

Magical MYSTERY TOUR 3



PASPORT



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SWEDEN</p> |  <p>OSLO
NORWAY</p> |  <p>HELSINKI
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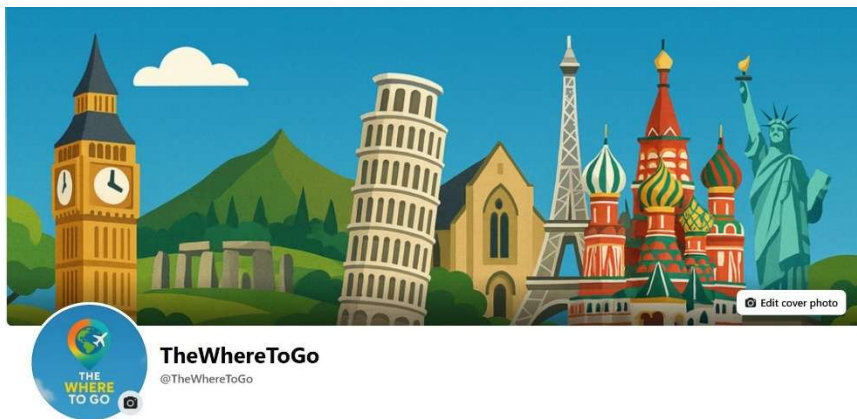




The Magical Mystery Tour 3 is just one of a series of documentary travel guides under 'The Where To Go' banner. You can also find curated videos of the many different places visited on this tour on my YouTube channel which can be found at www.youtube.com/@thewheretogo. Please feel free to like and subscribe.



You will also find up to date information about my worldwide travels on my dedicated Facebook page at www.facebook.com/TheWhereToGo.



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Chapter 1: Introduction



I am writing from Amsterdam Airport where I am waiting to board my connecting flight to Stockholm on the first leg of my Magical Mystery Tour. So, my first stop on this tour is Stockholm via Amsterdam. I actually forgot to put direct flights as a requirement for my tour and this flight with KLM was the cheapest.....other than those taking me to previous destinations:

Magical Mystery Tour 1 covered Dublin, Madrid, Rome, Malta, Greece and Warsaw

Magical Mystery Tour 2 covered Istanbul, Skopje, Belgrade, Bucharest, Chisinau and Milan

For the uninitiated, I have no idea where I am going on this holiday and each destination is chosen purely on the basis of being the cheapest available. Just like last time, I will avoid visiting the same country twice or using the same airline and I am booking everything on Google Flights using "Anywhere" as the destination. You can just as easily use Skyscanner or any such app.

Chapter 2: Stockholm



Arrived safely at Stockholm Arlanda Airport which is the first stop on this Magical Mystery Tourin fact my third Magical Mystery Tour so I am getting used to it. The flight with KLM via Amsterdam was quite pleasant and the staff could not do enough to make everyone feel welcome and comfortable.... a significant difference to what I am getting used to with British Airways I am sorry to say.

In no time at all I was in the arrivals hall and didn't even have to show my passport, presumably because passport formalities had already taken place in Amsterdam and I was now travelling within the Schengen Area. I caught the (very) fast Arlanda Express to train Stockholm Central Station where even the platforms are carpeted I think the locals must have thought I was bonkers taking pictures of the platform to prove I wasn't joking.

Just walking from the station to my hotel made me appreciate why Stockholm is known as the 'Venice of the North' since the city is built across 14 islands so that waterways, boats and bridges are an important part of the fabric. My route took me through Gamla Stan which is the Old Town and every bit as beautiful as any other Old Town I have visited although a hell of a lot colder.



Gamla Stan



Gamla Stan is the historic core of Stockholm and one of Europe's best-preserved medieval city centres. The area dates back to the 13th century and this is the place where Stockholm began, built on the island of Stadsholmen. The streets are narrow, winding, and deliberately confusing as they were originally intended to slow down attackers. The main square, Stortorget, is instantly recognisable with its colourful merchant houses but this was also the same square used for the 80-100 executions in November 1520 in what is now known as the Stockholm Bloodbath....i will let you look that up if you want more information as I don't think I can precis the event in a few words.



Stockholm Cathedral



Stockholm Cathedral, or Storkyrkan, is the city's oldest church, dating back to the late 1200s. This was historically the site of many Swedish royal coronations and major state ceremonies. The outside is not so spectacular but once you have paid your extortionate entrance fee you can observe the ornate pulpit dating back to the 1700s and the royal pews which are used only by the Royal Family when attending. Of particular mention is the dramatic wooden sculpture of St George and the Dragon which was created in 1489 to commemorate a military victory. Regardless of the entrance fee, this place is worth a visit if only for a good sit down and a rest after getting lost in Gamla Stan



German Church

Surprisingly more impressive than the cathedral is the German Church also known as St. Gertrude's. The church reflects Stockholm's long-standing ties with German merchants and was built in the 17th century on the site of a medieval guild hall. The spire is impressive and taller than that of the neighbouring cathedral which must say something.....I thought this was the cathedral from a distance.

Unfortunately, the church was closed when I got there so I didn't see the interior which is described as 'unexpectedly elaborate compared to many Swedish churches, complete with baroque decoration, gilded details, and a strong continental feel.' Services are still held in German today, which gives it a slightly different atmosphere from other churches in the area.



Royal Palace



The Stockholm Royal Palace is one of Europe's largest palaces still used for official state functions. The extensive buildings date back to the 18th century and was built after the original medieval castle was destroyed by fire in 1697. Despite being the official residence of King Carl XVI Gustaf, the royal family actually lives at Drottningholm, so much of the palace is open to visitors including the Royal Apartments, the Treasury (regalia) and the Tre Kronor Museum, which tells the story of the original fortress. The daily Changing of the Guard is worth catching if you time it right. I didn't get the chance to go inside but you can walk around the palace and into the palace ground with no hassle whatsoever.

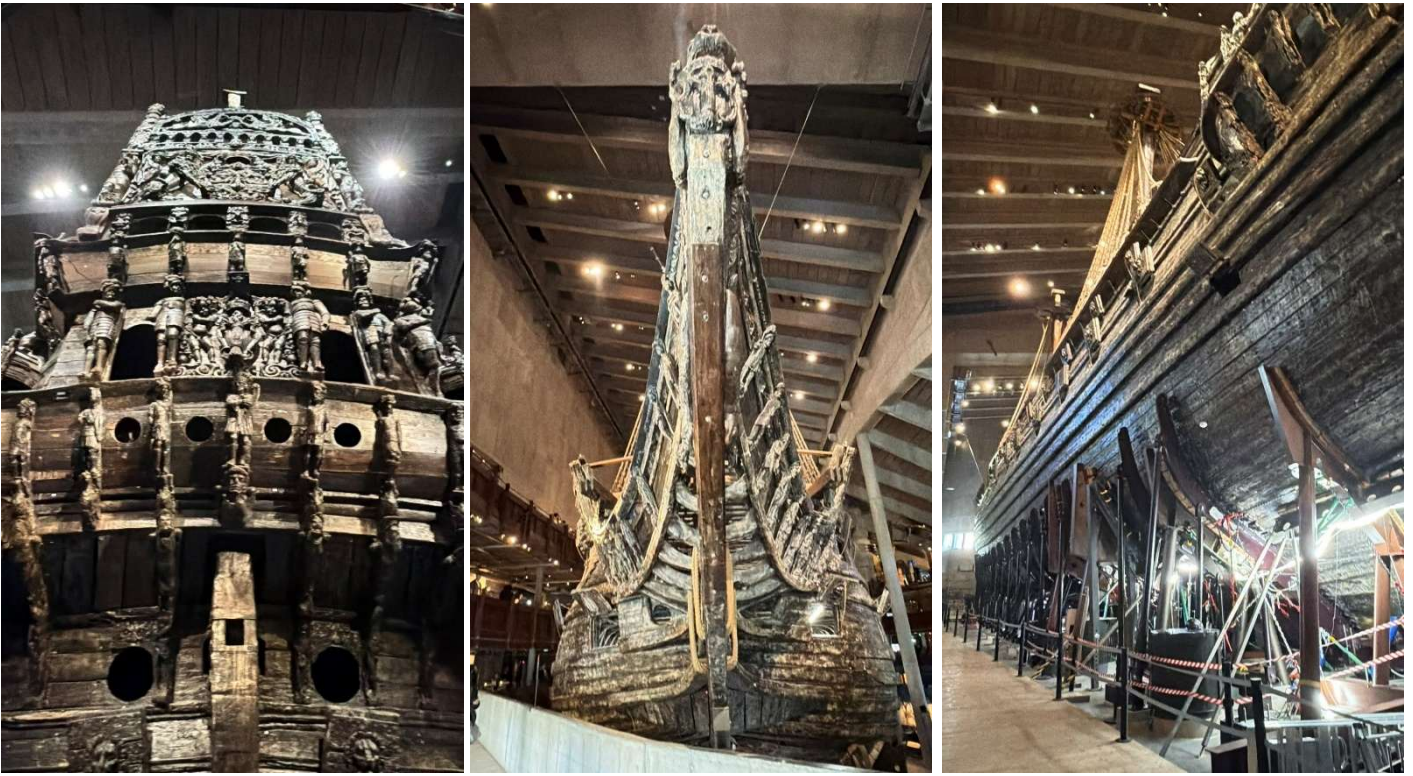


Vasa Museum



Google maps suggested I could take the tram or board a ferry to get to the Vasa Museum so I thought it would be nice to try out the ferry service which is an essential element of Stockholm's public transport provision. Many of the boats are run by Storstockholms Lokaltrafik (SL), meaning that my metro/bus travel card works on them at no extra cost. The trip was short but worthwhile. With more time I could have spent much more time visiting the 14 islands that make up Stockholm.





The most useful route for visitors is the Djurgården ferry running between Slussen and Allmänna Gränd giving you a wonderful view across the harbour toward Djurgården which is home to the Vasa Museum and many other museums including the Nordiska Museet, the Viking Museum, the Spritmuseum (dedicated to Swedish drinking culture) and the ABBA museum (which is probably worth a miss unless you are a big fan).

The Vasa Museum is entirely dedicated to the warship Vasa, which sank on its maiden voyage in 1628 after sailing just over one mile from the port where it was given a rapturous send off. The ship lay underwater for over 300 years before being salvaged in 1961. The ship was astonishingly well preserved and recovered virtually intact. The museum tells the history of the ship and its preservation with exhibitions explaining the politics, ambition, and engineering mistakes that led to its sinking.

I am not a huge fan of maritime history, but this was impressive and highly recommended. My pictures here cannot begin to tell story of this ship, which is massive, detailed, and somewhat surreal to look at.

Stockholm City Hall

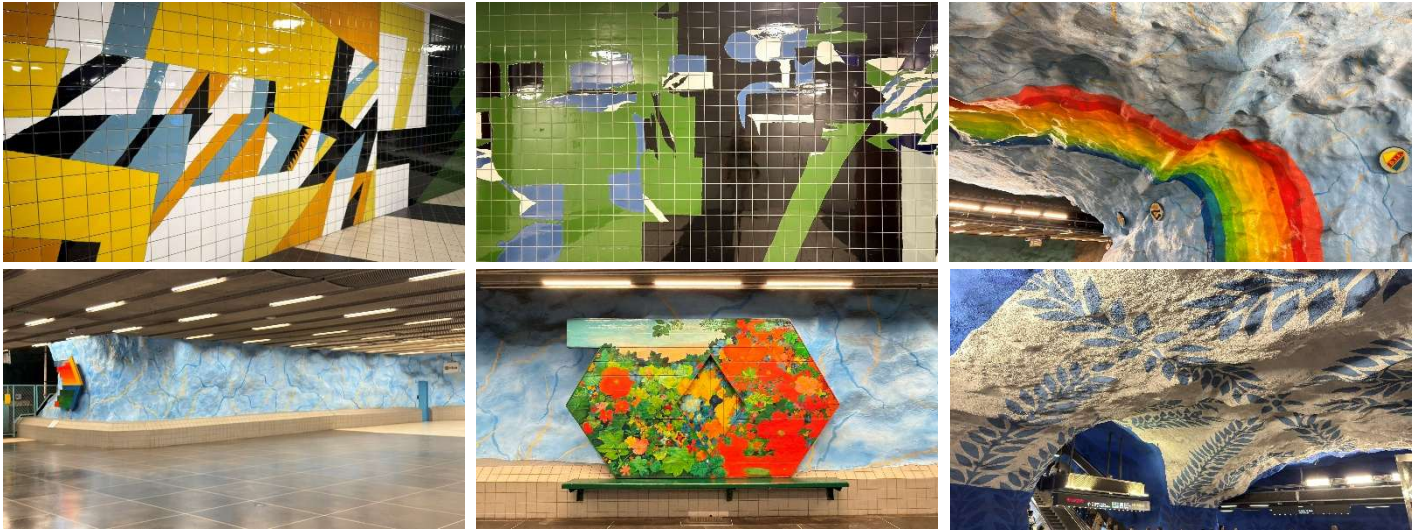
The Nobel Prize is one of the most prestigious sets of awards in the world, covering physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, and peace (with economics added later). The prizes were established through the will of Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, who in a final twist wanted his fortune to reward those who 'benefit humanity.' Stockholm is the main host of the prize ceremonies each December, with the Peace Prize awarded separately in Oslo.



Stockholm City Hall, which was completed in 1923, is best known as the venue for the Nobel Prize banquet, held annually in the Blue Hall (which, confusingly, isn't blue). The Golden Hall upstairs is even more striking, covered in millions of gold mosaic tiles depicting scenes from Swedish history. You can purchase tickets to see the inside of the building but, unfortunately the visits were suspended for another event on the day of my visit. Alternatively, you can visit the Nobel Prize Museum which is hidden away in Gamla Stan.

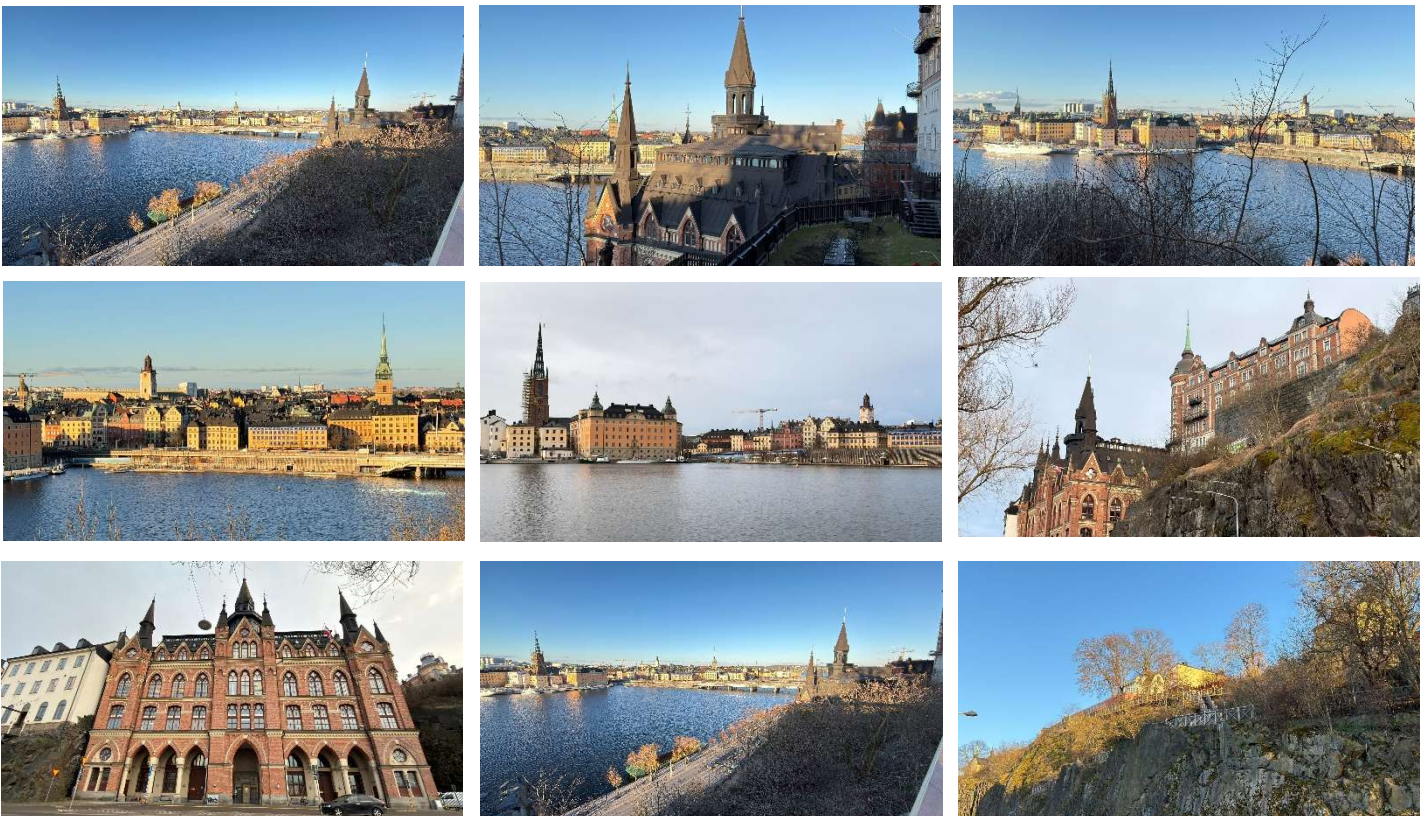
Stockholm Metro

Stockholm's Metro is often called the world's longest art gallery, and that's not an exaggeration. Over 90 of its stations feature artwork—murals, sculptures, installations—often carved directly into exposed rock. The artwork turns a basic commute into something far more interesting. The system itself is efficient and easy to use, so you'll likely end up using it anyway.....just allow a bit of extra time to actually look around. It's public transport done properly, with a cultural layer added on top.



