

Latvia

These are heady days for little Latvia. Not only is it finally part of the EU, but its economy is humming along at the fastest clip in Europe. Traffic seems to double annually at its flashy new airport. Its capital, Riga, is maturing like a fine wine, sprouting a lively cultural scene to match the exuberance of its world-class architecture.

Count Latvia as one country that's ready for prime time. Ancient Riga, stunningly diverse architecturally and fun, fun, fun, is a jewel of a city, despite the long winters. Outside of Riga lies an outdoors-lover's paradise, with hectares of forested national parkland beckoning bikers, hikers and bird-watchers. There are quaint castle towns, happening beach towns and, just as importantly, good domestic beer to enjoy in either.

You won't be the first one you know to come here any more, but you'll still be plenty charmed. Sure, Latvia retains some of its gruff old Sovietness, but that will soon be just another feather in its tourist-magnet cap. After all, you're not supposed to be able to witness old Soviet buildings in places that are so damn, well, nice.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 64, 600 sq km
- **Capital** Riga
- **Currency** Lats (Ls); €1=0.70Ls; US\$1=0.55Ls; UK£1=1.03Ls; A\$1=0.41Ls; ¥100=0.47Ls; NZ\$1=0.35Ls
- **Famous for** Riga's black balsam, ice hockey, Eurovision eureka in 2002
- **Official Language** Latvian
- **Phrases** *labdien/sveiki* (hello); *cik?* (how much?); *paldies* (thank you); *lūdzu* (please/you're welcome)
- **Population** 2.3 million
- **Telephone Codes** country code ☎ 371; international access code ☎ 00
- **Visas** none required for stays of up to 90 days for Australian, Canadian, EU, New Zealand or US citizens





HIGHLIGHTS

- Delight in vivacious **Riga** (p417), with cobbled Old Town streets, delectable Art Nouveau and seething nightlife.
- Take a bobsled ride at 100km/h, bungee jump or just stroll among woods and castles in magnificent **Sigulda** (p428).
- Go to the beach in **Jūrmala**, but also take in the distinctive wooden architecture (p427).
- Get down in Latvia's hippest city, **Liepāja** (p433), a haven for cool clubs, raucous festivals and funky design.
- Witness the raw power of nature and explore Liv culture at desolate, solitary **Cape Kolka** (p431).

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Spend one day exploring Riga's Old Town, then a morning in the Art Nouveau district before taking a half-day trip to Rundāle Palace and/or Salaspils. On the third day visit Sigulda or Jūrmala.
- **One week** Spend three days in Riga, with a day trip thrown in. Spend two days castle-crawling and/or engaging in outdoor activities in Sigulda and Cēsis. Lastly, drive to Liepāja via Cape Kolka and Ventspils before heading back to Riga for one last big night out on the town.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Latvia's climate is wet, with relatively harsh, long winters and warm, short summers. The winter is a great time to visit Riga, as the crowds thin, but bring your thermals. Beer gardens, sunbathing, and super-long days are compelling reasons to visit in the summer. Autumn and spring are hit or miss. The average summer temperature is 15.8°C and in winter a brisk minus 4.5°C.

HISTORY

Latvia's history is a troubled whirlwind of fierce struggle and long periods of occupation. Latvians descended from tribes that migrated north from around Belarus and settled on the territory of modern Latvia around 2000 BC. These tribes settled in coastal areas to fish and take advantage of rich deposits of amber, which was more precious than gold in many places until the Middle Ages.

Eventually, four main Baltic tribes evolved: the Selonians, the Letts (or Latgals), the

HOW MUCH?

- **Public transport ticket** 0.2Ls
- **Loaf of bread** 0.3Ls
- **Hostel bed in Riga** 8Ls
- **Bottle of vodka** 4Ls
- **Take-away hamburger** 1.04Ls

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **Litre of petrol** 0.62Ls
- **Litre of water** 0.2Ls
- **Bottled beer** 0.3/1Ls in store/bar
- **Souvenir T-shirt** 7Ls
- **Street snack (hotdog)** 0.5Ls

Semigallians and the Cours. From the latter three derived the names of three of Latvia's four principal regions: Latgale, Zemgale and Kurzeme. The fourth region, Vidzeme (Livland), derived its name from the Livs, a Finno-Ugric peoples unrelated to the Balts (p431).

During succeeding centuries of foreign rule these tribes merged into one Latvian identity. They were pagan until the first Christian missionaries arrived and began converting them in the late 12th century.

In 1201, at the bequest of the pope, German crusaders, led by Bishop von Buxhoevden of Bremen, conquered Latvia and founded Riga, which became the major city in the German Baltic. He also founded the Knights of the Sword, who made Riga their base for subjugating Livonia.

Latvia was conquered by Poland in 1561 and Catholicism was firmly entrenched. Sweden then colonised Latvia (seen by many as a golden age for Latvia) in 1629 until the Great Northern War (1700–21), after which the country was under Russian rule.

Out of WWI rose an independent Latvian state, declared on 18 November 1918. The Soviets were the first to recognise Latvia's independence, but the honeymoon didn't last long. Soviet occupation began in 1939 with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Nationalisation, killings and mass deportations to Siberia followed. Latvia was occupied partly or wholly by Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1945, when an estimated 175,000 Latvians, mostly Jews, were killed or deported.

BLUE MOOER

It sounds like your classic old wives' tale: blue cows delivered from the sea by mermaids. Yet at least part of this Liv legend is true – Latvia does indeed have blue cows. About 100 of them, to be exact, making it the world's rarest breed of cow.

These curious ruminants originated in Latvia's Kurzeme region. The first ones appeared in the early 1900s. No-one is sure why or how they appeared, which is why the bit about mermaids can't be completely ruled out, but their star quickly waxed as they proved remarkably resistant to cold, rain and wind – three things that Latvia has in great supply.

The blue cow population dwindled to less than 50 in Soviet times, but began to rebound in the 1990s as geneticists realised the value in cross-breeding with these hearty beasts. Your best bet for seeing one is to ask at the Information Centre of Ķemeri National Park (p428), where several of them roam.

The first major public protest of the *glasnost* (openness) era was on 14 June 1987 when 5000 people rallied at Riga's Freedom Monument to commemorate the 1941 Siberia deportations. On 23 August 1989 about two million Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians formed a 650km human chain from Vilnius, through Riga, to Tallinn, to mark the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

The Latvian Popular Front was formed to fight for independence. After its supporters won a big majority in the March 1990 elections, Russia barged back in on 20 January 1991. Soviet troops stormed the Interior Ministry building in Riga, killing four people.

The August 1991 coup attempt in Moscow turned the tables and Latvia declared full independence on 21 August. On 6 September, the USSR recognised Latvia's independence. The country held its first democratic elections in June 1993.

On 1 May 2004 the EU opened its doors to 10 new members, including Latvia, and the economy took off almost immediately. Long the Baltic laggard, Latvia registered the highest economic growth in the EU in 2004–05, even as thousands of Latvians left for jobs in Ireland and elsewhere. In long-time President Vaira Vīke-Freiberga – known as the 'Baltic Iron Lady' – Latvia has an internationally respected leader who at press time was being mentioned as a strong contender to succeed Kofi Annan as UN secretary-general.

PEOPLE

Latvia's 2.3 million inhabitants are made up of Latvians (59%) and Russians (29%), with Belarusians (4%), Poles (2.6%) and Ukrainians (2.5%) leading the rest of the pack.

Latvians are known for their steely demeanour and they often have to be coaxed into friendship – hardly surprising considering their history of oppression and the fact that Latvians are still a minority group in Riga and most other urban areas. But they also know how to unwind, as a Friday night out in Riga will attest.

RELIGION

The Roman Catholic Church has the largest following with roughly 500,000 adherents, followed by Lutheran (300,000) and Russian Orthodox (100,000).

ARTS

The traditional importance of song as Latvia's greatest art form is shown in the 1.4 million *dainas* (folk songs), identified and collected by Krišjānis Barons (1835–1923). Latvia has held a national song festival in Riga every five years for the last 125 years (p434). In 2003 the festival was inscribed on Unesco's list of 'Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' masterpieces.

Prāta Vētra (Brainstorm) is the country's biggest rock band. The group finished third place in the Eurovision Song Contest in 2000, two years before another Latvian, Marija Naumova, won the contest and became a national hero.

You can both learn about folk music and buy Brainstorm and other Latvian pop and folk albums at Upe (p426) in Riga.

The most celebrated figure in Latvian literature is Jānis Rainis (1865–1929), yet his criticism of political oppression meant he was exiled to Siberia and Switzerland. There's a monument to him in the Esplanāde park near the State Museum of Art in Riga.

ENVIRONMENT

Latvia is 64,589 sq km in area – slightly smaller than Ireland. Forest covers almost half of it, providing a home to creatures such as wild boar, wolves and deer – though you're not likely to bump into any of these creatures in the wild without some guidance. Latvia protects more than a million hectares as national parkland.

Environmental Issues

Soviet factories and chemical plants left quite a few stains on Latvia's environment, but the government and various national organisations have made cleaning up the environment a top priority and Latvia's pollution problems are now being addressed.

FOOD & DRINK

Half-Russian, half-Germanic, Latvian cuisine is hearty food designed to keep the cold out. Pork is especially popular – try the pork knuckle in any Lido restaurant (p424) – as are potato-based dishes, *zupa* (soups), *siļe* (herring) and *lasis* (salmon). *Pīrāgi* (small pies or pasties) are another favourite and come stuffed with just about anything. Vegetarian options are few outside of Riga.

Eating is not a drawn-out affair; it's traditionally done to refuel before resuming work, but Riga has many top-class restaurants for those who prefer sumptuous, relaxed dining. If you're lucky enough to be invited for a meal with a local, make sure you bring flowers (an odd number only, for superstitious reasons) and don't even think about being vegetarian. Grin and eat until your combats won't fit anymore then waddle home content.

One thing that will warm your cockles is the infamous Riga Black Balsam, a treacly alcoholic beverage with potent medicinal qualities – apparently. It tastes fairly vile straight up, but it's tasty mixed with coffee or blackcurrant juice in a heavenly concoction called Hot Balzams. Latvia's also a huge beer-drinking country. Less-popular brands Užavas and Tērvetes are the best of the lot.

RĪGA

pop 790,000

The Baltics' thumping heart lies in Riga, a glorious marriage of gracious old-world charmer and relentless, unabashedly liberated temptress. The charmer is Old Riga (known as Old

Town), a maze of narrow medieval streets lorded over by brooding Gothic spires and stone façades reflecting a dizzying array of centuries-old architectural styles. The temptress is New Town, bursting at the seams with bold Art Nouveau and seething nightlife.

Riga was founded in 1201 when the Germans established it as their primary bastion of power on the Baltic Coast. Since then it has grown into one of the few things in the Baltics you might call 'big' (aside from Soviet-era sanatoriums). But unlike most former Soviet cities, Riga can hold your attention even outside of its Unesco-honoured centre. In the sprawling suburbs you'll find old wooden houses, brick factories, hidden churches and parkland galore.

Thanks in part to budget airlines, Riga is no longer a secret. The maddening summer crowds can make getting a room, or even getting a seat in a beer garden, difficult. Weekend stag parties will continue to make their presence felt until somebody figures out a way to herd them out of Old Town. You can avoid the crowds, yet still absorb every morsel of what Riga has to offer, by visiting in the low season. Or just take the crowds in your stride and make friends with fellow travellers similarly inebriated by Riga's bounty.

