LATVIA
100
SNAPSHOT STORIES

Latvia
100
This is your personal invitation to a cultural adventure of Latvia – a country in Northern Europe, by the Baltic Sea, celebrating its Centenary of statehood in 2018. One hundred years, one hundred stories – snapshots of the codes of our consciousness, values and virtues, a glimpse at both the changeable and the constant Latvia, a reflection of the zeitgeist. Just like any other nation, we have our unforgettable experiences and past traumas, which we strive to overcome, big and small victories that keep inspiring us and keep reminding us of the things worth fighting for, special people and landmarks as important symbols telling the story of who we are, our weaknesses and strengths, and our future ambitions. The ingredients that make a nation are often the same, but their endless combinations are what make each and every nation unique and beautiful. Just like in the story about Latgalian pottery – we are all different, yet made of the same substance. Let us explore, inspire, support and celebrate each other, because we are all connected. We are all one.
White is a very loaded word for us. It denotes a synthesis of aesthetic and ethical values. We start with the small word “fair”, which is a mixture of beautiful and honourable. Then we add the notion of “good” and a fair measure of something like clarity or translucence. We use “white” when referring to virtue and spirituality in people, deeds, even thinking, and it appears as an adjective in a thousand variations throughout the Dainas, our folksongs.
The Dainas

Latvian folksongs, or Dainas, form one of the largest collections of versified folk heritage in the world. They are the collected wisdom and worldview of the Latvian people, encoded into 1.2 million four-to-six-line verses. Each verse contains rhyme, rhythm, poetry, metaphor and a narrative. They describe the ritual markers of an entire human life, as well as advice on how to live it well, and the seasonal cycle of the natural world in great detail. A complex mythological world, detailed accounts of the working life and social customs is set out as though it is in the best history book – yet written in poetry.

Keeping the form intact, it is clear there are influences that have evolved from many literary and historical periods over the centuries. The use of the diminutive form is a core element, making the Dainas almost impossible to successfully translate into any other language. Due to their extreme compactness, around 100 characters, we like to think we were the forefathers of micro-blogging.

Slowly, quietly drives God
Downwards to the valley;
Not a blossom is disturbed,
Not a foal is startled.

Lēni, lēni Dieviņš brauca
No kalniņa lejiņā;
Netraucēja ievas ziedu,
Ne arāja kumeliņu.

Translated by Velta Sniķere
The Lielvārde sash

Part of a woman’s folk dress, the Lievārde sash has an extremely complicated woven geometric pattern that changes up to 22 times in its approximately 3 metres of length. Visibly striking, and linked to the signs and graphic symbols of other ancient civilisations as far away as Asia, it was possibly used as a ritual protection or story telling device. Many scholars believe that some ancient coded information might lurk within it, capturing the imagination of modern-day designers, artists and craftsmen.

The Lielvārde sash is part of the national cultural canon and as a design element it even appears in our passports.

Pagans

We like to think of ourselves as pagans – appreciation of nature and the essence of a traditional world-view lies deeply rooted in the soul of an average Latvian. Christian and pagan traditions have co-existed for centuries, especially when it comes to major feast days like Christmas or Easter. Pre-Christian veneration of the sun, the obvious bringer of life, comes as logical given the northern climate we live in, and the ancestral wisdom passed on from generation to generation in the form of folktales, legends, proverbs and folksongs is an inexhaustible source of inspiration, even in the digital age.

At a time when nature is under threat, it is perhaps wise that we have never lost belief in the need for deference to the natural world.
Signs and symbols

Woven into fabrics, carved into the wall above the main entrance of a house or pressed into a loaf of bread, these ancient Latvian signs were believed to protect against various evils and misfortunes, harmonise energies in the household or bring prosperity to its wearer.

1. God. Attracts divine and creative energy, symbol of masculinity.
2. Laima, the goddess of destiny. Sometimes called Laima’s brush, the sign is a symbol of good luck and happiness, harmonises relationships among people.
3. Māra’s Cross. For the protection of material values – household and nourishment. A symbol of living matter. Māra looks after the material world. The sign was pressed into a loaf of bread before baking.
4. Morning Star or Auseklītis. Symbolic of the victory of light over darkness, it sheds light, protects against evil, gives hope and support in times of change. Before going to battle warriors covered their horses with a blanket of stars.
5. Thunder Cross. Symbol of light, fire and life, attracts happiness and strength, ensures a good relationship with the forces of fire.
6. Austra’s Tree. Protects family and ancestors, fosters development, the protection of virtues. Its roots symbolise the underground world, the middle – current life, and the crown is the heavens. It’s a unity of past, present and future.
7. Jumis. Shaped like two crossed ears of grain, the sign is a symbol of fertility and welfare. Normally it was placed at the apex of a roof gable to attract prosperity, fertility and harmony. It could also be carried in a wallet for prosperity.
8. The serpent or Zalktis. The symbol of wisdom, the sign of sages and wise men and women. It often appeared in female attire and in the bathhouse.
9. Ūsiņš. The protector of horses, the bearer of male energy, it ensures protection during journeys. Also known as a sign of life, it was drawn on the cradle and on the porch.
Indeed, it is the stuff of fairy tales about magical streams and criss-crossed force fields deep below the surface, however, many Latvian architects still check the ley lines before signing off on the plans of a house. 2 – 3 metres apart, intersecting at right angles, this network of mystical subterranean water energy lines was known to other Northern European peoples, too. A well dug on a cross-point was thought to have healing properties, but an oak tree there would attract lightning. How can one tell their influence? An instant cure for insomnia by moving the bed off a ley line. A line of trees in a forest coincidentally growing in a straight line. The dog or cat choosing an unusual place as a favourite napping spot.

Checking of ley lines is a job for a specialist, but often country folk do it themselves with a ring or a sewing needle. We believe – better safe than sorry.

Ancestral spirits

Paying respect to the dead is a tradition of many ancient civilisations, and we are no exception. Remembrance of departed souls (veļi) is still practised in modern times and intertwined with Christian rituals. It is believed that veļi return to their living kin in autumn, to be fed and remembered with a kind word, in exchange, providing protection and support for earthly endeavours. Today, we celebrate the memory of our loved ones during cemetery festivals, drawing the extended family together from all over the country. The grave sites are adorned with flowers and candles, a priest delivers a sermon, and local musicians perform. Most cemetery plots resemble a small garden, with hedges and flowerbeds including a small seat. This is where we come “for a chat”, to ruminate, ask for advice in hard times, and share news about the family in good times. The cemetery itself, on the outskirts of every village and town is a lush verdant oasis.
The Baltic Sea

Living by the sea fires one’s imagination of what is beyond the horizon and gives an exhilarating feeling of freedom. The first written records of the term Baltic Sea (Mare Balticum) date back to the 11th century, and as the world’s largest “slightly-salty” water basin with a salinity of 0.5-0.8%, it is border-line freshwater. Drinking its water as a means of survival would actually hydrate the body instead of dehydrating it, as is the case with ocean water. Influenced by the warm North Atlantic Drift, its climate is warmer than other places with the same latitude, hence the great gift of ice-free ports.

Wood

We live in one of the rare countries where half of the territory is wooded – any place is no more than 30 minutes away from a natural forest. Apart from being the habitat of numerous species of animals, birds and other living creatures, the forest is the place to recharge our spiritual batteries. Orienteering, not surprisingly, is among the most popular sports in Latvia. Wood, being not only the quintessence of cosiness and a building material, a source of energy and décor, also has a symbolic value: the oak is the manifestation of masculine energy, while the linden – the feminine. As you travel through the countryside you will notice a huge tree standing in the middle of a field here and there. It provides a refuge for birds and shade for livestock as well as adds harmony to the landscape – a vertical accent in an otherwise horizontal field. Wood is our thing, and modern designers embrace it in watches, spectacle frames, lamps, smartphone cases, toys and even bicycle frames.

The 500-kilometre long coastline of both gentle white sandy beaches and more savage rocky ones is a do-able distance for a hike along the water’s edge – a venture rapidly growing in popularity.
The plait

A very appealing visual image that we like, it has the added symbolic meaning of both strength and femininity. Historically, women never wore their hair loose, it would always be in a plait. Long hair was believed to be an energetic shield, and arranging it into plaits was a kind of ordering of the female psyche. Hence, it is no surprise that many modern Latvian designers use the plait or its form in their creations. Plaited motifs can be seen in household goods, knitting patterns and even landscape architecture.

The flower wreath

Plaited into a circle, the simplest and most perfect of shapes, with a nod to the Sun, flower wreaths were used as decoration from the beginnings of time. Whilst elsewhere, with the growth of politics and states, crowns developed into symbols of power with precious metals and jewels, Latvians to this very day never stopped wearing their flower wreaths, mainly at Midsummer. Women and children scour the meadows for plants, flowers and herbs known for their healing properties or other qualities. A day spent with hands green and sticky from sap, breathing the pungent dizzying plant aromas and vapours with bees hovering around your head is a very powerful kind of grounding ritual performed without much thinking, with great delight, since ancient times. For men, the choice is limited to oak leaf wreaths made for them by the women of the household. In folklore, a wreath or a crown worn by an unmarried woman was the mark of maidenhood – taking off the crown denoted getting married.
Neither soft nor spongey, it is the one thing we miss most when away from home.

