

In total, there were sixteen of us plus the Guide, Arturs, who was Latvian. A couple were from New Zealand, and there were two solo travellers from the US. The holiday involved long Coach Journeys, City Tours and walks in National Parks. I coped remarkably well with the journeys, with my bad back. On some coach journeys, Arturs would describe what life was like in Latvia, when he was growing up, when the Baltic States were under Russian control. Learning Russian was compulsory, and the local languages were not allowed to be taught.

Arriving in Vilnius, Lithuania, via Helsinki, to start the tour, we had an evening meal to get to know one another and have the first chance to try the local cuisine. One dish was Cold Beet Soup with Kefir mixed in, which gives it a creamy taste. I tried it when we were in Latvia. The next day we had a City Tour. The Old Town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. After lunch, we travelled to Kernave, a city with many Hill Forts and a view of the winding Neris River. In the Neris Regional Park, we had a walk. Finally, we drove to Trakai, where we saw a Castle on an island, in Lake Galve. When walking through some towns, a common sight was Storks nesting on Rooftops.

The next day we had a 300Km journey to Zemaitijos National Park for a walk, where we visited Plokstine a one-time Soviet missile base, now a Cold War Museum. We descended into underground bunkers for a guided tour of the various rooms and the silo from which missiles would have been launched. Afterwards we continued onwards to the port city of Liepaja for an overnight stay.

The following morning, we crossed the border into Latvia, travelling to Kuldiga, said to be the prettiest town in the country. We saw the Venta Rapid, a wide cascade of water. In Spring and Autumn, you can watch flying fish trying to jump over the Rapid. Next, we travelled to a vineyard for wine tasting, for example, Rhubarb wine. In the early evening, we had a walking tour of the capital Riga. An astonishing statistic is that the population of Riga is fifty per cent Russian. Afterwards, with three members of our Group, I had a Rooftop Restaurant meal at our hotel. The next day, we visited Gauja National Park, where we viewed sandstone cliffs.

Our next destination was Estonia which involved a five-hour drive and a ferry to get to the island of Saaremaa, the largest of more than 2200 islands in the country. We stayed in Kuressaare, the capital of the island. The next day we visited the second largest island in Estonia, Hiiumaa, which is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve which is devoid of noise or light pollution. We walked along a thin narrowing headland and afterwards visited two lighthouses, one of which was one of the oldest functioning lighthouses in the world.

The following day we headed for Tallinn, the capital, after a tour of Saaremaa, and a visit to the Kaali Crater, formed by a meteorite, just 7500 years ago. In Tallinn, we had a walking tour ending up at the top of a hill where there was the magnificent Russian Orthodox Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, with the traditional Onion Domes. Nevsky was a 13C Russian Prince. During some free time, I visited the renowned Fotografiska Photography Museum and viewed two interesting exhibitions, the third one was not my cup of tea.

We set off for our final destination Helsinki, the next day, crossing the Baltic Sea by ferry. We visited the Sipoonkorpi National Park, where we walked the Fisktrask trail around a large lake. Afterwards, we visited Porvoo the second oldest town in Finland. After a City tour in the morning, some of the group including myself, visited the Suomenlinna Fortress a UNESCO World Heritage site, which we visited by ferry. It was lucky that we could visit the fortress, as it was a three-day Bank holiday in Finland for the Summer Solstice, when there is hardly any nighttime. A feature of Helsinki was the tram network.

After breakfast the following morning, we set off on the homeward journey after visiting four countries in twelve days, a thoroughly enjoyable holiday, made better by our Group of 16 all getting on well with each other.