



Deep roots

IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE WOODS TODAY...

...YOU'LL FIND CRUMBLING
BUILDINGS, MYSTERIOUS BEASTS
AND ECHOES OF THE PAST.
RONAN J O'SHEA EXPLORES
ESTONIA'S REALLY WILD SIDE

PHOTOGRAPHS ALEX ATACK



Tallinn, they say, is the Silicon Valley of Europe. And by ‘they’, I mean the coders and coffee-swigging visionaries of the Baltic city’s burgeoning startup scene. I’m inclined to trust them on this and not just because I still use an iPhone 4. Skype is one of a few tech companies based here that’s valued at over \$1 billion, companies whose shiny office blocks now dominate the skyline. Walking through the medieval Old Town, I’m sure there are also trillions of ones and zeroes drifting around these cobbled streets, carrying the digital dreams of a new generation.

But, leaving the Estonian capital and heading east on the motorway, there’s something else on the breeze. Something mustier and more evocative. After I pass the *magalarajoonid* (huge, concrete, Soviet-era apartment blocks), the air smells surprisingly different. I’m getting moss and spring water, sweet pinesap, open wood fires and – yes – bear poo.

I’m driving towards Lahemaa, meaning ‘Land of Bays’. It’s a vast, forested national park that hugs the Baltic coastline for over 80km. Founded in 1971, this wilderness half an hour from Tallinn was the first national park in the Soviet Union, but is now just one of many in a country that’s been taken over by trees. Estonia was declared independent on 24 February 1918 (the centenary is celebrated this month), >

TAKE A BREAK
From top, the Estonian capital is just a 30-minute drive from the forests and wilderness of Lahemaa National Park



but was subsequently occupied by the USSR between 1944 and 1991 – a period that saw mass emigration and deportations. While humans suffered, trees flourished on land that was blocked off to locals. Nowadays, 50% of Estonia is covered in forest, within which fairytale landscape you'll find wild boar, red deer, lynx, wolves and a few hundred brown bears.

Surprisingly, it's these fuzzy creatures who need protection from us as, in a country making such swift progress, the cutting edge is threatening to bite into the national parks. "The pressure on the forests is increasing," says Artur Talvik, a local politician who's against deforestation. "Recently, Parliament passed a law which says that you can cut down younger pine and spruce trees," he explains, "which means we're moving towards industrial forests."

At the same time, the Estonian outdoors are enjoying a renaissance, with more city dwellers quitting town for places like Lahemaa, often on a permanent basis. Parking my car in a clearing, I can understand why the forests appeal to these tech-savvy Tallinnites: they provide a magical escape and all-important link to the past.

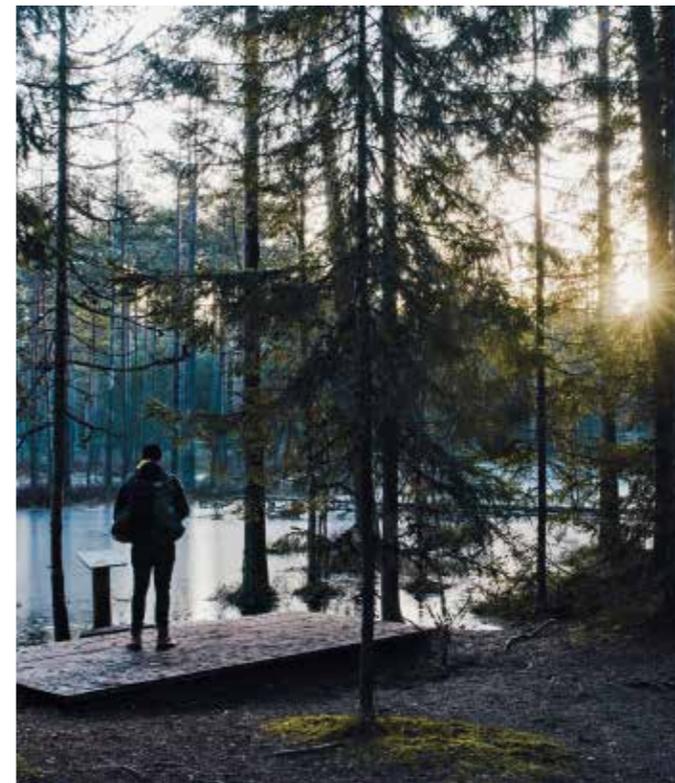
'*Rappa minema*' reads a sign nailed to a wooden post. 'It has gone to the bog'. I wish I'd done the same before embarking on the drive.

I've arrived at Viru bog, at the western edge of Lahemaa and the start of a 3.5km trail that leads through the ghostly fog of this forest marshland. The curious phrase means that something has gone wrong or gotten lost. I'm not sure whether it's being offered as a warning or as an invitation.

Here, the trees have grown to skyscraping heights, with bark as thick as elephant hide. I stick a toe out from the sturdy wooden trail and prod the ground, gingerly, only for water to rush up through the moss and soak my boot.

According to Estonian folklore I should keep a close eye out here for Eksitaja – an evil spirit with a bad habit of leading Estonians into bogs. Instead, I'm hoping to meet Soovana, who protects local people from the icy waters. Or, better still, Allikaravitseja, the elven healer, who rewards the good hearted with companionship. Not your typical holiday romance...

Somewhere in the distance a twig snaps – the sound carries for miles in the still air. I hope it's >



PRESERVATION ORDER
Clockwise from opposite page, a church in the forest; Roosa in the Käsmu Maritime Museum; which was Arne Vaik's home; our writer Ronan at Viru bog in Lahemaa

“Hara Submarine Base has become a popular site for urban explorers”



just a deer moving through the beech branches, and not Eksitaja coming to prove the sign right. “People used to be afraid of the forest,” says Triin Vaik, once I make it to Käsmu, a tiny Lahemaa village a few kilometres away. “It’s where the soldiers once did their target practice.”

Triin runs the Käsmu Maritime Museum, which touches both the forest and the sea, with her partner, Aarne. She smiles thinking about how popular the place has become, and points to a grand piano in the museum’s hall. “We have our own concerts, now. Aarne says it’s one of the best venues in Estonia.”

Aarne is in his mid-seventies. He opened the museum in 1993 to preserve his house – which fell into disrepair during Communism – as well as the seafaring traditions that stretch back 100 years to the first period of Estonian independence. He picks up a photo album. “My grandfather,” he says, while pointing at a black and white shot of young men in navy uniform. His finger moves across the page. “My uncle.”

In the next room, Aarne’s Irish setter, Roosa, bounces around an old rowing boat. “It’s just for pleasure that we use the sea now,” says Triin. As with the forests, access to the sea was limited under the Soviets – the Baltic was blocked by a 2m-high wall. She leads me out to the couple’s lighthouse and we stare across the inky water, something it’s hard to imagine would have been impossible just a generation ago.

There’s somewhere else I want to visit before nightfall, so I say my goodbyes and take a main road back through the forest and into Hara Bay. At the end of a muddy path, I arrive at a crumbling, concrete monolith: Hara Submarine Base.

In the 1950s, this military installation was used to demagnetise submarines (a high-tech procedure that protected them from mines). Nowadays, it’s a popular site for urban explorers and graffiti artists who’ve covered its halls in >

Bark to the future

A TRUNK-ATED NATURAL HISTORY OF OF ESTONIA, IN SIX KEY DATES

C 10,000BC

THE MESOLITHIC PERIOD
Hunter-gatherers live a semi-nomadic existence close to large bodies of water almost completely surrounded by forest.

C 500AD

THE MIDDLE AGES
Trees start to be cleared for agriculture. The idea of conservation emerges towards the end of the Middle Ages, in the 13th century.

1918

THE FIRST REPUBLIC
Estonia becomes independent for the first time. Its vast natural resources and sea access help it to thrive for two decades.

1944

THE COMMUNIST ERA
Soviet occupation brings hardship for Estonia’s people, but also the reemergence of forests on large areas of now disused land.

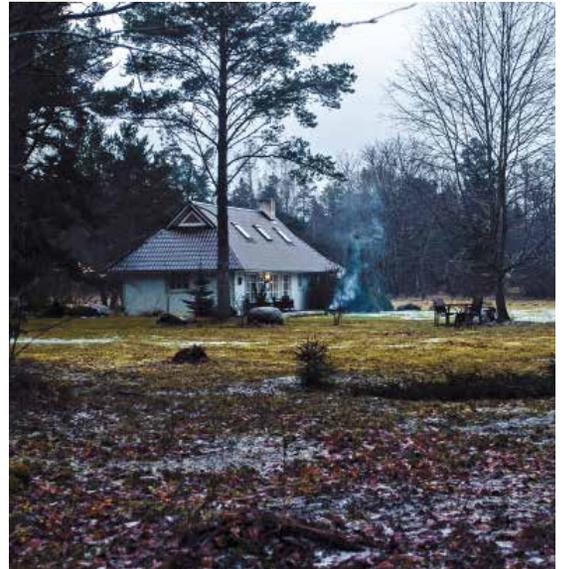
1971

THE FIRST NATIONAL PARK
Local conservationists help persuade Moscow to make Lahemaa the first national park in the Soviet Union.

