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TALLINN & PÄRNU “IN YOUR SPORRAN”

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About this guide

This series of downloadable NATA Mini “In Your Sporrán” Guides has been designed specifically to save the hassle of printing out reams of NATA web pages in order to make sure you don’t miss something whilst wondering the back streets of your chosen destination.

This guide has been compiled almost exclusively by me (Paul Allison), and is based entirely on personal experiences and opinions. Please do not prejudge anything on my say so – not only am I quite warped, but many places were only visited once, and therefore may have been having a particularly good or bad day.

This guide is not intended to replace more traditional sources of information, such as the excellent Lonely Planet guide books or the indispensable “In Your Pocket” guides available local in many Eastern European cities (as well as the downloadable versions from www.inyourpocket.com, which have inspired this very guide). Instead, the idea is to supplement these more detailed, better researched and more balanced guides with my own ramblings.

These guides originally came about as people were forever asking for pub tips and the like for places I’ve been to – I soon grew tired of typing out the same emails every few weeks and opted instead to keep the information on the web on the NATA Online site.

All opinions expressed in this guide are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Netley Abbey Tartan Army.

- For more information about NATA (the Netley Abbey Tartan Army), including photos and diary accounts of many trips abroad with Scotland, as well as much more travel information and guides), please visit www.netleyabbeytartanarmy.com
- For more information on me, please visit www.paulallison.co.uk



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Estonia Introduction

Estonia is far more Scandinavian than the other two Baltic States, and the national stereotype is that of a cool, calculating and reserved outlook. A famous quote (and one of my favourites) from around the time of the 1991 Revolutions, was “Estonians would die for their freedom, right down to the last Lithuanian”. Nevertheless, this is all a wee bit harsh – I find Estonia a really friendly and laid back place to visit (apart from the burger bars late at night!), and the scenery and architecture in Tallinn is truly breathtaking. A significant proportion of the population is ethnically Russian (far more than Lithuania, but less than Latvia), and although you can expect to hear Russian spoken quite commonly in Tallinn, it is apparently far more prominent in the eastern cities of Kohtla-Järve and Narva.

The country is easiest traversed by bus – there are a couple of buses daily between Riga and Tallinn, and very regular buses between Tallinn and the major cities of Tartu (a student town – never been) and Pärnu (a beach resort – see below).

The local bevvy of Saku beer was far better the second time around than how I remembered it, and has now been joined by A.Le Coq, which I found a bit weaker and less enjoyable. There are also several brands of pear cider on tap, so there's a good chance of finding one on draught wherever you go.

Tallinn

Over the past few years, Tallinn has continued to evolve into a thoroughly modern city, whilst still retaining its breathtaking medieval beauty. The Town Hall square is breathtaking under a blue sky, and the striking (if unpopular) Nevsky Cathedral on Toompea is also awe-inspiring. It's also chock-full of bars and clubs, and unfortunately, British stag parties and marauding groups of drunken Finns. Almost more Scandinavian than Eastern European, save for the large amount of Russian spoken, Tallinn is a great destination to combine sights and nightlife.



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One word of warning – Tallinn's taxi drivers are notorious for trying to rip off unsuspecting passengers, and many of them even have their meters hidden out of sight. One handy tip from a Scottish ex-pat (thanks Phil!) is to ring up IR Tasko, who are the cheapest company in town. In Phil's own words

“They have tons of cars and are always less than 10 minutes away wherever you may find yourself in Tallinn. You will never find them at the ranks as they only operate to telephone reservations. The number is 6380000 and with a wee bit of coaxing the controller will be able to understand your requirements. IR also own a company called Euro Takso so the car which turns up may have either name on the door. Trick to remember is that the reservation number they always give is the 3 digits from the car number plate.”

Paul's Tallinn recommendations:

#1 Bar – Hell Hunt

#1 Sight – View from Kiek in de Kok

#1 Thing to do – Catch a chopper to Helsinki

Tallinn: must see sights

- **Old Town square** (Raekoja Plats) and Tower - The focal point of Tallinn is a picture perfect medieval square bordered by a hotchpotch of coloured Hanseatic buildings on three sides, and a massive church-like Old Town Hall on the other. You can be active and pay a few Kroons to climb the slippery steps to the top of the tower for a great view, or you can just chill with a coffee, a beer or a pear cider in one of the many cafe terraces spilling onto the square.
- **Toompea Hill** - Looming above the Old Town is Toompea Hill (most easily accessed up Pikk Jalg), home to the ornate Orthodox Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, the Kiek in de Kok fortress and the pink Parliament Building. The Cathedral is breathtaking, but controversial as many Estonians view it as an attempt to "Russify" the capital. Kiek in de Kok contains a museum, and there are stunning views from the top floor.
- **City Walls** - The walls on the western flank of the Old Town (just north of Nunne) are pretty intact, and you can pay a few Kroons to climb up and walk between three towers. Very photogenic.



