

Globetrotter

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EDITED BY TIM LOCKE

Estonia – tales of the unexpected

Mary Moore Mason on a Guild members' trip to the Baltic state led by Neil Taylor



When I set out in mid-May for a BGTW trip to Estonia, led by Neil Taylor, author of Bradt's guide to the country and part-time resident of the Estonian capital Tallinn, I expected it to be a delightful, restful introduction to a previously unvisited country but probably not a truly exciting experience.

Tallinn's medieval old town, I thought, would be predictably

picturesque; the rest of the mainland and island areas we were to visit – green, sparsely populated and predominately rural – would be enhanced by the occasional photogenic windmill, castle and small town, and the food would be wholesome but not really remarkable.

Neil briefs us on the geography of Saaremaa island

Instead I discovered a series of unexpected, memorable and often delightfully quirky attractions... and some of the best and most imaginative cuisine I have encountered in my European travels – all enhanced by the sense of fun and adventure exhibited by my travel companions.

Upon arrival on the Estonian mainland we learned that it has as many as 2,000 islands – and that the two we were to visit – Saaremaa, the largest, and much smaller, causeway-linked Muhu – were virtually unknown to outsiders, even to many Estonians who were forbidden to visit them during the decades the Soviet overlords considered them militarily strategic and thus off-limits.



Our Leedri juniper syrup-making hostesses (left, back row) with (from back clockwise) Mary Moore, Neil, Jenny, Jan, Yasemen, Yolanda, Catherine and Ben (Photo: Catherine Beattie)

Given their history, it wasn't a great surprise to find on Muhu a former Soviet rocket base, now an Estonian military satellite tracking station, and, on Saaremaa, Tehumardi battlefield's monuments to fallen Soviet and German soldiers and, at Orissaare, a comprehensive Military Museum. But who could have predicted Muhu's sheep sauna and ostrich farm or Saaramaa's Viking ship excavation site (a roadside Viking Burger kiosk nearby), a limestone quarry where we were taught to cook without fire, and a five-star resort offering moonlight boat trips to a nearby 'love island'?

From wine to beer, rocket bases to sheep saunas

Soon after disembarking from the 35-minute ferry ride from Virtsu on the mainland to Muhu's Kuivastu we were whisked off to the Muhu Farm Winery where a dapper young man inexplicitly opened up bottles of white wine with the swipe of a garden spade – in its infancy, the Estonian wine industry is still in an experimental stage – and where the property's rustic farmhouse offered guest rooms where you could overnight under open wooden pyramids (we were led to believe they were a source of both energy and tranquility).

In the village of Liiva, a small roadside complex encompassed a brewery producing some commendable brews, a bakery known for wonderful black bread and a shop full of local handicrafts, including colourful traditional embroidery and felt slippers.

We then lingered at the fairytale-like former fishing village of Koguva where the Muhu Museum is housed in a cluster of early 20th-century thatched and metal-roofed limestone buildings. At its heart are rooms occupied for many years by the Juhan Smuul, one of the best-known Estonian authors during the Soviet era. Adjacent is a barn-like structure filled with interesting rural farm and household implements and upstairs galleries display beautiful hand-woven fabrics and colourful traditional clothing. Also on the grounds was an odd 'sheep sauna', sheep pens in which the local folk steamed themselves surrounded by straw-covered manure which was then scooped up and used as fertilizer for the surrounding fields.

Both visits were enhanced by background information provided by our delightful guide Elle Mae, a Muhu native who, in her girlhood heard rockets being fired nightly from the Russian base and, with school friends, slipped past the Russian border guards to visit the bluffs and beaches along the coast, which was strictly forbidden after 21.00, on the pretext that Saaremaa was the front line against NATO.

One of the reasons, she said, that Estonia in general and the islands in particular are so sparsely populated (Muhu has around 1,800 residents) is that thousands of Estonians were either deported to Germany or Russia or fled to Sweden in 1944 just before Soviet forces reoccupied Estonia. Many that were left were herded into collective farms whose bleak barrack-like structures are still seen around the otherwise beautiful countryside.

It's all change in the kitchen... and in the churches

Lunch, served on our first full day's visit in the atmospheric Nautse Mikhli farmhouse, was predictably impressive as our hostess, attractive blonde Ingrem Raidjõe, not only teaches cookery courses, runs a restaurant and offers B&B but is also the co-author of the handsome *Magical Meals of Muhu* cookery book. Among the most unexpected things on the menu was ostrich, sourced she said, from the local ostrich farm run by her mother. (We briefly stopped by and got a glimpse of the ostriches as well as the zoo – it's home to such exotic animals as kangaroos and zebras.)

