

snowkite europe **TERVISEKS!**

that means "to your health/cheers!" in Estonian, but you don't need to speak the language to buy a drink or fly a kite there. Butch and his confederates took a one week winter road tour to experience snowkiting in a cheap, mellow, eye opening and absolutely non conventional winter sports location...

I had heard the phrase 'This weather's positively Baltic!' before, but never really understood it. That was until we left the warm embrace of Tallinn Airport and felt the Arctic blast of 15 degree conditions outside. Our crew consisted of Adrian Martin – who was guilty of the whole idea of a powerkite trip to Estonia – plus his good friend Graeme Barlow, along with Chris from Up A Hill Kites and three members of the Ozone UK team – Chris Hill, Mark Archer and me. Not forgetting our trusty camera woman, Yumi the Emu.

Esti Bob was there to meet us. "All right fellas, enough wind for ya?" was the greeting in a thick northern English accent, as we all scrambled for gloves and beanies buried deep down in our jam packed bags. Esti owns and runs an English B&B with his lovely wife Juta (Estonian born, Bradford bred) in the Haanja region at the far south-eastern corner of Estonia.

We had been invited to fly over for a week to explore the countless possible snowkiting options the region had to offer and with a future view to taking groups back for trips.

Despite this mission, most of us had never ever powerkited on snow before, allowing the only two 'non virgins' to psyche us out comprehensively with the adventure that lay ahead. So what about the mountains that go with snowkiting? At a mere 318 metres above sea level, the cutely named Big Egg Mountain is Estonia's highest point. But we weren't here for mountains – with snow guaranteed, Haanja's 175 lakes were the focus of our curiosity.

on the road 4x4

Bob's two 4x4's transported us on the three hour drive south, with half a dozen snowboard bags tied to the roofs and the wind blowing a fairly constant 20 mph all the way. By the time we arrived at Plaani Lodge, the seven of us were amped about the action packed week that lay ahead with favourable conditions forecast – temperatures hovering around -10 to -15 degrees in moderate winds.

After a few bottles of the local brew 'Rock' that evening and a glorious home cooked breakfast next morning, we loaded up the 4x4's with boards and kites en route to nearby Voru town, nestling on the shores of our first destination which was Lake Tamula. It showed a lot of promise. The whole surface – 3 kilometres long by 2 kilometres wide – was frozen to a depth of 2 feet and covered by 18 inches of fresh powder, as well as being buffeted by a light 10-12 mph breeze. The only tracks through the snow had been made by the odd ice fisherman. These guys carry long poles to bore small holes in the ice for their short fishing rods. We watched them sit there for hours in the bitterly cold temperatures, clad in fur coats and bear skin hats, with only the company of a bottle of strong, Estonian vodka to keep them warm and probably alive. We never saw them catch anything, but I imagine the solace and serenity of the lake paid its own reward.

Our fears of being powerkite 'newbies' all over again were soon forgotten. One by one we all launched our kites and cruised off masterfully on the virgin snow. Well nearly all. ▶





Not being boarders but buggers, Graeme and Up a Hill Chris took a wee while to get to grips with being fully bound to your projectile, but soon had it under full control.

There was something about the snow that was like no other surface we'd ever ridden on before. Silky and smooth and oh so pure. We were stoked! That first day was spent carving back and forth through the soft powder, getting the most from our big kites in the light winds on this most awesome of surfaces. It was also surprising how hot we got in the freezing conditions. It was almost a relief to catch a front edge, causing a refreshing face plant in the deep snow for an immediate cool down. That's what I call a brain freezer!

During the afternoon we were visited by one of the local flyers who had watched five Ozone Frenzys launch on the icy lake. As one of only two snowkiters in the area, he immediately dropped what he was doing and trudged through the deep powder to meet these strangers on his home turf. He regaled us with his flying exploits in near perfect English, while passing on some much appreciated local knowledge.

The big cruise

With that first snowkite session completed, a beautiful dinner under out belts and bottles of Rock in hand, we set upon Bob to work out options for the next few days. Our next best bet looked to be Lake Vagala, a 40 minute drive to the north, three times the size of Lake Tamula and set in much more secluded surroundings. Sorted!

With 12's and 14's flying high, Mark, Chris Hill and myself set off on a trek to the far side of the lake on our first proper long distance snowkite run. That experience I will remember for the rest of my days. Nicely powered on a 12 metre Frenzy, effortlessly slicing through untracked powder with only the sound of board on snow to fill the freezing -25 degree wind-chill, sweeping across the lake all around us. I had a real 'moment' out there in the solitude. Thoughts of the life I currently lead and the life I could be leading buzzed through my head. The serenity, the purity... This was surely IT! Definitely up there with the most memorable moments of my life to date. I came away

from that place with a renewed outlook and a much more chilled attitude to things in general. It's funny because these things happen when you least expect it, but there is such a feeling of oneness at that time.

