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OLD TOWN, RĪGA, LATVIA P196
Itineraries

2 WEEKS

Best of the Baltic

If you’ve only got limited time but you’re keen on seeing the very best of what each of the Baltic states has to offer, this short itinerary ticks off many of the big-ticket destinations.

Inaugurate your tour in Tallinn and roam the magnificent medieval streets of the Estonian capital’s Old Town. Delve into the city’s treasure trove of gastronomic delights before trekking out to Lahemaa National Park. The electric university town of Tartu awaits; then skip south into Latvia to take in the crumbling castles of Cēsis and Sigulda in Gauja National Park. Spend the night at one of the posh muižas (manor houses) nearby, then plough through to reach Riga, home to a dizzying array of decorated facades. Next, head south to Rundāle to visit the opulent palace – the Baltic’s version of Versailles – built by the architect responsible for St Petersburg’s Winter Palace. From Rundāle, hop the border into Lithuania and stop for a quick look at the Hill of Crosses in Šiauliai before shooting west to Curonian Spit. Spend some time amid the quaint cottages, shifting sand dunes and roving boar before ending your trip in flamboyant, baroque Vilnius.
The Grand Tour

With a month you can roster in beach time, hiking excursions and see much more of the region’s quaint little towns – you could even fit in a side trip to Helsinki.

Start in Lithuania’s beautiful capital Vilnius, spending a couple of days wandering the cobblestone streets, checking out Gediminas Hill and taking in the city’s historical charms. Make a stop at Trakai Castle before heading west towards the sea. Stop at Žemaitija National Park for a quick lesson in Soviet missile tactics, then reward yourself with some uninterrupted relaxation along the dune-filled shores of Curonian Spit. Follow the Baltic Sea up through the port city of Klaipėda and family-friendly Palanga to reach the Latvian border.

Over the border the first stop is Liepāja, famous for its gilded cathedral and hulking Soviet tenements. If the weather’s behaving, head north to surfside Pāvilosta before detouring inland to the picturesque village of Kuldīga. Continue on to the lovely long sands of Ventspils, staying overnight before hitting windy and wild Cape Kolka. Follow the coast as it traces a snaking line past forests and quiet villages to the spa retreat of Jūrmala – a hot spot for Russian tycoons and an excellent pit stop. From here Rīga is only a short hop away.

After a couple of days in the Latvian capital, jump the border into Estonia for some beach bliss in Pärnu. Move west to play hopscotch between the forested islands of Muhu, Saaremaa and Hiiumaa. Stop for lunch and a castle visit in Haapsalu before continuing on to Tallinn. Allow at least three days to take in the Estonian capital’s treasures before ferrying over to Helsinki for a night. Back in Estonia, stop overnight in Lahemaa National Park before heading through Rakvere and Mustvee, on the shores of Lake Peipsi, to Tartu for a night or two.

Stop to check out the oddball border town of Valga/Valka before continuing on to Latvia’s Gauja National Park. Stop in charming Cēsis to wander among the fortress ruins, and in Sigulda for a side of bobsledding and bungee jumping. End your Baltic odyssey back in Rīga or motor on to Vilnius to return your hire car.
A full week in Latvia offers time to explore a good number of the nation's treasures beyond the attention-stealing capital.

After exploring Rīga, visit the castle-clad forests near Sigulda before moving on to the secret Soviet bunker at Ligatne and the stone fortress of Cēsis. Swing through to the peaceful Latgale Lakelands, where you can stay overnight in a guesthouse or a camp site on the shores of Lake Rāzna and visit the basilica at Aglona.

Loop back to Rundāle to take in the opulence of the palace before blasting on to the coast at Liepāja, home to Latvia’s garage-band scene and the strikingly dour Karosta district. Detour inland to Kuldīga, one of the country's quaintest towns, then stop overnight in beachy Ventspils. Then it's on to Cape Kolka, where the Gulf of Riga meets the Baltic Sea in dramatic fashion.

Follow the coastline through the constellation of lonely seaside villages to Jūrmala, the Baltic's most famous resort town, then finish up back in Rīga.

Ten days in the Baltic is just the right amount of time to get a feel for each of the region's capitals.

Start your journey in Vilnius (Lithuania) to appreciate the sumptuous baroque architecture amid the curving cobbled streets. Two days will give you plenty of time to snap photos of Gediminas Hill and take in the city's rich Jewish history.

A side trip to the castle at Trakai is a must before visiting Latvia’s capital, Rīga: the Baltic’s largest city. Haggle for huckleberries at the Central Market and crane your neck to take in the glorious art nouveau architecture soaring above. You’ll be spoilt for choice with day-tripping detours – cavort with the Russian elite in Jūrmala, Latvia’s spa centre; or crank up the adrenalin in Sigulda, with its clutch of adventure sports.

Next it’s on to Estonia and Tallinn, where you’ll be treated to a fairy-tale kingdom of quaint medieval houses. Indulge in the city’s world-class culinary scene and finish off the journey with a day at quiet Lahemaa National Park.
Lithuanian Solo

You can jam a lot into a week in compact Lithuania, but if you’ve got the time, you could easily stretch this itinerary out to a more relaxed 10 days.

After taking in the cathedral and museums of Vilnius, drop by Trakai to see the island castle and then continue on to vibrant, rough-edged Kaunas. Beach bums should then head to the Baltic coast, dropping in to the port city of Klaipėda before continuing on to Curonian Spit. The best place to base yourself here is the enchanting town of Nida.

