

# Traditions of Estonian Spa & Wellness: Kept Alive Through Tourism?

*An Ethnographic Journey Through Western and Southern Estonia*



MSc Thesis by Abigail Gordon

(Caption from cover page, Figure 1: Smoke sauna instruments lay on a table at Mooska Farm in Võru)

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***An Ethnographic Journey Through Western and Southern Estonia***

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## Abstract

This Master thesis investigates if, and how, tourism is affecting the vitality of cultural wellness traditions in Estonia. For nearly 200 years, wellness traditions have been an integral part of Estonian culture. Throughout Estonia's complicated history, the small Baltic nation has attempted to preserve the essential roots of heritage (*Estonianness*), especially in light of its second independence in 1991. Estonia has strategically used tourism as a development strategy via branding campaigns to showcase their unique traditions on the global scale; spa and well tourism developments were a major part of this effort. As a direct result, Estonia is progressing into a tourism "hotspot", and furthermore a *wellness* destination. Wellness tourism is currently a valuable niche trend to analyze; the worldwide wellness industry represents 5.3% of global economic output, making it one of the fastest-growing industries globally, and an impressive 43% of all customers in wellness facilities are tourists. Research has shown wellness tourism is increasingly interconnected with cultural experiences and serves as a driving force for authentic, multisensory, and memorable encounters in the experience economy. Estonian spas and wellness centers stage reproductions of these traditions, thus commodifying their heritage. Some Estonian wellness traditions have been dying or are progressively being forgotten, such as the smoke sauna ritual. Through an autoethnographic journey to two key wellness regions in Estonia, Pärnu and Võru, a method of participant observation was deployed, in conjunction with interviews of industry leaders to observe the general trend and discourse: tourism is actively helping to keep traditions alive. To date, there has been a lack of research on the relationship between wellness tourism and culture, especially in the Estonian case. This research was conducted with the guidance of Visit Estonia, paving way for future research on cultural preservation in the discipline of tourism studies and human geography.



## Foreword

Dear Reader,

I present to you my Master thesis, a reflection of my true passions, interests, and both my educational and professional life paths. This topic was entirely chosen by myself while on a quest to write about something that made me smile. I wanted to research something positive, taking a step away from all the negative COVID-19 effects on tourism. I reflected deeply on my passions to create a unique topic, something that was entirely out of the ordinary and allowed me to enjoy the journey of my research from an account of my own personal experiences. For the past six years, I've work professionally in travel, tourism, and international education. This has led me to venture into 30 countries across four continents. Throughout my travels, there was one place that stood out to me, a country that gave me a calling to return: Estonia.

So why Estonia? In 2018, after a FAM tour (a travel agent behind-the-scenes business visit) to Finnish Lapland I decided to extend my stay in the Baltics and took the ferry from Helsinki to Tallinn. I immediately felt drawn to Estonia: the history, the culture, the unique language, the folklore, and most importantly, their use of traditions. From stepping foot on the cobblestone streets of Tallin's UNESCO old town, it became one of my favorite places in the world. I quickly learned that Estonian proudly place its traditions in the forefront of culture. During this short trip, I discovered Estonia has a spa & wellness culture of nearly 200 years, with unique traditions variously spread along the country. I was told my locals there are a plethora of modern-day spas, wellness, and medical centers I could visit myself to experience "the Estonian way". Suddenly I was disappointed that I couldn't extend my trip in Estonia beyond Tallinn, but I knew I would return soon.

Outside of Estonia, I've used spa & wellness centers for my own rejuvenation, especially for fighting a chronic illness that demands constant thoughtful care. Wellness (and well-being) is a way of life for me. I see the value, benefits, and unique traditions of wellness centers I've experienced across continents. I personally hate to see spas adopt global standards and similar treatments. Where's the variety? The cultural attributes? What differentiates visiting a center in New York versus Nijmegen? Estonia was the place that set wellness apart for me, it stands out on top for the cultural integrity and emphasis on traditional ways. To me, this is worth protecting. Therefore, I decided to start a conversation with the top people in the spa & wellness sector in Estonia to find out firsthand how tourism is affecting their 200 years of culture. This thesis is the documentation of my research journey. The next time you visit a spa yourself, I hope you will reflect on the cultural traditions that may have been lost along the way; just maybe, they could have been preserved with the help of research.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Estonia: A Wellness Tourism Destination

Situated in Northern Europe, touching both the Baltic Sea and Gulf of Finland lies Estonia. A land as unique as the people, history, and cultural traditions that have shaped this small, northernmost Baltic country into an emerging tourism hotspot. Geographically, Estonia connects the dots between Scandinavia, Central Europe, and its eastern neighbors; it shares borders with Russia to east, Latvia in the south, and Finland towards the north. The country is over 45,000 km<sup>2</sup> and comprised of a mainland, 2,222 islands and islets (most of which are uninhabited), as well as swamps and bogs, several forests covering more than half of the country (especially pine, birch, and spruce), and nearly a quarter being protected nature sites (Estonia.ee, 2017; Visit Estonia, 2022). Estonia has a population of around 1.3 million (World Bank, 2020), with 1.1 million people speaking one of the world's smallest official languages: Estonian (Estonia.ee, 2017). English, Russian, Finnish, and even German are also widely spoken, making the country an easy destination for international tourism due to little language barriers.



Figure 2: Map portraying Estonia and surrounding countries. Source: Estonia.ee, 2017

The capital city, Tallinn, is the largest with a population of over 450,000 inhabitants (World Population Review, 2022). Tallinn also proudly hosts a UNESCO World Heritage status in its Old Town since 1997; this historic center is an exceptionally complete and well-preserved medieval northern European trading city on the coast of the Baltic Sea (UNESCO, 2022). In terms of tourism, Tallinn is usually the main point of entry as it hosts Estonia's main airport, *Lennart Meri Tallinn*, as well as the port of Tallinn (Old City Harbor) connecting Finland's capital, Helsinki, by a quick ferry ride in under two hours; ferries to Stockholm and St. Petersburg are also frequent. At present, Estonia is seemingly becoming a "hot spot" for tourism, mainly tourists from European countries. By 2019, the number of international arrivals into Estonia had reached over six million visitors, nearly a 60% increase since 2009 (World Bank, 2022). More tourists than ever are visiting (pre-pandemic), with the top five foreign tourists staying overnight arriving from Finland, Latvia, Russia, Scandinavia, Ukraine, and Germany (Visit Estonia Tourism Statistics, 2022).

Once a former republic of the USSR, Estonia is regarded increasingly as one of the most successful transition economies amongst the former Soviet states since its collapse in 1991 (Jarvis & Kallas, 2008). Already in 2006, Estonia's economy was nominated as one of Eastern Europe's 'Dynamic Duo' along with Latvia by the *Economist*; this was thanks to a significant economic expansion of over 37% between 2003 and 2006 (Jarvis & Kallas, 2008). This economic boom is largely due to its tourism development; according to the Estonian Tourism Board, from 1993 to 2006, just under under €9 billion receipts were generated, and during the same period, international tourism expenditure rose dramatically from 91.8 million to 1.08 billion (Jarvis & Kallas, 2008). As the small nation strove towards European Union (EU) accession, it launched successful tourism campaigns from 2002 onwards that helped brand wellness culture, and essentially "Estonianness". As a result, considerable part of this impressive tourism boom has been thanks to Estonia's spa & wellness developments in recent years. Estonian culture in general is deeply rooted in traditions; their wellness traditions date as far back as 200 years, with developments of small wellness establishments, medical spas (sanatoriums), fashionable resorts, and home-based treatments. As Estonians take utmost pride in their health and well-being, spa & wellness heritage is an integral aspect of the Estonian identity.

In recent years Estonia's wellness tourism has become increasingly known on a global scale, with certain destinations such as Pärnu comprising of distinguished spa clusters. Combining ancient traditions with innovative modern treatments, Estonian spas celebrate the best of old and new in wellness with each aiming to offer something different to entice their guests with staged, sensory experiences. Intertwining authentic, cultural wellness traditions with tourism may influence their vitality and existence. Some Estonian traditions have been forgotten or are actively dying. This thesis explores the role of tourism in keeping traditions alive through discussions and exploration in various Estonia spas & wellness centers.

## 1.2 Societal Relevance

The underlying societal issues that will be addressed in this thesis relate to the relationship between wellness tourism and cultural heritage. First, it's essential to understand why spa & wellness tourism is an important niche trend to analyze. It is no secret that health, spa, or simply "wellness" tourism is not at the forefront of societal discourse as a leading form. We often hear of cultural, experiential, adventure, eco, cruise, or even heritage tourism as our peers, friends and family tell us about their holiday choices. However, wellness tourism is actually one of the most ancient forms of tourism when considering the attention paid to wellbeing by ancient civilizations such as the Romans and Greeks, or the development of the seaside resorts and spa tourism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century (Smith & Kelly 2006, p. 1). "Wellness" is a modern word with ancient roots, but the concept in tourism is simply coming to light at this moment. Although it is perhaps not considered a common holiday choice by the masses, there is an overall global wellness turn that is shifting upwards.

Consider the effects of the coronavirus outbreak in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly caused disruptions to everyday life for everyone around the globe. From quarantines, illness, to remote working, it forced a period of self-reflection for many individuals. Depression, anxiety, loneliness, and physical ailments are only a few of the effects felt by individuals globally as a result to this sudden shift in life. Some people took the time to improve their health by focusing on their own wellbeing, whether that be diet, exercise, stress reduction, or other relaxation techniques. Pre-pandemic, there had been an unprecedented

intensification in the pursuit of wellness in the history of tourism in recent years (Smith & Kelly 2006, p. 2). Presently, it's no wonder why this wellness turn is shifting rapidly as the pandemic sparked profounder trends than ever before: more people are realizing the value of their individual wellness and are actively taking measures to improve their wellbeing. Spa and wellness centers are known to be places of rejuvenation, relaxation, recovery, pampering, and a pathway towards reclaiming one's wellness as a whole.

The worldwide wellness industry represents 5.3% of global economic output, making it one of the fastest-growing industries globally (University of Tartu, 2022). The Global Wellness Institute (GWI) identifies the global wellness economy is currently valued at USD \$4.5 trillion and growing (\$3.72 trillion pre-pandemic in 2017), with wellness tourism in particular comprising \$639 billion. Based on recent reports by the GWI, by the end of 2022, the spa and wellness industry will reach \$919 billion alone; GWI also predicts spa tourism will outpace the whole of the tourism industry by a staggering 200% (Global Wellness Institute, 2022).

The Baltic States in particular have a strong tradition of health and wellness tourism (Smith, 2015). In Estonia specifically, the popularity of spas today is a reflection of the developments in Estonia's wellness heritage (Estonian Spa Association 2022). Estonia has a spa & wellness culture of 200 years, with a strong emphasis on traditions. Considering the tourism boom Estonia is experiencing, with tourists reaching over six million (World Bank, 2022), there is also an increase in tourists (both foreign and domestic) to spa & wellness centers around the country as identified by Estonian academics (i.e. Heli Tooman) and the individual wellness centers along with Visit Estonia. Spa & wellness tourism is increasingly becoming a more popular trend and is intertwined with Estonia's nation branding; this is evident from viewing Estonia's tourism campaigns, namely, Visit Estonia. Visit Estonia's website has an entire section dedicated to spa and wellness information for tourists, offering where to go, what "uniquely Estonian" treatments to experience, products used in traditional treatments, and even recommendations for every type of traveler (i.e. the culture seeker, the experiencer, the nature-goer, the modern spa dweller...). Visit Estonia also proudly showcases the smoke sauna tradition of Võru as it can now be found on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Estonia's most popular wellness traditions (and smaller regional ones) are outlined by means of tourism promotion and actively reproduced in wellness centers for guests to experience.

Several scholars (as outlined in the coming literature review) have explained the growing relationship between wellness tourism and cultural experiences; there is evidence wellness tourists increasingly search for cultural elements such as traditions, locally sourced products, and authenticity in general. Thus, wellness motivations alone are not the sole driving force of tourists to wellness centers in Estonian; culture is becoming a central factor of attraction, and the need for transformative experiences fuels this curiosity (Artal-Tur, 2017). As Estonia claims to have the most spa hotels per capita than any other country in the world (Tooman, Tomasberg, & Smith, 2013), this makes the country a leading global wellness destination. Furthermore, Estonia has collaborated with the other Baltic States to brand their wellness sector, actively using tourism as a strategy to reinforce the Estonian identity and heritage (Cottrell & Cottrell, 2015, p.322). Given the growth of tourism in times of increased wellness attitudes, it is therefore worth investigating the relationship between spa & wellness tourism in Estonia and how these cultural traditions are being affected. Perhaps touristic developments of wellness centers have *disrupted* these longstanding traditions, or tourism is actually *strengthening* the value of these traditions. It is possible some traditions were on the verge of being lost or forgotten, but tourism may have the power to conserve them. Furthermore, do reproductions of

these traditions threaten their authenticity? Is culture being lost as wellness centers cater towards foreign tourists, giving in to the experience economy as heritage is commodified to present an unforgettable experience? The survival of Estonian wellness traditions must be researched in this context of tourism to discover how culture and heritage is sustained in this wellness turn. There has never been a better time than now to research this topic, especially as the prominent university city of Tartu has been named the European Capital of Culture 2024, set to showcase Estonian cultural heritage (Visit Estonia, 2022).

### 1.3 Scientific Relevance

In terms of scientific relevance, my research will constitute as a qualitative case study for examining the intertwined relationship between tourism and culture. Specifically, there is a lack of scientific studies concentrating on Estonian heritage and tourism in relation with spa & wellness heritage. In the following literature review, I have identified a few key publications revolving around this topic. However, it seems apparent there hasn't been anything published specifically about Estonian spa & wellness culture, and if/how their traditions have been *preserved through tourism*, or vice versa. This makes my research unique, and I'm filling in the knowledge gap by answering a key research question while investigating sub-question along the way. Spa & wellness tourism is an increasingly growing field, especially as the experience & transformation economy reached an all-time high pre-COVID and continues to shift upwards in light of the importance of individual wellness.

As outlined in the introduction, it is first important to understand how Estonia has shifted away from its Soviet past to brand a new national identity (Pawhusz & Polese, 2017) by using tourism as a national (and collaborative Baltic) development strategy (Tooman & Mürstaja, 2014; OECD, 2020), and how spa and wellness tourism has been a key part of this strategy. This leads into research conducted on spa and wellness tourism and the principles of wellness (Koskinen & Wilska, 2018; Smith, 2006), especially in the Baltic States (Smith, 2015), as part of the realms of the experience economy (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998), which embody sensory experiences and senscapes (Agapito, Mendes, & Valle, 2013), and the trend of experimental travel, with tourists seeking authenticity, culture, and heritage (Artal-Tur et al., 2017). However, with this desire for authentic cultural experiences, how is authenticity practiced, exposed, performed on the front stage, or hidden on the back-stage (Goffman, 1959)? Given Estonia's clear tourism strategy, and with the inauguration of traditions like the smoke sauna onto the UNESCO list, how authentic can these traditions truly be? Are they simply a product of tourism commodification, and subject to the shallowness of the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990)? Is Estonia showcasing its wellness traditions through storytelling as a way to commodify the experience (Mossberg, 2008; Moscardo, 2020)?

Authenticity is one of the oldest and most debated concepts in tourism studies since conceptualized by MacCannell in 1973 (Rickly, 2022), with Wang (1999) rethinking the original concept and outlining an alternative way to view it with existential authenticity. Several authors have expanded on this idea since then (such as Su, 2018), performing case studies and reformed arguments, especially when considering heritage tourism and respected UNESCO sites. Lastly, how can these cultural rituals/traditions be protected and conserved through tourism, and does the authenticity debate pose obstacles for sustainable heritage tourism management (Dai, Zheng, & Yan, 2020)?

These theories, concepts, debates and discussions set up the foundation for my essential research question. I'm not only updating the latest research on this topic, but also expanding on the knowledge already situated in the discourse and finding a new way to approach it. A qualitative, cultural geography perspective should be employed using an autoethnographic lens. There is a lack of field researchers immersing themselves in this topic from the ground level. A step into the realm of spa & wellness traditions by means of participant observation, interviews, and exploratory fieldwork is crucial to discover insider knowledge and open a discussion. This research sets the tone and foundation for further research to be expanded on spa & wellness impacts, how to use tourism as a cultural conservation strategy, or how the performances of such traditions set a new tone for the debate on authenticity (and perhaps redefine the criteria for UNESCO intangible cultural heritage practices). Furthermore, it will help tourism enterprises, spa managers, local Estonians, and tourism marketing experts realize the intrinsic value in protecting these wellness traditions.

## 1.4 Research Aim and Purpose

The quintessential aim of this Master thesis research is to gain insight as to *if* and *how* tourism is helping to keep Estonian spa & wellness traditions alive. This may not be the case at all, and in fact be quite the opposite; it is also possible tourism is destroying these traditions. Perhaps spa and wellness centers are inauthentically reproducing traditions by designing treatments and services that are more "comfortable" or relatable to tourists and offer a more interesting experience, rather than ones resembling Estonian heritage. However, it's also quite plausible (and hopeful) that these centers take their traditions seriously and keep them at the core of their business practices, curating their designs and products to reflect the roots of their culture and resources.

In order to uncover the overarching research question, it is necessary to investigate several sub-questions along the way. I will attempt to answer these questions through examining previous written literature, observations of my own in-person fieldwork, formal and informal interviews, meeting/tours, conversations with other tourists, and interpreting the results of these findings in an autoethnographic style.

- How has Estonia used tourism as a development strategy for their spa & wellness sector?
- How has this development strategy led into Estonian nation branding, and what has been the impact on its culture?
- Was the ambition to include the smoke sauna tradition on the UNESCO ICH list a deliberate action to strategically increase tourism?
- Is tourism the main driving factor in preserving these cultural traditions? More precisely in the wellness sector, was tourism the focus when inaugurating the smoke sauna tradition onto the UNESCO list?
- Does tourism directly help preserve these traditions, or does it jeopardize the authenticity of such traditions?
- In the absence of tourism (perhaps during the pandemic), were these cultural traditions threatened, or were they performed by Estonians as part of routine life?
- How does tourism shape the perception of Estonia as a travel destination?

- Is Estonia actively trying to promote itself as a wellness destination? If so, are there any downsides? (i.e. negative consequences to local Estonians or disrespectful actions to their culture?)

While these sub-questions themselves will not be independently answered in-depth (but rather touched upon), they pave the road to discovering if and how traditions are kept alive through tourism. Of course, a Master thesis can never fully solve a problem, answer a question in its entirety, or completely fill in a knowledge gap. There are clear limitations to research, and endless angles to go about uncovering even one single question proposed in a topic's discourse. Both society and science are continuously shifting, which leads to the need for further research in any given field. However, this thesis research can provide incredibly useful insights as to how culture is evolving with tourism.

Given this research aim, this Master thesis has a twofold purpose: to discover how spas, wellness centers, and local tourism enterprises are incorporating traditions into their service designs for tourism; and to find out if there is a blatant need to deliberately protect cultural wellness traditions in Estonia. The practical implications from gaining these insights will help in several ways. First, Visit Estonia (Estonia's national tourism board) can better strategize for future tourism marketing; with such an emphasis on culture and heritage in their marketing (especially in the spa & wellness sector), an outside analysis like this is helpful. Given that Estonia does not have a Ministry of Tourism or similar, research on culture will expose the current status of how the relationship with tourism is co-existing with one another. As Estonia has emphasized tourism development in their national (re)branding strategy, it's important to shed light on how the commodification of heritage and commercialization of certain traditions has a direct impact on the identity of the Estonian people. Is tourism strengthening the use of these traditions, thus reinforcing identities of the local communities? Without specific intention from the Estonian government, their branding strategy may directly be a cultural conservation strategy through the help of tourism. On the contrary, commodification could weaken the bond in these communities as traditions may have already been dying or forgotten, and commodification is contributing to their demise. Finally, the wellness industry in Estonia can benefit from this research as it positions spa or sales managers in the spotlight, coaxing an open but amicable discussion on the effects of their service designs. This serves as a period of reflection as they represent their brand and ultimately have a major influence on incorporating authentic culture or faux experiences on their guests. These centers operate as the gateway into wellness culture in Estonia. Do they have a moral obligation to help keep these uniquely Estonia traditions alive in this globalizing world?

## 1.5 Outline of Paper

This first chapter of this thesis has been an introduction to the case study. We first learned a brief background of Estonia and its tourism developments, an overview of the spa & wellness sector, and insight into the unique cultural wellness traditions that are deeply embedded into the Estonian heritage. This led us into the problem as underlying question to answer: how tourism is impacting these traditions? Drawing in the social and scientific relevance, I explained why this is an important topic to study in this day and age.

Chapter Two dives into the key literature revolving around Estonian (and Baltic) wellness and is interwoven with the conceptual framework used to conduct the research and

analyze the findings. The key concepts and theories that will be explored directly relate to the problem in question: wellness motivations, the experience economy in wellness tourism and the quest for cultural attributes, sensory embodiment of experiences, storytelling, staged experiences, the great authenticity debate, commodification/branding of heritage, and tourism as a cultural conservation strategy. This chapter also provides a background on wellness tourism in Estonia; how it started, why it's important, and what must be considered. Expanded literature on Estonian wellness is included in Chapter Four as part of my findings, providing background on the regions and places empirically observed.

Chapter Three gives a comprehensive overview of my methods and approaches. Through this qualitative case study, I choose a triangulation approach that ties in relevant literature, online publications (such as Estonian websites), research partnerships (Visit Estonia and the Estonian Spa Association), while conducting interviews and observations from my own fieldwork experience. I employ a participant observation method as my primary data collection technique, giving explicit reasons for doing so. I then give a reflection of my journey forming research partnerships, with Visit Estonia being a key institution that has a direct stake in this project's findings. With the help of Visit Estonia and other entities, I then go over how my fieldwork in Estonia is designed, selecting the itinerary, dates, spas, and interviewee choices. This chapter concludes with statements on COVID-19 and ethics.

Chapter Four is the bulk of this thesis: my research findings, experiences, and analysis. In an autoethnographic manner, I describe my own journey through Western Estonia (Pärnu) and Southern Estonia (Võru) in a first-person writing style. In this fashion, I try to give readers a visualization of my experiences with the cultural traditions in question, incorporating self-taken photos and descriptive imagery. This journey flows through history, culture, spa & wellness center overviews, meetings and interviews with managers, and a concluding analysis per each region in the discussion.

Chapter Fives concludes the research project with a final discussion, combining my analyses from Pärnu and Võru to present concluding thoughts. This discussion ties together the entire thesis, providing not only well underpinned conclusions, but also a reflection of the research questions I aimed to answer. Finally, this paper ends with a section on limitations of this project, and a considerable number of recommendations for further research.





## Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

### 2.1 The Global Wellness Turn and Rise of the Cultural Tourist

There is an unmistakable rise in health and wellness tourism during this prominent global wellness turn. An impressive 43% of all customers in health, wellness and spa facilities are tourists (Smith & Puckzó, 2015). First, we need to define what health or wellness tourism is, and if it is interchangeable. Some authors have argued “health tourism” is an umbrella term for spa, wellness or medical tourism (Smith & Puckzó, 2013). However, *wellness tourism* has a distinct characteristic and should be defined independently. Using Dunn’s (1961) definition, wellness is not only about the absence of disease, illness and stress but also the presence of purpose in life, active involvement in satisfying work and play, joyful relationships, a healthy body and living environment, and the presence of happiness. This concept by Dunn combines physical, mental, and spiritual health, along with emotional wellbeing, social harmony, and environmental sensitivity. Given this definition, it is no wonder the concept of *wellness* has been taken up by the spa industry. Given the global trend towards wellness, in 2012-2013 the Global Spa Summit started focusing on wellness tourism and even changed its name to the Global Spa and Wellness Summit to keep up with this progression. Smith and Puckzó (2013, p. 25) provide the definition for *wellness tourism* that has been adopted by this thesis: “Trips aiming at a state of health where the main domains of wellness are harmonized or balanced. There is an emphasis on prevention rather than cure, but some medical treatments may be used in addition to lifestyle-based therapies.” This definition is essential to understand as it explains the type of tourists I speak of when discussing wellness tourists and their experiences in spa & wellness centers.

Regarding these centers, “spa” and “wellness” are terms that should not be used interchangeably. A spa is a center for wellness, but simply a wellness center (or farm, camp, retreat, facility, etc.) can exist with the absence of spa facilities (such as hydrotherapy/water centers, treatments, or other paid services). One example of a wellness center is the Mooska Farm I visit in Southern Estonia. This is not a “spa”, there is no lobby, dressing room, water center, or treatments such as facials or massages. There is no relaxation room where herbal tea is offered with soft music and mysterious ambiance. Rather, a wellness center like Mooska Farm offers a journey to promote *wellbeing* (a physical and/or spiritual state of personal wellness). As will be discussed later on, the smoke sauna experience promotes wellness through self-rituals of the individual. On the other spectrum, “spas” are defined as places devoted to overall well-being through a variety of professional services that encourage the renewal of mind, body, and spirit (Smith & Puckzó, 2013, p. 10). Both terms indeed embody *wellness*; therefore, I generally combine the two terms “spa & wellness”, or simply “centers” to speak of them generally, as they both have overlapping wellness traditions in Estonian culture.

