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MERKINĖ: A DAY WITH CLAY

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On your way to Druskininkai or other places in Dzūkija region, don't forget to stop by the town of Merkinė. Merkinė is not only breathtakingly beautiful but also offers a truly unique attraction. This September, the ceramics workshop and centre of traditional Dzūkija crafts, *Vienaragių šilas*, opened its doors to visitors. Our photographer Agnė, who has spent many summers in Merkinė, says it's an exceptional place: you can learn about ancient Lithuanian ceramics, see the production process up close and even try your own hand at it. »»»»





» You can learn about the ancient Lithuanian ceramics, see the production process up close, and try your own hand at it, too. «

The first to greet you at the entrance to the quaint little house they have decorated with their own hands are the centre's hosts Džiugas and Laima (whose names, incidentally, are derived from the Lithuanian *džiugesys* and *laimė*, which mean joy and happiness – a good omen!). Their aim, in their own words, is to preserve and promote the traditional crafts of Dzūkija region and pass them on to the next generation. The centre, of which Džiugas is a



founder, now offers educational activities so visitors can both watch the craftsmen at work and try a little craftwork themselves. Eager beginners are given space to practise. Traditional decorative practises can also be seen: visitors learn how clay can be used to make natural colouring and see ceramic pieces decorated with ancient Lithuanian symbols.

The shape and ornamentation of each piece is in strict accordance with ancient tradition. Džiugas Petraitis, the youngest craftsman in Merkinė to master black ceramics, shows visitors the traditional techniques and process for making black and leaven ceramics and explains the secrets of pot throwing.

In the shade of the centre's yard stand three furnaces: a blast furnace, a furnace for leaven ceramics, and a furnace for black

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ceramics. Black ceramics is what makes Merkinė particularly famous. Although pottery fully developed in Merkinė in the 13th century, and traditions of the craft go back for centuries, black ceramics did not become widespread until the first half of the 20th century. When it did, however, Merkinė quickly became the centre of black ceramics in Lithuania. The tradition has survived to this day: black ceramics is still made in the

neighbouring villages of Zakavoliai, Pelekiškės and Maksimoniai.

The reason for the popularity of pottery in Merkinė is simple: the soil there is rich in clay. The local clay has a distinct chestnut shade, which makes ceramic pieces slightly darker in colour, a feature most noticeable in the deep dark colour of black ceramics. That is not the only advantage – local clay is also handy as it requires lower temperatures for firing.

The centuries-old Lithuanian traditions and customs that come alive at *Vienaragių šilas* make Merkinė well worth a visit; that and the warm welcome you will surely receive from the craftsmen who speak several languages and are only too happy to demonstrate their skills.