



An Adventure in Estonia

Baltic bike vacation

DESTINATION
ESTONIA

story by **Ava Chisling**
photos by **Rein Lepik**



The Estonia countryside south of the capital Tallinn is safe and beautiful, with rolling farmlands, charming cafes and just-paved roads. So when my lifelong friend Steve, author of several Lonely Planet travel books on this region, encouraged me to leave my home base of Viljandi, Estonia and bicycle east to a lake called Võrtsjärv, it certainly sounded like an adventure. I just didn't yet know what kind.

Any trip to Estonia begins in Tallinn, an artsy, livable, historic city on the Baltic Sea. During the summer months, its Old Town is jam-packed with tourists who arrive by sea to shop, by air to drink, and by rail to party. There is no car traffic in the Old City, a World Heritage Site, so it's alley-wall to alley-wall packed with people looking for cheap beer and a coveted seat in the main square. Cycling on the cobblestone streets can be a tooth-rattling experience. There are some nice rides out of Tallinn, especially along the seafront, but the more serene riding is done in the countryside. So a two-hour trip south takes me to Viljandi, my home for the summer and the country's sixth largest city with 20,000 people.

There aren't many North American visitors to Viljandi. The arrival of a Canadian in town attracted the attention of local politicians and the media. After my 15 minutes of Estonian fame, I started to explore the area by bike. I spent a few weeks cycling in the local forest and along the paths around Viljandi Lake, located minutes from the centre of town. The Viljandi region dates back to the 13th century and has been controlled by Poland, Lithuania, Germany, Sweden and Russia. Its scenery is deceptive. On the one hand, there are flat roads lined with greenery like you find all across Canada, but then you come across ancient castle ruins or abandoned blasted-out Soviet-era buildings and you realize you're not in B.C. or Prince Edward Island.

Sitting in the backyard of the house I rented from Steve, he recommended I take a day-trip east to see another lake called Võrtsjärv. He bought me a map and pointed out the best place to leave the bike and jump in the lake. He spent a long time on this last point and when I asked him why one spot was better than the next spot, he told me to trust him. He was a Lonely Planet author, after all; he must



TOP
The city centre of Tartu, river Emajõgi, made from the top of the tower Pläsku

CENTRE
A new bicycle road close to Saku, North Estonia

ABOVE
Traffic signs close to Kallaste. The bicycle route network was created by Vänta Aga Cycling Club in 2001–2002.

Photos: Rein Lepik/www.bicycle.ee

OPPOSITE TOP
Start of Tartu Rattamarathon – a mountain bike race with 5,000 participants

OPPOSITE CENTRE
A rest area for bicycle tourists close to lake Pühajärv. Similar constructions all over Estonia are free to use.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
A border crossing to Latvia, just signs, no customs

know what he's talking about.

On a gorgeous sunny July morning, I packed my knapsack with all the things I would need for a countryside ride and off I went. Unlike many of my fellow bike enthusiasts, I am not the least bit fussy about what I ride. I own fancy road bikes, heavy folding bikes and junky winter bikes. I have cycled in more than 300 cities on five continents and have happily done so on kids' bikes, bikes with flats, brakeless bikes, rusty bikes, too-tall bikes and high-end bikes. For me, it is the adventure I love.

On this day, wearing typical summer gear and riding a generic mountain bike I headed out on Route 92 towards the city of Tartu. Giant bales of hay

dotted the farmland. Multi-coloured mailboxes interesting enough to stop for and little traffic made for the perfect ride. Since the same road would just about take me from here to there, the possibility of getting lost was not a distraction. Passing through Uusna and Tännassilma, there are long stretches of forest on both sides of the road where you are left alone with your bike and your smile. Roughly 25 km out of Viljandi, I turned right and headed towards Valma and the big lake of Võrtsjärv.

Estonia is located north enough to experience close to 24-hour sunlight in the summer. But that means it is also gets pretty cold in the winter, which explains why Võrtsjärv is covered with ice four months a year. When I arrived, I followed Steve's instructions, parked the bike and waded in, despite the chilly temperature. There were a lot of fishing boats on the lake, but I didn't see any other swimmers, which surprised me because it was a hot sunny day. The lake was shallow and I was able to swim quite far out without worrying I'd tire myself out. After an entirely relaxing hour in the water, half swimming, half lying about, I exited, changed behind a rusty old boat, and got back on the road.

