

THE HIDDEN EUROPE

**WHAT EASTERN
EUROPEANS CAN TEACH US**

FRANCIS TAPON

THIS BOOK'S BUZZ

"Francis Tapon is a modern incarnate of the spirit of Solon or Pericles: he travels to foreign countries to watch things, for the sake of contemplation. And he does it with an extremely sharp eye and lot of wit. *The Hidden Europe: What Eastern Europeans Can Teach Us* is not only the book of the year; it also sets the twenty-first century's standard for travelogues." — **Flórián Farkas, Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Eurasian Studies***

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“*The Hidden Europe* is the kind of book you wish you had in school— it presents facts in a fun and unforgettable way. Learning has never been so entertaining!” — **Bruce Ward, President, ChooseOutdoors.org**

“Whereas some consider a three-week vacation long, Francis travels for three years! *The Hidden Europe* cleverly shares the inevitable wisdom and insights that comes with a long voyage.” — **Laurie Bagley, Author of Summit!**

“Francis Tapon is a rare person. He’s an adventurer who has visited much of the world, a student of history and culture who learns through first-hand experience, and a teacher who finds life lessons everywhere he goes. The countries of Eastern Europe, which I visited in the 1990s, aren’t among the more glamorous travel destinations, but are absolutely fascinating. Francis has brilliantly captured their essence in this highly readable, illuminating, and entertaining book. I enthusiastically recommend it.” — **Hal Urban, Author of Life’s Greatest Lessons**

“*The Hidden Europe* is an insightful look into Eastern Europe that weaves your mind in and out of the region and encourages your imagination to physically take you there.” — **Anil Polat, Travel Blogger, FoXnoMad.com**

“Francis Tapon found a unique, unexpected approach to present Eastern Europe. His accounts stem from his open curiosity accompanied by sound reasoning. His work, which includes a meticulous study on the history of the region, is most outstanding. As an amateur historian, I can also recommend his work as the clearest and most objective recent account on Hungarian history. Francis Tapon created an overview on this delicate subject with such clarity, focus, yet lightness, which I thought was impossible. I recommend his work not only to American readers, who will find it refreshing and exciting, but to every Eastern European reader as well. This book has a true potential to change the air of lingering suspicion among Eastern European nations to that of heartfelt friendship.” — **Dr. Janos Molnar, Hungarian cell and molecular biologist**

Dedicated to a special mouse
and
René Tapon, my French father, who introduced me to Europe

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INTRODUCTION—STEPPING INTO THE HIDDEN EUROPE

“THIS WOULD BE A PRETTY lousy way to die,” I thought.

I was locked in an outhouse with no way out. Outhouses sometimes have two latches—one on the outside and one on the inside. The outside latch keeps the door shut to prevent rodents and other creatures who like hanging out in crap from coming in. Somehow that outside latch accidentally closed, thereby locking me in this smelly toilet. I was wearing just a thin rain jacket and the temperature was rapidly dropping.

“This stinks,” I mumbled. It was midnight, I was above the Arctic Circle, and the temperatures at night would be just above freezing. There was no one around for kilometers. If I didn’t get out, I could freeze to death in this tiny, smelly, fly-infested shithole.

My mom would kill me if I died so disgracefully. She would observe that when Elvis died next to a toilet, he was in Graceland. I, on the other hand, was in Finland, not far from Santa Claus. This Nordic country was my warm up before setting out to visit all 25 countries in Eastern Europe over five months.

The fool wonders. The wise man wanders. — Susan Rea

I had started my hike at 5:30 p.m. and planned to hike all night. It was June 21 and the sun doesn’t set when you’re above the Arctic Circle on the summer solstice. So it really doesn’t matter when you hike. At 11:00 p.m. I ate some food in a deserted cabin and then went to use the outhouse. I tried all sorts of clever ways of getting out and they all failed. Then I thought, “Wait a sec. I am an American. Therefore, I must love violence and be a brute. Hell, Arnold Schwarzenegger was my governor. What would he do?”

I decided that the old fashioned, just-bang-the-door-down method was best. I gave the door a swift kick. BLAM!

Nothing.

“Okay. . .” I took a deep breath of the foul air and then let out the hardest kick my legs could deliver. BING! BAM! BOOM! The door stubbornly stared at me.

I sat on the toilet to think. Finland has one of the most sophisticated telecommunications infrastructures in the world, far better than America. I may be in the middle of some remote forest around the Arctic Circle, but I wouldn’t be surprised if those crafty Finns had a cellular phone tower nearby. Checking my phone, I had a solid reception.

“Gotta love the Finns,” I smiled to myself. So as my California friends were getting ready for lunch, I punched out a text message to describe my predicament: *“Funny, but scary: I am trapped in an outhouse. The outside lock flipped when I went in. Nobody here. Getting cold. Trying 2 bang out.”*

Most were busy eating a tofu burger so they didn’t get back to me. One friend, though, suggested “CALL 911!”

“Good idea,” I thought. But then I remembered that dialing 911 in another country usually doesn’t get you the emergency services. However, it might get you a pizza delivery service, which would be nice.

On the other hand, even if I got an emergency service, I was so deep in the Arctic wilderness they wouldn’t get here until morning at the earliest. By then I would be a frozen Popsicle. So I went back to kicking. Then I threw my measly body into the door a few times. I cursed, “I knew I should have eaten more cheeseburgers before I left!” I slammed my shoulder into the door so many times that I was nearly breaking a sweat in the frigid temperatures. “Damn it, Hollywood makes this look so easy!”

I screamed and lunged at the door with vigor. The door put me back in my place: on the toilet seat. I panted in the putrid air wondering what else I could do. I started to shiver as my sweat cooled my body. I couldn’t tip over the outhouse. I couldn’t break open the roof. Finally, I had one last idea: Matrix-like, Keanu Reeves rapid-fire kicks. I may not be The One, but I was the only one around, so I better kick some ass.

I lay down so that my back rested on the toilet seat while I looked at the ceiling. My legs were cocked close to my chest, ready to repeatedly slam the obstinate door into submission. I took a few deep breaths and then let out a fury of kung fu kicks that would make Bruce Lee proud. After 20 kicks (and nearly falling into the toilet), the tenacious door flew open.

I’m not as manly as you might think: I didn’t even break the lock. The vibrations from the continuous kicks just made it unlatch. Nevertheless, I breathed a sigh of relief (and some fresh air), and hiked the rest of the night.

I had always wanted to live an adventurous life. It took a long time to realize that I was the only one who was going to make an adventurous life happen to me. — Richard Bach

It was June 2004, exactly three years after I set off on my Appalachian Trail thru-hike. I craved another adventure. Once again, I wanted to wander and learn. I had visited Prague and Budapest in 1992, and Russia and Ukraine in 1999. However, the rest of Eastern Europe was still a mystery to me.

Therefore, in 2004, I set a simple goal: visit every country in Eastern Europe in six months and see what I could learn. I wanted the Eastern Europeans to teach me about their cuisine, history, languages, sites, innovations, economy, religion, and drinking habits. Then after five years, in 2009, I would return to spend two and half years there to see what’s changed. By 2011, I had spent three years collecting the wisdom of the Hidden Europe.

This book is organized by country, which means that it’s not in chronological order since I visited each country at least twice over a seven-year period. I mention dates for clarity and for the sake of any detective who wants to reconstruct the sequence of events. So get ready to hop back and forth in time.

Reopening the American mind

I am a first generation American. My mom was born and raised in Santiago, Chile. Her dad was laid off from his factory job when she was 16 years old, so she quit high school to work to help support the family. When she was 25, she emptied her retirement fund so that she could have enough money to buy a one-way ticket to America. She arrived in the United States with only \$300 in her pocket—too little to buy a flight back to Chile. It was far easier to immigrate to America in 1964 than it is today. She barely spoke any English when she arrived alone in San Francisco. Within two weeks, however, she landed a job that didn’t require speaking much English—being a clerk at Bank of America. My father was born and raised in France. He grew up with the Great Depression, the Nazi occupation, and World War II (WWII). Yes, my dad had issues, and not just because he’s French.

By 1947, France’s military was getting involved in Vietnam and Algeria. My grandfather didn’t want to lose his only son after having lost his brother in World War I (WWI). Therefore, he put my 17-year-old dad on a one-way boat voyage to Buenos Aires, Argentina. He lived there for seven years under the rule of Juan and Evita Peron. He witnessed how their populist policies destroyed the economy, and so, at the age of 25, he immigrated to Philadelphia. After two years there, he crisscrossed the United States in his car and parked it in San Francisco. He started working there and several years later, he met my mom. They started a small business that imported goods from Latin America. In short, they achieved the American Dream.

My parents didn’t just bring their bodies and hard work ethic to America. They brought their ideas. It’s that fresh input of ideas that has kept America competitive and strong since its founding. America’s open mind and flexibility helped it become the most powerful nation in the world. However, the fear of terrorism and xenophobic worries has made it incredibly difficult to immigrate here. Millions of brilliant

minds lie outside our borders yearning to get in. If we don't get them, another country will. Our competitive advantage will decrease and the American Era will end.

Therefore, the purpose of this book isn't to just share Eastern European insights. Its purpose is also to stir curiosity in you. I hope to inspire you to wander and learn. I want America to open its borders and brains not just to the brightest minds of Eastern Europe, but to the brightest minds of the world.

When it's OK to stereotype

This book may offend you. You will read sweeping statements like "Slovenians are polyglots," or "Latvians like to dress up," or "Americans are idiots." Some people hate such stereotyping and generalizing, especially when it's negative. Nobody will complain if I say "Ukrainian women are beautiful," but they will say I'm a closed-minded, superficial American if I say "Polish women are fat slob." Politically correct folks tell us that we should never stereotype. "Generalizations are always bad," they declare, not realizing the contradiction in their statement.

If our ancestors didn't stereotype, we'd be dead. Let's say cavemen with blue dots on their cheeks are responsible for killing half of your tribe. What would happen to your idealistic neighbor if she refused to generalize those with the blue dot? Let's just say she would produce few descendants. Hence, the human brain is wired to look for patterns and to categorize everything. We can't suppress that. It's part of being human. That's why when we're looking for potential suicide bombers, we instinctively look for young Arab men and not old ladies from Sweden.

You think you don't stereotype? Sure you do. You avoid dark alleys with disheveled humans, because you know that you're more likely to be assaulted there than in an office building. You stereotype office workers as peaceful creatures and gun toting gangsters in alleyways as high risk. Of course, these generalizations are sometimes wrong: office workers go on shooting sprees and gangsters can help you to a hospital. However, you continue to depend on stereotypes to get you through the day.

Stereotypes simply summarize the tendencies of a group of people. I've tried to document Eastern European tendencies, while recognizing that there are no absolutes and that there are plenty of exceptions. Therefore, when I say, "Albanians are friendly," obviously there are plenty who are assholes. Pointing out all the exceptions gets tedious after a while, especially for the intelligent reader who realizes that a generalization is not an absolute statement.

Admittedly, stereotyping gets tricky when you have few data points. Although I spent three years in Eastern Europe, sometimes I only stayed two weeks in a particular country. I would have loved to spend months (or years) in each country, but with 25 Eastern European countries, I had to keep moving. Therefore, a few of my observations are based on just a brief glimpse of a country. If I was unlucky to meet the only four jerks who live in Lithuania (and met no one else), it was hard not to walk away concluding that Lithuanians are jerks. I did my best to get around these limitations. For instance, I would ask neighboring countries, "Are all Lithuanians really jerks?"

They would usually reply, "No, but Americans are."

By asking the locals about how their life is really like, I could make up for my lack of data points. On the other hand, locals also make mistakes and spread false stereotypes. Bulgarians told me that most Romanians are thieves, which is obviously wrong, since Bulgarians are so poor that there is nothing to steal! (Relax, Bulgarians, I'm kidding.)

A great way to avoid the pitfalls of anecdotal evidence is to consider polls that survey thousands of people. Thus, we'll consider what reputable international pollsters, such as the Pew Research Center and Gallup, reveal about Eastern Europeans, while recognizing that surveys have their own shortcomings. By combining extensive personal travel experiences with statistics and surveys, we should be able to paint a fair and accurate description of each country. You'll finally understand how an Albanian differs from a Kosovar.

Why not avoid stereotyping completely? "Please don't!" cry the Baltic states. Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians hate that the world thinks they are all the same. They each want their own identity. In short, they want their own unique stereotype. Slovaks, Belarusians, Slovenians, Croatians, Macedonians, Bosnians, and Ukrainians created their countries partly because they were tired of being lumped together with some other nationality and identity. Each region has a distinct personality. To claim that Germans and Italians, for example, have the same character is idiotic. It's cute and idealistic to believe that we should just avoid labels altogether and simply call ourselves *Homo sapiens*, but humans demand more granularity than that. Lastly, if we simply say, "There are all types of people everywhere," we miss an interesting opportunity to understand the traditional values, beliefs, and characteristics of a people.

Hence, the solution isn't to avoid generalizing—that's impossible. Instead, the solution is to have flexible stereotypes and to be open to exceptions. *More importantly, if you see enough exceptions, consider changing the stereotype.* For example, let's say you believe that most Arab men are suicidal, religious maniacs. However, after visiting an Arabic country, you quickly notice that most young men aren't blowing

themselves up. Now you can create a new stereotype: *young Arab men are friendly, peaceful, and have fewer weapons than the average American*. In short, you still have a stereotype (because your brain demands it), but you've adjusted it to the new information you learned.

Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness. . . . Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime. — Mark Twain

To avoid making inaccurate stereotypes, I sought to experience the country from the ground level—where the “real people” live. Unlike most tourists, I avoided hotels, fancy restaurants, taxis, and rented cars. I rode crowded buses, ate sketchy food from street vendors, shopped at farmers' markets, hitchhiked, and stayed with locals whenever possible. In short, I did my best to detect the subtle differences among Eastern European countries, while trying not to impose stereotypes or invent differences that don't exist. Of course, everything is extremely nuanced, especially a country's history.

Learning history from the locals

Even before this book went to press, it was already pissing off some people. When I shared early versions of it with Eastern Europeans, they would occasionally say, “I loved it! You're so accurate at depicting the people and places in Eastern Europe. However, what you said about *my* country is completely inaccurate and unfair. You're just like every other American: arrogant and stupid.”

For example, some Albanians thought I depicted every country in the Balkans well except for Albania. Meanwhile, some Macedonians thought I depicted every country in the Balkans well except for Macedonia. In addition, some Eastern Europeans disagreed with how I summarized their country's history. As one Serbian put it in an e-mail to me, “U R so full of incompetence and not up to this story. But that's only my opinion and don't let me discourage U. Keep up the good work.”

Pay no attention to what the critics say; there has never been set up a statue in honor of a critic.
— Jean Sibelius, a Finnish composer

Although I wanted to learn everything about each country from its locals, this methodology has its flaws. First, locals often lack accurate knowledge beyond their small region. Second, their impression of their neighboring countries frequently has no empirical evidence, just hearsay. Third, their recollection of history is highly selective. People remember and forget different events. They emphasize certain events

while overlooking others. Every country does this. Throughout my travels in Eastern Europe, people would vividly recount how their country came to be and the root cause of their country's problems. I would travel 100 kilometers to another region and listen to others describe, with equal passion and zeal, the same events in a completely different way.

One of the things important about history is to remember the true history. — George W. Bush

Not exactly, George. I had always believed that there was only one true, objective version of history. In theory, that might be true, but in practice it isn't. First, even if all history books in the world said the same thing, what really matters is what people believe, because that is what they will teach the next generation. It is said that “victors write history.” That's true, but the losers don't necessarily read or believe it. Instead, they tell their children “what really happened.”

Although I've thoroughly researched Eastern Europe's history, re-telling history is a thankless task because it's impossible to please everyone. Moreover, I'm not a scholarly historian, so some snooty PhD might tell me that my facts are slightly off. Still, there's often no consensus even among professional historians, who love to gather in conferences and deliver astonishingly dull speeches meant to cure anyone of insomnia.

History is a set of lies agreed upon. — Napoleon Bonaparte

If you dig deep enough, perhaps you can uncover the truth, but it is often a murky and tricky affair. However, in some ways the truth doesn't really matter to me. *I'm not a historian. I'm an explorer.* For me, perception is reality; the people's version of history is, for this book, the history that matters. I wanted to hear the history parents tell their children.

Even when I knew the locals were wrong, I had little hope (and even less interest) in changing their minds. My goal was to understand them, their reasoning, their beliefs, and their world view. This book compares their view of history with “what really happened,” while recognizing that my sources (as objective as I hope they are) have their own biases. If all this ends up making you more confused than ever, wonderful. Welcome to Eastern Europe.

A not-so-stupid question: where is Eastern Europe?

Asking, “Where is Eastern Europe?” seems as stupid as asking, “Who is buried in Grant's tomb?” Obviously, Eastern Europe is in the eastern part of Europe. However, where to draw that line is extremely controversial. Indeed, it's hard to find two people who agree on which countries are in Eastern Europe.

Back in the good old Cold War days, defining Eastern Europe was easy: it was made up of all those losers who were on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain. Eastern Europe had those backward, communist countries which were frozen in the Stone Age.

Because the world had such a low opinion of Eastern Europe, nowadays nobody wants to admit that they live there. For example, let's just look at the Baltic countries. I've met Estonians who assert that they are in Northern Europe, Latvians who proclaim that they are in Central Europe, and Lithuanians who argue that they are in *Western* Europe!

If you were to believe everyone you talked to, you would conclude that Eastern Europe just doesn't exist! When pressed, Eastern Europeans admit that Eastern Europe exists, but they all believe that the region starts just east of whatever country they happen to live in. I like this definition. My father was French, so Eastern Europe, for me, starts in Germany. Sorry, Germans.

If you're European, it's time to review Geography 101. Any territory can be divided in a number of ways. For instance, you can divide it east-west and/or north-south. If you like, you can create a *central* region. To have even more granularity, you can create a northeast region, a southeast region, and so on. However, sometimes people don't want all those options. *They just want a simple binary division* (thereby eliminating the concept of a central region). For example, if you want to divide the US with a north-south split, you would probably use the old Civil War dividing lines. If you want a simple east-west split, you would use the Mississippi River, even though it's an imperfect split. Chicago boys may dislike being called an Eastern American just as a Hungarian might dislike being called an Eastern European. They both would yell, "We're *Central*, not Eastern!" Similarly, someone from Montana might say, "I'm not in the Western US, I'm in the *Northern* US!" They would all have a good point. However, if *central* and *northern* are not options (and they are not, when you divide a territory with a simple east-west split), then you must choose a side. You might not like east-west splits, but there's nothing evil about dividing any region that way. So get over it.

