

## Lithuania & Latvia: Vilnius to Riga

### Tour-Only Itinerary

Sea, sky, and sand: the universe is reduced to three elements as you survey the Bay of Amber and the 60-mile sweep of dunes at Curonian Spit. Whistling winds, waving grasses, and a boardwalk that leads to what feels like the world's edge—a landscape you never imagined. Then again, you're learning to expect the unexpected in Lithuania. Fascinating folk traditions and indelible sights fill each day's walk, from the legend-inspired woodcarvings on Witches' Hill to Trakai's red-sandstone island castle.

Yesterday a farm-to-table lunch near a Bronze Age hillfort, today the chance to craft your own amulet from native amber at a local jeweler's gallery. Across the border, Latvia awaits: scenic wetlands, country palaces, and Saturday's chef-led tour through the converted zeppelin hangars of Riga's food market. When you're hiking in the Baltics, every step reveals new horizons.



### Highlights

Take in sights straight out of the pages of a fairy-tale as you visit magnificent Baltic castles and grand, historic palaces, nestled in beautiful settings

Follow scenic trails into the national parks of Trakai, Curonian Spit, Žemaitija, Gauja, and Kemeris

Pay a visit to an amber museum to learn about the traditions surrounding this treasured gem and craft your own keepsake in the workshop

Tour one of Europe's largest markets guided by a Latvian chef, sampling fresh bread, cheese, and more, treating your senses as you explore

## On all Guided Adventures you can count on ...



Expert local guides to introduce you to the best of your destination.



Gracious accommodations that are a clean, comfortable home away from home.



Off-the-beaten-path places you'd never find on your own.



Experts to handle all the details.



A maximum of 18 fun-loving fellow travelers to share the journey.



Flight + Tour Combos include plane tickets, airport car service, and pre- and post-tour accommodations.



Delicious, authentic multi-course meals—virtually all are included.

## Activity Level

This tour is one of our Guided Walking Adventures, rated easy, with an average of 3 to 6 miles per day. There are slight ascents and descents each day, including steps at castles and on forest trails. The terrain includes grassy paths, dirt roads, wooden board walks, sand dunes and cobbled streets, with walks passing through villages, forests, and open farmland. Some days offer options for self-exploration, cultural visits, or free time to relax on your own.

## DAY 1

## Join your Lithuania & Latvia: Vilnius to Riga tour. Independent exploration of Trakai

Varnikai Bog to Trakai Castle; 5 miles, easy

After breakfast on your own, meet your Country Walkers guides—one Latvian and one Lithuanian—at 9:00 a.m. in the hotel lobby for a brief tour orientation.

You begin your Baltic adventure with a 45-minute transfer to the Varnikai Cognitive Walking Way, where serene nature trails thread their way through hilly forests and along swampland past splendid lakes. There'll be opportunities to pause along the way and take in the scent of pine and earth. You pass a memorial wood carving and inscribed stones, the marking for a mass Holocaust gravesite dating to 1941. Your footpath leads to Trakai, a lake resort with a fascinating past. This distinctive town straddles several lakes and was built and preserved by settlers of many different nationalities—Karaims, Tatars, Lithuanians, Russians, Jews, and Poles. In 1991, the region was designated as a National Historic Park. As you approach, you cross two footbridges and arrive in town via Lake Galve. Cross a bridge to the stunning, red sandstone Trakai Island Castle, once the seat of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

You have time to explore Trakai on your own, perhaps pausing for lunch and sampling *kibinai*, a local specialty resembling an empanada. Browse the shops along the main avenue or tour the castle, whose elegant chapel has a hand-laid, vaulted brick ceiling. And this being a lake resort town, you may choose to indulge in a swim, a paddleboat ride, or a pontoon cruise.

Back in Vilnius, enjoy a welcome drink before heading out by foot to dinner, where traditional Lithuanian dishes and libations are accompanied by lively folk music and singing.

**Accommodation:** Hotel Pacai, Vilnius, Lithuania

**Included Meals:** Dinner

## DAY 2

### Neris River regional park. Transfer to Klaipeda

Dukšta Trail; 3 miles, easy. Optional walk at Kernave; 1-1.5 miles, easy with moderate options.

