



## Visiting the Baltics – Estonia (E18A-3)

My third stop on a trip through the Baltics was Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, for a four-night stay. Estonia is on the Baltic Sea, located between Latvia and Russia, just across the Gulf of Finland from Finland. The area that includes Estonia was home to a handful of Baltic tribes who became targets of Teutonic Order Christian crusaders intent on Christianizing them. These Baltic Germans, as they came to be called, for centuries generally governed what became Estonia even as Denmark, Sweden, Poland-Lithuania and eventually the Russian Empire ruled the land.

Estonia gained its independence at the end of WWI when the Russian Empire collapsed, but it fought a two-year war of independence against the Soviet Union. In 1939 the Nazis and Soviet Union signed a treaty that gave them spheres of influence in eastern Europe. After installing a puppet government in Estonia, Estonia joined the Soviet Union, beginning 50 years of Soviet and Nazi occupation. The Nazis occupied Estonia during WWII, but the Soviets regained control near the end of the war.

Estonia declared its independence from the Soviet Union in August 20, 1991. Since then, Estonia has built close ties with Western Europe, joining the European Union, NATO and the Schengen Agreement. Estonia has about 1.3 million people, about a third of whom live in Tallinn. Ethnic Russians comprise a significant minority of the population.

The heart of Tallinn is its historic city center, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It consists of the medieval Old Town, which still has most of its city walls and wall towers, and Toompea, or Castle Hill, a mesa on the edge of the medieval city from which the rulers historically governed.

I took a sightseeing day trip to get to Tallinn from Riga, Latvia, making a couple stops in Estonia along the way. Most of my Tallinn sightseeing focused on Toompea, the medieval city and the Kalamaja neighborhood.

On the sightseeing drive that I took from Riga, Latvia to Tallinn, Estonia, our first stop in Estonia was at the Valga Military Theme Park in the border town of Valga. It was more or less a collection of Estonian military and war-related memorabilia, and it also had a small collection of items related to the Soviet occupation of Estonia.



A device used by the KGB to steam open envelopes.



Our next stop was in Viljandi, where we saw the ruins of the castle of the Teutonic Order, the Baltic Germans who took over, Christianized, and governed much of present-day Latvia and Estonia, even as the area was controlled by other regional powers.

The fortress that included the castle spanned three hilltops. The area is now a park.



On the grounds of the park is this traditional swing. In rural village festivities young men and women were introduced on the swing – explaining why many Estonian couples first met as swingers.



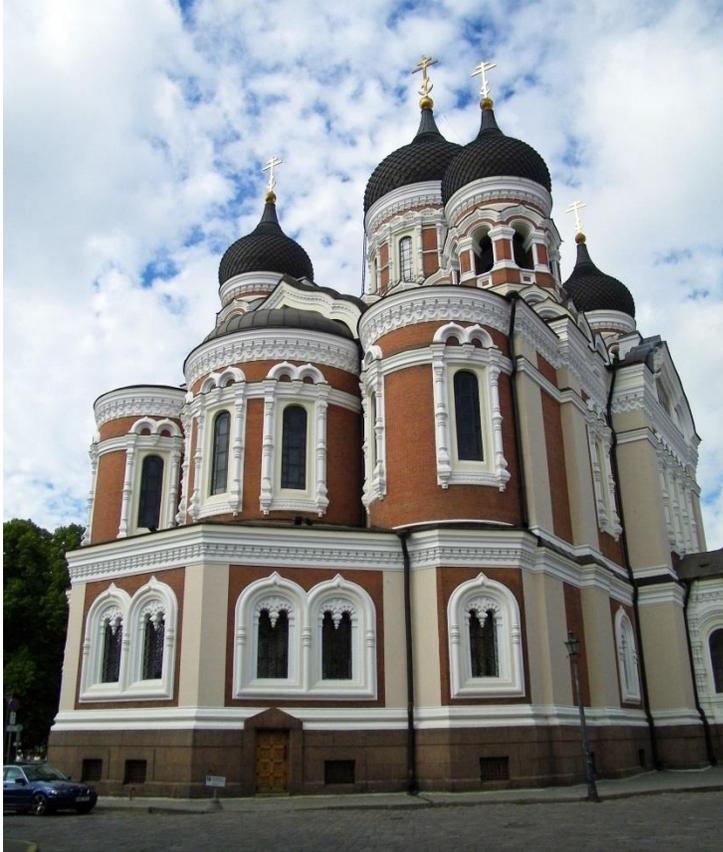
Late day sun catches St. John's Church in Viljandi. Its origins date back to the 1400s, but it was rebuilt a number of times. During the Soviet occupation it was used as a warehouse. Today it is used as a concert hall.

I began my exploration of Tallinn by heading up to Toompea, an area built on top of a 17-acre mesa that rises as much as 80 feet above Tallinn’s medieval city. A stronghold was first built here about 1000 years ago. When Danish crusaders took over northern Estonia including Tallinn, they built a new castle here. Castles, a cathedral and fortifications helped make Toompea the center of power for Estonia. The medieval city that developed down below Toompea was legally distinct from Toompea, so different laws governed the two communities.

