

TRAVEL

FROM SOVIET SHADOWS TO BALTIC TIGER



Three of the five iconic
windmills of Saaremaa
island in western Estonia



This year marks Estonia's 100th anniversary of independence. It's been a long road, with occupations by the Soviets and Nazi Germany, but it's become a leader in free market economics.

By **ASHWIN BHARDWAJ**

On an unremarkable street corner, in the Estonian city of Tartu, is a block of flats. Its late classical architecture is dulled by grey paint, and office workers on the ground floor look ready for lunch. But this banality hides past horrors. "Welcome to the former KGB cells of Tartu," says Silver Kadma, the museum curator, "In 1940, Estonia was occupied by our eastern neighbor, the Soviet Union. And they nationalised everything, including this building. They evicted the former residents, sent the owner to a Siberian labour camp, and handed the building over to the state security police, better known as the KGB. "From here," he says, "The KGB planned and executed their operations, investigations and interrogations, to get confessions from political prisoners."

The cells in the basement are old store rooms, converted to hold people by the addition of metal doors. Today they hold artefacts, case notes rather than prisoners; one tells the story of two Estonian schoolgirls, Aili Jürgenson and Ageeda Paavel. In 1946, they blew up a Red Army memorial in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, because they saw it as a symbol of Soviet oppression. The monument was rebuilt and the schoolgirls were sent to Siberia. They were 14 and 15 years old.

As well as the KGB, the Soviet Union brought industry and employment to Estonia, and many migrant workers moved here from the rest of the Union for the high wages and good living conditions. Today, a quarter of Estonia's population are ethnic Russian, the descendants of those migrants, and in the eastern industrial towns of Sillamae and Narva, that figure rises to over 90 per cent.

After Aili and Ageeda had been sent to Siberia, the monument was replaced by a sculpture of a Soviet soldier. In 2007, the Estonian government moved it to a nearby cemetery, citing concerns about celebrating Soviet rule. But to Russian-Estonians, whose parents and grandparents had fought the Nazis, this was an insult.

Following the statue's relocation, there were ►

TRAVEL



Clockwise from top left: Artefacts and evidence of Estonia's military past and present litter the countryside; the controversial Bronze Soldier of Tallinn; Estonia's railway system dates back to the early 1870s; and a repurposed watchtower overlooks the quiet suburbs of Tallinn

► two nights of rioting in Tallinn. At the same time, a series of cyber-attacks were launched on Estonia's parliament, banks and media, and Russia was blamed. I wanted to see this controversial monument for myself, and when the taxi driver, Yuri, realised where we were going, he was excited. "It is good that you are going to see The Bronze Soldier," he said, "I moved here from Russia during my national service, and chose to stay. This statue has always been a symbol of the defeat of fascism, which brought 73 years of peace to Europe. By moving it, Estonian nationalists are trying to wipe out that memory, and to ignore the concerns of Russians in Estonia."

Following the cyber-attacks, NATO established the 'Cooperative Cyber Defence' Centre of Excellence in Tallinn, but tensions with Russia remained high. Then, in 2014, Russian annexed Crimea, causing the Estonians, worried they might be next, to lobby alongside the Baltics and Poland for a NATO presence on its eastern flank.

NATO's solution was the "Enhanced Forward Presence", a brigade of troops from nearly every country in the alliance; the British Army heads up the Estonian mission. In just 23 years, Estonia had gone from being a member of the Soviet Union to a central partner in NATO.

"After 2007," says Kaspar Korjus, the head of Estonia's e-residency programme, "We realised that we had to defend against cyber-warfare. The Centre of Excellence was built here because of our expertise in network defence. Unlike other post-Soviet states, Estonia didn't put the old Communists back

“
We realised we had to defend
against cyber-warfare.
NATO's Cyber Defence
Centre was built here
because of our expertise
in network defence

into power when we got independence. We had a young prime minister who made free market reforms and implemented 'Tiger Leap', which put internet into schools, and made students computer-literate and aware of networks. That's why we lead in tech, and created companies like Skype.

Estonia was also a pioneer of the identity card, with its version including a chip and photo. "It was a travelling document but, once the banks and telecoms sector came on-board, you could use it to access state services like tax systems or healthcare," says Korjus. "Now, if you go to hospital in Estonia and get a scan, you can log into our system and see it from home. You don't need to wait around for results, so it saves money, too.

Estonia has now taken this system to its logical conclusion extent with the "e-Residency" programme. "It's the same platform," says Korjus, "So you can access Estonian digital services, like tax systems, but without residency or citizenship. It's

mostly used for company creation because you can set up an EU company in minutes – very useful for the British after Brexit! Because everything is recorded with the digital trace, we are completely transparent, and it discourages bad activities."

