Tour Code  
BS2

BALTIC STATES & RUSSIA
with Helsinki, Finland & St Petersburg, Russia

13 days

Created on: 8 May, 2020

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.

Overnight in Vilnius.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2  
Vilnius & Trakai

This morning we have a walking tour of Vilnius.

Sweden, Poland, France and Russia have all ruled Vilnius in the past, and today we will witness the influences that this has had on this beautiful city. The Old Town is one of the largest in Europe, with nearly 1,500 historic buildings of note built over several centuries creating a splendid blend of many different architectural styles.

Our 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.

While in Vilnius we'll also visit the KGB Museum (the Museum of Genocide Victims). For Lithuanians, the KGB Museum symbolises the 50-year-long Soviet occupation. During World War II it was the site of Gestapo headquarters and later of the KGB. The museum building is as intact as it was in 1991, when the KGB left the premises. You will see KGB rooms authentically furnished and secret KGB spying equipment.

After a full morning and a break for lunch, we we'll 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.

Overnight in Vilnius.

Included Meal(s): 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4  Riga: City Tour

Today we will enjoy a walking tour of the Old Town of Riga, getting us to some of the top sights and giving us a real feel for the city.

Over the last decade Riga has been going through a restoration phase, revitalizing many of its faded art nouveau buildings into pristine gems. While these buildings can be found throughout the central downtown area, the best place to see them is in a neighbourhood of streets centered around Alberta Street. Riga literally has hundreds of buildings in this flamboyant style as it experienced a period of unprecedented wealth at the beginning of the 20th century when art nouveau was all the rage in Europe.

While exploring this part of the city we will visit the Art Nouveau Museum, which is a completely restored art nouveau apartment. Our walk will include a stop at the mighty Freedom Monument, dedicated to those who fought for Latvia’s independence. We will pass by the Latvian National Opera House as well as the Powder Tower. Kalku Street is the main ‘semi-pedestrian’ thoroughfare, and it slices straight through Old Town leading us to Livu Square, created after the destruction caused by World War II. Today this is one of the Old Town’s most bright and cheerful corners. Bastion Hill Park runs along the northeastern edge of the city. Once the old city’s fortifications, Bastion Hill was replaced with this romantic park full of gardens, canals, and ornate bridges. The park makes a great transition space between downtown Riga and the historic center.

Working our way through the backstreets of the Old Town we come to a fixture of Riga’s skyline, St. Peter’s Church. The tallest church in the city, this large Gothic church dates back to 1209, although little of the original church is actually left. We can take the elevator to the top of the 130 meter high tower for great views down upon the rooftops of the city.

Another of Riga’s enchanting city squares is the Dome Square which sits out below the impressive Riga Cathedral. Throughout the city of Riga there are a lot of exceptionally well-preserved buildings, but the Three Brothers are quite unique in that they are the oldest residential buildings in the city. These three adjoining buildings date from between the 15th to 17th centuries and are home to local craftsmen. We will pass by Riga Castle, which today houses the offices of the Latvian president.

One of the last remaining segments of the city’s defenses is the Swedish Gate, a small gateway through what looks like a row of traditional residences. We will stop at the Town Hall Square to see the iconic House of the Blackheads where we admire the stunning design of its facade. Built for members of a merchant guild known as the Blackheads in the 14th Century, this is one of Riga’s most picturesque landmarks.

This afternoon is yours free to explore.

Overnight in Riga.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5  Riga: City Touring

Today we will get to some of the landmarks which lie outside the city’s Old Town, including a drive through modern Riga.

We will start with a visit to the massive Central Market. This visit will help to give you a sense of what local life is like in today’s Riga.

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This bustling indoor & outdoor market focuses on several large 1920s pavilions and the area around them. Here we discover plenty of local Latvian goods, from meats and fish to loads of other locally grown produce.

We continue with a panoramic drive around Riga that will take in some of the most famous sights. Our route along the embankment of the River Daugava provides us with wonderful views of the city, and we will drive through the modern part of the city where we see the University Building, the Academy of Arts and the central train station. Along Riga’s riverfront we will come to the Riga Ghetto and Latvian Holocaust Museum which details the city’s history of the Holocaust. Set inside an outdoor courtyard, this museum details what happened to the local Jewish population during the city’s Nazi occupation. The exhibits here focus on individuals’ stories and photographs.

Built during Latvia’s period under Soviet rule, the towering figure of the Latvian Academy of Sciences is hard to miss. Here we will take the elevator up to its observation deck for great views of Riga with the church tower visible amongst the skyline. A short trip from the city center brings us to the Latvian Ethnographic Museum. Here we will see what rural Latvian life was like over 100 years ago as dozens of original farm buildings, houses and even a church were transported to this picturesque lakeshore to preserve them for posterity.

Once back in the center you will have some free time this afternoon. Perhaps make a visit to the rooftop terrace of the Galleria Riga shopping centre for a cold drink and some incredible views.

 Overnight in Riga.

Included Meal(s): 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.

Included Meal(s): 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. For passengers ending their journey in Helsinki (ie not continuing to St Petersburg or our Nordic tour), we will be enjoying a farewell dinner.

