Latvia
The Greenovative Country

Born in 1918 and located in Northern Europe, by the Baltic Sea, it is a green and modern country with a rich cultural heritage, innovative spirit and 1.9 million outstanding personalities.

NAME “LATVIA”
From the ancient Latgalians (latgali), one of the Baltic tribes that eventually formed the core of the Latvian people.

FLAG
Officially adopted in 1923, the Latvian flag – carmine-white-carmine – is based on a legend that dates back to the 13th century and thus can be considered among the oldest flags in the world.

LANGUAGE
Considered one of the oldest languages in Europe, it belongs to the Baltic branch of the Indo-European language family and is one of the two living Baltic languages with official status.

DAINAS
The most outstanding monument of the Latvian language, quatrains of ancient Latvian wisdom and the lyrics for our folksongs. Around 1.2 million dainas have been registered and, together with the Cabinet of Dainas, included in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register.

RĪGA, THE CAPITAL
With a population of 704,476, it is the biggest city in the Baltic states, well known as an Art Nouveau architecture metropolis. 40% of buildings in the historic centre are Art Nouveau, which is the biggest collection in the world (2nd is Vienna with 15%). Equally unique is the collection of wooden buildings (~4000), thus it is no wonder that the Historic Centre of Riga is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
CASTLE OF LIGHT
Among the modern landmarks in Riga, the National Library building – also romantically dubbed the Castle of Light – excels. It is the masterpiece of the world-famous American/Latvian architect Gunnar Birkerts (1925-2017) and has been named among the most beautiful libraries in the world several times.

NATION OF READERS
Proven: Latvia is a nation of readers, being the 9th most literate nation in the world. The statistics speak for themselves:

1,671 LIBRARIES
13 621 471 BOOKS BORROWED YEARLY
READING A HOBBY FOR 39%

#IAMINTROVERT
Internationally (and locally) lauded was the #IamIntrovert campaign created for the Latvian literature promotion at the London Book Fair 2017 and 2018. Wittily depicting the introverted nature of Latvian writers, it was not only about a national personality trait, but also the immense richness and depth of the world of imagination resulting in literary masterpieces.

DAUGAVPILS
With a population of 93,308, it is the second biggest city in Latvia. Famous as the birthplace of the outstanding American painter Mark Rothko (1903–1970) and for his art centre, which is the only place in this part of Europe where a permanent exhibition of his works can be seen.

LIEPĀJA
With a population of 69,180, it is the third biggest city in Latvia. Famous as the “city where the wind is born” (due to its coastal location) and also considered the cradle of Latvian rock music. The latest pride of the city is the “Great Amber” concert hall, one of the 3 recently built regional concert halls, the other two being in the cities of Rēzekne and Cēsis.

GREEN
Latvia is among the greenest countries in Europe. ~50% of Latvia’s territory is forests, which makes it the 4th most forested country in Europe and gives ~1.4 ha of forest per inhabitant.

BLUE
With 12,500 rivers, springs and more than 3900 lakes, Latvia is also the 4th in Europe by fresh water resources. A special landmark is our Venta Waterfall – the widest natural waterfall in Europe (249 m).

GOLDEN
Latvia’s Baltic Sea coastline is 500 km long and never ceases to surprise with its golden dunes, sandstone outcrops and rock formations. It is clean, it is public, and pleasantly uncrowded.

WI-FI
In general, Latvia is one of the top 10 countries when it comes to internet speed, and Riga is no exception. Wireless internet can be found on almost every corner, literally, thus Riga is often called Europe’s capital of free Wi-Fi.
BIRCH WATER
Not only the riches of nature per se, but also the knowledge to use them is of value. A peculiar tradition is the gathering of birch water in early spring. ~200 000 tonnes of birch water is gathered yearly in Latvian State forests alone (and who knows what happens in the private ones). Being rich in vitamins and other elements, it is not only used as a healthy drink, but also as a beauty enhancer.

MUSHROOMING
At the end of summer, the national sport is mushrooming. Latvian nature provides us with more than 300 species of edible mushrooms, and ~60 000 tonnes of these are picked yearly (again, in State forests alone).

HEALING
Also, plants with healing qualities are gathered year by year. There are no statistics known, but one is clear: when the first symptoms of a cold appear, a Latvian does not go to a pharmacy, but to the cupboard to get some herbal tea.

POTATO POWER
The two “whales” of Latvian cuisine are the potato and the rye bread. According to statistics, an average inhabitant of Latvia eats 62 kilos of potatoes and 15 kilos of rye bread yearly.

