



Padaste Manor House, a small luxurious hotel on Muhu Island

## Discovering Muhu Island, Estonia

By Cindy Ross

The ancient mossy walls surround the fishing village of Koguva like long sheltering arms, as if to keep safe the history and the stories of its people. To learn them, a visitor must leave the dirt roads that follow the walls and enter into the fisherman's life. This old fishing settlement sits on the island of Muhu in the Baltic Sea. Although only a few miles off the coast of Estonia, it is a world apart.

It is nicknamed "Bumpy Island" for it is "only a bump in the sea" but really, it is a magical place. ([www.muhu.info](http://www.muhu.info)) Most visitors bypass this small island on their way to the much larger and busier Saaremaa Island. This is both a blessing and a disadvantage...a disadvantage for the masses that miss this jewel, a blessing for those who bother to discover it.

The country of Estonia itself is an undiscovered destination. Nestled between Russia to the north, Latvia to the south and Finland across the Baltic Sea, Estonia is a rare mix of gorgeous intact medieval towns and culture. Yet these progressive people are responsible for bringing us Skype, the world famous free internet telephone service and everywhere, wireless internet is available. Even on buses, trains and the island of Muhu!

### MUHU EXPERIENCE

A fast ferry departs Virtsu port every half hour for Muhu. Koguva sits on the west coast. The entire village is closed to motorized vehicles and is an open air museum. All 100 buildings are architectural landmarks, some dating back to the 14th century, and house the twenty full-time inhabitants. The old log homes are topped with dried water reed roofs

carpeted in moss. Traditional windmills in full working order spin in the wind. Draw wells with poles still bring up sweet water. Dead wooden boats are turned upside down and laid to rest on the mossy stone walls, a way to continue to pay homage to this valuable village icon.

We visit the village museum and the boat building workshop. A deeply lined fisherman comes with his little granddaughter tightly holding his hand, to tell us stories (through an interpreter) of life on the island and out at sea. In the tiny museum, we buy small jugs of juniper syrup, extracted from the berries of Estonia's national tree.

Our evening accommodations are at the southern tip of the island is the beautifully restored **Padaste Manor house**, ([www.padaste.ee](http://www.padaste.ee)) a luxurious small hotel, spa and Alexander Restaurant, which has received international acclaim. Nordic Island cuisine is featured here winning it "Best Restaurant in Estonia" for 2010, 2011 and 2012.

The gaily painted manor house stand stately amongst an open grove of huge trees in a 7 hectare landscaped park. Crunchy gravel paths lead to the estate's buildings. Rooms are decorated with textiles made by the local woman whose embroidery skills are exquisite. A cruiser bicycle with a basket sits parked by my room - enticing me to ride the sandy road to the tiny local harbor. Here I find great ice slabs bunched up and binding the shore, making the fishermen wait to get back out to their beloved sea. The clearest water in all the Baltic Sea surrounds Muhu.

### RIDING AND RELAXATION

The hotel arranges a horseback and bug-

gy ride with nearby Tihuse Horse Farm ([www.tihuse.ee](http://www.tihuse.ee)). Martin Kivisoo breeds these sturdy native horses (a tad bigger than a pony) which have recently been rescued from extinction. The Kivisoos raise and care for 300 horses and ship them to Finland, where they're used in their riding schools. We trot past quiet homes where long skirted island women hang up baskets of billowing fresh-cleaned laundry and a red foxes lope through passing fields. We ride through thickly forested land, where hundreds of ancient stone circles still exist - graveyards where grain offerings were once made and "big energy" can be found.

"When the Germans overtook Estonia back in the 13th century, our spiritual life went underground, but it is very much alive today," shares Kivisoo. Many locals have a strong nature-based spiritual life.

To relax before dinner, I head for the spa and wood-burning sauna. Bottles of honey and granular salt sit on a wide windowsill. We rub these onto our glowing soaked bodies, then plunge into the Siberian wooden tub of icy water on the terrace. I let out a scream when my sweaty body submerges in the continuously fed well water. The spa attendant races to my "assistance" and laughs when he sees that I am just expressing joy. Towel tucked around my middle, leaning back on the wooden deck chair, watching the evening sky glow peach and listening to the seagull songs on the sea, great peace surrounds me. They say Muhu means "island where time rests" and I can personally attest to that.

For more information about Estonia, go to [www.visitestonia.com](http://www.visitestonia.com)