

Finland & the Baltics 2023 Trip Report (December 8-25, 2023)

Finland and the Baltic States Tour: December 8th through the 25th of 2023. Mike worked with Sarah Oliphant at Baltic Holidays who prepared our tailor-made Helsinki and Baltic Christmas Markets Private Tour. We traveled independently on our own agenda with assistance as required. On the trip we had a guide at each designation take us on a walking tour for a few hours; a perfect way to get our bearings. Transfers, hotels, places of interest and drivers were all arranged. At each place we had a day on our own to explore the city.

Helsinki, Finland's southern capital, sits on a peninsula in the Gulf of Finland. Known as the "Daughter of the Baltic" or the "Pearl of the Baltic". Helsinki is a totally unique combination of quirky urbanity and peaceful nature that gives silence and space to feel more, hear more and experience more. Helsinki was built to rival the port of Tallinn across the water. It is a great place to explore on foot in this maritime city.

Monday 11th of December 2023: Leaving Helsinki with transport to Helsinki Airport for flight to Ivalo. When we landed in Ivalo our driver Darren, representing Aurora Service Tours, met us in the arrival hall and drove us and another couple to Utsjoki. It was a long drive to the cottage (including the stop at the supermarket where we brought some food/drink for our 4 night Northern Lights holiday). Quite the adventure at the supermarket as all the products were in Finish. We were able to ask questions to find what we were looking for. Loaded up on bread, lunch meat, cheese, fruit and drinks. I brought some items from home, especially fresh grinded coffee and filters.

Each cottage was perfectly equipped with heating, shower, washing machine, fireplace (with free logs), sauna, fridge, free WIFI and so much more. Our cabin was conveniently located near the observation tower that was available for guest any time of the day or night. The views were amazing looking out at the forest. We could step out on the deck and enjoy the forest blanketed with pure fresh snow. The cold air was refreshing to breathe. The night sky was full of stunning visuals, of twinkling stars and cosmic lights.

The highlight was walking over to the observation tower any time to view the Northern Lights. Turn on the TV and you could watch the Aurora Borealis/Northern Lights 'Live Stream' screen. Our guide would text you updates on the clear viewing of the Northern Lights. We were lucky that 3 nights there the skies were clear. Dressing for below freezing temperatures was required. We had brought a large variety of winter clothes, footwear & wool socks. Even then with temperatures at 10 or more below it was bitter cold. I felt comfortable with my layered collection of warm attire & Muck Boots. Even then my hands got cold and my toe nails felt that they might explode. To warm up Darren had a fire going in the hut at the bottom of the tower. We went in the hut to warm up and talk to our guide and the couple from England celebrating their 21st wedding anniversary. Afterwards stopped to say hi to the resident reindeer's roaming around. Darren gave us some food for the reindeer's for us to feed them.

Witnessing the Aurora Borealis/Northern Lights was a truly awe-inspiring unforgettable experience. The lights took on various hues, including bright green, pink, purple and blue creating a mesmerizing display that is often described as magical with the forest in the background. The night sky twinkled with stars and shooting stars. One night Mike and Darren stayed up on the tower to watch the Geminid meteor shower. Mike said they saw a brilliant fireball light up the sky. It was wonderful to relax in the wilderness with some peace and calmness in our minds and bodies. We left our last day for the journey back to Ivalo to take our flight back to Helsinki. On the way we admired the snowy scenery and many times reindeer crossing the road. We were met by our driver at Helsinki airport and he drove us to the Ferry Port to take a ferry to Tallinn.

Saturday the 16th of December 2023, Tallinn, Estonia's capital on the Baltic Sea, is the country's cultural hub: We stayed at the Palace Hotel Tallinn for three nights. Our private guide representing Baltic Holidays took us on a 3 hr. walking tour of the medieval city of Tallinn with its fairy tale towers, colorful Hanseatic houses, views across the Bay of Tallinn, cobbled streets lined with local art and craft markets, cozy cafes in quaint little squares.

The tour covered the main sights of Old Town Tallinn including the medieval defensive tower from the 15th century called Kiek in die Kok, the Parliament, Nevsky Cathedral and down to the Town Hall Square and St Catherine's Passage. We learned from our guide about life in Tallinn, and how things have changed since the Soviet occupation.

