

Destination Eastern Europe

It seems like a simple concept: it's Europe, but it's the eastern part. Eastern Europe.

Well, yes, but... It is not geography that defines Eastern Europe. If it were, this book would include countries such as Finland and Greece, which are at the eastern edge of the continent.

Language is not a binding factor either, for some of these countries use the Latin alphabet, while others use Cyrillic; most speak Baltic, Romance or Slavic languages, but Estonian and Hungarian are indecipherable anomalies of the Finno-Ugric family.

Religion does not unite the region (if we may be forgiven the understatement). The region's population is Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim and Lutheran. In recent years, religion and ethnicity sparked the worst violence Europe had seen since WWII, busting the former Yugoslavia into seven independent countries. It's fair to say that Eastern Europeans are still working out their religious differences.

Culturally the region is an art nouveau mosaic, each country a tile with its own colour, shape and texture. On display are southern hospitality and northern reserve, EU-approved transparency and post-Soviet haze, provincial modesty and big-city audacity, flabbergasting prosperity and heart-rending poverty.

So what is the unifying factor that defines Eastern Europe? What do these 21 countries have in common?

Their only universal commonality is a little piece of shared history: the 40-odd years that they spent under communist rule. The Iron Curtain so split the continent that even now – two decades after it was ripped from its dictatorial rod – it still divides Europe in popular imagination. (Only the former East Germany has completely discarded its 'eastern' label.)

These days, the communist legacy endures in different ways. Every city has a relic or two – a Lenin monument or a KGB museum that remembers the bad old days. Bits of Soviet-era bureaucracy linger on in visa and registration requirements, and standing in an orderly queue is still a skill that evades many Eastern Europeans. But throughout the region, the grey, bleak uniformity is long gone.

Eager young democracies are queuing up to join the new Europe. Ten of the countries covered in this book are already members of the European Union, with two candidates and five 'potential' candidates in the works. This leaves only four countries – Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova – with no EU prospects. It explains a lot about why the Russian administration might feel a bit isolated.

Politics aside, these countries are embracing the 21st century with more gusto than anyone would have guessed. From Albania to Ukraine, their citizens are breaking down the barriers of generations past and exploring the possibilities of consumerism, creativity and career. Fusion food and edgy art, high-tech hot spots and high-life nightspots – this is not your parents' Eastern Europe.

Getting Started

It has been 20 years since the Iron Curtain was pulled down, opening up an entire region for discovery by intrepid travellers. While much has changed in the course of two decades, Eastern Europe remains an intriguing destination – a region that mingles rich cultures, wild natural beauty and incongruous postcommunist quirks.

If this is your first trip to Eastern Europe, you may be surprised by a few bureaucratic hurdles that still plague travellers, especially as you move further east. If it's not your first trip, you will be surprised at how easy things have become. There are 10 Eastern European countries that are already in the EU, and two more vying for membership in the near future, thereby simplifying border crossing, moneychanging and life in general. (That said, other entities continue to declare themselves to be independent countries, so there are still plenty of national boundaries to deal with.)

Don't forget, visas are still required to enter Belarus and Russia. Even when visas are available at the point of entry, you must obtain an invitation in advance – so you'll want to plan ahead, even if you normally prefer to fly by the seat of your pants.

WHEN TO GO

In deciding when to go to Eastern Europe, the most obvious factors to consider are climate and crowds, but festivals and other events may also influence when you want to travel (see p29).

The high tourist season generally runs from May until September. However, the peaks vary from place to place: the snowy season attracts skiers to mountain destinations; in Catholic countries, festive pre-Lenten carnivals draw revellers in early spring; 'white nights' make June a popular month in St Petersburg and the Baltics; sun worshippers and seafarers flock to the Adriatic coast and the Black Sea in late summer.

Unless you are angling for a specific event or activity, the best time to visit is either side of the summer peak: May, June and September stand out for pleasant weather and manageable crowds.

July and August are sunny and warm, and filled with lively festivals (p30), but they are also jammed with backpackers, bus tours and beachcombers. Any place with a coastline draws massive crowds in late summer. You may also want to avoid July and August if you're going to any of the 'big three' – Prague, Budapest and Kraków – as they can be unbearably crowded at this time.

Travelling out of season, you might discover some bargains in accommodation. However, beach towns and other places where tourism is the main industry may resemble ghost towns during the low season.

Winter is cold, especially in the Baltics, Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, where temperatures dip to -10°C and below between November and February. Still, the snow-covered landscapes and long dark nights can be enticing for the well-equipped traveller. In the southern reaches of the region, winter is not nearly so formidable.

COSTS & MONEY

Gone are the days when you can travel east, sell one pair of blue jeans and live like a king for a week. Long gone. First of all, nobody wants your blue jeans. Secondly, if you want to live like a king you have to pay for it.

Generally speaking, Eastern Europe is still cheaper than Western Europe. But the cost of living has surged in Prague, Warsaw, Bratislava and Bucharest;

At the time of publication, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia were members of the EU. Croatia and Macedonia were candidates for membership.

See Climate Charts (p963) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Checking the visa situation, especially for Belarus (p95) and Russia (p797)
- Notifying your bank and your credit card companies to expect charges and withdrawals from Eastern European countries; see p968
- Brushing up on your Cyrillic (p1009): a little bit goes a long way!
- Your European Health Insurance Card or other proof of medical insurance (p988)
- Flip-flops to wear indoors
- A Swiss Army knife with a bottle opener
- A torch for dark streets (Albania) and stairwells (Russia)
- A headscarf, worn by women upon entering Orthodox churches
- Painkillers: at least one hangover is practically guaranteed!

at the time of publication, Moscow is the most expensive city in the world for expatriates.

Budget travellers can expect to pay €10 to €15 for a dorm bed in cheaper cities such as Sofia or Tirana, while similar accommodation in Moscow or Prague is between €20 and €25. By self-catering and eating fast food, you might get by on €20 to €30 per day for food.

Midrange travellers will pay about €50 for a private room in most parts of the region, but you'll fork out about €80 in Prague and more than €100 in Moscow or St Petersburg. Expect to pay €10 to €20 per head to dine in a decent restaurant in the major cities.

Of course, Eastern Europe is a vast region with widely ranging costs. You'll need far less in the countryside than in the city, and your euro will go further in winter than in summer. Museums, excursions and transportation are extra costs that will increase your expenses.

Students and seniors are often eligible for discounts, especially if you have an EU passport or ISIC card (see p966).

Nobody would have thought it a decade ago, but these days you can use your ATM card to obtain money in any Eastern European city. All major credit and debit cards are accepted by ATMs, including those on the Cirrus/Maestro system. Credit cards are also widely accepted by hotels, restaurants and shops.

It's always useful to have a back-up plan in case of emergencies: most major banks will do cash advances on credit cards. Travellers cheques are still the safest way to carry large sums of money, but they are a pain in the proverbial, especially if you try to change them outside major cities.

If you are carrying cash, both euros and US dollars are easy to exchange throughout the region. In many places you can even pay for hotel accommodation in euros, although never count on this. The days of currency controls in Eastern Europe are gone, so you can freely exchange your extra local currency for 'hard' currency before you depart. That said, it may be difficult to exchange the local currency once you leave the country in question. You are better off spending it or changing it, even if this means getting bad exchange rates at the border.

XE (www.xe.com) is an up-to-the-second online currency-exchange calculator. Find out the rates for all Eastern European currencies, and see exactly how much your trip is going to cost you.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Most Eastern European countries lag behind their Western European counterparts when it comes to awareness of ecological issues. But that does not mean that you're off the hook. Here are some ways that you can minimise the environmental impact of your trip.

