

THE MADEINEARNEST ESSENTIALS

Population **400,000**
Country **Estonia**
Currency **Estonian Kroon**
Official Languages **Estonian**
Time Zone **GMT+2**
Country Dialling Code **+372**

HOTEL

The Three Sisters

Gorgeous design hotel converted from three adjoining medieval merchant houses.

RESTAURANT

Le Bonaparte/Cafe Bonaparte

Excellent quiches and patisseries in the cafe, sumptuous French dining in the restaurant.

BAR

Stereo Lounge

Like an Estonian Milk Bar, with white walls and furniture and with DJs from around the globe at the weekend.

ART

KUMU

A stunning piece of modern architecture (with a lovely cafe overlooking Kadriorg Palace) to compliment the permanent collection and visiting international artists.

TRIP

Ferry to Helsinki

If you are in either city, get the ferry and visit the other. Its only a three hour crossing and ferries run throughout the day.

THE MADEINEARNEST INSIDER

Katrin Remmelkoor Tallinn 2011

RESTAURANT

Pirita Beach House

At Pirita beach, a 3km-long, white sand beach just outside the city proper - without a doubt Pirita's star attraction - they, not surprisingly, have a stunning view.

HOTEL

Domina Inn City

Great location and price - in a renovated building in the heart of the old town.

PLACE TO VISIT

Paljassaare

Close to the city centre, but pretty much ignored by tourists, Paljassaare peninsula has a bird preserve, a beach, a swamp and an untouched forest.

BAR/PUB

The Gentle Wolf ('Hell Hunt')

The oldest Pub of Tallinn, on Pikk Street, it is comfortable and homey. They have some pretty decent food and very nice people.

NIGHTCLUB

BobBon

Full of the pretty and fancy people.

SHOPPING

Müürivahe street

In the old town, next to the city wall, this is where to find your ethnic Estonian stuff.

Tallinn isn't just a picture perfect destination of red-tiled rooftops, old world charm and Hanseatic merchant houses of yellow and pink leaning into cobbled streets, it is also leading the way in information technology and the home of Skype, where parking can be paid by text and it will be the 2011 European Capital of Culture. A city of contradictions, then...

Well, not really. Just a modern European city embracing the twenty-first century while being unable and unwilling to forget the often turbulent past. A past best summed up in **Toompea**, the rocky mass at the heart of the old town, the seat of power and wealth, with marvellous views of the sea and the city and the home to the **Alexander Nevsky Cathedral**, a Muscovite-styled church built by Tsar Alexander in 1894. The Estonians would love it to disappear and must hate the fact that it is often used to illustrate travel guides, but it is an impressive piece of architecture which dominates the skyline. Inside it is full of icons and mosaics and really is a must-see.

Opposite the Nevsky is the altogether more elegant, neoclassical **Parliament** building. The pink and white exterior gives way to a dazzling yellow and International Klein Blue interior. In between these two buildings is **Lossi plats** (Castle Square) Toompea's main square from which it is a short stroll to the **Danish King's Garden** and the **Neitsiron cafe** which is within the **Megede** (Maiden Tower). Have a coffee here for wonderful, peaceful views out over the the Lower Town or head to one of the two (busy) viewing platforms at the other end of Toompea for equally impressive views.

The Lower Town (**All-Linn**) is the best preserved medieval walled city in Europe and is a UNESCO World Heritage site. It is also the Tallinn most people come to see. Home to most of the bars, cafes, restaurants and shops, the pretty courtyards, the timber houses, the inevitable stag parties around Karja Street and the nearby Irish-themed pubs, strip clubs and casinos. But you don't have to go too far to avoid that element of Tallinn. In fact, just one street west of Karja is Harju, where you can find the futuristic DJ bar **Stereo Lounge** and the cafe/bar/club **Moskva**. Then add into the mix of swish bars and stag parties, the old-fashioned traditional bars such as **Valli Baar**, an archetypal late-night bar with folk singers in the corner and old men downing Vodka. Irish-themed hell, plush designer or tradition Estonian bars, for the drinker, Tallinn has it all.

