



Latvia

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Best Places to Eat

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Best Places to Stay

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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 fixings. Thick greens take the form of Gauja Valley pines; onion-domed cathedrals sprout up above local towns; cheesy Russian pop blares along coastal beaches; and spicy Rīga adds an extra zing as the country's cosmopolitan nexus and the 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 overrun tourist hubs further afield. So consider a trip here rather than the usual suspects of Eastern Europe.

When to Go

Spend the holidays in the birthplace of the Christmas tree, and try some bobsledding if you dare during the frigid weeks of December and January. The all-night solstice in June rings in the warmer months as locals flock to their coastal cottages for beach-lazing and midnight sun. Refusing to let summer go, Rīgians sip lattes under outdoor heat lamps as the cool September air blows through at the season's last alfresco cafes.

RESOURCES

1188 (www.1188.lv)

Latvia Institute (www.li.lv)

Latvia Tourism Development Agency
(www.latvia.travel)

Country Holidays
(www.countryholidays.lv)

Fast Facts

- » **Area** 64,589 sq km
- » **Capital** Rīga
- » **Population** 2.2 million
- » **Telephone country code** ☎371
- » **Emergency** ☎112

Exchange Rates

Australia	A\$1	0.54Ls
Canada	C\$1	0.52Ls
Euro zone	€1	0.71Ls
Japan	¥100	0.69Ls
New Zealand	NZ\$1	0.41Ls
UK	UK£1	0.83Ls
USA	US\$1	0.53Ls

» For current exchange rates see www.xe.com

Set Your Budget

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

Arriving in Latvia

Latvia is the link in the Baltic chain, making Rīga a convenient connecting 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.

LANGUAGE

Hello (good day)	Labdien	<i>lab-dee-in</i>
Hi (informal)	Sveiki	<i>sfay-kee</i>
How are you?	Kā jums klājas	<i>kah yooms klah-yus</i>
Thank you	Paldies	<i>paul-dee-iss</i>
Please/you're welcome	Lūdzu	<i>lood-zoo</i>

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 a glass of cola to take the edge off.
- » **Mushrooms** 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 do 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!