

# Getting Started

You've bought this book, you've doubtless got lots of places you'd like to see, but what to do now? Whether you plan your trip from start to finish before leaving home or prefer to wait and see how you feel each morning before deciding what to do, there are some things you should definitely take into account beforehand. While Eastern Europe is a joy to travel round these days compared to how it was just a decade ago, you'll still find a number of bureaucratic hurdles, largely manifesting themselves more clearly the further east you go.

Visas remain an issue – not only getting them but also registering them. Questions of dual or multientry visa and timing create problems. Planning ahead is the simple answer. For example, two decades after *perestroika* and you still find all sorts of visa headaches when visiting Russia, the *bête noire* of the region's independent travellers. You still need to get an official invitation to visit Russia or Belarus before you'll be granted a visa!

## WHEN TO GO

Balancing the good weather against the huge summer crowds is the major concern when deciding when to go. If you plan to go to the 'big three' of Prague, Budapest or Kraków it's a good idea to avoid July and August when these cities can be unbearably crowded, although this is not such a problem elsewhere if you're getting off the beaten path. Eastern Europe has a surprisingly consistent weather pattern for a region its size. High season runs from May until September; in July and August you'll find the above cities and anywhere beachy teeming with backpackers and coach tours. The best time to visit is either side of the summer peak – May, June and September stand out, as it's not too hot, too crowded or overbooked anywhere.

Travelling out of season can result in some real bargains in accommodation; however, many places where tourism is the main industry all but close down during the low season. Also, bear in mind that Russia, the Baltics, Belarus and Ukraine have very cold winters, with -20°C not being unusual between November and February, although average temperatures are far less extreme. Winter is cold everywhere, but the further south you get the milder it is – Albania's average winter temperature is a relatively mild 9°C.

## COSTS AND MONEY

Along with EU expansion have come inevitable price rises. It truly is risible when people think they can go east and live like kings for peanuts (yet a surprising number of people seem to expect this in the region's less-visited corners). While this was once true, things have changed a lot, much to the horror of locals who in many cases cannot afford to live well in their own countries. Generally speaking it's still true that Eastern Europe is cheaper than Western Europe, but buy a cappuccino in Moscow or pay for a hotel room in Prague and you may find yourself lamenting the advance of the free market. Even in the least touristy niches of the region such as Belarus or Albania, locals are well aware of travellers' spending power and price things accordingly.

Trying to give daily budgets for such a huge region is hard indeed. Backpackers staying in hostels and eating cheaply can expect to spend around €30 to €40 per day, probably more in cities such as Moscow, Prague and Budapest. Those wanting to have a more comfortable trip (staying in mid-range accommodation and eating in decent restaurants most of the time) will

need to spend between €60 and €70 per day. These are very much ballpark figures; in the countryside you'll be able to get by on far less, while if you're in bigger cities during high season and visiting lots of museums and sights, you'll find you need more than that.

Unthinkable as it would have been just 10 years ago, these days as long as you have an ATM card, you need not worry about obtaining money in any major Eastern European city.

All major credit and debit cards are accepted by ATMs, including those on the Cirrus/Maestro system. However, always have a back-up plan, so if an ATM is not working or your card is stolen you won't be stranded. Most major banks will do cash advances on credit cards (you'll need to bring your passport) and, of course, exchange travellers cheques.

Travellers cheques are the safest way to carry large sums of money – they can be replaced if lost or stolen, and when stolen, cannot be cashed by the thief. However, they are a pain in the proverbial sometimes too, and should never be relied upon outside major towns.

Cash is the easiest way to carry money, of course, but lose it all and you're screwed. The euro and US dollar are the currencies most easily exchanged. In many places you can even pay for hotel accommodation in euros, although never assume this to be the case. The days of currency controls in Eastern Europe are gone, so there's no need to fear converting your 'hard' currency and being unable to re-exchange it before leaving the country. However, many countries' currencies are difficult to exchange elsewhere. In most cases it's best to change any currency into either euros, dollars or the currency of your next destination before leaving, even if this means getting bad exchange rates at the border.

## READING UP Books

There are a huge number of books about the region. While the most pertinent titles for each country are listed in the individual country directories of this book, the following books provide an interesting introduction to the complexities and idiosyncrasies of Eastern Europe as a region.

One classic of travel writing is *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, a huge unclassifiable look at the Balkans on the eve of WWII through the eyes of Brit Rebecca West as she makes her way through Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo, Albania and Croatia in 1937. Her pro-Serbian sentiment has made the book unfashionable since the area's recent ethnic cleansing, although her dark assertion that 'the whole world is a vast Kosovo, an abominable blood-logged plain' seems to have rung true some 50 years after she wrote it. This is a magnificent, poetic and fascinating account.

A more recent Balkan odyssey is Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*. Kaplan, who roamed Yugoslavia, Romania, Greece and Bulgaria in the 1980s and 1990s, recorded the stories of people he met on his way, and produced an engaging read.

*Stalin's Nose*, Rory Maclean's much-loved account of travelling from Berlin to Moscow via Romania in the period immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall, is a travelogue set during a unique time in history. Crossing the remnants of the Eastern Bloc with his aunt and her pet pig in a Trabant, Maclean draws an engaging and moving portrait of a region in turmoil.

Jason Godwin's *On Foot to the Golden Horn* is set at a similar time and details a walk from Gdańsk to Istanbul in the early 1990s. Mainly concerned with Poland and Romania, the book is entertaining and encyclopaedic, jumping from the fears of locals as democracy arrives to local history and getting along with his fellow walker and girlfriend, Kate.

XE ([www.xe.com/ucc](http://www.xe.com/ucc)) is an up-to-the-second online currency-exchange calculator. Find out the rates for all Eastern European currencies, and see exactly how much your trip is going to cost you.

See Climate Charts (p911) for more information.

An unconventional travel guide and Lonely Planet send-up, *Molvania: A Land Untouched by Modern Dentistry* (Santo Cilaurto et al) creates a fictitious land in Eastern Europe that's the 'next big thing'. A good laugh for anyone travelling in the region and sick of guidebooks like this one!

**TOP FIVE MUST-READS**

Eastern Europe's creative wealth is immense, nowhere more so than in its ever-challenging, ever-innovative literary production. The list below barely scrapes the surface, but these titles are warmly recommended by the authors of this book and will make great companions on any trip.

