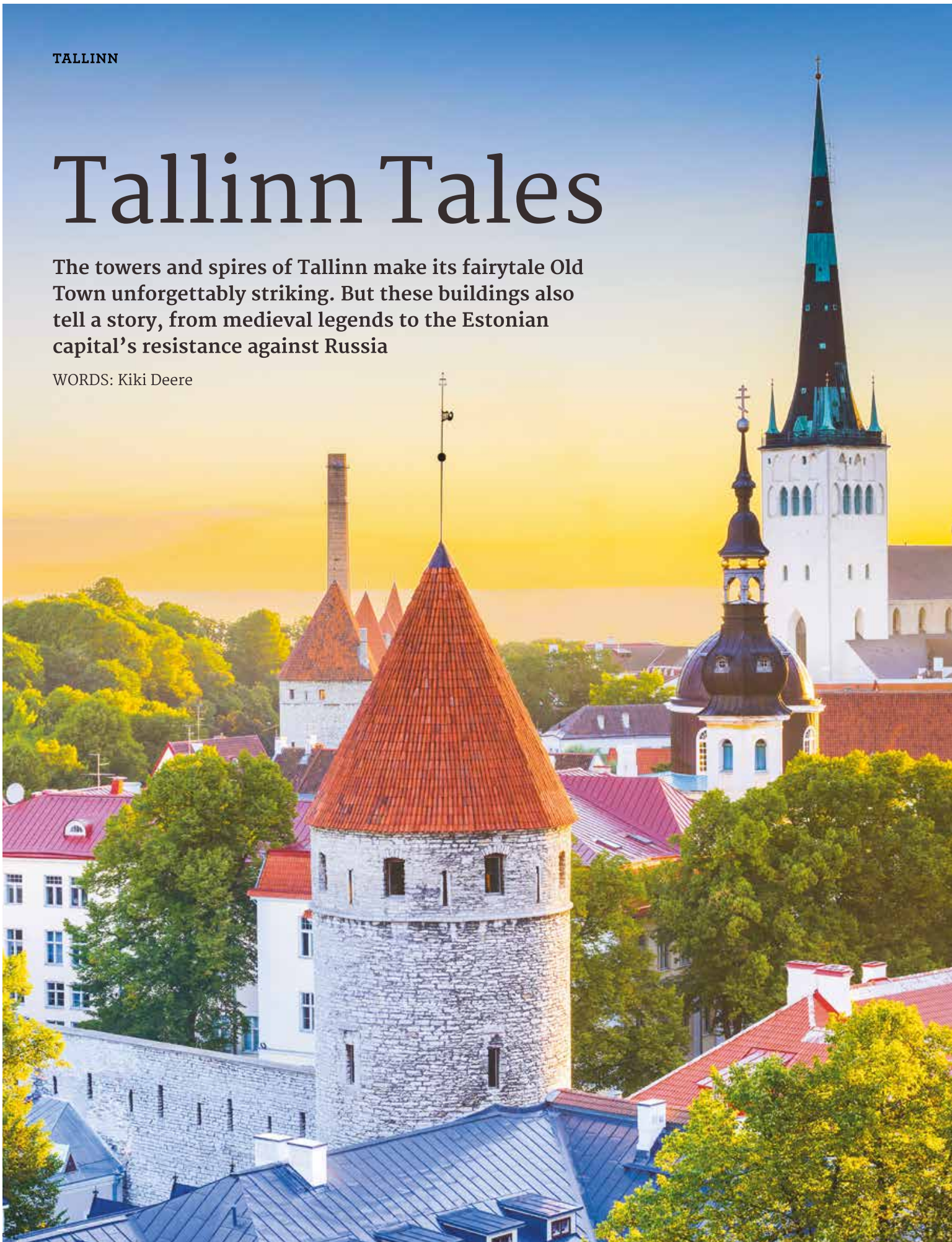


TALLINN

Tallinn Tales

The towers and spires of Tallinn make its fairytale Old Town unforgettably striking. But these buildings also tell a story, from medieval legends to the Estonian capital's resistance against Russia

WORDS: Kiki Deere



Few nations in the world can claim to have sung themselves free. But as hundreds of thousands of Estonians gathered in Tallinn, voices ringing out with hope, their 'singing revolution' marked the end of Soviet occupation.

