



# Latvia

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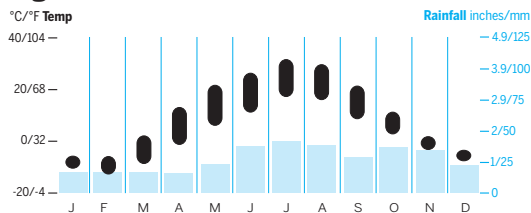
## Why Go?

Tucked between Estonia to the north and Lithuania to the south, Latvia is the meat of the Baltic sandwich. We're not implying that the neighbouring nations are slices of white bread, but Latvia is the savoury middle, loaded with colourful fillings. Thick greens take the form of Gauja Valley pines. Onion-domed cathedrals sprout above local towns. Cheesy Russian pop blares along coastal beaches. And spicy Rīga adds an extra zing as the country's cosmopolitan nexus and unofficial capital of the entire Baltic.

If that doesn't whet your appetite, hear this: the country's under-the-radar profile makes it the perfect pit stop for those seeking something a bit more authentic than the over-run tourist hubs further afield. So, consider altering your Eastern European itinerary and fill up on little Latvia instead of big-ticket destinations Prague, Vienna or – dare we say it – Hungary.

## When to Go

### Riga



## Best Places to Stay

- » Hotel Bergs (p476)
- » Europa Royale (p476)
- » Naughty Squirrel (p475)
- » Neiburgs (p475)

## Best Places to Eat

- » Istaba (p478)
- » Aragats (p478)
- » Ostas Skati (p478)

**December to January** Celebrate the holidays in the birthplace of the Christmas tree

**Mid-June to August** Summer starts with an all-night solstice romp; then it's off to the beach

**September** Refusing to let summer go, Rīgans sip lattes under heat lamps at al fresco cafes.

## Connections

Latvia is the link in the Baltic chain, making Rīga a convenient point between Tallinn and Vilnius. Long-distance buses and trains also connect the capital to St Petersburg, Moscow and Warsaw, and ferry services shuttle passengers to Stockholm and the German towns of Rostock and Lübeck. Rīga is the hub of airBaltic, which offers direct service to more than 50 European cities. See p491 for details.

### ITINERARIES

#### Three Days

Fill your first two days with a feast of Rīga's architectural eye candy, and spend your third day hiking betwixt Sigulda's castles, sunbathing in scintillating Jūrmala or snapping photos of Rundāle's opulent palace.

#### One Week

After a few days in the capital, swing by Jūrmala on your way up the horn of Cape Kolka for saunas, sunsets and solitude. Glide through western Latvia comparing its ultrabucolic townships to Rundāle's majestic grounds, then blaze a trail across eastern Latvia for a rousing trip back in time spiced with adrenaline sports.

## Essential Food & Drink

» **Black Balzām** Goethe called it 'the elixir of life'. The jet-black, 45% proof concoction is a secret recipe of more than a dozen fairy-tale ingredients including oak bark, wormwood and linden blossoms. A shot a day keeps the doctor away, so say most of Latvia's pensioners. Try mixing it with glass of cola to take the edge off.

» **Mushrooms** Not a sport but a national obsession; mushroom picking takes the country by storm during the first showers of autumn.

» **Alus** For such a tiny nation there's definitely no shortage of *alus* (beer) – each major town has its own brew. You can't go wrong with Užavas (Ventspils' contribution).

» **Smoked fish** Dozens of fish shacks dot the Kurzeme coast – look for the veritable smoke signals rising above the tree line. Grab 'em to go; they make the perfect afternoon snack.

» **Kvass** Single-handedly responsible for the decline of Coca-Cola at the turn of the 21st century, Kvass is a beloved beverage made from fermented rye bread. It's surprisingly popular with kids!

### AT A GLANCE

- » **Currency** lats (Ls)
- » **Language** Latvian, Russian
- » **Money** ATMs all over Rīga and smaller cities; banks open Mon-Sat
- » **Visas** none required for stays of up to 90 days for Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and US citizens

### Fast Facts

- » **Area** 64,589 sq km
- » **Capital** Rīga
- » **Telephone country code** 371
- » **Emergency** ☎112

### Exchange Rates

Australia	A\$1	€0.5Ls
Canada	C\$1	€0.5Ls
euro	€1	€0.7Ls
Japan	¥100	€0.59Ls
New Zealand	NZ\$1	€0.39Ls
UK	UK£1	€0.8Ls
USA	US\$1	€0.48Ls

### Set Your Budget

- » **Budget hotel room** 25Ls
- » **Two-course meal** 10Ls
- » **Museum entrance** 1.50Ls
- » **Beer** 1.20Ls
- » **City transport ticket** 0.70Ls

### Resources

- » **1188** ([www.1188.lv](http://www.1188.lv))
- » **Latvia Institute** ([www.li.lv](http://www.li.lv))
- » **Latvia Tourism Development Agency** ([www.latvia-tourism.lv](http://www.latvia-tourism.lv))