Monteliusvägen

Monteliusvägen is one of those places that delivers one of the best views in Stockholm. It's a narrow walking path along the cliffs of Södermalm, overlooking Riddarfjärden and straight across from City Hall and Gamla Stan. Named after archaeologist Oscar Montelius, the path has existed in some form since the late 1800s, originally as a simple track. Today it's been smartly restored with wooden walkways and benches. The view is breathtaking and worth a visit at any time of day and night but especially around sunset.

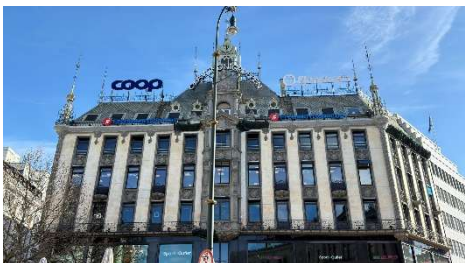


Chapter 3: Oslo

Well, I must admit that this next stop has caused me something of a quandary. I am not at all surprised that the destination is Oslo, but I am a little concerned that the cheapest flight is with Ethiopian Airlines. The problem is that I have no idea why Ethiopian Airlines would be flying from Stockholm to Oslo. Before you ask, I have considered the possibility that this is an elaborate scam or else a pretty unusual April Fool's joke.

Regardless, it turns out that my ridiculously cheap flight with Ethiopian Airlines to Oslo was neither a scam nor an April Fool joke. I even managed to get a flight on a Boeing 787 Dreamliner which is one of my favourite aircraft. The bad news is that the flight had just arrived from Addis Ababa and the cabin looked as though it has been hit with a whirlwind.

Notwithstanding the one-hour flight passes quickly although getting through passport control in Oslo is not as easy as it used to be and my UK passport is unfortunately relegated to 'Others' which requires another photograph, a set of fingerprints and a whole load of questions including where are you going next. My response that I had no idea did not go down to well.



Oslo's natural setting defines the city with a strong connection to nature. Oslo leads the world in electric mobility and sustainable urban design, striving to be a zero-emission city by 2030. The city has aggressively invested in a particularly comprehensive public transport and embarked on a controversial but successful policy of removing car parking from the city centre to prioritise pedestrians, cyclists, and public spaces.

Oslo was founded around 1049 by King Harald Hardrada who established a modest trading and shipping post at the base of the Ekeberg Hill. However, it was under his stepson, King Olav Kyrre, around 1060 that Oslo was formally established as a proper city. For centuries, Oslo served as a key Norwegian city until a devastating fire in 1624 destroyed most of the city.

Following the fire, the Danish-Norwegian King Christian IV relocated the city closer to the fortress and named the city as Christiania (later spelled Kristiania). This new city became the administrative centre of a kingdom increasingly dominated by Denmark. For the next 400 years, Christiania/Kristiania existed as a provincial capital with Denmark and then, from 1814, with Sweden.

In 1905, Norway dissolved its union with Sweden peacefully, and Kristiania finally became the capital of a fully independent nation. In 1925, the city reclaimed its original Norwegian name of Oslo. More recent cultural and urban developments (including the Oslo Opera House) have benefited considerably from North Sea oil revenue.



Royal Palace

First thing on Thursday morning and I am out of the hotel and following my planned route to take in a few more Oslo attractions. Close to my hotel at the top of Karl Johans gate is the Royal Palace which I have been warned is only open to visitors during the summer season. The Royal Palace acts as a kind of anchor point for the city.

The palace was built in the first half of the 19th century for King Charles III John (Karl Johan) and reflects a period when Norway was still in union with Sweden. Architecturally, it's fairly restrained, but the real draw is the setting at the top of the hill looking down on the city. The changing of the guard happens daily and is worth catching if you time it right but this early in the morning was not right.



Vigeland Sculpture Park (Frogner Park)



Next stop is the Sculpture Park which is a bit of a mystery because there are a few of them dotted over Oslo. Regardless, the one I am looking for is situated in Frogner Park and called the Vigeland Sculpture Park. This is allegedly the largest sculpture park in the world created by a Gustav Vigeland and being big is a bit of a disadvantage when it rains.....have you ever tried folding an iphone and an umbrella simultaneously?



The park boasts over 200 sculptures by Gustav Vigeland, all focused on the human form—birth, struggle, relationships, ageing, death. The park was developed between the 1920s and 1940s and is completely integrated into the larger Frogner Park which is beautiful itself. The centrepiece is the Monolith, a towering column carved from a single block of granite, depicting intertwined human figures climbing upwards.

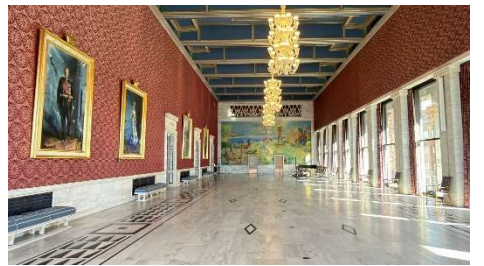
Some pieces are striking, some odd, some borderline uncomfortable—but that's the point. It's not polished or sentimental. It makes you look, think, and occasionally question what you're seeing. And because it's in a public park, there's no barrier—you just walk through it as part of the city. This is typical Oslo - accessible, slightly unconventional, and quietly thought-provoking.



City Hall

Oslo City Hall is hard to miss as it consists of two large brick towers situated directly on the waterfront. Construction started in 1931 and the building was finally completed in 1950 after years of delays caused by World War II. This is the building where the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony takes place every December.....all other Nobel prize events take place in Stockholm.

From the outside, the building is functional rather than elegant, but inside it's a different story. The walls are covered in large-scale murals depicting Norwegian history, labour, and identity.....very much reflecting the social democratic ideals of the time. The Main Hall is the building's most visible ceremonial space and has national visibility because it is used for the annual Nobel Peace Prize presentation. Admission is free.





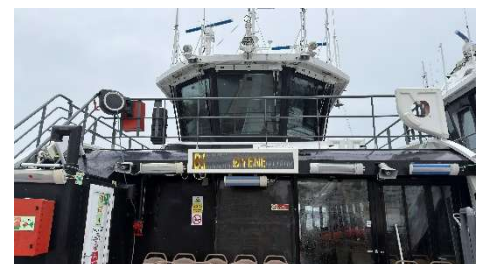
Public Ferry



Oslo's public ferries are one of the simplest and best-value ways to experience the fjord. They're part of the regular transport system, so your standard ticket works and no need to book a boat trip. The routes head out to islands like Hovedøya and Lindøya, which feel a world away from the city despite being just a short boat road away.



Historically, these islands were used for monasteries, military sites, and later summer retreats. Today they're mostly about swimming, walking, and slowing down. Even if you don't get off, just staying on board gives you a solid view back towards the city skyline. It's practical transport that doubles as a low-effort experience which is worth the round trip.



Akershus Fortress



Akershus Fortress has been guarding Oslo since the late 1200s. It was originally built by King Haakon V to defend the city, and it has evolved over centuries from a medieval castle to a Renaissance fortress to a military base. The fortress has never actually been taken by force, which says something about its design and positioning.

However, it surrendered without combat to Nazi Germany in 1940 when the Norwegian government evacuated the capital in the face of the unprovoked German assault on Denmark and Norway. During World War II, people were executed here by the German occupiers. The fortress was liberated on 11 May 1945, and the story of the Norwegian resistance movement is told in the museum.

Walking around it today, you get a mix of open grounds, thick stone walls, and views over the harbour. Parts of it are still used by the military, but large sections are open to the public. You can explore at your own pace, and it's particularly good towards evening when it quietens down. The views of the Oslofjord from the ramparts are particularly spectacular and there are plenty of places to just sit down and enjoy the views.



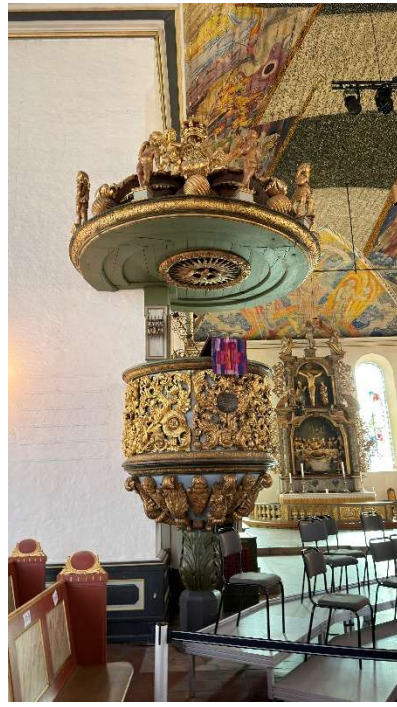
Parliament

The Norwegian Parliament (Storting) sits midway along Karl Johans gate and is central not just geographically but politically. The building was completed in 1866, and its distinctive curved façade and yellow brick make it stand out from the more formal neighbouring buildings. Norway's political system is relatively open, and guided tours are available, during the summer months giving a glimpse inside a functioning democracy. The building is less grand than many European parliaments, which fits Norway's generally understated style.



Oslo Cathedral

Oslo Cathedral dates back to the late 1600s and serves as the main church for national ceremonies, including royal events. From the outside, it's fairly modest, especially compared to some of the other grand European cathedrals, but inside it's more decorative than you might expect. The ceiling paintings and stained glass add colour and detail, particularly following renovations in the 20th century. The cathedral sits right in the city centre, so you will likely pass it without planning to. It's worth stepping inside as it gives a sense of Oslo's religious and civic life without demanding too much time.

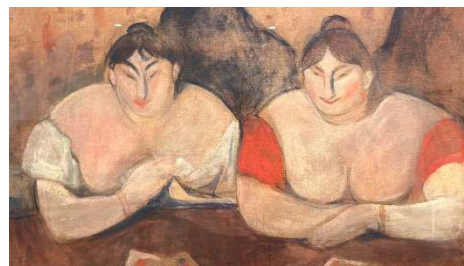
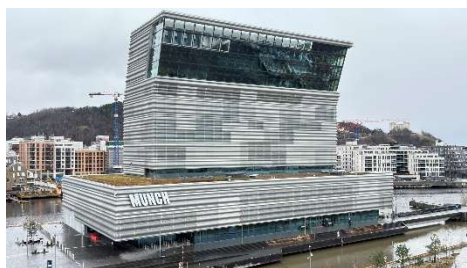


Munch Museum (MUNCH)



The MUNCH Museum is dedicated to Edvard Munch, Norway's most famous artist and the man behind 'The Scream'.....in fact this is probably the only piece of art you can think of when you consider this artist which is why this museum was so impressive and informative. The building, situated over 12 floors, is more substantial than you might expect and worth a proper visit rather than a quick stop.

The current building opened in 2021 and is a striking, slightly controversial structure leaning over the waterfront. Inside, it holds thousands of works by Munch, though only a selection is displayed at any time. The exhibitions go beyond just the famous pieces, showing his development and darker themes including anxiety, illness and isolation.

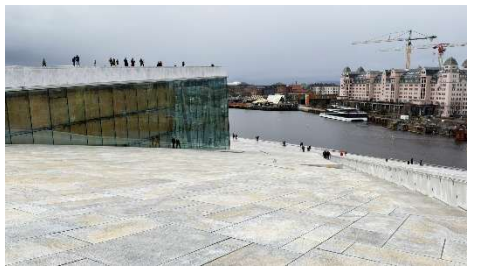


Norwegian National Opera & Ballet

The Oslo Opera House is an architectural masterpiece. The building opened in 2008, and it is definitely one of the city's standout modern buildings. This modern building with its sloping marble roof is designed so that you can walk straight up the roof to the top for some really spectacular views. This alone makes it worth visiting and the marble was not even slippery in the rain as my pictures will testify.

On the day of my visit, the opera house was allowing access to the auditorium which is every bit as spectacular as the outside. The main auditorium is a classic horseshoe shape seating 1,364 people, located 52 feet (16 metres) below sea level. The main foyer is huge, open, and flooded with light from massive glass walls facing the fjord outside.

The auditorium is spectacular with an amazing ceiling chandelier made up of about 5,800 hand-cast glass crystals.... which also contributes to the auditorium's amazing Th gambleacoustics. In addition, the stage curtain is made from thousands of small aluminium elements, woven together into a flexible surface. From a distance it looks like a solid reflective sheet but up close it is more like a finely engineered metallic fabric.



I should also mention the floating sculpture made of steel and glass, which is anchored in the fjord just outside the opera house. The artwork which looks like an iceberg or a shipwreck (you choose) is called 'She Lies' and was designed by Italian artist Monica Bonvicini. The sculpture rotates with the changing tides and wind, so the appearance and reflections are always different.



Chapter 4: Helsinki

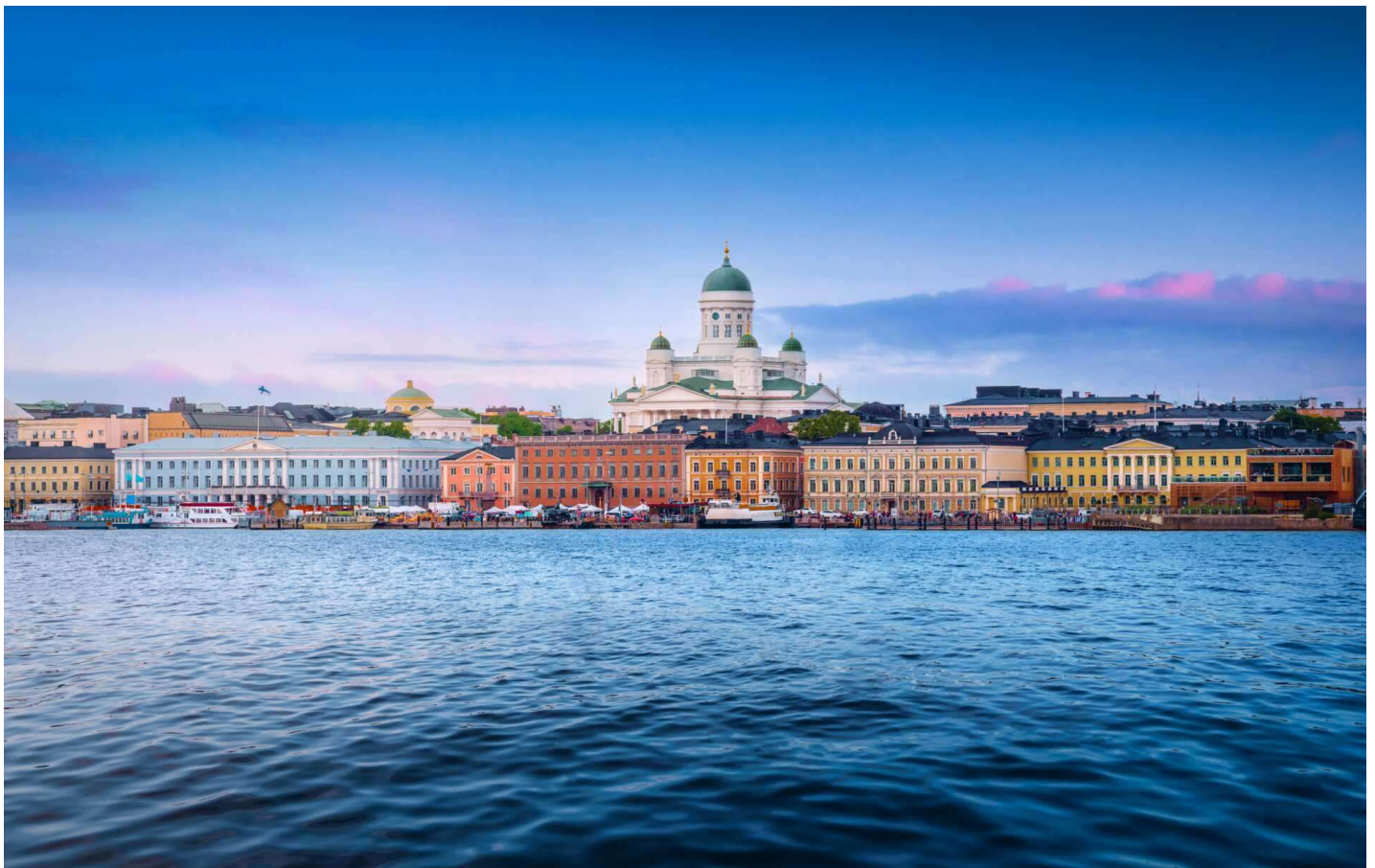
Back at Oslo Airport and waiting for my flight with Norwegian which is an airline with a remarkably interesting history. The airline was founded as Norwegian Air Shuttle in 1993 operating a small fleet of turboprop planes on regional routes in western Norway. Its story changed dramatically in 2002 when SAS purchased a rival airline and abruptly terminated Norwegian's operating contracts.



