



# WELCOME TO LATVIA



*Nice place\**

## **WELCOME TO LATVIA!**

### **LATVIA - WHERE IS THAT?**

The Republic of Latvia is situated in North-eastern Europe on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. Geographically, it lies so close to Scandinavia that it also could be considered a Nordic country. Its closest neighbours are Estonia in the North, Lithuania in the South, and Russia and Belarus in the East. Sweden, Finland and Denmark are also very close. Situated at the European crossroads, Latvia has absorbed western, eastern as well as northern cultures.

### **WHAT IS IT LIKE?**

Latvia is the second largest Baltic state but one of the smallest countries in Europe. Its land area is 64.589 km<sup>2</sup> (about 25 000 sq. miles). The territory of Latvia is slightly greater than that of Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland and Costa Rica and slightly smaller than that of Ireland or Panama. In the United States, the size of Latvia can be compared to that of the state of West Virginia. The Latvian coastline with beautiful beaches is about 500 km (about 300 miles) long. The country's topography is characterised by plains, low rolling hills, shallow valleys, many small lakes, lots of forests, dramatic seascapes and a rich variety of wildlife. Woods cover 41% of the territory.

### **WHO LIVES THERE?**

Latvia has approximately 2 million inhabitants. Latvians constitute 58% of the population, Russians - 30%. Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, Lithuanians and other ethnic groups are also represented in the society.

### **WHAT LANGUAGES DO THEY SPEAK?**

The official language is Latvian. It is a member of the Baltic group of the Indo-European languages (which also includes Lithuanian) and is written in the Latin alphabet. Russian is the native language for more than 40% of the population. It is a Slavic language that uses the Cyrillic alphabet. English and German are also widely spoken as foreign languages.

### **WHAT IS THE CAPITAL OF LATVIA?**

The capital of Latvia is **Rīga**, a former hanseatic town founded in 1201. Today, it has the population of approximately 743 000 people which makes Rīga the largest Baltic capital and one of the busiest cities in the Baltic's. In spite of that, many streets of Rīga have preserved the tranquillity of the past. Visitors are always impressed by the fascinating architecture and the medieval atmosphere of the Old town (called Vecrīga by the locals). Rīga is also one of the major ports on the Baltic Sea.

### **LARGEST CITIES**

The largest cities of Latvia are Daugavpils, Liepāja, Jelgava, Jūrmala, Ventspils and Rēzekne. The city of Jūrmala stretches for many kilometres along the coast of the Gulf of Rīga. The mild climate, sea air, pine forest and wide sandy beaches make Jūrmala one of the most popular resort areas.

### **ARE THEY RELIGIOUS?**

Latvians are traditionally Lutherans or Roman Catholics. Russians are mainly Russian Orthodox or Old Believers. A large percentage of the population has no religious affiliation. On the other hand, a number of various “non-traditional” religious movements have developed in Latvia in the recent years.

### **IS IT COLD THERE?**

Owing to the influence of maritime factors, the climate of Latvia is relatively temperate but changeable. The average July temperature is +21° C (about 70F), January -15° C (about 23F). However, temperatures vary from year to year. Winters are usually windy and rainy although sometimes severe frosts occur. Warm clothes are essential in the winter.

### **WHAT KIND OF MONEY DO THEY HAVE?**

Since the 2014 our currency is Euro.



### **LATVIA - WHAT ABOUT IT'S HISTORY?**

The present-day territory of Latvia has been inhabited since 9000 B.C. During the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC the ancient Baltic tribes settled the territory. The first formations of statehood came into being at that time. In the 1200s, this independent evolution was interrupted by the feudal German aggression in the Baltics.

At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, parts of Latvian territory fell under the influence of the Polish-Lithuanian state. After the Polish-Swedish war (1600-1629) it was seized by Sweden and remained an overseas colony of Sweden for 90 years. The inclusion of Latvian territories into the Russian Empire began after the Great Northern War (1700-1721) and continued all throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The process of Latvian national consolidation took place during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The outbreak of World War I and the collapse of the Russian and German Empires made it possible for the Latvian nation to establish its own independent state - the Republic of Latvia. Although the war had devastated Latvia's economy, the country managed to carry out successful reforms during the inter-war period and developed into a state with a flourishing national culture.

In 1940 Latvia, as well as the other two Baltic states - Estonia and Lithuania - was incorporated into the USSR. This was followed by a German occupation during World War II. Many crimes against humanity were committed both during the Nazi and the Soviet occupation. After the war, the population of Latvia had decreased by 1/3. Stalin's regime was restored and Latvians had to undergo a hard period of ineffective economy and political repression.

## ***AFS LATVIA INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE***

The processes that took place in the 1980's created the necessary pre-conditions for a national reawakening, as well as for the renewal and resurrection of the Latvian state. On May 4, 1990 the name of the Republic of Latvia was revived and the Declaration on the Restoration of Latvia's independence was adopted. On September 5, 1991 the USSR Supreme Soviet officially recognized the independence of Latvia.

On September 17, 1991 Latvia regained its rightful place within the international community by becoming a full member of the United Nations.

### **THE GOVERNMENT**

The Latvian Constitution states that Latvia is a democratic parliamentary republic. The supreme legislative power is held by Saeima (parliament). The government (Cabinet of Ministers) holds the executive power. The President of Latvia has very limited power and is elected by the parliament for the term of 4 years. The current president is Raimonds Vejonis (Raimonds Vējonis). The highest judicial power is exercised by the Constitutional Court.

### **DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION**

You are coming to Latvia at a very exciting and challenging time in its history. The regained independence entails difficult processes of political and economic transition. These processes do not occur in one day. They take years, even decades. Latvia's democratic statehood is still very young - independence was achieved only about 20 years ago. The changes that have taken place since then are enormous, although a lot is still to be done. The political and economic reforms produced fundamental changes in people's minds. After fifty years of isolation from the rest of the world, the country has opened up and is searching for its identity in the new circumstances. Latvia is striving for the position it deserves within the international community - both politically and economically.

In Latvia, you will find a full spectrum of political convictions - from stagnant "Soviet-time" conservatives to modern "European-minded" liberals; from hard-line nationalists to convinced cosmopolitans. You will see major differences in the different generations' perceptions and interpretations of the past, present and future of Latvia and the world in general. You will be able to become part of the rapid changes now taking place in Latvia, reassess your own attitudes and convictions and help others reassess theirs.

### **WHAT ABOUT AFS IN LATVIA?**

## ***AFS LATVIA INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE***

AFS Latvia Intercultural Exchanges is a non-governmental, not-for-profit organization that promotes intercultural learning through worldwide exchange programs for students and families in compliance with the mission of AFS.

The first AFS exchange involving Latvia was carried out in 1990-1991 as part of the program with the USSR. Since November 1991, AFS Latvia has been operating independently. AFS Latvia is run by the volunteer Board. Four staff members work at the AFS Latvia office: the National director, three program coordinators. The office also get help from an external accountant. The office is located in Rīga and coordinates activities throughout the country.

There are 3 AFS chapters in Latvia. Each chapter has a network of volunteers made up of schoolteachers, returnees, host families, natural families and other committed individuals. They help coordinate hosting and sending, assist in organizing orientation camps, various activities, counselling and student support. All exchange students have contact persons who support them.



## **AFS PROGRAMS IN LATVIA**

### **THE YEAR PROGRAM**

The Year Program involves a 10-month stay in a Latvian or a Russian host family, studies at a local secondary school and an opportunity to learn the language and culture. During the year exchange students participate in various AFS activities: the Arrival camp (one day directly after arrival), Post arrival camp (six weeks after the arrival), the Mid-stay camp (usually in January), a number of AFS weekends throughout the year and the End-of-Stay camp before departure. Each local chapter organizes activities for exchange students and host families throughout the year. All students are also strongly encouraged to participate in various school activities as well as join sports clubs, music, dance groups, language clubs, etc.

### **THE SEMESTER PROGRAM**

AFS Latvia also offers a six-month semester program. Students arrive in late August (together with the Year Program students) and leave in January. They stay with host families and attend school. The Semester Program participants throughout the stay attend all the activities of the Year Program. A special orientation is arranged for them at the camp. At the end of the program, the End-of-Stay camp is organized for them.

### **PLACEMENTS AND FAMILIES**

Students are placed both in the cities and in rural areas. The climate, customs and traditions do not differ much in different parts of the country, apart from the differences between the city and the country life-style.

Students are placed in both Latvian and Russian families and attend schools depending on the language spoken in the family. Latvia is the home of people of various cultural backgrounds whose mentalities and temperaments can be quite different. Latvians are usually perceived to be closer to Scandinavians - rather considerate and reserved, while the Russians tend to be more informal and easy-going. However, such generalizations are often inaccurate. Besides, a great number of people in Latvia are of mixed origin and consider themselves as part of both nationalities.

Exchange students are traditionally placed in two-parent households, although one-parent households are not excluded. Families can be large as sometimes up to three generations live together. Most people in Latvia live in apartments (this is almost exclusively the case in cities). As for the countryside, placements may be expected in both apartments and private houses.

Each family has its own way of living and its own rules and values. Exchange students are expected to accept their families' lifestyle as well as help with the house chores. Families are usually very protective of the exchange students as they feel strong responsibility for them. Parents are often rather conservative (just like all over the



## **AFS LATVIA INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE**

world!) - They expect their children and exchange students to observe a curfew, which is usually around 9-10 p.m. As to meals, Latvians perceive them more as a necessity rather than a social event. Mealtimes can be different for each family member as usually both parents work. In spite of that, family members are usually very close to one another.

### **SCHOOLS IN LATVIA**

Students are placed in the upper grades of secondary schools. Although schools are subdivided into primary and secondary schools, in many schools, grades 1 through 12 are in the same building. There are schools with Latvian as well as with Russian language of general instruction. AFS exchange students are expected to attend all classes. The school year begins on September 1<sup>st</sup> and ends at the end of May. Schools are attended Monday through Friday and classes usually run from about 8:30 a.m. till about 3 p.m. The length of the classes varies from 40 to 45 minutes. There are two semesters divided by a 2-3 week Christmas vacation. There is also one week off both in October and in the spring.

## **SOME TIPS ON THE GENERALLY ACCEPTED CUSTOMS AND NORMS OF BEHAVIOUR IN LATVIA**

### **FOOD**

- ◆ The food in Latvia can be heavy, greasy, not at all spicy and usually quite simple. Be ready for lots of potatoes, meat and dairy products.
- ◆ If you are placed in rural areas, expect that the food you will get will mostly be from farms. You will get lots of potatoes, eggs, dairy products, etc. from the locals.
- ◆ In winter, fresh vegetables and fruit are rather expensive, that is why it's hard to be a vegetarian in Latvia (although it really depends on the financial situation of the particular host family).
- ◆ If you are invited to a party, expect to sit at a table, eat a variety of foods and communicate with hosts and guests for HOURS. You are expected to eat everything off your plate, so take only as much as you can handle.
- ◆ It is a custom of hospitality for people in Latvia to MAKE you eat. In some cases, some may even get offended if you do not eat their food.
- ◆ Tea is a very common drink in Latvia, herbal, black, green etc. We strongly advise to boil water before drinking, even if it is not a common procedure in your host family.



### **DRESS**

- ❖ People in Latvia dress rather formally, especially if they go to work.
- ❖ Basically, students can wear whatever they want at school (the uniform was abolished after independence was regained in 1991). However, some teachers do not like if students wear too much make-up, or just do not look presentable (of course, every teacher has his/her own understanding of what 'presentable' means). Some teachers do not like the way ripped clothing looks, but if you do wear it, they will most probably think that this is accepted to do so in the country you come from and will not object.
- ❖ It is common to dress up for concerts, formal parties and the first and last day of school.
- ❖ People always take off their shoes when entering the house -- do not be surprised if you are offered a pair of slippers.
- ❖ As it is rather cold during the winter time, we strongly advise that you bring warm clothes with you (sweaters, scarves, hats, gloves, winter boots, etc.) During spring and fall it often rains; so don't forget to bring your umbrella!

### **SOCIAL LIFE**

- ★ There are people of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds living in Latvia, but Latvians and Russians represent the two biggest communities. There are some differences between them. The Latvian mentality is usually perceived as being quite similar to that of the Scandinavians: they are reserved, and do not express their emotions openly. The Russians are seen as more open in expressing their opinions and emotions. However, such perceptions do not always hold true. Besides, there are many people of mixed origin in Latvia who possess multiple national identities.
- ★ Some schools in Latvia provide a lot of extracurricular activities for students, while others offer very few. Schools that are located in small towns usually serve as cultural centres in local communities, and often you will have an opportunity to take part in different clubs. Folk dancing and choir singing are extremely popular among Latvians. The most popular sports in Latvia are basketball and hockey. However, other sports (such as soccer, skiing, biking, yachting, sleighing) enjoy great popularity as well. Dance, music, language and crafts clubs and groups are very common and you can always join one of them.
- ★ It is not very common to get together in big groups and have big parties. Close friends usually hang out in small groups or come together at someone's house or apartment. Since the apartment space is usually quite limited and because of the accepted tradition to offer tea and some food to guests, it is inappropriate to

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bring home large groups of friends. Most families would accept if a student from another host family stays over night. However, some families feel uneasy about this, therefore these issues must be negotiated well in advance with the host parents of both families.

- ★ There is a tradition to celebrate birthdays. Among Latvians there is also a tradition to celebrate name days. You often do not get invited to the name day's party -- the tradition is that you have to visit the person who celebrates his/her name day, and give him/her flowers and a small present. You can find out when exactly a person has his or her name date by looking at calendar published in Latvia.
- ★ The most popular holidays in Latvia are Christmas, New Year's, Easter, and Līgo. Christmas celebration was forbidden during the Soviet regime, because at that time the government was against all kinds of religious celebrations. At present Christmas, as well as Easter are regaining their fame. New Year's is actually as important for people in Latvia as Christmas, and this is also connected with the fact that during the Soviet era this holiday was the only winter holiday. Līgo is a true Latvian festival, the origins of which date back to the pagan times. This is the holiday to celebrate the longest day of the year. The most popular traditions of Līgo are singing Līgo songs, picking different sorts of herbs, making wreaths, bonfires, eating cheese and drinking beer. Ancient Latvians believed that herbs, which were gathered on Midsummer Day, would conquer evil spirits and bring benediction and health to people.
- ★ You should be aware of the fact that it is common for men to open doors in front of women, to stand up and let women sit down in public transport, to help women carry their bags. Those men who observe all these rules are not considered old-fashioned; on the contrary - they are thought of as very modern, gallant and nice.
- ★ When visiting someone you have never met before, it is common to give that person flowers as a sign of respect and willingness to get to know him or her. Generally if you are invited to dinner to another host family, you should bring chocolates, cookies or think of some other sign of attention and gratitude.

## **FRIENDSHIP**

- ✧ It is common to have an extensive number of acquaintances, but a small number of friends.
- ✧ Most Latvians and Russians consider having a close friend something very important and the relationships between close friends are usually very warm.
- ✧ You should be aware of the fact that sometimes it can be difficult for an AFSer to make friends at school quickly -- often students are a bit shy and hesitant to approach a newcomer. Don't worry, after some time you will make friends - just keep in mind that you yourself have to approach students at school and start a conversation.

### **MALE/FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILY**

- ♥ In Latvian and Russian families women usually do most of the housework. Those men who prepare meals, do the laundry, etc., are rare and are looked upon positively.
- ♥ Most host fathers automatically assume that women are supposed to keep the house and are very surprised if an exchange student (a young man) washes the dishes and takes other responsibilities of keeping the house. It does not, however, mean that you should discontinue helping with housework. Moreover, most host families will expect you to help them with the housework. Hosted students are strongly encouraged to clean their rooms regularly and to keep them in order -- this is a must.
- ♥ It is common to date. Usually a boy invites a girl to a date. The boy also often offers to pay for the food/movie tickets etc.

### **CONCEPT OF TIME**

- 🕒 The conception of time varies from person to person, but generally it is considered that people in Latvia are rather punctual and expect the same from others. If a student realizes that he or she will return home later than originally expected, it is recommended to call and inform the host family, as families tend to worry about the safety of their children. If you have made an appointment with a doctor, you **must** arrive at the exact time.

### **INDEPENDENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY**

- ◆ Latvian and Russian teenagers are financially dependent upon their parents. At home teenagers are expected to study in order to improve their chances of getting into a good university and finding a good job in the future; they are also expected to help with light housework, keep their rooms clean, and obey their parents. Teenagers are expected to inform their parents of their plans.

### **SOME NOTIONS OF MODESTY AND GOOD MANNERS**

- At the beach both bikinis and one-piece bathing suits are common. It is not common to sunbathe topless on the beach. However, there are a few designated nude beaches as well.
- People in Latvia do not speak loudly in public. It is considered rude to shout or whistle in public. This applies to restaurants, cafes, public transport and other public places.

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### **TOUCH**

- ✳ It is not very common to touch a friend while carrying on a conversation, although some people do it.
- ✳ Men usually shake hands when they greet each other. Women just say 'hi' or hug each other if they are close friends. Relatives and close friends often kiss each other on the cheek.
- ✳ It is accepted for two girls who are friends to walk hand in hand in public.

### **SPACE**

- ✳ While having a conversation, most people will stand about a metre away from each other. This also depends on the situation and space you are in.
- ✳ Most of the "space problems" are encountered in packed public buses, etc. during the rush hours. In such situations most people simply endure the journey and politely apologize to one another when they have to get off.

### **RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS**

- ✚ During the Soviet era, religious ceremonies and holidays were forbidden and atheism was enforced by the state. Some people celebrated Christmas secretly. Nowadays most young people do not consider themselves religious. Easter and Christmas celebrations tend to focus more on folk traditions and pagan religions than Christianity.

## **MORE ON THE SCHOOL SYSTEM IN LATVIA**

### **GENERAL INFORMATION**

In Latvia children start school at the age of 6 or 7.

General education has 3 stages:

- Primary school: 4 years up to the age of 10-11
- Secondary school: 5 years up to the age of 15-16
- High school: 3 years up to the age of 18-19.

However, in many cases, schools are divided into buildings for grades 1-6 and 7-12.

Pre-school education is not compulsory. Compulsory schooling in Latvia lasts up to the age of 15 until the student finishes primary school (grade 9). Those who graduate from primary school and do not wish to continue with secondary education usually plan to enter a vocational school to receive training in some handicraft.

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Most students continue their secondary school education and graduate with a diploma after 12 years of studies. After graduating from high school they can enrol in universities or get a profession at higher vocational schools after completing a one or a two-year course.

Education in Latvia is free of charge at state schools. A few private educational institutions have their tuition fees, which should be paid by students' parents. In Latvia we have schools with Latvian as well as Russian languages of instruction.

### **GYMNASIUMS, COLLEGES, LYCEUMS**

There is a tendency of reforming former secondary schools to improve the quality of education. As schools have a right to choose a special profile, they often do so by developing the content of their courses. A characteristic feature of some gymnasiums is that they set agreements according to which university professors deliver lectures as visiting teachers at those gymnasiums. This contributes positively to the quality of education at a certain gymnasium or a school. AFS students in Latvia study at high schools, lyceums, colleges and gymnasiums, but generally speaking there aren't any major differences between these institutions. Their names can be different, but the content is more or less the same -- all of them are "HIGH SCHOOLS". However, the more prestigious schools require students to pass an exam to enter the institution. Although schools are assigned by where the student lives, they aren't "tied" to that institution; they can still attend a different school if they are able to pass the exam to be accepted.

