

*The Baltic*

# GUIDE

LATVIA IN ENGLISH

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DECEMBER 2008/  
JANUARY 2009

**Latvia rocked**  
by bank's demise

**Armenian heaven**  
in the middle of Riga

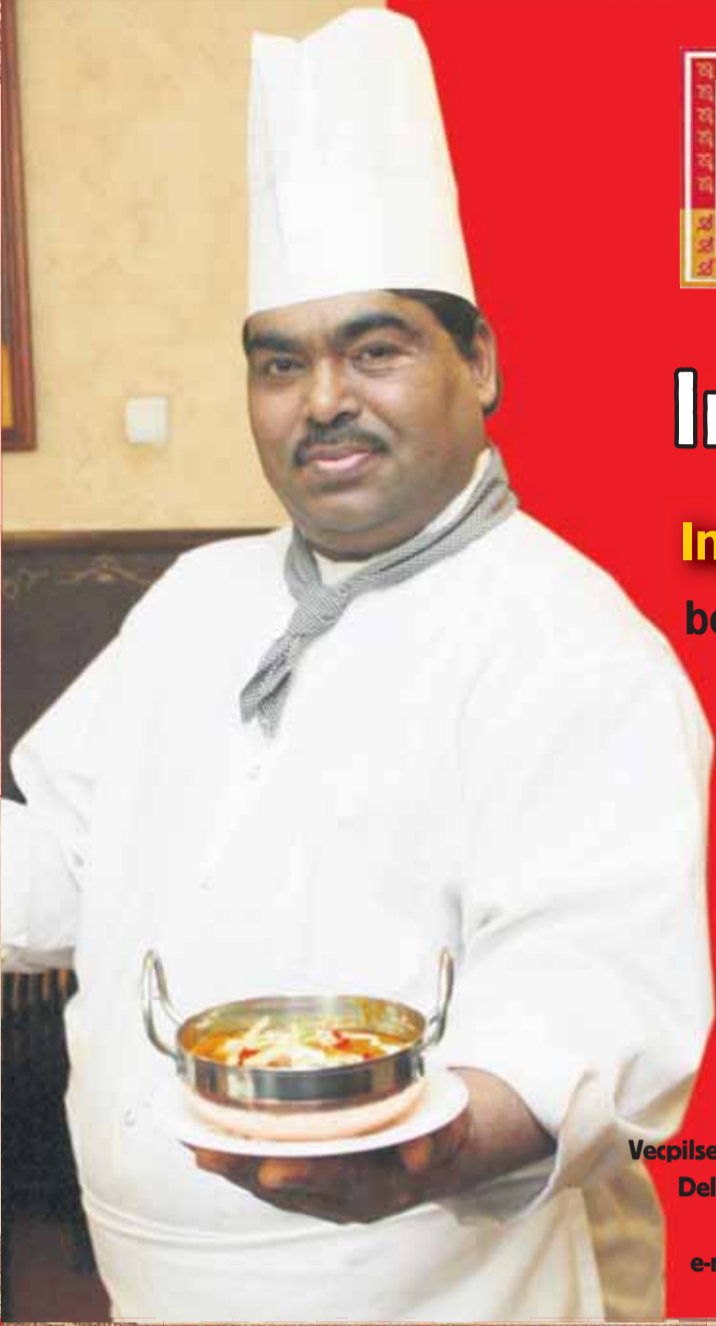

**What awaits**  
**Latvia in 2009?**

THE CRI-TICK

## RIGA'S TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

A guide to what to do and where to go for Christmas and New Year


accommodation / dining & drinks / culture / entertainment / shopping / current affairs / maps


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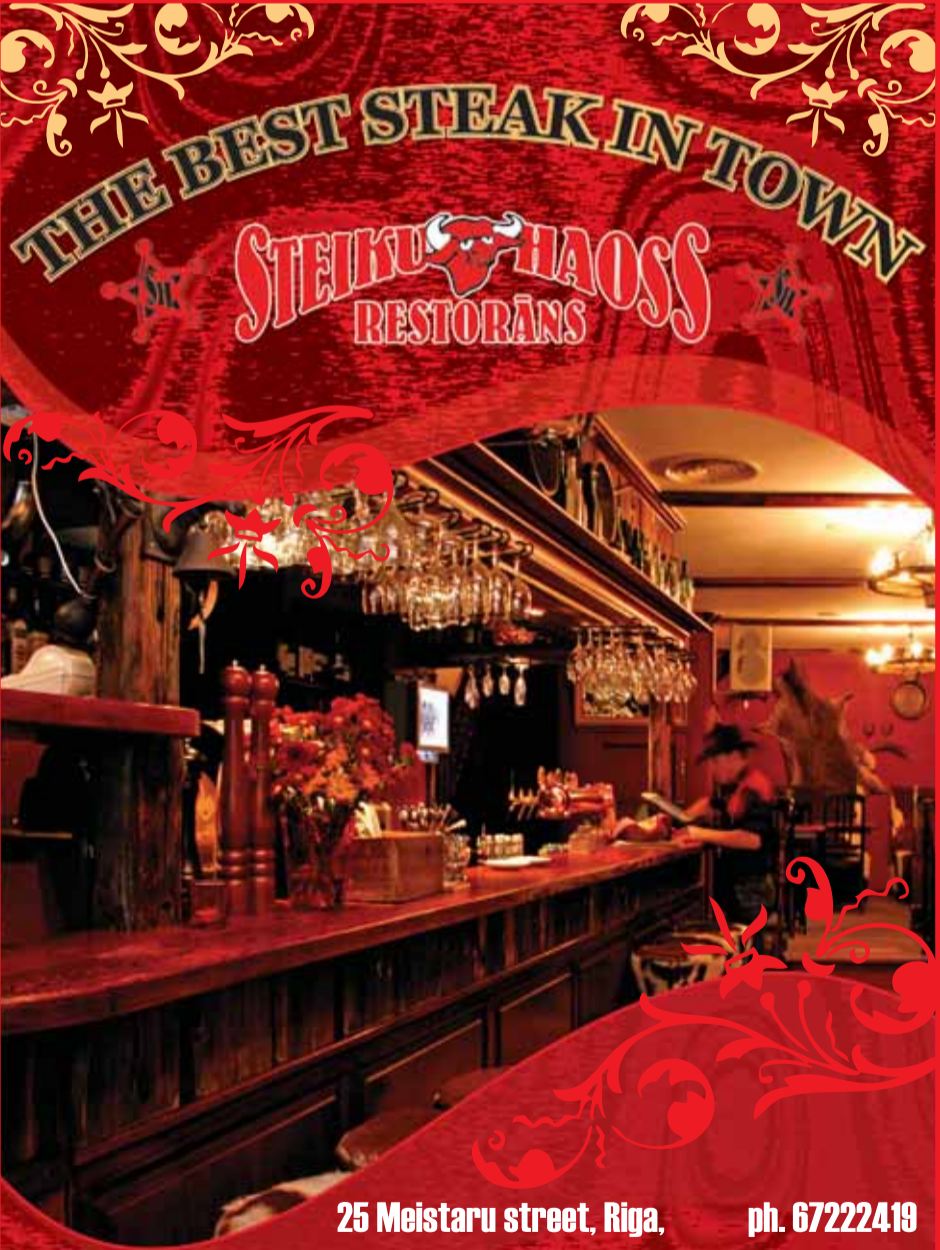
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# Time to relax... and then adapt

**editorial** These are tough times in Latvia and around the world. Money is too tight to mention for many individuals and businesses. The truth is that if you want to survive in the midst of a recession then you need to adapt, and adapt quickly. Here at The Baltic Guide Latvia we are not immune to this situation. We want Latvia's only free truly independent paper to survive this economic storm and so we have decided to trim our operation and produce a bi-monthly rather than a monthly paper during the forthcoming winter months. This issue, therefore, will be available throughout December and January. All being well, by the time we reach the spring, we shall return to our regular monthly slot.

I must apologise to any visitor reading the text above, which you will possibly find a little irrelevant. You are here, after all, to enjoy the festive season or

have decided to visit Latvia in January when flight and hotel prices are lower. December is a fantastic time to visit Latvia with its atmospheric Christmas markets and high class festive concerts, while snowy



January has a warm, cosy feel to it, quite unlike any other time of the year. I'm sure you will have a wonderful time here.

I wish everybody reading this paper a very Merry Christmas and every happiness in 2009!