The airline changed its name to Norwegian and rebranded itself as a low-cost carrier, directly challenging SAS on key domestic routes. The gamble paid off and by 2007 it had become Scandinavia's largest low-cost airline. Undetermined, in January 2012, Norwegian stunned the aviation world by placing a record order for over 200 new aircraft with its intent to dominate the European short-haul market,

In 2013, the airline launched long-haul flights offering bargain prices using fuel efficient Boeing 787 Dreamliners from Europe to the US and Asia, fundamentally disrupting the transatlantic market and forcing legacy carriers like SAS to adapt. Then disaster as the airlines reeled from technical issues with the Dreamliner engines, the global grounding of the 737 MAX and the final blow, the COVID-19 pandemic.

With most of its fleet grounded, the airline's massive debt became unsustainable and, facing collapse, Norwegian entered a deep restructuring process including abandoning its long-haul operations and selling off its entire fleet of Dreamliners. It focused on its short-haul routes operating a fleet of around 80 Boeing 737s focusing on Nordic and European markets. Today, Norwegian is a profitable airline. Oh I forgot to tell you.....next stop Helsinki in Finland. See you there x.



Helsinki (Finland)

Helsinki is the capital city of Finland and is located on the southern coast along the Gulf of Finland. Founded in 1550 by King Gustav I of Sweden, the city was originally established as a trading town to compete with the city of Tallinn. Helsinki remained relatively small until the early 19th century, when Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy under the Russian Empire. In 1812, Helsinki was declared the capital, and the city began to grow rapidly.

Much of its neoclassical architecture, including the iconic Helsinki Cathedral, dates from this period. Helsinki feels different from its Nordic neighbours.... more austere and, at a glance, more Russian. Today, Helsinki is internationally recognized for its high quality of life, clean environment, efficient public transport, and a strong focus on education and technology. Helsinki is constantly rated as one of the happiest capitals in the world in spite of the long and dark winters.



The Sibelius Monument

The Sibelius Monument is one of Helsinki's most recognisable and debated. public artworks. It was unveiled in 1967 to honour Finland's most famous composer, Jean Sibelius. Rather than going for the usual statue, sculptor Eila Hiltunen created a striking structure of over 600 hollow steel pipes, designed to evoke music visually. The result is abstract, slightly industrial, and not immediately obvious which is exactly why it divides opinion. There is a more traditional bust of Sibelius nearby, which was added later after criticism that the monument didn't really represent him.



Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) was a central figure in shaping Finland's national identity through music. Born in Hämeenlinna when Finland was still under Russian rule, Sibelius became a cultural voice for independence. His music blends powerful orchestration with themes inspired by Finnish nature, mythology, and a keen sense of national pride.



His Finlandia is considered to be Sibelius's most famous work and was written at a time when the Russian Empire was tightening control over Finland and censoring the press. Officially, the piece was part of a series of historical tableaux to avoid censorship, but everyone knew that it was a protest in musical form. The music is still deeply associated with Finnish identity and often mistaken as the country's national anthem.



Tempeliaukio Church (Rock Church)



The Tempeliaukio Church, better known as the Rock Church, was carved directly into solid granite and completed in 1969. The church reflects Finland's modernist approach to design.... practical, bold, and closely tied to nature. Inside, the raw rock walls are left exposed, while a copper dome lets in natural light from above, creating a calm and somewhat spiritual atmosphere. The acoustics are exceptional, so it's often utilised as a major concert venue. From the outside, you would hardly notice it is there and this contrast is clearly part of the appeal.



Oodi Library

The Oodi Library is a modern architectural marvel which tells you a lot about how Finland sees public spaces. This is much more than a library and highlights exactly how libraries should be presented as social spaces, urban workshops, and reading areas dedicated to relaxation and a wide selection of books. On the third floor you can read under the clouds, stop for a coffee, participate in various events and admire the surroundings.

The second floor offers open spaces for everyone to learn and create. Staff are on hand to help you develop your skills and make use of the 3D printers, laser cutters and electronic workshops. You can hem your own trousers, design a tea shirt sticker, produce a large poser and print your own toy. The whole building reflects Finland's long-standing emphasis on education, equality, and shared resources.



The library was opened in 2018 and sits directly opposite Parliament, which is no accident. Architecturally, it's a mix of curved wood, glass, and open space, designed to feel accessible and flexible. Even if you're not there to borrow anything, it's worth stepping inside just to see how a public building can actually work well. The top floor, with its open-plan design and city views, is certainly worth a visit.



The Kamppi Chapel

The Kamppi Chapel, better known as the Chapel of Silence, is situated in the middle of one of Helsinki's busiest squares and is one of Helsinki's most uniquely designed buildings. This wooden, windowless chapel, is intended as a place for quiet reflection rather than formal worship. The interior is simple with smooth wooden walls, soft light and no distractions. It is run by the Lutheran church, but it is intentionally non-denominational in feel. The contrast is what makes it work and as soon as you step inside, the city just disappears. You don't need long..... five or ten minutes should be enough to reset before heading back out.



Helsinki Cathedral

In 1812, Russia moved the capital of the Grand Duchy of Finland from Turku to Helsinki, with the intention of creating a new administrative centre that was closer to St. Petersburg and easier to control. What followed was a deliberate redesign of the city, led by German architect Carl Ludvig Engel. Senate Square became the focal point, and the cathedral, which was completed in 1852, was designed as its dominant feature.

Originally named St. Nicholas' Church after the Russian Tsar Nicholas I, it was intended to project imperial authority as much as religious presence.... explaining the grand neoclassical style, clean white façades, symmetrical layout, and those distinctive green domes. Inside, the cathedral is surprisingly restrained, in line with Lutheran traditions, with minimal decoration, and a focus on space and light rather than ornament.

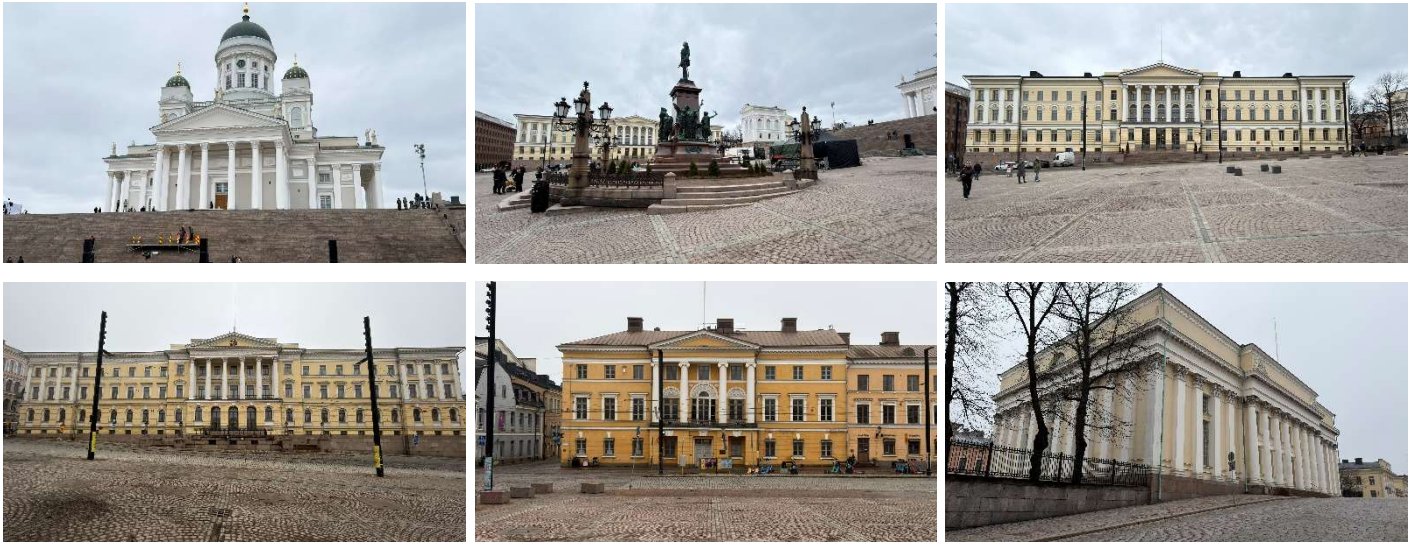


After Finland gained independence in 1917, the cathedral was renamed simply Helsinki Cathedral, shedding its imperial associations. Today, it's less about power and more about identity. The steps outside have become a social space, and the building itself has shifted from symbol of control to symbol of the city. The crypt is closed in the wintertime so tell me about it if you visit sometime.

Senate Square

Below the cathedral is Senate Square (known as Senaatintori in Finnish) which is tightly planned with matching buildings that give it a sense of order and symmetry. The highlights of the square (moving clockwise from the cathedral as a vantage point) are the University Building (to the left), the Government Palace (straight ahead), the University Annex (to the right) and the National Library (next door to the annex).

The square was designed by the German-born architect Carl Ludvig Engel in the early 19th century. When the capital was moved from Turku to Helsinki in 1812, the square was built as the monumental centrepiece of a newly planned capital mirroring that of St. Petersburg in Russia. Each building plays a specific symbolic role.



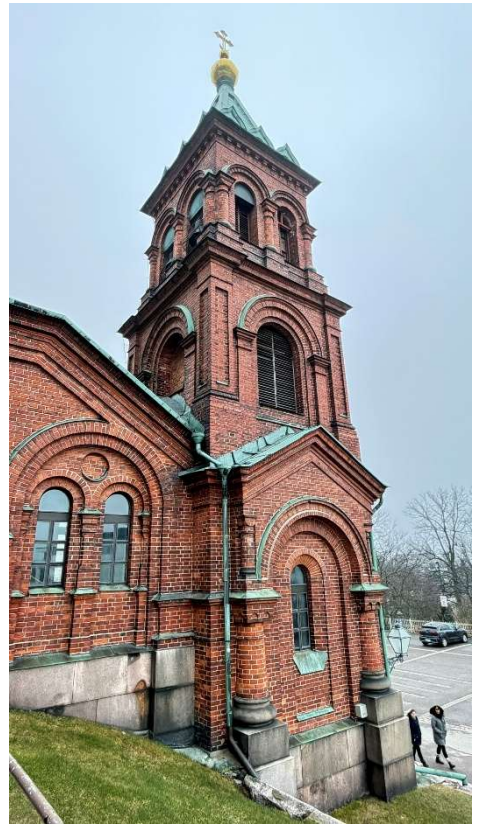
The Government Palace (1822) represents political and administrative power while the main building of the University of Helsinki (1832) symbolises science and culture. Helsinki Cathedral (completed in 1852) represents the spiritual and religious authority, and the National Library (1844) symbolises culture and memory, and is the storehouse of everything published in the country.

In the centre of the square stands a monument to Emperor (Grand Duke of Finland) Alexander II. It was erected in 1894 to honour his role in introducing reforms that increased Finland's autonomy while it was part of the Russian Empire. It stands as a symbol of quiet resistance during the Russification period in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.



Uspenski Cathedral

Uspenski Cathedral is the largest Orthodox church in Western Europe and a clear reminder of Finland's time under Russian rule. The cathedral was completed in 1868 and is perched majestically on the rocky Katajanokka hill overlooking the city and the harbour. The red brick and gold domes provide a fitting contrast to the white Lutheran cathedral nearby.



The cathedral was built between 1862 and 1868, and its primary purpose was to serve the large Russian garrison stationed in Helsinki, as well as the growing number of Russian merchants and officials who had made the city their home. The architect, Aleksey Gornostayev, a Russian from St. Petersburg, was determined to visually assert the presence and influence of the Russian Empire in its western frontier.

Unfortunately, having climbed all those stairs, the cathedral was shut so I did not see the inside which I am informed is dominated by a massive wall of icons separating the altar from the nave as well as the dark brick walls covered with murals, paintings, and gold leaf. From the terrace, I did get to see the panoramic views of Helsinki, looking directly across the harbour to Senate Square and Helsinki Cathedral



Esplanadi Park



Esplanadi Park is Helsinki's central green space and social strip. This is where members of Finland's cultural elite have gathered since the late 19th century, and the surrounding buildings and parklands have a tangibly Central European feel. The park was laid out in the early 19th century and runs between two parallel streets lined with shops and cafés. It's less about sightseeing and more about atmosphere.

In summer, it is filled with people sitting, eating, and listening to live music. In winter,it is cold.



Suomenlinna



Suomenlinna is a vast sea fortress spread across a cluster of islands just off Helsinki. It is one of Finland's most distinctive historic sites and you can get there on the public ferry which takes about 15 minutes although you will need a couple of hours in order to explore the place thoroughly including hopping between its six islands, taking in the stunning sea views and exploring its museums, barracks, and defensive walls.

The fortress, which was built in 1748 when Finland was part of Sweden, was designed as a military stronghold to defend against Russian expansion in the Baltic. Its construction was ambitious and strategic, with star-shaped bastions, thick stone walls, and extensive artillery positions integrated into the natural rocky landscape.

Despite its strength, the fortress surrendered to Russia in 1808 during the Finnish War, after which it became a key Russian naval base for over a century. When Finland gained independence in 1917, the fortress was renamed Suomenlinna, meaning 'Castle of Finland,' reflecting its new national identity. Today, it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of Helsinki's most popular attractions.



The UNESCO designation specifically highlights how 'the fortress's bastion system perfectly embodies the general principles of fortification from that era, while also showcasing its own unique adaptations to the challenging, rugged terrain of the Finnish islands. In short, it is a masterpiece of military design that profoundly influenced the history of Northern Europe.'



My visit took place on a very foggy day in April so if you think you're looking at my sauna pictures, then you need to look a little closer.... actually, if you think you're looking at my sauna pictures then you shouldn't be looking at all.



Chapter 5: Riga

Before I know it, I am off to the airport again. I thought I might be off to Copenhagen in Denmark but google flights suggested otherwise. I am halfway through my tour and have already visited Stockholm, Oslo and Helsinki. My next stop is Riga in Latvia, and I am already busy organising my schedule to make the most of my time. Riga is known for its wooden buildings, art nouveau architecture and medieval Old Town. This time I am flying with Finnair which, once again, is cheaper than the cheap airlines when you factor in my 8+ kilogram hand luggage.



Adventurous yes.....but not that adventurous!!!

Riga

Riga is a city with multiple layers of history founded in 1201 by the German bishop Albert of Riga. It quickly became a major trading hub as part of the Hanseatic League, linking Eastern and Western Europe. This early wealth can be seen in the compact Old Town, with its churches, guild houses, and merchant buildings. After its medieval rise, Riga entered a prolonged period of foreign rule that shaped both its character and fortunes.

