THE LATVIAN

ABC

YOUR GUIDE TO LATVIA AND THE LATVIANS

WARNING!
You may fall in love with Latvia after reading this book!
THE LATVIAN ABC
Your guide to Latvia and the Latvians

THIS IS MORE THAN ANOTHER CLICHÉD BOOK ABOUT THE BEAUTIFUL NATURE, AMAZING ARTISTS AND ATHLETES AND REMARKABLE ARCHITECTURE OF THIS GREENOVATIVE SINGING NATION.

Because this is all well-known already.

Some people are fortunate to know Latvia or Latvians. But if you don’t or you want to get to know them better...

THIS BOOK IS HERE TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND LATVIANS BETTER.

After reading this, you will get “the Latvian thing” wherever you are in the world.

Beware!
This book can make you feel like jumping naked into an icy pond.
Yes, we do that.

We are Latvians and we like you (but don’t expect us to show that right away).

SOME FACTS:

- Latvia, officially known as the Republic of Latvia, is a country in the Baltic region of Northern Europe. Since its independence, Latvia has been referred to as one of the Baltic states. It is bordered by Estonia to the north, Lithuania to the south, Russia to the east, Belarus to the southeast, and shares a maritime border with Sweden to the west.
- The Republic of Latvia was established as a state in November 18th, 1918.
- Latvia is a full member of all the world’s major economic and political organisations, such as: the EU, NATO, OSCE, UN, WTO and OECD.
- It has approximately 2 million inhabitants.
- Latvian is the official state language and one of the oldest languages in Europe.
- The dominant religion is Christianity (mainly Lutherans, Catholics and Orthodox).
- Latvia consists of four regions – Vidzeme, Latgale, Kurzeme and Zemgale.
- The country has a temperate seasonal climate. The Baltic Sea moderates climate, although it has four distinct seasons and snowy winters.

Overall, LATVIA IS A CLEAN, GREEN, SAFE AND MODERN COUNTRY IN NORTHERN EUROPE, BY THE BALTIC SEA, WITH A RICH CULTURAL HERITAGE, INNOVATIVE SPIRIT AND INTREPID CHARACTERS.

We are introverts (kind of), but if you know these 33 key words, we open up! Then you will become part of the family and get into the Latvian kitchen – which is full of tasty surprises!

NOW PAY ATTENTION, AS WE START WITH A!
AS A TRADITIONALLY RURAL PEOPLE, LATVIANS ARE NO STRANGERS TO GETTING UP AT THE CRACK OF DAWN. BUT SOMETIMES WE GIVE OURSELVES A REAL SHAKE AND WAKE UP PROPERLY.

ATMODA
Awakening

WE CALL THESE OCCASIONS ATMODAS, OR AWAKENINGS.

The First Awakening came in the middle of the 19th century, when a group of intellectuals called the Young Latvians started delving deeply into their native language and culture. Krišjānis Barons recorded tens of thousands of folk songs, Krišjānis Valdemārs opened the Maritime School at Ainaži and started the Latvian ship-building industry, and writers like Juris Alunāns edited Latvian newspapers, wrote poetry and nurtured education. THE FIRST ALL-LATVIAN SONG FESTIVAL HELD IN RIGA IN 1873 SAW THE NATION COME TOGETHER IN SONG.

This led to a cultural renaissance in the early 20th century. Writers like Rainis and Rūdolfs Blaumanis produced great literature, painters Vilhelms Purvītis and Janis Rozentāls made beautiful art, and architects Konstantins Pēksēns and Eižens Laube built the stunning new city of Riga. Then the turmoil of the First World War produced the Second Awakening, as Latvians got politically organized and fought a successful War of Independence, leading to the First Republic.

This progressive and prosperous state was brutally occupied by the USSR in 1940, then a year later by the Nazis, and by the Soviets again in 1944. But despite vicious propaganda, KGB spying and terror, Latvians never lost their identity or desire for freedom. In the mid–1980s, Latvians protested openly against mad Soviet schemes to build more dams on the Daugava River and an unnecessary metro in Riga. This ushered in the Third Awakening, as the Popular Front demanded independence through huge non-violent gatherings called the Singing Revolution. Soviet troops tried to crush this movement in 1991, but people manned the barricades and ultimately reestablished our independent country.

See also B Bērība / Freedom
ON THE ONE HAND, AN OLD LATVIAN SAYING GOES - LĒNĀK BRAUKSI, TĀLĀK TIKSI (THE SLOWER YOU TRAVEL, THE FURTHER YOU’LL GET) BUT WHILE CAUTION MAY BE A GOOD POLICY SOMETIMES, OUR ATHLETES LIKE TO PUSH THE PEDAL TO THE METAL.

Another man in a hurry is Reinis Nitišs. Hailing from Jēkabpils in eastern Latvia, Nitišs won the Super1600 division in the European Rallycross Championship in 2013, becoming the youngest event winner in FIA World Rallycross Championship history.

It’s hard to keep track of the flying fists of Mairis Briedis, who became Latvia’s first-ever world boxing champion in 2012, winning the WBC and IBO Cruiserweight titles. Or the formidable forehand of Aļona Ostapenko, who won the French Open the same year as the first unseeded champion since 1933. Not to mention the serve of Anastasija Sevastova, which can reach 177 km/h, propelling her to a world singles ranking of number 11 in October 2018.

Latvian ladies aren’t just quick, they’re strong too. Despite coming in at just 50 kg, weightlifter Rebeka Koha has won two junior world championships, two European championships and gained third place twice in world championships.
In the early 19th century, serfdom ended in most of Latvia earlier than in the rest of the Russian Empire. Peasants could go where they pleased and many moved to the cities, where they conquered literature, the arts, architecture and business. And as people’s self-confidence grew, they dreamed of casting off czarist autocracy and the feudal privileges of the German-speaking nobility.

