In Brief

Baltic Sea
Coastline 498 km

Highest point:
Gaiziņkalns
312 m

Deepest point:
Lake Drīdzis
65 m (below sea level)

Weather
Average winter - 7 °C
Average summer +19 °C

Highest temperature
ever recorded +37.8 °C (2014)

Lowest temperature
ever recorded -43.2 °C (1956)

Population of Latvia
1 950 116

Membership
NATO, EU, UN, OSCE, IMF, WTO, OECD,
Eurozone, Schengen, and others.

Length of railway tracks:
2 161 km

Length of roads:
58 926 km

Data: 2017, CSB

Geographic coordinates:
57° 00' N, 25° 00' E

Length of border:
1 866 km
**State administration**

**Head of State:**
President, elected by the Parliament every 4 years

**Legislative branch**
Saeima – unicameral Parliament; 100 seats; members elected by proportional representation from party lists by popular vote to serve a four-year term

**Executive branch**
Head of Government: Prime Minister  
Cabinet: Cabinet of Ministers nominated by Prime Minister and appointed by the Parliament

**Judicial branch**
Constitutional Court - a high court that deals primarily with constitutional law  
Highest court – Supreme Court, subordinate city and regional courts

**Land**
Total area: 64,589 km²

- **48%** Forest land
- **38%** Agricultural land
- **14%** Urban areas

Data: 2013, CSB

**FACTS AND FIGURES**

**UNESCO approved**

**Historical Centre of Riga:** medieval town elements, 19th century wooden architecture and the finest collection of Art Nouveau buildings in Europe.

**Struve Geodetic Arc:** a chain of survey triangulations that helped to establish the exact size and shape of the planet in the 19th century.

**Song and Dance Celebration:** a traditional movement that culminates in large-scale festivals every fifth year.

**The Suiti:** a small community in the western part of Latvia, known for their vocal drone singing, wedding traditions, cuisine, and a remarkable number of folk songs, dances and melodies recorded.
“Latvia has performed a miracle in restoring stability, growth and optimism in the country.” Finnish Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen, 2014

November 18
National holiday. On November 18, 1918, the Independence of the Republic of Latvia was proclaimed.

- 53% of the overall number of senior managers are women (highest rate in the world).
  Data: Eurostat, 2017

May 4
National holiday. On May 4, 1990, the declaration “On the Restoration of Independence of the Republic of Latvia” was adopted.

- 15,400 singers in the biggest a capella choir during the Song and Dance Celebration.
- 4.4 million nights spent by tourists in Latvia, with foreign tourists amounting to 3.04 million or 70 percent (CSB, 2016).
Driving force:

Culture

Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the European Union, said, “If I had to do it again, I would begin with culture.” For Latvians, culture has always been at the beginning and the core of the nation – it was at the core when the idea of an independent Latvian nation was only taking root. It was at the core of the more recent independence movement and it was central even to the EU accession debate. If you want to understand Latvia, you might want to begin with culture. Latvians are found on the stages of the Metropolitan Opera in New York or Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. Plays are staged by Latvians not only in Rīga, but also in Berlin, Zurich, Moscow and Vienna. Latvian filmmakers contribute to what the world calls “European cinema”.

Latvian culture looks European to some, and Nordic or Slavic to others. In fact, it is all of these and uniquely Latvian at the same time. Latvia’s culture is too diverse and too vibrant to summarize, so we present some common motives and a few highlights to help your further explorations. It is surprising to what extent traditional culture and folklore serves as an inexhaustible source of inspiration for Latvian artists, designers and architects.

Having a language that has ancient roots but is nowadays spoken by only two million people is another source of inspiration. Small language makes it more difficult for great poets and writers to be heard by wider audiences. But look: language is a universe. Is it not a wonderful liberty to have a universe of your own? A universe to nurture and cherish. What does it mean today? Latvians are storytellers. Be it cinema, literature or animation – there is certainly a Latvian voice.

The filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein was born in Latvia, as was philosopher Isaiah Berlin, painter Mark Rothko, artist Gustav Klucis, violinist Gidons Krēmers and ballet artist Mikhail Baryshnikov. Richard Wagner lived and worked in Riga, conducting around 20 operas and premiering five. The real success of culture is not measured in awards and prizes (although Latvians have quite a lot of those, too): the real value of culture lies in the extent to which culture is necessary for its creators and audiences, and how much it is a part of life. And here, culture is part of the air we breathe; it stretches towards the horizon.
Readers, singers and avid culture fans!

**FACTS AND FIGURES**

The most popular cultural activities are...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Watched or listened to a cultural programme on TV or radio at least once</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read a book at least once</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been to the cinema at least once</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited a historical monument or site (palaces, castles, churches, gardens, etc.) at least once</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited a museum or gallery at least once</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been to a concert at least once</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited a public library at least once</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been to the theatre at least once</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data: 2016, Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia

Latvia has

- 8 professional theatres
- 151 museums
- 361 choirs
- 790 folk dance ensembles
- 59 brass bands
- 233 folklore ensembles
- 1,679 libraries
- 618 NGOs working in cultural field
- 3 regional concert halls
Imagine 15 400 mostly amateur singers on one stage singing a capella with all the nuances, technical skills, tonal colour and style that you would expect from a professional ensemble. Imagine a corps de ballet of 14 800 dancers who perform by creating patterns based upon ancient Latvian designs best appreciated from above. Imagine a 50 000 people audience and many more watching live on TV. All that, remember, in a country of two million people. The Latvian Nationwide Song and Dance Celebration is an incredible phenomenon, recognized as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. With the tradition dating back to 1873, it is a grass-roots event that literally pervades all of Latvian society, engaging huge numbers of people from all walks of life. Behind the scenes are five years of thorough preparation, ancient tradition of singing and dancing, and respect and interest in the roots of Latvian culture.
Alvis Hermanis

