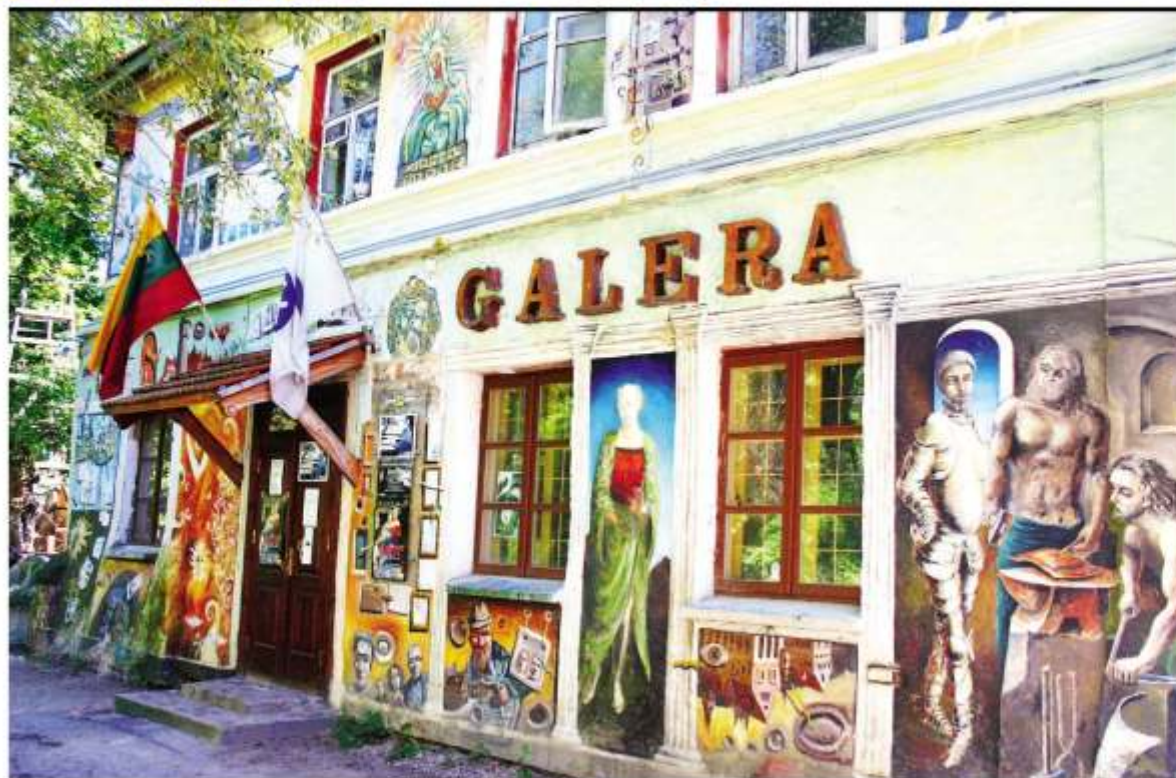




Mirror reader Mehak Puri gets to meet Bulleh Shah's modern-day mouthpiece, singer Rabbi Shergill, after a concert



(Left) The Galera, also called the Uzupis Art incubator, is used for craft workshops, exhibitions, and music performances; (Above) The streets festooned with graffiti and local flags

2013 MUST-VISIT

# A new world order

**A city district born out of rebellion against the Soviet retains its streak of independence. With its own constitution, Lithuania's Uzupis is a 'country' for artists and dreamers**



**Kalpna Sunder**  
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If you've gone looking for Utopia in literature and art, here's a city where you can encounter it, literally. As we lapse into a new year, tinkling old glasses, and snickering with an even more seasoned cynicism, perhaps a journey to utopia is the best gift we can give ourselves in the new year.

Uzupis, a district in the city of Vilnius in Lithuania, declared itself an independent republic in 1997. Spread over 148 acres on the right bank of the river Vilnele, Uzupis residents have their own passport, and the district-country has four different flags, one for each season. The people celebrate their own special holidays and festivals. Uzupis, or the Republic of Angels as it came to be called, has its own constitution

## TRAVEL

### Going off track

Those who go off the beaten track, write for us.

too, with rules like, 'Everyone has the right to love', 'Everyone has the right to be idle' and 'Everyone has the right to realize his negligibility and magnificence'.

