

Destination Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania

These are heady days for the Baltic, with the current state of play in this region unthinkable a mere two decades ago. In the space of one generation, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have had their prayers answered, and are scarcely recognisable from their former incarnations. After some hiccups in the early days, when self-government was being relearned, all three have politically and economically shaken off the dead weight of the Soviet era and turned their focus to the West, and to promises of a richer, shinier future. NATO and EU membership and the fastest-growing economies in Europe have been the Baltic lot since the turn of the millennium, and these three countries are now patting themselves on the back, puffing out their chests and celebrating their return to the world stage – independent, economically robust, tech-savvy and pretty damn satisfied!

And why wouldn't they be? There's certainly much to be proud about, and the world is slowly tuning in to the low-key and lovely Baltic charms. Savouring Tallinn's long white nights, scouring long Baltic shores for amber, scaling sand dunes in Lithuania's 'Sahara' and sampling local specialities – including Lithuania's infamous *cepelinai* (stuffed potato dumplings) and Latvia's Black Balzām (liqueur) – are Baltic joys to be revelled in. Vilnius boasts Eastern Europe's largest Old Town, a bohemian republic and a recommended overdose of baroque, while Riga has the world's finest collection of Art Nouveau architecture and a market housed in a series of WWI zeppelin hangars. Elegant Estonia, with its subtle hints of Scandinavia, boasts a coastline studded with 1521 beautiful islands and a wave of outdoor pursuits. National parks provide plenty of elbow room for the locals to enjoy downtime, and for precious wildlife long gone in other parts of Western Europe. Quaint villages evoke a timeless sense of history, uplifting song and dance festivals celebrate age-old traditions and retro-Soviet recycling gives the region its quirk and its kick.

Still, for all their accomplishments, there's no denying that there are still issues to be addressed here. Fifty years of Soviet rule can't be erased in only one generation (if at all), and environmental and social issues remain. The environmental clean-up may indeed prove easier than solving the complex social rifts and inequalities that linger between ethnic groups, and the burden of geography makes good relations with the neighbours – particularly that big and unavoidable eastern one – vital. This trio of newbies is also coming to grips with the market economy, learning to take the good (booming growth) with the bad (slowdown and recession). There may be a bumpy financial road ahead, but the fact that they survived all that the 20th century could throw at them gives us the confidence to predict they've got what it takes to live long and prosper.

'In the space of one generation, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have had their prayers answered'

Getting Started

Astonishingly few people can pinpoint Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on a map, giving Baltic-bound travellers an instant head start. There's more than enough here to warrant a stand-alone Baltic holiday, but equally your explorations of the region may be a northern addition to Eastern European roaming, a somewhat grittier add-on to travels in Scandinavia or a hassle-free adjunct to explorations of Russia. Either way, you'll be happy to know that communicating in English here is usually not a problem, transport is efficient and frequent between the main towns, standards of living are relatively high and you won't find the crazy crowds that blight summer travel elsewhere in Europe. One of the very few downsides is that the weather can be fickle.

Accommodation is relatively easy to find (except in the capitals and major beachside resorts in July and August, which do get tourist-busy), but is no longer the bargain it once was. Dining is another unexpectedly tasty experience, in the capitals at least, with some meals at laughable prices. To top it all off, the arts scene is hot, young and vibrant, and quirky festivals abound.

One thing to bear in mind when doing your pre-trip planning: if you're hoping to combine the Baltic countries with a jaunt into Russia (Kaliningrad, perhaps – to gain travel cred by getting a long way off the beaten path – or magnificent St Petersburg, only eight hours by bus from Tallinn), you'll make things a whole lot easier for yourself by organising your Russian visa before leaving home.

WHEN TO GO

In spring, the weather is warm, the days are long, gardens blossom and the cultural calendar oozes fun. April and May, when the stork returns to its nest, and the land and its people open up after winter, convey a real magic. June is midsummer-madness month (p20) and evokes the Baltic peoples' close ties to nature and their pagan past.

Summers are short but sweet. July and August (high season), the warmest and busiest months, and a time when many locals go on holiday too, can also be the wettest and subject to the odd thunderstorm. Coastal waters at this time average between 16°C and 21°C, and daytime highs from May to September hover between 14°C and 22°C, but can easily reach the mid- to high-20s.

Winter (November to March – essentially low season), with just a few hours of semidaylight every 24 hours, is a long, dark affair, with temperatures rarely above 4°C and frequently dipping below zero. December to March sees snow-clogged streets, icy pavements, and roofs laced with killer icicles. Ice skating, tobogganing, cross-country skiing, ice fishing and getting whipped in a sauna are this season's invigorating activities.

Avoid soggy March, when the snow thaws, bringing with it far too much slush for enjoyment. Autumn, when snow falls then melts, can be equally miserable.

COSTS & MONEY

Travellers may be surprised to find Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius touting prices comparable to those in Scandinavia. Double-digit inflation has hit all three countries in recent years; the travel bargains of a decade ago are considerably fewer, though if you shop around you should be able to secure some good deals. Booking your accommodation online will reap discounts, while eating your main meal at lunchtime saves money. Taking public transport between major cities (perhaps hiring a car only for exploring rural areas)

See Climate Charts (p392)
for more information.

will also cut down your costs – petrol is relatively expensive in the Baltic countries (count on paying 15Kr/0.64Ls/3.10Lt, or just under €0.90, per litre in Estonia/Latvia/Lithuania). Discount cards in Riga and Tallinn yield a bounty of money-savers for city-based visitors.

Accommodation in the Baltics is relatively expensive and the biggest cost for travellers, while dining in cities can be pricey (but cheap options certainly exist). Travel in the rural areas is definitely cheaper; however, in high summer popular coastal areas have room rates that may come close to those of the capitals.

At the bottom of the accommodation barrel in the capitals, you can scrape a night's sleep in a dorm for as little as 150Kr/7Ls/34Lt (€10) in a Tallinn/Riga/Vilnius hostel. Double rooms at a midrange-standard hotel start at around 800Kr/40Ls/200Lt (€50 to €60), while top-end rates for a double room kick in at about 2000Kr/85Ls/450Lt (€125) but can easily double or triple at one of the capitals' fanciest addresses.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Swelling tourist numbers, coupled with local property development and an ever-increasing drive towards commercialism, have accelerated the need to protect the region's fragile ecosystems, biological diversity and natural (and relatively unspoiled) treasures. Ways to avoid placing pressure on the environment include conserving water and electricity, not littering or burying your rubbish and taking care not to disturb wildlife. If you intend to camp or hike, seek permission to camp from the landowner or, in the case of national parks and protected nature reserves, pitch your tent only in designated areas. Forests – which carpet 44% each of Estonia and Latvia and 30% of Lithuania – are especially vulnerable. Do not light fires, discard cigarette butts or leave litter in these areas, and stick to assigned paths. Always observe the rules and recommendations set by park, nature reserve and forest authorities.

