



Far left: Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the president of Estonia, at his farm with the XJ. This page, counterclockwise from top: A horse-drawn cart in Latvia. Dining Estonian-style. Rock fans in Salacgrīva. The beach at Pärnu. A collection of Soviet-era mementos/propaganda. Russian vodka in Tallinn. The XJ outside the Hotel Telegraaf in Tallinn.

“ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL.” So Congressman Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill, the late, Democratic power broker, once famously observed. Although the legendary New England buttonholer’s succinct aphorism originally concerned an election he’d lost in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the 1930s, his words continue to resonate. As they did recently when I set off by Jaguar XJ from a rock-music festival in Latvia to catch up with Toomas Hendrik Ilves, president of Estonia, the smallest, most northern and most thriving of the three former Soviet republics on the Baltic Sea. Ilves and I had a political connection, once. While it had been some time, it was very local.

How’s that?

The Jaguar part is easy: the carmaker sent an XJ—my current most favorite touring sedan—overland from its German headquarters, through Poland, to meet us in Riga, Latvia, a handsome port city at the mouth of the Daugava River. From Riga, we’d drive an hour to Salacgrīva to catch my musical charges, OK Go, performing at the Positivus Festival, a multiday, open-air rock event.

Then it was on to Estonia, where we’d spend a few nights in Pärnu, a sleepy seaside retreat on the Gulf of Riga, before heading to the country’s capital, the quaint, walled city of Tallinn. Afterward, we’d travel back to Latvia for a few days of castle hopping, before rounding out our whirlwind, 1000-mile Baltic tour with twenty hours in Lithuania, birthplace of my paternal grandmother.

Many surprises lay in store for our intrepid trio of English speakers—me, photographer Martyn Goddard, and my bon vivant college chum, Richard Hart, a former New Orleanian who, like us, enjoys new places, strong drink, and four square meals a day. Eastern Europe gets a bad rap in the United States, even among those who’ve never been there, so a little look at the facts, up close and personal, couldn’t hurt.

Among the things we didn’t anticipate: the

JERSEY BOYS

At the wheel of a Jaguar XJ, **JAMIE KITMAN** heads to the Baltic states to see an old friend—now the president of Estonia—and to peer into the musty depths of the former Soviet Empire.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE INCOMPARABLE AND AFFABLE **MARTYN GODDARD**



Clockwise from top left: Ilves ponders the fate of Europe in the twenty-first century. Life inside the ancient walled old city in Tallinn recalls centuries past; an outdoor-themed restaurant serves medieval fare. A sculpture of Johann Voldemar-Jannsen, who is considered the father of Estonian journalism, stands in the center of Pärnu.



The Jaguar XJ's supremely comfortable chassis takes the cobble streets of Tallinn in stride, before transporting our party back to Latvia and Igate Castle. The restaurant Dzirnava Krodzins (above, which translates to, simply, The Mill Pub) serves traditional Latvian fare (right), including barley prepared three ways accompanied, as so many dishes are, with tasty pork products.

year-old a second five-year term in August. Ilves today, like the Ilves of our youth, would be considered fairly liberal in the United States, but by European standards he is a pro-Western moderate whose popularity is partly the result of the comparatively strong condition of the Estonian economy through the global downturn, the country's entry into NATO, and its recent admission to the Eurozone. He has been a vigorous advocate for technology—the country has been referred to as Estonia for its universal Internet access—and press freedom. And although hurt by tight credit and the worldwide recession, the country has less debt than most of Europe and employs every programmer it can mint. With his wife, Evelin, Ilves reads and travels widely, often visiting other heads of state, and, we discovered, he is something of a regional sex symbol. Not bad for a guy from New Jersey.

The roads in all three countries we'd visit are lightly trafficked, and although they are humble in scale—nary a multilane to spoil the scenery—they are, in the main, modern and well-maintained, with sweeping curves that perfectly suit the sharp-handling XJ, its lively V-8 engine, and its six-speed automatic transmission. To be sure, there are more dirt roads than we're used to; fortunately, the XJ's cossetting suspension—perhaps its strongest point, along with its supremely comfortable interior—proves up to the task.

After a wrong turn sends us two miles down a rocky, overgrown cart track, we finally locate Ilves' farm, reclaimed after the fall of the U.S.S.R., nearby. Overgrown and undertended during the Communist era, the land required years of brush clearing to make it the genteel presidential getaway it is now. The activity provided a useful talking point with one leading authority on brush-clearing, former U.S. President George W. Bush, on the three occasions he and Ilves met.

