

UNDER THE BALTIC SKY

ALONG THE COASTS OF LATVIA AND ESTONIA—FROM THE BUZZING BEACHES OF JŪRMALA AND THE UNTOUCHED ISLAND OF MUHU TO THE BACKSTREETS OF TALLINN—
THOMAS BELLER GOES IN SEARCH OF EUROPE'S LOST RIVIERA.
PHOTOGRAPHED BY BLASIUS ERLINGER



A woman with dark hair, wearing a strapless, floor-length dress with a red, white, and gold plaid pattern, stands in a white-painted arched window. She is looking out to the left with her hands clasped near her neck. The window is set into a wall of rough-hewn, grey and brown stones. The window frame is white and has two shutters that are swung open. On the wooden sill in front of the window, there is a small, shallow wooden bowl containing some white and red items. The interior behind her is dark, suggesting a doorway or a shadowed room.

At Pädaste Manor, on the island of Muhu, off the western coast of Estonia. Opposite: Jumping into the Baltic Sea in front of the hotel.

IT ALL STARTED DURING A LONG CONSULTATION WITH A MAP.

I was staring at the French Riviera, where we were thinking of spending a week. At some point my eye drifted upward until I hit a patch of blue, the Baltic Sea, and the filigreed curtain of Danish islands that separates it from the Atlantic. The looming fingers of the Scandinavian countries extended down from above, and the sea came to a timorous stop at the western tip of Russia. At its bottom lip were Latvia and Estonia. Looking at the map I couldn't help but think of them as two tiny pebbles only recently revealed by the receding Soviet tide. They have been independent since 1991, and joined the European Union in 2003. But at the moment, my thoughts were less geopolitical than preoccupied with the hedonistic question, *What's the beach like up there?* Mustn't there be a Baltic Riviera? Surely it must be pristine, untouched, an unknown kingdom neglected by history (or the tourism industry).

Which is how I found myself, a few months later, with my wife and our six-month-old daughter (a.k.a. "the Nugget"), setting off from Riga International Airport for Jūrmala, Latvia, the best-known beach resort on the Baltic. I'd had this perverse idea that we'd be entering some sort of Soviet time machine, but when I saw the profusion of Mercedes, BMW, and Audi sedans surrounding us on the broad highway, I knew I'd been wrong. What I discovered were two Baltic countries, different in language and culture, that are both still struggling to define themselves against their enormous neighbor to the east.

JŪRMALA IS MADE UP OF A SERIES OF BEACHES STRETCHED OUT over a small peninsula, bordered by the Lielupe River on one side and the Baltic on the other. The main promenade, Jomas Iela, sits next to Majori, the most popular beach, and is surrounded by thick trees, beneath which is an interesting amalgam of 19th-century wooden villas built for vacationing Russians—some are very beautiful, with towers, spires, and elaborate porches—alongside new structures with minimalist Scandinavian architecture. All the buildings—a jumble of old-school and new—were built in scale to the surrounding forest, except for two. One is the Jūrmala Spa Hotel, where we were staying, 11 stories of purple-tinted glass rising up out of the woods. Inside, the lobby hummed with a techno beat, and on the walls were black-and-white "art photographs" that celebrated the nude female body. I held my daughter tight and wondered what I had gotten us into.

A glass elevator lifted us up over the forest and took my mood with it. I was pleased when we opened the door to our small but opulent room on the 11th floor and saw that, in

addition to the sea, the beach, the forest, and the river, our view encompassed the white wedding cake of the Baltic Beach Hotel, the other enormous building on the beach that had been my first choice (and fully booked).

The Nugget had a boo-boo, and so we set off on the promenade to find a Band-Aid. There I discovered that Jūrmala, long favored among Russians, is not yet a place where English is widely spoken. But pantomiming "Band-Aid?" with a baby in your arms is not difficult. This errand taken care of, we walked to the beach for our Baltic baptism. Majori was impressively huge—a stretch of soft white sand that runs in either direction as far as you can see. And it was absolutely packed. But there was something odd about it—the dividing line between beach and water was not clear. Instead, people were sitting and lounging in the water 30 feet out from where it lapped the shore.