Leaving the coast, stop at Plateliai in Žemaitija National Park to see the abandoned Soviet missile base, which now houses the Cold War Museum. Break up your journey east with a visit to the Hill of Crosses before continuing on your way to Visaginas, built in the ’70s to house workers at the now-shuttered Ignalina Nuclear Power Station. Continue on to Aukštaitija National Park, with its lakes and hiking paths, and stop overnight in Labanoras, the centrepiece of Labanoras Regional Park, before heading back to Vilnius.

Essential Estonia

If you can drag yourself away from the wonderland that is Tallinn, this itinerary covers a little of everything Estonia has to offer: beaches, countryside, castles, historic towns and quaint villages.

On a week’s journey through Estonia, it’s best to give Tallinn at least two days – so you can fully explore each crooked nook in the charming medieval core while sampling the spoils of the nation’s foodie scene. Lahemaa National Park makes for a lovely day trip, while the university town of Tartu awaits those looking for cultured city life away from the capital. Swing through Otepää, Estonia’s self-proclaimed ‘winter capital’, then switch seasons in Pärnu, where sun worshippers come in droves for a bit of beach-lazing.

Round off the week on Estonia’s western islands. Stop by time-warped Koguva village on Muhu, then base yourself at Kuressaare on Saaremaa – Estonia’s prettiest spa town, set around an ancient moated castle. From here explore the island’s forested expanse of whooshing windmills, lonely churches and soaring sea cliffs. At the end of the week, there are direct flights back to Tallinn.
Map Legend

Sights
- Beach
- Bird Sanctuary
- Buddhist
- Castle/Palace
- Christian
- Confucian
- Hindu
- Jain
- Jewish
- Monument
- Museum/Gallery/Historic Building
- Ruin
- Shinto
- Sikh
- Taoist
- Winery/Vineyard
- Zoo/Wildlife Sanctuary
- Other Sight

Activities, Courses & Tours
- Bodysurfing
- Diving
- Canoeing/Kayaking
- Course/Tour
- Sento Hot Baths/Onsen
- Skiing
- Snorkelling
- Surfing
- Swimming.Pool
- Walking
- Windsurfing
- Other Activity

Sleeping
- Sleeping
- Camping

Eating
- Eating

Drinking & Nightlife
- Drinking & Nightlife
- Cafe

Entertainment
- Entertainment

Shopping
- Shopping

Information
- Bank
- Embassy/Consulate
- Hospital/Medical
- Internet
- Police
- Post Office
- Telephone
- Toilet
- Tourist Information
- Other Information

Geographic
- Beach
- Gate
- Hut/Shelter
- Lighthouse
- Lookout
- Mountain/Volcano
- Oasis
- Park
- Pass
- Picnic Area
- Waterfall

Population
- Capital (National)
- Capital (State/Province)
- City/Large Town
- Town/Village

Transport
- Airport
- Border crossing
- Bus
- Cable car/Funicular
- Cycling
- Ferry
- Metro station
- Monorail
- Parking
- Petrol station
- S-Bahn/S-train/Subway station
- Taxi
- T-bane/Tunnelbana station
- Train station/Railway
- Tram
- Tube station
- U-Bahn/Underground station
- Other Transport

Note: Not all symbols displayed above appear on the maps in this book

Routes
- Tollway
- Freeway
- Primary
- Secondary
- Tertiary
- Lane
- Unsealed road
- Road under construction
- Plaza/Mall
- Steps
- Tunnel
- Pedestrian overpass
- Walking Tour
- Walking Tour detour
- Path/Walking Trail

Boundaries
- International
- State/Province
- Disputed
- Regional/Suburb
- Marine Park
- Cliff
- Wall

Hydrography
- River, Creek
- Intermittent River
- Canal
- Water
- Dry/Salt/Intermittent Lake
- Reef

Areas
- Airport/Runway
- Beach/Desert
- Cemetery (Christian)
- Cemetery (Other)
- Glacier
- Mudflat
- Park/Forest
- Sight (Building)
- Sportsground
- Swamp/Mangrove
OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that’s all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, *Across Asia on the Cheap*. Within a week they’d sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Franklin, London, Melbourne, Oakland, Beijing and Delhi, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony’s belief that ‘a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse’.

OUR WRITERS

**Peter Dragicevich**  
**Estonia**  
native New Zealand and Australia, Peter ditched the desk and hit the road. He’s since contributed to literally dozens of Lonely Planet titles, including the previous edition of this book, *Scandinavian Europe* and five successive editions of the *Eastern Europe* guidebook. He rates Tallinn as one of his favourite European cities. Peter also contributed the Plan section to this book.

**Hugh McNaughtan**  
**Lithuania**  
A former English lecturer, Hugh decided visa applications beat grant applications, and turned his love of travel into a full-time thing. Having also done a bit of restaurant reviewing in his home town (Melbourne), he’s now eaten his way across Europe, and found the best way to work up an appetite for Lithuania’s great, gut-busting food is spending all day cycling in its stunning forests. He’s never happier than when on the road with his two daughters. Except perhaps on the cricket field...

**Leonid Ragozin**  
**Latvia, Helsinki Excursion, Kaliningrad Excursion, Directory A–Z, Transport**  
Leonid studied beach dynamics at the Moscow State University, but for want of decent beaches in Russia, he switched to journalism and spent 12 years voyaging through different parts of the BBC, with a break for a four-year stint as a foreign correspondent for the Russian *Newsweek*. Leonid is currently a freelance journalist focusing largely on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine (both his Lonely Planet destinations), which prompted him to leave Moscow and find a new home in Rīga. The latter turned writing this book into a literally life-changing experience.