

Russian tourists in Tallinn: perceptions and experiences

A research report

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Introduction

Russian tourists are the second largest groups of international visitors in Tallinn. In 2019, 143,990 tourists from Russia stayed in the city of Tallinn (Accommodation Statistics, Statistics Estonia 2020). The number of Russian visitors has steadily increased after a sharp drop in 2015 linked to the rouble inflation and the geopolitical situation in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea. The unfolding coronavirus situation has cut tourism short with yet unknown consequences for the tourism sector. Nonetheless it can be expected that also in the future Russian tourists remain an important group of travellers for Tallinn. This report provides close insights into their perceptions, examining Russian tourists' reasons for travelling to Tallinn, their impressions and experiences of the city as well as their perceptions of Tallinn's history.

The report is based on **28 semi-structured interviews** conducted in June 2019 with Russian tourists who were visiting Tallinn at the moment of research or had recently travelled there. Interviews were conducted with individual participants as well as in small groups of two or three people who were travelling together. In total, **48 people participated in the study**. Interviews were conducted mainly in three places – Tallinn Bus Terminal, Railway station and cruiseship terminal. Additional interviews were conducted in the city centre and online, with tourists who had travelled to Tallinn in the same year.

The research was conducted as part of the project "Tourism as Memory-Making" (2019-2021, ES/R011680/1), which examines Russian tourism to post-Soviet cities. It is financed by the UK Economic and Social Research Council and led by Dr Alena Pfoser, Lecturer in Communication and Media Studies, at Loughborough University, UK.

Tourist backgrounds

The large majority of tourists interviewed were travelling from Moscow and St Peterburg, followed by tourists travelling from other cities in the Western part of Russia such as Arkhangelsk and Nizhny Novgorod. The majority of participants were travelling in small groups of 2-4, either as a couple or with relatives (in several cases, adult children and their parents). There were also several individual travellers among the interviewees. Participants covered a wide age range, with interviewed participants being between 20 and 82 years old.

Participants spent between 1 and 12 days in Tallinn – apart from the cruiseship tourists who come only for one day, most participants stayed between 3-5 days in the city. The majority had visited Tallinn earlier, with five of them having visited the city 5 times and more.

Decision to travel to Tallinn

Most participants mentioned the **interest in the city** as the main driving factor that brought them to Tallinn. Those who visited for the first time mentioned that they had heard many positive stories about Tallinn and were recommended to visit the city by family members, friends and acquaintances. As one participant, aged 29, remarked: *"We knew that the Old Town here is very beautiful, we had a look and decided to come and see it ourselves."* Several participants also

mentioned more generally an **interest in Estonia or the Baltic region** and also referred to **historical connections to Russia** that they were interested in exploring.

Secondly, participants also mentioned the **proximity** as well as **ease and affordability of travel** to Tallinn. In comparison to other destinations, Tallinn is easy to reach from Russia, particularly from Moscow and St Petersburg where most travellers were from.

As one participant, aged 22, said: *This is an affordable place where you can come from St. Petersburg quickly, conveniently, comfortably, by bus and without spending a lot of money on it. One can relax, take a walk and go back home.*

The connections by bus and train are considered well priced and relatively comfortable, making it possible to come to Tallinn for a short stay. Some participants decided to travel to Tallinn because travel to other destinations was considered more costly.

Thirdly, several interviewed participants came because of **personal connections** to Tallinn, visiting friends or visiting places they had lived in earlier (roots tourism). Several participants were children of military personnel that used to be based in Estonia during the Soviet period.

Finally, some tourists, particularly cruiseship passengers came to Tallinn because it was **part of a round trip** that they had booked and is **well-connected** to other cities.

Tourists' interest in Tallinn, its heritage and architecture was also clear when participants spoke about their **expectations before their trip**. "*Seeing the beautiful old town*" and its medieval heritage and "*enjoying the beauty of the city*" were mentioned by a large number of participants. Participants also mentioned that they expected to relax in Tallinn and have a good time, to visit museums and enjoy good hospitality and to return to a familiar and loved place.

The image of Tallinn as a beautiful and special place is not only circulated by family, friends and acquaintances at home but has been formed over time as part of Russian cultural memory.

As one tourist, 42 years old, from Vologda said "*In Russian and Soviet culture, there was a common opinion that Tallinn was a foreign country, better than Riga, better than Vilnius, because it is the most medieval. I heard and read about it. In our region, visiting Tallinn is quite popular tourism, and Petersburgers go there, our people go there.*"

Places visited and positive impressions

Apart from the Old Town, which was visited by all participants, the most popular places for Russian tourists were the Kadriorg palace and park, different city centre parks, museums (including the Maritime museum, Open Air museum, Kumu, historical museums), Pirita and the Pirita Promenaad as well as the city beaches. Several participants also mentioned having booked a guided tour and attended organ concerts in the city centre.

Participants mentioned a **range of positive impressions and experiences** that made their stay special, referring mostly to the aesthetic and historical value of Tallinn's heritage and its quiet nature but also, to a somewhat lesser extent, its modern and developed character, excellent infrastructure and hospitality industry.

Aesthetic and historical value of Tallinn: The most important positive impressions that participants gained during their stay were in relation to the beauty of Tallinn, in particular of its old town. Tallinn was regularly called a “beautiful”, “attractive”, “mesmerising” city that what “pleasant to look at”. Alongside with valuing the aesthetic qualities of the city, participants also acknowledged the historical value of architecture and the high quality of its preservation. They particularly valued the completeness of the preserved Medieval heritage (participant, aged 45 from Moscow: “there’s not one separate old monument, the whole city has been preserved – this was impressive”). Participants were also impressed by the Old Town’s “narrow lanes”, “interesting buildings and facades”, and the beauty of the town hall square. The preservation of the city centre, alongside with the tourist offer available (such as the Olde Hansa) and the lack of ads were felt to create an authentic experience. Several participants showed general admiration for what they saw as the valuing of heritage in Estonia.

Participant, aged 58, from Moscow: “Well done, Estonians! They look after their old town. Here, in Estonia, in general, there is a very reverent attitude to antiquity. If you change something, they try to do it very carefully, even outside of the Old Town”.

Cosiness and tranquillity: A large number of participants also characterised Tallinn as a “quiet” and “cosy” city. Tallinn was pleasant and comfortable to visit, it was considered “compact”, “pleasant” and “measured” but also “soulful” and “warm”. These comments refer to partly to the small size of Tallinn in comparison to other capitals, the comfort of walking the city as well as the relative tranquillity in the evening. They also capture the general character of the city as perceived by tourists: a special atmosphere of the city and the likeable mentality of its inhabitants. These qualities were not only assigned to Tallinn as a city but in some cases also to Estonia as a whole.

A modern and developed city with a friendly service industry: Tallinn was not only perceived as old, cosy and quiet but also as a developed and flourishing city. Participants who had visited the city before mentioned that Tallinn had changed significantly over the years. They mentioned the construction of new buildings, a beautification of the city and more generally, what they saw as a “tasteful” transformation. Several participants mentioned that Tallinn appeared well-looked after and clean, had a friendly service culture and excellent tourism infrastructure and shopping opportunities. For a more detailed analysis of tourists’ encounters with the service industry see section on “Interactions with and perceptions of locals” below.

Interesting museums and sights: A limited number of participants mentioned the interesting and unusual museums such as the ethnographic museum and the maritime museum as special experiences during their stay.

Negative impressions and experiences

Participants were overall very satisfied with their visit. This was also reflected in the high number of return visits, and visitors who indicated their wish to visit the city again in the near future. Despite the overall positive impressions gathered during their stay, some participants noted a few (comparatively minor) negative impressions and experiences.

Visa/ entry to Estonia: Russian citizens need to obtain a visa to travel to Estonia. This can be experienced negatively, particularly by participants who regularly travel to Estonia. One participant

who visits Estonia every year mentioned that in contrast to the 5-year visas she was issued earlier, visas now tend to be shorter, for a year or less, which makes the travel more cumbersome. Two participants also mentioned negative experiences at the passport control, long waits and unfriendly treatment, which made them feel unwelcome. There is a general feeling among some participants that while the tourism industry is very welcoming to Russian tourists, the interstate relations between Estonia and Russia are less positive and affect their experience when it comes to visa issues and passport controls.

