

# Latvia

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Rīga** This vivacious city delights with cobbled Old Town streets, delectable Art Nouveau and a seething nightlife (p707)
- **Sigulda** Take a bobsled ride at 100km/h, bungee jump or just stroll among woods and castles (p713)
- **Best journey** Spend a night in Latvia's hippest city, Liepāja, a haven for cool clubs, raucous festivals and funky design (p715)
- **Off-the-beaten track** Spend a few days hiking or floating down the river in Gauja National Park (p713)

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 64,600 sq km
- **ATMs** No shortage anywhere humans outnumber barnyard animals
- **Budget** 20-25Lt per day
- **Capital** Rīga
- **Country Code** ☎ 371; international access code ☎ 00
- **Famous for** Rīga's black balsam, ice hockey, Eurovision eureka in 2002
- **Head of State** President Vaira Vīke-Freiberga
- **Languages** Latvian, Russian, English
- **Money** Lats (Ls); €1=0.70Ls; US\$1=0.55Ls; UK£1=1.03Ls; A\$1=0.41Ls; ¥100=0.50Ls; NZ\$1=0.34Ls; CA\$1 = 0.47Ls
- **Phrases** *labdien/sveiki* (hello), *cik?* (how much?), *paldies* (thank you), *lūdzu* (please/you're welcome)
- **Population** 2.3 million
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 2
- **Visas** none required for Australian, Canadian, EU, New Zealand or US citizens



## TRAVEL HINTS

We're not supposed to say this, but hitching actually works in parts of Latvia; the Rīga train station has various fast-food eateries.

## ROAMING LATVIA

Wander around Rīga, hang out on Jūrmala beach, then canoe down the Gauja River near Sigulda for a perfect Latvian week.

These are heady days for little Latvia, now a proud member of both the EU and the European backpackers' circuit. Count Latvia as one country that's ready for prime time. Ancient Rīga, stunningly diverse architecturally and fun, fun, fun, is a jewel of a city, despite the long winters. Outside of Rīga lies an outdoor-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.

## HISTORY

Latvia's history is a troubled whirlwind of fierce struggle and long periods of occupation. Latvians descended from tribes that settled on the territory of modern Latvia around 2000 BC to fish and take advantage of rich deposits of amber. These tribes eventually merged into one Latvian identity.

In 1201, at the bequest of the pope, German crusaders conquered Latvia and founded Riga, which became the major city in the German Baltic. The German Knights of the Sword made Riga their base for subjugating Livonia.

Latvia was conquered by Poland in 1561 and Catholicism was firmly established. Sweden then colonised 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; 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.

The first major public protest of the *glasnost* (openness) era was on 14 June 1987 when approximately 5000 people rallied at Riga's Freedom Monument to commemorate the 1941 Siberia deportations. The pro-independence Latvian Popular Front won a big majority in the March 1990 elections, but 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 Latvia entered the EU and its economy took off. 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. Today the future remains unclear but imbued with optimism.

## THE CULTURE

Latvia's 2.3 million inhabitants are 59% Latvian and 29% Russian, 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 most urban areas. But they also know how to unwind, as a Friday night out in Riga will attest.

## 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 (see p716 for more information). 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 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 numerous other Latvian pop and folk albums at **Upe** (Vāgnera iela 5) in Riga.

## READING UP

To gain an understanding of the psyche of the nation *The Holocaust in Latvia 1941–44* by Andrew Ezergailis is harsh but essential reading. It is the first comprehensive study of the local Jewish blood shed by Latvians and Germans.

## ENVIRONMENT

Latvia is 64,589 sq km in area – a little smaller than Ireland. Forest covers almost half of Latvian soil, providing a home to creatures such as wild boar, wolves and deer – although 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. Flat Latvia's highest 'peak' tops out at a mere 312m.

Soviet factories and chemical plants left quite a few stains on Latvia's environmental landscape, 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.

## TRANSPORT

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

#### Air

In 2005 budget carrier **Ryanair** ([www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) launched flights between Riga and London (Stansted), Liverpool, Stockholm (Skavsta), Frankfurt (Hahn), Tampere and Dublin. **EasyJet** ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)) has cheap flights between Riga and Berlin (Schönefeld), while **Norwegian** ([www.norwegian.no](http://www.norwegian.no)) offers budget flights to Oslo.

Latvia's flagship carrier is **Air Baltic** ([www.airbaltic.lv](http://www.airbaltic.lv); ☎ 2720 7777), with direct flights to about 30 cities in Europe. You'll find flight schedules and a full list of airlines flying to Latvia on the website of **Riga International Airport** (☎ 2720 7009; [www.riga-airport.com](http://www.riga-airport.com)).

#### Boat

**DFDS Tor Line** (☎ 2735 3523; [www.dfdstorline.com](http://www.dfdstorline.com); Zivju iela 1) has three weekly ferries between Lübeck, Germany (from 45Ls, 34 hours, three weekly) and Riga. One of those ferries goes via Ventspils.

Estonia's **Tallink** (☎ 2709 9700; [www.tallink.lv](http://www.tallink.lv); Eksporta iela 3a) sails to/from Stockholm (from 25Ls, 16 hours, every other day).

There are a few ferries connecting Ventspils with Germany and Sweden. Inquire at the **ferry information office** (☎ 2360 7358; 7 Plosta iela) in Ventspils or check the website of **Scandlines** ([www.scandlines.com](http://www.scandlines.com)).

**SSC** (☎ 2371 3607; [ventspils@slkferries.ee](http://ventspils@slkferries.ee); 5 Plosta iela) makes four weekly trips between Ventspils and Mõntu, Estonia (from 15Ls, four hours).

### EMERGENCY NUMBERS

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

#### Bus

International bus companies **Eurolines** (☎ 2721 4080; [www.eurolines.lv](http://www.eurolines.lv)) and **Ecolines** (☎ 2721 4512; [www.ecolines.lv](http://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).

#### Car & Motorcycle

Lines are small at the Lithuania and Estonia borders and shouldn't hold you up more than 10 minutes.

#### 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).

### GETTING AROUND

#### Bus

There are at least three buses hourly from Riga to Sigulda (1Ls, one hour) and at least one hourly to Cēsis (2Ls, two hours) and Liepāja (4.30Ls, 3¼ hours).

#### Car & Motorcycle

Latvia's road network is extensive and the roads are in pretty good shape, making driving an attractive option if you can afford it.

Of the rental agencies in the arrivals hall of the airport, **Budget** (☎ 2720 7327) seems to have the cheapest economy cars. 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.

#### 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 major cities have excellent public transport networks featuring a mix of trams, buses and trolleybuses.

#### Train

Suburban trains are the best way to get from Riga to Jūrmala (0.51Ls, 40 minutes, at least two hourly). Trains are also a reasonable option 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).

## RĪGA

#### pop 790,000

The Baltics' thumping heart lies in Riga, a glorious marriage of gracious Old World charmer and unabashedly liberated temptress. The charmer is Old Riga, 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 has most definitely been discovered in recent years – by both stag parties and more civilised tourists. View the crowds as an opportunity to make friends with fellow travellers similarly inebriated by Riga's bounty.

### GETTING INTO TOWN

The bus station is a three-minute walk south of Old Town. The train station is five minutes beyond that.

The airport is about 8km west of the city centre. Take bus 22 to the stop opposite the bus station (0.20Ls, 30 minutes). A taxi to the Old Town should cost about 10Ls.

## ORIENTATION

Riga straddles the Daugava River, with Old Town resting on its eastern flank. Old Town is dominated by three steeples – St Peter's, Dome Cathedral and St Jacob's. New Town sprawls northward and westward, separated from Old Riga by a band of parks.

## INFORMATION

### Discount Cards

**Riga Card** (per 24/48/72hr 8/12/16Ls, half price for under-16s) Available at the Tourism Information Centres and entitles you to a free city walking tour, free rides on trolleybuses and trams, free entry to some museums, a copy of *In Your Pocket* and other discounts.

### Internet Access

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

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

### Laundry

**Nivala** (Akas iela 4; wash/dry per load 2.40/0.80Ls; ☎ 24hr) Self-serve or leave it there.

### Media

**In Your Pocket** ([www.inyourpocket.com/latvia/en](http://www.inyourpocket.com/latvia/en); 1.20Ls) By far the most credible of the many city guides floating around, it's free at the airport and many hotels.

**The Baltic Times** ([www.baltictimes.com](http://www.baltictimes.com)) Good source of pan-Baltic news and cultural event listings, in English.

### Medical Services

**ARS Clinic** (☎ 2720 1001/3, emergency home service 720 1003; Skolas iela 5; ☎ 24hr) English-speaking service and an emergency home service.

**Vecpilsētas aptieka** (☎ 2721 3340; Audēju iela 20; ☎ 24hr) Pharmacy.

### Money

Banks and ATMs are all over the city.

**Latvia Tours** (☎ 2708 5001; [www.latviatours.lv](http://www.latviatours.lv); Kalķu iela 8; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri) Replaces American Express travellers cheques.

### 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.rigaturism.com](http://www.rigaturism.com); Rātslaukums 6; ☎ 10am-7pm); bus station (☎ 2722 0555; ☎ 9am-

7pm); train station (☎ 2723 3815; ☎ 10am-6.30pm) Gives out free maps, helps with accommodation, and books walking, bus or boat tours from a variety of tour operators.

## Travel Agencies

**STA Travel** (☎ 2700 7777; www.statravel.lv; Raiņa bulvāris 23; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Handles International Student Identity Cards (ISIC) and arranges visas to Russia and Belarus.

