

and a whole host of other useful information



Vacys Valužis

The Birštonas

telephone code is +370 319

Getting there

If you're a fish, finding your way to Birštonas is a doddle. Just swim along the Nemunas until it goes all wiggly and you get dizzy, and you're there. If you're a person, it's a bit more tricky.

Unfortunately – or fortunately, depending on your point of view – someone seems to have decided to hide this delightful little town. There is only about one road sign that points to Birštonas, and it's pretty much in Birštonas.

Still, try as they might, hiding Birštonas won't do any good because we're going to tell you how to get there.

From Kaunas

By car Pretend you've gone completely mad and want to go to Warsaw. You'll drive out on the A5, heading toward a place called Marijampolė. As you haven't gone completely mad, however, you'll turn off onto route 130 pretty quickly and follow signs to Prienai. Once you pass through that town, take the A16 toward Vilnius. Now you're getting pretty close to Birštonas and – lo and behold! – you'll see a sign.

By bus If that all sounds too complicated, you'll be pleased to know that buses depart from Kaunas every 30 minutes on the hour and half-hour from 06:00 to 20:00. Couldn't be simpler.

As you drive into town, don't be put off by the rambling great monstrosity of a building on the left that looks like a crashed space station. Just carry on. The bus station is not much more than a car park. It serves its purpose and nothing more. On the opposite side of the road and a little way to your right is the Tourist Information Centre. If you just want to explore the town on foot, turn left and explore away.

Where to stay

Audenis Lelijū 3, tel. +370 319 613 00, fax +370 319 613 01, info@audenis.lt, www.audenis.lt. It relies a bit on that spartan style that comes from flat-packed furniture, but it is affordable, comfortable, and the best option for those who are not in the mood for cultural or nocturnal adventure. All rooms have a television, minibar, a private bathroom, and even an internet connection. This hotel is also home to a nice restaurant which will come as a great relief after a day of outdoorsy adventure.

On yer bike

Birštonas is ideally suited to two-wheeled exploration. Near the heart of the town, along the river, is a long paved path that is ideal for a leisurely and picturesque ride. It's also very flat, which is great if you're lazy. In addition to that, you can pedal into the forests and enjoy the scent of pines, the calls of birds, and no chance of being run over by crazy Lithuanian drivers.

Keep in mind that you can not only explore the forest near the town itself, but head a bit further afield and make a real day of it. With a picnic lunch, a pair of wheels and a gentle spirit of adventure, you can enjoy the best of Birštonas by bicycle.

► 9 rooms (1 single 120Lt, 6 doubles 170 - 190Lt, 2 suites 190 - 230Lt, 1 apartment 250 - 270Lt). ★★★★★

Birštono Nemuno Vingis Turistų 20, tel. +370 698 020 17/+370 611 230 16, aldona@kortas.lt, www.kortas.lt. It's over the river from the main town and there's no bridge. (Just something to be aware of.) Accommodation is pretty basic, but the all-in-one nature of the place (pool, restaurant, lodgings), not to mention the beautiful natural surroundings, are the main attractions. Oh - and the four-wheel motorbikes help too. ► Rooms for three to five people 15 - 30 Lt/night.

Sofijos rezidencija Jaunimo 6, tel. +370 319 452 00, fax +370 319 452 01, info@sofijosrezidencija.lt, www.sofijosrezidencija.lt. Not in the best location, but so crammed full of over-the-top opulence that you'll probably never want to leave anyway. Lots of gilding, flowing fabrics, rococo furniture, plush cushions with images of angels leaning on their forearms and other romantic blah. Not just the newest hotel in town, but also the ultimate naughty nest in this region. We hope the doors are soundproof. 14 rooms (13 doubles 230Lt, 1 apartment 360Lt).

Sonata Algirdo 34, tel./fax +370 319 658 25, seklytele@sonatahotel.lt, www.sonatahotel.lt. The middle of a forest might be the last place you'd expect to find deep, plush carpets, chifon curtains and a gleaming spa bath. But that's exactly what you'll find here. The rooms offer a modest and elegant style that belies the forest hide-away location. You can ponder that while you're lying on the bed looking out the window at the trees or, from some rooms, river glimpses. A very quiet, classy and complete retreat. ► 22 rooms (18 doubles 160 - 240Lt, 2 suites 180 - 260Lt, 2 apartments 380 - 430Lt). ★★

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Tulpės Sruogos 4, tel. +370 319 655 20, santulpe@mail.it, www.tulpe.lt. A health resort that extols, demonstrates and offers the healing effects of the regional spring water and mud. Accommodation is healthcare-bland - which may be fine for those who are recovering from something, but otherwise unspectacular other than the fact that all rooms have balconies and the location is unbeatable. Service is pleasant with a hint of matronly-firm. Their packages that include accommodation and 'wellness' services are worth considering. ▶ 71 rooms (12 singles 30 - 54Lt, 50 doubles 60 - 96Lt, 3 triples 90 - 144Lt, 6 suites 45 - 110Lt).

