

LATVIA

# INCONGRUOUS RIGA

*Medieval vs. modern, East vs. West:  
A city with a split personality*



By JIM WAKE

*Special To The News*

In a closet-size office in a fairly run-down building in Riga's Old Town, the young Canadian-Estonian journalist confided his skepticism about Latvia's embrace of the West.

"From the perspective of a North American," he said, "these 50 years have changed them. They want to go back to the way it was, but that's not possible. Too much has happened during the last 50 years."

In a drab high-rise across the Daugava River, a Latvian journalist saw it rather differently. "We are part of Europe, of course," said Ilze Arklina. "Fifty years is just a short time. It hasn't changed us that much. We belong in Europe."

And that is Riga in a nutshell, best understood as a city of stark and often bizarre contrasts: between medieval and modern, between a progression of cultures that have tugged at it from every direction, between East and West, Soviet and European, and these days, exhilarating boom times and grinding poverty.

That's nothing new. Riga has always been many cities at once. Livs, Germans, Poles, Swedes, Russians, Soviets (as opposed to Russians) and Latvians have all rule at one time or another, and the city is both architecturally and culturally an eclectic mix, not quite jarring but not quite harmonious either.

For a visitor, the Old City (Vecrīga) is the place to begin exploring. When German traders and crusaders arrived in the 12th century, the site was occupied by two Liv fishing villages, but they were quickly absorbed, and for hundreds of years, this was a very German city. Even when German political power waned and the Poles, Swedes and Russians ruled, the German merchants wielded effective control.

Much of the German flavor remains, with dozens of old stone and half-timbered houses from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There's a row of three stone



PHOTOS BY JIM WAKE

A polished star of David carved into rough granite marks the old Jewish cemetery.

houses called the "Three Brothers" that are especially famous. It's just a few steps to St. Jacob's Church, which still retains much of its 13th century interior. Nearby is the Dom Cathedral, even older, and the large, open Dom Square.

In the two short blocks between the two churches, the striking eclecticism of Riga is on display — a mix of architectural styles spanning the centuries.

The eclecticism of the architecture is mirrored in the life on the street. In this district, government workers cross paths with the handsome entrepreneurial types with their padded suits, leather jackets, cellular phones and, typically, a strange sort of Elvis Presley curl to the lip that may well be hereditary.

The bankers gawk at the female office workers, who seem to have synthesized a collective fashion sensibility blending hints

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of Catherine Deneuve with bits of Bjork and Madonna — exotically beautiful, tending toward the Nordic, and frequently provocative.

Near the church an accordionist performs, and there in front of the stock exchange, a homeless mother appeals for a few coins.

You're as likely to hear Russian spoken as Latvian; nearly two thirds of the city's 900,000 residents are native Russian speakers. Most have been deprived of citizenship by a strong nationalist block in the parliament, but few are inclined to emigrate.

"If I go there, I don't feel like them," explained an ethnic Russian university student. Latvian culture, he said, had changed Latvia's Russians. "We even speak different."

The post-Soviet boom has brought a stunning transformation of the business climate in Riga, as a very free-wheeling variety of capitalism rushes in to fill the vacuum left by the sudden retreat of the Soviets.

Restaurants, cafes, electronics shops, travel agencies, car rental offices, galleries and fashionable boutiques are proliferating at a dizzying pace, and revealingly, McDonald's has set up in a prime location.

It's quite a change since the Soviet days, when there was only one decent restaurant in the city, and little to buy beyond shoddy Soviet products. Now, Nikes, Levis and Sony TVs are available in abundance, but sadly, it is almost impossible to find anything manufactured in the former Soviet Union.

Poking around the edges of the Old Town, particularly in the small streets south of St. Peter's Church, the atmosphere is more thoroughly "old," certainly more ramshackle, and in some ways, rather more charming. Here the streets are quieter, the fashionable boutiques co-exist alongside old-fashioned apothecaries, and 300-year-old

warehouses lean out over the streets.

Beyond a green belt where the old city fortifications once stood, a more modern version of the Old Town's architectural eclecticism dominates the new city. Especially notable is an idiosyncratic vari-

ant of *jugendstil*, characterized by undulating facades and structural elements like columns and pediments incorporating mythical creatures, voluptuous women and muscular men.

