

# cold calling

**Preserved for so long by the Iron Curtain, Estonia comes into its own as a winter retreat in which authenticity is served up with beguilingly simple luxury, says Julian Allason.**

**T**he sea eagle wheels above the frozen surface of the Baltic, its eye scanning for breaks in the ice. Far below and to the east, a couple skate hand in hand out towards the Isle of Love, at other seasons a stiff skull across the sound separating Muhu Island from its larger neighbour, Saaremaa. Then, with a dry whirr, the great bird plummets upon an ice hole cut by a fisherman. A moment later it soars upward, quicksilver flashing from its beak.

Estonia is that rarity, a country more magical in winter than high summer, a European destination in which the best of the past

lies down quietly with present comforts – and nowhere more so (and for the least expected of reasons) than on Muhu, one of over 1,500 islands. In the 35 years during which Estonia languished in the shade of the Iron Curtain, the island lingered within a penumbra of its own. Designated a military zone from which visitors were barred, but the 2,000 islanders perforce trusted, its landscape of windmills and cliffs remained largely untouched by development, social or architectural. Even today, local disagreements are routinely settled by village elders.

I am staying in a thatched farmhouse three and a half centuries old with a sauna

**Main picture: the winter wonderland of Estonia's capital city Tallinn. Inset: Ammende Villa, Pärnu.**







and some stylish additions – a glass-enclosed bathroom overlooking the forest and a private cinema. From the glazed veranda the sea eagle returns to view, patrolling the luminous blue sky with its mate. The crisp cold without is dispelled by an open fire, the scent of pine ascending through open rafters to the reeded roof. In spring, the outlook will soften to lush green sea marshes teeming with marine birds and seal colonies.

The cottage is on the estate of Pädaste Manor, the last survivor of the 13 manors into which Muhu's 78sq miles were partitioned by the Baltic German nobility in 1227. While the stone-built mansion is in the final stages of restoration, outbuildings have been converted into a dozen comfortable guestrooms and suites. Closest to the sea

**Above: Pädaste Manor on Muhu island is "about remoteness and nature". Right: Schlössle Hotel. Below: Viru Gates in Unesco-protected Tallinn Old Town.**

to maintain the continuity of the sheltered existence he knew as a child here. Despite the logistical challenge of providing simple luxury in an isolated location, there has been little of the cultural struggle that provisioning five-star service entails in an urban setting. "We don't want a wow factor," Sooäär explains. "Pädaste is about remoteness and nature."

Nature and solitude have all but conquered the Soviet missile base a few miles inland. Until 1994 it housed nuclear weapons aimed at targets in Scandinavia and Scotland. Now rare orchids grow at the entrance to bunkers that once concealed rockets and warheads. Only fading notices in Cyrillic script stencilled on to rusted blast doors provide a reminder of its former occupants and their

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wall is a log cabin of inviting cosiness that has established itself as a pathfinding restaurant. On the menu at the Seahouse is moose carpaccio, back fillet of hare, and a shoal of salted and fresh fish from the surrounding waters. Despite the splendid isolation, the restaurant's reinterpretation of traditional dishes is attracting guests from the Latvian capital of Riga and beyond, who often arrive by helicopter.

On the opposing sweep of lawn is another traditional structure housing a small spa. Hay and mud baths, a herbal steam room and sea-water hot tub promise treatments of authentically local provenance. For none of this is a modern-day re-creation of a way of life long lost to progress. Pädaste's co-owner is a local MP, the energetic Imre Sooäär, who – aided by his Dutch partner Martin Breuer – has sought

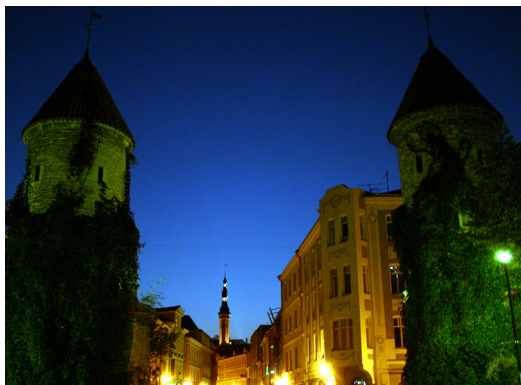
grim purpose. From the air the launch ramps and fortifications are now almost invisible.

We'd arrived on Muhu by helicopter, a 35-minute flight that abbreviated the lengthy road and ferry journey from Tallinn. At 1,400ft the featureless coniferous forests transform into rippling avalanches bisected by the occasional road running straight as an



arrow towards the sunset. From the woodland protrude spires of Lutheran churches, each signalling the location of a village otherwise hidden from sight. To the north and west the serpentine coast slithers into a diaspora of islands, beyond them the Gulf of Finland and the distant lights of Helsinki.

Tallinn had not disappointed. Arriving at the Hotel Schlössle in the Old Town at midnight, we found a handsome supper awaiting us – and Markus poised to guide us on a night tour of the medieval city. Climbing cobbled streets too steep for carriages and along alleys too narrow for ladies in bustles to pass each other we entered a silent, moonlit world barely altered in half a millennium. While the merchant class had inhabited the lower town, noble residences proclaimed the citadel to be the seat of the aristocracy. Pausing for breath by Oleviste church, Markus pointed to its spire, once the highest building in the world. The KGB had sited its radio direction finding antennae there to detect forbidden wireless use. Unamused by such blasphemy, heaven had dispatched a lightning bolt so powerful it was said to have fried the equipment and singed the secret policemen's eyebrows. (The credibility of this story was enhanced the following day when the Sokos Viru Hotel, the largest in the city, was revealed to have an intact listening room used





for bugging guests during the Soviet era.)