Even for urban folk having lunch in a restaurant, rye bread is a ritual trigger that elicits an unconscious reverence for the hard work of the farmer, the woman (usually) who kneaded the dough and recited grace as she was doing it, and the presence of continuity by dint of the small knob of dough that is always left in the mixing trough as a starter for the next loaf. Traditionally, the master of the house used to be the one who would cut the first slice. If you inadvertently drop a slice of bread, you kiss it after picking it up.

Bar codes

When the women wove multi-coloured yarns dyed with plants from the local surroundings into stripy skirts, they were packed with just as much information as the modern version of the bar code. It was about the village, the biosphere and the woman who made it.

A rainbow swirl to us, but every woman took care to be unique yet still retain the essence of the common ensemble.
Semigallians, Curonians, Livs and Latgalians settled around the River Daugava from 2500 BC and were very well-organised societies, with local kings, established rules of trade and a system of collecting tolls. Unlike their Scandinavian neighbours, the Vikings, the Balts were relatively peaceful, even though looting neighbours was a common practice at that time. Curonians in the west were sea-fearers, and attacked Danish and Swedish Vikings, mostly to take revenge for attacks on their own lands. Semigallians were rich due to the fertility of the land they inhabited in the southern part of today’s Latvia. They are noted for their sustained resistance against the German crusaders and the Teutonic Knights in the 13th century. Latgallians are believed to be the most ancient inhabitants in the region, and eventually formed the base of the Latvian nation.

The Baltic tribes

Romanticised stories of brave tribal kings, heroic battles against intruders, myths of magic rituals help us remember that underneath the farmer’s nature, dormant in every Latvian, there is a warrior’s spirit.

The Namejs ring

A silver spiral of varying intricacy, it symbolises tribal unity and heroism attributed to the 13th century Semigallian King, Namejs.

First found in archaeological excavations in the 1930s, it triggered the national imagination, and was embraced by the general public due to a novel, The Namejs Ring, by Aleksandrs Grīns, being published soon afterwards. In the following years, it became a symbol of manliness – a hand-wrought silver ring for a young man stood for a rite-of-passage to manhood. The ring was given a new lease of life in the 1940s by three Latvian silversmiths in a displaced persons’ camp in Esslingen, Germany. It became a mark of belonging for the Latvians who became refugees after World War II and dispersed all over the world. It is quite remarkable how, of all the folk crafts, jewellery-making became a staple activity of the exile Latvian summer camps for young people in various countries, and the Namejs ring, often proudly made by themselves, became a talisman of Latvian identity even when the language was no longer spoken.
The Latvian language

Latvian is one of Europe’s oldest languages. Spoken by about 2 million people, it is one of the two remaining languages on the Baltic branch of Indo-European languages, the other being Lithuanian, which has retained a remarkably archaic form, similar in age to Sanskrit. Although related, Latvians and Lithuanians cannot freely understand each other. Finno-Ugric Estonian and Liv, though not related to Latvian at all, have left their mark by the stress on all Latvian words being on the first syllable. Phonetic spelling requires us to write what we hear, therefore foreign names are modified to conform. For example, John Smith is written as Džons Smits. We know it is confusing, therefore we try to put the original in brackets. Tilde, a Latvian IT company and cultivator of the Latvian language, is well-known in the region as the best developer and pioneer of machine translation solutions and speech technologies tailored specifically for small European languages for digital applications.

The diminutive

In English, what is left of the diminutive – e.g. horsey, froggy, kitty – is used primarily for cuteness and kiddie-speak. We, on the other hand, use it often as a rich and refined tool to change tonality, to express tenderness, familiarity or irony, to ridicule or to belittle. Think of it as a button you can press to go into the poetical realm, to vibrate at a higher frequency or wrap an unremarkable everyday object in a warm and loving embrace.

Sadly, this fundamental aspect of our language is practically impossible to translate so you will have to take our word for it.

Pretty [´smuki]

We want things to be smuki. Neatly-nice. From the way the glasses are arranged on a buffet table, the layout of an official document or a grave site waiting for mourners. The quality, content or purpose of a thing is often secondary to a craving for the thing to look “smuki”.

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Storks

A stork family nesting close by is the ultimate seal of approval from nature - this place is green, clean and safe. Consequently, the return of the storks in spring is a much-awaited emotional marker of nature's cycle of life. Around 5% of the world’s white storks nest in Latvia - over 10 000 nests have been counted on utility poles, tall trees and chimneys. If these graceful birds dwell nearby your house, you can expect all the desired blessings: prosperity, babies, happiness, weddings and harmony in the household. A more elusive specimen is the white stork's slightly smaller brother, the black stork, an increasingly rare bird in Europe.

The Latvian Fund for Nature offers a remarkable opportunity: the life of these and other quite rare birds is live-streamed on the Fund’s homepage. Apparently, it is very engaging, as 8.5 million viewers have been counted in 2017.

The Daugava

Just like the Ganghes in India, the Daugava is a special river for us – we often call it our River of Destiny. An important waterway, it carried Christianity to Latvia, even if the first tribes washed off the alien religion after being christened. Because of it, we were and still are tradesmen. A kind of super highway, it carried goods, especially timber, from deep in the eastern lands to the prosperous port of Riga.

No wonder the Daugava is the protagonist of many songs, tales and legends, among them Mārtiņš Brauns’ choral ode, Saule, Pērkons, Daugava (Sun. Thunder. Daugava).
Kokle

A zither-like stringed instrument, prowess in playing it relies equally on the skill in suppressing unused strings as well as strumming and picking the ones that make the sound. On the one hand, it is a quiet, gentle instrument, relatively easy to make by the player. On the other, it can produce impressive sound vibrations when played by large ensembles. The kokle’s recent renaissance is spear-headed by Valdis Muktupāvels and Laima Jansone who give it a striking and complex voice well suited to virtuoso performances on centre stage. Still, as Valdis Muktupāvels says, the kokle is an instrument for the soul – it performs best when in solitude with its player.

Mittens

An ancient version of a woman’s business card, knitted woollen mittens are the most vivid expressions of our aesthetic taste, creativity and craftsmanship.

Their success story lies in the fact that they keep you warm and look beautiful – each pair is hand-knitted and unique in its richness of pattern and colour combinations. Before reaching the age of a bride, a young girl made her own “dowry” – a collection of textile goods for her future household. These included countless pairs of mittens to be given out as gifts to her new family. Men often proudly wore them tucked into the belt for everyone to see, even in the summer. For the rest of one’s life, beautiful mittens were the most honourable gift on various occasions to show courtesy and respect, including, eventually, to one’s gravedigger. An antiquated tradition? Not at all. 4,500 unique pairs of mittens were hand-knitted for the official delegates of the NATO Summit in Riga in 2006.
The bathhouse

The bathhouse ritual means profound cleanliness inside and out and is still as popular today as any modern beauty treatment. It is not so much about the place, it is about the senses – be it a small authentic bathhouse in Latgale or a luxury SPA in a palace. You sweat out your body’s impurities, scrub and swat yourself with a bunch of birch leaves and other specially selected plants. The heat and heady aromas are a form of meditation for the body and soul. Rolling naked in the snow straight after, or immersing yourself in cold water are optional extras that are great for circulation, and calmly sipping cups of honey flavoured freshly brewed herbal teas is popular. Formerly, purified by the high temperature, the bathhouse was a good place to give birth and a resting place before burial, earning the bathhouse the mystical and symbolic role of a gateway between two worlds.

Amber

Finding pieces of amber on the beach after a storm is thrilling! We know that it is millions of years old and we can’t help but look for that poor imprisoned insect each time. We are secretly proud of the Amber Road that started from the Gulf of Riga and supplied the Roman, Greek, Minoan and Egyptian civilisations with the treasured “sun-stone”, as if we somehow had something to do with it. We smiled at those who said we were becoming part of Europe when we joined the European Union, because what we really wanted to say was – darlings, we were a part of a pan-European marketplace long ago! Medieval alchemists were certain that amber had magical properties. We may not go that far, but, nevertheless, amber continues to draw us in.

Inga Ķašenko, an award-winning scientist and developer of amber thread, is leading research to develop self-healing amber sutures for use in cardio-vascular surgery, as well as the use of amber in textile and cosmetics products.
From tribe to nation

The historic Baltic tribes eventually united to form the modern-day Latvia with a common language. The Latgaliens in the east have retained a very distinct dialect and the Livs are a very small community with their own language but a strong attachment to their geographic location along the coastline. Regardless of the constantly changing shifts in powerful overlords – the Livonian Order, Kingdom of Sweden, Rzeczpospolita, Tsarist Russia, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the basic population remained the same. Gradually, with the development of a written language in the 16th century (during “the Swedish times” and the spread of the Reformation), greater education in the 18th century, the lifting of serfdom in the 19th century, a national awakening of a Latvian identity emerged in the second half of the 19th century. It led to a logical and escalating demand for self-determination.