Getting There & Away

Air travel is the worst form of transportation for emitting greenhouse gases (or best, if your goal is to give off as much carbon dioxide as possible). It should come as no surprise that your ability to avoid air travel to Eastern Europe will be directly related to your place of origin.

The good news is that if you are coming from Western Europe, there is no shortage of overland routes. All of the Eastern European capitals (with the exception of Tirana) are connected to Western Europe by train, as are many of the smaller cities (see p978). Cheap buses also ply the most popular tourist routes (p978). Ferries cross the Baltic and Adriatic, dropping passengers on their eastern shores (p979).

Even if you are coming from Asia, you might travel overland if you have some time to spare. (Trans-Siberian Railway, anyone?) Intercontinental travellers will have a tougher time of it, though.

Slow Travel

Once you arrive, the entirety of Eastern Europe is at your disposal. You may wish to pop in for a weekend on a low-cost carrier, but you'll experience only a tiny fraction of this riveting region. Why not take some time and explore by extended overland travel? Not only is it more environmentally sound, it also allows you to see more, do more and learn more.

Most major cities in Eastern Europe are well served by public transportation, so you might as well use it. Many of these towns are already choked with traffic, which you'll want to avoid, so hop on the metro, bus or tram instead of driving. Even outside the cities, you'll find that buses and trains will get you almost everywhere you wish to go.

While parts of the region still suffer from industrial pollution, you will be amazed by the extensive network of national parks and nature preserves, often protecting spectacular mountain scenery, gorgeous coastline or primeval forest. Head out to these green sanctuaries and explore by bicycle, on horseback or by foot!

Accommodation & Food

'Biodegradable' and 'organic' may not be widespread in Eastern Europe, but we came across a few establishments that are doing their part to go green (see the boxed text, p26).

Shopping at local markets is an easy way to eat healthy and cheap. There's a good chance you are buying locally grown produce, which benefits the environment and your wallet! Plus, the local market often provides a chance to interact with vendors and to sample local foods (sometimes homemade) – a great cultural experience.

Guest houses and hostels are an appealing, intimate alternative to hotels. These days, most small, private properties offer the same professional service that you'll find at a larger hotel. But they are often family-run operations with much more character, sometimes at a fraction of the price – again, this benefits the local economy.

Responsible Travel Organisations

Biljana Tourist Association (www.beyondohrid.com) An excellent resource for independent travellers who wish to explore Macedonia 'Beyond Ohrid'.

Black Mountain (www.montenegroholiday.com) A Montenegro tour operator that is committed to protecting the environment while organising activities such as birdwatching, mountain biking and white-water rafting.

Blue World (www.blue-world.org) This NGO is dedicated to research and conservation in the Adriatic. Also sponsors 'ecovolunteers' to participate in 12-day research missions.

On the 'Day of the Tree', hundreds of thousands of Macedonian volunteers planted two million trees in a single day in March 2008, and another six million on one day in November.

If you must fly, consider offsetting your carbon emissions; see www.climatecare.org and www.carbonneutral.com.

Ethical Traveller (www.ethicaltraveller.org) has selected Bulgaria, Croatia and Estonia for its list of the 'Developing World's 10 Best Ethical Destinations', based on criteria such as environmental protection, social welfare and human rights.

GOOD FOR THE BODY, GOOD FOR THE SOUL

These are our top picks for ecofriendly accommodation and organic eateries in Eastern Europe:

- **Aed** (p344), Tallinn, Estonia – An organic ‘garden’ of Estonian Eden.
- **Kauno Arkivyskupijos Svečių Namai** (p490), Kaunas, Lithuania – A church-run guest house with an ecoconscious approach.
- **Morkų Šėlsmas** (p490), Kaunas, Lithuania – You’re invited to a Carrot Party! Homemade vegetarian goodies, made with organic ingredients and lots of love.
- **National Eco Restaurant** (p577), Durmitor National Park, Montenegro – Is it ‘eco’ because it’s in the national park or because the menu features local game and produce? Both, of course!
- **Natyral & Organik** (p52), Tirana, Albania – Stocks organic goodies from local producers and advocates for environmental awareness.
- **Soline 6** (p249), Mljet Island, Croatia – A rustic and ecofriendly lodge in the midst of Mljet National Park.

Caput Insulae – Beli (www.supovi.hr) This Croatian organisation works to protect the Eurasian griffon. Travellers can volunteer on a weekly basis to clean up the endangered bird species’ habitat on the island of Cres.

Centre for Scientific Tourism (www.csts.sk) Tours in Slovakia that allow travellers to learn about natural history, geology and ecology.

Centre for Sustainable Tourism Initiatives (www.cstimontenegro.org) An NGO that promotes sustainable tourism in Montenegro. Its commercial wing, Montenegro Adventures (www.montenegro-adventures.com) organises tours, accommodation and the like.

European Centre for Eco Agro Tourism (www.eceat.org) A network of more than 1000 small-scale lodges and farms that provide rural, ecofriendly lodging. Also certifies environmentally friendly establishments throughout Europe.

Green Key (www.green-key.org) It’s a Scandi initiative, but the Baltic states are also signing up. The search engine includes hotels, hostels and restaurants that have fulfilled numerous environmental criteria.

Green Visions (www.greenvisions.ba) Offers ecofriendly tours and activities, engages in community development and lobbies for environmental protective measures in Bosnia and Hercegovina.

Heritage Trails (www.heritage-trails.cz) A Czech company that offers walking and cycling tours all around Central Europe.

Organic Agriculture Association (www.organic.org.al) An organisation of farmers in Albania that promotes the use of organic practices and principles.

Pro Natura (www.pronatura.ro) Administers protected areas and works to reduce the impact of tourism in Romania.

Responsible Travel (www.responsibletravel.com) A fantastic search engine that allows you to search for environmentally and socially responsible tour operators in your country and city of interest. All operators are screened for certain ‘responsible travel’ criteria.

Transylvania Ecological Club (www.greenagenda.org) Grass-roots environmental group that focuses on ecotravel in Romania.

Travelling Balkans (www.travellingthebalkans.net) Advocates for cultural and natural awareness as a means of promoting ethical and responsible travel throughout the Balkans.

Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (www.wwoof.org) Work at an organic farm in exchange for food, accommodation and some hands-on experience in organic farming. WWOOF has representative organisations in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia and Romania, but there are also ‘independent’ farms offering work opportunities in other countries.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

The most pertinent titles for each country are listed in the individual country chapters. The following books provide an interesting introduction to the complexities and idiosyncrasies of Eastern Europe as a region.

Skype – the software that allows you to make free international phone calls over the internet – was invented in 2003 by two Estonian software engineers.

