

Latvia

If you're yearning to hit Europe's untrodden jackpot, cash in your chips in Latvia (Latvija). Still undiscovered by the tourism masses, this sizzling Baltic sexpot is poised to become the continent's next A-list star. A country in transition, hellbent on shedding its stalwart old-Soviet image, the Latvia of today is vibrant, enigmatic and altogether mesmerising. Refreshingly unpretentious, Latvia manages to tantalise even the most jaded traveller. Many arrive expecting little and leave overwhelmed, certain they've uncovered long-buried treasure.

Bustling Riga, with its pumping nightlife, cobbled streets and marvellous Art-Nouveau architecture is one of Eastern Europe's most fun cities. Away from the capital, the pace slows. Historic villages, miles from anywhere, sit frozen in time. Despite growing popularity, Latvia is still one of those places where you can embrace the unbeaten path and become an intrepid adventurer exploring virgin terrain. From crumbling castles in pine-scented forests to alluring resorts on the edge of the ice-blue Baltic Sea, it's very easy to just get away. Summer is an especially magical time – twilight comes near midnight and by 4am it's light again. After long, dark winters, Latvians seem determined to soak up as much light as possible and the whole country exudes a frenetic, turbocharged energy. Beer gardens pop up in even the smallest villages and revellers slug pints well into the night.

It's hard to believe this tiny, vivacious nation shed its Russian stranglehold less than two decades ago because, despite years of intense suffering under Soviet and Nazi occupations, Latvia has a serenity and charm rarely found elsewhere in Europe.

This is Latvia's moment. Visit before everyone else does.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 64,600 sq km (twice the size of Belgium)
- **Birthplace of** the world's first miniature camera, the VEF Minox
- **Capital** Riga
- **Country code** ☎ 371
- **Departure tax** none
- **Famous for** winning the 2002 Eurovision Song Contest
- **Money** Latvian lats €1 = 0.70Ls; UK£1 = 1.02Ls; US\$1 = 0.58Ls
- **Population** 2.4 million
- **Visa** not required for visits of up to 90 days for citizens of the EU, the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. See p391 for details.



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Riga** (p187) Wander cobbled medieval streets, slide past Art-Nouveau flourishes and watch the sun rise over a skyline of spires and turrets.
- **Gauja Valley** (p227) Get your adrenaline rushing by bungee jumping, bob-sleighing or skiing amid this exquisite landscape.
- **Jūrmala** (p220) Soak up sun and Baltic Sea vistas in this boisterous resort area.
- **Liepāja** (p261) Discover the heart and soul of Latvia's rock 'n' roll scene in this progressive city poised to become a major Baltic hot spot.
- **Cape Kolka** (p253) Feast on fresh fish, gulp mouthfuls of crisp air and savour the solitude of wild and windswept Cape Kolka.

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Visit Riga, with a choice of day trips to Sigulda and the Gauja Valley, Jūrmala, the Ķemeri National Park, Rūndale Palace, the Pedvāle Open-Air Art Museum and nearby Kuldīga or Tukums.
- **One week** Do Riga and some day-trip destinations, then take the Riga–Kolka coastal road stopping in Jūrmala, Ķemeri and some of the fishing villages around Roja. See where the Gulf of Riga and the Baltic Sea meet at Cape Kolka, then nose-dive into the Slitere National Park and its Livonian villages. Dip south to happening Liepāja, stopping in wealthy Ventspils along the way.
- **Two weeks** Explore western Latvia at a more leisurely pace, allowing time to scale Slitere Lighthouse, follow a few nature trails in the national parks and enjoy some boating, bird-watching or other activity. Or split the fortnight in two and spend a week exploring eastern Latvia – include the Gauja Valley and Alūksne's narrow-gauge railway.

CURRENT EVENTS

From political shake-ups to 'get tough now' economic policies, there's a lot going on in Latvia today. Although one-third of Latvians voted against joining the EU in 2004, today the general mood in the country towards membership is optimistic and Latvia has moved quickly to embrace the free market.

HOW MUCH?

- **Cup of coffee** from 0.50Ls
- **Taxi fare per kilometre** 45Ls to 65Ls
- **Public transport ticket** 0.2Ls
- **Bicycle hire (daily)** 4.50Ls
- **Sauna per hour** 10Ls

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **Litre of petrol** 0.54Ls
- **Litre of bottled water** 0.50Ls
- **50cl bottle of beer** 0.40Ls
- **Souvenir T-shirt** 5Ls
- **Street snack** 1.50Ls

High inflation has hindered efforts to peg the lats to the euro (the first step towards making the euro the country's currency), but the government has imposed tough measures to curb inflation while still boosting growth, and the country is now establishing formal links with the common currency and hopes to adopt the euro within a few years. The EU invested more than €1 billion in the country between 2004 and 2006, and the funds are benefiting key economic development projects.

Since independence in 1991 Latvia has held four elections and had a string of governments, all leaning centre-right. The country's latest political shake-up came in 2004, when Prime Minister Indulis Emsis resigned following a parliamentary vote to reject the 2005 draft budget. Emsis, of the Greens and Farmers union, was Europe's first Green premier. His minority coalition government lasted only eight months. Aigars Kalvītis, of the centre-right People's Party, was given the task of picking up the pieces. Kalvītis' four-party coalition was approved in December 2004 and the new prime minister promised to work towards political stability.

Latvia made lots of world headlines in 2005. In May of that year US President George W Bush visited the country as part of a tour commemorating the end of WWII. Before Bush's arrival, the local media encouraged anyone living in Riga to stay inside during the visit, or better yet, sojourn



THE LATVIAN AMBER ROAD

Although the precious fossilised resin is not found as prolifically in Latvia as it is in Lithuania, *dzintars* (amber) is a ubiquitous shop staple throughout the country. Amber animal figurines dating back to the 4th millennium BC have been uncovered in Latvia, and traditional folk costumes include amber beads, brooches and *kniepkeni* (fastening for women's blouses).

The region's 'Amber Road' starts in the northwestern Latvian port town of Ventspils, where many fine pieces have washed ashore. Check out the Livonian Order Castle (p256) to see some fine samples. South of Ventspils, the next stop on the country's 80km amber discovery route is tranquil Pāvilosta. Large quantities of amber often wash ashore here, especially during strong spring and autumn storms. Amber fishers scour the coast for the substance and make a portion of their living from selling it. Following the professionals on an amber hunt is not only a great way to learn more, it is also a fabulous day-in-the-life experience. To get the scoop, visit the **Pāvilosta Ethnography Museum** (☎ 379 8276; Dzintara iela 1; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) and ask the staff how to set up a trip. The museum also houses an extensive amber collection.

The large, vibrant city of Liepāja has two not-to-be-missed amber attractions. During Liepāja's 750th birthday celebration in 2003, residents and visitors donated more than 50 litres of amber to the city. The pieces came in all shapes and sizes – the biggest were threaded into 123m beaded ropes, the rest used to construct a stunning 4m-high **sundial**. You can check out the 'amber clock' on the promenade along the town's Tirdzniecības canal – on a bright day it makes a wonderful photo. The beads are displayed at the **Liepāja craftsmen's association** (☎ 342 3286; Barinu iela 33; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri). The Liepāja History & Art Museum (p263) also boasts a fine amber exhibit.

If you haven't had your fill of Latvian amber, take a side trip to the Lithuanian-border town of Nida (p357).

to the countryside. Residents were asked not to make any sudden movements near their windows when Bush was in the vicinity – they were told this was a precaution against possible sniper bullets! To make matters more complicated, Bush's entourage was so big there were not enough hotel beds to accommodate them. The Latvian government solved the conundrum by hiring a large ship on which to sleep them. Prior to the visit, anti-Bush posters popped up in cafés and bars around town. The bright posters featured slogans such as 'Welcome Peace Duke' (you'll have to ask a Russian speaker what 'peace duke' sounds like in their language to get the negative gist...).

President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga was the only Baltic leader to accept Moscow's invitation to attend end of WWII celebrations, and her decision created quite a controversy – with demonstrations by veterans of Latvia's SS brigade and clashes with anti-fascist protestors in Riga.

The Baltics' first gay pride event – a march in Riga in July 2005 – was a milestone for gay rights activists. Even though the Latvian prime minister publicly condemned the march, the event went ahead and drew

large crowds. The event had little impact on the government's stance on gay rights, however. In September 2005 parliament took the first step towards making a ban on same-sex marriage part of the constitution. Same-sex marriage is illegal under civil law.

Other still-to-be-resolved issues in Latvia include a controversial language law passed in September 2004 stipulating that 60% of all lessons in state schools must be conducted in Latvian, and tensions between Latvia and Russia regarding issues over their mutual border, as Russia has yet to sign a treaty formally delineating the border.

In June 2005 Latvia's parliament ratified the proposed EU constitution.

Riga is hosting the November 2006 NATO Summit, just further proof that Latvia has taken its place on the world players' map.

HISTORY

The history of Latvia is best described as a troubled whirlwind of fierce struggle and downright rebellion.

Early History

The Latvians and Lithuanians are the two surviving peoples of the Balt branch of the

Indo-European ethnolinguistic group. The Balts are thought to have spread into the southeastern Baltic area around 2000 BC from the region that is now Belarus and neighbouring parts of Russia. (The term Balt, which was derived from the Baltic Sea, was first used in the 19th century.) Those people who stayed behind were assimilated, much later, by Belarusian or Russian Slavs (who are ethnically the Balts' nearest relatives). By the 13th century the Balts were divided into a number of tribal kingdoms.

The Latvians are descended from those tribes who settled in the territory of modern Latvia, such as the Letts (or Latgals), the Selonians, the Semigallians and the Cours. The Latgals, Semigallians and Cours gave their names to Latvian regions: Latgale, Zemgale and Kurzeme.

The Selonians settled between the Dauvaga River and northern Lithuania. During succeeding centuries of foreign rule, these tribes (and to a large extent the Finno-Ugric Livs who inhabited the northern coastal regions of Latvia) lost their separate identities and became merged in one Lettish, or Latvian, identity.

The first Christian missionaries arrived in Latvia in 1190 and tried to persuade the pagan population to convert. It was an uphill battle: as soon as the missionaries left, the new converts jumped into the river to wash off their baptism. In subsequent years more missionaries would arrive, and more Latvians would submit and then renounce Christianity.

In 1201, at the behest of the pope, German crusaders, led by Bishop von Buxhoevden of Bremen, conquered Latvia and founded Riga. Von Buxhoevden also founded the Knights of the Sword, who made Riga their base for subjugating Livonia. Colonists from northern Germany followed, and during the first period of German rule, Riga became the major city in the German Baltic, thriving from trade between Russia and the West and joining the Hanseatic League (a medieval merchant guild) in 1282. Furs, hides, honey and wax were among the products sold westward from Russia through Riga.

Power struggles between the church, knights and city authorities dominated the country's history between 1253 and 1420. Riga's bishop, elevated to archbishop in 1252, became the leader of the church in

the German conquered lands, ruling a good slice of Livonia directly and further areas of Livonia and Estonia indirectly through his bishops. The church clashed constantly with knights, who controlled most of the remainder of Livonia and Estonia, and with German merchant-dominated city authorities that managed to maintain a degree of independence from 1253 to 1420.

Latvia was conquered by Poland in 1561 and Catholicism was firmly rooted. Sweden colonised Latvia in 1629 and occupied the country until the Great Northern War (1700–21), after which it became part of Russia.

Soviet occupation began in 1939 with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, nationalisation, mass killings and about 35,000 deportations, 5000 of whom were Jews, to Siberia.

Latvia was then occupied by Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1945, when an estimated 75,000 Latvians were killed or deported. The Jewish population suffered greatly during this period. The Germans captured Riga on 1 July 1941.

At the end of WWII the Soviets reclaimed Latvia and occupied the country for another 40 years.

Road to Independence

The first public protest against Soviet occupation was on 14 June 1987, when 5000 people rallied at Riga's Freedom Monument to commemorate the 1941 Siberia deportations. New political organisations emerged in the summer of 1988. The Popular Front of Latvia (PLF) quickly rose to the forefront of the Latvian political scene. The PLF, representing the interests of many Latvian social and political groups, garnered much grass-roots support and on 31 May 1989 the group called for the full independence of Latvia. Less than two months later, on 23 August 1989, two million Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians formed a 650km human chain from Vilnius, through Riga, to Tallinn, to mark the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

The PLF won a big majority in the March 1990 elections, but Russia barged back in on 20 January 1991. Soviet troops stormed the Interior Ministry building in Riga, killing five people and injuring hundreds. However, the parliament in Riga was barricaded, the people stayed calm, the violence drew

Western condemnation of Moscow and the immediate threat subsided. In referendums in February and March 1991, big majorities in Latvia voted in favour of secession from the USSR. However, the West, not wanting to weaken Gorbachev further, gave only lukewarm support to the Baltic independence movements.

A 19 August 1991 coup attempt against Gorbachev in Moscow loosened the political stranglehold against full-fledged autonomy and Latvia declared full independence on 21 August 1991.

On 17 September 1991 Latvia, along with Estonia and Lithuania, joined the UN and began taking steps to consolidate their newfound nationhood, such as issuing their own postage stamps and currencies. In 1992 Latvia competed independently in the Olympic Games for the first time since before WWII. The pope visited all three Baltic countries in September 1993, but with the exception of these milestones, Latvia silently disappeared from the world's headlines.

Towards Europe

June 1993 saw Latvia's first democratic elections. Valdis Birkavs, of the centre-right moderate nationalist party, Latvijas Ceļš (LC; Latvian Way) became the country's first postindependence prime minister. Guntis Ulmanis of Latvijas Zemiņieku Savienība was elected president – an office he held for two terms.

The country's postindependence government lurched from crisis to crisis, and a game of prime-minister roulette followed the Baltija Bank crash in 1995, when Latvia's biggest commercial bank went bust. With a staggering 204 million lati in liabilities – and thousands of Latvians deprived of their life savings – the crisis spread, and by the time the blood-letting was over, 40% of Latvia's banking system had disappeared. Elections that year saw Andris Šķēle emerging as prime minister.

Formal Russian recognition of Latvian independence was achieved in 1996 in exchange for Latvia reluctantly ceding the Abrene (Russian: Pytalovo) region – a 15km-wide, 85km-long sliver of territory down its northeastern border.

Nervous of Russian sabre-rattling and hungry for economic stability, Latvia became

desperate to join NATO and the EU. By 1998 the West seemed less concerned about annoying Russia, which was fiercely opposed to eastward expansion by NATO, than previously, and the USA publicly pledged its support for Latvia, as well the other two Baltic nations, by signing the US-Baltic Charter of Partnership, in which it gave its support to Baltic integration into Western institutions, including NATO.

Latvia made world headlines again in May 1998, when the presidents of Estonia and Lithuania joined forces with the president of Latvia to publicly condemn Russia's political and economic pressure on Latvia, warning it was posing a danger to the region's future unity and integration with Europe. A medal awarded by Latvia to the former Russian president Boris Yeltsin for his role in helping Latvia secure its independence was spurned by Yeltsin following Latvia's imprisonment of a former WWII Soviet partisan in January 2000.

Presidential elections in 1999 saw Guntis Ulmanis defeated by Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, Latvia's current president and the first woman president of an ex-USSR country. The fact that Vīķe-Freiberga was not among the five presidential candidates – all voted out in the first round of voting – made her final election all the more unusual. A long-time Canadian resident, Vīķe Freiberga brought experience in a multiethnic democracy to Latvia and assumed office unburdened by petty political connections. On the other hand, she only took Latvian citizenship the year before her election, prompting critics to claim she was less 'in tune' with the real Latvia than a lifelong resident.

Vīķe-Freiberga faced a tough challenge during her first days in office. On 5 July 1999 Prime Minister Vilis Kristopans resigned, prompting Andris Šķēle's appointment as PM at the head of a conservative government formed by Šķēle's People's Party, the LC and For Fatherland and Freedom. Three days later the Latvian parliament approved a controversial language law that invited criticism from the EU and made international headlines. Among the law's requirements, employees of private enterprises and self-employed people had to use Latvian at public functions. Latvian was also made obligatory at major public events, and was the language for all publicly

displayed signs and notices. Heeding massive international pressure, Viķe-Freiberga vetoed the bill and sent it back to parliament. The law was amended in December 1999, the same year Latvia was invited to start accession talks with the EU.

But the language issue remained hot. Another amendment to the language law in late 2000 stipulated that lawyers, taxi drivers, telephone operators and a host of other professions in the private sector had to speak a certain level of Latvian. Throughout 2001 debate raged as to whether those standing for political office should speak the official state language, climaxing in mid-2002 with parliament, heeding the advice of NATO, decreeing that they don't. A couple of months previously all hell had broken loose after an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) official in Riga had suggested to Viķe-Freiberga that Russian be made an official state language alongside Latvian. The response was an immediate amendment to the constitution by parliament declaring Latvian to be its only working language, and a statement of support from the EU saying that it was up to Latvia alone to decide its state language. By 2004 the primary language that school pupils were being taught in was Latvian.

Merriment spilled across Riga's streets in 2001 as the capital celebrated its 800th birthday. To herald the event, the city council raised old Riga's 14th-century House of Blackheads from the ashes and built itself a new town hall too – allegedly based on the city's original town hall but in fact a complete fabrication on the part of architects. This, coupled with the heady rash of commercial development enveloping the old city, prompted a subtle warning from Unesco that it was not unheard of for cities to be struck off the World Heritage List (a status Latvia's capital was awarded in 1997).

On 1 May 2004, the EU opened its doors to 10 new members, including Latvia, amid huge expectations of a secure border with Russia and better times to come.

THE CULTURE The National Psyche

Latvia's inhabitants are very different in temperament from their neighbours, the flamboyant Lithuanians and calm Estonians. At first glance folks appear a bit

standoffish. You won't hear many hellos from strangers on the streets, and even shop owners may not greet you with as much enthusiasm as you'd expect. Latvians are a withdrawn people who have to be coaxed into friendship, but if you succeed you'll discover a steely strength hidden beneath their stoic façade. A prime example of this stoicism can be gleaned by watching the armed Guards of Honour standing rigid as stone in front of Riga's freedom monument from sunrise to sunset each day, come rain, hail or 3m of snow. This guarded nature is hardly surprising, however, considering the country's history of oppression – and the fact that Latvians are still a minority group in each of their main cities.

Lifestyle

Latvians generally adore nature – their traditions and customs reach back to their pagan past. In many rural households it's counted as lucky to have a green snake (nonvenomous grass snake) living in the home. Latvians like flowers; if you go to a birthday party or some other special event, it's nice to bring a bouquet – but make sure it's an odd number of flowers! Even numbers are reserved for funerals and other sad occasions. Latvian women are a tad less emancipated than in the West, so female drivers, for instance, might provoke some mildly sexist but harmless commentary. In addition Latvians have perhaps the best-developed entrepreneurial sense of all three Baltic countries, perhaps following the example set by the enterprising, predominately Russian population found in Riga.

Population

Of Latvia's population of 2.33 million, just 58.3% are ethnically Latvian. Russians account for 29.1% of the total population (compared to 32.8% in 1995) and Belarusians (4%), Ukrainians (2.6%), Poles (2.5%) and a small Jewish community (0.4%) round out the rest of the demographics. Latvians make up less than 50% of the population in Daugavpils, Jūrmala, Liepāja, Rēzekne, Ventspils and the capital, Riga, where 43.7% are Russian and 41.2% Latvian.

Of particular concern is the country's declining population, which dropped 13.8% between 1999 and 2000 and made Latvia the fourth-slowest-growing country in the

world. Some of this is due to the migration of ethnic Russians back to Russia, but the main factor is an extremely low birth-rate – at 20.3 births per 1000 people (compared to 32.2 deaths), Latvia is reckoned to have the world's lowest crude birth rate: nine births per 1000 inhabitants.

The divorce rate in Latvia remains among the highest in Europe: more than 60% of marriages end in divorce and almost 40% of children are born into one-parent families.

Up to 200,000 Latvians live in Western countries as a result of emigration around the turn of the 20th century, and during and after WWII. Most live in the USA, followed by Australia, Canada, Germany and Britain.

Multiculturalism

Citizenship has been one of Latvia's most contentious – and complicated – issues. Upon gaining independence, the new state proclaimed that residents of the pre-1940 Latvian Republic and their descendants – including about 300,000 nonethnic Latvians (mainly Russians) – automatically became

citizens of modern Latvia. Former Soviet soldiers, settled in Latvia after demobilisation, were understandably barred from citizenship, as were former Soviet secret-service employees.

But other residents – roughly 35% of the population and the vast majority of native-Russian speakers – were not allowed to vote in the 1993 elections because they were not citizens. This was widely seen as unjust.

Citizenship rules passed in 1994 stated that would-be citizens must have lived in Latvia for at least five years, must pass a test on Latvia's language, history and constitution, and take a loyalty oath. Additionally, only those of certain ages could apply at certain times (only Latvian-born residents aged from 16 to 20 could apply in 1996, those aged up to 25 in 1997, and so on), provoking an outcry from the large Russian community in Latvia.

Finally, in 1998 the Latvian parliament repealed the harsh 'windows' restriction on who could apply, meaning all noncitizens, irrespective of age, could apply for citizenship through naturalisation – a process

LATVIAN FOLKLORE

From the myth of *Lāčplēšis* (the Bear Slayer) to the custom of only giving odd numbers of flowers as welcome gifts, Latvian culture is rich in folklore. Customs and rituals, many dating back to pagan times, play integral roles in traditional Latvian life to this day. Step into a Latvian cemetery and you'll notice the sandy paths around the gravestones are meticulously raked, void of any footprints. This practice stems from the ancient belief that the spirit of the dead could follow the mourner home unless all living footprints were erased.

Another ancient tradition, still embraced wholeheartedly today, is the celebration of Midsummer's Day, or *Jāņi*. In pagan times, this was a night of magic and sorcery when witches ran naked and wild, bewitching flowers and ferns, people and animals. Today *Jāņi* is Latvia's biggest celebration, with festivities beginning on 23 June. People flock to the countryside to party amid lakes and pine forests. Special beers, cheese and pies are prepared, and flowers and herbs, meant to bring good luck and keep families safe from evil spirits, are hung around homes. Men adorn themselves with oak-leaf crowns, while women wear wreaths of flowers on their heads. Legend has it that if you sleep before the sun has sunk and risen again you'll be riddled with a year of bad luck. To help people stay awake giant bonfires are lit, traditional folk songs sung, dances danced and those special cheeses, beers and pies consumed. Lovers seek out the mythical fern flower, which supposedly only blooms on this night – finding the flower ensures a lifetime of happiness!

Latvian folklore has strong ties to the natural world. Many locals believe that when a child is born a new star appears and stays bound to the child throughout their life. When the person dies, the star falls to earth, a symbol of the disappearance of their soul. It is also believed that children born under sunny skies have better luck than those who enter the world on a grey or rainy day. Storks are another symbol of luck, especially if the bird decides to nest near a Latvian home. Trees, flowers and animals are also featured prominently in Latvian folklore, and stories about animals with human attributes are common.

requiring a test in Latvian and an exam about Latvian history. The law also granted automatic citizenship to children born in Latvia after 1991 whose parents were non-citizens.

Fierce opposition to the changes raised sufficient public support for a referendum to be twinned with parliamentary elections. Latvian voters narrowly approved the repeal, and European human-rights groups breathed a sigh of relief. So too did those waiting for citizenship. After the referendum was passed, applications tripled to around 1000 a month. The law was finally ratified by parliament in January 1999.

The problem is far from resolved, however, and today more than 450,000 Russians and native-Russian speakers (about 25% of the population) are still classified as 'non-citizens', because they have either refused, or failed, the required naturalisation test in Latvian language and history.

SPORT

Though it has exported its top talent to the USA-based National Hockey League, Latvia's sporting forte remains ice hockey. Although league games throughout the country draw only a few hundred hard-core fans, Latvians are fiercely devoted to their national team, and televised games, especially during the IIHF World Ice Hockey Championships, are closely followed. On big game nights devoted fans pack Riga's sports pubs, their eyes locked on the giant-screen TVs broadcasting the match. If you're interested in the sport, stop by a pub on a night when the Latvian national team is playing and join the chaotic party: Latvians may be a reserved bunch, but after a few pints they'll cut loose and cheer their home team on with some seriously raw enthusiasm!

Latvia hosted the IIHF World Ice Hockey Championships in 2006. To prepare for the event, the country constructed a state-of-the-art arena. One of the largest construction projects launched in Latvia since independence, the 12,500-seat Arena Riga is being used for both concerts and sporting events. To get an idea just how devoted Latvians are to the sport on a national level check out this figure: 17,000 ticket packages for the 2006 championships went on sale in September 2005 and sold out within the first hour and a half!

Bobsledding is another popular winter sport and Sigulda's bobsled track, one of Europe's longest, plays host to international competitions.

Basketball also draws crowds, though its following is not quite as large as in Lithuania. Latvian basketball player Uljana Semonova ranks among the best female players of all time. Of Russian origin, Semonova was born in Daugavpils in 1952 and won over 45 medals (including two Olympic golds for the USSR in 1976 and 1980) in an 18-year career that saw her team never lose an international game. At 2.1m tall, she was the tallest female player in Olympic history.

RELIGION

Christianity long ago superseded Latvia's ancient religion, which was based on a belief in natural deities and the divinity of all living things, though a movement in the 1920s tried to revive and preserve these ancient traditions.

Christianity first came to Latvia in the 12th century, and the crusades of the following century firmly entrenched it as the dominant religion. The type of Christianity practised today largely follows a historical pattern: eastern Latvia, which was under the Polish empire, tends to be Roman Catholic, while other areas are Lutheran.

The first Latvian Bible was published in 1689. Its translator was the Reverend Ernest Glück, and a memorial museum to him stands in the town of Alūksne. During the Soviet occupation, the power of the church was seen as a threat, and religious practice of any kind was condemned. The regime attempted to suppress the faithful by killing or deporting many priests and clergy and converting places of worship into secular buildings such as museums, concert halls and cinemas. When the Soviet stranglehold began to loosen in the 1980s, faith-based practices experienced a revival. The PLF included the right to religious freedom as a core of its political platform, and churches began to reassert their power. In Latvia today, the Roman Catholic Church has the largest following with roughly 500,000 adherents, followed by Lutheran (300,000), Russian Orthodox (100,000) and Old Believers (70,000).

ARTS

Latvian folklore plays an integral role in the country's art and music scene.

Cinema

Since Latvia's first full-length sound film, *Zvejnieka dēls* (The Fisherman's Son), came out in 1940, Latvian filmmaking has taken off, with occasional international recognition. The state-owned **Rīga Film Studio** (www.rigafilmstudios.com), prominent for its feature films during Soviet times, is less successful today, in part due to the dozen or so other film studios that have stepped up since independence.

Production studio Dauka is Latvia's leader in animation; its film *The Cat's Mill* won second prize at the Chicago International Film Festival in 1994. Other film makers of note include Laila Pakalnina, whose 1998 feature film *The Shoe*, about occupied Latvia, was an official selection at the Cannes 1998 film festival. Pakalnina's film *The Mail* shows

the isolation of Latvia, as symbolised by the lonely delivery of the morning mail.

Latvian director Jānis Streičs (1936–) has produced a number of films pertinent to Latvia's turbulent past. *Limousine in the Colour of Summer Solstice Night* (1981) and *The Child of Man* (1991) remain popular for their blend of irony and comedy. The latter, about a boy growing up and falling in love in Soviet-occupied Latvia, won the Grand Prix at San Remo in 1992 and was nominated for an Academy Award for best foreign film in 1994. Streičs' more recent film, *The Mystery of the Old Parish Church* (2000), addresses the prickly issue of local collaboration with Nazi and Soviet occupiers during WWII, as the victims of a former KGB agent set out to haunt their killer. The film, partly set during summer solstice, stars the lead singer of Latvian band Brainstorm, Renars Kaupers.

The website www.latfilma.lv has a wealth of information on Latvian films, directors, festivals and more.

JURIS PODNIEKS

Latvian film director Juris Podnieks, arguably the most influential filmmaker in the former USSR, had that rare gift of being at the right place at exactly the right time. During the 1970s, '80s and early '90s, Podnieks and his film crew worked tirelessly to produce riveting documentaries that in many ways predicted the collapse of the Soviet monolith.

Born in Riga in 1950, Podnieks worked in a Riga studio after graduating from film school in 1975. He began first as a cameraman and rose quickly, becoming a director in 1979.

Podnieks' breakthrough film was 1986's *Is It Easy to Be Young?*, which broke Soviet box-office records – and wooed an international crowd of 28 million – by depicting the Soviet Union's troubled youth. His cinematic triumph was managing to get footage of some youthful Latvians vandalising a train after a rock concert.

Another Podnieks landmark was the five-part 1989 series *Hello Do You Hear Us?* The series, broadcast in the USA, painted a gloomy portrait of the Soviet Union, from the Baltic police to the workers' strike in a Yaroslavl factory.

Even more important were *Homeland* and *Homeland Postscript*, which captured the events of the early 1990s. The film *Homeland* was completed and due to be released in February 1991. The turbulent events of January 1991, however, clearly required an addendum. When Podnieks was in Vilnius on 11 January 1991 to present *Homeland*, he was on the scene to film the storming of the Vilnius TV tower. He and his assistant, though caught in the crossfire, escaped unharmed and slipped back to Riga with their footage.

Nine days later a shoot-out took place in Riga as Soviet troops stormed the Ministry of the Interior. Two of Podnieks' crew heard the confrontation and ran out to film it. Both were killed in the crossfire. Endowed with new and sombre meaning, *Homeland* and *Homeland Postscript* opened on 7 February.

Podnieks died just a little more than a year later, on 23 June 1992, in a midsummer scuba-diving accident. The **Juris Podnieks studio** (☎ 721 69 67; jps@parks.lv; Citadeles iela 2, LV-1010 Riga) carries on under his name, however, and continues to produce documentaries. The studio can make copies of the films, some of which have English subtitles, for €17 to €20 (plus €30 postage within Europe).

Literature

Latvia's national epic – *Bear Slayer*, written by Andrējs Pumpurs in the mid-19th century – is based on traditional Latvian folk stories. The hero struggles against his enemy, a German Black Knight, only to drown in the Daugava River at the moment of triumph. The anticipated rebirth of *Bear Slayer*, however, leaves hope for new freedom. The first Latvian novel, *The Time of the Land Surveyors*, written in the 1860s and 1870s by the brothers Reinis and Matiss Kaudzite, has become a classic for its humorous portrayal of Latvian characters.

Rūdolfs Blaumanis (1863–1908) wrote psychologically penetrating novelettes and comic and tragic plays; among them, *Tailor's Days in Silmači* (Skroderdienas Silmačos) is still one of Latvia's most popular plays. Anna Brigadere (1861–1933) wrote many fairy-tale dramas and well-loved tales of rural life. Kārlis Skalbe (1879–1945) was another major writer of fairy tales.

Music & Dance

Traditional folk songs have always played an integral role in Latvian culture, although the recognition of music as an established art form did not come about until the mid-19th century. In 1869 Jānis Cimze started cataloguing folk tunes, some dating back 1000

years, and his collection of about 20,000 melodies quickly gained popularity. His collected works were sung in school choirs and became the basis for Latvia's first song festival, where thousands of singers joined together in huge choirs to celebrate traditional folk music. During the Soviet occupation the song festivals were pivotal in forging a strong sense of national identity and pride, and became part of the battle cry that rallied Latvians to fight for independence.

Today music is very popular and there are many big annual festivals (p266). Latvia's third-largest city, Liepāja, is considered the heart and soul of Latvia's rock 'n' roll scene. Artists come from across the country to perform in its lively bars and clubs, and even the smallest pubs often host live acts (although the quality of music is varied).

Perkons (Thunder) and award-winning mainstream rockers Rebel (formed out of Dr Blues, a band that had been on the scene since the late 1980s) were among the first bands to make it big in rock. Rebel notably sings in English and Russian on its album *Sarovaja Molnija* (1999). Acoustic blues is represented by Hot Acoustic, formed in 1994, while the eccentric Karl and Cuckoo-Bite contribute a new wave sound to the Rīga club scene. A more recent female vocalist to listen out for is Linda Leen with her mix of rhythm and blues.

Patra Vetra, otherwise called Brainstorm, is the best-known band outside Latvia, breaking into the European market with its first album in English (*Among the Suns*) in 1999, finishing third in the Eurovision Song Contest in 2000, and going on tour with the Cranberries in 2002. Lead singer Renars Kaupers, who wrote one of the band's best-known hit songs, 'My Star', has also indulged in a brief but successful film career. The surprise win of sexy Russian-Rīgan Marija Naumova (Marie N) in the 2002 Eurovision Song Contest served to tell the world that Brainstorm's third place was not a fluke and that Latvia really could sing.

The godfather of Latvian rock is the eclectic composer Imants Kalņins, founder of the country's first rock band, Menuets, in the mid-'70s. A graduate of the Latvian State Conservatory, Kalņins has written everything from film scores to symphonies and operas. His son, Mart Kristiāns Kalņins, lead singer of the 'art rock' band Autobuss

debešis, which released its debut album in 2001, is another name to look out for.

The National Opera House, reopened in 1996 after renovation, is the home of the Rīga Ballet, which produced Mikhail Baryshnikov and Aleksander Godunov during the Soviet years. The Latvia National Symphonic Orchestra is highly regarded. Song composers Joseph Wihtol (Jāzeps Vītols) and Alfrēds Kalniņš are important early-20th-century figures in classical music. Inga Kalna is among Latvia's leading female soloists.

Contemporary classicists include internationally renowned conductor Mariss Jansons, winner of the Latvian 1995 Grand Prix in music. Another major figure in the Latvian music scene is Raimonds Pauls, light music orchestra conductor for the Latvian State Philharmonic in the late 1960s. He later rose to become minister of culture (1988–93).

Visual Arts

Jānis Rozentāls was really the first major Latvian painter. At the turn of the 20th century he painted scenes of peasant life and portraits, with some influence from impressionism and Art Nouveau. Vilhelms Purvītis and Jānis Valters were the outstanding landscape artists of the time. Both – especially Purvītis – were influenced by impressionism. Olegs Tillbergs is one of the most interesting modern Latvian artists. He collects and assembles garbage and other unwanted materials. Ivars Poikans is another contemporary artist to watch for. Karlis Rudēvics is known for his translations of Roma poetry and for his striking paintings inspired by Gypsy legends.

ENVIRONMENT The Land

Latvia is 64,589 sq km in area – a little smaller than Ireland. Unlike its relatively compact Baltic neighbours, Latvia is a lot wider from east to west than from north to south. A good half of its sweeping 494km coast faces the Gulf of Rīga, a deep inlet of the Baltic Sea shielded from the open sea by the Estonian island of Saaremaa.

Latvia's borders include Estonia to the north, Russia and Belarus to the east and Lithuania to the south. Rīga lies on the Daugava River, just inland from the Gulf of Rīga. The country has four regions: Vidzeme, the northeast; Latgale, the south-

east; Zemgale, the centre; and Kurzeme, the west.

The Vidzeme Upland in eastern Latvia is the largest expanse of land with elevation over 200m in the Baltics; it is topped by Latvia's highest point, Gaiziņkalns (312m).

Wildlife

Forests dominate 44% of Latvia's landscape, with northern Vidzeme and northern Kurzeme the most forested parts of the country. The country's oldest forest, in Kurzeme's Slitere National Park and protected since 1921, is a broad-leaf forest with a calcium-rich bog and several rare orchids. This national park alone protects 23 forest types and three types of swamp. The Gauja National Park also has a vibrant ecosystem, and is the breeding ground for 900 plant types.

Latvia, along with the other Baltic countries, has more large wild mammals than anywhere else in Europe, although seeing them in the wild requires patience, determination and, often, the services of a local guide. Elks, deer, wild boar, wolves and even a few bears inhabit the country's forests in varying numbers, although you're not likely to bump into any without some guidance. There are also beavers on inland waters, seals along the coasts and large otter populations (between 2000 and 4000 live in Latvia). Gauja National Park is home to 48 types of mammal. South of Liepāja, Latvia's branch of the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) has reintroduced konick horses – descendants of wild horses that once roamed free in Europe – on abandoned farmland around Lake Pape. The country also has a large white stork population. In fact, in conjunction with Lithuania, the two countries have more storks than all of Western Europe. The rarer black stork is also found in Latvia and builds nests in the Gauja National Park.

National Parks & Reserves

An increasingly large area of the country is becoming protected as new nature parks and reserves are established. **WWF Latvia** (☎ 750 5640; www.wwf.lv; Elizabetes iela 8-4, Rīga LV-1010) is involved in several nature-protection projects around the country, aimed at restoring natural ecosystems. The most noteworthy national parks and reserves are the following.

LIFE AFTER EUROVISION 2002

Marija Naumova's life changed forever on 25 May 2002, the day she won the Eurovision Song Contest in Tallinn. Relatively unknown outside Latvia prior to her win, Naumova (who goes by the name Marie N) hit the world music scene in a big way following the contest when her winning single *I Wanna...* was released in countries as far away as Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Brazil. The last few years have brought their share of momentous moments for the young singer. She starred in a Rīga production of *The Sound of Music*, played clubs in Europe, the USA and Canada and even managed to record a few albums. Her latest endeavour, released in 2004 and titled *On My Own*, features original songs, along with a few well-known covers, and has Marie N belting out lyrics in English, Latvian, French and even Portuguese!

NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

National park or reserve	Area	Features	Activities	Best time to visit
Abava Valley Nature Park (p255)	149 sq km	the small towns of Kandava & Sabile	hiking	summer
Gauja National Park (p226)	917 sq km	castles & lovely valley scenery	hiking	summer
Ķemeri National Park (p252)	428 sq km	Latvia's oldest forest, wetlands, many bird species, nature trails & boardwalks across bogs	birding, hiking	summer
Krustkalni Nature Reserve (p138)	30 sq km	nine lakes & 48 protected species of flora	hiking	summer
Moricāla Nature Reserve (p251)	8 sq km	part of Lake Usma & its shores	fishing	summer
Slītere National Park (p254)	164 sq km	coastal & hinterland nature reserve	hiking	summer
Teiči Nature Reserve (p238)	190 sq km	an important feeding & nesting ground for many bird species	bog-walking, birding	summer

Environmental Issues

Rapid industrialisation during the Soviet occupation and the failure to address the environmental impact of endeavours such as the construction of manufacturing centres, hydroelectric plants and dams led to high levels of water and air pollution. Since independence the Latvian government and various national organisations have made cleaning up the environment a priority and Latvia's pollution problems are now being addressed. Ironically, some areas are threatened more today than during Soviet times: the Livonian coastline in northern Kurzeme – a former Soviet border-control post once off limits but now threatened by forestry and property development – is a classic example.

Financial assistance from Scandinavia and Germany has helped reduce the pollution generated by industrial centres such as Daugavpils and Liepāja. Ventspils, smothered in potash dust in the late 1980s, has witnessed a huge cleanup: a new water-supply system aimed at reducing the amount of sewage dumped in the Baltic Sea, air monitoring and the construction of a new heating system to decrease sulphur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide omissions are all part of the city's long-term environmental plan, drawn up to last until 2010 and estimated to cost €23 million. Despite these efforts, Latvia's Municipal Air Control Management admits Riga's air is still unhealthy and that pollution-induced damage to some of Old

Riga's historic buildings remains a problem (although it's starting to be tackled).

Riga's upgraded sewage treatment facilities are reducing the flow of sewage into the Daugava River and making swimming in the Gulf of Riga safer. The European Blue Flag (a water safety rating; see p34) has been awarded to beaches in Jūrmala, Ventspils and Liepāja, but the safety of swimming in other areas is still questionable.

Latvia is making a concerted effort to use renewable sources to generate energy. Currently 40% of the country's energy is obtained in this manner, with hydroelectric energy accounting for most of this figure. Latvia's 2004 entrance into the EU brought with it a new set of environmental obligations, and the government is committed to fully complying with EU environmental directives by 2010.

FOOD & DRINK

Farming and fishing have long been economic mainstays in Latvia, and as a result Latvian cuisine is of the hearty, sustenance-providing variety. Fish and meat, especially bacon, along with dairy products, grains, berries and vegetables are all staples.

Staples & Specialities

Step into a Latvian eatery and your nose will be assaulted with a melange of smells: roasting meats, salted fish, boiled peas dripping in bacon grease and smelling of onion

are only some of the varied offerings. Latvians consume a lot of dairy products, and *biezpiens* (cottage cheese), *siers* (cheese) and *rūgšpiens* (curdled milk) are main ingredients in many dishes. *Sprotes* (sprats) are popular starters in many places. If they're *ar sīpoliem*, they'll be with onions. Fish is another staple, and you will find *siļķe* (herrings), *lidaka* (pike), *zutis* (eel), *forele* (trout) or *lasis* (salmon) on many menus. If fish is *cepts*, it's fried; if *sālīts* or *mazsālīts*, it's salted; and *kūpināts* means it'll be smoked. *Žāveta desa* (smoked sausage) is another popular dish. Dill seems to be Latvia's favourite herb and is sprinkled liberally on almost all savoury dishes. (Where else can you buy dill-flavoured crisps?) *Zupas* (soups) and *salāti* (salads) are listed on almost every menu, and often vary. *Pankūki* (pancakes) stuffed with cheese, meats or potatoes are popular snacks, although you could easily make a meal out of two or three. *Pīrāgi* (small pies or pasties) are another favourite, and usually come stuffed with cabbage and boiled egg.

During the summer months berry picking is almost a national obsession, and you'll find fresh strawberry stalls everywhere, from the side of the highway to outside the town pub. During autumn fresh-picked mushrooms, cranberries and nuts replace strawberries and raspberries at the little stalls. Honey is another popular delicacy. Latvians are intrepid beekeepers and many farms have beehives and honey production facilities.

The sweet toothed won't be left disappointed. In summer and autumn good use is made of those fresh-picked berries – fruit pies and tarts (*kūka*) are abundant. Throughout the year you will find a mouth-watering choice of freshly baked cakes, breads and pastries for under 0.10Ls.

Drinks

Latvians like their booze; when it comes to alcoholic beverages, Latvians are among the heaviest drinkers in Europe. *Alus* (beer) has long been a traditional favourite, and for such a small country Latvia has more than its share of breweries. The leading beer is Aldaris. It comes in varying degrees of darkness and costs around 0.50Ls in kiosks (every kiosk stocks beer) and from 0.70Ls a litre in bars. *Cēsu* is another popular beer, and has been produced at Latvia's oldest brewery since 1590. Small breweries are scattered around the country, and different regions are known for their beers. Keep an eye out for Bauskas, Piebalgas, Tērvetes and Ūzavas, each with a distinct taste.

Riga *sampanietis* (champagne) comes in two varieties: *sausais* (sweet), which is very sweet, and *pussaldais* (semisweet). It's dirt-cheap at 2Ls a bottle. It's not up to French standards, but it tastes OK. Many restaurants feature extensive wine lists, incorporating the world's famous wine-producing regions as well as offerings from countries you never knew produced wine – like Georgia.

Not to be missed is Latvia's famous Balzāms (see boxed text, below), a thick,

BLACK MAGIC

It's as black as ink, as thick as custard, as sharp as lemon, and has been produced in Latvia – and nowhere else – since 1752. Its recipe remains a closely guarded secret: orange peel, oak bark, wormwood and linden blossoms are among some 14 fairy-tale ingredients known to stew in the wicked witch's cooking pot.

