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### KALININGRAD, RUSSIA

N 54° 41' 59.9454" E 20° 29' 59.9238"

Even when suppressed, history has a way of bubbling up to the surface. In Kaliningrad, that gray blob of dislocated Russia in the heart of the EU, local creatives have turned this bubbling into an arts scene. For visitors, the city-formerly-known-as-Königsberg provides a surreal, and economical, crash course in Teutonic Knights, WWII, the Cold War and today's Russia. Plus, with the Baltic Sea, there are long stretches of unspoiled beach.

**Kaliningrad is bursting out of its cheap Soviet cement. Cracks in the streets expose cobblestone from the times when this city was the Prussian capital Königsberg – a home base for the Teutonic Knights and, much later, relatively enlightened thinking. Today, this triangular exclave on the Baltic Sea, squished between Poland and Lithuania, is separated from 'Big Russia' by 300 kilometers of EU/NATO land.**

At the beginning of the 20th century, Königsberg was one of the most progressive – and scenic – cities of its day. But then it was obliterated in WWII, taken over by the USSR and ethnically cleansed of Germans. Renamed Kaliningrad, the town spent the Cold War suppressing its past and becoming one of the most militarized – and culturally dead – zones on the planet.

There are few places in the world where the aftereffects of both WWII and the Cold War are still so raw and apparent. And none with beaches as unspoiled as those of Kaliningrad's tourist-drenched Baltic neighbors of Estonia and Latvia.

Meanwhile, a burgeoning arts scene has only become more inspired by the region's twisted history. Today, visitors have a chance to catch an arts festival in the countryside at a squatted Prussian fortress or see a DJ rip it up in a retired nuclear submarine. Or, with a bit of luck, you might just end up in someone's living room – it's the people that are the real draw to this place.

For Arten Ryzkoff (39), director of a cinema and local arts entrepreneur, it all started in the late 1990s when he was young and hanging out in his living room. 'I was collecting records, jazz, avant-garde, experimental stuff. People brought their tapes, and they did crazy things – sometimes pretty sadistic actually, in terms of treating their cats as

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instruments. One night, a friend of mine was playing the Moonlight Sonata by Beethoven. Another held up a portrait of the great composer, and the third started to use a drill on it. There was a riot in the audience, it was very nihilist, modern and inspirational in a way.'

#### CITY DELETED

But let's go back in time a tiny bit. In the 13th century, roving Teutonic Knights entered the region, attracted by the outlet to the Baltic Sea and the surplus of pagans that could be forcibly converted. After building a series of fortresses to define the outer peripheries of Christian expansion, these monastic knights – later much mythologized by Hitler – went into decline due to their inability to stop waging war.

But a city developed, and in time it connected with the rest of Europe as part of the Hanseatic League trading network. In the early 16th century, Prussia was established as a secular state, and it became the first nation to recognize Protestantism as a religion. Offering relative freedom, the city attracted migration from across Europe and became a multicultural crossroads – a *transit*. By 1724, it had a printing press and a cathedral and was regarded as one of the most hi-tech cities of its day – with Immanuel Kant as its philosopher poster boy.

Today the city's German history is barely visible. After Kaliningrad had been largely destroyed by the Royal Air Force in 1944 and taken over by the USSR as a result of the Potsdam Agreement, Stalin initiated the Soviet tradition of constructing a nation's identity from the very bottom up. The remaining Germans were deported, their pasts bulldozed, the street names changed and gray apartment blocks built. New citizens were brought in from across the USSR and, in addition, effectively confused by that classic Stalin technique of relocating city folk into the countryside and country folk into the city. Due to Kaliningrad's strategic military location – it still remains Russia's only port that does not freeze in the winter – it was then effectively closed off from the outside world.

But of course, nothing completely closes. 'As a port city, we always had some exposure to new fashion, music, graffiti – those screens of social life – which appear in the world, even in Soviet times,' says artist Stanislav Krenz (29). 'But we still felt very far away.'

#### SPIRITS

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, Kaliningrad started to attract elderly German 'nostalgia tourists', who had been deported as children. Residents would recognize these tourists by 'how much they cried'. They'd all visit the one suburb, now best known as the setting for the childhood of Putin's wife, where some German-built houses still exist. Beside the front doors you can still see metal boot scrapers – apparently a typical German habit of the day. ▶

One thing that's certain – and somewhat eerie for Russia – is how safe it is as a pedestrian to cross the streets in Kaliningrad. Perhaps it's the EU-adjacent location. Or perhaps there are still ghosts of orderly German traffic wardens keeping an eye on things. For local DJ Evgeniy Malikov, the German past is what gives his city color: 'the spirit of Königsberg still permeates all the people and buildings – it's just always in the air.'

