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**Women business leaders from the Baltics visit Winthrop**

**By Carol Stull**

"Is this real, or is it Disneyland?" wondered Katrin Sulg of Estonia and Aida Zigmantaviciene of Lithuania, upon riding into Winthrop last week.

Along with 16 fellow women business leaders from the Baltic states, the two were enjoying the leisurely end of a two-week business and cultural exchange program. Seminars and speeches in the Seattle/Puget Sound area occupied the more serious beginning of their adventure. Now they were out touring towns on the Cascade Loop and having fun.

The group, including organizer Christina Bruning, president of Women's Business Exchange of Seattle, and their tour bus driver, spent last Wednesday and Thursday nights (Oct. 20 and 21) with Dan and Sally Kuperberg at the Chewuch Inn. They enjoyed shopping for souvenirs, dining at Burnt Finger Bar-B-Q, as well as frequenting the Hoonahnet Internet Cafe.

"I sent a letter to my daughter saying I felt like I was in the middle of a cowboy movie," reported Aida.

Back home in Kaunas, second largest city in Lithuania - a country of 3.6 million people - Aida, at age 30-something, is CEO of a garment manufacturing firm - one of the largest Lithuanian employers led by a woman. She is also a student at Kaunas University of Technology.

Katrin, in her 20s, is product manager at a company that produces technical construction materials in Tallinn, capital city of Estonia, whose national population is 1.4 million. Katrin also serves as president of Young Business and Professional Women Association in that city.

Both report that their countries, and also Latvia, since "regaining independence" from the former Soviet Union, make up one of the fastest growing regions, economically, in the world.

"They call us the Baltic tigers," said Aida. She and Katrin also expressed gratitude for American women as role models for women in business.

"They've taught us we could be in business, be successful, even powerful," declared Aida.

In 2003, Katrin and Christina met and shared ideas about the importance of mentoring and networking among women in business. From that meeting was born the exchange program "Across Cultures," which brought the Baltic women to America this month.

While in Seattle, the visitors attended seminars on health and human rights as related to women, as well as sessions on business and leadership. They toured such heavy hitters of Northwest commerce as Starbucks, Nordstrom's, Costco, Microsoft and Eddie Bauer. Highlights ranged from meeting and hearing a speech by Bill Gates to helping vendors at the famous Pike Place fish market set up for a day's business.

Katrin and Aida spent an entire day observing operations at Eddie Bauer, which Aida reports was a "perfect match" for her since the American firm, like her company back home, produces a lot of outdoor clothing.

Days of organized activities, including meals and social events, were long, starting at 6:30 a.m., ending at 10 p.m.

The Baltic delegates said that this year's exchange was only the beginning. Next year, American women will travel across the Atlantic for a similar event.

Last week offered them a glimpse of the slower-paced, rural culture of the Northwest. Following their two-day visit here, they were to stop overnight in Leavenworth.

Before leaving the Methow, Katrin summed up their feelings for this valley: "It's so warm here. Just like home. The people always say 'hello'."

And in spite of Winthrop's somewhat theme-park atmosphere, Katrin declares, "I like this town. I will come back here someday."