It steels the nerves, settles the stomach and stops Jack Frost from biting. A shot a day keeps the doctor away, so say most of Latvia's pensioners. In the 18th century it was administered to Catherine the Great when she was struck down by a mystery illness in Riga. Two sips later she made an instant recovery – and left town.

Riga druggist Abraham Kunze created the insidious concoction. Its name originates from *balsamon*, the ancient Greek word for a sweet-smelling medicinal balm or ointment. Its opaque ceramic bottle, labelled with a black and gold Riga skyline, is reminiscent of the clay jars the potent liquid used to be stored in during the 18th and 19th centuries to keep it safe from sunlight.

It is 45% proof and guaranteed to knock the hind legs off a donkey. Drink it with coffee or Coca-Cola; down it with a shot of vodka if you dare.

That's what you call Riga Black Balsams (*Rigas Melnais Balzāms*).

EAT YOUR WORDS

Menus in smaller towns are often in Latvian; so if you're craving pasta and not wanting to end up with salted fish, check out the Language chapter. We've listed a few of the more useful eating phrases here.

Useful Phrases

I have a reservation.

A table for ... people, please.

Do you have a menu?

I'm a vegetarian.

What do you recommend?

I'd like ...

The bill, please.

breakfast

muhn ir puh-500-teets

loo-dzu guhl-du ... per-so-nahm

vai yums ir eh-dean-kuhrt-e

es as-mu ve-jye-tah-rea-tis-/te

kaw yoos ea-suh-kuht

es vaa-laws ...

loo-dzu reh-kyi-nu

bro-kas-tis

Man ir pasūtīts.

Lūdzu galdu ... personām.

Vai jums ir ēdienkarte?

Es esmu veģetāriets/te (m/f)

Ko jūs iesakāt?

Es vēlos ...

Lūdzu rēķinu.

brokastis

Food Glossary

biešu zupa

cepts lasis ar piedevām

dārzenu salāti

desa

dīpolu diymid

kāpostu salāti

karbonāde ar piedevām

kokteiļu salāti

kotletes

lasis poju mērcē

lasis sēņu un dijuju mērcē

mednieku desinās

pelēkie zirņi ar speķi

šašlīks

sijķe kažokā

svaigo gurķu salāti

zivju zupa

beetroot soup (similar to borscht)

fried salmon with potatoes, pickled and fresh vegetables

diced vegetable salad in sour cream and mayonnaise

sausage (usually smoked)

beefsteak with fried onions

fresh grated cabbage

fried pork chop with potatoes, pickled and fresh vegetables

sausages, peas and cucumber in sour cream and mayonnaise

meatballs

salmon in cream sauce

salmon in mushroom and dill sauce

Hunter's sausages (pork)

grey peas with pork fat and onions

shish kebab (usually lamb)

pickled herring with sour cream, egg and beetroot

fresh cucumbers with sour cream

fish soup

jet-black, 45% proof concoction that tastes strange, if not downright revolting. Apparently, it's best served with coffee or mixed with equal parts of vodka.

Those not interested in alcoholic beverages will find the usual assortment of soft drinks as well as coffee, tea and fruit juices.

Celebrations

Food plays an integral role in Latvian festivals and holiday celebrations. Fishermen's or Sea Festivals are staples in the small towns and villages in Kurzeme and Vidzeme, with eating freshly caught fish and drinking locally brewed beer the main activities. During Jāņi (St John's Night), Latvia's most important celebration, a special beer is brewed. Latvians also cre-

ate a cheese, known as *Jāņi siers* (John's cheese), made with caraway seeds, for the day. For more on the festival, see boxed text, p179.

A special type of *pīrāgi* filled with cubes of fatty bacon and tender onion is a staple at pretty much every Latvian celebration. Another celebration favourite is sweetbreads topped with berries or apples in summer and dried apples or sweetened cottage cheese in autumn.

Where to Eat & Drink

Restorāns (restaurants) in Latvia are generally more formal affairs, while *kafējnīca* (cafés) are usually simpler self-service joints, although some have full menus. Bars, especially in Riga and other major

cities, often serve a full range of food. In the last 10 years Latvian restaurants have gone international – especially in Riga. Here you'll discover everything from classic French to rowdy British and Irish pubs to Greek, Thai, Italian, Chinese and even more than a few fusion restaurants. In smaller towns most restaurants serve traditional Latvian fare, although even the smallest villages now often boast a Western-oriented restaurant. Pizza and pasta dishes are your most likely non-Latvian choices outside the bigger cities.

A Latvian *brokastis* (breakfast) usually consists of bread and cheese, cold meat and smoked fish. Eggs and bacon can also be found, although the British fry-up is a rarity outside Riga or the big international hotels. Yogurt, cereal and milk are also common, and breakfast drinks include coffee, tea and fruit juices. Most hotels in Latvia include some sort of breakfast in their rates.

Pusdienas (lunch) and *vakarīņas* (dinner) are more substantial affairs, often consisting of a starter, such as a soup or salad, followed by a main course and finished off with a dessert. Restaurants serve lunch from 11am onwards. Dinner usually starts around 5pm. Many places serve food until 11pm or even later, and some Latvian cafés stay open 24 hours.

RĪGA

pop 760,000

Riga has always been the big boy of the Baltics – a metropolis with a big-city atmosphere hard to find elsewhere in the region. Funky and vibrant, it pulsates with a magnetism that traps travellers long after their planned departure date. Set on a flat plain divided only by the 500m-wide Daugava River, the city answers the quaintness of Tallinn and Vilnius with impressive Art-Nouveau architecture of its own, a historic old quarter and large parks. You won't want to leave once you're settled into a candlelit bar or lost on winding, sun-dappled or snow-covered cobbled streets. Riga manages to couple its toy-town cuteness of steeples and turrets with a glitzy nightlife and thriving restaurant scene. Business is booming, with eager backers pouring much-needed money into its infrastructure. Old Town

may be a Unesco World Heritage site, but this fairy-tale city, once dubbed the 'Paris of the East,' is building so fast that Unesco has warned Riga it may withdraw its protected status due to the number of glittering glass hotels and business centres springing up faster than mushrooms after the rain.

With lavish beauty, timeless elegance and a restless fusion of old and new, Riga has a charm as potent as the Riga Black Balsams liquor it's known for.

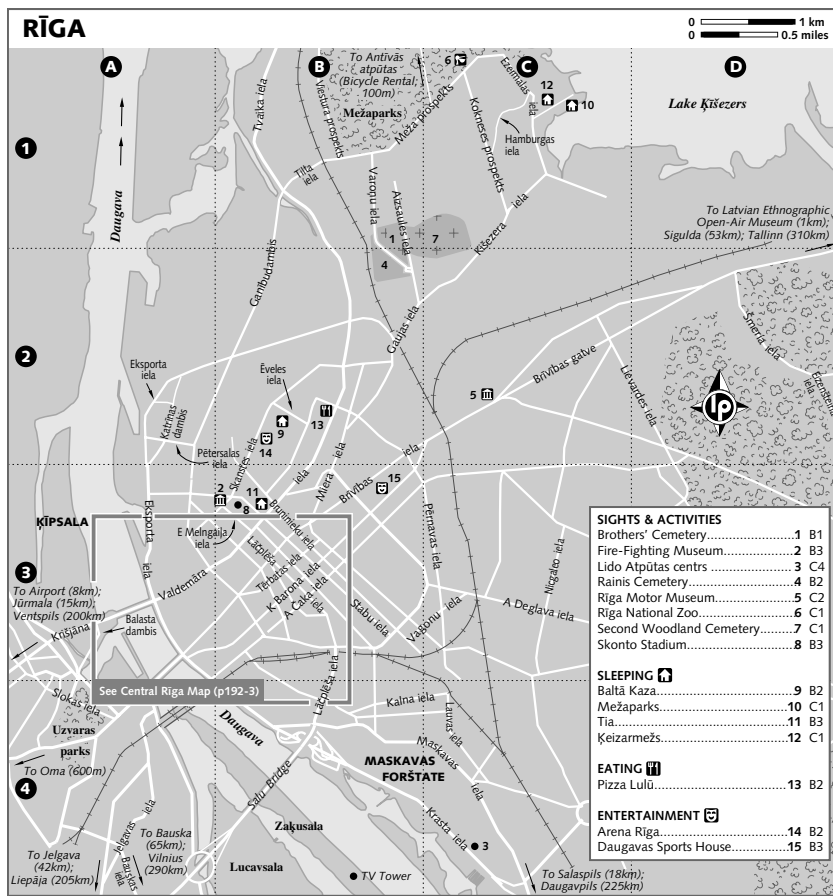
Fewer than half of Rīgans are ethnic Latvians (41.2% at last count), with Russians accounting for 43.7% of the population. Despite Latvians being a minority in their own capital, ethnic harmony prevails in the city, with street- and shop-talk a natural blend of Russian and Latvian.

HISTORY

Scandinavian and Russian traders and raiders used the Latgal, or Liv, fishing village on the site of modern Riga for centuries before German traders first discovered it in the mid-12th century. In 1201 Bishop Albert von Buxhoevden from Bremen founded the first German fort in the Baltics here, as a bridgehead for the crusade against the northern heathens. He also founded the Knights of the Sword, who made Riga their base for subjugating Livonia. Colonists from northern Germany followed, and Riga became the major city in the German Baltic, thriving from trade between Russia and the West.

Sweden captured Latvia in 1621, and during this period Riga was, effectively, the second city of Sweden. It was during this time that the city first expanded beyond its fortified walls. In 1710 Russia snatched Latvia from Sweden's grip and Riga grew into an important trading and industrial city. Its population jumped to 28,000 in 1794 and 60,000 by the 1840s. While the old part of the city remained a preserve of Riga's approximately 30,000 Germans, around it grew suburbs of wider, straighter streets with wooden houses, inhabited by the largest Russian community in the Baltic provinces as well as a growing number of Latvians.

Between 1857 and 1863 city walls were torn down to assist in the free flow of commerce. Riga soon developed into the world's busiest timber port and Russia's third-greatest industrial city (after Moscow and St Petersburg). Russia's first cars were



built here. And Riga was renowned for the quality of the Lithuanian and Belarusian hemp and flax it exported to the outside world.

The city population skyrocketed in the 19th century, as Latvians recently freed from countryside serfdom migrated to Riga and pushed their way into its trades, business, civil service and intellectual circles. By the 1860s about a quarter of the population was made up of former serfs. The Riga Latvian Association, formed in 1868, became the core of the Latvian national awakening, inspiring a Latvian national theatre, opera, encyclopaedia and, in 1873, the first Latvian song festival. The number of Latvians in Riga grew until they formed about half the city's

population of 500,000 on the eve of WWI. There were significant communities of Jews and Western merchants – the city's last mayor before the war, George Armitstead, came from an English merchant family.

Riga was badly damaged in both world wars. Following evacuations and other ravages, it was left with only 181,000 people at the end of WWI. The Germans departed after the Latvian land reform of the 1920s and Hitler's 'come home' call in 1939. In the Latvian independence era between the wars, Riga was the centre chosen by Western diplomats, journalists and spies to eavesdrop on Stalin's Soviet Union. Flourishing nightclubs, restaurants and intellectual life earned it the nickname 'Little Paris'.

RĪGA IN...

Two Days

Start your day meandering around the fairyland wonder of **Old Town** (p196), wander down narrow cobbled streets and gape at 17th-century and Art-Nouveau architecture before taking in the views from atop the spire at **St Peter's Church** (p196). After lunch, stroll through the **parks and boulevards** (p195) east of old Riga and watch the changing of the guard at the **Freedom Monument** (p196). Head back to Old Town in the afternoon and stop at a beer garden for a cold drink and some serious people-watching. Bar hop around Old Town in the evening; end your night with a drink at **Skyline** (p215).

Visit the famous **Central Market** (p218) on day two, then wander the less touristy streets of **new Riga** (p198), checking out funky boutiques, slick bars and hip restaurants. In the afternoon take a boat **tour** (p209) on the Daugava River. Spend the evening delving deeper into Riga's lively nightlife scene.

Four Days

Follow the two-day itinerary, but devote more time to exploring Old Town. Head to the suburbs and visit the **Latvian Ethnographic Open-Air Museum** (p199). Take a day-trip to **Jūrmala** (p220) on day four and spend some time sunbathing and soaking up the pleasant beach-resort atmosphere.

During WWII Riga was occupied by the Germans from 1941 to 1944, and virtually all its Jewish community (estimated variously at 45,000 to 100,000) was exterminated. Thousands of Latvians left for the West towards the end of the war to avoid Soviet rule.

After the war the city became the industrial and commercial powerhouse of the USSR's Baltic region, and many migrated here to work. Riga became the USSR's main source of railway engines and carriages, producing half its mopeds and a third of its washing machines, as well as trams, radios, telephone exchanges, robots and computers. The city sprawled as large numbers of migrants arrived, and Riga became known as the most Western city in the USSR, with a liberal arts and music scene that attracted people from all over the union.

Today Riga remains a bustling arts centre and, as the largest city in the Baltics, has acquired a reputation for its vibrant nightlife. The success of the city's 800th birthday party in 2001 – marked by a rash of historical buildings miraculously rising from the ashes – was sealed in 2002 by a budding young Russian-Rigan singer striking gold in the Eurovision Song Contest. The city went on to host the great event in May 2003. In 2006 Riga welcomed the World Ice Hockey Championships to its brand new state-of-the-art arena.

ORIENTATION

Riga straddles the Daugava River, about 15km inland from its mouth in the south-eastern corner of the Gulf of Riga. Old Riga (Vecrīga), the historic heart of the city, stretches 1km along the eastern side of the river and 600m back from its banks.

Three steeples dominate Old Riga's skyline. From south to north these are: St Peter's (the tallest), the square bulk of the Dome Cathedral tower, and the simpler St Jacob's. Around most of Old Town is a wide band of 19th-century parks and boulevards; beyond lies new Riga, beginning with the areas built up in the 19th and early 20th century. Further out are the newer, mainly residential suburbs and Soviet industrial enclaves.

The boundaries between these zones are clear if you trace the street running northeast from Akmens Bridge (Akmens tilts) over the Daugava. First it cuts across the middle of Old Town as a narrow, mainly pedestrian artery called Kaļķu iela. Then, becoming Brīvības bulvāris (Freedom Boulevard), it widens to cross the ring of boulevards and parks and passes the Freedom Monument, a key landmark. At the Reval Hotel Latvija, 1.25km from the river, it enters the new town and becomes Brīvības iela.

The train and bus stations border the central market and are a five-minute walk apart on the southeastern edge of old Riga. The ferry terminal is 600m north of old Riga.

Maps

Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian maps are sold at **Jāņa sēta** (Map p188; ☎ 709 2277; www.kartes.lv; Elizabetes iela 83-85). The *Rīga Pilsētas plāns* (Rīga City Plan, 1:20,000, 1.50Ls), with a 1:7000 city centre inset, is one of several city maps it produces. Stock up on road and city maps for Latvia while you're here.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Globuss (Map p196; ☎ 722 6957; Valņu iela 26) Small selection of classic English-language books and lots of newspapers, and an added bonus of an upstairs reading café.

Jāņa Rozes (Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 4388; Elizabetes iela 85a) Sells English-language novels, classical literature and Latvian-language learning cassettes. Its branch at K Barona iela 5 stocks reference books in English on Rīga and Latvia.

Jāņa Sēta (Map pp192-3; ☎ 709 2277; Elizabetes iela 83-85) Plenty of Lonely Planet guides and other travel titles.

Emergency

For an ambulance dial ☎ 03; see also Quick Reference on the inside front cover of this book.

Internet Access

Rīga has realms of Internet cafés.

Arēna (Map pp192-3; ☎ 731 4514; Ģertrūdes iela 46; per hr 0.50Ls; ☎ 24hr)

Dual Net Café (Map p196; ☎ 781 4440; Peldu iela 17; per hr 0.50Ls; ☎ 24hr)

Internet Kafe (Map p196; ☎ 724 0030; Valņu iela 41; per hr 0.50Ls; ☎ 24hr)

Laundry

City Clean (Map pp192-3; ☎ 727 2471; K Barona iela 52) Also does dry-cleaning.

Left Luggage

Baggage store (Map pp192-3; luggage 1Ls) In the bus station.

Left-luggage room (Map pp192-3; bagāžas glabātava; luggage 1Ls) In the basement of the train station.

Medical Services

ARS Clinic (Map pp192-3; ☎ 720 1001/3; Skolas iela 5; ☎ 24hr) English-speaking service and an emergency home service.

Rīgas vecpilsētas aptieka (Map p196; ☎ 721 3340; Audeju iela 20; ☎ 24hr) Pharmacy on the edge of Old Town.

Money

There are plenty of ATMs all over Rīga, although some will only accept local cash cards; if one machine doesn't work keep trying your luck at others – it can be very frustrating, but eventually you're likely to find a machine that works with your card.

Chequepoint Exchange (Map p196; ☎ 722 1219; Kaļķu iela 28)

Parex Banka (☎ 701 0873; Smilšu iela 3) Offers currency exchange, ATM and money transfer.

Post

Central post office (Map pp192-3; ☎ 701 8804; Stacijas laukums 1) Next to the train station.

Tourist Information

City of Riga Information Centre (www.rigatourism.com) airport (☎ 720 7005); bus station (Map pp192-3; Rīgas starptautiskā autoosta; Prāgas iela 1); House of Blackheads (Map p196; ☎ 704 4377; Rātslaukums 6; ☎ 10am-7pm) English-speaking staff provide city book, brochures, free maps and regional tourism info.

Travel Agencies

Latvia Tours (www.latviatours.lv) Kaļķu iela (Map p196; ☎ 708 5001; Kaļķu iela 8); Marijas iela (Map pp192-3; ☎ 724 3391; Berga bazārs, Marijas iela 13) One of Latvia's largest agencies and offers a bounty of services. Has branches in Ventspils and Liepāja.

Student & Youth Travel Bureau (SJCБ; Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 4818; www.sjcb.lv; Lāčplēša iela 29) Handles International Student Identity Cards (ISIC).

Via Rīga (Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 5901; www.viariga.lv; K Barona iela 7-9) Ferry and plane tickets.

World Travel Service (Map pp192-3; ☎ 733 2233; K Valdemāra iela 33) Ferry and plane tickets.

SIGHTS Old Riga

A joyous cacophony of 17th-century architecture, crumbling streets and church spires, the fairyland wonder of the World Heritage-listed Old Town is ideal for Rīga's main activity – strolling. Pick any of the narrow, now mainly pedestrian, streets and take a wander. You'll discover a gem of a boutique tucked behind a crumbling stone wall, a delicious aroma bursting from a brightly painted little restaurant, or a café made for people-watching. Simply walking around here – not forgetting to gaze up at the playful statues and carvings that adorn many building façades – is one of the chief pleasures of visiting Latvia's capital. The crumbling yet

stunning golden façade known as **Pie Kristapa** (Map p196; Jaun iela 25-29) is a classic example of but one of Rīga's many different faces.

Kaļķu iela neatly divides old Rīga in half, each half focusing on a towering church – Dome Cathedral in the north, St Peter's in the south.

ST PETER'S CHURCH

Rīga's skyline centrepiece is **St Peter's** (Sv Pēteru baznīca; Map p196; ☎ 722 9426; Skārņu iela; admission 1.5Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm, closed Mon). Don't miss the view from the spire, which has been built three times in the same baroque form: originally in wood in the 1660s; again in wood in the 18th century, after it burnt down from a lightning strike; and then in steel (1967-73) after it was burnt in 1941, by attacking Germans or the retreating Red Army, depending on whom you ask. The spire is 123.25m, but the lift only whisks you up to 72m.

DOME CATHEDRAL

The largest church in the Baltics, this humungous **cathedral** (Doma baznīca; Map p196; ☎ 721 3498; admission 0.50Ls; ☎ 1-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) boasts the fourth-largest organ (1880) in the world. Alternatively known as Rīgas Doms (from the German *Dom*, meaning cathedral), it towers beside Doma laukums, the main square within Old

RĪGA'S VITAL ORGAN

Architecturally, the Dome Cathedral is an amalgam of styles from the 13th to the 18th centuries: the eastern end, the oldest, has Romanesque features; the tower is 18th-century baroque; and much of the rest dates from a 15th-century Gothic rebuilding. The floor and walls of the huge interior are dotted with old stone tombs – note the carved symbols on some of those on the north side, denoting the rank or post of the occupant. Eminent citizens would pay to be buried as close to the altar as possible. In 1709 a cholera and typhoid outbreak, which killed a third of Rīga's population, was blamed on a flood that inundated the tombs.

The cathedral's pulpit dates from 1641 and the huge organ (which has 6768 pipes) was built in the 1880s; today it's the world's fourth-largest organ, but it was the largest in the world when it was originally built.

RĪGA CARD

Rīga Card yields a juicy range of discounts in selected restaurants, cafés, theatres and museums, and includes a free walking tour of the city, free admission to many museums, a free copy of *Rīga in Your Pocket* and other goodies. Prices for one-/two-/three-day cards are 8/12/16Ls (4/6/12Ls for under 16 years) and are sold at **Tūrinfo** (Map pp192-3; ☎ 721 7217; Lāčplēša iela 29) and at select hotels (such as Reval Hotel Latvija and Hotel de Rome) and travel agencies.

Town, surrounded by an unusual brew of architecture.

Founded in 1211 as the seat of the Rīga diocese, Mass is held at 8am Monday to Saturday, and at noon on Sunday. In the Soviet era services were banned; the first service for over 30 years, in 1988, was a major event of the *perestroika* era.

Rīga's oldest museum, the **Museum of the History of Riga & Navigation** (Museum vēstures un kuģniecības muzejs; Map p196; ☎ 721 2051; Palasta iela 4; adult/child 1/0.50Ls; ☎ 11am-5pm Wed-Sun), founded in 1773, is housed in the cloister of the monastery next to the cathedral.

RĪGA CASTLE

Originally built as the headquarters for the Livonian Order, **Riga Castle** (Map p196; Pils laukums) dates to 1330 and served as the residence of the order's grand master. Today Latvia's president lives here. Painted canary yellow, the castle appears younger than it really is following modifications through the centuries, and not very castlelike from its inland side. You get a more turreted aspect from the river or Akmens Bridge.

Part of the castle houses a **Museum of Foreign Art** (Ārzemju mākslas muzejs; ☎ 722 6467; Pils laukums 3; adult/child 1.20/0.70Ls; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun), exhibiting Latvia's largest treasury of artwork dating back to the 15th century. Also here is the **History Museum of Latvia** (Latvijas vēstures muzejs; ☎ 722 1357; www.history-museum.lv; adult/child 0.70/0.40Ls, free Wed; ☎ 11am-5pm Wed-Sun), which traces the national history.

ARSENĀLS MUSEUM OF ART

East of the square is the **Arsenāls Museum of Art** (Mākslas muzejs Arsenāls; ☎ 721 3695; Torņa iela 1; adult/child 0.70/0.40Ls; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue, Wed & Fri-Sun,

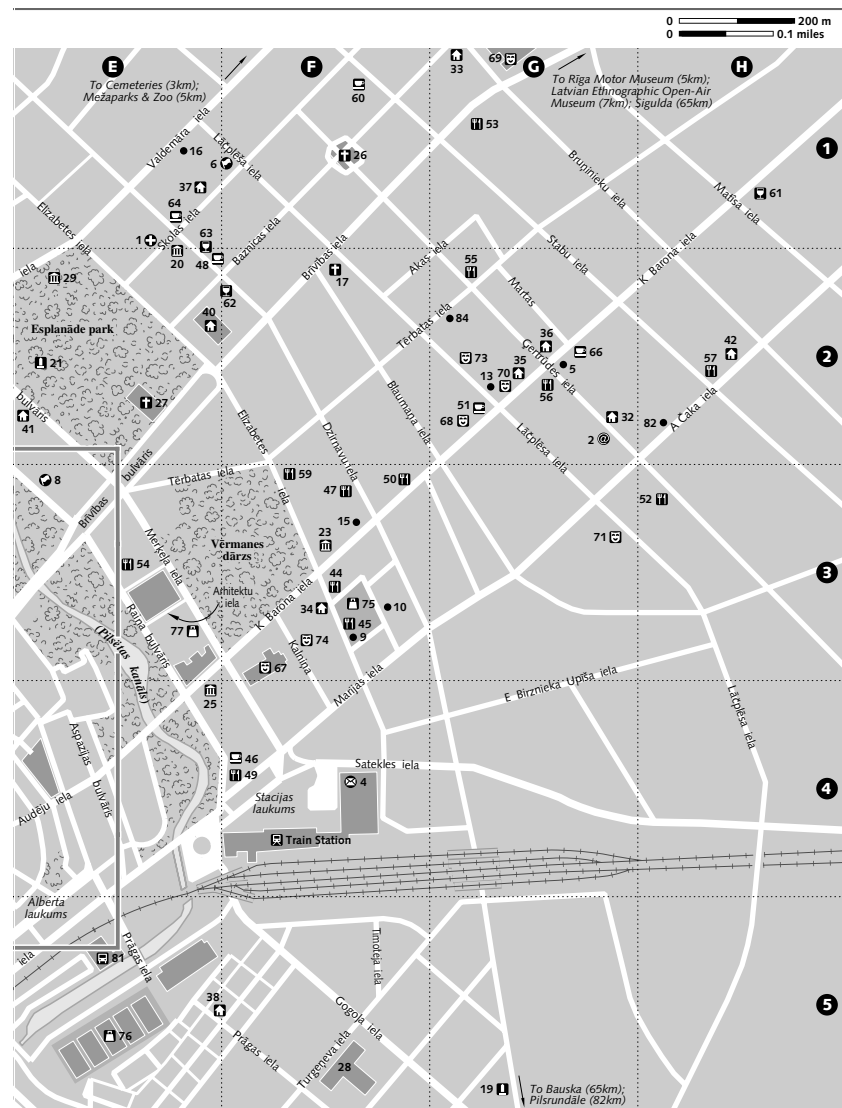


to 7pm Thu), the exhibition hall of the State Museum of Art (p197). Its interior magnificently frames a large modern-art collection.

LATVIEŠU STRĒLNIEKU LAUKUMS & RĀTSLAUKUMS

The square immediately east of Akmens Bridge is known as **Latviešu strēlnieku laukums**

(Latvian Riflemen Sq; Map p196), once home to Riga's central market but today dominated by the big, dark-red **Latvian Riflemen statue**. The said marksmen were eight regiments formed in WWI to fight in the Russian imperial army. When the Russian Revolution rolled around, most of them supported the Bolsheviks. They provided a palace guard for Lenin



and formed key units of the Red Army during the Russian civil war – although some sided against the Bolsheviks in the concurrent Latvian independence war. During the Soviet era the riflemen were known as the Latvian Red Riflemen.

Behind the statue, in a controversial bunker – at one point almost razed for its

ugliness – is the chilling yet spirited **Museum of Occupation in Latvia** (Latvijas okupācijas muzejs; Map p196; ☎ 721 2715; www.occupationmuseum.lv; Latviešu Strēlnieku laukums 1; admission free; 🕒 11am–5pm, closed Mon). The worthy museum gives an impressive account of the Soviet and Nazi occupations of Latvia between 1940 and 1991. An anonymous inscription inside

INFORMATION	Old Gertrude Church.....26 F1	DRINKING ☑ ☑	Barons Sports Bar.....61 H1
ARS Clinic.....1 E1	Russian Orthodox Cathedral.....27 E2	Bites Blūzs Klubs.....62 F2	Klondaika.....63 E1
Arēna.....2 G2	Science Academy.....28 F5	Kosher Cafe L'Chaim.....64 E1	Paldies Dievam Piektdiena ir Klāt.....65 D5
Baggage Store.....(see 81)	State Museum of Art.....29 E2	Rāma.....66 G2	Skyline.....(see 40)
British Embassy.....3 D1	Stockholm School of Economics.....30 D1		
Central Post Office.....4 F4	World Trade Centre.....31 C1	ENTERTAINMENT ☑	Circus.....67 F3
City Clean.....5 G2		Daile.....68 G2	Daile Theatre.....69 G1
Estonian Consulate.....6 F1	SLEEPING ☑	Indigo.....70 G2	Kino 52.....71 G3
Finnish Embassy.....7 D1	B&B Rīga.....32 G2	Kino Suns.....(see 44)	National Theatre.....72 C2
French Embassy.....8 E3	City Hotel Brūņinieks.....33 G1	New Rīga Theatre.....73 G2	Voodoo.....(see 40)
German Embassy.....(see 54)	Hotel Bergs.....34 F3	XXL.....74 F3	
Israeli Embassy.....(see 31)	KB.....35 G2	SHOPPING ☑	Barona Centrs.....(see 56)
Jāņa Sēta.....(see 34)	Krišjānis & Gertrude.....36 G2	Berga bazārs.....75 F3	Berga bazārs.....75 F3
Jāņa Rozes.....9 F3	Laine.....37 E1	Central Market.....76 E5	Latvijas Balzams.....(see 49)
Latvia Tours.....10 F3	Posh Backpackers.....38 E5	Senā Klēts.....77 E3	
Polish Embassy.....(see 31)	Radisson-SAS Daugava.....39 B5	TRANSPORT	Boat Station.....78 C4
Russian Embassy.....11 D1	Reval Hotel Latvija.....40 E2	Ecolines.....(see 81)	Ferry Terminal.....79 B1
Student & Youth Travel Bureau.....(see 13)	Reval Hotel Ridzene.....41 E2	Hanza Maritime Agency.....80 B1	Ferry Terminal.....79 B1
Swedish Embassy.....12 D1	Viktoria.....42 H2	International Bus Station.....81 E5	Norma-A (Ecolines).....82 H2
Swiss Embassy.....(see 31)		Rigas SeaLine.....(see 80)	Statoil.....83 B2
Tourist Office.....(see 81)	EATING ☑	Trace.....84 G2	
Tūriņo.....13 G2	Ai Karamba!.....43 D1		
US Embassy.....14 D2	Andalūzijas Suns.....44 F3		
Via Rīga.....15 F3	Bergs.....45 F3		
World Travel Service.....16 E1	Double Coffee.....46 F4		
	Dzirnavas.....47 F3		
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	Hedonia 55.....48 E2		
Alexandr Nevsky Church.....17 F2	Interpegro.....49 F4		
Andrejosta Yacht Club.....18 B1	Macaroni Noodle Bar.....50 F3		
Jewish Memorial.....19 G5	Osiris.....51 G2		
Jews in Latvia Museum.....20 E2	Pelmeņi.....52 H3		
Jānis Rainis Monument.....21 E2	Pizza Jazz.....53 G1		
Jānis Rozentāls Memorial Museum.....22 D1	Pizza Lulū.....55 G2		
Krišjānis Barons Memorial Museum.....23 F3	Rimi Supermarket.....56 G2		
Liepāja.....(see 78)	Staburags.....57 H2		
Mikhail Eisenstein's House.....24 D1	Vincents.....58 C1		
Museum of Nature.....25 E4	Vērmanītis.....59 F3		
	Zen.....60 F1		

reads: 'They took it all – our native land, our honour and our name. They punished us for being human beings.' Allow at least two hours to absorb all the details.

If a visit to the museum has left you depressed, head to the **House of Blackheads** (Map p196) for a dramatic change of scenery. Constructed in 2001 on Rātslaukums (Town Hall Sq) as an 800th birthday present to the city, it's an architectural gem. The ornate edifice was originally built in 1344 for the Blackheads guild of unmarried merchants, destroyed in 1941, and flattened by the Soviets seven years later. In front is a recent sword-wielding **statue of Roland**, Roland being the medieval defender of the accused. The **town hall**, on the opposite side of the square, was built from scratch in 2002 – after chopping Riga's former technical university in half to accommodate it, that is.

East of here is **Mentzendorff's House** (Mentendorfa nams; Map p196; ☎ 721 2951; Grēcinieku iela

18; adult/child 1.20/0.40Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun), a 17th-century dwelling showing how wealthy Rigans once lived.

OLD RĪGA NORTH

The red-brick Gothic **St Saviour's Church** (Map p196; Angļikāņu iela 2a), off Pils iela, was built in 1857 by a small group of British traders on 30ft of British soil brought over as ballast in the ships transporting the building material. During Soviet times, it served as a disco for Riga's Polytechnic Institute. It still remains the property of the Church of England. Sunday services in English are held at 10am.

Nearby are the **Three Brothers** (Map p196; Mazā Pils iela 17, 19 & 21), a quaint row of houses. No 17 dates from the 15th century, making it Latvia's oldest house; No 19 houses the **Latvian Museum of Architecture** (Latvijas arhitektūras muzejs; Map p196; ☎ 722 0779; Mazā Pils iela 19; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri). Nearby, **St Jacob's Cathedral** (Sv Jēkaba katedrāle; Map p196; Klosterā iela

has an interior dating back to 1225 and is the seat of Riga's Roman Catholic archbishopric. Latvia's **Parliament** (Saeima; Map p196; Jēkaba iela 11), in a Florentine Renaissance building, is next door.

Between Torņa iela and Aldaru iela, the picturesque **Swedish Gate** (Map p196) was built onto the city walls in 1698 during the Swedish period and is the only remaining old city gate. The round, peaked **Powder Tower** (Map p196) is a 14th-century original and the only survivor of the 18 towers in the old city wall. Nine Russian cannonballs from 17th- and 18th-century assaults are embedded in the tower's walls. In the past it has served as a gunpowder store, prison, torture chamber, museum and students' party venue. Today it is the **Museum of War** (Kara muzejs; Map p196; ☎ 722 8147; www.karamuzejs.lv; Smiļšu iela 20; adult/child 0.50/0.25Ls; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Sun May-Sep, to 5pm Wed-Sun Oct-Apr). Exhibitions on permanent display include 'Proclamation of the Latvian State and Liberation War' and 'Latvian Soldiers during WWII'.

The 19th-century Gothic exterior of the **Great Guild** (Lielā gilde; Map p196; Amatu iela 6) encloses a fine 1330 merchants' meeting hall, now a concert hall for the Latvian State Philharmonic Orchestra. The yellow-painted **Cat House** (Map p196; Meistaru iela 19) is the one you see pictured on many a postcard.

SKĀRŅU IELA & MĀRSTAĻU IELA

A row of particularly pretty restored buildings faces St Peter's on Skārņu iela. The former St George's Church – an original chapel of the Knights of the Sword dating to 1208 – is now the absorbing **Museum of Decorative & Applied Arts** (Dekoratīvi lietišķās mākslas muzejs; Map p196; ☎ 722 7833; Skārņu iela 10/20; admission 0.70Ls; ☎ 11am-5pm, closed Mon). It is full of fine Latvian work; the pottery and wall hangings are particularly outstanding.

Yet more ceramics and porcelain can be viewed in the **Porcelain Museum** (Map p196; ☎ 750 3769; Kalēju iela 9-11; adult/child 0.50/0.40Ls; ☎ 11am-6pm, closed Mon), tucked away in Konventa sēta, the restored Convent Courtyard of the **former convent** (Map p196; Skārņu iela 22) that stood here in the 15th century. Next door, **St John's Church** (Jāņa baznīca; Map p196; Skārņu iela 24) is a 13th- to 19th-century amalgam of Gothic, Renaissance and baroque styles.

Further south, near the corner of Audēju iela, is the 17th-century **House of Johannes Reiter** (Map p196; Mārstaļu iela 2-4), with its elaborate stone carvings. Reiter was a rich German merchant. Next door is the interesting **Latvian Photography Museum** (Latvijas fotogrāfijas muzejs; Map p196; ☎ 722 7231; Mārstaļu iela 8; adult/child 1/0.50Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue, Fri & Sat, noon-7pm Wed & Thu), an 18th- to 19th-century former merchant's house with unique photographs of 1920s Riga. The baroque **House of Dannenstern** (Map p196; Mārstaļu iela 21) was also home to a wealthy 17th-century merchant.

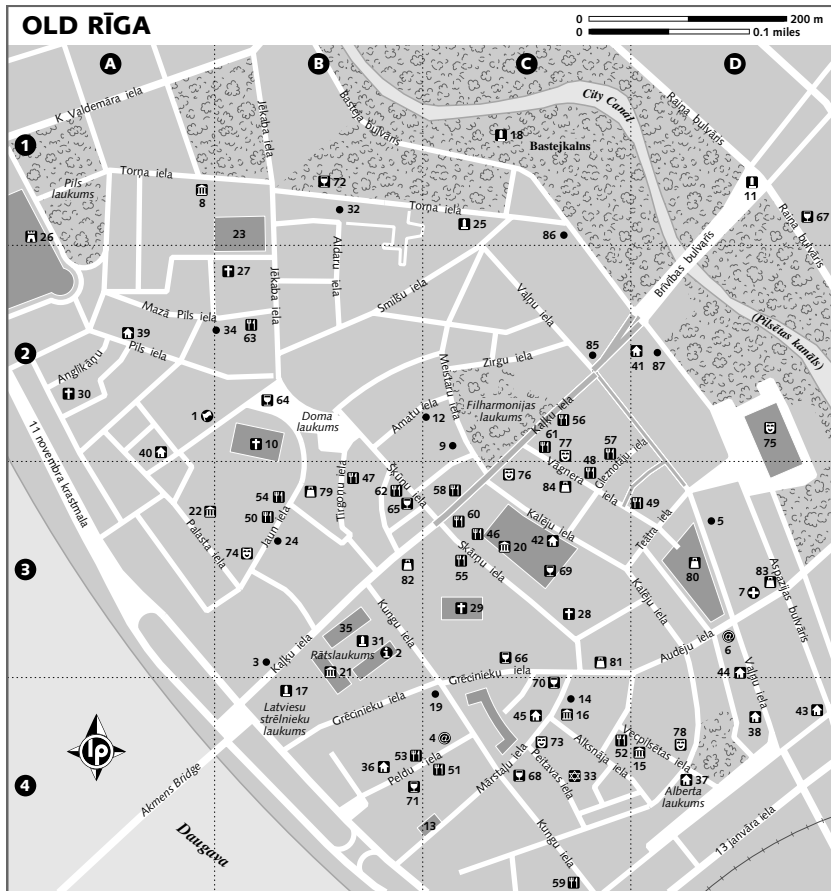
Nearby, the one-room **Latvian People's Front Museum** (Latvijas tautas frontes muzejs; Map p196; ☎ 722 4502; Vecpilsētas iela 13-15; admission free; ☎ 2-7pm Tue, noon-5pm Wed-Fri, noon-4pm Sat) remains furnished exactly as it was when it served as the office of the Latvian People's Front prior to 1990. There are several tall **medieval warehouses** both on this narrow street and the parallel Alksnāja iela – at Vecpilsētas iela 10 and 11, and Alksnāja iela 5, 7, 9 and 11. Both streets lead south to **Alberta laukums**, a small square that was the site of Bishop Albert's original German settlement.

Parks & Boulevards

East of old Riga's confined streets, the city opens out into a perfectly contrasting band of parks and wide boulevards laid out in the 19th century. Along the boulevards are many fine 19th- and early-20th-century buildings. Some of these belong to the eclectic school of design, which drew on a multitude of past styles, while others are flamboyant examples of Jugendstil which crops up all over Riga. The old defensive moat, known as the **City Canal** (Pilsētas

CAT HOUSE

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Latvian owner of the Cat House had statues made of the back ends of his two black cats – backs arched and tails up. He placed them on the building's topmost pinnacles facing the Big Guild Hall across the road as a gesture of defiance against the guild that refused him entry – it was strictly reserved for rich German traders. Following a lengthy court case, he was admitted to the guild on the condition that he his cats be turned around to a more elegant position.



kanāls; Map p196), snakes through the parks and marks the line of the old city walls that were knocked down in the mid-19th century.

FREEDOM MONUMENT

The central landmark of the park ring is the **Freedom Monument** (Map p196; Brīvības bulvāris), near the corner of Raiņa bulvāris. Paid for by public donations, the monument was erected in 1935, in a style best described as '30s nationalism, on a spot where a statue of Peter the Great had stood. Topped by a bronze female Liberty holding up three stars facing west, representing three regions of Latvia – Kurzeme, Vidzeme and Latgale – it bears the inscription 'Tēvzemei un Brīvībai'

(For Fatherland and Freedom). During the Soviet years the Freedom Monument was off limits, and a statue of Lenin, facing the other way down Brīvības iela, was placed two blocks east. Lenin was removed on the night of 20 August 1991, after the collapse of the Moscow coup attempt.

In the late 1980s and early '90s the Freedom Monument became a focus of the Latvian independence movement, which started on 14 June 1987, when 5000 people rallied here illegally to commemorate the victims of Stalin's deportations. Several later rallies and marches focused on the monument, which still functions as an unofficial centre for animated political debate. Come here to watch the changing of the guards,

INFORMATION			
Canadian Embassy.....	1 A2	Pie Kristapa.....	24 B3
Chequepoint Exchange.....	(see 41)	Porcelain Museum.....	(see 42)
City of Riga Information Centre.....	2 B3	Powder Tower.....	25 C1
Country Holidays.....	3 B3	Riga Castle.....	26 A1
Dual Net Café.....	4 C4	St Jacob's Cathedral.....	27 B2
Dutch Embassy.....	(see 72)	St John's Church.....	28 C3
Globuss.....	5 D3	St Peter's Church.....	29 C3
Internet Kafe.....	6 D3	St Saviour's Church.....	30 A2
Latvia Tours.....	(see 60)	Statue of Roland.....	31 B3
Rigas vecpilsētas aptieka.....	7 D3	Swedish Gate.....	32 B1
		Synagogue.....	33 C4
		Three Brothers.....	34 B2
		Town Hall.....	35 B3
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES			
Arsenāls Museum of Art.....	8 A1	SLEEPING	
Cat House.....	9 C2	Ainavas Boutique Hotel.....	36 B4
Dome Cathedral.....	10 B2	Argonaut Backpackers Hostel.....	37 D4
Freedom Monument.....	11 D1	Forums.....	38 D4
Great Guild.....	12 C2	Grand Palace Hotel.....	39 A2
History Museum of Latvia.....	(see 26)	Gutenbergs.....	40 A2
House of Blackheads.....	(see 2)	Hotel de Rome.....	41 D2
House of Dannenstern.....	13 C4	Konventa Sēta.....	42 C3
House of Johannes Reiterer.....	14 C4	Metropole.....	43 D4
Latvian Museum of Architecture.....	(see 34)	Old Town Hostel.....	44 D3
Latvian People's Front Museum.....	15 D4	Radi un Draugi.....	45 C4
Latvian Photography Museum.....	16 C4	EATING	
Latvian Riflemen Statue.....	17 B4	1739.....	46 C3
Memorials to Victims of 20 January 1991.....	18 C1	Alus sēta.....	47 B3
Mentzendorff's House.....	19 C4	Austrumu robeža.....	48 C3
Museum of Decorative & Applied Arts.....	20 C3	Bella Italia Restaurant.....	49 D3
Museum of Foreign Art.....	(see 26)	Cuba Cafe.....	50 B3
Museum of Occupation in Latvia.....	21 B3	Habibi.....	51 C4
Museum of the History of Riga & Navigation.....	22 A3	Indian Raja.....	52 C4
Museum of War.....	(see 25)	John Lemon.....	53 B4
Parliament.....	23 B1	Kamala.....	54 B3
		Lotoss.....	55 C3
		Nostalgija.....	56 C2
		Palette.....	57 C2
		Pelmeņi XL.....	58 C3
		Salt & Pepper.....	59 C4
		Sievsmātes pirādzīni.....	60 C3
		Zivju.....	61 C2
		Setpavārs Vilhelms.....	62 B3
		Kļiploka krogs.....	63 B2
DRINKING			
B-bārs.....	64 B2	ENTERTAINMENT	
de Lacy's.....	65 B3	Far & Gate.....	73 C4
Dickens Pub.....	66 C3	Groks.....	(see 56)
Melnai Kaķis.....	67 D1	Kingalerija.....	74 B3
Nautilus.....	68 C4	National Opera House.....	75 D2
Orange Bar.....	69 C3	Russian Drama Theatre.....	76 C3
Paddy Whelan's.....	70 C4	Wagner Hall.....	77 C2
Pulkvedim neviens neraksta.....	71 B4	Cetri balti krekli.....	78 D4
Rigas Balzams.....	72 B1		
SHOPPING			
A&E Gallery.....	79 B3		
Centrs Universālveikals.....	80 D3		
Musikas salons.....	81 C3		
Nordwear.....	82 B3		
Sakta.....	83 D3		
Upe.....	84 C3		
TRANSPORT			
AirBaltic.....	85 C2		
Estonian Air.....	(see 85)		
Europcar.....	86 C1		
Sixt.....	87 D2		

who stand still as stone in front of her, every hour on the hour from 9am to 6pm daily.