'I am equally inspired by reading Russian folk tales as I am by eating German marzipan,' jokes the musician/artist Kostja Trashinkov (25), before also taking a more spiritual turn. 'I see Kaliningrad/Königsberg more as a mystical city where all these different people of different backgrounds are still living.'

Ryzkoff actually has concrete memories. 'From my birth I lived in a Soviet house, but my cousin lived in a German house, so leaving the Soviet house and entering the German one was a unique experience. In the German apartment everything was about mysteries, history, secrets. So weird and scarily attractive. I felt that the apartment had a lot to tell about itself. In our Soviet house there were no secrets, no past: just straight angles, rectangular rooms, like boxes.'

#### THE MONSTER

These boxes fill boulevards of gray, functionalist flats. But the ultimate monument to Soviet times is, as the locals call it, 'The Monster'. The construction of this 'House of Soviets' began in 1974, but was never completed due to structural

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flaws. People like to say this was the revenge of the 700-year-old Teutonic fortress that was destroyed for purely political reasons to make room for it. The foreboding stare of this 'palace for the people', still without a clear owner, has become a muse for local photographers and artists: is there a certain angle from which it actually looks cool? How exactly can it be reinvented?

'This is the gift they gave the city of Kant – the philosopher treated with the highest respect by Engels, Marx and Lenin,' observes Ilya Dementiev (37), who teaches French and Ancient History at Kaliningrad's Kant University.

#### SEX, DRUGS AND POSITIVITY

In the 1990s, the region became infamous for how lustily it embraced the Russian clichés of the time: corruption, prostitution, smuggling, drugs, gambling and cowboy capitalism. 'But now it's as honest as anywhere in Russia,' an economics student says with the type of ironic smile that Kaliningradians often use when they talk about their motherland.

The global financial crisis of 2008-9 hit the region harder than most places. As one of the four designated gambling zones in Russia, it had been hoped there would be a casino building boom, but the outside investors never showed up.

Ryzkoff believes that on a cultural level, the crisis has actually had a beneficial effect – and not just for visitors looking for a cheap getaway. 'We are closest to the West but live by Eastern laws. We feel we must have a great future because of all of that, but we don't know when this future will come. Some start to think it will never come. But the crisis was actually purifying. Prices fell, young people and new ideas now have a chance.'

Ryzkoff and his wife run a nightclub, Club Kvartir, out of their home where everything is for sale: books, DVDs, LPs, furniture, alcoholic beverages. It's become a meeting place for the local arts scene, and involves people from the neighborhood by hosting regular acoustic concerts under a huge oak tree in the shared lot out back. On Sundays, Ryzkoff's mother hosts a 'positive film night', screening such films as *My Boy* and *Calendar Girls*.

#### RUSSIA!

Besides family values, Kaliningrad offers a concise summary of the three core stories that the Russian government deem important to share in the name of post-millennial nation-building: war, church and cosmos. On Kaliningrad's main square, the freedom statue celebrates Russia defeating fascism in the Great Patriotic War (their hard-fought portion of WWII). Nearby, the new Russian Orthodox Christ the Savior Cathedral has replaced the epic Lenin statue which once pointed the way forward.

Up the road you can witness the latest story that the Russian government is actively promoting: the nation's prowess as space explorers. The silvery, 1960s sci-fi-like Cosmonaut Monument is dedicated to the three cosmonauts who came from this region – a large number for such a small area. There's a common Russian expression: 'When the sun is setting in Kaliningrad, it's rising in Vladivostok'. As a symbol of Russia's horizontal vastness, it's not hard to imagine that some locals started to imagine making the leap into the vertical. Or perhaps they just wanted to get out of town...

Alexey Milovanov (31), the editor-in-chief of regional portal *newkaliningrad.ru* and the weekly newspaper *39 Region*, describes his hometown as 'calm and cozy, and I know all the necessary people and things to do my job well and honestly. But in Russia, you never know what will happen tomorrow. And that is the most terrible, and at the same time, most brilliant thing about my country.'

