

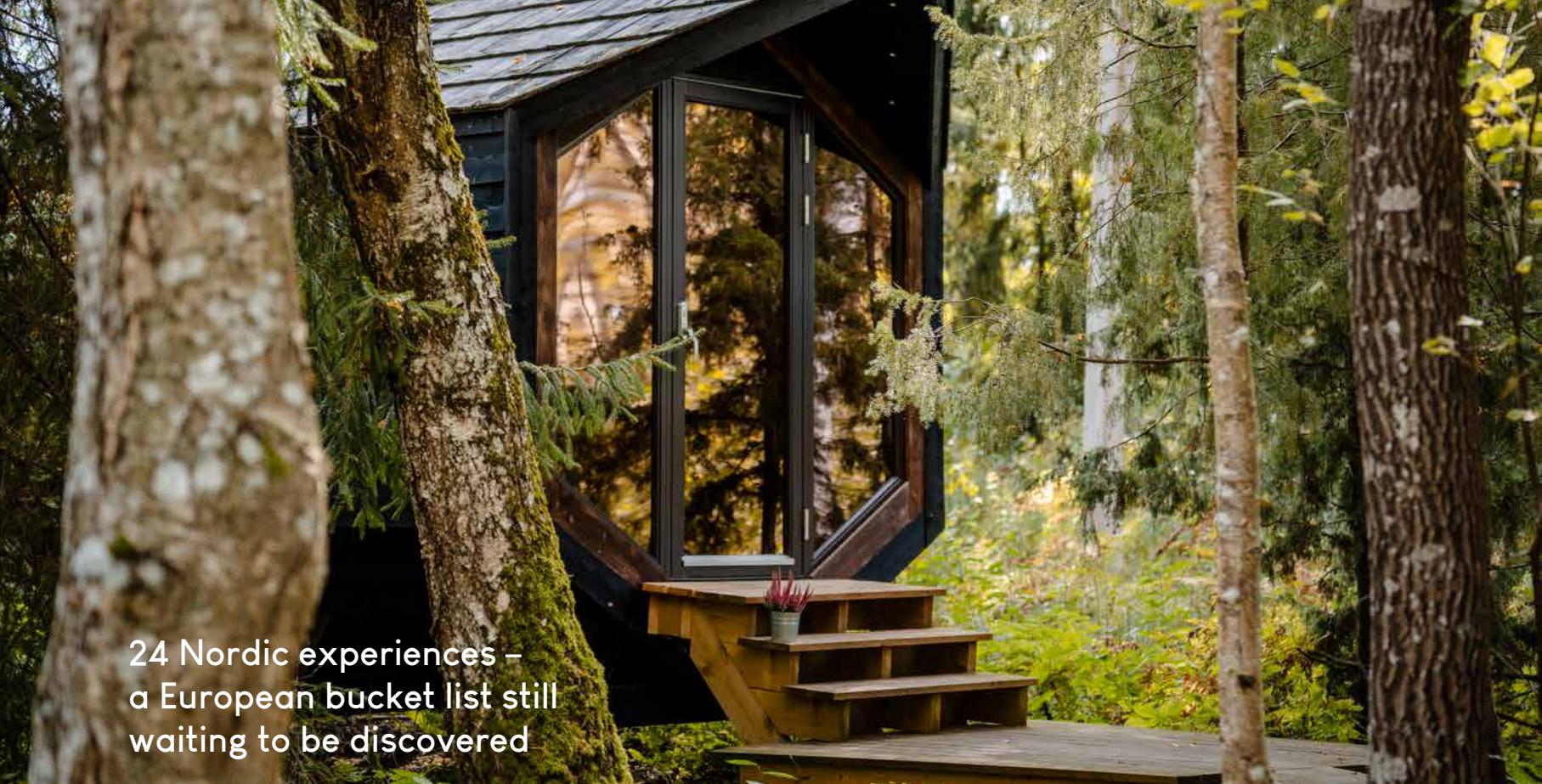


South
Estonia

EUROPE'S
BUCKET LIST.
STILL
UNDISCOVERED.

South Estonia:
One land. Four cultures.

