

instant

RIGA

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June - July 2009



Introducing Riga

Although proud Estonians and Lithuanians would certainly beg to differ, Latvia's cosmopolitan metropolis has long been considered the capital of the Baltics. A port of call for crusaders, soldiers, tourists and merchants for the past eight centuries, Riga is much more than the geographical centre of this little-known region. With a population of nearly 800,000 people, it's one of the largest cities in northern Europe although few would ever guess this by looking at a map.

In Riga, art nouveau and medieval architecture are always visible, quality restaurants abound and bars and clubs often stay open indefinitely as long as you have the cash to keep the taps flowing. Whether it's business or pleasure, Riga has something for everyone.

Arrival & Transport
Basics
Restaurants
Nightlife
Sights
Hotels

and a whole host of other useful information

By bus

The first thing you'll notice upon arrival at the bus terminal or *autoosta* (open 05:00 - 24:00) are the impressive hangars of the Central Market to your right just above the murky waters of the Riga canal. Inside, Eurolines and Ecolines offices are located to your left as well as an **ATM**, **baggage room** (0.24 - 0.50Ls/hour, 0.20Ls each additional hour) and **toilets** for 0.20Ls (ask for paper). To your right is the waiting room. A bar/cafe/terea with great views, a baby-changing station, a shower and even a small hostel are available upstairs. At the far end of the hall are a tourist and bus **information centre** (open 08:00 - 21:00) and currency exchange booth.

Getting to town: trams N°7 or 9 stop in front of the bus station; ride it one stop into the centre (buy a 0.50Ls ticket from the driver). To get there on foot, turn left, walk through the underpass and follow the signs 'Vecrīga-Vaiņu iela' into Old Riga. The cabs outside are notoriously unreliable, so public transport is your best bet. ▶

By car

As of 21 December 2007, Latvia is part of the Schengen zone of European nations and no longer operates passport checkpoints on its land borders with Estonia and Lithuania. Just drive across the border. The Russian and Belarusian borders still require time and patience. Happy trails! ▶

By ferry

The ferry terminal and yacht harbour lie less than 1km north of Old Riga. Change money in the terminal. Open 09:00 - 18:00. **Getting to town:** take trams N°7, 5 or 9 (buy a 0.50Ls ticket from the tram driver), from Ausekļa two stops to the centre of Riga. ▶

By plane

The **airport** (*lidosta*) is some 13km southwest of the Riga city centre. **Baggage claim** and **customs** are fairly quick, but don't forget to pick up a complimentary copy of *Riga In Your Pocket* while waiting for your luggage. A currency exchange booth is available here (open until the last flight) as well as a tourist information centre. Reserve a hotel room or rent a car in the arrivals hall. A 24-hour baggage room (1Ls/day) and yet another information centre are also available here, as well as three ATMs and a post office (open 08:00 - 17:30, Sat, Sun 09:00 - 16:00).

If you've departed from a non-Schengen country such as Ireland, the UK or the US, you'll arrive in a different terminal at the north end of the airport building. Car rental and currency exchange are available here, but you might want to leave the terminal, make a right and then enter the Schengen arrival hall because it offers more services.

Getting to town: A queue of eager taxis will be waiting outside the arrivals hall. A typical ride to the city centre should cost no more than 10Ls. The Airport Express shuttle stops at five different hotels throughout the city for 3Ls every 30 minutes between 05:30 - 00:45. Bus N°22 (get off at 11.novembra krastmala or the Stockmann shopping centre) costs 0.50Ls and departs for the city centre roughly every 20 minutes, but be prepared to pay extra for large pieces of luggage. Exit the airport arrivals hall and walk across the parking lot to find the bus stop and schedule. For more information in English visit www.riga-airport.com. ▶

Reserve a room online at
www.inyourpocket.com

Tourist information

City of Riga Information Centre I-2, Rātslaukums 6, tel. 67 03 79 00, www.rigatourism.com.

A very helpful tourist information centre that offers a wide range of information in a variety of languages. The knowledgeable staff can assist you with hotel bookings and other useful services such as arranging sightseeing tours. ▶ Also on J-3, Prāgas 1 (Bus station), tel. 67 22 05 55. Open 09:00 - 19:00; D-4, Stacijas 2 (Train station), tel. 67 23 38 15. Open 10:00 - 18:30.



By train

The train station (*centrālā stacija*) underwent massive renovations, and has been modernised with a spacious central hall and many shopping and eating options. International trains arrive at platform 2. Follow signs down to the Central Hall (*Centrālā zāle*), under which are renovated pay **toilets** (0.10Ls - ask for paper from the surly cashier) and a **baggage room** (0.50 - 1.50Ls/day), open 04:30 - 24:00. **Exchange money** at the currency exchanges (*valūtas maiņas*) or at the banks in the main terminal. There are several ATMs in the terminal. Pay-as-you-go internet points/phones can be found by the toilets next to tunnel A and by the Narvesen in front of tunnel C. The **train information office** is open 08:00 - 20:00. **Getting to town:** you are right beside Old Riga. Turn left when leaving the station and head toward the spire of St. Peter's Church, then walk through the underpass and follow the signs '13. janvāra iela' and turn right onto Aspazijas bulvāris. ▶

Public transport

Riga has 11 tram lines, 20 trolleybus routes and 54 bus routes that operate from as early as 05:00 to as late as 01:00, depending on the route. Buy a ticket from the driver for 0.50Ls or purchase an *e-talons* ticket beforehand at designated Riga Transport (Rīgas Satiksme) ticket offices, at public transport ticket machines or at Narvesen and Plus Punkts newsstands and Rimi supermarkets. Passengers can choose from a wide variety of different ticket options which include tickets for five (2Ls), 10 (3.80Ls) and 20 (7.20Ls) rides or tickets good for one (1.50Ls), three (4.60Ls) or five (7.60Ls) days of travel. The tickets are valid for trams, trolleybuses and city buses. If you buy an *e-talons* ticket you have to press it up against the electronic ticket readers on the bus or tram as soon as you board the vehicle. The green light will flash and the display will show you how many more rides are left on the card (e.g. Atlikums: 7).

You can also take a *mikroautbuss* or *mikriņš*, passenger vans that list their destinations and route numbers on their windscreens. Read more about routes and exact departure times in English on the Riga Transport Authority's website www.rigassatiksme.lv.

Car rental

AddCar Rental Airport, tel. 67 66 82 55, www.addcar-rental.com. ▶

Baltic Car Lease - Sixt Franchisee Airport, tel. 67 20 71 21, www.sixt.lv. ▶ Open 09:00 - 18:00.

Taxis

Lady Taxi Tel. 27 80 09 00. Only hire female drivers.
Smile Taxi Tel. 22 33 03 30, www.taksometrs.lv.

Alcohol

Latvia has the dubious honour of holding the record for the world's drunkest person. A few years ago an unnamed vagrant was found unconscious by the police and rushed to hospital where his blood test revealed an astounding 7.22 parts per million of alcohol. Before this man was saved by law enforcement, the medical community had agreed that 4 parts per million was a lethal dose for any human. Although we don't suggest you attempt to break any records, we do hope you enjoy a local drink in moderation while in Riga. *Užavas*, *Bauskas*, *Tērvetes* and the hard to find *Valmiermuižas* are among the nation's best beers and the infamous Riga Black Balsam is a potent liquor that Latvians enjoy inflicting on tourists. Although bars are open at all hours, alcoholic beverages are only sold in shops from 08:00 - 22:00. ▶

Money

The national currency is the lat (Ls). There are 100 santīmi to the lat, with 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50 santīmi and 1 and 2 lat coins. Bank notes come in denominations of 5, 10, 20, 50, 100 and 500 lats. As we go to press, one euro sells for 0.70Ls and one US dollar for 0.50Ls. There are currency exchange booths everywhere accepting a wide range of foreign bank notes, but always check rates before exchanging money. Major hotels, restaurants and shops accept Visa, Euro- and MasterCard. There are numerous ATMs around town as well. ▶

Roads

Latvia has some of the world's worst drivers. Passing on blind curves is shockingly common, red lights are ignored by most BMWs and pedestrians on crosswalks tend to become targets for wannabe F1 drivers in tricked out Mercedes jeeps. If, like many locals, you enjoy operating an automobile while intoxicated, you should bear in mind that all perpetrators, including foreigners, face a mandatory ten-day jail sentence and a 500Ls fine. The speed limit is 50km/h in towns, 90km/h on the open road and it is strictly enforced. Speed traps are prevalent and bribes are almost a thing of the past. Parking meters are all over Riga. Traffic police will clamp your car and demand a 5Ls fine on the spot for running out of time, or will fine you 10Ls for being parked illegally. Old Riga is now accessible to nearly all motor vehicles, but the authorities have made it impossible to drive from one end to the other having divided the town into four different sections. Many streets have been changed to one-way streets and certain areas, such as Doma and Līvu squares, have become pedestrian and bicycles zones. The city has lost loads of revenue by opening up the old city, but now charges equally exorbitant parking fees that can only be paid with an SMS text message sent from a Latvian mobile phone number. In other words, most tourists are prohibited from parking their rented or borrowed cars in Old Riga. ▶

Scams

The growth of the local tourism industry has created countless new jobs, but it has also spawned lots of scams and rip-offs. While most bars and restaurants are happy to welcome tourists, there are some rotten apples that will do anything to take your money. Strip clubs, nightclubs and late night bars seem to be the biggest culprits. Be wary of young attractive girls on Līvu Square asking you to join them for a drink in a nearby bar. You'll be shocked to discover later that the barely palatable bottle of wine you bought them costs 500Ls or more. If you refuse to pay the bouncers will pummel you until you give them your PIN code. Other scams include charging your card for much more than you purchased. Avoid seedy bars and try to always pay in cash at nightclubs. ▶

Market values

McDonald's Big Mac	1.60Ls	\$3.20	€2.29
Loaf of white bread	0.55Ls	\$1.10	€0.79
Snickers bar	0.30Ls	\$0.60	€0.43
0.7L of vodka	5.00Ls	\$10.00	€7.14
0.5L bottle of local beer	0.60Ls	\$1.20	€0.86
20 Marlboros	1.75Ls	\$3.50	€2.50
Public transport ticket	0.40Ls	\$0.80	€0.57
Cinema ticket	3.50Ls	\$7.00	€5.00
1l of petrol	0.70Ls	\$1.40	€1.00
Exchange rates (as of 28.05.2009)			
US\$1 - 0.50Ls €1 - 0.70Ls £1 - 0.80Ls ¥100 - 0.53Ls			

Smoking

Latvians love to smoke and until recently you could see them lighting up almost anywhere, from barstools to hospital beds. But all that has changed. As of July 1, 2006, smoking is banned in most public places including restaurants. The few places that have built separate smoking sections with proper ventilation systems have been assigned a ☞ symbol. Ironically, the government has largely ignored the root causes of smoking, but a new tax on cigarettes has brought the price of a pack of Marlboros up to around €2.50. ▶

Visas

US and EU citizens do not require a Latvian visa. For assistance obtaining residency permits call the Foreigners' Service Centre of the Citizenship and Migration Board, Alunāna 1, tel. 67 21 96 56, www.pmp.gov.lv. ▶

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ESSENTIAL CITY GUIDES

Instant Riga

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Two years ago it seemed that anyone with a little extra cash could open a restaurant in Riga just for the fun of it. Unfortunately, astronomical rents in 2008 and now the global financial crisis have sent many a chef packing. On the bright side, you can still enjoy a thin-crust pizza, fresh sushi, hearty pork knuckle and potatoes or an Armenian shashlik without much effort and many cafés now offer cheap lunch specials to lure diners into their empty establishments. A tip of 10% is expected at most places. The average cost of a main course is listed in parentheses.

American

T.G.I.Friday's I-2, Kaļķu 6, tel. 67 22 90 71. Local anti-globalisation fanatics may be upset, but expats and tourists can't get enough of this American chain of bar/restaurants. The average Joe or Jānis may gripe about paying almost 6Ls for a burger, but it could also be argued that the abnormally large portions more than justify the price. Enjoy steaks, ribs, nachos and a huge selection of cocktails. ▶ Open 12:00 - 24:00. Also at the airport. (6 - 12Ls).  

Arabian

Habibi J-2, Peldu 24, tel. 67 22 85 51, www.kaljan-kafe-habibi.lv. Laid-back decadence at its best. Kick back on comfy Middle Eastern-style sofas and pillows, smoke from an authentic hookah and watch gorgeous belly dancers do their thing in the evenings. The pipe will set you back several hard-earned lats, but who said decadence comes cheap? Oh yes, they also serve food and drinks, but be warned that the tempting nuts and sweets on each table cost extra. ▶ Open 14:00 - 24:00. Also on B/C-4, Gertrūdes 14, tel. 67 29 01 55. Open 13:00 - 24:00, Sun 14:00 - 24:00. (5 - 8Ls).  

Armenian











Akhtamar D-4, Merķeļa 9, tel. 67 21 50 32, www.akhtamar.lv. This cavernous brick cellar is a maze of rooms and niches decorated with traditional kilims hanging from the walls. Huge servings of grilled lamb, beef, pork and even trout are here in abundance as well as hearty soups and stews and a great selection of wines and brandies from across the Caucasus region. Beer lovers won't be disappointed either with Czech Budweiser and local Lāčplēsis on draught. A large smoking section is available for anyone who needs a cigarette with his or her shashlik. ▶ Open 11:00 - 24:00, Sat, Sun 12:00 - 24:00. (5 - 7Ls).  

Asian

Gan Bei D-4, Stacijas laukums 2 (Origo), tel. 67 07 30 12. Although the location in a popular shopping centre may lack intimacy, this stylish restaurant is a must see for hungry yuppie shoppers who can choose dishes from two separate menus - one Chinese, the other sushi. The former offers an excellent selection of dishes not offered elsewhere in Riga; the latter original maki and nigiri concoctions that are as pleasing to the eye as they are to the palate. ▶ Open 10:00 - 23:00. (4 - 8Ls).  

Wok Café C-4, Dzirnava 60, tel. 67 28 28 78, www.vairaksaules.lv. One of the city's best pizzerias has looked east for inspiration and opened this trendy wok café. Pick a combination of meat, noodles and sauces to be cooked to order in its open plan kitchen and Asian favourites like dumplings, spring rolls and a good selection of sushi. The walls are covered in photographs of green florae, so it always feels like spring even if it's snowing outside. ▶ Open 11:00 - 23:00, Fri, Sat 11:00 - 06:00. (5Ls). 

Symbol key

 Air conditioning	 Credit cards accepted
 Live music	 Take away
 Child friendly	 Fireplace
 Smoking section	 Facilities for the disabled
 Free wireless internet	 Outside seating

Belgian

Bon Vivant J-2, Mārstaļu 8, tel. 67 22 65 85, www.bon-vivant.lv. Solid wood furniture, a cosy atmosphere and assorted Benelux decorations aren't the only things that make this place an authentic Belgian beer bar. A whole page of the menu is dedicated to steamed mussels, sausages are ordered by the half metre and tasty brews from the Low Countries are served in their proper glasses. The delicious cuisine isn't cheap, but Europeans expect nothing less from Brussels. ▶ Open 11:00 - 24:00, Fri 11:00 - 01:00, Sat 12:00 - 01:00, Sun 12:00 - 23:00. (6 - 12Ls).  


Cafés

Emīlija Gustava Šokolahde C-4, Marijas 13/VI (Berga bazārs), tel. 67 28 75 10. It might be best to leave the kids at home as the team of chocolatiers hard at work making delicious candy in the corner may be too much of a temptation for the little dears. Friendly staff are keen to offer useful suggestions from sinfully rich drinks to enjoy on the premises or chocolates to take away. ▶ Open 09:00 - 21:00, Sun 11:00 - 20:00. Also on I-3, Aspazijas 24. Open 09:00 - 23:00, Sun 11:00 - 23:00; and at most shopping centres. 

Osīrišs C-4, Barona 31, tel. 67 24 30 02. The first of opera director Andrejs Žagars' many café ventures, and the only one to survive, Osīrišs found a successful recipe in the mid-1990s and stuck with it. Inexpensive breakfasts, sandwiches, international cuisine and a romantic ambience make this place a favourite of local big shots, politicians and intelligentsia so make a reservation for dinner. The only drawback is the horrible iron tables that were obviously created as torture devices for long legs. ▶ Open 08:00 - 24:00, Sat, Sun 10:00 - 24:00. (3 - 7Ls). 

Coffee & Cake

Coffee Nation C-4, Valdemāra 21, tel. 67 35 81 82. This trendy local chain of espresso bars once looked poised to conquer the city, with its fancy drinks, pastries and (gasp!) carry out cups. Perhaps its the fact that stronger competition has entered the arena, but the once mighty Nation seems to be on the decline. Great for snacks and coffee on the run though. ▶ Open 07:30 - 21:30, Sat 09:00 - 21:00, Sun 10:00 - 21:00. Also at C-4, Blaumaņa 5; C-4, Dzirnava 72. Open 08:00 - 22:00, Sat 09:00 - 22:00, Sun 10:00 - 22:00; and at the airport. 

Rīga Black Magic I-2, Kaļķu 10, tel. 67 22 28 77, www.since1752.lv. If you'd like to discover the mysterious properties of Riga's national drink, you'd have a hard time finding a better place to sip the black herbal liquor than at Riga Black Magic. Enjoy delicious cake, chocolates and other snacks with coffee, tea or one of its special cocktails including the Black Mojito. The interior of wooden furniture and exposed brick walls evokes the 18th-century when Balzams was first concocted. ▶ Open 10:00 - 01:00. 

Central Asian

Varzoba J-2, Peldu 21, tel. 67 22 41 80. A Google search reveals that Varzob is a town in Tajikistan and not much else. Odd then that many of the decorations here including a traditional costume and a painting of an abandoned ship in the sands of the Aral Sea seem to be Uzbek. In any event, this tiny café serves delicious Central Asian cuisine like lagman (tomato, noodle and lamb soup) with fresh non (bread) for cheap, not to mention draught Užavas beer. ▶ Open 12:00 - 22:00, Mon 13:00 - 22:00, Sat 14:00 - 22:00. Closed Sun. (2 - 4Ls).

Chinese

Honkonga B-4, Valdemāra 61, tel. 67 81 22 92, www.honkonga.lv. Polite wait staff in embroidered silk shirts promptly serve generous portions of delicious Chinese dishes to their patrons among buddhas, dragons and hanging lanterns. More exotic and slightly more expensive cuisine includes hot pots and platters of shark steak or stuffed lamb. ▶ Open 12:00 - 22:00. (5 - 7Ls).

Czech

Sveiks, Šveik! B-5, Stabu 23, tel. 67 31 46 74. Not unlike the scores of other bars dedicated to Jaroslav Hašek's classic character the Good Soldier Švejk that dot the Bohemian countryside, this one has a cosy atmosphere of solid oak tables and exposed brick walls, not to mention its most important feature - great beer. Užavas, Bauskas and Staropramen are on draught, cheap Baltic-Czech cuisine is on the menu and the pretty wait staff refuse to smile, just like in Prague! ▶ Open 11:00 - 23:00, Sat, Sun 12:00 - 23:00. (3 - 5Ls).

Indian

Indian Raja J-3, Vecpilsētas 3, tel. 67 22 16 17, www.indianraja.lv. All dishes, like the tandoori and curry, are so veritably Indian, it's almost overwhelming. This is hardly Baltic-modified cuisine, which is why the bill won't be small, but will reflect one of the best dining investments in the city. Although many of them have Indo European roots, most locals still shy away, which means you, expats and tourists, will have the peaceful interior all to yourself. Also serve Thai food. ▶ Open 12:00 - 23:00. Also at I-2, Skārņu 7. (6 - 10Ls).

Indian Tikka House (Paddy Whelan's) J-2, Grēcinieku 4, tel. 67 21 01 50, paddy@pub.lv, www.pub.lv. Its location inside Riga's landmark Irish pub may seem strange at first, but there might just be a spark of genius here. Who wouldn't want to watch a football match with a cold beer and a chicken tikka masala with a side of freshly baked naan? Start with mouth-watering onion bhajias, pakoras and samosas and move on to classic Indian main dishes cooked in a real tandoor. ▶ Open 12:00 - 22:00, Fri, Sat, Sun 12:00 - 23:00. (4 - 7Ls).

International

Charlestons C-5, Blaumaņa 38/40, tel. 67 77 05 72, www.charlestons.lv. There's something about Latvian-Canadians and food in Riga. They've set up some of the most popular restaurants in town, as is the case with this establishment's owner, Elmārs Tannis. With delicious dishes like real Caesar salad, Jack Daniel's ribs, superb pasta and a mouth-watering assortment of different cheese cakes, Charlestons is good for impressing friends or treating yourself. Do not attempt to play the piano - it's where they hide the cash. Must be a Canadian thing. ▶ Open 12:00 - 24:00. (6 - 14Ls).

C.U.T. C-4, Elizabetes 73, tel. 67 78 55 77, www.revalhotels.com. This upmarket restaurant located on the ground floor of the Reval Hotel Elizabete specialises in grilled cuisine from tuna steaks and salmon to beef tenderloin imported from the South American pampas. You can also enjoy a light lunch of Thai spiced sea scallops or veal carpaccio in its fantastic open courtyard. A wide selection of new and old world wines is also available. ▶ Open 12:00 - 24:00. (6 - 12Ls).

Esplanāde C-4, Elizabetes 55 (Reval Hotel Latvija), tel. 67 77 22 15. If you think that Esplanāde is just another hotel restaurant then guess again. The interior is neutral and can accommodate hundreds of tourists, but the cuisine it serves is simply fantastic. Start with the Italian antipasti platter and move on to delicious mains as diverse as baked sea bass and ostrich fillet in a pomegranate Shiraz sauce. A lunch and dinner buffet as well as a children's game room are also available. ▶ Open 07:00 - 23:00. (8 - 14Ls).

Gutenbergs

I-1, Doma laukums 1, tel. 67 81 40 90, www.gutenbergs.eu. Although the cosy cellar restaurant has plenty to offer, like duck liver in Champagne sauce or crispy catfish fillets, if the weather's good you'd be mad not to take the lift up to its summer rooftop terrace. Not only does it offer excellent views of the square, it also has a great barbecue menu. Grilled steaks and pork chops don't come cheap here, but you probably won't mind after you've been hypnotised by the golden clock of Riga Cathedral just across the way. ▶ Open 12:00 - 22:00. (8 - 12Ls).

Kebabs

Food Box B-3, Dzīrmavu 31-1a, tel. 29 11 33 93. After years of searching for a great kebab in Riga, we've finally found one at Food Box. Even if you stripped away the large panoramic photo of what we'd guess is Istanbul, the Middle Eastern music and the decorative tiles, we would still come to this casual eatery for the delicious yet inexpensive döner kebabs, falafel and exotic pide served by a young Turkish entrepreneur. The only drawback seems to be the heat produced by the ovens, but it might just make the experience more authentic. ▶ Open 12:00 - 21:00. Closed Sun. Also at C-4/5, Barona 31 (entrance from Lāčplēša). (2 - 4Ls).

Latvian

LIDO atpūtas centrs (LIDO Recreation Centre) Krasta 76, tel. 67 50 44 20, www.ac.lido.lv. If Paul Bunyon built a log cabin in Latvia it would look like this! Mr. Ķirsons of the LIDO Empire has outdone himself with the biggest buffet of home cookin' this country has ever seen. Enter the tremendous cellar and discover another restaurant with two bars which serve beer brewed on the premises. Weekends are family days with various activities for the kids including ice skating and there's live singing and dancing every night from 19:00. Take bus N°12 from the train station directly or tram N°3, 7 or 9 to the 'Atpūtas centrs LIDO' stop and walk about 5 - 10 minutes in the direction of the huge windmill. ▶ Open 10:00 - 23:00. (3 - 5Ls).

Staburags C-5, Čaka 55, tel. 67 29 97 87, www.lido.lv. If there were such a thing as a Latvian heaven, this place would come a close second. Feast on huge portions of traditional Latvian food in an immense labyrinth of oak furnished rooms and niches and wash it down with some of the country's best beer. In case you're curious, the ceramic jugs on each table are for bones, not flowers. ▶ Open 12:00 - 24:00. (5 - 10Ls).