However, we still have the challenge of deciding where that east-west line should be. Let's be scientific about it. Geologists agree that Eastern Europe ends at the Ural Mountains, which lie hundreds of kilometers east of Moscow. It's 5,200 kilometers (3,250 miles) from Lisbon, Portugal to Perm, Russia (a city next to the Urals). The halfway point is Wrocław, a Polish city near the German border. If you extend a north-south line through Wrocław, it would cross the Czech Republic, Austria, and western Croatia. Only Slovenia would find itself on the west side of that dividing line (you can hear the Slovenians cheering

now). In short, this 50/50 geographical split results in an east-west border that is quite close to the Cold War dividing line.

Another way to solve this tedious question is to learn where experts say is Europe's geographic center. Wherever that point is, we could project a north-south line across it, thereby clearly marking Europe's east-west division. Unfortunately, geographers can't agree on all the edges of Europe, so they can't agree on its exact center. Geographers have placed Europe's center as far west as Dresden (Germany), as far east as Rakhiv (Ukraine), and as far north as Estonia's island of Saaremaa.

War is God's way of teaching Americans geography.

— Ambrose Bierce

Before we invest too much time finding the perfect 50/50 split, let's remember that many east-west (or north-south) divisions are asymmetrical. For example, about two-thirds of America rests on one side of the Mississippi River. Russia's east-west line is the Ural Mountains, even though that results in a 75/25 split. Cities often have artificial and arbitrary east-west divisions that are hardly symmetrical. They might be based on a railway line or a river. Therefore, even if you play with a world map to "prove" that Europe's perfect 50/50 east-west split lies east of Romania, it doesn't mean that's where the division should be.

There's another good reason to use the old Cold War dividing line. History shapes who we are. Whether Eastern Europeans like it or not, the communist experience is still in their collective memory. Those who are under 30 years old might yell, "But I don't remember those days! I grew up with Western values!" However, their parents and teachers drilled their local history and values into their children's brains. It's part of who they are. The legacy of slavery can still be felt in the southern regions of the US, even though slavery ended 150 years ago. Communism, in contrast, ended less than 25 years ago. Communism may have left Eastern Europe, but its long shadow is still there.

Finally, there's one more thing that Eastern European countries have in common: they're still relatively hidden. Of course, businesses and tourists have poured into the region ever since the Wall came down in 1989. However, the world is still far more familiar with Western Europe than Eastern Europe. Most people can explain the difference between Italy and Ireland; however, they'll give you a blank look if you ask them to compare Slovenia and Slovakia.

In conclusion, for geological, historical, and even touristy reasons, I have defined Eastern Europe quite broadly. This book puts 25 countries in Eastern Europe. It includes western Russia, Germany's eastern half, and the ex-Yugoslav countries. It also includes three countries that few consider part of traditional Eastern Europe: Finland, Greece, and Turkey. Finland is east of Poland (and north of the Baltic), so geographically

it certainly is in Eastern Europe. Greece is also geographically in Eastern Europe (it's south of the Balkans). However, we will only examine the part of Greece that is most tied to the rest of Eastern Europe: Greece's northern portion. Like Russia, most of Turkey is in Asia, so we will just look at its western side. In sum, I spent three years in 25 countries nearly 25 years after the Berlin Wall came down.

Americans may wonder why I'm taking so much time to define Eastern Europe. "What's the big deal, anyway?" you may ask. "So you're in Eastern Europe. So what? Who cares?" Trust me. It's a *really big deal* in this region. It's a highly charged and emotional topic that sparks endless and explosive debates. If you want to make Eastern Europeans twitch and squirm, just tell them that they are from Eastern Europe. The only people who don't seem to care are the Moldovans. They're just happy that anyone knows that Moldova exists.

About the lessons

Each chapter focuses on one Eastern European country, and ends with a brief summary of what that country can teach you. Although it's tempting to just read the summaries and skip the rest, that might make you jump to erroneous conclusions. I can already hear the proud Russian who skips right to the summary of the Russian chapter and then yells at me, "All you have learned from the biggest country in the world is how great it is to drink vodka?!"

Therefore, before you read the summaries, remember that:

- **These aren't the only things you can learn.** Just because there are only two ideas in a summary, doesn't mean that those are the only two things you can learn from a country. First, you can learn many more things within the chapter itself, which is packed with information about each country's culture. Second, the summaries mainly focus on practical ideas that you can implement in your everyday life. Third, there are plenty of things to learn about each country that I have missed.
- **Other countries may be able to teach you the same lesson.** Just because one good idea is in the summary, doesn't mean that you can't learn that same concept elsewhere. For instance, if five countries can all teach you the same concept, only one country will get credit so that you don't have to read about the concept five times.
- **Other countries may have been the pioneers.** Just because I give credit to one country for doing something clever, doesn't mean it invented the idea.
- **Other countries may do it better.** Just because I give credit to one country for something useful, doesn't mean they are the best at practicing it.

Therefore, to answer the patriotic Russian, "Yes, there's much more to Russia than drinking vodka; Belarus is also great at drinking vodka; Russia invented vodka; and nobody drinks more vodka per capita than Moldova. Now are you all happy?"

"No," says the Russian, "because Moldova doesn't drink the most vodka. Estonia does!"

"Yeah, you're right. See, I told you that Russia has a lot to teach you about drinking vodka."

Lastly, the main purpose of this book is positive—to learn the best things about Eastern Europeans; nevertheless, we'll also learn about the stupid and idiotic things in Eastern Europe. Indeed, sometimes the most effective Eastern European lessons are the ones where they show us what *not* to do. I fell in love with Eastern Europe, warts and all. Perhaps you will too.

Before the development of tourism, travel was conceived to be like study, and its fruits were considered to be the adornment of the mind and the formation of the judgment.

— Paul Fussler

I began my voyage in Finland. During the Soviet Era, Finland was a quasi-Eastern European country. It was neither in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), nor in the Warsaw Pact. Therefore, it would be a good place to start the adventure. So we'll start there too, using it as a useful stepping-stone into the Hidden Europe.

1

FINLAND—OR CALL IT SUOMI

FINLAND IS NEARLY A PERFECT society. Everything works. Cities are clean. There is no crime. People are nice. It's just that the winters suck.

Finland is big and empty. It is 80 percent of the size of California, yet has 14 percent of the population. Most of the five million Finns live in the south, around Helsinki, to enjoy the country's best weather, which is horrible most of the year. According to a worldwide 2010 Gallup poll, only five percent of Finns thought global warming was a threat to them—that was the lowest rate on Earth.

Few Americans know exactly where Finland is. The answer is simple: it's where Santa Claus lives. Really. Rovaniemi is a quaint town on the edge of Lapland, the northernmost region in Finland, and is Santa's global headquarters. However, St. Nick was officially born in Korvatunturi (meaning "Ear Mountain"), which is even farther north. Santa Claus thought that Korvatunturi was a bit too chilly, so he set up shop a bit south of there in Rovaniemi. That's like moving from Houston to Dallas to escape the heat.

Although most of the world agrees that Finland is where Santa Claus lives, not everyone believes that Finland is part of Scandinavia. Looking at a map, it seems like Finland is in Scandinavia, along with Sweden and Norway. However, Finns told me that Scandinavia has little to do with geography and more to do with the historical, cultural, and linguistic heritage that Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland share. They said that if you must slap a label on Norway, Sweden, and Finland, then call them *Nordic* countries. Telling a Finn that he's from Scandinavia won't insult him, but telling him that he's from Eastern Europe will.

Still, maps don't lie—Finland is directly north of the Baltic states. Given that the Baltic states are solidly in Eastern Europe, that means Finland is in Eastern Europe. Of course, like all Eastern European countries, Finland will vehemently deny that they are in Eastern Europe. Finns will cry that they are in *Northern* Europe, and that Eastern Europe is a "political concept" that only includes countries that used to be in the Warsaw Pact. Despite their denials, I figured that two weeks in Finland would be a nice warm up for the "real" Eastern Europe. It's ironic that my "warm up" almost froze me to death.

Hiking all "night" at the Arctic Circle on the summer solstice

I celebrated the longest day of the year by going way north to the Hautajärvi Nature Center and hiking the 80-kilometer (50-mile)

Karhunkierros Trail. If you can say the name of that trail, you deserve a trip to Finland. It means "The Bear's Trail." The path starts at a place called Hautajärvi, which means "Grave Lake." With such cheerful names, I wondered if it was smart hiking this trail alone.

The rangers told me most people take four to six days to hike it. I had only two days of food and there were no stores nearby. I figured I'd move fast with a light backpack, so I went for it. However, after just five hours of steady hiking, a self-locking outhouse stopped me cold. Fortunately, I escaped and kept hiking throughout the night. At 2:00 a.m. the sun hid behind a mountain and 30 minutes later, it started rising again. The Karhunkierros Trail features ravines, primeval forests, and suspension bridges over whitewater rivers. The civilized Finns have built *pitkospuu* (narrow wooden paths) to preserve the vulnerable vegetation and to make you an easy target for the gangs of mosquitoes.

After hiking all night, I stopped at the Jussinkämpä cabin at 6:30 a.m. to sleep for four hours. After 13 hours of hiking, I had covered 45 kilometers (30 miles). Most of the trail, like most of Finland, is pretty flat, with some rolling hills. After my nap, I walked the last 35 kilometers, finished by midnight, and stayed in an adorable one-person hut at the trail's highest point, Valtavaara, which rises a modest 491 meters (1,600 feet). I was surprised that nobody was in the hut given the perfect conditions and the 360-degree views. Maybe it's because it's an emergency shelter and not meant for camping. Or perhaps it's just because there simply aren't that many Finns in Finland.

The rangers were shocked that I returned so quickly. What was my secret for covering 80 kilometers in 30 hours? Endless sun and some fine friends pushing me along: hordes of bugs. Only seeing the occasional reindeer would make me stop. And seeing Santa Claus too.

Hitchhiking towards Oulu

The next bus to Kuusamo was leaving in five hours. Hitchhiking would be faster. After 30 minutes, a small blue car pulled up. The muscular driver seemed bigger than the car he was driving. Not knowing if he understood English, I said, "Kuusamo?"

"Yes, come in," the dark-haired man replied with a unique accent. It's rare to see dark hair and olive skin in Lapland. When it's freezing nine months a year, you don't have much of a chance to get a tan. The driver was a 36-year-old Turkish man who had been living in Lapland for 17 years after marrying (and divorcing) a Finnish wife he originally met on a French beach. This former bodybuilder had biceps that could crush my skull like a nut.

He asked me, "So you're from America?"

“Yes,” I sheepishly answered, knowing that this Turk could hate America. I quickly added, “But my mom is from Chile and my dad is from France.” I figured that telling him this would make it more likely that he would just shoot me and not behead me.

He asked me, “So what do you think of Bush and the war in Iraq?”

I sighed. It was the summer of 2004 and the Iraq War was in progress and was unpopular throughout the world (except America). I said, “I think Bush should have been more patient and tried to get more countries to agree with him before going into Iraq. . . .”

“I think he did the right thing,” he interrupted, “You know, Saddam was a really bad man. People in Iraq suffered. Yeah, Bush might have done some things better, but it’s good that America went into Iraq. I like Bush.”

A pro-Bush Turk? No wonder he was living in Finland! After about an hour of chatting, he dropped me off in Kuusamo. I caught a bus to the quaint port city of Oulu. While I was hanging out on the dock, I met a Finnish woman named Outi Joensuu. She invited me to join her and some of her friends for drinks by the wharf. Before bidding farewell, they taught me about Finland.

I like looking like the president of a country, even if it is a woman. — Conan O’Brien, TV comedian who is popular in Finland partly because he looks like Tarja Halonen, the first female President of Finland

Finland might be the country that is least likely to start World War III. Finns are peaceful. Almost . . . too peaceful. Nobody hates the Finns. Still, some nations have invaded Finland anyway. First, the imperialist Swedes came in the 1100s. The Swedes conquered the Finns and ruled them for 700 years. The Swedes dominated the Finns so tightly that it wasn’t until 1863 when the poor Finns finally convinced the Russians (who were ruling them at the time) to let Finnish have equal status as Swedish. Notice that the Finns didn’t request to have their language be more important than Swedish, just equal. And it took over 700 years to reach that milestone.

Finland’s rivalry with Sweden goes way, way back when we were under Sweden’s rule. We always think they are better than us. We played against them so often for so many years. Every country has one opponent they want to beat and for us, it’s Sweden. — Saku Koivu, former captain of Finland’s national ice hockey team

Ahvenanmaa—Swedish Islands in Finland

To fully understand how much the Swedes are still milking their 700 years of domination, consider the Ahvenanmaa archipelago (Åland in Swedish) in the southwest corner of Finland. It has approximately 6,500 islands (about 80 are inhabited). Ahvenanmaa is roughly between the Swedish mainland and the Finnish mainland, but it officially belongs to Finland. Swedes have made it an exclusive Swedish-speaking enclave. That’s right, Finnish-speaking Finns are discouraged to live on an island in their own country because it’s effectively reserved for Swedish-speaking Finns.

Lentokonesuihkuturbiinimoottoriapumekaanikkoaliupseerioppilas — The longest Finnish word, which means, Airplane jet turbine engine auxiliary mechanic non-commissioned officer student (with words like that, I might prefer Swedish too)

Let’s see how far the Swedes have imposed their way. In 1921, the League of Nations (the precursor to the United Nations) said that Ahvenanmaa belongs to Finland, but it doesn’t seem that way. Unlike any other province in Finland, this island province has its own internal parliament, which shares the power with the governor. The Finnish government can’t amend the Ahvenanmaa Autonomy Act without the approval of the island’s parliament. Ahvenanmaa is a demilitarized and neutral territory. Even the Finnish Navy can’t park their boats on these Finnish islands!

They collect their own taxes, spend it all on their 28,000 inhabitants, and have few financial ties with the rest of Finland. To own property, vote, and conduct business on Ahvenanmaa you have to obtain the Right of Domicile. To get that, you have to live on this Finnish island for five years and speak excellent *Swedish*. Any international treaty entered into by Finland requires the consent of the Parliament of Ahvenanmaa to become valid also in Ahvenanmaa. The archipelago has its own postage stamps and flag. Websites use the .ax suffix instead of the .fi Finnish suffix. While Finland has two official languages (Finnish and Swedish), Ahvenanmaa has only one official language: Swedish! The poor Finnish government has to translate all documents it sends there into Swedish if they want the local parliament to read it. It’s amazing they don’t use the Swedish currency and carry Swedish passports!

How did the Ahvenanmaa natives get away with all this? To find the answer you have to turn back the clock 200 years. The reason they’re part of Finland and not Sweden is that Russia kicked Sweden’s butt in the war of 1808–09. To end the war, the Swedes agreed to hand Finland over to Russia. Russia said that wasn’t enough, so Sweden tossed them a bone, or, in this case, an archipelago—Ahvenanmaa.

Russia called all their newly acquired territory (including Ahvenanmaa) the Grand Duchy of Finland. Therefore, when Finland declared its independence from Russia in 1919, the Finns thought it was only fair to keep Ahvenanmaa. After all, for the last 110 years it was all part of the same duchy and Sweden lost that territory fair and square. However, the Ahvenanmaa populace preferred rejoining their Swedish motherland. The Finns, tired of fighting, agreed to a compromise that gave them all the autonomy that they enjoy today.

Many impartial observers believe Ahvenanmaa is an exemplary solution to a minority conflict. Ahvenanmaa is special not just because nobody died fighting for its autonomy, but also because it's been demilitarized for many years. Ahvenanmaa's relationship with the Finnish government is fascinating because Finns and Swedes basically get along well. As we'll soon see, Eastern Europeans get hysterical over much more trivial issues.

The Finnish Culture

Finnish culture discourages violence and emotional outbursts (unless you're drunk, which happens every weekend). On the other hand, just because they're peaceful doesn't mean they're wimps. They've defended themselves against the Russians many times and live in one of the coldest regions of the planet. They even think it's fun to jump in frozen lakes.

Still, when it comes to most disputes with the Swedes, they are like the husband who would rather not argue with his nagging wife. "Yes, dear," Finland says to Sweden. In the tranquil Finnish minds, it's just not worth getting upset about minor issues that hardly matter. In short, Finns have learned the Swedish language instead of telling Swedes the same thing Germans told the French: "Listen, you assholes, if you want to talk to me, you talk to me in English!"

It was 1:47 a.m. in Helsinki and I was desperately looking for someone who could speak English. That night I would learn something more about the Finnish character—they are unusually trustworthy and generous.

An odd night in Helsinki

The youth hostel where I was staying had a 2:00 a.m. curfew. After 2:00 a.m. there was absolutely no way to enter the building and it wouldn't reopen until 6:00 a.m. Unfortunately, with 13 minutes before closing, I was lost.

How did I get into this predicament? Earlier that evening I met an odd couple: a petite bubbly blond and a sour, chubby Goth girl. They had invited me to come with them to a nightclub. The hyperactive

blond girl was named Aila—she was dressed in pink. Her best friend, Marketta, wore black clothes and seemed to use mascara and eyeliner by the liter. The nightclub played ear-splitting metal music noise. The bouncy blond did most of the talking while her Anti-Christ friend lurked in the shadows.

To overcome the screeching noise, Aila would yell at me like I was a 95-year-old without a hearing aid. Toward the end of the evening, she surprised me by inviting me to join her and her boyfriend at her family's summer cottage. I had met Aila just a few hours before, yet she was inviting me to her home. Those who hike long distance trails in America call such unexpected generosity from strangers *trail magic*.

Unfortunately, going to Aila's summer house would require staying in Finland longer than I had planned. I was eager to enter the "real" Eastern Europe. I thanked her profusely for her trail magic and then left the nightclub at 1:30 a.m. with my ears ringing. It sounded like Lapland's mosquitoes were still chasing me. Suddenly I remembered my hostel's 2:00 a.m. curfew. I needed a quick, cheap way to return home. Fortunately, Helsinki had a way to do it—free bikes.

Biking to an unexpected shelter

Helsinki is bike heaven. Bike lanes are on pink pavement located between the sidewalk and the street, so it's easy to avoid pedestrians and cars. They even have special traffic lights and signs for bikes. When I visited in 2004, the city also had free bikes. I spotted a colorful parked city bike and unlocked it by depositing a two-euro coin in it. I would get my coin back whenever I parked it at a designated bike station. Unfortunately, in 2010, Helsinki canceled this system because a few people would wreck the bikes or check them out indefinitely. It's just another tragedy of the commons.

