

Tartu
2024

South Estonia



Exciting highlights from South Estonia – its nature, communities, lifestyle

Life on the Edge of Two Worlds









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Team of the Tartu 2024 South Estonia Community Programme:

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Tartu 2024 South Estonia Community Programme

The South Estonia Community Programme within the framework of the European Capital of Culture Tartu 2024 is a regional development project. The community programme is based on the initiative of communities and introduces places that highlight the nature, values, stories and legends of South Estonia. In 2023-2024, communities will carry out 20 projects, with a total of 100 events.

The aim of the project is to strengthen the identity of the region and to introduce South Estonia to visitors through values that are important to local people and communities. These values are clean nature, diverse cultural heritage, local food and crafts, healthy lifestyle, sustainable and innovative solutions, social cohesion and communities.

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Tartu 2024 South Estonia Community Programme
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See you in Tartu – European Capital of Culture 2024!

European Capital of Culture Tartu 2024 is one of the greatest events in our history and one which we have been preparing for in partnership with Southern Estonia. The city of Tartu in close collaboration with Tartu County, Põlva County, Võru County, Valga County and Viljandi – a total of 20 local governments full of inspiring people – is organising more than 300 events for different audiences of all ages and in various fields.

The city of Tartu – a strong hub, the oldest city in the Baltic States, a university town and a centre of innovation – is rightfully the capital of Southern Estonia. It is a magnet city and a gateway to those interested in exploring Southern Estonia or making their home here.

Why come to Southern Estonia – perhaps for a short visit, and then hopefully for good? There are many reasons why one might choose to make this

place their home, but one that is rarely mentioned is its dispersed settlement. Capital cities in Europe and across the world are struggling to come to terms with overcrowding, noise, pollution and endless hustle. Here, in Southern Estonia, we are located at a respectful distance from our neighbours and yet it usually takes just an hour or less to visit friends or enjoy culture events – such as those of Tartu 2024 – in any place in Southern Estonia. The charms of Southern Estonia, as highlighted in this book, will also become apparent when you participate in the community events organised as part of the capital of culture programme.

To me, Southern Estonia is all about the great number of inspiring people who call this place home and work here in their vibrant communities; they include the Seto people, people from the Võro

dialect area, people from Mulgimaa, old believers and Kodavere people, among many others. When we began planning for the events of the capital of culture programme, we were positively surprised by the number of people who showed a desire to contribute, and their numbers keep growing. Southern Estonia is definitely smoke saunas, tranquillity, hospitality and openness. These treasures are available for everyone who wants to join us and open their heart to the values that the region has to offer.

I hope you enjoy our stories and see you in Tartu – European Capital of Culture 2024!

Kuldar Leis
CEO of Tartu 2024 Foundation



South Estonian communities open their doors and hearts

In 2024, Tartu together with Southern Estonia will proudly bear the title of European Capital of Culture. We welcome with open arms all visitors to explore this culturally rich region and its diverse nature. For this reason, we have also launched the South Estonia Community Programme as part of the capital of culture initiative. The programme serves an important purpose – to open the doors for visitors to explore those things most valued by locals.

The South Estonia Community Programme involves 20 projects encompassing a total of one hundred different community events. Whether it's a joint river excursion, communal work days, a community performance, a hike, a festival or any other endeavour – all these events, born out of joint creative efforts, are marked by local identity and provide a strong sense of communal spirit.

The South Estonian mindset and lifestyle are also evident in this book and its photos. The very stories that speak of the values of Southern Estonia also beautifully encapsulate the essence of the South Estonia Community Programme. Centuries old local lore and sense of identity continue to thrive in our communities and its people who actively organise community events and lend the entire cultural capital its authenticity.

The community programme is implemented by South Estonian communities, local governments, entrepreneurs and LEADER action groups. At this point, LAGs Tartu County Development Association, Valga County Partnerships Board, Borderlands Leader and Võrumaa Partnership Assembly have worked together for more than ten years; as such, the community programme is a natural continuation of their long-term cooperation.

The European capital of culture provides a significant developmental impulse to the entire region, encouraging us to create new solutions and foster cooperation both locally and internationally. The concept of the capital of culture – the Arts of Survival – focuses on and reinforces themes such as circular economy, the environmentally friendly organisation of events, accessibility to different interest groups and the involvement of the young and old as well as those with special needs. The integration of various fields, volunteer work and co-creation are equally important. All of this also characterises our community events, allowing you to experience Southern Estonia, its authentic and unique value space in a way that the locals themselves do – with an open mind and heart!

After the capital of culture programme, Southern Estonia will no longer be the same – in a positive sense! We have become even more united and open, we have acquired new knowledge and experiences, we have experimented with innovative solutions and we have enhanced our cultural heritage. But most importantly, we have made many new friends both in



our own communities and throughout other parts of Estonia, Europe and beyond.

I wish you all an exciting time delving deep into the South Estonian value space and many delightful experiences!

Kristiina Tammets
Coordinator of Tartu 2024 South Estonia
Community Programme,
CEO of Tartu County Development Association



Hartsmäe Organic Farm owner
Agu Hollo with his herd.
Haanimaa





NATURE



The birthplace of Estonia

When the Baltic Ice Lake broke free 10,236 years ago with a great crack and roar, flowing into the world sea 25 metres below, most of today's Estonian mainland was born. However, the present Southern Estonia, specifically the hills of the Haanja Upland, had already been peeking out of the icy slush for at least four millennia, therefore marking the true birthplace of Estonia.

The regions of Southern Estonia were the first of the present-day Estonian territory to start breaking free from the ice about 15,000-16,000 years ago. The hilly landscape typical of Southern Estonia was in fact formed at the end of the last ice age. As the edge of the glacier remained in these areas for longer, large amount of sediment melted from the ice. From the perspective of landscape science, this region is marked as the Southern Estonian landscape region, stretching from Vooremaa in the north to Sakala Upland in the west and Haanja Upland in the southeast.

The relief of the region is characterised by the alternation of flatlands, mound-like uplands, and large

drumlins, basins and valleys with lakes or bogs at the bottom, as well as widely occurring primeval valleys. The thickness of the surface sediment carrier beds in Southern Estonia is more than 100 metres in places, and boasts a varied composition. Drilling has revealed sediment dating to several different ice ages.

The land that started to form after the last ice age and is familiar to today's residents of Estonia is generally divided into two regions: Northern Estonia featuring limestone and Southern Estonia featuring sandstone. Yet, the Southern Estonian region with its untouched nature and exceptionally wide variety of species is so diverse that it's not easy for even

dedicated natural scientists to describe the entire region in a brief overview.

Haanja, Rõuge, Urvaste

The sandstone terrain of Southern Estonia provides an interesting exception on the southern edge of Võru County, where sand is instead covered by Devonian limestone. Haanja Upland is situated on a limestone core; the height of the local bedrock reaches 166 metres above sea level – higher than anywhere else in Estonia. The nature of Võru County sets several other records on top of that, some of which also stand out when compared to our neighbours.

For example, the highest peak in the Baltic States, Suur Munamägi, reaching 317 metres above sea level, is located in Haanja Nature Park, and the 304-metre high Vällämägi with its 120-year-old primeval forest and 82-metre long slopes is the highest mountain in Estonia in terms of relative height. Vällämäe bog has the thickest layer of peat – a whopping 17 metres. Haanja Upland, one of the areas richest in lakes in Estonia, also has the highest lake, Tuuljärv, which is



River barge trips on Emajõgi. Tartumaa



South Estonian aquatic world. Tartumaa

257 metres above sea level. On the edge of the upland, in Rõuge primeval valley, lies Rõuge Suurjärv, which is the deepest lake in Estonia, at 38 metres.

Estonia's longest river, Võhandu, starts in Võru County. It meanders for 162 km and flows into Lake Lämmijärv. On the banks of the Piusa River is Estonia's highest sandstone outcrop: the 19-metre high Härma wall, with a valley side height of 43 metres. In Võru County, in the area of Urvaste primeval valley, grows the thickest tree – the nearly 700-year-old King of Estonian Oaks, the Tamme-Lauri oak, with a trunk circumference of 8 metres. This gigantic oak is the last witness to the natural oak forest that grew along the Urvaste-Kanepi road centuries ago.

Karula, Otepää, Pühajärv

In Valga County, the landscape formed by the uneven melting of the continental glacier is most vividly expressed in Karula National Park. The national park, which belongs to the pan-European

Natura 2000 network, helps to preserve the hilly forest- and lake-rich drumlin landscapes, landforms, nature and cultural heritage that is characteristic of Southern Estonia. Small bogs, marshes and 40 lakes, the largest of which is Ähijärv, lie between the fields and meadows covered by Karula's forests. 30% of Karula is comprised of cultural heritage landscapes, which have been formed over thousands of years through the interplay of human activity and nature. The national park is home to two animals that are rarely found in Estonia as well as in all of Europe – the European otter and the pond bat.

Adjacent to Karula is Otepää Upland; its highest peak, Kuutsemägi, reaches 217 metres. Otepää Upland is interesting thanks to its numerous primeval valleys that divide the upland into smaller hillocks and undulating terraces. Among other things, the upland is home to Estonia's highest town, Otepää, located 152 metres above sea level. Pühajärv, one of the region's largest and most beautiful lakes – at 3.5 km long and 1.6 km wide – is valued for its species-rich fish population.

River Emajõgi, Lake Peipus, Lake Võrtsjärv

Going north from Otepää, you may notice that the nature of Tartu County is characterised by powerful water ecosystems. The most important of these are the Emajõgi River and Lake Peipus, which also connect Jõgeva County and a few other counties thanks to their size. Another noteworthy lake is Lake Võrtsjärv, Estonia's largest inland lake, which is larger in area than all other Estonian lakes combined (excluding Lake Peipus), and is shared with Viljandi County.

One of Estonia's mightiest rivers, the 100 km long Emajõgi, is in places as wide as 145 metres. One of the peculiarities of Emajõgi is the powerful wetland delta, numerous floodplain water bodies and a number of old river courses. Emajõe Suursoo, the largest wetland delta in Estonia and an important nesting place for white-tailed eagles, is part of the Ramsar list of internationally important wetlands, along with the Alam-Pedja nature reserve. Kärevere

Nature Reserve is among other things a nesting area for the great snipe, a bird rarely found in Europe, but it is also home to protected species such as the black stork, lesser spotted eagle, white-tailed eagle, several bat species, the asp, spined loach, sculpin, weatherfish and lady's slipper orchid, among others.

Emajõgi flows from Lake Võrtsjärv to Lake Peipus – the fourth largest water body in Europe, covering an area of 3,555 km². The water body, divided into two large lakes, Lake Peipus or Suurjärv, and Lake Pihkva, is connected by the narrow and deep strait-like Lämmijärv. Standing on the shore of Lake Peipus, one may mistake it for a sea because the other shore is not visible in any weather: the total length of the lakes is a whopping 143 km, and the width is 49 km. The fish-rich Lake Peipus attracts visitors with its nearly 40 km long sandy beach, which is also the longest beach in Estonia. Every year, over a million migratory birds use Lake Peipus as a stopover. The longest Devonian sandstone outcrop in Estonia, the nearly one-kilometre long Kallaste bank, is also located on the shore of Lake Peipus. It houses the

largest colony of bank swallows in the area.

The unique quarter of primeval forest located in the Järvselja nature reserve in Tartu County is an area of natural value and of symbolic importance as it is considered the cradle of Estonian forestry. Primeval forests can be found in only a few places in Europe and one of these rarities is hidden in Järvselja. The 19.3 ha Järvselja primeval forest, also the oldest forest protection area in Estonia, gives a good idea of what ancient pristine forests looked like. The tallest spruces in Järvselja, known as the home of Estonian tree giants, have even reached 48 metres, setting a record in the Baltic States. The height of the 200-year-old pine stands in Järvselja reaches over 40 metres. One of the most dignified is Kuningamänd (the King's Pine), which is over 380 years old. The Padakõrve wood ants' nature reserve in Tartu County, one of the largest in Europe with a total of nearly 1,500 nesting mounds, is also worth highlighting. Long-distance monitoring of the region's vegetation, atmosphere and water is carried out, among other places, at Tartu Observatory.

Vooremaa, Lake Saadjärv

The large drumlin fields and lakes of Vooremaa in Jõgeva County form a kind of open-air museum of the Ice Age. Drumlins are the shaping forms of the continental glacier, elongated and gentle-sloping, with convex tops.

The Vooremaa landscape region, one of the few areas in Europe where classic large drumlins are found, is one of the most unique areas in Estonia. The length of the drumlins can reach 13 and the width 3.5 kilometres, and they can reach a height as much as 60 metres. The undulating landscape is accentuated by the ice wedge depressions between the drumlins and the elongated and deep lakes that have formed in them, like Lake Saadjärv, which has a depth of up to 25 metres.

Valgesoo, Taevaskoda, Sühahava, Piusa

The unique natural ecosystems of Põlva County can be seen in the Valgesoo and Meenikunno landscape conservation areas, which boast various types of marsh and bog landscapes as well as forest types that are



Matsuri village. Setomaa

rarely found elsewhere in Europe. Marshes play an extremely important role in the earth's water cycle. The values of the primeval and untouched nature of Southern Estonia are hidden, among other things, in numerous bog landscapes, most of which are under nature protection.

