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RIGA “IN YOUR SPORRAN”

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About this guide

This series of downloadable NATA Mini “In Your Sporrان” Guides has been designed specifically to save the hassle of printing out reams of NATA web pages in order to make sure you don’t miss something whilst wondering the back streets of your chosen destination.

This guide has been compiled almost exclusively by me (Paul Allison), and is based entirely on personal experiences and opinions. Please do not prejudge anything on my say so – not only am I quite warped, but many places were only visited once, and therefore may have been having a particularly good or bad day.

This guide is not intended to replace more traditional sources of information, such as the excellent Lonely Planet guide books or the indispensable “In Your Pocket” guides available local in many Eastern European cities (as well as the downloadable versions from www.inyourpocket.com, which have inspired this very guide). Instead, the idea is to supplement these more detailed, better researched and more balanced guides with my own ramblings.

These guides originally came about as people were forever asking for pub tips and the like for places I’ve been to – I soon grew tired of typing out the same emails every few weeks and opted instead to keep the information on the web on the NATA Online site.

All opinions expressed in this guide are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Netley Abbey Tartan Army.

- For more information about NATA (the Netley Abbey Tartan Army), including photos and diary accounts of many trips abroad with Scotland, as well as much more travel information and guides), please visit www.netleyabbeytartanarmy.com
- For more information on me, please visit www.paulallison.co.uk



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Latvia Introduction

Latvia is the central Baltic nation, and is the shortest from top to bottom. It is often assumed to sit in the middle of the other two in terms of stereotypes – Estonia and Lithuania form the extremes. One thing to note is the high Russian population – around 47% of the population are ethnically Russian, and indeed they form a majority in the two biggest cities: Riga and Daugavapils. Most of this is the result of the massive population displacements the nation suffered under Soviet rule (visit Riga's moving occupation museum for a better understanding). As a result, Latvia itself is very exacting with citizenship, and language and history tests have to be passed before it is granted. This has all led to a lot of anti-Russian racism, a backlash of sorts, and a fair bit of tension: you are very unlikely to experience this (unless you are close to Latvians or Russians, or speak either language).

Riga

Riga is my favourite of the Baltic capitals as it is just a functional big city with a very pretty centre. By that, I mean it doesn't care if you are a tourist or not, it just gets on with being what it is, with or without you (this is hard to explain, but I like it!).

The action is pretty much centred around the old town, known as Vecriga. Full of narrow, cobbled lanes and red brick churches and buildings, Riga has maintained many links with its Hanseatic past. The city celebrated its 800th anniversary in 2001, and was European Capital of Culture to celebrate. There are many sights to see, some of which I've listed below, and a good way to get your bearing is to take the minibus tour of the city from in front of the Rifleman's statue (most hotels and the tourist office in the House of the Blackheads has info on this).

The Hotel Konventa Seta is very highly recommended – I've stayed in all sorts of rooms there on my three visits (standard double, junior suite and suite). All are very spacious (obviously, they get bigger as you go up), and the cleaners are stunning. Radi un Dragi (Friends and Relatives) is also highly recommended – it's right opposite Dickens

Pub. For all mod-cons, use the Radisson SAS – just bear in mind that it's a long way across the river!

Paul's recommendations:

#1 Bar – A La

#1 Sight – the Skyline Bar in the Reval Hotel

#1 Thing to do – visit Jurmala

Riga: must see sights

- **The Three Brothers** - the oldest houses in the country, in an Old Town backstreet.
- **House of the Blackheads** – very colourfully decorated old Hanseatic Guild House
- **Occupation Museum** – right next door. Very, very moving.
- **Soviet War Memorial** – towering monument with 5 stars and angel holding palm upwards. This is on the far side of the river, but we saw this on the minibus tour.
- **Freedom Monument** – “Milda” is a large statue symbolising Latvian independence. Although the Soviets never dismantled her, they banned people from touching it. Has a guard of honour during the day.
- **Laima Clock** – In the same square as the Freedom Monument, this oblong clock is sponsored by the famous chocolate firm and is the de rigueur place for young Latvians to meet for a date
- **Skyline Bar in Reval Hotel Latvija** – a very designer bar on the top floor of this New Town skyscraper. Pricey, but well worth the views (as long as you don't pay £4 a pint, like Chris did!)
- **Konventa Seta** – also a top hotel (see above), the Convent Yard is an interesting collection of old buildings clustered around a yard immediately behind St Peters Church
- **The Dom Cathedral** – a big brick building in the Dom Square, with a huge organ
- **St Peter & St Paul Church** – Take the lift to the top of the spire for a great view over the rooftops
- **Big Christopher** – a statue of boatman who saved a child and founded the city
- **Zeppelin Hanger Markets** – built to build zeppelins, now hosting the central markets. Not much touristy stuff, but still a sight to behold.



