



Travel

The Soul of the Baltics

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I'm in a hot air balloon soaring over castle towers and steeples in the old town of Vilnius, Lithuania. This is among the only European capitals that allows ballooning over the city, given plentiful fields for takeoff and landing, and an airport that is small so flight routes remain uninterrupted. So I relish a literal birds-eye view of the historic capital, which dates to the 14th century. Back then, Lithuania was in its glory days helping to rule a massive swath of Europe including part of what is now modern-day Estonia, which is also on my itinerary. Now, with 25 years of post-Soviet freedom under their belts, the countries offer compelling alternatives to been-there-done-that touring of Western European capitals. So I found myself saying "Terviseks" (cheers) to Estonia's capital of Tallinn, which is situated on the Baltic Sea across from Finland. This is the land of amber, the "gold of the sea," and I am transported.

THE BALTIC MELTING POT

The city of Tallinn is relatively compact but large on charm. Cobblestone streets wind through its old town, which has a smattering of influences. In the last thousand years, Estonia has been invaded more than it's been independent with would-be conquerors leaving marks including the Swedish, Danish, Germans and Russians.

On one street I see hints of Teutonic knights and on another signs from the golden Swedish era. On still another, a grand Russian orthodox church stands testament to the westernmost point reached by the USSR. Across from that church, in the upper part of town, is the Estonian Parliament situated in a pretty pink building. Surrounding that is the area where nobility lived. I trace the routes of their footsteps along streets with whimsical-sounding names like Toom-Kooli, Rutu, and Kohtu. I pass medieval merchant houses and bell towers, stroll under archways, and find my way to the ram parts of this walled city where the views out toward the Baltic Sea are spectacular. In the distance are cruise ships, as well as local ferries that make the quick two-hour sail to Helsinki, Finland.

When it's time for a break, I delve into the local cuisine. The Baltics prove to be a kaleidoscope of culinary colors and tastes, with pink soups and black rye bread, golden chanterelles and honeyed cucumbers, blackberries on beef, blueberry-marinated herring, and spruce ice cream and amber tea. The smorgasbord intrigues me as does Tallinn's hip district for dining, Creativity City, a former Soviet-era industrial area that now pulses with pop-up shops, cafes, and a music scene.

A short ride from the city center is sprawling Kadriorg Park where Russian Czar Peter the Great built a summer palace. A smaller abode of his makes for an interesting museum with Romanov artwork and period furniture. Mere steps away, in contrast, is the contemporary-styled Kumu Art Museum, with its interior ramped walkways encircling a soaring atrium that reminds me of the airy feel of New York's Guggenheim. The museum has everything from classic romanticism and Soviet-era art to contemporary. Then I'm off to TV Tower, where on a clear day from its 22nd-floor deck you can practically see forever—or at least to Finland.

ESTONIA'S ISLAND ESCAPE

A particularly special treat in Estonia is the five-star kind a couple of hours' drive outside Tallinn on Muhu Island. There, a former manor house has been transformed into a luxury boutique hotel and spa, Pädaste Manor. Outdoors, along the fringes of the Baltic, I relax in a seawater hot tub before heading to a gourmet dinner. There I meet one of the manor's owners, handsome Imre Sooäär, who is also a member of the Estonian parliament. I am on my seat's edge as he describes the waning days of the Cold War in the Baltics, when he made a daring escape from Soviet conscription with the Russians futilely on his trail. The talk leads me to discover that Muhu Island has the remains of Soviet nuclear missile silos, and Imre offers to take me there the next day. There, I find myself caught in a time warp at the former top-secret site with its silos,

HOW TO GET THERE:

Finnair flies from Miami to Tallinn and Vilnius via Helsinki, www.finnair.com. Air Baltic is a local carrier with service between Baltic capitals, www.airbaltic.com.

WHERE TO STAY:

ALL RATES INCLUDE BREAKFAST

LITHUANIA

Kempinski Hotel Cathedral Square Beautiful views and 5-star luxury in an unbeatable location in the heart of Vilnius's Old Town. Rates start at approximately €150 per night, up to €2300 for a presidential suite. www.kempinski.com Around the corner is the amber spa, Nidos Kopus.

