

Day 1 Join your Lithuania & Latvia: Vilnius to Riga tour

Varnikai Bog to Trakai Castle; 5 miles, easy. Independent exploration of Trakai

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 drive 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 Galvė. Cross a bridge to the stunning, red sandstone Trakai Island Castle, once the seat of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

Upon arrival to Trakai, partake in a traditional cooking class for lunch where you learn to make kibinai, a local specialty resembling an empanada. Afterwards, you'll have some free time to explore Trakai on your own. Browse the shops along the main avenue or tour the castle, whose elegant chapel has a hand-laid, vaulted brick ceiling (additional cost). 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, head out by foot to dinner, where traditional Lithuanian dishes and libations are accompanied by lively folk music and singing.

Included Meals: Lunch, Dinner

Day 2 Kernavė

3-4 miles, easy with moderate options. Travel to Klaipėda. City tour, 1-2 miles

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 Kernavė, the medieval capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

Today's walk 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. The five hillforts in the city's archaeological site are interesting as it's rare to find so many concentrated in one location. Some of the hillforts can be accessed via stairways, and during your walk, you'll have a chance to explore a few of them. As you explore the site, take in sweeping Neris River vistas.

Today you will visit the winsome country homestead of Vida and Simas. Your hosts will prepare a hearty lunch with fresh seasonal ingredients harvested from their heritage-certified century-old gardens. And take time to sample their homemade herbal teas made from roses, lavender, and natural spring water.

Later, shuttle about two hours to the port of Klaipėda, 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 daytime the birds are commonly seen foraging for food in open farmlands.

Upon arrival at the hotel, you can join your guide for a brief walking tour. Dinner is on your own tonight. You may choose to stroll to one of the nearby restaurants or enjoy dinner at your hotel.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

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 Joudkrantė. Once a fishing village and part of Old Prussia, in Joudkrantė, 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. This afternoon, enjoy a seaside picnic lunch of smoked fish and other regional specialties.

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 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 relax, 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. Dinner is on your own.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

Day 4 Žemaitija National Park

Šeirė trail and Lake Plateliai; 4.5-5 miles, easy. Hill of Crosses. Travel to Latvia

Depart Klaipėda this morning and drive 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 Šeirė 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, žemaičių 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 travel 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.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 5 Latvian countryside

Rundāle Palace; 2-4 miles, easy

This morning, you walk right from your manor house to the massive Rundāle 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. Start your visit with a guided tour of the palace, marveling at the many rooms. There'll be time to explore the property further and enjoy lunch on your own at one of the many cafes on the property. For those that wish, an optional golf cart tour of the extensive gardens is available at an additional cost (approximately 6 euros cash).

Return to your manor house for a free afternoon. Perhaps you'll indulge in a visit to the extensive spa, take a spin on a rented bicycle or boat (at your own expense), or visit the on-site sugar beet museum in the property's Great Servants' House. For dinner, you enjoy another meal at your hotel. 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 kārtojums, a Latvian ambrosia of layered jam, whipped cream, and dark rye breadcrumbs served parfait-style.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner

Day 6 Ķemeri National Park

Ķemeri Great Bog walk; 1.5-2.5 miles, easy. Jūrmala; 1-2 miles, easy. Independent exploration of Riga

After breakfast, journey to Ķemeri 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. Ķemeri'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 Ķemeri 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 charming seaside town of Jūrmala and explore Jomas Street, a pedestrian avenue lined with colorful shops and fruit stands. A walk along Jūrmala's oldest street exposes the rhythm of daily life in this beachside haven. Here you pause for lunch on your own, perhaps savoring a meal of seafood plucked right from the sea.

Later, travel 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. This afternoon and evening are free to explore the city at your own pace. Wander the Riga Craft Road, a walking route through the city that passes authentic shops and studios or join your guide for an orientation tour of the Old Town. If time permits, you may also visit the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia or take in a show at the Latvian National Opera House. 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.

Included Meals: Breakfast

Day 7 Gauja National Park

Riga Central Market tour, 1.5 miles, easy. 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 travel 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 Krišjānis 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. Disembark 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 shops 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. After dinner, the brave might enjoy a tippie of the nation’s Black Balzām, 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.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 8 Your Lithuania & Latvia: Vilnius to Riga tour concludes

Uz redzēšanos! Your tour concludes after an included breakfast. Explore Riga on your own or prepare for onward travels.

Included Meals: Breakfast