

Is Estonia the world's smallest country?

Do Estonians ever speak?

Do polar bears live in Estonia?

Does Estonia have a King?

Does it rain iron in Estonia?

Do all Estonians know one another?

Where did the Estonians get their name from?

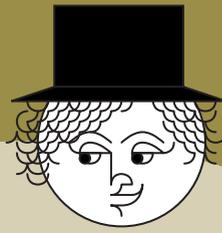
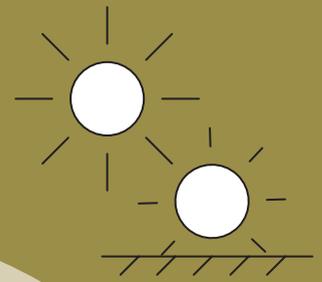
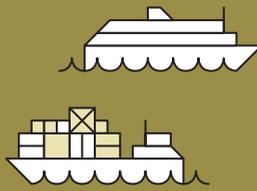
Why are the Estonians called a 'singing nation'?

How many countries fit into Estonia?

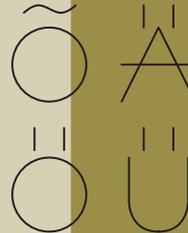
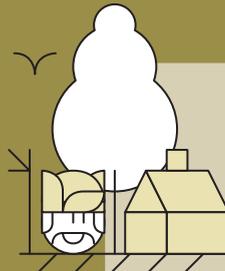
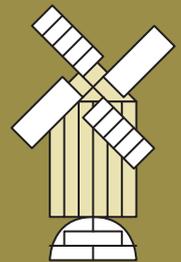
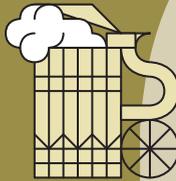
What brings bread to the table in Estonia?

Where do Estonians vanish on Midsummer's Eve?

What does an Estonian do at weekends?



A dozen questions about Estonia



Eesti Vabariik

Republic of Estonia

Declaration of independence:

24 February 1918

Legislature:

unicameral parliament – Riigikogu

Highest judiciary:

Supreme Court

Official language:

Estonian

Member of:

UNO (since 17 September 1991)

NATO (since 29 March 2004)

EU (since 1 May 2004)

Population:

1 315 635

Main ethnic groups:

Estonians 69%, Russians 25%

Area:

45 339 sq km

Capital:

Tallinn

Larger cities:

Tartu, Narva, Pärnu, Kohtla-Järve

Administrative divisions:

15 counties





Estonian Institute



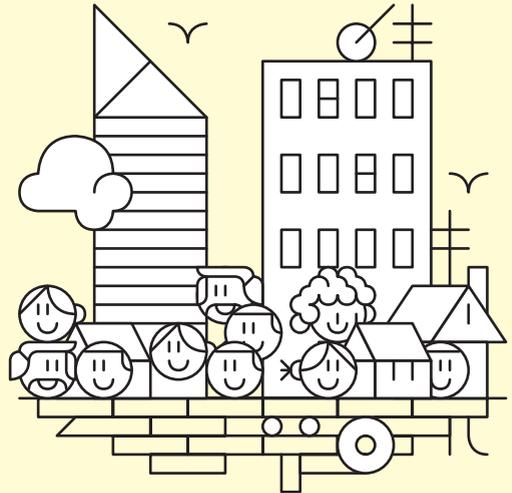
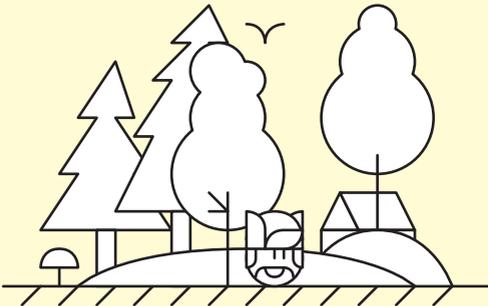
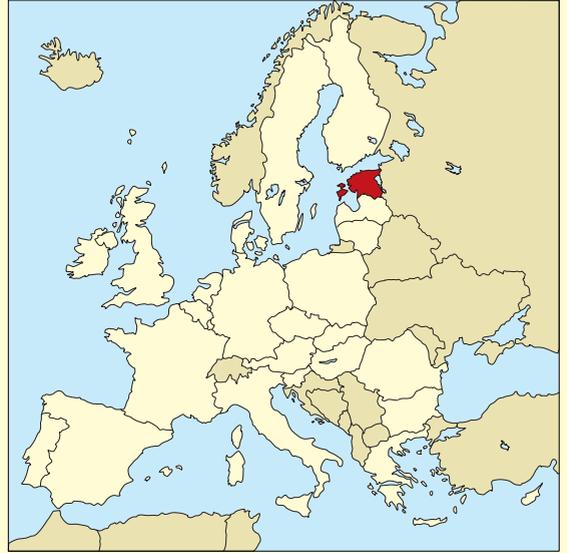
Johan Pössar

Is Estonia the world's smallest country?

Certainly not. With an area of 45 000 sq km, Estonia is larger for example than Denmark or Switzerland, more than twice the size of Slovenia, or a little smaller than New Hampshire and Massachusetts combined.

Located in Northern Europe beside the Baltic Sea, Estonia stretches 350 km from east to west and 240 km from north to south. Sea islands form one tenth and lakes about one twentieth of the nation's territory. All in all, Estonia's territory comprises 0.03 per cent of the world's land area.

Conversely, with its population of 1.3 million, Estonia ranks among the smallest countries in the world. Compared to the densely inhabited Central Europe, Estonians have plenty of room – an average number of people per sq km is 30, similar to that in the United States and around twice as high as in Finland.



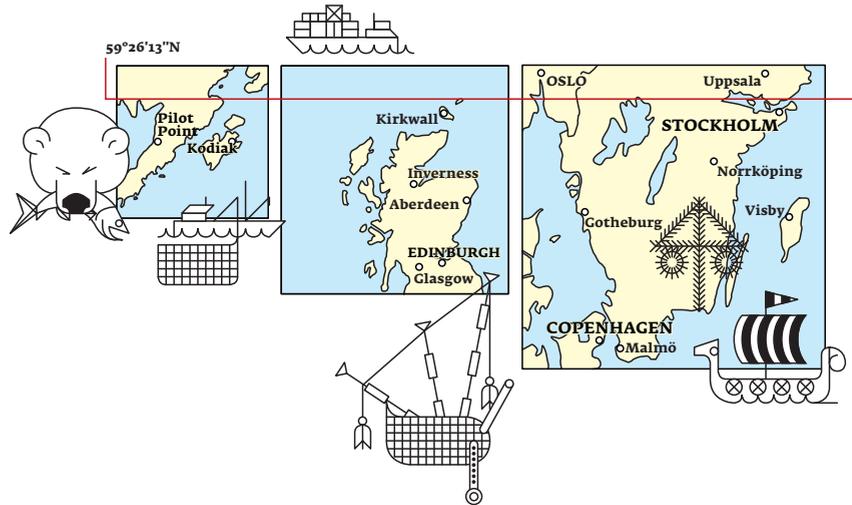
Two out of three Estonians live in towns.