- *The Joke* (Milan Kundera) An insight into Czech society during the communist era. In a moment of anger, Ludvik sends his girlfriend a postcard with the message 'Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!' It's a joke, meant to shock her, but instead, she reports him to the party, and a downward spiral of persecution and paranoia begins.
- *Death and the Penguin* (Andrei Kurkov) A charming novel about life and loneliness in post-Soviet Ukraine. Unsuccessful writer Viktor adopts Misha the penguin from Kyiv Zoo when it runs out of money to buy the animals food. Together they have many curious adventures in the magical Ukrainian capital, although they soon become embroiled in something far darker than Viktor ever imagined.
- *The Notebook* (Agota Kristof) The first book in a trilogy about war-torn Hungary, this coldly narrated, simple novel follows inseparable twins sent to live with their evil grandmother during WWII. The brutalising effects of the war, their grandmother's hatred and a lack of love turn them into true monsters before the reader's eyes. Watch out for the shock ending!
- *The Concert* (Ismail Kadare) History dissected by Albania's greatest living writer. Set during the break between President Enver Hoxha and China in the 1970s, this book follows the lives of the party elite and those who seek to join their ranks. A fascinating account of a hidden time.
- *Sarajevo Marlboro* (Miljenko Jergovic) This collection of short stories from Bosnian journalist Jergovic has established itself as a classic in just a few years. Within its pages, life rather than death is extolled, and while the dark events of the war in Bosnia are always present, the warmth and humanity of the stories are the overwhelming impression left with the reader.

*My War Gone By, I Miss It So*, by Anthony Lloyd, is a brilliant memoir of the Bosnian war by a heroin-addicted war correspondent, which was mildly controversial due to him not blaming the Serbs exclusively for the war.

Eastern Europe's culturally rich and sad Roma people are explored in Isabel Fonseca's *Bury Me Standing*, a history, travelogue, cultural guide and deeply moving account of Roma trying to retain their culture in postcommunist, nationalist Eastern Europe.

Bruce Benderson's *The Romanian* is a haunting memoir of his own love affair with a Romanian hustler he meets in Hungary. Falling into unrequited love, Benderson follows the object of his affection back to Romania where they live for a time, during which Benderson becomes fascinated by Romanian history and art. A bleak insight into the realities of Eastern European life.

A more light-hearted read is British TV comedian Griff Rhys Jones' *To the Baltic with Bob*, an account of sailing from the UK to St Petersburg via the canals of Eastern Europe. It's eccentric and grumpy but good fun.

**Websites**

There's a huge amount of up-to-date information on the web and, whether you're planning a weekend in Prague or a two-month odyssey through the entire region, you'll find the internet an invaluable tool.

**Euromost** ([www.euromost.com](http://www.euromost.com)) A chaotic (have these guys heard of spell check?) but interesting and useful site gathering news and information about the entire region.

**Flycheapo** ([www.flycheapo.com](http://www.flycheapo.com)) This brilliant website saves you the hassle of checking every budget airline's website for routes to wherever you want to go. Flycheapo monitors the flights of all these airlines and tells you who flies to where you want to go.

**Hostels.com** ([www.hostels.com/en/easterneurope.html](http://www.hostels.com/en/easterneurope.html)) This site has a list of most hostels and budget accommodation in Eastern Europe, organised by country. There are plenty of photos so you get an idea of what you are letting yourself in for!

**In Your Pocket** ([www.inyourpocket.com](http://www.inyourpocket.com)) This Vilnius-based desktop-publishing company has enjoyed incredible success. The formula is simple: it produces frequently updated booklets about scores of destinations within Eastern Europe, which are financially supported by advertising. You can download a huge amount of information in PDF form from the website – all for free!

**Rail Europe** ([www.raileurope.com](http://www.raileurope.com)) Gives lots of information on timetables, routes and prices for most of the region (but not the former Soviet Union). For detailed information about the entire former Soviet Union's trains, check out [www.poezda.net](http://www.poezda.net).

**Thorn Tree** (<http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com>) The Lonely Planet interactive travellers' message board. There's a dedicated section for posts relating to Eastern Europe and a huge number of travellers able to give up-to-the-minute advice.

**MUST-SEE MODERN MOVIES**

There's no better way to whet your appetite for travel than by seeing films about the region. Mention Eastern European film to most people and they'll think of slow-paced psychological dramas in black and white, a stereotype that couldn't be less true these days. Against all odds, Eastern Europe has a small but creatively dynamic film industry, as well as a long history of classic (erm, slow-paced, black-and-white) films.

- *Lost and Found* (2005) Six short films produced in Estonia, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Hungary, Romania and Serbia and Montenegro. All offer poignant peeks into the hearts and minds of young Eastern Europeans in the generation since the fall of the Berlin Wall.
- *Ya Lyublyu Tebya* (You I Love; 2004) A quirky Moscow-based romp featuring a romantic threesome between a gorgeous newsreader, an introspective advertising exec and a Mongolian zookeeper. Russia's first 'gay-friendly' film, it offers an interesting slant on old versus new in the Russian capital.
- *Cesky Sen* (Czech Dream; 2004) A 2004 documentary about two students who undertake the hoax of launching a huge new supermarket. A clever and compelling film full of observations on consumer society in the Czech Republic after the fall of communism.
- *Grbavica* (2006) Set in the area of Sarajevo of the same name, *Grbavica* is a Bosnian film about the realities of Serb rape camps during the Bosnian War. It's a harrowing story, which has broken the final taboo of Bosnian society as well as outraging Serbs who dispute its accusations. It won a Golden Bear for best film at the Berlin Film Festival in 2006.
- *Parrullat* (Slogans; 2001) This ponderous and poignant film about 1980s Stalinist Albania depicts life in a small village as seen through the eyes of a young teacher arriving to take up his first post. A love story interwoven with the denouncement of a social misfit, *Slogans* is a touching and lovely film.

**TOP FIVE FESTIVALS**

Once limited to folk dancing and classic music, there's a huge range of great festivals every year in Eastern Europe. Some of our favourites:

**EXIT Festival, Novi Sad, Serbia** ([www.exitfest.org](http://www.exitfest.org)) Eastern Europe's answer to Glastonbury! Novi Sad's historic Petrovaradin Fortress hosts this excellent annual festival in July, with five or more stages shaking to the best in rock, hip-hop and techno. The event is hugely popular and attracts people from all over the region. Tickets are around €70.

**Prague Spring, Czech Republic** ([www.festival.cz](http://www.festival.cz)) Held in mid-May to early June, this is one of Europe's biggest festivals of classical music, inspired by Czech composer Bedřich Smetana, kicks

One of the best films about the Bosnian war, *No Man's Land*, sees a Serb and a Bosnian soldier trapped in the same trench. More complications occur when the media and the UN blunder in.

Encumbered with plaudits such as 'greatest film of all time', Eisenstein's masterpiece *Battleship Potemkin* has influenced most film directors since it was released. The famous scene of the massacre on the Odesa steps with a baby's pram tumbling to destruction should be familiar to all. The Pet Shop Boys recently composed a new score for the film.

**DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...**

Eastern Europe can supply pretty much everything you need on the road today, although when visiting places like Albania, Moldova, Belarus and Russia it's advisable to leave as little as possible to chance. Medicines and toiletries are generally well supplied, although it's probably easier to bring birth control, tampons and any prescription medicine with you. EU citizens should bring their European Health Insurance Card with them to receive free treatment within the EU, and of course everyone should have full medical insurance for serious situations.

