

# ESTONIA

Estonia borders the Baltic Sea and Gulf of Finland. Including more than 1,500 islands, its diverse terrain spans rocky beaches, old-growth forest, and many lakes. Formerly part of the Soviet Union, it is dotted with castles, churches, and hilltop fortresses. The capital, Tallinn, is known for its preserved Old Town, museums, and observation tower. Estonia is the northernmost of the three Baltic states and has linguistic ties with Finland. Since regaining its independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Estonia has become one of the most economically successful of the European Union's newer members. The national language is Estonian and the currency is the euro.

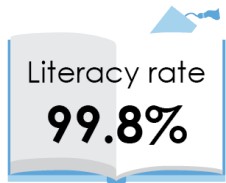


Population  
**1,327,387**



**17,463** MI<sup>2</sup>

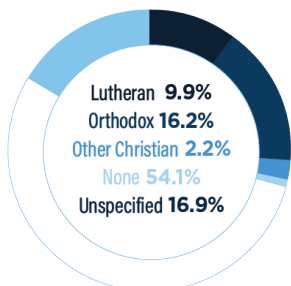
Roughly twice the area  
of New Jersey



## Ethnicities



## Religions



## FAMILY LIFE

Households usually consist of two generations, with grandparents and extended relatives living separately. Generally, both parents work and are considered equal authority figures in the family. Communication between family members is informal and direct.

It is considered normal for family members to both spend time alone and to pursue individual activities. Meals are commonly eaten together, but family members may have meals separately depending on individual schedules. When a family member would like to borrow something, it is generally understood that they must ask first.

Children are often responsible for specific household chores. Sometimes these responsibilities may follow traditional gender roles, such as daughters would be more likely to help out with cooking than sons.

Commonly, both parents exert equal authority in family decisions, but fathers tend to handle financial matters. In an effort to teach life skills, teenagers are expected to manage their own time and schedule. Some families give allowances to their children and teenagers may work part-time. Parents may be involved in monitoring what students do online.

Owning pets is common and they are often kept outside of the house in the countryside. Pets are not usually treated as members of the family.

## FRIENDSHIP

Friendships in Estonia are often formed in school, on the internet, and during extracurricular activities. It is acceptable for teenagers to socialize in groups or one-on-one with friends of both genders. Estonian teenagers use the term "friend" casually and when referring to acquaintances they may not know very well. Parents often know the friends of their children in the countryside, but this is not common in cities and towns.

Sharing money between friends is normal, but it is always expected to be returned. Teenagers are accustomed to maintaining personal space when interacting with other people. Making eye contact is a normal way of displaying respect in conversation with others. Teenagers are usually direct in conversation but tend to be modest in verbalizing feelings. Negative emotions are usually only shared among close friends.

## SCHOOL LIFE

In Estonia, there are both Russian and Estonian high schools. Students are primarily evaluated on homework and periodic written exams. Students study most subjects at the same level of difficulty, but in larger schools classes may separate for more advanced English or math. The core classes are obligatory for all students and each school offers eight different elective courses, such as psychology, religious studies, or foreign languages. Students tend to dress formally to school, but some also wear jeans and sweaters. Schools typically have dining halls where students usually eat lunch.

The severity of consequences for breaking rules varies from school to school. Students will not be expelled for fighting but may be given a bad grade for behavior. A movement against bullying is spreading. The punishments for cheating are not as serious as in the U.S., and a student might be asked to retake the exam or receive a bad grade, but will not be failed.

Nicknames are not used in the classroom between teachers and students. Teachers may allow students to call them by their first name, but only if the teacher approves this beforehand. Communication between parents and teachers is minimal since parents usually monitor their children's academic performance and school behavior through a school web page that includes the student's behavior and grades.

There are clubs available in most schools which may include performing arts and sports. Most students are involved in extracurricular activities outside of school.

## FOOD

Religious diets or fasting are not common practices, but dietary concerns such as lactose-intolerance and gluten-free and vegetarian diets are becoming more widespread. Food portions tend to be relatively big in restaurants. It is not common to ask to have something wrapped up to take home, but is becoming more acceptable.

## RELIGION

Attending religious services regularly is not common, but devoted families may attend church every Sunday. It is common for only parents and grandparents to attend services, and families often go together on holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Some major holidays include Mart's Day and Kadri's day, which are both similar to Halloween. Another holiday, Jaan's Day, is celebrated with bonfires and a late night of singing and dancing.

## PERSONAL CARE

Estonians are used to showering and changing clothes daily, but items like jeans may be worn multiple times. Parents might expect their daughters to do their own laundry, but this would not be a common expectation for sons.



**The Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program** is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. FLEX provides competitively selected secondary school students from 22 countries in Europe and Eurasia with the opportunity to spend the academic year in the U.S. living with a volunteer host family and attending a host high school. Begun in 1993, FLEX now has over 29,000 alumni.