

Travel

As wide as the sea, Lake Peipsi touches the imagination of all who see it. Straddling Russia to the east and Estonia on its western shores, it is one of the largest lakes in Europe. At dusk, viewed across its white sand beaches, the lake is a picture of Baltic enchantment; fishermen trawl the waters for pike-perch as the sun sinks.

Tourists come to swim in the lake's tideless waters, to pick raspberries in the forests and to loll in wood-burning saunas – but night and day, Lake Peipsi is patrolled by border guards. During the summer, the boundary line between Russia and Estonia is marked out by buoys; during the winter, by fir trees drilled into the ice.

East-west border tensions have long shadowed this part of the Baltics. With control of Lake Peipsi, Stalin was able to block enemy access to Leningrad during the second world war. In the 15th century, Prince Alexander Nevsky defeated the invading Teutonic knights on the lake's frozen immensity. The famous "battle on ice" (thrillingly recreated by Eisenstein in his pro-Stalin film *Alexander Nevsky*) established a frontier between east and west that has remained ever since.

Any visitor to the lake is bound to encounter the Russian Old Believers who settled on Estonian shores in the 17th century. Devout adherents to ritual and belief, they had rejected the Russian Church's reforms of the 1660s, which sought to bring Orthodox ritual in line with Greek. As the Old Believers saw it, the reforms were the work of the Antichrist: old Russian ritual was sacrosanct. Hounded by Muscovite state authority, some dissenters shut themselves up in their wooden prayer houses and, rather than submit to the new-style Orthodoxy, burnt themselves to death.

Thousands of others escaped to the forests of Lake Peipsi, where they set up utopian communities and refused to shave their beards or wear western clothes. Some 15,000 Old Believers are reckoned to live in Estonia today. Like the Amish in America, they remain inward-looking and enclosed; they are mostly old, however, as the young have long ago abandoned the old ways for city

houses are required to have an 'impure' side and a 'clean' side that houses the icon. Baptisms are performed in the lake; television is held to be the work of the devil

Peipsi are likely to become museums. Eager to explore a vanishing community, I set out for the Old Believer village of Nina. Here a border guard post has been converted into a hotel run by Dutch-born antiques dealer Hans Koster, who said he loved Nina for its picturesque remoteness. When I arrived in spring, the lake was still frozen over with ice and the meadows around Nina were carpeted in snow. I contacted a local guide called Irina Orekhova, who told me she regarded the Old Believers as among the last "authentic Slavs", unspoiled by European ways.

After breakfast, I set off with Irina by bicycle for the settlement of Kolkja, four miles away. Skirting the lakeside, we passed wooden-framed houses and caught the occasional glimpse of a church's golden dome. Everywhere we looked, small garden plots had been cultivated for onions.

In Soviet times the Old Believers made good money from selling onions at market in Leningrad. On Friday nights, the roads heading from Lake Peipsi to Leningrad would be busy with Old Believer trucks crammed full of onions. However, Chinese competition has since undermined the local onion trade, and today the Old Believers scrape by, earning a pittance by selling fish in Estonian markets. Many of the men have taken to drink as they lament a lost idyll of the "good old Soviet times".

At Kolkja, we stopped at the Old Believer museum. Within, an elderly curator in a poppy-red kerchief and black skirts rose from her chair and gave a little bow of greeting. "Dobro pozhalovat," she said. "You are welcome."

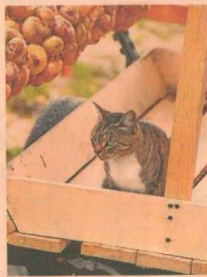


Where time stands still

Estonia | Like the Amish in the US, the Old Believers live in rural communities cut off from the modern world. *Ian Thomson* visits them on the shores of the 'severely beautiful' Lake Peipsi



Clockwise from main picture: on the shores of Lake Peipsi, Estonia, home to a community of Old Believers; a traditional headscarf; the front view of a local church



"Because the knot is symbolic of Judas's suicide by hanging," the curator explained.

In the Old Belief, ritual is inseparable from doctrinal truth. The "Great Schism" that followed the 17th-century church reforms was inflamed by violent argument over ritual. Under cover of darkness, Orthodox priests would take Old Believer children away from their parents and have them baptised in the reformed church. Old Believers were derisively called *raskolniki* – schismatics – or Onion-Russians.

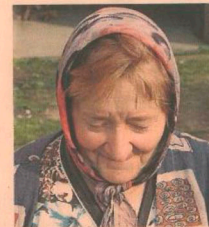
Old Believer prohibitions are stricter than anything to be found in the Orthodox church. Old Believer men who happen to die without a beard are buried anonymously, as the beard is held to be sacred. Houses are required to have a "clean" side and an "impure" side. (The "clean" side incorporates the icon station and must face east towards "Jerusalem and the rising sun.") Baptisms are still performed in the waters of Lake Peipsi; television is shunned as the work of the devil.

After a lunch of onion soup and braised pike-perch, Irina and I cycled on to the lakeshore village of Varnja. The sun shone brightly but everywhere the absence of human activity was striking. Peipsi boats – wooden, medieval-looking craft – had been upended on the sands

awaiting use; their fishermen were nowhere to be seen. "The villages are dying off," Irina said. "Fewer and fewer people live in them."

