

Welcome to Eastern Europe

Surreal, exciting and constantly surprising, Eastern Europe is an amazing warehouse of culture, history and architecture as well as mind-blowing scenery.

Cultural Explosion

Crossing Prague's 14th-century Charles Bridge at dawn; marvelling at Kraków's preserved Rynek Główny (Main Market Sq); viewing an unrivalled cross-section of art history at the Hermitage in St Petersburg; and hearing Liszt in his native Hungary: these are just a few of the cultural and architectural highlights on offer in Eastern Europe. Cities such as Moscow, Budapest and Warsaw groan under the weight of their heritage. It's not all about high culture though – the people you'll meet in the region's many small towns and charming villages are just as much of an attraction.

Spectacular Scenery

Anything but grey and predictable, this is also a region of exciting and unexpected landscapes: take a boat ride on the blue Danube; discover incredible beaches on the Croatian or Albanian riviera; hike your way through Poland and Slovakia's High Tatras, Romania's Bucegi Mountains and Albania's simply incredible Accursed Mountains. Even more surprising are the vast sand dunes of Curonian Spit in Lithuania and Kalinin-grad, beautiful Lake Ohrid in Macedonia, the Great Masurian Lakes of Poland and the racing river gorges of Slovenia, and Bosnia & Hercegovina.

Historic Overload

Eastern Europe's dramatic past is tangibly present in its amazingly preserved palaces, haunting castles, magnificent churches and grandiose plazas. Cross the bridge where Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo; stand in the room in the Livadia Palace where 'the Big Three' divided up postwar Europe at the 1945 Yalta Conference; feel the echo of the Romanian Revolution on Bucharest's Piața Revoluției (Revolution Square) or the even more recent tragic events on Kyiv's Maydan Nezalezhnosti. Going further back there's St Basil's Cathedral on Moscow's Red Square, a legacy of Ivan the Terrible's terrifying reign, and the remains of Diocletian's Palace in Split, Croatia.

Folklore & Festivals

This is the heartland of Orthodox Christianity, with the religion's rites and traditions permeating many aspects of cultural life, particularly so in countries such as Russia and Ukraine, where celebrations for Easter are not to be missed. Roman Catholic, Muslim and Jewish communities are also alive and kicking, as are older pagan rituals in events such as the Baltica International Folklore Festival or Slovakia's Východná festival – a chance to gain a contemporary insight into age-old Europe.



Why I Love Eastern Europe

By Simon Richmond, Writer

What has always impressed me about Eastern Europe is how communally minded the locals can be and how this makes for such a friendly experience for the traveller. Falling into conversation with locals on a train or at a cafe is commonplace. You'll likely end up sharing food and drinks with them, listening to folk songs, learning a new card game or even being invited home for dinner where you could be treated to delicacies such as Croatian truffles and Hungarian *gulyás* (goulash) as well as delicious staples such as Polish *pierogi* (dumplings) and Russian bliny.

For more about our writers, see page 478

Above: Prague (p137), Czech Republic