ORIENTATION

Riga straddles the Daugava River, with Old Town resting on its eastern flank. Old Town's skyline is dominated by three steeples: St Peter's, Dome Cathedral and St Jacob's. To the north and west of Old Town

RĪGA IN TWO DAYS

Head out to the **Latvian Ethnographic Open Air Museum** (p422) for a glimpse of what Latvia once was. You'll better appreciate what it has become when you return to Riga for lunch on Hotel Gutenberg's **rooftop terrace** (p423). Spend the rest of the day just taking in the many architectural flavours of Old Town.

The next day you're back in Old Town for a morning trip up the steeple of **St Peter's** (p420) and a trip to the **Museum of the Occupation of Latvia** (p421). Spend the afternoon walking around the **Art Nouveau district** (p422) in New Town before ending the day with a well-deserved cocktail at **Skyline Bar** (p425).

CENTRAL RĪGA

INFORMATION

- ARS Clinic.....1 F1
- Australian Honorary Consul.....2 F4
- British Embassy.....3 E1
- Canadian Embassy.....4 G1
- Central Post Office.....5 C5
- Elik Internet Cafe.....6 E4
- Estonian Embassy.....7 G1
- French Embassy.....8 E3
- German Embassy.....9 F3
- Globuss.....10 E5
- Jāņa Sēta.....11 G4
- Kazino Latvija.....12 E4
- Latvia Tours.....(see 76)
- LV Internet Cafe.....13 F1
- Nivala.....14 H1
- Parex Banka.....15 E4
- Rīga Tourism Information Centre.....(see 28)
- Russian Embassy.....16 D1
- STA Travel.....17 F4
- US Embassy.....18 E5
- Vecpilsētas aptieka.....19 F5
- Via Rīga.....20 H3

EATING

- Alus Sēta.....63 D4
- Cili Pizza.....64 E4
- Central Market.....65 F3
- Dzirnavas.....67 G3
- El Carlito.....68 H3
- Habibi.....69 D5
- John Lemon.....70 D5
- Kļipkolu Krogs.....71 D4
- Kamāla.....72 D4
- Pelmeņi XL.....73 D4
- Red Fred.....74 G2
- Rimi.....75 E5
- Sievasmātes pirādzīpi.....76 D4

DRINKING

- A Suns.....77 G3
- B Bars.....78 D3
- Belle Epoque.....79 D4
- Bites Blīzas Klubs.....80 F1
- Cuba Cafe.....81 D4
- de Lacy's.....82 D4
- Dickens.....83 D5
- Orange Bar.....84 E5
- Red.....85 F2
- Spalvas Pa Gaisu.....86 E5

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

- Audēju 7.....21 E5
- Cat House.....22 D4
- Dome Cathedral.....23 C4
- Elizabetes 33.....24 E1
- Elizabetes iela 10a & 10b.....25 E1
- Freedom Monument.....26 F3
- Great Guild.....27 D4
- House of Blackheads.....28 D5
- Jauniela 25/29.....29 D5
- Jewish Community Centre.....(see 30)
- Jews in Latvia Museum.....30 F1
- Laima Clock.....31 E4
- Memorials to victims of 20 January 1991.....32 D3
- Mentzenzorf's House.....33 D5
- Merchant House, Mārstāļu 2.....34 E5
- Merchant House, Mārstāļu 21.....35 D6
- Museum of Decorative & Applied Arts.....36 E5
- Museum of the History of Riga & Navigation.....37 C4
- Museum of the Occupation of Latvia.....38 D5
- National Museum of Art.....39 E1
- Outdoor Ice Rink.....40 D4
- Paul Mandelstam's Apartment.....41 E5
- Powder Tower.....42 D3
- Riga Castle.....43 C3
- Russian Orthodox Cathedral.....44 F2
- St Jacob's.....45 C4
- St Peter's.....46 D5
- St Roland Statue.....47 D5
- Swedish Gate.....48 D3
- Synagogue.....49 E5
- Three Brothers.....50 C4
- Town Hall.....51 D5
- War Museum.....(see 42)
- Warehouses on Vecpilsētas iela.....52 E5

SLEEPING

- Argonaut Hostel.....53 E5
- Boutique Hotel Viesturs.....54 E4
- Centra.....55 E5
- Grand Palace Hotel.....56 C4
- Hotel Bergs.....57 H4
- Hotel Guttenburgs.....58 C4
- Konventa Sēta.....59 E5
- Old Town Hostel.....60 F5
- Patricia.....61 C4
- Radi Un Draugi.....62 E5

ENTERTAINMENT

- Cetri Balti Krekli.....87 E5
- Essential.....88 F1
- Forum Cinemas.....89 F5
- National Opera Theatre.....90 F4
- Pulkvedim nevienš neraksta.....91 D6
- Wagner Hall.....92 E4
- XXL.....93 G4

SHOPPING

- A&E Gallery.....94 D4
- Rota.....95 E5
- Upe.....96 E4

TRANSPORT

- Bus Station.....97 F6
- Express Buses to Airport.....98 F2

TO LIDO ATĪPAUSĀS CENTRS (5km); SALASPILS MONUMENTS (15km); JELGAVA (46km); BAUSKA (65km); PĪLSRUNDĀLE (82km); LITHUANIAN BORDER (101km)

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runs a wide band of 19th-century parks and boulevards.

New Town lies beyond that strip. The train and bus stations are a five-minute walk apart, near the southeastern edge of Old Riga.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Globuss (☎ 2722 6957; Valņu iela 26; ☎ 8am–10pm) International mag titles downstairs and a few English-language novels upstairs.

Jāņa sēta (☎ 2724 0892; Elizabetes iela 83/85; ☎ 10am–7pm Mon–Fri, 11am–5pm Sat) The place to find every map under the sun, reference books on Latvia, and Lonely Planet guides.

Internet Access

Elik (Valņu iela 41; per 3hrs 1Ls; ☎ 24hr) Great Old Town location and cheap rates.

LV (Dzirnavu iela 53; per hr 0.50Ls; ☎ 24hr) Best internet café in New Town.

Laundry

Nivala (Akas iela 4; wash/dry per load 2.40/0.80Ls; ☎ 24hr) Self-service, or leave it with them.

Left Luggage

Bus station (per piece 1Ls; ☎ 5.30am–11pm)

Train station (per piece 1Ls; ☎ 4.30am–midnight) In the basement.

Media

In Your Pocket (www.inyourpocket.com/latvia/en) Of the gaggle of pocket-sized city guides floating around, *In Your Pocket* is by far the most credible. It features sardonic listings, a good city and public transportation map, and loads of practical information. It's free at the airport and many hotels and costs 1.20Ls elsewhere.

Baltic Times (www.baltictimes.com) English-language weekly. Good source of pan-Baltic news and listings for Riga cultural events.

Medical Services

ARS Clinic (☎ 2720 1001/3, emergency home service ☎ 2720 1003; Skolas iela 5; ☎ 24hr) English-speaking service.

Vēpilsētas aptieka (☎ 2721 3340; Audēju iela 20; ☎ 24hr) Excellent pharmacy.

Money

Banks and ATMs dot the city. Most big banks cash travellers cheques and provide cash advances.

Kazino Latvija (Kalķu iela 24) Has 24-hour currency exchange.

Parex Banka (Kalķu iela 28; ☎ 9am–8pm Mon–Sat) Great location and hours; has currency exchange between 8am and 10pm daily.

Post

Central post office (Stacijas laukums 1; ☎ 8am–8pm Mon–Fri, 8am–6pm Sat, 8am–4pm Sun) Next to the train station.

Tourist Information

Riga Tourism Information Centre main office (☎ 2703 7900; www.rigatourism.com; Rātslaukums 6; ☎ 10am–7pm); bus station (☎ 2722 0555; ☎ 9am–7pm); train station (☎ 2723 3815; ☎ 10am–6.30pm) Gives out free maps and has loads of information. They can arrange accommodation and book walking, bus or boat tours from a variety of tour operators. Website has great Old Town walking tour suggestions. They sell the Riga Card, a discount card costing 8Ls for 24 hours, 12Ls for 48 hours or 16Ls for 72 hours (half-price for under 16s). You get a free walking tour, free rides on trolleybuses and trams, free entry to some museums, a copy of *In Your Pocket* and other discounts.

Travel Agencies

Latvia Tours (☎ 2708 5001; www.latviatours.lv; Kalķu iela 8; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Fri) Large agency offers visa assistance to Russia and Belarus and replaces American Express travellers cheques.

Via Riga (☎ 2781 2624; www.viariga.com; K Barona iela 7/9) Ferry and plane tickets and a range of tours.

STA Travel (☎ 2700 7777; www.statravel.lv; Raiņa bulvaris 23; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri) Handles ISIC cards.

SIGHTS

Old Town

ST PETER'S & AROUND

Riga's skyline centrepiece is gothic **St Peter's** (Sv Pētera baznīca; lift admission 2/0.70Ls adult/student; ☎ 10am–5pm, closed Mon), thought to be about 800 years old. Don't miss the view from its famed spire, which has been rebuilt three times in the same baroque form. Legend has it that in 1667 builders threw glass from the top – the number of pieces it broke into was the number of years it would stand. It landed on straw and didn't break, and a year later it burned down. The spire's current incarnation dates to 1973.

St. Peter's overlooks the **Rātslaukums** (Town Hall Square) and the **House of Blackheads**, (Rātslaukums 6; admission 1.50Ls; ☎ 10am–5pm, closed Mon), originally built in 1344 to house the Blackheads' guild of unmarried foreign merchants. Facing the House of Blackheads across

the square is the **Town Hall**. Both buildings were destroyed in WWII and rebuilt from scratch in recent years. A statue of Riga's patron saint, **St Roland** (Rātslaukums), stands between the two buildings. It's a replica of the original, erected in 1897, which now sits in St Peter's.

The entire area south of St Peter's square is a fine place to wander. There are 16th- and 17th-century **warehouses** (Vēpilsētas iela), the only Old Town **synagogue** (Pietavas iela 6–8) to survive the war, and even some Art Nouveau – check out **Paul Mandelstamm's apartment** (Kalēju iela 23) and, a little north of Town Hall Square, **Jau-niela 25/29**. You can see how wealthy Rigans once lived at 17th-century **Mentendorff's House** (☎ 2721 2951; Grēcinieku iela 18; adult/child 1.20/0.40Ls; ☎ 10am–5pm Wed–Sun). More old baroque **merchant houses** are at Mārstaļu iela 21 and 2.

DOME CATHEDRAL

The Baltic's largest **cathedral** (Doma baznīca; Doma laukums; admission 0.50Ls; ☎ 11am–6pm Tue–Fri, 10am–2pm Sat) also boasts a marvellous 6768-pipe organ, which was the world's largest when it was completed in 1884. The cathedral's foundations were laid in 1211 and the stone tombs it contains were blamed for a cholera epidemic that broke out after a flood in 1709 and killed one-third of the city's residents. Mass is held at 8am Monday to Saturday, and at noon Sunday in its cavernous belly, which lost much of its décor in the Soviet era.

NORTH OF DOME CATHEDRAL

Heading north from busy Doma laukums (Dome Square), you'll spot **St Jacob's Cathedral** (Sv Jēkaba katedrāle; Mazā Pils iela), with an interior dating back to 1225. Nearby are the **Three Brothers** (Mazā Pils iela 17, 19 & 21), Riga's oldest stone houses. In Old Town's northeast corner, medieval **Riga Castle** (Pils laukums 3) now houses the president and a couple of museums.

