

An Introduction to Estonia

Where Medieval Meets Modern



Estonia
Positively surprising.

Estonia – WiFi in the Forest

Estonia is a country of contrasts. Such pristine and untouched nature is found in only a few places in Europe. A few hundred metres off the highway you can find yourself in virgin forest, where wolves, bears, and lynx roam free.

"...if you leave something important behind in a remote corner of Estonia, it isn't a problem. You can retrieve it on the very same day."



Connected to the world

A large proportion of our nation's land is designated as natural protection areas. At the same time, Estonia is on the vanguard of technological development. We invented the world famous free internet telephone service, Skype.

Wireless internet is available even on buses and trains. On small farms deep in the forest news of the world arrives via internet, there's no need to drive to town to buy the newspaper. On a child's first day of school he carries a bouquet of asters for his teacher along with his book of ABCs. But there'll also be a mobile telephone in his pocket. For every 100 Estonians there are 120 mobile telephones!

To our eastern neighbours the Russians and our southern neighbours the Latvians an Estonian is thought to be calm and slow to act. But to our northern neighbours the Finns we are a fast act which is tough to follow! When Latvians start to tell jokes, it's often at the expense of Estonians. But what might appear a guarded and suspicious Estonian is quite the opposite, once you get acquainted with him.

Get acquainted with our small, beautiful, and interesting land!



Tallinn's medieval Old Town

Modern cities in medieval clothing

You only have to step out of your Tallinn hotel in the early morning, step onto the small, meandering streets paved in granite and let the ancient city walls and red-stoned roofs carry you back to centuries past. From here and there emanates the sweet smell of the baker's fresh bread and somewhere in the distance is the sound of the morning's first tram.

With the morning's sunrise, the nation's flag is hoisted above Tall Hermann tower and city residents bustle across the Old Town Square on their way to work.

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In this very same Old Town Square the world's first Christmas tree stood in 1441. The tree was set on fire and people danced vigorously around it. In modern times the Old Town fir is bathed in cosy candlelight and the bustle of the annual Christmas market where cheerful merchants peddle a variety of Christmas fare.

In the Old Town Square you'll find Europe's oldest operating pharmacy, founded in 1422 and still open for business today. City alderman in ill health once came here to purchase dried frogs' legs, worm skin, and the blood of a black cat. Today the pharmacy sells more traditional remedies but marzipan made the old-fashioned way is still for sale, a product made on a large scale in both Tallinn and Lübeck, both cities first appearing in historical records in 1806.

Old Town Days, which take place at the beginning of June in the old Hanseatic city of Tallinn, are a shining example that the darkness of the middle ages was actually quite colourful – visually, audibly, and with respect to tastes. Tournaments of

knights, sword swallowers, fairs and presentations. Somewhere the bagpipes are played and maidens in long dresses and tied bodices invite you to try on a felt hat, and a smith dressed in leather has just completed a massive chandelier.



The Old Town Days on the Old Town Square

In the middle ages the guards blew the bugle at nine in the evening and the gates on both the city and its pubs were closed. In modern times, Tallinn's nightlife is just getting started at that hour. Restaurants, bars, and nightclubs teem with life. A visitor from abroad will find our beer inexpensive, our nightclubs modern, and service fast and friendly. You can pay for most things

with a credit card. If you want to surf the internet, a wireless signal is available in almost every cafe and pub.

"...He's held the post since 1530 and is the most recognized man in the entire city."



Tallinn's 'Old Thomas' (Vana Toomas) weathervane

Visitors from every nation find something familiar in Tallinn. The Irish find dark beer, the Italians pizza restaurants and the Russians taverns where the waiter's shirt is worn outside the belt to cover his trousers and vodka flows in a thin icy stream. Those from the dark continent will find a man from Mozambique at a wok, chilli pepper and garlic in hand.