RIGA CENTRAL MARKET
Being one of the biggest covered markets in Europe, it is famed for its pavilions housed in giant zeppelin hangars left behind by the German army after World War I. It is also a good place to look for traditional Latvian delicacies such as lampreys, hemp butter, or pickles.
THE GREAT CLEAN-UP
To care for our nature and environment, several special initiatives are active. Since 2008, “The Great Clean-up” project aims to make Latvia the greenest and cleanest place on earth. Each year, on a certain date, thousands of volunteers gather to tidy up their grounds, collect trash, plant some greens and refurbish courtyards. In 2018, as part of the Centenary of Latvia (LV100) programme, a World Clean-up Day was also organised, planting “Trees of Happiness” all over Latvia and abroad.

COUNT OF THE GREAT TREES
Another LV100 project, dedicated to nature, is the Count of the Great Trees. These are the oldest and largest examples of their respective species, testimony to the majesty and splendour of the natural world. It is suspected that ~30,000 Great Trees exist in Latvia, and everyone, with a special toolkit, is invited to explore the countryside and mark them.

GREENOVATIVE
When you combine green and innovative, it is greenovative you get, and, inspired by nature, our scientists and entrepreneurs create marvellous and greenovative things. Research is ongoing on spider silk, to replicate it for biomedical purposes (by the Latvian Institute of Organic Synthesis). An amber thread has been invented and already lauded for its antiseptic qualities (by Inga Lašenko). The already-mentioned birch tree sap is used instead of water in cosmetics, as Latvian scientists have researched and confirmed: adding birch water to a product increases its anti-ageing qualities (by the University of Latvia and Madara Cosmetics).

NEW START-UP GENERATION
According to the World Economic Forum (2017), Latvia is one of Europe’s entrepreneurial hotspots, ranking 3rd after Estonia and Sweden. In terms of total early entrepreneurial activity in Europe, it is the 1st.

NEW INCENTIVES
Organised by both the state and private sector to develop the Latvian start-up scene, these include a new start-up law and a special day for start-ups on 12 September. More and more international start-up events are taking place in Latvia, and many of our start-ups are recognised internationally: Infogram, Sorry as a Service, InSelly, Froont, Printful, etc.

RIGA TECH GIRLS
There is a special community – Riga Tech Girls – for women involved in the sector. Their accomplishments do not go unnoticed internationally, as 2 of them – Alise Dirika (Infogram) and Sabine Pole (Sorry as a Service) – were included in the Forbes 30 Under 30 list in 2017.

#1 IN EU
Speaking of girl-power, Latvia is the leader in the EU with women employed in research – 52%. Also, the largest share of women among managerial positions is recorded in Latvia, the only Member State where women are a majority – 53% - in this occupation. The share of women among doctorates here is the highest in the world – 60%.

DRONE SUPERPOWER
Latvian entrepreneurs have been actively developing drone science and made a lot of “firsts” here. The first drone jump (by Aerones), the first drone that follows its “master” (by AirDog), the first full carbon smart drone controlled with your mobile phone (by Atlas Aerospace) are just some examples.

LORDS OF THE WINDS
There is a reason why the Shaolin monks in China can fly, and that is – the Latvian company Aerodium that specialises in building wind tunnels. Even Hollywood stars like Tom Cruise can’t resist: Aerodium was commissioned to construct the world’s biggest wind tunnel (for public entertainment) to ensure the special effects in the new film “Mission: Impossible – Fallout”.

LATVIA. THE GREENOVATIVE COUNTRY
SOUND TECHNOLOGIES

Being obsessed with singing and music, it is no surprise that a significant branch of innovation reaches into sound. Sonarworks, with their headphones and speakers, is on a mission to ensure everybody hears music “the way it was meant to be”. Catchbox is the world’s first throwable microphone for audience engagement. Gamechanger Audio promotes their PLUS Pedal as the world’s first sustain pedal for all instruments. Again, these are just a few examples, and technological perfection is always accompanied by perfection in design.

DESIGN

For contemporary Latvian designers, innovations go hand in hand with the wide use of traditional materials. Clay, linen, beeswax and wicker crafts are quite popular, but the king here is, obviously, wood, as modern designers embrace it in watches, spectacle frames, lamps, smartphone cases, toys and even bicycle frames.

ART

At the London Design Biennale 2018, the Latvian designer Arthur Analts and his installation “Matter to Matter” won gold for the most exceptional design. He reflected the Latvian relationship with nature through his use of materials, wood and water, and the sophisticated recreation of a natural process.

LATVIAN SIGNS

You will often see things with some traditional marks on them. This is a part of Latvian pagan heritage - the Latvian signs that carry their specific meaning, protecting against various evils and misfortunes, harmonising energies in the household or bringing prosperity to its wearer.

