

## POLAND, THE BALTICS & NORDIC EUROPE

**33 days**

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**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.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

**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 Tallinn, Estonia - Helsinki, Finland

Today we take a fast ferry from Tallinn to Helsinki (HAVE YOUR PASSPORTS HANDY!).

Helsinki is situated at the arrowhead of a peninsula, surrounded by an archipelago of 315 islands, perfectly placed between its two great trading cousins, Stockholm and Moscow. From a European perspective, Helsinki is relatively young (450 years), yet it is Finland's sixth-oldest town. The Swedes, who extended their empire into Finland in 1155, founded the city of 'Helsingfors' (the name still used by the Swedes) in 1550 when King Gustav Vasa needed a site for a strategic, competitively placed trading port. It languished as a coastal backwater until Imperialist Russia invaded in 1809.

On arrival we'll have a walking orientation tour of Helsinki.

Overnight in Helsinki.

### Day 21 Helsinki: City Tour

Affectionately known as the 'Daughter of the Baltic', Helsinki is sited at the arrowhead of a peninsula, surrounded by an archipelago of 315 islands, perfectly placed between its two great trading cousins, Stockholm and Moscow. In a European perspective, Helsinki is relatively young (450 years), yet it is Finland's sixth-oldest town. The Swedes, who extended their empire into Finland in 1155, founded the city of 'Helsingfors' (the name still used by the Swedes) in 1550 when King Gustav Vasa needed a site for a strategic, competitively placed trading port. It languished as a coastal backwater until Imperialist Russia invaded in 1809.

Today we will enjoy a comprehensive walking tour taking in the most important and interesting parts of Helsinki, such as the historical centre and the diplomatic quarters, the Presidential Palace, City Hall, and the Parliament building. We'll stop at Senate Square, and, if possible, Tempeliaukio Church.

During the afternoon you can explore the busy market place or the many souvenir shops close to the harbour. Fans of modern architecture and/or libraries may enjoy a visit to the Oodi Helsinki Library, which occupies a hugely significant site in central Helsinki: facing the steps of the Finnish parliament building. The upper surface of the canopy structure has been used to create a large public terrace, from which one can look directly over the square to the steps and main entrance of parliament. The terrace doubles the amount of public outdoor space provided

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for library visitors and creates a new destination where people can meet and observe the city below.

Overnight in Helsinki.

### Day 22 Free time in Helsinki / Ferry to Sweden

Today you will have a free morning to explore Helsinki.

Helsinki is small and intimate; lively but not bustling. Its size makes it easy to walk around and cafes, markets, and the nearby islands are just a few of its summer delights.

A popular option for today is a quick 15-minute ferry trip over to Suomenlinna Island, an interesting and charming piece of Helsinki, even if it's not technically part of the city. In the history of military architecture, the Fortress of Suomenlinna is an outstanding example of general fortification principles of the 17th and 18th centuries, notably the bastion system, and also showcases individual characteristics. Suomenlinna is meant to be seen on foot at your own pace (many of its roads are paved with cobblestones, so you need to wear comfortable walking shoes). Your Tour Leader will point out the location of the dock during yesterday's tour.

This afternoon/evening we will board our overnight ferry to Stockholm. Our overnight ferries feature modern facilities, restaurants, duty-free shopping, and cozy cabins with low beds (ie not bunks) and en-suite washroom.

Overnight ferry (dinner on board).

### Day 23 Stockholm: Old Town & Vasa Museum

Welcome to Sweden!

After our morning arrival we check into our hotel and have a bit of a break to grab some lunch before commencing with our walking tour of the Old City and the Vasa Museum.

With its location on the east coast of Sweden at the mouth of Lake Malaren, Stockholm is widely renowned for its beauty. Three islands make up the oldest part of Stockholm -- Riddarholmen, Staden and Helgeandsholmen -- the whole history-riddled mass a cluster of seventeenth- and eighteen-century Renaissance buildings backed by narrow medieval alleys.

We'll begin our exploration at the magnificent Stockholm City Hall, a stunning architectural masterpiece that has hosted the prestigious Nobel Prize banquet since 1930. Our guided tour will take us through the iconic Blue Hall, the grand banquet hall where Nobel laureates and dignitaries gather to celebrate their achievements. We'll marvel at the hall's elegant decor, intricate details, and the historic ambiance that permeates the space.