When empires fell apart during WWI, we seized the opportunity to create a state of our own.
Latvia declared its independence on 18 November, 1918 in the National Theatre (then the Rīga City Theatre II). The new democratic republic was solemnly proclaimed by the newly-formed People’s Council, and the act was accompanied by the singing of the national anthem, God Bless Latvia! (Dievs, Svētī Latviju!). The birth of Latvia coincided with major changes on the political map of Europe. At the end of World War I, the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, German and Ottoman empires broke up and new countries, mostly along the lines of one or more ethnic groups, appeared. Among them were: Finland (6 December, 1917), the restored state of Lithuania (16 February, 1918), Estonia (24 February, 1918), Czechoslovakia (28 October, 1918), Poland (11 November, 1918) and Latvia. Hungary, Austria and some other countries rearranged their borders, and Russia, having undergone two revolutions, changed both its name and its political order.
Proclamation of the Republic of Latvia, 18 November, 1918.

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Local heroes.
Francis Trasūns

Hundreds of brave and selfless personalities worked tirelessly over half a century to lay the foundations for an independent nation state, but there were two particular men whose roles clicked key elements into place. Francis Trasūns, a Catholic priest and a cultural activist worked hard to promote Latgalian identity, its language and literature. At the time, the regions of Kurzeme (Courland), Vidzeme and Latgale were each part of different governorates of the Russian empire. It was Trasūns’ initiative, in 1917, a year before the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia, to convene the Latgale Congress and unequivocally declare that Latgale should join forces with Vidzeme and Kurzeme in pursuit of a unified Latvia. They say his visionary act of consolidation gave us the Latvia we have today.

The second man was Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics, who was Latvia’s first diplomat, and a remarkable individual who brought Latvia onto the international stage. He was sent to London to negotiate recognition for the People’s Council as an independent body from the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour. Meierovics succeeded seven days before the People’s Council declared the independence of Latvia on the 18th of November 1918. On the next day he became Foreign Minister and continued to work to achieve de facto and de jure recognition for the Republic of Latvia from as many countries as possible.

It was tireless work, executed with great tact, charm and intelligence; selfless work in the name of his country.
Our constitution, the Satversme, was adopted on 15 February, 1922, and is one of the oldest still functioning republican constitutions in Europe, as well as one of the shortest – it has 3645 words, compared to the 23 136 words in the basic law of Germany and 146 385 words – in the constitution of India. Guided by the best models of the time, it enshrines the principles of a parliamentary democracy and states that sovereignty is vested in the people of Latvia. It was among the first constitutions in Europe granting women equal rights to vote. The body of the document is concise and clear – a practical framework for a modern democracy. Amendments have included the establishment of a Constitutional Court, and fundamental human rights, as well as the preamble of 2014 describing Latvia’s historical perspective and less tangible notions like values and Latvian life-wisdom.

The Satversme has functioned well in the past, continues to do so and sits well within the spirit and principles of the European Union.

Our former national currency, the Lat, is the most beautiful money in the world. After joining the Eurozone in 2014, most Latvians kept a set of Lat banknotes and coins as a cherished memento. Meanwhile, the Bank of Latvia injects our aesthetics into the design of collectors’ coins which are artworks in themselves. The numismatic prizes they have been awarded are too many to list – for most innovative coin, most artistic coin, most original technology, gold coin of the year, silver coin of the year… Round, square, oblong, hexagonal, made of the latest metal alloys in handsome colours, they commemorate Latvian historical milestones, abstract notions, national heroes and even whimsical folk tales. Beautiful little gold buttons are a poignant code for the universal refugee, for whom paper money is meaningless. The graceful maiden on the silver five-Lat coin of the 1930s was a talisman sewn into the cuffs of many who fled Latvia during WWII, yet she returned to adorn the two-euro coin and was subsequently voted as one of the most beautiful euro coins in Europe.
The Freedom Monument

Comprised of 56 large-scale sculptures depicting scenes from Latvian culture, folklore and history, it is a powerful and eloquent symbol of our quest for freedom honouring those who died for Latvia’s freedom in 1919. The rumours go that it was miraculously spared by the Soviet regime due to the intercession of Vera Mukhina, a prominent and influential Rīga-born Soviet sculptor and a former student of Kārlis Zāle. Considered to be a great work of art embodying emotion and dignity, the monument is inscribed with the words “To the Fatherland and Freedom”, and is a revered site for celebration and official occasions.

Unveiled on 18 November, 1935, the 42-metre tall Freedom Monument by Kārlis Zāle has been one of the largest crowd-funding projects in the history of Latvia.
Pork and butter

After the great depression, in the 1930s, Latvia’s economy was saved by introducing the centralised export of butter, cheese and pork to Germany and other European countries. This plan ensured that Latvia was not affected by the global economic crisis of the 1920s as much as other countries. To honour the national source of income, Teodors Zalkalns, a prominent sculptor of the time, had an idea to create a large-scale monument hailing the pig to be placed at Rīga Central Market. This idea did not come to fruition due to the lack of necessary materials and funding. If his plan had succeeded and the statue of the pig had been erected amidst the Central Market pavilions, we would probably have an excellent symbol of the consumer society we are today. A smaller granite pig however, a prototype the sculptor made in 1937, is on display at the Latvian National Museum of Art.

Rīga Central Market

In the case of Rīga Central Market, no one would accuse you of going too far if you applied the term “cathedral of commerce” to describe it, as it combines clever design thinking and imposing architectural form. The German army built several air ship hangars at the Vaiņode airfield in Latvia during WWI, but after the war, airships didn’t quite “take off” as expected. When it came to building a new market for a rapidly developing new city, a local design, incorporating an unused piece of exemplary modern engineering, won the international design competition. Using the airfield’s iron hangar constructions, the market pavilions were clad in the new fashion of the time, Art Deco, an elegant and understated backdrop for the colourful, bustling life of traders and consumers in what was to become one of the biggest markets in Europe.
Another war. Another resistance

During WW II, most countries knew who their enemy was. In Latvia, we had to keep figuring out which one of the foreign armies crossing our borders was a lesser evil. For Latvia, the war started on 17 June, 1940, with an invasion by the Soviet Army. Behind this move was the secret pact signed a year earlier between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, dividing spheres of influence in Europe between the two powers). In 1941, Nazi Germany took over Latvia, eliminated the Jewish and Roma population, and killed those resisting Nazi rule. The shifts of invading powers pushed Latvians to take to various forms of resistance - military and political. Among the latter ones, the most influential was the Latvian Central Council led by Konstantīns Čakste, the son of Latvia’s first President, Jānis Čakste. Uniting Latvian politicians and the intelligentsia, it sought to restore the independence of Latvia by legal means, but many of its members were eventually executed or died in the Nazi concentration camps.

Forest brothers

At the end of WWII, after pushing the Nazi army out of the territory of Latvia, the Soviet Army occupied the country. Many locals, soldiers of both Russian and German armies, and those on lists for arrest or deportation, took to the forests. Awaiting the promised support from the West, they continued a partisan war against the Soviets. Throughout the country, 20,000 forest brothers, many of them young boys, lived in small groups in dug-outs with weapon workshops and printing presses for leaflets, and carried out some 3,000 raids inflicting damage on the Soviet military, its officials, buildings and ammunition depots. They worked to disrupt the new regime’s elections and incited the civilian population to continue resistance. But thanks to double agents like the British M16 officer, Kim Philby, most agents sent in by the British, American, and Swedish secret services from 1945 to 1954 were arrested. As the Soviets consolidated their rule, help from civilians to the partisans decreased. Gradually, the forest brothers were either killed or infiltrated.

The last groups emerged from the forests and surrendered to the authorities in 1957.
The Baltic Way

In a peaceful mass demonstration on 23 August, 1989, two million people joined hands to form a human chain spanning 676 kilometres across Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The greatest flash-mob in the history of the Baltics happened under press censorship, with no mobile phones or the internet, just the radio as the medium. It has been described as one of the most effective political publicity campaigns ever mounted because of its emotionally captivating and visually powerful imagery. Organised by Baltic pro-independence movements: Rahvarinne of Estonia, Tautas fronte of Latvia, and Sąjūdis of Lithuania, it condemned the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact which divided Europe into spheres of influence and led to the occupation of the Baltic countries in 1940. Drawing global attention by demonstrating a popular desire for independence, it allowed the organisers to position the question of Baltic independence not as a political matter, but as a moral issue. A logistical miracle and an impressive solidarity among the three nations, it is included in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register.

Strangely enough, all good rock bands managed to exist under the pretence of being the official musical ensembles for some obscure kolkhoz.

Daily life under the Soviet system – with empty shelves in stores where goods were available “under the counter” to the privileged few only, with voluntary joint work being obligatory and the ability to steal things from one’s workplace being considered “clever business” not theft – forced people into a self-preserving creativity. Clever women made coats from blankets and dresses from curtains, obligatory potato harvesting at the kolkhoz was clearly the best location for socialising, standing in food queues was character-building, concurrently saying and thinking two diametrically opposing opinions was a skill that children were trained to do at an early age and became very good at.