Medieval

Rozengrāls I-2, Rozena 1, tel. 67 22 03 56, www.rozengrals.lv. If the giant wine casks on Old Riga's narrowest street don't get your attention, the people in funny costumes certainly will. The city's only authentic medieval restaurant is already a hit with locals and tourists alike and with good reason. The candlelit cellar, already mentioned in ancient writings as early as 1293, was once used for special events by the town hall. Today it serves only food available hundreds of years ago, hence the absence of potatoes and tomatoes. Giant portions of delicious cuisine including pork, wild game and local fish are available as well as unique drinks that once graced the tables of both nobles and peasants. ▶ Open 12:00 - 24:00. (10 - 15Ls). ☑

Pizza

Čili Pica J-3, 13. janvāra 8 (Stockmann), tel. 80 00 33 55, www.cili.lv. If nearly 50 varieties of pizzas ranging in size from 20 - 50cm in diameter don't impress you, perhaps the incredibly attentive wait staff will. Big servings of spare ribs, salads, pasta and soups are also available in this large space decorated with faux marble columns and other assorted Italian kitsch. ▶ Open 08:00 - 24:00, Tu, Fri, Sat 08:00 - 06:00. Also on H-3, Brīvības bulv. 26, tel. 67 22 35 04. Open 08:00 - 03:00, Tu, Fri, Sat 08:00 - 06:00. (3 - 5Ls). ☑ ☑ ☑

Vairāk Saules C-4, Dzīmavu 60, tel. 67 28 28 78/80 00 90 80, www.vairaksaules.lv. The name means 'more sun,' but we prefer the title 'more places like this please.' Although the uniformed staff, colourful menus and interior design give this restaurant a slightly corporate chain feel, the service is genuinely friendly and the food, whether it be pizzas, pastas, seafood or vegetarian dishes, is fantastic. It also provides a kids' play area for the little ones and a children's menu. ▶ Open 09:00 - 23:00. (3 - 7Ls). ☑ ☑

Steak houses

Zilā govš (The Blue Cow) H-2, Meistaru 21. Named after a particular breed of Latvian cow, this huge restaurant housed in one of Old Riga's most charming medieval buildings specialises, not surprisingly, in a variety of different steaks that are aged 25 - 40 days in a special meat locker. You can also order swordfish or tuna steaks as well as nouvelle Latvian cuisine like pork fillet marinated in quince juice fried in hemp butter with spinach and pearl-barley risotto. Although impossible to miss, just follow the sounds of mooing on the square - no kidding! ▶ Open 11:00 - 24:00. (8 - 18Ls). ☑ ☑

Upmarket

Bergs Restaurant C-4, Elizabetes 83/85 (Berga bazārs), tel. 67 77 09 57, www.hotelbergs.lv. Possibly the best restaurant in Riga, Bergs never disappoints. With an interior design that looks like it's ripped out of the pages of Architectural Digest and an ever-changing menu of international fusion cuisine that will satisfy even the most demanding palates, it's guaranteed to make your lunch or dinner a memorable one. Try the rack of dry-aged lamb with buckwheat dumplings, sautéed vegetables and blackcurrant rosemary red wine sauce prepared by an award-winning chef. ▶ Open 12:00 - 24:00. Closed Sun. (12 - 18Ls). ☑ ☑ ☑

Hungry for more?
www.inyourpocket.com

What's new?

Bufete B-4, Valdemāra 34, tel. 67 27 34 04. For anyone who remembers the iconic diner Ai Karamba, this casual café/bar will come as a pleasant surprise. The simple menu consists of whatever's written that day on the big blackboard hanging behind the bar. Generous servings of Latvian staples, Užavas beer and a wide selection of spirits are all available on the cheap and alternative music compliments the quirky interior that includes Latvian landscape paintings, orange bar stools and wooden tables topped with bottles of Heinz ketchup. ▶ Open 11:00 - 23:00. Closed Sat, Sun. (2 - 4Ls). ☑

Franču maize (French Bread) H-1, Aldaru 11/3 (entrance from Trokšņu). This tiny café tucked away on Old Riga's most charming street produces some of the city's most delicious pastries. Order a marzipan chocolate, a piece of egg liquor cake or a slice of the best pecan pie we've had in a long time and wash it down with an affordably priced cappuccino or aromatic tea. Although the first room is nothing to brag about, the glass atrium in back offers a small courtyard and views of the ivy-covered walls of the surrounding medieval courtyard. ▶ Open 09:00 - 18:00, Sun 10:00 - 17:00.

Panda B-4, Lāčplēša 13, tel. 22 13 82 18. For once a local eatery has placed a greater emphasis on food than decorations. All of the usual Asian favourites are available like kung pao chicken, as well as spare ribs, chicken wings and prawn crackers. Lāčplēšis brew is on draught for a pleasant 1.20Ls and wide variety of lunch specials that include soup, a main course and white rice can be had for under 4Ls from 11:00 - 15:00. ▶ Open 10:00 - 21:30, Sat, Sun 11:00 - 22:00. (3 - 7Ls). ☑

Pastnieks zvana divreiz B-3, Alberta 13. Located in the cellar of what is perhaps Riga's prettiest Art Nouveau building, The Postman Rings Twice is a hip, casual café that looks like a cross between a library and a coffee shop. Enjoy huge mugs of coffee, a full menu of inexpensive international favourites, breakfast food served all day and excellent desserts like crepes with ice cream and maple syrup. A weekday lunch special for under 3Ls is also available not to mention Tērvetes beer on draught. ▶ Open 08:00 - 23:00, Sat, Sun 10:00 - 23:00. (3 - 5Ls). ☑

Rossini F-2, Pumpura 6, tel. 67 33 44 97, www.rossini.lv. Smartly dressed wait staff greet you with genuine smiles as you enter this red brick cellar in the embassy district. All of the usual suspects are available including Italian soups, salads, pastas and mains as well as a decent selection of thin crust pizzas. A good wine list is also on offer not to mention free table water - a true novelty in Riga. Not the place to go out with the guys, it's good for a business lunch or a date with the missus. ▶ Open 12:00 - 23:00. (4 - 8Ls). ☑

Silts B-4, Dzīmavu 39, tel. 67 33 25 17. When one considers its bright white and green interior, its friendly service and its sunny summer terrace, its name silts or warm is quite fitting. The reasonably priced menu offers a dozen or so salads, breakfast food served all day and a good choice of international dishes from classic Latvian pork chops to pasta, seafood and even vegetarian cuisine. Best of all, a half litre of Užavas beer will only run you 1.80Ls. ▶ Open 09:00 - 24:00, Fri 09:00 - 02:00, Sat 11:00 - 02:00, Sun 11:00 - 24:00. (3 - 6Ls). ☑ ☑

From standard bars to more mature music clubs and raging discos, Riga has no problem providing nightlife. It's just a matter of being able to choose where to spend your money. The town is small enough to cover on foot, but as the night gets longer, so does the distance between places.

Bars

Leningrad J-3, Kalēju 54, tel. 29 91 50 49, www.leningrad.lv. After nearly two decades of capitalism and double-digit inflation, some Latvians are looking back to the past. A bar with a retro Soviet interior of assorted communist relics and even period furniture is as good a place as any to enjoy a drink. The beer might not be as cheap as it was in Gorbachev's time, but for Old Riga the local Brengulis and Czech Kozel are remarkably affordable. The beefy bartender with the shaved head and trimmed beard looks like Lenin on steroids. ▶ Open 14:00 - 24:00, Fri, Sat 14:00 - 02:00.

