

# Quality of Life and Recreation

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Sights and experience 



Apart from being the capital of Latvia and indisputably the largest city in the three Baltic States Riga is also Europe's capital of Art Nouveau architecture and one of the 'greenest' cities in the region. Entertainment options for all ages and tastes range from upmarket clubs, cinemas, and casinos, to traditional theatres and exhibitions, as well as a zoo and an open-air Skansen-style museum for family visits. The Latvian National Opera and Ballet, in the very centre of Riga, is the proud architectural symbol of a newly independent nation; its distinguished building hosts internationally renowned orchestras, opera, and ballet troupes, and attracts major international artists touring Europe.

Riga's Old Town is on UNESCO's World Heritage List and offers a variety of historical and contemporary influences. These are perfectly captured in a number of Lutheran, Catholic, and Orthodox churches, a synagogue, and, naturally, a mix of international restaurants as well as Irish and British pubs – all within a few blocks of each other.

Latvia's own distinctive cuisine is becoming a major attraction for visitors to Riga, with a number of local 'ethnic' restaurants arriving on the scene throughout the capital. Maybe it was not so a few years ago, but currently it may be said with pride: Riga's restaurants have grown incredibly rapidly, and the meals offered can satisfy even the most sophisticated gourmands. Food items produced in Latvia are healthy and tasty; and the chefs are admirably skilled, talented and creative as they enrich the traditions of national cuisine with contemporary ease.

Nevertheless, Riga and its surrounding region is only half of Latvia's story. The remainder can offer an array of recreational options from cosy B&Bs with only a light touch of 'virtual rurality', to open-air medieval theatre, to rock and pop festivals with international stars. An evening at a country home featuring a Latvian 'herbal sauna', horseback riding across scenic hills, or fishing in a murmuring stream makes for a refreshing shared break, either for a management team or families. If you'd like a more culturally oriented country trip, Latvia offers numerous castles and manors complete with a variety of museums. One such pearl, for example, may be found in Daugavpils, where one of the renovated buildings of the giant historic fortress houses the Mark Rothko Art Centre featuring several of the legendary abstract-art master's works.

The most important national celebration in Latvia is St. John's Day – the summer solstice on 23 June – when the entire nation gathers at bonfires to greet each other with bouquets of seasonal flowers and grasses and to consume a slice of traditional cheese with a mug of specially-brewed beer. Latvia also boasts its own renowned quadrennial event – the Song and Dance Festival, which culminates in an open-air massed choral concert featuring several thousand singers.

Sometimes we wonder about it ourselves, yet it is a fact: Latvia is the 'superstate' of music. Such international stars as conductor Andris Nelsons, opera diva Elīna Garanča, and tenor Aleksandrs Antoņenko, for example, are our very own: they were born in Latvia, went to school here and became legendary artists.

The people of Latvia love music from their early childhood years to old age. Musical tastes may differ, but the choice of concerts and festivals is so varied that each person can find something to satisfy their taste. The International Early Music Festival is held every summer at Rundāle Palace, built in accordance with the magnificent traditions of Baroque and Rococo architecture; people who love opera have a festival in Riga, and an open-air one in picturesque Sigulda to enjoy. Jazz, symphonic music and chamber music are also favoured in Latvia, but most young people prefer popular music. The Positivus festival, held at Salacgrīva beach, has become the favourite popular music event in the Baltic States and beyond. Prāta vētra/Brainstorm, DaGamba and Skyforger are worthy of mention among the most popular bands, the latter's popularity among folk-metal fans having spread widely beyond Latvia.

Latvians also hold sport in high regard. Most fans gather in the stands or in front of TV screens to view team sports such as ice hockey, basketball and beach volleyball. Football, floorball and handball are popular too. We follow the feats of our skeleton and bobsleigh stars eagerly, with several having achieved Olympic, European and world titles. We follow the feats of boxer Mairis Briedis with bated breath, as he nears the pinnacle of world boxing.

