



Latvia

The middle of the three Baltic states: pine forests and empty white beaches, Riga's Art Nouveau streets, medieval castles and a nation that sings.

AT A GLANCE

Facts to know

CAPITAL

Riga

POPULATION

About 1.8 million

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

Latvian

CURRENCY

Euro, since 1 January 2014

AREA

About 64,600 km²

GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary republic

HIGHEST POINT

Gaizikalns, about 312 m, a hill in the Vidzeme Upland

LONGEST RIVER IN LATVIA

The Gauja, about 450 km, which starts and ends in Latvia. The Daugava is longer overall, but only about 350 km of it is in Latvia

NEIGHBOURS

Estonia, Lithuania, Russia and Belarus by land. Across the Baltic Sea it shares a sea border with Sweden

DRIVES ON THE

Right

CALLING CODE

+371

A 45-minute trip to Latvia

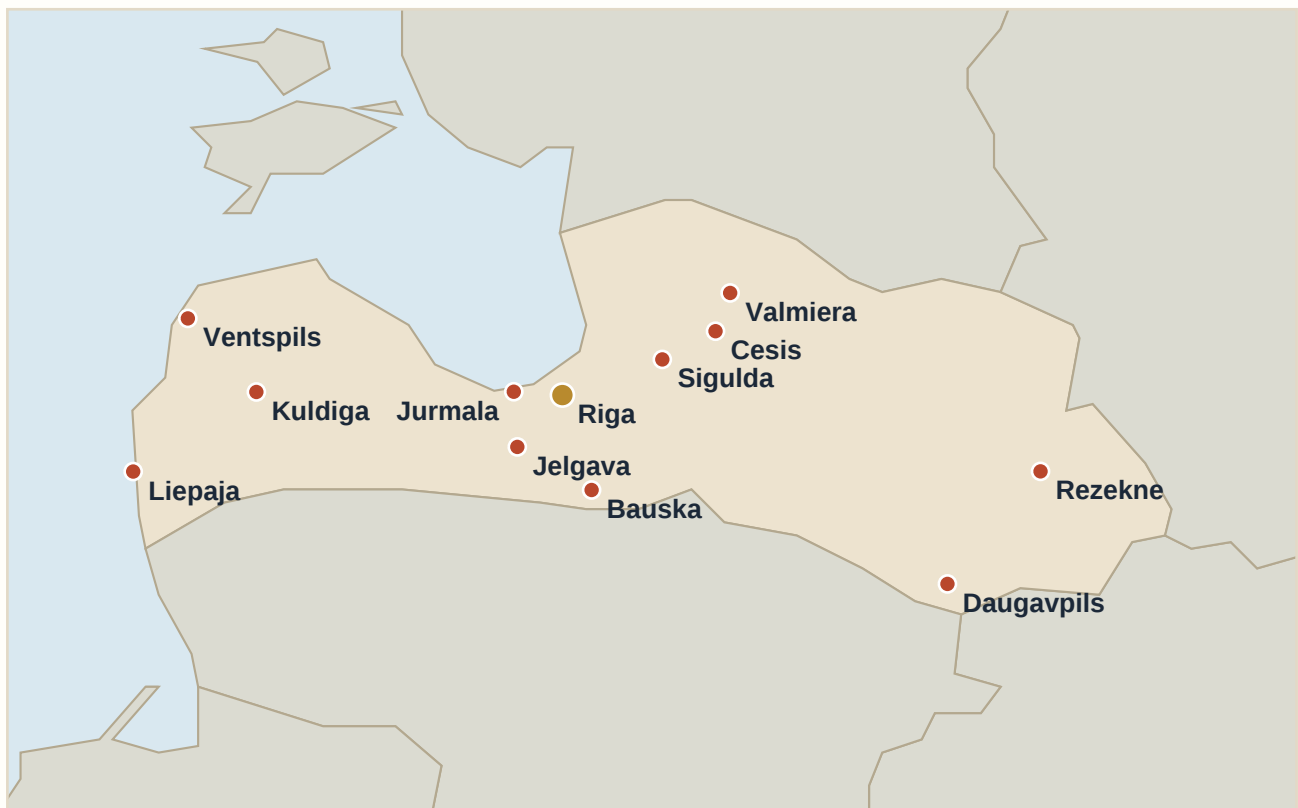
Everything you need is in this pack. No preparation beyond printing. Adapt the timing to your group.

