

# Come and See

## NATURE

### A sea climate with surface vegetation held in check

The Estonian **climate** resembles that of other countries on the Baltic littoral. On account of the country's proximity to the sea, the skies are often cloudy, and rain often falls in the spring and autumn, in the winter the rain turns to snow. The sea improves the climate; in the spring and summer cool breezes waft in from the sea, so that the average temperature in July is 17 degrees Celsius. It is not unusual, however, that the temperature rises to 30 degrees in summers. In the autumn and winter, the sea releases the heat it has soaked up during the summer so that the average temperature is around -5 degrees Celsius.

The highest point in Estonia is **Suur Munamägi** (Great Egg Hill), whose tip is 318 metres above sea level. Estonians are proud of this highest point and the pride is justified - **Suur Munamägi** is in fact the highest point in the Baltic region. The most dramatic geological features near the sea are the limestone cliffs on the Gulf of Finland, which plunge sheer 50 metres into the sea. Nowhere else on the shores of the Baltic can such terraced powerful limestone cliffs be found. **Limestone** is the national stone.

### Forests, meadows, lakes and bogs

**Forests** cover about one half of Estonia. The most common types of tree are pine, spruce and birch. The forests are rich in **game**. There are some 11 700 elk, 50 000 roe deer, 17 000 wild boar, 17 000 beavers, 800 lynxes, 600 bears and 100 wolves. Estonia, along with Finland and Sweden are the countries with the greatest percentage of forested land. Forest management and wood production are particularly important for the Estonian economy. One third of Estonian forests are protected areas. In these protected forests you can come across types of primeval forest cover, which have long ago disappeared from other parts of Europe. Examples of such primeval forests are the Järvselja forest in Tartumaa County and Poruni in Ida-Virumaa County.

**Meadows** in Estonia are rich in different species much more so than in Western Europe. In the summer, tourists travelling around the countryside can discover the variety and colour of the roadside meadows.

The type of meadow richest in species is the wooded meadow. In one wooded meadow in Vahenurme in Pärnumaa county one can find 74 different species of flora per square metre. Such a density of botanic life is rare in Europe. Centuries ago, there were many such wooded meadows in, among other places, southern Finland, Sweden and elsewhere in Europe. Nowadays, such meadows can only be found in Estonia.

Estonia is a country of thousand of **lakes**. The largest of these is Lake Peipsi, which is the fourth largest freshwater lake in Europe. Most of Estonia's lakes are small and are found in the south of the country. Larger lakes such as Lake Peipsi and Lake Võrtsjärv are rich in fish. One can find rare species of fish such as the lake whitefish and the Peipsi smelt in Lake Peipsi. Võrtsjärv is famous for its catches of pike-perch and eel, which are regarded as a delicacy.

There are also many **rivers** in Estonia, but only ten of them are longer than 100 kilometres. The most important rivers are the Pärnu River and the Emajõgi River.

About one fifth of Estonia is covered **with marshes and bogs**. Most of these are located in the central and eastern parts of the country. The best place to visit marshes is in the Soomaa National Park in Western Estonia. Soomaa means "Bogland" in Estonian and impressive bogs cover the majority of the park with the thickness of the peat layer reaching up to 7 metres in some places.

### Islands

Estonia has more than 1 500 **islands**. The largest of these is Saaremaa, which is about 2 900 square kilometres in size. Saaremaa is followed in size by Hiiumaa, Muhu and Vormsi. The islands and the coastal areas of the mainland are interesting owing to the fact that they are on the migratory route for waterfowl. Twice a year - in the spring and autumn - several hundreds of thousands of birds are visitors in Estonia. The barnacle goose, the swan, the eider plus many more are protected species.

The mild sea climate and the rather level landscape of the island, makes Saaremaa an area abundant in flora and fauna. Rare and beautiful species of orchids can be found in many places, and a large number of rare animals including seals live there.

**More information:** Estonian Institute: <http://www.estonica.org>

Written for the MFA by **Hendrik Relve**, naturalist

