<u>Historical Perspective</u>:

The separation of the Baltic nations from the former Soviet Union, which came to its violent conclusion in 1990, was less than amicable.
Before Lithuania could formally declare its independence on the 11th of March, there was much violence there was bloodshed, too.
To this very day many Lithuanians have neither forgotten the suffering Stalin's wrath bestowed upon them, nor the involuntary nature of the long drawn out Russian retreat during the sunset years of the Soviet Union.
Russian snipers, hidden away in Vilnius' television tower, abused the civilian inhabitants of the capital for target practice.
Trying to break the resistance of the Baltic Nations by spreading terror, fear and death, those proverbial desperadoes fought a loosing battle - for an empire that was already crumbling all around them.

Vilnius City Park with the city's Television Tower looming in the background.

It goes almost without saying that at the catharsis which awaited all participants at the end of that bloody drama, saw plenty of payback being bestowed upon the Russians and other Soviet minorities, by a Baltic populous frustrated by 5 decades of tyrannic occupation.
Because of these and many other historical entanglements, the outside traveler should not underestimate the wayward national sentiments, rooted in often traumatic national memories, which may show up unexpectedly in everyday life.

The Lithuanian majority and the Polish minority might begrudge each other, despite their common historical ancestry, just as some Russians might still dream of Stalin's old glory-days, regardless of Putin's daily reality of economic decay and political oppression.
Ukrainian, Roma, Jewish, German and other minorities still exist, but in such small numbers that their societal influence is marginal at best.

Population Statistic of Lithuania:[1]

Year	1979	1989	2001	2007	2011
Lithuanian	80.0	79.6	83.5	84.6	83.9
Russian	8.9	9.4	6.3	5.1	5.4
Polish	7.3	7.0	6.7	6.3	6.6
Belarus	1.7	1.7	1.2	1.1	1.3
Ukrainian	1.0	1.2	0.7	0.6	0.6
Jewish	0.4	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1
German	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1

[1] *Source: Lithuanian Office for Government Statistics (12th Mai 2012)*

From 1940 to 1958, due to deportations, acts of war and Holocaust, Lithuania lost an estimated 1 million people.

To this day Lithuanians refer to this era as "their Genocide", a trauma unknown to the rest of the world.

<u>Traveling throughout the country</u>:

Maps are good and GPS systems even better when traveling in the Baltics, but improvisation is king.
It was my experience that entire sub-divisions didn't show up on my (brand name) GPS system, while on other occasions I simply could not get a(ny) satellite lock, even on days with a clear blue sky, traveling under a wide open horizon.

And Internet based mapping software naturally only works as long as one has access to the Internet, an unrealistic expectation away from major urban areas.

And when purchasing services or renting equipment, be it smartphone based Internet access or renting a car, the Western traveler must be keenly aware not be presented with a "westernized" pricing scheme.
As few people speak good English in these parts, and even fewer of them speak it still once you get into a business dispute with them.
And it is not entirely unheard of that price quotes differ vastly, depending on what language is used when inquiring about them.

But not to be mistaken here. In my experience the Lithuanians are by en large a hard working, honest and industrious people.
The traveling stranger will for the most part be treated as well as (s)he behaves.
But the business culture in this easternmost corner of Europe is marked as much by its close proximity to Russia as by the rough climatic conditions in these parts.

Lithuania ranked 5.4 on Transparency International's Corruption Index (*CPI*) in 2012 (4.8 in 2011 and 5.0 in 2010) - on par with Costa Rica and just above Rwanda.
And few store owners like tourist who are all to brazen about their "I'm just sightseeing" intentions, and the best thing you can do to make the sales clerk happy is to hurry up and actually buy some of the stuff you've been gawking at for over half an hour.

By the way, don't even think of renegotiating a sales price you had already agreed upon, as that is the fasted way to becoming a *very* unpopular customer.

<u>Safety Concerns</u>:

While in urban areas it is reasonably safe to travel on your own during the day, the outsider should always keep in mind that Lithuania's' homicide rate for years has been among the highest of all European Union member states - and at least in 2008 even topped that of neighboring Belarus.

In Klaipeda most late night businesses - like hotel bars, casinos and currency exchange stations - are heavily frequented by Russians, Ukrainians, Western Expats and bulky "gentleman" (recognizable by their ill fitted suits) acting as private security guards.
Said private security guards are not the least hesitant to use their gorilla like physique to threaten and intimidate any curious but disobedient newcomer, and seem to have a lot more leeway with local law enforcement in this regard, than one is used to from most Western countries.
So I found it best to live by the motto, "if you don't have to be there after dark, then don't be there". That or go with a local fellow who knows *the rules*.

