



A CHILD'S GEOGRAPHY

Volume V



EXPLORE VIKING REALMS

WRITTEN BY
TERRI JOHNSON

A CHILD'S GEOGRAPHY

Praise for *A Child's Geography*:

My eleven year old daughter and I were delighted to read through A Child's Geography. We both learned so very much! Reading these books really ignites the imagination and helps you feel like you are THERE, walking through the streets of the country being studied, tasting the local foods, and meeting new friends. My daughter was so interested in what we were reading that she begged to finish the book in one day! I am a trained classroom teacher that has been homeschooling for the past 18 years, and I would definitely place the Child's Geography books up there with the very best resources—ones you and your child will return to over and over again. ~ Susan Menzmer

This was my first time reading any books in the A Child's Geography series and it will now be our new curriculum for geography as well as history. Beautifully written. The story pulls you in and allows you to fully immerse yourself in the places, sights, sounds, and scents of our world. The photographs are wonderful; beautiful, bright, and full of color. The book title says geography, but it is so much more. There is history—and not boring text book history either. It's edge of your seat history that you, as well as your children, will enjoy. I have learned so much and I am excited to get the whole collection to begin our journey around the world! ~ Stephanie Sanchez

I really enjoyed getting some more in-depth research about several areas that I have visited in person, either as a child or an adult. As always, Terri's knowledge is accessible to children and their parents alike so we can all learn together! ~ Meredith Boone

This book allows kids to not only learn geography and history, but to see where it is happening. History and geography should not be separate. They make sense placed together. ~ Laura Strombaugh

A Child's Geography is so vivid, it is the next best thing to being there! What a wonderful way to experience geography! Cuddle on the sofa with children at your feet traveling to foreign lands and times gone by. ~ Cindy Morgan

I love the content and the conversational tone. Great information. You have a nice balance of history, geography, food, and just what it is like to travel. I can't wait to see the book with the pictures and maps! ~ Cheri Stamile

I absolutely LOVE it! The style of writing is so exciting, and really gives life to history...not just a stack of facts and dates. ~ Marilyn Brasuell

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Summary : Readers will see and understand the viking expansion and Northern European empires through the exploration of architecture, original manuscripts, and the modern landscape. Hear the stories of vikings, monks, kings, peasants, inventors, revolutionaries, and other world-changers.

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TERRI JOHNSON

A Child's Geography

Explore Viking Realms

“Go into all the world...”

~ Mark 16:15

“Circle... take her measure... gaze long... climb ...

Then you can tell the next generation, detail by detail, the story of God.”

~Psalm 48:12



A Child's Geography: Explore Viking Realms





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Timelines, Map Work, Activities, Recipes, and more can be found on the download page listed in the Introduction.

Books in this Series:

A Child's Geography: Explore His Earth

A Child's Geography: Explore the Holy Land

A Child's Geography: Explore the Classical World

A Child's Geography: Explore Medieval Kingdoms

A Child's Geography: Explore Viking Realms

In loving memory...

Of my dear friend, April Fisher. April was like family to us. Her absence has left a big hole in our hearts. I miss her exuberant laugh, her sound advice, and her zest for life. Every single day. She lived life to the fullest and checked off every box but one on her bucket list, including visiting and photographing every continent.

April's footprints can be found all throughout this book. Her tagline has been etched upon my heart, because I am "dying to change the world" and striving to make a difference in the lives of people on planet Earth, just like April did.

Introduction

After the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 AD, much of Europe plunged into darkness. Although the sun did not literally disappear from the sky, nor the stars fade from view, the world did change in ways that historians would describe as “dark”.

The time of leisure and the pursuit of recreational activities so enjoyed during the Classical era had come to a screeching halt. No longer did the people of Europe have time to pursue education and scholarship, architectural advancements, or political debate. More pressing matters needed their attention... like survival.

The Vikings of Northern Europe were masters at survival as they were well adapted to living in harsh conditions, particularly the exceedingly cold, dark winters that lasted for months on end. They were forced to build sturdy homes, sew thick, insulated clothing, and prepare food in advance in order to survive the frigid arctic extremes.

For these reasons, the Vikings thrived during the period known as the “dark ages”, emerging as a powerhouse. Not content to settle and populate the most northernmost region of the continent alone, they began to explore and raid other nations to expand their territory, wealth, and influence.

While other countries were weakening, the Nordic Vikings were gaining strength and momentum, soon to rule one of the largest realms the world has ever known. The countries to the east, south, and west would feel their fury. Rumors of fur-clad warriors in sleek ships invading peaceful settlements spread like wildfire throughout Europe. Could they be stopped?

In many regions, the Vikings encountered loosely organized barbarian hordes. Complete conquest for more territory was their ultimate goal, but that wasn't

always possible. So if they couldn't raid, they would trade. The Vikings traded luxurious furs and sparkling amber in exchange for useful goods and valuables all the way down to the Black Sea.

But they encountered a different kind of valuable when they reached the British Isles. These people were different. Even though the dark pressed in around every other corner, here there shone a light that burned ever so brightly.

When the Roman soldiers abandoned England to fend for herself, missionaries stepped into the void to shine the light of the gospel. They built monasteries where students could pour over the word of God and other great works of literature. Common people learned to read, churches were filled with eager worshippers, and more missionaries were trained to take the light of the gospel to the far reaches of the world. There was light indeed!

You'll have to read on to find out what happened. Would the Vikings stamp out this light? Or would the light increase and spread and influence the invaders who came motivated by greed not religion?

And so, it is time to continue our explorations around God's glorious globe. Are you ready to go? I am!

Let's don our fur capes and lace up our tall leather boots as we venture into new territory: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Ireland, and Iceland. I cannot wait to see what we will find there, and whom we will meet!

Come! Let's explore the Viking realms and the modern-day countries of Northern Europe. This journey is going to be quite an adventure!

Before Embarking

This book is a stand-alone book and can be read straight through without any additional resources. We have provided maps, photos, definitions, and more to help you get everything you need out of this volume. However, there are a few things that you should know...

First of all, this is Volume V of *A Child's Geography*. Four volumes precede it—*Explore His Earth*, *Explore the Holy Land*, *Explore the Classical World*, and *Explore Medieval Kingdoms*. These books do not need to be read in order.

Ann Voskamp, best-selling author of *One Thousand Gifts*, wrote the first two volumes. She set the stage for a great series of books that teach history and geography using a “living book” approach that engages the reader while bringing greater understanding and appreciation for distant corners of our globe.

The first volume lays a foundation for geography by covering earth science topics such as components of our planet, layers of the atmosphere, continents and seas, tectonic plates, earthquakes, volcanoes, latitude, longitude and so much more. The other volumes dive straight down into a specific region of the world, exploring the beautiful countryside and bringing greater understanding for the cultures and people who live there.

Volumes II and III perfectly complement your study of ancient history. Volumes IV and V make ideal companions for a study of medieval history. *A Child's Geography* series is a wonderful way to study history and geography together in a seamless way.

A single volume of *A Child's Geography* can be studied over the course of a semester or an entire year. If you plan to use only one book this year, then aim to cover one chapter every two weeks. The first week, you can read the chapter and discuss the narration questions. The second week, you and your students can work on additional projects, such as writing in your journals,

keeping a timeline, labeling maps, doing extra reading and tackling some fun projects, especially (I hope!) cooking up some of the recipes provided. If you would prefer to finish the book in half the time—one semester—then plan on spending one week on each chapter, reading the content and choosing one or two additional activities per country.

Words in **bold** type indicate vocabulary words, which are defined in the glossary in the back of the book. If your student is unfamiliar with the word, use your reading time in this book to expand his/her vocabulary.

The extra activities are located on a special download page on our website—knowledgequestmaps.com/acg5-dnld-page/. There, you will find timelines, map work, hands-on activities, reading suggestions, and more.

This volume of the *Child's Geography* series is intended for students in 3rd through 8th grade, but it can work equally well with older or younger students by adjusting the activities, reading selections, and assignments according to your student's grade level and/or maturity level.

This book is your book and you are the teacher. Please use this book, along with its many optional activities, as you see fit. We hoped to provide you with MORE than you need or want to do. That way, you can pick and choose what works best for your family or group of students. Our goal is to equip you with resources, not shackle you to a pile of extra work.

I hope that you enjoy this fascinating journey around the countries of Northern Europe. I cannot wait to explore these places with you. Together, we will embrace new cultures and appreciate people different from ourselves. It will be an adventure we will not soon forget. Do you have your map ready, your bag packed, and your shoes laced? Great. Let's go!



The Baltic States



Timeline for the Baltic States

- 1800 BC** Maarahvas build fort settlements
- 1500 BC** Five meteorites crash into the island of Saaremaa in Estonia
- 1000** A Viking named Gunnar Hámundarson of Iceland raids the island of Saaremaa in Estonia
- 1061** Estonians prevails against barbarian invaders from Russia
- 1199** Pope Innocent III orders a crusade to Estonia to establish Christian church in the north
- 1201** Bishop Albert claimed Riga, Latvia as the new capital for the Christian church
- 1208** Crusade is dispatched to subdue the Vikings in Estonia
- 1227** Crusaders defeated the Estonian Vikings
- 1248** The capital city of Estonia, Tallinn, is established by the Danes
- 1253** King Mindaugus of Lithuania crowned
- 1291** Lithuanian Crusade begins
- 1385** Jogalia crowned King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania
- 1390** Welsh raiders storm Vilnius Castle (AKA Crooked Castle)
- 1410** Battle of Grunwald takes place in Lithuania
- 1625** St. Olaf's Church in Tallinn is the tallest building in the world.
- 1655** Sweden attacks Poland and Lithuania
- 1710** Russian occupation of Latvia
- 1917** The end of Russian occupation of Latvia
- 1918** Latvia declares her independence from Russia
- 1918** Estonia declares her independence from Russia
- 1941** Germany conquers Latvia
- 1990** Lithuania declares her independence
- 1991** Latvia regains her independence
- 2014** Riga, Latvia recognized as a European Capital of Culture

1

Lithuania

Of Knights and Crooked Castles

Icy wind stung the faces of the black-hooded knights as they urged their horses northward across the barren plain. Their next mission field was the vast and mighty empire of Lithuania. The Knights of the Teutonic Order had recently received their new assignment: Convert the last pagan nation of Europe to Christianity or die trying. This religious mission was a daunting

one—Lithuania was the largest and fastest growing kingdom in Europe during the thirteenth century. Her pagan roots ran deep out of old tribal customs, Viking terrorism, and barbarian beliefs.

The irony of the knights' mission was not lost on these black and white clad knights carrying the emblem of the cross on their tunics, flags, and shields. The Teutonic Order was established



Crooked Castle rises above the capital city of Vilnius. Photo courtesy of Pixabay.



The Battle of Grunwald painted by Артур Орлюнов. License CC BY-SA 3.0.

to save life, not destroy it. These knights were originally sent to ravaged Israel to build hospitals and attend to the wounded, nursing Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike back to health. Yet their new marching orders were clear: Convert the pagans to Christianity or destroy the nation of Lithuania. With the recent death of the fierce King Mindaugas of Lithuania, leaving the empire leaderless, the knights hoped their takeover would be swift and the Christianization process easy.

The Teutonic knights of Germany, along with cavalries from several other European kingdoms, congregated and planned their attack from the medieval fortress of Malbork in the neighboring country of Poland. The plan was simple: The horde of knights would swoop down *en mass* across the Polish plain into Lithuania using the “shock and awe” tactic of complete and utter surprise.

They were wrong. The knights’ surprise attack against Lithuania turned into an all-out war, lasting over 200 years. In 1410 after the Battle of Grunwald—one of the largest and bloodiest



Teutonic Knight at the Carpathian Reenactment Festival taken by Silar. License CC BY-SA 3.0.

battles in medieval history—Lithuania emerged victorious, spelling the end of the Lithuanian Crusades. Lithuania came out of the war stronger and more confident than ever before. She continued her dominance in the north, conquering the surrounding nations until ultimately, she became one of the largest countries in Europe.

In the 600 years since the Battle of Grunwald, Lithuania is no longer the largest country in Europe. In fact, she is one of the smallest. Nestled alongside the chilly Baltic Sea between Poland and Latvia, Lithuania is one of only three Baltic States. But while her land may be small, her history and culture are immense.

This great nation is where we begin our journey around the countries of the northern realm of Europe. Each of these places once served as a Viking stronghold during the Middle Ages.

So, lace up your hiking boots, strap on your backpack, and grab your camera. We have much to see and do in the beautiful, historic land of Lithuania. Let's go!



Take a peek out your airplane window. Do you see all those blue lakes? The small country of Lithuania contains over 3,000 lakes, located mostly in the east and southeast regions of the country. The capital city, Vilnius, is located in the southeast corner where the Vilnia and Neris Rivers merge and is within easy walking or driving distance of many of these lakes.

From this high altitude, you might also notice the many forests stretching beyond the horizon, covering over one-third of the countryside. The forested landscape gently rises and falls along the low rolling hillsides. Most of the country is comprised of low rolling hills, none of which are very high in elevation. In fact, the tallest mountain in the “highlands” region of Lithuania is a hill at just 965 feet. It is called the Aukštojas Hill. At less than 1000 feet, Lithuania's tallest peak is shorter than most city skyscrapers and about 100 feet shorter than the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France.



Walkway up to the top of the sand dunes at the Curonian Spit. Photo by Wojsyl. License CC BY-SA 3.0.

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However, none of this compares to Lithuania's arguably most unique geographical feature. You can't see it from here, but soon you will have the chance to see it up close. Lithuania borders the Baltic Sea and half of its coastline sits along the Curonian Spit. A **spit** is a narrow finger of land that projects out into the water. However, this particular spit stretches from the northern coast of Kaliningrad, the Russian **enclave** that is Lithuania's southern neighbor, to the northern coast of Lithuania, forming a **lagoon**. The long spit is covered in white sand dunes—dunes high enough to slide down on sleds. Sandboarding (AKA sand sledding) is a favorite pastime for Lithuanian children and is something you might enjoy as well.

Time to buckle up and prepare for landing. We'll be arriving in Vilnius in just a few short minutes.

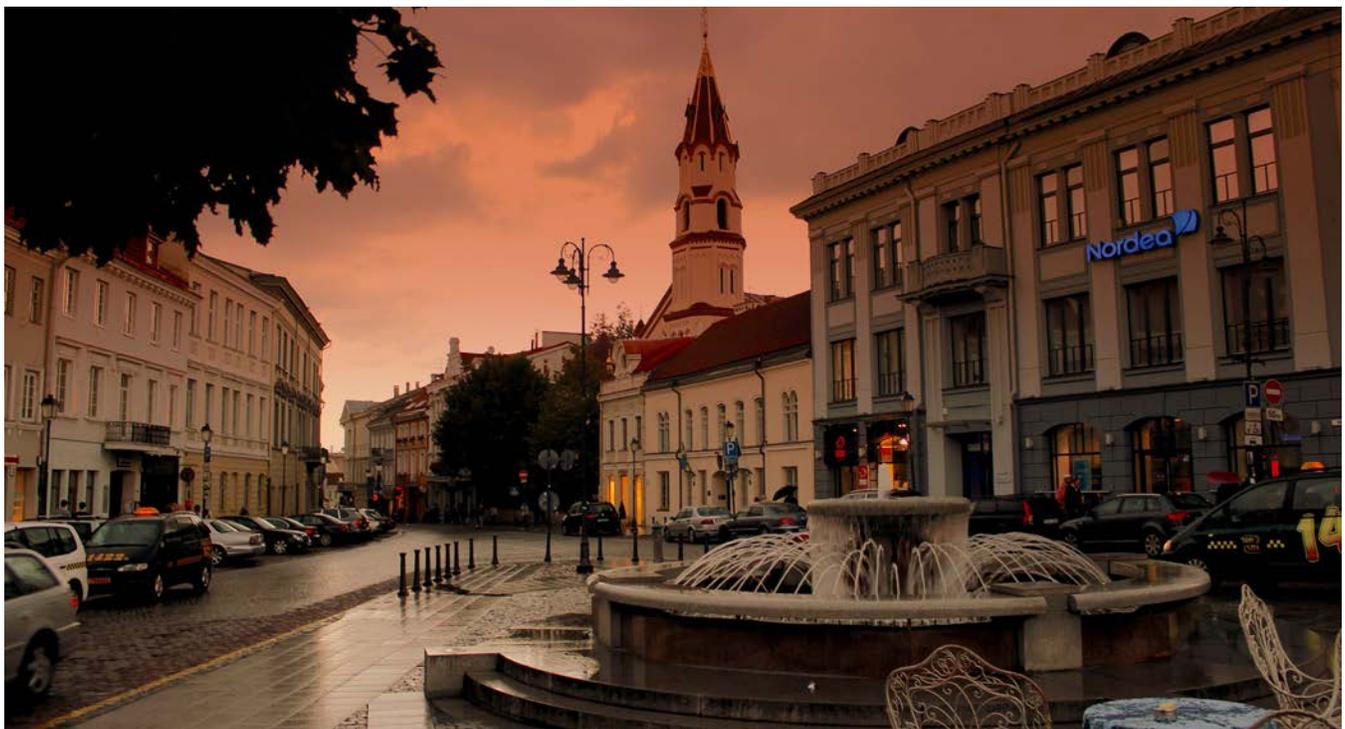


Our adventure starts in the Old Town of Vilnius. This old medieval center inside the capital

city is preserved as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**. This means that the cultural and architectural elements are protected from destruction or misuse so that current and future generations can appreciate what medieval Lithuania was like.

We'll enter through the Gate of Dawn, the only gate remaining of the nine original gates located along the medieval stone wall that once encircled this fine city. Most of the buildings inside the wall are considered new by Lithuanian standards, having been built in the last 500 years. Before that, the town's buildings were made of wood, which meant the buildings were vulnerable to fire. The entire city center burned to the ground twice during the Middle Ages. Now the buildings are constructed with stone to better withstand natural disasters.

Interestingly enough, most of the original buildings had basements or cellars, so while the re-built structure above ground may only be a few hundred years old, the basement below is



Vilnius Town Hall Square at dusk. Public domain image.



Vilnius castle tower at night. Photo taken by Mantas Volungevicius. License CC BY-SA 2.0.

often much older. Many of these cellars have been converted into hip restaurants and pubs.

Let's walk to the top of Bleak Hill—also known as the Three Crosses Hill—where Crooked Castle stands overlooking the Vilnia River. Remember, all the hills are gentle here, so it isn't too strenuous of a hike. The castle is called “crooked” because its layout is awkward and misshapen. Back in 1390, Welsh raiders stormed the castle using a demolition weapon known as the **Welsh Cat**. According to surviving documents, this wooden weapon was pushed close to a defensive wall and then, with its movable arm, the “cat” clawed away at the castle wall, hence the name.

Not far from here is the surprisingly beautiful Church of St. Peter and St. Paul. While it is pretty on the outside, the exterior doesn't hold a candle to what you will see inside. If you've come along on our travels in earlier volumes of *A Child's Geography*, then you've seen many cathedrals. After a while, they may all start to look the same.

But this one is unique. There is no other church in Europe that looks like this. Let's go inside!

What is perhaps most surprising about the interior of this church is its near blinding whiteness. It almost feels as if you have ascended into the clouds when you enter the **nave**. Most of the decorative elements in the church are white, punctuated by the occasional brightly colored painting. In fact, there are thousands upon thousands of pure-white stucco figures and ornamental finishes decorating the entire interior of the church. The masters who created this incredible artwork were Italian renaissance artists, both named Giovanni. Although designed by Italians, the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul is considered a Polish-Lithuanian masterpiece of the Baroque period.



I don't know about you, but I'm famished. The only thing we've eaten today is a little package



The Gate of Dawn taken by David Iloff. License CC BY-SA 3.0.

of cookies on the airplane. Let's step into this sidewalk cafe and order something to eat. The name alone is worth the stop. We should take a photo of ourselves outside the Little Bakery of the Fairies and then see what fanciful creations they have inside. I've heard they serve the best cappuccino in town, but maybe they'll also offer something more substantial for lunch.

The menu board reads that they serve the traditional menu of Lithuanian fairies—puff pastries, yeasty buns, **kybyns**, crepes, soups, salads, and pizza. I'll have the pizza. How about you? The seating is limited, so we'll have to share a table with an older couple who are waiting for their meal. In many cultures, it is not unusual to share a table with people you do not know, especially if the seating is tight.

"You look like a happy lot of adventure-seekers! What's the most interesting thing you've seen today?" asks the woman in a clear British accent.

Surprised that she speaks English, we rattle on about the Crooked Castle and the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul.

She and her husband smile at the excitement we share with them.

"What brings you here to Lithuania?" I ask.

"Oh, our daughter and son-in-law live here, and we have been visiting with them and our grandchildren this past week and a half. We head home to London tomorrow."

After mentioning that we have just arrived, Mr. Scott, a European history professor, asks us if we'd like a little history lesson about the country of Lithuania.

"Yes, please!" we answer in unison as our food arrives at the table. The pizza is piping hot, so it looks like we've got plenty of time.

"Lithuania is a very old country with an exciting past." He smiles and continues animatedly, "Not much is known about Lithuania from the Dark Ages, except that it was inhabited by barbarian Baltic tribes. At that time, a powerful warlord named Mindaugas united the fragmented tribes into one country and was crowned the first King of Lithuania on July 6, 1253. He ruled for only 10 years before he was **assassinated**. This was a tragic blow to the Lithuanians who now found themselves without a leader.

"Remarkably, things got worse. After the fall of Jerusalem in 1291, the crusaders set their sights on Lithuania, the last pagan territory in Europe, and now vulnerable without a strong leader. The goal of the crusade was to subdue Lithuania and convert her subjects to Christianity. That didn't turn out to be easy. Then, in 1385, almost a hundred years later, Jogalia, a Christian, was crowned King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. Now allied with Poland, Lithuania was finally able to defeat the Teutonic Knights at the Battle of Grunwald.

"Unfortunately, Lithuania's victory did not lead to peace. Surrounding countries, like Norway



The Church of St. Peter and St. Paul. Photo taken by David Iliff. License CC BY-SA 3.0.

and Sweden, felt threatened by the Polish-Lithuanian alliance and attacked in 1655. This series of battles became known as the Northern Wars. Less than 150 years later, there was another war—the Great North War—involving many of the same neighboring countries. And this time, Lithuania did not win. The Swedish army destroyed the land and destroyed the economy. A famine followed these two wars, then the **plague**, and then another war. Lithuania's population was reduced by 40%. Nearly half of her citizens died from battle, sickness, or starvation. Lithuania was left weak and vulnerable.

“Foreign powers swooped in, divided the territory into thirds, and doled it out to Russia,

Prussia, and Habsburg Austria. Most of Lithuania was swallowed up by Russia to the east. Unhappy with their lot, the Lithuanians protested and revolted against the Russian government. Russia fought back by closing Lithuanian schools and banning Lithuanian newspapers. The Russians believed that if they could keep Lithuania ignorant and isolated, they stood a chance at keeping her down. But their attempts to subdue the Lithuanian people failed. An underground network of book smugglers was formed, and Lithuanians began homeschooling their children in secret. How cool is that?”

We smile, because homeschooling is a topic we are familiar with.

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“That’s really cool! You know, some of us homeschool as well,” I pipe in. “It’s great to have the freedom to choose how we learn rather than being forced to keep it secret.”

“Really? Good for you. Then pay attention, because this is when the ping pong match starts.” Mr. Scott smiles, knowing he has captured our attention again. “Lithuania was passed back and forth between Russian and German control for the next two hundred years. Yes, that is a long time. It continued right up through the 20th century, the two world wars, and the **communism** of Eastern Europe. This was perhaps the darkest season of Lithuanian history.

“The ping pong match continued until 1990 when East Germany declared an end to communism in their country and the people of Lithuania were encouraged to do the same. After decades—even

centuries—of oppression, Lithuania declared her independence on March 11, 1990. The Soviets tried to squelch the succession but failed. Iceland was the first nation to recognize Lithuania’s independence, but the United Nations recognized the newly independent nation of Lithuania the following year.”

“That’s quite a history, now, isn’t it?” Mr. Scott sighs, but in a satisfied history professor sort of way. He and his wife begin to stack their dishes.

As they stand and prepare to leave, Mrs. Scott smiles. “I hope you weren’t too bored by a couple of old fuddy-duddies like us! We’ve certainly got the gift of gab.”

We wave goodbye and decide that it’s time we, too, get on our way. We’ve got tickets to a basketball game tonight. The Lithuanians are world renowned for their basketball teams,



Lithuanian basketball team wins the World Championship game in 2010. Photo by Christopher Johnson. License CC BY-SA 2.0.

having won several medals in recent years at world events, including four silvers in the summer Olympic Games. After the game, we'll spend the night in a small historic hotel in the town square. Tomorrow, we'll take a train west to the coast so we can see those pristine, sparkling sand dunes of the Curonian Spit for ourselves.



Chasing away dreams of knights in crooked castles and pastries with fairy wings, the sun peeks its cheery face over the horizon. We are ready for another exciting day in Lithuania. Within an hour, our packs are on, maps are handy, and tummies are full of the delicious complimentary breakfast served downstairs. Let's ask for directions from the hotel host so we can make the most of our day.

Before stepping through the door, our host kindly tells us which train to board, which station to get off, and the best place to rent sandboards and sand sleds. Then he wags his finger at us and warns us sternly, "Now keep your eyes and your mouth closed tightly when you sled down the dunes. Otherwise you will spit sand at the sand spit." He chuckles at his English-language pun, points us in the direction of the train station, and we are off on our next adventure.

Lithuania is a fascinating country of contradictions—old and new, somber and friendly, fiercely independent and yet blending well with the surrounding nations. Lithuania is still actively creating her own identity as a small but free country, with a unique culture and language all her own.

"*Sudie*, goodbye, Lithuania! It has been a pleasure getting to know you!" ■



Tell me what you remember about Lithuania:

- ◇ *Why did the Teutonic Knights invade Lithuania? Was their mission successful? Who won the Battle of Grunwald?*
- ◇ *What is one of the most remarkable geographical features of Lithuania? What is a popular pastime that people enjoy there?*
- ◇ *What makes the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul in the city of Vilnius so different from the "average" cathedral?*
- ◇ *Lithuania is world famous for which sport?*

Further Explorations:

- ◇ *Kids at the Crossroads: Crusades* by Laura Scandiffio
- ◇ *The Boy Knight: A Tale of the Crusades* by G.A. Henty
- ◇ *Usborne Young Reader Series: Crusades* by Rob Lloyd Jones
- ◇ *Taste Lithuania* by Beata Nicholson (cookbook)
- ◇ *The Baltic* by Michael North (for high school and up)

2

Latvia

The Great Amber Way

A short bus ride north along the Baltic Sea whisks us out of Lithuania and into Latvia. We are tired from sandboarding, but have very little time to rest before we arrive in Liepaja, a seaside resort town on the Baltic Sea. Latvia is similar to Lithuania in some ways, but very different in others. I can't wait to explore it with you.

The park-like landscape of Latvia is very flat and dotted with clear blue lakes, much like Lithuania. Over half of its vast, unspoiled countryside is blanketed in dense forests of birch, oak, and pine. Latvia may be a small country in the northern Baltic region of Europe and often overlooked by her big neighbors, but the natural beauty of this land is grand indeed. This is hiking and cycling



Latvian pine forest. Image in Public Domain, courtesy of Pixabay.



Driftwood washed up on a Latvian beach from the Baltic Sea. Image is in the Public Domain, courtesy of Pixabay.

territory with only one real cosmopolitan city, Latvia's capital city of Riga.

Latvia is well known for its pristine white beaches, which are desolate in the winter and over-crowded during the summer. Like clockwork, Rigans and other Baltic city dwellers escape to the seashore for their summer holiday retreats.

Liepaja is our first stop in Latvia. At this time of year, the desolate beach is hauntingly beautiful as the churning waves crash upon the glistening white sand and the mournful cries of seabirds echo overhead. We are meeting new friends here today. Levi and Grace, members of my parents' church, will join us at the beach before taking us on a scenic hike and later, a grand tour of their beautiful city of Riga. There they are now!

"Hello, hello!" Levi and Grace call, waving their hands to draw our attention to them sitting on a large blanket high upon the sand dunes. They jump up to meet us halfway and give us hugs even though we have never met. "It's so good to

see faces from home and hear you speak native English. We have been a bit homesick lately."

The Russells are Christian missionaries in Latvia, serving the Lutheran church, which has long been established here. They both teach English in local high schools during the day and lead Bible studies at the church a couple evenings per week. Grace is expecting their first baby.

"How are your parents? Please tell them hello from us. But please, come, sit down and tell us all about your travels. Where have you been so far and where are you going?" Levi asks enthusiastically.

We tell them that Latvia is our second stop and that we will be traveling all around the northern Scandinavian countries on the mainland of Europe and then the island nations of the United Kingdom and beyond. Suddenly, Grace squeals in delight. At first, we think her enthusiasm is in response to our travel plans, but we quickly discover it has nothing to do with our adventure, but with something she discovered in the sand.



Several pieces of unpolished amber. Photo by Lanzi and used with permission under license CC BY-SA 3.0.

While listening to us speak, she was moving sand with her bare feet when suddenly she hit something hard and very smooth. She lifts the yellow stone-like object from the fine white sand and polishes it on her sweater.

“It’s **amber!**” she cries.

We all crowd close to appreciate her beautiful find and then pass it around to inspect for natural **inclusions**, such as an insect of some sort. No, this piece of amber is crystal clear. In fact, its honey color is translucent in the brilliant Baltic sunshine.

Grace asks us, “Do you know how amber is formed?”

“No,” we answer, hoping we may get a mini-science lesson right here on the beach.

Grace holds the smooth, organic gem out toward the sun and explains, “Amber is created by trees, such as those pine trees on the far side of the beach. When a tree is cut or scratched, by a woodpecker or a beaver for instance, the

tree releases **resin** to protect itself, much like our bodies produce a scab when we are injured. Sometimes insects or small animals ambling by get trapped in the sticky resin. Over the course of a long period of time, that resin turns into a fossil, which we call amber.”

“If amber comes from trees, then why did you find this piece in the sand?”

“Strange, huh?” Levi chimes in. “But this is the most fascinating part to me. A long time ago, large glaciers moved through this region knocking down whole forests and dragging them into the sea. Over the years, the resin fossilized and became amber. Amber floats, so once fossilized, the pieces drift to the top of the sea and eventually wash ashore. The perfect combination of vast forests and massive glaciers in the Baltic region is the reason why more amber is found here than in any other region in the world.

“In fact, amber has always played a critical role in Latvia’s culture and history. During ancient

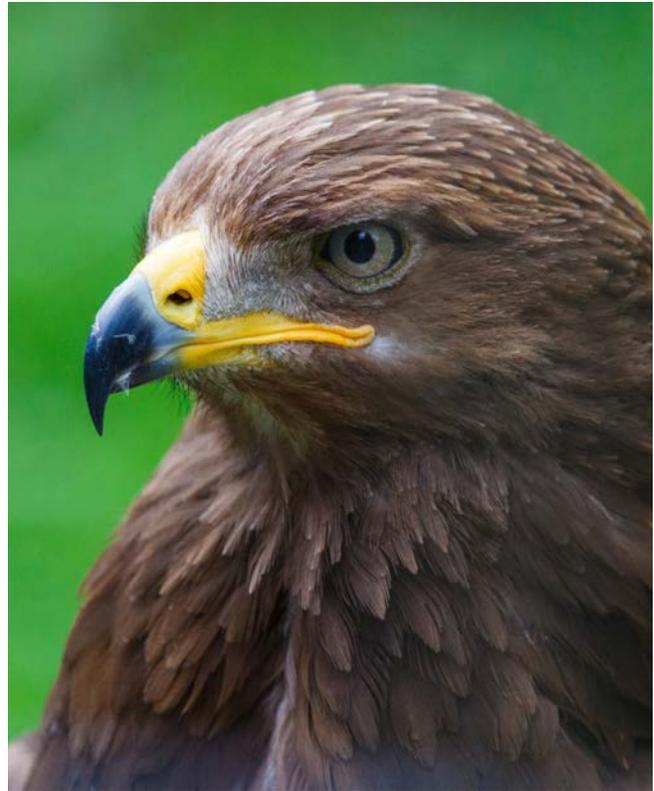
and medieval times, amber found along the Baltic coast was so prized that the Vikings who lived here in the north used it to barter for riches found further south in Greece, Egypt, and even Rome. Because of the lively and active trade of amber, the Amber Road, a major trade route in ancient times, was built.”

“But you’re starting to look sunburnt,” Grace notices. “Let’s put on our hiking boots and see some of the beautiful landscape of Latvia.”

With cameras in our pockets and water bottles in hand, we set out on a trail that leads up from the beach and into the lush coastal woodlands. Under the shade of the trees, it feels cooler than on the beach, even though the temperature rarely rises above 70 degrees Fahrenheit even during the warmest months of the summer. In the wintertime, the temperature is usually below freezing, but today is a lovely day to hike through the forests of Latvia.

Grace tells us to keep our eyes open for wildlife that, although common here, is endangered throughout the rest of Europe, such as the Eurasian beaver and the European wolf or lynx. She also tells us about some of the rare birds which live only in these Latvian woods, such as the corncrake, black stork, white-backed woodpecker, and spotted eagle. Hollow tapping sounds echo through the forest and we look up to find woodpeckers busy at work. We also see several white wagtails, the national bird of Latvia, and daisies, her national flower.

After about an hour of hiking along wooded trails, over lazy creeks, and behind cascading waterfalls, our trail circles back around to the parking lot. And just before reaching the Russells’ car, a spotted eagle soars over our heads. Its majesty is awe-inspiring. Imagine the lofty view of the dense forest, the sparkling beach, and the deep blue waters of the Baltic Sea this king of birds beholds every day!



Lesser spotted eagle. Photo in the public domain.



The road to Riga is short, flat, and straight as an arrow. The capital city lies a little more than a meter above **sea level** on a flat and sandy plain. Riga is not only the largest city in Latvia, it is also the largest city in all the Baltic States combined, with approximately 700,000 inhabitants. About a third of all Latvians live in this historic city situated on the southern shore of the Gulf of Riga.

The city of Riga is well over 800 years old. It began as a Viking fishing village but grew into an important trading center. Situated at the mouth of the Daugava River, the Vikings traded amber and other valuables up and down the Daugava-Dvina-Dneiper river system all the way to Greece and the Byzantine Empire thousands of miles to the south.

During the 12th century, crusaders were dispatched to Christianize the pagans, and in 1200, Bishop Albert arrived with 23 ships and



House of Blackheads at Dusk in Riga, Latvia. Photo by Diliff used with permission under license CC BY-SA 3.0.

500 crusaders to establish Riga as the new seat of the Livonian bishopric by force. In plain language, the leaders of the church invaded the town of Riga and made it a new capital for the Christian church. This declaration was made in the year 1201, and that year is now considered Riga's founding date, even though it existed and thrived for many, many years prior to that event.

"How do you like our city?" Grace asks from the front seat.

"First stop is the city center!" Levi announces. "It is so well preserved that the entire center is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It's truly beautiful. In fact, Riga was officially recognized as a European Capital of Culture in 2014. We are proud to call it our 'home away from home'."

After parking the car, we wander through the old quarter, admiring the historic buildings, some dating back to the 13th century when Riga joined the **Hanseatic League**, a community of merchant guilds that formed their own set

of laws to ensure free trade among the cities of northern Europe. Riga provides a striking contrast of old and new architecture laced with lush green public parks filled with people and their pets enjoying this bright spring day. It's a perfect day for a picnic. At the outdoor market, we buy Latvian black bread, smoked fish, smoked gouda, strawberries, and a paper sack filled with *biezpiena sierins*, a sweetened cheese curd snack. Now we have all the essentials for the perfect Latvian picnic!

Out on the green lawn, soaking up the warmth of the waning sun, our gracious hosts tell us more about the Latvia we are learning to love.

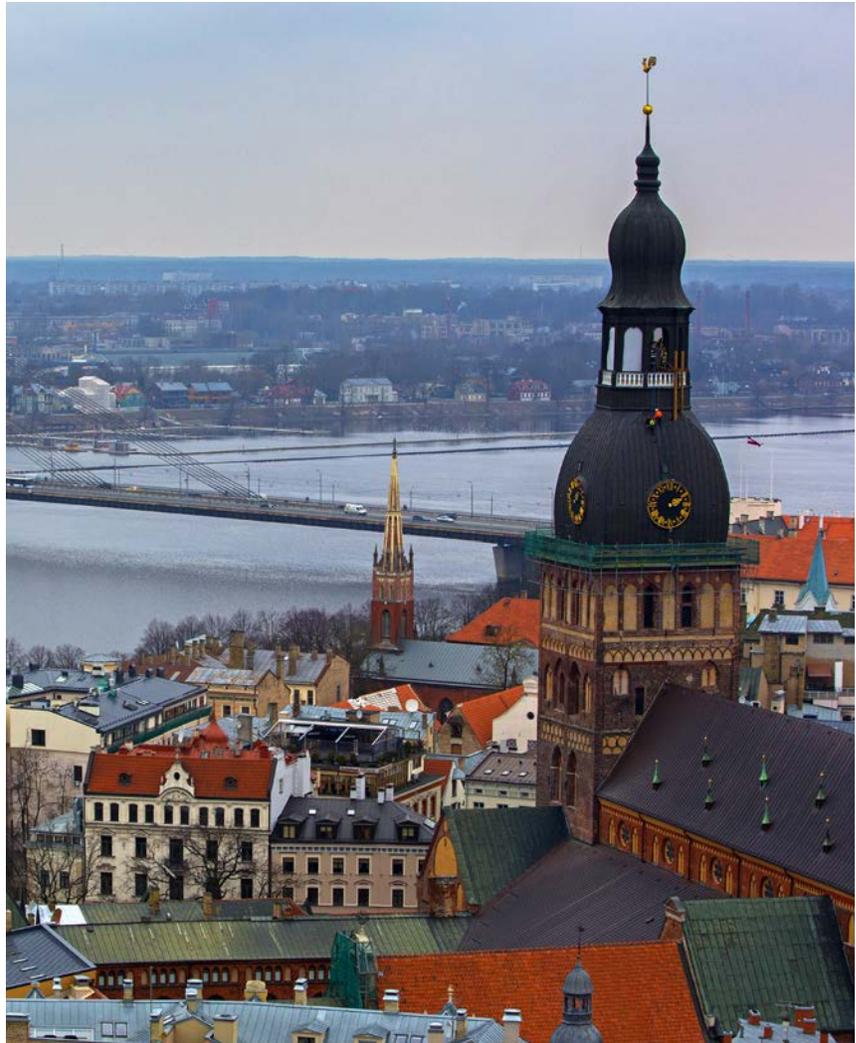
Latvia's past has not been a peaceful one. After the crusades, the "pagans" of Latvia were Christianized and modernized. Fortifications such as ramparts and town walls were built to protect Riga and the nearby communities, after which peace and prosperity abounded for a few hundred years, until the Reformation; the

majority of Latvians protested the Catholic Church and embraced Protestantism. However, this left the country divided and therefore weak. And so began the invasions. First, Poland invaded, followed by Sweden, and finally Russia.

The first Russian occupation of Latvia lasted just over 200 years from 1710 to 1917. During the first few years under Russian control, over 40% of all Latvians died from either famine or plague. At the end of the 200 years, the territory of western Russia, which included the state of Latvia, had been devastated by World War I. With a weakened Russian Empire and the general chaos of the war's aftermath, Latvia declared its independence from Russia in 1918. However, her independence didn't last long.

In 1939, the Germans and Russians made a secret agreement to divide the countries of northern and eastern Europe into two "spheres of influence". Latvia, along with the other Baltic States, was assigned to Russian control. Two years of misery and devastation passed under the dictatorship of Russia. Not surprisingly, neither Germany nor Russia kept their end of the bargain and were soon duking it out for countries previously assigned to the other party. First, they fought over Poland, then, in 1941, fought over Latvia. Germany prevailed, placing Latvia under equally miserable domination, as Germany's goal for Latvia was to reduce her population by 50%.

Under both countries' regimes, over 200,000 Latvians were either deported or killed, including 75,000 Jews who were murdered in Nazi **concentration camps**. The end of the Second



The Tower of Riga Cathedral. Photo by Olga1969 under license CC BY-SA 4.0.

World War brought no less hardship. Once again under the control of Russia, hundreds of thousands of terror-stricken Latvians fled to Sweden and Germany for **refuge**.

Thankfully, this story is coming to a happy ending. Fifty years after Russia's second occupation and sovietization, Latvia regained her independence in 1991. Latvia was finally free to rule herself once again! Today, many Russians still live in Latvia, but the Latvian language is the national tongue and the old Latvian culture is being slowly restored. The last hundred years have been extremely difficult and tragic for this small country, but Latvians are a strong and resilient people, rising from the ashes of domination and despair to become a beautiful,



Turaida Castle. Photo by Modris Putns and used with permission under license CC BY-SA 3.0.



Cesis. Photo taken by Graham under license CC BY-SA 2.0.

welcoming country, with Riga serving as her crowning capital of culture.

“That’s a depressing history, isn’t it?” asks Levi. “It may seem so very different from your own country’s history if yours has experienced freedom for many hundreds of years. But it is a history that we must learn so that we, as world citizens, do not repeat such mistakes or commit such atrocities going forward. How about we walk back to the square and get some ice cream before we drive to our apartment?”

Oh yes, we are happy to jump up from the grass and get some exercise after our delicious picnic. After topping off the meal with some refreshing ice cream and additional sightseeing through Riga’s old town, including St. Peter’s Church and the Riga Cathedral, we hop back into their car and drive to the Russells’ third-floor apartment not far from the city center.

We talk late into the night about their work here in Latvia and their future plans to return to

the States sometime in the next year or two. Grace and Levi have classes to teach tomorrow, so they give us their best tips for what else to see before we leave Latvia to drive north to Estonia.

There are some lovely medieval castles they insist we see. One is Turaida Castle, which is not far from Riga. The other place they insist we visit is the town of Cesis, one of Latvia's oldest townships. Running through its charming city center are cobbled lanes lined with historic wooden buildings and a few impressive castles.

As we drift off to sleep on mattresses laid out on the Russells' living room floor, we are thankful for new friends, the beautiful countryside, an exciting city in which to spend the night, and delightful plans to continue our explorations tomorrow.

Dear Latvia, neither tragedy nor triumph can hold you down, fade your inner beauty, or destroy your tenacious spirit. May your hard-fought and well-earned independence last for many centuries to come! ■



Traditional Latvian dress. Photo in public domain by Pxhere.

Field Notes

Tell me what you remember about Latvia:

- ◇ *What rare gem can be found along the coast of Latvia? How is it formed? Which civilization used it as a central component in their trading empire?*
- ◇ *Which endangered animals and birds are common in Latvia?*
- ◇ *Name some of the countries that have invaded Latvia over the years. When did Latvia finally regain her independence?*

Further Explorations:

- ◇ *Latvia (Countries of the World)* by Claire Throp
- ◇ *Amber* by Andrew Ross
- ◇ *The Food of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania* by Silvena Johen
- ◇ *The Edge of the World* by Michael Pye (for High School and up)