But you can't be a real sports fan without participating yourself! For sports enthusiasts, Latvia can offer all the traditional activities including basketball, football, tennis, and ice hockey, as well as golf, swimming, and ten-pin bowling. In terms of outdoor activities, the most popular are jogging, hiking, cycling, and orienteering. In addition, Latvia has a number of rivers and streams with good facilities for recreational rafting and canoeing; and for winter sport enthusiasts, the Latvian countryside offers several hills equipped for downhill skiing.

Wind tunnels were not initially intended for active recreation and entertainment, but the northern Latvian town of Sigulda begs to differ. Sigulda offers the Aerodium wind tunnel – a device blasting air upwards in the form of a vertical pillar, enabling visitors to literally take to the air. The coaches at Aerodium are among the world's leading professionals in their field, which was proven when they participated in the closing ceremony of the Turin Winter Olympics in 2006 and built the Latvian pavilion at EXPO 2010 in Shanghai.

Sigulda has become one of the most popular centres of active leisure attracting both local residents and foreign visitors. Striking impressions and thrilling adrenaline bursts will be guaranteed whether you choose to fly like a bird, bungee jump from a cable car, or race down a real bobsleigh course at breakneck speed.

#### Natural treasures



Despite being a relatively small country at a northerly latitude, Latvia features remarkable biodiversity as a result of low-intensity agricultural and forestry activities during the years the world was undergoing widespread industrialization. This, together with low rural-population density, has ensured the survival of ancient forests that host an incredible variety of fauna, both large and small. White storks and the rarer black storks occupy a number of colonies in northern Latvia, alongside other rare plant and animal species. This has made Latvia a hot spot on international birdwatchers' maps. For less 'professional' eco-tourists, Latvia offers a national park and four nature reserves spread across the country, each with educational nature trails, observation platforms, and herds of wild horses.

In all seasons but especially in summer, the sea entices friends of nature just like it would any of us. Our beach stretches for more than 500 kilometres, the sand on the beach is especially fine and white; and slender pine trees grow in the dunes and disseminate healing substances called phytoncides.

Because of its rich nature, the resort city of Jūrmala is especially popular; yet excellent beaches can be found in Liepāja, Ventspils, and elsewhere along the Baltic Sea coast. The extensive Baltic seashore is full of traditional fishing villages welcoming visitors with delicious freshly smoked fish or pleasurable boat trips.

The eastern part of Latvia is known as the land of blue lakes because of its hundreds of lakes, all very beautiful; and friends of nature are always welcomed there with true Latgalian hospitality.

As well as having international-chain hotels, Riga and the other largest cities have first-class residential property available for purchase or rent. The prices for these vary greatly, depending largely on location. The purchase of a comfortable country home in close proximity to any major city is guaranteed to be a sound investment.

Latvia has one of the highest ratios of doctors per head of population, and this ensures the quality of medical services in both public and private health centres and clinics. This, in combination with reasonable costs, has recently created a wave of medical tourism from neighbouring EU countries where medical costs can be excessive.

Latvia has three international schools and they are highly appreciated by the children of diplomatic staff and the country's expatriate populations. One of them is located near the city of Jūrmala, another one sits beside the Daugava River at Ķīpsala and the third is in the outer Riga suburb of Piņķi. In addition, most Latvian universities and colleges offer education of international quality within the humanities, social and natural sciences, and technologies for English-speaking exchange students or free-movers.

In addition to organizations such as the various foreign chambers of commerce, informal circles of expatriates have formed in Riga, uniting people from various countries and professional backgrounds for regular cultural and recreational activities.

## Additional information

Latvian Institute: <http://li.lv/en>

Investment and Development Agency of Latvia (Tourism Department): <https://www.latvia.travel/en>

<https://www.liaa.gov.lv/en/invest-latvia/business-guide/quality-life-and-recreation>