<u>Traveling to Vilnius</u>:

There is only one transnational railroad available to travel from Klaipeda to Vilnius, the two cities being almost exactly at opposite ends of the country.

The train makes its *slow paced* cross country trip only a few times each day, so if you miss one departure, be prepared to wait a few hours for the next one to leave.
To begin with, the seating arrangements still follow the old Soviet system, whereas each wagon has its own conductor (mostly of the bulky "Babushka" type), which rules her part of the train with the iron discipline of an oriental potentate.
I had to report to my wagon's conductor at the start of the journey, not just to get my ticket checked nut also to have a seat assigned to me.

And traveling with a dog on any part of Lithuania's public transportation system turned out to be a much greater challenge than I had anticipated, as most people at first refused outright to believe I would dare to do so.
And even after I had convinced them that I would really, truly take my benevolent four pawed mischief maker with me, most folks kept looking at the two of us as if waiting for my tail wagging pacifist to turn into the blood thirsty hound of Baskerville and start tearing everybody around us to pieces.

I know that many people in the Eastern half of Europe use their dogs for personal protection or guard duty, and so companion animals are not too common there.
And for example, in the United States almost all parts of the public transportation system are completely off limits for dogs anyway.
But it sometimes got outright ridiculous when it a bus driver or the train station's sales clerk required more than 5 minutes of smooth talk, before they would allow the two of us to board.

And taxi cab drivers outright refused to drive the two of us, muzzle or no muzzle. Not for one city block, not even around one street corner.

The Trip by Train:

While the train's passenger cabins - both the one I was told to stay in as the others I was allowed to walk through - were reasonably clean, the rest rooms were mostly to be avoided.
As was standing in the hallways or endlessly wandering along the train.
The first one is just unpleasant, while the other two may cause *your* conductor to give you a good civics lesson or two.

Yet while traveling by train has its challenges, going by rental car provides an entirely new range of obstacles.
The major roads are in pretty decent shape and for the most part Lithuanian drivers obey the traffic rules.
The Baltic roads are most definitely safer than the highways of Los Angeles or speed racing on the German Autobahn.

But after many frustrating weeks of trying to rent a car in vain, I had to surrender myself to the fact that no German rental car agency permits traveling to the Batic Nations (or for that matter any other country East of the Oder-Neiße line) in one of their vehicles.
The main concern here might not even be rampant car theft in Eastern Europe, but rather the close proximity of Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus - countries not known for their eagerness to cooperate with Western law enforcement.

Air travel, as the only alternative left, proved to be a challenge in and of itself.
This because the number of EU airports with direct lines to the Baltic Nations is rather limited, and for Lithuania itself I could only find flights directly to Vilnius' (the capital) Tarptautinis airport.
Unfortunately prices for these flights were all rather high, specifically when compared to bargain rates for flights to London or Paris.
At the time of my trip low cost airlines, like Virgin or Ryan Air, didn't offer any flights at all into the Baltics.

Winners and losers of the economic turnaround present themselves along the tracks.

The road and highway infrastructure is functional, even in remote areas.

Many former Soviet era industrial hubs now appear lost along the tracks.

The Passengers:

The train filled with passengers and emptied again, throughout its half day long journey, without any recognizable pattern.
While the trains was crawling, with agonizingly slow "speed", along the aging tracks and through the sparsely populated country side, none of the locals seemed to be in a hurry and the mood was generally friendly and relaxed.

Remote Šiauliai County, halfway into the country's interior.

Klaipeda's visiting Russian and Ukrainian crowds don't seem to penetrate far inland, this despite the breath taking landscapes which could inspire any Dr. Zhivago to immediately take up residence in those woods.
As far as nature tourism is concerned, the Baltic nations are an undiscovered jewel, waiting to be polished into a shining gem.

As is customary in these parts, the coffee served in the train comes with the coffee grounds awaiting the unsuspecting gourmet on the bottom of the cup (not the can).
Hopelessly overpriced sandwiches and snacks were also served on the train, but otherwise the trip was blissfully uneventful and quiet.
So maybe the train conductors' rigid "Babushka regime" does have its advantages - maybe.