



Tallinn, Estonia - The woman behind the counter smiled, her blue eyes flashing, as she exchanged my money for a fistful of Estonian Koons (EEK). "I hope you will be staying for a while," she said with genuine conviction in her voice. "Tallinn is a wonderful place, I know you will love it, just like we do!"

Her comments were typical of what I found during a week-long visit to this delightful 'little' country. Estonia and its capital, Tallinn, is truly one of the great undiscovered treasures of the world. From the moment I arrived, I felt more like a guest who is welcomed into a private home than a casual traveler. The warm smiles of the people, combined with a sense of safety, was a wonderful and welcome surprise from the normal hassles of travel.

As the oldest capital in Northern Europe, Tallinn has a long heritage of hosting tourists and for good reason. Although compact in size, Estonia offers a wealth of scenic diversity, architecture and opportunity for activities.

From trendy Tallinn and the romantic fishing villages of the north to the rugged hills and pristine lakes of the heartland and the academic-bohemian ambience of the university town of Tartu, this boutique country offers a wealth of opportunities for exploration within a few hours drive.

The heart of Tallinn is in the Old Town which is included on the UNESCO World Heritage list as one of the best-preserved medieval town centers in Europe. Winding through its web of cobblestone streets and past buildings dating from the 11th Century and earlier, one has a real sense of what a cultural center this was during the medieval ages. All the most important state buildings and churches, as well as many of the original residences from the medieval period have been preserved in their basic original form.

It's a fairyland of colorful buildings topped with red roofs, serpentine cobblestone streets, quaint alleyways and quiet cafes. From the 600 year old Gothic-style Town Hall with its dragon headed rain spouts to the 159-meter high Oleviste Church which was the highest structure in the world in the 16th century, Tallinn Old Town is the very essence of old world charm and grace.

Dynamic, Vibrant City

But this is not a static, musty, cold museum of a place. Rather, it is a dynamic part of a vibrant city where life abounds and people gather to exchange ideas, enjoy dinner or lunch in a genial restaurant tucked away in a narrow street, or just to have fun. Lying between the harbor, where modern ocean liners from such lines as Princess Cruises, Royal Caribbean and Holland America grace the port, and the modern Tallinn business district, Old Town is the center of much of the city's nightlife and daily entertainment.





The cozy cafes, quaint boutiques and theme restaurants are the perfect place to pass the day or the evening. I was struck by a seemingly overwhelming number of young people who gather here both during the day and throughout the night. The partying, and the laughter, seem to be non-stop. If you are in Tallinn on a Saturday, visit the open air market where vendors offer locally produced, hand-made items that make a perfect souvenir.

Hand-knitted woolen sweaters, pullovers and hats with traditional Estonia folk patterns, are available here at surprisingly low prices considering the quality of the work. The Estonia Kroon (EEK) is tied directly to the Euro (1 Euro = approximately 15.65 EEK) so calculating the exchange rate and the price in your home currency is always simple.

I also took home a few hand-made wooden kitchen utensils. The items are nice, but the story that came with them was worth much more. The woman selling them started by explaining that they were made by one of her relatives and then proceeded to tell me in details how they select only special wood and then carefully carve them by hand following a specific pattern that the family has used for generations. Other locally produced items for sale include handmade jewelry, colorful glassware, fine ceramics, and hand-painted marzipan (fun as well as tasty!).

Nearby, Estonia's 'first flag' flies atop Tall Hermann's Tower at the seat of the nation's parliament in the restored 13th century Toompea Castle. At every turn of the quaint streets people gather to have fun, sip a coffee and enjoy the lively atmosphere.

A Step Back in Time

One of the highlights of my visit was dinner at the famous Old Hansa restaurant which is located just about in the center of Old Town.

The Olde Hansa honors the old Hanseatic League which ruled the area during what is called the golden age of Tallinn. The Olde Hansa is a re-creation of a great dining hall of the middle ages and is anything but 'just another restaurant!' My group's adventure at the Old Hansa began with a greeting by a troupe of players dressed in authentic medieval costumes, period music and some delightful warm cider outside the restaurant - a perfect beginning to what proved to be a memorable evening.

Inside, we were treated to a wonderful feast that seemed like it would never end - all served in the same manner and prepared in the same way as it would have been during the time when knights and kings ruled the land. Everything from olives, local vegetables, and appetizers to delectable smoked salmon, unbelievable ham, and beef was spread before us. A variety of beer



Estonia: Friendly Persuasion

By Jim Thompson





(I had the Honey Amber Ale) and wines set to the sounds of a medieval orchestra put everyone in a good mood. If you ever go to Tallinn, don't miss a stop at the Olde Hansa Restaurant. The prices are reasonable and the experience memorable.

