



Going Baltic

Take one brand new VW California, two week's holiday, four mates and visit eight countries. Travelling to the far corner of Eastern Europe couldn't have been easier

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Working for one of the UK's leading VW California and Mercedes Marco Polo specialist comes with its perks. The main one being the annual CamperVantastic Road Trip. This year, with two weeks in the bank it was decided to see how far east we could get. Armed with a brand-new VW T6 California Ocean with only forty-six miles on the clock, we left the leafy London suburb of Forest Hill at one am on a Saturday morning last June....

On landing in Dunkirk, we pointed our campervan vaguely in the direction of Kiel, in the far North of Germany. This is where we would pick up the next DFDS ferry to Lithuania. Travelling through the night from London meant that we were in Ghent pretty

quickly and about the right time for breakfast. We intended to stop over "In Bruges" at first, but we were sick of the Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson quotes before we'd even left England!

After stopping over near Arnhem in the Netherlands we make our tracks through Germany and really get to see how the 204PS T6 holds up on the Autobahn, with the accompanying Kraftwerk album on of course. After a quick stop for some Curry Wurst and a stein of local beer in Kiel, we head for the ferry port. We board in the late afternoon, just in time for the bar to open and have a few drinks with the long-distance lorry drivers until the early hours. After a good night's sleep, we wake up and we're already halfway across the Baltic Sea, just in time for DFDS to serve up a great breakfast buffet, which



Disused Rummu Quarry and prison, now a thriving Swimming and diving area



Trakai Castle on an Island, Lithuania



Planning our route whilst waiting for our ferry in Dover



Our first free camping spot on the Curonia Spit on the first night in Lithuania



Hill of Crosses in Lithuania, a destination of Pilgrimage

After a good night's sleep, we wake up and we're already halfway across the Baltic Sea

we made the most of and enjoyed the rest of the afternoon watching the Lithuanian coast getting closer and closer.

We arrive in Klaipeda on a Sunday afternoon, as the ferry cruises into port we get a great view of the industrial area of the town on one side and the Curonian Spit, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and our first planned stop of the trip. One of the best coastlines in the world awaits us as we disembark the cruise ferry and jump onto a small ferry that takes us over to the National Park. Our first beer and a swim in the Baltic sea is unspoilt by any buildings, all you can see is sea and forest. The Spit is shared between Lithuania and Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast, a large exclave of Russia that without extra visas and vehicle insurance we can only look towards. The watch towers

along the beach at the border are a reminder that we really are on the edge of Europe already.

After a morning swim from our free camping spot (A car park with a portalo, shared by a few other Motorhomes) we head off the spit, to the mainland and North toward Latvia. We'll get to explore more of Lithuania later in our trip. The City of Leipaja has an interesting history, held by various militaries over the years you can really see the various cultures have changed the area. A visit to the Northern Forts which have been left to crumble to the sea and Karostas Prison in the North of the city and we learn a lot about this areas' history. We take the opportunity to use a campsite for much needed showers and to fill up our vans water tank. We found that most campsites in the area are near lakes and rivers, so we are



No Man's Land looking toward the Russian border on the Curonia Spit

never far away from a swimming spot. It's also at this point where we realise that we should have brought the canoes along.

Everywhere we drove in Latvia the roads seemed to be in a constant state of improvement. Proof that the economies of these three countries is on the up as they invest in infrastructure. The difference is that they don't really close the roads when they are rebuilding, so we have to dodge lots of workmen and at one point had to stop and wait for the foreman to sign off a certain part of the road, so that we could be the first to pass on this new road! We travel up to Riga, Latvia's capital city and our first city stop. The City Camping spot we find is a great use of space, parking up in the cities' exhibition centre car parks and surrounding

spaces. We had great facilities and only a thirty minute walk into the city centre along the river. We pick up a walking tour in the morning and explore the city's sights before retiring to a traditional Latvian Bar for dinner and dancing.

We'd managed to time this trip to coincide with the Baltics longest heatwave in years so we forget that this area can get very cold in the Winter (baltic, almost) so when we stumble upon a bobsleigh run in the middle of Latvia we already start planning a trip back in Winter.