The Estonian countryside is less crowded still: about 70% of the inhabitants reside in towns and cities, nearly a third of them (427 000 people) in the capital city Tallinn. Other notable urban centres are the university city of Tartu (93 000 inhabitants), the major industrial centre of Narva (57 000), and what is known as the summer capital Pärnu (40 000) – the popular holiday destination on the southwestern coast.



Estonian Institute

Church spires have defined the skyline of Tallinn since the Middle Ages.



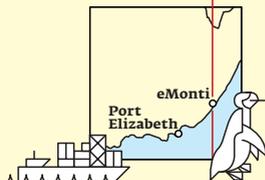
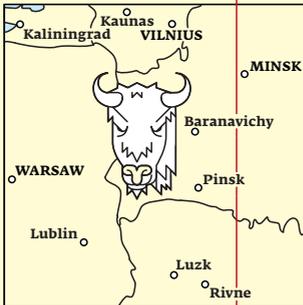
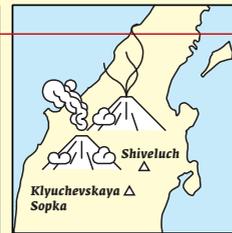
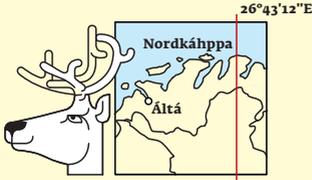
The closest major city to Tallinn is the Finnish capital Helsinki, a mere 85 km to the north, on the opposite shore of the Gulf of Finland. Riga, the capital of Latvia, lies at 307 km almost due south; St. Petersburg, Russia's northern capital, is situated 395 km to the east and Stockholm, the Swedish capital, 405 km to the west of Tallinn. Estonian officials heading for a work meeting of the EU or NATO in Brussels have to reckon on a two-and-half hour long direct flight.



Estonian Institute

Town Hall Square of Tartu, Estonia's main university city.

Do polar bears live in Estonia?



Although Estonia is situated in Northern Europe, the nearest polar bears live more than 2000 km further north.

Located between 57° and 59°N, Estonia shares its latitude with that of central Sweden, southern Norway and the northern tip of the Scottish mainland. Eastwards, the middle latitude of Estonia passes over the Central Urals and through Siberia, and continues over the Bering Sea into southern Alaska and the northern expanses of Canada.

By longitude, Estonia's companions include Sápmi, Finland, the Balkans, the Libyan Desert, eastern Congo and the Cape provinces of South Africa.

Estonia's Nordic location makes the rotation of seasons and the succession of light and dark periods of the year well marked. While the length of the shortest winter day is a mere six hours, the longest day in summer lasts over 18. As the long spans of twilight around the summer solstice make the darkness briefer still, southerners may find it difficult to sleep during the white nights that last from early May to late July.

Estonia's climate is primarily determined by the country's maritime location. The Baltic Sea that surrounds Estonia from the north, west and southwest, together with the proximity of the Atlantic Ocean, keep summers cooler and winters milder compared to the more continental regions in the east. In fact, the temperate climate made Estonia the northernmost cereal-growing region in the world for several hundred years following the arrival of agriculture in the Late Neolithic period.

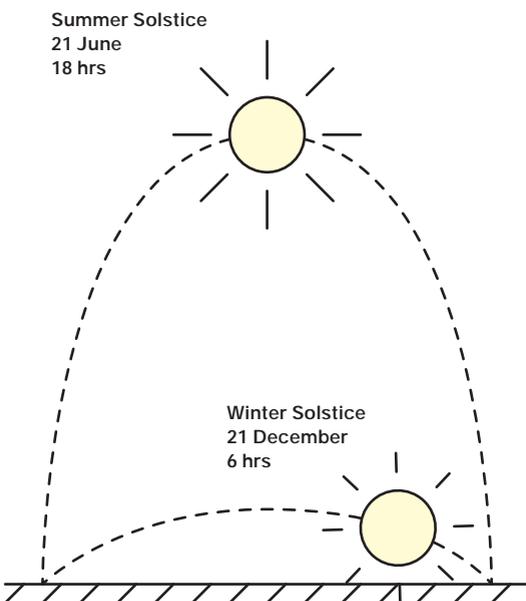
On the other hand, despite recurrent ironic complaints about Estonia's summer being "three months of lousy skiing weather," the clear distinction between the seasons is one of the few features cherished by the majority of Estonians. And rightly so! It is typical for an average Estonian summer day to warm up to around 20°C, and week-long spells of sunny and hot weather with daily temperatures topping 30°C are not uncommon either. Similarly, while the temperature of a normal winter's day ranges from around -2° to -5°C, plunges to -25°C are by no means unusual.



Pärnu beach in July.



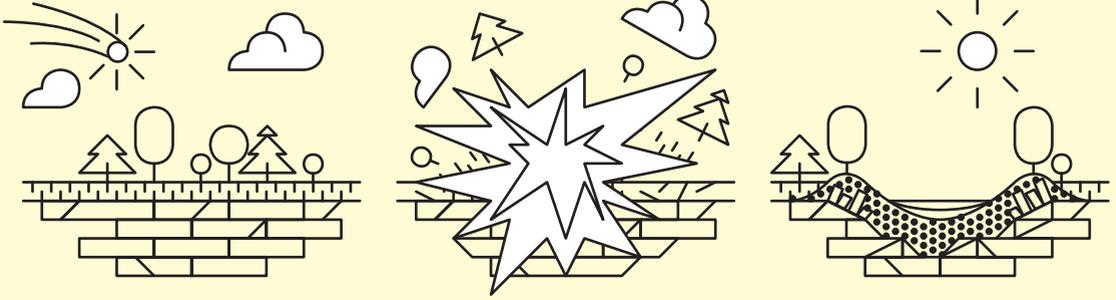
Bay of Pärnu in February.



While virtually snowless winters do occur in Estonia, it is common for a white carpet to cover most of the mainland from late December until the beginning of March. In harsher winters many of Estonia's islands become 'landlocked' by sea ice. They are made accessible by temporary ice roads, passing over the same straits in which many swim in summer – in July and August, the sea warms up to well over 25°C in small, shallow bays.

Estonia's share of rain and snow is brought mainly by the cyclones that move in from the Atlantic. Consequently, the prevailing directions of wind are southwest and west – a byname for westerly directions in many Estonian dialects is *vesikaar*, meaning literally 'the direction of water'. However, as Estonia is sheltered by the Scandinavian mountains from the direct impact of ocean-borne elemental fury, severe weather conditions are rare – the last hurricanes raged through the country in 1967 and in 2005.

Does it rain iron in Estonia?



Kaali crater lake 100 metres across and 16 deep.

It does, albeit very occasionally.

Estonia has been a favourite target range for meteorites, and could well have the highest number of meteor craters per area in the world. The best known of them is located at Kaali, Saaremaa Island, where the cosmic iron fell about 2600 years ago. The last large celestial object to hit a densely populated region, Kaali meteorite, had an impact comparable to that of a small atomic bomb, causing destruction across many kilometres. Still, the image of the sun falling from the sky in the shape of a huge fireball probably had an even deeper impact on the Bronze Age peoples in Northern Europe.

