

# So happy to see you: The European countries that want you to visit

*In these under-the-radar destinations, travellers are most welcome.*



The port town of Saranda in Albania is a short ferry ride from Corfu.

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It can happen as you are taking a stroll in Paris, Venice or Barcelona. There you are, walking down a boulevard (or a *calle* or *carrer*), soaking in the local atmosphere when you hear it: the unmistakeable chatter of a group of fellow Aussies wandering past.

In Vilnius, that is unlikely to happen. Lithuania's leafy capital attracts a modest 1.2 million tourists a year, and last year only 4000 of them were Australians, according to the head of tourism at Go Vilnius, Vilma Daubarienė.

It's a number that she hopes to change but, before she can help Australians understand what the city offers, she has to help them work out where it is.

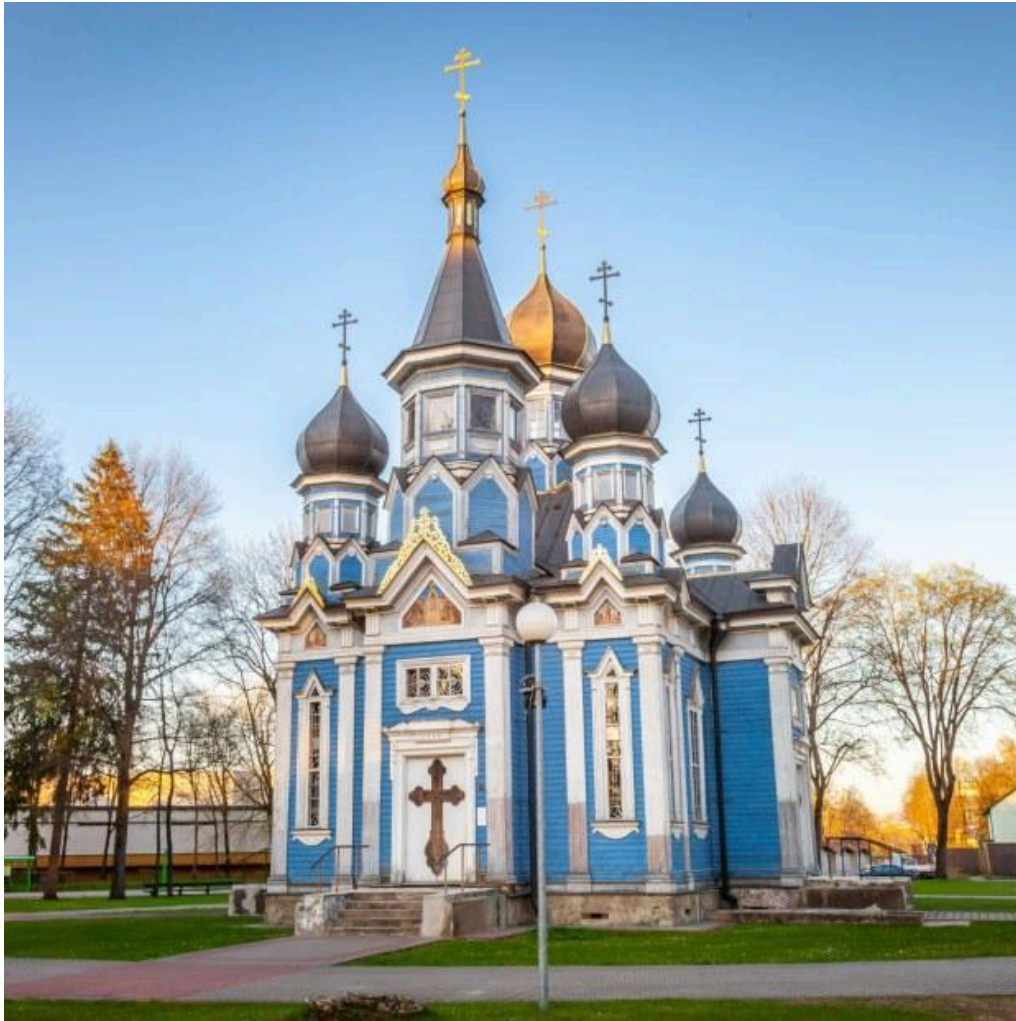


Trakai medieval castle on an island in Lake Galvė in Lithuania. **Getty Images**

“Located in northern Europe, Vilnius experiences classic snowy winter and enjoys pleasant, cool summers,” she explains. “With its relaxed atmosphere, green spaces, rich history and growing reputation for culture and cuisine, it has plenty to offer adventurous Australian travellers.”