The culture of today's Tallinn consists of international names in its interpreters, film directors and artists. Tallinn is home to the



Detail on the facade of the House of the Brotherhood of Black Heads

Baltic region's most prominent film festival, Dark Nights, known locally as PÖFF. Jazzkaar, our jazz festival, the Birgitta Cloister's opera festival and Tallinn International Organ Festival are also well known.

The conductor Neeme Järvi was born in Tallinn, as were many who've worked as chief conductors in the world's well-known symphony orchestras. One of modern music's most recognised names, Arvo Pärt, is from an Estonian small town called Paide. And if you happen to see a very familiar face on the streets, you're not mistaken – super-model Carmen Kass is also an Estonian girl.

One helmeted, long-moustachioed Tallinner still remains unmentioned. His name is Vana Toomas (Old Thomas) and he's the official guardian of the city and may be found at the top of the City Hall's weathervane in the Old Town Square. He's held the post since 1530 and is the most recognised man in the entire city.

In Tallinn, it's worth visiting the modern art museum, KUMU, built into a limestone terrace. Or travel to the city's edge to the Rocca al Mare Open Air Museum and marvel at the construction skills of the Estonian farmer, who centuries ago, with nothing but the naked eye, achieved proportions in his chimneyless home as if he'd studied the golden ratio in a university.

And of course visit the palace in Kadriorg (Katherine's Valley) which Tsar Peter the Great commissioned for Katherine the Second.

Something very Estonian can be found if you happen to visit during the Song Festival. Imagine twenty-five-thousand people together at one



The modern look of Tallinn

"...twenty-five-thousand people together at one time on stage with the audience singing along. For the most popular events, singers number around one-hundred-thousand."



Estonian Song Festival on Tallinn Song Festival Grounds

time on stage with the audience singing along. For the most popular events, the singers number around one-hundred-thousand. So many souls united in celebration foster a spirit and trigger emotions that most of us will never experience again in our lives, unless of course you return for another song festival.

Estonia has a few other "capital" cities in addition to Tallinn. Our winter capital is Otepää, where the World Cup Cross-Country Skiing

"... melodies which haunt your memory, become familiar and come to represent the romantic and sun-warmed Estonian summer capital of Pärnu!"

Championship is held and where Estonians scream themselves voiceless cheering on their country's skiers. And to release

the stresses of life, you'll find that some skiers have built saunas right into the snowdrifts.

With the beginning of summer, the title of 'capital' moves 130 kilometres west to Pärnu, where the buzzing of honeybees fills avenues which lead to the beach, lined on both sides by linden trees. In Pärnu, you can attend to your health in spas,



A summer day beside Pärnu beach



Skiing fans in Otepää

or listen to swing or jazz in the chic Jugendstil milieu of Ammende Villa. Cafes and nightclubs are numerous in Pärnu, and the Pärnu assembly hall, home to grand parties and dining, is unlike any other in Estonia.

The cultural meeting place in Pärnu is the Modern Art Museum where every year the Pärnu International Documentary and Anthropology Film Festival takes place. The festival and Pärnu are a natural combination. This is also true of the music festival which is held in memory of a favourite Estonian composer, Raimond Valgre. Valgre's melancholy songs offer melodies which haunt your memory, become familiar and come to represent the romantic and sun-warmed Estonian summer capital of Pärnu.

One-hundred-eighty kilometres from Tallinn is the city of Tartu, Estonia's centre of science and education since 1632, when Swedish King Gustav II Adolf built the University of Tartu. Today the university still remains the face and function of Tartu. Student traditions are carried from the university to the city's streets and take place everywhere in the city. Tartu residents are not annoyed when the bronze heads of their cultural

and academic heroes are shampooed by students in Toomemäe Park. So it is with Karl Ernst von Baer, the discoverer of mammalian ovum, and Kristjan Jaak Peterson, the first Estonian poet. Everyone here gets his treatment.

Tartu cafes have always been a meeting point and a place to rest legs for intellectuals as well as the regular folk of Tartu.

Worth a visit in Tartu is the Estonian Folk Museum, a storehouse of Estonian culture, or the botanical garden, where 6,500 plant species can be found in one small part of Estonia.

