**The Baltic States – 25 Years after Soviet Collapse**

It’s been a quarter century since Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia regained their independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, these thriving democratic nations along the Baltic Sea have strong ties to the West and are small gems waiting to be discovered by travelers.

Estonia, the northernmost of the three, has cultural ties to Scandinavia. The capital, Tallinn, is located on the Gulf of Finland, a two-hour ferry ride from Helsinki. Tallinn has a beautifully preserved Old Town whose cobblestone streets are dotted with medieval churches and grand merchants’ homes, as well as restaurants, shops and galleries. In the summer, Old Town Square is the site of concerts and in December, it’s transformed into a Christmas market.

While many of them are tiny, Estonia has about 1,500 islands and they offer activities including bird watching, canoeing, sailing and fishing. The largest, Saaremaa, is the site of majestic Kuressaare Castle, built in the 14th century. Tartu, a university city, is a cultural center that exudes a bohemian spirit.

Latvia is in the middle of the Baltic States. Its capital, Riga, built on the Daugava River, inspires superlatives. A poll of USA TODAY readers voted Riga the “Prettiest European City.” Among the must-see attractions are the intricately designed Art Nouveau apartment buildings along Albert Street; the vast Central Market housed in World War I Zeppelin hangars; and the 13th century Riga Cathedral, in the city’s Old Town. In addition to historic sites, Old Town is a great place to experience Riga’s nightlife.

Forests cover nearly half of Latvia and there are plenty of places to get in touch with the natural world. At Gauja National Park, about an hour northeast of Riga, visitors will find opportunities for hiking and cycling on scenic trails and canoeing along the Gauja River, as well as castles, churches and even an underground bunker built during the Soviet era for use in the event of a nuclear war. In the winter, the park’s slopes become a destination for skiers.

Southernmost of the three Baltic States, Lithuania is on the border with Poland. Its capital, Vilnius, has an Old Town that’s one of the largest in Central and Eastern Europe, with more than 1,500 buildings in a variety of architectural styles including the Gothic St. Anne’s Church. For a panoramic view of Old Town, climb or take the funicular railway to Gediminas’ Tower, named after the founder of Vilnius and a symbol of Lithuanian independence.

There’s much to see outside of Lithuania’s capital. Trakai Castle, located on an island on a lake, is a popular day trip from Vilnius. The Curonian Spit, a 60-mile strip of sand dunes and pine forests along the Baltic Sea, is one of Europe’s most unique natural features. And the Hill of Crosses, in north-central Lithuania, is a remarkable manmade site. Since the 19th century, visitors have left thousands of crosses there, many with photos of loved ones or personal messages.

For help planning a trip to the Baltics, which could even include a cruise to give you a taste of the region, contact the experts at Travel Leaders of Colorado Springs.