Meandering back toward the centre of Old Town, look for **Trokšņu iela**, Old Riga's narrowest street. It leads to the **Swedish Gate** (nr Trokšņu & Aldaru ielas), which was built into the city walls in 1698 to celebrate Swedish occupation. East of that is the round 14th-century **Powder Tower**, the only survivor of the 18 towers in the old city wall and home to the War Museum (right).

LĪVU LAUKUMS

This square, near the busiest entrance to Old Town along Kalķu iela, features beer gardens

by summer and an **outdoor ice rink** (admission free; skate rental per hr 0.50Ls; ☎ 10am–1am Nov–Mar, depends on temperature) by winter. The square is overlooked by the **Great Guild** (see p426), which faces the yellow-painted **Cat House** (Meistaru iela 19) that adorns many a postcard.

Venturing north towards Brīvības bulvāris, you'll encounter **Laima Clock**, favoured meeting spot for lovers and just about everybody else. From here, the city's old defensive moat – now a canal – snakes through parks between wide 19th-century boulevards.

Just over the canal, the **Freedom Monument** (Brīvības bulv). During the Soviet years the Freedom Monument was off-limits, and placing flowers at its base was a crime for which people were deported to Siberia.

Beneath **Bastejkalns** (Bastion Hill), west of the monument, five red stone slabs lie as **memorials** to the victims of 20 January 1991, who were killed here when Soviet troops stormed the nearby Interior Ministry. No-one who has seen filmmaker Jūris Podnieks' documentary, *Homeland – Postscript*, will forget the last footage shot by Andris Slapiņš or his gasped words 'keep filming...' as he lay dying.

MUSEUMS

Both the Soviet and Nazi occupations of Latvia during the last 65 years are chronicled in the chilling yet spirited **Museum of the Occupation of Latvia** (Strēlnieku laukums 1; www.occupationmuseum.lv; admission free; ☎ 11am–5pm May–Sep, closed Mon Oct–Apr, closed major holidays). A gaggle of young tour guides gives free tours in English, and there's also a worthwhile one-hour audio guide available (3Ls). Here you can also buy historical books on the occupation and dissident memoirs translated into English.

The absorbing **Museum of Decorative & Applied Arts** (www.dlmm.lv; Skārņu iela 10; student/child 1.50/0.50Ls; ☎ 11am–5pm, closed Mon), in a restored 13th-century church, presents an eccentric melee of Latvian textiles, china and tapestry.

The **Museum of the History of Riga & Navigation** (www.vip.latnet.lv/museums/Riga; Palasta iela 4; adult/student 1.50/0.50Ls; ☎ 11am–5pm Wed–Sun) is in a cloister next to Dome Cathedral. The gruesome mummified hand of a criminal and the 16th-century executioner's sword are highlights.

The violent history of this tiny nation is depicted in photos and war relics at the **War Museum** (Powder Tower, Smlīšu iela 20; www.karamuzejs.lv; adult/child 0.5/0.25Ls; ☎ 10am–5pm Wed–Sun).

New Town & Beyond

Extending north and east of the Freedom Monument, Riga's 'New Town' isn't particularly new. A vast area of wide boulevards lined with modern shops, stately embassies and regal townhouses, it began to take shape in the 18th century and rose to prominence as the centre of Riga's Art Nouveau movement (see below) in the early 20th century.

Just north of the Freedom Monument is Esplanāde park and the fabulous 19th-century **Russian Orthodox Cathedral** (Brīvības bulv 23). Across the park is the **National Museum of Art** (☎ 2732 4461; www.vmm.lv; K Valdemāra iela 10a; permanent/rotating exhibits 1.50/1Ls; ☎ 11am-5pm Wed-Mon), where pre-WWII Russian and Latvian art is on display among the Soviet grandeur of ruched net curtains, marble columns and red carpets.

The **Jewish community centre** (☎ 2728 3484; Skolas iela 6) shares a building with the **Jews in Latvia Museum** (admission by donation; ☎ noon-5pm Sun-Thu), which recounts Latvian Jewish history from the 16th century to 1945.

Located way out on the outskirts of the city, the **Latvian Ethnographic Open-Air Museum** (☎ 2799 4515; Brīvības gatve 440; www.ltg.lv/english/brivdabas.muzejs; adult/child 1/0.50Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm) is a Riga essential. The dozens of farmhouses, churches and windmills on the grounds provide a record of bygone country life. The National Fair of Applied Arts (held early June) and several festivals take place here. Take bus 1 from the corner of Merķeļa iela and Tērbatas iela to the Brīvības muzejs stop.

NEW TOWN'S ART NOUVEAU

The flamboyant Art Nouveau district is New Town's delicious answer to the refined elegance of Old Town. A walk around here reveals a dizzying display of façades festooned with nude nymphs, lordly lions, ghastly goblins, and all manner of menacing mug – typical features of the 19th-century German Art Nouveau school, known as Jugendstil.

Based on the idea that design should embrace the decadent and expressive, the Art Nouveau movement started in Paris, Munich and Vienna, but it was Riga that arguably took it the furthest. Today Riga's Art Nouveau collection – which unlike that of many German cities, survived the war – is credited by Unesco as being the finest in Europe.

The Art Nouveau district is centred around Alberta iela, but you'll find fine examples of Jugendstil scattered throughout the New Town and it even crops its head up – quite literally – in Old Town (Riga's first Art Nouveau building is in Old Town at **Audēju 7**). Don't miss the renovated façades of **Strēlnieku 4a** and **Elizabetes 10a, 10b and 33**. Those and most of the buildings on Alberta were designed by the Jugendstil movement's foremost practitioner in Riga, Mikhail Eisenstein. Examples of the Latvian Art Nouveau style, known as National Romanticism, are on Antonijas iela.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

For more on festivals see p434. For a complete list see www.km.gov.lv.

International Baltic Ballet Festival (www.ballet-festival.lv) Performances by Latvian and international companies, in March.

Riga Opera Festival (www.music.lv/opera) Takes place in June over 10 days.

Arsenāls Film Forum (www.arsenals.lv) International film festival held in even years in September.

SLEEPING Budget

Old Town Hostel (☎ 2722 3406; www.rigaoldtownhostel.lv; Valju iela 43; dm from 7Ls, d 20Ls; ☎ ☎) Not only is this a top-three hostel, but it also owns a pair of funky doubles that, if you can somehow reserve them, are the best value in Old Town. The always-lively pub downstairs is a great place to meet people.

Argonaut Hostel (☎ 2614 7214; www.argonauthostel.com; Kalēju iela 50; dm from 9Ls, d with shared bathroom 34Ls; ☎) Adventure lovers need look no further than this popular hostel, which boasts its own bobsled, and doubles as an adventure-tour agency. The kitchen could use a sink, but camaraderie runs rife among the wannabe Xgamer clientele.

Knight's Court (☎ 2736 4950; www.knightscourt.lv; Bruņinieku iela 75b; dm/d from 8/32Ls; ☎ ☎) A hostel-hotel hybrid with clean, well-above-average dorm rooms in the main building, and an annex out back with 10 great-value private rooms. No hostel in Riga is guaranteed quiet, but its location well out of Old Town gives it a chance. Free basic breakfast for all.

Livonija (☎ 2720 4180; livonija@nite.lv; Maskavas iela 32; s/d from 20/24Ls) Quite simply the cheapest true hotel in Riga. Its location in the gritty Russian Maskavas district turns some people off, but in reality it's a fine location. You're just three short stops on tram 7 from the bus station, and four stops from Old Town.

Lenz Guesthouse (☎ 2733 3343; www.lenz.lv; Lenču iela 2; s/d 32/35; with shared bathroom 27/32Ls; ☎ ☎) This quiet guesthouse on the fringes of the Art Nouveau district occupies that grey area between hostel and hotel. It's that rare budget hotel that pays attention to the details, including a big breakfast laid out in one of Riga's nicest communal kitchens.

Also recommended:

Patricia (☎ 2728 4868; www.patrichahotel.com; Elizabetes iela; apt from 27Ls, min 2-nights) Rents out private flats in the centre.

Riga Hostel (☎ 2722 4520; www.riga-hostel.com; Mārstāju iela 12; dm/d with shared bathroom from 9/40Ls; ☎) Spanish run hostel with nice chill-out room.

Midrange

Radi un Draugi (☎ 2782 0200; www.draugi.lv; Mārstāju iela 1; s/d from 37/46Ls; ☎) Great Old Town location? Check. Harmonious design? Check. Elegant bar and restaurant? Check. Kettles in all rooms? Check. Major weaknesses? Negative. All this for well under 50L? Affirmative! Several hotels in Riga charge twice as much and deliver half the quality. The junior suites, only 6L more than doubles, are the hotel's triumphant signature.

Krišjānis & Gertrūde (☎ 2750 6603; www.kg.lv; s/d from 35/50Ls; ☎ ☎) It would be hard to find better value than this friendly, family-run B&B in the heart of New Town. You can save even more money by self-catering in the kitchen. There are only five rooms, so book well ahead.

Konventa Sēta (☎ 2708 7501; www.konventa.lv; Kalēju iela 9/11; s/d from €90/95; ☎) Beyond its location in a 15th-century Old Town convent, there's nothing particularly special about this 140-room monster spread out among seven buildings. Turn your expectations down a notch and Konventa Sēta offers pretty good bang-for-the-buck, however.

Centra (☎ 2722 6441; www.centra.lv; Audēju iela 1; s/d €110/120; ☎ ☎ ☎) Smoke-free hotels in Riga are about as common as flying moose. Not only is Centra smoke free, but it also has some of the most tastefully designed, comfortable, and downright humungous rooms in Old

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hotel Bergs (☎ 2777 0900; www.hotelbergs.com; Elizabetes iela 83/85; r from €157; ☎ ☎ ☎) Beautiful mesh closet doors, fluffy white bathrobes, cute kitchens, and DVD players are just a few of the many, many treats that greet visitors at this highly effective fusion of 19th-century brick building and modern, concrete edifice. The minimalist interior design and artwork are utterly faithful to the stunning old-meets-new architecture, but the design is just the beginning. Its restaurant is among the top three in Riga. The king-sized beds are as ludicrously comfortable as they look. And the service is impeccable. Heaven found.

Town. The gigantic junior suites cost only €20 more than the doubles. The upper-floor rooms are quieter and have views.

Elizabetes Nams (☎ 2750 9292; www.elizabetesnams.lv; Elizabetes iela 27; s/d from 40/60Ls; ☎ ☎) This romantic boutique hardly fits the profile of a business hotel, yet it plays home-away-from-home for a loyal cadre of business travellers looking for an after-work sanctuary. No rooms are the same, but all ooze character and are outstanding values.

Hotel Gutenbergs (☎ 2781 4090; www.gutenbergs.lv; Doma laukums 1; s/d from 60/80Ls; ☎ ☎ ☎) Its rooftop restaurant has the best view in Riga. You don't look down on the spires of Old Town, you sit among them. The restaurant's a tough act to follow, but the cosy rooms, some with sloping ceilings, are up to the task. The newer wing lacks the character of the older wing, however.

Top End

Boutique Hotel Viesturs (☎ 2735 6060; www.hotelviesturs.lv; 5 Mucinieku iela; s/d/ste 59/89/159L; ☎ ☎) Rooms in this quaint 17th-century boutique are small but positively exquisite – especially the bathrooms. The loft suite, with balcony views of St Peter and Dome Cathedral, might just be the best room in Riga. The entire place is littered with amazing antiques.