The Ahja River primeval valley landscape conservation area, which protects the Devonian sandstone outcrops and caves along with a number of endangered species, offers magical experiences in Taevaskoja. Both Large Taevaskoda with its high



Visitors of the *Seto Kostipäiv* in Obinitsa, Setomaa

outcrop, and Small Taevaskoda with the Emaläte spring and Neitsikoobas cave, which have been formed by flowing water, are among the most beautiful natural attractions in Estonia. The sandstone outcrops of Võhandu, Estonia's longest river, are the most impressive in Sühavanna, where the wall height of the Viira mill has been measured at 16.5 metres.

One of the main purposes of the Piusa cave nature reserve is to protect the largest wintering bat colony in the Baltic States. More than 3,000 bats from five species have been counted wintering in man-made glass sand caves. The sandy and hilly pine heathland landscape is crossed by the Piusa River ancient valley with its high and steep slopes, which culminates in Lindora with the highest sandstone outcrop in Estonia. The height of the Devonian sandstone outcrop, called the Härma Wall, reaches 43 metres.

The ancient and biodiverse nature of Southern Estonia offers plenty of exploration and surprises for both locals and visitors from afar. One just needs to be attentive and sensitive to the peculiarities of life here – life on the edge of two worlds.



Suur Munamägi in fog. Võrumaa
Sulev Lindlaan, 2021 South Estonian Photo Contest winner



Pure nature, the wealth of South Estonia

The longing call of the crane, like a melancholic signal from the past, is the stern warning of this enchanting bird species about their fragile existence in these ancient landscapes that still extend around us. Like primeval messengers, cranes and their calls in the bogs between the hills at springtime are echoes from a distant time, and in autumn, before leaving, it's as if they question whether they will ever see their birthplace again. We will, they respond, as long as life persists, as they take flight with the utmost dignity.

Describing the crane's call to a person who has never heard it is as impossible as the Nordic peoples' attempt to describe the dozens of shades and meanings of white snow to a guest who has never seen or experienced snow before. One can certainly describe it, but the question is to what extent words can convey the true essence of the description without first-hand experience.

The same is true for the ability to see nature as a holistic system, and to perceive its value. The

indescribable wealth that embraces us in the landscapes of our homeland of Estonia, and in the natural purity of Southern Estonia, is difficult to put into words and numbers. This wealth can be experienced within the limits of one's senses – to breathe in, to caress with the eye, to touch with the hand, to taste with the lips; it can be saved onto one's inner hard drive, but it cannot be monetised or sold. When this Rubicon is crossed, this wealth loses its intrinsic value.



Cycling unveils nature's beauty. Tartumaa

Ancient landscapes

Very few people would shrug and respond “I don’t care” to the question of what kind of nature they would like to see around them. Most of us care about preserving primeval landscapes and their biodiversity – to ensure that they remain oases rich in life for our grandchildren and thrive even longer into the embrace of future generations.

So, in what way can we distinguish the nature and landscapes of Southern Estonia from the rest of the country? A hundred years ago, in 1922, the first typology of Estonian landscapes was published by Johannes Gabriel Granö, the first professor of geography at the University of Tartu and later an honorary doctor of natural sciences. Since then, other interesting approaches have emerged. One of the later ones is the classification published by geographer Arvo Järvet in 1998, according to which there are five different “faces”, that is, landscape regions in Estonia: Western, Northern, Intermediate, Eastern and Southern Estonian.

Nature lover Arne Ader prefers this latter approach: “Southern Estonia is a land of hills, colloquially also

referred to as the land of mountains. The local hilltops always offer beautiful views and sledding fun in winter, while the deep valleys astound with the babbling of water and bird song in spring, enriched by a magical echo in calm weather.” The nature photographer poetically summarises the essence of Southern Estonia’s landscapes and also adds: “The 400-million-year-old Devon reveals itself generously in Southern Estonia – there are beautiful sandstone outcrops like the holy Taevaskoda and the man-made Piusa caves that look as if they were created for bats. The beauty of Southern Estonia – it’s one of the five different faces of Estonia.”

According to conventional understanding, besides the hilly landscapes of Valga, Võru and Põlva Counties, Southern Estonia also includes Tartu County, Viljandi County and a good chunk of Jõgeva County, all of which are further divided into smaller lands – Soomaa or Setomaa, Vooremaa or Haanimaa, etc. How someone chooses to define Southern Estonia is not ultimately that important. What is more important is that we are talking about a region where there are still exciting

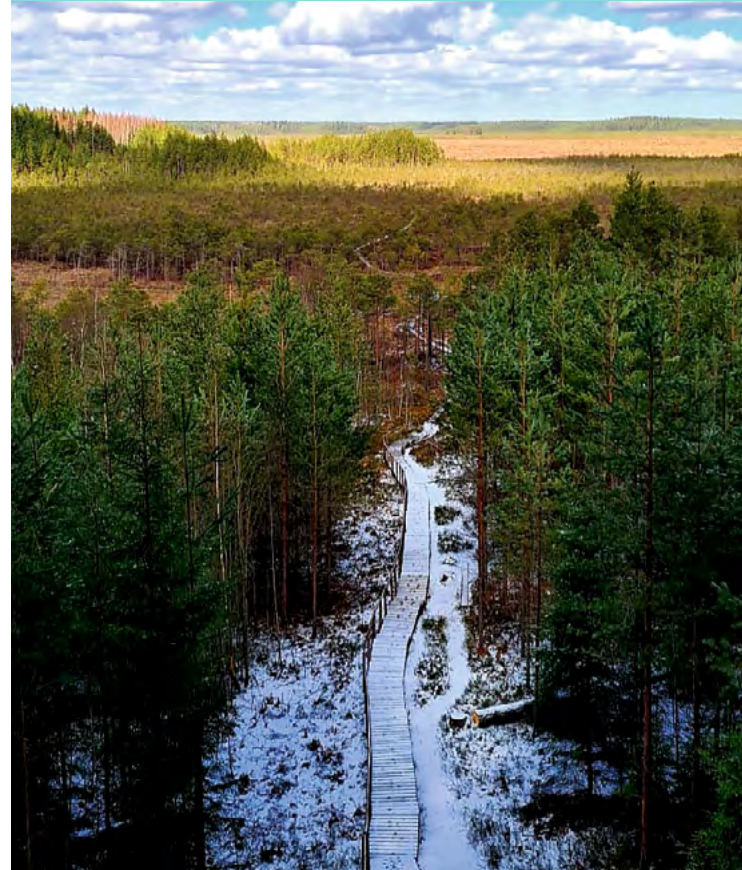
landscapes to be enjoyed and species-rich habitats that need to be preserved.

The state of nature

Arne Ader, who grew up in Valgjärve and now lives in Otepää, was inspired by observing nature in his childhood, and this inspiration has now developed into a deep interest in capturing Estonia's landscapes and biodiversity. The observant and caring photographer, who has portrayed more than two thousand native species through his camera lens, is the right person to assess the state of Southern Estonia's nature.

Ader says that the steep slopes of Southern Estonia have in some places helped curb the onslaught of intensive agriculture, and so there are organic oases here, where the lives of the bees and bumblebees who ensure the fertility of crops are not endangered. However, he feels the situation is worse in forests, where overharvesting means we are living at the expense of the next two human generations.

Several years ago, when Ader was looking for the most authentic views of primeval forests to photograph,



Seasonal changes in Meenikunno. Põlvamaa
Kaire Voode,
2021 South Estonian Photo Contest
audience award



Paabo Farm's Made Uus with endangered Kihnu native sheep.
Tartumaa

he found some great ones in Karula National Park. Pristine and untouched nature can also be found in other wildlife preserves: in the Ahja, Vöhandu, and Piusa primeval valleys, Teringi and Rubina bogs and Valgesoo bog, the Soontaga forests, the Otepää region, Haanja region, at Lake Kisejärv, in Meenikunno bog and in the Paganamaa region.

Having said that, he doesn't believe that untouched nature is the best direction to move towards. "Without coming into contact with nature and without being in pristine nature, it is not

possible to maintain a connection with true biodiversity, and with life,” he says. “Therefore, I would like to see us experiencing nature more and more, but in a way that ensures the impact is enriching for both parties, one that supports biodiversity and embraces life.”

Preservers of biodiversity

Such a poetic and respectful way of looking at nature is heart-warming. Especially at the present time, when everywhere we look, we see an egocentric, superior attitude, and even malicious indifference towards the environment that surrounds us and other living beings. In fact, there may be nothing more out of sync with life than the modern human’s attempt to continue unrestrained consumption, disconnect from nature and have an unwillingness to take responsibility. Southern Estonia is no exception in this respect, although there are surely more than your average share of caring and mission-driven people living on these landscapes, true preservers of biodiversity.

In Southern Estonia, there are surely more than your average share of caring and mission-driven people.

Biologist Rein Kuresoo, who has spent his entire life exploring in nature, studying, photographing, writing and drawing it, is among the 40 conservationists and natural scientists who founded the first independent environmental organisation in Estonia, the Estonian Fund for Nature (ELF), in 1991. The ELF, based in the capital of Southern Estonia, Tartu, aims

to preserve and protect all of Estonia’s biodiversity, and increasingly also mitigate the climate crisis. The NGO, known by the flying squirrel logo, has become the most influential organisation in its field in Estonia.

Rein Kuresoo was, among other things, one of the initiators of the Alam-Pedja, Karula and Soomaa wildlife preserves, together with biologist Eerik Leibak and ornithologist Einar Tammur. Considering the general state of nature in Europe, he says that the

nature of Southern Estonia is indeed rich in species, but we should learn to appreciate it more ourselves. These diverse landscapes and ancient species that can still be found below the former line of the primeval Emajõgi River are largely reaching their critical limit of existence. And unfortunately, by our own hand: humans have been among the greatest damagers of the diversity of natural landscapes and richness of species in Southern Estonia with their intensive land cultivation both in agriculture and forestry.

Instead of tree hugging

The necessity of forest management is not disputed by those familiar with the nature of Southern

Estonia, even though it is easy to label them all as tree huggers. The question revolves around the principles of how humans interact with nature and what remains afterwards – whether habitats and species necessary for the preservation of biodiversity will survive or whether we will continue to damage nature until the destruction of ecosystems becomes an irreversible process.

According to Kuresoo, anyone interested can certainly experience authentic nature in the Emajõe floodplain and transitional bog, the regions of Alam-Pedja and Soomaa, between the Vooremaa lakes and forested drumlins, in the Järvselja primeval forest, in the sandy slopes of Piusa, the domes of the Otepää and Haanja uplands and the Karula old-growth forests. You may encounter wolves, bears and eagles along with rare butterflies, birds, amphibians, the great snipe, the icterine warbler, the citrine wagtail, the northern crested newt, common spadefoot toad and so much more.

The list of the richness of species in Southern Estonia, as well as the new species arriving from the

“The landscape diversity of Southern Estonia, characterised by many different natural and seminatural communities, is one of the important bases for the survival of biodiversity.”

Aveliina Helm

south, could go on and on. If we wish to preserve this familiar natural wealth and ensure it thrives into the future, we all have to play our part.

Nature conservation for everyone

Nature conservation issues have been actively addressed in Southern Estonia for decades, and several country-wide initiatives have been led from Tartu, the city of good thoughts, that aim to restore the biodiversity of the sea, forests, wetlands and meadows. Aveliina Helm, Professor of Restoration Ecology at the University of Tartu and current scientific advisor to the Minister of Climate, who is one of the best experts on local meadow habitats, considers meadow communities to be a very important pillar of Estonia's biodiversity.

“The landscape diversity of Southern Estonia, characterised by many different natural and semi-natural communities – fields, meadows, forest patches and wetlands – is one of the important bases for the survival of biodiversity,” says Helm.

“Scientists are becoming increasingly convinced

that in addition to large natural masses, the smaller “patches” of biodiversity in the landscape are also extremely important. Unlike some other regions of Estonia, many places in Southern Estonia are quite diverse in terms of landscape, so this is where many different species find their habitat,” she explains. “But as our biodiversity and habitats are also in serious danger as a result of intensive land cultivation, people's awareness of wildlife preserves and of the importance of preserving and creating habitats outside of larger natural masses is becoming increasingly important.”

Oases of biodiversity

To put it simply – everyone can be a conservationist, and nature preservation starts for all people by noticing, maintaining and creating small oases of biodiversity everywhere around us. Recognising and maintaining meadow communities as much as possible, preserving old trees and patches of forest and making the surroundings of your home “wilder” are all useful steps.

Helm doesn't dispute the use of farmland, but she

does stress the importance of more conscientious and eco-friendly soil management. She says that just as one fallen tree can become a universe for millions of organisms, patches of meadows and other natural habitats at the edges of fields, and between and inside the fields, can become important protectors of biodiversity associated with agricultural landscapes. This helps to form a self-regulating ecological system, ensuring more functional and sustainable farmland, fertile soil, the survival of pollinators and many other groups of fauna crucial for food production. Biodiversity is beneficial for farmers. Nature as a wholesome system can only be as healthy as each of its component parts. But if intensive methods are used in farming, then no species can live on the fields, and the residues of plant protection products proliferate, making the loss of biodiversity an increasingly visible threat to the human species.

