

The Legacy of the Estonian Swedes Today



Pakri Belt Pattern

In the early 1940s, there were about 9,000 Estonian Swedes in Estonia, of whom **around 8,000 fled to Sweden** to escape Soviet occupation. In Sweden, they **preserved their language and culture** through cultural associations, archives, and memoirs documenting traditions.

In newly independent Estonia, the heritage of the Estonian Swedes was revitalized, and the **Estonian Swedish Cultural Society** was founded in 1988. Many refugees visited their homeland again, some building summer homes or moving back permanently.

In recent decades, several farm complexes have been restored and are now used as museums or community centers. In former Estonian Swedish villages, one can find **restored churches, bilingual place name signs, information boards**, and more. Several museums introducing the culture of Estonian Swedes have also been established, the most well-known of which is the **Estonian Swedes' Museum** in Haapsalu.

At the **Estonian House in Stockholm**, meetings of the Estonian Swedish Association SOV and local societies are held. In 2003, the Swedish SOV founded a counterpart in Estonia, SOV Eesti, which initiated efforts to establish cultural autonomy for Estonian Swedes. Today, the organization is known as the Estonian Swedish Cultural Self-Government—**Eestirootslaste Kultuuriomavalitsus**.



Meeting at the Estonian House in Stockholm, November 2024

The Estonian Swedes had their own newspaper, *Kustbon*, first published in 1918. Its publication continued in Sweden after 1944 and still appears four times a year. The Estonian Swedish Cultural Society's publication, *Ronor*, was issued in Estonia from 1988 to 1996, and since 2009, the magazine *Eestirootslane* has been published twice a year.

Every three years, an **Estonian Swedes' song and dance festival** takes place in Haapsalu. The festival was first held in 1933 and was revived in 2013.

Come and discover the unique cultural heritage of the Estonian Swedes. A story intertwined with the shared history of Estonia and Sweden, enriching the language and customs of our coastal villages. A story that lives on today in the village names, cultural landmarks, traditions, and the hearts of future generations in these enchanting places.

See Also:



Vormsi Belt Pattern

<https://www.visithaapsalu.com/en/aiboland.ee>
[visitaiboland.ee](https://www.visitaiboland.ee)
[eestirootslane.ee](https://www.eestirootslane.ee)



visit
HAAPSALU



REGIONAAL- JA
PÖLLUMAJANDUSMINISTERIUM

REGIONAALARENGU TOETUSEKS



Journey on the Trails of the Estonian Swedes

UNIQUE
HERITAGE
IN WESTERN
ESTONIA AND
THE ISLANDS

Origins and Settlements of the Estonian Swedes



Riguldi Belt Pattern

The **Estonian Swedes**, also known as **Coastal Swedes**, are a historic Swedish-speaking community that settled the northwest and west coasts of Estonia and its islands by the early Middle Ages. Their Swedish name is *estlandssvenskar*, but they referred to themselves as *aibofolke*, meaning 'island people.' The most extensive Estonian Swedish settlements existed during the 15th–16th centuries, making up 2–3% of Estonia's population at the time. The origins of the Estonian Swedes are linked to Swedes from Sweden's eastern coast, Gotland, Nyland, and Finland's southern coast. Their migration was likely driven by interests in seafaring and trade, the organization of Baltic German nobility, or simply natural curiosity and a spirit of adventure. Their communities thrived due to favorable geography and the isolation of these areas, which helped them adapt well to their new environment.



— Areas of the Estonian Swedes



Traditional Knitting Needle Bag from Vormsi



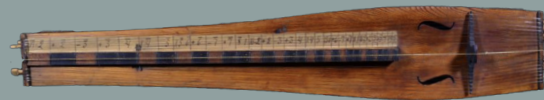
Vormsi Women Knitting in the 1920s

Culture and Traditions



Noarootsi Belt Pattern

The Estonian Swedes preserved their language and customs for centuries, speaking an archaic Swedish dialect influenced by Estonian. Each area developed its own unique dialect, often making mutual understanding difficult. Distinctive traditional clothing was worn in every region. **Music and dance** also played an important role. In Vormsi, the bowed lyre or *talharpa* was a popular instrument, while bagpipes were well-known on the Pakri Islands, and violins and accordions were played in Noarootsi. Another widely used instrument was the psalmodikon which, like the talharpa, is played with a bow but features a single string and a longer soundbox.



Single-String Psalmodikon

The Estonian Swedes were known for their excellent **craftsmanship**: women from Ruhnu, Pakri, and Vihterpalu were skilled lace knitters, while the men were experienced boat builders and sailors. They engaged in livestock farming, agriculture, fishing, and trade. On the islands, **seal hunting** was an important source of livelihood.



Runic Calendar from 1844, Noarootsi

The **Estonian Swedes' calendar** combined Christian and local traditions, influenced by both Estonian and Swedish customs. For example, the 1905 calendar already featured Lucia Day—*Luciadag*, which is still celebrated in the Noarootsi region. The custom of Walpurgis Night also spread to western Estonia through the Estonian Swedes.

Beer was the main festive drink, brewed from barley or rye. Early recipes used bog myrtle for flavoring, later replaced by hops, juniper, and occasionally chamomile by Ruhnu Swedes.

Bread and porridge were staples in **their cuisine**. Rye bread was common, with barley or wheat bread reserved for special occasions. On Osmussaar, thin dried bread called *sälskeopar* was prepared for seal hunts. Meat and fish, often salted, smoked, or dried, were important, along with **dairy products** like butter, cheese, and sour milk dishes. A popular sour milk dish, *vahhl*, resembled modern curd.

Education was highly valued, with Noarootsi establishing northern Estonia's first peasant school in 1650, followed by several Swedish-language village schools over time.



ESTONIAN SWEDISH DIALECT

NOAROOTSI DIALECT SWEDISH ENGLISH

<i>basta</i>	<i>bastu</i>	sauna
<i>eL</i>	<i>öl</i>	beer
<i>bre</i>	<i>bröd</i>	bread
<i>hunn</i>	<i>hund</i>	dog
<i>ja</i>	<i>jag</i>	I / me
<i>jöLe</i>	<i>jul</i>	Christmas
<i>koilde</i>	<i>kvällen</i>	evening
<i>mann</i>	<i>man</i>	man
<i>migg</i>	<i>kvinna</i>	woman
<i>målk å smer</i>	<i>mjölk och smör</i>	milk and butter
<i>storfar</i>	<i>morfar/farfar</i>	grandfather
<i>tack sko ne håva</i>	<i>tack ska ni ha</i>	thank you
<i>tufflar</i>	<i>potatis</i>	potatoes