We waded in, trailing the Nugget's toes in the surprisingly warm water. I had expected that, even in August, it would be freezing. But the Baltic is shallow, so the sun warms it, and there are hardly any waves. We walked 50 yards out to sea. A group of teenagers up ahead of us were screaming when the water swelled to their waists.

That night, we sat among the beach crowds and families from Riga who come for dinner on weekends at one of the many outdoor restaurants that line Jomas Iela. Amid the elaborate restaurants and gingerbread architecture, you can also buy ice cream and cotton candy, sit in a rowdy beer garden, or take a small-scale amusement park ride. A good portion of the citizenry dresses up for the night, in a mix of backless halter tops and elegant evening wear, and this promenading enhances the faintly czarist atmosphere.

Later we returned to our room and saw the Baltic Beach Hotel lit up like a cruise ship surrounded by darkness. It was graced with a huge neon sign with some malfunctioning letters. And so we drifted pleasantly off to sleep that first night with the words BALTIC BEACH HO looming over the town, the forest, and the sea.

Baltic State of Mind Opposite, clockwise from top left: Local color on Muhu; playing volleyball on Majori Beach, in Jūrmala; pastry-topped mushroom soup at Pādaste's Sea House restaurant; undergoing a hay treatment in the hotel's spa; a waitress at the Sea House; a spa therapist on the manor grounds; kayaking on the Lielupe River, in Jūrmala; a Manor House suite at Pādaste. Center: The 96-year-old Ekesparre Residents Hotel, in Kuressaare, the main town on the island of Saaremaa.





LOOKING AT THE MAP I COULDN'T HELP BUT THINK OF LATVIA AND ESTONIA AS TWO TINY PEBBLES ONLY RECENTLY REVEALED BY THE RECEDING SOVIET TIDE.

AFTER TWO NIGHTS IN JŪRMALA WE HEADED WEST FOR THE PORT town of Ventspils to begin our trip to Muhu, a small Estonian island to the north. Beneath the huge, bright blue sky were marvelous fields dotted with round bales of hay, sloping gently toward the horizon. We passed thick stands of white birches, clustered together in shadow, and dense forest with an incongruously sandy floor that suggested the nearness of the sea. Now and then we'd see a picturesque house with a very steep roof sitting alone by the side of the road. The landscape began to take on the flavor of one of those quaint—but also dark and foreboding—tales of the Brothers Grimm.

At the outskirts of Ventspils, gray Soviet-era housing blocks rose from the fields. One of them, an unfinished skeleton, looked almost archaeological, a ruin from the previous empire. We drove past little houses, each with a fastidiously tended garden out front. They made the town seem house-proud and tidy. Ventspils is an ice-free port where Russian oil and minerals are loaded onto ships. It is bisected by the Venta River, over which rises an elevated bridge that swept us up and then gently deposited us in the center of the sleepy old port town. Our room that night, in the Hotel Vilnis, was modest and clean. Only the convention of attack-dog trainers, whose dogs were barking in cages outside the lobby, made the visit the slightest bit unsettling.

The next morning we woke very early and drove to the ferry to cross over to the Estonian island of Saaremaa. As we set off, I noticed a line of tankers running parallel to our course, sailing along the horizon in a way that made the world seem flat. A vague fantasy of the naval maneuvers on the Baltic—both those of the 15th century, when the Swedes fought the Russians for control of the region, and

those of the 20th century, when the Germans battled the Soviets—emanated from that line of ships and stayed with me until we landed on Saaremaa. Under Soviet rule, the island and its smaller neighbor, Muhu, were part of the “border zone.” No one—not even Estonians—could travel to the area without a visa, and even since becoming part of the EU, the islands have seen few visitors and little in the way of economic development.