...

The island of Saaremaa sits off the northwest coast of Estonia and can only be reached by ferry. This remoteness has preserved traditional culture, and tourists visit to get a sense of 'Old Estonia.' Some like it so much they choose to move here, creating that rare thing – a rural population that's growing in size.

In the far west of the island, I visited Tarmo Virki, his wife Maarit Pöör, and their daughter Milly. "We moved here from the city," Tarmo said, "I was born on the mainland, but my grandmother's family had been on Saaremaa for at least 400 years."

But it was gin that cemented their move. "I was walking along the coast one night with a local lady," says Maarit. "She took me to some ruins and told me about the old distillery from the 19th century, when Estonia had lots of vodka production. Well, I thought, with all the natural produce here, we could do better than just vodka."

The distillery is a ten-minute walk from Tarmo and Maarit's house. The sun was setting in the west, where Sweden lay 250km over the horizon, and crumbling remains of bunkers in the waterline told the tale of old Cold War defences. This was part of the Soviet Union's border zone, and the KGB ►

TRAVEL



Minarets pepper the skyline of Tallinn's historic old town, which is split across two levels, the Toompea and the Lower Town. The historic centre has been granted UNESCO World Heritage status

► were stationed here, too, to stop spies from landing, and stop dissidents from escaping.

Maarit walked over to a spiky, squat bush, some ten feet tall, and showed me young, green berries and ripe, blue ones. "Its juniper," she says, "These aren't actually berries, but tiny pine cones. It takes them three years to mature." Meanwhile, Tarmo was digging away with a trowel, until he pulled up what looked like a skinny mandrake root. Breaking it open he encouraged me to smell it, and I detected hints of ginger, carrot and celery. "Nordic ginger," Maarit said, "The taste is extremely peppery. And we forage every bit by hand. The climate here is quite rough, so the fruits, berries and plants have much more taste. Every herb and botanical is from near here – the juniper berries and Nordic ginger, but also cowslip flowers, lilac flowers, wild thyme and birch leaves."

Back at their house, I tried a batch of their gin, Lahhentangge. Maarit had experimented with recipes, until a prize-winning gin was produced – now it's delicate flavours have been winning awards across Europe.

...

Ardon Kaerma of drinks company Õsel Birch grew up on the island and spent every spring tapping birch trees with his grandmother. As the winter snows melt and the sun comes out, the birch trees start to draw water up their roots and through the trunks. By drilling a small hole in the trunk and inserting a tube, the sap can be collected at a rapid rate.

This sap, which is a very light turquoise,

“

Every weekend we have a sauna and invite our neighbours for a beer. Maybe because we've all seen each other without our clothes on, it helps with an open society

can be drunk straight from the tree. It has a subtle, sweet, piney flavour and its health benefits are lauded for everything from hangovers to stomach upsets. Õsel Birch (whose name comes from the Danish word for Saaremaa) has released a series of flavours, and their success in markets including Germany means it now employs seasonal workers to tap enough birch trees to meet demand.

"I guess capitalism is saving the countryside," said Ardon, and he's not wrong. He has reinvested the money from his birch sap business to rebuild a local mill, and his Airbnb rental is full all summer. People come from as far as the Russian border to enjoy Saaremaa, and the insatiable demand for boutique products is a lifeline for the rural communities that have been here for centuries.

...

Leedri is a picture postcard Saaremaa village. The town hall lies on the green, where there is a huge pile of logs, drying

out ready for the midsummer solstice. "We have a huge party," says Jaanika Tiitson, whose husband is the mayor, "People can just turn up and join in, and the villagers invite their friends from all around, even the mainland. Sometimes there are hundreds of people here. The village is run as a sort of cooperative and the same families have been living here for centuries. We don't have house numbers, we just have the names of the families who live there."

Unusually for Estonia, the houses are close together, with low stone walls and trees separating gardens. "Every weekend we have a sauna, and invite our neighbours for a beer and a chat. Maybe because we've all seen each other without our clothes on, it helps with an open society!"

Jaanika and her family has been making juniper syrups for decades, and have just invested in industrial scale manufacturing facilities, with huge vats and a bottling facility. But in Jaanika's home kitchen, on a wood-fired stove, her mother still experiments with new flavours. Chilli sauce is proving particularly popular.

As I left Leedri, smoke was rising from the chimneys as fires were lit for the evening sauna. This thriving community is a far cry from its equivalents in England, with their shrinking, ageing demographics. Handicrafts still thrive, and people are proud of the village they come from. It's strange to think that the saving grace of tradition and heritage was modern technology. As people in England look for a better quality of life, maybe we can learn from Estonia's countryside innovations.

► For more information about Estonia, go to visitestonia.com ■