

## THE BALTIC STATES

### Three Nations, One Story

**10 days**

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#### Day 1 Arrival in Vilnius

Arrival in Vilnius, capital of Lithuania. The city's Old Town, included on UNESCO's World Heritage list in 1994, encompasses nearly 1,500 historic buildings spanning several centuries of architectural styles. With just over 500,000 inhabitants, Vilnius maintains an intimate, walkable character despite its cosmopolitan atmosphere.

This evening we gather with fellow travellers for our first meal together.

Overnight in Vilnius.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

#### Day 2 Vilnius: City Touring

This morning we explore Vilnius on foot, discovering the layers of history left by the city's various rulers—Sweden, Poland, France, and Russia have all governed here at different times. The Old Town, one of Europe's largest, contains nearly 1,500 historic buildings that create a rich architectural tapestry.

Our walking tour takes us to Cathedral Square in the city's heart. Inside the cathedral we see the chapel of Saint Kazimieras, an ornate example of early Baroque architecture. Behind Cathedral Square rises Gedimino Tower, remnant of the 14th-century defensive system that once protected the city. On the Old Town's eastern edge, the Gates of Dawn stand as the last of nine original city gates. From here we walk through the cobblestone lanes of the Jewish Quarter with its hidden courtyards.

The afternoon is free for independent exploration. A popular option is the self-proclaimed 'republic' of Uzupis, Vilnius's bohemian artistic district, or the KGB Museum (Museum of Genocide Victims). For Lithuanians, this museum symbolizes the 50-year Soviet occupation—the building remains as the KGB left it in 1991, with cells and interrogation rooms preserved intact.

Overnight in Vilnius.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

This morning we depart Vilnius for Klaipeda, stopping first at Trakai, Lithuania's medieval capital. The town occupies a peninsula between several lakes, with two prominent castles built to defend against German knights in the 14th century. Our visit includes the Trakai Historical Museum, housed within the island castle's main rooms. Trakai is also known for its Karaim community, descendants of Turkic people brought here from Crimea by Grand Duke Vytautas in the late 14th century.

We continue to Kaunas, Lithuania's second-largest city, for a lunch break and brief exploration of the historic Old Town with its medieval buildings and market squares.

By late afternoon we reach Klaipeda, a port city on the Baltic Sea. After settling into our hotel, we take an evening stroll through the Old Town, where cobblestone streets wind between half-timbered houses. The architecture reflects the city's Germanic past—Klaipeda was known as Memel until 1923—and its evolution from medieval fortress to major trading port.

NOTE: Trakai Castle undergoes ongoing restoration work until 2027. Some areas may have limited access or scaffolding, though the site remains visitable. If circumstances make a visit impractical, we will substitute another point of interest in the region.

Overnight in Klaipeda.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### **Day 4 Klaipeda & the Curonian Spit**

This morning we take a ferry across the lagoon to Curonian Spit National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site. This narrow, 98-kilometre sand peninsula separates the Curonian Lagoon from the Baltic Sea, shaped over millennia by wind, waves, and human intervention.

The spit's massive sand dunes—some reaching 60 metres in height—have buried entire villages over the centuries. At Juodkrant we walk through the Hill of Witches sculpture trail, where wooden carvings depict characters from Lithuanian folklore. The village itself sits beneath forested dunes, its traditional fishermen's houses painted in distinctive colours.

The Russian border lies just beyond the spit's northern end at Nida. We learn about the region's amber industry—the Baltic coast has supplied this fossilized resin for thousands of years—with a visit to a local amber museum. The exhibits explain how amber forms, its historical trade routes, and its uses from ancient jewelry to modern applications.

We return to Klaipeda by ferry in late afternoon.

Overnight in Klaipeda.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

Leaving the coast, we travel inland through the Lithuanian countryside to the Hill of Crosses near Siauliai. Thousands of crosses cover this modest rise, placed here over more than a century as symbols of Christian devotion and national resistance. The site became particularly significant during Soviet occupation, when authorities repeatedly removed the crosses only to see them replaced by persistent pilgrims. Today newlywed couples often visit to seek blessings for their marriage.

Crossing into Latvia, we continue to Rundale Palace, designed by Italian architect Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli, who also created St. Petersburg's Winter Palace. Completed in 1768, Rundale exemplifies Baroque architecture with classical influences. The palace interior features elaborate stucco work, crystal chandeliers, silk wallpapers, and frescoes by Italian artists. We tour the state rooms where Latvian officials received Denmark's royal couple in 2006, showcasing the palace's continued ceremonial role.

After the visit and a break for lunch, we proceed to Riga, Latvia's capital and the largest Baltic city.

