



Latvia

📍 371 / POP 2.2 MILLION

Includes ➔

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Best Places to Eat

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Best Places to Stay

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Why Go?

A tapestry of sea, lakes and woods, Latvia is best described as a vast unspoilt parkland with just one real city – its cosmopolitan capital, Rīga. The country might be small, but the amount of personal space it provides is enormous. You can always secure a chunk of pristine nature all for yourself, be it for trekking, cycling or dreaming away on a white-sand beach amid pine-covered dunes. Having been invaded by every regional power, Latvia has more cultural layers and a less homogenous population than its neighbours. People here fancy themselves to be the least pragmatic and the most artistic of the Baltic lot. They prove the point with myriad festivals and a merry, devil-may-care attitude – well, a subdued Nordic version of it.

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.

RĪGA

POP 703,500

Gothic spires that dominate Rīga's cityscape might suggest austerity, but it is the flamboyant art nouveau that forms the flesh and the spirit of this vibrant cosmopolitan city, the largest of all three Baltic capitals. Like all northerners, it is quiet and reserved on the outside, but there is some powerful chemistry going on inside its hip bars and modern art centres, and in the kitchens of its cool experimental restaurants. Standing next to a gulf named after itself, Rīga is a short drive from jetsetting sea resort Jūrmala, which comes with a stunning white-sand beach. But if you are craving solitude and a pristine environment, gorgeous sea dunes and blueberry-filled forests, begin right outside the city boundaries.

History

If Rīga were a human, it would be keeping a stack of expired passports issued in its name by a dozen states and empires.

It was born German in 1201. Bishop Albert von Buxhoeveden (say that fast three times) founded Rīga as a bridgehead for the crusade against the northern 'heathens' – the Balts, the Slavs and Finno-Ugric people. Thus Rīga became a stronghold for the Knights of the Sword and the newest trading junction between proto-Russia and the West. When Sweden snagged the city in 1621, it grew into the largest holding of the Swedish empire (even bigger than Stockholm!). Then the Russians snatched Latvia from Sweden's grip and added an industrial element to the bustling burg. By the mid-1860s Rīga was the world's biggest timber port and Russia's third city after Moscow and St Petersburg. The 20th century also saw the birth of cafes, salons, dance clubs and a thriving intellectual culture, which acquired a distinct Latvian flavour after the country became independent in 1918. All of that ended with the Soviet occupation in 1940 followed by WWII, which left the city

LATVIA AT A GLANCE

Currency

Euro (€)

Language

Latvian, Russian (unofficial)

Capital

Rīga

Area

64,589 sq km

bombed out and without its two large communities – the Germans, who resettled into Germany, and the Jews, who were slaughtered in the Holocaust. But somehow, Rīga's indelible international flavour managed to rise up from the rubble, and even as a part of the USSR, Rīga was known for its forward thinking and thriving cultural life.

Today, Rīga's cosmopolitan past has enabled the city to effortlessly adjust to a global climate, making it more than just the capital of Latvia – it's the cornerstone of the Baltic.

Sights

Rīga quietly sits along the Daugava River, which flows another 15km north before dumping into the Gulf of Rīga. Old Rīga (Vecrīga), the historic heart of the city, stretches 1km along the river's eastern side and 600m back from its banks. This medieval section of town is mostly pedestrian, containing a flurry of curving cobbled streets and alleys.

Kaļķu iela heads away from the river and turns into Brīvības bulvāris (Freedom Boulevard) when it hits the thin, picturesque ring of parkland that protects the medieval centre from the gridiron of grand boulevards just beyond. The copper-topped Freedom Monument, in the middle of Brīvības bulvāris, is the unofficial gateway into Central

LANGUAGE

Hello (good day)	Labdien	<i>lab-dee-in</i>
Hi (informal)	Sveiki	<i>svay-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>