NORTH OF FREEDOM MONUMENT

Bastion Hill (Bastejkalns; Map p196), the mound beside Basteja bulvāris, is what remains of one of the bastions of Riga's fortifications. Beside the paths either side of the canal, below Bastion Hill, stand five polished stone slabs – **memorials to the victims of 20 January 1991**. Edijs Riekstins, Sergey Kononenko, Vladimir Gomanovich, Andris Slapins and Gvido Zvaigzne were all killed or fatally wounded here when Soviet special forces stormed the Interior Ministry nearby at Raiņa bulvāris 6. Slapins and Zvaigzne were members of the film crew of the Latvian documentary maker Juris Podnieks. No-one who has seen the films *Baltic Requiem* or *Homeland Postscript*, or the documentary *Homeland*, will forget the last footage shot by Slapins that night or

his gasped words 'keep filming...' as he lay dying.

Raiņa bulvāris was 'Embassy Row' during Latvian independence between the world wars and has assumed that status again, with the Stars and Stripes fluttering in front of No 7, France installed at No 9 and Germany at No 13. To the west, opposite the corner of Basteja bulvāris, the **National Theatre** (Nacionālais teātris; Map pp192-3; K Valdemāra iela) is an interesting baroque building (1899–1902); Latvia's independence was declared here on 18 November 1918. To the north, Riga's **World Trade Centre** (Map pp192-3; Elizabetes iela 2) is also home to some foreign embassies: Israel, Poland and Switzerland. The building used to be the Latvian Communist Party headquarters.

The **State Museum of Art** (Valsts mākslas muzejs; Map pp192-3; ☎ 732 4461; K Valdemāra iela 10a; adult/child 1.20/0.40Ls; ☎ 11am-5pm Wed-Mon) has collections of Russian work downstairs and Latvian work upstairs, plus interesting

JEWES OF RĪGA

The history of Riga's Jews has been tumultuous. Pre-18th century Riga had less than 1000 Jewish residents, a consequence of social policy that granted residency only to successful Jews. Even then, laws barred them from being buried in Riga; the Jews had to shuttle their own dead to Polish cemeteries. A more flexible policy was instituted in 1725, when clearance came through for the first Jewish cemetery to be built.

Prior to the 19th century, most Jews were concentrated in the ghetto in the Maskavas suburb, about 1km southeast of the train station. It was a 750-sq-metre area bounded by Lāčplēša iela, Maskavas iela, Ebreju iela, Lauvas iela and Kalna iela. There's little trace of the area's old character now due to Nazi destruction. In the late 1800s restrictions were lifted and the Jews were able to move to other parts of Riga.

The first **synagogue** (Map p196; ☎ 721 0827; Peitavas iela 6-8), built in 1905, was the only synagogue to survive the Nazi terror. It's proximity to Old Town, and the danger of destroying the entire city, made them afraid to burn it. Call in advance to sample kosher food at the synagogue.

When WWII began about 5000 Jews were among the thousands of Latvians deported to Siberia by the Soviet authorities from 1940 to 1941. The city fell to the Germans on 1 July and new atrocities began that day with hundreds of Jews executed as 'retribution' for the Germans killed in the taking of Old Town. Others were forced to scrub the bloodstains from the site of the battle with toothbrushes. A few days later, on 4 July 1941, 300 or more Jews were taken from the streets and locked in the Big Choral synagogue. Grenades were thrown through the windows and the building was set on fire. No-one survived. The Jewish cemetery buildings were also burned that day; later the Soviets razed the old cemetery and converted it into the 'Park of the Communist Brigades'.

Several thousand more Riga Jews were murdered before the remaining thousands were herded into the ghetto in October 1941. Half-starved, they endured forced labour until most were taken and killed in Rumbula Forest, east of Maskavas, between 30 November and 8 December. Latvian collaborators as well as Germans were responsible for the holocaust – indeed the collaborators had a reputation for greater cruelty. Other Jews transported from Germany took some of the dead victims' places in the ghetto.

After the 1943 Warsaw-ghetto uprising, the Riga ghetto, along with others, was liquidated on Himmler's orders, but those inmates capable of work were moved to the Kaiserwald prison camp in Mežaparks. Later they were brought back to other camps with the retreating German forces.

A **memorial** (Map pp192-3; Gogola iela 25) marks the former site of the Jewish community's Big Choral synagogue. The Jewish community headquarters shares the same building as **Jews in Latvia** (Ebreji Latvijas; Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 3484; ebreji.latvija@apollo.lv; Skolas iela 6; admission free; ☎ noon-5pm Sun-Thu), Riga's small Jewish museum that recounts Latvian Jewish history from the 16th century to 1945.

temporary exhibitions. On the Kalpaka bulvāris side of the Esplanāde is the **Jānis Rainis Monument** to Latvia's national poet.

The domed 19th-century **Russian Orthodox Cathedral** (Pareizticīgo katedrāle; Map pp192-3; Brīvības bulvāris) fronting the boulevard was a planetarium under Soviet rule but is once more used as a church.

New Riga

The heart of everyday Riga life lies outside the once fortified confines of Old Town and the park-boulevard ring in the areas built up in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Here you'll find funky boutiques selling discount designer wares and other non-tourist-oriented shops, as well as slick bars and hip restaurants. For a less touristy side of Riga and a glimpse into the core of Latvian urban life, take a stroll through streets north of Old Town (coming from Old Town look for the Reval Hotel Latvija – it's the tallest building around – and head northeast from it).

The **central market** (Centrāl tīrgis), south of the train station, always presents a lively scene and is a barometer of the city's standard of living. For more on the market, see p218.

Other landmarks to look for include the Russian Orthodox **Alexandr Nevsky Church** (Map pp192-3; Brīvības iela 56), built in the 1820s; the Gothic **Old Gertrude Church** (Map pp192-3; Ģertrūdes iela 8), built in 1865; and the towering Stalin-era wedding-cake-like **Science Academy** (Map pp192-3; Turģeņeva iela).

Krišjānis Barons, the father of Latvian folk songs, lived the last years of his life in the building which now houses the **Krišjānis Barons Memorial Museum** (Krišjānis Barons memoriālais muzejs; Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 4265; K Barona iela 3; adult/child 0.40/0.20Ls; ☎ 1-7pm Tue & Wed, 11am-5pm Thu-Sun).

Suburbs

MOTOR MUSEUM

The stars of the collection at the fantastic **Riga Motor Museum** (Rīgas motormuzejs; Map p188; ☎ 709 7170; Eisenšteina iela 6; adult/child 1/0.50Ls; ☎ 10am-3pm Mon, to 6pm Tue-Sun) are cars once belonging to Soviet luminaries Gorky, Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev – complete with irreverent life-sized figures of the men themselves. Stalin, pockmarked cheeks and all, sits regally in the back of his seven-tonne, 6005cc armoured limousine. The car has 1.5cm-thick iron plating everywhere except on the 8cm-thick windows. It drank a litre of petrol every 2.5km. Brezhnev sits,

with appropriate surprise registered on his features, at the wheel of his crumpled Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow, written off in 1980 when he strayed from the safety of an official convoy into the path of a truck.

The museum was opened in 1989, but its seeds were sown in 1975 when a Latvian car enthusiast, Viktors Kulbergs, saved a rare 16-cylinder 1938 German Auto Union racer from being scrapped in Moscow. The racer is today shown with 100 or so other Eastern and Western cars, motorcycles and bicycles – including an 1886 Daimler Motorkutsche (a genuine horseless carriage, maximum speed 16km/h), a 1984 Cadillac Fleetwood limo and a 1942 Harley Davidson – packed into this modern, purpose-built museum.

The museum is 8km east along Brīvības iela, then 2km south to the Mežciems suburb. Take bus 21 from the Russian Orthodox Cathedral to the Pansionāts stop on Šmerļa iela.

LATVIAN ETHNOGRAPHIC OPEN-AIR MUSEUM

The not-to-be-missed **Latvian Ethnographic Open-Air Museum** (Latvijas etnogrāfiskais brīvdabas muzejs; ☎ 799 4515; Brīvības gatve 440; adult/child 1/0.50Ls; ☎ 11am-5pm mid-May–mid-Oct) sits on the shores

ART-NOUVEAU ARCHITECTURE

Riga's architectural distinction is its Art-Nouveau style, also called Jugendstil and credited by Unesco as being the finest in Europe. Crafted in the late 19th and early 20th century, it has survived in Riga more than in many German cities, which were damaged during WWII.

The Jugendstil architectural features emphasise the ornate: monsters, flowers, masks and grotesques peer out from the upper storeys of the buildings. Different coloured tiles may be used to make the designs stand out. Often the buildings' plain interiors offer an almost comical contrast to the elaborate style of the façade.

One place that showcases the ornate Jugendstil style is along the combined residential, office and commercial streets east of Elizabetes iela, where a number of low, wooden buildings survive from the 19th century. One of the best examples, designed by Mikhail Eisenstein, father of the renowned film-maker, is the beautifully renovated blue-and-white house at Elizabetes iela 10b, just north of the State Museum of Art.

Around the corner on **Alberta iela** – famous as a confluence of architectural schools: national romanticism, historicism, neoclassicism and rationalism – the buildings become even more fantastical. All were designed by Mikhael Eisenstein except for No 12, an Art-Nouveau apartment, formerly home to the Latvian painter Jānis Rozentāls (1866–1916) and now the **Jānis Rozentāls Memorial Museum** (Map pp192-3; ☎ 733 1641; Alberta iela 12-9; adult/child 0.60/0.30Ls; ☎ 11am-5pm Thu-Mon). The houses at Nos 2, 4, 6 and 8 have grandiose Art-Nouveau façades; the façade at 2a towers above the building itself.

Equally fabulous is the beautifully renovated 1905 façade of the **Stockholm School of Economics** (Map p192-3 Central Riga; Strēlnieku iela 4a), considered by many to be the city's most stunning example of Art-Nouveau architecture.

of Lake Jugla on the city's eastern edge. Dozens of predominantly wooden buildings from rural Latvia – churches, windmills and farmhouses from Latvia's different regions – can be discovered here. Thousands of artefacts inside the buildings provide a record of bygone country life. On summer weekends folk-dance performances are held and there's a crafts fair in early June.

Take bus 1 from the corner of Merķeļa iela and Tērbatas iela to the Brīvības muzejs stop.

MEŽAPARKS & CEMETERIES

Riga's biggest park is **Mežaparks** (Woodland Park; Map p188; ☎ 754 0288), about 7km north of the centre, beside Lake Ķīšezers. Here you'll find pine woods, playgrounds, lots of boats and jet skis to rent in summer, the Riga National Zoo (p209) and the stage for the main concerts of Latvian song festivals.

South of Mežaparks are three cemeteries: **Rainis Cemetery** (Raiņa kapi), where Jānis Rainis, his wife (feminist poet Aspazija) and other Latvian cultural figures are buried; **Second Woodland Cemetery** (Meža kapi II), with a monument to the five dead of 20 January 1991; and the **Brothers' Cemetery** (Brāļu kapi), the resting place of Latvian soldiers who died in WWI and the independence war, and notable for its monuments and sculptures.

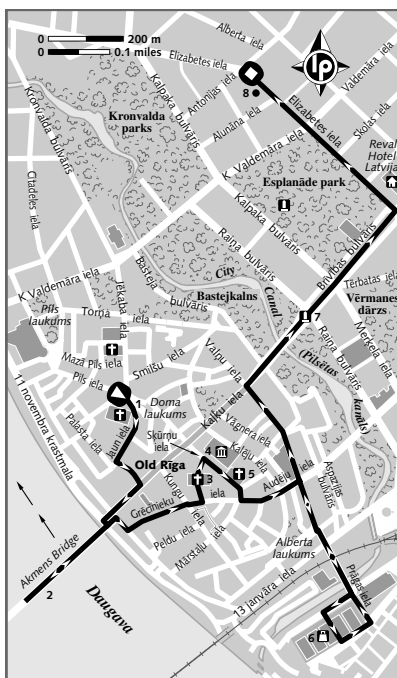
WALKING TOUR

Start at the northern half of old Riga, which centres on **Doma laukums (1)**, then head towards the riverside and walk halfway over **Akmens Bridge (2)** for a classical view of old Riga. Return to the southern half of old Riga and ride the lift up the spire of **St Peter's Church (3)**; p191) for another rewarding view. From there head down Skārņu iela and gaze at the varied architecture. Further along the street you'll find the whitewashed bricks of Riga's oldest building, the former **St George's Church (4)**, today home to the **Museum of Decorative & Applied Arts** (p195). Just a few buildings up the street you'll find **St John's Church (5)**; p195), with a baroque-style altar and enticing stained-glass windows. Wander east out of old Riga to the **Central Market (6)**; p198), a focus of the city's modern and historical life. Head north, first along Valņu iela then Brīvības bulvaris till you reach the **Freedom Monument (7)**; p196), set in the band of boulevards and parks

WALK FACTS

Distance 5km

Duration three hours (leisurely pace)



that border Old Town. From here you can stroll around the city parks, ride the lift to the 26th floor of Reval Hotel Latvija for yet another stunning city view, and – if you still have the energy – head northwest to view Riga's sumptuous **Jugendstil (8)**; p199), German Art Nouveau-style architecture.

RĪGA FOR CHILDREN

Riga is not a particularly child-friendly destination. It's not that travelling with the kiddies is discouraged; it is just there's simply not that much to keep them interested. Riga's greatest delights are discovered by foot, and while strolling the streets and checking out the architecture of Old Town is a fascinating experience for adults, younger children will probably bore quickly.

(Continued on page 209)

(Continued from page 200)

That said, there are a few options sure to bring a smile to a child's face. Riga's biggest park, **Mežaparks** (p200) is packed with playgrounds and you can rent boats and jet skis in summer. You'll also find the **Riga National Zoo** (Zooloģiskais dārzs; Map p188; ☎ 751 8669; Meža prospekts 1; admission 2Ls; ☎ 10am-6pm) here. Set in a hilly pine forest, the zoo has a motley collection of animals, including a few bears, zebras and even the odd camel or two.

Museum of Nature (Dabas Muzejs; Map pp192-3; ☎ 722 6078; K Barona iela 4; adult/child 0.60/0.30Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue, Wed & Sat, to 6pm Thu, to 4pm Sun) is another kid-friendly attraction. The top floor features pickled body parts and child-oriented interactive computer programmes in English. There is also a zoology exhibit featuring stuffed lions, tigers and bears and a collection of ancient creepy critters and fossilised fish.

Young wannabe firefighters will dig the collection of fire engines, uniforms and old photos at the **Fire-Fighting Museum** (Latvijas ugunsdzēsības muzejs; Map p188; ☎ 733 1334; Hanzas iela 5; admission 0.20Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun).

If your kids just want to play in the water, you'll have to head to Jūrmala (p220), just a short ways out of town. Here you'll find Latvia's largest indoor water park, **Līvu Akvaparks** (☎ 775 5636; www.akvaparks.lv; Vienības gatve 36; admission 8Ls, child under 6 free; ☎ noon-11pm Mon-Fri, 10am-10pm Sat & Sun), in the village of Lielupe. A wave pool, children's pool and waterslides are among the attractions.

TOURS

Most travel agencies, including the ones listed earlier in this chapter, arrange city tours and day trips to other places in Latvia, including Sigulda, Cēsis, Kurzeme, Latgale and Rundāle.

Liepāja (Map pp192-3; ☎ 953 9184; Novembra krastmala 11; admission 2Ls) This company offers Daugava River boat tours. Trips depart from the boat station by Akmens Bridge (opposite the tram 4 stop) two to five times daily – stop by to check the schedule. River tours last one to two hours.

Riga Sightseeing (☎ 702 7801; amberway@inbox.lv; adult/child 6/3Ls) Organises two-hour bus tours of the city, departing from in front of the House of Blackheads on Rātslaukums at noon daily. The tourist office sells tickets or you can buy them direct from the bus driver.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Riga hosts dozens of annual and one-off festivals. The following are among the most famous:

International Baltic Ballet Festival (www.ballet-festival.lv) Takes place over five days in late April; performances by Latvian and international companies.

National Ethnic Arts and Crafts Fair (www.muzeji.lv/index_e.html) Big arts and crafts fair held at the Open-Air Ethnography Museum on the first weekend in June.

Riga Opera Festival (www.music.lv/opera) The Latvian National Opera's showcase event, it takes place over 10 days in June and includes performances by world-renowned talent.

Arēna New Music Festival (www.arenafest.lv) Contemporary music festival showcasing various genres and held at venues throughout Riga during the first two weeks of October.

SLEEPING

Although it seems a new hotel is opening in Riga every day, there still aren't enough rooms to go around. Unless you've booked in advance (highly recommended), there ain't no rooms to be found between May and August. If you arrive without a reservation, you'll probably have to shop around. Don't despair, with enough sleuthing you'll probably find a place to lay your head, but be prepared to have to check out and start the search all over again the next day – frustratingly hotels seem to have one room left for only one night. Although budget and midrange places are becoming more prevalent, the majority of accommodation in Riga still falls in the top-end price bracket.

Budget

New hostels are opening every day, and Riga's definitely becoming more budget-friendly. If the hostels are full, or just not your thing, some of the nicer hotels have cheaper rooms with shared bathrooms.

Old Town Hostel (Map p196; ☎ 722 3406; www.rigaoldtownhostel.lv; Valņu iela 43; dm/r 10/30Ls; ☎) Marble floors, chandeliers on all four floors, a spiral staircase and sauna make this smart place a star find. Dorms are large and clean, and the on-site bar is a great place to meet people and party. There's a self-catering kitchen.

Argonaut Backpackers Hostel (Map p196; ☎ 614 7214; www.argonautbackpackers.com; Kalēju iela 50; dm from 6Ls, r 25-60Ls; ☎) The new kid on the block. Smack in the middle of Old Town,

it was packed when we stopped by. High-lights at this Aussie-owned place include a chill lounge, bold colour scheme, friendly reception and free Internet. Dorms are a little cramped.

Viktorija (Map pp192-3; ☎ 701 4111; www.hotel-viktorija.lv; A Čaka iela 55; s/d from 12/17Ls; (P)) If you don't want to stay in a hostel, Viktorija wins the prize hands down for Riga's best-value budget accommodation. The cheapest rooms share bathrooms (for around 40Ls, you can get a more modern room with en suite and breakfast), but are very clean and spacious with high ceilings and sinks.

Posh Backpackers (Map pp192-3; ☎ 721 0917; www.poshbackpackers.lv; Pūpolu iela 5; dm/d 8/16Ls; (P)) Dorms feel spartan, but the place is clean and friendly. In an old warehouse, it sits within the central market precincts and can feel bustling. Those with heavy packs will be happy to know it's just a minute's walk from the bus and train stations. A lounge, laundry and free Internet are pluses.

Krišjānis & Gertrūde (Map pp192-3; ☎ 750 6604; www.musbalt.com/hotel.htm; Gertrūdes iela 39; r from 17Ls; (X)) This five-room setup is named after the Latvian couple who run it. The cheapest rooms share bathrooms, but all are clean and uniquely decorated. It's a cosy place.

Baltā Kaza (Map p188; ☎ 737 8135; Ēveles 2; dm/d 4/25Ls) With the cheapest dorm beds in the city, the 'White Goat' is an option for the financially strapped. It's a 15-minute tram ride from the centre of town, so it's not the most convenient place, but the four-bed dorms are clean and safe.

Mežaparks (Map p188; ☎ 755 9988; mezaparks@tvnet.lv; Sakses iela 19; d from 9Ls; (P)) One of Riga's top cheap hotels comes complete with outstanding lake views, although it's a ways out of town. The cheapest rooms are clean, no-frills affairs with shared bathrooms. Pay a bit more for a renovated room with private facilities and TV. Take trolleybus 2 for 30 minutes to the last stop.

Midrange

Prices include breakfast unless mentioned otherwise. The bathroom-clad rooms at the Viktorija (above) offer excellent-value mid-range accommodation too.

Radi un Draugi (Map p196; ☎ 722 0372; www.draugi.lv; Mārstaļu iela 1; s/d from 37/46Ls; (P)) Owned by British-Latvians, Radi un Draugi is very popular and often fully booked. An Old

Town gem, it consistently gets rave reviews for its value, cleanliness and Scandinavian feel. There's disabled access and a lift.

B&B Rīga (Map pp192-3; ☎ 652 6400; www.bb-riiga.lv; Gertrūdes iela 43; r from 25Ls; (P)) A small, family-run B&B, this features eight spacious, modern rooms with fridges and microwave ovens. It's tucked back from the street in a quaint, flower-filled courtyard and offers travellers good-value accommodation.

Laine (Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 8816; www.laine.lv; Skolas iela 11; s/d from 40/50Ls; (P)) In a courtyard off the main street, Laine is a great central find. A colourful, spacious place, most rooms here come with satellite TV and minibars. There are a few cheaper rooms with shared bathrooms. For the best views, ask for digs on the top floors.

KB (Map pp192-3; ☎ 731 6953; www.kbhotel.lv; Barona iela 37; d from 27Ls; (P)) This great new B&B has restored frescos in the foyer and a marble staircase leading to bright and modern rooms. There's a communal kitchen.

Forums (Map p196; ☎ 781 4680; www.hotelforums.lv; Valņu iela 45; d from 46Ls) The elegant rooms at this modern hotel are done up in dark reds with gold upholstered furnishings. If you're looking to splurge, try a top-floor suite, complete with private sauna (85Ls).

City Hotel Bruņinieks (Map pp192-3; ☎ 731 5140; www.cityhotel.lv; Bruņinieku 6; r from 50Ls) Rooms are clean and newly refurbished with nice touches like heated bathroom floors and minibars. The big, airy and very modern lobby has a 24-hour bar. Service is professional, and the place is good midrange value.

Tia (Map p188; ☎ 733 3918; www.tia.lv; K Valdemāra iela 63; s/d/tr 50/62/78Ls; (P)) Tia has simple, soulful rooms, done up in blues and greys, with unusually nice bathrooms. All are renovated and come with satellite TV and fridges.

Metropole (Map p196; ☎ 722 5411; www.metropole.lv; Aspazijas bulvāris 36-38; s/d from 55/65Ls; (P)) Down towards the bus station, Metropole was renowned as a centre of diplomatic intrigue and espionage in the 1930s. Riga's oldest continuously running hotel has a Scandinavian influence and modern rooms done up in tasteful pastels.

Keizarmežs (Map p188; ☎ 751 7510; www.keizarmezs.lv; Ezermalas iela 30; s/d 40/48Ls; (P)) A modern hotel overlooking Lake Ķīšezers, 7km north of the centre in Riga's green and flowery Mežaparks. Rooms are sparkling clean, and the swimming pool, air-con and

fabulous fitness centre make it great value if you're willing to be a bit outside town.

Top End

Rīga boasts scores of top-end hotels ready to cater to your every whim. Rates include breakfast.

Grand Palace Hotel (Map p196; ☎ 704 4000; www.schloss-hotels.com; Pils iela 12; r from 140Ls; (P)) With some of Riga's most attractive rooms, this lavish place caters to visiting celebrities. Rooms are truly luxurious, done up in white, blue and gold colour schemes. The service is attentive and professional.

Reval Hotel Rīdzene (Map pp192-3; ☎ 732 4433; www.revalhotels.com; Reimersa 1; s/d €180/200; (P)) There's a rubber duck in every bathroom at this renovated hotel, which once catered to the Soviet elite. Rooms are comfortable with cherry-wood furnishings and include all the modern conveniences. One of the city's most deluxe hotels, this comes with sauna and fitness centre, which are on the top floor. They come with 180-degree city views.

Ainavas Boutique Hotel (Map p196; ☎ 781 4316; www.ainavas.lv; Peldu iela 23; s/d €135/175; (P)) Ainavas markets itself as a boutique hotel and, indeed, it is stylish. Each room flaunts a different landscape depicted in a painting above the bed. Heated bathroom floors and web TV are among the perks at this original spot inside a 15th-century town house.

Konventa Sēta (Map p196; ☎ 708 7501; www.konventa.lv; Skārņu iela 22; s/d €80/86; (P)) Within the restored courtyards of a 15th-century convent, this unique hotel is excellent value. The 10 medieval buildings are named after their original uses and the rooms are exquisitely furnished, many making use of the building's existing oak beams. Wheelchair-accessible rooms are available.

Gutenbergs (Map p196; ☎ 781 4090; www.gutenbergs.lv; Doma laukums 1; d 70Ls; (P)) A gorgeous place in the heart of Old Town, Gutenbergs is worth a stay, if only to dine in its stunning rooftop restaurant overlooking the spire of St Peter's Church. Try for a room in the newer wing – these feature rustic furnishings and wooden ceilings.

Reval Hotel Latvija (Map pp192-3; ☎ 777 2222; latvija@revalhotels.com; Elizabetes iela 55; d from 100Ls; (P)) Once an Intourist hotel that sent shivers down the spine of many a Latvian, today it's a sparkling 27-storey tower of

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hotel Bergs (Map pp192-3; ☎ 777 0900; www.hotelbergs.com; Elizabetes iela 83/85; r from 90Ls; (P)) In the trendy Berga bazārs shopping plaza, this luxurious hotel was made for pampering. One of Riga's best hotels, it has rooms that are spacious and tastefully decorated with quality linens and a mix of 19th century and contemporary furnishings. The exotic-looking bar is filled with African artefacts.

wealth and luxury. Views from the 26th-floor bar are the best in Riga (even better than St Peter's). Rooms are rather simple, but come with fabulously comfortable linens. The staff attends to every whim.

Hotel de Rome (Map p196; ☎ 708 7600; www.derome.lv; Kaļķu iela 28; s/d from €142/156; (P)) With a fabulous central location and jam-packed with amenities, this prestigious hotel is often fully booked. Rooms are lux and the views fantastic.

Radisson-SAS Daugava (Map pp192-3; ☎ 706 1111; www.radisson.com/Rigalv; Kuģu iela 24; s/d €122/142; (P)) Considered to be on the 'wrong' side of the river by many, the Radisson has great views of the Old Town skyline, and every imaginable facility: fitness centre, indoor swimming pool, sauna and a restaurant renowned for its Sunday brunch. It caters to business travellers, and rooms are well appointed and comfortable.

EATING

Dining out in Riga is dizzying. The choice of cuisine – be it Korean, Caribbean or Caucasian – can be overwhelming. For those seeking good old-fashioned Latvian fare, there are loads of self-service, cafeteria-style eateries run by the hugely successful Lido chain.

In summer, tables and chairs spill out onto Doma laukums and the open-air plaza along Kaļķu iela, transforming Old Town into a fun-packed plaza of cheap cafés, beer tents and late-night bars.

Cafés

The city's café scene is fun, fun, fun and never more so than during Latvia's short but sweet summer when outdoor terraces fill most of the many Old Town squares and side streets.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

John Lemon (Map p196; ☎ 722 6647; Peldu iela 21; meals 4Ls) With orange walls and a pink bar, this is a popular spot for late-night nosing (it serves food until 5am on Friday and Saturday nights). John Lemon dishes up lots of Western favourites (you won't find any pork or sour cream here): eggy breakfasts, soul-soothing soups, sumptuous wraps and loads of salads. It's a very chill joint with a decidedly bohemian edge, the kind of place where you can curl into slinky green '60s space-station sofas and read the night away in relative peace and quiet. Solo women travellers will feel comfortable here.

Cuba Cafe (Map p196; ☎ 722 4362; Jaun iela 15; light meals 3-6Ls) A new, very hip spot with dark walls and ultramod, classically smoky environs and cramped, but oh-so-trendy tables outside. The light tapas menu is hearty and delicious. The cocktail menu is extensive, and includes Cuban favourites like *mojitos*.

Osiris (Map pp192-3; ☎ 724 3002; K Barona iela 31; meals 6-12Ls) A Riga institution, Osiris remains one of the city's best spots for a leisurely breakfast or romantic evening glass of wine. It's very slick with green marble counters and framed photos on the walls.

Hedonia 55 (Map pp192-3; ☎ 724 2855; Dzirnava iela 55; meals 2-7Ls) Minimalist Asian meets pseudo-industrial at this popular café/bar featuring a spinning disco ball and red plastic chairs. Bar food is served until 3am and the extensive menu features dishes from around the globe. If you just want to drink, the crowd is young, hip and well dressed. The cocktail menu includes more than 70 concoctions.

Zen (Map pp192-3; ☎ 731 6521; Stabu iela 6) It's as zen as zen can be at this oriental teahouse. Loll on floor cushions, watch the candles flicker, and chill out while your tea is prepared tableside – the full ritual takes a very thirsty 20 minutes. If you want to smoke while you're waiting, tobacco water pipes are available for 5Ls.

Double Coffee (Map pp192-3; ☎ 722 6548; Raina iela 25; meals 2-4Ls; ☒) This is one of the best coffee shops in Latvia. It features a large menu of espresso and tea drinks as well as

the richest hot chocolate you'll ever taste. There are also sandwiches, breakfast options, more substantial mains and cocktails on the glossy menu. The nonsmoking section is a real plus.

Habibi (Map p196; ☎ 722 8551; Peldu iela 24) Run by an English- and Russian-speaking Egyptian, Habibi has a rich and exotic interior clad with cushions and carpets. Local belly dancers shake their stuff in front of a water-pipe smoking clientele in the back room. Fruit-flavoured tobacco costs 5Ls per pipe.

Rāma (Map pp192-3; ☎ 727 2490; K Barona iela 56; meals 2Ls) The café of the Society for Krishna-Consciousness lolls in a lovely pink-and-violet wooden house and is the cheapest place to stuff yourself with veggie fodder in Riga. Choose from rice, cabbage and tofu dishes flavoured with chilli and curry. The food is often hit or miss, but all proceeds go to the poor, so you never feel you're wasting money.

Kosher Café L'Chaim (Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 0235; Skolas iela 6; meals 3-5Ls) Popular with Riga's Jewish community, this small café guarantees all food to be 100% kosher. The menu includes *tsimmes*, *latkes*, *gefillte fish* and *challa*, along with loads of freshly baked pastries.

Restaurants

OLD RĪGA

Paleta (Map p196; ☎ 721 6037; Gleznotāju iela 8; meals 15-25Ls) A *très* elegant restaurant, delectably designed Paleta is the place to go for fine dining; the Latvian cook spent five years cooking for Latvia's former president, and makes a tender champagne-poached sea bass and a sumptuous salmon *teriyaki*. There's piano or guitar music most nights.

Salt & Pepper (Map p196; ☎ 722 6836; Kungu iela 33; meals 6Ls) Looking out on the river, this is a stylish joint in super spacious environs and definitely one of the hot places to see and be seen in Riga. Lavish and lux, with a sort of pseudo-Soviet industrial vibe, it also offer lots of hidden nooks and crannies for getting intimate. The 2Ls breakfast buffet gets rave reviews. The menu is arty Parisian café meets greasy American diner.

Indian Raja (Map p196; ☎ 721 2614; Vecpilsētas 3; meals 13Ls) An expat place offering some of the best Indian food in the Baltics, this is where to go if you're craving a sumptuous, spicy curry or a perfectly cooked tandoori.

Lotoss (Map p196; ☎ 721 2665; Skārņu iela 7; meals 9Ls) Serving a refreshing range of tantalising light lunches – everything from samosas to fillet mignon to lots of meatless entrées – Lotoss also attracts the people-watching set who flock in for one of Old Riga's best views.

Bella Italia Restaurant (Map p196; ☎ 722 3587; Vāgnera iela 16; meals 6-12Ls) Tucked into a corner of Old Town, this popular Italian place has a congenial vibe – think warm hues, stone tables, rattan chairs and heaping plates of Italy's favourite comfort food, pasta. There's also a decent selection of seafood and pizza.

Alus sēta (Map p196; ☎ 722 2431; Tirgoņu iela 6; meals 7Ls; ☒ 10am-1am) Lido's only Old Town outlet has fabulous outside seating overlooking Doma laukums and serves hearty Latvian cuisine at unbeatable prices. Favourites include chicken or pork shashlik and Latvian grey peas. Wash your meal down with home-brewed Lido ale.

Ķīploka krogs (Garlic Bar; Map p196; ☎ 721 1451; Jēkaba iela 3; meals 7Ls) Probably not the place for a first date – although the intimate ambience just might lure you inside for a romantic evening – Ķīploka krogs dishes up garlic in all shapes, sizes and guises. This also doubles as a bar (albeit a smelly-breathed one).

Austrumu robeža (Eastern Border; Map p196; ☎ 781 4203; Vāgnera iela 8; meals 6Ls, admission for shows 2Ls) Decked out like some demented person's dream of a WWII bunker, this independent theatre and restaurant is at least worth a peep for its Soviet memorabilia. Eastern Border is 1011km from Moscow, and the menu is old school red Baltic and Caucasian cuisine. It even boasts a hammer and a sickle on its front.

Kamāla (Map p196; ☎ 721 1332; Jaun iela 14; meals 6Ls) This vegetarian restaurant exudes spiritualism. Incense smoke, Indian music, ornately carved furniture and bright embroidered tablecloths set the dreamy vibe.

1739 (Map p196; ☎ 721 1398; Skārņu iela 6; meals 12Ls) Inside a historic home, this classy Italian restaurant serves authentic pastas, meat dishes and soups in calm, refined environs. If you can't afford dinner, the menu at lunch is very similar but with much lower prices.

Zivju (Map p196; ☎ 721 6713; Vāgnera iela 4; meals 18-36Ls) One of Riga's only true seafood restaurants, Zivju serves some fabulous fish

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Nostalgija (Map p196; ☎ 722 2338; Kaļķu iela 22; meals 10Ls; ☒ 10am-2am) This gaudy, gilded monument to all things communist is where to head for a solid meal of *pelmeņi* (meat dumplings fried, boiled or swimming in soup) and caviar. At this retro Soviet restaurant, which also serves Western classics, you'll be able to feast your eyes on glossy murals glorifying the old revolution. Late on Thursday through Saturday nights, the place turns into a chaotic disco.

and seafood. Its cooked tiger shrimps in fennel sauce (a mere 9.40Ls) are sublime. The ambience is soothing, yet elegant, with a blue and beige colour scheme.

CENTRAL RĪGA

Bergs (Map pp192-3; ☎ 777 0949; Elizabetes iela 83/85; meals 10-20Ls) Serving international fusion cuisine, Bergs, in the Berga bazārs shopping mall, is one of Riga's top restaurants. The menu changes constantly, but the elegantly presented mains are consistently delicious. The restaurant's easy-on-the-eyes interior only serves to enhance the experience.

Andalūzijas Suns (Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 8418; Elizabetes iela 83/85 3; meals 8-12Ls) Thanks to some seriously devoted patrons, this restaurant in the Berga bazārs is a perennial expat favourite. You'll dig the industrial flavour and the American brewpub grub – think juicy burgers, plump burritos and endless glasses of ale.

Macaroni Noodle Bar (Map pp192-3; ☎ 721 7981; K Barona iela 17; meals 6-12Ls) A very modern and ultrahip joint where ambient House plays softly in the background. The menu includes every type of pasta, sauce, meat and seafood combo imaginable along with loads of sushi platters. In the evenings it turns into a trendy, and popular, cocktail lounge.

Vincents (Map pp192-3; ☎ 733 2634; Elizabetes iela 19; meals 12-20Ls) Inspired by Van Gogh, Vincents is a bit of a local institution and has served more than one head of state and international movie star. Every summer the restaurant adopts a European theme – Catalanian and French have already rolled around, but future choices promise to be equally delicious. Other perks are a separate sushi

menu and a three-course business lunch (from 6Ls).

Ai Karamba! (Map pp192-3; ☎ 733 4672; Pulkveža Brieža 2; meals 6Ls) It's about as kitschy Americana as Riga gets, and the food at this Canadian-owned restaurant is about as close to American country kitchen-cum-greasy-spoon diner as you'll find in Latvia. A good bet if you're craving one of those hangover-curing breakfast fry-ups.

Vērmanītis (Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 6289; Elizabetes iela 65; meals 6Ls; ☎ 8am-1am) With fabulous park views and the whole gamut of Baltic fare – meat, potatoes, rice, salads, desserts – it's no wonder Vērmanītis is another local favourite. Those not in the mood for pork and potatoes can choose from pizza on the ground floor and fast food in the basement.

Dzirnavas (The Mill; Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 6204; Dzirnavu iela 76; meals 6Ls) This authentic Latvian kitchen, also run by Lido, packs in hordes of hungry Latvians, tourists and expats alike. The giant buffet fills several rooms and offers all sorts of greasy, yet tempting, local favourites.

Staburags (Map pp192-3; ☎ 729 9787; A Čaka iela 57; meals 6Ls) A rustic Latvian joint serving great ribs, peas and beer in an inviting farmhouse setting. It's a favourite with locals.

Lido atpūtas centrs (Map p188; ☎ 781 2187; Krasta iela 76; meals 5Ls) This vast eating and drinking complex has food galore, lots to entertain the kids (animals, electric cars, playground) and folk musicians playing every evening from 7pm. Take bus 107 from in front of the train station to the Lido stop.

PASTIES, PANCAKES & DUMPLINGS

Latvia's answer to fast food can be found stuffed inside *pelmeņi* (meat dumplings fried, boiled or swimming in soup), *pīrāgi* (meat pasties baked in the oven) and *pankuki* (pancakes). Which is maybe why the big international fast-food chains are refreshingly few and far between in the Latvian capital.

Dozens of places dish up pasties, pancakes and dumplings. Temples devoted exclusively to the latter include **Pelmeņi** (Map pp192-3; A Čaka iela 38a; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat) and **Pelmeņi XL** (Map p196; Kalķu iela 7; ☎ 9am-4am), two calorie-heavy spots where you can indulge to your heart's content – eat in or take away – for 0.55Ls a dumpling. Pelmeņi, a cheerful polka-dotted place with its entrance on Ģertrūdes iela, cooks up soup (from 0.45Ls) too.

The mother-in-law bakes the best pīrāgi at **Sievsmātes pīrādžiņi** (Map p196; Kalķu iela 10), quite literally called Mother-in-Law's Pīrāgi. The cute little pasties come stuffed with meat, mushrooms, fruit or cheese.

Pancakes with sweet and savoury toppings and fillings are the reason behind that long lunch-time queue that spills into the street outside **Šetpavārs Vilhelms** (Chef William; Map p196; Šķūņu iela 6), another cafeteria-style place in old Riga.

Quick Eats

For Riga's most popular fast-food options, see boxed text, below.

Pizza Jazz (Map pp192-3; ☎ 800 0005; Raiņa bulvāris 15; pizza from 3Ls; ☎ 10am-midnight Mon-Sat, 11am-midnight Sun) This Lithuanian-run chain is said to serve the biggest and best pizza in town. They'll deliver directly to your hotel room. You can find another branch of Pizza Jazz at Brīvības iela 76 (Map pp192-3).

Pizza Lulū (Map pp192-3; Ģertrūdes iela 27; meals 4Ls) Run by a Canadian-Latvian team, it serves yummy American-style pizzas by the slice or pie. A slice, soda and a salad will only set you back about 2Ls. There are seven locations around town, one of which is at K Valdemāra iela 143/145 (Map p188).

Self-Catering

Central market (Map pp192-3; Prāgas iela; ☎ 7.30am-6pm Tue-Sat, to 4pm Sun & Mon) Riga's colourful market is housed in five great zeppelin hangars behind the bus station. You can buy everything from slabs of meat to fresh fruits and veggies; see p218 for more info.

Interpegro (Map pp192-3; Marijas iela 1) You'll find this well-stocked supermarket opposite the train station.

Rimi (Map pp192-3; K Barona iela 46) A large supermarket inside the Barona Centrs, a small shopping centre on three floors.

DRINKING

Nightlife in Riga is pumping and there is no shortage of great places to grab a pint and while away the evening.

Rīgas Balzams (Map p196; ☎ 721 4494; Torna iela 4) Not ordering at least one shot or cocktail made from black Balzāms is sacrilege at this intimate bar. The ambience is warm and tingling, just like you'll feel inside after partaking of the potent elixir. The bar attracts a mix of tourists, diplomats and well-dressed locals, all looking to have a good time.

Orange Bar (Map p196; ☎ 722 8423; Jāņu sēta 5) Attracting a mixed crowd, this tiny place is always packed and usually a little crazy; where the beautiful people swig champagne straight from the bottle then dance on tables to alternative grooves.

Klondaika (Map pp192-3; ☎ 724 0366; Dzirnava iela 59) This cellar joint serves lots of food and beer, much to the delight of the mainly foreign crowd. This well-loved pub is so extravagantly kitsch you can't help falling for it. With an American West theme (cow skulls and wagon wheels), it also boasts one of the best people-watching patios in town. Inside you'll find slots, billiards.

Pulkvedim nevienš neraksta (No-one Writes to the Colonel; Map p196; ☎ 721 3886; Peldu iela 26/28) An old favourite that's still going strong, this is a bar and disco rolled into one. Dedicated party animals dance the night away to alternative grooves in the industrial digs up top or amid the trippy colours down below.

TOP FIVE RĪGA BEER GARDENS

When the snow begins to melt and the days grow longer, Old Town fills with merry revellers pounding pints well into the white summer nights under the tents and umbrellas of Riga's numerous beer gardens. The cigarette smoke is thick, the gossip juicy, the heat lamps warm and the vibe frenetic. Most of these seasonal watering holes don't have proper names, so we've used the name of the sponsor embossed on the tents to identify our favourites. They are open most of the day and well into the night.

