

# Beauty and the east



The Stari Most bridge in Mostar, Bosnia Herzegovina

**Looking for a cheap and independent adventure? Head to Eastern Europe. Its geography may be unclear, but its beauty, allure and unique architecture isn't**

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There is no generally accepted definition of what exactly Eastern Europe is. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania often identify themselves as Northern European and seem keen to distance themselves culturally from their soviet past. At the southern end of the continent, in the Caucasus, it can be debated whether Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan should be geographically classed as a part of Eastern Europe, despite many of the population very definitely identifying themselves as European. Russia, of course, is mainly geographically in Asia, but its best-known cities, St Petersburg and Moscow, are firmly rooted, both culturally and geographically, within the traditions of Europe.

Most of the Eastern European countries were a part of the Soviet Union up until its dramatic fall in 1991, but Yugoslavia – despite also being a communist state – remained largely independent before eventually breaking up into its

component parts of Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia Herzegovina. Hard-line communist Albania was also an exception, having aligned itself with Maoist China.

To confuse matters further, a number of functionally independent countries within what is generally considered to be Eastern Europe, often aren't recognised by the United Nations as legitimate sovereign states: Kosovo is still struggling for full recognition within the UN as Serbia still considers it a part of its territory; Transnistria – despite having its own army, currency and enforceable borders – is still generally considered to be a part of Moldova; and South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh, in the Caucasus, are also all disputed territories.

Despite such apparent political turbulence, in what is undoubtedly one of the most rapidly evolving regions of the

world, most Eastern European cities are far safer to visit than their Western European equivalents. As public transport is often heavily state subsidised, they are also far cheaper to get around. Longer distance and international overland travel is also something of a bargain: overnight sleeper trains can be a particularly efficient way of covering large distances, with a bunk in a second-class sleeper compartment costing little more than a night in a hostel (which are also often great value in comparison to Western Europe).

Although some of the less accessible parts of Eastern Europe – such as Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and the Caucasus – might be better visited as part of a larger overland trip, the dramatic rise of budget airline flights across the region now means that many of Eastern Europe's greatest cities can easily be visited over a long weekend. If you book flights well in advance at non-peak times (try the sites for EasyJet, Ryan Air, Air Baltic and Wizz Air) then you might well find that you can pick up return flights for less than your train fare to many UK airports. What's stopping you?

## **Dubrovnik, Croatia**

Dubrovnik is one of the best preserved and most beautiful medieval cities in the whole of Eastern Europe. Monumental walls surround a maze of marble streets and baroque buildings, protecting a historic port at the foot of magnificently craggy cliffs. If this all sounds like somewhere out of *Game of Thrones* then that's because it is: Dubrovnik, along with a number of other sites along the Croatian coast, has often been featured as more than one of the exotic locations in the hit TV show.

'The pearl of the Adriatic' was heavily bombed during the siege of 91-92, with a large number of the medieval buildings receiving direct hits. Fortunately, the city has been skilfully restored, and other than some slight variations in the colour of the red tiled roofs, it has largely been returned to its former glory.

If you are planning to visit Croatia on a short budget trip, then your best option might be to fly into Split, further up the coast, on EasyJet. After checking out the Roman ruins of Diocletian's Place and visiting Klis Fortress (yet another *Game of Thrones* location), it's around four hours on the bus to Dubrovnik itself.

**THINGS TO DO** The biggest attraction in Dubrovnik is simply the city itself: whether getting lost in the narrow maze of medieval alleys, promenading along the marble floored Placa, or wandering around the walkways perched on top of the 25m-high city walls. Within the city itself, there are plenty of shops, museums, monasteries and numerous churches to explore.

Dubrovnik makes for a great base for exploring not only Croatia, but also other parts of the former Yugoslavia ([dubrovnikdaytours.net](http://dubrovnikdaytours.net)). There are numerous boat trips on offer to the surrounding islands and you can also take day trips to Mostar in Bosnia Herzegovina (home to the gorgeous Stari Most – the ‘old bridge’ that was blown up during the war, but later restored) and to the spectacular fjord at Kotor in Montenegro. Not surprisingly, some *Game of Thrones* themed tours have also become popular ([gameofthronestourcroatia.com](http://gameofthronestourcroatia.com)).