The land in Estonia is flat – most of the territory lies at a height of 0 to 50 metres and only one tenth has an elevation over 100 metres above sea level. Locally, however, the glaciers of the last Ice Age created a variety of landforms. The southern part of Estonia is both the highest and topographically most varied. The rolling landscape of ice-shaped hills and small deep lakes, combined with scenic river canyons eroded into red sandstone clearly distinguish the southern uplands from the lands north of the River Emajõgi.

Of the several conservation areas in the region, Karula National Park is the best known.

Long after the retreat of the last glaciers from Estonia some 11 000 years ago, most of the western Estonian mainland and the islands were covered by the waters of large ice-dammed lakes and the Baltic Sea. They have since gradually emerged as a result of land uplift, which continues in the northwest at an annual rate of two millimetres. This causes new land to arise from the shallow coastal sea, and adds to the more than 2000 islands that dot Estonia's coast.



Autumn in the Haanja Upland.

The sheltered bays and coastal wetlands make the Estonian western seaboard a stopover point for millions of migratory birds. Its main conservation area, Matsalu National Park, is a key link in the Ramsar network of Wetlands of International Importance.

A large share of the least disturbed wilderness in the country is in Transitional Estonia, a chain of mires, forests and woodland stretching from the northern coast to the southwestern corner. It provides a habitat to many plants, fungi and animals that have disappeared from most of Europe, including the grey wolf, the brown bear and the lynx. Soomaa National Park was founded in 1993 to protect the raised bogs and flood meadows typical of the country's southwest.

Most of North Estonia is taken up by a flat limestone plateau which is set apart by extensive alvars – dry meadows with very thin soil cover over bedrock. The oldest semi-natural communities in Estonia, they support an array of wildlife with the most fascinating adaptations to the extreme habitat.

Compensating for the lack of vertical majesty across the country, the northern edge of the limestone plateau falls abruptly to the sea, forming the North Estonian Klint that stretches for kilometres along the shore of the Gulf of Finland. It was for the preservation of the landscape of large bays, alvars and tracks of pine forests further inland, that Lahemaa National Park, the largest and oldest in Estonia, was founded in 1971.



Spring migration of barnacle geese in Matsalu.



Cloudberries and crowberries in a raised bog.



North Estonian Klint on the Pakri peninsula.

Large predators in Estonia.



Grey wolf

200



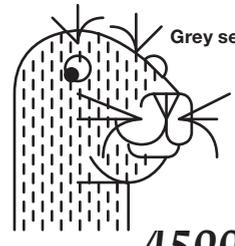
Brown bear

700



Lynx

800



Grey seal

4500

Do all Estonians know one another?



Glitzy city life is most readily embraced by Estonian teenagers.

No, they do not.

Because the number of people in Estonia is small, a foreigner who walks around with a native might easily get the impression that he or she knows everybody by sight. However, despite being small in size, Estonian society features a wide array of groups with different cultural, linguistic and religious affiliations.

Estonia has been ethnically diverse for as long as written sources have been available. From the Middle Ages, the towns were largely German-speaking. Typically for that era, the workforce – artisans, traders, teachers and priests – moved freely around. The peasants, who settled in towns and wished to get on in life had to conform to the German ways and, as Estonians, became quite ‘invisible’ for the latter-day students of history.

Today, most Estonians have been living in towns for more than one generation and have had every opportunity to establish a truly Estonian urban culture. Yet, strangely enough, increasingly many choose to abandon the stone districts for a more bucolic environment in the outskirts or for the satellite boroughs that have sprung up around larger cities.

Estonia’s industrial northeast and the capital Tallinn have large, mainly Russian-speaking minorities, who settled in Estonia as part of the mass influx of people from the Soviet Union which started in the late 1940s. Russians, an important minority in certain border regions and towns before WWII, now constitute the biggest minority group by far – a quarter of the entire population; the second largest group, Ukrainians, constitute just 1,8%. Altogether, modern Estonia is home to over one hundred nationalities.

Ethnic groups in Estonia.



Unfortunately, their list no longer includes several historical minorities, some of whom lived in the country for many hundred years – e.g. the Estonian Swedes on the West Coast, as well as the Baltic Germans. In the turmoil of the war that caused great population loss for the whole nation, these minorities, as well as the Estonian Jews and Roma, were lost to evacuation, exile, deportation and mass killings.

Estonia was one of the last countries in Europe to be converted to Christianity as a result of the Northern Crusades in the 13th century. Nevertheless, many pagan rituals survived, some up to this day. More a way of life than a faith, Estonian indigenous nature worship, *maausk*, emphasises the significance of the memory of natural shrines: sacred groves, springs, stones.

As far as religion is concerned, Estonia is reputedly the most indifferent country in Europe. Yet, while less than twenty percent of the people regard themselves as believers according to opinion polls, Estonian society and its value criteria could be regarded as protestant. “Work hard, and love will follow,” is a maxim that is a frequent topic of the final essay exam for Estonian school leavers.



Tomas Huik

One of the oldest minorities, Muslim Tatars have lived in Estonia since the 16th century.



Peeter Langovits

In search for religious liberty, Russian Old Believers settled in Estonia in the 17th century.



Kaido Hulgren

Austere interior of the Lutheran St. John's Church in Tartu.



Mina Kasak

Votive offering of ribbons to sacred trees is among the rituals of *maausk*.

Does Estonia have a King?

Valdemar II the Victorious
of Denmark, r. 1202–41



Sigismund II Augustus
of Poland, r. 1548–69



Gustaf II Adolf
of Sweden, r. 1611–32



Alexander II
of Russia, r. 1855–81



In the past, various foreign monarchs have ruled over parts or the whole of Estonia, including the kings of Denmark, Sweden and Poland, and the tsars of Russia, but since the proclamation of national independence in 1918, Estonia has been a republic.

Although they have never had their own king, Estonians have a State coat of arms of royal origin. The heraldic motif of the three lions dates back to the 13th century when the Danish King Valdemar II donated the arms to the city of Tallinn. Despite arguments against the use of a foreign monarchical emblem and calls to include the griffin to represent the historical coat of arms of Southern Estonia, the three lions were adopted as the national coat of arms in 1925. Estonia's blue, black and white national flag dates back to the 19th century. The tricolour, which the ethnically Estonian students of the Tartu University chose for their association's flag, was embraced by the majority of Estonians at the beginning of the 20th century.



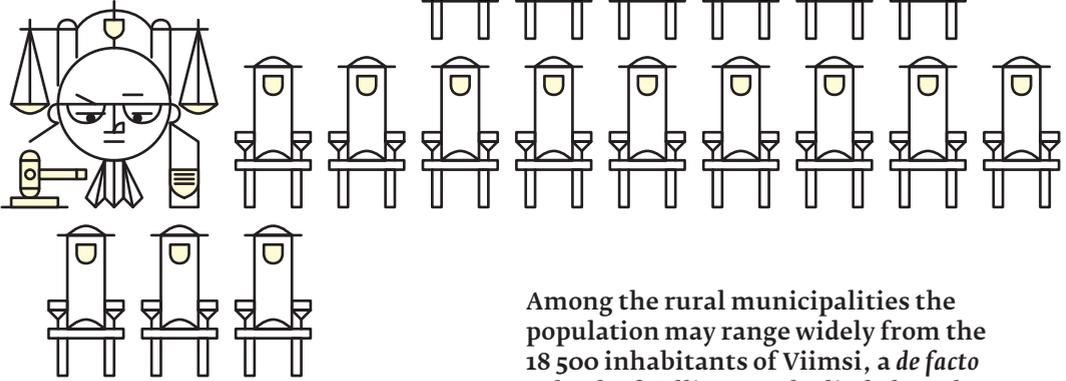
Three blue lions, *passant guardant*, on a golden shield of the Estonian coat of arms.



