

Narva: past, present and future

Think back to the last time you travelled to some place new. What was going through your head? Excitement? Expectation? Nervousness at the prospect of venturing into the unknown? Even if you knew next to nothing about the destination, your mind would have started building up a mental image; a collage of ideas based on various snippets of information from guide books, conversations with previous visitors, reports in magazines and on TV. Of course, nowadays the world is just a click away: all we need do is visit Google Earth and zoom about like migratory birds.

But no matter how advanced the technology, there is no substitute for the real thing. Physically experiencing a place involves all the senses. We “read” the environment taking in its sights and sounds, tastes and textures. Our mental pre-conceptions fade the more we absorb of the “real” place. But that reality, in turn, becomes a mental construct as soon as we get back home. This becomes evident when we meet someone else who just happened to have also visited the exact same place: they might have come away with a completely different picture. This is because even if two visitors followed an identical tourist route and ticked off the same must-see sights, the stories they come away with will all be different.

But what must it be like to visit a place that apparently doesn't even have a tourist itinerary? Somewhere that is full of foreboding, described as a place where there is nothing to see or do and where the only experiences you are likely to have will either be ghastly or ghostly. Ghostly because the place *used* to be nice and touristy but all that remains is destruction and despair. It's no exaggeration to say that that was what I'd been led to expect when I told people in Tallinn that I planned to visit Narva. This was confirmed by a trip to a bookstore: there were plenty of publications about Narva, but they were all filled with sepia coloured postcards dating from before 1944. That was the year Narva died.

So, I was, as you might expect, feeling a tiny bit nervous as I stepped off the bus at Narva. Fortunately the person I was travelling with spoke Russian, so I knew that we could talk ourselves around this supposedly barren landscape. We had travelled to Narva to study something that we knew *did* exist. But even that was a ghost-like recreation of a lost original: a sculpture of a lion erected by the Swedes in the year 2000 to mark the 300th anniversary of the battle of Narva. The Swedes presumably hoped that this version would last longer than the original: erected in 1936 it had been blown up along with everything else in 1944.

In my copy of *The Rough Guide to the Baltic States* I'd read that the new lion monument was “barely tolerated” by local people. This conjured up yet another vivid fantasy in my head: a wasteland with the lion at its centre, circled by packs of feral youths. What I actually discovered was a town full of friendly people, tasty pickled lamphreys and a lion monument that is situated in a neatly tended park with a fabulous view overlooking the river and two fortresses, one in Narva the other in neighbouring Ivangorod. And instead of utter destruction I found a town that hadn't been completely annihilated – at least not architecturally. Traces of the past abounded, if you knew where to look. I discovered fragments of old buildings incorporated into new structures. Narva had been reborn as a Soviet place. Now, this might be to everyone's taste, but I happen to like my architecture

ugly. One of my favourite buildings in Britain is Birmingham Central Library. This icon of Brutalist architecture is soon to be torn down by those who consider it to be ugly, unfit for purpose and of no value whatsoever. I wonder what future generations will think about this “lost Heritage”?

Because *anything* can qualify as “Heritage”. Take Narva’s statue of Lenin, for example. Instead of gesturing to people in the town square, he now occupies a corner of the castle grounds. He’s been knocked off his pedestal, moved sideways and become a tourist attraction. Perhaps this might be a sign of things to come? After all, if we want to understand modern European history and the still-festering divide between East and West, there’s no better place to visit than Narva. There are already indications that this tourist potential is being tapped. On a repeat visit to the town a couple of years ago I noticed that a number of heritage signs had been erected pointing out the various monuments and memorials – including its Swedish lion.

Hopefully there will be more attractions to point out in the future. The monumental 19th century Alexander Cathedral is being restored to its former glory. It was built as a house of worship for the thousands of workers at the Kreenholm textile factory. In recent times the factory has struggled to continue production, leading to its Swedish owners going out of business in 2010. Perhaps other uses can be found for this palace of the industrial age? If Saltaire in West Yorkshire can achieve UNESCO World Heritage status, why not Kreenholm? The on-going restoration of Narva fortress shows what can be achieved. Its history – told so well in the museum inside – really puts Narva on the historical map.

And it’s not just about piecing together the past: the present is making a contribution too. One such example is the plan for a bold new building to house Narva University College. This is to be erected on the site of the old stock exchange, which currently stands empty next to Narva’s impressive Town Hall. The latter had originally been built in the 17th century during the Swedish era. The Soviet authorities reconstructed it after the Second World War, not so much for its heritage value but because the building had been used to launch the Estonian Workers Commune of November 1918. During the Soviet period it became a House of Pioneers. But it has been empty and in disrepair since the early 1990s. It could and should be refurbished. The weirdly Swedish-Soviet-Estonian Town Hall is the perfect setting for a museum and heritage attraction telling the *whole* of Narva’s eventful story – and not just the sepia-imaged, nostalgic view of its pre-war past. That way future tourists might avoid the nervousness I experienced before travelling to Estonia’s not so wild and not so destroyed East...