TOUR CODE

BS1

ADVENTURESABROAD

BALTIC STATES & Helsinki

Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland

9 days

Updated 05/01/2013

Day 1 *Arrive 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 543,000 inhabitants, it has an almost village-like atmosphere, making it an easy place to get to know.

A NOTE ON SUITABILITY: Though we do not rate this tour "strenuous", it is a busy programme with numerous city / town walking tours featuring uneven surfaces, inclines and / or stairs. You must be able to spend several hours on your feet per day, walking at a leisurely pace. There may not be porters available in all locations. We also make use of public transit in some cities in order to maximize sightseeing where vehicles are impractical (most people quite enjoy this insight into daily life). If you are unsure of your suitability for this trip, please contact one of our destination specialists.

Overnight in Vilnius. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 *Vilnius & Trakai*

This morning we travel to 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 tour here includes a visit to the Trakai Historical Museum, housed within the main rooms of Trakai's island castle.

We return to Vilnius for a lunch break and town tour.

Sweden, Poland, France and Russia have all ruled Vilnius in the past, and this afternoon 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 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. The original Gothic defensive wall was once over 2 km (1.5 miles) long. 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.

Overnight in Vilnius. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 *Vilnius - Kaunas - Siauliai, Lithuania - Riga, Latvia*

Today we travel to Riga via Kaunas to see the Castle and Old Town at the confluence of the two largest Lithuanian rivers, the Nemunas and the Neris. We see the Town Hall Square, lined with 15th-16th century merchants' houses, and the 17th century baroque Town Hall dominating its center. Nearby Kaunas Cathedral and Gothic Vytautas Church dominate the riverbank. After our visit we continue north to Riga.

En route we stop at the Hill of Crosses, located just north of the small industrial city of Siauliai. Siauliai is the Lithuanian national pilgrimage center, and a city of famous cultural traditions and legends. On a small hill stand thousands of crosses that represent Christian devotion and act as a compelling resistance memorial to the German and Soviet occupation. Today newlyweds often come here after their wedding ceremony to ask for God's blessing.

After our stop we will proceed to the border and continue on to Riga.

Overnight in Riga. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *Riga: City Tour*

Riga, founded in 1201 by the German bishop Albert, is the largest of the three Baltic capitals and boasts an impressive kaleidoscope of various architectural styles.

We start with a panoramic drive taking in some of the most famous sights of Riga. Our route along the embankment of the River Daugava provides us with wonderful views of the city. Our route takes us to the center of town to the Jugendstil District and Alberta Street, an open-air architectural museum and one of the best collections of Art Nouveau buildings in Europe. We then drive through the modern part of the city, observing the university building, National Opera, Academy of Arts and central train station. We will then leave our bus at the entrance to the Old Town.

Our walking tour of the Old Town will include Riga Castle, Dome Cathedral, St. Peter's Church, Swedish Gates, Large and Small Guild Houses, and the Freedom Monument. During your free time, we recommend a visit to the Museum of the Occupation, dedicated to information about Latvia and its people under two occupying totalitarian regimes from 1940 to 1991 (entrance by donation).

Overnight in Riga. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Riga: Rundale Palace*

This morning we travel about 90 minutes to a region known as Bauska, where we visit Rundale Palace, an architectural pearl created by architect Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli, designer of the Winter Palace in St Petersburg. Construction of the palace was completed only in 1768 and now it is a magnificent sample of baroque style with elements of classicism, with crystal chandeliers, rich stucco moulding, silk wallpaper, collection of paintings, and frescoes by Italian artists. This is the place where leaders of the state, wishing to receive high guests with really regal honours, hosted the royal couple from Denmark when they visited in Latvia.

The balance of the day is yours to further explore this beautiful, compact city on your own.

Overnight in Riga. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Riga, Latvia - Parnu - Tallinn, Estonia*

This morning we depart Riga for Tallinn, visiting Parnu en route. There was a trading settlement in Parnu before the German crusaders arrived, but recorded history of the city dates back to the 13th century. From the middle of the 19th century, Parnu developed as a resort town with its good beaches and relatively good weather. During the Soviet era, Parnu's guesthouses, inns and hotels were converted to sanatoria. We will do a stroll through parts of the Old Town, including the town's oldest building, the Red Tower.

We continue 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. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 *Tallinn: City Tour*

Today we have a guided WALKING tour of this important Baltic Sea harbour city. We begin with a visit to the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, built in the nineteenth century. The cathedral dominates the Lossi Plats, and is an imposing testament to the Russian imperialist influence. We also visit the Dominican Monastery, which played an important role in bringing Christianity to Estonia. We have the opportunity to visit the Toompea Castle site, a 13th century castle where the current parliament of Estonia holds its sessions. In the immediate area we will also visit the Toomkirik Lutheran cathedral, founded in 1233, with its impressive carved tombs inside.

This afternoon you will have some free time to stroll through the picturesque Old Town with its jumble of medieval buildings, turrets and walls.

Overnight in Tallinn. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *Tallinn, Estonia - Helsinki, Finland*

This morning we take a fast ferry from Tallinn to Helsinki (HAVE YOUR PASSPORTS HANDY!) and embark upon a tour of this sophisticated capital. 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. 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.

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, the Parliament building, Finlandia Hall and the Opera House. We stop at Senate Square, and, if possible, Temppeliaukio Church. During the afternoon you can explore the busy market place or the many souvenir shops close to the harbour.

Overnight in Helsinki. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Departure from Helsinki*

Today we depart from Helsinki.

NOTE: If you would like to extend your time in Helsinki, please let us quote you rates for extra accommodation at the hotel used on tour.

HYVAA MATKAA!! Meal plan: Breakfast.