



Estonia's capital, Tallinn



# Estonia: wild at heart

*Whether you want to party in the capital or enjoy the tranquility of the countryside, there's lots to offer in this Baltic state*

BY BEN WEST

Why do so many people return repeatedly each year to the same countries for their holidays, whether France or Greece, Portugal or Spain, when there are so many other far less visited destinations to discover, with their own fascinating quirks and cultures, landscapes and cuisines?

One such place is Estonia, the smallest and most northerly of the Baltic states, and one of Europe's smallest countries. Tucked away in the far-eastern corner of Europe, bordering Russia, it boasts diverse attractions: there's Lahemaa National Park, a vast nature reserve in the north of the country. And Parnu, whose long and smooth beach entices Estonians throughout the summer. You can wander back to Soviet times at Sillamae, perhaps take in a festival, where much colourful traditional dress is on display, or peer into flooded meteorite craters near Kaarma.

My visit seemed ideal, including the contrasts of its fairytale capital, Tallinn, with the wild beauty of a couple of its western islands, Saaremaa and Muhu.

Estonia has withstood centuries of Russian, German, Danish and Swedish rule, along the way absorbing their diverse influences. With a population of only around 1.35 million, it is a sparsely populated country, not least because thousands of Estonians were either deported to Germany or Russia or fled to Sweden in 1944, just before Soviet forces reoccupied Estonia. Many of those who remained ended up in collective farms whose bleak barrack-like structures can still be spotted around the otherwise beautiful countryside.

Our party visiting Estonia was fortunate enough to be in the company of Neil Taylor, whose incredibly detailed guide to Estonia published by Bradt Guides is a marvellous companion for any trip. Indeed, one of our Estonian guides told us: "You have the best guide in Estonia, his books are bibles for Estonian tour guides."

Neil told us that when he first visited Estonia, in 1992, there were no more than about 10 petrol stations in the whole country, it was so undeveloped. However, apart from the main towns, there seems to be not that much more development now: the roads are blissfully empty and we pass miles of unspoilt countryside, though enhanced by the occasional photogenic windmill or castle and regularly dotted with little simple farms and houses. Many Estonians own the latter as summer houses that they use to grow fruit and vegetables. In Soviet times it was vital to grow your own produce as food was scarce in the shops.

There doesn't seem any possibility of the country becoming more crowded anytime soon: it loses around 13,000 of the workforce



The Northern Lights in Estonia

annually, who leave to find higher paid work elsewhere.

It's a very cheap country to visit: for example, a bus from the capital, Tallinn, to Riga in Latvia, which takes nearly five hours, costs just £3 or so. For residents, public transport is free. Cigarettes are incredibly inexpensive, so if you're thinking of taking up the habit this is an ideal place to come.

## Tallinn

Lonely Planet has named Tallinn the best destination for travellers in 2018. Strolling its attractive, well preserved Old Town is a great introduction to the country. Compact enough to explore on foot, its cobbled streets, colourful houses and distinctive church spires, ancient towers and city walls are like something from a medieval film set.

At some point it's a given that you take in the Baltic Sea views and a panorama of this beautiful city. A good vantage point is the flat roof of the City Hall.

Tallinn boasts handsome squares lined with cafés, restaurants, arts and crafts shops and museums, the newest being the treasure-filled Museum of Icon Art, featuring stunning icons from around the world.

On the waterfront is the Estonian Seaplane Museum, set in a huge seaplane hangar, with everything from an historic seaplane to a World War II submarine you can clamber aboard.

Worth checking out is Kalamaja, a fast-changing

bohemian area of Tallinn, north of the old town, where fishermen used to live in traditional wooden houses, now lived in by artists and young families. The neighbourhood is peppered with cafes and restaurants, bijoux shops and a market at weekends.

## Muhu

Having driven from Tallinn, passing miles of forest and pastureland, and many wooden houses and barns (often sporting red roof tiles for some reason) on good roads that are noticeably very quiet, we take a 40-minute ferry from the mainland port of Virtsu to Kuivastu on the small island of Muhu and its 1800 residents.