Sven Albet

The Estonian tricolour is among the few surviving original national flags in the world.

Nineteen justices of the Supreme Court preside over the rule of law and the separation of powers.



The foundation of the Estonian system of governance was laid in the aftermath of WWI and consolidated during the Estonian War of Independence in the Constitution of 1920, which vested extensive authority in parliament. After the forced hiatus caused by the Soviet occupation in 1940, Estonian statehood was restored on the basis of *de jure* continuity in 1991.

Today, Estonian governance is based on the fusion of the legislative and executive branches of power typical of parliamentary democracies. The citizens of Estonia elect a 101-member unicameral *Riigikogu* (Parliament) for a four-year term. Ancillary to its legislative powers, Parliament regulates taxation and adopts the State budget. The top executive institution, the Government of Estonia headed by the Prime Minister, conducts the nation's daily domestic and foreign policy, and directs the work of government institutions.

Estonia's Head of State is the President; however, his or her role, much like that of the constitutional monarchs of Europe and quite unlike the presidents of the USA or France, is largely representative and ceremonial.

Decisions on the matters closest to the Estonian people are taken by urban and rural municipal councils, which are elected every four years. Suffrage in local elections is extended to all permanent residents who are at least 16 years old.

Among the rural municipalities the population may range widely from the 18 500 inhabitants of Viimsi, a *de facto* suburb of Tallinn, to the little less than 100 permanent residents on the island municipality of Piiressaar.



Many young families have settled in the booming Viimsi municipality.



A placid island in Lake Peipsi, Piiressaar is famous for its fish and onions.

Where did the Estonians get their name from?

The first humans arrived in Estonia at the end of the last Ice Age, some 11 000 years ago. Although some words from their language, such as the name of the largest Estonian lake, Peipsi, have allegedly survived, it is not known what they called themselves or the land they inhabited.

What can be taken as the first account of Estonians originates from classical authors: the Greek explorer Pytheas mentions *ostiatoi* around 320 before the Common Era, followed by the Roman historian Tacitus, who writes about the amber-rich *aesti* at the end of the first century in the Common Era.

Around 800 CE, the Viking Age of Northern Europe, Estonia became known as *Austervegr*, 'the eastern route' to the riches of Constantinople and the Caliphate. Later, the Latin rendition of Estonia was introduced by clerical writers, e.g. the chronicler of the Northern Crusades, Henry of Livonia.

In the Late Middle Ages, Estonia was a part of the loose union of feudal states and Hanseatic merchant towns known as the Confederation of Livonia.

With the northern half of the country swearing allegiance to the King of Sweden during the Livonian War in 1561, the Duchy of Estland emerged. The unification of the nation and the advances in public education have earned the following era, albeit war-ridden, the name of 'good old Swedish times' in Estonia. Following the Northern War that raged at the beginning of the 18th century, Estonia became part of the Baltic Provinces, Russia's 'window to the west'. Over the following two hundred years, the local Baltic German nobility played a key role in the military, civil and academic achievements of the Russian Empire.



Estonia's earliest artefacts – flint points from the Pulli site by the Pärnu river.

9000 BCE

200 BCE



800 CE

1220

1450

One of the earliest depictions of Estonians: a sculpture from the 13th century Karja Church on Saaremaa Island.

1600



1700

Commemorative medal of Karl Ernst von Baer (1792–1876), the founder of modern embryology and the most famous scientist Estonia has produced.

1800



The Cross of Liberty: the highest order awarded for services to the Republic of Estonia during the War of Independence (1918–20).

1850



1900

1920



1940

While depicting the future in bright colours, the Soviet agricultural reforms brought about the deportation of thousands of Estonians in 1949.

1991



The Estonian tricolour that survived the years of Soviet persecution in the wall of a small primary school in South Estonia.

2017

For Estonia's indigenous people, the 18th century meant the worst of feudal oppression and the loss of any influence in the government of their country. The identity of Estonians diminished to their parish or dialect area.

It was the enlightened Baltic Germans who initiated the social, economic, and political emancipation of Estonians. Known today as the National Awakening, it led to the formation of the idea of the Estonian nationhood, and in the wake of the Russian revolutions and WWI, to the Estonian declaration of independence on 24 February 1918.

The Republic of Estonia carried out an extensive land reform and realigned the economy from Russian to Western markets. New state administrative structures were founded, Estonian-language university education and science were established, and the conditions for a range of cultural activities created.

In direct consequence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, Estonia disappeared from the political map of Europe. The secret supplementary protocol to the Pact led to the Soviet occupation and annexation of Estonia in June 1940 – a move that the major Western powers never acknowledged *de jure*. The Soviets set out to dismantle the Estonian society with the policy of mass arrests and deportations. The Nazi occupation that followed in 1941–44 brought more human losses.

Even though the armed resistance to the Communists who invaded again in 1944 was largely curtailed by the mid-1950s, Estonians' will for freedom never was. For decades, native culture provided a refuge. When the weakening of the Soviet regime opened an opportunity, a mass movement for the restoration of independence emerged in the 1980s. The dream came true on 20 August 1991.

In two decades, Estonia has undergone major reforms and development across the whole society. From 2004, Eesti Vabariik has been a member of the European Union and NATO.

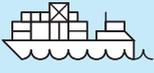


Andreas Kealla

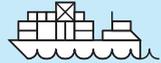


Ingrid Muskus

FINLAND



Hanko



Stockholm



Naissaar



Helsinki

Tallinn



Osmussaar

Pakri

Paldiski



Lehtma

Kardla

Vormsi



Noarootsi



Rapla

Baltic Sea

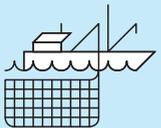


HIIMUMAA

Haapsalu

LÄÄNEMAA

RAPLAMAA



Väinameri

Matsalu National Park



Lihula



Ninase

Triigi

Muhu

PÄRNUMAA

SAAREMAA



Kuressaare

Pärnu

Vilsandi National Park



Roomassaare



Kihnu

Bay of Pärnu



Kilnõ



Bay of Livonia

Ruhnu



Küolka

Ventspils



St. Petersburg

Gulf of Finland

Lahemaa National Park

Loksa

Kunda

Kohtla-Järve

Sillamäe

Narva

Rakvere

Jõhvi

Tapa

IDA-VIRUMAA

LÄÄNE-VIRUMAA

Alutaguse

JÄRVAMAA

Paide
The Heart of Estonia

Jõgeva

Mustvee

Gdov

Lake Peipsi

JÕGEVAMAA

Kallaste

Põltsamaa

VILJANDIMAA

Piirissaar



Soomaa National Park



Viljandi

TARTUMAA



Tartu

Elva

PÕLVAMAA

Mulgimaa



Põlva

Otepää

Lake Pihkva

VALGAMAA

Võromaa

Võru

Pskov



Valga

VÕRUMAA

Setomaa

Karula National Park

Suur-Munamägi
317 m

Valmiera

LATVIA

Alüksne



Katja Hagen



Ingrid Muskus

Why are Estonians called a ‘singing nation’?