TRADITION OF JĀŅI

Another pagan tradition that still lives on is the festivity called Jāņi (Summer Solstice), an ancient fertility festival on the shortest night of the year and the most favourite Latvian celebration. The must-haves for Jāņi include dancing around and jumping over bonfires, wearing a herb crown, eating caraway-seed cheese and drinking beer, singing folk songs and decorating everything with herbs and branches.
THE FIRST CHRISTMAS TREE
The second favourite Latvian celebration is Christmas, in the pagan tradition considered the time of the rebirth of the Sun Maiden. Typical traditions include mumming and dragging the Yule log, which symbolises the pains and sorrows of the last year and has to be burnt. Also, according to a chronicle, Riga is the place where the Christmas tree decoration tradition started in 1510.

SONG AND DANCE CELEBRATION
The Latvian tradition, grandest in scope, is the Latvian Song and Dance Celebration – an outstanding phenomenon that has taken place in Latvia since 1873 and has been recognised as a UNESCO Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Imagine 17 000 singers performing with the utmost nuance, technical skill, tonal colour, and style, led by just one conductor, and 18 000 dancers gracefully forming patterns based upon ancient Latvian designs. The drive to participate is so strong that even 100 years of age is not a problem: Roberts Zuika (1913–2015), Conductor of Honour, conducted part of the final concert of the XXV Song and Dance Celebration in 2013.

OPERA STARS
Not only are we good at singing and dancing in big crowds, we also do it solo. Many famous opera singers are from Latvia. Season 2015 of the New York Metropolitan Opera included three Latvian divas - Marina Rebeka, Kristīne Opolais and Elmara Garačka, as well as the tenor Aleksandrs Antonenko. The season 2018/2019, again, includes 3 of them.

GRAMMY-AWARDED CONDUCTORS
Latvian conductor Andris Nelsons has two, but Mariss Jansons – one Grammy for Best Orchestral Performance. They have both been recognised among the top 5 best conductors in the world (Bachtrack, 2015).
GRAMMY-NOMINATED COMPOSERS
Perhaps the most prominent Latvian composer is Pēteris Vasks. Recently, his work has also been valued by the Italian director Paolo Sorrentino, who has used some of Vasks’ work in his popular series “The Young Pope” starring Jude Law. Another Grammy nominated Latvian composer is Uģis Prauliņš, whose “Nightingale” was considered among the Best Contemporary Classical Compositions in 2013.

DANCE LEGENDS
The world-famous dancer and choreographer Mikhail Baryshnikov, who recently gained Latvian citizenship, his classmate Alexander Godunov and the brilliant Māris Liepa have made their first dance steps in Latvia. Vija Vētra is one of the most senior and well-known Indian dance priestesses.

ATHLETIC EXCELLENCE
Strength and agility are also the qualities our athletes possess. If you count the medals Latvians gained in the 2014 Winter Olympics per capita, the 5 medals (one for 400 200 inhabitants) rank our country in 3rd place after Norway and Slovenia.

THE MINT OF MEDALS
A unique object in Latvia is the bobsleigh and luge racetrack in Sigulda, hosting top level championships and moulding the winter sports champions of Latvia. Since 2006, they have won 9 Olympic medals (a gold, 3 silvers and 5 bronzes). Our skeleton racer Martins Dukurs is also 5-time world champion.

CHAMPION AFTER CHAMPION
At the 2008 Summer Olympics, Māris Štrombergs became the first ever Olympic champion in BMX and earned another Olympic gold in 2012. Mairis Briedis became Latvia’s first ever world boxing champion in 2017, winning the prestigious WBC and the IBO Cruiserweight titles. In the same year Latvia also gained its first French Open victor, as the young Aļona Ostapenko made tennis history and became the first unseeded champion since 1933.

BASKETBALL FAME
In 1993, our legendary basketball player Uļjana Semjonova became the first non-US woman enshrined into the Basketball Hall of Fame. Nowadays, the most famous Latvian in the basketball world is the 2.21 m tall Kristaps Porziņģis. In his debut NBA season (2015/2016) he became one of the leading players for the New York Knicks.
THE FREEDOM MONUMENT

Built entirely from public donations and unveiled on 18 November 1935, the monument honours those who fought and died in the War of Independence in 1919. It has miraculously survived WWII, the Soviet Occupation and numerous attempts to demolish it, becoming the symbol of the Latvian nation’s striving for freedom, our identity, values and ideals. As its sculptor, Kārlis Zāle, noted: “I want to build a monument, which is understandable to everyone in all times”.

Photo: LETA