

Baltic States destination for local LEAD study residents

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Travelers warm up to culture, experience despite winter in former Soviet countries.

Shannon Peterson and Greg Feather of Gothenburg boarded a plane in Omaha on Jan. 8 in subzero temperatures only to fly to a part of the world with as much cold and snow as Nebraska.

The two Nebraska LEAD fellows, along with 27 others, were also traveling to an area they knew little about—the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania that gained independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991.

The states are at the same latitude as Alaska.

Temperatures were a little warmer when the Nebraska LEAD fellows landed in Vilnius, Lithuania, but not much.

“Those countries were having the worst winter in 15 years with lots of snow and cold,” Peterson said. “But they don’t have the wind like we do here.”

Both Peterson and Feather said they were a little disappointed when they learned where they

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were going because of lack of knowledge about the countries and a wish for a trip to warmer climes. But they didn't feel let down at the end of the two-week trip.



"It was a very neat trip," Peterson said.

The international study/travel seminar is designed to create and provide a unique learning environment for Nebraska LEAD fellows to see and experience up close issues and events of other countries.

One of the highlights of the trip included a ferry ride from Tallinn, Estonia, to Helsinki, Finland.

They described the vessel as like an elaborate cruise ship that broke ice as they traveled across the Gulf of Finland.

"The ports are open but the sea is frozen," Peterson said.

The port of Riga in Latvia was also interesting, Peterson and Feather said.

"When Russia was in control, Riga was the largest exporter it had," Peterson said.

Today, she said United States officials use the port to ship supplies to Afghanistan where U.S. troops are stationed.

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Another of Peterson's favorite stops was a visit to farms in Lytagra, Lithuania, owned by an importer for Case New Holland. There were 1,200 milk cows, 1,000 pigs and 200 beef cows—all inside huge buildings.

Peterson was particularly interested since she's involved in a farm/ranch operation outside of Gothenburg.

Unlike U.S. ranchers, she said calving is year round. Lithuanian ranchers also don't have as many regulations as U.S. producers and what rules are in place are not strictly enforced.

Feather, a research assistant at Gothenburg's Monsanto breeding station, noted that the farms are big in the Baltic States with up to seven combines per operation.

Wheat, rapeseed, barley and some sugar beets are grown, mostly for consumption in an area with long growing days in the summer but virtually no to little daylight during the winter months.

"While we were there, we averaged about an hour a day of sunlight," Feather said.

That may have something to do with the suicide rate in Lithuania which is the highest in the world, he said.

Because of grants available from the European Union—to which the countries pay to belong—Peterson said beginning farmers under 40 years of age can receive up to \$100,000 to start agricultural operations.

Land is scarce, however, and heavily forested. Each of the three countries is about the size of Nebraska, Feather said.

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The European Union only allows 40,000 pounds of beef to be imported into member countries.

The group also toured a fur factory in Estonia where fox, mink and raccoon are raised in cages and harvested.

“There’s a lot of technology involved in their operation,” Feather said, noting that 90% of the foxes are artificially inseminated for color purposes.

Peterson said she was amazed at the age of the buildings the group saw and the gorgeous architecture.

“Our buildings are 100 to 200 years old and old for them is 800 to 900 years,” she said, adding that Estonia was probably her favorite country because of its ancient buildings and fascinating architecture.

Both also mentioned how cities are built around town squares and how snow is not removed during the winter.

In fact, in Tartu, Estonia, snow is piled in the middle of the town square so children can have a winter playground.

Feather thought it interesting how precious freedom seems to people in the Baltic States.

Under Soviet rule, he said Estonia was the only country that was allowed to keep more of its culture and language.

Before one can become an Estonia citizen, Feather said he or she has to speak and understand its language.

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Besides the United States, Peterson pointed out that Estonia is the largest per capita donor to the war in Iraq.

When it comes to health care in Estonia, Peterson said everyone is covered and the majority of people seem to like it.

Maternity leave for a mother or father is up to three years with the previous year's salary divided into one third for each year.

Because of declining birth rates, she said financial incentives exist to have more kids.

While in the Baltic States, the group visited the U.S. Embassies in all three countries.

The Nebraska LEAD program includes men and women active in production agriculture and agribusiness and is a two-year leadership development program under the direction of the Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council in cooperation with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

The group also took a national study trip to Kansas City, Washington D.C., and Chicago.

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