Soviet survival
This is reconciliation by reflection. We work through the trauma of deportations and mass killings by planting trees and bringing stones from all over the country to a special place on the bank of the River Daugava. Visualised by Shunmyo Masuno, a Japanese landscape artist, the evocative Garden of Destiny is a tribute to the wasted potential of all those hundreds of thousands of intellectuals, officers, entrepreneurs, politicians, artists and farmers whose lives were extinguished in the Soviet GULAG camps in Siberia. The garden is designed in a way so that every year on 18 November, the sun sets precisely in the middle of the garden’s amphitheatre. All trees planted there are like our past, present and future – the roots nourish the trunk so that the crown can grow and reach the stars.

This is the gift to Latvia from its people on the Centenary of statehood, and a promise – we are survivors.

The fallout of the failed coup d'état in Moscow was that Latvia finally declared its independence on 21 August, 1991, and the USSR recognised Latvia's de facto independence soon after. The barricades were fully removed only a year later – in the autumn of 1992.

Non-violent resistance is our thing, and a period of tension that is known as “the Barricades” was the beginning of the end of Soviet rule in Latvia. In 1990, the Soviet empire was on the verge of collapse. By 4 May, 1990, all three Baltic countries had declared their respective restorations of independence, and the Soviets took action to tighten their grip on the break-away nations. On 13 January, 1991, the Soviet army stormed the TV tower in Lithuania, resulting in 14 deaths. Fearing the same scenario in Latvia, 500,000 people took to the streets in Riga, and barricades were erected around strategically important buildings. Trucks, construction vehicles and agricultural equipment was brought into the city to block the roads. Over the following 10 days, 6 people were killed, but as it was non-violent resistance, the Soviet armed forces could not clamp down on protestors en masse. The resistance succeeded, and the troops withdrew.

Auseklis, the symbol for the morning star in Latvian folklore, emerged as one of the symbols of the Latvian national re-awakening in the 1980s, aka the Singing Revolution. One of the leaders of the awakening, Dainis Ivāns, often wore a jumper ornate with the Auseklis during his public appearances with impassioned speeches about our right to be free. During Soviet times, public display and use of Latvian folklore signs was prohibited, so Auseklis and the jumper itself (now on display at the Latvian National Front museum in Old Riga) came to signify that Latvians were no longer afraid. We were ready to claim back our freedom, and in 1991, we succeeded.
History has scattered us all over the world, and by our latest estimates there are 370 000 Latvians living in 120 countries around the world – about 15 per cent of the entire population of Latvia. It was the Latvian diaspora in Europe, Australia and the USA that helped to keep Latvia’s de jure independence internationally during the Soviet occupation. Regardless of their reasons for living abroad, Latvians have managed to maintain an emotional attachment to their home country, making contributions to both their new countries of residence and making us proud of their achievements. The nation state Latvia is therefore as rich as the sum total of the intellectual, cultural and economic capital that its citizens are investing either directly back home or all over the world.

Being Latvian is a state of mind and soul, not necessarily related to its geographic location, holding immense potential from which everyone wins.

Women

Women in Latvia have had equal rights with men and universal suffrage since independence in 1918. History, however, has not been so considerate.

Two world wars and the Soviet occupation decimated the male population, leaving a lasting impact on gender balance and the roles of the sexes. Women had no choice but to get on with it, and take over. In 2017, more than half of the top management positions are held by women. Riga Techgirls celebrate a better gender balance in the IT sector than many other countries and the Forbes list of young successful entrepreneurs, 30 under 30, included two Latvian women, Alise Semjonova (Infogr.am) and Sabine Pole (Sorry as a service). Our stellar ex-President, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, even though no longer involved in active politics, continues to inspire people around the world through the World leadership alliance, The Club of Madrid. At home, her contribution to strengthening the nation’s self-confidence has become legendary.
Edvards Liedskalniņš built a coral castle in Florida using mysterious techniques, Anatole Lapine became the Chief Designer of Porsche, Jacob Davis invented the rivets for denim jeans, and Gustavs Klucis, a pioneer of the Constructivist movement, were all Latvians or originated from Latvia. So too was Charles Petersen who became the most renowned and exclusive pipe maker in Ireland, exporting throughout the world. Arvīds Blumentāls, known as Crocodile Harry, became the prototype for the legendary film character Crocodile Dundee. Daina Taimina, a mathematician, is known for crocheting objects to illustrate hyperbolic space, and Annie “Londonderry” Cohen Kopchovsky, entrepreneur, athlete, and globetrotter was the first woman to cycle around the world. A pioneer in jet engine technology, Frīdrihs Canders, has an asteroid and crater on the Moon named after him, while he himself named his children after celestial bodies – Astra, Merkurs (Mercury) and Marss (Mars). Juris Upatnieks, a pioneer in holography has numerous patents in his scientific field.

Mikhail Baryshnikov who grew up in Rīga and became one of the world’s greatest contemporary dancers, recently became a Latvian citizen.
Talking about Latvian aromas is not quite the same as sniffing them and subconsciously connecting to their triggers, so we want you to go and find them. A summer salad of tomatoes, cucumber, sour cream and dill, damp woollen mittens after a day out in the snow, freshly baked bacon rolls, a room full of just-picked apples, freshly dug earth in the spring, a mix of scents at the Railway Museum, opening a book from the 1930s, bunches of sweet-pea blossoms at the Vidzemes market in Rīga, incense in a Russian Orthodox church in Latgale... Share your aromatic adventures in Latvia with us – tag "If you like Latvia, Latvia likes you" in Facebook with #scentsofLatvia.
A Latvian childhood

Before we start school, we have already spent a lot of time in “activity groups”, mainly learning music, drawing, dancing and swimming. Kindergarten is a full-time job, but as school starts, the after-school activities kick in at full volume: art, various kinds of dancing, music and singing, and a great deal of sport. Most are provided free of charge in municipal music, arts and sports centres dotted around the town. As the school year finishes, we are shipped off to spend the summer with our grandparents in the countryside. After free-range adventures in the fields, ponds and forests fed on a diet of berries, tomatoes, cucumber and cottage cheese, our parents pick us up with skin many shades darker and hair many shades lighter. As we get older, summer camps in our chosen specialities replace this bucolic idyll. The funny thing is that Latvian children who live in other countries end up with a similar scenario.

Latvian Sunday schools on weekends, choir and folk dancing during the week, followed by summer schools and camps for teenagers. The result is engaged, multi-tasking young people with a good posture.
Kids on the move

The birch plywood rocking horse has been a staple of Latvian childhood since 1972, and in 2013, it was sent as a gift to Prince George of Cambridge. Although the horse was the first “balance work-out machine” for many children in Latvia, there are now new kids on the block. Dip dap? Brum brum! – an exchange between a parent and a 3-year-old which translates as: “Shall we go for a ride on this pretty wooden balance bike that develops vital co-ordination skills for you?” “Yay! Let me go as fast as my little legs will carry me, and watch how my confidence grows!” Just like their predecessor, the rocking horse, the two different yet equally robust and well-designed balance bikes are winning design prizes and being shipped to children’s homes around the globe.

Tadenava

Tadenava, the childhood home of the illustrious Latvian poet, Rainis (Jānis Pliekšāns), has been turned into a museum of childhood. In the digital age, this exposition invites visitors to discover the childhood world through both digital and analogue interaction, touch and other senses. It is a game that elicits the curiosity to notice, understand and feel what the first years of Rainis’ life were like. He was not only an outstanding poet and playwright, akin to Shakespeare for the English, but also an influential political figure and philosopher, contributing to the rise of national self-awareness and helping pave the way to statehood. Even though the exposition itself has been recognised for its innovative approach, receiving numerous international and national design and culture awards, the depths of Rainis’ literary heritage are yet to be discovered by readers worldwide.
The Talka

The Talka, or joint work, is a concept which captures the power of people coming together on a voluntary basis to accomplish some big task.

In the countryside, it was the only way to do things: gathering hay at the end of the summer, digging up potato crops in autumn before the rain sets in or building a new shed for the animals. After a job well-done, the hosts would treat their helpers to a sturdy meal and a few beers, and you would have all the elements for a good party to finish off. Today, the Lielā Talka (Big Clean-up) is the largest voluntary country-wide movement, every April gathering about 200 000 people joining forces to clean up littered forests, improve a neglected urban space or living conditions for shelter animals. The event is underpinned with carefully designed logistics for disposal and monitoring which has become a know-how product itself, exported to other countries. Inspired by the Talka movement of the three Baltic countries, naturally, we will take part in the global Let’s Do it! campaign on September 15, 2018, sending a message to politicians that we want the world to be a cleaner and greener place.

