

ENCHANTED IN ESTONIA

IT'S A COUNTRY WHERE A LOVE OF MUSIC MEETS A LOVE OF FREEDOM, AND IT'S INVITING YOU TO JOIN ITS PEOPLE IN CELEBRATING A VERY BIG BIRTHDAY. BY MARK A. THOMPSON

AT TWILIGHT, ONE EVENING IN ESTONIA, AS WE WALKED across an expansive lawn that rolled down to the Baltic Sea, our host suddenly stopped. Hushing us with a finger to his lips, he raised his head so that we, too, would hear the bird song. “A nightingale,” said Martin Breuer, owner of Pädaste Manor (padaste.ee), a 24-room luxury resort and spa situated on Muhu Island. “It sounds like a chorus, but it’s actually only one bird. Not much to look at, but what a singer!”

Enchanted, we stood and listened to the whistles, trills and gurgles of this Estonian nightingale which, in hindsight, was an appropriate accompaniment for a country that achieved independence from authoritarianism via a “Singing Revolution.”

Tucked into a corner of Northern Europe, Estonia is flanked by the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Finland, with more than 2,200 islands and a dramatic coastline of limestone cliffs. Its heavily-forested mainland contains over 1,400 lakes and — in extra-terrestrial news — clusters of meteorite craters. With its numerous fens and bogs, Estonia evokes images from Norse mythology where supernatural nymphs and elves frolic in the woodlands. In short, there’s much that’s magical about Estonia.

The history of this country of 1.3 million people, one of the smallest members of the EU, has been something of a centuries-long chess match with various invaders using Estonia as a pawn on their strategic chessboards. For nearly a millennium, Estonia was annexed in successive waves by Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Russia.

Despite a declaration of independence in 1918, Estonia was first occupied by the Soviet Union, then by Nazi Germany before being officially annexed by the Soviets in 1944. However in 1988, spontaneous singing demonstrations broke out at various music festivals around the nation — eventually growing to nearly 300,000 citizens. After four years of protests

and the singing of once-forbidden patriotic songs and hymns, Estonians regained their independence in 1991. This will be one of many historical events celebrated during the nation’s hundredth birthday throughout 2018.

THE ISLAND WHERE TIME RESTS

Accessible only by ferry, Muhu Island is where “time rests,” according to the locals who cherish their maritime heritage amidst charming fishing villages and bucolic landscapes dotted with thatched cottages and windmills.

A member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World (SLH), Pädaste Manor dates to the 16th century with a pedigree that includes hosting royals, heiresses, and the Imperial Hunting Master at the court of Czar Nicholas II. (It was also once occupied by the Soviet military before becoming a fish warehouse and later, a geriatric nursing home). Pädaste’s renaissance commenced in 1996 with a complete restoration of the 70-acre estate and its landscaped park and apple orchards. Today the stately manor is Estonia’s only five-star hotel outside Tallinn.

Take in the view that inspired the Pet Shop Boys to write a song while in residence. Sip a champagne cocktail at Pädaste Yacht Club overlooking Pädaste Bay. Juniper trees and wild orchids dot the shoreline where sea eagles nest. In the distance, “Love Island” beckons, calling to romantics across the globe.

Michelin-starred chef Matthias Diether helms the kitchen at Alexander restaurant where a Nordic Islands seven-course tasting menu highlights the indigenous bounty from Muhu purveyors. Dinners at the 14-seat Chef’s Table (alexanderchefstable.ee) are most definitely a convivial introduction to Estonian gastronomy and hospitality.

For the morning after, treatments at Pädaste Spa are based on ancient Muhu traditions with emollients

“Nearly as much as Estonians love their ubiquitous and delicious dark rye bread, they cherish their centuries-old spa traditions.”



Pädaste Bay

prepared daily from the surrounding herb gardens. Housed in the estate's former dairy, the spa includes a wood-fired sauna complete with birch branches for light flagellation (to stimulate circulation) and a Siberian cold tub on the terrace.