Sunday the 17th of December 2023 Day #2 on our own to explore Tallinn, Estonia's capital on the Baltic Sea. After a nice breakfast at Palace Hotel Tallinn we started walking pass the Christmas Market to St. Olaf's Church once used as a radio tower by the KGB stationed next door. We went to the church to climb the tower for 360 degree views of the city. Unfortunately the lady in the ticket office said that the tower was closed for the winter till April.

We continued on to St. Nicholas "Niguliste" Church a medieval church dedicated to Saint Nicholas, the patron of the fishermen and sailors. Originally built in the 13th century, it was partially destroyed in the Soviet bombing of Tallinn in World War II. It reopened in 1984 as a subsidiary of the Art Museum of Estonia. We got tickets and took the elevator that rises four floor to a sky-deck where you can see views of Old Town and Tallinn Bay. We were pleasantly surprised to see a concert was about to begin. It was the 35th Jubilee year of the Tallinn Boys Choir singing Christmas carols. I wondered why I saw children and teens all dressed in red jackets running around the museum. It was an amazing concert bringing the Christmas spirit alive.

After the unexpected concert we went to Chocolats de Pierre Café: Nestled inside the picturesque Masters' courtyard way from Old Town a café renowned for its handmade chocolates also pastries, sandwiches, quiches, cakes and hot chocolate. We then ventured back to the Christmas Market at dusk for one last look and got some local food cooking in one of the stalls for dinner.

Tuesday 19th of December 2023: After the transfer from Tallinn to Riga on the 18th we met with our guide today on the 19th for a 3 hour walking tour. She met us at Hotel Justus where we are staying for 3 nights. Our first stop was the House of the Blackheads a building situated in the old town of Riga, Latvia. The original building was erected in 1334 as a warehouse, meeting and celebration place for merchants. A large astronomical clock is seen on the facade the building. It shows the time, date, month, day of the week, and lunar phase. Also located in this square is the site of the world's first decorated Christmas tree in 1510 by the men of the local merchants' guild.

Next was St. Peter's church. This Gothic church is 800 years old, one of the oldest medieval buildings in the Baltic. Behind the church is a unique sculpture of the "Town Musicians of Bremen", Riga is an old Hanseatic Town and partner city of Bremen. It was gifted the sculpture by Bremen in 1990. It tells the story of four aging domestic animals, a donkey, rooster, dog and cat, which after a lifetime of hard work are neglected and mistreated by their former masters. They decide to run away and become town musicians in the city of Bremen known for its freedom, to live without owners. The monument has a deep political meaning. The animals are symbolically looking through a crack in the Iron Curtain. Rubbing their faces brings good luck. The higher you rub the more luck you get.

We passed by a group of three historic stone houses lined up in a photogenic row called "Three Brothers". Number 17 is over 600 years old, making it the oldest dwelling in town. The windows are tiny on the upper levels because Riga's property taxes during the Middle Ages were based on window size.

We entered one of the Swedish Gates that were erected in 1698 as part of the Riga Wall to provide access to barracks outside the city wall. In the 1800s Riga was modernized and the defense walls removed because they were of no use in the modern war. On the other side of Swedish Gate is a long stretch of the remaining city wall.

We walked pass Livu Square featuring outdoor cafes and flower-beds in the shape of waves to remind people of the lost river after whom Riga was once named. The whole square is surrounded with old central Europe buildings. Small guild (erected in 1863) and Big Guild (1854) are placed on one side of the square. The Guild accepted traders and craftsmen, except for weavers and sauna operators. At one time there was a disagreement with a Riga local whose building was across from the Big Guild. Getting into the Great Guild in the 14th century, was an incredibly huge honor. Getting snubbed from the Great Guild was a gigantic insult. One local displeased at not getting admitted to the Guild attached two black cat sculptures on top of his building and turned their tails and backs to the neighboring Big Guild house. The Guild hated the cats and a fight raged for months to have them removed. An agreement was finally made between them that the local could be admitted to the club on condition that the cats were turned the opposite direction.

Our guide took us on a stroll through Kronvalda Park with its Christmas Light Trail glittering on the water of the city canal. We crossed a little bridge with hundreds of love

locks rusting away in the cold weather. The walk took us to the Freedom Monument that honored soldiers killed during the Latvian War of Independence. The copper figure of Liberty is lifting three gilded stars representing Latvia's historical regions of Kurzeme, Vidzeme, and Latgale. The motto "For the Fatherland and Freedom" is inscribed upon the base. It was unveiled on 18 November 1935 and financed entirely from public donations. After Latvia's independence was restored the honor guard from the National Armed Forces started standing at the base of the monument. Our tour was over so we headed back towards other sites in Riga. For an early dinner we went to Neiburgs Hotel to eat at their restaurant that is defined by local flavors & ingredients of Latvia.