 Overnight in Tallinn.
Day 8  **Tallinn, Estonia - Helsinki, Finland: City Walking Tour**

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 tour of Helsinki.*

* PLEASE NOTE: Your activities in Helsinki today will vary depending on what tour option you have chosen. Those travellers who are ending their trip here or continuing to St Petersburg tomorrow will enjoy a leisurely walking tour of Helsinki today. Travellers who are continuing on our Nordic Explorer itinerary will have their Helsinki touring tomorrow and an afternoon at leisure today (you are welcome to join today but some sightseeing will be repeated tomorrow).

Due to the leisurely nature of our afternoon and the possibility of an early departure for some travellers tomorrow, we do not include dinner this evening. Your Tour Leader will help you plan your afternoon/evening.

Overnight in Helsinki.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

Day 9  **Helsinki, Finland - St Petersburg, Russia**

We depart Helsinki on Finnish train ‘Allegro’ to St Petersburg (+- 3.5 hours), arriving in the mid-afternoon.*

St Petersburg is a relatively new city, founded in 1703. When it was nine years old it became the capital of Russia and retained this status till 1918. Even now it is referred to as the "Northern Capital" of Russia. Over almost 300 years of its history, St Petersburg accumulated all the grandeur of the Russian Imperial Court and became one of the largest centers of culture, science and industry. Created by Peter the Great as a sea port on the Baltic, it was essentially "a window to the West" for Russia, combining the best of the West and the East.

* PLEASE NOTE: You will say farewell to your Baltics Tour Leader and travellers not extending to St Pete's this morning; you will be met by your St Petersburg guide upon arrival at St Pete's Station.

Overnight in St Petersburg.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10  **St Petersburg: The Russian Museum & Peter and Paul Fortress**

This morning we visit the Russian Museum. The museum opened in 1898 by Alexander III in the beautiful Mikhailovsky Palace -- well worth inspecting before we take a look at the collection inside. Works of Russian art abound with over 370,000 pieces in the collection. There are prized paintings, sculptures, iconographic art and several masterpieces. It truly is an encyclopaedia of Russian life, character and soul.

We also visit the Peter and Paul Fortress and St Isaac's Cathedral. At the fortress we will see how the fort played an important role in
the development of St Petersburg. Inside the stone walls we will visit the Cathedral of Peter and Paul, the final resting place of the Romanovs. At St Isaac's Cathedral we will notice the interior reliefs of exceptional beauty. We will also hear of the many legends that make this church famous throughout Russia.

During our time in St Pete's, we'll also visit the Church on the Savior of Spilled Blood, a marvelous Russian-style church was built on the spot where Emperor Alexander II was assassinated in March 1881. After assuming power in 1855 in the wake of Russia's disastrous defeat in the Crimean War, Alexander II initiated a number of reforms, freeing Russian serfs (peasants, who were almost enslaved to their owners) from their ties to their masters, and undertook a rigorous program of military, judicial and urban reforms, never before attempted in Russia. The decision was taken to build a church on the spot where the Emperor was mortally wounded. The church was built between 1883 and 1907 and was officially called the Resurrection of Christ Church; its construction was almost entirely funded by the Imperial family and thousands of private donors.

As we travel around from point to point today you will also have a general orientation / panoramic tour of this compact city.

Overnight in St Petersburg.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11  
**St Petersburg: Peterhof Palace & the Hermitage**

This morning we visit Peterhof Palace (Petrodvorets), a remarkable example of an eighteenth and nineteenth century country estate. Built by Peter I in 1717, the palace was to be "better than the French king's at Versailles." An intricate system of water fountains surrounds the palace in the immaculate gardens. We will have a chance to walk through the palace and the gardens. We return to the city by hydrofoil (weather/season permitting).

This afternoon we explore one of the world's leading museums, the Hermitage. With over 400 exhibition halls, it is virtually impossible to list all of the treasures. While walking through the many galleries, look out for Madonna by Raphael, Judith by Giorgione, Titian's Saint-Sebastian, and many, many paintings by Rembrandt. Inside this beautiful Winter Palace are some of the finest collections of French impressionist works. In addition, there is a fine collection of ancient and classical works from ancient Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia. One could easily spend several days wandering the halls inside the building; for the purposes of our formal guided tour today, we concentrate on the highlights and provide an orientation to those wishing to explore further on their own during some designated free time. You are welcome to remain in the museum and make your own way back to the hotel on your own.

Overnight in St Petersburg.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12  
**St Petersburg: Catherine Palace & Time at Leisure**

This morning we travel to Pushkin to see the sumptuous Catherine Palace, created in the eighteenth century by Catherine the Great, the second wife of Peter III. Designed by Rastrelli, this palace is a truly stunning example of classical baroque architecture and interior design. The true glory of the palace is the Amber Room, made of several tons of the golden tree resin -- the lightest gem in the world. The room was first installed in the Winter Palace, but in 1755 Empress Elizabeth ordered Francesco Rastrelli to move it to the Catherine Palace.

We then return to St Pete's where you'll have some much-deserved free time on your own this afternoon.

Overnight in St Pete's.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13  
**Departure**
Departure from St Petersburg.

NOTE: Due to Russian visa requirements, please advise your booking agent or tour consultant if you plan to extend your stay in Russia after our tour.

SCASTLIVOGO PUTI!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast