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Party Capital of the Year: Tallinn, Estonia

By SETH SHERWOOD

WHEN the British guidebook author Laurence Shorter was sent to research Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, a couple of years ago, he knew little about it and had no idea what to expect. "I have to admit," he recalled recently, "I didn't really know where it was."

Six weeks later, Mr. Shorter emerged with a vastly improved sense of the city's location (on the Baltic Sea) and a newfound appreciation of its "full-time party culture," as he described the local vibe in the fruit of his adventure: a slick, hardbound directory of decadent addresses called "A Hedonist's Guide to Tallinn."

The 2004 guide - which lists pubs with handcuff-carrying waitresses, nightclubs with scantily clad dancers, and stylish restaurants representing every corner of the globe - has become a minor bible for the rapidly growing ranks of "time-poor, cash-rich 30-something partiers" heading to Tallinn, as Mr. Shorter described his audience.

How did a city smaller than Fresno, Calif., (population about 400,000) in a former Soviet backwater explode into a hot spot whose "Hedonist Guide" companions include the likes of [Madrid](#) and [Miami](#)?

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Estonia's integration into the European Union in 2004 have done much to open the nation of 1.4 million. So have budget-airline flights connecting Tallinn with Western European capitals.

But simple geography plays the main role. Just 50 miles across the Gulf of Finland from Helsinki, Tallinn gets a whopping injection of cash and conviviality from the more than half-million Finns who head across every year - frequently on multiple daily "booze cruises" - to exploit Tallinn's significantly cheaper alcohol.

Pockets filled with kroons (about 13 of them equal a dollar), motivated pleasure-seekers can smoke Cuban cigars at La Casa del Habano, watch rugby over a pint at Scotland Yard, sip cocktails in the Scandi-chic interiors of R.I.F.F., boogie at the huge Club Hollywood or elite Club Prive, watch women lose their clothes at the Soho strip club, and then lose their own shirts at Bally's Casino.

But Finns are increasingly quaffing alongside a new crowd: British bachelor-partyers. Take a summer stroll in the Old Town - the city's medieval center - and you're likely to find a host of Mr. Shorter's besotted countrymen weaving over the cobblestones and into myriad pubs and beer cellars. Many are sent by Tallinn Pissup, a three-year-old travel agency whose sole mission is to send bachelor parties to slosh through the various forms of decadence in the Estonian capital. (It has sister companies for [Prague](#), Budapest and Bratislava.)

"It's quite exciting, because the local populations, especially there in Tallinn, have a great imagination for different activities," says Neil Smith, a founder and marketing manager of Tallinn Pissup. These include parachute jumping, demolition derbies, Doctor Death's Military Academy (machine-gun training) and a "Medieval Lesbian Stripper Show" in an Old Town cellar.

When the effects of all that late-night partying wears off, drinkers' eyes can take advantage of the Old Town's fairy-tale

sights, including Middle Ages' houses merchants' guilds, chapels, monasteries and the soaring needlelike spire of St. Olaf's church. Better yet, they can hit the rustic Town Hall Square and its famous 15th-century pharmacy, which still offers relief from ye olde hangover.