



Zoë Woods discovers serenity and charm in the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

BALTIC BLISS

FACT FILE

The three Baltic countries are great places to visit individually, though many visitors choose to combine all three into a single itinerary, or as part of a longer trip in the region (Russia and the Ukraine all combine well with any Baltic itinerary). Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius rightly receive the most visitors, but the provinces are also well worth exploring - in particular the beautiful and unique Curonian spit in Lithuania.

A week long trip to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, including return flights and private transfers between the capitals costs from £1,100 per person. Please call Zoë on 01993 838 207 for details.

During the Cold War the good people of Helsinki knew what it was really like to live in fear. On leaving Soviet airspace, a MiG 31 fighter, travelling at over 2,000 miles per hour, could reach the capital of Finland in under 90 seconds. To look at Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania now it is hard to credit this as fact – let alone that it was fact only 20 years ago. Apart from the odd reminder here and there the three capitals – Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius – retain not the dubious charm of the Soviet period, but the feel and look of prosperous European cities, endowed with grand boulevards, art deco architecture and some very fine hotels. An hour's walk in any of the three will reveal yet more layers of history – of the Swedish Empire, the Hanseatic League and the Teutonic Knights.

Estonia

Fiercely independent, Estonia is perhaps closer to Scandinavia than to its Baltic sisters, and the language of Estonian is closely related to Finnish. With the Finns investing heavily in the liberalised economy and the proximity of Tallinn to Helsinki, it is no surprise that the country has a distinctly Scandinavian feel.

Tallinn is a small city, easy to get to know, with charming medieval cobbled streets and a relaxed atmosphere. Walking through the city is comfortable and allows the marvellously well preserved medieval centre to reveal itself slowly. If you concentrate your efforts on heading uphill your toil will be rewarded with some lovely panoramas. The best view in the city, looking north from Toompea Hill, takes in the old town,

the harbour and the gigantic spire of St Olaf's church which literally punctures the skyline. At the height of the Hanseatic League this was the world's tallest building, in part used as a beacon to guide trading ships into port.

Most visitors to Estonia see little beyond the capital, but the islands of Hiiumaa and Vormsi to the west are unspoilt and tranquil with extensive pine forests and undeveloped coastlines. Estonians, like their Finnish cousins, take relaxation very seriously. For those looking to wind down, the country has some beautiful spa hotels.

Latvia

Riga is the grandest and biggest city in the region, and with as many Russians as Latvians it feels more cosmopolitan than either Vilnius or Tallinn. Despite the city's size, the art nouveau old town is easily manageable on foot and a day or two meandering through the churches and museums is very rewarding. As any Parisian knows, sunny afternoons in the city need open-air cafés and Riga has plenty. There is real variety here – Moroccan tagines rub up against Japanese sushi and steak-frites – and the prices will come as a welcome surprise. A night out at either the national opera or ballet is also a must, where performances and atmosphere are amongst the best in the world.

Elsewhere in Latvia, Sigulda and the Gauja National Park (dubbed "little Switzerland" by the locals) are great places to explore the countryside. For pure relaxation the coastal resort of Jurmala boasts some of the best beaches and spa resorts in the Baltic. >



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< Lithuania

The largest of the three countries both geographically and by population, Lithuania was at one time a thriving empire ruling over much of the region, as well as parts of present day Poland. Lithuania differs from Estonia and Latvia in its denomination of choice – it is a predominantly Catholic country, ardently so since its independence. The pretty capital, Vilnius, is a baroque gem with some fascinating Jewish heritage and an offbeat charm (fans of Frank Zappa will be pleased to find a statue of him here). The ex-headquarters of the KGB, by contrast, have been converted into a sombre, chilling museum dedicated to the victims of the Soviet secret police.

Around four hours from Vilnius lies the Curonian spit, a 50 mile long stretch of sand running from Lithuania to the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. With some stunning dunes and pine forests, the spit is ideal for nature lovers or those that just want some time to relax by the sea. You can hire bikes, take in the dunes, or simply wander along the long, white sandy beaches, watching local fishermen bringing in their catch from the Baltic.

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