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Easy Harder Epic



INTRODUCTION

Epic road trips are a source of stories and happy memories for years to come. And, on one occasion, they sparked the idea of Lonely Planet itself. When Tony and Maureen Wheeler set out from England to drive to Afghanistan in 1972 and then journey onward to Australia, they didn't realise that at the end of the trip their experiences and insights would be the basis for Lonely Planet's first guidebooks.

They were far from the first people to drive halfway around the world. In 1968 a group of six British grandmothers bought two second-hand Land Rovers, packed some supplies in Tupperware and drove from London to Australia, passing through Turkey, Iran and India via the Khyber Pass. Go all the way back to 1903 and H. Nelson Jackson, Sewall K. Crocker and their dog Bud took 63 days to drive across the USA from New York to San Francisco.

No matter who you are – youthful or more mature, solo or with a family in tow – the open road is irresistible to travellers.

This book is intended to offer fresh inspiration for your next road trip. We asked our global network of travel writers for their suggestions and selected 50 of the best drives the world has to offer. Their stories cover almost every corner of the world. The classic routes are well represented with the likes of Route 66 and the Pacific Coast Highway in the US, the Great Ocean Road in Australia, and Iceland's Ring Road. Coastlines are a magnet to the roaming motorist – our authors cruise along the coasts of Norway, Ireland, the Cote d'Azur, the Adriatic, the Baltic and beyond. The adventurous won't be disappointed: we feature drives in Vietnam, Bhutan and Nepal, we cross the Kalahari, and Tony Wheeler introduces the Gibb River Road in Western Australia's Kimberley region. There are also easy-going excursions, for instance around Scotland's Isle of Skye, that are no less beautiful or memorable.

We've tried not to discriminate against any driver: we have routes written and ridden by motorcyclists and even a tour of Northern California by electric vehicle. A few of these drives take a day but others can be enjoyed over a weekend, a week or more. Most of the

drives that made the grade are recognised routes – from the Going-to-the-Sun Road across the Rockies in Montana to the Wild Atlantic Way in Ireland – with regular signposts to minimise the chance of going wrong. A few, especially those in the more remote reaches of Australia, Asia and South America, require some logistical planning, a degree of mechanical experience (at least check that you're carrying a spare wheel and a jack!) and a more intrepid attitude. With the sophisticated mapping apps available today, we've avoided providing turn-by-turn directions. The most important role of these tales from the road is to inspire you to pack an overnight bag and hop behind the wheel to explore somewhere new.

Road trips can be a way of linking together a string of highlights, such as southern Utah's unbeatable series of national parks, making a musical pilgrimage or simply cruising through beautiful scenery, stopping where you please. What they have in common is that the road tripper is always independent. Want to take a detour (and we suggest some gems) or stay an extra day? Go right ahead. It's all about the journey. Driving a car need not be a mode of transport that insulates you from your surroundings: if you stop regularly, explore, encounter local people and their culture, you'll have as rich and rewarding an experience as you could hope for.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The main stories in each regional chapter feature first-hand accounts of fantastic drives in that continent. Each includes a factbox to start the planning of a trip – when is the best time of year, how to get there, where to stay. But beyond that, these stories should spark other ideas. We've started that process with the 'more like this' section following each story, which offers other ideas along a similar theme, not necessarily on the same continent. Drives are colour coded according to difficulty, which takes into account not just how long, remote and challenging they are but the logistics and local conditions. The index collects different types of drive for a variety of interests.



Clockwise from left: a South African service station on the Panorama Route; a classic Ford Galaxy on the Pacific Coast Highway (also below). Previous page: exploring the east coast of New Zealand in a VW campervan







ROVING THE BALTIC: ESTONIA TO LITHUANIA

Take a drive through the crossroads of several mighty European powers: the Baltic countries twist their own brand of Northern culture with a history steeped in millennia.

At a dinner in Riga over a decade ago, as I pushed around a slab of grey pork and side of boiled potatoes, I learned that the Latvian language – one of the oldest tongues still spoken on the planet – had no word for ‘mountain’. The term *kalns*, or hill, serves as the best substitute, as there are no true mountains in the entire region – no borrowed term has been added to the local lexicon. And there’s really no need for one: from cobbled alleys of coastal Tallinn to the desolate recesses of the Curonian Spit, the entirety of the Baltic shield is blanketed by an undulating current of towering pine.