From here it takes only a matter of seconds to cross the bridge into Stockholm's Old Town, or Gamla Stan. This medieval heart of the city is a maze of narrow, cobblestone streets lined with colourful buildings, historic churches, and charming shops. We'll see the Royal Palace, one of Europe's largest; its grand facade and intricate details are a sight to behold. We'll pass by St. Nicholas' Church, the oldest church in Stockholm, and the Riddarholm Church, the traditional burial place of Swedish royalty. Along the way, we'll discover hidden courtyards, charming cafes, and unique boutiques. We will visit the square which hosts the Nobel Museum, which showcases the history of the Nobel Prize and its laureates (you'll be able to visit on your own during free time tomorrow).

From here we take a quick ferry to the extraordinary Vasa Ship Museum. This world-renowned museum houses the only preserved 17th-century warship in the world. The Vasa, a magnificent ship that sank on its maiden voyage in 1628, was salvaged in 1961 and meticulously restored. As you explore the museum, you'll be amazed by the intricate details of the ship's construction, its stunning carvings, and the fascinating stories of the people who sailed on it. After a full day, we'll transfer back to our hotel by either public tram or taxi (your Tour Leader will arrange and advise).

Overnight in Stockholm.

**Day 24 Stockholm: Boat Tour & Leisure Time**

Our day begins with a 50-minute boat tour that will take you on a journey through Stockholm's rich history. Departing near the City Hall, the cruise will wind its way through the heart of the city, offering stunning views of the picturesque skyline. We'll have the opportunity to admire the historic island of Kungsholmen, known for its elegant architecture and cultural institutions. We'll also pass by the intriguing islands of Langholmen and Reimersholme, each with its own fascinating story to tell. The cruise guide will share insights into Stockholm's maritime heritage, explaining how the city's development has been shaped by its unique location. From its humble beginnings as a medieval trading post to its transformation into a modern metropolis, you'll gain a deeper understanding of the city's past and present.

The remainder of your day is yours to explore Stockholm at your own pace. This vibrant city offers a wealth of opportunities for sightseeing, shopping, and dining. Lose yourself in the charming streets of the Old Town, with its colorful buildings, historic churches, and quaint shops. Indulge in some retail therapy at the stylish shops and boutiques in the city center. Relax in one of Stockholm's beautiful parks, such as Kungsträdgården or Djurgården. Whether you prefer to wander through the city's historic neighborhoods, soak up the sun by the water, or simply enjoy a leisurely meal, Stockholm has something for everyone.

Overnight in Stockholm.

**Day 25 Stockholm, Sweden - Fly to Copenhagen, Denmark**

Today we fly to Copenhagen. Welcome to Denmark!

Upon arrival and after check-in, we'll enjoy a relaxing and scenic introduction to this vibrant capital.

We kick off our Copenhagen touring with a one-hour historical canal boat tour, which provides an excellent introduction to our stay. As we'll glide along the picturesque canals, we'll have the opportunity to admire some of Copenhagen's most iconic landmarks. We'll pass by the stunning Amalienborg Palace, the official residence of the Danish royal family. You'll also catch a glimpse of the historic Christiansborg Palace, which houses the Danish Parliament. As we cruise through the canals, you'll see colorful townhouses, charming bridges, and the iconic Little Mermaid statue (from a distance).

A knowledgeable guide will provide commentary on the city's history, culture, and architecture, making the tour both informative and entertaining.

Overnight in Copenhagen.

**Day 26 Copenhagen: City Touring**

Today's walking tour offers a unique opportunity to immerse yourself in Copenhagen's rich history and culture.

We begin in the vibrant and colourful Nyhavn. Once a bustling port, this picturesque canal-side district is now a popular tourist destination. As you stroll along the waterfront, you'll see brightly painted 17th-century townhouses, cozy cafes, and charming shops. Nyhavn is also closely linked to the beloved fairytale writer, Hans Christian Andersen. He lived in one of the houses here for many years, drawing inspiration from the lively atmosphere and diverse characters that filled the streets. On your free time, you can even visit the house where he once resided, now a museum dedicated to his life and work.

From Nyhavn, we'll head towards Amalienborg Palace, the official residence of the Danish royal family. You'll have the opportunity to admire the elegant Rococo architecture of the four identical palaces that surround the square.

Our next stop is Rosenborg Castle, a Renaissance castle that once served as the royal residence. Today, the castle houses a fascinating collection of royal treasures, including crowns, scepters, and ornate tapestries. You can also explore the beautiful castle gardens, which offer stunning views of the city.