Justin Walley, Editor-in-Chief

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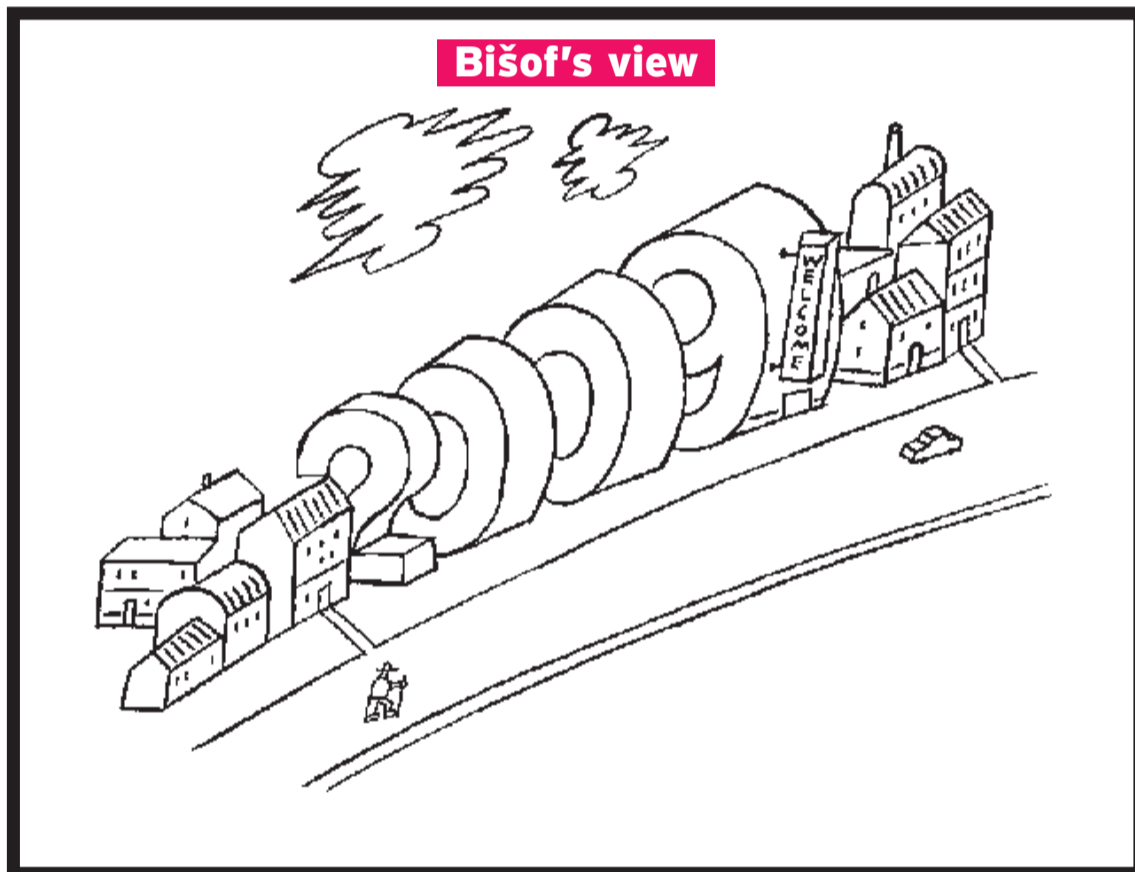


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DECEMBER 2008 / JANUARY 2009

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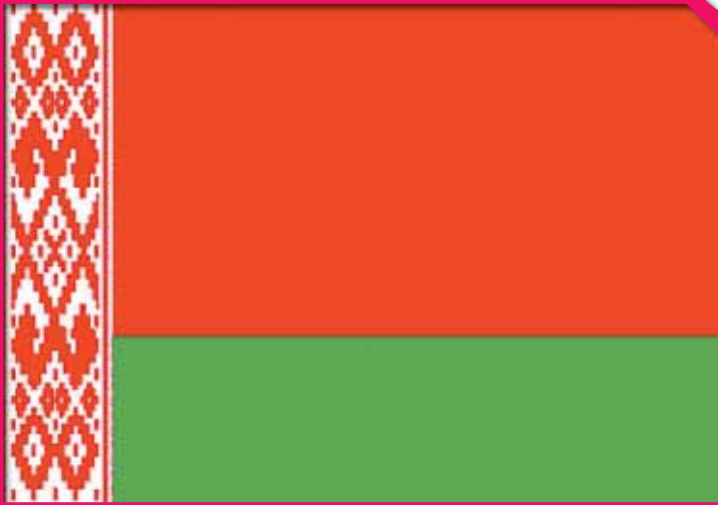
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# Hot topics

STORIES BY MIKE COLLIER, PHOTOS BY JUSTIN WALLEY

## PRESIDENT THINGY DOES US PROUD

We're big fans of President "doc" Zatlers here at The Baltic Guide, so we were on the verge of requiring medical treatment at a recent NATO conference held in Riga when our Dear Leader was repeatedly humiliated in public.

Having extended an invitation to his fellow presidents Adamkus of Lithuania, Ilves of Estonia, Yushchenko of Ukraine and Saakashvili of Georgia using his best bedside manner, first Zed was disappointed when Yushchenko and Adamkus cried off at the last minute and then he was kept waiting while Mikheil "It wasn't me" Saakashvili showed up late.

But the thing that would have seen lesser men storming off in a huff was when Craig Kennedy, moderator of the presidential pow-wow referred to Zatlers as "President Zalters" throughout. But Zatlers/Zalters is such a gent he didn't even correct him. We hope Mr. Kennedy enjoyed his brief stay in Lathustonia.

## EVERYBODY NEEDS GOOD NEIGHBOURS

More eyebrow-raising diplomatic shenanigans recently when Latvia played host to Sergei Sidorski, prime minister of Belarus and sidekick to moustachioed, slaphead and cuddly dictator Alexander Lukashenko.

Sidorski was taking advantage of the fact that the EU had just removed him from a blacklist preventing him from travelling to these parts. According to the EU, democracy took a step forward in Belarus when no opposition MPs at all were elected in the general election earlier this year.

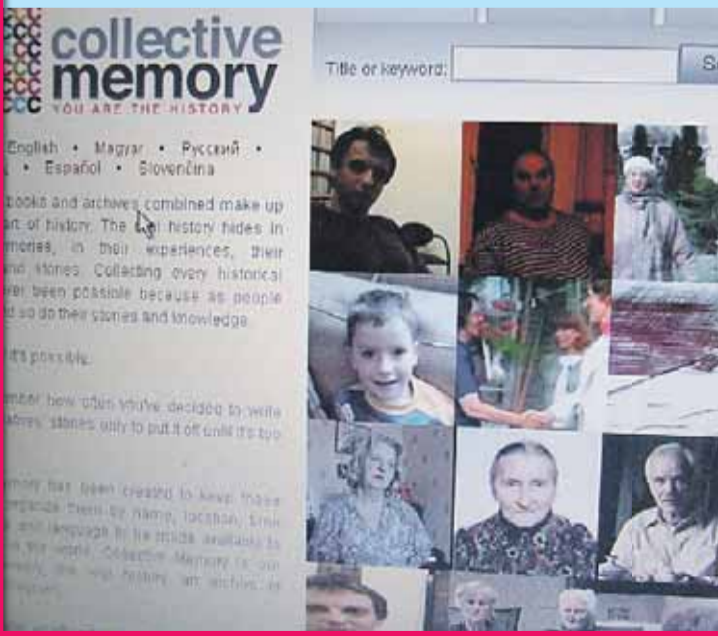
After a chit chat with Latvia's prime minister Ivars Godmanis, which did not include such vulgar topics as a nasty habit of locking people up without trial, Sidorski's flatteringly large motorcade could be spotted whizzing through the streets of Riga as he inspected decadent western shops and visited a trade fair extolling the virtues of leading Belarusian exports such as tractors and rickety furniture.

## REAL STORIES FROM REAL PEOPLE

He may have come up with some of the most pretentious advertising campaigns ever devised (the one with transport minister Ainars Slesers, a can of energy drink and a toe curling tourism effort being particularly memorable) but fair play to marketing "guru" Eriks Stendzinieks for producing something genuinely worthwhile.

Stendzinieks is one of the people behind a new project collecting an online library of interviews with ordinary Latvians, which has been created at the website [www.collectivememory.tv](http://www.collectivememory.tv). The hope is that as the video clips are added an authentic aural history of the Baltic nation will be established.

"We have stories from those who fought with the Legion and we have stories from the Red Army," Stendzinieks said at the launch event, referring to the controversial history of the Second World War in which Latvians fought on both sides.



## that's a bit odd



AND AFTER ALL, EVERYBODY ENJOYS 'A GOOD RIDE' FROM TIME TO TIME

# Keep the faith

STORY BY PHILIP BIRZULIS

Christmas comes but once a year and cynics would say that many people go to church about as often.

But that truism may depend a lot on where you happen to be. A study of religious views has found striking differences in European attitudes towards the Big Questions.

Back in 2005, Eurobarometer, the European Commission's polling organization, asked people across the continent whether they believe in God, in a spirit or life force, or none of the above. One of the surprising findings around the Baltic Sea region was that former communist countries tend to have lower rates of unbelief than their neighbours who have enjoyed uninterrupted freedom of religion.

A miniscule one percent of Poles and roughly ten percent of Latvians and Lithuanians are atheists, compared with about a quarter of Germans and Swedes. However, the pattern is broken by

the Estonians, who outdo even the Scandinavians in this sphere. Perhaps this is part of their often-stated goal of becoming "just another boring Nordic country."

Whether you consider a decline in religiosity to be a triumph of reason over superstition or a sad moral decline is a matter of opinion. But in Latvia's case, its continuing strength is probably a good thing. Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, pagans and other faiths have coexisted here for centuries, generally harmoniously, and the country should pay more attention to this multicultural tradition. And given widespread disillusionment with politics and tough economic times, it is positive that people find spiritual strength in the Bible, sacred oaks or simply deeper within themselves. ■



## THE CRI-TICK

### Getting started in Latvia

Now, I'm new to Latvia. In fact, I am merely in the fifth week of my 2-year stint in the "Wild East", so forgive me for making wrong assumptions, but this is a funny little place, isn't it? Let's talk about setting up here, as a foreigner, starting out and getting all the things you need, legal and otherwise. What I have experienced in my short time has been a dire contrast between, on the one hand, complete bureaucratic officialdom to the extent of insanity and, on the other, half-hearted bodge jobs.

Let me explain. I have only just, after 5 weeks of trying, only just been able to get a Latvian phone and an Internet package at home. You see, to get any contract here, you must have a personal number. To have a personal number, you must be registered at immigration. To register at immigration, you have to have a contract of work. (To have a contract of work, it is pretty handy to be able to search for jobs on-line, and give companies a local number to call and not, as in my case, the choice between a British or Austrian number to call. But these are mere luxuries - let's get back to the red tape.)

