



Hanseatic town Viljandi

The name of Viljandi in the list of Hanseatic towns seems unusual. This small hilly town is, after all, situated far from the sea and other large waterways.

The prehistoric stronghold of Viljandi was first mentioned in 1154 by explorer Al-Idrisi. Construction of the stone castle began in the 13th century after local lands fell under the rule of the German Order of the Brothers of the Sword. It became one of the most powerful fortification complexes in the Baltics. A settlement of merchants and artisans emerged around it. The growth of Viljandi was fostered by its great location on the Medieval Riga-Pärnu-Viljandi-Tartu-Novgorod trade route, partly navigable at the time. The rise in population and wealth was such that in 1283, Viljandi received **town privileges** under Lübeck law and was also accepted to the honourable Hanseatic League in 1346.

Medieval Viljandi was surrounded by a 4 metres high and 2 metres thick granite town wall, the fragments of which can be seen in the townscape to-day. The might of bygone centuries can still be felt when standing at the ruins of the magnificent castle and enjoying the beautiful scenery of the lake.

More than 700 years of history wait for you on your walk through Viljandi!

- 1 You might start your sightseeing from the **Vabaduse Sq.**
- 2 Crossing Vabaduse Sq. you notice the white **Jaani (St. John's) Church**. The church was built in 1464 for the Franciscan Monastery. In the Livonian War of the 16th century, it was burnt, and during the Soviet era the building was used as a warehouse. By 1992, it was fully renovated. Currently, this sacred building is used as a Lutheran church and a concert hall.
- 3 In the park opposite of Jaani church, you will see the main building of **Viljandi manor**. The so-called New Castle was built in 1879 by the landlord of Viljandi manor, Otto von Ungern-Sternberg. The building has been renovated and houses the boutique hotel Schloss Fellin.
- The monument to the victims of Stalinist repressions was opened in front of the manor house on 14 June 1991, the 50th anniversary of the first mass deportation in Estonia. It commemorates nearly 10,000 people of Viljandi county who were executed or deported to Siberian prison camps by the Soviet authorities.
- 4 An ancient dead oak tree in the park has been transformed into the **World Tree** decorated with Estonian folk patterns. It was placed in the manor park in 2009, when Viljandi held the title of the forest capital city of Estonia. Behind the park, a view opens on the Viljandi **song festival arena**. As Estonians take pride in being a "singing nation", traditional choir singing festivals are held in every self-respecting town.
- 5 **Equestrian statue** standing next to the song festival grounds was erected in honor of **General Johan Laidoner**. He was born and lived in Viiratsi parish, Viljandi County. Johan Laidoner was one of the founders of Estonian Republic in 1918, a talented Commander-in-Chief of the Army, and a renowned pre-WWII politician, both in Estonia and abroad.

6 Should you have time to walk slightly further, you will find a surprising natural sight not far from the song festival arena — a **red sandstone outcrop**, 6 m high and 18 m long.

7 On your way back, take the path leading towards castle ruins. Soon you will reach a famous Viljandi landmark — a red **suspension bridge**. The bridge was a present to the town by the landlord of Tarvastu manor, Karl von Mensenkampf. It was installed in 1931, and has been rebuilt several times over the years, most recently in 1995. The bridge is more than 50 m long.

8 Just a moment later you will find yourself in the **medieval fortress**. Its construction began in 1224 by the German Order of the Sword on its crusade against pagan Estonians. The castle was the mightiest in Old Livonia. Its influence and wealth derived from Viljandi's location on a profitable medieval East-West trade route. Due to damages inflicted in different wars the stronghold now lies in ruins. These days its majestic remains form a backdrop for outdoor theatre plays and concerts. Every summer, a famous international **Folk Music Festival** takes place here.

9 In Estonia, everyone knows the romantic song of a boatman rowing on Lake Viljandi. From the castle ruins **the most beautiful view** opens on the lake and its surroundings.

10 On your way back you will pass the old Kirsimäe granary, which now houses the **Estonian Folk Music Centre** — a place where traditional music can be studied and enjoyed.

11 Leaving the castle ruins behind, you will cross the **Vares bridge**. The bridge was built in 1925 and got its name after the then mayor Dr. Jaan Vares.