As owner Breuer attests, “Muhu is about slow travel,” and most likely you’ll want to savor every moment at this remarkable estate.

Before heading on to Saaremaa, Muhu’s larger sister island, consider a respite at Koost (the Estonian word for “spoon”), where a bakery and brewery complement a restaurant renowned for its fresh produce and seafood with homemade dairy products.

Famous for its 13th-century castle and moat, the isle of Saaremaa offers waterside villages, windswept beaches and a vista festooned with windmills. Also of interest is the 4,000-year-old meteorite crater field known as Kaali, which is the largest in Europe and has been an ongoing influence in Estonian mythology.

THE NORDIC RIVIERA

Nearly as much as Estonians love their ubiquitous and delicious dark rye bread (baked daily and served with fresh butter — diet be damned), they cherish their centuries-old spa traditions. Nowhere on the mainland is there a more beloved health resort than the city of Pärnu, a seaside vacation capital since the Russian aristocracy began taking mud baths there in the early 19th century.

Now known as Hedon Spa & Hotel (hedonspa.com), the original mud baths date to 1838 and are currently housed in a neoclassical building. Nestled along the white sands of Pärnu beach, the spa at Hedon celebrates ancient Roman bathing culture with cleansing



Männikjärve Bog

rituals that include a Silent Spa, various saunas, a foot bath, a Dead Sea saltwater pool and a sun bath that generates the kind of rays you’d expect to find on the shores of Bali, Mauritius or Miami.

Hedon’s sleek hotel addition opened in summer 2014 with waterfront rooms and private balconies that face Pärnu’s broad beach and coastal lagoons. Alongside the birds and amphibians protected inside Pärnu’s nature preserve, the beach hosts thousands of EDM enthusiasts for the annual Weekend Festival (weekendbaltic.com), one of the world’s largest electronic dance music events. Equally acclaimed is Pärnu Music Festival (parnumusicfestival.ee), a weeklong summer series of classical music hosted by the Estonian Festival Orchestra.

Given the historical import of their “singing revolution,” it’s appropriate that Estonians gather for numerous musical events, including Jazzkaar (jazzkaar.ee/en), the largest jazz festival in the Baltics. There are folk music fests, musical walks, lake music festivals and a Tchaikovsky Festival (tchaikovskyfestival.ee/en). Most important for many Estonians is the Song Festival (sa.laulupidu.ee/en) held every fifth year and featuring some 30,000 singers who perform at an historic bayfront setting fabled for its acoustics and architecture. Since its music



Kuressaare Castle on the Isle of Saaremaa



Tallinn Old Town



Pädaste Manor



Estonian National Museum

is so inextricably intertwined with liberation, the power of Estonian song has been recognized by UNESCO on its revered cultural heritage list. And the meditative music of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt — termed *tintinnabuli* (or “little bells”) — has made him the world’s most performed living composer for the past five years.

A short ferry ride from the mainland, the isle of Kihnu in the Gulf of Riga has also been UNESCO-designated for its ancient cultural traditions which include singing, dancing and handicrafts. Hospitality is equally valued here and it’s likely that any time spent on the quaint little island will include an invitation into a private home for homemade potato bread and freshly-caught fried Baltic herring served with plenty of butter and jam. Given that the island men were often out to sea, Kihnu women have established a matriarchal society that perpetuates the island’s folk and agrarian traditions — plus an annual old ladies’ motor race on motorcycles and sidecars.

TALLINN FOR EVERYONE

As for LGBT life, in 2014 Estonia became the first ex-Soviet country to legalize

same-sex partnerships. LGBT people serve openly in the military and anti-discrimination laws have been in effect here for years. Pride parades have been held in Tallinn since 2004 and in 2017, the city hosted Baltic Pride, the annual LGBT event that rotates among three Baltic capitals. For the past 13 years, X-Baar (baar.ee/en) has remained a favored LGBT boîte while Club 69 (club69.ee), the first gay baths in the Baltics, has been open since 2001—and both establishments are but a short walk from Tallinn’s illustrious Hotel Palace (tallinnhotels.ee/hotel-palace-tallinn).

