



WHY VISIT LATVIA

Produced by Lonely Planet for



A tapestry of sea, lakes and woods, Latvia is best described as a vast unspoilt parkland with one cosmopolitan city – its vibrant capital, Rīga. The country might be small, but it has more than a few surprises hidden amidst its lush pine forests and architecturally rich towns. Here are ten reasons to add Latvia to your travel wish list.

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ART NOUVEAU ARCHITECTURE

PHOTO BY YULIA-B / GETTY IMAGES

1 OLD RĪGA

Riga's medieval core boasts an impressive array of World Heritage-listed historic buildings, oversized churches and cobbled lanes. Best of all are the many sunny squares filled with beer gardens and street cafes, which in summer thrum with the cosmopolitan clatter of locals and tourists. In the winter, Old Rīga does its best impression of a scene from a Christmas card – fitting for the place where the world's first Christmas tree was erected.

2 ART NOUVEAU ARCHITECTURE

For fans of this theatrical style of architecture and design, there's simply no better destination than Riga. Over 750 buildings – more than any other city in Europe – boast this flamboyant and haunting style of decor. Gaze up as you wander the streets and you'll see imaginative façades decorated with screaming goblins, praying goddesses, creeping vines and geometric emblems.



OLD RIGA

PHOTO BY COREY / GETTY IMAGES ©



SUNSET ON THE BALTIC SEA

PHOTO BY FOTOFLOOR / GETTY IMAGES ©

3 BEAUTIFUL BEACHES

First-timers to the Baltic are often surprised by just how beautiful the beaches are. Granted, it doesn't quite have the climate to match, but in the height of summer, the country's endless golden sands are a great place to be. Jūrmala, only 20km from the capital, is Latvia's swankiest beach town. For a more relaxed vibe, try the Kurzeme coast.

4 ANCIENT CASTLES

Once the feudal playground for dozens of German nobles, Latvia is riddled with reminders of a sumptuous bygone era. Hundreds of crumbling castles and manor houses hide in the nation's dense forests of pine, and today many of these estates have been lavishly transformed into museums and memorable inns. An entire week could be spent living out your fairytale fantasies in the countryside.



CĒSIS CASTLE

PHOTO BY NIKONAF7 / SHUTTERSTOCK

BEST IN TRAVEL 2016

TOP 10 country

Latvia

Why go in 2016?

Latvia is shining for its silver anniversary

Celebrating 25 years of freedom from its Soviet fetters, Latvia is poised to take centre stage after more than two decades of playing catch-up with many of its European brethren. The title of 'most improved' is rightfully deserved for resuscitating centuries-old traditions that have long made this hidden treasure shine. After a generous infusion of funds during its reign as European Capital of Culture in 2014, Rīga is unrecognisable – chic, lively and overflowing with architectural gems – reclaiming its rightful title as the cosmopolitan cornerstone of the Baltic.

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5 RUNDĀLE PALACE

The remarkable Rundāle Palace, built for the Duke of Courland in the 18th century, is the grandest of its kind in the Baltics. This primo palatial gem is a flawless tribute to opulence, with formal gardens modelled on those at Versailles and 138 rooms within its baroque shell. Inside, the state rooms are slathered with frescoes, moulded plasterwork and gilt trim.



RUNDĀLE PALACE

6 FAIRYTALE FORESTS

If you want to get close to the Latvian heart, take a walk through the woods. Forests cover around 45 percent of the country and shelter a diverse range of critters, including lynx, beavers and birds of prey. The best places to wander tree-dappled trails are in Kemerī National Park, a large expanse of forest and bog near Jūrmala, and Gauja National Park, northeast of Rīga.



GAUJA NATIONAL PARK

7 PICTURESQUE TOWNS

Rīga tends to steal much of the limelight, but more intrepid travellers should consider seeking out some of Latvia's sleeper centres. Our favourites include pretty little Cēsis, hidden in the forested confines of Gauja National Park. Much further west, Kuldīga boasts Europe's widest waterfall (249m) – but at a height of only two metres, it's more scenic than it is dramatic.

8 MARK ROTHKO ART CENTRE

One of the world's leading exponents of abstract expressionism, Mark Rothko (1903-1970) was actually born in Latvia's southeast. In 2013 his hometown recognised its most famous son with the opening of the Mark Rothko Art Centre. The Rothko family stumped up some original works, which hang alongside an ever-expanding collection of contemporary Latvian art.

9 KOOKY EXPERIENCES

From spy games in old Soviet coastal forts to horror scenes acted out in darkened basements, Latvia has a particularly spine-chilling range of experience-based attractions on offer. If you're a glutton for Soviet-style punishment, report to Liepāja's creepy old military jail, Karosta Prison, for a few hours of abuse by costumed KGB operatives. You can even stay the night in a cell.

10 CONTEMPORARY CUISINE

Rīga's food scene has come a long way. Over the past few years, hip cafes have spread like wildfire throughout the city centre, swapping sweaty pork-and-potato dinners for savvy dishes inspired by the New Nordic movement. Chefs are catapulting local flavours to such artisanal heights that they would truly give Copenhagen a run for its money if Michelin were paying them more attention.



SOVIET ERA MONUMENT



NEW NORDIC CUISINE

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