- Head to **Piebalga** (Līvu laukums) if you're looking for attention. This is Riga's most popular beer garden, and a place where patrons dress to impress. It's often impossible to find a table amid the hubbub, and the service is less than quick, but the vibe is always rowdy and upbeat.
- A bit more sophisticated than its neighbouring establishments, **Capri** (Līvu laukums) is where to go for creamy Italian gelatos, glasses of champagne or shots of Sambuca. In a central, bustling location, it's a great place to just sit back and watch the night unfold.
- The food and brew at **Konventa Sēta** (Jāņu sēta), in St John's Courtyard, is quite good, but the beers are a little overpriced. It's popular with tourists and good for people watching.
- Although not as trendy as it once was, **Doma dārzis** (Doma laukums) has a long cocktail menu, making it the obvious choice for those not interested in another pint of ale.
- Sandwiched between two colourful churches, **Labais krasts** (The Right Bank; Anglikāņu 5) is an atmospheric spot with great river views. It appeals to those looking to have a quiet drink away from the deafening crowds.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Skyline (Map pp192-3; ☎ 777 2222; Elizabetes iela 55) Sky high on the 26th floor of the Reval Hotel Latvija, Skyline is a must for every first-time visitor to the capital. The crowd is glam and the city view is nothing short of stunning. Window tables are hard to score, but with enough patience you're likely to snag one at some point.

B-bārs (Map p196; ☎ 722 8841; Doma laukums 2) An inviting place with well-spaced brown leather couches and chairs, Riga's second Balsams bar is a hot spot these days. Filled with trendsetters, it serves some of the best cocktails in town, especially ones made with Latvia's national drink.

Paldies Dievam piektdiena ir klāt (Thank God It's Friday; Map pp192-3; ☎ 750 3964; 11 Novembra krastmala 9) A Caribbean bar-cum-restaurant in Old Town, it's favoured for its imaginative and exhaustive cocktail menu and the bikini-clad women dancing on the bar.

Dickens Pub (Map p196; ☎ 721 3087; Ģrēcinieku iela 9/1) This British pub is where most Anglophone expats kick off a night out. Guinness/Kilkenny costs 1.70/1.60Ls a pint. Loud and rowdy, it's popular with stag parties.

Paddy Whelan's (Map p196; ☎ 721 0249; Grēcinieku iela 4) Riga's first Irish pub pours pints of Aldaris to Latvian youngsters downstairs, while older foreigners down glasses of Guinness upstairs. Good pub grub, sports on the telly and bands are other drawcards.

Barons Sports Bar (Map pp192-3; ☎ 729 9707; K Barona iela 108) Riga's biggest sports bar, this place takes up three floors and is filled with TVs, including a huge screen in the back where clients can bet on live matches. It's the place to go to sip pints and catch the game.

de Lacy's (Map p196; ☎ 722 9045; Skūņu iela 4) Riga's latest expat watering hole, this Irish pub packs in crowds nightly. Sports jerseys hang from the ceilings and patrons can sip Guinness while watching sport on the telly behind the bar.

Melnais kakis (Map p196; ☎ 781 4190; Raiņa bulvāris 15) A slick spot at any time of night, the Black Cat was recently renovated and now boasts classy, colourful environs and a potent cocktail menu. The kitchen stays open all night.

ENTERTAINMENT

Riga has a giddy entertainment and cultural scene. Upcoming events are listed in the *Baltic Times*, *Riga in Your Pocket* and *Riga This Week*. If you'd rather have someone else arrange your big night out, **Riga by Night** (☎ 927 6072) does a city bar and club tour four times nightly for €50 per person. There's no office, so call to book.

Nightclubs

Far & Gate (Map p196; ☎ 722 1221; Mārstaļu 6; cover 5Ls) The new kid on the clubbing block, Far & Gate is quickly becoming the town's hottest spot. Upstairs the place is an ultrahip, retro-meets-modern joint, with eccentric lighting, Art-Nouveau décor and crazy plastic chairs. In the basement you'll find a dance floor and dark corners for discreet cuddling.

Četri balti krekli (Map p196; ☎ 721 3885; Vecpilsētas iela 12; cover 5Ls) Literally 'Four White Shirts', this is the top place to listen to Latvian rock bands. It's popular with well-known local writers and artists.

Bites Blūzs Klubs (Map pp192-3; ☎ 733 3125; Dzīnavu iela 34a; Fri & Sat cover 3Ls) For a taste of the blues in the Baltics, head to this unpretentious club. Dark and smoky, you'd never call it trendy. The patrons here are more interested in listening to the fabulous live acts,

some hailing from as far away as New Orleans, than worrying about the hip factor.

Groks (Map p196; ☎ 721 6381; Kaļķu iela 12; cover 2Ls) A flashback to life under communism. The modern club is decked out as a Soviet train, complete with the cloakroom in a re-created train compartment and the DJ in the driver's cabin. It's popular with young Russians who come to drink and dance to pounding techno.

Voodoo (Map pp192-3; ☎ 777 2355; Elizabetes 55; cover 3-5Ls) Inside the Reval Hotel Latvija, this African-themed small club is one of Riga's poshest. Dress to impress. The patrons are mostly the stylish, well-heeled local and expat variety. The music varies, but there's never techno. No one under 21 allowed.

Indigo (Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 4263; K Barona iela 31; Fri & Sat cover 2Ls) Off the main clubbing circuit, this is a very local joint attracting a slightly older crowd. The music is a mix of Russian top 40 and smash pop hits.

Nautilus (Map p196; ☎ 781 4477; Kungu iela 8; cover 3-8Ls; ☎ 10pm-7am Wed-Sat) In the same building as a Japanese restaurant, Nautilus is throbbing hot spot inside a faux submarine. There's a chill-out room with plush red couches, a frantic dance floor and a little too much uniformed security.

XXL (Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 2276; Kalniņa iela 4) Riga's sole gay club and video bar makes no bones about the 'face kontrole' that bouncers rigorously exercise at the door. If you make it inside, you'll find a thriving disco on Friday and Saturday nights, go-go dancers and plenty of dark rooms to get cosy.

Classical Music

Great Guild (Lielā gilde; Map p196; ☎ 721 3643; Amatu iela 6; tickets 2-7Ls; box office ☎ noon-6pm & 2hr before performances) The main concert hall of the renowned Latvia National Symphonic Orchestra hosts numerous other concerts too.

Wagner Hall (Vāgnera Zāle; Map p196; ☎ 721 0814; Vāgnera iela 4; box office ☎ noon-3pm & 4-7pm) Chamber and solo concerts are often held at Wagner Hall.

The Dome Cathedral's acoustics, as well as its huge organ, are spectacular (see p191) and the twice-weekly evening organ concerts (Wednesday and Friday at 7pm) are well worth attending. Tickets (1Ls to 3Ls) and concert programmes are available from the cathedral **ticket office** (☎ 721 3213; ☎ noon-3pm & 4-7pm), opposite the western door of the

Wagner Hall box office and 30 minutes before performances start.

Cinemas

Films are generally shown in their original language – often English – with Latvian or Russian subtitles. Tickets cost about 2.50Ls; some cinemas give 10% discounts to ISIC cardholders. Call ☎ 722 2222 or 777 0777 (English spoken) to find out what's showing where. On the Internet, see www.filmas.lv and www.baltcinema.lv.

There are several cinemas:

Daile (Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 3854; K Barona iela 31) Mainstream fare.

Kino 52 (Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 8778; Lāčplēša iela 52-54) Also mainstream.

Kino Suns (Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 5411; Elizabetes iela 83-85) Artsy cinema.

Kinogalerija (Map p196; ☎ 722 9030; Jaun iela 24) Hosts the British Film Club on Friday.

Opera, Ballet & Theatre

Ballet, opera and theatre break for summer holidays, around June to September.

National Opera House (Map p196; information ☎ 707 37777; www.opera.lv; Aspazijas bulvāris 3; tickets 1-10Ls; box office ☎ 10am-7pm) The home of the highly rated Riga Ballet, where Mikhail Baryshnikov made his name. Performances start most nights at 7pm.

There are several theatres:

Daile Theatre (Daiļes teātris; Map pp192-3; ☎ 727 0278; Brīvības iela 75) Stages plays in Latvian.

New Riga Theatre (Rīgas jaunais teātris; Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 0765; www.jrt.lv; Lāčplēša iela 25) Plays in Latvian.

Russian Drama Theatre (Krievu drāmas teātris; Map p196; ☎ 722 5395; www.trd.lv; Kaļķu iela 16) Plays in Russian.

Circus

Circus (Cirks; Map pp192-3; ☎ 721 3279; circusRiga@apollo.lv; Merķēla iela 4; tickets 1-3Ls; shows twice daily Fri-Sun Oct-Apr) Riga's permanent circus is close to the train station.

Sport

Football is the most popular spectator sport (posters around town announce big games), followed closely by basketball. The city's leading football clubs, PFK Daugava and FC Skonto, play at Riga's 5000-seater **Daugava Sports House** (Daugavas Sporta Nams; Map p188; ☎ 727 2030; K Barona iela 107); and the **Skonto Stadium** (Map p188; ☎ 702 0909; E Melngaila iela 1a), which holds

8300. Ice hockey is played at the **Arena Riga** (Map p188; ☎ 738 8200; www.arenaRiga.com; Skanstes iela 21), a multipurpose arena built for the 2006 World Ice Hockey Championships.

SHOPPING

Street sellers peddle their wares – amber trinkets, knitwear, paintings and Russian dolls – outside St Peter's Church on Skarnu iela and along the southern end of Valņu iela. Riga's large crafts fair, the Gadatirgus, is held on the first weekend in June.

Berga bazārs (Map pp192-3; Dzīnavu iela 84) Literally 'Bergs Bazaar', this upmarket mall was built in the late 19th century by Kristaps Bergs (1840–1907), and reconstructed in the late 1990s. The maze of courtyards, sandwiched between Elizabētes, Marijas and Dzīnavu, has fine boutiques and galleries.

Nordwear (Map p196; ☎ 750 3546; www.nordwear.com; Kaļķu iela 2) This is where Australian-born Aldis Tilēns sells Nordic wool sweaters patterned with tiny Latvian symbols and other 'amber-free' souvenirs.

Latvijas Balzams (Map pp192-3; ☎ 722 8715; Marijas iela 1) This place sells Latvian Balzāms and other alcohol.

Centrs Universālvaiķals (Map p196; cnr Valņu iela & Audēju iela) In Old Town, this is the only department store. A large branch of the newspaper and magazine shop, Narvesen, is on the ground floor.

Among the mind-boggling plethora of craft and souvenir shops in Riga, consider shopping at the following:

A&E Gallery (Map p196; Jaun iela 17) Off Doma laukums, this is the place to shop for amber. It's a favourite with visiting dignitaries and celebs.

Musikas salons (Map p196; Audēju iela 6) Latvian rock, pop and classical music.

Sakta (Aspazijas iela 30) Latvian flags and wooden jewellery.

Senā Klēts (Merķēla iela 13) Latvian national costumes.

Upe (Map p196; Vāgnera iela 5) Folk music, traditional instruments and unusual toys beautifully carved from wood.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

See p393 for links with countries outside the Baltics.

Air

Riga Airport (Lidosta Rīga; ☎ 720 7009; www.riga-airport.com) is at Skulte, about 8km west of the city centre. Most major European airlines have an office here, including Latvia's national

CENTRAL MARKET

Whatever your heart desires – be it CDs, a pig's head, bloodied sheep carcasses or Ecuadorian bananas – Riga's bustling, colourful central market will supply them in abundance. As well as being a fantastic place for cheap shopping, this colourful collage of people and products is a worthy attraction in itself. It is one of Europe's largest markets and also its most ancient, dating back at least to the city's founding in 1201.

Riga's market was not always so large – nor was it always in its present location. Historians believe that a tiny market operated along the banks of the Daugava in the Dark Ages. When German crusaders, on a northward sweep, founded Riga in 1201, this fledgling market logically relocated within the new city.

A 1330 manuscript provides the first written reference, alluding to the market near the Dome Cathedral being moved to what is now called Latviesu strēlnieku laukums (Latvian Riflemen Square), east of Akmens Bridge. The market remained in Riflemen Sq until 1570, when it was moved to the banks of the Daugava to facilitate trading along the river.

The market stayed on the Daugava banks for more than 350 years. Its growth corresponded to that of Riga itself. By the mid-1600s when Riga, then under Swedish rule, outgrew Stockholm, the market flourished with over 1000 merchants trading goods from all over the region. But in 1930 the market was moved once more, to its present location by the train and bus stations. This final move was prompted by the need to have the market closer to the railway, which had replaced the river as the principal route for trade. Confronted with the market's vast size, the city of Riga decided to bring in five enormous zeppelin hangars from the town of Vainode in western Latvia. At a cost of 5 million lati, these hangars – each 35m high – were erected on the current site between 1924 and 1930. All told, the hangars provide 57,000 sq metres of space for up to 1250 sellers and – crucially – central heating for Riga's long, cold winters.

When Latvia was absorbed into the Soviet Union, the market shrank briefly, but it rebounded with produce from the southern Soviet republics. These days it is larger than ever, seemingly bursting at the seams. If you get lost wandering through the forest of carcasses and cheese in the mammoth zeppelin hangars, don't despair – you're not the first.

carrier, **AirBaltic** (Map p196; ☎ 720 7777; www.airbaltic.com; airport & Kaļķu iela 15). Its Estonian counterpart, **Estonian Air** (Map p196; ☎ 721 4860; www.estonian-air.ee; Kaļķu iela 15) is in town.

AirBaltic flies twice daily Monday to Friday to/from Tallinn (code-sharing with Estonian Air) and twice a day Tuesday to Thursday to/from Vilnius. Return fares to Tallinn/Vilnius start at 76/75Ls (three-day advance purchase, maximum stay of five days).

Boat

Riga's **ferry terminal** (Map pp192-3; ☎ 732 9882; www.rop.lv; Eksporta iela 1) is about 1.5km downstream (north) of Akmens Bridge. It is served by a twice-weekly ferry to/from Kiel, Germany. Tickets are sold at the **Hanza Maritime Agency** (Map pp192-3; ☎ 732 3569; www.hanza.lv; Eksporta iela 3a). There is also a twice-weekly ferry to/from Lübeck, Germany.

Between mid-April and mid-September the Max Mols ferry sails every second day between Nynashamn, 60km south of Stockholm, and Riga. For fare details, see p403.

The service is operated by **Rigas Jūras Linija** (RJL; Riga Sea Line; Map pp192-3; ☎ 720 5460; www.rigasealine.lv; Eksporta iela 3a). Ferry tickets are also sold at travel agencies (see p190).

In January 2006 Tallinn-based Tallink started ferry operations between Riga and Stockholm; check with the tourist office for more details.

Andrejosta (Map pp192-3; ☎ 732 3225; support.rsc@apollo.lv; Eksporta iela 1a), Riga's yacht centre, rents out yachts from 10Ls per day. It has a mooring depth of up to 4m.

Bus

Buses to/from other towns and cities use Riga's **international bus station** (Rīgas starptautiskā autoosta; Map pp192-3; www.autoosta.lv; Prāgas iela 1), behind the railway embankment just beyond the southern edge of Old Town. Up-to-date timetables and fares are displayed in the station (with final destination and departure platforms) and on the bus station's well-organised website. Most staff in the **information office** (izziņas; ☎ 900 0009) speak English.

Ecolines (☎ 721 4512; www.ecolines.lv) has an office at the bus station and another called **Norma-A** (Map pp192-3; ☎ 727 4444; A Čaka iela 45) in town. It runs weekly services to/from Bremerhaven in Germany, Brussels, Kyiv, London, Moscow, Paris and Prague (for details, see p396).

Weekly buses to Berlin and other cities in Germany, St Petersburg (via Jēkabpils and Rēzekne) and Kaliningrad are operated by **Eurolines** (☎ 721 4080; www.eurolines.lv), based at the bus station. Eurolines also runs daily inter-regional services to/from Valga (4.50Ls, 3¼ hours, one daily), Tartu (8.50Ls, 4¼ hours, one daily), Tallinn (8.50Ls, 5¼ hours, five daily), Vilnius (6Ls, five hours, four daily), Kaunas (6Ls, 3½ hours, one daily) and Klaipėda (6Ls, six hours, twice daily).

The bus services within Latvia include, among others, the following:

Bauska 1.20Ls, 1½ hours, hourly btwn 5.30am and 5.10pm.

Cēsis 1.30Ls, two hours, hourly btwn 6.30am and 6.55pm.

Daugavpils 3Ls, four hours, up to seven daily.

Jelgava 0.80Ls, one hour, one or two daily.

Kolka 3Ls, 5¼ hours, three daily.

Kuldīga 2.50Ls, three to four hours, six to 10 daily.

Liepāja 3Ls, 3½ hours direct, four to 4½ hours via Kalnciems, five to seven hours via Jelgava or Tukums, hourly between 6.40am and 4.45pm.

Rēzekne 3Ls, 4½ hours, up to six daily.

Sigulda 1Ls, one hour, hourly between 8.15am and 8.10pm.

Talsi 2Ls, 2½ hours, hourly between 7.55am and 8.45pm.

Tukums 1Ls, 1¼ hours, eight daily.

Valka 2Ls, 3¼ hours, up to four daily.

Valmiera 1.50Ls, 2½ hours, hourly between 6.20am and 10.20pm.

Ventspils 3Ls, 2½ to four hours, hourly between 7.05am and 10.30pm.

Car & Motorcycle

Motorists have to pay 5Ls per hour to enter Old Town, payable with a *viedkarte* – a magnetic strip card, sold and recharged at the information desk inside the Centrs Universālvēlaks (p217) and out of town at the **Statoil** (Map pp192-3; Eksporta iela 1c; ⚡ 24hr) petrol station.

Car-hire firms include the following:

Avis Airport (☎ 720 7535); Krasta iela (☎ 722 5876; www.avis.lv; Krasta iela 3)

Budget Airport (☎ 720 7327; www.budget.com)

Europcar Airport (☎ 720 78 25); Basteja bulvāris (☎ 722 2637; www.europcar.lv; Basteja bulvāris 10)

Hertz Airport (☎ 720 7980; www.hertz.com)

Sixt Airport (☎ 720 71 31); Aspazijas bulvāris (☎ 722 4036; www.sixt.lv; Aspazijas bulvāris 8)

Train

Riga **train station** (centrālā stacija; Map pp192-3; ☎ 583 3095, advance reservations ☎ 721 6664; Stacijas laukums), at the southern end of the park-and-boulevard ring, underwent a €5.8 million face-lift in 2003.

Tickets are sold in the main departures hall: window Nos 1–6 sell tickets for *starptautiskie vilcieni* (international trains); window Nos 7–9 sell tickets for long-distance *dizēlvilcieni* (diesel trains); and window Nos 10–13 sell tickets for slower *elektrovilcieni* (electric suburban trains).

Staff at the **information desk** (izziņas; ☎ 583 2134) don't appear to be very cooperative – a less frustrating bet for schedules is to consult the train timetable on Latvian Railways' website at www.ldz.lv.

SUBURBAN

There are six suburban lines out of Riga, served in the main by *elektrovilcieni*. Speedier diesel trains serve some larger suburban stations, like Valmiera.

Ergļi–Suntāži Three trains daily take this line.

Jelgava One or two trains an hour go to Jelgava between 5.40am and 11.05pm. Some long-distance trains to Ventspils, Šiauliai, Kaunas and Vilnius stop at Jelgava too.

Ogre–Krustpils This line follows the Daugava River inland to Krustpils, opposite Jēkabpils. Trains run between 5.10am and 11.12pm. Destinations include Ogre, Lielvārde, Aizkraukle or Krustpils. Long-distance trains heading to Daugavpils, Rēzekne, Zilupe and Moscow also take this line.

Priedaine–Dubulti–Sloka–Ķemeri–Tukums This is the line to take for Jūrmala. Two to five trains an hour leave for each of Ķemeri, Sloka and Tukums II between 5.45am and 11.10pm. All call at Dubulti and most at Majori.

Saulkrasti–Skulte Two to three trains an hour leave for varying destinations, including Skulte and Vecāķi, between 5.52am and 11.08pm.

Sigulda–Cēsis–Valmiera There are four trains daily to Sigulda, two to Cēsis and four to Valmiera. All call at Sigulda; Valmiera trains also call at Cēsis. The long-distance train to St Petersburg also takes this line. This line runs from 5.42am to 10.36pm.

LONG-DISTANCE

The timetable for *atiesanas laiks* (departures) listing the final destination, platform number, name of train and departure time is bang opposite you when you enter the

station. To check *pienaksamas laiks* (arrivals), consult the printed timetables on the wall.

It is quicker to get to Tallinn by bus (see p218). There is a slow overnight train to/from Vilnius (6/8/11Ls for a seat/courette/bunk in four-bed compartment, 7½ hours) via Kaunas (but again, the bus is easier to both places), and an overnight train to St Petersburg (10/20/31Ls for a seat/courette/bunk in four-bed compartment, 50Ls in 1st class, 12¾ hours) that stops in Krustpils, Rēzekne and a handful of other towns. Other mainline services include the following.

Daugavpils 3Ls, 3½-4¼ hours, four daily.

Liepāja 2.50Ls, five to 5¾ hours, two daily.

Valga via Sigulda, Cēsis & Valmiera 2Ls, three to 3½ hours, one daily.

Ventspils 2.50Ls, 4¾ hours, two daily.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Bus 22 runs about every 20 minutes between Riga airport and the stop on opposite the bus station in central Riga. Tickets (0.20Ls) are sold by the bus driver. A taxi to the centre should cost no more than 10Ls.

Bicycle

You can hire two wheels from **Trase** (Map pp192-3; ☎ 728 8617; Terbatas iela 34) for 2/1.50Ls for the first/each consecutive hour.

Bus, Tram & Trolleybus

Riga has 123km of tram lines serving eight different routes and 23 trolleybus lines covering 217km, all operated by TTP. The usual ticket-punching system is used on trams, trolleybuses and buses too, but different tickets are used on each. Tickets cost 0.20Ls, and are sold at most news kiosks

and by the driver. City transport runs daily from 5.30am to 12.30am. Some routes have an hourly night service. Updated timetables are posted on TTP's website (www.ttp.lv).

Taxi

Officially, taxis charge 0.30Ls per kilometre (0.40Ls between 10pm and 6am), but as a foreigner you could get ripped off. Insist on the meter running before you set off. There are taxi ranks outside the bus and train stations, at the airport and in front of the major hotels.

AROUND RĪGA

A bounty of white-sand beaches and a WWII concentration camp where the earth still groans (or, rather, beats) lie within easy reach of Riga.

Jūrmala

pop 56,000

Latvia's version of the French Riviera, Jūrmala (Seashore) is the name of a string of small towns and resorts stretching 20km along the coast west of Riga. Vehicles clog the roads on summer days when it seems everyone from day-tripping Rīgans to families on holiday from far-flung country villages descends on Jūrmala for serious fun in the sun. In fact, beautiful fresh air and a relaxed atmosphere have drawn vacationers in droves since the 19th century. In Soviet times 300,000 visitors a year from all over the USSR flooded in to boarding houses, holiday homes and sanatoriums owned by trade unions and other institutions. Today Jūrmala's long, sandy beaches backed by dunes and woods of pine and its shady streets lined with low-rise wooden houses are only

slightly less packed. Although once polluted, the beaches at Majori and Bulduri have been cleaned up in recent years; the water, while quite cold, is safe for swimming.

During Soviet times the Riga-Jūrmala highway, Latvia's only six-laner, was dubbed '10 minutes in America' because local films set in the USA were always filmed on it.

ORIENTATION

Jūrmala lies between the coast, which faces north, and the Lielupe River, which flows parallel to the coast, 1km or 2km inland. The Lielupe finally empties into the Gulf of Riga 9km west of the mouth of the Daugava. The main townships that make up Jūrmala are, from the eastern (Riga) end: Priedaine (inland), Lielupe, Bulduri, Dzintari, Majori, Dubulti, Jaundubulti, Pumpuri, Melluži, Asari, Vaivari, Kauguri (on the coast) and Sloka (2km inland). The busiest part is the 4km to 5km between Bulduri and Dubulti, centred on Majori and Dzintari.

Majori's main thoroughfare is the 1km-long, pedestrianised Jomas iela, where you'll be able to find most lodging, restaurants and bars. A number of streets and paths lead through the woods on the left, heading northwards, to the beach.

INFORMATION

Datorklubs (☎ 781 1411; Jomas iela 62; per hr 0.60Ls; ☎ 24hr) In Majori; Internet access.

Latvijas Unibanka (Jomas iela 46) One of several Majori ATMs.

Post office (Jomas iela 2) In front of the town hall.

Tourist office (☎ 776 4676; www.jurmala.lv; Jomas iela 42; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Oct-May, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat & Sun Jun-Sep) Sells maps, provides info, and arranges accommodation and guided tours. Distributes the free *Jūrmala This Week*, a quarterly listings guide.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Walking along the beach, over dunes and through the woods before popping into a couple of cafés are reason enough to come to Jūrmala. Dubulti is its oldest township, while the highest **sand dunes** are at Lielupe. Further west, Vaivari is home to the wet and wonderful **Nemo Water Park** (Nemo ūdens atrakciju parks; ☎ 773 6392; www.nemo.lv; Atbalss iela 1; admission before/after 8pm & all day Mon 5/2.50Ls; ☎ 11am-11pm Mon-Thu & Sun, to 4am Fri & Sat May-Sep), with five waterslides, a sauna and two

heated pools right on the beach. The centre also rents bicycles for 5Ls per hour. For more on another Jūrmala water park, Līvu Akvaparks, see p209.

In Majori, north off Jomas iela, is poet Janis Rainis' country cottage, where he died in 1929; now the **Rainis & Aspazija Memorial Summer Cottage** (Raīna un Aspazijas vasarnīca; ☎ 766 4295; Pliekšāna iela 5-7; adult/child 0.50/0.30Ls ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Sun), it showcases various exhibitions and houses Rainis' personal library. Across Jomas iela, in the **Jūrmala City Museum** (Jūrmalas pilsētas muzejs; ☎ 776 4746; Tirgoņu iela 29; adult/child 0.50/0.20Ls; ☎ 11am-5pm Wed-Sun), you can view works by local artists and learn how the resort has developed since the 19th century.

Anyone who makes it as far as Bullūciems, the tiny town beyond Lielupe, will be rewarded by the intriguing open-air **Fishery Museum** (Jūraslīcis; ☎ 775 1121; Tiklu iela 1a; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat). It has exhibits (with Latvian captions) about the region's fishing history, displayed in small cottages and linked by a planked wooden walking path.

SLEEPING

Jūrmala is a spread-out place, so you may have to put in a bit of legwork to find a room. The tourist office can usually guide you to accommodation in your price bracket. It also keeps a list of families that rent private rooms and can help with apartment rentals for longer stays.

Budget

Dzintaru (☎ 775 4539; iestādes 6-14; s/d/ste 11/14/30Ls; ☎) In Dzintari, this former Soviet monster doesn't sport a sign, but it's a great deal for those travelling on a shoestring. The reception and hallways are drab, but rooms, while sparsely furnished, are clean and have private bathrooms. Splurge on a renovated suite – these are spacious and include refrigerators and TVs.

Kempings Nemo (☎ 773 6392; www.nemo.lv; Atbalss iela 1; cottages 5-24Ls, camp sites 1Ls plus per person 1Ls; ☎) Adjoining the Nemo Water Park in Vaivari and right on the beach, this place sports little wooden cottages as well as green grass on which to pitch tents.

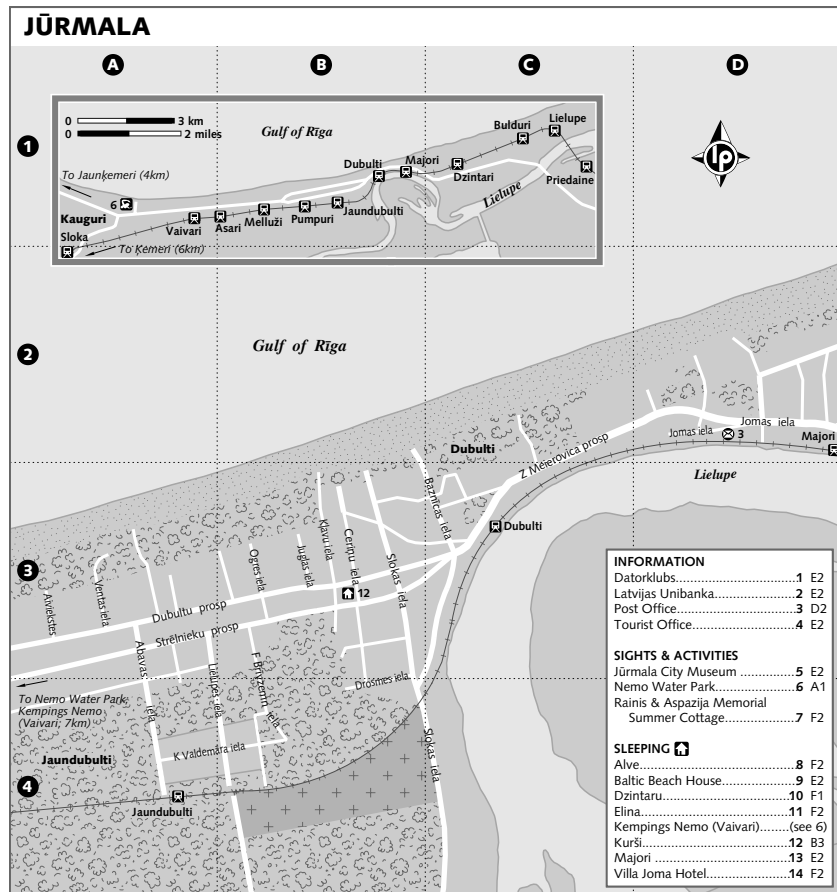
Midrange & Top End

Jūrmala has many lovely small hotels and even a swanky high-end spa resort to choose

...THE EARTH GROANS

Between 1941 and 1944 about 45,000 Jews from Riga and about 55,000 other people, including Jews from other Nazi-occupied countries and prisoners of war, were murdered in the Nazi concentration camp at Salaspils, 15km southeast of Riga. Giant, gaunt sculptures stand as a memorial on the site, which stretches over 0.4 sq km. The inscription on the huge concrete bunker, which forms the memorial's centrepiece, reads 'Behind this gate the earth groans' – a line from a poem written by the Latvian writer Eizens Veveris, who was imprisoned in the camp. Inside the bunker a small exhibition recounts the horrors of the camp. In its shadow lies a 6m-long block of polished stone with a metronome inside, ticking a haunting heartbeat, which never stops.

To get there from Riga, take a suburban train on the Ogre-Krustpils line to Dārziņi (not Salaspils) station. A path leads from the station to the *pieminekļis* (memorial), about a 15-minute walk.



from. Unless otherwise noted, breakfast is included at the following places.

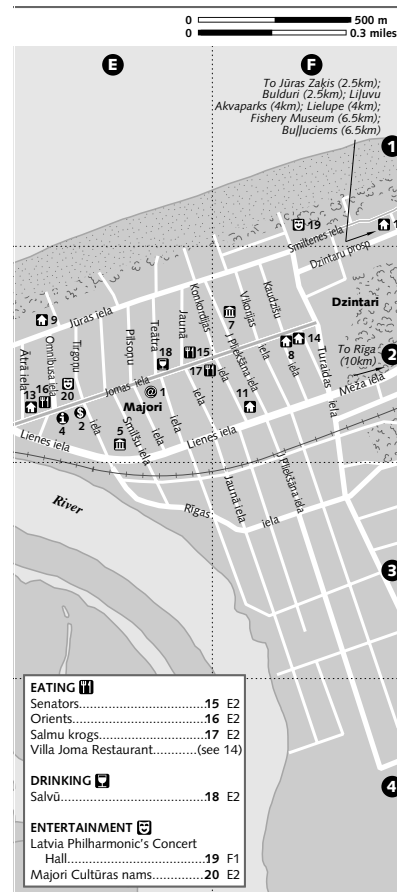
Villa Joma Hotel (☎ 777 1999; www.villajoma.lv; Jomas iela 90; r from 40Ls; 📍) This boutique hotel is great value. The airy, immaculate rooms are all different, but a minimalist theme presides throughout. Try for a room with a skylight. The breakfasts are fabulous: you get to choose from the restaurant menu.

Baltic Beach House (☎ 777 1400; www.balticbeach.lv; Jūras iela 23-25; s 50-100Ls, d 55-120Ls; 📍 🚰 🚿 🚰) Right on the beach, Jūrmala's showcase swanky establishment somehow manages to cater to all budgets. The most expensive rooms have luxury furnishings, satellite TV, bathrobes and sea-view balconies. The cheapest have Soviet-era trappings and no

air-con, but are comfortable, and a good deal to boot. Amenities include a top-notch spa, tennis courts and a good restaurant.

Alve (☎ 775 5971; www.alve.times.lv; Jomas iela 88A; s/d 45/55Ls; 📍) The handrails are made from braided rope at this chichi place with an eclectic interior design. Rooms come with nice linens and Scandinavian-style light-wood furnishings. Spa treatments and steam baths are available.

Elina (☎ 776 1665; www.elinahotel.lv; Lienes iela 43; d from 25Ls; 📍) Often fully booked, Elina has 24 rooms of varying size. All are simple, but cheery, and come with TVs. The attached café and friendly English- and German-speaking staff are pluses at this family-run hotel. Breakfast is not included.



Kurši (☎ 777 1606; www.augstceltne.lv; Dubulti prospekts 30; apt 40-75Ls; 📍 🚰) In Dubulti, this pleasant place has modern two-storey apartments. They come with kitchens, microwaves and satellite TV. Rates depend on size. Prices drop in low season.

Majori (☎ 776 1380; www.majori.lv; Jomas iela 29; s/d 35/50Ls; 📍) It's got a bold paint job, but rooms aren't quite as glam as you'd expect from a place with such a swanky lobby. Done up in a sort of retro '70s style, the digs are smallish but feature big bathrooms with old tubs. It's not bad if other places are full.

EATING & DRINKING

Every second building on Jomas iela offers an eating or drinking option. In summer the

street is lined with beer tents and pavement-terrace bars and cafés. Jūrmala is a year-round resort, and most places are open.

Villa Joma Restaurant (☎ 777 1999; Jomas iela 90; meals 6-12Ls) The food is fabulous at this restaurant attached to the hotel of the same name. The gourmet menu is Western and seafood oriented, quite eclectic and very reasonably priced. Try the crab soup; it's mouth-watering.

Orients (☎ 776 2082; Jomas iela 33; meals 4-10Ls) A Middle Eastern restaurant with a great pavement terrace in Majori, Orientis is well worth a nibble. It's definitely got the most eclectic décor in town – sort of French bistro meets Asian-style bar with an electronic buffalo head thrown in for good measure.

Salmu krogs (☎ 776 1393; Jomas iela 70/72; meals 4-10Ls) This charming, rustic bar is topped with a thatched roof and plenty of wooden benches around shared tables. Meats are grilled outside on the terrace and the place emits delicious smells. There's a long cocktail menu and a decent wine list.

Jūras Zaķis (Sea Rabbit; ☎ 775 3005; Vienības prospekts 1; meals 6Ls) In Bulduri, the Sea Rabbit is a good place to try local fish. Fishing nets suspended from the ceiling and weathered wooden furniture support the seafaring theme. The restaurant is about 30m from the beach.

Senators (☎ 781 1163; Jomas iela 55; meals 5-10Ls) A charming little place with a glass-enclosed patio and lots of greenery along with outdoor seating in a prime people-watching locale, Senators features a large menu with pizza, pastas, sandwiches, meats and seafood.

Salvū (☎ 776 1401; Jomas iela 57; meals 4-9Ls) Jūrmala's late-night hot spot, this place offers a big and airy covered patio for drinking or dining on Russian favourites and a second-storey nightclub that rocks late into the night. There is live music on weekends.

ENTERTAINMENT

In summer there are discos several nights a week in and around Majori. Look out for flyers on billboards down Jomas iela. Nemo Water Park (p221) organises pop concerts, disco nights and raves on summer weekends.

Majori Culture House (Majori Kultūras nams; ☎ 776 2403; Jomas iela 35) The Majori Culture House hosts films, music concerts and various art and craft exhibitions.

Latvia Philharmonic's Concert Hall (Dzintari Koncertzāle; Turaidas iela) At the northern beach end of Turaidas iela, this hall hosts a season of summer concerts from June to August.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Between 5.45am and 11.10pm, two to five trains per hour run from Riga to Jūrmala along the Ķemeri-Tukums line (see p219). All stop at Dubulti (0.50Ls, 35 minutes), but not all stop at Majori (0.50Ls, 40 minutes) and other stations.

Motorists driving into Jūrmala have to pay a toll of 1Ls per day, at self-service machines at control posts either end of the resort. Bicycle tracks wind through pine forests from Riga to Jūrmala; ask at the tourist office or bike-hire places in Riga for details.

GETTING AROUND

You can use trains to go from one part of Jūrmala to another. There are also buses along the main roads. The Nemo Water Park (p221) hires bicycles.

VIDZEME

With a heady mix of long sandy stretches of unspoilt, wild coastline, ancient forested valleys sprinkled with historic castles and deep ravines, tranquil and alluring small towns and the wondrous Gauja Valley, Vidzeme is Latvia's most scenically enticing region.

After Riga, Vidzeme, embracing the northeast, is the country's biggest tourism draw. If you only have time to explore one region in Latvia, we'd suggest heading here. Be warned though: the intoxicating scent of pine forest in the exquisite Gauja National Park, could make you dizzy. The sight of castle turrets peeping through dense woodland in Sigulda may seduce you into extending your stay. An outdoor enthusiast's paradise, there is always something to see and do. Ride the country's only operating narrow-gauge railway through bucolic countryside, frolic in the watery playground known as the Vidzeme Upland, canoe down a fat, lazy river or check out one of the fabulous medieval town's – Cēsis is our favourite.

Getting There & Away

Vidzeme is accessible by private vehicle, bus or train. Buses and trains serve the region's

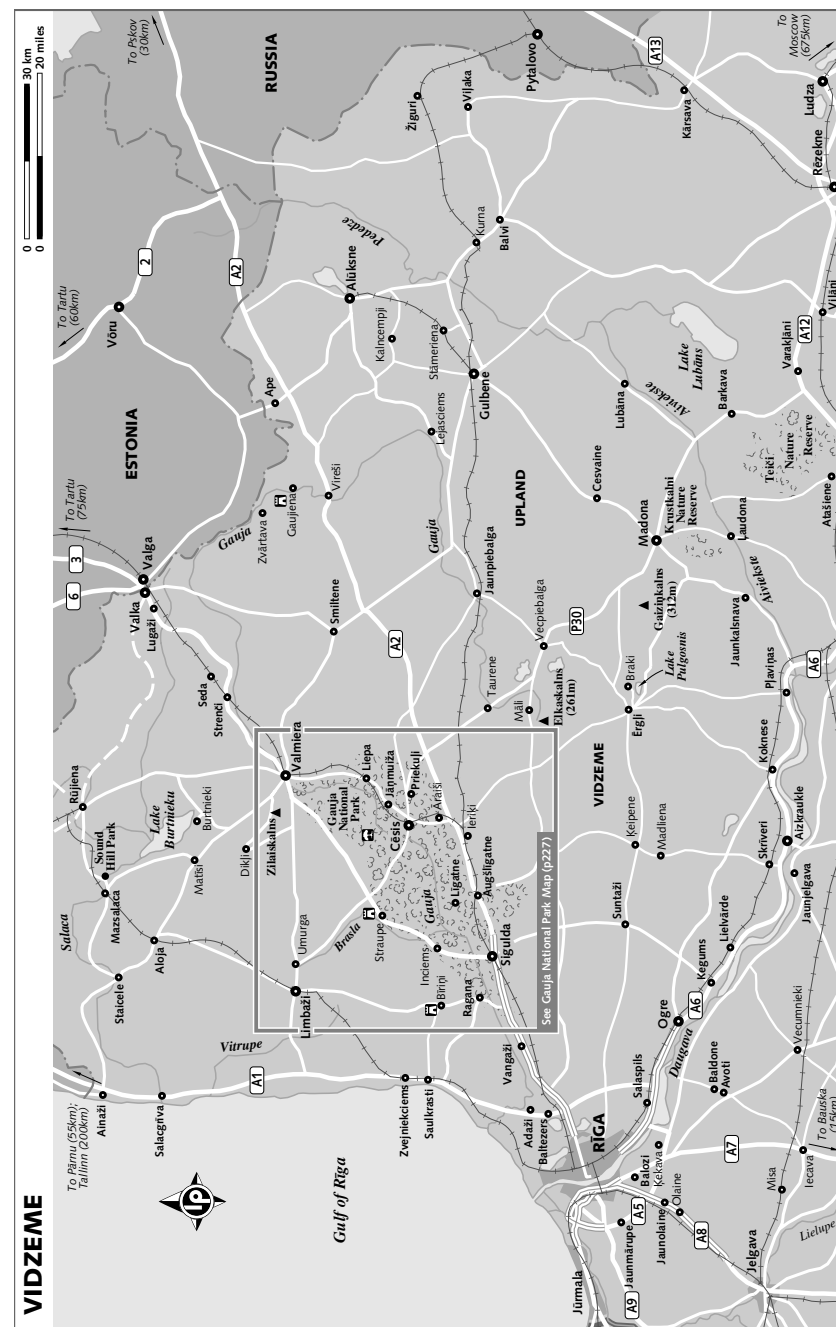
major towns – Sigulda, Cēsis and Valmiera – multiple times daily and there is usually at least one bus per day to even the smaller towns. Buses also plough along the coast road between Riga and Tallinn, in Estonia.

THE COAST

The main road from Riga to the Estonian cities of Pärnu and Tallinn (the A1) runs close to the shore of the Gulf of Riga for much of the 115km to the border. It's part of the infamous via Baltica, and soon after dividing from the Sigulda and Tartu road, 15km from Riga, the road runs through wooded country, dotted with lakes, small villages and tranquil camping spots.

Standing between two lakes 12km north-east of Riga, **Baltezers** is a busy spot for mid-summer celebrations. Suburban trains on the Sigulda line stop at its station, 3km south of town, but there is little to draw tourists. **Saulkrasti**, about 40km further north, is a popular summer escape for Rigans. The road meets the open sea at a sandy beach on the northern side of town. It's a tiny place, basically just a string of houses stretched out along the A1, and again won't hold the average traveller's attention for long. If you're just looking for a peaceful camping spot close to the beach, **Jūras Priede** (☎ 795 4780, 922 7523; Ūpes iela 56a, Saulkrasti; wooden hut around 10Ls, tent 2Ls) will deliver. An attractive, well-kept place, it features a collection of boxy huts of various sizes scattered amid the trees. It has a small cafeteria, covered outdoor cooking area and picnic tables. The place is at the north edge of town; look for the sign north of the bridge after crossing the Aga River.

The area's most substantial town, **Salacgrīva** sits on a harbour at the mouth of the Salaca River. It's still a blink-or-you'll-miss-it type of place, not really worth going out of your way to visit, but if you're hungry on the way to Estonia it makes a good lunch stop. The **tourist office** (☎ 404 1254; Rīgas iela 10a; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) runs tours to Livonian sacrificial caves on the coast. **Zvejnieku Sēta** (Rīgas iela 1, Salacgrīva; meals 2-6Ls) is a friendly restaurant, with a pleasing, rustic old-time seafaring vibe – creaky wood floors, a fishing boat moored outside and nets draped across the terrace. The menu is mostly seafood oriented, although it does sandwiches, soups and salads. The food is hearty and surprisingly tasty.