Where to eat

Restaurants

Audenis Lelju 3, tel. +370 319 613 00, www.audenis.lt. Not surprisingly, as it is in a four-star hotel, this restaurant maintains high standards of style, cuisine and service. The menu is, broadly speaking, European, and has some interesting options. The fireplace can add a very cosy atmosphere to the otherwise sleekly-modern interior in winter. It's also a good spot for 'business' meetings, which are a surprisingly frequent occurrence in Birštonas. ▶ Open 11:00 - 23:00.

Birštono Seklytėlė Prienu 10, tel. +370 319 658 25, seklytele@sonatahotel.lt, www.sonatahotel.lt. A hilltop location right beside the river offers the best views in town, and attracts a stream of special occasion visitors - weddings, parties, anniversaries or just those wanting a special treat. You might have to fight for space in the car park with limousines, but it's worth it. A high timber A-frame ceiling and stone fireplace combine with big windows and plenty of light and space to create a bit of a Scandinavian ski cabin feeling. Oh - and the food is appropriately good, too. Come on a Saturday night and chances are you'll be able to enjoy somebody else's celebratory fireworks. To get there: Drive out of Birštonas and turn right on the A16. Take the first U-turn, and then the first turn on your right. It's not too far to walk from the town centre. ▶ Open 11:00 - 24:00.

Sofijos rezidencija Jaunimo 6, tel. +370 319 452 00, fax +370 319 452 01, info@sofijosrezidencija.lt, www.sofijosrezidencija.lt. If the food is subject to as much care and attention as the furniture it ought to be divine. ▶ Open 11:00 - 23:00.

The Birštonas telephone code is +370 319

Information

Tourist Information Centre Jaunimo 3, tel./fax +370 319 657 40, turizmas@Birštonas.lt.
▶ Open 09:00 - 18:00, Sat 10:00 - 18:00. Closed Sun.

Sonata Algirdo 34, tel. +370 319 657 33, seklytele@sonatahotel.lt, www.sonatahotel.lt. Whether on the deck in summer, or just by the floor-to-ceiling windows in winter, you'll feel like you're dining right in the forest. Except you won't be eating raw mushrooms or munching on a wild mink. Rather, you will enjoy any of a pleasing range of meals, carefully prepared and presented in a setting where refinement and nature happily meet. ▶ Open 09:00 - 23:00, Fri, Sat 09:00 - 24:00.

Cheap & Cheery

Pizza Fun Birutės 3, tel. +370 659 002 50. The favourite place for locals out for casual fun and a decent feed, probably because it doesn't disappoint on either count. Design your own pizza and order a few beers, or just drop in for coffee and a chat. ▶ Open 11:00 - 24:00, Sat, Sun 10:00 - 24:00.

What to see

Boat About

Ferry Departing from a pontoon behind the Tulpės sanatorium is a dinky little boat that ferries passengers to the other side of the river and back. A sign on the pontoon will list departure times (May 1 - Nov 1).

Vytėnis Crumbly dock at the end of Pušyno, tel. +370 319 658 25, seklytele@sonatahotel.lt, www.sonatahotel.lt. While you can jump on board for an hour-long cruise at 15:00 on Sundays (adults 20Lt, kiddies 10Lt), this floating play pen really screams out for private bookings. It's ideal for weddings, parties or just a weekend away with a group of friends. There are six cabins that sleep two, and a big glassed-in room with a padded floor where half a dozen people can get very friendly, play body Tetris and enjoy great views. See the website for a map of where to climb aboard.



Promenade

Churches

Saint Anthony from Padova Birutės 14. The current church was completed in 1909 and features a very pretty floor formed from stone tiles decorated with mosaics. It's almost a shame to walk on it, but you'll have to do so to visit the three naves. A church was believed to have been built on this spot by 1529, when Birštonas became a recognised town. The church was rebuilt in 1674, probably after a fire. Don't miss the wooden carved crosses in the yard toward the pond.

