

# Getting Started

Astonishingly few people can pinpoint these three countries on a map, giving Baltic-bound travellers an instant head start. Accommodation is relatively easy to find (bar the capitals in July and August, which do get tourist-busy) and is still a steal compared with many other European countries. Dining is another unexpectedly tasty experience, in the capitals at least, with many meals at laughable prices. To top it all off, the arts scene is hot, young and vibrant.

## WHEN TO GO

In spring, the weather is warm, the days are long, flowery cottage gardens blossom and the cultural calendar oozes fun. April and May, when the lucky stork returns to its nest, and the land and its people open up after winter, convey a real magic. June is midsummer-madness month (p17) and equally evokes the Baltic peoples' close ties to nature and their pagan past (p31).

Summers are short but sweet. July and August (high season), the warmest and busiest months, and a time when many Balts go on holiday too, can also be the wettest and subject to the odd thunderstorm. Coastal waters at this time average between 16°C and 21°C, and daytime highs from May to September hover between 14°C and 22°C.

Winter (November to March – essentially low season), with just a few hours of semidaylight every 24 hours, is a long dark affair with temperatures rarely above 4°C and frequently dipping below zero. December to March sees snow-clogged streets, icy pavements and roofs laced with killer icicles. Ice skating, tobogganing, cross-country skiing, ice fishing and getting whipped in a sauna (p40) are this season's invigorating activities.

Avoid soggy March when the snow thaws, bringing with it far too much slush for enjoyment. Autumn, when snow falls then melts, is equally miserable.

## COSTS & MONEY

Latvia and Estonia are the most expensive of the trio, with Riga and Tallinn touting prices comparable to Scandinavia. Accommodation in the Baltics, especially in Riga, is expensive and the biggest cost for travellers. Dining in

See Climate Charts (p384) for more information

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Valid travel insurance (p387), ID card or passport, and visa (p391) if required
- Driving licence, car documents and car insurance (p397)
- Sunglasses, hat, mosquito repellent, a few clothes pegs and binoculars (summer)
- Thermals, ice skates and the thickest, warmest hat and coat you can find (winter)
- A universal sink plug (if you like baths)
- A good wad of tissues or toilet paper – to be carried at all times
- Your sea legs
- An indestructible pair of shoes or boots to combat cobblestones
- A taste for 'black magic' (p185)
- A travel pillow; some pillows in Latvia feel as though they're made of concrete.

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rural Latvia and Lithuania, and across the board in Lithuania, is relatively cheap (p387); ditto for museum admission fees (free to €2) and overland travel (€2.55 to €4.50 per 100km) in the region. Discount cards (p385) in Riga and Tallinn yield a bounty of money-savers for city-based visitors.

At the bottom of the accommodation barrel in the capitals, you can scrape a night's sleep in a dorm for as little as €12.80/8.50/5 in a Tallinn/Riga/Vilnius hostel and €19.50/12.80/30 in a budget hotel; double rooms are cheaper per person than singles and most midrange and top-end hotels will put in an extra bed for kids for free or a small fee. Comfortable B&B accommodation in Tallinn/Riga/Vilnius starts at €18/35/23 per person, while a night's stay in a midrange hotel costs €60 to €70 a head. Top-end rates can rocket as high as €200 per person, per night in all three capitals. Step away from the capitals into rurality and prices plummet: €10 gets you a blissfully quiet and peaceful night's sleep in budget/mid-range/top-end accommodation in the Baltic countryside.

## READING UP

### Books

**Among the Russians** (Colin Thubron) Gloomy and resigned, yes, but that was precisely the mood when this Englishman motored everywhere he could in the pre-glasnost USSR.

**Journey into Russia** (Laurens van der Post) The three Baltic capitals are vividly painted in this travelogue through Soviet Russia in the 1960s.

**The Last Girl & Amber** (Stephan Collishaw) Collishaw (p276) won the heart of the literary world with these dark, haunting and highly emotive novels evoking two very different faces of modern-day Lithuania.

**The Merry Baker of Riga** (Boris Zemtsov) Hilarious and dry, this intuitive tale of an American entrepreneur setting up shop as a baker in Riga in 1992 is a true story.

**To the Baltic with Bob** (Griff Rhys Jones) A beach read easy enough to read with your eyes closed: sail with Griff 'n' Bob from London to Germany via Ventspils, Riga, Saaremaa, Vormsi, Paldiski ('a wreck') and Tallinn.

**Venusburg** (Anthony Powell) For a taste of 1930s Latvia and Estonia, try this amusing tale of a journalist hobnobbing with exiled Russian aristocrats, Baltic-German intellectuals and local patriots.

### Websites

**In Your Pocket** ([www.inyourpocket.com](http://www.inyourpocket.com)) Insider city guides to a clutch of Baltic cities, with free PDF downloads to pop in your pocket.

**Latvia: The Land That Sings** ([www.latviatourism.lv](http://www.latviatourism.lv)) Latvian tourist board website.

**Latvians Online** ([www.latviansonline.com](http://www.latviansonline.com)) Excellent Latvian-related features and loads of Latvian news, current affairs and hot topics.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Notes and posts on Baltic travel, plus the Thorn Tree bulletin board.

**Official Lithuanian Travel Guide** ([www.travel.lt](http://www.travel.lt)) Sexy name? No. Great site packed with useful information? Yes.

**Welcome to Estonia** ([www.visitestonia.com](http://www.visitestonia.com)) Estonian tourist board website.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The region enjoys a sumptuous festival calendar, embracing everything from religion and music to art, folklore, handicrafts, film and drama with gusto. Summer festival madness peaks with midsummer celebrations on 24 June (p17); the annual Baltika Folklore Festival in mid-July, which the three capitals take in turn to host; and the legendary Baltic song and dance festivals (p33).

All three countries celebrate magical festivals at other times of the year too; for a fat-cat calendar of country-specific festivals and events see the Festival & Events section in each country chapter.

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### TOP TEN BALTIC FESTIVALS

- **Midsummer** (regionwide) 24 June (opposite)
- **Black Nights Film Festival** (Tallinn) late November–early December (p80)
- **Kaziukas Crafts Fair** (Vilnius) 4 March (p306)
- **Jazzkaar** (Tallinn, Pärnu, Narva, Tartu & Viljandi) mid-April (p79)
- **Old Town Days** (Tallinn) early June (p79)
- **Song & Dance Festivals** Vilnius 2007, Riga 2008, Tallinn 2009 (p33)
- **Baltika Folklore Festival** Riga 2006, Tallinn 2007, Vilnius 2008 (p386)
- **Baltic Beach Party** (Liepāja) late July (p267).
- **Days of the White Lady** (Haapsalu) August (p132)
- **Visagino Country** (Visaginas) mid-August (p322)

### RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Swelling tourist numbers coupled with local property development and an ever-increasing drive towards commercialism have accelerated the need to protect the region's fragile ecosystems, biological diversity and natural (relatively unspoiled) treasures. Ways to avoid placing pressure on the environment include conserving water and electricity, not littering or burying your rubbish, and taking care not to disturb wildlife. If you intend to camp or hike, seek permission to camp from the landowner or, in the case of national parks and protected nature reserves, only pitch your tent in designated areas. Forests – which carpet 44% each of Estonia and Latvia and 30% of Lithuania – are especially vulnerable. Do not light fires, discard cigarette butts or leave litter in these areas, and stick to assigned paths. Always observe the rules and recommendations set by park, nature reserve and forest authorities.

Erosion, fire and tourism pose an enormous threat to the unique sand spit and dunes on western Lithuania's Curonian Spit – a Unesco World Heritage natural treasure; a tableau at the foot of steps leading up to the Parnidis Dune shows just how much the mountain of sand has shrunk in the past 20 years. When walking on the spit don't blaze new trails across virgin sand or pick plant life that keeps the top sand in place; stick to marked wooden walkways.

Cities pose a whole different set of responsible travel rules. The cobbled old towns of Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius all star on Unesco's list of World Heritage cultural and natural treasures. Pay them the respect they deserve. In Tallinn, after years of Finnish 'vodka' and 'Gin Long Drink' tourism, people are fed up with rowdy drunken behaviour and blokes peeing on the streets. You'll get better treatment if you indulge in moderation. The same applies to the increasing number of British stag parties hitting the Baltic capitals for cheap weekends of binge-drinking and sex. Drink by all means – but quietly and without offence to others.

Prostitution is rife in the capitals, particularly in Riga where it is legal (prostitution is illegal in Estonia and Lithuania). While prostitution is legal in Latvia, pimping is punishable by up to four years in prison. Incidents do occur where Western clients are drugged, robbed and left lying in the gutter – literally. For your personal safety and for the sake of the young girls at hand, often forced by their parents to work the streets, it is better not to engage in this activity.

### MIDSUMMER MADNESS

In pagan times it was a night of magic and sorcery when witches ran naked and wild, bewitching flowers and ferns, people and animals. In the agricultural calendar, it marked the end of the spring sowing and the start of the summer harvest. In Soviet times it became a political celebration; a torch of independence was lit in each capital and its flame used to light bonfires throughout the country.

Today Midsummer Day, summer solstice or St John's Day, falling on 24 June, is the Balts' biggest party of the year. On this night darkness barely falls – reason alone to celebrate in a part of the world with such short summers and such long, dark winters. In Estonia it is known as Jaanipäev, in Latvia Jāni, Jānu Diena or Ligo and in Lithuania Joninės or Rasos (the old pagan name).

Celebrations start on 23 June, particularly in Latvia, where the festival is generally met with the most gusto. Traditionally, people flock to the countryside to celebrate this special night amid lakes and pine forests. Special beers, cheeses and pies are prepared and wreaths strung together from grasses, while flowers and herbs are hung around the home to bring good luck and keep families safe from evil spirits. Men adorn themselves with crowns made from oak leaves, and women with crowns of flowers.

Come Midsummer's Eve, bonfires are lit and the music and drinking begins. No-one is allowed to sleep until the sun has sunk and risen again – anyone who does will be cursed with bad luck for the coming year. Traditional folk songs are sung, dances danced and those special beers, cheeses and pies eaten! To ensure good luck, you have to leap back and forth over the bonfire. In Lithuania, clearing a burning wheel of fire as it is rolled down the nearest hill brings you even better fortune. In Estonia, revellers swing on special double-sided Jaanipäev swings, strung from trees in forest clearings or in village squares.

Midsummer's night is a night for lovers. In Estonia the mythical Koit (dawn) and Hämarik (dusk) meet but once a year for an embrace lasting as long as the shortest night of the year. Throughout the Baltic region, lovers seek the mythical fern flower, which only blooms on this night. The dew coating flowers and ferns on midsummer's night is held to be a purifying force, a magical healer and a much sought-after cure for wrinkles! Bathe your face in it and you will instantly become more beautiful, more youthful. However, beware the witches of Jaanipäev/Jāni/Joninės, who are known to use it for less enchanting means.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### BEST OF THE BALTICS

Embark on the grandest of Baltic tours in the Lithuanian capital, **Vilnius** (p287). Take a day trip to castle-clad **Trakai** (p315) and/or the Soviet sculpture park at **Druskininkai** (p324), then push west to **Klaipėda** (p347) and the Unesco-protected **Curonian Spit** (p362). Next, hit **Riga**: take the 3½-hour speed route via **Šiauliai** (p339) and the **Hill of Crosses** (p341); or the slow route of a few days along the tranquil Latvian coast via hip 'n' happening **Liepāja** (p261), **Cape Kolka** (p253) and **Jūrmala** (p220). In **Riga** (p187), revel in Europe's best Art-Nouveau architecture, then delve into **Sigulda** (p227) and the Gauja Valley en route to university-driven **Tartu** (p106) and **Soomaa National Park** (p165). Those with bags of time could detour to the lazy old spa town of **Pärnu** (p155) or the fabulous islands of **Saaremaa** (p142) and **Hiiumaa** (p135).

