

## THE BALTIC STATES

### Lithuania, Latvia & Estonia

**10 days**

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#### Day 1 Arrival in Vilnius

Arrival in Vilnius, capital of Lithuania.

In 1994 the Old Town of Vilnius was included on UNESCO's World Heritage list. With its diverse architecture and colourful history, Vilnius is a cosmopolitan place, though with just over 500,000 inhabitants, it has an almost village-like atmosphere, making it an easy place to get to know.

Overnight in Vilnius.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

#### Day 2 Vilnius: City Touring

This morning we have a guided walking tour of Vilnius.

Sweden, Poland, France and Russia have all ruled Vilnius in the past, and today we will witness the influences that this has had on this beautiful city. The Old Town is one of the largest in Europe, with nearly 1,500 historic buildings of note built over several centuries creating a splendid blend of many different architectural styles.

Our guided walking tour will take us to Cathedral Square in the heart of the city. Inside the cathedral we see the famous chapel of Saint Kazimieras, considered an architectural gem. Rising in the distance behind Cathedral Square is the Gedimino Tower, once part of the 14th century defense system.

We will also see the baroque Peter and Paul Church, originally built in the 14th century. The Gates of Dawn, on the eastern side of the Old Town, were one of the original nine gates into the city. From this remaining gate we will walk down through the streets of the old town. Nearby is the Jewish Quarter, with its cobblestone lanes and hidden courtyards.

The afternoon is yours for independent exploration. If you'd like a break from Vilnius's historic monuments, you can take a walk through some of the charming gardens around the city. Maybe visit a self-proclaimed 'republic' of Uzupis, Vilnius's Bohemian and artistic district.

Highly-recommended is a self-guided visit to the KGB Museum (aka the Museum of Genocide Victims). For Lithuanians, the KGB Museum symbolizes the 50-year-long Soviet occupation. The museum building is as intact as it was in 1991, when the KGB left the premises.

Overnight in Vilnius.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 3 Vilnius - Trakai - Kaunas - Klaipeda

This morning we leave the capital and travel to Klaipeda with a stop at Trakai, a former capital of Lithuania. The town, situated on the shores of several lakes, has two prominent castles built to fend off German knights in the 14th century.\* Trakai is famous for its population of Kara-Kalpak people, brought to Trakai from the Crimean Peninsula by the Grand Duke Vytautas in the late 14th century. The Kara-Kalpak still hold their Jewish religious services in the yellow Kinessa, built in 1812. Our guided tour here includes a visit to the Trakai Historical Museum, housed within the main rooms of Trakai's island castle.

From Trakai, we continue our journey to Kaunas, Lithuania's second-largest city. Known for its rich history and vibrant cultural scene, Kaunas is an ideal spot for a lunch break and a brief exploration. Before continuing, we'll take a stroll to appreciate the city's charming old town with its historic buildings and bustling streets.

After our visit to Kaunas, we resume our journey to Klaipeda, a vibrant port city on the Baltic Sea offering a delightful blend of history,

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culture, and seaside relaxation. The city's maritime heritage is evident from the moment we step off the coach, with the harbour bustling with activity and the distant cry of seagulls filling the air.

After settling in, we head out for a leisurely stroll through Klaipeda's Old Town. This area is a delightful mix of cobblestone streets, historic buildings, and quaint squares. As we wander, we notice the half-timbered houses and decorative facades that reflect the city's Germanic past and transformation over the centuries, from its roots as a medieval fortress to its role as a key trading port.

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 \* PLEASE NOTE that Trakai Castle will be under renovation until 2027, during which time specific parts of the complex will have limited access and certain parts will be closed on a rotational basis. Parts of the exterior will also be under scaffolding. Though it is unpredictable, should a visit become impractical, we may substitute the visit with something else of interest in the city or the surrounds.