In Tartu, you can board a gorbellied barge which smells of pine tar and will carry you east on the Emajõgi ("Mother River" literally) as far as Estonia's biggest lake, Peipsi.

With the peaceful rhythms of Tartu come good thoughts, which is why the city refers to itself as the "City of Good Thoughts."



The main building of the University of Tartu

"Student traditions are carried from the university to the city's streets and take place everywhere in the city."



Tartu's famous statue of the kissing students in front of Tartu Town Hall



Limestone cliffs are characteristic of northern Estonia

Small but diverse

In Estonia, there are no long distances, though it is by no means an uninteresting landscape: and how different the landscapes can be! A village in the north may have one face and a southern one quite another, not to mention islands in the west or villages in the east along Peipsi lake. And the contrasts don't stop with appearances, either. Customs and traditions in different corners of Estonia can offer unexpected surprises.

Along north Estonia's coast you can walk for tens of kilometres. On one side is the sea, and to the other a high, unbroken limestone cliff which rises in places 56 meters above sea level. In spring-time, water spills 30.5 meters over Valaste Falls, and from the highest terrace it's possible to see the strata of greys, yellows and greens which

form the "cake" of limestone, millions of years in the making. Along the rocky coast shine the white houses of sea captains in Käsmu village. From the verandas of these houses wives once gazed out to sea, each looking for a familiar sail. In 1930, there were 62 sea captains for every 100 families in Käsmu village.

"In 1930 there were 62 sea captains for every 100 families in Käsmu village."

Architecture enthusiasts will enjoy touring fascinating manor houses. The old manor houses, at one time the living quarters of Baltic Germans, number in the thousands in Estonia. Housekeepers once ran between the kitchen and the dining room and peasant boys went with pitchforks to bring in the hay while the lord of the manor sat comfortably with his morning coffee. Now the manor houses are exclusive hotels, restaurants, conference locations, as well as school houses. The manor house pearls of Estonia make quite a long list.

In southern Estonia, there is no trace of limestone. Here the bedrock is sandstone. When travelling by boat on the Ahja river one is carried past Taevaskoja (literally "home of the sky"). Here the river's current has carved a deep bed in the sandstone with about 20-metre yellow and red-toned walls towering above. This is the product of tens of thousands of years of the river's work since the end of the ice age. Those who have seen the Colorado river at the Grand Canyon will find something familiar in Taevaskoja.

From here it is not far to the Piusa sand caves, a veritable underground cathedral where in the high arches will winter seven species of bats which zoologists estimate to number around 3,000.

At dusk on a warm August night candles are lit on the island at the Leigo farm in southern Estonia's hill country. You can lie down on a hayfield and listen to music until the moment arrives when there is no longer a difference between the lights on the water and the stars in the August sky.



Setu men

In the southeast corner of Estonia is the Setu Kingdom, where from time to time a new king, God's viceregent on earth, is chosen, as well as a brewmeister, vodka maker and other essential positions. During the holidays, the Setus sing



Concert on the shore of Lake Leigo

around the Orthodox church, men wearing high boots, women weighted down with kilos of silver around their necks.

Afterwards, the Setus set a rich table on their relatives' graves. Those who happen to take part in Setu folk parties feel discomfoting regret that they were not born Setu, but also endless joy when they have found a friend among the Setus.

On the western Estonian islands, Muhumaa, Saaremaa, Hiiumaa, are thatched-roof log houses, moss-covered stone walls along village lanes and fishing boats left to meet their final days. The homes of Koguva, Muhu Island's most naturally preserved coastal village, are surrounded by two-hundred-year-old stone walls reaching heights of two metres.

When you step off the ferryboat on to Vormsi Island you may be convinced you've landed in Sweden. The white-framed windows on red

houses are identical to those on the Sweden's small Seacrow Island, if you recollect the stories of Astrid Lindgren.

