

# Europe, July to September 2026

## August 13, Tallinn, Estonia

To paraphrase an old movie, “If today is Thursday, it must be Estonia”. Estonia is a country about the size of Maryland with less than 1.5 million people. Before I get started, last night the ship stopped at sea to let us view the eclipse that was occurring just before sunset. Everyone on the ship were given dark (very dark) glasses and the eclipse was visible through them.

It was not a 100% eclipse. We did see the moon eating the sun as a snack. It was too bright to take a picture directly with the phone camera, but I was able to get something-or-other by first holding the dark glasses over the lens. The problem was that the phone asked me to hold still for 3 seconds. I really needed a stable tripod to do so, and only had a semi-stable bipod. But I got something that I want to show you just because it was a pain to get.

For what it’s worth.



## Estonia

Had a great guide take us on a “Jewish History of Estonia” tour. As an introduction to the mindset of the people of this country, he mentioned that they were a country of introverts. People were allowed to smile once a month and to say three words a day. Also, a typical Estonian joke is that there was this man who loved his wife so much that he told her.

That’s it for the stories, but I needed to write them down before I forgot.

Oh, wait, there's one more. The true part of this is that Estonia is a very non-religious country. Unlike other Baltic states, over 50% of the residents consider themselves non-affiliated. The guide called the people Pagans. The questionable part of the story is that the Estonians do worship a holy trinity, just theirs consists of sauna, dark beer, and fast Internet.

OK, now I'm really done.

Estonia is a very socialistic country. The government pays for all health care, schooling, and day care. Parents are given time off after the birth of a child, 18 months paid time off, which can be extended if you have another child during that time. Income tax is very high. It might be north of 50%. But there is no property tax and there is no corporate income tax.

The country is also extremely clean.

The old town of Tallinn, dating back to the 1200s, is small and divided into two parts. The upper belonged to aristocrats and the lower to workers. Here is a view from the top to the bottom taken just outside a great store that sells shot glasses.



And the old town wall.





This is a Jewish history tour. Estonia's story from the Holocaust was a work camp where Jews were sent from all over Europe to mine shale, for oil. It was not a concentration camp. It was real forced labor out in the woods. Word arrived that the Russians were advancing and would soon capture Estonia from the Germans, so the Germans tried to execute as many workers as they could before they themselves returned to Germany. Many were killed. Some number escaped and managed to hide until the Russians came the next day. The Estonians eventually established a memorial in the woods where the labor camp was. Actually, the Russians constructed the original memorial, but called it a memorial to persecuted Russians.

The area of the memorial site was extensive and the picture above is one of at least a half-dozen. After 1991, after the fall of the USSR and departure of the Russians, the Estonians updated the memory site to improve accuracy about who exactly were the victims.

There is an addendum story about the times before World War II. Estonia was controlled by Russia before 1918 and many Estonian Jews were sent to Siberia to work. We were told about half of the Jewish population did this. They were there when the Nazis arrived, so survived. Later, the descendants of these families returned to Estonia, making it the only country with a larger Jewish population after the war than before.



Another interesting story we were told was that, during USSR occupation, Russia was very antisemitic. They had a draft and drafted a lot of Jewish boys. The draft age for them was set at the age of 12, much younger than for others, but everyone knows why. Their service obligation was 25 years. Sounds bad, but when service was over they were free to move anywhere in the USSR area. The Jewish people earned this privilege sooner than others and returned to Tallinn for the benefit of the Jewish population.

The next stop was a synagogue in Tallinn. It was built in 2002 and is the only synagogue in the country. There are only about 2,000 Jewish people living in Estonia. The synagogue is located in an area populated by both Jewish and Islamic people, who live together very peacefully. We were told that a wealthy Islamic person actually contributed money to help build the synagogue.



Our guide was not Jewish by birth but married a Jewish woman from Siberia and later returned to Tallinn. He had also attended the Jewish school in Tallinn because it provided the best education, so his Jewish connections were strong. He said there was no antisemitism in the country, or almost none, claiming you would feel safe to walk down the streets carrying an Israeli flag. There are parts of the U.S. where that would be dangerous.

Back on safety, the guide also said crime in the country is extremely low. One of the sources of income is to rent the underused jail space to house criminals from other countries. They have a contract with Sweden and a new one coming up with Denmark. It helps the country, not only from the cell-rental income, but also because they have to hire Estonian guards.

On the same thought line, he said there were almost no protests in the country. No unions and protests are just not in the nature of the people. Not none, but almost. There was one where the restaurant and hotel owners were angry about the size of new taxes levied against their industry. So, they protested. They got together and decided to close all the hotels and restaurants in the entire country. Which they did. They were all closed for ten minutes.

Back to the ship, the guide ended by saying he would see us again next year in Jerusalem. He said it in Hebrew.