Time to check out the Christmas Market in Dome Square in the heart of Old Town. Then to St. Peter's church built in 1209 to take the elevator to the top for twilight panoramic views of the red roofs of Old Town, Riga Bay and the Daugava River with its large port. Back to our hotel with a stop in an amber shop for last minute shopping.

Wednesday 20th of December 2023: Today we went to explore Riga on our own. We walked to Riga Central Market, Europe's largest market and bazaar in Riga, Latvia. It is one of the most notable structures from 20th century in Latvia and has been included in UNESCO World Heritage Site list in 1998. It was planned from 1922 and built from 1924 to 1930. During World War I, the German army established Vaiņode Airport in Kurzeme, where several airships (dirigible balloons) were permanently located. The airships were intended for reconnaissance or for bombing an enemy for example by attacking a Russian army seaplane airfield.

The building is a wonder in its own right, constructed in the second half of the 1920s and repurposing German Zeppelin Hangars into pavilions. Two massive hangars were built for housing these pioneering aircraft. The halls, 240-meters long, 47-meters wide and 38-meters high were named Walhalla and Walther, following German mythology. After the Latvian War of Independence, the hangars were dismantled and used to build the hangars of the Riga Central Market, planning to leave them in their original size. It was later decided to use only the upper parts of the hangars. Today you can see the metal structures of the German army airship hangars.

These titanic buildings are right on the Daugava, just south of Vecrīga, and each one has its own specialty, be it gastronomic specialties, fish, meat, dairy or vegetables. There are also stalls to browse outside, while the former warehouses (Spikeri), have been turned into a trendy arts and entertainment zone. Some goodies that may take you out of your comfort zone are smoked eels, Rupjmaizes kārtojums (a layered dessert made from rye bread) and hemp paste.

Wednesday 20th of December 2023: Continuing exploring Riga on our own Mike arranged for a Bolt (local equivalent of Uber) to pick us up in front of Riga Central Market. We wanted to go to Alberta Street regarded as Riga's Art Nouveau gem, since it is full of splendid historical Art Nouveau-style buildings from one end to the other. The area was erected in a short period of time – from 1901 to 1908, each of the buildings standing alone as an inimitable 20th century architectural achievement.

Eight of them have been recognized as architectural monuments of state significance, including several by the noted Russian architect Mikhail Eisenstein. The architectural style makes use of structural and decorative elements of romantic nationalism common to northern Europe at the time. Each house is decorated by figural sculptures, façades with protruding balconies, columns and other elements covered in abstract curls keeping with the best traditions of Art Nouveau. Facades are rich in ornamentation and decorative elements, including intricate floral motifs, lacy balconies and sculptures of chimeras, sphinxes and dragons.

Wednesday 20th of December 2023: Continuing exploring Riga on our own this afternoon we walked to St Jacob's Cathedral. It is the smallest one among the four Old Town churches; however, its belfry has best maintained the features characteristic to Medieval Riga churches. In 1812, during the Napoleonic Wars, the edifice was used as a warehouse for food supplies; and since 1923 the Cathedral again belongs to the Roman Catholic Church.

The archaeological excavations in St Jacob's Cathedral have lasted for five years. During them, amazing scenes and facts were discovered, including a "bone chamber" or ossuary and several significant burials. The discoveries show that the wealthiest residents were buried inside the cathedral, while the others were buried outside. Doctor of History, archaeologist Auturs Tomson reported.

We then went to Riga Cathedral. Riga Cathedral formally the Cathedral Church of Saint Mary, is now the Evangelical Lutheran cathedral in Riga. Beginning in 1955 the building was used as a museum and concert hall, but it resumed a religious role in 1991 and is now the Cathedral of the Archbishop of Latvia's Evangelic Lutheran Church.

Heading to Vilnius the Capital of Lithuania, with a stop in Bauska for the night.

Thursday 21st of December 2023: We were picked up by our driver at Hotel Justus to take us to Bauska. On the way, we had a 1.5 hour stop to visit Rundale Palace with an English speaking guide who was very informative. Rundale Palace with its garden is the most distinguished Baroque and Rococo monument in Latvia. It was built between 1736 and 1740 as a summer residence for the Duke of Courland, Ernst Johann Biron. The name of Rundāle comes from the German place-name Ruhenthal (Valley of Peace). Duke Ernst Johann died in 1772, and the palace was inherited by his widow Duchess Benigna Gottlieb; during her time orchards were formed around the palace. The ceilings were painted by the Italian painters Francesco Martini and Carlo Zucchi from Saint Petersburg.

