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**CURRENT ISSUE**

WHAT ARE YOU DOING FOR THE NEXT YEAR OF YOUR LIFE?

**Play****Batting in the Baltic**

Article by Angus J.J. Bell

Photos by Angus J.J. Bell, Andy Barr, Lonely Planet Images

ALL THE SPORTS IN THE WORLD— FOOTBALL, BASEBALL, BASKETBALL, ARCHERY—share one universal, unbreakable rule: Nudity will always attract the loudest cheers. Even in Estonia, even in sub-zero conditions, and even when the game is cricket. In fact, in Estonian ice cricket, streaking is mandatory.

Estonia has been playing cricket since 1998, when an Indian restaurant owner and an Estonian back from holidaying in Australia formed a club on a horse track in Tallinn. Today, they run two grounds (one of which has three trees in the middle), and the team includes players from Zimbabwe, South Africa, Australia, the UK, Finland, and the Netherlands as well as six native Estonians.

At the end of January, I traveled to medieval Tallinn—a UNESCO World Heritage site, the booze cruise, casino,

and stag capital of the Baltics, and the actual capital of Estonia—for the world's first international six-a-side cricket tournament on ice. Four teams from the UK flew in by budget carrier to do battle against the locals (the Estonians split their side in two). No one, however, had any clue how to play on ice.



Estonia's captain is Jason Barry, a half-English, half-French marketing whiz. His brother is a yeti hunter in the Himalayas. After watching Groundhog Day, he set off in 1996 to play cricket in a world-record-breaking 128 countries, eventually coming to a stop in Estonia when he was offered a bank job. During his trip, he was forced to mortgage his house, and was arrested at Moscow airport for breaking a window and setting off the sprinkler system. (He'd been teaching cricket to Georgian refugees near the toilets.) When I spoke to him before the tournament, he didn't seem concerned

about his side's ranking. In fact, they're the team that loves to lose. "We're happy being the worst

international team in the world,” he said. “It’s a great marketing tool. When we’ve won, it’s been embarrassing. We just want to give touring sides a good run, let them win, and hope they enjoy it enough to come back.”

Slavophile Julian Tall, 33, was one of the architects of this tournament. He runs Baltic Adventures, a London-based travel company on whose team I was playing, that specializes in unusual activities, like rally karting in the snow and Kalashnikov practice. On the eve of the games, he told me, “The matches will be held on an ice rink in a former Soviet missile factory, which you’d have been shot for prowling round fifteen years ago. The pitch has been marked and we’ve had hockey players scuff the outfield to give better grip. Play is always ongoing, and we’ve got bicycle helmets for anybody who wants.”

At 12 in the vast Jeti Hall, we began play against Estonia’s first entry (we’d already lost one game to an English pub side). We were a mixed bag of Antipodean and British strangers, drawn together by a common love of international cricket. Our lineup included two London money-laundering analysts, a Sydney D.J., a South African Muslim, a New Zealand electrician, and myself, the kilted Scotsman. Giant concrete walkways and rusting girders criss-crossed over the ice pitch, while Donna Summer blasted from the stereo. Behind the plastic barrier, waiting teams swigged French cognac and Russian sparkling white wine, preparing to take to the sauna.

Being short and bearded, with little Courvoisier coursing through their veins, the Balts seemed at a considerable advantage in the field. They wore white and came prepared with spikes. For us giggling batsmen, it was like running on oiled glass, and it was not long before our opening pair collided with the wickets, the wicketkeeper, and the umpire. Which, in case you’re not familiar with the rules of cricket, is bad. Each wobble and Home Alone–esque flip throughout our innings prompted oohs! from bemused, gold-toothed Russian onlookers, keen to check out a new sport. Holding back the manly tears, we fought our way to a commanding innings total of 93.



There was no chance of us making the final, but as we jogged back onto the pitch for the second half of our Estonian clash, there was a fierce determination in our team.

Opening the bowling in scarf, gloves, kilt, and sporran was no easy task. The ball was plastic and wrapped in duct tape, and the batsman was wearing one leg guard and a woolly hat. The Baltic openers came out fighting. They thrashed our bowling and ran like a team that had,

well, practiced. We hurled ourselves across the surface to save runs. By the end of the day, I would have had three kneecaps on each leg, but the temperature kept the swelling down.

The Estonians were like a good English village Sunday team. As their innings progressed, our lack of pace and knack for getting balls to roll along the ground caused them problems. Finally, they succumbed. Having bowled them out for 70, us Baltic Adventurers proved that we could compete on an international level.

Estonia’s second entry had more success in Group 2. They won a game, which surprised them most of all. Estonia’s chairman, biologist Kristjan Kogerman, took more wickets than his total for the last five years, but it was not enough to put a home team in the final. Luckily, this meant they had a great vantage point from which to watch a New Zealander, clad only in trainers, dash across the pitch during the finals.

Estonia’s cricketers hope the success of their inaugural ice sixes will attract more teams who sorely

miss playing during the long winter months. A second tournament was held in March, again in the missile factory; the Kelletino Warriors, from St. Albans, beat out a side from Cambridge University to take the silver trophy. Now there are even talks of an ice World Cup. "Australia has fast, bouncy pitches. We have ice," said Chris Lautre, Estonia's Zimbabwean recruit. "Send over the Scottish team to play on this surface and we'll make them mincemeat, or haggis."

It can be a lonely place at the bottom of the cricket table. Archrivals Latvia (41st, just behind Mozambique) turned down the opportunity to play on ice—the concept was too obscure for their puritan cricketing ideals. This summer the Netherlands (14th) will be challenging the Estonians outdoors. "What's the plan?" I asked captain Jason Barry.

"We'll take them out drinking till seven, then play will start promptly at eleven," he said. "I'll toss with a small coin, which their captain won't see... and we'll still lose." A win against the Dutch would propel Estonia up the rankings, and save them from touring Sierra Leone.

**LOWDOWN:**

FANCY PLAYING CRICKET AGAINST ESTONIA, OR DOING SOMETHING UNUSUAL IN THE BALTICS? Visit [www.balticadventures.co.uk](http://www.balticadventures.co.uk).

FOR A THOROUGH EXPLANATION OF THIS GREAT GAME, CHECK OUT: [www.cs.purdue.edu/homes/hosking/cricket/explanation.htm](http://www.cs.purdue.edu/homes/hosking/cricket/explanation.htm).

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT ESTONIAN CRICKET, SEE [www.cricket.ee](http://www.cricket.ee)

OR TO FIND OUT ABOUT CRICKET IN THE US, try [usaca.org](http://usaca.org).

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