I raced towards my hostel, but by 1:47 a.m. I was lost. The street was deserted. Then, in the distance, a lone woman was walking my way. She was a slender blond wearing pink pants. A few wrinkles in her face indicated that she was probably 40 years old. It was remarkable that she was walking alone in such a deserted area—it was either a testament to Finland's safety or to her stupidity. I pointed to my map and said to her, "I need to get to *here* in the next 12 minutes."

"You'll never get there," she said. "It's at least 30 minutes away. And you won't find a taxi around here either."

I had left all my camping gear in the hostel, so I couldn't camp out. I had only two options. I could get another room in a hotel, but that would be expensive and I would feel stupid renting a second room when I'm already paying for one. The other option would be to party all night. It was near late June, so the nights hardly got dark and Finns

party until 6:00 a.m. While I contemplated my undesirable options, the lady stunned me when she said, “Well, if you want, you can sleep on my couch.”

I couldn’t believe my luck. This lady, named Lea, had spent just a few minutes talking with me and trusted me enough to invite me to her house! What’s more stunning is that Lea had four children; mothers are usually cautious about bringing a stranger home. Finns obviously trust their fellow humans, or at least the ones riding free bikes.

Her apartment was small, clean, and modern. She offered some food. A *perinneruoka* is a traditional Finnish dish, which is traditionally not eaten. That’s right; Finns only eat a *perinneruoka* if it’s a holiday or if they’re old farts. Instead, most Finns favor *kotiruoka* (home-made food). Even though it was the middle of the night, Lea offered *ruisleipä* (dark sour bread), *juusto* (cheese), and *lihapullat* (Finnish meatballs). After finishing our snack, things began to heat up.

The Finnish temple: the sauna

There was something unexpected in Lea’s bathroom: a sauna. Finns value a sauna like Americans value a home theater—it’s hard to be truly happy without one. As we finished our *kotiruoka*, Lea said, “Do you want to try the sauna with me?”

I hesitated. In America, getting into a sauna at 2:30 a.m. would be risqué. However, doing it in Finland might be just as innocent as watching a movie in an American’s home theater. I agreed. “OK, then get in,” she said, “And I’ll go change my clothes.”

I got naked, wrapped a towel around my waist, and walked into the hot sauna. Lea shocked me when she walked in: she was completely naked—not even a skimpy towel. She giggled when she saw me sitting meekly in a corner with a towel around me. She laughed, “You’re obviously not Finnish! You don’t wear towels in saunas! Give it to me,” she said with a smile.

This was one of those travel moments when I was glad to be a man.

I wasn’t in Rome, but I thought, “Do as the Romans do.” I stood up and humbly took my towel off. I sat down again and looked at my penis. What was I supposed to do with it? Just let it lie there in plain view? Or should I cross my legs and tuck my unit in between my legs so that only my pubic hair is visible? Or does doing that make me gay?

Lea sat next to me and was saying something, but I wasn’t listening. I was thinking about my penis and what to do with it. Then I observed her naked figure and thought: for a 40-year-old mother, she certainly has an amazing body. Uh oh. I am thinking too much. No, not with that head; my other head. Suddenly I lost control of my unit. He started to

get bigger. *Oh no! Stop! Please!* Of course, the more I thought about not thinking, the more I couldn’t help but think about what I was thinking.

It expanded more. Is she noticing? What is she chattering about anyway? *Who cares!* Just get that boy down! Maybe I should tuck it in! But if I tuck it in now, I’ll draw her attention there. Just ignore it! *No!* It’s getting engorged with blood. Is it hot in here or is it me?

Finally, I thought of the ultimate libido killer: Michael Moore. I repeated in my head, “Michael Moore. Michael Moore. Michael Moore . . .” I imagined the fat, hairy Michael Moore next to me, naked. Instantly, I began to deflate. *Whew!*

I finally started listening to her and then interrupted, “Hey, where are your kids anyway?” I had seen their photos in the apartment and there were a few closed doors that surely led to their rooms.

“They’re away for the weekend with their father,” she said.

“Oh, that’s nice,” I said. Awkward silence.

Lea said quietly, “Would you like a Finnish massage?”

Oh no. Not again. My blood was leaving my brain again and heading south. How should I answer her question? Her delicate hands grazed my back. *Francis, behave. Michael Moore! Michael fucking Moore!!! Damn it! It’s not working! I know, I’ll lie on my stomach! That will hide everything!*

“Sure, I’d like to try a Finnish massage,” I said while quickly flipping onto my stomach. Lea’s soft hands caressed my back. Thinking of Michael Moore wasn’t helping. I imagined Michael’s hands rubbing my legs, but it was useless: Lea’s hands were too small and she just wasn’t a fat film director.

Lea’s wet hands went up and down my body. Her soothing voice was as soft as her hands. I was in Finnish heaven. She eventually massaged my butt and that’s when I blurted out, “You’re, er, I mean, it’s really hot,” I stammered. “Can I take a shower?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “It’s just right there,” she pointed to the nearby shower. I rose with my back to her so that she couldn’t tell what else had risen. Of course, she knew something was up. She was grinning mischievously.

While I took an ice cold shower, little did I know that I would have two more interesting sauna experiences in Eastern Europe. Around 3:00 a.m. the sky was brightening as the sun started to rise. That’s exactly when I went to sleep. As I lost consciousness, I realized that I was falling madly in love with Finland.

Software is like sex: it is better when it’s free.

— Linus Torvalds, the Finn who invented Linux

When I woke up, Lea offered open sandwiches caked with margarine. Finns have been eating rye and whole grain bread long before the rest of world realized how healthy it is. For toppings, there was hard cheese and cold cuts. Lea also offered *villi* (sour yogurt) with muesli and jam. Lea was more lively than typical Finns, who are so calm that it's almost creepy. Germans are almost as stoic, but at least they get mad every once in a while and start a world war.

Finns admit that they are horribly shy (unless they are drunk). Still, Finns are friendly and helpful once you start talking with them. My experience with Lea is a perfect example of how safe, trusting, and generous Finns are. They also produce smart kids. When Lea bragged about how smart her kids were, I thought she was just another deluded parent. I was wrong.

The smartest kids in the world

In 2009, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development tested hundreds of thousands of teenagers in 57 countries. Finns were the best in science, and the second best in math and reading. International observers flew in from all over to learn the Finnish secrets. What they discovered surprised them.

The typical Finnish high-school doesn't have a school uniform, gets only 30 minutes of homework per night, has no honor roll or valedictorian status to strive for, has no tardy bell to hear, and hardly stresses about going to college. Teachers aggressively help struggling students. Meanwhile, a gifted student isn't sent to an elite school; instead, he becomes a teacher's assistant. Unfortunately, the young geniuses can be impolite. For example, when someone asks a stupid question, Finnish kids sometimes bark out, "KVG!" That stands for *kato vittu Googlesta* (Google it, you cunt)! You gotta wonder what it says about the future of the human race when the smartest kids on the planet are calling each other cunts.

So what is the secret to the Finnish success? While I waited for Helsinki's Museum of Modern Art to open, I observed Finnish teenagers to see if I could see the answer. They were smoking, had dyed hair, and sang Bob Dylan's "Knocking on Heaven's Door." They were similar to American teenagers, yet American students got a C in the global competition despite spending 20 percent more per student than Finland.

The main reason for Finland's educational success is that teachers are highly valued and have substantial autonomy. Although teachers in Finland are paid about the same amount as American teachers (and they have similar costs of living), the job is highly coveted—nine out of ten applicants are rejected. Unlike the US, all teachers get performance evaluations. Most importantly, teachers in Finland are entrepreneurs—they customize each class depending on the needs and

abilities of the students, instead of having to strictly follow a national curriculum.

We don't need to copy everything in the Finnish educational model. A common mistake when people look at the best of the best is to conclude that we should copy everything. We forget that they may be the best *despite* a methodology, not *because* of it. Nevertheless, we ought wander to Finland and learn its habits.

Do you know what Finns call their country?

Understanding what the Finns call their country tells a lot about their non-confrontational nature. Before we learn what the Finns call their country, let's see what other countries call Finland: *Finlande* (French); *Finnland* (German); *Finland* (Swedish, Dutch, and Portuguese); Φινλανδία (Greek — it sounds like "Finladia"); *Finlandia* (Spanish and Italian); 핀란드 (Korean—sounds like "Peen-lan-duh"); Финляндия (Russian—sounds like "Finlyandiya"); フィンランド (Japanese—sounds like "Finrando"; and 芬蘭 (Chinese— sounds like "Fenlan"); *Ufini* (Swahili); *Finnország* (Hungarian); *Finland* (Icelandic). Therefore, it's safe to say that most countries in the world call the country where the Finns live something that sounds like "Finland."

What do Finns call their country? *Suomi*. Huh? How did this happen? Simple. A few thousand years ago, the Finns introduced themselves to their neighbors. The exchange went something like this: "Welcome Stranger, what land do you hail from?"

"*Suomi*," replied the Finn.

"Oh really? Hey honey, this guy says he's from a place called Finland!"

"No," the Finn said, "It's not called Finland, my country is called *SUOMI*!"

"Yeah, whatever. You're from *Finland*, bucko!"

Languages do funny things with names. For example, Chileans named Francis are sometimes called Paco. In America, folks called Robert are also called Bob, and every Richard is obviously a Dick. Still, when naming a foreign land, we should try to pronounce it like the locals. For example, it's disgraceful that we call the capital of the Czech Republic *Prague*, when the Czechs call it *Praha*. Come on, how hard is it to say *Praha*? Why do we call the capital of Portugal (*Lisboa*) *Lisbon*? Saying *Lisboa* is hardly a tongue twister. Nevertheless, at least Lisbon and Prague aren't completely off the phonetic mark.

Bigger alterations are harder to forgive, like Greeks calling Switzerland *Elvitia* or English speakers calling *Deutschland* Germany. At least these are isolated cases. Most of the time countries pronounce foreign countries in the same phonetic ballpark of what the locals call

it. However, the world has failed to call Finland by its proper phonetic name of *Suomi*. What's crazy is that nobody knows why this happened.

Why don't Finns launch a global campaign to get everyone to call them *Suomi*? Myanmar, a far poorer country than Finland, led an expensive global crusade to force everyone to stop calling their country Burma. Even cities have forced geographers throughout the world to redo their maps. Mongolia's Ulan Bator became Ulaanbaatar. Bombay now wants to be called Mumbai. Peking must be called Beijing. St. Petersburg has been a real pain in the ass for cartographers because it's changed its name three times in the last 100 years (Petrograd; Leningrad; St. Petersburg). If we can make the change for Myanmar, we can do it for *Suomi*.

It says a lot about the Finnish character that they don't force the world to change. Finns are relaxed, peaceful, and calm. Why fuss over such a petty issue? It's just a name. Thus, Finns quietly accept reality, just as they accept that Swedish is their official second language and that Swedes have taken over Ahvenanmaa. On the other hand, why don't Finns just call their country something that sounds like *Finland*? After all, if everyone calls you Ralph, then maybe you should just call yourself Ralph, even though your real name is John.

The reason Finns continue to call their country *Suomi* is also quite telling. Finns are tough and proud in their own subtle way. They're quietly intense. You may not realize how much they care about something until you push them over the brink. Finns are *not* like the stubborn child who will yell "NO!" and throw a tantrum; instead, they are more like the child who just shakes her head firmly and pouts without saying a word. With the kid who throws a tantrum, you have a chance of persuading him, but with the stubborn, quiet head shaker, you don't stand a chance. Therefore, next time you watch the World Cup or the Olympics and you see an athlete with jersey that says SUOMI, think about the meaning behind this amazing country's name.

Finlandization

After visiting pristine Lapland, I returned to Helsinki and visited the medieval town of Porvoo. Later, I saw Turko, the former capital of Finland, and the southernmost point of Finland, Hanko. They're all fascinating places to check out. Finland's complex history, filled with Russian and Swedish occupation, gives visitors a taste of Finland's dynamic past. Finland is idyllic and spacious. It's filled with shy, honest, and good-hearted people. I loved it. Then again, Finns told me that if I came in the winter time I might have a different impression.

Like Switzerland, Finland was neutral during the Cold War. However, just like Switzerland leaned more toward the West, Finland leaned more toward the East. This wasn't because Finns wanted to get

cozy with Russia. On the contrary, Finns preferred the West. It still has an uneasy relationship with Russia. In the Cold War, Finland's efforts to appease the Russian bear became known as *Finlandization*. We could all use some Finlandization in our lives.

What Finland Can Teach Us

- **Ride a bike.** Lobby your local government for bike lanes and support a private company that creates a Finnish-like rent-a-bike program. Helsinki's weather is rougher than most of America's, yet Finns bike everywhere. Quit making excuses. When I lived near rainy Seattle, I had no car and I biked everywhere. Wear a raincoat, rain pants, a cap, and laugh in the rain! When I lived in San Francisco, I carried a backpack full of groceries and biked over fearsome hills. You'll lose weight and you'll never fight for a parking spot.
- **Be quick to trust people.** Don't worry so much about giving strangers a ride, inviting them to your house, or loaning them something you value. When you become more trusting, others will open up and trust you more. You create a virtuous cycle: mutual generosity and happiness soars. Being cynical and suspicious leads to mutual caution and misery. Obviously, women should be a bit more cautious than men, but life is boring if you selfishly shut yourself off from the world. Learn from Finns and assume that most people are good and honest.
- **Learn patience by having a broad perspective.** Finns keep events and their lives in a wide perspective so that few things bug them. Whenever you find yourself losing patience, take steps back and examine the situation from a broader point of view. Why get irritated when someone calls you Liz instead of Elizabeth? Why get angry if traffic is worse than you expected? Why fight when someone offends you? Why get offended in the first place? Finns aren't saints, but they're amazingly calm when most people boil and raise their voices.
- **How to run a school.** Finns have mastered the art of creating responsible kids and well-trained teachers. Instead of blindly dumping more money into our schools, let's pull out some cheap lessons from Finland's school playbook—like empowering teachers to become entrepreneurs.
- **Remember the meaning behind Suomi.** Don't always fight to be "right." You can be true to yourself, and you don't have to change others to be happy with your own life.

Places I saw and recommend in Finland: Helsinki; Lapland; Porvoo; Turko; and any of their southern islands.

Travel deals and info: <http://ftapon.com/finland>

Now, let's truly start the adventure in Eastern Europe. We're going to take a boat across the Gulf of Finland and enter one of the key gateways into Eastern Europe. We'll begin in a port city that used to be called Reval. Today, it is known as Tallinn. It is the capital of an unusual country called Estonia.

ESTONIA—REVENGE OF THE NERDS

LET'S START WITH THE BASICS: does Estonia even exist or is it just some made-up country? Like Albania, Estonia just doesn't sound real. Have you ever met someone from those two countries? Do you ever see those countries mentioned in the news? I didn't think so.

Estonia? Where's that?

Estonia is unknown. An Estonian named Triin Tammaru told me of a real conversation she had when she lived several months in Florida:

"Where are you from?" asked the American man.

"I'm from Estonia," Triin replied.

"Where's that?"

"Next to Finland."

"Where's Finland?"

"Next to Sweden."

The brilliant American exclaimed with all the confidence of a *Jeopardy* champion, "Oh, so you're *Swedish!*"

From then on, the American introduced Triin to his friends as "the Swedish girl." She didn't want to tell Americans that Estonia was next to Russia because then they might classify her as "the Russian girl," or "the communist girl."

Americans are so geographically challenged that it's amazing we can find our way home every evening. Triin estimated that one in twenty Americans she met during her four months in America had heard about Estonia. About one in a hundred knew exactly where it was. Triin met an American girl who thought Europe was just the name of *one big city* on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. She also met a man who thought Europe was made up of one country: Germany. And no, that guy's name wasn't Adolph.

Before Europeans chuckle too much about ignorant Americans, it's clear that Western Europeans aren't geographic geniuses either. When one of my Lithuanian friends introduced herself to a Dutch man, he thought that Lithuania was in Moscow. Irina, a Russian friend of mine who lives in Spain, said that a Spaniard asked her, "What language do they speak in Russia?" Here's another gem: when Irina told a Western European that she's from Moscow, he got excited and said, "Really? I have another friend who is also from *Sweden!*" Obviously, Americans aren't the only people who need to be slapped around with a giant world map.

Learning facts and fiction

Estonia sounds so unreal that Scott Adams, the creator of the Dilbert comic strip, made up a bizarre country called *Elbonia*. It's no coincidence that Elbonia sounds like Estonia. According to the comic strip, Elbonia is a Fourth-World country where the national bird is the Frisbee. All Elbonians have beards (including women and babies), use cans attached to strings as telephones, and fly Elbonia Air (a massive slingshot that launches passengers so that they land far away in the waist-deep mud that covers the entire country). After overthrowing communism, Elbonia is fighting a civil war between left- and right-handed Elbonians. In an effort to increase tourism, Elbonia's dictator not only made gambling and prostitution legal, but he also made them *mandatory*.

Given this background, I was skeptical when I bought a boat ticket to Estonia. Was this just a hoax to squeeze money out of gullible tourists? On June 30, 2004, I sat in a waiting room in Helsinki. Soon we would board the Nordic Jet Line, which was not a jet going north, but rather a catamaran going south. The crew assured me that the vessel was going to Estonia and not Elbonia.

I relaxed my doubts by reading a few facts about Estonia in my guidebook. Estonia is slightly smaller than the combined size of New Hampshire and Vermont, yet it feels big because only 1.3 million folks live there. That makes it one of the least dense countries in Europe, with just 32 Estonians per square kilometer. Their mountains are really hills—Suur Munamägi, at 318 meters (1,043 ft), is the tallest point in the country. Estonia's flatness makes it a great place for cross-country skiing. Estonians drink liquor like water. That was still true in 2011: Estonia was the world's second highest per capita consumer of alcoholic spirits (after South Korea).¹

Meeting Maiu Reismann

It was 3:00 p.m. and we would board the vessel soon. I had no lodging reservation in Tallinn, Estonia's capital. I would arrive at 5:00 p.m., homeless. I didn't panic because this was my normal routine—I rarely make reservations anywhere I travel. Instead, I carry a tarp and a sleeping bag wherever I go. This eliminates the pressure to find a place to stay. In the worst case, I can happily sleep in a park. Having spent many months sleeping in the mountains every day, I find it easy to spontaneously camp anywhere. Although I was prepared to camp in a random park near Tallinn, I wanted to consider other options. While I flipped through my guidebook, a young lady sat near me. Although guidebooks are great, local advice is sometimes better, so I asked, "Excuse me, are you from Estonia?"

"Yes," she replied with a soft, sweet voice. "I live in Tallinn," she said with a bit of an accent.

"Do you know of any cheap places to stay in town?" I asked.

"Yes. In fact, I have a degree in hotel management and I work in tourism."

And so began a 90-minute conversation on the turbulent catamaran with a 24-year-old named Maiu Reismann. She was petite and had sparkling hazel eyes that reflected her gentleness. She wore her dark brown hair in a ponytail as if to advertise her simplicity. She nearly threw up on me because she thought I was so revolting, but she claimed that it was the boat ride that was making her seasick.

Maiu was returning home after dropping off her American boyfriend at the Helsinki airport. They had been dating three years. She offered to walk me to a nearby hotel. It was pouring rain when our boat arrived. We leaned into the horizontal rain and splashed through puddles. When we arrived at the hotel, dripping wet, we learned that the price was exorbitant. Maiu sighed calmly, demonstrating her patience. She said softly, "There is another hotel I can take you to, but it's kind of far."

"That's no problem," I said. I've walked and camped in torrential rain for days, so spending a few minutes in a downpour would be trivial. However, the weather was bothering Maiu, even though her stoic attitude hid it well.

"On second thought," she said, "If you want, you can just stay with me. I am not sure what my brother will say, but we have a sofa that you can sleep on if you want."

On the one hand, I was thrilled. This would be a great glimpse into the lives of a local Estonian and I might save a couple of bucks. On the other hand, she could be a scam artist who will rob me during the night and have her big brother toss me in a dumpster. I accepted her generous offer. I figured I had nothing to lose except for my camcorder, a few hundred bucks, and my life.

Estonian has no sex and no future

Fortunately, Maiu and her brother were not ax murderers. When the rain stopped, Maiu took me to Tallinn, which was named the 2011 European Capital of Culture. As we walked into the medieval old town, I felt I should have brought chain mail, a steel helmet, and a sword. Tallinn's Old Town feels like a Hollywood set for *The Lord of the Rings*. A tall, thick stone wall encircles the old town, just as ready to receive a catapult projectile today as it was 500 years ago. A few burning torches make the town irresistibly romantic. Charming cobblestoned streets lead you through inviting alleyways and narrow passages. Cars rarely use the bumpy streets, so pedestrians rule the old town. All you hear are soft footsteps, classical music, and the occasional drunk Finn.

While Maiu and I dined at a medieval restaurant in Tallinn's Old Town, she taught me that the Estonian language has no sex and no future. Estonian has no sex because it lacks grammatical gender (just like in English). Thus, a *table* is not female and a *car* is not male. Also, Estonian has no future. Or better said, it has no future tense. To express a future event, Estonians use the present tense and then specify when it will happen. For instance, instead of saying *I will go home*, Estonians might say *ma lähen kahe nädala pärast koju* (I go home in two weeks).

In addition to not having to learn a future tense, there are some other aspects about Estonian that make it easy to learn. Unlike English, for example, every letter is pronounced the same way every time. Furthermore, Estonian has no articles. You can also use the same pronoun to refer to a man, woman, or a thing. Moreover, word order is not fixed. For instance, you can say *koer* (the dog) *hammustas* (bit) *poissi* (the boy). But if you change the word order, the sentence is still grammatically correct. Hence, you can also say *koer poissi hammustas* or *poissi hammustas koer*. Maiu was proud that Estonian has a vowel that few languages have: õ. It sounds like the sound you might make when you realize that you just stepped on a piece of shit: *eevw*.

Unless you live there, it's tough to get motivated to learn Estonian because only one in 10,000 humans speak it. Nevertheless, if you visit, it's good to know these words: *tere* (hello); *tänan* (thanks); *jaa* (yes); *ei* (no); *vabandust* (sorry/excuse me); and *head aega* (goodbye). If you're good, try saying *ma ei räägi eesti keelt* (I don't speak Estonian). When you consider Estonia's history, it's unbelievable that their language still exists today.

Want to run a country? Come to Estonia

It seems that everyone has had a chance to run Estonia. In the last 800 years Sweden, Poland, Denmark, Germany, and Russia have all called the shots in this territory. The habit of invading Estonia started in 1208, when crusaders wanted to convert Europe's last remaining pagans. Crusaders ordered Estonian pagans to become good Christians or die. (By the way, *pagan* in Estonian has two meanings: the first is the same as the one in English; the second means *damn!* It's funny hearing an Estonian who hits his finger with a hammer yell out, "*Pagan!*")

By 1219, the Danes controlled Tallinn. Three years later, the Estonians revolted and tasted freedom for *two short years*. That's when a Germanic people called the Teutonic Knights of the Livonian Order bought Estonia from the Danes. Unfortunately, the Teutonic Knights weren't so knightly. They limited Estonians to menial jobs and forced thousands to become Christians. On the other hand, the Livonian Order (being Germanic) was quite orderly. For example, they protected merchant trade routes and built beautiful buildings that still stand

today, like Tallinn's Town Hall. After those two years of independence, Estonia wouldn't taste freedom again for another 700 years.

History is more interesting than politics.

— Lennart Meri, 1929–2006, *President of Estonia*

In the 1500s, Estonians nearly went extinct when over 70 percent of the Estonian population died during the Livonian War. After 25 years of bloodshed, Russia retreated and only 25,000 Estonians survived. Estonia was split between Sweden, Poland, and Denmark. It's remarkable that these traumatic events didn't permanently kill Estonia's language and culture. Estonians are tough.

With Russia out of the picture, Poles and Swedes looked at each other and said, "Hey, are you tired of fighting for the last quarter of a century? Cuz I'm sure not! Bring it on!" They went on killing each other for another 46 years! Swedes finally won and did nice things like starting schools, ending the famine, reducing the nobility's power, and importing some hot blonds. Even today, Estonians still call that era "the good old Swedish time."

Russia grew tired of all the peace and quiet, so in 1700 they started a 21-year war, which killed half of the Estonian population. This time Russia won. They kindly abolished serfdom and let German remain Estonia's official language, although locals continued speaking Estonian among themselves. Unfortunately, plague and famine killed 200,000 Estonians during the 200 years of Russian rule. Hence, Estonians still think of this period as "the bad old Russian time."

The Soviet and Nazi sandwich

In 1918, while Russia was busy with its civil war, Estonia declared independence, hoping that Russia wouldn't notice. It worked. After a couple of years of being sandwiched between Germans and Russians during WWI, Estonia finally became independent in 1920. This was the first time Estonians were free since that brief two-year period 700 years before.

This time, their freedom lasted 19 years. In 1939, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) told Estonia that they would "protect" them by placing 25,000 Russian troops in Estonia. Estonia's army numbered 16,000; it gave in. In 1940, about 10,000 Estonians, including Maiu's grandfather, were deported to Siberia. The seesaw battle for Estonia restarted when Germany reconquered Estonia in 1941. In 1944, the Russians grabbed it back and then the fun communist era started.

During the Soviet era, private property was abolished and Estonia's best food was shipped to Russia. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Estonians were deported to Siberia, while tens of thousands of Russians poured into Estonia to replace them. If the other Russian period was

called “the bad old Russian time,” this was probably called “the really shitty Russian time.” Fast forward to 1991, the USSR imploded and Estonia became free again. Yulia Trutko observed, “We moved from one union to another—from the Soviet Union to the European Union.” Finally, in 2011, Estonia celebrated its new record for being independent: 20 years.

Russophones in Estonia

Although the Soviets are out of Estonia, Russians are still in it. Over a quarter of Estonians are Russophones (people who prefer to speak Russian). In 2006, during my second trip to Estonia, I took a bus to Lasnamäe, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Tallinn filled with blocky, gray, dull high-rises. Over 85 percent of Lasnamäe’s 160,000 residents are Russophones. Most moved in when the Soviets encouraged Russian migration to Estonia. On the bus ride a young blond with a round head sat next to me. I asked her what she thought of Tallinn. She said bitterly, “Tallinn is *boring*.”

“Why?” I asked.

She answered with a strong Russian accent, “It’s just a bunch of casinos, tourists, and restaurants.”

“Sounds like Vegas,” I mumbled. Although she had the gentleness of the Incredible Hulk, I continued, “So what do you think of Estonians?”

“Estonians are just a bunch of liars. They all lie. They pretend to be nice, but then when you turn your back, they do or say something else. You can’t trust them. Russians are honest, they will tell you what they think, we are friendly and warm,” she said in an angry tone.

I asked, “Do you think Russians should learn to speak Estonian?”

“No! Why should we? Russians are the majority of the population in Estonia!”

This is false. Russians are 25 percent of Estonia’s population. There are two reasons she might have believed that Russophones are the majority. First, Russophones often live in enclaves that feel like you’re in Russia: Russian signs are everywhere and everyone speaks Russian. Russophones often have no Estonian friends, only watch Russian TV, and shop exclusively at Russian markets. Therefore, it’s easy for them to overestimate the Russophone population. Second, Russians are cynical about governments. You would be too if you were under communism for 70 years. The popular belief was: the truth is the opposite of whatever the government says.

Why Russians don’t want to learn Estonian

Estonians view Russians as unwelcome immigrants, while Russians believe that they’ve been in Estonia “forever.” So who’s right? They

both are. Russians have been in Estonia as long as there’s been history to record it. In fact, Russophones dominate many Estonian border towns because they’ve lived there for countless generations. Victor, an Estonian Russophone, told me he could trace his Russian lineage over seven generations—all come from the same town in Estonia.

On the other hand, the USSR encouraged tens of thousands of Russians to move to Estonia. In 1932, Russians made up only 8.2 percent of Estonia; by 1989, they were over 30 percent. In short, some of the Russophones who live in Estonia today are the descendants of families who have lived in Estonia for 1,000 years. Others moved in last week.

Russophones who have a long history of living in Estonia feel no need to learn Estonian. Maiu’s mom believes that there’s another factor. She said, “Russians think that since they liberated us from the Nazis, we should be grateful. They don’t think that they were occupying us; they were supposedly ‘helping us.’ Russians don’t want to learn Estonian because they feel that we owe them one.”

Meanwhile, Russophones are furious that their government is now treating them like second-class citizens. After transferring buses on my way to Lasnamäe, a Russian mother told me, “Estonians are fascists.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Estonians want Russians out. They are closing down Russian schools. They won’t even give us a passport,” she said as she rose to leave with her five-year-old daughter.

“Why not?” I asked.

“They’re *fascists!*” she yelled as she got off the bus.

I left my seat and approached three tall 20-year-olds who were standing at the back of the bus. They were all born and raised in Estonia, but they have no citizenship, and they “hate the Estonian language.”

Later, Yuliya Trutko, a Russophone who grew up in Estonia, would tell me, “Russians are still separate, because that’s their choice. They don’t want to integrate. It’s hard for them. I think it’s even impossible for them.”

Want a headache? Try to get an Estonian passport

After Estonia declared independence, it was stingy with giving away passports. People not only had to prove that they had been living in Estonia for years, but also that they were proficient in Estonian. At first, the language exam was hard. After years of Russian protests it became easier. In 2008, Alissa Avrutina, a Russophone polyglot, had to retake the exam because the government had changed the requirements again. “I’ve taken this exam four times!” she told me. “I’ve paid

\$300 to take courses to help me pass the exam. I must take it again because some employers prefer that I pass the latest exam. It's frustrating."

Alina Lind, an Estonian Russophone, observed that Estonia's passport requirements are tougher than those in the West. In 2011, after eight years of hassle, she finally got a passport. Those who don't get a passport get a *Välismaalase Pass* (Alien's Passport). Russia invited those with the Alien's Passport to visit Russia without a visa. This angered the Estonian government, because it decreased the incentive for its ethnic Russians to learn Estonian. In 2008, Lev Jefremtsev, a 22-year-old Russophone, told me he didn't need Estonian citizenship, "If I get an Estonian passport, then I must pay \$100 visa every time I visit my relatives in Russia. With my Alien passport, I can enter Russia for free."

I said, "But isn't there some benefit to having an Estonian passport?"

He said, "The only benefit is that you get to vote and travel outside of the European Union more easily. And I don't care about that."

Pursuing the Nobel Peace Prize in McDonald's

To meet English-speaking locals, I visited the McDonald's in Lasnamäe and asked a young Russophone couple if I could ruin their romantic meal. Dimitri spoke English, but Tatiana could only speak Russian and German. When I asked Dimitri what he thought of Estonians, he said, "There are good Estonians and bad ones, just like there are good Russians and bad ones. So when I meet an Estonian, I have an open mind."

I asked him, "Do Russians feel like second-class citizens here?"

"Russians feel at home in the Baltic. We have lived here for centuries. And as the Baltic becomes more international, life will improve."

Then I had a flash of brilliance and said, "What if Russians didn't have to learn Estonian as a second language, but had to learn English instead, and that Estonians had to do the same. This way you could each keep your native tongue and your common language would be English! What do you think?"

"This would be great!" he said.

Feeling like the Nobel Peace Prize was within my grasp, I shuffled over to a table where an Estonian couple was chatting. I made the same language proposal to them. Their response shattered my Nobel dreams: "Absolutely not! Then we'll lose our language! We'll use English to communicate with Russians and then we'll eventually use it to communicate between Estonians. We would lose our culture and identity. No way."

These Estonians were named Ronnie and Liis. It's rare to find Estonians who live in Lasnamäe, so I asked Ronnie what he thought about the Russophones. He said, "I'd just like to see all Russians go back to their country."

I asked, "What do you have against them?"

"They're loud and aggressive. The older generation expects you to speak Russian. Although things are getting better, most Russians refuse to learn anything about Estonian culture."

"But Russians say they can't get an Estonian passport," I said.

Ronnie sighed, "All they have to do is to take a really basic language test. It's so easy. But they're lazy or they just don't care. *It's about attitude.*"

Liis said, "Yes, the Russians just have such a bad attitude about it. If they just tried a little, we would understand, but they are so inflexible."

I asked, "Do you think Russia will invade Estonia in this century?"

Ronnie said, "No way. They wouldn't dare. We're part of NATO now. If they attacked Estonia, Europe and America would immediately defend us."

Although a foreign country has manhandled Estonia for 95 percent of its existence, "This time is different," people said. I talked with Ronnie and Liis in 2006. Back then, the situation *really did feel different*. NATO dismissed the question of what it should do if a Baltic country were attacked. It was a preposterous idea. However, in 2008, after Russia took action into South Ossetia, Georgia, things changed. Russia could justify invading Estonia by using the same excuse it used to enter Georgia: to defend ethnic Russians from an abusive local government.

In 2008, during my third visit to Estonia, the mood was different. I asked Herki, Maiu's brother, if he thought Russia could reoccupy Estonia in the next 50 years. He said, "Sure, why not? Look at our history. We're usually occupied." He said it with a casualness that people usually have when they ask you to pass the salt.

Estonia's arrogance towards Russia has deflated in the last five years, but they're still a bit cocky. Now that they're in NATO, they're like the nerd in the schoolyard who finally has a bodyguard to fend off the bully. However, it's remarkable that despite NATO's presence and despite being independent for 20 years, Estonia still has trouble moving a simple statue.

Estonians fight over a statue

In 2006, I touched Eastern Europe's most controversial statue, the Bronze Soldier. At that time, it was located near Tallinn's center. It depicts a common Russian soldier who is solemnly looking at the ground. It's about as tall as an NBA basketball player. Every May 9, Russians

would gather around the statue to commemorate Victory Day—the end of WWII. This all seems rather innocent, but this simple statue set off an international crisis.

To understand why, we need some background. After winning WWII, the Soviets blew up the monument dedicated to Estonian independence. With “liberators” like these, who needs enemies? The Soviets erected a wooden pyramid in its place and dedicated it to their soldiers. Two courageous teenage Estonian girls burned down the new pyramid. They were eventually caught and sent to a Gulag coal mine for many years. In 1998, both girls, who were now in their late 60s, became the only Estonian women to be awarded their nation’s highest medal. The key point is that the Soviets replaced the burned down pyramid with the Bronze Soldier.

For many Estonians the Bronze Soldier represents 48 years of Soviet oppression. Meanwhile, Russians believe that the statue represents the triumph over the Nazis. A few months before I returned to Estonia in 2006, an Estonian nationalist threatened to blow up the statue if it weren’t removed. The police began to guard the statue nonstop. Urban legends spread. The Estonian Prime Minister (PM) said that some believed that what was really buried there was: (a) patients from a nearby hospital; (b) executed looters; (c) drunken USSR soldiers who had been run over by their own tank.

There are a terrible lot of lies going about the world, and the worst of it is that half of them are true.

— Winston Churchill

The PM’s statement became so twisted that Russians told me that the PM said that what was really buried under the statue was a drunken prostitute! The PM never said that, nor did he say that he believed any of the rumors. He simply said that those were the rumors and that he wanted to excavate the site to end the speculation. The situation climaxed in an event called the Bronze Night.

The Bronze Night

In April 2007, the Estonian government voted to remove the statue within 30 days. Russophones rallied around the statue. The Estonian parliament gathered for an emergency session at 3:40 a.m. No, that’s not a typo. They asked parliamentarians to roll out of bed, drive to the parliament building, and vote on a statue. And you think that the US Congress has strange priorities.

The groggy Estonian leaders voted to remove the statue immediately. Three hours later, the statue disappeared. Chaos erupted. For the next few days there was widespread rioting, looting, and vandalism. A prominent Russian leader demanded that the Estonian government resign.

Russians vandalized Estonia’s embassy in Moscow. The Russian government said that the “zealots of Nazism” are behind the dismantling of the statue and “these admirers of Nazism” have made a “mockery of the remains of the fallen soldiers [which] is just more evidence of the vengeful policy toward Russians living in Estonia and toward Russia.”

Estonians told me that they were scared. The government advised everyone to stay at home. People started whispering the word “war.” Russia practically boycotted all Estonian commerce. Russian leader Vladimir Putin said that removing the statue “sows discord and mistrust.” One restaurant in Russia was more blunt. It put up a sign stating: “ESTONIANS AND DOGS MAY NOT ENTER.”

Reflecting on the Bronze Night

When the dust settled, 12 bodies were exhumed from the original site. Four were WWII Russian military officers. Their remains were returned to their families. The rest were unidentifiable and were re-buried in Tallinn’s Military Cemetery, where the Bronze Soldier now stands. In 2008, during my third visit to Estonia, I visited the statue after a snowfall.² The statue looked the same, but Estonia had changed. I asked locals to reflect on the issue.

Igor Kuzmitshov, a thoughtful Russophone, thought that the statue should have been left alone. He understood the Estonian perspective on the Bronze Soldier, but he said, “What Estonians don’t understand is that Russians also suffered in communism. The average Russian was just as much of a victim of the totalitarian state as the average Estonian. Sure, a few Russians benefited from communism, but so did a few Estonians. Estonians forget that many Russians also had family members deported to Siberia, had property stolen by the state, and were scared of criticizing the government. *Everyone* suffered under communism, not just Estonians. Sometimes Estonians forget that.”

Artur Kuldmaa, a computer administrator in Tallinn, has an Estonian father and a Russian mother, so he was objective. He looked at me intensely through his geeky glasses. I asked him what he thought should be done with the statue. In a typically calm Estonian manner, he said, “We should have left it where it was.”

“So you think Russia was right?” I asked.

“No. Russia shouldn’t have gotten involved in Estonian affairs. This is our problem. We, as a country, should decide what to do with the statue. It’s none of Russia’s business.”

“So should Estonia have left the statues of Lenin and Marx behind too?” I asked.

“No, it was right to take those down. Those were political figures. This statue is of a common soldier. It is neutral.”

“Now that everything has settled down a bit, what do Russians think of Estonians?”

“They think Estonians are fascists!” he smiled. “I went to a soccer match in Russia and a Russian asked me, in all seriousness, if it’s true that Estonians walk through the street with Nazi swastikas on their clothes! I couldn’t believe that some people actually believe that!”

Not only was Artur not wearing his regular Nazi outfit, but he also argued that Russophones must integrate in the Estonian culture. He said, “Russians living in Estonia should know who the most famous Estonian writers and singers are. They should know how to speak Estonian.”

Although he and his wife, Nastya, both believe their child should learn Estonia’s language and culture, they are sending their seven-year-old boy to a Russian school—a mediocre place to learn about Estonian language and culture. Nastya, who went to a Russian school in Estonia, said that Estonia’s Tartu University was hard because she had to quickly learn Estonian, despite years of classes before college. I asked, “Given your beliefs about integration, why are you guys sending your son to a Russian school?”

Nastya replied, “When Estonians find out that a kid has Russian parents, they mumble, ‘Ah, that explains everything.’ In other words, Estonians often attribute any character flaw to your Russian heritage. Russian kids are picked on in Estonian schools. We hope our son learns Estonian language and culture later.”

Future mothers may not have that option because Russian schools are disappearing. For example, Artur’s mom teaches Russian in Tartu, and she says that five years ago there were five Russian schools; now there are only two.

The Bronze Night highlights the biggest issue in Estonia’s future: not alienating its large Russophone population. That night proved to all Estonians just how fragile their independence is. A few more sloppy steps and Russia might have crushed Estonia just as it crushed Georgia in 2008. Estonia’s future depends on making peace and co-existing with its large Russian population.

Estonia is calmer than the media leads you to believe

For the seven people on the planet who are curious about what’s going on in Estonia, it may seem that its citizens are always embroiled with some Russian controversy. However, let’s not exaggerate this perspective. Igor told me, “Our society is too politicized, mostly due to the brainwashing by nationalist politicians, and the two communities are separated indeed, but I hope you see that the picture is much more bright and relaxed.”

He told me that he is “not against learning the Estonian language,” but that he “hopes that people could be more reasonable.” For instance, there’s no sense in forcing people who live in Narva (an Estonian city next to the Russian border) to learn Estonian. Nearly everyone in Narva is a Russophone. Igor said, “They not only can survive without Estonian, but they actually have no practical use for it there.”

He concluded, “I wish we could talk more about cinema, literature and travel—these are some of the things that really fill everyday life to much greater extent than external political issues. I hope you do not see people in Estonia from the perspective of national confrontation only. We actually live quite normally here.”

I lived in Estonia throughout the winter of 2008–2009 and I agree with Igor. Few discuss the Russian-Estonian relations. Most just want to hang out in saunas, sing, and go canoeing.

Chaos on a canoe trip

The Maldives and the Netherlands may be the flattest countries on earth, but Estonia isn’t far behind. Thus, when Maiu invited me to canoe the *Ahja Jõgi* (Ahja River) during my 2004 trip, I figured it would be just as easy as canoeing in a swimming pool. I was right: it was incredibly easy. Unfortunately, I underestimated how incompetent I can be.

The *Ahja Jõgi* is a shallow, lazy river that cuts through Estonia’s Otepää region. Given how unassuming this river was, I laughed when we were given life jacket. I filmed the pleasant pastoral landscapes from the canoe as Maiu paddled. After an hour, Maiu noticed a part of the river that dipped a tiny bit, thereby creating whitewater that might scare someone without arms or legs.

I confidently shouted to Maiu, “Don’t worry, I can navigate our way through this with my eyes closed!” I put my camcorder in my pocket and calmly prepared for the little dip. The canoe approached the dip at an angle, which was somewhat troubling. Suddenly we saw several metal protrusions right on the dip. We tried to avoid them, but the canoe slammed into the protrusions and flipped us into the river. Maiu fell gracefully into the water, but sharp rocks sliced my feet and bruised my lower back. On the other hand, the water was refreshing and I learned that life jackets really do work.

There was some good news and bad news about overturning the canoe. The bad news is that my camcorder got wet and began malfunctioning. Whenever I tried to turn it off, it would eject the tape. This irritating behavior would haunt me for the rest of my 2004 trip in Eastern Europe. To get around that problem, I would have to pop out the battery whenever I needed to turn it off. The good news was that Maiu stripped down to her underwear to dry off her wet clothes. I thought

sacrificing my camcorder to see her petite body nearly naked was a fair trade.

Backpacking without mountains

Figuring that I should stick with what I know, we left the river behind and backpacked Estonia's gentle hills. I proposed a two-day 50-kilometer (35-mile) trip. Maiu thought that was insane, but she agreed to go as long as I carried her. She had never camped under a tarp and was surprised that we stayed dry during a rainstorm. She could have never imagined that two years after our first backpacking trip, she would spend four months living under a tarp. That happened when we backpacked 4,240 kilometers (2,650 miles) on America's Pacific Crest Trail.³

The day after the rainstorm, a family invited us into their house after they saw us lost in their backyard. Soon they served us *rosolje*, a classic Estonian dish that has *peet* (beet), *liha* (meat), and *heeringas* (Baltic herring, Estonia's national fish). Everyone also ate *leib* (black rye bread). Lastly, they offered Estonia's signature food: *kama*. Although Finns also eat *kama* (they call it *talkkuna*), it's hard to find anywhere else. *Kama* is a finely milled powder made of roasted barley, oats, peas, and rye. Imagine bread crumbs put through a coffee grinder—that's similar to *kama*. We swirled it in kefir. It's not sweet, although some mix it with sugar. During the five months I lived in Estonia, I ate *kama* almost every day.

Estonian cuisine is heavy. Russian and Germanic influences pervade in the Estonian kitchen. This translates into a meat and potato diet. Most of the Estonian population lives near the Baltic Sea, where herring, anchovies, and salmon are also popular. Estonian food won't win many culinary awards, but it tastes great when you're hungry.

An empty belly is the best cook. — Estonian Proverb

I assumed that since this nice family lived in the woods, they had no Internet connection. They not only proved me wrong, but they also demonstrated that Estonians make Americans look like the Flintstones.

E-stonia

Estonia is sometimes called *E-stonia*, because it is one of the most wired countries in the world. Many people assume that Estonia is behind the times, like most of Eastern Europe. However, in many ways Estonia is ahead of the US. For example, when Florida was debating the merits of punch cards and chads in the 2001 election, Estonians were voting in their pajamas. Estonians have a smart card that lets them vote from anywhere.

Estonia gets its tech culture from its Nordic neighbors. In 2011, Nordic countries had the highest percentage of households with high-speed Internet connections. Surveys show that Estonia is more wired than Germany, Spain, or France. Meanwhile, Southern European countries, like Italy and Greece, are in the Internet Stone Age.

Americans think we're tech savvy if we use PayPal, but Estonians make us look like we're still using the barter system. In 2008, Estonians were already paying each other through their mobile phones. Their phones act like a mini-bank. If you need to send someone money, just compose a text message (SMS) from your phone. Combine Estonia's smart ID card with your phone or computer and you can authenticate yourself for almost any transaction. Goodbye cash.

Next time you're lugging a bowling ball's weight in coins to get 10 minutes at the parking meter, think of Estonia. In 2006, Estonians were already paying for parking via SMS. Just SMS your license plate number to the number indicated on the parking lot's sign. When you leave, call them, and an automated system answers and sends an SMS with your parking bill. The amount is added to your phone bill. Although you won't save much money, at least you don't have to carry around a bunch of coins.

Finally, next time you Skype someone, thank the four Estonians who developed it. Also, Skype employees should thank Microsoft, which bought Skype for \$8 billion in 2011. Now those four Estonians can finally afford to buy a legal copy of Microsoft Word instead of pirating it.

By the time you read this, you may think, "We do all these things in America now. What's the big deal?" The point is Estonia was doing it years before us. If you want to see the future, go to E-stonia.

The freest country on Earth

America calls itself "The Land of the Free." However, according to The State of the World Liberty Project, the US was number eight on the list of the freest countries. The project generated a composite score based on three factors: (1) economic freedom; (2) individual freedom; (3) government involvement and tax burden. The 2006 survey looked at 140 countries. The results: the least free country in the world was North Korea; the freest was Estonia.

Let's look at the three components to understand why. First, Estonia's *economic freedom* is high because its citizens have a high degree of personal choice, are free to exchange goods based on market prices, can compete in markets, and have excellent property rights. The second component, *individual freedom*, soared with the dissolution of the USSR. Estonians travel freely and can scream, "Bring Lenin back! The press is not free!" and nobody will care.

The third component, *government involvement and tax policy*, is where Estonia truly stands out. Estonia transformed itself from a totalitarian society into a libertarian one. Starting a business in Estonia takes less than seven days on average. Only Singapore offers a more efficient bureaucracy. Estonia soared up the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business survey—in 2011 it ranked 17th in the world, above Germany and Japan. Their finances are cleaner than a microprocessor plant. In 2011, while most eurozone economies weren't complying with their euro standards, Estonia was and joined the club. In 2010, Estonia's debt as a percentage of GDP was just 7.7 percent—that makes it one of the top 10 countries with the lowest debt burden.

Estonia's income tax is so simple that it's almost a pleasure to pay it. In 2011, all income exceeding the basic exemption is taxed at 20 percent. To make it insanely simple, the government totals up all your income sources and calculates your taxes for you on their secure website. All you have to do is log on and click "Approve." Payments or rebates get settled electronically. Even corporations pay the same 20 percent flat tax, so they don't have to hire an army of tax lawyers and accountants to understand the system. I couldn't find an Estonian who took more than 10 minutes to do his taxes.

In sum, there are five types of taxes: income, payroll, VAT, and excise taxes. That's it. No other sneaky taxes. Your parents die? No inheritance or estate taxes. You sold stock or real estate at a profit? Congratulations, no capital gains taxes for you. You want to reinvest your company's profits? No tax on that either. Move to another part of the country? No special local or regional taxes to pay anywhere. You just bought a car? No car or road tax for you. You own a home? Starting in 2013 there will be no property tax. There is no tax on many other things, including education, cultural events, and, most importantly, sauna services.

It's not surprising that because the tax code is so disarmingly simple, tax evasion is one of the lowest in the region. As a percent of GDP, taxes make up 31 percent of their economy. Although that's a bit higher than the US tax burden, it's lower than most European countries. The point is that the cost of tax compliance is super low because even a child can understand Estonia's tax regulations. The other remarkable point is that Estonia was able to transform itself from a totalitarian state to a libertarian one in less than 20 years. They did it in a peaceful and orderly fashion. We can all learn from that.

The sound of 300,000 people singing

To see one of the world's largest choirs, you must go to one of the world's smallest countries. Once every five years Tallinn hosts the *Laulupidu* (Estonian Song Festival). The climax is when nearly 30,000

singers stand on an enormous stage and chant Estonian folk tunes. I was lucky to be in Tallinn for the event in 2004. Hearing 30,000 singers gives you shivers and your heart soars. Although I didn't understand the lyrics, I understood the emotion. These were the songs that were banned under the Soviet regime. They were also the songs that helped bring down the USSR.

On September 11, 1988, a quarter of the Estonian population, 300,000 citizens, crammed into Tallinn and chanted banned national hymns. Maiu's entire family (including her grandmother) was there. The Soviets knew how to handle 300,000 Germans charging at them with rifles, but they weren't trained to deal with 300,000 Estonians singing at them armed only with their voices.

Maiu explained what life was like before the Singing Revolution. When she was a little girl, it was normal to see tanks in the streets. Few had cars back then, so tanks owned the road. "Seeing a tank was like seeing a car today," she said. "Whenever it would roll by our apartment, the earth would shake and the windows would vibrate."

Now imagine singing while a Soviet tank is pointing straight at your face. That's exactly what brave Estonians did when the Soviets tried to shut down their radio and TV stations. Estonians held hands, encircled the TV tower, and sang hymns as tears ran down their cheeks. Such bravery gave Estonia's leaders the courage to declare their independence on August 20, 1991. In short, Estonians regained their freedom by singing their hearts out. No blood was ever spilled. Estonia's Baltic neighbors, Latvia and Lithuania, were not so lucky.

Sauna experience part II

After the 2004 Song Festival, Maiu invited me to go to her summer house, which is in Lahemaa National Park. Founded in 1971, it was the USSR's first national park. Although Lahemaa is great for hiking and biking, Estonians see it as a hunting ground for berries and mushrooms. We followed the Viru Bog Nature Trail, which has a long boardwalk traversing the wetlands. From a wooden tower, we overlooked the park, admired the Baltic Sea, and snapped a photo of ourselves. Lahemaa is a paradise if you like bogs and swamps. While the rest of the world fights to get rid of their mosquitoes, Estonia is protecting a few trillion of them.

Maiu's summer residence had a large unfinished house, a primitive cottage, and a stream in the backyard. Although the kitchen had piped water, the only toilet was an outhouse. For a shower, they stored water in a large barrel. Like a true Estonian, the first room that Maiu's father built was the wood-powered sauna. Like Finns, Estonians are obsessed with saunas. Maiu's father would boil himself in the sauna and then jump in the frigid stream. He'd repeat this cycle until dawn.

He lived a good life, but he died of cancer when he was 55 years old. After telling me about her father, Maiu asked in her childlike voice, “Do you want to use the sauna?”

I immediately thought of my Finnish sauna experience that I had had the previous week. At this point, Maiu and I had spent several days together traveling throughout Estonia. Our relationship was platonic, although I was hopelessly attracted to her. *She has a boyfriend*, I reminded myself every hour. Going into a sauna with her would be torture, but I told myself what people like to tell themselves when they’re masochists: *it builds character*.

This time I felt like a sauna veteran: I confidently entered the baking sauna naked. I told Maiu that she need not be self-conscious because without my glasses I can’t see the big “E” at the eye doctor. Her towel dropped to the floor. Despite being nearly blind, I could see enough to admire Maiu’s skinny, yet toned body. By now, I had learned a lot about her American boyfriend. They had spent most of the last three years apart. Maiu was no longer sure about whether she wanted to marry him. In fact, several years ago many Estonians began to question the very institution of marriage.

In 1996, Estonia had the highest divorce rate in Europe: it was twice the European average and four times higher than Poland’s. Interestingly, Estonia’s marriage rate that year was also the lowest in Europe. In other words, in 1996 few wanted to get married and the fools that did got divorced. So why did Estonians have such a high divorce rate?

The least religious country on the planet

One reason couples stay together despite a crappy marriage is that they are religious. For example, Greece, Ireland, and Poland are some of the most religious European countries and they also have some of Europe’s lowest divorce rates. Estonia, on the other hand, is the least religious country on the planet—76 percent of Estonians said they have “no religion.” Compare that to the 15 percent of Americans who are irreligious. In 2009, only 17 percent of Estonians told Gallup that religion was an important part of their daily life (only China and Sweden had lower rates). Meanwhile, just 12 percent of Estonians had attended a religious service in the previous week (only Vietnam was lower). Atheists rule Estonia.

By 2011, perhaps due to a decade of prosperity, the Estonian divorce rate diminished 30 percent. Although it’s still above the European average, if you’re a guy who is considering marrying an Estonian, then relax—Estonia’s divorce rate is still lower than America’s. Besides, Estonian women are incredibly hot, so go for it.

Speaking of hot Estonian women, while I was in the sauna with Maiu, I wasn’t thinking about divorce rates and I certainly wasn’t thinking about religion. As sweat dripped down Maiu’s body, our bodies touched, she smiled, and I flooded my brain with: *she has a boyfriend!* She pressed up her warm, wet body against mine and looked at me flirtatiously. Overcoming near-death experiences in the wilderness had given me more willpower than the average naked dude in a sauna.

Officially, nothing happened in that sauna, but it was certainly hot in there. I explained to Maiu that I respected her relationship with her boyfriend. If she wanted to kiss, she would have to initiate it. If she wanted to break up with her boyfriend, she had to make that choice. We rinsed off using the water in the barrel. Later that evening, Maiu said she had made her decision. We embraced.

Part of me wanted to just settle down in Estonia and be with Maiu. On the other hand, I had promised myself to see every country in Eastern Europe and it was crazy to quit my journey after seeing just one country. Maiu understood this and eventually took me to the *bussi-jaam* (the bus station). I bought a ticket to the second of the three Baltic countries—Latvia. We hugged. I looked her in the eyes and said, “*Koh-tumiseni*.”

She replied, “I hope to see you soon too.”

I put my backpack on, boarded the bus, and headed south to Latvia.

An old lady predicts Estonia’s future

As the bus crossed the Estonia-Latvian border, I looked back and remembered a conversation I had had with an old lady on an Estonian bus a few days before. She was holding a transparent plastic bag that allowed me to spot an English children’s book in it. It’s hard to find old Eastern Europeans who speak English, so I asked her about what life was like now. She spoke excellent English. She said, “It’s getting better. The young kids are more interested in learning the Estonian language and preserving the culture.”

“What about the Russian population?” I asked.

“They are still separate. The integration is just starting. It will take time. This is only the beginning. Sorry, but this is my stop.” She smiled and left. It was a perfect, succinct summary of Estonia’s promising future and the obstacles it faces on that path.

What Estonia Can Teach Us

- **Adopt libertarian principles.** Estonia is Eastern Europe’s economic star. Few have improved more in the last 20 years. Many are copying Estonia. For example, half of Eastern

Europe has a flat tax system, including Russia. Estonia has followed other libertarian habits like privatizing most industries, protecting personal freedoms, ending corporate subsidies, and abolishing tariffs to make goods cheaper for poor people. Estonia is no utopia, but it's doing remarkably well, especially when one considers where it started from and how few resources it has.

- **Bring voting to the twenty-first century.** Let's hope that by America's 2012 election, everyone will be able to vote over the Internet. Only half of eligible American voters exercise their right. One big reason for such low turnout is that we're lazy. If voting were as easy as visiting Facebook, then we'd have high participation.
- **Aim for low population density.** In 2011, Estonians had 31 inhabitants per square kilometer, which is the lowest population density in Europe. The average in Europe is 111 inhabitants per square kilometer. (The UK has 256 and the Netherlands is tightly packed at 491.) Although Estonians have government incentives to reproduce, it's nice that they have more elbow room than any other European.
- **Turn cell phones into banks.** Estonians pay each other by just sending a text command via their cell phone. They pay for parking via their cell phone. In short, their cell phones behave like mini-banks ever since 2004. In 2013, check out what Estonia is doing so we don't take another eight years to catch up.
- **Sing!** Estonia is called the Singing Nation for good reason. Let's follow their tune. Singing releases endorphins, works out your lungs, floods your body with oxygen, strengthens your abdomen, improves your posture, and stimulates your circulation. Most importantly, singing encourages socialization and bonding with others. And, every once in a while, it can even topple an empire.

Places I saw and recommend in Estonia: Tallinn's Old Town. If you have extra time, visit Lahemaa National Park, Tartu, and Saaremaa.

Travel info and deals: <http://ftapon.com/estonia>

Although I loved Estonia, I stayed there far longer than I had planned. As my bus pulled into Rīga, the capital of Latvia, I couldn't wait to step outside and explore.

BELARUS—EUROPE'S LAST COMMUNIST COUNTRY

WITH A HOSTILE AND negative tone, the Belarusian travel agent asked me, "Why would you want to go to Belarus?" Notice she didn't say, "Why *do* you want to go?," but rather, "Why *would* you want to go?" I was waiting for her to add, "Are you nuts? Why not just go to Iraq while you're at it."

It was August 2004 and I was sitting in a drab office in Tallinn, Estonia, trying to apply for a visa to Belarus, Europe's last communist country. The belligerent travel agent lived and worked in Estonia, but she spoke little Estonian or English, so helping non-Russophones irritated her. She treated me like dirt, but her attitude was so extreme that it was comical.

I handed her \$50, two mug shots, my life story, and a signed document that promised that I would *never, ever* overstay my visa. Clearly, Belarus was having a tough time handling the armies of tourists who are trying to sneak into this Eastern European paradise. The Belarusian travel agent mumbled that the embassy would process my visa request "eventually."

Eventually, they did give me the visa, which helped me survive the border crossing ordeal. I left Vilnius in a bus packed mostly with old, fat Belarusians. The summer's heat and humidity made the bus feel like a wet sauna, minus the babes. I was sitting next to an obese man who insisted on showing me his hairy, deodorant-free armpit. I couldn't believe how long he could hold onto the rail above him. He was like a rock climber whose arms never tire of clinging onto a rock. Unfortunately for me, he was wearing his wife-beater tank-top and his bacteria-infested armpit was nearly buried in my nose.

We stopped at the border and a couple of folks tried to get off the bus to escape the heat (and the stench). The bus driver barked at them to stay on board. With no breeze flowing the non-air-conditioned bus, the temperature rose to oppressive heights. Finally, 30-hellish minutes later, the border guard collected our passports. After another 30 minutes, we drove up to another spot, where everyone got off to get our passports stamped. After half an hour, we all got stamped a few times and everyone was happy. Except the border guards. They're never happy.

Foreshadowing the inefficiency to come, we spent 90 minutes dicking around at the border. As we drove into Belarus, we passed an endless line of big rigs waiting to leave the country. The Belarusian sign said, "Сардэчна запрашаем у Беларусь" ("Welcome to Belarus").

Defining Belarus

Belarus is sometimes called White Russia because in East Slavic languages *bela* means *white*, and *rus* refers to *Russia* (or the *Rus* people). It's not any more snowy or white than the rest of Russia, but the name stuck. Although there are two ways to refer to Belarus, there are nine ways to call its citizens: Belarusian, Belarusan, Belarussian, Byelarussian, Byelorussian, Belorussian, Bielorrussian, White Russian, and White Ruthenian. It was so much easier during Cold War; we just called them all *commies*.

Before exploring into Belarus, let's consider a few facts about this medium-sized, flat, and sparsely populated country. Belarus is slightly smaller than the UK or Kansas. Although it's easy to see that Belarus is in Eastern Europe, some tried to convince me that Belarus is in Central Europe. Like its Baltic neighbors, Belarus is on the Northern European Plain, and its highest point is only 346 meters (*Dzyarzhynskaya Hara* mountain). With only 9.5 million citizens, Belarus is one of Europe's most uncrowded countries. It's becoming even less dense, because 40 percent more Belarusians die than are born, so the population is declining 0.36 percent annually. Although the government is concerned that its fertility rate (1.26) is the ninth lowest in the world, so far it has done little to change that. Before WWII, about 10 percent of the population was Jewish. After the war, just a fraction of one percent were left. All this doesn't make Belarus sound particularly interesting, but once you dig deeper, you learn that it is.

Belarus is Europe's lungs

Belarus's flatness makes it a geographic bore, but its vast forests, wetlands, and swamps re-oxygenate Europe's air. The Pripet Marshes, for example, are Europe's largest marsh zone. Those marshes suck in our waste products and pump out oxygen. Another reason Belarus acts as Europe's lungs is that woodlands cover 40 percent of Belarus's land. Its most celebrated forest is the Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Some learned about it because that's where the USSR formally dissolved in December 1991. It's Europe's largest primeval forest; it's what's left of the forest that covered Northern Europe 800 years ago. The park features 300-year-old pine trees and 600-year-old oak trees. It is also the oldest wildlife refuge in Europe, protecting otters, beavers, minks, badgers, elks, wild horses, wolves, boars, lynx, deer, and odd creatures named ermines.

However, the real stars of the park are the 800 remaining wisent (European bison, sometimes called a *zoobr*). A wisent is smaller than an American bison, but it's the largest land animal on the European continent. It's a miracle that wisents are still with us. Like its American cousin, the European bison was hunted to near extinction. Once it was

everywhere in Europe, but by 1919, there was only one wild wisent left. The creature was in the woods looking for a nonexistent mate when a hunter thought it would be a bright idea to shoot it dead. So he did.

Fortunately, 52 wisents remained in the zoos. Biologists bred them back to life. Now there are over 3,000 wisents in the world, mostly in zoos. Although my bus crossed western Belarus, I didn't see any wisents running around.

Hotel Sputnik

As the bus bumped and jostled its way to Minsk, Belarus's capital, I wondered where I should sleep. My guidebook mentioned the Hotel Sputnik. I liked the idea of staying in a hotel named after mankind's first satellite. The USSR stunned the USA when it took the lead in the space race in 1957. The Soviet accomplishment inspired Americans to land on the moon, a feat that the Soviets could never reproduce. As I imagined the slow and delicate movements in space, the bus jerked to a stop at the terminal.

As the Belarusians shoved their way out of the bus sauna, I asked random people, "*Gde Hotel Sputnik?*" By observing their hand gestures and listening for the words *naprava* (to the right), *nalieva* (to the left), and *priama* (straight), I eventually found the uninspiring Hotel Sputnik. I hoped there would be a replica of the smooth, spherical Sputnik satellite nearby, but instead I found only an old blocky, gray building.

When I stepped into the hotel lobby, the receptionist ignored me. I walked up to her desk and stood next to her. She continued ignoring me. I said, "*Dobry den.*" Wishing her a *good day* made her raise an eyebrow and glance at me for a moment. And then she went on ignoring me. I said, "*Vi gavorite pa Angliski?*" Without looking at me, she just shook her head, indicating she didn't speak English. It was remarkable that in a decent hotel in the capital of Belarus, the receptionist didn't speak English. I asked her for *odin nomer* (one room). She exhaled as if I had just asked her to clean my filthy toilet. Then she checked her circa 1988 computer.

In 2004, Belarus's per capita GDP was one-sixth of America's and the average Belarusian made \$100 a month (in 2011 it's one-ninth). You would think that hotels would be dirt cheap. Wrong. Welcome to communism, the land of frivolous price controls. The receptionist said the room's price, but I couldn't understand such a big number. My Russian is so pitiful that I can barely keep up with a Russian toddler. I peered over to see her computer screen. She pointed to the amount: *87,000 rubles*. Although that was just over \$40, there were two numbers under the 87,000 one. One had a price of 42,000 and the other was just 26,000. I wanted to know more about those numbers, so I said, "*Shto eta?*" ("What is this?")

She explained that the 42,000 ruble price was for people from the former USSR. The 26,000 ruble price was for Belarusians. Because I was a foreigner, I had to pay four times more than a local for the exact same crappy room. “But maybe it isn’t crappy,” I thought. I wanted to see it, so I said, “*Ya hachu pasmatri eta nomer.*” It was Tarzan Russian, but she understood and told me to go to the third floor. The elevator was broken, so I took the stairs and then met the floor guard, a chubby middle-aged woman who didn’t look that happy either. The room she showed me was clean and had not been remodeled since the 1950s. It was certainly worth the Belarusian price of \$12 per night, but \$40 was ridiculous. Besides, I can’t stand paying four times more than another person for the same thing. I left saying, “*Nyet, spasiba*” (no, thanks).

Exactly 10 years before, Belarus said “*Nyet, spasiba*” to capitalism. Indeed, what makes Belarus remarkable is that it’s the only ex-communist country in the world who gave capitalism a shot, and then reversed its course. The story of this flip-flop begins when it plunged into capitalism in 1991. It did what most Eastern European countries had done: privatize state enterprises, accept foreign investment, and let prices float freely. Transitioning to capitalism was rough on all Eastern Europeans. Although it was tempting to return to communism, people had faith that the draconian economic reforms would eventually lead to a higher standard of living for all. However, just three years into the transition, Belarus lost its patience and pulled the plug on the capitalist experiment.

Aborting capitalism

The road back to communism began when Belarus elected President Alexander Lukashenko, who assumed power in 1994. He promised to conquer inflation, which was clearly the fault of evil capitalism. To crush inflation, he pulled a classic communist move: he just ordered it to stop. He dictated that prices couldn’t go up more than two percent per month (or 27 percent per year). What a fool. If only taming inflation were so easy. Any economist would tell you that if you expand the money supply (print money) and you devalue your currency, then you will get high inflation, no matter what law you pass. Unfortunately, most politicians don’t take Economics 101.

While inflation ignored Lukashenko’s orders, he re-nationalized many private companies. At first, nationalizing something sounds like a good idea—you declare that the people now own something that was private before. It’s good to stick it to those evil corporations anyway, right? However, when nationalization happens to you, it no longer seems so great. It feels more like a robbery. Imagine you took a huge risk and started chocolate factory. One day, a government official walks into your office and says, “Your company now belongs to the

state. You shall work for the state; we will set the salaries, policies, prices, and procedures. If you disagree, you will go to prison.”

An authoritarian style of rule is characteristic of me, and I have always admitted it. You need to control the country, and the main thing is not to ruin people’s lives.
— Alexander Lukashenko

Under communism, people who had invested their life savings in owning a piece of a company, farm, or property, saw it vanish. Communists can even nationalize your home. For example, when I was staying with a family in Trinidad, Cuba, the owners told me what happened to their house when Fidel Castro took over. Their family had worked hard and saved money to buy a one-story house. The government decided it was too big for one family. So they literally drew a line down the middle and said, “Everything to left of this line is now government property. Don’t worry, we will pay you a fixed rate to the father of the family.” Unfortunately, this rate was non-transferable and would not adjust for inflation. In Cuba, getting a \$10 rent check every month might have been acceptable 50 years ago, but a few short years of high inflation made that rental income worthless. What’s more insulting is that once the father died, the family stopped getting those \$10 checks. That’s because when the father died, the state inherited half of his house and no longer had to “rent” it. Belarus copied Cuba by nationalizing private property that the government felt was “too big.”

I wanted to rent a private apartment in Minsk since the state hotels were such a rip-off. After much searching, I found a studio apartment in Minsk’s epicenter. For a week’s stay, I gave the owner \$150 in hard US currency. The apartment was on Praspekt Nezalezhnasti, in between Lenina and Kamsamolskaja streets. It was nice being near Lenin’s street, and that just one block away was another attractive street called Karla Marxa.

Falling in love with a brilliant kitchen invention

In America, those who don’t use a dishwasher perform a stupid ritual. I never realized just how stupid and inefficient it is until I came to Belarus. In the US, after washing a dish, we place it on a dish rack. After the dishes air dry, we put them away in the cabinet. Any Belarusian communist will tell you that this is highly inefficient.

The Belarusian solution is brilliantly simple and effective: the kitchen cabinet, which is placed over the sink, has dish racks embedded into the cabinet itself. Moreover, the cabinet has no bottom—it’s open underneath. Therefore, you can place the freshly washed (and dripping) dish directly into the cabinet. Water drips through the opening on the bottom and lands in the sink (or the metal, waterproof coun-

tertop). Later during my Belarus trip, I would find some designs that had a removable tray that rests under the cabinet racks to catch the dripping water, in case you don't want it to drip through the cabinet's bottom. The open bottom allows enough airflow for dishes to air dry in the cabinet. Not only do Belarusians skip a step when dish washing, but they also gain extra counter space since they don't need a separate bulky dish rack. Genius!

I'm not sure who invented this brilliant design, but it's the kind of thing a Belarusian would make: it's not pretty, but it works. Since the cabinet's bottom is below eye level, its unattractive open bottom is out of sight. Belarusians are the masters of jerry-rigging things. Communism limits imports, so it's often hard (or prohibitively expensive) to obtain things you want. Instead of finding a new fuel pump for your car or a pipe for your plumbing, a Belarusian will spend hours repairing it with simple tools, lots of creativity, and liberal use of duct tape. The resulting solution won't win any beauty contests, but it will work. In this way, Belarusians are the opposite of Italians, who are obsessed about aesthetics and sometimes make things that have little purpose other than to look good. Belarusians care little about aesthetics, and instead just focus on if the damn thing works.

Pulse dial lives in Belarus

The smelly bus ride reminded me that I needed to do laundry. I figured the guy who rented me the apartment might know where I could find a laundromat. When I started dialing his number, I heard a sound I hadn't heard since I was a child: pulse dial. If you don't know what pulse dial is, that's my point—it's that old.

If you ever wondered how telecommunications was ages ago, come to Belarus. Pulse dial is what we used before we had touch tones. Belarus is the only European country that still uses it. The one benefit of having pulse dial is that you don't have to deal with, "If you want to check your account, press 1; if you want to murder the person who invented this automated system, press 2; if you wish you had pulse dial, press 3 and move to Belarus."

Beltelcom, Belarus's telecommunications monopoly, is in charge of mismanaging all the landlines and long-distance communications. In 2011, only two-thirds of the switching equipment is digital, so pulse dial still lives. Talking on a Belarusian landline is like talking on a phone half a century ago: static-filled connections and dropped calls are common. Like many of their jerry-rigged solutions, the damn phone works, barely.

On the other hand, all Belarusians have a mobile phone. It helps that there are three GSM providers competing for their business. I didn't have a cell phone, so after listening to the machine gun rattle

of pulse dial, my contact picked up the line and I asked, "*Dobrey den*, where can I find a laundromat?"

"Laundromats don't exist in Belarus," he said. "The government doesn't think they're necessary," he added. Most tourists stay with relatives (who usually have a washing machine) or in a hotel (which will do your laundry). I considered hand washing everything, but my contact offered to do my laundry for a fee. They did a fine job, although they lost one of my socks.

The first thing you will notice about Minsk is how clean and safe it is. It's one of the benefits of living in a police state. There are more cops per capita in Belarus than in any other European country. Getting caught by a Belarusian policeman is about as much fun as going on a date with the Spanish Inquisition.

Nevertheless, a few try to meekly challenge the police. For example, at 8:00 p.m. on the sixteenth day of every month some Belarusians turn off their apartment lights and put a candle on the window. It's a symbolic protest against the disappeared political opponents. Some even show up with candles on Kastychnitskaja Ploshcha Square, but the police quickly break up this silent protest.

Minsk takes a cultural vacation

I searched for a cultural event around Oktyabrskaya Square. Eastern European cultural events are a bargain. In 1999, for example, I saw a ballet in the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow for \$9 and one in Ukraine's best theater for \$6. Unfortunately, such events are 10 times more expensive today, but if you go to smaller cities, you can still find deals. Therefore, I was excited when my guidebook mentioned that, "Minsk has quite a lively cultural life." However, when I visited in the July 2004, I discovered that the circus was closed until August, the ballet was closed until September, dance performances were suspended until November, and the Philharmonic Hall was undergoing reconstruction. In short, this city of two million (22 percent of Belarus's population) had nothing going on.

One Russian said that the reason Minsk is quiet during the summer months is that most people go to the countryside. Fine, let's see what's so great about the countryside. For the next two days, I communicated with grumpy bus drivers in order to visit three towns in the countryside: Dudutki, Mir, and Njasvizh. They were nice, each one showing off a few dilapidated 500-year-old buildings. The sixteenth-century Mir Castle, a UNESCO site, was memorable. Located 85 kilometers from Minsk, the red brick castle has an archaeological museum. On the other hand, if you never see these places, you're not missing much. Moreover, I didn't see the hordes of Belarusians who supposedly had escaped from the culturally dead Minsk.

This wasn't the first time Minsk was nearly dead. Like Lithuania's Kaunas, Minsk has come back from the dead several times since it was born in 1067. Several fires burned Minsk to the ground throughout the centuries, Crimean Tatars sacked it in 1505, Napoleon ruined it in 1812, the Germans pounded it in 1918, and then the Poles came in to finish the job in 1919–20. Still, it was WWII that delivered Minsk's most brutal spanking: the city was leveled and half of its population perished, including nearly all of its 50,000 Jews. With this dismal history, how do real estate agents convince anyone to buy a home in Minsk?

The Great Patriotic War

Imagine if the US fought a war where a third of Americans died. That puts into perspective the importance of WWII for Belarus. Perhaps that's why Russians don't call it WWII, but rather The Great Patriotic War. For the Soviets it was symbolically equal to (Pearl Harbor + September 11) x 100.

When you enter the Museum for the Great Patriotic War, they ought to give you a barf bag—it's that graphic. There are photos of people (including women and children) getting hung and shot. Mutilated bodies are everywhere. It's gruesome to see photos of soldiers with blown-off heads, body parts strewn about, and close-ups of young dead faces. On the other hand, everyone should see such horrors. If more people saw just how ugly war is, we might think twice before getting involved in one.

Later in my trip, I would visit the border town of Brest, which has the best Soviet WWII memorial in the world. The Brest Fortress defends the confluence of the Buh and Mukhavets Rivers. For one cruel month in 1941, Soviet soldiers fought to the death against the Nazis. The relentless German siege consumed Soviet supplies and energy. Although the Soviets lost that battle, it cost the Germans dearly. In honor of those who fought so valiantly, a gigantic soldier's head, carved from a single rock, dominates the center of the memorial. The sculpture's name is *Valor*. Next to it, an obelisk pierces the sky, an enormous eternal flame burns, and violin-filled music that sounds like "Adagio for Strings" plays in the background. If this memorial doesn't move you, none will.

WWII was a big deal throughout Eastern Europe because they bore the brunt of the war's devastation. They had most of the concentration camps. They had to deal with the Nazis storming in, the Soviets pushing them back out, and then overstaying their welcome. They saw their Jewish population vanish. In some cities, Jews were up to 75 percent of the population. (One reason for this was that during the 1800s Russians forced its Jews to settle in Belarus.) Today, thanks to Hitler, Jews are only 0.3 percent of the population. WWII not only annihilated the Jews, it also killed 2.5 million Belarusians.

So many Belarusians died that they're still unearthing the bodies. In 1988, for example, an archaeologist digging near Minsk made a mysterious and gruesome discovery. He dusted off a 50-year-old human skull. Within minutes, he found another, then another. Eventually he estimated that the mass grave in Kurapaty contained the remains of over 200,000 corpses. It ended up being the third largest concentration camp in WWII. This should give you an idea of just how many people died in Belarus, when you realize that someone could sweep that many human remains under the carpet, right outside of Minsk, and nobody discovered it until 44 years later!

These Belarusians had been executed between 1937 and 1941. The question remained: who done it? The two usual suspects were rounded up: the Soviets and the Nazis. Belarusian nationalists concluded that the Soviets were to blame. They believed that the USSR was trying to wipe out Belarus's culture and language. As Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev once said, "The sooner we all start speaking Russian, the faster we shall build communism." On the other hand, the Nazis had this thing for killing lots of people and making mass graves. Most objective historians conclude Stalin's regime is to blame.

What if the US suffered like Belarus did in WWII?

To understand how Belarus was nearly obliterated in WWII, try to digest these numbers. The fighting destroyed half of its economic resources, 72 percent of its cities, and 85 percent of its industry. Minsk looked like Hiroshima after the atomic bomb. Nearly a third of the country died—many were executed in over 200 concentration camps.

Let's compare what Belarus sustained in WWII with what America suffered in its deadliest war: the American Civil War. In our conflict, most of our resources and infrastructure were untouched. Approximately 625,000 Americans died, which was about *two percent* of our prewar 1860 population. Compare that to *33 percent* of Belarus's population dying in WWII.

Let's imagine that what happened to Belarus in WWII happened to America. Imagine 100 million Americans dead—that every third person you know is dead. Imagine most of our industry in Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, and Silicon Valley obliterated. Imagine nearly three-fourths of our cities in ruin, including New York, Chicago, Miami, Los Angeles, Dallas, San Francisco, Seattle, and Atlanta. Imagine half of our farmland and forests burned, most of our lakes and rivers contaminated, and 85 percent of our schools and universities destroyed. Imagine Washington, DC completely flattened: the Washington Monument toppled, the US Capitol building without a stone standing, the Lincoln Memorial a pile of rubble, and the White House a charred and burning mess.

Now try to imagine what kind of psychological trauma that would have on the generation that had to rebuild. And then imagine trying to rebuild with the oppressive, totalitarian government with Stalin breathing down your neck. Perhaps only now you can begin to imagine the incredible hardness of the Belarusian people. They've put up with a lot of shit.

If you are going through hell, keep going.
— Winston Churchill

After the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, my head was spinning one way and my stomach was spinning another. I had to go for a walk. Minsk is neither charming nor beautiful, but it's not bad. The architecture in the center of town is a mix between pleasant classic architecture and ugly, blocky concrete buildings. One nice building is the Church of St. Alexander Nevsky, built in 1898. It was closed during much of the atheistic Soviet era. Minsk also has a fake old town called *Traetskae Pradmestse*. It's fake because the real old town was pulverized. The Soviets rebuilt part of the old town to show what Belarusian architecture was like before they constructed the ugly Soviet buildings.

The balcony of my apartment overlooked Lenin's boulevard, which had just received a face-lift in 2004. Its wide sidewalk has elegant, warm, old-school lamps next to modern fountain jets that fire streams of water through the air at regular intervals. People of all ages stroll down the wide boulevard, enjoying the water-jet performance. I introduced myself to four young Belarusians who were sitting on a bench. After a few minutes of chatting, I invited them to my apartment for tea. They looked at each other, exchanged a few words in Russian amongst themselves, and concluded that I probably wasn't a CIA agent who would torture them with the Guantanamo Bay Special.

The government encourages students to fail exams

We ended up talking about our countries until 1:30 a.m. It was a great cultural exchange that Lukashenko wouldn't want to hear. They asked me not to reveal their names (for fear of getting in trouble with the authorities). There were two men and two women. Only one guy didn't speak English, he voiced his opinion through translation. I didn't have enough chairs, so some of us sat on the carpet, sipping tea. Their main criticism against Americans is that our friendliness is sometimes fake. I've heard this comment many times: we're all smiles, but we don't mean it. Hence, fellow Americans, work on your frown.

The students said that the government effectively encourages them to fail. If you pass your final college exams, the government won't let you go abroad. The purpose of this policy is to prevent brain drain, but it's not working. One student knew of 20 fellow classmates who were

working in the USA (and who were doing their best to stay there). They had all failed their final exams.

Five years after meeting these four students, in 2009, I met another Belarusian student, who told me another revealing tale about Belarus's educational system. I was couchsurfing with a Flemish family in Bruges, Belgium. They were hosting Valentina Martman, a plump 18-year-old Belarusian, who had been staying with them every summer as part of a cultural exchange. Valentina explained that you have two options in the university: (1) you pay your own way and then you can do what you want afterward, or (2) you let the government foot the bill and for the next several years you have to work wherever the government wants you to work, to pay back your debt. They often send you to undesirable places. It's a form of indentured servitude. On the other hand, paying your own way so you can have freedom doesn't always pay off either: Valentina spoke about a dentist who had been unemployed for six years.

Valentina also said that Belarus is not a true communist country, because it allows some private industry and ownership. However, she admits that most Belarusians dislike the system. Lukashenko labels his particular communist-capitalist blend as "market socialism." Valentina jokingly called it "communism with a cappuccino." I call it "idiotic."

Take food, for example. Lukashenko (who was in charge of the collective farms before he became the dictator) claimed that if the state controlled the farms and food-processing industry, Belarus would no longer need to import any food. Fat chance. Within three years of nationalizing the food industry, the agricultural industry's share of the GDP nosedived from 24 percent to 14 percent. Here's another way to illustrate just how lousy a government can be at feeding you: state and collective Belarusian farms own 83 percent of the agricultural land and get most of the state subsidies; however, privately run farms (which use only 17 percent of the land) produce over 40 percent of the national output. Belarus is importing more food than ever.

In 2005, Belarus nationalized even more companies, including banks, so that by 2011 about 80 percent of all Belarusian industry is in the state's hands. There are price controls, currency controls, and the government manhandles the private sector. The communists change regulations randomly, conduct frequent strict inspections, impose new regulations retroactively, and throw businessmen they don't like in jail.

In Belarus, freedom doesn't just take a backseat to state control, freedom is put in a body bag and thrown in the trunk. Lukashenko limits the press, religion, free speech, and peaceful assembly. Although people can vote, it's a joke. Lukashenko has effectively castrated the parliament and taken over the government. The Belarusian Constitution limits a President to two five-year terms. Using phony "referen-

dums," Lukashenko got rid of term limits. Thanks to his complete media monopoly and totalitarian control, his political opponents have no chance to dethrone him. In the last election, Lukashenko not only won 83 percent of vote, but also pro-Lukashenko candidates swept all 110 seats in the Legislature. If you believe those election results, I've got a Belarusian potato farm to sell you.

I often wondered why Lee Harvey Oswald shot John F. Kennedy. But then I learned he lived in Minsk. Living under this system of government would drive me to shoot someone too. Earlier that day, I had checked out Oswald's apartment. It's a great location, by the Svislach River and near the Victory Obelisk. While everyone was trying to defect from the USSR to the USA, Oswald was defecting the other way. Oswald left the US Marines and arrived in Minsk in January 1960. He spent his early 20s in Minsk, getting a job in a radio factory, marrying a local, having a baby, and changing his name to Alek. Eventually the KGB said, "We need you to return to America. We have a job for you. . . ." At least that's what one conspiracy theory believes.

The future of Belarus

Let's return to the four Belarusian university students who were hanging out in my Minsk studio. I asked them about Belarus's future. Two believed that Lukashenko and his totalitarian government would stay until he dies (around 2030). The other two believed Lukashenko would get kicked out by 2015. It seems that Lukashenko is standing on thin ice.

"Belarus's economy is a fantasy," said one student. It's true. The biggest delusion since he took power came from Russia, which sold oil to Belarus at well below market prices. Belarus would refine the oil and export it at normal market prices. It was a great deal for Belarus. Even a moron running an inefficient, bureaucratic business can make money when they get to buy products at a heavily discounted rate.

Belarus's dream is getting a wake-up call. In 2007, Russia required that Belarus give nearly all the duties that Belarus collects on exported Russian oil. In 2011, Russia sold gas to Belarus at world price levels, which caused severe inflation in Belarus. When Belarus didn't make debt payments, Russia stopped supplying electricity. Belarus, like a drowning swimmer, is fighting to stay afloat. They're improving energy efficiency, diversifying exports, selling off state assets, and tightening their fiscal and monetary belt. Nevertheless, they're still sinking. They're plugging the holes with borrowed money from Russia.

Ironically, this is exactly what brought down the USSR. As the price of oil dropped during the 1980s, the Soviets borrowed money like crazy. By 1991, the USSR was bankrupt. Russia is setting Belarus up for the same fate. Once Belarus is down on its knees, Russia's leader will

make a Darth Vader-like offer: "Join me, my son, and together we shall rule the galaxy!"

It would be an offer that Belarus could not refuse. By merging with Russia, Belarus would just become another state within Russia and, therefore, would receive the internally subsidized energy prices. (Russia, like many oil-rich countries, sells its oil domestically at dirt cheap prices.) Like a heroin addict getting his fix after a long break, Belarus would breathe a deep sigh of relief and life would return to normal.

"But if Russia and Belarus merged," I asked the students, "Would Lukashenko remain in power? Would his totalitarian regime remain an island within the more free Russian country?"

"*Nyet*," said one woman. "I'm sure Russia will protect Lukashenko, give him a nice *dacha* and lots of money, but eventually Belarus would have to open up."

In 1999, Belarus signed a two-state union treaty with Russia, promising closer ties. Over a decade later, they had made no progress, mostly because Lukashenko prefers autonomy. However, don't expect Belarus's independence to last. Belarus has always been under a greater power, and this time it looks like it will be going under Russia's wing again.

It was 1:00 a.m., and given all the questions I was asking them, the students were beginning to wonder if I really was working for the CIA. Having heard their opinion on Lukashenko and the future of Belarus, there was one final puzzle to solve: the Belarusian language.

The elusive Belarusian language

Haven't heard any Belarusian? Don't worry, neither have the Belarusians. Although I had heard that Belarus has its own language, Russian is all I could see and hear on the streets of Minsk. The students assured me the language exists, but they weren't very convincing. I asked them, "So, do you speak Belarusian when you go buy something?"

"No."

"How about when you talk to the government?"

"No."

"When you're hanging out at your house with your friends?"

"No."

"In business?"

"No."

"So when do you speak it?"

"In some classes in school."

“That’s it?”

“Yeah.”

Dumbfounded, I later re-confirmed this fact several times. It seemed that nobody in the world speaks Belarusian, not even the Belarusians. What’s Belarusian really like? One student told me that Belarusian is similar to Ukrainian. That meant little to me, so another described it as a blend of Polish and Russian. This is logical, since Belarus shares borders with Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. It’s also makes sense because in the 1921 Treaty of Riga, Poland and Russia split Belarus in two, and each tried to impose its language on the Belarusians. A few sample phrases back this up: *dobry dzyen* (good day) and *privitane* (hi) is similar to Russian’s *dobry den* and *privet*; *dzyahkoee* (thanks) is similar to Ukrainian’s *dzyahkooyu*, which seems related to Poland’s *dziękuję*; also, *kalee laska* (please) is similar to Ukrainian’s *bud laska*. Of the three languages, Belarusian is most similar to Ukrainian. One Belarusian told me that he can “understand almost every single word” in Ukrainian. Russians, in contrast, struggle to understand the Belarusian and Ukrainian languages. However, none of this explains why Belarusians don’t speak Belarusian.

To further confuse you, Belarus’s official government website says that 37 percent of Belarusians spoke Belarusian at home (most of the rest spoke Russian). By asking enough people, I finally solved this mystery: Belarusian is spoken in villages. While Poland and Russia tried to erase Belarusian, peasants kept the language alive.

Yarik Kryvoi, a Harvard Law School graduate, spent half of his life in Belarus, and he told me, “People in rural areas speak Belarusian naturally, because they can’t speak any other language. But you wouldn’t hear much Belarusian in Minsk, unless you come across some young people or some old ladies who come from a village. For the young people, it’s also a form of protest against the current political regime, because they sort of repress the Belarusian language, which is an interesting thing that the government of Belarus oppresses the Belarusian language. It does not want to support it. It’s not really welcomed by the government. Speaking Belarusian is the way Belarusians show their position and what they think of the situation in the country. Lukashenko has decided to follow more anti-Belarusian language policies.” It’s ironic that after Poland and Russia attempted to erase the language, the Belarusian government is now trying to finish the job.

To hear the language and meet the “real Belarusians,” I would have to go deep into Belarus. I wanted to visit a place so ridiculously remote that it would make the moon seem like a tourist Mecca. Scanning the Belarus map, my eye stopped in the southeast. It’s a place that nearly everyone has heard of, but few have visited: Chernobyl.

On April 26, 1986, the world learned about a remote Soviet town called Chernobyl (Chornobyl in Ukrainian). On that day, the Chernobyl nuclear reactor melted down and ruined Belarus’s day. Imagine a nuclear plant blowing up in the UK, dropping radioactive fallout on 25 percent of Britain’s land, and poisoning the territory for decades. That’s exactly what happened to Belarus (Belarus and the UK are a similar size). Even though the nuclear plant was in Ukraine, the winds blew about 70 percent of the radioactive isotopes on Belarus’s southeast. Today, 250,000 hectares are still contaminated. The worst part is the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, although areas around it aren’t exactly the Garden of Eden. I wasn’t sure if the few people who live there spoke Belarusian, but I was sure that they glowed and had three arms.

As my excitement of visiting this radioactive wasteland grew, I got the advice of a husky Minsk policewoman. We spoke for 45 minutes and she told me that her father had gone to Chernobyl immediately after the disaster. The government told everyone that alcohol protects you from the effects of radiation. Later, I would learn that most Belarusians still believe this. The cop told me how the government forced her father to drink liquor. She believes it’s because they didn’t want him to remember anything. It worked: he doesn’t remember much. This creates a funny scene. Imagine a cop, who can barely stand, slurring, “Don’t worry, *hic!* I’m heeere to save you from the, errruumm, radiation! *Hic!*”

Off to Radiation Land

Everyone discouraged me from going to Belarus’s southeast. A few Minsk citizens are still afraid of the radiation, even though they live far from Chernobyl and the event happened 25 years ago. For example, while it was raining at a bus stop, I met a hypochondriac who was afraid of the “radioactive” rain and eating the “contaminated” food in Minsk. Such people thought it was suicidal to visit the southeast. Even my guidebook was discouraging. It practically said, “DO NOT GO TO THE SOUTHEAST OF BELARUS UNLESS YOU ARE A COMPLETE FOOL. THERE IS NOTHING TO SEE AND YOU WILL GET AN UNHEALTHY DOSE OF RADIATION. YOU STUPID IDIOT.”

So the next day I boarded a train to Gomel, in the southeast of Belarus. During the six-hour train ride to Gomel, I met a guy named Yuri. Despite his broken English, we talked for most of the way. I asked him, “So if I want to go to a really remote town in Belarus, near the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, where would you recommend?”

“The town I live in: Dobrush,” he answered. “Oh, but one thing: the government shuts off the hot water for one month to save money. They do that every summer. So your hotel won’t have hot water.”

“Perfect! Has an American ever visited your town?”

Yuri laughed, “No, I think you will be the first!”

Yuri’s dad picked us up at Gomel and took us on the 30-minute drive to Dobrush. He dropped me off at the town’s only *gastinitsa* (hotel) and wished me good luck. Yuri would be leaving for Moscow the next morning, so I needed a lot of luck. The streets of Dobrush were deserted, so once Yuri and his dad drove away, I felt quite alone in this little corner of Belarus.

Bizarre Belarusian priorities

The hotel receptionist was a bit surprised to find an American in Dobrush. In fact, she seemed surprised to see anyone—the hotel was empty. So much for Belarusians rushing to the countryside. She led me down a long, dark hallway; they kept lights off to keep the energy bill down. After she showed me the room, I said, “*Spasiba.*” She smiled and welcomed me by saying, “*Pazhalusta.*”

The hotel had bizarre priorities: the room had a TV and a refrigerator, but no hot water and no toilet paper. Granted, the TV received only two fuzzy channels and the temperature inside the refrigerator was nearly room temperature—obviously those appliances weren’t huge priorities either. Nevertheless, for \$20 a night, you would think they could spring for a roll of toilet paper.

Here’s another example of Belarus’s strange priorities. The government sells goods to the local state-owned enterprises. The government allows these monopolies to mark up everything from zero to 30 percent. Being a good little monopoly, the state-owned enterprise marks up everything to the maximum 30 percent. However, the government has a few exceptions which can only be marked up a small amount because they are “essential” products. The short list includes bread, bottled water, milk, and vodka. Now you know the Belarus’s priorities: vodka is more important than toilet paper.

An alien in an alien land

It was time to hear the Belarusian language and to meet the radioactive people of Dobrush. Everywhere I went, I introduced myself to the locals. Most people looked at me like *I* was the radioactive one! *The nerve!* I never liked that the American government calls foreigners *aliens*. However, when I was in Dobrush, I felt like a Martian. Although I didn’t see any locals in Dobrush with three arms, they would all twist their heads 180 degrees whenever I spoke in stores or public places. Showing how fast gossip spreads, some knew about me before I met them, “You’re that American,” a few said. Kids stared at me with their mouths open. Even Lenin’s statue in Dobrush’s main square seemed to look me over.

