

# Sunday Herald travel

## CULTURAL REFORM



**ICONIC** The gothic Town Hall located in the old town of Tallinn. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

# Baltic fairy tale

Tallinn in Estonia is where the modern merges seamlessly with the ancient; it's a place that's enjoying its freedom from the shackles of the repressive Soviet regime.

**KALPANA SUNDER** is enchanted by the city, its people and world-class architecture.

“Our power was only our music, not weapons,” says Katrin, my local Estonian guide. I am at the Song Festival grounds, looking at the bowl shaped stadium where in September 1988, 3,00,000 Estonians gathered, many in folk costumes, to sing the Soviet repression away with patriotic songs. I am totally enchanted by this vision of a singing nation and today Tallinn does have a lot to sing about — it's a city that's enjoying its freedom from the shackles of the repressive Soviet regime.

### Wired city

Tallinn is Estonian for 'Danish Town' referring to the time it was under Danish control in the 13th century. Katrin tells me that Estonia was under foreign rule for centuries, first the Danes, then the Swedes, Germans and finally the Soviets. It seems to have made a smooth transition from communism to capitalism. The Estonians have embraced technology — it has one of the highest mobile phone ownership rates in the world today!

It's one of the most wired cities of the world where citizens pay parking tickets, file their taxes and vote online. 90 per cent of all bank transactions are done online, and Wi-Fi internet is in most cases, free. It also is a place of entrepreneurship and innovation as it's the birthplace of the internet phone service known to all — Skype. I am told that a start-up can register and commence business within a week here.

The Old Town in Tallinn used to be called Reval. Walking through the story-book old town, I come across a delectable warren of gingerbread houses, terracotta rooftops, cobblestone streets, turrets and spires and a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The picturesque Town Hall has been the focal point of the locals for eight centuries. It was the site of one execution (arising from a dispute over a bad omelette) and many tournaments. Today it's a Wi-Fi enabled sprawl of open air cafes, filled with tourists and locals, guzzling the cheap local beer, restaurants and even an Indian restaurant called Maharajah, owned predictably by a Sardar.

The Town Hall is Northern Europe's only surviving Gothic Town Hall. We see Old Toomas — Tallinn's mascot beaming down from the roof of the town hall. Legend goes that a plucky boy entered an archery contest, reserved exclusively for people from noble families. He managed to

hit the target on top of a pole and was made an apprentice guard. He later became an expert soldier with many heroic deeds to his credit. The locals noticed that this weather vane looked like him and started calling him Toomas. An ancient Tallinn institution, the Town hall Pharmacy (with its intriguing symbol of a cup with a snake around its stem) is touted as the 'oldest, continuously in operation pharmacy' in Europe (it was already on its third owner in the year 1422).

In medieval times the remedies sold here were black cats' blood, rabbit's heart and powdered unicorn, but now the shop dispenses the usual aspirin and other medicines. There is an interesting museum with ancient medical instruments, herbs and curiosities displayed.

We walk along Pikk jalg (the long leg), where the colourful guild houses stand in testimony of the powerful merchant and craft guilds that controlled life in Tallinn in the 14th century. Across the street is the bright white Holy Spirit church, with an octagonal tower and a brilliant outdoor clock. We understand that it was here, that after the Reformation, the first sermons in Estonian were conducted. My favourite here is the extravagant Renaissance style red, green and gold door of the 'House of Brotherhood of Black Heads'. Katrin tells me that this guild was for unmarried German merchants whose patron saint was Mauritius, a dark-skinned moor.

We walk through the photogenic Catherine's passage where craftsmen spin out marvelous creations of pottery and stained glass and glass blowers create multi-hued wares watched by tourists.

St Olaf's church named after the Norwegian king Olav was built as a landmark for ships docking in Tallinn. At one point this was the tallest building in the world with its 460 feet spire. Its tall spire was also its downfall-it was struck by lightning twice and burnt down. I hear that during the Soviet regime it was used to transmit radio signals by the KGB.

As we slowly walk uphill to Toompea, munching on roasted almonds (with sugar, herbs and spices added) sold by medieval maidens in carts, the chilly Baltic winds make our fingers numb. We reach the Dome church or the St Mary's Church, the main Lutheran Church for German nobility and re-built several times. The inside is Harry Potteresque filled with baroque chandeliers, epitaphs, tombs and on the

wall is exquisite coat of arms, battle flags and wings. Sea-gulls wheel above Toompea (this used to be a wooden castle) — the seat of Estonian power since 1227.

### Of present and future

It's on a steep limestone cliff (one of Estonia's important resources) and today its home to the Rigikogu, the nations' parliament and the pink, baroque palace that we see in the 18th century addition. From the Patkuli street viewing platform, we get the fairy tale view of Tallinn that is straight out of a glossy travel brochure — the red roofed pointy towers, the russet roofs fighting for space, the St Olav's spire rising dramatically, the harbor with ships ferrying Finns from Helsinki, just two hours away, and the modern, glass blocks in the distance cutting through time.