DETOUR – BĪRIŅI CASTLE

A trip to **Bīriņi Castle** (Bīriņi pils; ☎ 406 6316; www.birinupils.lv; admission & tour 0.80Ls, r from 34Ls; **P**), 17km east of Saulkrasti, makes a fabulous scenic detour. To reach the baronial manor, built amid vast grounds in 1860, take the well-marked turn-off from the A1 in Saulkrasti. The drive is pretty: the trees thin out giving way to fields dotted with old barns and, in summer, mesmerising bright yellow wildflowers. Once at the castle, you can tour the house; fish and boat in Bīriņi Lake; ride a horse; or simply picnic on the magnificent grounds. There are a steam bath, sauna and pool (from 19Ls per hour) for relaxing, and you can even stay the night. The 11-room hotel is situated on the castle grounds, and is a remarkable spot to sleep like a baron and breakfast beneath vaults. The inside of the palace itself is decorated in the original neo-Renaissance style and there's a great sweeping staircase. Be warned that operating hours are erratic, and you might not be let through the gate (the gatekeeper speaks a mix of Latvian and German and if she doesn't understand you, she'll simply turn you away). Call first and make a reservation to avoid difficulties.

Pie Bocmaņa (☎ 407 1455; Pērmavas iela 6), supposedly 'the most legendary fisherman's pub in town', is another option.

The former shipbuilding town of **Ainaži** (derived from the Liv word *annaži*, meaning 'lonely') is 1km south of Estonia. Its only attraction is its old naval school, now home to the **Naval College Museum** (Ainaži Jūrskolas memoriālais muzejs; ☎ 404 3349; Valdemāra iela 45; admission 0.30Ls; ☎ 10am–4pm Jun–Aug, closed Sun & Mon Sep–May). This mildly interesting museum exhibits the naval academy's history and reconstructs a typical 19th-century Latvian classroom.

Buses north from Rīga to Pärnu and Tallinn serve the region via the coastal road (one hour to Saulkrasti, 1¼ hours to Salacgrīva). Suburban trains from Rīga run as far as Saulkrasti (0.70Ls, one hour).

MAZSALACA & RŪJIENA

Anyone intrigued by Latvian folklore might want to visit the area around Mazsalaca, 55km inland from Ainaži on the Salaca River. Head to **Sound Hill** (Skaņāis kalns; ☎ 425 1945), a splendid park 1.7km west of town, which showcases marvellous outdoor woodcarvings of gigantic proportions. Motorists can drive the length of the park, or better yet stroll the 2km on foot, stopping at strategic spots. The **Werewolf Pine** is believed to turn you into a werewolf if you crawl through its roots after muttering certain incantations under a full moon. The **Stairway of Dreams**, 300m north, tells young lovers how well suited they are, while about 1km downstream from the Werewolf Pine, a spring flowing out of a rock at the **Devil's Cave** is said to have healing properties. And

about 800m further downstream, the sandstone cliff **Sound Hill** on the left bank of the river apparently throws off an occasional bizarre acoustic effect. A picnic area decked out with picnic tables and benches marks the end of the trail. On the town's village green there is an open-air **Dinosaur Park** (Dinozauru parks; Parka iela 8; admission free).

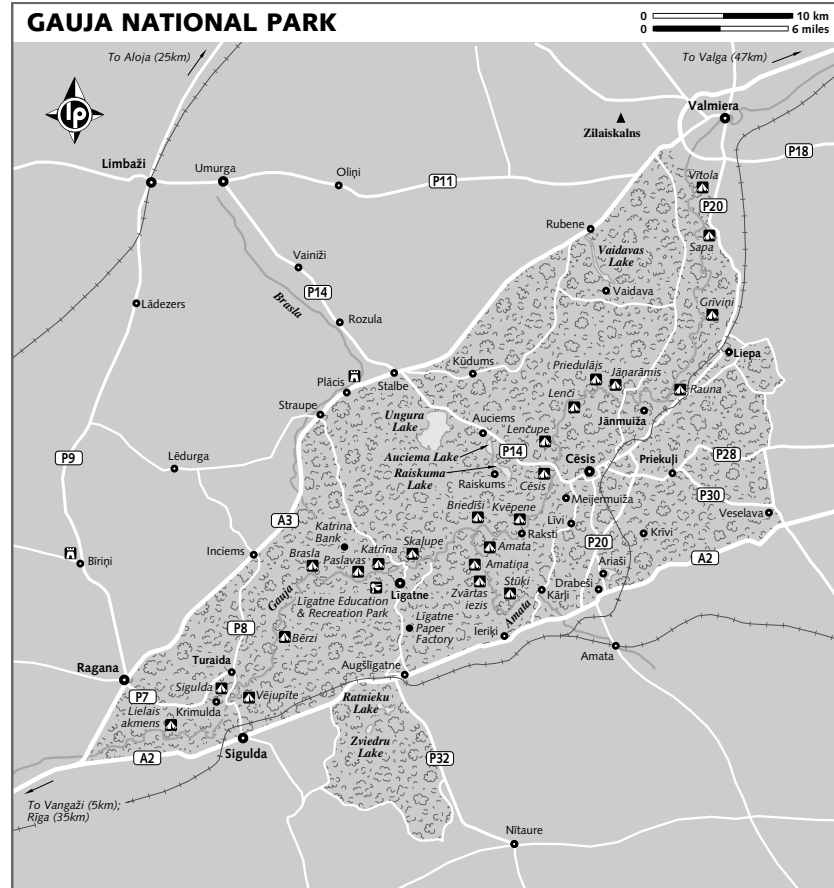
Rūjiena, 15km northeast, is set in attractive countryside and boasts Latvia's oldest operating dairy. Tourism touts sell the town as the 'capital of ice cream', and visitors can tour the **dairy** – hours vary, visit the **tourist office** (☎ 426 3278; www.rujiena.lv; Raiņa iela 3; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Sat) to arrange a tour – and taste the delicious ice cream produced here. The town also features several sculptures by K Zemdegis, a well-known Latvian sculptor. If industrial tours are your thing, the tourist office can also help arrange trips to a sheep-breeding farm and wool-processing mill.

The only hotel is **Tālava** (☎ 426 3767; Rīgas iela 12; r 15–25Ls; **P**) in Rūjiena. It's a slightly shabby establishment with an on-site restaurant. Rooms are nothing special, but acceptable for a night.

GAUJA NATIONAL PARK

Much of the area between Sigulda and Valmiera falls within **Gauja National Park** (Gaujas nacionālais parks; www.gnp.gov.lv). Founded in 1973, Latvia's first national park protects a diverse range of flora and fauna, and offers a multitude of forest and river hiking as well as biking trails and fabulous canoeing opportunities – a great way to explore the exquisite, pine-scented environment. The historic towns of Sigulda and Cēsis are main jumping-off points for exploring the park.

GAUJA NATIONAL PARK



SIGULDA

pop 10,855

This enchanted town stands on the southern edge of a picturesque, steep-sided, wooded section of the Gauja Valley and is spanned by a string of medieval castles and legendary caves. Just 53km east of Riga, it is known locally as the 'Switzerland of Latvia', although that title is a bit deceptive – the surrounding area is very pretty, but don't expect towering snowcapped peaks. That said, the bogs, green rolling hills, old wooden farmhouses and fields of yellow flowers create some pretty dreamy-looking countryside.

Sigulda is a minor health resort and winter sports centre, with an Olympic bobsled

run snaking down into the valley. It also is the primary gateway to the beautiful Gauja National Park, located northeast of town. Sigulda itself offers some excellent sleeping options – get away from hotels and check out the charming country guesthouses.

History

Finno-Ugric Liv tribes inhabited the area as far back as 2000 BC; by the 12th century they had built several wooden hill-top strongholds. In 1207, when the German crusaders were dividing up their spoils, the Gauja was chosen as the boundary in this area between the territories of the Knights of the Sword, who took the land south of the river, and of the archbishop of Rīga, who

took the north side. Both built prominent castles, as much to guard against each other, one suspects, as against any local uprising.

After suffering numerous wars, particularly between the 16th and 18th centuries, Sigulda developed as a country resort with the building of the Pskov–Rīga railway in 1889. The Russian owner of the local estate, Prince Kropotkin, sold off land to wealthy Rigans to build their own country houses.

Orientation

Sigulda is quite spread out, without a real centre. You enter the Gauja National Park as you descend the hill from the town towards the river.

Information

Gauja National Park Visitors Centre (☎ 797 1345; www.gnp.lv; Baznīcas iela 3; ☎ 9.30am–5pm Mon, to 6pm Tue–Sun) Sells park and town maps, arranges accommodation and guided tours and organises activities.

Latvijas Krājbanka (Pils iela 1) One of several ATMs.

Post office (Pils iela 2) Opposite the Latvijas Krājbanka.

SBS Online (Pils iela 3; per hr 0.70Ls; ☎ 9am–11pm)

Look for this Internet café on the 2nd floor.

Sigulda Tourism Information Centre (☎ 797 1335; www.sigulda.lv; Pils iela 6; ☎ 10am–7pm May–Oct, to 5pm Nov–Apr) Stocks reams of information on the region.

Unibanka (Rīgas iela 1) Has a currency-exchange facility and cashes AmEx traveller's cheques.

THE TURAIDA ROSE

Sigulda's local beauty, Maija, was taken into Turaida Castle as a little girl when she was found among the wounded after a battle in 1601. She grew into a famous beauty courted by men from far and wide, but she loved Viktors, a gardener at Sigulda Castle. They would meet in a cave halfway between the two castles.

One day a particularly desperate Polish officer among Maija's suitors lured her to the cave by means of a letter forged in Viktors' handwriting. Maija offered to give the Pole the scarf from around her neck, which she said had magical protective powers, if he let her go. To prove the scarf's powers, she suggested he swing at her with his sword. Whether this was a bluff or she really believed in the scarf isn't clear. Either way, the Pole duly took his swing, killed her and then fled.

Sights

GŪTMAŅIS' & VIKTORS' CAVES

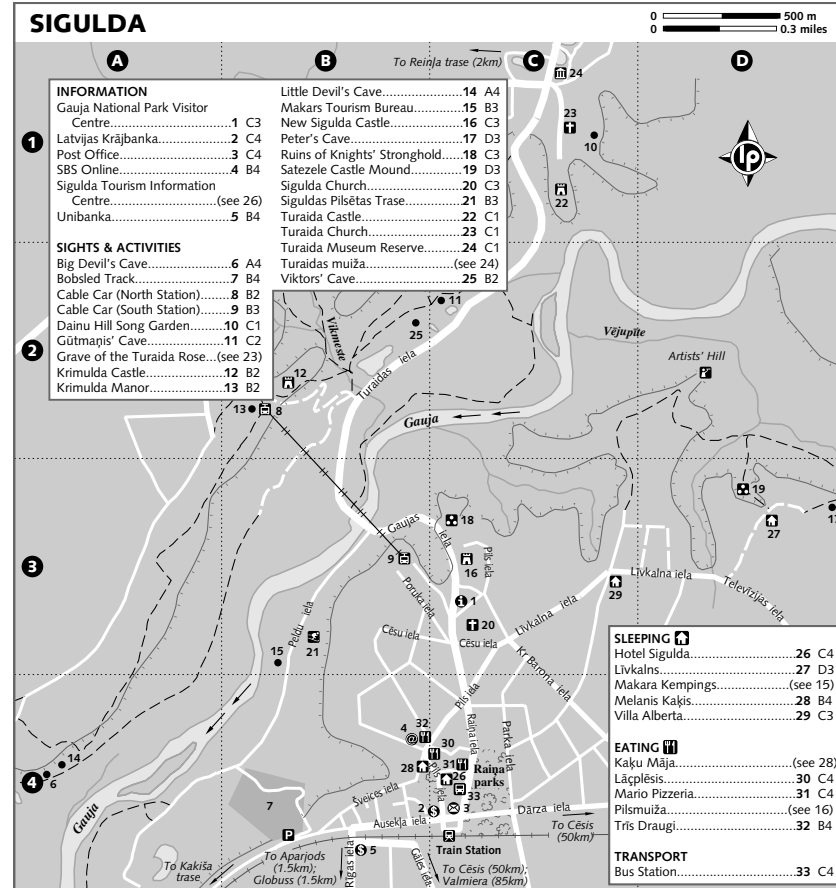
Below the viewing tower of Krimulda, immediately to the left of the castle, are some steep wooden steps. Walk down the 410 steps and then follow the wooden riverside path leading to **Gūtmaņis Cave** (Gūtmaņa ala), at the bottom of the north side of the valley. The cave is covered with graffiti going back to the 16th century – including the coats of arms of long-gone hunters. The water from the stream flowing out of the cave is supposed to remove facial wrinkles. Legend has it the cave is named after a healer who allegedly cured the sick with water from it. This cave is most famous, however, for its role in the tragic legend of the Turaida Rose (left). To get here take a Krimulda bus and get off at the Senleja stop.

The nearby **Viktors' Cave** (Viktora ala) was supposedly dug out by Viktors to allow Maija to sit and watch the castle gardens where he worked.

TURAIDA MUSEUM RESERVE

The centrepiece of Sigulda's **Turaida Museum Reserve** (Turaidas muzejrezervāts; ☎ 797 1402; www.turaida-muzejs.lv; admission 1.50Ls; ☎ 9.30am–8pm May–Oct, 10am–5pm Nov–Apr) is **Turaida Castle** (Turaidas pils; ☎ 10am–6pm May–Oct, to 5pm Nov–Apr), a red-brick archbishop's castle founded in 1214 on the site of a Liv stronghold. It was blown up when lightning hit its gunpowder store during the 18th century. The restored castle – whose name, Turaida, means 'God's Garden' in ancient Livonian – is better viewed from a distance, but the museum inside the 15th-century **granary** offers a rather interesting account of the Livonian state from 1319 to 1561. Further exhibitions can be viewed in the 42m-high **Donjon Tower**, and the castle's western and southern towers.

On the path between the castle and the road is the small wooden-spired **Turaida Church** (Turaidas Baznīca; ☎ 10am–6pm Wed–Sun May–Oct), built in 1750 and housing a small history exhibition. In the churchyard two lime trees shade the grave of the legendary Turaida Rose. The headstone bears the inscription 'Turaidas Roze 1601–1620'. Viktors himself is said to have buried Maija and planted one of the trees, then disappeared without trace. The hillside behind the church is known as **Daina Hill** (Dainu kalns) and shelters the **Daina Hill Song Garden**. The *daina* (poetic folk



song) is a major Latvian tradition, and the hillside is dotted with sculptures dedicated to epic Latvian heroes immortalised in the *dainas*.

More paths twist around the estate past the **estate manager's house**, home to an exhibition on collective farming in the 1950s; the **dog keeper's house**, where wood craft tools are displayed; the **smithy**, still operational; the **cart house**, which hosts various farming exhibitions; and the old 19th-century **sauna**. All these exhibitions are open 10am–6pm from Wednesday to Sunday, May to October.

Kārļa Hill (Kārļa kalns), facing Turaida Castle across the ravine which the road ascends, was another old Liv stronghold.

SIGULDA CASTLES & CHURCH

Little remains of the **knights' stronghold** (Siguldas pilsdrupas), built between 1207 and 1226 among woods on the northeastern edge of Sigulda. The castle hasn't been repaired since the Great Northern War, but its ruins are perhaps more evocative because of that. There's a great view through the trees to the archbishop's reconstructed Turaida Castle, on the far side of the valley.

On the way to the ruins from town, you pass **Sigulda Church** (Siguldas baznīca), built in 1225 and rebuilt in the 17th and 18th centuries, and also the 19th-century **New Sigulda Castle** (Siguldas jaunā pils), the former residence of Prince Kropotkin and now a sanatorium.

KRIMULDA CASTLE & MANOR

On the northern side of the valley, a track leads up from near the bridge to ruined **Krimulda Castle** (Krimuldass pilsdrupas), built between 1255 and 1273 and once used as a guesthouse for visiting dignitaries. A good way to reach the castle is by **cable car** (☎ 797 2531; www.lgk.lv; Poruka iela 14; admission 0.50Ls; ☎ 9am-5pm Jun-Aug, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun May-Sep), which crosses the valley (west of Raiņa iela) every 15 minutes and affords splendid views. The big white building just west of the northern cable-car station is **Krimulda Manor** (Krimuldass muižas pils; Mednieku iela 3), built in 1897, confiscated by the government in 1922 and later turned into a tuberculosis hospital. Today it is a sanatorium.

Buses link Sigulda bus station with Turaida and Krimulda eight or nine times per day. Bus departure times are posted at the bus station.

Activities

Sigulda is probably the best town in Latvia to get your adrenaline rushing.

BALLOONING & BUNGEE JUMPING

To get a different perspective on things, try a 43m **bungee jump** (☎ 664 0660; www.lgk.lv; first/subsequent jump 15/13Ls) from the cable car which crosses the Gauja. Jumps are on Saturdays and Sundays, May to September, from 6.30pm until the last customer has jumped.

Less stomach turning are hot-air balloon flights organised by **Altius** (☎ 761 1614; www

.altius.lv; 50min flight per person 70Ls). Call to arrange a flight; balloons depart at any time, year-round, in good weather conditions.

BOBSLEDDING & SKIING

Sigulda's 1200m artificial **bobsled track** (☎ 797 3813; Sveices iela 13) was built for the former Soviet bobsleigh team. Today, the track hosts a portion of the European luge championships every January. In winter you can fly down the 16-bend track at 80km/h in a five-person **Vuchko tourist bob** (admission 2Ls; ☎ 11am-6pm Sat & Sun Nov-Feb), while summer speed fiends can ride a **wheel bob** (admission 3Ls; ☎ 11am-6pm Sat & Sun May-Sep). If your stomach is not up to it, scale the **viewing tower** (adult/child 0.30/0.15Ls; ☎ 8am-dusk) instead for a panoramic view of the bobsled run snaking into the valley.

Sigulda sports several gentle **downhill ski slopes**, with lifts, and snow-covered from late November until March or April. **Pilsētas trase** (350m; ☎ 944 7713; Peldu iela 4; per lift 0.25Ls; ☎ 3-6pm Mon-Thu, 10am-midnight Fri & Sat, 10am-10pm Sun), also known as the city ski slope; **Reiņa trase** (150m; ☎ 927 2255; Kalnzaķi; lift per hr/day 2/5Ls; ☎ 3-6pm & 7pm-1am Mon-Fri, 11am-6pm & 7pm-1am Sat & Sun), in Krimulda; and **Kakiša trase** (300m; ☎ 944 7713; Senču iela 1; per lift from 0.20Ls; ☎ 2-10pm Mon-Thu, 2pm-midnight Fri & Sat, 2-11pm Sun) are the main slopes. You can hire skis, poles and boots at all three slopes for about 3/12Ls per hour/day.

WALKING

Walking to the main sites – New Sigulda Castle, Gūtmaņis' Cave and Turaida Castle –

is a fabulous way to stretch your legs. Within the Turaida Museum Reserve a series of gentle nature trails is marked, ranging from 200m to 800m in length.

A good circular walk on the castle's eastern side – about 6km to and from Sigulda Church – heads first to **Satezele Castle Mound** (Satezeles pilskalns), another Liv stronghold, then on to **Peter's Cave** (Pēteris ala), found on a steep bank of the Vējupīte River, before reaching **Artists' Hill** (Gleznotāju kalns), which offers an excellent 12km panorama.

On the northern bank you could walk downstream from the bridge to the **Little Devil's Cave** (Mazā velnala) and **Big Devil's Cave** (Lielā velnala), then return along the top of the escarpment to Krimulda Castle – about 7km. The Little Devil's Cave has a **Spring of Wisdom** (Gudribas avotiņš). The Big Devil's Cave has black walls from the fiery breath of a travelling demon that once sheltered for a day here to avoid sunlight.

The Gauja National Park Visitors Centre (p228) has details of plenty more walks in the national park. Particularly interesting are its day- and night-time bird-watching and birdsong-discovery walks.

CYCLING, ROLLERBLADING & HORSE RIDING

In summer you can rent bicycles and Rollerblades from **Eži** (☎ 942 8846; Pils iela 4a; per day 5Ls; ☎ 10am-8pm May-Oct).

Turaidas muiža (☎ 912 4360; Turaidas iela 10; ☎ 11am-8pm) organises various horse-riding activities, including treks (from 16Ls per person per hour) and horse-drawn carriage rides (5Ls for four people for 20 minutes) around the national park.

Sleeping

Wild camping is permitted in certain designated areas in the national park. Apart from camping, budget options don't really exist. Unless otherwise mentioned, all places listed here include breakfast.

Villa Alberta (☎ 797 1060; www.zl.lv/villaalberta; Līvkaļna iela 10A; r 35-55Ls; ☎) A classy option in town, a lot of time went into decorating the uniquely furnished and spacious rooms. The deluxe rooms, with rich tapestries, Jacuzzis and satellite TV, are huge and a steal at just 55Ls. The attached bar and restaurant serves a variety of food (meals 4Ls to 8Ls), including pastas, Mexican dishes and Latvian fare.

Līvkaļns (☎ 797 0916; www.livkaļns.lv; Pēteralas iela; s/d from 24/30Ls; ☎) A peaceful and romantic choice, Līvkaļns overlooks a lake and has well-maintained grounds. The large wooden thatched-roof house has eight spacious rooms with pale wooden furnishings and muted colours. All are spotless and comfortable. The restaurant gets good reviews.

Aparjods (☎ 770 5225; www.aparjods.lv; Ventas iela 1b; s/d/tr 28/30/40Ls; ☎) A rustic reed- and shingle-roofed place 1.5km south of town, Aparjods merges old and new styles with solid results. Soft duvets and sturdy oak doors are highlights of the cosy rooms.

Hotel Sigulda (☎ 797 2263; www.hotelsigulda.lv; Pils iela 6; s/d 30/42Ls; ☎) A comfortable and modern hotel, it has spacious rooms with sloping ceilings and bright bedcovers. The pool with steam room (2Ls per hour) and sauna (up to four people 30Ls per hour) are oddly open only on Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

Melanis Kājis (☎ 797 0272; Pils iela 8; r 25Ls; ☎) This new place has immaculate rooms with bright walls and sturdy furniture. The rooms are a bit cramped, and were rather hot when we stopped by, but the central location and on-site bar and restaurant (Kaķu Māja) make it a decent find. If you can't locate reception, ask about rooms at the restaurant.

Makara Kempings (☎ 924 4948; www.makars.lv; Peldu iela 1; person/tent/car/caravan 3/1.50/1.50/4.50Ls; ☎ 15 May-15 Sep) Pitch your tent at this riverside camping place inside the national park. Enjoy a traditional Latvian sauna for 15Ls per hour. Two-person tents can be rented for 4Ls a day.

SLEEPING BENEATH THE STARS

Twenty-two 'wild' camp sites, which are intended for hikers and canoeists, are strung along the banks of the Gauja between Sigulda and Cēsis – the most scenic stretch of valley. They're mostly on the northern bank, but there's one opposite Katrīna Bank at Līgatne (accessible by car or on foot from Līgatne Education and Recreation Park; p232) and a couple more on the Amata River between Zvārtas Iezis and the Gauja. Both the information centre at the Līgatne Education and Recreation Park, and the national park visitor centre (p228) in Sigulda can tell you where they are.

CANOE TRIPS

Vidzeme's Gauja and Salaca Rivers are both fine canoeing terrain. The 220km stretch of the Gauja between Vireši and Sigulda is particularly good, flowing through some of Latvia's best scenery with nothing more hazardous than some fairly gentle rapids. Riverside camp sites dot this whole stretch; above Valmiera the river flows through almost entirely unspoilt country.

You can set up a Gauja canoe trip through many organizations. On the banks of the river in Sigulda, inside the Gauja National Park, **Makars Tourism Agency** (☎ 924 4948; www.makars.lv; Peldu iela 1) arranges one- to three-day water tours in two- to four-person boats from Sigulda, Līgatne, Cēsis and Valmiera, ranging in length from 3km to 85km. Tours cost between 10Ls and 40Ls per boat including equipment, transportation between Sigulda and the tour's starting point, and camp-site fees for up to four people. Tents, sleeping bags and life jackets can also be rented for a nominal fee. For the less intrepid paddler, Makars rents out canoes and rubber boats seating between two and six people for about 10Ls per day.

Valmiera's **Sporta Bāze Bailji** (☎ 422 1861; www.bailji.lv) arranges various one-day canoe trips that cost 22Ls (24km, Valmiera–Strenči), 40Ls (83km Valmiera–Sigulda) or 30Ls (45km, Valmiera–Cēsis). Trips spread across two days or more cost more. The company also offers one-day rafting trips for 115Ls. The price includes a boat, paddles, life jackets and transport.

Eating & Drinking

Aparjods (☎ 770 5225; www.aparjods.lv; Ventas iela 1b) This place dishes up delicious food (meals 12Ls) in an elegant dark-wood setting with fireplace and interesting B&W photos of old Sigulda on the walls. Sample traditional herrings with curd or for a splash out with friends order an entire roasted piglet (110Ls). Retire to the on-site dance club after dinner.

Kaku Māja (☎ 797 0272; Pils iela 8; meals 4-10Ls) Artsy and modern, the restaurant and nightclub part of this slick complex features steel and wood décor and very funky orange-striped chairs – a rather unexpected find. The food is meat and fish oriented. The adjacent canteen-style café has a sumptuous pastry selection.

Mario Pizzeria (☎ 797 3322; Pils iela 4b; meals 4-12Ls) If you're tiring of Latvian fare, head to this quaint little pizzeria with lots of choices and fabulous English translations – 'fowl ham' pizza was our favourite. The thin-crust pizza is quite tasty, and cooked just right.

Trīs Draugi (☎ 797 3721; Pils iela 9; meals from 2Ls) Trīs Draugi is a bright and sparkling place where you can be served – canteen-style – with large, tasty helpings of cheap food. Sit at the outside picnic tables under the trees.

Lāčplēšis (☎ 797 4640; Pils iela 8; meals 4Ls; ☎ 8am-2am) Directly opposite Trīs Draugi, this place is mainly a bar with lots of pool tables, darts and one-armed bandits (slot machines). It's very clean with funky red curtains and serves light meals in a pub-style setting.

Pilsmuiža (☎ 797 1425; Pils iela 16; meals 7Ls) Inside New Sigulda Castle, this eatery overlooks the ruins of the castle and has panoramic views of the Gauja Valley. The food is typical Latvian fare.

Globuss (Ventas iela 1; meals from 1Ls; ☎ 24hr) This supermarket has a small bistro for those needing to eat on the cheap.

Getting There & Away

Buses trundle the 50-odd kilometres between Sigulda bus station and Rīga (1Ls, two hours, six daily).

Ten trains a day on the Rīga-Sigulda-Cēsis-Valmiera line stop at Sigulda. Fares from Sigulda include Rīga (2Ls, 1¼ hours), Valmiera (1.5Ls, 1¼ hours), Līgatne (0.50Ls, 10 minutes) and Cēsis (1Ls, 50 minutes).

LĪGATNE

pop 1365

Although the village of Līgatne, in the heart of the Gauja National Park, is in itself unremarkable, some of Latvia's loveliest countryside is a mere hop, skip and jump from the village, making it a good base from which to explore the area.

On the southern side of the river, about 4km west of Līgatne village and 15km northeast of Sigulda, is **Līgatne Education and Recreation Park** (Līgatnes mācību un atpūtas parks; ☎ 415 3313; adult/child 1/0.50Ls; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon, to 6.30pm Tue-Sun May-Oct), a nature park where elks, beaver, deer, bison, lynxes and wild boar roam in sizable open-air enclosures in the forest. A 5.1km motor circuit and a network of footpaths link a series of observation points, and there's a 22m observation tower with a fine panorama. Marked footpaths include a 5.5km nature trail with wild animals, a botanical trail (1.1km), a wild nature trail (1.3km) and a fun fairy-tale trail (900m), which winds its way through a fantastical path of 90-odd wooden sculptures.

One of the national park's camp sites (see boxed text, p231) is opposite Katrīna Bank in Līgatne. It is accessible by car or foot from Līgatne Education and Recreation Park. In a log-style building, **Lāču Mīga** (☎ 750 6604; www.lacumiga.lv; Gaujas iela 22; s/d 22/35Ls; ☎) has rooms with TVs and coffee makers. There are nearby trails for walking and cross-country skiing, along with a restaurant, terrace bar and grocery store selling takeaway.

Public transport is poor. The bus stop nearest to the nature park is Gaujasmalā, 2km from the entrance. Five buses daily are scheduled from Cēsis to Zvārtas iezis, but the service is erratic. You can always get a bus or suburban train to Līgatne village's main road or to Jerīķi, then walk or hitch.

Coming from the north (Straupe direction), you can catch a **car ferry** across the Gauja to Līgatne. A single fare is 0.40Ls per person, plus 1Ls per car. Boats run from May to September between 6am and 11pm. From Līgatne village, follow the signs for 'Līgatnes Pārceļtuve'.

CĒSIS

pop 19,471

We just loved historic Cēsis, Latvia's most Latvian town. Decidedly romantic, Cēsis is made for wandering. The main drag, Rīgas

ielā, has loads of character and is lined with old tan and brown stone buildings. Check out the crumbling castle, the country's oldest brewery (although the famous beer is now produced in a slick facility outside town) or meander down to the small murky lake and nap on grassy grounds shaded by ancient trees. About 30km northeast of Sigulda, Cēsis was once the headquarters of the Livonian Order. Open-air concerts are often held in summer on the castle grounds.

Orientation

The bus and train stations are on the eastern fringe. From here Raunas iela leads to the main square, Vienības laukums.

Information

Capital Datorsalons (☎ 410 7111; Rīgas iela 7; per hr 0.50Ls; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Internet access.

Cēsis tourist office (☎ 412 1815; www.cesis.lv; Pils laukums 2; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun mid-May-mid-Sep, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri rest of year)

Latvijas Krābanka (Vienības laukums) There's an ATM outside.

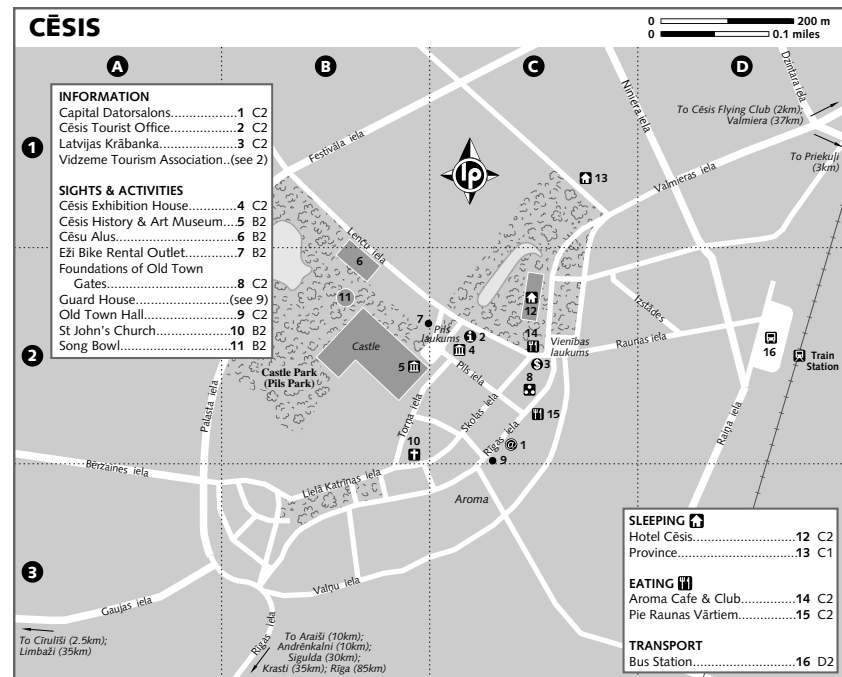
Vidzeme Tourism Association (☎ 412 2011; info@vta.apollo.lv) This is based at the Cēsis tourist office. It arranges accommodation in private homes in rural Vidzeme.

Sights

CASTLE, MUSEUM & PARK

Cēsis Castle (Cēsu pils) was founded in 1209 by the Knights of the Sword. Its dominant feature is two stout towers at the western end. To enter, visit **Cēsis History & Art Museum** (Cēsu Vēstures un mākslas muzejs; Pils laukums 9; adult/child 0.30/0.20Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), in the adjoining 18th-century 'new castle', painted salmon pink. Temporary art exhibitions and chamber-music concerts are held in **Cēsis Exhibition House** (Cēsu Izstāžu nams; ☎ 412 3557; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) next to the tourist office on the same square. The yellow-and-white building housed stables and a coach house (1781) in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Pretty **Castle Park** (Pils park) has a song bowl, lake and a Russian Orthodox church. On the far side from the church is the 19th-century building of **Cēsu Alus** (Cēsis Brewery; ☎ 412 2245; Leņču iela 9/11). It has brewed beer since 1590. Opening hours vary; just stop by.



OLD TOWN

Old Town runs south from the bottom end of Vienības laukums. Just off this square, at the top of Rīgas iela, the foundations of the Old Town gates have been excavated and left exposed. Nearby, the **Old Town hall** and **guard house** (Rīgas iela 7) dates to 1767.

The main landmark is **St John's Church** (Svētā Jāņa baznīca; Skolas iela), which dates back to 1287 and makes for an impressive photo. Its original Gothic form has been altered, with the towers dating back to 1853. Inside, the church has some fine stained glass and a baby-blue ceiling.

Activities

Cyclists can hire wheels from the **Eži bike rental outlet** (☎ 428 1764; Pils laukums 1; per hr/day 1/5Ls; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sun Apr-Sep).

In winter skiers and snowboarders poodle down the gentle slopes and cross-country trails at **Cirulīši** (☎ 412 5225; cirulikalns@e-apollo.lv; Cirulīšu iela 70), on Cēsis' southwesternmost fringe. The tourist office has details of other places to ski in the region, such as **Andrēnkalni** (10km south near Skujenes) and **Krasti** (some 25km further south near Drabēši).

Sleeping & Eating

Unless otherwise noted, the following places include breakfast.

Hotel Cēsis (☎ 412 2392; www.danlat-group.lv; Vienības laukums 1; s/d 30/42Ls; P) This hotel looks slightly dreary outside, but is almost posh inside. Rooms are spacious with fine linens. Staff at reception speak good English, and it's a solid tourist-class place. The in-house restaurant serves strictly Latvian cuisine (meals 4Ls to 10Ls) in a formal setting and is the place to eat in town.

Province (☎ 412 0849; Niniera iela 6; s/d 17/28Ls; P) The five rooms here are simple but spotless with cherry bedspreads. The popular restaurant in a glass conservatory is quite stylish and offers lots of pork, pancake and salad selections (meals 4Ls to 10Ls). The flavourful shrimp soup (0.85Ls) makes a great starter. Breakfast is not included.

Pie Raunas Vārtiem (☎ 919 2938; Rīgas iela 8; meals from 6Ls; ☎) In a lovely yellow building with a wooden ceiling and fresh flowers, this is the spot for traditional and authentic Latvian fodder in an appealing rustic setting.

Aroma Café & Club (☎ 412 7575; Lencū iela 4; meals 4-8Ls) By day Aroma is a lively café with 70

types of coffee and tea on, along with light Latvian snacks and pastries. At night the back opens into a slick club with an industrial vibe, with red walls and silver piping.

Getting There & Away

Cēsis bus station is served by at least hourly buses daily to/from Rīga (1.30Ls, two hours) and about 10 daily to/from Valmiera (0.50Ls, 45 minutes). There are six daily trains between Cēsis and Rīga (1.30Ls, 1¼ to two hours).

ĀRAIŠI

Popped on an islet in the middle of Āraišu Lake, about 10km south of Cēsis, **Āraiši Lake Fortress** (Āraišu ezerpils; ☎ 419 7288; adult/child 0.60/0.20Ls; ☎ 10am-6pm May-mid-Oct) is a reconstruction of a settlement inhabited by ancient Latgalians in the 9th and 10th centuries. A wooden walkway leads across the water to the unusual village, which was built on a low flooded islet, fortified like a hill fort and discovered by archaeologists in 1965. About 40 log houses originally stood on the site – 15 have been rebuilt in recent times.

Peering across the lake are the ruins of **Āraiši stone castle** (Āraišu mūra pils), built by Livonians in the 14th century and destroyed by Ivan IV's troops in 1577. From here a path leads to a reconstructed Stone Age settlement – there's a couple of reed dwellings and earth ovens for roasting meat and fish. A Bronze Age dwelling will also be built on the lakeshore. The fortress and castle, together with the 18th-century **Āraiši windmill** (Āraišu vējdzimava; ☎ 419 7288) signposted 1km along a dirt track from the main road, form the **Āraiši Museum Park** (Āraišu muzejparks).

VALMIERA

pop 28,732

Although less historic than Sigulda or Cēsis, as most of its Old Town burnt down in 1944, Valmiera (formerly Wolmar) dishes out its own brand of easy country charm. About 30km north of Cēsis, it sits at the northeastern tip of the Gauja National Park, just outside its boundaries. Quiet tree-lined streets, peaceful riverbanks and a bonanza of outdoor adventures are among its highlights.

Orientation

The focus is the road bridge across the Gauja. Cēsu iela and its continuation, Stacijas iela,

leads south from the bridge to the bus station (100m or so), opposite the corner of Cēsu iela, and on to the train station (800m). The centre is on the northern side of the bridge.

Information

Datocentras (☎ 428 1818; info@devia.lv; Tērbatas iela 1; per hr 0.50Ls; ☎ 9am-11pm) Internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 420 7177; www.valmiera.gov.lv; Bruninieku iela 2; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat May-Sep) Sells maps and arranges private accommodation.

Sights

Valmiera's pinprick historic area stands on a point of land between the Gauja River and a tributary called the Ažkalna. **St Simon's Church** (Svētā Sīmaņa Baznīca; Bruninieku iela 2) dates to 1283 and shelters a fine 19th-century organ. You can climb its church tower for a nominal fee. Along the same street are the ruins of **Valmiera Castle**, founded by the Livonian Order.

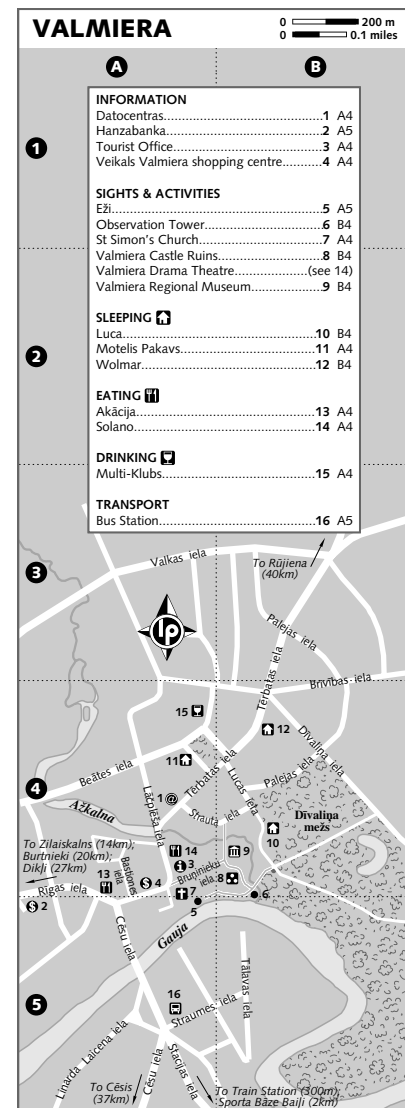
Continue to **Valmiera Regional Museum** (Valmieras Novadpētniecības muzejs; ☎ 423 2733; Bruninieku iela 3; adult/child 0.50/0.30Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat). Its collection is of limited interest, but it's a good source of information on the district – if you read Latvian.

The curtains rose for the first time at **Valmiera Drama Theatre** (☎ 422 3300; Lāčplēša iela 4) in 1885. The current building dates to 1987.

There's an **observation tower** on the hill-ock Valterkalniņš, just above the meeting of the Ažkalna and the Gauja. Across a small bridge over the Ažkalna, a loop of land surrounded by the Gauja has been preserved as a woodland park.

Activities

In town, **Eži** (☎ 420 7263; www.ezi.lv; Valdemāra iela; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun), once a popular hostel, now concentrates solely on outdoor adventures. It organises all sorts of active pursuits – from themed one- or two-day hiking and biking excursions to river rafting to zip-wires through the trees (trips start at 20Ls per day). It also rents out mountain bikes (2/6Ls per hour/day), helmets (2Ls per day), saddlebags and seats for kids (each 2Ls per day) along with canoes (10Ls per day). In winter the company does cross-country skiing tours across lakes and through snow-covered forests complete with picnic lunch cooked over a bonfire in the woods.



Sporta Bāze Baili (p236) is another option for water sports, organising raft and canoe trips on the Gauja and Salaca Rivers; for more on these trips see the boxed text, p230. The place also has a short mountain-bike trail through forest and there's winter skiing. A half-day ski pass (valid from 11am to 4pm or from 4pm to 11pm) for

the centre's 10 slopes costs about 6Ls, and you can hire equipment for another 2.50Ls per day. Although the place boasts a black run, the slopes are pretty horizontal (they don't have a lot of elevation to work with – in the summer it looked as if one of the runs started on the hotel's roof!).

Sleeping

Unless stated otherwise, all rates include breakfast.

Wolmar (☎ 420 7301; www.wolmar.lv; Tērbatas iela 16a; 20/27Ls; Ⓟ) The town's modern, up-market choice, it features 30 comfortable rooms. Pay 10Ls per hour to be mollycoddled with a sauna and massage. It has an on-site café and bar.

Sporta Bāze Baiļi (☎ 422 1861; www.baiļi.lv; camp site 1.50Ls plus per person 1Ls, chalet from 30Ls, r 15Ls; Ⓟ) This place, open only during summer, has self-contained wooden chalets with private bathroom, plus camp sites and hotel rooms. Hotel rooms are in a very old and rickety building, the roof of which appears to double as a ski run. Linens are scratchy and rooms are small, but include comfy touches like slippers and satellite TV. To reach Baiļi, go south along Stacijas iela from the Gauja bridge, then turn left (east) just after the Statoil station along Kauguru iela. Rates do not include breakfast, but there is an on-site café.

Luca (☎ 422 3988; luca-haus@one.lv; Lucas iela 2; s/d 12/18Ls; Ⓟ) Luca is a squeaky-clean guesthouse on the edge of a pretty park, with English- and German-speaking staff. The wooden house doubles as a German cultural centre and library.

Motelis Pakavs (☎ 428 1050; Beātes iela 5; 14/19Ls; Ⓟ) It's looking a bit rundown these days with lots of peeling paint, but the place touts six very beige doubles, an equally beige in-house café, and a bar frequented by a stony-faced clientele.

Eating & Drinking

Dining options are frustratingly limited. In a nutshell, the choice is the café at the Wolmar (above) or the following.

Akācija (☎ 423 3812; Rīgas iela 10; meals 4Ls) This busy bar with a token handful of tables dishes up a vast array of satisfying creations. Its veal cooked in wine with mushrooms and potato pancakes is recommended. There's an attached nightclub.

Solano (Lāčplēša iela 4; meals 2Ls) Known for cheap but tasty traditional Latvian cuisine, Solano is inside the drama theatre.

Multi-Klubs (☎ 423 2114; Tīrgu iela 5) In a big red building, it's the place to sink bar snacks and beer. Air hockey and a machine to test alcohol levels are other features of this surprisingly with-it nightclub.

