

How to adjust better to life in Estonia?

Adjusting to life in Estonia, expats experience a sense of something that everyone seems to know, yet that is not recorded in writing anywhere. To level the playing field, here's:

A useful guide to adjusting to life in Estonia



Photo: Ken Mürk

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Thank you everyone that let us know within the framework of relevant studies and surveys (2025) that they need a little help adapting to Estonian customs.

1. General observations

People like to spend time in nature, many families have traditions related to nature — going hiking, berry and mushroom picking.



Photo: Renee Altrov



- In Estonia, it is important to be polite in public. Politeness means that:
 - we do not raise our voice – shouting in public is frowned upon, even if the reason for the loud voice is joy;
 - we do not make physical contact with strangers – pushing in line or touching someone to get their attention is discouraged; we wait for our turn and try to make eye contact in order to get someone's attention.
- When entering, we allow people exit first and enter only thereafter.
- Everyone has the right to their own opinions, preferences, and views as long as it does not harm others or is not against the law.



- Our society is not hierarchical. It is most likely a relevant specialist, not the specialist's boss, that will help you resolve any questions and concerns you may have.
- Religion is not important at the social level in Estonia; however, many of our values and behavioral norms are linked to the Christian cultural space.
- Estonia upholds freedom of religion which means that everyone has the right to practice in their private lives the religion of their choice. Religious affiliation is not a (suitable) topic of conversation among a company of strangers.
- There are many reliable channels of information, e.g. news.err.ee, delfi.ee, news.postimees.ee, aripaev.ee at the national level as well as publications that provide information as regarding specific places of residence (city, city district etc.).



- Use of physical force and violence against people, animals, and other people's property is punishable and strongly condemned by society.
- During seasons with limited daylight and in low visibility conditions (rain, fog), we wear a reflector to make ourselves visible in traffic and to be noticed by drivers. Wearing a reflector is mandatory and the police can fine you if you do not do so. [See more](#).
- During the viral period, take care not to infect others. If you're feeling under the weather or you're sick, stay home and cancel your appointments.
- We take off our outdoor shoes both at home and when visiting someone.

2. Official matters

There is no caste system or social hierarchy in Estonia — you can talk to the mayor, minister, or president if you need to. The president may be out and about just like anyone.



Photo: Silver Gutmann

- Officials are public service providers and provide support and assistance to people.
- Appointments are booked in advance online or by phone – to a bank, a doctor, or an official.
- If you have booked an appointment (e.g. to see a doctor, an official), be there on time (on the dot or a little earlier) and make sure you have any required documents with you.
- The language of any official matters, including doctor's appointments, is Estonian. If possible, assistance is also provided in Russian or in English.
- Do not bring gifts to officials, doctors, or other service providers. Gifts make the situation uncomfortable for everyone because, essentially, gifts are a bribe, the giving and receiving of which is punishable in Estonia.
- It may happen that officials forget that not everyone is familiar with relevant services and rights. You may always ask clarifying questions about what the next steps are or what is going to happen next. Officials have a duty to explain – this means that they must provide the reasoning for their decisions.

3. Working life

If possible, make sure you give ample prior notice of any dates on which you need to be absent from work so that the employer may have enough time to make the necessary arrangements.



Photo: Renee Altrov

- When attending a job interview, dress cleanly and properly (in line with the position) and take off your outdoor clothing indoors.
- Compile your CV based on your actual experiences and education, emphasizing your strengths. If possible, include references that have been agreed upon in advance.
- It is considered important to adhere to agreed times and arrive on time (or a little early) for both work and job interviews.
- The annual holiday schedule is agreed with the employer in January – February. Annual holiday is prescribed by law and it is mandatory to use your holiday days for at least two consecutive weeks once a year.
- Work tasks are completed as agreed. If the instructions given are unclear, we ask for clarification; if we have any suggestions, we discuss them.
- Communication with superiors and coworkers is respectful and friendly.



- The basis of an employment relationship and the employee's duties is the or a digital copy – in both cases, the signed contract has equal legal force.
- Termination of employment contract
An employee may notify the employer of their intention to terminate the employment contract in writing on paper, by telephone, by message, by email or through another electronic channel (SMS, messenger, email). It is important that the employee has proof of said notification (screenshot, email), confirming that the employer has been officially informed, and that the notification was sent 30 days prior to expiry of the employment relationship.

4. Time

Arrive slightly early rather than late for any agreed appointment. Being late is rude.
Agreed time = a few minutes earlier.



Photo: Renee Altrov



Photo: Silver Gutmann

- It is important to adhere to agreements and agreed times. If we are unable to respond or arrive at the agreed time, we inform the other parties in advance.
- We perform our obligations on time. If for some reason this is not possible, we notify any relevant parties as soon as possible, informing them of the reasons as to why our performance will be delayed.
- Nighttime or quiet time begins at 23:00/11 pm (24:00/12 midnight before weekends and holidays), and violators can be called to order by contacting the police.

5. Children

Parents are responsible for their child's behavior and must explain to their child what is appropriate and what is not appropriate in public.



- Everyone has the obligation to report a child in distress to the emergency number 112 or the child assistance number 116 111.
- Physical punishment and mental abuse of children is prohibited by law.
- Babies must attend regular check-ups with their family physician during their first months and years of life. The family nurse and family physician also administer vaccines in line with the national vaccination schedule.
- A parent supervises their own child in a public space — you should not assume that someone else will supervise your child or ensure their safety without you asking them to do so first. Some parents may consider engaging with or calling out strangers' children in a public space to be unwanted interference.
- The father has just as big of a role in raising a child as the mother. Fathers can also take out paternity leave, meaning the mother goes to work for the first three years of the child's life and the father stays at home with the child (or the parents take turns in staying home).
- Every family raises their children as they see fit, and comments regarding parenting from other people may be considered offensive.



- At the playground or kindergarten, it is not polite to borrow another child's personal toys or bicycle without asking.
- Babies sleep outdoors in the winter, and that's normal. Fresh air ensures good, deep sleep.
- In autumn and winter, when your child is sitting/lying in a stroller, remember that the child will be even colder than you - both of you should dress accordingly (hat, gloves, boots).
- Sick children stay home from kindergarten/school.
- Breastfeeding a baby in public is a matter of personal choice for each mother.



- In Estonia, there is strong emphasis on the mental health of both children and parents.
- Each and every teenager receives free-of-charge 24/7 support and advice. lasteabi.ee/en
- Crisis counseling is offered to women with children who have been victims of violence or who have suffered from domestic violence. palunabi.ee/en

6. School/Kindergarten

Parents collaborate with the school and maintain close contact through e-school where you can view your child's homework and grades, communicate with the teachers and exchange information.



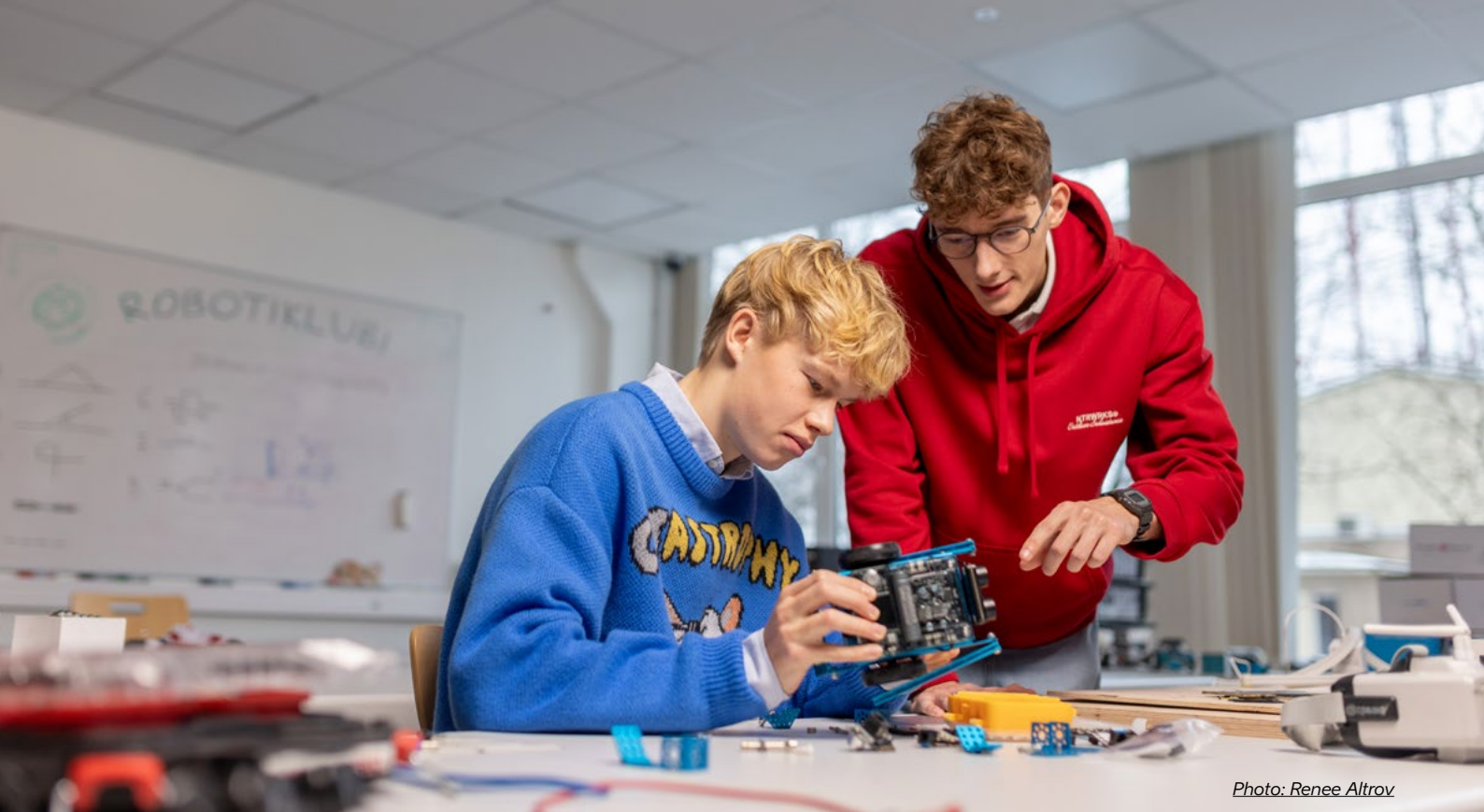


Photo: Renee Altrov

- Every school and kindergarten has its own rules and agreements.
- On September first, children dress somewhat more formally and bring flowers to their teachers. The same is done on the last day of school. On these days, the opening and closing ceremonies of the academic year take place.
- Teachers perform development and performance evaluations — parents are told how their child is developing in kindergarten or at school.
- If a child has a birthday, it depends on (class) agreements whether and how it is celebrated at school/kindergarten.



- A professional nurse is available on site in schools who keeps an eye on the children's health. Parental permission is required for vaccination and information about this is provided by the homeroom teacher.
- Children must wear sports clothes for Physical Education class at school. After PE class, the children shower up and change into their school clothes.
- In kindergarten, children are offered breakfast, lunch and an evening snack, while school provides school lunch. Parents must pay for school meals, but children are guaranteed affordable, healthy hot food.

7. Things

Garbage sorting is mandatory. We care about cleanliness everywhere and do not throw our garbage, including cigarette butts, on the street or into nature.





- If you lost something, you may get it back either from the police or the company that provided the service (e.g. bus company) or via a local Facebook group (e.g. "Leitud Tartus" (Found in Tartu)).
- We take any things that we find and that are not ours to the police or try to find the thing's owner.
- We take empty containers to the reverse vending machine so that they can be recycled (and we also get our money back).
- We place increasingly more value on reusing things. For example, we repair them, make them into something new, or take them to a second hand store.

8. Food

Traditional foods include black rye bread, kama, blood sausage, meat jelly, potatoes in various forms, sauerkraut, Baltic sprat, *mulgi* cabbage, *mulgi* porridge, etc.



Photo: Kairi Tähe

- Eating with a knife and fork is a rule rather than an option and young children are also taught to eat properly with a knife and fork. We use our hands to eat only certain foods (pizza, sandwiches, burgers, and similar street food).
- Traditional foods include black rye bread, kama (a dish made from a mix of roasted barley, rye, oats, and peas), blood sausage, meat jelly, potatoes in various forms, sauerkraut, Baltic sprat, mulgi cabbage (stewed sauerkraut), mulgi porridge (barley and potato porridge), etc.
- Baltic sprat sandwiches are a very traditional dish for any celebration of something truly Estonian, such as the country's Restoration of Independence Day.
- Dairy products are important: cottage cheese, milk, sour cream, sour milk / buttermilk, yogurt, kefir, butter, and curd are everyday dishes, plus *kohuke* (sweet curd cheese snack) and pudding for dessert.
- The ice cream selection in grocery stores is versatile.
- One may purchase and consume alcohol starting from the age of 18. Alcohol is sold between 10:00/10 AM and 22:00/10 PM. Consuming alcoholic beverages in public places is prohibited. NB! Alcohol and driving do not mix — Estonia fosters a zero tolerance policy, meaning that the permitted blood alcohol content while driving is zero per mille.



- It's perfectly okay to refuse alcohol or a certain food or drink if you don't want it — this will not offend anyone.
- There are no rules as regarding finishing all of the food or leaving leftovers - everyone eats what they want and as much as they want; however, if you make your plate yourself, only take as much as you will actually eat.
- Pork is common in Estonia and is eaten especially as a Christmas roast and as shashlik in the summer. Fish and poultry are also common dishes.
- For Estonians, a hot meal (a roast, soup) is important, especially at lunchtime.
- Mushroom and berry picking are customary autumn activities that many people engage in.



- In the fall, if our garden provides more garden produce than we need for ourselves, we happily share it with others – for example, containers filled with apples are placed by the roadside for anyone to take an apple for free and without needing to ask for permission.
- When asked about how we liked the food (“Kuidas maitses?” literally translates to “How did it taste?”), the answer is usually “Hästi” (“Good”) or “Väga hästi” (“Very good”) — meaning you liked the food. However, the answer “Huvitav” (“Interesting”) indicates you didn’t like the food, rather.
- Tipping is not mandatory, but you may leave a tip if you want to. If you are satisfied with the service, you may leave as much tip as you like.

9. Communication

Becoming friends with locals takes time, as trust is built over time.





- Estonian is the official language. Russian and English are also spoken.
- Feel free to say that you wish to communicate in Estonian. Don't be afraid to make mistakes and take advantage of any and every opportunity to learn Estonian as it will make your life easier.
- The question "Kuidas läheb?" ("How are you?") is usually answered with "Hästi" ("Fine") or "Normaalselt" (literally "Normally", meaning "Okay"). No one expects you to tell them your life story. For example, if you add, "I just started learning Estonian," ("Hakkasin just õppima eesti keelt."), it gives the other person a chance to ask about it and spark a conversation.

- In Estonia, people keep their distance (about 1-2 m from another person). Not everyone likes to hug, let alone kiss. Only those closest to you (family, friends) are allowed to come physically close.
- In public places, we try to be quiet so as not to disturb others. We make video and voice calls in a private place. On public transport, we try to speak on the phone briefly and quietly. It is rude to put a video or voice call on speakerphone in a public space.
- We value honesty and directness. Small talk is practically absent in our communication, we may say a few sentences about the weather and then get straight to the point. We often ignore hints and nonverbal cues, assuming that we are told directly how things are or what needs to be done.
- Estonian society has an individualistic worldview, meaning that personal well-being is prioritized over the well-being of the community as a whole. People tend to stay within their own narrow circle of friends and do not actively seek out new contacts.
- It will most likely take a lot for a local to invite guests to their home, we do not invite just anyone.

10. Relationships and gender roles

The importance of gender roles has decreased in society, there are no gender-specific professions or jobs. Both partners are involved in raising children and doing household chores.



Photo: Renee Altrov



Photo: Renee Altrov

- Cohabitation is very common — living together, having children, and purchasing real estate, cars, etc., but not officially being married. This is a completely normal and accepted way of life.
- In Estonia, people may choose to get married or to cohabit. Both same-sex and opposite-sex couples can get married.
- Divorce and ending a relationship are accepted in society.



- Blended family — the number of divorces is high and if new love is found, both partners may have children from a previous relationship/marriage. Such blended families look for suitable living arrangement where the children divide their time between different families. In the event of a divorce, both parents have equal rights in raising the child.
- Same-sex couples — everyone is equal in Estonia. It is not customary to discuss or condemn another person's choice in public. Insults, bullying, public threats, humiliation, and other forms of discrimination based on gender, religion, race, or language are unacceptable and punishable by law.

11. Important dates and holidays

The Song Festival is a big party — if possible, folk costumes or folk costume elements are worn.



- The Anniversary of the Republic of Estonia is celebrated on February 24 — people gather with family or friends, watch the Anniversary concert (broadcast by ETV) and listen to the president's speech. National dishes are served with Baltic sprat sandwiches and stuffed eggs usually also present on the table.
- Christmas is spent with loved ones - family and relatives. The traditional Christmas dinner includes blood sausage, sauerkraut, oven roast (pork or turkey), potatoes, gingerbread, mulled wine, and Christmas beer.
- New Year's Eve is more often celebrated with friends.
- Shrove Tuesday (February-March) is celebrated by sledding, eating Shrove Tuesday buns, and making pea soup.
- Easter or Resurrection Sunday is celebrated by dyeing eggs. Easter is certainly less connected to the church in Estonia than in many other countries around the world.
- Birthdays can but do not have to be celebrated. Kindergartens, schools, and work places have different arrangements for celebrating birthdays, and it's worth asking about this in advance.