#### 2.1.1 Culturally Curious in Wellness Experiences?

So, how does wellness tourism relate to culture and heritage? Do the two go hand in hand? Is there a driving force to integrate culture into wellness services? In 2011, the Global Spa Summit published a report noting a new trend of consumers looking for local, traditional, and unique experiences in as part of their wellness visits. The organization advised wellness centers that there should be an emphasis on national or regional specialisms and signature treatments (Smith & Puckzó, 2015, p. 209). Furthermore, research from the Tourism Observatory for

Health, Wellness and Spa (TOHWS, an organization aimed to improve the understanding the ways in which travel and tourism can improve our overall wellness, with a platform for industry, investors and academics) demonstrated the need for unique products and services to be developed (TOHWS, 2012). Smith & Puckzó (2015) (two leading authors in Baltic spa & wellness tourism field) found that most often, cultural and heritage is packaged together with spas and wellness, only falling after conferences/business visits, weddings/honeymoons, and events/festivals (p. 213). The authors discovered that international tourists specifically are primarily motivated by treatments that are based on local assets, resources, and traditions (p. 216). In terms of traditions and trends, it has been noted that spa and wellness consumers and health tourists appear to be interested in *ancient traditions and rituals*, natural resources and therapies, and signature treatments reflecting the locality (p. 217). Domestic tourists are motivated by these elements as well, but need to experience a true healing benefit or transformation in their experience to actually desire treatments from their own culture and local resources. It is therefore no surprise that wellness centers have not only developed signature treatments and specific branding campaigns (for international tourists, primarily) to distinguish themselves from the rest, but increasingly these centers are using some local resources, traditions and rituals in their service designs.

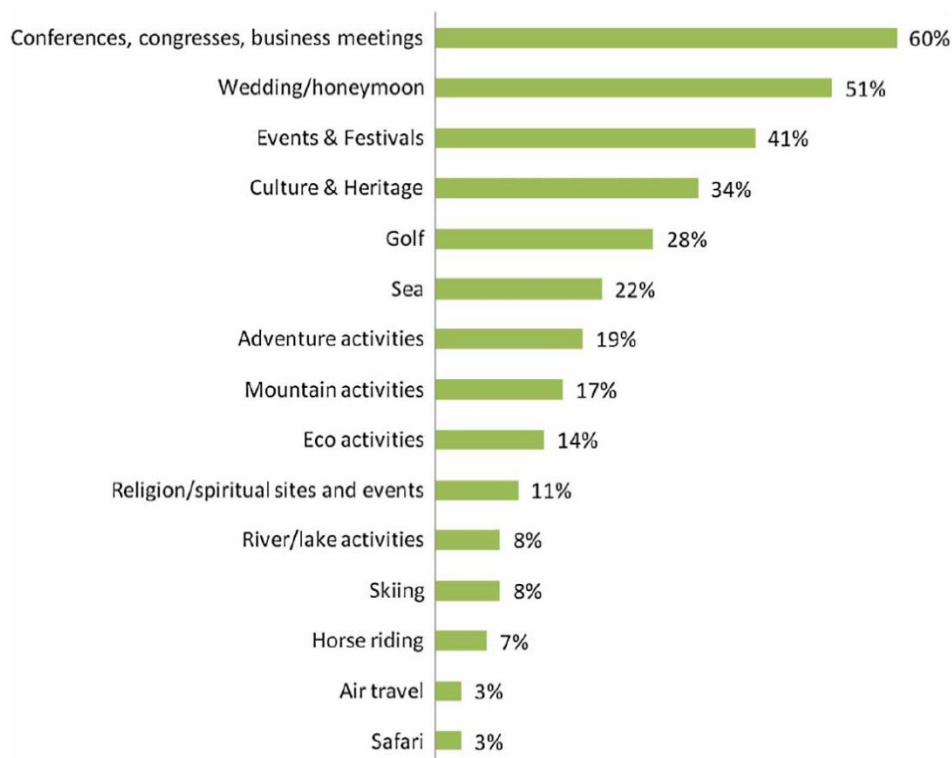


Figure 3: Most common activities packaged with spa & wellness (Smith & Puckzó, 2015)

Niinepuu, Tooman & Smith (2021) conducted research on “customer delight” in Estonian and Finnish day spas (described as exceeding customer expectations, surpassing presuppositions). In order to achieve delight, they discover through formal surveys and interviews that design rituals were one of the main artifacts. In conversations with spa & wellness managers, they found that cultural traditions were *not* originally considered an important service design, but to keep up with the changing of the times, services were renewed and innovative new ways to integrate them were added (such as supporting a company’s local products) (p. 7). During a

video conference with Heli Tooman, Head of the Department of Tourism Studies and Senior Lecturer at University of Tartu (Pärnu College) in Estonian, she told me that there indeed a growing demand for wellness tourists to experience more authentic cultural experiences (such as traditions, rituals, and local products and foods) during their visit. As a lead researcher in the field of tourism management in Estonia, specializing in spa & wellness tourism, there is no doubt Estonia is experiencing this trend. She also provides an important fact: spa & wellness tourism is the *only* form of all year around tourism in Estonia, making the wellness sector highly influential in Estonia's economy. Therefore, it is evident this sector keeps up with the evolution of wellness tourism and thoroughly designs services, treatments, and overall experiences to exceed expectations. This includes incorporating Estonia's 200 years of wellness heritage into these experiences.

This then leads into the question of cultural experiences in wellness services; why do tourists search for culture? If the demand for experiencing ancient traditions and rituals (for example) is growing, and wellness centers are designing, re-branding, or integrating culture and heritage to keep up with this demand, how does this affect the culture? Does this lead to some degree of exploitation, commercialization, and obvious commodification of culture? How authentic are these traditions when reproduced in wellness centers? Lastly, one key point that Smith & Puckzó (2015) make: the wellness field is moving forward so quickly and keeping up with demands, yet is it actually helping to "re-valorize the past" for some new markets in its return to local traditions which may have otherwise been lost? (p. 217). In other words, wellness tourism is helping to preserve these traditions and keep them alive by incorporating them into service designs.

## **2.2 The Experience Economy and Sensory Embodiment**

### **2.2.1 The Experience Economy: Adding Value**

In 1998, Pine and Gilmore identified that consumers prefer to buy experiences and memories staged by a company, thus paying to spend time enjoying a series of new memorable personal events that can engage them in an inherently personal way (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). They developed the "four realms of the experience" (absorption, active participation, immersion, and passive participation), paving way to proving how strong the *experience economy* can truly be. Passive participation relates to sitting back to be entertained, while active engagement in an activity has the individual taking away learning from the experience. Absorption relates to the connection to the experience and what form of perception dominates; we are then immersed in a part of aesthetic and escapist experiences. Wellness tourism involves all four realms at different stages of the experience. As identified by Smith et al. (2014), "health, wellness and medical tourism services are in fact based on highly subjective and immaterial elements, completely involving guests during the consumption experience in a physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual way". Spa & wellness centers need to keep up with the changing of the times. They need a competitive edge, a brand, something that makes them distinctly unique from the rest. Often times, this includes incorporating elements of culture and heritage in service design, from traditions, products made from local resources, and locally sourced food. This is not only vital to their survival as wellness tourists demand cultural elements, but incorporating culture also helps create a stronger and more memorable experience during their visit (creating value through lived experiences). Offering services alone is no

longer enough; any spa can offer massages, facials, common body treatments and access to hydrotherapy. There needs to be a twist, an element of surprise, or something that sets it apart.

Koskinen & Wilska (2018) recognize that spas in particular are a key business within the wellness industry; wellness tourism is an active form of tourism, meaning that spa tourists are not only consumers of niche services, but are involved in creating their individual wellness experiences. They highlight that wellness tourists search for transformation, which is directly interlays with the experience economy. As they investigate the underlying factors influencing behaviors and attitudes of wellness tourists via surveys in Estonian and Finnish spas, they find that wellness desires are increasingly integrated with travel and quests for memorable experiences and self-transformation of mind, body, and spirit.

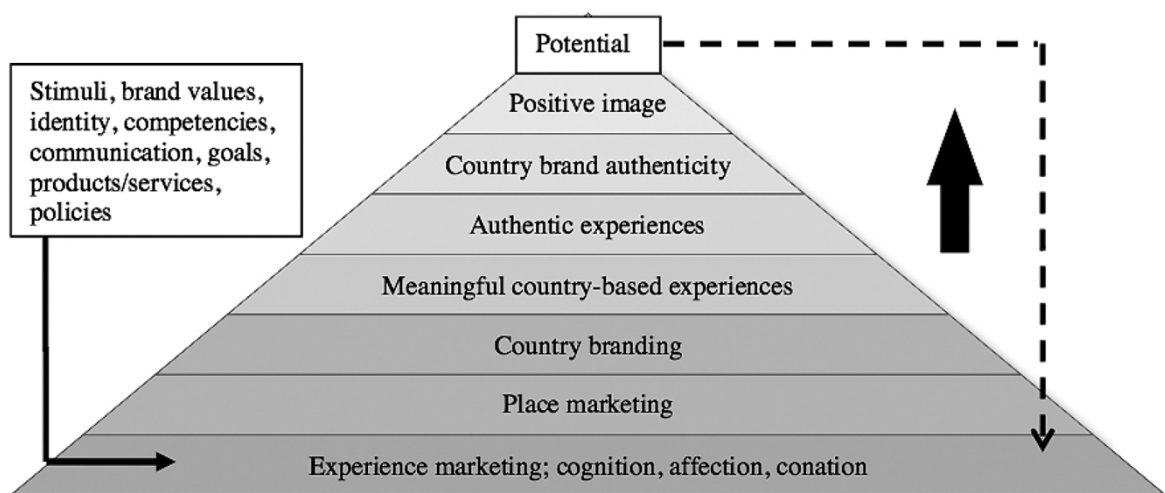


Figure 4: Model Indicating the Interconnections between Experience Marketing, Country Branding, Authentic Experiences, and Positive Image in Estonia (Same, 2014)

### 2.2.2 Sensory Embodiment

Spa & wellness experiences cannot be spoken of without mentioning the role of sensory embodiment. Sauna heat, warm and cold water, mud stimulation, oils on skin, steam, herbal teas, are all part of the experience that Estonian wellness centers create. In Estonian traditions, all senses are stimulated; there has even been a word created in Estonian to describe the sound and feel of *leil*, when water is poured on sauna rocks. Tourism (especially wellness tourism) constitutes one of the pioneering examples of the experience economy, as the entire journey of the tourist is experienced via experiencescapes (Agapito, Mendes, & Valle, 2013, p. 66). Researchers currently stress the importance of addressing and understanding the role of the body in the tourist experience, focusing on a holistic approach to sensescapes. This is a vital concept in tourist experience as I use my own body to participate in traditions, in turn documenting my visceral observations. In designing the tourist experience, including thoughtful sensory elements can benefit all parties involved: “although experiences are individual and internal, comprised of constant flow of conscious thoughts and feelings, they can be designed and co-created by the visitor and the host, making the experience more valuable to the consumer and consequently, benefitting the provider and the destination (Agapito et al. 2013, p.69).

As wellness tourists visit these centers to achieve wellbeing or a multidimensional state and a sense of well-being (Poluzzi & Esposito, 2019, p. 98), they undertake in sensory embodiment experience that awakens all five senses: sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste. These senses are of crucial important to the individual's experience of different purchase and consumption processes (Agapito et al. 2013, p. 64). Senses are historical, rather a product of place and especially time, so that how people perceive and understand them relate to their experience is connected to senses of place. These senses as scapes (sensecapes, soundscapes, tastescapes, smellscapes, etc.) help to enhance the positive tourist experience (p. 64). Sensory embodiment experiences help clarify the brand identity and image, and contribute to adding value to a customer. As Mossberg (2007, 2008) and Pine & Gilmore (1998) state, tourist experiences have raised the importance of stimulating the senses in order to reach the heart and mind of the tourist. Experiences must be memorable, competitive, and product emotions, the "consumption of emotion" (Poluzzi & Esposito, 2019, p. 99). However, at the same time, these memorable, unique, emotional and multi-sensory experiences can be accessed and manipulated using ritualistic and quasi ritualistic practices (p. 99).

## **2.3 Storytelling and Staged Experiences**

### **2.3.1 Storytelling, Themes, and Mindful Service Design**

Spa & wellness centers design their services mindfully and purposefully. Every step of the customer journey is considered: from the moment a guest steps foot in the door, the experience itself, and how it will create a long-lasting memory to be cherished once their journey had ended. Given the growing demand to intertwine these experiences with aspects of culture and heritage, services themselves must tell a story that moves the individual by encountering a staged experience. The concept of storytelling is extremely relevant in Estonia as cultural traditions (of all kinds) are embedded tightly in their heritage. From the Estonian language, folklore and song festivals, to wellness traditions, there is a story or theme beneath the surface. The existence of themes is what turns a service into a consumer experience; in creating a coherent experience, a destination can coordinate its services around a theme.

As tourists, the desire to collect "stories" underpins so many of our consumption choices: new experiences are sought in order to build memories, identities, and stories of social capital. Hence, wellness tourists can be seen as experience seekers. In our quests for unique and memorable transformations, rarer experiences and less-visited (or undiscovered places) boosts our interest to collect stories unknown to others, as it's simply more exceptional and valuable to us. The interrelatedness of culture and storytelling of traditions could be considered part of the "second generation" of the experience economy. As Kirilova et al. (2017, p.1) states, "In the contemporary marketplace, staged pleasurable and memorable experiences no longer constitute ultimate economic offerings because the market has evolved into the second generation experience economy in which unique and personally meaningful experiences are co-created by a firm and consumer. As co-consumers, individuals seek personal significance, a meaningful life, and fulfilling relations with others."

As this thesis is written in the angle of autoethnographic research, the concept of storytelling is an important element relating to the experience economy. Estonian traditions were explained to me in the form of stories; I also created my own story of the experience as I uncovered my research questions by observing, encountering, participating, and asking

questions. Moscardo (2020) developed a conceptual framework for stories in tourism, highlighting two specific opportunities for experience design: a design for experiences within specific activities (undergoing a tradition wellness treatment specific to the region); and a design for the experience of destinations as a whole (an authentically Estonian tradition, not region specific). Moscardo's features of entertaining and persuasive stories include perceived realism, narrative transformation, emotional engagement, and character identification/admiration. While this thesis does not aim to be "entertaining" but rather help solve a societal problem and fill in a knowledge gap, the journey through my findings touches on all of these elements in a story-like manner.

### **2.3.2 Staged (and Stages of) Experiences**

In order to create a well-rounded, multisensory experience that encompasses an embedded story of a cultural wellness tradition, the wellness center needs to recreate a staged version that becomes an individual ritual to the consumer. Each wellness center has its specific rituals, performed through the use of products of ingredients which offer real experiences to guests, partly aesthetically and partly emotionally (Poluzzi & Esposito, 2019, p.100). In Estonia, wellness traditions are based on elements found in nature. For example, in Southern Estonia, the use of peat (mud from swamps), birch, juniper, and hemp are common elements found in the region. For hundreds of years, Estonia have used these same elements as part of their everyday wellness rituals, forming the usage into a sound cultural tradition. Spas in the region use these traditions as an advantage in their service design (such as Kubija Nature Spa); this branding makes them unique, culturally relevant, and provides a one-of-a-kind experience into Estonia wellness.

Despite the authentic intentions when developing services that mirror these traditions, a wellness center still must carry out the ritual on a specific stage. In this case, the stage is typically inside a modern treatment room developed to meet the needs of any kind of visitor. A comfortable table, music, interior designs, diffused scents, dim-lighting, etc. Of course, there are exceptions to this standard, but generally speaking, all modern spas and wellness centers are structurally similar. This is in contrast to how the tradition is still practiced by locals, such as outdoors or in a wooden structure with no modern establishments. The visitor will never truly experience how the tradition is carried out in the rawest form, but rather a meticulously crafted version of the story to present the experience systematically. In this case, the services provided (a unique cultural treatment) are used as the stage, and goods (ingredients found in nature) are used as props to engage individual customers in a way that creates this memorable journey (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998, p. 98). As experiences are personal (occurring inside the individual's body and mind), the outcome depends on how the consumer contextualized by a specific situation and mood, reacts to the staged encounter (Agapito et al. 2013, p.65)

What the visitor (or tourist in particular, as the culture is unfamiliar to them) sees is only the "front-stage" of the tradition; the side that is presented and curated for them, sheltering them from the behind the scenes matters. They may never have access to the "back-stage" reproduction of the ritual by native Estonians: places out of tourists views, and where the team members (i.e. spa staff) can retire and prepare between performances. Moving through the initial work of Erving Goffman (1956), Dean MacCannell (1973) coined the concept of staged authenticity and elaborated on Goffman's work. MacCannell's account of back-stage tourism will be applied to my Estonian case study; tourists are invited into spas, wellness centers, and locally operated small enterprises and introduced to what is seemingly the "back-stage": the

reproduction of original, unchanged, and essentially authentic wellness traditions that are reproduced in the present. This is in contrast to the “front stage” where hosts and guests simply meet in a common space. Using the smoke sauna tradition of Võru as a leading example here, tourists are invited to experience an authentic, but yet branded ritual. What is *seemingly* the accessed back-stage by tourists (i.e. an Estonia tradition that would be used in raw daily life) has actually been brought back from the past and made to look as if it’s part of regular usage. In my research, I attempt to uncover the back-stage while posing as a tourist on the front-stage. I get inside access to learn about the origin of traditions, how they have naturally evolved, how wellness centers consider culture when creating their experience designs, and how they are reproduced present day for the masses to partake in, while simultaneously representation the “Estonian Way of Wellness”.

## 2.4 The Great Authenticity Debate

In direct relation to these staged experiences is the highly debated concept of authenticity. Poluzzi & Esposito (2019) boldly conclude in their research that spa & wellness operators should provide their guests with original and authentic rituals, as they are international businesses attracting international guests (p.102). This offers tourists the opportunity to experience a different culture and intercultural services, in turn establishing authenticity. Throughout my research, I repeatedly come into this question of authenticity and use it as a component in my essential research question. I’m quite interested in how cultural traditions are a product of tourist consumption, a spectacle that becomes inauthentic due to the ‘staged’ experience and expectations of tourists. On the other hand, if a culture once performed these traditions, and tourism allows them to be brought back to life, does this truly make them inauthentic? For example, was the desire to inaugurate the smoke sauna tradition onto UNESCO ICH a strategic attempt to enhance the experience economy side of tourism? There are several tours now offering smoke sauna experiences, mainly catering to groups for a set price. Will the funds be cycled back into the community to help these traditions stay alive, or are they mainly used to support new tourism prospects? How do local Estonians feel this contributes, or goes against, their traditions; are they proud to showcase these rituals, or are do they feel they’re becoming a spectacle for the masses? Do spa & wellness managers/hosts feel they are authentically upholding the traditions, or do they acknowledge they have consciously manipulated the reproduction, in turn perhaps degrading Estonian wellness culture?

It is first necessary to recall the longstanding authenticity debate in tourism research. Authentication is practically defined by Cohen & Cohen (2012) as “a process by which something; a role, a product, a site, an object or an event; is confirmed as original” (p. 102). However, as a general concept, authenticity’s ambiguity and limitations have been increasingly exposed, and critics question its usefulness and validity because many tourist motivations or experiences cannot be explained in terms of the conventional concept (Wang 1999, p. 349); authenticity is a complex concept with different manifestations (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Several scholars have worked through the debate on what authenticity is, how it interplays with tourism, and how the theory has evolved to keep up with the changing of the times and interconnectedness with identity. MacCannell coined the concept of *staged authenticity* (cultural practices that are deliberately modified and presented for tourists to be interpreted as real, from authentic origin). However, Eric Cohen (1988) argues that tourists are (to some degree)



aware that most experiences are somewhat staged, and not all are consciously seeking authenticity as an absolute truth.

As tourists are drawn to Estonia by the impressive marketing and cultural branding schemes, inviting tourists to experience wellness heritage while rejuvenating themselves in a one-stop-shop holiday, there is a presumption in this case study that most tourists are not all duped when experience something “authentic” for themselves. They hold some understanding that these traditions are staged and commodified for profit and are thus not an exact reproduction. Considering this evolution and development of the authenticity debate in tourism, Wang’s (1999) highly criticized concept of *existential authenticity* should also be considered. Existential authenticity provides a better lens to answer these questions in a practice-based view; authenticity should perhaps not be objectively categorized as authentic/inauthentic, but rather constructed individually by the person encountering the experience, and socially between the tourists and respective Estonians. Existential authenticity is a justifiable alternative to the two conventional meanings already firmly previously theorized: objective (the authenticity of originals, ‘real’, historically accurate) and constructive authenticity (projections on toured objects in terms of imagery, expectations, beliefs, etc.), thus an alternative source for authentic experiences in tourism (Wang 1999, p. 365).

Wang demonstrates how existential authenticity can explain a greater variety of tourist experiences, enhancing the *authenticity-seeking* model in tourism. Authenticity is highly relevant in ethnic, historical, and cultural tourism which involve representation of the “Other” or of the past. Existential authenticity ultimately goes against the shallow first order observation of authentic/inauthentic, and instead opens a new dimension that cannot be essentialized. Who has the authority to decide if something is authentic or not? It is a state of being that can be produced, re-produced, and pursued through tourism activities (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). The question is not to decide whether the tradition is authentic, but rather depends on the person viewing or experiencing the event. Tourists are not merely searching for authenticity of the Other, they also search for the authenticity of, and between, themselves on the intra and inter-personal level (Wang 1999, p. 364) during their staged multisensory journey. This theory challenges the post-structuralist formulation of authenticity, which assumes there is no truth to be known and that knowledge is contextual. Instead, a constructivist embodiment allows these tourists in Estonia to construct their own reality as determined by their own experiences in a second order observation; in essence, creating their own unique interpretation of “authentic” traditions. Authenticity does exist, as it may be a real notion to those undergoing the experience, but its definition and signification are subjective and sometimes socially constructed into multiple realities. In other words, co-constructed by painting the picture on the level of self, and then forming the reality.

Therefore, “authenticity” can be understood less as a theoretical label that denotes “reality” or “truth”, and more of a process for embedding objects (culture traditions and performances) and people, within networks of relationship. I examine these processes in this thesis. In tourist experiences, cultural significance is important as a guide to the *perception* of authenticity (Gilmore & Pine, 2007); tourists from different cultural backgrounds may feel the perceived authenticity of wellness services in a different way. Any spa can offer a sauna with tree leaves for whisking, but not all can provide the essence of this ritual practiced in Estonia. In wellness centers, tourists relate authenticity to loyalty, satisfaction and monetary value of the experience; thus, authenticity is an extremely significant concept for marketers (Poluzzi & Esposito, 2019, p. 102). They want to leave Estonia feeling changed, motivated, transformed,

or at least knowing they themselves had an “authentic” cultural experience. Therefore, authenticity is discussed greatly in both cultural and wellness tourism, it’s a topic in the spotlight as the second generation of the experience economy surfaces. In an essentialist view, authenticity is linked to object or culture, but in fact the essence of culture is emerging and not static. This is the case in Estonian wellness history as traditions have shifted throughout time. A hybrid view of authenticity (Chhabra, 2008), together with existential authenticity, is critically taken into account throughout this project.

## **2.5 Branding and Tourism Development: A Deliberate Strategy**

### ***2.5.1 History of Estonian Independence: The Struggle for Estonian Culture and Identity, “The Estonian Way”***

One must question the authenticity of such cultural reproductions considering the deliberate attempt to use tourism as a national development strategy. Estonia has purposely, and effectively, used tourism to re-brand its image and gain economic benefits from the increase in tourism. In all of the Baltic States, tourism is considered an important part of the economy after regaining independence in 1991. With this focus on tourism, Estonia has found unique ways to commodify their heritage while simultaneously (and indirectly) contributing to the preservation of traditions. Let’s first take a brief look at how and why this happened by exploring history, and how it relates to identity & heritage, wellness tourism, and cultural conservation.

Estonia is continuously celebrating its 100 years of independence; official celebrations occurred between 2017-2020, but when visiting the country in 2022, there are many signs, posters, and the general discourse proudly illuminating this feat. It’s a celebration that now occurs annually as the Republic celebrates its “restored” independence from thirty-one years ago (Visit Estonia, 2022). Each year, celebrations around the country commemorate the occasion, shining light on the pivotal events leading to this “second” independence: The Singing Revolution, and a human chain “The Baltic Way” (Visit Estonia, 2022).

Ten thousand years ago, the Finno-Ugric tribe settled along the Baltic Coast, creating the unique Estonian language and developing an outstanding culture that has persevered under several periods of foreign powers (Tammalu, 2016). Ruled at various times during the Middle Ages by Denmark, the German knights of the Livonian Order, and Sweden, Estonia ended up part of the Russian Empire in the 18th century (BBC, 2021). Estonia was determined to claim its own sovereignty and make its presence known in the world; the soon-to-be nation set up new universities, theatres, and governmental bodies; created its own unique music, art, literature, and cultural attributes, thus building its own economy (Tammalu, 2016). In 1918, Estonia claimed independence (physically in Pärnu), as an independent, democratic republic, but a peace treaty with Russia wasn’t signed until 1920 (BBC, 2019). This accomplishment was cherished by the Estonia people, and even strengthened their identity; after being conquered numerous times, they were finally free to practice their culture and re-affirm “Estonianness”. During this time, Estonians celebrated the well-known Singing Revolution, reaffirming their cultural roots that are deeply tied to progression of their heritage. They stood up for what they believed: the heritage of the Estonian people, the right to express their traditional ways. Estonian traditions (such as folklore, songs, and of course wellness from nature) are rooted in the Estonian culture but have been continuously suppressed until the grand moment of independence. Specifically in regard to wellness, nature protection was also tightly related to their

struggle for independence as many cultural traditions are deeply rooted and part of the identity of everyday practices considered “the Estonian way” (Cottrell & Cottrell, 2015, p.321). Following independence, Estonia grew, local society developed and cultural life flourished for the next 20 years (EU-Lisa, 2018). In 1944 during the Second World War, the new nation experienced cultural repression yet again as it was reannexed by the Soviet Union (BBC, 2019).

Re-annexation brought harder times than ever before as the Soviet republic essentially quelled the Estonian way of life; religion, culture and language were suppressed, and Estonians expressed their heritage behind closed doors on the familial level. Wellness traditions, such as the smoke sauna, were not allowed to be used in spiritual or ritualistic ways; meanwhile, the Soviet regime cherished some traditions (such as mud therapy) and used the natural resource and facilities to their advantage. The once booming thermal baths and seaside resorts of Estonia were overtaken by the regime, dedicating their usage to the health rejuvenation of high officials (Kask & Raagmaa, 2010). Outside of this realm, domestic and international tourism nearly prohibited due to strict regulations. Finally, in 1991 the Soviet Union fell and freedom was regained. The Ministry of Culture created the Estonian Tourist Board for implementation of government policies in tourism, and Estonia’s tourism industry has developed rapidly since then. “The Development Objectives of Tourism” was adopted by the government in 1992, declaring tourism a prioritized export area and thereby establishing the Tourism Development Council. Already by 1995, tourism services accounted for 20% in Estonia’s total export (Tooman & Mürstaja, 2014, p.3). By 2014, the *intensity* of international tourism was quite high with 1.4 foreign tourist per resident each year (despite relatively low *volumes*). According to a survey by the World Economic Forum in 2012, Estonia gained the 25th place among 139 countries for tourism competitiveness (Tooman & Mürstaja, 2014, p.1).

In a major turn towards its sovereignty and European integration, Estonia’s accession into the European Union was finalized in 2004, the Schengen zone in 2007, and the euro area in 2011 (Tooman & Mürstaja, 2014, p.1). Since their second independence, the Estonian people have been free to practice their culture, rediscover their roots, brand a new (original and ancient) identity, and incorporate tourism into their nation-building agenda as a development strategy along with (and also independently) the other Baltic States. Estonia was ready to be seen on the international stage.

### **2.5.2 Branding the Baltics: Uniquely Estonian Roots**

The Baltic States have successfully collaborated in tourism (especially promotion) for several years in an attempt to overcome the lack of a distinct image in the past, and to place the Baltics on the tourist map (Smith, 2015, p. 357). Each of the Baltic States aimed to be known by more than simply their Soviet past and capital cities (Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius); Leib, Rhoden, Reynolds, Miller, and Stone (2013) found that many people did not have an image of the rest of the country. While clustered together in the same region, each nation offers their own unique attributes and developed separate branding campaigns. The Estonian Institute “Enterprise Estonia” (EAS, now under direction of Visit Estonia), was the central agency responsible for managing the “Brand Estonia” campaign from 2007 to 2015. This campaign not only aimed to “sell” the country by showing the world who Estonia is and what it has to offer, but it also served as a nation-branding strategy to strengthen the identity of the Estonian people and heritage. Significant effort was put into nation-building efforts by means of tourism, with the construction of cultural heritage in the forefront. The Brand Estonia campaigns directly led to the creation of new tourist brochures that emphasized certain aspects of the national culture

while celebrating the richness of the country (Pawlusz & Polese, 2016, p. 874). In turn, the narratives these campaigns created asserted a detachment from the Soviet past and a rediscovering of “Estonianness”; a message was conveyed that helped enrich the narrative on national identity. In this construction, cultural heritage was strengthened, along with a well-defined attempt to establish the legitimacy of pre-Society identities; thus, tourism rhetoric revolves around the markers of an ethnic past with the aim of building a sense of historical and cultural continuity of the nation (p. 874). As Pawlusz and Polese (2016) point out, nation-branding and the construction of tourist sites have much in common; in both cases, states attempt to construct and market their image abroad. Branding, seen as identity politics, or commercial nationalism, shows how its authors imagine the state and nation and what came to represent it; branding campaigns (re)produce culturally embedded features of national identity and define the nation for locals (p. 876).

The Brand Estonia campaign initiative originated around the time of hosting the Eurovision Song Contest in Tallinn, 2002; this gave the country an opportunity to introduce themselves. Enterprise Estonia found it important to not only bring foreigners to Estonia and show them what life was like, but also go abroad and talk about Estonia to as many people as possible. The Brand Estonia campaign became an ongoing joint and integrated national marketing way to obtain greater recognition by means of few resources. The national image was crucial to build on the national identity, tourism, culture exports, policies, and foreign investments (Mändmets, 2010, p. 71-73).

Originally, the marketing concept developed in 2002 branding the first campaign *Positively Transforming*, and updated it in 2008 to *Positively Surprising*. Commissioned by the government, the first campaign sent the world a message that Estonia is in a peaceful transition and ready for positive change. It adopted the slogan “Welcome to Estonia”, strategically preceding EU accession and showcasing brand imagery via national airlines, ports, airports, and tourist sites (Pawlusz & Polese, 2016, p. 877). Once it proved this feat and indeed managed to surprise the world with its thinking, innovation, and development, the brand philosophy was updated yet again. With the help of expert workgroups and international consultants, *Introduce Estonia*. The campaign was evolving as the country gained recognition, and this new branding concept was aimed at foreign visitors; it gave access to key information about all of Estonia, enabling everyone to learn about Estonian stories, symbols, and in turn, the culture. “Estonia may be small in form, but it is rich in content. As a young country that is only emerging, it is important to introduce our riches to the world, since it enables us to preserve our uniqueness and is a strategic activity of national importance” (Mändmets, 2010, p.75). A big part of this mission was to further brand a sense of place and discover the roots of “Estonianness”; “Estonians have been living in their homeland for thousands of years. This is rare even in Europe, to say nothing of the rest of the world. We have faced disasters, rulers, wars and climate, but we prevailed. This gives us our historic heritage, which no-one else in the world has. There is some heroic romanticism in a sense of place. This gives us a unique language and traditions, but also makes us calculating and introverted.” (Mändmets, 2010, p.76).

*“A warm feeling deriving from the crisp Nordic nature and traditions dating back thousands of years fills hearts when simply travelling in Estonia. This is a country full of contrasts and surprises every step you take – not only for foreigners, but all for us. The more we perceive it, the stronger the feeling becomes and the deeper our roots grow.”* – Enterprise Estonia. Source: Pawlusz &

Polese, 2016

Tourism became one of (if not *the most*) important areas of the Brand Estonia campaign due to its wide and diverse audience; there was, and continues to be, a focus on international tourism in particular. International tourism proved a valuable tool to expose the rootedness of Estonian history, language, nature, but especially ancient culture, traditions and heritage. This mission echoes early post-Soviet national building which exposed national heritage in an attempt to reestablish a sense of identity and national pride; in contrast to the perception of Estonia as a young and fragile state, culture serves as a validation and anchor of the nation's ancientness, timelessness, and even Europeanness (Pawlusz & Polese, 2016, p. 878-879). The marketing strategy of "rootedness" establishes the validation of authenticity in their culture, creating an alluring dimension; it is therefore vital for tourists to experience something "truly Estonian", such as their 200 years of wellness traditions. This "rootedness" and ambitions of branding heritage appeal to the "tourist gaze" (Urry & Larsen, 1990); cliché expectations to encounter and experience something authentically local.

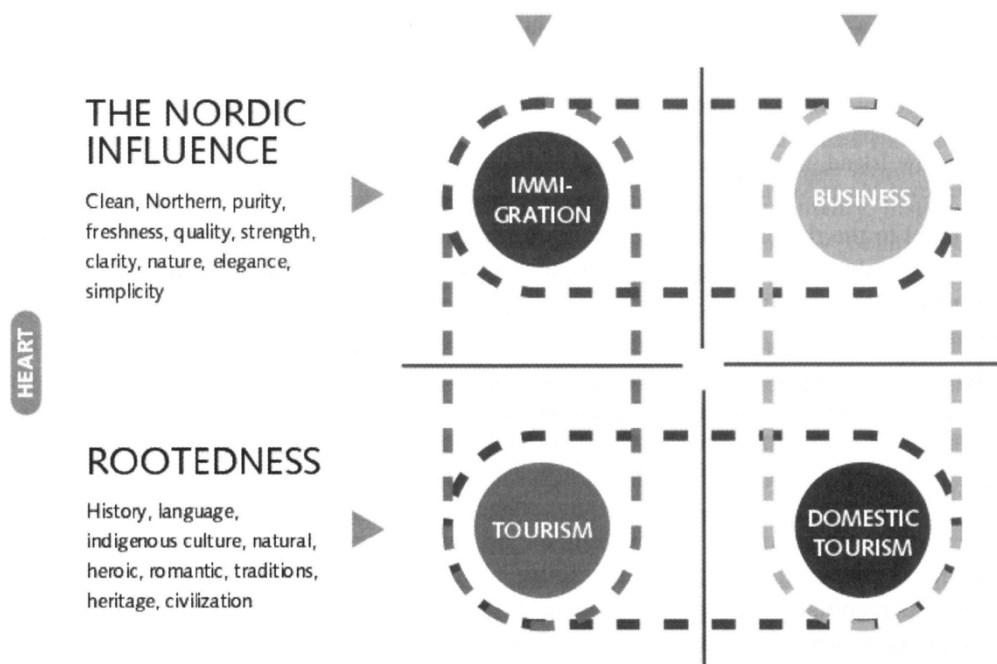


Figure 5: Enterprise Estonia's "Introduce Estonia" Marketing Concept for Tourism (Pawlusz & Polese, 2016)

Smith (2015) shows how the Baltic States deliberately created a tourism campaign to better market their spa & wellness tourism traditions and place the Baltics on the map as wellness destinations; the Baltic Health Tourism Cluster was established in 2013 (p. 357). The Baltic countries all have a long tradition of health tourism, from traditional thermal baths to rehabilitation centers and sanatoria, many of which are located along the Baltic Sea (i.e. Pärnu in Estonia and Jurmala in Latvia) (Smith, 2015, p.360). Partnerships via collaborations and clusters are discussed as approaches for sharing good practice, improving quality and branding means to improve the competitiveness of wellness tourism destinations (Cottrell & Cottrell, 2015, p.324). While the Baltic States have some commonalities in their wellness practices, each country has their own unique traditions. Estonia has incorporated health/wellness tourism as part of the National Development Plan 2014-2020, aimed at increasing international

competitiveness of the tourism sector and thus economic growth (Tooman & Müristaja, 2014, p.3); there was a national interest in developing a Baltic Tourism brand, but Estonia has shown its own distinctive health tourism resources and products. The country currently uses the slogan “Health Republic: Estonia 200 years of spa culture”; Estonia even proudly claims that no other country has as many spa hotels per capita (and the sector continues to grow). Today, Estonia still finds unexpected ways to market and brand their wellness sector; for example, in Helsinki and Riga you can find “spa trams” that allow you to easily find and book your favorite spa (Visit Estonia, 2022). The establishment of The Estonian Spa Association in 1996 and the Estonia Health Tourism Cluster in 2011 is further evidence of the branding of wellness tourism, directly following the essence of Estonian “rootedness” as shown by the Brand Estonia campaigns.

As Estonia has created (and continues to deliver) such strong branding campaigns, not only for showcasing the country as a whole but by marketing their entire wellness sector, it has successfully invited culturally curious tourists to discover their heritage. Wellness traditions are undoubtedly a key component in Estonian culture, branding their wellness sector as ancient, authentic, and central to the Estonian identity. In doing so, they are exposing “Estonianness” to the world, proudly showing what makes their culture distinctive and worth a visit to experience their unique way of life. However, there is a certain degree of exploitation as the country sells itself, and in particular, intentionally commodifying their wellness traditions to tourists.

## **2.6 Commodifying Heritage, Effective Preservation?**

### **2.6.1 Putting a Price on Estonian Heritage**

Central to my in-person fieldwork are visiting spas, wellness centers, and small tourism enterprises that also serve as businesses. In these facilities, culture is portrayed in a story-like manner, experienced, reproduced, and put on stage as the Estonia heritage of wellness traditions are exchanged for profit. Spas in particular are a luxury business where tourists can pamper themselves while experiencing the cultural stories, local products, and longstanding traditions themselves. As previously discussed, this plays into the experience economy of staged experiences. Estonian heritage is intentionally exploited, corresponding to the Brand Estonia campaigns, and essentially, heritage is actively commodified. The commodification of heritage emerges when a community’s culture, previously developing in tacit cultural practices, has moved from a self-regulating process to a consciously acknowledged commodity packaged and offered for tourist consumption, as, for example, in the construction of staged experiences (Bardone, Rattus, and Jäätis, 2013, p. 205). The process of commodification has been highly criticized due to its negative impact on the environment as well as on local people and culture (i.e. increasing economic and social inequalities, commercialization and touristification of traditions, etc.), with serious long term effects leading to the destruction of the place and community (p. 207). Commodification can lead to the degradation of culture, depletion of local resources, loss of the “traditional way of life”, and even cultural theft when profits are set as the first priority. While tourism may promote a renewed interest in traditional arts and social practices among local craftsmen and others, tourist purchases (let’s say a day visiting the smoke sauna in Võru) are often fueled by a desire to possess a mark, rather than any genuine interest in local cultural traditions or belief (Sherpard, 2002, p.185). Commodifying any aspect of a culture innately “others”; it involves ordering and re-ordering, categorizing the most valuable assets

and determining their essential intrinsic values while artificially labeling what is unworthy of consumption. To say the least, it's tricky to balance heritage and commercialization.

Authenticity is also highly debated by scholars in relation to commodification: tourism turns culture into a commodity, packaged and sold to tourists, resulting in a loss of authenticity (Cole, 2007, p.945). However, how is authenticity defined in this context, and to what extent do "authentic" reproductions matter? Is a reproduction ever authentic? Does a staged reproduction or copy always mean the tradition is degraded or not based on its origins? Commodification and its effects will be explored in the Estonian case, both empirically observed and also consulted during interviews. Have the reproductions of Estonian wellness traditions lost their authenticity to some degree? Does a loss of authenticity threaten the tradition or culture as a whole, as the main reproductions of these commodified elements are performed for tourist consumption? Has commodifying the wellness heritage diluted the Estonianness that the country so desperately wanted the world to see?

### ***2.6.2 Tourism as a Cultural Conservation Strategy***

Central to this thesis is the question if, and how, tourism is helping to keep these Estonian traditions alive. While commodifying culture can weaken heritage and hasten its degradation through exposure to tourism, it can have the reverse effect just as strong. Proponents of cultural involution have argued that cultural tourism can stimulate a revival of local interest in traditional cultural forms, thus both strengthening cultural bonds and providing local actors access to material benefits (Shepard, 2002, p.184). Culture is constantly in a flux state. It is evolving, progressing, and adapting to the changing of the times in this globalized world. While ancient traditions may still be practiced in the present day, the health and longevity of any such practice or production requires faithful replication. Perhaps the tradition can be adapted for modern day usage (i.e. a staged experience in spas and wellness centers), but it needs to be continuously reproduced to simply keep it alive. While there still may be questions to the integrity and authenticity of the tradition, the fact they are still produced serves a means of cultural preservation. Tourism can provide benefits not only for interested visitors, but for the resident population able to preserve their memories while improving cultural opportunities at the local level (Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

When properly managed, tourism may help communities stay aware of what to look out for in terms of keeping traditions alive; it can keep us aware of the dangers of losing the past in the push to move forward while also offering ways to use that past for progress. In some cases, tourism has become an intentional tool to preserve cultural heritage. In Estonia's case, it is clear tourism was used as a strategy to not only help the country economically and transformatively, but it was also used as a nation-building tool to re-validate cultural roots. The Brand Estonia campaigns helped to show the world "who we are", in turn firming the domestic population's sense of national belonging and perceptions of nationhood (Pawlusz & Polese, 2016, p.887). Heritage, ancientness, and cultural distinctiveness represent the nation not only in cultural, but also in political terms, making tourism further traverse nation-building (p.887). Cultural tourism can contribute to the understanding between people, or even consolidate

peace at the regional level, as well as the analysis of interactions between cultural visitors and local residents (Artal-Tur, 2017, p.180). The deliberate tourism marketing invites international tourists to experience the culture themselves, and in this way, it's helping to reaffirm the identity and Estonianness of the people.

By analyzing how Estonian tourism and nation-branding campaigns are symbolic places of identity production, tourism is seen as a strategy to develop the population's sense of national belonging and perceptions of nationhood (Pawlusz & Polese, 2016, p.886). This romanticized nationalism asserts feelings of uniqueness, a lust for ancient roots and authenticity, and a desire to showcase these traditions to "others" by inviting tourists in their world. The symbolism and emotionality of reproduced wellness traditions may strengthen the image of branding as a collective responsibility toward a national good, striving towards protecting these traditions from the threat of extinction. I further explore the notion of cultural preservation via tourism in my findings as I search for a deeper meaning behind the vitality of Estonia's wellness traditions.





## Chapter 3: Methodology, Approaches and Techniques

### 3.1 Methods Overview

This chapter goes into detail on the methodological approaches of this Master thesis. A detailed methodology section was needed as this thesis topic as a whole does not follow a routine design. This project is unique and therefore should be understood clearly before diving into the findings and analysis. First, there is an explanation on which research approach is applied and why it suits the project. In conjunction, there is a thorough explanation of the participant observation approach. Next, a story-like synopsis of the research partnerships shows how this topic was narrowed down and designed. An in-depth personal account provides insight on how the dates and itinerary for in-person fieldwork was selected, in addition to which spas and wellness centers visited, and how interviews participants were selected. An explanation as to how the analysis of data was determined: participatory observations and experiences, interviews, meetings, and tours. Finally, COVID-19 and Ethics statements conclude this section.

### 3.2 Qualitative Approach

This research project takes a qualitative approach in the form of a case study. A qualitative method was selected as it is generally based on the belief that people personally involved in a particular situation are best placed to describe and explain their experiences, feelings, and world view in their own words (Veal, 2007, p. 278). Qualitative research allows for flexibility to uncover others' opinions, beliefs, motivations, particularly in relation to interviews, personal experiences, and encounters. Unlike quantitative methods, this research was not quantified, structurally surveyed, or measured with indicators. Empirical data was gathered by means of recorded, semi-structured interviews, tours, meetings, follow-up discussion, and personal observations of the researcher. Within this qualitative method, a modern cultural geography approach within the discipline of Human Geography was the foundation of this project as it looks at how tourism is shaped and understood through complex relationships found in society. Cultural traditions are socially constructed through ongoing social interactions. Due to this, these behaviors are not quite quantifiable, but are more relative to culture, time, and place. Culture itself is conceived as a fluid, flexible, and dynamic process that actively constructs society, rather than simply reflecting it (Castree, Kitchin, Rogers, 2013, p.273).

### 3.3 Participant Observation

In this research project, I became a participant in the social process being studied. Participant observation is a key ethnographic tactic in this Master thesis. In essence, it leads to the very questioning of the objectivity of the researcher, the status of the observation of social phenomena and the scientific and ontological standing of social research (Goodson & Phillimore, 2004, p. 150). This method attempts to understand the everyday lives of other people from their perspective, requiring researchers to situate themselves in the lives of others and allow their voices and actions to influence the researcher (Bennett, 2001, p. 5). It proceeds along two trajectories: finding a setting where the social or cultural issue the researcher wishes to study is happening and becoming intimate with the group in that setting; and researchers

themselves change how they understand the setting and its inhabitants (Clifford et al., 2016). In other words, I place myself physically in the research as an inside observer in Estonia to fully encounter the sites of where wellness traditions originated and are reproduced today. I experience the places and *genius loci* in which they occur as I learn the history and background from locals and wellness center personnel. I experience the traditions themselves, using my body as a visceral template for immersion in the sensory embodiment ritual. This enables opportunities for observing everyday tourism activities and for in-depth dialogue between myself and subjects (i.e. other tourists, interview participants, locals). "Participant observations requires a profound level of introspection on the part of the researcher with respect to his or her relationship with what is being researched and how the process of 'Othering' takes place" (Goodson & Phillimore, 2004, p. 150).

There is a choice to disclose my researcher status to others whom I encounter. On the one hand, declaring that I am a researcher may provoke thoughtful and insightful discussions and a chance for more detailed conversations to flow as the purpose of my research is exposed. On the other hand, remaining incognito often allows others to speak their mind more freely on a given subject, as they do not know they're being observed and strategically approached. Between mud wraps, saunas, whisking, and herbals baths, I chose to experience these traditions just as a normal tourist would. While it was physically exerting to endure so many rituals in the same period, it gave me insight that I would not otherwise have had. This approach embraces a range of fieldwork experiences with researchers adopting different roles and levels of participation depending upon the demands of the research context (Bennett, 2001, p. 6). Research for this thesis would be incomplete without my deployed ethnographic participant observation method.

### 3.4 Data Collection

Data was gathered and analyzed by means of triangulation, referred to as multiple measures to capture a construct (Heath, 2015, p.638). As previously mentioned, participant observation is a key method of this thesis. In conjunction with personal observations, previous literature and data on Estonian wellness, concepts and theories, interviews, tours, and casual discussions were all used to report findings, interpretations, and ultimately a critical analysis.

In total, over seven hours of audio recordings were carefully analyzed by listening and partially transcribed using Atlas.ti, a software for qualitative data analysis. Data was selectively coded, compared to find major similarities or differences between interview results. This was rather difficult to do, as interviews were at minimum one hour long and flowed in a conversation or story style, rather than straightforward questions and answers. Detailed notes were taken while playing each interview, and personal notes from my own experiences and observations were cross-checked. It should also be noted that formal interviews were conducted *after* my own personal experiences after undergoing the wellness traditions myself. This allowed me to ask pertinent questions during interviews and speak easily with background knowledge. Therefore, during analysis of these interviews there was no confusion on the topic in question.

During my personal experiences and observation, around 250 photos were taken to document the journey. I took notes several times during the day as I was able. Of course, during treatments or in the spa facilities in general (i.e. where the hydrotherapy or saunas are found) I was not allowed to bring my phone for recordings or photos due to privacy reasons. I

kept a notebook with me at all times and wrote notes each time I talked with someone (either wellness center personnel, other tourists undergoing the same experience, or locals). Sometimes this method required me to leave the immediate area, return to a locker where my belongings were located, and write notes accordingly. As most wellness guests did not know I was a researcher (only the management), I was given odd looks or questioned, to say the least. Instead of writing complete paragraphs, often times I wrote key words, themes, or paraphrased things other guests said to me. These notes and photos were essential for my empirical observations, thus they were analyzed critically while transcribing interviews.

### **3.5 Research Partnerships (*Internship*)**

Concrete partnerships in Estonia were necessary to begin this project. Initial contact was made with Visit Estonia in January 2022 to establish a partnership with the official tourism board. Visit Estonia carries a prestigious name and can be found on almost any tourism website related to culture, accommodation, travel, activities, and of course spa and wellness centers around Estonia. Marketing Manager Kristiina Talisainen was my initial contact, who led me to Anneli Haabu, Head of Strategic Development. Anneli and I together decided on my exact research topic. As Visit Estonia discovered my passion for spa & wellness traditions, it was mutually decided that I would research Estonian spa & wellness cultural traditions in relation to tourism, as this was something *not* commonly studied by other Master student researchers. Visit Estonia (together with Enterprise Estonia) also conveyed to me that my research findings could potentially be used for future tourism campaigns or cultural projects.

Anneli connected me to the Estonian Spa Association to have deeper discussions with CEO Aire Toffer. Although extremely busy in her role, Aire was able to offer support and specifically explain the business management side of Estonia's wellness sector. From this point on, both organizations became my direct partners, along with The University of Tartu (program manager Kai Tomasberg, Master of Wellness and Spa Service Design Management at the Pärnu campus), of which all parties recommended me to.

Both organizations and the University assisted me tremendously with all aspects of my research: from finding resources of information and historical backgrounds, to learning about the traditions, cultural nuances, the spa & wellness centers themselves, and helping to make the appropriate contacts at centers to arrange in-person visits and interviews. Although I did not have a direct "supervisor" per se, the main contact who helped guide me along the way was Ave Pill, Project Manager at Enterprise Estonia (an institution of Visit Estonia). Formerly, Ave was the Sales and Marketing Manager of ESTONIA Spa Hotels in Pärnu for six years before her current role at (Enterprise) Visit Estonia. Ave generously helped me reach out to spa managers and confirm interviews as she personally knew nearly all spa or sales managers at well-known centers where tourism thrives. She also helped with some translation in two in-person interviews, a tour of ESTONIA Spa Resort, and additional talks with me while both in Pärnu and after my Estonia trip.

### 3.6 Date Selection and Itinerary

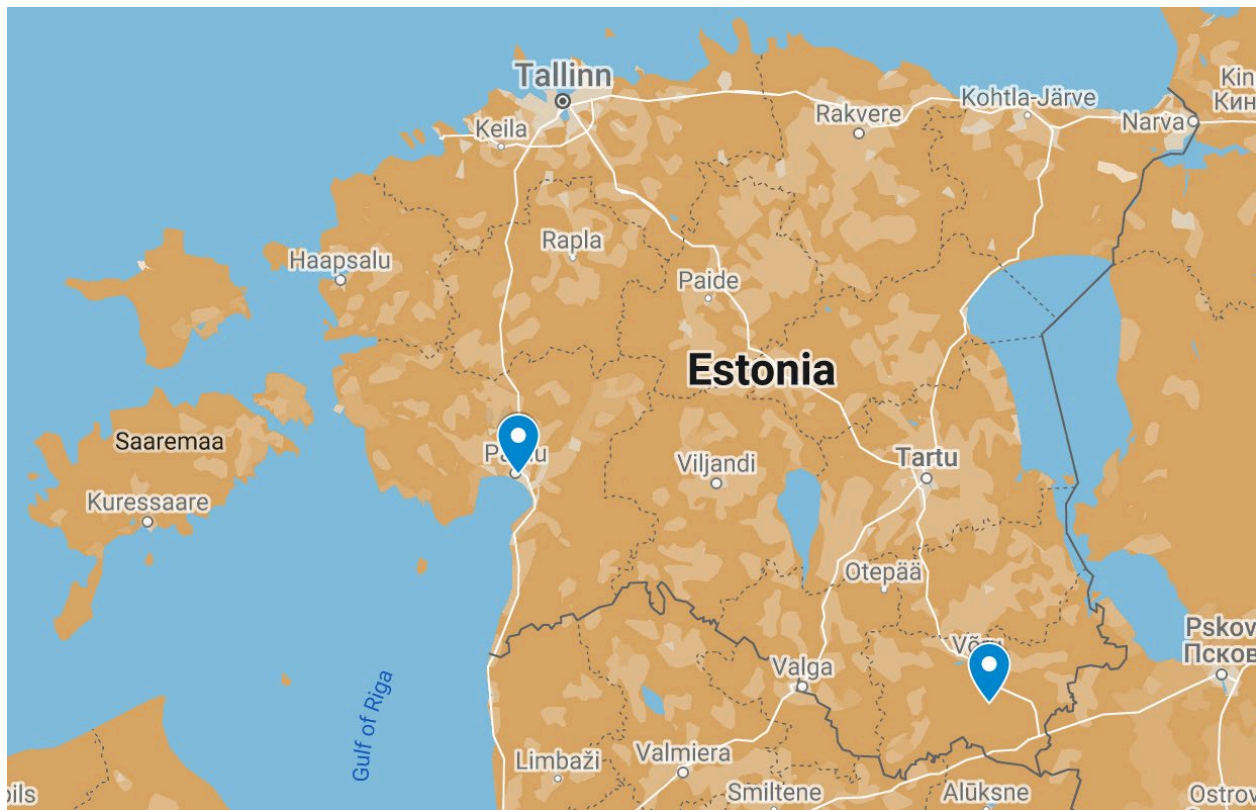


Figure 6: Map of Estonia with marked research locations, Pärnu and Võru (Author's creation on Google Maps, 2022)

When planning in-person research to Estonia in the summer of 2022, careful consideration was given to the dates selected and destinations within the country. The months of May, June, July, and August were initially considered as this was peak tourism season in Estonia. This was beneficial for two main reasons: first, the tourism season means most spas, wellness centers, and even smaller tourism enterprises are fully open with nearly all services available to tourists (in contrast to the winter season and shoulder months where there is a drop in tourists). A variety of wellness centers needed to be open in order for me to properly select the ideal ones to visit. It was vital to involve myself with experiencing the wellness traditions via participant observation. There would be significant limitations to my empirical observations if I had a small selection to choose from, or if some part of wellness centers were closed for the season. Second, as this research directly relates to tourism, it's best to conduct in-person fieldwork when tourists are plentiful. The opportunity to converse with other tourists undergoing the same services or experiencing the same traditions/rituals was valuable. Thus, a visit during the summer season ensured that I would encounter plenty of tourists, a convenient sampling to discover their thoughts on Estonian wellness traditions (i.e. how they chose Estonia, the particular service or ritual opted for, if they knew the origin of the tradition or perceive it as authentic, etc.) July was ultimately selected as the ideal month to conduct this research.

Given the relatively small size of the country, a two-week visit around different regions in Estonia was feasible. As no funding had been provided for this research, two weeks was also an ideal time to independently sustain the necessities for fieldwork (i.e. accommodation, transportation). The destinations in Estonia were meticulously selected over a three-month period prior to the journey with the help of Visit Estonia, The Estonian Spa Association, The

University of Tartu, and other key individuals affiliated with Estonian wellness traditions (i.e. locals contacts who own small tourism enterprises). Initially, I used Visit Estonia's official Spa Trail Map published online (Figure 7) as a guide. This map shows a variety of wellness centers around the country, breaking them into color-coded categories of City Spas, Wellness Spas, Eco Spas, Saunas in the countryside, and Sauna centers. This visually appealing map at first seemed like a great resource, even a database of Estonian spa and wellness centers. It features geographic borders and key regions in Estonia from the coasts, to forests, and even the islands in the Baltic Sea. However, after careful examination and outside research, I determined what was *not* listed on this map was just as important as what *is* shown. While this map may exist and serve as a helpful resource for new Estonia travelers seeking an easy selection of spa and wellness locations and categories, this map by itself does not explain which of them may offer traditionalized services or insights into culture (services offered with traditional Estonian wellness roots).



Figure 7: Visit Estonia's "Spa Trail" Map. Source: Visit Estonia, 2021

All maps are indeed political (and even geopolitical) and not objective nor neutral. This is evident when considering the author of the map (Visit Estonia, the official tourism organization of Estonia); what hidden agendas may lie underneath the surface (profitable marketing strategies, insider network connections, strategic steering of the masses to better guide flows of tourists throughout the country, etc.) Yet, I kept this map as a baseline during this preliminary investigation to use as a tool in three ways: 1) to eliminate wellness centers that were *not* advertising traditional Estonian treatments or services on their websites; 2) to become acquainted with the wellness centers Visit Estonia is showcasing to tourists; 3) to use in my analysis when understanding wellness tourism trends in Estonia.

Using the knowledge gained from this map, I went over itinerary options with Kai Tomasberg and Ave Pill. It was mutually agreed *not* stay in the capital city, Tallinn, as wellness traditions did not originate there. Pärnu (Western Estonia) was ultimately the best destination to visit due to the wellness history and traditions, and the proximity to the sea where curative mud is found. In 2019, Pärnu was also chosen as the best health and wellness tourism destination in Estonia by EDEN (European Destinations of Excellence) (Visit Pärnu, 2019), making it an obvious choice for research. The island of Saaremaa in the Baltic Sea was also considered, but

due to time restrictions and similarities of traditions with Pärnu (therapeutic mud), it was decided Saaremaa would be redundant for this trip. As Pärnu is home to many wellness centers, I was advised there would be no issues with having several interviews while experiencing traditions for myself. The second mutually agreed destination was Võru (Southern Estonia) due to both the smoke sauna heritage, and also for the nature spa center. Southern Estonia has different traditions than Western, and thus gives a broader perspective of traditions. As the smoke sauna tradition is a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, every single contact pointed me in the direction to visit the smoke saunas at Mooska Farm where the “guardian” of the tradition would host me. Visiting Värksa to the (south) east was also briefly mentioned, but quickly dropped as the border situation was still uncertain. Therefore, the first half of my research trip would be spent in Pärnu, and the second half in Võru (see Figure 6). Tallinn was used only for the international airport and picking up a rental car.

### 3.7 Spa and Interview Selection

During conferences with Kai Tomasberg and Ave Pill, we generated a list of preferred spas and wellness centers to contact in Pärnu and Võru to schedule in-person visits and interviews. The first task was to select the category of wellness centers. In Estonia, there are two main classifications: spa and wellness treatment centers, and medical wellness centers. At a typical spa and wellness treatment center (also informally known as just “spas” or “sauna”) host hydrotherapies, saunas, “softer” services, and treatments such as massages and baths, with no doctors or medical personnel present. These treatments are meant for leisure, enjoyment, relaxation, and simply to help the body and mind recover from the everyday stressors of life.

On the other end of the spectrum, medical centers (formerly known as sanatoriums during the Soviet period), host ‘harder’, more intense treatments assisted and monitored by doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel. Treatments are meant to help ease the symptoms of medically diagnosed illnesses and provide physical relief. Medical spa status must be granted as a form of certification; so far, only seven medical wellness centers have attained such a status (Estonia Spa Association, 2022). For this paper, it was decided to focus on spa and wellness treatment traditions and not *solely* medical ones. Although, it is recognized there is some overlap with both sides of the traditions, as both categories ultimately target visceral rejuvenation by use of earthly Estonian elements (curative mud, water, herbs, etc.) Some wellness centers host a combination of both wellness treatments and medical services, with a distinction between the two. For example, ESTONIA Resort in Pärnu distinctly categorizes itself between a wellness treatment center, and a medical center (Spa Estonia, 2022; Estonia Spa Association, 2022).

Between the above mentioned sources in Estonia, whom all have both professional and personal backgrounds of Estonian wellness traditions, spas and wellness centers were selected based on the following criteria: a) the center currently offers a form of a traditional Estonian service, treatment, or product; b) the center has a historic component of Estonian culture (i.e. location, infrastructure, historic significance, etc.); c) the center *does not exclusively* offer only medical wellness services (sanatoriums); d) the center openly markets to and attracts tourism from both Estonian and international travelers (services and treatments explained in at least Estonian, Russian, Finnish, or English, a hotel package component is optionally offered for guest accommodation); e) the center is endorsed by Visit Estonia as their website is a primary source for many tourists.

Before a final selection was made, it should be made known there was a preference given to preliminary exclude Eastern Estonia, as the spa and wellness centers there are situated on the Russian border. Given the times of uncertainty of this war with Russia and Ukraine, and the border dispute between Estonia and Russia (including increased propaganda), I was advised not to venture to the east *at that time*. Instead, Estonia's northern, western, central, and southern regions were considered "safe" for travel in July 2022. While I tried to remain neutral and not to categorize the eastern part of Estonia by labeling it as 'dangerous' or 'risky', the other Estonian regions turned out to naturally be a better selection for my research as several wellness traditions originated in those regions.

In Pärnu there are currently nine spa & wellness centers, six of which were considered for observation and interviews. The other three were not considered as they mainly host waterparks and conferences geared for families, groups, and business trips; these components are not concerning for this project. The remaining six all offered at least one major traditional Estonian wellness treatment and made up a great overall sample of historic, modern, and culture-based centers. Two of these centers were branded with the same name: ESTONIA Resort and ESTONIA Medical; Wasa Resort and Wasa Medical. As this research is not focusing solely on the medical aspects, it was enough to select only the resort sides as they host the sauna/spa, treatment, and wellness elements of traditions. Thus, four spa and wellness centers were chosen:

- ESTONIA Resort Hotel & Spa: inspired by Estonian traditions
- Hedon Spa & Hotel: located in the historic Mud Baths building
- Tervis Medical & Wellness Spa: Estonia's largest medical spa hotel with a wellness component and cultural center
- Wasa Resort: Pärnu's newest spa with the most modern rapport

In Võru, there are several smaller spa & wellness centers quite spread out and interwoven in nature. Many of them are known only by locals and do not have the capacity or designated marketing for international tourism. As this thesis revolves around the relationship with tourism (primarily international tourism), it was best to explore a wellness center that is well-known for tourism while still incorporating elements of Southern Estonia's traditions. Three spa & wellness centers were recommended to me by Visit Estonia, but only one had the desire to participate in this research project: Kubija Hotel & Nature Spa, known for their nature-based treatments that promote relaxation in holistic ways through traditions of Estonian nature.

Finally, Mooska Farm was on the top of everyone's list for me to research as the owner and hostess, Eda Veeroja, has been known as the guardian for safekeeping the dying smoke sauna tradition. This tradition is even referred to as "the most Estonian you can get" when Estonians speak generally about their oldest wellness traditions. Eda is a local to the Võru region and spearheaded the UNESCO ICH idea, carrying it through to completion. Her Mooska Farm business is a tourism enterprise that spreads awareness about the tradition, and I was told by each of my partners that exploring her farm, speaking with Eda (both informally and formally in an interview), and an experience with the sauna was an absolute must for this project. I approached Eda myself to confirm a date to meet. The other interviews, tours, treatments, and wellness center access was coherently arranged by Visit Estonia and Kai Tomasberg, and followed up myself to establish a personal connection.



Overall, six semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with spa, sales or marketing managers (at Mooska Farm, with Eda herself). These interviews were audio recorded and complemented by at least one planned tour. In addition, three informal, unrecorded and unstructured "interviews" were conducted in the form of talks in Pärnu with Ave Pill, Kai Tomasberg, and academic Heli Tooman.

### 3.8 COVID-19 Statement | Research During the Pandemic

Prior to in-person research, I had an extremely difficult time reaching contacts at Visit Estonia and the Estonian Spa Association. At certain moments, I was told some people were out of the office sick or working from home due to personal reasons. As I discovered later on, COVID was a major reason for receiving extremely delayed replies, and I needed to send multiple emails/calls to get one answer. I was sick with COVID myself in March and also delayed this project for three weeks while I fully recovered. It was a rough start, but by late Spring I was in full contact with nearly everyone.

Fortunately, at the time of in-person research there were no entry restrictions for Estonia whatsoever for travelers arriving from European countries (no testing, vaccination requirement, or quarantine). This means travel to Estonia was fully accessible and I faced no obstacles, just as it was before the pandemic. Furthermore, Estonian spas and wellness centers have implemented the COVID-19 safety label; awarded to spas by the respective regional tourism boards (i.e. Visit Estonia, Visit Pärnu, The South-Estonian Tourism Cluster), the safety label ensures centers have met the requirements and instructions of the Government of Estonia and the Health Board of Estonia to keep up to date with information, and help visitors comply with the infection-prevention guidelines on site (Kriis.ee, 2022). This safety label allows centers to operate normally without reduced functions, services, or capacity. Therefore, COVID-19 did not hinder this project while conducting my empirical research, but indeed delayed the start of the communication.

### 3.9 Ethics Statement

Being an ethical geographer is crucial as it helps protect the people and places affected by our research, and ensure we are able to continue to conduct socially and environmentally valuable work (Clifford et al., 2016). As a researcher, I had no personal conflicts with this project that jeopardize the data or results. I also have no personal connection to Estonia, other than a strong curiosity for the culture. I followed the principles of ethics behavior as outlined in *Key Methods in Geography (2016)* as a guide prior to commence research: consent, confidentiality, harm, cultural awareness, and dissemination of results/feedback to participants (p.35).

General consent to participant in the research project was obtained from all parties prior to interviews, tours, and discussions. All interviews were conducted voluntary and given the choice of opting out at any time. Interviewees were also asked if their names, position, professional data (i.e. spa hotel data), and personal stories could be used in this research project. The option was explicitly given to remain anonymous or to exclude certain information. Permission to record interviews, tours, and meetings was asked verbally prior to recording. In addition, interviewees were offered a written consent form in lieu of verbal confirmation, in which they could indicate what to include or exclude from the interview (i.e. recordings, personal stories, opinions, etc.). I advised data (notes, recordings, photos, and other voluntary

information given) would be stored only on my own computer for personal use until the thesis is submitted and accepted by Radboud University, at which point it would also become University property. I also advised that upon submission, data could not be retracted, but the University could be notified of any concerns. All participants were informed they may contact me at any time to discuss the project, ask questions, give additional information, or simply with a friendly follow-up gesture. Finally, they were advised project results would become available to them upon acceptance by the University.

In this project, I also did my best not to other, subjectify, order, essentialize, or categorize the Estonian people and culture (specifically heritage and cultural traditions). Culture is a sensitive topic to discuss as it has disparate meanings for each individual. However, I recognize that it's difficult to remain neutral in an autoethnographic project on cultural geography, especially by means of participant observation methods. My analyses are a reflection of my own subjectivity, but serious effort was put forth to remain ethical, professional, academic, and empathetic.



## Chapter Four: Findings, Analysis, and Discussion

### 4.1 Insight on Estonian Wellness

Estonia: unspoiled nature, clean air, sandy beaches, untouched forests...and a complementary 200 years of spa culture to match. Estonians have inhabited northeastern Europe for millennia and have picked up ancient folk wisdom along the way to stimulate both their bodies, souls, and spirits in harsh Northern conditions (Visit Estonia, 2022). Today, Estonia is known as a leading wellness destination, a place where culture is rich and traditions are highly respected. Often times when we think of Estonian wellness, the first thing that comes to mind is the sauna (also known as the Finnish Sauna). However, Estonian wellness is so much more than this. Sauna rituals, fasting, the use of medicinal plants and herbs, mud therapy, water treatments, salt therapy, clay, ancient massages, nature-based wellness, and medical spa treatments are just few of the traditional elements found in Estonian wellness culture. As part of Estonia's (re)branding strategy from the early 2,000s, wellness tourism has become a proud element of Estonia's economy. It offers not only a way to show their unique culture to the world, but also a way to actively re-live the practice of ancient traditions. Estonians believe in the healing powers of nature; combining ancient traditions with innovative modern treatments, Estonian spas celebrate the best of old and new in wellness, with each aiming to offer something different to entice their guests through unique experiences. These multi-sensory journeys tell a story about Estonian heritage and provide transformative rituals for (especially foreign) tourists to remember. Estonia's message has been clear: come experience our culture, you will find it "Positively Surprising".

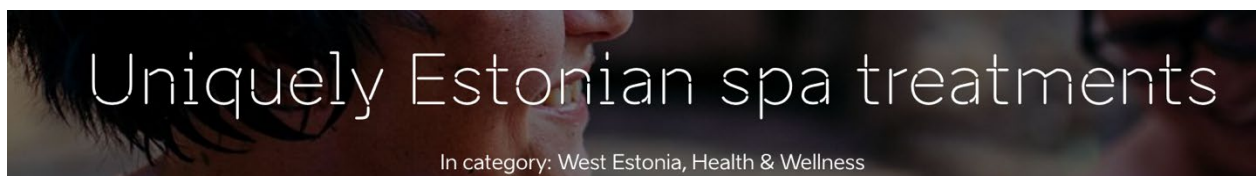


Figure 8: Snapshot of Visit Estonia's list of "Uniquely Estonian" spa treatments across various wellness centers (Visit Estonia, 2021)

The popularity of today's spa and wellness centers are a reflection of traditions and historical developments in Estonia's wellness tourism. Wellness centers can be found all around the country, with two top destinations being Pärnu in the west on the Baltic Sea, and Võru to the southeast in the depths of forests along the Russian-Latvian border. The marketing for wellness experiences is strong and can be found virtually on any Estonian website, such as Visit Estonia. "Culture" is always mentioned in tandem with wellness traditions. From enticing advertisements inviting others to experience the "Estonian Way of Wellness" (e-wow concept, developed by Ave Pill), "Uniquely Estonian" treatments, to the UNESCO smoke sauna tradition of Võru, these traditions have been portrayed an integral part of the Estonian culture as if they hold the holy grail of authenticity. Wellness visitors have simultaneously become cultural tourists, experiencers of these mysterious traditions. Why is there an emphasis of such traditions, is there a threat to their existence if they were not promoted as crucial components to experience? I embarked on my own journey to Estonia to find out. In Pärnu, I visited four well-known wellness spas, interviewing the most knowledgeable and well-known Estonians in the industry

(managers and academics) to gain insight. In Võru, I visited one nature spa, and the now famous smoke sauna located in the notable farm that started its UNESCO initiative.

## **4.2 Western Estonia focus, Pärnu: Capital of Estonian Wellness Traditions**

### ***4.2.1 Intro to Pärnu: History and Background of a Leading Wellness Destination***

In Estonian wellness culture, the town (and county) of Pärnu is arguably the most famous destination; it is often the first place Estonians mention when discussing their wellness culture, as it has led to the formation of modern-day resorts and facilities. Pärnu has become the most visited vacation and health resort town in Estonia, and the second most popular tourist destination (behind Tallinn). The history of spas in Estonia expands over more than two centuries, with Pärnu being a vital component to development. Pärnu is not just considered the birthplace of Estonia as a nation, but the birthplace of Estonian resorts: subsequently, it's also "Estonia's Summer Capital", and the green town of health! Today, the biggest cluster of wellness centers are found practically next to each other in Pärnu, lining the Baltic Sea. A brief history is needed in order to uncover how Western Estonian traditions originated within historic legacies, and why they are vital to the culture. The below historical account is a compilation of knowledge gained from my observations and talks with locals in Pärnu, visits to historical centers and spas, meetings with Visit Estonia (Ave Pill) and Pärnu College (Kai Tomasberg) in the center of Pärnu, and also books acquired about Pärnu's history, published by the local government.

In Pärnu's history, the strategically important location on the east coast of the Baltic Sea brought it face to face with different cultures. Through many twists and turns throughout history, the Estonian people have fought to keep their language and ancient cultural roots of the region. The first written documents of Pärnu date from the year 1251, when it was one of the most important strongholds of the Teutonic Order in Livonia and also a Hanseatic town. Trade became one of the most important influences as was a main seaport on the east-west trade routes. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Pärnu had turned into a baroque fortress town. With the most modern fortifications in all of Livonia, the town was used to protect the domains of the Swedish kingdom. Following The Northern War ending in 1721, Pärnu became a sea fortress, protecting the western border of the Russian Empire until 1835 when the resort era emerged (Kask, 2010, p.25).

Already in 1820, Dr. Abraham Hunnius, a county physician, began treating the local population in a nearby town (Haapsalu) with a popular medicine: sea mud. He analyzed and tested the new method of curative mud therapy (pelotherapy), and results looked promising. In 1825, the first hydro and pelotherapy establishment was built on the coast of Haapsalu under his initiative, and Pärnu also quickly adopted this as the curative sea mud was plentiful in the bay. This gathered attention of the Russian czars and members of the imperial household (Kask & Raagmaa, 2010, p.165). Water and mud therapy became wellness traditions that still stand in Pärnu's spas today. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, upper-class Europeans enjoyed the culture of sea-bathing; this reached the shores of the Baltic Sea by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, thereby prompting the creation of seaside resorts in the Baltic States. The development of resorts was promoted by the therapeutic nature of the climate, seawater, and sea mud, backed scientifically as beneficial for health. A group of local businessmen persuaded the town council to allow them to convert a seaside tavern into a great bathing establishment; this encouraged the spread of both sea bathing and baths from the "cure", turning this phenomenon into

something more substantial (Worthington, 2003, p.371). The first privately-owned bathing facility of Pärnu opened in 1838, thus establishing its first “resort”: seawater baths and sea bathing was offered in the summer, and the facility worked as a sauna in the winter. For a few decades, the private bathing facilities remained a relatively local phenomenon; around 1882, the city council gradually began to involve itself with town planning and attempted to organize Pärnu as a summer vacation area. Due to poor connections (i.e. rail, roads), Pärnu experienced economic instability but still had local visitors and some nearby tourists (150 holidaymakers per season from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Livonia, and Estonia). The regular service of steam ships helped tourists from Riga easily reach Pärnu (Worthington 2003, p.371). The privately owned facilities flourished despite poor connections, and lead to the development of the town as a whole (Kask, 2010, p.26).

By 1890, a new modern bathing facility was opened as the town council dramatically improved the town, leading to Pärnu existing on the list of Russian imperial resorts. This recognition made the town blossom: green areas, avenues, sports grounds, bowling alleys, cycling lanes, playgrounds, villas, expanded beaches, etc. Rannapark was the area where the summer vacation life concentrated, and where deeper traditions formed. The town council published advertisements in the larger newspapers of Moscow and St. Petersburg in an effort to generate tourism. Tourists increase dramatically: from 100 in 1890, 800 in 1898, to 2,500 in 1908 (Kask & Raagmaa, 2010, p.166), and 3,000 in 1910 (Worthington, 2003, p.371). 1910 marked a prosperous year of finished renovations to bath houses, and the total number of baths taken doubled to 12,000 per annum (Worthington, 2003, p.372). This growth in tourism was prompted not only by the prestige of the marketed Pärnu resort town with the mud “cure” therapy, but by developments in transport, especially rail routes (Worthington, 2003, p.372). Even prior to World War I, the town of Pärnu set out a goal to turn into a premier European health resort. The local authorities of both Haapsalu and Pärnu began heavily marketing their towns and promoted holiday areas and heritage elements that later became icons imbued with special spirit meaning; the sense of place of these resort towns was tightly tied with Estonian culture and traditions (p.166). World War I revolutionized the context entirely; the forming of the Soviet Union from the Russian Empire eliminated the vast Russian market. Domestic tourism from within the newly established Baltic States could not sustain the infrastructure created before 1914. The industry found new markets to replace the old one (Worthington, 2003, p.372).

By 1918, Estonia had proclaimed its independence (officially in Pärnu); despite uncertain times, the summer vacation destination experienced rapid growth and expanded the resort town. Tourism began to revive after the war in an independent Estonia; the town council decided that tourism was the best source of income in the short-term and fruitlessly lobbied the state assembly for funds to reopen the resort (Worthington, 2003, p.373). 1927 brought a new era as Pärnu became one of the most popular vacation and health resorts in Estonia, designated as the official summer capital and restored green zone. New mud bath facilities were opened, entire tourism infrastructure had been redeveloped, and Pärnu had even become the favorite summer holiday place of the Estonian president (Kask & Raagmaa, 2010, p.166). This was prompted by a bathing housing of Pärnu which offered both unique water and mud treatments. Finnish and Swedish tourists flocked there first, followed by Latvians and Germans. Reaching its peak in the summer of 1939 (100 years of the resort town), more than 8,000 guests stayed in Pärnu for an extended stay, and nearly 60% of them were foreigners. Pärnu

was undoubtedly a popular wellness destination for tourists (and Estonians), only stunting its growth and progression due to World War II (Kask, 2010, p.27).