There are also frequent buses from Tallinn, which stop at both Kuivastu and Liiva and continue to Kuressaare on Saaremaa.

Briefly during winter there is another way also: the coastal regions of the Baltic Sea freeze over, to the extent that you can do the journey by driving over the ice.

Our guide on the island, Elle Mae, is a Muhu native who, as a girl, regularly heard rockets being fired from the island's Russian military base.

Her and her friends would slip past the Russian border guards to visit the beaches, which was strictly forbidden at night time.

Muhu's attractions are low key: we visit Muhu Farm Winery, an example of the fledgling wine

industry on the island, where we are greeted by a man inexplicitly opening bottles of wine with the swipe of a garden spade.

At the village of Liiva we drop in on a small roadside complex with a brewery producing some impressive beers and a small bakery selling a local speciality, black rye bread.

At the former fishing village of Koguva, a group of centuries-old limestone buildings house the Muhui Museum and a collection of hand-woven fabrics, colourful traditional clothing and various other artefacts, and which used to be the home of a celebrated Estonian writer from the Soviet era, Juhan Smuul, who wrote about life on the islands as well as embarking upon a Soviet expedition to Antarctica. With a liking for 'alcohol, cigarettes and women', he was a hero of the island.

But perhaps Muhu's greatest attraction is the unspoilt wildness, the opportunity to wander or cycle the vast landscapes.

## Saaremaa

We drive across a short causeway that goes from Muhu to Saaremaa. Estonia has around 2,000 islands, Saaremaa being the largest. Made up principally of low-lying plains resting on limestone with almost half of the interior forested, it is a supremely restful place, especially as it is inhabited by just one person per kilometre. Like Muhu, it's ideal for walkers, cyclists and nature-lovers.

Being a restricted area, considered militarily strategic, few Estonians and no foreigners were allowed to visit during Soviet times (the last occupation ending in 1991) and Saaremaa's residents recall that era with little fondness. Reminders of past occupation of the island are at battlefield monuments to fallen Soviet and German soldiers at Tehumardi and at a comprehensive military museum at Orissaare, stacked with guns and military uniforms.

Another reminder is at Kuressaare, Saaremaa's main town. Its 14th-century castle - the best-preserved medieval fortress in Estonia - with its red-topped turrets towering above the island's southern coastline, is now a history museum focusing mainly upon the island during the turbulent 20th century, including the grim Nazi and Soviet periods.



The women of Kihnu are keen on motorbike racing

With the huge focus that there has always been on the evil of the Nazis, many people would perhaps assume that the German occupation during World War II would be the nadir of Estonian history. However, as Charles Bourgeois points out in his book, 'A Priest in Russia and the Baltic', the German occupation instead came as a liberation for the Estonian people. The Soviet one that came directly before was significantly worse.

He writes:

The regime was far less despotic and there was no comparison between it and the horrible terror, which under the Soviet regime, held everyone in its grasp the whole time and

controlled the smallest details of life.

A bigger excerpt appears in Neil Taylor's comprehensive guide to Estonia.

Kuressaare has a small stretch of sandy beach and is known for its spa culture, and many of the hotels have their own spa.

Estonia is rich in limestone, so it seems fitting we visit Lümada Limestone Park, surrounded by many pine and fir trees. I was wondering how on earth this would be at all inspiring, but after a brief explanation of how here limestone is still traditionally heated for hours in a kiln fired with wood so that it chemically changes to



quicklime (for use in such things as lime-based paint), we were shown how adding water to quicklime causes a violent chemical reaction resulting in extreme heat. To underline how hot it becomes we fry an egg over it on an aluminium plate. Soldiers in Estonia used to carry a stone of quicklime in their bags and use it in an emergency to cook with.

The southern tip of the island has a peninsula with a 50m lighthouse, Sõrve, at its tip, which is about 90 nautical miles from Sweden. Surrounded by grasslands and sandy coastline, and looking out at the fierce Baltic Sea, it seems like the end of the world.