We are all custodians of nature's riches, regardless of gender and skin colour, age and profession.

Free benefits

The need to conserve biodiversity has been widely discussed, but what exactly is its importance? Ecologist Aveliina Helm states that preserving biodiversity is not only our moral or environmental duty but also an existential question.

“Biodiversity and well-functioning ecosystems are linked to the features of nature that we humans need – nature’s benefits that we use every day without much thought. These benefits, such as clean water and air, fertile soil, nutrient cycles, climate regulation, carbon sequestration and storage, raw materials, sustainable food production and so much more, depend on the good condition and presence of ecosystems in every landscape,” Helm explains. “Furthermore, maintaining and restoring ecosystems is the cheapest and most effective way to mitigate climate change and alleviate its negative impacts. Well-functioning ecosystems are like our insurance policy for the future.”

Driven by a mission

The essence is we are all custodians of nature's riches, whether that be in Southern Estonia or further afield, regardless of gender and skin colour, age and profession. What could every one of us do right now? "The quickest way to do something productive would be to leave some things undone. Leave some grass uncut. Leave some forest unlogged. Leave some short-lived and unnecessary things unbought," says nature photographer Arne Ader. "As country folk and Southern Estonians, we need a swift spiritual awakening. We have to rediscover those essences of our souls that bind us in the holistic web of life."



Sauna tales in Karula. Valgamaa

Peeter Paaver,

2021 South Estonian Photo Contest special award



South Estonia is full of surprises for both young and old.
Haanimaa

Let's turn again to the pure nature of Southern Estonia: has this view somehow changed?

A grounding realisation of my, your and our shared responsibility has emerged, one that wishes for this fragile balance that characterises the integrity of nature to endure. When we look at the beauty of Southern Estonia – one of five different faces of Estonia – with a broader, more aware, more caring gaze, we experience a deep respect for this land, its biodiversity and its keepers. See you soon, Southern Estonia!



Remote work in Haani Creative Hut.
Haanimaa



Premiere of
The Gold Miner of Leevaku.
Põlvamaa



CULTURE



Hidden treasures

When you lift the lid on the cultural and historical treasure chests of South Estonia, you will discover surprising aspects of our peoples. The roots of the strong southern Estonian communities run deep.

When King Charles XII of Sweden set out with his troops during the Great Northern War, he could not have imagined how fickle luck could be. What became of him is well documented among historians, but only a handful of contemporaries beyond his realm – among them one clever cottager from the foot of Suur Munamägi – could say with any authority where lies the gold of the retreated king.

The tale of a fortune hidden on a lake island is, naturally, not the only wealth that has been passed on from generation to generation in Võru County. But undoubtedly this story of riches rarely spoken of belongs, like most lore, among the real treasures of South Estonia.

It was probably the clever cottager from the foot

of the big mountain who made sure that the village community of Haanja would know and remember. On a gloomy day during the Great Northern War the Swedes were forced to retreat before the advancing Russian army. They were in such a hurry that the king ordered they leave behind all excess supplies, so they could escape alive. Two horse carts full of gold were duly cast off, and they were subsequently hidden behind Suur Munamägi, on an island in Lake Vaskna.

Now, more than 300 years later, the people of Haanja are sure that the treasure hidden by the Swedes while retreating on the frozen Lake Vaskna is still there. A mysterious tell-tale sign to which the storyteller refers has also stood the test of time and can still be seen today. The king's subjects carved a secret mark into

one of the rocks in the lake, which was supposed to show them the precise location of the hoard if they were ever to return to dig it up.

Indeed, there is a rock jutting out from Lake Vaskna even today on which the secret mark can be seen. Encouraged by that mark, through time there have been many fortune hunters who have dug numerous holes on the islands and peninsula of Lake Vaskna. Some of the holes are even quite fresh.

Playground for traditions

Should the treasure ever be recovered, no doubt a piece of gold will be set aside to preserve the region's lore. But there is something more important here than material treasures; that is, of course, the language, culture and intangible heritage of South Estonia as a whole.

This region has a myriad of reasons to preserve its traditions: for example, one of Estonia's oldest Stone Age settlements has been found in Setomaa, a historical and ethnic region in the south-eastern corner of Estonia. According to archaeologists, the

signs of human settlement found at the village of Meremäe date back nearly 8,400 years.

For the many conquerors traversing from the south to Livonia – the name given to the wider region after the time of the ancient counties – it represented part of the mystical north, a distinctive Ultima Thule located across the boundaries of the known world. Although the language of North Estonia became the basis for Estonia's literary language and the Soviet period crushed regional cultural differences, the languages of Võru, Setomaa, Tartu and Mulgimaa are still spoken today.

Vigorous communities

The strong communities of South Estonia that carry on the traditions of their ancestors can be considered the real treasure. UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity includes both the Seto Leelo, a polyphonic singing tradition, as well as the smoke sauna tradition. Tartu, which is regarded as the capital of South Estonia and has been renowned as a university town since 1632, has maintained a sort

of balance between the North and the South: the stronghold of power versus the stronghold of spirit.

The diversity of cultures within such a small area even surprises experts. The richness of life is created by the communities of traditional culture in Mulgimaa, Setomaa, Haanimaa, Karula and many others. One example of this richness is the Russian Old Believers, who live in the Kodavere area near Lake Peipus and whose ancestors fled across the lake from persecution from the Russian church authorities in the 18th century and subsequently went on to establish linear villages where life continues as in the old times. It is also created by Kodavere Heritage Centre that helps to preserve Kodavere dialect. Yet another manifests in the traditions of singing and playing instruments as well as the Uma Pido singing festival, the button accordion of August Teppo, Seto kannel and small kannel (both zither-like instruments), the bagpipe, the first Estonian Song Festival and the home of the Estonian national flag in the town of Otepää.

The richness of life is demonstrated by handicraft skills and a traditional way of life, the river barge *lodi*,

the wooden boat called *kale* and the Estonian dugout canoe *haabjas*, onions and a special vehicle for riding on lake ice called *karakatitsa* as well as the rye of Sangaste, watermills, the seto farm and the orthodox village chapel *tsässon*, Vastseliina Episcopal Castle, South Estonia's strong dispersed villages, communal work days and celebrations, and the manor culture of Mooste, community centres in Säanna, Obinita and elsewhere. Rich local tastes, the South Estonian languages and spirit.

There is a really thick layer of culture in South Estonia, one which nourishes the very diverse identity of the region. There is no doubt that the riches of South Estonia that have been handed down from generation to generation could not simply be carried on two horse-drawn carts like the Swedish king's gold. Those treasures hidden on the peripheries of Europe, near the border of Russia and Latvia, only reveal themselves to the susceptible seeker and the attentive eye. Life in the south of Estonia – on the border between different culture spaces and worlds – is a treasure that is worth preserving.



About 600 years ago, Hanseatic-era shipbuilders created a river barge that was used for trade on Emajõgi River for centuries. Tartumaa



Identity through the eyes of South Estonians

Each era has its own face. Each place and region speaks the language of the thoughts and actions of the people who are rooted there. Each new beginning starts with people, but it often springs in an unseen way from heritage, sense of place, self-image or identity. In Southern Estonia, where several lands and realms visibly intertwine, life generally happens at the edge of worlds, through making sense of today's way of living and seeking a new form of existence in this rapidly changing world.

A strong identity, local tradition, language, culture and history go hand in hand with nature in the peripheral regions of Europe, where people's sense of place persists, and their understanding of self is linked to it. The diverse cultural heritage of Southern Estonia's various population groups still enriches the local cultural space to this day, and it creates a certain background against which our modern life with its global developments unfolds.

In a situation where dozens of Baltic-Finnic, hundreds of Nordic and about a thousand other small

cultures around the world have disappeared over the past hundred years, Southern Estonia still offers hope. However, there is a risk that we will only begin to understand the value of Southern Estonia when Europe starts to value it – we ourselves may not even notice our own diamonds in the rough.

A stronghold of magical ecology

Southern Estonia is like a stronghold of magical ecology, a unique parallel universe that lies between the modern world and the balance of nature. So says

writer and semiotician Valdur Mikita, one of the few intellectuals since President Lennart Meri who has managed to accurately articulate something that is inherently characteristic of our essence and sense of place.

So, what exactly is the set of values on which Southern Estonians base their understanding of themselves in this corner of the world? Whenever or wherever someone starts to unravel identity like pure silk fabric, they always run into difficulties – some delicate threads break immediately, some strands are inextricably intertwined with others and some curl back into a silk moth's cocoon... The countless layers and stratifications that make up identity, or self-image or one's essence, float like bold silk and refuse to be unravelled. Identity is like a halo or a hologram: if you look, you see – it exists, but you cannot touch it.

When exploring the essence of Southern Estonia, Valdur Mikita approaches the whole topic with a significant degree of liberty, along with his characteristic humorous digressions and unexpected generalisations, while still remaining within certain boundaries. He

draws a geographical boundary for Southern Estonia along the ancient Emajõgi River: everything that lies south of the Emajõgi and Pärnu rivers is Southern Estonia, and everything north of this divide is regarded as Northern Estonia. Since large swampy areas around the rivers formed a natural barrier separating Southern Estonians from the north thousands of years ago, which according to Mikita can even be seen in the genetic patterns of people with native backgrounds, it can be said that these vast marshlands shaped the people of Southern Estonia, as well as their language.

Holding the status of the oldest language

The South Estonian language is the oldest Finnic language, which, according to linguists, branched off from the common Finnic proto-language and formed a separate branch nearly 2,000 years ago. Southern Estonian is the only language that has survived to this day from the Inland Finnic language, and it was most likely spoken initially over a wider area. This language now comprises four small languages: Mulgi, Tartu,

Võru and Seto. Furthermore, three of them – Mulgi, Võru and Seto – are also developing their own literary language.

Rainer Kuuba, director of the Võro Institute, considers the role of language to be the most important element in the formation of the self-image of South Estonian. Identity, or *hindätiidimine* in the Võru language, however, represents the South Estonian folk groups in different ways through language, folk costumes, religion, calendar and holidays. According to Kuuba, the Võru people have their *uma kiil* (own language) in everyday use more than, for example, the Mulgi people, so in Vana-Võromaa (Old Võru) it is not considered that important to demonstrate belonging by wearing national costumes. The Setos, on the other hand, in addition to the language, place more emphasis on religion, customs, folk costumes, their calendar and giving importance to their holidays.

The venerable age of the Southern Estonian language is attested by the fact that the oldest surviving book written in the Southern Estonian language is known to be *Agenda Parva*, a Catholic

priest's handbook published in 1622. It contains the same text side by side in Latin, Latvian, Southern Estonian, Polish and German. Shortly after this, in 1648, the first Southern Estonian grammar book was published, and in 1686, the *Wastne Testament* (the New Testament) was published in Kambja in the Tartu language, which preceded the New Testament in the Tallinn language by as much as 30 years.

The introduction of secular publications in the smoky cottages of Southern Estonians began in 1806 when the publication of the first Estonian language newspaper, *Tarto-maa rahwa Näddali-Leht*, started. Although the Tartu language weekly newspaper for the peasant folk of Tartu and Võru counties was shut down by order of Emperor Alexander I at the end of the same year, it was a significant cultural phenomenon in the context of Europe at the time. The South Estonian language and culture continued to sprout and, in 1885, the first alphabet book in the Võru language, *Wastne Wõro keeli ABD raamat*, was published by the pen of schoolmaster Juhan Hurt from Himma, Põlva county.

Poetic milieu

In addition to the roosters typically portrayed on alphabet book covers, this region was also characterised by roosters in church towers. Artist Peeter Laurits, who has been photographing Southern Estonia and its people for years for his various art projects, primarily associates the identity of Southern Estonia with that of old Livonia. “South of the River Emajõgi, there’s a rooster in the church tower instead of a cross, the word for ‘knife’ is *väits* instead of *nuga*, and the term for ‘harnessing horses’ is *kapla panema* instead of *kõide panema*,” says Laurits. “For many reasons, the old pagan tradition lasted longer in the south, and therefore the milieu of Southern Estonia is much more poetic and imbued with magical colouring.”

According to Laurits, the best way to access the Southern Estonian identity layer is through

the works of artists Juhan Jaik and Konrad Mägi. In fact, Laurits’s own works are imbued with creative impulses born from the naturalistic authenticity of Kütioru, which has led him to new paths in interpreting the world.

Interestingly, the theme of the forest runs like a red thread through both the works of Peeter Laurits and Valdur Mikita, as if inexplicably imbued with the spirit of Southern Estonia. The meta-level of being

and the forest theme are intertwined in Laurits’ art as tightly as wild nature and pagan-like culture are intertwined in Mikita’s texts on wild linguistics, where he analyses the ancient Baltic-Finnic culture and the elusive sense of life in the region.

“I divide the world into three categories: language, culture and nature,” Mikita says, and adds: “In Southern

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Peeter Laurits

Estonia, there is a unity of language, culture and nature – it’s as if it lingers in the air.” When counting the ethnic groups of Southern Estonia, he creates a striking connection with the former slogan of the Noor-Eesti (Young Estonia) movement, saying: “Let’s be Mulks, Setos and Võrus, but let’s also become Southern Estonians!”

