

# ESTONIA – Advice from Fulbright Alumni

The following are extracts from Fulbright Grantee Reports and are not meant to reflect the views of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), its cooperating agencies, or the U.S. Embassy.

## Topics covered below include:

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## **Cultural notes**

Estonian Culture: Despite the stereotypes of Estonian culture, I found the Estonian people, colleagues and students to be wonderfully delightful. People are somewhat private (as are their northern Scandinavian neighbors) but my experience was that we felt welcomed and supported, although we often had to be a more proactive in asking questions and expressing our needs or interests. In general we communicated in English. Estonian is challenging and many (especially younger) people speak sufficient to excellent English (people seemed happy with the few words we managed to learn). Culturally, we felt that Estonians are a bit more reserved at first, so they will often not smile or say hello on the street (unless they already know you) and might touch or push slightly getting on busses but none of this is intended to be rude, just a different way of interacting. Once people get to know you this is no longer true. Also, be prepared to find out things at the last minute (or that things have been changed at the last minute). Again, it seems the cultural norm rather than anything intentional. In general we found Estonians to be educated, thoughtful, knowledgeable, proud of their history and aware of events in the rest of the world.

Diversity is much less obvious in Estonia than in most places in the US. There is almost no racial diversity, so diversity issues are more focused on relationships with the various Russian/Soviet communities (Uzbek, Azeri, Georgian, Ukrainian etc). There are also active Feminist and LGBTQ communities but they are less visible and are struggling for basic issues like visibility rather than specific human rights or a stronger political voice. Religious diversity is also slightly limited, due to lower rates of religious practice in Estonia in general (often primarily older people). There are several Christian church options (including Russian Orthodox, Lutheran and Roman Catholic). There is one Jewish synagogue, which we occasionally attended and there is supposedly a masjid (Muslim) near the airport area which we never found. Beyond that people seem to go to nature for their connection to spirituality.

Estonians are typically reserved but friendly people who have endured many years of repression. They highly prize their language and culture and have made great progress in just over 20 years of re-independence.

## **Personal Interactions**

As noted in many final reports, Estonians tend to be outwardly reserved, but very genuine, giving and helpful when you get to know them. This was also our experience.

We found few cultural challenges, beyond trying to learn the language. In general, we needed to take the initiative to ask for what we needed or for any questions, it is not that people don't communicate but it doesn't seem to occur to them that an outsider might need to know something that seems obvious to them. Also, communication and timing of events is often at the last minute or by chance. We often would find out about things (events, school dates, etc) at the last minute. This was often frustrating, since we were not able to attend things we wish we could have been at, but this seems a pretty consistent pattern.

The US embassy community was supportive. Fulbrighters were included in the regularly scheduled social events and embassy staff was wonderful resources for our questions. Plus they were a great bunch of folks.

Estonia is an easy place to live and get settled. Most people speak very good English and are kind and eager to help you. Though not demonstrative in their thoughts/feelings, what they express is genuine and can be trusted.

### **Language**

It is possible to manage well speaking English and not knowing Estonian, although there are periodically times when communication is impossible because of not knowing the local language and it can be quite frustrating.

### **University Life**

Tartu is a wonderful university town that is very supportive of an academic lifestyle. The university is very traditional in its approach to teaching. There is change occurring in the recognition of the importance of teaching in higher education, however the role of research is still highly valued. Faculty roles are somewhat different in that many "lecturers" are also PhD students who carry a large share of the teaching load. The few "Professors" are mostly engaged in administration and research.

My discipline is viewed differently in Europe than in the US. Nevertheless, my course material worked well with their curriculum and they seemed to be prepared for what I was teaching. Surprisingly, I managed to cover nearly as much as I would in a lecture on the same topics in the US. However, there were fewer weekly contact hours, and this reduced the scope of what I was able to cover in the courses. I used the e-learning system for my courses (called moodle, used throughout Estonia) and found it to be more advanced than comparable systems in the US, although I used moodle for the basics. Faculty colleagues and administrators are most helpful when asked for help. If you don't ask, you might not receive help.

Teaching facilities: the classrooms were quite basic and did not have computer equipment and projectors installed. I had to carry a laptop and LCD projector and set it up for each lecture. There was wireless internet in the buildings, but it was extremely unreliable, and often did not work for days on end. Evidently the modem size is not sufficient to handle the demand. Students are not well-trained to do write research papers. Much of the work they submitted came directly from Internet websites, even after I spent a session explaining the use of peer-reviewed sources and the unsuitability of Wikipedia for

their projects. Attendance is quite spotty, despite a strict attendance policy in my syllabus which I was encouraged to include by Tartu College faculty colleagues. I chose to offer a written mid-term exam (most courses do not). This gave me valuable information about the students' understanding of the course material. I found their English language writing on an in-class written exam (although not essay-style exam where English language writing was important) to be slightly better than I expected. Students will not visit a faculty member during office hours, even when personally invited. Also, I am used to getting much more feedback (good, bad, indifferent) about courses from students in the US.

For the most part, their assignments met the requirements of the project statement and no more, where as ambitious students in the US will go above and beyond. Some colleagues were extremely outgoing and friendly. Others did not seem to want to interact with me at all. English language skill may or may not have something to do with this. Overall the faculty was a congenial group who seemed to have good relations with each other. If I asked for help, colleagues were usually willing to be helpful. But if I did not ask, they did not volunteer.

## **Housing**

Housing in Old Town and Kesklinn can be fairly expensive. Consider this alternative which worked out really well for me and my family (husband and adult son): Email the TLU International Students' Coordinator, currently Merje Songe at: [merje.songe@tlu.ee](mailto:merje.songe@tlu.ee). She gets inquiries from the community for short-term housing. I was lucky to find a lovely 2 bedroom apartment through a young mother who had to go to UK for 5 months, where her husband is working. It was located in Nomme which is a southern suburb of Tallinn, but really lovely, near a forest, and right near a bus stop that took about half an hour to City Center. She left bedding, towels, kitchenware, everything we needed to set-up house. Including utilities, we paid less than half of what we would have had to pay in town for a two bedroom apartment. Another advantage was that instead of a realtor, you were dealing with a "new friend" , and she was very eager to orient us and answer all our logistical questions. Very helpful. If you can attend the International Students' Orientation, they give good logistical information that was helpful to us as a family.

We lived near the old town area and love how easy it was to get around and get to lots of events within a few minutes. It was also close to campus (15-20 minute walk) which was great. We got our apartment on line through [city24.ee](http://city24.ee) and it was easy to do. We could see relevant details about the apartment as well as photos and could talk with the owner or agent before we arrived. When we were looking, there were lots of choices and we were happy with where we ended up living. There are lots of choices, I started a few months before we were going to arrive just looking to see costs and locations for what was available. Then the month before I started to contact people more seriously. There are lots of real estate agents so if the person you are emailing doesn't seem to understand your needs, there are many more choices. We also contacted Tiina Mae at Tallinn University (International Affairs) and while she didn't have any specific suggestions, she was helpful in locating the agency we worked with to find out place. Our landlord was great and fair. He was prompt about repairs and responded to our needs quickly. Also there was a building supervisor who was also fairly prompt.

Finding housing: [www.city24.ee](http://www.city24.ee) <http://arcuskv.ee/kinnisvara> (Arcus Kinnisvara) (Kinnisvara means real estate company) <http://www.leading.ee> (Leading Property Solutions) <http://www.oberhaus.com> (Ober Haus) <http://tallinn-apartments.goodsonandred.com/> (Red Group)

## **Communications**

Cell Phones: Bring an unlocked phone and use local SIM card, or buy phone and SIM card there. Several companies to choose from: Tele2, Elisa, EMT etc. You can buy a "Top Up" card, which can be refilled in a number of ways, by going to the store, a kiosk, or online. In general, cell phone charges are much less than in the US. Buy an international SIM card for use in other countries you may travel in. Cell is primary means of communication in Estonia, mostly via texting. People do not leave messages, but use caller ID to return a missed call. Skype: Skype can be a practically free and easy way to make calls to US. Invest in a Skype account, you can get a phone number (in US if you want) that accepts voice mail and send you an email when you have a message. You might also get a SkypeOut number, which enables you to make a call when you are not in WiFi. It works off of local cell network, so only charges you a local call. However, now it seems that Skype is running on WiFi and 3G cell network.

Skype is essential for international calling and amazing. From someone who had to keep in touch with family in Hawaii, it was indispensable and FREE!

### **Health and Safety**

Tallinn is incredibly safe (unless you behave in unsafe ways) and changes in character from winter to tourist season.

We didn't not need to purchase prescription medications but I suspect most would have been available. We also did not need to go to a hospital, but some faculty needed emergency service during two different department meetings and the ambulance came quickly, care appeared to be efficient and competent. I would not want to have to go to a doctor or hospital, but if I needed to do so, I would not be worried.

### **Food**

Traditional food is pretty basic- sausage, potatoes, pea soup, dark bread, berries, honey, salmon, smoked fish, mild cheeses and yogurts/kefirs with lots of flavors and cabbage-type greens. You can get almost anything (I even found some tahini in Stockman's) and often cheaper than in the US. Alcohol is also easily available, the local "'brew' is beer or vodka. However, there are a growing number of good ethnic restaurants. We loved discovering new places and finding favorite bakeries, coffee-shops and chocolate places. There are lots of market options including several local "turgs" with local produce, most shopping centers have a food market in the basement (Solaris, Viru Keskus and Stockmans) as well as cheaper local supermarkets. There are also smaller specialty stores selling fish, meat, bread/cakes or dairy/cheeses. Traditional Estonian bread is the best- if you can find it.

### **Street Life**

Once summer arrived, there were also lots of festivals and the entire time we were here we also found many traditional, ethnic and religious festivals to attend and enjoy. In particular, folks singing and dancing is an important part of Estonian identity and wonderful to see performed. While still somewhat poor as a country it is basically a well-organized, efficient place. Internet is easy, available and usually free, which makes getting information, buying travel tickets, banking and lots of other things easy to do. (There are some exceptions, getting a visa, for example was mysteriously complex but most other things are not.)

## **Clothing**

Estonians dress conservatively but not particularly formally (except for suicide heels for women, even in the winter). I was able to buy or see almost anything I might need available in the stores. Most items were of good quality and a range of prices.

## **Money and Banking**

I am fortunate to have a good international bank in the US that does not charge foreign transaction fees for credit charges or ATM withdrawals. Because of this, and the fact that I could pay my monthly rent in Estonia by credit card, I was happy to not have to open a bank account in Estonia.

Having a local bank to do online payments was essential. I was very satisfied with Swedbank. They were always cordial and helpful and their ATMs are all over. A helpful hint in getting cash from ATMs is to use the "small denominations" and "other amount" buttons. Many stores balk at giving change for 50 euro bills.

Banking is easy here, once you have an account set up (it takes about 2 weeks) almost everything can be done via bankcard. (I wish the US would adapt their system). Because we arrived two weeks apart, we wired money to the bank (Swedbank) once we had opened an account. This was the cheapest and easiest way to get funds here. At the end we wired money back to our US bank and withdrew the rest.

Bank Account: Swedbank "" Non-ID card holders can open account, takes about 1 week from application to receiving bank card. There are many branches. The one on the corner of Parnu Mnt. and Estonia Pst. is a good one. SEB- an option if you already have your ID card Cash/Wire transfers: Cash: You can withdraw money from ATMs using most US ATM cards. There may be a fee, though. You can also withdraw money from your US bank account (using US ATM card) and deposit into your Estonian account (using Estonian ATM card). Wire transfers from US to Estonia can take up to one week and charges a fee (\$40-50ish). Utilities/Payments: Virtually all bills are paid on-line in Estonia. Once you get your banking set up, you may pay all of your bills electronically. In fact, checks are not used. Once you get your ID card, you may also connect it with your bank account and cell phone to pay for concert tickets, bus passes, parking, etc.

## **Visas and other Logistics**

Visas are a pain and the process seems somewhat arbitrary. Before arriving get every document anyone mentions they needed (apostilled birth certificates, degrees, marriage certificates, insurance coverage proof, letter from your department, proof that a partner is employed and covered by insurance...etc) They did not use the photos we brought so we took more at the office. We breezed through easily on one time (I also got help filling out the forms from Tiiina Mae and our department secretary) but other Fulbrighters did not. It seemed somewhat arbitrary. We got slightly stalled when we were asked to pay in cash and not with our bank card (which technically is an option) so bring all you can, start early, breathe and keep your sense of humor.

Getting your Estonian ID Card: Start ASAP, it might take a while (process could take 3 months). In Tallinn, go to office at Vilmsi 59, 10147 Tallinn (ask Embassy for address in Tartu, or look it up: <http://www.politsei.ee/>). Take a number to get in line, take your photo in the photo booth, make sure to bring all your documents: -birth certificate -passport -diplomas (especially for scholars) -health

insurance documents -lease -letter of invitation from host -letter of appointment from Fulbright - bank statements You may be asked to present other documents, too. You might also be requested to present birth certificates or diplomas with an apostille. You will receive a series of letters in the mail asking for more information, or informing you of the progress. You might also get an email or phone call.

Get your credentials in order before leaving. Have all important documents "apostilled" including birth/marriage certificates, degrees.

### **Travel and City Notes**

Tartu is a lovely place, but it is easy to feel disconnected from the Fulbright program in Tallinn (all embassy sponsored events for Fulbrighters and others take place in and around Tallinn).

There are some 1,000 manors established over the centuries, some which are architectural jewels. The Estonian Manor Association is active in maintaining and sharing these interesting historic sites. More information at [www.manor.ee](http://www.manor.ee).

We found travel in town, between towns and between countries incredibly easy, prompt and inexpensive. Although winter was more difficult for travel due to the shorter daylight times and lots of ice and snow - once it was spring, it was easy to get around. People love to be outdoors once it is a possible, and the only challenge is avoiding mosquitoes and ticks.

