



Culture in Estonia

# Something for everyone!



Estonia  
Positively surprising.

# A culture distilled from history and occupation

Modern Estonian culture has been shaped by centuries of occupation by other nations, something which is evidenced in its language, architecture and the country's thousands of folk songs... In the last thousand years, Estonia has been ruled by Germany, Russia, Denmark, Sweden, and Poland. Despite Estonia's independence today, each nation has left its mark.

Today's culture is the distillation of centuries of history which can be traced through its song festivals, poetry, literature and national epics. It can also be seen all around, from the ancient architecture of a drying barn to modern glass structures, and from the pattern on a knitted glove to interactive creations on the internet.



Medieval Days on Town Hall Square



The "New World" Districts Street Festival

## At first glance

The first encounter with Estonia for the majority of guests is in Tallinn. The country's thousand year old capital is one of Europe's most northerly cities and one of the best examples of a walled medieval city. Its Old Town has UNESCO heritage status. In Tallinn, it's possible to see structures and layers created over centuries, which have resulted in a multitude of styles. Wars and architectural styles have also left their mark, as have periods that have seen Tallinn occupied both by affluent merchants and by oppressed citizens. The city is indebted to the poorer years for the Old Town's preservation as a lack of money prevented old buildings been torn down to follow modern trends. Tallinn is a walking city, and a stroll through narrow cobbled streets passes historic buildings, churches, ancient shops still in centuries old locations, while newer buildings now tower above the modern quarters of the city. Whether visiting Kalamaja (the Fish house), Kadriorg (Katherine's Valley), Uue-Maailma (the New World), or the city's fast rising modern quarters, everything is within close proximity by foot, bicycle, taxi or tram.

To discover the arts in Tallinn the best place

to start is the Tallinn Art Hall, Estonia's best example of functionalism. Continue from there to KUMU, the largest art collection in the Baltics, named Europe's Best Museum 2008. The KUMU is beside the beautiful Kadriorg Park and exhibits the best in Estonian art, with constantly changing new and exciting exhibits. A gentle stroll from KUMU to Kadriorg finds an area rich in Baroque architecture with the stunning Kadriorg Palace and garden, children's garden and the Mikkel Museum.



KuMu Art Museum



Tartu Love Film Festival tARTuFF

## Long weekends and short trips

If more than a single day is available for travel, but week-long trips aren't a possibility, consider a visit to another Estonian city. There are plenty which may be seen in only one day. Arrive by train or bus in the morning in Tartu, Viljandi, or Pärnu, and return in the evening.

Tartu, with its university established in 1632, has always been the soul of the country. Imposing churches from the Middle Ages stand next to the university's classical buildings, and this city full of greenery also boasts many cosy cafes and restaurants. Also, Tartu's 100-year-old suburbs have been preserved: their bohemian spirit transports a visitor to another era. Tartu is a city which is alive and aware of its uniqueness. Viljandi is a personable town, its cultural scene taking its face from the Cultural Academy, the Ugala Theatre, the Kondas Naiviete Art Centre, and summer folk music festivals which take place year round in the folk music barn. For those wishing to leave Tallinn and Tartu and experience a different rhythm in the cultural sphere, Viljandi is the right choice.



The Kondas Centre of Naive Art in Viljandi

The best examples of resort architecture and Estonian functionalism from the beginning of the 20th century are found in Pärnu. Pärnu is called Estonia's summer capital and – if Tartu becomes quiet and sleepy with the summer departure of



Pärnu – Estonia's summer capital

its university students – then Pärnu is where life moves. On a short walk a guest will encounter ultramodern art happenings and concerts. And there are always the beaches or nightclubs. The city offers quiet elegance and pulsating night life side by side.

## Unique experiences

The versatility of a complete and authentic Estonian life is, in large part, found outside larger cities. Three larger, special regions are worthy of mention: Setumaa, Lahemaa, and the islands.

In the southeast corner of Estonia is Setumaa, historically an orthodox region, and therefore one of the best-preserved representations of its eastern idiosyncrasies – its familiar "brand" of folksong tradition, a language quite different from northern Estonia's written language, folk costumes and jewellery art, and without a doubt its culinary arts. In terms of museums, all the above can be seen at the Värskä Farm Museum. But with a little luck, the real beauties of everyday life may be witnessed. It's especially worth a visit during folksong days, fairs, and the year's biggest event, Monarchy Day, where a Setu kingdom is declared and a new vice-regent is chosen for the year. During these events, Setu culture and food are seen at their finest.

