

editorial

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There is a certain advantage to living on the edge of things. Sometimes it pays to keep a little distance from the frenzied buzz of metropolitan affairs. Nicolaus Copernicus, the talented early sixteenth century polymath, studied in Kraków, Rome, Bologna and Padua. But it was only when he went to the Baltic outpost of Frombork that he fully formulated his thesis that the Earth might not, after all, be at the very centre of the universe. Peripherality often breeds a very valuable perspective.

Folk here in Frombork know a thing or two about life on Europe's periphery. The last train stopped at Frombork's railway station in March this year. Now the rails just rust. The Russian port city of Kaliningrad is just sixty kilometres away. But Frombork is in Poland, and crossing the border into Russia is not so easy. So the Baltic town where Copernicus lived and worked is now an obscure outpost on the very edge of the European Union.

We shall return to Frombork in a future issue of *hidden europe*. Meanwhile this *hidden europe* offers more than its fair share of our continent's less frequented spots. We touch down in Abkhazia, a troubled province on the Black Sea coast that was once the favourite holiday playground of the Moscow elite. Today it is a fragment of post-Soviet chaos, a place over which Moscow and Tbilisi tussle, and yet somehow, as our regular correspondent Karlos Zurutuza reports, Abkhazia contrives to function with some measure of normality.

Karlos' essay on Abkhazia apart, we welcome two other guest contributors to this issue of *hidden europe*. Laurence Mitchell unravels the tale of the Karaim in Lithuania — an unusual Jewish sect who, in Laurence's words, "reject the Talmud as the impious musings of rabbinical scholars." And Adam Daniel Mezei provides a genial introduction to the sport of chess boxing. When Adam first proposed the topic, we thought this was some kind of leg-pull, but after a couple of evenings at the chess boxing club in Berlin, we are converts to the cause.

Elsewhere in this issue, we visit Märket reef in the Baltic, find a haven of quiet in Venice, and brave Vauxhall's fierce traffic to find a London outpost where visiting Martians might plausibly stop for tea. We extol the merits of the slow boat, and we reveal some of our favourite travel writers — essayists who, like us, enjoy nothing more than delicately unpicking the curiosities of peoples and places that make our continent so endlessly fascinating.

Nicky SC Gardner & Susanne Kries
EDITORS

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front cover: transporter gondola, Vizcaya Bridge (photo by Xosé Castro Roig)
left (from top to bottom): the *MS Wappen von Hamburg* (© Martina Berg), Lenin in Abkhazia (photo by Karlos Zurutuza), mapping Europe (© Yegor Korzh)
above right: chess boxing tournament (photo by Angela Ankner © WCBO)
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