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Travels with AIACE Finland

AIACE Finland has traditionally organized trips abroad for its members and their companions. Every year, there is normally a short trip, 3 nights, to a neighbouring or close by country and another longer one, 6-7 nights, to a European destination further away. The Covid pandemic imposed a break of some 2 years, but travelling has now resumed with increased interest.

In 2023, AIACE Finland organized two short trips to Tartu, Estonia, and a longer one to Galicia, Spain. All were very popular and successful, attracting some 30-35 members and companions on each trip.

Two trips to Tartu, Estonia

The trips to Tartu were organized in April and August with similar programmes. Tartu is an important town for Finland's history: the Treaty of Tartu between Finland and Soviet Russia was signed there on 14 October 1920 confirming the new border between the two countries

after the Finnish Civil War. Tartu is also important in the EU context as it is going to be one of the European Capitals of Culture in 2024. We decided to have a sneak peek into it.

We travelled to Tartu first by ferry and then continued by bus. During our bus trip, we learned a lot about Estonia and Estonians from our knowledgeable guide. In Tartu, we first visited Tampere Maja, the centre for cultural cooperation between the twin cities of Tampere and Tartu, where we got more information about Estonia and its history. The following morning, an Estonian pensioner joined the first group, and we visited the Estonian National Museum, a work of bold modern architecture erected on an old Soviet-era military airfield. In the afternoon, we had a city tour of Tartu and later visited the beautiful neo-classical main building of Tartu University. After a general presentation of the university, we climbed to the attic to see the cell where badly behaved students were locked up to reflect on their misdeeds.





The highlight of our university visit was meeting professor emerita Marju Lauristin, 83 years, who is also an Estonian politician, ex-Minister of Social Affairs, and former member of the European Parliament. She brought us up to date with the programme of the new Estonian government, the status of Russian speakers in Estonia and Ukrainian refugees. What an amazing lady!

The last morning, we had some spare time and visited the Market Hall, the famous coffee house Kohvik Werner and other sights in the city centre. This short trip had sparked such an interest in Estonia that new Estonian travel destinations were already being planned during the return trip. Is it going to be Narva next?

The tour and contacts with Estonian pensioners showed how the countries work together. We hope to meet all Aiaceans in Helsinki and Tallinn in the coming years.

Following pilgrims' footsteps in Galicia, Spain

The trip to Galicia took place in September. It started off in Porto, Portugal, due to its better connections for international flights. A total of 35 AIACE Finland members and their companions from Finland and other EU countries gathered there. The first night was spent in Porto, where we were invited to a cosy dinner by a Finnish-Portuguese family in their beautiful old villa Quinta do Castelo Maria. Before dinner we had a chance to visit their gardens with hundreds of different plants. A lovely surprise was also meeting Ms Anu Patrakka, Finnish detective story writer who lives in Portugal and gave us a good introduction to Portugal and its people.

The following morning our bus headed towards La Coruña on the northwest coast of Spain. On our way we visited Pazo de Rubianes, a centuries old manor house with beautiful camelia gardens.

La Coruña is an old fishing port that features beautifully restored buildings with glass covered balconies, *galerias coruñesas*. During the next couple of days, we saw some of the main sights of La Coruña: the town square with its statue of Maria Pita, university, and the tower of Hercules. On the following days, on our excursions to the Rias Altas area and Fisterra we admired the magnificent green scenery of the Galician coast, saw many *horreos* (granaries built in stone or wood, raised from the ground), learned about the superstitions of local people and even tried out a short *camino*.

One of the main themes of the trip was Galician gastronomy. It is rich in seafood: we had mussels, clams, cuttlefish, squid, octopus, hake, tuna, angler and many more, not to mention scallops, the symbol of pilgrims. And a special mention should go to regional cheese. All these were washed down with local wine, of which Albariño wines are the most famous. In La Coruña we also visited the Estrella de Galicia brewery, where we got a thorough introduction to the making of beer and had a tasting session of different types of beer matched with local cheese.

Our final destination in Galicia was its capital, Santiago de Compostela. This town with its impressive cathedral is also the main destination for thousands of pilgrims who arrive there daily. It is also an old university town, whose university dates back to 1495. The main square is lively with pilgrims, students, tourists, *gaita* (Galician bagpipe) players and *tunas* (student bands). We visited the cathedral and the lively market hall, and wandered around the town's cobbled streets, admiring its old architecture.

After a couple of days in Santiago de Compostela it was time to head back to Porto and home. This popular trip will be repeated for our members in May 2024.