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| 0 to 5 min | Welcome. Show the map page and find Latvia together. Ask: who has been there, or knows someone from there? |
| 5 to 15 min | Read the facts at a glance, then three moments from the story:
3000 BC: The first Balts arrive; 1918: Latvia declares independence; 2014: The euro arrives. |
| 15 to 25 min | At the table: talk about Grey peas with bacon and Dark rye bread. Idea: bring a small taste (bread, cheese, fruit, tea) if your kitchen can help. |
| 25 to 30 min | Say it like a local: practise "Labrit" (Good morning), "Labdien" (Good day, hello), "Labvakar" (Good evening). Everyone says them together. |
| 30 to 40 min | Quiz: read the questions aloud, or play the big-screen version at https://preview.worldstroll.com/countries/latvia/group . No scores needed. |
| 40 to 45 min | Talk about it (questions page), then stamp or sign everyone's passport page. |

You will need

- This printed pack (one per table, or one each)
- Pens for the quiz
- Optional: a world map or globe, a small tasting, music from the country

Latvia and its cities



- Riga (Riga): Its Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, At least 800 Art Nouveau buildings, The Central Market in old Zeppelin hangars
- Daugavpils (Latgale): The Daugavpils Fortress, built from 1810 to 1878, A mainly Russian-speaking population, Trips to Aglona Basilica nearby
- Liepaja (Kurzeme (Courland)): A wide sandy beach, Karosta, a former naval town and military prison, European Capital of Culture in 2027
- Jelgava (Zemgale (Semigallia)): Jelgava Palace, designed by Bartolomeo Rastrelli, The Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies, A major railway junction
- Jurmala (Riga region): A 33 km white sand beach, Wooden summer houses in Art Nouveau style, Spas and summer concerts
- Ventspils (Kurzeme (Courland)): The medieval Ventspils Castle, An ice-free port, Painted cow sculptures around town
- Rezekne (Latgale): Being 'the heart of Latgale', The ruins of Rezekne Castle, Latgalian language and culture
- Valmiera (Vidzeme): The Gauja river, Its Hanseatic past, The largest share of ethnic Latvians among the state cities
- Cesis (Vidzeme): Cesis Castle, St. John's Church and old town walls, The Cesis Art Festival
- Sigulda (Vidzeme): Turaida Castle across the river, Autumn colours in Gauja National Park,

Bobsleigh and luge in winter

- Kuldīga (Kurzeme (Courland)): The Venta Rapid, a very wide waterfall, A 164 m old brick bridge from 1874, Its UNESCO-listed old town
- Bauska (Zemgale (Semigallia)): Bauska Castle, Rundale Palace nearby, The road between Riga and Lithuania

A short history of Latvia

Latvia's story runs from amber traders and Baltic tribes, through German crusaders, the Hanseatic port of Riga and a duchy with colonies overseas, to independence in 1918, fifty years of occupation and a peaceful return to freedom in 1991.

3000 BC **The first Balts arrive**

Around 3000 BC the ancestors of the Latvians settled on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. Later they traded local amber with Rome and Byzantium for precious metals.

1201 **Bishop Albert founds Riga**

German crusaders led by Bishop Albert made a trading place at the mouth of the Daugava river the seat of his power. Riga became the base for the conquest of the lands that became known as Livonia.

1282 **Riga joins the Hanseatic League**

Riga became a member of the Hanseatic League, the great trading network of northern German towns, and later Cesis, Valmiera and other Latvian towns joined too. Riga grew rich from east to west trade.

1561 **The Duchy of Courland is born**

During the Livonian War the Livonian Order was dissolved. Its last master, Gotthard Kettler, became Duke of Courland and Semigallia in western Latvia, under the protection of Poland and Lithuania.

1621 **Sweden takes Riga**

In a war between Poland and Sweden, Riga and much of northern Latvia came under Swedish rule. Riga became one of the largest cities in the Swedish Empire, and the Swedish period is remembered for schools for peasants.

1651 **Courland's colonies overseas**

Under Duke Jacob Kettler, Courland built a large merchant fleet in Ventspils and Liepāja. In 1651 it set up a colony on an island in the Gambia River in Africa, and it also held land on the Caribbean island of Tobago.