Flip flops/thongs are useful all over Eastern Europe as it's generally not done to wear outdoor shoes inside. Backpacks are the easiest way to carry luggage for those on a long trip, although shoulder bags and suitcases with wheels are also fine for the majority of trips. A Swiss Army knife, a torch, ear plugs, plug adaptors and a towel are other things that will more than repay their weight in your backpack.

off the summer. The festival begins with a parade from his grave at Vyšehrad to the Smetana Hall, where his *Má vlast* is performed.

**Karlovy Vary Film Festival, Czech Republic** ([www.kviff.com](http://www.kviff.com)) This is Eastern Europe's most important film festival and it's perfectly timed for travellers visiting the charming spa town of Karlovy Vary each summer in late June to early July. Getting tickets is easy – all films are open to the public, and over seven days around 240 films are shown.

**Kazantip, Ukraine** ([www.kazantip.com](http://www.kazantip.com)) Kazantip isn't just a festival, it's a Republic, or at least that's according to its organisers. Held for a whole month over July and August, this piece of Crimea hosts thousands of ravers from all over the former Soviet Union. Nudity, camping, dancing on the beach and free love are the main ingredients. Just don't try to do drugs, this is still Ukraine.

**Sziget Festival, Budapest, Hungary** ([www.sziget.hu/festival\\_english](http://www.sziget.hu/festival_english)) A week-long world-music bash held in late July to early Aug on Óbudai Island. People come from all over Europe to camp and party. There are more than 1000 acts with bands from around the world playing at more than 60 venues.

**RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL**

In Eastern Europe's nature reserves and national parks, be sure to follow the local code of ethics and common decency and pack up your litter. Minimise the waste you must carry out by taking less packaging and no more food than you will need. Don't use detergents or toothpaste (even if they are biodegradable) in or near natural water sources. When camping in the wild (checking first to see that it's allowed), bury human waste in holes at least 15cm deep and at least 100m from any nearby water. Avoid driving as much as you can – the cities of Eastern Europe are already choked with traffic and public transport is fantastic nearly everywhere. Consider offsetting your carbon emissions used when flying to the region by using websites such as [www.climatecare.org](http://www.climatecare.org) and [www.carbonneutral.com](http://www.carbonneutral.com).

Local charities that would benefit massively from donations include the Chernobyl Children's Project ([www.chernobyl-international.com](http://www.chernobyl-international.com)), the Relief Fund for Romania ([www.reliefundforromania.co.uk](http://www.reliefundforromania.co.uk)) and Healthprom ([www.healthprom.org](http://www.healthprom.org)), all of whom work for some of the neediest people in the region and all of whom accept online donations. If you'd like to sponsor an Eastern European child, try SOS children's villages ([www.soschildrensvillages.org.uk](http://www.soschildrensvillages.org.uk)), the world's largest child sponsoring charity, which operates in 15 Eastern European countries.

Eastern Europe's cities get intolerably crowded in peak season. Traffic congestion on the roads is a major problem, and visitors will do themselves and residents a favour if they forgo driving and use public transport.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### THE BIG FIVE

Begin your trip in magical **Prague** (p256), spending several days absorbing the city and nearby towns, such as beer-lovers' mecca **Plzeň** (p286) and beautiful **Kutná Hora** (p278). Head into Poland to stunning **Kraków** (p561) with its gobsmacking Old Town. This is a great base for visiting the beautiful **Tatra Mountains** (p574) and the harrowing trip to **Oświęcim** (Auschwitz; p570). From Poland head to Slovakia, where you can enjoy magnificent scenery in the **High Tatras** (Vysoké Tatry; p801) before pursuing more urban activities in delightful **Bratislava** (p786). Next to stunning **Budapest** (p356) where you can enjoy the vibrant city. From here visit the picturesque Hungarian countryside – try the baroque city of **Eger** (p400) with its ancient castle and **Pécs** (p391), stuffed full of relics from the Turkish occupation. Now plunge into Romania. Use **Cluj-Napoca** (p653) as your base for visiting the medieval region of **Maramureş** (p663) and stunning **Braşov** (p640) and try to get to **Timișoara** (p659), Romania's coolest city, before heading on to imposing **Bucharest** (p625), where you can drink in the monolithic architecture. End up on the Black Sea coast where you can join partying Romanians in summer at a beach resort around **Constanța** (p675).

### Four Weeks



This is a great trip for any first-time visitor to Eastern Europe, taking in five of the most popular and accessible countries in the region. It begins in the Czech Republic and wends its way through Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, providing a fantastic introduction to a region in transition.

## THE BALKAN SHUFFLE

Four Weeks

Begin in lively little Slovenia with a cheap flight to charming **Ljubljana** (p827). Enjoy superb scenery and adrenaline-rush mountain sports in the magnificent **Julian Alps** (p838) before heading south to the Croatian coast and working your way through **Dalmatia** (p218) and its gorgeous beaches to delightful **Dubrovnik** (p233). Enjoy the stunning Old Town and explore the surrounding islands. Take the opportunity to see Bosnia from Dubrovnik – perhaps a day trip to **Mostar** (p116) to see the newly reconstructed bridge or a night or two in picturesque **Sarajevo** (p106) – before continuing south into dynamic Montenegro, Europe’s youngest country. Spend some time enjoying the fantastic scenery, stay a night or two in historic **Kotor** (p533) and see its charming walled city, then enjoy some of the country’s beautiful beaches around **Budva** (p532) before heading over into enigmatic Albania. From the northern city of **Shkodra** (p58) take a bus straight on to **Tirana** (p51), a mountain-shrouded, ramshackle capital on the rise. Enjoy a day or two here and make an excursion to **Kruja** (p59) and gorgeous **Berat** (p62) before taking a bus through the stunning mountains into little-explored Macedonia, ending up in **Ohrid** (p481). Spend at least two days here – enjoy its multitude of sights and swim in the beautiful eponymous lake. Make your way to **Skopje** (p474), Macedonia’s fun capital, from where you can head overland through Serbia to the booming post-Milošević metropolis of **Belgrade** (p752).

This wonderful trip – unthinkable a decade ago – takes you through some of Europe’s youngest countries and down the spectacular coastline of the former Yugoslav states and Albania. Beginning in Ljubljana the route snakes through six more Balkan states to bring you back to where you started.



