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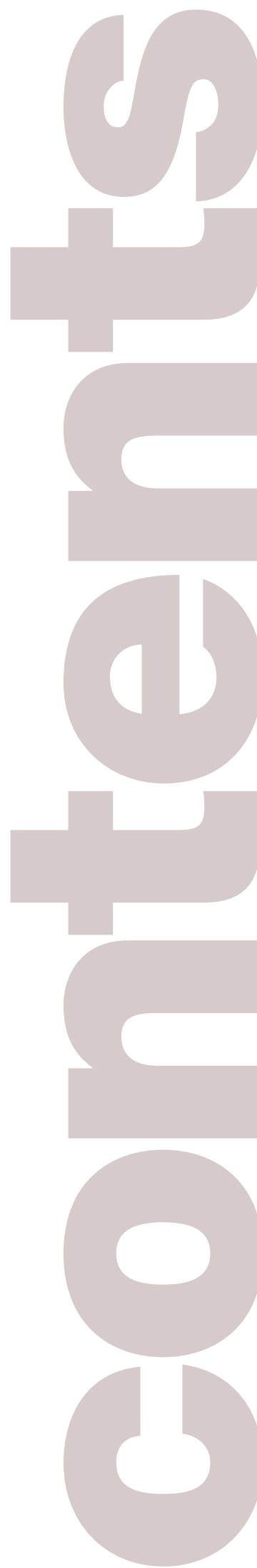
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Balticflavours



The once-isolated islands of western Estonia have come in from the cold to offer an idyllic antidote to city life, with a tranquil atmosphere and rustic but inventive style of cooking that is an increasing source of inspiration to the country's leading chefs, as Francis Pearce discovers

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EMMA WOOD



Travel information

The currency of Estonia is the euro. Estonia is two hours ahead of GMT and has generally warm summers and rather extreme winter lows, with temperatures falling to -8°C. The best time to visit is from May through to September, when temperatures average 20°C-25°C. The gateway to the islands of Saaremaa, Hiiumaa and Muhu is Haapsalu, a 90-minute drive from Tallinn.

GETTING THERE

Estonian Air (00 372 6401 160, estonian-air.ee) flies daily from Heathrow to Tallinn.

Easyjet (easyjet.com) operates frequent flights between London Stansted and Tallinn.

RESOURCES

Estonian National Tourist Board (visitestonia.com) will provide you with everything you need from travel, accommodation and upcoming events, as well as all the must-see places, to ensure you make the most of your stay in Estonia.

Tourism.ee (tourism.ee) will ensure you know everything about Estonia's finest cuisine, the places to go for a great night out, along with the essentials on car rentals, medical services and accommodation.

FURTHER READING

Estonian Tastes and Traditions Karin Annus Kärner (Hippocrene Books Inc, £20.99). This excellent book offers a good introduction to not only Estonian cuisine but also the culture. The recipes are a mix of traditional and contemporary dishes, using ingredients that are readily found at the market, making this an ideal holiday read.

Looking at Estonia Piret Hiisjärv and Ene Hiiepuu (Oliver Press, £11.99). Well written and containing everything you would want to know, this book is a must-read before visiting Estonia. You can expect to learn about the country's history and culture, while also delving into the glory of Estonia's cuisine, its climate and general environment.

PREVIOUS PAGES: PADASTE MANOR; SEA-BUCKTHORN BRULEE; ALEXANDER RESTAURANT. THIS PAGE, LEFT: 'WHITEFISH', 'PIKE-PERCH' AND 'BARLEY' AT ALEXANDER. BELOW: VODKA AND PICKLES AT TRAHTER VESKI; LOCAL HERRING AND EGG PASTY FOR SALE; ONE OF THE RUSTIC ROOMS AT NAMI NAMASTE FARM. OPPOSITE: KRISTI KULL'S LAMB STEW AND SMOKED MUTTON; HAAPSALA STATION ENTRANCE; KURESSAARE CASTLE AND MUSEUM

Each time you come to Saaremaa, you leave a little of your heart there until one day the Baltic island has it all, says Kristi Kull, who has moved back there to raise sheep. She has literally made her home, a thatched log house, next to her brother's on grassy land by the shore. Its kitchen has a large, traditional tiled stove and a table big enough for both families. As a vast wooden mug of home-brewed lambic ale is passed around for each of us to sip, she urges us to sample the smoked mutton, pine-coloured rye bread and peppery lamb stew she has prepared for us. The sheep are transported by tractor trailer to small coral islets where they feed on salty plants and seaside herbs, which helps explain the meat's depth of flavour. Her aim is to establish an eco-village with a tavern at its heart, but it is still early days.

