

Estonia

We had planned to go to Estonia with Mark and Alice in early April. A combination of EasyJet and Icelandic volcanoes ensured that this did not happen: but we finally went with Alice only, late in May.

Thursday 20 May 2010

Drove to Stansted: four hours (including one stop) home to ‘parking’, then hanging around for a 16:00 Easyjet takeoff (actually 17:00) to Tallinn. Met up with Alice at Stansted – with the new government just arrived, Mark had no chance of travelling with us. Because of the two hours difference, it was after 9.30 pm when we touched down in Tallinn, still sort of daylight and very warm. Arrived at the hotel too late to eat (which was as we had expected) but enjoyed a beer in the courtyard.

Friday 21 May 2010

Today was scheduled for ‘downtown’ – ‘old town’. Note that “Vana” means “old” – she was NOT amused!! Modern, clean, bustling, cheerful, overpriced; the old part was attractive but (mainly) being maintained and used, elsewhere the appearance of a modern Western city. It completely seemed (in downtown Tallinn) to have shaken off the Soviet history, only nineteen years ago; completely different from Riga which wallows in and is completely weighted down by its Soviet past. But the threat to Estonia is palpable, any day the Russians could decide they need the port at Tallinn and could move in – Europe would do nothing to help – and meanwhile the Russians still have an economic stranglehold. It may do no good, but it is obvious why Estonia is building ties to Europe as fast as she is able. Adopting the Euro next year, and prices already at Euro-currency levels!

Did some museums – less than Alice and Vana would have liked – but I avoided them and the only one I wanted, the museum of Estonian history, was shut for modernisation until 2011! I found the customary blankness everywhere – hotel, tourist information, etc – about stamp dealers: but one antique shop gave us a lead, and we found an excellent postal history

dealer (Shifara gallery, Vauro-Posti 7, 10146 Tallinn, shifara@online.ee). I spent almost an hour there, bought four items, all Estonian, all czarist period, and was very happy! Lots of coffee and cake shops open in the (beautiful and spacious) squares and on the sidewalks. Two good bookshops, I could have bought half their stocks IF they had been in English! – but I contented myself with a volume on Estonian history. More social than political, which is a bit of a shame, but I suspect there is a lot of political history which no one dares say or write or sell in Estonia. It sums up thus:

Before 1917 Czarist. Untouched by Napoleon's armies. Run by Germans, owned by Russia. Northern part ("Estonia") was one province of Russia, southern part with Latvia ("Livonia") was another province administered from Riga. Tallinn was the Easternmost of the Hansa ports (after Lubeck – Danzig – Memel – Konigsberg – Riga).

1917: Bolsheviks seize power (led by Kalinin): unite Estonia.

1918: Declaration of Independence (slightly muddled). Recognised as independent with agreed borders after 1920.

1939: Russians move in.

1940: Russian flag flies over Tallinn.

1941-2: Germans move in. German flag flies over Tallinn. Russians attack. Germans resist. For one day, Estonia flag flies alongside German flag. Russians move in. Russian flag flies. Russians stay till 1991.

1991: Independence. Almost the 1920 borders, but Russia has taken two tiny strips of Estonia, in the North East (Narva-Joesuu) and in the South East (Pechory).

Then. Steady integration into Europe.

One Cathedral was a beautifully ornate orthodox one, another a catholic one: both religions are practised, although the commonest religion is Lutheran.

It was so warm that we were back in our hotel by 3 pm. We had an ordinary but expensive 'supper' at 5 pm, to give us plenty of time to get to the ballet. The state opera and the national theatre are side by side, both part of the same huge modern palace but completely independent. The opera is well designed, not a large auditorium (half full for the ballet, probably about 800 people there: which makes it larger than the Leeds opera but smaller than Lowry or Covent Garden), but plenty of interval rooms, free (manned) cloakrooms – not enough toilets! Overall well designed, with a big stage and good scene-changing.

The ballet was 'Three Musketeers', we have not seen it done as a ballet before, makes better use of male dancers than many, there are only two major female roles (Constance and Milady). It was not composed as a ballet, but musical sequences were taken from many other composers. The show was excellent, dancers doing ballet steps as they stuck swords into one another, and for me, even though I know the story so well, it was still exciting. A memorable comic twist was an absurd sequence in the denouement at the royal ball, when a dozen jewel boxes appeared and the dancers were all playing catch with them.

Sat out in the main square having tea and desserts about 9.30/10.00pm after the show. Very pleasant, very civilised – probably much warmer than is normal here even in mid summer.

Estonians are serious people, like the Finns, by English standards relatively humourless. But they are friendly and obliging – if you ask for something they don't have, they will go to a lot of trouble to try to help. Sadly we met an English bachelor party out for a weekend drinking – *why* Tallinn, with the prices here?? I wish we could make them hold their bachelor parties in jails!! The Estonians are so friendly, they must view us as real jobs!