The very stones of the capital echo with the country's tumultuous history. Here even the architecture has its own tales, each building marking a new chapter.

The story begins in the Old Town. Arriving by sea, its towers, turrets and spires rise silhouetted against the blue sky, 14th-century fortifications still protecting the historic centre, bright colours shining beyond the modern tower blocks which line the port. Soaring highest over the perfectly preserved medieval streets is the church of St Olav.

Once one of the world's tallest buildings, its simple black steeple stretching as tall as 159m, the church has stood over Tallinn for eight centuries, enduring at least 10 lightning strikes which often left its spire in flames. Today the rebuilt structure stands at 124m

*"Not all the
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but the sight from the viewing platform over the Old Town has remained as spectacular as ever.

Pastel-coloured Hanseatic buildings line narrow cobbled streets that twist and turn, opening up onto pretty squares whose architecture has remained largely intact since the Middle Ages.

At its core, the picture-perfect Germanic architecture of Town Hall Square is a reminder of the country's Hanseatic past. Orange-roofed cream buildings frame the cobbled square, brightened by splashes of blue, yellow and red. And while the Baltic Germans who ruled from this spot in the 16th century are gone, one of their traditions still influences us all today.

Because it's here that the world's first Christmas tree was displayed in 1441 by the Brotherhood of the Blackheads, a guild for unmarried merchants, who danced around the decorated branches before setting it on fire at the end of the festive celebrations.

What stories Europe's oldest functioning pharmacy could tell too. In business since 1422, all manner of medicinal concoctions were created here; anyone contemplating a remedy to aid digestion can be thankful they're no longer offered fish eyes, typically consumed with hot red wine.

Not all the ghosts of the past are gone. The haunted Virgin's Tower, once a prison for prostitutes, has an eerie reputation for housing more than a café; employees have reported hearing spine-chilling noises while a monk-like figure is said to roam the

premises as he sips on blood red wine.

The six-floor medieval stone tower of Kiek in de Kok (or 'Peek in the Kitchen') will inspire its own shudders, with an exhibition of medieval life including replicas of torture equipment and exhibits on the plague. Part of the fortifications which made Tallinn one of the best defended cities in the world by the 1500s, cannonballs are still embedded in the structure after the final 16th-century assault on the tower.

Its curious name, according to legend, comes from soldiers furtively peering down into the windows of the Lower Town kitchens. Look up instead, and overshadowing the picturesque streets from Toompea hill is the onion-domed Aleksandr Nevsky Cathedral, its shining icons and elaborate wedding cake façade hiding a darker chapter.

The Russians provocatively named the Orthodox building after the Prince of Novgorod, Aleksandr Nevsky, who conquered Estonia in the 13th century. Built between 1894 and 1900, the church's glistening icons and mosaics were imported from St Petersburg, as was the 15-ton bell; to this day no books are sold within the church in Estonian.

It remains a controversial reminder of 20th century Russian dominion and oppression. But to shed light on the stiflingly repressive reality of life in the Soviet Union, another building holds the key. Behind an anonymous door in the boxy Modernist Hotel Viru are the former KGB headquarters, now a museum detailing the Soviet Union's clandestine activities where foreign dignitaries and journalists were spied upon and filmed from the secret 23rd floor. Long a hub of espionage thanks to its strategic location, English author Graham Greene even planned to set a spy novel in the city after his own pre-war trip. Cut off completely post-war, what would have been Our Man in Tallinn became Our Man in Havana.

The final chapter takes place up the 314m-high Tallinna Teletorn, the city's TV tower, where Estonian radio jammers foiled a reinvasion attempt in 1991, stopping commands reaching the occupying troops.

From here, the sparkling blue of the Gulf of Finland unfolds below, the country's window to the West under occupation, along with Tallinn's medieval roofs and the Song Festival ground where Estonia's story of independence began again in music.

TRAVEL FACT

So captivated was Peter The Great by this medieval gem that he revealed he would have made the city capital of European Russia had Tallinn been his in 1702 - he eventually conquered it in 1710.