The final leg is north to the Estonian capital, **Tallinn** (p64), where old-town medieval splendour jockeys for pride of place with hip wine bars, stylish lounges and a dizzying choice of cuisine.

### Two Weeks / Vilnius to Tallinn

Vilnius to Tallinn direct is only 588km, but throw in the slow route and detour cooked up by this itinerary to cover the very best of the Baltics and you'll easily clock up 1400km. The trip – minus deviations – can be done in a whirlwind fortnight, but definitely merits as much time as you can give it.



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### PAINT THE TOWN RED

### One Month / Paldiski to Daugavpils

Tracking the Baltics' Soviet past is an eclectic trip. Start with the crumbling cliff-top Soviet barracks in Estonia's **Paldiski** (p93), then hit **Tallinn** (p64) for stained-glass Soviet-socialist realism in the TV tower and Soviet memorabilia shopping. Speed east next, through the USSR's first national park, **Lahemaa National Park** (p95), to **Sillamäe** (p103), a seaside museum of Stalinist architecture, and Russian-speaking **Narva** (p103), with its moody castle where Lenin lives. Villages settled by Soviet-persecuted Old Believers and Soviet-era resorts hug **Lake Peipsi** (p105; p127).

Cross the border into Latvia at twin-town **Valga/Valka** (p124; p236) and rip down the artificial bobsled track built for the Soviet team at **Sigulda** (p227). In **Riga** (p187) meet die-hard reds in Victory Park, gawp at Stalin's birthday cake, dine retro-Soviet style, party in a Soviet train and learn about Soviet occupation in the Museum of Occupation, and Latvian resistance in the Latvian People's Front Museum. Then play I-spy at the world's eighth-largest parabolic antenna, 24km north of **Ventspils** (p256), and stroll around **Liepāja** (p261), taking in Karosta and its Soviet prison, where die-hards kip the night. Otherwise, try funky Hotel Fontaine.

In Lithuania, a tour of the **underground Soviet missile base** (p361) at **Žemaitija National Park** is terrifying. Sleep in the old Soviet barracks, then push east past the **Hill of Crosses** (p341) to **Vilnius** (p287) with its disturbing Museum of Genocide Victims and poignant reminders of bloody 1991. Afterwards, bear north to **Visaginas** (p322) and the dangers of a Soviet-designed nuclear power plant and overnight in the only Soviet city in the EU where nothing is more than 30 years old. Then it's north again to drab **Daugavpils** (p242) with its remarkable fortress where Soviet troops were stationed.



This trip takes you pretty much the length and breadth of the region, traversing north to south along its coastal western realm then heading back again via the more industrial, Russian-influenced east. Count 1720km, three border crossings and plenty of greenery to distract you when the concrete gets too much.

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## ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

### GO GREEN

#### Two Weeks / Lithuania's Spit to Estonia's Islands

National-park hopping ensures mountains of discoveries off the beaten track. Witness the vulnerability of nature around the Sahara of Lithuania, **Curonian Spit** (p362), an unforgettable spit of sand where elks mingle with wild boar and Lithuania's largest colony of cormorants and grey herons. From **Nida** (p365), Lithuania, sail into the desolate **Nemunas Delta** (p370) where birdlife at the Ventės Ragas Ornithological Station enthral. Complete the coastal ride with a look at innovative recycling in **Nida** (p357), Latvia; a blow-through at the end of the world at **Cape Kolka** (p253); and a walk through Latvia's oldest forest in the **Šlītere National Park** (p254). Next dive into the **Gauja National Park** (p226), where walking, biking, hiking and canoeing – and the rare black stork – thrill outdoor-lovers.

In week two go green in Estonia: stop at **Otepää** (p116) for skiing or summer swimming, and midsummer celebrations around Estonia's most sacred lake, **Pühajärv** (p118). Continue via pretty **Viljandi** (p162) to the wet, and wildlife-packed **Soomaa National Park** (p165), and explore myriad forested waterways by traditional *haabja* (canoe). Wallow in mud in **Pärnu** (p155), followed by a slice of island life: wooded islands lie off the lovely shores of Saaremaa in the **Vilsandi National Park** (p152), while **Matsalu Nature Reserve** (p135) is the Baltics' best bird-watching terrain. Alternatively, from Pärnu steer north to **Lahemaa** (p95), an alluring paradise with beautiful nature trails and coastline, and old-fashioned seafaring villages.

A fortnight gives you just enough time for a glimpse of the extraordinary Baltic flora, fauna and landscapes. A breath of fresh air after the tourist madness of the three capitals' medieval old towns, this green itinerary covering 1200km guarantees a foolproof getaway from the crowds.



## TAILORED TRIPS

### THE AMBER ROAD

Amber has been transported along amber roads since before the birth of Christ, and there's nowhere finer to feel its subtle magic than in the Russian-controlled **Kaliningrad Region** (p376), source of almost all Baltic amber. Stunning amber-studded jewellery and the world's second-largest hunk of amber add a sparkle to the Kaliningrad Amber Museum, while Kaliningrad's amber cabin aboard the *Vitiaz* is an interesting port of call. A tour of the industrial Yantarny Amber Mine from the capital is a must.

The region's finest amber gallery in **Nida** (p365), Lithuania, is a hop, skip and jump across sand dunes on **Curonian Spit** (p362) from the Russian province. Amber treasure was found in **Juodkrantė** (p364) in the 1850s but today you'll find only specks, washed up on the shore after fierce storms; professional amber fishers frequent **Karklė** (p351) and **Šventoji** (p355) beaches. **Palanga** (p355) sports a palatial amber museum and an innovative amber processing gallery, while wacky **Nida** (p357) across the border in Latvia presents amber-fishing from a home-spun perspective.

Lovely **Liepāja** (p261) boasts a 123m-long rope of amber beads and an amber clock. There are fine amber displays at Pāvilsta Ethnographic Museum, which also arranges amber-fishing trips, and inside the Livonian Order Castle in **Ventspils** (p256). **Vilnius** (p287), **Riga** (p187) and **Tallinn** (p64) all have quality amber galleries.

### WORLD HERITAGE SIGHTS

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania safeguard nine Unesco-protected world treasures (<http://whc.unesco.org>), kicking off with each capital's extraordinary old town, inscribed on the World Heritage list since 1997: **Riga** (p190) is a mind-blowing plethora of medieval, neoclassical and Art-Nouveau buildings dating from the 13th to 19th centuries, and its Art-Nouveau collection is Europe's best. Church-studded **Vilnius** (p294) is medieval, Gothic, Renaissance and classical, and has Europe's biggest baroque old town to boot. Nowhere better reflects the fabric of a medieval northern European trading city than **Tallinn** (p69). The archaeological site of **Kernavė** (p318) near the Lithuanian capital is another world gem, as is the extraordinary slither of sand linking Lithuania with Kaliningrad, **Curonian Spit** (p362), sculpted over millennia by Baltic Sea winds and waves.

Days of discovery surround the region's intangible treasures safeguarded by Unesco with a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' stamp: cross crafting and its symbolism in Lithuania; the Kihnu Cultural Space on **Kihnu Island** (p161); and the magnificent Baltic song and dance festivals.



# Snapshots

## CURRENT EVENTS

EU harmonisation is driving current affairs in the Baltics. Fully fledged EU members since 2004, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have realised their pipe dream: they've rejoined the West. Now they face the gargantuan task of bringing their laws, policies, economies and infrastructures in line with those of Europe while also realising their individual growth potentials: these are three of Europe's fastest-growing economies, after all.

Brussels' money is easing the transition: Estonia was allocated €695 million in structural and cohesion funds for 2004–06, Latvia just over €1 billion and Lithuania €1.5 billion. Building new roads, hotels and spas, rehabilitating railway tunnels, constructing waste-water treatment plants, decommissioning nuclear power plants and sorting out stinky sewage (not to mention drinking water) are among the kaleidoscope of projects flagged with a circle of stars on what feels like every second street corner.

But this is no easy ride. Every euro spent by Brussels is roughly matched with a euro from national coffers. The Baltic countries are the poorest of the 25 EU countries: one-third of households live below the poverty line. In 2005 the Latvian GDP per capita was 43.6% of the EU average, the Lithuanian 47.8% and the Estonian 50% (comparatively, France and Germany hover around the 110% mark, and Austria and Denmark are at 120%). Average net earnings better reflect the reality: €231 a month in Latvia, €264 in Lithuania and €379 in wealthier Estonia.

Incredibly the region remains on target to meet the economic requirements needed to trade in their national currencies for the common European currency, the euro. In Estonia and Lithuania, budget deficits are less than 3% of GDP, inflation has reached a constant low, and the Lithuanian litų and Estonian kroon have been pegged to the euro since mid-2004. Once Latvia has brought its 6% inflation down to 2.1%, it too can peg; curiously enough, Latvians – sticklers for language – are running a campaign to call the euro by its Latvian name, 'eiro'.

NATO hosted its spring parliamentary assembly in Vilnius in 2002 and returned to the Lithuanian capital in April 2005 for an informal meeting of foreign ministers – much to the consternation of Russia, which makes no bones about its fierce opposition to NATO's eastward expansion and its increasing influence on old USSR territory. Since Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined NATO in April 2004, Baltic air space has been policed by NATO aircraft based in Šiauliai – a bitter pill for Russia given that the Soviet-built base, large enough to land a space shuttle on, once defended the USSR's western border. Wrangles over shared borders, language laws, WWII celebrations and the citizenship rights of the region's sizable Russian-speaking community further exacerbate relations between the ex-Soviet republics and Russia, which are cool at best.

Players with the big boys they might be, but at heart these three Baltic countries remain extraordinarily young societies, as the extreme public opposition – including from the Latvian prime minister – to the region's first gay-pride march, held in Riga in July 2005, clearly demonstrated. This emotive vent of anger was followed in September 2005 by all but one Latvian MP voting for a constitutional ban of same-sex marriages, which are already illegal under civil law. At time of research, the parliament had passed the amendment to the constitution, but it must be signed by

The euro should replace Estonia and Lithuania's national currencies on 1 January 2007, and Latvia's in 2008.

All three countries are parliamentary democracies run by a parliament (Estonia: *Riigikogu*; Latvia: *Saeima*; Lithuania: *Seimas*) and a president, both elected by universal suffrage for a four- or five-year term.

## PRESIDENTIAL LINE-UP

Estonia: Arnold Rüütel ([www.president.ee](http://www.president.ee)); elected in 2001 for five years.

Latvia: Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga ([www.president.lv](http://www.president.lv)); re-elected in 2003 for four years.

Lithuania: Valdas Adamkus ([www.president.lt](http://www.president.lt)); elected in 2004 for five years.

## BALTIC LEXICON

**Balkans** Absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the Baltics, beyond the fact that a shocking number of people confuse the two.