From the ramparts the whole city unfolded below, the Bay of Tallinn twinkling in the reflected lights of cruise liners. From here Helsinki is 100 minutes away via fast ferry, and by day Finns are the most numerous visitors, drawn by cheap prices and the prospect of their own language, a rare cousin to Estonian, being understood. “Can Finns comprehend Estonian, then?” I asked. “Not really.” Ethnic Estonians comprise almost 70 per cent of the population, with Baltic Russians accounting for just over a quarter.

If Tallinn’s Unesco-protected Old Town is, as is often suggested, the most perfectly

**Above: Tallinn can be explored during a guided night tour.**

**Below: traditional wooden windmills at Angla in Saaremaa.**

friend observed, “It proves that Estonians like to live with their toes in the water – and that we’re natural blondes.” Set back from the

sea in parkland is a recession of buildings that might have been constructed to illustrate the development of architectural style. From the magnificent art nouveau of Ammende Villa – the resort’s premier hotel – through functionalism to art deco, they resemble docked liners, each more streamlined than the last.

Ammende’s colourful history encapsulates that of modern Pärnu. Built in 1905 as a summer house by a tycoon who went bankrupt 20 years later, thereafter it became a casino, a sanatorium for Party officials in the 1960s

evolving. Our last dinner is served in state at a single table in the tower with panoramic views of the resort whose modest claim is to be “a town between a river and the sea”. Descending, I notice Ammende’s icon: clinging to the high chandelier is a stuffed raptor of impressive wingspan. Closer inspection reveals it to be a sea eagle.

Aaron Jennings, European product manager of tour operator Cox & Kings, had remarked upon Estonia’s sudden elevation to cult status as a destination that was simultaneously near at hand yet far from familiar. To that one might add its quality of “otherness” in which authenticity preserved in the aspic of oppression has become accessible – this made possible by the opening of hotels in which isolation is cherished, and history and eccentricity given long shrift. ♦

## Tallinn’s Unesco-protected Old Town is often suggested to be the most perfectly preserved medieval city in Europe.

preserved medieval city in Europe (a claim Kraków might dispute), then the Schlössle is the base from which to explore it. Two conjoined houses dating from the 13th and 15th centuries sit around a courtyard garden into which the restaurant spills out in summer. Such Estonian staples as wild boar and venison are rendered with Italianate flourishes, making it – and the cellar bar – a popular dating venue for the city’s *jeunesse d’orée*. The 23 comfortable period rooms and suites seem aimed less at the business traveller than the visitor with high-end touring in mind. Helicopter transfers are routinely offered to the western isles and Baltic Sea resorts, notably Pärnu.

Visiting Pärnu last summer I had been drawn by its languorous atmosphere and golden sands. One stretch of beach is set aside for women to sunbathe *au naturel*, untroubled by the admiration of men. As a female

and a Soviet officers’ club. All of these existences now concatenate in an atmospheric 13-room hotel, the galleried interior of which is adorned with furniture from each period. Thus the dining room is decorated in Odeon style, while the commanding Ammende Suite is a Red ringer for a St Petersburg hotel room I occupied in the 1970s. Only the cooking is contemporary and illustrative of the panache with which Estonia’s traditional cuisine, with its stews and 250 breads, is now



### COMING IN FROM THE COLD

The best time to visit Estonia is December through January (there’s snow after Christmas) or April through June (July and August can be rainy).

Julian Allason travelled to Estonia with **Cox & Kings** (020-7873 5000; [www.coxandkings.co.uk](http://www.coxandkings.co.uk)) which offers a six-night package from £1,045 based on two sharing, including economy flights with **Estonian Air**, private transfers and six nights’ B&B: two nights each at Hotel Schlössle, Ammende Villa and Pädaste Manor. He was also a guest of **Pädaste Manor**, **Hotel Schlössle** and **Ammende Villa**.

The following rates are for a double room midseason 2008 B&B: **Pädaste Manor**, Muhu Island (00372-454 8800; [www.padaste.ee](http://www.padaste.ee)), from about £100, farmhouse from about £430. The **Schlössle Hotel**, Tallinn (00372-699 7700; [www.schlossle-hotels.com](http://www.schlossle-hotels.com)), from about £324. **Ammende Villa**, Pärnu (00372-447 3888; [www.ammende.ee](http://www.ammende.ee)), from about £85.

Other tour operators offering Estonia include **Regent Holidays** (0845-277 3301; [www.regent-holidays.co.uk](http://www.regent-holidays.co.uk)), **Original Travel** (020-7978 7333; [www.originaltravel.co.uk](http://www.originaltravel.co.uk)) and **Baltic Holidays** (0845 070 5711; [www.balticholidays.com](http://www.balticholidays.com)). **Estonian Air** (01293-555 700; [www.estonianair.com](http://www.estonianair.com)) flies daily from Gatwick and European capitals to Tallinn, from £228. **EasyJet** (0905-821 0905; [www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)) flies daily from Stansted, from £41.

ALAMY (3); BENJAMIN ALLASON (2).