

BLOG PART 4

Michael and Norma's camper travels in Europe 2014

ESTONIA

Tuesday 8 July

On entering Estonia from Latvia we bypassed the coastal resort town of Parnu but endured some of its dismal suburbs. More rural travel then, until finally we got to Virtsu, a kind of non-place except that it is the ferry terminal for the trip across to the islands of Saaremaa and Muhu, to the west of mainland Estonia. The one-way ferry ticket cost €12.90, which we thought was quite a good price.

The ferry seemed like quite a big ship until we saw the identical one coming the other way! Took about 20 minutes to make the crossing in flat calm. Had some vague plans for camping on the island where the ferries dock, Muhu, but it was really too early to stop so we pressed on over the causeway to the big island, Saaremaa. Generally well-surfaced road the whole way, and a few prosperous-looking villages and flourishing farms.

Just as for all the other western shores and islands of the Baltic States, during the Soviet era these Estonian outliers were important to the occupiers for strategic and communications reasons. Access to Saaremaa and Muhu was very restricted, even to residents, which goes a long way to explain the lack of obvious, let alone large scale, development. What development there is, is primarily in new dwelling places in the villages and the expansion of tourist facilities in the "capital" town of Kuressaare. Driving between the settlements, mostly the flat scenery is confined to yet more forests of pine and birch, and healthy-looking farmland.



One deviation was interesting. This was to the place where somewhere between 3,500 and 7,600 years ago the earth here was blasted by the divided remnants of an enormous iron meteorite. The biggest part still weighed 20-80 tonnes and was about 3-6 metres in diameter. This bit hit the ground at about 15 km per second, which (if correct) converts to over 50,000 km/h, and the resultant energy released was bomb-like. It blasted a hole 15-20 metres deep and set alight the countryside for kilometres around. The crater can be visited, and is now a circular lake up to 100 metres wide

depending on the amount of recent rain and ice-melt deposit. There are several smaller craters in the area, about nine within a square kilometre, all caused by other bits of the meteorite as it disintegrated when entering our atmosphere.

We had in mind a camp site in the official literature held to be part of a spa hotel complex near the marina at the island's principal town, Kuressaare. However, while the hotel was all too prominent the camp site appeared to have been absorbed into the several new spa-hotel developments and we pressed on south to a site recommended by the manager of the one we had so recently liked and left in Latvia. (When we later returned to the town, we did find the site, but it was just a fenced-off part of a hotel car park, designated for motorhomes and provided with power points.)

The site we did finally come to was in the location of Temuhardi and looked fine, except that our visit had coincided with that of no fewer than 18 British motorhomes on an organised tour, which had occupied all the best spots. We were getting too used to quiet and near-empty sites! Still, we had a chat in English with one of the group, always a pleasant change.

Estonia seemed to us so far as a very well-developed place, much more so than the Baltic states now to our south, and we now turned to reviewing the history of the place as the sun again sank slowly sideways into the sea.

Obviously, Estonia shares much recent history with its two neighbour states to the south. In ancient times, however, it is held that its original settlement was by Finno-Ugric tribes unconnected with the southern tribes. Tribal life continued until the Bishop of Riga established in 1202 the crusading Knights of the Sword (the Livonian Order) to Christianise by conquest, whereby the south fell to the Knights and the north to Denmark. Then another band of German crusaders, the Teutonic Order, purchased northern Estonia from Denmark. By 1620 Estonia had fallen to the Swedes, but following the Great Northern War Estonia became part of the Russian Empire in 1721. This succession of repressive and authoritarian regimes fostered a sense of self-awareness and nationalism, and the feudal system died along with improved education and land rights.

Wednesday 9 July

The Poms all went pretty early, so the site then looked deserted! Relaxed start, and we first returned to Kuressaare to take a proper look at the town and, in particular, the castle. The town exists because of this exceptionally well-preserved castle, founded in the 13th century as the Bishop of Haapsalu's stronghold in the island part of his diocese. The limestone dolomite fortress that exists today was not built until the 14th century along European lines, with more bastions and outer defences added over the next few hundred years. In the 16th and 17th centuries it was the centre of Danish and Swedish power in Saaremaa, becoming an important trading centre. Following the Northern War it became a Russian fortress.



Within the several layers of the immense keep there is a labyrinthine museum, almost impossible to follow along the lines suggested in the leaflet; a coherent story, therefore, is hard to follow. The best English signage is in the last part of the museum, the post-WW2 section sponsored by the EU, where an (understandably) anti-Soviet propagandist tone colours the quite interesting displays of life under Soviet domination.



We then cut north across Saaremaa island, with a stop at Angla on the top of what in these parts is called a hill, where there is an interesting array of traditional wooden windmills. There are now four left from the original nine. Three date back to the 19th century, square in shape, of the kind that require the whole structure to be turned on a turntable base in accordance with the wind. The fourth is the later, Dutch-style more efficient kind, where the rotation is at the top and affects the blades only. It is possible to explore inside

two of them and view what looks like the complicated system of wooden gearing that links the rotation of the horizontal blade shaft with the vertical movement of the system that drives the grindstones. Interesting to nerds like me, anyway!

Nearby there is a fortress-like 14th century church, a white-washed, spare building with some intriguing external carvings that depict their souls emerging from the mouths of a dying good man and a bad one, being whisked off to heaven and hell respectively. Nearer the coast we paid a short visit to an old fishing village, now a long way from the sea, which has supposedly been preserved as it was – but it was not inspiring, a bit of a tourist trap we thought, with none of the flavour of the fishing village it once was.



Our final visit in Saaremaa was to the remains of a castle built by the German knights during the 14th to the 16th centuries. Under Danish occupation it was destroyed to prevent the Swedes taking it over, leaving a mound for later exploration by archeologists. The remains have been partially exposed, with excavations exposing a cool system of underground chambers. From the top of the mound there is a lovely view of the sea between Saaremaa and Muhu islands,

with the shallows and reeds making home for hundreds of seabirds.

Back over the causeway, then, to Muhu and a pleasant little campsite that we shared with several cyclists and a motorcyclist, but no other vans.

Thursday 10 July

Took the ferry back to Virtsu. On the approach to the mainland the vast displays of wind turbines became apparent from north to south. Just to the north of Virtsu is the important Matsalu National Park, encompassing a long bay deep into the west coast, a prime migration and breeding ground for Baltic and European birds. Some 282 different bird species have been identified here, and it has been nominated as a RAMSAR wetland site of international importance. We found it incredible that, while Estonia (and the Baltic states generally) have not festooned the most attractive parts of their countryside with wind turbines, they chose to plant a so-called wind “farm” of these bird-killing machines right in the path of countless migrating flocks.



We then embarked on a longish and not always easy drive across to the central southern part of the country, starting on an anticlockwise loop that would in a few days take us into Tallinn – our final destination in Estonia – from the east.

We crossed wide wetlands, being on the fringe of the Soomaa National Park, a boggy area of swamps, meadows and waterside woodlands which almost completely floods during the early spring, when the ice melts. The wooded parts of this environment and similar areas throughout the country were the home of the Forest Brothers, a post-WW2 underground movement fiercely resisting the Soviet occupation through sabotage and the killing of Soviet troops. The Soviet response was deportation of group members and their supporters, culminating in 1949 with the

mass deportation of 20,000 mostly women, children and the elderly who had provided the Brothers – the Metsavendlus – with succour and support.

After this cross-country trek, much of it on minor and often gravel roads (although better and less washboarded than some we have encountered in the Baltics), we came to the delightful town of Viljandi. We knew of no camp sites in the area, although we were subsequently told of one just off the main road from the north leading into town. We also knew of one a little further east. But in any event we simply parked on a small road just outside the big Castle Park, within which lay a sight we had come to see, the ruins of a German crusader castle.



This immense fortress, with a huge keep and at least two outer baileys, is strategically positioned on the top of what is a high hill by Baltic standards. It was founded by the German Knights of the Sword in 1224 and became an important trading post and member of the Hanseatic League. It was destroyed by the Swedish army in 1620 and never rebuilt. Many of its building bricks were used to construct the town. We wandered through the wide expanse

of ruins, now wisely being stabilised rather than any effort being made to reconstruct the whole edifice. On a lovely afternoon we could enjoy the view down the valley of the Raudna river, which widens into a the beautiful Lake Viljandi under the town.

There was more to see in the town, including many old wooden buildings, a nicely repainted water tower, the old market square and some old churches. We called in at the good Tourist Info Centre and asked about the festival of ancient music, which we knew was held around the middle of July. Yes, it's on now, said the helpful lady, and gave us a festival leaflet that identified two concerts to be held that very evening. We resolved to go to one of these and stay the night in the van in the town somewhere. Returning to our camper we noticed that the church right opposite to where we were parked had a sign outside, giving notice of yet another concert there. So we could simply walk across to it after dinner. That doesn't happen often!



The concert, as it happened, which included early sacred choral music, was very much to our taste. And the setting was wonderful: St John's church, gleaming white in the setting sun, was originally part of a 15th century Franciscan abbey. Following the Reformation it became a Lutheran church, and the Soviets turned it into a furniture warehouse of all things. Well rescued and restored in modern times it is simple and unadorned inside in Lutheran style, which does wonders for its acoustics, which are marvellously suited to the *a capella* singing we were to enjoy.

The singers were the Collegium Musicale chamber choir, led by Endrik Uksvarav, and in my inexpert opinion were of world-class standard. After a few short introductory pieces, including a lovely solo *benedictus* by the leader himself, the first of the two major works was a motet by J H Schein, "*Israelsbrunlein*". We were unfamiliar with both the composer and the music, but it certainly had Lutheran overtones. The major piece, which we do

have in our collection, was Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli*, which was heartbreakingly gorgeous when sung in such an intimate setting.



Afterwards, we simply wandered back across the road to bed.

Friday 11 July

Not that we had a completely peaceful night – parks are where young men and a few women come in their cars to gather late at night and into the early hours to talk and laugh and have fun, and I suppose we can't blame them for disturbing us!

The park alongside us was backed by one of the great manor houses of Estonia, Viljandi Manor, now obviously empty and in need of care and attention. In front of the manor there is a black stone memorial "to the victims of Soviet oppression", unveiled in 1991 on the 50th anniversary of the first mass deportation in Estonia, when nearly 10,000 people of the Viljandi county were executed or sent off to the Gulag.

An interesting side note, demonstrating the complexity of the evolving situation of the time, is that there is in Viljandi a graveyard for German soldiers killed in WW2. Maybe the reason lies in this. Estonia had capitulated to the Russians as first of the three Baltic States in 1940, and yielded to Soviet demands. Following the Soviet deportations, Estonians greeted the Germans as liberators, and in return the Germans accepted that Estonians were racially superior to the other Baltic people. Estonians killed all the Estonian Jews they could find, under German orders, as well as about 5,000 non-Jewish Estonians for ostensible collaboration with the Soviets. Thus arise the horrors of one occupation and subjugation following another.



On the road again, but first to a Rimi hypermarket on the northern edge of the town, a very good shop and stock-up. Then east on a major road, off which we took a small deviation for lunch by a lovely little river. It was such a nice place, and the weather was so balmy, we took the chairs out and had a restful couple of hours reading in the sunshine.

It was then a short run to our intended destination, a small camp site on the shore of Lake Vortjarv. What we hadn't realised in our sheltered lunchtime spot was that the cool

northerly wind was really cracking in, and the lakeside was fully exposed to it. We were the only camper, though, in what is really a B-and-B place with cabins as well, and we tucked into a spot in the lee of an old wooden boatshed as the wind swooshed through the trees in the park that is an integral part of the camp. We are noticing that English is not so much spoken here, in these regions where tourism is hardly a major contributor to the economy yet. We think the manager understood

that we would probably stay a couple of nights. The various determinants of this decision were too complicated to discuss!

Saturday 12 July

Peaceful night, and the wind died down a bit. But for the first time in a week, the skies carried a layer of grey cloud and the air was cool. Walked around the precinct that includes the camp and several new cottages, and some beautiful gardens for fruit and vegetables. There are two little harbours, with a sailing boat that takes out groups (and we saw out sailing yesterday, in very splashy conditions), and a few small fishing vessels that lay out tubular fish traps.

The large precinct was clearly under substantial development, including a hotel and function centre and was not the simple little camp site we had expected. Motorhomes are not at all well catered for, with extremely limited facilities and only four dedicated spaces which were being used as car parks for the cottages. There was no wi-fi access, very unusual in this country.

For us, another unusual feature was that the only shower (and the only toilet) was part of the sauna, a unisex facility with two shower heads and no door lock. We supposed you would have to see the operation in use to determine the appropriate etiquette!

Otherwise, the day was spent reading and researching the rest of Estonia.

Sunday 13 July

Away from a site that was very pleasant in terms of environment and situation, but lacking in that new developments are not attuned to motorhomes.

Pleasant morning run through attractive countryside round the top of the lake and east towards Tartu. Cut south on approach to the town to visit the Eesti Lennundusmuseum, or Estonian Aviation Museum. This was an unexpectedly interesting display of aircraft (for aircraft nuts anyway), predominantly of fighter and fighter-bomber planes used by Warsaw Pact nations during the Cold War era. They are all very well displayed, each one in its own hangar under "canvas" on steel frames.



No fewer than 11,496 examples of the MiG 21 "Fishbed" fighter were produced between 1959 and 1985. This single-seat Mach 2 aircraft was used by 45 states during its life, commonly in conflict. It was built not only in the USSR but also in Czechoslovakia, India and China. It is one of the most successful combat aircraft of all time. Its more sophisticated cousin was the MiG 23 "Flogger", a swing-wing fighter, in service between 1967 and 1985, with over 5,000 built and in service with 15 states. Another swing-wing of significance was the 1969-1990 Suhoi Su-22M4, a two-seat fighter-bomber like the F111, nearly 3,000 built and widely exported. The Saab Viggen and Draken were also

featured, and I was pleased to see an F104, in service 1958-2004, one of the most dramatically beautiful and long-lasting jet aircraft of all time.

Then up to Tartu. This, in the end, was a bit of a disaster. Tartu is a university town with some stately buildings and many old wooden ones. It had no other particular interest for us, except that in the mid-1800s it became the focus for Estonian nationalism and is where a peace treaty was signed with Russia which granted the country independence for the first time in 1920. The first problem was that on this Sunday there was some major celebration going on in the centre of town and many of the roads were blocked off. The second was that many of the roads that were open were being dug up. The result was that both we (i.e. Norma and her map) and Tomtom Kate became totally disorientated and lost in our search for a little guesthouse with some camper parking that was on our list. We did finally locate it, but – sort of inevitably, by this time – we were politely informed on arrival that campers had not been accommodated for over two years. (This will also have disappointed the French motorhome that pulled up there shortly after us.)

We thought of staying in a huge nearby car park, but it did not look inviting and there were tell-tale tyre doughnuts on the surface, so we took to the road again. We set off further to the north-east, towards the vast inland sea that is Lake Peipus. The River Narva drains from the north end of the lake through to the town of Narva, and both the river and the lake form part of the border between Estonia and Russia. Where we reached the western shore the lake is about 50 km wide. We passed a few camping possibilities, but a tourist booklet we had picked up pictured a nice-looking place right on the shore. After trekking down yet another dirt road we came to a basic and very small site, part of a little holiday complex based on an old postal station and border guard post built in 1711, the Aard Villa guesthouse. This would do, we decided, and we were the only van there.

The western shores of Lake Peipus are the home of those who remain from the True Believers, a breakaway Orthodox sect who were persecuted for refusing to accept 17th century liturgical reforms. They are supposed to grow exceptionally fine onions, but this is not fresh onion season, so the several roadside stalls were not occupied.

Monday 14 July

We enjoyed the most peaceful night we have had for ages! We drove up then along the lakeside road before diverting north towards the far north-east of the country and the border city of Narva.

Narva is separated from Ivangorod in Russia by the River Narva and its people are 95% Russian. The city has always been on an important trade route, sitting at it does on the divide between Western (Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox) civilisations, and has always been at the centre of destructive border disputes. Driving towards the end of the main street we were confronted by yellow signs indicating “No Entry” or “Border Control” at the end of the main square. There was also a large and



nearly empty car park, from which we could easily walk to Hermann Castle, the main object of our visit.



The original castle was built by the Danes in the 13th century, and with its matching (but far from twin) castle across the river comprises a unique ensemble. It has been restored after bomb damage in WW2, and the tower includes a museum with presentations of varying interest as you climb up storey by storey. At the top

there is a splendid view across the river to the Russian castle on the other side – and the view includes the queue of vehicles on the Russian side that stretches out of sight over the hill in Russia. That queue did not move one single vehicle (trying to get to Estonia) during the two hours or so we were at the castle.

In a yard off the castle they have reproduced what might have been a 17th century village, with artisans of all kinds of skills working with wool, wood and iron. It is well done, and we even shelled out some money on souvenirs, which is rare for us tight-wallets! Walking out back to the van, we came across one of the few statues of Lenin still standing.

We then drove up the western side of the river to the sea, where Russian mansions were supposed to overlook the local Riviera. But it was impossible to get a view of the sea (here, the Gulf of Finland) because of closed roads and high fences, Russki style. So we continued on west, with a diversion slightly inland to the settlement of Sinimae.

There is a little war museum there, which the tourist booklet said described the history of Narva and its place in 1944 and thereafter, but it was shut (Monday!). But as we walked away, disappointed but not surprised, a lady (the manager) came across and said she would open up for us. That turned out to be a treat, because she turned out to be an excellent English speaker who had grown up in the region during the Soviet era as a good Communist, then was involved in student uprisings during the great changes, and with whom we could discuss history and the present situation in NE Estonia.

She described through a diagram on the wall how the Russians had invaded across the river in 1944 but were held off by the Germans, one of the last successful defensive actions of the German army in those days. (Later, of course, the Russians continued their inexorable advance.)

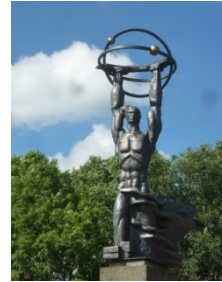
When the Russians took over as the result of the post-war political settlements, many Russian industrial workers and their families moved in and many Estonians were displaced world wide – including to Australia, she stressed. The now predominantly Russian population has not been popular for its failure to integrate, its use and teaching of the Russian language, and its religious affiliation with the Orthodox rather than the Protestant faith. Thus, the orientation of the Estonian people like her was to the north (Finland) and to the west (the EU), rather than to the east. Nevertheless her son, a power station engineer, had to learn Russian to speak to his workers. On being asked, do you talk about, or worry over, the situation in Ukraine and its possible implications, she instantly responded, “all the time!”

Moving a little further east we made yet another diversion, this time to Sillamae, a most intriguing place. Its history is intimately bound up with the oil shale industry of the region, and the related extraction and processing of uranium found in minute quantities in shale oil. The discovery of uranium in the country's main industrial product was obviously of massive interest to the USSR in the immediate post-war period, and 5,000 Russian political prisoners were brought in to build a uranium processing and nuclear chemicals factory. The town of Sillamae was built to house Soviet workers in standard Russki apartment blocks in the outskirts, while the centre was designed by Leningrad architects and built by Baltic prisoners of war for the Soviet elite managers and directors.

It was all very secret for a long while, and the town didn't even have an official name during the peak of the paranoia.



This "new town" is therefore a monument to grand Soviet neoclassical architecture and, to our eyes, was very attractive. The cultural centre looks like a Greek temple, and oversees a magnificent terraced stairway down towards the Baltic. Opposite is the pink town hall, absurdly – given the Soviet aversion to religion - topped by a spire to look like a Lutheran church. In a green and flowery park is a statue of a muscular man proudly holding aloft a model of an atom. The Russian intention was to develop the plant to produce nuclear-ready uranium, but the collapse of the USSR and the independence of Estonia brought all this to a halt. The country, with the help of the EU, is still now cleaning up what is left of these operations and halting the seepage of radioactive waste into the sea, all at huge cost.



The camp site for the night was one built as part of a hotel-spa complex in the coastal settlement of Toila. It had good facilities compared to a few we had recently visited, and we could see the sea through the trees. It was, however, extremely crowded when we arrived, as a large group of German motorhomes on a guided tour had taken a large proportion of available spaces, all in the best spots of course.

Tuesday 15 July

By the time we got up the next morning we were pleased to see the group had left. We decided to stay the day and another night, and moved very to a pleasant spot where they had been.

Caught up with several jobs during the day, and took a walk down a flight of steep stairs to the stony beach. This escarpment extends along the north-east Estonian coast, and is called the "klint" from the layers of minerals in the sandstone face. There is a little port along the beach a way, with a handful of tired-looking fishing boats. We don't think there's much fishing done here these days.

Had a glass of wine in the evening with a Swiss couple next to us, going in the opposite direction, so we swapped ideas on places to visit and stay.

Wednesday 16 July

The weather has continued changeable, and yesterday's generally clear skies were interrupted in the late afternoon by a thunderstorm and cool change. But the early morning was fine again.

Out and along to the west along fairly open countryside, first passing the district of Kohtla-Jarve. This is the centre of the north-east Estonian shale oil industry. Shale oil, used as fuel for power stations, is massively important to Estonians and their economy. Some three-quarters of Estonia's total energy comes from burning shale oil, and is unique in the world in this regard. The oil-extraction process also produces gas, large amounts of which are shipped by pipeline from Kohtla-Jarve to St

Petersburg. The power generation capacity in Estonia also allows it to supply most of the requirements of Latvia and parts of north-west Russia.

The major deposits of shale are mined here, and it is possible to take a tour of one of the closed mines, although that did not attract us. The industry is also a huge employer, mostly of Russian workers who were originally transported in by the USSR. It does pose environmental threats, however, which are being addressed: groundwater pollution from the mining, and sulphur dioxide emissions from the power stations.

The view from the road of the oil-refining industry, with tall chimneys and slag heaps of unwanted limestone, coupled with the heavy Soviet nature of the buildings and plant, is not attractive, but no-one could expect it to be. No country is wholly a picture postcard, and affordable energy is extremely important to the people of Estonia and their rapidly expanding economy, one of the most successful in the world in recent years.

A by-product is what's left of the shale after extraction of the oil is used to make cement. A little further up the main road we took a deviation to Kunda, with a massive and quite modern-looking cement works. Scattered around are many ruined remnants of older works and chimneys.



Then down for a fun visit to the medieval castle of Rakvere, built by the Danes in the 14th century and taken over during following centuries by the various invaders that have seized bits of the Baltic States over time. It is largely a ruin, but part of the original keep overlooks a large northern court. This has been fitted out as it might have been, with artisans in their cubicles

all around, stabling for horses and other animals, and sheep wandering around. We even bought a beautiful and most unusual shawl or wrap from a young woman using a local technique. Visitors are encouraged to dress in medieval garb at the entrance (although few adults do!), and join in with archery and lance contests, mock parades and other charades. It's all a bit Disney, but taken in the right spirit it brings a smile to the face – until they fire one of the guns when you're not expecting it! There are a few little museums in the keep, one featuring tartan, commemorating the deaths of Scottish soldiers in some medieval battle here.



Back towards the coast we called in to see Sagadi Manor. There are "manors" all over Estonia, what we would call mansions, but most of them these days are in a poor state of repair. This is one of the best, finished in 1753, and we walked around the attractive gardens admiring the symmetry of the large pink-and-white dwelling, complete with outhouses now used as a hotel and restaurant. The original aristocratic owners were "nationalised" during the first period of independence, but were permitted to live there until 1939.

Our camp site for the night was in the Lahemaa National Park, on the northern coast. It was a pleasant enough place for the night, with a very enthusiastic manager who plied us with documents about the park. Good wi-fi, needless to say.

Thursday 17 July

Today's main purpose was to see some of the rest of the national park. A map of the park shows four finger-like peninsulas projecting into the Baltic where a strait separates Finland from Estonia. We started with the third of the four, Kasmu Peninsula, at the foot of which we were camped, with a run up to a little maritime museum at the coastal settlement of Kasmu. This was once upon a time a fishing port, but subsistence fishing has pretty well died out in the Baltic and some of the little harbours – like this one – have been tidied up in an attempt to attract cruising yachts – not that there were any here. The “museum” was a disappointment, being a motley collection of bits and pieces of fishing and old sailing gear.



But in and around the water we saw our first large collection of what they call “erratic boulders”, big rocks ashore and hundreds awash in the water making good resting places for seabirds. Tens of thousands of years ago all this and southern Scandinavia were covered by ice that was kilometres thick. As the globe warmed, the ice retreated into glaciers which deposited these boulders all over what became northern Estonia, although most of them originated in further north. Why “erratic”? Beats me – it implies that the boulders had some capacity for self-determination and got confused.

We then looped round and drove up the peninsula immediately to the west, Parispea. and went right to the end. Most of the park is untouched forest, where in the flatter bits they sit in marsh or swamp land – picturesque in parts, but much loved by mosquitos! The main reason it is so undeveloped is that, like most of the coast of the Baltic States, the region was strategically highly important to the Soviet Union in its stand-off with the west. We had already seen much evidence of this during the last few weeks of our travels, as previously described. This meant that access and development were forbidden or highly restricted for decades.



On the west side of this peninsula, near the tip, on a shockingly rough little road, we came across a typical two-storey Russki barrack block, deserted and overgrown, lots of graffiti but no windows. We passed the remainder of a guard post then saw, deeper in the woods, more ruins of smaller buildings. At the end of the road there was another large concrete block building, which we thought was just another Soviet defensive structure until we walked round to the seaward side and saw that it was a submarine base, with a deep and narrow channel between the sea and a gated passage

leading under the building. A large observation building stood nearby.

Further up, and near the tip of the headland, we had lunch in a small clearing in the woods right by a tall grassed hump, with a steep concrete track leading up the side. This, we established, had been the site of a radar station.

Lahemaa was the first national park in the Soviet Union. The USSR was officially against national parks, on the basis that they encouraged unwanted nationalism, but someone found that Lenin had once decreed that national parks were an acceptable form of nature protection and the park was declared in 1971.

Given the state of the deeply potholed tracks towards the end of the peninsula, where 4-5 km/h was the maximum possible speed, it was a relief to get down to the motorway and speed west to Tallinn, which would be our last stop in our fascinating trip through the Baltic States. We headed for the better of two possible camp sites near the city, at the Pirita marina complex, and having deliberately got there fairly early (because we suspected it could be crowded), we settled in to a reasonable spot, from where we could see the outline of the city across the wide bay. The “camp site” is simply a supposedly dedicated part of the car park for the marina, with which it shares its so-called facilities. The manager did suggest it was going to get busy over the weekend.

Friday 18 July

We took the convenient bus into Tallinn in the morning, getting off near the terminal by the Viru gate in the medieval city walls. But before going into the old town we had to walk out a fair way to the ferry terminals, to book a passage for us and the van to Helsinki. We had already established that the Finnish Eckero Line seemed to be cheaper than its Estonian rivals, and that the earliest we could get a passage was Monday. So that’s what we booked, quite expensive we thought (for a 2:40 hours crossing) at €213, but this is high holiday season and this is one of Europe’s busiest ferry routes.