Lobby Bar C-4, Elizabetes 55 (Reval Hotel Latvija), tel. 67 77 22 22. What traveller hasn't spent a little time at a lobby bar out of sheer necessity? Unlike most reception area lounges, the Reval's offers cutting edge design, an impressive variety of cocktails and an excellent menu that offers everything from a Nicoise salad or a Mediterranean tapas platter to big burgers and the best club sandwich in the city. You'll pay more for a beer than at most other places in town, but style and comfort don't come cheap in Riga. ▶ Open 09:00 - 02:00, Sun 10:00 - 02:00. ☑ ☑ ☑

Pharmacy Bar (Krogs Aptieka) H-1, Mazā Miesnieku 1. After presiding over a staple of the Washington DC nightlife scene for several years, American-Latvian Kristaps Krēslīšs has decided to open yet another Pharmacy Bar, but this time in the Latvian capital. Medieval brick walls, medicinal tinctures and scales, tables embedded with capsules and pills and painted silhouettes of old-fashioned bottles on two floors are a clever combination of old and new and the perfect backdrop for a night of cocktails and beers. The bar also provides a smoking courtyard, summer terrace and a jukebox that offers anything from Johnny Cash to the Pixies and Rammstein. ▶ Open 17:00 - 01:00, Fri, Sat 17:00 - 05:00. ☑ ☑ ☑

Pieci Vilki (Five Wolves) B-4, Stabu 6, tel. 67 29 95 55. Owned by a prominent member of a local motorcycle club, Five Wolves is sometimes frequented by local neighbourhood types sipping beers and at other times by hard-looking, hard-drinking leather-clad men with beards. The menu offers a bit of everything including fried eggs and bacon served on red-hot cast iron pans, chicken wings in extra large sizes and steak served just right. Shot takers shouldn't pass up the vodka bottle served in a block of ice. ▶ Open 10:30 - 24:00, Sat, Sun 13:00 - 24:00. ☑ ☑

Casinos & Gaming halls

Latvian law compels all gamblers to register at each casino they visit, so bring a passport or valid ID.

Europa Club Casino C-4, Barona 12, tel. 67 50 28 37. A proper casino like the ones you see in James Bond films as well as slots. ▶ Open 24hrs. ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑

Olympic Voodoo Casino C-4, Brīvības 31, tel. 67 82 87 77. Located in the new wing of the Hotel Latvija, its supposedly the biggest casino in the Baltics. ▶ Open 24hrs. ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑

Tobago Casino Club I-3, Aspazijas 22 (entrance from Vaļņu), tel. 67 22 32 22, www.tobago.lv. Ahoy gamblers! Staff dressed in pirate garb man the tables.

Clubs

NEW

Amber Night

F-3, Elizabetes 55 (Reval Hotel Latvija), www.amber-night.lv. Descend into the depths of the Reval Hotel Latvija, to find this sleek, stylish nightclub designed with an over 25 crowd in mind. Listen to Top 40 from the past three decades while you sip expertly poured cocktails served at two different bars. Hit the dance floor, relax on gold and black couches in the main hall or occupy a table in the back each of which has its own champagne bucket that changes colour every few seconds (not unlike the walls of the entire club). You have to leave your coat and 5Ls at the door but your first drink is on the house. ▶ Open 21:00 - 05:00. Closed Mon, Sun. Admission: Fri, Sat 5Ls. ☑ ☑

Club Essential

C-4, Skolas 2, tel. 67 24 22 89, www.essential.lv. Having experienced the ill-fated disco that once occupied this space, we were relieved to discover that this trendy club is essentially a new creation or, to speak frankly, not another typical boring Riga techno club. In fact, it's quite stylish offering a funky chill out room and several distinct areas on two levels which are all a part of the action surrounding the central dance floor. The music is fast-paced and progressive which is what you'd expect given the talented DJs it imports from around Europe each weekend. ▶ Open Thu 22:00 - 06:00, Fri, Sat 22:00 - 08:00, Sun 22:00 - 05:00. Closed Mon, Tue, Wed. Admission: 3 - 5Ls. ☑ ☑ ☑

La Rocca

B-5, Brīvības 96, tel. 67 50 60 30, www.larocca.lv. An admission fee of 5Ls buys you a pass to a variety of different clubs within the confines of a converted theatre that still bears the tell-tale signs of its original incarnation such as gilded decorations and ceilings as well as red velvet walls. However, the theatre-goers of yore would doubtless be shocked by the flashing lasers, smoke machines and go-go dancers with glitter-paint shining from their naked thighs. Drinks are reasonably priced and if you're not into techno or Russian pop you can try the hip-hop club upstairs. The smouldering smoking section and its choking inhabitants look like a vision of hell that even Dante couldn't imagine. ▶ Open Fri, Sat 22:00 - 06:00. Admission: 3 - 5Ls. ☑ ☑ ☑


Pulkvedis (Nobody Writes to the Colonel) J-2, Peldu 26/28, tel. 67 21 38 86, www.pulkvedis.lv.

It's affirmative: the Colonel has gone AWOL. Since the mid-1990s, this was the only bastion of alternative music for a bohemian crowd desperate to avoid pop and techno music. The dark, industrial-style interior is still hip as is the retro cellar bar with pink shag carpeting on the wall, but what's the point of drinking a fabulous cocktail to old Michael Jackson songs? What happened to the Clash, the White Stripes or even the Chili Peppers? On the bright side, DJs Dace Volfa and Marty Smits have remained true to the club's original music style. ▶ Open 20:00 - 03:00, Fri, Sat 20:00 - 05:00. Closed Sun. Admission: Fri, Sat 3Ls. ☑ ☑ ☑

Space Dog

I-2, Vecpilsētas 19, tel. 67 49 10 39, www.spacedog.lv. Space Dog's typical orange and grey interior is nothing new, but it does have a few things of which to be proud apart from the attractive, hip crowd of bohemians that it draws. Cute bartenders, live music, local beer, a foosball table and, best of all, a Jägermeister shot machine are certainly nothing to sneeze at. During the day you can also order soups, salads and sandwiches and a smoking section (although by the looks of it not completely legal) is also available. ▶ Open 12:00 - 23:00, Fri, Sat 12:00 - 03:00. Admission: free. ☑ ☑ ☑

Cocktails

Cuba Café I-1, Jauniela 15, tel. 67 22 43 62. The global fascination with Fidel and Guevera is still alive and well in Riga in this dimly-lit café whose walls are adorned with black and white photos of the tropical nation and its immortal leader. Although a few assorted starters are on offer, Cuba Café is more of a cocktail bar serving island drinks in an intimate setting. You can also shoot pool in the cellar. ▶ Open 15:00 - 02:00, Fri, Sat 15:00 - 05:00.   

Lounge 8 I-3, Vajņu 19 (entrance from Gleznatāju), tel. 67 35 95 95, www.lounge8.lv. Pass the walk-in humidior on the ground floor and head upstairs to experience one of Riga's trendiest bars. A unique, spacious interior of palm trees and skylights as well as an inventive drinks list that includes key lime, chocolate and even rhubarb and lemongrass martinis makes one half expect to see the cast of Sex and the City flirting with eligible men at the bar. Mediterranean and Southeast Asian cuisine is also available as is a huge smoking lounge. ▶ Open 17:00 - 24:00, Thu 17:00 - 01:00, Fri, Sat 17:00 - 03:00.   

Mad House H-2, Kaļķu 11, tel. 67 22 05 54. Mad House offers a scatter-brained interior of old movie posters, niches that look like retro living rooms and kitchens and even a portrait of old Lenin. Mixed drinks are delicious but will run you nearly 5Ls each and even beer prices are over the moon. A full breakfast, lunch and dinner menu is available as well as a dance floor and a chill out room hidden in the depths of the cellar. Two for one happy hour from 17:00 - 19:00. ▶ Open 08:00 - 03:00, Fri 08:00 - 06:00, Sat 11:00 - 06:00, Sun 11:00 - 03:00. 

Skyline Bar C-4, Elizabetes 55 (Reval Hotel Latvija - 26th floor), tel. 67 77 22 22. A visit to the Skyline Bar has become a mandatory stop on the well-travelled tourist routes of Riga and this fact is reflected in its largely foreign clientele. The views are spectacular and the new retro interior of shag carpeting, comfortable couches and an abundance of pillows is warm and inviting. Getting one of the coveted seats by the windows is often a chore, but it's worth the effort. The wait staff can be a little lethargic, but perhaps it's due to the altitude. Tapas and sandwiches also available. ▶ Open 15:00 - 02:00, Fri, Sat 15:00 - 03:00.  



Live music

Bites Blues Club B-4, Dzirnava 34a, tel. 67 33 31 25. The dark interior is basic without any trendy trappings, the way a real blues club should be. If you're unfortunate enough to miss the live acts on weekend nights, sometimes from as far away as Memphis, classic performances are often broadcast on the big screen during the day. Even if the blues is just another colour to you, it's worth a visit for the delicious international cuisine and the Užavas beer on draught. ▶ Open 11:00 - 24:00, Fri 11:00 - 01:00, Sat 14:00 - 01:00. Closed Sun. Admission: Fri, Sat 5 - 15Ls. 

