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**BONUS HOLIDAY ISSUE**





# Christmas in the Baltics is breathtakingly beautiful

By Betsy Harter

**D**O YOU DREAM ABOUT SPENDING THE HOLIDAYS IN a magical winter wonderland, complete with bustling Christmas markets, sleigh rides, mulled wine, and copious amounts of snow? With their holiday traditions passed down through the centuries, the breathtaking Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will surely put you in the festive spirit.

## Winter fun

Although the Baltics remain dark most of the day during the wintertime, those precious daylight hours are full of invigorating activities. Explore bogs and forests on snowshoes or cross-country skis, ice skate on thick frozen lakes, snowmobile or dogsled across vast plains. The hills, though small compared to other more mountainous regions of Europe, host winter recreation areas for downhill skiing and snowboarding.

Another favorite activity in the Baltics is the 800-year-

old ritual of sauna. In Estonia and Latvia, traditional smoke saunas burn wood to heat water, which is poured over hot stones to generate humidity. After heating up in the sauna, you may quickly cool down your body in an icy pond, shower or pool. It may seem odd at first, but “whisking,” or a “gentle beating” is part of the sauna process. Using twigs from local trees, bathers swat each other for exfoliation, massage and aromatherapy. In Lithuania, spa services include the use of amber, which is known for its healing properties.

## Christmas markets

In the Baltics, Christmas markets are the heart of the winter holidays and offer games, performances, local foods and a plethora of winter activities. There is an ongoing disagreement between Estonia and Latvia about which country had the very first public Christmas tree in its town square. In either case, the decorated tree is the focal point



A Christmas market in Riga, Latvia, is full of luxurious furs, handmade wooden crafts, beautiful perfumes and knitted wool scarves.

Aleksandrs Muiznieks Doma

► Betsy Harter is the marketing director at Global Escapes, a travel advising company based in Athens, Georgia.



of the festive season and always something to behold. The markets remain open into the second week of January, making them perfect to visit during a long holiday vacation. Treasures include luxurious furs, handmade wooden crafts, beautiful perfumes, and knitted wool mittens, socks and scarves. Sit down and chat with Santa, ride a pony through the old town and feast on local delicacies such as gingerbread and mulled wine.

### Holiday traditions

Each Baltic state celebrates Christmas a little bit differently, but one thing remains constant: a focus on family. The Estonian word for Christmas, Joulud, comes from the Scandinavian word Jul.

Interestingly enough, holidays in Estonia relate more to the pagan ritual of honoring the winter solstice than a religious celebration. Even so, the season offers wholesome, merry fun for the entire family.

In addition to decorating trees and spending time with loved ones, Estonians have a tradition of giving back to others during the holidays. Whether it is serving at a homeless shelter, donating food to the less fortunate, or volunteering together as a family, giving is valued over receiving.



Submitted photo

A Tallinn, Estonia, artist, paints gorgeous landmarks. Submitted photo

# THOMAS COTTON GIN



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Like here in the United States, Father Christmas visits Estonian kids on Christmas Eve. However, instead of sneaking in while they are sleeping, Santa arrives after dinner and spends time with the children, who are expected to perform in order to receive presents. The nervous little ones dance, recite a poem, sing or play a musical instrument until they gain his favor.

As in Estonia, Christmas in Latvia is linked with the Pagan celebration of Yule, which recognizes the winter solstice and the rebirth of the sun maiden. Known as Ziemassvetki in Latvia, Christmas is rung in by dragging a Yule log around the house, then burning it, signifying the incineration of last year's misfortunes. Additionally, citizens partake in "mumming," or wearing animal masks and dressing up as living corpses to chase away evil spirits.

Latvians decorate their homes just a few days before Christmas or on Christmas Eve itself, with simple evergreen branches, lit candles, and straw ornaments. The typical meal, served on Christmas Eve, consists of 12 foods to symbolize the 12 months of the year. This includes a pork roast, carp, grey peas (dry peas that have been rehydrated and cooked with onion, bacon, and barley), stewed sauerkraut, boiled or roasted potatoes, gingerbread and sweet rolls.

Fish with big scales symbolize money, so Latvians eat it to ensure financial health. Eating all your gray peas protects you from crying too many tears in the new year. Latvians also enjoy piragi, a crescent-shaped baked good with smoked meats inside, eaten only during the winter and summer solstice.

Much more religious than their two Baltic neighbors, Lithuanians call their Christmas Eve dinner Kucios. The closest family and friends are invited over to enjoy a feast that—like Latvia—also includes 12 different foods. Tables are covered with white tablecloths, and fine hay is tucked underneath as a reminder that Jesus was born in a stable. The meal doesn't consist of any meat, dairy, or eggs. Instead, Lithuanians enjoy all that nature has provided: grain, seeds, nuts, fish, and vegetables. Kutia is a boiled cereal dish with dried fruit and honey, and kuciukai are sweet nuggets of dough served with poppy seeds. The entire family shares a Christmas wafer, and they believe that at midnight water turns to wine, animals can speak, and dreams come true.

Old-world charm is still alive and well in the Baltic states. Whether strolling through a Christmas market, snowshoeing through a forest, or decompressing in the sauna, a refreshing holiday getaway in the Baltics is sure to invigorate you, inside and out.



Winter in Tallinn, Estonia, is full of breathtaking views

Submitted photo