## EAST OF EAST TOUR

Three to Four Weeks

Begin in bustling **Warsaw** (p547) where you can see the reconstructed Old Town and learn about its dark history. From here, head by train to **Lviv** (p874), Ukraine’s most beautiful city, and spend a few days here before crossing the country to graceful **Kyiv** (p865), the Jerusalem of East Slavonic culture. You’ll need a couple of days in the capital to enjoy its sights before taking the sleeper train to monolithic **Moscow** (p700), Europe’s biggest city and a place of the most striking extremes. A visit to the **Golden Ring** (p716) is also highly recommended, to get a sense of Russian life outside big cities. **St Petersburg** (p718) is next on the agenda – staggeringly beautiful and full of cultural life, you can easily spend three or four days in the city itself, although there are abundant sights outside the city, such as the tsarist palace at **Petrodvorets** (p731). Exiting Russia to Estonia, you’ll love charming medieval **Tallinn** (p320) and you can visit **Saaremaa** (p343) for some rural delights. Next up is **Riga** (p417), an exceptional city with a huge wealth of Art-Nouveau architecture that is generally considered Europe’s finest. Make sure you don’t ignore Latvia’s other highlights such as the medieval castles and caves of **Sigulda** (p428) and the breathtaking **coastline** (p432). Unsung Baltic gem Lithuania is next. Enjoy charming **Vilnius** (p443) and the amazing **Curonian Spit** (p463) on the Baltic Sea before re-entering Poland and heading back to Warsaw.



The nitty-gritty of Eastern Europe – this trip is fascinating, but involves some visa planning for Russia. It takes you in a circle from Poland, through Ukraine and Russia to the lovely and largely undiscovered Baltic countries.

## ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

### ON THE EDGE: UKRAINE & AROUND

Begin with a cheap flight from Western Europe to **Timișoara** (p659), the best budget gateway city for the far reaches of Eastern Europe. Spend a day here before heading overland for medieval **Brașov** (p640) and charming **Iași** (p667) near the Moldovan border. Here the real adventure starts – cross into Europe’s poorest and most corrupt country and head for the entertaining capital, **Chișinău** (p506) where partying is a way of life and wine is plentiful and cheap as it’s made in the local **vineyards** (p513). Travel into **Transdnestr** (p515), a country that doesn’t officially exist, and go back in time in **Tiraspol** (p517) before heading into post-revolutionary Ukraine. Make a beeline for ethnic melting pot **Odesa** (p885) and enjoy the relaxed pace of the Black Sea before heading for **Kyiv** (p865), which demands several days’ attention. Be one of the few people in the world who has made the grim but fascinating trip to **Pripyat** (p864), the abandoned town next to the Chernobyl reactor. From here, head to gorgeous, crumbling **Lviv** (p874), a place for which the moniker ‘the new Prague’ might not be too far from the truth. After a few days here, Belarus, Europe’s last bastion of repression, is your next stop – although after Transdnestr it may not look so Soviet. Check out amazingly monolithic **Minsk** (p80) and see the ultimate Soviet War memorial at **Brest Fortress** (p90) before crossing into Poland from where cheap flights back to Western Europe abound.

### Three Weeks

### THE IONIAN TO THE BALTIC

### Four Weeks

Arriving in Albania at **Saranda** (p66), stay the night and try to see the glorious ruins of **Butrint** (p66) before travelling either up the beautiful **coastline** (p65) or via historic **Gjirokastra** (p67) to **Tirana** (p51), where you can spend a day or two before taking the bus to **Prishtina** (p772) in Kosovo. From Kosovo head north to **Belgrade** (p752), a city that has been rejuvenated since Milošević’s time and one of the most interesting places in the Balkans. Head north to **Novi Sad** (p762) – if you come in July you might catch the **EXIT Festival** (p763), held annually in the city’s historic hilltop fortress. From Serbia cross into Hungary at pretty **Szeged** (p397) and head for **Lake Balaton** (p385). Keep surging north and into Slovakia, aiming for **Bratislava** (p786) before going on to the incredible **Slovenský Raj** (p811) with its wonderful scenery. Crossing the **Tatra Mountains** (p574) into Poland, travel via gorgeous **Kraków** (p561) to unsung gem **Wrocław** (p584), spending a few days in both before dropping in on beautifully restored **Poznań** (p589). From here, the Baltic is yours – try any of the relatively undeveloped towns along the coast, **Hel** (p604) and **Łeba** (p604) are both highly recommended for beaches, wildlife and watersports, while you shouldn’t miss **Malbork** (p605), famed for Europe’s biggest Gothic castle, or historic and thriving **Gdańsk** (p597). Finally, for true adventure (and that’s just getting your Russian visa) head for **Kaliningrad** (p732) – about as far from the beaten track as anyone can get in Europe!

Take advantage of the fact that once totally Soviet Ukraine is now a visa-free zone for most. Enjoy its fascinating cities, beautiful scenery and the wealth of interesting off-the-beaten-track neighbouring countries such as Moldova and Belarus. Not a simple trip, but a world away from the crowds of Prague!



A paradoxical way to begin perhaps – get a cheap flight to package-tourist destination Corfu, and take the daily ferry just 27km into a different world. Beginning on Albania’s magnificent and as yet totally undeveloped coastline, weave your way north through the continent to Poland’s equally neglected Baltic coast.

## TAILORED TRIPS

### WORLD HERITAGE–LISTED SIGHTS

#### One Month

Begin this most cultured of trips in Moscow to see the **Kremlin** (p707) and **Red Square** (p705) with day trips to Sergiev Posad for the **Troitse-Sergieva Lavra** (Trinity Monastery of St Sergius; p717), and **Suzdal** (p716) and **Vladimir** (p716). Head west through Belarus, stopping at **Mir Castle** (p89) and the fabulous **Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park** (p92) before entering Poland. Stop in medieval **Zamość** (p581) before heading to **Kraków** (p561) where you can see

**Auschwitz** (p570) in a day trip before carrying on to see the historic centres of **Prague** (p256), **Kutná Hora** (p278), **Český Krumlov** (p291), **Telč** (p303) and the Vila Tugendhat in **Brno** (p296). Cross into Slovakia and stop at **Spiš Castle** (p809), then on to **Bardejov** (p812). Press on into Hungary and stop off to explore the wine-producing region of **Tokaj** (p403) before steaming on to sumptuous **Budapest** (p356) with its Castle District. Head south via **Pécs** (p391) for the early Christian cemetery before crossing into Croatia. Stunning sights here include the **Plitvice Lakes National Park** (p221), **Split's old centre** (p223), the centre of **Trogir** (p228) and finally, the jewel in Croatia's glittering crown, sublime **Dubrovnik** (p233).



### JEWISH HERITAGE TRIP

#### Two to Three Weeks

Begin in Riga and learn about the deportation of Latvia's Jewish population at the **Jews in Latvia Museum** (p422), then visit the haunting memorial to the **Salaspils Concentration Camp** (p426) before going south to Lithuania. Vilnius has plenty of interest including the **Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum of Lithuania** (p448). Nearby there's **Trakai** (p453), still home to some 360 Karaite Jews, a fascinating example of cultural continuity. Stop in Kaunas for a visit to the chilling **Ninth Fort** (p457) and the **Sugihara House & Foundation** (p457), home to Japanese consul and sometime Schindler of Lithuania, Chiune Sugihara. Next to Poland; head straight for **Warsaw** (p547), taking in the wealth of museums, memorials and other sights associated with the ghetto and the holocaust. Stopping first at **Lublin** (p578), where you can walk the Jewish

heritage trail, head for **Kraków** (p561), where there are a number of fascinating sights, including the 15th-century Old Synagogue, remarkable for having survived WWII. Make the harrowing trip to **Auschwitz** (p570) and **Birkenau** (p570) for a shocking first-hand glimpse of human evil. From here carry on to Prague's **Staré Město** (p264) to visit Josefov, the Prague Jewish Museum, and the Old-New Synagogue – the continent's oldest Jewish house of worship. End in **Budapest** (p356) where you'll find a flourishing Jewish population of 80,000 and some 25 active synagogues, including Europe's largest, the 1859 Great Synagogue, a hopeful and positive end to a sometimes harrowing trip.