**Baltic countries** Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

**Baltic states** A generic term used to refer to the Soviet Baltic-Sea republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Since independence, this has become a misnomer of convenience, but it is considered to be horribly outdated and politically incorrect by many. Avoid.

**Baltic region** The entire Baltic Sea catchment area, of which Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania make up approximately 11%. Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Poland and the Kaliningrad Region (Russia) are all in the Baltic region – but are not Baltic countries.

**Balts** A derivative of *Mare Balticum*, the Latin for 'Baltic Sea' (coined by the German chronicler Adamus Bremen in the 11th century). It is used to describe people of Indo-European ethnolinguistic groups (Latvians and Lithuanians) who settled in the southeastern Baltic Sea area from 2000 BC.

**Nordic countries** Traditionally understood to be Scandinavia and Finland, but seen by many as including also Estonia, as the former Estonian foreign minister pointed out in the newspaper *Eesti Ekspress* in 1998. Toomas Hendrik argued that Estonia had closer historical and cultural ties to Finland than to Latvia and Lithuania, and concluded by saying that Estonia was Europe's 'only postcommunist Nordic country'.

**Post-Soviet countries** Assumed to be an indisputable tag, yet one that the Lithuanian parliament clearly rejected in early 1999 when it urged NATO not to describe Lithuania as 'former Soviet' or 'post-Soviet'. This, the parliament argued, implied that the Baltics legally belonged to Moscow in the Soviet era, as opposed to being 'illegally occupied'.

the president, Vaire Vīķe-Freiberga, before it becomes law. She is not in favour of the amendment, but is under immense pressure to sign it.

## HISTORY

Until the early 20th century the ethnic identities of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were denied or suppressed. They emerged from the turmoil of WWI and the Russian Revolution as independent countries and enjoyed two decades of statehood until WWII, when all three fell under Soviet influence. Occupation by Nazi Germany in 1941 was followed by Soviet reconquest and the region was forcibly merged with the USSR. In 1991 Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania again won independence.

Ethnically speaking, Latvians and Lithuanians are closely related. The Estonians have different origins, with closer linguistic links to Finland than to their immediate Baltic neighbours.

However, in terms of the history of the past 800 years, Latvia and Estonia have more in common with each other than with Lithuania. The latter was once a powerful state in its own right – at its peak in the 14th to 16th centuries – but Latvia and Estonia were entirely subject to foreign rule from the 13th to the early 20th century. By the late 18th century the entire region had fallen under Russian rule. Until emancipation in the 19th century, most of its native people had been serfs for centuries.

## From Settlers to Serfs

Human habitation in the region goes back to at least 9000 BC in the south and 7500 BC in the north, with the forebears of the present inhabitants –

## UNEMPLOYMENT

In 2004, unemployment was at the following levels.

Estonia: 10.2%

Latvia: 9.8%

Lithuania: 10.8%

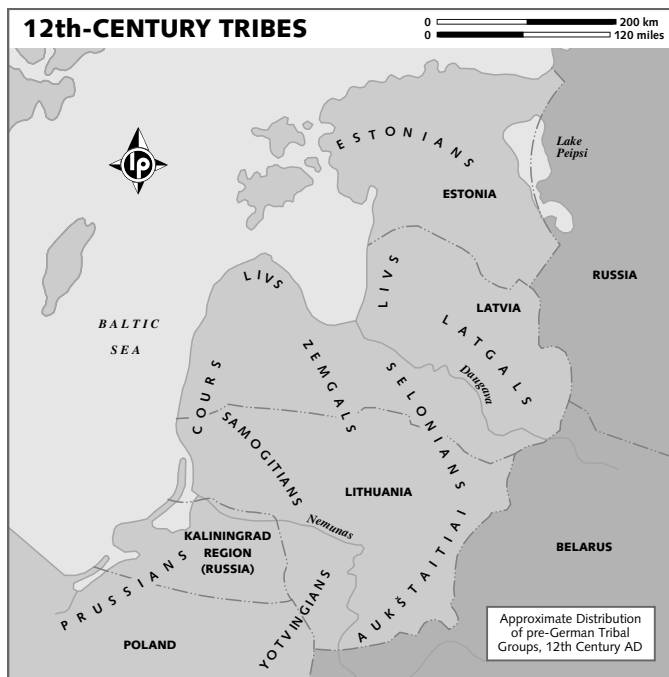
EU: 9%

## TIMELINE 3000–2000 BC

Finno-Ugric hunters from the east and Balts from the southeast settle the region

## 13th century

By 1290 Germanic crusading knights have conquered almost all of Estonia and Latvia



**'In 1201 the Bishop of Riga built the region's first Germanic fort'**

Finno-Ugric hunters from the east and the Balts from the southeast – settling between 3000 and 2000 BC. The region rapidly became known as a rich source of amber, and local tribes traded the substance with German tribes, the Roman Empire and, later, Vikings and Russians.

The region was dragged into written history by the expansionist *Urge to the East* of Germanic princes, colonists, traders, missionaries and crusading knights. In 1201 the Bishop of Riga, Albert von Buxhoevden, built the region's first Germanic fort and established the Knights of the Sword, an order of crusading knights whose white cloaks were emblazoned with blood-red swords and crosses. Their mission? To convert the region by conquest. And indeed, within a quarter of a century these knights had subjugated and converted all of Estonia and most of Latvia, bar some regions in the west, which they would snatch in 1290. Cēsis became their castle-clad base. In 1237 they became a branch of the Prussian-based crusaders, the Teutonic Order, and renamed themselves the Livonian Order.

By 1346 Germanic rulers controlled the Baltic seaboard from west of Danzig (modern Gdansk in Poland) to Narva in northeastern Estonia. They divided the region into fiefdoms headed by Teutonics, Livonians or their vassals. In trade-rich towns like Riga, Dorpat (Tartu), Pernau (Pärnu), Windau (Ventspils) and Wenden (Cēsis), a wealthy German

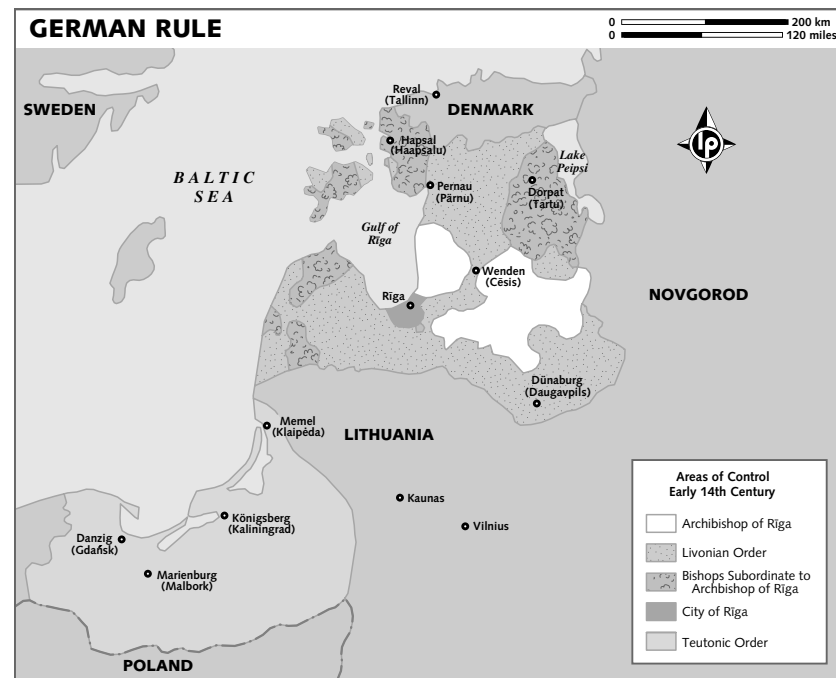
nobility emerged to enjoy the good life while natives were reduced to feudal serfs. This remained the case until the 20th century.

The Germanic invaders made repeated attacks on Lithuania during the 14th century but were restricted to a thin coastal strip around Memel (Klaipėda), allowing the Baltic country to emerge as a powerful state in the 14th to 16th centuries. But its subsequent union with Poland saw Lithuanians play second fiddle to the Polish, with Lithuania's gentry adopting Polish culture and language and its peasants becoming serfs.

**Swedish, Polish & Russian Rule**

As German control in Latvia and Estonia wavered in the mid-16th century, other powers cast interested eyes over the region. Ivan the Terrible of Muscovy seemed to ravage every town in mainland Estonia and eastern Latvia during the 25-year Livonian War and, after the war's end, the Baltic lands were fought over by Protestant Sweden and Catholic Poland-Lithuania, with Sweden the eventual victor. Seventeenth-century Swedish rule is regarded as an enlightened episode in Estonia and Latvia's long histories of foreign oppression: Swedish kings Gustaf II Adolf and Carl (Charles) XI raised Estonian and Latvian peasants from serfdom and introduced universal elementary education.

The Great Northern War was so devastating for Estonia and Latvia that neither bark of dog nor crow of cock could be heard anywhere from Narva to Riga by the end of it, according to one Russian general.



**14th–16th century**

Lithuania staves off Germanic attacks to emerge as a powerful state; its alliance with Poland sees it play second fiddle in the partnership

**18th century**

Peter the Great destroys Sweden as a regional power and establishes Russian rule in Estonia and much of Latvia

**19th century**

Emancipation marks the end of centuries of serfdom for most native Balts – and the birth of nationalism

**1917**

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania emerge from WWI and the Russian Revolution as independent countries

Using original German and Soviet wartime newsreels, International Historic Films has produced an enthralling DVD depicting the true horror of WWII for the occupied Baltic nations. Buy *The Baltic Tragedy* online at [www.ihffilm.com/22023.html](http://www.ihffilm.com/22023.html).



Long term, however, Russia emerged as the victor. Peter the Great destroyed Sweden as a regional power during the Great Northern War (1700–21) and established Russian rule once and for all in Estonia and much of Latvia. A few decades later the Partitions of Poland gave Lithuania to Russia. The Baltic region's fate was sealed.

Russian rule brought privileges for the Baltic-German ruling class in Estonia and Latvia but greater exploitation for the peasants. In 1811 and 1819 respectively, Estonian and Latvian peasants were emancipated (Lithuanians, involved in the Polish rebellion against Russian rule during 1830–31, weren't freed until 1860), giving the native Baltic peoples the opportunity to slowly but surely crawl out from under the doormat of history to express their own cultures and senses of nationality; to teach, learn and publish in their own languages; to hold their own song festivals and stage their own plays. The policy of Russification pursued by Russian rulers only strengthened the determination of nationalist Balts.

### Brief Independence

The 1917 Russian Revolution overthrew the tsar, allowing Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to declare independence; their position as independent countries was officially recognised by Soviet Russia in 1920.

But all three countries – caught between the ascendant Soviet Union and the openly expansionist Nazi Germany, which glorified the historic *Urge to the East* – lapsed from democracy into authoritarianism in 1930s, ruled by regimes that feared the Soviet Union more than the Third Reich.

### WWII & Soviet Rule

On 23 August 1939 Nazi Germany and the USSR signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, putting Estonia, Latvia and, soon after, Lithuania under Soviet control. Baltic Germans who hadn't already left for Germany departed, and by August 1940 the three countries were USSR republics. On 14 June 1941 mass deportations to Siberia began.

Hitler's invasion of the USSR and the subsequent Nazi occupation of the Baltic region between 1941 and 1944 created one of the most sensitive periods in Baltic history, as far too many Balts collaborated with the Nazis in their slaughter of Jews and other local people.