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- **Occupation Museum** - This is a relatively new museum at the foot of Toompea street (down the hill from the Cathedral, away from the old town. It's in a new and very modern building, but is pretty text-based. Be sure to ask at the counter for an English guide leaflet that will explain all the numbered exhibits.
- **Fat Margaret** - This comically-named Bastion and gun-tower is at the head of the Old Town, near the port. Apparently it contains a museum and you can climb on to the roof, but it was closed when we were there. Just outside the gate by the tower is the towering sculpture commemorating the MV Estonia ferry disaster.
- **Day trip to Helsinki (& pub tram)** - There's a lot to do in Tallinn, so this is not a suggestion that you need to get out of town! However, we did, so we thought we'd throw this in. We managed to get an internet booking on Copterline, giving us bargain £50 tickets for the 18-minute one-way journey over the Gulf of Helsinki. Once there, we spent an hour on the Pub Tram, then went up to the Olympic Stadium (the Olympic Tower was shut), before catching the 90-minute jet-foil back to Tallinn (£13 each). Why do it? Well, it's a damn sight better than staying in Helsinki and only spending one day in Tallinn! And you might get to go on a helicopter!

Tallinn: Top pubs (& some restaurants too)

- **Beer House**, Dunkri 5 - This massive German-style beer hall is just off the Town Hall Square, and boasts a nightclub and sauna upstairs (we never ventured that far). In addition to brewing their own dark and light beer, you can watch the campest chef in the world (in his yellow and maroon overalls) as he prepares food over an open grill. If you're lucky, the house duo will be onstage knocking out "La Paloma Blanca".
- **Soti Klubi**, Uus 33 - The Scottish Club is a bit of a weird one. On the edges of the Old Town out towards the port, the entrance is up some steps and then through a secluded garden with a fresco painting of a lochside landscape. The club itself is like a posh golf club, but boasts an impressive selection of Malts. The downside is they may or may not be open to "outsiders". We bowled in on our first visit, but our second interrupted a slide-show of some sorts!
- **Molly Malone's**, Raekoja Plats – Small but very popular bar in the Old Town Square. Now with added karaoke and a new Formula 1 theme bar next door (*thanks Phil*)



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- **Kompressor**, Rataskaevu 3 - A cross between a pancake café, a bar and a student common room, the bright and airy Kompressor knocks out very reasonably-priced drinks and pancakes to an appreciative young crowd. Well worth a visit if you like pancakes.
- **Hell Hunt**, Pikk 39 - Far and away the best ex-pat pub in Tallinn. Re-invented from it's previous days as an Irish pub, Hell Hunt (meaning "Gentle Wolf") has now got a stripped, industrial feel that's still comfortable. Knocking out it's very own dark and light beers and pear cider at almost half the price of it's ex-pat competitors, the bar has quickly become established as a locals' favourite as well. The pub's been around a while as while, having opened in 1993.
- **Bamba**, Pärnu Mnt 69 - A pool hall within easy staggering distance from the A.Le Coq Arena, this seemed to be frequented by drunken Russian neds. Did what it said on the tin.
- **Nimeta Baar**, Suur Karja 4 - The legendary "Bar With No Name" (and it's sister "Nimega" over the road – the "Bar With A Name") are well established on the Tallinn ex-pat scene. Both have historical Scottish connections, however I just can't grow to like them. Very popular with everyone else, mind.
- **Kower Korts**, Viru 8 - You can spot this place by virtue of it's quirky metal sign of a mechanical head straining to drink a beer. Inside it's small, cramped, and difficult to get served (once you've managed to find a space at the bar that is). I don't know why we bothered.
- **Scotland Yard**, Mere pst 6e - The most stylish pub we encountered in Estonia, the huge Scotland Yard has the feel of a Sherlock Holmes museum. Loads of comfy seats on different levels surround a spacious dancefloor. Don't miss the cigar bar behind the huge aquarium that sits on top of the other bar. The toilets may have an electric chair theme, and the waitresses may carry handcuffs, but unfortunately that didn't excuse the surly and unfriendly service. Beyond that, a fine pub.
- **Depeche Mode**, Nunne 4 - It's all I ever wanted, all I ever needed. 'Nuff said.
- **Baar Tallinn**, Narva Mnt 2 - The first bar beyond the Viru hotel is a cheap and functional affair, and seemed popular with Finnish jakies. 1 litre steins available on request.
- **Kolumbus Krisostomus**, Viru 24 (2nd Floor) - This bright and open Estonian bar sits directly above yet another soul-less Irish pub, just inside the Viru gates. Popular for food, this is one of the few places we went that did table service for beer.