In 1561, Riga came under the control of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Trade remained strong, but this period brought religious tension, as the Commonwealth was largely Catholic while Riga had become strongly Protestant during the Reformation. In 1621, the city was taken by Sweden under King Gustavus Adolphus, ushering in a relatively stable and prosperous era.

This ended in 1710 during the Great Northern War, when Riga fell to the Russian Empire. Under Russian rule, especially through the 18th and 19th centuries, Riga expanded rapidly into a major Baltic port and industrial powerhouse, with railways, factories, and the Art Nouveau architecture that still defines much of the city today.

Latvia first declared independence in 1918 after World War I, making Riga the capital of a new nation. That independence lasted just over twenty years. In 1940, the Soviet Union occupied Latvia, only to be pushed out a year later by Nazi Germany in 1941. The German occupation brought devastation, including the near destruction of Riga's Jewish community during the Holocaust. In 1944, Soviet forces retook the city.

During this period, Riga was heavily industrialised again and reshaped by Soviet planning, alongside significant population changes. Only in 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, did Latvia regain independence, allowing Riga to reassert itself as a European capital shaped by centuries of trade, conflict, and survival.

That's the end of the history lesson so let us get on with the tour.....



Town Hall Square and Old Town

At the heart of Riga's Old Town sits Town Hall Square, the symbolic and historical core of the city. This is where Riga began to take shape as a powerful medieval trading centre after its founding in 1201 by Bishop Albert. The square functioned as the city's main marketplace, a place where merchants met, deals were struck, and civic life unfolded.



The standout building here is the House of the Blackheads—arguably Riga's most iconic structure. Facing it is Riga Town Hall, which, like much of the square, has been reconstructed to reflect its historical appearance. In the centre stands a statue of Roland, a medieval symbol of civic rights and market freedom—essentially a declaration that Riga was a self-governing trading city.



What makes the square interesting now is that it's largely a reconstruction. It was heavily bombed by the Germans in 1941 and then cleared further during the Soviet period, which preferred open, controlled spaces over historic clutter. The current square, rebuilt after 1991, reflects a conscious effort to restore pre-war identity using historical plans.



House of the Blackheads



The House of the Blackheads is easily Riga's most striking façade... ornate, theatrical, and unapologetically decorative. The building was originally built in the 14th century and served as the headquarters for the Brotherhood of Blackheads, a guild of unmarried German merchants who played a key role in Riga's trading life. They were wealthy, influential, and keen to show it.

The name 'Blackheads' comes from their patron saint, St. Maurice, who is traditionally depicted with dark skin. The brotherhood organised commerce, hosted diplomatic events, and acted as a powerful social and economic network. The building's façade, with statues, astronomical clock, and symbolic figures, reflects both wealth and outlook.

The original building was destroyed in 1941 during the war and completely demolished under Soviet occupation. However, what you see now is a faithful reconstruction completed in 1999, based on plans and photographs. Inside, it is just as lavish with grand halls, chandeliers, and a sense of history.

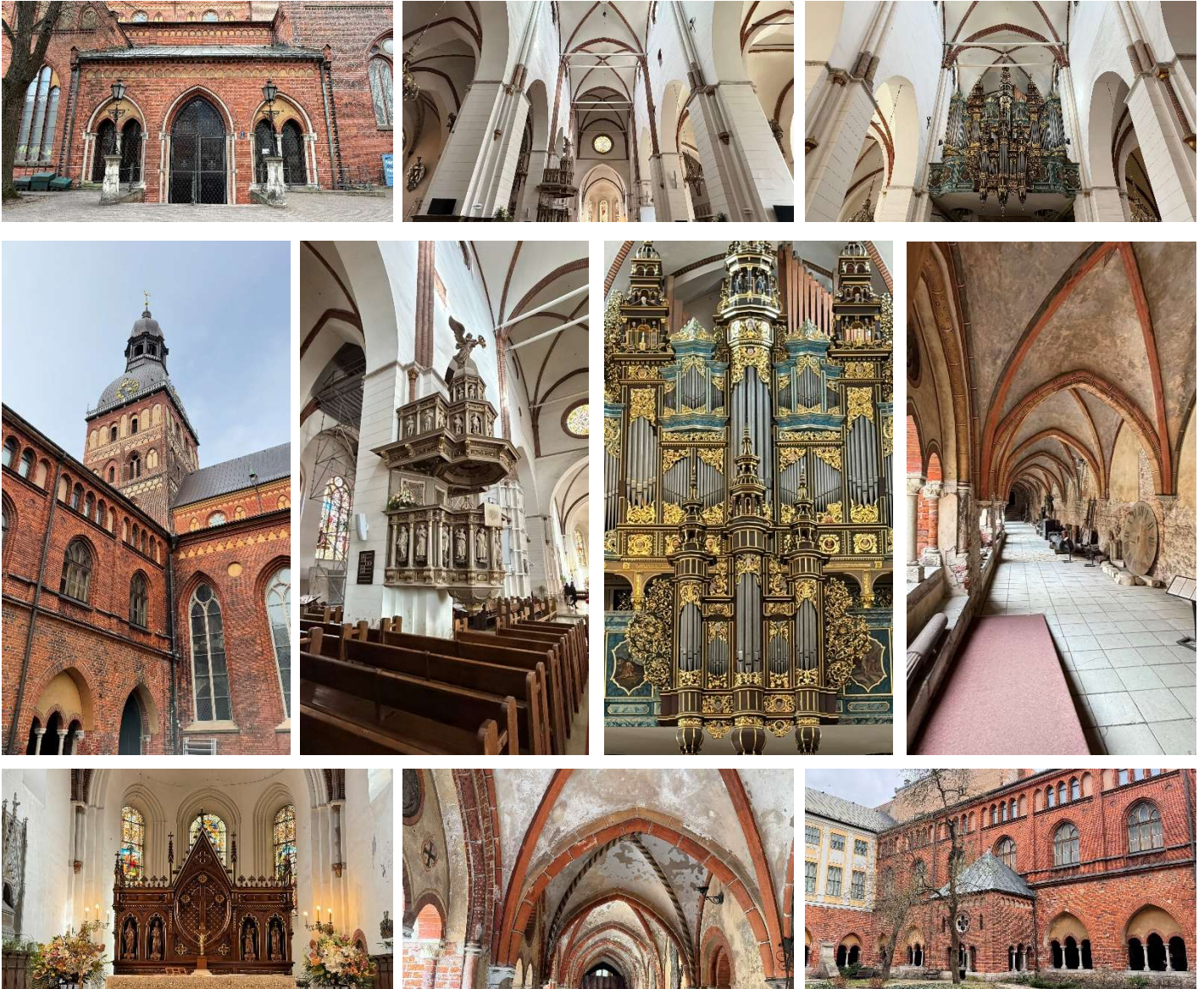


Riga Cathedral



Riga Cathedral is the largest medieval church in the Baltic states and a real mix of architectural styles Romanesque foundations, Gothic expansions and Baroque additions. Construction began in 1211, and like much of Riga, it reflects changing powers and influences. The standout feature inside is the massive pipe organ, one of the largest in Europe when installed in the 19th century and still used for concerts today.

Riga Cathedral was founded by the German Bishop Albert who established Riga itself as a German-led Christian stronghold in the Baltic. It was intended to project both religious authority and the power of the crusading orders who controlled the region. The cloister is one of the oldest surviving parts and gives a keen sense of medieval Riga.



St Peter's Church



St. Peter's Church dates back to the 13th century, but its spire, rebuilt several times after lightning, fire and war damage, is what defines Riga's skyline. Today, you can take a lift to the viewing platform, and it is one of the best panoramic views.....although not, in my opinion, the best as you will discover later. Historically, it was a Lutheran church tied to the city's German merchant class, and the Hanseatic League. Today, the church is a mix of styles the core structure is Gothic but later additions introduced Baroque elements. The spire is the defining feature. At various points in history, it was among the tallest wooden structures in Europe. The current version dates from a Soviet-era reconstruction after World War II.



The Swedish Gate

The Swedish Gate was built in 1698 when Riga was under Swedish control. It is the only surviving gate from the city's fortifications, which once completely enclosed Riga. Unlike grand ceremonial gates elsewhere, this one was more functional and built into existing structures to manage access through the walls. The surrounding area still follows the old defensive line, giving a sense of how compact and protected the city once was.



The Three Brothers



The buildings at 17, 19, and 21 Mazā Pils iela in Riga are collectively known as the 'Three Brothers' and they form the oldest surviving group of residential houses in the city. Despite their modest size, they offer an architectural timeline, showing how domestic life and building styles evolved in Riga from the late medieval period into the early modern era.

The oldest building, No. 17, dates from around the late 15th century and is the earliest preserved stone dwelling in Riga. Its Gothic character is visible in the stepped gable and simple façade, and it reflects a time when homes were highly functional spaces. Typically, a single large room would serve as a workshop, shop, and living area all at once, with goods stored in the attic above.

Next door, No. 19, was built in 1646 and represents a shift toward greater prosperity and refinement. With Dutch influences, its more decorative façade and structured layout signal the rise of a wealthier merchant class. Features such as the ornate doorway and the inscription "Soli Deo Gloria" reflect both increased status and a broader European cultural influence.

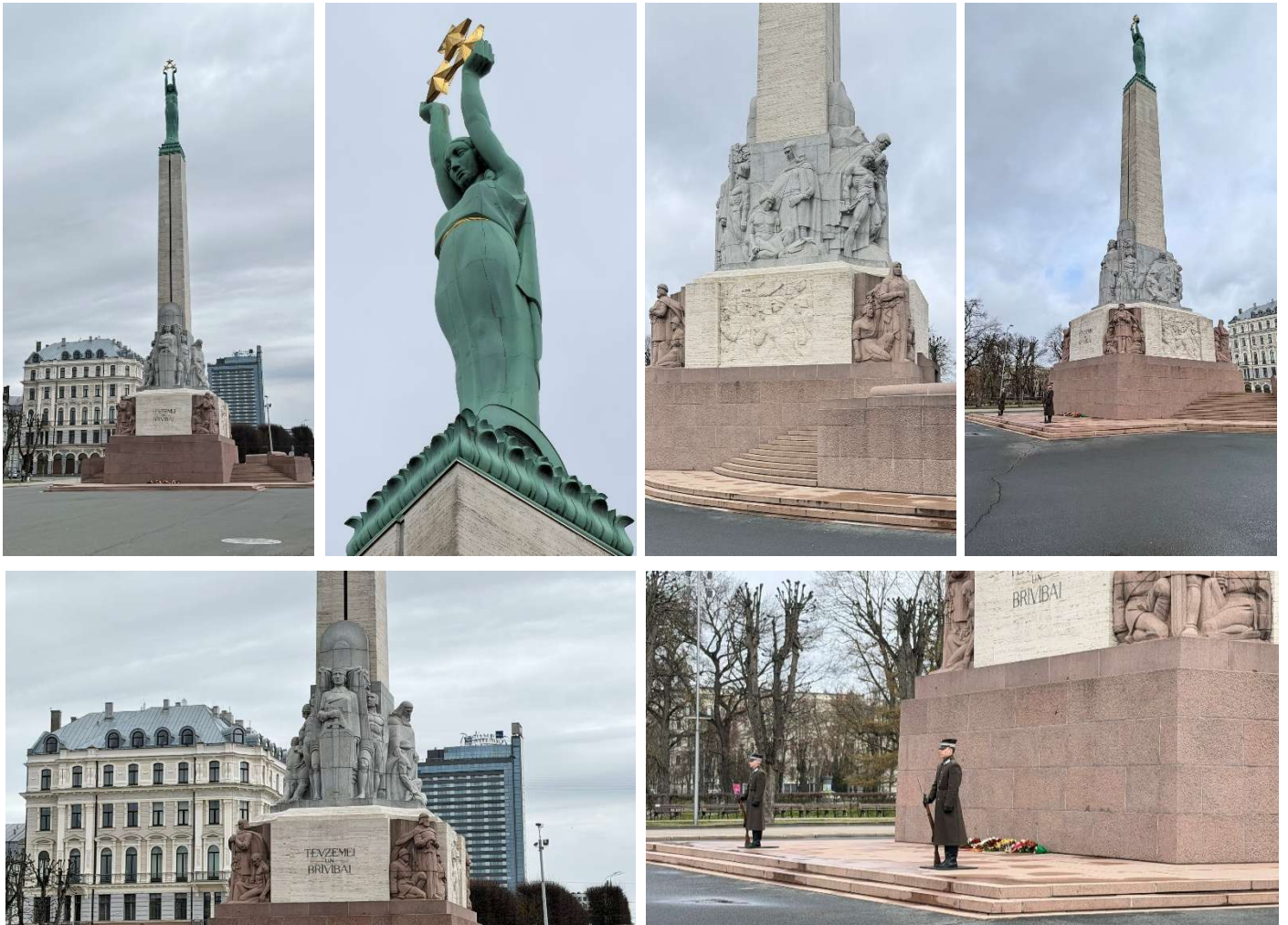
The third building, No. 21, constructed in the late 17th century, shows the transition into the Baroque period. Narrower and more vertical in design, it reflects a denser and more urbanised city environment. The façade is noticeably simpler and more restrained emphasising verticality and compactness rather than ornament. The middle one is so much nicer.



Freedom Monument

The Freedom Monument is located on Freedom Boulevard and was unveiled in 1935 honouring soldiers who died in the Latvian War of Independence. The figure on top holds three stars representing Latvia's historic regions while the base includes reliefs depicting key moments in Latvian history. During Soviet occupation, the monument was not, surprisingly, destroyed, although it was heavily guarded. Since 1991, the monument regained its original status and acts as a stark reminder of the country's struggle for freedom.

At the base of the Freedom Monument stand the guards of honour from the Latvian National Armed Forces' Staff Battalion. They are not just ceremonial, but they act as a living symbol of the country's hard-won freedom, particularly the struggle during the Latvian War of Independence (1918–1920). Their presence today also carries added weight because the tradition was abolished during the Soviet occupation and only reinstated in 1992 after Latvia regained independence.



The Latvian National Opera and Ballet

The Latvian National Opera and Ballet building, set beside a canal and parkland, is one of Riga’s more elegant landmarks. Opened in 1863, it originally served as a German theatre, reflecting the city’s cultural makeup at the time. After a fire in 1882, it was rebuilt and later became central to Latvian national culture, especially in the early 20th century as identity movements grew.





Nativity of Christ Cathedral

The Nativity of Christ Cathedral was built between 1876 and 1883 when Latvia was part of the Russian Empire. Its scale and prominent location in the Esplanade were deliberate as this was about visibility and influence.....and the building certainly has visibility. It was deliberately made to be the largest Orthodox cathedral in the Baltics, backed by Tsar Alexander II.



Since then, the building has been repeatedly repurposed depending on who controlled Riga at the time. During the First World War, German forces turned it into a Lutheran church. In 1921, after Latvian independence, it switched back to its Orthodox use although this caused some tension because the new Latvian state was wary of Russian religious influence.



During the Soviet occupation of Latvia, religion was actively suppressed and the cathedral was stripped and converted into a planetariumreplacing religion with science and ideology. After 1991, when Latvia regained independence, the building was restored to a functioning Orthodox cathedral. The interior is largely the result of late 20th- and early 21st-century restoration work. Regardless, the church looks absolutely beautiful inside and outside.



KGB Corner House

KGB Corner House is a chilling but essential visit. This unassuming yellow building was the headquarters of the KGB (and the Nazi occupation authorities before them). It now serves as a museum of occupation, showing preserved prison cells and interrogation rooms in the basement. It offers a harrowing look at the Soviet occupation which took place from 1944 to 1991.

From the outside it looks almost ordinary, which is part of what makes it unsettling. Inside, it's deliberately left stark including cells with no daylight, interrogation rooms, and basement execution spaces. Prisoners were often kept in constant artificial light to disorient them, and the building was heavily soundproofed, so nothing escaped.



Between the 1940s and 1980s, thousands passed through here and many never came out. It only stopped operating as a KGB site in 1991, so this isn't even distant history.



Alberta Iela

Riga is home to over 800 Art Nouveau buildings which is one of the largest collections of Art Nouveau architecture in the world and Alberta Iela (which translates as Albert Street and comes from Bishop Albert, the founder of Riga) is an open-air museum featuring the best of them. It was laid out in 1901 during a boom period when the city was one of the fastest-growing industrial centres in the Russian Empire.