- *Stalin's Nose* (Rory Maclean) Immediately following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Rory Maclean set out on a journey in a Trabant from Berlin to Moscow, accompanied by his aunt and her pet pig. His hilarious account captures the quirks of postcommunist Europe at an exceptional time in history – after the wall but before the mall.
- *Café Europa: Life after Communism* (Slavenka Drakulic) This book, by a Croat journalist, comments on the rush for Eastern Europe to become Western Europe. Born of a communist father, married to a Swede and now living in Vienna, Drakulic has a unique perspective on the changes sweeping the region in the 1990s. This book follows on her earlier collection of essays, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, published in 1992.
- *The Zookeeper's Wife* (Diane Ackerman) A well-documented account of one Polish family's heroic efforts to shelter Jews fleeing the Warsaw ghetto. The biographical account also shares Ackerman's own impressions as she returns to Poland 50 years after her story transpired.
- *Guerrilla Radio* (Matthew Collin) This is a riveting, informative account of the music-lovers turned political rebels who ran an independent radio station during the Milošević era in Serbia. Collin's personal interactions and interviews with the founders of the station make this a fascinating read.
- *Bury Me Standing* (Isabel Fonseca) Eastern Europe's culturally rich Roma people are explored in this history, travelogue and cultural guide. It's a deeply moving account of Roma trying to retain their culture in postcommunist, nationalist Eastern Europe.
- *Eastern Approaches* (Fitzroy Maclean) The wry wit and derring-do of Fitzroy Maclean is on display in this firsthand account of his adventures as a British diplomat and dynamite in Stalin's Soviet Union and Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia. Maclean plays the role of diplomat, soldier, spy and all-around adventurer; some claim he inspired Ian Fleming's character of Bond, James Bond.
- *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (Rebecca West) This is a huge, unclassifiable look at the Balkans on the eve of WWII through the eyes of Brit Rebecca West as she makes her way through Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo, Albania and Croatia in 1937. This fascinating, poetic account is still considered a travel literature classic.
- *Another Fool in the Balkans* (Tony White) Sixty years after Rebecca West's journey, White retraces her footsteps, paying tribute to her in this collection of essays. He explores the region's history and cultures in attempt to make sense of the contemporary conflict.
- *Hidden Macedonia* (Christopher Deliso) This engaging travelogue records a journey around the great Macedonian lakes of Ohrid and Prespa, and the three countries that share them: Greece, Albania and Macedonia.
- *To the Baltic with Bob* (Griff Rhys Jones) For a light-hearted read, try this account of sailing from the UK to St Petersburg via the canals of Eastern Europe. Written by British TV comedian Griff Rhys Jones, it's eccentric and grumpy but good fun.

For a laugh, read *Molvania: A Land Untouched by Modern Dentistry* (Santo Cilauro et al), a faux-guidebook to a fictitious Eastern European country that's the 'next big thing'. Hilarious!

Several Western writers turned their surreal postcommunist travel experiences into funny and insightful novels. *Everything is Illuminated* is Jonathan Safran Foer's fictionalised account of the retracing of his roots in Ukraine. Gary Shteyngart wrote *The Russian Debutante's Guide* about expat life in the fictitious city of Prava.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Whether you're planning a weekend in Prague or an odyssey around the entire region, you'll find plenty of information on the web.

Balkan Travellers (www.balkantravellers.com) News and musings from the Balkans. Articles feature off-the-beaten-track destinations, active adventures and cultural discoveries, plus there is a route planner to help you plan your trip.

Multilingual, multi-national and multimedia: Cafe Babel (www.cafebabel.com) is the magazine for the new Europe, an interactive forum commenting on current affairs across the continent.

Baltic Times (www.baltictimes.com) News from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as travel stories in the region and cultural listings from the capital cities.

Flycheapo (www.flycheapo.com) This brilliant website saves you the hassle of checking every budget airline's website for routes to wherever you want to go. Flycheapo monitors the flights of all these airlines and tells you who flies to where you want to go.

In Your Pocket (www.inyourpocket.com) This Vilnius-based desktop-publishing company has enjoyed incredible success. The formula is simple: it produces frequently updated booklets about scores of destinations within Eastern Europe, which are financially supported by advertising. You can download a huge amount of information in PDF form from the website – all for free!

Rail Europe (www.raileurope.com) Gives lots of information on timetables, routes and prices for most of the region (but not the former Soviet Union). For detailed information about the entire former Soviet Union's trains, check out www.poezda.net.

Southeast European Times (www.setimes.com) A source of news and information about business, politics and society in Southeast Europe, offered in 10 different languages.

Thorn Tree (<http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com>) The Lonely Planet interactive travellers' message board. There's a dedicated section for posts relating to Eastern Europe and a huge number of travellers able to give up-to-the-minute advice.

MUST-SEE MOVIES

Most people think Eastern European film means slow-paced psychological dramas in black and white, but that stereotype couldn't be less true these days. Against all odds, Eastern Europe has a small but creatively dynamic film industry, as well as a long history of classic (erm, slow-paced, black-and-white) films. Here are some recent releases that offer good entertainment and insight on the region:

- *California Dreamin'* (2007) A train bound for Kosovo gets delayed in a small Romanian village, much to the chagrin of Polish and American soldiers who are guarding the cargo on board. Some local officials attempt to entertain their unexpected guests, while others attempt to profit from them.
- *Kráska v nesnáziach* (Beauty in Trouble; 2006) This delightful and insightful drama follows three generations of a Czech family as they try to navigate the tumultuous transition from communism. Their troubled existence is disrupted when they cross paths with a kind-hearted and wealthy émigré who has returned to settle his dead mother's estate.
- *Grbavica* (2006) Set in the area of Sarajevo of the same name, *Grbavica* is a Bosnian film about the realities of Serb rape camps during the Bosnian War. The harrowing story shocked Bosnians and outraged Serbs, and it won the Golden Bear for best film at the Berlin Film Festival in 2006.
- *Lost and Found* (2005) Six short films produced in Estonia, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Hungary, Romania and Serbia, and Montenegro. All offer poignant peeks into the hearts and minds of young Eastern Europeans in the generation since the fall of the Berlin Wall.
- *Cesky Sen* (Czech Dream; 2004) A documentary about two students who undertake the hoax of launching a huge new supermarket. A clever and compelling film full of observations on consumer society in the Czech Republic after the fall of communism.
- *The Pianist* (2002) Roman Polański's film vividly depicts the Warsaw ghetto during the Nazi occupation. The true story is based on the autobiography of musician Władysław Szpilman.

Events Calendar

JANUARY–FEBRUARY

KUKERI Sun before Lent
Masked dancers in Shiroka Laka (p194; Bulgaria) ward off evil spirits in this (hairy) festival.

KURETOVANJE 10 days leading up to Lent
This rite of spring in Ptuj (p905; Slovenia) is celebrated for 10 days before Shrove Tuesday; it's the most popular Mardi Gras celebration in Slovenia.

RIJEKA CARNIVAL 2 weeks leading up to Lent
Held in Rijeka (p227; Croatia), this carnival's two weeks of partying involves pageants, street dances, concerts, masked balls, exhibitions and an international parade.

VITRANC CUP late Feb-early Mar
Men's slalom and giant slalom competitions in Kranjska Gora (p894; Slovenia).

MARCH–APRIL

MARTENITSA Mar
Bulgarian custom (see p194) dictates that locals exchange red-and-white figures, which they wear until they see a stork.

SKI-JUMPING WORLD CUP CHAMPIONSHIPS 3rd weekend in Mar
This competition in Planica (p894; Slovenia) was the site of a world-record jump of 239m in 2005.

ZAGREB BIENNALE 3rd week in Apr
Held since 1961, the Zagreb Biennale (p214) is Croatia's most important classical-music event; it takes place in odd years only.

FESTIVAL OF SACRED MUSIC 2 weeks leading up to Easter
Six thematic concerts in the solemn setting of Petrov Cathedral in Brno (p313; Czech Republic).

MAY

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR DAY 1 May
Still celebrated as a major holiday in the former Soviet Union (p955); bigger cities have fireworks, concerts and other performances.

PRAGUE SPRING 12 May-3 Jun
This international classical-music festival kicks off summer in Prague (p281; Czech Republic).

KHAMORO last week in May
An annual festival of Roma music, dance and culture in Prague (p281; Czech Republic).