Smoke sauna under protection

How does one become a true Southern Estonian? Eda Veeroja, the owner of Mooska Farm and a sauna woman who promotes smoke sauna culture in Haanimaa, explains this from her own perspective. Veeroja was one of the instigators in ensuring the smoke sauna tradition of Old Võromaa was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2014.

The fact that Southern Estonians have managed to even put the smoke sauna under protection makes Northern Estonians envious, but it is true that the family tradition associated with the smoke sauna, which has survived to this day in Southern Estonia, cannot

be seen anywhere else in Estonia. When introducing the smoke sauna tradition, Veeroja says that there are currently over 3,000 smoke saunas in Old Võromaa that are in constant use. “The smoke sauna culture is part of the lives of many indigenous peoples, and in Southern Estonia it has survived as a part of everyday life; it’s not a museum piece,” she affirms.

Just as Valdur Mikita emphasises the importance of sparse settlement in the formation of the identity of Southern Estonians, Eda Veeroja also points this out, citing the research of Oskar Loorits. “Sparse settlement has helped to keep family-centred culture alive, including sauna culture,” she says. “For Southern Estonians, the sauna has been a source of spiritual support and distinctive culture element. Connection with nature has been an innate and inseparable part of our identity. The sauna and the forest, or more broadly nature as a whole, were treated in the same way – the smoke sauna is regarded as a sacred place, like a transition from the forest to the farmhouse or vice versa.”



Kaidi Kerdt from Kirsi Farm in front of her smoke sauna. Setomaa

A rich spiritual world

As every family had its own practices associated with the smoke sauna, no one can say today what right or wrong sauna culture is – everyone has their own. Some sauna practices were hidden from strangers' eyes because the sauna was seen as a visible intermediary in communicating with the invisible world. As Eda Veeroja says, Southern Estonians communicated across different worlds: “In the sauna, the conscious world of understanding ends and the ‘in-between’ world begins where it is possible to come into contact with ancestors and their wisdom. The sauna creates a generational link where the wisdom of the ancestors is accessible to many of us even today.”

But how can we explain the growing interest in traditional sauna culture in the modern era of digital technology? Perhaps it's because more and more people feel lost in the world, left behind, searching

“The smoke sauna has all the elements for one to take a break and be with oneself – to rest, recharge and be grateful for everything.”

Eda Veeroja

for their roots. “The smoke sauna has all the elements, as in other spiritual practices, for one to take a break and be with oneself – to rest, recharge and be grateful for everything,” Veeroja explains. She adds that this simple, yet profound spiritual wisdom is present in our own culture – that's why it's so familiar and valuable to us. “When you emerge from the smoke sauna, your body and soul are clean, and there is no feeling of being lost. The soul feels light.”

Just as the sauna culture is thriving, Southern Estonian native culture as a whole is a rich and vibrant indigenous culture with its own language. Whether it's the fruit of past progressive-thinking pastors, sextons/schoolteachers or the efforts of the peasant folk themselves, the number of speakers of small South Estonian languages remains significant today – at nearly 100,000 people. Considering the current population of Estonia and the number of speakers of the unified Estonian language, the large number

of speakers of the small South Estonian languages is even more remarkable.

A forager's Eldorado

According to Valdur Mikita, the Baltic Sea environment was a true Eldorado for foragers for millennia, and the traditional lifestyle could be continued here for a long time. This directly influenced the development of the people and cultures in this region. In Southern Estonia, where foraging remained an important part of life even with the advent of farming, circumstances helped shape the Southern Estonians into an animistic forest people, who regard the forest as a sacred place. For them, the cultural component associated with forest landscapes is like an axis of life.

Southern Estonia as a stronghold of magical ecology still offers shelter to people with a shamanistic-animistic sense of life, in whom knowledge of the modern world and the understanding of the spirit of indigenous culture and nature

Southern Estonia still offers shelter to people with a shamanistic-animistic sense of life.

blend together. “Many of us have a sense of home that extends to the landscape. If a person has a sense of home, they also domesticate the forest and the beach, from which new layers of magical ecology open up,” Mikita contemplates. “Many of us have an intuitive desire to create a sacred place around our home, and this desire is something that doesn't exist elsewhere in quite the same way. On a mytho-geographical landscape, animistic communication begins through communicating with a tree, stone, animal, plant.”

All of this can be metaphorically called an analogue world, which will become particularly important should the digital world collapse in some form. In Southern Estonia, there is a mythological way of sensing the world, as well as the infrastructure to re-educate people to be sensitive to nature. This is extremely important

from the viewpoint of the harmonious continuation of life, which is unfortunately a quickly disappearing value today. Today, one can still find “country-grannies” and

“country-grandpas” living deep in the Southern Estonian nature, bearers of the indigenous way of life and traditions, who are mostly declared a red list species elsewhere in the world.

Where to, Southern Estonia?

The globalising world pressures all small cultures to merge into one, but a multicultural world contains far more life and vigour. What can an increasingly identity crisis ridden society do? One of the under-recognised opportunities in power circles is to look towards small national cultures and communities to explore and accept each other’s differences, and to encourage everyone else to value their roots. What could we learn from the elders and wise women with deep knowledge of mushrooms and plants, the furrow venerator, and wood-splitting therapists in Southern Estonia? How to stay put, live in nature, start anew – this could be a cure for the trapped feeling of the millions of people who are hopping around like migratory locusts, who are also a significant burden on the world’s ecosystems in their aimless race.

Is there anything that could potentially threaten the self-image of Southern Estonia and its people in the near future? Perhaps our own indifference towards small languages and indigenous cultures, as well as neglect towards preserving surviving values. Valdur Mikita, who is originally from Mulgimaa, a well-to-do periphery of the increasingly urbanised Estonia, believes that Estonia is a small model system for the future of Europe because in its peripheral areas, more of Europe has been preserved than at its centre. Therefore, if there is a desire to rediscover European and national identity, there is still a chance to return to existentially important topics through ethnic groups and small societies: to nature conservation and ecological issues, to valuing indigenous identity, to the model of sustainable living. All this wealth can be found in Southern Estonia because the balance between man and nature is still largely preserved there. “If you accelerate the ideal green world with science, Southern Estonia could be like a cosmodrome or mycodome, where you can test new innovative solutions,” Mikita adds with amusement.

The scattered settlement model, which keeps Southern Estonia on a strong foundation, ensures that people have the necessary contact with living matter, with nature, to live and to create. People living far from civilisation, in the midst of nature, while still connected to the world, have essentially captured how to synthesise old and new. In Valdur Mikita's opinion, the scattered settlement model, together with the old habitats of Southern Estonians, should be included in the UNESCO Cultural Heritage List. This is a sound idea, not only because it helps to retain forgotten wisdom but mainly because of the potential for reuse and more extensive implementation. Furthermore, a prosperous life in outlying regions allows one to maintain contact with nature and provides a qualitatively higher way of living and a more meaningful form of existence than an urban area ever could.

It is how it is

Like people in many places around the world, Southern Estonians also face the serious question:

“If you accelerate the ideal green world with science, Southern Estonia could be like a cosmodrome or mycodome, where you can test new innovative solutions.”

Valdur Mikita

how to survive? The answer is both simple and complicated: you need to find a balance between constant change and maintaining your identity at the same time. If we become aware today that Southern Estonia is full of wealth that is not visible to the eye, as if incense and myrrh were bequeathed to us, which all kings and emperors would value more than gold in tomorrow's world, it would be easier for Southern Estonians to stay true to themselves and start searching for these riches within and around them. All of this forms an exciting collection of the arts of survival, which the Southern Estonians still master quite well.



Masterful ramblers of soulful landscapes

Amidst the slopes and valleys of Southern Estonia, you can find some fascinating people who have made their home here. Whichever direction you take, you will invariably spot a cosmopolitan individual of whom it can be said: this is undoubtedly an esteemed person. When you strike up a conversation with one of them, a few common keywords tend to come up again and again: “nature”, “self-sufficiency” and “intuition”.

In the modern world, you might be hard-pressed to find people for whom an understanding of the world begins with self-awareness, taking notice of nature and the tuning into the laws that govern the relationships between all creation. How come, then, do we find such a great number of them congregating in Southern Estonia – people with an unshakable spirit whose creative minds draw strength directly from nature? Is it a mere coincidence or something inherently characteristic of this region? Are these people bestowed with some kind of special ability to survive in changing conditions?

While real human values are becoming increasingly scarce worldwide, they are still cultivated on the verges of different cultures and lifestyles, those in direct contact with nature and cultural landscapes. This is definitely the case with Southern Estonia. There is something special in the local people here – whether that’s their authenticity, simplicity and sincerity, or perhaps maturity, depth and wisdom.

The latter quality – wisdom – was clearly one that oozed from the very being of the writer and poet Jaan Kaplinski, as we sat down with him for a cup of tea on a fine summer’s afternoon in his country home of

Vana-Mutiku farm in Põlva County, three years before the departure of the grand old man. My conversation with Jaan didn't follow the usual script; it was full of humorous detours by him – from the dark alleys of suburban slums and behind-the-store meeting points in remote villages to the great metropolises of world culture and well-maintained soulful landscapes.

On simplicity and sense of home

Layers of language and culture, brimming with history and beauty, which Kaplinski carried within him due to his origin and roots, invariably emerge in his writings, aided by his acute sense of nature and broad knowledge base. The well-known author often spoke of simplicity, but also of the need to appreciate biodiversity and restore healthy humour.

There were the healing “thought vitamins” which he distributed in a tongue-in-cheek way, rather than absolute truths. “I have been on the edge, so to speak, in many ways in my life,” he marked. “I’ve spent more time in the country than in the city; my home, too, is on the edge of old Võromaa, at the intersection of

parishes. Living on this edge has been very beneficial to me: it has given me the opportunity to view things from different perspectives and realise that some things just cannot be precisely defined.”

Jaan viewed himself as a global citizen, who spoke several languages and felt quite at home in many places in the world. And yet he was also a local patriot, who wrote his poems in the Võro language and considered Southern Estonia to be his real home: “To me the Southeastern corner with its landscapes, culture and language feels like home. People here are kinder and livelier; there is certainly more of temperament and less of the German influence.”

Likewise, Estonian literary language never felt quite natural to a man who grew up under the influence of the Võro dialect: “Here, we only grow cranberries,” he grinned, referring to the Võro equivalent to the common Estonian word for “cranberry”, jõhvikas (literally “horsetail hair berry”). According to Jaan, the whole region is known for its peculiar people who tend to approach things through the prism of humour – this also applies to more serious discussions. Healthy

humour, as we all know, dissolves all kind of tensions.

I asked Jaan what makes him keep writing at such an advanced age, to which he replied, with a more serious note in his voice: “I draw inspiration from my home and its surroundings. The morning sun in a forest cabin. The common swift – the bird of the soul: summer truly begins with its arrival. The vast beauty around me. But also Portugal, Madeira, the Azores, Sicily, Saint Petersburg.” Jaan felt a strong connection with his country and its landscapes but also with the ancient cities that had once emerged and prospered – as wildly as the forests do.

On lightness and hope

As long as he could remember, Jaan had always enjoyed pedalling around those homey and wild Southeastern landscapes. “In the 1950s, as a young boy, I rode my bike from Tartu to Võru and beyond, and it instantly felt like home. The sun shone brighter and even the people had more lightness about them. Sure, they used to be tough, but never gloomy, always cool. The fine line between humour and reality was greyer

back then,” recalled Jaan who kept riding his bike along the smaller known paths from Vana-Mutiku to Tartu well into his old age.

But can one be a lighter person these days? “Trust your gut and don’t worry too much. Learn to be content with less and stop chasing after that more expensive car, fancier house or greener pasture...” With crinkles at the corners of his eyes, the poet remarked, in a somewhat casual manner, that we humans need something higher – so that we won’t make God out of our own desires. “Most religions urge people to live more modestly, or the world will be destroyed. Both religion and ecology have this in common. Nature, too, can become compromised, yet its laws always hold true.”

On flora and fauna

The grand old man knew what he was talking about. His younger colleagues also know. Whenever civilisation meets nature, a window opens to a much greater world, and even though an overloaded, rational mind might find it difficult to grasp, it nevertheless

exists. For example, it is evident in wild nature, with its mysteries and laws that are incomprehensible to the human mind.

Nature photographer Remo Savisaar, whose job is to capture the inner life of flora and fauna on camera, perceives environmental changes particularly sharply. According to Remo who maintains a close relationship with wild nature and its creatures, Southern Estonia has everything necessary to ignite the inner fire in people and inspire a burst of creativity in them. “The tranquil pace of life, away from the hustle and bustle of the city, leaves time for contemplation, focusing and creativity,” the man of nature says, adding that we should all take time to simply be, and be more carefree. “This is actually a productive time for thoughts and ideas!”



Janika Naaber from Sarve Farm with her kids and beloved alpacas. Võrumaa

On roles and masks

Wandering in nature helps us to find clarity in ourselves, while self-awareness and self-sufficiency bring inner peace and the strength to face the world. We all need time to be alone and recharge our batteries, and the versatile Southern Estonian landscape is such a perfect springboard to explore our soulful landscapes. You've probably heard someone saying: I'll stop living my life according to other people's wishes and start listening to my own heart! However, how many of us actually dare to remove the mask and reveal our true nature?