Wealthy merchants and professionals wanted something that showed status, and Art Nouveau (Jugendstil) was the style of the moment. This street became the showcase. Many of the buildings here were designed by Mikhail Eisenstein, who pushed Art Nouveau to extremes with faces, mythological figures and geometric patterns, all layered onto façades in a way that's more theatrical than practical.

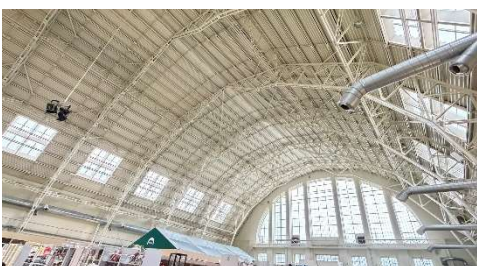
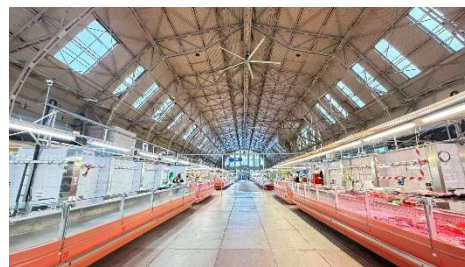


Riga Central Market

Riga Central Market was opened in 1930 and was designed to replace the small, scattered open-air markets that couldn't keep up with a growing city. The market is impressive enough, but what makes this really worth a visit is the five huge pavilions which were originally repurposed from German World War I Zeppelin hangars.

These hangars were brought from Germany after the war.....literally dismantled, transported by train, and reassembled in Riga. They were originally intended for airships, so they were already massive, elongated, and structurally sound. Using them for a market was an interesting concept offering a massive space with each pavilion used for a different purpose.

During Soviet times, the market stayed open but also became a hub of black-market trade. After independence in 1991, it was restored and modernised, keeping the historic structure intact. Today, it is the largest market in Europe and a recognised UNESCO World Heritage site, as well as reminder of Riga's practical ingenuity.



Latvian Academy of Sciences



The Latvian Academy of Sciences is a classic example of Stalinist architecture.....imposing, decorative, and designed to project power. Built in the early 1950s, it was part of a wider Soviet effort to reshape city skylines across Eastern Europe. Interestingly, it was funded partly through 'voluntary' contributions from Latvian workers, which tells you a lot about how the system functioned.

Locals sometimes call this building 'Stalin's birthday cake' because of its tiered design. At the time, it symbolised Soviet progress and scientific ambition but, today, it is more of a historical artefact. The viewing platform is one of the best in Riga, but the real interest is what it represents.....a period when architecture was used very deliberately as propaganda.

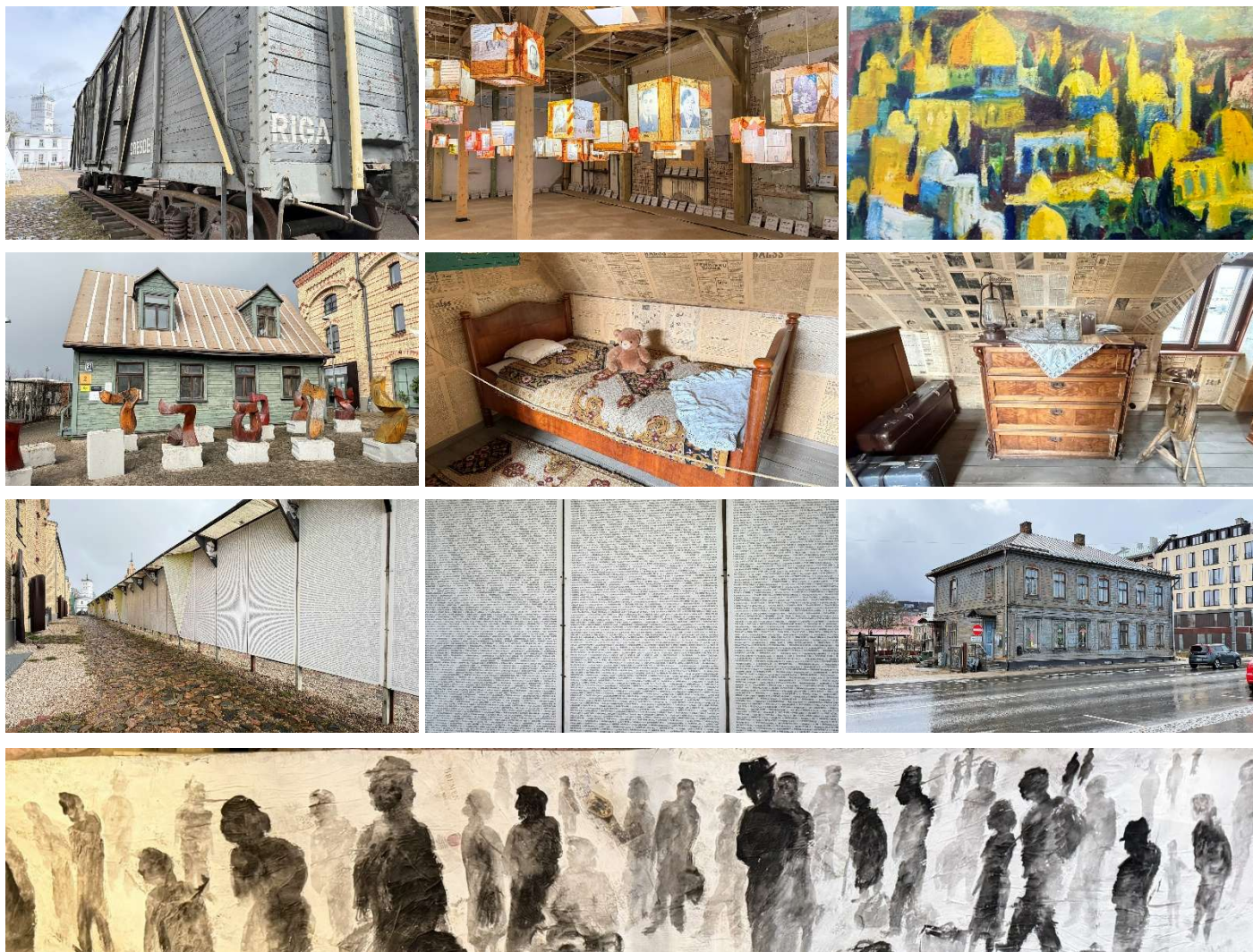
This is perhaps where I should have started my tour of Riga because the views from the viewing platform are quite breathtaking. I had originally presumed that this viewing platform was higher than that of St Peter's Church, but I did check and St Peter's is higher.....by about 6 feet. However, the views from St Peter's are mostly medieval streets and rooftops whereas this place is much more panoramic, I leave you to choose.



Riga Ghetto and Latvian Holocaust Museum

The Riga Ghetto and Latvian Holocaust Museum focus on the destruction of Latvia's Jewish population during the Nazi occupation. Before World War II, Riga had a large and active Jewish community but, by the end of the war, the vast majority had been killed. The ghetto was established in 1941, and tens of thousands of people were confined there under brutal conditions before mass executions in nearby forests.

One of the most powerful elements of the museum is the wall of names, which makes the scale of loss very concrete. It also covers the wider context—how the Holocaust unfolded in Latvia and how quickly a community can disappear. Like the Occupation Museum, it's not easy, but it gives necessary depth to the city you're walking around.



Chapter 6: Tallinn

So much to see and so little time before I am back at Riga Airport awaiting the next stage of my trip. I like to organise a 'best route' for each of my trips so that my time is used efficiently. However bad weather interrupts and you find yourself focusing on museums and cathedrals when it is raining and outside attractions when it is not. That always messes up your schedule for the day.

To be honest, I had no idea where my next stop would beI still hadn't visited Copenhagen, but everyone was telling me that it would be Vilnius. Google flights offered me Helsinki for £42, Oslo for £27 and Stockholm for £14 but I had already been to those places. Vilnius with airBaltic was £62 but the cheapest was Tallinn with airBaltic at £57 so now you know where I am off to today.

AirBaltic is the national airline of Latvia, founded in 1995 and headquartered in Riga. The airline plays a key role in connecting the Baltic region, including Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, to the rest of Europe, operating a network of more than 80 destinations. The airline focuses particularly on routes across Northern and Eastern Europe, while also serving popular tourist destinations in Spain and Greece.



The airBaltic fleet is entirely made up of Airbus A220-300 aircraft. You will be pleased to know that airBaltic has been recognised in recent rankings as one of the safer airlines globally. It has also received industry awards, including being named among the best airlines in Eastern Europe.....although there are not that many airlines in Eastern Europe.

Tallinn (Estonia)

Tallinn is one of those cities where the past hasn't been eradicated or replaced...it has simply been built around. This is one of the best-preserved medieval cities in Northern Europe, where you feel like you've stepped into a fairy tale with a futuristic tech hub. At its core is a remarkably intact medieval town shaped by trade, conquest, and survival.

Tallinn was founded in the early 13th century and quickly became an important member of the Hanseatic League, linking Northern Europe with Russia and beyond. Its strategic position on the Baltic Sea made it valuable.....and therefore contested. Over the centuries, control of the city shifted repeatedly. The Danes established the first stronghold, followed by the Teutonic Order, then Sweden, and eventually the Russian Empire.



The 20th century was far less stable. After a brief period of independence following World War I, Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union, then Nazi Germany, and again by the Soviets until 1991. These decades left deep political and social scars which still shape the national identity today. Since regaining independence, Estonia has moved quickly (politically, economically, and technologically) and now positions itself as one of Europe's most digitally advanced societies.

What makes Tallinn stand out is a powerful sense of identity that comes from having been controlled by others, yet never entirely defined by them. The town is compact and walkable. Should you wish to venture further afield then public transport is well organised and relatively cheap. In the meantime, the Old Town, with intact walls, watchtowers and cobbled streets, is a good place to start.



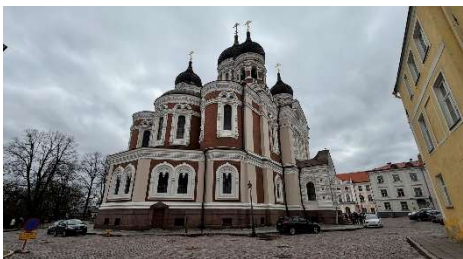
Toompea Castle

Perched on the top of Toompea Hill above the Old Town, Toompea Castle has been the seat of power in Estonia for centuries. Its layered architecture tells the story of successive rulers who shaped the region. The earliest fortifications on this site date back to at least the 9th century, but the castle was begun under Danish control in the 13th century.

Over time, the stronghold passed through the hands of the Teutonic Knights, Swedes, and Russians, each leaving their mark. The most striking feature today is the soft pink Baroque façade which was commissioned by Catherine the Great in the 18th century when Estonia was still part of the Russian Empire.... a strange choice for what was once a symbol of military dominance.



From the gardens at the side of the building is the Tall Hermann watchtower, where the Estonian flag is raised daily at sunrise as a powerful ritual of national identity. Today, the castle houses the Parliament of Estonia which is called the Riigikogu, and the building serves as the active seat of the nation's legislative government.



Alexander Nevsky Cathedral

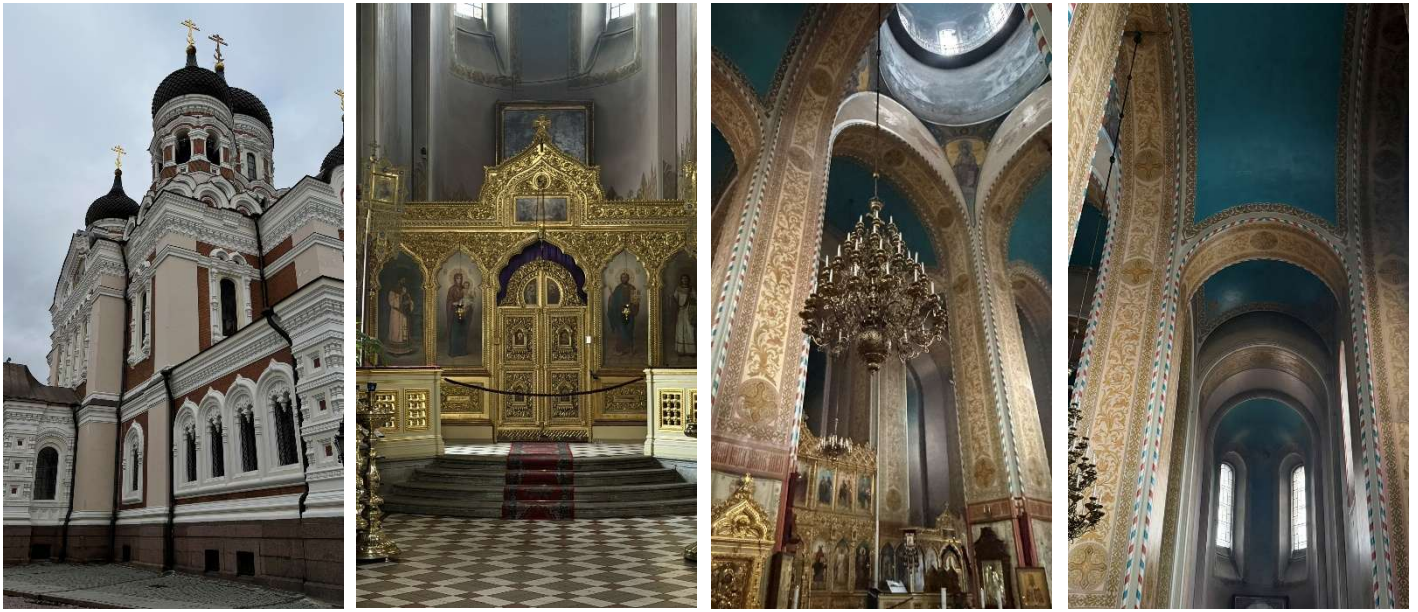
Knowing how much you enjoyed my pictures of the Nativity of Christ Cathedral in Riga, I thought I would make the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral my first stop as I managed to arrive in daylight so thought I would start my tour early. The Alexander Nevsky Cathedral sits high on Toompea Hill and is Tallinn's most visually dominant church.....and also its most politically charged.



Built between 1894 and 1900 during the Russian Empire's control of Estonia, it was designed in a grand Russian Revival style, with onion domes, rich mosaics, and heavy ornamentation that contrasts sharply with the Gothic and medieval buildings around it. Dedicated to the Russian prince-saint Alexander Nevsky, the cathedral was intended as a symbol of imperial authority as much as a place of worship.



Inside, the dark wood, gilded icons, and the smell of incense create a distinctly Orthodox atmosphere which is different from the Lutheran traditions more typical of Estonia. The bells are among the largest in the city, and when they ring, you feel it through the square. After Estonia gained independence in 1918, there were serious discussions about demolishing the building, but it didn't happen which, I guess, is fortunate.



St Mary's Cathedral

St Mary's Cathedral—often known as Toomkirik—is the oldest church in Tallinn and one of the most historically layered buildings in the country. Originally established in the early 13th century by Danish settlers shortly after their conquest of northern Estonia, it began as a wooden structure before being rebuilt in stone. Over time, it evolved into a Gothic cathedral, though much of what stands today reflects later reconstruction following a devastating fire in 1684 that destroyed large parts of the interior.

For centuries, the cathedral served as the spiritual centre of the Baltic German elite who dominated Tallinn during the medieval and early modern periods. This legacy is visible inside with the walls which are lined with hundreds of ornate coats of arms belonging to noble families, turning the cathedral into a kind of heraldic gallery as much as a place of worship. The interior also contains notable funerary monuments, including tombs of prominent figures connected to the city's political and military history.



Architecturally, the cathedral's plain white exterior contrasts sharply with its richly detailed interior. Its tower, rebuilt several times, offers views over Toompea and the Lower Town, reinforcing its role as both a religious and symbolic high point of the city. Today, St Mary's Cathedral remains an active Lutheran church, but it also functions as a quiet record of Tallinn's layered past—Danish origins, German influence, Russian rule, and ultimately Estonian independence—all contained within a single well-preserved space.