DRUGA GODBA late May-early Jun
A festival of alternative and world music held at the Križanke in Ljubljana (p883; Slovenia).

JUNE

VILNIUS FESTIVAL late May-early Jun
Throughout June, performances in Vilnius (p480; Lithuania) highlight Lithuanian composers and music from different eras, including early baroque and contemporary jazz.

WROCLAW NON STOP Jun
Movies, music, theatre, dance and art are exhibited throughout the month at venues around Wrocław (p635; Poland).

OPERA FESTIVAL Jun
An annual event that showcases the best of Riga's (p451; Latvia) opera season.

OLD TOWN DAYS early Jun
Held in the photogenic 14th-century Old Town of Tallinn (p342; Estonia), this week-long festival features dancing, concerts, costumed performers and plenty of medieval merrymaking.

BALTICA INTERNATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL early-mid-Jun
A week of music, dance and displays focusing on folk traditions. It's shared between the Baltic capitals; it will be in Riga (Latvia) in 2009, Tallinn (p342; Estonia) in 2010, and in Vilnius (p497; Lithuania) in 2011.

ROSE FESTIVAL 1st weekend in Jun
Three-day celebration of roses in Kazanlak (p168; Bulgaria) that culminates in the crowning of a festival queen.

VIP INMUSIC FESTIVAL 3-4 Jun
Zagreb (p214; Croatia) hosts a two-day music extravaganza on the island in Jarun Lake.

MALTA INTERNATIONAL THEATRE FESTIVAL 3rd week in Jun
A prestigious international theatre festival in Poznań (p639; Poland).

UNITED ISLANDS 3rd weekend in Jun
World-music festival in Prague (p281; Czech Republic).

FIVE-PETALLED ROSE FESTIVAL 3rd weekend in Jun
Knights, jugglers, musicians and artists roam Český Krumlov (p307; Czech Republic), celebrating the Renaissance period.

ST JOHN'S EVE & ST JOHN'S DAY 23 & 24 Jun
The Baltic region's biggest annual night out is a celebration of midsummer. It's best experienced out in the country, where huge bonfires flare for all-night revellers. See p363 and p463 for details.

WHITE NIGHTS late Jun
St Petersburg (p781; Russia) celebrates the summer solstice with all-night parties and a packed cultural calendar.

LENT INTERNATIONAL SUMMER FESTIVAL late Jun-early Jul
A two-week festival of folklore and culture in Maribor (p904; Slovenia).

ROCK OTOČEC late Jun or early Jul
Slovenia's biggest open-air rock concert takes place in Novo Mesto (p907; Slovenia).

KALIAKRA ROCK FEST last weekend in Jun
This festival in Kavarna (p184; Bulgaria) kick-starts the Black Sea summer with well-known heavy-metal bands.

JULY

RĪGAS RITMI Jul
This international music festival in Rīga (p451; Latvia) highlights rhythms from around the world, including world beat, nu jazz and Afro-Cuban music.

WARSAW SUMMER JAZZ DAYS Jul
This summer concert series in Warsaw (p601; Poland) attracts international artists such as

Wynton Marsalis and Natalie Cole, as well as Polish performers.

LJUBLJANA FESTIVAL Jul-Aug
Slovenia's premier cultural event (p883) includes music, dance and theatre.

JEWISH CULTURE FESTIVAL 1st week in Jul
Kraków (p614; Poland) hosts a week of music, art exhibitions and lectures celebrating Jewish culture.

KARLOVY VARY INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL early Jul
A renowned event in Karlovy Vary (p296; Czech Republic) that shows hundreds of films and attracts international celebrities.

BALKAN FESTIVAL OF FOLK DANCES & SONGS early Jul
A five-day festival in Ohrid (p517; Macedonia) that captivates audiences with performances by folkloric groups from around the region.

EXIT FESTIVAL 2nd weekend in Jul
Europe's edgiest annual music festival, held in Novi Sad (p820; Serbia), pulls in an international audience and a star-studded line-up.

GALIČNIK WEDDING 12 & 13 Jul
A beloved traditional event in gorgeous Mavrovo National Park (p514; Macedonia).

MEDIEVAL FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS mid-Jul
Sighișoara (p701; Romania) hosts open-air concerts, parades and ceremonies, all glorifying medieval Transylvania.

SLAVYANSKY BAZAAR mid-Jul
Dozens of singers and performers from Slavic countries come together for a week of concerts and parties in Vitsebsk (p92; Belarus).

MARAMUZICAL FESTIVAL mid-Jul
A lively four-day international folk music-festival in Vadu Izei (p719; Romania).

INTERNATIONAL MUSIC FESTIVAL mid-Jul-mid-Aug
Thousands of music lovers congregate in Český Krumlov (p307; Czech Republic) for classical concerts, as well as jazz, rock and folk music.

CROATIA SUMMER FESTIVALS

mid-Jul–mid-Aug

Dubrovnik, Pula, Split and Zagreb host month-long events (p256), with music, dance and theatre performances at venues around the towns.

OHRID SUMMER FESTIVAL

mid-Jul–mid-Aug

Held in Ohrid (p517), Macedonia's biggest cultural event features classical music, opera, theatre and dance.

BALTIC BEACH PARTY

3rd weekend in Jul

A weekend of music and drinking in Liepāja (p459; Latvia), along with volleyball and football competitions on the beach, and a sand-sculpture exhibition.

SEA FESTIVAL

late Jul

Celebrations in the port city of Klaipėda (p493; Lithuania).

AUGUST**DON CHENTO****JAZZ FESTIVAL**

1st weekend in aug

A newish jazz event in Kaliningrad (p791; Russia) that already attracts performers from across Europe.

SARAJEVO**FILM FESTIVAL**

mid-Aug

Globally acclaimed festival screening commercial and art-house movies in Sarajevo (p113; Bosnia and Hercegovina).

SZIGET**MUSIC FESTIVAL**

mid-Aug

A week-long world-music bash in Budapest (p382; Hungary) that features bands from around the world playing at more than 60 venues.

SEPTEMBER**DVOŘÁK AUTUMN**

Sep

A festival of classical music in honour of the Czech Republic's favourite composer. Held in Karlovy Vary (p298; Czech Republic).

PRAGUE AUTUMN

12 Sep-1 Oct

This festival of orchestral music, held in Prague (Czech Republic; p281), hosts conductors and symphony orchestras from around the world.

COWS' BALL

mid-Sep

A weekend of folk dancing, music, eating and drinking in Bohinj (p893; Slovenia) to mark the return of the cows from their high pastures.

OCTOBER**ADVENTURE RACE MONTENEGRO**

early Oct

A two-day fundraising challenge (p578) that incorporates kayaking, mountain biking, trekking and orienteering.

WINE FESTIVAL

2nd Sun in Oct

Winemakers, wine tasting, wine buying and wine-enriched folkloric performances in Moldova (p550).

NOVEMBER–DECEMBER**INTERNATIONAL****JAZZ FESTIVAL**

2nd week in Nov

Held in Sarajevo (p113; Bosnia and Hercegovina), this festival showcases local and international jazz musicians.

PRAGUE INTERNATIONAL**JAZZ FESTIVAL**

late Nov-early Dec

This festival in Prague (p281) attracts the Czech Republic's top jazz musicians, as well as a few international performers.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

EASTERN EUROPE 101

Four Weeks / Prague to Budapest

Begin your trip in magical **Prague** (p270), spending several days absorbing the city and nearby towns, such as beer lovers' mecca **Pišeň** (p300) and beautiful **Kutná Hora** (p291).

