

2

Latvia

The Great Amber Way

A short bus ride north along the Baltic Sea whisks us out of Lithuania and into Latvia. We are tired from sandboarding, but have very little time to rest before we arrive in Liepaja, a seaside resort town on the Baltic Sea. Latvia is similar to Lithuania in some ways, but very different in others. I can't wait to explore it with you.

The park-like landscape of Latvia is very flat and dotted with clear blue lakes, much like Lithuania. Over half of its vast, unspoiled countryside is blanketed in dense forests of birch, oak, and pine. Latvia may be a small country in the northern Baltic region of Europe and often overlooked by her big neighbors, but the natural beauty of this land is grand indeed. This is hiking and cycling



Latvian pine forest. Image in Public Domain, courtesy of Pixabay.



Driftwood washed up on a Latvian beach from the Baltic Sea. Image is in the Public Domain, courtesy of Pixabay.

territory with only one real cosmopolitan city, Latvia's capital city of Riga.

Latvia is well known for its pristine white beaches, which are desolate in the winter and over-crowded during the summer. Like clockwork, Rigans and other Baltic city dwellers escape to the seashore for their summer holiday retreats.

Liepaja is our first stop in Latvia. At this time of year, the desolate beach is hauntingly beautiful as the churning waves crash upon the glistening white sand and the mournful cries of seabirds echo overhead. We are meeting new friends here today. Levi and Grace, members of my parents' church, will join us at the beach before taking us on a scenic hike and later, a grand tour of their beautiful city of Riga. There they are now!

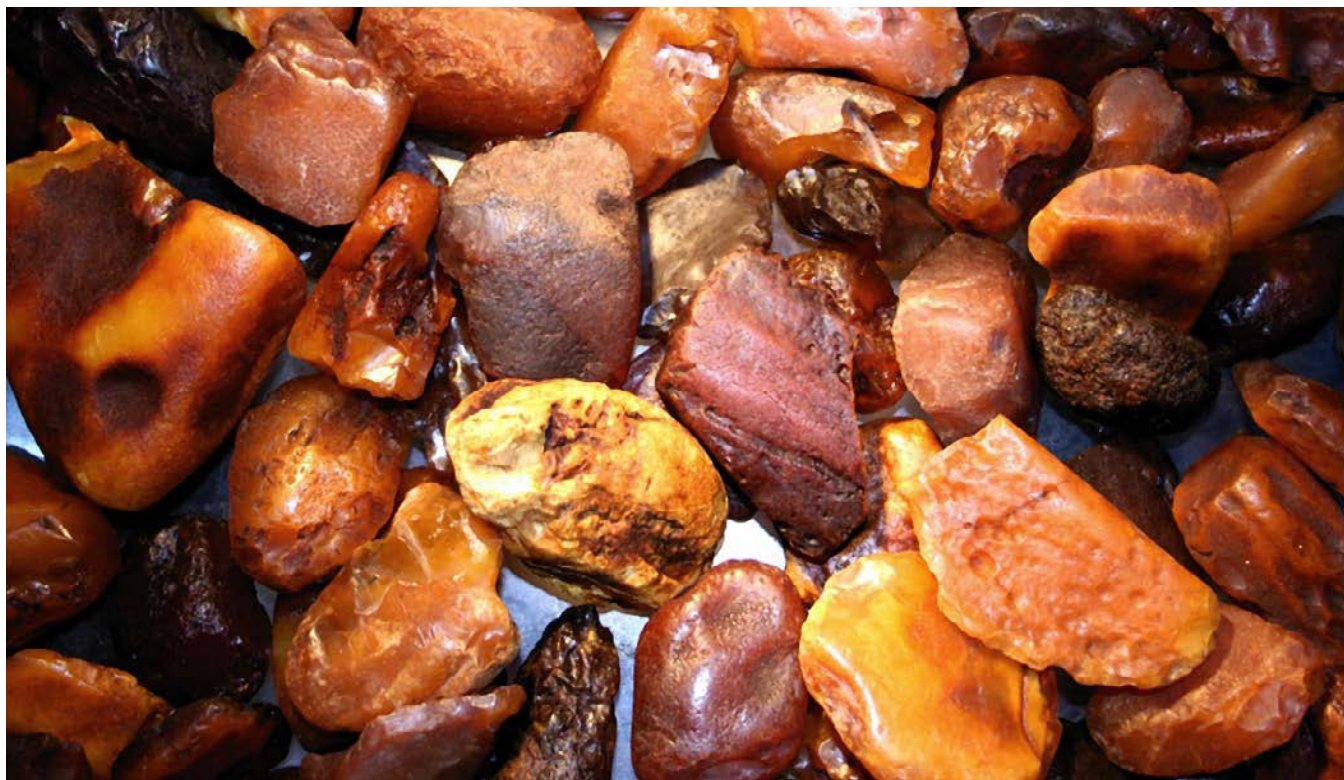
"Hello, hello!" Levi and Grace call, waving their hands to draw our attention to them sitting on a large blanket high upon the sand dunes. They jump up to meet us halfway and give us hugs even though we have never met. "It's so good to

see faces from home and hear you speak native English. We have been a bit homesick lately."

The Russells are Christian missionaries in Latvia, serving the Lutheran church, which has long been established here. They both teach English in local high schools during the day and lead Bible studies at the church a couple evenings per week. Grace is expecting their first baby.

"How are your parents? Please tell them hello from us. But please, come, sit down and tell us all about your travels. Where have you been so far and where are you going?" Levi asks enthusiastically.

We tell them that Latvia is our second stop and that we will be traveling all around the northern Scandinavian countries on the mainland of Europe and then the island nations of the United Kingdom and beyond. Suddenly, Grace squeals in delight. At first, we think her enthusiasm is in response to our travel plans, but we quickly discover it has nothing to do with our adventure, but with something she discovered in the sand.



Several pieces of unpolished amber. Photo by Lanzi and used with permission under license CC BY-SA 3.0.

While listening to us speak, she was moving sand with her bare feet when suddenly she hit something hard and very smooth. She lifts the yellow stone-like object from the fine white sand and polishes it on her sweater.

“It’s **amber!**” she cries.

We all crowd close to appreciate her beautiful find and then pass it around to inspect for natural **inclusions**, such as an insect of some sort. No, this piece of amber is crystal clear. In fact, its honey color is translucent in the brilliant Baltic sunshine.

Grace asks us, “Do you know how amber is formed?”

“No,” we answer, hoping we may get a mini-science lesson right here on the beach.

Grace holds the smooth, organic gem out toward the sun and explains, “Amber is created by trees, such as those pine trees on the far side of the beach. When a tree is cut or scratched, by a woodpecker or a beaver for instance, the

tree releases **resin** to protect itself, much like our bodies produce a scab when we are injured. Sometimes insects or small animals ambling by get trapped in the sticky resin. Over the course of a long period of time, that resin turns into a fossil, which we call amber.”

“If amber comes from trees, then why did you find this piece in the sand?”

“Strange, huh?” Levi chimes in. “But this is the most fascinating part to me. A long time ago, large glaciers moved through this region knocking down whole forests and dragging them into the sea. Over the years, the resin fossilized and became amber. Amber floats, so once fossilized, the pieces drift to the top of the sea and eventually wash ashore. The perfect combination of vast forests and massive glaciers in the Baltic region is the reason why more amber is found here than in any other region in the world.

“In fact, amber has always played a critical role in Latvia’s culture and history. During ancient

and medieval times, amber found along the Baltic coast was so prized that the Vikings who lived here in the north used it to barter for riches found further south in Greece, Egypt, and even Rome. Because of the lively and active trade of amber, the Amber Road, a major trade route in ancient times, was built.”

“But you’re starting to look sunburnt,” Grace notices. “Let’s put on our hiking boots and see some of the beautiful landscape of Latvia.”

With cameras in our pockets and water bottles in hand, we set out on a trail that leads up from the beach and into the lush coastal woodlands. Under the shade of the trees, it feels cooler than on the beach, even though the temperature rarely rises above 70 degrees Fahrenheit even during the warmest months of the summer. In the wintertime, the temperature is usually below freezing, but today is a lovely day to hike through the forests of Latvia.

Grace tells us to keep our eyes open for wildlife that, although common here, is endangered throughout the rest of Europe, such as the Eurasian beaver and the European wolf or lynx. She also tells us about some of the rare birds which live only in these Latvian woods, such as the corncrake, black stork, white-backed woodpecker, and spotted eagle. Hollow tapping sounds echo through the forest and we look up to find woodpeckers busy at work. We also see several white wagtails, the national bird of Latvia, and daisies, her national flower.

After about an hour of hiking along wooded trails, over lazy creeks, and behind cascading waterfalls, our trail circles back around to the parking lot. And just before reaching the Russells’ car, a spotted eagle soars over our heads. Its majesty is awe-inspiring. Imagine the lofty view of the dense forest, the sparkling beach, and the deep blue waters of the Baltic Sea this king of birds beholds every day!



Lesser spotted eagle. Photo in the public domain.



The road to Riga is short, flat, and straight as an arrow. The capital city lies a little more than a meter above **sea level** on a flat and sandy plain. Riga is not only the largest city in Latvia, it is also the largest city in all the Baltic States combined, with approximately 700,000 inhabitants. About a third of all Latvians live in this historic city situated on the southern shore of the Gulf of Riga.

The city of Riga is well over 800 years old. It began as a Viking fishing village but grew into an important trading center. Situated at the mouth of the Daugava River, the Vikings traded amber and other valuables up and down the Daugava-Dvina-Dneiper river system all the way to Greece and the Byzantine Empire thousands of miles to the south.

During the 12th century, crusaders were dispatched to Christianize the pagans, and in 1200, Bishop Albert arrived with 23 ships and



House of Blackheads at Dusk in Riga, Latvia. Photo by Diliff used with permission under license CC BY-SA 3.0.

500 crusaders to establish Riga as the new seat of the Livonian bishopric by force. In plain language, the leaders of the church invaded the town of Riga and made it a new capital for the Christian church. This declaration was made in the year 1201, and that year is now considered Riga's founding date, even though it existed and thrived for many, many years prior to that event.

"How do you like our city?" Grace asks from the front seat.

"First stop is the city center!" Levi announces. "It is so well preserved that the entire center is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It's truly beautiful. In fact, Riga was officially recognized as a European Capital of Culture in 2014. We are proud to call it our 'home away from home'."

After parking the car, we wander through the old quarter, admiring the historic buildings, some dating back to the 13th century when Riga joined the **Hanseatic League**, a community of merchant guilds that formed their own set

of laws to ensure free trade among the cities of northern Europe. Riga provides a striking contrast of old and new architecture laced with lush green public parks filled with people and their pets enjoying this bright spring day. It's a perfect day for a picnic. At the outdoor market, we buy Latvian black bread, smoked fish, smoked gouda, strawberries, and a paper sack filled with *biezpiena sierins*, a sweetened cheese curd snack. Now we have all the essentials for the perfect Latvian picnic!

Out on the green lawn, soaking up the warmth of the waning sun, our gracious hosts tell us more about the Latvia we are learning to love.

Latvia's past has not been a peaceful one. After the crusades, the "pagans" of Latvia were Christianized and modernized. Fortifications such as ramparts and town walls were built to protect Riga and the nearby communities, after which peace and prosperity abounded for a few hundred years, until the Reformation; the

majority of Latvians protested the Catholic Church and embraced Protestantism. However, this left the country divided and therefore weak. And so began the invasions. First, Poland invaded, followed by Sweden, and finally Russia.

The first Russian occupation of Latvia lasted just over 200 years from 1710 to 1917. During the first few years under Russian control, over 40% of all Latvians died from either famine or plague. At the end of the 200 years, the territory of western Russia, which included the state of Latvia, had been devastated by World War I. With a weakened Russian Empire and the general chaos of the war's aftermath, Latvia declared its independence from Russia in 1918. However, her independence didn't last long.

In 1939, the Germans and Russians made a secret agreement to divide the countries of northern and eastern Europe into two "spheres of influence". Latvia, along with the other Baltic States, was assigned to Russian control. Two years of misery and devastation passed under the dictatorship of Russia. Not surprisingly, neither Germany nor Russia kept their end of the bargain and were soon duking it out for countries previously assigned to the other party. First, they fought over Poland, then, in 1941, fought over Latvia. Germany prevailed, placing Latvia under equally miserable domination, as Germany's goal for Latvia was to reduce her population by 50%.

Under both countries' regimes, over 200,000 Latvians were either deported or killed, including 75,000 Jews who were murdered in Nazi **concentration camps**. The end of the Second



The Tower of Riga Cathedral. Photo by Olga1969 under license CC BY-SA 4.0.

World War brought no less hardship. Once again under the control of Russia, hundreds of thousands of terror-stricken Latvians fled to Sweden and Germany for **refuge**.

Thankfully, this story is coming to a happy ending. Fifty years after Russia's second occupation and sovietization, Latvia regained her independence in 1991. Latvia was finally free to rule herself once again! Today, many Russians still live in Latvia, but the Latvian language is the national tongue and the old Latvian culture is being slowly restored. The last hundred years have been extremely difficult and tragic for this small country, but Latvians are a strong and resilient people, rising from the ashes of domination and despair to become a beautiful,



Turaida Castle. Photo by Modris Putns and used with permission under license CC BY-SA 3.0.



Cesis. Photo taken by Graham under license CC BY-SA 2.0.

welcoming country, with Riga serving as her crowning capital of culture.

“That’s a depressing history, isn’t it?” asks Levi. “It may seem so very different from your own country’s history if yours has experienced freedom for many hundreds of years. But it is a history that we must learn so that we, as world citizens, do not repeat such mistakes or commit such atrocities going forward. How about we walk back to the square and get some ice cream before we drive to our apartment?”

Oh yes, we are happy to jump up from the grass and get some exercise after our delicious picnic. After topping off the meal with some refreshing ice cream and additional sightseeing through Riga’s old town, including St. Peter’s Church and the Riga Cathedral, we hop back into their car and drive to the Russells’ third-floor apartment not far from the city center.

We talk late into the night about their work here in Latvia and their future plans to return to

the States sometime in the next year or two. Grace and Levi have classes to teach tomorrow, so they give us their best tips for what else to see before we leave Latvia to drive north to Estonia.

There are some lovely medieval castles they insist we see. One is Turaida Castle, which is not far from Riga. The other place they insist we visit is the town of Cesis, one of Latvia's oldest townships. Running through its charming city center are cobbled lanes lined with historic wooden buildings and a few impressive castles.

As we drift off to sleep on mattresses laid out on the Russells' living room floor, we are thankful for new friends, the beautiful countryside, an exciting city in which to spend the night, and delightful plans to continue our explorations tomorrow.

Dear Latvia, neither tragedy nor triumph can hold you down, fade your inner beauty, or destroy your tenacious spirit. May your hard-fought and well-earned independence last for many centuries to come! ■



Traditional Latvian dress. Photo in public domain by Pxhere.

Field Notes

Tell me what you remember about Latvia:

- ◇ *What rare gem can be found along the coast of Latvia? How is it formed? Which civilization used it as a central component in their trading empire?*
- ◇ *Which endangered animals and birds are common in Latvia?*
- ◇ *Name some of the countries that have invaded Latvia over the years. When did Latvia finally regain her independence?*

Further Explorations:

- ◇ *Latvia (Countries of the World)* by Claire Throp
- ◇ *Amber* by Andrew Ross
- ◇ *The Food of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania* by Silvena Johen
- ◇ *The Edge of the World* by Michael Pye (for High School and up)