If you ask an Estonian to sing, you’ll be probably met with an embarrassed refusal. Yet, the typical Estonian willingly sings in a choir, and choral music is considered by many to be a symbol of the country at large. Estonians’ byname of ‘singing nation’ largely derives from the tradition of song festivals that has brought together choirs from all over the country since the mid-19th century. It was further validated during the Singing Revolution of the 1980s – mass gatherings of people at the Song Festival Ground in Tallinn to demand the restoration of national independence via singing patriotic songs. Nowadays, Estonian Song and Dance Festivals that take place every five years are included in the list of UNESCO’s Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

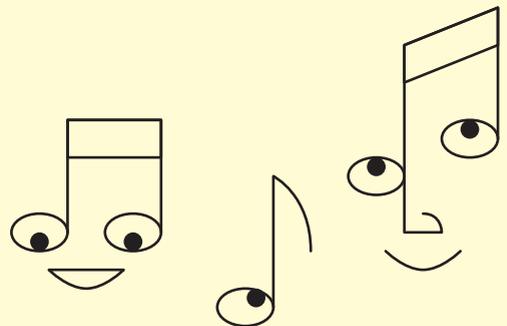
While Estonians are often regarded as being frugal with words, their cultural world is very much based upon texts. Several key composers, for instance, have looked for inspiration in folk poetry, and found their stimuli in the 1 300 000 page folklore collection in the Estonian Literary Museum. In the wider world, though, Estonia is probably better known through its less language-centred composers such as Arvo Pärt and Erkki-Sven Tüür.

On the whole, Estonia’s cultural life rests on the stubborn insistence of explaining the world from the nation’s satiric, fresh viewpoint, combined with promoting the Estonian-language education across the full spectre of music, theatre, figurative and applied art, architecture, film, and last but not least, traditional culture.



It is hard to find an Estonian who has never attended a Song Festival.

This faith in education is based on the high literacy rate acquired via public schools since the late 1600s, as well as on the strong literary tradition that took off from the publication of the national epic *Kalevipoeg* in the mid-19th century. Literature’s role increased during the complicated years of the 20th century, when the ability to write and read between the lines provided a key tool for the culture-centred resistance.



The majority of Estonians still have many shelves full of books at home, and every small town and large village features a public library – more than 500 altogether. Although new cultural attractions have emerged, there is no sign that books are becoming obsolete; the writer and the poet are still seen as tribunes of the people.

Another domain of arts that is also largely reliant on language, as well as being close to the Estonian heart, is theatre – from vibrant scenes of drama, music and dance in Tallinn and Tartu to the long-established theatrical centres of Rakvere and Viljandi, county towns of less than 20 000 inhabitants.

Considering that the country's population numbers only 1.3 million, the 1.15 million theatre visits and two hundred new productions a year are remarkable achievements indeed. The spectator numbers peak in the three-month open-air season with troupes performing in meadows, bog islands and manor houses, and audiences hailing from every corner of the country.

The Estonian film industry produces films for one of the smallest audiences in the world, comparable in that respect, only with Iceland. This has not been an inhibiting factor, as documentaries, feature and animated films are released every year. The latter especially have taken the names of Estonian film-makers to the international arena, where their original cartoons and puppet animations, abounding in ironic metaphors, have attracted much attention and received many awards.



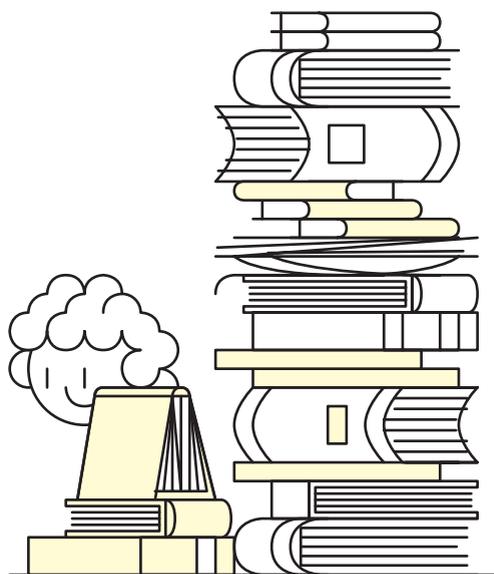
Ene-Liis Semper

Ubu Roi by Theatre NO99



Ingmar MäeKus

Leigo Lake Music Concerts have become a summer tradition in its own right.



Do Estonians ever speak?

Yes, they do. Sometimes by staying silent.

The Estonians' character has inevitably been shaped by their country's history and its natural environment. The long, dark winters fostered their sombre scepticism and taciturn manner. Yet, the dreary season of indoor chores also provided moments for self-contemplation and even for some sunnier flights of fancy.

The ethos of olden folklore still provides insights into the value-judgements of contemporary urbanised Estonians. Thus, the main character of an Estonian folk tale never actually becomes king, nor does he charge into battle with dragons, brandishing his trusty sword. Rather, relying on his sharp mind and quick wits, he talks philosophy with all kinds of characters and double-crosses them in the end.

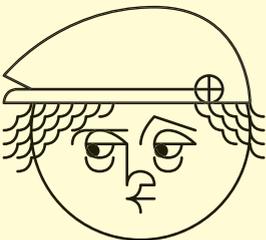
Inherent self-irony, a rational rather than romantic disposition, and a sceptical nature have created an image of Estonians as stubborn and self-absorbed. Indeed, they loathe instruction from bystanders and are deeply convinced that their own advice is the best possible. In everyday life, Estonians may defend their rights in a rather unusual way – just by sullen silence. “Silence is gold, speaking – silver,” to quote an old proverb.



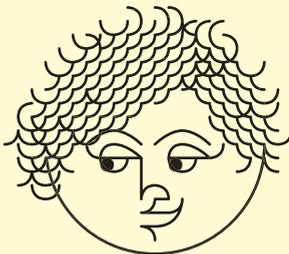
The dour Estonians of winter change in summer: they ask friends out, meet new people, and actually laugh.

Foreigners are well advised to bear in mind that in human relations, Estonians generally try to avoid sentimentality. Much that other nationalities would voice without hesitation, Estonians may reveal only once they know a person quite well. As Estonians tend not to be impressed by someone's social standing alone, they find small talk and the exchange of formal compliments quite difficult to bear, no matter which end of the conversation they are on. This has to do with the nation's obstinate conviction that any authority may be, indeed must be, ridiculed.