- 1710** **Russia takes Riga**
During the Great Northern War, Russian troops took Riga, and plague killed about half of the city's people. By 1795 all of today's Latvia was part of the Russian Empire.
- 1873** **The first Song Festival**
About 1,000 singers gathered in Riga for the first All-Latvian Song Festival, during a time of national awakening. The festival is still held, normally every five years.
- 1918** **Latvia declares independence**
On 18 November 1918, just after the end of the First World War, the People's Council proclaimed the independent Republic of Latvia in Riga.
- 1920** **Peace with Soviet Russia**
After two years of fighting against Soviet and German forces in the War of Independence, Latvia signed a peace treaty with Soviet Russia on 11 August 1920, which recognised its independence.
- 1940** **Soviet occupation**
In June 1940 the Soviet Union occupied Latvia, and in August it made it a Soviet republic. Nazi Germany occupied the country from 1941, and the Soviets returned in 1944. Tens of thousands of people were deported to Siberia or killed, and under Nazi rule tens of thousands of Latvia's Jews were murdered in the Holocaust.
- 1989** **The Baltic Way**
On 23 August 1989 about two million people joined hands in a human chain about 675 km long through Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, to call for freedom from Soviet rule.
- 1990** **The declaration of 4 May**
On 4 May 1990 Latvia's newly elected parliament, the Supreme Council, adopted a declaration on the restoration of independence. In January 1991 people built barricades in Riga to protect key buildings from Soviet forces.
- 1991** **Independence restored**
On 21 August 1991, as a coup attempt in Moscow failed, Latvia restored its full independence. Russian troops withdrew in 1994, apart from a radar station at Skrunda that closed in 1998.

2004

Latvia joins the EU and NATO

In 2004 Latvia reached two of its main goals of the 1990s, joining both NATO and the European Union. It joined the Schengen area at the end of 2007.

2014

The euro arrives

On 1 January 2014 the euro replaced the lats, the Latvian currency first used between the two world wars and brought back in 1993. The same year Riga was a European Capital of Culture.

What people eat in Latvia

Latvian food grew out of farm life in a cool northern climate: dark rye bread, potatoes, peas, cabbage, pork, dairy and, on the coast, smoked fish. Dill is the favourite herb and caraway the favourite spice. Breakfast is usually light, and lunch, eaten between noon and three, is the main meal of the day, sometimes with a soup to start and a dessert to finish. Many dishes follow the seasons, from birch sap in spring to caraway cheese at Midsummer and grey peas at Christmas.

Grey peas with bacon (pelekie ziri ar spei)

All of Latvia

Large grey peas, boiled until soft but still whole, then tossed with fried bacon and onion. They are served warm as a hearty dish or a snack, often with a glass of kefir or beer.

Dark rye bread (rupjmaize)

All of Latvia

A dense, dark bread made from coarse rye flour with malt and caraway seeds, traditionally baked in a wood-fired oven. It has been the everyday staple of Latvian meals for centuries.

Layered rye bread dessert (rupjmaizes kartojums)

All of Latvia

A dessert like a trifle, made in a glass bowl from layers of toasted rye bread crumbs with cinnamon and sugar, berry jam and whipped cream.

Sklandrausis (sklandrausis)

Kurzeme (Courland), from Livonian tradition

A small, open, round rye pie filled with a layer of mashed potato topped with a thicker layer of sweet mashed carrot, flavoured with caraway. It is eaten with milk and honey.

Bacon rolls (sperauši)

All of Latvia

Small crescent-shaped buns of soft yeast dough filled with finely chopped fatty bacon and onion. They take a long time to make, so families bake them in large batches for holidays.

Jai cheese (Jau siers)

All of Latvia, for Midsummer

A round, fresh, mild cheese made from curds of soured and fresh milk, cooked with eggs, butter and caraway seeds, then pressed. It is sliced and eaten at the Midsummer

festival.

Cold beetroot soup (auksta zupa)

Eaten across the Baltic region and Latvia in summer

A bright pink soup served cold in spring and summer, made from kefir or soured milk with boiled beetroot, cucumber, radish, hard-boiled egg and plenty of fresh dill.

Potato pancakes (kartupeu pankukas)

All of Latvia

Crisp, golden pancakes of grated raw potato fried in oil, a favourite across northern and eastern Europe. In Latvia they are often served with smoked salmon and sour cream.

