

LATVIA

SPRINGTIME IN LATVIA FOR CAROLINE DARLINGTON

The Paris of the Baltics

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DENSE EMERALD PINE FORESTS COVER LATVIA. THIS IS A LAND WHERE WOLVES STILL ROAM FREE AND LEGENDS STEP OUT OF THE SHADOWS TO MEET YOU. RIGA WAS A MAJOR TRADE CROSSROADS ON THE ANCIENT AMBER ROUTE WHILE JURMALA IS A LEGACY OF RUSSIAN TSARIST HIGH SOCIETY WITH 25 MILES OF SPARKLING WHITE QUARTZ SAND, MINERAL SPRINGS AND HEALING MUD

Sandwiched between Lithuania, Estonia, Russia and Belarus, Latvia's past is chequered by conflict and conquest. But there is also a cultural heritage here that is as complex and layered as a pattern on a Persian carpet. Riga, the capital city, acted as a major crossroads on the ancient road trodden by enterprising traders in precious amber, which is given up by the sea in this region. Riga still separates western economy and the eastern markets and as such is a city of contrasts and cultural eccentricity. Jurmala, on the other hand, is a step back to nineteenth century gentility. This is a natural spa and still the most fashionable resort in the Baltic. Both places are situated on the Riga gulf and both bear the scars and decoration of Latvia's history, but for very different reasons.

As I ambled along Jurmala's empty beach with its soft quartz sand that sparkled like diamonds in the sunlight, I could easily understand why wealthy tourists began flocking here over 200 years ago. Their footprint is still clearly visible along the miles of shore-lined resorts in the shape of ornately carved wooden villas.

The Soviets loved Jurmala for its celebrated spa waters and health treatments and the Politburo wanted fast access to it. So they built the airport half way between Riga and Jurmala, a three-lane carriageway and a huge sanatorium right on the beach.

Latvia has moved on from those bleak times. Since the Soviet demise, the airport has been modernised, the road well kept and a toll to enter Jurmala has been imposed. The drive from the airport to either Riga or Jurmala is an easy 20 minutes, so whatever your politics, you cannot help but feel some admiration towards the old communists for their excellent taste in resort reinvention. Even their sanatorium serves a new purpose; it's now a 5 star hotel and spa.

Latvia is steeped in folklore and the people share a profound love and respect for nature. The Latvians feel passionately that their heritage is based on their tangled myths and legends, which in turn rely heavily on the geographical lie of the land. Just five years after the Latvian state was founded in 1919, the Archive of Latvian Folklore (LFK) was established. For 70

years, the LFK has sent collectors out to record ancient stories that have been passed down by word of mouth through generations in order for the people of Latvia to understand their own identity. These archives are now extensive and contain phonograph recordings dating back to 1924 of people recounting their versions of traditional fairytales.

Latvia gained independence in 1991 after centuries of occupation by the Swedes, Germans and Soviet Russians. Even the Brits had a spell of influence in the early part of the 20th Century, leaving behind a British church that still holds services in English. Riga has had many identities. Napoleon referred to it as a 'suburb of London' and before WWII it was the 'Paris of the Baltics' - a name that is

once more becoming fashionable as Latvia gains economic confidence. All who settled here left their mark, resulting in a capital city rich with gorgeous architecture and a lively, international atmosphere. The ancient folklore offers a reason for this continuous reinvention. Every 800 years, the devil is said to poke his head out of the Daugava River and ask Riga if it is finished. If he hears, 'yes' the city will sink back into the water making constant change vital if the city is to survive.

I was in Riga at Easter time and the city was littered with straw rabbit figurines. Like their real life counterparts, they had

multiplied fast and were proudly displayed in parks, shop windows, bars and hotel lobbies as symbols to herald the advent of springtime. Riga's indoor market, housed within massive zeppelin hangars, is jammed to the rafters with ethnic produce. Bags of onion skins, used to stain boiled eggs for Easter, were literally flying off the stalls. The bustling activity was mesmerising. Sauerkraut juice is their instant hangover cure. I was very glad not to be in need of the vile concoction, but noticed that it was selling very well. The market is a fascinating mix of ancient and modern and worth setting an hour aside for. ▶

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Pictured from top: Riga Harbour, an art nouveau stairwell, one of Riga's indoor markets. Opposite page, top: Riga's spired skyline, bottom: Latvia's emerald pine forests

GETTING AROUND

It's very easy on foot, but there is also an extensive tram and bus system. A flat fee of LV10.20 (about 25p) will take you anywhere within the city area, pay the conductor. For Jurmala it's best to use the trains, also easy to use. Taxis are readily available and inexpensive; the locals say that the red taxis have a better reputation than the white.

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Riga is packed with high class restaurants, trendy boutiques and haute couture. If shopping isn't your bag, the art nouveau buildings, churches, museums and spires are marvels to look at.

An absolute must is the town hall square with its Blackheads House. Managed by the ex minister of culture, it's a glorious copy of a 14th Century guild house that was destroyed by WWII bombing. It will host a visit by HM The Queen in October and is probably the most photographed building in Riga. As I toured its warren of rooms and cellars, I was impressed that Latvia has not lost its skilled artisans. The exhibits and renovations are quite extraordinary; ceiling art, antique silverware and furniture mixed with modern art exhibitions create an eclectic allure. Do not miss it.

