Sunny Days & Frozen Bays

Nature in Latvia
They say the first inhabitants in modern day Latvia arrived 11,000 years ago. Even back then they must have been pretty surprised to see the bountiful forests, lush meadows, rich rivers, quiet lakes and the awe-inspiring Baltic sea.

 Millennia have passed but Latvians still retain an utmost respect for nature. If anything, the bond between Latvians and their land has only increased. As it was the forest that provided ancient Latvians with shelter and heat, during tough winters, the simple but rich harvest that helped them sustain themselves and grow and develop into tribes and city-states. The rivers and the sea served as trading routes to ensure prosperity. And once darker times hit, with foreign forces seeking to enslave the land and its people, Latvians once again turned to nature for protection and nutrition.

Latvians have traditionally been an agricultural society, learning early on that in order to achieve sustainability in their symbiosis with nature, it is best to leave it alone or farm it as non-intrusively as possible. This has let Latvia become one of the few countries left in the world where natural ecosystems, largely untouched by man, still thrive in half of its territory.

Latvia has a long tradition of nature conservation. At present 8.5% of Latvian natural territories are protected by law. There are four state reserves, three national parks, 22 nature parks, 211 nature reserves, six protected landscape areas, and one biosphere reserve. Families of storks, lynx and other rare species happily give their seal of approval to the virgin and unpolluted nature, fresh and pristine air and clean water around them.
Oaky, Birchy, Leafy and Other Famous Latvians

Not only are these “green” surnames the most common ones, but some internationally known Latvians have them as well.

Ernests Gulbis (Swan), a tennis player, Andris Bērziņš (Birchy), the current president of Latvia, Egils Siliņš (Pine-tree wood), an opera singer, Pēteris Vasks (Wax), a composer.

Latvia is a land where nature and tradition have coexisted in harmony from time immemorial. So it makes sense for the most popular Latvian surnames to be nature-themed. Why, it was just in 2011 when the Latvian Parliament elected Andris Bērziņš (Bērziņš being a diminutive form of ‘bērzs’ or birch) as the President. Bērziņš may very well be the most popular surname among Latvians, but the “top hits” also include Ozols and Ozoliņš (Oak and Oak-y, respectively), Kalniņš (Hill-y), Krūmiņš (Bush-y, hey, stop snickering!), Lapinš (Leaf-y), Līepāja (Linden-y), and the list goes on and on, also including some forest animals like Zaķis (Hare), Lūsis (Lynx), Vilks (Wolf), Briedis (Deer) etc.

But to take the whole nature based etymology one step further, Latvians have even named some of their biggest cities based on the names of rivers that run through them. You probably know the capital of Latvia is Rīga, but did you know that it received its name thanks to a small river, Rīdzene, that used to run through it? Then there’s also Daugavpils, a tribute to Latvia’s biggest river Daugava, Ventspils – courtesy of Venta river and so on and so forth. So, if you meet someone named Bērziņš from Rīga, you can say you are actually meeting Birch from the Rīdzene river city. The more you know, right?
Steamy Kitchens, Aching Backs and Other Fun Ways to Survive the Winter

While the season itself no longer threatens the survival of a modern-day Latvian, the smelting summer days spent in a cucumber plant bed with an already aching back serve as a great way to reconnect with Mother Nature. It may not sound fun, but the process is almost meditative, and most Latvian families will go through this on an annual basis. Willingly.

Due to the Northern European climate, Latvians have always made sure to have provisions for the harshest time of the year. We are practical people and like to be prepared for everything.

Where one would normally see fresh cucumbers, Latvians see future pickles. We can not help it. We are hard-wired to preserve goods for the winter.
That's why we pick cucumbers, mushrooms and berries, which may seem weird to the average European, but the end result is to die for. Especially when it's -20 Celsius outside.

But if we would have to name a king, pickled cucumbers are probably the very staple of the Latvian winter diet, and most households will whip out a three litre jar every time a guest arrives, as it's the perfect appetizer or a snack in between meals.

End of July is the perfect time for making pickles, so don't be surprised to see Latvians in steamy kitchens boiling jars and stuffing them with cucumbers. Come winter, the soups, stews and salads made with these bad boys will be worth the hassle.

And it doesn't end with pickles, oh no! Any Latvian will tell you that one can pickle most anything – tomatoes, mushrooms, zucchinis, pumpkins, basically everything that is edible and grows above or below the ground. And the recipes! The perfect blends of water, vinegar, sugar, salt, pepper, cloves and other special ingredients are passed down from generation to generation and are guarded as family secrets.

But pickling is only the top of the iceberg, as no winter is imaginable without specially prepared cabbage more commonly known as sauerkraut, and other combinations of ensilaged or salted vegetables and mushrooms. It is alchemy, really, therefore it serves as no surprise to see dedicated books on the preservation of food alongside regular cook books on the shelf of a modern day Latvian household.