Curd snack (biezpiena sieriš)

All of Latvia

A small bar of sweetened curd cheese, sometimes filled with jam and usually coated in a chocolate glaze. Curd snacks became hugely popular in Soviet times and are still loved across the Baltic states.

Riga Black Balsam (Rigas Melnais balzams)

Riga

A strong, dark herbal liqueur made with 17 botanicals, from birch buds to oak bark, blended with honey and sold in a clay bottle. There are also versions with blackcurrant and cherry. It is often called Latvia's national drink.

Birch sap (berzu sula)

The Latvian countryside, in spring

The clear, slightly sweet sap tapped from birch trees, a very popular drink in spring. It is drunk fresh or kept with raisins, lemon peel and blackcurrant twigs, and sold at markets and roadside stalls.

Kvass (kvass)

Drunk across eastern Europe, popular in Latvia

A lightly fizzy, brown soft drink traditionally brewed from fermented rye or black bread. In Soviet times it was sold on the street from big tanks on wheels.

GOOD MANNERS

At the table

- Before eating, people wish each other 'Labu apetiti' (enjoy your meal).
- When glasses are raised, people say 'Prieka!' (cheers).
- Lunch is traditionally the main meal of the day, and it often starts with a soup.

- Kefir or soured milk is commonly drunk with hot meals, not just at breakfast.
- A classic simple lunch is boiled potatoes with lightly salted herring, cottage cheese, spring onions and sour cream.
- At Jai, the Midsummer festival on 23 and 24 June, people leave the city to eat, drink and sing through the night in the countryside.

Grey peas with bacon

Large grey peas, boiled until soft but still whole, then tossed with fried bacon and onion. They are served warm as a hearty dish or a snack, often with a glass of kefir or beer.

Ingredients

- 500 g dried grey peas (or brown marrowfat peas), soaked overnight
- 150 g smoked streaky bacon, cut in small cubes
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- Salt to taste
- Kefir or buttermilk to serve (optional)

Method

1. Soak the peas in plenty of cold water overnight. Drain and rinse.
2. Cover the peas with fresh water, bring to the boil and simmer gently for about 1 hour, until soft. Do not overcook them, so that they keep their skins.
3. Meanwhile, fry the bacon in a dry pan until it gives up its fat and turns crisp. Add the onion and cook until soft and golden.
4. Drain the peas, add them to the pan with the bacon and onion, season with salt and stir well.
5. Serve warm, with a glass of cold kefir or buttermilk on the side.

Layered rye bread dessert

A dessert like a trifle, made in a glass bowl from layers of toasted rye bread crumbs with cinnamon and sugar, berry jam and whipped cream.

Ingredients

- 200 g dark rye bread (without seeds), dried or a day old
- 2 tablespoons sugar and 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 20 g butter
- 300 ml whipping cream with 1 tablespoon sugar and a little vanilla
- 6 tablespoons blackcurrant or lingonberry jam
- Fresh berries and a little grated dark chocolate to decorate

Method

1. Grate the rye bread into fine crumbs. Melt the butter in a pan, add the crumbs, sugar and cinnamon and toast them for 5 minutes, stirring, until crisp. Leave to cool.
2. Whip the cream with the sugar and vanilla until it holds soft peaks.
3. In 4 glasses or one glass bowl, make layers: a spoonful of jam, then whipped cream, then rye crumbs. Repeat until the glasses are full, ending with cream and a sprinkle of crumbs.
4. Chill for at least 2 hours so that the crumbs soften and the flavours come together.
5. Decorate with fresh berries and grated chocolate just before serving.

Cold beetroot soup

A bright pink soup served cold in spring and summer, made from kefir or soured milk with boiled beetroot, cucumber, radish, hard-boiled egg and plenty of fresh dill.

Ingredients

- 3 medium beetroots, boiled, peeled and cooled (or ready-cooked beetroot)
- 1 litre kefir or buttermilk, well chilled
- 1 cucumber and 4 radishes
- 3 hard-boiled eggs
- A small bunch of dill and a few spring onions
- Salt, a pinch of sugar and a squeeze of lemon juice
- Sour cream and boiled or fried potatoes to serve

Method

1. Grate the beetroot coarsely or cut it into thin strips. Dice the cucumber and slice the radishes thinly.
2. Finely chop the dill and spring onions. Chop two of the eggs.
3. Put the vegetables, herbs and chopped eggs in a large bowl and pour over the cold kefir. Stir until the soup turns pink.
4. Season with salt, a pinch of sugar and lemon juice. If it is too thick, add a little cold water. Chill for 30 minutes.
5. Serve in bowls with a slice of the last egg and a spoon of sour cream, with warm potatoes on the side.