The old town is small and easily walkable. Full of little alleyways and sidestreets just head off in any direction you think looks nice, but to give you a quick tour idea: start at **Viru Gate**, the entrance to the street of the same name, which is now Tallinn's trendiest shopping street. From there you naturally head to **Raekoja plats**, one of Europe's most appealing town squares. The square is ringed with cafes and restaurants and three worth mentioning are **Balthasar**, the 'garlic restaurant', **Karl Friedrich**, famed for its fish dishes and **Troika**, the popular Russian restaurant with vaulted interior and a terrace on the square. The **Raekoda** (Town Hall) built in 1371, dominates the square and it really is worth the climb to see the view from the tower.

From the square, you can continue up the hill along Pikk Street and Pikk jalg through the gate tower to Toompea and the Lutheran **Toomkirik**, the oldest church in Tallinn, or alternatively head the other way on Pikk Street, down the 'street of guilds'. Here you will find the **Russian Embassy**, **St Canute's Guildhouse** (now use for contemporary dance), the **Guild of Saint Olaf's** and the **Brotherhood of the Blackheads**, a guild composed of single men renowned for their parties! Stag anyone? Whilst you are taking in these sights stop at **Le Bonaparte** cafe and restaurant for some fabulous food in both parts.

Further down Pikk Street is the **Interior Ministry building** which was home to the KGB during the Soviet occupation. A plaque outside simply reads, 'here began the road to suffering for thousands of Estonians'. Contrasting the past with the future is easy here, as a few doors down is the imposing 15th century merchant's houses that have now become the stylish boutique hotel **The Three Sisters**. It is as nice as you would hope for and also has a cellar restaurant which is open to non-guests. In between these two icons of the change that Tallinn has undergone is the elegant **Oleviste Kirik**. Once the tallest building in the world, its white spire still dominates the skyline and you can walk to the precarious viewing platform at its top. This is not for the vertiginous but the views are breathtaking and well worth the climb and the heart palpitations.

Understandably the old town dominates any visit to Tallinn, it is just too pretty not to, but the rest of the city has its fair share of gems as well. Chief among them for me was **Kadriorg**, which is a long walk (or rather a short bus ride) from the old town through the Soviet concrete architecture. This leafy district houses several foreign embassies, old painted houses, Functionalist apartment blocks and parkland which is great to wander around. The cultural highlight is **Esti Kunstimuseumi (KUMU)**, a stunning **Pekka Vapaavuori** designed home for the Estonian Art Museum. The building is actually more impressive than some of the art it holds, but that is becoming the norm around the world these days.

Opposite KUMU is **Kadriorg Palace**, a mulberry and cream baroque masterpiece that is a little slice of St Petersburg hidden away in Tallinn. Built by Peter the Great for his wife Catherine, and set amongst landscaped gardens, this palace now provides an opulent backdrop to much of Estonia's foreign art collection. Behind the Palace is the pink and white neoclassical **Residence of the President**, while further up is a former school building that is to house the **Russian Museum**. Nearby is the **Peter The Great House Museum**, his 'cottage in the woods', and the **Mikkel Museum** whose highlights include works by Rembrandt and Dürer. Kadriorg is the cultural hub of Tallinn and this is proven by the fact that it is also home to the **Song Festival Grounds**.

Every Estonian town has a song bowl but nothing on the scale of this, which has a stage which can hold 30,000 singers. The stage faces a steep slope where, in 1988, 300,000 people sparked the **Singing Revolution**. The **National Song and Dance Festival** is held here every four years and the 1988 festival included singing of forbidden songs and was the start of what ultimately became independence in 1991. The Singing Revolution has now been made into a documentary by James and Maureen Trusty: 'a single nation, a million voices, the fall of an empire'.

Other recommended things to do during your visit include heading out to **Pirita Beach**, Pirita River and the splendid ruins of **St Brigitta Convent**; catching a ferry over to **Helsinki** for a day or two (it really is close enough to do and if you have time you should go); or getting a bus to the near-rural suburb of **Nomme** or the Soviet-era tower blocks of **Lasnamae** - they couldn't be more different!

In 2011, Tallinn will be the **European Capital of Culture** which is bound to mean improvements to some things, changes to others and money spent over the next few years on the infrastructure and cultural attractions. Hopefully the charm of the city will remain despite the undoubted increase in tourists who are bound to flood in in even greater numbers.