**GOING OUT** The seating of numerous tourist-oriented restaurants sprawl out across the marble boulevard of Placa, while the electronic music scene is thriving thanks to Croatia’s summer beach and boat festivals.

**WHERE TO STAY** If you are travelling independently, then as soon as you get off the bus at Pile Gate, you are likely to be approached by locals renting out rooms in their own houses or apartments. As in many other parts of the former Yugoslavia, this is likely to be your best-value option.

### **Vilnius, Lithuania**

Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, is considered by many to possess the most beautiful ‘Old Town’ in the Baltic. Cobble streets snake around numerous baroque churches and extravagantly ornate medieval buildings, leading down from the Gates of Dawn – one of the walled city’s original gates – towards Vilnius Cathedral and its landmark 57m-high belfry. Overlooking Cathedral Square is the ruined Gediminas Castle – accessible by foot or funicular railway – with impressive views from the top of its tower.

By the 15th century, Lithuania had grown to become one of the largest empires in Europe, with territory reaching down from the Baltic to the Black Sea. These days it’s tiny, if crammed with places of interest, but the people are still fiercely proud of their heritage. Lithuania’s large Jewish population, in particular, suffered terribly during the Nazi occupation and Soviet era but the people’s independent spirit was never really broken: it went on to become the first country in Eastern Europe to formally declare its independence from the Soviet Union.

Many travellers will choose to visit Lithuania as part of a larger trip to the Baltic, along with Latvia and Estonia. A recommended short(ish) trip would be to fly into Kaunas or Vilnius on Ryan Air and then out of Estonia’s capital Tallinn with EasyJet. If you wished to carry on into Russia, then it is also easy to travel on from Tallinn to St Petersburg.

**THINGS TO DO** As in many Eastern European capitals, nearly all that is of historic interest is to be found within the easily walkable Unesco-listed Old Town. It’s the kind of city where you could happily wander around all day, seeing something slightly different around every other crumbled or ornately decorated corner.

Particularly of note is the district of Uzupis. In 1998 its residents declared it an independent state, to be known as the Uzupis Republic. They have their own government, flag,

currency, constitution and an army of 11. Among the 41 points listed in the constitution, it states that ‘everyone has the right to be of any nationality’, ‘everyone has the right to appreciate their unimportance’ and ‘everyone has the right to die, but this is not an obligation’.

One worthwhile attraction that lies slightly outside of the historic old town is the Museum of Genocide Victims (otherwise known as the KGB Museum). Guided or headphone tours are available, or you can just wander through the former cells, interrogation rooms and exhibits by yourself. In one cell, known as the water room, prisoners were forced to stand on a small platform until fatigue sent them crashing down into the surrounding frozen water. In the execution cell, more than a thousand lost their lives. The guide told me that he used to be in the KGB but he might have been joking...

A popular day trip from the modern capital is to the ancient capital of Trakai to visit the beautifully restored gothic Island Castle. It takes about 45 minutes each way on the bus.

**GOING OUT** Restaurants line the main pedestrianised area leading down towards Cathedral Square, and plenty of the numerous bars and pubs also serve good Lithuanian food. Particularly recommended is the Uzupis Café: it has a great location right next to the river in the most scenic part of Uzupis, and the prices are surprisingly reasonable.

**WHERE TO STAY** The competition among budget hotels and hostels is fierce, but I would particularly recommend the Old Town Hostel ([oldtownhostel.lt/en](http://oldtownhostel.lt/en)), conveniently located close to both the train station and the Gates of Dawn.

### **Kiev, Ukraine**

Ukraine might not seem like an obvious place to go on holiday at the moment. That’s a shame as Kiev has the potential to become one of Europe’s most popular

destinations: there’s plenty to see, its good value for money, and it’s probably far safer than most big cities.