Erosion, fire and tourism pose an enormous threat to the unique sand spit and dunes on western Lithuania's Curonian Spit (p362) – a Unesco World Heritage natural treasure; a tableau at the foot of steps leading up to the Parnidis Dune shows just how much the mountain of sand has shrunk since 1960 (over 20m!). When walking on the spit don't blaze new trails across virgin sand or pick plant life that keeps the top sand in place; stick to the marked wooden walkways.

Cities pose a whole different set of responsible travel rules. The cobbled Old Towns of Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius all star on Unesco's list of World

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Valid travel insurance (p395), ID card or passport, and visa (p399) if required
- Driving licence, car documents and car insurance (p412)
- Your sea legs
- Sunglasses, hat, mosquito repellent and binoculars (summer)
- Thermals and the thickest, warmest hat and coat you can find (winter)
- Umbrella – there's a fair chance you'll use it
- Your mobile phone – local prepaid SIM cards are cheap
- An indestructible pair of shoes or boots to combat cobblestones
- A taste for the unusual, from blood sausage to Black Balzām
- An eye mask – to help you sleep during the long nights of summer

DRINKING WATER

Official travel advisories detail the need to avoid tap water in the Baltic countries and drink only boiled or bottled water, but locals insist the tap water is safe to drink (if not altogether pleasant-tasting). Some visitors may wish to buy bottled water simply because they prefer the taste. If this is you, please consider the environment – buy locally sourced and bottled water, rather than imports, and look for recycling bins, where possible, to dispose of empty bottles. In Estonia (copying other Nordic countries) you can return recyclable bottles to vending machines at supermarkets for the return of a deposit (usually 0.50Kr or 1Kr) – it won't make you rich, but it will help the environment.

Heritage cultural treasures. Pay them the respect they deserve. In Tallinn, after years of Finnish 'vodka' and 'Gin Long Drink' tourism, people are fed up with rowdy drunken behaviour and blokes peeing on the streets. You'll get better treatment if you indulge in moderation. The same applies to the increasing number of British stag parties hitting the Baltic capitals for cheap weekends of binge-drinking and sex. Drink, by all means – but quietly and without offence to others.

Prostitution is rife in the capitals, particularly in Riga (prostitution is legal in Estonia and Latvia, although pimping is illegal). Organised crime and trafficking in women and children for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation are issues within the region. Incidents do occur where Western clients are drugged, robbed and left lying in the gutter – literally. For your personal safety and for the sake of the women at hand, please do not engage in this activity.

See also our GreenDex (p446) for Baltic attractions, hotels, restaurants, craft studios and tour operators recommended for their commitment to sustainability.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

The following page-turners have a rich Baltic flavour that evokes the region's people and places and its complex history. Some are entertaining or enlightening travelogues revealing snippets of life in another era, while others craftily use a Baltic city as a backdrop for their tale.

Among the Russians (Colin Thubron) Gloomy and resigned, yes, but that was precisely the mood when this Englishman motored everywhere he could in pre-*glasnost* USSR.

Between Each Breath (Adam Thorpe) In this witty recent novel, Tallinn and the Estonian islands are the setting for a successful Englishman's midlife crisis and infidelity, and the fallout from his actions.

Journey into Russia (Laurens van der Post) The three Baltic capitals are vividly painted in this travelogue through Soviet Russia in the 1960s.

The Last Girl and **Amber** (Stephan Collishaw) Collishaw won the heart of the literary world with these dark, haunting and highly emotive novels evoking two very different faces of modern-day Lithuania.

The Merry Baker of Riga (Boris Zemtsov) Hilarious and dry, this intuitive tale of an American entrepreneur setting up shop as a baker in Riga in 1992 is a true story.

To the Baltic with Bob (Griff Rhys Jones) Sail with Griff (a well-known British comedian, writer and actor) and his mate Bob from London to St Petersburg via Ventspils, Riga, Saaremaa, Vormsi, Paldiski ('a wreck') and Tallinn. There are some decent laughs and spot-on descriptions, but rather too much boating talk for our liking.

Venusburg (Anthony Powell) For a taste of 1930s Latvia and Estonia, try this amusing tale of a journalist hobnobbing with exiled Russian aristocrats, Baltic-German intellectuals and local patriots.

TOP 10



FESTIVALS

The region enjoys an impressive festival calendar, embracing everything from religion and music to art, folklore, handicrafts, film and drama. For a fat-cat diary of events see the Events Calendar, p18.

- 1 Lake Sartai Horse Race (Dusetos, Lithuania), early February
- 2 Midsummer (regionwide), 23–24 June
- 3 Rīgas Ritmi (Rīga, Latvia), early July
- 4 Õlletoober (northern Saaremaa, Estonia), mid-July
- 5 Mākslas Festivāls (Cēsis, Latvia), mid-July to mid-August
- 6 Baltic Beach Party (Liepāja, Latvia), late July
- 7 Klaipēda Sea Festival (Klaipēda, Lithuania), late July
- 8 Viljandi Folk Music Festival (Viljandi, Estonia), late July
- 9 Visagino Country (Visaginas, Lithuania), mid-August
- 10 Black Nights Film Festival (Tallinn, Estonia), mid-November to early December

ACTIVITIES

There are countless ways (wild or mild) to get up close and personal with the Baltic countries' natural beauty. For more see p201.

- 1 Cycling the Curonian Spit, Lithuania (p362)
- 2 High-adrenalin high jinks in Sigulda, Latvia (p253)
- 3 Water sports at Surf Paradiis on the island of Hiiumaa, Estonia (p151)
- 4 Boating in Aukštaitija National Park, Lithuania (p326)
- 5 Canoeing across Latgale's silent Lakelands, Latvia (p269)
- 6 Cross-country skiing in Otepää, Estonia (p116)
- 7 Hot-air ballooning high over Vilnius, Lithuania (p309)
- 8 Cycling along the desolate Kurzeme coastline, Latvia (p233 to p243)
- 9 Bog-walking and canoeing in Soomaa National Park, Estonia (p138)
- 10 Berryng and mushrooming in Dzūkija National Park, Lithuania (p334)

UNUSUAL & SPECIALITY FOOD

If, like us, you consider food an essential part of travel, here are some ways (from dead-easy to summon-your-courage) to embrace the local cuisines, aside from getting the ubiquitous pork on your fork. For more information, see the Food & Drink sections of the Estonia (p57), Latvia (p185) and Lithuania (p289) chapters.

- 1 Try out Black Balzām in Rīga
- 2 Harden your arteries with Lithuanian *cepeliniai*
- 3 Enjoy freshly picked summer berries, regionwide
- 4 Compare each country's version of beetroot soup, pancakes or rye bread
- 5 Order smoked pigs' ears as a tasty beer snack, regionwide
- 6 Tuck into Russian-style *pelmeni* (dumplings), regionwide
- 7 Sample Vana Tallinn liqueur in Old Tallinn, Estonia
- 8 Savour smoked fish in coastal or lakeside areas, regionwide
- 9 Go mushrooming in autumn, regionwide
- 10 Be brave and taste Estonian *verivorst* (blood sausages)

INTERNET RESOURCES

The internet is loaded with sites that can help you plan your Baltic sojourn. The following are excellent starting points; many more are listed throughout the book.

