

# Latvia

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- » Pelmeni XL (p723)

# **Best Places to Stay**

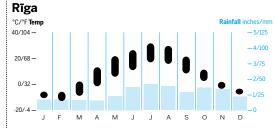
- » Naughty Squirrel (p722)
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## Why Go?

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 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 altering your European itinerary and fill up on little Latvia instead of big-ticket destinations in the east such as Prague, Vienna or – dare we say it – Hungary.

# When to Go



#### Dec & Jan Celebrate the holidays in the birthplace of the Christmas tree

#### Mid-Jun-Aug Summer starts with an all-night solstice romp; then it's off to the heach

**Sep** Refusing to let summer go, Rīgans sip lattes under heat lamps at alfresco 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 Sweden and Germany. Rīga is the hub of airBaltic, which offers direct service to dozens of major European cities.

### **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 Rundãle'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 Rundãle'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 jetblack, 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** 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 cities; banks open Monday to Saturday
- » Visas Not required for EU citizens, or for stays of up to 90 days for Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and US citizens

## **Fast Facts**

- » Area 64,589 sq km
- » Capital Rīga
- » Country code ≥371
- Emergency 2112

## **Exchange Rates**

Australia	A\$1	0.57Ls
Canada	C\$1	0.54Ls
Euro Zone	€1	0.70Ls
Japan	¥100	0.59Ls
New	NZ\$1	0.46Ls
Zealand		
UK	UK£1	0.83Ls
USA	US\$1	0.55Ls

# **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)
- » Latvia Institute (www.li.lv)
- » Latvia Tourism Development Agency (www.latviatourism.lv)