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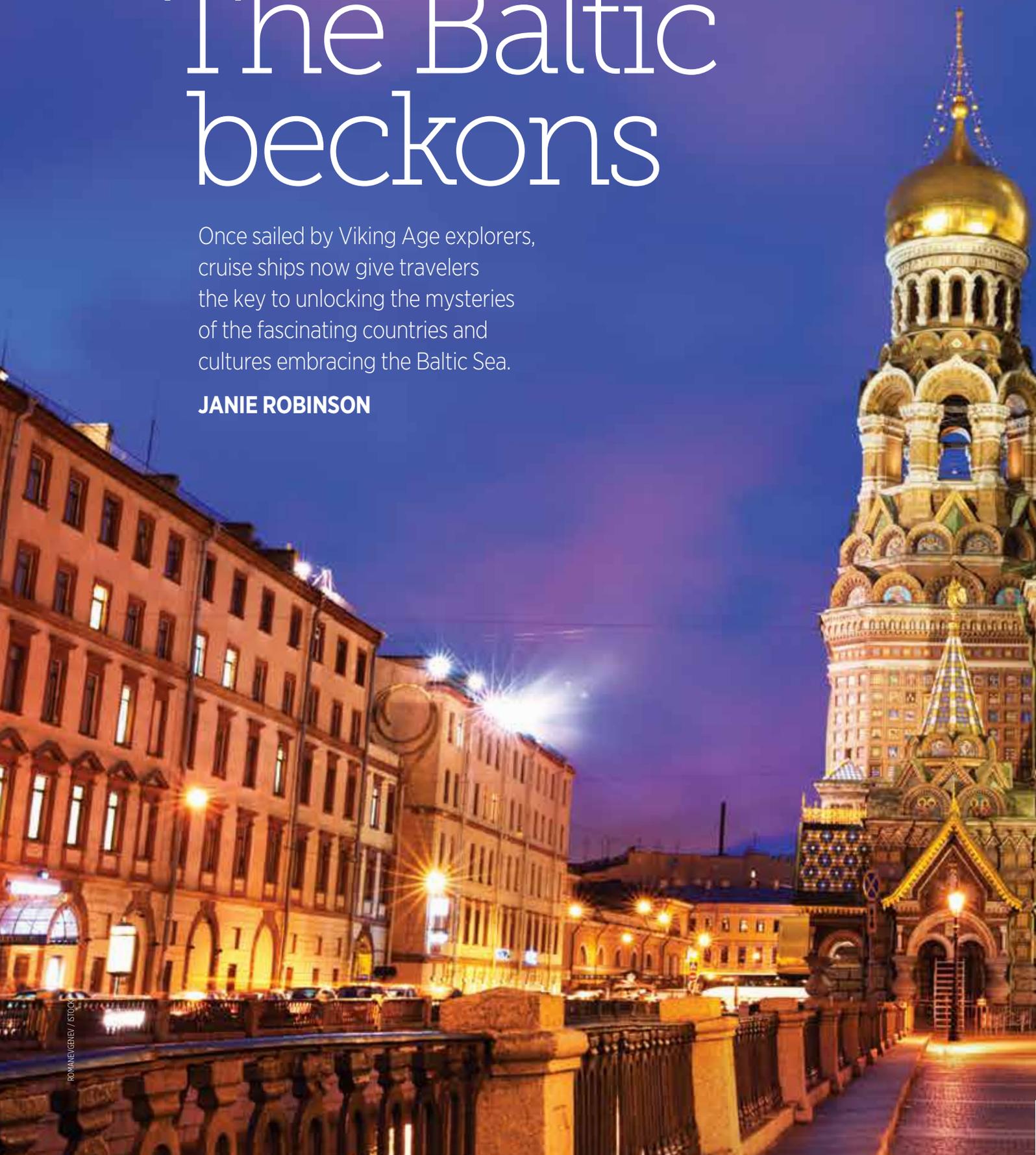
NEW CULTURES AND TIMELESS FAVORITES

ROMANCING EUROPEAN RAILS | REGATTA DAY IN VENICE

The Baltic beckons

Once sailed by Viking Age explorers, cruise ships now give travelers the key to unlocking the mysteries of the fascinating countries and cultures embracing the Baltic Sea.