Once you have your contract (and a 300€ phone bill) and an appointment to register at immigration, you must

then acquire a Latvian translator, because nobody dealing with foreigners is able to speak a foreign language. If anything is missing from your pile of manically sought-after documents, such as a handwritten name omitted from beneath a signature on page 7 of your 12-page contract, you will be sent packing. And you will have to wait another week for another appointment to start again. If matron OKs everything during visit number 2, you must wait a further 2 weeks until your personal number comes through and only then may you reconnect with the rest of the world on-line and by telephone.

But alas Miss New-Comer, do not be fooled. The Latvian way of doing things is not always so official and above board. On the contrary, I learned pretty fast that doing a job is, in fact, only half doing it. This, I saw when my otherwise colourful and amusing landlord, furnished my apartment with: a wardrobe with a door missing, chairs whose legs "have to be screwed back in every few weeks", and an extendible dining table minus the extendible part. But hey, a three-legged chair is much better than going through the tedious and inane process of trying to buy one at Elkor.

# Latvia - Je t'aime!

STORY AND PHOTO BY AMY BRYZGEL

Just a few short years ago Xavier Delhomme only had one name, and had only heard of Latvia as a new EU member state. Now, he lives here, has two names (a Latvian one and his original French one), a wife, child, and a successful import business to boot!

**X**avier's path to Latvia played out like a typical Hollywood love story – boy meets girl in Paris, the city of love, and fall in love. Fast-forward three years, and the happy Hollywood ending has turned into a more unusual indie film (but still happy) ending. Xavier and his wife now live in Riga – the Paris of the North, or so some say – and the Frenchman says he feels fully integrated into Latvian society.

What's more, Xavier and his wife (and business partner) are trying to do something to help Latvians and the environment, by providing eco-cosmetics and beauty products. These all-natural creams, after-shave lotions, deodorants and cosmetics are completely organic, and made with all-natural packaging as well. Their current product, the Olivia organic line, is available at Stockmann, and the two hope to begin importing a line of all-natural makeup and cosmetics beginning next

year. Although Xavier maintains that he is not a militant environmentalist, he and his family do aim to do their part to help the environment, by conserving on energy and buying locally-grown organic food.

Although Xavier, whose positive energy and excitement is truly contagious, is perfectly content here in Latvia, when asked if

✓“I couldn't believe that I had to Latvianise my name!”

there was something he didn't like about it, he mentioned the bureaucracy. “I couldn't believe that I had to Latvianise my name!” he said, joking about his consulta-

tion with the “experts,” who in the end decided that he could keep the original (French) spelling of his name, although the Latvian spelling (Deloms) would have to be used in official documents. In general, however, he enjoys doing business here, and enjoys working with the locals, who, in his words, have a positive “go for it” approach. ■



Xavier now has two names

## ✓TRAM GUIDE:

Stay on the rails with our series of route-by-route guides to Riga's tram network. Another instalment to follow next month.

■ Tram number 9 runs from Tirdniecibas centrs “Dole” to Aldaris

■ Tickets purchased on board cost 50 centimes for a single journey of as many stops as you wish. Tickets purchased in advance cost 40 centimes.

## tramspotting

# Backtracking

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PHILIP BIRZULIS

With a history stretching back 800 years, Riga has a plentiful supply of historic sites.



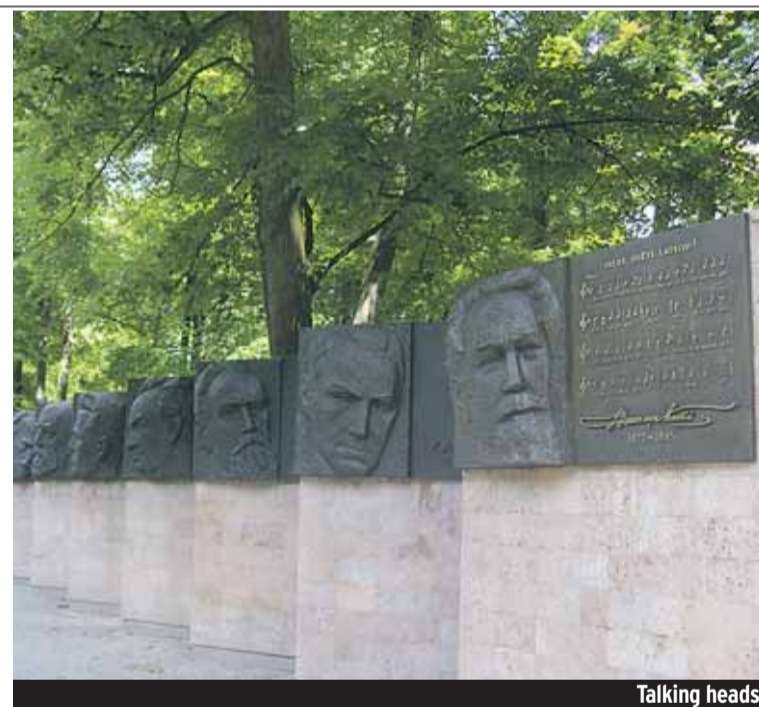
Blowing a tune on tramline 9

**A**nd there are some bizarre relics to discover beyond the churches and statues of the tourist trail. Jump aboard tram number nine for US presidents, fake archaeology and much more.

Number nine originates in the eastern suburbs, but in this article we'll only cover the stretch northwest of Riga's Old Town. It also only runs during peak hours, but you can get to the areas described here by joining any northwest-bound tram five near the Opera House.

For your first blast from the past, hop off at the Nacionalais Teatrs stop and walk across the road to the monument that looks like a bunch of footballs. This is a tribute to Wilhelm Ostwald, a Riga born chemist who won a Nobel Prize in 1909 for perfecting nitric acid, a vital ingredient in fertilizer and explosives.

A bit further on, alight at Ausekla iela stop for the Andrejsala alternative arts community and the start of the Jugendstil District. There's a plaque at Ausekla 22 tes-



Talking heads

tifying that John F. Kennedy spent the night there in 1939 while on a European holiday. Given JFK's nocturnal habits, I wonder whether there are any Kennedys walking around Latvia today?

For more wholesome reflection, head to Viesturdarzs Park across the road. Established in the 18th century as a palace for Peter the Great, this green oasis has a monument at the spot where the first Latvian song festival was held in 1873.

The tram rattles on through the old Petersala neighbourhood before entering Sarkandaugava. This rough industrial district is home to Riga's main mental hospital, its biggest brewery and the lovely Dauderi Museum. A few minutes walk from the tram nine

terminus (Aldaris stop for tram five), this neo-Gothic edifice was built in 1897 by Adolf von Bingner, the owner of the Aldaris brewery, then became the residence of Latvian President Karlis Ulmanis in the late 1930s. The lovingly crafted folk costumes, domestic items and other pre-war memorabilia on display inside are in stark contrast to the brutal Soviet apartment blocks nearby.

Near the museum is a more charming memorial to human folly. To give his property more gravitas, Herr Bingner had some fake medieval castle ruins built, which you can still see in all their crumbling glory today. There is no record of how much beer he had consumed when he dreamt up that idea. ■

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# Armenian heaven in the middle of Riga

STORY BY JUSTIN WALLEY, PHOTOS COURTESY OF AKHTAMAR

It's time to discover one of Riga's best restaurants

I was a little taken aback when I heard that Akhtamar restaurant had taken a full-page advert on the back page of the Baltic Guide. The reason for my surprise was that I didn't even realize this Armenian restaurant existed! Not good form from the editor of a city guide...



Reminders of Armenia...

To put things right I quickly paid a visit to Akhtamar and soon discovered a real gem of a place that I will certainly be frequenting on a regular basis.

Located close to Riga Circus on the difficult-to-pronounce Merkela Street, you will find Akhtamar down a flight of stairs, below street level. The first big obvious plus is this restaurant's size and atmosphere. It has small intimate side rooms, a bar area, and two spacious open-plan seating areas with Armenian trinkets and paintings decorating the walls. At the weekend diners in the main hall can enjoy live music, and there's a real tangible party atmosphere on Friday and Saturday evenings with a disco running from midnight until 7am the next morning.

There are numerous Armenian restaurants in Riga but the Armenian food on offer here appears to be easily the best in Riga. This perhaps has much to do with the attitude of the Armenian owner who takes a "hands on" approach to running Akhtamar, and confesses that happy customers are just as important to him as turning a profit.

If you are new to Armenian food, don't be put off by the

## dining&drinks



You will find Akhtamar in a basement on Merkela Street

unknown! Akhtamar's Armenian dishes are simply delicious and even the vegetarian options are amongst the tastiest in the city. What's more, the prices and service are excellent. A meal and a glass or two of Armenian wine at Akhtamar will set you back far less than it will at the majority of restaurants in Riga. Armenian shaskliks start from just 4 lats, Armenian "Kufta" is 5.20 lats and pancake dishes come in at under 2 lats. Akhtamar also offers a range of Armenian wines and brandy

that you can't find in other establishments in Latvia.

Don't rule out this place as somewhere to just go for a drink either, as its atmospheric, homely interior is spot on for kicking off any night out on the town. After my first visit here I instantly reserved a table for eight people for the following weekend when some friends were due to visit Latvia. Akhtamar just seemed like the ideal place to take them for their first night in Riga.

Top 3 + 3 is where The Baltic Guide discovers a Latvian resident's recommendations. This includes three top places to eat or drink, and three top places for entertainment.

## top 3+3

STORY AND PHOTO BY SARAH MACKIE

George Steele is quite a known face in Riga, and even during our chat for Top 3 + 3, somebody stopped him in the café to give him a business card after spotting him on local TV!