Kristi is part of a gradual movement back to Saaremaa, Hiiumaa and Muhu, the three main islands of western Estonia, since the tiny country bordered by Russia and Latvia reasserted its independence in 1991. The islands re-emerged into the daylight after an enforced hibernation of half a century under Soviet rule when, as a military 'frontier zone', special passes were needed to travel to or from them regardless of the isolation imposed each winter by freezing seas. But between world wars and earlier, Saaremaa in particular was a summer resort, known internationally for its mud baths and concerts, and the tranquil beauty of its birch and juniper woods, windmills and meadows. All three islands have a reputation for being laid-back and friendly. Doors are left unlocked; a broom placed in the doorway bars entry instead.

Like many others, Kristi returned from abroad after Estonia's 'singing revolution', when folksong and tradition helped demonstrate popular will, and her take on Estonian cookery is tempered by having lived in Greece, among other countries. Jutta Pae, on the other hand, threw in a job as a paramedic in Tallinn to come home to Lümända in the far west of Saaremaa. The little town is close to the huge, unspoilt Viidumäe Nature Reserve, a wetland area preserved as the one lucky legacy of the island's subjugation. Jutta runs the Lümända Söögimaja, or 'dinner house', in an old church school whose main building dates from 1875 but which was built around an older baking chimney. A traditionalist, she specialises in the food her grandmother used to prepare: peasant dishes such as juicy *kapsarullid* (cabbage rolls), rich *mooritud lamba raguu* (stewed mutton ragout), soothing *tuhli puder ja nott* (pudding made with potatoes) and rhubarb cake.

Saaremaa's capital is the pretty town of Kuressaare which, despite having a population of barely 30,000, has a harbour for Baltic cruise ships and lists a 13th-century bishop's castle, spa hotels, a golf course and small daily markets among its —————>>





As a mug of home-brewed lambic ale is passed around, Kristi urges us to sample the smoked mutton, pine-coloured rye bread and peppery lamb stew she has prepared. The sheep are transported to small coral islets where they feed on seaside herbs, which helps explain the meat's depth of flavour





Food glossary

Hapukapsalat Sauerkraut.

Hapukoore ja sibulaga Broad beans with sour cream and onion.

Haug filee Pike fillet.

Kali Estonia's homegrown equivalent of cola, but better.

Kama A traditional drink made with *kefir* and kama flour, which is a mixture of rye, barley and pea flours.

Kapsarullid Cabbage rolls.

Kartuli-Tangpuder Barley and potato casserole with ham.

Mooritud lamba ragu A braised mutton ragout.

Tuhli puder ja nott A pudding or 'porridge' made from mashed potatoes.



The chanterelles are wild and, like the miniscule strawberries we bought this morning, were almost certainly picked and brought to market without changing hands. Even Tallinn townies are avid foragers, if only at weekends

attractions. It makes a comfortable base for exploration, although the island also has numerous bed and breakfasts, eco-farms, stables, log cabins and small hotels. Accommodation on the island ranges from clean bunks at the Tihuse Horse Farm, where you can ride the hardy Estonian breed, the Tori, and sample beer soup (oddly, a pudding), to the get-away-from-it-all chic of the Nami Namaste, which is often used as a retreat by Estonia's elite – French president Nicolas Sarkozy slept there in the pure white loft of a converted cattle shed overlooking ageless meadows.

We opt to people-watch from the platform of the Veski Inn, a converted windmill in Saaremaa, as we sample sour pickles stuffed with smoked fish and sip icy Estonian vodka. On the cobbles below, women – all of a certain age – are arranging themselves in clusters. Some groups are dressed in heavily decorated traditional Estonian costumes, others sport matching frocks and hats that give them the look of team gate-crashers at a wedding.

At a hidden signal they begin to dance and sing in a stately, if slightly batty and uncertain, way. One or two need help and are firmly steered through their moves as the accordion player segues from the 'Saaremaa Waltz' to 'The Birdie Song'. Despite the complexity of the language, and the country's flatness, there are Estonian words to 'She'll be coming round the mountain when she comes'. As we are guests, we focus our attention on the pork and fried cabbage with chanterelle sauce, and avoid giggling ungraciously.

The chanterelles are wild and, like the miniscule strawberries we bought this morning in the market, were almost certainly picked and brought to market without changing hands. Even Tallinn townies are avid foragers, if only at weekends. Saaremaa's woods also deliver boar and deer. Historically, islanders have had to make the best of what's available, especially by preserving food for the harsh winters by salting, drying, smoking and pickling. In mid-summer it is not unusual to see flounders pegged up like washing on lines, drying in the wind, or being loaded on wire trays into small, smoking ovens in specially built garden pits.