## SIGHTS Old Town

Riga's skyline centrepiece is Gothic **St Peter's** (Sv Pēterā baznīca; lift admission adult/student 2/70Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), thought to be about 800 years old. Don't miss the view from its famed spire. The streets around St Peter's yield plenty of delights, including the only Old Town **synagogue** (Peitavas iela 6-8) to survive WWII, and some Art Nouveau – check out **Kalēju iela 23**, **Audēju 7** (the city's first Art Nouveau building) and the delicious **Jauniela 25/29**.

St Peter's overlooks the Rātslaukums (Town Hall Square) and the **House of Blackheads**, (Rātslaukums 6; admission 1.50Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), 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.

Nearby, don't even think about missing the chilling **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), which documents Soviet atrocities and chronicles the Latvian resistance movement from 1940 onwards.

North of Rātslaukums you'll notice the Baltic's largest church, **Dome cathedral** (Doma laukums; admission 0.50Ls; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) looming over pleasant Dome Square. It boasts a marvellous 6,768-pipe organ, which was the world's largest when it was completed in 1884. The cathedral's foundations were laid in 1211. Beyond Dome Square you'll run into medieval **Riga Castle** (Pils laukums 3), which now houses the president and a couple of museums.

East of the castle, the third piece in Old Riga's skyline puzzle, **St Jacob's Cathedral** (Mazā Pils iela), has an interior dating back to 1225. It stands near the terminus of **Trokšņu iela**, Old Riga's narrowest street. Follow that east to the **Swedish Gate** (cnr Torņa & Aldaru ielas), which was built into the city walls in 1698 to celebrate

Swedish occupation and the 14th-century **Powder Tower**, the only survivor of the 18 towers in the old city wall. The **War Museum** (Smilšu iela 20; www.karamuzejs.lv; adult/child 0.50/0.25Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun) is in the Powder Tower.

Old Town's busiest square is Līvu laukums, where there are beer gardens in summer and an **outdoor ice rink** (admission free, skate rental per hr 0.50Ls) in winter. The square is overlooked by the **Great Guild** (p712), which faces the much-photographed **Cat House** (Meistaru iela 19).

Venturing northwards towards Brīvības bulvāris, you'll encounter **Laima Clock**, a 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.

## New Town

Just over the canal, the **Freedom Monument** (Brīvības bulvāris) effectively divides Old Town and New Town. During the Soviet years the Freedom Monument was offlimits and placing flowers at its base was a crime. 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 when Soviet troops stormed the nearby Interior Ministry.

Extending north and east of the Freedom Monument, Riga's 'New Town' rose to prominence as the centre of Riga's Art Nouveau (*Jugendstil*) movement in the early 20th century. The Art Nouveau movement was born in Paris, Munich and Vienna, but Riga arguably took it the furthest and today the city's Art Nouveau 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 city. Don't miss the renovated façades of **Strēlnieku 4a** and **Elizabetes 10a, 10b** and **33**.

Also in New Town you'll find the **Jews in Latvia Museum** (☎ 2728 3484; Skolas iela 6; admission by donation; ☎ noon-5pm Sun-Thu), which recounts Latvian Jewish history from the 16th century to 1945.

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 fascinating and peaceful escape from the city. The sprawling grounds feature sundry old-style farmhouses, churches and windmills, plus frequent festivals and traditional crafts and music. Take bus 1 from the corner of

Merķeļa iela and Tērbatas iela to the Brīvības muzejs stop.

## SLEEPING

A spate of recent hostel openings has made cheap beds easier to come by. You might also try an apartment rental agency such as **Patriciā** (☎ 2728 4868; tourism@parks.lv; Elizabetes iela 22).

**Old Town Hostel** (☎ 2722 3406; www.rigaoldtownhostel.lv; Valņu iela 43; dm from 7Ls, d 20Ls; ☎ ☎) Not only is this a top-three hostel, but it has two funky doubles that are the best value in the 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 adore this popular hostel, which boasts its own bobsled and doubles as an adventure-tour agency. Camaraderie runs rife among the wannabe X-Gamer clientele.

**Livonija** (☎ 2720 4180; livonija@nite.lv; Maskavas iela 32; s/d from 20/24Ls) The cheapest true hotel in Riga is plenty comfortable and located just four short tram stops from Old Town.

**ourpick** **Lenz Guesthouse** (☎ 2733 3343; www.lenz.lv; Lenču iela 2; s with/without bathroom 32/27Ls, d 35/32Ls; ☎) This quiet guesthouse on the fringes of the Art Nouveau district occupies that grey area between hostel and hotel. It's one of the rare budget hotels that pays attention to the details, including a big breakfast laid out in one of Riga's nicest communal kitchens.