JANIE ROBINSON





Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood,
Saint Petersburg, Russia



PHOTO COURTESY HOLLAND AMERICA



TUPPINGATO/ISTOCK



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The mournful call of the ship's horn

wakes me, not the early-dawn alarm I'd set on my travel clock so I wouldn't miss a second of our sail-in to Stockholm. Leaping from bed, grabbing my camera in one hand and my robe in the other, I shove open our balcony curtains to capture every moment of this morning's four-hour scenic journey through the world's largest archipelago.

Instead of Sweden's spectacular coastal scenery, a vast wall of white shrouds us in its murky gloom, our ship's fog horn an eerie call through the early morning mist.

"Sailing through the islands in Stockholm is one of my favorite places," says Captain Werner Timmers when I ask what he considers the highlights of this 12-night Baltic Adventure aboard Holland America Line's sophisticated *ms Eurodam*. "The Baltic always stands out for me and is one of my favorite areas to sail, especially Stockholm's stunning archipelago," says the well-traveled captain who has served on most of the "dam" ships since his apprentice year in 1984.

The Baltic beckons to me too, even with this pea-soup fog hanging around like a wet blanket on our early morning approach to Stockholm. From striking Scandinavian stops like Sweden's capital city and an overnight in spectacular Saint Petersburg, Russia, to cities like charming Tallinn, Estonia and once-divided, now-dynamic Berlin – both trapped for years behind the Iron Curtain – all were exciting cities I'd never experienced.

My husband, Brian, and I are still fairly new to cruising, and exploring the Baltic on the *ms Eurodam* is our very first experience with Holland America. From its vintage-style navy blue hull to classic decor, my first glimpse of the venerable ship is a romantic reminder of the old-world charm of cruising. This historic cruise line's first ship, *ms Rotterdam*, set sail on a voyage between Holland and New York in 1873.

Our twelve-night voyage begins in Copenhagen, Denmark, the gateway to the Baltic, and we sail away from this gracious gabled city under the wistful watch of the iconic Little Mermaid statue. All the ports on this cruise offer a different taste of unique European culture, some famous and others still a special travel secret for many of us: A day trip to Germany's vibrant capital city of Berlin is the excursion of choice when we dock at the quaint seaside town of Warnemunde while Estonia's captivating walled city of Tallinn surprises with a fairy-tale thicket of turrets, spires, and red rooftops rubbing shoulders with glass skyscrapers and shiny shopping malls.

Saint Petersburg is simply stunning. Even my wild imagination can't compare with the jaw-dropping grandeur of Russia's timeless imperial capital.

I've often pictured myself right here in the City of the Tsars, back in the 18th century glory days of Catherine and Peter the Great. I'd have lived in the Winter Palace and helped my good friend Catherine collect some of the stunning pieces of art that began the State Hermitage – one of the five largest museums in the world. The Easter-egg domes and mosaic masterpieces of the Church on the Spilled Blood would have been my backyard and I'd have whiled away the eternal twilight of Russia's White Nights, floating along the lovely labyrinth of rivers and canals that Peter the Great envisioned, turning this once desolate swampland into the "Venice of the North".

This page (clockwise from top left):

Holland America's *ms Eurodam*.

Women walk past a graffiti art-covered preserved section of the Berlin wall.

Aerial view of the old town, Tallinn, Estonia.

Facing page:

The magnificent Jordan Staircase of the Hermitage Museum Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg.





JANIE ROBINSON



PHOTO COURTESY HOLLAND AMERICA



TUNART / ISTOCK

This page (clockwise from top left):

Canadian Tony Irace, cellar master in Eurodam's Pinnacle Grill.

Asian-fusion cuisine from Tamarind Restaurant.

Shore excursions included experiences like world-class Russian ballet.

Facing page:

A calm morning sailing through Stockholm's Archipelago.

Outdoor cafés in Stockholm's medieval Stortorget Square.

