

Estonia never quite became a true Soviet republic following its annexation by Stalin in 1940, somehow maintaining its language and culture. Now a dynamic western European country, visitors will be dazzled by medieval Tallinn, formidable castles, wilderness areas and pristine beaches, writes **Kiki Deere**

ESTONIA is a bit of an unknown quantity to its fellow EU citizens in Ireland, many of whom would be hard pushed to pinpoint its exact location on a map.

Yet, this tiny country nestled beside the Baltic Sea, with fewer than 30 inhabitants per square kilometre, is at Europe's technological forefront. Estonian programmers developed Skype's software, for instance, and since Microsoft bought it over in 2010, the global IT giant's Skype division remains a big employer here. Travelling to Estonia, I listen to fellow passengers talking in musical tones, rolling their "rs" in a pleasant lilt. Related to Finnish, Estonian is a highly complex language, whose difficulty proved invaluable during Soviet times when Estonian writers took advantage of the fact that not many Russians could master it to circumvent the censors. My first impression of Estonia is formed at the Song Festival Grounds, where an open-air choir concert involving more than 18,000 voices singing together takes place every five years – the next festival will be held in July this year. Singing started when the first yearnings for independence were expressed in the late

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Estonia: Land of contrast



19th century, at a time when Estonia was a province of the Russian tsarist empire, albeit with German landlords controlling the peasantry. Some Estonians go as far as saying they sang themselves free from the more recent Soviet occupation – during the Singing Revolution of the 1980s hundreds of Estonians gathered to sing patriotic songs and reassert Estonian identity. Around a quarter of Estonia is covered in marshes. I drive through the vast swathes of bogland, pines, fir forests and birch groves that provide a habitat to hundreds of species of plants, fungi and animals that have largely disappeared in the rest of Europe, including the brown bear, the grey wolf and the lynx. In Viru National Park I don a pair of funny-looking 'bog shoes' to help me from sinking in the swampy soil. Cloudberries, bilberries and crowberries spring up in a sprightly dance, while overhead flocks of migratory birds temporarily call these grounds their home.

Estonia's western seaboard is a major stopover for millions of waterfowl that nest in the Arctic, making the country a prime bird-watching destination. I travel east towards Lake Peipus, Europe's fourth-largest lake, that is the border between Russia and Estonia. In a couple of months its deep blue waters will start to attract bathers, while in winter, frozen, it becomes the setting for an annual skating marathon. Little has changed along the lake's western shore in 200 years, from the time when the Russian Old Believers, an offshoot of the Russian Orthodox Church, were expelled from St Petersburg and settled here along the fringes of the USSR. Here, they managed to maintain their religion. To this day this small Russian-speaking community largely remains self-sufficient, mainly relying on fishing and cultivating onions. I visit a church, making sure to cover my hair with a headscarf as is traditional in Russia; an old lady welcomes me in,

surprised to see a foreigner in this remote corner of the country. It doesn't take long before her soothing voice is conveying childhood war memories in a mixture of Russian and German, as she vividly recalls seeing German troops in her back garden. I leave this little Russianised pocket of the country and travel south to the fairytale Alatskivi Castle, which provides another glimpse into Estonia's colourful past where traditions and nationalities remain closely intertwined. Located on the eastern borders of the European Union, the castle took its cue from the royal residence of Balmoral in Scotland and was built in 1885 by Baron Arved von Nolcken. Hundreds of beautifully preserved historical manors dot the Estonian countryside, with both German and Russian influences evident in their architectural styles. Tartu, the country's second-largest city, is Estonia's educational centre, home to one of Europe's oldest universities built in 1632. As I explore the city's quaint streets lined



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Factfile

■ Regent Holidays (www.regent-holidays.co.uk) arrange holidays to the Baltics, and offer a range of itineraries from Tallinn city breaks to extended group tours across the country, including cycling tours across the Baltic states.

■ The Savoy Boutique Hotel (tallinnhotels.ee/savoy-boutique-hotel-tallinn), renovated in 2006 in the Art Deco Style, offers stylish and comfortable rooms on the edge of Tallinn's Old Town.

■ The welcoming restaurant MerMer (mermer.ee), located in the old fishing village of Kolga-Aabla on the Juminda peninsula 45km east of Tallinn, offers wonderful home cooking. Chef and hostess Merrit has set up a restaurant in her cosy seaside home – guests can enjoy seasonal dishes including rabbit liver, herring on black bread and duck with cranberry sauce in a warm and welcoming environment.

with 17th century Classicist buildings, students scuttle to and fro between lectures. The Town Hall Square is often the centre for light-hearted entertainment. But for me the highlight is the Toy Museum, with its more than 23,000 pieces, including a section dedicated to toys in the USSR, which aimed to mould children into ideologically correct citizens. From Tartu the road leads west to Otepää, the country's winter capital, where athletes train in winter but where tourists relax amid lakes and woods in summer. Outside the sleepy town is Lake Puhajärvi, with its 70km coastline, considered to be the country's most beautiful lake. Legend has it that a mother mourned her sons in battle and her tears formed the lake, while her son's graves became little islands. My trip takes me full circle back to Tallinn, where I spend a couple of days exploring the town's Hanseatic cobbled streets. The capital is one of the world's best preserved

medieval cities, and here too I am transported back into yet again a different period of time, when merchants and petty traders lived in the lower town, while the German nobility, representing central rule, settled in the Upper Town. As I board my homebound plane, I am left marvelling at the remarkable architectural and historical diversity in such a small landmass where modernity sits cheek by jowl with life of yesteryear. ■ See visitestonia.com/en.

■ **HISTORIC:** Viru National Park, above; main and this picture, Tallinn with its cobbled streets



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