

# HILARIOUS ESTONIA

Pictures: Hillar Mets

Text: Rohke Debelakk



Estonian Institute, 2001  
Suur-Karja 14  
10140 Tallinn  
Estonia

Tel (+372) 6314 355  
Fax (+372) 6314 356

e-mail: [einst@einst.ee](mailto:einst@einst.ee)  
<http://www.einst.ee>  
<http://www.estonica.org>  
<http://www.kultuur.info>

Illustrations by Hillar Mets  
Text by Rohke Debelakk



Nobody is any longer taken aback if he  
sees a man in a skirt,  
or if a bowl of steaming frogs' legs is  
placed on the table.  
No mystery there,  
people have got used to  
many things like that.

So how do Estonians do things,  
what do they like best and  
what they are not so keen on?  
What do they look like,  
and what do they eat?  
What is surprising about them?



People living in Estonia can roughly be divided into the following types: children. This type is more widespread in rural areas - the rush and bustle of life in the city usually deprives parents of such luxuries.

Then there are those types of indeterminate age who are not yet adults but are no longer children. It is common knowledge that they are not able to walk, hence society has accepted skateboards and roller skates as their means of transport, and is prepared to build smooth asphalt roads, all in the name of a bright future.

Students can be identified by their extremely worn-out appearance and their pensive expressions. They nevertheless possess an incredible amount of energy which makes them do unutterable things the description of which does not merit the printer's ink.

There are various types of workmen: e.g. the time-honoured ploughman who sows and ploughs - unperturbed by bad weather and a hostile government, or even no harvest to speak of for 10 years in a row.

Then there are athletes. They spend very little time at home since they have to win glory for Estonia elsewhere, and will not return unless they have won something, or someone.

Misses and other women. There is usually not much variety in their appearance. All look exceptionally beautiful, and thus the beauty contests have long lost their popularity in Estonia.





Pensioners have suffered most over the years from the draughts of realpolitik: during the previous century their property was nationalised and denationalised five times in all. Quite a few of them have had to relinquish all they had for the good of society. In the literal sense of the word.

You may wonder where the politicians are. The answer is: everywhere. Every single inhabitant of Estonia is a politician of sorts, and at any point in time some of them can be found chucking in their socially useful jobs and take up politics. Not many return.

Every nation has its own symbols, and Estonians, therefore, began using theirs as well. Primarily in order to recognise their own kind among strangers. There has always been a myriad of strangers in Estonia, and it often happens that when



an Estonian came home, he found his house full of all sorts of people. He was then hard put to determine which of the women was his own, or who was his son, brother or other relative.

It was thus agreed that all Estonians would start walking around with one hand on their hip, and the other one too.

Alas, it turned out most tiring, and caused a good deal of trouble at work: crop failure and starvation would soon be banging on the door.

For that reason it was decided that the Estonians would start wearing similar clothes.

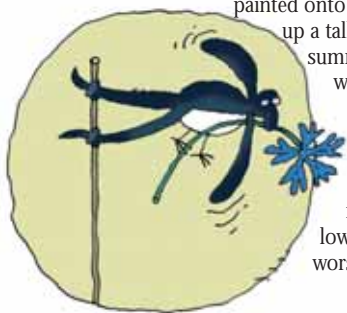
The fashions were debated for centuries, until true to the spirit of Estonian pig-headedness, each region designed its own costume.





The Estonians also have their flag, national flower and bird. At first these things were united, and the swallow fulfilled the functions of all three. The swallow sat on the roof instead of the flag, or when circumstances demanded, it was brought inside and stuck into a vase as a flower. In autumn, unfortunately, the swallow's genes got the upper hand and for the long winter months it would fly away to far-off southern climes. The last thing people saw of it in autumn was its white underbelly and black wings against the background of the blue sky. A really empty and melancholy feeling.

As a last resort, these colours – blue, black and white – were painted onto a yard of linen cloth and hoisted up a tall mast to cheer people up. One fine summer's day, a farmer chanced upon a weird plant in his precious rye field – similar to a flower, but no-one had seen anything like it before. The thing was blue – with a hint of black and white. It was unanimously agreed not to stick swallows into vases any more, and start worshipping the cornflower instead.

