

*Estonia has become one of Europe's
most intriguing destinations*

A Nation of Saunas and Startups

BY *Todd Pitock*
FROM THE BOSTON GLOBE

Colorful Tallinn,
Estonia's capital city
on the Baltic Sea, is
rich in history.



THE WEATHER WHEN I arrive in Tallinn can't quite reach a decision. As I amble around the walled medieval Old Town of the Estonian capital with my guide for the day, Mari Toom, the sun and the clouds grapple. When we reach a lookout point, the sun gets an advantage and lights up the red tile roofs and painted buildings, and the steeples, spires, and domes that define Tallinn. A gloom hangs over the Baltic Sea in the distance, and a shower begins to fall, but the sun holds on, the rain glistens in its beams and a sparkling rainbow comes between them.

"In South Africa," I say, "when there's sun and rain at the same time, they call it a monkey's wedding."

"In Estonia," says Mari, "they call it summer."

IT'S MARCH 2019 and the country is hosting a three-year celebration to mark 100 years of statehood, although between then and now it was occupied by Germany during World War II and then annexed by the Soviet Union until 1991. It was a grim interruption during which Estonia as a country was literally wiped off the map. Now, Estonians want the world to know who, what, and where they are—and how in a few short years they have become the creators of outsized achievement.

The country sits just above the other Baltic states, Latvia and Lithuania. It



Left: A street in Tallinn's Old Town; the Church of St. Nicholas at the end was built in the early 19th century. Right: The ultra-modern Estonian National Museum in Tartu puts an emphasis on the uniqueness of Estonia's culture. Below: Kalamaja is Tallinn's prime hipster area.



has little in common with them culturally, and even less with Russia, but a lot with Finland, whose language is similar. At different periods, it has been considered to be at the eastern edge of Europe or the western edge of the Soviet Union. In the three decades since that deep fog lifted, it has become a beacon of progress in which all citizens have health care and free education is available at every level, and where filing taxes takes only minutes a year (there is a flat rate for everyone of 20 percent).

For Estonia, knowledge is power. The University of Tartu and the Tallinn University of Technology are its MIT and Stanford. It's a nation of

ideas and startups. "Skype," Mari says, "is from Estonia. Scandinavians created the company, but the knowledge came from Estonia."

Startups also include Bolt (formerly Taxify), the Europe-based ride-sharing service; TransferWise, a global currency exchange; and Playtech, a leading gambling software company (an Estonian-Israeli partnership). One venture called Robot Muralist created a robot that can put a mural

on the side of a multistory building in just hours, with minimal paint and no scaffolding. The co-founder, Mihkel Joala, has an engineering background but didn't graduate from college. "I invent by meditating," he tells me.

Success has infused zest and optimism. I've come just to have a look around, and I am as interested in the recent past and ancient traditions as in the innovations and everything else that makes this place so intriguing.

To get a sense of where Estonia is going, I visit a couple of museums that show where it has come from. Just off Town Hall Square on Pagari Street are the KGB Prison Cells. Down a few stone steps is a compact space of a half-dozen cells, and it doesn't take long to imagine what went on here. Arbitrary arrests, interrogation, banishment...incomprehensible brutality associated with so much grief.

At the Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom, the emphasis is on liberation in the years after World War II. It avoids the kind of propagandist

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and triumphant style that would, I think, trivialize what was in fact a gargantuan struggle.

I step into Freedom Square and explore Old Town. In Town Hall Square, the outdoor café tables are full, suitcase wheels clack on cobblestone streets they weren't built to roll on, and people steal a smoke in an alley as if it's an illicit pleasure. In Valli Bar, I try the house shot—sambuca, tequila, and Tabasco sauce. It's an assault on common sense, but I seem to be the only one here who thinks so.

The building styles change quickly outside of Old Town as I make my way toward Baltic Station Market and neighborhoods beyond. The market sells artisanal cheese, chocolate, textiles, and souvenirs. Its name comes from the train station next to it—the first line connecting Tallinn to St. Petersburg, several hours to the east.

Telliskivi is the prime hipster area, gritty but not grimy, with evocative street art and some great spots to eat and drink. It's anchored by the Telliskivi Creative City, a private development of Soviet industrial sites. It houses cafés like Lendav Taldrik, a casual Asian fusion place; a craft beer bar, Pudel; and fashion and design shops. It also hosts arts events, including a recent dance/theater piece called "Together Forever," which asked if love can last, with allusions to Nicolas Cage. Estonians are passionate consumers of American pop culture.

Telliskivi is part of a larger neighborhood revival called Kalamaja, where I meet Adam Rang, a 33-year-old who moved here from England in 2016. His grandfather had left Estonia in 1944, so it wasn't a totally random choice, and now he and Anni Oviir—his partner, whom he met going to sauna parties—have started a business to introduce tourists to the Estonian *saun*. His own sauna, open by appointment, is in a suburb of Tallinn. Since it takes hours to reach a proper temperature, we meet instead at a historic public sauna.

While every hotel has a sauna, the real experience is largely communal. "It's as central to Estonia as the pub is to Britain," Rang tells me. Unlike the pub, they're not that accessible to outsiders. Most Estonians have a sauna in their homes and view the public ones as down-market. Also, there was a time, not that long ago, when some saunas were actually brothels, and Kalamaja was one of the sketchiest areas.