At another farm, known as Good Kaarma, we were introduced to a young couple, she Estonian, he British, who support their idyllic rural lifestyle by producing organic soap. In fact, cottage industries appear to be a growing attraction in this part of Estonia – on Saaremaa, the picturesque village of Leedri is home to a pretty yellow cottage where several ladies produce a wide range of quire delicious syrups made from local juniper trees; elsewhere the Roosli sheep farm is not only home to a restaurant specialising in mutton dishes but also produces a wide range of handsome (and pricey) sheep skin and woollen items.

Christianity came late to Estonia – courtesy of the 12th century Crusaders – and today only 14 percent of its residents claim to follow a religious belief. (Although 69 percent reputedly believe that trees have souls – very convenient as more than 50 percent of the country is forested.) However, the country is full of historic churches some of them moving back and forth between German Lutherans and the Russian Orthodox governance. This was exemplified by Muhu's medieval Valjala church where we could glimpse ornate Catholic frescoes through the plaster applied during the Reformation.

In Kuressaare, the Saaremaa capital, the 14th-century castle which was once home to bishops, is now a history museum covering among other things the grim Nazi and Soviet periods. (This summer is also houses a temporary exhibition dedicated to the work of famous American architect Louis Kahn who spent his early boyhood in Kuressaare before his family emigrated to the USA.)

Graced by handsome homes, a pretty park, cafés, speciality food stores and arts and craft shops, the town is particularly known for its numerous spa hotels. We stayed at the modern Georg Ots Hotel, named for a famous Estonian opera singer, enjoying its pools and sauna before admiring the nearby waterfront statue of folkloric giant Suur-Tõll, frolicking in the nude with his well-endowed consort Piret. Then it was off to another gourmet dinner (this time featuring ferocious-looking but delicious gar fish) at the Kuressaare



Yasemen swaps her Lemon Compendium cookbook with Estonian hostess Ingrem Raidjõe's Magical Meals of Muhu

Kuursaal restaurant overlooking the castle.

To the manor born

Over the next two days we had another delicious meal of pork, red cabbage, pickled pumpkin and potatoes, washed down by strong local beer, at the Lumanda Tavern, sited in a converted school house next to a splendidly ornate Orthodox church, learned how to fry eggs without fire at the nearby Limestone Park (when limestone paste is mixed with water it creates sufficient heat under a tin plate to do the trick) and visited two manor houses. The first, more modest establishment, Loona Manor, dating back to the Middle Ages, is adjacent to the information centre for the Vilsandi National Park, encompassing coastal wetlands and islands, and the second – Pädaste Manor, on an estate dating back to the 13th century – has been transformed by Dutch businessman Martin Breuer and his Canadian-Estonian business partner Imre Sooaar into a five-star resort.



Padaste Manor, the five-star Muhu island resort where we enjoyed a lunch prepared by an award-winning German chef (Photo: Padaste Manor)

Once owned by the land marshal of the last czar of Russia and used as an old people's home during the Soviet occupation, the main manor house has 24 elegant rooms and suites in addition to other accommodation in the resort's 400-year-old wooden farmhouse. The restaurant, presided over by an award-winning German chef, offered us such unusual choices as ostrich tartar, and hazelnut and raisin bread. And then there are the hedonistic spa, featuring everything from sea weed and mud wraps to goats milk and bladderworth baths, the sauna and deck chairs set on the water's edge and the midsummer moonlight trips to nearby Love Island.

And yes, as we explored the island there were windmills as well as a lighthouse with its own museum set on the tip of the southern Sõrve peninsula, so remote that our cell phones said "Welcome to Latvia".

Estonia's compelling capital

The final part of our trip took us to Tallinn about which much has been written by other Guild members so here are just my personal highlights: the hike through parkland up to the highest point in the city topped by a 15th century tower, the ornate Alexander Nevsky Cathedral (which could have been lifted intact from Moscow) and the impressive Parliament Building; the views from here over the Old Town's ancient towers, church spires and city walls; strolling down the steep cobbled streets and through the handsome squares lined with cafés, restaurants, arts and crafts shops, street vendors and museums, the newest being the treasure-filled Museum of Icon Art. And then for a totally different ambience: the waterfront's Estonian Seaplane Museum, set in a massive, cave-like seaplane hangar and encompassing everything from an historic seaplane to a World War II submarine you can clamber aboard. And, of course, it was all enhanced by delicious meals at both the Platz and Leib restaurants, within walking distance of our overnights at the Sokos Hotel and Meriton Park Inn.

Travelling with Neil Taylor and Mary Moore were Ben West, Yolanda Zappaterra and Jan Fuscoe from London, Yasemen Kaner White from Windsor, Catherine Beattie from Woking, and Jennifer Walker, joining the group from her base in Budapest. For more information on Estonia visit www.visitestonia.com/en/ for details of Pädaste Manor, www.padaste.ee and for details on Neil Taylor's books on Estonia and the Baltic Cities, www.bradtguides.com



Part of Tallinn's old city wall and Alexander Nevsky Cathedral (Photo: Jenny Walker)