

## POLAND & THE BALTIC STATES

**20 days**

Created on: 15 Jan, 2025

### Day 1 Arrive in Krakow

Arrival in Krakow.

Krakow is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. It was originally the home of the Polish royalty (between 1038 and 1596), before the capital was moved to Warsaw. The cobblestone streets, majestic churches (almost 100!), and old world charm make Krakow an unforgettable destination.

Overnight in Krakow.

### Day 2 Krakow: City Walking Tour

Krakow is very compact, and the whole central region with its cobblestone streets is full of well-preserved architecture, Gothic churches and splendid museums. On our sightseeing tour (largely on foot at a leisurely pace) we visit Wawel Hill with the Royal Castle, Market Square, and the 16th century Renaissance Cloth Hall. We continue onward to Jagiellonian University and St Mary's Church with the Wit Stwosz altar. This was designed in 1489 by Wit Stwosz of Nuremburg and is the finest sculptural work in Poland.

We then stroll down the hill from the castle complex and enter the Old Town, one of the most famous old districts in Poland and the centre of Poland's political life from 1038 until King Sigismund III Vasa relocated his court to Warsaw in 1596. The entire medieval old town is among the first sites chosen for the UNESCO's World Heritage List. The district features the centrally located Rynek Glowny, or Main Square, the largest medieval town square of any European city. There is a number of historic landmarks in its vicinity, such as St. Mary's Basilica (Kosciol Mariacki), Church of St. Wojciech (St. Adalbert's), Church of St. Barbara, as well as other national treasures.

While in Krakow, we'll also have a walking visit of Kazimierz, once an independent town governed separately from Krakow until the late middle ages. Later, it became known as the Jewish Quarter of the city and was finally transformed into a center for Krakow's beatnik bars and cafe culture.

Overnight in Krakow.

### Day 3 Oskar Schindler Museum & Wieliczka Salt Mines

This morning we visit the Oskar Schindler's Factory Museum. The story of Oskar Schindler and his employees is one which has been well-known since the book and film by Thomas Keneally and Steven Spielberg (whose film 'Schindler's List' was shot almost entirely in Krakow). Individual histories of Krakow's wartime inhabitants guide visitors through the exhibit which covers the war of 1939, everyday life under occupation, the fate of the Jews and the city's underground resistance using vast archival documents, photos, radio and film recordings, period artifacts and multimedia.

We'll then break for lunch\* after which we'll head to the Wieliczka Salt Mines. On our 5km (3 mile) journey below the earth's surface we will see the salt-formed caves and grottoes, a subterranean lake and a chapel with statues carved from salt. The mines' 11 levels of galleries stretch 300km (186 miles), and some 20,000,000 tonnes (22,000,000 tons) of rock salt were extracted over 700 years. According to local legend, the deposits were discovered in the 13th century by a Hungarian princess named Kinga, whose lost ring was found in a block of salt extracted here.

\* Because of the fullness of our day, and because past travellers indicated a desire for some independence for dinner while in Krakow (and an earlier night), we include a light lunch instead of dinner today.

Overnight in Krakow.

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**Day 4 Krakow - Oswiecim (Auschwitz) - Czestochowa - Lodz**

Today we embark on a poignant journey to Oswiecim (Auschwitz) and Brzezinka (Birkenau), the former Nazi concentration camps that now serve as a haunting memorial to the 1.5 million victims of 28 nationalities who perished here. As we walk through the camp's somber grounds, our knowledgeable guide will reveal the compelling history of this site, sharing personal stories and anecdotes that bring the past to life. This emotional experience will leave a lasting impression, reminding us of the importance of tolerance, compassion, and humanity.

We continue our journey to Czestochowa, the spiritual heart of Poland, where pilgrims from far and wide flock to Jasna Gora (Luminous Mountain) Monastery. This revered site is home to the iconic Black Madonna, Poland's most cherished relic, said to have been painted by St. Luke the Evangelist himself. Legend has it that the icon was brought from Jerusalem and installed in the monastery in 1384. As we explore the monastery, we'll delve into the fascinating history and symbolism surrounding this sacred image.

Our final destination today is Lodz (pronounced "Wooj"), a city with a rich and diverse heritage. Once a small settlement, Lodz blossomed into one of Europe's largest textile industry centers in the 19th century, earning the nickname "a promised land" and "a city of many cultures." As we arrive in Lodz, we'll discover a city that proudly celebrates its multicultural roots, where people of different nationalities and faiths came together to build a thriving community. We'll have time to explore the city's unique character and enjoy dinner at one of its many restaurants.