ON MUHU'S SOUTHERN SHORE, WE LOCATED PĀDASTE MANOR, A series of low stone houses and a main house arranged around a beautiful quad. Thick old trees sway high above the lawn, which is intersected by paths that lead to a gate and a long, thin strait of water to the Baltic. We dropped off our bags at our attractive duplex room and rushed to the Sea House restaurant to eat. It was nearly three in the afternoon, and we had the place to ourselves. The stone walls felt so heavy and protective that each small window seemed like its own miniature Dutch Renaissance painting, capturing landscapes of iridescent green grass, pale light, and calm if slightly ominous water in the distance.

I wanted to get into the carnivorous, hunter-gatherer vibe of the place as much as possible and, not being able to decide between the roasted and dried ostrich and the moose carpaccio, I chose the “Muhu antipasti,” which had them both, along with smoked eel and something called “dried roach.” (The roach, I was relieved to discover, is a small fish found in the rivers and creeks of western Estonia.) The moose carpaccio was fantastic, like pork but smokier and gamier. Elizabeth had the squab. The Nugget had Elizabeth. Sated, I left the two of them in the room for a nap and headed out past the gate. There, amid the tall

Old Meets New

Jurmala's main promenade,
Jomas iela, on the Gulf of Riga.
Opposite, from left: On the ferry
approaching Saaremaa, formerly
a Soviet "border zone"; riding a
Segway in Tallinn's Old Town;
the Estonian capital's medieval
rooftops.



grass, I found a helipad, and beyond that a dock at the foot of the long, bowling-alley-like lane of water stretching out to the sea. The sun was setting now, though the sky had a couple of more hours of daylight left in it. I lay down on the pier and looked up at the sky, and then sat up to take in the stillness of it all, the distant shore dark with trees, the streaks of pink light playing on the water.

The next morning I met Martin Breuer, the Dutch-born proprietor of the manor, who told me about the island's history. Muhu has only been accessible since 1992. "There was never any Sovietization, no shipping in workers from Russia, and so tradition and culture survived much better here than in other parts of Estonia," he said. Built by German aristocrats in the 19th century, Pädaste, he explained, was one of the few manor houses in Estonia that had not been built over by the state during the Soviet era. "Most of them now have corn silos, or ugly apartment blocks."

Breuer came to look at the place in 1993 and, after purchasing it three years later, has rarely left. Estonia then had a kind of innocence, he said. "In '93 you'd come to a bar, there were three bottles of hard liquor and four bartenders. And everyone sat together and sang songs. Now there is so

much energy. You feel a people building their country." One of the virtues of Pädaste is that you can project yourself into a fantasy in which it is your own ancestral manor.

On the last morning there, I had my hay treatment. The Baltic States have retained the old-world idea that holidays should be more than just fun—they should be restorative, curative—as though the Baltic itself were a kind of aquatic version of the Magic Mountain. For a moment, the line separating the height of luxury and medieval punishment seemed very thin. I was wrapped in a giant gauzy tea bag packed with hay and told by the young woman attending to me to lie down on a plank suspended over a wooden vat of warm water. With the press of a button, the plank beneath me miraculously folded itself into a kind of easy chair and I was lowered into the vat and left to steep.

The rich, grassy aroma of the hay began to percolate into my nostrils. The whole thing combined a kind of return to the womb and a return to the manger—thus appealing to fantasies both Freudian and biblical, along with the as-yet-uncategorized desire to be wrapped in a tea bag and dunked in hot water. When it was over I was led to my goat-milk massage by a young woman with platinum hair and multiple piercings. *(Continued on page 164)*

GUIDE TO THE BALTICS



WHEN TO GO

The Baltic region is less crowded during shoulder seasons (May and early October) when temperatures are in the mid-60's. Beach weather is best in June, but expect up to 24 hours of daylight.