Sitting in the afternoon sun, I remind the Estonian president of a day in 1972 when he invited me to his old house. That afternoon, he'd proceeded to blow my fourteen-year-old mind when he spun a platter by an up-and-coming L.A. band who'd just released their first record. Dating this moment in time, they were called, simply, Eagles. "Wooo, hooo, witchy woman. See how high she flies." That one was a winner, I'd opined. These Eagles fellows were going somewhere.

natural beauty and abundance of unspoiled lands, the quality of the roads, and the general ease of transit. The people look great, too: fit, well-dressed, handsome. Then there was the unexpected appeal of the architecture, along with the hospitable kindness of persons who once lived behind the Iron Curtain, individuals who we in the West were taught to imagine as grim, boring, and unfriendly, but who proved anything but. Still, for sheer improbability, the Estonian president's story gave everything and everyone else a run for their money.

Toomas Ilves' father, Endel, fled Estonia as a young man in 1944. Acting on a tip, he left the same family farm to which we'd been invited—near Abja Parish, some forty miles inland from Pärnu—just ahead of Russian troops marching in to reoccupy the country.

In 1941, Estonia had been annexed by Adolf Hitler's Germany. Although the Nazis' stay was memorable, it wouldn't last long, and, having already declared it a Soviet state in 1940 (Estonia had been part of the Russian empire before declaring its independence in 1918), the Soviets were coming to reclaim the country when Endel escaped to Sweden. Beleaguered Estonia would remain under Communist rule until the fall of the U.S.S.R. in 1991.

In Sweden, the elder Ilves would marry a Russian exile he'd known in Estonia, Irene Rebane, but there was no thought of returning to his homeland—and the farm his family had lived on since at least 1763—after the war. While many Estonians welcomed the Nazis as liberators who might have gone a little far by rapidly exterminating that portion of the country's relatively small Jewish population that the Russians hadn't already killed or deported to Siberia on account of their wealth, the Germans, too, soon came to be viewed as

occupiers. But the young man, a member of a land-owning family, would have found the Communists just as brutal. In due course, they'd confiscate all 200 acres of his family's farm.

Thus, when their eldest son, Toomas Hendrik, was a boy, the Ilveses quit Sweden and headed not home, but for America. Settling finally in the sleepy hamlet of Leonia, New Jersey—a leafy suburb of 8000 souls not even three miles from New York City—Ilves' father worked as a systems analyst and his mother became the town's librarian. Of note here, a few blocks from the Ilves' home stood the North American headquarters for what would become British Leyland, makers, in the day, of Jaguar cars.

Flash forward to 1970. The first Jaguar XJ has recently been launched. I am twelve years old and have begun a five-year sentence at Leonia High School, where I quickly fall under the sway of a sparkling orator four years my elder, the newly elected vice president of the school's student council and the class of 1972's future valedictorian, one Tom Ilves. A skilled pol-

itician even then, this tall, long-haired junior—with a fashion-forward penchant for tweed sport jackets—managed, while attending to his official duties, to humor an awkward, argumentative cadre of young student loudmouths whose tedious number included yours truly.

The student leader offered unexpected moral support for our affinity group of downtrodden underclassmen as we introduced annoying student resolutions, one after the other, such as a proposal for a moratorium on French class until the United States announced its withdrawal from Vietnam.

But Ilves, who could be dismissive, even withering, to political opponents, tolerated such amateur theater. With our admiration only heightened by his parents' dark green Volvo 1800S and a plain Jane but stealthily quick Plymouth Satellite wagon, both of which he used to ferry us around, the boy crushes were fully installed.

Looking back, we see that Ilves' innate skill at building unlikely coalitions has served him well, evidenced when Estonia's parliament granted the fifty-seven-



gamalls, although some Estonians we met were anxious to show us a glittering mall that opened adjacent to Tallinn's Hotel Viru, outside the old city's walls.