Birch sap

The delicate birch tree draws down the Sun’s goodness deep into the ground where its roots mine the soil’s nutrients during the winter. As soon as there is an inkling of spring, the ground water, loaded with trace elements, gushes back up to fuel intensive sprouting. Starved of natural vitamins and minerals during the winter, our bodies crave this tonic of life, and in April, we simply plug into the pipeline for our annual rejuvenation treatment. Experienced once, our bodies are fine-tuned to expect this nourishment every spring and it becomes an addiction. Clever producers like the Libertu family and Birzi now make birch lemonade, wine, syrup and sweets to be consumed for the rest of the year, while many others supply office workers with freshly bottled birch sap every spring. Scientists confirm that birch sap is good for controlling blood pressure, boosting the immune system and that it has anti-ageing properties. Our ancestors knew what they were doing long before science.

Beauty tips

We know that if you roll around in the dew on Midsummer night, health and beauty will be yours throughout your life. If long, beautiful hair is what you desire, then on Midsummer night you must comb your hair where the hops grow. To avoid fat legs, on Midsummer night before sunrise, you must stand on a rock with bare feet and legs. With the ability to scientifically test these “folk remedies” now, most have been found to have some basis, as even a cold rock can improve blood circulation. A number of skin care companies like Madara Cosmetics, Bio2You and Alternative Plants distil essences for the potency of northern plants and use other natural elements to create a large range of natural, organic, paraben-free skin and hair care products.
Second only to Reykjavik, Rīga has the largest number of historic wooden houses for a European capital; about 4000, or 20% of buildings. Some exquisitely restored, others sadly neglected, they are a significant feature of the cityscape, with the oldest of them dating back to the 18th century. Most of the original ones were burnt down in July 1812 to thwart an attack by Napoleon’s army. It turned out to be a false alarm as he changed his mind and marched in a different direction. In many areas of Rīga, historic wooden villas and simple apartment buildings for factory workers sit side by side, while the seaside resort, Jūrmala, boasts its own particular architecture style of summer houses, adorned with ornate wood carvings, verandas and little towers. The town of Kuldīga is praised for its smart policy and support for home owners to restore the town’s unique wooden heritage.
What induces a whole nation to take to the forests and run through the moss bent on all fours, carrying a knife? Mushrooms. Edible ones; not hallucinogenic ones. Experienced mushrooming enthusiasts save GPS coordinates of the spots where their favourite mushrooms grow and keep this information a great secret, undisclosed even under the threat of death. Chanterelles, porcinis, penny buns, russulas are just a few of a Latvian’s favourites for a mushroom sauce served with new potatoes and fresh dill. Boasting of your mushroom harvest on social media is now part of the process. An average Latvian can tell edible and poisonous ones apart, but newbies had better join forces with an experienced mushroomer since Latvia’s forests provide us with more than 300 varieties of edible mushrooms and about the same number of inedible ones, 33 of which are outright poisonous.

More than being fun, it is a way to ensure that the food we put into our mouths is ecological and tastes like a real thing. No wonder, allotment life in the outskirts of the town is as popular as ever.

The older each of us gets, the more we feel an itch to sink our hands into the soil. May it be a herbal pot on the kitchen window, flower boxes on the balcony or a proper garden in the country - it all connects us, modern pagans, to the earth. Even politicians are not immune to this urge - the flowerbeds by the Cabinet of Ministers’ building were once turned into a vegetable patch with cabbages, beans and beetroot. Unlike our parents who took gardening seriously because growing vegetables provided an important addition to the daily meal, the younger generation tends to adopt a more chilled-out approach. Trendy hipster-gardeners experiment with traditional and exotic cultures, letting them grow undisturbed by excessive weeding or fertilising, and take pride if this tactic actually bears fruit. Finally, posting photos of one’s harvest on social media is a joyful closure of the gardening season, and an inspiration to others to do the same next year.
There are supermarkets on every corner, so why are farmers’ markets like the Kālnciema quarter or Straupes market going from strength to strength? Because there is demand. The Slow Food movement was started in Italy because the old lifestyle that depended on non-processed food was disappearing, but in Latvia it never did. Thanks to high-profile chefs like Mārtiņš Rītiņš, Mārtiņš Sirmais and Ēriks Dreibants, a new lease of life was given to small farmers and artisan producers who didn’t even know they were “artisan producers”. Even though being part of a veggie-box delivery co-operative is often complex and time-consuming, it is a stable part of household management for many young urban families. For others, there are relatives in the country providing a regular supply of fresh vegetables, meat and dairy products directly from the source.

To promote seasonal, locally grown, fresh and organic food, Rīga-Gauja region in Latvia is the first bearer of the European Region of Gastronomy title in 2017.

We tend to treat ideas the same way – we let them ferment a little before releasing them.

We have known that fermented foods like kefir, buttermilk, pickled cucumbers, garlic, beetroot and sauerkraut are very good for you for centuries, we just didn’t know they were fashionable. Whilst sauerkraut is a dish favoured widely throughout Northern Europe, few know that sauerkraut juice is the fastest cure for a hangover. We tend to treat ideas the same way – we let them ferment a little before releasing them.
Green pharmacy in a cupboard

We are one of the few modern societies where know-how of the healing properties of plants is alive and kicking. For home use, we know where, when and how to pick healing herbs, how to dry them, store and prepare them to treat various ailments.

Camomile (Flores Camomillae) – The most popular healing herb in Latvia, it is used for digestive problems, as an antiseptic, has a calming effect, works as a mouthwash and can be used in compresses. Used as a rinse for light hair, it has a slight bleaching effect and adds a lovely honey tone.

Linden blossom (Flores Tiliae) – A diuretic, it’s good for relieving coughs and cold symptoms as well as diarrhoea and nervousness.

Yarrow (Achillea Millefolium) – Promotes blood-coagulation and stops internal bleeding without causing blood clots. Good for treating intestinal and liver complaints.

Wild Thyme (Thymus serpyllum) – Used as a cough decongestant, it also gives pain relief and cures dandruff.

Nettles (Urtica Dioica) – Good for curing injuries and slowly healing wounds. Some claim it is useful in treating cancer, but as a rinse, it is definitely successful in hiding slight greyness in dark hair.

Peppermint (Mentha x piperita) - A very useful tea, it offers pain relief, is an anti-inflammatory, promotes digestion, decongestion and getting rid of bile and gas. Good for the relief of anxiety, it helps in the promotion of sleep.

Common wormwood (Arthemisia Absinthium) – Promotes good appetite and digestion.
Guest etiquette

If you are going to a Latvian house party, and would like to secure future invitations, here are some rules to follow.

1. Always bring flowers to the hostess and something tasty for the table. 2. Upon arrival, be prepared to take off your shoes. Take an extra pair of easy to slip-on shoes of your own if you don't want to wear "guest slippers". 3. Be prepared that classic Latvian house parties involve a lot of sitting around a heavily-laden table of salads, cold platters, meat and fish dishes, and eventually - singing. 4. The first drink always comes with a toast to the hosts. 5. When the cake and coffee are offered, the party is drawing to a close. Traditionally, one of the most popular cakes is "Cielaviņa", a meringue cake with peanuts and rich chocolate frosting. No minimalism here!

The threshold

We often confuse our guests with an awkward jostle on arrival at someone’s house. We believe it is bad luck to greet or hand something over a threshold. Laima, the deity of fate, sleeps there and you wouldn’t want to disturb her...

The weekend plan

In summer, you will see more traffic jams on rivers than on roads. The moment the ice disappears from our 12 000 bigger or smaller rivers, kayaks, rafts or inflatable rubber row-boats suddenly appear in an outdoor-action-loving ritual called Boating. When we say boating, we mean a leisurely row along the river rather than shooting the rapids. You can choose to row vigorously or let the river carry you so you can simply chill out and enjoy the scenery together with family and friends. After a day on the river comes camping under starry skies (or rainclouds, if less lucky), food cooked on an open fire, conversations and jokes, singing, star-gazing and sleeping in tents. This is one of our favourite weekend plans.

For those who prefer to skip the camping part, a calm ride on a SUP board is a good alternative.

Rasols

If, when presented with a serving of rasols, you were to remark: “I don’t get what the fuss is about, it’s just finely chopped leftovers!” you’d be right. But then you would’ve missed a deeply ingrained respect for food that should not be wasted, and the camaraderie of hours of preparation in a group gossiping, laughing and comparing mothers’ recipes. Whilst, thankfully, industrial strength mayonnaise is no longer used, and the variations are as numerous as the makers, the essence of the dish is the same all over the world where Latvians gather. Basic ingredients include boiled potatoes, green peas, pickled cucumbers, boiled egg and cooked meat or sausage. By the way, we haven’t reached a national consensus on the correct spelling of the dish, so by saying “rasols” and “rosols”, we mean the same thing.
The annual Latvian Ethnographic Open-air Museum’s craft market on the 1st weekend of June, is ample evidence that master craftsmen who have handed down their skills for centuries are not a side-lined breed in Latvia. Whilst it may not be clearly visible on the surface, there is a ground-swell of appreciation for real things made by real hands worldwide. The cognoscenti of style, Wallpaper magazine, even recognised this trend way back in 2010 devoting a whole issue to it. Ultimately, a craft is tactile intelligence and, as it turns out, valuable know-how in the world of innovations. Making a prototype of your invention can be an expensive exercise requiring investment even before the product itself is made, and here our inventors often have an advantage simply because they can make their prototypes partly or entirely by hand.