City Jazz Club C-5, Ģertrūdes 34, tel. 26 12 91 91, www.cityjazzclub.lv. Owned by a local celebrity musician, this dark cellar club was designed with London's renowned Ronnie Scott's jazz club in mind. Giant black and white photos of legendary musicians hang from the red velvety walls and most of the leather chairs offer good views of the stage at the far end of the basement. Even if jazz isn't to your taste, you'll no doubt be impressed by the international dishes concocted by a British chef who spent several years working in the States and the Caribbean. ▶ Open 18:00 - 24:00, Fri, Sat 18:00 - 02:00. Closed Mon, Sun. 

Wine bars

D'vine C-4, Elizabetes 55, tel. 67 77 22 17. Banish all images of typical wine bars where scruffy men sit and smoke at wooden tables stained with the ghosts of drinks past. Sleek, modern D'vine is located on the second floor of the new glass and cutting-edge metal arrow jutting out of the Reval Hotel Latvija. Snack on Mediterranean tapas and salads while you sip a wide variety of wine by the glass, half-bottle or bottle. ▶ Open 12:00 - 24:00, Fri, Sat 12:00 - 01:00. Closed Sun. 

Vina Studija B-3, Elizabetes 10, tel. 67 28 32 05, www.vinastudija.lv. Enjoy a reasonably priced glass, carafe or bottle of wine in this refined, yet relaxed establishment in Riga's art nouveau district. If you can't make up your mind, choose one of the specials on the board, ask one of the knowledgeable staff or trust in the judgement of leading wine critics, whose ratings are published in the menu. Local and world press is also available as well as Mediterranean tapas. ▶ Bar open 12:00 - 24:00; shop open 10:00 - 22:00.  


Pubs

Kapteina Enriko pulkstenis B-4, Antonijas 13, tel. 67 33 89 73. Named after a classic 1960s Latvian film, Captain Enrico's Watch is a cosy bar decorated with antique wooden furniture including the solid tables adorned with ancient termite holes. International food is on offer from salads and pastas to steaks and even duck. A much-coveted chill out room is available in back and Latvia's tastiest beers, Užavas and Tērvetes, are on draught. ▶ Open 09:00 - 24:00, Fri, Sat 09:00 - 02:00.  

Klondaika C-4, Dzirnava 59, tel. 67 24 03 66, www.klondaika.lv. The designer of this kitschy place has seen one too many westens, but we love it just the same. Relax outside in one of the best summer courtyards the centre has to offer, head down to the slot machine hall optimistically labelled the gold mine or go down to the bar for beer and cocktails under cattle skulls. ▶ Open 09:00 - 07:00.    

Sports bars

Paddy Whelan's Irish Pub & Sports Bar J-2, Grēcinieku 4, tel. 67 21 01 50, www.pub.lv. Not so much an Irish pub as it is a sports bar dedicated to the finer things in life - namely football and formula one. On the ground floor you can expect a dozen or so flat screen TVs showing different matches, while upstairs you'll find a cosier atmosphere with loads of memorabilia on the walls including a portrait of Pierluigi Collina. In addition to the usual Irish and international pub food, Paddy's also offers a menu of authentic Indian cuisine cooked in a real tandoor and those craving something spicier can head upstairs at the weekend after 22:00 for striptease and lap dances with no admission fee! No kidding! ▶ Open 11:00 - 01:00, Fri, Sat 11:00 - 03:00, Sun 11:00 - 24:00.    

Stars J-2, Grēcinieku 11a, tel. 20 23 52 35, www.sportabars.lv. The one on Grēcinieku includes a giant bar and large flat screen TVs that can show nearly any live match via satellite as well as a cellar bar with couches and an enormous wall-sized screen for major events. Over a dozen different brews are available as well as a good selection of bar food that is definitely pricey, but, thankfully, arrives in generous serving sizes. ▶ Open 11:00 - 01:00, Fri, Sat 11:00 - 02:00. (5 - 10Ls). 

Essential Riga

Art Nouveau architecture B-3, Alberta 2, 2a, 4, 6, 8, 13; Elizabetes 10b; Strēlnieku 4a. Visit the biggest gallery of Art Nouveau architecture by Russian architect Mikhail Eisenstein. A definite must! Some buildings have still not been renovated which makes for a somewhat chaotic clash of modern investment and communist neglect. Of particular interest is the house at Strēlnieku 4a. Built in 1905 it was home to a student hostel from 1953 - 1993. It has since undergone a complete facelift and is now home to the Stockholm School of Economics. Nearly 40% of buildings in the centre of Riga were built in this flamboyant style.

Latvian Ethnographic Museum (Latvijas etnogrāfiskais brīvdabas muzejs) Brīvības gatve 440, tel. 67 99 45 15, www.muzejs.lv. 100 hectares of life as it used to be. Farmsteads, windmills, fishing villages, churches and other historic structures have been moved here and preserved for posterity. Watch craftsmen perform various tasks or try some Latvian cuisine and drink in the tavern. Take bus N°1 from the corner of Merķeļa and Tērbatas to the Brīvdabas muzejs stop. ▶ Open 10:00 - 17:00. Admission: 1.50Ls.

Riga Cathedral (Doma baznīca) H-1, Doma laukums, tel. 67 21 32 13, www.doms.lv. The largest place of worship in the Baltics, measuring 187 x 43m, with walls two metres thick, Riga Cathedral also has one of the biggest organs in Europe (6,768 pipes!). It was such a marvel in its day that Franz Liszt composed a piece of music in its honour. The drop from Cathedral Square (Doma laukums) to the church's base shows how the level of the city has risen in the 800 years since its foundations were laid on the site of a Livonian fishing village. Unfortunately, the massive structure is in desperate need of repairs, hence the steel beams and other supports you'll see around columns and just below the ceiling. The price of the ticket also includes access to its Romanesque cloister. ▶ Open 10:00 - 17:00. Admission: 2Ls.

St. Peter's Church (Pēterbaznīca) I-2, Skāmu 19, tel. 67 22 94 26. First mentioned in ancient chronicles in 1209, St. Peter's was a Catholic church until 1523, when it turned Lutheran. Its wooden tower, the highest in Europe at that time, was destroyed several times. It first collapsed in 1666 and was rebuilt a year later. To see how long it would last, the builders hurled a glass from the top: the more pieces the vessel broke into, the greater the tower's longevity. Alas, a pile of straw cushioned the glass' fall and the spire burnt down one year later. Artillery fire destroyed the structure again in 1941. In 1973 it was finally rebuilt and the glass ritual was repeated, this time with smashing results. Take the lift to the observation platform for spectacular views of the city. ▶ Open 10:00 - 18:00. Closed Mon. Admission: 0.50Ls, tower 2Ls.

The Museum of the Occupation of Latvia (Latvijas okupācijas muzejs) I-2, Strēlnieku laukums 1, tel. 67 21 27 15, www.occupationmuseum.lv. Once a museum honouring the Latvian Red Riflemen, the building now houses a fascinating museum dedicated to the Nazi and Soviet occupations of Latvia. The various exhibits display the atrocities committed against the people of Latvia and the systematic destruction of their nation's sovereignty. Visitors can walk into a reconstructed gulag barracks and catch a glimpse of the intolerable living conditions in Siberian labour camps. Exhibits are available in English, German, Latvian and Russian, but you can also choose to use an audio guide with headphones in English or just ask for a live guide. ▶ Open 11:00 - 18:00. Admission: free.

Churches

Orthodox Cathedral (Pareizticīgo katedrāle) G-3, Brīvības 23, tel. 67 21 12 16. Built between 1876 and 1884, this yellow-brick church capped with five gilded cupolas was turned into a planetarium during the occupation but was finally returned to its congregation in 1990. The Soviets destroyed many of the church's ornate works of art including wall and ceiling frescoes by the famous Russian painter Vereshchagin. Much of the cathedral has now been restored to its former glory.