Between 65,000 and 120,000 Latvians, about 70,000 Estonians and 80,000 Lithuanians succeeded in escaping to the West in 1944–5 to avoid the Red Army's reconquest of the Baltics. Thousands more – known as 'forest brothers' – took to the woods rather than live under Soviet rule.

The postwar Soviet era saw the collectivisation of agriculture, the repression of religion and the death or deportation of thousands of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians. There was also a huge influx of migrant workers from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, causing many Balts to fear that they'd become minorities in their own countries.

### The Singing Revolution

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's encouragement of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the late 1980s prompted the Baltic countries' pent-up dreams of independence to spill into the open. Popular fronts, formed in each republic to press for democratic reform, won huge followings, while rallies in 1988 saw thousands of Balts gather in the capitals to voice their longing for freedom by singing previously banned national songs. Several big rallies on environmental and national issues were held in Latvia, with 45,000 people joining hands along the coast in one antipollution protest; and an estimated 300,000 Estonians – about 30% of the population – attended one song gathering in Tallinn. On 23 August 1989 – the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact – two million people formed a human chain stretching from Tallinn to Vilnius, demanding secession.

Moscow granted the Baltic republics economic autonomy in November 1989 and a month later the Lithuanian Communist Party left the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – a landmark act in the break-up of the USSR. Lithuania became the first Soviet republic to legalise noncommunist parties and to declare its independence. Events turned bloody in Riga and Vilnius in January 1991, but this didn't deter all three states voting overwhelmingly in favour of secession from the USSR in referenda a month later. Although there was little enthusiasm in the West for the Baltic independence movements, the 19 August 1991 coup attempt against Gorbachev in Moscow changed everything; on 6 September 1991 the West and the USSR recognised Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian independence.

*The Singing Revolution* (1992) by Clare Thomson tracks Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania's path towards independence through an account of the author's travels in the region in 1989 and 1990.

*The Baltic Revolution* (1994) by Anatol Lieven is a classic. Half Irish, half Baltic-German, Lieven was the Baltic correspondent for the *London Times* in the early 1990s and is a mine of information.

Altogether, Lithuania lost something like 475,000 people during WWII. Latvia lost 450,000 and Estonia 200,000.

Keep abreast with the Baltic markets.  
Tallinn Stock Exchange: [www.tse.lt](http://www.tse.lt).  
Riga Stock Exchange: [www.rfb.lv](http://www.rfb.lv).  
Vilnius Stock Exchange: [www.nse.lt](http://www.nse.lt).

### 1939–41

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the USSR puts Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania under Soviet control

### 1941–44

Hitler invades the USSR and the Baltic region; some Balts collaborate with the Nazi slaughter of Jews and other local people

### 1944–52

Soviet reconquest sees the region become part of the USSR; Stalin kills or deports thousands of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians

### 1991

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania win back their independence after five decades of Soviet rule; months later they join the UN



A couple of weeks later, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined the UN, the first step to consolidate their new-found nationhood. In 1992 they competed independently in the Olympic Games for the first time since before WWII, and Estonia held its first elections under its own system (followed later that year by Lithuania, and by Latvia in June 1993). The pope visited all three countries in September 1993 but, such landmarks apart, the Baltic countries dropped out of the world's headlines.

### Postindependence

Zealous one-upmanship between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania marked the immediate postindependence years as the three countries suddenly found themselves vying for the same foreign investment and aid. Each established its own currency, army and police force, and started the painful process of switching from a centralised economy to the free market. Runaway inflation topping 1000%, soaring unemployment, plummeting purchasing power, the collapse of several banks (wiping out life savings) and the end to the rudimentary-but-universal Soviet social-welfare system provided a harsh introduction to the 'joys' of consumer capitalism.

In politics a succession of coalition governments came and went, with no single party managing to form a mandate strong enough to gain an overall parliamentary majority.

The average monthly old-age pension in Estonia/Latvia/Lithuania is €103/99/93.

#### PURGING THE PAST

Local collaboration with Nazi and Soviet occupiers during WWII has been confronted head-on by the Baltic countries, which have prosecuted several war criminals. They are the only post-Soviet countries to do so.

Among the first to be tried was Aleksandras Lileikis, head of the Vilnius security police during the 1941–44 German occupation of Lithuania. TV images of the feeble 91-year-old defendant in court in 1998, wheelchair-bound and scarcely able to speak, shocked the international community. Lileikis, who had fled to the US where he remained until 1996, when the US Department of Justice stripped him of his American citizenship and expelled him, was accused of sending hundreds of Jews to Nazi death squads. His case was dropped after the courts ruled him medically unfit to stand trial, and he died in 2000. His deputy commander, Kazys Gimzauskas, was found guilty of genocide in 2001 but escaped imprisonment after the courts ruled the 93-year-old pensioner medically unfit.

Neighbouring Estonia has succeeded in doling out one prison sentence. In 1999 79-year-old Mikhail Neverovski, Estonian citizen and former KGB agent, landed four years in prison for his role in deporting 300 Estonians to Siberia in 1949. Every other decrepit collaborator tried by Estonian courts has got a suspended sentence.

Ironically, the biggest trial in Baltic history, which saw some 4000 witnesses give evidence over the course of three years, was of Soviet hardliners who stormed the Vilnius TV tower in 1991. In August 1999 59-year-old Juozas Jarmalavičius and 71-year-old Mykolas Burokevicius, leaders of the Lithuanian Communist Party, were sentenced to eight and 12 years in prison respectively.

Purging the past remains a painful, controversial process. This was dramatically demonstrated in the Kalējs case in 2000, which saw the Latvian government refuse to prosecute 86-year-old Konrads Kalējs, accused of killing thousands of Jews, but – in the same breath – condemn 77-year-old WWII Soviet partisan Vasily Kononov to six years in prison. This was slammed as blatantly hypocritical by Russia and international critics.

Free-trade agreements with the EU were established in 1995, a watershed for the region; nervous of Russian sabre-rattling and hungry for economic stability, the Baltic countries also changed tack around this time, joining forces to present a united front to the world. In 1998 the USA signed the US-Baltic Charter of Partnership, pledging its support for Baltic integration into Western institutions, including NATO (which all three joined in 2002). The same year the three Baltic presidents publicly condemned Russia's political and economic pressure on Latvia, warning it was posing a danger to the region's future unity and integration with Europe.

In October 1999, with the dismantling of the Skrunda radar site in Latvia, the last Russian military personnel left Baltic soil.

Citizenship, abolishing the death penalty, prosecuting Nazi and Soviet criminals and resolving border disputes with Russia were among the thorny issues the three countries were forced to tackle before starting accession talks with the EU in 1998 (Estonia) and 1999 (Latvia and Lithuania). For Latvia, the question of how to treat its substantial Russian-speaking minority was particularly contentious (see p179). All three countries were invited to join the EU in 2002 and became fully fledged members in 2004.

On a no-less serious note, the Balts' singing talents have made Europe sit up and take note. Mocked in music circles it might be, but the Eurovision Song Contest – hosted by Tallinn in 2002 and Riga in 2003 – has served as a billion-dollar publicity campaign for the relatively unknown countries. The €8.2 million it cost Tallinn to host the show was a small price to pay for bringing Estonia to the attention of 166 million TV viewers worldwide – as well as the €5 million of business generated in the capital by the event.

### PEOPLE Lifestyle

Postindependent Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are young societies in every sense of the word. Large chunks of all three economies are in the hands of energetic young dynamos with mobile phones and fast cars. For them, the world – certainly Europe – is their oyster. They speak a couple of languages at least, are comfortable mixing with most nationalities and are as at home on holiday in Spain or Greece as they are in their own country. Flitting off to the seashore to kitesurf at the first sign of good wind, regularly jetting abroad for work and indulging in the odd weekend shopping spree in London or Barcelona is what life is all about for this sizable group of city dwellers in their mid-30s.

But a fair few of the older generation look back with nostalgia to the Soviet era, when a certain equality of poverty prevailed. And indeed, stalling the ever-widening gap between rich and poor by 2015 is one of the Millennium Development Goals set for all three countries by the UN. Unless social policies are changed, life will only become harder for many people, including those living in rural areas (where the GDP per capita is generally half that in the capitals), families with several children or a handicapped child, and single-parent families.

In all three countries, the birth rate is steadily declining (in Lithuania, it has decreased by 43.5% since 1990) and the mortality rate is rising. Male life expectancy in particular is notably lower than in the rest of Europe; on average, Baltic men only live until the age of 66, compared to 75 in the EU. Traffic accidents, violence and suicide remain higher-than-average forms of death.

Marriage and divorce trends reflect those in the rest of Europe: less people are marrying, more couples are having children out of wedlock and more are divorcing (around 60% of marriages end in divorce). Balts still

The Balts are way more Internet and mobile-phone savvy than many of their EU counterparts. Paying for street parking by SMS is red-hot in all three capitals, with mobile phones the only way to fill the meter.

The population is ageing and shrinking. The birth rate per 1000 inhabitants in Estonia/Latvia/Lithuania is 9.9/9/8.6.

The long, cold, hard Baltic winter casts a definite dampener over some Balts, who appear unneringly glum, pessimistic and brusque during this dark time of year.

2002

Latvia wins the Eurovision Song Contest with a sexy little number by Marie N

2004

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania join the EU and NATO



### TIPS ON MEETING LOCALS

Don't lump Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians into the one melting pot. They share common traits, but first and foremost they are three separate nationalities.

The stereotypical Estonian is reserved, efficient, polite and short on praise. Lithuanians are typically more gregarious, welcoming and emotional. Dubbed the 'Italians' of the region, they have a greater confidence in their national identity, being the only Baltic country to show its toppled Lenin to the world rather than keeping it under wraps. Latvians in general fall somewhere in between these two extremes, being least at ease with foreigners (partly because of ethnic tensions between Latvians and Russians) and probably the most entrepreneurial.

Baltic people do not greet each other with a hug or kiss. Most people are quite formal, and it takes a while to get onto first-name terms. Men always shake each other's hands and some women shake hands too. Don't mistake lack of smiles or a reserved attitude for indifference or hostility (Estonians are especially poker-faced – one national saying is 'May your face be as ice').

Flowers are a universal gift, but only give odd-numbered bouquets as even-numbered offerings (including a dozen red roses!) are for mournful occasions. If you are invited to a private home, take flowers or a bottle – but never money – as a gift for your host. Take your shoes off when you enter and do not shake hands across the threshold. Do not whistle inside either. Both actions bring bad luck and will be severely frowned upon.

Muttering just a few words in the local language will raise instant smiles. In Latvia and Lithuania, speaking Russian as a foreigner is generally (but not always) acceptable. In Estonia, you should try every other language you know first – be it English, German or Finnish – as speaking Russian can be met with a hostile response, or no response at all.

marry quite young – when they are around 24 (women) or 26 (men) – but more women are now waiting until their early 30s to have children.

### Multiculturalism

Ethnic identity is a sticky subject in the Baltic countries. Large-scale immigration of workers from Russia and other Soviet republics during the Soviet period dramatically changed the population make-up of Latvia and Estonia; ethnic Estonians and Latvians are barely in the majority (65.5% and 57.6% respectively), Latvians are a minority in Latvia's seven largest cities, and Russians easily swamp Estonians in industrial Narva (northeastern Estonia), where they account for 96% of the population.