Estonia lost its independence after the war and became part of the Soviet Union. The atmosphere and genius loci (sense of place) in Pärnu and other western resort towns that had flourished in the pre-war decades became a nostalgic, idealistic space which held a meaningful secret message from times of independence (Kask, 2010, p.28). The developments of resorts stopped, and only Pärnu had visitors during the summer of 1940. The Soviet resort town became known as the year-round-working, cross-union health resort organized by the state. Tourism marketing was halted, and the existing resorts became therapeutic “production lines” (Kask & Raagmaa, 2010, p.167). As Baltic Resorts were taken over and managed by a Central Office of the Soviet Trade Unions headquartered in Moscow, the summer resort facilities (bathing/mud houses) were transformed into sanatorium-based health resorts that treated about 25,000 patients per year. Vacations were organized through vouchers issued by the health administration or the Soviet trade union system as a bonus. The ideology and priorities of the Soviet Union were also carried out in the management of the spas; for example the services were now a privilege enjoyed by the factory workers, not foreign aristocrats or tourists. Pärnu Beach Hotel was turned into a holiday home for workmen: “Our working class heroes now enjoy relaxing vacations for the first time in their lives. All thanks to the government!” (Estonian Spa Association, 2022). The number of people receiving treatment in Pärnu grew from 6,300 in 1948, to 14,000 in 1962; in 1967, out of 36,263 people, 14,013 received treatment in Pärnu. By the 1980s, more than 26,000 people visited Pärnu annually (p.167). Predominantly in the 1950s, the Estonian resorts became highly valued vacation destinations for the intellectuals of Moscow and Leningrad (scientists, media personalities, high-level part functionaries); the Baltic countries required an elitist wellness image. For many, Estonia was the closest “western experience” available.

Despite the harsh period and forced “assembly line” of health facilities and absence of pre-war tourism, the Soviet systems is credited for keeping wellness traditions alive during that time; Pärnu and other Baltic resorts avoided decline. The traditions from hydrotherapy and mud therapy were still used as strongly in the early 1800s as the health benefits were notable. Thus, sanatoriums hosted these popular treatments, along with innovative other wellness treatments developed, tested, and carried out by the Soviets right in Pärnu. When Estonia regained independence in 1991, the eastern border was closed and the Estonian seaside resorts reoriented themselves to Western markets; Pärnu was ahead of the others (Kask & Raagmaa, 2010, p.168). The spa and wellness traditions started to attract foreign tourists, and Pärnu again marketed itself as a wellness and culture destination of Estonian heritage.

When taking a stroll through Pärnu today, you feel as if you’re back in the 1920s. Rannapark is still flourishing with summer tourists, the historical mud bath house (now Hedon Spa) proudly stands out as the central point among all the spas. The green zones, parks, sports areas, avenues, old town, and even architecture are still in their original form. Some infrastructure, quite literally, has not been touched since pre-war times. The locals there like to keep things in their original condition unless it needs to be saved; this contributes to the sensescapes of Pärnu’s history from the 1820s to 1930s. It’s quite shocking to see the façade of some buildings in the old town (where the shops, restaurants, and general life thrived); the wood is peeling off, color has faded, and has an overall shanty-town feel. The porches of old cafes creak and the general impression is that things are “falling apart”. This is not the summer capital I had in mind. However, from talking with locals, I found that renovations do occur from

time to time, especially inside hotels and top restaurants, but the main developments are focused on the spa & wellness centers themselves, as that is the heartbeat of Pärnu's existence. When discussing with my sources on the reason for this, I'm advised tourism is driving force. Each year, wellness tourism in Pärnu has grown (with the exception of 2020 due to the pandemic). In 1995-2000, the numbers of guests grew from 44,000 to 105,000. In 2009, this increased to around 195,000 foreign guests (mainly from Finland, Germany, Sweden, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, and Latvia). Although these countries still generate the most tourists, foreign from all corners of the earth flock to Pärnu specifically for its wellness culture. From what I'm told, Estonians also visit Pärnu often during the summer, but hardly stay for more than a few days. This makes international tourism the true driving force.



*Figure 9: One of many boarded-up wooden buildings in Pärnu's old town*



*Figure 10: Decaying building and steeple*





Figure 11: Main (restored) street in Pärnu leading to primary spa cluster

During my first two days in Pärnu I was guided beautifully by my sources and shown where to find the most historical sites, buildings, monuments, and important aspects of culture. I saw the outside of every single spa & wellness center, taking mental notes of my personal routes for the coming days. Pärnu is small and practically everything was within walking distance. As Pärnu had developed primarily due to its bathing history, the central beach point can be reached from the furthest spa in only fifteen minutes. Walking from the old town towards Rannapark, the feeling of a resort destination starts to come alive. Despite the high number of tourists in the summer, the town was planned in such a way to give the opposite feeling; the green parks separate the wellness facilities and provide much needed shading from the sunny beach. The avenues guide you to all important places, and scooters (or “steps”) can be found on every corner for easily mobility. Despite the shanty town appearance in the old town, Pärnu was most definitely alive. Several concerts and cultural events occurred during the time I visited, and every night there was always something to do. The vibrant energy of this coastal destination certainly leaves an impression on any visitor. However, the cultural developments and traditions found here are truly the root of its foundation and progression. Today, you can find more than water and mud treatments, sea bathing and family holidays. Pärnu’s spa and wellness centers encompass traditions from several regions and have integrated these traditional elements in their service designs. In doing so, Pärnu is not only showcasing its own history; it’s actively demonstrating the greater Estonian wellness heritage, giving both domestic Estonian tourists and international tourists an opportunity to experience traditions themselves. I visited, observed, and experienced these traditions in ESTONIA Spa (Resort), Hedon Spa, Tervis Wellness Center, Wasa Spa, and ESTONIA Medical Spa (for a contrasting viewpoint).

As stated before, the focus of this thesis is *not* the medical side of Estonian traditions (known as sanatoriums). However, I decided to stay at ESTONIA Medical spa due to the history, and also the famous wellness center they boast. ESTONIA Medical and ESTONIA (Resort) Spa embody the same brand, but two different elements. The ESTONIA brand is important as

it was created during the Soviet times. The Medical sanatorium side was rated as number “1” in the system to test out new, innovative treatments; the Soviets developed this numbering system to give preference as to where new testing should occur. The ESTONIA name became rather (in)famous. As I checked into the medical hotel, the sanatorium feeling strongly remained. Everything was still in a drab Soviet style, with only minor renovations since the 80s. The hallway and rooms felt more like communal apartments as the wooden doors required old-fashioned keys. This medical spa combines two aspects of wellness. First, doctors and nurses are present for consultations relating to wellbeing concerns. Conventional, modern medicine treatments are performed as needed, but there is an emphasis on holistic wellness. There, a patient may be prescribed a routine of wellness-center therapies to improve their condition. This could be anything from sauna and hydrotherapy usage to salt therapy, walks in the sun on the beach, to a combination of herbal medicine or pharmaceuticals. While the medical side alone is indeed interesting, and overlaps with some traditional elements of Estonian wellness, it does not have a focus on heritage traditions. Sanatoriums were developed during Soviet times on the basis of some Estonian wellness attributes. Found effective, they still remain a great way to keep health in balance. Furthermore, the wellness side “spa center TERMID” is well-known in Pärnu as a favorite for health & wellness seekers. It’s a great choice to opt a-la-carte if not choosing treatments in a modern spa. It was worthwhile to stay here and observe these features for a deeper contrast.

#### **4.2.2 ESTONIA Resort Hotel & Spa: Experience and Interview**

My first experience into a true Estonian spa center brought me to the other side of the ESTONIA brand: the resort and spa. The resort side is located about five minutes walking from the medical side, which is unusual given the fact it’s the same brand. A different hotel entirely breaks up the buildings, so they are not physically connected at all. Similar to this break is a metaphor for the contrasting sides of the brand. Even by observing the facade of the resort side, it looks entirely different than the medical hotel building. The design is new, it feels modern, elegant, simply comfortable. The logo of the resort side even hosts a different element, with Estonian weeds/herbs to represent the nature of Estonian traditions, originating from the earth. This side of the brand is inspired by Estonian nature, cultural traditions, and even handicraft. This is also the motto of the treatments designed by Estonian nature and primeval traditions. Every single aspect of this resort has been built on these core elements. Even the restaurant serves contemporary Estonian cuisine, including fresh, local, seasonal products. This is virtually opposite from the medical side. As I approach the spa reception for my appointment, I’m handed an English brochure of the various treatments to choose from. “Original Estonian treatments” are featured on the cover: the treatment menu itself is as colorful and varies just like the Estonian history for past few hundred years. I take this with me and change into the provided robe and slippers before taking my place in the waiting area. Dim lighting, soft music (with sounds from Estonian nature), freshly brewed herbal tea – including the blue national Estonian cornflower – set the mood for an authentic experience. After five minutes, I’m led down a hall to the treatment room.

The spa manager had chosen a traditional herbal bath for me to experience: magnesium and home beer bath. An unusual combination, but in ancient Estonia, magnesium was used to promote relaxation and relieve tension, even before the true medicinal properties of the mineral were truly known. Home brewed beer was another (sticky) traditional method to promote relaxation as hops grow plentiful. The B6 vitamin in hops does indeed induce a strong

calming effect, refreshing the mind and body and giving new energy. Herb and mineral baths have a strong tradition in Estonia. At ESTONIA spa, hemp baths and milk baths are other traditional treatment featured. Others in this category of “original Estonian” include: mud wraps, peat and honey body treatment, birch bud body treatments, conker and chili body treatments, and sauna/whisking rituals.

In a white jacuzzi-like tub, I’m shown the plain water is warm. The hostess then shows me greyish-white minerals and a full putcher of dark, almost black beer. She throws both of the ingredients in at the same time, and instructs me to fully undress while she sets a timer for 30 minutes and leaves the room. The smell of beer overpowers the room, but the temperature and feel of the bath is quite wonderful. The water feels soft on my skin ever so slippery from the beer. Soft music played in the background, and the bath indeed felt calming, tension relieving, and very unique. When the bath was finished, I was instructed to sit back in the waiting room and relax for ten minutes or so, while give more Estonian herbal tea. Before I left, I was told not to wash off the “healing ingredients” and let the treatment fully absorb in my body overnight. Finally, I was given a sticky yellow beer lotion to rub on my skin for later.



Figure 12: Treatment room featuring tub for traditional baths and massage tables at ESTONIA Spa

Knowing that I would come back the next day to interview the spa manager and also the former marketing manager, I reflected on my experience. I thought about the story ESTONIA resort side was trying to show. It was clear to me the brand has such a deep connection in Estonian traditions; were all of the spa & wellness centers in Pärnu like this as well? Did ESTONIA spa design something “different” in their treatments compared to others? Perhaps most

importantly, why was there an emphasis on “original Estonian” treatments? Were foreign tourists choosing them often, even demanding them? Prior to my interview, I took a few hours to explore and experience the other side of the spa, the wellness facilities. The chief floor consisted of impressive, attractive pools with different sections of hydrotherapy (jets, whirlpools, a river with strong currents). The outside hosted a few jacuzzi tubs, but also a few saunas. One of them was a smoke sauna replica, found in almost no other wellness center (apart from the “real” ones in mainly the south). Although not Estonian at all, there was also a saltwater pool with Dead Sea salt. It was certainly a well-rounded center, with a third floor dedicated to just saunas: sauna rituals with whisking being the main cultural feature here. I had an opportunity to speak with a few other spa-goers while posing as a tourist myself. Four of them were foreign tourists, from Denmark, Finland, Germany, and Norway. Among our conversations, each one told me they chose ESTONIA resort due to the variety of cultural Estonian treatments. One specifically advised that they were “bored” with the same spa experiences in their home country; anywhere you can get a massage, facial, or body treatments. But in Estonia, there is a certain confidence in their treatments from nature. It delivers an exciting “new” way to promote well-being by looking from the past. The person from Finland told me that “everybody in Finland knows Estonian treatments are clean and effective”; year after year they visit Pärnu and know they are receiving a quality spa holiday, and enjoy the experiences of these new forms of traditional treatments that arise.

I met with ESTONIA spa’s manager, Jana, and also Ave Pill, the former spa marketing manager of ESTONIA for six years (now a project manager with Enterprise Estonia). Ave provided translations for me as Jana’s English was insufficient for a formal interview. Furthermore, as Ave and Jana had worked together for a few years, they together developed this concept of ESTONIA’S “original” treatments, based of Ave’s design of the e-wow (Estonian Way of Wellness) promotion. We decided to sit in the treatment waiting room, the same place as I enjoyed the previous day. They both thought it was important for me to know the resort history, as it’s one the most important facilities, both historically and culturally, in Pärnu today. The roots of Estonia Spa go back to 1890 when the first health resort building was opened in Pärnu. It was then that mud therapy, several mineral and bog baths, and even electric therapy were offered. Pärnu offered help for anemia, rheumatism, gout, heart disease, nervous system problems and more. They described the periods of history, from World War I having taken a hard hit on Pärnu, how resort life was restored to its former glory by 1927 when the health resort opened its doors again, to Pärnu resorts hosting rest homes and medical institutions of the USSR trade union system (sanatoriums). Since 1947, ESTONIA was called “Sanatorium No. 1”, and it took another 15 years to get the official name “ESTONIA”. In 1962, all sanatoriums in Pärnu received names instead of numbers. After independence in 1991, it was owned by the city of Pärnu; from 2002 to 2014, under Estonia’s national re-branding movement, ESTONIA operated in three buildings: Park House (now ESTONIA Medical), Green House, and White House. The term “sanatorium” has been replaced by the new term SPA, *sanus per aquam* (health through water). In 2015, The Green and White House accordingly adopted the full name “ESTONIA Resort Hotel & Spa”, branding a new concept that reflected true Estonia culture. This concept carries out today with their branded uniquely Estonian treatments.

When I asked why ESTONIA decided to create this focus on Estonian traditions, they both said it’s truly due to the resort’s history and culture of Pärnu. The resort carried such a name and reputation, an important element in Estonia’s wellness development. They also feel there was a moral responsibility to let ESTONIA live up to its name in a very cultural way; the



resort's concept should embody authentic Estonian traditions because they are proud of how Estonia has protected its heritage throughout history. Branding these unique traditions for tourist consumption allows others to discover the Estonia Way of Wellness, and in turn strengthens the identity of the Estonian people. For foreign tourists, it introduces them to one-of-a-kind Estonian traditions and creates memorable experiences. For Estonians, the resort's concept reaffirms their roots, all the while in the historic Pärnu. Both women noted there is a general growing trend of cultural curiosity; more tourists want culture intertwined with wellness services, and the demand is still growing. If tourists are looking for the most traditional, authentic cultural experience, they come to ESTONIA resort.



*Figure 13: ESTONIA Spa's treatment room for Ancient Estonian Massage, performed on the floor*

Jana and Ave told me this growing “cultural curiosity” is helping to bring back traditions from the past. I was given a tour of the entire spa and wellness center before continuing our interview as they were eager to show me a few crucial things. I was led into about six different rooms. The first was the designated ancient Estonian massage room, where traditionally, massage was performed on the floor with a blanket. This tradition had not been actively used or heard of since before the Soviet times. In an effort to create a well-rounded brand, ESTONIA dug deeper for traditions and re-discovered this one. The other rooms I was brought into all boasted elements of culture; from tribal beaded decorations, wool socks used in feet treatments, herbal balls, birch sticks, to several herb baths. It was impressive, and I indeed felt I was experiencing an entirely “other” way of life. They had dedicated the third floor of the spa entirely to sauna rituals; Ave and Jana meticulously designed these rituals together to combined authentic elements with realistic expectations. For example, whisking was available, but not a whisking therapist (as would usually be performed). I questioned the authenticity of traditions in such a modern facility. Are they truly performing the reproductions in the original way? Jana and Ave believe their treatments are authentic, but they are indeed adapted in a modern way. Tourists expect comfort and modern amenities alongside cultural experiences when in a spa. Estonian elements are interwoven with all treatments, from products and ingredients to the style and technique of the ancient ways. Jana and Ave both strongly agree it's

important to preserve traditions. When I questioned why they thought so, Ave gave a heartfelt answer:

*“Estonians are rather nationalists. It’s very popular in Estonia to keep cultural traditions alive - it is a very important part of surviving here, because only one million Estonians live on this small piece of land, this piece of land is on a very good strategic position. We have had 700 or more years that bigger countries want to rule here. So we have always tried to keep our culture alive, also our language. Otherwise, if we lose our language and our traditions, we will just melt. It will just be forgotten”. -Ave Pill, 2022*

I directly implored how and why tourism is important for preserving these traditions. They insisted that only one million Estonians alone is not enough to keep their traditions going, “we believe we need tourists to survive”. Ave continues to say that tourism also gives Estonians a reason to keep the traditions going, it strengthens their beliefs in their own heritage. She goes to say how many foreign tourists think the Baltic states are all the same, their differences are blurred to the masses. “You know, nowadays in tourism marketing, and in general marketing, you have to be different, you have to be unique and tell your story.” Estonia is distinctively different nation, and this is another reason why Estonia wants to show its prominent culture. Both women agree the national branding campaigns from the early 2000s put a strong focus on wellness tourism, and this directly helped promote culture aspects in treatment designs across all Estonian spa and wellness centers. Pärnu in particular has always heavily relied on tourism since the mid 1800s and continues to do so today.

#### **4.2.3 Hedon Spa & Hotel: Experience and Interview**

Hedon Spa is undeniably the most beautiful and easily spotted building in Pärnu. The pastel yellow structure is proudly situated next to a roundabout where the famous Rannapark was located. When driving through the main historical areas of the town, this roundabout leads you to all spas and wellness centers in Pärnu, so you can’t help but to take in the history while going to your destination. Today’s Hedon Spa is neo-classical building and one of the most important symbols of the Pärnu resort: the former Mud Bath House. Built in 1927 when Pärnu was in the peak of its glory, this building was constructed as a replacement for the previous mud bath facility that burned down in World War I (1915). Of course, as we recalled before, the history of the Pärnu mud baths and resort development originated in 1838 when the bathing house by the sea offered warm sea baths in the summer, and hot saunas in the winter. During the Soviet era, the current Hedon Spa building was considered the “temple of health” as it served the health of the working people; after Estonia’s independence it became deserted and lost its function. It is now a luxury boutique spa existing in the historical Mud Baths building, with extensions and renovations to turn it into a functional resort. To this day, is still remains of the main symbols of Pärnu and the site of architectural heritage (Hedon Spa, 2022). Described as the place where old meets new, Hedon combines traditional and contemporary elements in Estonian wellness (Visit Estonia, 2022).



Figure 14: Hedon Spa (Original Mud Bath House) and Surrounding Area



Figure 15: Plaque of original Mud Baths site and architectural heritage, located at Hedon Spa

Hedon Spa brands itself as “a place where a journey begins enhanced with purification and vitality for body and spirit”; having gathered inspiration from ancient traditions of beauty and well-being all over the world, Hedon has collected a selection of the best treatments. The historically symbolic spa hotel invites you to an exciting journey to the most beautiful places in the world – the original ancient beauty rituals offer fascinating new pleasures, the joy of recognition and the opportunity to escape everyday life for a while (Hedon Spa, 2022). The spa itself is divided into two parts: a swimming area and a Silent Spa. The latter observes ancient Estonian spa traditions and is meant for peaceful relaxation for guests (Visit Estonia, 2022). Prior to our interview, the Sales Manager, Romet Rahnu, booked an authentic experience for me to try: Journey To Ancient Estonia. On this journey, Hedon has combined the ancient knowledge of Estonian ancestors with the pure nature of the homeland, and has added some modern wisdom, just as has become customary at Hedon. The goal of this journey is to

tell a story of Estonian traditions in a three step, carefully designed multisensory experience. All five senses are stimulated during 120-minute journey.

I excitedly walked through the landscaped centerpiece of the Rannapark roundabout on my way to Hedon. This magnificent building looks truly majestic with white pillars, tall glass windows, and intricate decorations. The inside spa lobby is just as impressive and offers its own space away from the reception. The reception itself was clearly crafted to fit in the theme of the historic site, and even some original flooring and walls can still be seen meshing into the modern parts. After changing into my provided robe and slippers, I'm invited to the treatment waiting area. This section is split into two parts. The dimly lit, dark room with Estonian herbal tea and drawn curtains for privacy. On the opposite end, a bright open room with lounge chairs and a sun lamp (encouraging vitamin D absorption ocularly, in opposition to the darkness). The sun room also offers a huge, heavy black book with the history and significance of Hedon Spa's location. Mainly photos and some text provide an in-depth account through history of the founding of Pärnu resort, water and mud baths, the glory days, war, independence, economic depression, resort revival, the new building creation and architectural significance, and of course the Soviet era.

After sipping my herbal tea for ten minutes, I'm taken back to a treatment room with an Estonian sauna ready to go. This is the first part of the journey. When opening the sauna door, there is a pile of birch branches and a bucket of water. These are typical elements of Estonian sauna rituals. The ritual is designed to relax the body by detoxing the pores and promoting circulation, and then opening the mind. This part of the journey was totally solo and encouraged to be performed nude to get the maximum health benefit; this is also the way it has always been performed in the tradition. I initiate the sauna experience by take a few ladles of water and throwing it on the sizzling sauna rocks, creating *leil*. The air suddenly becomes humid, and after a few minutes I begin to sweat. The more water, the higher temperature and intensity of the detox. Once the body is sweaty, it's customary to then take the bundle of birch leaves out of water and start to more or less hit yourself. Typically, this is done by your sauna partner by asking to be massaged with the branches: this tradition is called whisking, and it is always performed in conjunction with a sauna ritual. Whisking stimulates the body further, creating a massage on the body through the hard force. It further helps detoxify the body as you continue to sweat. After twenty minutes, my journey guide advises it's time to move on to the next step.





Figure 16: Inside a Hedon Spa sauna featuring the stove, water bucket with ladle, and wet, used birch whisks

Since my body is now hot, sweaty, and blood has circulated well, it's the best time for a curative mud wrap. Naturally, a journey to ancient Estonia wouldn't be complete without a mud experience, given the history of Pärnu, and the tradition of mud usage altogether. I lied on a bed covered in plastic wrap. Warm mud is applied in sections across my legs, stomach, back, and half of my chest. The guide then swaddles me in plastic to increase the exfoliation effect, as the mud contains live organisms that stimulate your metabolism for a healing effect on the nervous system. The heart area on my chest is intentionally left open, as increased circulation there is not beneficial for the cardiac system. This treatment could only be performed

due to me being physically strong and without a serious medical condition (a waiver was signed). While the plastic warmed my skin and felt like I was in a tight-knit sauna for a second time, my head and face were massaged as we let the mud work its magic for thirty minutes. A timer cued the removal of the plastic, and I was promptly instructed to use the shower in the corner of the treatment room to rinse everything off. Since the sea mud is actively working on your body by entering the skin, it's important to leave it on for only a set amount of time. Traditionally, nude mud baths were taken instead of wraps, but over time the tradition has evolved.

The final step of the journey was an ancient Estonian massage (known as *soonetasumine*, translating roughly as "vessel repayment"). I wondered what would be different about this massage apart from any other one I had received. This old treatment forms part of traditional Estonian folk wisdom in its best and purest sense. This was passed down orally from generation to generation when the peasants' bodies, exhausted from long laborious days out in the fields, required some pampering. The treatment is focused mostly on various muscle groups, joints, organs, blood circulation, lymph nodes, the nervous system and skin. It stimulates the entire body and gives you back your balance and lost strength. The massage was always performed on the floor, sometimes by kids, by simply stretching and hitting the body to loosen it up. It didn't always follow a pattern, and kids definitely weren't trained on pressure points or techniques. Today, the Estonian massage typically follows a technique, but still involves a lot of hitting, pounding (in a chopping motion), clapping, and soft, easy strokes. Despite this unpleasant sounding procedure, it is very tension relieving and relaxing, especially with the traditional, locally sourced carrot and hemp oil (Hedon Spa, 2022). In combination with the

intensity of the sauna, the metabolism revving from the exfoliating mud wrap, this massage was a great way to end the journey.

The following day I returned back to Hedon to meet with Romet. This time, I passed the treatment area and went down a dark hallway that resembled a museum. The dim lighting created a nostalgic energy of what had occurred previously inside the building. Photos and text hung on the wall in a timeline order, showcasing the historical developments of both Pärnu and the baths, the Soviet era's experimental treatments, moving on to today. A few original bathtubs were situated in this "museum" hallway; the cracks, stains, scuffs, and discoloration clearly proved the routine usage of mud therapy. I wondered about the people who had used these baths, what they experienced, how the therapy helped them, and if mud baths were still commonly used today as part of tradition. Romet and I took a seat with coffees at the end of this historic hallway, where the new extension meets the old building. Guests were passing by us left and right in their robes as we had an open, easy conversation-style interview.