It is unusual, however, for people still to make all their living from fishing. So, on Muhu, we join a team of three part-timers who harvest Baltic herring and needlefish as a paying hobby. We leave the dusty road and take a rocky path through low scrub and juniper trees to a point below some sand bluffs where two open boats are moored. Amid cursing and plumes of acrid smoke, the engine on the first boat eventually coughs into life. We set out, towing the second, and reach the nets which are staked out in shallow water to maze the fish and pen them in. We arrive just in time to see a seal ducking into the nets and tucking in.

The catch is brought on board by pulling up the nets from opposite sides and tugging the boats together to create a fishy trampoline. Not surprisingly the catch here is a bit thin, so we move to another spot which proves more generous before returning to shore, ankle deep in expiring fish and glittering from a cloud of —————>>



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MARDI TALU FARM; ANNI ARRO'S BATTERED HERRING; TRAHTER VASKI; CORNFLOWERS – ESTONIA'S NATIONAL BLOOM; CHEF ANNI ARRO WITH HER PERCH AND CHANTERELLE DIP; EMBROIDERED SHOES AT KURESSAARE MARKET. THIS PAGE: NAMI NAMASTE FARM, AND COLLECTING SALAD LEAVES IN ITS GROUNDS; ANNI ARRO'S FISH PIE AND BALTIC HERRING SANDWICH; FOLK DANCING OUTSIDE TRAHTER VESKI





Where to eat

Prices quoted are per person for three courses (without wine), unless otherwise stated.

Alexander The restaurant's 'Nordic islands cuisine' makes it the essential gourmet stop in western Estonia. Options include a three, four or five-course table d'hôte menu. £35. *Padaste Manor, Muhu, 00 372 454 8800, padaste.ee (see also Where to Stay)*

Anni's Café Stylish and relaxed tearooms and restaurant at the Epp Maria art gallery. £15. *Kokamägi, Haapsalu, 00 372 508 2828, eppmaria.ee*

Arensburg Restaurant Traditional dishes served in a boutique hotel in Saaremaa town centre. £22. *Kuressaare, 00 372 452 4700, arensburg.eu (see also Where to stay)*

Kalakohvik A roadside treasure for a cheap, authentic lunch or snack. Fried, marinated Baltic herrings and cucumber salad £1.50. *Liival, Muhu, 00 372 525 5966, kalakohvik.ee*

Lümanda Söögimaja Traditional Estonian food, just like grandma made it. £12. *Lümanda, Saaremaa, 00 372 457 6493, soogimaja.planet.ee*

Trahter Veski A renovated windmill near the centre of town specialising in Estonian dishes. £10. *Kuressaare, Saaremaa, 00 372 453 3776, veskitrahter.eu*





The catch is brought on board by pulling up the nets and tugging the boats together to create a fishy trampoline. We return to shore, ankle deep in expiring fish and glittering from a cloud of silvery scales

silvery scales. An hour later we receive a call to say the boat has caught fire and sunk.

We are on our way to Pädaste Manor, once the country pile of the island's most powerful land marshal but now a stunning boutique hotel and home both to a jazz festival and to one of Estonia's best restaurants. Saaremaa-born chef Peeter Pihel's 'Nordic islands cuisine' includes traditional dishes such as fried Baltic herring with cucumber salad and finely tuned versions of local delicacies. We sample braised beef cheek with a salad of lovage and wild herbs picked from along the shore; cloudberry and cowslip jam, and crispy cumin bread. The greens accompanying the white fish at the manor are wild, the eggs are organic and local, and the goat's milk for the ice-cream comes from Matse, a nearby farm run by another returner, Martin Kibish.

Pihel pays special attention to both the terroir and the seasons, working with, rather than against, the islands' rugged climate. He explains his philosophy: 'Our summer, with its long evenings and bright nights, our damp autumns and crisp winters all have an influence. The slower a plant grows the better it tastes, and the cold makes plants store more minerals.'

Pädaste Manor, once a tiny, self-sufficient hamlet, has been artfully restored, with the granite and limestone forge, stables, bakery and

other outbuildings put to new uses. Lawns lead from an arboretum down to a jetty where there's a wood-burning hot tub that looks out over reeds and the sea to the horizon. As we enjoy an apéritif, a couple in fluffy bathrobes are guided to the hot tub by a waiter with champagne on ice. At midnight we return with a digestif to take in the view from the jetty in the half light. Our path crosses that of the same couple, this time dressed up to the nines. He has proposed. She has accepted.

Pihel maintains a friendly rivalry with Estonia's other top chef, Rene Uusmees at Mekk in Tallinn, who has helped develop modern Estonian cuisine by sticking closely to traditional ingredients and timing (he takes three days to make sourdough rye bread, for example) while using new technology. 'I use the same techniques and many of the same ingredients as my grandma but with the precision that modern equipment allows, so I can cold-smoke fish on the premises or cook a dish at exactly 100 degrees for seven or eight hours,' he tells us over a glass of cucumber spritzer.