Built in 1937, Hotel Palace has a long history of hosting diplomats and ambassadors from its perch overlooking Freedom Square. Completely renovated in 2014, the Palace retains its understated Art Deco glamour with sleek rooms that feature the work of the esteemed Estonian artist Konrad Mägi (for whom the restaurant Konrad is named). Superior rooms at the Palace offer views onto Freedom Square, Tallinn’s grandest public space, where Victory Day celebrations commemorate their war of independence.

A walking city (served by free public transit for its residents), Tallinn radiates outward from Old Town, one of Europe’s best preserved medieval walled cities. At the center is Town Hall with its tower topped by the weather vane nicknamed “Old Thomas,” which has been Tallinn’s mascot for nearly 600 years.



Restaurant Raimond



The Isle of Kihnu



Estonian Black Bread



Herbs with Poached Egg Yolk



Kaupo Kikkas



Aloha Houseparty at Club Hollywood



Hedon Spa & Hotel in Pärnu



Estonian National Museum

Divided between Upper Town and Lower Town, Old Town's historic main thoroughfare is Pikk Street, at the top of which stand three merchant houses built in 1362. What was once the home of noblemen and dignitaries now houses The Three Sisters Hotel (threesistershotel.com), a remarkable, 23-room Relais & Châteaux property that features secret staircases and labyrinthine passageways. In its current incarnation, Three Sisters has hosted such luminaries as HRH Queen Elizabeth II, Sting, R.E.M., Lou Reed and Bryan Ferry. Breakfast is served in a dining room with a charming ceiling fresco rediscovered beneath 14 layers of wallpaper.

For a taste of Tallinn's extraordinary culinary talent, Leib Resto & Aed (leibresto.ee/en) is named in honor of Estonian black bread and offers soulful, casual dining marked by organic food from local purveyors. Situated on the edge of Old Town, the restaurant features a lush dining garden with a grill that recalls the best summer barbecues.

Estonians are the world's most non-religious people, choosing instead a worldview that focuses on celebrating life and nature. Perhaps it is unsurprising then that — in a region that has seen its fair share of religion-related conflict over the centuries — this is the country where more than two million people of all backgrounds joined hands in solidarity for independence in 1989, forming a human chain of nearly 400 miles stretching across the three Baltic states.

Regardless of its history marked by foreign occupations, Estonia has become one of the world's most digitally-advanced societies, with a high level of economic freedom in a high-income economy.

Equally laudable are the civil liberties and press and internet freedoms enjoyed by Estonians who thrive in the same tech-savvy society that gave us both Skype and Kazaa. In fact, Estonians have held their elections online since 2005.

Tallinn's creative hub is centered in Telliskivi, a former industrial complex next to the railway station that has become a locus of hipster energy and creativity — and a magnetic draw for youthful entrepreneurs. Weekends are particularly popular in Creative City, thanks to numerous cafés, restaurants, boutiques, and flea markets.

With 30 miles of coastline and more than twenty-five percent of its area given over to parkland, Tallinn has been designated as one of the world's top ten cities with the cleanest air. Especially alluring is Kadriorg Park, a palatial expanse of nearly 200 acres noted for a Baroque summer palace built there by Peter the Great in addition to the pink presidential palace that houses Estonia's president.

Flanking the park's northern edge, the restaurant Mon Repos (monrepos.ee/english) offers up a fascinating roaring '20s backstory that includes a chef from the Russian Imperial Court, a bartender from London's Savoy Hotel, café society, flappers and gamblers — and a raid by the Tallinn police that closed the place. Reopened in 2016 by a visionary team, Mon Repos offers a menu inspired by Kadriorg's "Golden Era." The villa's illustrious culinary history is celebrated in a romantic setting that affords a perfect opportunity to reflect upon the enchanting beauty of Tallinn — and the ongoing resilience of the indefatigable Estonian spirit. visitestonia.com/en