Still... here I am in real life, standing on the eastern tip of Vasilyevsky Island where the Neva River flows through the historic heart of this iconic city. The birthplace of Saint Petersburg at St. Peter and Paul's Fortress stands sentinel across the river to my left. The gleaming spire of the Admiralty, opulent St. Isaac's Cathedral and world-famous Hermitage are to my right. No matter what direction I turn, there's a perfectly framed view of something spectacular in this "come and explore me" melting pot of old Russian traditions and contemporary European ambitions.

Even Saint Petersburg's subway stations are stunning. They were designed to be "palaces to the people", lined with artwork, amazing mosaics and statues peering out amidst the marble columns. While we stop to admire the palatial elegance of Zvenigorodskaya station, stern-faced locals push past, seemingly oblivious to their striking subterranean surroundings in the rush of everyday city life.

After spending two tantalizing days dipping my toes into surprising Saint Petersburg, I'm already plotting my return to this dazzling living museum. I could have spent days in just the Hermitage alone but a Baltic cruise allows the perfect first visit to this beautiful bucket-list destination. Cruise ship guests staying less than 72 hours and on accredited tours, don't need a Russian visa and Holland America offers an extensive three-page list of shore excursions – day tours filled with sightseeing and shopping and breathtaking evening experiences like world-class Russian ballet.

Setting sail for Helsinki, we sample "Flavors of the Baltic" at the Culinary Arts Center, learning how to prepare Beef Stroganoff and Deviled Eggs with Caviar. Holland America is known for its attention to the culinary arts, both with its show kitchens and its variety of dining venues. Canaletto is a family-style Italian dining option, the Asian-fusion Tamarind our personal favorite, and the Cellarmaster's Dinner at the Pinnacle Grill is one of the finest meals and wine pairings we've ever had. "Learning about wine should be fun and not pretentious," says cellar master and fellow-Canadian Tony Irace. "My father always said he would rather eat dinner without a fork than without wine," says the engaging sommelier, talking us through each delicious course and its perfectly paired wine in Eurodam's signature fine dining venue.

After the foggy early morning approach offered by Mother Nature, the *ms Eurodam* docks in Sweden's sunny capital, offering two whole days to explore this colorful cosmopolitan city with the medieval heart and hopefully to discover some of Stockholm's local secrets too. A favorite turns out to be having a fika in charming old town. The Swedes have been doing it for over a century and even have their own word for this local tradition. "To fika" means enjoying a beverage with a tasty baked treat in a neighborhood bakery or cozy cafe.

Local ferries take us almost everywhere we want to go in this city of islands, and we often hop off and on in a crush of daily commuters. We rub shoulders with workers



“The Baltic always stands out for me and is one of my favorite areas to sail, especially Stockholm’s stunning archipelago.”
— Captain Werner Timmers, *ms Eurodam*

on their lunch break inside a popular local food hall to sample traditional Swedish husmanskost favorites like smoked reindeer heart, cured salmon and scrumptious Belon oysters from the West Coast of Sweden. Thanks to a tip from a friendly, young Swede, we catch the sun kissing Stockholm goodnight from the cliffside Fjällgatan’s Kaffestuga café in the lofty, trendy Södermalm district.

Holland America’s wide range of shore excursions offers everything from exploring Stockholm by boat, bike, and even a rooftop walk, to amazing museums for ABBA lovers or history-buffs, including our top pick, the stunning Swedish battleship in the Vasa Museum. The Vasa was salvaged after three centuries on the ocean floor, with an amazing more than 95 percent of the ship still intact, making it the world’s only preserved 17th century ship and the most visited museum in Scandinavia.

It’s hard to say goodbye to this lively and livable Swedish city but sailing out of Stockholm is everything Captain Timmers promises. Locals give us friendly waves back from their charming island homes and cottages as the stately *ms Eurodam* cruises through the photogenic archipelago on its return voyage to the storybook city of Copenhagen.

IF YOU GO Holland America’s new cruise ship, *ms Koningsdam*, is sailing the Baltic from Amsterdam this summer, with two 14-day itineraries in June and September. For *ms Koningsdam*’s summer itineraries and all of Holland America Line’s 2016 Baltic sailings, see your travel agent or visit www.hollandamerica.com.