The inability of some native Russian-speakers to speak Latvian has only added fuel to the fire. Interestingly, 42.2% of these are Latvian citizens. Education programmes aimed at teaching Latvian to non-Latvian speakers has dissolved some, but not all, linguistic barriers in Latvia. Twelve per cent of residents – mainly elderly people – still don't speak any Latvian; some Russian speakers, moreover, simply don't want to learn or speak Latvian, as the February 2004 street demonstrations in Riga following education reform proved. Citizenship requirements are equally controversial (see p179).

Odd incidents serve as an unnerving reminder of the ethnic tension that simmers beneath the surface. The violent attack by Russian nationalists on a 24-year-old Lithuanian border guard in May 2004 was a clear signal that the Balts' accession into the EU is not liked by Russian nationalists, who see it as a huge step in the wrong direction – ie away from Moscow.

Other ethnic groups present in smaller numbers include Poles, Jews, Roma, Tatars and Germans (in Lithuania), as well as nationals of the former Soviet Union.

Bureaucracy certainly seems its most Byzantine in Latvia, where armed Guards of Honour still stand, as rigid as stone, in front of Riga's Freedom Monument from sunrise to sunset, come rain, hail or 3m of snow.

The *Guide to Jewish Genealogy in Latvia and Estonia* (2001) by Rosemary E Wenzel is a fascinating if unsettling read.

### ARTS Folk Culture

The Balts' treasure-trove of oral folklore – inspired by the seasonal cycle, farming and the land, family life, love and myths – is considered the largest collection in the world. Latvia alone boasts more than 1.5 million *dainas* (short poetic songs somewhat like the Japanese haiku), vast collections of which were written down in the 19th century by people like Krisjānis Barons in Latvia and Jakob Hurt in Estonia. The first folkloric musical score was published in Lithuania, now guardian of some 600,000 folk songs and stories, as early as 1634.

Folk rhymes and music are very much living traditions, with numerous societies and groups devoted to them. Particularly unusual are chants of northeastern Lithuania, known as *sutartinės*, and of the Setumaa region in southeast Estonia. More immediately impressive are the national song and dance festivals (see boxed text, p33), evidence of the age-old power of song in Baltic culture.

With the mass production of identical crosses, the art of cross crafting (see p341), traditionally handed down from master to pupil in Latvia and Lithuania, is fast becoming a dying art – so much so that it is also Unesco-protected today.

### Literature

Baltic literature draws heavily on folklore. Modern Estonian and Latvian literature got going in the mid-19th century with the writing of national epic poems based on legends and folk tales that had been part of the oral tradition over preceding centuries. The giants of 20th-century literature are Estonian novelist Anton Hansen Tammsaare (1878–1940) and Latvian poet and playwright Jānis Rainis (1865–1929), who has been compared to Shakespeare and Goethe. More recently Estonian novelist Jan Kross and poet Jaan Kaplinski (both past Nobel Prize nominees) and

During the Soviet era, Santa Claus didn't exist for Baltic children. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day were school days, and Santa Claus was replaced by the soulless Father Frost, who dropped gifts down chimneys on New Year's Eve.

*Walking Since Daybreak: A Story of Eastern Europe, World War II and the Heart of our Century* (1998) is a family history of acclaimed historian, Latvian-born Modris Eksteins, who spent most of his childhood in displaced-persons camps.

### PAGANISM

Czech bishop Albert Waitiekus, the first Christian missionary to venture into the region, came here in the 10th century. Unfortunately for him, he wandered into a forest dedicated to pagan gods and was killed – leaving paganism to run rife in the region for another two centuries.

To pagan Latvians and Lithuanians the sky was a mountain and many of the leading gods lived on it, among humans: Dievs the sky god, Saule the sun goddess, Perkūnas (Pērkons in Latvia) the thunder god, who was particularly revered, and Mēness the moon god. There was also an earth-mother figure called Žemyna in Lithuania and Zemes māte in Latvia. In Latvia the Christian Virgin Mary has many of the attributes of Žemyna, and the two figures seem to be combined in the mythological figure of Māra. Also important were Laima the goddess of fate, Medeinė (Meža māte in Latvia) the forest goddess, and Velnias (Velns in Latvia) the guardian of wizards and sages, who was transformed into the devil in the Christian scheme of things. Many lesser deities presided over natural phenomena and objects, or human activities.

Today the pagan gods are enjoying a marked revival among those known as the Dievturība (literally 'Holding the Gods') in Latvia, and among the Romuva in Lithuania. The Romuva is particularly strong, perhaps because Lithuania was the last European stronghold of paganism until 1385, and it has congregations in Vilnius, Kaunas and in Lithuanian communities in Canada and the USA. It is named after an ancient temple site near Chernahovsk (in today's Kaliningrad Region) that attracted Lithuanian, Latvian and Prussian worshippers alike prior to Christianity's arrival in the Baltics. Founded as an organised pagan revival movement in 1967, it was banned under the Soviet regime in 1971 but revived under the jurisdiction of the 'Society for Ethnic Lithuanian Culture' in 1988.

Robert G Darst's *Smoke-stack Diplomacy* (2001) tackles the whole dirty issue of environmental protection in five former Soviet states, including Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Lithuanian novelist Stephan Collishaw have received international acclaim. Lithuania also shares the credit for some major Polish writers who grew up in Lithuania, including Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz.

In the Soviet years many leading writers and artists went into voluntary or forced exile and most other talent was stifled. Since 1991 the literary scene has changed so fast and there has been such a flood of outside influences that writers, artists and musicians in the Baltics seem to have been stunned, with many still struggling to assimilate their new freedom.

### Music & Dance

Opera is big in Riga thanks to Jāzeps Vītols, who founded the Latvian National Opera, and Andrejs Žagars, who revived that same opera in the mid-1990s. Before WWII the Latvian capital was likewise a pre-eminent performing-arts centre; its ballet company, which dates from the 1920s, was one of the best in the Soviet Union and produced Mikhail Baryshnikov and other notable dancers.

Rock and pop thrive, arguably at the expense of classical music, which was state-funded but is pretty strapped for cash these days. Both Estonia and Latvia host big annual rock festivals (see p169), and Lithuania is the Baltic jazz giant. The region's best-known composer is Estonian Arvo Pärt, who writes mainly choral works, including the haunting *Magnificat*.

Latvia's surprise victory in the 2002 Eurovision Song Contest – all the more remarkable given that Latvia didn't qualify originally (it replaced Portugal) – proved once and for all that the Balts' singing revolution and the previous Estonian victory in the 2001 Eurovision Song Contest were not one-off events: Balts really can sing. Eurovision-type pop and dance music remain the dominant forces in the Baltics' young music scene.

### Architecture

The three capitals are architectural wonders. Their impressive collections of historical buildings prompted Unesco to protect the Old Towns in all three cities as World Heritage sites in 1997; Tallinn is particularly rich in medieval architecture, Vilnius in baroque and Riga in Art Nouveau (p199). Both Riga and Tallinn have excellent architecture museums hosting some great temporary exhibitions; Tallinn's is inside the city's beautifully restored salt cellars (see boxed text, p77).

City rejuvenation has created some noteworthy examples of contemporary architecture: Vilnius has a new skyline of skyscrapers (see p302); in Estonia, Pärnu central library is striking; and Urban Loop is the exciting glass concert hall crafted for Liepāja (in Latvia) by Austrian architects Giencke & Company.

### Visual Arts

The contemporary scene is active, although few Baltic artists cause a stir internationally.

Only Lithuanians would be bold enough to create the tongue-in-cheek Republic of Užupis (see boxed text, p298) or turn Vilnius-based sessions of NATO's 2002 spring parliamentary assembly into a visual arts object – encasing the proceedings in glass walls so that the public could view what was happening. Outside the capital, contemporary art installations by Baltic artists are displayed at the Centre of Europe (p318), a highlight being a maze of 3000 second-hand TV sets that leads to a statue of Lenin. As with many works conceived by the region's artists today, the Soviet past inspired the work: the TV maze portrays the absurdity of Soviet propaganda and communism's ultimate burial by the Balts.

Much-raved-about coffee-table book *Lithuania. 24 Hours* (Lietuva. 24 Vilandos) is the creation of 30-odd international photographers, who completed a 24-hour photography mission in Lithuania with awesome results.

*Peeling Potatoes, Painting Pictures* (2001) by Renee Baigell and Matthew Baigell is an enlightened look at how female artists in Estonia and Latvia perceive themselves in the post-Soviet era. (The conclusion: art remains male-dominated.)

### THE POWER OF SONG

Song is the Baltic soul. And nowhere is this expressed more eloquently than in the national festivals that unite Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians worldwide in a spellbinding performance of song. The crescendo is a choir of up to 30,000 voices, singing its heart out to an audience of 100,000 or more, while 10,000-odd folk dancers in traditional dress cast a bewitching kaleidoscope of patterns across the vast, open-air stage.

Festivals are held every four years in Lithuania and every five years in Latvia and Estonia – the next taking place in Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn in 2007, 2008 and 2009 respectively. To help ensure their survival, these Baltic song and dance celebrations were recognised by Unesco as one of 47 precious 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' in 2003. As rural communities (and thus choirs) dwindle and city dwellers get increasingly wrapped up in modern life's frenetic pace, there are fears that these precious celebrations, which evoke the Balts' age-old relationship with nature, could die.

Although the first song festival did not take place in the Baltic region until the late 19th century, the Balts' natural lyricism and love of singing can be traced to pre-Christian times. Ancient Baltic beliefs in the pagan powers of sky god Dievs, god of thunder Perkūnas, and the mythological family of the sun, moon and stars found their way into Baltic folk rhymes, the lyrics of which were passed down orally between generations. Lines like 'once we sang so that the fields resounded with our songs' and choral titles like 'Song of Pain and Sun Disc', 'Lilac, Do You Bring Me Luck' and 'Blow Wind, Blow' remain an essential part of festivals. Dance, equally inspired by the agrarian cycle, relies on simple choreography, with dancing couples creating circles, lines, chains and other symmetrical formations. In the 'fisherman dance', giant ocean waves of dancers wash across the stage.

With songs, legends and proverbs being committed to paper in the 19th century, a political tool emerged. The revival of national spirit in Estonia and Latvia saw the first festivals in Tartu in 1869 and Riga in 1873. In Lithuania, song filled interwar capital Kaunas for the first time, in 1924. Lyrics praising Stalin and later the USSR replaced many of the original Baltic songs during the early Soviet era. Following WWII's mass deportations, displaced Balts turned to song for solace in the refugee camps: the first song festival outside the region was held in 1946 for the estimated 120,000 Latvians in UN camps in Germany. Until 1991 loss and love of homeland dominated the symphony of festivals celebrated among Baltic immigrants in the USA, Canada and elsewhere. In Estonia and Latvia the power of song reached fever pitch during the 1990 national song festivals – two highly charged affairs climaxing with choirs of 30,000 singing in unison. The return of many Baltic exiles to the subsequent festivals in 1993–94 – the first since independence – was also incredibly emotive.