# Snapshots

## RECENT HISTORY

Eastern Europe, a huge, diverse area and the fastest-changing part of this extraordinary continent, may sometimes seem to have more differences than similarities when individual nations are pitched together. What does ultramodern, superclean Estonia have in common with chaotic and somewhat backward Albania? How can swaggering behemoth Russia, the world's largest country and Eastern Europe's most powerful nation, be grouped with tiny Slovenia, the region's answer to Switzerland? Why are Greece and Finland – far more easterly lying than the Czech Republic – never included among these countries?

These questions are totally valid and the simple answer – 20th century history – at once belies and underlies the complexity of these 19 countries and their national identities, outlooks and respective fates.

## THE SOVIET UNION

It has been said that the Russian Revolution of 1917 was the single most important event of the 20th century, and without it, it's certain that Eastern Europe would be a very different place today. Following victory in a bloody civil war, the Bolshevik government formed a vast conglomerate of nations from the remains of the Russian Empire, which became the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the world's first communist state.

Brutally industrialised by Josef Stalin in the 1930s, during which new benchmarks in terror and political oppression were carved, the Soviet Union had become a huge economic and military power by the time of WWII. Initially in a nonaggression pact with Hitler, the USSR was forced into the war against its will in 1941 when Germany shocked the world by invading its erstwhile friend. This insane act of German aggression marked the beginning of the agonisingly slow end for the Third Reich, and during the siege of Leningrad, and at battles in Stalingrad, Moscow, Kursk and Sevastopol, literally millions of Soviets died.

When Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt met in Yalta in 1945 as the Third Reich finally crumbled and Soviet troops advanced on Berlin, the agreement hammered out between them effectively created the delineation we still use today between East and West. The Iron Curtain between the Soviet and US 'spheres of influence', which fell in the aftermath of the war, is still how most people understand and approach the region today: the Soviet Union annexed the three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which became republics within the USSR, while Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria were deemed to be in the Soviet Unions' 'sphere of influence'. Countries such as Greece and Finland, parts of Eastern Europe by anyone's reckoning – just look at a map – remained outside Stalin's reach. Yugoslavia and Albania were the only two countries that became communist of their own will, meaning they were never as subject to Moscow's control as other Eastern European countries, but to all intents and purposes were thought of as being in the same Eastern 'bloc'.

With the exception of Albania and Yugoslavia, for 40 years all the Eastern bloc countries were satellite states to Moscow, with imposed communist governments that denied freedom of speech, foreign travel and free assembly to their inhabitants. Those Cold War years can be characterised by economic backwardness (many wealthy countries before WWII, such as Romania and Hungary, became poor countries postwar due to

Blessed is the mother  
who gives birth to a  
brewer – Czech proverb.

Despite most people  
connecting the Cyrillic  
alphabet with Russia,  
it was invented by two  
Bulgarian monks, Cyril  
and Methodius, in the  
9th century and is a huge  
source of national pride  
to the Bulgarians.

During the reign of  
Albania's dictator Enver  
Hoxha, half a million  
defensive bunkers were  
installed throughout the  
country to protect it in  
the event of an invasion.  
Many have now been  
dismantled, but they're  
still plentiful.



centralised economies run on communist principles), political repression and the formation of underground opposition movements. Revolts against the Soviet Union's regional leadership were not tolerated: in 1956 Soviet tanks quelled an uprising in Budapest, and in 1968 the 'Prague Spring' of Alexander Dubček was brutally brought to an end in the same way. When Josip Tito's Yugoslavia and Enver Hoxha's Albania broke with the Soviet Union in 1948 and 1956, respectively, it was probably only the lack of a border between them and the USSR that prevented an invasion to impose a pro-Soviet government.

## CRACKS IN THE IRON CURTAIN

While a vast array of opinion can now be found in Eastern Europe about the second half of the 20th century, it's no exaggeration to say that when the communist system suddenly began to collapse in the late 1980s, the vast majority of the local populations were delighted and threw out the communist governments with great enthusiasm.

The beginning of the end came with the 1985 appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union, the country's most important post. A young reformer in a country whose once relatively strong economy had slipped into a period known as the stagnation under Leonid Brezhnev during the 1970s, Gorbachev was determined to make changes to a system he had realised needed fundamental reform.

Gorbachev's twin policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) brought relatively free speech to the Soviet Union for the first time in 70 years, in the hope that through debate the Soviet people would support Gorbachev's economic restructuring, being held up by the all-powerful apparatchiks, senior party officials who had total control over the centralised (and desperately inadequately run) economy.

Awaking from their decades of dutiful slumber, the Soviet people responded in a way that was not quite what Gorbachev had in mind, and this response manifested itself in scandal after scandal as information about the high crimes and misdemeanours of the Communist Party reached a previously ignorant population. Whether it was the true extent of Stalin's brutal purges, the gory details of the gulag, corruption in the present-day leadership or the food shortages and bad housing that were a reality for millions but had never been discussed openly before, the new freedoms allowed people to talk about far more than economic restructuring.

## DEMOCRACY

At the same time, change throughout Eastern Europe – where similar policies to those begun in the USSR had been enacted – was outpacing the politicians. The year of revolutions was 1989: Lech Walesa's Solidarity Movement came to power in Poland; the Velvet Revolution saw the peaceful overthrow of communism in Czechoslovakia; Hungary instituted democracy and allowed its citizens to travel abroad freely; the Berlin Wall came down; and in Romania a violent revolution overthrew the particularly repugnant regime of Nicolae Ceauşescu, who was later executed with his wife on national TV.

Gorbachev somehow managed to keep the Soviet Union together until 1991, despite total economic meltdown and the loss of its European empire. Plucky Lithuania declared itself independent of the USSR in 1990, and despite Soviet forces brutally trying to quell the revolt well into 1991, it eventually accepted the inevitable and Lithuania became the first former Soviet state. Later that year, amid mass nationalist movements throughout its vast expanse, the Soviet leadership bowed to fate and lowered the famous hammer and sickle flag over the Kremlin for the last time on 31 December 1991.

