



For a city that feels like a fairy tale but is also modern and lively, Tallinn has plenty to offer. The Estonian capital is compact, charming, and easy to explore on foot. Ask locals how much time you should spend in Tallinn and you'll hear: "As much as you can." The Old Town alone can fill days with its cobbled lanes, medieval towers, and hidden courtyards. Beyond that, the city mixes Nordic modernity with Baltic history, offering visitors a rich and varied experience. As well as offering plenty to explore during your free time, many of the places below may also provide useful starting points for research, visits, or fieldwork connected with your ILEx Project. Some of the must-see attractions in Tallinn include:

- 1) **Tallinn Old Town (Vanalinn):** A UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the best-preserved medieval towns in Europe. The winding streets, stone walls, and merchant houses transport you back in time. Be sure to walk along the Town Wall, peek into St. Catherine's Passage, and take in the atmosphere at Town Hall Square (Raekoja plats), where cafés spill onto the cobblestones in summer. Don't miss climbing one of the church towers, such as St. Olaf's, for panoramic views. The Old Town feels especially magical at Christmas, when the market lights up the square.
 
- 2) **Alexander Nevsky Cathedral:** Perched on Toompea Hill, this grand Russian Orthodox cathedral with its onion domes is one of the most photographed buildings in the city. Built during the Tsarist era, it is richly decorated inside and serves as a reminder of Estonia's layered history. The sound of the cathedral bells can often be heard across the Old Town, adding to the atmosphere. Although controversial for some locals, it remains a striking and important part of Tallinn's skyline.
 
- 3) **Toompea Castle and Parliament:** Right across from the cathedral is Toompea Castle, today home to the Estonian Parliament. The pink façade and Baroque design contrast beautifully with the medieval fortifications around it. From Toompea Hill you can also find the city's best viewpoints, such as Kohtuotsa and Patkuli, where red rooftops meet the sea. Visiting at sunset is particularly rewarding, as the golden light spreads across the city and the Gulf of Finland.
 

beyond. The castle grounds themselves are best appreciated from the outside, but the hill as a whole is unmissable.

- 4) **Kumu Art Museum:** Estonia's largest and most impressive art museum, located in Kadriorg Park. The sleek glass-and-stone building houses both classical and contemporary Estonian art, with exhibitions that often connect local themes to international trends. It's a good way to learn how Estonia's culture has evolved, from its rural traditions to its modern independence. Even if you're not a big museum-goer, the building's striking design and peaceful location make it worth a visit.

- 5) **Kadriorg Palace and Park:** Commissioned by Peter the Great for his wife Catherine, this baroque palace and its surrounding gardens are perfect for a leisurely stroll. The palace itself hosts the Kadriorg Art Museum, featuring European art from the 16th to 20th centuries. The landscaped park, dotted with fountains, swan ponds, and flowerbeds, is one of Tallinn's most romantic spots. In summer, it's a popular escape for locals who want a picnic or a walk under shady trees.



- 6) **Telliskivi Creative City:** A transformed industrial district just outside the Old Town, Telliskivi is now a hub of cafés, art studios, design shops, and street art. The area hosts markets, concerts, and creative festivals, and is a great spot to get a feel for Tallinn's youthful energy. Every corner has something quirky, from murals to pop-up food stalls. It's a good place to spend an evening, with plenty of bars and live music venues.

- 7) **Seaplane Harbour Museum (Lennusadam):** An impressive maritime museum located in a historic seaplane hangar. Exhibits include a real submarine, icebreakers, seaplanes, and interactive displays. It's great for families and anyone curious about Estonia's naval history. The hangar itself is an architectural marvel, built in the early 20th century and one of the first concrete shell structures of its kind. Kids love the hands-on exhibits, while history buffs can spend hours exploring.



- 8) **Noblessner:** Once a major submarine shipyard established during the Russian Imperial period, Noblessner has been transformed into one of Tallinn's most attractive waterfront districts. Its former industrial buildings now house restaurants, cafés, galleries and cultural venues, while the marina and seaside promenade make it a popular place for a walk or an evening out. The area is an interesting example of how Tallinn has transformed its industrial past into part of the modern city.
- 9) **Pirita and the Seaside:** Just a short bus ride from the center, Pirita is where locals go for the beach. The area offers a wide sandy stretch, the ruins of a medieval convent, and a marina built for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. In summer, it's one of the best places to relax, swim, or enjoy a seaside walk. The nearby forest paths are also popular with joggers and cyclists. For a perfect day trip, combine a morning in the Old Town with an afternoon by the sea.

- 10) **Balti Jaam Market:** This modern, multi-level market combines fresh produce stalls with street food kitchens, vintage clothing shops, and local design boutiques. It's a lively place to grab lunch or shop for souvenirs beyond the usual tourist offerings. Locals come here for everyday groceries, so it's also a window into Tallinn life beyond the Old Town. The food court upstairs is especially popular, with everything from Georgian khachapuri to Estonian street food.



- 11) **Tallinn TV Tower:** Standing 314 metres tall, this Soviet-era tower features a modern observation deck with sweeping views over Tallinn and the Baltic Sea. On exceptionally clear days, it is even possible to see the Finnish coast. For the adventurous, the tower also offers an outdoor "Walk on the Edge" experience. A café and restaurant at the top provide a scenic place to stop while enjoying the panorama.