Patkuli Viewing Platform

A short walk away from the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral is the Patkuli Viewing Platform which is a good starting point for a visit to Tallinn. The viewing point offers a picture postcard view of Tallinn with a dense patchwork of red-tiled roofs, church spires, and defensive towers, all framed by stretches of medieval wall that are still remarkably intact.

The viewpoint sits on the northern edge of Toompea Hill and is named after Johann Reinhold von Patkul who was a Baltic German nobleman executed in 1707 by the Swedish Authorities for behaviour which they considered amounted to treason. By way of making an example of him, he was executed by breaking on the wheel which was one of the most brutal forms of capital punishment used in early modern Europe.

You can look that up if you want as I am not going to say any more on the matter.



Kiek in De Kök

Kiek in De Kök is one of Tallinn's most memorable names—and one of its most serious defensive structures. The name is Low German for 'peek into the kitchen,' supposedly because guards could look down into nearby houses from the tower. The tower was built in the late 15th century and was designed to withstand artillery fire with walls which were up to 13 feet thick in places.

At the time, it was one of the most advanced fortification towers in Northern Europe. Today it is part of a museum complex that includes the Bastion Tunnels beneath Toompea Hill. Inside the tower, exhibitions walk you through Tallinn's military history from medieval sieges to more modern conflicts. The underground tunnels, built in the 17th century by the Swedes as hidden military passages, are definitely worth a visit.



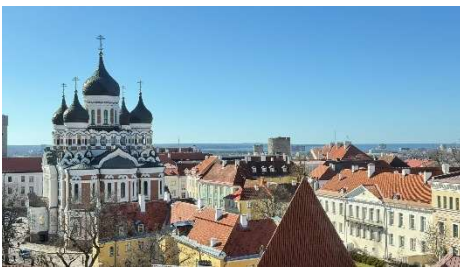
St Nicholas Church

St Nicholas Church is a deconsecrated church known locally as the Niguliste Museum. The church was originally built in the 13th century by German merchants and reflects Tallinn's strong ties to the Hanseatic League when trade and religion were closely linked. The church itself was heavily damaged during World War II but fully restored. The space is additionally used for art exhibitions and concert recitals. You can also take the lift to the top of the tower for some more panoramic views of Tallinn.



The museum is a highly regarded repository of medieval and early modern ecclesiastical art including Bernt Notke's 'Dance of Death' (Danse Macabre) which is a haunting late-medieval painting showing figures from all walks of life being led to the grave. The work was painted around 1463–1465 and was originally estimated to be over 100 feet in length although only a small fraction of that still remains here.

The original is kept in a glass case, and the picture is not brilliant, so I have obtained a copyright free version to share with you.



Town Hall Square

Town Hall Square is the heart of Tallinn's Old Town and has been for over 700 years. Everything important happened here including markets, celebrations, announcements and public punishments. It's still the city's central gathering place but with more cafés and fewer executions. In winter, this area transforms into a Christmas market, with lights, stalls, and a tree that continues a tradition dating back to 1441.



The focal point is the Town Hall itself which is the only fully preserved Gothic town hall in Northern Europe, and it still dominates the main square exactly as it did in the Middle Ages. The current building dates back to 1402, when Tallinn was at its peak as a Hanseatic League trading city. The building is still used for official ceremonies, concerts, and events.

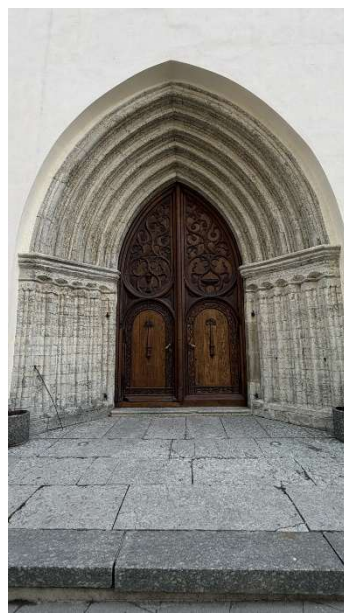


St Olaf's Church



St Olaf's Church once held a serious claim to being the tallest building in the world. In the 16th century, its spire reportedly reached around 159 metres, making it a landmark for sailors navigating the Baltic. That height came at a cost—it was struck by lightning multiple times and burned repeatedly, which is why the current spire is more modest.

The church dates back to at least the 12th century and was central to Tallinn's Scandinavian connections, particularly with Norway. Its role shifted over time, especially during the Reformation, but it remained a key feature of the skyline. Today, you can climb the tower, and it's worth the effort if you're up for it. The stairs are narrow and steep, but the reward is a 360-degree view of Tallinn.



KGB Cells



The KGB Prison Cells on Pagari Street offer a much darker, more recent layer of Tallinn's history. These basement cells were used by Soviet security services during the occupation of Estonia, particularly in the 1940s and 1950s. Suspected dissidents, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens were held, interrogated, and often sent on to labour camps. The building at Pagari 1 was originally constructed in 1912 as a residential house. It later served as the headquarters of the Estonian Provisional Government in 1918 and the Ministry of War from 1920 to 1940.

During the Soviet occupation, it became the headquarters of the NKVD, later known as the KGB, and its basement was used as a pre-trial prison where political prisoners, intellectuals, veterans, and ordinary citizens were detained, tortured, and sometimes executed or deported to labour camps in Siberia. The space is deliberately left stark. Narrow corridors, metal doors, minimal light....and it's not staged for effect because it doesn't need to be. You get a clear sense of how confined and controlled life was under Soviet rule, and how quickly people could disappear into systems like this. Exhibits focus on personal stories of individuals whose lives were permanently altered.



City Walls

The Tallinn City Walls are among the best-preserved medieval fortifications in Europe, offering a rare glimpse into the defensive mindset of a prosperous Hanseatic trading city. Built primarily between the 13th and 16th centuries, the walls once stretched nearly 2.5 kilometres and were reinforced by around 46 towers, though roughly half of these survive today.

Walking along the remaining sections, particularly near the Patkuli viewing platform or between Nunna, Sauna, and Kuldjala towers, you get a genuine sense of how the city protected itself against invaders while controlling trade and movement. Each tower had a specific defensive purpose, from archery to artillery, with the aptly named Kiek in de K ok allowing guards to look down into the homes below.



Unlike many European cities that dismantled their fortifications to make way for expansion, Tallinn preserved much of its medieval structure, largely because it never underwent the same scale of industrial redevelopment. The walls are not just historical artefacts; they define the character of the Old Town, enclosing a space that feels intact rather than reconstructed.



Balti Jaam Market

Balti Jaam Market sits right next to Tallinn's main railway station and is a working market that's been modernised without losing its edge. It's split across different sections: fresh produce, street food, antiques, clothing, and a slightly chaotic mix of everything in between.

What makes it interesting is the contrast. One minute you're looking at locally sourced food and clean, modern stalls; the next you're in a section selling Soviet-era memorabilia, old tools, and second-hand goods. It hasn't been polished into uniformity, which is a good thing.

Food-wise, it's one of the best places in the city to try a range of options quickly—Estonian, international, and street food all in one place. It's casual and practical rather than curated, so it works well as a stop between sights rather than a destination in itself.



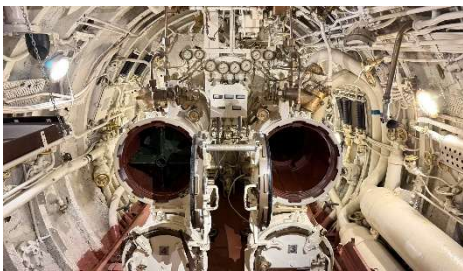
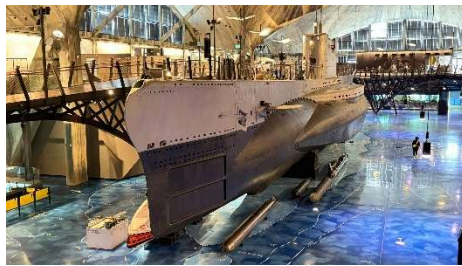
Seaplane Harbour



The Seaplane Harbour (Lennusadam) is one of Tallinn's most impressive museums, largely because of the building itself. The vast concrete hangars were constructed in 1916–17 as part of a Russian naval base and were among the first large-scale reinforced concrete shell structures in the world.

Inside, the focus is maritime and military history, but it's presented in a hands-on, accessible way. The highlight is the submarine Lembit, which you can actually go inside. It's cramped, functional, and gives a very direct sense of what life would have been like for the crew.

There are also historic ships in the harbour outside, interactive displays, and plenty on Estonia's naval history and its strategic position on the Baltic Sea. It avoids feeling static—this is a museum you move through rather than just observe. It's slightly out of the Old Town, but worth the detour.

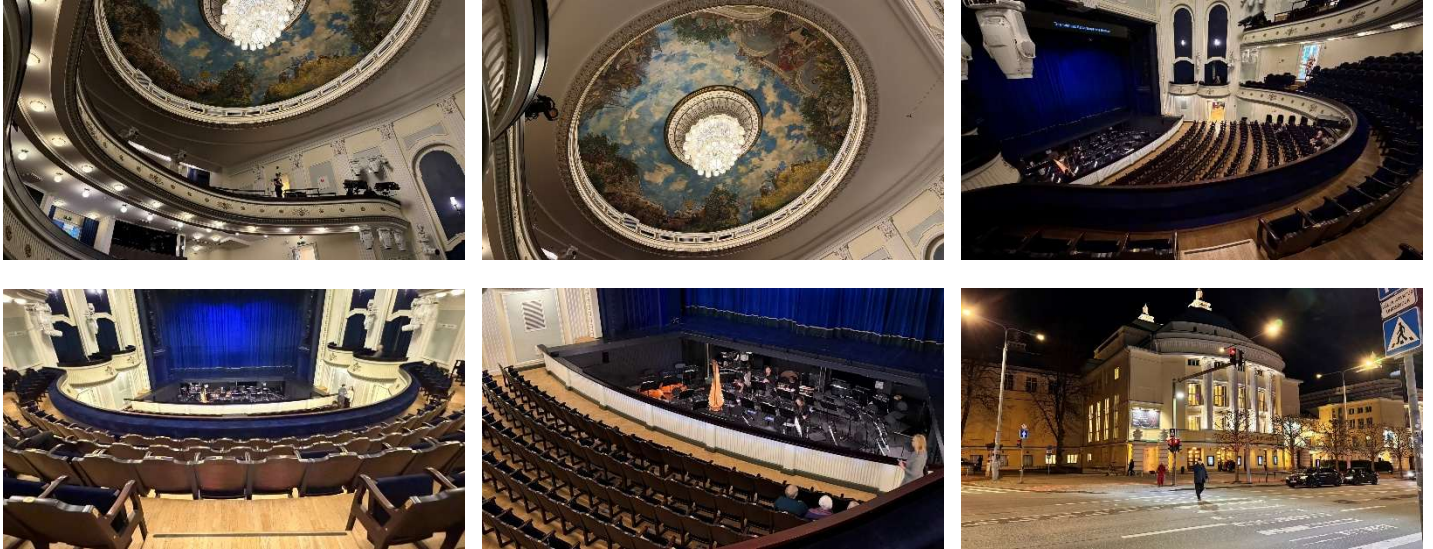


Estonia National Opera

The Estonia National Opera, or Rahvusoper Estonia, represents Tallinn's cultural ambitions in the early 20th century. The building opened in 1913 and was designed in a mix of Art Nouveau and neoclassical styles, reflecting a period when Estonia was asserting its cultural identity under Russian rule. It was heavily damaged during World War II and later restored.

The building sits just outside the Old Town, marking a transition from medieval Tallinn to a more modern, national identity. The programme includes opera, ballet, and concerts, with a strong emphasis on both international classics and Estonian works. On my first night in Tallinn, I managed to purchase a ticket to see *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (The Tales of Hoffmann) opera, staged by the Latvian National Opera and Ballet.

The opera, written by Jacques Offenbach, ran for just under four hours (including repeated curtain calls) so I didn't get back in time to complete my evening write-up. The production was lavish as was the setting and the costumes. The music was beautifully orchestrated, and the opera singers were amazing although I still don't get the story in spite of the fact that we had everything translated into Estonian and English.



Kadriorg Park and Palaces

Kadriorg Park is Tallinn's most elegant green space, shaped by imperial ambition but fully absorbed into Estonia's modern identity. It was founded in 1718 by Peter the Great after Russia seized the city during the Great Northern War. The name honours Catherine I of Russia, and from the outset it was intended as a formal royal park in the European style.



Kadriorg Palace was built between 1718 and 1725 as a summer palace for Peter the Great. Its pink Baroque façade was designed to impress. Inside, the richly decorated main hall with its stucco work and painted ceiling is one of the finest Baroque interiors in the Baltics. Today the building houses part of the Art Museum of Estonia.



Behind Kadriorg Palace is the Kadriorg Presidential Palace which is a lot more restrained. This palace was constructed in 1938 during Estonia's first period of independence. Unlike the Baroque extravagance nearby, this residence is understated and functional, reflecting a hugely different idea of power—national rather than imperial. Today, it remains the official residence of the Estonian president.

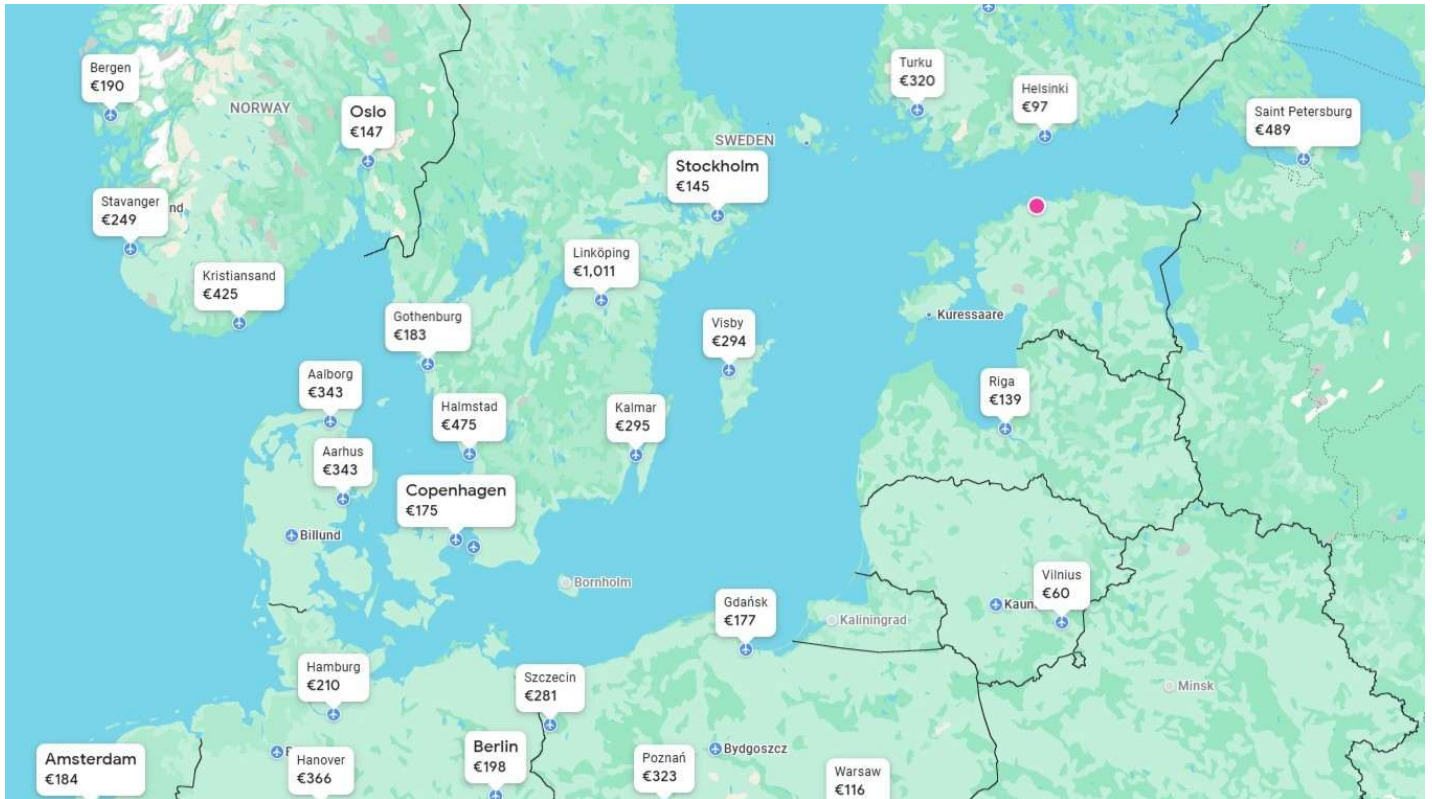


Chapter 7: Vilnius

Tallinn Airport is officially named after Lennart Meri (1929–2006) who was a writer, filmmaker, diplomat, and ultimately the second President of Estonia after the restoration of independence. The airport is located just 2.5 miles from the city centre so just a short bus ride from where I was staying. The airport opened in 1936 during Estonia's first period of independence and was dominated by Aeroflot operations.