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 Overnight in Klaipeda

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 4 Klaipeda & the Curonian Spit

This morning we'll embark on a guided day trip to the Curonian Spit National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site. A short ferry ride across the lagoon will transport us to this unique, narrow strip of land.

As we explore the park, we'll witness the relentless battle between the sea and the sand. Whole villages have been swallowed by the shifting dunes, leaving behind fascinating remnants of the past. We'll visit Juodkrante, a picturesque village renowned for its enchanting forest filled with whimsical wooden sculptures depicting Lithuanian folklore.

With Russia just a stone's throw away, we'll gain insights into the region's history and culture. We'll also delve into the world of amber, a precious gem that has been mined here for centuries. A visit to a local amber museum will reveal the beauty and mystique of this golden stone, possibly with a chance to taste an amber-infused drink.

We return to Klaipeda for dinner and overnight.

Overnight in Klaipeda.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 5 Klaipeda - Hill of Crosses, Lithuania - Rundale Palace, Latvia - Riga

This morning we leave Klaipeda and the coast behind and travel inland for a scenic drive through the Lithuanian countryside. Our first stop is the Hill of Crosses, a sacred site located just north of the industrial city of Siauliai. Renowned as Lithuania's national pilgrimage center, Siauliai is steeped in rich cultural traditions and captivating legends. Atop a modest hill, thousands of crosses stand as poignant symbols of Christian devotion and a powerful testament to the nation's resistance against German and Soviet occupation. In recent times, newlywed couples have made it a tradition to visit this hallowed ground after their wedding ceremony to seek divine blessings.

From the Hill of Crosses, we venture towards the Latvian border and continue our journey toward Riga, making a detour to Rundale Palace. This architectural gem, masterfully crafted by Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli, the visionary behind St. Petersburg's Winter Palace, is a breathtaking example of Baroque style infused with classical elements. Completed in 1768, the palace boasts opulent interiors adorned with crystal chandeliers, intricate stucco moldings, elegant silk wallpaper, and stunning paintings and frescoes by renowned Italian artists. It was within these regal halls that Latvian leaders extended a warm welcome to the Danish royal couple, showcasing the palace's grandeur and its ability to host dignitaries with utmost honour and splendour.

After a guided tour and a break for lunch, we'll make our way to Riga, the largest of the Baltic capitals. As we arrive, we'll be greeted by the city's stunning skyline, a blend of medieval architecture and modern skyscrapers.

Overnight in Riga

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 6 Riga's Old Town: Walking Tour

This morning we embark on a guided walking tour of Riga's Old Town, exploring some of the city's top sights and getting a real feel for its character.

We head to the Jewish area and the Ghetto Museum, which is mostly outdoors and offers a poignant insight into the history of Riga's Jewish community during World War II. A small green house, a relic from the former ghetto area, starkly illustrates the cramped living conditions of the time.

Our walk includes a stop at the mighty Freedom Monument, dedicated to those who fought for Latvia's independence. We'll pass by the Latvian National Opera House and the Powder Tower. Kalku Street, the main 'semi-pedestrian' thoroughfare, leads us to Livu Square, one of the Old Town's most bright and cheerful corners.

As we weave through the backstreets, we'll encounter St. Peter's Church, the tallest church in the city, dating back to 1209. The Three Brothers, the oldest residential buildings in the city, showcase Riga's historical craftsmanship.

One of the last segments of the city's defences is the Swedish Gate, a small gateway through what looks like traditional residences. We'll stop at Town Hall Square to admire the iconic House of the Blackheads, a picturesque landmark built for a merchant guild in the 14th century.

This afternoon, you'll have a bit of free time to explore Riga at your own pace.

Overnight in Riga.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 7 Riga Touring Continued

Today we begin our second day in Riga with a stop at the Central Market, a bustling hub of activity and a feast for the senses. Housed in old Zeppelin hangars, this market is one of the largest and most vibrant in Europe. As we wander through the stalls, we'll encounter a diverse array of goods—fresh produce, local delicacies, and handmade crafts.