For those with an interest in Estonia's Soviet past, Tallinn offers several powerful and sometimes sobering places to visit. These sites, ranging from former prisons to secret surveillance rooms, provide a stark reminder of life under occupation and the resilience of the Estonian people. These can be sobering places to visit, but they add an important layer of understanding to the city beyond its medieval streets and modern skyline.

- 12) **Vabamu – Museum of Occupations and Freedom:** This museum tells the story of Estonia's turbulent 20th-century history under Soviet and Nazi rule, and its eventual road back to independence. The permanent exhibition, Freedom Without Borders, uses interactive displays, personal testimonies, and artifacts to explore themes of repression, survival, and resilience. It's not only a history lesson but also a powerful reminder of the importance of freedom. A visit here gives essential context for understanding Estonia today.



- 13) **KGB Prison Cells (Pagari Street):** Hidden in the basement of a residential building at Pagari 1, these cells were once used by the NKVD and later the KGB to interrogate and hold prisoners during the Soviet period. Visitors can step into solitary confinement cells and see the narrow corridors where many endured harsh treatment. The exhibition Locked Up Stories: The KGB in Estonia makes for a sobering but unforgettable experience, bringing history into sharp focus right in the heart of the Old Town.

- 14) **Patarei Prison (Sea Fortress):** Originally built as a 19th-century coastal fortress, Patarei later became one of Estonia's most notorious prisons and was used during both the Soviet and Nazi occupations. Today, part of the former prison is open to visitors as the exhibition Communism is Prison, which explores political persecution, imprisonment, and life under totalitarian rule. Its stark cells, corridors, and prison yards offer a sobering insight into the experiences of those held there and the human consequences of Estonia's turbulent 20th-century history.



- 15) **KGB “Secret Room” at Hotel Viru:** During Soviet times, the Viru Hotel — Tallinn’s first high-rise built for foreign visitors — was heavily monitored by the KGB. Today, visitors can take a guided tour to the once-hidden “Secret Room,” where listening equipment and surveillance gear were used to monitor guests. The tour offers a mix of dark humor and unsettling insight into the surveillance culture of the Soviet era. It’s a fascinating glimpse of how everyday life was quietly watched and controlled.
- 16) **Maarjamäe Palace and Memorial Complex:** On Tallinn’s seafront, Maarjamäe Palace hosts part of the Estonian History Museum, and the grounds outside display Soviet statues removed from public spaces after independence. The surrounding memorial complex also commemorates those lost to political repression. The contrast between the sunny seaside location and the weight of history makes it a moving place to reflect on Estonia’s Soviet past.
- 17) **Rocca al Mare Open-Air Museum:** Located on the edge of the city, this large park showcases traditional Estonian village life. Historic farmhouses, windmills, and chapels have been relocated here from across the country. It’s like stepping back into rural Estonia of centuries past, with demonstrations of crafts and folk traditions. The setting by the sea makes it even more picturesque.

Environs of Tallinn

- 18) **Lahemaa National Park:** About an hour’s drive from Tallinn, this is Estonia’s largest national park, known for its forests, bogs, and rugged coastline. Visitors can explore wooden boardwalk trails across wetlands, visit restored manor houses like Palmse and Sagadi, and discover fishing villages along the Gulf of Finland. It’s one of the best ways to experience Estonia’s natural beauty in a single day.



- 19) **Viimsi Peninsula:** Just northeast of Tallinn, this coastal area is popular for its seaside trails, small harbors, and views across Tallinn Bay. There are also spas and seaside cafés, making it a good half-day escape from the city.

Other Cities in Estonia

- 20) **Tartu:** Estonia’s second-largest city and intellectual hub, Tartu is home to the country’s oldest university, founded in 1632. The compact Old Town features neoclassical buildings, cozy cafés, and riverside walks along the Emajõgi River. Tartu also has a youthful vibe, thanks to its student population, and plenty of quirky museums, including the Estonian National Museum, which blends tradition with cutting-edge design.



- 21) **Narva:** On the border with Russia, Narva offers a very different experience. The city’s highlight is Hermann Castle, which faces the Russian fortress of Ivangorod across the Narva River. The border location gives Narva a unique cultural flavor, and a visit here provides insight into Estonia’s complex history. The riverfront setting is striking, especially at sunset when the two fortresses are lit up.

Weekend or Reading Week Trips

22) **Riga, Latvia:** Around four to five hours away by direct bus, Riga is a larger, more cosmopolitan Baltic capital. Known for its Art Nouveau architecture, wide boulevards, and buzzing nightlife, Riga makes an excellent weekend trip from Tallinn. The Old Town, with its spires and squares, is full of character, and the Central Market — housed in former Zeppelin hangars — is one of the largest in Europe.



23) **Helsinki, Finland:** Only two hours by ferry across the Gulf of Finland, Helsinki is an easy and popular escape. The Finnish capital blends sleek Nordic design with quirky attractions like the Rock Church, as well as seaside saunas and markets. Many people make it a day trip, but staying overnight allows you to experience the city's nightlife and explore more of its museums and parks.

24) **Stockholm, Sweden:** Easily reached from Tallinn by air, Stockholm makes an excellent destination for a weekend or Reading Week trip. Built across a series of islands, the Swedish capital combines an attractive waterfront setting with historic neighbourhoods and modern Scandinavian design. The cobbled streets of Gamla Stan lead to the Royal Palace and medieval churches, while highlights elsewhere include the remarkable Vasa Museum, the open-air Skansen museum, and the lively Södermalm district. With its museums, cafés, shops, and extensive waterfront, Stockholm offers plenty to explore over two or three days

