



Unsung Estonia is worth a visit for its medieval architecture and indigenous culture alike

By DAVID DURAN

In the 1992 film "Encino Man," Brendan Fraser plays a cavewoman unearthed from a suburban California backyard. When he attends the local high school, his teenage minders (Sean Astin and Pauly Shore) hastily claim he's from Estonia. After all, no one knew anything about the European country — which is three times smaller than New York state — so it was a plausible home for the mysterious exchange student.

Twenty-five years after the film's release, Estonia still seems off the beaten path. (Even though the now ubiquitous phone-imitating app Skype was founded in Estonia, and most locals won't let you forget it.) But it's well worth a visit.

Larger than both Denmark and Holland, but with a population of just 1.3 million, it's easy to take advantage of both city and country — especially since about 50 percent of the country is uninhabited forest. Flights from New York to Estonia start at about \$800 round-trip on Finnair via Helsinki this winter. Here are the Baltic nation's four major cities worth exploring, especially for first-timers.

TALLINN

The fairy-tale capital of Estonia is the best-preserved medieval city in Northern Europe, with winding cobblestone streets and incredible architecture. Once home to wealthy merchants and neighboring countries, Tallinn's historic center — called the Old Town — is now filled with restaurants, bars, museums and galleries, with a lively mix of both locals and visitors. Though keen observers will see a wide array of handsome Gothic churches — practically one every other corner — only about a quarter of the population is affiliated with any religion, making Estonia one of the least religious countries in the world. (Don't let that stop you from enjoying Tallinn's multitude of gorgeous spires.) Surrounding the medieval center is a city, one that is best ogled from the



Get edgy atop the Tallinn TV Tower.

highest open observation platform in the Baltic region, atop the Tallinn TV Tower (from \$2 for entry; Teletorn.ee). It's possible to walk along its circumference — 1,180 feet off the ground — while securely tied to a harness.

TARTU

Estonia's second-largest city, located about two hours south of Tallinn by car, is Tartu. It's home to the University of Tartu, founded in 1632, making it one of northern Europe's oldest universities. As a result, the city is a hotbed for creative outlets and scientific research, as well as home to a thriving nightlife scene. (Makes sense, since the city's businesses mostly cater to students.) Upon arrival via bus or car, visitors are welcomed by a statue of kissing collegians, which stands in the central Town Hall Square, surrounded by museums, cafés and a large park. A compact place, Tartu's major sights — like the national museum and toy museum — are all near the square.

HEART OF STONE



One of Estonia's main draws, its capital Tallinn, has gorgeous historic buildings.



Estonia is 50 percent parkland, making it an ideal destination for outdoorsy types.

PÄRNŪ

For a more laid-back vibe, there's the summer vacation destination of Pärnu, which is two hours west of Tartu by car. A large sandy beach fronting the Gulf of Riga, part of the Baltic Sea, is far and away the main lure of this western city. During warmer seasons, its promenade is chock-full of sun-seekers out for a stroll or bike ride. Adventurous folks can try various water sports. For a break from the sun, head to one of Pärnu's many spas. From

large water parks to intimate bathhouses is where Estonians pamper themselves.

KIHNU

Estonia also boasts 2,000 small islands in the Gulf of Riga. Though most are uninhabited, a few boast small populations with traces of Viking and medieval culture. One of the islands, Kihnu, is an ideal spot to experience traditional Estonian culture. Ferries from Pärnu take about 2½ hours; a private guide to show you around (population: less than 500) including a history museum, the lighthouse and main house of worship, St. Nicholas. The most fascinating part: Most residents still wear traditional handmade wool in bright colors. The women don leotards and bonnets, while the men mostly traditional mariner-style sweaters with local designs. Though it can be as a day trip from Pärnu, visitors can see their hands stay next to the harbor. Kihnu (from \$48; PuhkaKihnu.ee) in 2013 by local women who rest in a fish-smoking facility.

The author was a guest of Visit

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TALLINN



Visit Estonia (2)

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