Riga: Top pubs

As well as the Skyline Bar mentioned above (which is more of a sight anyway – not one for a session!), here are a few more you may wish to consider:

- **A La** – Best bar in the Baltics? It's not to everyone's tastes, but if you can find it, it's well worth a visit. Even if it's just for the crisps served delicately in a basket.
- **Zeppelin** – Fitted out like a Zeppelin cabin, and brewing it's own (slightly dodgy) beer, zeppelin is a pleasing place to sink a few.
- **Runcis** – A madcap place, full of characters, and bikes, and with big pictures of cats on the walls. This is in a wee courtyard next to the Konventa Seta.
- **Alus Seta** – An absolute must visit. A Latvian beer and food hall (Alus Seta translates to Beer Yard) near the Cathedral – here, you can try several types of beer and queue up for a Latvian carvery, all for next to nothing. Owned by the Lido group, who also own...
- **Staburags** – more a restaurant than a pub, but still well worth a visit. Try the knuckle of pork – it almost broke our table. Say hello to Alexander, the mad Russian biker tattooist, if you see him.
- **Klondaika** – A humble pool hall, but the scene of the Notts/NATA pre-match shenanigans before the 2000 match. When we went back on a Friday night in April 2003, the place was full of scantily clad Russian youngsters downing the cheap drinks ahead of hitting a club. A culture shock experience.
- **Amsterdama** – Probably the most refined drinking option in town, outside of the hotel bars. Has Spaten Bavarian pils on tap (if you like that sort of thing, which I don't).
- **Rigas Balsams Baras** – very trendy bar at the Arsenal end of Vecriga. Well worth a visit for the superb range of Balsam cocktails – I had the ice cream one, and it was delicious – even in the middle of a freezing blizzard outside.
- **FC Barcelona** – Directly opposite the Skonto Stadium, and a wee bit out of the centre – this is handy for food and a wide range of beer if you're in the area. Very modern, and Premiership football on the telly.
- **Paddy Whelan's** – Riga's most famous, and biggest, Irish pub. Okay, but you're not in Dublin, you're in Riga. Apparently has a posh bit upstairs, but never went to look for it.



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- **Dickens** – English pub (with upstairs restaurant) directly opposite Paddy Whelans. Go, if you must, but with so many other choices I don't know why you would.
- **Tim McShane's** – A decent choice for food, although it's right next to the much cheaper, and much more authentic, Alus Seta. One to consider when you want familiarity.
- **The Dublin** – The smallest, yet friendliest, of Riga's Irish pubs. Went there in 2000 and was plied with free vodka. Couldn't find it again in 2003, but wasn't really looking too hard – up near the Hotel de Rome.

Jurmala

Just down the coast from Riga, and practically conjoined to the Riga metropolis, is the gorgeous resort of Jurmala, home to many a retired Soviet colonel. Jurmala is actually a string of several towns joined together along the beach – Majori seems to be where it's mostly at, and has a Disney-esque main street lined with brightly coloured houses. Head down to the wide golden sandy beach, where there are plenty of facilities, including an amusement park, several bars on the sand itself and changing facilities.

Local trains leave regularly from Riga's main station (just to the south-east of Vecriga) – these are the biggest trains you will ever see! Get off at Majori, where you too can experience the worst Gents toilet I have ever seen – if it hadn't been for the gnarled old woman charging 15p a go I would have been back in with a camera just to prove it to you!

We went on a warm (for the Baltics) September day – you may want to give it a miss if you're there in February!

Was this guide useful? Please let me know:
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