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Next Stop

By SARAH KHAN

It was late afternoon and the colors of Muhu Island in [Estonia](#) were at their most kinetic: Neon-green mosses clinging to tawny cottages seemed aglow against the deepening blue sky. It's an enchanting hour, one that would be best spent inhaling the crisp late-summer air and watching the sleepy island inch languorously from day into night. But I hadn't figured that out yet. I was determined to find something to do. Which explains how I found myself at an accordion concert.

Many of Muhu's 2,000 residents appeared to have joined me for the occasion, clearly an eagerly anticipated program on the island's somewhat limited social calendar. While this seemed like the type of event held primarily for the benefit of tourists, I was fairly certain my friend Sabiha and I were the only foreigners present. All around us, beneath the thatched eaves of the Kunstitall art gallery, audience members sang along throatily to an Estonian folk song mocking the plight of a boy being rejected by his beloved's father. People leapt up periodically for impromptu jigs.

We didn't know it then, but we were crossing "night life" off our Muhu to-do list.

I spied one of the performers leaving the room for a cigarette and trailed him outside.

"Welcome to the exotic island of Muhu," Josh Turi told me, with more than a hint of sarcasm, after I introduced myself. (Mr. Turi is half Estonian, half English, and moved to Muhu from Tallinn a decade ago.)

"No offense," he said with a laugh, waving smoke away from his face, "but why are you here?"

Why was I here, indeed?

A 76-square-mile speck off the southwest coast of Estonia, Muhu sounds more like the punch line of a knock-knock joke than a destination. It's the getaway to the much larger neighboring island of Saaremaa, a popular holiday spot in the Baltic region's sneeze-and-you'll-miss-it summer season. These are not places you simply stumble upon, requiring a nearly two-hour drive from Tallinn followed by a 30-minute car ferry. Most of Muhu's traffic comes from commuters embarking from Virtsu on the mainland to Kuivastu, Muhu's main port, then cutting across the island before continuing on over a bridge to Saaremaa. It's an Estonian Delaware, a place plenty of people pass through but few find reason to linger.

And yet, there I was, and I was determined to uncover something to render it worth the effort.

A large part of the reason I made the journey to Muhu was because of a hotel. [Padaste Manor](#) is the kind of place you read about once in a magazine, then can never fully extricate from your subconscious — Googling it absent-mindedly after a punishing day at work to gaze longingly at rustic wood-beamed rooms, old-fashioned bathtubs and cozy fur throws. When I started planning a Baltic road trip, the first thing I did was map it out and coax it into our itinerary. As Sabiha and I cruised through the Estonian countryside, all impossibly green fields studded prettily with perfect cylindrical bales of hay and ruins of 18th-century neo-Classical manor houses, my anticipation grew. By the time we drove onto the ferry, it was at a fever pitch. Would it live up to the hype?

At my first glimpse of the stone-and-vine-clad carriage house at the end of the driveway, I knew I'd been on to something; by the time I crunched my way up the gravel path to the rose-tinted manor house, I was patting myself on the back.

Built on the site of a 14th-century house — some of the original walls are embedded into the current structure — Padaste Manor is a 19th-century residence resurrected from ruin. The waterfront real estate was bequeathed by the king of Denmark to an illustrious family of Baltic German nobles in favor with the Russian court, which might explain its unusual architectural mishmash. The result is an imposing structure quite unlike any I've seen before: It is as stately as one would imagine a place with such an august pedigree to be, but its saccharine pink hue, neo-Gothic bones, geometric eaves and curlicue dormer windows defy logic in the way they harmonize without falling into the realm of confection.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Baron Axel von Buxhoeveden and his wife, Charlotte von Siemens, regularly brought artists and musicians from St. Petersburg to delight their visitors, making Muhu, for the briefest of spells, a worldly retreat. A gruesome death at the hands of revolutionaries (for Axel) and a daring escape (for Charlotte) marked the end of seven centuries of von Buxhoeveden influence. Following decades of Soviet neglect, the house was revived by a Dutch businessman, Martin Breuer, and an Estonian politician (and Muhu scion), Imre Sooäär.