In Latvia today, the week-long festival peaks with a candlelit performance to an audience of 100,000 in Riga's Mežaparks. Estonia's three-day festival kicks off with the centenary flame being brought by horse-drawn carriage from Tartu to Tallinn's song bowl. Lithuanians, meanwhile, sing for three to five days, parading along the streets from Vilnius Cathedral to the open-air festival stage in Vingis Park. For tickets (€15 to €80) and information contact festival organisers:

**Estonian Song & Dance Foundation** (☎ 6427 3120; www.laulupidu.ee; Suur-Karja 23, Tallinn)

**Lithuanian Folk Culture Centre** (☎ 22-611 190, 22-612 540; www.lfcc.lt; Barboros Radvilaitės gatvė 8, Vilnius)

**Song Festival Foundation** (☎ 722 8985; pasts@tmc.gov.lv; Pils laukums 4, Riga, Latvia)

Zooming in on photography, it is another Lithuanian whose name is known internationally: Antanas Sutkas' works have been exhibited in galleries in Paris, New York et al.

### ENVIRONMENT

#### The Land

...is small and flat: it's just 650km from Estonia's northernmost point to Lithuania's southern tip, and the highest point, Suur Munamägi in Estonia, peaks at a paltry 318m. Lakes are rife – there are 9000 in all, of which Lake Peipsi is the largest.

## CLEAN BEACHES

Twenty-seven criteria must be met to get a **European Blue Flag** ([www.blueflag.org](http://www.blueflag.org)), awarded annually to Europe's clean, safe beaches and marinas. In 2005 the region scored 16 flags, up from 12 in 2002. In Estonia, beaches in Pärnu, Võsu and Pühajärv (near Otepää) got the thumbs up, as did marinas in Lohusala, Pärnu, Roomassaare and Kuressaare. In Latvia, Jūrmala's Majori and Bulduri beaches, Ventspils beach and marina, and the beach in Liepāja were flagged – as were Lithuania's beaches in Nida, Juodkrantė and Smiltynė on the Curonian Spit, and the botanical-garden beach in Palanga.

The coastline clocks up 5000km, much of it either fronting the Gulfs of Finland and Riga, or protected from the open Baltic Sea by islands. Estonia has over 1000 islands, but Latvia and Lithuania have none. The coast's most remarkable feature is the Curonian Spit, a Unesco-protected 98km sand bar divided between Lithuania and Kaliningrad (Russia).

## LONGEST RIVERS

Daugava: 1005km from southeastern Latvia to the Baltic Sea.

Nemunas: 937km across southwestern Lithuania to the Curonian Lagoon.

Gauja: 452km within eastern Latvia.

Venta: 346km from Lithuania to western Latvia.

Narva: 77km north from Lake Peipsi to form the Estonia–Russia border.

## Wildlife

There are more large mammals here than anywhere else in Europe, although spotting them invariably requires the help of a local guide. Forty-eight types of mammal alone live in Latvia's Gauja National Park. Elks, deer, wild boars, wolves, lynxes and otters inhabit all three countries, but brown bears, seals and beavers are only found Estonia and Latvia.

Some of Estonia's islands and coastal wetlands, as well as Lake Žuvintas in southern Lithuania and Ventės Ragas at the edge of the world in western Lithuania, are key breeding grounds and migration stops for water birds. Latvia and Lithuania harbour more white storks (see p282) than all of Western Europe, while the rare black stork nests in western Lithuania's Nemunas Delta and Latvia's Gauja National Park. The eagle owl and white-backed woodpecker – rare in the rest of Europe – also nest in abundance in the latter.

## National Parks

Lithuania has five national parks, Estonia four and Latvia three – and they all have dozens more nature reserves that are protected to various degrees. See p60 (Estonia), p183 (Latvia) and p283 (Lithuania) for further details.

## Environmental Issues

The Baltic Sea – particularly brackish and thus extra vulnerable – is the region's largest shared environmental burden. It is getting cleaner, but virtually all Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian coastal waters remain polluted – partly by chemical pollution washing out from rivers and untreated sewage being pumped into rivers or the sea. Improving sewage systems, establishing more efficient waste-management systems and raising the quality of drinking water to EU norms are key concerns. The increase in shipping routes is not helping matters.

Oil transportation is equally dirty. The region occupies a key position in the Russian crude-oil pipeline system, with 16% of all Russia's crude oil exports in 2004 passing through Lithuania's Būtingė Oil Terminal and its own Baltic Sea port at Pirmorsk. Smaller quantities of crude oil, other petroleum products and coal – arriving by rail – pass through Tallinn. Russia is striving to reduce its dependency on these Baltic ports though; it reduced crude-oil shipments at Ventspils port in Latvia by 30% between 2000 and 2002, and halted shipments in 2003.

Energy production is hazardous. The EU has forced Lithuania into closing its Chernobyl-styled Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (p322) in 2009, but Lithuania has already expressed interest in opening a new nuclear facility to meet energy needs. Estonia, meanwhile, relies heavily on its shale oil-fired power plant in Narva for electricity, but has been likewise compelled by EU environmental policies to switch to cleaner means by 2015. Its shale oil industry spews out 90% of the country's hazardous waste. Stringent renewable energy quotas – to be achieved by 2010 – have been set for all three countries by the EU.

For pointers on green travel, see p16.

## FOOD & DRINK

### Food

Baltic gastronomy has its roots planted firmly in the land, with livestock and game forming the basis of a very hearty diet. Potatoes add a generous dose of winter-warming stodge to national cuisines that are all too often dismissed as bland, heavy and lacking in spice.

Food preparation is plain and simple, and sauces are rarely used to brighten up meat and fish. In autumn, fruits of the land – mushrooms,

Lithuania's Nemunas River is one of Europe's most polluted rivers.

## THE BALTIC AMBER ROAD

Amber – fossilised tree resin – was formed in the Baltic region 40 to 60 million years ago. Yet it was not until the mid-19th century that the trail for the so-called Baltic gold began in earnest.

Early humans burnt amber for heat, and in the Middle Ages it served as cash. For the tribal Prussians inhabiting the Baltic Sea's southeast shores around 12,000 BC, rubbing it was the best way to generate static electricity. During the 12th century, it was said to contain mystical qualities – amber worn next to the skin helped a person become closer to the spirits. In true crusader fashion, the Teutonic knights claimed Baltic amber as their own in the 13th century, yet they too failed to understand where amber was to be found and just how much there really was.

In 1854–55 and 1860 substantial amounts of amber were excavated near Juodkrantė on the Curonian Spit in Lithuania. Three separate clusters weighing 2250 tons in total were uncovered during the 'amber rush' to the sleepy seashore village, yet by 1861 the amber had dried up. Since 1869 amber has been excavated at the Yantarny mine in Kaliningrad (Russia), the place where most amber sold in the Baltics today actually comes from!

Treasure seekers trailed Juodkrantė's shores once more in 1998, this time in search of the legendary Amber Room – a room comprising 10,000 panels (55 sq metres) of carved, polished amber given to Peter the Great by the Prussian king in 1716. For decades opportunists have been trying to track down the missing panels, which graced the Catherine Palace near St Petersburg until 1942 when invading Germans plundered the palace and shipped the jewels either to Königsberg (Kaliningrad) or, as the mayor of Neringa told the world in 1998, to the shores of the Curonian Lagoon, where wartime residents allegedly saw the SS burying large crates. Predictably, the search yielded few results.

Amber comes in 250 colours, ranging from green, pale yellow and black to brown or golden. White amber, contains one million gas bubbles per cubic millimetre. Some pieces sold are heated or compressed, combining pieces; others are polished (to test if a polished piece of amber is real put it in salt water – if it sinks, it's a dud). Rubbing unpolished amber should yield a faint pine smell. Old-fashioned ways of treating it include boiling in honey to make it darker, or in vegetable oil to make it lighter. Original, pieces with 'inclusions' – grains of dirt, shell, vegetation or *Jurassic Park*-style insects – are the most valuable.

The **Baltic Amber Road** ([www.balticamberroad.net](http://www.balticamberroad.net)), an EU-funded tourism project, steers amber-curious tourists along a 418km route tracing the region's unique amber sights and experiences. See p21 for an itinerary, and p175 (Latvia), p282 (Lithuania) and p379 (Kaliningrad) for information on country-specific sights.

Forest covers 44% of Estonia, 44% of Latvia and 30% of Lithuania.

### TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

We dare you to try these gastronomic highlights:

**Cepelinai** Lithuanian 'zeppelins' (potato dumplings covered with bacon, cream and butter sauce). A gastronomic legend.

**Rīgas Melnais Balzāms** Riga Black Balsam – a thick, dark, bitter and potent liqueur.

**Rūkytas ungurys** Smoked eel, a lovely Lithuanian speciality to wrap your tongue around.

**Saltibarsčiai** Lithuanian cold beetroot soup; it's the pinkest soup you'll ever see.

**Verikākk** Estonian balls of blood rolled in egg and flour and spiced with pig's fat.

**Verieib** Tasty Estonian blood bread.

cabbage, herrings and sausages – are salted, smoked or pickled and stored in cellars for the long hard Baltic winter.

### STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

The national cuisines are meat-based and not for the faint-hearted. Be it an animal's tail, its blood or balls, the Balts eat every last bloody morsel – literally. *Šiupinys* (hodgepodge, alias pork snout stew) and *kraujinė sriuba* (blood soup) are Lithuanian delicacies, while Estonians deem *verivoris* (blood sausages wrapped in piggy intestines) to be a real treat.

Four common ways of cooking meat are as a *shashlik* (shish kebab), *carbonade* (a chop but in practice any piece of grilled meat), beefsteak (fried meat) and *stroganoff* (cubes of meat in stew).

Little salt is used, a reflection of the rarity it once was: if a dish is too salty, the cook is in love; if salt is spilled on the table, a quarrel will break out; and a loaf of bread and pot of salt is a traditional house-warming gift.

Bread tends to be black, rye and dry. Other staples include pancakes filled with sweet fruit, jam, curd, sour cream or meat; sausage, usually cold and sliced; and a variety of dairy products – milk is turned to curd, sour cream and cottage cheese as well as plain old butter, cream and cheese.

Breakfast is generally bread with ham and cheese, a boiled egg or an omelette. Slices of tomato or cucumber are often served too, and coffee or milk is the usual drink. A typical lunchtime main course consists of a piece of grilled or fried meat or fish, along with potatoes and boiled vegetables.

### Drinks

Tap water can be dodgy, so buy bottled mineral water, of which there are numerous local and imported brands. The fine art of brewing tea from the land's rich bounty of herbs, berries, leaves and fruits is a tradition very much honoured in the countryside and one that is suddenly hip in the capitals.

Excellent beer is brewed, and is widely available in restaurants, cafés and supermarkets alongside pricier imported German and Scandinavian beers (and even Guinness in some bars). Most Baltic beers are light, fairly flat and of medium strength. Four of the biggest brands – Saku in Estonia, Aldaris in Latvia, and Utenos alus and Švyturys in Lithuania – are the pride and joy of Baltic Beverages Holding (BBH), a Sweden-based joint venture between Carlsberg and Scottish & Newcastle. All four brands produce a dozen or so different labels, ranging from nonalcoholic beer to dark American-style iced beer. Highlights include Saku's seasonal Saku Porter, brewed strictly for Christmas; the ultradark Utenos Porteris (stout), which is reckoned to taste like wine; and the unfiltered Švyturys Baltas, served with a slice of lemon.

