

# Welcome to Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania

*A land of crumbling castles, soaring dunes, enchanting forests and magical lakes – a trip to the Baltic proves that fairy tales do come true.*

## Teensy but Diverse

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are tiny. Yet in this wonderfully compact space there are three completely distinct cultures to discover – with different languages, different traditions and markedly different temperaments. By way of example, you need only look at the three unique yet equally compelling capitals: majestically medieval Tallinn, chic art-nouveau Riga and flamboyantly baroque Vilnius. When it comes to cultural mileage, the Baltic is as fuel-efficient a destination as you could ever hope for.

## Cold War Comrades

For all their differences, the Baltic States suffered the slings and arrows of 20th-century misfortune together. And when the time came, they answered the ‘to be or not to be’ question hand-in-hand, singing loudly in the affirmative. Visitors will find myriad opportunities to engage with the heart-breaking and horrifying stories of the Nazi and Soviet occupations of these lands: numerous war relics, mass-grave memorials and excellent social-history museums ensure that they’re never forgotten. Meantime, distinctive Stalinist architecture and striking Socialist Realist art continue to fascinate. And doesn’t everyone love a happy ending?

## Super Nature

Endless sandy beaches, a multitude of lakes, large tracts of forest and wildlife-rich wetlands: the Baltic States may be flat but they’re not lacking in natural appeal. Best of all, the relatively low population density means there’s plenty to go around. Many of Europe’s large mammals have found quiet corners to linger in here, although the wolves, bears, elk and lynx know better than to mug for tourist snapshots. You’re more likely to see white storks in their bathtub-sized nests balanced on lamp posts, or woodpeckers tap-tapping away, or the odd startled deer scampering along the side of the road.

## Magic in the Air

From Tallinn’s storybook turrets to the ghostly ruins of Ludza Castle, romantic adults and spellbound children will find plenty of intrigue in this ancient and alluring landscape. Folk tales abound of holy lakes, magic springs and the witches and goblins that inhabit the darkest forests and most treacherous bogs. This was the last corner of Europe to be Christianised and, even now, in out-of-the-way places, you’ll occasionally stumble across ribbons tied to trees in sacred groves and coins deposited on mysterious offertory stones. Suspend your disbelief just a little and let your imagination take flight.



## Why I Love Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania

By Peter Dragicevich, Writer

Growing up in New Zealand, where you simply won't find a building that's even 200 years old, probably makes me more susceptible than most to the charms of a place such as Tallinn. From the moment I first set eyes on its cobbled lanes, crooked walls and soaring steeples, I was smitten. The collision of history with the modern world has rendered all three Baltic States places of ardent fascination for me. And each time I visit, there's something new to love.

**For more about our writers, see page 448**

Above: A 13th-century castle in Cēsis (p264), Latvia