Tallinn Walking Tour -- by Jay Brentjes, October 2010

If you enjoy walking, like to see medieval towns and learn about their history, then Tallinn is for you. This walk takes you between the stone walls and towers of Old Town Tallinn, then climbs up to the castle at Toompea (where you wonder what it was like five hundred years ago), and continues to explore the little alleys where it is easy to get lost but just as easy to get your bearings by seeing the church steeples and other tourists along the way. Have lunch at the city square, try a beer, buy a Cuban cigar and enjoy. All of this is within easy walking distance from the harbor.

Most visitors arrive by cruise ship or ferry from Finland or other Baltic ports. The harbor is very close to the town and it is an easy walk to get to the first stop that we will describe.
But we need a map. The following only gives you some idea about the overall picture and how to get to our starting point - the Coastal Gate (Section 1 below). The second map at the end of this page is more detailed.



When you leave the ship, follow the path that has been painted for you on the street. Go through the small gate, and continue along the street towards the busy intersection on Rannamae Tee. You are heading for the pointy church and the stubby tower straight ahead.



1. The Great Coastal Gate Suur Rannavarav

During the Middle Ages the Great Coastal Gate was the most important gate going through the stone defensive walls leading into Tallinn. Back then, the water front was only “300 footsteps” from this entrance and there are stories that during heavy storms the waves would lap at the front door. The stubby stone tower was built during the 16th century. It had 155 openings for archers and later for cannons, had a diameter of 82 feet, but was only 65 feet high. It was named Roosikrants, but because of its shape came to be known at “Fat Margaret”. It now is home for the Estonian Maritime Museum. Inside are brief exhibits about the Estonian maritime and fishing history.





The Great Coastal Gate is the beginning of the main boulevard of medieval Tallinn. It is Pikk (Long) street. You will see it again later during this tour. But for now: enter Old Town and walk along Pikk to the church.

2. St. Olav's Church dates back prior to 1267 when the first recorded history named the church after the Norwegian king Olav II Haraldsson. He lived and reigned around the year 1000 and was canonized as a saint in 1031, one year after his death. St. Olav was considered to be the protector of seafarers. The church was built and rebuilt several times and around 1500 reached a height of 520 feet. That made it the tallest building in the world at that time. It was probably because of Tallinn’s location along the shore of the Gulf of Finland and the maritime trade that inspired the citizens to build such a tall steeple. It could be seen for many miles out at sea. However, the church is known to have been hit by lightning numerous times and it actually burnt down three times. It is said that the fire could be seen from across the gulf in Finland.

Here is some more trivia about the church. During the Cold War, the Russian KGB had taken over the church and connected a radio transmitter to the top of the steeple. It has now been removed.
If the church is open, you can climb the tower for a view of the harbor.
When you are ready to continue our walk, go south along Lai street and then turn right on Suurtuki. It takes you to the old city wall. You can now see another gate and to your left a long stretch of this huge wall separated by towers- at least nine of them.

3. The Walls and Towers

Turn left along the inside of the wall. Notice how massive these structures are and just think about the labor that went into building this with simple tools, cementing rocks by hand. These are actually double walls with rubble and gravel on the inside. Some have been modified and now contain apartments and shops. There are several along the east side of Old Town.



On the south side of Suurtuki the path gets a bit narrower until you come to Suur Kioostri. Before you cross the street, have a peek at the wall and towers from the outside.
By the way, we are now on the detailed map that is shown at the end.

Are you tired of seeing walls and towers? Well, continue south until you come to an intersection of several streets. We are back at the end of Pikk Street. You cannot miss the gray building with the arched passageway.
Notice the people underneath the tree, looking down from the wall above you. That is where we are now heading; it is part of Toompea. Be prepared for a long walk uphill. This path is called "Pikk Jalg". In Estonian the word for leg is "jalg". So use them.



4. Toompea

This is the most prominent and visible hill around Tallinn. No wonder it has been the most sought after piece of real state for centuries. It started with Finish settlers, but it was not until 1219 when Valdemar II of Denmark, leading a Danish fleet, landed here and defeated the Estonians at the Battle of Lyndanisse. It was a time when the Catholic bishops in Denmark insisted that the pagan people of the Baltic should be shown the Christian faith by force, if necessary. It is now known as the Baltic Crusade, but it was also the start of Tallinn being a town and port of some importance. The Danes were the first to build a fortress on top of Toompea and called it Danneburg. It is now referred to as Domberg (Cathedral Hill).