On Kihnu island the local women ride motorcycles with sidecars, their brightly coloured, striped national folk costumes flapping in the wind. Where else could you possibly see this? On Kihnu in winter the sound of looms at work can be

heard, because during wintertime the Kihnu woman will make several new striped skirts for herself. If she weaves using a lot of the colour

red, her life is full of song and joy. If she weaves with more blue and black, she has been worrying about the goings-on in her house. If you want to please a Kihnu woman, take her fabric to make an apron with a traditional pattern. Kihnu women have soft spots in their hearts for aprons.

Kihnu's unique folk culture is found on the UNESCO world heritage list.

"On Kihnu island the local women ride motorcycles with sidecars, their brightly coloured, striped national folk costumes flapping in the wind."



The local women of the Kihnu island



Traditional Estonian homestead

Land of Forests and Boulders

Our home is the forest, sings an Estonian at night by the fire. He is right, of course, as half of Estonia is forested. If you travel from the city in any direction, wherever you turn you are surrounded by forest. A horizon without forest can only be found in towns or by the sea. Estonia leads Europe in great boulders and enormous stones. We are third in the number of bogs and second in the number of plant species (seventy-six!) contained in a single square metre of meadow grasslands. And were we to count the number of meteorites which have fallen on Estonia...

Estonians are so connected to their land that most everyone has a favourite boulder, a giant

tree, or a forest lake – old acquaintances to be visited again and again.

If you turn off from the highway, you only need to take a few steps along an elevated plank trail and you are quickly surrounded by soft sphagnum moss. Dwarf pines rise in the distance as far as the eye can see. Light reflects off bog pools scattered between marsh tussocks, mirroring blue sky and passing white clouds. A Pied Wagtail, the small agile bird, runs along the trail swinging its long tail, and somewhere in the distance is the barely audible trill of the Meadowlark.

In the first half of summer, mothers of Estonian households send their families to the forest to gather chanterelles, wild strawberries, and blueberries. Closer to autumn, lingonberries and



Colourful autumn in Soomaa

cranberries are gathered in the bogs. From forest and meadow the Estonian woman also gathers healing plants for the making of tea for the family during darker seasons.

The four seasons make Estonian nature versatile: summer with its lush verdure, autumn's passionate display of colour, winter's snow and frost and spring's budding nature and birdsong.

"The four seasons make Estonian nature versatile."

But there is a fifth season. This peculiar phenomenon shows itself only in the western Estonian region of Soomaa and never at the same time every year. This is the flood season. The waters from the melting snow are unable to drain and the river rises from its bed into the meadows, on to the roads and the farmyards. Where once was hay or potato fields are now "high seas" and the village woman travels across her yard to the barn in a skiff in order to feed the pigs and the chickens. This can last a week. Sometimes longer.

At this time of year a boat trip in Soomaa is a special thrill. It's especially nice to travel by a haabjas—a boat carved from a thick-trunked aspen. Balance comes in handy in this instance.



Even the bears find Estonia's roads uncrowded

One knows where to reduce speeds on forest roads, because nearly always deer, elk and rabbit are seen. Occasionally a wild boar and its large family will cross the road, piglets following one another single file like tiny striped railcars behind a large locomotive. Sometimes, when you sit on an elevated observation platform to watch the pigs pass, a bear and her cubs will approach a feeding trough, eat a light meal and move on.

There is the occasional day where not a single forest resident is seen. On these days, rare events can be read from paths in the grass and tracks in the snow: Who has followed whom, who got away, who got a tasty mouthful or went without.

Spring and autumn, the seasons of bird migration, bring the west coast of Estonia busloads of storm-jacket-wearing-, binocular- and cam-

era toting men and women. On Estonia's west coast, the Matsalu Nature Reserve is a paradise for migratory birds. Estonia is at the heart of the flyway for tens of millions of birds. Estonia's own migratory birds also begin their journey south. Storks gather in flocks in the hayfields and their trumpet-like call carries far into the forest.



An encounter with the Ural Owl



Enjoying a spa treatment

The Calm of the Forest, Healing Mud, and the Sauna

Spas and water centres, ski trails, the seashore and quiet forest roads await the guest in Estonia who has come to rest and nourish body and spirit.