**Marshes**

Aside from being meditative, fresh and uplifting, going for a walk along a wooden pathway in a bog, alone or in company in the 21st century, is as close as we can get to the origins of life on earth. A bog or a marsh is created from rainwater meeting minerals from the air, landing onto the soil and eventually forming sphagnum moss capable of retaining 20 – 25 times its dry weight. After about 8,000 years, like at Ķemeri Bog, you’ll have a layer of peat that is about 8 metres deep. Ķemeri is part of a protected national park, but many other marshes and bogs all over Latvia are home to a rich variety of birds and animals. The less wet ones feature wall-to-wall carpets of different seasonal berries richly filled with potassium, fibre, iron, and vitamins. Unlike many countries who have reclaimed the land, we have let our marshes be, because they are like the nation’s memory – everything that sinks in it, stays there encapsulated.
Manor houses

Do you dream of living in an old manor house? In Latvia, you don’t need to be wealthy nobility to do that, but having a rich imagination and an awareness of your place in the historical continuum helps. Aside from wealthy investors transforming manor houses and palaces into fancy boutique hotels and SPAs like the beautiful Rūmene and Mārciena Manors, there is a new wave of people choosing to slowly restore historical ruins and fill them with new content. Many manor houses have become not just homes for young families, but also centres for culture and creativity, pumping fresh air into local communities. To dare to do this, a refined feeling for proportion, lots of patience, skilled hands and impeccable taste are required. According to various sources, there are about a 1000 castles and manor houses built from the 16th century onwards and many are looking for care. For inspiration, visit Oleri Manor or Ermaņu Manor in Northern Vidzeme, Lūznava Manor in Latgale or Fon Stricka Villa in Riga – they are just a few examples of how much difference enthusiasm and love for our historic heritage can make.

Rundāle Palace

Try to picture the condition of a grand baroque palace after a few revolutions, two world wars, being used as a school for many years and a granary, poorly maintained and never properly repaired.

Rundāle Palace was close to ruin in 1971 when the decision to restore it was finally made. Room by room, object by object, this elegant architectural masterpiece, designed by Bartolomeo Rastrelli and built in the mid 1700s as the summer residence for the Duke of Courland in the plains of Zemgale, was revived and given back its former magnificence. With the main works finished in 2015, the Palace complex of 16 buildings with its grounds covering 72 hectares – the French style park, forest park and the impressive rose garden with 2400 varieties including 670 historical ones – is now one of the most beautiful and popular tourism destinations in Latvia. Numerous local and international masters of restoration were responsible, but the biggest credit goes to the Latvian painter and art historian, Imants Lancmanis, who has dedicated over 50 years of his life to leading the revival of this baroque pearl of the Baltics.
Summer of festivals

Summer in Latvia is short so every sunny weekend from June to August is of golden value. We have become very good at squeezing all possible summery activities like swimming, sunbathing, gardening and camping into a single afternoon, combining it with a cultural event and socialising. Most summer festivals offer a combination of all of the above. Camping + boating + star-gazing + music = Ezera Skaņas (Lake Sounds) festival. Nature-research + family camping + contemporary music = Dabas koncertzāle (Nature’s Concert Hall) and Labadaba (GoodNature). Movie watching + wine sipping + swimming + beach party = RojaL film festival. The biggest festival in the Baltics is Positivus. It started in 2007 as a cozy party in a pine forest by the sea for 2000 friends and friends of friends, yet ten years later it attracts 30 000 visitors and features 178 international acts and local stars.

Positivus is not just a title, it is an attitude, a change of paradigm in the way younger generations of Latvians think of the world and themselves in the greater scheme of things.
An attractive platform to develop one’s talents is a good way to keep a city kid out of trouble, help him grow confident and strong. It began with a free-for-all outdoor gym in one of Rīga’s suburbs and “tournaments without judges” in 2009, inviting locals to play sport together. Today, Ghetto Games is the largest street culture and sports movement in the region. Its annual festival, GG Fest, brings together professionals and fans of extreme inline skating, skateboarding, MTB/BMX, street dance and other street sports from all around the world. Becoming a star in street culture is usually a viral business, driven by young film amateurs and photographers, who often turn professional. For all of them, graffiti artists included, the entire city is both a training ground and a stage, adding new functions to the urban landscape.

Squares around the newly-built National Library of Latvia and the renovated National Art Museum in Rīga have become popular skatespots, and new skateparks continue to grow like mushrooms after rain in every other Latvian town, breeding a whole new generation of future champions and artists.

Check them out:
- **Raimonds Elbakjans**, founder of Ghetto Games, the 2016 European Week of Sports #BeActive Local Hero.
- **Nils Janson**, professional in-line skater and founder of Straume, the inline skating school. He has been named ONE Skater of the Year in 2012.
- **Mādars Āpse**, professional skater, coach at the Rīga Skateboard School, leader of the Centenary project, Messangers of Freedom.

**KIWIE**, graffiti artist, his art is based on repetition of one particular character, Sausage dog, featured on a limited edition of VANS skater shoes.

**Rudens Stencil**, stencil artist. His most famous work, Saule Pērkons Daugava (Sun, Thunder, Daugava), created together with KIWIE, still adorns the firewall of 46 Tallinas Street in Rīga.
Stencil graffiti on the firewall of 46 Tallinas Street in Rīga, by Rudens Stencil and KIWIE © Mārtiņš Otto / Riga2014
Cycling

Cycling and Riga, our compact metropolis, are made for each other. Already in 1941, there was a suggestion to revise the city plan to adapt it for cycling. Those plans were delayed by WWII and, perhaps, the rise of the automobile industry, but today the bicycle is back even if appropriate infrastructure is not always in place. While the annual Tweed Ride and the Critical Mass cycling events remind us in a leisurely manner that bicycles are an integral part of the city traffic, more fanatical cyclists take to partisan methods. Going as far as painting unsanctioned bicycle lanes on the central streets of Riga has proven that changing urban planning is not so difficult. For those pedalling away (with or without cycling lanes), an authentic Ērenpreiss bike is probably a synonym for a good ride. The G. Ērenpreis factory, which was one of the leading bicycle manufacturers in the Baltics in the 1940s, has been given a new lease of life by enthusiastic family members. Reborn as a boutique brand in the new millennium its classic design bicycles represent the original maker’s best know-how.

The world’s first functional glass bicycle, designed by Artis Nīmanis and Gatis Vasiljevs, is a somewhat more exotic addition to the cycling scene here.

Fashion

Magazines of the 1920s clearly show that Riga was just a heartbeat away from the latest Parisian trends; a European metropolis. In the Soviet era, “Rīgas Modes” was the foremost fashion house in the USSR and would represent the Union at international showings. We had the most skilled designers and the most beautiful models. It did not however mean that ordinary Latvian women could buy good quality fashionable clothing in the stores. Every fashionista therefore had her own seamstress, or at least the skills to make her own dresses. In the late 1980s and early 90s, the Untamed Fashion Assembly, presenting wildly eccentric runway shows of total fantasy wearable art creations was a fresh sign of the times. Soon, labels like Mareunrol’s made the international circuit. A Latvian fashion sensibility? As soon as you head in the direction of understated, architectural, intellectual, grey complexity, like Talented, Anna Led, Natālija Jansone and One Wolf, then Katya Katya, Amoralle, QooQoo and Elita Patmalniece “slap you in the face” with a swirl of colourful details, witty prints and feminine shapes.
At first glance, Latvians might seem a bit cold-ish and, indeed, in many cases, we can be quite reserved. However, when we set our hearts on something, it’s for real. One of the most expressive manifestations of Latvian fervour is our sports fans – possibly, the best fans in the world, especially when it comes to ice-hockey and basketball. Well-organised, dressed and painted in the colours of the Latvian flag, they are visible and audible wherever they go, though usually in a positive and non-violent manner. An impressive emotional highlight worth mentioning occurred during the 2017 Ice Hockey World Championship in Cologne, Germany. The fans were so excited about the Latvian team’s victory over Denmark that it didn’t matter when the music for the Latvian anthem was cut short – the fans kept singing it a capella to the end!