Photo: Georg Svidlov

- Summer parties and Midsummer's Day: Barbecuing is popular. On Midsummer's Day, people build bonfires and gather with friends.
- Weddings — everything depends on what's (financially) available to you as well as your preferences. There is no mandatory program.
- Funerals: There are two options — secular or religious, coffin or urn burial. The funeral service often depends on relevant preferences of the deceased.

12. Shopping

There are many self-service checkouts in grocery stores across Estonia. If you need help, ask a staff member. Occasionally, random checks of your shopping cart are carried out.





- People stand in line without physically touching another person.
- Servers are treated politely, greeted and thanked.
- Customer cards guarantee discounts and possible personalized offers from the respective store chain.
- It is customary for people to bring their own shopping bags. Plastic and paper bags are available for a fee.
- Most shops accept payment cards. ATMs enable you to deposit and withdraw cash.



Photo: Priidu Saart

- In large grocery stores, to make a purchase request at the culinary counter and meat/fish counter, you must first take a number from relevant machine: people are served at the counter based on these numbers.
- We return deposit marked containers to the reverse vending machine located at every major grocery store. In return for the containers, the reverse vending machine issues a receipt for the deposit value which can be redeemed at the cash register of the store operating the vending machine.

13. Public transport, traffic

Allow people to exit first before entering.
This applies everywhere, on the bus, in
the elevator, at the store.



Photo: Renee Altrov

- A red traffic light is prohibitive – neither cars nor pedestrians can move.
- Every passenger must fasten their seatbelt in a car (including a taxi) and on a long-distance bus.
- On public transport, it is preferable to sit alone and not interact if possible.
- On public transport, backpacks are removed so as not to disturb other passengers.
- We avoid talking on our mobile phones on public transport. If we absolutely need to talk to someone, we try to be discreet. If we wish to listen to music/podcasts, we use headphones.
- Pay attention to the markings on the bus indicating priority (for those with small children, strollers, the elderly, etc.).

14. Nature

Nodding or saying a friendly hello to people you meet on a forest trail, in a bog, or just while hiking is a pleasant custom.



Photo: Giulio Gröbert



Photo: Priidu Saart

- Nature is accessible to everyone as a beloved place to be that is everywhere around us. Nature helps relieve stress and has a versatile beneficial effect.
- Estonia is characterized by its abundance of bogs. There are good hiking trails, swimming in the summer, beautiful sunrises, region specific natural sites, peace and quiet. Do not venture into the bog and swamp alone as it can be dangerous, especially if you go swimming in the bog (unable to get out of the water afterwards).
- RMK (Riigimetsa Majandamise Keskus – State Forest Management Centre) has ensured that nature is freely accessible to everyone — take a look at the marked forest trails where you can go for a walk, and campfire sites for barbecuing.



Photo: Long-Nong Huang

- It is important to bring back home all of the items you took with you into nature, i.e. make sure that no garbage (candy wrappers, sandwich wrappers, beverage bottles) is left in the natural environment.
- You may pick mushrooms and berries in the forest, but do it knowingly and wisely so that only edible things end up in your basket. Locals have their own secret mushroom and berry spots, the location of which they do not want to reveal to others.
- Venturing into nature, dress in light colored, windproof and rainproof clothing and charge your phone. Go into the forest with a companion, and if you get lost, call the emergency number 112 as soon as possible (the phone battery drains quickly in the cold and it gets dark early in autumn and winter).

15. Sauna culture

If there is a body of water near the sauna, people go to the water to cool off in between sauna sessions. In winter, some people jump into an ice hole or roll around in the snow.



Photo: Rauno Liivand

- Going to the sauna is never mandatory, and there is no offense if you refuse. Every family or group of friends has their own sauna habits – if you are invited to the sauna, it is always worth investigating how it is done in that particular group/environment.
- The temperature in the steam room of a classic sauna is 70-110 degrees Celsius.
- People go to the sauna alone, with family and friends, with coworkers – with whomever you like.
- All spas have a variety of saunas.
- Traditionally, people go to the sauna naked and with people of the same sex (men separately, women separately). Attending a mixed sauna, people often wrap a towel around their body. In public saunas, people wear swimwear.
- Remove your jewelry before going to the sauna – it gets too hot.

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“If you want to know more about any of the items,
kindly ask your neighbor or a local — they will be
happy to help you. It’s a good way to start a
conversation with locals.”



Photo: Priidu Saart