Head into Poland to **Kraków** (p608), with its gobsmacking Old Town. This is a great base for visiting the **Tatra Mountains** (p629) and for the harrowing trip to **Oświęcim** (p618).

Travel south to Slovakia, where you can enjoy magnificent scenery in the **High Tatras** (p851) before pursuing more-urban activities in delightful **Bratislava** (p836).

Journey up the Danube to **Budapest** (p373). From here visit the picturesque Hungarian countryside – try the baroque city of **Eger** (p419), with its ancient castle, or **Pécs** (p410), stuffed full of relics from the Turkish occupation.

Now plunge into Romania. Use **Cluj-Napoca** (p706) as your base for visiting the region of **Maramureş** (p716), then head for the medieval superlatives of **Sibiu** (p702) and **Braşov** (p695) before heading on to the **Danube Delta** (p735), where you can ogle birds, dine on fish and enjoy some of the quietest beaches in Europe. Finish in **Bucharest** (p677) for excellent food and nightlife, and a taste of megalomaniac architecture.

If you are a first-timer, consider Eastern Europe 101, which covers the region's 'big five'. It begins in the Czech Republic and wends its way through Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, providing a fantastic introduction to a region in transition.



EAST OF EAST TOUR

Four Weeks / Warsaw to Warsaw

Begin in bustling **Warsaw** (p595), where you can see the reconstructed Old Town and learn about its dark history. From here, head by train to **Lviv** (p926), Ukraine's most beautiful city, and spend a few days here before crossing the country to graceful **Kyiv** (p916), the Jerusalem of East Slavonic culture.

After a few days enjoying the sights in the Ukrainian capital, take the sleeper train to the megalopolis **Moscow** (p753), Europe's biggest city and a place of striking extremes. Travel around the **Golden Ring** (p769) to get a sense of the Russian countryside. Next on the agenda is the beautiful baroque architecture and rich cultural life of **St Petersburg** (p771). You can easily spend three or four days in the city itself, although there are abundant sights outside St Petersburg, such as the tsarist palace at **Petrodvorets** (p786).

In Estonia, you'll love medieval **Tallinn** (p334) and the rural delights of **Saaremaa** (p359). The Latvian capital at **Riga** (p443) boasts Europe's finest collection of art nouveau architecture. But don't ignore the country's other highlights, such as the medieval castles and caves of **Sigulda** (p460) and the breathtaking Baltic coastline around **Ventspils** (p459). In Lithuania, enjoy charming **Vilnius** (p472) and the amazing **Curonian Spit** (p495) before re-entering Poland and heading back to Warsaw.



Plan ahead to get your Russian visa. Once armed with the appropriate *dokumenty*, you'll make a grand loop, starting in westward-looking Poland, traversing the Ukrainian countryside, dipping into Mother Russia and circling back to sample the feisty Baltic countries.

THE BALKANS & BEYOND

Four Weeks / Ljubljana to Varna

Begin in lively little Slovenia, with a cheap flight to charming **Ljubljana** (p877). Indulge in superb scenery and adrenaline-rush mountain sports in the **Julian Alps** (p889) before heading south to the Croatian coast and working your way through the beaches along the **Dalmatian coast** (p232). Stop in **Dubrovnik** (p249) to explore the Old Town and the surrounding islands. Take a side trip to Bosnia – perhaps a day trip to **Mostar** (p120) to see the legendary bridge, or a night or two in bustling **Sarajevo** (p106).

Then continue south into Montenegro, one of Europe's youngest countries. Visit the historic walled city of **Kotor** (p563) and enjoy some of the country's beautiful beaches around **Sveti Stefan** (p567) before heading over into Albania.

From the northern city of **Shkodra** (p53) take a bus straight on to **Tirana** (p46), a mountain-shrouded ramshackle capital on the rise. Make an excursion to **Kruja** (p55) and gorgeous **Berat** (p59) before taking a bus through the mountains into little-explored Macedonia, ending up in **Ohrid** (p514). Spend at least two days here, enjoying the multitude of sights and swimming in the beautiful eponymous lake. Make your way to **Skopje** (p507), Macedonia's fun capital, from where you can head overland into Bulgaria.

Your obvious first stop is **Sofia** (p145), Europe's cheapest capital and best hidden gem. But don't tarry too long before continuing east to **Veliko Târnovo** (p169), the awesome ancient capital and university town. From here it's an easy bus to the beach at **Varna** (p179), complete with marvellous museums, Roman ruins and open-air nightclubs.

Beginning in the Slovenian capital, this itinerary winds down the spectacular coastline of the former Yugoslav states and Albania, visiting some of Europe's newest nations along the way.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

ON THE EDGE

Four Weeks / Timișoara or Cluj-Napoca to Warsaw

Begin with a cheap flight from Western Europe to **Timișoara** (p713) or **Cluj-Napoca** (p706), the best budget gateway cities for the far reaches of Eastern Europe. Then get medieval in **Sibiu** (p702) and/or **Brașov** (p695) before a run to lively **Iasi** (p720), near the Moldovan border.

Here the real adventure starts – cross into Moldova and head for the entertaining capital, **Chișinău** (p534), where partying is a way of life and wine is plentiful and cheap, as it's made in the local vineyards, including **Cricova** (p541). Travel into Transdnestr, a country that doesn't officially exist, to go back in time in **Tiraspol** (p545).

Entering Ukraine, make a beeline for the ethnic melting pot at **Odesa** (p936) and enjoy the relaxed pace of the Black Sea. If you want to check out the Crimean peninsula, head to **Simferopol** (p945), the peninsula's transport hub. From here you can make a loop around the peninsula to admire the palaces near **Yalta** (p947), and the fantastic Khan's Palace and monastery at **Bakhchysaray** (p950).

When you have had your fill of sun and sea, head north to **Kyiv** (p916), which demands several days' attention. Be one of the few people in the world to make the grim but fascinating trip to the abandoned towns near **Chornobyl** (p926); consider the risks before you sign up, however.

Your last stop is Belarus. Have a blast in monolithic **Minsk** (p76). Heading west, stop at **Brest** (p86) on the border and use it as a base to visit **Belavezhskaya Pushcha National Park** (p90) before circling back to **Warsaw** (p595).



This region is on the edge in more ways than one: geographically, for sure, but also culturally. You'll find these off-the-beaten-track destinations to be nearly tourist-free, but still replete with fascinating history, amazing architecture and glorious fresh air.

THE IONIAN TO THE BALTIC

Four Weeks / Saranda to Kaliningrad

Arrive in Albania at **Saranda** (p63), then stay the night and try to see the glorious ruins of **Butrint** (p64) before travelling up the **Ionian Coast** (p61) to **Tirana** (p46).

Spend a day or two in the Albanian capital before taking the bus to Kosovo. Revel in the freedom at **Pristina** (p434), Europe's newest capital. Then head north to **Belgrade** (p807), now vibrant and rejuvenated. Continue north to **Novi Sad** (p819) – if you come in July you might catch the Exit Festival, held annually in the city's historic hilltop fortress.

Cross into Hungary at pretty **Szeged** (p416) and head for **Lake Balaton** (p403). Keep surging north into Slovakia, aiming for **Bratislava** (p836), before going on to the incredible scenery of **Slovenský raj** (p861).

Crossing the **Tatra Mountains** (p629) into Poland, travel via **Kraków** (p608) to unsung gem **Wrocław** (p633), spending a few days in both before dropping in on beautifully restored **Poznań** (p638). From here, the Baltic is yours. Try any of the towns along the coast: **Hel** (p650) and **Łeba** (p655) are both recommended for beaches, wildlife and water sports; **Malbork** (p651) is famed for Europe's biggest Gothic castle; while **Gdańsk** (p643) is the thriving port city where Solidarity was born.