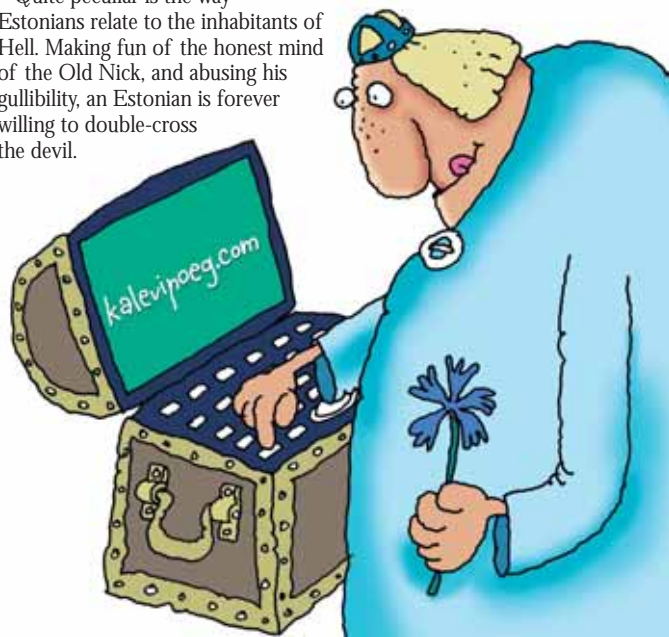


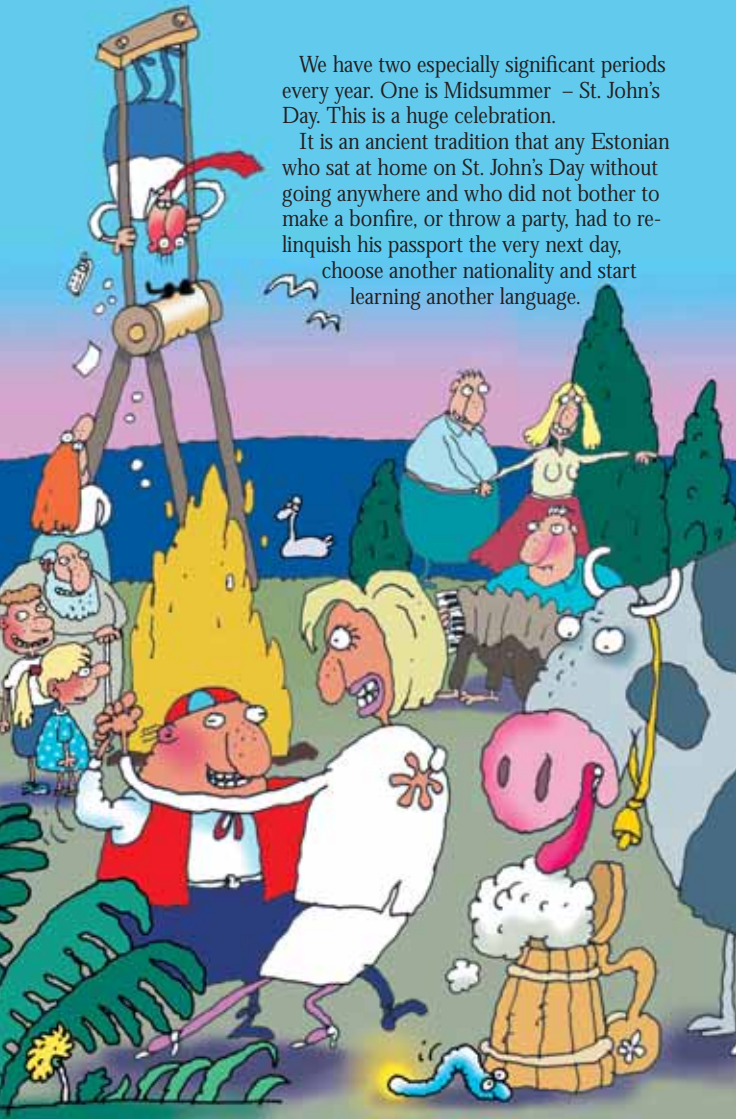
The man in the picture, as you will have noticed, has a small wooden chest stuck under his arm.

The chest is meant for storing knowledge, because according to our national epic, knowledge is worth more than silver treasure and hoards of gold. That is why he keeps the treasure close to himself.



Quite peculiar is the way Estonians relate to the inhabitants of Hell. Making fun of the honest mind of the Old Nick, and abusing his gullibility, an Estonian is forever willing to double-cross the devil.





We have two especially significant periods every year. One is Midsummer – St. John's Day. This is a huge celebration.

It is an ancient tradition that any Estonian who sat at home on St. John's Day without going anywhere and who did not bother to make a bonfire, or throw a party, had to relinquish his passport the very next day, choose another nationality and start learning another language.

On St. John's Night, the shortest night of the year, people come together: they lug a staggering amount of firewood to one place and then set fire to it. All over the country.

Thousands and thousands of bigger and smaller bonfires are in fact the reason why it never gets dark that particular night. When the fire is blazing, people start leaping over it. At the moment the flames are underneath the leaper, he or she may make a wish and it will be fulfilled. Most people in fact want to simply get across the fire alive, a wish that is mostly granted.

A lot of singing goes on – once a year those who normally sing out of tune are allowed to perform in public. There is a lot of dancing too – once a year those who cannot dance are allowed to tread the dance floor. A lot of beer and stronger distillations are quaffed, and those who usually cannot drink are allowed to do so once a year. This is a party for the entire country.

Both young and old must be present, as well as the strong and the frail, and if someone happens to have a visitor from a distant land at the time, this person must certainly join in too.

Animals and birds also attend: eternal friendship is sworn with them, and on many occasions man has found a common language with animals when morning is nigh. By that time, quite a few revellers have acquired some beastly aspects themselves.

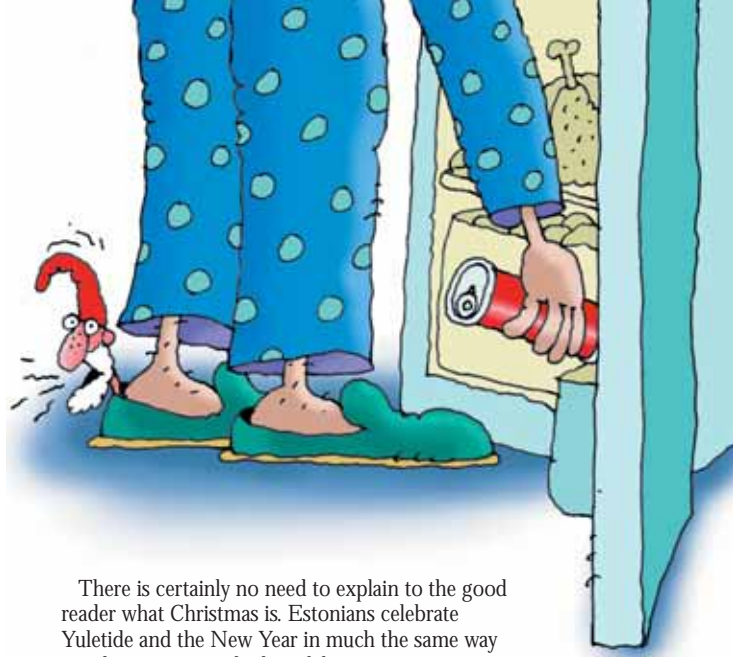
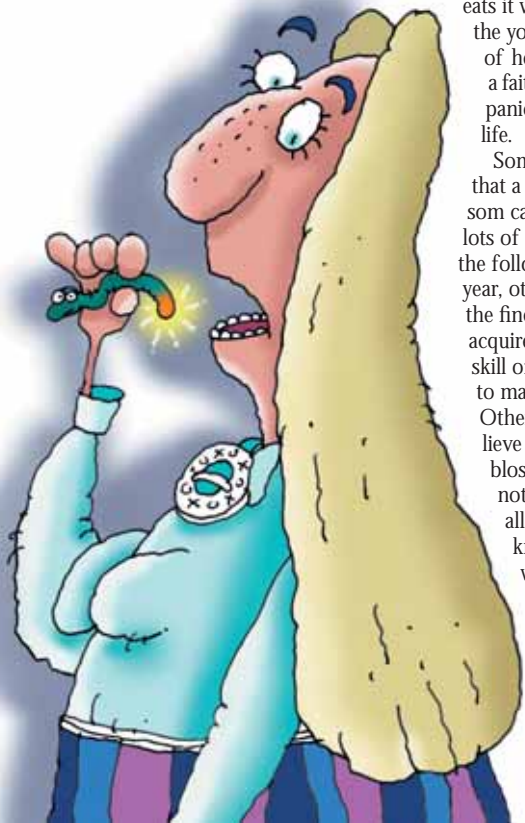


One important reason why the St. John's Day is celebrated in the first place is to indulge in the search for fern blossoms. The fern flowers but once a year, and only for a few seconds, and is so beautiful that the beauty of all the flowers in the world taken together cannot be compared with the fern blossom. Hundreds of people, young and old, make for the forests in search of a fern blossom.

There are numerous legends connected with fern blossoms.

It is believed that a maiden who finds such a flower and eats it will get the young man of her dreams, a faithful companion for life.

Some believe that a fern blossom can bring lots of money the following year, others that the finder acquires the skill of a bird to make a nest. Others still believe that fern blossoms do not exist at all. Who knows where the truth lies!



There is certainly no need to explain to the good reader what Christmas is. Estonians celebrate Yuletide and the New Year in much the same way as other nations, only the celebrations are completely different.

When Christmas time approaches, people put a dwarf into their child's slipper, or that of a beloved family member, or a friend. Then the owner of the slipper is in a position to negotiate directly with this dwarf and order whatever surprise he wants.

Christmas is a remarkable time primarily in the sense that absolutely everything gathered during the year is consumed, down to the last drop or morsel. People buy up everything there is in the shops, usually not bothering to think what it is exactly they are buying, for whom or why. When the shops have been emptied, they too will be bought, and given as presents to good friends or members of the family.





Christmas is a time of generosity and kindness. Company owners donate their entire profits to their employees, the government opens up its state coffers, and the Prime Minister visits every single household personally, enquiring about what it is people need, what ought to be repaired and whether they have enough money for a trip to some southern holiday spot the following January.

The benefactors are well aware that the political capital gathered over Christmas will come in useful over the coming year. They are especially attentive and caring in a year before an election is to take place.

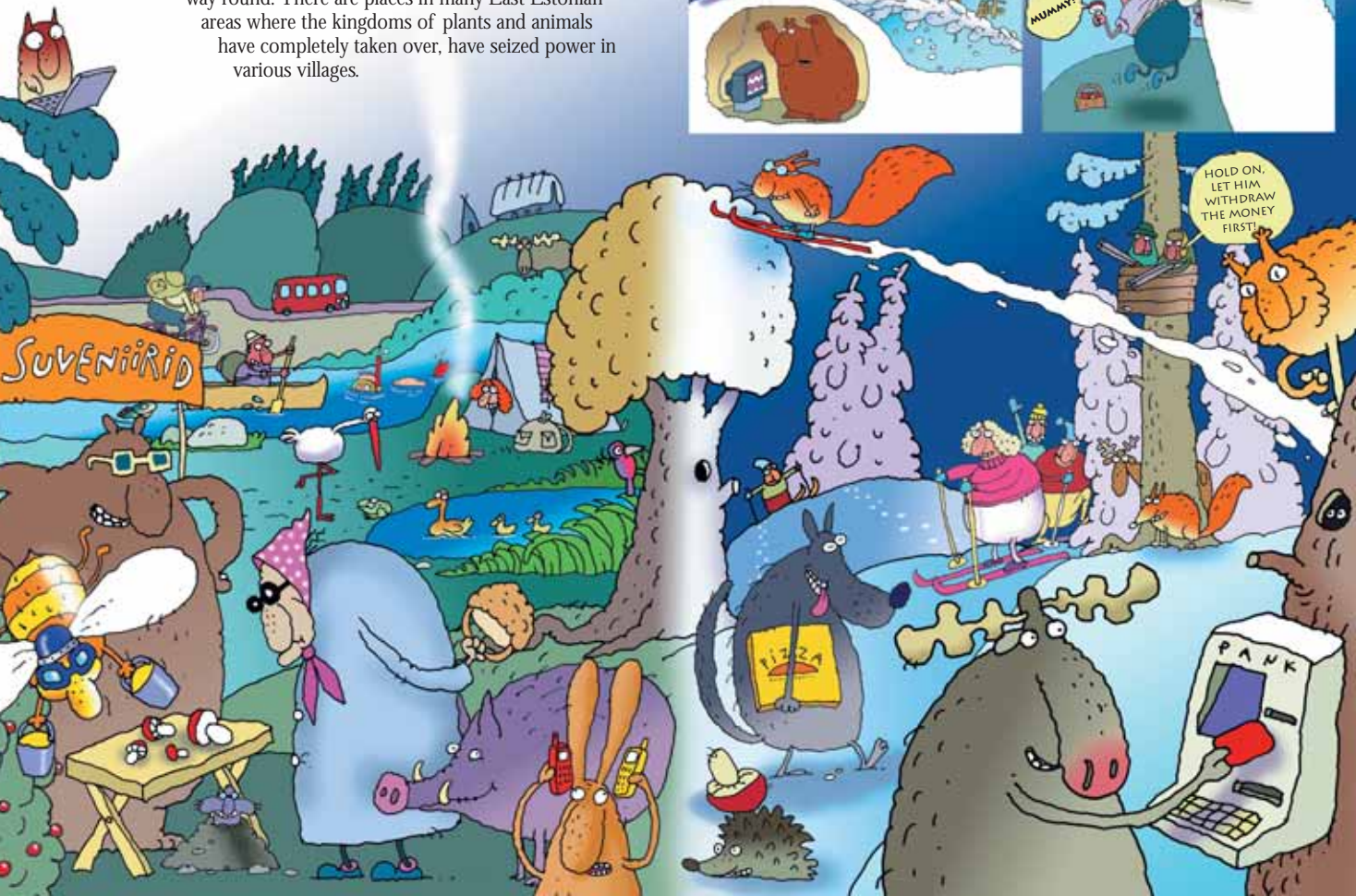
On New Year's Eve, every single person sits down in front of his TV set. It is unclear to this day how the TV stations achieve this – are they using some secret signal which works on the subconscious, or are the programmes really so enthralling? During the first few seconds of the New Year, the neighbours' windows are shattered by a firework rocket, in the belief that this will enliven relationships in the new year.

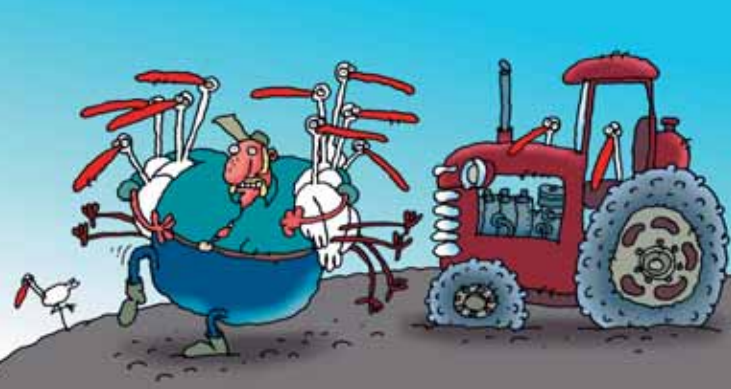
New Year-related customs and habits abound by the hundreds, and some may seem pretty weird at first glance. An Estonian is usually keen to know what lies in wait for him in the coming year. For that purpose he melts, either on the stove or in the microwave, half a litre of lead, and then pours it into the sink filled with water. A sound resembling a modest explosion is now heard, and when the sink shatters, it is quite clear, for example, that the new year entails buying a new sink.





One of the peculiarities of Estonian nature is its amazing vitality. Contrary to the widespread trend in other parts of the world, here nature ousts man, and not the other way round. There are places in many East Estonian areas where the kingdoms of plants and animals have completely taken over, have seized power in various villages.





One sometimes cannot help wondering: how come there is so much room for them all, for the animals, uncountable numbers of migratory and not-so-migratory birds, to say nothing of plants? You have to find the answer to that yourself since nobody has a suitable one.

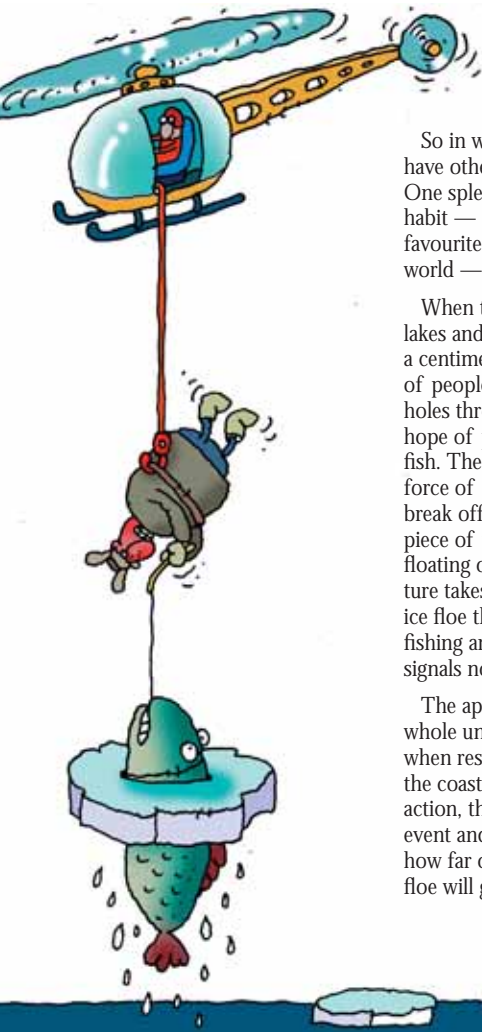
At a time when people abroad are getting excited over a stork, or, after an interval of 54 years, chance upon a wolf, Estonian tractor drivers have to forcefully remove armfuls of storks from their fields, whilst wolves help elderly people to carry their shopping bags. There are still places in Estonia where humans go but rarely.



Ordinary Estonians spend most of their spare time amidst nature. If an Estonian has not been to the country and seen any wild beasts or birds for a week, he becomes irritable, flies off the handle and finally, at the end of his tether, may well leave his job in mid-week and vanish into the countryside, without telling anyone.

Throughout history, the Estonians have had great respect for nature, and to this day they take its whims into careful consideration. For example, a custom spreads in Estonia from time to time that the fields are not to be sown in winter, because the harvest will be meagre.





So in winter time, Estonians have other hobbies. One splendid example is the habit — not exactly a wild favourite in the rest of the world — of riding ice floes.

When the ice on the rivers, lakes and bays is at least half a centimetre thick, thousands of people set off. They drill holes through the ice in the hope of pulling out some fish. The wind, or some other force of nature, will soon break off a smaller or larger piece of ice, which then starts floating off to wherever nature takes it. People on the ice floe then spend their time fishing and sending out SOS signals now and then.

The apotheosis of the whole undertaking arrives when rescue helicopters and the coastguards spring into action, the media covers the event and people lay bets as to how far one or the other ice floe will get before...



Those not engaged in this sport, busy themselves with other world-famous winter pastimes, such as armchair sports; those more agile actually get directly involved in sport as such.







For instance, people buy hugely expensive quality alpine skis and keep them nice and safe in their shed, because there are not too many mountains in Estonia (although locals affectionately call their hills 'mountains', the loftiest of them is no taller than the Eiffel Tower). You can certainly get up to a greater speed on ordinary skis.

Estonians spend their winters on skis, they go to work, visit friends, and compete with one another almost every weekend. There is really no point in broadcasting the Tartu Ski Marathon on TV, because everybody is either taking part in it or standing at the side of the track cheering the others along.

Estonians hardly ever participate in world competitions for fear of winning them all and thus



causing displeasure to their neighbours. Once or twice a year, this does happen nevertheless. The sportsmen involved are given a good dressing-down, and are provided with houses and money to make them so lazy and fat that they will not be able to repeat their offensive deed again next year.

The sports craze is, alas, difficult to fight against, and when spring comes and the snow vanishes, little wheels are screwed onto the skis, or roller skates taken out of the cupboard. Anyone short of equipment, and not possessing even a bicycle, simply runs and pretends to be especially keen on that area of sport.



One thing without which Estonians cannot imagine life at all is, however, the sauna. If someone has not been to a sauna for a week, he will be sent to see a psychiatrist. People simply cannot imagine that you can leave town, take part in some sport or other, or just have a party in the open air, and not go to the sauna afterwards.

The principle of the sauna is simple. One room is heated up to the point where water in the bucket starts boiling. Then naked people climb on to a special wooden platform, and wait. From time to time they throw boiling water at the stove and whip themselves with birch branches. After an hour or so, people are so heated up they can quite calmly walk around in freezing weather without any clothes on, or even take a dip in the icy water. They feel cold only a few days later, by which time a new sauna evening is drawing nigh. But back to sports and hobbies.

Although the government has tried its best to combat the craze for sports, it has failed miserably. One new fad follows the other, and for some time now Estonia, as any other normal European country, belongs to those nations where football-mania has taken a firm grip on the majority of the population. People go out in hordes and build stadia, teams compete with the best in the world. When a game is afoot, no grass grows, no bird sings, the sun fails to shine, delinquents stop their thieving and politicians do not lie.

Every single shop has been cleared of footballs, and on each remotely bare place one can see old gaffers dribbling around together with toddlers. Singing, too, is a sport in this part of the world.







Upon arriving in Estonia you are well advised to enquire immediately whether a song festival is taking place. There are bound to be numerous parties of all kind involving singing, but you demand to know about the national Song Festival. If it's on, consider yourself lucky. The song festival is held at the Song Festival Ground. It is a place that can accommodate one third of the entire Estonian population. Four years long, song contests take place in every Estonian village, and town large and small where the competition is significantly more intense than at the Eurovision Song Contest. Only the best will have a chance to perform at the song festival.

People sing on the huge and specially constructed choir dais that will welcome a small townful of singers. For long days, the undaunted singers stand as one row, clad in national costume in the spirit if their ancestral traditions, singing songs they have been practising and polishing for four years.







The repertoire usually contains about one thousand songs, half of which are actually performed. The other half is sung by the audience among themselves, before and after the great festivities, and naturally in the course of them as well.

Everybody is there. People arrive from hundreds of kilometres around, just like in olden days — on horseback or on foot, a colourful coif can be glimpsed both in a horse-drawn carriage, or at the wheel of a latest BMW. Quite a few Estonians see the light of day for the first time during the song festival. For a tourist, it is a real test of endurance.

It is no ordinary matter to listen to a choir whose song, without any aid of sound amplification, reaches for dozens of kilometres.

It is also pretty puzzling why people, despite the mild summer weather, wear their beautifully colourful, but still warm folk costumes, or how the thousands of singers have trimmed down their songs to become so precise and clear as if the stage only



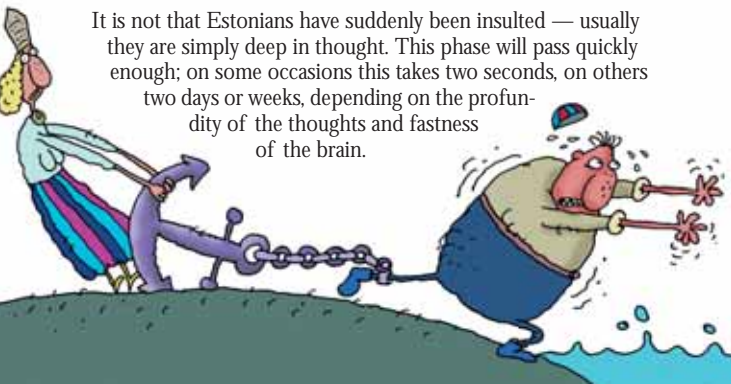
exhibited one single, giant six or seven-voiced singer with a tremendously powerful voice.





The impression of an Estonian, so far, is that of an industrious, busy, active and forever joyful person. That is basically true, although... Sometimes, in the middle of the most demanding work or spirited merrymaking, an Estonian suddenly turns serious, withdraws from the crowd, and directs his gaze towards the horizon. Where do we come from, whither are we going, what shall we become in the future? Estonians are Finno-Ugrians, and therefore it is part of their nature to contemplate the universe on a regular basis.

It is not that Estonians have suddenly been insulted — usually they are simply deep in thought. This phase will pass quickly enough; on some occasions this takes two seconds, on others two days or weeks, depending on the profundity of the thoughts and fastness of the brain.



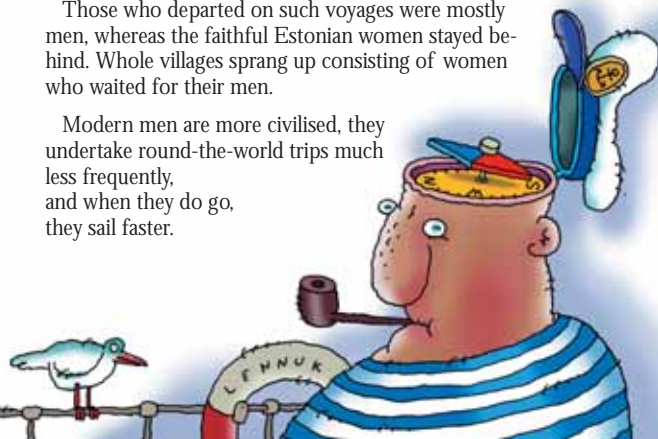
Sometimes, alas, it won't pass at all. In that case there are several options. One is a sea voyage. For hundreds of years now, Estonians have abandoned the shores of their all too small homeland in order to visit foreign lands and peoples, seeking answers to their questions — and finding them too.



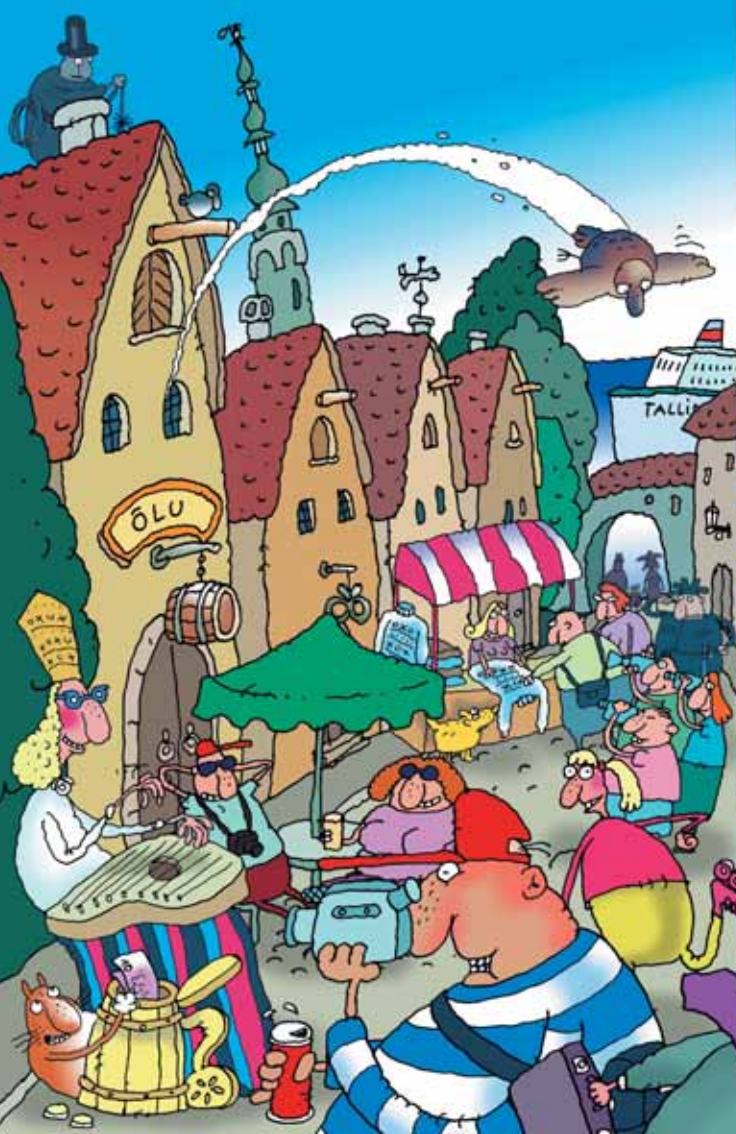
Nothing much has changed throughout history. An urge to see distant places and the wish to test one's tenacity are just as intense as one thousand years ago. It was considered quite ordinary in the olden days for someone who had got really fed up with his domestic life, to embark on a round-the-world tour. He would build a sailing boat and vanish. The boat was usually built in his free time, often at night when the others were asleep. Once the boat was ready, it was left waiting for the right time; when that arrived, the man departed, and didn't return until he had circumnavigated the earth.

Those who departed on such voyages were mostly men, whereas the faithful Estonian women stayed behind. Whole villages sprang up consisting of women who waited for their men.

Modern men are more civilised, they undertake round-the-world trips much less frequently, and when they do go, they sail faster.

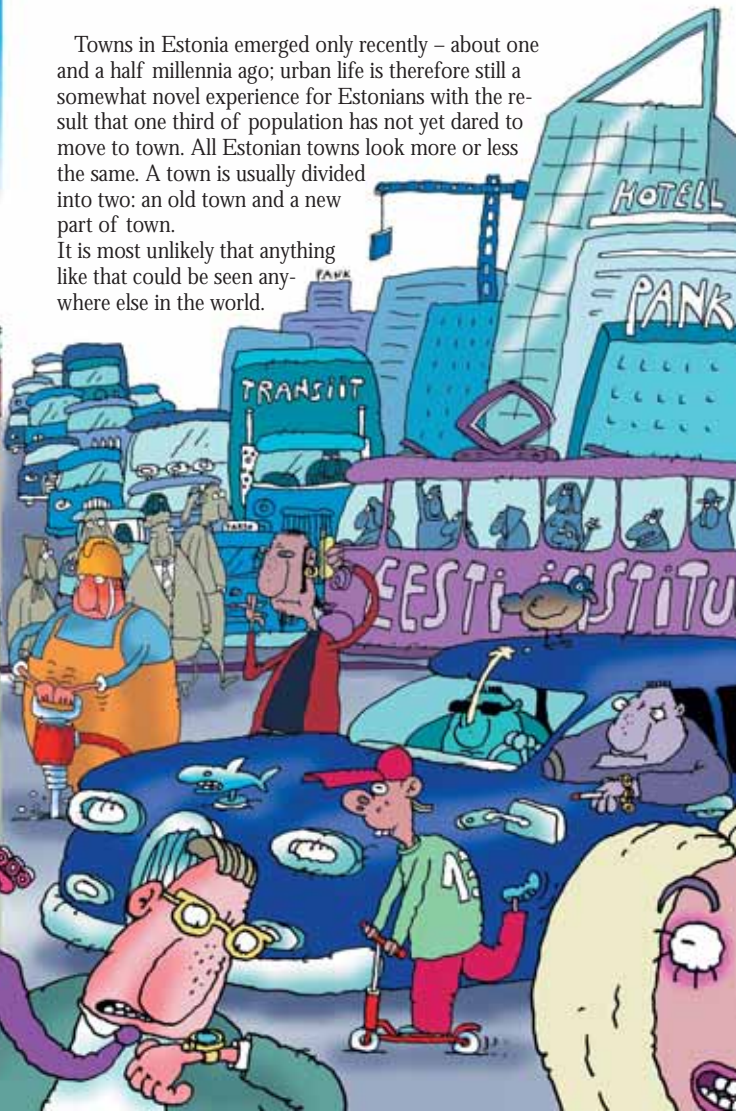






Towns in Estonia emerged only recently – about one and a half millennia ago; urban life is therefore still a somewhat novel experience for Estonians with the result that one third of population has not yet dared to move to town. All Estonian towns look more or less the same. A town is usually divided into two: an old town and a new part of town.

It is most unlikely that anything like that could be seen anywhere else in the world.





A DOVE WITH A LASER SIGHT  
IS THE DREAD OF EVERY  
SCULPTURE



Estonians have chosen Tallinn as their capital city – why? Historians are running around in search of an answer to that question. That is why we could not get hold of them and put our question to them. Maybe you can find the answer yourself when you walk around, keeping your eyes peeled.

The confusion is only increased by the fact that in summer time, Estonia's capital is Pärnu, and in winter it may easily be Otepää. If you are here as a tourist, it pays to stay for a year and visit each capital separately.

Estonian towns are presently developing at tremendous rate, so one should not trust city maps older than a few months. A new hotel, shopping centre or a multiscreen cinema is built every day, all traffic is re-routed in such a complicated way that during rush hours it has to be directed by satellites from the heavens. The citizens of the capital are not in the least surprised when they find a petrol station built overnight around their car that they had parked behind their house the evening before, or when they see that all the asphalt has been removed in front of the house and taken somewhere where it is more needed at the moment.

Otherwise Tallinn is a perfectly ordinary fast, neurotic and jolly harbour city.

There is a cash dispenser per every 10 citizens, and 6 pickpockets per every 6 tourists, as in every proper metropolis.

Every second inhabitant of the capital city



owns a car, which is naturally taken to the streets during rush hours. Where do all the people using public transport come from, is an unsolved mystery to this day.

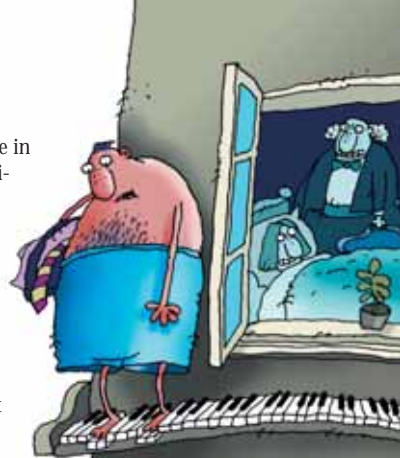
Any normal and well-informed person spends his first day in the Old Town, and you may rest assured – a unique experience is guaranteed. Especially if you manage to find your way, either assisted by a tourist guide or by your own merit, out from among the medieval walls and buildings and ask the taxi driver to take you and your hoard of souvenirs to a suburb. Within ten minutes, you are in a place where it is quite difficult to draw any parallels with the city. Be it an abandoned military base, fishing village, a picturesque farmhouse or a primeval forest.

It is worth your while roaming the suburbs for the sheer excitement of finding examples of architecture and inhabitants, the existence of which, after the brief first encounter, you very much doubt for years afterwards.