Baltic Times (www.baltictimes.com) English-language news from the region.

In Your Pocket (www.inyourpocket.com) Highly recommended insider guides to a clutch of Baltic cities (free PDF downloads are available from the website).

Latvia: The Land That Sings (www.latviatourism.lv) Latvian tourist board website.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Notes and posts on Baltic travel, plus the Thorn Tree bulletin board.

Official Lithuanian Travel Guide (www.travel.lt) Lithuanian tourist board website.

Riga Tourism (www.rigatourism.lv) Official city site.

Tallinn Tourism (www.tourism.tallinn.ee) Official city site.

Vilnius Tourism (www.vilnius-tourism.lt) Official city site.

Welcome to Estonia (www.visitestonia.com) Estonian tourist board website.

Events Calendar

Summer festival madness peaks with midsummer celebrations on 24 June (p20); the annual Baltica Folklore Festival (p34) in July, which the three capitals take turns hosting; and the legendary Baltic song and dance festivals (p34). All three countries put on magical festivals at other times of the year, too, celebrating everything from religion to music, art to film and beer to ghosts.

Expect an extra-full calendar of events in Vilnius and Tallinn as they celebrate their status as a European City of Culture in 2009 and 2011, respectively. For more, check out www.culturelive09.lt (for Vilnius) and www.tallinn2011.ee.

FEBRUARY

LAKE SARTAI HORSE RACE 1st Saturday in February

Annual horse race (www.zarasai.lt) dating from 1865 and held on frozen Lake Sartai at Dusetos, near Utena, Lithuania. Attracts horse enthusiasts, musicians and folk artists from all over the region.

TARTU SKI MARATHON mid-February
Held outside Estonia's second city, Tartu, this 63km cross-country race (www.tartumaraton.ee) draws about 4000 competitors.

PALANGA SEALS FESTIVAL mid-February
This three-day festival (www.palanganatic.lt) at Palanga, Lithuania, sees thousands of hardy swimmers frolic and squeal in the freezing waters of the Baltic Sea.

UŽGAVĖNĖS Shrove Tuesday (the day before Lent begins, ie 41 days before Easter)
Mardi Gras and the coming of Lent is celebrated in Lithuania with animal, bird and beast masquerades in towns and villages (the best is in Plateliai in Žemaitija National Park).

MARCH

ST CASIMIR'S DAY 4 March
Lithuania's patron saint's day, with the renowned Kaziukas folk arts and crafts fair held in Vilnius around this date.

HAAPSALU HORROR & FANTASY FILM FESTIVAL late March
Scare yourself silly with this showcase of altogether creepy and kooky films (www.hoff.ee) in Haapsalu, Estonia.

BIRŠTONAS JAZZ FESTIVAL late March in even-numbered years
Lithuania's top jazz festival (<http://jazz.birstonas.lt/en>) is this three-day event at the renowned spa town of Birštonas.

APRIL–MAY

ESTONIAN MUSIC DAYS mid-late April
In Tallinn, this weeklong event (www.helilooja.ee) features both classical Estonian performances and new, emerging works.

JAZZKAAR mid-late April
Jazz greats from around the world converge on Tallinn, Estonia, during this two-week festival (www.jazzkaar.ee); it also hosts smaller events in autumn and around Christmas.

KAUNAS INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL late April
The Balts clearly love their springtime jazz! This four-day Lithuanian festival (www.kaunasjazz.lt) has acts in Kaunas and Vilnius; also hosts smaller events in September and December.

TARTU STUDENT DAYS late April
Tartu's students let their hair down in this wild pagan celebration (www.studentdays.ee, in Estonian) marking the end of term and the dawn of spring in Estonia.

INTERNATIONAL BALTIC BALLET FESTIVAL late April–early May
Features stirring performances (www.ballet-festival.lv) by Latvian and international companies over three weeks in Rīga, Latvia.

NEW BALTIC DANCE early May
International contemporary dance festival (www.dance.lt) held in Vilnius, Lithuania.

INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL FOR PUPPET THEATRES

mid-late May

Viljandi's puppet theatre gathers a specialist crowd at this Estonian fest (www.viljandinukut.ee) subtitled 'Theatre in the Suitcase', with plenty of puppet shows to take in.

JUNE

PALANGA SUMMER FESTIVAL

June–August

Opens on the first Saturday of June in Palanga, Lithuania, and closes with a massive street carnival, song festival and pop concert on the last Saturday in August. It's one long merry-go-round of music concerts (www.palangosvasara.lt) of all genres.

PAŽAISLIS MUSIC FESTIVAL

June–August

Three-month classical music festival (www.pazaislis.lt) held in the atmospheric courtyards and churches of Pažaislis Monastery, outside Kaunas, Lithuania.

SUMMER EXTRAVAGANZA NERINGA

June–August

The summer season at Curonian Spit, Lithuania, ushers in this fiesta (www.muzikosfrontas.lt/en/projects) of concerts, craft days and cultural events.

VILNIUS FESTIVAL

June

A month-long festival (www.vilniusfestivals.lt) involving classical music, jazz and folk-music concerts in Old Town courtyards and assorted venues (Vilnius, Lithuania).

TALLINN OLD TOWN DAYS

early June

Held in Tallinn's cinematic 14th-century quarters, Estonia, this weeklong fest (www.vanalinnapae.vad.ee) features dancing, concerts, costumed performers and plenty of medieval merrymaking.

BALTICA INTERNATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL

mid-July

A week of music, dance and displays focusing on Baltic and other folk traditions, shared between the capitals. In 2009 it will be in Riga; in 2010, in Tallinn; in 2011, in Vilnius.

RĪGA OPERA FESTIVAL

early-mid June

The Latvian National Opera's showcase event (www.opera.lv) takes place over 10 days and includes performances by world-renowned talent in Riga.

MIDSUMMER

23–24 June

The region's biggest annual night out is a celebration of the Midsummer's Night, best experienced out in the countryside, where huge bonfires flare for all-night revellers. See the boxed text, p20.

INTERNATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL

late June

The biggest event on Nida's calendar (Lithuania), featuring folk music (www.visitneringa.com) from around the world.

OPERETTA IN KAUNAS CASTLE

late June–early July

Held for two weeks in Kaunas' scenic castle ruins in Lithuania (www.operetta.lt, in Lithuanian).

JULY

CHRISTOPHER SUMMER FESTIVAL

July–August

Two-month music festival (www.kristupofestivaliai.lt) of various genres in Vilnius, Lithuania.

INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY

early July

Three days of medieval fun and frolics (www.kernave.org) – axe throwing, catapulting, mead making, medieval fights, music making – in Kernavė, Lithuania. Lots of fun despite the dull name.

PÄRNU INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

early July

Pärnu's big-name film fest (www.chaplin.ee) showcases documentary and anthropological films from all over the world (Estonia).

ÖLLESUMMER (BEER SUMMER)

early July

Extremely popular ale-guzzling, rock-music extravaganza (www.ollesummer.ee) in Tallinn, Estonia.