We like basketball. A lot. For a start, Kristaps Porziņģis, the centre player of the New York Knicks, is probably the most famous Latvian today to the general public in the USA, but there are many others whose achievements have made us proud. We really like the story of how, against all odds, the Latvian basketball team won the European Basketball championship in 1935, a classic underdog achievement that was made into a feature film, Dream Team 1935, in 2012. After WWII Latvians played for high-ranking teams in Paris, the USA and Australia. Our all-time star player for the legendary TTT Rīga women’s basketball team, Uļjana Semjonova, was the first non-US female player enshrined into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1993, also in the FIBA Hall of Fame in 2007. Ten years later, in 2017, she was followed by Valdis Valters, a legendary player and basketball coach.
When asked what they miss most, many Latvians living abroad will say – the Latvian landscape. Do they mean the gently undulating hills and meadows surrounded by lush dark forests and silvery birch groves? Perhaps they mean an idyllic environmentalists’ dream of dotted farmsteads of organic farming with watchful storks as sentinels? Just because it is hard to articulate, it doesn’t mean it is not fundamental to our identity. The Latvian landscape ecologist, Jānis Ķīnasts, makes a fair attempt by saying – landscape is not a decoration for comfortable living. Perhaps the most real and beautiful landscape is one which forms in harmonious interaction between nature and human work.
If music therapists are right, and the physical act of singing has a healing effect on the singer, then all becomes clear. The Latvian resilience and ability to survive through the hardest of times in history, is probably one of the best side-effects of our obsession with singing. Be it an old ritual folk song, an opera aria or a mighty ode for a choir of eight voices; performed solo in the field, on an opera stage, in a circle of close friends during the night of Midsummer celebration in June or at the gala concert of the Song and Dance Celebration, singing keeps us in the boundaries of sanity, letting us cope with pain, frustration or overwhelming joy. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say - we will continue to exist as long as we keep singing.
LATVIA CELEBRATES 100 YEARS

The Song and Dance Celebration gala concert

© The Latvian National Centre for Culture
Once in five years, we become the largest choir in the world. Dating back to 1873, the Latvian Song and Dance Celebration is the grandest festival in the Baltics in terms of scope, authenticity and style. In the beginning of July, Riga becomes a buzzing stage for 20,000 folk and choir singers and 15,000 dancers, young and old, dressed in folk costumes, living the tradition. No wonder it has been included in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. One of the highlights of the festival is all participants dressed in folk costumes, striding through the centre of Riga in a 5-hour parade cheered by spectator crowds lined along the route.

If you are really lucky, you might even get tickets to the gala concert at the Mežaparks open-air amphitheatre which is undergoing major redesigning works for the 2018 Celebration to host 11,000 singers and 35,000 visitors.

Dancing

We work hard and we play hard. When we celebrate, everyone is included and our dances are vigorous, yet simple so everyone can join in. The virtuosity of a solo performance is not for us. More formal patterns, like our geometrical ornaments, evolved through observing the habits of the German nobility. In 1965, mass dancing celebrations joined the well-established song festival tradition where the patterns created by thousands of dancers become overwhelmingly spectacular. A Dutch journalist was heard to remark –

there is no other place in Europe, except for sports matches, where you will see so many young people enjoying themselves together with such unabashed delight.
Distant Light (1997) is a concerto for violin and orchestra by Latvia’s foremost contemporary composer, Pēteris Vasks. Mist-like and mystical, it is ‘nostalgia with a touch of tragedy’, as the Rīga-born violinist, Gidon Kremer, put it. There seems to be a perceptible film, a patina that many Latvian works of art have. You will see the same meditative aesthetic in the works of artists like Jūlijs Feders, Līga Purmale, Ieva Iltnere, Kristaps Ģelzis, Dace Lielā, and even Raimonds Staprāns and Vija Celmiņa in the USA. After all, it is less about what we see or hear, but more about what the artists and composers want us to feel. If so, you could argue that Mark Rothko, who was born in Daugavpils is on the same wavelength.

Either speaking to the Latvian soul or illustrating it, the melody certainly resonates with us.

The Melancholic Waltz (1904) by Emīls Dārziņš is one of the most popular Latvian symphonic music pieces. The use of “melancholic” in its title is only partly true, as the 7-minute piece in A major creates an atmosphere of light wistfulness, embracing simplicity, sincerity and romanticism. The story goes that the music came to the composer as a vision on a summer night. In the morning, he sat down by the piano trying to capture the melody he heard during the night. That was the beginning of the Melancholic Waltz.
The purpose of contemporary art is to ask questions. By its very nature it is risky and multifarious. In Latvia, benefactors and savvy collectors coexist with Survival Kit, the annual contemporary art event that has taken place since 2009. Each year, Survival Kit selects socially relevant topics for artists to expand the boundaries of individual and collective perceptions and to look for sustainable survival strategies. On the one hand, urban and industrial decay forms a certain framework, yet on the other, artists like Katrīna Neiburga and Andris Eglītis, experiment with closeness to nature by crawling naked into a beaver burrow to test the modern individual’s comfort zone in a very direct way. Traditional structures too, are under scrutiny. The future Latvian Museum of Contemporary Art (LMoCA), in a stellar modern building designed by Sir David Adjaye, will be funded by a consortium of public-private partnership and will house a unique collection of works celebrating arts and visual culture in the Baltic Sea region from the 1960s onwards. Meanwhile, the art gallery, kim? (its name literally means “what is art?”), and the digital platform, Arterritory.com, keep asking even more questions.

Symbolism

All possible shades of brown and grey dominate the Latvian landscape in late autumn and early spring until whiteness of snow or greenness of spring come to rescue. These combinations carry something very Latvian, and perhaps the greatest master to capture this form of our northern soul has been Vilhelms Purvītis. Being one of the most prominent Latvian painters of the time, he was widely exhibited internationally, receiving many awards, including a Bronze Medal at the World Exhibition in Paris (1900). And exactly to Paris his works are heading again, along with other masterpieces by his contemporaries, Janis Rozentāls, Johans Valters, Pēteris Krastiņš and Rūdolfs Pērle, to be displayed at Musée d’Orsay as part of the exhibition, Symbolism in Baltic art, to mark the centenaries of the three Baltic countries in 2018.
Poetic documentary

Hard-pressed to compete in the mega-budget feature film world, Latvia has always done well in documentary film and animation.

An understated and poetic style together with complex content – this feature of our documentary genre is perhaps best personified by Herz Frank, whose seminal film, Ten Minutes Older (1978), has inspired generations of filmmakers around the world. Likewise, Latvian animation, particularly the stories crafted by Roze Stiebra and Signe Baumane, are beguiling audiences the world over. Some documentaries such as Is it Easy To Be Young? (1986) by Juris Podnieks gained cult status, portraying the beginning of the decline of the Soviet system through the eyes of an entire generation. It is no surprise then, that of the 16 new films commissioned by the Latvian state as part of the Centenary Film Programme, eight are documentaries and two – animation films.

Theatre

As Latvia was born in a theatre, perhaps that is why we are drawn to it. We bring flowers for our favourite actors and directors and theatre lovers from all over the country organise themselves in groups and hire buses to come to plays in the capital or Daugavpils, Valmiera and Liepāja. The amateur theatre genre is very popular, and as soon as the choir is formed in a new place, a theatre group is quick to follow. We prefer our drama in text form under a proscenium, therefore we rely on the Homo Novus festival of contemporary theatre and the Dirty Deal Teatro to show us new forms and possibilities. The New Riga Theatre is in a category of its own.

Centred around Alvis Hermanis’ particular and unique vision of telling a story, his ground-breaking opera and theatre productions have engaged audiences all over the world.
The Opera house in Rīga, built in 1863, is central to our cultural identity; after a popular memoir, we even call it “our white house”. Rebuilt at the same time as when we were rebuilding our democracy (1991 - 1995), it was a powerful and tangible symbol of rebirth. Its productions received more international press then, than any political news of the nascent nation. Rīga was Richard Wagner’s home for a short time (1837 – 1839) but it left an indelible impression – the design for the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, the creation of the opera Rienzi and the beginnings of the Flying Dutchman, which had its premiere in Rīga a mere 4 months after the world premiere in Dresden in 1843, a remarkable feat in pre-internet times.

Today it is a marvellous springboard for many careers that have gone on to the Met, La Scala and beyond, like Kristīne Opolais, Elīna Garanča, Aleksandrs Antoņenko, Andris Nelsons and Mariss Jansons, just like it inspired Mikhail Baryshnikov and Māris Liepa earlier.
The Castle of Light

A fine choral work, which was composed in one day, on 21 June, 1899, by Jāzeps Vītols (lyrics by Auseklis) and is always performed as the climax of the Song and Dance Celebration. A story of a mystical castle which holds our nation’s collected wisdom, virtues and strength, it is a tale of the triumph of light over darkness, a timeless ode to the nation’s aspirations. It is therefore no surprise that the new National Library of Latvia building is called the Castle of Light. Opened to the public in 2014, the new building is a masterpiece by the US-based Latvian architect, Gunnar Birkerts (1925-2017). It is home to the unique Cabinet of Folksongs (on display on Level 5), over 2 million books and is at the centre of the nation-wide network of knowledge uniting 800 libraries loaded with books, periodicals, public computer workstations and free Wi-Fi. The BBC has ranked it among ten of the most beautiful modern libraries in the world.