This struggle climaxed during the First World War. In 1915, Latvia was invaded by Imperial Germany, and the legendary Latvian Rifle Regiments were formed to fight back. These troops were nominally part of the Russian army, but they had their own insignia and officers and craved independence. ON 18 NOVEMBER 1918, A REPUBLIC WAS PROCLAIMED IN RIGA’S NATIONAL THEATRE, and over two years the Latvian armed forces drove invading Bolsheviks and a motley crew of German adventurers out of Latvia.

Latvia joined the League of Nations, and the job of state building began. On the agenda was commemorating the terrible losses of the war and pride in having won freedom. Designed by sculptor Kārlis Zāle, the Freedom Monument was unveiled in central Riga in 1935. The words on its base – TĒVZEMEI UN BRĪVĪBAI, “For Fatherland and Freedom” – say it all. Friezes depict Latvians singing, working and fighting for their freedom. On top, an elegant lady we lovingly call Milda holds three stars representing the historic regions of Latvia – Vidzeme, Kurzeme and Latgale.

Tragically, tyrannical powers had their own bloody plans. But we never lost our dream of freedom. On 14 June 1987, dissidents from the human rights group Helsinki 86 laid flowers at the Freedom Monument. They were arrested by the KGB, but they inspired many others to openly call for leaving the USSR. This was successfully achieved in 1991. Latvia has been free for longer in its second period of independence than the first time around, and we are confident that this time it will be for good.

See also Ceļš / Road or Way
But with some hard work from our construction workers (and a little cash from the European Union), the ride is getting smoother all the time.

The road to independence also had plenty of bumps along the way. One of the most beautiful landmarks on this journey was the Baltic Way, or *Baltijas ceļš* in Latvian, *Balti kett* in Estonian, and *Baltijos kelias* in Lithuanian. On 23 August 1989, 2 million people joined hands from Tallinn down to Riga and then on to Vilnius. This vast human chain commemorated the 50th anniversary of a notorious pact between Stalin and Hitler which led to the Baltic states being invaded by those totalitarian monsters.

This was the climax of a movement intended to tell the world the truth about the Soviet occupation and the justice of the Baltic independence cause. Starting in 1988, hundreds of thousands of people gathered in the three Baltic capitals for demonstrations and burst into song, giving the period the nickname of the *Singing Revolution*. This non-violent and ultimately successful campaign still resounds around the world today – in 2019, pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong said they were inspired by the Baltic Way.

LATVIANS LOVE COMPLAINING ABOUT OUR ROADS, WISHING THERE WERE A FEW LESS POTHOLES.
Latvians aren’t always quiet – just look at our hockey fans! But there’s a national love for silence, too. Silence is better than unnecessary drama. And it is a pleasure to listen to it from time to time, because stories, music and noise sometimes just blows our brain.

Only in silence can you hear your heart. A whisper tells ten thousand times more than a loud word. There is a special silence in Latvia - when you listen to it for a while, you can hear whispers. Forests whisper, the sea whispers, flowers whisper, your subconscious whispers, time whispers, precious amber whispers…

SO IF YOU’RE TALKING TO A LATVIAN AND THERE’S A PAUSE IN THE CONVERSATION – DON’T WORRY, JUST RELAX AND GO WITH THE SILENT FLOW!
AND WITH ABOUT 1.2 MILLION FOLK SONGS, WE'RE NEVER SHORT OF MELODIES.

Hang out with Latvians and you’ll discover we love a good singalong.

Songs are what we’re all about. **Folklorist Krišjānis Barons** (1835-1923) recorded thousands of folk songs (dainas) in a filing cabinet called the **Dainu skapis**, housed today in the National Library. This enormous collection of oral culture is included in the UNESCO Memory of the World list.

Singing was at the heart of the movement to restore independence. Every village, school and university has a choir, and every five years they all come to Riga for the **Song and Dance Festival**, a week of music culminating in a concert with 20,000 singers on stage at the same time.

Dainas star in other genres, too. "Post-folklore" group **Iļģi** have put Latvia on the world music scene, **Skyforger** mix dainas with heavy metal, while **Laima Jansone** blends improvisation and tradition on her kokle, an ancient Latvian wooden harp.

**Opera** in Latvia goes back to the 18th century and the Dukes of Kurzeme. **Richard Wagner** conducted at the German Theatre in Riga from 1837 and 1839, and wrote The Flying Dutchman while fleeing the city to escape his creditors.

Today, the **Riga Opera Festival** has a great reputation around Europe, while the Sigulda Opera Festival offers spectacular open-air concerts amidst medieval ruins. And stars like Elīna Garanča, Egils Siliņš and Marina Rebeka grace the world’s opera houses.
IT’S A LITTLE-KNOWN FACT THAT ONE OF LATVIA’S GREAT CONTRIBUTIONS TO HAPPINESS AROUND THE WORLD IS THE CHRISTMAS TREE.

P.s. Don’t be scared if you see a bunch of Latvians with knives in their hands in the forest during the autumn. They are collecting mushrooms for their supper!

Timber is one of Latvia’s biggest exports, and a lot of people earn their living from harvesting wood or turning it into furniture or plywood. In medieval times, the local pagan inhabitants of Riga would bring fir tree branches into their houses at the winter solstice as a sign of hope – since these were green, then surely spring would come again, was the optimistic belief. This was observed by young foreign merchants, who thought they could do even better, by chopping down an entire fir tree and decorating it. They would then burn it on New Year’s Day. The site where this is first known to have taken place in 1510, opposite Riga’s magnificent House of Blackheads, is regarded as the birthplace of the Christmas tree!

In the golden age of sailing ships, many vessels on the high seas sported masts made from Pinus rigens, the remarkably tall and straight pine trees native to Latvia. These trees also produce a scent which restores the body, making a stroll along the beach at Jūrmala a balm for body and soul.

But for Latvians, the forest is much more than just a source of timber. Over 80% of people say that a walk in the woods is one of their favourite pastimes, a place to be at one with nature and enjoy tranquility. To get in touch with some weird energy, visit Pokaiņi forest in Zemgale, which is filled with ancient pagan stones with healing powers. Enjoy stunning views on the hiking trails of the Gauja National Park or get high on the treetop adventure courses in Sigulda. There’s history amongst the trees too, like the memorial to Latvia’s anti-Soviet partisans in Stompaki Forest in Viļāni County, Latgale, or the former Soviet missile base at Zeltiņi near Alūksne in Vidzeme.

In season, the forest is also where we gather berries and mushrooms, then come home and whip up chanterelle sauce or king boletus soup...

See also Ņāmmīgs / Yummy
ABOUT 20% OF ALL THESE MAGNIFICENT CREATURES IN THE WORLD NEST IN LATVIA when they return after wintering in southern Africa, a tribute to the healthy conditions our feathered friends find in our country.

Latvia’s most iconic bird is the stork. Regarded as a sacred creature which brings good fortune to the houses near which it nests, they love to follow farmers’ ploughs to see what delicacies have been churned up. Which is not such a happy event for frogs!

While species extinctions are a major problem around the world, many bird species flourished in Latvia in recent decades. Over half the country is forest, and with lots of wetlands and 500 km of seacoast, there are plenty of places to nest and breed. Swans, kestrels and warblers are common, and if you’re lucky you might spot a northern gannet or a storm petrel. Great places for birdwatching include Cape Kolka in the northwest, an epicenter of migration in spring and autumn, and the ornithological station at Pape on the southwest coast. But you don’t have to go that far – just watch the sky in Riga in March or September and there’s a good chance you’ll see wild geese flying in formation.

LATVIA IS A PARADISE FOR BOTH BIRDS AND BIRD WATCHERS, AS DEMONSTRATED BY CLANGA POMARINE, THE LESSER SPOTTED EAGLE.

See also Gailis / Rooster
LATVIANS HAVE BEEN FLOCKING TO THE MOVIES SINCE 1895, WHEN THE VERY FIRST “MOVING PICTURE SHOW” WAS SCREENED IN SOLOMONSKA CIRCUS IN RIGA. And we’ve made some fine flicks of our own in the years since as well.

Riga’s Splendid Palace cinema is a majestic relic of the golden age of cinema. And at the time it opened in the early 1920s, Riga-born Sergei Eisenstein was pioneering the art of montage in world cinema, creating classics like Battleship Potemkin (1925).

Es karā aiziedams (As I went off to War, 1920) was the first silent feature made in Latvia, while Zvejnieka dēls (The Fisherman’s Son, 1939) was the first full-length talkie.

In the Soviet era, the Riga Film Studio made great movies while dodging the censor’s scissors. Limuzīns Jāņu naktis krāsā (A Limousine the Colour of Midsummer Eve, 1980) is Latvians’ all-time favourite comedy. Četri balti krekli (Elpojiet dzili) (Four White Shirts (Breathe Deeply), 1967) is a story about rebellious musicians in 1960s Riga. Suppressed by the Soviet bureaucracy, it was rediscovered years later and hailed at the Cannes Film Festival in 2018. Juris Podnieks also won accolades for documentaries like Vai viegli būt jaunam? (Is it easy to be young? 1986).

In recent years, historical dramas like Dvēseļu putenis (Blizzard of Souls, 2019) and Tēvs naktis (Father Night, 2018) have been set during the First World War and the Holocaust. Bille (2018), an absorbing tale of growing up poor in 1930s Riga, became an instant classic.

And we have world-class animation, too. Away (2019), entirely designed, animated and scored by 25-year-old Gints Zilbalodis, is a hint of things to come.
THE ROOSTER’S RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM COMES FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT, WHERE JESUS WARNED THAT HIS DISCIPLE PETER WOULD DENY HIM THREE TIMES BEFORE THE COCK CROWED. Your faith will be tested, so be on your guard is the message. Riga’s roosters also played an important practical role in the days of sailing ships. With one side of the bird buffed to a shine and the other dull, they served as weathervanes, telling captains in the port if the wind was right to cast off.

Roosters are not the only creatures decorating Riga. Lions, peacocks, dragons, dogs and many more adorn the facades of Art Nouveau masterpieces designed by early 20th century architects Mikhail Eisenstein, Konstantīns Pēkšēns and Eižens Laube. There’s even a camel on the side of an Old Riga warehouse-turned-hotel, while the Cat House (no, it’s not that sort of establishment) has a pair of felines on its towers. Legend has it the animals used to face the other way, with their backsides showing the building owner’s displeasure at the nearby Great Guild.

Humans get a look in as well, thanks particularly to the prolific sculptor August Voltz (1851-1926). He created the lovely Opera Nymph, Zeus throwing a bolt of lightning at the VEF electronics factory, the three muscular Atlases holding up the globe on the roof of the Italian Embassy, Roland standing guard outside the House of Blackheads... Oh, and the proud lions in Vērmanes Garden are his as well.

See also U Urbāns / Urban

A first-time visitor to Old Riga may feel like they have entered fairy tale land when they see sculptures of birds not crosses on top of the church steeples. BUT THIS IS NO HALLUCINATION, AS ROOSTERS HAVE CROWED ABOVE THE ROOFTOPS HERE SINCE MEDIEVAL TIMES.
Edvards Liedskalniņš (1887-1951) was a humble stonemason who left his home near Stāmeriena in northern Vidzeme when his bride abandoned him at the altar. Ed wound up in Florida, where he spent the rest of his life creating the Coral Castle, a mysterious tribute to the girl who broke his heart. To this day, no one knows how he was able to move stone blocks weighing several tons with no help or mechanical equipment. The 1980s hit song “Sweet 16” by British rocker Billy Idol is about Ed and his lost love.