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- **Troika Trahter**, Raekoja Plats 15 - There's a well-regarded Russian restaurant downstairs, but it's this cosy and atmospheric Russian tavern, right on the Town Hall Square, yet back enough from the cobbles to avoid the brunt of the stag party crowd, that you should head for. Neck vodka and pickles (or just sip your beer) and chat to the soundtrack of authentic wailing Russian folk songs.
- **Karja Kelder**, Vaike-Karja 1 (aka Villa Willem) - A really cosy, and surprisingly huge, downstairs bar diagonally opposite the Nimeta. The misleading name above the door (Villa Willem) made it slightly difficult to find. Decent priced food and drink and a good atmosphere.
- **Treff**, Kinga 3 - Supposedly once the cheapest bar in the old town, knocking out any drink for €1, this place has recently doubled it's prices. Nothing special.

Restaurants (although they serve beer too!)

- **Controvento Restaurant**, Vene 12 - Controvento does have a small bar area, but it's the food you should come here for. Not quite the bargain it used to be, it's still a massive saving on what you would expect to pay at home for fine steaks and pizzas.
- **Fellini Restaurant**, Kinga 1 (Old Town square) - Sitting right on the Town Hall Square, this tourist trap of a restaurant does exactly what it says on the tin. Beware the "Fellini" sized pizzas, unless there's a dozen of you sharing one.
- **Peppersack**, Viru 2 - One of several medieval restaurants in the Old Town, Peppersack is three-in-one. It combines a café/patisserie with a grill house/barbecue and a normal restaurant. We ate downstairs and I enjoyed a game kebab on a skewer over a pint of the house beer. Definitely recommended, but not quite as good as...
- **Olde Hansa**, Vanaturg 1 - The daddy of all medieval restaurants, Olde Hansa is a Tallinn institution. Apparently, a lot of research went into everything, from the music to the waitresses uniforms, not to mention the food. It's possible to eat bear here, as well as other simple yet surprising dishes (although it's not the best for vegetarians). Be aware that all food comes with authentic side dishes, which I loved (but Helen hated). Three types of house beer to wash it all down with: Honey Beer, Strong Beer with Herbs and Cinnamon Ale.



Pärnu

Pärnu markets itself as the "summer capital of Estonia", which may or may not be true. We were there before the start of the season, and it had the air of a place that was tidying itself up and applying a fresh lick of paint. Halfway between Riga and Tallinn, Pärnu is relatively easy to reach (frequent buses from Tallinn, taking 2 hours, or 2 trains a day, taking nearly 4), the town is eminently walkable, and benefits from wide roads and lots of green space. The sandy beach is very wide, and not drastically affected by the tide (it's in a sheltered bay at the north of the Gulf of Riga), and is packed with playing apparatus and changing shelters.

The prices are very reasonable, and the whole place was very friendly and very honest (which Tallinn's taxi drivers could take note from!) – all in all, the city is geared as a resort for Estonian holiday makers. Those who have been there in high season rave about the place as well.

Paul's Pärnu recommendations:

#1 Bar – Veerev Olu

#1 Sight – View from the Romantik Baar

#1 Thing to do – See the beach (and maybe have a mud bath?)

Pärnu: Top sights

- **Rüütli Tänav** - Pärnu's main street is reminiscent of Disneyland's (not that I've been). It's mostly pedestrianised, and is flanked by picturesque wooden shops. It's also a good start for a pub crawl, as most of the action seems to stem from this street.
- **Beach** - The beach is onto Pärnu Bay, an inlet off the north-eastern edge of the Gulf of Riga (which is an inlet of the Baltic), and is therefore slightly sheltered. It benefits from a wide expanse of sand, complimented by a number of changing screens, nets and goals, and during the summer there are bars, amusement parks and mud baths all within easy reach. It rained while we were there! The magnificent Art Deco Ranna Hotel is right on the beach, and is well recommended as a place to stay.
- **Tallinn Gate** - Not only is this a well-preserved medieval gate, but it even comes with it's own in-built bar (below) - can't go wrong there!