When you reach the top, make an immediate right and go to the end of the street for a view of Old Town roof tops. We'll come back to visit the ornate church you see at the corner. From the wall you can see where you were a few minutes ago. Now retrace your steps and explore the section above you. At the northern tip of the hill you have another view of Tallinn. St. Olav's church and the harbor are in the distance.

5. Cathedral of Saint Mary the Virgin (Toomkirik)



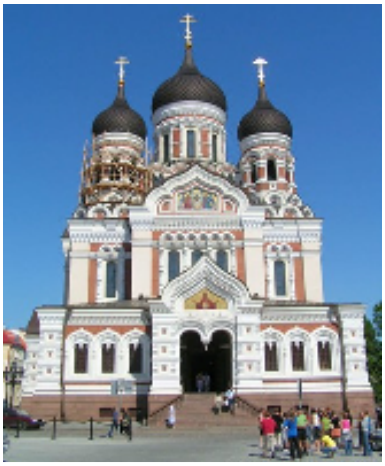
Walk back to the intersection and turn right. There are a few streets with large buildings. You can look around until you come to a white, stone church. This is Dome Church. It may not be the most beautiful you will find in Europe, but it is a Cathedral with lots of history.
Once the Danish had settled around 1219 and started building a fortress on Toompea, they needed a church. It is believed that the Dome Church was a originally a wooden building. Records make mention of it in 1233. A few years later it was replaced by a stone building. What you see now dates from 15th to 16th century, except for the tower which was added around 1775. Some of the "add-on" sections came even later as they were donated by the rich inhabitants of Toompea.

Inside the church you can see several family crests and coats of arm and grave stones of the nobility. This includes Sophia Gyllenhelm, the daughter of Swedish king Johann III. Also; admiral Samuel Greigh, Catherine the Great's lover; and the Russian admiral Adam Johann von Krusenstern, who led an early expedition around the world.

There is an interesting story about another person buried here. If you take three steps from the main entrance of the Cathedral toward the southern nave, you will find a large stone slab which reads, "Otto Johann Thuve, landlord of Edise, Vääna and Koonu Ehis grave, 1696 A.D."
It was said that he was a merry old soul who loved raucous parties with wine, women and song. As he lay dying, however, he was overcome with a sudden sense of contrition. He asked to be buried at the threshold of the Cathedral so that the god fearing people, who kneel to pray upon entering the church, might eventually save his soul from his sinful ways.

6. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral

This small hill top has a second cathedral; one that is more controversial but certainly more impressive from the outside. Walk south along Toom Kooli. When you arrive at the church with its orthodox cupolas, step back and admire the exterior architecture. This is the largest and most ornate cathedral in Estonia. The cathedral was built in 1885, a time during the Russian domination. Because of this, the Estonian people never like it and, in fact, in 1924 it was almost torn down.



The cathedral was dedicated to Prince Alexander Nevsky, who in 1242 won the Battle on the ice at Lake Peipus, just north-east of Tallinn. Alexander Nevsky became a national hero and was canonized in 1547. He is revered by many Russians. In fact, Empress Catherine I introduced the Order of Alexander Nevsky, which is still one of the highest military decorations in Russia.

7. Toompea Castle

By now you have noticed the bright pink building across the street. Believe or not, this is the Domberg Castle. Keep in mind, that you are standing on the inside of a heavily fortified town and to build high walls right here would have been redundant. Only when you go down and around to the north-west side would you see how monumental this structure is.

Most of the buildings you see on Toompea house administrative offices, consulates and other government agencies. The pink section here is for the Parliament of the Republic of Estonia, formed in 1918. Go through the arched entry and have a look inside the courtyard. It is possible to take a guided tour of the inside (if you have the time and inclination).
When you exit the entry, go right, to the little park. You can see where the pink ends and the gray stone tower takes over. This is Pikk-Hermann, the emblem of the national flag of Estonia.



The first stone castle was built here in the 13th century by the Danes. Then during the 14th and 15th century the castle was reconstructed with the high, thick walls along the north-west side. It was the main stronghold of the Eastern Baltic. Most of what you see now is the result of renovations to match the luxurious residences prominent on the hill during the 18th and 19th century.
It is not clear how the castle walls were connected to the stubby tower you see down to the south-east. Now it is an open passage and the main entrance for vehicles into Toompea.

Now walk around the south side of the cathedral to where you will find a street that leads down to our next stop, Kiek in de Kok. Instead of going through the gate, stay on this side of the wall and go to your right.

8. Kiek in de Kok and the southern towers

The name of this large tower translates to ‘Peek in the Kitchen’. To find out why, you have to go inside the tower which is now a museum (closed on Mondays). There are some models and prints on display showing what the site looked like in the olden days. If you don't read Estonian, the person there will help you.