Interspersed among these monuments are simple two-story wooden houses, imposing neoclassical edifices and Soviet monstrosities, such as the high-rise Latvija Hotel, and further away from the center, the Academy of Sciences, a high-rise monument to Stalinist kitsch. Some of the best examples of Latvian *Jugendstil* line Elizabetes iela (street) and Alberta iela.

Just to the south of the Old Town is one of the most ingenious and effective military conversion projects every undertaken: Riga's central market. The market is housed in five huge zeppelin hangars dating back to World War I.

One of Europe's largest markets, it is a spectacular mix of sights, sounds, smells and flavors,



Buffalo News





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On the fringes of Riga's central market, men and women, many of them elderly, peddle articles of clothing.

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and despite the collapse of the Soviet Union still a meeting ground for Tadzhiks, Uzbeks, Azeris, Georgians, Armenians, Russians, Latvians, and many others.

On the fringes of the market is a reminder that the transition to a market economy has not been painless — men and women, many of them elderly, peddle a few pathetic articles of clothing to passers-by, presumably trying to earn enough to bridge the gap between their meager pensions and the actual cost of living.

The further you get away from the center of Riga, the closer you get to Soviet Russia. Riga may be a city in transition, but it still has a long way to go, and a mile or two out from Riga's Old Town, on both sides of the river, it's a very different world with a very different culture.

Nearly all the main attractions of Riga are in or near the compact Old Town, but it is impossible to get a sense of Riga's split personality without wandering into the Russian neighborhoods outside the core.

Some have existed since the last century and have an odd charm with their cobbled streets and faded wooden buildings. Others were built to house the waves of Russian immigrants arriving in the fifties, sixties and seventies to work in the factories, and have the dreary look of high rise concrete industrial parks.

The shops, restaurants and cafes here have a completely different ambience from the cosmopolitan establishments just a few miles away.

There are a couple of districts of particular note. In the middle of the bustling city, Kipsala, a small island in the Daugava River, manages to retain an almost village-like calm, with quaint wooden homes set among trees and back yards overlooking the river.

The Mascava District, southeast of the Old Town along Mascavas Street, was the center of Riga's large Jewish community until World War II, but nearly all the Jews were murdered during the war, and the district is now a predominantly Russian neighborhood, containing many well-reserved wooden buildings.

Up Ebreju Street, which runs off Mascavas Street, is a haunting

symbol — one large piece of rough granite with a star of David carved into a polished facet, marking the old Jewish cemetery. It is a lovely location, three or four acres perched on a small knoll with many old trees — but no gravestones.

Riga is a city that reveals itself a bit grudgingly, but persistent exploration is worth the effort. Much is accessible by walking, and a fine public transportation network connects the center to the outlying areas, where one finds vast stretches of pine and birch forests crisscrossed by foot paths.

A bit farther away are the beaches of the seaside resort towns know collectively as Jurmala, or less developed stretches of beach extending along the Gulf of Riga just to the east and west of the mouth of the Daugava.

The beach, where the sand unambiguously meets the Baltic, is a highly recommended destination for contemplating Riga's enigmatic incongruities.

## Travel information

Latvian is the official language, but two-thirds of Riga's residents are native Russian-speakers. English is spoken in hotels, restaurants, and many shops.

The Latvian currency is the "lat." One lat is just a little less than \$2. 100 "santimi" equal 1 lat. Change money at any of the exchange bureaus ("valutas maina") located around town.

"Riga in Your Pocket" is an outstanding pocket guide to Riga's attractions and provides up-to-date information on the ever-changing situation, including new restaurants and hotels, and tips on traveling around the country. Available from hotels and news stands for about \$1 (.5 lats). Also recommended: Lonely Planet's "Baltic States" guide.

Latvia is overhauling its entire phone system, which means much confusion as numbers change. The Latvia country code is 371, Riga city code is 2. Check "Riga in Your Pocket" for information on how to dial between the old and the new systems and how to reach telephones outside of Riga.

Buy tickets for buses, trams and trolley buses (8 santimi flat rate) at news stands and kiosks.