In the historic Kalma Saun, men and women are in separate sections. We shower and settle in. The regulars swat themselves with whisks of slender leafy branches, most commonly birch, a practice said to promote circulation and relieve muscle aches. They have a lot to say to one another. It's in Estonian, though, so I have no idea what that is. It's pretty hot, but still not hot enough for the hard-core types. One wizened veteran pours water with some eucalyptus oil on the hot stones, which smells good at first but spikes



Above: In southern Estonia, you can find fairy-tale carvings in stumps. **Top right:** Eda Veeroja performs a ritual at her smoke sauna. **Right:** Voru's town square was designed as a modern urban space.

PHOTOS: (CARVING, WOMAN) TODD PITOCK; (VORU) MARIS TOMBA/VISIT ESTONIA

the humidity until the heat feels like pepper flakes on my skin. We cool off in a tank of cold water, grab a beer, and go for round two. But I'm a newbie and soon enough have to tap out.

I REACH OUT to see if I might meet Estonia's best-known street artist, Edward von Lõngus, whose work I'd seen in Telliskivi and enjoyed even before I knew who he was. Von Lõngus's real identity is a secret, although I manage to get a meeting with his representative, Andra Orn.

I ask how old he is. "I won't even

tell you if he is a he," Orn says. "I won't give you any clues."

"Is it you?" I ask.

"No," she says with a laugh. "It's not me."

"Well, that's one clue."

Von Lõngus's work includes motifs about death that manage to inject some humor into the topic. It also includes figures from Estonian folklore. "We have two stereotypes," Orn says. "We're the digital people and the forest people." At first I think she means to challenge this, but she doesn't. Perhaps a better word is dualities, like

sun and rain.

“An Estonian is only truly happy in the forest,” she says.

I decide to spend time in one. First, though, I stop in Tartu, which is about two hours to the south. Tallinn is four times bigger, and from a Tartuvian perspective, it sucks up too much of

TRAVEL TIPS

Check operating times of restaurants, and availability of hotels, on their websites, or connect with visitestonia.com.

WHERE TO STAY

TALINN The contemporary **Hotel Palace** (hotels.ee/hotel-palace-tallinn); the more traditional **Hotel Telegraaf** (telegraafhotel.com) in Old Town.

TARTU **Lydia Hotel** (lydia.ee).

VÕRU Near the smoke sauna at Mooska farm, **Georgi Hotel** (georgihotell.ee).

WHERE TO EAT

TALINN The menu at **ORE** (orerestoran.ee) is sophisticated and daring. Try the deer filet with beet cream and juniper salt (in season). **Pegasus** (restoranpegasus.ee) is stellar; try the salted halibut.

ÜLO (facebook.com/Kopli16) offers splendid vegan and non-vegan fare.

TARTU **Hõlm** (holmrestoran.ee) in the Lydia Hotel offers a dish featuring guinea fowl, onion, and cabbage that's worth the visit.

SAUNAS

For more information on the Estonian sauna culture, see estonianSaunas.com.

the national oxygen, a frustrating reality considering that Tartu, its residents say, has breathed so much life into the country.

“You can't spell ‘startup’ without Tartu,” one resident tells me, and illustrates it on a notepad: sTARTUp. The University of Tartu sits atop a hill above the Town Hall Square and Emajõgi River. The Estonian National Museum, which reopened in 2016 in a gleaming 366,000-square-foot building, narrates the 11,000-year history of the Finno-Ugric people, which includes Estonians, Finns, Hungarians, and others who are scattered across countries and borders.

Tartu is a “smart city,” meaning its entire design is meant to serve and engage citizens in a way I imagine would have appealed to Cicero or Aristotle. “People think ‘smart’ means new technology, or something futuristic, fully automated,” says Lauri Sokk, the head of Smart City Tartu. “But it's about how citizens connect with the city.” Just after my visit in April 2019, the organization, working with the local government, took suggestions from anyone on how to allocate the town's budget.

Tartu's cleanliness, pace, and public spaces like Town Hall Square and the promenade along the Emajõgi River make its case. Citizens don't jaywalk or cross against lights, even when there are no cars. One evening a woman notes that I am walking without a reflector on my clothes and tells me I could get

fined. “In Philadelphia,” I tell her, so she gets where I'm coming from, “a green light means go, a yellow light means go faster, and most drivers regard the first three seconds of red as optional.”

Her look makes me think maybe I should move to a more civilized place.

The next day I head further south to Võru to explore the forest that is said to animate Estonians. The area is flat and dense with birch, pine, and spruce trees. There are vast expanses of bogs and wetlands, and villages with wood houses whose communities speak their own languages and dialects. Almost invariably, Estonians I meet want me to know theirs is the least Christian country in Europe, that they're pagans at heart and in practice. They believe trees are connected to the spirits of ancestors. They do exquisite fairy-tale carvings out of stumps.

The sauna tradition draws on four earthly elements: hot stones, gelid ponds, wood for heat, and the leaves of various trees, each said to contain its own properties and energy. “The sauna is our chapel,” says Eda Veeroja, who hosts visitors at her smoke sauna near the Latvian border. Its chamber is heated, like a barbecue, with smoke, and Veeroja, a 57-year-old who learned the sauna's customs and



A work by famous street artist Edward Von Lõngus

history through an oral tradition, “greet” it with sonorous incantations that grow in intensity as she summons those forest spirits.

I lie down, letting the sweat work itself into me. The wood planks, the aroma of the whisks, everything works into my mind a little, too.

I'm a rationalist. I don't go in for mysticism. Nonetheless, there is something transcendent about letting go and reaching a state of deep physical relaxation.

One day, as I walk through the woods and onto a narrow boardwalk that runs through a bog that empties into an immense pond, it occurs to me that I like small countries like Estonia the way I like a good short book. It doesn't feel like a great commitment, which lowers my resistance to making one. ♦

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