



On the Baltic Coast

Some 15 years after independence from Soviet rule, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia offer travelers a rich experience in architecture, culture and history

By M. Susan Wilson

I'm sitting alone at an outdoor cafe on a cobblestone square in Riga's Old Town. Behind me a husky-voiced singer/guitarist, who sounds uncannily like a member of the Gypsy Kings, plays to a crowd of stylishly dressed, wine-sipping twentysomethings. Across the square, in front of the city's Dome Cathedral, European tourists wander about, taking in the architecture, the cooling air, the extended daylight of

the northern latitudes in early summer.

I've just had my first sip of Latvian beer—a bracing but happy experience to my American palate. But my mind is on cake.

Yes, cake.

If ever there were a place that makes you want to indulge in decadent confections, Riga is it. Everywhere in this Latvian

capital city's Old Town—a UNESCO World Heritage Site—you find Art Nouveau buildings fancifully trimmed in patterns and colors that evoke sugary frosting. Narrow streets lead you through the maze of these architectural gems. At times, you're certain you'll round the next corner to find a glittery carriage—complete with footmen in tails—carrying a fairy-tale princess.

I'd come to Riga—the first stop on my tour of the Baltic states—following a two-

week-long, hurry-up-and-see-it-all run through Scandinavia with a couple of friends. By the time I arrived, I was ready to slow down, recharge and soak up the atmosphere. The cafe scene in the oldest and most picturesque part of the city obliged, affording me each evening with a perfectly positioned seat for watching the light change over the facades of the buildings and people, speaking a half-dozen languages, end their day.

My street-level introduction to Riga had begun somewhat by accident: On our first morning in town, we spent two hours on foot trying to navigate an address system that didn't always conform to logic and find our way to the agency that had booked our accommodations. Which brings us to a few more trip essentials: good maps and a willingness to stop and ask for directions. There's not as much English spoken in the Baltics as in, say, Stockholm, but you're likely to find someone who can direct you if you approach younger-looking folks, in their 20s. You may even make a new friend and learn a little more about this tiny country, with its sobering past and hopeful heart.

Latvia's story was, for much of the last century, a difficult one. The same is true for its neighbors along the Baltic coast, Lithuania to the south and Estonia to the north. All three cultures are very aware of their history—and grateful to be in the present. Tell anyone you meet in Riga that you're a tourist, and they're likely to ask eagerly if you've yet seen the city's Museum of the Occupation of Latvia. Here you'll find on display black-and-white photographs, letters written from Siberian work camps (on tree bark, the inner layers of cement bags and anything else these desperate prisoners could acquire) and other personal artifacts from the Nazi and Soviet occupations, the last of which ended in 1991. In all, more than a half-million Latvians lost their lives during this time. The story that this well-organized museum presents speaks of relentless oppression—

and remarkable endurance. After an hour-and-a-half of gazing through glass at these relics of a chillingly recent past, I was relieved to step outside into another picturesque square, find a cafe and balance out the afternoon by absorbing the energy of a culture mending itself.

A trip to the occupation museum should be followed at some point by a walk through Riga's teeming Central Market, another reaffirming testament to life moving on. Set up inside and among four Zep-

pelin hangars left behind by the German Kaiser's army in the western part of the country after World War I, the market hosts fruit-and-vegetable vendors, bakers and butchers hawking their goods to throngs of busy shoppers. Take a moment to stand back and observe the crowd: Rotund elderly women in headscarves carrying plastic bags bursting with their purchases, the weight of which seems to pitch them from side to side as they walk. Old men in gray suits and '40s-style hats, gin-





TALLINN, OLD TOWN

ESTONIA

Seattle-based travel writer Rick Steves recommends Estonia, Latvia's northern neighbor on the Baltic Sea, as a "detour for those who want to spice up their Scandinavian travels with an ex-Soviet twist." Step into the outdoor market that spreads across Tallinn's Raekoja Plats (Town Hall Square) on a summer weekend, and you'll meet plenty of travelers who've apparently taken his advice, ferrying across the 50-mile stretch from Helsinki, as well as package-tour groups and cruise-ship passengers on shore excursion. All of this may seem a little distracting at first—but that feeling will pass as you begin to explore more fully this capital city, which rivals its southern neighbors in all its well-preserved history and captivating charm.

Like its neighbors to the south, Estonia emerged from Soviet rule in the early 1990s and has been changing rapidly ever since. Save Tallinn for your last stop, and take the opportunity to shop. Vendors spread out along an eastern stretch of the Old Town's impressive medieval wall (punctuated by no less than 26 watch towers) and across the Town Hall Square, the ancient, year-round centerpiece of this striking little city: Markets were first set up here in the 11th century, and every Christmas the square hosts a huge decorated pine tree, a tradition reaching back 550 years. Chic boutiques along Old Town's Viru and Müürivahe streets also offer tempting options. Shoppers will discover a range of goods, from classy to kitschy: versatile scarves and shawls; fine perfumes, shoes and leather goods; funky, woolen hats; and heavy, brightly patterned sweaters. (There's an underlying Nordic flavor here, and it's particularly pronounced in the fashions you'll see offered for sale.)

As in Riga and Vilnius, load up your camera with plenty of film or a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 182

gerly making their way with canes. Middle-aged women—their hair dyed improbable shades of red, blonde or black—surveying the offerings of the day.

I first visited the market in the early evening, a few hours before sunset, just as the vendors were closing up shop. A stocky, gregarious, fifty-something woman with a wild, retro sense of style—teased yellow hair, shimmering blue eye-shadow and waxy, pink lips—spotted one of my traveling mates and me among the dwindling crowd of locals and beckoned us over to her stand.