Overnight in Riga.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

This morning we explore Riga's Old Town on foot, discovering the city's architectural heritage and cultural landmarks. We begin at the Freedom Monument, erected in 1935 to honour those who fought for Latvian independence. The monument's bronze figure holds three stars representing Latvia's historical regions—Kurzeme, Vidzeme, and Latgale.

Walking through the Old Town, we pass the Latvian National Opera House and the Powder Tower, a remnant of the medieval city walls. Kalku Street leads us to Lvu Square, one of the Old Town's most animated corners. St. Peter's Church, dating to 1209, rises above the surrounding buildings—its 123-metre spire dominates Riga's skyline. The Three Brothers, a group of connected medieval houses, represent the city's oldest residential architecture, with each building from a different century showing the evolution of construction styles.

At Town Hall Square we see the House of the Blackheads, rebuilt after World War II destruction. The original 14th-century building served a guild of unmarried German merchants. The Swedish Gate, a small archway through what appears to be residential buildings, marks one entrance through the old city fortifications.

The afternoon is free to explore Riga independently.

Overnight in Riga.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 7 Riga Touring Continued

We begin at Riga's Central Market, housed in five former Zeppelin hangars from World War I. The market ranks among Europe's largest, with vendors selling fresh produce, local cheeses, smoked fish, and traditional Latvian foods. The scale and variety offer insight into regional culinary traditions.

From the market we visit the Art Nouveau Museum, located in a restored apartment that recreates early 20th-century living spaces. Riga contains one of Europe's highest concentrations of Art Nouveau architecture—over 800 buildings feature the style's characteristic organic forms and decorative elements.

Our tour continues to the area where Riga's Jewish ghetto existed during World War II. The Ghetto Museum, largely an outdoor exhibition, documents this period through preserved structures and interpretive panels. A small green house illustrates the cramped conditions families endured.

We visit the Academy of Sciences observation deck for panoramic views across Riga's skyline, taking in the city's mix of medieval spires, Art Nouveau facades, and Soviet-era buildings. After descending, we head to the Lido Leisure Centre for lunch—a casual spot popular with locals serving traditional Latvian dishes.

This afternoon we visit the Ethnographic Open-Air Museum, where historic farmsteads, windmills, and churches from across Latvia have been relocated and preserved. The exhibits illustrate rural Latvian life from the 17th through early 20th centuries.

Overnight in Riga.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

This morning we depart Riga and travel north toward Estonia, stopping first at Sigulda in the Gauja River valley. Known as "Latvian Switzerland" for its forested hills and river gorge, the area contains several medieval castles. We visit the ruins of Turaida Castle, built by the Bishop of Riga in 1214, which offers views across the valley from its restored brick tower.

Continuing north, we reach Cesis, a medieval market town with origins in the 13th century. The cobblestone streets wind between timber-framed houses and the imposing ruins of Cesis Castle. The castle, constructed by the Livonian Order of knights, played a central role in the region's medieval history. We have time for lunch and a walk through the compact Old Town.

By late afternoon we cross into Estonia and proceed to Tallinn, the capital. The city's Old Town, remarkably preserved despite numerous invasions and fires over eight centuries, gained UNESCO World Heritage status in 1997. Its medieval walls, towers, and merchant houses remain largely intact, creating one of Europe's best-preserved historic quarters.

Overnight in Tallinn.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

This morning we explore Tallinn's Old Town on foot, beginning on Vene Street at the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. This Russian Orthodox cathedral, built in 1900 during the Russian Empire's final decades, features distinctive onion domes and an ornate interior with icons and

mosaics.

We continue to Toompea Hill, where Tallinn Castle has stood since the 13th century. The pink Baroque facade visible today was added in the 18th century; the castle now houses Estonia's parliament. Nearby, Toomkirik (Tallinn Cathedral) dates to 1233 and contains carved coats of arms of Baltic-German nobility who once dominated the region's aristocracy.

Descending to the Lower Town, we pass the Town Hall, completed in 1404 and the only surviving Gothic town hall in Northern Europe. The Town Hall Square has served as Tallinn's commercial and social centre for 800 years. We visit the Holy Spirit Church with its 14th-century clock, one of Europe's oldest public timepieces still functioning.

At the medieval Town Hall Pharmacy, one of Europe's oldest continuously operating pharmacies since at least 1422, we see displays of historical medical instruments and remedies. We also visit the Marzipan Museum, where Tallinn's confectionery traditions are explained—the city claims to have invented marzipan, though Germany disputes this.

The afternoon is free to explore independently. The Old Town's narrow lanes invite wandering, or you might visit Kadriorg Park with its Baroque palace built by Peter the Great.

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