Overnight in Lodz.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 5 Lodz - Warsaw: City Tour**

This morning, we journey to Warsaw, Poland's resilient capital, where a rich history and vibrant culture await. Upon arrival, we embark on a comprehensive city tour, exploring the meticulously restored Old Town, a testament to the city's determination and spirit. After being razed during World War II, Warsaw's citizens embarked on a remarkable reconstruction campaign, resulting in today's stunning UNESCO-protected site. As we wander through the cobblestone streets, we'll discover an impressive array of churches, palaces, and marketplaces, showcasing the city's fascinating history, spanning from the 13th to the 20th century.

Having shaken off its Soviet-era persona, Warsaw has emerged as a thriving business and cultural hub, proudly showcasing its true colours. Our sightseeing adventure begins with a scenic drive along the Royal Route, followed by a brief orientation tour of the city. We'll delve into the historic Old Town on foot, visiting iconic landmarks such as Castle Square and the Uprising Monument. Next, we'll cross the river to the Praga district, where we'll take in the panoramic views of the city. Our journey continues in the Jewish Ghetto area, where we'll visit the poignant Umschlag Platz and the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. This state-of-the-art museum tells the captivating story of Poland's Jewish community, which flourished for over a thousand years, through a multimedia narrative exhibition.

Overnight in Warsaw.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 6 Warsaw Sightseeing - To Torun**

As we bid farewell to Warsaw, we pay a poignant visit to the Warsaw Uprising Museum, a poignant tribute to the brave men and women who fought for Poland's freedom during World War II. Located in a former tram power station, the museum is a treasure trove of artifacts, personal stories, and historical records that bring the 1944 Warsaw Uprising to life. Explore the exhibits, which include weapons, love letters, and personal belongings of the insurgents, and gain a deeper understanding of this pivotal moment in Polish history.

Having delved into Warsaw's complex past, we journey to the enchanting medieval town of Torun, nestled on the banks of the Vistula River in northwestern Poland. This charming city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, boasts an astonishingly well-preserved medieval architecture, having miraculously escaped bombing during World War II. Stroll through the cobblestone streets and admire the stunning Gothic buildings, including the majestic St. Mary's Church. As we wander, the warm atmosphere of the old town envelops us, inviting us to linger at one of the many outdoor cafes and restaurants, where we can indulge in local delicacies and soak up the timeless charm of Torun.

Overnight in Torun.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 7 Torun: Nicolaus Copernicus Museum - Gdansk

This morning, we delve into the charms of Torun, a medieval gem nestled on the Vistula River. As we wander through the UNESCO-listed Old Town, we're surrounded by the city's rich history and architectural splendor. Admire the imposing 13th-century Town Hall, one of the most impressive in Northern Europe, and explore the stunning churches and historic streets that preserve Torun's past glory.

Our journey continues at the Nicolaus Copernicus Museum, located in the very house where the renowned astronomer was born. Step into the world of Copernicus and discover an incredible collection of artifacts, including rare books, ancient prints, and intricate models of astronomical instruments. Gain insight into the life and work of this Polish genius, who revolutionized our understanding of the universe.

As we make our way to Gdansk, the 'Maritime Pearl of Poland,' we're enchanted by the city's captivating blend of medieval charm and maritime heritage. The city's skyline is dominated by towering, narrow buildings with peaked roofs and decorative facades, perfectly complemented by the cobblestone streets. The famous Gdansk Shipyards, where the Solidarity movement was born, are visible from many parts of the city.

As we explore Gdansk's marvellous Old Town, we stroll along the iconic Dlugi Targ (Long Market), lined with picturesque buildings, quaint shops, and lively cafes. Every step reveals a new treasure, from the majestic Neptune's Fountain to the impressive St. Mary's Church, one of the largest brick churches in the world.

Overnight in Gdansk.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 8 Gdansk Area Tour

Its position on the Baltic has historically made Gdansk one of the most important port cities in Northern Europe, and tragically also the scene of a rather disturbing past. World War II was ignited by a dispute over the control of the city. By the end of the war the city lay almost completely in ruins. The German population was expelled and replaced by Poles as the city came under Polish rule and changed its name to Gdansk. However, the impact of its former German ties is still evident. Although most of the old buildings were damaged or destroyed in WWII, they have been painstakingly restored or rebuilt.