Local perceptions of Russians/ outsiders: All participants felt that Tallinn was a friendly and hospitable city. There were a few instances however when participants noted minor negative experiences of travelling in Tallinn as a Russian. One participant reported that they were guided in the wrong direction. Another group of travellers felt that they were not welcome at the song festival (Laulupidu), which took place during their visit. They felt the event was not advertised well and they were unable to secure tickets when they heard about it, leaving the impression that tourists were not invited to join.

Crowded centre/ museumification of city centre: Several participants also mentioned mass tourism to Tallinn as a negative experience, in particular in relation to the crowded city centre at daytime. While large numbers of tourists didn't spoil the trip, tourists prefer the city to be quieter.

One participant, aged 70, from St Petersburg recalled her experiences of Tallinn during the Soviet period: *"There were small cafes, it was more comfortable, intimate, now it has been put on an industrial scale. But nonetheless we have good impressions of the city today."*

Two participants also mentioned that the old town appeared more like a museum or toy rather than a lived authentic space.

High expenses: Some participants also mentioned that the prices were relatively high, due to the high euro conversion rate but also in comparison to the other Baltic capitals, Riga and Vilnius.

Getting around: Participants articulated mixed experiences in relation to getting around in Tallinn. Several participants also noted the ease of moving around in the city, due to the city's compactness and its well-organised public transport system. Others had less positive experiences: one participant, who travelled by car, felt that the city is uncomfortable to drive and had high parking charges. Two further participants found the public transport system difficult to understand without internet access, saying that information available at the tram and bus stops were difficult to read.

Interactions with and perceptions of locals

Apart from those who visited friends, participants largely interacted with people working in the service industry during their stay. These relations were perceived as **very positive and friendly** (only one out of 48 people noted a negative incident).

Participant, aged 71, St Petersburg: *"We liked the people, they were very friendly. They gave us a warm welcome, they were friendly everywhere."*

Participant, aged 30, Moscow: *“People are very friendly. Everyone we turned to tried to help us, for example when we didn’t know something, they tried to help. Everything was very positive.”*

Participant, aged 29, Nizhnyi Novgorod: *“When they saw that I was from Russia, people themselves switched to Russian, although I always tried to start in English.”*

Participants noted that **many locals speak Russian**, which makes it easy for them to get by. A few participants, like the one quoted above, preferred to use English to avoid negative reactions, or mixed English and Russian depending on what generation they spoke to.

Some participants indicated that relations between Estonia and Russia had been complex and difficult and experienced some insecurity whether they would be welcome. But overall they perceived that the relations between the countries had significantly improved, something that was also reflected in how they were treated as visitors. Participant, aged 29, Nizhnyi Novgorod, said: *“I was surprised there was no Russophobia in Tallinn”*. Some tourists felt that they were treated well because they brought income to Estonia as tourists.

Tourist, aged 77, from St. Petersburg: *“People now have a positive attitude towards Russians. We are now a source of income for them, but before we were the yoke.”*

Interpretations of Tallinn’s history

The research was particularly interested in visitors’ perceptions of Tallinn’s history. Respondents were asked about what they associated with Tallinn’s history and what they perceived as the most important, best and most difficult periods in the city’s history. The responses are interesting for the diversity of interpretations as well as the diplomatic tone of many responses. They reflect the **importance of the Medieval heritage** for the city. A large number of participants also **acknowledged Estonian suffering under Soviet rule** and the **significance of independence and sovereignty** for the Estonian nation; a position that **co-exists with positive interpretations of the period of Soviet and Russian imperial rule**, including some nostalgia for the Soviet period that can be found among other participants.

In general, the questions about history were difficult to answer for several respondents. This was partly due to their limited historical knowledge and fear to “get it wrong”. Many participants were also aware that questions about the interpretation of history were sensitive and subject to different interpretations. Several participants stated that locals themselves needed to decide what the best and worst times of their history were, pointing at least in some cases to participants’ recognition that local perceptions of history differ from those held in Russia.

Most important period

The **Middle Ages** were seen as the most significant period in the city’s history. Participants mentioned the foundation of the city and the building of the historical centre as well as Tallinn’s status as a Hanseatic city. This point about the importance of the Medieval history is consistent with participants’ motivations to visit Tallinn for its medieval architecture mentioned earlier. Other

participants noted the **shared history with Russia** as most important period in Tallinn's history – the incorporation into tsarist Russia as well as the Soviet period, the latter of which was seen as a significant period due to the expansion of the city as well as its economic development. Some participants also noted the period of **Estonian independence** since 1991 as the most important part of Tallinn's history.

Participant, aged 68, from Petrozavodsk: 1991, when Estonia became independent. For us, it may have been a little unusual and difficult, because we thought that it was all one whole, but we understand you in this matter.

Best period for Tallinn

Many respondents found it difficult to answer when being asked about the best period in Tallinn's history and felt that Tallinners need to decide this for themselves. Of those who indicated a specific period, most responses focused on the **post-Soviet period**, the years after Estonia regained its independence as well as the time after joining the EU. Independence and sovereignty for the Estonian nation and to a somewhat minor degree, economic development, were given as reasons for this being the best period for Tallinn.

A smaller number of participants stated the **(late) Soviet period as the best period** in the history of Tallinn. Participants mentioned the special atmosphere in the city, the good development and connected to that high living standard and consumer choice available as well as the lively and diverse character of the city. The quotations below show responses from a couple in the 70s who saw both the Soviet and post-Soviet period positively.

Participant, aged 70 from St Petersburg: Compared to where we lived, it was the West, understand? And now this West has changed, become European.

Participant, aged 77, from St Petersburg: It just became a real European city, without the smell of a Soviet one, understand?

Other responses focused on the **Middle Ages** as the time when the city was built, Russian empire as driving Tallinn's development and First Republic as time of first independence.

Worst period for Tallinn

When being asked about the worst times for Tallinn, most participants mentioned **the time of WWII and the Soviet annexation**, followed by those who struggled to answer. Participants particularly referred to experiences of Stalinism, deportations and repressions as well as the losing of sovereignty as the darkest episodes in the city's (and Estonia's) history. There was some variation within the responses with a few participants focusing more generally on WWII without mentioning Soviet-induced suffering as well as other mentioning the suffering under Stalinism shared by both Russians and Estonians. A larger number of participants however acknowledged **specific Estonian suffering**, noting for example that Estonia was a "country with tragic history" that "had to do a lot to preserve their identity".

Participant aged 44 from Moscow: "I think from the 1940s onwards (was the most difficult period). Estonia was taken captive and, as they say, both ordinary people and those who belonged to the government ended up in camps."

A few participants explicitly acknowledged that Soviet rule was an occupation, whereas other found this idea disturbing.

Other participants referred to the **Middle Ages and early modern period as the most difficult periods** due to the wars and different rulers. Some also mentioned the break-up of the Soviet Union as most difficult period, emphasising the economic difficulties in the **period of early independence** in the 1990s as well as the difficult status of the Russian-speaking minority within Estonia. These answers drew on the experiences of personal contacts within Estonia.

Summary of key findings

- Russian tourists come to Tallinn due to a general interest in the city, its distinct Medieval heritage, charm and tranquillity. Historical connections between Russia and Estonia and personal relations also attract Russians to travel to Tallinn but are secondary reasons.
- Impressions and experiences during the stay in Tallinn are very positive. Particular important are the aesthetic and historic value of the Old town heritage, Tallinn's "cosiness", the good urban infrastructure as well as the friendliness of the locals. These experiences mean that many of them plan to return to the city.
- Positive moments outweigh negative ones by far. Negative experiences refer to practical problems of entering the country (visa issues and border control), high expenses, problems of navigating the wider city space, the touristification of the city and in very few instances tourists feeling unwelcome.
- Some participants are sensitive of how they are perceived by locals and show awareness of different interpretations of history held locally. Tourists perceive relations with locals during their stay as very friendly and welcoming. While they hold a range of different interpretations of history, many of them show a diplomatic attitude when it comes to interpretations of the past and also demonstrate a significant understanding of Estonian history – such as the importance of independence and Stalinist repressions in national historical memory.