Humans are social beings who tend to know and understand others more than they do themselves. The idea that our external body is, in fact, a mere reflection of our inner world, still sounds uneasy to many. When scientists study humans and human qualities, we tend to nod approvingly. But if any of

This kind of "madness" is widely spread in Southern Estonia. You just have to notice it.

us embarks on a journey of self-study and tries to map out the hidden areas of their soul, people often tend to laugh it off, saying that this person must have lost his mind. By the way, this kind of "madness" is widely spread in Southern Estonia. You just have to notice these people. But if you manage to make contact with one of them and genuinely pay attention to what they have to say, your worldview may greatly expand with new and exciting perspectives.

On questions and answers

The singer and songwriter Anu Taul who lives in historic region of Haanimaa, shares her own experiences and vision of becoming a human. She is one of those sensitive and creative yet powerful women who is determined to carve out her own path. But before getting to this point, Anu went through a personal purification, so to speak. "One day I just realised I was at a complete impasse. I had no desire to sing, and my will and stamina were just gone," she says, reflecting on the period of her life that served as a

good wake-up call. Anu understood that she couldn't go on like this. "I realised that it was related to me having way too grandiose plans. I had set a standard for myself that I couldn't meet, and I had convinced myself that I had to fit into the mould of a typical freelance singer."

Her inner transformation became possible from the moment she consciously decided to cast off all the various masks that concealed her true identity. "It felt amazingly liberating – to be just nobody. At this very moment, I began looking at things with a much broader perspective, and new doors started to open instantly. What's more, my creative juices started flowing again – it felt like the floodgates opened."

On nature and local lore

In Southern Estonia Anu feels safe and at home: that's where she was born and raised. She considers herself to be a place-sensitive person and firmly believes that her birth into a music-loving Southern Estonian family wasn't a coincidence. All of this has shaped her into the person she is today – a creative soul

who has been blessed with a good dose of inherent sensitivity. "When wandering in the forest, I have learned to be that open channel, so that the power of creation could flow through me," she explains. When discussing her sources of inspiration, she mentions nature over and over again. She recently released a new album "Metskass" (Wild Cat), that expresses in music her realizations around relationships with nature and between people.

"I am deeply impacted by the Southern Estonian landscapes – both natural and cultural – they are a part of me," says the musician. "Those mystical spruce forests, pine groves teeming with bilberries, cranberry bogs in autumn, forest lakes, the slopes tinted with liverworts, the cries of cranes in the distance and the bright nights of nightingales – they all awaken a strange longing in me... All these places and moments have their own story to tell. They speak directly to the soul and make it sing."

What could be more exciting than to embark on a journey with interesting people and visit some fascinating places? Southern Estonia offers soul-



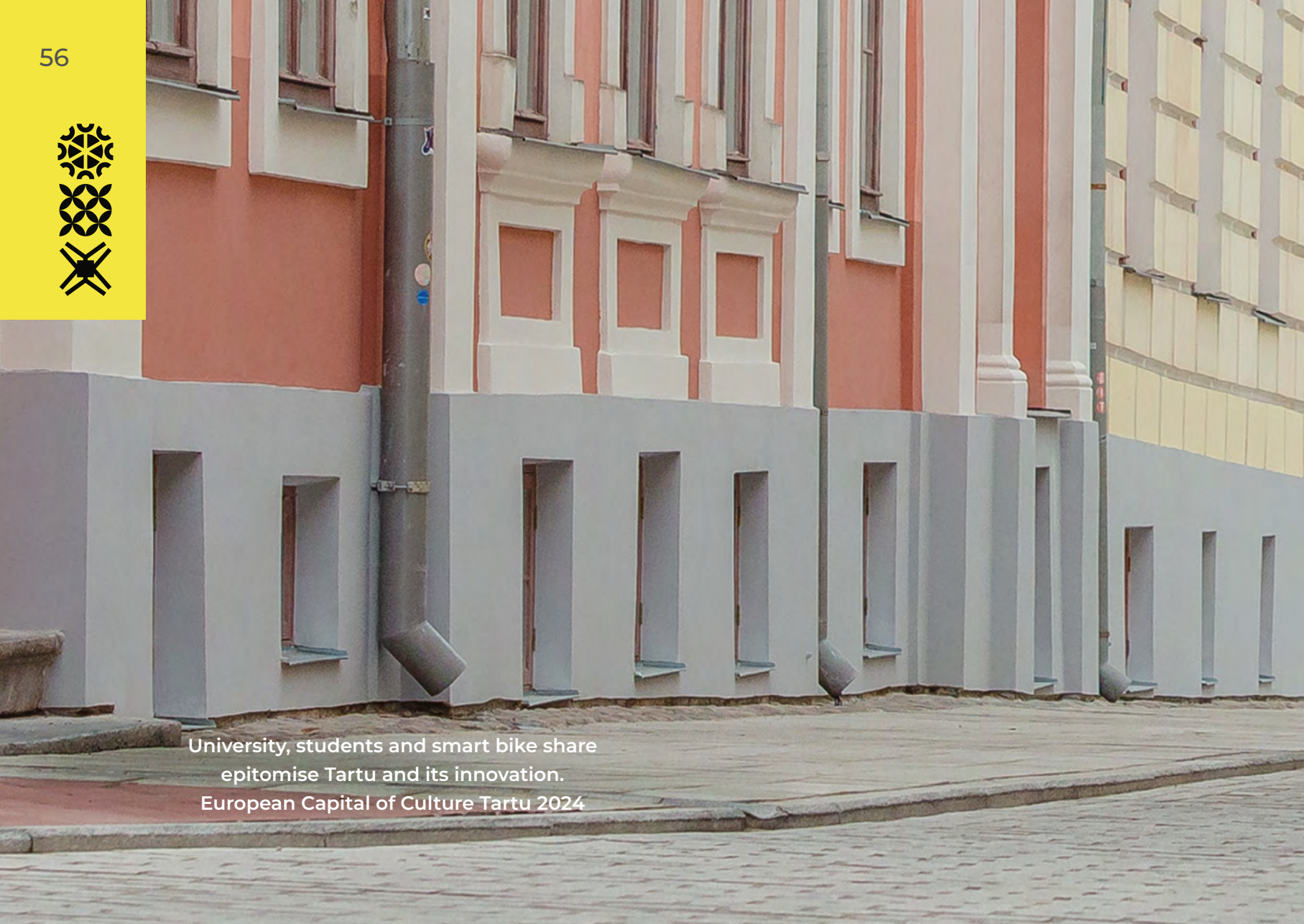
Kalev Raudsepp, founder of Parmu Ecovillage, enjoys the traditional methods of forestry work. Valgamaa

enriching journeys and deep experiences that are difficult even to imagine without experiencing them firsthand. A chance to meet the masters of their trade on their soulful landscapes is a privilege that has a value difficult to measure.

The Southern Estonian nature is a perfect place to invigorate your soul, make it shine like a precious stone and learn the arts of survival. Surrounded by its cultural landscapes, clean nature and inspiring people you may end up discovering your true self. Southern Estonia has all the prerequisites for that to happen but the most important components are your own seeking spirit and open mind. Come and explore life on the edge of these different worlds. Come alone or bring a friend or few with good intentions and a smile on your face. And come quietly, because if you bring a lot of noise with you, your vision and hearing will be compromised. But definitely come if you hear your inner call and that of Southern Estonia.



Marika Hütt from Olemari Farm with a kid.
Jõgevamaa



University, students and smart bike share
epitomise Tartu and its innovation.
European Capital of Culture Tartu 2024



INNOVATION



Innovation through the eyes of South Estonians

Innovation – a modern buzzword – can refer to a brilliant technological breakthrough and the meteoric rise of a pioneering startup, or also to the exciting symbiosis of the old and the new. This is exactly how South Estonians view it, as they look for ways to breathe new life into local small businesses.

Creative and sustainable solutions are born from the combination of a traditional way of life, ancestral wisdom and modern technologies. These are the solutions that lead to self-realisation and income generation and, above all, make the world a better place. At least, that seems to be the case with the smart examples from the South Estonian business landscape.

Innovation has many faces: for some people, it means technology; for others the innovative use of traditional knowledge. Some might view it as a

conscious developmental process. Innovation can also be viewed as smart startups, or something totally different again...

There is one thing, though, that everyone seems to agree with: that innovation starts with people. Oddly enough, Southern Estonia seems to have a particularly high number of people with innovative ideas. But what is that “something” distinctly inherent of South Estonians and their innovation? The answer: a copious amount of seemingly crazy ideas and enthusiastic leaders!

A good dose of craziness is essential in order to conceive something new and unique. The courage to think outside the box, the ability to work with people and the capacity to recognise the potential for co-creation across different fields, sectors and communities – these are all the keywords for successful innovation. South Estonians have learned that science, awareness and understanding are the increasingly vital components of doing things differently, and that mutual encouragement is equally important.

A meeting place at the edge of the universe

Entrepreneur and IT visionary Linnar Viik talks passionately about the power of encouragement. With the help of his family and friends, he has transformed the Suur Muna (Big Egg) café and restaurant at the foot of Suur Munamägi into an innovative meeting place. “All crazy ideas must be realised before reason sets in!” he chuckles, sitting at a coffee table next to the highest peak in the Baltics.

Here, nearly 300 metres above sea level, city



Singer and songwriter Anu Taul draws inspiration from South Estonian nature. Haanimaa



Ilmar Ilves, owner of Murimäe Wine Cellar, introduces his produce on his farm at Naha Lake in Otepää Upland. Valgamaa

dwellers can discover the beauty of nature. Technology is equally important, though, as it gives them the freedom to enjoy a higher quality of life in the midst of this natural landscape, yet still be able to work in a way that was once only possible in the office of a major city.

“We are like this restaurant at the edge of the universe. When you drive onwards from here, you’ve got to be careful because if you hear a rumble, you might begin to fall over the edge!” says Viik, visualising – quite revealingly – the family restaurant that attracts regular customers from all corners of Estonia and beyond. In fact, this is not your regular place that uses local raw produce; it’s a unique meeting place – a modern smart workplace equipped with all the facilities necessary for remote work – or as the Võro people say, “taipsa tüü kotus” (the home of smart work). There is also a cinema that shows high-quality films. And if nature calls you, the

disco outhouse is at your disposal – let’s just say, this is something you need to experience for yourself!

Rural versus urban

Based on his experience, Viik can attest that the differences between rural and urban is increasingly a topic of the past: “Nowadays, you can be as connected to the rest of the world in the country as in the city. However, urban settlements don’t really give you the option to “disconnect” and be on your own, not at least to the same degree. The countryside offers many more opportunities to spend your personal quality time than a city does.”

This is where the IT visionary sees one of the most promising values that Southern Estonia can offer: thanks to technological advancements, people can now live in a rich natural environment, enjoy a better quality of life, eat cleaner and forge a more moderate pace of life. Innovation in Southern Estonia means focusing on quality rather than quantity, and carving out exciting niches that inspire both creators and consumers.

“To me, innovation is a verb: a process from the conception of an idea to its execution – even when things ultimately go awry,” explains Viik. “Innovation is a way of doing things with a smile on your face.” And doing things differently is something that brings a smile to the face of a lot of South Estonians – besides their timber industry and other traditional businesses. Southern Estonia has long enjoyed a reputation for being a paradise for hikers, a gourmet hub for local food enthusiasts and a haven for handicrafts lovers, but also a fertile ground for creative economy. And there’s nothing to stop all of these from developing even further.

Innovation in Southern Estonia means focusing on quality rather than quantity, and carving out exciting niches that inspire both creators and consumers.

Time has a different meaning

Technology can be increasingly used to promote life in the border regions. As a cofounder of the e-Governance Academy, Viik says that, along with the latest technologies, so-called analogue technologies continue to demand our attention – culture, traditions, values. These are so-called “soft” values.

The idea of appreciating analogue technologies seems to support the way of life in Southern Estonia very well. Time here has a different dimension, and it opens up some possibilities that could benefit the region, says Viik. Southern Estonia can easily be viewed as a meeting point of two different worlds – the artificial and the natural. In the first case, every second of the day counts while with the latter, you can clearly divide your day between morning, noon and evening.

“When a visitor comes from the first world to the second, we can offer them local values and high-quality surprises,” Viik says, explaining his idea. “People come here for a good reason but they are going to leave with a handful of stories and even a more compelling reason to return.”

The benefits of sharing economy

According to Viik, today knowledge and ideas are our bread and butter, and people could share them a lot more. It really pays off to be open-minded and listen to others – ideas tend to be enhanced once they are shared. Obviously, nobody has time to turn all their ideas into reality, so they could be shared a lot more boldly.

The rapidly changing world has taught us to keep up with changes. One of the principles of the sharing economy is “You are what you share!”. It takes time to truly grasp what’s behind the concept – not only in Southern Estonia but in other

“The measure of being a human is whether I keep my ideas to myself or share them for the benefit of everyone!”