Potato pancakes

Crisp, golden pancakes of grated raw potato fried in oil, a favourite across northern and eastern Europe. In Latvia they are often served with smoked salmon and sour cream.

Ingredients

- 1 kg floury potatoes, peeled
- 1 onion
- 2 eggs
- 3 tablespoons plain flour
- 1 teaspoon salt and a little black pepper
- Sunflower oil for frying
- Sour cream and smoked salmon to serve

Method

1. Grate the potatoes and the onion finely. Put them in a clean tea towel and squeeze out as much liquid as you can.
2. Mix the potato and onion with the eggs, flour, salt and pepper.
3. Heat a thin layer of oil in a large frying pan over medium heat. Put in large spoonfuls of the mixture and flatten them to about 1 cm.
4. Fry for about 4 minutes on each side, until deep golden and cooked through. Take care with the hot oil.
5. Drain on kitchen paper and serve hot with sour cream and slices of smoked salmon.

Useful phrases

Labrit

lahb-REET · Good morning

Labdien

lahb-DYEN · Good day, hello

Labvakar

lahb-VAH-kahr · Good evening

Ar labu nakti

ahr LAH-boo NAHK-tee · Good night

Uz redzešanas

ooz RED-zeh-shah-nwawss · Goodbye

Ka jums klajas?

KAH yooms KLAH-yahs · How are you? (polite)

Labi, paldies

LAH-bee, PAHL-dyess · Fine, thank you

Prieks iepazīties

PRYEKS EE-ah-pah-zee-tyess · Nice to meet you

Atvainojiet

AHT-vy-naw-yet · Excuse me

Vai jus runajat angliski?

vy YOOS ROO-nah-yaht AHN-gee-skee · Do you speak English?

Es nesaprotu

ess NEH-sah-praw-too · I don't understand

Cik tas maksa?

TSIK tahs MAHK-sah · How much is this?

Kur ir tualete?

KOOR eer TWAH-leh-teh · Where is the toilet?

Kur ir bankomats?

KOOR eer BAHN-kaw-mahts · Where is a cash machine?

Labu apetiti

LAH-boo AH-peh-tee-tee · Enjoy your meal

Prieka!

PRYEH-kah · Cheers!

Tas bija oti garšigi

tahs BEE-yah LYAW-tee GAHR-shee-gee · It was very delicious

Reinu, ludzu

REH-tyee-noo, LOO-dzoo · The bill, please

Things you might not know

1. Riga's House of the Blackheads is linked to one of the earliest recorded Christmas trees: the Brotherhood of Blackheads put up a holiday tree there in 1510. Tallinn in Estonia has similar records from 1441.
2. Jacob Davis, the tailor credited with inventing riveted blue jeans, was born in Riga in 1831. He later went into business with Levi Strauss in San Francisco.
3. The tiny Minox spy camera was invented by Walter Zapp, who was born in Riga, and it was first made in Riga by the VEF factory in 1938.
4. In the 1600s the small Duchy of Courland, now part of western Latvia, had colonies in Africa, on the Gambia River, and in the Caribbean, on the island of Tobago.
5. Collectors have written down more than 1.2 million texts of Latvian folk songs, called dainas. Most are just four short lines long.
6. The Latvian Song and Dance Festival brings tens of thousands of amateur singers and dancers to Riga. Together with the song festivals of Estonia and Lithuania, it has been on UNESCO's list of intangible heritage since 2008.
7. Riga's Academy of Sciences, a 108-metre Soviet-style tower finished in 1961, is nicknamed 'Stalin's birthday cake'. It was the first skyscraper in Latvia.
8. In spring, salmon at the Venta Rapid in Kuldīga leap up the waterfall, so Kuldīga was once called the town where they catch salmon in the air.
9. Latvia's highest point, Gaizikālns, is only about 312 metres high. A tower was once built on it to beat Estonia's highest hill, Suur Munamägi, at 318 metres, but it was never finished and was pulled down in 2012.
10. Livonian, a language related to Estonian and Finnish, was once spoken on Latvia's coast. Grizelda Kristiā, long called its last native speaker, died in 2013. Today a few families and students are bringing it back.
11. Latvia won the very first European basketball championship, EuroBasket, in 1935.
12. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, President of Latvia from 1999 to 2007, was the first

woman to be head of state in any country of the former Soviet bloc.

