

Jewels of the Baltics

Lithuania and Latvia

May 11–19, 2025

With optional post-tour extension
to Estonia, May 19–22, 2025




HIT
Heritage Tours
by American Ancestors


The Wyner Family
Jewish Heritage
Center™
at AMERICAN ANCESTORS

OVERVIEW

Situated in northern Europe along the shores of the Baltic Sea are the captivating countries of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, all with a storied past. On this tour specially designed for the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center at American Ancestors, we will explore Jewish heritage and culture and learn about the rich history of the Baltic states, accompanied by scholar Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller and other experts.

Our journey begins in Vilnius, once known as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania,” with more than 100 synagogues and some of Europe’s leading rabbinical and academic institutions. Prior to World War II, Lithuanian Jews were among the most influential members of society. We will explore Vilnius’s rich history on a walking tour of the charming Old Town and on a visit to the Trakai Island Castle. Next, we travel to Riga, the capital of Latvia and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Here, we will learn about Riga’s prominence in medieval Europe and the role Latvian Jews played in the flourishing economic and intellectual life of the country before the second world war. Highlights of our Riga stay include a special visit to the Jewish Museum for a summary of the region’s Jewish history and a visit to the Art Nouveau district to view the city’s mixture of medieval and elaborately ornamented buildings.

Those wishing to extend their journey will spend three nights in Estonia’s capital, Tallinn, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of Europe’s best-preserved medieval cities. Here, we will enjoy a walking tour of the Old Town with its mix of German, Scandinavian, and Russian architecture, as well as visits to the recently opened Beit Bela Synagogue and KUMU, one of the Baltic area’s most prestigious art museums.

Throughout the tour, we will learn from academic experts and local guides, stay in luxurious and centrally located accommodations, and enjoy delicious regional cuisine. Discover the allure of the Baltics through this immersion in landscape, architecture, culture, and memory.

ITINERARY

SUNDAY, MAY 11 | VILNIUS

Arrive in Vilnius, capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and transfer independently to the **Grand Hotel Vilnius, Curio Collection by Hilton** in Cathedral Square. (Rooms available for check-in after 3:00 PM.)

In the mid-afternoon we will gather for a guided walking tour of the Old Town, one of the largest surviving historic centers in Europe. Our evening begins with an orientation and presentation, “Vilna: The Cradle of Modern Jewish Civilization,” by Rabbi Seidler-Feller, followed by a welcome reception and dinner in our hotel.

MONDAY, MAY 12 | VILNIUS

This morning, we set off on foot for a walk with our expert local guide through the medieval Jewish quarter and former small and large ghettos. We will continue to the Choral Synagogue for a visit. The synagogue, built in 1903, is the only one in Vilnius that is still in use after all the others were destroyed either during World War II or by the Soviet authorities after the war.

After lunch, we will travel by coach to visit the oldest and largest Jewish cemetery (the final resting place of the Gaon of Vilna) and then to the historical site of the pre-war Jewish cemetery.



Vilnius, Lithuania



Choral Synagogue, Vilnius, Lithuania



Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum



Ohel Jakob Choral Synagogue, Kovno, Lithuania



Trakai Historical National Park, Lithuania



Kaunas Old Town

This evening, our scholar will present a talk, “Hasidim and Their Lithuanian Opponents: The Legacy of R. Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna,” followed by dinner on your own. A list of recommended nearby restaurants will be provided.

TUESDAY, MAY 13 | VILNIUS | KAUNAS | ZHEZHMAR

This morning we depart by coach for Kaunas (also known as Kovno) and take a walk through the Old Town. We will visit the Ohel Jakob Choral Synagogue founded in 1871. Before the Holocaust, this radically designed, neo-Baroque temple was one of more than 35 synagogues and Jewish prayer houses in Kaunas. Though few Jews remain here, the synagogue houses a stunning Torah ark and encapsulates the rich and illustrious history of Jewish Kovno. Now a museum, the building also contains collections of historical artifacts related to Soviet and Nazi atrocities. Then we continue to the Sugihara House, dedicated to the Japanese consul Chiune Sugihara who, in 1940, and against official guidance, issued several thousand transit visas to Jews fleeing the advancing Nazis.

After lunch, we will head back to Vilnius, stopping en route at the former shtetl of Zhezhmar. Here, a wooden synagogue has been reconstructed and is used as a local cultural center today.

Back in Vilnius this evening, we will dine at a local restaurant.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 14 | VILNIUS | TRAKAI

This morning we travel west to **Trakai Historical National Park**, stopping en route at **Paneriai Forest** to view the memorial site commemorating the killings of more than 100,000 Jews during the Holocaust. Trakai Historical National Park encompasses a wooded lake area with castles and the historic town of **Trakai**, the ancient capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania developed in the 13th century.