GETTING THERE

Finnair has direct flights from New York's JFK to Riga, while KLM, Lufthansa, and Air Baltic fly from most major European cities to Riga International Airport. From there, rent a car to explore the region. **Exeter**

International (813/251-5355; exeterinternational.com), run by T+L A-List agent Greg Tepper, crafts custom itineraries throughout Eastern Europe.

WHERE TO STAY

Ammende Villa Historic Art Nouveau hotel and restaurant. 7 Mere Blvd., Pärnu, Estonia; 372-44/73888; ammende.ee; doubles from \$390.

GREAT VALUE **Baltic Beach Hotel** 23/25 Juras St., Majori, Jūrmala, Latvia; 371-67/771-400; balticbeach.lv; doubles from \$156.

Hotel Jūrmala Spa 47/49 Jomas St., Jūrmala, Latvia; 371-67/784-415; hoteljurmala.com; doubles from \$268.

Hotel Telegraaf 9 Vene St., Tallinn, Estonia; 372/60-00-600; slh.com; doubles from \$220.

GREAT VALUE **Hotel Vilnis** 5 Talsu, Ventspils, Latvia; 371-36/688-880; doubles from \$114.

Kalvi Castle Kalvi, Estonia; 372-33/95300; kalvi-hotel.com; doubles from \$190.

GREAT VALUE **Pädaste Manor** Muhu, Estonia; 372/45-48-800; padaste.ee; doubles from \$244.

WHERE TO EAT

Melnais Sivens Small tavern with a menu full of hearty stews and local seafood, in a medieval castle. 17 Jana iela, Ventspils, Latvia; 371-63/622-396; dinner for two \$50.

Sea House Pädaste Manor Muhu, Estonia; 372/45-48-800; dinner for two \$113.

Vertigo 4 Sleek brasserie serving contemporary Mediterranean cuisine, with a

lounge and rooftop terrace. Ravala Pst, ninth floor, Tallinn, Estonia; 371/66-63-456; dinner for two \$90.

Veski Tavern Estonian food and live music in a 100-year-old windmill. 19 Pärna Tn., Kuressaare, Estonia; 372/45-33-776; dinner for two \$40.

WHAT TO DO

Estonian Song and Dance Celebration Festival 23 Suur-Karja, Tallinn; 371/62-73-120; laulupidu.ee; July 2-5.

Kumu Art Museum A fine collection of Estonian paintings and sculpture from before and after the Soviet era. 34 Weizenbergi, Valge 1, Tallinn; 372/60-26-000; ekm.ee.

Latvian National Opera Opera and ballet season runs September-May, with a summer festival highlighting new works. 3 Aspazijas Bulvaris, Riga; 371/70-73-777; opera.lv.

SEASIDE CITIES

Check out more of the world's great urban beach towns at travelandleisure.com.

A view of the Baltic Sea from Pädaste Manor's spa deck.





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I didn't want to break the mood too much, but I couldn't help asking, "Is this special hay?"

"No," she replied. "It's just hay."

"The brochure implies there is some special property in Estonian hay."

"Well, the hay is from Estonia," she said. "But I'm not sure what the special properties might be."

"How do you get it?"

"We mow the lawn."

I WOUND MY WAY OUT OF TALLINN'S OLD Town at dusk. I was going east, to the city of Narva on the Russian border, where, I had been told, I would find the Baltic's most spectacular beach. That morning Elizabeth, the Nugget, and I had made our way to the capital, a pleasant ferry ride followed by two hours on a highway into Tallinn. There, I had set up Elizabeth and the Nugget in the newly opened Hotel Telegraaf, which occupies the renovated interior of the former post office at the center of the Old Town. With its black marble and glittering chandeliers, it exuded a solidity that made me comfortable leaving the two of them in their room, turning to the room-service menu as I walked out the door.

I had been led to believe that Narva was Estonia's equivalent to the South Bronx, so I was doing this part of the journey on my own. I guided the car through the narrow cobblestoned streets of the Old Town, the buildings huddled together and medieval but also strikingly colorful and clean. In their brightness I felt the pulsating prosperity of the place.