At your breakfast this morning, be sure to try some of the local honey. Lithuania has a history of

beekeeping and honey-making dating back to medieval times. The honeybee is not only a respected creature in Lithuania, but also a symbol of friendship. After breakfast, depart Vilnius for Neris River regional park. The Neris is known as the link between Lithuania's two historic capitals: Vilnius and Kernave. You begin your exploration along the Dukšta Trail, a wooded path that follows its namesake rivulet and its lush valley. Salmon make a 300-mile journey here from the Baltic Sea to spawn. During your walk, ascend the observation tower on the Hill of Oaks for a breathtaking panorama of the Neris, surrounding forestland, and a valley that was inhabited as far back as the 1st century AD. At a nearby mound local tribes held sacrifices, and to commemorate its significance to local heritage, some weddings are still held here today. You also pass the Saint Oak of the Hollow, a 300-year-old tree of great importance in Lithuanian pagan mythology: locals once believed that the souls of the dead were reincarnated as oaks.

Today's walk also highlights some of Lithuania's 800 hillforts, or *piliakalniai*, which are central to Lithuanian history and identity. Tribes built walls along the contours of these oval, table-top hills to optimize defense. Within the earth of these mounds, remains of ancient settlements and burials have been excavated. Many date back to the Bronze Age, and several have been associated to conflicts with the Teutonic Knights. Some of the hillforts can be accessed via stairways, and during your walk, you'll explore two of them—Buivydai and Bradeliškes.

After, settle in for lunch at a secluded restaurant in the woods. Your host, the owner and chef of this unique establishment, guides you through a multi-course farm-to-table lunch of foraged and locally farmed ingredients cooked in a traditional wood stove. Continue to Kernave, the medieval capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The five hillforts in the city's archaeological site are interesting as it's rare to find so many concentrated in one location. As you explore the city, take in more sweeping Neris River vistas. Later, shuttle about three and a half hours to the port of Klaipeda, once an important city of the Hanseatic League. During the drive, be sure to keep on the lookout for Lithuania's national bird, the white stork. In the spring and summer months, these large birds migrate from Africa to breed and build their impressively sized stick nests atop buildings, trees, and telephone poles. Throughout the days the birds are commonly seen foraging for food in open farmlands.

Dinner tonight is at your hotel, shortly after arrival.

**Accommodation:** Boutique Hotel Michaelson, Klaipeda, Lithuania

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

## DAY 3

### Curonian Spit National Park

Hill of Witches; 2-3 miles, easy. Nagliai Nature Reserve; 1.5 miles, easy

Set out on a walk this morning to the pedestrian ferry dock, where you embark on a short crossing to the picturesque Curonian Spit. This 60-mile stretch of sand dunes separates the Curonian Lagoon from the Baltic Sea and connects Lithuania and the Kaliningrad Oblast (an exclave of Russia). The lagoon's tranquil waters are part of a migration route for millions of birds each year. Throughout your day, keep an eye on the sky for the great cormorant and the grey heron, two of the majestic birds that nest on the spit.

From the Bay of Amber, where straw sculptures made by local artists adorn the coastline, you trace the shores of the Curonian marsh through the tiny resort of Joudkrante. Once a fishing village and part of Old Prussia, in Joudkrante, you'll stop to explore the incredibly detailed wooden sculptures on the Hill of Witches where 80 stunning works depict figures from Lithuanian mythology and folklore. Later, follow the boardwalks of Nagliai Nature Reserve through the scenic grey dunes carved by strong winds. As you walk, inhale deeply, and you may notice the heavy scent of the pine forests that border the Baltic Sea.

Continue to the town of Nida and an amber gallery, where a local craftsman enlightens you on the unique qualities of this popular stone. After admiring the 434 amulets in the gallery's museum, you set to work making your own amber amulet as you learn about the history and folklore of this gem. Afterward, there'll be time for lunch—perhaps smoked fish—and independent exploration. You might visit the Fisherman's Homestead or Thomas Mann house, where the author spent his summers. Or walk to the gigantic Parnidis sand dune, on top of which is a sundial standing 45 feet and weighing 36 tons. On your way back to the ferry, there may be time for a swim in the beautiful Baltic Sea.

Back at the hotel, you can join your guide for a brief walking tour, visit the Maritime Museum at Fort Wilhelm, or head to the 235-year-old Švyturys Brewery where the nation's most popular beer is made.

**Accommodation:** Boutique Hotel Michaelson, Klaipeda, Lithuania

**Included Meals:** Breakfast

## DAY 4

### Žemaitija National Park. Transfer to Latvia

Šeire trail and Lake Plateliai; 4.5-5 miles, easy. Hill of Crosses

Depart Klaipeda this morning and transfer to Žemaitija National Park in the Samogitian Highlands. Samogitia (Žemaitija) has a distinct culture with a proud heritage dating to the pagan era. Žemaitija National Park was established in northwest Lithuania in 1991 to preserve the region's unique landscape and traditions. Here, lakes cover more than seven percent of the land—this scenic pocket of Lithuania is said to have been the last place in Europe to accept Christianity. Your walk today begins at the Šeire Trail, a pleasant idyll through woodland that leads you to the shores of Lake Plateliai. It's believed that the islands on these waters were once much larger and greater in number, as underwater archaeologists have discovered stones that were placed in a circular pattern beneath the surface. From this historical lake, you follow a path through several villages that harken back to life in old Lithuania.