This morning we head out of town a short distance to visit the Oliwa Cathedral. This Holy Trinity, Blessed Virgin Mary, and St Bernard's Church was first erected as a Cistercian shrine back in the 13th century. Reconstructed in 1350 after a great fire, it re-emerged in the Gothic style, but many of the new fixtures were to be relatively short lived. The Gothic interior was extremely damaged in a 1577 fire and was replaced with the Baroque fixtures we admire today for their beauty and intensity.

The Oliwa Cathedral is perhaps best known for its massive, splendid organ. The organ is comprised of over 7,000 pipes and is decorated with movable angels and brightly painted stars. When built, the instrument was the largest in Europe. The main altar is also very impressive, and if the organ is in use, you're sure to be riveted by its magnificent sound!

While in Gdansk we'll also visit the European Solidarity Centre, a museum and library devoted to the history of Solidarity, the Polish trade union and civil resistance movement, and other opposition movements of Communist Eastern Europe.

The balance of the day is free to enjoy Gdansk. Gdansk is sometimes called the Amber Capital of the World; the surrounding area is the richest known source of this semi-precious stone, and the product can be viewed (and purchased, of course) in many shops in town. In order to maximize your free time in this interesting place, we do not include dinner this evening.

Overnight in Gdansk.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

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### Day 9 Gdansk - Malbork - Olsztyn

This morning, we embark on a scenic drive to Olsztyn, nestled in the heart of Poland's breathtaking lake district. En route, we make a thrilling stop at the majestic Teutonic Knights Castle in Malbork, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the largest brick building in Europe. This imposing 13th-century fortress, with its towering walls, grand halls, and intricate Gothic architecture, is a testament to the region's rich history and a must-see attraction.

As we continue our journey, the landscape unfolds like a canvas of rolling hills, sparkling lakes, and dense forests. We arrive in Olsztyn, a charming town surrounded by the pristine beauty of the Masurian Lake District. The crowning jewel of Olsztyn is its picturesque old town, encircled by a set of well-preserved fortified walls that whisper tales of the past. As we wander through the narrow streets, we'll discover a treasure trove of medieval architecture, quaint shops, and cozy cafes, inviting us to soak up the town's warm atmosphere.

Overnight in Olsztyn.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 10 Olsztyn - Olsztynek - Warsaw

This morning, we bid farewell to Olsztyn and embark on a scenic drive back to Warsaw. En route, we make a fascinating stop at the Ethnographic Park in Olsztynek, home to the Museum of Folk Architecture, one of Europe's oldest and most captivating open-air museums.

As we wander through the park's picturesque grounds, we'll discover a treasure trove of traditional folk architecture, showcasing the region's rich cultural heritage. Admire the charming wooden houses, rustic barns, and historic windmills, each one telling a story of the past. Step inside the beautifully restored old homes, and explore the evangelical church, blacksmith, pottery stand, and windmill, each one offering a glimpse into the region's traditional way of life.

Be sure to check out the temporary exhibitions, featuring an array of traditional handicrafts and modern folk art from the region. From intricate woodcarvings to vibrant textiles, these exhibits showcase the region's enduring passion for traditional craftsmanship. After a captivating morning at the Ethnographic Park, we continue our journey back to Warsaw, filled with unforgettable memories of Poland's rich cultural heritage.

Overnight in Warsaw.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 11 Warsaw, Poland - Vilnius, Lithuania

Today we fly\* from Warsaw to Vilnius and transfer to our hotel.

"Narrow cobblestone streets and an orgy of Baroque: almost like a Jesuit city somewhere in the middle of Latin America," wrote the author Czeslaw Milosz of pre-war Vilnius. Soviet-era satellite suburbs aside, it's a description which still rings true today. Despite being the capital of the medieval Lithuanian state, Vilnius was occupied by Poland between the wars and was inhabited mainly by Poles and Jews who played such a prominent role in the city's life that it was known as the "Northern Jerusalem". Vilnius is still a cosmopolitan place -- around twenty percent of its population is Polish and another twenty percent is Russian -- though with just 543,000 inhabitants it has an almost village-like atmosphere, making it an easy place to get to know.

\* NOTE: Depending on final group size and flight schedules (which can be erratic), this journey may take place overland (by private bus). If so, we apologize for the backtracking and inconvenience.

Overnight in Vilnius.

## Day 12 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.

## Day 13 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, 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.

\* 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.

Overnight in Klaipeda

## Day 14 Klaipeda & the Curonian Spit

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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.

### Day 15 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

### Day 16 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.

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.

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.

### Day 17 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.

Next 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.

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.

### Day 18 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.

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.

**Day 19 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.

**Day 20 Departure**

Departure from Tallinn.

SAFE TRAVELS!