ESTONIA

Hotel Telegraaf—Tallinn 5-star hotel in medieval Old Town next to Town Hall Square with rates starting at €150. www.telegraafhotel.com

PÄDASTE MANOR Idyllic escape set by the edges of the Baltic Sea on Muhu Island, 2 hours from Tallinn. Rates start at €178, up to €993 for an historic private farmhouse with veranda and garden. www.padaste.ee

KAU MANOR Eclectic boutique resort with history dating to the 13th century, 40 minutes from Tallinn. Rooms include artifacts from around the world and start at US \$115. www.kau.ee

bunkers, and old Soviet newspapers and military marching hymns strewn on building floors. I even find a bottle of a radiation antidote. (Imre swears I will not glow in the dark after my visit.)

GOLDEN DAYS IN LITHUANIA

Then I'm off on a short flight to Lithuania—the geographic center of all Europe, as determined by a French geographic society that honed in on a spot 26 kilometers from Vilnius. Close by to that spot is a wonderful open-air park, Europos Parkas, with miles of wooded walking trails that wind past enormous contemporary sculptures. To the west along the Neris River, I visit the first Lithuanian capital, Kernave. It was an important tribal center in the Iron Age and features an archaeological museum with finds dating back to 10,000 B.C. up through the days when an “Amber Road” led south for trading with the Romans.

Vilnius itself is a treasure, a beautiful UNESCO World Heritage city. Its Old Town revolves around the sprawling Cathedral Square, where locals congregate and which features the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania with 13th century defensive ruins in its cellar. From there, I meander down cobblestone streets with outdoor cafes and shops filled with the gold of the sea-amber. Millions of years ago, tree resin was transported from along rivers into Baltic Sea beds, where it fossilized into the glowing gems of today, the most precious featuring specks of fauna and insects. Amber seems to infiltrate everything in Lithuania; I even luxuriate in a massage rubbed with Amber powder.

Vilnius has charm at every turn, whether Literati Street with its walls embedded with plaques dedicated to famous Lithuania literary figures, or roads that lead to a funicular that whisks me up to Vilnius Castle for spectacular cityscapes. There are testaments to dark periods of Lithuania history as well like the KGB Museum, a Soviet-era prison where Lithuanian resisters to occupation were tortured. Lithuanians were known as the most stubborn of the Baltic nations in the face of Soviet oppression. As my guide Gintas Zabulenas says tongue in cheek, “Estonians will fight for their independence up until the last Lithuanians.”

MEDIEVAL ISLAND CASTLE

Not far from Vilnius, I take a pretty diversion to the country's medieval capital of Trakai, situated along a scenic lake. Tour boats are available for hire, artisan stalls abound, and a wooden walking bridge takes me over to Trakai Island Castle, a fortification where Lithuania's sovereigns once resided. Within is an interesting museum filled with medieval armor, swords, and glinting valuables.

Heading back to Vilnius, I pull out my personal arsenal that had been tucked in my satchel throughout my Baltic trip. They are letters from my grandfather, a Lithuania immigrant in New York at the turn of the century. The letters were written in his native tongue to his girlfriend Anna (also Lithuanian) when he was heading off to fight in WWI. Emboldened by my new knowledge of Lithuania, I ask my guide Gintas to translate a handful. I and my travel companions are then enraptured as we hear the progression of letters that start out as thoughtful but stand-offish, then become forlorn as my grandfather fights in war, and then he pines for his “love” Anna and hopes for her to become his bride if he lives to make it back to America. In those letters, I sense the quiet stubbornness and fighting spirit of the Lithuanians. And the letters bring me back to another place and time when my grandmother, Anna, gave me a token of her native history—a piece of amber. Little did I know, until now, that in that brilliant gem, my grandmother had passed on to me more than just a bit of gold

from the sea. Through the stories of amber, and these letters, and my trip, I had been given a glimpse through the window into the Lithuanian soul.

For more on Lithuania and Estonia visit www.lithuania.travel and www.visitestonia.com.