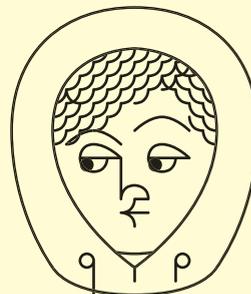
Spring



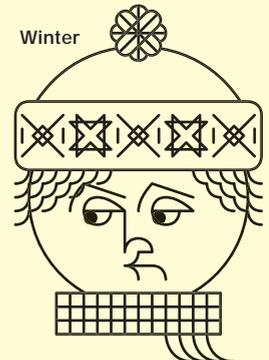
Summer



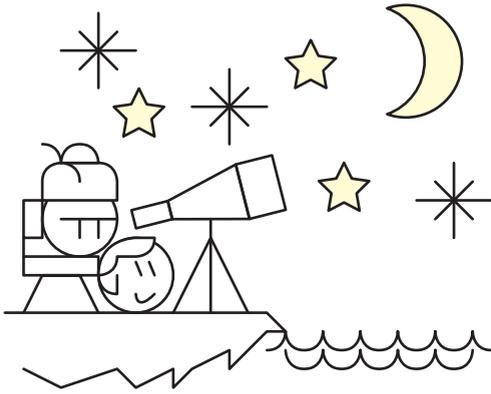
Autumn



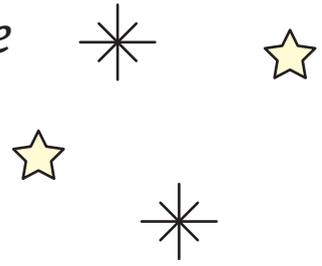
Winter



An Estonian at different seasons.



Kuuuurijate
töööö
jäääärel



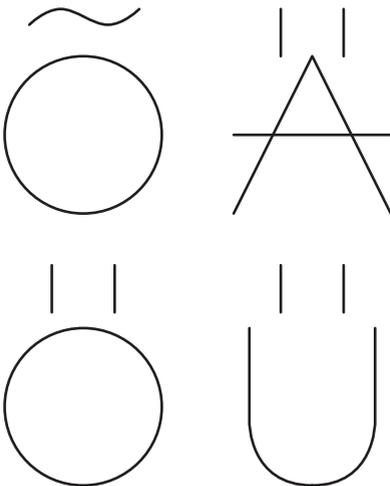
Estonians' passion for vowels is evident in the "working night of lunar researchers on the edge of ice."

As is typical of small peoples, the innermost identity of Estonians is closely connected to their language. The words of their mother tongue spring from the depths of the soul, charged with meaning, so they are to be used sparingly – as a secret weapon with which to protect dreams and deeds. After all, while literary Estonian arose from the Lutheran reformation of the 16th century, the vernacular memory of Estonians, centred as it is around distinctly metered, repetitive runo-singing, stretches back over several millennia.

Estonian, together with Finnish, Hungarian, Sámi and several others, belongs to the Finno-Ugric family of languages and has probably been spoken in this corner of Europe since it was first inhabited by man.

The grammar of the language is complex: it has 14 cases, no articles, no grammatical gender, and no definite future tense, and these are just the most striking features that distinguish Estonian from the Indo-European languages of the rest of Europe. This is probably one of the key factors that has helped Estonian to survive, become an official language of the European Union, and above all, a modern cultural language with a contemporary terminology covering all major fields of life.

Estonian is spoken by about 1.1 million people in Estonia, approximately 890 000 of whom use the language as a mother tongue. As a result of the many episodes of voluntary and forced exile in the 19th and 20th century, Estonian communities emerged in Sweden, Finland, Canada, the United States, Russia, Germany, etc. The nation's enterprising spirit stays strong, and Ernest Hemingway's fancy that "no well-run yacht basin in the Southern waters is complete without at least two sun-burned, salt-headed Estonians," can be taken as a fact again.



Pressing on to Southern waters.

How many countries fit into Estonia?

At least two. An observant eye will see many more.

For a long time, the Estonian settlement area was divided into the provinces of Estland in the north and Livland in the south. Moving from north to south, the type of landscape changes, the cross on top of the church steeples is replaced by a rooster, red cows appear instead of black and white cattle. What also changes is how the Estonians speak, and according to many, even their world views.

The differences between North and South Estonia are evident in their capitals – the maritime Tallinn and the midland Tartu. A visitor will certainly be told of the ‘spirit of Tartu’ in that city, supposedly incomprehensible for the arrogant and pragmatic citizen of Tallinn. A Tallinner, on the other hand, might consider Tartu people to be stuck in an everlasting fusty academic complacency.

But all the more, despite Estonia’s small area and population, the country is inhabited by a surprising number of clearly-defined, divergent regional populations.

The southern part of Viljandi County is called Mulgimaa (Mulkland) and the inhabitants of this region are Mulks. They have always been considered wealthy and enterprising, albeit also priggish and stingy. Despite their arrogance, or perhaps thanks to their doggedness, Mulks played a significant role in promoting Estonian self-awareness in the 19th century and in shaping the nation state. Today’s county town Viljandi and its Culture Academy have become the centres of Estonian heritage culture, featuring the biggest folk music festival in the country in late July.



The spirit of Tartu is chasing ahead.

One of the most singular parts of Estonia is undoubtedly the Southeast, or Võromaa. The vernacular here differs so much from standard Estonian that it may well be considered a language in its own right. Also the Võromaa landscape, with its plentiful lakes and rolling hills, is strikingly different from the flatlands of Northern Estonia. Võro people have every reason to feel proud of their culture and all the more so after establishing the written standard for their language, coining a number of new words and introducing Võro-based courses to school curricula.

The extreme southeastern corner of Estonia plus certain districts on the Russian side of the border are called Setomaa. Seto people are perhaps the most distinct group among Estonians. Although Orthodox Christians, the Setos retain their pagan traditions and beliefs, such as worshipping their ancestors by eating and leaving food on their graves.

Another highly unique region comprises the islands of West Estonia. Saaremaa, the largest, is widely known for its post windmills and, so they say, for the best home brewers in the country. The islanders' life has always been bound to the sea; the resilience of their womenfolk, kept busy toiling the land while their men were at sea, is truly legendary. The dialects of these parts of Estonia have a sing-song intonation, reminiscent of Swedish, which confirms their close ties with lands beyond the sea. The jokes of the folks of Saaremaa and Hiiumaa, the second largest island, may be lost on other Estonians, just as is British humour on the Continent. Befittingly, the islanders claim that there have been only three major sea powers in world history: Inglismaa (England), Saaremaa and Hiiumaa.



Defining the borders of historical Mulgimaa.