Yet the air was infused with the reek of boiling tar; boats were being caulked somewhere. Sometimes, said Irina, Varnja's shoreline is littered with beer cans left by holidaying fishermen from neighbouring cities. The beer is only better

Further on, shack-like dwellings stood on marshy ground beside willows, but rushes and outlandish swampy trees. Much of the dilapidation was the work of sun and rain, but man had done the rest.



Afterwards, a young local named Veronika Kookmaa drove me back to Nina along a one-street village made up of clapboard dwellings and Quaker-like prayer houses, known as the "Onion Route". The shacks of eastern Europe must have looked a bit like this, I thought, before Hitler destroyed them. The street-village continued for six miles. While looking out for foxes on the dimly lit way, Veronika told me: "The biggest problem the Old Believers have is that they just don't know what a wealth of culture they're sitting on. They live in their own little worlds, and time has stood still."

Nevertheless I felt privileged to have been in their company. Back at the village of Nina, a rejuvenating midnight sauna helped me to sleep in my room above the frozen lake; I dreamt of onions and onion soup.

In 1944, this part of Estonia was a battlefield as Hitler fought Stalin for supremacy of the east. These days, the main danger is fire: wooden houses frequently burn down in accidents involving alcohol and cigarettes. Many of them, I noticed, had been hung with fishing nets and rows of gutted fish left out to dry.

"Oh look!" Irina pointed to a flock of geese swirling away across the lake. The wetlands are alive with birdlife, and Irina likes to cycle here in spring to watch the marsh birds fly in from the White Sea and skim the lake's surface.

By now it was getting dark and the air, turning cold, had a tired, end-of-the-day smell of damp sand and reeds. We were about to leave when an extraordinary hooting noise reached us. Silence – there it was again. "That'll be the Eurasian bittern," Irina said. "It sounds like a wine bottle being blown into." The bird fell silent as we approached. Then a wild duck flew up with a quack from the rushes and, all at once, a cloud of birds



hung screaming and circling in the air. Outbursts of shiny red cranberry bushes brightened the swamplands; not for the first time, Lake Peipsi struck me as severely beautiful.

The next evening, with a full moon glowing in the clouds, I attended a church service in Mustvee at the northern end of the lake. Inside the church, broadfaced women bundled in layers of clothing crossed themselves elaborately before candle-lit icons. They stood on the left-hand side of the church, some distance from the men. As local male priests have now all died out, the prayers were intoned by women elders, who swayed slightly from side to side with both arms outstretched. Beeswax candles flickered aromatically as a frail-voiced woman's choir chanted songs. No electricity was used for lighting, only candles. The liturgy, amazingly, was recited from old church Slavonic, which few Russians

today can understand. As Old Believers, very old to sit on even though it is customary to stand during an Old Believer service. The concession was a nod to changing times, I supposed. As incense wafted my way I looked up. The church's vaguely Byzantine interior, with its gilt capitals and heavy brass chandelier suspended from the roof, testified to a hard-working farming community of immense piety.

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DETAILS

The nearest city is Tartu, where the tourist office (visittartu.com) has details of hotels and guides. Ian Thomson stayed at the Nina Kordona guesthouse (otakordona.ee, doubles from €60), his guide, Irina Orekhova, can be booked through her company Peipsi Tee (peipsitee@net.ee). For more general information, go to visitestonia.com

Short cuts

London The launch of the film *Paddington* later this month has sparked a slew of bear-related tourist experiences around the world. They range from the obvious (a *Paddington* tea at the Athenaeum Hotel in May/fall, complete with marmalade sandwiches) to the spurious (a new trip to "darkest Peru" with Wexas). Tuesday sees the launch of the official *Paddington* Bear trail, in which 50 UK statues of the bear have been hidden around

London at sites featured in the original books by Michael Bond. The statues have been designed by an illustrious group of artists, and celebrities including David Beckham, Darcye Bussell and Nicole Kidman, and are designed to draw followers to some of London's key tourist attractions before being auctioned for charity on December 30. visitolondon.com/paddington

country on the Horn of Africa, has been low-scale and aimed mainly at budget travellers. However, its attractions – which include world-class snorkelling along the Red Sea coast and dramatic lunar landscapes around the Ardakuoba volcano – may be about to gain wider awareness, helped by more upmarket providers. Qatar Airways has introduced a direct flight to the country from Doha, a three-weekly service taking around three hours, while UK-based adventure tour operator Explore is offering the destination for the first time as part of a 12-day tour combined with neighbouring Ethiopia (from £2,676). qatarairways.com; explore.co.uk; visitdjbouti.dj

Cambodia Luxury boat operators are rushing to offer ever more exclusive experiences on the Mekong. Aqua Expeditions, a company that made its name with high-end cruises down the Peruvian Amazon, made its inaugural voyage last week with a trip taking in the Tonlé Sap lake and Phnom Penh. Its new boat has staff in designer uniforms, food by the celebrated chef David Thompson and just 20 cabins (from £1,848 per person for three nights). Meanwhile Pandaw, an existing operator, has just launched trips to the river's remote Kratie region, home of the rare Irrawaddy dolphin. The 11-day cruise (£1,550 per person) also

stops at remote floating villages and Koh Trong island where guests can also spot Mekong mud turtles. aquapeditions.com; pandaw.com

Tanzania For Afriaphiles wanting a different kind of insight into the safari experience, Gene and Marshall is offering the opportunity to learn how to become a guide. Its "Pyramids of Life" itinerary will take place over three weeks in the Serengeti and the Masai Mara. From £6,495 per person for one week, all inclusive. geneandmarshall.com

Emily Mathieson

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