You must have heard of him. He has more than 70 performances to his name, staged in Riga, Salzburg, Berlin, Vienna, Cologne, Munich, Modena, Moscow, Zurich, and Tallinn. The production Long Life, a theatre piece where five actors perform life in a flat shared by a group of elderly people, has become a benchmark of Hermanis’ documentary approach to theatre – the dramatic material is created together with the actors, based on attentive observations of real-life situations and human behaviour. But it would be wrong to limit Hermanis’ style to that – he is also the author of proficient interpretations of classical literature and dramatic texts. Hermanis has been accurately described as a contemporary thinker who, instead of writing philosophical dissertations, stages performances. Following his thought process continues to excite audiences throughout Europe, even opera fans now.

Mariss Jansons

“Superb,” “breathtaking” – this is how professional reviews describe conductor Mariss Jansons. King Harald of Norway has named Jansons Commander of Star of the Royal Norwegian Order of Merit, the country’s highest honour for non-Norwegians and for Norwegians living abroad. German President Joachim Gauck has presented him with the German Federal Cross of Merit for outstanding service to the Federal Republic of Germany. Music lovers say the same with standing ovations after his concerts. Jansons was born in 1943 to a family of musicians in Riga under Nazi occupation, grew up there and later moved to what was then Leningrad. Soon after the fall of the Iron Curtain, he became a sought-after maestro around the world. Currently, Jansons is the chief conductor of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and till 2015 was the chief conductor of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam.

Though he is one of a kind, Jansons is not alone in the Latvian Olympus of conductors and interpreters of music. How such a small country can produce so many world-class musicians remains a mystery. Conductor and music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra Andris Nelsons, composer Pēteris Vasks, violinist and music director of Kremerata Baltica Gidons Krēmers, opera singers Inese Galante, Elīna Garanča, Maija Kovaļevska, Kristīne Opolais, Egils Šiliņš and Aleksandrs Antoņenko are just a few of the Latvians on stages of world-class concert and opera halls.
Birkerts and the Castle of Light

Gunārs Birkerts is the most famous architect of Latvian origin in the world. He has worked mainly in the United States and is known internationally for projects such as the Law Library building at the University of Michigan, the Corning Museum of Glass, and most recently – the Castle of Light, the new building for the National Library of Latvia in Riga. The architectural form of the Castle of Light draws inspiration from the metaphors and images of Latvian folk legends. The original inspiration for Birkerts was the metaphor of a hill of glass as a symbol of obstacles that have to be overcome in order to reach a worthy aim. Yet, over the course of time, the building became associated with the Castle of Light – another symbol, coming from the era of national romanticism, and representing the nation’s aspirations for freedom and spirituality. Not only expressive in form, the library building is designed for the needs of readers, books and librarians in mind. In 2015, the Castle of Light was home of the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.
HIGHLIGHTS: HISTORY

Rainis and Aspazija

What Goethe is to Germans, what Cervantes is to Spaniards, Rainis is to Latvians – or, as it would only be fair to say, Rainis and Aspazija (the pseudonyms of Jānis (1865-1929) and Elza Pliekšāns (1865-1943)). Literary Latvian language was in its infancy at the time, and Rainis and Aspazija were without doubt among those who helped nurture it. In their poetry, plays, translations and political activities, they both helped create the sense of Latvian identity. You would be hard-pressed to find a Latvian town that does not have a street named after Rainis or Aspazija. It is hardly surprising that there is even a crater on the planet Mercury that bears Rainis’ name. Latvia marked the 150th anniversary of the Latvian power couple of culture in 2015.

Mark Rothko

In 1903, a boy named Marcus Rothkowitz was born in Dvinsk, today the Latvian city of Daugavpils. He spent his first ten years there, until, in anticipation of the First World War, his family left home. They immigrated to the United States of America, where later on under the name of Mark Rothko, he became one of the pre-eminent artists of his generation, a central figure of the so-called New York school of painting. His paintings, known for rigorous attention to formal elements such as colour, shape, balance, depth, composition and scale, yet penetrated by mythology, are displayed at the Guggenheim and Metropolitan museums in New York City, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Tate Gallery in London, in Daugavpils now and many other museums. He never returned to Latvia in person, yet with the involvement of his children, the Mark Rothko Art Centre in his birthplace, Daugavpils, was opened in 2013.
Driving force:

Entrepreneurship and innovation

INTRODUCTION

Left:
Cardboard furniture business Foldlife

Below:
Start-up conference TechChill Baltics organized by TechHub Rīga

What drives the Latvian economy? There is no single cash crop, copper mine or oil well that Latvia depends on; if you look for a few, it would be timber, transport, and people, with their capacity to invent, adapt, and collaborate. Latvia is a small, open economy. Due to its geographical location, transport services are highly developed, along with machinery manufacturing and high-tech industries, as well as timber and wood processing, agriculture and food products. The majority of companies, banks, and real estate have been privatized, although the state still holds sizable stakes in several large enterprises, including forests – an invaluable resource for Latvia.

The timber industry is the nation’s main exporter of products. The strongest element of this sector has traditionally been the production of plywood. Latvian output no longer represents 10% of the global total, as it did in the 1930s, but Latvian plywood is bound for high-level applications, including critical elements in liquefied natural gas tankers.

