

AMBER -- THE GOLD OF THE BALTICS

Amber is mesmerizing to look at and fulfilling to buy. It is fossilized tree resin that comes in any color but is especially sought after in the easily recognized yellow-orange-brown range. Some colors are more precious than others due to rarity -- like those in the pale yellow range.

And prices for amber range from almost nothing (2 euro for a stretchy bracelet made of small chips), to thousands for perfectly formed beads in a desirable color.

As I travel around the Baltics I soon realize that amber comes in every jewelry encantation: necklaces, rings, bracelets, earrings, charms, and just about anything you can think of can be covered in amber: purses, candlesticks, plates, silverware handles, and even buttons.

Shopping opportunities are everywhere. From high-class stores to street vendors who lay out their wares on tables along the sidewalk. They are the most fun to buy from!



Amber beads have been found in ancient tombs.

It has been always prized thru the ages. Maybe not so much by the locals in the early days as it was so plentiful and could be picked up off the ground. But in places far away from the Baltics, like Rome, France and Spain, it was always precious and in demand. Amber beads have even been found in Egyptian tombs and in neolithic caves. In the 19th century, Baltic artisans began to work with making beautiful contemporary jewelry and these rocks that could be picked up off the ground moved to being considered semi-precious.

I've always liked amber and have bought pieces in Belize (Mexican origin), Nairobi (who knows where that came from!), art fairs in Chicago and even a few blocks from my

house at the annual Arlington Heights Art Show. And I brought some pieces with me on this trip - not only to wear, but also to have someone identify the kind of amber it is.

THE BEADS

It is just our third day on the trip. We are on a day excursion to an archaeological site about an hour away from Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. There are just a few booths by the parking lot and, of course, I quickly check them all out. Wait, what is that? In the back of one booth I spot a temporarily strung set of graduated cognac colored amber beads. I show them to our guide Loretta who proclaims them “pressed amber.” This term is new to me, but I soon find out it is true amber, but melded from pieces. Only a very trained eye can tell it from naturally formed amber. And the price is right - I buy.

Now, to have them strung. Back in town, I go to an Amber “museum” where they test the beads for me. Yea! They are amber, but no, they can not/will not recommend anyone to string them. Then I think, I can do this myself and go in search of a bead store to buy clasps and findings as there are enough beads for a necklace, bracelet and earrings. A street seller directs me in the right direction. The store has everything I need and Olga, one of the girls working there, offers to do the stringing and even figures out she can make me two pairs of earrings! I select sterling clasps and findings, she gives me a price and the pact is sealed. I am to pick up the finished work the next afternoon.

Come to find out I made the deal of the trip. Stores that have pressed amber are selling similar necklaces and bracelets for 3 to 5 times the price. I will wear this set proudly.



The Set!

The Amber Angels smile at me again in the town of Klaipeda. On a walking tour, we pass a public market on its day off. It is mostly empty with just a few stalls selling fruit or flowers, and also two elderly men selling coins, Soviet military regalia - mostly buttons, pins and medals. But there - clumped in a corner of the dusty cloth, are some necklaces. I pull out two out - both vintage, one with transparent and faceted yellow beads; and the other with round coffee-color beads with a carmel and yellow pendant hanging from the center. This is the first time I have seen pieces strung on chains, rather than thread. Loretta, our guide, tells me they are from the Soviet era and probably made in the 1970s and 1980's. Later I learn more about this style of jewelry

RIGA IS MY FINEST MOMENT

Eldertreks has a long itinerary - 20 days with intense and active sightseeing and very little free time. So if I want to wander around on my own, I have to give something up. While in Riga, Latvia's biggest town and capital, we are scheduled to spend an entire day visiting three castles. Anyone of us has seen lots of castles - Europe is filled with them. So I decide to "take a vacation from my vacation" and spend the day in the old city. With no obligations except to meet the group at 6:30 for dinner, I sleep until 9am, take care of laundry, read thru a backlog of emails, then go for a long wander.

The amber which is most prized by many has embedded fossilized insects, leaves and twigs.



Riga's old town is a fairy-tale. With over 20 church spires piercing the sky along with medieval buildings complete with turrets, arches and gargoyles along with cobblestone streets, and leafy little squares, it looks like something Hans Christian Anderson has conjured up. The shops are a combination of classic, boutique and some long-established companies. And there is where I luck out. Near the Freedom Statue, which is my point of reference as I know how to get everywhere from there, I notice a store specializing in porcelain and silver flatwear fronting a pedestrian area. It doesn't look too interesting until I spot a few pieces of jewelry in one corner of the window. Of course it calls to me and I go in. The pieces are magnificent and I try them all on. The owner explains that during Soviet times, artisans didn't have access to silver or gold, so they used copper/bronze/white metals to frame and string their pieces. The links making the chains are all hand-made. I am enthralled with a large brandy colored block of amber with lots of inclusions and think of it as an art piece. There is also a double strand of round beads. What to choose - that is the dilemma. No problem, I buy both!

The rest of the trip is spent in search of a pair of earrings to match these magnificent pieces.

I first thought to visit the vendors by St. Peters Church. Well... it was so windy and raining on and off, that they didn't set up shop up today. Neither did many by main square. So I start the rounds of Amber stores. I must have visited around 30, even my favorite - Amber Queen. Thanks to travel friend Karyn, I am alerted to this store that carries everything amber and can be found in all the main cities. Some are pieces that would have been acceptable, but not perfect. Perhaps the color is a bit off, or there is too much silver - the pendant is darkened metal, or the size or shape is not good.

Finally, in a teeny shop located on the last street before the river, I find it. Perfect color, matching inclusions, and just a small drop.

I am a happy woman.



Need something restrung in a hurry? Make your way to Nide, a small town on the Curonian Spit in Lithuania and find Algirdas Marcius. His home is his workshop and he fixed several pieces for me, including restrung a yellow amber bead bracelet. His specialty is carving ancient symbols on amber pieces.

June, 2016