

Politics and revolutions

have changed the map of Europe, but if the shops, hotels and restaurants have changed out of all recognition, the people and the historic places of interest have largely stayed the same. Our tour of Poland and the Baltics looks at the lives of the old Polish aristocracy – the castles and art collections – and those of the merchants whose legacy lies in the Old Towns.

In Krakow a visit to the sixteenth century Wawel Castle, with its crown jewels and Flemish tapestries, and then to the mediaeval Old Town district with its Gothic cathedral, exemplifies the difference between the flamboyant lifestyles of the Polish nobles, and the low-key lives of the merchants.

One sees the same divide in taste and style in Warsaw, particularly so when one walks through the Old Town, completely rebuilt after the Second World War, and then travels out of the city to look at the Baroque Wilanow Palace, summer residence of the Polish kings.

In the Baltic cities, it is the civic architecture of the merchants which dominates. In Vilnius, the Old Town is known for its many churches and the Gates of Dawn. Our tour also takes you outside the city to Trakai in the lake region to look at the fourteenth century castle; beautifully situated on the water's edge, the castle was the centre of what was once an empire that stretched as far as the Black Sea.

In Riga, following the pattern of the other cities that we have visited, we take you on a walking tour of the Old Town, and then to see something completely different: the Rundale Palace, built by Rastrelli.

Our tour finishes in Tallinn, and it is here that we see the high point of merchant power and wealth in the Old Town guild houses. Yet here also, as elsewhere, the aristocrats might be said to have had the last word when we take you to see the Kadriog Palace and Park, founded by Peter the Great.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Three nights Krakow, two nights Warsaw, two nights Vilnius, three nights Riga, two nights Tallin. Extensive private excursions to the major museums palaces and sites in each city. **Backstage tour of Riga Opera House.**

An escorted tour on selected dates. May also be customised for independent travel.