My accommodations were at the newly built Radisson SAS Hotel. The hotel offers the finest in modern convenience and decor along with a striking contrast to the quaintness of Old Town that is only a five minute walk but a world away.

Besides its reputation of being one of the best preserved cities in Europe, Tallinn is also one of the most tech-savvy. The ultra modern business district offers the business traveler some of the best facilities and conveniences anywhere in the world.

Nearly everywhere I went Internet access was available via Wi-Fi. Most of the local cafes and the airport provide free wireless Internet access. Even the hotel had free access in the rooms and in all public areas. Overall, Estonia has

more than 900 public wireless Internet or Wi-Fi areas and more than one-third of these are in Tallinn. A number of international high-tech companies, including Internet telephone provider SKYPE, are located in this thriving capital city.

But Tallinn should only be the beginning of a journey to this wonderful little country that blends modern living with the best of its ancient culture and traditions. But, it's the warmth and friendliness of the people that will capture your heart.



Where to Stay:

Radisson SAS Hotel

280 rooms, Spa, Restaurant, Bar
 Rävåla pst.3
 10143 Tallinn, Estonia
 Telephone: +372 682 3 000
 Fax: +372 682 3 001
 Reservations: + 372 682 3 500
 Email:
 Info.Tallinn@RadissonSAS.com
 Web: www.tallinn.radissonsas.com
 Prices start at about 150-Euro
 for a standard double

Georg Ots Spa Hotel

Tori 2, Kuressaare 93810
 Tel: +372 45 50 000
 Fax: +372 45 50 001
 Prices: 800-EEK to 2,123-EEK
 (call for special pricing and discounts)
 Includes unlimited use of fitness-
 center, pools and saunas
 Web: http://www.gospa.ee
 Prices: 800-EEK - 2123-EEK
 (call or email for special rates)

Hotel Dorpat

Soola 6
 Tartu 51014
 Telephone: +372 733 7180
 Fax: +372 733 7181
 Web: www.dorpat.ee
 200+ rooms, restaurants and Spa
 Price: 61-Euros - 176-Euros

Where to eat:

Olde Hansa Restaurant

(Estonian Food)
 Vana Turg 1
 10140 Tallinn
 Telephone: +372 627 9020
 Fax: +372 627 9021
 Web: http://www.oldchansa.ee

Vertigo Restaurant

(Continental Food)
 (across street from
 Radisson SAS Hotel

Tel: +372 666 3456
 or +372 534 94222
 Email: info@vertigo.ee
 Web: www.vertigo.ee

Restaurant Troika (Russian Food)

Raekoja plats 15
 Tallinn, Estonia
 Telephone: 6276245
 Web: www.troika.ee

Eesti Maja (Estonian Food)

(C-3) Lauteri 1
 Tallinn
 Tel. 645-5252
 Web: www.eestimaja.ee

land per square kilometer than
 anywhere in Europe; bogs cover
 some 20 percent of the country.
 Forests cover nearly 40 percent.

Estonian population: 1.4 million;
 65% Estonian, 32% Russian-
 speaking.

Main religions: Most ethnic Esto-
 nians are Lutheran-with a minority of
 Orthodox (loyal to Constantinople)
 among them. Most ethnic Russians
 are Russian Orthodox-loyal to
 Moscow's Patriarch.

Tallinn population: 430,000.



Fast Facts:

Call it little, but not Tiny! Esto-
 nians don't like hearing people call
 their country tiny and quickly point
 out that many others - such as Den-
 mark, Belgium, Holland and Israel -
 are even smaller.

Counting its more than 1,000
 islands and by its winding coastline,
 Estonia spreads over 3,794 kilome-
 ters. Estonia also has more marsh-

Other large cities: Tartu, 105,000;
 Narva, 80,000; Kohtla-Järve, 70,000;
 Pärnu, 50,000.

Total territory: 45,227 sq. km, a bit
 larger than the Netherlands.

Highest Point: Suur Munamägi
 (Big Egg Mountain) is 318 meters
 high; this glorified hill in south Esto-
 nia is the highest point in the Baltics.

Climate: July is the warmest
 month, when temperatures hover
 around 20°C (68°F); in February,
 temperatures average -5°C (23°F).