Just don't let the amount of pickling confuse you – Latvians also like living the dolce vita, and will make jams, juices, compotes and jellies from the fruits and berries that gardens and forests have to offer. Starting from staple jam classics, like strawberry, blackcurrant or raspberry to exquisite jam delicacies like cloudberry, bilberry or wild strawberry. Those Saturday morning pancakes are guaranteed to taste amazing and bring back the memories of childhood summers.
We love our autumn, and the Latvian winters are cool too. But along with the lower temperatures, there’s a higher chance to catch a cold or the flu. Latvians, being the crafty nature-lovers that we are, of course have natural remedies to fight against possible ailments:

**Herbal teas**
Every family has several kinds of dried herbs that serve as the number one panacea when the usual symptoms of a cold are looming upon you.

**Honey**
Either added to the tea or eaten off a spoon, honey is arguably the tastiest way to strengthen your body in times of need.

**Cranberries**
Loaded with vitamin C, cranberries help a sore throat and weakened immunity and can be found in Latvian swamps till October.

**Black radish**
It may not be a looker, but black radish combined with honey is a miracle worker against coughs, bronchitis and pneumonia.

**Garlic**
Considered to be the last line of defence by some due to its, ahem, specific aroma, garlic is irreplaceable for improving metabolism, resisting viruses and clearing the respiratory tract.
Turning pulp into sap

To preserve birch sap tapped in spring we traditionally ferment it, pour it into glass bottles and store in cool cellars. It’s remarkably refreshing during hot summer days and has very beneficial properties.

Birch sap has a much lower sugar content in comparison with Canadian maple sap, therefore more vaporizing and more sap is required to get syrup, for example. But technological difficulties have been solved, and sparkling birch sap wine, syrup and other beverages are in production. All birch tree sap products have a specific, pleasant and vital flavour.

Scything

Scything. It’s not a Latvian analog of planking, owling or some other fad. What used to be an everyday activity for Latvian farmers is now a serious sport where men, women and children cut grass with traditional scythes – competing in speed, precision and style. We even hold annual championships! Just don’t try this at home without proper guidance.
A Latvian child usually has two favourite holidays – New Year and Summer Solstice, because on both occasions they are allowed to stay up late. Of the two, Summer Solstice is of course the more exciting, because not only is everyone allowed to stay up late, it is encouraged to stay up all night. Moreover, the celebration goes hand in hand with making and wearing beautiful flower or oak leaf wreaths, singing “Līgo!”-songs or making them up as you go along, adding “Līgo, līgo” to the end of each line, eating the best cheese of them all (made with caraway seeds) and doing seemingly crazy things such as jumping over fires, and going into the forest to look for a magical fern flower which, according to tradition, blooms only on this night.

There is no scientific explanation of the fern flower myth, but there is a correlation between couples looking for the fern flower on midsummer’s night and an annual baby boom in March.
There is no doubt that Summer Solstice, or “Jāņi” as we call it here, is by far the most popular holiday in Latvia for young and old, rural and urban, religious and non-religious; it beats Christmas, New Year, Valentine’s Day and everything else there is on the annual event calendar. Cities become ghost towns, everything closes, and everyone heads to the countryside to celebrate the longest day and the shortest night. We light fires, sing songs, dance, eat cheese and drink beer all night long waiting for the sunrise, and we really do jump over fires and go looking for the fern flower while sporting stunning wreaths made of field flowers for women and oak-tree leaves for men.

“Jāņi” was thought to be the time when the forces of nature were at their most powerful, and the boundaries between the physical and spiritual worlds the closest. Similarly it was believed that this was the best day for collecting herbs as they were believed to hold magical qualities specifically at midsummer. Today it is an occasion to be in the countryside, to spend time with friends, to just have fun while taking advantage of an almost full day of daylight, a day off work, and of course a chance to enjoy some of the ancient traditions which brought about this fantastic celebration.
When driving up the coast you will notice, that coastal fishing traditions are still very much alive and kicking in Latvia. Coastal villages are ripe with the fresh and enticing fragrance of freshly smoked fish, which you can buy from small roadside markets (and we encourage you to do so!), and if you get really lucky, you can even join a fisherman on one of their early morning expeditions into the sea, followed by smoking the catch yourself.

