



Estonia, aka 'E-Stonia': The Baltic country balances medieval beauty with digital innovation



BY JIM FARBER

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Estonia looks like a step into the past, but in many ways it's more advanced than most countries.

By JIM FARBER

THE TWISTING streets of Tallinn, Estonia, snake back to the Middle Ages. Every cobblestone, back alley and turret has been restored with a precision that would make Prague proud.

Yet in, and around, the storybook structures of this old city lies more electronic savvy and digital innovation than nearly any city in the world.

Those new to this tiny Baltic country may view it as a place where thick-ankled women in babushkas slurp borscht.

But those in the know have come to recognize it as a nation-sized, Eastern answer to Silicon Valley.

It's this country that brainstormed Skype, as well as the successful TransferWise money transfer service. Spurred by such scores, Estonia has become a breeding ground for as many startups as around San Francisco.

Small wonder the place has convincingly rebranded itself "E-Stonia."

In this northernmost Baltic country — on the west border of Russia, and a two-hour ferry ride from Finland — 99% of the population's bank transfers are performed electronically, 98% of medicines are prescribed that way, while 95% of tax returns are filed via the e-Tax Board.

Virtually every citizen votes online, eliminating the possibility of fraud. Estonia's introduction of mandatory citizen ID cards — used for every legally binding interaction — has made signing by hand as vestigial as using a public pay phone.

"I don't even know what my handwriting looks like anymore," says Karli Suvisild, who teaches tourists about the country's advancements at an e-Showroom facility in Tallinn, Estonia's capital. "We all do digital signatures."



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A wireless, nearly paperless society in a historic setting

But it's the balance between the drive for progression and the needs of preservation that has made Estonia a beautiful experience for travelers. The wealth the country has generated since breaking free of Soviet rule just over two decades ago has helped Estonians keep their old town center stunning. At the same time, their paperless society helped preserve the local forests that sprawl over more than half of the country. Visitors can bask in the openness of a place that boasts just 1.3 million people — that's less than the population of the Bronx.

There's much to explore in Estonia's piney preserves and country manors. But before hitting the rural spots, first seek the wonders of central Tallinn (pronounced Tahl-in).

Even by the standards of Medieval towns — this one dating mainly from the 12th to the 14th century — its streets prove a daunting maze. They turn and veer in every direction, leading to variety of open squares. Luckily, Old Town isn't large. You can cross it in 20 minutes. So relax and wander. It's touristy for sure, with some restaurant folks donned up in humiliating "ye olde" wear. But the prices aren't tourist trap-like and the architecture is the real thing.

Along the way, you may have to endure a lot of hard drinkers in your midst. Many folks from Finland take the brisk two-hour ferry from Helsinki to get cheap booze here. While drinks are heavily taxed, and sold only in government stores in Finland, in Estonia they're cheap and accessible. It's a stark enough difference to have earned the place a reputation for "alcho-tourism."

Unlike Prague's pristine Medieval center, Tallinn's jewel-like center endured bombings during World War II. But they've done a kick-ass restoration job. While restaurants, bars and tchochka shops dominate the pristine byways, there's also a cool night club scene. At the music venue Sinilind I saw a crack band from Lithuania, named Garbanotas Bosistas, who mix classic psychedelic rock with modern art rock. To acknowledge the importance of nature here, the guitarist wore the locally ubiquitous lilac flowers and branches in his hair.

Music plays a key part in Estonia's history and character, virtually fueling its independence. Local activist/artist Heinz Valk coined the term "the singing revolution" to capture the break of all three Baltic countries from the Soviets' grip. The phrase refers to the nighttime singing demonstrations that drew hundreds of thousands to the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds, located just outside Old Town. Massive shows still take place here. You can visit by taking the Hop-on Hop-off bus and it's worth it. I got chills imagining 300,000 people — one-fourth of the population — gathering here to sing songs banned by the Soviets, as a lyrical protest. In the end, they won their freedom without a single death on either side.

Lately, Russian president Vladimir Putin's regime has been sending ships into the Baltic to intimidate countries like Estonia. While this has made elder citizens nervous, younger ones take comfort in the fact that, unlike the now war-torn Ukraine, few citizens here identify with Russia, so there's no internal movement to change their independent state.

You can find out more about the nation's dramatic history at the must-see Museum of Occupations in Tallinn. Curator Martin Andreller told me the architects chose its modern design to move away from centuries of oppression at the hands of Swedes and Germans as well as Russians. The building's exterior consists of clear glass, emphasizing the importance of transparency in a country often held down by secretive regimes. In the garden and foyer lay suitcases made of cement to represent the heaviness of the expulsions the citizens often experienced. There's also ample space devoted to life under the Soviets. It includes a section called "Forbidden Music," which documents Estonia's first rock festival held in 1972, an event viewed with great suspicion by the occupiers.

It's a short hop — physically and thematically — to the Bastion Tunnels, a defensive tunnel system under Tallinn's Old Town that dates back to the 1600s, when the Swedes ruled. You have to call ahead to book an English-speaking tour, and you'll need one, because there are no printed explanations

on the walls. The guide tells of the many uses of the tunnels, from a cunning place to hide during the bombings of World War II to a refuge for punk bands suppressed during the '80s by the Soviets. The punks even played down there, turning them into literal underground bands.



Old Town Tallinn is just about a 20-minute walk across.

The history of resistance in Estonia has much to do with its current role in technology. The people retained their own language through every occupation, cementing a strong bond and sense of patriotism. That explains why Estonians so readily accepted the key component of their e-status — that national ID card. Another factor: When the Soviets left in the '90s, they took their bureaucracy with them. The new nation needed to reorganize quickly and they didn't have a large population to help. Technology, just becoming a mass obsession in the '90s, offered a visionary solution.

The e-way of life has encouraged an entrepreneurial spirit that has created a wonderful boom in home restaurants in Estonia's countryside. Many families open their homes to diners, and the results can be especially warming. I had a lunch at an insanely quaint home eatery called MerMer by the sea on the Juminda Peninsula. The setting suggested the most romantic spots of Scandinavia. The husband/wife of Jaan and Merritt team prepared a luscious five-course meal, with wine, for 40 Euro (about \$44 at current exchange rates), a steal given the bounty and quality (e-mail merritt@mermer.ee).

Stays at manor houses provide another hallmark of the Estonian countryside. I spent a pastoral night in Vihula Manor Country Club & Spa, a 16th century estate set on 50 acres of parkland along the Mustoja River in the giant Lehemaa National Park. As in many places here, the Manor's restaurant features odd fare. I had beaver, and yes, folks, horse (it tastes like bland beef).

The manor lies one hour from Tallinn, but it feels a world away. It's key to experience the greenery and calm of such a place when traveling here. Estonians take nature so seriously. They pipe the sounds of tweeting birds into the bathrooms at their national airport.

That exchange — between the natural world and the technological one — underscores the observation of Aman Kumar, a young American from Silicon Valley who's serving as a special adviser to the tech folks here. As he told me, "This is truly the little country that could."

If You Go:

Air: Finnair (finnair.com) has the most flights from the U.S. You'll fly to Helsinki, the capital of Finland, then catch a 40-minute connecting plane to Tallinn.

Stay : * **In Tallinn** - Hotel Schlossle (schloesslehotel.com), a beautiful boutique establishment from the 14th century that's up to date enough to feature iPads in every room. From \$250 per night.

* **In Lahemaa National Park** - Vihula Manor Country Club & Spa (vihulamanor.com), from \$125 per night.

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