The palace was renovated in 1923 and some of its rooms were used as the primary school of Rundāle Parish. In 1972 a permanent Rundāle Palace Museum was created and its main aim was to renew the whole ensemble of the palace by mainly orientating towards the condition of the palace during the second part of the 18th century. The palace was also open to the public during World War II. In 1945 a grain storage was formed in the halls of the palace, and the palace was closed to the public after that. The first restored

rooms in the eastern building of the palace were opened to the public in 1981, gradually being followed by new interiors. Restoration of the palace was finished in 2014.

After our tour of Rundale Palace our driver took us to Zoltners for a one night stay. We arrived in the afternoon to a beautiful place in the countryside located in the legendary Zemgale region, Tervete. Beautiful quiet grounds and comfortable rooms. They brew their own beer here from home-grown barley. The restaurant and facilities at the resort were very enjoyable.

Friday 22nd of December 2023: Bauska to Vilnius stop at Hill of Crosses

Our driver-guide will pick us up at Zoltners to drive us to Vilnius. On the way we stopped to visit the iconic Hill of Crosses. This site is the location of over 250,000 crucifixes that have been placed on a hill near the city of Šiauliai, nicknamed City of the Sun. It was knocked down three times during the Lithuanian occupation eras of the Nazis and the Soviet Union. The wooden crosses were burned to the ground and the metal ones melted for scrap metal. It was also used as a waste disposal site and it was dangerous to visit there.

But, each time it was destroyed the Lithuanian people rebuilt it as a sign of resistance. The tradition of placing crosses in the city of Šiauliai was peaceful resistance to the occupation of foreign invaders. In fact, some say it started with the Teutonic Knights who took over the city in the 14th century. But, the Hill of Crosses we see today started after the Lithuanian Revolt against the Russian occupation in 1831. By 1895, there were 150 crucifixes that had been mounted at the site and by 1940 over 400.

By 1940, Nazi Germany took over Lithuania and, at the end of World War II, the Russian Soviet Union. People continued to place crosses here as resistance to occupation and not being able to practice their Christian beliefs. Also, as so many Lithuanians were being deported into hard labor camps, family members left crosses here for loved ones they could not bury. Once upon a time, the Hill of Crosses was a dangerous destination during the Soviet Era. Placing crosses here was forbidden. So, you quite literally risked your life to do so.

Finally, in 1985, the Hill of Crosses was left alone. By 1990 Lithuania was granted its independence. Today, the site is visited by pilgrims all over the world and is seen as a symbol of faith. Even Pope John Paul II visited the site to bless it. He declared the hill a place of peace, hope, love and sacrifice.

Saturday December 2023: Vilnius the Capital of Lithuania

Vilnius, Lithuania's capital, is known for its baroque architecture, seen especially in its medieval Old Town. But the buildings lining this district's partially cobble stone streets reflect diverse styles and eras, from the neoclassical Vilnius Cathedral to Gothic St. Anne's Church. The 16th-century Gate of Dawn, containing a shrine with a sacred Virgin Mary icon, once guarded an entrance to the original city.

We met our guide at the lobby of our hotel, Hotel Vilnia for a 3 hour privately guided walking tour of Vilnius. She took us to the main sights of Old Town, considered one of the largest and best preserved old towns of Europe. She brought Vilnius to life with her knowledge and stories of the area. In Cathedral Square is the equestrian statue of Grand Duke Gediminas, one of the first rulers of Lithuania. Our guide told us a legend that Gediminas had a dream after a successful hunt in the scared forest near where the Vilnia River flowed, about a huge Iron Wolf on top of a hill howling as loud as a hundred wolves. Then Gediminas asked a priest to interpret the dream and he told him that the Iron Wolf represents a castle and a city which will be established by you on this site. This city will be the capital of the Lithuanian lands and the dwelling of their rulers, and the glory of their deeds shall echo throughout the world.

We had a nice morning tour with a light covering of snow covering Old Town. She took us inside Vilnius Cathedral that was quiet and peaceful as very few people were inside. We visited several rooms and she told us the history of the Cathedral. She pointed out several places to enjoy lunch and dinner and hidden courtyards and shops. We went inside several churches that were on our list. When our guide left us we continued to explore some of the buildings and churches we had passed during the tour.