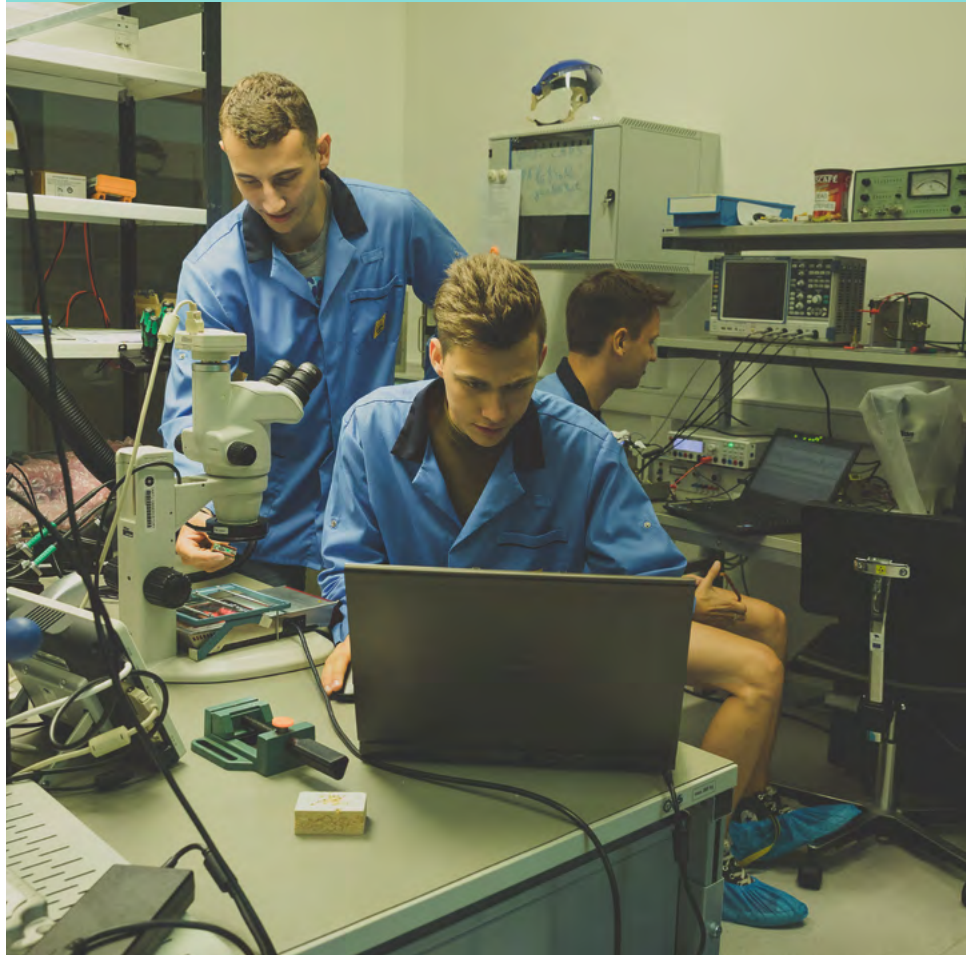
Linnar Viik

countries as well. But people learn. “The measure of being a human is whether I keep my ideas to myself or share them for the benefit of everyone!” Viik says.

To confirm this, he himself is more than eager to openly share the ideas related to his family restaurant, inviting others to join in: be it a festival showcasing homemade ice cream, lollipops or ground elder and nettle pesto, or any other curious idea from any kind of delicious niche – Suur Muna offers an inspiring environment to bring those ideas to life.

Profitability and wellbeing

Kuldar Leis, the CEO of Tartu 2024 European Capital of Culture and owner of one of the first passive



Cultivating science. Tartumaa

houses in Estonia, displays no shortage of creativity and innovative ideas. As one of the initiators of Kupland – a network of remote working service providers in Southeast Estonia – Leis, as an entrepreneur and entrepreneurship consultant, has collaborated with the University of Tartu Startup Lab where he also helps to infect his students with the entrepreneurial bug. He highly values Tartu as a magnet for Southern Estonia. “The spirit, power and knowledge of the university holds tremendous potential,” Leis says, though he admits that entrepreneurs are still often struggling when it comes to turning to scientists for advice.

Innovation, which also entails a better use and reuse of resources according to Leis, starts with the willingness to work together and with open-minded people who are not discouraged by setbacks. “The pace of life in Southern Estonia is slower, but people are also friendlier and more dedicated,” says Leis of South Estonians. He adds that once people overcome their initial distrust, even competitors can find ways to work together on projects. As the CEO of Tartu 2024 European Capital of Culture, he keeps these values at

the forefront of his activities – so that Tartu and the rest of Southern Estonia can benefit from this major international project as much as possible.

Though innovation is generally associated with entrepreneurship, equal attention should be paid to innovative solutions that would improve people’s everyday quality of life. “Instead of focusing on the profitability of your home, think of your wellbeing,” says Leis who himself lives in a passive house. “It must be understood that energy efficiency, a healthy indoor climate and the sustainable use of materials are also innovations,” he says, adding that the keyword “organic” is becoming increasingly important both in the context of food and in terms of our lifestyle.

A stronghold of innovation

Yes, this does indeed seem to be the case. No matter how you define innovation, Southern Estonia is a stronghold of innovation and a sort of creativity reserve. But what is that “something” that makes innovation in Southern Estonia stand out? Is it a better sense of nature, a slower pace of life, a more focused way

of living or the visionary thinking of local people, or perhaps cutting-edge knowledge and the ability to peek into the wider world? Or is it something entirely different?

To answer this question, you should head south – to the region bordering two worlds – and experience it yourself, with your feet planted on the ground and your head in the clouds. Be careful though not to fall over the edge!



Masterful clay plasterer Marko Kikas applying his skills on a wall in Mooste. Põlvamaa



A breeding ground for the arts of survival

Although the entrepreneurship sector has been recently buffeted by serious storms, the entrepreneurial spirit shows no signs of waning. At least that's the case with Southern Estonia: along its winding roads you can still encounter enterprising individuals with a broad smile on their faces. Their unusual ideas have helped them adapt to changing circumstances and survive. One may perhaps ask, is this innovation? We definitely think so! This is grassroots innovation that we all can learn from.

And not only learn – local perspectives allow us to draw firmer conclusions about our global economic model and the entire world order. Nature and life provide us with plenty of hints that we should learn to recognise – in order for us to adapt to changing circumstances in the wisest, most insightful and perhaps even most radical way. The keyword here is sustainability; it is popping up everywhere these days, even if we attempt to banish it like a ghost or an

unwelcome guest, without bothering to recognise its hidden value or learning to harness it.

Infinite growth is by no means possible; at the same time, we refuse to change our ideas and habits. So how can we keep going in this challenging time? Perhaps we could benefit from some observations from Southern Estonia – a place simultaneously marked by wisdom and creative playfulness. After observing the routines of South Estonians for a

while, certain truths emerge: while just listening to chanterelle mushrooms (a local speciality) may not be enough, it is still of utmost importance to listen to them.... And this quality might also be the key to local resilience, their art of survival, pure joy of existence.

Arts of survival

We Estonians are particularly keen on being on our own, but if we combine this with the strengths of our digital state and the benefits of our rural environments, we'll get the curious symbiosis of local innovation which, when mixed with both modern and traditional ways of adaptation, forms a significant part of the wisdom of people living in this latitude – their arts of survival. And even though it's a somewhat simplified approach to innovation, the Southern Estonian example soon teaches us that operating in this way brings some rather unique results that allows people to get by, and to happily do so.

Guided by this very wisdom of survival, the tour leader of today's photographic excursion, Terje Atonen,



Mini zoo at Kase Farm near Elva. Tartumaa

begins her journey in a small camper. Her destination – the Voronja Gallery on the Onion Route. Along the way, she buys some smoked bream, then stops at Kostja’s who grows onions nearby. Next, she sets her sights on Haanimaa to capture some precious moments on camera – how the owner of the Hartsmäe organic farm is tended by his amiable cattle (not the other way around), how the musician Anu Taul finds inspiration in the wild cat, how a resident of Parmu Ecovillage harnesses his horses and the landlady of Andre Cheese Farm caresses her “Dotsies”... She drives from Valga County to Võru County, from Haanimaa to Setomaa, from Põlva County to Tartu County, stopping here and there, and ultimately heads back to Tallinn. All she does is drive and shoot pictures, but when she arrives in the capital city, she says that these meetings in the south were like a day of therapy for her.

“Every day we hear about the need to conserve nature, but in my opinion, we should value more those who keep life in the south going.”

Terje Atonen

From the photographer’s perspective, Southern Estonia teems with people who have happily dedicated their lives to doing things that they are passionate about. “It seems to me that people in Southern Estonia take more time, talk to each other and take more enjoyment from their life in general. They pay close attention to the signs of nature, and it seems to me that they specifically take time to think things through before acting,” says Terje. “My

biggest discovery, however, was to find such well-functioning communities in the south!”

The joy of creating

Through her work as a photographer, Terje has met many active and enterprising people from several places in Southern Estonia. There is one common denominator that they all share, as she points out – their determination to thrive and undertake fulfilling endeavours. This is creativity!

”What they are doing is so creative; it’s almost as

if they have discovered some secret formula to get by, using all the possibilities of rural living,” she says, adding that to her, the greatest wealth of Southern Estonia is not just its nature; it’s also its people. “Every day we hear about the need to conserve nature, but in my opinion, we should value more those who keep life in the south going.”

A man who settled in a secluded corner of Karula National Park decades ago, wholeheartedly agrees. He hasn’t needed much for his simple life ever since. Although a new woollen sweater would be welcome.

Sceptical optimism

Kaido Kama, the owner of Liivakingu Farm and a well-known public figure in Estonia, considers his life on a unique chessboard made up of forests, fields and pastures to be a sort of luxury. Karula National Park is one of the few places in Estonia where the local community consciously collaborates to maintain the balance between nature and the natural way of life.

The visitor’s journey to Kama’s farmyard is nothing short of an orienteering game, but there he is, poking

his head out of the kitchen window! Kama kindly invites us in and puts the kettle on. “This year, there are a lot less insects, so you can sit with the window open,” he instructs us as we enter. We are not entirely sure whether this is good or bad – just another sign of nature. Kama who has seen quite a bit of life knows more than he lets on. Whenever he says something, though, it’s thought-provoking. When asked about inspiration, he warns us right away that his views may not be popular among mainstream Estonians. In fact, Kama believes that instead of a common push for economic growth, the only viable direction would be degrowth, or sustainable reduction. Without further ado, we’ll get to the heart of the matter.

Now you might think that what will follow will be yet another doomsday conspiracy theory or some tree-hugging rhetoric... Far from it! It’s a simple and clear life perspective from a salt of the earth type of man – a healthy mix of sceptical pessimism and pragmatic optimism. We all possess these personality traits, he says, and thanks to that we have been able to adapt and survive in this silver-white corner of the

world. Now, let's be wise and adapt again because as the illusion of endless economic growth is beginning to shatter, a different reality is becoming increasingly obvious. "The biggest issue of our time is the loss of biodiversity as a result of human activity. The situation is dire," Kama says. And yet, the sceptical optimist in him is tirelessly seeking new ways to adapt and keep abreast with the changing world.

Growth or degrowth

Just like an animal seeks shelter from the scorching sun or heavy rain, humans seek refuge from an exhausting or violent external environment. During the COVID-19 spring, many of us found our way back to our country homes, to escape the external conditions and manage on our own. At the same time, it soon became obvious to all that we are not made for extended solitude – humans are social beings. Also, it's not possible to transform the external environment into a more suitable living space by oneself. It can only be achieved in cooperation with others, once a decision has been made.

And this is what Kama talks about: the world around us is quickly transforming, and so is our living environment. It would be foolish to deny it. "The COVID-19 virus could have been a kind of finger of fate to mankind, calling us to order. Yet, world leaders made the money printing presses spin even faster and are giving out more loans. Many are desperately clinging to the past," says Kama. He admits, though, that on an individual level, it did serve as a wake-up call: during the COVID-19 spring, we witnessed our magnet cities turn into counter-magnet cities within just a few months. "In the long run, our system of summer homes certainly has its advantages. People can go there if they want to get out of the city."

How can we expect societal and economic development continue in a situation where the current growth-oriented approach has led to environmental degradation? Is it even possible to halt economic growth or at least shift from growth to degrowth, and what would this achieve? Development through contraction seems like a counterintuitive idea, especially in the market economy, where growth and



Margus Siilik, creator of acoustic pine needle panels is learning from nature. Põlvamaa



Self-made is the best way! The arts of survival workshop. Põlvamaa

profit are perceived as the only measures of progress. Yet, the deeply ingrained principle of the market economy is already changing, as the focus is shifting to the principles of sustainable entrepreneurship, green and circular economy.

In a situation where the careless management of resources is being replaced by the principles of caring management, we should also redefine the concept of innovation and elevate it beyond its narrow meaning of profitable product development. Then, how can we strive to expand the concept of innovation from the perspective of sustainable degrowth? It will only become feasible if, in light of global changes, we shift our focus to local processes, regional development and self-reliance.

Alone and together

Scattered across the landscape, just like the three horses and one hundred or so sheep of Liivakingu Farm, stand other households of local enterprising families who have made their homes on the hilly slopes of Karula National Park. Though each of them possesses a strong drive for self-sufficiency, they are well aware of the



Bagpipe master Andrus Taul. Mulgimaa

vicinity of their neighbours – perhaps by that lakeside or behind the winding road – and seize on any good opportunity to do something together. Because doing things together, as a community, is far better than toiling alone.