St. James Cathedral (Jēkaba katedrāle) H-1, Jēkaba 9, tel. 67 32 64 19, www.catholic.lv/katedrale. This church beside the parliament was first mentioned in ancient chronicles in 1225. In 1522, it became the first church in Latvia to hold a Lutheran service, but during a brief Polish occupation 60 years later it was returned to its Catholic flock, who have held it ever since. ▶ Open 07:00 - 19:00.

St. John's (Jāņa baznīca) I-2, Jāņa 7, tel. 67 22 40 28/67 22 51 71. First mentioned in 1297 when it served as the chapel of a Dominican abbey, the monastery and church were closed during the Reformation in 1523 and served for a time as the city's armoury. It was taken over by the Lutherans in 1582. During the building's construction two monks were bricked into the southern wall and lived out their lives there, fed through the window grate. (08:00, Sat 08:00, 18:00, Sun 08:00, 09:00, 11:00, 18:30 - Latvian) ▶ Open 11:00 - 17:00. Closed Mon. Admission: donations.

Jewish Riga

Jews in Latvia C-4, Skolas 6, tel. 67 28 34 84. Located on the third floor, this small, yet informative museum documents, in Latvian and English, the history of Jewish life in Latvia beginning with the 18th century. Visitors can discover the important role Jews played in Latvian society and the contributions they made to intellectual life, the arts and even sports. The exhibits are also a moving testimony to the suffering Latvian Jews experienced at the hands of the Nazis and Soviets. The last section of the museum entitled 'The Jewish People Survived' illustrates the triumphant rebirth of Judaism in Latvia after independence. ▶ Open 12:00 - 17:00. Closed Fri, Sat. Admission: donations.

Museums

Latvian Railway Museum (Latvijas dzelzceļa muzejs) E-2, Uzvaras 2/4, tel. 67 23 28 49, www.railwaymuseum.lv. Retrace the tracks of rail history in Latvia in this museum run by Latvian Railways (Latvijas dzelzceļš). Inside the brick hangar you'll find old photographs, antiquated machines and a few specimens of old wagons. Outside you can look at restored Soviet diesel and electric locomotives built in Ukraine and Russia as well as a German locomotive built in 1942 that no doubt became a spoil of war. ▶ Open 10:00 - 17:00. Closed Mon, Sun. Admission: 1Ls.

Museum of Riga's History and Navigation I-1, Palasta 4, tel. 67 21 13 58, www.rigamuz.lv. Walk up the stairs to the first floor to discover temporary exhibitions from Latvia and abroad, as well as art and memorabilia from the days of the first Latvian Republic. The second floor displays Bronze Age artefacts and medieval curiosities, such as the sword used by Riga's executioner in the 16th century and the mummified hand of an unlucky criminal. You can also take a peek at the Riga Cathedral's courtyard, which is also open to the public, from upstairs. ▶ Open 11:00 - 17:00. Closed Mon, Tue. Admission: 3Ls.

National Art Museum (Nacionālais mākslas muzejs) F-3, Valdemāra 10a, tel. 67 32 44 61, www.vmm.lv. Enter this time capsule and marvel at the red-carpeted marble stairs and gilt walls and ceiling, which display murals of Latvian landscapes. View classic paintings, drawings, watercolours and sculptures by the Latvian masters Rozentāls, Annuss, Valters, Padeģis, Liberts and many more. Works by the famous philosopher, artist and explorer Nicholas Roerich and many other Baltic-Russians and Germans are also available. ▶ Open 11:00 - 17:00. Closed Tue. Admission: 1 - 3Ls. Tours in English: 8Ls.

Riga Art Nouveau Museum B-3, Alberta 12, tel. 67 18 14 65, www.jugendstils.riga.lv. This long-awaited museum is housed in an apartment where one of Latvia's best art nouveau architects once lived - Konstantīns Pēkšēns. The prolific artist and engineer who was responsible for the creation of no less than 250 buildings in Riga also designed this impressive edifice. The historic house was also home to the illustrious painter Janis Rozentāls and the writer Rūdolfs Blaumanis to whom another museum is dedicated on the top floor of the building. View period furniture and artwork from one of the Latvian capital's most creative eras. ▶ Open 10:00 - 18:00. Closed Mon, Tue. Admission: 1Ls.

Places of interest

Central Market (Centrāltirgus) D-4, Centrāltirgus iela, www.centraltirgus.lv. When construction was completed in 1930, Riga's Central Market was one of the largest and most modern marketplaces on the European continent. Seventy years later, four of the five pavilions, which were used as zeppelin hangars during WWI, still serve their original function as meat, fish, produce and dairy markets. The bustling atmosphere also hasn't changed much, although most of the hawkers are more reluctant to haggle than in the past. ▶ Open 08:00 - 17:00, Mon, Sun 08:00 - 16:00.

Freedom Monument (Brīvības piemineklis) H-3, Brīvības and Raiņa. 'Milda.' as she is affectionately known, was unveiled in 1935 and is a national shrine for Latvians. Designed by Kārlis Zāle, the friezes around the base of the sculpture depict Latvians singing, working and fighting for their freedom, while the three stars in the maiden's hands represent the three historical regions of the country: Kurzeme, Vidzeme and Latgale. Locals are always placing flowers at the base of the monument, an act for which people were deported to Siberia in Soviet times. The honour guard changes every hour on the hour from 09:00 - 18:00.

Riga Castle (Rīgas pils) H-1, Pils laukums 3. Built in 1330 as a base for the Livonian Order, the castle was destroyed several times during battles with, of all possible foes, the local townspeople. After the Order's destruction, the various occupiers of the city housed their governors inside. Latvia's first post-Cold War president Guntis Ulmanis made it his official office to continue the tradition begun by Latvia's interwar presidents in the 1920s and 1930s. It also houses two museums.

Riga National Zoo (Rīgas zooloģiskais dārzs) Meža prosp. 1, tel. 67 51 86 69, www.rigazoo.lv. Take a look at a wide variety of animals from around the globe including tortoises from the Galapagos, Japanese macaques, Bactrian camels, African zebras, lions, tigers, giraffes and hippopotami, Asian red pandas and European bears, wolves and seals. The zoo also has a top-notch tropical house filled with rare birds, snakes, frogs and insects. Take tram №11 from Barona to the Mežaparks stop. ▶ Open 10:00 - 16:00. Admission: 3 - 4Ls, free for children under four.

Midsummer's Eve

What began as an important religious fertility festival has slowly evolved into a secular beer bash. To ancient Latvians Midsummer's Eve, or Jāņi, marked the longest day of the year when light both symbolic and literal was at its most potent. The old pagans celebrated with singing, dancing and large quantities of beer. Huge bonfires were set alight and as they eventually died down, revelers would jump over the flames for good luck. While the older generation was getting their load on, young lovers would take to the forests in search of the mythical fern blossom which only blooms on Midsummer's Eve or so the story goes. Even now, people born in March (roughly nine months later) are often referred to as *Jāņu bērni* or the children of Jāņi. Did we mention that according to tradition all participants have to stay awake until sunrise?



Today the festival is Latvia's favourite holiday. Part ethnographic concert, part barbecue, part hedonistic drinking marathon, it's celebrated throughout the countryside and many June conversations in Riga revolve around the question of where to spend the holiday. Locals wouldn't dream of being trapped in the city for Jāņi. Although each Latvian family celebrates it a little differently, a modern Latvian Midsummer consists of good friends, music, singing, truckloads of beer, caraway seed cheese, bonfires and several kilos of grilled meat enjoyed as far away from civilisation as possible. Latvians celebrate Jāņi from June 23 - 24, but this year it'll be an official five day weekend holiday. Perhaps, Latvian lawmakers thought it best to keep inebriated and unemployed locals far away from the parliament building for as long as possible. If you're lucky enough to be invited to an authentic Latvian celebration don't forget to bring your rain gear. Locals don't say that it's raining cats and dogs here. Anytime there's a downpour they say that it's raining as if it were Jāņi.

A crafts fair is held on Cathedral Square (Doma laukums) every June 22. You can buy plenty of food and drink as well Latvian souvenirs and mandatory Midsummer supplies such as flower wreaths for women and oak-leaf wreaths for men. Ethnographic song and dance concerts with plenty of locals in national costume are also a mainstay of the fair.

