

Going wild

Estonia is better known for its nightlife than its wildlife, but **Joanna Booth** spots seals, bears and birds on a nature-focused fam trip with UK tour operators



Grey seals in the Baltic Sea
PICTURE: Remo Savisaar

As if on cue for a teatime picnic, it's 6pm when the first bear wanders out of the forest. I'm immediately thrilled – these burly beasts have long been on my wish list and I never expected finding one to be this easy.

She's watchful, almost neryy, pausing frequently to scan the clearing for signs of danger, and jogs surprisingly fast on

her pigeon-toed paws. It's understandable as, according to Bert Rähni, our guide from Estonian wildlife specialist NaTourEst, she's pregnant. Happily, hidden away in a purpose-built hide, we get fantastic views without causing this mama-bear-to-be any stress.

FUR REAL

During the next few hours in this wildlife reserve adjacent to ➤

ASK AN OPERATOR



“Estonia is the perfect location for soft adventure – hiking, bog-walking and wildlife

– before relaxing in comfortable accommodation and enjoying excellent, natural food. We visited towards the end of the summer, when wild berries and mushrooms were abundant, providing the basis for delicious, foraged meals.”

Jim Molloy, sales manager, Regent Holidays



“Estonia has an amazing mix of habitats – bogs, meadows, wetlands, coastline

– all packed with wildlife. You could spot beavers and brown bears or watch thousands of migratory birds from a national park. You can pair the incredible wildlife with culture in Tallinn and even combine it with neighbouring Baltic countries Lithuania and Latvia, all within a single week.”

Laurie Thomas, Europe product manager, Explore



“One of the most noticeable features of Estonia was the tranquillity. I was able to

truly appreciate the beauty of my surroundings with nothing more than the chirping of the birds overhead and the crunch of my own footsteps. I was mesmerised by some of the locations we visited, like the perfectly still Tudu Lake and Jägala Waterfall.”

Alfie Claydon, sales and marketing support, Exsus Travel



Tudu Forest



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Wildlife viewing hide in Alutaguse National Park; a Eurasian brown bear, photographed from the hide; Kuunari harbour, Tallinn; walk through the trees **PICTURES:** Herve Rannu Photography; Shutterstock/Studio MDF; Marko Poolamets

Estonia’s Alutaguse National Park, we spot another two bears, both juveniles and probably siblings, which come thrillingly close to the hide windows. We also see a handsome fox, a bickering flock of jays and a large family of raccoon dogs. These creatures – which look like lively, over-caffeinated badgers – create a real soap opera, trotting around and getting into some highly vocal scraps.

As this region is home to more than 500 Eurasian brown bears – half Estonia’s total bear population – sightings are almost guaranteed. The team drops small amounts of fish or wheat close to the hide, but Bert is keen to emphasise that these tiny quantities aren’t large enough for them to rely on and don’t affect their behavioural patterns when searching for food in the long term.

The hide makes the process of going on a bear hunt rather civilised. Checking in at 4pm, we find comfy chairs lined up in front of the viewing windows, plus an indoor speaker hooked up to a powerful exterior microphone, so we can not only see the sights but also hear the sounds of the forest. Being able to make a cup of tea and pop to the loo while we await the bears is a real bonus.

These creature comforts are necessary, however – we’ll be here all night. To maintain guests’ safety, and not disturb the wildlife, no one leaves the hides before 8am the next morning. There are four categories to choose from; ours is a comfort hide, with four small rooms behind the main viewing window, each with a set

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of bunks and a sliding door. There’s a shared toilet and sink with running water, plus a kettle. Prices start at €135 per person.

On my next visit, I’d book the luxury hide, from €590 per night, which has a comfortable double bed in front of mirrored floor-to-ceiling windows, plus a full bathroom with a shower and even a coffee machine.

NATURE’S NEIGHBOURHOOD

Many clients won’t know much about Estonia beyond picturesque Tallinn, and may not have considered it as anything other than a city-break destination. But this flat, green country is so manageably sized that, while there’s enough to do to create longer nature-focused itineraries, you can easily combine wildlife viewing with a traditional short break.

Alutaguse is a 90-minute drive from Tallinn, making the bear hide a simple overnight add-on. And there’s ➤