We were acutely aware of the wilderness that surrounded us on the lake, keeping our eyes peeled for the many forms of wildlife that inhabit this beautiful land. Elk, wild boar, lynx, wolves and brown bears to name a few! But it wasn't until our journey home that evening, when Bob casually stopped our 4x4 in the middle of the road and jumped out. "Out there.... look!" he exclaimed, pointing across one of the many frozen bodies of water we were passing. Sure enough, there was a group of deer calmly strolling about the edge of the ice, searching for any signs of food in the cold evening air. We stayed there for a good 15 minutes, blocking the deserted road with our two vehicles. You don't see anything like that living in inland Britain.

No wind? No problem!

As with most kite road trips, we had the inevitable 'No wind' days. Bob was on the case and always had a back-up plan for this eventuality. Kutioru, the local downhill ski and snowboard centre was close by, and he even managed to get the slopes opened a few hours earlier than usual for our group. "Just push the green button to start the tow" were the words from the owner, as we took our first tentative look at the short runs. These were by no means black mountain runs, but just the thing to improve our limited snowboarding skills in anticipation for the next kite session. Getting down was easy enough. It was the ride back up on the tow that was the real test, as countless bruises showed next morning. Probably the funniest time of the whole trip was our windless day at Kiidi Turismitalu, riding the toboggan run on inflatable rubber rings. Solo runs, two-up, three-up and tube trains kept everyone amused for hours with non-stop laughter. No Wind doesn't have to mean No Fun!



After only a few days in this extremely beautiful place, the thing we came to appreciate was how well we were being looked after. Juta and her assistant Irie were always on hand to prepare meals, make sure our gear was clean and dry for the next day, and generally ensure we stayed as comfortable as was possible. You really do need a dose of TLC after a few days out in these extreme elements, and we were certainly getting A1 treatment. Combined with the fully stocked bar on site we couldn't have asked for anything more – everyone in the area knows 'those crazy, fun loving English' at Planni Lodge.

On our last night in Estonia we played cards, drank to our heart's content and recounted favourite sessions of the trip. We had hardly scratched the surface of the amazing potential this breathtaking country has to offer and vowed to return to continue where we left off. Having inspired Bob to get to work with a welder, we now have word that there are three prototype ice/snow kite buggies, waiting for the next bunch of like minded individuals to session and test at Planni Lodge. Who

says snow kiting is just on boards and skis? I can't wait for that buggy session – my heart is already there.

If you fancy an easy introduction to snowkiting with your mates – without the crowded slopes, expensive lifts and trendy resorts of mainline European ski places – why not experience a like Estonia. It will be cold, but you'll leave with a different perspective and a load of memories to keep you warm for many winters to come.

Story: Butch. Photos: Yumi

Main pic: Frenzies flying across the lake.
Top left: A windless day at Kiidi Turismitalu, riding the toboggan run on inflatable rubber rings kept everyone amused for hours with non-stop laughter;
Top right: Butch Snowboarding – no Wind doesn't have to mean No Fun!
Center: Darth Adie.
Bottom: Exhausted.

FACT FILE

To arrange a snowkite trip to Estonia, try Bob and Juta at ouplaanilodge@hotmail.com or their website at www.activeestonia.com

Also try www.visitestonia.com and www.estonia.org

While you're there, visit Kutioru ski centre at www.kytiorg.ee and enjoy snow tubing at Kiidi Turismitalu www.kiidi.ee

Don't forget the local nectar www.rock.ee

A big thanks to Venue Snowboards for lending us one of their super sweet boards and Flow bindings. These are the way forward for snowkiting. Check them out at www.venuesnowboards.com and www.flow.com

Easy Jet runs one flight a day to Tallinn. Don't forget to tick the tiny little box among the fine print for your snowboard, or you may get stung for excess baggage as some of us did. Top Tip – pick out the saddest looking check-in girl and smile loads when you speak to her. The pretty ones usually have an attitude problem and take great joy in making everything as difficult as possible. We were none too impressed with the inconsistent service we received, both on the way out and back.

Republic of Estonia

Estonia lies along the Baltic Sea just below Finland. Gained independence from the USSR in 1991.

Area: 45,227 square kilometres.

Population: 1,445,580 (4 people per square kilometre).

Capital: Tallinn.

Official language: Estonian (closely related to Finnish). English, Russian and German are widely understood.

Currency: £1 = 22.5 Eek 100 Eek = 1 Kroon.

Pix clockwise from right:
The Ozone bus;
Cool!
Planni Lodge;
The Russian Church opposite the lodge;
The Crew.

