



W E L C O M E T O

TALLINN



PHOTOS AND TEXTS: CARINA JUHHOVA • CHRISTOPHE MORA



# Estonia



**GEOGRAPHY:** Estonia is the northernmost, the smallest and the least populous of the three Baltic States.

**AREA:** 45 339 km<sup>2</sup>, about the same size as Denmark or the Netherlands.

**RELIEF:** Less than 10% of the country has an elevation of more than 100 metres. The highest peak, Suur Munamägi or "Big Egg Hill", reaches 318 metres above sea level.

**LANGUAGE:** The official language, Estonian, is related to Finnish and Hungarian and belongs to the Finno-Ugric family of languages. The most common minority language is Russian.

**POPULATION:** 1.4 million people.

**CAPITAL:** Tallinn, 450 000 people.



# Estonian faces



They look like this



... and like this



but not like that!



My Estonian grandmother was the only one from her family to survive the deportation and return to Estonia from the Ural Mountains' gulag camp in Oshya.

# Born in the USSR



Mum with her parents



My brother, Mum and I



Meet my mum Valentina. Her dad was Russian, her mother Estonian so she speaks both languages. She became an English teacher dreaming to leave the Soviet Union but later, when Estonia became independent, decided to stay.



In July 2025






*My Ukrainian grandmother lost her parents in "Holodomor", the Soviet government inflicted famine of 1933, she and her sister fled to Moscow.*

Meet my dad Vladimir. Born near Moscow to a Russian father and Ukrainian mother, raised in Ukraine, he is fluent in both languages but does not speak Estonian. He lived and worked in several parts of the Soviet Union, till arriving in Estonia some 45 years ago. My mum met him in a winter swimming club. After the fall of the Iron Curtain he had a grey passport for several years because he did not know where he was actually from.



*Ice swimming in January 1983, I'm 1 year old*



A collage featuring a woman lying on grass, dandelions, and a piece of lined paper with handwritten text.

Tallinn,  
July 7, 2007

I feel like I don't belong  
anywhere. I want to be a  
nobody, a nomad - without a  
name, without a home, without a  
family, without a nationality,  
without a language. The road is  
the only place where I can be  
my true self.



# Around the world #1

I was off to a normal start in life - a master in management of culture, I worked at an art museum as a co-ordinator of education. Quitting my job at the age of 25 and setting off to discover the world by hitchhiking made sense to no-one but myself. My pursuit was a life without a clock, professional titles and money, made of random encounters, human kindness and luck. I came back to visit my family in 2011 but then returned to South America and settled down in Chile.





# Around the world #2

I was Head of Tourism of Cape Horn, living and working in Puerto Williams, when in 2015 Christophe made landfall on “my” island in the furious fifties. Despite having never sailed before, I again decided to abandon the advised route, this time to learn about seasickness, togetherness as well as the beauty and the beast of nature. In August 2024 we made it back to France only to set sail again the following spring with the romantic goal to finally introduce Christophe to my family in Estonia.







# The final leg

## DEPARTURE:

Sweden, Bay of Napoleonviken, July 4, 2025.

## ARRIVAL:

Estonia, Tallinn Old City Marina, July 5, at midnight.

## DISTANCE:

204 nautical miles (174 km).

## PASSAGE TIME:

1 day, 16 hours, 25 minutes.





# Welcome home party

We arrive in sync with one of the largest choral events in the world celebrated in Estonia every 5 years - The National Song Festival.

**NUMBER OF CHOIRS PARTICIPATING IN 2025:** 990

**NUMBER OF PERFORMERS:** 31 027

**AUDIENCE:** 58 000 + 2 clandestine (that's us)

The tickets for the event had been long sold out. My brother Daniel was a singer in one of the men's choirs and his daughter Helina performed in the children's choir. They had an idea!



*My brother Daniel  
with his daughter Helina*



*Sharing the festival entry bracelets*





# Singers in the rain 🎵 🎵



Estonian national dress varies by region.



Mum

Valentina

Christophe

Me

Niece

Helina(9)

Dad

Vladimir

Brother

Daniel

Nephew

Taavet  
(7)

Sister-in-law

Helerin



"Jätku leiba", in other words "bon appétit" means in Estonian "may you always have bread". Dark rye bread is made of fermented sourdough, 100% rye flour and rye malt.





Photo: Geneviève Clédel



**TIP:** Public transport in Estonia's capital is free for Tallinn residents, but in practice nobody ever checks the tickets so it is basically free for everyone. However, if you would like to support the good system, there is a self-service visa, mastercard, etc. tap-machine by the front door of all trams, trolleys and buses.



# #1 Old Town

Get lost in the medieval heart of Tallinn, built between the 13th and 16th centuries, walking its cobblestone streets and narrow alleys. Stumble upon the prettiest street called Katariina käik (St. Catherine's Passage) and Kohtuotsa viewing platform.

Estonia is on the border between Eastern and Western Europe and contrasting Orthodox and Protestant churches are easily distinguished in the city panorama. Visit St. Nicholas' Church and then Alexander Nevski Cathedral to experience the difference between two cultures.



St. Nicholas' Church  
from the 13th century



Photo: Genevieve Clede

Aleksander Nevski Cathedral  
from 1894







Bianka in 2003, when we first met hitchhiking in Portugal



Us in 2025, busy catching up

## #2 Kalamaja

This is one of the oldest districts of Tallinn made of charming wooden houses, those which have survived the bombs and fires, from late 1800, others new. Every house is divided into separate apartments inside - there can be four per floor.

My friend Bianca Soe lives here. While I had been away, Bianca got married, had three daughters and wrote a book "Kalamaja in the Air" (Estonian title - "Õhus on Kalamaja").

Would you like some sea buckthorn juice from my father's orchard?

Bianka's kitchen



Inspiration: Piet Mondriaan's composition from 1930



Livingroom



# #3 Kadriorg Park and Palace

I used to work in the Baroque style palace, built in 1718 by the Russian Emperor Peter the Great to become the royal family's "summer cabin".

Today Kadriorg Palace is a museum hosting a collection of European and Russian art, including the master of marine painting - Ivan Aivazovski.

From the Palace you can walk for 10 minutes to quite recently built Kumu Art Museum, which displays Estonian art and holds changing exhibitions of contemporary art.



Kadriorg Palace



Aleksandra Murre, my colleague from 18 years ago, introduces Christophe to Ivan Aivazovski



This was me in 2006!







## #4 Linnahall ↗

Close to the port, the strange, aztec-temple shaped building, designed for the 1980 Moscow Olympics, used to be an ice skating hall and a concert venue for two decades. Climbing the stairs to the roof is worth a while for the view. This concrete communist colossus is a good example of ruins from the Soviet times, one of many big questionmarks on the City's things to do list.

So how to manage the ugly neighbourhoods near the town centre? While I had been away, some of the 19th century factories saw old and new architecture combined into commercial venues, office buildings, hip cafes and fancy restaurants. Although the limestone ghost-town has become smaller, just around the corner, waiting for more investments, are many more ruins to be found.



## ↖ #5 Rotermann



**TIP:** Discover a seaside stroll full of contrasts as you walk from Rotermann, via Linnahall and the ruins of Patarei Prison, all the way to the Sea Plane Harbour and Noblessner.



Photo: Estonian Maritime Museum

# #6 Sea Plane Harbour

This hangar was built in 1917 on the initiative of the Russian Empire, then forgotten... In 2012 the building re-opened its doors as a branch of the Maritime Museum.

Before renovation

What is ice sailing?!

Ice sailing history on display



# #7 Lasnamäe

All buildings look the same in this Soviet-era part of town. Better take a bus to measure how immense this monotonous anonymous urban landscape actually is. A quarter of Tallinn's population lives here, most of them Russian speakers.

The sleeping quarters were built between 1960s and 1980s to host the Soviet immigrants. To attract builders, they were promised apartments in the future blocks of flats. Since my parents had nowhere to live when I was born, my dad took on house building for a few years.

This is where I grew up!

Look, a Lada!