In the charming enclave of Beržoras, you'll visit with locals who have invited you to lunch in their home. Foraged berries and mushrooms have been a staple on the Lithuanian table for generations, and today you'll have the chance to sample them along with a feast of meats, vegetables, and freshly baked breads with just-made butter. You might even try a national favorite, *žemaiciu blynai*, or Samogitian pancakes. Your meal is served on earthen dishes and eaten the local way—with wooden spoons—and in the spirit of the old Lithuanian proverb, "One can manage without gold, but not without bread."

Afterward, you transfer to the Hill of Crosses, one of Lithuania's most moving pilgrimage sites. This hillside is festooned with crosses adorned with statues, rosaries, and icons. It dates to the mid-1800s and many have tried to destroy it: in 1961, the Soviets demolished 5,000 crosses. But many have survived and today the hill is home to well over 100,000 monuments. In 1993, Pope John Paul II visited and called it a place for hope, peace, love, and sacrifice.

Your final destination today is the lower Zemgale region of Latvia. You pass fields of wheat and yellow flowers en route to your elegant manor house to enjoy dinner.

**Accommodation:** Mazmežotne Manor, Rundale parish, Latvia

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

## DAY 5

### Latvian countryside

Rundale Palace; 2-2.5, easy. Bauska Castle walk; 1-2 miles, easy

This morning, you walk right from your manor house to the massive Rundale Palace, a sprawling butter-hued Baroque wonder. Built for the Dukes of Courland in the 18th century, today its splendid residences and gorgeous gardens serve as a museum and a great source of Latvian pride. There'll be time to explore the property before continuing on a short bus transfer to Bauska for a walk along the green banks of the Lielupe River. Your riverside stroll delivers you to the Bauska Castle, overlooking the confluence of the Muša and Memele rivers. If there's time, you may continue further to Bauska's historical Old Town.

Return to your manor house for a free afternoon. Perhaps you'll indulge in a spa treatment, take a spin on a rented bicycle or boat, or visit the on-site sugar beet museum in the property's Great Servants' House. For dinner, you cross a bridge over the Lielupe River by foot, arriving at the historic Mežotne Palace, where you'll enjoy refined Latvian cuisine in a stunning setting. With its proximity to the sea and abundance of rivers, fish is always on the menu in Latvia. The daily catch is nicely complemented by freshly baked dark rye bread (a staple in the Baltics) and locally sourced beet or nettle soup. For dessert? Perhaps a traditional *rupjmaizes kartojums*, a Latvian ambrosia of layered jam, whipped cream, and dark rye breadcrumbs served parfait-style.

**Accommodation:** Mazmežotne Manor, Rundale parish, Latvia

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, Dinner

## DAY 6

### Kemeri National Park. Independent exploration of Riga

Kemeri Great Bog walk; 1.5-2.5 miles, easy. Coastal walk; 3 miles, easy

After breakfast, journey to Kemeri National Park. In past millennia, this scenic region was underwater, part of the Baltic Sea. Today, it is a vast wetland that supports thousands of species of flora and fauna, including the white wagtail. This mesmerizing bird with white, gray, and black plumage is the national bird of Latvia. Kemeri's lakes, mires, marshes, and bogs are a distinctive feature of the region, and you'll witness their tranquil beauty up close in the Great Kemeri Bog. Choose from two loop walks along a network of boardwalks, the longer of which has a popular raised observation platform. As you stroll, stop to

admire delicate moss, stunning orchids, undersized pine trees, blueberries, rosemary, and along the way, perhaps you'll spot a stork or an otter.

After a rewarding morning, you head to the Baltic Coast for a lunch of seafood plucked right from the sea. Later, you enjoy a walk to the shore, continuing to the fishing village of Ragaciems, which has a distinctive red lighthouse. Here, you pause to visit the Ragaciems sedums site, where former fishing piers stand as a monument to the history of fishing. In the site's tiny wooden huts, fishermen would make long cylindrical fishing nets. Small fishing boats, long since run aground, still seem eager to set out for the water. As you continue along the wave-kissed beach, you pass dune habitats and watch for birds in the estuary of the Starpinupe River, then follow a boardwalk through the Kupskalni Nature Reserve.