“The mud bath is an extremely relaxing invention. You get up, wash yourself, and you are a new person.”

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Forty modern water centres for a country of almost 1.4 million people is just enough so that every city may have one. The water centres are big and small, some with many guests and some quite exclusive; some are ultra-modern and others retro, carrying an air of the Soviet period.

Haapsalu, Kuressaare and Pärnu have long been known as resort towns. The first mud clinic in Haapsalu opened its doors in 1825 and from that time on it has attracted visitors from around the world who appreciate the mud bath, including Russian Tsars.

The city of Kuressaare has long been like a foreign land, even for Estonians themselves, since it's situated on Estonia's largest island and requires a half-hour ferry trip from the mainland. When a session of water treatments are fin-

ished in the modern health centre, one can visit Saaremaa Opera Days in the castle's courtyard or wander through ancient coastal villages. Or sample the islanders' home-brewed beer with its hidden kick. It's recommended to somewhat limit the sampling.

Pärnu is famous for its health centres, shallow waters, white sand beaches and beautiful parks. You can easily recognise someone who's spent a few days in Pärnu, no matter where he's from, since he'll be noticeably tanned and happier.

There is something similar about the resort towns of Haapsalu, Kuressaare and Pärnu: all three seem to belong to the 19th century. There are tree-lined beach promenades, assembly halls, seashell-shaped bandstands, residential areas full of historic wooden homes and endless cosy cafes and noble restaurants.

And they have one more thing in common: for over a hundred years they have valued the healthy qualities of mud. First the visitor lies down and warm mud is spread over the body. Next, wrapped in warm towels, the guest lies in a warm, damp cocoon, with no earthly thoughts or worries. The mud bath is an extremely relaxing invention. You get up, wash yourself and you are a new person.

The sauna was a holy place for ancient Estonians. In modern times, it has become a place to



The sauna – a holy place



Taste the colours of nature

relax and rejuvenate. There are all kinds of saunas in Estonia. In every good Estonian tourism farm there is a traditional sauna, where guests slap their bodies with a birch branch to improve circulation. The temperature in these saunas can reach 120 degrees Celsius and the experience is said to protect against 99 different diseases. The guest, having poured ice-cold water on himself, leaves feeling strong, happy and healthy.

Especially pleasant is the archaic smoke sauna, where an open fire burns a half day and smoke sneaks out through gaps in the windows and door. Here, the hot stones grow ripe like tomatoes.

Spas and water centres are not the only places where a tourist can relax in Estonia. There are beaches and forest lakes where water and sun can be enjoyed while never seeing another soul. And the forests are full of hiking trails which become ski trails once the snow falls.

Narva-Jõesuu, also known as the Northern Riviera, has been an important resort town for decades with its almost eight kilometres of sand beaches and curing pine forests.

What else can Estonia offer its guests? Silence. Silence is a natural resource which is becoming

more scarce in the modern world – much like polar bears, rain forests and Usuri tigers. But there is still silence in Estonia, and you don't have to go far to find it. And if you lose the sense of time during your holiday, you don't need to do anything but open your laptop on the sauna bench and review your return tickets. Or book new ones for a few weeks later.



Enjoy the silence

www.visitestonia.com



Estonia in Brief

<i>Official name:</i>	Republic of Estonia (Eesti Vabariik in Estonian)
<i>Area</i>	45,227 km ²
<i>Inhabitants</i>	1.36 million
<i>Capital</i>	Tallinn (405,000 inhabitants)
<i>Official language</i>	Estonian
<i>Form of government:</i>	parliamentary democracy
<i>National holiday</i>	24 February (Independence Day)
<i>National bird:</i>	barn swallow
<i>National flower:</i>	cornflower

The Republic of Estonia is a member of the **European Union**, **Schengen area** and **NATO**.

Estonia is in the **East European time zone** (GMT/BST + 02:00).

Estonia's country code is + 372. To place an International call start by dialling 00.