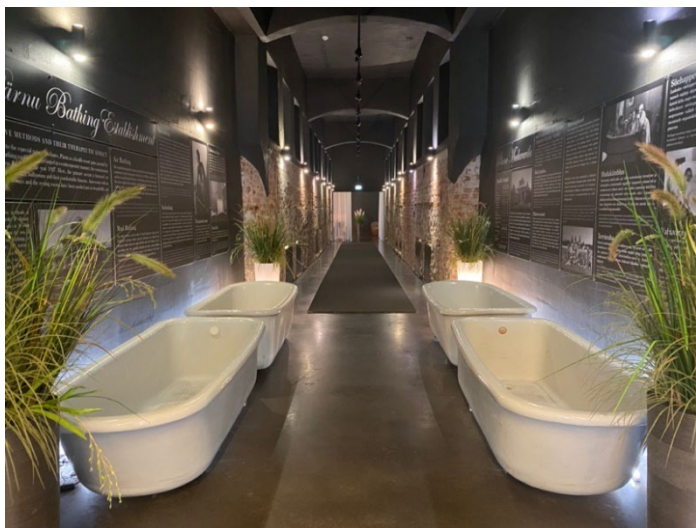


Figure 17: Original tubs for mud baths inside Hedon Spa's "museum" hallway

Romet relays how the site of Hedon has always been a place of wellbeing, both historically and culturally. It emits a memory of the past and present, serving both as an architectural landmark and the birthplace of traditions. Romet is from Pärnu and is able to tell me the detailed history of the site, and how the new Hedon brand had a social responsibility to include an element of heritage in the treatment design and marketing. I posed the question why traditions are emphasized in Estonian culture. While he says there may be different opinions, the overcoming of their Soviet period is a prevalent theme. Estonians have always tried to remember their heritage throughout history. "It comes natural, it's something that we value ourselves. That's why we kind of use it in several ways, because it's something we're used to living with, and we know it's something that can be lost very easily and that's why it's dear and special." Estonians want to show that they are different and move away from the association of "Russian". It really comes down to a categorization of "us" vs. "them"; Estonians really wanted to distance themselves, especially in the 90s and early 2000s, so the emphasis on heritage was highlighted and used as a strategy for re-branding. "It was really pushed back then, that we are different, we are not *them*". Part of this distancing is shifting back to the roots of Estonianness, which brings out the traditions of nature-use.

Romet admits that despite the historic and culture significance of Hedon's location, the brand was not built solely to honor Estonian traditions. The most authentic Estonian treatment

they offer is the Journey that I experienced. The reason for this is that Estonians are not opting for treatments relating to their own culture. Instead, they are wanting new experiences. This is why Hedon offers journeys through other parts of the world, such as Bali, Egypt, India, etc. Hedon deliberately commodifies “authentic” reproductions of other cultures’ wellness traditions as part of an experience for guests to try out. These treatments are mainly popular among Estonians, but foreign tourists prefer to do the ancient Estonian journey. I found this quite fascinating, as I would have assumed Hedon primarily offered Estonian treatments (like ESTONIA Resort). When I discovered this wasn’t the case, I realized that tourists are the reason they even keep continue to keep this journey on their treatment list. Romet and his team have often debated getting rid of it altogether as it doesn’t fit in with their brand of experiencing “other”, far away cultures. However, they simply cannot remove it as the demand for it is there. While it may not be the most popular treatment, it is a prominent journey in Pärnu, and it tells a distinct story on Estonian heritage. It adds to the entire authenticity of being in Estonia and experiencing what it has to offer; in turn, showing Estonians their roots have a powerful impact on the outside community. Romet believes tourism is definitely helping to keep traditions alive: “sometimes local people might forget (our heritage), but at least tourists come and enjoy this, and that further helps preserve it”. However, he doesn’t think any Estonian wellness traditions were in danger of dying or being forgotten. Perhaps this is because traditions are in surplus in Pärnu. Seemingly a contradiction, he believes more spas across Estonia will add *additional* authentic culture elements, as the demand is growing thanks to tourism. He has been observing this trend and feels justified with the Hedon brand image knowing his culture isn’t in immediate jeopardy.

#### **4.2.4 Tervis Ravispaahotell / Medical Spa Hotel: Interview**

After spending nearly a week in Pärnu, I began to wonder how the curative mud bath tradition was being preserved. Both ESTONIA Resort and Hedon offered simple mud wraps, but who was the keeper of this sacred Pärnu tradition from 200 years ago? Were shallow mud wraps really enough to keep the spirit and memory alive? Was the mud bath tradition actually dying off, in lieu of these other mud fads (wraps, facials, oils, etc.). I spoke with some locals to find the answer, and I was pointed in the direction of Tervis Medical and Wellness Spa: a prominent keeper of Pärnu culture. Tervis has operated consistently for 51 years. Although it opened during the Soviet times, it was owned collectively by construction unions and farmers rather than state owned. This was unusual during those days, but it allowed for the Estonian way of wellness to continue inconspicuously. Unlike today, it was not meant for tourists or outsiders. Tervis was established to help alleviate physical sufferings of the local Estonian farmers and labor workers, as their heavy labor often created serious aches or illnesses.

At present, Tervis’ treatment list is virtually the same as it was back then. In an interview with the spa’s Marketing Specialist, accompanied by Ave Pill, I discovered the main attraction here is still the mud baths. Foreign tourist especially request to take part in the mud experience as I was told about the growing curiosity for its supernatural, visceral feeling and efficacy. I also learned why Tervis is the only wellness center in Pärnu to still offer the bath in a (albeit in a semi-traditional way). Both Ave and the Tervis spokesperson told me that curative mud is actually very intense and heavy on the body (full explanation found in Appendix C). It needs to administered under a doctor’s supervision with prior medical clearance; if a patient has a heart or kidney disorder for example, they cannot use this treatment. Mud stimulates the metabolism and gets quite hot, over 50 Celsius. You absolute must be naked, and

keep your chest uncovered. The bath can only last fifteen minutes at maximum; it induces immense discomfort at first, and then a deep state of relaxation before immediately rinsing off. Due to these extremes, mud baths can only be performed in accredited medical spas like Tervis. Even with accreditation, there are still serious risks, which explains why most wellness centers in Pärnu choose not to offer it. Mud wraps, as I did in my Ancient Estonia Journey, can be used by nearly anyone.

Tervis has chosen to use mud extract (the black concentrated water of mud, rather than the thick substance). It's lighter and allows more people to experience it, since it's such a demanded treatment by both Estonians and foreigners. True sea mud is also not sustainable; it's a natural resource, excavation and transport is tedious, expensive, and not beneficial for nature. Disposal is also a concern, as mud cannot just be disposed as regular waste. I was taken to a few rooms where mud is stored. It's placed on baking sheets, taking the appearance of delicious chocolate, and stored in industrial freezers. Before the day(s) treatments, the frozen blocks are melted and stirred in a pot before specific portions are scooped and administered.



Figure 18: Tervis staff setting up a mud bath for the next guest



Figure 19 (right): A sheet of frozen curative mud extract from Pärnu Bay

Tervis markets itself as a place for everyone; managers actively go abroad and sell their hotel-treatment-spa bundles, “health packages”, as complete experiences. Embedded are these old Estonian traditions, and what really is marketed are cultural packages. Tervis relies on foreign tourism; if they didn't have it, they wouldn't be able to offer mud baths or their other traditional treatments (such as sea salt/mint baths or mountain *kerit* body treatments) as Estonians alone are not enough sustain them. Furthermore, mud is something that can only be reproduced in wellness centers, it's not something that can be done at home. Centers are vital to host these traditions, in the same way as they were formed in the 1800s.

*“If they (foreign tourists) are not coming, then it's not a health resort. Local people can't offer enough – we don't have so many people in Estonia, we rely on foreign markets. It's not like Spain or U.S. where you have so many local people. In Estonia, you know there's only 1 million people, we need tourists, otherwise we can't afford to keep these spa centers. We are very dependent on foreign markets.” -Marketing Specialist of Tervis Ravispaahotell, 2022*



Tervis has generated an extensive list of annual tourists, particularly from Sweden and Finland. The medical doctors have even learned these languages to keep up with the influx and establish relationships. Several guests return year after year (some for 20+ years), hugging and kissing staff upon their arrivals. Tervis seemingly has a heritage of its own by respecting this relationship with their international guests. From simply walking down the hallways in this extensive facility, it feels like a community, “they have become our family members by now”, as described by the Marketing Specialist. Smiles, greetings by name, in combination with a menu set in traditions make the experience memorable. The older clientele in particular consistently return to Tervis due to the rootedness in effective, original Estonian treatments. The tradition is held up by the people who keep coming. During the pandemic, Tervis admitted their center nearly went out of business. Services (like treatments) were suspended, and Estonians “weren’t just coming here to sleep”. The wellness center was afraid the tradition would be lost. Fortunately, it persevered with government funding. They realized how delicate their traditions truly are, especially mud therapy. If it’s lost in Pärnu, then it’s nearly lost in Estonia. This is one main reason mud will continue to be offered even during future uncertain times; unquestionably, Tervis will keep this as a treatment option. Tervis deeply believes in cultural preservation; it’s one of the few facilities that displayed Estonian culture during the second period of lost independence. “It’s important to show that we have something uncommon, special”. Tervis believes in keeping the strong heritage of Pärnu and being able to offer an authentic part of culture in an effective, reliable way. Undoubtedly, they not only believe but *know* tourism is helping to keep this alive.

#### **4.2.5 Wasa Resort: Interview**

I had been in Pärnu over one week and explored the resort town nearly in its entirety. I had walked through the famous Rannapark and nearby beach, strolled many times through the old town and historical parts of the resort. My local guides had escorted me to the respective wellness centers, introduced me to the most knowledgeable people in the area, and provided insight through interviews and conversations. There was one aspect still missing: a modern wellness center, and how culture is (or is not) potentially showcased. Was Pärnu Janus-faced, and have a hidden side that boasted non-Estonian wellness services? I interviewed Tiina Sarapuu, Spa Manager of Wasa Resort, spokesperson for the newest wellness center in Pärnu. Wasa is not known for treatments of traditional Estonian origin. It’s rather a resort that offers standard, globally known treatments (and products, like the French brand *Payot*). It has branded itself as a place for anyone, but Tiina still found a way to sneak in elements of Estonian culture in a fun, unexpected way. Despite Tiina working professionally in the spa industry for some years now, she is in the Master program for Spa Design at Pärnu College. She believes in the power of branding spa services and has a personal interest in evolving traditions.



Figure 20: Outside of the newly built WASA Resort (medical side from 1938 not pictured)

While developing Wasa's service list, Tiina discovered the Estonian brand *Magrada*. It's a local mother-daughter brand that has uses traditional elements such as mud and algae in their attractive product line. They are based near Pärnu and have a partnership with the College. Tiina has developed a passion for intertwining Estonian cultural elements with sustainable resources that benefit the local community. It not only creates a personal relationship within the community, but it fuels the local economy. Local products are increasing in demand across Estonia, especially in wellness centers. Not all of Wasa's treatments use Magrada, but she explains the few that are offered are extremely popular. She notes that there is a particular interest in foreign tourists opting for Magrada products, and they are eager to learn the story of Estonian wellness. Tiina says this is directly keeping culture alive by creative marketing and branding; she found a way to adapt with the changing of the times in a modern way. Finding elements of tradition and integrating them into a well-rounded sensory experience for guests. I directly asked Tiina why it's important for her, but also for Wasa as a brand, to still keep some aspects of traditions alive. Her answer reflects history, the struggle for independence, and holding onto roots:

*"Why have traditions been kept alive for so many years? I think it's just something we humans do, we try to have some roots. When you are being occupied, you have to protest. You want to keep something alive that's yours. What your ancestors, grandparents told you about. It gets more important when someone is telling you what to do. When someone is not telling you what to do, like in this current global scene, we are very eager to forget about traditions and take everything in that's out there (other cultures). Then we are not very eager to think what we had. We put all of our energy into maintaining our status quo, and everything you had with it...the culture changes when you get influences from all over the world, so we need to actively preserve it."* -Tiina Sarapuu, Wasa Resort, 2022

In the future, Tiina hopes to create a new, niche resort concept: a self-sustaining, circular wellness center with local resources, entirely based on the beautiful, yet simplistic Estonian nature. I was quite surprised as this is in stark contrast to Wasa's current branding. However, seeing the success of the Magrada products and their designed treatments has pushed her to incorporate more authentic experiences. "You can keep the old traditions alive through good branding. You can't sell it just because it's Estonian. If there's something authentically strong in the heritage, it stays. If it's made to stay alive through centuries, then maybe it adjusts to whatever is going on in the world, it becomes the face of the generation that knows about it". Points of views may change, but values remain the same. Tiina believes it's time to get stricter with Estonian traditions; creative designs in wellness tourism is simply the new branding to help keep them alive as culture evolves. In her metaphor, "you don't just sell Estonian juniper branches. You sell a beautiful design that creates an experience for all five senses. Tourists especially want to feel *changed* during wellness". They want their senses to be fulfilled and curiosity stimulated. Tiina explained that Estonians have become bored of their own culture and no longer even "see" it. This is why Wasa (and Hedon) have designed and successfully commodified global experiences of other cultures (exotic passage through Bali, Ayurvedic wellness of India, luxury French facials, etc.) as authentic journeys without the need to travel far. Wasa and Tiina know Estonian wellness is about simplistic nature, and it has become too simplistic for Estonians over time. That's why outsiders (foreign tourists) are needed to help re-affirm the fact Estonianness is something to protect. Upon finishing this interview, Tiina told me that this conversation has inspired her. She hopes to keep in touch as she tries to develop her ambition for a sustainable resort concept based in Pärnu.

### 4.3 Southern Estonia Focus, Võru: Rooted in Nature

On a cloudy afternoon I checked out of the ESTONIA Medical Hotel and packed my bags for the three-hour drive to the South. I said my goodbyes to Pärnu and the hospitable people who helped me on the first part of my research. It was time to shift gears and dive into the unique, shrinking cultures of the Võrumaa region (Võru County) for the second half of my trip. I set my GPS to Kubija Nature Hotel & Spa and enjoyed the easy, rural drive into the depths of the pine forests. While staying by the sea in Estonia's official summer capital was nothing short of memorable, I personally looked forward to being surrounded by pure nature: rolling hills and hidden blue lakes, sleepy villages, wildlife (such as moose and bears), hiking trails, deeply rooted wellness, and traditional communities. There are two ethnic groups native to Võru county: the Võru people and the Setos; both have their own language and cultural heritage in traditions (Visit Võru, 2022). In addition, the Estonian Old Believers are a culturally endangered national minority also living in the county, known for their religion; they are ethnic Russians, living in what is now Estonia, and what were then the Imperial Russian provinces of Estland and of Livonia since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Aidarov, 2014, p.200). Needless to say, Southern Estonia, and Võru county in particular, is culturally rich and distinct from Pärnu.

The Võru Institute was founded by the Estonian government in 1995, established for the preservation and promotion of the Võru language and culture. The institute is engaged in a wide range of activities, including establishing school programs, conducting linguistic and regional research, preserving place-names and their stories, publishing texts in Võru language,

and organizing conferences (Võru Tourism, 2022). The ultimate aim is to encourage speaking their own language and preserve their traditional lifestyle. As part of this goal, the smoke sauna tradition in the Võrumaa region was added to the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in 2014; the sauna and its rituals were part of traditional life and cultural heritage of the Võru people, which was steadily dying up to that point. The Setos also have their own institute with a similar purpose, including a UNESCO ICH tradition of polyphonic style of folk singing (*leelo*) since 2009 (Visit Võru, 2022). Despite these preservation aims, conservation of wellness traditions is only upheld by the communities themselves.

Wellness traditions, such as the smoke sauna, are held in high regard. Võru's own official tourism website describes the region to be authentic: "expressing a typical Võru lifestyle, hints at the peculiar local dialect of the Estonian language, the original wooden architecture, the beautiful environment, the predilection for all things that are our own and good, the respect for a culture that focuses on self-identity" (Võru Tourism, 2022). Unlike sea bathing and curative mud baths in organized facilities, Võrumaa traditions are deeply rooted in nature. Some have been recreated and rather "preserved" by spa & wellness centers in the region, but traditions like the smoke sauna simply *cannot* exist in a center due to the nature of its use. Interestingly, the local government of Võru County has clear, publicized goals of cultural preservation. On the other hand, in Pärnu, we found the keepers of Western traditions to be unsystematic and left up to the spa & wellness centers themselves for selective preservation. Was tourism even needed in this region to help keep these traditions stay alive, as in Pärnu? My Võru mission was twofold: to visit the best-known wellness establishment in the region to see how tourism is held up or affecting these Southern traditions; and to discover firsthand the story and development of the smoke sauna preservation by visiting the spearhead and "guardian" of the tradition: Mooska Farm.

#### **4.3.1 Kubija Hotel & Nature Spa (Loodusspaa): Everyday Rituals from Nature: *Experience and Interview***

Kubija is located directly in the heart of Southern Estonian nature and is marketed as an "Eco Spa" by Visit Estonia. Despite the desolate location in the wilderness, the spa hotel is only hour away from Tartu, Estonia's second largest, and most cherished city after Tallinn (the European Culture Capital 2024). Tartu is known for culture, as it's considered "the intellectual capital city", especially with its prestigious 17<sup>th</sup> century University. It therefore comes as no surprise that Southern Estonia receives a great deal of domestic and international tourism. As the most well-known spa and wellness city in the region I chose to stay here and experience their nature-rooted rituals myself. The center is situated elegantly next to a lake in between forests. The atmosphere is cozy, rustic, and leisurely. Upon checking in, the reception hands me maps and brochures (in English, Estonian, and Russian) and tells me where to access the various hiking trails from the property. When taking a stroll to the side of the main building, there is an entire small village of wooden cabins that house the spa's various saunas (Estonia's oldest and original "spas"). The saunas are mainly open on the weekends to serve the high number of tourists that flood in; the cabins were built as an extension of the original wellness center due to the growing popularity. This September (2022), Kubija even has plans to shut down for a few weeks to renovate and expand in order to keep up with the demand, especially as tourism is resuming to nearly normal numbers since pre-pandemic. The influx of (foreign) tourists is not solely due to Tartu's proximity: the Latvian border is only 30 minutes to the south and the Russian border (closed at the time of research) is 45 minutes to the east.





Figure 21: Sauna cabins of Kubija Nature Spa. Source: Visit Estonia, 2021

In preparation for my interview, the Spa & Hotel Manager had booked two Estonian treatments for me to try, in addition to full access to the spa center (pools, saunas, etc.). The employees who assisted me were unaware I was actively researching culture and traditions. I did advise that I had just come from a week in Pärnu, to which several staff responded, “culture is very different here”, or “their spas are too commercialized”, implying authenticity of rituals in Võru’s wellness centers. That night I explored the wellness center, enjoying the various hot and cold pools while I spoke to some fellow tourists about their experiences. My second day at Kubija began with a uniquely Estonian hemp flower body scrub. I laid on a table without clothes, listening to soft Võrumaa music in a dark room. My hostess brought a jar of rather awful looking soot, with a strong smell to accompany it. As it was applied to my back first, the scrub was rough, gritty, and felt like it would erode the first layer of my skin. In ancient times, hemp scrub was used to purify the outside of the body, shedding away layers of dead skin to become clean and purified. As baths were uncommon back then, this was one way of washing the body. A sauna ritual afterwards enhanced the bathing as pores were already open, allowing the body to detox from the inside out by sweating. After my scrub, I was instructed to shower, and then lay back on the table for a body hemp salve. The salve eased the skin irritation caused by the harsh scrub and also seal pores. When I inquired about the pungent product used, I was told it was hemp from the nearby forest: unbranded, sold to Kubija by local community members, and not for public sale (as opposed to Magrada products in Pärnu).

Now that my skin was primed, I was ready for an ancient Estonian massage with locally sourced carrot and hemp oil. This treatment was euphoric and simple. Much like the tradition reenacted at ESTONIA Resort, this massage was part of everyday life in the South but has been used less frequently as the tradition evolved. Pleased with both my treatments, the Manager had insisted I try the hotel restaurant; Kubija takes pride in offering guests local products from their community partners. In my pasta dish for example, the smoked ham was from down the road at Mooska Farm. Other meats, cheese, butter, herbs, vegetables, grains, and even desserts were all sourced within a 50km radius (Kubija, 2022); ingredients are delivered daily by local businesses. Since Kubija created its wellness facility around the traditional culture of nature elements, food is also an important aspect for them as the dishes offered are part of everyday life. Furthermore, within the region, there are several restaurants that offer the same

concept: Seto food, Võru specialties, heritage bakeries (think of forest berries), farm stand products, even mineral water from the nearby lakes. I had wondered, was all of this for tourism, in the ongoing effort to preserve culture? Or was this also for locals of Võru, a multidirectional effort to preserve heritage within the communities?



Figure 22: Kubija Spa's indoor cold pools, situated next to the forest

My interview with Hotel & Spa Manager, Ruth Hoole, and her assistant Liina (for translation help), gave me great insight as to the overall role of tourism here. Both showed great enthusiasm for my topic but gave an interesting stance from the get-go: “we do not offer cultural treatments here”. I was immediately rather puzzled, as I had encountered two cultural traditions in the days prior. Perhaps this was a primary example of what I had been told many times by now: Estonians usually do not see their own culture as it's simply part of their everyday life. Interestingly enough, for the next 45 minutes I learned how Estonians believe in using nature for holistic wellness. The roots of their traditions all stem from earthly resources such as mud, peat, minerals, herbs, water, air, sun, and animal byproducts. In general, Kubija believes in preserving nature in treatments by offering this “nature spa”. “This is the Estonian way”, and they have their treatments and spa revolving around this basic concept; it does not take a lot of effort or strategizing as it's normal for them, and they don't believe it's something extraordinary.

Nothing short of extraordinary to me is the list of traditional treatments and rituals they offer, with elements such as: bear fat, hemp oil, sea buckthorn, peat (from nearby swamps, opposite of sea mud), and the ancient massage. Ruth was eager to speak about bear fat in particular; in Southern Estonia, bear is a longstanding tradition in Estonian wellness, and fat is a local byproduct. The meat is eaten as a regional dish, and the fat is sold to wellness centers. The fat is only used in massages due to its warming effect; the result is reduced muscle tension and improved circulation. Kubija started using bear fat six years ago and it's a very

popular treatment. Ruth's father used to hunt bears during her childhood, and the fat was used traditionally. From this memory, she incorporated it into the treatment list. I inquired on who opts for such services, is it only Estonians, or foreign tourists too? Besides Estonians, tourists mainly visit from Latvia, Russia, Finland and Scandinavia, and Germany. However, in recent years more Western Europeans and even North Americans are visiting. Moreover, the U.S. military sometimes uses the hotel and the wellness center as they have a nearby military base. Kubija is a member of the Spa Association, and Ruth suspects the increase in general tourism has been thanks to Visit Estonia's promotion. Each year (besides the pandemic), they have seen an increase in new (and repeat) clients, even day-visitors come for the unique treatments. Kubija is notable compared to some other wellness centers as it has pure Estonian roots, and people appreciate the natural, traditional choices offered of the region.

I questioned Ruth and Liina if there were any forgotten or dying traditions. They explained Kubija used to offer the tradition of walking through a bowl of buckwheat (popular for group bookings), stimulating the feet and improving circulation. This is a true Southern tradition, but it wasn't popular among tourists. Ruth explained it wasn't designed as a memorable experience, rather a "one and done" type. The demand wasn't there, so it was removed for the list. Today, this buckwheat tradition is practically dead: nobody else offers it, Estonians don't care for its simplicity, therefore tourists never discover it. Similar to this is the tradition of literal "swamp walking" to relieve leg pains; Ruth states this is not something a spa cannot offer, only in the forest. This tradition is dying as it cannot be replicated, and locals don't use it as much thanks to modern therapies.

As we approached the end of the interview, it was remarkable to see the tone of the talk completely shift. Both Ruth and Liina realized that Kubija is actually rich with Estonian culture: from the local food, the list of treatments, to the guidance of nature routes for tourists and explanations of old traditions. They admitted it would be difficult to keep their traditional Võrumaa treatments as part of their design if weren't for foreign tourism. They do believe tourism actively helps keep these traditions stay alive and gave prime evidence to this in two ways. First, as their client base was primarily Estonians (originally), Estonians were not the ones primarily selecting the treatments rooted in traditions; instead, they often selected the modern ones such as facials, paraffin hand treatments, or the foreign "exotic" ones like Thai foot reflexology. On the contrary, tourists were the ones who wanted to experience these "uniquely Estonian" rituals as they're entirely new experiences for most. They discover the Estonian way, and thus their eyes are opened to culture around them. The treatment list was expanded to add more experiences like this (i.e. bear fat massage, body treatments with sea-buckthorn powder and hemp oil, etc.) to cater to this demand.

Second, the pandemic resulted in a major loss in tourists. Estonians still came, but they selected simple treatments, such as standard massages (i.e. Swedish, deep tissue). The local ingredients ready for use of the traditional treatments were not utilized and actually wasted. Ruth and her team debated if they could even keep these culturally-based services on the menu as there wasn't a demand for them. Therefore, Ruth and Liina truly hope tourism will not pause again, because they want to keep their treatment list strong and be able to offer these unique options. Without tourists, their treatment list would undoubtedly be adjusted, and would shift to the popular demand options rather than ones strongly based on traditions. There may be some overlap in these popular options, but it was very clear from their reaction that tourism is essential to keep them available. After all, the local Võrumaa government aims to preserve culture and heritage. So far, Kubija has been able to uphold these traditions, but the future is



never guaranteed. To conclude our talk, I asked about the role of Võrumaa culture center, tourism office, and various heritage institutions: how were they helping to preserve these wellness traditions? Unfortunately, there is not much focused on wellness; there is preference given to language as the most at-risk heritage components. The only wellness tradition that is showcased is the smoke sauna one, solely thanks to the prestigious UNESCO status authenticating its value. The various Võrumaa organizations did not assist with this accomplishment but use it for advantageous marketing as a tourist attraction. Besides sauna culture, there are no other traditions even mentioned on websites such as Visit Võru, just features such as Kubija for the hotel and spa.