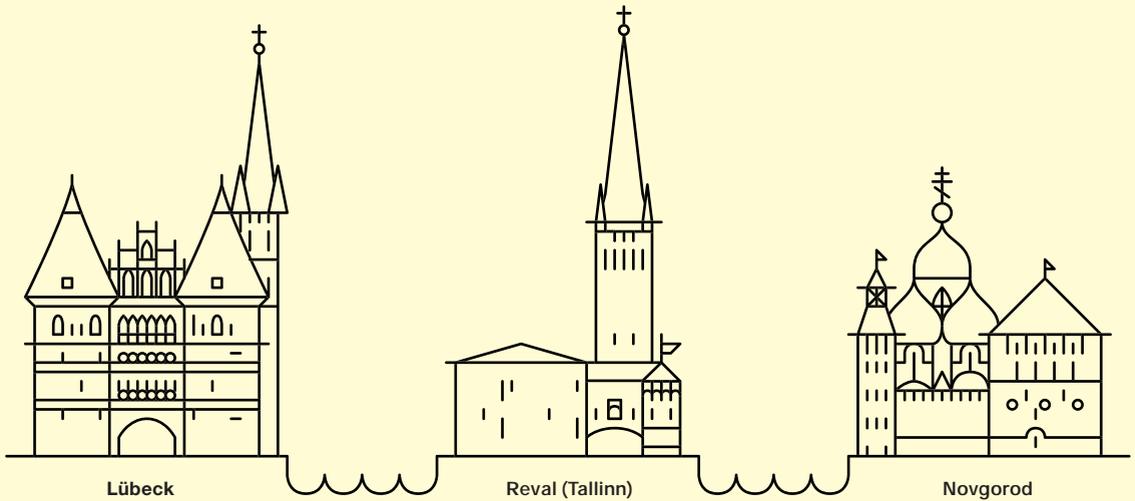


Islanders of Kihnu keep their national costumes as everyday attire.



One of the most vigorous regional traditions is that of the Seto people.

What brings bread to the table in Estonia?



The Estonian economy has always relied on the country's location at the Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean of the North. As the northernmost members of the Hanseatic League, its medieval towns were allegedly 'built on salt' – a key commodity in the transit trade between Western Europe and Russia. While some local products, such as the smoke-dried grain – renowned for its storage life – have lost their importance, the Estonian economy still belongs to the close-knit Northern European economic area. Ice-free ports along a major trade route between East and West remain an asset in the 21st century.

On the whole, most Estonians earn their daily bread working in a small or medium enterprise or in the public sector. Small is flexible – and agility has proven to be the best survival strategy for a small nation with limited natural resources. There are no industrial giants in Estonia – bar the energy company that employs 5800 people in the northeast of the country. Two major power stations, relying on the large deposits of oil shale, provide for Estonia's energy-independence, but should be substituted for more sustainable alternatives in the near future.

Ever since regaining independence, Estonia has persistently applied a model of an open economy that is versatile and free of undue bureaucracy. The country has acquired fame for its adoption of innovative IT solutions, both in the private and public sector. Several web applications that the Estonians are already accustomed to, such as e-banking, online tax declarations or even voting at local and parliamentary elections using a digital ID card, have become articles of export.



Skype is, no doubt, the best-known IT application stemming from Estonia.

While the images of stalwart fishermen and tenacious farmers as archetypal symbols of Estonianness persist in the minds of many Estonians, as of today, the share of people employed in agriculture and fisheries has dropped below the European Union average. The new generation in the sparsely populated rural areas has to apply its wits to combining tradition and innovation, be it furthering nature tourism or producing ready-to-assemble log houses.



Vainu Rosenbalt

Adding value to Estonian wood provides many jobs around the country.

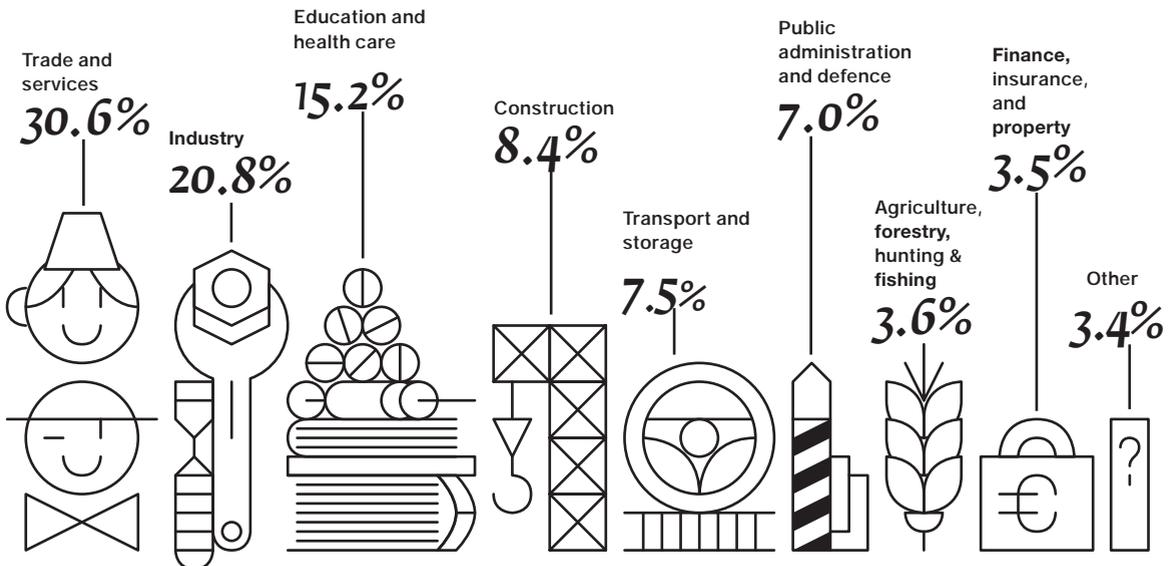
Tallinn and its surroundings that contain about a third of the nation's population provide 60 per cent of Estonia's economic output. Here lie the country's primary airport, main railway station and one of the biggest merchant ports on the Baltic Sea. Tallinn acts as the gateway for most foreign visitors to Estonia; its medieval Old Town is the country's foremost tourist attraction. The business life of Tartu centres around its university, which was founded in 1632 by the Swedish king Gustav II Adolf. Estonia's leading centre of research and innovation, the University of Tartu stands for the main asset Estonians have in an open world – an excellent education and staunch traditions of scientific studies.



Peeter Langovits

Tallinn's Old Town against the backdrop of hotel-size cruise ships.

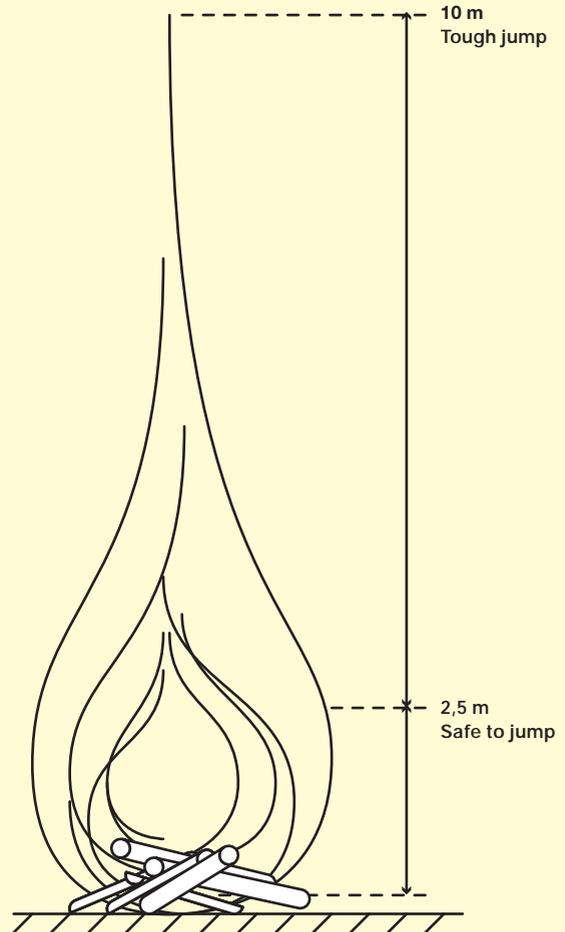
Workforce structure in Estonia



Where do Estonians vanish on Midsummer's Eve?