So, back towards the old town, on the way taking an astonished look at the Linnahall, between the old town and the sea. This massive concrete structure, over 400 metres long and 200 metres wide, was built for the 1980 Moscow Olympics and originally christened the Lenin Palace of Culture and Sport. There is a vast concert hall inside, and Tallinn was the sailing centre for those Olympics (which explains the large but lightly used marina and boat maintenance facilities at the Pirita marina). Linnahall is closed up now, with weeds sprouting and graffiti covering the hulk of a building, which the locals apparently don’t know what to do with.

Into the old town through its medieval walls, as we walked past the impressive bastion that guards the Great Coastal Gate at the north end of the town. The site of Tallinn is thought to have been established some 2,500 years BC by Finnish-Ugric people, who brought the rudiments of the present-day Estonian language. This is much closer to Finnish than the languages of the other Baltic States and explains, in part, its northerly political leanings. The Danes invaded in 1219; “Tallinn” is derived from *Taant Linn*, Estonian for Danish town (or castle). The German Knights of the Sword took over in 1227, then the Danes again, who sold northern Estonia to the German Hanseatic League. Tallinn became a major trading port between Russia and the west. With the decline of the Hanseatic League a series of surrounding nations all fought for the place, until it stabilised as a port for the Russian empire in the late 19th century. The world wars of the 20th century, with their population movements and deportations added to the human misery caused by fighting and bombardment, took the toll they did



for all the Baltic. Tallinn, however, was influential in the emergence of a freedom movement and eventual independence under an Estonian government.

We meandered past St Olav's Church, with its very high spire visible across the bay from where we are camped. Established back in the 13th century, the Reformation and the Russians have ensured that its interior is as stark as most other Lutheran churches, but its simplicity is still attractive and the nave soars high. Estonia quickly became a Lutheran country in the 16th century in response to abuse of power by the Catholic church and the bishops.



Past the impressive and exceptionally well preserved medieval Town Hall, and down one of the two main streets running south through the town, we were impressed by the beauty of the place in the streets and the squares. There is clear attention to detail. In most old towns the streets and squares are lined with countless restaurants and cafes, all covered by umbrellas

in a melange of differing bright colours and advertisements, a discordant mix that we try to exclude from our photographs. In Tallinn, by way of contrast, there seems to be an agreement whereby all such umbrellas are of a light buff-coloured material, with discrete ads for a local products in light brown script, and the overall ambience is sympathetic to the medieval surroundings.

We visited two museums of history. The first was the City Museum in a 14th century merchant's house, which focusses on the guilds and trading that made Tallinn important. The other, a branch of the Estonian History Museum, was centred on the Estonian people and their reaction to events including the Soviet occupation that preceded independence. There is a long (too long!) video, with English subtitles, documenting the rise and success of the independence movement, with nationalistic fervour encouraged by huge singing assemblies. These are commemorated in the regular mass singing festivals of today, for which a stadium has been especially built in the Tallinn outskirts to take tens of thousands of people. We had just missed the latest one, and did meet two people on the ferry back from Saaremaa who had been singing in it.

During the occupations the Estonians took to singing songs of patriotism and protest that the authorities found hard to suppress. In September 1988, 300,000 joined in a massive songfest and publicly demanded independence in what became known as the "Singing Revolution".

We had an exceptionally good lunch, at a very reasonable price, in a little cobbled street in one of the busiest tourist cities in Europe, and again were hugely impressed. The town does manage the crowds and other potentially negative aspects of tourism better than most. Most of the souvenir shops in the centre sell good quality local crafts, and as we found, you can still get world-class food in the middle of it all. Although there were three cruise ships in port, no great gangs of passengers were noticeable. We became more impressed by the place the longer we were there.

After lunch we walked on through down to the Viru Gate in the south and to the underground local bus terminal, from where we caught our bus back to the marina.

Fine weather all day, but not too hot for walking.

Saturday 19 July

Two or three of the sights we still wanted to see were scattered around the extremities of the city. We decided to take the system of hop-on-and-off red tourist buses for the day, which turned out to be an excellent decision. One of its stops was at the Pirita Hotel at the marina. Our first stop was at Toompea Castle, on the crest of the eponymous hill and Estonia's traditional seat of power. It still is, as the Estonian parliament sits in a grand, baroque, pink-and-white building that is part of the castle complex after being added in the 18th century. Next to it stands one of the only remnants of the original Danish castle, the 14th century Pikk (tall) Hermann tower, where flies the white, blue and black national flag.

Opposite the parliament building is the 19th century Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, built as part of Tsar Alexander III's policy of Baltic Russification. It is highly ornate both inside and out, in true Orthodox style, and the many worshippers appeared very devout. The Orthodox faith is relatively new in Estonia. Many hoped that by joining "the Tsar's church" they would get better treatment and could acquire land.

There is a lovely park down from the castle precincts, and we walked down past it to another museum, the Museum of Occupation. This is probably the best of the similar museums we have visited in the Baltic States, concentrating on the 1939 to 1991 period during which the country was occupied by Russians, then Germans, then Russians again. The photographs, copies of documents and displays are evocative enough, but the several videos – totalling well over three hours, according to the lady at the desk – are stunning. They are all too long to watch here in comfort, but can be called up on the web, which we shall do on our return home. Downstairs there is a reconstruction of a "cupboard", a tiny enclosure too small to sit or lie in, of the kind we saw in Riga at the KGB museum and which was used to soften up people for interrogation by leaving them in there for a long time.



The architects of the notorious Molotov-Ribbentrop line and the origins of the Cold War

Lying around in this space were bits and pieces of the statues of Soviet leaders – mostly their heads - that had been pulled down once the city became independent, and the walls were covered by Soviet posters depicting the wonders of Soviet life and collectivism.



Back on the open top red bus we then took a long ride through and out of the city to the new Maritime Museum, known as the Seaplane Harbour, on the waterfront on the west side of Tallinn Bay. Far away on the other side we could see "our" marina, and the city buildings were down to the right at the head of the bay: the most conspicuous of which was the hideous Linnehall.

We knew by this time that the weekend was a festival-style celebration of maritime life in Tallinn. At least two international yacht cruising flotillas were

based in the marinas at Tallinn and Pirita, and in Tallinn we had seen several nautically-oriented stalls being erected yesterday. Now we appeared to be at the epicentre of local festivities: countless local families were enjoying all the fun of the fair and exploring the ships moored at the museum,

some historic and others of the Estonian navy and border control. Live music was booming from a large outdoor stadium.

The centrepiece of the museum is the triple-domed seaplane hangar. This was built in 1917 and was the first columnless thin-shell domed structure in the world. It is huge, inside and out, and has been well fitted out as an interesting museum. Its feature vessel is a 1937 British built submarine, one of the few that have survived intact since the pre-WW2 era. There is a replica of the Short 184 seaplane, the first seaplane to successfully mount a torpedo attack. There is part of the skeleton of a 16th century vessel found off Saaremaa in 1985 and preserved. There are good displays of dinghies, and lots of mines. The seas off Tallinn were among the mostly heavily mined seas in the world by the end of WW2, and it is no surprise that two of the Estonian ships on display in the water were a minesweeper and a mine-detector.

Just as another example of how tech-savvy Estonia is (but I didn't catch on to until too late) is that you can pick up a card that you present to any of the descriptive display screens at the exhibits. Press "Collect and Read", and the text is emailed to your address! Sure beats the photographing of these displays, which I do a lot.

(Another techno factoid is that the Minox miniature "spy" camera was invented in Tallinn by Walter Tapp in 1938.)

Finally, then, we got a red bus back to the town terminal, and took an ordinary bus back because we were too late for a red bus to the marina.

Fridge still not working well on mains power – tried gas again, seemed OK, but gas bottle ran out so decided to leave it on mains all night and see what happened. Fireworks across the bay as dark – such as it is – fell.

Sunday 20 July

More maritime fun and games outside the marina, with a helicopter practising rescue drills with lifeboats in the water. Sadly for the fun-goers some rain, with some thunder and lightning, in late morning – Norma washed the van.



In the afternoon it cleared to a sunny day, and we took the short walk over the main road to the 1407 St Bridget's convent. Only the walls of the main structures remain, but they were still very beautiful in the sun and evocative of religious times past. Several very old gravestones are scattered around. Ivan the Terrible destroyed the convent in 1577 during the Livonian war and it was never rebuilt. Next month it will be used as a concert hall – missed that as usual!

Followed the German GP on the scratchy internet connection, beamed from the typically Russki marina hotel which was built as part of the 1980 Olympic complex.

Estonia has been a great country to visit, and along with its two neighbours in the Baltic States has done an astonishing job in rising like Phoenix from their extraordinarily complicated and violent history to take their places as respected members of the European Union and NATO. An exhibit in the Estonian History Museum quotes statistics claiming that the Estonians are an unhappy people, theorising that WW2 left them fearful and distrustful. Well, nothing that we saw and experienced throughout the country – with the exception of the predominantly Russian regions in the north-east

– would support that claim, especially among the young, who are too busy on their phones and inventing new ways to use the internet.

Apparently Estonians say “happiness is being alive”. Can’t argue with that.