Aussies who head to Vilnius will find a compact capital (population: 540,000) distinguished from other north European cities by its open space – about 61 per cent of the city consists of green areas including forest-like parks. (Appropriately, Vilnius has been named this year’s European Green Capital.) It has 100 kilometres of green walking trails, as well as kayaking and stand-up paddleboarding on the Neris River.

Favourite events include the National Song Festival, which draws 37,000 musicians and around 70,000 spectators, and the Vilnius Pink Soup Fest, an exuberant celebration of Lithuania’s beloved cold beetroot soup. The Michelin guide has bestowed stars on a handful of eateries, including two farm-to-table restaurants housed in a former palace.



An Orthodox church in the spa town of Druskininkai, Lithuania. **Alamy**

And beyond the city lie Lithuania's other attractions: the seaside towns of the Curonian Spit, the mineral-rich waters of Druskininkai and Birštonas, and the city of Kaunas, which has a World Heritage listing for its modernist architecture.

Even as parts of Europe hit peak tourism, [Lithuania is a reminder that the Continent still has underexplored pockets](#) – places where tourists are not just tolerated but welcomed. Countries such as Lithuania and its neighbouring Baltic Sea countries, Latvia and Estonia, along with Central European nations such as Romania, and Balkan states including Albania and Montenegro, combine fascinating histories with spectacular natural landscapes – not to mention terrific value for money.

So why aren't we visiting? The biggest issue is awareness, says Tom Wilkinson of tour operator Explore Worldwide. "All these places had periods of complete blackout," he explains. The Baltic states spent most of the second half of the century under Soviet domination; Montenegro was part of Serbia until 2006; while Romania and Albania both suffered under their own homegrown dictators for decades.



Now these countries are tapping into tourism as an important potential source of revenue, investing in infrastructure and campaigning to raise awareness among travellers – although some are still more suited to adventurous visitors than luxury lovers.



The colourful houses in Nida on Lithuania's Curonian Spit. **Alamy**

“Some countries have accelerated far faster than others,” cautions Wilkinson.

The Baltic states have long offered comfort levels similar to those in Western Europe, but even somewhere like Romania is pushing forward quickly.

“There has been a real upswell,” says Raluca Spiac of luxury travel company Beyond Dracula. “A lot of the [accommodation] we use didn’t exist when the company started in 2013, and the opening this year of the [Corinthia](#) hotel in Bucharest is, in my view, the city’s first true five-star property.”

The region of Transylvania has long been Romania’s biggest draw. Travellers lured by the legend of Dracula often find themselves falling for the area’s magnificent landscapes and picturesque towns such as Brasov.

Now the northern region of Bucovina, known for its colourfully painted monasteries, is undergoing a revival. Young Romanians who have worked abroad are returning to raise their children at home, bringing life back to a region that was stagnating.



The historical centre of Brasov in Transylvania, Romania. **Getty Images**

“Bucovina is great for travellers who are interested in tradition,” Spiac says, highlighting the week leading up to Easter as a time rich with rituals, from egg-painting to Easter feasts. Her guests are hosted by a local couple in three houses on their property.

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“You have your privacy, but otherwise it’s like a family stay, so they’re cooking for you with produce from their garden. It’s a very authentic experience.”

For those seeking authenticity, Albania is a must-visit, according to Sean Martin of G Adventures. “I think of the Balkans as Europe’s last frontier. For people looking for new destinations who are mindful about their impact, Albania is a wonderful place, with incredible hiking, kayaking and biking,” he says.





Theth in Northern Albania. **Getty Images**

“It’s more affordable than a lot of destinations and you have some of the most beautiful Alpine scenery around, with glacial lakes and lush valleys. And the people are very friendly, very welcoming. They want tourists to be there.

“Things don’t always go to plan, but that’s one of the most beautiful things about it. And when you return home, you remember what you did every single day, every sight, every smell, every feeling.”

Sometimes a small dose of chaos helps visitors understand a destination. “The traffic in Tirana is a little chaotic but a few decades ago you were only allowed a car if you were part of the top echelon in the ruling party,” Wilkinson explains. “Now everyone can have a car, and that’s why it’s chaotic.”