Although George claims to be "in love" with this country, he believes he is also its self-confessed enemy. An avid human rights activist, George frequently uses his well-known voice to speak up for what he believes in, which, he says, is not always what the authorities like to hear.

### three places to eat

- 1 Soraksans** (12 Miesnieku iela) (H-1) is Latvia's first and, according to George, only Korean restaurant. He rates this place mainly for its authenticity and great food. The owners are a Korean/Latvian couple who met in China and moved to Latvia to open the restaurant. The chefs are Korean and Latvian but the food is 100 percent Korean, no Latvian traces to be found!
- 2 Charlstons** (38-40 Blaumana iela) (C-4) is another favourite for its great breakfast, cheap hearty dishes and cosy atmosphere. He says, quite rightly, that tourists are always looking for a good breakfast place with good prices...well, tourists, look no further!
- 3 Staburags** (55, A. Caka iela) (C-5) is the place to go on an empty stomach! It is very Latvian in design and a place where you can feast on huge portions of traditional Latvian food. Some of the robust dishes include pork legs, smoked chicken and sauerkraut, washed down nicely with a pitcher of local beer! It is, in George's words, "absolutely Latvian through and through."

### three places to go

- 1 Gauja National Park.** Since George became a father, his social life has revolved around child-friendly haunts, and being a fan of nature, this park is one of his favourites. "You can take the whole family and spend an entire day just walking in the forest. It's extremely beautiful," he reckons. Situated on the banks of the Gauja River, the park is one of the biggest in the country. It hosts an inspiring combination of nature, including forests, rivers and caves, and cultural sites.
- 2 Liepaja's Coast** (to reach Liepaja from Riga, take highway A9, distance-220km) is a gorgeous strip of coast on the Baltic Sea, with sandy beaches and pinewood in the dunes. A great place to while away summer days. George loves to spend time at the beach, which is claimed to have the whitest sand in the Baltics.
- 3 Open Air Museum,** (440 Brivibas Gatve) This ethnographic museum has entertained George and his family no end. The park represents the four regions of Latvia by dividing the area into four sections housing characteristic buildings from the regions: Kurzeme, Latgale, Vidzeme and Zemgale. Visitors can watch a blacksmith, spoon-carver and beekeepers at work. George says it's a place where you can really have fun and learn something about this country.



## GIMME 5 FREEDOM TRAIL REAL CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

It's more blessed to give than to receive, and you can help the less fortunate and improve your karma by supporting these worthy causes.

### KIDS IN CRISIS

Founded by Pastor Juris Calitis of Riga's Anglican Church, the two Zvannieki "alternative family homes" in Cesu District, east of the capital, give food, shelter and love to children from troubled backgrounds. See [www.zvannieki.lv](http://www.zvannieki.lv) for details.

### HIGH NOTES

The annual Christmas Charity Concert has top Latvian musicians playing works by Mozart, Vivaldi and other greats, with entry by donations of toys for poor children. December 22, 19:00, Liela Gilde, 6 Amatu iela, Old Riga. Pick up invitations beforehand at Liela Gilde or [www.hbf.lv](http://www.hbf.lv).

### GREEN AND KEEN

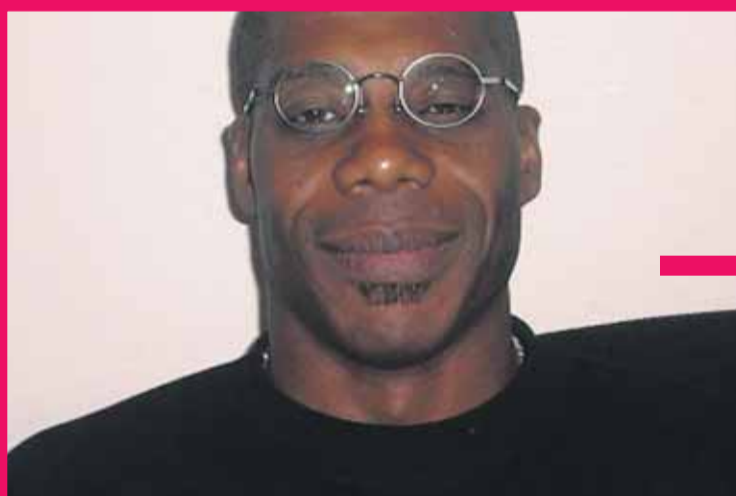
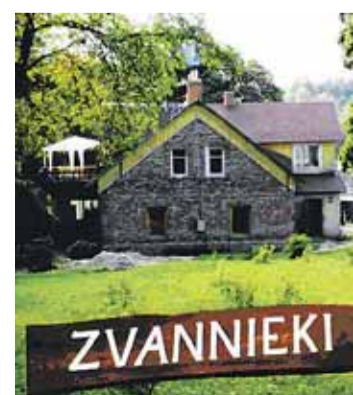
Latvia has some stunning countryside, but sadly plenty of litterbugs as well. The social organization "Pedas" (Footprints) organizes clean up bees to pick up trash and develop community spirit so everyone can enjoy the rivers, lakes and meadows as nature intended. See [www.pedas.lv](http://www.pedas.lv).

### MAN'S BEST FRIEND

It's tough to be homeless in Riga whether you have two legs or four, so every year the "Dzivnieku draugs" (Animals' Friend) shelter in Pardaugava finds new owners for hundreds of dogs, cats and other furry critters. See [www.dzd.lv](http://www.dzd.lv) or the Latvian charity portal [www.ziedot.lv](http://www.ziedot.lv).

### ON THE REBOUND

Most Latvian athletes aren't rich, and many wind up with big medical bills. The project "Support for veterans of Latvian basketball" helps stars like Olympic champion Uljana Semjonova access knee and hip surgery. Donations over Ls 25 get a nude calendar of the current national women's team! See [www.ziedot.lv](http://www.ziedot.lv).





On the spot



This month, The Baltic Guide got chatting to Louise McCauley to get a newcomer's perspective of Riga!

**Where are you from and what brings you to Latvia?**

I'm from Donegal, North West Ireland, but I have lived in Dublin for the past 4 years. I came to Latvia a few months ago because my boyfriend is Latvian, so I came with him initially.

**What were your first impressions of Latvia?**

I started coming here on holidays before I moved here, usually in summer and I really liked it. I spent a lot of time at the beach in Jurmala, the weather was good and the people seemed to follow the summer mood! But now it's winter, people seem a bit more solemn.

**What did you know about Latvia before you came here?**

Before I met my boyfriend, I didn't know anything about Latvia, but when we met, he gave me a history of the country and made me aware that it would be different to live here and it would take time to settle in and get used to the different people and culture.

**So, what would you say the main differences are, between Latvia/Latvians and Ireland?**

The Latvian people are much more quiet and they keep to themselves if you don't know them, unlike the Irish paddies who are more open and friendly and will talk to anyone about anything! Latvia is much colder in the winter than Ireland too. The traditional food in Latvia is totally different to Irish food – we have lots of stews, and I guess, fish and chips! In Latvia, they use a lot of dill and different types of sauces that we don't have at home. But I'm not complaining about the food here because I love it!

**What would you bring to Latvia from Ireland?**

I would bring a "Pennies" (that's Primark to Brits) to Riga! Because there's nowhere here where you can buy things like socks and your every day things in bulk for really good prices. Well, maybe there is, but I haven't found it yet!

business



Krasovitsky and Kargin were forced to sell their stakes in Parex banka for 1 lat each

## Latvia rocked by bank's demise

STORIES BY MIKE COLLIER, PHOTOS BY LETA AND JUSTIN WALLEY

Latvian government steps in to save the country's second biggest bank

**HOW ARE THE MIGHTY FALLEN...**

Latvia found itself the subject of the world's financial pages in November when the government suddenly announced the nationalisation of Parex Banka, the second largest bank in the country and the biggest locally-owned financial institution.

In a bizarre sequence of events, the country's two richest men, Valery Kargin and Viktor Krasovitsky, sold their stakes in the bank for just one lat each and were then told they couldn't withdraw any more money from the very bank they founded. It was humiliating for them, but after years of lording it over ordinary folks in their

flashy cars and private jets, sympathy was in short supply.

Now speculation turns to which – if any – banks will be next for a government bailout. All have protested that they have nothing to worry about, but for the next few weeks and months, account holders at Latvijas Krajbanka, Aizkraukles Banka, Rietumu Banka, Norvik Banka and the rest might be feeling a tad nervous.

**GO FIGURE...**

The extent of the confusion surrounding how Latvia found itself in its current economic creek and what it should do to find its paddle again is driven home by a single day's advice from central bank governor Ilmars Rimsevics.

On the one hand, Rimmo said: "Everyone who has some money to spend, must spend. We must not economise."

A little later on, he said unemployment "is likely to show a significant rise by the end of the year."

Hang on, isn't spending without thought of tomorrow, when we should have been saving, what got us into this mess in the first place?

**LATVIANS LEARN TO LOVE LADAS**

With sales of new cars in Latvia shrinking by more than a third in the first ten months of 2008 according to official figures, it was left to carmakers at opposite ends of the price spectrum to report the strongest results.

Total sales from January to October dropped to 10,434 from 17,239 in the same period last year, according to the Latvian Authorized Car Dealers Association.

With an economic downturn well underway, Latvians appear to be weaning themselves off their

Porsches and BMWs. While market leaders Toyota, Volkswagen and Honda all suffered falls in their sales figures, Russian carmaker Lada saw its sales rise by 66 per cent to 449.

✓ "Everyone who has some money to spend, must spend. We must not economise."

But clearly there are still some deep pockets in Latvia as the biggest percentage increase was recorded by Italian sports car specialist Ferrari, which doubled its sales – albeit from 2 cars in 2007 to 4 in 2008.