"Russian business woman," she said with a laugh as she pointed to herself, then the wooden crates spread out in front of her, overflowing with tangerines, strawberries and other fruits, as well as decorative plants. A few teenage boys began to break down her booth and haul it into nearby trucks as she quickly grabbed an armful of ripe produce and shoved it into our hands to take home.

Then, inexplicably, she broke into song—my friend joining in—to the amusement of everyone nearby.

After several bars of robust alto, the

show ended, and we thanked our new friend and politely turned to leave. But not before she grabbed a huge potted geranium—and insisted that we add it to our gifts.

THE BALTICS ARE SMALL ENOUGH that you can visit at least the capital cities and their immediate surroundings inside of a week or so. After a few days in Riga we were ready to head south to Vilnius, Lithuania's capital city.

As in Latvia, Lithuania's experience in the 20th century was marked by periods of occupation by the Nazis and the Soviets. The country emerged from the final chapter of this history in 1993, when the last of the Soviet troops pulled out. As in Riga, you'll want to steel yourself for a glimpse at the relics of this past. Save time for a walk through the neighborhood that was, during the Second World War, Vilnius' Jewish ghetto, a map of which you'll find posted on the wall outside Rūdninkų gatvė 18. (Before World War II, Vilnius was known as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania," with some 100,000 Jewish residents.) Also, plan a tour of Vilnius' former KGB headquarters—now

NW Duty Free
1/3 v.

a museum—in an unassuming stone building on a busy city block. In the basement here you'll find a one-time political prison, which appears to have been left mostly untouched in the intervening years, left as a reminder of the nature of such absolute power. Outside the building, lit candles and piles of flowers attest to a lingering sense of mourning—while passing crowds of busy shoppers, professionals and tourists bear witness to a present marching steadily ahead.

At this point, you may be tempted to lift your spirits a bit with a walk through Vilnius' famed Independent Republic of Užupis, a "breakaway republic" of artists, extra-scruffy hippies and hard drinkers. We'd read in our travel guide about the amusing 41 points of Užupis' counter-cultural constitution—including, my favorite, "Everyone has the right to love and take care of a cat." To us, however, it looked like this neighborhood has seen livelier days. We searched without success for someone to stamp our passports—a tradition practiced, according to one local, only on the republic's annual "Independence Day."

If you're short on time, bypass Užupis in favor of more time in the heart of Vilnius' baroque Old Town, which, like Riga's oldest section, boasts UNESCO World Heritage status. Or find a cafe somewhere off the main streets (if the menu is in Lithu-



ESTONIA

FROM PAGE 181 blank disc and walk the streets, taking in the grandeur of the Old Town's 15th to 17th century architecture—you'll quickly see why this historical area is, like its southern neighbors, UNESCO-protected. When it comes time to end your day, step well off the main arteries and you'll likely find a cute, out-of-the-way cafe. Granted, the people-watching opportunities will be less prime—but you'll also pay less for a meal than you would along the main cobbled thoroughfares. And, after all the shopping you've done, you'll be glad to save a few *krooni*.

anian only, that's a good sign) and sample some hearty national fare (think: fried pork and potatoes). Don't worry about the language barrier; the locals will likely be amused by your attempts to make yourself understood. And, if all else fails, do as we did: Check out what folks at the next table are eating; if it looks good, just point and nod "yes."

Once you've walked through Vilnius, you'll likely want to set aside some time to venture outside the city a bit. One excellent option: a day trip to Lithuania's ancient capital, Trakai, a pretty lake district lorded over by a restored 14th century castle. This region is rich in history, so it's worth it to hire a private guide, available through the castle museum's ticket office. Ours was a young Lithuanian law student, whose command of English was near perfect. She took us through each room of this brick fortress, talking us through the various antiquities on display—including an impressive collection of ancient local coins.

After you've had your fill of 14th century grandeur, if the weather is good, take a seat by the lake outside the castle. Watch the paddleboats go by, or witness rowdy pre-teens standing on the railings of the footbridge posturing and daring one another to jump into the black water. If you meet an old man playing an accordion, tip him a couple of *litas*, and he may just

Brice Cos
1/3 sq.

in Seattle. She's written on destinations as far from her home as Australia and as near as Vancouver, B.C.

play for you the *Chicken Dance* song.

ON THE WAY BACK TO VILNIUS, my little group and I decided to hop off the train in Ponar, in search of Paneriai, a memorial to the Lithuanian Jews who perished in a concentration camp once situated in this quiet country town.

As on our first day in Riga, we quickly found ourselves lost, the address system as much a puzzlement in Ponar as it had been in Latvia. Finally, down a long road between forest and pasture—with no signs to lead us—we found 17 Agraštų gatvė and the entrance to Paneriai.

It was late in the day, and the breeze had begun to pick up, lending relief from the still June heat. As we passed into the enveloping forest that now stands in this place, our erstwhile chatty little group—my two traveling companions and a young Canadian couple we'd picked up along the way—fell silent. The only sound in this profoundly beautiful place was that of a young mother reading a storybook to her daughter on a nearby park bench, and the wind moving among the branches overhead.

The group quickly split up, to wander alone—here, solitude seemed most appropriate. As I walked deeper into this place—now filled with so much greenery and life—I felt a strange calm pour into me, an unexpected peace. This site, in so many ways, represents the surreal experience that awaits visitors to this corner of the world: If you listen, you'll find that the past always whispers to you here, like the stirring of the breeze.

But the present sings. 🏰

M. Susan Wilson is a writer and editor living

GETTING THERE



Use Mileage Plan miles to visit Riga, Vilnius and Tallin via partner airlines American Airlines, XXX, XXX, Delta Air Lines, KLM and Northwest Airlines. For information or to enroll in Mileage Plan, go to alaskaair.com or call 800-654-5669.