

Xenophobe's Guide to the Estonians

By Hilary Bird, Lembit Öpik, Ulvi Mustmaa

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The Xenophobe's Guide to the Estonians is filled with clever observations and self-ironic descriptions that shed light on the Estonian soul, its uniqueness and its phobias. Here you can find our best kept secrets to piece us together. Bird, Öpik, and Mustmaa, the authors of this short book, describe the Estonian way of life with humor and wit. Okay, a hilarious read--but you may wonder, "Who are the Estonians and where is Estonia?" Some think it is somewhere in Siberia or part of Russia. No? Australia, did you say? Slovenia? On the Moon? Never heard of it.

Foes it exist? Yes, it does. "Find it underneath Finland, about the size of Denmark or Switzerland," would be a quick Estonian orientation. A land between the East and West, next to the Baltic Sea, a place where wandering tribes and invaders have passed leaving their mark on this nation of nature worshippers, who have somehow made their way into the 21st century.

While Estonia is very multicultural, with more than 120 ethnic minorities, native Estonians define nationality through language and ethnicity. *The Xenophobe's Guide to the Estonians* focuses on those who see themselves as the original Estonians. Meeting an Estonian for the first time and speaking Russian would generally not be in good taste, though you may never know if you offended your interlocutor or not. Why? Simply because Estonians have their own identity and they can be great poker players. Don't expect an Estonian to talk about their feelings openly or what is bothering him or her – the one who suffers lives longer. Estonian Russians would be a different matter but they are not under the microscope here.

Bird, Öpik, and Mustmaa review Estonian national symbols, for example, *Kalevipoeg*, the national epic and the Estonian flag's horizontal stripes of blue (top), black and white. Blue is for loyalty, the beautiful blue skies, seas, and lakes; as well as the blue peasant jacket of the past; black speaks of both oppression and fertile soil; white recalls virtue, winter snows and the light of summer nights. These colors help explain Estonian likes and experiences.

The authors address the country's past with just the most important bits, relevant for understanding how history has shaped Estonians' mentality and fears. However, I would like to add a mention of the period of the Northern Crusade battles, the ancient Estonian fight for independence, guided by the mentality, "better die fighting for freedom than live in slavery," led by Lembitu, the ancient Estonian elder of Sakala county and military leader, who tried to unite Estonians to fight the German conquest.

His death at the battle of Madisepäeva (St Matthew's Day) resulted in 700 years of servitude for Estonians, not a happy outcome. Invasions in Estonian territory spanned seven centuries during which there were only three uprisings when Estonians decided that "enough is enough." Perhaps this explains why Estonians can be masters of both patience and quiet protest, and prefer silence to going on strike. Setbacks in life are normal, yet success comes from not giving up. What counts is what's inside you. No wonder Estonians can adapt to different situations.

Throughout history Estonians had to fight with their blood relatives—might this be why one Estonian is often not good enough for another Estonian and why we find it so easy to criticize each other? People say everyone has ideas in Estonia but no one likes anybody else's—"two people, five opinions." The strength gained from the wisdom of nature, resilience and resistance allowed Estonians to survive numerous invaders and preserve their own ways of thinking, customs, beliefs and traditions. Their saving grace has been a combination of inventiveness, flexibility and tenacity.

Doris Kareva, an Estonian poet, has remarked that time in this sea-oriented culture does not flow from one place to another, but is in ceaseless arrival, an eternal murmur of the waves. *Tasa sõuad, kaugele jõuad*, "row quietly and you will travel far." And, *ikka tasa ja targu*—ever quiet and wise. Estonians dream quietly about their future and hope things will turn out for the best, but also think what might happen if they don't (if things are going well, there'll likely be a reversal of fortune).

Bird, Öpik, and Mustmaa say Estonia is a young country, though Estonians are not a young nation. Estonia may be young in the length of its first independence (1918-1940) and in the time since the restoration of independence (1991-present), but Estonians have a very old soul. Their ancestors arrived in this homeland about 10,000 years ago. There were also Estonian Vikings and the Viking soul is still hidden in many of us—and it may peek out after a few drinks!

Bird, Öpik, and Mustmaa mention that Estonian humor can be difficult to grasp—a mixture of sarcasm and self-irony, not unlike British black humor. Sometimes you must read between the lines to get the punch line. An Estonian might not joke around in a social setting, or if he or she does, it may not sound funny at all to you. A successful Estonian social evening is grilling meat with friends, singing, beer and sauna.

And the climate? Well, Estonians live by the seasons with each serving a purpose. Summer is lovely—the time when Estonians are transformed, taking full advantage of long summer nights.

At the other extreme, be prepared for cold, icy roads and early darkness in winter months when many hibernate or at least become more inward-looking.

Home is best. The Estonian ideal is a private house not far from the city but near the forest or the sea. About ten years ago a new residential area on the outskirts of Tallinn became known as the “village of fools.” Villas were planted on windswept plains with a sea view, but their upkeep cost a fortune. Their owners were the first Estonian *nouveau riche* who wanted to show off what they had. In Estonian, every foolish person has his or her own joy, but wisdom is appreciated over money and a wise person thinks before acting.

You can be quite confident that whenever you meet an Estonian they’ll be pondering how you size them up and whether they should say this or that about themselves. This illustrates the Estonian self-consciousness, aversion to conflict and beating themselves up with what others might think of them. Less than 9% of Estonians attend church once a month or more, the lowest ranking in Europe. But then again Estonians are really Earth believers deep down. Everyone will have their own judgment day. There is an Estonian saying, *Loll saab kirikus ka peksa*—a silly person gets beaten up in church too.

Bird, Öpik, and Mustmaa describe the Estonian language with humorous grammatical descriptions and examples of pronunciation. If you think Estonian is related to Russian, Lithuanian or Latvian, think again. It is a difficult language to learn, but as with any language, anyone can learn it. Some older folk say that at one time the Estonian language won second place after Italian in a beauty contest with the sentence "*Sõida tasa üle silla*" (Go slowly over the bridge).

Titles are not so important in Estonia – after all, most Estonians don’t feel comfortable being in the spotlight or being made a fuss of. However, respect for the elderly and for those in higher positions is expected, which doesn’t mean Estonians like hierarchy. An Estonian might not tell you that you have made a social gaffe—but you may need to get the silent message.

“So if others tell you to put your head in the oven, you’ll do it?!” “Keep your mouth shut in the cold weather or you’ll catch cold.” These are proverbial lectures Estonian children are likely to get at home. The point is to think for yourself and always think before you act. If an Estonian tells you to “mind your own business,” don’t think of it as an offense, but just as a word of wise advice.

What is life like in Estonia today? Have you heard of e-Estonia, digital prescriptions, e-elections, skype? It is a wired world! Economically, however, many Estonians have “borrowed themselves to death” and will be financial slaves for the rest of their lives, trying to keep up with the Western (largely USA) model and with their richest neighbors. All too many have gone abroad to taste something different. Agriculture has lost much of its importance (mostly due to EU directives and quotas) and currently makes up only about 8% of the country’s industry.

There is concern about losing *Estonianism* and a dose of intolerance is lurking inside many Estonians. Integration of immigrants (a two-way process, by the way) is a painful topic as not all settlers from Soviet times have fully integrated. This is even more worrisome in light of EU policies and newly arriving immigrants. The darkest scenario suggests that native Estonians become the minority in their own land and eventually cease to exist. On the other hand, their perseverance and adaptability to live side by side other nationalities in the past may help them survive and go on for centuries to come. Estonians seem to be on the road, carrying the past with them, looking for better ways and taking risks, if they dare, hoping to find what they are looking for without losing touch with their souls and that indefinable quality that makes them really happy inside—*ilo*.

The Xenophobe's Guide to the Estonians is a recommended read for foreigners dealing with Estonians, those planning a trip to Estonia, or those just eager to find out more about us. It's a great gift for Estonians who have a good sense of humor, as well as giving the unknowing reader a decent portrait of us—an interesting and enjoyable way to learn something new about a piece of the world that too few can locate on the map. Even if you have no connection to this land, it will engage your curiosity!