Each nation holds its culture in high esteem. So do the Estonians, whatever the guise this culture may adopt: dance, song, theatre, film, opera, ballet, applied and non-applied art, or even literature. The state, too, supports culture as vigorously as it can, and people engage in it whenever they find a moment outside working hours.

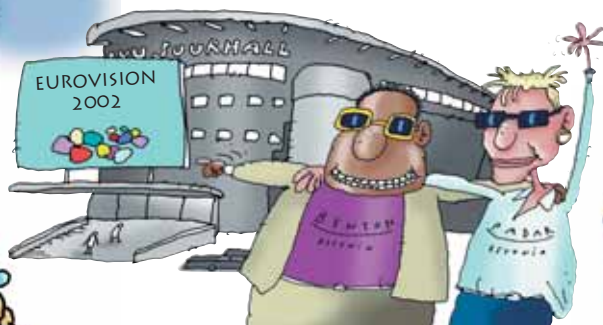
It is most difficult, however, to find a suitable moment, and that is why many



have chosen culture as their job. Every family has at least one opera singer, musician, artist, actor or writer.



All our cultural figures have joined one or other professional association and are thus in a good position to sit around and wait for inspiration.



I, too, my good reader, was blessed by a sudden visit from a Muse, and I'd like to present you with a little poem that goes as follows:

*Täiuslikkuseni viidud kalamees,  
Kel nina asemel on havi ees,  
Paati ja võrke tal pole vaja, vaid –  
Mootorit!*

A fisherman quite perfect,  
Who, instead of nose, has a pike,  
Has no need for boat and nets,  
Just an engine!

*Valib jõe välja, paneb seljapeale käed,  
Natukene kükitab ja siis sa näed  
Käivitub mootor, nina avab suu –  
Ja mees on jões.*

Chooses a river, folds his hands behind him,  
Squats down a bit, and you'll see  
The engine starts up, the nose opens its mouth  
And the man is in the river.

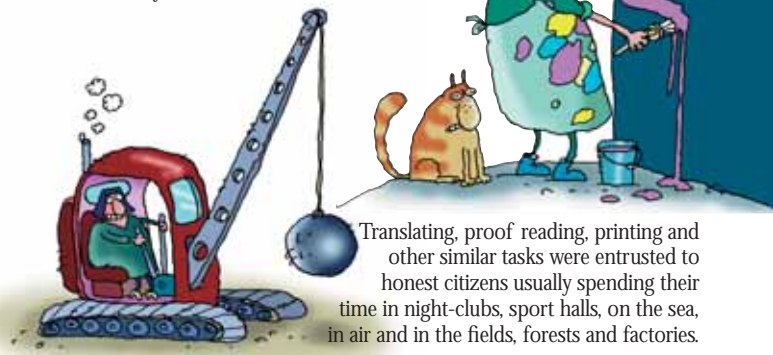
Perhaps this immortal little book about Estonia and its people would do nicely for starters. The publication has numerous imperfections, all of which we shall list in the issue appearing in the year 2029, but it also possesses many merits.

One of them is the fact that people involved in producing this book had never done anything like this before in their lives.

The text was written by someone working on a farm as an assistant milkmaid.



The pictures were drawn by a man whom we found painting a wall at a small town railway station.



Translating, proof reading, printing and other similar tasks were entrusted to honest citizens usually spending their time in night-clubs, sport halls, on the sea, in air and in the fields, forests and factories.



And that is as it should be. This is how the simple people of Estonia see their country and their compatriots. All inhabitants of Estonia, who are as follows, bid you welcome:

1. Ants Palu
2. Anne Auvel
3. Kristina Mäe-Umbaed
4. Jüri Tamm
5. Pearu Paleuss
6. Karin Aasaleht
7. Olga Kastekõrs
8. Maris-Virge Peterson
9. Krõõt Tobreluts
10. Anu Krebsbach
11. Toivo Tolstikoff
12. Õnnelemb Kaukatu
13. Sveinjaak Joola
14. Tuuli Oidekivi
15. Viuu Frosch
16. Liivia Pepik
17. Maali Pilv
18. Aili-Airiin Nato
19. Hjalmar Kõnnimees
20. Koit Aavekukk
21. Richard Virolainen
22. Juhan Aadamtõug
23. Iris Lomp
24. Rein Veiderpass
25. Malle Sisask-Mäur
26. Kai Urpp
27. Janno Tüksammel
28. Raul Mälton
29. Toomas Ahjupera
30. Indrek Mürkhain
31. Karl Missik
32. Harti Leheroo
33. Lee Kaugemaa
34. Gea-Gertrud Zirk-Hübsch
35. Kaur Langeproon
36. Tehvan Saarlem
37. Siiri Teoleib



38. Margus Pasun
39. Aet Kivialt
40. Karmen Hüüs
41. Tiiu Mähhar
42. Tormi Pritsik
43. Kätlin Nif
44. Teodor Jalakas
45. Lilly Kopsu
46. Meelis Aru
47. Triinu Kattai
48. Tõnis Hürri
49. Armas M. Mallika
50. Ilmar Kosevoog
51. Ott Ao
52. Tõiv Mõtspalu
53. Pille Averbuch
54. Milli Nolgus
55. Reelika Au
56. Rüüt Rea
57. Hirlanda Sooperv
58. August Ahelik
59. Saide Tuulepealt
60. Lembela Puravik
61. Hillar Jõõts
62. Maret Leesikas
63. Kaur Andevelt
64. Helmi Sildisaba
65. Voldemar Helge
66. Tiit Tümkas
67. Daisy Taluveer
68. Arnika Lill
69. Marje Hein
70. Andres Tsoova
71. Aja-Silvi Maasikas
72. Lembit Rahovõtra
73. Kaidar Räsapalu
74. Heli Taputa