



Merkinė is located at the confluence of the Rivers Nemunas, Merkys, Stangė and Strauja. The sands of the Dainava Plain and the hills and lakes of the Dzūkai Upland crisscross in the environs of Merkinė. In the words of geography Professor Česlovas Kudaba, „only the area in and around Vilnius exceeds Merkinė in the beauty of its sculptural relief and variety of landscape”. It is in Merkinė that the areas inhabited by the „riverine”, „field”, and „forest” *dzūkai* (strands of the Dzūkai ethnic group) meet, and the historical roads from Vilnius to Warsaw and from Kaunas to Grodno cross. Merkinė was for many centuries an administrative, military, economic, and cultural centre of the ethnographic region of Dainava.

In centrally located Darius and Girėnas Square you can visit the Museum of the Merkinės Region History founded by the late teacher Juozas Vitkus. Many exhibits of the museum tell the history of the Merkinė region, its people, and crafts. The museum also tells about the painful history of the region after the Second World War through the life stories of its inhabitants, their fight, losses, and victories reflected in the documents, photographs, and personal items of partisans and deportees.

At the intersection of Seinai and Nemunaitis streets, turn right and you will come to a monument to the writer Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius. The monument was built by the sculptor Petras Mazūra in 1994 at the initiative of local inhabitants. Vinco Krėvės Gymnasium is nearby. In 1676, the first school in Merkinė was founded by Jesuits (Lat. *Societas Iesu*). By 1797, there was also a Jewish school in Merkinė.

Behind the school building in the area of the former school sports grounds, there is a small Hill of Crosses. The crosses commemorate not a place of burial, but suffering and death while fighting for freedom and the right to live in the motherland. These crosses symbolise family trees and identify people who died for freedom in this region of Lithuania and whose bodies were desecrated and secretly dumped in sand pits, wells, and marshes. At the initiative of teacher Juozas Kaupinis, in 1994 a chapel was also built in the former sports stadium.

On your way down Juozas Bakšys Street (the street is named after a priest who was also the first principle of Merkinė Gymnasium) heading towards the hill fort, turn left to visit the Church of the Assumption of Virgin Mary located on the far side of the square. The first church was built in this place around 1388 and was where King Jogaila baptized Lithuanians. The current church was completed about 1844. This Gothic church bearing signs of early Baroque is a sanctuary that accommodates eleven monuments of art. Among the priests buried in the churchyard, there is the grave of Konstantinas Jagminas, the legendary priest and book smuggler (Lith. *knygnešys*).

The hill fort is nearby. Merkinė Castle was one of the key castles in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and in Eastern Europe. It was mentioned in chronicles beginning in 1359. In 1377, the armed crusaders – 12,000 elite men – and their servants reached the castle after a march. The castle repulsed the subsequent siege. But the wooden castle, which was later lost, burnt down, and recaptured several times, no longer stands. The only thing that remains is the panorama of natural beauty opening from hill fort.



In the central square at Vilnius Street 3, you will easily locate the Visitors Centre of Dzūkija National Park and the Art Gallery. You can find out about the works of local folk and professional artists here and listen to a guide telling about local natural and ethnocultural treasures. Guests may get a map of the park and various brochures and souvenirs at the Visitors Centre and, together with a guide, take a stroll and enjoy the beauty of Merkinė and its environs.

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DZŪKIJA NATIONAL PARK

Merkinė 

The first inhabitants in the area of Merkinė settled in the 9th millennium B.C. A mention of the castle in chronicles dates back to 1359. In this castle city the Magdeburg Right was signed for the city of Vilnius in 1387. Merkinė, a town located about 100 kilometres from Vilnius or Kaunas, flourished in the 15th–17th centuries. At that time Merkinė was one of 10 largest cities in Lithuania. The place was frequented by kings and dukes who went hunting in the picturesque environs of the area. There were three masonry churches with bells that resounded throughout the city, two local monasteries where monks rewrote holy books or books of science, and a town hall with a weathercock on the roof pointing to all the countries of the world. The city was also proud of the domes of the Russian Orthodox Church. Beginning in the 17th century, the synagogues of the city drew the Jewish population together for prayer.

In 1569, Sigismund August granted the Magdeburg Right to Merkinė again and approved the seal of the city, which featured a unicorn.

In 1648, Vladislav Vaza IV, king of Poland and grand duke of Lithuania, died in Merkinė and in 1744, Michal Serwaci Wisniowiecki, the grand hetman (chief army commander) and chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania died in Merkinė.

It was on the hills of Merkinė that Mathias Casimirus Sarbievius, poet and professor at Vilnius University, looking onto the valley of the Rivers Merkys and Nemunas and the forests on the horizon, wrote in Latin his verses about hunting and the games of the shepherds.

The manor of Merkinė was located close to the castle. In 1785, Michael Oginski hired a kapellmeister from the royal palace in Warsaw for the local orchestra. The prettiest women in Lithuania and, of course, in Europe, attended dances in Merkinė.

In 1938, the „Day of Ancient Times” was first celebrated in Lithuania in the town of Merkinė. Later, this celebration gave rise to the „Days of Crafts” celebrated in many towns in Lithuania.

After all the historical cataclysms, fires, and wars, the town deteriorated, but the relationship between the natural surroundings and man in the course of history in Merkinė and its environs still lingers on. Today, it is a small town that charms its visitors not only with its history, stories, and legends, but also with its natural beauty.

MERKINĖ



4 Jonionių akmenys



i Merkinė Visitors Centre of Dzūkija National Park. Art Gallery

Local authority School Urban area

1 Visiting points:

1. Museum of Merkinė Region
2. Church
3. Hill fort
4. Stones of Jonionys
5. Monument to Vincas Krėvė
6. Hill of Crosses
7. Landmarks of former city

1 Cemeteries:

1. Town cemetery
2. Old Orthodox cemetery
3. Cemetery of Soviet soldiers WW II
4. Burial ground of XV cent.
5. Jewish cemetery
6. Graves of the Holocaust victims
7. Cemetery of German soldiers WW I

P Parking place Quay Camping site