

# RĪGA

## - THE CITY OF CONTRADICTIONS

Despite the remnants of half a century of grim Soviet occupation, Rīga is reviving its past prosperity, writes  
*Klára Smolová*

**A**n ideal weekend break should be spent in a cute sunny place where you can relax and simply have a good time. The ride from Rīga's airport to the city centre on a dull, chilly Saturday afternoon along the left bank of the Daugava river, interspersed with old and neglected Russian-style wooden houses, empty streets and abandoned factories made me think that this probably won't be it.

But just as the weather in Latvia can change within minutes, your view on its capital Riga changes as you get closer to the centre and deeper under its skin.

Rīga has for centuries been at the nexus of trade between the western part of Europe, the Baltic countries, and Russia.

Thanks to German expansion in the 12th century, the city became a member of the Hanseatic League of traders controlling commerce on the Baltic and North Sea which brought it prosperity. Of course that also made Rīga, and Latvia as a whole, an attractive target for conquerors – Germans, Swedish, Poles and Russians – but the city still kept profiting from its strategic position. Unfortunately the Soviet Union, Rīga's last occupiers, literally robbed the city of its wealth. So, after regaining independence in August 1991, Latvia had to struggle to regain its lost fortunes.

But this bestows the city its very unique look, full of contradictions. The capital today still carries reminiscences of the 'good old Soviet days' (read unsightly concrete 'cultural centres'), but along with that one can feel the pulsing modern city. On the one hand you meet old babushkas on the streets bashfully selling pens or flowers just to make some extra cash, and on the other hand you will notice smartly dressed Latvians who don't hesitate to splurge on luxury brands or dine in the most fashionable restaurants. That's just Rīga.

### The must sees

The historical centre Vecrīga ('Old Riga') is quite small and you'll be able to easily walk it in a day and see all of the most interesting sights. From the old city walls, dating back to the 13th century with the famous Powder Tower, today the home of the Museum of War, you can walk randomly through the small streets southwards and not worry about getting lost. All roads, inevitably, will lead you back to the three main squares (laukums), each featuring interesting landmarks.



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Dome Evangelical Lutheran Church and Riga's Castle

At the Doma Laukums you will find Riga's largest church – the Dome Evangelical Lutheran Church – with one of the four biggest organs in the world made of a staggering 6,768 flutes. The Līva Laukums, meanwhile, is dominated by beautiful merchant houses from the 14th century – the Great and Small Guild Halls. Most importantly at the Ratslaukums near the river you can admire the magnificent Town Hall and the House of Blackheads (another important merchants' hall) which are so precious to Riga's citizens that they didn't hesitate to rebuild them after they were both destroyed during World War II.

Equally cherished are the Three Brothers, three medieval buildings which show the city's architectural development from the medieval to the baroque.

If you want to have the whole city in the palm of your hand, climb up the 72m tower of St Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church (don't worry, there is an elevator!).

And you shouldn't miss Riga's Castle, home of the Latvian president, the Museum of Foreign Art and History and the Museum of Latvia. Despite its small size, (only about 800,000 inhabitants), Riga still manages to squeeze in 23 museums including some rather odd ones like the Museum of Pharmacy, the Museum of

Anatomy or the Museum of the Barricades of 1991. Something to do when you get caught in the rain.

### Beyond the old centre

Once you explored the historic centre, venture beyond its borders and take a stroll through the parks. Notice the National Opera House (which hosts an annual Opera Festival every June) and the Christ's Birth Orthodox Cathedral on Brīvības Boulevard, whose huge golden cupolas proudly shine in the sun.

If you go north, through Kronvalda park until you reach Elizabetes ielā ('street'), you enter the Central district, renowned for its beautiful Art Nouveau buildings (more than 700 of them – nearly half of all the buildings in the city centre). In fact, Riga is internationally recognised for having the finest concentration of Art Nouveau buildings in Europe. The streets, like Elizabetes or Alberta (named after Bishop Albert who established Riga in 1201), are full of genuine masterpieces, most of them nicely restored. Many Art Nouveau buildings can also be found on Smilšu street in the Old City.

But after all that sightseeing, you'll need to take a break and you haven't been to Riga if you haven't been in Jūrmala, a popular Latvian recreational resort just 20km away

from the city centre. Long (32km), sandy beaches protected by dunes and tall pine forests are a perfect getaway for locals and tourists alike. From early spring, weekend trains bring hundreds of people who just want to stroll on the beach and have lunch or coffee in one of the many cafés and restaurants on the promenades. Jūrmala basically consists of a chain of small towns in a park-like landscape where you can find original wooden houses as well as eclectic modern mansions, most of them for hire during the summer.

The train takes only about 30 minutes from Riga's central station, with trains leaving about every half hour, and a return ticket to Majori, for instance, will cost you about 1.10 lats (1 lat is about 99p).

### No hamburgers, please!

Latvians love to meet up over a good cup of coffee so it is no surprise that coffee shop chains such as Double Coffee or Coffee Nations are so widespread. Very popular too are Lido restaurants – self-service dining rooms in a traditional log cabin style. Every customer takes a tray and collects whatever they like from meats to salads, pays at the cashier and only then sits at a table. For as little as 4 lats (including drinks) you can stuff yourself to the gills! Seafood lovers will also





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The Meingalvju (Blackheads) House in the Ratslaukums, and St Peter's Church

be happy to see sushi bars on almost every corner. Actually you can often order sushi even in an Italian restaurant. Just check that they have an Asian cook before you order!

Latvians do not fancy fast food chains like McDonald's or KFC so if you need a snack try one of the local bestsellers – pancakes. Warm, filled with sweet or salty stuffings like

cream cheese, bananas, cheese, meat etc. Smother them with some sauce like raspberry or a bit of sour cream and order a glass of sour milk for the complete traditional Latvian fast food experience. Latvians drink sour milk with anything, even steak. No wonder they are so thin.

Nightlife is one of the features well praised by tourists. Among the most

popular discotheques are Fashion Club and Essential. The entrance fee is about 5 lats but may vary depending on the day of the week, and they run till early morning hours. The only problem is that as a foreigner you are likely to get ripped off at the bar if you don't speak Russian or Latvian. A gin and tonic costs around three lats for the locals, but we were charged eight!

Other than that, Riga is a welcoming city and keenly aware of its dependence on tourism. If you plan a trip there, be wise and go in spring and summer (May to August), or at the end of the year if you love a white Christmas. Latvians are Christians, so the winter seasonal festivities take place at the end of December. ■

■ Klára Smolová travelled to Riga with Ryanair. The airline operates regular flights from London Stansted twice a day on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays and once a day from Liverpool. Ticket prices start from 13p (London) and £10 (Liverpool) excluding taxes and fees. For more information see: [www.ryanair.co.uk](http://www.ryanair.co.uk).

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Art Nouveau on Alberta street