

Chasing wagyu steaks,



Nicholas Hercules samples six courses in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

After the established golfing nations of England, Spain and Sweden, which country had the next biggest number of players to qualify for the last 64 knock-out stage of The Amateur Championship in June 2024, held at Ballyliffin in County Donegal, Ireland? If you answered Estonia, congratulations; you are well-informed.

Estonia's smoke-sauna culture dates to the 13th century and is considered important enough to be included on the UNESCO Intangible Heritage List. But its first golf course, the first in the Baltic states, opened a mere 31 years ago in 1993, two years after the country gained its independence from the Soviet Union.

Today, with a population of 1.3m, Estonia boasts 10 golf courses. And following the much heralded Danish model of investing

heavily in youth golf, some even think the tiny nation could be the next golfing frontier in the European game.

I was invited first to play the Estonia Golf and Country Club by a friend I met on the links of Pyongyang in North Korea more than a decade ago. Situated 25km east of Tallinn, with breathtaking views of the Gulf of Finland, the club has a striking clubhouse which is the epitome of elegant, modern design. It resembles a traditional Estonian cottage with an unusually large gabled roof, and stands like a castle perched over the challenging and well-maintained course.

Ahead of us was a group of visitors from Finland, whom we encountered at the unmanned, but well-stocked half-way hut where the 'honesty' check out till operates in four languages (English, Estonian, Finnish and

not WAGR points!



Russian). The Finns explained that they and their golf-mad compatriots visit early in the season when courses at home, a short ferry hop across the Gulf of Finland, are closed due to their even more severe winters (as it is, golf in Estonia is only possible for half the year).

I also discovered that Swedish female golfing legend Annika Sorenstam is building a second 18-hole lay-out there, which will no doubt take the club up a further notch or two when it is opened.

History is never far away in this part of the world. If your tee-shot from the elevated par-3 tenth enters the greenside 'captain's bunker', you are requested (in Estonian and English) to support the restoration of the organ – broken by Red Army soldiers in the 1940s at the nearby Joelahtme Church of the Holy Virgin Mary by calling an automated number and

donating 15 euros.

My primary purpose for making this unusual golfing trip, however, was not a history lesson or to play at the Estonia Golf and Country Club. It was to enter The Estonian Amateur Open, a 54hole international stroke play competition open to all male and female amateurs, and hosted by Parnu Bay Golf Links 200km south of Tallinn. First staged in 2004, the tournament is recognised as a World Amateur Golf Ranking (WAGR) event, attracting the country's leading player, Richard Teder, who was ranked 99th in the amateur world at the time (he is better than that now). Teder came second, unable to defend the title he won in 2023, going on to finish a highly credible 17th at The Amateur Championship in Donegal.

Remember that name! The top end

of the leaderboard was packed with other youngsters chasing WAGR points, though all ages were welcome almost 20 nations were represented. Some countries, such as neighbouring Latvia, used the tournament to determine qualification for their female Olympic Games golf team.

Getting in to our Amateur Championship requires a handicap of +1.5 or better and a WAGR ranking in the top 2,000, but thankfully the Estonian Amateur is not so strict. While one third of the 104 entries were players who were scratch or better, my humble goal at the other end of the field was to experience a golfing trip across the three Baltic states and to see if Parnu Bay lived up to its hype. In a country of numerous Michelin-starred restaurants, one could say that it was more a quest to find the best local wagyu steak rather than chasing WAGR points.

As for Parnu Bay, resting at the same latitude as Royal Dornoch and St Petersburg, its sandy soil and crisp links turf provide a fabulous test of strategic golf for all abilities. While online profiles often flatter courses – photographs from the air give a better impression than what you find on the ground – Parnu Bay is spectacular, notably the final four holes played along the Gulf of Riga. No two holes are the same, but it is the multi-level greens which provide the most formidable golfing challenge.

Parnu Bay is Estonia's de facto summertime capital, thanks to its long, sandy beach, lively cafes, and packed events calendar. Opened as recently as September 2015, it drains remarkably and I'm thankful it did as there were two thunder storm breaks during the opening round. Watch out for midges if playing near sunset, reminiscent of the flying menaces of the west coast of Scotland in summer. Along with a flask of whisky, be sure

to pack some anti-bug spray.

From Estonia I travelled south to Latvia and the Ozo course, owned by ice hockey legend Sandis Ozolinsh, who doubles as the hands-on course manager. Ozo has a fabulous stretch of pine-tree lined holes over rolling terrain from holes three to five, bringing to mind Sunningdale and The Berkshire. Unlike the Surrey sand belt, it has a wood fire oven under the elevated par three third green to speed up thawing after a heavy winter.

Jurmala Golf Club, also in Latvia, was my next stop, memorable for some

'Unlike the Surrey sand belt, it has a wood fire oven under the elevated par three third green to speed up thawing after a heavy winter.'

unparliamentary language by a local who spotted me inadvertently parking in a space reserved for members (inadvertent because the signs had disappeared). Then to Lithuania and the friendly if hilly Capitals Golf Club, followed by the finale at V (Vilnius) Golf Club, a good strategic test of one's game where I was invited to join one of their twice-weekly evening 9-hole shotgun tournaments which the club holds during the summer season.

A trip to the Baltic states will not break your bank account. Greens fees are relatively modest given the quality, as is accommodation and eating out. Parnu Bay is head and shoulders above the rest, and worth a trip by itself.

Nicholas Hercules is a well travelled UN diplomat and a regular contributor to *Golf Quarterly*