While Northern Europe, Scandinavia & the Baltic cover a huge area of land and sea, it is very common for these regions to be encompassed in one cruise when travelling from the UK. While the Mediterranean remains ever popular, the Baltic has experienced a huge rise in visitors from cruise and it has become one of the most popular Ex-UK itineraries of all in recent years. This is enhanced by the wide ranging appeal of this area, with mainstream, luxury and traditional cruise operators all regularly operating itineraries here.

Northern Europe in this sense often covers much of the North Eastern coast of the European continent. Key ports such as Amsterdam and Zeebrugge are often used as turnaround ports and have huge facilities for dealing with all but the largest cruise ships. While often undervalued, quite possibly due to their easy accessibility by air or ferry from the UK, these ports can provide a relaxed first port of call on a Baltic cruise, but also do hold the attractions and sights for those who wish to be more active. It is also worth noting that Amsterdam in particular is a key cruise port in the region because of its role as the starting point for many Rhine river cruises. Further north many cruise ships who are not taking in southern Scandinavia choose to take the Kiel canal, providing they meet the size requirements, which offers guests with a fantastic, almost river cruise-esque experience sailing down the canal from the Elbe estuary, through Schleswig-Holstein and into the Baltic Sea.

For those not taking the Kiel canal route, the straits of Skaggerak and Kaggerat, colloquially known as the Norwegian or Jutland Sea, provide an alternative route and in doing so take in the major ports and Scandinavian capitals of Oslo and Copenhagen. Both are well known for their culture and beauty and, in fact, many would not consider a Baltic cruise complete without a visit to the Little Mermaid in Copenhagen or the wonder of docking almost in the centre of town next to the Akershus Castle and iconic Town Hall in Oslo. Both ports and many others along the Skaggerak/Kaggerat route are surrounded by islands that make the sail in a particularly breathtaking site, especially for Oslo, located at the end of the Oslofjord. One fascinating and unique site that can be gained by those sailing through this route is the wonder of sailing under the East Bridge of the Great Belt link. While this is not the bridge connecting Norway and Denmark (this is the Oresund Bridge, further east), it is a fascinating site and a popular vision amongst those cruising the area.

Whether you travel via sea or by the canal, both arrive in the Bornholm basin in the south of the Baltic. The Baltic Sea is surrounded by fantastic ports and beautiful scenery, none more so than the iconic sail into Stockholm. The route through the 37 mile across Archipelago winds between stunning Nordic islands, many of which are uninhabited, making for one of the most entrancing sail ins and sail aways in the cruise world. A cosmopolitan city itself, Stockholm is also a beautiful place...
for excursions and you would be hard pressed to find an itinerary that did not take in this stunning capital. To the east of the sea, the Baltic states of Latvia, Estonia & Lithuania all present opportunities for cruise ships, but no place more than the Estonian capital, Tallinn. One of the top 10 digital cities in the world, but also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Tallinn has it all, but its separation of the old walled town and new modern city means it is exceptionally popular as a cruise port as it feels much smaller than it is. For many the jewel of a Baltic cruise and the most popular port is St. Petersburg. Russia’s most westernised city and without a doubt its cultural capital, St. Petersburg, is full of fascinating buildings, particularly the Rococo façade of the Winter Palace and Hermitage complex. The Hermitage itself contains a fascinating mix of art encompassing a time period from the ancient Egyptians to the modern day – the majority of which was collected by Catherine the Great. Founded by Peter the Great, it has often been renowned as a revolutionary city and between 1905 and 1917, much of which was led by Vladimir Lenin (later to give the city his name), witnessed great changes in Russian political history, hence becoming ‘the city of the three revolutions.’

History

Unlike much of Europe, the Baltic was never reached by the Roman Empire, whose limit extended only into Northern Europe and the Netherlands, where they were often met by marauding Germanic tribes, leading to an uneasy border in the region for many years. The Baltic was known by the Romans and referred to in the works of many great historians such as Tacitus – however during this period the area was by no means quiet with Scandinavia and the surrounding Baltic states being settled in some form since at least 10,000 BC.