Getting There & Away

From Valmiera **bus station** (☎ 422 4728; www.autobusunoma.lv; Stacijas iela 1) buses run hourly between 4.55am and 7.55pm to/from Rīga (1.50Ls, 2½ hours). Other services include 10 to 15 buses a day to/from Cēsis (0.50Ls, 45 minutes).

The **train station** (☎ 582 7232; Stacijas laukums) is served by five trains daily to/from Rīga (1.55Ls, 1¾ to three hours) via Cēsis (0.60Ls, 40 minutes) and Sigulda (1Ls, 20 minutes).

Around Valmiera

Heading 18km northeast on the Valmiera–Valka road, you hit Strenči, known for the Strenči Rapids, 4km below the town on the Gauja. With its steep, high banks, this is reckoned to be the most scenic stretch of the entire river. To get paddling, contact a canoeing centre; see boxed text, p230. The village hosts a raft festival on the third Sunday in May.

Blue Hill (Zilaiskalns), topped by a lookout tower 14km west of Valmiera, and **Lake Burtnieku**, about 23km north, off the Mazsalaca road, are other local beauty spots. **Burtnieki** village, on the southern edge of the lake, is known for its **horse-breeding centre** (Burtnieku zirgaudzētava; ☎ 425 6444). When the Latvian show-jumping team isn't in training, you can ride (5Ls per hour) or be driven around the exceptionally pretty village in a horse-drawn carriage (15Ls). The centre is signposted 'stallis' (stables) from the village.

VALKA

pop 6927

Unless you're heading to Estonia, there's little reason to visit the border town of Valka about 45km northeast of Valmiera. On the road and train line to Tartu in Estonia, Valka is the Latvian (and smaller) part of the unique twin town of Valga/Valka – divided between Latvia and Estonia when the republics were declared in 1920. The

border, ironically nonexistent in Soviet times, is marked by a fence and can now be crossed in town.

The history of the 'great divide' and the 142 buildings Valka was allocated is explained in the **Valka Regional Museum** (Valkas novadpētniecības muzejs; ☎ 472 2198; Rīgas iela 64; adult/child 0.50/0.30Ls; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Fri, to 4pm Sat), which doubles as an unofficial tourist office.

Valka's sole hotel, **Oltā Elpa** (☎ 472 2280; Zvaigžņu iela 12; s/d 17/20Ls; Ⓟ) is modern, with tastefully furnished rooms and a decent restaurant. Saunas (8Ls per hour) and meals (4Ls) are also available.

From Valka bus station, at the northern end of Rīgas iela, daily buses run to/from Rīga (2Ls, 3¾ hours, up to four daily). There are no buses to/from Estonia; a **taxi** (☎ 987 1999) to Valka from the rank in front of the bus station should cost no more than 4Ls.

The main train station is on the Estonian side, but one or two trains daily to/from Rīga (2Ls; via Cēsis and Sigulda) stop on the Latvian side in Lugaži (1km off the main road, down a dirt road).

ALŪKSNE, GULBENE & AROUND

The primary reason to visit this area is to take a ride on the **Gulbene–Alūksne Narrow-Gauge Railway** (☎ 953 1097; www.banitis.lv; one-way ticket 0.70Ls), the only narrow-gauge railway still operating in Latvia today. Trains depart from Gulbene at 6am, 1.25pm and 6pm and meander through 33km of lovely, hilly countryside to Alūksne. The journey, by diesel locomotives and modern carriages, takes 1½ hours. Trains depart Alūksne at 7.50am, 3.20pm and 7.50pm.

Gulbene is a run-down town that holds little interest for tourists. By contrast, sleepy Alūksne is rather delightful and one of Latvia's prettier small villages. Still, there's not a lot to see or do, and you'll really only need a few hours to wander around. Alūksne, located 202km east of Rīga, is best known as being home to Ernest Glueck (1654–1705), a Lutheran clergyman who was the first person to translate the Bible into Latvian. You can study sermons and check out hymns at the **Ernest Glueck Bible Museum** (Ersta Glikā Bībeles muzejs; ☎ 432 3164; Pils iela 25a; adult/child 0.40/0.20Ls; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Thu, 8am–5pm Fri, 10am–2pm Sat), located in his old home. The nearby **Museum of Local Studies & Art** (Mākslas muzejs; ☎ 432 1363; Pils iela 74; adult/child 0.30/0.10Ls; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Thu,

8am–5pm Fri, 10am–2pm Sat) features exhibits pertaining to the region, and a small collection of oil paintings by Leo Kokles.

Or, take a day trip to the **Museum of Local Studies** (kalncempju novadpētniecības muzejs ates dzirnavas; ☎ 434 5452; admission 1Ls; ☎ 9am–5pm Wed–Mon) midway between Alūksne and Gulbene (as the crow flies) in Kalncempji. Granaries, a smithy, barns, a watermill, and 4000 exhibitions and photos are among this open-air farm museum's exhibits. During the lively harvest festival, on the second Saturday in September, test your threshing and rope-making skills, then relax with a slab of homemade bread and mug of home-brewed beer.

Nearby, in the small town of Stāmeriena, you can spend the night at the tranquil **Vonadžini Guesthouse** (☎ 924 2551; www.vonadzini.lv; Skolas iela 1; r from 18Ls; Ⓟ). On the shores of Lake Ludza, the thatched-roofed guesthouse offers 16 tidy rooms, a restaurant and a children's playground.

Anyone driving west from Alūksne to Valmiera might consider a side trip to **Zvārtava Manor**, built in a neo-Gothic style in 1882. The park-clad estate in Zvārtava is about 2km northwest of Gaujiena, signposted off the P23. Gaujiena itself is home to **Annipās** (☎ 435 7101; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Sat), the house where Latvian song composer Joseph Wihtol (Jāzeps Vītols) spent most of his summers between 1922 and 1944 and composed some of his most important works.

Alūksne tourist office (☎ 432 2804; www.aluksne.lv/tourism; Dārza iela 8a; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri mid–Oct–mid–Apr, 9am–6pm Tue–Fri, 9am–3pm Sat mid–Apr–mid–Oct) stocks plenty of information on accommodation options in and around Alūksne.

VIDZEME UPLAND

Latvia's highest hills give way to the low-lying plains of Lubāna in the unique outdoor paradise of the Vidzeme Upland (Vidzemes Augstiene). Sandwiched between Cēsis and Madona, 80km southeast, forests and farms converge and two nature reserves offer ample opportunity for ecotourism adventures. From castle mounds to strange rock forms, from sacred springs of medicinal and mythological importance to baronial estates, churches and windmills, the Upland is both scenically and culturally appealing. Hills flag the approach to **Madona**, climaxing in Latvia's highest point, **Gaiziņkalns** (312m), 10km west of the small country town.

Picturesque lakes are sprinkled throughout the Upland, and the Gauja River, rising on the southern side of **Elkaskalns** (261m), flows in a big lazy circle around the region: east through Jaunpiebalga and Lejasciems, north past Vireši and Gaujiena to form the Latvian–Estonian border for a stretch, then southwest through Strenči and Valmiera.

Egļi, 28km southwest of Vecpiebalga, is a small ski resort. Latvian writer Rūdolfs Blaumanis (1863–1908) was born in **Braki**, 3km east, and his former home can be visited. Traditional musical instruments are exhibited in **Meņģeļi** (☎ 487 1077; adult/child 0.40/0.30Ls; 🕒 11am–4pm Thu–Sun), a picturesque farmstead by Lake Pulgosnis. It has a sauna and bathhouse (advance reservations only) and tents can be pitched on the lakeshore for 2Ls.

South of Madona, **Krustkalni Nature Reserve** (Krustkalni rezervāts; 30 sq km) and **Teiči Nature Reserve** (Teiču rezervāts; 190 sq km) serve up titillating treats for outdoor buffs. Fish or splash around in one of Krustkalni's nine lakes, or search for rare birds and plants in its forests and swamps. Teiči, 11km southeast, features even more lakes, 19 in total, along with Latvia's largest bog and a migrating crane population. Both reserves offer ample opportunities for mushroom and berry picking (the cranberries are particularly delicious). Ļaudona village, wedged between the two, is a handy base for forays into either reserve. Both parks are headquartered at **Madona tourist office** (☎ 486 0573; Saieta laukums 1; 🕒 8am–5pm Mon–Fri). You must visit the tourist office before entering either reserve; both are open by appointment only.

The Riga–Rēzekne–Moscow trunk road crosses the Upland from west to east (through Madona), but the north–south route from Cēsis to Madona (the P30 through Taurene and Vecpiebalga) is more scenic. The Riga–Pskov–St Petersburg road (the A2) crosses the northern part of Vidzeme Upland.

LATGALE

Anyone searching for the heart and soul of Latvia just might find their elixir in Latgale. Another scenic beauty queen, Latvia's poorest region is well off the mainstream tourist's radar screen. With placid, bright-blue lakes, timeworn, gracefully decaying castles and centuries-old churches still packing in

the faithful for Sunday Mass, Latgale has a timeless quality about it. From faded villages to the Soviet relic of Daugavpils, Latvia's second-largest city, the evidence of hard times is omnipresent. Life passes slowly here, but folks are friendly and this region's real attraction lies in its lack of serious attractions. Unless you're the type that relishes exploring one-shop towns, you'll probably want to head straight for the Latgale Upland. The region's most scenically enticing area, the Upland is packed with thousands of lakes to play in. It's also home to the shimmering white Aglona Basilica, Latvia's leading Roman Catholic shrine.

The southeastern region gets its name from the Latgal (Lettish) tribes who lived here at the time of the German invasion in the 12th century. It's also the main bastion of Roman Catholicism in Latvia, having been under Polish control from 1561 to 1772.

Getting There & Away

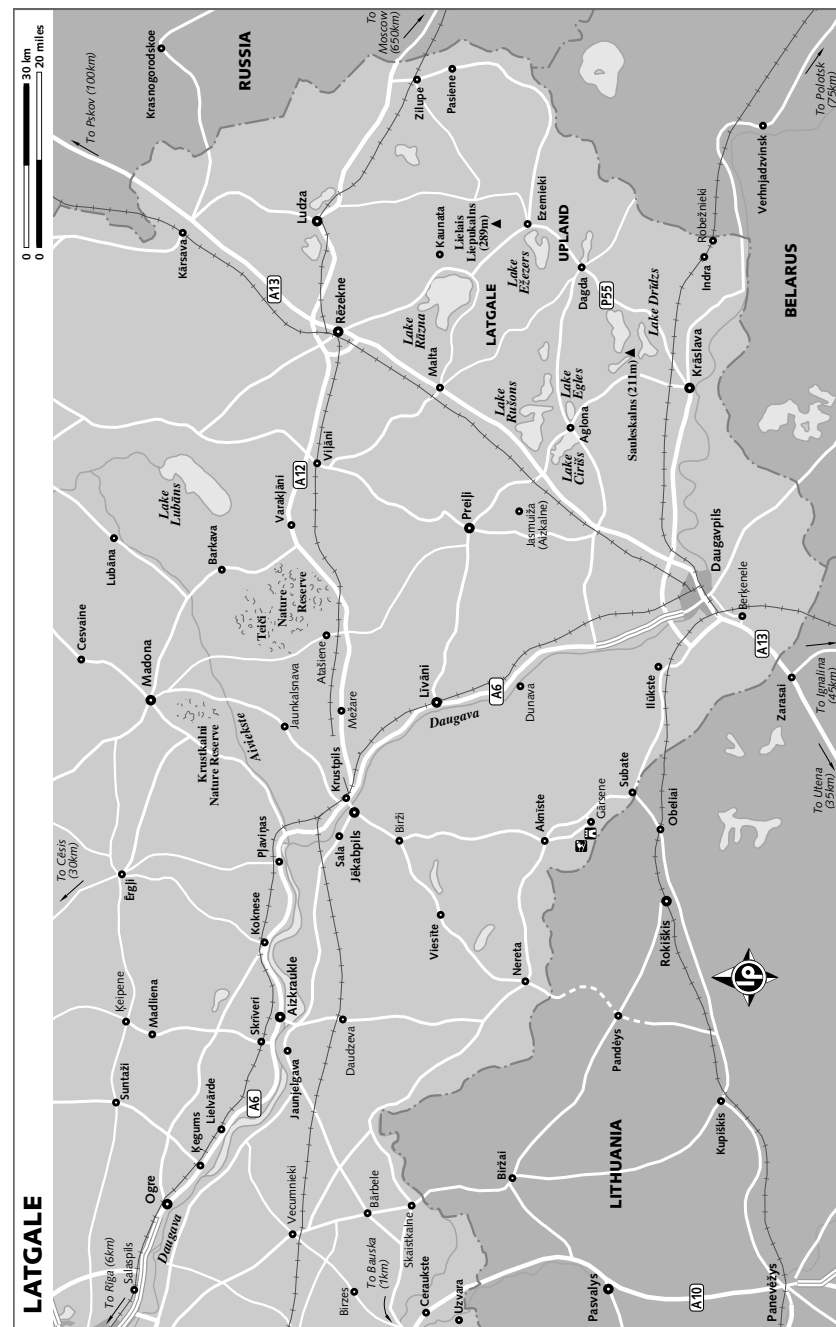
Buses and trains run between Riga and Daugavpils several times per day. Buses also travel between the capital and other Latgale towns. The Latgale Upland is best explored by private vehicle, as public transport in this area is unreliable.

DAUGAVA VALLEY

Latvia's Daugava River rises in western Russia then flows through Belarus and Latvia before emptying into the Gulf of Riga. The most impressive and longest river in the country, it has served as inspiration for myriad folk songs and mythical tales pertinent to Latvian culture. The Daugava Valley has been Latvia's main northwest–southwest transport corridor for centuries. Prior to hydroelectric construction projects, goods were transported downriver by rafts and barges. Today goods travel via a road and railway following the northern bank of the river and linking Riga to Daugavpils.

The area is neither spectacularly beautiful nor profoundly interesting, but has a few worthwhile sights. Those interested in poetry may find a stop particularly worthwhile, as the Daugava Valley was home to two of Latvia's best-known poets, who are remembered in local museums.

From Riga, the first worthy stopping place is **Ķegums**, 50km east of the city. Visit the hydroelectric plant, dam and on-site



MYTH OF LĀČPLĒSIS

Latvia's famous myth of Lāčplēsis runs roughly as follows: Lāčplēsis, the son of a bear mother, lived in Lielvārde. He inherited his mother's bear ears and thus was at first named Lāčausis (The One With Bear's Ears). But as the young Lāčausis grew stronger and was able to defend his family against wild animals, he was renamed Lāčplēsis – from *lācis* (bear) and *plēst* (to tear apart).

Another, more creative variant of the myth holds that Lāčplēsis' father, rather than his mother, was actually the bear from whom he inherited his ears. Lāčplēsis' father kidnapped and impregnated a woman (Lāčplēsis' mother) and kept her trapped in his lair by means of a large stone to block her escape path. When Lāčplēsis grew up, he rolled away the stone, killed his father the bear and rescued his mother.

Lāčplēsis' real trouble began with a witch who lived on the opposite bank of the Daugava River with her three-headed monster-son. Jealous of Lāčplēsis' prowess, the witch pitted her son against young Lāčplēsis. This three-headed monster knew Lāčplēsis' secret – that if his bear's ears (which were magic) were lopped off, Lāčplēsis could be defeated. A mighty Homeric battle ensued, in which Lāčplēsis cut off two of the monster's heads, while the monster succeeded in chopping off Lāčplēsis' ears. Their combat ended when both tumbled mortally off a cliff into the Daugava River at sunset.

Daugava Electricity Museum (Daugavas spēkstacijas muzejs; ☎ 505 3256; zaliteg@dhesk.energo.lv; Ķeguma prospekts 7-9; admission 0.50Ls; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri). The dam was built between 1936 and 1941, and the history of electricity production in Latvia is the focus of the power-station museum.

Lielvārde, 10km further east, is the home town of Andrejs Pumpurs, a 19th-century poet and journalist best known for weaving an epic poem around the myth of Lāčplēsis. To learn more about this myth, see boxed text, above. The **Andrejs Pumpurs Museum** (Andreja Pumpura muzejs; ☎ 505 3759; adult/child 0.50/0.20Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun), on the far side of town, honours the author and his epic tale through displays of photographs, manuscripts and facsimiles. Unless you're fanatical about Latvian poetry and myths, the museum is only mildly interesting. But the parklike area around it is quite pleasant. Stroll along the riverside path that winds past wooden sculptures inspired by the poem before climbing to the cliff-top ruins of **Lielvārde castle**. The whopping stone next to the museum was once, legend has it, the mighty Lāčplēsis' bed.

The scenic ruins of a 13th-century **knights' castle** at the confluence of the Daugava and Perse Rivers in **Koknese**, 95km east of Rīga, are famous and worth a brief pause. Built by German crusaders in 1209, the castle ruins lost some of their dramatic cliff-top appeal when rising river levels from dam construction eclipsed

them. Today the ruins appear to be practically sitting in the river, and the sight is enchanting. The one-street town has a small **tourist office** (☎ 516 1296; tic@koknese.apollo.lv; Blaumaņa iela 3; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), with info on the Daugava Valley.

The wealthy market town of **Jēkabpils**, 140km from Rīga, is a laid-back place exuding a quiet country charm. One-storey wooden houses with tidy gardens and a number of old churches grace its streets. Once a separate town, **Krustpils**, on the northern bank of the river, is now considered part of Jēkabpils. Here you'll find a 17th-century church and a 13th-century castle. Inside the elegantly restored wing of the Krustpils castle, you'll find the **Jēkabpils History Museum** (Jēkabpils vēstures muzejs; ☎ 522 1042; Rīgas iela 216b; adult/child 0.80/0.40Ls; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-3pm Sat May-Oct). It has a fine collection of old furniture and a fascinating open-air section with 19th-century farmstead buildings.

The best lodging option in Jēkabpils is **Hercogs Jēkabs** (☎ 523 3433; saule@niko.lv; Brīvības iela 182; r 25Ls; ☎), which has six pastel-coloured rooms with TVs. Ask for one with a river view.

Livāni, on the Rīga–Daugavpils road, is a pretty village, the highlight of which is its **Glass Factory** (☎ 534 1129; Zala iela 23; adult/child 0.50/0.30Ls; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri). The place has been blowing glass since 1887; you can tour the factory and purchase unique pieces in the gift shop.

Dunava, 27km further southeast, is the birthplace of Latvia's great poet Jānis Rainis. The village is said to be 'the cradle of the poet's soul'. The Rainis museum, **Tadēnava** (☎ 525 2522; adult/child 0.40/0.20Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), inside the house where he lived until the age of four, recounts Rainis' childhood. For details on other Rainis' museums in Latgale, see p242.

An alternative route to Daugavpils from Jēkabpils is via **Gārsene**, about 50km west of Daugavpils in the gentle Saara hills near the Lithuanian border. In winter you can ski here.

RĒZEKNE & AROUND

pop 44,000

Predominantly Russian Rēzekne, 235km east of Rīga, took a heavy beating during WWII when most of its historic buildings were pulverised by artillery fire. Tourist information says the town stands on seven hills like Rome, although this is hard to see. In reality, Rēzekne is a rather depressing place filled with drab grey buildings. We mention it, however, because it forms the northwestern gateway to the Latgale Upland, and you may find yourself spending a night here if you're heading in that direction.

The main street, Atbrīvoš anas alejā, runs from Rēzekne II train station (north) to the bus station (south), and crosses the central square en route. In the square's middle stands **Māra**, a statue twice destroyed by the Soviet authorities in the 1940s and only re-erected in 1992. Its inscription 'Vienoti Latvijai' means 'United Latvia'.

More enticing, and also the place for regional tourism information, is **Untumi** (☎ 463 1255; untumi@e-apollo.lv), a country ranch 7km northwest of town signposted off the Rīga road (the A12). It's a tranquil place where you can ride horses (2Ls to 5Ls per hour). Open fields surround the ranch and there's plenty of space to pitch your tent (1Ls per pitch) or have a picnic.

If you need to stay the night, the only real option is the **Hotel Latgale** (☎ 462 2180; latgale@hotel.apollo.lv; Atbrīvošanas alejā 98; s/d from 13/22Ls; ☎). Overlooking Māra, the hotel is not bad as far as Soviet-era hulks go. Prices reflect room size and extent of renovation. Try for an upper floor room, all of which have good city views.

Little Italy (☎ 462 5771; Atbrīvošanas alejā 10; meals 4Ls), opposite the Hotel Latgale, is a relaxing spot for an evening meal. It dishes up pizza, pasta, meats and other Italian-inspired fodder in congenial environs.

The **bus station** (Latgales iela 17) has services to/from Daugavpils (2Ls, two hours, seven daily) and Riga (2.70Ls, 4½ hours, up to six daily), among other destinations. The Eurolines bus from Riga to St Petersburg stops here every second day.

Rēzekne II train station (Stacijas iela) has one train daily each way between Riga and St Petersburg, and Moscow–Riga. In all, there are four trains daily to/from Riga (2.50Ls; four hours).

The St Petersburg–Vilnius train (every second day) is the only service to stop at the southern **Rēzekne I train station** (☎ 588 3801).

LATGALE UPLAND

A land of a thousand lakes (okay, really just a few hundred, but doesn't the other way sound better?), the Latgale Upland (Latgales Augstiene) is an angler's paradise and the region's star attraction. The shimmering blue lakes come in various shapes, sizes and hues and include **Lake Dridzs**, Latvia's deepest at 65m, and **Lake Lubāns**, Latvia's largest, covering 82 sq km. Some of Latgale's prettiest scenery is found around **Lake Rāzna**, Latvia's second-biggest lake. Sheltered by rolling green hills, its easily accessible eastern and southern shores are perfect for strolling. With sweeping blue bays and dozens of islands, **Lake Ezerzeris**, 45km from Rēzekne, is perhaps the region's most beautiful lake.

To say you've stood at the top of the Upland, visit its highest point, **Lielais Liepukalns** (289m), located 3km east of the Lake Rāzna–Ezernieki road. Other fine views are found at the Catholic church in **Pasiene**, 8km south of Zilupe and 4km from the Russian border. From here you can see across the plains of Russia, which stretch endlessly to the east.

The Latgale Upland is also home to Latvia's most important Roman Catholic shrine, **Aglona Basilica**. Even if you're not religious, the shimmering white, twin-towered church is a majestic sight worthy of a visit. Overlooking Lake Egles, south of Aglona village, the 18th-century church is engulfed by a vast grass courtyard, created when Pope John Paul II visited in 1993. The disproportionately large pulpit where he addressed the

congregation still stands, as does the regal archway built at the entrance to the site. One of the basilica's 10 altars guards a miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary, said to have saved Aglona from the plague in 1708.

Every year on Ascension Day (15 August) pilgrims gather here. A candlelight procession the night before precedes the religious celebration. During the Soviet era Peteris Jakovels, then dean of Aglona, was sent into forced labour after rigging up loudspeakers outside the basilica on 15 August 1959.

Aglona village, wedged between Lake Egles (east) and Lake Cirišs (west), is 35km north of Krāslava and 8km off the main Daugavpils–Rēzekne road (the A13), which crosses the western part of the lake district.

Anyone keen on slightly obscure poetry might want to visit **Jasmuīža** (also called Aizkalne). The renowned Latvian poet Jānis Rainis (1865–1929) wrote some of his earliest works here, 9km west of Aglona. The **Rainis Memorial Museum** (☎ 535 4677; adult/child 0.60/0.40Ls; ☹ 10am–6pm Fri–Sun) showcases traditional Latgalian pottery as well as changing literary exhibitions devoted to the Shakespeare of Latvia. True fans will find the **Rainis House Museum** (☎ 542 2515; adult/child 0.30/0.15Ls;

☹ 10am–4pm Tue–Sat) in Berķenele, about 10km south of Daugavpils, equally interesting. The poet lived in the cottage for nine years.

One of the best places to stay in the area is **Cakuli** (☎ 537 5465; Ežera iela 4; dm 5Ls, r from 8Ls; ☹), a family-run guesthouse by Lake Cirišs. Choose from a dorm-style summer house, cosy attic digs with shared bathroom or a proper room with a balcony and lake view. A beating in its traditional lakeside Latvian sauna (10Ls) is an absolute must, and you can rent paddleboats (3Ls per hour).

Getting There & Away

Public transport is limited, making a car or bicycle the only way to get around the Latgale Upland. Despite the numerous lakes, there is nowhere to hire canoes in the region. A handful of daily buses run between Rēzekne and Ludza, and several daily between Daugavpils and Krāslava, Aglona and Ludza – although service is erratic and fares were not available.

DAUGAVPILS

pop 114,000

Daugavpils, Latvia's second-largest city, dates from 1275 and has a chequered past in which it has, at various times, been called Dünaburg by the Germans, Borisoglebsk by the Russians and Dvinsk by the Poles. Today it's a drab, post-WWII Soviet creation and so depressing to visit it's almost a national joke – a skyline of smoke stacks and the lumbering grey hulk of Daugavpils prison overlook the southern approach. But the city, perched on the northern bank of the Daugava River, 225km upstream from Riga, does provide a gateway to the decidedly lovelier Latgale Upland. And intrepid travellers looking for a grittier, harder-edged slice of Latvian life just might find the place appealing.

Information

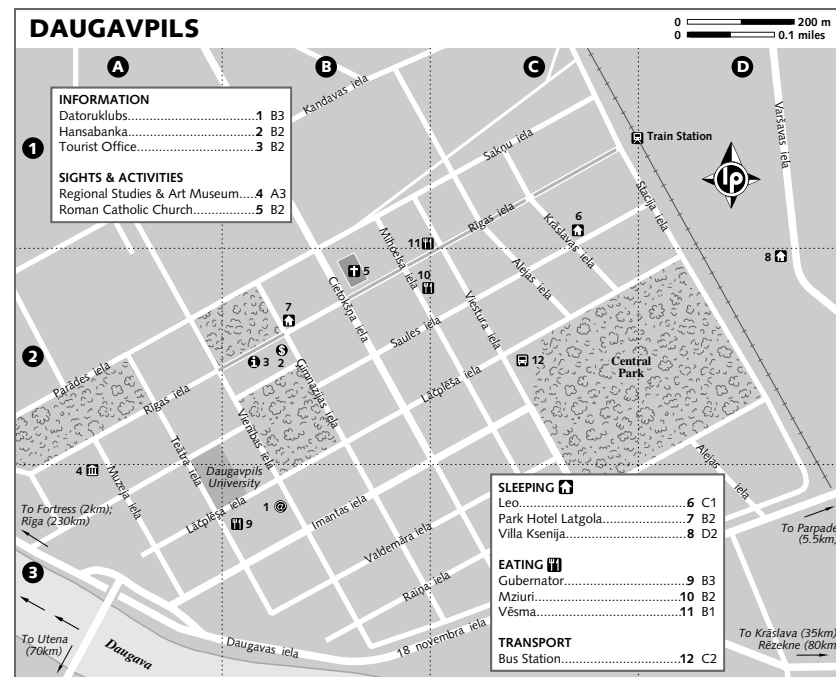
Datoruklubs (☎ 542 4457; Vienības iela 11; per hr 0.50Ls; ☹ 10am–6am) Internet access.

Hansabanka (Rīgas iela 22) There's an ATM outside.

Tourist office (☎ 543 3818; Rīgas iela 22a; ☹ 9am–5pm Mon–Sat) City and regional information.

Sights

Downtown Daugavpils is a typical Soviet city centre of straight streets arranged in a strict grid, a couple of large squares, a desolate park



with a black-marble **monument** to those who died in WWII (and an eternal flame that no longer burns), and a mixture of pre-WWII and Soviet-era buildings. Ugly Hotel Latvija is the dominant landmark – a dramatic contrast to the white-domed **Roman Catholic church** next to it across Cietokšņa iela.

The **Regional Studies & Art Museum** (Novadpētniecības un mākslas muzejs; ☎ 542 4073; Rīgas iela 8; adult/child 0.40/0.20Ls; ☹ 11am–6pm Tue–Sat), inside an Art-Nouveau house guarded by stone lions, exhibits high-quality reproductions of abstract painter Mark Rothko's paintings. Rothko was born in Daugavpils in 1903 and lived there until 1913, when his family moved to the USA. Although long recognised in the West, Rothko's work remained relatively anonymous in Latvia until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today the museum is striving to awaken national interest in the artist through its exhibition and educational programmes in local schools.

Daugavpils' most remarkable feature is the huge **fortress** (cietokšnis; ☎ 542 6398; adult/child 0.20/0.10Ls; ☹ 8am–6pm), built by the Russians in 1810 on the northwestern side of town and

occupied by the Soviet army until 1993. A red-brick bunker monument by the entrance states (in Russian and Latvian) that the Tatar poet Musa Jalil languished here from September to October 1942, in what was then the Nazi concentration camp Stalag 340.

Tickets to the inner compound are sold at the former checkpoint. Once inside, you can follow the abandoned, run-down streets past boarded-up buildings and desolate parade areas. Part of the barracks – once home to 6000 army personnel including 2500 army cadets attending the engineering school – are occupied today by pensioners and those in need of state assistance. From town, a quiet riverside road leads 2km from the western end of Imantas iela to the fortress.

Sleeping

The following places include breakfast.

Park Hotel Latgola (☎ 542 0932; www.hoteldaugavpils.lv; Ģimnāzijas iela 46; r 40–60Ls; ☹) Once a dreary Soviet hotel, this place recently received a total face-lift and is now the classiest place to stay in town. The comfortable, although rather antiseptic, rooms feature

DOWN & OUT DAUGAVPILS?

Daugavpils had 40,000 inhabitants before WWII, about two-thirds of them Latvians and one-third Russians or Poles. Today less than 15% of the population is Latvian (the lowest percentage of any town in Latvia), and Russian seems to be the only language used in shops, bars and on the street.

This massive population shift took place during the Soviet era when industries located here lured mainly Russian workers. Most industries were large, specialist, all-union plants performing a single service for the whole USSR, like the 4000 people who made bicycle and tractor chains or the 3500 repairing one type of railway locomotive. When the Soviet Union collapsed, so too did these industries – and Daugavpils.

More than a decade on, the city has yet to recover – it remains more economically depressed than other Latvian towns. Unemployment in the Daugavpils region clocks in at about 18%, close to the highest in the country.

satellite TVs and other modern conveniences and there's an on-site restaurant and bar.

Leo (☎ 542 6565; Krāslavas iela 58; r 20-40Ls; (P)) In an attractively restored building, this intimate little hotel offers the best comfort-to-price ratio in central Daugavpils.

Villa Ksenija (☎ 543 4317; www.villaks.lv; Varšavas iela 17; s/d 35/45Ls, luxury ste 90Ls) In an early-20th-century mansion, this place offers rather small, but very comfortable, rooms. The luxury suites, complete with private saunas, are posh and romantic.

Eating & Drinking

Mziuri (☎ 542 1518; Mihoelsa iela 60; meals 5Ls) Mziuri shines. It dishes up delicious Georgian cuisine in a stone-clad interior decorated with Georgian castles. Eating its *kuchmachi* (spicy liver cooked with pomegranate seeds) and *chanahi* (ground pork stewed with eggplant) is a definite Daugavpils highlight.

Gubernator (☎ 542 2455; Lačpleša iela 10; meals 4Ls) Tucked away in a cellar, Gubernator is an unpretentious spot with a menu featuring Latvian and international dishes. The place has a publike vibe, and is the liveliest place to drink in town.

Vēsma (Rīgas iela 49; meals 2-4Ls) Multifunctional Vēsma features a self-service canteen with a decent salad bar on one side and a rather hip café and bar on the other. It's a popular place with the local crowd.

Getting There & Away

From the **bus station** (☎ 542 3000; www.buspark.lv; Viestura iela 10) buses run to/from Rīga (3Ls, 3½ hours, eight daily), Rēzekne (2Ls, two hours, seven daily) and Aglona (1Ls, 1½ hours, three daily).

Daugavpils is served by trains to/from Rīga (3Ls, four hours, four daily). For international rail service information to/from Gomel (Belarus) and St Petersburg (Russia), see p398. Trains also run to/from Vilnius (3Ls, three to four hours, three daily).

ZEMGALE

Architecture, art and history buffs will relish a visit to Zemgale, in central Latvia west of the Daugava River between Riga and the Lithuanian border. Quaint country towns, and castles and palaces are the reason to come. Rastrelli's majestic Rundāle Palace,

which rivals St Petersburg's Winter Palace, is stunning. And each year on the third weekend in July an evocative festival of ancient music fills the interiors and grounds of Zemgale's most prized castles and palaces.

The region is low lying (below sea level in parts) and has a vast network of waterways, making it Latvia's most fertile farming area. Most of the waterways flow into the Lielupe River, which enters the sea between Rīga and Jūrmala.

Zemgale is named after the Baltic Zemgal (Semigallian) tribes, who lived here before the 13th-century German conquest. The Semigallians, in fact, held out longer against the Germans than any other people living in the area that is now Latvia and Estonia, not being subdued until 1290. From the 16th to the 18th centuries, Zemgale (along with the Kurzeme region) formed part of the semi-independent Duchy of Courland.

Most places in Zemgale can be reached on day trips, albeit lengthy ones, from Riga. The main road to Vilnius and Kaunas passes through Bauska, while the rail link cuts through Jelgava – a town best known for pop band Brainstorm.

Getting There & Away

Bauska, Rundāle and Jelgava can be visited on day trips from Riga. Buses run between the capital and Bauska every half-hour or so. From Bauska, you can catch a bus to Rundāle, though Rundāle is best reached by private vehicle. Jelgava is best reached by train; these depart Riga hourly.

BAUSKA

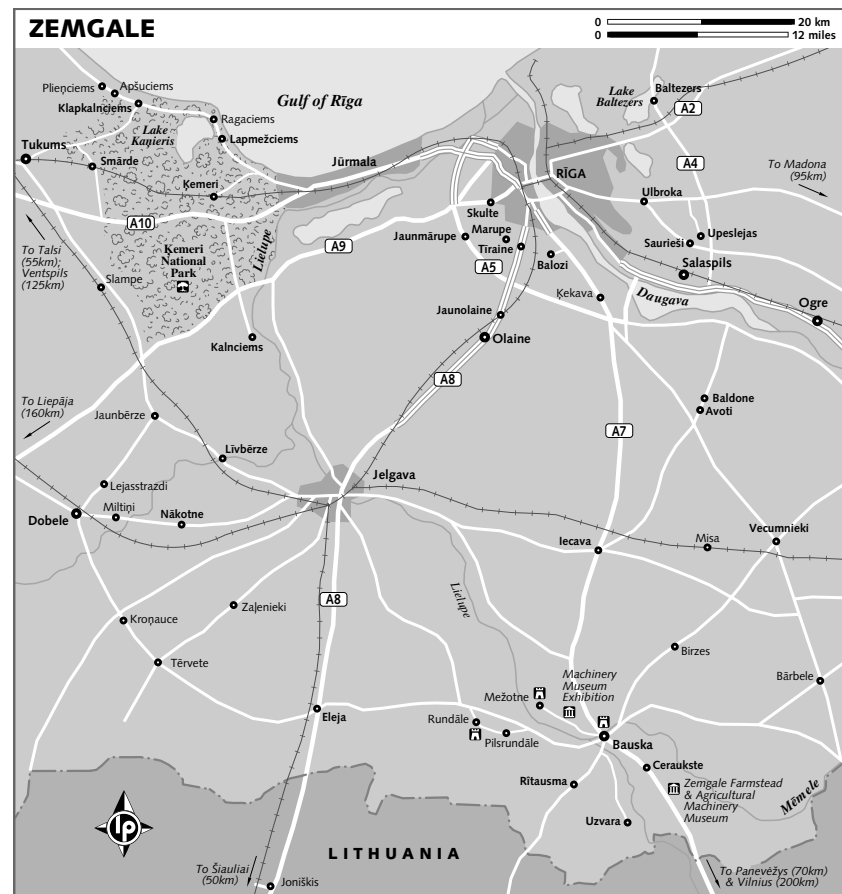
pop 10,620

Bauska is a country town with a small textile industry, 65km south of Riga on the main Rīga–Vilnius road. A staging post on the way to Rundāle Palace, it's worth a brief stop in its own right to see its large castle.

As well as the music festival in July, Bauska Castle hosts a **medieval arts festival** in September.

Orientation & Information

The city centre is on the southern side of the main road bridge over the Mēmele River. Its **tourist office** (☎ 392 3797; www.bauska.lv; Rātslaukums 1; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat) stocks lots of information on the Bauska region.

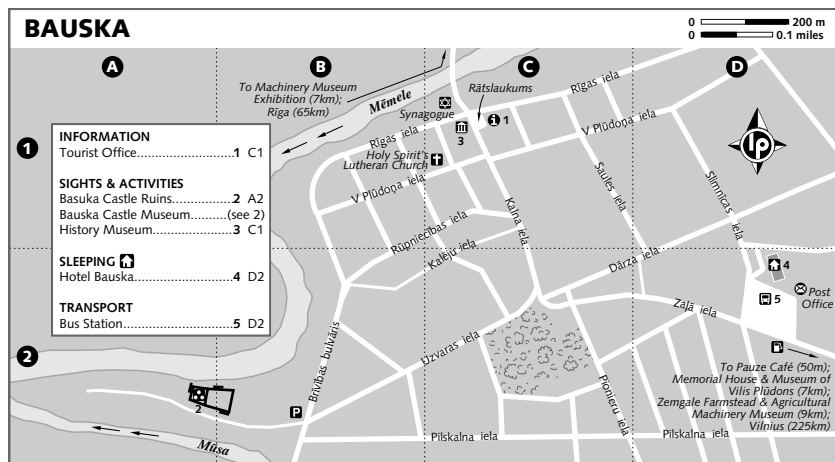


Sights

On a hillock between the Mēmele and Mūsa Rivers, 1km from the centre on the town's western edge, are the **Bauska Castle Ruins** (Bauskas pilsdrupas; ☎ 392 3793; ☎ 9am-7pm May-Sep, to 6pm Oct). From the bus station, walk towards the centre along Zaļā iela then branch left along Uzvaras iela beside the park at the top of Kalna iela. You can also approach the ruins along any street westward off Kalna iela. The castle was built between 1443 and 1456 as a stronghold for the Livonian knights. The imposing edifice was destroyed in warfare, rebuilt as a residence for the duke of Courland in the 16th century, and destroyed again during the Great Northern War (1706).

Despite the impressive reconstruction job carried out in the 1970s, it is still possible to see where parts of the old castle remain. Inside, **Bauska Castle Museum** (☎ 392 3793; adult/child 0.50/0.25Ls; ☎ 9am-7pm, to 6pm Oct) displays archaeological finds and a collection of 16th- and 17th-century art.

Around the centre are several 18th- and 19th-century houses and the local **History Museum** (Bauskas novadpētniecība un mākslas muzejs; ☎ 392 2197; bnmuzejs@apollo.lv; Kalna iela 6; admission 0.50Ls; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun May-Oct, 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun Nov-Apr). A 1930s hair-dressing shop and exhibition on Bauska's pre-WWII Jewish community – 15% of Bauska's prewar population – are among the exhibits.



Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Bauska (☎ 392 4705; fax 392 3027; Slimnicas iela 7; r 5-24L; (P)) Bauska's only hotel lets you choose from very Spartan rooms or slightly more luxurious abodes with nicer furnishings and TVs.

Pauze Café (☎ 392 7408; Zajā iela 25; meals 4Ls) Pronounced paūza, this café is popular with international visitors and is about 300m from the bus station. Good all-round dishes and plenty of beer complement the simple but tasteful décor.

Getting There & Away

From Bauska **bus station** (☎ 392 2477; Slimnicas iela 11) there are at least hourly buses between 5.30am and 5.30pm to/from Rīga (1.20Ls, 1¼ hours). All long-distance buses from Rīga to Panevėžys, Vilnius and Kaunas also stop here.

Around Bauska

Latvian poet Vilis Plūdons (1874–1940), best remembered for his children's poetry and romantic lyrics, was born just south of Bauska in **Ceraukste**. The farmstead where he grew up is now the **Memorial House & Museum of Vilis Plūdons** (māja muzejs; ☎ 919 4975; adult/child 1.50/1Ls; ☎ 10am–6pm Wed–Sun May–Oct), which gives you all the details about his life. Wooden sculptures dot the garden and there is a traditional Latvian sauna.

19th-century rural life is captured at the **Zemgale Farmstead & Agricultural Machinery Museum** (Zemnieku sētas un lauksaimniecības mašīnu muzejs;

☎ 395 6316; admission 0.50Ls; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun May–Oct), a few kilometres south along the A7. Farm machinery from the early 20th century is displayed here and at the museum's **Machinery Museum Exhibition** (Mašīnu muzeja izstāde; admission 0.50Ls; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun May–Oct), west of Bauska on the road to Mežotne.

RUNDĀLE PALACE

Built for Baron Ernst Johann von Bühren (1690–1772), duke of Courland, by Bartolomeo Rastrelli, the baroque genius from Italy who created St Petersburg's Winter Palace, 18th-century **Rundāle Palace** (Rundāles pils; ☎ 396 2197; www.rpm.apollo.lv; adult/child 1.50/1Ls; ☎ 10am–6pm May–Oct, to 5pm Nov–Apr) is a Latvia must-see. Located near Pilsrundāle, 12km west of Bauska, this lavish creation is a monument to aristocratic ostentatiousness and is provincial Latvia's architectural highlight.

Restoration of the palace began in the 1970s, with most period furnishings being bought or donated. Its façade was restored in 2001. Of the palace's 138 rooms, about 40 are open to visitors. The Gold Room (Zelta zāle) was the throne room; its ceiling paintings display the baron's virtues as a ruler. The White Room (Baltā zāle) was the ballroom. The main staircase in this wing, with multiple mirrors in its walls, is perhaps the outstanding original Rastrelli creation here.

On the ground floor of the eastern wing you can visit the palace kitchens; the western wing was for the duchess' apartments. The

Rundāle Palace Museum (Rundāles pils muzejs) on the ground floor showcases paintings, silverware and other treasures from the Courland dukes' collections. In the old stables there is an interesting exhibition on Latvia's Lutheran churches in Soviet times.

A stroll through the gardens is a pleasant way to end a visit.

Sleeping & Eating

Straumeni (☎ 910 9388; Rundāle; d 10-12Ls; (P)) Strau-meni is a countryside guesthouse with 10 beds 3km west of Rundāle Palace. Fish and boat here, or get beaten with birch twigs in the Latvian sauna. Breakfast is included.

Rundāle Palace Restaurant (☎ 396 2116; meals from 6Ls) Inside the palace kitchens, this place dishes up excellent steak, veal and fish entrees, although there's little for vegetarians.

Getting There & Away

Rundāle Palace is about 1km south off the Bauska–Eļeja road. Unless you're on a tour or have your own transport, take a bus to Bauska, then a Rundāle-bound bus to Pilsrundāle; make sure you get off at Pilsrundāle, a different village to Rundāle, 2.5km west. From Bauska there are seven Pilsrundāle buses daily between 8am and 4.30pm; if you're coming from Rīga the tourist office there has updated schedules.

