

# 5 Cultural Differences When I Moved To Estonia.

## A British Expats View

David Bailey-Lauring



I moved to Estonia in the summer of 2014. Married to a Estonian with three young children, I wanted to try my chances at living in another country. So I packed up my belongings, convinced my wife that Estonia can be just as good as the UK, and headed off.

Of course I knew there would be cultural differences when I moved to Estonia. Every country has them, and living in Tallinn and discussing with others from around the world, these are the 5 cultural differences that I immediately noticed.

### 1. Directness and a no nonsense attitude

When communicating with Estonians I was always happy and smiley and attempted to express my emotion. Yes I admit, sometimes nonsensical but I was trying to make conversation.

For Estonians, less is always more. Best to be concise and to the point. For us Brits this seems very direct and is considered rude. Yet it is not, an Estonian doesn't have time to waste words so why bother with emotions and small talk (for example, we Brits love to talk about the weather). Talking a lot and taking centre stage is considered rude and disrespectful in Estonia. I'm now more practical and get straight to the point!

### 2. Silence is appreciated

An Estonian will not cut anyone off in a conversation, talk louder, or fight for attention. A polite Estonian waits for silence, a question or simply their turn to talk. If they have something to say that is. Estonians will only speak if they have something to offer an individual that could be useful to them (again relating to their no nonsense attitude).

So I know now that if you have nothing of substance to offer, it is better to stay quiet. Even senior citizens know that *"talking is silver, silence is golden"* (*"rääkimine hõbe, vaikimine kuld"*).

### 3. Sincerity

Estonians are serious people—hardworking, responsible, rule-obedient, simple and transparent. If an Estonian makes a promise, he/she will keep it. In the UK if I asked for a favour the response will be "sure, let's do that" and yet unless I push that person to fulfil that favour, they will not mention it again. I applied the same logic when arriving in Tallinn and was pleasantly surprised that every time I asked for a favour—the Estonian concerned always delivered and helped me.

Estonians also expect sincerity. As a Brit, I always greet people with the proverbial *"how are you?"* and expect a response similar to *"good, thank you"*. I am not genuinely asking about how the person is, merely a more polite, indirect (and yes I admit it, ungenue) way of saying hello. When I used this greeting to my Estonian colleagues, I was surprised to receive a plethora of

information about their lives, the Estonian assuming I was genuinely asking about them. Needless to say now my greeting is a simple, sincere and no nonsense “*tere.*”

#### 4. Personal Space

Estonians need their personal space. Quite a lot of it. They do not easily speak about personal or emotional stuff. It is much more convenient to have conversations about the news, weather, politics or world events. Estonians love their forests and time in the countryside, and why not when there is so much of it.

Now I always greet new people with a handshake, (never hug or kiss continental style). Maybe once alcohol is applied to Estonians and the persons concerned are friends and family, then maybe I'll pluck up the courage to offer a “bromance” hug or slap on the back. Funnily enough alcohol seems to turn Estonians into very affectionate and sentimental people!

#### 5. Global curiosity

I quickly learnt from my wife and many Estonians here that Estonia is part of *Northern* Europe and the nordic nations. Culturally aligned, language similar to Finnish and speaking several other languages fluently, Estonians are curious about the world and how the world views them. They are not a post-Soviet state struggling for identity in the modern world, but a progressive, open and technologically advanced society (which of course Estonia is!).

Estonians study and work hard, travel often and seek to learn more from the world to improve themselves. It's this attitude that has most benefited me, from being a reactive consumer within society to a more diligent, proactive and resourceful person. It's this attitude that I have imbued that I must thank Estonia and my Estonian friends for.

*David is the Managing Director of [Blu Mint Digital](#); and writes about Digital Marketing and Entrepreneurship. This article he wrote for [Quips](#).*

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