Riga is quite compact with a clearly defined old town that is a UNESCO world heritage site. I headed for Alberta Street and Elizabetes Street for the art nouveau, where the hotel concierge told me I would see the best examples of architecture anywhere in the city. After a day of sightseeing, you might be grateful for the day spas and shoe shops. Your feet will need some pampering and your neck might be glad of a massage from being craned whilst you gaze at the art nouveau reliefs atop the tall buildings.

Less of a strain on the neck are the historic and lower, wooden buildings. Riga is vying with Reykjavik to see which of the two has the most. To give myself and my neck a break, I took the lift up St Peter's church tower for a panoramic view of the entire city. The air was clean and crisp, there was not a cloud in the sky and the queue for the lift to come down was small price to pay.

I gave in to a spot of people-watching in one of the many squares, during which I found something bothering me as being unusual. At first I couldn't put my finger on it and then it hit me. Everyone was

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SEASIDE AND SPA

Jurmala means seaside in Latvian. Given that Jurmala has been known for its spas, springs and health treatments for over 200 years, the variety of feel-good and feel-well offerings is huge, experienced and inexpensive.

The spa centre at the Hotel Jurmala covers three floors. I passed a number of doors labelled with doctors' names on the way to my spa treatment room. People come to Jurmala for its clean air and asthma treatments, sport injuries and much more at very affordable prices. A doctor's diagnosis fee is £12 and you can bet that whatever your needs, they can provide the treatment here.

My therapist, Ksenija, showed me the Rainbow Capsule upon which I was to lie for my Egyptian Coffee treatment. Invented in neighbouring Estonia, this capsule is an all in one pampering cocoon. Whilst Ksenja massaged me with oils and coffee granules, a touch of chromotherapy from the rainbow lights in the open lid set the mood. When the lid closed, the machine entered sauna mode, aromatherapy, then vichy douche mode and even a vibrating mode.

I chose this treatment as I wanted to experience the horizontal, Tardis-like machine, not just because the entire session cost a mere £26. If you choose to visit Jurmala, all I can say is do not miss the opportunity to try it out for yourself.

Opposite the Hotel Jurmala is a converted wooden building, now housing a spa and with a rooftop Jacuzzi garden, the TB Viesu Nams.

Just across the way is the Baltic Beach Hotel, in the days of the USSR, a sanatorium. Their large spa offers an extensive spa menu as well as Russian baths, Turkish baths and medical diagnosis. I had just completed my spa treatment, so, feeling chilled, I chose a light lunch at the Caviar Club restaurant. Baby soft skin. A fine lunch. A view of the shallow waters of the Baltic Sea. With such easy access and only 2 hours from London, Latvia is a delightful escape, especially in Spring. Just the ticket.

chic and well groomed from top to toe; testament to the many beauty parlours and day spas making such a good living. I realised that the local population is hooked on looking good.

Foot-weary, I was beckoned by the 26th floor of the Reval Hotel Latvija. Their newly re-opened Skyline Bar is the in place to be. You need to grab a window table and be prepared for the astonishing, panoramic view. Or you might want to try the lounge of the Radisson SAS with ground floor views from the other side of the river bank to the spires and palace of Riga.

My favourite evening took me to the Riga Dom cathedral church, which houses one of the largest pipe organs in the world. For £4 I enjoyed a 90 minute concert of Latvian Peteris Vasks' organ and choral music amongst a full house of mostly Latvian patrons. His CD now plays full time in my car.

At weekends, the old town splits at the seams with lads groups. The beer is cheap and the nightclubs plentiful. Although there are tourist police to keep things under control, unless stag groups appeal to you, my advice is to stay in Jurmala and visit Riga.

Although there are plenty of day spas and medical spas in Riga, Jurmala is where you have to go for hotels with spa. I stayed at the Hotel Jurmala Spa where a one hour coffee exfoliation treatment left my skin as smooth as a baby's. Boy oh boy, those granules get everywhere! If you don't like coffee, go for the avocado instead.

Jurmala was made up of several fishing villages that were slowly gobbled up by early tourists. It's now one long resort with several regions that are all connected by train. As I wandered around the main resort of Majori, it was easy to imagine the style and quality of the entire resort.

Juras Street runs parallel to the beach and is lined by wooden villas. Jomas Street, the main prom, has lots of old and grand homes, but also offers shops and restaurants with a few discos too.

People were sitting at sidewalk cafés, wandering on the beach or along Juras Street. It's an easy going resort that offers high quality services. Perched on the beach is the old bath house, now converted to exclusive apartments.

Alexandra at the tourist information centre told me that in the mid 19th century they flew a red flag when the gentlemen were allowed to swim for two hours and a blue flag when the ladies were permitted the same pleasure for a mere hour. Once bathing suits were invented, the segregated swimming times were relaxed. Relaxed is a good word for Jurmala

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THE WEATHER
LATVIA

Best time to visit:

Pleasant springs, warm summers
and harsh winters.

May - Sept average temperature
60-70°F

Nov - March freezing and snow

Pictured from top:
Blackheads House, a victorian
era depiction of a traditional
mud bath in Jurmala.
Opposite page, the beach and
old bath house at Jurmala and
an art nouveau relief by the
artist Eisenstein

GETTING THERE

Riga (RIX) is served by
Air Baltic from London,
Dublin and Manchester
www.airbaltic.com
Ryanair from Stansted and
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