

Tallinn: A Trip to the Perfect Winter Fairytale

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Tallinn's medieval Old Town is at its fairytale best in the winter, with its cobblestone streets covered in snow.

TALLINN, Estonia — The small yet diverse and vibrant Baltic country that is Estonia has plenty to offer in summer, when it is visited by tourists from all over the world, but the winter season in Tallinn is something special.

Fabulous views of Estonian islands and Tallinn's Old Town open up to visitors even before the tiny, 33-seat SAAB340 airplane that flies between St. Petersburg and Tallinn touches the field of Lennart Meri Tallinn Airport.

Tallinn's medieval Old Town is at its fairytale best in winter, with its red rooftops covered in snow. A walk along the town's chaotic narrow streets leads to the center of Christmas and New Year festivities: Town Hall Square, where a huge Christmas tree stands — a tradition stemming from 1441, when Tallinn's Brotherhood of Blackheads guild put up a tree, making it

the first public Christmas tree ever put on display in Europe.

Under the tree is a lively Christmas market, with plenty of stalls offering all kinds of things from a glass of hot spiced wine or non-alcoholic grog to Estonia's famous woolen socks and mittens, various kinds of souvenirs and even Latvian lard. Children and adults alike crowd around the wooden enclosure containing a trio of reindeers munching hay.

Estonia is renowned for both respectfully preserving traditions and simultaneously introducing daring innovations. The country's inventions and discoveries are celebrated at the newly reopened Tallinn Television Tower (58a Kloostrimetsa, tel: +372 680 4057, www.teletorn.ee), which during the Soviet era was famous for its café, from where, weather permitting, guests were said to have been able to look behind the Iron Curtain to see the lights of free Helsinki across the Gulf of Finland.

The 314-meter tower — Estonia's tallest structure — was built in time for the 1980s Soviet Olympic Games, whose sailing regatta was held in Tallinn.

The outdoor observation deck — located at a height of 170 meters — is closed during the wintertime, but dizzying views can be seen through the structure's glass walls. A digital panel in the tower's fast-moving lift (the ride takes 49 seconds from bottom to top) shows the height to which visitors are elevated.

The museum inside the tower features an old Soviet stationary television camera, enabling visitors to try their hand as television presenters and record their performance, while a large portion of the exposition is dedicated to innovations created by Estonians, including Skype technology, developed by Ahti Heinla, Priit Kasesalu and Jaan Tallinn.

Less well known is the fact that the famous Paiste cymbals used by rock bands across the world were first produced in 1906 by Estonian musician Toomas Paiste in his instrument repair shop in St. Petersburg. Visitors can easily spend hours in the tower looking at the exhibits before having a meal at the tower's café and restaurant located on the 22nd floor.

A memorial stone in front of the tower is dedicated to the people who risked their lives to defend the tower — unarmed — against Soviet tanks that besieged the building on Aug. 20, 1991 in an attempt to gain control of Estonia's broadcasting, which had by then gotten rid of the Kremlin's censorship.

The stone honors four Estonian men who locked themselves in the tower to stop invading paratroopers attempting to gain control of the nation's broadcasting.

The year of Tallinn as Europe's Culture Capital 2011 may be over, but the city continues to launch impressive projects aimed to inspire interest from tourists and locals alike. One is the new, state-of-the-art branch of the Estonian Maritime Museum, located in the Seaplane Harbor, a 20-minute walk from the Old Town (6 Vesilennuki, tel: +372 620 0550, www.lennusadam.eu).

Opened in May, the high-tech museum occupies three hangars, initially constructed in 1916–1917 as an addition to the historic naval fortress of Peter the Great. The world's first reinforced concrete shell structure, the hangars are now home to a wealth of unusual items,

including Estonia's original Lembit submarine, the world's only surviving mine-laying submarine of its series dating back to the 1930s. Visitors can climb into the submarine and explore its interior.

The old Maritime Museum, opened in 1935 in the Fat Margaret Tower on the edge of the Old Town, also still functions. Built in the early 16th century to protect the city from attacks by sea and to impress visitors arriving in Tallinn by ship, the tower is also worth visiting for the detailed insight it provides into Estonia's past and present as a land of sailors and fishermen (70 Pikk, tel: +372 641 1408, www.meremuuseum.ee).

On a less somber note, Estonian traditions are well reflected in national cuisine. The famous Olde Hansa restaurant in the Old Town serves dishes made according to medieval recipes and eschews foodstuffs brought to the country in more recent times, such as potatoes.

Launched six months ago, the private food sightseeing tour "Flavors of Estonia" enables participants to enjoy some of the best local food combined with sights of the Old Town, as the group is escorted from one place to another on foot, ensuring they retain just enough appetite to have a bite here and there along the way (www.foodsightseeing.ee).

The St. Petersburg Times was a guest of the Estonian Tourist Board, Enterprise Estonia (2 Lasnamäe, 11412 Tallinn, Estonia. Tel: +372 6279 770). www.visitestonia.com.

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