Infinitely more fascinating to American eyes were the real-life monuments to the KGB. At Hotel Viru, a high-rise jewel of the former Soviet Intourist hotel empire, a creative press officer curates a KGB museum, which preserves the eavesdropping apparatus and logs of the old secret police. The director of the museum showed us how the electronic snooping was conducted, how old ladies sitting in the halls of each floor would silently record guests' comings and goings, and how teams of Moskvich "limo" drivers and KGB-approved prostitutes, exempted from arrest or harassment by local law-enforcement agencies, worked to ply travelers for information.

We found an even more skin-crawling relic of the totalitarian era in Latvia, at Ligatne, where beneath a still-active rehabilitation center, we were escorted into an underground bunker, a subterranean world where Latvia's Communist Party leaders were meant to hastily repair in the event of nuclear attack. We descended its dank concrete stairs thirty feet underground with an enthusiastic, multilingual tour guide who looked—with youthful, scraggly perimeter beard and wire-rimmed glasses—like he could have been a founding member of The Band. It smelled impossibly awful, with a choking combination of mildew, mold, and diesel fumes—from the two period Soviet T-54 tank engines that run its generators—hanging in the air. Built in the 1980s and well-known to the CIA from the start, it made us wonder why America ever spent so much time worrying about Soviet world domination.

Highlights of the tour include firing up the facility's old-school air-conditioning system, which sounds like a squadron of B-17s taking off; a hilariously dated telecommunications center, which tied the bunker directly into the Kremlin and the KGB's Moscow command center; and assorted busts of Vladimir Lenin and friends. I'd have run outside to the fresh air and taken a fatal dose of radiation sooner than I'd spend a second hour in here, much less a night. But given the frightful state of the economy and the post-Soviet need for the rehab center to pay its own way, the bunker is available to rent for parties, weddings, and other occasions. Rooms for overnight guests are available upstairs in the rehab center, where one might bunk next to a pa-

Trip Notes

ESTONIA

Estonian Tourist Board

(www.visitestonia.com/en)

Ammende Villa

Sympathetically restored 1905 Russian art nouveau villa in Parnu, furnished in period, with manicured grounds, excellent kitchen, and fabulous waitstaff. We'd go back in a heartbeat.

(www.amende.ee)

KGB Museum, Sokos Hotel Viru

Soviet-style 1960s modern hotel isn't as charming as the hotels inside Tallinn's walled "old town," but the rooms are pleasant and the KGB museum fascinating.

(www.viru.ee)

LATVIA

Latvian Tourism Board

www.latvia.travel/en/latvia-brief

Riga Motor Museum

From a 1930s Auto Union grand prix racer to the mother lode of Soviet-era limousines, this modern facility with a distinct German and Eastern European bias, won't disappoint.

(www.motormuzejs.lv)

Mālpils Manor

Forty-minutes from Riga, Mālpils Manor's main building—one of thirty-eight buildings—was erected in 1911 after a fire destroyed its predecessor. Luxuriant grounds, classical Biedermeier furniture, and

Latvian artwork make for a memorable luxury hotel experience.

(www.malpilsmuiza.lv)

Igate Castle

The restaurant adjacent to the castle serves traditional Latvian fare, with barley prepared three ways and pork—a diet staple—prepared one way: salty, smokey, and delicious.

(www.latvia.travel/en/igate-castle)

Ligatne Soviet Bunker

(www.bunkurs.lv)

LITHUANIA

Lithuanian National Tourism Office

(www.lithuaniantourism.co.uk)

Vieneri Vartai

A rustic farm lodge situated near a huge pine forest, surrounded by ponds and lakes, will accommodate up to 100 overnight guests and two pole dancers.

(www.countryside.lt/en/sodyba-vienerivartai)

Chaim Frenkel Palace, Šiauliai

The mansion of a prosperous Jewish shoemaker in Lithuania's fourth-largest city, directly adjacent to his former factory and near a synagogue he built, it is a prime example of modernist, secession architecture, slowly being restored after having been used as a hospital by the Nazis and then the Soviets. Not far away, the impressive Hill of Crosses pulls in the greatest number of tourists.

(tic.siauliai.lt/article/view/1303/1/429)

As was Ilves, who soon departed our little town and crossed the river to New York's Columbia University and a psychology degree; three years later, we met again when I arrived at Columbia as a freshman. Once again, I basked in his aura of wry hipness, and then he was gone and I wouldn't see him again for twenty-five years. Until now, at his farm on a hot July afternoon, where I'd come to catch up, now that he was the president of Estonia and all.