Known as the “magician from Riga”, chess master Mikhail Tal (1936-1992) is considered the finest attacking player in the history of the game. And one of the most stylish, too: “Chess, first of all, is art”, was his motto. In 1960, Tal became world champion aged just 23, at that time the youngest man ever to attain the title.

Unfortunately, chronic health problems cut his career short, but there is a monument to Tal in Riga’s Vērmanes Garden – not far from where as a lad he played against old men like the fellows enjoying chess in the park today.

Marta Skavronska (1684-1727) was an illiterate peasant girl from Vidzeme who ended up ruling an empire. She worked as a maid for Johann Gluck, a Lutheran pastor in Alūksne, Vidzeme, who made the first translation of the Bible into Latvian. After the Russian army invaded Latvia during the Great Northern War, the family was taken to Moscow, where Marta’s charm and beauty soon won admirers. She became the mistress of Czar Peter the Great, then his wife, and after his death in 1725 she was crowned Czarina Catherine I. Although she never did learn to read or write, during her reign she founded Russia’s Academy of Science.

See also U Urbāns / Urban
Every May, the national team goes to the world championships (best result seventh place) accompanied by an army of fans who are rated the most colourful and dedicated on the planet. Back home, there’s an ice rink in every city and town, producing NHL stars like Teodors Bļugers (Pittsburgh Penguins), Elvis Merzļikins and Matīss Kivlenieks (both playing for the Blue Jackets in Columbus), Rūdolfs Balcers (Ottawa Senator) and Zemgus Girgensons (Buffalo Sabres). They follow in the skate tracks of Helmut Balderis, a phenomenally speedy, skillful attacker who played for Soviet teams and Latvia’s national side and was the first-ever Latvian in the NHL.

Riga Dinamo competes in the KHL, continuing a tradition when this team dominated Soviet hockey. And we are truly proud of our legends of NHL, playing recently such as Arturs Irbe, Sandis Ozoliņš, Kārlis Skrastiņš and Sergejs Žoltoks.

Basketball is another sport Latvians go crazy about. The film “Sapņu komanda” (Dream Team, 2012), tells the true story of the Latvian underdogs who won the first-ever European championship in 1935. Kristaps Porziņģis (Dallas Mavericks), Dāvis Bertāns, Anžejs Paseņčiks (both playing in Washington Wizards) and Rodions Kurucs (Brooklyn Nets) are current NBA players hailing from Latvia.

See also | Iedvesma / Inspiration
In 1873, Jacob Davis, a tailor from Riga, added copper rivets to denim cloth, and in partnership with Levi Strauss, blue jeans were born. This is just one of a long line of brilliant inventions by Latvians. In the 1930s, Walter Zapp invented the world’s smallest camera, the Minnox, which became essential gear for spies around the world. And with no oil to drill or minerals to dig up, today Latvians have to rely on their brains as well.

In recent years, the government has eased tax and visa rules for startups, which has brought talented, multi-lingual locals and innovative tech folks from around the world together to nurture promising ideas.

Printful provides on-demand printing services and has production facilities in Riga, California and Mexico. Giraffe 360 generates high-quality photographs and floor plans for real estate companies.

Sonarworks software is revolutionizing sound monitoring in music played around the world.

Medical tech is another area where Latvians excel. Riga-based JLU Technologies is using Baltic amber to produce composite amber thread, a biomaterial with myriad uses in healthcare and textiles.

Our art is uplifting too. Opened in 1905 and recently renovated, the National Art Museum in Riga is an intriguing blend of neo-baroque splendour and cutting-edge glass and showcases 19th and 20th century Latvian painting. The former Stock Exchange in Old Riga hosts the Museum of Foreign Art, including a unique collection of Himalayan landscapes by legendary mystic Nicholas Roerich.

The useful and the beautiful come together at the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, housed in Riga’s oldest church. The Museum of Romans Suta and Aleksandra Belcova tells the vivid story of an artistic couple who amazed the world with radical modernist yet deeply Latvian ceramics in the 1920s. Riga’s rich porcelain painting traditions and exciting contemporary artists working in the genre blend deliciously at the Riga Porcelain Museum.

For mind-warping conceptualism, head to the Kim? Contemporary Art Centre, and to shift your view on what the body can do, don’t miss the annual Riga Performance Festival.

Also, take a trip to the Mark Rothko Art Centre in Daugavpils, Latvia’s second largest city, to learn about the man who changed our feelings about squares forever.

See also U Urbāns / Urban
If you’re on a bus in Latvia on a scorching summer’s day and the passengers start slamming the windows shut, they haven’t gone mad. THEY’RE JUST PROTECTING THEMSELVES FROM MYSTERIOUS DRAFTS OF WIND CALLED CAURVĒJS, SAID TO CAUSE EVERYTHING FROM BACK PAIN TO DEAFNESS.

AFTER YEARS OF BATTLING CAURVĒJS, Latvians won’t be intimidated by something as relatively benign as coronavirus. Especially if they drink Bebru dziedzeru uzlējums, an elixir made by pouring alcoholic spirit onto a beaver’s gallbladder, said to cure cancer, paralysis, memory loss and men’s issues (hence its nickname “the hunter’s Viagra”).

Irlavas Parish in Kurzeme is home to the “bridge to nowhere”, a handsome concrete span sitting forlornly in the middle of a field. In the late 1930s, a railway line was planned to link Tukums and Kuldīga, but it was abandoned after the Soviet invasion of 1940 with only the bridge completed.

