

HISTORY OF NERINGA

Neringa is situated on the Curonian Spit, a narrow peninsula that detaches the Curonian Lagoon from the Baltic Sea. Neringa can be reached by crossing the Curonian Lagoon on a ferry from the Lithuanian seaport of Klaipėda.

The town of Neringa was founded in 1961 when the main settlements on the Lithuanian section of the Curonian Peninsula – Juodkrantė, Pervalka, Preila, and Nida – were merged into a single new town of Neringa, almost 50 kilometres in length. About three thousand inhabitants live constantly in Neringa.

Scientists say that Baltic waves and winds built up the Curonian Spit over five thousand years ago. In the beginning, it was a bleak strip of marine sand which stretched along the Semba Peninsula and slowly increased. Over time, the sea waves and streams drifted more and more sand in; the strip kept enlarging and, eventually, separated the lagoon from the sea.

The pride of the Curonian Spit, dunes, was formed of dry sand which was blown in by the winds. The flow of air shifted dunes toward the lagoon, thus, turning the seacoast into a firm land.

While pouring the sand over the lagoon, the spit kept enlarging, shifting from west to east. This shifting ceased in the Stone Age when forests covered the sandstone. It is believed that the first human beings settled down on the Curonian Spit at that period of time, too.

The origins of Nerija (Spit) name relate to *Kuršiai*—a western Baltic tribe who lived on the current Latvian and northern Lithuanian seacoast and in the south stretched to the areas of Klaipėda.

Urbanisation of the Curonian Spit began in the 13th century, when the crusaders, or Teutonic Order, occupied this territory and built several castles of the Order. The most important of them was Rasytė (Rossitten, currently Ribachiy).

At the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th centuries, Kuršininkai settled at the Curonian Spit. They were fishermen who used boats of a special structure, named *kurėnai*.

Under the influence of the specific nature of the Curonian Spit and nearly isolated from the continent, local residents built authentic houses covered with reed. The settlements of the Curonian Spit are the only place where you can see special carved decorations and weathercocks on the buildings. These weathercocks are evidence of the main activity of the old residents of Neringa – fishing.

Needy everyday life and harsh living conditions, which depended on the sea and the lagoon, conditioned ascetics in housing and clothing styles of local residents. For centuries, fish has been their basic food. In search of other food products that could substitute the sea and lagoon catches, old settlers learned to hunt the crows and to cook it in a special way for food.

In the 15th century, the entire Curonian Spit was covered by dense forest. The old residents believed trees to be sacred and did not touch them.

Later, people began to cut trees with no pity. Particularly, the forests suffered during the Seven-year War, which lasted from 1756 to 1763. When the forests were destroyed, nothing prevented the sand from moving in the wind, so, it slid along the peninsula towards the Curonian Lagoon. Huge dunes buried numbers of fishermen's' villages on their way.

It is believed that that there are as many as 14 villages buried under the sand in the Curonian Spit. Inhabitants kept wandering from one place to another, but the quicksand of the dunes used to "catch up" with the fugitives. Sliding dunes forced the people to look for solutions. Thus, the ridges of the dunes, formed artificially by people, emerged. It became evident later on that roots of hill pines are the best way to prevent the moving sand.

Two centuries ago, afforestation of the Curonian Spit's dunes started; and this process is still ongoing. The seacoast dune fortification and planting works in the Curonian Spit are the only project of such scope in the world.