Bouncing along a dirt track in the middle of Latvia in the back of an old Soviet army truck, breathing a heady mixture of petrol fumes and dust, might not be everyone's idea of fun. But Edgars Karklevalks says there is no shortage of people who find it a delightful way to spend a holiday.

Over the roar of the engine, Karklevalks shouts: "Some of my guests find this a very familiar experience from their pasts, but there are also young people who know very little about what happened in Soviet times." Resplendent in an authentic Red Army uniform to match his immaculately maintained GAZ-66 truck, Karklevalks was a Soviet military driver in the 1980s - and still has the badges to prove his best-in-battalion status. Following Latvian independence in 1991 after five decades of Soviet rule, he opened a guesthouse before hitting on the idea of combining that business with his enduring interest in military vehicles.

Now he provides truck excursions through former Soviet tank training zones, and insists that after a hard day's driving a cold beer and barbecue taste much better. Karklevalks also has a ready answer for those who ask whether there is a danger of turning the Soviet Union's half century of occupation into nostalgia. "Everything is history," he says. That sentiment is echoed by Asnate Ziemele of the Latvian Country Tourism Association, which has included Karkelvalks's tours in a new European Union- backed project which aims to make the most of Latvia's military heritage sites. "Military tourism is positive from the point of view that whether or not the actual sites or
events were positive or negative, they are all part of our common heritage," Ziemele tells AFP.

A special heritage map listing 60 sites has been produced, but the idea is to build an online database of hundreds of locations to tap the military tourism market that could attract wealthy foreign visitors on Baltic cruises or city breaks. "We think these sites have real potential, but locally people don't always see that. It would not require a lot of investment to make them more attractive to tourists -- in some cases just cutting the grass or erecting an information board," says Ziemele. The Baltic nation of 2.2 million has suffered the ravages of many wars. From crusading knights in the 13th century through periods of Swedish and Polish domination, to independence battles in the wake of World War I and periods of Nazi and Soviet occupation, Latvia is studded with castles, battlefields, military cemeteries and former bases.

Some sites, such as the missile facilities which were the pride of Soviet power, are in a poor state of repair. One, on the edge of the port town of Ventspils, is now a shabby collection of collapsing concrete bunkers, most of them filled with litter. The grounds have been scarred by people digging up cables and pipes to sell as scrap. But Russian signs can still be seen stenciled on the walls and to military historian Yuri Melkonov, the base is well worth a visit. "It's of interest to tourists because it is a unique object," he says, explaining the construction methods, the strategic location and how the base combined with others to form a formidable defence of the USSR's western flank.

Ironically, the years as restricted military zones under Soviet rule and their subsequent abandonment have given many sites an added significance as nature reserves, which explains why the military heritage drive has also been included as part of the EU's Baltic Green Belt initiative. Another set of underground bunkers 30 kilometres (19 miles) away near the village of Usma is in better shape, but only because of the efforts of local enthusiast Andris Keizars. Hidden deep in a pine forest are the former hideouts of the "Rubenis battalion", partisans who in 1944 took on both the Soviets and the Nazis in an attempt to restore Latvian independence. Surprisingly, the exploits of commander Roberts Rubenis, and his 600 soldiers remain little known even inside Latvia, which prompted Keizars to take action.

As well as restoring the battalion's bunkers and establishing a walking trail, Keizars has opened a small museum. "It's not easy for me to run the museum, particularly as I have to make a living as well. But last independence day we had young people coming to the bunkers with pots and pans to eat and drink and mark the occasion. I think people are rediscovering their past."

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