

The Perfect Weekend

R I G A

Though possessing all the old-world charm of much busier Eastern European cities like Prague, Latvia's capital has a fresher, younger feel than its cobbled streets initially suggest. Its restaurants and design shops snap at the heels of Copenhagen, but offer much better value for money for a winter break

WORDS ORLA THOMAS @OrlaThomas ● PHOTOGRAPHS SARAH COGHILL @SarahCoghill1



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TRAVEL ESSENTIALS AirBaltic, Ryanair and Wizz Air fly to Riga from UK airports including those in London, Glasgow, Liverpool, and Manchester (from £120; airbaltic.com). Find information on Riga at Latvia's official tourism site (latvia.travel). The Riga Card provides free public transport and many discounts (from £22 for 24 hours; liveriga.com).

MAP ILLUSTRATION: NIK NEVES

The walk

Its red-brick façade adorned with carved saints, a lapis-blue astronomical clock and gold weather vane, **Blackheads House** is the standout architecture of Riga's Old Town. But the building isn't actually old at all – dating back to 2001, it's an extremely convincing replica, built using blueprints that survived the 1334 original destroyed by WWII bombs. Once a fraternity house for unmarried German merchants, it was legendary for its raucous feasts, and it's easy now to imagine fur-clad 14th-century party boys stumbling across the snow-dusted town hall square and disappearing into the cobbled lanes of the city's Gothic core. Follow in their footsteps past Rozengrāls, an ancient wine vault turned medieval-themed restaurant, and another restaurant named 1221, after its year of construction, but better known as 'the blue house with cows'. Painted in similarly pastel shades are Riga's oldest dwellings, nicknamed the Three Brothers. One thin, one fat, one slightly receding, all the siblings look to be made from iced gingerbread, and are all slightly on the wonk. →



Blackheads House is thought to be a place where the tradition of decorating a Christmas tree began, in 1510. INSET 1221 Restorans' exterior features Latvia's blue cows, a breed native to the country





The drink

INSET The Labietis brewpub serves 12 beers on draught. **BELOW** The pub has an industrial design, with a glass wall into the brewery

Beer, says Reinis Pļaviņš, founder of brewpub Labietis, is the most sung-about beverage in Latvia. The lyrics of these drinking ditties have their roots in the country's pagan traditions, of which he, like most Latvians, is intensely proud. Labietis was the name for an old doctor-slash-brewer, and Reinis's aim is to put that ancient tradition of herbal healing back into beer. The 12 draughts on offer behind the bar taste anything but medicinal. A red-toned beer called Kamīns, meaning fireplace, has caramel and camomile flavours, a combination vaguely evocative of Christmas; while Ausma ('dawn') is like a boozy ginger beer with a refreshing peppermint finish. While sinking a glass or two, customers peer through a glass wall that reveals the brewing processes that went into creating their drink; it's mere metres from the bags of grain to the beer tap itself.



Under pools of light cast by bulbs in sawn-off beer bottles, the crowd grows increasingly lively, comparing their choices at long wooden tables that encourage sharing and conversation.

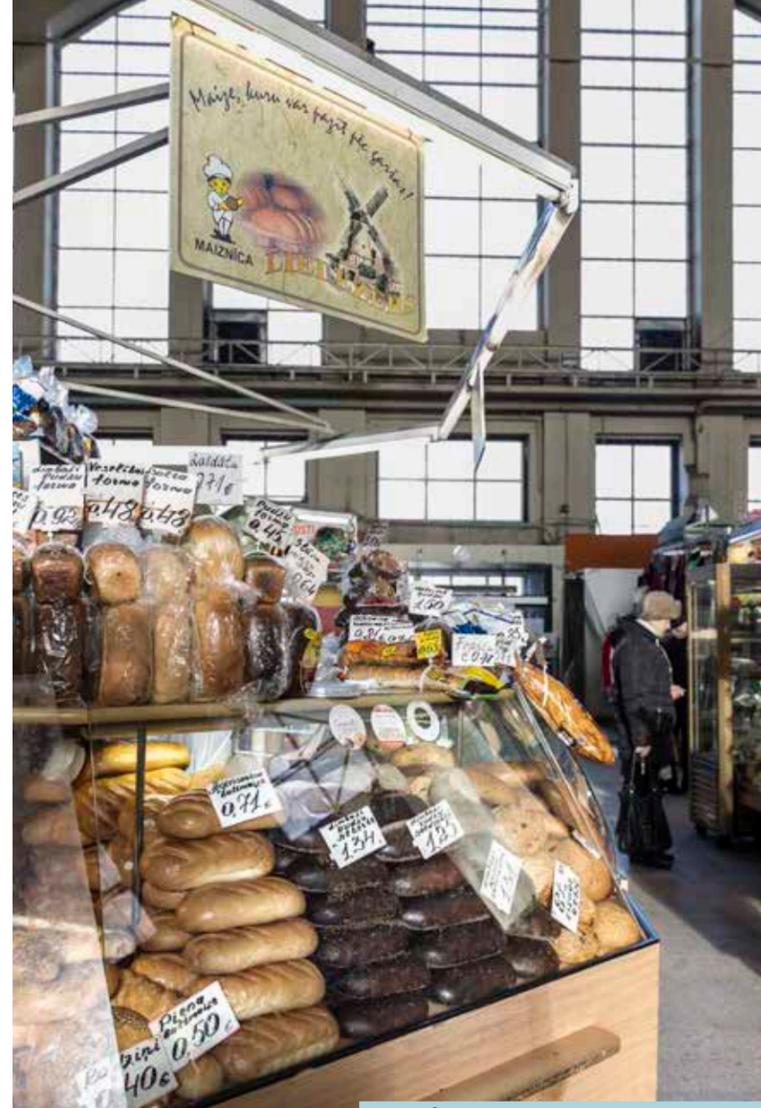
● Beer from £1.30; labietis.lv

The museum

A bus ride away from downtown Riga is the **Latvian Ethnographic Open-Air Museum**, a patch of historic rural life grafted onto the edge of the city. Wandering tree-lined avenues, visitors encounter wooden buildings that date from the 17th century to the 1930s, transplanted here from the provinces and carefully preserved. On the shores of Lake Jugla, cold air blasting off its partly frozen surface, is a replica fishing community, its tethered vessels as eerily empty as the *Mary Celeste*. Half of an upturned boat has been repurposed as a smokehouse, and icicles hang from the dwellings' moss-mottled thatched roofs. A trail of woodsmoke leads to a house made cosy, its bed spread with blankets woven with traditional patterns in red and white. Further along the path are old wooden churches and a hilltop windmill, its sails long since stilled.

● Take Bus 1 from the corner of Merķeļa Street and Tērbatas Street in Riga city centre to the 'Brīvdabas muzejs' stop (35 mins; £2 return; latvia.travel). Entry to Latvian Ethnographic Open-Air Museum £3.50 (brivdabasmuzejs.lv).

ABOVE The open-air museum has more than 100 wooden buildings, including windmills, churches and farms. **BELOW** Icicles hang from the roof of one of the once-rural homes



ABOVE Lieliezers, a traditional Latvian bakery, is one of many stalls at Riga's Central Market. **BELOW** Seasonal cranberries for sale at Central Market

The market

Housed in repurposed 1920s Zeppelin hangars, each of **Riga Central Market's** pavilions smells of what it sells. In the dairy hall, the aroma is overwhelmingly of cheese, but move into the greengrocers' area and the air is strongly scented with the vinegar used for pickling their produce. One stall sells a rainbow of preserved vegetables, all home-grown – everything from apples to garlic cloves is available in brine, as well as the more conventional sauerkraut. Nearby, a woman wrapped up in a shearling jacket and woollen mittens offers jars of just-picked cranberries, calculating a customer's bill on a wooden abacus. Bakers' stalls are stacked high with ryes and sourdoughs, plus klingeris, the traditional Latvian birthday cake, shaped like a giant pretzel.

Queues form outside an Uzbekistani bakery, richly decorated with blue and yellow tiles, where workers can be glimpsed feeding the ovens with giant discs of dough on cast iron pans.

● rct.lv



PERFECT WEEKEND RIGA

The tour

INSET Faces full of emotion and motifs taken from nature are characteristic of Art Nouveau design. **BELOW** No. 10b Elizabetes Street, designed by Mikhail Eisenstein, is the city's best-known Art Nouveau building

Art Nouveau didn't last long, but no city in Europe was more enamoured with the style than Riga. Popular between 1895 and 1910, the trend coincided with a financial boom in the Latvian capital – leaving a legacy of more than 700 buildings strewn with floral motifs, figures in states of either distress or ecstasy and the occasional Egyptian sphinx. Eat Riga's **Art Nouveau tour** guide, Arturs Adamsons, leads a small group down Alberta Street, where many of the most famous examples can be found. Walking beside apartment blocks, shops and restaurants, he points out the intriguing designs of architect Mikhail Eisenstein: screaming gargoyles, preening peacocks and lions keeping watch from the rooftops. At no. 10b on the adjacent Elizabetes Street, the exterior combines duck-egg blue tiles with extravagant carvings, including a pair of giant gloomy faces, their expressions full of the emotion that characterises this short-lived style.

● Eat Riga offers a two-three hour Art Nouveau walking tour (from £9; eatriga.lv). →





The shop

The name of Latvian design store **Riija** translates in local language as 'threshing barn'. Historically this building was at the heart of rural Latvian farmsteads; the place where precious edible wheat was sorted from the chuckable chaff. Here the word is cleverly reapplied – only the best local design makes it onto the shelves of this high-ceilinged, undeniably barn-like concept store. Latvians are used to working with their hands, says co-owner Sarmite Stabulniece; she feels things made this way have more heart, more energy. Traditional examples of this culture of craftsmanship include the richly-patterned Lielvārde belt, and black or 'burnt' clay ceramics. Elsewhere well-dressed customers examine picture frames made using Latvian wood, boxes of clay dominoes inscribed with pagan folk symbols, and skilfully drawn temporary tattoos showing Baltic wildlife from bear to lynx. Despite honouring local heritage, this collection remains resolutely contemporary, and never strays towards twee.

● Clay dominoes £19; riija.lv



INSET Ceramic bells are among handmade items for sale at shop Riija. **BELOW** High-ceilinged Riija showcases the best of local design



The restaurant

One of the appetisers at **Restorans 3** is a small bowl of pine cones, picked in the summer while small and nutrient-rich, and cooked in sugar syrup. They taste like the trees smell, bringing to your mouth the sensation of walking among conifers. This one dish typifies the restaurant's philosophy – it was the first in Latvia to serve wild food, much of it foraged from the forests. Chef Juris Dukalskis, emerging from the kitchen with his sleeves rolled to reveal heavily tattooed arms, is happy to acknowledge the inspiration of New Nordic cuisine, particularly Copenhagen's Noma. Restorans 3's interior also draws from nature, its exposed brickwork and earthy paint shades offset with framed drawings of birds and lamps like oversized wicker baskets. This muted look allows the dishes to take centre stage, and some are presented with theatrical flair. Onion bread has the appearance of a parsnip just pulled from the earth, and a dish of smoked beaver with black garlic and Jerusalem artichoke arrives on a bed of juniper, set alight in crackling flames.

● Mains from £11; restaurant3.lv

ABOVE Pigs' ears with horseradish cream, pickled onions, mustard seeds, crispy pork skin and bacon powder at Restorans 3. **BELOW** A waiter serves glasses of tart apple and lingonberry juice



The café

Sixties-inspired **Get Smart** invites customers to turn onto Lāčplēša Street, tune in to this café and drop out of the 21st century for a few hours. The décor pays colourful homage to the period – from psychedelic wallpaper to bucket chairs; vintage TV sets to a pile of weathered board games like Uno, dominoes and chess. One teal wall is hung with old vinyl records, and an upbeat indie folk song, Vance Joy's *Riptide*, plays from the stereo. Behind an old-school serving hatch decouped with vintage film posters is an American-style white fridge, and the menu also references US diner cuisine. Thick, creamy banana milkshakes are given a Latvian twist and blended with quince. Dubbed 'the lemon of the north', it's a tart citrus-like fruit that's able to withstand winter temperatures that often drop to -30°C. On such days, cafés become a refuge.

● Milkshake £2.70, burger from £3.75; getsmartcafe.lv →



ABOVE Get Smart café has a laid-back home-from-home feel. **INSET** Diner-style milkshakes are made using local fruits, such as blueberries and quince



ABOVE Hotel Bergs' lobby combines an Art Nouveau fireplace with Modernist paintings. **BELOW** There's live piano music in the restaurant on weekends

The hotel

Etched into window glass and swirled into the restaurant's 3D ceiling is **Hotel Bergs'** distinctive logo: the cabbage. Though the pale-brick Art Nouveau building is now surrounded by restaurants and shops, it was built on top of a cabbage field. First used as an apartment block, and commandeered by the Soviets during their occupation, the hotel's style blends elements of historic and contemporary Latvia. Walls are hung with portraits of the hotel's founders, the Bergs, plus monochrome works by modern Latvian artist Ilmārs Blumbergs. Dotted along the corridors are imported African woodcarvings, while bedrooms feature hand-woven local linens. The hotel's communal spaces are alluring, too. The restaurant, where breakfast is served, is bathed with light in the morning, making it an inviting place to linger over the freshest of bread, dark rye and scattered with seeds. After dusk, order an aperitif and take up a fireside position in one of the lobby's plush velvet armchairs.

● From £165; hotelbergs.lv



The local's tip

“Latvia is a small country, but when it comes to classical music we are world-class. The Great Guild Hall is a historic venue in the heart of Riga Old Town, but it's the music that brings it to life. Tickets here cost as little as 10 euros – phenomenally good value to hear performances of such high quality.”

JANIS JENZIS owns and runs Riga restaurants including HOT'E (hote.lv) and the wine and Latvian tapas bar Demokrātisks Vīna Bārs Garage (vinabars.lv). 



ORLA THOMAS is our features editor. Her first visit to Latvia, she was delighted to meet a former Eurovision star while out dancing.