Since the end of the Soviet era, Riga has revitalized many of its Art Nouveau buildings into pristine gems. We'll visit the Art Nouveau Museum, a fully-restored Art Nouveau apartment, to get a sense of this flamboyant architectural style.

From the museum, we move on to the Academy of Sciences. Here, we take an elevator ride up, enjoying panoramic views of Riga's skyline. The final two floors must be climbed on foot, but the effort is rewarded with a breathtaking vantage point over the city, offering a unique perspective of its layout and landmarks.

After a morning of exploration, we drive to the Lido Leisure Centre on Krasta Street where you can get yourself some lunch. Known for its excellent food and reasonable prices, this casual dining spot is popular among locals and provides a great opportunity to sample hearty, authentic cuisine in a relaxed setting.

Post-lunch, we head to the Ethnographic Museum, a short drive away. This open-air museum showcases traditional Latvian life with a collection of historic buildings, including farmsteads, windmills, and churches, spread across a beautiful natural setting. As we explore, we get a glimpse into rural Latvian life over the centuries, with exhibits detailing everything from traditional crafts to daily living practices.

You will have some free time before our evening meal.

Overnight in Riga.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 8 Riga - Cesis - Ligatne, Latvia - Tallinn, Estonia

This morning we depart Riga and head north toward Estonia with a stops en route to explore the historic town of Cesis and the intriguing Soviet bunker in Ligatne.

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Cesis is a charming medieval town that's steeped in history. As we wander through the cobblestone streets, we'll admire the well-preserved timber-framed houses and the imposing Cesis Castle. The castle, with its towering walls and impressive fortifications, offers stunning views of the surrounding countryside.

After exploring Cesis with a break to get some lunch, we'll make our way to Ligatne, a small town with a big secret. Here, we'll have the opportunity to visit a top-secret Soviet bunker, a relic of the Cold War. This underground facility was built to protect high-ranking officials in the event of a nuclear attack. During our tour, we'll learn about the bunker's history, its purpose, and the lives of those who worked there.

Following our visit we'll cross the border en route to Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. Historically, Tallinn has been attacked, sacked, razed and pillaged on numerous occasions. Although extensively bombed by Soviet air forces during the latter stages of World War II, much of the medieval Old Town still retains its charm. The Tallinn Old Town became a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site in 1997.

Overnight in Tallinn.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 9 Tallinn Morning Walking Tour & Leisure Time

Today we immerse ourselves in the history and charm of Tallinn, starting with a leisurely guided walking tour through the city's most notable landmarks.

We begin at the Orthodox Church on Vene Street, a serene sanctuary with intricate icons and a peaceful atmosphere. At the City Museum, we delve into Tallinn's past through engaging exhibits. Next, the Marzipan Museum treats us to sweet delights and intricate marzipan sculptures.

We can pause for a coffee break at Tallinn's oldest coffee house on Pikk Street, where the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and the nostalgic ambiance set the perfect mood.

Continuing to the Holy Ghost Church, we are offered a glimpse of its distinctive white facade and 14th-century clock. We then visit the Old Pharmacy on the Main Square, one of Europe's oldest, with fascinating displays of ancient remedies. Ascending Toompea Hill, we marvel at the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral's onion domes and solemn interior, followed by a visit to Toomkirik, the Gothic-style Lutheran Cathedral.

With our walking tour complete, the afternoon is yours to explore at your own pace. Stroll through the picturesque Old Town with its jumble of medieval buildings, turrets, and walls. Wander through the charming Kadriorg Park, a serene oasis with beautiful gardens and historic palaces. Or, you might prefer to delve deeper into Tallinn's rich history by visiting one of the city's many museums.

Overnight in Tallinn.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 10 Departure

Departure from Tallinn or continue to Helsinki to join our Nordic Europe tour.

SAFE TRAVELS!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast