



Estonia – a modern history

Occupation and awakening

29 July–6 August 2026 (MM 120)

9 days

Speaker: Dr Paris Pin-Yu Chen

Picturesque towns and cities, an appealing mix of architectural styles; attractive landscapes of farmland, forest and sandy coastline.

Among the most successful, progressive and attractive countries on the Baltic shore.

Two nights on the little-visited island of Saaremaa, home to Gothic, Baroque and Classical architecture.

Estonia is a country whose beauty belies a long and complex history. For over seven centuries, it endured successive foreign dominations – Swedish, German, Russian and Soviet – before independence was finally restored in 1991, having been first gained and then lost between the two world wars. The material and historical legacy of these occupations, and the quest for self-determination and independence, are central themes of this tour.

Architecturally and culturally, Estonia offers remarkable variety. The Swedes established schools throughout the country and founded Tartu University in 1632, though their tangible legacy is most evident in Tartu and Kuressaare. More striking still are the remnants of the Baltic German presence – the surviving red-brick fortresses and ubiquitous manor houses, along with their furnishings and collections, reflect a legacy of wealth, power and cultivated taste. Following Peter the Great's conquest in 1710, Russian imperial policy upheld German landholding and political rights, further embedding their presence within Estonian society.

Since the mid-19th century, the Estonian national movement navigated carefully between the powerful Baltic German nobility and the Russification policies imposed by the Tsarist empire. The *Age of Awakening* refers to this period when language, folklore and song helped kindle a powerful sense of national consciousness – later instrumental in mobilising mass support for independence during the final years of Soviet occupation.

Meanwhile, the countryside and coast offered a form of quiet resistance as places of retreat and cultural continuity. Forests are a central to Estonian folklore and Estonians are experts in the use of wood. Their distinct skills and craftsmanship are particularly evident in the spa town of Pärnu, which flourished in the



Tallinn, view from Castle Hill, 20th-century etching.

1920s–30s, and on Saaremaa, the country's largest island, where wood was also the material of many of its early churches.

Today, Estonia is one of Europe's least populous countries, yet among its most dynamic. Estonians are their own masters now, and their eclectic tastes and diverse skills – as expressive in a piece of fabric, glass or juniper bark as in a skyscraper – can finally enjoy free rein. Meanwhile, the country's galleries, museums and concert halls offer a cultural variety that a country ten times the size would struggle to match.

Itinerary

Day 1: Tallinn. Fly mid-morning from London Heathrow via Helsinki to Tallinn (Finnair) for the first of three nights.

Day 2: Tallinn. Morning walk through the Lower Town, one of Europe's best-preserved medieval centres, to see the 13th-century Church of the Holy Ghost, and the Gothic Town Hall. In the afternoon, continue to the Upper Town and visit the Russian Orthodox Cathedral, the Lutheran Dome Church, once

the religious centre of the Baltic German community, and sections of the original city walls.

Day 3: Tallinn. Begin with the Occupation Museum, a sober chronicle of WWII and the Soviet era. Then to the massive Song Festival Grounds, so crucial for keeping alive Estonia's national consciousness in Soviet times and still a major choral centre. Continue to Kumu Art Gallery, a strikingly modern space housing 200 years of Estonian painting. Conclude the day at Maarjamäe Palace, reopened in 2018 to coincide with the centenary of the first Declaration of Independence; behind it is a collection of Soviet-era statues that were hurriedly removed from the streets in 1991.

Day 4: Tartu. Morning drive through a landscape of woodland and fertile fields to Tartu, Estonia's cultural capital. After lunch, visit the National Museum – opened in 2016, its ambitious new building provides an account of the country's political and cultural history over two millennia. First of two nights in Tartu.

Day 5: Tartu, Setomaa. Morning walk through the city's historic core includes the University

Estonia continued

of Tartu, founded in 1632. See the *aula* where students receive their degrees, and the lock-up where in the 19th century students could be confined for not returning library books. Many 18th- and 19th-century buildings in Tartu have survived: the Jaani Church (St John's), with its unique rows of terracotta sculptures, was restored soon after re-independence in 1991. Afternoon excursion to Setomaa, home to the Seto people, who maintain a distinct language and identity, a pagan-infused Orthodox culture, and a UNESCO-recognised singing tradition.

Day 6: Viljandi, Pärnu, Saaremaa Island. In Viljandi, visit the Paul Kondas Gallery which houses work by the artist created between the 1950s–80s – pieces that could not be exhibited during the Soviet regime due to their focus on Estonian identity. Continue to Pärnu, a spa town known for its functionalist buildings and its turn of the century flamboyance along the coast. Ferry to Muhu Island where many of the pleasures of rural Estonia remain: wooden cottages, windmills and wild seacoasts, then drive across a causeway to Saaremaa Island. First of two nights in Kuressaare.

Day 7: Saaremaa Island. Spend the morning in Kuressaare, the capital of Saaremaa Island, with its Swedish-era town houses and intact castle, the only one remaining in Estonia. It now houses the island museum and an extensive natural history collection. The afternoon is spent touring Saaremaa, visiting St Martin's in Valjala, possibly the oldest surviving church in Estonia, and Sõrve peninsula.

Day 8: Haapsalu, Tallinn. Return by ferry to the mainland and visit Haapsalu, a charming seaside town that flourished in the 19th century under imperial patronage. Tsars Nicholas I and Alexander II were frequent summer visitors, as was Tchaikovsky. The railway station, with appropriate elegance, dates from that time. Overnight Tallinn.

Day 9: Tallinn. Fly from Tallinn via Helsinki to London Heathrow, arriving in the afternoon.

Lecturer

Dr Paris Pin-Yu Chen. Historian specialising in modern Estonia and research fellow at the University of Birmingham. He holds degrees from the University of Tartu and University College London. His writings on the Baltic states have appeared in English, Estonian, and Traditional Chinese (Taiwan). He is currently working on an oral history of the post-socialist land reform in Estonia.

Practicalities

Included: travel by private coach throughout; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 2 lunches and 7 dinners with wine, water and coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer, tour manager and local guides.

Accommodation. Hotel Palace, Tallinn (radissonhotels.com): comfortable, 4-star hotel on the edge of the old town, reopened after a smart refurbishment. **Lydia Hotel, Tartu** (lydia.ee): modern, centrally located 4-star hotel with a good restaurant; decor is quite bright. **Georg Ots Spa Hotel, Kuressaare** (gospa.ee): plain but comfortable 4-star spa hotel on the waterfront. *Single occupancy rooms are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? There is a reasonable amount of walking each day and some long coach journeys. Outdoor terrain is good but there are a few steep slopes. Average distances by coach per day: 80 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.