On the way to the Medieval town of Cesis, we find castles to explore before searching the nearby National Park for a place to camp. We discover a spot on the Gauja River, complete with a shelter which came in handy when two huge thunderstorms pass over

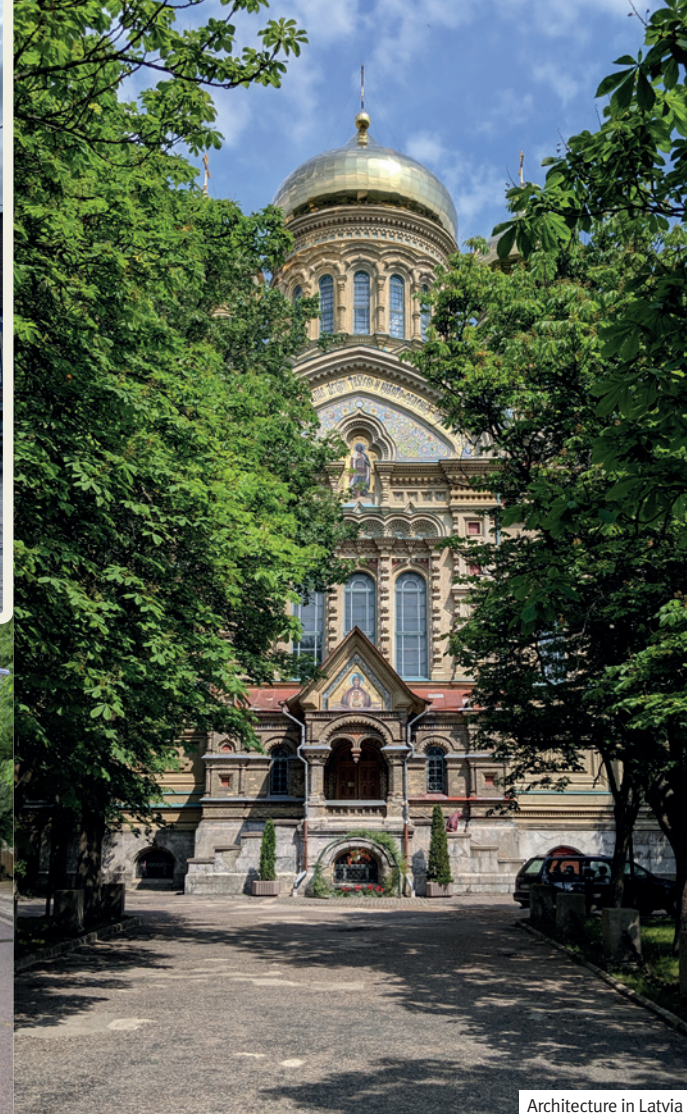


A quick stop over in Ghent

Wild/Free camping is tolerated and even encouraged in the Baltics, National and regional parks all have picnic areas and toilets. One we found in Estonia even had a small hut, fireplace and free wood and an axe we could use, building a campfire really helped with the mozzies! We travelled in June, so the fleets of motorhomes weren't out in force, most of the places we stayed were empty and we weren't disturbed.



Packing the VW California in Forest Hill.



Architecture in Latvia



Colourful streets in the arty districts of Vilnius



Welcome to Germany



First beer in the Baltics reminds us more of Ibiza



Riverside free camping, shortly before a huge storm passed over



We couldn't pass Belgium without picking up a few beers

Our first beer and a swim in the Baltic sea is unspoil by any buildings, all you can see is sea and forest.

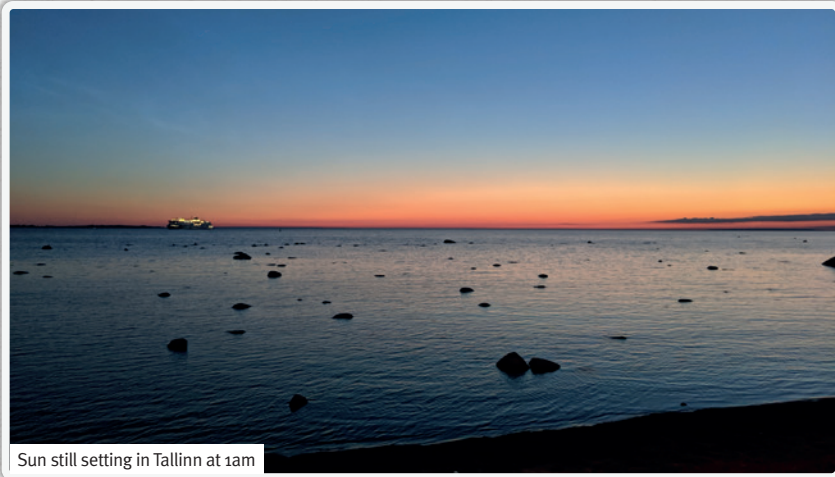
during dinner. We're completely un-phased by the other two that pass overnight in our California and Khyam Igloo tent.