MUHU FUTURE MUSIC FESTIVAL

early July

Jazz, experimental music, progressive rock and much more, on the island of Muhu, Estonia (www.nordicsounds.ee).

CASTLE DAY

early July

Lots of family-friendly medieval fanfare (www.saaremaamuseum.ee) around Kuressaare's magnificent castle in Saaremaa, Estonia. Expect lots of food, music, and handicrafts.

RĪGAS RITMI

early July

'Riga's Rhythms' is the Latvian capital's international music festival (www.rigasritmi.lv).

MIDSUMMER MADNESS

In pagan times it was a night of magic and sorcery, when witches ran naked and wild, bewitching flowers and ferns, people and animals. In the agricultural calendar, it marked the end of the spring sowing and the start of the summer harvest. In Soviet times it became a political celebration: a torch of independence was lit in each capital and its flame used to light bonfires throughout the country.

Today Midsummer Day, aka summer solstice or St John's Day, falling on 24 June, is the Balts' biggest party of the year. On this night darkness barely falls – reason alone to celebrate in a part of the world with such short summers and such long, dark winters. In Estonia it is known as Jaanipäev, in Latvia Jāņi, Jānu Diena or Līgo and in Lithuania Joninės or Rasos (the old pagan name).

Celebrations start on 23 June, particularly in Latvia, where the festival is generally met with the most gusto. Traditionally, people flock to the countryside to celebrate this special night amid lakes and pine forests. Special beers, cheeses and pies are prepared and wreaths strung together from grasses, while flowers and herbs are hung around the home to bring good luck and keep families safe from evil spirits. Men adorn themselves with crowns made from oak leaves, and women, with crowns of flowers.

Come Midsummer's Eve, bonfires are lit and the music and drinking begins. No one is allowed to sleep until the sun has sunk and risen again – anyone who does will be cursed with bad luck for the coming year. Traditional folk songs are sung, dances danced and those special beers, cheeses and pies eaten! To ensure good luck, you have to leap back and forth over the bonfire. In Lithuania, clearing a burning wheel of fire as it is rolled down the nearest hill brings you even better fortune. In Estonia, revellers swing on special double-sided Jaanipäev swings, strung from trees in forest clearings or in village squares.

Midsummer's night is a night for lovers. In Estonia the mythical Koit (dawn) and Hämarik (dusk) meet but once a year for an embrace lasting as long as the shortest night of the year. Throughout the Baltic region, lovers seek the mythical fern flower, which blooms only on this night. The dew coating flowers and ferns on midsummer's night is held to be a purifying force, a magical healer and a much sought-after cure for wrinkles! Bathe your face in it and you will instantly become more beautiful and more youthful. However, beware the witches of Jaanipäev/Jāņi/Joninės, who are known to use it for less enchanting means.

ŽEMAIČIŲ KALVARIJA CHURCH FESTIVAL

early July

Thousands of pilgrims from all over Lithuania flock to the Žemaičių Kalvarija (Samogitian Calvary) in Žemaitija National Park.

VÕRU FOLKLORE FESTIVAL

mid-July

It's full of dancers, singers and musicians decked out in colourful traditional dress (www.werro.ee/folkloor), celebrating the culture in Võru, Estonia.

HANSA DAYS FESTIVAL

mid-July

Crafts, markets, performances and more commemorate Tartu's Hanseatic past (Estonia; www.hansapaevad.ee).

ÕLLETOOBER

mid-July

Saaremaa's long history of home-brewed beers is celebrated at this beer festival (www.olletoober.ee), alongside live music and festivities in Northern Saaremaa, Estonia.

JOMA STREET FESTIVAL

mid-July

Jūrmala's annual city festival (www.jomasiela.lv) in Latvia. Don't miss the sand sculpture contest.

MĀKSLAS FESTIVĀLS

mid-July–mid-August

Cēsis in Latvia comes alive on the weekends with performances ranging from symphonies to storytelling, held at a variety of venues (www.cesu-festivals.lv).

KLAIPĒDA SEA FESTIVAL

3rd weekend in July

Klaipėda, Lithuania, celebrates its rich nautical heritage with a flamboyant five-day festival (www.jurossvente.lt), which includes sailing excursions on the Baltic Sea.

NEW WAVE SONG FESTIVAL

late July

This soloist song contest (www.newwavestars.com, in Russian) in Jūrmala, Latvia, attracts competitors from around the world.

VILJANDI FOLK MUSIC FESTIVAL

late July

Hugely popular four-day festival (www.folk.ee/festival) featuring bands from Estonia and abroad, and around 20,000 attendees (Viljandi, Estonia).

WINE FESTIVAL

late July

The village of Sabile, Latvia, is famed for its vineyard – the world's most northern open-air grape grower. The only chance to taste local wine is at this festival (www.sabile.lv).

HANDICRAFTS SHOW

late July

Kuldīga, Latvia, hosts an enormous handicrafts show (www.visit.kuldiga.lv) with hundreds of artisan booths lined up along Liepājas iela.

FESTIVAL OF ANCIENT MUSIC

late July

Music festival (www.bauska.lv) held at Bauska Castle and Rundāle Palace, Latvia.

BALTIC BEACH PARTY

late July

Fast becoming a must-stop of the Eastern Europe party circuit, featuring live music, discos, carnivals, fashion shows, sporting events and other hoopla on the beach at Liepāja, Latvia (www.balticbeachparty.lv).

OPERA MUSIC FESTIVAL

late July

Open-air festival (www.sigulda.lv) held in Sigulda's castle ruins, Latvia.

AUGUST**BIRŽAI TOWN FESTIVAL**

August

Biržai, the heart of Lithuanian beer country, hosts a madcap fiesta where the town's breweries sell their wares on the street; expect plenty of beer swilling and general drunken behaviour.

LIEPĀJAS DZINTARS

early August

'Amber of Liepāja' rock festival (www.liepajaszintars.lv, in Latvian), Latvia.

MARITIME FESTIVAL

early August

Kuressaare (Saaremaa, Estonia) celebrates its island status with lots of sea-related activities (www.merepaevad.ee).

VISAGINO COUNTRY

mid-August

Visaginas, Lithuania, rocks bizarrely with a bunch of cowboys – hats, boots and all – who groove on into town from across Europe for this two-day, international country-and-western music festival (www.visaginocountry.lt).

BIRGITTA FESTIVAL

mid-August

An excellent place to experience Estonia's vibrant singing tradition, with choral, opera and classical concerts (www.birgitta.ee), held at the atmospheric ruins of the Convent of St Birgitta, Tallinn, Estonia.

TARTUFF

mid-August

This weeklong open-air film festival (www.tartuff.ee) has its screenings in the atmospheric Town Hall square, Tartu, Estonia.

BALTĀ NAKTS

late August

This 'white night' event (www.baltanaks.lv), sponsored by the Contemporary Art Forum, mirrors Paris' night-long showcase of artists and culture around the city (Rīga, Latvia).