Theth Village, Thethi, in the Albanian Alps. **Alamy**

The pay-off for putting up with a little chaos, however, is huge. Albania has an extraordinary range of destinations within its borders, including four World Heritage-listed sites ranging from the ancient Greek ruins at Butrint to the 13th-century Berat Castle.

Other civilisations that have left their mark include the Ottomans. The picturesque hill town of Gjirokastër may have a history dating back 2500 years, but it's the Ottoman architecture – including a traditional bazaar and around 600 striking Ottoman manor houses – that has scored the city's old town a World Heritage listing.

Elsewhere, the pastel-painted buildings and elegant squares of Shkodër have a distinctly Italian feel, while the communist-era nuclear bunkers that sprouted right across the country add to the country's distinctive character.

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Travelling around Albania can be challenging. "Accommodations can vary and, once you've left Tirana, you probably won't find anyone who speaks English," Wilkinson says, noting that travelling with a small group is a way to avoid potential pitfalls. "If anything were to go slightly wrong [as an independent traveller], you're not really sure what you'd do about it."

The rough-around-the-edges charm of Albania is a world away from the overtourism that plagues the Balkans' most famous attraction, [the Croatian city of Dubrovnik](#). Yet Croatia still has plenty of lesser-known places worth visiting, according to Sharyn Kitchener, chair of Virtuoso's member advisory board in Australia and New Zealand.





Albania's Gjirokaster is famous for its traditional stone houses. **Getty Images**

“If people don’t want to do the busy side of Croatia, incorporating [the city of] Zagreb with, say, neighbouring Slovenia is an extremely good combination.”

[Then there is Montenegro](#), another neighbour of Croatia. The coastal city of Portonovi is becoming something of a yachting hub, complete with a One&Only hotel, but general manager Andreas Porias says the compact country offers much more than just a seaside escape. “We’re next to the sea but look out the other window and you’re looking at breathtaking mountain scenery. You can go for a swim in the morning and a hike in the mountains in the afternoon.





One & Only's Portonovi Hotel in Montenegro.

“Dubrovnik is 45 minutes away and yesterday I went to the 17th-century Ostrog Monastery, which is carved into the hillside and absolutely beautiful. It’s only an hour and a half away.”

In fact, many of Europe’s less-visited destinations are easier to reach than you might imagine, with close connections to better-known destinations. G Adventures runs a trip that traverses Albania north to south, ending on the Greek island of Corfu. Lithuania has good train connections to Poland. Romania is an easy train trip from Austria, Hungary or Bulgaria.

“The Corona train, [which] runs from Budapest to Brasov, has great sleeping cars and a full restaurant on board,” says Eurail’s Hugo van Vondelen.

That’s not the only thing that will appeal to train buffs. “Montenegro’s Bar to Belgrade railway – the Montenegro Express, Tito’s engineering marvel – is one of Europe’s most stunning train journeys, cutting through mountains and deep gorges,” says Eurail consultant Bart Giepmans.

In some countries, the rolling stock may be older, but for many that is part of the appeal. “There is a nostalgic charm to train travel here,” says Giepmans. “The slow pace and scenic routes add a touch of romance to the journey.”

## Need to know

- LITHUANIA | STAY Located in a 17th-century mansion on the edge of Vilnius' medieval Old Town, the contemporary-cool [Hotel Pacai](#) has restaurants and an underground spa. EXPLORE Ker & Downey offers custom itineraries to the Balkan states including Lithuania.
- ROMANIA | STAY Surrounded by Transylvania's vast forests, fortified churches and picturesque villages, [Bethlen Estates](#) consists of three immaculately restored guesthouses. EXPLORE [Beyond Dracula](#)'s bespoke tours are designed to match client interests, from cycling to wildlife, culture and history.
- ALBANIA | STAY Among the most stylish hotels on the Albanian Riviera, [Prado Luxury Hotel](#) in Himarë epitomises pared-back chic. EXPLORE [Explore Worldwide](#) offers six itineraries through Albania including trips focused on cycling and hiking.
- MONTENEGRO | STAY [One&Only Portonovi](#) brings some international glamour to Montenegro, thanks to collaborators such as architect Jean-Michel Gathy, chef Giorgio Locatelli and the wellness team at Chenot Espace. EXPLORE [Scott Dunn](#) consultants create itineraries that will take you from the beaches to the mountains, rafting down canyons and sailing through Europe's southern-most fjords.