



LOVING LATVIA

SPENCER enjoys the delights of Latvia and its capital Riga, Eastern Europe's new Prague

If you've trotted the globe a bit you'll appreciate the enjoyment of discovering a new destination that far exceeds your expectations. I had this rare pleasure when my travels took me to Latvia, a little known Baltic state sandwiched between Estonia, Russia, Belarus, and Lithuania. Having been under Soviet occupation, one could be mistaken for expecting to find a grey and desolate place with antiquated infrastructure and services. Instead you will find a young vibrant nation, which has taken the best from its previous occupiers; the architecture, the culture and the economic structure and combined this with new technology, first class service and cold war prices.

Latvia's fledgling national airline, www.airbaltic.com, recently started flying to the UK. British Airways also offers a direct service from London. Arriving in Latvia is easy. The newly modernised international airport is about 10kms from its capital city, Riga. You will appreciate what good value this place is to visit even before you reach the centre as the bus from the airport costs about 30p or if you really want to push the boat out a taxi will end up costing £7.

Riga sits quaintly on the banks of the Daugava River which flows into the icy Baltic Sea. For a city that for so many years was oppressed by the Soviets, Riga has done a wonderful job in re-inventing itself since independence from Russia in the early 1990's. The old town is filled with history from the reconstructed **House of Blackheads** to the **Occupation Museum**. Geographically, the centre of the city is the **Church of St. Peter**, which dates back nearly 800 years to 1209. At one time its wooden steeple was the highest in Europe and is still today one of the best places to get a panoramic view of the old town. If history and going back in time is your thing, there are many boutique style hotels situated in and around the old town, which offer all the mod cons without losing any of the medieval charm that is so in abundance here. Look out for **Gutenbergs** in the very heart of the old town, the luxurious **Grand Palace** or the art nouveau **Laine Hotel** where a suite only costs \$50! Of the larger modern hotels I would recommend the **Radisson SAS Daugava Hotel** (24 Kugu Street) which sits right on the river and boasts a great gym, swimming pool and casino. **The**

Hotel Latvija (55 Elizabetes Street) is a must see for any visitor to the city. Not for it's 3 star rating and rather ordinary rooms, but for the wonderful **Skyline Bar** on the 26th floor which gives spectacular views of the city day and night, with great cocktails too.

Food-wise, everything is on offer from Kosher to Korean and Indian to Irish. But when in Riga, do as the locals and try the homemade grub. One of the best places to try traditional Latvian food is in the **Lido** (www.lido.lv), complete with it's own brewery. Fish features a lot in the local cuisine, so I was in my element with a selection of seafood, salmon, and other delicacies from the deep. A fiver will cover a hearty meal and a drink so eating out won't break the bank.

There are only two gay bars in the Riga but for information on the many other gay parties that move around these are good starting points. Open nightly from 9pm till 6am, **Purvs** (60 Matisa Street) is a busy gay bar and dance club. Be aware that the absence of a sign makes it hard to find but maybe that's the idea. For more about this place check out purvs.gay.lv. The second is **XXL** (4A Kalina Street). Open from 11pm till 6am, it's a popular bar with a disco on the weekend when it's \$3 entrance. Good food is served and there are video cabins and dark rooms. The local



brew is **Balsam** liquor prepared from an ancient mix of herbs, flowers, juices and medicinal roots. It's worth a try but may strip your throat at the same time. If this isn't really your bag, try the locally brewed beer, **Aldaris**, which is on tap almost everywhere.

For a breath of sea air to detox, the beach resort of **Jurmala** is under an hour away from the city. Here long golden beaches meet a calm Baltic sea and today rich locals inhabit this seaside retreat, which is almost totally covered in forest. To really appreciate the beauty of the area you must visit the **Hotel Lielupe** with its lovely rooftop bar. From here you can see above the treetops for miles around, it almost feels like you could be in Africa. As Jurmala is only 25kms out of Riga, it's easily accessible, if just for an afternoon.

They say Riga is the new Prague as a city break destination, although it's relatively unknown. They put on a great show in hosting the **Eurovision Song Contest** last year, and joined the newly enlarged EU on 1st May. I say it's one of Europe's best kept secrets though, and if you like being a step ahead of the rest in terms of discovering the next hot travel destination, I would well advise a visit before everyone finds out!

> **Online reservations can be made for all hotels at www.rigathisweek.lv**

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