Since 1989, the peoples of the region have largely gone their own way, despite sharing a number of the same economic and social problems. In general the transfer of nationalised commodities into private hands in the early 1990s benefited the very few (usually 'communists' with good connections) at the expense of the many. Entire industries worth billions were sold off for a fraction of their true worth. This rampant feeding frenzy gave rise to organised crime, which was particularly strong in the former Soviet Union, but a factor everywhere. The various 'mafias' so often associated with the region have in most cases become far less important in daily life, but there's an entire class of oligarchs (mainly in Russia) who made billions out of communism's collapse and still broker considerable power today.

In many cases, former communists have rebranded themselves as democrats and have retained positions of power in postcommunist Eastern Europe. Most obviously, both Boris Yeltsin, Russian president from 1991 to 1999, and his successor Vladimir Putin (2000–present) are from staunch communist backgrounds, Putin having once been head of the KGB's successor organisation, the creepy FSB.

The 1990s was a frenetic time of 'shock therapy' economics for the region. Most countries responded positively to this despite much hardship – economic miracles have well and truly occurred in the Baltics and to a

Did you know six out of the first seven countries in the world to send a human into space were in Eastern Europe?

## RELIVING THE COMMUNIST PAST

All over Eastern Europe you can find bars, cafés and restaurants that hark back to the 'good old days' of the USSR: central planning and bad food. These can be very good fun, but why pay extra to relive the past? Below, the authors of this book have selected their favourite surviving buildings, monuments and other sights that will fascinate anyone interested in the communist era.

**Lenin's Mausoleum & Red Square, Moscow, Russia** – Communist ground zero. The man who started it all still lies embalmed on the Moscow square where the USSR annually showed off its military might to the world in huge choreographed parades.

**Szobor Park, Budapest, Hungary** – See the incredible collection of communist statues, (unwanted Lenins, broken Marx and forgotten Engels) collected together here in Szobor (Statue) Park, a short journey from central Budapest.

**Palace of Culture & Science, Warsaw, Poland** – Stalin's 'gift' to Warsaw after WWII dominates the city's skyline and is generally cited as being Europe's ultimate Stalinist structure. Loathed by many during communist times, the building is now treated more fondly by locals and is still the city's tallest structure.

**Former Enver Hoxha Museum, Tirana, Albania** – Designed by the dictator's daughter, this astonishingly ugly complex (usually known as the Pyramid) is now a disco, but its eerie shape and general feel make you wonder how dead the past is.

**Minsk, Belarus** – Few entire cities can be described as communist monuments, but Minsk certainly can. Totally destroyed in WWII and rebuilt under Stalin, this gloomy, monolithic city should be on any nostalgic communist's itinerary.

**Brest Fortress, Brest, Belarus** – Sweeping, sombre made-for-the-movies orchestral music is blasted over loudspeakers, and men and women in period uniforms march around Belarus' vast memorial to the fallen of WWII.

**Palace of the People, Bucharest, Romania** – Ceauşescu's monstrous palace still dominates this part of his capital, as does the eerie Blvd Unirii, 6m longer than the Champs Élysées in Paris. Now housing the Romanian deputies' offices, it still retains its grotesque Cold War aura.

**Creators of the Bulgarian State Monument, Shumen, Bulgaria** – Looming above the provincial town of Shumen is this incredible concrete block commemorating Bulgarian independence.

**Ninth Fort, Kaunas, Lithuania** – The Soviet monument commemorating the murdered at this former German concentration camp has to be one of the most astonishing pieces of monolithic art in the region.

**Transdniestr** – Forget Minsk, a mere communist city, Transdniestr is a self-proclaimed country devoted to communism, even though the rest of the world doesn't recognise its existence. The communists are still in power here, taking photographs will usually land you in trouble and locals are afraid to have anything to do with you. Fun!

A Bulgarian cinematic classic (no, really), *The Goat Horn* is set during the Turkish occupation. A young girl avenges her mother's rape and murder by tracking down three of the four culprits and killing them with a goat's horn. Before she kills the fourth, more tragedy strikes.

lesser extent in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. However, some countries became basket cases, such as tiny, isolated Albania, and, of course, Yugoslavia, the tragedy of which deserves its own discussion.

## THE COLLAPSE OF YUGOSLAVIA

That the USSR had dissolved itself with such a small loss of life was a miracle. Sadly the pattern didn't repeat itself and the region's second-largest conglomerate nation, Yugoslavia, descended into a series of wars and a period of genocide and ethnic cleansing not seen in Europe since WWII. The scars of these atrocities are still all too visible today when visiting the six countries the nation gradually became.

Post-WWII Yugoslavia is synonymous with one of the giants of postwar European politics, Josip Broz Tito, leader of the anti-German partisans, president of the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia and the only communist leader to openly defy Stalin. Yugoslavia broke with the Soviet Union in 1948, causing a rift that would never be properly repaired. Tito had the power to hold together an ethnically and religiously disparate society. Following his death in 1980, the country's ethnic strife threatened to blow up immediately. At this time the Serbian communist party boss, Slobodan Milošević, consolidated his power base by exploiting tensions between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians in the Serbian province of Kosovo, eventually becoming Serbian president in 1989.

By 1991 the collapse of Yugoslavia seemed inevitable in the wake of the changes throughout Eastern Europe. Pro-democracy, pro-independence forces controlled regional capitals, while authoritarian federalist Milošević held sway in Belgrade. Slovenia declared independence in 1991 and, after a short war, became an independent nation. Croatia and Macedonia followed suit, but it was Bosnia and Hercegovina's declaration the same year that made bloodshed inevitable, as Bosnia's population, divided between Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats saw their future in different places. The Bosnian War (1992–95) cost more than 200,000 lives and saw the worst genocide in Europe since WWII, as 'ethnic cleansing' became a tool used to ensure ethnic uniformity and thus a common direction. Meanwhile in the remains of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) hyperinflation saw prices rise by five quadrillion percent (that's 5000 trillion), the highest in history, and the general collapse of the economy.

As if the region hadn't experienced enough horror, in 1996 a guerrilla campaign by Kosovar Albanians against Serbs in Kosovo marked the beginning of another long and bloody conflict, which resulted in the bombing of Belgrade by NATO in 1999 and UN control of the region ever since. While Milošević was forced from power in 2001, both Kosovo and Macedonia remain an ethnic tinderbox and could easily slip back into ethnic conflict in the future.

## NEW EUROPE

Eastern Europe was comprehensively divided in two in May 2004 when eight of the region's most economically progressive countries joined the EU. To say that this changed the regional dynamic would be a massive understatement – to put it into historical perspective, just a decade and a half before most of these countries had been members of Comecon (the communist version of the EU), grey and undemocratic Moscow satellites with little or no self-determination. Since 2004, for better or for worse (and you'll be given a massive breadth of opinion by locals on your travels) they have been part of a huge European superstate where the market economy is king, trade barriers and borders no longer exist, and democracy and human rights are

enshrined as sacrosanct. At the time of writing Romania and Bulgaria were due to join the EU in 2007 and 2008, respectively, with Croatia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Albania and Serbia hoping to join them some time after 2010.