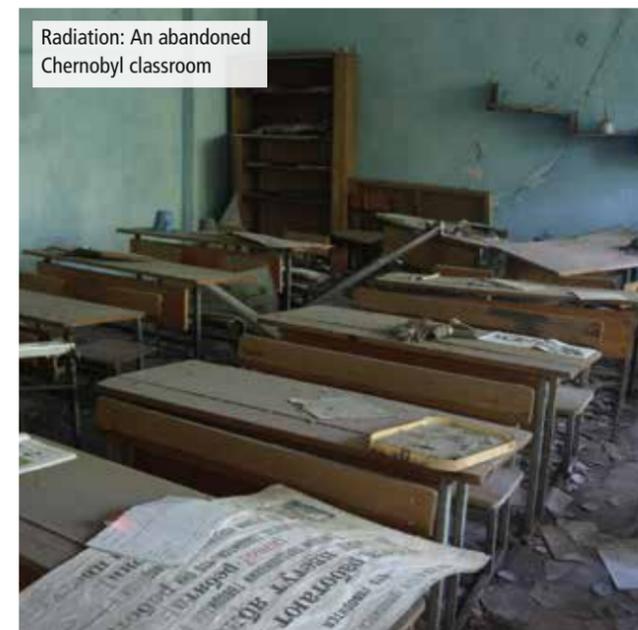
Until fairly recently it was only really worth budget travellers visiting Kiev as part of a bigger trip – possibly arriving overland from Poland via Ukraine’s Unesco-listed Lviv, or by overnight train from Moscow or Minsk – but Wizz Air are now offering cheap flights directly from the UK, opening up the possibility of a weekend break in Ukraine’s capital.

With a population of around three million – slightly more than Paris – Kiev covers a large area, but most of the many sites can easily be visited by foot. For trips further out, the metro is cheap and easy to use – the buses can be harder to figure out.

**THINGS TO DO** Kiev’s biggest attraction is the Caves Monastery. It is actually a whole complex of Orthodox-style churches, museums and monasteries, laid out across a forested park overlooking the Dnipro River. On descending to the caves you will be given the opportunity to buy a long, narrow candle to help you find your way as you shuffle along behind a long line of headscarf-wearing babushkas kissing the coffins of the monks.

Closer to the commercial centre of the city are numerous Orthodox onion-domed churches and museums. Most notable is the St Sophia Cathedral Complex. Other sites worth visiting include the recently restored Golden Gate, the Gaudi-like Chimera Building and Independence Square (aka Maidan), the site of recent demonstrations. Despite demonstrators still refusing to move their tents and barricades of tyres at the commercial hub of Kiev, life seems to be carrying on around them as normal (at least for the time being).

A popular day trip from Kiev is to the Chernobyl nuclear power station and the towns of Pripjat and Chernobyl themselves. You have to keep your arms and legs covered at all times, and on the way out you have to go through a



Radiation: An abandoned Chernobyl classroom

series of radiation checks. One of the guys on our trip was initially turned back but eventually let through after they had scraped some radioactive mud off his trainers. A tourist on an earlier trip had to strip down to his underpants for testing after failing to make it through the safety radiation checks a number of times (he had neglected to mention that he had received radiotherapy for cancer a few years earlier). At around US\$150 a head – or slightly more if you don’t book in advance – it’s not cheap for a day trip but they do at least throw in a decent meal (at a restaurant well within the exclusion zone).

**GOING OUT** Almost every style of restaurant can be found in Kiev, and there are plenty of clubs and bars. Some of the best ones can be found in backstreet basements but these can be difficult to locate without assistance, so ask the locals.

**WHERE TO STAY** The Kiev Central Station Hostel ([kievcentralstation.com](http://kievcentralstation.com)) is clean, and the staff friendly and helpful – when you manage to find them. They can also help arrange trips to Chernobyl.

