

## POLAND &amp; THE BALTIC STATES

## Resilience Across Four Nations

20 days

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**Day 1 Arrive in Krakow**

Welcome to Poland, where over a thousand years of tumultuous history have forged one of Europe's most resilient cultures. Today we arrive in Krakow, a city that served as Poland's royal capital for over five centuries before Warsaw claimed the crown in 1596. Nearly 100 churches pierce the skyline of this enchanting medieval city, their spires rising above cobblestone squares that have witnessed coronations, invasions, and the quiet persistence of Polish identity through centuries of occupation.

Tonight we gather with our fellow travellers for our first dinner together, settling into the old-world charm that has made Krakow one of Europe's most beloved destinations.

Overnight in Krakow.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

**Day 2 Krakow: City Walking Tour**

We begin atop Wawel Hill, where the Royal Castle commands sweeping views over the Vistula River. This limestone outcrop has witnessed Poland's most pivotal moments—from coronations to royal funerals, from Renaissance splendour to Nazi occupation. Our exploration unfolds largely on foot through Krakow's compact, well-preserved centre, where cobblestone streets connect architectural treasures within comfortable walking distances.

Descending into the heart of the Old Town, we enter Europe's largest medieval market square—the magnificent Rynek Glowny, where merchants have traded for over 700 years. The haunting trumpet call echoes from St. Mary's Church towers above us, a tradition dating to the 13th century when a trumpeter's warning saved the city from Mongol invasion. Inside, we marvel at the Wit Stwosz altar, carved in 1489 by the master craftsman from Nuremberg—Poland's finest sculptural masterpiece.

Our journey continues through cobblestone streets to Jagiellonian University, one of Europe's oldest institutions, where Copernicus once studied the stars that would revolutionize our understanding of the universe. We conclude in Kazimierz, the former Jewish Quarter that has transformed from medieval independent town to vibrant cultural district, where centuries of Jewish heritage blend with contemporary cafe culture.

Overnight in Krakow.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

This morning we visit the Oskar Schindler Factory Museum, where individual histories of Krakow's wartime inhabitants guide us through exhibits covering the war of 1939, everyday life under occupation, the fate of the Jews, and the city's underground resistance. The story of Oskar Schindler and his employees—made famous by Thomas Keneally's book and Steven Spielberg's film, shot almost entirely in Krakow—unfolds through archival documents, photos, radio recordings, and multimedia presentations.

After a break for lunch featuring Polish specialties, we embark on a truly unique adventure: a descent into the Wieliczka Salt Mines. Prepare to journey 5 kilometres (3.1 miles) beneath the earth's surface, exploring a world sculpted entirely by salt. We wander through a labyrinth of salt-formed caves and grottoes, each with its own character and charm. A mesmerizing subterranean lake reflects the glow of mine lamps, while the most awe-inspiring sight awaits—a chapel adorned with intricate sculptures, all carved entirely from surrounding salt.

The scale of this operation staggers the imagination: 11 levels of galleries stretching an incredible 300 kilometres (186 miles) in total. Over 700 years of continuous mining have yielded a staggering 20 million tonnes of rock salt. Local legend tells of Princess Kinga, a Hungarian princess whose lost ring was miraculously found within a block of salt mined here in the 13th century—said to be the very origin of the mines themselves.

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

Overnight in Krakow.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

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

Our journey takes a solemn turn as we arrive at Oswiecim and Birkenau, where preserved barracks and railway ramps bear witness to humanity's darkest chapter. Here, 1.5 million souls from 28 nations perished, their stories now preserved as an eternal reminder of the importance of tolerance and human dignity. Our guide shares personal testimonies that transform statistics into human faces, ensuring these voices are never forgotten.

From this profound experience, we travel to Poland's spiritual heart—Czestochowa and the Jasna Gora Monastery. Within these sacred walls resides the Black Madonna, Poland's most venerated icon, believed painted by St. Luke himself and brought from Jerusalem in 1384. Pilgrims have journeyed here for centuries, drawn by the mysterious power of this darkened image that has survived Swedish invasions and Nazi occupation.