MEŽOTNE PALACE

On the northern bank of the Lielupe River, **Mežotne Palace** (Mežotnes pils; ☎ 392 8796; adult/child 0.50/0.20Ls; ☎ 8am–5pm), 11km west of Bauska in Mežotne, is worth a side trip. The palace was built in a classical style from 1797 to 1802 for Charlotte von Lieven, the governess of Russian empress Catherine II's

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

How the Italian master Bartolomeo Rastrelli came to build the splendid Rundāle Palace in such a remote corner of Europe, which wasn't even part of the Russian Empire at the time, is a curious tale. It begins with the marriage in 1710 of Anna Ioannovna, a niece of Russia's Peter the Great, to Frederick, Duke of Courland – no doubt an affair of state as Russia clawed its way into Poland's sphere of influence. In 1730, following Peter the Great's death, Anna of Courland found herself crowned empress of Russia.

Baltic German baron Ernst Johann von Bühren (Latvian: Bīron) had been something of a failed adventurer in Courland and Russia before becoming Anna's chief adviser (and lover) a few years before she succeeded to the Russian throne. With more interest in the trappings than the exercise of power, Anna handed over much of the management of the empire to von Bühren and a small clique of German advisers. Von Bühren's heavy-handed and corrupt style soon made him unpopular with the Russian nobility, but as long as Anna ruled Russia, the baron's star waxed. When he decided he needed a new home to go with his new status, Anna dispatched Rastrelli to Courland, and in 1736 work began on the summer palace for von Bühren, at Rundāle. It proceeded quickly with as many as 1000 people working on it at one time.

In 1737 the duke of Courland died heirless and, thanks to Russian influence, von Bühren was handed the dukedom. He then began work on an even grander Rastrelli-designed palace at Jelgava, intended as his main residence. Rundāle was put on the back burner – and came to a halt altogether in 1740 when Empress Anna died and von Bühren's enemies took their revenge, forcing him into exile for the duration of Empress Elizabeth's reign in Russia.

Only in 1763 – with a German, Catherine the Great, now on the Russian throne – was von Bühren allowed to return and finish Rundāle, also restoring the parts that had decayed in his absence. This time Rastrelli brought the Italians Francesco Martini and Carlo Zucchi, who had worked on the St Petersburg Winter Palace, to do the ceiling paintings. JM Graf, who had worked on Prussian royal palaces in Berlin, came to do the elaborate wall decorations.

In contrast to Rastrelli's initial baroque work, Rundāle, completed in 1768, was in the newer rococo style. Von Bühren was able to enjoy the palace until 1795 when, in the third Partition of Poland, Courland became Russian territory, and Catherine gave Rundāle to one of her favourites, Subov. Von Bühren managed to shift most of the fixtures and fittings to some of his other estates in Germany.

grandchildren. Catherine II bequeathed the estate to von Lieven (ancestor of contemporary writer Anatol Lieven) in 1795. Agrarian reforms in 1920 transformed the family palace into an agricultural school (1921–41).

Mežotne Palace was restored in 2001 and a handful of rooms, including the dining room and grandiose Cupola Hall, can be visited. Part of the palace is a lovely live-like-royalty **hotel** (☎ 392 8796; mezotnepils@apollo.lv; r 30-40L; (P)), one of rural Latvia's most charming. The surrounding 0.14-sq-km park is landscaped in English style. The rooms feature old-world décor – think cast-iron bed frames and lots of antiques.

Mežotne, an ancient Zemgalian hill fort settlement, is signposted west off the north-bound Bauska–Rīga road (A7). The best way to reach it is by car.

JELGAVA

pop 63,000

Jelgava, 42km southwest of Rīga, is Zemgale's biggest town and home to Latvia's best known boy band, Brainstorm (Patra Vetra). From the 16th to 18th centuries, it was the capital of the duchy of Courland. Afterwards, it was the capital of the Russian province of Courland and a place of renowned society and hospitality where gentry would gather in winter.

Unfortunately, much of Jelgava was ruined in the two world wars. But lovers of Rastrelli architecture should stop here to see the 300-room, baroque **Jelgava Palace** (Jelgavas pils; ☎ 300 5617; Leilā iela 2; adult/child 0.50/0.30L; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri), built in 1783. The palace, now Latvia's Agricultural University, houses the family vault of the dukes of Courland. The palace is beside the main river bridge on the Rīga road, a 750m walk from the central square on the eastern side of town.

Jelgava **tourist office** (☎ 302 3874; Ķakstes bulvāris 7; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri) has accommodation details.

Hotel Jelgava (☎ 302 6193; jelgava@apollo.lv; Leilā iela 6; s/d from 8/12L; (P)) is the best sleeping option in the city. It has English-speaking staff and pleasant rooms in a lovely 1938 building near the palace.

Buses run every half-hour between Rīga and Jelgava (0.80Ls, 1¼ hours). One or two suburban trains an hour run from Rīga to Jelgava (0.75Ls, 50 minutes).

KURZEME

Latvia's sparsely populated western region, Kurzeme (Courland in English), with coast on both the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Riga, is perfect for off-the-beaten-path exploring. The region's allure lies in its subtleties, and you'll need to prod beneath the surface to unearth its quiet charm. With the exception of its largest town, Liepāja, you won't find much rollicking nightlife or many big-city restaurants, but Kurzeme will enchant those searching for a taste of rural Latvian life. The wild coastline, crowned by glorious Cape Kolka, has long, untouched stretches of beautiful white-sand beaches and is home to Latvia's tiny ethnic minority, known as the Livs. The wealthy port town of Ventspils boasts brisk, clean air and a vibrant vibe. Slightly eccentric Liepāja is quickly turning hip and has become the epicentre of Latvia's burgeoning rock 'n' roll scene. It proudly boasts that it's home to Latvia's only 'rock café', a multilevel venue where bands play late into the night. The sleepy country town of Kuldīga is a real gem, perfect for wandering and immersing yourself in local life.

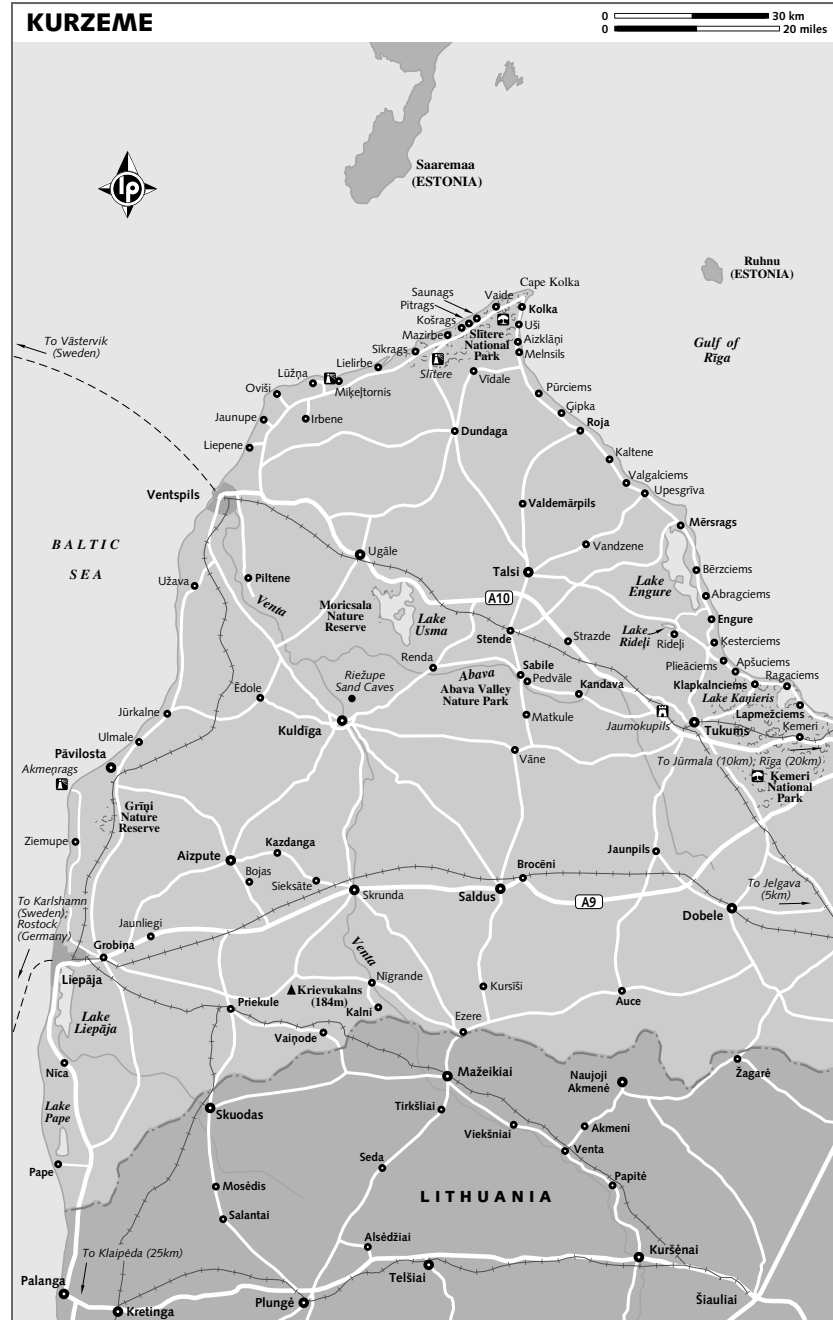
Getting There & Away

Multiple buses run between Rīga and Kuldīga, Ventspils and Liepāja each day, while Tukums can be reached by train from the capital. It is possible to journey to Cape Kolka by bus, but it is easier to explore this region by private vehicle.

History

Kurzeme is very much a region apart from the rest of Latvia. When Germany signed its unconditional surrender in Berlin in 1945, the Red Army had succeeded in reconquering the whole of the Baltic countries – except Courland. The region became sadly famous as the 'Courland Fortress' for the fight Latvian troops put up against the Red Army. The troops suffered heavy losses in the struggle.

Kurzeme is named after the Cours, a Baltic tribe who lived here before the 13th-century German invasion. They were an adventurous lot who would raid Scandinavia from time to time – and even occasionally join forces with the Vikings to attack Britain. Their leader, Lamekins, accepted Christian



THE LIVS

'My fatherland, You are dear to me! Where waves lap against the native shore,
Where I hear my beloved mother tongue!'

Excerpt from the Livonian hymn My Fatherland/Min izāmō

The Livonians (Livs) are Finno-Ugric peoples who first migrated to northern Latvia 5000 years ago. At the time of the 13th-century German invasion this fishing tribe inhabited the coastal regions on the eastern and western sides of the Gulf of Riga; today a population of around 1600 is clustered in 14 fishing villages along the Livonian Coast, which stretches from Pūrciems, 11km north of Roja on the Rīga–Kolka coast road, to Lūžņa, 49km southwest of Kolka along the Kolka–Ventpils coast road. These villages are preserved under Latvian law, and it is forbidden to open a hotel, restaurant or other commercial enterprise in them.

These preservation efforts are intended to aid the cultural survival of the Livs, who are on the brink of extinction. Just 10 people or so in Latvia are native speakers of the Liv language (which is more closely related to Estonian and Finnish than to Latvian), while no more than 50 have 'Livonian' as a nationality written in their Latvian passports. Dainis and Helmi Stalti, a Liv couple who pioneered Latvia's folklore movement with their folklore ensemble Skandinieki in 1976, work hard to keep traditional Livonian songs alive. Liv is the language of their album *Livod lolod (Livu dziesmas/Livonian Songs)*, released in 1998.

Sadly, the younger generation of Livs, despite compulsory once-a-week classes in Liv language in schools, is much more interested in being called Latvian than Livonian; many have left their homeland for other cities in Latvia and have quickly assimilated into the surrounding Latvian culture and language. The Livonian language may well die out with the older generation.

Liv culture is celebrated each year in early August with Mazirbe's **Liv festival**.

baptism and made a separate peace with the Pope in 1230 in order to avoid rule by the German knights of Livonia. The knights, however, refused to accept this arrangement and eventually subjugated the Cours in 1267. When the Livonian Order state collapsed under assault from Russia's Ivan the Terrible in 1561, the order's last master, Gotthard Kettler, salvaged Courland and neighbouring Zemgale as his own personal fiefdom.

Although owing allegiance to Poland, this Duchy of Courland, as it was known, was largely independent. Its capital was Jelgava (called Mitau) in Zemgale. Duke Jakob, its ruler from 1640 to 1682, developed a well-known navy, merchant fleet and shipbuilding industry, and purchased two far-flung colonies: Tobago in the Caribbean (from Britain) and an island in the mouth of the Gambia River (from African chiefs). He even laid plans to colonise Australia! His son, Duke Frederick, married into the Russian family and had big dreams of turning Jelgava into a 'northern Paris' (he never quite succeeded). The duchy was swallowed up by Russia in 1795 and governed as a province of the tsarist empire. It became part of independent Latvia after WWI.

TUKUMS

pop 19,465

Tucked away amid rolling green hills on the banks of the Slocene River, picturesque Tukums, 68km west of Riga, is a mildly interesting country town. We wouldn't suggest going out of your way to visit, but if you're in the area there are a few worthwhile sights.

The **tourist office** (☎ 312 4451; www.tukums.lv/turisms; Pils iela 3; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat) has information on Kurzeme, including cycling routes (in Latvian only) in the region. **Velo Service** (☎ 950 7095; Raiļa iela 14; per day 4Ls) rents out bicycles.

You'll find the last remnants of a fortified **castle** (☎ 310 7081; admission 0.50Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) built by the Livonian Order in 1301 just off the southern end of the town square. An exhibition hall and museum on the grounds tell the history of the area. The nearby **Tukums Art Museum** (☎ 318 2392; Harmonijas iela 7; admission 0.40Ls; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 9am-1pm Mon & Sat) has a collection of 1920s and 1930s Latvian art. For great views – on a clear day you can see as far as the Gulf of Riga – head to the top of **Milzkalns** (113m), 5km north-east of town. In July, the entire town turns out for the annual **Tukums festival**.

Pastel-themed **Hotel Arka** (☎ 312 5747; ervins@arka.apollo.lv; Pils iela 9; d/tr from 24/36Ls; ☎) is both spacious and comfortable and boasts a great spiral staircase. On weekends its cellar restaurant turns into a popular disco. Alternatively, opt for a night in a castle. Signposted some 12km northwest of Tukums off the Ventpils road (A10), **Jaumokupils** (☎ 310 7125; dm 7Ls, s 7-15Ls, d 10-25Ls; ☎ noon-6pm Mon, 9am-6pm Tues-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat, 11am-6pm Sun May-Oct, until 5pm daily Nov-Apr) was built in 1901 as a hunting residence for George Armitsted, mayor of Riga between 1901 and 1912. During WWII the former aristocratic palace, turned over to the state by land reforms in 1919, served first as a Russian military school, then a German transmitting station and later a German hospital. The Latvian State Forestry Commission now owns the **castle** (adult/child 0.50/0.25Ls), hotel and restaurant. The original ceramic-tiled stove featuring 50 different drawings of early-20th-century Riga and Jūrmala is in the entrance hall and is stunning. Spending a night here lets you get a feel for the way Latvia's royalty lived in the old days.

There are buses to Riga (1Ls, 1¼ hours, eight daily). You could combine a visit to Tukums with one to Jūrmala, since they're both on the same suburban railway line from Riga. Tukums I station (1Ls, 1½ hours), the first station you reach coming from the east, is nearer the town centre than Tukums II (1.50Ls), where the trains terminate four minutes later. At least 10 trains run in each direction daily.

TALSI & AROUND

pop 12,391

Once a medieval war zone, today peaceful Talsi, 115km from Riga, is the cultural and economic centre of northern Kurzeme. Nine hills, which locals are fiercely proud of, ring the village. Cobble streets twist around the slopes above the town's two small lakes, making it a pleasant place to wander. Quiet as it might be, Talsi does serve as good base for exploring. About 30km west lies **Lake Usma**, a 39-sq-km puddle of water polka-dotted with seven islands and backed by leafy forests. The **Moricšala Nature Reserve**, established in 1912, is one of Europe's oldest nature reserves. It protects the lake's western waters, shores and several islands. The heavily wooded reserve makes a great camping place, with several serene

spots around the sandy shores; see below. The reserve's **tourist office** (☎ 324 2542; Dakterlejas iela 3, LV 3270 Dundaga) is in Dundaga village.

Orientation

A shallow valley runs north-south through Talsi making it surprisingly hilly for such a flat region. There are two lakes, one on the southern edge of town (Lake Talsu), and a bigger one (Lake Vilku) towards the north. The town centre is at the top of the valley's western slope, with the central square at the meeting of Valdemāra iela and Lielā iela. The **market** (Ezera iela 7) is north off Lielā iela in the lower part of town.

Information

Latvijas Krājbanka (Lielā iela 3) Has an ATM.

Tourist office (☎ 322 4165; www.talsi.lv; Lielā iela 19/21; ☎ 10am-1pm & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri) Inside Talsi Culture House.

Sights

There's really not a great deal to do in Talsi except wander around and enjoy the surroundings. Rising above **Lake Talsu** on the eastern side of town is **Pilsētas dārzis**, an ancient Cour castle mound topped by **Freedom Sun**, a statue of a man sitting Buddha-style. It was erected in 1996 in remembrance of Latvia's freedom fighters.

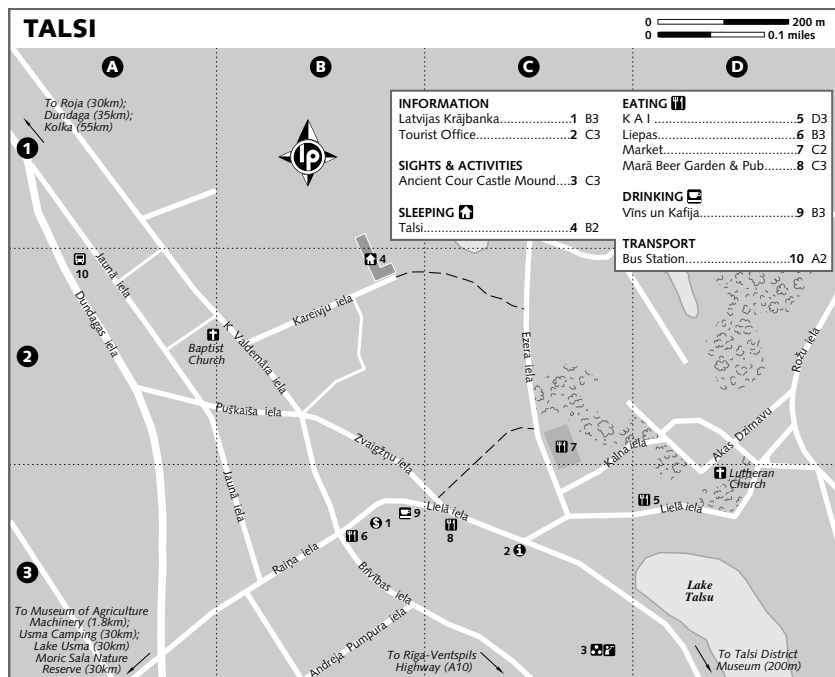
Above the mound, local history is documented at the **Talsi District Museum** (Talsu novada muzejs; ☎ 322 2770; Milenbaha iela 19; adult/child 0.50/0.30Ls; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun summer, 10am-4pm Tue-Sun winter). The museum is in a baronial manor dating to 1880.

South of town, the **Museum of Agriculture Machinery** (Lauksaimniecības tehnikas muzejs; ☎ 328 1343; Cēlnieku iela 11; adult/child 1/0.50Ls; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri) exhibits tractors from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Sleeping & Eating

Usma Camping (☎ 633 4500; www.usma.lv; Priekškalni; camp site 1Ls plus per adult/child 1/0.50Ls, cabin from 10Ls; ☎ May-Oct; ☎) Usma is the get-away-from-it option for those who seek peace. You can camp, fish, sail, row, swim and play volleyball at this lakeside site, 1km south of the A10 on the road to Usma village. Although a bit more rustic, it's a much better option than Talsi's sole hotel.

Talsi (☎ 322 2689; viesnica_talsi@e-apollo.lv; Kareivju iela 16; r 12-40Ls; ☎) A Soviet-era block of 95



rooms situated atop a hill, Talsi's only hotel boasts a striped yellow-and-beige exterior and a renovated interior.

Marā Beer Garden & Pub (Lielā iela 16; meals 3Ls) A hip bar (at least by Talsi standards), this place has a cafeteria-style eatery on the ground level and a cellar beer bar serving big platefuls of grilled meats and lots of salads.

KAI (☎ 928 8407; Lielā iela 30; meals 2Ls; 🕒 11am-3am) KAI competes for the title of the most kitsch spot in the Baltics. Munch on unremarkable food and watch fish bob in plastic tubes of florescence. The place has a pool table and late-night disco.

Liepas (Lielā iela 1; meals 2Ls) Liepas is a food shop and café rolled into one. Be sure to try the *platmaize*, a sponge cake topped with curd, particular to this region.

Vins un Kafija (☎ 328 1049; Lielā iela 7) The place to taste and buy wine (albeit wine produced everywhere but Latvia) and coffee. It runs a beer tent out front in summer.

Getting There & Away

From the **bus station** (Dundagas iela 15), on the road north to Dundaga, there are buses to/

from Rīga (2Ls, 2½ hours, hourly), Ventspils (1.50Ls, 1½ hours, twice daily) and Liepāja (2.50Ls, 4½ hours, six daily).

NORTHERN KURZEME

You could visit the remote northern tip of Kurzeme in a day trip from Talsi, or make a long loop on the way to Rīga or Ventspils. The area remains fairly untravelled and is worth taking time to explore.

Getting There & Away

Northern Kurzeme is best seen by private transport, although there are sporadic buses; always check return schedules before setting out. Buses to Rīga (3Ls, four hours, twice daily) pass through Mērsrags and Roja.

Kēmeri National Park

Well off the beaten track, **Kēmeri National Park** (☎ 776 5387; www.kēmeri.gov.lv; 🕒 May-Oct 15) is one of Latvia's most beautiful reserves and well worth visiting. Established in 1997, the park spans 427.9 sq km from just west of Jūrmala to Klapkalnciems, and inland to Kalnciems. It is easily accessible from the

Rīga-Kolka coastal road (P128). Ancient bogs, swamps, lakes and forests, dating back about 8000 years, are all found here, along with a wealth of flora and fauna. Check the website for updated information as the park was undergoing major restructuring and the information centre was in the process of moving when we stopped by.

Hiking is the main activity in the park, and a vast network of wooden boardwalks and nature trails traverse the beautiful landscape. The 1930s spa town of **Kēmeri**, in the middle of the park, is known for its sulphurous springs and is also the starting point for the **Dumbrāja laipa**. This 600m, raised plank trail (look for the signs in the centre of town) takes about 30 minutes to hike and winds past rivers and forests. The quiet hamlet is also the starting point for the 3km **Laipa Lielajā Kēmeru tīrelī**. Slightly more strenuous, this boardwalk jaunt crosses the large bog that fills the entire southern half of the park. To reach the trailhead turn right on the A10/E22 at the Kēmeri train station then take your first left by the cemetery. In the park opposite town, 12 cutely named bridges – Musical Bridge, Bridge of Sighs, Bridge of Caprices etc – cross the Vērš upite River and are scenic spots to snap a picture.

The information centre arranges **bat-watching** expeditions and runs half-day **nature workshops** in summer. For birding buffs, there's **Lake Kanjēris**, home to 237 bird species nestled around 14 islets.

Fish canning and smoking remain traditional occupations in the national park. Nowhere smells fishier than **Lapmežciems**, overlooking Lake Kanjēris, 3km west of Jūrmala. Sprats are canned in the factory on the right at the village's eastern entrance. The village market sells freshly smoked eel, sprat, salmon and tuna, as does the market in **Ragaciems**, 2km north.

There are plenty of places to stay along this coastal stretch. The Soviet-era **camp site** (☎ 3143146; dm 2Ls; 🕒 summer only), 2km north of Apšciems, is rather uninspiring and offers beds in very rustic wooden huts with shared bathrooms. The roadside car park across the street is much more appealing, and you can camp for free amid pretty wooded sand dunes. There are motels on either side of the road at the eastern entrance to Ragaciems. The very modern **Lindaga café-bistro** (☎ 316 3544; meals 2-6Ls) is a good place to fill up before

or after a hike. It serves big plates of simple, but hearty, Latvian fare.

Lake Engure to Roja

Two kilometres north of the fishing village of Engure, **Lake Engure** is the country's third-largest lake and a major bird reservation; 186 species (44 endangered) nest around the lake and its seven islets. The **Engure Ornithological Research Centre** (☎ 947 4420; Bērciems; 🕒 by apt only) arranges bird-watching expeditions to the observation tower in the middle of the lake. The centre, signposted 600m north of Bērciems village, is at the end of a 2.5km dirt track.

You can rent a boat to row around the lake (1/5Ls per hour/day) from the *laivu bāze* (boat station) off the main road in Bērciems. **Abragciems Kempings** (☎ 316 1668; camp site 8Ls), a site by the sea 4km north of Engure (open only during summer), also offers boat rentals and has a serene sauna.

At **Lake Rideļi**, a tiny lake 15km inland (west), you can visit **Rideļi Watermill**, still in operation, and munch on pancakes made with local flour at the adjoining **Cope Café & Guest House** (☎ 316 1373; s/d incl breakfast 9/16Ls, camp site 2Ls; 🕒). The camp site is open only during summer. Boat hire costs 4.50Ls per day.

Roja, 50km further north, is another fishing town, the history of which is told at small **Maritime & Fishing Museum** (Jūras un zvejniecības muzejs; ☎ 326 9594; Selgas iela 33; admission 0.50Ls; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sat). The most interesting exhibits are those relating to the development of Roja's collective fishing farms and state fish cannery in the 1950s.

The **Roja Hotel** (☎ 326 0209; Jūras iela 6; d 20Ls; 🕒), just past the harbour, is one of the few lodging options in the area. It's a decent, comfortable place with simple but brightly furnished rooms.

Kolka & Cape Kolka

Enchantingly desolate and hauntingly beautiful, a journey to Cape Kolka (Kolkasrags) feels like visiting the ends of the earth. Kurzeme's most northerly village, Kolka stands on the Gulf of Riga just south of Cape Kolka – the dividing point between the gulf and the Baltic Sea. The village is not pretty, but its dramatic position on the tip of the cape is reason enough to spend time strolling along sandy beaches, over dunes and through forests. During the Soviet era

the area was a military reserve, out of bounds to civilians, and today the region's sparsely populated villages have an almost eerie, long-forgotten feel about them. But the rugged coastline here is some of the Latvia's most captivating, with long uninterrupted stretches of white-sand beaches set against forests of spruce and pine. The cape itself is the point where the line of beach and dunes changes direction – making it possible to stand with one foot in the Gulf of Riga and the other in the Baltic Sea.

Simple, but quite friendly, **Ūšī** (☎ 327 7350; www.kolka.lv; camp site/r 3/10Ls; (P)) has little wooden chalets with sea views, a communal kitchen and places to pitch tents in the garden. To find it, look for the brick house, opposite the onion-domed Orthodox church on the main road at the village's northern end. Featuring clean and modern rooms, **Zitari** (☎ 324 7145; d 15Ls; (P)) is Kolka's only hotel. Its ground-floor café (meals 4Ls) is popular for a drink and a plate of herrings (0.80Ls) or smoked eel (2.45Ls) after a trip to the windy cape. Look for it on Kolka's only real street.

Slitere National Park

Overlooking the Gulf of Riga and the Baltic Sea, **Slitere National Park** (☎ 328 1066; www.slitere.gov.lv) is a magnificent pocket of spectacular sand dunes and forests covering 163.6 sq km on Latvia's most savage coastal tip. Beginning at Cape Kolka, and extending 5km to 10km inland, the park stretches 26km west along the Baltic Coast to Sikrags, and shelters deer, elks, buzzards and beaver. Rare species include the yew tree, pond turtle, golden eagle and osprey. In mid-April, during spring migration, the Kolka peninsula buzzes with 60,000-odd birds. The park's population (1300) doubles in summer when rich Rigans flock to their summer cottages.

The information centre, inside Slitere lighthouse (right), runs a guide service (0.30Ls per hour) and is the starting point for a 1.3km **nature trail** through Latvia's oldest forest. Protected since 1921, the broad-leaf forest shelters a calcium-rich bog and is prime ground for rare orchid species (which flower in June or July).

THE KOLKA-VENTSPILS COAST ROAD

Far removed from the 21st century's hustle and bustle, the remote villages along

Latvia's northernmost coastal road are nestled among a natural wilderness of sea, sand and breathtakingly beautiful beaches and pine forests. Feel the centuries slide backwards as you explore these sleepy fishing hamlets where time all but stands still.

Elk antlers hang from street signs in **Vaide**, 10km west of Kolka, where there is little to see or do except wonder at the simple wooden houses. If the antlers spark your curiosity, there are 518 more in the **Museum of Horns & Antlers** (Ragu kolekcija; ☎ 324 4217; admission 0.50Ls; ☎ 9am-8pm May-Oct). The collection, creatively arranged in an attic, is the result of one man's lifetime of work as a forest warden in the region (none are hunting trophies). In summer you can **camp** (camp site per person 0.50Ls) in the field behind the museum; there's a pond, toilets and picnic tables.

Eighteenth-century wooden buildings line the sand-paved streets in pleasant **Košrags**, 6km to the west. Spend the night at **Jaunitmāči viesu nams** (☎ 941 2974; r 30Ls), a quaint B&B with charming rooms and on-site sauna.

Behind a gorgeous stretch of dune-backed beach, neighbouring **Mazirbe**, 18km southwest of Kolka, is home to the **Livonian People's House** (Libieš u tautas nams; Livlist rovkuda in Livonian). In a modernist white-cube 1930s building, it hosts exhibitions on Livonian culture. Livonian ethnographical treasures, including a small costume display, are found at the **Rundāli Museum** (Muzejs Rundāli; ☎ 324 8375; ☎ by appointment only), located inside a squat, barnlike building on your right when entering the village. To experience village life first-hand, spend the night at **Kaleji** (☎ 324 8374; d from 5Ls; (P)), a 12-bed guesthouse with sauna in a private home. It is well signposted.

From Mazirbe a gravel road leads inland to Dundaga and Talsi. About 5km south of Mazirbe you will see a sign for **Slitere Lighthouse** (Sliteres bāka; ☎ 324 9215), 1.4km down an even rougher track. Pay 0.30Ls and climb 101 steps for an aerial view of the national park and the Estonian island of Saaremaa. The lighthouse was built in 1849 and hosts the national park information centre.

Latvia's tallest lighthouse at 55.6m, **Miķeļ Lighthouse** (Miķeļbāka; ☎ 368 1501), built in 1957, is further down the coast in **Miķeļtornis**. The caretaker lives opposite the lighthouse entrance on the 1st floor; ask nicely and he'll

take you up the 277 steps for yet another stunning view.

DUNDAGA

Set amid three lakes, 20km from the Gulf of Riga and 40km north of Talsi, Dundaga is known for its **crocodile statue** (nr Talsu & Dinsberga iela). The 3m concrete crocodile, which lazes on a bed of stones, was given to the town by the Latvian consulate in Chicago in September 1995. The statue honours Arvids von Blumenfelds, a Latvian born in Dundaga but forced to flee his home town during WWII for Australia. Here he spent his days hunting crocodiles in the outback, and local lore has it that the film *Crocodile Dundee* was based on this Dundaga hero. As you enter Dundaga from the north, the crocodile is on your left.

If you're looking for ghosts, pay a visit to **Dundaga Castle** (Dundagas pils; ☎ 324 2093; Pils iela 14; adult/child 0.50/0.20Ls; ☎ 10am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat & Sun). Constructed in 1249, it is the largest castle in northern Courland. Legend has it that a fair maiden made the mistake of intruding upon a gnomes' wedding and as punishment she was walled up here alive. She haunts the castle to this day, appearing when the moon is full.

Pūpoli (☎ 324 0100; pūpoli@dundpag.apollo.lv; Gipka iela; camps site/d 2/20Ls; (P)) is a wooden terraced guesthouse with four comfortable rooms and oodles of green space for campers. It arranges berry- and mushroom-picking trips, forest walks and sauna soaks. Pūpoli is 600m east of Dundaga centre along the Gipka road.

ABAVA VALLEY

Carved by glaciers a few millennia ago, the U-shaped Abava Valley is a picturesque place popular with outdoor enthusiasts. The Abava River from near Kandava to its confluence with the Venta River is a popular canoe route, and the area also offers lots for hikers and bikers.

Kandava

Split in two by the Abava River, Kandava is a charming town located 20km south of Strazde. A mound fortified by the ancient Cours and the ruins of a **Livonian Order castle** appear to the north. From the top of the mound, there is an excellent view of the fine **stone bridge** (1875) – one of

Latvia's oldest – across the Abava River. Bikes can be rented at **Velotūre** (☎ 941 5842; Sabiles iela 6; per day 4Ls) or **Plosti** (☎ 313 1349; www.plosti.lv; Rēdnieki; per day 4Ls; dm 3Ls; (P)). The latter is a recreational centre that also offers canoe hire, guided paddles down the Abava, horse rides and fishing trips. The place doubles as a small hostel, offering accommodation in basic dorms. For a simple meal, visit **Pīls** (meals 2-4Ls) a green-and-white cottage café below the castle ruins. It has a wonderful fireplace in winter and a sunny terrace in summer.

Sabile & Pedvāle

The sleepy, cobbled-street village of Sabile, 14km downstream from Kandava, is famed for its vineyard – listed in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the world's most northern. A Council of Europe flag marks the legendary patch of land, called **Vīna kalns** (Wine Hill), located on a hill just north of town. Founded in the 17th century by Duke Jakob of Courland, the vineyard was never very productive and fell into disuse. Although operations resumed in 1936, the vineyard's focus lay in researching hardy strains of vines rather than producing high-quality wines. The only chance to taste local wine (it's impossible to buy) is at Sabile's **wine festival** in July, but the **tourist office** (☎ 325 2269; Ventspils iela 14; ☎ 10am-3pm Mon-Fri) sells tickets (0.15Ls) that allow you to check out the wine terraces. The self-guided tours are worthwhile, providing great views over the town. Other Sabile highlights include a 17th-century **Lutheran Church**, at the western edge of town. The blazing white church features an arresting baroque pulpit held up by four gryphon-headed snakes. Follow the trail behind the church to the summit of **Castle Hill**, where there's an ancient fort and excellent valley views.

Across the river from Sabile the road climbs to the **Pedvāle Open-Air Art Museum** (Pedvāles brīvdabas mākslas muzejs; ☎ 762 2335; www.pedvale.lv; adult/child 1/0.50Ls, guide 5Ls; ☎ 9am-6pm May-Oct), located about 1.5km south of the tourist office. The museum spreads over 2km and features over a hundred works of art created by artists from around the world. Many of the sculptures, installations and paintings were created in memory of those deported to Siberia. The graves of Latvian soldiers who died during WWII are also on the estate. Also located here is **Firkspedvāle**

(☎ 325 2249; pedvale@pedvale.lv; camp site 1Ls, r per person 5Ls; (P)), an atmospheric guesthouse with a handful of simply furnished rooms featuring wooden floors and rustic beams. The camp site is closed during winter. Opposite the guesthouse, **Krodziļš Dāre** (☎ 325 2273; meals 4Ls) dishes up satisfying food, from simple salads to hearty plates of freshly caught trout. Sit outside on the wooden terrace in summer.

In winter you can ski at **Zviedru cepure** (☎ 651 4001; www.zviedrucepure.lv; lift ticket per hr/day 1/6Ls; ☎ 10am-1am Mon-Thu, 9am-1am Fri-Sun winter, 10am-10pm Mon-Thu, 9am-midnight Fri-Sun summer), a recreational centre 3.5km south of Sabile on the road to Matkule. You can rent ski or snowboarding gear here (2Ls to 5Ls per hour) and whizz down its two short downhill runs. In summer get your thrills by flying down its dry toboggan run. The place also rents bikes and boats and you can pitch a tent for 2Ls.

Abavas rumba is a small waterfall 4km northwest of Sabile. The **Rendas rumba**, off the Abava River at Renda, 20km downstream on a tributary called the Ivanda, falls 2m and is Latvia's highest natural waterfall.

This area is best explored by car.

VENTSPILS

pop 44,000

Viewed by Latvians as the country's most dynamic city after Riga, Ventspils is a tidy oil-transit port renowned for the riches it reaped from black-gold exports. The air is brisk and clean, and the well-kept buildings are done up in various pastel and yellow hues. Small shops and outdoor cafés abound, and the city is home to the country's best skate park and an Olympic training centre. However, Ventspils, 200km west of Riga, is an industrial town at heart. Its port is Latvia's busiest, and much of its tourism is business-oriented.

There was a Cour settlement here before the Livonian Order founded a castle in 1244. Ventspils was in the Hanseatic League from the 14th to 16th centuries, and in the 17th century Duke Jakob of Courland based his navy here. After a spell in the doldrums the town revived with the arrival of a railway from Riga in the early 20th century. During the Soviet era Ventspils was a key USSR port and attracted a workforce mainly from non-Latvian parts of the USSR – 32% of the population remains Russian today.

When in Ventspils, do as locals do – drink Užavas, a light beer brewed locally.

Orientation

The Venta River flows up the eastern side of the town then turns west for its final 2.5km to the sea. Old Town, south of the river, was the real town centre until the Soviet navy took over the riverside area, and a new centre was created around Ganību iela and Kuldīgas iela, 750m or so further south.

Information

Baltijas Transzitu Banka (cnr Liela and Kuldīgas iela)

Currency exchange and ATM.

Planet Internet Club (Andrejs iela 7; per hr 1Ls;

☎ 10am-10pm) On the top floor of the Andrejs Nams shopping centre.

Post office (Jūras iela)

Tourist office (☎ 362 2263; www.tourism.ventspils.lv; Tīrgus iela 7; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm Sat, 10am-5pm Sun May-Oct, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat Nov-Apr) Reams of tourist info; reserves accommodation.

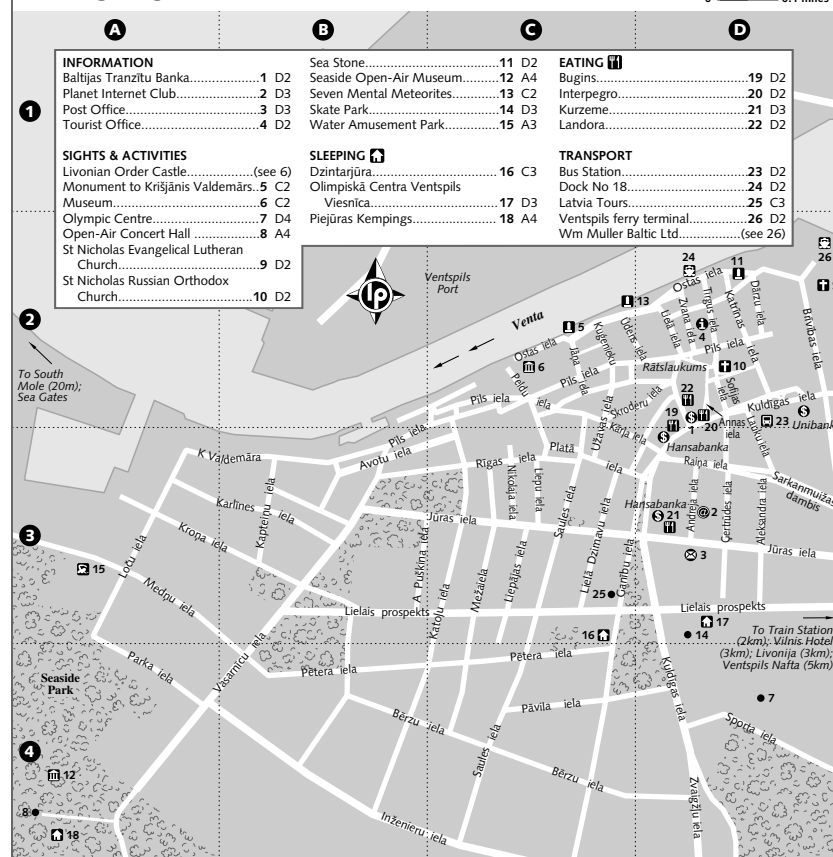
Sights & Activities

Ventspils' prime attraction is its coastline, which is laced with a sandy, dune-backed beach stretching south from the river mouth, about 2km west of the town centre. You can reach it along Viļņu iela (or Medņu iela), which branches off Vasarnīcu iela, or take bus 10 along Lielais prospekts.

Breakwaters poke 1km or so out to sea from the mouth of the river to form Ventspils' Sea Gates, with a narrow entrance that makes it treacherous for shipping if there's any sea running. A popular pastime is to walk or cycle 1km from the northern end of the beach, along the **South Mole** (Dienvidu mols) walkway, to the lighthouse at the end of the southern breakwater.

Ventspils' beach is overlooked by a **water amusement park** (Ūdens atrakciju parks; ☎ 366 5853; Medņu iela 19; per hr adult/child 1/0.50Ls, per day adult/child 2/1Ls; ☎ 10am-8pm), a vast complex in **Seaside Park** (Piejūras parks). Towards the south is the **Seaside Open-Air Museum** (Ventspils jūras zvejniecības brīvdabas muzejs; ☎ 322 4467, Rīņku iela 2; adult/child 0.60/0.30Ls, railway adult/child 0.50/0.25Ls; ☎ 11am-6pm May-Oct, 11am-5pm Wed-Sun Nov-Apr), with a collection of fishing craft, anchors and other seafaring items. On weekends between May and October you can ride around the museum's extensive grounds on a narrow-gauge railway dating to 1916. A little further south there's an **open-air concert hall** (Vasarnīcu

VENTSPILS



iela). Buses 6 and 11 run here regularly from Lielais prospekts.

Boarders, bladders and BMX bikers can leap around in the region's only **skate park** (Skeiiparks; ☎ 362 2172; Sporta iela 7-9; admission free; ☎ 24hr), with 18 jumps. Ice skaters can twirl around the city's ice-skating rink inside the modern **Olympic Centre** (☎ 362 1996; Sporta iela 7-9; per hr 1Ls, skate rental adult/child 0.50/0.20Ls).

There is little to see or do in Old Town except wander its streets and absorb the 18th-century architecture. Pils iela is the main street, cutting east-west across Old Town. Peering across Brīvības iela is the neo-Byzantine **St Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church** (Sv Nivolaja pareizticīgo baznīca; Plosu iela 10), built in 1901 and crowned with five onion domes.

Walking west along Pils iela, you can detour south down Tīrgus iela to Rātslaukums, a pretty cobbled square overlooked by **St Nicholas Evangelical Lutheran Church** (Sv Nivolaja luterāļu baznīca; Tīrgus iela 2), built in 1835.

Ventspils' 13th-century **Livonian Order Castle** (☎ 362 2031; Jana iela 17; adult/child 1/0.50Ls; ☎ 9am-6pm May-Sep, 10am-5pm Oct-Apr) hosts a cutting-edge interactive museum on castle history, with digital displays and two panoramic telescopes for visitors to enjoy an eagle's-eye view of the port and city. The museum also showcases fine pieces of amber discovered on archaeological digs in the region.