Other recommended hostels:

**Posh Backpackers** (☎ 2721 0917; www.poshbackpackers.lv; Pūpolu iela 5; dm/d from 9/20Ls; ☎) Friendly home-away-from-home near bus station.

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

**Barons** (☎ 2910 5939; www.baronsbb.com; K Barona 25; dm/d per person with shared bathroom 11/25Ls; ☎) Argonaut's quieter, more upscale sister in New Town.

## SPLURGE

**Radi un Draugi** (☎ 2782 0200; www.draugi.lv; Mārstaļu iela 1; s/d from 37/46Ls; ☎) Several hotels in Riga charge twice as much and deliver half the quality of this Old Town nugget, which features harmoniously designed, kettle-equipped rooms, an elegant bar and a fine restaurant. The junior suites, only 6L more than doubles, are the hotel's triumphant signature.

## EATING

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 escapes the crowds in New Town.

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

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

**Kamāla** (Jauniela iela 14; mains 2-4Ls) Trance-y Indian music, ornately carved furniture and *apsaras* (heavenly nymphs) set the dreamy vibe at this intimate vegetarian restaurant. The exceptional Indian soup is among 25 on the menu.

**el Carlito** (☎ 2777 0586; Blaumaņa iela 38/40; mains 3-5Ls) Your quintessential bustling Mexican eatery mixes margaritas and fires up fajitas and *quesadillas* for 3Ls.