I stopped for the night at Kalvi Kastle, a two-hour drive from Tallinn during which, other than forest and the occasional looming factory, all I saw were a few cars and signs warning of crossing moose. Kalvi

Kastle looks like an English country-manor house. From the outside, at dusk, it was formidable, but as soon as I stepped through its doors I saw a suit of armor, an empty shell, standing at attention. It was a good symbol for the place. There was hardly anyone there. The waiters and the man at the front desk were quite professional, but at any moment I felt that they might break out into hysterical laughter, unable to sustain any longer the illusion that this was a real hotel.

The next morning I struck up a conversation with the one other person having breakfast in the dining room. He worked for a Danish furniture maker who co-owned the castle; they had a plant nearby. Eventually, it would be a top-notch resort; for now, it was a hotel for company executives.

After breakfast I took a winding road to a beautiful little beach populated only by some youths setting up a campfire and a volleyball net. I looked at the waves, tempted, but there was no time for a swim. I had to get to Narva to meet a local journalist who had agreed to show me around. A few miles outside of town I started passing trucks parked on the side of the road, one after another—a petrified forest of trucks. The town sits across the Narva River from the Russian border: it's the end of the line, pushed up into the northeasternmost corner of Estonia. Huge medieval forts face each other across the river, leftovers from the centuries of battles between the Russians and the Swedes. For the truck drivers, crossing the border here can take more than a week. Estonia may have modernized—it's now home to Skype, the Internet phone company headquartered in Tallinn—but as my guide, journalist Sergei Stepanov, himself a Russian, later explained, "On the Russian side they are all drunk!"

We met at a petrol station at the edge of town, and he drove me out to see the beach I had heard about. Some State Department guys in Tallinn had told me this was the secret gem of the Baltic—better than Jürijala. Perhaps it was my source, or the proximity of the Russian border, but I felt a bit like a spy. We drove past a huge monument featuring a tank sitting on top of a square pedestal with fresh

flowers arranged at its base, down a quiet lane, then pulled up to a small carriage painted in red-and-white candy stripes and sitting at the edge of a little park.

Sergei got out and proudly announced that this was the symbol of the town. "A cabin for the shy girls who wanted to go to the beach in the beginning of the last century," he said. Apparently these "shy girls" would enter the carriage fully clothed and change into their bathing gear, after which it would be pulled, either by horses or men, into the shallows. I couldn't decide what was more touching—the image of the beach dotted with these carriages, with ladies emerging and returning, or the cheerful hope and optimism embodied by the fresh coat of paint on this specimen, and the nearby plaque explaining its history.

We walked down the beach. It was mostly empty. Sergei pointed out a yellow gazebo. "Tchaikovsky used to compose there," he said. Now it was covered with crudely drawn graffiti—anti-American and anti-Estonian slogans, written by the angry Russian youth of Narva. Narva had once been the Hamptons of St. Petersburg, 85 miles away. The dirt road behind the beach was lined with gorgeous old wooden mansions, some in disrepair. The center of things had shifted to Jürijala. When I asked why, Sergei said, "Politics." The fundamental tension of Estonia lies in its desire to separate entirely from its old Soviet occupiers. And yet a third of the population is Russian and doesn't even speak Estonian. Many of these immigrants live in Narva. Could Narva rise again? There is no way to know. But that broad expanse of empty beach, so full of history, seemed promising.

On my drive back to Tallinn, clouds raced across a bright blue sky, and I raced along with them, heading toward my wife and the Nugget. I passed more houses with steeply angled roofs and meadows dotted with haystacks. I drove across a huge field of wind turbines—their narrow bases and three blades so gigantic it was surreal, like toys in a race of giants. The windmills were spinning to the rhythm of the clouds racing overhead, the future in the landscape of a fairy tale. ✦

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