**CIGARETTES AND ALCOHOL**

In the first nine months of 2008, Latvia produced nearly 1.5 billion cigarettes, which is enough to keep the average Latvian puffing away for nearly a week (only joking about the last bit).

Most of the nicotine nails were made by the Scandinavian Tobacco Company and destined for export, though Latvia also imported 6 billion cigarettes, 4,586 cigars and 16,495 kilos of smoking tobacco.

During the same period, Latvia's output of alcoholic beverages (excluding beer) was nearly 57 million litres, down 7 percent on 2007's figures. Beer production reached 107.2 million litres, down 6 percent. Presumably smoking all those cigarettes is killing people off before they have a chance to get properly plastered.



Beer production is down in Latvia

# Current AFFAIRS

STORIES BY LARS SVANTESSON, PHOTOS BY JUSTIN WALLEY

▶ **A snowstorm in late November toppled trees, caused traffic mayhem and left some 25,000 households without electricity.**

There were more than 130 car accidents reported, which claimed three lives during the night of the storm. Latvia's fire and rescue service were kept busy throughout the night pulling cars out of ditches, picking up blown over advertisement stands and clearing roads of fallen trees. There were also reports of at least ten fires in which three people were injured. The strongest winds were observed in Ventspils, a city on the northwestern coast, where wind speeds peaked at 30 metres per second. In Riga winds also reached 20 metres per second.

▶ **Both the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund have expressed readiness to give financial support to Latvia, which is sliding towards a deep recession.**

The EC said in a statement that: "The EU stands ready to participate in a coordinated financing package with the IMF conditional upon a strong commitment by the Latvian authorities to implement a rigorous and credible adjustment program in order to underpin balance-of-payments sustainability in Latvia." Latvia's central bank head Ilmars Rimsevics said that aid from the EU and IMF would boost the stability of the country's currency, which recently was rumoured, for the second time in less than a year, to face devaluation.



An almighty snow storm caused chaos in Latvia in late November

▶ **Latvian politicians, who have been saying for months that the global financial crisis would not hit Latvia, recently decided to save its second biggest bank, Parex, from bankruptcy by nationalizing it.**

The government bought 51 percent of the shares in the privately held bank for 200 million lats and had to give a guarantee that it would refinance a syndicated loan due next year of almost 1 billion dollars. The 1 billion dollar debt has forced the Latvian government to seek help from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund. Still, the government's initial concern was to maintain depositors' trust in the banking sector. Latvia's banking sector watchdog, the Finance and Capital Market Commission, said it had started to monitor Parex more closely as long ago as September when it became clear that the bank would run into liquidity problems.

▶ **Latvian security police jailed an academic for two days and launched a criminal case against a singer for spreading rumours about the economic stability in the country.**

Police action has sparked a debate about freedom of speech in this former member of the Soviet Union. This came after Latvia officially fell into recession, asked the International Monetary Fund for help and nationalized the country's second largest bank. Latvian newspaper *Latvijas Avize* asked on its front page: "Is freedom of speech a criminal offence?" while Neatkarīga Rita Avize headlined: "Repression of opinions." The

academic was put in jail for two days after an online newspaper debate where he said people should not trust banks or keep their money in the local currency, the lat. A musician came under investigation after he allegedly told an audience at a concert that they should go to two specific banks and withdraw their money. The musician said later his remarks were simply jokes. Police have responded in a statement saying that the investigations into spreading malicious rumours about Latvia's economy do not fall under the protection of freedom of speech.

▶ **After six hours of debate the Latvian parliament adopted the 2009 budget with a 1.5 percent deficit in the second and final reading.**

Initially, the budget passed in the first reading was calculated with a gross domestic growth rate of 2 percent for next year, but the country's Finance Minister Atis Slakteris decided to make changes to the budget before the final reading by recalculating it with a GDP growth rate of minus 1 percent instead, which is in line with the central bank's forecasts. Still, analysts are not hopeful that the govern-



The Latvian Lat has been making the news a lot recently

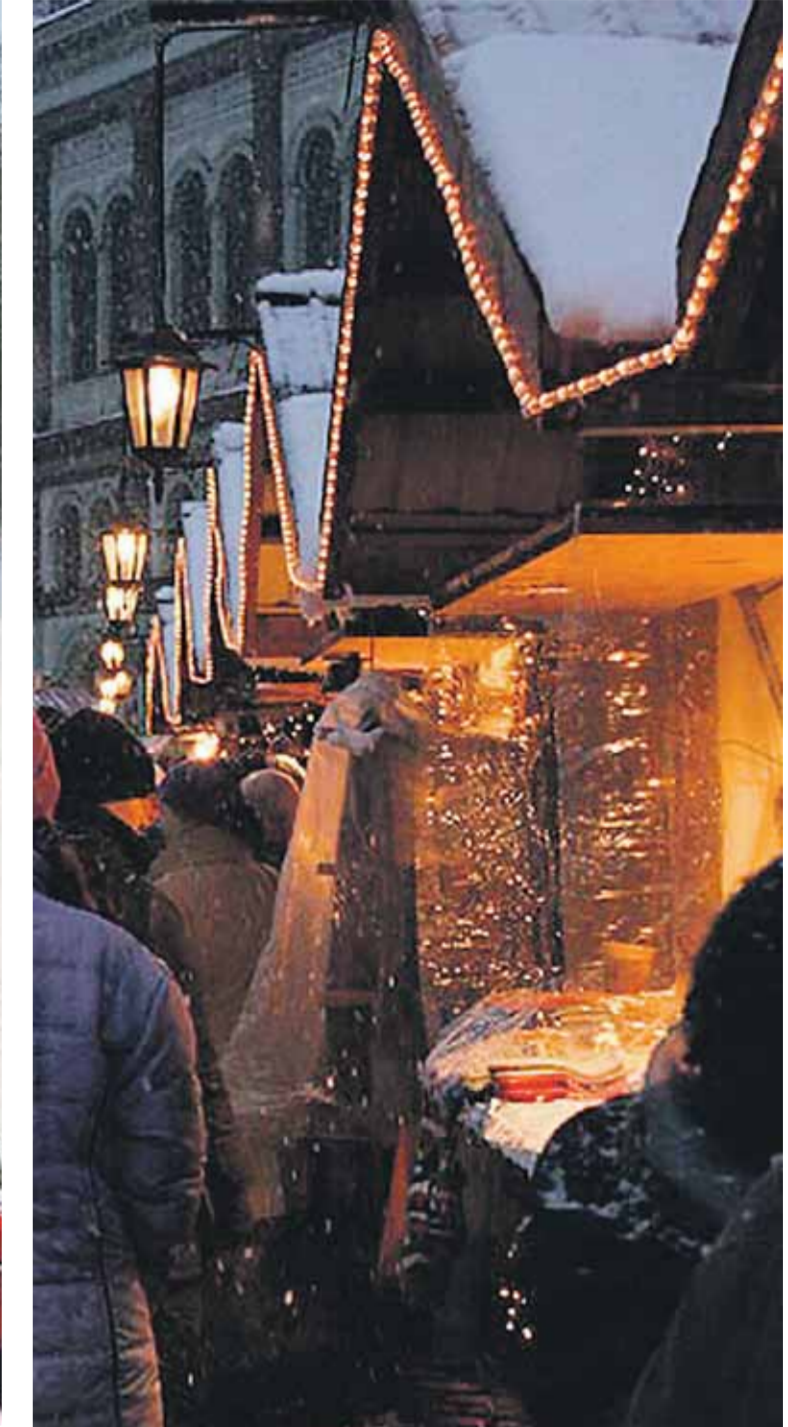
ment will be able to keep expenditure low enough to stick to the 1.5 percent deficit. Some analysts suggest the 2009 actual budget deficit could reach a figure as high as 5 percent.



Parex banka grabbed world headlines in late 2008



One of Riga's atmospheric Christmas markets



# RIGA'S TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

STORY BY AMY BRYZGEL, PHOTOS BY JUSTIN WALLEY AND COURTESY OF INSPIRATION RIGA

Stuck for ideas on what to do, where to go and what to buy at Christmas? Here is our guide to the Latvian Christmas celebration.

## ON THE FIRST DAY OF CHRISTMAS, RIGA GAVE TO ME... THE FIRST CHRISTMAS TREE!

**It** is widely believed that Riga is the site of the first Christmas tree in the world; a commemorative plaque even marks the spot where it stood in Town Hall Square, in front of the Occupation Museum and the Blackheads' House. Legend has it that the first Christmas/New Year's tree was decorated, with paper flowers, right here in this square.

*On the second day of Christmas, Riga gave to me...*  
**TWO CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS!** Just as Latvians celebrate two birthdays (birthday and name day) and two independence days (November 18th and May 4th), they also celebrate two Christmases! Lutherans and Catholics celebrate Christmas on the 25th of December, whereas Russian Orthodox worshippers have their Christmas on the 6th of January.

*On the third day of Christmas, Riga gave to me...*  
**TREES FILLED WITH FAIRY LIGHTS!** Riga's Christmas decorations are some of the most magical that this journalist has seen, and every year they are differ-

ent and more elaborate. A stroll through Vermanes Gardens and Bastejs Park will make you feel like you've entered a magical fairyland. Some of the highlights over the years have been giant illuminated boxes of Christmas presents hanging from the branches, massive twinkling snowflakes, and even a little fairy village right next to Bastejs Hill.

*On the fourth day of Christmas, Riga gave to me...*  
**FOUR PAIRS OF MITTENS!** When Latvia hosted the NATO Summit in 2006, hundreds of women across the country worked for months to knit 4,500 pairs of mittens, created in local patterns, to give as a gift to Riga's visitors, along

with several other items considered to be representative of Latvia's rich cultural heritage. Aside from mittens, take home some of these items for yourself: amber jewellery; beeswax candles; locally made honey; hand-carved wooden kitchen utensils, lovely linen tablecloths, pillows or clothing. And don't forget Black Balsams, to spice up your eggnog!

*On the fifth day of Christmas, Riga gave to me...*  
**FIVE GOLDEN EARRINGS!** Looking for a unique, one-of-a-kind gift? There are several interesting shops in Riga that this writer always sticks to for that special inimitable gift. Istabā, at 31a Barona iela offers hand-made jewellery by local

artists, as well as interesting baubles and accoutrements, cool cards, arty bags and so on. Zagatas Bode, at 5 Laipu iela also has an assortment of quirky hand-made earrings, necklaces and bracelets, and a variety of hand-knitted goods. Stop by the blacksmith's shop across the street for perhaps the heaviest Christmas gifts of all.

*On the sixth day of Christmas, Riga gave to me...*  
**SIX GEESE FOR DINNER!** Wondering where to go for a nice Christmas meal? Try Otto Schwarz, on the top floor of Hotel de Rome, for a sumptuous meal. Their prime location overlooking Bastejs Park will offer you a fine view of

the Christmas decorations there, and their own cosy interior will make you feel like it is Christmas morning already.

*On the seventh day of Christmas, Riga gave to me...*  
**PAGAN CELEBRATIONS!** We all know that Christmas traditions started as Pagan ones, and if you'd like to find out more about their origins, nothing is better than the Winter Solstice celebrations at the Outdoor Ethnographic Museum at 440 Brīvības gatve. On 21 December, come out to the museum and witness the original Christmas celebrations just as in old times.

*On the eighth day of Christmas, Riga gave to me...*

**A CHRISTMAS MARKET IN DOMA LAUKUMS!** This is the place to come for one-stop shopping, as you can buy up souvenirs and Christmas presents, sample some mulled wine and traditional foods, perhaps hear a concert or two, admire the Christmas tree, and go ice-skating, all in one afternoon!

*On the ninth day of Christmas, Riga gave to me...*  
**NINE LADIES SKATING!** What better an activity to put you in the Christmas spirit than ice skating? If the rink in Cathedral Square is too packed, try the one in Esplanade Park, just behind the Russian Orthodox Cathedral. There is also

a huge rink at the Lido Recreation Centre (76 Krasta iela).

*On the tenth day of Christmas, Riga gave to me...*  
**TEN LORDS A-LEAPING!** You can't leave Riga without a trip to the National Opera, and there is no better time to take in a performance than December, when you can witness a performance of Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite in the splendid surroundings of Riga's restored nineteenth century opera house. Tickets to opera and ballet performances are one of Riga's treasures – you can get decent seats at a decent price...even Ebenezer Scrooge would be happy!

*On the eleventh day of Christmas, Riga gave to me...*  
**ELEVEN PIPARKUKAS!** You haven't experienced Christmas in Riga if you haven't tried the famous gingerbread cookies, or "pepper cookies" as they are called here, as they are made with pepper to spice things up. You can find these at any local grocery store, and many come packaged nicely to give as gifts.

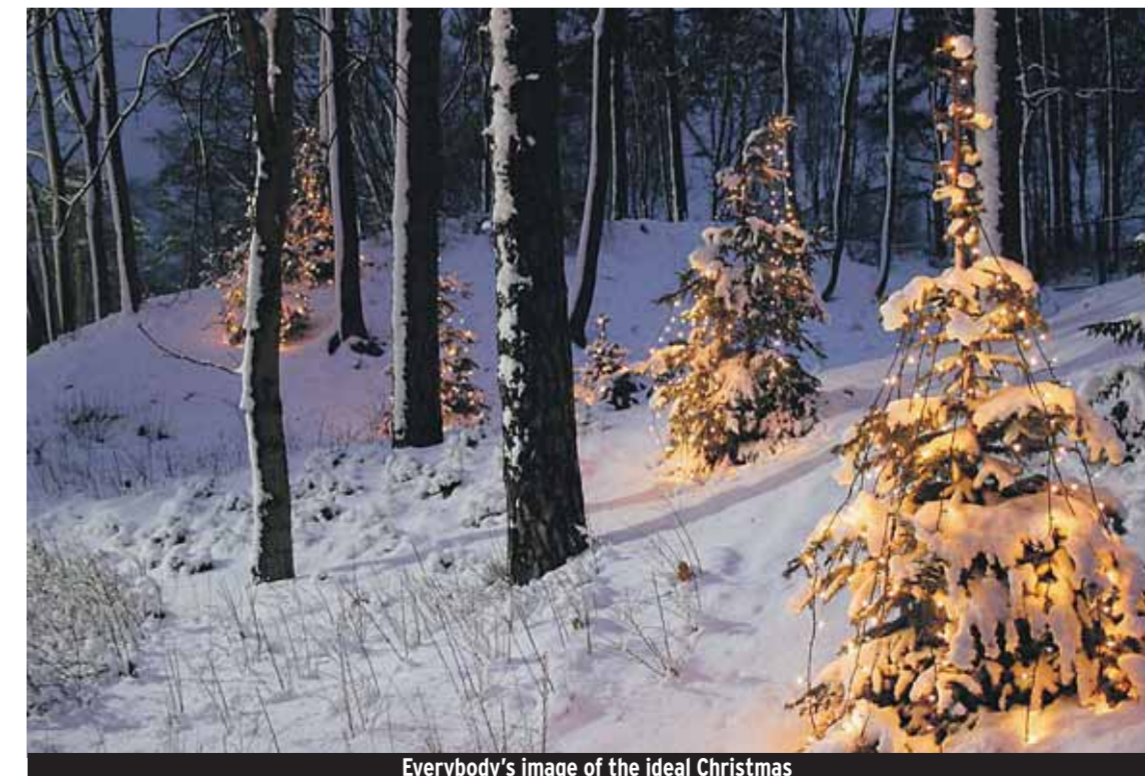
*On the twelfth day of Christmas, Riga gave to me...*  
**NEW YEAR'S EVE!** While there's plenty to do with Christmas in the air, Riga is also a great place to be for your New Year's Eve celebrations. Choose from themed parties at the Radisson or Hotel Latvia, or many of the Old Town's bars and clubs that are open that night. Don't forget to come out for air to watch the annual firework show over the Daugava at midnight! Welcome 2009!



Enjoy a traditional Christmas in the countryside



...and make sure you pay a visit to church on Christmas Day



Everybody's image of the ideal Christmas









**WWW**  
what when where



## Accommodation

### HOTELS TOP OF THE RANGE

#### Reval Hotel Ridzene ■ 2 F-3

1 Reimersa iela, Riga.  
Tel: (+371) 6732 4433.  
An elegant hotel just a stone's throw from Old Riga, overlooking a beautiful park. Friendly staff, sauna, fitness complex and the Pyramids restaurant. www.revalhotels.com.

#### Radisson SAS Daugava Hotel ■ 1 D-2

24 Kuģu iela, Riga.  
Tel: (+371) 6706 1111. Conveniently located on the bank of the Daugava river with breathtaking views of Riga's Old Town. 361 fully equipped rooms, including Business Class and Suites as well as non-smoking rooms and rooms for the physically challenged. All rooms have bath, satellite TV, telephone, Wireless Internet, minibar, air-conditioning and 24 hour room service. Also 13 conference rooms, restaurant, bar, fitness centre with indoor pool, saunas, beauty salon, complimentary hotel shuttles and more. www.riga.radissonsas.com.

### UPMARKET

#### Domina Inn ■ 8 B-3

11 Pulkveza Brieva iela, Riga  
Tel: +371 6763 1800.  
Domina Inn Riga is conveniently located in the quiet centre of Riga - in the Art Nouveau and embassies' neighborhood, within walking distance of the Old Town and the main landmarks of the City. The Hotel presents its historical beauty through contemporary elegance and prides itself on its professional and friendly service, offering elegance with a touch of Italian style. It represents the ideal retreat for trips for business and pleasure. www.dominahotels.com

#### Elefant Hotel

90 Kalnciema iela, Riga  
Tel: +371 67225560. The Elefant Hotel is conveniently located between the Riga International Airport and Riga City Centre, with easy access to business, shopping, cultural and spare time activities. www.elefantotel.lv



#### Hotel Islande C-3

Islande Hotel was opened on March 2006 and it offers all facilities and services which might be expected in a four star hotel. The hotel is located in Kipsala, in the center of Riga - a 10 minutes walk from the Old City.

#### Metropole ■ 10 I-4

36-38 Aspazijas bulv., Old Riga.  
Tel: (+371) 6722 5411.  
This is the longest continuously running hotel in Riga, with a great location on the edge of Old Riga, near the National Opera. There are 80 cosy rooms (smoking and non). Other services include an excellent restaurant, satellite TV, WIFI internet and conference, sauna and fitness centres. www.metropole.lv.

#### Promenade Hotel

40 Vecā Ostma, Liepāja.  
Tel: +371 63488288. The hotel is situated in building which was built around 1870 as grain warehouse. During the course of reconstruction, the original building's architecture was preserved to give the hotel its special charm. The individuality of Promenade Hotel is further enhanced by the yacht centre and docks located at the hotel as well as by the front lobby which is also an art gallery. www.promenadehotel.lv

#### Reval Hotel Latvija ■ 4 C-4

55 Elizabetes iela, Riga.  
Tel: (+371) 6777 2222. The largest hotel in Latvia offers stunning views from the rooms or the sauna. A trendy bar on an upper floor offers great music, cocktails and bird's eye views. Large conference facilities, a stylish restaurant and bar, room service, and fitness centre available. www.revalhotels.com.