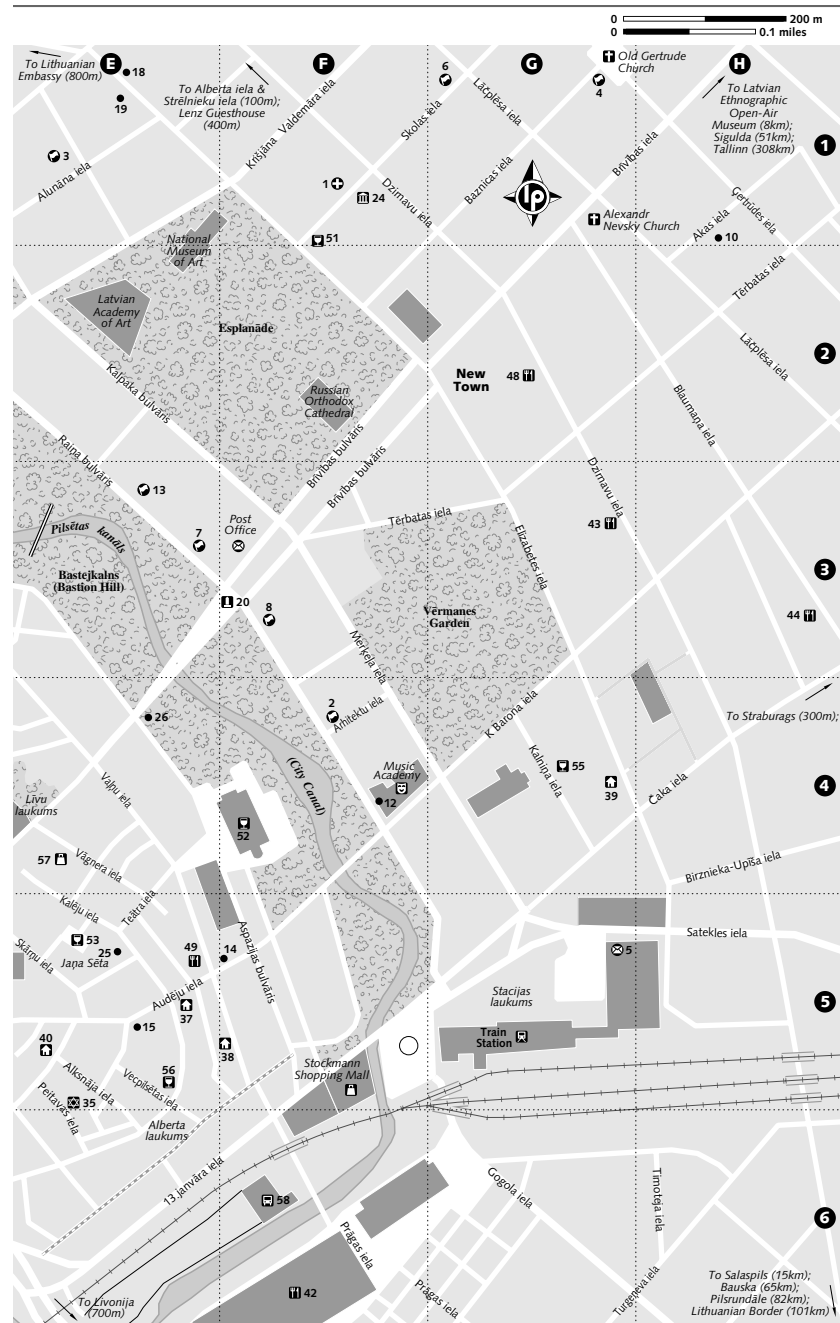
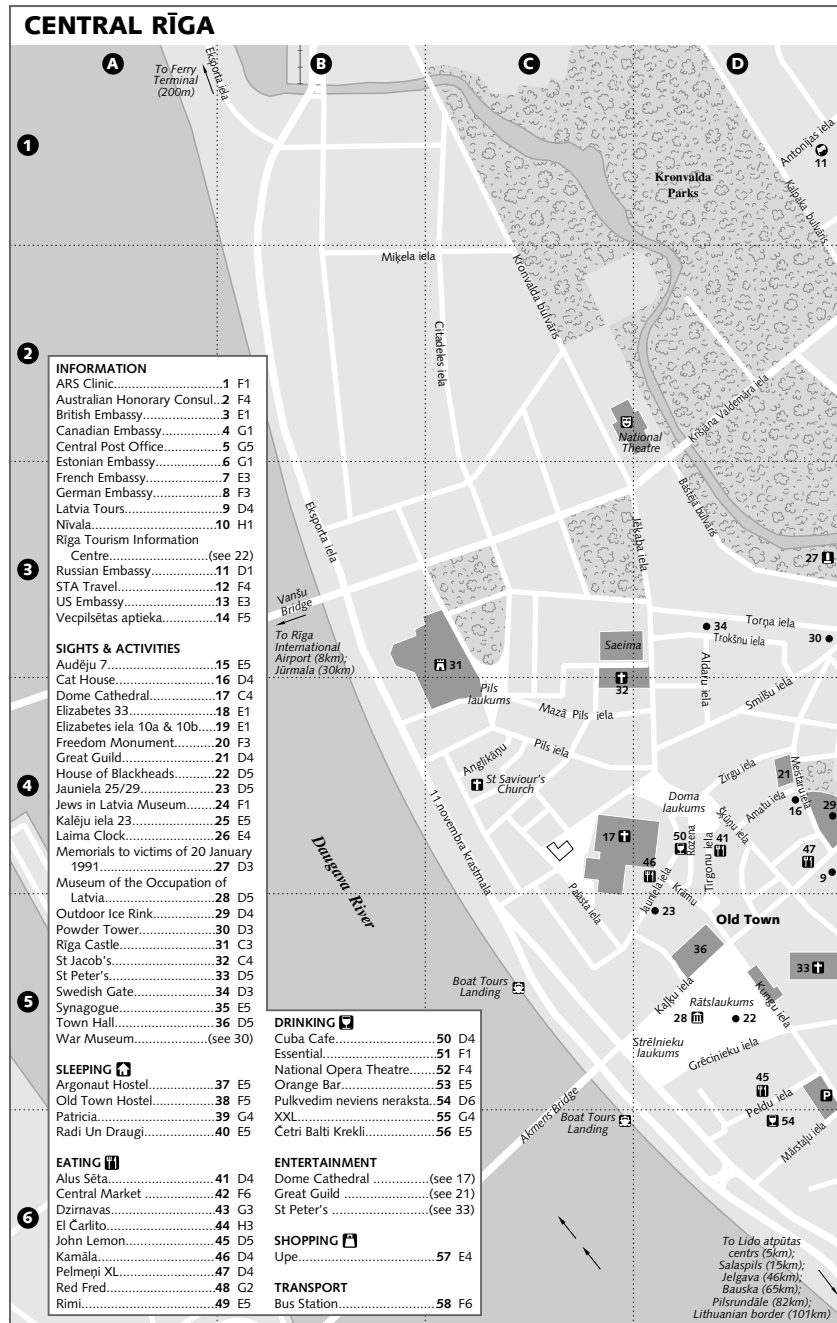
**Red Fred** (Dzīzavu iela 62; mains 3-6Ls) The urban hipster clientele probably doesn't have much experience using the pickaxes and hard hats on the walls, but you can't blame them for liking the eclectic food.

For affordable and scrumptious Latvian fare look no further than the buffet-style Lido chain. The flagship is the amusement park-like **Lido atpūtas centrs** (Kraista iela 76), where you might get lost amid endless buffet rows of pork knuckle, potato pancakes and, oh, about a thousand other dishes. From the bus station take the tram 7 for about 15 minutes to the 'Lido' Stop. Lower-key Lidos include **Alus sēta** (Tirgoņu iela 6; ☎ 10am-1am) in Old Town, and **Staburags** (A Čaka iela 55; ☎ noon-midnight) and **Dzirnava** (Dzīzavu iela 76; ☎ 8am-11pm) in New Town. A decidedly heavy meal with a pint of *alus* (beer) at any of these places shouldn't set you back more than 5Ls.

Self-caterers should head to Riga's colourful **Central market** (Centrālirgus iela), located in five huge hangars behind the bus station, or to **Rimi** (Universālieks Centrs, cnr Audēju & Valņu ielas; ☎ 9am-10pm).