If time permits, linger a while in seaside Jurmala and explore Jomas Street, a pedestrian avenue lined with colorful shops and fruit stands. A walk along the town's oldest street gives you insight into the rhythm of daily life in this beachside haven. Later, transfer to Riga, Latvia's cosmopolitan capital, where you'll find cobbled lanes winding past gingerbread-trim houses and Europe's highest concentration of Art Nouveau architecture. Indulge in a well-deserved treatment at your hotel's spa or join an orientation tour of Riga's Old Town. Dinner is on your own. Your guide can point out ideal spots to try some of the city's creative cuisine, complemented by a great local beer.

**Accommodation:** Grand Poet Hotel by Semarah, Riga, Latvia

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, Lunch

## DAY 7

### Gauja National Park

Optional tour of Riga Central Market. Three Castles Walk; 4.5 - 6 miles, easy with moderate sections

Early risers may join an outing to Riga Central Market, one of Europe's largest. This impressive emporium of produce, flowers, and countless other items is housed in five former Zeppelin hangars; only nine of these unique structures remain in the world. You are escorted through the market by a renowned Latvian chef, whose high regard in the marketplace allows him to jump behind food counters and offer you samples of the freshest bread, smoked meat, and more. Here, you also help gather picnic provisions for later today. Afterward, you transfer to Gauja National Park for our "Three Castles Walk."

Begin at Turaida Castle's Folk Song Hill, a harmonious blend of powerful sculpture and the natural world. It is impossible to overstate the importance of song to the identity, culture, and freedom of the Baltic nations. Traditional folk songs shaped the spirit of a revolution as masses of proud people raised their voices in collective songs to protest against the Soviet Union. Folk Song Hill commemorates that Singing Revolution. You take the Krišjanis Barons Trail, named for a renowned Latvian folklorist and writer, down wooden steps, entering a fragrant forest, and following the Gauja River. The steep path passes oak, ash, and linden trees and brushes by lush fern and lily of the valley.

You gather for a picnic lunch at Tautas Park, surrounded by birch trees, serene ponds, wildflowers, charming footbridges, and dragonflies. Afterward, continue your sojourn past Gutman's Cave, the largest cave in the Baltics, where the legend of the Rose of Turaida was born. In this sad tale, Rose is deceived, and instead of meeting her fiancé Victor at the cave, she meets a malevolent suitor. Her entrapment leads to her murder. After Victor's ax is found at the scene, he is sentenced for her death. You can pause here to contemplate the power of love before following the serpentine road to the remains of Krimulda Castle. This former carriage road was built in a zig-zag through the forest to reduce the grade for horses.

From Krimulda, a cable car crosses the Gauja River, affording spectacular vistas of the primeval valley and three castles—Turaida, Krimulda, and Sigulda—including the Krimulda manor house and a winding bobsled track. Diembark your gondola and walk next through Walking Stick Park, named for Sigulda's 200-year tradition of carving walking sticks. You will undoubtedly want to find the one that speaks to you and purchase it as a keepsake of your journey!

Visit the old and new Sigulda Castles, the latter a neo-Gothic fortress of stone and subtle details. Ascend the towers for lovely views, browse the shop for leather crafts, silver jewelry, pottery, and walking sticks, or relax with a beer in the garden. After time here, return to Riga and celebrate your Baltic explorations during a farewell dinner at one of the city's top restaurants. Your multi-course tasting menu emphasizes fresh, seasonal, and locally sourced items. The theme of your meal is "Taste of Nature" and may include forest-foraged plants such as sorrel and elderberry or fresh fish from the nearby Baltic seaside. After dinner, the brave might enjoy a tippie of the nation's Black Balzam, a 45-proof herbal liqueur beloved by Goethe as "the elixir of life." This toast provides a fitting end to your adventures throughout the cities, countryside, and coast of Latvia and Lithuania.

**Accommodation:** Grand Poet Hotel by Semarah, Riga, Latvia

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

## **DAY 8**

### **Your *Lithuania & Latvia: Vilnius to Riga* tour concludes**

*Uz redzešanos!* Your tour concludes after breakfast. Explore Riga on your own or prepare for onward travels.

**Included Meals:** Breakfast

## What's Included

### Tour Only

Exceptional boutique accommodations	✓
All on-tour meals except 3 lunches and 2 dinners	✓
Local guides with you throughout tour	✓
Local wine and/or beer with dinner	✓
Entrance fees and special events as noted in the itinerary	✓
Travel assistance available 24/7 provided by Allianz Global Assistance	✓