

## Tallinn, Estonia

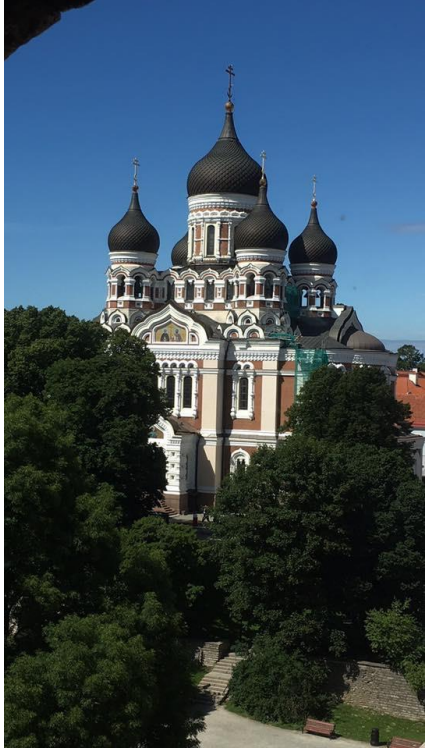


*Medieval stone wall surrounding Tallinn.*

When I called my credit card company to tell them I would be travelling abroad, the man on the other end said, “Would you say the third place you were travelling again? ... Sorry, what?... Could you spell that?” While Tallinn, Estonia, may seem an uncommon -- possibly questionable -- vacation destination for most Americans, I can promise you that it is a remarkably wonderful, affordable, and memorable experience. However, stepping out of the airport and into the cab, I instantly regretted not packing a warmer jacket. The peak of summer brings temperatures in the 50s and 60s and the crisp air bites at your skin. The upside is that the cab ride, food and accommodations are amazingly affordable -- the short cab ride from the airport brings you to the heart of Tallinn for less than \$20 and restaurants average \$15 for dinner and drinks.

Although Tallinn is small, its history is vast and rich (and if you're as much of a history buff as I am, that's enough of a draw). You could easily spend three days exploring the Old Towne and its attractions, and even maybe a week if you wanted to venture into the Estonian countryside. Be aware that many people have discovered its charm, and I was a bit overwhelmed by the throngs of tourists dispatched from several nearby cruise ships, pushing their way through narrow cobblestone streets and jabbering in dozens of foreign languages. Tallinn itself features more than 70 museums and attractions, including a marzipan museum that claims the invention of the first marzipan, a historic pharmacy where you can find Advil and well as a Mysterious Cure for the Broken Heart, and the menacing office/detention center for the former-KGB. So be ready for adventure, and wear flat-soled shoes -- the streets are treacherously rocky and uneven!





*The Alexander Nevsky Cathedral*

You may want to start your visit of Tallinn with the free walking tour that begins at the tourist information center and ends in the market at the Town Hall. It will give you a two-hour rundown of the history of Tallinn, and since it is the capital of Estonia, it also reflects the general history of the whole country. I found it interesting that, although they do have a Viking legacy, Estonians seem to focus on their history since medieval times -- the 15th century, when it began to erect its magnificent walled city. Climbing winding paths over magnificent, man-made mounds of sculpted sod and stone, you will reach a stunning view of the city, with its ornate Russian orthodox church domes and stately baroque buildings. Woven into this fairytale are quirky details, such as the story of Old Thomas, the legend of the giantess who cried Tallinn's nearby Lake Ülemiste, and the dark purpose of the Maiden's Tower. But the fairytale ends there, because in the 15th century, Tallinn was a profitable trading city on the Baltic Sea. As a result, it became highly prized by other nations, and the

overwhelming theme of the present is a reclaimed Estonian nationalism, driven by years of a tug of war over Estonia, who relentlessly battled the Swedes, Danes, Germans, and Russians. Manipulated and oppressed by foreign powers for hundreds of years, what is left in Estonians is pride, fear, resistance, endurance, and feisty indignation.

These sentiments carried over into the other attractions I visited. I highly recommend taking the Bastion Tunnel Tour based in the Kiek in de Kök Museum. We threaded our way through a stretch of dank tunnels that have served a wide variety of purposes in their varied and colorful history. Our guide, Kadi, provided a riveting commentary about the tunnels' use as a bomb shelter, a military stronghold and arsenal, a secret retreat for dissident punk rockers and homeless during the Soviet Era, and even a dungeon for Katherine the Great's arch nemesis. Cloaked in mystery and riddled with legends, the tunnels are fascinating. But bring a jacket-- both the spookiness and the underground chill will make the hair on your arms stand up!



*The Bastion Tunnels*

After our tour through the tunnels, my travel group managed to befriend our guide, and Kadi led us on a second tour, zigzagging across the Old Towne, through the city walls to a new Soviet Era world that is vibrant, filled with tempting smells from food kiosks, hip



*Pick-up ping-pong outside city walls*

music and pick-up ping-pong games. This is where the young locals have out -- the Estonians and Russians mingle together under graffiti and in gentrified factories left over from Soviet occupation. We enjoyed a delectable meal here and wandered back to Old Towne through a sculpture garden, past a World War II bomb crater, and over a sidewalk timeline of Estonian history. On the way, Kadi told us about growing up in

Estonia in the 1970s and 80s, the death of her grandfather in a Soviet gulag, the horror of the Hungarian Revolution, and the rocky the transition to independence.

My curiosity about the occupation of Estonia was piqued, and on the next day we visited the Occupation Museum. This museum is *not* about jobs in Estonia, but rather about the series of occupations by the Soviets and the Germans (and then the Soviets, again) beginning in 1939. It is fascinating to hear the lingering resentment in the voices of our tour guides. Here you see the plight of Estonia, Hungary and other satellite nations in vivid black-and white-film and technological artifacts from WWII and the Cold War. It is here that I finally understood Estonians delicately expressed bitterness of their neighboring nations.



*One of many beautiful doorways in Tallinn. Step inside!*

So, despite its dramatic appearance as a land of fairytales and towers begging for a Rapunzel, Tallinn is far more complex and interesting. It's spelled E-S-T-O-N-I-A, Estonia, and I think you should see it.