### **Moscow, Russia**

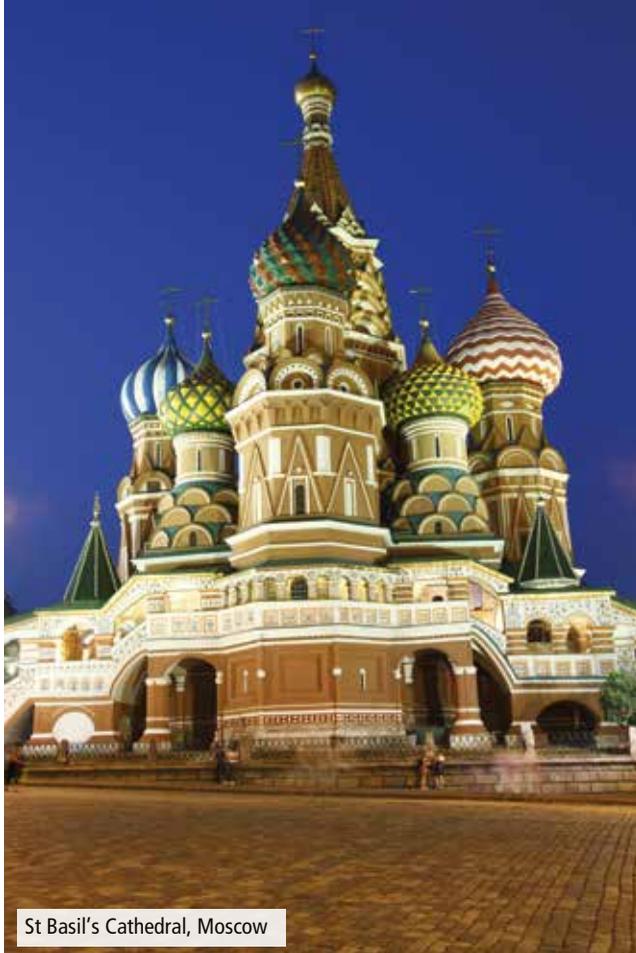
Moscow is huge, with a population of more than 10 million. And in stark contrast to most of Eastern Europe, it has a reputation for being outrageously expensive. Also, unlike the rest of Eastern Europe – with the exception of notoriously obtuse Belarus – Western tourists require an expensive visa to visit. Fortunately for Russia’s fledgling tourist industry, Moscow is home to some of the biggest attractions in all of Eastern Europe.

Another incentive to finally make the trip is that EasyJet is now flying to Moscow. If you wanted to make the most of the cost of the visa, then you could also take an overnight train north to beautiful St Petersburg, before carrying on to Estonia and catching a cheap flight back from one of the Baltic capitals.

Getting around Moscow is easy and cheap, using the excellent metro system. Many of the stations are so ornately decorated that they have become a tourist attraction in their



The view of Vilnius Cathedral Belfry from Gediminas Avenue, Lithuania



St Basil's Cathedral, Moscow

own right. It is even possible to take an organised Moscow Metro Tour ([moscowfreetour.com](http://moscowfreetour.com)).

**THINGS TO DO** One of my most vivid travel memories is emerging from Moscow's majestically ornate metro system in the middle of a brutal Russian winter, and stepping out through the snow into the hugely impressive Red Square. At one end of the square stands the spectacularly onion-domed St Basil's Cathedral, so beautiful that Ivan the Terrible blinded the architects to ensure that nothing comparable could ever be built again. To the other sides stand Lenin's Mausoleum, the State History Museum, the extravagant shopping centre GUM and the Kremlin.

Other popular attractions include the Cathedral of Christ the Redeemer, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Gorky Park, Pushkin Fine Arts Museum, and a night out at the Bolshoi Ballet.

One of Moscow's newer attractions can be found at Winzavod ([winzavod.ru/eng/](http://winzavod.ru/eng/)), a former brewery and wine factory that has been transformed into a complex of art galleries and performing arts venues. As a centre for contemporary Russian arts it is generally considered to have been at the heart of Moscow's cultural transformation.