Finally, for true adventure (and that's just getting your Russian visa) head for **Kaliningrad** (p786) – about as far from the beaten track as anyone can get in Europe!

From Albania's magnificent Ionian Coast, weave your way north across the continent, covering Kosovo, Serbia, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland. End your journey in Russian Kaliningrad.



TAILORED TRIPS

WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Eastern Europe is flush with history, culture and natural wonders, so it is no surprise that it contains numerous **World Heritage sites** (<http://whc.unesco.org>). Start in the historic centres of **Prague** (p270), **Kraków** (p608) and **Budapest** (p373), then kick off the Baltic countries with the capitals' extraordinary Old Towns: art nouveau **Riga** (p447), baroque **Vilnius** (p478) and medieval **Tallinn** (p339). Moscow earns acclaim for **Red Square** (p758) and the **Kremlin** (p759).

But there are scores of sites outside the capitals. Sites in the Czech Republic include the historic centres of **Kutná Hora** (p291), **Český Krumlov** (p305) and **Telč** (p318). In Slovakia, Spišské Podhradie is home to the remarkable **Spiš Castle** (p860).

In Poland, medieval **Zamość** (p624) boasts an incredible architectural ensemble. The Lithuanian archaeological site of **Kernavė** (p486) is a world gem, as is the extraordinary **Curonian Spit** (p495).

In Belarus, stop at **Mir Castle** (p86) and **Belavezhskaya Pushcha National Park** (p90).

In Hungary, don't miss the wine-producing region of **Tokaj** (p422). The jewel in Croatia's glittering cultural crown is **Dubrovnik** (p251).

Montenegro's World Heritage sites are natural wonders: the fjords of the **Bay of Kotor** (p561), and the icy peaks of **Durmitor National Park** (p575).

Over in Albania, **Berat** (p59) and **Gjirokastra** (p65) earn Unesco attention. In Bulgaria, **Nesebăr** (p185) evokes ancient Byzantium with its churches.

JEWISH HERITAGE TRIP

Begin in Riga and learn about the deportation of Latvia's Jewish population at the **Jews in Latvia** (p450) museum, then visit the haunting memorial to the **Salaspils concentration camp** (p450) before going south to Lithuania.

Vilnius has plenty of sites of interest, including the **Holocaust Museum** (p481), while **Trakai** (p485) is still home to some 360 Karaite Jews, a fascinating example of cultural continuity. Stop in Kaunas for a visit to the chilling **Ninth Fort** (p490) and the **Sugihara House & Foundation** (p489).

In Poland, head for Warsaw, taking in the wealth of museums and memorials, including the **Warsaw Rising Museum** (p600). In Lublin, you can walk the Jewish heritage trail and visit the remains of one of the Nazis' largest death camps at **Majdanek** (p622). Your last stop in Poland is Kraków, where the Jewish quarter **Kazimierz** (p613) was made famous by the movie *Schindler's List*. Use Kraków as your base to make the harrowing trip to **Oświęcim** (p618) for a shocking firsthand glimpse of human evil.

In the Czech Republic, **Josefov** (p277) was Prague's original Jewish quarter; it's jam-packed with Jewish history.

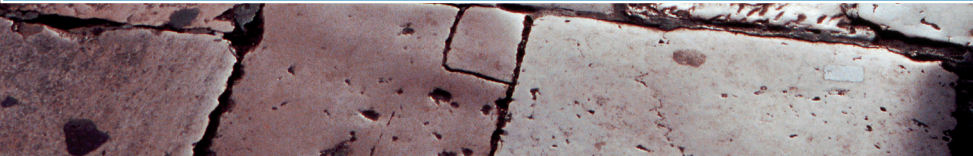
End in **Budapest** (p373), where you'll find a flourishing Jewish population of 80,000 and some 25 active synagogues – a hopeful and positive end to a sometimes harrowing trip.





REGIONS WITHIN THE REGION

Eastern Europe is a vast region, incorporating millions of square kilometres in land area and 21 independent nations. The cultures and landscapes are so varied that it can be difficult to create a cohesive picture of the region – but expansive coasts, voluminous rivers and sharp political boundaries (past and present) can help connect the dots. Explore the regions within the region to find commonalities among the diversity.





Along the Adriatic

If you think of Eastern Europe as a cold, colourless destination, think again – and then head directly to the eastern coast of the Adriatic. Here the rugged rocky mountains drop straight into the crystalline waters, yachties hop from island to idyllic island, and Roman ruins, medieval cities and quaint fishing villages dot the tantalising landscape.





3

1 Dubrovnik, Croatia

Walking around the city walls of Dubrovnik (p249) offers expansive vistas of rocky islands, grassy mountains and shimmering seas, along with views of people pegging out their washing on lines running between buildings.

2 Piran, Slovenia

Surrounded by the sparkling Adriatic on three sides, picturesque Piran (p900) is the highlight of the slim Slovenian coast, with Gothic architecture and seafood delicacies that are reminiscent of Venice.

3 Zadar, Croatia

This Croatian chocolate box (p233) offers all of the Dalmatian treats, from Roman ruins and medieval churches to quaint cafes and sun-bleached beaches. Sample them all, but don't miss the maraschino cherry.



4

4 Kotor, Montenegro

Fifteen hundred steps lead up to the old fort that overlooks the sleepy town of Kotor (p563). The reward? A cooling dip in the emerald-coloured fjord.

5 Sveti Stefan, Montenegro

Once a fishermen's village and now a luxury island hotel, Sveti Stefan (p567) is one big vehicle-free zone – perfect for a leisurely stroll taking in all its charms: rustic stone buildings, narrow streets, small churches and shops...



1

Baltic Bliss

A land of extremes, this northern corner of Eastern Europe is known for its silent, stoic population, who brave the deep, dark winters. But their reward comes in summer months, when the sky stays light around the clock, the Baltic waters warm to a bearable (and bare-able) frigid and the cities' old towns come to life.



2



3

1 Vilnius, Lithuania

With Europe's largest medieval Old Town, Vilnius (p472) is a maze of cobbled streets punctuated by church spires, quaint courtyards, cosy cafes and Jewish-heritage sights.

2 Gdańsk, Poland

From the Teutonic takeover to the collapse of communism, this vibrant port (p643) has played a crucial role in Polish history. Explore the colourful Old Town before heading to the seaside resort at Sopot or the pristine beaches of Hel for a cooling Baltic dip.

3 Riga, Latvia

Foodies visiting Riga (p443) should head straight to the Central Market. Old ladies haggle over prices for shiny berries, big bunches of sorrel and pickled garlic, while containers overflow with fresh sour cream, hearty black bread and every cut of meat imaginable.

4 Tallinn, Estonia

Explore the gorgeous Old Town in Tallinn (p334), or escape the crowds and leg it to lovely Kadriorg Park for some space, a breath of fresh air and wonderful people-watching.



4

5 St Petersburg, Russia

Russia's 'northern capital', St Petersburg (p771) is at its most enticing during the magical white nights, when the sun never sets and the whole town celebrates. Locals and visitors stay out to drink champagne and watch the parade of ships that passes through when the Neva bridges are raised.

6 Lahemaa National Park, Estonia

Follow the coastline of this national park (p349) out of Käsmu, once a village for sea captains and now a burgeoning colony of artists. Discover Estonia's past at the park's manor houses, but don't bypass the Bronze Age archaeological sites.

