



Old Town Tallinn
Photo Credit: Maria Tahamtani

Pigeons in Tallinn and Turtles in Tartu

By Maria Tahamtani

When visiting Tallinn, Estonia, I expected to be met with the magic of the Christmas Market, to be entranced by the medieval fairytale atmosphere that dominates its Old Town, and to feast on a variety of hearty foods such as hand-stuffed meat pies, grilled game sausages, and ox soup served in traditional clay bowls. I also expected to feel the history underfoot, and to walk where courageous men and women of the small Baltic country once stood, displaying their quiet power in the effort to regain independence from the

Soviet Union through a peaceful revolution of unified song. However, on my first journey along the narrow, winding cobblestone pathways that meander through much of the city, the one thing I could never have expected was perhaps the very thing that made me smile the most: large pigeon sculptures repeatedly and strategically placed in the streets of Tallinn. The first time I came across a couple of the birds, I watched as a few small children who, no taller than the pigeons themselves, danced and played

on the backs of the sculptures, jumping on and off of them and running in between them, as if they were playing hide-and-seek. Content with these concrete reminders of nature, I smiled and walked on. They were, after all, a pleasant surprise and a sweet addition to the storybook quality of Tallinn. However, the further along I walked, the more sculptures I noticed and the more I began to question their purpose. It took gaining a familiarity with the whole city to finally understand that these pigeons were not decorative nor



Tallinn, Estonia
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a temporary art installation, but in fact served a unique purpose within the city. As it turns out, the birds act as concrete barriers to vehicle traffic on certain streets and street corners throughout the capital city.

Tallinn commissioned local artist Seaküla Simson to create the original ninety-seven birds which were installed beginning in 2006. While over subsequent years some of the birds have been moved so as not to block the most efficient delivery routes for products and services, the spirit of the pigeons remain a testament to the ability of a city to keep nature front-and-center in the most unexpected of ways. Simson was given free reign when it came to choosing the animal that would be so prominently featured, but said he chose pigeons simply because they are, and have always been, such a prominent part of everyday life in Tallinn.

Reinforcing the nature that is already so much a part of the culture of the city through these traffic barriers is not unique to Estonia's capital. Just about every major city in Estonia also commissioned the creation of some sort of natureful traffic barrier that would be distinct to their cities. As a result, visitors will find large sculptures of turtles in the southern city of Tartu, large strawberries in Vilijandi, and small polar bears as part of the landscape of the city of Jõhvi.

In fact, nature permeates the streets of Estonia and the lives of those who call the country home



Children Playing Among the Pigeons in Old Town, Tallinn
Photo Credit: Maria Tahamtani



Turtles in Tartu, Estonia
Photo Credit: Cheryl Rofer



Cranberries along the Jõhvi Promenade
Photo Credit: zakrit_dver, Live Journal

in more creative ways than one. Walk along the Jõhvi promenade, for instance, and you'll be instantly surrounded by the larger than life cranberry seating and lighting that were inspired by the moniker "jõhvikas," a word which not only means a resident of Jõhvi but also means "cranberries" in Estonian. Explore historical Old Town Tallinn instead, and you'll most certainly come upon expanses of trees interspersed throughout the city around which parks have been created, along with wide street medians that provide more space for nature to flourish. This comes as no surprise, however, for a country which boasts that half of its land area remains forest, while another fifth of the land is preserved as national parks and nature reserves.

This past year, the [Republic of Estonia celebrated the 100 year anniversary](#) of its independence. As part of their year-long continued celebration, the country also took the opportunity to define its future, proudly unveiling the "[Estonia 100 Hiking Series](#)" in order to reacquaint residents with the wondrous nature in their own backyard. Estonia wanted its residents to know that natureful experiences like these need not require travel outside the country's borders. The hiking series featured an experience suitable for just about any resident, including both traditional hiking and more water-based adventures via kayaks and canoes, along with "nature observation, mushrooming and berry picking hikes, car and other motorised vehicle hikes and

also kick-sled and skate hikes" throughout 2018. In parallel, the Environment Department of Tallinn concluded its two-year long effort called [NATTOURS](#), which they led jointly with the City of Helsinki, Finland, to provide more opportunities for nature tourism and education among the two closely linked cities. This environmental-tourism based effort included many technological innovations, supplying residents with easy access to educational information on all objects of nature in the two cities, as well as maps and GPS-guided nature tours for residents and visitors alike.

I was fortunate to be among the masses of excited citizens gathered in Tallinn's Freedom Square counting down from 100 with Estonia's President to welcome in the 2018 New Year. What I didn't realize then, in that moment, however, was just how meaningful that countdown would be for a country that is continuously advancing toward its future of green.

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