Saturday 22 May – The royal palace

We took a cab uptown, about 2½ miles, to the 'palace': a palace overlooking the harbour, and built by some czar as his summer residence. In fact, this is the royal palace, this is not the president's palace, which is next door and is off limits, all we were allowed to visit was the czar's palace at the opposite end of the garden, which houses the national art collection. This was pleasant for the décor (ceiling paintings, furniture) and the few pictures there were. But, all the German and Germanic-type artists were taken by the Germans when they fled from Estonia in 1944: then any pictures the Russians thought were worth anything were taken in 1990: so the national art collection is the pictures the Germans and Russians didn't want (mainly Estonian artists) plus anything which was hidden during the occupations or has been bequeathed since. A few pictures of czar's family by minor artists, a few copies of ones by good artists, and some 'peasant' pictures. Actually quite interesting but artistically limited.

Then we walked around the garden of this palace/summer house, which is quite extensive, and down to the shore on the one side of the harbour. This harbour is on the Baltic: the north shore of Estonia. In glorious sunshine we spent a couple of hours walking round, stopping

for a beer, watching the birds (mainly fieldfare), and – like 5000 Estonians – enjoying the park. We clocked up 19 unexciting species!

Then a short bus ride, an amble through the old town stopping off for a couple of ‘displays’ and a couple of street markets, Vana bought a ‘top’, and through a relatively less populated area (welcome after the scrum and bustle of the town) down to the lake on the north-west side of the town. This was ornithologically unexciting, we saw a spotted flycatcher which made us up to an unspectacular list of 20. So back to the hotel, the Van Stackelberg at the corner of Falgi and Toompuietee. Supper early (5 pm) in the hotel.

Left Alice in the hotel, Vana and I went to the opera, *Così*, same seats as last night (D1-2: the *best* seats are F1-2). Very well performed, not a lot of scenery but furniture used; absolutely straight, as if any change from the original was a sin (the D’Oyly Carte complex). Singing excellent – Fiordiligi was tubby and unattractive but sung beautifully – the high spot was Despina, looking young and very attractive (and also singing well). In the denouement, everybody seemed reasonably content with the outcome, no blame game.

Stopped off again in the main square for cakes on the way home. All the kitchens close at 10 pm but they manage cakes, etc. until later. Back for the last night at Von Stackelberg (he was a Swedish field marshal – ran North Estonia until 1722 when the Russians won). It has been a very comfortable hotel, a little old-fashioned, food a bit overpriced (the hotel would be overpriced but I got a ‘deal’): but very convenient, helpful, and the courtyard where we eat is an added bonus.

Sunday 23 May – Birding West Coast

We had booked with a really helpful lady, Marika Mann, who runs her own business organising birding tours and birding holidays in Estonia. She is working too hard, making proposals and quotes for people who simply want to see her projected itineraries so they can copy them: and this in turn increases her costs, and means she has to charge fairly high prices when she gets a customer! It may be a bit self-defeating. I can’t see an answer!

She had arranged a 3-day tour for us, with a guide called Tarvo Valker, who turned out to be a lot younger than we had expected (he is low thirties). He is making a tenuous career as a freelance guide who fills in part of the rest of the time with occasional consultancy

jobs/surveys/environmental reports. He is knowledgeable about birds, found a lot of birds because he knew the terrain so well and had a fantastic ear for the songs. He also speaks good English and knows the (English) names of all the birds. He says English is his third language (Russian 2nd, Finnish 4th!) Tarvo picked us up at about 9.30, it was a cloudy overcast day which was a real disappointment after the two lovely days in Tallinn.

The day was spent on *eight* stops in the Parnu area, and along the coast south of Parnu, on the gulf of Riga almost down to the Latvian border. Essentially this involved two 'coastal' stops to look over the gulf, looking for terns and scoters and similar, and six inland stops which were mainly wooded marshes. Mostly we went round on made trails, mostly boardwalks which were amazing because they were kept in such good condition, I don't think I have been anywhere where the trails and boardwalks were so good and so well-maintained. On this day I had a bit of a hard time because we were in a hilly area, and because of the swamps, most of the hills and valleys were stairs. Our penultimate call of the day was at a lookout tower, described as the tallest bird-watching tower in Estonia. From the second floor I was looking out over forest in every direction, with the sea beyond in one direction, and lakes surrounded by bog beyond the trees in another direction. Vana, Alice and Tarvo went up several more levels but I don't think they saw a lot more than I did.

We checked into our hotel in Parnu before noon, lunched there, then siesta'd until 3 pm. Then Tarvo kept us out until 9 pm! We certainly got our money's worth today. The hotel, the Wesset Villa, was excellent: clean, friendly, attractive. We quickly realised that yellow wagtail (the blue-headed, British version) is quite common here, but one high spot was a pair of citrine wagtails – spectacular, but I now know that we have never seen these before. Also common are whinchats, as common as stonechats in England. The other spectacular high spot was a bittern flying across the reedbed from one hiding place to another: and for me, a brief view of a rose finch. The mammal of the day was a racoon dog, rounded back with nose and tail low to the ground – a vicious egg thief!

