

By Rūta BUTKUTĖ

Shopping HEAVEN

An attractive, shapely design and an excellent choice of stores and international brands make the Europa shopping center one of the essential stops on any shopping trip to Vilnius.



The cheerful glow touches you as soon you walk in the door. Greenery and running water, a high glass ceiling and bright lighting, the delightfully refreshing interior are all immediately striking. This is Europa, a shopping center just across the river from the Old Town, one of the best places in Vilnius to do a spot of shopping – and most certainly an oasis of warmth in a cold February landscape.

Europa transforms the mundane activity of shopping or grabbing a bite to eat into something that could be described as a joyful experience. This, you think to yourself, is how the Lithuanians buy their clothes. How lucky they must feel...

Europa is undeniably popular – a visit at any time of the day will confirm this. Situated in a sharp and modern business area of several high-rises (and more to come – see cover), it is a shopping center in the very midst of Vilnius, within easy walking distance from anywhere in the city center.

It's classy, bright and airy, its three open floors of shops a pleasure to walk through. On clear days the view of the Europa Tower through the roof is quite spectacular.

"Floating cafés" are suspended from the ceiling with a sweeping view of the shops and the activity below. These little white boats of coffee tables have been a particular selling point for Europa.

Europa, which calls itself a "fashion and style center" rather than a common shopping mall, has shops that range from clothing and footwear (over 100 stores including Tommy Hilfiger, GANT, Marc'O Polo, Mexx, Gerry Weber, Geox, and more) to gifts and accessories to food and drink.

Restaurants and cafés on the ground and top floors offer sushi, pizza, salads, cakes, and both Lithuanian and international dishes.

In the mini-supermarket, Maxima, an ample assortment of Lithuanian and other cheeses, meats, vegetables, salads, and fresh bread are displayed on the shelves. If you fancy a break from dining out, this will make snacking in your hotel room a gourmet treat.

FINDING IT

Europa is a short walk from the Old Town. Stroll to the northern end of Vilnius Street, past the imposing Opera & Ballet Theater, cross the river over the Green Bridge with its comical Socialist Realist figures, and climb the broad flight of steps to the left. Pass the 18th century, double-spired, Baroque Church of St Raphael on your left, then the Planetarium on your right.

At the end of this pedestrian-only precinct the broad Konstitucijos Avenue and Europa Square open out before you.

The new high-rises here have mushroomed out of what used to be an area of wasteland, transforming a once ignored corner of town into what they call the "new business district" of Vilnius. These new buildings have helped to give life to a part of the city which was in need of regeneration in the 1990s.

The wall of windows to the right is the new municipality building, on the left a curving residential block. The circular Europa Tower stands behind them, the Europa shopping center in the foreground. Taking care crossing the road (there's a subway in front of you), choose from entrances to the right or to the left.



SANDRA KVILIENĖ
Marketing Director
Europa

What inspired Europa's strikingly original design?

Earlier shopping centers looked at mostly economic factors – the customers chose according to the supply given. As the quality of life became better, a new type of consumer emerged.

This type of customer was concerned not only with satisfying basic needs and wants, but also with the emotions he would experience. So the idea of "pleasant shopping" inspired a change. The habits of eating and buying clothes are taking on more and more importance in the creation of our culture and environment in Vilnius.

It is a time when we dress not only to feel warm but also to express ourselves. After all, we are willing to become true Europeans. So the design of Europa was inspired by the will to change traditional attitudes towards shopping and give more spirit to consumers in their daily lives.

Europa seeks to reflect a modern view towards the experience of life. Perhaps this could be unexpected and unusual, but it is always understandable for our consumers. What's important is that its expression is graceful, clear and stylish. The aim of Europa is to penetrate the world of our consumers, merging two opposites: professionalism and high standards, with joy and self-satisfaction.

What are your feelings about the approaching competition from new shopping centers due to open this or next year, such as Panorama and Gedimino 9? What are Europa's special qualities that will keep your customers coming back?

Loyalty, understanding and care are the grounds for strong relationships. These are values that are not much talked about, but always strongly felt. We hope that these feelings will make our relationship with our customers strong and enduring.

How important has location been in defining Europa's success?

Place is one of the most important factors that influences the conception of any project – especially a shopping center. It determines the characteristics of your customers and your relationship with them. And, of course, it also shows the exceptional nature of the shopping center itself.

The Europa shopping center has attracted a certain group of consumers. They are city residents – businesspeople, officials, who value aesthetics, comfort, and style. They have their favorite shops and brands, and quality is important to them. Their lives are intensive, so professional service – which saves their time and energy and provides high quality – is valued, and that is rewarded with loyalty.

This is what has determined the success of Europa – it tries to make a little festival out of everyday activities like lunch and shopping.

Europa often hosts cultural and social events, whether it's special dates in the Lithuanian calendar, galas surrounding the opening of new shops, or one-off events that need a colorful and vivid backdrop.

Taking just one example, an unconventional art project called Moc'Art 2006 organized by the Vilnius-based arts company Culture Artfact took Europa as a stage as the shopping center's impressive suspended cafés were transformed into a new concert space for Mozart's piano music. Actors dressed in costumes as characters from the great Austrian composer's works improvised performances inspired by the music. It was a visually dazzling setting for Mozart's music.