In the end, I met nearly 100 people, but only one person spoke English well enough to have a decent conversation. Her name was Irina Kurochkina. She was a simply dressed 23-year-old. She had shoulder-length brown hair and a curvy body. Her most stunning feature were her haunting crystal blue eyes. They were so big and intense that it almost hurt to look at them. She was shy, but she was excited to practice English. Over the next few days, she would show me a side of Belarus that few aliens have ever seen.

Irina invited me to have a meal with her family and friends. Upon entering her modest apartment, her large mom greeted me with a jovial, “*Zdravstvuite!*” She guided me to the kitchen’s dining area, pointed to a chair, and said with a smile, “*Sadites, pazhalusta!*” So I sat down. I also met Irina’s father, her shy little brother Denis, and three other visitors in the apartment. Everyone was eager to talk, but nobody spoke English and my Russian was too poor to have a meaningful conversation. Therefore, Irina was interpreting nonstop among all of us. Her English skills were good, but the mental strain was tiring her out. Luckily, she got a break when her mother brought out the food.

Belarusian cuisine

In the USSR, neighboring Soviet Republics disparagingly called Belarusians *bulbashi* (potato-eaters). This is odd because everyone in a 1,000 kilometer radius of Belarus also consumes an absurd amount of potatoes. Still, it’s true that potatoes play a big role in Belarusian cuisine. Irina’s mom brought out stuffed *draniki* (potato pancakes) and *khalodnik* (beet soup with boiled potatoes and sour cream). Belarusians also love their dumplings, like *kolduni* (meat-filled potato dumplings) and *kletschy* (mushroom-filled dumplings). I was secretly happy Irina’s mom did not offer the Belarusian finger-stuffed sausage (raw pig’s intestine stuffed with minced meat) or *kravianka* (sausage made of buckwheat grain and pig’s blood).

Belarus gets the same cold, wet climate that pervades in the Baltic, so they grow similar crops. For instance, rye outperforms wheat in soggy cold lands, so Belarusians use rye to make everything from bread to vodka. Because of their limited selection of vegetables, Belarusians hardly knew what a fresh salad was 70 years ago. Even today their idea of a fresh salad is something that has cooked cabbage or boiled beets. Otherwise, there’s a potato salad, which often has cucumbers and dill drowned in sour cream or mayonnaise. Since communism limits the import of spices, their cuisine is often a bit bland. Nevertheless, those who grow up on the Belarusian diet adore it—for them, it’s comfort food.

Irina’s mom asked me what I thought about the Belarusian standard of living and how it compares to the rest of the world. I said that

Belarus is a five out of 10 on the global scale. She was surprised, thinking they were much lower, like a two. “If you’re a two, then what are the African countries?” I said. That question made her recalibrate her scale. Like many Eastern Europeans, Belarusians compare themselves with Western Europeans and then feel poor. They forget that they’re better off than Cambodians, Nigerians, and Nicaraguans.

Yarik Kryvoi would later tell me, “The most important characteristics of Belarusians is that they are not really proud that they are Belarusians. This is a good thing, because there are almost no ethnic or nationalistic conflicts in Belarus. On the other hand, because of that, they have no formulated identity, which makes it easier for other countries, like Russia, to influence Belarus and its political processes, and to impose guys like Lukashenko so that he rules Belarus.”

A common human trait is that no matter where we are, we believe we’re the center of the universe. That’s not the case in Dobrush. The humble locals acknowledge that they live on a forgotten fringe of this planet. They know that if their part of the world disappeared, nobody would notice. That’s ironic, because in 1986, they nearly did vanish, yet the world certainly did notice.

1984 in 1986

George Orwell’s *1984* describes a totalitarian government that covers up the truth. In 1986, the government of Belarus (with orders from Moscow) waited several days before admitting that they had a little problem. However, they couldn’t hide reality from those who were in the middle of the Chernobyl disaster area. After all, things were a bit freaky that day.

The old Belarusians in Irina’s home described that April day as scorching hot. The temperature was ridiculously hot for spring. The sky was an eerie dark color. As they marveled at the bizarre weather, nobody had any clue that they were being doused with radiation. Nine tons of radioactive material was filling the sky. That’s 400 times the Hiroshima atomic bomb. Over five million people had the distinct pleasure of having radioactive fallout land on their heads.

Irina was five years old when she witnessed the cataclysm. She said, “I remember a violent, horrible wind, unlike any I’ve ever felt. I knew something was wrong, but I didn’t understand what was happening.” Neither did the adults. The Soviets were atheists, but as doom descended on Dobrush, some believed that the end was at hand.

There are two things that are counterintuitive about the Chernobyl horror. The first has to do with who suffered the most. Everyone I met knew several people who had died of cancer or other ailments a few years after radiation rained on them; however, it’s surprising who the

victims were. You would probably predict that a five-year-old *dievushka* (girl) like Irina and a 70-year-old *babushka* (grandmother) would be the most likely to die five years after the radiation poisoning. However, according to the locals, the middle-aged folks fared the worst; those under 30 and over 60 fared better. Although it’s good to question such anecdotal evidence, with the secretive Belarusian government, such stories may be the best source of information.

The second counterintuitive aspect about the Chernobyl aftermath is that its effects weren’t as bad as you might imagine. The worst news: 50 direct deaths, up to 4,000 indirect deaths over many years, and a 12-fold increase in the rates of thyroid cancers among Belarusian women.¹ Although that’s tragic, you might have expected worse news given that the explosion released 400 times the radiation dose of the Hiroshima atomic bomb. Indeed, the land around Dobrush looked surprisingly normal. The fact that girls like Irina survived without health problems seems miraculous.

Nevertheless, nowadays Dobrush locals blame nearly all their ailments on Chernobyl. Most Belarusians over 50 are fat, but they claim that Chernobyl is the reason that they have bad joints and high blood pressure. Unfortunately, since the government represses most of the little information it gathers, we may never know the full long-term effects of Chernobyl. All these mysteries only increased my curiosity. There was only one way to learn more: I had to go into the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. But first, I had to go to Hell.

Sauna Experience Part III

The next day, Irina drove me to the outskirts of Dobrush (that sounds funny—it’s like saying you’re going to the outskirts of no-man’s land). In a small farm house, Irina introduced me to three of her close friends: Dimitri, his fiancée Alla, and a crazy girl named Sveta. None of them spoke English, although the hyperactive, skinny, blond Sveta certainly tried. We barbecued some pork together and ate outside overlooking the surrounding farmland. We joked and laughed often, despite (or perhaps because of) our language differences. It’s amazing how much one can communicate when two people really want to communicate.

As our meal winded down, Dimitri and I watched the girls go off into the potato fields to have their “girl talk.” I rested my chin on my palm, admiring the beautiful girls as they walked into the summer’s sunset. Just as I began fantasizing about having a sauna with them, Dimitri invited me to join him in a “*Russkaya banya*.” Although I understood the words (*Russian bath*), I didn’t know what it really meant. “Maybe it’s like a Jacuzzi,” I thought. Nevertheless, I love jumping blindly into the unknown, so I agreed. Little did I know that I was jumping blindly into Dante’s Inferno.

Dimitri led me to a small house. When I entered inside, I started sweating. It was hot like a sauna. Dimitri told me to strip. I did. Then he told me to follow him into another room. "But I thought we were in the sauna . . ." I mumbled as I followed him into the second room.

As I walked into the next room, hot air enveloped my skin. Sweat began dripping down my forehead, stinging my eyes. The naked Dimitri fiddled with a variety of things while I just closed my eyes and tried to breathe normally. As sweat poured down my back, Dimitri opened yet another door and then, like Satan, motioned me to follow him into Hell.

I am not sure what was the temperature in that third room, but I'm sure that even the Devil would get a heat stroke. The steam-filled air burned my throat. My head was spinning. Dimitri told me to lay my naked body on the bench. I laid on my stomach. I winced as the burning bench scorched my chest and legs. Sweat rolled down my brow as if I were running a marathon in the Amazon jungle.

In the fog of my mind, I saw Dimitri bring out a big, bushy plant. *What the hell is he going to do with that thing?* He started running it all over my body. It didn't feel good: it just felt like a big, bushy plant running up and down my wet, naked back—not exactly a dream sensation. Occasionally he shocked me by whipping me with it. *Whack! Whack! Whack!* I bit my lip and clenched my fists each time, not because it hurt, but because I was wondering what in heaven's name I had done to deserve all this.

After what felt like a lifetime, Dimitri told me that we could take a break from Hades. We cooled off outside for a couple of minutes, admiring the Milky Way. However, before my body could cool down to a boiling temperature, he said it was time to return to the inferno. I gave him a fake American smile and followed him back in.

He told me to lie down again. I did. Then with hand gestures and a semi-stern voice, he ordered that I flip over, on my back. Suddenly, saunas lost all their sex appeal. I thought of my sauna experiences in Finland and Estonia, but my smile vanished when Dimitri reminded me to roll over.

I did. Now, my penis was out in the open, feeling extremely vulnerable. Then Dimitri brought out that hell-spawned plant again. My penis shrieked. My wiener just wanted to run for cover in between my legs. But it was too late, Dimitri had us right where he wanted us.

Dimitri stood next to me, completely naked. He looked down on me with that big bushy plant in his sweaty hand. He had a malevolent stare, but that could have simply been an illusion in my heat-stroked state. The harsh sound of steam filling my ears only made the hellfire feel more hopeless. I closed my eyes and started asking the Lord Jesus for forgiveness. I asked for Muhammad's help too. And the Buddha.

He ran the plant all over my front side. Then he raised his arm high. I closed my eyes muttering, "Sweet Jesus, save me now." *Whack!* He gave me several good whacks. *Whack! WHACK! W-H-A-C-K!!!* Fortunately, not there.

After an eternity, Dimitri stopped battering me and I emerged from Hell. I felt like falling to my knees and singing *hallelujah!* Clearly, I was now a better man. Like a good Catholic, I had atoned for my sins. So now it was time to sin again.

Watching porn with a Belarusian family

After the Russian bath, I joined Dimitri's family and the girls for a small snack at 2:00 a.m. The TV was on in the background. Suddenly, I heard English! I was so excited that I turned to watch the TV. A sexy woman was walking across in a movie that looked like *Mad Max*, except Mel Gibson wasn't there. From the narrator's voice, I could tell this wasn't just some B movie. This was an X-rated movie. I warned my hosts that we were about to see some porn. They shrugged. Soon the movie "got into it."

This made for another bizarre scene. There I was, enjoying a fine meal in the outskirts of Dobrush, listening to everyone speak Belarusian, and glancing at some hardcore pornography in the background. Dimitri's mom probably didn't understand what the girls on TV meant when they screamed, "Oh yeah, that's it, fuck me *harder!*"

After 10 minutes of nonstop moaning and screaming, Dimitri's mom grew tired of the distraction and switched to the Russian version of "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" It's the same show, except that the grand prize is a million *rubles*, not dollars. In 2004, that worked out to about \$25,000. But with monthly wages averaging \$100 per month, you would feel like a millionaire if you got that.

At 3:00 a.m., we went to bed. As I replayed the day's events in my mind, I realized that some may never believe that all this really happened. Even I couldn't believe it. Yet that was how I spent a warm summer day in Dobrush, Belarus.

Entering the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone

My Belarusian friends knew that I wanted to inhale radioactive air. Therefore, the next day Mikhail, Dimitri's father, offered to drive Irina and me into the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. Although the Chernobyl reactor was in Ukraine, it was just 16 kilometers (10 miles) from the Belarus border. Since most of the radioactive plume blew onto Belarus, most of the contaminated Zone is in Belarus. The military was guarding all the entrances. Nobody could enter unless you had family ties in the zone. In 2004, it was illegal for any foreigner to enter the zone

(Ukraine opened their side of the zone to tourists in 2011). Therefore, Mikhail was taking a big risk in trying to sneak me in.

As we approached the checkpoint, Mikhail told me not to open my mouth. He will tell the guard that we're visiting relatives. Since he lives just 40 kilometers from the zone, it's a believable story. The guard examined Mikhail's documents. Then he looked at me. I stopped breathing.

The guard barked out a question in Russian. I had no clue what he was asking. My lips began to part, as I thought about something to say in Russian.

Just in time, Mikhail answered the question. The guard relaxed, raised the gate, and waved us through. I exhaled and took a deep breath of radioactive air. We were entering what was the most radioactively and chemically contaminated area in the world.

What's strange is that the zone didn't look so bad: it looked more like a ghost town than a wasteland. I expected a gray, desolate, and lifeless area. Instead, plants flourish everywhere. Abandoned buildings have trees and vines growing out of broken windows. Everywhere we drove, the streets were empty, but nature had taken over. Rusted heaps of metal lay off the road, as if they were quickly abandoned. All the man-made elements of the zone were dying, but life was springing forth in every corner. It was green everywhere you looked on that August day. The zone was a glimpse of what would happen if humans suddenly vanished from the earth.

We parked at the dilapidated house of Mikhail's father. The wooden structure was decaying; moss grew in the dark, wet places. Dust-covered tools and random objects lay on the floor, forgotten. There was a small farm in the back. Entropy ruled: you could see the remnants of an organized vegetable plot, but it was fading fast. Mikhail told me that scientists discovered mutated plants in the zone. Still, apple trees were bearing things that looked like fruit. I plucked an apple and examined it. It looked normal. I bit into it. Radioactivity never tasted so good! Finnish authorities warn against eating mushrooms and fish around Chernobyl because their levels of radioactive cesium-137 still exceeds the EU standards. Hey, they didn't mention apples, so I ate the whole thing! Who needs GMO apples when you can have yummy radioactive ones?

It's hard to believe, but a few loonies live permanently in the zone. We drove by two *babushkas* sitting outside their shacks. It's hard to imagine how these grandmothers live here. They have no electricity, police, stores, or government services. These Chernobyl survivors cling to their homes, because that is all they have. Probably only a few dozen live in the zone, but two million Belarusians still live in the hardest hit

areas. They don't move because the state-controlled labor market is rigid. The government employs most people and helps with housing. If you move, good luck finding a job and a house. Besides, who are you going to sell your radioactive house to?

Mikhail said the government relocated 75,000 people "just for show." They were probably the folks who were glowing in the dark. Most had to stay put. The government didn't want to relocate two million people and abandon the vital industries in the southeast. In fact, just three months after the accident, the Soviets forced the surviving Chernobyl plant workers to return to their offices, which were located just a five-minute walk from the blown up reactor. They had to restart the remaining three reactors to make sure that people had power during the winter. Many Chernobyl workers died from prolonged radiation poisoning. Today, the government downplays the dangers of living in these areas. They are encouraging resettlement and are cutting benefits to those who suffered from the accident.

Leaving Belarus

Although the radiation therapy felt great, we didn't want to overdo on it. We left behind the verdant Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and came home to peaceful Dobrush. I took one last cold shower in my hotel that had no toilet paper. The next day, I gave long hugs to Irina, her family, and her friends. Yeah, I even hugged Dimitri.

Dobrush comes from the Russian word meaning *good* or *kind*. Irina and all the people I met there were truly good and kind to me. I'll never forget their generosity and warmth. I waved goodbye to them (and Lenin) as the minibus left the main square in Dobrush.

Seven years after visiting Dobrush, in 2011, Irina found me on Facebook. She was now 32 years old and living in Moscow. I was a bit sad when I looked at her photos. Although her beautiful haunting blue eyes remained, much had changed. She had dyed her hair blond and wore fancy clothes with heels. Gone was the simple girl that I met in Dobrush. She even sounded different. She wrote (excuse her imperfect English):

I am really thankful to Moscow for the changes of myself and what the city could do with me, my temper, character, and personality. I changed, I know, and feel it myself. I may say I became much stronger, a bit violent and much less sentimental. I changed my mind on a lot of different things, life events, principles and people too. I'm happy and now I don't want to change anything in my life.

In fashion, I prefer the classic style. In addition, here there are rules of office etiquette. On weekends, I wear modern, cheerful clothes for clubs and other city entertainment places.

Remember Sveta and Alla?! Both became mothers last year. And both of them have sons, Nikolay and Konstantin, my godsons. This year my brother Denis went to the Economical University, he's a student now, he lives in Gomel. I urged him to go to Moscow University, but he's a patriot of Belarus and decided to stay there, though he likes Moscow and visited me several times. That is my news.

Irina

Moscow had transformed the simple village girl I met in Dobrush. Nevertheless, I hoped that deep underneath her mesmerizing crystal eyes, there was still a part of her that hadn't forgotten the lessons she had learned while growing up in Belarus.

What Belarus Can Teach Us

- **Do a Belarusian kitchen remodel.** If you frequently hand wash your dishes, you will love doing what Belarusians do—put the wet, dripping dish directly into the cabinet. Belarusians don't use separate dish racks, because their cabinets have holes on the bottom to let the water drip out onto the waterproof counter (or onto a removable tray). Although this efficient design saves time, it still doesn't make dish washing fun.
- **Jerry-rig something.** When something breaks, Americans usually buy a new one. If we fix it, we hire a professional. Next time, do what Belarusians do: fix it yourself. Your solution may be a pathetic jerry-rigged solution, but you will have learned how something works, become a bit more self-sufficient, and saved a few bucks.
- **Suck it up.** Compared to Belarusians, most people are wimps. We've gotten soft with our many comforts, so that today we complain when the slightest thing is not perfect. Next time you're feeling whiny, think about what the Belarusians had to deal with after WWII. Then shut up and deal.

Travel deals and info: <http://ftapon.com/belarus>

Places I saw and recommend in Belarus: Minsk, Brest, and the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.

When I was in southeastern Belarus, I was tempted to cross into Russia or Ukraine, but I had visited both of those countries in 1999, and I had never been to Poland. Besides, I knew I would return to those ex-USSR countries one day, so we will discuss them at the end of this book. I was a bit sad to leave Belarus. Its resilient people were good to me, even if they didn't always smile at first.

Now we shall go to Poland and re-enter the world of capitalism and tourists. To get you in the mood, here's a Polish joke:

An American is walking down the street when he sees a Pole with a long piece of wood and a tape measure. He's standing the wood on its end, while stretching and jumping to reach the top of it with his tape measure. Seeing the Pole's struggle, the American grabs the wood, lays it on the sidewalk, measures it with the tape measure, and says, "There! Two meters long!"

The Pole shouts, "You stupid American! I don't care how long it is! I want to know how high it is!"