Lakes are another water based treasure in Latvia, we have 2256 of them that are bigger than 1 ha, with a collective area of 1000 sq. km. A key source of lake-induced pride is Pape Lake and its surrounding environment. It is a typical 1000 ha coastal lake. Rare species of birds, such as the bearded tit, common and little bittern, the comcrake, the hen harrier, the little and spotted crake nest in the lake and its surroundings – and yes, we actually know names of birds here in Latvia, and enjoy sightings of them. The lake and the nearby Nida mire are important stopovers for bean and white-fronted geese and curlews during migration, and are pleasant to the eye to the human visitor also. The lakeshore boasts one of the few bird watching towers in Latvia (exciting!). Every year millions of land-dwelling birds and thousands of migratory bats travel through the strip of dry land between Pape Lake and the Baltic Sea.

Getting Wet and Wild in Latvia

The sea and coastal zone, stretching along the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Riga, is an important part of the Latvian landscape.
Compared to other European countries, mires take up a significant proportion of Latvia. 4.9% of Latvia’s territory consists of open marshes – which we not only do not warn people to stay off of, in fact we encourage people to go on the marshes to see and collect the natural wonders they offer. These include rare species of plants and animals, and tasty berries, including cranberries, cloudberry, cowberry and bilberries, which we certainly prefer to pick ourselves rather than buying them in a supermarket (the only acceptable alternative to picking them yourself is buying them off someone selling them at the side of the road, or, at a stretch, buying them at the central market in Rīga).

At least 15 species of birds live in mires and marshlands, including the crane, golden plover, black grouse, whimbrel, merlin and peregrine. During periods of bird migration, the mires are important resting places for cranes and geese.

Let’s not forget our rivers, as Latvia has over 12 500 of them, which stretch for 38 000 kilometres. Nearly all inland waters are pollution-free and ideally suited for swimming and fishing – which we do a lot of. What we also enjoy is taking overnight boat trips with a group of friends, spending the inbetween nights in tents somewhere in the riverside forests or fields.
Latvia is a land of diverse terrain where plains alternate with hillocks and river valleys. With stately forests, broad mires and clear waters. With meadows, fields, groves, gardens and parks.

And naturally, pun intended, one shouldn’t forget the 500 kilometres of sandy beaches that are easily reached from historical towns and fishing villages that have lived in-sync with nature since ancient times. Together, these features form a unique mosaic that is the landscape of Latvia. Nowhere else in Europe will you find such a large population of the black stork and the lesser-spotted eagle. The density of these rare species is among the largest in Europe. Within our 64,589 sq. km of territory there are also hundreds of wolves and lynxes, 4,000 otters and 100,000 beavers. The animal kingdom found in Latvia is a prevalent feature in children’s stories and the proximity of urban and rural ensures that children can see some of the creatures in real life, for a wild boar or a deer to wonder into your country-side garden is no rare occurrence.

Latvia’s geographic position alongside the Baltic Sea has fostered unique conditions where northern-southern and western-eastern vegetation can be found flourishing side by side.
Nature lovers will know that almost anywhere you look you will find plant and animal species characteristic of various geographic regions growing in one place. Latvian forests, covering approximately half of the country’s territory, range from northern coniferous to southern deciduous trees. You will find a pine forest next to a linden tree forest and a diverse spectrum of other species throughout. Because of the unique climate and terrain, nearly one quarter of Latvia’s forests grow on wetlands. Many plant and animal species that can survive only in constant habitats have found a home here. The existence of the wetland forests ensures a high standard of biological diversity.

Latvia’s forests also afford a rich supply of berries - wild strawberries, blueberries, raspberries and loganberries. The berry-picking season, which coincides with the mushroom gathering season, lasts from late June until late September, and during these months most Latvians will ensure to engage in both activities. Apart from clearly marked private lands, the wealth of Latvia’s forests, berries, mushrooms and hazelnuts is accessible to anyone. Don’t be alarmed by the number of people in the forests when you too venture in to try this very Latvian activity, but be careful with the mushrooms – there are poisonous ones too in Latvia, and even the well-seasoned Latvian mushroom gatherers sometimes get it wrong and pick a poisonous mushroom among the edible ones.
It is important to vaccinate yourself against tick-borne encephalitis, as these little critters are probably the most dangerous thing that lurks in the Latvian wild. Boars, lynx and even wolves will leave you alone, if you do the same.

You may walk freely, pick berries or mushrooms in practically all forests accessible by regular highways or country roads.

Many farms offer simple hospitality, but if you crave something more exotic, you can pitch a tent and build a campfire at specially designated places on the banks of rivers and lakes.

If you wish to find out more about picturesque places to visit in Latvia, visit www.latvia.travel/en

If you do decide to camp outside, bring your earplugs with you. The frogs' choir on summer nights can get quite loud, but is magically unique nonetheless.

Bring your camera – it is more than possible to spot a picturesque nest of a white stork atop a post, old chimney, or broken tree. This large, noble bird is considered sacred by Latvians. Approximately 10,000 pairs of white storks nest in Latvia.
For further information please contact the Latvian Embassy or Consulate in your country, or the Latvian Institute:
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