Our day concludes in Lodz (pronounced "Wooj"), the city that rose from humble village to Europe's textile powerhouse in just one century. Once known as "the promised land" and "city of many cultures," this multicultural marvel welcomed Germans, Russians, and Jews who together wove the fabric of industrial prosperity. Tonight we discover how this diversity created one of Europe's most fascinating urban tapestries.

Overnight in Lodz.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

Today we continue to Warsaw, a city that rises before us like a phoenix from ashes—refusing to surrender its soul to destruction. After being systematically razed during World War II, Warsaw's citizens embarked on one of history's most remarkable reconstruction projects, rebuilding their beloved Old Town brick by brick, using paintings and photographs as their guide. Today's UNESCO-protected historic centre stands as testimony to Polish determination and cultural pride.

We begin along the elegant Royal Route, where kings once processed to their coronations, then dive into the meticulously restored Old Town. Castle Square pulses with life while the Uprising Monument honours the heroes of 1944. Crossing the Vistula River to the Praga district, we gain panoramic views of this resilient capital that has shed its Soviet-era persona to emerge as Central Europe's dynamic business hub.

In the former Jewish Ghetto area, we visit the poignant Umschlagplatz memorial before exploring the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Through innovative multimedia exhibitions, we discover the thousand-year story of Poland's Jewish community—once Europe's largest—whose vibrant culture flourished here before the Holocaust forever changed this landscape.

Overnight in Warsaw.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 6 Warsaw Sightseeing - To Torun

The morning begins at the Warsaw Uprising Museum, housed in a former tram power station where artifacts tell the story of the city's 1944 rebellion. Love letters, weapons, and personal belongings of the insurgents create an intimate portrait of ordinary citizens who chose extraordinary courage. These exhibits reveal how 200,000 Warsaw residents fought for freedom during 63 days that would define their

city's character forever.

Leaving Warsaw's complex history behind, we journey north to medieval Torun, a UNESCO World Heritage gem that time forgot to destroy. Nestled on the Vistula River's banks, this enchanting city miraculously escaped World War II bombing, preserving its Gothic architecture in pristine condition. The warm glow of red-brick buildings reflects centuries of Hanseatic League prosperity, when merchants from across Northern Europe gathered in these cobblestone squares.

As evening approaches, Torun's outdoor cafes come alive with the aroma of local delicacies. The majestic St. Mary's Church towers above us, its bells calling across centuries of Polish history while we settle into the timeless rhythm of medieval life.

Overnight in Torun.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

We begin in the very house where Nicolaus Copernicus was born in 1473, the man who revolutionized our understanding of the universe. The museum's collection of rare astronomical instruments, ancient star charts, and original manuscripts reveals how this Polish genius challenged centuries of accepted wisdom. Standing in his birthplace, we appreciate how medieval Torun nurtured the mind that would prove Earth revolves around the Sun.

The imposing 13th-century Town Hall dominates our morning explorations—one of Northern Europe's most magnificent civic buildings. Its Gothic towers have overseen seven centuries of commerce and culture, while surrounding streets preserve the medieval urban planning that made Torun a Hanseatic League powerhouse.

Our journey continues to Gdansk, the "Maritime Pearl of Poland," where narrow, peaked-roof buildings create one of Europe's most photogenic skylines. This Baltic port city carries the weight of momentous history—World War II began with disputes over Gdansk's control, while decades later, Lech Walesa's Solidarity movement launched from its famous shipyards. Tonight we stroll the iconic Długa Street, past Neptune's Fountain and into St. Mary's Church, one of the world's largest brick churches, as Baltic sea breezes carry stories of merchants, warriors, and revolutionaries.

Overnight in Gdansk.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 8 Gdansk Area Tour

Gdansk's strategic Baltic position has made it one of Northern Europe's most coveted ports for centuries, a blessing that became a curse when competing powers tore the city apart. By 1945, the German population had fled and Polish settlers renamed the ruins "Gdansk," beginning the painstaking reconstruction we admire today. Though most buildings rose from rubble, master craftsmen ensured every Gothic detail matched the original splendour.