The green carpet – unbothered by the brutal winter weather – seems uniform from the car window year after year, no matter how many times I return to visit. But a turn onto a lonely side road reveals thousands of years of fascinating geopolitical history.

Sure, Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius, the triad of Baltic capitals, each stir their own brew of old-meets-new, but it’s the countryside – the veritable battlefields of both ancient and modern empires – that narrates a more nuanced history of subjugation and glory.

Latvia’s largest national park, the Gauja, follows its namesake river as it snakes between tribal war mounds and medieval castle ruins; I do the same. Subtle bumps in the terrain mark the strongholds of the tribes that waged war in the region over 2000 years ago – archaeologists have uncovered old stones from other parts of the planet lending credence to the notion that the area was an epicentre of global trade.

A rich medieval history comes to life at the rosy-red tower of Turaida Castle and at the ashen stone spires of Cesis castle. In Sigulda, I spot my first Soviet relic – a cluster of tenements and a strange ribbon of concrete. In the cities, the austerity of the



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architecture seems like an unassuming patch of the urban quilt, but in the forest, surrounded by swatches of deep greens, the structures are shockingly dour.

It was in Sigulda that the Soviet bobsled team trained for international championships, like the Olympics. The facility was abandoned after the fall of the USSR, and today local business owners offer introductory spins on the track with various sleighs.

Following a stomach-churning ride down the concrete corkscrew, I meet up with a friend-of-a-friend who has invited me to his *pirts* (sauna). Like the Finnish, Estonians and Latvians have an elaborate and enthusiastic sauna culture, but without any of the modesty assigned to the ritual by other Western nations.

After a hardy shake of hands, my friend-of-a-friend strips to his birthday suit and lies upwards on the thin birch planks of his pond-side sauna. I follow and an older woman, the sauna master, immediately enters the chamber holding bushels of dried twigs and flowers. What follows is a choreographed dance – almost in nature – as she swishes her branches through the air to raise the humidity then beats us with garlands to open our pores. The branch-beating session lasts some 15 minutes, after which I’m grabbed by the arm and tossed in the chilly lakelet out the door. Lather, rinse, repeat with a splash of vodka and some cured meats, and by the end of the afternoon I feel fully indoctrinated into the Baltic way of life and ready to continue my journey.

The trees continue to march on like noble warriors, save the odd clearing marking a cool, dark lake in the near distance, until suddenly the crash of the frigid Baltic Sea breaks their stride. The



LITGATNE BUNKER

In Latvia’s pine forests lies one of the most compelling artifacts from the Soviet Era, lending the land’s dystopian history some context. Discovered early this century in the basement of a convalescence home, the nuclear shelter was to protect the highest officials of the Union. And no item has been changed since the 1980s: propaganda scrawled on the walls, levers in the control room, and one single bed – for the senior commandant.



Clockwise from top: Tallinn’s colourful facades; blue skies over a Baltic beach; the skyline of Tallinn from Toompea Hill. Previous page: Turaida Castle above the Gauja River



seaside enclave of Jurmala softens the transition between worlds with its cottage architecture and art nouveau flourishes. In the summer months the beach teems with day-tripping Rigans, but out of season the veneer fades on the holiday town, and the so-called sanitariums lie bare along the coast like beached cruise liners.

Latvia’s coastline swerves up to a point at Kolka where the Baltic Sea meets the Bay of Riga. A line, where the purple seas lap over the clearer waters of the bay, can be seen from the haunting sea stacks formed by faraway timber. The area was strictly off limits to civilians during the Soviet occupation, and therefore feels lost in time, save the odd concrete wartime watchtower along the shore.

The Cape of Kolka is the indigenous territory of the Livs, or Livonians, one of the ancient regional tribes that guarded their land claims with the legendary ferocity of the Vikings. Today, only a handful of ethnic Livs remain – fewer than a dozen are native speakers – their sea-blue eyes catch your attention as they tend to the small cottages and fish-smoking shacks along the shore.