Grand Palace Hotel (☎ 2704 4000; www.schlossle-hotels.com/grandpalace; Pils iela 12; s/d from €215/260; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) If you don't mind smallish rooms, you'll find no better place to be pampered than the lavish Grand Palace. Hotel staff wax nostalgic about the various luminaries

who have stayed here, such as Catherine De-neuve and REM, but it's actually more fit for royalty than rock stars.

EATING

The days when there was little to choose from in Riga outside smoky cafés and a handful of overplayed expat joints are long gone. Today you'll find a veritable cornucopia of ethnic restaurants and most of them are smoke-free thanks to a strict new antismoking law.

In Old Town you can't toss one of Riga's trademark fluffy alley cats without it landing (on its feet) in a restaurant. Smart money follows the locals to New Town to escape the crowds.

Restaurants

OLD TOWN

John Lemon (Peldu iela 21; mains 1.50-4Ls) This small diner with orange walls and a pink bar is open until 5am on Friday and Saturday nights, but is a great spot for nosing any time. The calzone-like *lavash* are a bargain.

Kamāla (Jauniela 14; mains 2-4Ls) Trancey Indian music, ornately carved furniture and apsarās set the dreamy vibe at this intimate vegetarian restaurant. The exceptional Indian soup is among 25 on the menu, and many dishes are Ayurvedic.

Kiploku krogs (Jēkaba iela 3/5; mains 2.50-5Ls) The 'garlic pub' dices up garlic and sticks it into hearty dishes of all shapes, sizes and guises. The pasta dishes are especially good, and cheap to boot. Not a place for calorie counters.

Habibi (☎ 2722 8551; Peldu iela 24; mains 5-7Ls) This totally cool Egyptian-run hookah joint serves up Middle Eastern and Central Asian food in a rich, cushiony interior.

NEW TOWN

Ai Karamba! (Pulkveža Brieža 2; mains 3-4Ls) American country kitchen meets greasy spoon at this colourful Canadian-owned diner. There's a chill-out room upstairs and surprises like stuffed schnitzel on the menu.

el Carlito (☎ 2777 0586; Blaumaņa iela 38/40; mains 3-5Ls) This bustling Mexican eatery features margaritas and decent fajitas and quesadillas (3Ls).

Red Fred (Dzirnava iela 62; mains 3-6Ls) It's unlikely that the urban hipsters bathing in the sublime red glow of this eatery have too much experience using the pick-axes and hard hats that line the walls. But you can't blame them for liking the eclectic food.

Vincents (☎ 2733 2634; Elizabetes iela 19; mains 8-12Ls) Inspired by Van Gogh, this fancy local institution boasts Riga's finest European cuisine cooked up by Latvia's most famous chef, Mārtiņš Ritiņš.

Cheap Eats

In addition to the following places, the train station has a wealth of cheap and quick eating options.

Sievasmātes pirādzīņi (Kaļķu iela 10; ☎ 9am-9pm) This is the most centrally located of Riga's beloved *pirāgi* shops; you can go local and fill up on a few of these for under 2Ls.

Pelmeni XL (Kaļķu iela 7; meals 1-2Ls; ☎ 9am-4am) Hungry mobs flock to this dirt-cheap cafeteria on Old Town's main drag for huge bowls of *pelmeni* (Russian dumplings) and *varenyky* (Ukrainian dumplings).

Čili Pizza (meals 2-3Ls; Old Town (Brīvības bulv 26); New Town (Raina bulv 15) With five locations in Riga and counting, this reliable Lithuanian chain is fast becoming ubiquitous.

Self-Catering

Central market (Centrālirgu iela; ☎ 8am-6pm) Located in five huge hangars behind the bus station, this colourful, Soviet-style market is one of the largest in Europe and has Riga's cheapest produce.

Rimi (Universālveikals Centrs, cnr Audēju & Vaļņu ielas; ☎ 9am-10pm) The biggest and best-located supermarket in Old Town.

DRINKING

Riga thoroughly deserves its reputation as a party mecca. Don't be surprised to find yourself still out dancing at 7am on a weekday morning. Many harmless-seeming daytime cafés turn into raucous bars by night.

Old Town

In the summer, the numerous outdoor beer gardens on Old Town's two main squares, Līvu laukums and Doma laukums, make fine places for pints.

Orange Bar (Jāņa sēta 5) Check your inhibitions at the door of this grungy alternative venue, where peeps are not afraid to dance on the bar. Can get ugly late at night – in a good way.

Spalvas Pa Gaisu (Grēcinieku 8) A classy outfit with a mean streak, it showcases thirty-somethings going bananas to a mix of Latino and Latvian music.

Cuba Café (Jauniela 15; light meals 3-6Ls) This lively spot pulls no punches with its mojitos and draws a hip, energetic crowd that clearly appreciates that.

Belle Epoque (Mazā monētu iela 6) Students flock to this basement bar to power down its trademark 'apple pie' shots. Also called French Bar, it's relatively immune to stag parties.

B Bars (Torņa iela 4) Do not – repeat *do not* – leave Riga without stopping by here for a mug of their heavenly Hot Balzams. It puts mulled wine to shame. Happy hour is two-for-one.

Dickens (Grēcinieku iela 9/1) Old Town has an inordinate number of Irish bars that show sports on TV and get taken over by stag parties on weekends. This is probably the rowdiest of the bunch.

de Lacy's (Šķūņu iela 4) You'll have a slightly better chance of enjoying a pint of Guinness and a good Irish meal in peace at this expat hang-out.

New Town

Skyline Bar (Elizabetes iela 55) The glam crowd and the stunning view make this newly redesigned

window palace on the 26th floor of the Reval Hotel Latvija decidedly *de rigueur*.

A Suns (Elizabetes iela 83/85) If you happen to visit this popular expat hang-out in Berga bazārs, make a point of visiting the men's room for a truly warped example of artistic creation.

Bites Blūzs Klubs (☎ 2733 3125; Dzirnava 34a; cover 3Ls Fri & Sat) It has great live blues and a proper bar – the kind where the bartender can slide a beer from one end and it will take several seconds to reach a customer at the other end.

ENTERTAINMENT

In Your Pocket has a full listing of movie venues as well as listings for opera, ballet and classical music. Ballet, opera and theatre break for summer holidays, from around June to September. Check www.livas.lv for movie listings.

Nightclubs

Pulkvedim neviens neraksta (No-one Writes to the Colonel; ☎ 2721 3886; Peldu iela 26-28; cover 1-3Ls Thu-Sat) There's no such thing as dull night at 'Pulkvedis,' which serves up 1980s and '90s hits on the ground floor and trancier beats downstairs.

Essential (☎ 2724 2289; www.essential.lv; Skolas iela 2; cover 5-7Ls; ☎ Thu-Sun) Riga's hottest club is a spectacle of beautiful bodies boogieing to some of Europe's top DJ talent in three dance chambers. Overzealous security aside, there's no safer bet if partying till dawn is your mission. Sorry, no local beer – just 4Ls Coronas. Drink cocktails.

Cetri Balti Krekli (Four White Shirts; ☎ 2721 3885; www.krekli.lv; Vecpilsētas iela 12; cover 1-5Ls) This is the place to see live Latvian rock bands any night of the week.

XXL (☎ 2728 2276; Kalniņa iela 4; cover 1-10Ls) Riga's best gay club features a thriving disco on Friday and Saturday nights, go-go dancers and plenty of dark rooms to get cosy.

Ballet & Opera

The awesome **National Opera Theatre** (☎ 2707 3777; www.opera.lv; Aspazijas bulv 3; box office ☎ 10am-7pm) is home to the Riga Ballet, where Mikhail Baryshnikov made his name, and the Latvian National Opera.

Cinemas

Films are generally shown in their original language with Latvian or Russian subtitles. The Leviathan **Forum Cinemas** (13 Jāņvāra 8; www.forumcinemas.lv) is the second-largest movie

LATVIA'S LIDO LOVE AFFAIR

If you want to sample Latvian food look no further than the wildly popular buffet-style Lido restaurants. The chain's flagship enterprise is the gargantuan, amusement park-like **Lido atpūtas centrs** (Krasta iela 76; ☎ 10am-11pm), where you can easily get lost amid endless buffet rows of pork knuckle, potato pancakes, fried cabbage and, oh, about a thousand other dishes. With an ice-skating rink and its own outdoor ethnographic park, it's a huge draw for Latvian families. From the bus station it's an easy 15-minute ride out to the 'Lido' stop on tram 7.

The other Lido restaurants are basically miniature versions of the original without all the bells and whistles. The only one in Old Town is **Alus sēta** (Tirgoņu iela 6; ☎ 10am-1am). In New Town the best options are **Staburags** (A Čaka iela 55; ☎ noon-midnight) and **Dzirnava** (Dzirnava iela 76; ☎ 8am-11pm).

A decidedly heavy meal with a pint of *alus* (beer) at any of these places shouldn't set you back more than 5Ls.

theatre in Northern Europe. Tickets average 2Ls at most theatres.

Classical Music

Great Guild (Lielā ģilde; ☎ 2721 3643; www.music.lv/orchestra; Amatu iela 6; tickets 2-7Ls; box office ☎ noon-6pm) This lovely 14th-century building is the concert hall of the renowned Latvian National Symphony Orchestra.

Music performances are also held at the following places.

Dome Cathedral (☎ 2721 3213; Doma laukums 1; tickets 1-3Ls; box office ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat & 30min before concerts) Organ concerts at least weekly at 7pm.

St Peter's Church (☎ 2722 9426) Free concerts every Tuesday at 6pm.

Wagner Hall (☎ 2721 0814; Vāgnera iela 4; box office ☎ noon-3pm & 4-7pm) Chamber and solo concerts.

SHOPPING

A&E Gallery (Jauniela iela 17) The place to shop for amber and art, it's a favourite with visiting dignitaries and celebs.

Rota (Kalēju iela 9/11; ☎ 10am-11pm) Good selection of amber jewellery set in silver.

Upe (Vāgnera iela 5) The place to learn about and/or buy traditional Latvian folk instruments and albums. Also has a small selection of carefully selected, cheese-free Latvian rock.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

For information on airline offices in Rīga and international flights, bus, train and ferry services see p436.

Land

The Riga **bus station** (☎ 2900 0009; Prāgas iela 1) is a three-minute walk south of Old Town across 13 Janvāra iela.

The **train station** (☎ 2723 3113; Stacijas laukums) is about a five-minute walk beyond that. For information on domestic buses and trains going to/from Riga, see p436.

GETTING AROUND

To/from the Airport

Riga international airport (RIX; Lidosta Rīga; ☎ 2720 7009; www.riga-airport.com) is about 8km west of the city centre. Bus 22 runs at least every 30 minutes from 5.45am to 11.40pm between the airport and the stop on 13 Janvāra iela opposite the bus station in Riga (0.20Ls, 30 minutes). Express bus 22A (0.25Ls) drops you off at the Orthodox Cathedral on Brīvības

bulvāris and is 10 minutes quicker, but it only runs about every hour.

A taxi from the Old Town to the airport costs 10Ls; agree on a price beforehand and insist the driver takes the short route over the Vanšu Bridge (Vanšu tilts) or they will try to rip you off.

Car & Motorcycle

For information on car rentals, see p437. Motorists must pay 5Ls per hour to enter the Old Town.