Noting that his country (where Audi supplies high officials' cars) had its own successful Jaguar dealership—selling cars mostly to Russians, the dealers there preferring the security of parking their wares in his own, less thieving country—Ilves proceeded to fill in the missing decades. After earning a psychology degree at graduate school, his Estonian language skills eventually found him work for the Baltic desk of Radio Free Europe. Why, I didn't even know you spoke Estonian back in the day, I told him. "Why would you?" our ever-snappy friend retorted. "You didn't speak Estonian."

Having caught the eye of Estonia's new democratic leaders, he was invited to serve as the country's ambassador to the United States after the Soviet Union collapsed.

Then, having become an Estonian citizen, he went on to serve twice as the country's foreign minister before being elected to the European Parliament. In 2006, Ilves became Estonia's third post-Cold War president.

Estonia is unlike its Baltic neighbors to the south, Ilves reminded us, because as a Nordic country, it is ethnically more closely related to Finland than to Latvia or Lithuania. One thing all three of the Baltic states have in common is their memories of Soviet rule. Ethnic Russians, sent by Moscow at the height of its central planning power to tamp down the smaller states' nationalistic tendencies, remain significant minorities, and tensions can still flare, although this may be easing.

Each of the Baltic countries now goes its own way as it best sees fit, within the limits of a lousy global economy and political systems rife with corruption. (Outsiders agree that Estonia is the relatively uncorrupt exception to the rule.) But their shared Soviet history is easy to spot in the many aesthetically blighted state housing tracts, as soulless and depressing as we'd imagined. Conversely, the former planned economies are noted in the refreshing and near total absence of Western fast-food chains and me-



Clockwise from above: A Soviet bunker in Līgatne is frozen in time, as is ancient telecommunications equipment. Comrade Kitman mans the hotline to the Kremlin. A repurposed tank engine runs the bunker's generators. A smelly Soviet car ferry. Bunker tour guide, Oscar. A child admires a bust of Lenin, quizzically.



tient. In fact, we saw several residents wandering around, bumming smokes or admiring the Jaguar in the visitors' lot.

From there, we took a hand-drawn car ferry across the narrow Gaujā River for a few Latvian lats (only Estonia uses the euro) and reflected on the new economies that have risen from the ashes of the old state-run economy. Wages are low by American standards—the minimum wage in Latvia is less than \$400 a month—yet we saw plenty of the sorts of cars, fancy foods, and clothing one finds back home. A Bentley dealership in Riga testifies that some people are getting rich.

Of course, jobs growth has been an inevitable result of the new market economies in the Baltic countries. As Ilves said of his own country: “Like the rest of Eastern Europe, there was no service sector [in Estonia] at all to speak of under Communism. You didn’t have restaurants. There was no choice. Basically, it was like you had State Haircut Facility Number 347. So that had to change.”

While milking what it can from the Soviet era, Latvian tourism does a brisk business in palaces from the much more enduring feudal period. The palace at Mežotne, completed in 1802, is believed to have served as the prototype for Buckingham Palace, while the Rundāle Palace, a huge and magnificent edifice with baroque and rococo elements, as well as a vast French garden, shared its architects with those of the State Hermitage in Saint Petersburg. It surely must be at the top of anyone’s list of great castles.

But it’s hardly only about the past. The entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well, nowhere more so than in Ogre, Latvia, where we visited the workshop of OSCar. Andris Dambis, an automotive engineer, and his two sons, Kaspars and Kristaps, meticulously restore Soviet-era RAFs, a sort of Iron Curtain Volkswagen Microbus, for wealthy customers, while designing, fabricating, and racing their own highly specialized Paris–Dakar rally machines. Their first effort turned a wheel in 2004, but they’ve refined their brutal yellow machines year after year. For 2012, they’ll be back with their most ambitious effort yet, a series-hybrid (think Chevy Volt) racer with a Nissan V-6 charging its battery pack.

The business model for making these fellows internationally rich is, they concede, unclear, but their ambition and enthusiasm are manifest—our planned twenty-minute visit lasted for hours.



WRITER'S BLOG

NO AUTOMOTIVE JOURNALIST'S TRIP to Estonia would be complete if it didn't include an audience with Margus-Hans Kuuse. In his early seventies now, Kuuse, more than anyone—through dint of hard work, an engineer's mind, and an earnest but winning personality that brought him into unusual contact with Westerners during the Soviet era—kept the Eastern bloc apprised of Western automotive products and racing developments at a time when the authorities weren't especially keen on alerting the public to all the fun they were missing.