In town, we will have a private tour of the **Karaite Ethnographic Museum** which traces the ancestry of the Karaites, an ancient sect and offshoot of Judaism whose descendants arrived in Trakai from the Crimea in the 14th century. There were once a few hundred Karaim families living in Trakai. Now, fewer than 250 Karaim people live in Lithuania, mostly in the area around Vilnius and Trakai.

After lunch with a view of the lake and the castle, we will have a private guided tour of the **Gothic Trakai Island Castle**, considered a masterpiece of medieval defensive architecture and one of the few monuments in the former Soviet Union to have been fully restored during the Soviet period. It’s the only castle built on water in Eastern Europe and houses a collection of exhibits about the history of Lithuania. Finally, we will embark on a private boat to cruise **Lake Galvė**, one of the deepest lakes in Lithuania, to experience the castle from a different perspective.

This evening we’ll enjoy another presentation, “Who Were/Are the Karaites? Are They Jews? How Have They Influenced the Development of Judaism?” by our scholar. Dinner is on your own.

THURSDAY, MAY 15 | VILNIUS

Accompanied by our local expert, we’ll depart our hotel on foot to continue our Old Town explorations, including the Gothic quarter and the Gate of Dawn, built between 1503 and 1522 as a part of the defensive fortifications for the city. Then we will visit the recently-opened new branch of the **Vilnius Jewish Museum**. The remainder of the afternoon will be on your own to explore the city.

Our educational program continues this evening with a lecture, “How Latvian Activists Launched the Movement to Free Soviet Jews,” and dinner on our own.

FRIDAY, MAY 16 | RIGA

This morning, we’ll check out of The Grand Hotel Kempinski and travel 185 miles north to **Riga**, the capital of Latvia and a UNESCO World Heritage site. After crossing the Latvian border, we’ll stop at **Rundāle Palace**, considered the grandest home in the Baltics and a true gem of Baroque and Rococo architecture. It was built as a summer residence for Ernst Johann Biron, Duke of Courland, who was a favorite of the Russian empress Anna Ioannovna. Here, we will have a special private guided tour and lunch.

In the late afternoon, we will check in to the **Grand Palace Hotel**. After time to unpack and relax, we will meet for Shabbat dinner at our hotel.

SATURDAY, MAY 17 | RIGA

The morning is at leisure to relax, explore Riga Castle, St. Peter’s Church and the city’s medieval historic center, and/or attend Shabbat services at Peitav Shul. In the afternoon we will set off on a guided walking tour of historic **Old Riga**, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site with its elaborately ornamented Art Nouveau buildings. We will visit the **Riga Art Nouveau Museum**, the only museum in the Baltic States dedicated to Art Nouveau heritage, which was built in 1903 as the private home of the famous Latvian architect Konstantīns Pēkšēns. The façade of the monumental building boasts ornamental reliefs and stylized motifs of plants and animals common in Latvia. The impressive spiral staircase is considered one of the most magnificent masterpieces in Europe.

The remainder of the day is on your own. A list of recommended nearby restaurants will be provided.

SUNDAY, MAY 18 | RIGA

This morning will begin with a private director-led tour of Riga’s **Jewish Community Center and Museum**. The museum is dedicated to the history of Latvia’s Jewish community from the first Jews in the territory in the 16th century to the tragic events of Holocaust. We will also visit **Peitav Shul**, Riga’s synagogue, with our local guide.

After lunch on our own in Old Town, we will explore the “**Moscow District**,” the former ghetto area with the Great Synagogue memorial and the old Jewish Cemetery. Along the cobblestone streets in this area, wooden homes stand next to old buildings and churches and Soviet-era housing estates.

We will end our day at the **Žanis Lipke Museum**, a modern, interactive museum that tells the little-known tale of Žanis Lipke and the small network of people who created an “underground railroad” to rescue Jews during the Nazi occupation of Latvia. Constructed next to the site where the Lipke family hid Jews saved from the ghetto, this memorial has been ingeniously designed by prominent Latvian architect Zaiga Gaile.

Tonight, we will gather for our farewell dinner to celebrate our journey through the Baltics.

MONDAY, MAY 19 | DEPARTURE / OPTIONAL EXTENSION

The main tour ends after breakfast this morning. After checkout from the hotel, those on the optional extension will continue to Tallinn. Checkout time for those leaving from Riga is at noon.



Riga, Latvia



Riga Art Nouveau Museum



Žanis Lipke Museum



Towers, Tallinn, Estonia

OPTIONAL EXTENSION TO TALLINN

May 19 – 22, 2024

For those joining the trip’s optional extension, we will depart Riga and travel through the arboreal countryside to **Tallinn**, Estonia. Along the way, we will stop for lunch in the southwestern seaside town of **Pärnu** at a restaurant renowned for its cuisine and its early Art Nouveau style.