Since Estonia regained independence in 1991, the airport has been steadily modernised and now handles several million passengers annually while maintaining a notably relaxed atmosphere. The airport is often described as one of the 'cosiest' airports in the world with short walking distances, minimal queues, and a calm, well-designed interior that reflects Scandinavian and Baltic sensibilities.

The number of flights out of Tallinn is somewhat limited but you can work out my next stop from this map view courtesy of google flights.



Vilnius (Lithuania)

The history of Vilnius can be traced back to the early 14th century when Grand Duke Gediminas established it as the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania around 1323.... although there were people settled there before that date. Since then, the city has seen constant change under Polish, Russian, Nazi and Soviet control with each leaving their mark in terms of history, politics and culture.

By the 15th and 16th centuries, especially after the Union of Lublin, Vilnius thrived as part of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth which was one of Europe's largest and most complex political entities. What sets Vilnius apart was not just size or influence, but its relative tolerance as a place where Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Protestants coexisted.

The city became a major centre of Jewish intellectual life, earning the nickname 'Jerusalem of the North,' particularly in the 18th century. From the late 18th century, following the partitions of the Commonwealth in 1795, Vilnius fell under Russian Imperial control. The 19th century saw repeated uprisings against Russian rule, notably in 1831 and 1863, both of which were strongly suppressed.

After World War I, control of the city shifted repeatedly before it was annexed by Poland in 1920, remaining so until 1939. World War II brought further upheaval with Soviet occupation from 1940 to 1941 and Nazi occupation from 1941 to 1944 during which time the city's Jewish population was almost entirely annihilated.

The Soviets returned in 1944, and the Polish populations were displaced, and the city was repopulated largely by Lithuanians and Russians. Independence in 1990 marked another milestone when Vilnius became the capital of a restored Lithuanian state allowing time for it to redefine itself politically, culturally, and historically. That is it. Up to date.



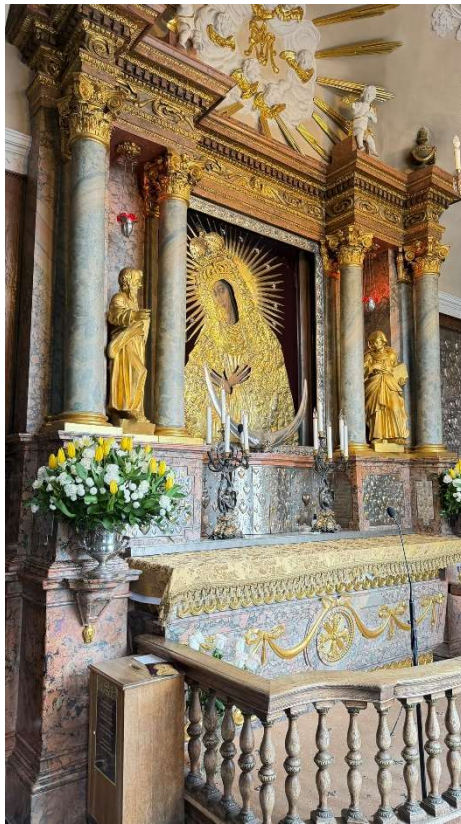
Gate of Dawn and Gate of Dawn Chapel

The Gate of Dawn, built between 1503 and 1522, is the only remaining gate of Vilnius's original defensive wall. Its significance today is almost entirely religious due to the icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary which was installed in the 17th century and is housed in a chapel above the gate. The icon, which dates from around 1630, is associated with miracles and attracts pilgrims from across Lithuania and Poland.





The site became especially important during times of national crisis, including the partitions and later occupations. The gate is architecturally modest as a defensive structure but its transformation into a major pilgrimage site is what makes it unusual. Indeed, Pope John Paul II visited the site in 1993, reinforcing its significance.



Bastion

The Bastion of the Vilnius Defensive Wall is a preserved 17th-century fortification which was once part of the city's protective walls and dates back to the period from 1503 to 1655. The Bastion reinforced the city's southeastern perimeter and was designed by military engineer Friedrich Getkant, reflecting Western European bastion systems adapted for local terrain.

The structure included underground tunnels connecting gun platforms and observation points. The bastion's most distinctive feature is its horseshoe-shaped structure, connected to the city by an underground tunnel. This allowed soldiers to move safely between the inner city and the defensive position while under attack. Despite these precautions, the fortifications proved insufficient and gradually lost their military relevance.

The building fell into disrepair and much of the wall system was dismantled. However, restoration efforts have transformed the site into a museum and viewpoint. Today, it houses part of the Vilnius Museum and offers visitors both historical insight and panoramic views over the surrounding area as well as exhibits exploring the city's fortifications, weaponry, and historical background.

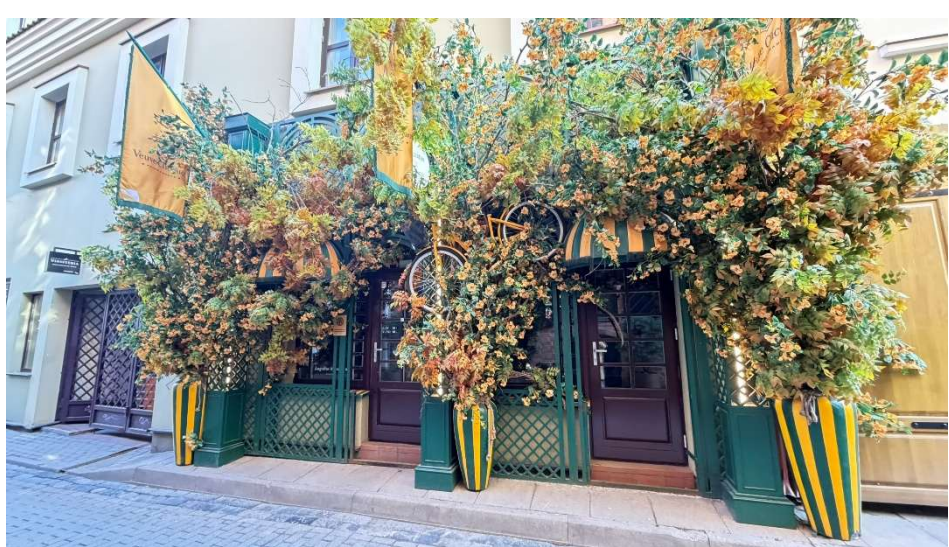


Vilnius Old Town (including Town Hall Square)

Vilnius Old Town is one of the largest surviving medieval old towns in Europe, shaped from the 14th century onward as the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Its layout reflects organic growth rather than rigid planning, with Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, and neoclassical buildings collected together with no sense of any thoughtful planning offering a potpourri of architectural designs which does actually work.

The city flourished in the 15th and 16th centuries as a major political and trading hub linking East and West. As such, Town Hall Square has been its civic centre since that time, hosting markets, executions, and public announcements. The current Town Hall building dates from 1799, redesigned in neoclassical style after earlier Gothic structures deteriorated. This is presently being refurbished.

Of particular interest in Town Hall Square is the Portal installation, launched in 2021 which is a large circular structure containing a live video screen and camera that connects Vilnius in real time to other cities. The original link was with Lublin in Poland (close to the border with Ukraine) but now the network has expanded, and it links with other countries including Ipswich in the UK and Dublin in Ireland.... what a lovely idea.

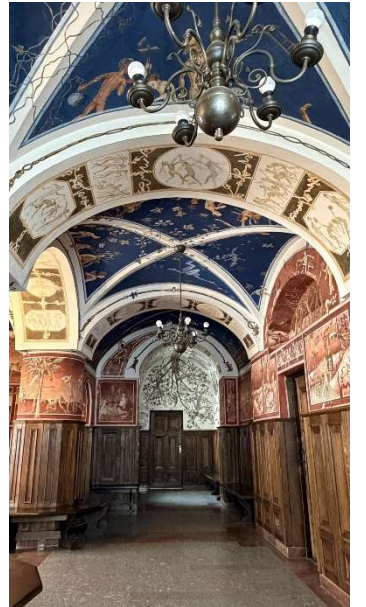


Vilnius University & St. Johns' Church Vilnius

Vilnius University was founded in 1579 by King Stephen Báthory and the Jesuits, making it one of the oldest universities in Eastern Europe. It quickly became a major intellectual centre, particularly for theology, philosophy, and science. The campus is a patchwork of courtyards built between the 16th and 19th centuries, reflecting shifting architectural styles. Entrance to the university is free and you will be made very welcome.



St. John's Church, originally Gothic (15th century) but heavily remodelled in Baroque style in the 18th century, forms the spiritual core of the university. Its bell tower, completed in 1738 and later raised to about 68 metres, is the tallest structure in the Old Town. During the partitions of Poland-Lithuania, the university was closed by the Russian Empire in 1832 and only reopened again in 1919. The university is the oldest and largest university in the country and the most popular Lithuanian higher education institution.



Presidential Palace Vilnius



Next door to the university is the Presidential Palace which has its origins in the 14th century as a residence for Vilnius bishops, later evolving into a palace under the Russian Empire. Its current neoclassical form largely dates from the late 18th century, with significant reconstruction in the early 19th century. From 1795, after the final partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, it served as the residence of Russian governors-general.

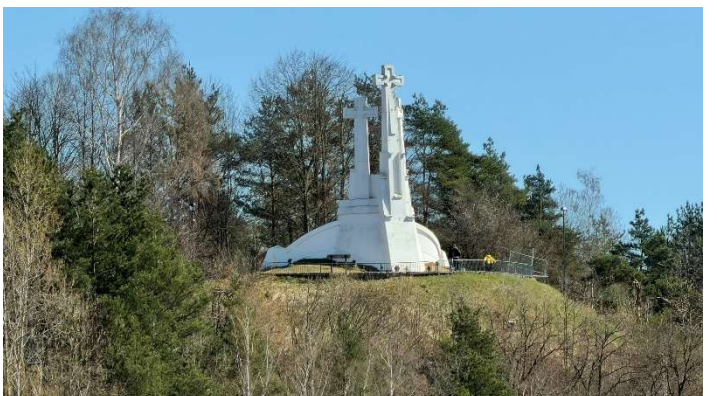
After Lithuania declared independence in 1918, the building became the presidential residence, although this role was interrupted during Soviet occupation (1940–1990), when it housed various administrative bodies. Since independence was restored, it has again functioned as the official residence of the Lithuanian president. The palace is relatively restrained architecturally compared to its political importance, but the surrounding courtyard is used for ceremonies, including flag-raising and state receptions.



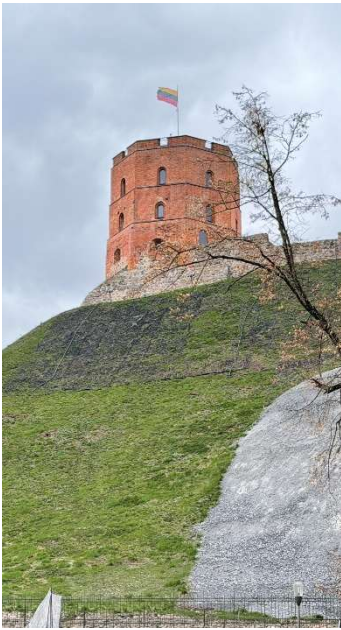
Hill of Three Crosses

The Hill of Three Crosses is tied to a legend that Franciscan monks were martyred here in the 14th century, although historical evidence is not conclusive. Wooden crosses were first erected on the hill and later replaced by a concrete monument in 1916 designed by architect Antoni Wiwulski. These were destroyed by the Soviet authorities in 1950 but rebuilt in 1989 during the independence movement.

The current white crosses are deliberately stark and visible across the city, reinforcing their symbolic role. The hill itself offers one of the best viewpoints over Vilnius, but its importance is more ideological than scenic. It became a site of quiet resistance during Soviet rule and a rallying point during the late 1980s. The combination of medieval legend and real politics makes it an interesting attraction.



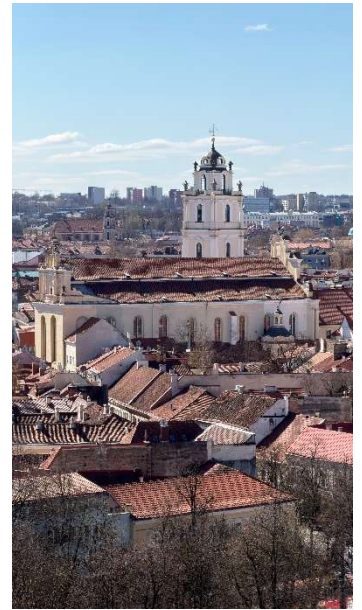
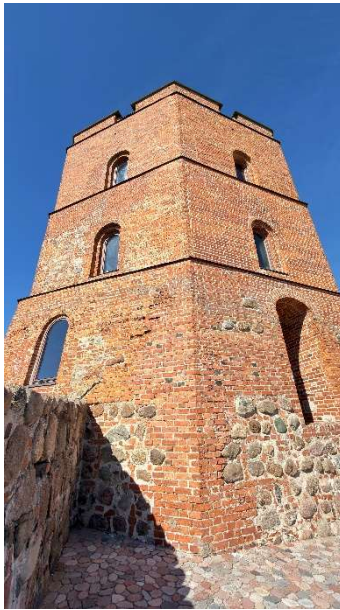
Gediminas Castle Tower



Gediminas Castle Tower is highlighted as the symbol of Lithuania and the most recognisable symbol of Vilnius. The tower dates back to the 14th century under Grand Duke Gediminas and formed part of a larger Upper Castle complex designed to defend the capital of the rapidly expanding Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The hill itself was a natural stronghold, overlooking key trade routes along the Neris River.

Over time, the castle fell into ruin, particularly after wars with Moscow in the 17th century, leaving the tower as the primary surviving structure. Today, it houses a small museum focused on the city's history, but most visitors come for the views which are arguably the best in Vilnius. The Lithuanian national flag flying above the tower is significant in that it was first raised here in 1919 as a symbol of independence.

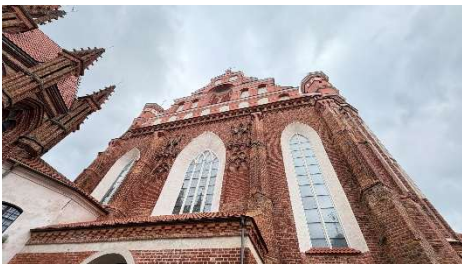
If the stairs don't look too inviting, then you can always get to the top via the funicular which is efficient and cheap although walking down is the better experience since it allows you to trace the old defensive slopes and appreciate how geography shaped the city.





St. Anne's Church Vilnius & Bernardine Church Vilnius

St. Anne's Church, built around 1495–1500, is a masterpiece of late Gothic architecture, famous for its intricate brick façade composed of over 30 different brick shapes. Legend claims Napoleon Bonaparte was so impressed in 1812 that he wished he could carry it back to Paris. Next door, Bernardine Church (St. Francis and St. Bernard), begun in the late 15th century, combines Gothic structure with later Renaissance and Baroque additions. The two churches together illustrate the transition of styles across centuries. St. Anne's has survived wars and occupations with minimal alteration, which is rare in Eastern Europe. Bernardine Church, by contrast, was closed and repurposed during Soviet rule before being restored. The pairing offers a visual contrast... St. Anne's is delicate and vertical while Bernardine Church is bigger and more fortress-like.



Palace of the Grand Dukes

The Palace of the Grand Dukes was originally constructed in the 15th century and expanded during the Renaissance. The palace was the political and ceremonial centre of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, one of the largest states in Europe at its peak. It hosted foreign dignitaries, royal events, and key decisions shaping Eastern Europe. However, after the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the palace fell into disrepair and was ultimately demolished by the Russian Empire in the early 19th century. The current structure is a controversial reconstruction, completed in 2009 after extensive archaeological work. Critics argue it lacks authenticity, but supporters see it as a necessary act of historical restoration. Inside, the museum blends genuine artefacts with recreated interiors, offering insight into court life, diplomacy, and culture. It also hosts national ceremonies, reinforcing its symbolic role.