Soviet Riga

Academy of Sciences (Zinātņu Akadēmija) D-4, Akadēmijas laukums 1, tel. 26 49 12 37. This Soviet edifice is a cousin to similar statements of ugliness all over Eastern Europe and local nicknames for the Empire State building copy include 'Stalin's birthday cake' or 'the Kremlin'. Most Latvians just consider themselves lucky that the portrait of Uncle Joe that was supposed to be a part of the facade never came to fruition. If you look close enough you can spot several hammers and sickles, but best of all, at a height of 65m, the 17th-floor balcony is now open to the public for only 1Ls. For a short tour in English visit on weekdays 11:00 - 15:00. Someone always mans the information desk on the ground floor, so you can visit on weekends too as well as in the evening or early morning, or so they claim.

Nordic Hotel Bellevue D-4, Raiņa 33, tel. 67 06 34 00, fax 67 06 34 01, bellevue@nordichotels.eu, www.nordichotels.eu. Opened in 1886 simply as the Bellevue, this historic building was completely renovated in 2008. All rooms are spacious and include modern conveniences such as flat screen TVs, free wireless internet, climate control, mini-bar, safe and bathroom, as well as extras like Italian marble, oak floors and full-length mirrors. Suites even have Lavazza espresso machines! An upmarket restaurant, a full-service spa with a swimming pool and a cigar lounge are also available. ▶ 112 rooms (25 economy from 42Ls, 61 standard from 49Ls, 24 superior from 62Ls, 2 suites from 135Ls).

Reval Hotel Elizabeth

C-4, Elizabetes 73, tel. 67 78 55 55, fax 67 78 55 54, www.revalhotels.com. Built from the ground up in 2008, this incredibly stylish hotel is located opposite Riga's most beautiful park a short walk from Old Riga. Its interior was created by a trendy London design firm and each of its modern, spacious rooms includes flat screen TVs, free wireless internet, large bathrooms and many other four-star amenities as well as views of either the courtyard or the park. A fitness centre, a hip cocktail bar and a grill restaurant called C.U.T. are also at your disposal. ▶ 228 rooms (95 singles from 55Ls, 129 doubles from 55Ls, 3 junior suites from 177Ls, 1 suite from 208Ls).

Reval Hotel Latvija

C-4, Elizabetes 55, tel. 67 77 22 22, fax 67 77 23 32, www.revalhotels.com. The Reval Group has completely transformed this skyscraper into one of Latvia's premier hotels. All rooms include phone, minibar, hairdryer, climate control and satellite TV. Business class suites are more spacious and include a few extra amenities. Allergy and smoke-free accommodation is also at your disposal, as well as three bars, a restaurant, conference facilities and room service, not to mention a new wing with dozens of shops and a seafood restaurant. Don't miss the view from the 26th-floor Skyline Bar. ▶ 571 rooms (singles 80Ls, doubles 87Ls, triples 114Ls).

Mid-range

Art Hotel Laine B-4, Skolas 11, tel. 67 28 88 16, fax 67 28 76 58, info@laine.lv, www.laine.lv. From the sunny staff to the unique, spacious and colourful interior, Laine is a superb, central find. Most rooms offer satellite TV, mini-bar and private bathrooms. Take in the Riga skyline from newer top floor rooms, or lose yourself in the detailed bathroom tiling. Conference facilities, a restaurant and free wireless internet access are also available. ▶ 33 rooms (28 singles 39 - 50Ls, 28 doubles 49 - 60Ls, 1 triple 50 - 60Ls, 1 suite 70 - 80Ls, 4 apartments 65 - 80Ls).

Clarion Collection Hotel Valdemārs F-3, Valdemāra 23, tel. 67 33 44 62, fax 67 33 30 01, reservations@valdemars.lv, www.valdemars.lv. The Scandinavian owners of this hotel have completely renovated every square meter of this historic 1901 building including its original parquet floors, fireplaces and stained glass windows. All rooms are relatively spacious and include flat screen TVs, free wireless internet, phone, mini-bar, safe and bathrooms with heated floors and either shower or bathtub. Only allergy-free fabrics are used in each interior from the pillows and sheets to the upholstery of the couches in its suites. Conference facilities, a fitness centre and a Swedish restaurant are also available. ▶ 83 rooms (16 singles 50Ls, 44 doubles 60Ls, 1 triple 85Ls, 13 suites 85Ls, 9 junior suites 74Ls). Breakfast and dinner included.

Dodo Hotel E-6, Jersikas 1, tel. 67 24 02 20, fax 67 24 02 18, www.dodohotel.com. Although budget airlines have been flying to Riga for years now, local hoteliers have completely ignored the budget accommodation niche - until now. Built in 2008, this Western, French-owned low-cost hotel offers 109 rooms with flat screen TVs, free wireless internet, private bathrooms with showers and hairdryer all for under €50. A continental breakfast with French crepes is also available at an extra cost and the cafés and bars of Old Riga are only a short tram ride away. ▶ 109 rooms (105 doubles 34Ls, 4 family rooms 52Ls). Breakfast 3.50Ls.

Hotel Edvards F-3, Dzīnavu 45/47, tel. 67 43 99 60, www.hoteledvards.lv. Opened in late 2008, this quiet family-run hotel is a great option for people who'd like to avoid the noise and party atmosphere of Old Riga or travellers who simply want a good night's sleep. All rooms are similarly decorated with bright walls and peach-coloured doors and carpeting and include flat screen TVs, free wireless internet access, mini-bar, phone and bathrooms with heated tile floors. Superior rooms are more spacious and include bathtubs and terraces. A children's room and a Viennese-style cafe are also at your disposal. ▶ 20 rooms (7 singles 33Ls, 11 doubles 40Ls, 2 superior 60Ls).

Kolonna Hotel Riga I-2, Tīrģoņu 9, tel. 67 35 82 54, www.hotelkolonna.com. Located on one of Old Riga's most charming streets just off Dome Square, this new hotel certainly has plenty to offer. Each room is slightly different in size but all offer satellite TV, writing desk, phone, private bathrooms with shower and minimalist décor. The top floor rooms also have air conditioning and luxury two-storey penthouse suites are also available. ▶ 41 rooms (singles 54Ls, doubles 58Ls, triples 85Ls, apartments 68Ls, penthouse 85Ls).

TIA B-4, Valdemāra 63, tel. 67 33 39 18, fax 67 83 03 90, tia@tia.lv, www.hoteltia.lv. This three-star hotel offers comfortable accommodation in the city centre and its 49 rooms face a quiet courtyard so you don't have to worry about noise. With the exception of the upmarket suites on the top floor, all rooms are decorated in a similar style with bright pastel colours, wood furnishings designed by local craftsmen, cable TV, phone, safe, mini-bar and private bathrooms with showers and hair dryers. We, however, prefer the rooms on the sixth floor each of which has its own balcony at no extra cost. ▶ 49 rooms (6 singles 38Ls, 7 doubles 48Ls, 3 triples 63Ls, 2 suites 56Ls, 31 twin 48Ls).

Bed & Breakfast

Jakob Lenz B-3, Lenču 2, tel. 67 33 33 43, fax 67 33 13 78, www.guesthouselenz.lv. This B&B located in a quiet residential neighbourhood is only a stone's throw from the city's most impressive Art Nouveau buildings and offers bright and spacious rooms, many with private bathrooms, within renovated apartments on three floors. A full kitchen is also available as well as a communal computer or free wireless in rooms. ▶ 25 rooms (4 singles 25 - 30Ls, 10 doubles 30 - 40Ls, 7 triples 35 - 45Ls, 4 apartments 47 - 52Ls).

KB B&B C-5, Barona 37, tel. 67 31 23 23, fax 67 31 69 53, www.kbhotel.lv. It's not by chance that KB stands for Krišjānis Barons. The B&B is located on the street of the same name and is owned by the great-grandson of the illustrious 20th-century collector of folk songs. Climb the marble stairs to find bright, renovated rooms with cable TV, new furniture, reading lamp and en suite bathroom with shower. The attic apartment also offers a kitchenette and a private terrace. ▶ 12 rooms (2 singles 20 - 28Ls, 4 doubles 25 - 33Ls, 5 triples 30 - 38Ls, 1 apartment 58 - 78Ls).