

# Angry Birds entrepreneur Peter Vesterbacka hatches plan for £13bn tunnel

A proposed undersea rail link between Finland and Estonia will be the longest in the world, and will also include 'leisure archipelagos' housing 50,000 people



The link connecting Finland with Estonia will be studded with artificial islands

Peter Conradi,  
Saturday April 10 2021, 5.00pm BST, The Sunday Times  
Share

**H**e made his name a decade ago with *Angry Birds*, one of the world's most successful video games, which has been downloaded billions of times and went on to spawn two feature films.

Now the Finnish entrepreneur Peter Vesterbacka is hoping to hatch a more ambitious project: an undersea rail link, twice the length of the Channel Tunnel, connecting his homeland with Estonia on the opposite side of the Gulf of Finland.

The longest such tunnel to date, at 63 miles, it will connect several artificial islands that will be home to tens of thousands of people — a kind of chilly Dubai, with pines rather than palm trees.

Vesterbacka, 53, said last week that he hoped boring would begin as early as next year, once requisite permissions had been obtained. The FinEst Bay Area Project is to be privately funded: Vesterbacka said that the €15 billion (£13 billion) required to build the first stage had been secured from Touchstone Capital Partners, a Chinese investment company based in London.

The serial entrepreneur wants the first trains to be running between Helsinki and Tallinn, the capitals of Finland and Estonia, on December 24, 2024. It is a hugely ambitious target — but tickets for the maiden journey are already on sale.

“Like all the best ideas, it’s a bit crazy,” Vesterbacka told me by telephone from Uzbekistan, where he was on business. “But I always say that if people laugh when you tell them your ambition, then it is your job to stop the laughter.”

“I haven’t come across anything that would make this impossible, and a lot of people who know a lot more than I do about tunnelling are working on the project. So let’s see what happens.”



Vesterbacka with his wife, Teija — who wears an Angry Birds gown  
JUSSI NUKARI/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

Vesterbacka made his name after *Angry Birds* was launched in 2009 by Rovio Entertainment, the Finnish video game developer where he was an executive. He subsequently left Rovio but is still known there as Mighty Eagle, and often wears a red hoodie adorned with the image of that character from the game.

The idea for the tunnel came to him five years ago. He sees it as the first stage of a scheme to create a unified “bay area” linking the capitals of the two countries. Although they have a combined population of fewer than seven million people, Finland and Estonia have created a remarkably large number of “unicorns” — privately held start-ups valued at more than \$1 billion.

#### **SPONSORED**

---

Two rail tunnels will be dug, one for freight and the other for high-speed passenger trains, which will travel from Helsinki to Tallinn in 20 minutes rather than the two hours it takes by ferry. There will also be a third service tunnel and even a cycle path.

The line will link to a new EU-funded railway, expected to start operating in the mid-2020s, which will run from Estonia through Latvia and Lithuania to Poland. Most existing rail links go via Russia, the region’s former ruler.

According to the plans, the largest of the artificial islands, just over nine miles off the coast of Finland, will eventually be home to 50,000 people and include hotels and a conference centre. It will be shaped like a flower and built from 80 million cubic metres of rubble removed from the tunnel. A lift will take people to a railway station deep below.



The artificial islands will feature homes, hotels — and even a conference centre

Several smaller islands will be built nearby. Also planned is a floating island — or archipelago — about six miles off Estonia, which will be smaller and greener and used mainly for leisure. It will be several hundred yards wide and probably made of concrete — a larger version of the floating homes and office blocks that have sprung up in recent years close to the coast of Holland.

Karina Czapiewska, director of Blue21, a Dutch consultancy involved in the project, said that the floating island could become a showcase for similar projects elsewhere. The decision not to build it up from the ocean floor was dictated by the nature of the seabed, which on the southern side of the gulf is soft clay rather than bedrock.

“It would not make sense to build [a proper island in that location] since it would slowly sink,” Czapiewska said.

According to Vesterbacka, more than 10 million passengers travel each year between Finland and Estonia, which have close cultural and linguistic links. The intention is that the project will earn enough in fares to pay for itself in 17 years — making it attractive to investors.

Digging the tunnel, using 16 high-tech boring machines, is expected to be straightforward and take two years, following six months of preparatory work.

This is not a lot of time for such a large engineering project. The Channel Tunnel took five years to complete, but as the FinEst Bay project is being privately funded, there will be no need for protracted public tenders.



Vesterbacka in his trademark Mighty Eagle hoodie

The main obstacles have been bureaucratic: although the Finnish government has been sympathetic, the previous Estonian administration was not. However, the new government under Kaja Kallas, who became prime minister in January, is more enthusiastic.

An environmental impact analysis must still be completed and various other regulatory requirements satisfied. More problematic is the project's reliance on Chinese expertise and money — a contentious subject in eastern Europe, where Beijing has been trying in recent years to increase its influence.

Estonia's foreign intelligence service warned last year of an increasing security threat from “the potential use of China's foreign investment for political purposes and the possible development of technological dependency [on it]”.

Vesterbacka, a Sinophile who has extensive links with the country, dismisses such concerns, although he and Kustaa Valtonen, co-founder of the project, have adjusted the financing to reduce Beijing's stake. They will still draw heavily on China's tunnelling expertise, however.

“If you look at who knows how to build tunnels and who has built the most tunnels globally, it is the Chinese,” Vesterbacka said.

“But from the beginning we made clear that we would keep Chinese investment below 50 per cent and that the majority ownership of the Bay Area Development Company that is to build and operate this tunnel will always be in Finland.”

[@Peter Conradi](#)