#### ***4.3.2 Mooska Farm and the Dying Smoke Sauna Tradition? Experience and Interview***

As the Hotel & Spa Manager at Kubija understood I would next investigate the now-famous smoke sauna tradition, she spoke in detail of the dying tradition and why it cannot be offered in wellness centers. The smoke sauna is a true countryside practice, taking many hours to heat and presents major fire risks if used “indoors”. It would be inauthentic of spas like Kubija to offer smoke sauna replicas; she is therefore thrilled that some community members have established tourism enterprises to host the original custom. So, who in Võrumaa offers this authentic experience? The indigenous people of Võru who have been residing in the scattered farmhouses here for many generations still observe their traditions and customs (Visit Võru, 2021). Although their heritage is dear to them, the smoke sauna tradition has been dying, even forgotten by new generations. There are around ten Võru County Farmers who have decided to open their smoke saunas to tourists in recent years. This number is growing due to tourism demand and recognition of UNESCO in 2014, as displayed on many tourism websites across the Baltics and beyond. Through my research and contacts, I discovered Eda Veeroja, the woman who started this UNESCO ambition. On the most exciting part of my fieldwork yet, I enjoyed an entire day at Eda’s Mooska Farm to uncover some essential questions: what was (or is) the smoke sauna tradition? Why was it dying? Why was the UNESCO ambition initiated? Why were tourism enterprises started in Võru? Is tourism helping to protect this tradition from vanishing?

I drove quite literally fifteen minutes down the road to Mooska Farm, almost missing the long gravel driveway with a small sign. At the front of the property was her farmstand, and very close to that a relatively modern wooden home. Two dogs came running down the hill from the porch to greet me and grant me access to the rest of the farm. Eda came out to greet me and then proceeded to give me a thorough property tour on a windy, but sunny morning. Eda confessed that it was “refreshing” to meet with a student researcher rather than her usual interviewers: media, journalists, wellness marketers, spa managers, etc. She was happy to know someone wants to write about the true culture side of heritage, and to find out more how tourism could be a conservation strategy; she described how some people come here wanting “the next big story” but fail to consider the cultural implications.



Figure 23: Mooska Farm's sign advertising smoke sauna and nature experiences for tourism

Eda took me into each building, from three saunas, one workshop, and the farmhouse. As she explained her personal story and the tradition of the sauna itself, I was instructed to greet the sauna “hello” as a gesture upon entering. Eda grew up in the Võru countryside; she recalled using the smoke sauna as part of normal “everyday” life (at least once per week). Everyone in the community had one, and it was even common practice to visually see your direct neighbors using the sauna. Over time, it became a social practice; as heating it takes several hours (4-8, depending on the season and conditions) and significant energy, it was common to invite neighbors, friends, and community members to use one at a time to make the most out of the bathing session. When she was older, her family moved into town due to a factory work opportunity for her father (in Soviet times), leaving the sauna and country life behind her. She longed for her way of life and missed the rituals; it was in her blood, the root of her heritage.

We stepped inside the newest-built sauna to talk about the ancient 13<sup>th</sup> century tradition itself: it comprises a rich set of traditions including the actual bathing customs, the skills of making bath whisks, building and repairing saunas, and smoking meat. The sauna is a building or room heated by a stove covered with stones and with an elevated platform for sitting or lying. It has no chimney, and the smoke from burning wood circulates in the room, and is released through a window, a cracked door or through a special slip hole. In a properly and properly heated smoke sauna, there is no harshness or smoke, the air is light. The steam does not burn, the heat gradually warms the body, and you start to sweat in the humid *leil* immediately. The smoke sauna tradition is primarily a family custom typically practiced on Saturday afternoons, but also before major festivals or family events to relax the body and mind (Visit Estonia, 2022). Beyond these basics, Eda describes there are ancient beliefs for the tradition that get very detailed: from how to take the logs (for building), marking the corners, who lights the fire (usually a woman), who performs whisking, etc. In the 3-5 hour ritual, saunas are fumed by the scent of burning wood, birch, and honey. Bathers ask their sauna partners to beat them with tree branch whisks (much like I did at Hedon Spa), which exfoliates the skin

and stimulates circulation. Throughout the ritual, bathers step out of the intense sauna heat as needed, and sometimes into nearby cold water (ponds, buckets, creeks); originally, temperatures reached 80-90 Celsius, but often 65-75 present day. Smoke sauna heat is tricky to control as it depends on several factors: outside conditions like rain or wind, dampness and age of wood, and how long the preference is to heat it (i.e. 6 versus 8 hours). In ancient times, the smoke sauna was used as bathing in three ways; people did not know about “toxins” at that time or have access to medicines as we know it. The sauna served as medicinal, practical, and purification purposes. As the wood burning creates an antibacterial environment, it became a place to heal from sickness, especially by whisking. Whisking finds the places where the disbalance occurs and balances the body naturally. It was also practical as another room in a home; it served as a guest house, a place for the daily Estonian massage, women gave birth here, and the dead were temporarily kept here. The smoke sauna also served as a personal ritual to become spiritually pure. I asked Eda what the main health benefits of the sauna are, in general. Her answer was simple but complicated, reflecting the deeply spiritual side of the tradition:

*“The shortest answer is that smoke sauna always ends something: spiritually, emotionally, physically...it depends how deep you are ready to go. It’s always a transformation. Sometimes you can’t even figure out what happens, the influence isn’t immediate...our body needs time for transformation. Some people let the transformation happen, some people end up at the same point as before. It’s very personal. It’s an individual ritual. Ritual is always individual”.* -Eda Veeroja of Mooska Farm, 2022

Eda’s husband came out of the farmhouse and instructed us to step away from the sauna we were sitting beside. It was time to start the heating process. Tourists from Germany were set to arrive in the late afternoon; they had found Eda’s website and booked a first-time experience for four people. Due to the wind, the sauna must be ignited sooner so it would be ready on time. Usually, Eda performs the ritual with her guests at least three times per week, “they don’t know how to use it or the significance. I must teach them”. Her body couldn’t handle another session this week, and she casually said “someone else in the community will do it. There’s always someone”. Other English-speaking Võru community members who regularly practice the ritual don’t mind stepping in. Like Eda, they find it inspiring to teach their traditional ways. I learned there were 20 smoke saunas in the community, and they are all in communication with each other. Not all have tourism enterprises or want to invite outsiders. For some, the ritual is their own space, and they appreciate others keeping the tradition alive on their behalf. Eda’s Mooska Farm is distinctly unique as she’s the only entrepreneur who wants to provide multifarious and multisensory experiences related to smoke sauna heritage; from an authentic experience of the session, to the smoked meat tasting, it adds to the storytelling of the tradition and leaves longstanding impressions on her guests (Võsu & Sooväli-Sepping, 2012, p.99).





Figure 24: The backside of smoke sauna during the heating process at Mooska Farm



Figure 25: The center point of Mooska Farm, showing two smoke saunas and a workshop

We moved to her back patio of her home, sipping freshly brewed herbal tea, for a deeper talk on why Mooska Farm was established for tourism and how the UNESCO ambition was inspired from it. In her adult life, Eda rediscovered her roots and purchased this rural farm

property with her family. She longed for her sauna, so the first one was built in 1997 for their private use. In the 90s, the Estonian economy was very young, and Võrumaa became dominated by international companies, mainly Finnish and Swedish. During business trips, company owners came across the dying smoke sauna tradition and asked Eda to use hers (with guidance) to gain local insight. Over a few years, the word spread (without formal marketing) and Eda continuously hosted foreigners in her own sauna, as there were not many to be found in the community. This inspired her idea to establish Mooska Farm (meaning “joy of life” in Võru language), and combine smoke sauna tourism with nature trips, Võru heritage teachings, and smoking meats. This gave an opportunity to teach others about the traditional way of life, from the endangered Võru language (even older than Estonian), folklore, the healing elements of nature, and of course the spiritual smoke sauna ritual. Mooska smoke saunas are authentic. There is no electricity, running water, glass windows, or modifications for comfort: she preserves the heritage as it has always been. Gradually, Eda and her acquired students gave workshops, hosted company retreats, and even trained other wellness professionals on the smoke sauna tradition.

Over time, Eda realized her fellow community members with smoke saunas did not appreciate what they had in their own backyards. Some had left them to decay or be destroyed, while others used theirs but didn’t realize the importance of preserving the memory. She believed the smoke sauna tradition had nearly died due to 700 years of repression, politics (Estonian struggle for freedom), religion (restrictions of self-expression and spirituality in Soviet times), and natural “progress”, or changing lifestyles, evolution of the changing times. At many points in history, she claims the Võru connection to culture and spirituality was lost, as it’s often been something “against the rules”; “...in the sauna, you can communicate with your ancestors, hear your true self...we had to hide this from the church, landlords, and even neighbors...”. Eda saw the sauna’s spiritual aspect for most are gone, and it was no longer a place of social interaction. Estonia’s regained freedom in 1991 allowed for culture to finally flourish again, but there needed to be a revamping, something to spark the desire to conserve (Võru) heritage. Accordingly, her ambition for smoke sauna to be part of UNESCO ICH was campaigned to the community in 2004. The application itself was a tedious process: gathering evidence, stories, affidavits, photos, proof of heritage, etc. In 2009, the application was submitted, but not reviewed until 2012. By this time, Eda had acquired her second smoke sauna, and was on her way to a third as she believed her mission would be successful. UNESCO found the evidence to be strong and did not even need to visit the sites in Võrumaa to officially inaugurate the tradition in 2014. The ambition for the UNESCO status was never for the purpose of tourism itself, but rather a straight message to strengthen community heritage:

*“...we really didn’t ‘need’ this tradition to be UNESCO to claim authenticity; we wanted to tell our local people, ‘look, you have something valuable in your backyard’ and this message is very clear now. If somebody from outside tell us that ‘oh, this is something great!’, then suddenly eyes are opened”. -Eda Veeroja of Mooska Farm, 2022*

Eda doesn’t believe UNESCO guarantees cultural authenticity by default, but it rather helps affirm the fact there was (or is) a tradition worth recognizing and preserving. “If it’s under UNESCO, then it commercializes quite fast. This is something we wanted to avoid”. However, since gaining UNESCO status, tourism has steadily grown for Mooska Farm and within the community. Mooska does not advertise her business and feels she doesn’t need tourism to



make her living (smoking meats is enough). She simply wanted the tradition preserved and help the community respect its values to keep it alive. “We protect every person’s happy-to-go-to sauna in the way they used to do it. There is no right or wrong, or this or that.” They are protecting the everyday practice of the tradition. Alas, other tourism enterprises have run away with the idea and over commercialized the tradition by staging inauthentic experiences to tourists, as outlined by Võsu & Sooväli-Sepping (2012). These entrepreneurs have changed saunas structures to make (foreign) tourists feel more comfortable. This is not bad per se, but ethics are questionable as they often fail to teach the importance of the heritage and the spiritual element. It’s more of a wild, once-in-a-lifetime experience for tourists to see what’s on the “other side”, rather than a transformative journey that induces deep reflection.

For this reason, Eda believes tourism here has two sides. On the one hand, she knows tourism has been helping Estonia’s economy majorly grow over the past few years. It’s important to have tourism in rural areas to help the communities; in Võru, it has been a significant source of fuel for the local economy. Tourism provides the everyday income for some individuals, supporting their daily life unpretentiously. Many community members have their income entirely from tourism, they rely on it. In Võrumaa, there are around 100 tourism entrepreneurs, Kubija being one of the most successful. She believes tourism keeps centers like Kubija running, and also knows that this drive has been fueling culture conservation projects. Therefore, on the other hand, tourism to her is indeed making the community realize their values and promote storytelling, and this growing alliance of smoke saunas is proof the tradition is alive and actively remembered. As a result of the UNESCO ambition, Estonians all over the nation know about the tradition and visit to learn about wellness heritage. Smoke saunas used to be found mainly in the South, but they have now been popping up in more places across Estonia (including replicas in modern spas as we saw in Pärnu). The UNESCO ICH tradition is showcased on several Estonian websites, including Visit Estonia (one of nine UNESCO features), Estonian Spa Association, University of Tartu, regional tourism websites, governmental entities (i.e. Ministry of Culture), and other outside culture/tourism, and travel guide websites.

As Eda’s guests would arrive soon, we took one last look into the halfway heated sauna before trying fresh smoked ham together. My eyes stung as I felt my way around the dark corners, using my hands to feel the benches and walls, and crouching down to get some clean air. The fire and smoking are completely put out when the sauna is fully heated, making it much easier to breathe during the actual ritual. Stepping out of the sauna, my hands were completely saturated in black soot. Eda laughed, handed me a bucket to water, and said “this is why I need to teach you our ways”. Mooska Farm invites up to 5,000 tourists each year, a combination of smoke sauna experiences, nature tours, workshops, and meat tastings. Tourism accounts for less than 50% of the Farm’s income; she states there is “hardly a profit to be made” from the sauna itself as rising energy prices outweigh the energy to heat it. She operates her tourism business for the sake of the tradition and the greater mission she started. Eda’s name has become very popular especially among Visit Estonia, who had connected us so I could research this story.



Figure 26: The author (right) and Eda Veeroja (left), sitting beside a heating smoke sauna

#### 4.4 Discussion

My insightful journey across Pärnu and Võru left me reflecting on my essential research question: if, and how, tourism is affecting the vitality of cultural wellness traditions in Estonia. The concluding answer is undoubtedly yes, this is the case, but it appears in different forms as exposed during my fieldwork. Before analyzing my experiences and interviews themselves, it's important to note a few facts. Estonia does not technically have a Ministry of Tourism; it heavily relies on Visit Estonia (the national tourism board), its Culture sector, regional tourism institutions (i.e. Visit Pärnu), and respective broader organizations (i.e. Estonian Spa Association). This is critical to note as there is also a lack of deliberate policies to protect Estonian wellness heritage in relation to tourism growth. The main research conducted on tourism is performed by Visit Estonia (and Enterprise Estonia), but as I've found throughout my meetings, the board doesn't measure or intentionally analyze progression on how tourism is affecting Estonian culture, society, and heritage over time. This is why the research of this thesis was of use to them as a starting point.

A second form of tourism research and its effects on the wellness sector is conducted by University of Tartu's Wellness and Spa Service Design & Management Master (at Pärnu College). Program Manager Kai Tomasberg shared the mission of the Master and curriculum with me. There are no courses focusing solely on cultural aspects, but several lecturers mention them in their own courses. Furthermore, the Wellness Philosophy and Self- Management course introduces the historical and cultural background of wellness traditions, leading into a second course on Wellness and Health Tourism. With this being said, on an academic level, there are consistent observations on the overall wellness tourism trends, showing hand in hand which traditions are being affected the most over time. This is how, for example, it was discovered the ancient Estonian massage was being forgotten, as it was (previously) virtually absent as a

treatment option in spas. However, there is still a blatant disconnect between an intentional analysis on tourism and preservation of traditions; while the University and various institutions may shallowly observe there are indeed cultural changes in flux, a gap remains to fill in the heritage consequences of Estonia's wellness tourism growth. Therefore, the result of this thesis is the first of its kind.

As these important details were every so often mentioned to me by a few spa managers, I unearthed which body in Estonia oversees culture preservation in general. The overall responsibility for heritage lies with the Ministry of Culture, and from underneath the Ministry, a National Heritage Board and various institutions (i.e. NGOs); monuments and sites of historical, architectural and archaeological value are protected by the Heritage Conservation Act of 2011. The objective of the act is to ensure that monuments, sites and heritage conservation areas are preserved in their traditional environment (Council of Europe, 2018). However, despite the emphasis on cultural heritage protection as outlined by Council of Europe, wellness traditions are practically inexistant in this mentioning, other than the smoke sauna due to its highly regarded UNESCO status. As we discovered, this UNESCO inauguration was not a state attempt, but rather an ambition from the community level. I found the lack of policies difficult to absorb as I recalled the strong "Brand Estonia" campaigns from the early 2000s, which were designed to showcase the unique Estonian traditions as a both a tool for nation building and strategic development. Throughout history, Estonians have fought to preserve their ways of life, their roots in nature, and overall "Estonianness". In essence, Estonia has mindfully set out to commodify its heritage via tourism, but seemingly failed to provide a framework for keeping this balance of commercialization and sociocultural impacts such as degradation in check. Keeping this in the forefront, it allows us to understand why it is better to empirically analyze how tourism is affecting traditions and heritage aspects, rather than searching for policy effectiveness of their preservation.

However, change is in the works. In my interview with academic Heli Tooman, the impressive growth of international tourism in Estonia is inspiring significant attention onto preservation of culture, heritage, and traditions (including wellness traditions). In extremely recent news, Heli advised a new Estonian Tourism Strategy 2022-2025 was announced (only in Estonian language at this time). The key related topics for this strategy are culture, nature, and food tourism. In the wellness realm, a new branding for Estonia as a spa destination will be put in place, "Spectacular Estonia". Some traditions, such as curative mud use, are also geared to be in the spotlight and have been adopted by Estonia's Center of Excellence in Health Promotion and Rehabilitation. The reason for these new, refined ambitions to protect heritage has been directly instigated by the global wellness turn, and coincidingly the growing demand for authentic cultural experiences. As Heli explained, these objectives would not have been conceived without the formidable developments and prosperity of Estonia's wellness sector, shaping it into a world class "wellness destination". One last aspect to mention is the slow, but growing emergence of small, niche wellness spas, camps, lodges, etc. For example, the "Energia Talu" is an eco-spa situated in a remote location, in comparison to the major spa clusters. Smaller wellness centers such as this are sprouting from the local level, offering small group retreats, highly specialized wellness plans (based on Estonian tradition), personalized nature tours, focused rehabilitation packages, etc. Prior to Estonia's tourism boom in recent years, small centers like these were not commonly found. From what I'm told, Estonians didn't need these options, as they were already such common practices as part of everyday life in the Estonian heritage. If Estonians did visit a wellness center, it was one of the larger spas that

offered varied, multicultural experiences outside of their normal realm of traditions, products, and offerings. As Heli and I concluded, the emergence of these niche wellness establishments are a direct result of tourism, proving there is demonstratable evidence of expanding traditional Estonian wellness services.

Each wellness center I visited was unique in their own service designs, branding, and integration of cultural elements. However, there was a common theme among all of them: the staged experiences offered, reproductions of traditional rituals on the front stage, are only able to be sustained by means of international tourism. Repeatedly mentioned was the fact that there are only (just over) one million Estonians; the demand for traditional rituals inside centers is not high enough to entice locals to take part in their reproduction. It hits too close to home for the masses; the everyday practices are part of them, perceivably too simplistic, and do not encompass a new, memorable experience. This is why we saw spas such as Hedon and Wasa, despite their cultural significance in Pärnu, adopt journeys and treatments based on “other” cultures. However, we also saw spas such as ESTONIA Resort and Tervis embody the Estonian way of wellness, and form their brand around the uniquely Estonian concept. There is a twofold dimension here: on the one hand, the very presence and availability of having such traditionally based spas reaffirms the Estonian national identity. It serves as a reminder that their heritage is secure and able to be exposed on a global scale. On the other hand, the staged reproductions are designed to allude into the experience economy, a form of hybrid authenticity. While it serves as symbolic rootedness for Estonians, it’s truly the international tourists who are opting for these experiences and thus keeping the demand high. The sole existence of tourism has in many cases allowed spas and wellness centers to not only remain open, but force the managers, markets, and sales representatives to critically reflect on aspects of Estonian culture that are unique, authentically based, and essential for foreigners to try in their sensory embodiment journey.

At ESTONIA Resort, the “uniquely Estonian” rituals were designed to give the illusion of accessing the front stage of the tradition, tapping in to all five senses: from the locally sourced herbal tea, scented ingredients, sounds of nature, physical feelings of water/heat/relaxation, to the sight of the fabricated surroundings (i.e. smoke sauna replica, dark, blackened-wood illusion). The idea of authenticity is placed at the forefront, and over time more treatments were developed to keep up with the demand for authentic insights into the Estonian culture. As I discussed with Ave Pill and Jana, the Spa Manager, this demand was the driving force to become creative and find old traditions that are rarely used present day. The ancient Estonian floor massage with carrot and hemp oil is a prime example. As the Spa Manager explained, the popularity of this treatment became so popular that other spas in the area also adopted the idea (such as Hedon Spa, in their Journey to Ancient Estonia package). With confidence, I uncovered that ESTONIA Resort’s entire brand would not have been possible with this dictation from international customers. However, the symbolic nature of the resort is built on the history of the Soviet “Sanatorium No. 1”. The staff feel there is a responsibility to keep the building as a place of living wellness practices. It stands tall as Estonia’s most “authentic” spa, a place for Estonians to remember their roots, despite the small number of Estonians that physically take part in these “uniquely Estonian” treatments in-house.

On the other hand, Hedon Spa has sculpted its brand in a different fashion, despite the major significance of the building as a former mud bath house in Pärnu. The only Estonian offering was a staged, three treatment package that consisted of the now (most well-known), Estonian rituals. The Spa Manager blatantly admitted this Journey package does not fit in with

the brand's mission and was designed solely due to tourism demand. Several times, Hedon has tried to remove the package entirely. However, this has been unsuccessful due to its popularity (and profitability). Romet was the only spa manager that seemed out of touch with Estonian culture; he simply did not know some traditions were dying or were in danger due to natural progression and globalization. Every other spa and wellness personnel, academic, or local Estonian I spoke with had expressed otherwise. However, when analyzing this contradiction, there is a reason for this line of thinking. As Romet had stated, he believes there will be *more* authentic, Estonian based wellness centers or treatments added in the future. In his eyes, the traditions are not dying because they are *actively being preserved* through tourism. While Hedon may only host Estonians for "exotic" treatment options, the foreign tourists visit Hedon for the Journey treatment and move on to different spas for further rituals.

Tervis and Hedon are entirely different from one another, despite their shared mud bath history. Tervis believes in preserving the curative mud tradition and even hosts a small cultural center. While mud was used in abundance during the past, these days it is expensive, unsustainable, and difficult to manage. The spa and medical center have tried hard to keep this treatment on their list; this struggle was not due to lack of popularity, but because of the operational conflicts. During the pandemic, Tervis was nearly unable to obtain or offer mud baths as tourists were faced restrictions on entering the country. This posed a major risk to the tradition's vitality, as mud is not something that can be administered at home in daily practice. Since almost no other wellness center in Estonia offers mud baths (apart from Värskä on the Russian border), Tervis is the leading guardian of this Baltic Sea tradition from the 1800s. If Tervis would no longer host this capability, the tradition would be in great jeopardy (as it's already at risk). However, since normal operations have resumed, their typical, repeat clientele has returned (mainly from Finland and Sweden) and allowed for the extraction to occur once again. Going along with the common theme as previously mentioned, the Marketing Specialist of Tervis insisted Estonians are not enough to be able to extract and present curative mud to their guests. Personally, she believes the mud offering is an essential aspect of Estonian culture, and shows how Estonians were able to keep such a ritual as rare and dear to them throughout times of repression and control.

Pärnu's newest spa, Wasa, has its own distinct image of modernity, pampering, and upscale retreats. Unlike the other spas, the traditional treatments are scarce here; this was mindfully decided upon as the brand needed to have an identity set apart from the rest. However, the inclusion of locally sourced (and owned) Estonian products such as Magrada exposes a sustainable way to remember culture and progress with revamped versions of the Estonian way of wellness. Modernization, progression, globalization, and regenerated mindsets inevitably change traditions in their naturally flux states. Society and culture are continuously produced, reproduced, and shifting. Wasa's Spa Manager, Tiina, has witnessed how tourism finds a different way to revitalize Estonian traditions. The power of branding Estonian resources (i.e. curative mud masks, hemp oil, herbal hair masks, etc.) still finds a way to exhibit the ancient way of using nature; the existential authenticity clause here shows how authenticity doesn't always have to appear as saunas and birch whisking (for example), but through adaptive re-uses of Estonian roots. The same resources, spiritual beliefs, medicinal remedies, and transformational conquests that Estonians have used throughout the ages can be exhibited in modern ways. However, as I learned at Wasa, local Estonians are not the driving force behind this trend. Tiina explains that foreign tourists were the ones to specifically *request* Estonian products as they are different from the mainstream market options. When Tiina observed this

demand, she began adding more local products. While on the surface this may not seem to “keep traditions alive” in their original form per se, tourism truly helps to preserve the culture and finds new ways to include attributes of heritage in wellness services.

