



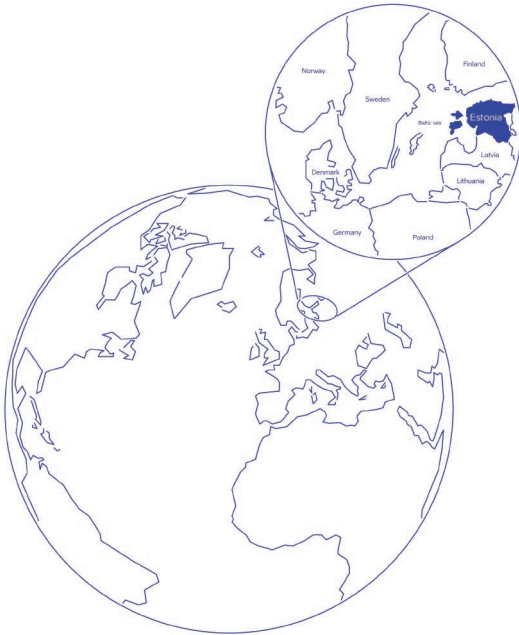
21 Questions about the Estonian Song and Dance Celebration

Do you know Estonia?

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In short, Estonia is a republic. Located in Northern Europe by 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. At the same time, with its population of 1.3 million, Estonia ranks among the smallest countries in the world. Compared to densely inhabited Central Europe, Estonians have plenty of space – the average number of people per sq. km is 30, which is similar to the United States and around twice as high as Finland.



How old are the song and dance celebrations?

Of course nobody knows when Estonians sang their first songs or danced their first dances. Nevertheless, we can be certain that the lives of Estonians have always been interlaced with song and dance. Singing and dancing have helped us soothe sorrows, fortify the spirit, prepare for battle, celebrate marriages, spark joy and create a sense of belonging.

For over 150 years Estonians have been organising large-scale song and dance festivals that bring many guests to Tallinn, our capital. Even greater numbers watch the celebrations on TV and other devices throughout the world.

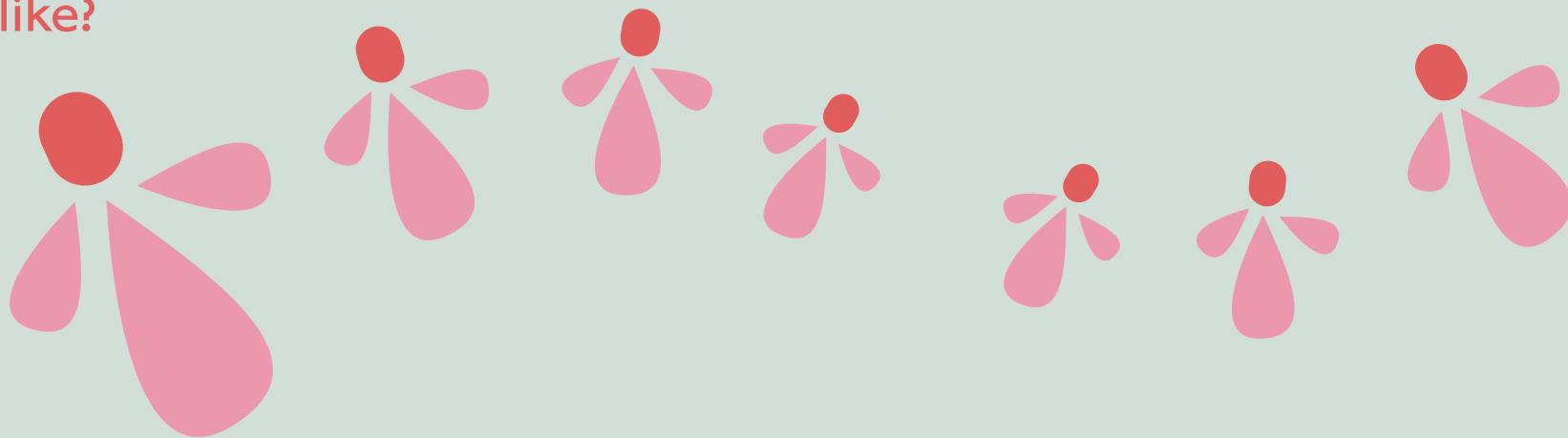
We have a saying that if the Estonian identity had a PIN, it would probably be 2479. Simply because the youth song and dance celebrations take place in years ending with 2 or 7, and the All-Estonian song and dance celebrations occur in years ending with 4 or 9.

What was the very first song celebration like?

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What about dancing?



The very first All-Estonian song celebration took place in 1869 in Tartu, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the abolishment of serfdom. The concept of organised collective singing was borrowed from the Germans in the 19th century. Such communal singing went a long way towards raising and reinforcing a young nation's self-awareness. 1,000 singers and musicians took part in the first song celebration, with the audience of 12,000. In comparison – the 2014 Song and Dance Celebration brought together 175,000 people.

Song celebrations were originally organised and held in Tartu. The first song festival in Tallinn was hosted in Kadriorg in 1896 (the third national song celebration). Since 1928, all national song celebrations have taken place at the Song Festival Grounds in Tallinn. The stage can accommodate 15,000 people, and, at times, the grounds have held close to 300,000 people.

The Estonian Games in 1934 could be considered the first official Dance Celebration in Estonia. The gymnastics event included 1,500 dancers performing folk dances between the acrobatics. These days folk dancing can hold its own, and dance celebrations have become very popular with performers as well as spectators. Anyone who has witnessed almost 8,000 people dressed in folk costumes create intricate patterns will probably never forget it. An hour and a half of co-

hesive dance routines takes years of work, but the result is well worth it.

Nowadays the Dance Celebrations take place in Tallinn's Kalev Stadium. And in many homes and hearts whenever the mood strikes.

And, last but not least – folk dancing has coupled up countless modest Estonians.

Did the Soviet occupation change Estonian song and dance celebrations?

After World War II the Republic of Estonia was violently annexed by the Soviet Union. Nationality was ostracised by Soviet authorities; in principle it was banned.

So, over the years of occupation the song and dance celebrations had to be held for the glory of the Soviet Union. However, the authorities actually never succeeded in turning the festival into a tribute to themselves. After the 'compulsory' songs, people always sang the ones that came straight from the heart. For example, the song "My Fatherland is My Love" (by Gustav Ernesaks and Lydia Koidula) became an anthem where each word acquired special meaning that no alien power could suppress.

Just how much the authorities truly dreaded the song celebrations was evident in the large number of guards, and their eagerness to disperse people after the last performance. To prevent any outbreaks of spontaneous singing or dancing, the grounds were drowned in marching music. Music is the coded portrait of society. The Song and Dance Celebration is also such a portrait. In the course of history, this portrait has acquired special clarity and significance, especially at difficult times: singing together at song festivals helped this small nation, practically declared non-existent, to feel united and strong.

The Singing Revolution – what for?

Possibly the most internationally well-known song-related event is the Singing Revolution. The non-violent revolution took place between 1987-1991, and concluded with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reinstatement of independence for the three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

And it is pretty clear that without the tradition of song celebrations that had lasted well over one hundred years, there would have been no 'singing revolution' that helped to restore the independence. Masses of people, who expressed their will by singing, confused even the most dedicated military men.

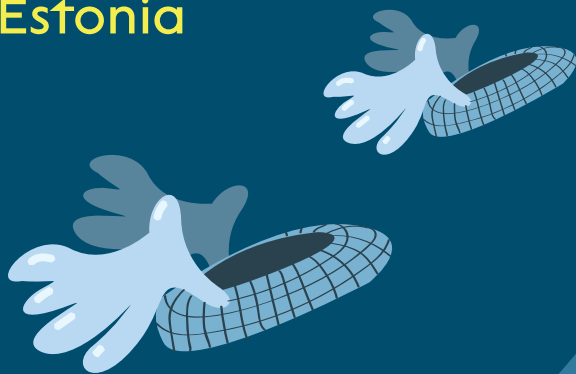
Long story short – for Estonians it all began in the summer of 1987, during the Old Town Days in Tallinn, when a group of punks initiated a spontaneous sing-along in Town Hall Square, which soon attracted a large number of people and transferred to the Song Festival Grounds. Emotions were high, people started to remember the taste of freedom and many similar concerts followed over the subsequent years. There was no

turning back.

The 23rd of August 1989, marked the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact – a contract which included a secret protocol that divided various European countries into "spheres of influence" between dictators, ignoring international law, and "leaving" the Baltic states to the Soviet Union. That day, the three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, became united in the revolution, as the peoples of all three states jointly organised a peaceful protest demonstration. Men, women and children stood side by side in a human chain from the capital of Estonia, Tallinn, through the capital of Latvia, Riga, to the capital of Lithuania, Vilnius, in, what became known as, the Baltic Way. A total of almost two million people took part, and the length of the human chain was about 620 kilometres.

Lithuanian independence was declared on the 11th of March 1990, Estonian independence on the 20th of August 1991, and Latvian independence on the 21st of August 1991.

What kinds of song and dance celebrations take place in Estonia today?



The All-Estonian Song and Dance Celebrations take place every five years. Between the big events, there often occur various smaller song and dance festivals: the punk song festival, the men's song festival, the women's song festival, student song festivals in Tartu, the university town, and so on, and so on. There's also the Baltic student song and dance festival *Gaudeamus*.

Local and regional festivals feed and sustain the main event. They are not rehearsals for the big one, they are part of the process, part of the culture. And the schedule is always full. The scene is lively. It could be said that the Estonians' sense of togetherness and dreams of a better future have always

been closely associated with song festivals. Estonians often refer to themselves as "the singing people" – this phrase is one of the markers of our national identity, and it has united Estonians during struggles for national sovereignty both in the beginning of 20th century and throughout the Soviet occupation.

While Estonians participate in *Laulu- ja tantsupidu*, the Latvians have *Latviešu Dziesmu un Deju Svētki*, and Lithuanians enjoy *Lietuvos Dainų Šventė*. These three traditions, similar but different, were entered into the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2003.

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Location, location, location... how to get there?

The Song Celebration takes place at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds, which are instantly recognisable by the imposing arch. A bus will take you from the city centre straight to the Grounds. If the weather is good, you might prefer to take the tram to Kadriorg and enjoy a scenic stroll to the Festival Grounds, either along the seashore (Pirita road), or through Kadriorg park. The first day of the Song Celebration is the day of the parade, which means that the singers and dancers will most certainly point spectators in the right direction.

The Dance Celebration takes place in Kalevi Keskstaadion (Kalev stadium), which is located in Tallinn city centre, right between Hotel Olumpia and the Tallinn bus station. The stadium is located at Staadioni 8. You can take a bus there, but it is easily reachable by foot.

Of course, everything, even information, travels slower on Celebration days. The festival causes road closures and the re-routing of a few buses. Therefore, just in case, add at least an hour to any of your travels on public transport. The most accurate traffic information will be available right before the party.

And once the buses or trams get moving during the festival, these journeys tend to be merrier than usual. The buses and trams might end up jam-packed full of cheerful singers and dancers, who are usually abuzz with excitement, elevating everyone's mood. Someone might start a singalong. Sadly there isn't enough space for dancing. Information on Tallinn's public transport is available on the official website of Tallinn: www.tallinn.ee

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Why must there be a parade?



Five kilometers, 6,600 steps. This is the Estonian samba carnival and pilgrimage at once.

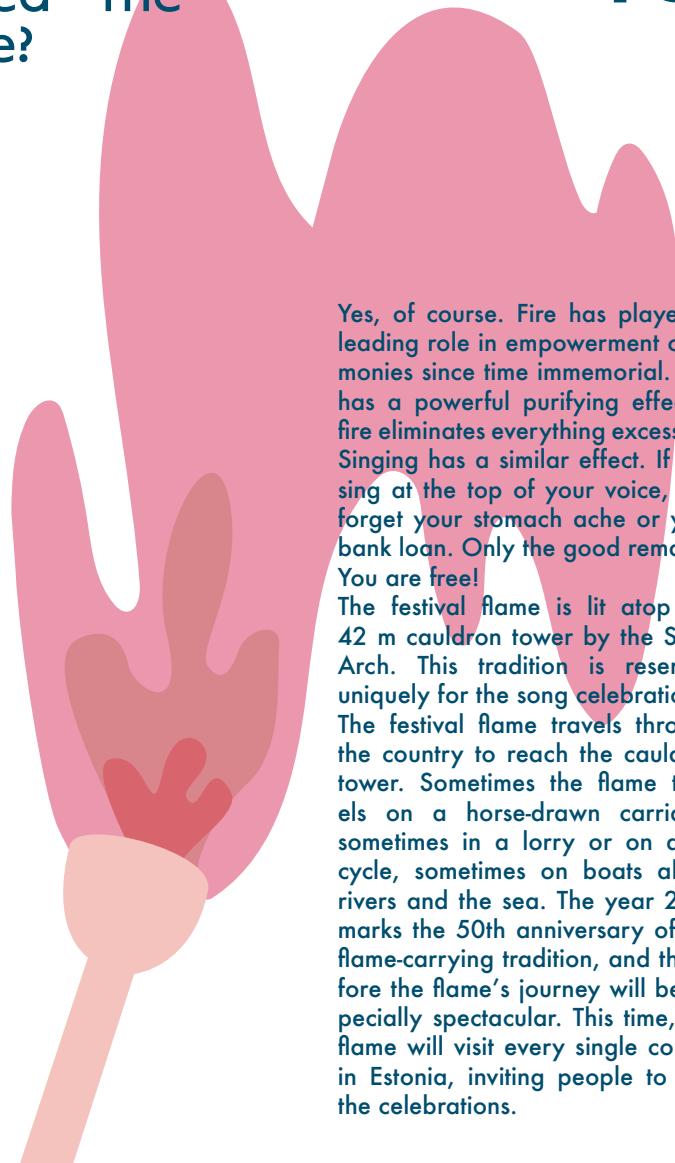
The Song and Dance Celebration's parade takes place before the first song celebration concert, on Saturday. The parade follows a set route from Toompea hill through Tallinn city centre and Kadriorg to the Song Festival Grounds. Traffic in the city is halted. The parade attracts cheering multitudes from far and wide.

The festival's performers all participate in the parade. Singers, dancers, musicians, conductors. They've been practising for this great event for a long time and now they can feel proud of their accomplishments, and spread the joy. Every group in the parade is having their very own party – it's a parade of a hundred parties.

It is also the tuning process for what is yet to come. Once the parade reaches the Song Festival Grounds and the audience settles in, the excitement reaches a new high – the festival flame is lit. The grand party may begin.

Do we need the fire?

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Yes, of course. Fire has played a leading role in empowerment ceremonies since time immemorial. Fire has a powerful purifying effect – fire eliminates everything excessive. Singing has a similar effect. If you sing at the top of your voice, you forget your stomach ache or your bank loan. Only the good remains. You are free!

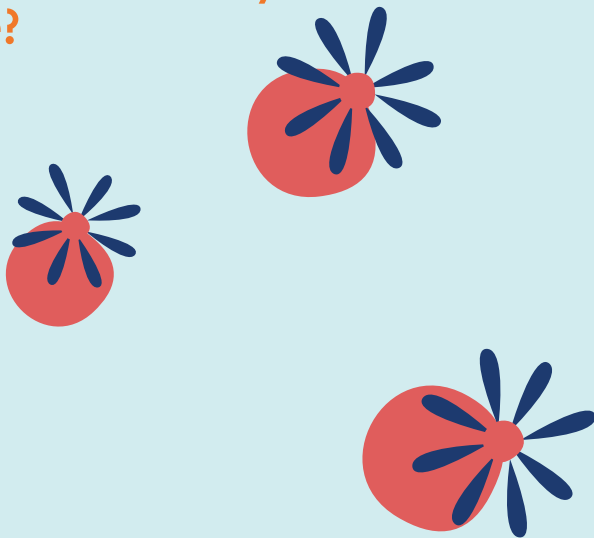
The festival flame is lit atop the 42 m cauldron tower by the Song Arch. This tradition is reserved uniquely for the song celebrations. The festival flame travels through the country to reach the cauldron tower. Sometimes the flame travels on a horse-drawn carriage, sometimes in a lorry or on a bicycle, sometimes on boats along rivers and the sea. The year 2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the flame-carrying tradition, and therefore the flame's journey will be especially spectacular. This time, the flame will visit every single county in Estonia, inviting people to join the celebrations.

What does the programme usually look like?

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Is it easy to become a performer at the Song and Dance Celebration?



The festival lasts from Thursday to Sunday. It begins with the dance performances and ends with the song festival over the weekend. The parade takes place on Saturday, followed by the first concert of the song festival.

The song festival culminates on Sunday with a set of songs that are the most well-known and loved by the audience.

The dance festival programme gets is 3-5 times Thursday to Friday.

Songs for the celebration are picked thematically. However, there are songs that have been sung at almost every celebration. For example, "My Fatherland is My Love" -- the song Estonians consider to be their alternative national anthem. This song, composed by Gustav Ernesaks (1944), based on a poem by Lydia Koidula, was performed even when Estonian songs were generally prohibited.

Around a thousand choirs audition for the song and dance celebration.

Choirs start practising the songs two years in advance of the celebration. First they have to compete with other choirs in their county, and the best proceed to the Song Festival Grounds.

Spectators, unfortunately, cannot join the choirs on stage. However, everyone at the Song Festival Grounds becomes part of one gigantic choir.

The dancers, too, start preparing early. Not only that – a dance performance that lasts 90 minutes takes years of preparation on many levels. Dance instructors have to be trained in higher education institutions. Choices have to be made between various folk dances, which then have to be turned into choreographed dance numbers for the festival. Dance patterns for thousands of dancers have to be dreamt and fine-tuned. Folk costumes and footwear have to be made by skilled specialists.

It all culminates with a week's stay in Tallinn's schoolhouses, where days include sweating in rehearsals and nights are all about sleeping on mattresses on the floor, which is better than it sounds, as anyone who's ever experienced it will tell you.

After all that sweat and sleeplessness, a dance miracle is born – the rather unique dance show is ready for the audience.

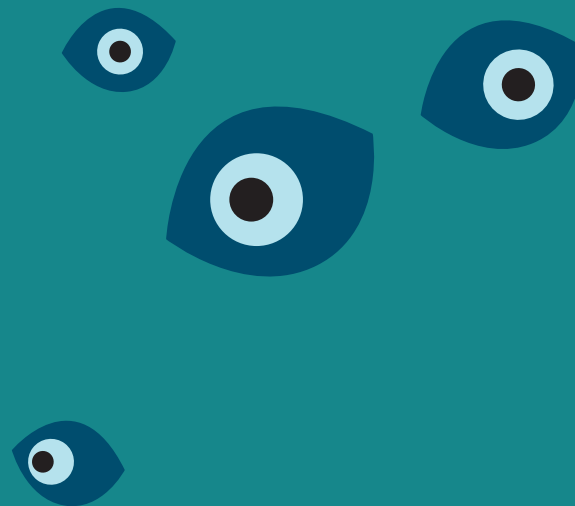
Where can I stay overnight as a guest? And as a performer?

Generally speaking, tourists are well catered for in Tallinn. However, during a festival year it is recommended that you book your accommodation early, perhaps even half a year in advance. Also, as always, accommodation is more expensive during big events, so please bear that in mind.

Performers start gathering in Tallinn a week in advance of the celebration. Their days are filled with endless practice sessions, as well as limitless excitement and joy. The choirs and dance groups are housed in various school buildings around Tallinn. Yes, sleeping in a strange schoolhouse is something almost every Estonian gets to experience at least once in their life.



Where is the best place to look for festival information?



The best source of information about the song and dance celebrations can be found at www.laulupidu.ee. It is the webpage of the Estonian Song and Dance Celebration Foundation, and it has basically everything you need. There are also booklets with information and some songs in Estonian available to purchase during the festival. Please note that song lyrics are available in Estonian only. Most of the songs performed at the celebration are in Estonian, but sometimes you'll hear a song in Latvian, Livonian, or other languages.

And what about the tickets?

Tickets for the Song and Dance Celebration become available at the start of the festival year. They can be purchased online or at various ticket vendors all over Estonia. Tickets for the dance performances should be purchased as early as possible – the stadium can only accommodate a certain number of spectators, which means that tickets usually sell out fast.

Tickets for the song celebration may also be purchased on the day of the concert at the gates of the Song Festival Grounds. However, it is highly recommended that they are obtained earlier – that way you'll escape one of the many queues associated with a festival.

Admission is free for kids up to and including 7 years of age.

The dance celebration is a seated event.

The Song Festival Grounds are divided into sectors, and spectators have a choice between sitting on a seat, or enjoying the show on a picnic blanket on the grass.

Please note that no ticket means no admission.

It is useful to keep in mind that while the song festival concerts are different each day, the dance performances are the same.

Can I come to the party if I'm 6 months old? If I'm 200?



Yes, you can! There are no age restrictions on the song and dance celebrations. Everyone is welcome. Of course, the smaller guests should have an older companion with them; and the elderly could do with some support in the hustle and bustle of the party, too.

The best way to attend the party with a baby is to carry them in a carrier (e.g. wrap, sling), as there might not be much space at the festival grounds for prams. It has to be said that the song and dance festival can test one's patience – there are lots of people about, big and small, the days are long and travel times are longer. The happy fact is, however, that people tend to be pleasant and calm. This truly is a party for everyone. Indeed, everyone matters!

I've reached the Song Festival Grounds, what do I do now?

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You could negotiate a place for yourself on the grass – there's plenty of space for everyone. You might want to sit down, you might prefer to walk around, you might decide to stand. The concerts are long, so you'll probably get the chance to do all of the above and then some. You'll find numerous food stalls at the Song Festival Grounds, so you won't go hungry.

Of course, patience is your best friend at a festival – with so many people around, there's bound to be queues and waiting, but with patience you can always enjoy yourself.

Some people sing, some listen, some talk. If you have a ticket for the seated area, there's a greater chance of your experience resembling a concert, rather than a picnic in a park.

You may leave and re-enter the festival grounds as you please.

What should you bring to the festival? Something to sit on, a rain mac, and why not a picnic basket. Camping or bonfires are not allowed. People usually don't bring

their pets with them – hordes of people are not usually animals' idea of fun.

Naturally, big crowds require vigilance. Losing a companion in a crowd can be easier than we'd like to believe. We should of course pay special attention to children, as they could become overwhelmed by the bustle and get lost in the sea of strangers. Therefore we ask the parents and conductors and dance coaches to go over any possible dangers and situations with children or youth before attending the festival. Children should come equipped with contact numbers for their guardians. Should a problem arise, please don't hesitate to contact members of police or security staff.

Song and dance celebrations are alcohol-free events. You can bring your own food and drink, in moderation. However, you should also be prepared for security checks at the gates. Glass containers are not permitted, neither will unidentifiable substances.

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How are people with disabilities catered for at the festival?

At the 2017 Youth Song and Dance Celebration, vision-impaired guests of the dance festival were able to experience the live show thanks to descriptive interpreters and tactile booklets, for the first time, as part of the "I See" project. Now it is becoming a tradition. This year, the song festival will also be made more accessible to people with hearing impairments for the first time. Also, this year the song festival will be made audible to people with hearing impairment for the first time.

Guests in wheelchairs will find it easiest to enter the Song Festival Grounds through Oru or Mere gates. The Song Festival Grounds has a dedicated sector for wheelchair users, with nearby seats for any companions. At every dance performance there are seats allocated for people with special needs, and security staff are there to assist and help you with finding and getting to your seat. Again, seats are also allocated for your companions. Admission is free for companions of people with special needs. For more specific information, you are always welcome to contact the organiser of the event – contacts can be found on the website www.laulupidu.ee

What should I wear to the Song and Dance Celebration?

There is no dress code for the audience. You could opt for a casual look, or you might want to dress up, the choice is yours. You might even wish to come in your own national dress. Why not! Estonian spectators often come in their national garments, and we would be glad and honoured if you chose to wear yours. Just bear the weather in mind when making your sartorial decisions – it could get wet, or scorching!

Strict guidelines exist for the performers, however. The dancers, for example, have to be dressed in correct, authentic dress. Authenticity here refers primarily to the geographical provenance of the garments; nowadays the clothes are made using modern materials, of course. This means that no stylised, national costume-inspired, trendy 'ethnic' garments are allowed. Most dance groups, it has to be said, already have and wear proper national garments. During recent celebrations, seminars and workshops were held on various aspects of the national dress, and practical hints and tips and help for the dancers were given by Estonian National Museum staff.



What if it rains?

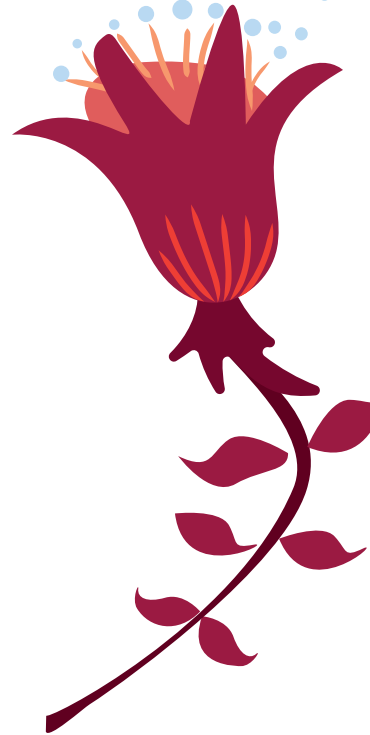


In that case you'll need a rain mac. Umbrellas are not allowed at the festival – let's face it, they're cumbersome, pointy and pointless. Not a single festival has ever been cancelled because of rain. They've tried, but haven't succeeded. History knows a few spontaneous unofficial dance festivals occurring in downpours.



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When does it all end?



Actually, never.

But, of course the grand finale of every festival is a deep and touching experience for everyone who happens to witness it – whether on-site or in front of the TV or computer screens all around the world.

The last dance of the dance celebration is always "*Oige ja vasemba*" ("Left and Right"), and the last melody of the 2nd concert of the song festival is *Kodumaa* ("Hometown"). One of the highlights of that evening is undoubtedly the emotional gratitude ceremony, which concludes the song festival – people cheer and make waves, while all the conductors and dance coaches are flung up in the air.

We thank you, we thank ourselves, we thank the music.

And when the last notes of the last concert are about to fade into the evening air, there are plans being made for the next Song and Dance Celebration already.

This is how the ritual works.

Because the celebration of one's soul is a never-ending story. Just like our songs and dances.



Eesti Laulu- ja Tantsupeo SA

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