With the prevalence of the Norse culture in Scandinavia and the Baltic, Christianity took much longer to catch on, however in time it did and by the time of the Viking invasion of Britain, they were led by their first Christian kings. However, despite 200 years of raiding Northern Europe before the rise of Christianity in the region, the Viking culture are much better known for invading Britain, meaning there is not a huge deal of Norse history or culture present in the north of Europe in the modern age. What we now know as the Baltic states in particular were some of the last in Europe to convert to Christianity, however despite this the region, along with much of Northern Europe, was soon to become one of the most powerful economic forces in Europe under the control of the Hanseatic League. Ironically, despite the characteristic military strength of the Norse culture, which for so many years had kept it separate from Europe, the crippling economic sanctions laid on by the Hansa, especially through control of the trade routes running from the North Sea to the Eastern Baltic, brought the newly formed Norway to its knees, leading to a distinct lack of the Feudal classes that defined mainland Europe.

As the Hanseatic League broke up into individual states the battle for control of the Baltic became more intense. Over a period of 5 centuries trade in the Baltic was intermittently monopolised by Poland, Denmark and Sweden before finally
being dominated for many years by the strong naval power of the Dutch. While the Dutch held control of trade for one of the longest consecutive periods, driven by the need for Baltic supplies to fuel their Empire building, the arrival of the Russians and the founding of St. Petersburg brought a new superpower to the region and between then and the gradual secession of the Baltic states, the majority of the Eastern Baltic was controlled by Russia. It therefore became a key battleground in the Crimean War and World Wars I & II. The Baltic states finally achieved independence in the 90's and since their joining of the EU in the mid-2000's, all but the small Russian east coast and the exclave of Kaliningrad are now EU member states.

Meanwhile, in Norway, the country was still weak from the hangover of its debt to the Hanseatic League. For 400 years Norway was not an independent country, going through unions first with Denmark and then with Sweden. The country negotiated its peaceful independence in the early 1900s and soon appointed their first king in nearly 600 years, Haakon VII. However, nearly as soon as they gained independence they were plunged back into war as a key stronghold in the fight for control of the strategically important Baltic Sea. For both World War I and World War II, Norway proclaimed itself neutral, yet this backfired terribly in 1940 when the German’s invaded and took control for 5 years, until with British help they claimed back their land. The now traditional Fir Christmas Tree delivered to Trafalgar Square in London annually is a continuous thanks from the Norwegian Royal family for the assistance rendered by the UK during this time. Since the end of the war, the increase in demand for oil has driven Norway from pauper state to a high level of economic stability, albeit with a high level of tax.

Cuisine
As this is a particularly large region, styles of cooking vary hugely from West to East. In Holland and Germany, much of the cuisine is similar to the UK and dependent on the practices of agriculture, livestock farming and fishing, with the cultivation of the potato being particularly key. In Norway, Sweden and Denmark much of the food is based on raw or preserved materials found in the rich landscape, such as fish & game. The long winters common to this region have led to this culture of conserved materials and the general norm is for one warm meal a day and two cold additions. The rise of smoked salmon’s popularity in the Western world is the one key addition that the Nordic style of cuisine has brought, although the preserved dishes like pickled herring, gravadlax and lutefisk (lyed fish) have all gained mildly significant popularity across the globe. While meat is less common, Norwegian and Swedish meatballs (quite possibly made famous in the UK by Ikea...) are also very popular dishes.

Finally, in the Baltic, cuisine is closer to the Russian and Polish styles of food - Rye bread, pork and potatoes are exceptionally common, much of which is likely to be washed down with Vodka. The majority of ‘Russian’ vodka is now produced using water from the Baltic states and bottled in the region. However, with its location on the shores of the Baltic Sea, there are a number of very popular fish dishes and all three of the Baltics national dishes are fish based.