There have been hundreds of shipwrecks over the centuries in the treacherous waters around Cape Kolka, taking down everything from warships to Swedish galleons loaded with silver. But hardly any trace of them has ever been found because the mud at the bottom sucks it all down. An intricately carved 17th century ship’s prow displayed in the Museum of Riga’s History and Navigation is a rare exception.

THE SOVIET REGIME LEFT BEHIND RELICS LIKE THE GIANT RADIO TELESCOPE IN THE FOREST AT IRBENE IN KURZEME, and the well-preserved fallout shelter for the Communist Party elite hidden under a medical centre in Ligatne, Vidzeme. Politicians have been creating wonders more recently too. In Ventspils, the controversial mayor has built a mountain of garbage (60 metres and rising as more trash is added) called Lemberga hūte (Lemberg’s Trilby). In winter it is used as a ski slope complete with advanced and beginner’s runs, lifts and a café.

See also N Novadi / Regions
THIS COMBINATION OF PASSION, STUBBORN INDIVIDUALISM AND FASCINATION WITH THE GREAT BLUE YONDER HAS BEWITCHED LATVIANS FOR CENTURIES.

Latvians have a long tradition of seafaring. We have been trading and fighting with our neighbours across the Baltic for millennia, and in the middle ages Riga and other Latvian towns were members of the Hanseatic League. In the 17th century, Duke Jacob of Kurzeme built a fleet and established colonies in Gambia and Tobago. In the late 1800s, a shipbuilding industry thrived on the Gulf of Riga coast and Latvian vessels plied the world’s oceans.

Today, Latvian mariners continue to crew and captain merchant vessels, and the sea is also a favourite place to relax. The annual Gulf of Riga Regatta is an exciting yacht race which also raises awareness about environmental issues. Pāvilosta, a chilled-out fishing village on the west coast, is a great spot for surfing and windsurfing. And there’s lots of coastline to wander around, from the pretty Vidzeme Stony Beach to the resort bling of Jūrmala and the almost deserted strands of the Livonian Coast.

And do try the fish!

See also Ņ Namīgi / Yummy
While for other nations cemeteries are dark corners where zombies, ghouls and other horror movie villains lurk, for Latvians they are places of beauty and love.

Of course, we cry at funerals, but the settings where our loved ones spend eternity are a work of art that we look forward to visiting.

Latvians believe that at the grave they are actually communicating with the departed. Late autumn is veļu laiks, the time of the spirits, when the souls of the deceased wander around with the mists, and to bring them comfort people place candles on the graves. And every graveyard in Latvia holds an annual kapu svētki (cemetery festival), when people come from far and wide to remember the passed on and enjoy a reunion with their living kin.

THE LATVIAN SOUL TRAVELS BETWEEN JOY AND SORROW, BETWEEN THIS WORLD AND THE NEXT, WITH EASE.

Traditionally we’ve kept it mild, with dill, cumin, white mustard and garlic giving a gentle kick to grandma’s hearty treats.

A lot of those herbs – not to mention tomatoes, carrots and cucumbers from the garden, raspberries and blackberries from the bushes and apples and pears from the orchard – are homegrown. As a people who have experienced more than a few wars, bouts of rationing and plain hard times, we’ve never lost the knack for growing our own nutritious food. And pickling and preserving it for winter. In other places, seasonal, organic produce is a recent trend you pay through the nose for.

In Latvia, we’ve been doing it for centuries, and handing out jars of lingonberry jam and marinated pumpkin is pretty much how we say, “I love you.”

FOLK MEDICINE IS ALIVE AND WELL, TOO. GOT A COLD?
Tea with your own peppermint, ginger and honey and a slice of lemon (OK, that’s from the supermarket) will fix that. Or grab some raw garlic and stuff it up your nose. Or hang some cloves on the front door. Or spread it so thickly on bread your breath will scare away the nastiest germs!
The Baltic states were the last corner of Europe to encounter Christianity, and we’re still thinking about the offer today. More precisely, while plenty of us belong to a church, we still passionately follow pagan traditions and see no reason to change our ways.

You see this most clearly at MIDSUMMER’S EVE IN JUNE. People flock from the cities to their friends’ and relatives’ farms for a night of good times and rituals celebrating the shortest night and the longest day of the year. Revelers dance and sing ancient songs with the incantation “Līgo, līgo,” which means to sway or to rock, in tempo with the sun, with nature and with life itself. Symbolizing fertility, houses get decked out with green branches, and women weave floral crowns for themselves and oak wreaths for the guys. Couples go off to the forest to look for the mythical flowering fern - nobody has ever seen one, but any excuse will do on this magical occasion...

BEER FLOWS, A SPECIAL FRESH CHEESE WITH CARAWAY SEEDS WHICH LOOKS LIKE THE SUN IS PASSED AROUND, AND FOLKS JUMP OVER THE BONFIRE IN AN ACT OF SPIRITUAL CLEANSING.

On the surface, Latvians might seem a bit pedantic (as you may have noticed when dealing with our government departments). But we’re happiest when we surrender control and let the good vibes take us to wonderful new places... Even on dry land. In every town and village across the country, the social highlights of the year are ZAĻUMBALLES. These are open-air parties held in squares, castle ruins and parks, where live bands play popular tunes and people of all ages dance till sunrise. Don’t be shy - go and ask someone for a dance!

For Latvians, vārda dienas, or name days, are on a par with birthdays as a reason to celebrate. Check the calendar, and if it’s the special day for your colleague Ilze or your neighbour Imants, give them a call or send them a text saying, SVEICIENS VĀRDA DIENĀ! (Congratulations on your name day)!

Chances are, they’ll invite you to a casual get together at their place or a cozy café for some cake and a drink or three. Bring them some flowers (in an odd-numbered bunch - OK, there are some little rules here)!