### MID-RANGE

#### Forums Hotel ■ 12 I-4

45 Valņu iela, Old Riga.  
Tel: (+371) 6781 4680. The Forums hotel is a three star business class hotel with 32 rooms. In the historical Old Town of Riga, the hotel is within walking distance of major cultural and historical sights, shopping areas, official institutions as well as all transport. Forums has comfortable double and triple rooms, mansard type rooms and suites with sauna or balconies with fantastic views. Rooms have phone, satellite TV, a bath and shower. Rates include breakfast. Other services such

as laundry and travel excursions can be arranged. www.hotelforums.lv.

#### Hotel Skanste ■ 6 A-4

Skanstes iela 9, Riga, LV-1013 Latvia  
Tel: (+371) 6751 9923  
Fax: (+371) 6751 9922  
Hotel is located right by Arena Riga - the main concert and ice hockey arena. www.hotelskanste.lv

#### Līva

Tel: +371 63420102. Hotel "Līva" is a tourist class hotel with 43 years of experience in working with guests and satisfying their desires. We offer for our guests 111 comfortable rooms for suites, business, standard and economy class conveniences. www.liva.lv

#### Metropole

11 Baznīcas iela; Kuldīga  
Tel: +371 63350588. In order to offer the residents and guests of Kuldīga a place to rest, a hotel - bar - restaurant "Metropole" has started its work in the old town. Metropole building serves as

hotel - restaurant since 19th century. The renovated Metropole Hotel offers 14 rooms. www.hotel-metropole.lv

### HOSTELS

#### Red Roofs ■ 3 I-3

Jana street 6, Riga, Latvia. Tel: (+371) 673 50560. Fax: (+371) 673 50561. Hotel in the very heart of Riga city: Old Riga. reservation@redroofs.lv, www.redroofs.lv

### Dining & Drinks

### RESTAURANTS

#### Akhtamar D 4

9 Merķeļa street; Riga.  
Tel: +371 67215032. Armenian cuisine in the center of Riga. www.akhtamar.lv

#### City Jazz club ■ 9 C-5

34 Gertrudes iela; Riga.  
Tel: +371 26129191.  
www.cityjazzclub.lv

#### Columbine I-4

36-38 Aspazijas bulv. (in the Metropole hotel), Old Riga. Tel: (+371) 6721 6161. Open 12:00-23:00, bar open 11:00-01:00. An excellent restaurant located in an upmarket hotel. A plentiful seafood bar is on offer, with other food including international and Indian cuisine. This is a nice place to indulge. www.metropole.lv.

#### del Popolo ■ 4 I-3

8 Jana iela, Riga. Italian restaurant in the very heart of Riga city: old Riga. www.delpopolo.lv

#### Indian Raja ■ 3 I-3

3 Vecpilsētas iela, Old Riga.  
Tel: (+371) 6722 1610. Open daily 12:00-23:00. Follow the aroma through the streets of Old Riga and you will find a hidden treasure that will satisfy your appetite. The extra cost is certainly justified by the quality atmosphere, service and food. www.indianraja.lv.

#### Juffins 12 ■ 12 H-2

10 Aldaru street; Riga (Old city)  
Tel: +371 67224271

#### Kabuki ■ 19 I-4, C-4, C-5

Mix with the trendy urbanites at these fresh-feeling Japanese restaurants. Tasty sushi sets and a good choice of other oriental treats, at standard prices. 14 Audeju iela, Old Riga. Tel: (+371) 6735 9663. 14 K. Barona iela (enter from Elizabetes), Tel: (+371) 6728 2052; and 46 Tērbatas iela, Riga, Tel: (+371) 6784 2728.

#### Lido centre

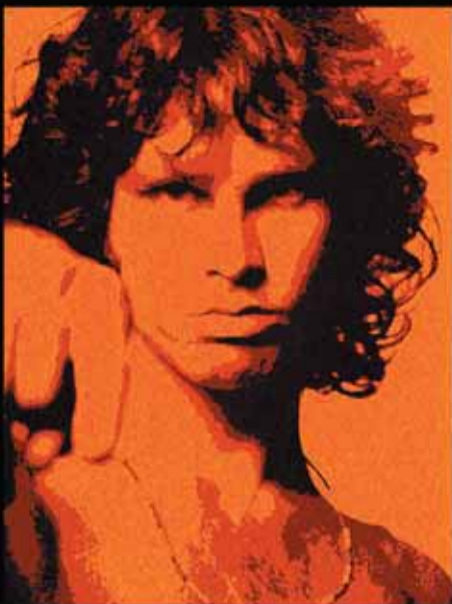
76 Krasta iela; Riga.  
Tel: +37167504420  
One of the largest and most beautiful timberworks in the Europe! Express Restaurant 12:00-23:00 Dainties buffet, Exquisite hot dishes, Salom music played nightly. Bistro 10:00-23:00. Delicious and healthy dishes and drinks for all tastes Beer Cellar 12:00-24:00. Traditional Latvian dishes, savoury snacks and LIDO beer. Folk songs and dances Amusement Park 10:00-23:00  
http://ac.lido.lv



The Baltic  
**GUIDE**

The Baltic Guide online

# RE LIVING LEGENDS



## NEW YEARS EVE PARTY 2009

FOR DETAILS

WWW.LIVINGLEGENDS2009.COM

**WWW**  
what when where

### Macaroni ■ 19 I-4, C-4

A funky and fashionable eatery with food featuring – you guessed it – macaroni and pasta! Different styles are covered, from Italian to oriental. A pleasant dining experience with mid-range prices.

**14 Audēju iela**, Old Riga. Tel: (+371) 67359665. **K. Barona iela**, Riga. Tel: (+371) 6721 7981.

### Misipi (floating restaurant) ■ 10 J-1

The ferryboat Misipi, located at the stop next to the Stone (Akmens) bridge. Opening hours: 12:00 till 23:00. Tel: (+371) 29378599

### McDonald's restaurants ■ 18

H-3, D-4  
18 Basteja bulv., Old Riga and 1 Mērķēla iela, Riga.

### Paddy Whelan's Irish Pub ■ 15 I-3

4 Grēcinieku iela, Old Riga. Tel: (+371) 6721 0150. Open Sun.–Thurs. 12:00–01:00, Fri. & Sat. 12:00–03:00. The first Irish pub in Riga. A relaxed, friendly atmosphere, with tasty food and real old fashioned BBQ available. Discount business lunches, 18 kinds of beer on tap and also wines, liquors and cigars. Live Sky sports on several large screens and WiFi internet. Banquet services, happy hour, courtyard and street side summer terrace. Non-smoking areas.

### Piramida ■ 7 F-3

1 Reimersa iela (enter via Reval Hotel Ridzene), Riga. Tel: (+371) 6732 4433. Open 07:00–24:00. Breakfast buffet

07:00–10:30 at Ls 9, lunch buffet 12:00–15:00 at Ls 12.50.

The elegant atmosphere under a glass pyramid offers fine food and wine at this five star hotel restaurant.

### Red Fred ■ 19 C-4, I-4

62 Dzirnava iela, Riga, 14 Audēju iela, Old Riga. Tel: (+371) 6736 5113. This fairly new beer & grill bar offers a fun, relaxed atmosphere and live music. Freshly grilled dishes and 21 kinds of beer! An extensive menu with their self-proclaimed "democratic" prices. www.sushi.lv

### Restaurant "Ambiance" ■ 17 J-2

23 Peldu iela; Riga (old city) Tel: +371 67814316. Restaurants "Ambiance" is located in Boutique Hotel Ainavas, in one of the most picturesque part of Old Riga. Its special atmosphere and original design give our guests an unforgettable experience. www.ainavas.lv

### Sue's Asia ■ 11 I-4

50 Kaleju street, Riga (Old city). Tel: +371 67216155; GSM: +371 29105391. Authentic Thai and chinese cuisine in Riga. email: suesasia@inbox.lv www.suesasia.lv

### Steiku Haoss ■ 6 I-3

Info: The Steak Bar chain. **Audēju street 2**, LV-1050 Tel: (+371) 6722 5699. Open 10:00-01:00, Saturday, Sunday 12:00-01:00 **Meistaru street 25**, LV-1050 Tel: (+371) 6722 2419. Open 11:00-01:00, Saturday, Sunday 12:00-01:00 **Tērbatas street 41/43**, LV-1011

Tel: (+371) 6727 2707. Open 10:00-00:00, Thursday, Friday, 10:00-01:00, Saturday, 11:00-01:00, Sunday 11:00-00:00

### BARS

**Leningrad ■ 13 J-4**  
54 Kaleju iela; Riga. Tel: (+371) 29915049 www.leningrad.lv

## Shopping

### SPECIALITY SHOPS

#### Cool Cats ■ 1 I-3

Jana iela 12; Old Town Riga Tel: +371 2935 5655. Home of Riga's exclusive collection of officially licensed Team Latvia Hockey, Football and Basketball jerseys, Art Nouveau home decor pieces, hand made & one of a kind handbags, hats, accessories and much more. All with a unique "Made in Latvia" flavour. www.coolcats.lv

#### The Amber Room galleries ■ 4

G-3, I-3, H-3, D-2.  
4 Torņu iela (Opposite Swedish gate) Mon–Sat 10:00–18:00, Sun 11:00–17:00; 9-11 Kalēju iela (Konventa Seta Hotel) Mon–Sat 10:00–18:00, Sun 11:00–17:00; 16 Kalķu iela (Līvi square) Mon–Sat 10:00–19:00, Sun 11:00–17:00; 24 Kuģu iela (Radisson SAS Daugava Hotel) 5th floor 14:00–22:00, ground floor 10:00–22:00. Exclusive amber jewellery, set in silver 925 and 14K gold. www.amberbelinda.com.