Public Transport

Riga's user-friendly Soviet-era public transport system is worth mastering if you plan to venture out of Old Town. All bus, trolleybus and tram routes are clearly marked on any decent city map. Tickets (0.20Ls) are sold on board by conductors and there is no need to punch your ticket. Five-day passes (3.80Ls) for all three are sold at news kiosks. Most city transport runs from 5.30am to 12.30am daily, but some trams run sporadically all night. For Riga public transport routes and schedules visit www.rigassatiksm.lv.

Taxi

Taxis officially charge 0.3Ls per km by day and 0.4Ls per km by night, but drivers employ every unofficial trick in the book to rip off foreigners. Insisting the meter is switched on is always a good idea, but some – not all – cab companies quadruple their rates late at night. If the meter is counting off santimi faster than your watch is counting off seconds, stop the cab and get out! You can hail cabs on the street, find them in rank at several points throughout the city, or call **Rigas Takso** (☎ 2800 1313) or **Riga Taxi** (☎ 2800 1010).

AROUND RĪGA

Salaspils

'Behind this gate the earth groans', reads the inscription on the large concrete bunker that marks the entrance to the **Salaspils Concentration Camp**.

Between 1941 and 1944 an estimated 45,000 Jews from Riga and approximately 55,000 other people, including Jews from other Nazi-occupied countries and prisoners of war, were murdered here, 15km southeast of Riga. Today the site is a place of peaceful solitude amid whispering pine trees. A metronome encased

inside a black marble wall beats out never-ending time. Several giant, gaunt sculptures stand near the middle of the 40-hectare site. It is a haunting memorial.

The concrete sculpture on the left upon entering reads: 'On this way went crying children, mothers, fathers and grandfathers – all went to die. Who will count those unsaid words? Who will count the lost years which Nazi bullets killed...?' Inside the bunker a small exhibition recounts the horrors of the camp.

To get there from Riga, take a suburban train on the Ogre–Krustpils line to Dārziņi (not Salaspils) station. A hidden path leads from the station to the *pieminekļis* (memorial), a 15-minute walk away. If you're driving from Riga on the A6 highway, the hard-to-spot turnoff is on the left 300m before the A5/E77 highway.

Rundāle Palace

If you only have time for one day trip out of Riga, make it **Rundāle Palace** (☎ 2396 2197; www.rundale.net; adult/student 2.50/1.50Ls; ☎ 10am-7pm Jun-Aug, to 6pm Sep-Oct & May, to 5pm Nov-Apr), 75km south of the capital in the tiny town of Pilsrundāle. A monument to aristocratic ostentatiousness, it was gifted by Empress of Russia Anna Ioanovna to her favourite advisor (and lover), Baron Ernst von Bühren, whom she later appointed Duke of Courland.

The architect of this sprawling complex was the Italian baroque genius Bartolomeo Rastrelli, best known for designing the Winter Palace in St Petersburg. Rastrelli wasn't able to complete Rundāle before Empress Anna died in 1740, and Von Bühren was forced into exile. But when Catherine the Great took the Russian throne in the 1760s Von Bühren returned with Rastrelli to finish the mothballed palace. It was completed, with rococo elements, in 1768, and served as the Duke's summer home until his death in 1772.

Today about 40 of the palace's 138 rooms are open to visitors, as are the extensive, wonderfully landscaped gardens. Although the furnishings in the rooms are not original – they were donated or bought when the palace was restored in the 1970s – they are positively exquisite. Outside the palace ballroom, a real stork's nest is visible in a chimney, bizarrely mirroring a stork's nest engraving in the ceiling of the ballroom, which was painted white

to better highlight the bright plumage worn by ball guests.

To get here take a bus from Riga to Bauska (1.60Ls, 1¼ hours, hourly), 12km west of Pilsrundāle. Buses run sporadically from Bauska to Pilsrundāle – the tourist office in Riga has details.

You may also wish to check out Rastrelli's **Jelgava Palace** in Jelgava, 30km east of Pilsrundāle, which today houses a university. There's also an interesting **castle** in Bauska.

Jūrmala

pop 56,000

They call it the Baltic Riviera, and while the weather's a bit too fickle to justify the moniker, this endless stretch of sandy beach, backed by an odd mix of quaint wooden Art Nouveau houses and shocking Soviet-era sanatoriums, makes a delightful respite from the hustle and bustle of Riga.

Jūrmala actually consists of 14 townships spread out over 32km due west of Riga. Unless you have a car or bicycle (in which case you can explore several townships), you'll want to head straight to the two main townships of Majori and Dzintari, linked by Jumas iela, a 1km pedestrian street that constitutes Jūrmala's main drag.

Jūrmala Tourism Information Centre (☎ 2714 7900; www.jurmala.lv; Lienes iela 5, Majori; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, 10am-3pm Sun) disseminates free maps and a useful brochure outlining walks, bike rides and tourist attractions in the area. It can arrange accommodation in private homes for as little as 5Ls.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Besides its 'Blue Flag' beach, Jūrmala's main attraction is its colourful Art Nouveau **wooden houses**, distinguishable by frilly awnings, detailed façades and elaborate towers. These houses are found all over Jūrmala, but you can get your fill by taking a leisurely stroll along Jūras iela, which parallels Jomas iela in Majori and Dzintari. The houses are in various states of repair; some are dilapidated and abandoned, others are beautifully renovated, and still others are brand new constructions.

Way at the other end of the architectural spectrum are several particularly gaudy beachfront Soviet-era sanatoriums. No specimen glorifies the genre quite like the **Vaivari sanatorium** (Asaru prospekts 61), on the main road

5km west of Majori. It resembles a giant, beached cruise ship that's been mothballed since the Brezhnev era. Surprisingly it still functions, catering to an elderly clientele who have been visiting regularly since, well, the Brezhnev era.

You can rent **bicycles** at several places around town, including most hotels, for 5Ls per day. Check www.jask.lv for **kiteboarding** information.

Kemerī National Park

Jūrmala is the jumping-off point for this 42,790-hectare **national park** (www.kemerī.gov.lv). Ancient bogs, swamps, lakes and forests are all found here, along with a wealth of flora and fauna. You can get information on hikes and canoe trips in the park from the **Information Centre** (☎ 2773 0078; Meža māja; ☹ 9am-6pm May-Sep) in Kemerī, the westernmost township of Jūrmala.

SLEEPING & EATING

There's a dizzying array of lodging options here, few of them good values. Many offer a full range of spa services. Prices go way down outside the peak months of July and August.

Kempings Nemo (☎ 2773 2349; nemo@nemo.lv; Atbalss iela 1, Vaivari; cottages 5-24Ls, per camp site/person 1/1Ls; (P) ☹) It's right next to Nemo Water Park and the beach, but it's a long way from most of the action.

Elina (☎ 2776 1665; www.elinahotel.lv; Lienes iela 43; d from 25Ls; (P) ☹) There's nothing particularly special about this place except for the price. Rooms are basic but have what you need – namely a bed, closet and TV.

Baltic Beach Hotel (☎ 2777 1400; www.balticbeach.lv; Jūras iela 23-25, Majori; s 50-100Ls, d 55-120Ls; (P) ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹) The hulking Soviet exterior here belies a crisp lobby and impeccably renovated rooms, many with balconies overlooking the beach. It has a top-notch spa, good restaurant and a primo location.

Slavū (Jomas iela 57; meals 4-9Ls) A rare year-round eatery in Jūrmala, it serves a ferociously good chicken shashlyk among other dishes. There's a weekend nightclub here in the summer.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Suburban trains go every 20 minutes or so to/from Riga (0.51Ls, 40 minutes). All stop in Dubulti and most stop in Dzintari, Majori and the other townships.

EASTERN LATVIA

Heading east out of Riga, cobblestones quickly yield to conifers as you enter the wild and woolly Vidzeme region. The region's highlight is the Gauja National Park, an outdoor lovers' paradise with hiking, canoeing, mountain biking, berry picking, fishing and even skiing (albeit on modest slopes) on offer. The region is also dripping with history, as a slew of medieval castles attests.

Much of Sigulda and all of Cēsis – the only two towns covered here – lie within the 49,000-hectare national park.

GAUJA NATIONAL PARK

Much of Vidzeme's prime forest-clad real estate falls within this highly accessible **national park** (www.gnp.gov.lv). Some 150 bird species and almost 50 different mammals can be found frolicking amid its rivers, cliffs and pine forests. The park's extensive network of camping grounds makes it a fine place for human frolicking as well. The best camping grounds line the Gauja River between the Cēsis and Sigulda.

SIGULDA

pop 10,855

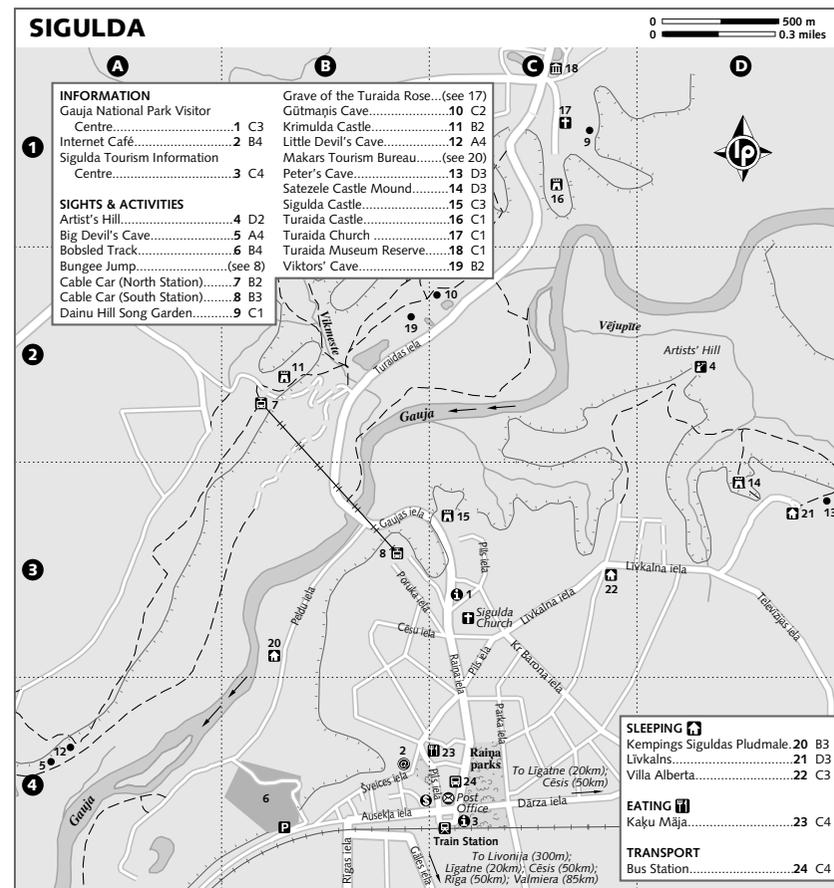
It's hard to believe that this tranquil paradise, spread out over a ridge above the Gauja River and cloaked in a blanket of pine forest, is only a half-hour (50km) drive from Riga. Like all of Latvia, Sigulda lacks high mountains, but that hasn't stopped it from becoming Latvia's outdoor activities capital. As its medieval castles attest, it's also pretty darn old – 800 years old, to be exact, as of 2007.

