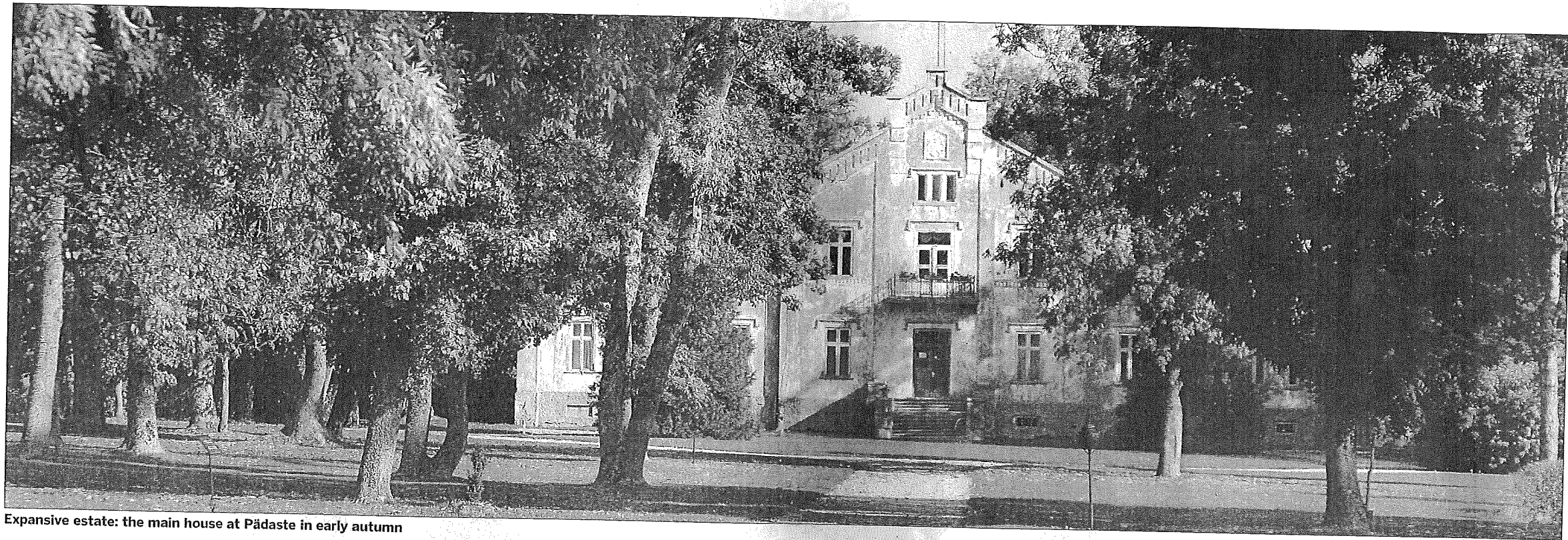


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Expansive estate: the main house at Pädaste in early autumn

The only stags you see are moose

A world away from the bachelor parties of Tallinn, Muhu in Estonia feels like the island time forgot, writes **Claire Wrathall**

There we were on the Baltic shore of Pädaste, an ancient estate-turned-hotel on the Estonian island of Muhu, peering through the eyepiece of a Celestron SkyScout, a state-of-the-art telescope that identifies the stars you point it at. It was early May and after midnight, the air was silent but for the marshy sound of the night-birds, and although the heavens glittered above us, there was still some light on the horizon. The second glass of after-dinner Põltsamaa Kuldne apple wine, which tastes like a smoky Calvados crossed with Beaumes de Venise, wasn't helping us to focus, but it had been too tempting to pass up as we sat by the fire, while the hotel's garrulous 30-something co-proprietor and local MP, Imre Sooäär, played the piano rather well: lullabies his grandmother had sung to him, the song for Eurovision he'd written in 2001. (These things matter in Estonia.) Then he suggested we go out and look at the stars. It seemed a perfect end to a day that had started early with a guided walk around the grassy bay to watch flocks

of migrating Hooper swans, barnacle geese and Arctic terns.