We venture to nearby Oliwa Cathedral, where Cistercian monks first built their shrine in the 13th century. Fire destroyed and transformed this sacred space multiple times—the Gothic interior gave way to magnificent Baroque fixtures after a devastating 1577 blaze. The cathedral's crowning glory awaits: a massive organ with over 7,000 pipes, decorated with movable angels and painted stars. When constructed, this instrument was Europe's largest, and today its thunderous voice still rivals any concert hall.

At the European Solidarity Centre, multimedia exhibits chronicle how electrician Lech Walesa sparked a movement that would topple communism across Eastern Europe. The story of Solidarity—from shipyard strikes to Nobel Peace Prizes—unfolds through personal testimonies and artifacts from this pivotal chapter in modern European history.

The afternoon belongs to you in this "Amber Capital of the World," where shops display fossilized treasures from the Baltic's ancient forests. In order to maximize your free time in this fascinating place, we do not include dinner this evening.

Overnight in Gdansk.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

### Day 9 Gdansk - Malbork - Olsztyn

Our morning begins with Europe's largest brick building—the magnificent Teutonic Knights Castle at Malbork. This 13th-century fortress stretches along the Nogat River like a medieval city unto itself, its towering walls and Gothic halls testament to the military might of the Crusading order. UNESCO protection ensures future generations will witness the architectural genius that once commanded the Baltic trade routes. Our two-hour guided tour reveals the massive scale of this complex, and afterwards we cross the footbridge for spectacular panoramic photographs of the entire structure.

As we continue southeast, Poland's landscape transforms into the pristine beauty of the Masurian Lake District. Rolling hills give way to sparkling waters and dense forests that have remained largely unchanged since the Ice Age carved this terrain. Olsztyn emerges like a fairy tale town, its medieval walls encircling narrow cobblestone streets where Gothic churches and Renaissance townhouses create perfect architectural harmony.

The fortified walls surrounding Olsztyn's old town whisper tales of Swedish invasions and Napoleonic campaigns, while cozy cafes and artisan shops invite us to experience the gentle rhythm of lake district life. Tonight we rest in this charming sanctuary where nature and history exist in perfect balance.

Overnight in Olsztyn.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

### Day 10 Olsztyn - Olsztynek - Warsaw

Our final morning in the lake district begins with a walking tour through Olsztyn's medieval quarter, where we explore the Gothic cathedral and the castle where Nicolaus Copernicus once lived and worked as a canon and administrator. On the very walls of his chambers, you can still see the schematics he drew—astronomical calculations that helped him develop his revolutionary heliocentric theory, proving that Earth revolves around the Sun rather than the reverse.

We then journey to the Museum of Folk Architecture in Olsztynek, one of Europe's oldest and most comprehensive open-air museums. Wooden houses, rustic barns, and historic windmills transported from across the region create a living timeline of traditional Polish life. These structures, saved from demolition and lovingly restored, preserve centuries of craftsmanship and cultural memory. We explore the interiors of beautifully restored farmhouses, where traditional furniture and household items reveal the daily rhythms of rural Polish families. The evangelical church, blacksmith workshop, and pottery stands demonstrate how entire communities once functioned as self-sufficient units.

After lunch at the museum, we journey back through the Polish countryside toward Warsaw. Wooden windmills and thatched-roof villages dot the landscape like scenes from a living museum, reminders of a way of life that persists even as Poland embraces its European future. Tonight we return to the nation's dynamic capital carrying memories of traditions preserved and stories that span centuries.

Overnight in Warsaw.

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

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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 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 13 Vilnius - Trakai - Kaunas - Klaipeda

This morning we depart Vilnius for Klaipėda, 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 Klaipėda, 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—Klaipėda 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 Klaipėda.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 14 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 15 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 16 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 17 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 18 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 Csis, a medieval market town with origins in the 13th century. The cobblestone streets wind between timber-framed houses and the imposing ruins of Csis 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 19 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 20 Departure

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

SAFE TRAVELS!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast