

Estonia – people, culture, language

A guide for businesses



The country

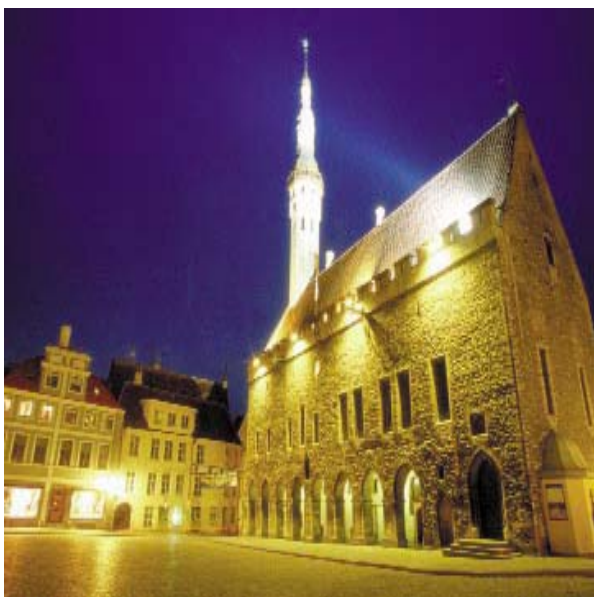
Estonia today: Estonia is the northernmost Baltic State and with a population of only 1.4 million, it is also the smallest. On 20 August 1991 Estonia re-established independence and in 1994 the last Russian troops withdrew from the country. Rapid development of the communications infrastructure followed and the capital city, Tallinn, is now particularly technologically advanced and produces half of the country's GDP. Estonia has done well since gaining independence due to its favourable location and strong Scandinavian links, particularly with Finland and Sweden. An excellent business environment and conditions for production, liberal



Joelahtme church established in the 14th century
Source: European Commission

economic policy and low taxes have already attracted numerous companies and continue to make Estonia an exceptional location for foreign direct investment. The country gained accession to the EU in May 2004.

Environment: 38.7% of Estonia is forested, and 10% of the country is a nature reserve. Estonia is home to several mammals and plant species that are extinct or very rare in other parts of Europe. The most numerous species of the large mammals are the roe deer, elk, and wild boar.



Townhall Square in the Old Town, Tallinn
Source: European Commission

The people

Song: Estonia is often called the 'singing nation'. Most Estonians sing in a choir, and choral music is considered by many to be a symbol of the country at large. This culture of song remains very strong both within Estonia, where song festivals served as a rallying cry against foreign oppression throughout their years under Soviet occupation, and within Estonians' adoptive homelands, where this distinctive aspect of their culture has helped to foster new ties and a sense of belonging.

Ethnic mix: 67.9% of the population is Estonian, 25.6% is Russian, 2.1% is Ukrainian, 1.2% is Belorussian and 0.92% is Finnish.

Religion: The main religion in Estonia is Lutheran.

Character: A foreign visitor is well advised to bear in mind that Estonians try to avoid sentimentality. Much of what other nationalities voice without hesitation, Estonians may reveal only once they know a person quite well. Estonians are reputed to be stubborn and tend not to be impressed by others' social standing. Authority is usually ridiculed and the sceptical nature of an Estonian – what they like to call 'a sound peasant mind' – can appear narrow minded to outsiders.

Did you know?

- At 37, Prime Minister Julian Parts is the EU's youngest leader.
- Estonians love new technology: 80% of banking is done on-line, and businesspeople habitually negotiate and close deals by texting each other on their mobile phones. The Estonian Government was the first in the world to hold a cabinet meeting on-line, saving a massive 1.4 million sheets of paper!
- Estonians are also into reading in a big way – their country has the third highest literacy rate in the world.
- Ernest Hemingway wrote that in every port in the world, at least one Estonian can be found: this speaks volumes about the nation's enterprising spirit.
- The Estonian version of 'bon appétit' is *jätku leibu*, which means 'may your bread last'.
- It never goes completely dark at night in Estonia from the beginning of May to the end of July.

Language

Official language: Estonian. Estonian is one of the smallest cultural languages to include contemporary terminology for all major fields of life. Unlike most other European languages it does not belong to the Indo-European group. It is a part of the Finno-Ugric language family, which also includes Finnish and Hungarian.

By law, all transactions, contracts and company returns in country have to be in the Estonian language (Russian is not an official language.) Notarised translations in English normally accompany these.

English: Most businesspeople and Government officials in large cities in Estonia, particularly those under the age of 30, have a good command of English. Nevertheless, a few words in Estonian will turn the meeting into a warm and friendly encounter. It is recommended that a few words be learned in Estonian to thaw the atmosphere. The presence of an interpreter will help a business meeting to progress.

Finding translators/interpreters: in the UK, you can search for local, quality-assured providers on **BLIS Professionals** (www.blis.org.uk/professionals). In Estonia, translators and interpreters are readily available – the best place to enquire is at the British Embassy.

Basic Estonian phrases

The positive impression you will make by learning to speak a few basic Estonian phrases cannot be overestimated. Below are some commonly-used phrases – if you are interested in learning the Estonian language, you can search for quality-assured trainers and courses at www.blis.org.uk.

	Estonian	Pronunciation
Hello	Tere	Te-rre
Good day/ morning	Tere hommikust	Te-rre hom-mi-kust
Good evening	Tere Öhtust	Te-rre yh-tust
Goodbye	Head aega	Head ae-gah
Yes / no	Jah / Ei	Yah / ay
Please	Palun	Pah-lun
Thank you	Täna	Ta-nahn
You're welcome	Palun	Pah-lun
Excuse me	Vabandage	Vah-bahn-dah-ge
My name is...	Mn nimi on...	Mu ni-mi on...
What's your name?	Mis te nimi on?	Mis te ni-mi on?

Business culture and etiquette

- **Initial contact:** it may take some time to be able to fix a meeting. Remember that frequently, senior executives acquired their experience in the former Communist regime. Confirm in advance, before the meeting, by fax or letter, that the meeting will take place.
- **Meeting and greeting:** in general, business behaviour in Estonia is similar to that in the rest of Europe. A handshake before and after a meeting is customary and acceptable. Care should be taken to shake hands with everyone present at a meeting. It is customary to shake hands with all business contacts at every meeting, not only on introduction. Immediately after shaking hands at the start of the meeting, it is customary to exchange business cards. See that you have a sufficient quantity of business cards.
- **In meetings:** at first meetings, until a contact has been established, Estonians display affection very sparingly (a pat on the shoulder, for example, would seem very out of place). Nevertheless as a relationship is established, Estonians do 'open up', and are excellent hosts. The Estonian sense of humour is fairly sarcastic, so visitors from Britain should feel at home!
- **Taboo topics:** Estonians are very sensitive as regards Estonian culture. Jokes that may be offensive to their culture should be avoided. The Estonians greatly appreciate talking about their historical heritage.
- **Holidays:** you are recommended to avoid business meetings in the months of July and August or around the times of national holidays.

Signposting and resources

- **BLIS Professionals** (www.blis.org.uk/professionals) – an on-line, quality-assured database of translators, interpreters, language trainers and cultural consultants in your area. You can search for BLIS providers offering Estonian language services in the East Midlands.
- **Resources** and organisations for more information:
 - Euro Information Centre – www.euro-info.org.uk
 - British Embassy Estonia – www.britishembassy.ee
 - British Council Estonia – www.becc.ee
 - Enterprise Estonia – www.investinestonia.com
 - Estonian Embassy – www.estonia.gov.uk
 - Estonian Tourism Board – www.visitestonia.com

Sources

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Euro Information Centre www.euro-info.org.uk
Regional Language Network East Midlands www.rln-eastmidlands.com
Language Network Northern Ireland www.ln-northernireland.com
Foreign & Commonwealth Office London www.fco.gov.uk
International House www.ihworld.com
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A Dozen Questions about Estonia – Expo 2000 Estonia Estonian Institute. www.nationmaster.com
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