

The Baltic by Teak Deck

Sampling Scandinavia, Russia and other treasures along the Baltic Sea is easy in the company of a good ship

By Dana Hammond - travel writer *AAA Traveler Magazine*

Best of all are the arrivals, the morning sail-ins when sunbeams from a new day spotlight horizons beyond the bow and set a course for discovery. With teak underfoot, a rail at the belly and sea air slapping your face into consciousness, the world seems freshly made. On my first cruise I learned about the magic of the mornings, and how the day's earliest hours can form lasting impressions when greeting the world from the water. That voyage brought a Caribbean landscape of dazzling aquamarine surf, diamond-dust beaches and candy-colored sunrises into view as every day dawned. But how would a cruise vacation beyond the calm was of the Caribbean measure up? How far could my sea legs take me?

Since then I've given those legs a good workout sampling more sophisticated itineraries. Without exception, all of them enhanced my appreciation for the perspective a seagoing vacation imparts. Along the way I came to the conclusion that nothing etches the contours of a city into my mind more memorably than approaching it by ship. Most great cities are lighthouses that wink messages of promise and opportunity. Sailing towards them compels you to take stock of their offerings, to relish their potential. Ships are like matchmakers fostering a flirtatious courtship between passengers and the places they encounter.

As I stood at the rail of Holland America Line's (HAL) Amsterdam, midway through a 10-day cruise of Northern Europe's Baltic Sea, I was struck by the good fortune of the company I was keeping. In the Baltic, where the seafaring history of cities such as Copenhagen, Helsinki, Stockholm and St. Petersburg looms large, a perch on the deck of a classic ship that's part of a cruise line with more than 130 years of experience makes perfect sense.

As Amsterdam settled into a prime location near Stockholm's Old Town, I thought about the sampling nature of cruising. It promises broad-spectrum travel in a neat, carefree package, and with my voyage that's exactly what I got. Every day ushered in opportunities to peek at new places. Plus, in parts of the Baltic where different languages and currencies can complicate touring, the familiar services of the ship helped ease my way.

My cruise began and ended in Copenhagen, a city that oozes charm. Its treasures are easily found on foot (or free city bike), and planning a pre- or post-cruise stay here is a must. From the antique lights of Tivoli, an amusement park in the center of the city that inspires Disney years ago, to the rainbow-colored rowhouses and sloops of Nyhavn, a lively inlet that once was home to Hans Christian Andersen and now houses trendy cafes, Copenhagen's whimsical spirit captured my heart. Adorned with a statue of The Little Mermaid inspired by Andersen's fairy tale, even the harbor is enchanting this city. Other can't-miss attractions include Stroget, Europe's longest pedestrian street, and a string of royal havens representing the oldest kingdom in the world.

As more ports came into view, the memories started mounting. Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city, thrives on activities surrounding its university. It's also the base for treks to the original Legoland as well as a scenic train tour of the lake highlands. In Stockholm, I contemplated Nobel Prize winners while walking through The Blue Hall. I also visited Scandinavia's top attraction, the royal warship Vasa. A 17th century carved-oak magnum opus with a bow that looks like an altarpiece, Vasa proved to be more a work of art than a seaworthy vessel when it sank moments into its maiden voyage. Brackish water spared it from boat-eating bugs, and today Vasa ranks as the oldest intact ship in the world. In Visby, the Swedish countryside beckoned with a breathtaking bike tour while Helsinki's urban archipelago lured me into a blistering boat excursion that's not for the faint of heart.

The Hermitage Museum, housed in the Russian baroque splendor of the Winter Palace, occupied most of my time in St. Petersburg. Its collection, a mind-boggling three million works of art, was assembled primarily by the czars and is displayed in their opulent compound where rulers like Catherine the Great resided. Just getting a chance to savor the setting is worth the price of admission. Jaw-dropping interiors, such as the alabaster-and-gold Jordan Staircase and the green Malachite Room, draw as much attention as the great masterpieces.

Port calls in Tallinn, Estonia (formerly of the Soviet Union) and Warnemunde, Germany (formerly of East Germany) also were on my itinerary. Founded in the 12th century, Tallinn's medieval walls and towers made a stunning impression on the approach from the sea. Warnemunde's not as photogenic, but it boasts day-trip access to Berlin.

While undeniably fascinating, sailing through the Baltic can be a bit overwhelming. There's a lot to digest, and you're constantly shifting gears between cultures. The ship becomes your one constant companion; but in the company of the right ship, you can't go wrong.