Tallinn small, walking and biking are easy. We are older or pensioners so almost all forms of transportation is cheap. Students also get discounts. Anyone over 65 can ride local transportation for free (bring something to prove your age) and there are cheaper ticket booklets that are easily available. We tried to explore a lot, and found it easy to get to and around new towns and villages. We went to Tartu, Viljandi, Hapsaalu, Parnu, Kihnu, Tallinn "suburbs" like Nomme, Pirita, and various "nature areas". Outside of Estonia, we also went to Riga, Vilnius, Copenhagen and Helsinki. We would have done more, but we ran out of time. I would be happy to share more specific information about these places. We loved the cultural options in Tallinn, which might have been more plentiful because the city was one of the cultural capitols of Europe this year. We lived near the old town and loved the range of alternative, traditional and classical arts, music, theater, and dance options that was available for a moderate cost to free. (Some tickets were less if you were a pensioner and some gave discounts for anyone with an International Teachers Card)

During my one-semester stay in Estonia, I traveled to all corners of the country (especially the Northeast) and am very happy to have had the experience. I also took short trips to Sweden, Finland, and Russia, and I encourage any Fulbright Scholar to take advantage of every possible travel opportunity in the Nordic countries. It is a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

Winters are cold and long, bring warm, waterproof boots and a warm coat, gloves, hats, etc. In general, clothing is substantially more expensive in Estonia, as are many other goods such as athletic equipment (except cross-country skis). Sidewalks are not shoveled or salted. Be wary of falling snow/ice from rooftops, better to walk in the street after big snow or thaw.

You can walk most places in each city, including Tallinn, which is the largest. Taxis are not expensive (but better to call a taxi than to hail one). Many companies, one I used frequently is Tulika Taxi phone number: 612-0000 (arrive within 10 minutes), Tartu Taxi 538-5717.

Travel in Estonia is relatively easy and public transportation is readily available. There is no need for a car.

### **Websites and other helpful resources**

Google translate! Also, the New York Times articles on travel in the Baltics as well as features articles on the Estonian education system (and language) and change to the Euro were helpful. Materials distributed by CIES were helpful, and the reports of previous Fulbright awardees were useful and practical. In terms of my own research and interests, published academic research about Soviet times in Estonia helped me to understand current perspectives about that era.

If you don't have a car and are relying on public transportation (a very good system by the way), these websites are indispensable and you can click on the ENG. button: [www.soiduplaan.tallinn.ee](http://www.soiduplaan.tallinn.ee) gives you the bus schedules and there's a button for the best routing to take (although you have to know the name of your destination stop). At [www.bussireisid.ee](http://www.bussireisid.ee) you can buy bus tickets to main Estonian cities like Parnu, Haapsalu, Narva and Tartu fairly cheaply. Also, [www.luxexpress.eu](http://www.luxexpress.eu) offers more upscale and comfortable busses, but still amazingly inexpensive to Riga, Latvia and Vilnius, Lithuania. They have wi-fi available. Also, we flew to Helsinki and took the ferry over to Tallinn. Nice way to go and no limits to baggage. Just be aware that you must carry your own baggage on board, and the walk is "healthy". If one is looking to do some traveling around Estonia for a couple of days, a good alternative to renting with regular car companies like [www.easycarrent.ee](http://www.easycarrent.ee) is to rent loaners from a locally owned car shop like HiTeh at [www.hiteh.eu](http://www.hiteh.eu) at a much cheaper rate.

For housing: [www.City24.ee](http://www.City24.ee); TLU International Center-Tiina Mae <[tiinamae@tlu.ee](mailto:tiinamae@tlu.ee)> Oberhaus, in Estonian Tallinn bus website: <http://kaart.tallinn.ee/Tallinn/Show?REQUEST=Main&lang=eng> Estonia bus website: <http://www.bussireisid.ee/index.html?MENU=&KEEL=en> I am happy to send additional website, just contact me. There are many sources of information and most have English language versions.

General info: [estonica.org](http://estonica.org) Busses: Many buses for travel around Estonia/Baltic. Busses are comfortable and inexpensive. Main bus stop in Tallinn is Bussijam on Lastekodu 46 (between Tartu Mnt. and Junkentali), about 10 minutes south of Old Town Booking bus tickets: <http://www.bussireisid.ee/> Ferries: Many ferries between Tallinn and Helsinki: Tallink (most frequent, runs through the winter) [tallink.ee](http://tallink.ee) Viking Line (2 per day) [vikingline.ee](http://vikingline.ee) Linda Line (fastest, new company, not sure if running in winter) [lindaline.fi](http://lindaline.fi) Eckero (older, less frequent, less expensive) [eckeroline.ee](http://eckeroline.ee) Also daily ferries to/from Stockholm VikingSilja [siljaline.se](http://siljaline.se)