

ESTONIA NOW

Political change makes it more, not less appealing

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TALLINN, Estonia

The six o'clock news may have discouraged a lot of Canadians from visiting Estonia this year or next, but for spirited travellers, now would be the perfect time to visit the country.

Tallinn, Estonia's capital, is the city where most of the political re-awakening has occurred, but don't expect to see rows of Soviet army officers controlling the streets. There are very few signs of political instability here—apart from

the odd group that demonstrates quietly in front of the Estonian parliament.

In short, the tourist will find Tallinn a safe and surprisingly friendly place to visit—one that appears to function more efficiently compared to other Soviet cities.

The city of half a million is small; you can walk through it in about four hours. The streets are clean and constantly full of pedestrians, very much like a western European town, but when you look closely at window displays or go inside grocery stores, you'll

realize this is a Soviet-run town—where the stores are just as bare and crowded as those in Moscow.

Hotels

There are only a few hotels that are worth paying for in Tallinn, and tourist officials admit this themselves. The only western four-star hotel, is the Palace Hotel which caters to business people. Tourists have the option of staying at the three-star Viru or Olympia hotels downtown. The Rataskaevu doesn't get a star rating

and it's listed as being "suitable for government guests."

The Sport Hotel is near the sea and is popular with "sportsmen." The Tallinn Hotel, says our guide, is a shabby place—even for Soviets. The Kungla is listed as "an unpretentious tourist hotel."

If you're booking Tallinn, play it safe and stay with the star-rated hotels. If you can afford the Palace Hotel, stay there.

Tallinn is looking for foreign investment to build a tourism infrastructure, but so far only a handful of Finnish companies



A Ukrainian Orthodox cathedral in Tallinn

have come through with hard capital to restore some hotels. Tallinn now has less than 1,000 hotel rooms and not all of them meet western standards. Intourist, with some possible financial assistance from foreign sources, plans to build a second four-star hotel next year.

Last year, about 20,000 visitors came to Tallinn, mostly from neighboring Finland. About 2,500 were Canadian ethnic and business travellers.

Roughly 60,000 Estonians live in Canada.

Finnair offers three weekly flights from Helsinki to Tallinn, and SAS flies to Tallinn from Stockholm twice a week. Tallinn can also be reached by ferry from the two Scandinavian capitals.

Package trips to Estonia are available only through Intourist.

Culture

Estonia's cultural life is far removed from Russia's, but the two countries share a common love for local theatre, cinema and the bars.

Tallinn alone has 17 museums, six theatres, 10 art galleries and 30 cafes and bars.

The major tourist attraction is the Song Festival that's held every four years. This year the festival is expected to attract more than 100,000 people from all over Estonia and Finland. Estonian folk groups from Canada will also participate.

Apart from the few special events, there's not much nightlife in Tallinn. You really have to look for it at the downtown bars.

If you're hungry, the best place for a great meal is the Submonte restaurant. An appetizer, pork steak with rice, wine, coffee and excellent ice cream costs only an astounding \$1.50.



A group demonstrates quietly in front of parliament. Note the English signs

SOVIET SNIPPETS

Across the U.S.S.R.

Intours is again offering a 29-day train ride across the Soviet Union on the Trans-Siberian Express. The trip, which costs \$299, includes visits in Moscow, Leningrad, three Siberian towns, Yalta and Bukhara.

Intours also has several spa packages in Russia for \$5,399, and six- and seven-night cruises down the Volga River.

Trendy tour

Globus Gateway has a perestroika tour of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The 24-day itinerary focuses on the Baltic Republics, Russia and the Ukraine as well as major capitals of Eastern Europe.

Thirteen days are spent in the U.S.S.R. This package is available until Oct. 11. Tour price is \$2,769.

Bike in the U.S.S.R.

Aventures Mondiales in Montreal has individual and group tours to the U.S.S.R. The packages include a variety of biking and trekking itineraries, that will be accompanied in part by members of local cycling and recreational clubs. There are visits to Star City—the Cape Canaveral of the Soviet Union, art appreciation and language courses, sailing and horseback riding around Lake Baikal and camel caravans.



A smoke break