Information

The helpful **Gauja National Park Visitor Centre** (☎ 2780 0388; www.gnp.gov.lv; Baznīcas iela 3, Sigulda; ☹ 9.30am-7pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar) can arrange guided tours of Sigulda and the national park. **Sigulda Tourism Information Centre** (☎ 2797 1335; www.sigulda.lv; Ausekļa iela 6; ☹ 10am-7pm May-Oct, to 5pm Nov-Apr) has maps and loads of other information. There's also an **internet café** (Pils iela 3; per hr 0.70Ls; ☹ 10am-10pm).

Sights

Stunning **Turaida Castle** occupies an enviable knoll overlooking the Gauja River inside the **Turaida Museum Reserve** (☎ 2797 1402; www.turaida-muzejs.lv; admission 1.50Ls; castle & museum ☹ 9am-7pm



May-Oct, 10am-6pm Oct-Apr, grounds till 9pm Jun-Aug). Turaida means 'garden of god' in ancient Liv, and it's an apt enough moniker for this serene sanctuary – even if the Liv gods might frown on the big summer crowds. The sprawling grounds include the sculpture-festooned **Dainu Hill Song Garden**, the quaint wooden-spired **Turaida Church** and a local-history **museum** in a 15th-century granary. In the churchyard two lime trees shade the **grave** of the legendary Turaida Rose; read her heartbreaking story in the museum.

The 18th-century Great Northern War left **Sigulda Castle** in ruins, but it's enchanting to scramble around this once-formidable knight's stronghold and enjoy the views of Turaida Castle across river. There are outdoor concerts here in the summer. Across the street

is a scenic **cable car** (return tickets weekdays/weekend 1/1.50Ls; ☹ departs half-hourly 10am-7.30pm May-Sep, departs hourly 10am-4pm Oct-Apr) that runs across the valley to the ruins of **Krimulda Castle**.

Activities

One experience you'll never forget is the hair-raising ride down Sigulda's **bobsled track** (Sveices iela 13; tourist/authentic bobsled 4/35Ls; ☹ all evenings & 11am-5pm weekends Nov-Mar, 11am-5pm weekends May-Sep) with a professional driver at 100km/h. Think of the scariest rollercoaster you've ever been on and multiply the fear factor by three. Less intrepid souls can negotiate the track in a five-man 'tourist bob' resembling an oversized raft, and there's a wheeled bob for summer sliding.

WORTH A TRIP

Līgatne, 20km east of Sigulda and only slightly further from Cēsis, offers a fine escape from often-crowded Sigulda and a chance to see animals roaming in relatively natural confines near the **Līgatne Nature Trails** (visitor centre ☎ 2415 3313; adult/child 1/0.50Ls; 🕒 9.30am–5pm Mon, to 6.30pm Tue–Sun). The animals here, most of which are indigenous to Latvia, were rescued after being injured or abandoned in the wild. Their spacious outdoor pens, linked by a series of walking trails, leave only the bears wanting for space. There's also a loop for cars and bicycles.

There's a camping ground on the river near the visitor centre, and you might consider floating back to Sigulda on a raft, canoe or innertube (below). To get here, take a train to Līgatne and walk or hitch the 4km to the trails.

For the real deal you *must* book in advance through Karīna at Makars Tourism Bureau (below). This track was once the primary training ground for Soviet bobsledders and lugers, and it still hosts many big regional competitions.

Adrenaline junkies can also **bungee jump** (☎ 2921 2731; www.lgk.lv; jumps from 17Ls; 🕒 Fri–Sun May–Oct from 6.30pm) from the cable car over the Gauja River. The same company can also get you airborne in a **vertical wind tunnel** (📞 2838 4400; per min 5Ls). Call for advance booking.

HIKING

Sigulda is prime hiking territory so bring your walking shoes. A popular easy route is the 40-minute walk from Krimulda Castle to Turaida Museum Reserve via **Gūtmaņis Cave** and **Viktors' Cave**. Or you can head south from Krimulda and descend to **Little Devil's Cave** and **Big Devil's Cave**, cross the river via footbridge, and return to Sigulda (about two hours).

East of Sigulda, try the well-marked loop that joins **Peter's Cave**, **Satezele Castle Mound** and **Artist's Hill**; it starts from behind the Līvkalns hotel and takes about 1½ hours. The view of Turaida Castle and the Gauja River valley from Artists' Hill is spectacular.

The Gauja National Park Visitor Centre (p428) has details on longer walks.

FLOATING

Floating down the peaceful Gauja River is a great way to observe this pristine area and have a few wildlife encounters if you're lucky. There are camping grounds all along the stretch of river from Cēsis to Sigulda. **Makars Tourism Bureau** (☎ 2924 4948; www.makars.lv; Peldu iela 2; tours per boat 10–40Ls) is one of several organisers of boat trips along the Gauja, and you can just head upstream, stick your arse in an innertube, and float back to town.

Sleeping & Eating

Livonija (☎ 2797 3066; www.livonija.viss.lv; Pulkveža Brieva iela 55; dm/s/d 8/15/22Ls; 📞) Friendly, bright, cheery and fun. The nine dorm beds are distributed among four rooms in a wonderful annex with satellite TV and a free (!) washing machine.

Līvkalns (☎ 2797 0916; www.livkals.lv; Pēteralas iela; s/d from 24/28Ls; 📞) No place is more rustic than this idyllic retreat next to a pond on the forest's edge. The rooms are pine-fresh but lack noise-reducing carpeting. The cabin-in-the-woods-style restaurant is sensational.

Villa Alberta (☎ 2797 1060; www.villaalberta.lv; Līvkalna iela 10a; s/d from 35/40Ls; 📞) This boutique in a brick house oozes class inside and out. Each of the meticulously designed, spacious rooms has a different theme – Alaskan, Mexican, Mayan and more.

Kempings Siguldas Pludmale (☎ 2924 4948; www.makars.lv; Peldu iela 2; camp sites per person/tent/car/caravan 1/1/1/2Ls; 🕒 15 May–15 Sep) Wonderful riverside camping spot that rents tents for 4Ls a day.

Kaku Māja (☎ 2700 272; Pils iela 8; mains 3–5Ls) Your one-stop shop in the town centre for just about everything. There's a restaurant that turns into a club on weekends, a basement sports bar and a cheap caf teria-style canteen next door.

Getting There & Around

For information on buses and trains to/from Riga, see p436.

There's at least one public bus per hour between Sigulda train station and Turaida until about 8pm (0.25Ls). Hitching is popular around here, but take the usual precautions.

CĒSIS

pop 17,588

Stings of history, ecologically well-endowed and quaint to the core, Cēsis can trap you for days. Latvians say that this town is quintessentially Latvian and pay it due homage by

drinking lots of Cēsu *alus*, which recently became the country's most popular beer.

Pick up a map at the **Cēsis Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 2412 1815; www.cesis.lv; Pils laukums 2; 🕒 9am–6pm Mon–Sat, 10am–5pm Sun May–Sep, 10am–5pm Oct–Apr) near the castle. **Capital Datorsalons** (☎ 2410 7111; Rīgas iela 7; per hr 0.50Ls; 🕒 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat) has internet access.

Sights

Endearing **Cēsis Castle** (Pils laukums 11; adult/student incl park & museum 1.50/0.70Ls; 🕒 10am–5pm Tue–Sun Oct–Apr, to 6pm Tue–Sun May–Sep), with its magnificent twin towers, is Latvia's best-preserved castle. The Master of the Livonian Order chose it as his residence in 1237 when Cēsis was the capital of Livonia. The castle's western tower has a viewpoint overlooking **Castle Park**, and the adjoining 18th-century New Castle contains a museum of history and art. The city's old **Lenin Statue** lies in an open coffin on the castle grounds.

There are plenty of outdoor activities going on here, including boat trips down the Gauja (opposite).

Sleeping & Eating

Hostel Puņķiņkrogs (☎ 2412 0290; cdzp@apollo.lv; Saules iela 23; d with shared bathroom per person 6Ls; 📞) Inside this grimy Soviet-style building, 1km west of the train station, lurk perfectly fine rooms for peanuts. You can buy food at the store downstairs and self-cater in the nice kitchen.

Katrina (☎ 2410 7700; www.hotelkatrina.lv; Mazā Katrinas iela 8; s/d 28/36Ls; 📞) This pinkish building near the centre of the action is the best midrange option in town. Rooms are bright with light-wood furniture and have free internet access.

Hotel Cēsis (☎ 2412 0122; www.hotel.kolonna.com; Vienības laukums 1; s/d 30/42Ls; 📞 ☒) This rather stately place is Cēsis's best hotel. Rooms are

spacious and comfortable and the English-speaking staff are superhelpful. The inhouse restaurant serves Latvian and European cuisine in a formal setting and is excellent, as well as having a lovely garden where you can dine outside.

DivasPuses (Rīgas iela 4) This well-situated bar has decent pizzas and stays open late on Saturday nights, catering to a diverse crowd.

Getting There & Away

For information on buses and trains to/from Riga, see p436.

WESTERN LATVIA

Sandy beaches meet rocky seaside points, rolling farmland yields to thick forests, and cobbled medieval towns bump heads with thriving urban centres in Latvia's enchanting western Kurzeme region. Known as the Courland in English, it's named after the Baltic Cours who lived here before the 13th-century German invasion. The country's most diverse region, it presents off-the-beaten-track exploring around Cape Kolka and more accessible delights in Kuldīga, Ventspils and Liepāja.

KOLKA & CAPE KOLKA

The Gulf of Riga meets the Baltic sea in dramatic fashion at **Cape Kolka**, a desolate moonscape of wind-swept sand bars and angry currents. The raw, powerful effect of this desolate point was amplified by a biblical winter storm in 2005, which uprooted dozens of trees and tossed them like matchsticks onto the sandy beach, where they remain hideously entombed, roots in the air.

The monument near the entrance to the beach was put up in 2002 after three Swedes

THE LAST OF THE LIVS

Kurzeme is home to some of the last remaining Livs, a Finno-Ugric peoples who first migrated to northern Latvia 5000 years ago. Although many Latvians descended from this fishing tribe, less than 200 Livs remain in Latvia today, clustered in 14 fishing villages along the coast south of Cape Kolka. Hungary, Finland and Estonia also have small Liv populations, but they consider this area their homeland and return every August for the **Liv Festival** in Mazirbe, 18km south-west of Kolka.

While the Liv language is still taught in local elementary schools and at Tartu University in Estonia, there are fewer than 10 native speakers remaining in the world. You can learn about the Livonians at the small **Livonian Centre** (☎ 2327 7267; 🕒 9am–6pm Mon–Fri) behind the library on the main street in Kolka, and in a few other Kurzeme towns.

drowned in the cape's shallow but treacherous, quicksand-bottomed waters. One side reads, 'For people, ships and Livian earth'; the other, 'For those the sea took away.' Locals claim the cape's waters are littered with more shipwrecks than anywhere else in the Baltics. Cape Kolka's beauty is best admired from the beach.

Kolka's only hotel is the basic **Zitari** (☎ 2324 7145; d 15Ls) on the main street.

Getting There & Away

Cape Kolka is less than two hours from Riga by car, making an easy day trip. Two daily buses make the trip but can take up to five hours.

For more active sorts, an excellent way to get up here is by bicycle from Jūrmala. It starts off bumpy but the road soon turns into the beautifully paved, incredibly scenic, two-lane Hwy P131. It's about 130km from Jūrmala to Cape Kolka, and there are many campsites and guesthouses along the way, particularly in Purciems, 22km south of Kolka.

