

Baltic beauties

Despite St Petersburg still being off the agenda for cruise lines, Jane Archer discovers that there's plenty more to take in and enjoy from the Baltic Sea



Helsinki, Finland
PICTURE: Shutterstock/Andrii Stepan

It's the words 'speed' and 'thrill' that do it. My daughter Ilana and I are choosing tours for our upcoming voyage in the Baltic with Oceania Cruises. We've already planned a dip into the history books in Riga and Tallinn; as we check out Helsinki in the excursion brochure, there, flashing in neon lights, are those two words. I exaggerate of course, but you get the picture.

Which is how I find myself looking my sartorial best, modelling the latest in safety glasses and sitting in a rigid inflatable boat (RIB) as it speeds around some of the 330 or so islands that guard the seaward access to the Finnish capital.

Jukka, our RIB driver, slows now and then to point to log cabins and houses nestling amid the pine trees, to which city-dwelling Finns escape in summer. I don't blame them. The islands look glorious, but then it is August. Come winter, they are part of a frozen landscape with temperatures around minus 30C. No wonder cruise lines come here only in summer.

By the time we return to base – a short walk from Hernesaarenranta, the out-of-town port where our ship, *Marina*, is docked – the morning chill has lifted, the sun is out, the sky is blue and there's

loads of time before the vessel sails to take the shuttle bus into the city for lunch in the colourful harbour market.

When Russia invaded Ukraine last year, cruise lines raced to pull ships from the Baltic amid safety fears and a belief that people wouldn't be booking cruises in the region without calls into St Petersburg.

The Russian city was always the jewel in the crown of a Baltic cruise: the place where ships stayed for two or even three-day calls so passengers had time to see the city's Hermitage Museum, ornate palaces and cathedrals, and learn about the tsars who ruled from here and the revolution that ended their 300-year reign.

Our Oceania cruise last summer, then, was bold. "Internally there were voices [against it] but I decided to stay," former Oceania president and chief executive Howard Sherman said. His plan was to find new ports to visit, to prove there is more to the Baltic than St Petersburg.

It was a gamble. It meant *Marina* wasn't sailing full, which wasn't ideal for the line's finances after the lost years of Covid. "Many people were concerned about travelling to the Baltic," Sherman conceded. However, Oceania made the most of the empty cabins to host agents ➤

DESTINATIONS

EUROPE | BALTIC SEA



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Marina; Riga, Latvia; Copenhagen; Gotland Island

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SELLING TIPS

🌀 Copenhagen and Stockholm are popular start or end ports for Baltic cruises, but there are also no-fly voyages from the UK.

🌀 The region's history is fascinating, but don't let it control the narrative. The laid-back lifestyle and fun excursions are an equally big attraction for many travellers.

🌀 With fast RIB rides, cycle rides and Copenhagen's Tivoli theme park among attractions, Baltic cruises promise a great family holiday.

BOOK IT

A 10-day trip from Stockholm to Copenhagen on **Oceania Cruises'** *Oceania Sirena*, departing on September 9, 2024, costs from £3,389 including flights and transfers. oceaniacruises.com

so they could experience the ship and the Baltic – and the signs are that the gamble has paid off.

For one thing, Oceania Cruises' Baltic sailings have been "extremely popular" this year too, with people "keen to visit the new and exciting" ports that have been introduced, says managing director EMEA Bernie Carter. For another, lines including Princess Cruises, Celebrity Cruises, Fred Olsen Cruise Lines, Azamara and Holland America Line have restarted in the Baltic. Finally, it showed the region can do just fine without St Petersburg.

Of all the ports on our cruise – 12 nights from Copenhagen to Stockholm – only Tallinn in Estonia and Helsinki were regulars on the Baltic beat. Kiel in Germany, Ronne and Visby (respectively on the Danish and Swedish islands of Bornholm and Gotland), Klaipeda in Estonia and Riga in Latvia used to crop up now and then. However, Kotka in Finland, our penultimate call, was completely new and took us within about 40 miles of the border with Russia.

From this port, Ilana and I had joined a great back-to-nature hike in nearby Valkmusa National Park, while others went river rafting or on another high-speed RIB.

Oceania Cruises isn't calling into Kotka this year, but sister brand Regent Seven Seas Cruises is, and Oceania will be back there in summer 2024. The other ports are all making a return this summer.

From Kiel, passengers can take tours to the former Hanseatic city of Lubeck, spend the day in Hamburg or go beer tasting in a brewery. They can explore Bornholm by bike, dip into medieval history in Visby

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or, for something different, join a chef-led tour here to learn about local farming methods.

Klaipeda also scores on the 'something different' front, with kayaking, cycling or an excursion into tunnels dug by the Soviets during the Cold War to house nuclear missiles that pointed towards London, Berlin and Paris.

We loved the Helsinki RIB ride, as well as Riga and Tallinn, which like Klaipeda were under the Communist thumb from the end of the Second World War until 1991 (Lithuania got its independence a year earlier) and have picturesque old towns packed with half-timbered houses and cobble streets. In Tallinn we explored tunnels beneath the town – these ones built by the Swedes, used as bomb shelters in the Second World War and reinforced by the Russians in case the Cold War went nuclear.

With all that going on, there wasn't time to miss St Petersburg, although I doubt that I'm alone in hoping the ships will be able to return there one day, because it is a magnificent city. However, there are many equally wonderful places for cruise lines to visit on and around the Baltic Sea in the meantime. **TW**