Having fertile land covering a large part of the country, agriculture plays an important role, as does food production – be it products from the sea or exclusive chocolate treats.

According to World Economic Forum, Latvia is one of the Europe’s entrepreneurial hotspots, ranking third after Estonia and Sweden. The Latvian IT sector and the startup community is bustling, providing services that might be invisible, but keep our modern lives running. Latvian companies provide IT solutions for banking systems, internet infrastructure and small solutions that keep larger machinery running.

One of the cornerstones of the country’s competitive advantage in the global marketplace is the chemical and pharmaceutical industry. From unique influenza medicine to petrochemicals and paints, Latvia produces a diverse array of chemical and pharmaceutical goods. It might be very small by global standards, but its R&D potential and manufacturing competence makes it an important regional player. Many small and medium-sized enterprises drive the Latvian economy – a mechanism that has proven its ability to adapt and restart.
### Real GDP growth

Percentage change from previous year (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EU</th>
<th>LV</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>-4.3</td>
<td>-14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data: 2017, Eurostat, prognosis for 2018

### Inflation

Annual average rate of change (Harmonised Indices of Consumer Prices, %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EU</th>
<th>LV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
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Data: 2017, Eurostat, prognosis for 2018

### Exports (EUR, bn)

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.33</td>
<td>11.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data: 2018, CSB

### Latvian exports by country

Data: 2016, CSB

- 18% Lithuania
- 12% Estonia
- 8% Russia
- 7% Germany
- 6% Sweden
- 6% UK
- 5% Denmark
- 5% Poland
- 3% Netherlands
- 2% Norway
- 28% Other countries
Latvian exports by sector

- **18%** Wood and articles of wood
- **18%** Machinery and mechanical appliances; electrical equipment
- **8%** Prepared foodstuffs
- **7%** Vegetable products
- **8%** Base metals and articles of base metals
- **5%** Mineral products
- **4%** Live animals and animal products
- **4%** Plastics, rubber and articles thereof
- **16%** Other goods

Data: 2016, CSB

Maritime transport

Gross weight of goods handled in all ports (tonnes per capita)

- **34.3** Latvia
- **47.3** Norway
- **35.1** Netherlands
- **26.6** Estonia
- **21.4** Belgium
- **7.5** EU

Data: 2015, Eurostat
Stepping into the unknown

Although science and research is ordinarily a collective process and is rarely tied to nationality nowadays, there are at least a few vital fields where Latvia’s brightest minds contribute to discovering new ways of looking at the world. Andris Ambainis, who is the youngest academician in the history of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, is one of the most gifted new scientists in the world in quantum computing. Meanwhile, Inga Lašenko, who works with “noble” materials – has developed silver-coated filaments that can be used to produce textiles with antibacterial and antiperspirant qualities. Hosiery with silver filaments helps the prevention and treatment of varicose veins. Lašenko’s latest interest has been technology that allows the use of amber filaments for medical purposes, such as for implants in the human body. Osteoreflexotherapy is another Latvian innovation, a new method of medical treatment invented by Georgs Jankovskis. Put simply, it is a puncture into the bone. This method is based upon the discovery that bone nerves are connected with the spinal cord and brain, and that by irritating the receptors of the bones, it is possible to affect other systems and functions of the body. This method is used to treat more than 80 diseases, including depression.

World’s first auto-follow drone AirDog, made in Latvia
Finding the missing elements

Sometimes it is not inventing a spaceship that matters, sometimes it is about a small but crucial gear to run a spaceship or to ensure that it comes back. Latvian technology innovators are often creating these small details that improve existing technologies. Biosan, a company created by two Latvian scientists, Vasily Bankovsky (Ph.D., Molecular Biology) and Svetlana Bankovska (MSc., Biochemistry), has claimed a strong position in the world of biotechnology. Biosan produces customized laboratory instruments, and 99% of their production goes to export markets – Russia, CIS countries, Europe, Asia, Middle East and elsewhere. Mikrotīkls is another innovative technology company, one of the biggest Latvian exporters in the IT field. They can easily claim that they have retailers in most parts of the world, and customers in nearly every country on the planet. Their main product - computer hardware and software.

Design matters

The Latvian start-up Infogr.am – possibly the world's simplest application for making infographics – has answered to the needs of making information more visual. Only one year after its creation, Infogr.am hosted eight million unique monthly visitors. Its services have been used by the Wall Street Journal, Human Rights Watch, MIT, Stanford and others.

In some cases one might need more than just an infographic to tell a story. Dd Studio, a digital design enterprise, is internationally acclaimed for creating multimedia museum expositions and multimedia products. Dd Studio takes ideas and transforms them to design by creating a storyline, telling it through physical and virtual objects, and building interactive activities to involve audiences. In the last few years, the entire Latvian creative industry has been booming. Many Latvian designers create customized goods – from shoes (ZOFA) to leggings (QooQoo) to high quality linen ware (Laima Kaugure) and more.
As it is for many other nations, history is a big deal for Latvians. However, Latvians feel that their story is a very complicated one. It is a history of the birth and development of the idea of an independent nation, and a consequential struggle to attain, maintain and renew it. Coming to terms and dealing with the consequences of the past is an ongoing process, especially if yours is so turbulent.

Despite the importance of history in Latvia, it is, in general, not entirely unique. The changes which swept through the territory of Latvia over the last two dozen centuries were tied to the ever-changing map of Europe and the shifting balance of power. From Viking conquests and German Crusades to the more recent World Wars, the territory of Latvia was very much part of global events. What is unique, perhaps, is how the growth and development of a nation, initially only a nascent idea, permeated all these events through the centuries. The culmination came in 1918, when Latvia finally declared independence.

Unfortunately, this status quo did not last for long. The World War II brought occupation both under German and Soviet rule, and de facto freedom was regained only 50 years later – in 1991.

In recent years, significant turn of events was joining NATO and the European Union in 2004. Both organisations embodied the values and visions that Latvians held dear since the beginning of the 20th century. Becoming a member state also offered the prospects of cementing stability, growth and European integration. Nowadays Latvia is also a part of Eurozone and OECD.
Latvia proclaimed independence in 1918, was occupied in 1940, but regained its de facto freedom in 1991.

**Historical dates**

- **1201**: Riga is founded
- **1918**: November 18, 1918; Proclamation of the Republic of Latvia
- **1990**: May 4, 1990; Restoration of independence
- **2004**: NATO and EU membership
3 incredible historical landmarks

**The Baltic Way** – This was one of the most creative non-violent protest activities in history. On August 23, 1989, two million people joined hands to form a human chain spanning over 600 kilometres across the three Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania – all occupied by the Soviet Union at the time. The Baltic Way was arranged on the 50th remembrance anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which had led to the occupation of the Baltic States in 1940. It drew global attention to the unlawful occupation and formed the first cracks in the Soviet regime, catalysing the collapse of the USSR.

**The Bermondt Affair** – the greatest victory in Latvian military history. 32 000 newly mobilized Latvian troops protected Rīga against an army of 45 000 battle-hardened and better equipped veterans led by general Bermondt. Bermondt was a German-supported Russian imperialist, who led the so-called West Russian Volunteer Army. Latvians succeeded in defending Rīga against their foe in November 1919, thus safeguarding an independent Latvia. The feat called Lāčplēša Diena, is commemorated each year by lighting candles on November 11.

**Dainas** – quatrains in form of songs or poetry, carrying ancient wisdoms and traditions. Dating back to well over a thousand years, these tales were part of celebrations, daily work and reflections on life preserved in oral form. Dainas capture the Latvian world view and are the core of Latvian cultural history. They tell of Latvians working, living, loving, singing and thinking, thousands of years ago. More than 1.2 million texts and 30 000 melodies have been identified and collected in the Cabinet of Dainas. They were first published between 1894 and 1915.

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The Baltic Way manifestation in 1989
Driving force:

Cities

FACTS AND FIGURES

The biggest city: **Rīga 641 423**
2nd biggest: **Daugavpils 84 592**
3rd biggest: **Liepāja 69 443**
The smallest town: **Durbe, 508 inhabitants**

Data: 2017, CSB

Left:
Rīga skyline

Economic activity

Percentage of all economically active units (companies, self-employed persons, individual merchants etc.)

43%
Rest of country

42%
Rīga

15%
8 other cities

Data: 2015, CSB
Rīga - the capital

Rīga, founded in 1201, has always been the political, economic, and cultural centre. Nowadays, around one third of Latvia’s population lives and works there. The Historical Centre of Rīga is listed by UNESCO as one of the world’s most important cultural and architectural sites. Rīga has hosted a NATO summit, a World Ice Hockey Championship, the Eurovision Song Contest, and many other large-scale international events: in 2014, Rīga was the European Capital of Culture; in 2015, Rīga was home to the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Rīga’s cityscape represents the multi-layered history of Latvia from the Middle Ages until today. Art Nouveau and wooden buildings of the 19th century are trademarks of Rīga, although the architecture is a mix of everything – from medieval houses to apartment blocks of Soviet times, and the contemporary architecture that makes Rīga so special. Rīga International Airport is one of the fastest-growing travel hubs in Europe and provides direct flights to 83 destinations.

HIGHLIGHTS

Area: 304 km²
(including 48.50 km² of water)
Population: 641 423
(2017)

Annual Tweed Ride in Dome Square, Rīga
Liepāja

In every country there is a city which is treated like a favourite child – it is sufficient just to mention it, and people put on a happy expression or a dreamy smile. For Latvians, this is Liepāja. Many residents of Latvia treat this coastal town like their own private honeymoon retreat – a perfect place to spend a romantic weekend for two, indulging in the city’s cosy cafes, charming bed-and-breakfasts, and the beautiful seaside location. Liepāja is also the third largest city in Latvia and a major Baltic port. The city offers classical music concerts by the excellent Liepāja Symphony Orchestra, a wealth of theatre productions by the renowned Liepāja Theatre, and in 2016 the new Great Amber concert hall was opened. For Latvians, Liepāja is “the city where the wind is born” and where many Latvian rock musicians come from.
Kuldīga

Kuldīga is possibly the most romantic and cinematic town of Latvia, characterized by narrow, winding streets, wooden, stone and brick houses from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, babbling rivers and picturesque views from the old brick bridge. These days, tourist traffic is the main industry of Kuldīga. Among many other things, the Venta Rapids are one of Kuldīga's sources of pride – in spite of being not much higher than the average Latvian, it is the widest waterfall in Europe (approximately 250 m). With all its cultural affluence, Kuldīga’s creative spirit has not rested in the 19th century: present-day Kuldīga residents, inspired by an ancient tradition to bathe in the morning dew on the Summer Solstice, have come up with an updated version of it – a “naked race”, when during the Midsummer night, Kuldīga’s bravest men and women, covered only with flower wreaths on their heads, take a symbolic sprint over the historical brick bridge of Kuldīga.
Can a booming industrial city still be green and offer a high quality of life? Yes, it can, if it is Valmiera – a medium sized city with smart industries, for example, the glass fibre factory. What is glass fibre? A chemical inorganic fibre, obtained from molten glass of a specific composition. As it is made from natural materials, it remains ecologically pure. It is used for numerous purposes from surfing boards to space rockets. Although Valmiera has been home to all kinds of business ideas, from game industry to food production, it is also well known for its theatre house, university college and athletic facilities.
Rēzekne and Daugavpils