In Võru, I journeyed to the southern, rugged nature of the pine forests and visited Kubija Nature Spa. Kubija’s brand presents Estonian wellness in its purest form, relying on the effectiveness of nature, and integrity of heritage beliefs. Southern Estonia hosts different traditions than Pärnu, with some overlap. Perhaps easier perceived than the rest of Estonia are the dying traditions here. This could be due to the focus on preserving Võru and Seto language and culture, which have roots even older than Estonian language. Like some spas in Pärnu, Kubija relies on tourism for its existence. The popular southern spa offers traditional treatments that are different from the rest of the country, such as the use of bear fat, peat, herbs, and other animal byproducts. Deeply rooted in Kubija’s brand is the concept of spirituality of nature and rootedness; their designs are mainly based on how Estonians have lived since ancient times. However, the spa does not actively try to preserve traditions by offering these unique services, the Spa Manager and her assistant explained it’s more of a way of life, and they offered Estonians a way to rejuvenate themselves in a familiar way. However, over time, Estonians were opting for the “exotic” options, and not as much as their common, everyday rituals. This resulted in an expanded list of choices from global trends. Contrastingly, when tourism began to increase thanks to promotion from the Estonian Spa Association, foreign tourists requested the authentic, local treatments. The treatment list was revamped again to cater to this demand and has helped to bring back traditionally-based options. Along the way, some traditions were lost due to unpopularity. Therefore, Kubija realizes the important role of tourism in being able to shape how it wants to express the story and background of southern Estonia to educate others about culture. The pandemic proved this tenfold, as the absence of foreign tourism resulted in Estonians again choosing the basic or modern options, rather than the ones reflecting their own culture.

Finally, Mooska Farm encounter proved to be a different visit than to a modern spa; the Farm is a wellness center that aims to protect the dying smoke sauna tradition of Võru. Eda Veeroja witnessed the smoke sauna tradition progressively dying, and she decided to halt its decay. On a personal and community level, her ambition to inaugurate the smoke sauna onto the UNESCO ICH list had very little to do with tourism in the beginning. The initiative was aimed to induce community involvement in realizing how sacred and essential the tradition is in Võru culture, and to preserve it with respect for the future before it’s too late. This mission became successful without international tourism. It originated, and continues to flourish, as part the intrinsic value of heritage among locals. However, conscious preservation was limited to the confines of southern Estonia and would have remained there without the UNESCO branding. Since gaining this prestige in status, the smoke sauna tradition has now gained popularity throughout other parts of Estonia, and has even been recognized by the Ministry of Culture, various tourism organizations, etc. Essentially, tourism helped in two specific ways. First, it helped to re-affirm, validate, and inspire the Võru population to realize the smoke sauna is indeed something very unique, experienceable, and could potentially strengthen the community and respective customs. Second, tourism proved that the vitality of this tradition could in turn help the community grow by circulating profits, fostering deeper relationships among community members as smoke sauna resources and knowledge are shared, and provides international recognition, word of mouth, and presence of Võru culture outside of Estonia. As a result, Visit Estonia has effectively marketed this experience, thus making a statement that some

wellness traditions are at risk. Without the presence of tourism to smoke sauna enterprises such as Mooska Farm, it is highly probable the “need” to start preserving wellness traditions would not have come to light on a broader scale.

## Chapter 5: Concluding Thoughts

### 5.1 Conclusion

This Master thesis has exposed how tourism has been a vital aid in keeping wellness traditions alive in Estonia. We began by looking at an overview of Estonia as a growing tourism destination in the Baltics, and as a leading wellness destination with over 200 years of traditions. Estonia's impressive tourism boom has undoubtedly shaped its wellness developments into an industry worthy of global attention. Wellness tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism, although still considered a smaller, niche trend. Wellness trends were at an all-time high prior to COVID-19, making wellness tourism a relevant topic to research. Furthermore, the global wellness turn has simultaneously led travelers to seek authentic, unique opportunities while on quests for self-discovery, transformation, and rejuvenation. As there is a gap in current literature on the relationship between wellness tourism and sociocultural consequences, this thesis helped to fill this gap and provide a first look on how tourism affects the vitality of Estonian wellness traditions based on heritage roots of "Estonianness".

Through this qualitative approach, I used the method of participant observation to explore firsthand the sensescapes and genius loci of two leading wellness regions in Estonia: Pärnu and Võru. Data was collected empirically through several interviews with wellness industry leaders, exploration of my own observations, discussions with academics, Visit Estonia and Estonian Spa Association (as direct partners), and with fellow tourists in the same setting. Via these methods, I was able to gather the contextual background, history of each place, and take part in the wellness traditions that are regarded highly in Estonian culture today.

In Pärnu, we learned how the developments of the first seaside resorts came about thanks to the discovery of curative mud therapy from the Baltic Sea. This tied to the history of the Estonian struggle for independence (twice), and preservation of roots during times of oppression. After breaking free from the Soviet Union in 1991, Estonia quickly wanted to show the world their uniqueness: from traditions, to songs, ways of life, openness to transformation and innovation, the Brand Estonia campaigns turned into a development strategy for the small nation, with tourism as a leading force. Tourism was used as a nation building tool to help reaffirm the identity of the Estonian people, while slowly strengthening its economy. Having developed successful campaigns to brand the Baltics as a wellness destination, we saw how Estonian spas and wellness centers deliberately commodify their heritage to provide incredible, memorable, sensory experiences for (primarily) foreign tourists on the backstage. A question of authenticity comes into play as reproductions were examined in relation to vitality of traditions. This was a common theme for especially spas in Pärnu; services and treatments were designed mindfully, with a few distinct ways to showcase the story of the Estonian way of wellness. However, we also journeyed to the front stage of a (former) dying tradition when experiencing the UNESCO smoke sauna tradition of Võru; tourism proved again to be a tool for an effective cultural conservation strategy. All in all, tourism is unquestionably helping to keep wellness traditions alive and at the forefront of Estonian culture, thus slowing down the chance of decay for the time being.



## 5.2 Limitations

It should be recognized that any research project, especially ones self-conducted at an individual level and without funding, have several limitations. First and foremost, I experienced a personal limitation in deciding exactly how far to take this research project, and how much I could actually do as one person. I took into account my own background: International Relations, Russian & Central Studies, professional experience in the tourism industry, my choice of courses in my Master, and a reflection of my own writing style. My personal background certainly gave me strength and a good push to initiate this project, but it indeed does have its limits. I initially considered conducting a mixed methods project where I critically analyze data on tourism, specifically in relation to Estonia's wellness sector. However, this wouldn't allow me to dive deeply into the cultural/heritage aspect of traditions, which is the root of this project's passion. I then considered significantly cutting down the size of this project and researching only one destination (Võru, focusing on cultural commodification with UNESCO sties), but this would have shifted the project entirely and developed a new (narrowly focused) research question. I decided to focus on what I'm good at, and that's meeting with people (establishing relationships and great conversations), experiencing things for myself, and writing about it autoethnographically. Still, on one hand, I wanted the project scale to be wider. I wanted to interview more people, especially locals, spa managers, tourists, and discover deeper trends about experiencing a culture through wellness traditions. Specifically in Southern Estonia, I experienced a limit on the number of people to speak with due to the spread-out nature of the pine dotted forest region. On the other hand, it's not about the quantity of interviews, places visited, or time spent in each place...it's the *quality*. The quality of my interviews exceeded my own expectations.

There was a limit to how much I could experience myself, I had to be selective and careful. After all, my method of participant observation resulted in very visceral experiences. In order to immerse myself in these traditions, I had to physically endure rituals that were unfamiliar to me. Some of them were rather exhausting and made it difficult to cognitively analyze the situation. Rest and breaks were needed in between, especially to prepare for interviews and write notes. Participant observation is a research method that should not be taken lightly. It goes far beyond analyzing from behind a desk. Although I wanted to experience *everything*, especially as I have a deep passion for wellness experiences and authentic cultural experiences, I realized my own bodily limits.

Language and communication undoubtedly have their own limits, and when dealing with any other foreign culture, there will be some degree of language barriers and cultural nuances that do not translate accurately. Although I successfully conducted interviews in English (and had live translation help during three interviews as I do not speak Estonian), participants cannot express themselves as fully, freely or accurately through translation, or through speaking a second language. This was taken into account as the usage of traditions and heritage was conveyed to me; most likely, there was some elements or details unintentionally left out, or not able to be described properly. Thus, there is a limit to my ability to reiterate Estonian spa & wellness traditions, culture, and heritage on paper. I recognize there may be a margin of error.

This study was limited to specific geographic regions, and does not provide a complete overview of all Estonian regions where spa & wellness traditions originated, or where they are reproduced today in wellness center or smaller tourism enterprises. For example, the island of Saaremaa in the Baltic Sea also has strong traditions of curative mud for therapeutic

purposes, much like Pärnu across the bay. The island, especially in the old town of Kuressaare, has been a health resort destination since the first spa establishment in 1824; today, Saaremaa hosts nine spa hotels offering a plethora of both traditional and modern-day treatments (Visit Saaremaa, 2022). It would have been a great addition to visit Saaremaa and other regions, learn about the history of traditions and conduct interviews, but this was not able to happen for a variety of reasons. Other regions to research in order to conduct a well-rounded analysis are Northern, Central, Eastern, and along the Russian border (i.e. Narva).

As previously mentioned, there were many constraints that lead to the ultimate selection of places to visit, people to interview, destinations to experience and empirically observe. The lack of funding was a major obstacle as this ultimately narrowed down the duration of stay in-country, selection of places to visit, methods of transportation, and therefore traditions that could be researched firsthand (including ability to conduct interviews in-person). Another constraint was a lack of contacts overall. Although Visit Estonia (including Enterprise Estonia), Estonian Spa Association, and University of Tartu were top research partners with connections around the country, there were connections missing on the local level. Although my partners personally and professionally knew many people and could effectively connect me with relevant parties, I still experienced a gap in reaching others outside of this realm. Furthermore, I was not able to reach everyone who I contacted (both by email and phone) despite my connections. Some respondents never answered, said they were too busy, or referred me elsewhere. Thus, having connections does not always guarantee success. Taking matters into your own hands doesn't always work out either. For example, after sending numerous emails and phone calls, the administration at Wagenküll Spa did not respond. As the historical castle was on my route, I decided to stop in unannounced only to be turned away due to a private event.

Finally, while the methods of participant observation and conducting interviews are a great way to start a research project, they cannot decipher the entire story of Estonian spa & wellness cultural traditions. These methods only offer an introduction and snapshot to the research question, which could be further developed in a continuing research project.

### **5.3 Further Research & Recommendations**

There are several avenues in which this research could be continued, expanded (or narrowed), or shifted into alternate research questions. First and foremost, the same research question could be applied to the regions not yet studied. The same methods could be carried out by means of a researcher experiencing the traditions and interviewing spa managers, locals, and tourists. Conclusions may be drawn and then compared to the results of this thesis; perhaps results can be combined, or new conclusions drawn to update the research.

As the experience economy is a leading concept in this thesis, it could be further explored at the level of individual wellness centers: to what degree are tourists visiting centers for the cultural or sensory experiences, versus for achieving the perceived health benefits of wellness treatments? This would uncover the motives behind visiting particular regions, destinations, or centers. Discovering these motives can help update the analysis for the current thesis results. Once the motives are known, especially for the sample of tourists who visit Estonian wellness centers to enjoy cultural experiences, this may strengthen the authenticity of experiences or influence the marketing strategies of centers.

Outside of wellness centers, traditions are passed down through the concept of storytelling. Within wellness centers, traditions are conveyed to tourists by the design of the center,

selection of treatments offered, how treatments are carried out, and ingredients/products used. Future research could investigate the tourist experience through storytelling of traditions in centers. This could be uncovered through guest surveys (before and after their experience), written and verbal documentation of their experience, and interviews. This would answer some questions such as: what they knew about a particular wellness tradition before opting for the treatment or journey, if the treatment was unfamiliar to them (including ingredients used), how authentic they feel the experience was, if their experience provided insight into the Estonian culture, and if they felt transformed from the experience as a whole. Results from this study would be insightful to discover the tourist experience, how effective are wellness centers in conveying their traditions through experiences, how culture can be preserved through this concept of storytelling in tourist experiences, and how to better market traditions without exploiting heritage purely for profit.

Lastly, one final recommendation relates to sustainability of both wellness traditions, culture, and the local communities. Several conversations were held with the Spa Manager at Wasa Resort (Tiina) in Pärnu after my trip. She is currently finishing her own Master at Pärnu College (Wellness and Spa Service Design and Management program) and will write her thesis starting this Fall. She expressed how this Master thesis inspired her to look deeper into Estonian traditions; the results of this research will help propel her own project. Since there is evidence tourism is helping to keep traditions alive, one idea is to discover (from a business management/spa design perspective) how incorporating more cultural aspects in treatments can help promote sustainability and inclusion of the local community. For example, the Magrada product line includes Estonian ingredients such as curative mud. If the resort began using a variety of locally sourced ingredients or products, this would help circulate funds in the local economy. This also helps to directly keep traditions alive, and major brand products would be replaced by Estonian ones. From the angle of a cultural tourist, this is ideal as it creates a more authentic experiences for the guest. The storytelling of the tradition is stronger, resources of the nearby regions are used sustainably, and the preservation of culture, intertwined with heritage and identity, is kept at the forefront by both locals and wellness centers, in turn leading to new branding and marketing strategies.

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## Appendix A

### Interview guide for Master's Thesis in Human Geography, Specialization in Cultural Geography and Tourism

Nijmegen School of Management | Radboud University

Thesis Title: Traditions of Estonian Spa & Wellness: Kept Alive Through Tourism?

Interviewer: Abigail Gordon

Respondent: Spa managers (for example)

Introduction	
<b>Intro</b>	<p>Introducing myself as a researcher and thanking the respondent for their participation.</p> <p>Remarking that participation in the interview is voluntary and HIGHLY APPRECIATED, and that the participant can choose to opt out at any stage of the interview process.</p>
<b>Recording and anonymity</b>	<p>Asking permission to record the interview, making clear that it is fine even if the interviewee prefers not. In case of permission is granted. Explain that the recording will be transcribed and ask whether the participant would like to receive a copy of the transcription. If the permission to record is not granted, ask permission to take notes.</p> <p>Explain that the interview can be anonymous if the respondent requires so, that in that case a pseudonym will be used and that I will be the only one having access to the participant's name and contact details. Explain that the interview's recording, transcription and/or notes will not be made public. Ask if the participant would like to receive the thesis once it's finished. Consent will be obtained verbally.</p>
<b>Aim of the interview</b>	<p>Interview focus: to discover if Estonian spa &amp; wellness traditions are being kept alive by tourism (or vice versa: perhaps traditions would survive on their own without tourism, or tourism is changing the use of these traditions...)</p> <p><i>Keywords: spa &amp; wellness traditions, authenticity, heritage commodification, smoke sauna, mud therapy, water rituals, herb rituals, nation branding, identity, UNESCO ICH, sensory embodiment, experience economy, global wellness turn, preservation of traditions, cultural conservation, uniquely Estonian</i></p>
<b>Time needed</b>	<p>At bare minimum, 30 minutes is needed to complete all structured questions. 45 minutes to one hour would be extremely useful as the interview should flow as a conversation. If possible, a tour of the facility (if at a spa/resort) would be an additional asset.</p>
Questions and possible follow-ups	
<b>Part 1: Background on Estonian traditions</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Please explain the historical and cultural significance of particular spa/resort. Why is it one of the most special and important establishments for Estonian wellness traditions?</li> <li>2. Why are spa &amp; wellness traditions important to Estonian culture, heritage, and identity in general? Why does Estonia focus on traditions?</li> <li>3. In your opinion (and from your own knowledge), what are the three most traditional Estonian spa &amp; wellness practices? Ones that are "uniquely Estonian" and highly important in your culture?</li> <li>4. Can you please briefly describe these traditions: what they are, how long they've been used, why are they important in Estonian culture? (Where and how are they used outside of spa resorts centers?)</li> </ol>



	5. Which Estonian wellness traditions would you say have been “forgotten”, but are being brought back to life these days?
<b>Part 2: Traditions in transition, in practice, (re)branding, and identity</b>	<p>6. How have these traditions changed in recent years? For example, if they are used differently, changed, adapted, shortened, modified...? Why have they changed?</p> <p>7. Do you believe it’s important to preserve cultural spa &amp; wellness traditions?</p> <p>8. Was there a deliberate effort to market, brand, or commodify these traditions as part of Estonia’s ongoing national tourism campaign to re-shape its identity? In other words, was there big effort to show the world these “uniquely Estonian” spa &amp; wellness traditions?</p> <p>9. What traditional treatments are offered at your resort? Are they adapted/significantly modified for spa tourism use?</p>
<b>Part 3: Relationship with tourism</b>	<p>10. Who is mainly selecting the traditional or “authentic” Estonian treatments at your spa: foreign tourists, Estonians (domestic tourism), or local Estonian (from nearby regions)? Why do they choose the traditional ones?</p> <p>11. Are there any traditional treatments you used to offer, but no longer offer? Why?</p> <p>12. Do you believe traditions would be lost, forgotten, or used much less frequently if they were not openly available for tourism?</p> <p>13. If tourism suddenly stopped (i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic), how would Estonian traditions continue to be preserved?</p> <p>14. Do you believe tourists care about culture or authentic traditions when they choose Estonia for their spa &amp; wellness trips?</p> <p>15. Do you personally believe the traditional treatments your spa services offer are original and authentic based on Estonian tradition?</p> <p>16. How do you anticipate the future of spa &amp; wellness treatments to look like in Estonian day spas and re-sorts? Are the traditional Estonian treatments at the core of the Estonian wellness sector, will they always be the primary focus?</p>
<b>4. Conclusion</b>	Q17: Is there anything you would like to add to this conversation that we didn’t touch upon?
<b>Closure</b>	
<b>Thank you note</b>	Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. Your contribution is highly valued and is essential to my research. Give gift brought from the Netherlands.
<b>Feedback</b>	Do you have any feedback for me? Do you have any questions or remarks?
<b>Contact information</b>	<p>If any question or remark arises later, you can send me an e-mail. I will leave you my contact details.</p> <p>In case any further question arises from my side, could I contact you again?</p>

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions: Eda Veeroja at Mooska Farm

*Interview focus: to discover if Estonian spa & wellness traditions are being kept alive by tourism (vice versa: perhaps traditions would survive on their own without tourism, or tourism is changing the use of these traditions...)*

*Keywords: spa & wellness traditions, authenticity, heritage commodification, smoke sauna, mud therapy, water rituals, herb rituals, nation branding, identity, UNESCO ICH, sensory embodiment, experience economy, global wellness turn, preservation of traditions, cultural conservation, uniquely Estonian*

1. Why are spa & wellness traditions an important part of Estonian culture, heritage, and identity?
2. Have wellness traditions always been important in Southern Estonia?
3. What are the main wellness traditions in Southern Estonia?
4. Have there been any forgotten or dying traditions that are no longer commonly used today? Why is this so?
5. The smoke sauna tradition from Southern Estonia now has a positive reputation. Please explain this wellness tradition: who it was used by, why, and how? What is the cultural significance?
6. Was this tradition also on the verge of being forgotten or dying? Who still uses this tradition today (apart from tourists)?
7. In Estonia, there were successful (ongoing) marketing attempts to re-brand the country and shape a new identity. Spa & wellness culture has been part of this campaign, especially in relation to tourism. Was the inspiration to preserve the smoke sauna tradition part of this ambition?
8. What was the main motivation behind preserving the smoke sauna tradition? Who felt it was important to keep the tradition alive?
9. The smoke sauna tradition received UNESCO ICH status in 2014. Why was it important to have the UNESCO branding?
10. Since receiving UNESCO status, how has this influenced more tourism in the region?

11. How is tourism helping to keep the smoke sauna tradition alive?
12. Do you believe tourism is a great conservation strategy for this tradition (and other potential wellness traditions that need preservation)?
13. Is tourism benefitting locals and contributing to the re-branding attempts of shaping the “uniquely Estonian” identity?
14. Has the authenticity of the smoke sauna tradition been jeopardized through increased tourism?
15. If tourism in Southern Estonia were to double, how would this affect the tradition, its usage, and local tourism enterprises such as Mooska Farm?

## Appendix C

### Mud Therapy (Curative Mud) Explanation

Mud therapy use, also known casually as “mud baths” and symbolically as “Estonian black gold” to signify the importance in Estonian culture, maintains one of the longest standing traditions in Estonian wellness. Originally used as a medical wellness technique, the mud has a therapeutic effect with the ultimate goal of helping to ease the symptoms of chronic diseases over time with repetitive use. It has been used for centuries to alleviate all sorts of health problems, namely: people suffering from rheumatic diseases, chronic arthritis, spine diseases, muscular atrophy, post-traumatic and post-surgical scarring, chronic skin diseases (such as psoriasis and eczema), and chronic internal diseases (such as gynecological). Despite the varied list of medical concerns mud therapy may help with, this is not a treatment for everyone; those with blood diseases, tumors, hemorrhages, cardiac ailments, kidney diseases, tuberculosis, and pregnancy. Studies have shown mud therapy improves blood circulation, relieves muscle aches, and joint pains. Estonians truly believe their tradition of mud usage has helped to improve their health, well-being, and productivity.

The mud itself, more technically known by Estonians as curative mud, is considered a valuable natural resource and has been mined for few hundred years. This mud is currently found in five locations across Estonia: Ermistu, Haapsalu Tagalaht, Mullutu-Suurlaht, Värskla Bay and Käina Bay. It's held on a high pedestal in Estonian culture with emphasis on the “black gold's” uniqueness. According to Tallinn University's professor of Ecohydrology, Jaanus Terasmaa, the mud found in Estonian bays and lakes is highly valued due to its organic composition; it's an even plastic matter that has deposited on the bottom of watersheds. The mud is rich in bioactive compounds such as humic substances and other active ingredients, found to have antiviral, anti-cancerous, anti-inflammatory, and anti-aging effects. Laws are currently in the making to ensure the quality standards of the curative mud for use in spa & wellness services.

So what exactly happens during the traditional curative mud usage: the full-body mud bath treatment? While this may sound like a relaxing form of therapy, it may actually induce an unpleasant and aggravating feeling on the body during the initial encounter. The applied mud acts as a thermal, mechanical, and chemical irritant, beginning with stimulation on the skin, and causes changes in the metabolic processes, nervous and cardiovascular systems. Each person's reaction will be different, but in general, after a few moments of sitting in the warm mud with most of your body saturated (except head of course), your heart rate will increase as well as breathing due to the metabolism becoming more active. The skin acts as the initial receptor to the mud, ultimately affecting the brain cortex. As a result, it's normal to feel drowsy during and after the intense process, and even drained of energy to the point of mild exhaustion.







Aerial photograph of historic Mud Bath House;  
bathers enjoying the facilities; bathers posing  
in front of Mud Bath House (now Hedon Spa)





Hedon's informational poster on bathing; heavily used bathtubs for mud therapy; Tervis Spa's current bathtub for mud therapy



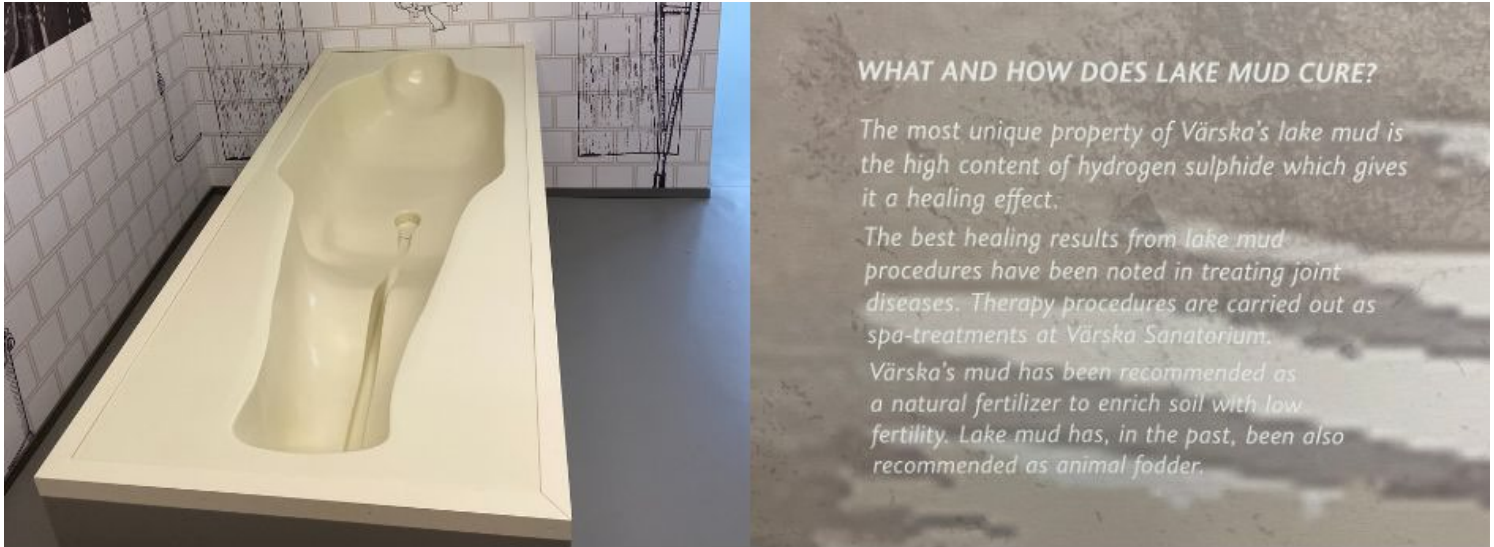




Tervis' mud extract melting for treatment; man receiving mud wrap; man receiving full mud bath (including obsolete chest/heart area)







Värskä Sanatorium's mud bath "tubs" and explanation on lake mud (alternative to curative mud from the Baltic Sea)





Inside of a dormant smoke sauna at Mooska Farm in  
Võrumaa





ESTONIA Resort's smoke sauna replica; Kubija's water/sauna center; and Kubija Spa Hotel from the outside