Our coach will then continue to the charming 5-star centrally-located **Hotel Telegraaf**, our home for three nights. In the evening we will have dinner together at a local restaurant close to our hotel.

TUESDAY, MAY 20 | TALLINN

This morning we travel by coach to the spectacular **Kumu Art Museum**, whose mission is to preserve and interpret Estonian art from the 18th century to the present. Here, we’ll have a private guided tour that encompasses the building’s award-winning architecture and the highlights of its permanent collection. In 2008, it received the prestigious European Museum of the Year Award. There will be time to explore the shop before lunch together in a local restaurant.

Next, our local guide will lead us on a walking tour of **Old Town**, including Town Hall Square, Toompea Castle, Dominican Monastery, and Alexander Nevsky Cathedral (a magnificent example of a Russian Revival cupola cathedral). Along the way, we’ll stop for a guided tour of the **Niguliste Museum**, housed in St. Nicholas’ Church built in the 13th century. It is one of the few museums in northern Europe located in a former church building, where ecclesiastical art can be enjoyed in its historical context. The stars of the museum’s collection of medieval and early modern ecclesiastical art are the late medieval altarpieces from northern Germany and the Netherlands, and Bernt Notke’s painting *Danse Macabre* from the late 15th century.

The remainder of the afternoon and evening is at leisure. A list of local restaurants will be provided.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 21 | TALLINN

This morning we’ll visit Tallinn’s architecturally fascinating and modern **Beit Bela Synagogue** and the adjoining museum. We will have an introduction from one of the members of the Tallinn Jewish community and a private guided tour of its museum, housed in the Jewish Community Centre next door. Lunch and the rest of the afternoon are on your own for last-minute shopping or to explore the city.

Tonight we’ll end the tour with a festive farewell dinner in our hotel.

THURSDAY, MAY 22

Following breakfast and check-out, transfer to the airport for flights home.



Old Town Tallinn, Estonia

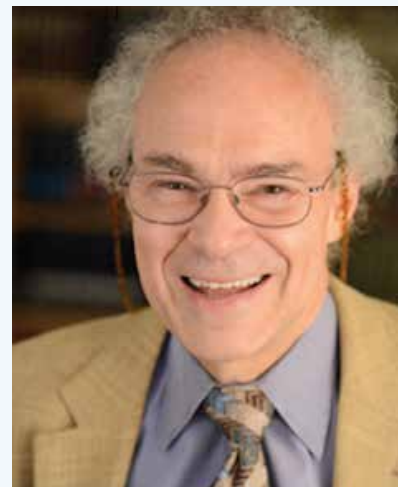


Beit Bela Synagogue, Tallinn, Estonia

SCHOLAR

CHAIM SEIDLER-FELLER

Chaim Seidler-Feller recently celebrated his fortieth year of working with students and faculty as the executive director of the Hillel Center for Jewish Life at UCLA. Currently director emeritus, he also serves as director of the Hartman Fellowship for Campus Professionals. An ordained rabbi, he also completed a master's degree in rabbinic literature. Chaim has been a lecturer in the Departments of Sociology and Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at UCLA and in the Department of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University. He is also a faculty member of the Shalom Hartman Institute, North America, and of the Wexner Heritage Foundation, and he was rabbinic consultant to Barbra Streisand during the making of the film *Yentl*. The International Hillel Center has granted Chaim the Hillel Professional Recognition Award "for blending the love of Jewish tradition with the modern intellectual approach of the university." Chaim will be joined by his wife, Dr. Doreen Seidler-Feller.



ACCOMMODATIONS



GRAND HOTEL VILNIUS, CURIO COLLECTION BY HILTON

The distinctive Grand Hotel Vilnius, Curio Collection by Hilton is located on Cathedral Square and features breathtaking views over Vilnius's UNESCO-listed Old Town. Within walking distance are major attractions, including the Presidential Palace, the main shopping street of Gedimino Boulevard, galleries, and more.



THE GRAND PALACE RIGA, RIGA

Originally built in 1877 as the Central Bank of Latvia, the Grand Palace Riga was converted into a boutique 5-star hotel in 2000. It offers a setting that encompasses luxury, warmth, and comfort. Voted Latvia's leading hotel, it is located in the heart of the sightseeing district of Riga's Old Town.



HOTEL TELEGAAF, TALLINN

Centrally located in the heart of Tallinn's historical Old Town, Hotel Telegraaf is an elegant 19th-century building with a stunning façade. Formerly a telephone exchange, it has been masterfully converted to a charming 5-star boutique hotel that provides the highest standards of accommodations and cuisine.

American Ancestors/New England Historic Genealogical Society is America's founding genealogical organization, the most respected name in family history, and one of the leading non-profit organizations in the field. We create enriching opportunities for members and the public to research their own family history, attend educational programs and tours, exhibitions, and other inspirational experiences that communicate the power and importance of family history.

The Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center (JHC) is an archive and educational center dedicated to preserving, exploring, and illuminating Jewish history and heritage. Through its programming and its archival collections specializing in New England Jewish history, the JHC engages researchers in the study of Jewish history, connects individuals and families with their heritage, and informs audiences of all backgrounds about the Jewish experience.

To learn more, visit AmericanAncestors.org and JewishHeritageCenter.org

PROGRAM DETAILS

TOUR PRICES

Main Tour

Tour Cost, based on double: \$7,950

Single Supplement: \$1,450

Tour price is per person, based on double occupancy, with a minimum of 12 paying participants.

Postlude to Tallinn, Estonia

Tour Cost, based on double: \$2,250

Single Supplement: \$400

Tour price is per person, based on double occupancy, with a minimum of 10 paying participants.

Deposit & Final Payment: A deposit of \$1,500 per person is required to reserve a spot on the tour at the time of booking. Deposits are payable by check or credit card (MasterCard, Visa, or American Express) to American Ancestors. Final balance will be invoiced and is due on January 11, 2025. Final balance payments are payable to Jewish Heritage Travel (JHT). Registrations will be accepted beyond this date on a space-available basis.

Activity Level: Moderate to active; good walking ability is advised. Some museum and palace visits require use of stairs and there will be considerable walking on cobbled and uneven ground.

Flights: Airfare is not included in the tour price. Participants are responsible for all aspects of their round-trip air arrangements. *Please do not purchase airline tickets until the operation of the tour is confirmed.*

Terms & Conditions: Upon receipt of registration, JHT will send registrant a Participant Tour Agreement detailing the full terms and conditions for this tour. This document must be signed and returned to JHT before participant's registration is considered complete and any arrangements can be confirmed.

Travel Insurance: Travel Insurance is not included in the tour cost, but participants are strongly encouraged to purchase a travel protection plan in conjunction with this tour, including coverage of trip cancellation, trip interruption, emergency evacuation/repatriation, medical expenses, lost or damaged baggage, and other expenses and/or losses incurred due to unexpected situations. Should a participant cancel at any time after registering for the tour, American Ancestors and JHT must strictly abide by the cancellation policy outlined herein. Travel insurance information will be sent upon tour registration.

Tour Price Inclusions: 5 nights' accommodation at the Grand Hotel Vilnius, Curio Collection by Hilton and 3 nights' accommodation at the Grand Palace Riga; breakfast daily at the hotel, 4 lunches, 4 dinners; wine or beer at included lunches and dinners; land transportation by private motor coach; entrance fees to sites and visits listed in the itinerary; leadership of Chaim Seidler-Feller and American Ancestors staff for duration of the tour; services of both JHT and American Ancestors tour

managers; expert local guides for all touring; gratuities for guides and drivers and at included meals; handling of 2 pieces of luggage per person upon arrival and departure from the hotel; bottled water on coach; service charges and taxes.

Extension Price Inclusions: 3 nights' accommodation at the Telegraaf Tallinn; breakfast daily at the hotel, 2 lunches, 2 dinners; wine or beer at included lunches and dinners; land transportation by private motor coach; entrance fees to sites and visits listed in the itinerary; leadership of American Ancestors staff for duration of the extension; services of a JHT and American Ancestors tour managers; expert local guides for all touring; gratuities for guides and drivers and at included meals; group departure airport transfer; handling of 2 pieces of luggage per person upon arrival and departure from the hotel; bottled water on coach; service charges and taxes.

Tour and Extension Price Exclusions: Airline tickets, airline taxes and surcharges, and baggage fees; airport portage; airport transfers upon arrival and departure; passport or visa fees; meals other than those specified in the itinerary; gratuities for hotel housekeeping; personal items such as telephone calls, room service, valet service, à-la-carte orders, specialty wines and liquors, laundry charges, travel extensions, or tour deviations; entry or departure fees levied by local governments; travel insurance; any other items not specifically included in the itinerary.

Cancellations & Refunds: Cancellation by participant must be made in writing to American Ancestors and is effective only upon acknowledged receipt by American Ancestors. There is a non-refundable registration and planning fee of \$500 per person regardless of cancellation date. Written cancellation received by American Ancestors on or before December 11, 2024: full refund minus \$500 per person registration and planning fee. Written cancellation received by American Ancestors between December 13, 2024 and January 11, 2025: full refund minus \$4,500 per person cancellation fee (includes registration and planning fee). Written cancellations received by American Ancestors on or after January 11, 2025: no refund. Tour registration is non-transferable. In the case of cancellation, substitutions are not allowed. After the tour has commenced, no refunds will be issued for any reason including, but not limited to, unused portions of tour. If the tour is cancelled by American Ancestors due to low enrollment, active registrants will receive a full refund of all tour payments.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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