- 13.** In Latvian, foreign names are spelled the way they sound in Latvian, so newspapers change the spelling of names from other languages to fit Latvian sounds and endings.

TALK ABOUT IT

Questions for the group

- Have you ever been to Latvia, or has someone in your family? What do you remember?
- Have you ever tasted Grey peas with bacon or Dark rye bread? What is a dish you remember from a trip?
- The declaration of 4 May (1990). Do you remember hearing about it? Where were you then?
- Independence restored (1991). Do you remember hearing about it? Where were you then?
- Have you seen The Historic Centre of Riga, in person or in pictures? Which famous place would you most like to see?
- If you could spend one day in any city of Latvia, which would it be and why?

QUIZ

How well do you know Latvia?

Circle the right answer. The answers are on the last page.

1. What does the figure of Liberty on top of Riga's Freedom Monument hold up?

- A) A torch
- B) Three gilded stars
- C) An oak wreath
- D) A sword

2. Latvia won the very first EuroBasket, the European basketball championship, in 1935.

- A) True
- B) False

3. On which days does Latvia celebrate Jai, the Midsummer festival?

- A) 1 and 2 May
- B) 18 and 19 November
- C) 23 and 24 June
- D) 24 and 25 December

4. Which Riga building is nicknamed "Stalin's birthday cake"?

- A) The House of the Blackheads
- B) Riga Cathedral
- C) The Central Market
- D) The Academy of Sciences

5. Riga's House of the Blackheads is linked to an early record of which tradition, from 1510?

- A) Easter eggs
- B) A New Year firework display
- C) Advent candles
- D) A holiday Christmas tree

6. In Latvian, "ne" means yes.

- A) True
- B) False

7. Latvia adopted the euro as its currency on 1 January 2014.

- A) True
- B) False

8. Jacob Davis, born in Riga in 1831, is credited with inventing what?

- A) Riveted blue jeans
- B) The sewing machine
- C) The safety pin
- D) The zip fastener

9. Jurmala, whose name means "seaside", is a beach resort town near Riga.

- A) True
- B) False

10. As of September 2026, Cesis Castle is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

- A) True
- B) False

11. On what date in 1918 was the independent Republic of Latvia proclaimed?

- A) 4 May
- B) 24 June
- C) 21 August
- D) 18 November

12. What are Latvian dainas?

- A) Folk dances
- B) Short folk songs
- C) Midsummer wreaths
- D) Wooden boats

Quiz answers

1. B) Three gilded stars

Three gilded stars. The copper figure is affectionately known as Milda.

2. True

True. Latvia won the first EuroBasket in 1935 and took silver in 1939.

3. C) 23 and 24 June

23 and 24 June are public holidays, when many Latvians leave the cities to sing and light bonfires in the countryside.

4. D) The Academy of Sciences

The Academy of Sciences, a 108-metre Soviet-style tower finished in 1961 and the first skyscraper in Latvia.

5. D) A holiday Christmas tree

A holiday Christmas tree, put up by the Brotherhood of Blackheads. Tallinn has similar records from 1441.

6. False

False. "Ne" means no, and "ja" means yes.

7. True

True. The euro replaced the Latvian lats on 1 January 2014.

8. A) Riveted blue jeans

Riveted blue jeans. Davis later went into business with Levi Strauss in San Francisco.

9. True

True. Jurmala lies about 25 km west of Riga and has a 33 km white sand beach.

10. False

False. As of September 2026 Latvia's World Heritage Sites are the Historic Centre of Riga, the Old Town of Kuldiga and points of the Struve Geodetic Arc.

11. D) 18 November

18 November 1918: the People's Council proclaimed independence in Riga, just after the First World War ended.

12. B) Short folk songs

Short folk songs, usually just four lines. More than 1.2 million texts have been collected.

Latvia visa page

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