## Entertainment

### Guide service

Excursions in Riga. Tel: (+371)29415409 Old city, Jugendstyle (Art Nouveau). Languages: English, French, Russian, Latvian.

### Riga Out There Excursions

8/49 Hospitalu iela, Riga. Tel: (+371) 6748 2443. For those who want to discover the best of Latvia, without the fuss of organising and research, Riga Out There can help. A diverse range of options including bobsleigh and big gun shooting for the adrenaline seekers, to spa services and sightseeing for the more relaxed. Accommodation, nightlife, day trips, the list goes on. British owned with no hidden costs. www.out-there.eu.

## Health and Beauty

### DENTAL

#### Elladent Private Stomatology Clinic ■ 2 B-3

18 Vilandes iela, Riga. Tel: (+371) 6733 3004, (+371) 2 910 2595. Open every weekday: 9:00–21:00; Sat. 9:00–18:00. All kinds of stomatology (dental) services, hygiene, therapy, endodontie, surgery, prosthesis, laser whitening, children's stomatology.

Qualified doctors, modern medical equipment and latest materials. English speaking staff. www.elladent.lv.

### SPAS & BEAUTY SALONS

#### Aqua Villa ■ 4 I-2

11 Tirgoņu iela, 2nd floor, Old Riga. Tel: (+371) 6781 4686. Open Mon.–Fri. 8:00–21:00, Sat. 10:00–21:00. A quality beauty salon in the heart of Old Riga. Hairdresser, cosmetologist, body treatment, massage (non-erotic), manicure, pedicure and a luxurious spa. www.aquavillaspa.lv.

#### City Fitness ■ 6 C-4

13/8 Marijas iela; Riga. Tel: +371 67288585. Radisson SAS Daugava, 59b Agenskalna iela; Riga. Tel: +371 67808199. The sport center City Fitness was opened in 1999 and was one of the first clubs, offering its clients a professional and modern approach to fitness. The club design and conception were developed on the basis of modern world technologies. We were the first to acquaint our customers with many new exercises and are constantly working on boosting and perfecting our sport programs. www.cityfitness.lv

#### Kolonna Spa ■ 1 I-4

Above Galerija Centrs shopping centre, top floor, 16 Audēju iela, Old Riga. Tel: (+371) 701 8034, 701 8035. Right in the heart of Old Riga, this new spa is one of the biggest

in the Baltics. All manner of pampering procedures, plus hairdresser and gym. www.kolonnaspa.lv.

#### Šalini J 2

11. Novembra krastmala 29 (entrance from Peldu street, Old city) Tel: +371 67220207. Authentic eastern massages. Indian, turkish, latvian parlours. Free parking. shalini@shalini.lv www.shalini.lv

## Other Services

### LANGUAGE COURSES

#### R&V Centre of Foreign Languages ■ 2 C-4

4 Skolas iela, Riga. Tel: (+371) 6724 2200. www.runv.lv. English Language courses and private tutorials available – all with English native speakers. Preparation courses for International Examinations

### TRANSLATION/ EDITING SERVICES

#### R&V Centre of Foreign Languages ■ 2 C-4

4 Skolas iela, Riga. Tel: (+371) 6724 2200. www.runv.lv. Professional translations-notarisation available, from/to 20 of the most popular languages. Corporate and private clients welcome.

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The Baltic  
**GUIDE**







### ✓ POOR HEALTH

Latvia has been ranked as having the least consumer friendly health care system in Europe. This is according to an index compiled by the private Swedish company Health Consumer. Latvia scored 449 points on the index out of a potential 1,000. Croatia, Macedonia and Bulgaria also scored poorly on the index. The Euro Health Consumer Index assesses a range of criteria including clinical outcomes, access to treatment, waiting times and patient rights. "To be honest there are very few things Latvia does right," the president of the Health Consumer Powerhouse, Johan Hjertqvist, commented when analysing the index outcomes for Latvia.



### ✓ AIRLINE DEPARTURE TEMPORARY

Many of the airlines, which recently stopped operations at Riga International Airport, will return in the summer. That's according to Riga airport chairman Krisjanis Peters: "Several airlines have left us. We are sorry about this situation. From July 31 flights have been stopped by SAS, Armavia, but Armavia has handed its flights to Airbaltic. FlyLal has left Riga with a loud scandal on unsettled debts. AerLingus, Easyjet and Germanwings have left the airport. However, all of them, apart from FlyLal, plan to return to Riga in the summer season."



### LATVIAN SAYING OF THE MONTH:

*Jauns ar spēku,  
vecs ar prātu.*

English-language translation:  
Young with power,  
Old with a mind.

## interview



Morten Hansen makes some predictions for 2009

# What awaits Latvia in 2009?

STORY BY LARS SVANTESSON, PHOTO BY LETA

The Baltic Guide spoke to Danish economist Morten Hansen about the most recent economic developments in Latvia and what he thinks we can expect to happen in 2009. Hansen, who is based in Riga and teaches at the Stockholm School of Economics, came under fire in early 2007 when he wrote in an article in the Latvian daily Diena that it might be necessary for the country to devalue its currency.

**If you gaze into your crystal ball, what do you expect to happen to the Latvian economy in 2009?**

There will be a recession and I think everybody agrees on that. Even the central bank is predicting more than a 4 percent decline so it will not be the nicest of years. There will be unemployment but, on the other hand, inflation should come down quite a lot and that is nice of course. More unemployment is unfortunate, but inflation coming down is very nice indeed.

**What do you think the living situation will be like for ordinary people in the country then?**

It will be sort of a tough year of course, but people should try to remember that the past few years, at least for a lot of people, have been too good to be true. But most likely people will not remember that. So it will be rough for some people absolutely.

**There are analysts saying that between 30 and 60 companies go bankrupt every day in Latvia.**

I haven't heard these numbers but it is obvious that banks have been lending quite a lot and in a recession unemployment goes up and some companies go bankrupt. The demand for goods is going down. Retail sales figures have gone down by 13 percent and that is very, very much. A lot of people don't buy so much anymore.

**I suppose the most noticeable of companies going bankrupt recently was Parex bank (the second largest bank in the country), which ended up being bailed out by the government.**

I think they ended up in an unfortunate competitive situation. I would put most of the blame on the European Union. The European Union's response to this financial crisis has been very little actually. They didn't make any coordinated efforts. The whole thing started out with the Irish saying that they would support their banks 100 percent. This meant that a lot of money was moved from England to Irish banks then they were followed by other countries like Germany, my own country of Denmark and the Swedes

did it also. Banks like Swedbank and SEB are covered by the Swedish government and Parex cannot compete with that. I don't think it was a question of unhealthy business. I think it was quite a healthy bank doing good business. Very prudent and all that. But they are just sort of victims of the global financial situation.

**✓ I don't think it was a question of unhealthy business. I think it was quite a healthy bank doing good business.**

**Do you think there are other banks in Latvia that could face the same situation where a government bailout could be required?**

Who knows? Latvia's banking system is to a larger extent owned from Latvia; much more so than in Estonia. Estonia virtually has no Estonian banks so any banking crisis is then a foreign problem.

But here there are more. But, then again, it's just speculation.

**Some Latvian economists have suggested that a way out for eastern European countries could be allowing them to join the euro zone as soon as possible. What are your thoughts on this?**

Technically that is quite complicated and the European Union will say no. It is a question of fulfilling the Maastricht criteria. And that is what the EU will insist on. Unilateral euroization is not the way forward.

**The International Monetary Fund has recently said it would be willing to help Latvia with money, but what sort of concessions do you think Latvia would have to make?**

The IMF has come out with a statement saying they will support Latvia and that they have some sort of program for the country but the details remain to be seen. I hope for a comprehensive program that is forward-looking in the sense of promoting growth and stability. ■

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### ARE YOU VISITING OR LIVING IN LATVIA?

The British Embassy invites all British Citizens either visiting or resident in Latvia to register with the new Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) registration service. This new registration service (LOCATE) has been created in response to the changing face of travel. More people are travelling and living abroad today than ever before. Although the chances of being directly involved in a crisis are small, a fifth of Brits say they have been abroad during an incident and felt compelled to let someone at home know they were OK. But communication is often difficult at those times and not knowing an individual is safe can lead to worry for friends and family and a diversion of consular assistance away from those who really need it.

This new service will help to track down Britons in the event of a crisis abroad and can also be used to register details of your family and friends so that they can be contacted with news in the event of you being affected by an incident abroad. LOCATE is a two-way service and in the event of an emergency worried family members can register details of a loved one who may be caught up in the incident. If the traveller also confirms with the FCO that they are OK, LOCATE will match the two bits of information and the good news can be quickly passed to relatives.

All **British citizens resident in Latvia** are reminded that they should consider registering with LOCATE. While registration is not mandatory it will allow the Embassy to contact you directly in the event of an emergency or pass on messages of general interest. While previous registrations were automatically migrated to LOCATE not all contained the necessary details. If you do not re-register with LOCATE your current registration will automatically be deleted after one year. Once you have registered with LOCATE the system will automatically generate an annual message requesting confirmation that registration is still required. Once registered please keep your registration up-to-date - especially if you change e-mail addresses.

To register please go to: <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travelling-and-living-overseas/Locate/>

If you are having problems in registering on LOCATE our Consular Staff will be more than happy to give advice. This can be done either in person by calling at the Consular Office at 5 Alunana Street, Riga, by phoning (Tel: 6777 4700) or by e-mail at [british.embassy@apollo.lv](mailto:british.embassy@apollo.lv)



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