From the castle, it's a two-minute walk to the Venta River. Ostas iela is a riverside prom-

enade with interesting views of the bustling port on the opposite riverbank, running east along the water. From April to November the Hecogs Jēkabs boat sails around the mouth of the Venta River, a 45-minute trip; it leaves six times daily from **dock No 18** (☎ 362 2586; cnr Ostas iela & Tirgus iela; adult/child 0.50/0.20Ls). The **Sea Stone** (1998), at the far eastern end of the walkway, is a massive boulder dug out from a depth of 17.5m when the port canal was deepened. It's one of several sculptures lining the scenic promenade. Look out for Feldbergs' **Seven Mental Meteorites** (1996) and the **monument to Krišjānis Valdemārs** (2000), founder of Latvian shipping.

Sleeping

Olimpiskā Centra Ventspils Viesnīca (☎ 362 8032; www.ocventspils.lv; Lielais prospekts 33; r 13Ls; Ⓟ) Next to the Olympic Centre, this brand-new hotel is the best deal in town. Inside a modern-looking yellow building with lots of glass, rooms are spotless and cheery, although couples will have to deal with twin beds. There's a bar on the premises.

Dzintarjūra (☎ 362 2719; Ganību iela 26; r 30Ls; Ⓟ) A throwback to another era, this slightly shabby Soviet-style hotel somehow manages a strange, almost comforting, oddball charm. The public areas sport horrendous silver and black wallpaper; the aging rooms offer green shaglike carpet, velour bedspreads and disco-era love-seats. There's an on-site bar and restaurant and an indoor swimming pool that is free in the morning but costs a few lati at night (although no one could explain why).

Piejūras Kempings (☎ 362 7925; www.camping.ventspils.lv; Vasarnīcu iela 56; camp site per person 1.50Ls,

4-person cottage from 15Ls; Ⓟ) In the 'millionaire row' part of town near the sea, this is a modern site with pine-furnished, heated cottages, a laundrette, bicycle rental (0.80Ls per hour), and tennis, volleyball and basketball courts.

Vilnis (☎ 366 8880; Talsu iela 5; r from 40Ls) On the other side of the Venta River near the busy port, Vilnis is a service-orientated block targeted primarily to business travellers. Rooms are nothing special, but then they're not bad either.

Eating & Drinking

Bugins (☎ 368 0151; Lielā iela 1/3; meals 4-8Ls) With a log-cabin interior jam-packed with rustic knick-knacks and a large patio, Bugins is as hip as it gets in provincial Latvia. A feast of *shashliks*, soups, salads and omelettes fill its vast menu, which also has kids' meals.

Landora (☎ 362 2481; Lielā iela 2; meals 6Ls) Decorated with fishing nets and junk from the sea, Landora is a small but hip joint. The outdoor beer garden is a great place to linger over a quiet late-afternoon cocktail. Live bands rock the place on Saturdays from 11pm.

Kurzeme (☎ 362 4180; Jūras iela; meals from 4Ls) A modern café with glass tables, sparkling furnishings and mirrored windows, Kurzeme doubles as a nightclub where local DJs spin hip-hop and House music. There is karaoke Wednesday through Saturday nights.

Livonija (☎ 362 2287; Talsu iela 8; meals 4-12Ls) Downstairs there's a funky green bar and nightclub. Upstairs you'll find the restaurant with an extensive menu of meat-based entrées served with various sauces.

Interpegro (Annas iela 1) Interpegro is a central supermarket.

I-SPY

The Soviets used the 32m-diameter radio telescope in Irbene to eavesdrop on Western satellite communications. Today scientists gaze at the stars, moon and sun through it.

Hidden in the forest 24km north of Ventspils, Irbene's superpowerful antenna was one of three used to spy on the world by the Soviet army at the USSR Space Communication Centre. When the last Russian troops left in 1994, they took one antenna with them but left the remaining two – too large to move – to Latvia.

The R-32 – a 600-tonne dish mounted on a 25m-tall concrete base – was built by the USSR in the 1980s and is the world's eighth-largest parabolic antenna. Since 1994 the former military installation has belonged to the **Ventspils International Radio Astronomy Centre** (VIRAC; Ventspils starptautiskais radioastronomijas centrs), which is part of the **Latvian Academy of Sciences** (☎ 722 8321; www.lza.lv; Akademijas laukums 1, LV-1524 Rīga). Essentially a research centre, the antennae can be visited by guided tour, arranged in advance by calling ☎ 368 1541.

Getting There & Away

Ventspils' bus station (☎ 362 2789; Kuldīga iela 5) is served by buses to/from Rīga (3Ls, 2½ to four hours, hourly), Liepāja (3Ls, three hours, twice daily), Talsi (1.50Ls, 1½ hours, twice daily), Kuldīga (1.50Ls, 1½ hours, four daily) and Jelgava (3Ls, 4¼ to 5½ hours, four daily) via Kandava and Tukums.

Two trains run daily to/from Rīga (2.50Ls, 4¼ hours) from the **train station** (Dzeiželnieku iela), on the Rīga road 2km east of the centre, across the river.

VVLine LV (☎ 360 7358; www.vvline.com; Plostu iela 7) runs seasonal ferries six times weekly from **Ventspils ferry terminal** (☎ 360 7357; Plostu iela 7) to Västervik in Sweden. **Latvia Tours** (☎ 362 5413; www.latviatours.lv; Ganību iela 8) also sells tickets.

KULDĪGA

pop 13,335

Untouristy Kuldīga, 54km southeast of Ventspils, is a sleepy country town on the Venta River. There's not a lot to see or do, but the place has an almost romantic air about it and offers a glimpse into rural life. If you're tired of big-city hustle, stop here for a night. The medieval-looking town – with crumbling buildings, cobbled streets and quiet riverside parks – is perfect for lazy wandering. Settle down at an outdoor café and watch life slowly pass by.

An important Cours settlement and most likely the Cour capital at the time of the 13th-century German invasion, Kuldīga (then called Goldingen) later became an important stronghold of the Livonian Order. In its heyday it served as the capital of the Duchy of Courland (1596–1616), but the town suffered greatly in the Great Northern War (1700–21) and never quite regained its former importance.

Kuldīga throws its annual **town festival** in mid-July.

Orientation

The Venta River flows east of town and is crossed by the bridge leading out to the Rīga road. The old part of the town centre is 500m or so west and southwest of the bridge. The newer part of the centre focuses on Pilsētas laukums, 500m west along Liepājas iela.

Information

Hansabanka (Liepājas iela 15) Has an ATM outside.

Post office (Liepājas iela 34)

Tourist office (☎ 332 2259; www.kuldiga.lv; Baznīcas iela 5; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun mid-May–mid-Sep, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri rest of year)

Sights

OLD TOWN

Start your explorations in Rātslaukums, the old town hall square, which gets its name from the **17th-century town hall** (Rātslaukums 5). The new town hall, built in 1860 in Italian Renaissance style, is at the southern end of the square, and Kuldīga's oldest house – built in 1670, reconstructed in 1742 and renovated in 1982 – stands here on the northern corner of Pasta iela.

From Rātslaukums, Baznīcas iela leads north to the Lutheran **St Katrīna's Church** (Sv Katrīnas baznīca), built in 1655 and largely rebuilt in the 1860s and 1960s. The wooden altar and pulpit date from 1660; the large organ, with 996 pipes, is c 1712. Another fine church, the 1640 Roman Catholic **Holy Trinity Church** (Sv Trisvītenības baznīca; Raiļa iela), with an ornate baroque/rococo interior, is also a short way off Rātslaukums, along Liepājas iela – the main Old Town street.

From Baznīcas iela a bridge leads across the Aleksupīte, a tributary of the Venta, to a **water mill** (1807). Across the river is the site of the **Livonian Order Castle**, built from 1242 to 1245, but ruined during the Great Northern War. The **castle watchman's house** (Pils iela 4) was built in 1735 to protect the ruins. Legend has it that the house was the site of executions and beheadings and the stream behind the house ran red with the victims' blood. Today all that remains of the castle are a few mounds and ditches. On the grounds you'll find the mildly interesting **Kuldīga District Museum** (Kuldīgas novada muzejs; ☎ 332 2364; Pils iela; adult/child 0.40/0.20Ls; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun), located inside a home built in Paris in 1900 to house the Russian pavilion at the World Exhibition.

From Pils iela there's an excellent view of the Venta and the **Kuldīga waterfall**, which is only a metre or so high but stretches the width of the river – at 275m it's said to be Europe's widest waterfall. You can fish and swim here and, when the water's low, you can walk across the top of the falls.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

The large **old castle hill** (pilskaļns), 2.5km north of town on the western bank of the

Venta, was the fortress of Lamekins, the Cour who ruled much of Kurzeme before the 13th-century German invasion. Legend has it that the castle was so staggeringly beautiful – copper pendants hanging from the roof glistened in the sunlight and tinkled in the wind – that invaders were magnetically drawn to it. To get to the hill, follow Ventspils iela then Virkas iela north from the centre, then take the right fork off Virkas iela.

Immediately after the old bridge – the eastern extension of Baznīcas iela – turn left to get to **Riežupe Sand Caves** (Smilšu alas; ☎ 332 6236; adult/child 2/1Ls; ☎ 11am–5pm May–Oct), 5km further along unpaved Krasta iela in Riežupe. The labyrinthine caves can be visited by candlelight; they're a chilly 8°C, so

bring a warm sweater. The forested area around the caves is equipped with picnic tables and outdoor games.

Sleeping & Eating

Jāņa nams (☎ 332 3456; fax 332 3785; Liepājas iela 36; r 22–40Ls; (P)) The best sleeping option in town. Rooms are cosy, rustically inspired and very clean. The funky in-house café has bright-yellow walls, a varied Latvian menu (meals 2Ls to 5Ls) and possibly the coolest curtains in the country. Rates include breakfast.

Kursa (☎ 332 2430; fax 332 3671; Pilsētas laukums 6; s/d 12/16Ls; (P)) Recently renovated, this Soviet-era hotel features lovely public areas, but rather shabby rooms with twin beds,

lumpy pillows and scratched wooden furniture. The English-speaking staff is friendly, however, and the place is clean and OK for a short stay.

Stenders (☎ 332 2703; Liepājas iela 3; meals 4Ls) A fabulous find, Stenders is the town's funkiest joint. Housed in an 18th-century granary, it features a great upper-level wooden porch that's perfect for people-watching. Live bands often play here.

Namiņš (☎ 332 2697; Kalna iela 25a; meals 3–6Ls) With bright-orange walls and mod white leather chairs, this is the place to curl up by the fireplace in winter. In summer the outdoor terrace offers tranquil dining. The long cocktail menu features everything from pina colodas to margaritas. If you're hungry, choose from pasta, salads, soups, traditional Latvian fare and even a few vegetarian options.

Getting There & Away

From the **bus station** (☎ 332 2061; Stacijas iela) buses run to/from Riga (2.50Ls, three to four hours, six to 10 daily), Liepāja (1.50Ls, 2¼ hours, six daily) and Ventspils (1Ls, 1½ hours, four daily).

Motorists must buy a 0.50Ls ticket to cross the old road bridge (the Riga road) across the Venta in the town centre. Looping around town to cross the river at the new bridge (the Ventspils road) instead is free. Namiņš (above) sells tickets.

LIEPĀJA

pop 89,400

Latvia's third-largest city has a gritty, urban vibe. A port city on the Baltic Coast, Liepāja, 205km west of Riga and 111km south of Ventspils, is a city lost in transition, not sure which way it wants to go. Decaying and abandoned Soviet-era buildings sit next to slick Western-style bars, and the feel is at once edgy and eccentrically upbeat. Part of the Latvian Amber Road (see boxed text, p175), Liepāja is home to 123m ropes of amber beads and an impressive amber sundial. The city also hosts Latvia's largest rock festival, *Liepājas Dzintars* (Amber of Liepāja), in August each year, although the town is cashing in on Latvia's burgeoning rock 'n' roll scene year-round. Its multistorey 'rock café' is unique in the country, and hosts live bands nightly. Smaller venues are drawing up-and-coming

bands from as far away as Riga, and the nightlife here is often raging. Though lacking in sightseeing attractions, Liepāja has a pleasant beachfront, unique boutique hotels, some funky galleries – and a glass concert hall. Bizarrely, the local city council markets Liepāja today as the place where wind is born! The city still has rough edges to polish, but it's progressing quickly. In 10 years it just might be considered ultrahip. You'll have to visit to decide.

History

Founded by the Livonian Order in the 13th century, the city only really took off with the deepening of the harbour and arrival of a railway track in the 19th century. Tsar Alexander III built a naval port in Liepāja in 1890, becoming home to the first Baltic fleet of Russian submarines. Heavily bombed during WWII, Liepāja became a virtual ghost town in the postwar years. The Soviets used its port as a military base and kept everyone away. After the Iron Curtain fell, life returned, with residents working hard to turn it into the progressive hub it is today.

Orientation

Liepāja occupies the neck of land (about 2km to 3km wide) between Lake Liepāja and the sea. The city straddles Tirdzniecības Canal, the narrow canal flowing from the lake to the sea. The former naval port, and train and bus stations sit north of the canal, while the city centre lies south of the canal.

Information

Liva Hotel Hansabanka (Lielā iela 11) There's an ATM outside.

Post office (cnr Pasta iela & Radio iela) A block west of Lielā iela.

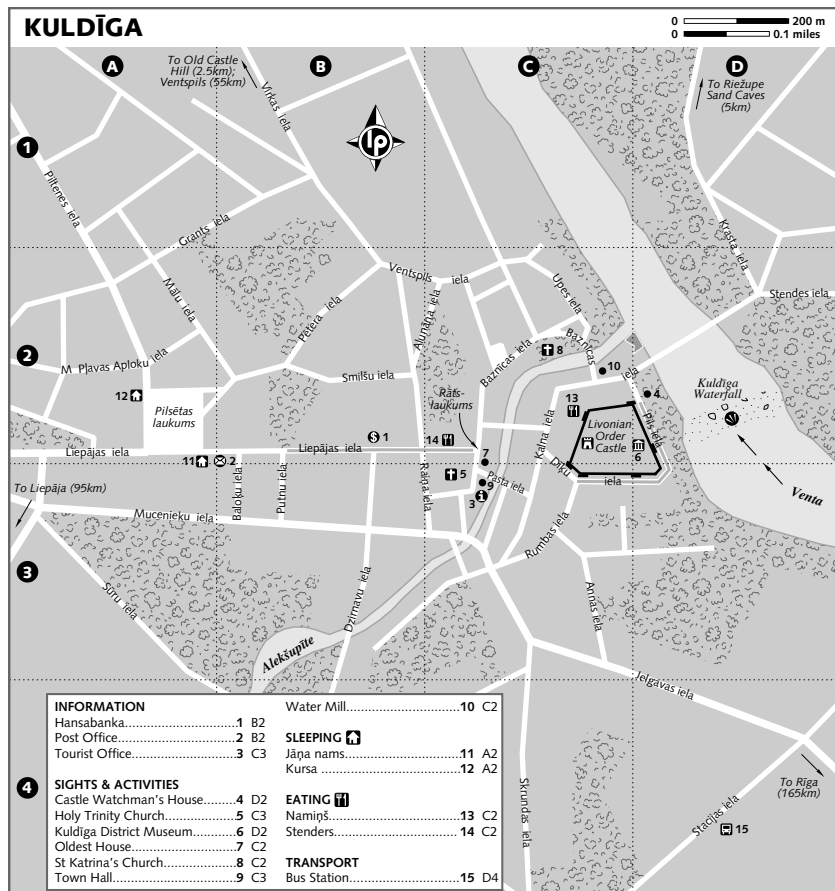
Sapņu sala (☎ 348 5333; Lielā iela 12; per hr 0.50Ls; ☎ 9am–9pm) Internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 348 0808; www.liepaja.lv; Lielā iela 11; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, to 5pm Sat) Inside the Liva Hotel, the tourist office offers a limited amount of English-speaking help to visitors.

Sights

OCCUPATION MUSEUM

This sobering museum (Okupāciju režīmos; ☎ 342 0274; K Ukstiņa iela 79; admission free; ☎ 10am–5pm Wed–Sun) traces the bloody history of the Soviet and Nazi occupations in Latvia, with an emphasis on Liepāja. A visit here is a



LIEPĀJA

INFORMATION

Post Office	1 D2
Sappu sala	2 C3
Tourist Office	3 D2

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Bowling Centre	4 B3
Holy Trinity Church	5 D2
Liepāja History & Art Museum	6 C2
Monument to Sailors & Fishers	7 A2
Occupation Museum	8 D3
Peter's Market & Pavillion	9 D3
St Anne's Basilica	10 D3
St Joseph's Cathedral	11 C3

EATING

Ilze	16 C2
Pastnieka Māja	17 C2
Pie Krustmātes Agates	18 D2
Senču Sēta	19 D3
Vecais Kapteinis	20 C2

DRINKING

Big 7	21 D2
Grilbārs Bruno	(see 12)
Latvia's 1st Rock Cafe	22 D2

ENTERTAINMENT

Pūt, Vējini	23 B3
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TRANSPORT

Latvia Tours	(see 3)
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SLEEPING

Amrita	12 D1
Feja	13 C3
Hotel Fontaine	14 C2
Līva Hotel	(see 3)
Roze	15 B3

moving, albeit disturbing, experience and should be on any Liepāja agenda. Captions are in Latvian, but no words are needed to explain the powerful images of the 1939–40 deportations to Siberia (an estimated 2000 people from Liepāja were deported), the genocide committed against Latvian Jews and the 1991 fight for independence.

KAROSTA

Off limits to everyone – including Latvians – during the Soviet occupation, Karosta is a former Russian naval base encompassing about one-third of Liepāja's city limits. From aging army barracks to ugly Soviet-style, concrete apartment blocks (many abandoned), evidence of the occupation still remains, but the Karosta of today is a vibrant place with a bohemian air. Home to artists, musicians, writers and other free thinkers, this progressive area is worth exploring.

A detention facility until 1997, today ghostly **Karosta Prison** (Karostas cietums; ☎ 636 9470; www.karostascietums.lv; Invalidu 4; admission from 0.50Ls; ☎ 10am–6pm May–Sep, by appointment only Oct–Apr) offers a variety of tours. Originally

built as an infirmary in 1900, the Soviets, Nazis and most recently the Latvians used the place as a military prison. Graffiti left behind by former inmates reveals the horrors incurred doing hard time here. Supposedly haunted, your tour guide will be happy to try to explain the unexplainable – light bulbs that mysteriously screw out of their sockets, doors that open without assistance and sudden eerie chills that descend upon a heated room. If you're craving some serious punishment, or just want to brag that you've spent the night in Latvian jail, sign up to become a prisoner for the night. You'll be subjected to regular bed checks, verbal abuse by guards in period garb and forced to relieve yourself in the most disgusting of latrines. It's a very different experience, all right. For more details, check the website.

HOLY TRINITY CHURCH

Built between 1742 and 1758, the baroque-style **Holy Trinity Church** (Sv Trīsvienības baznīca; ☎ 943 8050; Lielā iela 9; admission by donation; ☎ 10am–6pm) has a dazzling gilded rococo interior. Its centrepiece is its fabulous organ, at one

time the world's largest, boasting more than 7000 pipes, 131 registers and four manuals. For a small fee (usually 1Ls), the church caretaker will escort you up the myriad of creaky wooden steps to the clock tower, where fabulous city views await.

LIEPĀJA HISTORY & ART MUSEUM

A collection of carved amber ornaments dating back 1500 years is just one of the highlights of a visit to the **Liepāja History & Art Museum** (Liepājas vēstures un mākslas muzejs; ☎ 342 2327; Kūrmājas prospekts 16/18; adult/child 0.50/0.30Ls; ☎ 10am–5pm Wed–Sun Sep–May, 11am–6pm Wed–Sun Jun–Aug). Other exhibits include impressive Stone and Bronze Age artefacts unearthed on local archaeological digs, an interesting collection of old jewellery and weapons and vintage memorabilia from both world wars. At the seaside end of the same street is a **monument** to sailors and fishers who died at sea.

PETER'S MARKET

Vendors have touted their wares at the outdoor market on Kuršu laukums since the mid-17th century. The market expanded in 1910, when a **pavilion** (Pētertirgus; ☎ 343 4517; Kuršu laukums 5–9; ☎ 8am–6pm) was constructed adjacent to the square. Today you'll find stalls inside and out at this bustling complex, selling everything from second-hand tables, pirated CDs, DVDs and local crafts to fruits, vegetables and fresh slabs of meat.

ST JOSEPH'S CATHEDRAL & ST ANNE'S BASILICA

The Roman Catholic **St Joseph's Cathedral** (Sv Jāzepa katedrāle; ☎ 342 9775; K Valdemāra 28) is a towering yellow-brick church with a notable interior – it's ornately decorated with Bible scenes. Nearby, **St Anne's Basilica** (Sv Annas baznīca; ☎ 342 3384; Veidenbauma 1) is a red-brick, neo-Gothic edifice constructed in 1587. Its highlights include a sky-high steeple and an impressive baroque altar painting that is 5.8m high and 9.7m wide.

Activities

If you're travelling with the kids, head to the **Bowling Centre** (Dzintara boulingis; ☎ 348 0080; Peldu iela 66; ☎ noon–midnight Mon–Thu, noon–2am Fri & Sat, 10am–midnight Sun). The giant recreation complex houses eight bowling lanes, air hockey and pool tables, a children's play area and a bar and restaurant. Adults will

likely dig the complex too, especially if it's freezing outside.

The **beach**, west of the city centre, is long, clean and sandy. Once considered unsafe for swimming (rumour has it the Soviet navy dumped several hundred thousand tonnes of toxic waste and unexploded bombs here during the days of the military base), the water has subsequently been cleaned up, and the beach has been awarded the internationally recognised Blue Flag rating.

At the far west end of Peldu iela, right behind the beach, nearly 0.5 sq km of parkland have been designated as **Jūrmala Park**. With woodlands and dunes, this park is perfect for strolling. Grand wooden Art-Nouveau summer homes, constructed by Liepāja's wealthy citizens from the 1870s onward, grace the streets around the park. If your wanderers have left you parched, stop by one of the many beer gardens or cafés scattered around the grounds. You can also partake in a game of miniature golf or tennis or check out the skate park.

Festivals & Events

Liepāja throws a giant beach bash every year at the end of July. The **Baltic Beach Party** (www.balticbeachparty.lv) takes place over two days and includes live music, discos, carnivals, fashion shows, sporting events and other hoopla all right on the beach.

Sleeping

Unless stated otherwise, room rates in the listings in this section include breakfast.

Roze (☎ 342 1155; www.parkhotel-roze.lv; Rigas iela 37; s/d from 32/40Ls; ☎ ☎) Stylish and comfortable, this Art-Nouveau wooden guesthouse near the sea was once a summer home for the elite. Rooms are spacious, and each is uniquely decorated. Amenities include satellite TVs and minibars.

Feja (☎ 342 2688; www.feja.lv; Kurzemes iela 9; s 18–30Ls, d 20–40Ls; ☎) This turreted red-brick guesthouse, with a rather strange grey and silver colour scheme, offers very large rooms with all the mod cons and a couple of luxury suites. The entrance is on Peldu iela.

Amrita (☎ 340 3434; www.amrita.lv; Rigas iela 7; s/d from 40/60Ls, presidential ste 205Ls; ☎) Liepāja's classiest hotel offers comfortable digs with all modern conveniences, done up in a pseudo-Scandinavian style, although they seem a bit bland for the price. The two-floor

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hotel Fontaine (☎ 342 0956; www.fontaine.lv; Jūras iela 24; r from 20Ls; P) A real gem, this boutique joint is one of those places you'll either fiercely love or absolutely abhor. The rooms are ultrahip, but the beds are less than comfortable. Whatever, it's definitely Latvia's funkiest hotel. A shrine to everything rock 'n' roll, it's kitsch to the max. Each retro room is different (see a few before deciding), but all feature loads of rock memorabilia as well as satellite TV with DVD players. Old Soviet army-issue footlockers serve as tables in some; others boast private balconies, hardwood floors, oriental rugs or garish bedspreads. Walls sport a mix of '70s disco-style wallpaper and bright, bright paint. Downstairs there's a communal kitchen and a chill-out lounge with hookahs. The reception is in the on-site curiosity shop, crammed with dusty Soviet-era gas masks and uniforms, woollen coats and other assorted knick-knacks – dig hard enough and you might just find a cheap treasure (we discovered a vintage Gucci purse selling for pennies).

presidential suite is a luxurious affair complete with Jacuzzi, and is where the president stays when she's in town. The lobby bar and restaurant are swanky enough, and reception is very friendly and accommodating.

Pie Jāna Liepāja (☎ 342 5075; piejana@one.lv; Raiņa iela 43; dm/r 8/21Ls; P) Backpackers on a budget will appreciate the clean, cheap and renovated dorm rooms here. Those with a little extra cash will dig the cosy doubles, decked out with antique furnishings. To book a room, visit the travel agency on the 1st floor; the same friendly folks run the hotel.

Liva Hotel (☎ 342 0102; www.liva.lv; Lielā iela 11; s 10-25Ls, d 15-32Ls; P) Liva makes up for its lack of character by offering clean, good-value rooms in a very central location. The cheapest share bathrooms, the more expensive have modern en-suite facilities. Couples will have to deal with twin beds in double rooms.

Eating

Pastnieka Māja (☎ 340 7521; Brīvzemnieka iela 53; meals 6-12Ls) This very modern, ultraslick two-level restaurant is housed in a vast

mansion. The menu features traditional Latvian favourites, as well as a few very exotic offerings: the 'spicy nuts' are bulls' balls stuffed with a garlic nut sauce served on a bed of warm bean and potato salad. This is also one of the few places that serves Liepāja's local beer, Līvu alus.

Ilze (☎ 342 6724; Graudu iela 23; meals 4-8Ls) Candles and flowers set the mood at this inviting cellar restaurant with an international menu that includes dozens of salad choices. One of the city's oldest privately run cafés, Ilze has live jazz performances on weekends.

Senču Sēta (☎ 342 5453; Stendera iela 13a; meals 2-8Ls) Located on a quiet side street, this fisherman's cottage has a modern red and green theme inside and an outdoor flower-filled beer garden strewn with fishing nets. The big menu offers lots of salads, vegetarian options, hearty Latvian meals and light snacks. It's also a popular drinking spot.

Pie Krustmātes Agates (Zivju iela 4/6; meals 2Ls) Pie Krustmātes Agates is a real gem. This canteen-style spot dishes up mains for 0.35Ls in a lovely rustic setting, decorated with cartwheels, dried flowers, pumpkins and the like.

Drinking & Entertainment

Liepāja has a reputation throughout Latvia as the centre of the country's rock-music scene, and taking in a concert is a real treat. Even if you can't understand the lyrics, just being a part of the screaming, pulsating masses is a cultural experience you won't soon forget.

Upcoming concerts, cinema and theatre productions are listed in *Liepāja This Week*, a weekly eight-page entertainment magazine; pick up a free copy at the tourist office. In summer open-air concerts are held at **Pūt, Vējini** (☎ 342 5268), an outside theatre in Jūrmala Park.

Latvia's 1st Rock Café (☎ 348 1555; Zivju iela 4/6; www.pablo.lv; cover 2-3Ls) It goes by a variety of names, including Pablo's Place, but there's no way you'll miss this massive four-storey structure with loads of glassy windows and a pseudo-industrial look. Restaurants, bars, dance floors, billiards and a rooftop beer garden are all housed here. The walls are plastered with old concert posters and the club features live music every night, as well as frequent rave parties.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Vecais Kapteinis (Old Captain; ☎ 342 5522; Dubelsteina iela 14; meals 4-14Ls) Hands down, the best meal we had in Latvia. The innovative dishes, best described as upmarket Latvian fusion, are rich in flavour and nothing short of delicious. Meat, fish and seafood comprise much of the giant menu, but there are a few pasta and vegetarian offerings as well. The ambience is almost as delightful as the cuisine. In a stunning timber-framed building dating to 1773, whitewashed walls, candles and a seafaring theme cultivate a romantic vibe. Other highlights include a long, global wine list, quiet music and glasses of absinthe served in the traditional fashion and guaranteed to knock your socks off.

Grilbārs Bruno (☎ 340 0888; Rīgas iela 7/9) Exposed brick walls and sturdy wooden tables dominate at this cosy cellar bar inside the Amrita hotel. Enjoy a game of chess, darts or *novuss* – a Latvian creation that's part shuffleboard, part billiards – with a glass of the nation's favourite beer, Užavas, served on draught.

Big 7 (☎ 342 7318; Baznīcas 14/16) This giant complex offers a little bit of everything. Divided into multiple sections for dancing, drinking, eating and chilling, it also offers stripteases, pool and slot machines. Head upstairs to King 7 if you want to zone out on couches and pillows or fill your lungs with hookah smoke (5Ls per hookah).

Getting There & Away

Liepāja's **bus & train stations** (☎ 342 7552; Rīgas iela) are rolled into one, linked by tram 1 with Lielā iela in the town centre.

There are daily bus services to/from Rīga (3Ls, 3½ hours direct, four to 4½ hours via Kalnciems, five to 5½ hours via Jelgava, and seven hours via Tukums, hourly), Kuldīga (2Ls, 2¼ hours, six daily), Talsi (3Ls, 4½ hours, six daily) and Ventspils (3Ls, three to 3¾ hours, six daily). Updated timetables are online at www.liepaja-online.lv/lap.

There are six trains to/from Rīga (3.50Ls, 4¾ to six hours, four daily).

In town, **Latvia Tours** (☎ 342 7172; www.latvia.tours.lv; Lielā iela 11), inside the Liva Hotel, sells tickets for ferries and Eurolines buses.

Terrabalt (☎ 342 7214; www.terrabalt.lv; Pier No 46) runs ferries from Liepāja to Karlshamn (Sweden) and Rostock (Germany). Ferries depart for Karlshamn three times weekly (17½ hours); seats cost 40Ls, beds in two/four-bed cabins cost 60/70Ls. There's a 5Ls port tax per person and it costs 7/46Ls to transport a bicycle/car.

Terrabalt ferries to Rostock depart twice weekly (seven hours). A seat costs €80 and beds in two-/four-bed cabins cost €110/140; port tax is €10. It costs €10/115 to transport a bicycle/car.

On both routes children aged three to 15 pay approximately 50% less.

LATVIA DIRECTORY

The following contains practical information related to travelling in Latvia. For regional information pertaining to all three countries, see the Regional Directory.

ACTIVITIES

Mushrooming, berrying, canoeing and cycling in summer, and hitting the sauna, skiing, snowshoeing and snowboarding in winter are but some of the uplifting pursuits Latvia offers to active visitors. All three national parks plus Latvia's many nature reserves sport some well-marked nature trails that help visitors discover the country's rich flora and fauna collection. See the Activities chapter for more regional activity info.

CUSTOMS

The **Latvian Tourism Development Agency** (www.latviatourism.lv) posts the latest customs rules on its website.

People over 18 can bring in and take out 1L of alcohol and 200 cigarettes, 20 cigars or 200g of tobacco without paying duty. You can import and export duty-free any amount of hard currency.

Works of art or of cultural significance (including antique books) that date from before 1945, but are less than 100 years old, are subject to a 50% customs duty; those older than 100 years attract 100% duty. They may only be taken out of the country with a licence issued by the **State Inspection for Heritage Protection** (☎ 722 9272), inside the **Ministry of Culture** (☎ 704 7400; www.km.gov.lv; Valdemāra iela; LV-1050 Rīga).

PRACTICALITIES

- The English-language paper *Baltic Times* (www.baltictimes.com) is published every Thursday in Riga and has an entertainment guide that includes cinema listings. For news, the Latvian daily newspaper *Diena* (www.diena.lv) provides the best politically independent coverage and comes out in a separate Russian-language edition.
- *Riga in Your Pocket* (www.inyourpocket.com) and *Riga This Week* (www.rigathisweek.lv) are bimonthly English-language guides with Riga hotel, restaurant and nightlife reviews.
- On air, tune into Latvian State Radio (www.radio.org.lv), which transmits daily short-wave broadcasts at 5935 kHz in English; FM frequencies are listed on its website. Popular commercial channels are Mix FM on 102.7 FM, Radio SWH at 105.2 FM and Super FM on 104.3 FM. Listen to the BBC World Service 24 hours a day at 100.5 FM.
- Latvian State Television (Latvijas Televīzija; www.ltv.lv) broadcasts two state-run TV channels, LTV1 and LTV2, while TV5 (www.tv5.lv) is Riga's city channel, broadcasting programmes strictly about the capital and its inhabitants. The country's most popular private TV broadcast station is Latvian Independent Television (Latvijas Neatkarīga Televīzija; www.lnt.lv).
- PAL is the main video system used in Latvia.
- Electrical current is 220V, 50Hz AC. Sockets require a European plug with two round pins.
- Use the metric system for weights and measures.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES Latvian Embassies & Consulates

A complete list of Latvian diplomatic missions abroad is posted on the website of Latvia's **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (www.am.gov.lv). They include the following:

Australia (☎ 02-9744 5981; 32 Parnell St, Strathfield, NSW 2135)

Belarus (☎ 0172-849 393, consular 84 74 75; daile@anitex.by; 6a Dorosheva Str, BY-220013 Minsk)

Canada (☎ 613-238 6014, consular 238 6868; www.magma.ca/~latemb; 208 Albert St, Suite 300, Ottawa, K1P 5G8 Ontario)

Estonia (☎ 627 7850; embassy.estonia@mfa.gov.lv; Tõnismägi 10, EE10119 Tallinn)

Finland (☎ 09-4764 7244, consular 4764 7233; consu.late.finland@mfa.lv; Armfeltintie 10, SF-00150 Helsinki)

France (☎ 01 53 64 58 10, consular 01 53 64 5816; embassy.france@mfa.gov.lv; 6 Villa Said, F-75116 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-8260 0222; www.botschaft-lettland.de; Reinerzstrasse 40-41, D-14193 Berlin)

Lithuania (☎ 5-213 1260; embassy.lithuania@mfa.gov.lv; Ciurlionio gatvė 76, LT-2600 Vilnius)

Russia (☎ 095-925 2703, consular 923 8772; russia@mfa.gov.lv ulitsa Chapligina 3, RUS-103062 Moscow)

Sweden (☎ 08-700 6300; lettlands.ambassad@swipnet.se; Odengatan 5, Box 19167, S-10432 Stockholm)

UK (☎ 020-7312 0040; embassy@embassyoflatvia.co.uk; 45 Nottingham Place, London W1U 5LR)

USA (☎ 202-726 8213; www.latvia-usa.org; 4325 17th Street NW, Washington, DC 20011)

Embassies & Consulates in Latvia

The following embassies are in Riga:

Canada (Map p196; ☎ 722 6315; canembr@bkc.lv; Doma laukums 4)

Estonia (Map pp192-3; ☎ 781 2020; www.estemb.lv; Skolas iela 13, Riga LV 1010)

Finland (Map pp192-3; ☎ 707 8800; www.finland.lv; Kalpaka bulvāris 1)

France (Map pp192-3; ☎ 703 6600; www.ambafrance-lv.org; Raiņa bulvāris 9)

Germany (Map pp192-3; ☎ 722 9096; www.deutsche.botschaft-Riga.lv; Raiņa bulvāris 13)

Lithuania (Map p188; ☎ 732 1519; litsemb@ltemb.vip.lv; Rūpniecības iela 24)

Netherlands (Map p196; ☎ 732 6147; www.netherlandsembassy.lv; Torņa iela 4)

Russia (Map pp192-3; ☎ 733 2151; rusembas@mail.junk.lv; Antonijas iela 2)

Sweden (Map pp192-3; ☎ 733 8770; www.sweden.emb.lv; Andreja Pumpura iela 8)

UK (Map pp192-3; ☎ 777 4700; www.britain.lv; Alūnāna iela 5)

USA (Map pp192-3; ☎ 703 6200; www.usembassy.lv; Raiņa bulvāris 7)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Latvia shares a number of regular cultural events with Estonia and Lithuania, the most important being the national song festival (which occurs every five years) and the Baltika Folklore Festival (see p386) and midsummer celebrations. Information on

the dozens of one-off festivals is online at www.km.gov.lv.

Latvia's major annual festivals include the following:

International Baltic Ballet Festival (www.ballet-festival.lv) Takes place over five days in late April; performances by Latvian and international companies.

National Ethnic Arts and Crafts Fair (www.muzeji.lv/index_e.html) Big arts and crafts fair held at the Open-Air Ethnography Museum in Riga on the first weekend in June.

Riga Opera Festival (www.music.lv/opera) The Latvian National Opera's showcase event, it takes place over 10 days in June and includes performances by world-renowned talent.

Baltic Beach Party (www.balticbeachparty.lv) Giant festival featuring live music, discos, carnivals, fashion shows, sporting events and other hoopla on the beach in Liepāja; late July.

Festival of Ancient Music (www.bauska.lv) Music festival held at Bauska Castle and Rundāle Palace in late July.

Opera Music Festival (www.sigulda.lv) Open-air festival in Sigulda's castle ruins; late July.

Tukums Town Festival (www.tukums.lv) Small town festival, held in Tukums in late July.

Ascension Roman Catholic processions, celebratory masses in Aglona; 14-16 August.

Āreņa New Music Festival (www.arenafest.lv) Contemporary music festival showcasing various genres and held at venues throughout Riga during the first two weeks of October.

Lāčplēsis Day (Lāčplēšu Diena) Commemoration of dead heroes, named after Latvia's mythical warrior hero, whose name means 'Bear Slayer'; 11 November.

HOLIDAYS

Latvian national holidays:

New Year's Day 1 January

Good Friday (Easter Monday is also taken as a holiday by many.)

Labour Day 1 May

Mothers' Day Second Sunday in May

Ligo (Midsummer festival) 23 June

Jāni or Jānu Diena (St John's Day) 24 June

National Day 18 November; anniversary of proclamation of Latvian Republic, 1918

Christmas (Ziemsvētki) 25 December

Second Holiday 26 December

New Year's Eve 31 December

INTERNET ACCESS

Wi-fi access is becoming quite prevalent in Latvia. There are wi-fi hot spots in all the major cities, and many hotels, especially in Riga, offer the service to their guests. Fees vary, sometimes it's free, other times there

is a slight charge. Wi-fi is also available in many cafes around the country.

Internet cafés – many open 24 hours – are abundant in Riga and most large towns and seaside resorts. Online access generally costs 0.50Ls per hour.

In provincial Latvia an Internet café tends to translate as a *datorsalons*, crammed with square-eyed kids playing killer computer games. Make it clear you want to access the Internet (rather than tangle with Lara Croft) and a kid will be kicked off to make way for you.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The official website of the **Latvian Tourism Development Agency** (www.latviatourism.lv) is packed with oodles of intelligently written cultural, historical and practical information about Latvia, as well as some excellent links to other Latvia-related sites.

The other indispensable site for serious background information and up-to-date cultural listings is **Latvians Online** (www.latviansonline.com). Its section on Latvian music reviews all the latest releases and is particularly useful, as are its links to other sites on Latvia. **Music in Latvia** (www.music.lv) is another inspiring site for those keen to tune in to Latvian jazz, opera, folk and other classical genres.

Sports fans can follow Latvia's football, basketball and ice hockey clubs with **Sports News** (www.sportsnews.lv). Those interested in what the president has to say can click on www.president.lv. For articles on everything Latvian, check out www.allaboutlatvia.com.

MAPS

Country, city and town maps of Latvia are available from Riga-based **Jāņa sēta** (Map p188; ☎ 709 2277; www.kartes.lv; Elizabetes iela 83-85, LV-1009 Riga), which runs an excellent map shop in the capital. Its town-plan series covers practically every town in Latvia; individual maps range in scale from 1:15,000 to 1:20,000 and cost 0.70Ls to 1.50Ls.

With the exception of Jāņa sēta's detailed *Gaujas Nacionālais parks* (Gauja National Park, 1;100,000, 1.35Ls), hiking maps don't exist. But Jāņa sēta does stock topographical map sheets (1:50,000, 1.98Ls) of Latvia published by **Kartogrāfijas Pārvalde** (☎ 703 8610; www.vzd.gov.lv; 11 Novembre krastmala 31, LV-1050 Riga) covering western Latvia. The satellite-generated sheets (1:50,000, 0.98Ls) by the

same cartographer and available on CD (13.90Ls) are less accurate.

MONEY

Latvia's currency, the lats (plural: lati), was introduced in March 1993 and has remained stable ever since. The lats (Ls) is divided into 100 santīmi (singular: santīms). Lati come in coin denominations of 1Ls and 2Ls and notes of 5Ls, 10Ls, 20Ls, 50Ls, 100Ls and 500Ls; and santīmi come in coins of 1, 2, 5, 10, 20 and 50. The 100Ls gold coin, minted in 1998, is a rarity.

The national bank **Latvijas Bankas** (Latvian Bank; www.bank.lv) posts the lats' daily exchange rate on its website. For exchange rates, see inside front cover.

POST

Latvia's postal system is almost completely reliable. It costs 0.15/0.30/0.30Ls to send a postcard/letter under 20g to Latvia/Europe/elsewhere; a letter weighing 20g to 100g costs 0.50Ls to send within Latvia or Europe and 0.80Ls to the US. Mail to North America takes about 10 days, and to Europe about a week.

TELEPHONE

Public cardphones are widespread throughout Latvia, but coin-operated phones are a rarity. Calls can be made from cardphones using a *telekarte*, worth 2Ls, 3Ls or 5Ls and sold at kiosks and post offices, or with a major credit card; instructions in English are included in every booth.

Latvian telephone numbers have seven digits and need no city or area code. To make a local or national call, simply dial the seven-digit number. To make an international call, dial the international access code (00), followed by the appropriate country code, city code if applicable and subscriber's number. To call a Latvian telephone number from abroad, dial the

international access code, then the country code for Latvia (371) followed by the subscriber's number. Telephone rates are posted on the website of the partly state-owned **Lattēlekom** (www.lattēlekom.lv), which enjoys a monopoly on fixed-line telephone communications in Latvia.

Telephone numbers kicking off with 900 or 999 are pricier than normal calls; those starting with 800 are free. To contact directory inquiries, try www.118.lv, or dial ☎ 118 or ☎ 722 2222; English is spoken.

Mobile telephones likewise have seven digits and need no area code; they generally start with the digit nine. Mobile phones are difficult to rent, but providing your phone is GSM900/1800-compatible, you can buy a SIM-card package from one of Latvia's two mobile telephone operators, **Latvijas Mobilais Telfons** (LMT; www.lmt.lv) or **Tele2** (www.tele2.lv). Tele2's Zelta zivtiņa (literally 'gold fish') start-up kit costs 8.50Ls (SIM plus 7Ls credit) and local calls cost 0.168Ls to 0.234Ls per minute. LMT's OKarte package costs 9.70Ls (SIM plus 7Ls credit) and calls cost 0.036Ls to 0.216Ls per minute. The LMT network extends further than Tele2, but coverage in the countryside can be patchy with either network.

TOURIST INFORMATION

A small network of tourist offices overseas represents the **Latvian Tourism Development Agency** (☎ 722 9945; www.latviatourism.lv; Pils laukums 4, LV-1050 Riga). In Latvia practically every town and city has a tourist office, listed both on the Latvian Tourism Development Agency's excellent website and under Information in the respective city/town sections of this chapter.

Some tourist offices are substantially more efficient than others, although practically all have an English-speaking staff and distribute printed information in English on its respective town and region.

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