

As a volunteer I spent 8 months living in Plateliai and working in Žemaitija National Park. I participated in Erasmus+ European Volunteer Service program “Bridge across nature”. After all the time spent in Lithuania, I can say that I really like this place and appreciate time spent here. Although I travel a lot during my volunteer project, every time I come back to Plateliai I feel like come back home. This small town, I would even say a village, has its own charm. Not just Plateliai in particular, but this whole area of Žemaitija National Park and its surroundings.

Speaking about Žemaitija, it is translated from Lithuanian as Lowlands, but a paradox that National park is located partly on hills, so called Lowlands hill area. Of course, the hills are not big and usually covered by forest (45% of the park territory), but for me as a mountains addicted person it was very important to see at least some small hills. Hilly forests, swamps, meadows and lakes are the main natural attractions of the area. The largest and the deepest lake in Žemaitija region is Plateliai lake, a favourite place of tourist not only from Lithuania. Personally I have met here lots of people during summer from Latvia, Poland, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Italy etc. The lake covers about 12 km<sup>2</sup> and reaches 48,5 m in depth. It has seven islands. On one of the islands archeologists found remains of the medieval castle. Even now there are some old wooden constructions of the old medieval bridge visible in the water. One of the most interesting things we did with my colleague during our leisure time is exploring the islands and the remains of the bridge. We took the boat and went on four islands out of seven; we also were diving in the bridge area and saw wooden bridge trunks. The lake has also diving and yacht clubs, which are overcrowded in summer. Concerning that weather is not always perfect for sunny beach time, here you have a lot of opportunities to enjoy loneliness in the nature. For me as a cyclist, bicycle was a perfect way to explore the territory of the national park. Besides wild forest paths, you can enjoy modern bicycle road which encircles the lake. Usually in the weekend there were lots of tourist groups riding bicycles. I explored not just the territory of the park, but went by bicycles to the seaside, to Klaipeda, Nida and other towns of Žemaitija region. Besides the beautiful landscapes, the territory of the park has an impressive variety of natural species, especially birds. There are 189 registered species, 48 of which are in the Red Book of Lithuania. During work in the nature I have seen some wild animals as roes, foxes, rabbits etc.

Since my arriving to Plateliai I managed to get acquainted with every active person in the local community. During the work we spend a lot of time exploring the territory of the park and meeting with representatives of school, kindergarten, library, sports club, information centre, museums and, of course, our park directorate. Me and my colleague were introduced to all the departments in the Žemaitija National Park. Most of the time I was working with Nature Department at

the park, helping in different duties, for example cleaning, repairing old birdhouses and installing the new ones in Šeirės forest near Plateliai, I learned the methodology of bat houses positioning and birds nesting. In my free time I discovered technology of setting Lithuanian sauna. Also I learned geocaching orientation during inspection of the “In search of nature’s secrets” quest route in the Plokštine forest. I was constructing barrier fences for frogs along the highway and moved them away after the end of migration period. Contributed into cleaning the park from old branches and rubbish, I was helping the workers to cut the wood, using chainsaw and axe. Inspected on bicycles a bicycle path around Plateliai lake before spring season. In summer we started a project of ecological and biological monitoring of the lakeshore and monitoring of the storks’ nests, in the future the data that we collected will help the park to make strategies of protection species and landscapes. During the summer period in collaboration with Lithuanian volunteers we created short promo video about Žemaitija National Park <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MntStKGHjZA>. One or two days a week I work as a guide in Cold War Museum at Plokštinė, I had lot of tours with international tourist from all over the world, because Cold War museum at the missile base located in the park is one of the three museums in the world where you can see real rocket silo and discover life of the militaries at the underground base. I also had lot of practice in local school. Besides learning Lithuanian language, I arranged lessons of Ukrainian for pupils, we helped during the work of school camp, organized presentation about Ukraine, its culture and folk music. With my new friends from school we made a video about local traditional sport game “ripka”, this video won Lithuanian school documentary competition (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hq1N5QyAQQ>).

The most challenging initiative during this period was to participate in mountain bicycle competition Žemaitijos MTB Taure 2015. I have never tried participating in mountain bike races before, so for me it was a big challenge. But, at least, I was not the last; I was 56th with a result of 1 hour and 55 minutes. In general, I try to use each chance to discover something new here and take part in something interesting. My photos of Plateliai and the lake were demonstrated at exhibition in Plunge town and in Cold War museum. I took part in traditional Lithuanian celebration Rasos Švente or Joninės day, helped to organize meeting of all Lithuanian protected areas that held in our park.

This year Žemaitija National Park organized its first working camp for international volunteers. The aim of such camps is to combine working, learning and cultural exchange. The concept of this work camp is the following: volunteers are getting tasks from the park representatives, contributing their skills and time to working for the park or local community. I was the leader of the camp, responsible for communication with the park administration, food supply, finances and all the aspects of the work and leisure activities. Volunteers were living in a camp located in the old military

town among the forest, get full food supply and covering of travel expenses. The camp hosted 9 volunteers from France, Italy, Germany, Ukraine and South Korea. All together we made a lot of improvements inside the military town - cleaned the flower garden, brushed and painted old playground. We were digging out the trees with roots at the abandoned military stadium. Besides, we had informative workshop on making the birdhouses, during which volunteers using tools and schemes made six educational birdhouses and learned a variety of birds singing voices.

During the project I travelled a lot, exploring most of the interesting places in Lithuania, visited Riga in Latvia, Parnu and Tallinn in Estonia, Helsinki in Finland, Warszawa in Poland and Praha in Czech Republic.

Volunteering is like a tiny life, separated from person's usual lifetime in home country. Here you have exact period of time, which you try to use as much actively and productively as you can: to do a lot at your project, to visit as much cities and countries as possible, to make new friends all around Europe, to diverse your experience in all areas of life. For me it was a fantastic experience to spent this time in Lithuania, in Žemaitija National Park, travelling with my new friends around Europe, discovering new cultures, languages, cuisines and lifestyles.

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