Lahemaa National Park on Estonia's northern coast is known for its wondrous nature, though



Seto women singing the leelo



Interesting architecture can be found all over Estonia

also in Lahemaa are Estonia's most imposing manor homes (Palmse, Sagadi, Vihula), which are must-sees for anyone interested in Estonian architecture. The manors are known for their museums, as well. Excellent Estonian food can

be found at the Altja and Viitna inns, and time in Käsmu, the captains' village, is always well spent. Traveling east from Lahemaa, a stop along the road is the friendly town of Rakvere, and eventually the highway ends at Narva, which features one of Estonia's most impressive castles and, just over the river, Russia can be seen.

Folk culture in its finest form touches western Estonia's small islands of Kihnu and Ruhnu. The large islands of Saaremaa, Hiiumaa, Muhu, and Vormsi, differentiate themselves from each other by their pride. Cultural enthusiasts should certainly see Saaremaa's churches from the Middle Ages, gorgeous windmills, and in the city of Kuressaare, the castle of the Brotherhood of the Sword. Hiiumaa has northern Europe's oldest lighthouse.

All of the aforementioned regions are suitable for longer holidays – points of interest are but a short drive away (or a more time-consuming bicycle ride). It isn't difficult to find a pleasant hotel or good place to eat – all possibilities to spend cultural time away from the hum of the cities, but still in the main of life.



Saaremaa Opera Days in Kuressaare

## Estonian food

Eating is one of our oldest cultural habits! Estonian eating habits are influenced particularly by German and Russian cuisine. In addition, northern peculiarities play a role – for understandable reasons a lot of emphasis cannot be placed on wine and tropical fruits. Although products from grain – bread and porridge, beer, and vodka – have always been high quality and a point of honour for Estonians. Today's Estonian cooks are following well in the example set by their Scandinavian brothers and are developing the modern Estonian cuisine. In Estonian forests, the sea, and fields grow many tasty foods, and it's only necessary to put them together in new exciting combinations. The selection of fine restaurants at least in Tallinn is wide, and Estonian tastes hold a place of honour. When it's possible (in summer) open markets are ideal for exploration. More well known and typical are the Nõmme market in Tallinn and the Tartu market building, both of which offer excellent examples of market architecture from their respective eras.



Cooking in an Estonian kitchen

Anyone who has tasted Estonian smoked ham or spiced Baltic sprats, or tried good, simple, boiled potatoes, won't believe that Estonian food can be boring. It's the harmony of pure tastes that makes Estonian cuisine a delicacy.



Pure Estonian flavours from the Rottermann Market

## A literary holiday

A good holiday isn't complete without a good read.

The literary centres in Estonia throughout the centuries have been Tallinn and Tartu. It is in these two cities that the main literary events are held, including Tallinn's literary festival, Head-Read (literally, "good lines") and Tartu's Prima Vista festivals which are both held in May, just as the finer weather begins.

Visitors are welcome at readings, which are held one evening a week at the houses of the Estonian Writers Union in Tallinn and Tartu, (Wednesdays in Tallinn, Tuesdays in Tartu). A good selection of Estonian literature can be found in foreign languages in the major cities too. Those with serious interest may wish to contact the Estonian Literature Centre (elic.ee).



Indrek Hirv presenting his works



Song Festival Grounds during the Song Festival

## Song Festival

Song festivals are a major part of Estonian culture. The biggest and best known is the Tallinn Song Festival held every four years in the Song Festival Grounds when tens of thousands of performers bring choral music to hundreds of thousands of listeners. In a nation with a little over one million inhabitants, the involvement of such a high percentage of the population is truly remarkable. The Tallinn Song Festival started in Tartu in 1869, the beginning of the national awakening, Estonians have since gathered together to sing and dance. Throughout the land, plenty of smaller, local festivals are organised in summer and there is even a Punk Song Festival, though the main festivals are those which reinforce the solidarity of the Estonians and reflect the culture of folk music and song. For Estonians the Song Festival is not only a mass event, but a proud cultural occasion. The last song and dance festival, held in July 2009, drew over 37,000 performers.



Punk Song Festival



Something for every booklover

## Festivals

The cultural vacationer will no doubt check the dates and times of local festivals before planning a trip to Estonia. This short overview outlines the most regular and traditional cultural events.