“I keep horses. But I do so in a healthy way – that requires some innovate approaches,” says Kama, in contemplating on his knowledge and experience, and the possibility of transmitting them to those interested in learning. He finds that local innovation could be described as doing something differently or doing it in an old-fashioned way. In other words, our local healthy innovation lies in the skilful combination of ancestral wisdom and modern possibilities. “There are plenty of great examples of such innovation here,” he says. “And the more examples we have of people who can successfully manage on their own, without depending on large corporations, the better it is for society as a whole.”

Perhaps our profound wisdom and the ability to understand broader processes in order to draw the conclusions necessary for sustainable progress from

it are all due to the fact that as a small nation – one that has managed to stand the trials of time despite its complicated history –we haven’t become too self-centred even in this modern wellbeing society. Kama says that climate change and a lack of resources have led to increasingly nasty geopolitical power games, and therefore, there is a desperate need for a calmer environment and more sober look. “For example, the same scenario of this disastrous growth model, which is currently being applied to planet Earth, historically devastated Easter Island. A lack of resources there led to fratricidal wars and ultimately to the disappearance of the indigenous culture; people had to protect their food from their neighbours at all costs,” says the worldly Kama, reflecting on the historic lesson of the island, once deemed as “the centre of the universe”.

On the other hand, he says, we can find plenty of good examples of frugal living – such as the case with Tibetan culture. “The Tibetan people who live in ascetic conditions at 3,000-4,000 metres above sea level are known for their highly developed culture.” Kama then makes an interesting observation about

their conscious demographic practice. “In Tibet, due to the local environment and extremely harsh conditions, it is customary for a woman to have several husbands. Such a woman has fewer children than would a man with several wives. Any increase in the population would have meant a devastating famine for these people.”

Here Kama draws a parallel with Estonia: “In our neck of the woods, there are currently as many Estonians as there were 100 years ago, while the world’s population has grown nearly fivefold.” He adds that with this demographic indicator, Estonia could, in a broader sense, set an example for the rest of the world. But could the same be said about sustainable living? “In order for there to be a radical shift in values and a change in the current world direction, a good shakeup is probably necessary. In an affluent society, the majority of people would never give up their enjoyable lifestyle.” Kama is more than certain that the campaign “Choose me, and we’ll consume less” would never quite cut the mustard in an election campaign.



Smoke sauna at Harrõoro Farm
in Masluva village. Setomaa

Global initiative

According to Kama, if we want to help our home planet out of the current conundrum, we should not just agree on policies that reduce carbon emissions; we should also tackle economic growth: “Carbon agreements are currently the only existing voluntary reduction agreements between countries. The next huge step could be an agreement on sustainable degrowth.”

Kama acknowledges that the concept of sustainable degrowth is a utopia, but sees no other way out of the current situation. He also asserts that sustainable degrowth stemming from the model of sustainable economic decline cannot be implemented in just a few isolated countries; it should be a global initiative. As we already have the first examples of sustainable lifestyles making sustainability more palatable on a grander economic scale, why can't Estonians be among the pioneers of this initiative?

And why not? We can change the paradigm, start a global initiative of sustainable degrowth, lead

“In Southern Estonia, we have been bestowed with self-awareness and identity.”

Kaido Kama

intergovernmental discussions and show the way out of this global challenge. We already have the experience with the World Cleanup Day. The change starts with people, communities, a deeper understanding and a caring attitude towards nature and life in general – it starts with valuing biodiversity.

Judging the examples of Karula and other Southern Estonian communities, Kama says that regional development doesn't start with asphalt or concrete – it takes culture and traditions, identity and a sense of place. “In Southern Estonia, we have been bestowed with a healthy dose of self-awareness and identity; it's really like winning a jackpot. This allows us to build community life upon our unique culture,” Kama firmly believes. “The wealth of Southern Estonia lies in its natural environment and people. Here we have an abundance of forests and we speak võro kiil. I am happy to live my dream life surrounded by nature.”

According to him, the key for progress lies in combining remote work with practical rural work – the ability to sustain oneself by using traditional skills and the best part of technology, while appreciating your region and protecting its treasures. “All of this is part of biodiversity.”

Changes are already under way

The pastures surrounding the Hundiallika Retreat and Training Centre certainly give out a strong aura of wild and versatile biodiversity. This is where Kaia-Kaire Hunt and Toomas Trapido decided to establish their food grove. The centre, which promotes openness to the world and self-development, opened in 2013 and has attracted hundreds of enthusiasts from Southern Estonia and beyond. People come here to learn about self-reliance and nature. With its activities, the centre strives

to create harmony: to teach people to connect with themselves and their surrounding environment.

While keeping themselves busy with assisting people in either self-discovery or embracing nature, Kaia-Kaire and Toomas have had to reinvent the wheel quite a bit. As bizarre as it sounds – restoring

biodiversity has become a sort of innovation after the way in which the intense use of natural resources has depleted or even destroyed life and diversity in many rural areas. “We live in an unstable world in a unique era. The knowledge that used to hold our world together no longer serves us, nothing is certain, nothing is the same,” ponders Toomas. “Rock solid truths are crumbling, weather patterns are changing, cultural values are being overthrown – there is a major shift happening, one that

“Southern Estonia holds the key for sustainable development. Life here is permeated by the sense of culture and people are self-sufficient.”

Toomas Trapido



Fishing on Emajõgi, Tartumaa
*Inna Murzak, 2021 South Estonian Photo Contest
special award*

affects the majority of the world's population.”

In physics, there is a term marking a transition – a phase shift. In biology, a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, marking its complete transformation. “As humans we have been given this opportunity to become better versions of ourselves, establish a different relationship with nature and learn to meet our needs without burdening our planet,” remarks Toomas. He believes that our home planet is sending us clear signs that blindly pursuing growth and sticking to our old ways will have dire consequences.

Kaia-Kaire says that people are struggling to let go of their desires and wants – we are guided by them until an inner shift occurs. “True change requires inner alertness and awakening, and any change is uncomfortable. This is why even the most conscious among us are often spiritual shoppers seeking comfort rather than inner change,” she says, speaking of her experience as a mental health therapist

and coach. “If you want to change the world, start with yourself. Therefore, our mission is to encourage people to initiate that change within themselves. And this place here really supports it.”

Mysticism and magic

In many places in Southern Estonia, one can detect that archaic, ethno-futuristic vibe that is so characteristic of the region. “Southern Estonia is an exotic place with its own character and image. Its mysticism and magic draw you in like a magnet. There’s a different kind of closeness to nature and traditions, our own language and value space, the roots are deeply felt,” explains Kaia-Kaire. She humorously describes local innovation as a rustic high-end product that stems from deep values and flirts with modern possibilities. “Nature is an important part of innovation here. You can only do things honestly, putting your heart and soul into it.”

Toomas adds that the key to changing the world is not technology, as this wouldn’t change our relationship with nature and ourselves. The roots of progress lie

deep within us, our understanding of the world and our relationships with others. “Southern Estonia holds the key for sustainable development because life here is still permeated by the sense of our own culture and people are more self-sufficient, and create real values.” The owners of the Hundiallika Centre find joy in those special moments when their guests find peace and show signs of inner transformation.

In Southern Estonia, this kind of vibrancy and entrepreneurship cannot simply be encountered – it can be seen, heard and touched, and it’s never short of surprises. Surprises can come even in the form of thoughts as you drive along these winding roads. Is innovation a progress or regress, especially if seen from the perspective of sustainable development? If growth is our only measure of success, our single criterion, the world may ultimately pop like an overripe tomato in autumn. However, if we take it slow and dare to care, different solutions and new possibilities emerge. Then we will begin to notice sustainable experimentation, playful actions, pure joy – the wealth of Southern Estonia.



Festive hospitality in Hilana village.
Setomaa

See you all soon in Southern Estonia where every enterprising family, every community and every stronghold of sustainable living awaits visitors with good intentions – and not only to visit but also to stay. The community events that take place in Southern Estonia as part of the Tartu 24 European Capital of Culture programme offer people a great opportunity to meet with local communities and get to know their exciting culture and values!

Read more at
www.vistisoutheastonia.com



South Estonia is a stronghold of innovation and a creativity reserve – so it says on Neitsijärve Creativity Barn. Põlvamaa



Seto Kostipäiv
in Inara Vanavalgõ
Kohvitarõ.
Mikitamäe,
Setomaa





28

MIKITAMÄE
KOOL
1981 - 1984

PELLET
"KOKKORU"
KÕRPUKOR
VALIKU-NAK
KOHALIK
"TÕELISE"
HÄBES
HETKEL

Jaga elamust!
#setokostipäiv
#setoküük
Tartu 2024

COMMUNITY EVENTS



Linda Saare, Karoliina Lass
Discover Emajõgi river trips series
TARTUMAA

The *Discover Emajõgi* river trips series introduces you to a captivating aquatic world

The exciting and adventurous *Discover Emajõgi* river trips series which kicked off in June 2023 allows you to experience the aquatic world of the Emajõgi River. In 2023 and 2024, the thematic river trips on unique wooden barge lodi and other vessels will take you to untouched parts of the Emajõgi River where you can have a closer look at the beautiful and delicate catchment area. What's more, the different trips allow you to explore the aquatic life in all four seasons – spring, summer, autumn and winter – while also inspiring people to contribute to the preservation of the river ecosystem. The series was launched at the initiative of Tartu County Development Association and is organised by the cooperation network of Emajõgi River.

Tartu County's *Tureen* food series awaits participants over two years

The diverse food series that kicked off in July 2023 and will last until December 2024 involves a series of events spread across the county. It engages different parties and introduces the best culinary practices of Tartu County. As the events cater to versatile tastes, there's plenty to do for everyone – children, pensioners, families and professionals alike. The programme includes workshops, café days, fairs, culinary outings and much more. The first event in the series – a [pre]opinion festival – took place on 22 July 2023 in the Äksi Ice Age Centre and focused on food and environment. The full *Tureen* programme is available on the website of Tartu County Development Association, which is also an organiser.



Katri Kuusk
Tureen food series
TARTUMAA



Gerli Auväärt, Kairi Kasearu
The Gold Miner of Leevaku
 performance
 PIIRIVEERE

***The Gold Miner of Leevaku* community performance enthralled in its extravagance**

Where can you find the tallest sauna chimney in Europe, towering at 50 metres? You'll find out by coming to see the summer performance of *The Gold Miner of Leevaku*. This is the story of outrageous ideas, intergenerational relationships, successes and failures that were experienced exactly a century ago here, in Leevaku. The story revolves around local visionary Artur Reinomägi and his decision to build a colossal brick factory in Leevaku – the event that marks its 100th anniversary this year. In the community performance, directed by Marko Mäesaar, professional actors Viire Valdma, Tiina Mälberg and Ken Rüütel are joined by local amateurs. A total of 8 summer performances are delivered throughout July and August, providing an interesting peek into local history, culture, language and environment. Stunning nature and local food, the Räpina Youth Wind Orchestra and the many singers and musicians add to the experience. The community performance is organised by NGO Leevakk.

Seto *Kostipäiv* delights visitors with its hospitality

Sõir (fresh pressed curd cheese), *suulliim* (a cold soup served in summertime), *kikkaseenepiirak* (pastry made from chanterelle mushrooms) – these and many other delicacies typical of traditional Seto cuisine make you glance at the calendar – when will the *Seto Kostipäiv* (pop-up café day) finally begin? In 12-13 August 2023 and in 10-11 August 2024, if you happen to hear the compelling sound of the garmon or the exotic Seto leelo singing, come and step into one of the local farmyards where a cosy pop-up café awaits. Stay for a while and savour dishes made using grandmothers' recipes. Take time to experience authentic Seto cuisine and relax your body and soul. As you can only eat so much, bring a lunchbox with you, and you'll be ready for an evening concert. We actually recommend staying for a night since next morning some cafés will host a so-called *peräpütüpäiv*, i.e., the serving of leftovers, which also may surprise you. *Seto Kostipäiv* is organised by NGO Seto Küük.



Ülle Pärnoja, Inara Luigas
Seto kostipäiv
 PIIRIVEERE



Rutt Riitsaar, Kaja Kesküla

I Know Where My Food Comes From
community festival
VÖRUMAA

I Know Where My Food Comes From – Rõuge Community Festival

We've all heard the saying: you are what you eat! The people of Rõuge are well aware of this fact but want to know more, and they are excited to share their knowledge and local flavours with others. On 9 September 2023, at the initiative of Rõuge rural municipality, a community food festival will take place in Rõuge primeval valley, or Ööbikuorg (Nightingale Valley). With a focus on local and organic food, the day will be packed with lectures by Tartu World University, workshops, discussions and an exciting cultural programme. There will also be a bustling marketplace. The community festival will detail the developments of the food industry, both locally and globally.

Artisans from Tartu County teach ancestral arts of survival

Inherited Arts of Survival thematic days, which are organised by NGO Loomemõis, focus on the local knowledge, skills and traditions that have been passed down for generations. From September to May, the series of events invites you to four different places in Vooremaa, where local artisans teach you ancient life skills. How to cook traditional dishes, craft musical instruments out of natural materials, make scented and stress relief balls, prepare healing ointments and create prehistoric looking ceramics – you will learn all this and more from your hosts through local family traditions in each location.