Brick wall built by dad



Our apartment block in winter.  
I lived on the seventh floor



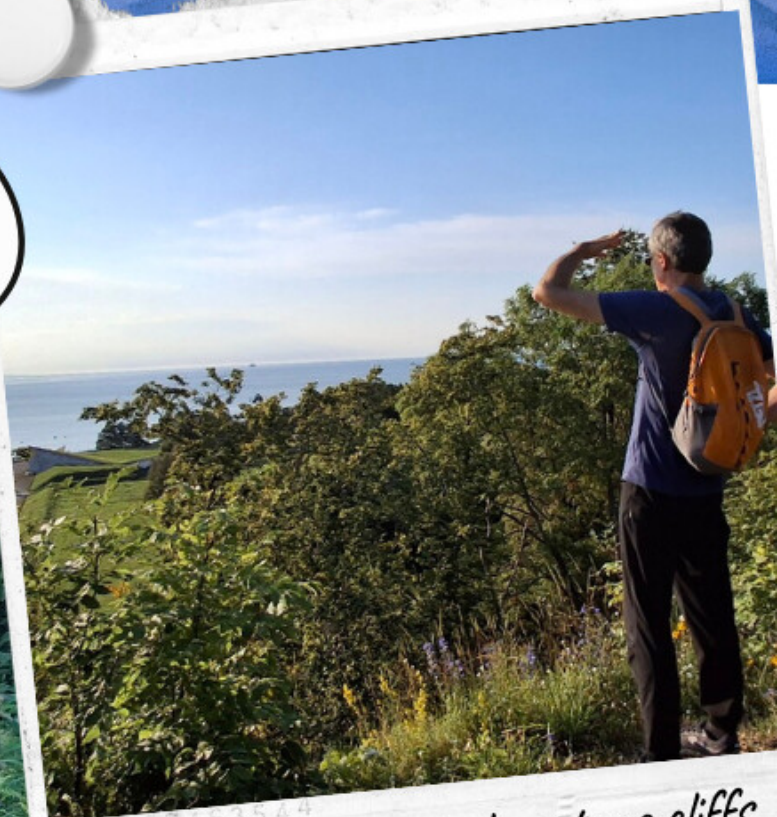
Frame from Christopher Nolan's 2020 science fiction movie "Tenet" filmed on the freeway which connects Tallinn city centre with Lasnamäe.

This exact place is a 10 minute walk from where I used to live.



**TIP:** Lasnamäe can also be discovered differently. From the bus stop Lasnamägi take the Mäe Street and walk in the direction of the sea. Look for the non-marked trail on your right which follows the cliff edge. This is a no man's land with bush and trails stretching out for kilometres on end, all the way to the Botanical gardens and the Pirita River banks which you can then follow all the way to the beach.

What I love best about living at the edge of our concrete jungle are the countless possibilities of nature hikes.



On top of Maarjamäe limestone cliffs



## #8 Pirita

A 2 kilometre long sandy beach on one side and a forest on the other side, Pirita neighbourhood is only a 15 minute bus ride away from the city centre.



Photo: Geneviève Clédél

*Forest, sand and sea*



From Pirita you may want to walk to Metsakalmistu - a cemetery in the heart of the forest, which has separate burial areas for artists, writers, composers, political figures etc. This is also where my Mother's parents rest.

Most Estonian graveyards are in fact nestled in natural forests with their moss covered gravestones scattered along the walking paths.



Photo: Geneviève Clédél

*Estonian cemetery*

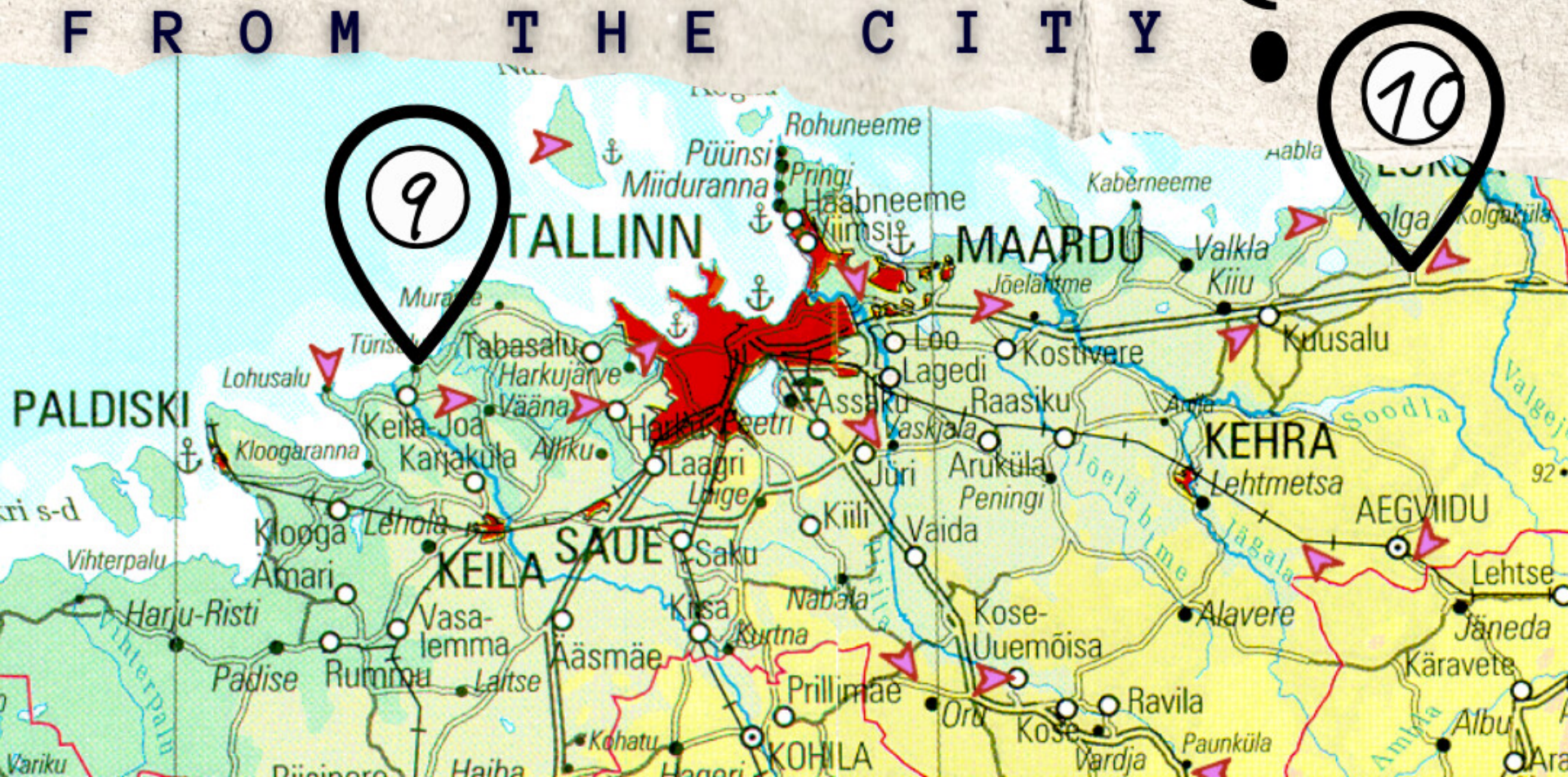






# NEED A BREAK?

FROM THE CITY





# #9 Keila-Joa

Just 20 kilometres west of Tallinn the surrounding English gardens of a 19th century manor house were the childhood playground of my brother and I.



## Life at the "dacha"

### 1- Work



### 2- Play



### 3- Relax



**TIP:** From the waterfall take the small path which goes behind the manor and follows the right bank of the Keila River. You will soon see the sea. Walk on the wild beach till reaching a small stream. A 5 minute hike up the rivulet will lead to Türisalu bus stop from where you can grab the bus back to Tallinn.

Keila-Joa and nearby Türisalu villages are dotted with tiny seasonal homes. Our rustic "dacha" is also there.



# #10 Viru raba

Follow the boardwalk

Jump in!



22% of Estonian territory is covered with bogs. Viru raba is only 50 kilometres east of Tallinn and you can easily visit it by bus. Bog water is very clean.



# Estonia - when to go ?

Although the longest days of the year are in June, if you like sunshine more than rain, consider coming to Estonia between the first week of July and mid August.

Summer is  
my favourite season.

I just hope it will  
last longer than a week  
this year!

## The 9 seasons

- |   |   |  |  |   |
|---|---|--|--|---|
| 1- Winter<br>(Dec-Jan-Feb)                    | 2- Almost spring<br>(beginning of March)        | 3- Second winter<br>(end of March-mid April) | 4- Real spring<br>(mid April-May-June) | 5- Summer, if lucky!<br>(July-mid August) |
| 6- False autumn<br>(mid August-mid September) | 7- Second summer (1 week)<br>(end of September) | 8- Autumn<br>(October)                       | 9- Mud season<br>(Nov-mid December)    |   |





THANK YOU



JULY 2025