



LIVING TRAVEL

# A guide to Europe's most underrated country

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

Mariann Liimal / Visit Estonia

In the 1992 film "Encino Man," Brendan Fraser plays a caveman 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.



Christmas in the Baltics.

Photographer: Roman Eloshvili

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.

Less obvious to visitors is the country's continued tech savvy: Residents use a coded government identification card to pay bills and taxes — and even cast all votes in elections — from home.

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



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

Visit Estonia

The fairy-tale capital of Estonia is the best-preserved medieval city in northern Europe, with winding cobblestone streets and incredible architecture. Once was home to wealthy merchants from neighboring countries, Tallinn's historic center — called the Old Town — is now filled with restaurants, bars, museums and galleries, with a healthy mix of locals and visitors.

Though keen observers will notice a wide array of handsome historic churches — practically one on 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 Gothic spires.)

Surrounding the medieval center is a vibrant city, one that is best ogled from the highest open observation platform in the Baltic region, atop the [Tallinn TV Tower](#) (from \$12 for entry). It's possible to walk along its circumference — 1,030 feet off the ground — while securely tied to a harness. The tower also houses several exhibits, including an Estonian Hall of Fame that showcases the country's various claims to fame (including Skype, of course). It comes off a bit cheesy at first, but visitors will soon appreciate why Estonians are so proud of what they've accomplished.

In Tallinn, bunk down at the [Three Sisters Hotel](#) (from \$190). Three 14th-century merchant houses, located within the Old Town's 16th-century walls, were renovated and united in 2003 to create a boutique hotel with medieval flair and modern amenities.



Three Sisters Hotel in Tallinn.  
Roman Eloshvili



## 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, walkable place, Tartu's major sights — like the Estonian National Museum and the Tartu Toy Museum — are found on a few parallel streets.

Opened in 2016, a very short distance from Town Hall Square is four-star **Hotel Lydia** (from \$124) has just 70 rooms, a spa with a variety of saunas and the Hõlm restaurant. The eatery features dishes from a recently rediscovered cookbook written in the 1920s by chef Lydia Grümman Hõlm (where the restaurant gets its name).

## Pärnu



Soak it out at Hedon Spa & Hotel, located in the vacation hot spot of Pärnu.

Hedon SPA & HOTEL

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, including kayaking to more remote parts. For a break from the sun, head to one of Pärnu's many spas. From large water parks to intimate bathhouses, this is where Estonians come to pamper themselves.

Situated on the shoreline, [Hedon Spa & Hotel](#) (from \$224) houses 72 contemporary rooms. The highlight, though, is its spa was built into the historic mud baths — one of the hallmarks of the city. Access to baths is open to hotel guests and the public. Another draw is the sun room, which has a bright lamp that imitates the whole spectrum of natural light, giving guests an opportunity to enjoy summer all year long.

## 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 place to experience traditional Estonian culture. Ferries from Pärnu take about 2½ hours. Hire a private guide to show you around the island (population: less than 500) including the history museum, the lighthouse and the city's main house of worship, St. Nicholas Church. The most fascinating part: Most Kihnu residents still wear traditional handmade wool clothing in bright colors. The women don long skirts and bonnets, while the men mostly wear traditional mariner-style sweaters woven with local designs.

Kihnu is small, and can be visited as a day trip from Pärnu, although visitors wanting to immerse themselves in the intimate community can opt to stay next to the ferry harbor at [Puhka Kihnus](#) (from \$48), which was founded in 2013 by two generations of local women who restored an old fish-smoking facility.



Get edgy atop the Tallinn TV Tower.

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