## Why visit Estonia?

*Fresh air, unspoiled nature, wild forests, and more than 2000km of hiking trails*

*Short distances: no need to choose between city and nature when you can easily have both*

*The 3800km of coastline has beautiful sandy beaches and a rich maritime culture*

*Curative mud baths and relaxing spas*

*Interactive museums, historical manors and fortresses, and more than 200 festivals each year*

*A favourite stopover for migratory birds and a habitat for wild animals now rare in the rest of Europe*

## Where to stay

### Pädaste Manor, Muhu

This charming 15th century manor house on a gorgeous estate surrounded by a nature reserve is a wonderful luxury escape. The estate lies by the Baltic Sea, where you can take a short boat trip to the nearby Island of Lovers and the Island of Whores. Guests have included Queen Margaret of Denmark and various presidents, and Prince Albert had his stag party here. Neil Tennant wrote a Pet Shop Boys song called *Between Two Islands* here when he went on a boat to the nearby islands. There's a luxurious spa featuring everything from seaweed and mud wraps to goats milk and bladderwort baths, and the superb Restaurant Alexander, which

has earned the title of being 'the best restaurant in Estonia' over the years - no doubt helped by German house chef Matthias Diether, who has several Michelin stars under his belt. The unusual menu includes such things as ostrich tartar dotted with blue wildflowers, locally caught cod served with ramson (wild garlic) and herbs, and hazelnut and raisin bread. The water, filtered from a well on the estate, smells of the sea, I've never tasted water like it. *Muhu Island, 94716 Saare County; phone +372 454 8800; padaste.ee*

### Nautse Mihkli Farm, Muhu

Located in an historic wooden and stone house, this eco-farm has comfortable guest accommodation as well as wonderful food including ostrich, pannacotta with sour cream and rye, delicate fish soups made from the catch of the day flavoured with freshly picked wild garlic and baskets of local sweet rye bread. There's a sauna, garden, ostrich farm and mini zoo. Owner Ingrem Raidjoe teaches cookery courses and co-authored handsome cookery book, *Magical Meals of Muhu*. *Nautse Mihkli talu, Nautse kula, Muhu vald 94728; phone +372 5860 0887; nautsemihkli.ee*

### Luscher & Matiesen Muhu Winehouse, Muhu

Estonia's first wine tourism farm, located close to a rocky beach. Its outdoor terrace with views over the vineyards offers a place to relax in the summer.

*Lõo talu, Muhu vald, Liva sijk, 94765, Muhu; phone +372 5363 6574; veinitalu.ee/farm-winery/*

### Georg Ots Spa Hotel, Saaremaa

Across the harbour from the famous castle, this has its own spa complex, including cosmetic treatments and a swimming and sauna area. The hotel restaurant also serves up a gastronomic selection of Baltic cuisine. *Tori 2, Kuressaare, 93810 Saaremaa; phone +372 455 0000; gospa.ee*

### Sokos Hotel, Tallinn

A comfortable, modern hotel near the old town. *Viru väljak 4, 10111 Tallinn; phone +372 680 9300; sokoshotels.fi/en/tallinn/sokos-hotel-viru*



## Where to eat

### Platz, Tallinn

This modern restaurant in the old industrial area offers dishes that include quail egg with sour cream, herring and shaved black bread on top (which is brown). *Roseni 7, Tallinn 10111; phone +372 664 5086; platz.ee/en*

### Leib Restoran, Tallinn

Leib means 'black bread' in Estonian and the weekly-changing menu features fresh wild and organic dishes, and drinks that include the house-fermented kombucha, and rowanberry schnapps. Pike perch and other fish feature strongly, and a dessert of frozen yoghurt and cherry cream is enlivened with shavings of Jerusalem artichoke and grated egg yolk. *Uus 31, Tallinn 10111; phone +372 611 9026; leibresto.ee*

Further information: [visitestonia.com/en/](http://visitestonia.com/en/)

Further reading: Estonia, by Neil Taylor (Bradt Guides, £16.99)