The castle square is between the seat of the Estonian Government and 19th century symbol of the Tsar's power in Estonia — the brilliant mustard hued onion domes of the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, a Russian Orthodox Church whose interiors are a riot of incense, glittering gold gilt and flickering candles. We walk along the colourful flower market near the old city gates and feast our eyes on the traditional jumpers, hats and gloves in a riot of styles and colours at the woolen market along the city walls.

We also see the other Tallinn — residential areas where the people live in leafy neighbourhoods. We drive through Pirita, the summer playground with its beaches and yachting harbor passing the striking Russalka Monument, which is a sculpture of an angel facing the sea which is a monument to a Russian military ship that sank on its way to Helsinki in 1893. Today it's the place where Russian couples lay flowers on their wedding day. Kadriorg, east of the city centre, is a where Peter the Great who conquered the Baltic's in the 1700s built an extravagant, baroque summer palace for his wife Catherine. This palace now is the Estonian Museum for foreign art.

There are ornate wooden mansions and a frozen park with a gazebo, fountains, jogging paths and people walking their dogs. The Presidential palace is also here as well as the uber modern KUMU Art Museum.

Come night, the wilder side of Tallinn emerges. On Party Street there are pubs, cocktail lounges, nightclubs, strip bars and gentleman bars with wild Estonians bursting into song, fuelled by vodka shots. I am also astounded by the number of casinos at every street corner. On the other side, the scars of the Soviet regime are still visible as people have preserved testimonies of the dark years like the KGB headquarters and the Patarei Prison.

I notice the reluctance of my guide to show me these places — she wants to move on and dwell in the present and future. Tallinn has reinvented itself and is rushing into the future (it is the European capital of culture in 2011) and I see this in the Freedom Square — the new gathering spot of the people. It's filled with cafes, benches and lively crowds.

I stop at a glass panel on the floor of the street at a corner of the square and peer down. In the depths below, I can see the foundation of the medieval Harju Gate Tower that once stood here. I remember this moment for a long time — the modern, merging seamlessly with the ancient in an utterly pleasing way!

## Vineyards as tourist attractions

With music, food offerings and other activities, Maryland's (US) wineries are offering a good time and a good sip to attract tourists. These wineries range from new buildings erected in former tobacco fields to sprawling waterfront estates.

## TREKKING

# Conquering nature's fury

Roaring winds from Mt Nanda Devi East were crashing the tent at our camp set at 5200 meters; one lift would take the tent down 300 meters onto the other side of the ridge. Ice axes, three-foot snow stakes and walking sticks that were used in anchoring the tent loosened out in no time. I used all that was in the tent to hold the three corners and stood firmly near the fourth and I knew I was losing ground and had to get out to safety abandoning the tent, my backpack and other essentials, which were ready to be dragged out in a matter of a few minutes.

After one bigger round of pounding, I heard Bharath and Takpa, as they rushed in kicking down the anchors into the snow and we were holding on to the tent for the next 45 minutes till Nanda Devi calmed down.

Locals believe that the Nanda Devi range is one of the most powerful and dangerous range in the Himalayas. They offer prayers to Nanda Devi to ensure that her fury does not bring doom. For a mountaineer, peaks in Pindari Glacier have always been the most challenging quests, given its inhospitable terrain and highly unpredictable weather conditions, but Pindari Glacier is also one of the most beautiful regions, and our quest to climb Mt Nanda Khat (6611 Meters) started for Loherkhet.

### Abundant flora and fauna

The trek from Loherkhet to Pindari Glacier (the glacier has receded in the last two decades) is scenic for the entire 50-km stretch. The trail is a traverse all through the huge rocky hills on one side, river Pindari gushing right below and rocky and lush green hills on the other side with several waterfalls that join river Pindari at the base. The rich forest cover on both sides of the river houses an amazing assortment of flora and fauna, birds like Eurasian Jays, Rose Finches, Snow Partridges, Snow Doves, Fly Catchers etc are found in abundance.

Even though the Rhododendron flowering season was over, there were still some pink patches here and there in contrast with lush green surroundings. The clear water in the river splashing the huge rocks, sound of the waterfalls all around and the wind was soothing. Dakuri, our first camping site gave us a 180 degree trailer of the snow covered peaks like Maikotli, Cream Roll, Sunderdhunga Col, Panwali Dwar, Bhanoti, Nanda Devi and its outer sanctuary ridge.

As we hiked up and down the hills crossing Khati, the chirping of the birds and the sound of the pleasant breeze was replaced by the roaring river; with water gushing down rapidly slamming the huge rocks in its way, and making its presence felt. Tiny brown dippers did entertain us for a while but the sound of the river was too loud to be ignored. As we reached a place called Dwali, where the water flowing from Kafni and Pindari Glaciers meet, it was a different world all together; the enormity of the water was so much that the hills on both sides are literally invisible.

As we moved to higher altitude, the trees and shrubs were replaced by grass and the trail opened into the meadows covered with the bright yellow Butter Cups and over four to five colours of Potentilla. With clear blue sky, and ice covered peaks far ahead, it looked like a carpet of flowers just laid out to shoot a scene in Yash Chopra movie.

As we approached the basecamp, the view of the magnificent peaks, constant noises of the avalanches and rock falls welcomed us. Given the logistical difficulties for



**LOCAL SPECIES** Sheep and other livestock is the main source of livelihood for locals.

a 12-member-team to manage itself for 20 to 30 days, we decided to set up our advance basecamp closer to the peak we would be attempting. As we got closer, we could sense that the furies of nature got stronger, calmer nights were replaced by thunder, snowfall and the day with gushing avalanches. At the advance basecamp, it was indeed a 360 degree effect, as we were completely surrounded by the peaks, Lamcher, 1, 2, 3, Nanda Kot, Changuch, Trails Pass, Nanda Khat, Panwali Dwar, Baljuri.

Our movement to higher camps got slower than planned, and sometimes we stayed in the tents for 24 to 48 hours. Route to Camp-1 was about four hours with two rock faces of 150 to 200 meters each, an ice wall and an altitude of 900 meters. Occupying Camp-1 with all that we needed took us eight days, and the approach to summit camp from there on was a snowfield filled with crevasses, snow bridges and a climb of three to four hours. However well trained or experienced mountaineer one could be, there is no possibility of competing with bad weather or taking an unsafe route trying to challenge nature at its worst.

### For the love of mountains

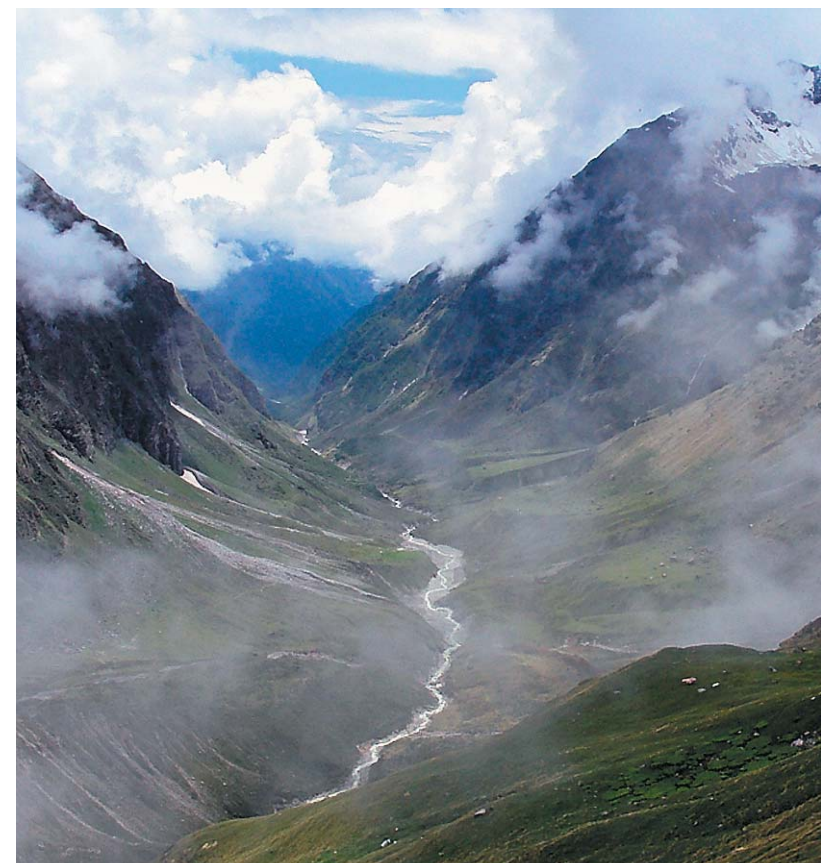
After days of waiting for the weather to get better, we finally got a clear window and the summit attempt started after splitting the team into two. As it was an alpine style climbing, we could do better with two teams and also the risk factor would be much lesser in smaller teams.

As one team conserved their energy at Camp-1 the lead team successfully attempted the summit, which took over 20 hours. The weather got worse at the end of 11 hours, but reaching the lower camp safely was a priority. The next day, the second team did not get lucky. They were to start the summit ascend by 10 pm but the weather never cleared. Heavy snowfall and a complete whiteout along with strong winds forced them to move down to safety with heavy hearts.

Every expedition, every summit attempt may not be always successful, but what drives a mountaineer to these mountains again and again seeking new highest and new challenges is the sheer love to be amidst magnificent peaks. Mountains do really bring out the best in you; one would look at them and wonder how tiny and insignificant human beings really are.

For a true mountaineer surviving the cold, facing the challenges, climbing the mountains is not a sport but it's an 'attitude' they love to live.

**KAVITHA REDDY**



**SKY-HIGH** The mighty Mount Nanda Devi. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR



**MEDIAEVAL** The Viru Gates is the entrance to the old town in Tallinn and date back to the 14th century.

“TALLINN IS ONE OF THE MOST WIRED CITIES OF THE WORLD WHERE CITIZENS PAY PARKING TICKETS, FILE THEIR TAXES AND VOTE ONLINE.”