Other market leaders include Lithuanian brewers Kalnapilis (of which BBH owns 50%), Horn and Gubernija, and the heavier Saare beer from the Estonian island of Saaremaa. Across the region, small microbreweries brew great beer – many preservative-free and lasting no more than a week. Some breweries in Lithuania can be visited, and Estonia's five-day beer festival in July, Ollesummer (Beer Summer; p168), is a good tasting opportunity.

Estonians warm the cockles with *hõõgvein* (mulled wine) and Latvians rely on a shot of Riga Black Balsam (see boxed text, p185) for a short, sharp pick-me-up. Vodka is less fashionable than it was but remains popular. Chart-topping brands like White Diamond Latvian vodka (which scooped the gold in the San Francisco World Spirit Competition in 2004) and Lithuanian Vodka are best drunk chilled and neat, or mixed as part of a martini. Lithuanians also merrymake in the company of *midus* (mead), *trauktinė* (bitters) and fruit liqueurs known as *likeriai*.

Wine is a niche drink rather than trend or tradition, but champagne – the thing to chink when celebrating – is enthusiastically consumed.

### Where to Eat & Drink

The capitals burst with sophisticated restaurants, funky eateries, American-style diners and cosy bistros. International cuisines abound and there's ample choice, be it Armenian, Mexican, Italian or French. Places dishing up the Balts' meaty national cuisines are equally prevalent, with prices to suit budgets big and small. Many food products are imported though, and this, coupled with the Baltic indifference for spices, can mean you end up eating a tasteless, tamed-down version of a given ethnic dish.

Restaurants in Riga, Tallinn and, to a lesser extent, Vilnius command Western European city prices, but eating in the provinces is cheap. Many restaurants accept major credit cards and a few have English-language menus. Service ranges from superefficient to snail-pace slow. You can pay anything from €10 to €150 for a three-course meal in these places. Standard restaurant opening hours are 11am to midnight daily.

Canteen-style places – often with attractive rustic interiors and buzzing with local city dwellers – rarely have menus, but they display what's cooking, allowing you to point and order. While the food is generally no gourmet's delight, it's perfectly palatable. National dishes prevail and a fill-up typically costs between €3 and €6.

The café scene is vibrant and dynamic. Stylish design-led spaces, traditional places and everything in between serve up quality coffee, fresh breads and pastries, as well as alcoholic drinks and light hot meals. Many double as bars, opening from 8am to midnight daily. In Estonia and Lithuania, international fast-food chains are found in most larger towns and cities, but Latvia – with its own clutch of *pelmeņi* (meat dumpling) and *pīrāgi* (pasty) places – has yet to really embrace Western chains.

In provincial towns, dining is limited and is often accompanied by a blaring TV set. Cuisine is local, menus are limited and in the local language, and service can be bad: it is not unknown for a main course to arrive before the starter. In rural parts, simply finding somewhere to eat is tricky.

Practically every town has a daily market with a good choice of fruit and vegetables. Supermarkets are generally open from 8am to 10pm seven days a week.

Baltics Worldwide really is a fun tool for keeping tabs on political, economic and cultural action in the region. Check it out at [www.balticsworldwide.com](http://www.balticsworldwide.com).

The Balts are big drinkers: annual beer consumption per capita is 81L in Estonia, 80L in Lithuania and 58L in vodka-fuelled Latvia.

# Activities

Open space abounds in the Baltic region, and with major populations concentrated in relatively few urban areas, there's plenty to go around. Factor in low tourist numbers, especially in comparison with much of the rest of Europe, and you'll quickly realise the region offers some of the continent's best opportunities to ditch the crowds and just frolic in the wilderness.

A smorgasbord of active endeavours awaits the outdoor enthusiast. You can whet your appetite with berry picking before grabbing an al-fresco meal-on-the-run of brisk, salty air, untouched white-sand beaches and icy-blue Baltic Sea vistas. Want seconds? Try cycling through dense forests scented with pine, canoeing down a fat, lazy river or checking out the flora and fauna in a quiet nature reserve. If you still have room for dessert, try baby-gentle downhill or cross-country skiing or birding, or maybe just sweat it all out in a sumptuously steamy sauna. In fact, whatever you're craving this hour, the Baltic countries can deliver it almost right to your door.

Visit [www.bicycle.lt](http://www.bicycle.lt) for the scoop on cycling in the Baltics. It has info about all three countries.

## CYCLING

Cycling is taking off in a big way in the Baltics these days, with new tours and routes popping up all over the place. The region's flatness makes tooling around the countryside on a bicycle an option for anyone: casual cyclists can get the hang of things on gentle paved paths, while hard-core fanatics can rack up the kilometres on more challenging multiday treks. Although there's not much along the lines of steep single-track trails, dirt tracks through forests and hills abound, and the varied, but always peaceful, scenery ensures you'll never tire of the view. There are plenty of places to rent bicycles in Estonia and Latvia, and even the smaller towns usually have at least one hotel offering cycles for hire – although the quality of the gear varies greatly. Pickings are slimmer in Lithuania, with bike-hire outlets centred in major towns and cycling hubs.

For cycling info on all three countries, visit **BaltiCycle** ([www.bicycle.lt](http://www.bicycle.lt)). The group, which incorporates the major cycling clubs in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, can hook up you with cycling maps (1:500,000), route descriptions and contacts for arranging biking tours.

BaltiCycle also arranges an annual cycling tour through Eastern Europe. The trip lasts for two months and covers lots of terrain in the Baltic countries. Cyclists ride between 40km and 70km per day, and spend the nights in camp sites along the way. If you're serious about cycling and have some time to spare, this tour is a great way to experience the culture and natural beauty of the region. Check the website for more on dates, prices and routes.

## CANOEING & RAFTING

Watching the landscape slide slowly by while paddling down a lazy river is a fabulous way to experience the natural world from a different angle. As the region's rivers are not known for their wild rapids, it is a great place for beginners to hone their skills or for families to entertain the kids. Even if you're usually more into wild than mild, the region's scenic beauty and tranquillity create such a Zen experience you'll quickly forget you haven't hit a single rapid.

Canoeing and rafting are particularly popular in Latvia. The Gauja, Salaca and Abava Rivers all offer uninterrupted routes stretching for several days, and you can join an organised tour or rent gear and run the routes on your own. In the capital, **Campo** (☎ 922 2339; [www.laivas.lv](http://www.laivas.lv); Blaumaņa iela 22/24, Riga) is a good starting point for information. The club organises canoeing trips in Latgale, Zemgale, Kurzeme and Vidzeme and rents gear. For more info on paddling in this region, see p230.

### BIKING THE BALTICS: A FEW EPIC RIDES

Whether you're yearning to pedal along the coast, through the forest or around the lake-flecked countryside, there are plenty of cycling routes to accommodate you. Here are a few of our favourites.

#### Riding the 'Sahara of Lithuania'

Western Lithuania boasts one of the most magical one-day cycling trips in the Baltics. The stupendous Curonian Spit, dubbed the 'Sahara of Lithuania', is a fragile stretch of spit coastline loaded with towering dunes, wild white beaches and pine forests. The biking trail starts in the sleepy little village of Nida and heads 30km north, mostly through pine forests, to bewitching, sculpture-studded Juodkrantė. Along the way you pedal through the Nagliai Strict Nature Reserve, past an authentic fish-smoking house in the tiny fishing village of Preila, and have the chance to marvel at the wondrous 67.2m-high Vecekrugas Dune – the highest on the spit. Lovely Nida or Juodkrantė are perfect spots to spend the night. For precise route details, see p367.

#### Estonian Island Jaunt

Loosely following part of Estonia's National Cycle Route No 1, this three-night trip is well signposted in English. To start your journey, catch a ferry to the island of Hiiumaa. Quiet and sparsely populated, the island is perfect for biking – think delightful coastal stretches, pine forests and plenty of fresh salty-sweet air. From the ferry pier, head north for 28km to the island's 'capital', Kärdla, a sleepy town filled with gardens and trees. From here pedal south through bog and forest for 33km until you reach Käina, the island's second-largest settlement and your stopping point for the night. The town is nothing special, but it does boast several decent hotels. Rise early, as day two is long. From Käina the route heads southwest for 25km to the small harbour of Sõru. It's a pretty ride, passing coastal marshlands, picturesque hamlets and isolated farmsteads. Catch your breath on the ferry to Saaremaa, which departs from Sõru. Despite being the country's biggest island and a favourite summer holiday spot, Saaremaa still retains an old-fashioned feel. Unspoiled rural landscapes, farmsteads, windmills and trees abound. From the pier it's a beautiful 30km ride to Orissaare, where you can bed down at the friendly hostel. The following morning, cross the 2.5km-long causeway to Muhu and spend the day cycling around the island, checking out fortress ruins and quaint villages. Spend the night on Muhu before catching the ferry back to the mainland from the Kuivastu pier.

#### City to Surf in Latvia

The 25km trail from Riga to Jūrmala is a great day trip, perfect for novice riders or anyone just looking for a relaxing spin. Take the Vanšu bridge (on Valdemāra iela) out of Rīga and look for the red-painted trail behind the bus shelter at the edge of the road. Head past the Olympia shopping centre and over a canal, then follow the well-marked path to the right. Head straight for 600m before making a left onto Klingēru iela and another left again onto Kuldīgas iela. At the end of the road, turn right onto the main road, Slokas iela, and follow this until you see a pedestrian crossing. Cross the road here and look for Kandavas iela, where you'll turn left. Take the first right onto Zārdu iela and you'll finally find yourself off the main roads and on the bike trail proper. From here it's a straight shot to Jūrmala on a paved path. You'll feel miles away from the city once you hit this tranquil, tree-lined trail. And since it's closed to motor vehicles, there's no need to worry about riding in traffic.

In northeast Lithuania, Aukštaitija National Park (p320) also offers excellent canoeing terrain, with a big network of interconnected lakes. Both the Aukštaitija National Park Office and the boatmen on the lake-shore in Palūse organise trips and rent equipment. In Dzūkija National Park (p328), canoeing trips along the Ūla River can likewise be arranged through the visitors centres in Marcinkonys and Merkinė.

Canoes or traditional *haabjas* (Finno-Ugric single-tree boats carved from aspen) serve as the primary vehicles for exploring Soomaa National Park (p165) in southwest Estonia. **Karuskoe** (☎ 0506 1896; www.soomaa.com), in Tohera, just outside the park's northwestern boundary, arranges canoeing and boating trips on Soomaa's rivers and bogs between April and September. The overnight trips are unique, and include a sweat in a floating sauna!

## SKIING & SNOWBOARDING

They might not have anything even closely resembling a mountain, but Estonia and Latvia haven't let this little geographic hurdle hinder their ski-resort construction efforts. Instead these countries have become mas-

### SWEAT IT OUT

Given that it's cold, dark and snowy for many months of the year, it's little surprise that the sauna is an integral part of Baltic culture. Most hotels have one, and some cities have public bathhouses with saunas. But it's the ones that silently smoulder next to a lake or river, by the sea or deep in the forest that provide the most authentic experience.

Balts split their saunas into two categories: Russian, and Finnish or Swedish. A 'Russian' or 'smoke' sauna is more traditional and is modelled after the great Russian *bahnja*. The sauna is housed in a one-room wooden hut; bathing begins when the open wood stove has roared for some three to four hours, turning the interior of the hut black with soot and the heated rocks a sizzling red. When taking a sauna, the often-boisterous bathers throw water onto the sizzling rocks to ensure the wood-perfumed air remains thick with steam (and sweat).