## DRINKING & CLUBBING

Riga thoroughly deserves its reputation as a party mecca. Sports fans can head to any Irish pub for big-screen tube watching. The beer gardens on Līvu laukums and Doma laukums make fine places for pints in the warm months.



LATVIA

LATVIA

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

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

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

**Pulkvedim neviens neraksta** (No-one Writes to the Colonel; ☎ 2721 3886; Peldu iela 26-28; cover 1-3Ls Thu-Sat) Dull nights are a foreign concept at 'Pulkvedis', which serves up '80s and '90s hits on the ground floor and trancier beats downstairs.

**XXL** (☎ 2728 2276; Kalniņa iela 4; cover 1-10Ls) Riga's best gay club teems with both gay and straight life on weekends. Check www.gay.lv (in Latvian) for listings and other links.

**Essential** (☎ 2724 2289; www.essential.lv; Skolas iela 2; cover 5-7Ls; ☎ Thu-Sun) Overzealous security aside, there's no safer bet if partying till dawn is your mission. Sorry, no local beer – just 4Ls Coronas. Drink cocktails.

## ENTERTAINMENT

*In Your Pocket* lists movie venues and full opera, ballet and classical music schedules. Check www.livas.lv for movie listings.

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

**Great Guild** (Lielā ģilde; ☎ 2721 3643; www.music.lv/orchestra; Amatu iela 6; tickets 2-7Ls; ☎ box office noon-6pm) The renowned Latvian National Symphony Orchestra performs within this lovely 14th-century building.

The **Dome Cathedral** (☎ 2721 3213; Doma laukums 1; tickets 1-3Ls; ☎ box office 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) has organ

concerts at least weekly at 7pm, while **St Peter's Church** (☎ 2722 9426) stages free concerts every Tuesday at 6pm.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

See the information under the Transport section (p706).

## GETTING AROUND Public Transport

Riga's user-friendly Soviet-era public-transport system is worth mastering. 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 for all three forms of transport are sold at newsstands (3.80Ls).

## Taxi

Taxis officially charge 0.30Ls per km by day (0.40Ls at night). Insist the meter is switched on, never take a cab outside a club (they charge triple) and be wary of your driver taking the 'scenic route'.

## AROUND RĪGA 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 sanatoria, makes a delightful respite from the hustle and bustle of Riga.

## 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 all over Jūrmala, but you can get

your fill by taking a stroll along Jūras iela in Jūrmala's main township, Majori.

You can rent **bicycles** at several places around town, including most hotels, for 5Ls per day.

## Ķemeri National Park

Jūrmala is the jumping-off point for this 42,790-hectare **national park** (www.kemeri.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 Ķemeri, the westernmost township of Jūrmala.

## SLEEPING & EATING

If you want to stay the night check in with the **Jūrmala Tourism Information Centre** (☎ 2714 7900; www.jurmala.lv; Lienes iela 5; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, 10am-3pm Sun).

**Kempings Nemo** (☎ 2773 2349; nemo@nemo.lv; Atbalss iela 1, Vaivari; cottages 5-24Ls, camp sites 1Ls plus per person 1Ls; ☎) About the only good value in town is this place. It's right next to Nemo Water Park and the beach, but it's a long way from most of the action.

There are plenty of restaurants along Jomas iela, Majori's main drag.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Suburban trains go every 20 minutes or so to/from Riga (0.51Ls, 40 minutes). Most stop in Majori.

## EASTERN LATVIA

Heading east out of Riga, cobbles 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). The only town covered here is Sigulda, but if you have time quaint Cēsis, an hour east of Sigulda, is well worth visiting.

## 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 camp sites line the Gauja River between Cēsis and Sigulda. The park's **Visitor Centre** (☎ 2780 0388; www.gnp.gov.lv; Baznīcas iela 3; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar) in Sigulda has details on various hikes in the region.

## SIGULDA

pop 10,855

It's hard to believe that this tranquil paradise, spread 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

**Sigulda Tourism Information Centre** (☎ 2797 1335; www.sigulda.lv; Ausekla iela 6; ☎ 10am-7pm May-Oct, to 5pm Nov-Apr)

## Sights & Activities

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 to 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. Look for the **grave** of the legendary Turaida Rose outside the wooden-spired **Turaida Church**.

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 over the river. Across the street is a scenic **cab car** (return weekday/weekend 1/1.50Ls; ☎ departs half-hourly 10am-7.30pm May-Sep, hourly 10am-4pm Oct-Apr) that runs across the valley to the ruins of **Krimulda Castle**. Adrenalin junkies can **bungee jump** (☎ 2921 2731; www.lgk.lv; jumps from 17Ls; ☎ from 6.30pm Fri-Sun May-Oct) from the cable car.

