

**POLAND, THE BALTICS & NORDIC EUROPE****33 days**

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**Day 1 Arrive in Krakow**

Today we arrive in Krakow.

For over five centuries, from 1038 to 1596, this enchanting city served as the seat of Polish royalty before Warsaw claimed the crown. Tonight, we step into a living fairy tale where nearly 100 churches pierce the skyline and medieval squares echo with the footsteps of history. As twilight falls over the old world charm that has made Krakow one of Europe's most beloved destinations, we settle into our accommodation.

Overnight in Krakow.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

**Day 2 Krakow: City Walking Tour**

We begin our exploration 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. Our sightseeing unfolds largely on foot at a leisurely pace through Krakow's compact, well-preserved centre, where cobblestone streets connect architectural treasures within comfortable walking distances.

As we descend into the heart of the Old Town, we enter Europe's largest medieval market square—the magnificent Rynek Główny, where merchants have traded for over 700 years. The haunting trumpet call 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 the cobblestone streets to Jagiellonian University, one of Europe's oldest institutions, where Copernicus once studied the stars.

We conclude in Kazimierz, the former Jewish Quarter that has transformed from medieval independent town to vibrant cultural district. Here, centuries of Jewish heritage blend with contemporary café culture, creating an atmosphere both poignant and alive with possibility.

Overnight in Krakow.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**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.

After a break for lunch featuring Polish specialties,\* we'll embark on a truly unique adventure: a descent into the Wieliczka Salt Mines. This isn't your average mine tour. Prepare to be amazed as we journey 5 kilometers (3 miles) beneath the earth's surface, exploring a world sculpted entirely by salt.

We'll wander through a labyrinth of salt-formed caves and grottoes, each with its own unique character and charm. Our descent will lead us to a mesmerizing subterranean lake, its surface reflecting the eerie glow of the mine lamps. And, perhaps the most awe-inspiring sight of all, we'll visit a chapel adorned with intricate sculptures, all carved entirely from the surrounding salt.

The scale of this operation is truly staggering. The Wieliczka Salt Mines boast 11 levels of galleries, stretching an incredible 300 kilometers (186 miles) in total. Over 700 years of continuous mining have yielded a staggering 20,000,000 tonnes (22,000,000 tons) of rock salt.

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But the history of the Wieliczka Salt Mines goes beyond mere extraction. Local legend tells the tale of Princess Kinga, a Hungarian princess whose lost ring was miraculously found within a block of salt mined here in the 13th century. This discovery is said to be the origin story of the mines themselves.

Return to Krakow.

\* 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

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

Our journey takes a solemn turn as we arrive at Owicim and Birkenau, where the 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—Czstochowa and the Jasna Góra 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 ód (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 our journey continues 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 Toru, 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, Toru's outdoor cafés 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 revolutionised 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 Toru 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 the surrounding streets preserve the medieval urban planning that made Toru a Hanseatic League powerhouse.

Our journey continues to Gdask, 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 Gdask's control, while decades later, Lech Wasa's Solidarity movement launched from its famous shipyards.

Tonight, we stroll the iconic Duga 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

Gdask'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 "Gdask," 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 Wasa 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 fossilised 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.

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 cafés 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 brings us 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. Temporary exhibitions showcase contemporary folk art alongside ancient handicrafts, proving these traditions continue to evolve rather than merely survive.

As we journey back through the Polish countryside toward Warsaw, wooden windmills and thatched-roof villages dot the landscape like scenes from a living museum.

Tonight, we return to Poland's dynamic capital carrying memories of a nation that has preserved its cultural soul while embracing its European future.

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.

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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. 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### 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.

□

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\* 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 (or nearby or Liepaja).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 14 Klaipeda & the Curonian Spit

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

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### 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.

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 defenses 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### 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.

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.

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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 18 Riga - Ligatne - Cesis, Latvia - Tallinn, Estonia

This morning we depart Riga and head north toward Estonia with a stops en route to explore the the intriguing Soviet bunker in Ligatne. and the historic town of Cesis.

We 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.

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 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### 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

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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, Temppeliaukio 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 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 Danish history as well as several very good ethnological rooms.

NOTE: The order of Copenhagen sightseeing may depending 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 the 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 Rosenkrantzstøtten 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

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Today we depart from Bergen.

BON VOYAGE!