DAY OF THE**WHITE LADY FESTIVAL**

late August

On Haapsalu's castle grounds, Estonia, this festival (www.haapsalu.ee) culminates in the appearance of a ghostly apparition.

DANCE FESTIVAL

late August

Contemporary dance festival (www.saal.ee) featuring troupes from all over Europe and the Baltics (Tallinn, Estonia).

SEPTEMBER**CAPITAL DAYS**

early September

Three days of musical and cultural events (www.vilniusfestivals.lt) in theatres, concert halls and the streets of Vilnius, Lithuania.

ARSENĀLS INTERNATIONAL FILM FORUM

mid-September

Film festival (www.arsenals.lv) showcasing over 100 movies relating to experiential and interactive themes in Riga, Latvia.

MATSALU NATURE FILM FESTIVAL

mid-late September

One of the more unusual film festivals (www.matsalufilm.ee) in the Baltics (Lihula, near Matsalu National Park, Estonia), this one features nature films submitted by a variety of filmmakers.

SIRENS

mid-September–mid-October

International theatre festival (www.sirenos.lt) in Vilnius, Lithuania.

MUSHROOM FESTIVAL

late September

More mushrooms than you'll ever want to eat at Varėna, outside the Dzūkija National Park, Lithuania (www.varena.lt/en/events).

OCTOBER**FUTURE SHORTS**

mid-late October

Kino Riga hosts several film festivals, including the international Future Shorts (www.futureshorts.lv), celebrating short films (Rīga, Latvia).

ARĒNA NEW**MUSIC FESTIVAL**

mid-October–early November

Contemporary music festival (www.arenafest.lv) showcasing various genres held at venues throughout Riga, Latvia.

GAIDA

late October

This festival showcases new music from Central and Eastern Europe in Vilnius, Lithuania (www.vilniusfestivals.lt).

NOVEMBER–DECEMBER**BLACK NIGHTS****FILM FESTIVAL**

mid-November–mid-December

Estonia's biggest film festival (www.poff.ee) showcases films and animations from all over the world (held in Tallin).

CHRISTMAS MARKETS

December

Festive decorations, arts and crafts, traditional foods and entertainment brighten the dark days in the leadup to Christmas, in the capitals' Old Towns (and many other towns around the region).

NEW YEAR'S EVE

31 December

Fireworks and revelry on the main squares of Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius in the countdown to midnight.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

BEST OF THE BALTIC

Embark on the grandest of Baltic tours in the Lithuanian capital, **Vilnius** (p292). Take a day trip to castle-clad **Trakai** (p322) and/or the Soviet sculpture park at **Druskininkai** (p332), then push west to **Klaipėda** (p353) and the Unesco-protected **Curonian Spit** (p362). Next, hit Riga: take the 3½-hour speed route via **Siauliai** (p347) and the **Hill of Crosses** (p348), or the slow route of a few days along the tranquil Latvian coast via chilled-out **Pāvilosta** (p243), **Cape Kolka** (p233) and **Jūrmala** (p226). In **Riga** (p186), revel in Europe's best Art Nouveau architecture, then delve into **Sigulda** (p253) and the Gauja Valley en route to university-driven **Tartu** (p106) and swampy **Soomaa National Park** (p138). Those with bags of time could detour to the lazy old spa town of **Pärnu** (p127) or the fabulous islands of **Saaremaa** (p153) and **Hiiumaa** (p146).

The final leg is north to the Estonian capital, **Tallinn** (p59), where old-town medieval splendour jockeys for pride of place with hip wine bars and a dizzying choice of cuisine. From Tallinn, a ferry trip across the Gulf of Finland to **Helsinki** (p167) is too easy to be ignored.

Two Weeks/Vilnius to Tallinn



Vilnius to Tallinn direct is only 588km, but throw in the slow route and detours cooked up by this itinerary to cover the very best of the Baltic region and you'll easily clock up 1400km. The trip – minus deviations – can be done in a whirlwind fortnight, but definitely merits as much time as you can give it.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

GO GREEN

Three Weeks/Southeastern Latvia to northern Estonia

The starting point is southeastern Latvia. Here, among Soviet-era stains on the landscape, are the hushed forests and lakeside villages of the ultrabucolic **Latgale Lakelands** (p269). From Latgale, trek south for fishing, boating and berrying in Lithuania's paradise, **Aukštaitija National Park** (p326).

At the opposite end of the country, the combination of disused nuclear missile silos and sunsets over lake and pine woodlands bewitch visitors to **Žemaitija National Park** (p377). Witness the vulnerability of nature around the nearby 'Sahara of Lithuania', the unforgettable **Curonian Spit** (p362), where elk mingle with wild boar and Lithuania's largest colony of cormorants and grey herons. From Nida sail into the desolate **Nemunas Delta** (p370) to witness birdlife at the Ventės Ragas Ornithological Station. Zip up the Latvian coast to experience the rugged beaches and enchanting desolation of **Cape Kolka** (p233), then tour east to explore the castle-dotted **Gauja National Park** (p253), where walking, biking, hiking and canoeing – and the rare black stork – thrill outdoor-lovers.

Head northeast to **Otepää** (p116) for skiing or summer swimming, and midsummer celebrations around Estonia's most sacred lake. Continue via pretty **Viljandi** to the swampy, wildlife-packed **Soomaa National Park** (p138), and explore myriad forested waterways by traditional *haabjas* (canoe). West of here, **Matsalu National Park** (p146) is the Baltic's best bird-watching terrain. From here the solitude of the Estonian islands beckons, or you can steer north, bypassing Tallinn, to unwind in **Lahemaa National Park** (p94), an alluring bayside haven of nature trails, coastlines, and old-fashioned seafaring villages.

Three weeks gives you time for battery-recharging alongside glimpses of the extraordinary Baltic flora, fauna and landscapes. A breath of fresh air after the tourist madness of the three capitals' Old Towns, this green itinerary covering some 1300km guarantees a foolproof getaway from the crowds.



PAINT THE TOWN RED

Three Weeks/Tallinn to Daugavpils

Tracking the Baltic's Soviet past is an eclectic trip. First, brush up on history in Tallinn (p59) at the Museum of Occupation & Fight for Freedom, followed by coffee at the timewarp Narva Kohvik. Speed east next, through the USSR's first national park, **Lahemaa National Park** (p94), to **Sillamäe** (p102), an intriguing seaside museum of Stalinist architecture, and downbeat border town **Narva** (p103), with its moody castle and majority Russian population.

Head south to Latvia and make a beeline for **Sigulda** (p253), where you can rip down the artificial bobsled track built for the Soviet team before touring a top-secret Soviet bunker at nearby **Līgatne** (p259). In **Rīga** (p186) meet die-hard reds in Victory Park, gawp at Stalin's birthday cake, fire Kalashnikovs, dine retro-Soviet style, and learn about Soviet occupation in the Museum of Occupation. Next, play 'I spy' at the huge radio telescope in **Irbene** (p242), 24km north of Ventspils, designed to eavesdrop on Western satellite communications. Stroll around **Liepāja** (p243), taking in Karosta and its Soviet prison, where diehards can kip for the night.