Two decades ago, this district was filled with art galleries and a few hundred bohemian residents. In the '90s, after Lithuania broke away from the Soviet, a group of artists and youngsters decided to take on the city council over the neglect of Uzupis, at that time a derelict and run-down locality. They anointed the late American rockstar Frank Zappa as their patron saint and decided to rekindle the spirit of independence, something that had been lost in 70 years of oppression to USSR.

I would not have found Uzupis if it were not for my guide, Egle Mickeviciene. Angels on the windowsills, cherubs and pottery, brilliant graffiti, shabby cluster of crumbling 19th century houses next to spruced up apartments — Uzupis is atmospheric. I walked uphill, along the main

(Above, left) A bronze angel with a trumpet dominates the main square of Uzupis; (Right) A sculpture of a drunken man on a wall in Uzupis

street and saw many cul-de-sacs and courtyards. The symbol of Uzupis — an open hand with a round hole in the middle of the palm to indicate blisters on a worker's hand — hung around me on boards and banners. There are many interpretations for the country's symbol that is also stamped on passports. For Egle, it meant that you may own everything, but you cannot take away anything after death.

As I walked through the streets, I saw graffiti stencilled, hand sprayed or drawn on grey, drab walls. On a crumbling wall in Paupio Street, I read the offbeat Constitution in nine languages, with its 41 articles etched on metal plaques.

Uzupis was formed by dreamers, free spirits and artists as well as philosophers on April Fool's day — every year, a national feast is organ-

» CONTINUED ON PAGE 29

## FACT FILE FOR UZUPIS

**HOW TO GET THERE:** Fly Finnair from New Delhi to Helsinki and connect to Vilnius

**WHERE TO STAY:** If you are on a budget, stay at Hotel Tiltot near the Cathedral. A slightly more expensive option is the tasteful Hotel Shakespeare tucked in a quiet lane in Old Town where each room is themed on a particular writer ([www.shakespeare.lt](http://www.shakespeare.lt))

**WHAT TO SEE:** A walking tour of Old Town allows you to see some of the 40 churches in town with a wealth of architecture, and take a funicular ride to the castle for a bird's eye view. Spend a day at Uzupis and take a day trip to the medieval town of Trakai.

**WHAT TO BUY:** Pick up amber jewellery, fine linen, pottery and glass and rough hewn angels in wood.

**WHAT TO EAT:** Lithuanian staples include zepplins (dumplings) with potatoes and meat, cold beetroot soup, kepta duona (black bread fried in oil and rubbed with garlic), and beer. Try the local beer at the Prie Katedros Beer Restaurant on Gedimino Avenue. Missing ghar ka khana? Sue's Indian Raja near the Cathedral is divine.





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Black and white pictures of ordinary citizens of the city line the banks of the river in Uzupis



The constitution of Uzupis visible at Paupio Street, includes rules like 'Everyone has the right to love' and 'Everyone has the right to be idle'

used to commemorate that. Originally inhabited by Russians and Jews, the post-war years saw the once-bustling district of craftsmen abandoned. The buildings became squalid, bandits and tramps began to live in the shells of houses. Today, two sets of people inhabit this place: the nouveau riche, who find it fashionable to buy, renovate and live here, because of which the price of real estate in this area has shot up. (Even the mayor of the city has a house here, Egle informed us.) The second lot are the impoverished bohemians — artists, photographers and craftsmen — who are fighting to retain their country's relevance in the midst of rising prices.

Uzupis has its ambassadors in different countries; to become a citizen, all you have to do is share the beliefs enshrined in the constitution. Many people are honorary citizens already, including the Dalai Lama. I reached the triangular piazza of Uzupis, dominated by a brass and bronze angel blowing a trumpet towards the heavens. The Prie Angelo café at the square looked cosy and inviting. For a respite from the biting winds, I stepped in and ordered a cappuccino. Sitting on a table, I looked at the angel through the frosted windows.