VENTSPILS

pop 44,000

Latvia's main port sure doesn't feel like the gritty, industrial hub it's supposed to be. It's relatively quiet, with lots of parks, a clean beach, some rustic old wooden houses and a lovely promenade along the canal port. Each year the city plays host to the country's Eurovision contest finals – quite a distinction in Latvia.

Information

Ventspils Tourism information centre (☎ 2362 2263; www.tourism.ventspils.lv; Turgus iela 7; ☎ 8am–7pm Mon–Fri, 10am–5pm Sat, 10am–3pm Sun May–Sep, 8am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–3pm Sat & Sun Nov–Apr) can arrange cheap hostel accommodation in summer. **Ventspils Library** (Akmeņu iela 2; per hr 0.50Ls; ☎ 10am–7pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat) is a superb new facility with internet access.

Sights

Ventspils' 13th-century **Livonian Order Castle** (Jāņa iela 17) hosts a cutting-edge **museum** (☎ 2362 2031; adult/child 1/0.50 Ls; ☎ 9am–6pm May–Oct, 10am–5pm Nov–Apr) with an interactive display on castle history and two panoramic telescopes for visitors to enjoy an eagle-eye view of the port and city.

Sleeping & Eating

Piejūras Kempings (☎ 2362 7925; www.camping.ventspils.lv; Vasarīcu iela 56; camp sites per person 1.50Ls, basic/equipped 4-person cottages from 12/24Ls; (P)) This

superb camping ground is just a five-minute walk from the beach, and rents gorgeous wooden cottages year-round.

Olimpiskā Centra Ventspils (☎ 2362 8032; www.ocventspils.lv; Lielais prospekts 33; r 13Ls; (P) ☎) This hotel is effectively the institutional arm of Ventspils' state-of-the-art Olympic Centre is easily the best hotel deal in all of Latvia.

Melanis Sivēns (Jāņa iela 17; mains 2–4Ls) Ventspils' nicest restaurant is in the Livonian Order Castle dungeon.

Kosmos (Ganību 22/24; mains 2–4Ls) While best known as a club, this warehouse-style space is also a tasty option for lunch or dinner.

Getting There & Away

Buses run to/from Kuldīga (1.35Ls, one hour, seven daily), Liepāja (3.40Ls, two hours, seven daily) and Riga (2.30Ls, 3¼ hours, at least hourly).

For international ferry schedules see p436.

KULDĪGA

pop 14,000

Picturesque Kuldīga is a mellow medieval masterpiece. The antithesis of nearby Liepāja, it doesn't have a whole lot to do besides stroll its narrow streets, chill out down by the river and soak up the old-world charm.

The **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 2332 2259; www.kuldiga.lv; Baznīcas iela 5; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat, 10am–2pm Sun May–Oct, 9am–5pm Mon–Fri Nov–Apr) in the old Town Hall has a great brochure explaining the fascinating history of the town, which dates to 1242 when the German Order of Knights built a castle on the Venta River.

All that remains of the castle today are a few mounds and ditches scattered around pleasant, sculpture-laden **Pils parks**, a short walk east of the tourist centre. From here you get a good vantage point of gentle **Kuldīga waterfall**. At 275m, it's said to be Europe's widest – just don't expect Niagara Falls!

Kuldīga's main drag, pedestrian **Liepājas iela**, is a fine place to plop down in a street-side café and watch the world go by. **Jāņa Nams** (☎ 2332 3456; Liepājas iela 36; s/d 20/22Ls; (P)) is a clean middle-of-the-road sleeping option; inquire at the tourist centre if you prefer something more up- or downmarket.

Buses run to/from Ventspils (1.35Ls, one hour, seven daily), Liepāja (2.20Ls, 1¼ hours, eight daily) and Riga (2.30Ls, 3¼ hours, hourly). Use the bus stop near Rimi super-

market on Sūru iela to avoid a long hike to/from the bus station.

LIEPĀJA

pop 90,000

Liepāja's irrepressible party spirit and exuberant embrace of design make it one of Latvia's hippest cities. Known as 'the cradle of Latvian rock', the city doesn't turn out bands like it used to, but it has two of the world's funkier clubs and a great beach where the Baltics' craziest summer beach party is held.

Liepāja Tourist Information Office (☎ 2348 0808; www.liepaja.lv/turisms; Rožu laukums iela 11; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Fri, 9am–4pm Sat, 10am–3pm Sun May–Sep, 9am–5pm Mon–Fri Oct–Apr) can help with accommodation and has details on getting to Liepāja's one must-see attraction, **Karosta Prison**, in the crumbling Karosta district south of the centre. Among the tours here is the quirky and unique 'prison experience' tour that involves donning prisoner garb and spending the night. Whilst in Karosta check out the crumbling old Tsarist forts slipping into the sea and the ubiquitous red-brick turn-of-the-century architecture.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Fontaine (☎ 2342 0956; www.fontaine.lv; Jūras iela 24; r from 15Ls; (P) ☎) Liepāja's reputation as a boutique haven rests largely on the doorstep of this kitschy hotel. The themed rooms here are brimming over with curiosities such as old Soviet army footlockers, B-movie posters, and quilted bedspreads. Reception doubles as a curiosity shop, crammed with dusty Soviet-era gas masks and an array of secondhand clothing.

More fastidious types might prefer the more minimalist boutique **Porins** (☎ 2915 0596; www.porins.lv; Palmu iela 5; s/d 18/25Ls; (P)) or the **Beach Hotel Liepāja** (☎ 2342 2095; www.liepajahotel.lv; Kr. Barona 14; s/d 15/30Ls; (P)).

Porins and Pablo (see Entertainment) have good restaurants, or for something a little fancier try **Vecais Kapteinis** (☎ 342 5522; Dubelsteina iela 14; mains 3–7Ls), a marvellous seafood restaurant that also serves meat and pasta dishes.

Entertainment

Fontaine Palace (☎ 2348 8510; www.fontainepalace.lv; Dzīrmavu iela 4) If you like Hotel Fontaine, you'll love this inimitable nightclub–concert venue

housed in a gorgeous 18th-century warehouse. Note the giant phallus standing at attention over the main dance floor.

Pablo (☎ 2348 1555; www.pablo.lv; Zivju iela 4/6) Liepāja's other stroke of genius is this four-storey party palace, also known as 'Latvia's 1st Rock Café'. It's essentially a shrine to Latvian rock'n'roll, complete with a live-music stage, restaurant and rollicking nightclub.

Every July Pablo helps throw the **Baltic Beach Party** (www.balticbeachparty.lv), fast becoming a must-stop on the Eastern Europe party circuit. In August it helps put on the **Amber of Liepāja** (www.liepajaszintars.lv) rock festival.

Getting There & Away

Buses run to/from Kuldīga (2.20Ls, 1¼ hours, eight daily) and Ventspils (3.40Ls, two hours, seven daily), and there are several buses (4.30Ls, 3¼ hours) and one early morning train (3.40Ls, 3¼ hours) to/from Riga.

LATVIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Riga was already becoming popular before Ryanair entered the scene in 2005, resulting in a huge spike in both stag parties and more civilised forms of tourism, and making it hard to get a room in the peak season (June to August). Several Riga hotels opened and/or expanded in advance of the May 2005 World Ice Hockey Championships, which has alleviated the room crunch somewhat, but you should still book well in advance.

A recent spate of hostel openings in Riga means a cheap bed is no longer so hard to come by – but again, book ahead. You can find listings for hostels across Latvia and book beds at the website of the **Latvian Youth Hostel Association** (www.hostellinglatvia.com). Prices range from 5Ls to 15Ls per night. There are plenty of good camping grounds across the country, both with and without facilities.

For a double room in the high season expect to pay 25Ls to 40Ls for budget lodging in Riga, and up to 150Ls at the top end. You'll pay much less in the regions, where good budget rooms start at about 12Ls. Rates are typically at least 20% cheaper during the low season (generally around October to April).

ACTIVITIES

With hectare after hectare of unspoilt forest and national parkland, Latvia is ideal for camping, hiking, bird-watching, berry-picking, mushrooming or picnicking in the woods.

Sigulda (p428), on the border of the Gauja National Park, is a haven for adventure enthusiasts looking to float the Gauja River, bungee jump, bobsled, or ski down one of Latvia's modest slopes. Argonaut Hostel (p422) runs a series of unique adventure tours, many of them around Sigulda.

The country's extensive coastline lends itself to kiteboarding and windsurfing – notoriously windy Liepāja (p433) is a hotbed. Locals simply love to while away the winter hours ice fishing on the country's many lakes and estuaries.

BUSINESS HOURS

Most shops open between 10am and 6pm in the larger towns and cities on weekdays and Saturdays. Banks generally open from 9am to 5pm weekdays. Most bars and restaurants open between 10am and noon and close around 11pm. Bars and some restaurants stay open much later on weekends – until 2am or till the last customer leaves.

DISABLED TRAVELLERS

The cobbled streets of Riga's Old Town make life difficult for wheelchair users, but the city is slowly coming around, and about half the city's buses (but none of the trams or trolleybuses) are now equipped for disabled travellers. Most of the newer hotels have at least a couple of rooms kitted out for disabled travellers.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Check www.mfa.gov.lv/en/ministry/mission for a full listing of Latvian missions abroad and foreign missions in Latvia.

Latvian Embassies & Consulates Abroad

Australia (☎ 02-9744 5981; dalins@optusnet.com.au; 32 Parnell St, Strathfield NSW 2135)

Canada (☎ 613-238 6014; www.ottawa.am.gov.lv; 350 Sparks Street, Suite 1200, Ottawa, Ontario, K1R 7S8)

Estonia (☎ 2-627 7850; embassy.estonia@mfa.gov.lv; Tõnismägi 10, EE10119 Tallinn)

France (☎ 01 53 64 58 10; www.paris.am.gov.lv; 6 Villa Said, 75116 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-8260 02 22; www.am.gov.lv/berlin; Reinerzstrasse 40-41, D-14193 Berlin)

Ireland (☎ 01 662 1610; embassy.ireland@mfa.gov.lv; 14 Lower Leeson St, Dublin 2)

Lithuania (☎ 52-131 220; embassy.lithuania@mfa.gov.lv; Ciurlionio gatvė 76, LT-03100 Vilnius)

Russia (☎ 495-232 9760; www.am.gov.lv/lv/moscow; ul Chaplignina 3, Moscow)

UK (☎ 020-7312 0040; www.london.am.gov.lv; 45 Nottingham Place, London W1U 5LY)

USA (☎ 202-328-2840; www.latvia-usa.org; 2306 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in Latvia

The following diplomatic offices are in Riga.
Australia (☎ 2722 4251; australia@apollo.lv; Arhitektu iela 1-305)

Canada (☎ 2781 3945; www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/canada-europa/baltics; Baznīcas iela 20/22)

Estonia (☎ 2781 2020; www.estemb.lv; Skolas iela 13)

France (☎ 2703 6600; www.ambafrance-lv.org; Raiņa bulv 9)

Germany (☎ 2708 5100; www.deutschebotschaft-riga.lv; Raiņa bulv 13)

Lithuania (☎ 2732 1519; <http://lv.urm.lt>; Rūpniecības iela 24)

Russia (☎ 2733 2151; www.latvia.mid.ru; Antonijas iela 2)

UK (☎ 2777 4700; www.britain.lv; Alunāna iela 5)

USA (☎ 2703 6200; www.usembassy.lv; Raiņa bulv 7)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

During the midsummer **Ligo** celebration on the night of 23 June (St John's Eve), the entire country retreats to feast on country food, jump over fires and reenact other pagan rituals. It's not always the best time to visit, however: Latvians joke (somewhat justifiably) that 'it always rains on Ligo'.