You will notice the square building in front of you. It is the "Virgin Tower". Why? We know it was built during the middle of the 14th century and afterwards was used as a prison for prostitutes. That certainly does not explain the name "Neitsitorn".
If you are getting hungry, you might want to skip it, have a cup of coffee at cafe Virgin Tower. To do that, you have to be on the other side. So, go through the gate further to your left and enjoy the view with a snack (but if you can, hold off with lunch).

Then let's continue to the Danish King Garden. However, do remember that Kiek in de Kok (just like Fat Margaret) was, for quite some time, one of the most important defensive towers in all of Tallinn.

9. St Nicolas Church

From the Virgin Tower we go down the steps of a narrow alley called Luhike Jalg. This takes you to the Danish King Park. This is another example how the Estonians seem to honor past invaders of their country; something I don't understand. Here once a year, on July 15, they celebrate Danneborg Day.
There is one more church that we will pass. It is St. Nicolas Church. You can see it from the elevated section of the garden.
Head in that direction.





St. Nicolas is now the museum of Medieval Art. But here is some history. The original building was erected in 1230 but was completely rebuilt during the first part of the15th century. The central aisle was rebuilt higher than side aisles and the church was redesigned as a full basilica. In 1515 the tower was raised and covered with the late-Gothic spire. The baroque style tower, however, was not added until the 1690s. Unfortunately the church burnt down during an air raid against the Nazis by the Soviets on March 9, 1944. Reconstruction was started about ten years later but not finished until 1981.

The interior of the church looks new but the art treasures are not. The most famous of the artworks is a painting by the German artist Bernt Notke called Dance Macabre (Dance of Death). It depicts the transition from life to death; the skeletal figures of Death taking along the mighty as well as the feeble ones. This is only the first portion of the 98 foot long original.

10. Lunch

We are now in Old Town. From here you can wander through the many streets and alleys. It is a great way to explore and find your own spot on the main square or some side alley. So we go north along Ratakaevu. After a short way we turn right on Dunkri. Here you will find several good places but you have to stop at the Olde Hansa. You cannot miss it because you will see youngsters dressed up in medieval costumes enticing you to come in. There is no electricity here; just candles and more candles. I suggest



you try something local, like a plate of sausage with red cabbage, sour cream and a beer. Even if you don't need to, go visit the restroom. Again no electricity, just candles. Good luck!!!

11. Raekoja Plats (City Square)

After lunch head for the square. Just go around the corner to your left and follow the crowd. On a nice day there are lots of chairs and tables owned by the restaurants along the perimeter. Depending on the day of the week, you might see stalls with souvenirs for sale. Be sure to have a look at the old city hall.



High above the crowd stands Old Thomas, the symbol and guardian of Tallinn. The story is told that Thomas was a poor peasant boy who was a sharpshooter with a crossbow. One year he won the springtime parrot shooting contests organized by Tallinn's Baltic elite (mostly German at the time). The event involved firing crossbow bolts at a painted wooden bird on top of a pole. However, because of his low-class status, he was unable to receive a prize. Instead Thomas was rewarded the job of town guard for life. The original Thomas is kept in the city hall while his replacement keeps watch over the inhabitants.



12. Old Town Browsing

From the square you can browse Old Town on your own in almost any direction. You will find alleys, quaint courtyards, shops and old buildings everywhere.
Just be sure to end up at the Katherine Passage off Vene Street. It should not be missed and is the way back as shown on the map. If you are lost, just ask anyone and reply with "tanan".



13. Viru Gate and Back

At the end of Katherine Passage you can turn left to explore the east wall area. There are several stalls with various knitwear and handmade sweaters, etc. But we have come far enough, turn right and you will see the double towers of Viru Gate. This is the most popular entry and exit area of Old Town. You will notice several flower shops and souvenir stands. If you haven't finished you shopping there are still some opportunities to get rid of your Estonian Crones. Did you buy any amber? The prices here are probably better than you will find anywhere in the Baltic.



After you have passed the gate and the last shops along Viru, and if you have time, you might want to go to the top of the Viru Hotel for a last look of Old Town. Or you can go around the back to the large department store. Or you can walk back to the dock. Follow the map and your fellow cruise ship passengers.

I hope this excursion left you impressed with Tallinn. Just remember ‘tanan’


From the harbor and Great Coastal Gate
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Walking Tour
The numbers refer to sections of the text.
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Kuberneri aed
Harjumägi
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