This afternoon (or tomorrow), you may choose to visit Copenhagen's excellent National Museum with its permanent collections pertaining to

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Danish history as well as several very good ethnological rooms.

NOTE: The order of Copenhagen sightseeing may depend on weather, hotel location, and other logistical considerations.

Overnight in Copenhagen.

### Day 27 Copenhagen: City Tour - Overnight Ferry to Oslo

Today we delve deeper into Copenhagen's rich history with a visit to the magnificent Christiansborg Palace. This imposing granite castle, surrounded by canals on three sides, stands as a testament to Denmark's royal past. While the current palace is the third to occupy the site, its grandeur and significance remain undiminished. The first two castles were tragically destroyed by fire, but the current Baroque structure, built in the 18th century, is a masterpiece of architectural elegance.

As we explore the castle, we'll learn about its fascinating history and the important role it has played in Danish politics and culture. We'll have the opportunity to admire the opulent state rooms, the historic Royal Reception Rooms, and the beautiful chapel.

If time permits prior to our ferry, you may choose to visit the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, often simply referred to as the Glyptotek, is a renowned art museum in Copenhagen, Denmark. Founded by Carl Jacobsen, the son of the founder of the Carlsberg Breweries, the museum houses an impressive collection of both ancient and modern art.

This afternoon we head to the port to board our evening ferry for the overnight journey to Oslo. Our route takes us along the coast of Denmark and the body of water that separates the North Sea from the Baltic and into Norwegian waters. Our cabins are small but comfortable with ensuite facilities. These vessels are large and well appointed with amenities that include restaurants, shops, maybe even a cinema and swimming pool.

Overnight ferry (dinner on board).

### Day 28 Arrival in Oslo: City Touring

The final 1.5 hours before docking are a must-see event. Grab your camera and head up to the deck early to capture the enchanting scenery. The historic Drobak Fortress, a picturesque landmark, will come into view, its imposing silhouette contrasting with the tranquil waters. Scattered throughout the fjord, you'll spot charming islands dotted with colourful summer homes, creating a postcard-perfect scene. The ship will dock just outside the city centre and a bus/guide will be waiting to commence our sightseeing program.\*

Upon disembarkation, we'll visit one of Oslo's most celebrated and popular cultural targets, the Vigelandsparken, an open-air sculpture park which commemorates the modern Norwegian sculptor of world renown, Gustav Vigeland (1869-1943). On our way back to the centre, we'll stop at the outdoor Norwegian Folk Museum, where a collection of city homes, farm buildings, one of the famous Stave Churches, give you an overview of Norway, its culture, and history.

Our tour includes a visit to the Opera House, designed to be walked upon! From here you'll have a great view of the inner harbour where our guide can point out the Munch Museum, which you can visit on your own at some point during our stay.

After hotel check-in, the balance of the day is yours to spend at leisure, visiting the museums mentioned above and/or possibly strolling down the main street of Carl Johan, enjoying the activity in a city that comes alive during the summer months.

\* Please note that our Oslo hotel rooms will NOT be ready for us this early in the day. Your large baggage will be securely stored on the bus; you might want to prepare your day-pack ahead of time.

Overnight in Oslo.

**Day 29 Oslo: Area Sightseeing**

This morning we walk the short distance to Oslo City Hall for a look at the main hall and the murals depicted on the interior walls.

Nearby, we hop on a small ferry taking us to Bygdoy Peninsula, site of some of Oslo's most visited museums. Here we visit the Viking Ship Museum (please note that this museum has been intermittently closed for renovations and may not be available at the time of our tour), housing the three ships found buried along the Oslo Fjord, all of them nearly 1,200 years old.

We also visit the Fram and Kon-Tiki museums, the latter of which houses the balsa raft used by Thor Heyerdal and his international crew in 1962. They sailed from Peru to Polynesia to confirm his theory that the first Polynesians originally came from Peru. The Fram Museum tells the story of Norwegian polar exploration.

After our visit, we return to the city by public bus in time for a break for lunch and then a visit to the National Museum for a self-guided visit. This has been described as "the best new art gallery in Scandinavia" -- definitely a place where you could spend the better part of your free time after the formal guided part of today's program. This is where Munch's most famous work, "The Scream," is on display (the Munch Museum also displays two other earlier versions).

Overnight in Oslo.