- **Mini Zoo** - Mini? They weren't bloody joking - there's two rooms of fish tanks containing snakes, spiders and even Nile crocodiles. Not one for the faint-hearted, or for anyone even slightly concerned about animal welfare! (Me? I was sizing the crocodile up as a potential sporrán)
- **Red Tower** - It's not at all red, it's white. And it was closed when we were there. It's tucked down a driveway off a side street in the town centre, but apparently it's historically significant (sayeth the guide book), and let's face it, it's not going to take too much of your valuable drinking time!

Pärnu: Top pubs

- **Alexandri Pub**, Vana-Raama 8 - A quirky pub on the north side of the Pärnu river, but well worth the stroll. Don't let the menacing biker club next door put you off. You could spend years trying to look at everything on the walls, but when we were in, there was a saltire hanging in one of the alcoves.
- **Laterna**, Puhavaimu 12 - A very cheap, very local bar, just off Ruutli. Smelled a bit funny, but at 50p a pint, who'd complain?
- **Nikolai Lehtla**, Nikolai 7 - Another bar just off Ruutli, you can spot this one by the wooden decking out front just beyond the Tourist Information centre on the corner. The walls are bedecked with lifesize pictures of a forest, but when we were in, the atmosphere was pretty dead and the service surly. Supposedly open later than most bars, but don't count on it.
- **Postipoiss**, Vee 12 - Mainly a restaurant, but at weekends this place turns into a raucous dance hall for a more mature crowd. There's also a small amount of seating near the bar, which serves their own (nice) dark house beer as well as pear cider on draught. There always seems to be a taxi stationed outside as well, which is handy.
- **Romantik Baar**, Tervise Paradis Hotel - a bar with a view! It's on the 8th (and top) floor of the brand spanking new, and very plush, Tervis Paradis Hotel on the beach. Well worth a visit for the view alone.
- **Tallinna Varavad**, Kuninga 1 - Now we're talking – a bar built into the roof of the Tallinn Gate. No windows, but loads of atmosphere. The only let down is that it closes pretty early, and there aren't loads of seats. Definitely worth a visit, even if it is only bottled beer.



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- **Ruutlihoov**, Ruutli 29 - This wee pub has it's own courtyard off Ruutli, but to be honest, I wasn't that impressed. There seemed to be a mezzanine level – we sat underneath it and felt like we were in a curry house waiting room. The main room felt a little like a beer hall, but everyone seemed more preoccupied with eating than drinking.
- **V6**, Vee 6 - A small, friendly, local bar opposite the theatre at the top of Vee. The swirly walls give the impression of some pre-club haunt, but this is anything but. No pumps, so bottles all the way.
- **Veerev Olu**, Uus3a-2 - Best pub in Pärnu (Alexandri's is second), in my opinion. It's off the road, tucked behind some other buildings, and gives the impression of a wood cabin in the middle of wasteland. This pub has long, beer hall style benches and a very friendly atmosphere. Look out for the football photos and the older world maps of the Baltics on the walls.
- **Vies Villem**, Kuninga 11 - Just around the corner from Postipoiss, you can spot this place by the Guinness sign. Indeed, on the inside as well, this pub really does want to be an Irish pub, complete with random jakies! A decent selection of food and drink, and lots of seats, make this an acceptable choice.
- **Vaike Klaus**, Supeluse 3 - Halfway between the mud baths on the beach and the centre of town, this small bar/restaurant is pretty much marooned, but a handy staging post if headed in either direction. Help yourself to a menu, and order at the bar.
- **Kuursaal**, Mere pst 22 - This massive ex-theatre is almost on the beach, and the nightclub had the atmosphere of a Jumpin Jaks or a Brannigans, with a big bar and lots of tables, plus a stage for live music. I was lucky enough to see Kool & The Gang here.
- **Martini & Espresso Bar**, Munga 2 - The good news is this place is open VERY late (5 or 6am). The bad news is it's little more than a room with a bar in. Still, it serves beer, and is open very late.
- **Teater Endla**, Keskväljak 1 - This minimalist designer café is primarily for theatre goers, however it does coffee and cakes for early risers, and a nice line in Vana Tallinn cocktails for the more decadent.

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