Monday 24 May – Parnu to Haapsalu

We started out at 5.30 am, mainly I think in the (forlorn) hope of catching a lot of early-morning woodpeckers. In the event the morning birding was unspectacular, except for a nightjar which took off purely by chance and no more than two metres from us. This was

really close and good sighting, with the big white patches on the wings; my first good sighting ever of a European nightjar. Also in the morning, a couple of young elks, already big animals, almost as big as a cow, but not yet grown their antlers. Almost the same animal as moose!

Lunch in Lihula, followed by a visit to Marika's office which is in Lihula (Estonian Nature Tours, Linnuse tee 1, 90303 Lihula: info@naturetours.ee). She was just as charming in person as in her e-mails. Then out for some birding – lots of stops in the afternoon, towers, coastal views, marshes etc – with a wryneck as a high spot, Vana seeing a wild boar, and a white-tailed sea eagle overhead as we arrived in Haapsalu.

Checked in to our hotel (Promenadii) at Haapsalu about 6 pm: a gorgeous room, lovely, clean, spacious, and with a view straight over a lagoon full of ducks, terns and gulls. Wish we could stay longer here. Best from our room were Caspian tern and Baltic gulls (lesser blackbacks with glossy black backs) and yellowlegs (herring gulls with yellow legs). A good supper, and then we were off again (starting with a merlin!) for an evening's bird-watching. The main feature was a lake and reedbed with an excellent boardwalk through the marsh and into the reedbed. Our list for the evening was short but stunning: black tern, bearded tit (V), little gull, rose finch, red and Slavonian grebes. Alice stayed back in Haapsalu, walking round a lagoon, photographing the town, etc. Vana and Tarvo walked along the boardwalk, I tried to do the same, but I fell off the boardwalk and up to my ears in stagnant muddy marsh. The reed warblers and bearded tits must have thought it hilarious! (So did Vana!) I was not so sure!! We finally got back to our hotel at 11.30, with clear instructions to be 'on parade' at 6.00 am!

Tuesday 25 May – Haapsalu to home

Tarvo was determined to give us good value on our last day! We set off by watching a black grouse lek from relatively close to. The grouse are not easily distracted! There were more than thirty male birds lekking, spread over six fields all within one kilometre. The morning also yielded a Montagu's harrier (my first good view) and a corncrake, before we drove on to the headland at Poosaspea (peninsula) to sea watch. This was a lot warmer and pleasanter than Balranald (but no skuas), with all the things you would expect plus some others –

normal and velvet scoters, black and red necked divers, scaup and also some eider who clearly hadn't read the textbook!

Then to a mixture of reedbeds and farmed fields to look for a lesser spotted eagle (our first ever). When we did find him, he gave us a lovely display, having a dogfight with a pair of buzzards. A good view of a cuckoo; and hearing half a dozen warbler species and actually seeing a grasshopper warbler made this a morning to remember. Then, last call before lunch, we finally saw a white-backed woodpecker, the white back is quite conspicuous, and this was another 'lifer' for us.

Lunch at a funny little place in Amanda Puhuet, looked like a diner but actually was very pleasant when we went in. I had seen the white-backed woodpecker as a good omen: and sure enough we saw the black woodpecker – huge and black – and then a second wryneck! – in the afternoon. Not a bad way to end a tour.

Tarvo delivered us to the airport just before 7 pm. We flew at 9 pm, reached England three hours later after a 'cattle truck' Easyjet flight (inexpensive) at 10 pm. Drove home, arriving (after two stops) about 3.30 am! This is no good, I think we are both too old for this – I know I am, I only drove once, for less than half an hour, and even then I could not keep awake. If we do this again, we use a Travelodge and sleep as soon as we can after leaving the airport.

An excellent few days. Estonia feels like management have taken a 'quality' decision: everything Estonia does will be done well, even if they cannot afford it. They are one of the 'greenest' nations in Europe, environmentally friendly, large areas of national park and protected areas, good walkways well maintained, decent roads with some bicycle lanes, hotels good, clean and friendly. Tallinn was a joy, but more so the areas outside Tallinn where the government is trying to create an aura of quality: this is all difficult in a country with the bear looming over the shoulder, and with such a low income. Prices are at euro levels, but incomes less than half those of UK/Germany/France. As Tarvo said, Estonia produces excellent dentists – but they all go to Finland, where they are paid three times as much.

In three days with Tarvo we saw an incredible 117 bird species, heard another ten (including three we have never seen!) and seven land mammals (and seals and bats). In Tallinn we saw an excellent ballet and an excellently-performed opera. Overall a really good holiday.