We quickly came upon an example of what Kuuse was up against when the inveterate literature hoarder presented us with an English-language, 1983 edition of *Avtoexport Round-Up*, a glossy, coffee-table Soviet magazine which contained exciting prose like: "Cooperation with the service and operating organizations of socialist countries in servicing Soviet-made motor vehicles is accomplished by AVTOEXPORT within the framework of the Comprehensive Program for Socialist Economic Integration adopted at the 23rd Special Session of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance."

Take that, Ezra Dyer.

Kuuse didn't let that slow him down, and at one time was read by more than 30 million people across the Soviet Union. But Tallinn was his home.

"Tallinn was the U.S.S.R.'s racing capital, and the Estonian public was interested more in Western racing cars and racing per se than people in the other fourteen republics, maybe excluding Latvia," he told us over dinner in the walled city.

The author of thousands of articles and several books celebrating the motorcars built in the capitalist West, Kuuse, keeps an old Nissan sedan as personal transport but took the bus to join us. For a fan of the West, he is curiously ambivalent about Estonia's current free-market economy, which he said made retirement years uncertain for many, including himself. "You used to know you had something when you grew old." So this stalwart car lover can't kick it into overdrive yet. He continues to write, and we wish him well. —JK



They're confident they'll make money from all they've learned, somehow, somehow, and their thrifty and nifty ingenuity (they've borrowed heavy-duty electrical components from old Riga streetcars) is inspiring.

Time constraints prevented us from seeing more of the two countries we'd already visited, and thus our stay in Lithuania was cut short. With less than twenty-four hours to spare, we were unable to venture far enough south to visit Vilnius, my grandmother's birthplace and the country's biggest city.

On the other hand, the local tourist authority arranged for us to visit a local brewery, Rinkuškiai whose wares will soon be offered in America. From here, we drove fifty miles, the last seven of them on a dirt road that defied our navigation system, just beyond the village of Duokiškis, to spend the night at an otherwise vacant lodge that has been built to cater to large groups. Our host, an affable bear of a Georgian wearing a heavy-metal T-shirt, smoked like a fiend, day and night. Rising at dawn to cook our breakfast—eggs, with giant chunks of smoky slab bacon—he took us on a tour of the grounds, which feature a man-made lake, giant wood-fired saunas, and dance halls, all of it built by his family, by hand. He was particularly proud to show a trio of obviously savvy Westerners the new pole-dancing room they've opened, which apparently has a big following among corporate clientele. Before we left, he offered us a shot of the local cordial, a black liquor made of pine resin. We accepted the first one, to be polite, but declined the second and third, on account of the early hour (it was 7 a.m.) and our impending airBaltic flight out of Riga.

Everywhere we went, we were im-



Brigitā Stroda, the charming and chatty head of the Latvian Tourist Authority who'd befriend us during our stay there, rounded out our Latvian history lesson: "**Riga** was at the heart of the 'Amber Road' trade route, which brought entry to the Hanseatic League, and successive dominations [of Latvia] by Poland, Sweden, and Russia. The ruling elite were German, while the vast majority of the population were Latvians who were only released from serfdom in the middle of the nineteenth century."

pressed. We knew we liked the Jaguar, and it didn't miss a beat. After years of questionable reliability, the company's products have really shaken their reputation for shoddiness (well, at least we didn't have any troubles in our days with the car). But the Baltic countries and their people surprised us in a way we'll never forget. As President Ilves, our favorite democratic leader of 2011, explained, "I think there is a fundamental prejudice against Eastern Europe that goes back at least 200 years. Today, the West likes to think of Eastern Europe as 'gray people living gray lives in gray apartment houses,' but we are doing the same things that immigrants did in the U.S. and everywhere. Countries like mine work harder, are more efficient, and are more fiscally responsible."

"It's going to be another twenty or thirty years, but this whole East/West Europe distinction is disappearing. The future distinction, bizarrely enough, will be North/South, because Finland, Estonia, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria—they're fiscally responsible."

Politics, shmopolitics. With that I bid the Estonian president adieu. Unable to remember the Leonia High fight song, I instead invoke Eagles. Take it easy. **AM**