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24 Nordic experiences – a European bucket list still waiting to be discovered

If Iceland speaks of raw nature and the Faroe Islands of isolation, South Estonia speaks of several worlds at once. In a surprisingly compact region, Estonians, Setos, Võros and Old Believers live side by side, each with their own songs, rituals, and ways of finding the sacred in the everyday. These are not museum pieces. They are living, breathing worlds.

This booklet takes you on a journey through four distinct Nordic cultural landscapes without crossing a single border. Discover 24 unforgettable experiences you can offer your clients who value nature, culture, and the art of slow travel.

Estonia may be known as a digital trailblazer, but South Estonia reveals the country's deeper cultural heart. Here, modern life hums alongside a remarkable heritage in one of Europe's most sparsely populated regions. Forests, lakes, and centuries-old traditions endure, yet fast internet and modern infrastructure reach almost everywhere.

South Estonia is easy to reach. Tallinn and Riga airports are just under three hours away, while Tartu Airport offers direct flights to Helsinki. Perfect as a standalone destination, South Estonia also makes a natural extension to a visit to Tallinn, Riga or Helsinki.



ESTONIAN STORIES

The Bog: a landscape that shaped its people

The experience

Perfect for active nature lovers who treasure experiences shaped by movement, stillness, and gradual discovery. This silence is part of the Estonian identity. Nordic luxury.

Sunrise over a bog lake is a moment to experience at least once in a lifetime. Around 14% of South Estonia is covered by mires and bogs, creating a landscape unlike any other. It feels like stepping into a place that exists perfectly without people. And yet, our ancestors have always walked these landscapes. A bog could once offer the shortest route to a village celebration or provide refuge from invaders. The bog teaches slowness. When the ground is soft, you move more carefully. And you notice more.



Europe's darkest lakes

South Estonia is home to hundreds of lakes. Some are said to have the darkest waters in Europe, absorbing light and colour alike. One person sees Coca-Cola, another Guinness. Swimming in such waters is unforgettable, especially on a bright midsummer night when the sun never sets. For those who love contrasts, head to Mustjärv and Valgjärv, lying just a few hundred metres apart. True to their names, Mustjärv is among the darkest lakes in Estonia, while Valgjärv lives up to its “white lake” reputation as one of the clearest.

Kooraste Lake District: eleven lakes, one quiet passage

The Kooraste Lake District is one of Europe's rarest connected networks of small lakes. Think of it as a Nordic soundscape: eleven serene lakes linked by narrow, natural waterways. They allow you to move by SUP board or canoe at an unhurried pace, in rhythm with the breathing of northern nature. Each lake has its own character. This is not an adventure. It is sustained calm, lasting throughout the journey and beyond.



Võhandu: the river that connects people

The Võhandu River was once considered a sacred, spirited being, where even thunder was said to dwell. Today, its slow-flowing waters offer calm stretches and modest rapids, formed decades ago at the sites of former watermills. Once, these waters ground grain, powered machines, and brought villages together. Now the Võhandu hosts Europe's biggest paddling marathon by number of participants. Every spring, after the snowmelt, thousands of paddlers set out on a 100 km journey ending in Lake Peipus, Europe's fourth-largest lake.



Taevaskoda: a sacred place not built by humans

Taevaskoda resembles a natural cathedral, yet no stones were ever laid here by human hands. Nature itself is the sanctuary. These towering sandstone walls rise tens of metres high, their layered surfaces etched with stories of time and belief. To our ancestors, the sacred was found not in churches, but in rivers, springs, and caves. Rituals were performed here, and during times of war, the valley offered refuge. Today, this ancient river landscape invites quiet movement – by kayak, on foot, by bicycle, or even by kick sledge in winter.



Berries and mushrooms: from forest to plate

In our forests, gathering is as natural as breathing. Long before states, borders, or ownership existed, the forest was a shared space. We gather because nature's gifts belong to everyone. You simply pick berries and mushrooms, enriching your table just as people have done for centuries and still do today. If the season allows, we can even prepare a meal together using ingredients foraged from the forest that very day.