The eagerness with which the EU has embraced its new members has been viewed with great suspicion by Russia, which feels its traditional 'sphere of influence' has been breached and is gently fuming at its impotence to do anything about it. The EU accession countries, however, all clearly see their destiny as being part of Europe and view the idea that they are somehow in Russia's 'sphere of influence' as a vaguely humorous hangover from the long-gone days of communism.

Almost without exception Eastern European countries have centre-right democratically elected governments whose priorities have been economic stability and development. The obvious exception to this rule is Belarus where, to many people's utter amazement, the dictatorship of Alexander Lukashenko continues to fester while the country slips further and further behind its neighbours economically. Russia is another conundrum. Despite the extraordinary laissez-faire capitalism of the 1990s, the country has reverted to an austere regime under Vladimir Putin. While the country seeks to make itself the world's undisputed energy superpower due to its massive oil and gas resources, press freedom and transparency have suffered enormously. With Putin's departure from office scheduled for 2008 (he's unable to seek a third term as president without changing the constitution), what lies beyond that date for Russia is anyone's guess, although most commentators believe he'll seek to install a loyal and trusted friend as his successor.

## RECENT EVENTS

Eastern Europe saw more considerable change in 2006, including the sudden death of Slobodan Milošević during his trial in the Hague for crimes against humanity. Milošević's death from a heart attack robbed thousands of his victims of justice, but it also went some way to confining the brutal bloodshed and ethnic hatreds of the 1990s to the past. Two other war criminals, Radovan

Mountainous Slovenia is the homeland of the first married couple to scale Mt Everest together. Andrej and Mariga Stremfelj reached the summit on 7 October, 1990.

*The Death of Mr Lazarescu* (2005) by Romanian director Cristi Puiu has been hailed as one of the country's greatest-ever films, winning prizes at film festivals around the world. The film concerns the fate of the eponymous pensioner, shuffled from one Bucharest hospital to another in search of medical treatment – a dark, comedic commentary on modern Romania.

## STAGS AND HENS ROAMING THE REGION

As if anything were needed to further illustrate Eastern Europe's transformation from buttoned-down autocracy to hedonistic playland, visit Bratislava on a Saturday night. Groups of men in specially printed T-shirts being sick, fighting locals, shouting and swearing, inebriated gangs of women crawling from one bar to the next in unfeasibly high heels and sporting plastic breasts; welcome to stag and hen culture, Eastern Europe style.

The rise of the cheap airline industry has meant that Eastern European cities are often flooded at weekends with gangs of male and female friends celebrating stag and hen nights (bachelor and bachelorette parties). While these events can be fun, there's nothing quite like a gang of 20 drunk men vomiting in public to ruin your romantic weekend in an otherwise lovely Eastern European city.

Cities that are particularly notorious include Bratislava, Riga, Tallinn, Ljubljana, Budapest, Kraków, Prague and Vilnius. If you're keen to avoid this proud (mainly British) tradition, the simplest thing to do is avoid the above cities over the weekends. If you can't do this, check with your hotel that they don't accept stag groups (most decent hotels won't) and staying outside of the Old Town is usually a good bet.

There are usually certain bars associated with stag groups, so for example in Bratislava avoid the Dubliner or Slovak pubs (p793) at the weekend if you want to avoid a close encounter. Think of it as wildlife-watching and it can be fairly amusing.

You might hear *Wind of Change* by German rockers the Scorpions during your visit to Eastern Europe – it's still got a special place in many people's hearts there as it became the unofficial anthem of freedom and democracy when it was released in 1990.

*Russian Ark*, the ponderous yet incredible 2002 Alexander Sokurov film, was the first feature length movie to be made with one continuous tracking shot. Sokurov got it on the second take.

For a bizarre and satirical 'first-person' view of Josip Tito's life, see the late Yugoslav leader's 'homepage' at [www.titoville.com](http://www.titoville.com) – pictures, anecdotes, jokes and general partisan sniping await.

Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, remain at large in the Balkans and their capture is still a priority as their ethnic cleansing still casts a long shadow over the shattered nations of the former Yugoslavia.

A far more positive development was the final dismantling of the transnational compromise that was Yugoslavia, when Montenegro voted in a 2006 referendum to leave its union with Serbia, thus creating two newly independent countries. To many people's surprise, Serbia shrugged and accepted the decision stoically.

Not all development has been positive. The 'brain drain' is an inescapable reality in countries that have recently joined the EU: Estonian IT specialists have been absorbed by countries throughout the EU, while Poland has seen a massive number of people leaving to work in the service and construction industries in the UK. Likewise, Latvia and Lithuania have seen huge numbers of young professionals relocate to Ireland. Further flows into the west are expected when Germany and Austria relax their immigration rules for the new members in the next few years.

Despite this exodus, there's palpable excitement in the air in Eastern Europe today. Even where the political system remains miserable and democracy seems a long way off, there's a new spirit of hope. Belarus is case in point; since the mass antigovernment protests following the rigged elections of 2006, and despite the failure of protestors to dislodge the government, there's a very definite feeling that things can't go on like this for much longer. As democracy and transparency become ever more Eastern European traits the future looks extremely bright for this once benighted region.

Did you know Belarus has the highest number of US green-card lottery winners in the world?

# The Authors



## TOM MASTERS

Tom first visited Eastern Europe at the age of 14 when he went to stay with family friends in Bulgaria just as communism was crumbling there. He has had a love affair with the once-obscure region since he can remember, and aged 15 travelled around a newly democratic Eastern Europe by train with his mother (an experience not unlike a Graham Greene novel). At 18 Tom finally got to see Russia, his true passion, while studying the language at university. A decade later and he still doesn't claim to truly understand the country, but thinks he's got a better idea than most. More of his writing can be seen at [www.mastersmafia.com](http://www.mastersmafia.com).

### My Favourite Trip

In summer 2005 I found myself retracing the route of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union for a TV documentary I was working on. Starting in Gdańsk (p597), where WWII started, we headed through the beautiful Polish countryside of the Great Masurian Lakes (p608), stopping to see Hitler's wartime HQ, the Wolf's Lair (p610), where our flesh was stripped from our bones by swarms of mosquitoes deep in the forest. We then went on to Kaunas (p455), where we got drunk with students in Lithuania's biggest university town, visited the chilling Ninth Fort (p457) and continued to Riga (p417), where we enjoyed the amazing architecture and hung out with Latvia's biggest boyband, BrainStorm. (I wonder if each member of Westlife speaks three languages and could give a guided architectural tour of their home town?) After this we visited university town Tartu (p333), in Estonia, where we enjoyed the beer halls and midnight sun, before crossing into Russia and arriving in St Petersburg (p718) in time for the summer solstice. Magical.