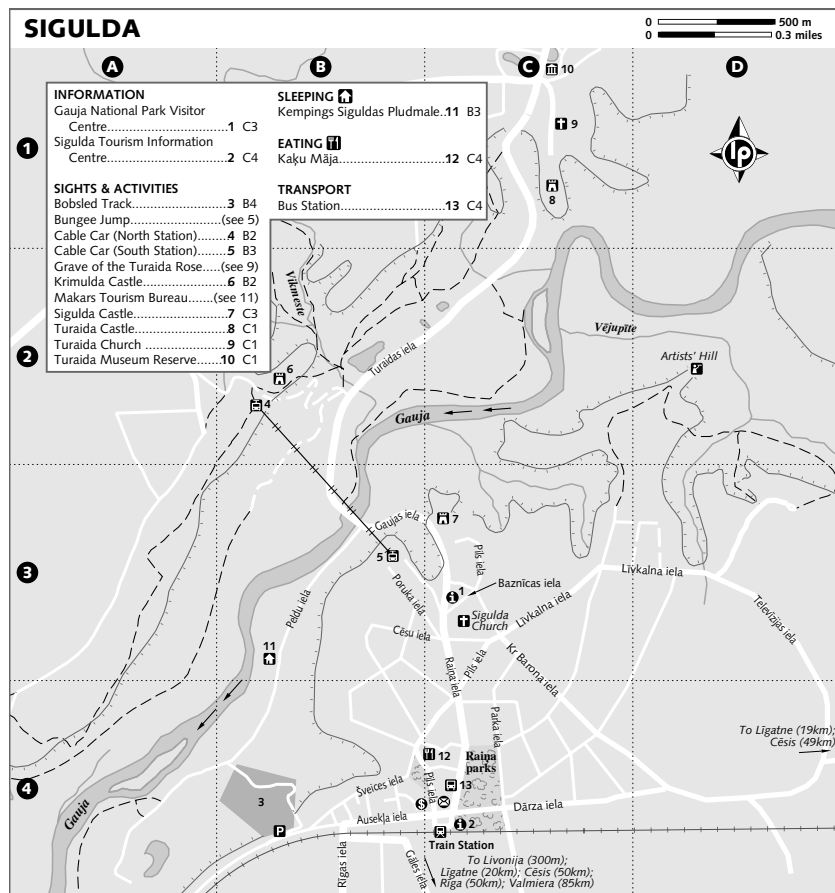
One experience you'll never forget is the hair-raising ride down Sigulda's **bobsled track** (Sveices iela 13; 4/35Ls tourist/authentic bob; ☎ all evenings & 11am-5pm weekends Nov-Mar, 11am-5pm weekends May-Sep) with a

## WORTH A TRIP

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, 10am-6pm Sep-Oct & May, 10am-5pm Nov-Apr), 75km south of the capital in the tiny town of Pilsrundāle. The architect of this sprawling monument to aristocratic ostentatiousness was the Italian baroque genius Bartolomeo Rastrelli, best known for designing the Winter Palace in St Petersburg. About 40 of the palace's 138 rooms are open to visitors, as are the extensive, wonderfully landscaped gardens.

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.





professional driver at 100km/h. 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.

To ride the authentic bob you *must* book in advance through Karina at **Makars Tourism Bureau** (☎ 2924 4948; www.makars.lv; Peldu iela 2), which also organises boat trips (10Ls to 40Ls) along the Gauja River in the summer.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Livonija** (☎ 2797 3066; www.livonija.viss.lv; Pulkveža Brieža iela 55; dm/s/d 8/15/22Ls) The nine dorm beds (advanced booking required) are distributed among four rooms in a wonderful annex, with satellite TV and a free washing machine.

**Kempings Siguldas Pludmale** (☎ 2924 4948; www.makars.lv; Peldu iela 2; person/tent/car/caravan 1/1/1/2Ls; ☎ 15 May-15 Sep) This fantastic riverside camping spot rents tents for 4Ls a day.

**Kaķu Māja** (☎ 2700 272; Pils iela 8; mains 3-5Ls) Your one-stop shop for just about everything has a restaurant that turns into a club on weekends, a basement sports bar and a cheap canteen next door.

### Getting There & Around

It's easy to get to Sigulda from Riga via train (0.71Ls, one hour, 12 daily) or bus (1Ls, one hour, about three hourly).

There's an hourly bus between Sigulda train station and Turaida until about 8pm (0.25Ls).

## WESTERN LATVIA

Sandy beaches converge on rocky seaside points, rolling farmland yields to thick forests and cobbled medieval towns bump heads with thriving urban centres in Latvia's diverse 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 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. The monument near the entrance to the beach was put up in 2002 after three Swedes drowned in the cape's shallow but treacherous, quicksand-bottomed waters – Cape Kolka's beauty is best admired from the beach.