In Lithuania, a tour of the underground Soviet missile base at **Žemaitija National Park** (p377) is terrifying. Sleep in the old Soviet barracks, then push east past the huge former USSR military base outside **Šiauliai** (p347) to **Vilnius** (p292), with its disturbing Museum of Genocide Victims and poignant reminders of bloody 1991. A sidetrip south to **Grūtas Park** (p336), aka Stalin World, east of Druskininkai, is a must. Afterwards, bear north to bizarre **Visaginas** (p329), where you can heed the dangers of a Soviet-designed nuclear power plant. Then it's north of the border to Latvia's grey and gritty **Daugavpils** (p266) with its 'fortress' where Soviet troops were stationed. If the theme of this itinerary has you itching for more, pop across the border to Belarus (prearranged visas essential), where the Soviet era is alive and well.



This trip takes you the length and breadth of the region, west to east and back again. Coastal security bases and the more industrial, Russian-influenced east provide relics of an era most locals would rather forget. You'll travel close to 2500km, with plenty of greenery en route for when the concrete gets too much.

TAILORED TRIPS

THE AMBER ROAD

Amber has been traded since before the birth of Jesus, and there's nowhere finer to feel its subtle magic than in the Russian-controlled **Kaliningrad Region** (p383), source of almost all Baltic amber. Stunning amber-studded jewellery and the world's second-largest hunk of amber add a sparkle to the Kaliningrad Amber Museum, while the amber cabin aboard the *Vityaz* at the World Ocean Museum is an interesting port of call. A tour of the industrial **Yantarny Amber Mine** (p384) from the capital is a must for serious amber-admirers.

The region's finest amber gallery in **Nida** (p365), Lithuania, is a hop, skip and a jump – across sand dunes on the **Curonian Spit** (p362) – from the Russian province. Amber treasure was found in **Juodkrantė** (p363) in the 1850s but today you'll find only specks washed up on the shore after fierce storms; profes-

sional amber-fishers frequent **Karklė** (p359) and **Šventoji** (p377) beaches. **Palanga** (p372) sports a palatial amber museum and an innovative amber-processing gallery, while wacky **Nida** (p376), across the border in Latvia, presents amber-fishing from a homespun perspective.

Latvia's **Liepāja** (p243) boasts the largest piece of amber art in the world (an enormous dangling tapestry) and an amber sundial. There are fine amber displays inside the Livonian Order castle in **Ventspils** (p239), the northern end of the Amber Road. More on these sights can be found at www.balticamberroad.net.

Even if you don't make it out to the Baltic coast, you'll be able to souvenir-shop for 'Baltic gold' in the stores of Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn.



WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania safeguard a handful of Unesco-protected world treasures (<http://whc.unesco.org>), kicking off with each capital's extraordinary Old Town, inscribed on the World Heritage list since at least 1997. **Riga** (p186) is a mind-blowing plethora of medieval, neoclassical and Art Nouveau buildings dating from the 13th to 19th centuries; its Art Nouveau collection is Europe's best. Church-studded **Vilnius** (p292) is medieval, Gothic, Renaissance and classical, and has Europe's biggest baroque Old Town to boot. And nowhere better reflects the fabric of a medieval northern European trading city than **Tallinn** (p59).

The archaeological site of **Kernavė** (p325) near the Lithuanian capital is another world gem, as is the extraordinary slither of sand linking Lithuania with Kaliningrad, the **Curonian Spit** (p362), sculpted over millennia by the Baltic Sea's winds and waves.

The region's intangible treasures are safeguarded by Unesco with a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' stamp: cross-crafting and its symbolism in Lithuania; the cultural and natural heritage on Estonia's tiny **Kihnu Island** (p134); and the magnificent Baltic song and dance festivals.



The Great Outdoors

A photograph of a winter landscape. In the foreground, several bare, dark tree trunks stand in a snow-covered field. A simple wooden bench is partially buried in the snow. In the background, a wide river is completely frozen, covered in a layer of snow and ice. The sky is a pale, hazy blue, suggesting a clear day. The overall scene is peaceful and serene.

An ice-covered river in the Nemunas Crook Regional Park (p346), Lithuania

JONATHAN SMITH



The Baltic countries offer visitors plenty of up-close-and-personal encounters with Mother Nature at her most gentle – paddling on a sparkling lake, rambling or cycling through pretty birch or pine forest. Instead of craning your neck at sky-reaching peaks, here you can marvel over accessible nature – tame and neat – and superbly pretty scenery. Still, while the region lacks the drama of mountains and cliffs, there are places where you're left in no

doubt that it's Mother Nature calling the shots, and she can sometimes be tempestuous – witness the shifting sands of the awesome Curonian Spit, or windswept, desolate Cape Kolka.

There's plenty of breathing space in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, too. Check those population figures and you'll be in little doubt that open space abounds here. Factor in the relatively low tourist numbers (compared with southern European destinations, for example) and you'll understand the appeal of some of the continent's best opportunities to ditch the crowds and simply frolic in the wilderness.

A smorgasbord of active endeavours awaits anyone with an appetite for the great outdoors. You can whet your appetite with berry picking before feeding on an alfresco meal of brisk, salty air, pristine white-sand beaches and icy-blue Baltic Sea vistas. Want seconds? Try cycling through dense, pine-scented forests, canoeing down a lazy river, or checking out the flora and fauna in a quiet nature reserve. Those craving an adrenalin fix can find some surprising options too; from bobsledding to bungee jumping. If you still have room for dessert, try baby-gentle downhill or cross-country skiing, or just get hot-and-sweaty in a sauna. In fact, whatever you're craving, the Baltic countries can usually deliver.

CYCLING

The Baltic offers superb cycling territory. The region's flatness makes tooling around the countryside on a bicycle an option for anyone: casual cyclists can get the hang of things on

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BALTIC BIKING

We met Englishman Malcolm Russell in Narva, on the Estonia–Russia border, on the last leg of his seven-week marathon bike ride from Amsterdam to St Petersburg. Madness or inspiration? We can't really tell! Over a couple of well-earned beers, he happily shared his insider information from a two-wheeled journey that had taken him across the Baltic countries and Kaliningrad.

What are your tips for anyone planning a cycling trip across the Baltic? You can do this sort of journey on any kind of bike, including a road bike. The most important thing is to get a decent map showing road surfaces. It's tricky and slow going on a road bike tackling gravel surfaces, so plot your itinerary accordingly. You can usually get perfectly adequate maps for free from the tourist offices; Lithuania has an amazing free cycling map for the country, available at any tourist office.

A normal touring distance of 45km to 60km a day is reasonable, although wind on somewhere like the Curonian Spit can slow you down. It seems there are plenty of guesthouses and hotels, about every 30km to 50km, so you can be spontaneous about where you want to spend the night.

Even the main roads are cyclable – there's not too much traffic (with the exception of Kaliningrad) and the roads are generally nice and wide.