#### CREATIVE DISSENT

In January 2010, Kaliningrad marked the beginning of the creative dissent that's now on the increase across Russia. Armed with mandarins, which were referring to a famous children's tale about political suppression, 10,000 people rallied to protest against a large rise in public transport costs, and to call for the dismissal of Georgiy Boos, then Kaliningrad governor and regarded by many as a Kremlin puppet.

Now it's generally accepted that this demonstration had in fact been fueled by the Kremlin wanting to replace the governor with one more friendly towards the Russian Orthodox Church, who wants to make inroads to this Russian territory that

ironically, because of its history, comes with no Orthodox past. Later in 2010, the new governor did indeed hand over many state-owned properties that are currently being used by cultural initiatives – including squatted Prussian fortresses in the countryside that have hosted many memorable festivals, parties and events – to the church. So you might want to plan your trip fast, before the church starts re-zoning. And bring your beach shovel for digging up more than just sand: there might be other, still submerged, stories being played out in this town.

And one last thing, from us, to you, that should not be suppressed about Kaliningrad: it is still quite gray, and best visited in summer. ♦

#### TO READ:

**Königsberg/Kaliningrad Now**  
*A guide to the city and all its (submerged) histories and sites by local and international artists and historians.*

**Atlas of Cultural Resources – Kaliningrad Region**  
*A guide to the sights and the people behind them.*

**Thanks:** Yulia Bardoun, Ilya Dementiev, European Cultural Foundation, Anastasia Karpenko, The Turtle Hotel Zoologichesky Tupik 10 Kaliningrad turtle-hotel.ru



KALININGRAD:OUT IN THE CITY**Elephant** (Očtyabrskaya 8)

A restaurant with wallpaper made of prints from streetscapes from the time when you were surrounded by Königsberg and not by Kaliningrad.

**Reporter Revue** (Grazhnaya 2)

A restaurant/club decorated with Che memorabilia and a nice porch view of post-industrial disrepair.

**Club Kvartir** (Koloskova 2)

A Berlin-styled living room club.

**National Centre for Contemporary Arts**

(Dm. Donskogo 7/11)

A very savvy and engaged modern art museum located in 19th-century Prussian military barracks.

**Cinema Zarya** (Prospekt Mira 41-43)

Local arts cinema, complete with statue of Allen Königsberg (aka Woody Allen).

KALININGRAD OBLAST:OUT IN THE REGION

**Svetlogorsk** is a beautiful and relatively unspoiled seaside resort, half an hour away from the city, complete with a non-operational Soviet-era elevator that used to take bathers down to the beach. There are still original villas, once frequented by Nazi bigwigs, that have escaped the worst of WWII, as well as much more economical resorts 'for the people'.

**Curonian Spit** is a thin line of forest, beach and sand dunes connecting Kaliningrad Oblast with Lithuania. The dunes resemble desert landscapes and the 'Dancing Forest' is filled with small pines twisted as if drunk – their appearance is variously explained, depending on who you talk to, with microbes, unstable soil or 'polarized energy fields'. Apparently bird-banding was also invented here, with African and Indian storks hardwired to visit every year.

**Baltiysk** acts as harbor for the Russian Baltic fleet. Don't climb any fences.

**Yantarny** is the Klondike of amber where a so-called 'amber war' is being waged for control of the industry. Kaliningrad holds 90 percent of the world resource of this petrified pine resin. Beaches are scattered with the stuff.

**Poland and Lithuania** are both close enough for a weekend trip (the EU border is 30 kilometers away from the city) – make sure your Russian visa is good for a double entry.