Vilnius Cathedral



Vilnius Cathedral stands on a site used for worship since at least the 13th century, when King Mindaugas, who was Lithuania's first and only crowned king, accepted Christianity, largely for political reasons, and reportedly built the first Christian church around 1251. After his assassination in 1263, the political situation collapsed and Christianity, which was never really deeply rooted, was abandoned.

In 1385, the uniting of Lithuania and Poland under a single crown saw a return to Christianity with the King of Poland ordering the construction of a cathedral in 1387 on the same site. The current neoclassical cathedral dates largely from 1779 after repeated fires and structural failures. The exterior façade looks more like a Roman temple than a Gothic church.

Inside the cathedral lies the tombs of major figures including Grand Dukes and Polish-Lithuanian kings. The adjacent freestanding bell tower, originally part of the Lower Castle's defensive system, underlines how religious and military spaces once overlapped. Outside, Cathedral Square is used for coronations, political rallies, and, crucially, mass demonstrations during the independence movement.



Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights (KGB Museum)

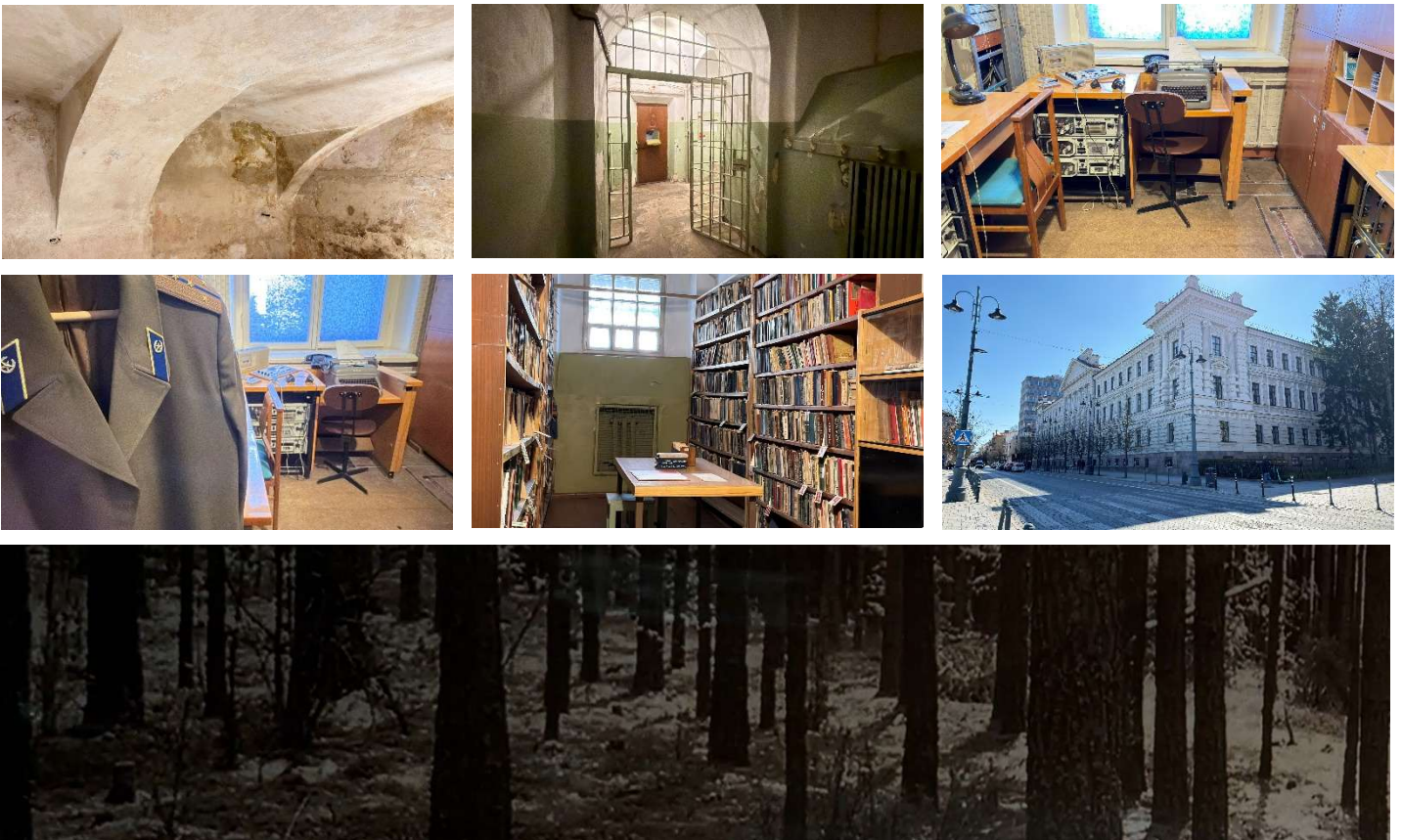


The Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, still widely referred to as the KGB Museum, offers one of the most direct and unsettling insights into Lithuania's 20th-century history. Located in the former Soviet KGB headquarters, the building itself is part of the exhibit. After Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940 (aside from Nazi occupation between 1941 and 1944), this site was used for interrogations, imprisonment, and executions of those considered to be enemies of the state.... often on extraordinarily little evidence.

Thousands of Lithuanians were imprisoned, deported, or executed here, particularly during Stalinist purges in the 1940s and 1950s. The museum was established in 1992, shortly after independence, making it one of the first institutions in the region to confront Soviet repression directly. Unlike more polished museums, it retains a stark, almost raw atmosphere. The museum includes the basement cells and interrogation rooms. One of the most disturbing features is the execution room, where prisoners were shot and bodies removed through a discreet exit.



The museum documents deportations to Siberia, partisan resistance in Lithuanian forests, and the broader system of surveillance and control. It does acknowledge the earlier Nazi occupation, but its primary focus is on Soviet rule, which lasted far longer. Personal stories, documentation, artefacts and physical spaces combine to make the history immediate rather than abstract. It's not an easy visit and the museum makes no attempt to balance narratives or sanitise what is seen. Overall, it goes a long way to explain why the country offers so much support for the present situation in Ukraine.



Choral Synagogue

Built in 1903, the Choral Synagogue is the only surviving synagogue out of more than 100 that once stood in Vilnius before World War II. Designed by architect Dovydas Rozenhauzas in Moorish Revival style, its ornate façade is typical of European synagogue trends of the late 19th century. The term 'choral' in this case refers to the inclusion of a choir, a reform-influenced feature uncommon in traditional Eastern European Judaism.



The Nazi occupation (1941–1944) led to the near-total destruction of the Jewish community which totalled roughly 60,000 people at that time. By 1943, around 90% of Vilnius's Jewish population had been murdered as a result of the mass executions which took in Ponary Forest just outside the city. The synagogue survived largely by chance as it was used as a warehouse during Soviet rule. Since Lithuanian independence, it has been faithfully restored and returned to religious use.



The Church of St Teresa

The Church of St Teresa is one of the finest examples of Baroque architecture in Lithuania. It was built in the 17th century and strongly associated with the Carmelite Order. Its façade is relatively restrained compared to more elaborate Baroque churches, but the interior is richly decorated reflecting the spiritual intensity of the period. The church is situated next to the Gate of Dawn, which is one of Vilnius's most important religious sites.

Historically, the church served both local worshippers and pilgrims, reinforcing Vilnius's role as a religious crossroads. Adjacent to it, the Domus Maria Hotel occupies a former monastery, and that heritage is still evident. Unlike typical city hotels, it retains a quiet, almost cloistered atmosphere, with simple architecture and a sense of separation from the surrounding Old Town.

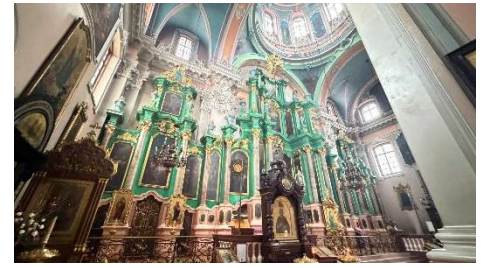


Orthodox Church of the Holy Spirit



The Orthodox Church of the Holy Spirit highlights the city's long-standing religious and cultural diversity. While Vilnius is often associated with Catholicism, this church represents the strong presence of Eastern Orthodoxy. Originally founded in the 16th century, the church was rebuilt multiple times, with the current structure reflecting Baroque influences adapted to Orthodox traditions.

The interior is richly coloured and heavily ornamented. Unlike many historic churches, this one remains very much active, with regular services that reinforce its living role in the community. It stands as a reminder that Vilnius has never been culturally uniform and has long been a meeting point of Latin and Eastern Christian traditions, as well as other faiths.



Lithuanian Opera and Ballet

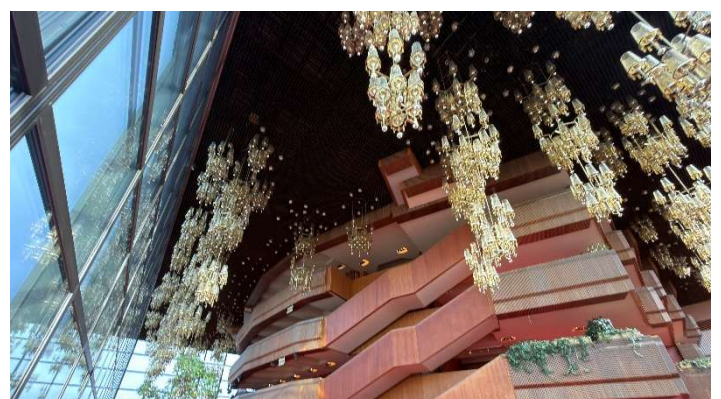
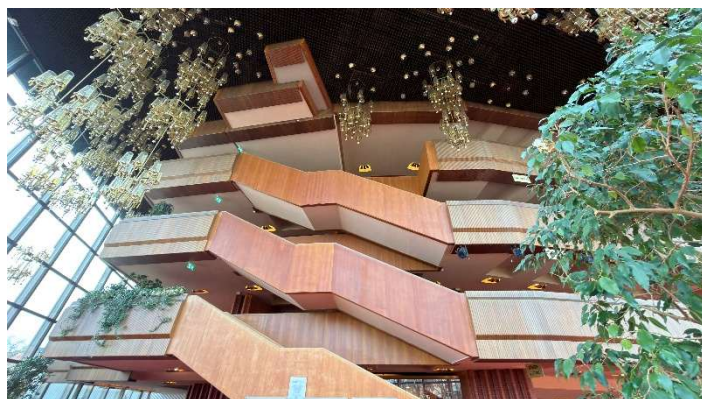
The Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theatre was completed in 1974 and is typically a product of Soviet-era architecture, with a functional (and rather boring) exterior that contrasts sharply with the elegance of its performances. During the Soviet period, it served both as a cultural institution and a tool of state prestige, showcasing approved works of opera and ballet.

Since independence in 1990, however, it has evolved into a fully international venue, hosting a wide repertoire from classical to contemporary productions. The quality of performance is high, often featuring collaborations with European artists and companies. For visitors, it offers a distinct perspective on Vilnius—not medieval or religious, but modern and outward-looking.



Anyway, it's my last day in Vilnius and the last day of my tour and tomorrow I will be flying back to a whole load of post and a lot of catching up. Tonight though, a special treat as I am attending the opening night of *Madame Butterfly* at the National Opera and Ballet theatre here in Vilnius. The performance is the same production as that at the English National Opera except it is sung entirely in the original language of Italian.

I tried to get a ticket as soon as I found out about the performance but, being the first night, the production was completely sold out indeed, it seems to be sold out for most of the run. As luck would have it, I passed the theatre this morning and decided to pop in to see if there were any tickets and I got a seat at the front of the theatre for £30.....that's a whole lot cheaper than London even when you factor in airfare + hotel + ticket !!!





Chapter 8: Summary

My 'Magical Mystery Tour 3' reads like a controlled experiment in letting chance dictate experience....and it worked. Starting from London with no fixed destination beyond 'cheapest available' I moved through Stockholm, Oslo, Helsinki, Riga, Tallinn, and Vilnius, building a route that makes no conventional sense on paper but actually forms a tight, coherent sweep through Scandinavia and the Baltics.



Starting in Stockholm, I immediately understood why the city works. It's built across islands, and you feel that constantly.... bridges, ferries, and water everywhere. Walking through Gamla Stan gave me the expected medieval charm, but it was the Vasa Museum that really stood out. I'm not even into maritime history, but seeing a 17th-century warship sitting there almost intact was something else.

Oslo was different. The booking on Ethiopian Airlines wasn't a scam, and the city grew on me. It's not showy, but it's well thought out. The Vigeland Sculpture Park was strange, and borderline uncomfortable but memorable. The Opera House, on the other hand, was a clear highlight.... especially being able to walk up the roof and then step inside a genuinely impressive auditorium is hard to beat.

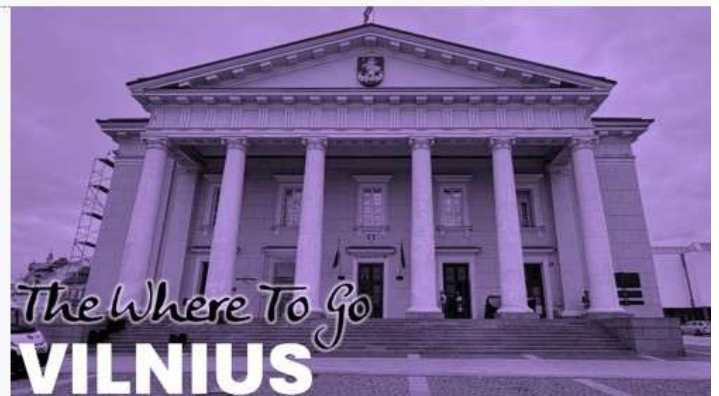
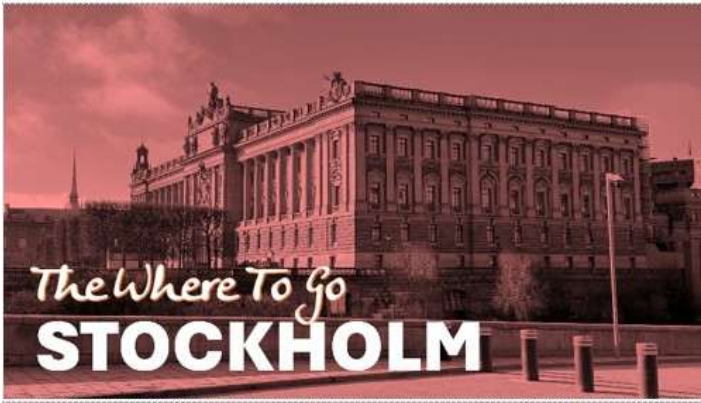
Helsinki shifted the tone again. It felt more austere, slightly harsher, with clear Russian influence in its architecture. But the city made sense. The Rock Church, carved straight into granite, was clever and understated. The Oodi Library was probably the best example I saw of how a public building should function.... practical, modern, and actually useful. Suomenlinna was delightful even in the fog!

Riga brought things back to something more layered and complex. The Old Town gives you the medieval backbone, but the real story is everything layered on top—German, Swedish, Russian, Soviet. The Latvian Academy of Sciences summed that up perfectly...a Stalinist "statement building" now offering views across the city. Riga feels less polished than the Nordic capitals, but more grounded because of it.

Tallinn was probably the most visually striking place on the trip. The Old Town is ridiculously well preserved—walls, towers, cobbled streets—the whole thing feels intact rather than reconstructed. But it's not stuck in the past. You've got places like the Seaplane Harbour, which mixes serious history with hands-on exhibits and a submarine. Tallinn balances medieval and modern better than anywhere else I visited.

Then Vilnius, the final stop, and probably the most historically complex. You can feel that immediately. This is a city that's been passed around for centuries.....Polish, Russian, Nazi, Soviet....and it shows. The KGB Museum reinforces that in a way that's hard to ignore. But it's not all weight and ending the trip at the Opera House with Madame Butterfly felt like a fitting finish: something cultural, slightly unexpected, and enjoyable.

Find the videos on www.youtube.com/@thewheretogo



The outside cover if you enjoyed this guide.....



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