Eneli Kaasik, Kalvo Kaasik
Inherited Arts of Survival thematic days
TARTUMAA



Vahur Veeroja, Eda Veeroja
“It’s sauna time!”
VÕRUMAA

Families of Rõuge area announce: “It’s sauna time!”

In October, families from Rõuge rural municipality will open their sauna doors to anyone interested. On 20-22 October 2023, at the initiative of Rõuge rural municipality, nearly 50 saunas – each one different in its own way – will be heated up amidst the rolling hills and lakes of the region. The event offers people the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of going to the sauna of a local family, participate in workshops, purchase sauna-related products, and learn about local sauna traditions and the way of life.

***Create or Capitulat!* – the South Estonian spatial design conference shapes the vision of small towns**

What is the vision of small towns in South Estonia? What is their preferred living environment like and how do they perceive a strong sense of place identity? The *Create or Capitulat. Local Culture as a Component of Spatial Design* conference is being organised by Valga rural municipality government and will take place in 15 November 2023. It invites participants to explore place design through local heritage and culture. During the vision event, we will seek answers to questions such as how to create valuable space around us, what the role of community is in place design, and whether culture and art really are the cornerstones of place identity. The conference is preceded by so-called walkshops (inspired by Walk – the historic name of Valga), thematic workshops and discussions which attempt to unveil the spatial and architectural essence of small towns in South Estonia.



Elisabeth Tõnisson, Lea Vutt
Create or Capitulat! conference
VALGAMAA



Maarja Ülper
Emajõe-Suursoo winter roads
TARTUMAA

Emajõe-Suursoo winter roads offer an extraordinary journey through time

A network of ancient winter roads that are unique in the whole world can be found in Emajõe-Suursoo, not far from the European Culture Capital of Tartu. In olden days, these seasonal winter roads in frozen bogs formed an important link between dispersed communities, shortening the travel distance. Nowadays, with human visitors being rare, the unique paths are used mostly by wild animals. The cultural and historical significance of the Emajõe-Suursoo winter roads is celebrated as a joint initiative between three rural municipalities through a diverse programme of hikes, educational activities and festivities. The winter roads festival will take place from 23 January to 12 February 2024. The festival is organised by Luunja rural municipality government and will be held in Luunja, Kastre and Peipsiääre rural municipalities bordering the Emajõe-Suursoo area.

The Otepää hiking series reveals stunning landscapes through film, art and photography

Would you like to see where and how that charming landscape painting, some award-winning photo or a publicly acclaimed film originated? Then come to Otepää, where you can embark on three creative hikes throughout spring, summer and autumn 2024: a hike through film landscapes, painting landscapes and photography landscapes. The hikes are inspired by the great artistic beauty of Otepää's landscapes and take you to places where notable works of art in various genres have been conceived. By listening to fascinating stories about the artists who once trotted the very same paths, and about their art, you can let your own creativity loose and create some artwork under the guidance of an instructor. The hiking series through picturesque landscapes is organised by NGO Otepää Külade Ühendus.



Triin Nurmsalu, Ago Arro
Otepää hiking series
VALGAMAA



Gea Järvela, Gaili Kangur
Sensory journey in nature
TARTUMAA

Elevate your senses by taking a sensory journey in Luke Manor Park

The palpable mystery of Luke Manor Park draws visitors like a magnet. In May and August 2024, you can embark on a unique sensory journey that will awaken and elevate your senses. The *Sensory Journey in Nature* programme will take the visitor back to the bygone era of great manor houses. While spending time in nature, you can actively engage all your senses, including your sense of smell and taste. At the end of the journey, a romantic culture café awaits you with forest and cultural delicacies prepared specially for the event. The sensory journey is organised by Vapramäe-Vellavere-Vitipalu Foundation.

The first Kodavere song festival lets us peek into a unique world of an indigenous language

In the European Capital of Culture year, history will be made on the tiny singing stage of Pala village. On 2 June 2024, the first Kodavere song festival (Kodavere laalopido) will take place here, with the aim of preserving indigenous languages. The event was sparked by a local initiative: the people of Kodavere parish have decided to lift the lid on their treasure chest just a little, so that their secret language – Kodavere kiäl – may be heard. Kodavere laalopido is a public festival open to everyone. Organised by the Kodavere Heritage Centre, all the songs are sung in the Kodavere dialect. “Tule kõhale, laala kuasa ja õle ajalulise pido sünni juuren!” (Come and sing along, and witness the birth of an historic festival!).



Mikk Kirikal, Ergo-Hart Västrik
I Kodavere Song Festival
TARTUMAA



Mihkel Kohava, Sandra Kartau
The Arts of Survival.
The PSACCs
 TARTUMAA

A documentary participatory performance on the art of survival awakens and challenges

Let's meet our guests from the future – People Significantly Affected by Climate Change, or PSACCs. The documentary participatory performance entitled *The Arts of Survival. The PSACCs* brings the experiences and skills of those directly affected by the impacts of the climate crisis to the wider public. So, what are the five tips that help us survive floods and much more? Welcome to the arts of survival school! People who have been affected by climate change from South America, Africa, Oceania and Southern Europe share their stories of surviving extreme weather conditions. We will meet in summer 2024 in Kambja at Kesk tee (literally, “middle ground”) to try to establish the middle ground together. The performance is organised by NGO Loodusvõlu.

Seto Dance Festival showcases the richness of traditional culture

Stunning national costumes and the joy of creating together – in the summer of 2024, people from Setomaa, Võromaa, Mulgimaa and Kihnu island as well as the Suiti people from Latvia will gather in Setomaa to present the treasures of their cultural space through the language of dance.

The *Kad´ah kavvõkõ´* Seto dance festival is the third in a series of traditional Seto dance festivals, involving dance enthusiasts from other regions of living traditional culture. See you on 29 June 2024 in the paddock of the Värskä Farm Museum in Setomaa! The traditional dance festival of the Seto people is organised by the Setomaa Cultural Centre.



Evelin Leima, Maarja Saarine

Kad´ah kavvõkõ´ Seto dance festival
PIIRIVEERE



Maiki Park, Mirelle Vetemäe
Navi Community Festival
VÕRUMAA

Delve into local lore with Navi village society

Navi village in Võru County is inviting locals and visitors to its community festival in July 2024. Discussions on how to preserve local traditions, a seminary workshop, a cultural-historical journey, an intense culture programme and a designated youth area – all will help attendees to become fully immersed in local lore. The programme is available on the website of event organiser NGO Navi Külaselts.

Kaagjärve puts itself on the map with stylish Rose Festival

On 27-28 July 2024, the Rose Festival will be held at Kaagjärve Manor in Valga County – a stylish all-family event marked by beautiful music, dance performances and interesting workshops. The Rose Festival is inspired by the unique rose garden on Kaagjärve manor grounds and will introduce the local manor culture, while presenting some rising stars and hidden talents. The Estonian-Latvian gourmet and rose market will also be set up on the festival grounds, where you can sample local food and purchase handicrafts and rose plants. Pop-up cafés will open specifically for the day, offering some of the best flavours in South Estonia. The event is organised by Kawershof Manor Foundation.



**Keidi Russak, Maritta Pillaroo,
Mikk-Marken Jaanimets, Riin Margus**
Kaagjärve Rose Festival
VALGAMAA



Triinu Akkermann
Peipsi Food Street 175 km
TARTUMAA

The 175 km Peipsi Food Street delights with authentic tastes

Pop-up restaurants at harbours and along the highway, open yards and community centres, a rich flavour palette of local cuisine and culture – such is the endless and bountiful food street that winds along the coastline of Lake Peipus from Vasknarva to Saabolda in Setomaa. Everything you see is genuine, real and natural. The grand Peipsi Food Festival will take place on 17-18 August 2024. It offers two days of fantastic restaurant experiences along a 175 km stretch. A total of 45 restaurants will serve the produce of Lake Peipus, local fields, forests, bogs and marshes. Organised by NGO Peipsimaa Kogukonnaköök, the *Peipsi Food Street 175 km* festival will expand the dimension of the European Capital of Culture even further by offering workshops, where you can learn about local food culture and gather inspiration for new recipes and cooking methods.

Unleash your creative juices at the *Creativity Brings Hope* inspiration festival in Southeast Estonia!

Do your eyes light up when it comes to creativity, art and creative entrepreneurship? If that's the case, then the *Creativity Brings Hope* culture and inspiration festival in August 2024 in Võru, Southeast Estonia, might just be for you! The event brings together creative souls and other interested parties with one common goal in mind: to boost the activities of creative people in South Estonia. Lively discussions, exciting workshops and enjoyable music all serve to show how creativity can solve even the most complicated of issues. The culture and inspiration festival is organised by NGO Võru Loomeselts and is overseen by Võru Creative House Liiva-ATE.



Madis Meister, Eleriin Seim
Creativity Brings Hope
inspiration festival
VÕRUMAA



Tarmo Tagamets, Kaspar Kurve
Antsla's Undiscovered Treasures – Lakes
VÖRUMAA

Antsla surprises with its undiscovered treasures – three special lakes!

One summer, two days, three lakes – as Tartu enjoys the status of European Capital of Culture with Southern Estonia, the highlight of the Antsla area will be its three special lakes. On the first of the lake days, Lake Uhtjärv will be in focus with its local lore and lake art, which you can enjoy both on site and through multimedia channels. The second day at Lake Ähijärv provides an insight into the world of fish. You will have the opportunity to learn traditional skills and craftsmanship techniques, fix a boat and sample fish dishes. As the evening falls, Lake Boose will entice you to explore its shores. With the aid of modern technology, you can watch a fascinating story unfold, which links the local lore about the golden rooster of the former Linda collective farm with the very beginning of the world. So be sure to head to Antsla on 30-31 August 2024 and not miss this fascinating experience! The sustainable lake days *Antsla's Undiscovered Treasures – Lakes* are organised by Antsla rural municipality.

A cityscape performance takes you on an adventure through the twin city of Valga and Valka

“One city, two countries” – that’s how Valga’s slogan reads. But how does this border city actually live and breathe? The *Through the City* cityscape performance began its journey through the vibrant neighbourhoods of the European Culture Capital of Tartu, with the aim of reaching Estonia’s Southern border by October 2024. Meanwhile, experts of Latvian applied theatre joined forces with a creative team from Estonia to tell the story of both cities and their inhabitants. This is how *the Through the City: Valga+Valka* cityscape performance with local residents came to be. The task of the audience is very simple: just wear appropriate clothing to suit the weather and embark on an adventure with our actors to fully experience the uniqueness of Valga+Valka. The programme is available on the website of NGO ProTheMus.



Jaanika Tammearu, Merili Viks
Through the City: Valga+Valka
VALGAMAA



Triinu Guerrin, a researcher of South Estonian food traditions, cultivates produce in Vastseliina in her permaculture garden. Võrumaa



PHOTO GALLERY

Bullplay. Agu Hollo from Hartsmäe Organic Farm raises Hereford cattle with his sons. The lives of the horned animals unfold leisurely on the hills of Haanimaa, but the bulls also enjoy engaging in bullplay. Once, one of them nudged Agu in the bum and sent him flying!





Working horse. Kalev Raudsepp understands the language of horses – when the gelding needs to work, he harnesses the shafts and holds the reins.

Father of bee queens. A functioning ecosystem is an exceptional example of nature's innovation. Take, for instance, bees, without which humans would starve. Since humans need bees more than bees need humans, bee breeder Mario Kalvet from Paganamaa is diligently seeking ways to contribute to the birth of bees that can better withstand changing environmental conditions and are well-suited to local circumstances.



Meteor shower. The meteor shower of young researchers serves as confirmation that Estonia has succeeded in nurturing a new space generation. The annual scientific camp at Tartu Observatory is another clever step by Southern Estonians towards placing Estonia among spacefaring nations.





Silkie. Ander Konks, Peri Organic Farm owner, receives assistance in vegetable cultivation from exotic silkies. The rooster was too proud to be part of the photo, Ander laughs.



Goat race. Thuringian goats outrun Linda Pajo and Kermo Rannamäe, Andri-Peedo Farm owners, along with their sons Kerd and Timo. The most modern goat farm in Northern Europe accommodates up to 500 animals, who produce high-quality goat milk.

Herding.

Võrumaa

*Eve Kõrts, 2015
South Estonian
Photo Contest
special award*

Flax harvesting.
Võrumaa
Mirjam Möttus, 2015
South Estonian
Photo Contest
special award



Royal guard. Just like a guard of the Seto Kingdom, Rommi strikes a pose for the official photo alongside Kaidi Kerdt and little Adeele Elisabeth. In Setomaa near the Russian border, this mighty house guard has plenty of watching to do day and night.





Dotsies. The dairy cows at Andre Farm know how to bring joy to Erika Pääbus: first, they need to lick her face with their rough tongues, and then provide the best milk. That's exactly what the "Dotsies" of the cheese farm do.



Fish day. Konstantin Avvo, Kostja Onion Farm owner, knows what works: eat onions and fish, so you don't go amiss! On the vast sea-like lake, you better know your way.

Seto Leelo.

Since 2009, it's been part of UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.



Mother of rivers.
Emajõgi River and
its distributaries on
a summer's day.



www.visitsouthestonia.com





Tartu 2024 South Estonia Community Programme