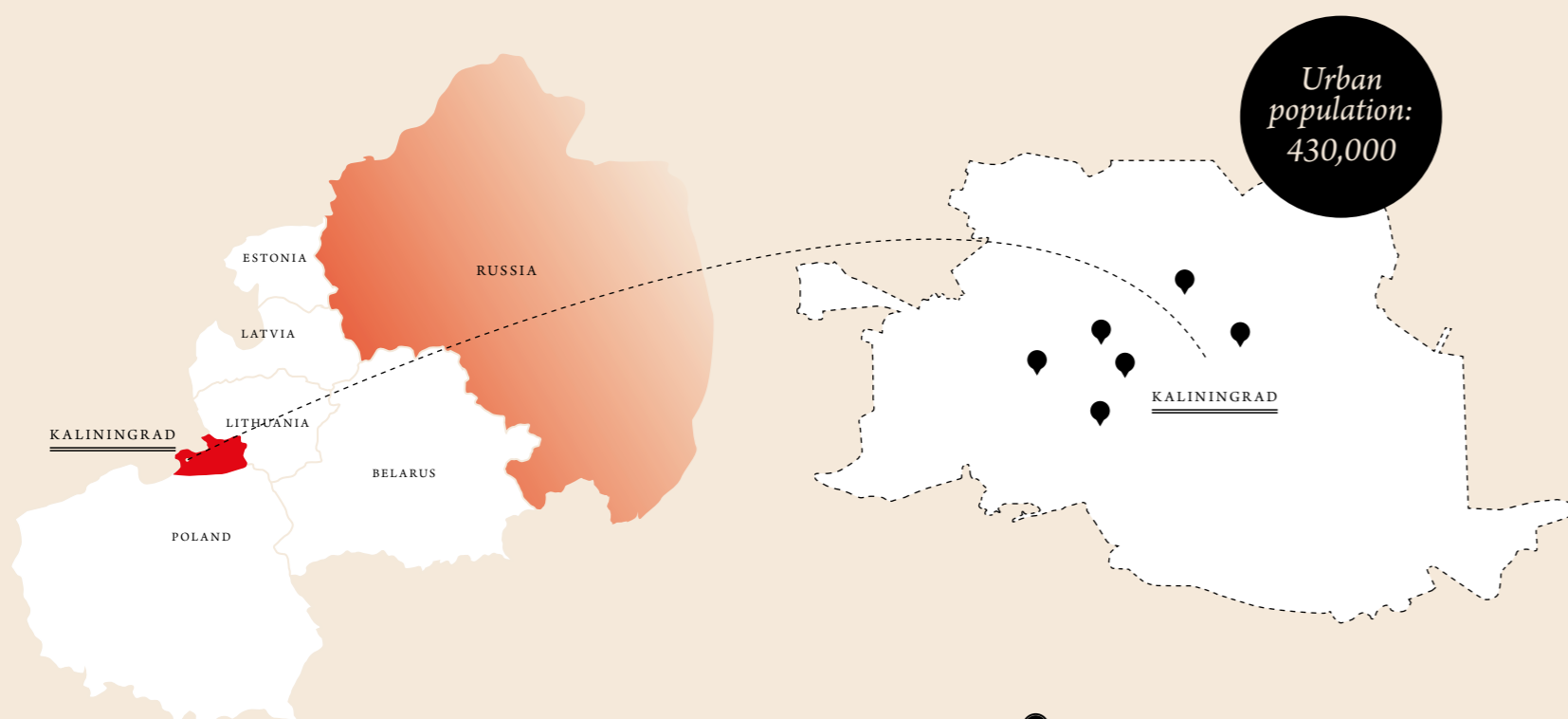
CULTURE BOOST

Yulia Bardoun (36) recalls that, growing up in Kaliningrad in the late 1980s, she 'recognized some hidden past – some drama had played out that was only hinted at.' She is now vice director of the National Centre for Contemporary Arts and the director of Tranzit Agency, an organization supporting cultural initiatives in the region. 'Later, people became interested in how the different layers – German, Soviet, post-Soviet etcetera – melt together in the place we live.' This shared interest became the basis for a scene.

'It first formed around a group of people working in the museum sector,' recalls Bardoun. 'We saw that many of our goals overlapped. We began with common projects, such as our Museum Night, and it grew from there.' Suddenly, dusty institutions became hangouts where a younger generation of artists, designers and entrepreneurs could interact.

Bardoun describes strengthening the cultural scene as being like cooking: bringing different ingredients together. 'People learned languages, their identities became clearer, their networks grew. They became more confident and could take on more ambitious roles and projects.'

Some creatives are now working on a pan-European level, and even giving workshops in other, more fragile, post-Soviet cities, of which there are hundreds.

**KALININGRAD BASICS**

**Area:** 15,100 square kilometers  
**Population:** 1,000,000 (urban: 430,000)  
**Getting there:** Around €200 for flights from most major airports in central Europe. Russian visa required.



THE MOST ORIGINAL PEOPLE DESERVE THE MOST ORIGINAL VODKA

Stoli