Moving North up the coast towards Estonia it's hard to believe that there were once hard borders here as recently as 2007. The old border houses and customs buildings are left derelict or turned into petrol stations or cafes. We pass through Estonia's Baltic coast, hidden from view on the coastal road by thick forest, but with plenty of picnic spots along the road we can find the perfect lunch spot and swimming spot on the beach. Rummu Quarry is our next stop and a highlight of the trip. Originally two neighbouring prisons, the quarry was dug by prisoners in the 1930s. The prisons closed in 2012 and the quarry filled up with water. Now a water-sports venue you can dive down to see the old quarry buildings or just relax

on the waterline and enjoy the crystal blue water.

The historic city of Tallinn is nearby, so we head there for a couple of days. We're close to mid-June and at the furthest point north that we'll reach, we are keen to witness the long days and short nights. Local mead and "Medieval Themed Banquets" are on offer in the city so after a local banquet and some herbal beers we arrive back to our parking stop at one am and manage to catch the sun still trying to set in the distance.

Back on the road heading South we free camp another night in Estonia and head towards Lithuania through Latvia. Passing through lots of small villages to pick up local produce and check out the less trodden path. We even get stopped by border control somewhere in deepest Latvia, another reminder that we are not far from the Russian border, ↴



Sun still setting in Tallinn at 1am



Balancing stones in Lithuania



One of Gustave Eiffel's lesser known projects in Latvia (designer of the Eiffel Tower)



Welcome to Latvia, disused border posts are found on all border crossings



Lighthouse on Curonian Spit

A shout out to DFDS here, Dover-Dunkirk was as smooth as ever, we got the Saturday 4am crossing with the premium lounge upgrade, which was empty, so it felt like we have the boat to ourselves. Kiel - Klaipeda Was the smoothest crossing ever and with the cabins we had the nineteen-hour crossing just sailed by.



Northern Forts in Latvia are left to be swallowed by the sea

We explore Uzupis, a declared independent republic with honorary citizens such as the Dalai Lama!

carrying our V5 and insurance documents meant this was a very easy process and we were allowed to pass in good time. Our only rainy day of the trip is used to put away 250 miles as we head south through Latvia and into Lithuania again.

After only visiting Lithuania briefly on the first day, we are excited to be exploring the eastern side of the country, its capital city Vilnius is a UNESCO world heritage site and an arty University town. We explore Uzupis, a declared independent republic, with its street art and galleries and honorary citizens such as the Dalai Lama! A great place to spend some time it's bars and cafes. We opted to stay at a Youth Hostel with campervan parking in Vilnius, but with no more spaces to park the van we had no other choice than to take a room and take advantage of having separate beds! On the way out of the city we visit Trakai Castle, built on

a large island surround by lakes, we stop for the night nearby watching hot air balloons across the lake. Into our last days of our trip back to Klaipeda for the ferry we pass through the spectacular Hill of Crosses, a site of pilgrimage where thousands of Christian Crosses have been left by pilgrims since the 1830s. We reach Klaipeda and, despite the temptation to do another lap of the Baltics, we board the ferry back to Kiel for the long drive back to London. We board the ferry on the 20th June, strategically planned so that we can watch the midsummer sun set as we leave port and get up early to watch the Summer Solstice sunrise over the Baltic Sea. ☺

If you want to see more images from the trip checkout #CVTgoesbaltic on Instagram. If you want to know more about Campervantastic, or hire one of their Californias visit www.campervantastic.com

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