**GOING OUT** Moscow has a bit of a reputation for both hedonism and unreasonable door policy: some of the most popular clubs and bars include Propaganda, Bunker 2, and Karma (ex Buddha) Bar.

**WHERE TO STAY** Godzillas ([godzillashostel.com](http://godzillashostel.com)) is well established and centrally located. It can also provide independent travellers with the required visa invitations (at a cost).

### **Berat, Albania**

Albania has such a distinct feel and atmosphere that it barely feels like Europe at all. While many countries within Europe seem to simply merge into one another, from the moment you cross into Albania, it is clear that you are setting foot into somewhere truly unique.

The first things you will notice are the thousands of concrete bunkers dotted not just over the hillsides, beaches and gardens, but also throughout the centre of the cities. Albania's former communist leader, Enver Hoxha, had around 700,000 of these concrete and steel domes constructed throughout the country in the hope that they would repel any invaders. Having been built to stand up against a full tank assault, they are now almost impossible to destroy.

Having emerged from a hard-line, isolationist, communist netherworld, Albania now seems keen to welcome tourists. Many of the once notoriously potholed roads have now been resurfaced; the drab grey tower blocks in the capital, Tirana, have been repainted in a range of vivid colours; and the beach resorts around Saranda are being exposed to breathtakingly rapid development.

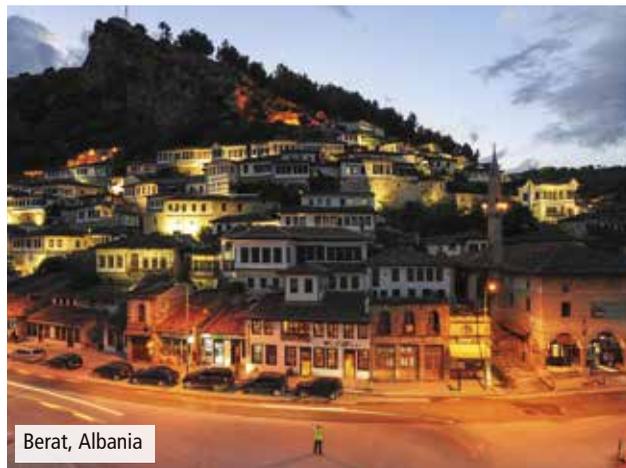
Albania is still a bit harder to get to than most of Eastern Europe, but EasyJet flies to both Corfu (a short ferry trip across from Saranda) and to further south in Greece, and it is easy to cross into from Montenegro, Serbia and Macedonia.

**THINGS TO DO** Berat is arguably Albania's most beautiful town. Known as 'the town of a thousand windows' its hillside is covered with traditional white Ottoman houses, seemingly stacked one upon the other. Towering above it all stands the Kala, a 14th-century citadel that is still home to a number of active churches. At the foot of the hill stands the 14th-century Sultan's Mosque, one of the oldest in Albania. A pleasant walk along the river and across the seven arched stone bridge will lead you on to yet more medieval churches, mosques and monasteries.

The journey to Berat from other Albanian cities such as Tirana, Saranda, or Albania's other Unesco-listed historic centre Gjirokastra, is as memorable an experience as Berat itself. The mountainous bunker-dotted scenery is as awe-inspiring as it is individual, and the near suicidal risk-taking of the minibus drivers, regularly overtaking blind on extreme mountain switchbacks, is something you are usually more likely to encounter in the Himalayas than in Europe.

**GOING OUT** While Tirana and Saranda have more than their fair share of bars and nightlife, Berat isn't really the place to go if you want to go clubbing.

**WHERE TO STAY** The attractive Hotel Mangalemi ([mangalemihotel.com](http://mangalemihotel.com)) is a great-value B&B set in one of Berat's traditional Ottoman houses. The terrace, which has gorgeous views, is a great place to eat out or even just to stop for a drink. ■



Berat, Albania