A few days after the summer solstice, on the evening of 23 June, urban Estonia empties of people. Anybody who can do so, travels out of town, to celebrate St. John's Day. Known also as Midsummer Day, it marks the lightest time of the year and associates with a set of customs relating back to heathen times. During Midsummer Night that precedes the holiday, the few hours of midnight twilight are brightened by hundreds of bonfires lit all over the countryside. People sing and dance around the fires, and when the flames have died down a bit, those who are brave enough leap through them to shake off the year's evils.

The other major festival, Christmas, falls in the darkest period of the year and is observed after the winter solstice. The Estonian name of the holiday, *jõulud*, reveals another connection with olden times and the pre-Christian Nordic traditions. Nowadays Yule is primarily a family-centred holiday. Both the old and the young stand by a decorated, candle-lit Yule-tree waiting for Father Christmas – usually the costumed husband of the house, who delivers the presents. The eve continues with a feast of roast pork, black pudding with cowberry jam, and sauerkraut with roast potatoes.



The meeting of dusk and dawn reduces the Midsummer Night to a mere moment of darkness.



No presents without saying a rhyme.

The list of ancient calendar customs still followed in Estonia is longer still. On Shrove Tuesday, in February or March, adults seize the chance to go sledging together with the children, on the pretext of the old custom. On St. Martin's Day (10 Nov) and St. Catherine's Day (25 Nov), children in costumes go from house to house, earning sweets with their singing and dancing.

Estonians have also several national holidays. The most important falls on 24 February, when people celebrate the Declaration of Independence of 1918. Regardless of the weather, which in February may vary between a mild thaw and a fierce frost, a military parade takes place in the morning. In the evening, the majority of Estonians gather in front of their television sets to watch the President's reception – if they are not invited to attend themselves, that is.



Eino Pliig

The longer the sledge ride on Shrove Tuesday, the taller the flax grows in the coming summer.

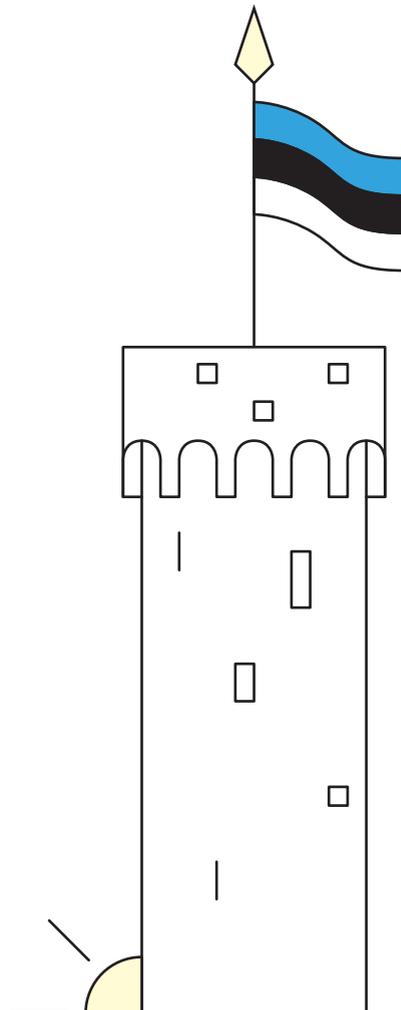


Marko Mumm



Andres Hsuibu

A real patriot on 24 February:
 7.33 a.m. (sunrise) – hoisting the flag
 11 a.m. – parade in the ranks of voluntary Defence League
 6 p.m. – must not miss the President's speech



What does an Estonian do at weekends?



Leisurely time in a summer cottage.

That largely depends on the time of year. In a good, snowy winter, an Estonian goes skiing – while a few try to make use of any hillside, and some have even taken to snowboarding, the majority opt for the flat terrain. In February, the sportier Estonians will join scores of their countrymen who participate in the annual 63-kilometre Tartu ski marathon.

In spring, weather permitting, Estonians leave the city for the weekends. Many families have a cottage in the country, with a small garden and orchard. As a result, people can load their freezers with all sorts of berries and fruits, or make preserves and jams in the autumn.



During holidays even the popular bog trails may become crowded.

Approximately half of Estonia is covered with wood- and wetlands. Much of this land is under some form of conservation. Therefore going for long walks in the wild is one of Estonians' favourite pastimes. The forest is seldom further away than half-an-hour's drive, people go there to hunt for mushrooms, watch wildlife, or just for a nice afternoon stroll. Those who do not like to tread their own path can follow marked trails or board walks that have increased over recent years.



Long and warm summer days provide a great setting for various family outings – village parties and local choral days, bicycle tours, re-enactment pageants, joint community jobs, etc. During the holiday season it might thus be quite difficult to decide where to head for and what to see.

Summer activities naturally include a lot of sunbathing by the seaside; Estonia boasts miles of sandy beaches, and water that may seem too chilly for a southerner is just right for any Estonian who wants to go for a swim or a round of windsurfing.

In winter, Estonians are more sedentary – they fill the local theatres and concert halls and books start to pile up on bedside tables. The young, as ever, seek alternatives, either in the global club culture, or delving into their roots and giving a fresh breath to traditional music.

Regardless of their age or whether they live in a city or countryside, an important weekend ritual for many Estonians is the Saturday sauna. Red and steaming from slapping themselves with a bundle of leafy birch twigs, whatever the weather, Estonians dart from the heat of the sauna directly into the closest body of water.



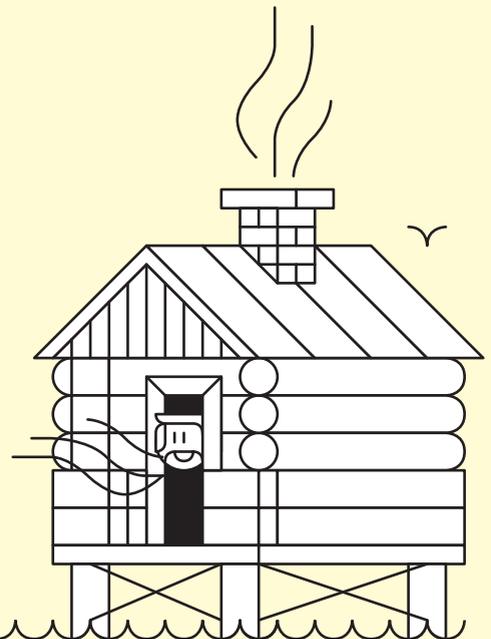
Joint performance of the folk-metal band Metsatöll and the Estonian National Male Choir.



Regardless of distractions, some Estonians cannot be enticed off the Web.



After-sauna bliss.





Ingrid Muesli



Katja Hagen



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2. Do polar bears live in Estonia?
3. Does it rain iron in Estonia?
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