7 Jūrmala, Latvia

With pine forest descending to meet wide, white-sand beaches, Jūrmala (p456) provides a perfect escape from the city. Pack a picnic and watch the sunset after a long summer day.



1

Beautiful Blue Danube

Contrary to popular opinion (most notably held by Johann Strauss II), the Danube is not blue; it's really more of a murky greenish brown. But it *is* beautiful, stringing together some of Eastern Europe's most precious urban and natural jewels before splaying out into the Danube Delta and the Black Sea.



2



1 Danube Delta, Romania

As the mighty Danube approaches the Black Sea, it splits into three, creating the Danube Delta (p735). Rich in birdlife and fish species, this wetlands habitat is home to Europe's largest pelican colony.

2 Belgrade, Serbia

Boasting beautiful river views, the Serbian capital (p807) surrounds a fantastic fairytale castle. The Belgrade population knows how to have a good time, and you'll find people crowding into cafes and getting carried away on river cruises every day of the week.

3 Budapest, Hungary

Looking for pampering in Budapest (p373)? Relax in the glory of the Gellért Baths (Gellért Fürdő), which combine serious spa treatments with extravagant architectural excesses, then retire to a Viennese-style coffee house for tokay and excellent cherry strudels.

4 Bratislava, Slovakia

Wander the historic cobblestone centre of this charming city (p836), which is preserving its past even as it embraces its Euro-centric future. Climb up Castle Hill for an overview of the city.



5 Novy Sad, Serbia

Visit Novy Sad (p819) in July to be part of the Exit Festival, where wildly eclectic sounds and amazing views enchant and exhilarate revellers. Described as the place where 'hedonism meets activism', Novy Sad really becomes a State of Exit.

6 Rusenski Lom Nature Park, Bulgaria

The rocky cliffs of this ever expanding nature reserve (p178) house the intriguing Ivanovo Rock Monastery; for the claustrophobic, there are miles of walking trails providing fresh air and expansive river views.

7 Vidin, Bulgaria

Centuries-old walls surround this historic city (p191), which is topped by a 10th-century fortress. Enjoy the city's riverside setting in the leafy park or at one of many floating fish restaurants.



Red Ramble

The Soviet Union is gone but not forgotten. No trip to Eastern Europe is complete without a visit to one of the former republics to remember the regime that so shaped the region in the 20th century.



1 Moscow, Russia

Not only the capital of Russia and the capital of the USSR, Moscow (p753) was the capital of communism. Stepping onto Red Sq never ceases to inspire: the towers of the Kremlin, the colours adorning St Basil's Cathedral, and the elaborate edifice of the State History Museum all encircle a vast stretch of cobblestones.

2 Yalta, Ukraine

The events of 1945 at the Great Livadia Palace in Yalta (p947) changed the course of history. Here – in the wake of the Allied victory – Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin divided up Europe and inadvertently launched the Cold War.

3 Minsk, Belarus

Meander down the grandiose main thoroughfare in Minsk (p76), where the ghost of Stalinism still lurks amid the monolithic communist-era architecture. Remember dark days and witness the city cautiously moving towards a brighter future.

4 Transnistria, Moldova

Step back in time when you enter this idiosyncratic and anachronistic region (p543), which claims to be one of the last bastions of communism. There are plenty of Lenin statues – and even a Kirov! – ready for photos.

The Authors



MARA VORHEES

Coordinating Author

It was 1988 when Mara took her first trip to Eastern Europe, riding a bus from Helsinki to Leningrad, then ditching her tour group for friendly black marketeers. She has since travelled throughout the region, acting as au pair in Ukraine, bussing through the Baltics, journeying by train across Russia and drifting down the Danube. Her first assignment for Lonely Planet was the 6th edition of this very book, and she authored the *Moscow City Guide*, *St Petersburg City Guide* and *Russia*. When not in the east, she lives in a pink house in Somerville, Massachusetts. Follow her adventures at www.maravorhees.com. Mara wrote Destination Eastern Europe, Getting Started, Itineraries, Regions within the Region, Regional Directory and Transport in Eastern Europe.



BRETT ATKINSON

Czech Republic

Brett has been travelling to Eastern Europe for more than 20 years, and has honeymooned in Slovenia and Bosnia, written about Hungary's communist past, and island-hopped in Croatia. On his second extended research trip to the Czech Republic, he attempted to really get off the beaten track, especially if this meant seeking out interesting out-of-the-way microbreweries. When he's not on the road for Lonely Planet, Brett lives with Carol in Auckland, New Zealand. Fortunately his local microbrew emporium produces a damn fine Bohemian pilsner, ensuring the world's best beer is never far away.



CAROLYN BAIN

Estonia

Melbourne-born Carolyn got her first glimpse behind the Iron Curtain in Poland in early 1989, while she was a student in Denmark. It was the year communism unravelled throughout Eastern Europe, and thus began her fascination. In 1991, while studying Russian and politics at university, she was overjoyed when her Soviet Politics class had to change its name to the Soviet Union and Beyond. Since then she has applauded the renewed independence and flourishing creativity of the Baltic countries on regular visits to the region. She has covered Sweden and Denmark for Lonely Planet, but Estonia holds a special place in her heart for combining the best of Eastern Europe and Scandinavia into something heartwarmingly unique.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are passionate, dedicated travellers. They don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage so you can be sure the advice you're given is impartial. They travel widely to all the popular spots, and off the beaten track. They don't research using just the internet or phone. They discover new places not included in any other guidebook. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, palaces, trails, galleries, temples and more. They speak with dozens of locals every day to make sure you get the kind of insider knowledge only a local could tell you. They take pride in getting all the details right, and in telling it how it is. Think you can do it? Find out how at lonelyplanet.com.



NEAL BEDFORD

Hungary, Lithuania

A trip to the northeastern corner of Poland some summers ago saw Neal come into more contact with Lithuania than he'd expected. Many locals affiliated themselves with Vilnius rather than Warsaw, and whenever he read about Poland's history, up would pop that country just across the border. His interest sparked, he decided to explore Lithuania. He found paganism and Catholicism comfortably sleeping in the same bed; dense, mysterious forests and glistening lakes; sweeping sand dunes; and curious, friendly people (once you broke the ice). He also found some of the most challenging restaurant service he'd ever experienced. Neal has travelled through much of Eastern Europe from his base in Vienna, Austria.



JAYNE D'ARCY

Albania

Ever since she watched Celtic Tigers eat up and commercialise Irish culture in the mid-'90s, Jayne's been attracted to countries with more character and lower GDPs. Albania hit her radar in 2006, when she joined her first-ever package tour; although she complained about her fellow travellers, she was pretty stoked to get a new passport stamp and see some amazing ruins in relative peace. The changes in Albania since then are astonishing, but while the similarities to the 'old Ireland' are huge (homemade spirits, dodgy roads), the Albanian Tiger is yet to emerge. As well as writing about travel, Jayne produces features on design, people and the environment.



CHRIS DELISO

Macedonia

Chris Deliso's long experience of seductive Macedonia began a decade ago and, since 2002, has evolved to full-fledged residential status. As a travel writer and journalist, he has covered almost everything there is to cover here, but still delights in uncovering the country's many hidden places, which range from mountain wilds and ancient ruins shrouded by vineyards to rustic village eateries and secret lakeshore beaches. For Chris, researching the present guide involved off-roading in remote locales, swimming in four lakes and rivers, handling real ancient Macedonian gold, eating plenty of grilled meats, and sampling one superb wine after another in the Tikveš wine region. He has also cowritten Lonely Planet's *Greece*, *Bulgaria* and *Western Balkans* guides.