Rēzekne and Daugavpils are cities in Latgale, the most distinctive region of Latvia. It is Latgale where many ancient Latvian crafts and traditions – pottery, traditional cooking and bread making, weaving and folklore – are still very much alive. It is the most religious region, with Catholic and Orthodox believers prevailing. This region is home to the most sophisticated dialect of Latvian – Latgallian – sometimes not even understandable to other Latvians. Rēzekne and Daugavpils have recently been experiencing a wave of cultural activity – the concert hall Gors and creative centre Zeimuls opened in Rēzekne, while Daugavpils takes pride in the Mark Rothko Art Centre, devoted to the world-famous artist who was born in Daugavpils.

Rēzekne
Area: 18 km²
(including 0.74 km² of water)

Daugavpils
Area: 72 km²
(including 9.75 km² of water)
Population: 84 592 (2017)
Even the most hardened Latvian city-dwellers, come summer or weekends, will jump at the chance to clear out of the city and catch a train to the countryside, returning laden with baskets of mushrooms and berries, jars of pickles or honey. And those who lack a countryside home to visit will opt for hikes in Latvia’s parks and nature reserves or a visit to the seaside. Latvian culture is inextricable from nature: Latvian festivals and holidays retain close ties to the change of seasons, while Latvian cuisine delights in the annual arrival of seasonal ingredients like birch sap and sorrel. Though Latvia’s mostly flat terrain doesn’t offer much for mountain climbers, the country’s seaside, forests, rivers, lakes and marshes have been appreciated by Latvians and travellers for centuries.

Latvia’s most prominent national symbols are primarily natural in origin. Latvians carefully catalogue the tallest, widest and oldest oak trees in the country, take pride in Latvian roots of the modern-day Christmas tree, watch for storks nesting on chimneys and poles across the countryside every summer, and search for amber along the seashore... or in shops.

If the territory of Latvia were magically transported to the heart of Western Europe, what would be the result? We would see a territory resembling a nature preserve or a national park, surrounded by the highly urbanised landscape of modern Europe. Few countries remain in the world where ecosystems are largely untouched by man, where nature has developed over centuries at its own pace with minimal human interference and where pristine sandy beaches stretch for 200 km, undisturbed by resorts, restaurants or hordes of holidaymakers. Yet, if you are into more civilized pleasures of the sea coast, Jūrmala, a resort town with a long history will be a heaven for you. Latvia has the largest population of the lesser spotted eagle in Europe. The density of these rare species is among the largest in Europe. Within 64 589 km² of territory, you will find hundreds of wolves and lynxes, thousands of otters and beavers. When in Latvia, do not be surprised if you see people leaving milk in their gardens for hedgehogs, helping snakes cross the road or catching a spider indoors just to release it outside.
FACTS AND FIGURES

Data: 2013, CSB, Latvian Tourism Development Agency

- 498 km coastline
- 3,800 rivers
- 2,256 lakes
- 211 nature reserves
- 10,600 stork pairs
- 8.5% protected natural territory

(larger than 1 ha)
Ask Latvians where they get their strength, where they go to solve existential dilemmas or have some recreation. If it is not the forest, it must be the coast of the Baltic Sea. The coastal zone, which stretches for 498 kilometres along the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Riga, is an important part of the Latvian landscape. Sand dunes of up to 36 metres, sandy beaches, rivers and their estuaries, and all land adjacent form an ecosystem that has developed as a result of the interaction between land and sea. A large part of the coastal zone is still home to picturesque fishing villages that appear to have stepped out of a page in a history book. The coastal lowlands contain unique natural areas, including the Pape Nature Reserve, south of Liepāja, and Slītere National Park at the tip of the western coast, with its steep coastline formed millions of years ago. Stony or sandy, stormy or calm – Latvia has it all.
Parks

Imagine an island in the middle of a lake inhabited by a 400-year-old oak tree, 222 various species of butterflies, 150 diverse kinds of moss, 338 different kinds of mushrooms and other wonders of flora and fauna – that is the nature reserve of Moricsala, the second oldest in Europe. It is preserved for research and conservation. If you want to explore, learn and enjoy, national parks are the place to go. One of the most popular ones, Gauja National Park, is formed around its main artery, the Gauja River. The valley is 95 kilometres long, with many tributaries that are also in deep ravines with massive sandstone cliffs from the Devonian period. The territory has a great diversity of species, with some 900 plant species all in all. Gauja National Park is one of the best-arranged protected territories in Latvia in terms of nature trails and tourism routes. By boat, on foot or by bike – that is up to you.
Let’s go “sēņot”!