12 **Kondas Art Centre** was named after the famous local naivist painter Paul Kondas. It houses a collection of his works and an active gallery displaying Estonian and international art. The **large eye-catching straw-berries** on the streets of Viljandi have been inspired by Paul Kondas' painting "Strawberry Eaters".

13 You can enjoy another wonderful view of the lake from the corner of the Pikk street. **The grand oak tree** offers a shade and a nice break to anyone who takes a seat on the swing. From here you can discover a lovely **pedestrian street Kassisaba (Cat's Tail)**, which takes walkers through greenery to the stairs of Trepimägi. The long-forgotten street was recently renovated by citizens' initiative. You can also go back to find a romantic Lutsu street and continue to the General Laidoner Square from there.

14 **General Laidoner Square** was used as a town marketplace until the early 20th century. Now it's a park with a **fountain "A Boy with a Fish"** (designed by August Vomm) in its center.

15 A noteworthy building by the side of the square is an old pharmacy, which dates back to 1780. It has housed the **Museum of Viljandi** since 1942. You are welcome to step in and take a look at the exposition!

16 The **old water-tower of Viljandi** between the museum and Town Hall has been reconstructed now to serv as an observation tower. Ascending to the top you can have a nice view of the whole town.

17 And the **Town Hall** can be seen already! Constructed in 1768-1774, it's one of the oldest stone buildings in Viljandi. The clock tower was added to the building in 1931 when the Town Hall was extensively rebuilt.

There is a **monument to August Maramaa**, the legendary mayor of Viljandi, (by a sculptor Aili Vahtrapuu) next to the Town Hall.

18 The **stairs of Trepimägi**, built in early 20th century to improve the connection between the town and the lake, start right behind the Town Hall. The stairway has five flights and 158 steps.

19 At the foot of the stairsway, a sculpture **"Runner"** (by Riho Kuld and Ülo Stöör) can be seen. It symbolizes a winner of the annual **Race Around Lake Viljandi**, a tradition of which dates back to 1928. The sculptural ensemble is completed by the row of granite monuments with the names of the winners.

You can get to the **beach** along the **Vesiflirdi street**. If you feel like spending some time there, you can borrow a boat or a water cycle to have a glimpse on the town from the lake.

By the stadium, a 13,5 km **hiking trail around Lake Viljandi** begins.

20 On your way back towards the town center, stop at the **monument of Johann Köler** (authors Edgar Viies, Rein Luup), the world-famous Estonian artist. Köler was born to a poor peasant family near Viljandi and made it all the way to Czar's court in St Petersburg, the capital of the Russian Empire.

21 Have a look at the **statue of C. R. Jakobson** (sculptor Mati Karmin). In 1878, he founded "Sakala", the newspaper instrumental for Estonian national awakening of the 19th century. The paper is still published today in Viljandi.

22 In the heart of the town centre — in the **Garden of Arcadia** — you will find a pedestrian street with interesting elements displayed: fragments of the medieval town wall, a modern walkway with unique fountains and benches, and examples of old log architecture.

23 In Väike-Turu street, a green wooden house — the **Bonifatius Guild** — serves as a centre for the craftsmen of Viljandi. The Guild aims to keep Hanseatic traditions alive and to offer food, clothing and other goods to townspeople as well as to our visitors.

24 In front of the Viljandi Sports Center, you will see the **monument to Martin Klein**, the first Olympic medallist and one of the best-known athletes in the history of Estonian sports. At the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm, he won a silver medal in the world's longest wrestling match (against Alpo Asikainen from Finland). The match lasted for 11 hours and 40 minutes. Unfortunately, after such an effort, Mr Klein didn't have enough strength left to continue wrestling for a gold.

25 **Pauluse (St. Paul's) Church**, completed in 1866. Architect Matthias von Holst had used the Tudor-Gothic style immensely popular at the time. The altar painting "Christ on the Cross" was created by K. C. Andreae.

26 Across the street from the church stands an imposing red-brick theatre building. **The "Ugala" Drama Theatre** was formed in 1920 joining theatre groups of the two local citizens' societies: "Koit" ("Dawn") and "Vabadus" ("Liberty"). The theatre got a new building in 1981 and was renovated in 2017.

27 On a slope behind the theatre, you will find a **historic cemetery** and a **memorial burial ground of German soldiers** from WWII.

We hope you'll feel at home in our little town!