The 'Finnish' or 'Swedish' sauna, by comparison, can be a clinical, second-rate affair. This Nordic terminology refers to the clean and smokeless modern sauna that sprang up in the 1990s (despite the fact that until the 1950s Finns favoured the smoke sauna). Electric heaters are generally used to warm the modest mound of stones, contained in a small rack at one end of the neat, bench-clad sauna.

Balts use a bunch of birch twigs to lightly switch the body, irrespective of which sauna type they're sweating in. This gentle beating is said to increase perspiration, tingle the nerve endings and add to the overall sense of relaxation and revitalisation. Cooling down is an equally integral part of the sauna experience: most Finnish-style saunas have showers or pools, while the more authentic smoke saunas are usually next to a lake or river. In the depths of winter, cutting out a square metre of ice from a frozen lake in order to take a quick dip is not unheard of.

An invitation to share a sauna – said to come close to a religious experience on occasion – is a hospitable gesture that should be treated with great respect. Public or hotel saunas demand an hourly fee of around €5 and there are plenty of small, private saunas that can be rented for €15 to €23 per hour. Normally, you rent the entire sauna, which can usually fit at least eight people. In Estonia, the Reval Hotel Olümpia (p82) has a glass-windowed Finnish-style sauna noteworthy for its stunning views over Tallinn. For a sootier experience, try the smoke sauna at Kalma Suan, also in Tallinn (p78), and the traditional Russian-style sauna, dating from 1915, at the Mihkli Farm Museum (p151) on Saaremaa.

At the Zevynos Hostel (p329), in southern Lithuania, you'll find a serene sauna nestled into the forests of Dzūkija National Park.

In Latvia, soak up some sky-high city views – 180 degrees worth – while working up a sweat in the top-floor sauna at Riga's Reval Hotel Ridzene (p211). The traditional lakeside sauna at Cakuli (p242), a guesthouse in the Latgale Upland, is also fabulous.

ters at working with what they've got – and that means constructing lifts and runs on the tiniest of hills, and using rooftops and dirt mounds to create vertical drops. At least they've got the climate working for them, with cold temperatures ensuring snow cover for at least four months of the year. The Alps this ain't – don't expect much in the way of technical terrain or long powder runs – but you've got to admit that saying you've skied or snowboarded the Baltics is pretty damn cool!

Otepää (p116), in southeast Estonia, is probably the best of the Baltic winter resorts. It offers a variety of downhill-skiing and snowboarding areas, myriad cross-country trails, a ski jump and plenty of outlets from which to hire gear. Lively nightlife and a ski-town vibe heighten the appeal for skiers and boarders.

The Gauja Valley is the centre of Latvia's winter-sports scene. Sigulda (p227), Cēsis (p232) and Valmiera (p234) all offer short-but-semisweet downhill runs as well as loads of cross-country trails. Adrenaline junkies disappointed by Sigulda's gentle slopes can get their fix swishing down the town's 1200m-long artificial bobsled run – the five-person contraptions reach speeds of 80km/h!

Lithuania hasn't really joined the downhill game, but you can cross-country ski amid deep, whispering forests and frozen blue lakes in supremely beautiful Aukštaitija National Park (p320).

## BIRD-WATCHING

Thanks to a key position on north-south migration routes, the Baltic countries are a bird-watcher's paradise. Each year, hundreds of bird species descend upon the region, attracted by fish-packed wetlands and wide-open spaces relatively devoid of people. White storks arrive by the thousands each spring, nesting on rooftops and telegraph poles throughout the region. Other annual visitors include corncrakes, bitterns, cranes, mute swans, black storks and all types of geese.

In Estonia, some of the best bird-watching in the Baltics is found in the Matsalu Nature Reserve (p135), where 275 different species (many migratory) can be spotted. Vilsandi National Park (p152), off Saaremaa, arranges bird-watching tours. The Hiiumaa Islets Landscape Reserve (p142) is another other great birding spot. Visit the **Estonian Ornithological Society** (Eesti Ornitoloogiaühing; ☎ 0742 2195; www.eoy.ee; Veski tanav 4, Tartu) for all the latest regional birding info.

Home to some 270 of Lithuania's 325 bird species, the Nemunas Delta Regional Park (p370) is a must for serious birders. Park authorities can help organise bird-watching expeditions during the mid-September, late October and March-mid-May migratory seasons. The nearby Curonian Spit National Park (p362) offers opportunities for spotting up to 200 different species of birds amid dramatic coastal scenery.

In Latvia, keep an eye out for some of Europe's rarest birds in splendid Gauja National Park (p226). With thick forests and numerous wetlands, Ķemeri National Park (p252), in northern Kurzeme, is another great bird-watching spot. The boggy Teiči Nature Reserve (p238), in the Vidzeme Upland, is an important feeding and nesting ground for many bird species. Lake Engure (p253), in northern Kurzeme, is a major bird reservation with 186 species (44 endangered) nesting around the lake and its seven islets. The **Engure Ornithological Research Centre** (☎ 947 4420; Bērziems; ☞ by appt only) arranges bird-watching expeditions to an observation tower in the middle of the lake. For the scoop on everything bird-related in Latvia, check out **Latvian Birding** (www.putni.lv). This highly informative site is in English, has exhaustive lists of common

'Bobsleds on Sigulda's artificial bobsled run can reach a speed of 80km/hr'

Latvian birds, notes on recent rare species sightings and tips on hot bird-watching spots.

## BERRYNG & MUSHROOMNG

The Balts' deep-rooted attachment to the land is reflected in their obsession with berryng and mushroomng – national pastimes for all three countries. Accompanyng a local friend into the forest on a berryng or mushroomng expedition is an enchantng way to appreciate this traditional rural occupation.

If you're keen on picking, but lack a local invitation, join an organised tour. **Countryside Tourism of Lithuania** (☎ 37-400 354; www.countryside.lt; Donelaičio gatvė 2-201, Kaunas), **Estonian Rural Tourism** (☎ 600 9999; www.maaturism.ee in Estonian; Vilmsi tänav 53B, Tallinn) and Latvia's **Baltic Country Holidays** (☎ 761 7600; www.traveller.lv; Kūģu iela 11, Rīga) all offer ecotourism-oriented trips that include rural homestays and mushroom- and berry-picking excursions with your host.

## FISHNG

Abundant lakes and miles upon miles of rivers and streams provide ample fishing opportunities in all three countries. Visit a regional tourist office for the scoop on the best angling spots and information pertaining to permits.

In the dark depths of the Baltic winter there is no finer experience than dabbling in a touch of ice-fishing with vodka-warmed local fishermen on the frozen Curonian Lagoon (p362), off the west coast of Lithuania. The Nemunas Delta Regional Park (p370) is another good western Lithuanian fishing spot. The park information office sells the required permits and offers assistance on where to pick up gear.

The Estonian coastline has some fine angling spots. You'll need a permit to fish anywhere along this coast; stop by the nearest tourist office to find out where to get one. In northeast Estonia, the **Lahemaa National Park Visitors' Centre** (☎ 0329 5555; www.lahemaa.ee) has all the information on the regional fishing scene.

Latvia's numerous lakes and rivers are packed with all sorts of fish. You'll need a permit to fish anywhere in the country; these can be bought at local post offices or angling stores. The Latgale Upland (p241) is packed with hundreds of deep-blue lakes offering ample fishing opportunities. In northern Kurzeme, Lake Engure (p253) is another favourite angling spot.

For info on berryng and mushroomng tours, check out www.countryside.lt (Lithuania), www.maaturism.ee (Estonia) and www.traveller.lv (Latvia).

An angling permit is compulsory in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania; visit a regional tourism office to arrange one. Staff can also give you the low-down on the best fishing spots.



# The Authors



## NICOLA WILLIAMS

**Coordinating Author, Lithuania**

A year in Latvia before returning to London as an up 'n' coming young journalist never did work out: Nicola ended up staying a couple of years in Riga, quitting her job as features editor for the *Baltic Times* only to move to Lithuania as editor-in-chief of the Vilnius-based *In Your Pocket* city guide series. Eventually, she did leave – to wed her German sweetheart in France where she now lives. Nicola wrote the 1st edition of *Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania* and has worked on many other Lonely Planet titles.

### My Favourite Trip

I revel in the contrasts the three capitals proffer: quaint old Vilnius (p287), with its hidden courtyards and cobble maze, Tallinn (p64), with Scandinavian serenade, and Riga (p187), the only capital sufficiently gritty and cosmopolitan to really feel like a capital. City-hopping aside, my favourite trip entails some serious eating and drinking in Vilnius, with an overnight flit to Trakai (p315) to Zen-out in the lakeside Jacuzzi and enjoy refined dining on the jetty restaurant at Akmeninė Užeiga (p317). Then it's a speed-drive west to the coast where party-mad Palanga (p355) contrasts with the indescribable beauty of the Curonian Spit (p362). Here, I could cycle through pine forests, swim in the sea, splash in wild sand and wallow in the slow life for ever.



## BECCA BLOND

**Activities, Latvia**

Even as a child growing up in the USA during the end of the Cold War, Becca was proud to say she was half Russian. Her grandmother's stories about immigrating to the United States as a child sparked a lifelong fascination with the former USSR, and so Becca jumped at the chance to research Latvia for Lonely Planet. On the road for most of the year, she has updated Lonely Planet guides in Africa, Asia, Europe, the USA and Canada. When not living out of her backpack, she calls Boulder, Colorado, home.

### My Favourite Trip

I enjoy leaving Latvia's obvious starting point, Riga, for last. The city seems even more magical after tooling around the countryside. My favourite trip starts in the Gauja Valley (p224). Using Sigulda (p227) as a base, I spend a few days playing in this pine-scented wonderland. A canoe trip and visit to my favourite Latvian town, Cēsis (p232), are musts. From here I head to happening Liepāja (p261) and spend a few nights dancing to live Latvian rock music. Then it's on to desolately beautiful Cape Kolka (p253). I just love it's soul-soothing vibe. With my country cravings appeased, I head to Jūrmala's (p220) beaches before finishing up my trip in magnificent Riga (p187).



## REGIS ST LOUIS

**Estonia, Kaliningrad Excursion, Regional Directory, Transport**

Regis first became interested in Estonia during his student days at Moscow State University, when the Baltics were still referred to as wayward states rather than independent nations. Since then, he's avidly followed developments in this tiny country as it's gone from ex-Soviet to EU, becoming one of Europe's hottest destinations that almost no-one can point to on a map. The natural beauty of the landscape, the friendly people and the splendid cities and villages are just a few reasons why he can't stop raving about Estonia. Regis lives in New York City.

### My Favourite Trip

My Estonian journey begins in Tallinn's alluring Old Town (p69). After a few days soaking up medieval splendour and café culture, I head south to charming Tartu (p106). Lovely parks, a meandering river and fascinating galleries preface an inspiring trip into the southeast (p106). There, I am immersed in Estonia's natural beauty: picturesque villages, lush forests and enchanting lakes. After rustic living beneath the gaze of Setu god Peko, I strike west for Saaremaa (p142), not overlooking its majestic castle nor its indulgent spa resorts. Assuming there's time (and money) to spare, I head to Haapsalu (p130) for lovely strolls along 19th-century lanes, and continue to Lahemaa (p95), a gem of a national park, fronting an idyllic stretch of deep-blue Baltic Sea.



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