Latvians are so fond of picking mushrooms that they even have a verb for it: sēņot – to go mushrooming. In late summer and autumn, Latvians head deep into the woods to their favourite mushroom-picking spots, clad in worn old clothes and wielding a dull knife, baskets or buckets. Latvian laws declare that in the state owned and municipal forests, anyone has the right to pick mushrooms, berries, fruits and nuts. The most popular are the edible boletus, orange cap boletus, chanterelles and russula, but Latvians usually recognize 20 to 30 kinds, out of Latvia’s 1 100 mushroom species in total, including 300 edible kinds. Technology hasn’t left mushrooming behind: Latvian developers have even made an app, so you can check if the mushroom you have found is safe to eat, so long as there’s internet in your mobile.

Freshly harvested boletus mushrooms or ‘baravikas’
Birch trees

Ask a Latvian schoolchild to draw you a tree, and instead of a brown trunk topped with green, you might see a slender white birch tree. Latvia is abound with birch trees that can be found in forests and groves, mythology and folklore, and are widely used for saunas, furniture and toys. Birch is also used for making children’s swings and wooden floors; it is indispensable when it comes to Latvian sauna traditions – steaming with whisks of birch twigs will give you an unforgettable sauna experience. Also, “bērzu sula” or birch sap is one of Latvians’ most favourite drinks. In early spring, farmers appear in markets and on street corners with rows upon rows of bottles of the sweet, watery drink, freshly tapped from the trees that same morning. Even wine and fizz are made from birch sap! Some innovative cosmetics companies have found ways to use birch sap in anti-aging cosmetics.
Storks, blue cows and more

So, what are the rarest creatures you might spot in Latvia's wilderness? Wild boars, foxes and lynxes, wolves and deer, to name a few. Rare species can be found in the marshes, such as swamp turtles and copperhead snakes, as well as the endangered natterjack toad. There are around 360 species of birds – one of the most noticeable, come summertime, is the white stork, Latvia's very own “bald eagle”. Almost every third farm house in Latvia has a pair of nesting storks. If you are into strange things, look for a blue cow, most likely found in the Kurzeme region, where they are believed to have originated from.

Is there anyone to be wary of? You should avoid getting stung by a viper, and also something as tiny as a tick can be harmful. Yet the main danger in Latvian wilderness is that of being carried away and lost in your amazement.
Driving force:

Sports

INTRODUCTION

What Latvian sports fans lack in numbers, they make up for in enthusiasm. At an international sporting event, you’ll find Latvians by following the loudest voices and most zealous cheering. Latvian athletes certainly have earned the cheers: the country consistently pulls above its weight in sports of all kinds. Latvia placed 23rd at the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, taking home four medals in skeleton racing, bobsleigh and luge. But, when ranked by its medal count per capita, Latvia advances to the third position, right after Norway and Slovenia. Latvians also brought home a gold medal in BMX cycling and bronze in beach volleyball from the 2012 London Summer Olympics. In the history of the Olympic Games, independent Latvia has won 26 medals and many more as part of the Soviet Union.

The following international stars are certainly the “visiting card” of Latvian sports: tennis player Ernests Gulbis and Jeļena Ostapenko, the 2017 champion of the French Open, Jeļena Prokopčuka, a twofold champion of the New York Marathon, and Viktors Ščerbatihs, world champion of weightlifting in the super-heavyweight category. Not to forget Mairis Briedis, who became Latvia’s first ever world boxing champion in 2017, winning the prestigious WBC and the IBO Cruiserweight titles, and the 2.21m tall basketball player Kristaps Porziņģis, who in his debut NBA season became one of the leading players for New York Knicks.

It is not rare that in major international competitions Latvian athletes compete with rivals who might have better financing and technological support, but Latvians often make up the difference by their significant determination, maximum commitment, wisdom and fair play.

Approximately 100 different types of sports are practiced more or less successfully in the small Latvia with its population of just 2 million. Among these sports, everyone can find the most likeable and appropriate for participating or being a fan. Moreover, unlike most of Europe, where football is followed by other competing types of sports, Latvia’s most popular sport is ice hockey. And Latvia might have just the best sport fans in the whole world.
FACTS AND FIGURES
Data: 2012, CSB

781 sports organisations
1,223 sports halls
49 stadiums
92 sports schools and clubs
55 mountain skiing tracks
81 public swimming pools
The hockey legend Sandis Ozoliņš has had a career spanning over more than twenty years and two continents. “Ozo” for short, the veteran defenseman began playing for Soviet teams, spent 16 years in the American NHL, playing for the San Jose Sharks, Colorado Avalanche, Anaheim Ducks and others, and eventually returned to play for Dinamo Rīga in 2009. Coming from Latvia’s winter sports capital of Sigulda, Ozoliņš officially retired from international hockey after the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, but returned in 2013 to help Latvia qualify for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. Ozoliņš is a seven-time NHL All-Star and was the highest-paid Latvian athlete for years until surpassed by NBA basketball player Andris Biedriņš. Though far from being the only Latvian to have played in the NHL, he remains the all-time leader for goals, assists, points and games played out of Latvian NHL players. Ozoliņš was Latvia’s flag bearer at the opening ceremonies of the 2014 Winter Olympics.
Martins Dukurs and Elīza Tiruma

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 1988 they have won 9 Olympic medals (a gold, 4 silvers and 4 bronzes). A two-time silver medallist at the Olympics is Martins Dukurs, who is also five times world champion, eight times European champion and eight times World Cup champion in skeleton. Sledding is a family business: his brother Tomass Dukurs is also a skeleton racer, and father Dainis Dukurs is a former bobsledder and coach of the Latvian skeleton team.

