

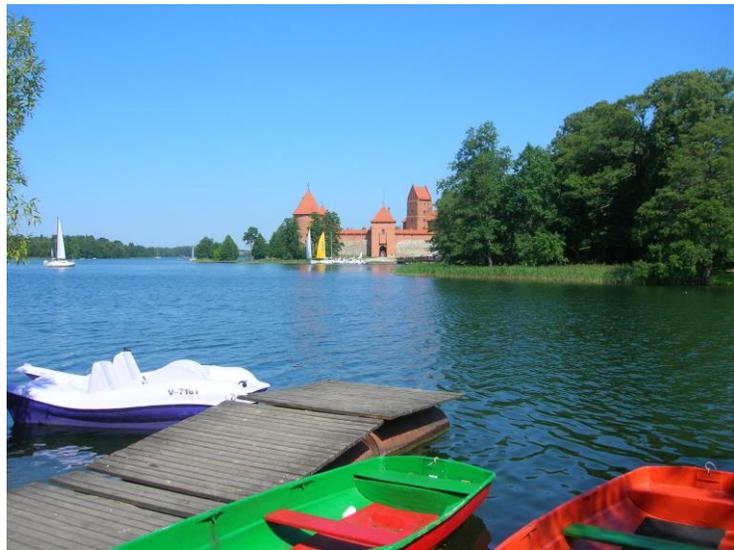
Scandinavian Eastern Europe

The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are between Russia, East Europe and Scandinavia. The countries appear to want to be more like Scandinavia than Russia and there is a Scandinavian feel to the Baltic. But, due to Russian dominance in this area there is still much in the area that is Russian in nature.

As with most Eastern European cities, the old town of Vilnius is more attractive than the new city. The Gediminas Hill overlooks the old town and has the normal suspects: a castle, museum and churches. The rest of the old town is dotted with churches and streets. The next city has some interesting items as well; most notable is the Museum of Genocide Victims, which is housed in the old KGB building. Included are pictures of those killed by the KGB, Lithuanian resistance, the cells where dissidents were held and the execution area.

There are some unusual areas of Vilnius as well. Within the city is the Uzupis Republic (a reference to usurper of the thrown), which is unofficially its own republic with its own constitution. Among rights granted are: dogs have the right to be dogs, everyone has the right to be unhappy, and everyone has the right to appreciate their unimportance. There are several bridges in this republic many with locks on them. These locks are placed on the bridge on one's wedding day and then the couple throws the key into the water showing that their marriage will never be unlocked. The groom also has to carry the bride across the bridge. There is also an Angel of Uzupis that is a standing on an egg and a separate egg statue that supposedly hatched the angel.

Trakai is a good day trip from Vilnius. The Island Castle is the main attraction and as the name implies it is a castle built on an island. Within the castle are exhibits on the history of the castle, weaponry and a little history of Lithuania. A lot of Lithuanians get their wedding pictures taken here. The Peninsula Castle is nearby but is the old castle and all that is left is ruins. Also in the area is a Kenessa which is a prayer room from the religious group called the Karaites, which formed in Baghdad and appears to be a combination of Judaism and Islam. The city is small enough to walk around and has some interesting areas such as elaborate cemeteries.



The Hill of Crosses, located near Siauliai, is a great story of resistance. Tens of thousand of crosses cover two small hills. The crosses started appearing in the fourteenth century and were removed, but the crosses reappeared. The tsar killed several religious people and again removed the crosses, but the crosses reappeared. The Soviets bulldozed the site but the crosses reappeared. Then they said the area was contaminated and no one was allowed in the area but the crosses reappeared. When the wind blows the crosses



rustle against each other and make a chiming noise. There are a wide variety of crosses. Many families come with their children who add a small cross to a set of crosses previously placed by other family members.

Siauliai contains several parks and a lot of statues. One of the parks has a golden archer that serves as a sundial. The statues include: three bird, pelican, corkscrew, motherhood and grandfather. Motherhood is a picture of mother and child

where the mother shields the child from trouble. Grandfather is playing with three children. All are unique and add to the feel of the city. A small pedestrian mall and a relaxed atmosphere make the city a nice place to visit for a day.

Riga's old town is between the Daugava River and a series of large parks. The parks hold traditional songs, a monument to those who died in the 1991 revolt versus the Communists and are a place to relax. There are numerous churches in the old town, with St. Peter's being the most important. The Museum of the Occupation of Latvia looks at both Nazi and Soviet occupation through pictures and historical documents, with the most harrowing exhibit illustrating how a gulag



worked. Liva Laukums is the most important square, with several beer gardens. Many Western Europeans, especially British, visit the Baltic States for bachelor parties which has led to some animosity. My hostel did not allow anyone involved in a bachelor party to stay. The owner told me in the previous month, thirteen drunken Brits had gotten arrested for urinating on Riga's most revered statue.

Salaspils Concentration Camp served as a Nazi transport camp between 1941 and 1944. It can be visited on a suburban train that stops at a Darzini station, in the middle of a woods. A path through the woods lead to the monument. The woods and the sounds of the periodically passing trains makes for a chilling affect. There are four large concrete monuments that are called unbroken, solidarity, mother and humiliation. Near the mother



monument, next to the rose bushes, are small toys and stuffed animals left for the children who died here. The Life/Death Continuum Monument describes what happened at the camp, but there are no buildings that remain from World War II.

Another day trip from Riga is the pleasant city of Sigulda. The city has a bobsled track to the west of the city center. Tourists can go down the bobsled in something that looks like a raft, but this option is only possible on weekends. Some hostels sell a trip down the track with an Olympic bobsledder, with speeds over 60 miles an hour.

Slightly more relaxing is taking a hike around Sigulda and the neighboring countryside. There are three castles to visit. The “new” castle, Sigulda Castle, can be easily visited. One has to take a cable car or walk up and down a hill to Krimulda

Castle. The third castle, Turaida Castle, is also on the west side of the Gauja River and is imposing from far due to its location on top of the hill. Up close, the castle is less impressive but within the complex is the Dainu Hill Song Garden, which is a nice sculpture garden. The small Turaida Church is worth a visit as is the grave of national hero, Turaida Rose

The area known as the “Baltic Riviera” is also an easy day trip from Riga. Jurmala is a series of townships and includes a long beach that many people visit. The place has the feel of the French Riviera as it is ritzy and there are many specialty shops and expensive restaurants. There are old wooden houses in the area which adds some ruggedness to the area. Many are in rather rough shape, but many are restored.

Another of the Baltic capitals is Tallinn, Estonia. The city is more expensive and has more tourists, with more signs indicating they should watch for robbers. However, there was the same appeal of the pleasant city and it was a relaxing way to end my Baltic experience.