The solitude of the cape crescendos with activity as I pass through seaside towns. In laid-back Pāvilosta locals are zipped to the neck in neoprene, battling the Baltic waves on their kiteboards. Further on, grungy Liepāja provides interesting contrast, with its roaring nightclubs built in old port-side warehouses.

Then the road quite literally comes to an end on the Lithuanian side of the border, and suddenly the Baltic’s trademark pines are gone – replaced with a landscape so severe that it feels almost Soviet in nature: a desert. Small vacation villages with adorable chalet-style architecture have popped up where the sand meets the sea, but the vast expanse of dunes, seemingly ripped from the depths of the Sahara, always make me wonder what’s more surprising: the lack of Baltic vocabulary for ‘mountain’ or the fact that locals have seven words for ‘desert’? **BP**

“The area near Kolka was strictly off limits to civilians during the Soviet occupation and feels lost in time”



DIRECTIONS

Start // Tallinn, Estonia

End // Nida, Lithuania

Distance // 948km (589 miles)

When to drive // June is the optimal month for travel, when the three Baltic nations embrace their pagan roots with celebrations held around the summer solstice; July, August and September remain delightfully busy along the coast as well.

Where to eat // Tallinn offers plenty of hipster hangouts: start with Must Puudel (the Black Poodle); in Riga try upmarket Vincents, which pioneered the down-to-earth food movement that supplanted pork and potatoes and put Latvia on the culinary map.

What to take // Much of the terrain between towns is undeveloped tracts of land, which lends itself well to some blissful camping experiences – pack all the accoutrements for a summertime tenting adventure.



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Opposite from the top: dawn at Mont St-Michel; the skyline of Charleston, South Carolina

MORE LIKE THIS WAR HISTORY DRIVES

NORMANDY & BRITTANY, FRANCE

In much the same way that castle ruins and crumbling tenements cut the pristine pine forest of the Baltic, spartan watchtowers and solemn cemeteries haunt the idyllic coastline of Normandy and Brittany. A drive around France's northwest reveals some of its most iconic destinations, like the demi-island Mont St-Michel, and the quintessential Breton township of St-Malo. The area embraces roots that predate the nation's union. But the rocky coastline famed for its dramatic tides and purple-pink twilight also reveals some of the biggest scars from WWII.

Start // Caen

End // St-Malo

Distance // 182 miles (293km)

THE AMERICAN SOUTH

Warm hospitality and soul food brighten any road trip in the southern United States – the 'other America' best explored by Eisenhower's interstate highways connecting hubs below the Mason-Dixon Line. Sites such as the Fort Sumter National Monument near Charleston, South Carolina, or the Antietam National Battlefield near Sharpsburg, Maryland are reminders that the country isn't blanketed in a single definition of America, but a patchwork of values, customs and cultures. The Civil War occurred in the early 1860s; its series of bloody battles moved steadily from the Deep South up towards the Union states, costing more than 600,000 soldiers their lives in four years. Richmond, Virginia, was the capital of the Confederacy and is filled with relics to retell the story of the war. Finish in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, famed as the site of Abraham Lincoln's 1863 address, but also the place that marked the turning point in the war when General Lee could first see that the South's campaign would end in surrender.

Start // Charleston, South Carolina

End // Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

Distance // 660 miles (1062km)

SCOTLAND

A separatist sentiment and an assertion of independence has long been the hallmark of the Scottish vis-à-vis their British neighbours, and dozens of ruins mark the fights for freedom over the centuries. A drive through the highlands is one of the most breathtaking road trips in its own right, but marrying the ethereal landscape to its storied past enhances the experience. Fittingly, the Wallace Monument marks the area where the Scots earned their first decisive victory against the English – Stirling Bridge, a narrow pass that split the English forces in two just before the start of the 14th century. Locations of several important battlegrounds inscribed in the history books remain a mystery, but Glencoe has become mainstream due to James Bond *Skyfall* fame, and Culloden, near Inverness, is a handsome reward for intrepid road trippers travelling to the Isle of Skye and beyond.

Start // Stirling

End // Inverness

Distance // 234 miles (377km)



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