One of the largest festivals in Estonia is the international Black Nights Film Festival (PÖFF), which over the years has grown to be important on the European scene – if not for its size, then for its serious content, quality and its own unique features. Visitors interested in Estonian films will find new Estonian films in some theatres, though to get a general picture it's recommended to borrow or buy films on disk – the important ones



International Black Nights Film Festival in Tallinn

through smaller mini-festivals throughout the year. Jazzkaar has managed to raise itself to a level on the world's jazz map where the biggest names and the most exciting players are always present along with Estonia's best. Viljandi's Folk Music Festival or Viljandi Folk, is the most notable music festival because of the fact that the



Jazz Festival Jazzkaar

are available in better stores and where advice is available, as well. Special attention should be paid to Estonian puppet and cartoon films which are world famous, the most important of which have also been recently made available on disk.

For the jazz lover, Jazzkaar is a "must see," which takes place every year, though not only in one single specific week: its charms are spread



International Contemporary Dance Festival – the August Dance Festival



Viljandi Folk Music Festival

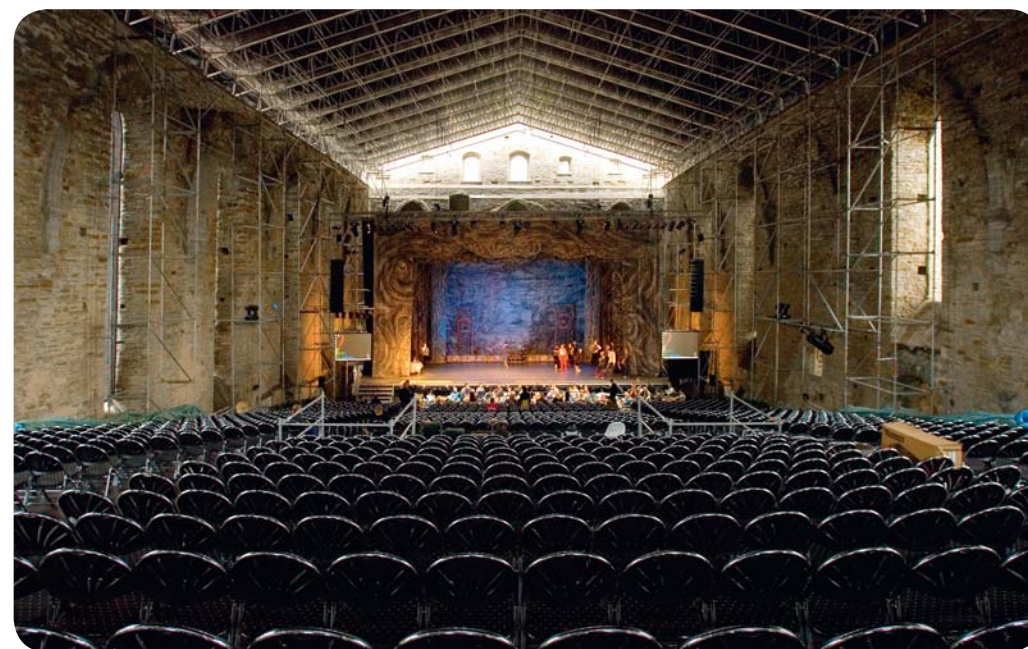
event literally doubles the population of the town which hosts it. Since the beginning, the festival has become known not only for its music, but for its atmosphere and for its spirit of

gathering people together as one. Of course, the performers are always of good quality. From the festival's inception to its status as a major musical, quality has always been the first priority.

Rakvere's Baltoscandal is an intriguing theatre festival which has a history as long or longer than the newly independent Republic of Estonia itself. A visitor who values radical, alternative, and simply good theatre will find it here in a very international setting.

The Birgitta Festival takes place at St. Birgitta's Cloister in Pirita on the edge of Tallinn and also in the heart of Old Town and is an event for both lovers of old and classical music. Centred around the one-time Dominican and Birgittine cloister, the festival offers edification for the spirit, soul, and heart.

Living culture is constantly changing so internet addresses have been given where possible but the surest way to enjoy Estonia's varied culture is to simply visit. We wish you pleasant times and discoveries in Estonia.



Birgitta Festival in the medieval Pirita Convent



[www.visitestonia.com](http://www.visitestonia.com)

[www.einst.ee](http://www.einst.ee)

[www.festivals.ee](http://www.festivals.ee)

[www.laulupidu.ee](http://www.laulupidu.ee)

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