With thousands of lakes and rivers, Latvia is a paradise for fishing, wild swimming and boating, loved all the more because summers are so short. And water is the perfect metaphor for going with the flow.
Latvians have a deep affection for their homes, particularly farms which have been in the family for generations. Manors are also historic residence which have taken a battering from history but are now being nurtured and restored in intriguing ways.

For centuries, the ruling class in Latvia’s countryside were German-speaking aristocrats. The elegant manor houses they resided in were attacked during revolutions, shelled during wars, and turned into schools, hospitals and granaries when ruling ideologies changed. But there are still around 1,200 of these buildings in Latvia.

The magnificent 19th century neo-Gothic pile at Rūmene near Kandava, Kurzeme, is today a five-star hotel, while a bit further north, Jaunmoku Pils is the only manor which has retained its medieval fortifications and serves as a community centre and library.

Over in Vidzeme, Ungurmuiža is a delightful wooden manor with unique 18th century frescoes, while the magnificent park of Bīriņu pils is a favourite spot for Latvians to tie the knot.

SOME MANORS HAVE BECOME TREASURES due to creative people who have dedicated their lives to them more recently. Ružciems is a 600-year-old property near Pūre village where painter Laila Kelle has established an artistic guesthouse with a nature trail where you can meet beavers, elk and other wildlife, while not far from Sabile, sculptor Ojārs Feldbergs has created the Pedvāle Open-Air Art Museum, 100 hectares of historic buildings, beautiful landscapes and fascinating sculptures.

To mind your manors in Riga, see also U Urbāns / Urban
KURZEME in the west has two ports which couldn’t be more different in atmosphere. Liepāja is a scruffy, music loving town with architecture ranging from genteel mansions to the bleakly beguiling Karosta, former Soviet naval base. Ventspils has been redeveloped to the max, presenting acres of paving, urban art objects and lots of attractions for families, from miniature steam trains to adventure parks. Inland, with its superbly preserved 17th century buildings and canals, Kuldīga is a town you will fall in love with. To get away from civilization, head for the Livonian Coast where you can walk for miles with just the gulls and the pines for company.

VIDZEME, literally “the midlands,” is the country’s biggest region and has a lot to say for itself. The delightful Gauja National Park offers scenic hiking and adrenaline rushes from bobsleigh, bungee jumping and loads of other exciting sports, as well as a brace of ancient castles at Sigulda. Cēsis is a charming old town with a medieval atmosphere and a rich musical life. Further west, Latvia’s highest point Gaiziņkalns (311 metres) may not rival the Alps, but the hilly area has beautiful views and museums dedicated to the Latvian writers and composers inspired by it all.

In the south, ZEMGALE is known as the breadbasket of Latvia thanks to its fertile soil.

Rising unexpectedly from these rolling plains, the Baroque Rundāle Palace is an 18th century marvel designed by architect Francesco Rastrelli. After admiring Rundāle’s magnificent state rooms and lovely rose garden, pop over for lunch to the gorgeous classical-style Mežotne Palace.

A very warm welcome indeed will await you in LATGALE. Known as the “Land of the Blue Lakes”, it’s a scenically beautiful part of the world with a strong Roman Catholic tradition. Aglona Basilica attracts some 300,000 pilgrims from around the world every August, making it briefly Latvia’s second largest city. Besides religion, Latgalians also get a lift from their fiery homemade vodka, and there’s even a Moonshine Museum in Daugavpils. If art is more your thing, that city also has a unique museum dedicated to its most famous son, the modernist genius Mark Rothko. And be sure to also check out Latgale’s famous pottery.

WITH ALMOST HALF THE POPULATION LIVING IN RIGA, YOU MIGHT THINK THE BIG SMOKE IS WHERE ALL THE ACTION IS. BUT YOU COULDN’T BE MORE WRONG, SINCE LATVIA’S REGIONS HAVE A WEALTH OF FASCINATING HISTORY, BEAUTIFUL NATURE AND AMAZING PEOPLE TO DISCOVER.

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You can get pizza or sushi in every town these days, but Latvians have proud culinary traditions of our own.

As we have historically been peasants not aristocrats, the food is simple rather than sophisticated, but it’s often homegrown, delicious and guaranteed to fill you up.

A gift from God and the reward of hard work, bread (maize) is the traditional cornerstone of a Latvian meal. Our rye bread (rupjmaize) has a sweet, earthy flavour, and packed with complex carbohydrates, it’s very healthy. You’ll want a slice or two with your cold beet soup (aukstā zupa) in summer or sorrel soup (skābeņu zupa) in winter, or that tasty medley of leftovers soļanka when you’re hungover.

There are plenty of vegetarian Latvians these days, but most people still love to put pork on their fork, especially if it’s a pan-fried fillet of karbonāde, which may also be topped with cheese or mushrooms. Smoked carp, salmon or mackerel are also popular, and if you’re feeling adventurous, dive into some lamprey (nēģi), bottom-feeding creatures caught in estuaries on the Gulf of Riga coast.

In summer, Latvian gardens produce a bounty of vegetables and herbs which create salad heaven, while in the colder months you won’t go wrong with marinated pickles (skābētie gurķi) or sauerkraut (skābētie kāposti). Rasols, a weighty blend of vegetables, potatoes, sausage and mayonnaise, is a meal in one.

Also, don’t miss out on our traditional hemp spread (kaņepju sviests), which won’t get you high but is packed with nutrition and flavor.
Pagan traditions come to the fore on other celebrations of the change of seasons and the flow of life.

For us, EASTER IS ALL ABOUT EGGS, but not the tinsel-wrapped, chocolate sort. Instead, we take real chicken eggs, wrap them in fern fronds, leaves and flowers, then boil them in natural food dyes to create beautiful patterns on the shells. Then around the table we have egg fights with our family members, taking turns to bump them end to end, until someone ends up with the strongest egg and good luck for the rest of the year.