Sooäär grew up on Muhu and bought the ruin that was Pädaste in 1996 for about €40,000 with his more reserved Dutch partner, Martin Breuer, who manages the hotel. (The company they bid against had wanted to turn it into a semiconductor factory and, er, model agency - that's "model" in the fashion sense.) And they have been restoring the estate ever since. At present there are 12 guest-rooms - the loveliest are the duplexes in the carriage-house (from €224), especially Moon, which has a large balcony built over the old ice-house - and a beautifully refurbished thatched farmhouse that sleeps six. But next year will see the opening of the gothic stone manor house, once home of the last tsar's hunting master, and the hotel all but double in size.

Not that it will seem crowded. The estate, like the wooded island it sits on, is huge: Muhu, a half-hour ferry ride from Virtsu on the mainland, extends over 212sq km, yet it's home to just 2,000 people, along with 1,000 wild boar,

some moose and seals, which gives it a real sense of isolation and escape. During the riots in Tallinn in April, this was where Estonia's president sought refuge; while Yeltsin's widow, Naina, was expected as soon as her 30 days of mourning were over.

It's not hard to see what attracts them to Pädaste. Staying here does feel like staying with friends. Martin and Imre live on site and though there's no forced bonhomie, they are visible hosts. It may not be luxurious in terms of glitz and polish but I have rarely felt so looked after.

One could spend a few days here simply resting at the hotel - so relaxed that they don't start serving breakfast until 9am - wandering the coast, canoeing to the other islands or enjoying hay baths and the wood-burning sauna in its spa, all rough-hewn wood and colourful locally embroidered blankets. But it would be a shame not to venture out. We spent a magical morning exploring the forest on horseback, two foals gambolling alongside us. I hadn't ridden since childhood but the thor-

oughbred Estonian horses at the Tihuse stud are docile and impeccably trained. On other days we wandered through the aromatic juniper woods - the largest in Europe - and cycled from village to village, admiring the ancient white church in Liiva, and the long, low, log cottages and wooden windmills

We spent a magical morning exploring the juniper forest on horseback, two foals gambolling alongside

at Koguva. Muhu feels like an island time has forgotten, having been off-limits even to mainlanders during the Soviet era, evidence of which remains in the occasional Zhiguli car and abandoned building. Take the first paved turning right into the woods west of the village of Piiri, for instance, and

you'll come to a derelict nuclear missile base.

But the downside of Muhu's remoteness is that fishing and farming are dying out and this is leading, paradoxically, to a reduction in its rich biodiversity which runs to 23 kinds of orchid. Unless the land is managed, the local naturalist Kristo Kiiker told me, the conifers will take over.

Pädaste makes a point of hiring Estonian staff, and the delightful team, some of whom grew up on Muhu, are very much part of its unstuffy appeal, so keen are they to chat about life here. There are also intriguing Estonian elements on the menu, chef Heigo Vitsur's deft cooking being another of the glories of Pädaste: moose carpaccio dressed with juniper and a salad of rocket grown on the estate (which also raises Highland cattle); whitefish with smoked beetroot; hare cooked in beer (caramelly Saku Tume); roasted squab with lentils and smoked apple.

Estonia's reputation as a holiday destination has been blighted by the herds of stag parties that roam Tallinn at

weekends. Spend a few days on Muhu, however, and the only stags you'll encounter are moose, the only signs of boarish behaviour are tracks among the trees. For Muhu, as its nascent tourist association calls it, is an "island where time rests". I loved being here - the quiet, the stark Nordic beauty - and found it a wrench to leave. But I know I'll go back, ideally in the depths of winter when the sea freezes, and you can drive from the mainland over an "ice road" marked with juniper branches (your speed mustn't fall below 20kph, and nor must you fasten your seatbelt) or snow-shoe across to neighbouring islands. Or better yet, in high summer, when it's warm enough to swim in the peacock-blue Baltic and the sky barely darkens at night.

Claire Wrathall co-authors the FT's hotel review column 'Check Out', and was a guest of Pädaste (tel: +372 454 8800; www.padaste.ee) and easyJet (easyjet.com) which flies to Tallinn from London Stansted and Berlin Schönefeld