

Estonia's Pädaste Manor Hotel Makes Simple Luxury Out Of History And Nature

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I know the difference between expensive travel and the truly luxurious

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The grounds at Pädaste Manor

COURTESY OF THE HOTEL

Martin Breuer has always been a lover of slow travel, even since long before that became a fashionable phrase. Many years ago, when he was 18, he recalls, he visited the US, as many of his fellow Dutch did at the time. But while they traveled across the country, he stayed in just one state for a full month. “It’s better to go deep and get a better feel for things,” he says.

He went deep as a hotelier with his purchase, restoration and opening of [Pädaste Manor](#) on Estonia’s remote Muhu Island. He first saw the property in 1992, on a visit to Estonia shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Baltic country’s newfound independence. (He was already friends with his future co-owner and business partner, Imre Sooäär—an Estonian emigrant in Canada—at the time.)

The manor house was “inspiring,” remembers Breuer, even though he saw it only as “total ruins” on his way to a picnic by the sea. And so in 1995, when Sooäär found out that the property was for sale, they

decided to buy it. “It couldn’t cost much,” they reasoned, and at the time, Estonia—a nation that had never wanted communism, despite the strictures imposed on it during Soviet times—was something of a Wild West.



Overlooking the nature of Muhu Island

COURTESY OF THE HOTEL

To be fair, there’s reason for that. During the USSR, Estonia and particularly Muhu Island, was one of the westernmost points of the empire, it was a border zone, open only to residents. That meant that nature won in the end: Development was minimal, forests prevailed, and migratory birds still pass through.

But back to the metaphor. “In 1992, people were eager,” recalls Breuer. “They had a fire to do things. They also had a naivety and charm, a youthful energy and a willingness to fail.” It was the perfect environment for bringing a dream to life.

Breuer and Sooäär had the idea from the beginning to emphasize quality over quantity—something that was unheard of in the 1990s—both in the size of the hotel and its room count, and in the demographics of its guests. And so they carefully renovated the 24 rooms in the main house and a few side buildings, and they avoided bargain prices from the beginning.



A very tender nature

COURTESY OF THE HOTEL

Estonians didn't get it, they say. The local clientele complained that there was nothing to do and that the food was too much like dishes they could make at home. And so word of Pädaste Manor's charms spread through word of mouth among well-traveled foreigners (and an [influential New York Times article](#)) who like to go off the beaten path.

It turns out that certain Estonians also caught on, and now for Pädaste Manor's fans from all over the world, "nothing to do" is the come-on. Muhu Island seduces with its nothingness. The nature isn't dramatic—rippling fields of reeds rather than jagged mountain peaks—but it's pristine. The light has that particular slanted goldenness of northern latitudes, vivid moss has taken over rocks, and the silence can be profound. Breuer calls it "a very tender nature."

As with most European manor estates, Pädaste Manor has a long history. The earliest documents date from 1566, when Danish king Fredrik II handed it over to the Knorr family in recognition of services rendered to the Crown. The origins of the main house back to the 14th century, and some of those stone walls still exist. Significant additions ensued in the 19th century, when German-Baltic nobles enjoyed great wealth.



A guest room

COURTESY OF THE HOTEL

One of them, Baron Alexander von Buxhoeveden had an influential position at the court of Czar Nicholas II. With his wife, Charlotte, an heiress to the von Siemens company, he brought worldly splendor to the sleepy island, both in the renovations of Pädaste Manor and in the social life it hosted, as Charlotte brought artists and musicians when she moved with her entourage from St. Petersburg for summers on Muhu.

Of course, Communism was never kind to private estates—this one was once used as a fish distribution center and then a home for the elderly until the roof caved in—and by the 1990s it had fallen into the state that today’s owners found it in. That gave them a canvas on which to create something that celebrates all of the property’s history.

Breuer, who lived many years in Rome and understood that architecture should have layers, says they didn’t set out to re-create a particular epoch, pointing to remnants of faded wallpaper as he does so. The furnishings—leather armchairs, Oriental rugs, claw-foot bathtubs—are timeless and cozy. It has a feeling of history, but it’s impossible to pin it down in time. “We wanted to respect [the past] but not copy,” he explains.



The manor house and winter garden

COURTESY OF THE HOTEL

A good example is the winter garden, the most significant addition to the main house. The enormous stone blocks of the floor are original, the metal columns are from St. Petersburg, and the large glass panels of the walls and slanted ceiling are the results of a negotiation with the historical preservation people. They argued that this kind of window didn't exist in the 19th century; Breuer countered that if it had, the barons certainly would have used it. Plus it can all be taken down and leave no trace, another of Breuer's priorities.

It serves as the dining room for the hotel restaurant, Alexander, where chef Achim Braitsch turns out what they call Nordic Islands' Cuisine. (It's worth noting here that "Baltic countries" was something of a Soviet shorthand and Estonia has more in common with Finland than it does with Latvia.) It celebrates its Baltic coastline terroir—something it has in common with other northern islands, such as [Gotland, Sweden](#)—with a nine-course tasting menu.

As at any serious restaurant, it changes often. Earlier this month, mine included dishes like Baltic herring with spruce and rye, and beetroot with fermented carrot and cacao beans. Celeriac is aged for 12 months and grated like white truffle, and the "Muhu magic sauce" is a secret recipe of vegetables from the kitchen garden. Last week, the restaurant was deservedly honored with a place in the 2023 Michelin Guide.



Cod with carrot and black nut

COURTESY OF THE HOTEL

Apart from dining, there's not much to do at Pädaste Manor—which is precisely the point. There are beautiful grounds, a small lake with strategically placed benches, a saltwater hot tub facing the sea, and a small access point for ocean swimming. Spa therapists give excellent massages. Songbirds trill.

Breuer, who also founded a small tourism association on the island and came up with Muhu's unofficial slogan—"Where Time Goes to Rest"—calls his co-creation "simple luxury. It's not over the top. There's no gold. We have nice hospitality. It's gentle. You can take your time."

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