Also at Easter, the handymen of the family build a swing, and everyone has a go rocking back and forth. IF YOU DO THAT YOU WON'T GET BITTEN BY BUGS IN SUMMER, OR SO THE FOLK BELIEF GOES.

An important ritual at Christmas is tying a rope around a block of wood, which is then dragged around the house by family and friends. This is said to collect all the negative energy, which is then burned together with the log. And fire plays a role in new years celebrations too, both with the crackers everyone lets off, and the custom of melting ingots of lead, then dousing them in water and trying to guess what the future will bring based on the shapes that emerge. It’s like a Latvian horoscope, with a hiss and a splash!
On a daily basis, Latvians are mostly fully clothed.

But on certain occasions, we like nothing better than to rip off our gear and revel in our natural state.

Exhibit A for this exhibitionist streak is THE PIRTS, a Latvian sauna often enjoyed by women and men together in their birthday suits. The venue is usually a small wooden hut on a farm, in which water is splashed over hot rocks to produce steam, which helps the body sweat out all the toxins and stress of modern life. Perspiration is further provoked by gently beating each other with switches made from birch, oak, maple and other leaves.

Cool down with a plunge in the adjacent pond or stream, then come back for another round. Combined with a vigorous salt scrub to open the pores even more and a honey massage at the end for glowing skin, you’ll feel brand spanking new.

We also love skinny dipping. On a lovely day by a lake in a pristine forest, or on a stretch of beach where there’s no other humans for miles, it would be weird to worry about your swimsuit.

See also L. Lauties / Go with the flow
Latvians are hardworking folk, and work makes you thirsty, so beer is also incredibly popular in our country. As well as veteran brewers like Aldaris, Tērvete and Bauska, in recent years there’s been an explosion of microbrewing, producing a foaming of flavours, creative names and colourful labels. Savour the genteel herbal amber ale Akmenrags or the aptly named, 10%-strong smoked black ale Kapracis (Gravedigger) at the Labietis brewery bar near Riga’s hipster drag Miera iela. Or descend into the cellar of Folk Club Ala in the Old Town where they have 20 local brews on tap, including honey, cranberry and hemp beers. And for the perfect pint snack, grab some deep-fried garlic rye bread.

The world’s northernmost outdoor vineyard is located in Sabile, Kurzeme, and every fall they have a harvest festival. Latvians also make wines from black currants, apples, quinces and many other fruits and berries.

If you’re driving, have some tree juice! Every spring, people put little taps into birch and maple trees, then mix the acquired sap with water to produce a very refreshing beverage. You can’t get more natural than that.
EVERY YEAR, ON 8 MARCH, INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY is celebrated with gusto in Latvia. Men traditionally mark the occasion by bringing flowers to their women, but Latvian women would like them to change a few more diapers as well.

SIEVIETE Woman

MAKING UP ALMOST 54% OF THE POPULATION, LATVIA HAS ONE OF THE HIGHEST PROPORTIONS OF FEMALES TO MALES IN THE WORLD.

With numbers like that, you’d expect Latvian ladies to have a huge impact on the country, and indeed they do.

The very symbol of our nation, Milda on the Freedom Monument, is a woman (and her face is on our euro coins, too). We’ve had a successful female president, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga (1999–2007), and prime minister, Laimdota Straujuma (2014–2016). Women are more highly educated than males, they live almost ten years’ longer, and to top it off, Latvia has the tallest women in the world, averaging almost 170 cm (our men come in fourth place).

And that’s not even in high heels!

It’s not all roses, of course. Women still earn significantly less than men. And with almost half of Latvian marriages ending in divorce, vastly more women than men end up caring for the children. Perhaps it’s no surprise that increasing numbers of couples are choosing to enjoy each other’s company without kids.

See also V Virietis / Man
FOR ALMOST A CENTURY, MANY FIRST DATES HAVE STARTED AT RIGA’S LAIMA CLOCK, a central meeting point advertising our most popular brand of chocolates.

ŠOKOLĀDE
Chocolate

With such a sweet beginning, there’s a good chance the romance will blossom, and if the lovebirds browse the dessert menu after dinner, things will look even more promising.

You’re never far from a sugar hit in Latvia. The classic Riga café chain Vecrīga does legendary ābolmaizītes (apple pastries) and vēja kūkas (wind cakes), light-as-air puff pastries with a delectable swirl of cream protruding from the top. Medus kūka (honey cake) is the tastiest thing short of licking a beehive (and without a stung tongue). Maizes zupa (bread soup), a dream of crumbled rye bread, whipped cream and dried fruit in a glass, is both sinful and healthy in equal measures.

AND YES, CHOCOLATE...
Some find Laima’s bittersweet bars an acquired taste, but in recent years an explosion of scrumptious boutique treats has come to the rescue. Trying to choose is an exquisite torment at one of the Emīls Gustavs stores, or the Vilhelms Ķuze café in Old Riga, named after Latvia’s premier pre-war confectioner. Or for something healthier, nothing beats a bowl of fresh strawberries or raspberries straight from a Latvian garden in summer.
BACK WHEN MOST OF US LIVED ON FARMS, WE HAD A SET OF PLAIN CLOTHES FOR LONG HOURS OF HARD WORK, AND A SUIT OF OUR SUNDAY BEST.

For Latvian women especially, the latter were magnificent handicraft items passed from generation to generation. There was a rich regional variety in materials, patterns, colours and ornamentation, from the vivid dresses of Rucava in the southwest to the earthier tones preferred in eastern Latvia.

As we became urbanized in the late 19th century, folk costumes became badges of our national identity, and we still love them today. Women wear them at Midsummer celebrations, and during the song festivals the streets are full of men and women in traditional hats and boots, shawls fluttering in the wind and pendant chains jangling.

There are magnificent folk costumes on display at the Dauderi history museum in suburban Riga. Or to have a costume made to order, head for the salon Senā Klēts in Old Riga.

