



WORDS ELISABETH KING

## ESTONIA'S BALTIC JEWEL A REAL SPARKLER

OVER the past decade Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, has built up a raunchy, British stag-party reputation. Thankfully, the beer and babes circuit is more subdued than it was and it's easy to avoid the binge-drinkers on Saturday nights. But the recent British "invasion", which earned Tallinn and Riga, the capital of Latvia, the title of Las Vegas of the East, is just the latest in a long line of foreign incursions.

Tallinn's position as a major trading port on the Gulf of Finland has lured many armies - real ones - to make the short sea voyage for over 800 years - Swedes, Danes, Germans, Russians, Hanseatic merchants and the Teutonic Knights. To be fair to the Brits, the Finns also head for Tallinn to guzzle beer and vodka at prices that are only a fraction of what

E-stonians." He wasn't kidding. In this wired city of 1.3 million, there are booths offering free Skype connections and wi-fi spots to be found around every corner. Like US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, we stayed at the Radisson Blu Olumpia hotel, a 15-minute stroll from the main sights. Built for the 1980 Moscow Olympics (the sailing events were held in Tallinn), the large, airy bedrooms are available from \$110 per double. There's a clutch of boutique hotels, the best of which is The Savoy, with an Art Deco lift and furnishings (from \$170). Next to Town Hall Square, you'll find the five-star Telegraaf Hotel. A spectacular renovation of Tallinn's former post and telegraph office with a spa and pool, rates begin at \$230 per double.

The lower town, known as the All-Linn, formerly housed the city's merchants and artisans, and is the most visited part of town. Crowds of day-trippers from Scandinavia pack the Viru, Tallinn's smartest shopping street, throughout spring and summer. The Baltic Germans, whose elite were descended from the Teutonic Knights, held sway over Estonia from the 12th century until they were forcibly ejected at the end of World War II. Their legacy is everywhere, from the Dome Church, thick with the crests of the richest merchant families, to the 15th century Guild Hall which now houses the national history museum. The Museum of Occupations fleshes out the period of Nazi and Soviet rule, and is candid about the fact that many locals joined

*Tallinn's imposing city walls were built in the 13th century and 26 of the original fortified towers stand guard along nearly 2km of metre-thick ramparts.*

they would pay at home. "But they are much quieter," said Mikk, our student guide, on the Tallinn Free Tour. Apart from the fact that you don't have to pay, the two-hour stroll through Tallinn's World Heritage-listed mediaeval old town is not only a great way to get your bearings, the student volunteers voice their personal opinions more often than regular tour guides. "I don't hate the Russians," said Mikk "but my parents and grandparents did." A rather polite way of pointing out that Russia ruled Estonia with an iron fist for two generations, deporting tens of thousands of Estonians to the gulags and importing Russian nationals to take their places.

That's in the past, though, said Mikk, and the optimism of the locals is infectious. "Who knows where Skype was invented?" he asked. "Yes, right here in Estonia. We sometimes call ourselves

Tallinn's imposing city walls were built in the 13th century and 26 of the original fortified towers stand guard along nearly 2km of metre-thick ramparts. The only way to explore this historic security system is on foot and that's the best way to discover the city's cobble-stoned streets, lined with buildings painted in Baroque-era pastels of blue, pink and grey. Like Budapest, Tallinn is divided in two - the upper and lower levels. The imposing Alexander Nevsky Cathedral dominates Toompea Hill in upper Tallinn. A Russian Orthodox blast-from-the-past in a country where most of the native population are Lutheran, its lavishly restored facade is a tourist symbol of the city. Close by is the Toomkirik, the mother church of Estonian Lutheranism, the Estonian parliament and an 18th century Tsarist governor's palace.

the Waffen SS because the Germans were seen as liberators at first. If you're after authentic Estonian souvenirs, the best hunting ground is the Viru and surrounding side streets, filled with picturesque boutiques selling locally-made linen, woollen jumpers, crystal and amber. Authenticity is also the main come-on of the restaurants and cafes in and around Raekoja Plats, where it's hard to get a seat on warm summer evenings. The Kuldse Notsu Korts (the Golden Piglet Inn; [hotelstpetersbourg.com](http://hotelstpetersbourg.com)) is a must for that true, old-time Estonian feel and food from homemade cheeses to the "sausage feast". Locals as well as tourists come here because of the much-vaunted "grandmother's recipes".

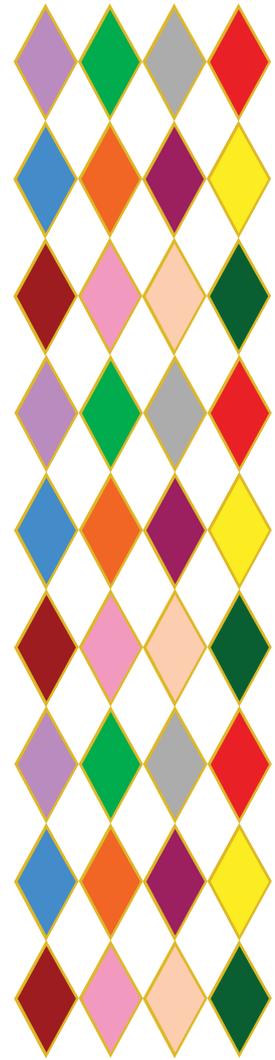
Normally I would never set foot in a mediaeval-themed restaurant, but Olde Hansa ([oldehansa.ee](http://oldehansa.ee)) is an original.

The interiors are kitted out like a wealthy merchant's home and the wait staff are all in costume. It's a lot of fun and the Estonians pull it off in high style whether you are choosing from the menu - Precious Portions - or going the whole hog with a Grand Feast. The background music hails from the 15th century and the honey beer is exceptional. Like Prague, Tallinn has plenty of strip clubs, bars with head-banging music and dives called Shooters, whose names act as fair warning. But don't by-pass Hell Hunt. The language isn't English and the monicker means "Gentle Wolf" in Estonian. There's a wide range of European beers on tap, including home-made micro-brews.

Many Scandinavian visitors head for Tallinn's seafront at Pirata Beach, even when only two rays of sunshine are poking out from the clouds, for an icy-cold beer or vodka. We headed for a far grander piece of seashore real estate - Kadriorg - a short tram ride from Tallinn's city centre. Restored wooden buildings from the 18th century share the streetscapes with Art Deco houses. But in the centre of a 90ha park lies Kadriorg Palace, built by Italian Baroque architect, Niccolo Michetti, for Tsar Peter the Great in 1718. A move that kicked off Tallinn's popularity as a summer resort for the Russian nobility throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

The tranquil setting more than explains why Peter the Great came here to dry out from his notorious drinking binges which left rooms trashed beyond repair, according to one English aristocrat. The tsar founded the "Most Drunken Council of Fools and Jesters" in 1695, whose charter stated that "the first commandment was that members were to get drunk every day, and might never go to bed sober". The stag boys of their day. 🍷

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