1991

THE ‘SINGING REVOLUTION’
Independence is restored, and the national parks are reclaimed and celebrated by the Estonian people.





“Times change, but history clings to these buildings”

paint. The countryside is littered with intriguing Soviet sites such as this one, that have been reclaimed by nature – wood proving stronger than concrete. Strange rumblings, like the howling of some trapped animal, echo around the disintegrating structure as I tiptoe through it. It’s several nervous minutes before I realise they’re coming from giant holes in the floor, where waves are crashing into the foundations far below.

“You often see bear tracks, but the animals tend to keep away from humans,” says Eva-Maria, a guesthouse owner in the north-eastern corner of Lahemaa, who I meet the next day. “It helps if you sing and talk as loudly as you can.”

Eva-Maria used to live in London, but moved back to Estonia eight years ago to set up her Adami Guesthouse, hidden among the pines. She fixes us a lunch of rye bread, freshly smoked salmon and juice made from sea buckthorn – a type of wild berry. “Life is harder in the country – you only have your head and your hands – but it’s better. I never regret coming back here,” she says. “There’s nothing finer than waking up in the morning and walking barefoot on the grass.”

With the city so close by, Eva-Maria has found an enviable point of harmony between old and new. Her fear – like that of Artur Talvik – is that the old will become a thing of the past.

I finally meet up with Talvik, who’s leader of Estonia’s Free Party, at the Riigikogu >

REST STOP
Clockwise from top left, Adami Guesthouse owner Eva-Maria; the guesthouse; inside it’s totally hygge-fied





(Estonian parliament). He greets me in his office with a beastly handshake – the closest that I’ve come to a mauling since my arrival, thankfully.

“For us, the forest is like a cultural feeling, a symbol,” he says, stressing that figures suggesting there is more forest in Estonia now are misleading. “Estonians like to pick blueberries, cranberries, mushrooms – activities that were forbidden in the Soviet era.

“I live in a timber house,” he adds. “I love wooden furniture. So, I understand that you have to cut down trees. It’s about balance, though.”

The clock ticks. He needs to go, but is lost in a memory. “I used to go for night-time walks in the forest,” he recalls. “In the beginning, it’s very scary. Your ears are really keen. You think everything you hear is a wolf.” He laughs at himself, and stares into the space of his office as if it were the pitch black of Lahemaa at night. “But you get used to it. You open up new senses.”

It’s early evening as I leave the Riigikogu and walk into the cobbled Old Town. I stop and take a deep breath. The city smells like cars, people and big ideas. There’s everything you could possibly want here, but I know I’ll be drawn to Lahemaa again, as surely as bears poo in the woods.

Find out more about Estonia’s centenary celebrations at ev100.ee 

WALKIES

The dense forest is ripe for imaginings, so it’s no wonder there are a number of spirit elves in Estonian folklore. Pay no attention to that sprite calling your name....



THREE MORE WILDERNESS HOLIDAYS TO GET STUCK INTO

BOHEMIAN SWITZERLAND, CZECH REPUBLIC
Ceské Švýcarsko (or Czech Switzerland) is a national park north of Prague, with Swiss-style cottages, beautiful churches and towering mountains. It’s best known for its unique rock formations, including Pravická brána, the largest natural sandstone arch in Europe.
easyJet flies direct to Prague from four destinations.

BIAŁOWIEZA FOREST, POLAND
Straddling the border of Poland and Belarus, Białowieża Forest is home to around 800 European bison, Europe’s largest land animal, with a breeding centre to protect the beasts. Lucky visitors may also spot beavers, roe deer, wild boar, wolves, lynx, foxes and rare birds.
easyJet flies direct to Lublin from Milan Malpensa.

SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA, SPAIN
Spain’s often overlooked forests have some of the most diverse woodland in Europe, with the Iberian Peninsula home to around 8,000 species of plants. Once favoured by monks and hermits seeking solitude, Galicia’s forests are now a perfect getaway from frantic city life.
easyJet flies direct to Santiago de Compostela from London Gatwick and Milan Malpensa.

DESTINATION TALLINN

Stay three nights B&B at 4-star L’Ermitage, departing London Gatwick 17 April, from £215pp*.
easyJet.com/holidays

easyJet flies direct to Tallinn from 3 destinations