Campfire sites: Nordic trust, rare in Europe

South Estonia is home to around a hundred free, publicly accessible campfire sites. For centuries, the campfire has been a place to meet, share stories, and connect, and here that tradition lives on. This is trust culture at its purest. The state builds the sites, people use them, and everyone helps keep them in good order. Come, sit by the fire. Add a picnic that tastes of the region itself with local food and drink, the warmth of woodsmoke, and the quiet of the forest.



Emajõe-Suursoo: silence on the scale of a capital city

Our region is home to twelve nature reserves and twenty-five protected landscapes, including the vast Emajõe-Suursoo Landscape Reserve. Roughly the size of Tallinn, this great bog landscape is largely untouched by people. In the past, it could only be reached by boat in summer or by sledge across the ice in winter. Here, humans are guests. On snowshoes, by canoe, or guided on foot, you move through vast emptiness. This profound silence is part of the Estonian identity and the essence of Nordic luxury.



SETO STORIES

Setos: An indigenous Finnic people of the borderlands between Estonia and Russia, known for their unique language, culture, and centuries-old leelo singing.

Seto leelo: a thousand years in song

The experience

Perfect for culturally curious and conscious travellers seeking authentic community experiences, living heritage, and genuine human connection.

When the Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066, leelo was already echoing in Setomaa. This traditional polyphonic singing, inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list, is more than music. It is a vocal culture that has endured for a millennium. Across Europe, many ancient song traditions have moved into museums, but Seto leelo remains alive, sung by women at religious festivals, communal work gatherings, and village celebrations, just as their mothers and grandmothers once did.



Seto attire: heritage you can try on

The Seto traditional dress is a social code. To those who know it, no explanation is needed. The large brooches and patterns carry information about marital status, social position, and cultural belonging. If you wish to step into this tradition, we dress you the Seto way, layer by layer and symbol by symbol. This is not a performance. It is an encounter with a culture that has been carried across generations.



Tsässon: sacredness smaller than a room

Tsässons are small wooden village chapels, modest in appearance yet symbolically vast. To put it in perspective, more than 200 tsässons would fit into the floor area of Westminster Abbey. In Notre-Dame de Paris, the number would be even higher. While sacredness in Europe is often expressed through monumentality, for the Seto it is found in closeness and simplicity.



Fortified farmsteads: architecture shaped by life on the border

The Seto have always lived at the edge of cultural worlds. This was not an abstract idea but a daily reality. As a result, local farmsteads evolved into enclosed fortified compounds, with buildings arranged in a circle and inner courtyards closed off to protect families from raiders, wild animals, and unsettled times. This is rural architecture born of necessity, and that is precisely what makes it exceptional today.



Photo: Sven Žacek

Flavours that tell a story: sõir, karask and handsa

Seto food culture is another tradition carefully kept alive. Sõir cheese, karask bread, smoked meats, and home baking are all part of the local identity. Then there is handsa, a strong rye spirit and the Seto version of rye brandy. Historically distilled in secrecy, today, handsa is a cultural souvenir of a special kind. You can taste it, but you cannot buy it in a shop.

VÕRO STORIES

Võros: A Finnic people of South Estonia's hilly heartland, known for their distinct Võro language, rich folk traditions, and vibrant local culture.

The experience

Perfect for slow travellers who value rituals, heritage landscapes, and a UNESCO-recognised way of life.

**Smoke sauna:
a cleansing Nordic ritual**

The Võromaa smoke sauna is recognised by UNESCO as part of the world's intangible cultural heritage. Fire, smoke, and water are its three guiding elements. The sauna is dark, warm, and unhurried. Light enters through a narrow doorway, scent rises from the hearth, and cleansing happens from within. Here, it is not a performance. It is simply life as it is lived.



Karula National Park: the beauty of Nordic landscapes

Karula is Estonia's smallest national park, a hilly, human-scale landscape of rounded hills, small farmsteads, traditional meadows, and clear lakes. Large forests, ancient sites, and a rich local heritage with the Võru dialect add layers of history and culture. Nights here are dark and crisp, with virtually no light pollution. On clear evenings, the Milky Way is visible to the naked eye.