**Day 30 Oslo - Flamsbana Railway - Gudvangen - Stalheim**

An early departure takes us to Oslo's train station where we will catch a +/- 08:00 departure to Flam via Myrdal where we connect to the Famous Flamsbana, the Flam Railway, one of the world's most spectacular rail journeys.

In 1923 work was started on the separate railway line from Myrdal down sheer cliffs to Flam. Since the tunnels were done by hand, the first of the track wasn't put down until autumn 1936. By 1940 the line was opened and run first by steam engines. Electric engines took over in 1944. It takes about an hour to cover 20 km (12 miles) of track on the Flamsbana train. Eighteen of the 20 tunnels were chiseled out by hand which took one month of hard labour for each meter excavated. To avoid risk from avalanches, the railway criss-crosses the river and the bottom of the valley three times. Then, instead of building bridges, the river was routed through a tunnel under the railway line. Nowhere else in the world do adhesion rail cars on normal tracks have a steeper journey. Almost 80% of the railway line has a gradient of 5.5% (1:18).

At the bottom, we will enjoy the scenic landscape of the Flam Valley and admire the lovely Aurlandfjord, an offshoot of the Sognefjord, the longest in the world.

We will enjoy a break for lunch in Flam and then board a leisurely 2-hour cruise along the narrowest arm of Sognefjord and Aurland fjords. Here we are surrounded by the dramatic West Coast fjord landscape of steep snow-capped mountains (up to 1800 m /6,000 ft) and tumbling waterfalls, sheltered hamlets, and high mountain farms. After this journey we will catch a bus at Gudvangen and continue on to Stalheim, located at the very heart of Western Norway's beautiful fjord region.

Overnight in Stalheim.

**Day 31 Stalheim - Train to Bergen**

Our day begins with a visit to the fascinating Stalheim Folkemuseum. This open-air museum offers a glimpse into Norway's rural past, showcasing traditional crafts, rustic objects, and a collection of 30 log buildings arranged to resemble a traditional farm. As you wander through the museum, you'll gain a deeper appreciation for the region's rich cultural heritage.

Afterwards we'll embark on a scenic journey along a winding mountain road to the charming town of Voss. This picturesque route offers breathtaking views of towering mountains, cascading waterfalls, and lush valleys.

Once in Voss, we'll board the world-renowned Bergen Railway. This iconic railway line is renowned for its stunning natural beauty, winding through dramatic landscapes and passing by majestic fjords and snow-capped peaks. As we journey along this scenic route, you'll have the

opportunity to admire the breathtaking scenery before arriving in Bergen..

Bergen is widely-regarded as one of the more beautiful cities of Norway, and is an ancient city that looms large in Viking sagas. Until the 14th century, it was the seat of the medieval kingdom of Norway. Later the Hanseatic merchants established a major trading post here, holding sway until the 18th century, when the locals reclaimed their trading rights. Bergen has survived many disasters, including several fires and the explosion of a Nazi ship during World War II. It is a town with important traditions in shipping, banking, and insurance, and its modern industries are expanding rapidly. The oldest part of town overlooks the busy harbour; along the harbour's edge are myriad shops, boutiques, and the famous open-air fish market.

Overnight in Bergen.

### Day 32 Bergen: City Tour

Our tour starts in the center of town and Bryggen, the wharf on the northeast side of Bergen's harbour. The gabled wood warehouses lining the docks mark the site of the city's original settlement. We take time to walk the narrow passageways between buildings; shops and galleries are hidden among the wooden facades.

Our walk continues down the wharf, past the historic buildings to the end of the Holmen promontory and to Bergenhus festning (Bergenhus Fort), which dates from the 13th century; the nearby Rosenkrantzturnet is a 16th century tower residence. Bergen's oldest cathedral is located behind the fort, the 12th century church called Mariakirken. Walking around the back of the church down four blocks to Floybanen, we take the funicular that runs up and down Floyen, one of the city's most popular hiking mountains -- the view is spectacular. At the base of the funicular is an area of crooked streets and hodgepodge architecture where you'll find most of Bergen's antiques shops.

Balance of the day at leisure to enjoy this charming town. We recommend a stop at the Fish Market, where you can enjoy fresh caught prawns right of the fishing boats. Sit down and enjoy them like the locals do -- peel and load them onto fresh bread, add a bit of lemon and locally made mayonnaise.

Balance of the day at leisure to enjoy this charming town.

Overnight in Bergen.

### Day 33 Departure

Today we depart from Bergen.

BON VOYAGE!