If you are on a road bike, bring spares! Everyone in this part of the world rides cheap shitty bikes bought from the supermarkets, so good-quality spares aren't readily available. You should be OK if you're riding a mountain bike.

What are the highlights? The Curonian Spit is one of the great cycling trips of Europe. Without a Russian visa (ie if you're not heading north from Kaliningrad, but west from Vilnius), hire a boat to take you and your bike from Rusnė to the bottom of the Lithuanian part of the Spit, then cycle north to Klaipėda. (In 2007 Malcom spent seven days cycling from Vilnius to Klaipėda via the Curonian Spit; this time around he accessed it from Kaliningrad. The Lithuanian side of the Spit has a bike path, the Russian side doesn't.)

The underground Soviet missile base in Lithuania's Žemaitija National Park is also incredible.

What are the biggest problems when cycling the Baltic? Dogs and drunks. In that order. Large guard dogs are often unleashed. At night, if you're doing some remote camping, drunks will think nothing of paying you a visit and causing a ruckus. Or they'll stand in the middle of the road swinging a carrier bag that you'll have to dodge.

Hazards include fissures and potholes in Kaliningrad – the biggest potholes this side of Phnom Penh!

gentle paved paths, while hard-core fanatics can rack up the kilometres on more challenging multiday treks. Although there's not much along the lines of steep single-track trails, dirt tracks through forests and (mini)hills abound, and the varied but always peaceful scenery ensures you'll never tire of the view.

Among the most popular places to cycle are Lithuania's spectacular Curonian Spit (p362), Muhu (p163), Saaremaa (p153) and Hiiumaa (p146) islands of Estonia, and the Kurzeme coastline (p231) and 'Baltic Riviera', Jūrmala (p226), in Latvia. The forested surrounds of the region's national parks offer superb two-wheeled adventures – top picks include lake-studded Dzūkija National Park (p334) in Lithuania, the bay-fringed Lahemaa National Park (p94) in Estonia, or castle-clad Gauja National Park (p253) in Latvia.

If you want someone to help with planning, a growing band of cycling operators offer everything from itinerary-planning services to fully guided treks. In Estonia, try **City Bike** (www.citybike.ee), in Latvia, **Bikerent.lv** (www.bikerent.lv) and in Lithuania, look for **BaltiCycle** (www.bicycle.lt). Also, some tour operators (p415) offer guided cycling treks. For DIY planning, check out the info-laden sites www.bicycle.ee and www.bicycle.lt.

SOMETHING DIFFERENT?

The Baltic countries certainly have a way to go to rival New Zealand in the crazy-activities stakes, but here's our list of activities to take you off the usual tourist trails and outside your comfort zone while you amble round the region. See our Top 10 Activities list on p16 for other favourites.

- bog-shoe-walking expeditions in the wetlands of Soomaa National Park, Estonia (p138)
- hot-air ballooning over Vilnius, Lithuania (p309)
- hiring a floating sauna, for the ultimate chill-out experience, at either Soomaa National Park (p138) or Hiiumaa (p152), both in Estonia
- bungee jumping from a moving cable car, Sigulda, Latvia (p256)
- kiiking (p51), a kooky swinging sport invented in Estonia
- bobsledding down a 16-bend track at 80km/h in Sigulda, Latvia (p256)
- braving the winter to go ice fishing on the Curonian Spit, Lithuania (p362)
- going on a beaver-spotting canoe safari in Soomaa National Park, Estonia (p138)
- getting high at the aerodium wind tunnel in Sigulda, Latvia (p256)

HIKING & WALKING

While the Baltic countries lack the craggy grandeur or wild expanses of some of their neighbours, a day or two hiking in one of the forested national parks is rewarding all the same. All that forest (it covers 51% of Estonia, 45% of Latvia and 33% of Lithuania) just begs to be explored, especially if there are beavers to spot, berries to pick, or resident witches and fairies to hear tales of along the way.

Grab your hiking boots, breathe deeply of the pine-fresh air, and hit the trails in the likes of Žemaitija National Park (p377) in Lithuania, Gauja National Park (p253) in Latvia, and Lahemaa National Park (p94) in Estonia. Pretty villages that make good bases for exploration include Estonia's Otepää (p116) and Rõuge (p122); Valmiera (p262) and Cēsis (p260) in Latvia; and Nida (p365) in Lithuania. If regular walking doesn't float your boat, make a beeline for Estonia's Soomaa National Park (p138), where you can go on a guided walk through the park's wetlands using special bog shoes (don't laugh), which give you access to otherwise hard-to-reach areas.

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Rowing boats on the Danė River (p357), Klaipėda, Lithuania

JONATHAN SMITH

WATERSPORTS

Having been cooped up for most of the winter, the region comes alive in summer, with locals and visitors taking any opportunity to soak up some vitamin D during the gloriously long days. You're never far from the sea or a lake offering fishing, sailing, windsurfing and swimming. And when the weather's not favourable towards outdoor frolicking, there's no shortage of wet 'n' wild waterparks (with indoor pools, slides, saunas etc) in big cities and holiday areas (these guys know from experience that a Baltic summer is no guarantee for beachgoing weather).

Great Baltic beachy spots are Pärnu, Narva-Jõesuu, Pirita (Tallinn) and Saaremaa in Estonia; Jūrmala, Ventspils, Pāvilosta and Liepāja in Latvia; and Palanga, Klaipėda and Nida in Lithuania. Myriad watersports can be attempted at the western end of Hiiumaa island in Estonia, and Pāvilosta in Latvia.

CANOEING & RAFTING

Watching the landscape slide slowly by while paddling down a lazy river is a fabulous way to experience the natural world from a different angle. As the region's rivers are not known for their wild rapids, this is a great place for beginners to hone their skills or for families to entertain the kids. Even if you're usually more into wild than mild, the region's scenic beauty and tranquillity create such a Zen experience you'll quickly forget you haven't hit a single rapid.

In Latvia, the Gauja (p256) and Abava Rivers (p235) offer uninterrupted routes stretching for several days, and you can join an organised tour or rent gear and run the routes on your own – the best places to start are Sigulda, Valmiera and Kandava. In Lithuania, Labanoros Regional Park (p329), Dzūkija National Park (p334), Trakai (p322) and Nemunas Crook Regional Park (p346) all offer the opportunity for great canoeing. Canoes or traditional *haabjas* (Finno-Ugric boats carved from a single log) serve as the primary vehicles for exploring Soomaa National Park (p138) in southwest Estonia – you can even learn to build your own *haabjas*. Otepää (p118) is another good Estonian spot to organise and access canoe trips, including ones that combine canoeing with hiking and cycling.



Ice-fishing outside Trakai's Island Castle (p323), Lithuania

IZZET KERIBAR

FISHING

Abundant lakes and miles of rivers and streams provide ample fishing opportunities in all three countries. Visit a regional tourist office for the scoop on the best angling spots and information pertaining to permits.