LATVIANS ARE FASHIONABLE PEOPLE, as Victoria’s Secret model Ieva Lagūna and designers like Natalia Jansone can attest. But as well as following the latest trends, we also have a deep reverence for the beautiful outfits our ancestors made and wore.

See also Šauties / Go with the flow
Riga’s historic centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, encompassing medieval cathedrals, marvels like the Central Market with pavilions housed in First World War zeppelin hangars, and the richest collection of Art Nouveau buildings on the planet. With over 4,000 historic timber buildings, Riga also has a unique wooden heritage, including churches, manors and humble workers’ cottages. There are also intriguing contemporary structures like the National Library, and even Soviet-era buildings that are interesting to the eye, like the Academy of Science skyscraper.

The city’s neighbourhoods are also well worth exploring. Miera iela is hipster central, home to cool cafes, boisterous craft beer breweries and the Laima Chocolate Museum. One of the world’s first “garden suburbs”, Mežaparks has tree-lined streets of mansions, Riga’s pretty zoo and the iconic Song Festival grounds. On the other side of the Daugava, Agenskalns offers an interesting dining scene, a bustling local market and loads of that timber architecture, including a model of restoration at the Kalnciems Quarter.

And within minutes, you can be relaxing in one of the many green parks, walking on the beach at Jūrmala or deep in the countryside. Riga is the ideal blend of big and compact.

See also G Gailis / Rooster
As we’ve already discovered, Latvian water is wonderful for boating (see Ļ – ļauties / go with the flow), seaside walks (J – jūra / the sea) or cooling down after a sauna (P – pliks / naked). We wouldn’t have our bountiful gardens without rain (Ķ – ķiploks / garlic). And if you scroll down (Z – zaļi / green) you’ll learn how it provides much of our power. But there’s another treasure that comes out of the wet that’s beguiled the world for much longer than kayaks or kilowatts.

**AMBER** is fossilized tree resin which flowed into the sea eons ago and is washed ashore after storms in beautiful lumps which vary in colour from pale lemon to what we think of as the normal golden brown through to black. The world’s finest amber ends up on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea, and it was so valued in antiquity that the stuff was traded all the way down to Rome.

**LATVIANS HAVE BEEN MAKING BEAUTIFUL THINGS FROM DZINTARS** for millennia, and today an amber brooch or necklace is still the pride of a lady’s jewelry box. Riga’s Museum of Nature has an extensive display on the history of amber, and lots of vendors and stores sell it in Old Riga.

AND IF YOU ARE WALKING DOWN THE BEACH ON LATVIA’S WEST COAST, KEEP YOUR EYES PEELED AND YOU MAY JUST FIND A FEW LITTLE PIECES.
The pink granite statue of Rainis in Riga’s Esplanade Park is a tribute to a man whose poems and plays inspired a nation. “He who knows what he wants, gets what he desires”, is one of his classic aphorisms. The National Art Museum next door is fronted by a statue honouring Janis Rozentāls, an early 20th century painter who brought the Latvian soul to light in vivid, loving colour. The adjacent late 19th century boulevards are lined with buildings designed by Jānis Frīdihs Baumanis, the first formally-educated Latvian architect, who rose from poverty to build a new city.

Another inspiring Latvian man was the poet Imants Ziedonis (1933-2013). His words and the challenges he cast out to readers in a bittersweet, ironic tone have enriched the Latvian language and people beyond measure.

And there are good guys around today as well. In an iconic musical about Lāčplēsis staged during the late 1980s Awakening, he was played by Rodrigo (Igo) Fomins, who has demonstrated great courage in his own life. Overcoming serious injuries in a road accident in 2000, he is a successful musician, poet, graphic artist and radio presenter.

Andrejs Medinš is a Catholic clergyman who is inspiring people and protecting Latvia’s cultural heritage. He founded a community for addicts at Brukna Manor in Zemgale in 2001, established an innovative boys’ school in the nearby village of Bārbele, and has restored numerous churches across the country entirely from donations and volunteers’ work, currently focusing on historic Kurmene Catholic Church.

Aigars Apinis is one of Latvia’s most successful athletes, and he’s done it from a wheelchair. After suffering a spinal injury while diving in 1992, he competed in five Paralympics from 2000 to 2016, winning gold, silver and bronze medals in both shot put and discus.

See also S Sieviete / Woman

WITH LĀČPLĒSIS THE BEAR SLAYER AS A ROLE MODEL, LATVIAN MEN CAN MUSTER PLENTY OF TESTOSTERONE ON THE HOCKEY RINK AND BASKETBALL COURT. BUT THEY HAVE PLENTY OF BRAINS AS WELL.
WE’RE NOT ANGELS, BUT CLOSENESSE TO NATURE IS DEEPLY ENGRAINED IN OUR CULTURE AND WE’RE TRYING TO BRING THIS TO LIFE IN THE MODERN WORLD.

A recent study ranked Latvia as the second greenest country in the EU, thanks to our abundance of forests and fresh water, low output of greenhouse gases and high usage of renewable energy. We do need to do more about recycling at home, but Latvians love shopping at thrift stores – from clothing to furniture to crockery, giving new life to something old at a bargain price is a national obsession. And hundreds of thousands of people pitch in at the annual Big Cleanup Day, picking up the bottles some of us carelessly leave behind after a celebration in the forest...

ZAĻI
Green

See also Jūra / Sea

ŽĒL
Sorry / a pity

We’re sorry, and it is indeed a pity, that we’ve come to the last letter of our alphabet, but come to Latvia and get to know us better in person – we’re sure that’s something you won’t regret!
**THE LATVIAN ABC**

*Your guide to Latvia and the Latvians*

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Text by Philip Birzulis and Kristīne Komarovska.
Design by Linda Ofelia Rutule.