In Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind, Shunryu Suzuki says that the goal of Zen practice is to always keep a beginner’s mind. The same must also be said for travel, for it is the open and supple mind of the beginner, or the one just starting out, that takes in the most and with the widest eyes. More than two months, now, into our stay here in Helsinki, I think that it’s fair to say that we are no longer starting out, and so our beginner’s minds must be cultivated or else they will leave us. Thus our trip to Tallinn, Estonia last weekend was well-timed, as things have been starting to feel familiar here in Helsinki.

With as close to Helsinki as Tallinn is – about 50 miles and one and half hours by boat – it is a very different place. Where Helsinki feels like a bustling modern city, the Old Town of Tallinn feels quaint and relaxed, though it is Estonia’s capital and largest metropolitan area. As a friend here in Helsinki said to me recently, “Tallinn is where middle Europe starts,” and there you can find many well-preserved structures from the Middle Ages. In fact, the whole of the Old Town feels something like a museum – you almost can’t believe that such a place exists and that people still live and work in such ancient buildings. The down side is that it is touristy to the extreme. It seems that its unique charm together with cheap (for the Nordic countries) food, drink, and lodging attract many travelers. Where a Missoulian might go to Glacier Park or Chico Hot Springs for a weekend getaway, a Finn, Norwegian or Swede might go to Tallin.

For non-Europeans such as us, being able to walk around a truly old city is a treat. Even the kids enjoyed our explorations of the Old Town on foot. We went to a couple of museums, one of which was within a tower in the old castle wall.
Our lodgings were in the rear of The Master’s Courtyard: an artists’ compound, café and chocolatarie. Although our room had an odd smell that many of the oldest buildings in the town also had, it was newly remodeled and totally unique. I would highly recommend the spot to any who travel to Tallinn and like to experience something nice, yet quirky. It was just our style and was only one block from the center of Old Town, Town Hall Square.

One thing about Tallinn is that you can see most everything in the Old Town in a couple of days, even with kids, so it was good to get back to Helsinki at the end of day three of our trip. In fact, it was something of a revelation to me to step off of the boat in Helsinki’s harbor and feel that I was home. Although Helsinki isn’t home in the same sense that Missoula is, it is my town for now.