

What to Do in 24 Hours in the Latvian Capital

By [Aleks Tapinsh](#)

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The cobble streets of Riga's Old Town contain a mix of architectural influence from the last eight centuries.

RIGA, Latvia — A city of the medieval Hanseatic league of trading nations with a mix of Latvian, Germanic and Russian cultures, Riga has a rich 800-year history and a vibrant modern buzz.

A trip to the Latvian capital is an opportunity to see world class art nouveau buildings, join trendy locals in top eateries and take a trip down the memory lane of Soviet history.

After arriving, you have a choice of several good hotels, from the top end Neiburgs Hotel, a favorite of German tourists, or the Grand Hotel in the medieval Old Town, the boutique Hotel Bergs in the newer center, which has hosted celebrities such as Lady Gaga, or bigger chain hotels like the Radisson Blue Hotel Latvija.

Riga is split into two central parts favored by tourists: the historic Old Town near the river, and the newer center, which includes the Art Nouveau district, as well as the main shopping streets.

5 p.m. — The first excursion is to the Old Town, starting from the square at the top end of the area nearest to the river Daugava. Here you will see a statue of French medieval epic hero Roland, who was a symbol of justice in northern German towns and which the German-dominated Riga burghers decided to erect in 1897.

Roland, along with several other buildings, was destroyed during World War II, and the city council has gone to great lengths and expense to try to re-create the pre-war feel.

The statue, City Hall and the House of the Blackheads, a guild house for unmarried German merchants when the Baltics were dominated by a German-speaking elite and ruled by the tsars in St. Petersburg, have all been restored. Today the House of the Blackheads is the temporary office of the Latvian president as Riga Castle undergoes reconstruction.

Take a leisurely walk around the Old Town, savoring more than 800 years of history that has been influenced by Riga's former German, Swedish and Russian overlords. Riga has been back in the hands of the Latvians themselves since independence was regained from the former Soviet Union in 1991.

Of particular note are Cathedral Square (Doma Laukums), with the Dom cathedral on one side, the building housing Latvian Public Radio on the other. Another corner features a newly restored old bourse building that now houses a contemporary art museum.

From here, take any of the streets and let your feet guide you — you will see tiny, cobbled streets, little squares, many with small bars or restaurants, several old churches and Riga Castle. In the days when Latvia was ruled by the tsars, Riga Castle was the residence of the Russian governor.

Other notable monuments are The Three Brothers, the oldest buildings in the Old Town, as well St Peter's church, St. Jacob's cathedral and the Cats' House, an old building in the center of the Old Town which has two statues of cats on the point of each tower. The legend is that a Latvian merchant was excluded from the nearby guild and had the cats' bottoms turned towards the guild house to show his anger. The dispute was later resolved and the cats' bottoms were turned the other way round.

8 p.m. — Stop by "The Three Chefs' Restaurant 'The good shall grow'" (Tam Labam Bus Augt) restaurant inside Jacob's Barracks in the Old Town. The three well-known chefs — Eriks Dreibants, Ruta Rietuma and Martins Sirmas — will titillate your taste buds. Because almost all the food is made from local, fresh organic produce, the menu changes daily and depends on the season.

In the new part of the town, next to the plush embassy district, there is also the very well-known Vincents restaurant, run by Martins Ritins. Most visiting foreign dignitaries drop in.

10 p.m. — Savor the nightlife of the Old Town, which boasts many bars and restaurants.

Saturday

9 a.m. — Begin a day with a walk around the beautiful Art Nouveau district in what is known as the "The Quiet Center." Riga boasts one of the largest collections of Art Nouveau buildings in the world, which are also recognized by UNESCO as having outstanding universal value.

10 a.m. — Visit the Art Nouveau Museum, take a walk on Alberta iela (street) and Elizabetes iela, gaze at the Art Nouveau building of the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga nearby. Lunch can be had at any of the cafes in the area, such as Harry Morgan's, the bar of the Albert Hotel, the Bite Blues Club or Burga Bars.

1 p.m. — After lunch, head back to the Old Town, where there is still plenty to see, through the two parks which were built during the days of tsarist rule, first Kronvald park and then over to the park leading up to Bastion Hill (Bastejkalns).

One diversion could be to the Latvian National Museum of Art, whose collection includes many Latvian impressionists and which is next to Kronvald park.

Walking through the parks, you will see near the foot of Bastion Hill some red marble stones, which mark the place where five people were killed during the 1991 storming of the Interior Ministry by loyalist Soviet paramilitaries.

Just along the road is Latvia's most important monument, the Freedom Monument, a 42-meter column and statue of a woman, Liberty, holding up three stars. It was built to commemorate the soldiers who fought for Latvia's first period of independence, but has come to represent the country's sovereignty in general.

In the Old Town, the must-sees include the Museum of the Occupation, which chronicles the painful history of Latvia after it was occupied by Soviet forces in 1940. After criticism that Latvia was ignoring the Holocaust, it now features exhibitions on the murders of the Jews under Nazi rule from 1941, which ended when Soviet forces returned in 1944 to begin 50 years of Moscow rule.

There is also the War Museum, a recently renovated Art Museum at the Bourse; the Swedish Gate and an elevator that travels up the tower of St. Peter's Church for a panorama of the city.

4 p.m. — Refresh yourself at one of Riga's many coffee shops in the newer center or in the Old Town. These include German coffee place Junge.lv on Blaumana iela or Emils Gustavs' Sokolade, where you can also buy chocolates as a souvenir.

If you still have time and the inclination, a trip over the river to the area called Pardaugava is worth a visit to see the needle-like Victory Monument, a Soviet-era addition which commemorates the arrival of Red Army forces during World War Two. Some Latvians dislike the monument as honoring an occupying force, while local Russian-speakers flock there every year to honor men they consider heroes.

Another well known Soviet-era building is the Stalin-era Latvian Academy of Sciences, which can be seen towering behind the main central railway station.

6 p.m. — Check out the national opera for an evening show.

9 p.m. — Have supper at Istaba, which houses an art gallery on the ground floor and a restaurant above, which is popular with the Latvian crowd. The menu changes regularly and you can decide what to order by consulting with the chef himself, who can often be seen in the cramped kitchen.

Sunday

10. a.m. — One sight worth seeing is the Riga central market, a colorful, and sometimes grimy, maze of stalls, where the central feature is five pavilions, which are made from old zeppelin hangars. Each pavilion specializes in a different commodity, such as meat or dairy products.

Otherwise, if the capricious Baltic weather permits, you could rent out a bike from BalticBike, whose stands can be found in several spots in the city. An ambitious ride would be to Jurmala, a seaside resort popular with Russian billionaires and locals alike and whose name literally means "sea side."

If such a long bike trip (about 20 kilometers) is too much, you can join the locals on the rattling trains that trundle out of the city to the coast and hop off at any of the Jurmala towns, the most popular of which are Bulduri, Majori and Dzintari. If the weather is right and you have the time, it is great to enjoy lazing on the fine white sandy beaches and a splash about in the shallow waters, which are also perfect for children. A brisk walk in the autumn or winter rounded off with a coffee at one of the several cafes is also a good way to round off the weekend.

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