Ilumetsa meteorite craters: where a star once fell

Hidden among the forests of Võrumaa are landforms that seem almost extraterrestrial. The Ilumetsa meteorite craters were formed around 6,600 years ago when a cosmic body struck the Earth, leaving deep impact craters. The largest, Põrguhaud, or "Hell's Pit," is about 80 metres wide and more than 12 metres deep. Remarkably, Estonia holds a global record, with the highest number of meteorite craters per square kilometre anywhere in the world.



Photo: Sven Začek

Tamme-Lauri Oak: a living cathedral

The Tamme-Lauri Oak is older than most British cathedrals, making it one of the thickest and oldest oak trees in Northern Europe. Its trunk measures 8.5 metres in circumference, and it is believed to have started growing in 1326. Estonians and the Võro people considered the oak sacred, believing that Laurits, the fire god, lived within the tree as a guardian of light and strength.



Västseliina: a Nordic pilgrimage route

A fortress stood in Västseliina even before Christianity reached the region. But on one September night in 1353, it became a place of pan-European significance. Music filled an empty castle chapel, the space glowed with an unusual light in the darkness, and a cross appeared above the altar with no visible support. Pope Innocent VI declared the event a miracle, and pilgrims began arriving from across Europe. This was a Nordic Camino: quieter, slower, and more inward-looking.



Photo: Sven Začek

Piusa Sand Caves: a silent underground world

The Piusa caves are a subterranean world of hand-carved sandstone passages and home to the largest wintering colony of bats in the Baltics. Layers of history from former glass-sand mining have settled into silence. A new virtual 3D model allows visitors to explore this underground world without disturbing the bats. It is a place where history and protected species coexist beneath the surface.

Europe's Organic Region: purity without slogans

Võrumaa was named Europe's Organic Region of the Year 2025. The award reflects a regional agreement that at least 20% of food served in schools and kindergartens must be organic. Here, clean food and pristine landscapes go hand in hand. This is not a slogan but a shared commitment.



OLD BELIEVERS' STORIES

Old Believers: A Russian Orthodox community along Lake Peipus, known for preserving centuries-old faith, villages, and traditional ways of life.

The experience

Perfect for visitors seeking a rare European cultural landscape, where living traditions have been shaped by water, time, and continuity.

Onions and smoked bream: lake flavours that need no kitchen

The flavours of Lake Peipus, Europe's fourth-largest lake, come straight from the fisherman and the onion bed. Freshly caught bream is still salted and smoked exactly as it was a hundred or even two hundred years ago. Onions grow on unusually high raised beds, a practice born of lakeside wisdom to keep crops above excess moisture. Today, the Onion Route offers a chance to experience this living food tradition, with smoked bream, onion pies, braided onion strings for winter storage, and the distinctive raised beds passed down through generations.



The rhythm of villages: a way of life shaped by water

Old Believers built their villages following the lake, not the land. Houses stand in a line, with long, narrow plots stretching down to the water. This form of settlement is rare in Europe, a waterside “street village” where every yard ends at the lake. Hundreds of boat canals were dug by hand in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their purpose was practical: to protect boats, the primary livelihood, from changing water levels and to ensure direct access to fishing grounds. These shovel-dug channels fed families and connected villages to the lake.



Karakat: a self-built vehicle for travelling on ice

In winter, Lake Peipus becomes a road. This is not a metaphor. In Estonia, travelling on ice is part of the official transport culture. Along the west coast, Europe's longest formal ice roads open in cold winters – the longest stretching up to 28 kilometres. Further inland, along the shores of Peipus, life moves differently. Fishermen head onto the ice in karakats, homemade, unsinkable ice vehicles. A karakat is engineering in its simplest form, with an engine from an old car, tractor wheels, and a design built for survival. It moves safely across the ice, turning frozen water into a route to work and back home. Here, ice is not an obstacle. It is the fisherman's road, an experience that requires courage.



The Samovar Tea: copper, fire and time

Old Believers' tea culture is centuries old. Heating the samovar is a slow process, one that brings people together and softens conversation. It is also a deliberate pause. Tea is never made for just two or three people; friends are always invited. Locals say the samovar is like the lady of the house: gleaming, warm, and welcoming.





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