Undoubtedly Latvia's biggest festival, held every five years, is its **national song festival** (www.dziesmusvetki2008.lv). The 24th edition of the festival is scheduled for 2008.

Latvia hosts the pan-Baltic **Baltica International Folklore Festival** every three years; the next one is scheduled for 2009.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

The Baltics first gay pride event – a march in Riga in July 2005 – was a milestone for gay-rights activists. Riga's gay scene revolves around established club XXL (p425). Compared to gay scenes across the rest of Europe, Latvia's is a fledgling operation but no less fun. There are links to gay and lesbian clubs, groups and information at www.gay.lv (in Latvian).

HOLIDAYS

Latvia's official public holidays:

New Year's Day 1 January

Good Friday March/April

Easter Sunday March/April

Day after Easter March/April

Convocation of the Constitutional Assembly of Latvia 1 May

Declaration of Independence from USSR 4 May

Mother's Day 2nd Sunday in May

Ligo 23 June, Midsummer Night (St John's Eve)

Jani 24 June, Midsummer Day (St John's Day)

National Day Anniversary of proclamation of Latvian Republic, 1918, on 18 November

Christmas Eve & Day 24 and 25 December

Boxing Day 26 December

New Year's Eve 31 December

INTERNET ACCESS

Riga has myriad 24-hour internet cafés and most reasonably sized provincial towns have a few places to log on. If you are paying much more than 0.50Ls per hour you are getting ripped off.

Riga airport, some provincial hotels and many cafés, restaurants and hotels in Riga provide paid wi-fi access through the monopolistic national telecoms company **Lat-telkom** (per hour/day 0.95/9.95Ls). A few hotels in Riga offer wi-fi free of charge to guests, but free wi-fi is not nearly as ubiquitous in Latvia as it is in neighbouring Lithuania and Estonia.

LANGUAGE

Latvian is one of only two surviving Baltic branches of the Indo-European language group (the other is Lithuanian). It is distantly related to the Germanic and Slavic language families.

Russian is the first language of 37.5% of Latvians, and is widely understood by anybody over the age of 25. You should have no trouble getting by with English in Riga. Knowledge of English is growing in the provinces, but learning a few Latvian phrases is a good idea.

MONEY

The national currency is the Lat (Ls). One Lat equals 100 santimi and is roughly equivalent in value to a British pound. Latvia was originally planning to adopt the euro by 2008, but because of high inflation this does not look likely to happen before 2010.

You should be able to find an ATM machine in any town where humans outnumber barnyard animals. Most big banks cash travellers cheques and most major currencies. Credit cards are widely accepted.

National bank **Latvijas Bankas** (www.bank.lv) posts exchange rates on its website.

POST

Latvia's postal system is almost completely reliable. It costs 0.36/0.45Ls to send a postcard/letter to Europe and 0.40/0.55 to other countries. Mail to North America takes about 10 days, and to Europe about a week. Stamps are sold at a post office (*pasts*).

TELEPHONE

Both mobile and fixed Latvian telephone numbers have seven digits. As of 2007 you have to dial a 2 before *any* number (both mobile and fixed), but there are no city codes. To make a call, simply dial 2 followed by the seven-digit number (of course you must also dial the country code ☎ 371, if you're calling from outside the country).

Calls can be made from cardphones using a telekarte, worth 2Ls, 3Ls or 5Ls and sold at kiosks and post offices, or with a major credit card; instructions in English are included in every booth. International cards are done by **Telenets** (www.telenets.lv) and **lattelekom** (www.lattelekom.lv). To make an international call, dial the international access code ☎ 00, followed by the country code, city code and number.

If you're going to be around for awhile, pick up a local SIM card (basically free with the purchase of credits) from any kiosk or supermarket and stick it in your mobile phone. The options are **Latvijas Mobilais Telefons' Okarte** (www.lmt.lv) and **Tele2** (www.tele2.lv). Local calls cost around 0.20Ls per minute, and you can send texts abroad for a nominal fee (international calls, on the other hand, will sap your credits in a hurry!). Mobile telephones likewise have seven digits and need no area code.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- Emergency ☎ 112
- Police ☎ 02
- Fire ☎ 01
- Ambulance ☎ 03

VISAS

Holders of EU passports don't need a visa to enter Latvia; nor do Australian, Canadian, Israeli, New Zealand, Swiss and US citizens, if staying for less than 90 days. South Africans are among some nationalities that do require visas. For information on obtaining visas and seeing if you need one, please visit www.mfa.gov.lv/en/service/visas.

TRANSPORT IN LATVIA

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

All flights to Latvia land at **Riga international airport** (RIX; ☎ 2720 7009; www.riga-airport.com), which has flight schedules and a full list of airlines flying to Riga on its website. There is no departure tax.

Latvia's flagship carrier is **Air Baltic** (www.airbaltic.lv; ☎ 2720 7777), with direct flights to about 30 cities in Europe.

Other major carriers with direct flights to Riga include the following:

Aeroflot (☎ 2724 0228; www.aeroflot.ru)

AeroSvit (☎ 2720 7502; www.aerosvit.ua)

Air Lingus (☎ 2735 7736; www.aerlingus.com)

Austrian Airlines (☎ 2750 7700; www.aa.com)

British Airways (☎ 2720 7097; www.britishairways.com)

Czech Airlines (☎ 2720 7636; www.czech-airlines.com)

KLM (☎ 2766 8600; www.klm.com)

LOT (☎ 2722 7234; www.lot.com)

Lufthansa (☎ 2750 7711; www.lufthansa.com)

Land

BORDER CROSSINGS

Lines are small at the Lithuania and Estonia borders and shouldn't hold you up more than 10 minutes. Have your passport, insurance and registration documents ready to expedite the process. See opposite for information on road rules and car hire.

If you're planning on crossing into Russia or Belarus in a rental car, check your rental conditions very carefully, most rental companies forbid this. For all road crossings into Russia or Belarus, see the boxed text on p929.

BUS

International bus companies **Eurolines** (☎ 2721 4080; www.eurolines.lv) and **Ecolines** (☎ 2721 4512; www.ecolines.lv) are based at the Riga bus station.

Eurolines and a few smaller carriers have buses from Riga to Vilnius (7.50Ls, five hours,

at least four daily), Moscow (15Ls, 17 hours, two daily), Tallinn (7Ls, 4½ hours, 10 to 15 daily), St Petersburg (12Ls, 13 hours, two daily) and Kaliningrad (8.50Ls, nine hours, two daily).

Ecolines and Eurolines serve various cities in Poland, Germany and other Western European countries, including Warsaw (22Ls, 10 hours, daily), Berlin (30Ls, 20 hours, daily) and London (81Ls, 36 hours, four weekly). See their websites for full schedules.

TRAIN

Riga is linked by direct train to the following international destinations: Moscow (from 25Ls, 18 hours, twice daily), St Petersburg (from 10Ls, 13 hours, daily), Kyiv (from 25Ls, 20½ hours, even days October to May, daily June to September), Lviv (from 18Ls, 26 hours, even days), and Vilnius (from 10Ls, five hours, even days). Visit www.ldz.lv for updated international train schedules.

Sea

Tickets for all ferries can be purchased through the carriers or through travel agents. Schedules change often and vary according to season.

RİGA

DFDS Tor Line (☎ 2735 3523; www.dfdstorline.lv; Zivju iela 1) goes to/from Lübeck, Germany (from 45Ls, 34 hours, two weekly). Estonia's **Tallink** (☎ 2709 9700; www.tallink.lv; Eksporta iela 3a) goes to/from Stockholm (from 25Ls, 16 hours, every other day).

VENTSPILS

Tickets for most ferries originating in Ventspils must be bought at the **ferry information office** (☎ 2360 7358; 7 Plosta iela). **Scandlines** (www.scandlines.lt) goes to/from Rostock, Germany (from €40, 27 hours, four weekly); Karlshamn, Sweden (info@becoship.se; from 55Ls, 17 hours, three weekly); and Nynäshamn, Sweden (jacob.norling@bourgergroup.se; from 50Ls, 11 hours, five weekly). **SSC** (☎ 2371 3607; ventspils@slkferries.ee; 5 Plosta iela) goes to/from Mõntu, Estonia (from 15Ls, four hours, four weekly).

GETTING AROUND

Air

There are no commercial domestic flights (Latvia's too tiny!).

Bicycle

Cycling is a great way to get around, as Latvia is as flat as a *blini* and its once-dismal roads are increasingly well-kept. The 160km ride from Riga up to Cape Kolka (p431) is an excellent two- to three-day ride. The **Latvian Bicycle Tourism Information Centre** (www.velokurjers.lv; Jēkabpils iela 19a) in Riga has cycling advice.

Bus

Buses are quicker, cheaper and more frequent than trains. Timetables are to the right inside Riga's bus station. Carefully check schedules so as not to get stranded at your destination; along some of these routes the last bus of the day departs as early as 6pm.

Destination	Cost	Duration	Frequency
Bauska	1.60Ls	1½hr	at least hourly
Cēsis	2Ls	2hr	at least 2 hourly
Kolka	3.40Ls	5hr	2 daily
Kuldīga	3.30Ls	3¼hr	at least hourly
Liepāja	4.30Ls	3¼hr	at least hourly
Sigulda	1Ls	1hr	at least 3 hourly
Ventspils	4.30Ls	3¼hr	hourly

Car & Motorcycle

Driving is the best way to get around the Latvian countryside. The road network is extensive and the roads in pretty good shape, even if most 'highways' are simple two-lane jobs. To drive from one end of the country to the other shouldn't take much more than four hours.

Driving is on the right-hand side. There's zero tolerance of drinking and driving (and a hefty fine of 500Ls plus a possible 15-day jail sentence if caught). Speed limits are generally 50km/h within towns and between 70km/h and 110km/h on highways), and are vigorously enforced. Headlights must be on at all times while driving.

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Of all the airport's car-rental agencies, **Budget** (☎ 2720 7327) seems to have the cheapest economy cars. Others airport agencies include **National** (☎ 720 7710) and **Europcar** (☎ 2720 7825), which has discounts for Riga Card holders. You can generally save money by renting an older car from a local agency, such as **Auto** (☎ 2958 0448), which can also supply you with a driver. Car-rental companies usually allow you to drive in all three Baltic countries, but not beyond.

To drive in Latvia you're technically required to have an International Driving Permit, but most rental car agencies won't hold you to it, nor will the cops.

Hitching

Hitching is never totally safe, and Lonely Planet doesn't recommend it. That said, hitching is popular in certain areas of the country, especially around Sigulda and Cēsis, and will often save you a lengthy bus wait.

Local Transport

Most reasonably sized cities have excellent public transport networks featuring a mix of trams, buses and trolleybuses (buses attached to overhead electric wires). Tickets generally cost 0.20Ls and can be bought on board. In smaller towns, such as Sigulda, taking a taxi may save you a long wait. For tips on public transport in Riga see p426.

Train

Train travel in Latvia is deliberate, to say the least, but the country is so small that it hardly matters. Suburban trains are the best way to get from Riga to Jūrmala (0.51Ls, 40 minutes, at least two hourly) and are a reasonable way to get from Riga to Sigulda (0.71Ls, one hour, 12 daily), Cēsis (1.10Ls, 1½ hours, five daily) and Liepāja (3.40Ls, three hours, daily). For complete domestic train timetables see www.ldz.lv.