Tomorrow we are on our own to visit more places in Vilnius.

Saturday December 2023: Vilnius the Capital of Lithuania

Today we walked around Vilnius and visited Bernardine Garden Park and the monument to Frank Zappa tucked away behind the city's Central Clinic. It's the only one of its kind in Europe while the second (a replica) is in Baltimore, Zappa's hometown. The duplicate was donated to Baltimore by the Lithuanian non-profit and Zappa-fan organization ZAPPART. Although Frank Zappa has nothing to do with Lithuania, he is a symbol of freedom and unbridled ideas for Lithuanians.

Frank Vincent Zappa (1940-1993) was an American musician, composer, and bandleader. His work is characterized by nonconformity, free-form improvisation, sound experimentation, musical virtuosity and satire of American culture. He was born in Baltimore, MD.

Zappa caught the attention of artists in Lithuania, becoming a symbol of freedom. The bust of Frank Zappa was sculpted by 70-year-old Konstantinas Bogdanas, the same artist who made the statues of communist heroes that dotted the city so many years before. The bust, along with a psychedelic mural behind it. It was unveiled on the 17th of December 1995. The Vilnius military band performed various Zappa singles at the ceremony, which ended with a fireworks display.

Sadly, the musician himself never found out about the memorial; he died before the memorial was erected. People pay their respects to the legendary musician while in

Vilnius and use it as a starting point to explore the alternative side of the city, including the murals right behind the monument and continuing down a side street.

The Bernardine Garden, previously known as Sereikiškės Park, is a public park in the city of Vilnius, Lithuania. It is located on the left bank of the Vilnia River between the Gediminas Tower and Bernardine Monastery. One special section of the park is the botanical exhibition, which commemorates the Vilnius University Botanical Gardens that once grew here in the 18th century and were the largest in Eastern Europe. Bernardine Garden is also home to the oldest oak tree in Vilnius, which is approximately 400 years old.

Sunday, 24 December 2023: Last day in Vilnius the Capital of Lithuania then flying home on Christmas Day.

We went to climb up the stairs of the Cathedral's Bell Tower and then visited the Christmas Market for the last time.

One of the most distinctive features of the square is the cathedral's bell tower, situated several yards from the cathedral itself, a thing uncommon outside of Italy. According to many scholars, the tower was in fact one of the towers of the ancient city walls of the medieval Lower Castle that once stood near the modern square. According to another version, not supported by modern historians, the base of the tower was in fact a small pagan temple, demolished and then turned into the bell tower. Regardless of its origins, the lower parts of the tower are medieval, with several small loop-holes preserved. Its oldest underground square section was built in the 13th century on the bottom of the old riverbed. Upper parts of the tower were added in the 18th century while the Neo-classical finish was added in the 19th century, during the reconstruction of the cathedral.

The city's oldest clock at the top of the tower chimes its bells to invite people to mass.

Sunday, 24 December 2023: Continuing Last day in Vilnius the Capital of Lithuania

Our last full day in Vilnius and then flying home on Christmas Day. Christmas Eve in Lithuania is considered the most important day of the whole holiday season. This is the time when all the family gathers together from different parts of the world to sit down around Christmas Eve table with close relatives. Twelve simple dishes that do not contain any meat should be prepared for Christmas Eve dinner.

As Lithuania is predominantly a Catholic country, it is said that 12 dishes represent 12 apostles (followers of Jesus). However, it is believed that 12 dishes were served even before Catholicism spread all over the country. Those 12 dishes represented 12 months of the year that passed. Everyone had to try all the dishes so all the following months would be successful. One dish for every month.

Usually Christmas Eve dinner would start when the Western Star rises. At first, family members would share communion wafers that can be bought at every church before

Christmas. Then everyone can start tasting twelve dishes. You can find different herring dishes on every Christmas Eve dinner table as well as kūčiukai (small pastries with poppy seeds made from leavened dough), poppy seed milk, grains, different kinds of nuts and dried fruits, kissel drink, kūčia (a dish made from different grains), potato salad, etc. Recently you can find more variety on Christmas Eve dinner table like salmon or even sushi.

We stepped inside Vilnius Cathedral and they were getting started with mass. We found some seats near the front and listened to the ceremony. It was in Lithuanian and Latin but was interesting to watch. In the balcony was a choir that filled the cathedral with their singing.

Happy Travels!
Mike & Audrey