Museums

Museum of Birštonas Vytauto 9, tel. +370 319 656 05. What, you may wonder, is an old log doing lying in the corner of a museum. And why has someone hollowed it out? Well, the answer is that it is not a log, but an early wooden pipe through which the mineral water of Birštonas flowed. The history of the spa town is thoughtfully laid out here with many artefacts and documents coming together to give you glimpses of the history of the town at various stages of its development. ▶ Open 10:00 - 17:00. Closed Mon, Tue.

Sacral Art Museum Birutės 10, tel. +370 319 656 99, smuziejus@Birštonas.lt, www.muziejai.lt/Birštonas. Not surprisingly, this place is full of religious bibs and bobs and while we're sure it's the best Birštonas has to offer of such material, it can be a bit staid, austere and ... well, boring, to be honest. The museum is located in a pretty little wooden building near the church, so it might be worth popping in on your way there. ▶ Open 10:00 - 17:00. Closed Mon, Tue.

Statues & Monuments

Bust of Balys Sruoga A writer, poet and intellectual, Balys Sruoga (1896-1947) was considered dangerous to Nazis and hence found himself in a concentration camp. Luckily, he survived the experience and in 1945 settled down in Birštonas to write about his experiences. The resulting book, *Forest of Gods (Dievu miskas)*, has become famous and was recently turned into a film. Sculpture by Giedrius Plechavičius.

Vytautas the Great Near the base of Vytautas Hill (which you can't miss, because it's the only hill) is a big statue (which you can't miss because it's the only big statue) of Vytautas the Great atop his trusty steed. Vytautas was Grand Duke from 1401-1430 and one of the most respected characters in Lithuania's history as he was instrumental in leading the combined Lithuanian and Polish forces to victory over some troublesome Teutonic knights in what was the biggest battle of medieval Europe. See page 10 for history, and 38 if you're looking for Vytautas' statue in Kaunas. Pink granite sculpture by Gediminas Jokūbonis erected in 1998.

Wooden sculptures In a yard beside the church find a small but impressive collection of wooden sculptures that were created during an international wood carving symposium held in Birštonas in 1998.

Walk About

Memorial path On the other side of the river to the town, and around the bend a bit, is a path on the steep river bank. Here there are various wooden sculptures carved by folk artists in memory of those who suffered under Stalin, and their relatives. To get there, take the road to Birštono Nemuno Vingis (listed under 'Where to stay') and keep going past the hotel.



It's all downhill from here

Vacys Valužis

Promenade By the side of the river is a long, flat and paved path for strollers and cyclists. At the south end (to your right as you face the river) is the Vytautas Hill, while if you continue in the other direction you will eventually come across a forest suitable for a more challenging, but also more rewarding, hike.

Vytautas Hill (Birštonas Hill) It is believed that in the 14th century a wooden castle once stood on this hill. Now you can stand on it too, and you'll notice that it offers some breathtaking views of the winding river and the town of Birštonas itself. Try not to think too much about the fact that, supposedly, a woman was hanged from a tree up there by a priest with whom she had fallen in love. Now it is often used as a vantage point from which to take wedding photos. Steps lead up the hill on both the north and south sides.

Winter Fun

Birštonas is lovely in spring and summer, and even rather fetching in autumn. But what about winter?

Well, it seems this pretty little town can even turn on the attraction in the chillier months. Not only is it all very pretty when dressed with snow, and with the rumbling backdrop of the ice-covered river, but Birštonas also attracts skiers.

The town has a 40m-high ski slope. It may not sound like much, but there are two downhill runs to keep both novices and moderately experienced skiers happy. Anyone with a real hunger for adventure will have to head to some other country with proper ski slopes, but if you're after some simple outdoorsy fun, Birštonas will keep you at least mildly amused. There's a pommel-style ski lift, a snow machine which can be fired-up when the weather is not cooperating, and lights that keep the whole thing going well into the evening.

Further information on the ski slope is available on **+370 319 657 70** or **+370 698 430 56**.

If you're a bit more sedate, you might like to try a winter sleigh ride. A horse-drawn sleigh is available to drag you around Birštonas's pretty landscape, warm the cockles of your heart and leave you with fairy-tale romantic memories. For information or bookings, call **+370 682 560 63**.