### **SYSTEM OF GRADING**

- |    |   |
|----|---|
| 10 | unusually independent and excellent performance |
| 9  | excellent and independent performance           |
| 8  | very good performance                           |
| 7  | good performance                                |
| 6  | rather good performance                         |
| 5  | satisfactory performance                        |
| 4  | poor performance                                |

Grades below 4 mean that a student has not passed.

### **AFS STUDENTS AT A LATVIAN SCHOOL**

Most Latvian students do not receive any credit for their year abroad. In spite of this, they generally have no difficulty readjusting and going on with their studies after coming back. This is usually also the case with those students who spend an AFS year in Latvia and then go back to their home countries.

Going to school is an AFS Latvia rule. You will get a certificate with grades, but getting a diploma is not guaranteed.

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**<https://www.facebook.com/afslatvia>**

*For more information on history, geography, sights, language, government, educational system, entertainment, etc. please refer to the following web pages:*

**<http://www.mfa.gov.lv> (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Web page)**

**<http://www.latvia.eu/>**

**<http://www.latnet.lv/>**

**<http://www.lanet.lv/> (Latvian Academic Network)**

**<http://www.lanet.lv/links/ewww.html> (WWW servers in Latvia - links to almost everything Latvian on the web)**

**<http://www.EUnet.lv/VT/>**

**<http://www.inyourpocket.com>**

**<http://www.codefusion.com/latvianasp/latonline.asp> (Latvian language learning online)**

**<https://www.facebook.com/IfYouLikeLatviaLatviaLikesYou?fref=ts>**

**We are looking forward to seeing you in Latvia!  
We wish you good luck and a happy stay in our country!**

**Laipni lūdzam!**

## WHAT IS LATVIA?

By Suzanne McGrew

An exchange student from the USA, '94-95

*What is Latvia? To those who've never been, it may be not much more than a name. It may be one of the newly independent Baltic States, a population of 2.5 million, a newly formed democratic-capitalist economy. It may be 33% Russians. It may be on the Baltic Sea, even with the capital called "Rīga" to those who have never been.*

*We've been, for almost 11 months, and to us, Latvia is so much more. Rich green summers, crisp orange autumns, pure white winters, and quiet colourful springs. Old women pushing their hands in our faces for a few santimes on the street because the government pays them only enough to buy weekly bread. A country full of people who - after a while - open their hearts, though it does take a while to crack through their icy faces. Amber. Eternal sandy coasts. Tall birch forests. Thick moss covered pine forests. Paddocks with no fences. Big cars with alarms. Little rusty Ladas with alarms. Old Rīga, with its incredible architecture and open booming green square. Many nationalities - Germans, Poles, Russians, Ukrainians.... Homemade remedies, involving garlic and vodka. Cows in backyards. Tiny kept vegetable gardens covering acres on the outskirts of cities. Monstrous anonymous apartment blocks lurking in cities and towns. The trolley buses rumbling across the cobblestones. Forget-me-nots, lilacs and other flowers for every occasion. Trams clanging their bells for cars or small children to get out of the way. Digging potatoes in the soft summer dirt. Traditions and superstitions passed through the years. Wild parties. Quiet parties. Mushroom picking in the woods. Being force fed at every meal by eager families. People sweeping the streets at 5:00 a.m. - first with twig brooms, then shovels, then ice picks. The platinum blonde hair and dark visible roots of Russian women in red lipstick, high heels and tight skirts. Adidas trainer pants. Basketball fanatic boys. Markets full of pushy people, cigarette peddlers and the best deal on sheep heads. Young people sitting in the summer shade, always drinking and smoking. Sunsets that last forever, and sunrises that wake you up far too early. Street sellers and beggars. National songs. Waiting. Silence. An occasional fear. Loneliness. The sun shining after ten days of a grey winter, bringing back your hibernating smile.*

*For everyone this year, Latvia has been something different. One thing we can all agree, however, is that it is a country rich in culture, blistered by sad memories, strong in its struggle, and complete with good memories for us and friends we can never ever forget.*