In the dark depths of the Baltic winter there is no finer experience than dabbling in a touch of ice-fishing with vodka-warmed local fishermen on the frozen Curonian Lagoon (p362), off the west coast of Lithuania, or at Trakai (p323). The Nemunas Delta Regional Park (p370) is another good western Lithuanian fishing spot. In Latvia, the Latgale Lakelands (p269) is packed with hundreds of deep-blue lakes offering fishing opportunities galore. In northern Kurzeme, Lake Engure (p234) is another favourite angling spot. Huge Lake Peipsi (p105) is popular in Estonia.

BERRYING & MUSHROOMING

The Balts' deep-rooted attachment to the land is reflected in their obsession with berrying and mushrooming – national pastimes in all three countries. Accompanying a local friend into the forest on a summer berrying trip or autumn mushrooming expedition is an enchanting way to appreciate this traditional rural pastime.

If you're keen on picking but lack a local invitation, join an organised tour (locals closely guard the location of their favourite spots, so just asking around probably won't reap any useful information). For info on berrying and mushrooming tours, check out www.countryside.lt (Lithuania), www.maaturism.ee (Estonia) and www.traveller.lv (Latvia), and ask at local tourist offices. You can't go wrong at Lithuania's Dzūkija (p330) or Aukštaitija National Parks (p326). Failing that, head to any market and check out the freshly picked produce, or peruse menus for in-season treasures from local forests, and pat yourself on the back for the low food miles your meal has travelled.

HORSE RIDING

The gentle pace of horseback exploration is definitely in keeping with the yesteryear feel of parts of the Baltic countries. Some of the best and most bucolic places to get saddlesore include Lahemaa National Park (p98) and the islands of Hiiumaa (p146) and Saaremaa (p153) in Estonia – operators here will usually combine rural and coastal rides, and can arrange multiday treks. In Latvia, head to Plosti (p235), between Kandava and Sabile in the picturesque Andava River Valley; Untumi country ranch (p269), 7km northwest of Rēzekne; or the well-established Klajumi stables (p271), outside Kraslava in the Latgale Lakelands. Lithuanian visitors hankering for some four-legged fun can head to Trakai (p323); the stud farm (p349), 12km northeast of Šiauliai; or the horse museum (p352), in the village of Niūrōnys, outside Anykščiai.

BIRDWATCHING

Thanks to a key position on north–south migration routes, the Baltic countries are a twitcher's paradise. Each year, hundreds of bird species descend upon the region, attracted by fish-packed wetlands and wide-open spaces relatively devoid of people. White storks arrive by the thousands each spring, nesting on rooftops and telegraph poles throughout the region. Other annual visitors include corncrakes, bitterns, cranes, mute swans, black storks and all types of geese.

In Estonia, some of the best birdwatching in the Baltic is found in the Matsalu National Park (p146), where 280 different species (many migratory) can be spotted, and where regular tours are run. Spring migration peaks in April/May, but some species arrive as early as March. Autumn migration begins in July and can last until November. Vilsandi National Park (p162), off Saaremaa, is another prime spot for feathery friends, and the park's headquarters can help arrange birdwatching tours.

Some 270 of the 330 bird species found in Lithuania frequent the Nemunas Delta Regional Park (p371), making it a must visit for serious birders. Park authorities can help organise birdwatching expeditions during the peak migratory seasons. The nearby Curonian Spit National Park (p362) offers opportunities for spotting up to 200 different species of birds amid dramatic coastal scenery.

In Latvia, keep an eye out for some of Europe's rarest birds in splendid Gauja National Park (p253). With thick forests and numerous wetlands, Ķemeri National Park (p230), in northern Kurzeme, is another great birdwatching spot. The boggy Teiči Nature Reserve (p265), in the Vidzeme Uplands, is an important feeding and nesting ground for many bird species. Lake Engure (p234), in northern Kurzeme, is a major bird reservation with 186 species (44 endangered) nesting around the lake and its seven islets.

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SWEAT IT OUT

Given that it's cold, dark and snowy for many months of the year in the Baltic, it's little surprise that the sauna is an integral part of local culture. Most hotels have one, and some cities have public bathhouses with saunas. But it's the ones that silently smoulder next to a lake or river, by the sea or deep in the forest that provide the most authentic experience.

There are three main types of sauna in the Baltic:

- the Finnish-style sauna, where an electric stove keeps the air-temperature high (between 70°C and 95°C), and humidity is kept low. These are found in plenty of private homes, most hotels, all spas and waterparks etc. Some hotel suites have a private sauna attached to the bathroom. Public or hotel saunas charge an hourly fee, and there are plenty of small, private saunas that can be rented by the hour.
- the smoke sauna – the most archaic type of sauna, whereby a fire is lit directly under rocks in the chimney-less sauna (generally a one-room wooden hut), and heating can take up to five hours. After the fire is put out in the hearth, the heat comes from the heated rocks. The smoke is let out just before participants enter, and the soot-blackened walls are part of the experience. Smoke saunas are rare but have become more popular in recent times.
- the 'Russian sauna' or steam sauna/steam bath – not as popular in the Baltic region as the Finnish style of sauna, but found mainly in spas or waterparks. In these, the air temperature is medium (about 50°C) and air humidity is high.

Locals use a bunch of birch twigs to lightly slap or flick the body, stimulating circulation, irrespective of which sauna type they're sweating in. Cooling down is an equally integral part of the experience: most Finnish-style saunas have showers or pools attached, while the more authentic smoke saunas are usually next to a lake or river. In the depths of winter, rolling in snow or cutting out a square metre of ice from a frozen lake in order to take a quick dip in is not unheard of.

SKIING & SNOWBOARDING

They might not have anything closely resembling a mountain, but Estonia and Latvia haven't let this geographic hurdle hinder their ski-resort efforts. Instead these countries have become masters at working with what they've got – and that means constructing lifts and runs on the tiniest of hills, and using rooftops and dirt mounds to create vertical drops. At least they've got the climate working for them, with cold temperatures ensuring snow cover for at least four months of the year. Don't expect much in the way of technical terrain or long powder runs – but you've got to admit that saying you've skied or snowboarded the Baltic is pretty damn cool!

Otepää (p119), in southeast Estonia, is probably the best of the Baltic winter resorts. It offers a variety of downhill-skiing and snowboarding areas, myriad cross-country trails, a ski jump and plenty of outlets from which to hire gear. Lively nightlife and a ski-town vibe heighten the appeal for skiers and boarders. Kicksledding, cross-country skiing and snowshoe excursions are available at Soomaa National Park (p138).

The Gauja Valley is the centre of Latvia's winter-sports scene. Sigulda (p256), Cēsis (p261) and Valmiera (p262) all offer short-but-sweet downhill runs as well as loads of cross-country trails. Adrenalin junkies disappointed by Sigulda's gentle slopes can get their fix swishing down the town's 1200m-long artificial bobsled run – the five-person contraptions reach speeds of 80km/h! The Vidzeme Uplands (p265), centred on the whopping 312m Gaiziņkalns, is adored as the country's top spot for skiers and snowboarders.

Lithuania hasn't really joined the downhill game, but you can cross-country ski amid deep, whispering forests and frozen blue lakes in beautiful Aukštaitija National Park (p326).

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