These days, Padaste Manor has 24 suites where you can live out your latent baronial fantasies without forgoing less medieval creature comforts — in-room iPads and PS3s; flat-screen TVs that rise discreetly from footboards, plus a helipad and PS3s; flat-screen TVs at 225 euros, or about \$240.) It's also home to one of Estonia's finest restaurants, Alexander. In an elegant conservatory that surely transforms into a snow globe come winter, a Danish chef with a French pedigree designs refined multicourse menus marrying Estonian ingredients, Nordic recipes and Gallic presentation: quail with pickled ramps and capers; cod with whey sauce; a heady chanterelle soup.

I was fairly certain I could while away days on Padaste's tranquil grounds, doing little more than watching the robotic lawn mower meander in solitude on its daily constitutionals. But Sabiha and I grabbed a map — only later discovering it was in Russian — and set out to see what lay beyond the dense juniper forests.

We began at Koguva, a national heritage site dating from 1532, where the Muhu Museum replicates an early-19th-century village: humble bedrooms, kitchens, pigsties and a tribute to the museum's most famous son, the writer Juhana Smuul. The museum's earnest director, Meelis Mereaar, intercepted me on my way to an exhibit of traditional textiles and dolls, and tried his best to share the island's history in halting English punctuated with beaming smiles and laughs. He grew more somber when the subject of Soviet rule came up.

"After Russia's Red Terror, we welcomed back Germans in 1941 as liberators," he told me. "We didn't know about concentration camps."

Back under Soviet control following World War II, Muhu was home to military bases, and its residents were effectively cut off from the mainland until 1992, which explains the island's lost-in-time quality.

We drove back along the main road of the village of Liiva, where the whitewashed 13th-century St. Catherine's Church was constructed atop a pagan site. At a handicrafts shop nearby, I bought coasters hewed from fragrant juniper wood and a black wool hat enlivened with Muhu's signature floral embroidery. We sought out an old stronghold, only to be woefully underwhelmed to discover it was a solitary slab of hulking stone in a large green clearing abuzz with bees.

"It's like Stonehenge, minus the everything," Sabiha remarked.

Another unexpected island landmark, an ostrich farm, did not spark our interest; we had traveled all this way from South Africa, where the gangly bird is hardly in short supply. Eventually we paused for a late-afternoon coffee at one of the island's marshy ports, staring intently at the famously placid Baltic Sea and trying to catch it moving.

"Wow. There's really not much to do here," Sabiha said. Actually, there was one thing. It turned out we had arrived in Muhu on the Night of the Ancient Bonfires (this year, it falls on Aug. 29). The Lounaranna Port is one of many spots on the island and hundreds all around the festival — here with a roaring fire, plenty of booze and, curiously, a giant trampoline. Depending on whom I asked and how drunk they were, this night either honors sailors who died along the coast or marks the way Viking wives lit the night skies to guide their husbands' return.

The truth lies closer to the second theory.

"At that time, the lights were part of a communication system; people would leave lights to warn that enemies were coming, or they would leave lights to show the way back to home for those who were on the sea," said Anneli Ohvril, a marketing and communications professional in Tallinn who used to be one of the festival organizers for Estonia. "The messages are now different. We are communicating that we are one, we are sharing the one sea, the Baltic Sea. This festival is also a nice way to celebrate the end of summer."

I squinted into the darkness and faintly discerned dozens of lights flickering all along the horizon.

The next morning we headed across the causeway that bisects the Vaike Vain strait. Saaremaa has more guidebook-ready charms than Muhu: a church with a stern red Scandinavian base crowned with fanciful mint-green Russian-style onion domes; random meteoric crater sites; sparse villages with liting, almost Hawaiian-sounding names (Lahekula, Puha, Pahapilli); and a charming main town, Kuressaare, that would not be out of place in New England. In Kuressaare we stopped at a 13th-century castle seemingly borne from my childhood princess fantasies, all stone and turrets and a picture-perfect moat. Afterward, we had lunch at Ku-Kuu, a stylish moat-front cafe. With its tourist-friendly hotels and restaurants, Saaremaa is clearly the anti-Muhu. Yet by the end of the day I found myself longing for the sleepier isle.

On my final morning, I surrendered to Muhu standard time. I walked to the Padaste spa, housed in the estate's former dairy, and had tea on the deck overlooking the water while I contemplated a Muhu mud wrap or a hay bath. In the end, I opted for something less loamy: a foot massage with orange oils and goat's-milk cream. I lay face down, lost in bliss, when suddenly my reverie was interrupted by a humming just beyond the open window. I looked up, and for a few minutes I was entranced by the robot lawn mower zigzagging its way languidly across the grass.

Perhaps that's just what I should have been doing all along.

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