Another Olympian training on the Sigulda track is Elīza Tiruma, who won a bronze medal in the luge team relay competition at the 2014 Olympics. Tiruma was the first Latvian woman to win a medal at Winter Olympics since the restoration of independence in 1990. Tiruma also comes from a sporting family – two of her three sisters were lugers and the third is an alpine skier. Tiruma has been competing since 2006 and won bronze also at the 2013 World Championship in Whistler, Canada, and silver at the 2014 European Championship in Sigulda.

Māris Štrombergs

Known as “The Machine”, Štrombergs began training for BMX racing at an age when most kids are only learning to ride a bicycle. By age nine, Štrombergs had already won his first world championship. He continued to make history winning the first-ever gold medal in BMX racing at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, and followed that with a second gold at the 2012 Olympics in London. Since BMX racing was included in the Olympics only from 2008, he remains the only athlete in the world to have an Olympic gold medal. A couple of World Championship titles have also been added to the athlete’s collection. Štrombergs is known for his big smile, healthy lifestyle and disciplined training schedule. It is probably the smile that earned him the number two spot on the “Sexiest Man in Latvia” list in 2011. Next year he made it on more best-of lists as Latvia’s Athlete of the Year and Most Popular Athlete of the Year.
In recent years, beach volleyball has become explosively popular in Latvia. And we have these gentlemen to thank for. Beach volleyball has been developing as a popular sport in Latvia since 2002, in part thanks to a training centre opened on the seaside in Jūrmala. The beach volleyball team of Jānis Šmēdiņš and Mārtiņš Pļaviņš won Latvia its first medal at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, beating the number-one ranked American team and bringing home bronze. Šmēdiņš and Pļaviņš went on to win the Grand Slam championship following the 2012 Olympics and then decided to part ways as teammates. Since 2012, Šmēdiņš has played with Aleksandrs Samoilovs. Šmēdiņš and Samoilovs reached the top spot in the world rankings in 2013, after winning silver at the European Championships in Austria. They were considered the most consistent pair in beach volleyball for the 2013 season, winning one gold and two silver medals at the World Tour. Meanwhile, Pļaviņš paired up with the rising talent Aleksandrs Solovejs. Together they have already won a gold medal in the 2014 FIVB Beach Volleyball World Tour and are among the contestants for the overall world title.
Ernests Gulbis and Jelena Ostapenko

Tennis player Ernests Gulbis' 2007 Grand Slam debut was called a brilliant performance and his playing has continued to dazzle since then. Gulbis advanced to the 10th place in the world rankings after a marvellous performance at the Roland Garros-2014 French Open, where he defeated legendary Roger Federer as well as the sixth-seeded Czech Tomas Berdych, but could not outmatch Novak Djokovic in a close semi-final game. Still, the French Open results paved the way to great popularity and a title of the first Latvian to be ranked among the Top 10 best in the world.

In June 2017, the 20 years old Jelena Ostapenko made history with stunning French Open victory and became the first unseeded champion at Roland Garros since Margaret Scriven in 1933. It was the first ever victory in a Grand Slam tournament by a player from Latvia. Consequently she was ranked 12th in the WTA rankings.
Dream team 1935

In 1935, the newly established International Basketball federation (FIBA) held the first regional championship FIBA Europe in Switzerland as a test event, preceding the first Olympic basketball tournament at the 1936 Summer Olympics. The Latvian team, possibly the worst equipped and financed team at the 1935 championship, fought against all odds and defeated its competitors. The legendary win of the Latvian team is shown in the film Dream Team 1935 (2012) by Aigars Grauba.

Since then, Latvian basketball players have not lost their prowess. In 1993, the famous Latvian basketball player Uljana Semjonova became the first non-US woman enshrined into the Basketball Hall of Fame. In 2004, Andris Biedriņš became the first Latvian basketball player to be drafted in NBA.

Today, the most famous Latvian in the basketball world for sure is the 2.21m tall Kristaps Porziņģis. In his debut NBA season he became one of the leading players for New York Knicks.
Driving force:

People

INTRODUCTION

A typical Latvian is quite difficult to grasp, because an average Latvian simply does not exist, instead, there are about 2 million unique ones. Still, there are some features of Latvian-ness to get used to. Latvians might seem to have a moderate northern temperament, but only until the moment you see them talking about sports, during Midsummer or when they start to sing. You are very likely to find some dill in almost any food cooked at a Latvian home and you might discover that “lauki” (literally – countryside, but usually meaning a countryside house) is something that every Latvian has or is longing for.

Though a sparkling sense of humour is a widespread quality among Latvians, there are several things which Latvians take seriously. The Latvian language is dear to a Latvian, and history is also very important. With independence regained just over 20 years ago, it is naturally cherished. Symbols which are best left untouched are the Latvian flag, the Monument of Freedom and the national anthem. Latvians don’t joke about them: you will not find humorous merchandise featuring these symbols; they are respected in a good old-fashioned manner. Latvians know the value of freedom.

Each county contributes to the whole, be it European Union or the world with its own competencies, resources and experiences. Latvian scientists, side by side with other European colleagues, take part in the development of innovative technologies. Half of the country being covered in forests makes a significant contribution to a healthy ecosystem for Europe. Latvians are among the most multilingual Europeans, with 95% knowing at least one and 55% knowing at least two languages other than their mother tongue.