On our return journey from the islands to the capital, we stop off at the seaside town of Haapsula, once a favourite resort of the Russian Tsar Nicholas II who would arrive by special train from St Petersburg. The station is long abandoned, in the sense that it is far longer than most, so that the monarch would never have to —————>>



PREVIOUS PAGES, FROM LEFT:
DRIED FISH, LUMANDA; KRISTIAN
PRII AT KALAKOHVIK; CATCHING
HERRING AND NEEDLEFISH. LEFT:
MUTTON STEW AT LUMANDA
SOOGIMAJA; PICKLES FOR SALE;
A GOAT AT METSA FARM;
FISHING VILLAGE ON MUHU;
TRADITIONAL EMBROIDERY;
JUNIPER TREES AT MARDI
TOURISM FARM; NAMI NAMASTE
FOOD FARM. THIS PAGE, FROM
TOP: GRASS GROWS OVER THE
TRACKS AT HAAPSALU
STATION; CABBAGE PARCELS AT
LUMANDA SOOGIMAJA

They welcome us with open sandwiches of sprats on rye bread topped with eggs and rocket; cucumbers pickled with herbs and oak leaves, and kama, a traditional drink made with fermented milk

step down to touch earth, and abandoned in that the line goes nowhere now. Today's more common variety of visitors come by road from the capital at weekends to take the sea air and sip tea.

The best-known teahouse here is also an art gallery, the Epp Maria Galerii, run by a particularly talented family. The pictures hanging there are by Maria Epp; the sculptures are by her husband Jaak Arro. It is run by the ceramicist Liisu Arro, who makes all the crockery, and her sister Anni who has presented cookery programmes from its kitchen and is also known nationally as a model.

They welcome us with open sandwiches of sprats on rye bread topped with eggs and rocket; cucumbers pickled with herbs and oak leaves, and *kama*, a traditional drink made with *kefir* (fermented milk) and kama flour (a blend of rye, barley and pea flours), sweetened with honey and topped with forest fruit. We leave clutching copies of Anni's cookery books and wondering where we will find wild dill and buckthorn berries growing at home.

Anni and Liisu have made a point of staying. Anni says: 'It is easier to leave, as it is hard to succeed here where the winters are long and the sunshine is limited. But the feeling you get from achieving something here, big or small, is a million times more powerful. It makes me understand our grandparents' efforts and suffering were not in vain. I feel embarrassed by Estonians who find that only life in Paris or London can be perfect. It is always nice to travel, but it is much better to return.'

House martins have built their nest on the bridge of the brand new ferry to the mainland. It clings to the superstructure over the wheelhouse like a fur hat raised above the skipper's head as he scans the four miles between mainland and island. A flash of white underbelly, a steep ascent brought to an instant halt and a martin makes an urgent delivery to its nestlings, then launches off again without a second wasted. When the ferry moves off the airlift is suspended and the birds glide watchfully overhead. It's hard not to wonder if every time they make the half hour journey they also leave a little of their tiny hearts behind. □

Francis Pearce and Emma Wood travelled to Estonia courtesy of the Estonian Tourist Board (visitestonia.com) and Estonian Air (estonian-air.ee)



Where to stay

Arensburg Boutique Hotel and Spa Very smart but also comfortable hotel in Saaremaa town centre with a good restaurant serving traditional dishes. Doubles from £80 a night including breakfast and use of swimming pool and saunas. *Kuressaare, 00 372 452 4700, arensburg.eu*

Jurna Recreation Farm Rustic B&B run by an Estonian baking enthusiast. Doubles from £30 a night, including breakfast. *Upa, Saaremaa, 00 372 452 1919, saaremaa.ee/jurna*

Mardi Talu Quirky seaside retreat. Options include a self-catering log cabin with sauna and accommodation for up to six for £375 a week. *Lumanda, Saaremaa, 00 372 504 7250, marditalu.ee*

Nami Namaste Post-hippy chic in the countryside, with optional cookery classes from a former TV chef. Minimum three days' stay for £100 a person including breakfasts. *Simisti, Muhu, 00 372 515 2808 naminamaste.com*

Pädaste Manor Stunning boutique hotel ideal for a romantic getaway on Muhu, with one of Estonia's top restaurants as a bonus. Doubles from £190 including breakfast. *Muhu, 00 372 454 8800, padaste.ee*

Saaremaa Okoküla Stay in a traditional farmhouse away from it all on a working coastal eco-farm. Self-catering accommodation for up to eight. £375 a week. *Lahetaguse, Saaremaa, 00 372 5104 844, sheep.ee*

Tihuse Hobuturismitalu Farmstead and riding stable with basic but clean accommodation. £18 a person per night including breakfast. *Hellemaa, Muhu, 00 372 4598 943, tihuse.ee*