After coffee, I began my walkthrough. At the Galera, also called the Uzupis Art Incubator, I encountered a vibrant space that is used for craft workshops, exhibitions, and music performances. The house is a riot of colours with beautifully painted walls, and young students of the Vilnius Art Academy have worked to make this space what it is.

Humorous figures lined the walls like that of a drunken man clutching his empty bottle. Walking over the main bridge, I was intrigued by the sight of locks and padlocks on either side. Egle explained that couples lock their love and throw the keys in the river in the belief that their bond will remain strong forever. At café Uzupio Kavine, I bought myself a copy of the Uzupis Constitution in English. Sitting on the deck of the bright red outdoor terrace, I ate a delicious meal of fried rye bread with garlic and cheese, and washed it down with Lithuanian beer, Svyturus Extra. Ahead of me, the river wound its way along a bank lined with black and white photographs, beeches and willows, and beyond them, a synagogue lay ensconced by grass-covered hills.

Every April Fool's day, the seven bridges that lead into Uzupis become the state border. There are celebrations all day long with parades and concerts. After Easter, they celebrate the White Tablecloth day when the people bring food left over from Easter feast and share it with others.

Uzupis celebrates New Year's Eve on March 21, not December 31. There's a good reason for that: March 21 is the day of the Spring Solstice and is also called the Day of Traps. Many people burn their old diaries, or write some negative thoughts on a piece of paper and burn it in a bonfire. The idea, says Egle, is to do away with old prejudices.

Now that's what a New Year celebration sounds like.

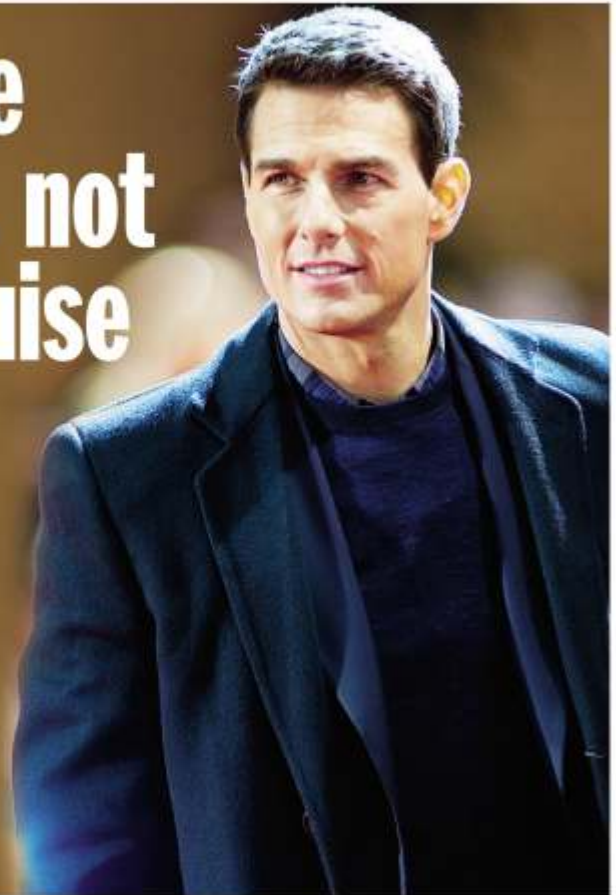
# Stunts are technical, not scary: Cruise

**A**t 50 years, superstar Tom Cruise says he is comfortable doing his own action stunts as he has years of practise behind him. Cruise made his debut in Hollywood with 1981 movie *Taps* and went on to star in many action flicks like, *Mission Impossible* series, *Ghost Protocol*, *Minority Report* and *The War Of The Worlds*.

All the years in industry have helped him give his 100 per cent to the character, reported *Daily Mail*. "(At this age) People do say no, but as an actor you bring everything, physically and emotionally, to a character. I'm able to do them (stunts). I've trained for 30 years doing things like that," he said.

Cruise does accept that stunts do go wrong sometimes. "I don't get scared. It's quite technical but sometimes things go wrong," he added.

—PTI



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