When Estonia became part of the Russian Empire, Toompea was all but abandoned, but eventually it got some attention. Part of the castle was refurbished for use as a government administration building. In the late 1800s, the Russian Orthodox Alexander Nevsky Cathedral was built on Toompea during a period of “Russification” of Estonia, its prominent location making it visible from the harbor.



Toompea Castle, now the seat of the Estonian Parliament



The Russian Orthodox Alexander Nevsky Cathedral



Garden of the Danish King. According to legend, during Danish King Valdemar II's invasion, the Danish flag fell from the sky here, inspiring the king and his army to complete their mission.



Kiek in de Kõk Tower, part of Toompea's fortifications, and now home to the Fortifications Museum.



"The Rack", on display in the Fortifications Museum. Even in medieval times, they appreciated the value of a good stretch before exercise.

Oh. Correction. "...before execution".



View from Kiek in de Kök Tower of what was once the Executioner's house.



St. Mary's Cathedral is believed to be the oldest church not only in Tallinn but in mainland Estonia. It was originally established by the Danes in the early 1200s.



View of the medieval Old Town from Toompea. Some of the Old Town's fortifications, including a handful of towers and St. Olaf's Church tower, can be seen here.



Another view from Toompea, including St. Olaf's Church tower and the Church of the Holy Spirit tower.

Now down the hill to Tallinn's Old Town....



Old Town Hall, on Town Hall Square, was completed in 1404. Tallinn's city government met here until 1970. Today it houses a museum on the history of the town hall.



A pharmacy on Town Hall Square. A pharmacy has continuously operated in these premises at least since 1422. It also includes a small exhibit of medicines and other items that the pharmacy has sold over the centuries.



Morning view of Town Hall Square



Evening view of Town Hall Square.

In between morning and evening, Town Hall Square was packed with cruise ship passengers looking for food and souvenirs.



Interior of the Church of the Holy Spirit. It is first mentioned in written records in 1319.



St. Olaf's Church, dedicated to King Olaf II of Norway, dates back to 1267 in written records, although some believe that it may predate Toompea's St. Mary's Cathedral. Originally a Catholic Church, it became Lutheran during the Reformation, and then Baptist in 1950. From 1944 until the end of the Soviet occupation of Estonia, the KGB used its spire as a radio tower and surveillance post.



The Great Guild was a guild for merchants and artisans. It started in the late 1300s, and operated until 1920.

It was based in this building, the Great Guild Hall, which was built in the early 1400s.

Today the hall houses the so-so Estonian History Museum.



Great Guild Hall door knocker



Near the Great Guild Hall is the House of the Brotherhood of Black Heads. This was once the headquarters of the Brotherhood of Blackheads, a professional organization of merchants and ship owners.

The association dates back to the 1300s, and acquired the building in the 1500s.

The association was based here until 1940, when members fled to Germany when the Soviets occupied the Baltic states.



Maiasmokk is the oldest operating café in Estonia, dating back to 1864 in this facility, and to 1806 overall.

Today it specializes in coffees, pastries, desserts and candies. The café also features a small exhibit on the history and uses of marzipan.



St. Nicholas' Church was originally built in the 1200s. It was partially destroyed by Soviet bombing in WWII. The restored church now is home to a branch of the Art Museum of Estonia that focuses on religious art.



While checking out its hours of operation one morning, I had this strange feeling that I was being watched.



The Old Town's medieval city walls



The Old Town's medieval city walls at Towers Square



A tribute to Russian president Boris Yeltsin, whose political activities inside the Soviet Union helped the Baltic states achieve their independence and led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.



From the 1300s through the 1700s, this round house was a horse-powered mill. Sixteen horses were used to turn the mill during periods when available water power was insufficient.



A marker describes the warehouse history of this building, and then briefly notes that the house next door was the former city residence of Peter the Great, the Russian tsar who officially established and greatly expanded the Russian Empire.



The one-time home of famous Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky, who lived here in 1840.



St. Catherine's Dominican Monastery and church, one of the oldest surviving buildings in Tallinn. Much of the monastery was destroyed during the Reformation in 1524.





Model of the fortified Toompea (upper left) and lower town, representing Tallinn in 1825, on display in the Tallinn City Museum.



Vana Toomas, or Old Thomas, one of the symbols and guardian of Tallinn. This weathervane once was mounted on the Old Town Hall's spire, standing watch over Tallinn.



As in Vilnius, Lithuania and Riga, Latvia, during the Soviet occupation, the KGB maintained jails, interrogation centers and prisons for political prisoners. This is one of the jail cells, now part of the KGB Prison Cells Museum.



This wooden cupboard was an isolation unit. It was too small to allow someone held inside to sit down, let alone lie down.

Once prisoners held here were (almost inevitably) convicted, many were sent to Patarei Prison, a couple miles away in Tallinn's Kalamaja neighborhood.



Houses and shopping stalls built along the inside of Old Town's city wall.





The old city walls and Viru Gate, which provides an entrance into the walled Old Town. The road leads to the Town Hall Square.



Had I visited Tallinn during the years of the Soviet occupation, like most foreigners I likely would have stayed here at Hotel Viru, across from Viru Gate.

The hotel had a hidden KGB radio center used to eavesdrop and spy on hotel guests. After the end of Soviet occupation, sixty of the guest rooms and several tables in the hotel restaurant were found to have had concealed espionage and eavesdropping devices.

One can only imagine what Russian surveillance might have recorded when some American politician or famous businessman stayed in one of their hotels.

The former radio center is now a museum.



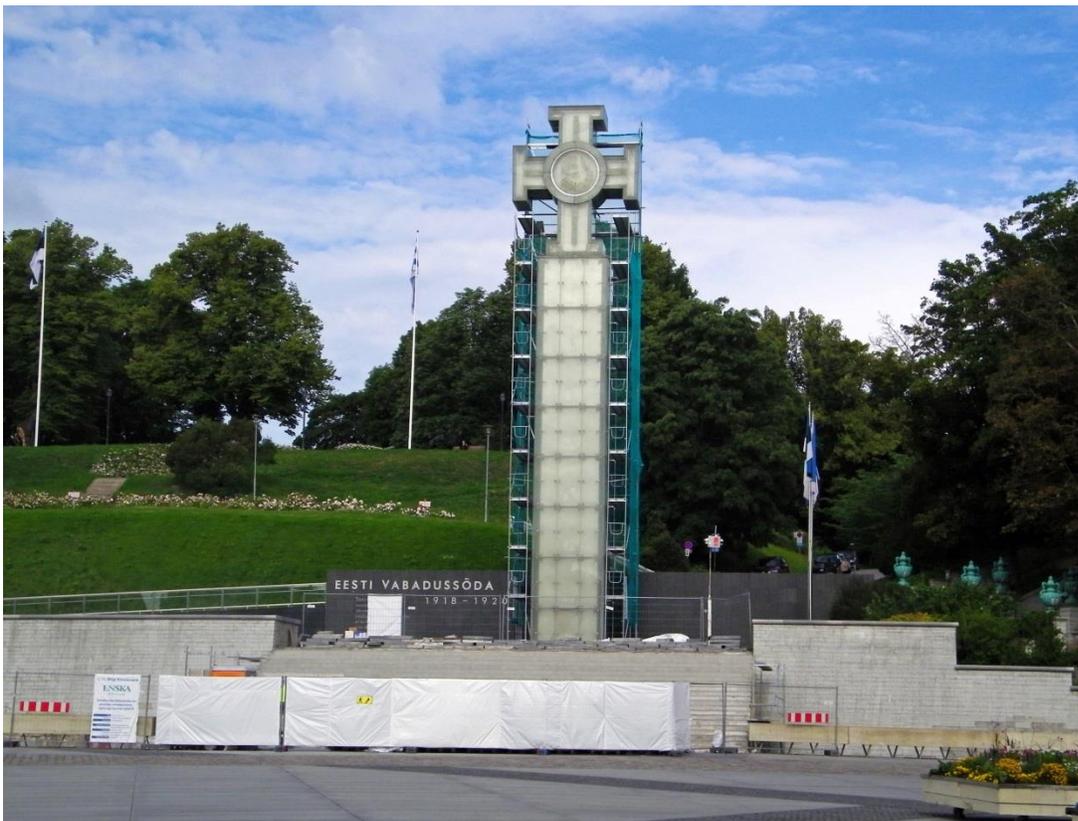
I took a walk through some neighborhoods outside Tallinn's historic center, including the Kalamaja neighborhood. This included exploring the grounds of what was once Patarei Prison. It was originally built as a coastal fortress in the 1800s. It was later used as a barracks before it was converted to a prison in 1920. The Nazis executed some Estonian Jews here, but the Nazis generally did not use Patarei for mass executions. When the Soviet Union reoccupied Estonia, it housed and persecuted numerous political prisoners at Patarei.



Estonia is heavily wooded. There are numerous older wooden buildings in Kalamaja.



The Balti Jamma market in Kalamaja



The 1918 Independence Monument (undergoing refurbishment) on Freedom Square



Cruise ships on Baltic Sea tours dock in Tallinn and dump thousands of tourists just a short walk from Old Town. From mid-morning to early evening the souvenir shops and restaurants of Old Town and Toompea were packed with cruise tourists, obscuring the city center's charm that they presumably came to Tallinn to see.



These cruise ship tourists stare in awe at Toompea Castle in front of them, which they traveled halfway around the world to see.

Or not.



After finishing my 13 days exploring the Baltic states, I boarded a ferry and left for Helsinki, Finland. This view of Tallinn through the ferry window includes the towers of St. Nicholas' (left) and St. Olaf's (right) Churches, and Alexander Nevsky Russian Orthodox Cathedral (near left).