## BRETT ATKINSON

Brett's first experiences of Eastern Europe were Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, when the Iron Curtain was still pulled tightly shut. He's since returned to write about Hungary's communist legacy, island hopped in Croatia and honeymooned in Sarajevo. During eight weeks of research in the Czech Republic, he furthered his hobby of beer appreciation, especially while watching Friday night ice hockey at the local *pivnice* (pub). When he's not travelling for Lonely Planet, Brett lives with Carol in Auckland, New Zealand, about as far from Eastern Europe as is possible. He advises never to drive a Skoda Fabia across a narrow castle drawbridge – especially if there's no room to turn around on the other side.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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## GREG BLOOM

While living in Ukraine from 1997 to 2002, Greg used to visit Latvia annually for the ultimate Frisbee tournament in Jūrmala. Back then you could still find a \$10 hotel room, bribe a traffic cop, and hail Ladas in lieu of cabs. Riga was an undiscovered jewel. Returning to the Baltics for the first time in years, Greg reports that a) Riga is no longer undiscovered; and b) apparently, you can no longer bribe Baltic traffic cops. The cops are nicer, though, and speeding tickets not too expensive. Formerly the editor of the *Kyiv Post*, Greg is now based in Manila.



## PETER DRAGICEVICH

Over the course of a dozen years working for newspapers and magazines in both his native New Zealand and Australia, Peter's covered everything from honeymooning in Verona to gay resorts in Fiji. He finally gave in to Kiwi wanderlust, giving up staff jobs to chase his typically diverse antipodean roots around much of Europe – spending time in his grandparents' villages in Croatia, Scotland and northern England. While it's family ties that first drew him to the Balkans, it's the history, natural beauty, convoluted politics, cheap *rakija* (Macedonian firewater) and, most importantly, the intriguing people that keep bringing him back.



## LISA DUNFORD

A fascination with Eastern Europe gripped Lisa from childhood, probably because her grandfather came from the Carpathian region that was Hungary, then Czechoslovakia and is now in the Ukraine. She studied in Budapest for her junior year and arrived in Bratislava, Slovakia, after graduation looking for work; various projects led to a job at the US Agency for International Development. She danced with the country as it became an independent nation, learned the language and made life-long friends. Lisa now lives in Houston, Texas, but projects and travel take her back to the region often; she always makes sure she spends as much time as possible on the trip in Slovakia. It still feels like home.



## STEVE FALLON

Steve has been travelling to Slovenia since the early 1990s, when a well-known publishing company refused his proposal to write a guidebook to the country because of 'the war going on' (it had ended two years earlier) and an influential American daily newspaper told him that their readers weren't interested in 'Slovakia'. Never mind, it was his own little secret for a good 10 years. Though he still hasn't reached the top of Mt Triglav, Steve considers at least part of his soul Slovenian and returns to the country as often as he can for a glimpse of the Julian Alps in the sun, and a dribble of *bučno olje* (pumpkinseed oil).



### PATRICK HORTON

Born with restless feet, Patrick's journeys have taken him to the more arcane areas of the world, especially those with current or former communist leanings. North Korea, Cuba, the old USSR, the old Yugoslavia and Nicaragua come to mind. Donning his author disguise of sunnies, fedora and trench coat, Patrick prowled around Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina to unearth the traveller hot spots. Patrick has been a contributing author and photographer for many Lonely Planet guides.



### STEVE KOKKER

Steve has long found life in Eastern Europe more thrilling and full of exciting possibilities than back in his otherwise-great hometown of Montreal. A frequent visitor to the region since 1992, he has spent most of his time in Estonia, Russia and elsewhere in Eastern Europe since 1996. He's now living in Tallinn, where his father was born, thereby completing a karmic circle of sorts.



### VESNA MARIC

Vesna loved researching Hungary in below-zero January temperatures, spending a lot of time warming her bones in thermal baths, eating hot goulash, drinking wine and dancing in smoky clubs. Her first visit to Hungary was some years ago: after an overnight train from Sarajevo, she emerged into a springtime Budapest so full of beans and birds and bees, and she kept longing to go back for more. Vesna will never forget the joy of skating on a frozen lake, along with residents of a whole Hungarian village.



### JEANNE OLIVER

Jeanne arrived in Croatia in 1996 just as the country was getting back on its feet and she has returned every year since. Enchanted by the coastline and fascinated by the ever-evolving political scene, Jeanne spends her vacations in Croatia between writing every Lonely Planet guide to the country. As well as turning out newspaper and magazine articles, Jeanne has launched a Croatia travel website, [www.croatiatraveller.com](http://www.croatiatraveller.com).



### LEIF PETERSEN

In 2003, Leif's 'unhinged contempt for reality' spurred him to abandon an idiot-proof career with the Federal Reserve in America and embark on a homeless odyssey of travel writing. Despite having no leads or training – and a dubious grasp on grammar – he achieved modest success by deluging hapless editors with material so raw and protracted that a trilingual international support group was formed to deal with it. Leif's weakness for pretty girls brought him to Romania in 2004, where the low cost of living compelled him to stay. Speaking the language, having an apartment and owning a 1990 Dacia 1310, it's said that Leif need only learn how to distill *țuica* to gain honorary Romanian citizenship.



### ROBERT REID

Somewhere between an Oklahoma tornado and a Rambo movie, little Robert's sense of rebellion led him to old *Soviet Life* mags, and on to the Bulgarian-created Cyrillic alphabet and travels in lands where sickles aren't just a convenient rhyme for pickles. After studying Russian in college ('nearly a minor!'), he spent a couple of summers roaming Eastern Europe. He maintains a disproportionate attraction to planned cities made to impress Soviet dignitaries, clunky '70s hotels with drastically floral carpets, and grey housing blocks – but he likes the pretty parts too. He updated two of his favourites for this guide, Bulgaria and Romania. He lives in Brooklyn.



### TIM RICHARDS

Tim spent a year teaching English in Kraków, Poland, in 1994–95, having transferred with an international teaching organisation from a two-year stint in Egypt. He was fascinated by the massive post-communism transition affecting every aspect of Polish life, and by surviving remnants of the Cold War days. As a result, he jumped at the chance to return for this assignment more than a decade later, and was delighted by his intense reacquaintance with this beautiful, complex country. When he's not on the road for Lonely Planet, Tim is a freelancer living in Melbourne, Australia, writing on topics such as travel, lifestyle, the arts, technology and pets.



### WENDY TAYLOR

Wendy Taylor is a 35-year-old *luftmensch* whose affinity for vast snowy landscapes started at an early age when she toddled around Anchorage, Alaska, looking for a carrot for her snowman's nose. But it wasn't until the 1990s, when her humour had sufficiently blackened, that she fulfilled all requirements for the perfect Slavophile. With a degree from UC Berkeley in Slavic Languages and Literatures she set off for big bad Moscow in 1994. She has since teetered back and forth between California and the former USSR, steered by the ups and downs of her love/hate relationship with the place. She recently spent six months in Belarus writing, editing and participating in anti-Lukashenko activities.

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