PETER DRAGICEVICH

Montenegro

After a dozen years working for newspapers and magazines in both his native New Zealand and Australia, Peter finally gave into Kiwi wanderlust, giving up staff jobs to chase his diverse ancestral roots around much of Europe. While it was family ties that first drew him to the Balkans, it's the history, natural beauty, convoluted politics, cheap *rakija* (fruit brandy) and, most importantly, the intriguing people that keep bringing him back. He's contributed to 12 Lonely Planet titles, including writing the Macedonia and Albania chapters for the previous edition of the *Eastern Europe* guide. He's just completed Lonely Planet's first guidebook to *Montenegro*.



LISA DUNFORD

Hungary, Slovakia

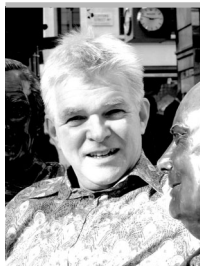
Lisa has been fascinated with Eastern Europe since childhood, probably because her grandfather came from a part of the Carpathian region that was Hungary, then Czechoslovakia and now Ukraine. She studied in Budapest during university, and after graduation worked at the US Agency for International Development in Bratislava. She learned the language, danced on the main square the night Slovakia became an independent nation, and made lifelong friends. Though she returns to Eastern Europe often, Lisa, her husband, and their dog currently call a riverfront in East Texas home.



MARK ELLIOTT

Bosnia & Hercegovina

British-born travel writer Mark Elliott was only 11 when his family first dragged him to Sarajevo and stood him in the now defunct concrete footsteps of Gavrilo Princip. Fortunately no Austro-Hungarian emperors were passing at the time. He has since visited virtually every corner of Bosnia and Hercegovina, supping Hercegovinian wines with master vintners, talking philosophy with Serb monks and Sufi mystics, and drinking more Bosnian coffee than any healthy stomach should be subjected to. When not travel writing he lives a blissfully quiet life in suburban Belgium with the lovely Danielle, who he met while jamming blues harmonica in a Turkmenistan club.



STEVE FALLON

Hungary, Slovenia

Steve has been travelling to Slovenia since the early 1990s, when a travel-publishing company initially refused his proposal to write a guidebook to the country because of 'the war going on' (it had ended two years before) and a US newspaper of record told him that their readers weren't interested in 'Slovakia'. Never mind, it was his own private Idaho for over a decade. Though he *still* hasn't reached the top of Mt Triglav (next time – *domen*, promise!), Steve considers at least part of his soul Slovenian and returns to the country as often as he can for a glimpse of the Julian Alps, a dribble of *bučno olje* (pumpkin-seed oil) and a dose of the dual.



VESNA MARIC

Croatia

Vesna was born in Bosnia and Hercegovina while it was still a part of Yugoslavia and, as a result, she has never been able to see Croatia as a foreign country. A lifelong lover of Dalmatia's beaches, pine trees, food and wine, she expanded her knowledge during this book by exploring Zadar and Zagreb, two cities she discovered anew. Researching Croatia was a true delight.



TOM MASTERS

Belarus, Ukraine

Tom enjoyed getting to grips with Belarus and Ukraine after years of passing through them on the way to Russia, where he has studied and worked on and off for more than a decade. His main surprise was how little Belarus lived up to its consistently negative portrayal in the press – the people were some of the friendliest he's ever met, and Minsk was a ball of pent-up positive energy. Travelling through Crimea in August was another unforgettable experience, although in future he'll avoid the crowds at Yalta and head immediately for romantic Bakhchysaray. Tom lives and works in London, and more of his work can be seen at www.mastersmafia.com.



MARIKA McADAM

Kosovo, Serbia

Marika is an Australian writer and lawyer currently based on the precipice of Eastern Europe in Vienna. Marika has explored Europe as far north as Sweden, as far west as Spain and as far south as Italy, but the further east she goes, the more at home she feels. Her memories of Serbia as being grim and grumpy were completely eclipsed on this research trip by experiences with fun and friendly Serbs, with whom she laughed about nothing and everything. And whatever its international status, resolutely determined and unfailingly hospitable Kosovo has marked her forever (literally – she burnt her arse in a jacuzzi).



LEIF PETERSEN

Moldova, Romania

In 2003, after nine years of feigning interest in electronic payments for the US Federal Reserve System, Leif – originally from Minneapolis, Minnesota – was 'Kramered' into being a homeless, shameless, godless freelance travel writer by an unbalanced friend. Leif's weakness for pretty girls brought him in 2004 to Romania, where he's lived and travelled for nearly two cumulative years. He's repeatedly visited every notable patch of grass in Romania and Moldova, making priceless friends – except for Romania's neo-Nazi party, which publicly denounced him in 2008, calling him a 'slimeball' and 'human piece of garbage' (yes, really). Leif writes an almost award-winning, 'slightly caustic' blog, KillingBatteries.com.



BRANDON PRESSER

Latvia

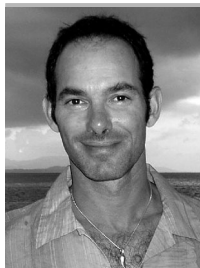
With his wanderlust bigger than his wallet, Brandon earned his backpacker stripes after an epic overland adventure from Morocco to Finland. He was delighted to revisit Eastern Europe for the Latvia chapter, especially since he's got a bit of Baltic blood in him. After savouring several blissful beach days on the Kurzeme coast, Brandon put his Harvard art-history degree to good use while checking out Riga's surplus of evocative art nouveau architecture. Brandon has contributed to a handful of Lonely Planet guides, including *Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania 5*, and when he's not writing his way across the globe he enjoys crossword puzzles, scuba diving and vintage Bond flicks – especially the ones with crafty KGB agents.

**ROBERT REID****Bulgaria**

Brooklyn-based Robert (www.reidontravel.com) likes Bulgaria. He returned for the third time to update the chapter for *Eastern Europe*, and experienced thrilling, unexpected things – stumbling into Roman roads, being forced to do a Bulgarian traditional dance (and liking it), being cornered by sheep. He's written for Lonely Planet since 2003, and has updated over a dozen guidebooks, including *Romania & Moldova*, *Russia*, *Trans-Siberian Railway* and *New York City Guide*.

**TIM RICHARDS****Hungary, Poland**

Having transferred with an international teaching organisation from a two-year stint in Egypt, Tim spent a year teaching English in Kraków in 1994–95. He was fascinated by the massive postcommunist transition affecting every aspect of Polish life, and by the surviving remnants of the Cold War days. He's since returned to Poland repeatedly for Lonely Planet, and has been delighted by his reacquaintance with this beautiful, complex country. When he's not on the road for Lonely Planet, Tim is a freelance journalist living in Melbourne, Australia, and writes on various topics: travel, lifestyle, the arts, technology and pets. You can see more of his writing at www.iwriter.com.au.

**SIMON RICHMOND****Russia**

After studying Russian history and politics at university, Simon's first visit to the country was in 1994, when he wandered goggle-eyed around gorgeous St Petersburg, and peeked at Lenin's mummified corpse in Red Sq. He's since travelled the breadth of the nation, from Kamchatka in the far east to Kaliningrad in the far west, stopping off at many points between. An award-winning writer and photographer, Simon has written about Russia for several publications, including the Russian edition of *Newsweek*. He's the coauthor of the 1st and subsequent editions of Lonely Planet's *Trans-Siberian Railway*, as well as editions 3, 4 and 5 of *Russia*. Catch him online at www.simonrichmond.com.

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