The ride back was the same as the ride there, filled with sunshine and fresh air. Back in Viljandi, Steve couldn't wait to hear about my trip. He asked me three times if I'd gone swimming and when I finally told him I spent an hour lolling

In Viljandi, a set agenda is not necessary. There are terrific trails around Viljandi Lake and equally terrific rides in and out of town

about in the water, he laughed uncontrollably.

The reason for all this excitement over my swim in the middle of nowhere is that Steve neglected to tell me the better known name for lake Võrtsjärv is Eel Lake. And not just one or two eels, but tonnes and tonnes of eels. More than three quarters of all eel caught in Estonia, including the Baltic Sea, is caught in this one lake. And we are not talking about little petting zoo eels. These are huge, apparently, five foot-long eels. And they're everywhere. It was exactly then that my heart stopped. I had floated in that lake like giant eel chum for more than an hour. Alone. Unaware. I wondered if I still had a pulse.



A typical small road in South Estonia, almost no car traffic, slightly hilly

FURTHER INFO

lonelyplanet.com/estonia

General travel advice

balticcycle.eu

Information on cycling in the Baltic States

ecf.com

Home page of the European Cycling Federation



Details

How to Get There

The best way to experience Estonia is to combine it with at least one other country. You can fly from London, England to Tallinn for about \$350 return. However, it is more fun to take an overnight train from Saint-Petersburg, Russia, a speedy hydrofoil from Helsinki, Finland or a posh cruise from Stockholm, Sweden. If you are not so adventurous, most of the major European airlines fly into Tallinn from their hub cities. In the summer, buses head back and forth between Tallinn and Viljandi as often as 20 times a day. However, if you arrive during the Viljandi Music Festival, held the third week in July, you may have trouble finding a spot on the bus or a room at a hotel.

Where to Stay

In Tallinn, if you stay in the Old Town, the action is right at your door, but so is the late-night partying. The Telegraaf Hotel (telegraafhotel.com) is in the Old Town, the Swissotel (swissotel.com) is just outside. Uniquestay has three hotels in Tallinn (uniquestay.com). I have also used several Tallinn rental agencies to rent a furnished apartment. In Viljandi, the four-star Grand Hotel, is well, the grandest (ghv.ee), but most hotels here are of good basic quality. The price of the rooms will dictate what you find inside.



Now I don't know much about eels except that a leisurely swim in Eel Lake was not on my must-do before I die list. Getting revenge on Steve for sending me there, yes, but not eel swimming. And now that it is done, I can honestly say that thinking about that swim continues to give me the creeps. And that feeling is only offset by my 50 km bike ride and the comforting notion that life is always better (and safer) on dry land.

Ava Chisling (avachisling.com) is an award-winning writer and editor who has bicycled in hundreds of cities worldwide and now only swims in familiar swimming pools. Ava is also a media lawyer.



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Where to Eat

Anywhere within the Old City walls is going to be expensive. If you're on a budget, venture outside and take your pick. You will find Indian, Russian or Italian food and even good old British pub fare. Try Korsaar for excellent pricey meals, the Balthasar for a whole lot of garlic or Aed for something more organic. In Viljandi, the best restaurants are also in the best hotels. Otherwise, there are small restaurants along the main street where you can order the regular fare: chicken or fish.

What To Do

The Old Town is a nightmare to navigate on wheels so it is best explored on foot. To rent a bike, contact City Bike, at mail@citybike.ee. They offer city tours, which are worth taking to get your bearings. Afterwards, explore the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, a Russian Orthodox Church that will take your breath away, the Town Hall because everyone hangs out at the Town Hall Square, Toompea Castle, the central market. Bike to one of the city's five beaches, the farther out the better, so you can get a sense of the real Tallinn, one that was not so long ago part of the Soviet empire. And to experience Tallinn's present, head to the large American-style shopping mall near the airport, Ülemiste Center.

In Viljandi, a set agenda is not necessary. There are terrific trails around Viljandi Lake and equally terrific rides in and out of town. Aside from biking, there is a great beach by the lake, castle ruins to visit, concerts in the park, and long midnight-sun walks to enjoy. ☺

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