Continuing south you'll pass through the bustling port city of **Ventspils**, where a few international ferries arrive (p706). Nearby, mellow medieval **Kuldīga** is a fine place to relax. But if you're looking for a little more action you'll want to head to **Liepāja**, home to two of the world's funkier clubs and a great summer beach party.

**Liepāja Tourist Information Office** (☎ 2348 0808; www.liepaja.lv/tourisms; 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 'prison experience' tour that involves donning prisoner garb and spending the night.

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

If you like Hotel Fontaine, you'll love the inimitable **Fontaine Palace** (☎ 2348 8510; www.fontainepalace.lv; Dzīvamū iela 4), a nightclub and

concert venue housed in a gorgeous 18th-century warehouse. Note the giant phallus standing at attention over the main dance floor. Liepāja's other stroke of genius is **Pablo** (☎ 2348 1555; www.pablo.lv; Zivju iela 4/6), also known as 'Latvia's 1st Rock Café'. It's essentially a shrine to Latvian rock and roll, complete with a live-music stage, restaurant and rollicking nightclub.

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

From Riga there are several buses (4.30Ls, 3¼ hours) and one daily train (3.40Ls, 3¼ hours) to/from Liepāja.

## LATVIA DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

The ever-growing supply of hostels in Riga is matched dutifully by ever-growing demand, so book well ahead on weekends and throughout the peak summer season. You can find listings for hostels across Latvia and book beds at the website of the **Latvian Youth Hostel Association** (www.hostellinglatvia.com). There are plenty of good camping grounds across the country, both with and without facilities.

If you want more privacy, the cheapest doubles in Riga cost 25Ls to 40Ls. Rates at all Riga hotels are typically at least 20% lower in the winter. Outside of Riga accommodation is wonderfully affordable, with excellent doubles available for as little as 15Ls in some towns. Hostels are scarce in the regions; many of those that do exist operate seasonally.

### ACTIVITIES

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

Sigulda (p713) 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 in Riga 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 (left) is a hotbed.

## BUSINESS HOURS

Most shops open between 10am and 6pm in the larger towns/cities on weekdays and on Saturdays. Most cafés and restaurants open between 10am and noon and then stay open until around 11pm at night. Bars and some restaurants stay open much later on weekends – until 2am or until the last customer leaves.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### Embassies & Consulates 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 bulvāris 9)

**Germany** (☎ 2708 5100; www.deutschebotschaft-riga.lv; Raiņa bulvāris 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 bulvāris 7)

### Latvian Embassies & Consulates Abroad

**Australia** (☎ 02-9744 5981; 32 Parnell St, Strathfield, NSW 2135)

**Canada** (☎ 613-238 6014; 350 Sparks Street, Suite 1200, Ottawa, Ontario, K1R 7S8)

**France** (☎ 01 53 64 58 10; 6 Villa Said, F-75116 Paris)

**Germany** (☎ 030-8260 02 22; Reinerzstrasse 40-41, D-14193 Berlin)

**UK** (☎ 020-7312 0040; 45 Nottingham Place, London W1U 5LY)

**USA** (☎ 202-328-2840; 2306 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20008)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

**Ligo** During this midsummer celebration on the night of June 23 (St John's Eve), the entire country retreats to feast on country food, jump over fires and re-enact other Pagan rituals.

**National Song Festival** (www.dziesmusvetki2008.lv) Undoubtedly Latvia's biggest festival, held every five years. The 24th festival is scheduled for 2008.

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

## HOLIDAYS

**New Year's Day** 1 January

**Good Friday** March/April

**Easter Sunday/Monday** March/April

**Convocation of the Constitutional Assembly of Latvia** 1 May

**Declaration of Independence from USSR** 4 May

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

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

**National Day** (anniversary of proclamation of Latvian Republic, 1918) 18 November

**Christmas Eve & Day** 24 and 25 December

**Boxing Day** 26 December

**New Year's Eve** 31 December

## INTERNET RESOURCES

For an excellent overview of Latvian culture and history, see the website of the **Latvian Institute** (www.li.lv).

## MONEY

The national currency, the Lat (Ls), 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 a currency exchange and ATM machine in any town where humans outnumber barnyard animals. Most big banks cash travellers cheques and major currencies. Credit cards are widely accepted.

An appropriate tip for waiters and bartenders is 10%.

## POST

It costs 0.36/0.45Ls to send a postcard/letter to Europe, 0.40/0.55 to other countries.

## TELEPHONE

To make an international call, dial the international access code ☎ 00, followed by the country code, city code and number.

Calls can be made from payphones using a *telekarte* (phonecard), which are worth 2Ls, 3Ls or 5Ls and sold at kiosks and post offices, or by using a major credit card; instructions in English are included in every booth.

## VISAS

Holders of EU passports don't need a visa to enter Latvia; nor do Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and US citizens if staying for less than 90 days.

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