

GOING PLACES

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TALLINN

ESTONIA'S MEDIEVAL GEM



The more I see of this amazing planet, the more I wish I could time-travel. I mean, imagine going back through the centuries to when Chinese workmen erected the Great Wall, or Egyptian artists crafted the Pyramids, or Inca engineers designed Machu Picchu. Imagine seeing ancient Rome and Athens, not as crumbling ruins, but in all their gold-&-marble glory. And imagine watching the citizens of those bygone centuries going about their ordinary, run-of-the-mill, day-to-day lives, right in front of our eyes ...



I found myself doing this imaginary back-tracking one beautiful day-dreamy Wednesday last year, as my wife and I explored the twisting lanes and fairytale turrets and grandly-domed cathedrals and needling spires of Tallinn.

We'd been cruising the Baltic, you see, checking out the big names: **Oslo** (Norway) and its blue/green deep-water fjords ... wonderful, wonderful **Copenhagen** (Denmark), home of the world's oldest monarchy ... **Stockholm** (Sweden) with 24,000 islands crammed into its stunning harbour ... **Helsinki** (Finland), land of saunas, spas and an ice-breaker fleet ... and glorious, breathtaking **St Petersburg** (Russia) with cathedrals and palaces to burn.

We ticked the last one off our list and thought, "That's it – we've seen 'em all!" But when our ship dropped anchor near

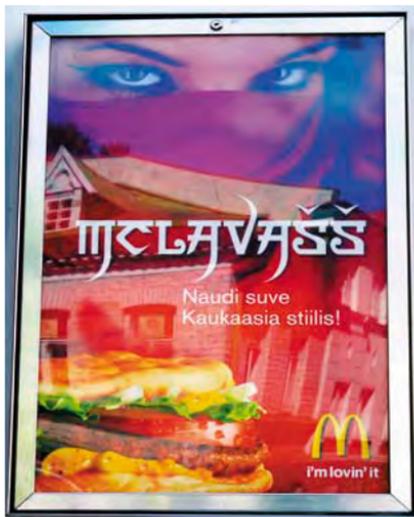
the little-known capital of Estonia, we were caught totally – and pleasantly – by surprise.

Estonia (if you want to go) is on the right as you head up the map, just past Lithuania and before you hit Finland. And Tallinn (it turns out) is small, old, walled-in and beautiful – a stunningly preserved medieval gem that was largely untouched by the battles of the tsars and the bombs of WWII.

The historic section is, at first glance, like a toy-town made of playdough ... a hodgepodge of cobblestone alleys, crowded squares and neat castles ... echoing to the sound of church bells a-ringing, locals a-laughing, and horses a-clopping. Costumed knaves and lasses trade tasty treats from roadside stalls bearing names like *Olde Hanse* ... noisy waiters point tourists to vacant tables at the cafes that sprawl in every direction ... a city-hall pharmacy sells herbal remedies that have remained unchanged since 1422 ... and this entire hustle and bustle is enclosed by thick stone battlements, designed (I imagine) to keep invaders out.

Because Tallinn has seen its share of invaders ...

For more than 700 years, this one-time coastal fort was a pawn in the political games of its big neighbours. And the unlucky guards up there on those walls were first shot at by the Danes, then picked on by the Swedes, then pursued by the Russians, then imprisoned by the Nazis, then bullied by the Soviets. In 1991 the tired country finally declared its independence, and UNESCO, not long after, declared the old town a World Heritage Site.



That, in turn, prompted a new invasion – this time by tourists. And hot on their heels came *McDonalds* (spelled *McLavass* on the sign in the window), who set up shop right next to the Old Town walls and now sell Baltic-Burgers to the capital's half-million-or-so Estonians.

Tallinn, to sum up, is one of the world's most invaded cities (according to the websites) ... one of the world's coolest cities (according to an expert: me) ... and one of the world's most-wired cities (according to its citizens, who've all been granted free Internet access).

So there! Don't say you haven't been told ...

Our route that Wednesday morning took us through the old city's cultural heart, where we gazed up at those old moss-covered turrets, then across beautiful Kadriorg Park where we gazed up again at the Knights of the Sword Castle and its 14th century tower nick-named 'Tall Hermann'.



Before long our cameras were overheating with panoramic views of turrets, towers, onion-domed churches and jutting steeples. So, to cool off, we drove out along the region's attractive waterfront where we stopped for some yummy local pastries at a seaside eatery that looked like an overturned boat. Then a second stop at the magnificent ruins of a 15th century convent named after St Bridget (the patron saint of Sweden).

By now, this jewel from the Middle Ages had us under its spell. And, after lunching at Tallinn's traditional *Peppersack Grill*, we went back for more – stumbling upon an archery re-enactment under trees on a grassy hill, and gate-crashing a wedding in the beautiful 19th-century Alexander Nevsky Cathedral (named after the Russian hero who beat the Teutonic Knights in a 13th century punch-up).

The marriage ceremony was seriously Russian Orthodox, and we couldn't understand a word. But the bride looked gorgeous in any language. And the gold



icons, the smell of burning incense, and the chanting of the cantors guaranteed that this moment would get added to the 101 other memories we'd made in Tallinn.

Can you think of a nicer way to spend a Wednesday ...? ❁



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