A mystical castle which holds our nation’s collected wisdom, virtues and strength.
Very old and majestic “great trees” (dižkoki), a testimony to the splendour of the natural world, hold a special place in our hearts – we treat them with dignity like monuments. Research on them was initiated by Staņislavs Salīns in the 1960s, but it took one of Latvia’s greatest poets, one especially loved by the general public, Imants Ziedonis, to give the “liberation of the great trees” cult status. In the 1970s, together with a group of like-minded personalities, they travelled the country to find, document and liberate the great trees from undergrowth and obscurity. It was a symbolic act of rediscovering and reviving Latvian consciousness and the worldview encoded in our folksongs, legends and fairy tales, emasculated by the Soviets. Through his actions and writings, Ziedonis revealed the universe behind the seemingly small and insignificant things to us, and became like one of those great trees – a spiritual vertical in our daily lives. His ideas live on through the foundation, Viegli, that encourages today’s artists, musicians and thinkers to continue Ziedonis’ work, quoting him:

“Latvia is a miraculously wonderful land, but we must help it reveal its beauty”.

Being a book-loving nation, we were very excited by the imminent completion of the new National Library on the bank of the Daugava so we thought we’d help out and bring some of the books over ourselves. It was a massive group-book-love-fest where about 30 000 people stood in a line across central Riga in the January cold of minus 12 degrees Celsius, talked to each other, and commented on the books they were passing on – “oh yes, I loved this one, have you read his other novels”, “what was the first book you remember you fell in love with?”, “one book changed my life”. “I think the most moving love story I’ve read is … “. The Chain of Book-lovers united young and old and 2000 books were passed on from the old library building to the new one during the five-hour and 2.014-kilometre route on 14 January, 2014.
We are still a society that operates with certain unwritten codes, which sometimes means it is difficult for outsiders to “get it”. As far as literature goes, with such a powerful legacy of short saturated verse, the Dainas, in our consciousness, it is no surprise that we are more adept at poetry than the grand sweeping novel. In 2014, Come to me, a poem by Kārlis Vērdiņš was included in a list as one of the 50 best love poems from all over the world, compiled by Literature and the Spoken Word at The Southbank Centre (London). On average, there are more poetry books than prose published in Latvia annually, and the annual Poetry Days festival is one of the oldest arts festivals in Latvia.

Introvert is the new black

The #IAMINTROVERT campaign created for the Latvian literature promotion at the London Book Fair 2018 is both about a national personality trait, and a description of an immense richness and depth of the world of imagination. Our writers and poets do us a favour by letting their literary works speak for us. While in his novel, Jelgava 94, (the EU Prize for Literature in 2014) Jānis Joņevs portrays growing up and searching for one’s own identity in 1990s Latvia in a setting of underground culture, Nora Ikstena speaks of life and death, faith and love in her numerous novels. Inga Ābele, in turn, reflects on human nature through metaphors from the natural world. To round things off, a series of comics by Reinis Pētersons about the introvert Latvian writer tells you – there is nothing to be ashamed of. After all, “introvert” also applies to the act of reading a book.
We often refer to ourselves as a small nation, even though it is not always clear - is it to justify our timidity, or to express appreciation for detail? Given the number of inhabitants barely reaching 2 million, we are Olympic giants - in 2014, we won almost twice as many Olympic medals per million inhabitants as the USA, and 4 times more than Russia. The number of Latvian musicians, conductors and opera singers regularly performing in most major opera houses and concert halls in the world is noticeably impressive. Perhaps an appreciation of the small has helped Latvian scientists make significant breakthroughs in nano-technologies and niche IT solutions. Small things that make a big difference. Rainis, one of Latvia’s greatest philosophers and poets, once wrote: “We are a small tribe, but we will be as great as our will.”
Rīga. Bigger on the inside

As a port city, our capital, Rīga, has always been at the crossroads of East and West, North and South, attracting lucrative trade as part of the Amber Road or the Hanseatic League, and becoming a melting-pot of influences, customs and languages. Founded in 1201, Rīga was the main regional stronghold of Livonian crusaders and the seat of the Catholic arch-bishop. According to historic documents, rigans were the first to decorate a fir tree for Christmas in 1510, a tradition that spread throughout the Christian world. By the 17th century, Rīga had become the second largest city in the Kingdom of Sweden, but by the 19th century – one of the main ports in the Russian Empire with rapidly growing industry. Even during the Soviet occupation, Rīga managed to keep some of its Europeanness.

After regaining independence in 1991, many international organisations chose Rīga to set up their Baltic regional offices. In spite of being a city of less than a million inhabitants, Rīga is a northern metropolis that sets the heartbeat of the Baltics.
A stage for excellence

The real success of culture lies not so much in prizes or awards, but in it being a necessity for both creators and audiences. Even the economic downfall of 2008-2010 could not stop us from satisfying our thirst for arts: we built three modern multifunctional concert halls in Latvia’s regions. GORS in Rēzekne (2013), the Cēsis Concert Hall (2014), and the Great Amber (2015) in Liepāja all have superb acoustics and cutting-edge architecture, making them magnets for culture-lovers and boosting local economies. Also worth noting are the Mark Rothko Art Centre in Daugavpils (2013) in a 19th century bastion-style fortress, and the renovated Dzintari Concert Hall in Jūrmala (2015).

The right environment for breeding excellence is there, so future prizes and awards seem inevitable.
Useful connections

The natural habitat of an archetypical Latvian is a single homestead in the country. Our detractors say this makes us individualists, slow to co-operate, but we say it is just because we like an undisturbed view of the horizon. For this reason, we have one of the fastest broadband and Wi-Fi networks in the world so that we can be in touch with our friends on the other side of the hill.

For those who want more than a virtual contact, we have direct flights from Rīga to about 80 destinations worldwide and soon RailBaltica will connect us by land to the rest of Europe in comfort.

Fertile soil for new ideas

Our soil is fertile not only for growing crops but also for breeding ideas. The recently adopted start-up law and its tool package contains a simplified taxation framework and various forms of support (including a Latvian Start-up Residency Permit for persons from third countries) designed to give maximum benefit to those who really need it. The ecosystem of “paying it forward” encourages successful entrepreneurs to help those who are just starting out, passing on their knowledge and contacts with no expectation of something in return.

An exciting calendar of international IT events like Digital Freedom Festival or TechChill keeps new ideas on the move. Andris K. Berziņš, the founder of TechHub, adds the final ingredient: “Mentality is the key - these are people who believe that they can do something different and have the drive to go make it happen. They want to determine their own future, not implement someone else’s view of what that future should be.”

Green, well-connected and safe, Latvia has the potential of becoming the great new destination for globetrotting freelance professionals.
Because our highest point is only 311.94 m above sea level, it has fired up our desire for a view from a higher vantage point. The Aerodium team has given everyone who dares, a chance to fly high in a wind tunnel in Sigulda, just outside Riga. Airdog was one of the first start-up companies introducing drones as “pets” to the extreme sports scene. Aerones has gone even further – their prototype of the heavy-weight-lifting drone can take you snowboarding without high mountains, and new solutions for firefighting and lifesaving are in the pipeline. Closer to the ground, a test track for self-driving vehicles, the first Computer Vision sports laboratory in Europe, amber threads for medical use, innovative anti-reflective museum glass, a unique tricycle powered by solar panels, anti-cancer drugs, quantum computing - these are many of the directions that Latvian inventors are successfully exploring.

In an understated and offhand manner, we live in accordance with the cosmic rhythm. Following the lunar cycles is just one example – doing the laundry when the moon is waning will produce better results, but cutting your hair when the moon is waxing makes it grow thicker and healthier. We have always known that there is a whole different world above the clouds, and technological advancements allow us to satisfy our curiosity. Helped by the network of radio telescopes and satellite tracking devices like the Irbene Radio Telescope, Latvian scientists cooperate with NASA and the European Space Agency. We have launched our first satellite, Venta I, and the space project, “First 100 km in Space” to create the first Latvian rocket capable of reaching an altitude of 100 km, is in process.

The European Planetary Science Congress held in Riga in 2017 attested that we are heading in the right direction, and some of us are already laying the groundwork for asteroid mining.
Peaceful coexistence

Latgalian pottery is probably the best expression of Latvia’s cultural diversity, where a swirl of enamel colours coexists with the minimalism of black pottery. Many towns have Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Russian Orthodox and Old-believers’ churches next to each other, telling a story of peaceful coexistence for centuries. Just like the unique Sūtī ethnic group, whose cultural space has been recognised by UNESCO, has melted the pre-Christian and Catholic traditions into a harmonious wholeness, Latvians and Livs together with Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Russians, Roma, Jews, Poles and others are all woven into a single societal fabric. We are like Latgalian clay pots – each unique, yet all made of the same substance.

“It is only by accepting the dignity of every other human being that we develop the true humanity within ourselves. Then we can say – you are my brother, as I am your sister, for we are all children of the same primordial Mother; we are all members of one human race.”

– Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, ex-President of Latvia
A Centenary is a valuable chance to reflect but its true purpose is like a recipe for the future. Powerful and practical ingredients: identity forged by having to fight for it, nature, well-understood and harnessed by greenovative technology, community built by noble purpose and fuelled by grassroots energy, culture distilled by history and singing, all kneaded together by the glue of tested resilience – are lined up and ready to go for the next 100 years. A pinch of salt and some spice will be added by world events, but the basic recipe, the spirit of the Latvian people surrounded by their green northern forests, is sound.
LATVIA
In Northern Europe, by the Baltic Sea