How great is the chance that you will meet a Latvian? Latvia has around 2 million inhabitants, more than one-third of whom live in the capital city of Riga. In recent years, though, several thousand Latvians have moved to Ireland, the UK, Russia, Ukraine and elsewhere. In turn, several thousand have chosen Latvia as their new homeland. Forced migration caused by world wars created strong Latvian communities in exile – in the US, Germany, Canada, Australia, Sweden, Brazil, the UK. Nowadays, you can meet a Latvian anywhere – ranging from a runway of the Japanese fashion industry to the campus of Oxford University.
Population

**Total: 1 950 116**
- **Male: 46%**
- **Female: 54%**
- **Urban: 67.5%**
- **Rural: 32.5%**

Data: 2017, CSB

Language

- **Being able to speak at least one more language other than mother tongue:** 95% (LV) / 54% (EU)
- **Being able to speak at least two more languages other than mother tongue:** 54% (LV) / 25% (EU)

Data: 2012, Eurostat, Special Eurobarometer 386
Ethnicities  % of all Latvian population

- 62.0% Latvians
- 25.4% Russians
- 3.3% Belarusians
- 2.2% Ukrainians
- 2.1% Poles
- 5% Others

Data: 2013, CSB

Density  people per km²

- 32 Latvia
- 119 EU
- 145 China
- 34 US
- 24 Brazil
- 4 Canada
- 55 World

Data: 2013, World Bank population density statistics
What language do Latvians speak?

Latvians like this question, because it gives them a chance to tell about their ancient language, similar to Sanskrit, but neither Slavic or Germanic. The language belongs to the Baltic group of the Indo-European family of languages; its closest and only living relative is Lithuanian. It is believed that Latvian and Lithuanian proto-dialects appeared in the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. Although with ancient roots, Latvian is as lively and ever-changing as any other language of the world. There are a few small weird features in the Latvian language. They are based on the Latin alphabet with a few special features (diacritics): ā, č, ē, ģ, ī, ķ, ļ, ņ, š, ū, ž. Latvian is often described as melodic, but it is not the easiest language to learn – Latvian nouns have seven grammatical cases, and verbs may inflect depending on the tense, mood, voice and person. You might derive the most fun out of the Latvian language when you see your name written in Latvian. Latvians not only transcribe names and surnames as they are pronounced, but also add Latvian endings in order to properly conjugate names and surnames in sentences. Therefore Charles Dickens becomes Čārlzs Dikenss, and something belonging to Jean-Jacques Rousseau looks like this: Žanam Žakam Ruso.

Latvians and food

If anyone ever tells you that Latvian cuisine is boring, they are most likely ill-informed, as it could not be farther from the truth. Ask a Latvian about typical Latvian food and you will hear - pearl barley, grey peas, rye bread, herring and pork. However, if you peak over a Latvian’s shoulder while they are eating, you would most likely find a Greek salad, Italian pasta, Ukrainian borsch and many other foods. What remains typically Latvian is that all of it would be prepared from fresh, locally grown produce. If we tried to define what Latvian cuisine is all about today, it would not be the easiest of tasks. It is a question of whether we take all the influences from the past, mix them up and serve something, drawing inspiration from them and reinventing old recipes, or do we reshuffle the deck completely and go with food that is made from local ingredients but bears no resemblance to its previous counterparts. For a Latvian, a salad is always on the menu, soups are appreciated and so are rich dairy products. What really stands out as unique is our smoked meat and fish, the revered Riga sprats, fresh cottage cheese and traditional cheese with caraway seeds, sour cream and kefirs, wild berries made into delicious desserts, jams and pastries, as well as mushrooms straight from the forest.

Ecological goat cheese cake served by chef Mārtiņš Ritiņš
Latvians and Celebrations

A Latvian is likely to celebrate a healthy mix of Christian, Pre-Christian and commercial traditions. Every Latvian celebrates the Summer Solstice or Midsummer, called Jāņi, with folk songs and customs like jumping over a bonfire and singing until dawn. Christmas and Easter in contemporary Latvia are likely to have elements both from Christian and pre-Christian traditions. There is also March 8 – International Women’s Day, popular since socialist times. In the past decades, Valentine’s Day and Halloween have also made it into the Latvian calendar. For Latvians, Name days are important, they are celebrated much like birthdays. Cemetery “celebrations” are another Latvian tradition. Once a year Latvian families gather at cemeteries, where family graves are tidied, decorated with flowers and candles. There is a pastor-led church service, typically followed by a buffet table or a get-together at a relative’s home. Latvians like to self-critically point out that due to the country’s complex history, there are more dates of commemoration than of celebration in the Latvian calendar.
Latvians and heroes

Latvians have a legend of Lāčplēsis, or Bear-slayer: a young man who kills a bear by ripping its jaws apart with his bare hands, becomes a hero and later on fights for the freedom of his people. Another literary hero - Antiņš, the third son - initially perceived as the juvenile one, with his persistence and ability to listen to his heart as much as to his mind, frees the princess from a never-ending sleep and brings prosperity to his nation. Another literary character – Sprīdītis – a brave young boy who goes out into the world to look for happiness, learns many things from nature, from people he meets, defeating evil powers along the way and eventually finding true happiness back at home.

Latvians like to showcase ordinary people and value their stories: even on the Latvian euro coin you will not find a king, writer or inventor, but a maiden, nicknamed Milda. Her portrait was first used for Latvian national money in 1929. When the Latvian government commissioned for a design of a silver coin which would symbolize freedom and Latvian statehood, a famous Latvian artist Rihards Zariņš came up with an idea to have a young woman as a model. He chose the proofreader of the State Securities Printing House – a simple girl, who spoke fluently in seven different languages. Having her image on every 1 and 2 Euro coin issued in Latvia now again, she might be the most popular Latvian girl in the world.