

LATVIA – Advice from Fulbright Alumni

The following are extracts from Fulbright Grantee Reports and are not meant to reflect the views of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), its cooperating agencies, or the U.S. Embassy.

Topics covered below include:

- Cultural notes
- Personal Interactions and Language
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Cultural notes

Family life vs. career or business life are very separate entities for most Latvians whereas in America it is more customary to mix business with personal life.

One aspect of local culture at work and outside of work is dress. Latvians, especially women, are very fashion conscious. The stiletto heels on cobblestone streets are famous. While there is no need to become a slave to fashion, it's advisable to dress business casual at work. Outside of work Latvians dress neatly as well. You will not find sweatpants worn on the street. Gym shoes are for college age students and younger.

Personal Interactions and Language

Realize that those around you are alert to you but probably will not meet your gaze or speak to you, even if you address them. Don't take this personally. However, there may be times when you and a stranger witness an amusing event, such as a cute kitten or a child, and you both will respond by smiling to yourself. When at these times your eyes meet, you will detect a warmth, an exchange, and an understanding that is very special. Always try to be gracious and flexible when things don't go your way or as you expect. You may not find every convenience you are accustomed to enjoying back home, but if you keep an open mind you will find that the local customs work very well.

When you enter a shop, greet the proprietor with "good morning" or some such, and as you depart, say "thank you." You may be fortunate to experience acts of extreme kindness by strangers, perhaps especially when you're having a tough day. For example, you cannot find what you want to buy, but the vendor leaves her station and walks three shops down to ask another vendor if she has what you need. Savor the sweetness of such moments and seek opportunities to be of help to others.

Many locals do not speak English. Having an English/Latvian dictionary at hand will give you some confidence and make things easier.

University Life

Students relish working in teams when there is real work to be done. They enjoy activities that reveal team dynamics. Project planning is said to be weak, so activities that promote project planning, are good. Some colleagues have expressed that the traditional lecture format will result in large absences. I made it clear to my class from the first day that to get the most out of this class (teamwork, self management) they had to be in class. 95% complied with my suggestion. I suggest you have an honest discussion with the class, shortly after the class has started and the ice has been broken about how the class is going and what is and what is not working. I did this via a confidential plus delta and changed several things. Language was problematic, so I was happy to discover that these students would discuss English readings in small groups and give me a list of key points after their discussions. These key points showed me clearly they were reading and understanding the readings. I encouraged them to discuss things and to present reports in Latvian, giving me brief summaries in English. Eventually, several began to use English more and more, especially in written work.

In the institutions where I taught and gave lectures there were always computers and LCD projectors. Microsoft Office is standard. Most instructors put PowerPoint presentations on a flashdrive and just take it to class. The schools all had technology people that were very helpful. Many schools still have overhead projectors (but bring pens from home) and SmartBoards are becoming more and more common.

Social Life

I think is very important is to bring small gifts from your institution or city. I gave a couple of guest lectures and they always gave me a nice pen, keychain, cup with the institution or city insignia. I arranged to have CDs of my schools choir sent and gave those as parting gifts.

Housing

Our apartment was very modern and quite roomy by Latvian standards but be aware that the washer/dryer units are usually very small and with a family of five it seemed to be a constant issue to keep clothes clean without running the unit more than 8-10 hours per day. Also, the new US Embassy is on the edge of town and a bit more of a challenge to get to as opposed to the old Embassy which was located in the center of Riga.

Banking

Before I went to Latvia I was given to understand it's a cash society. While this certainly was the case at the outdoor markets, everywhere else, especially grocery stores, credit cards (or debit cards, probably) were frequently used. If your visit is prolonged, you can apply for a "loyalty card" similar to what American grocery chains use.

SunTrust, my bank, began in January of 2011 charging me 3% on every ATM withdrawal plus a \$5 transaction fee for each ATM use. This adds up to hundreds of dollars. I urge participants to shop around for the best international money deals. A small community bank may be more customer friendly than a large bank. My bank failed to respond to my e-mails, cut off my ATM access in Croatia, etc. I did use cash

a lot to avoid even more fees from credit card companies like AMEX or Visa, etc. I suggest finding a credit card that has no fees for international use.

Debit cards and credit cards are accepted in most places (not the markets though). It is possible to find cards that do not charge currency conversion fees. To make on-line payments an account at a local bank is necessary. This was the only way to make payments for fees at the International School. I have an account with Swedbank and I was very satisfied with their services.

Street Life

Be flexible as to where you shop, and try a variety of stores to find best prices, products, and opportunities for seeing the culture. The local shopping malls on Saturday afternoon often have very interesting entertainment such as teen fashion shows with great music. Even if you're not fond of museums, visit your local museum as it probably will offer great insights into ancient and recent history of the region. This was definitely the case in Liepaja, Latvia.

When you go out, take along some tissues because the presence of toilet paper is not guaranteed.

Transportation

When you use public transportation, be informed on their rules for currencies they will or will not accept as fares. Some bills/coins may be too big for them to make change easily and they will refuse you, perhaps gruffly if a sign above your head states the rules.

Taxis (for example in Riga) will charge foreigners (Americans anyway) a higher fare than locals. I learned this when I was befriended by a young man who saw I needed a taxi after exiting the Liepaja-Riga bus. He made arrangements for me, and I saved half the \$10 fare.

To get to and from airport use bus 22 if traveling light and AirBaltic shuttle if you have suitcases. If you are planning a trip to St. Petersburg, use a travel agent to do the visa paperwork. Bring thermal underwear.

Safety

Latvia and Riga are very safe. There are of course areas to avoid. Crime is mostly pickpockets and pursesnatchers. Be careful getting in and out of public transportation because this is a prime place to get robbed.

Websites and other helpful resources

There is a lot of good information at: <http://www.rigathisweek.lv/>

<http://www.inyourpocket.com/latvia/riga>

www.rigalatvia.net - a very informative website run by US ex-pat. Michael Johnson. This site is full of tourist info pertaining to all aspects of the country.

www.rigassatiksm.lv - Riga bus, tram and trolleybus website, a must for any Riga grantee.

www.ldz.lv - country train schedule website. A very safe a reliable method to travel throughout the country.

For discovering the music of a country, I found some wonderful sites on YouTube. I also used the various travel websites. You are welcome to visit my blog at <http://travelwithkay.blogspot.com>

Getting around Riga: <http://www.rigassatiksm.lv>

Getting around Latvia and neighboring countries: <http://www.autoosta.lv/> <http://www.1188.lv/>
<http://www.luxexpress.eu/lang/lv/>

Finding inexpensive accommodations in Latvia and neighboring countries: <http://www.booking.com/>
<http://www.tripadvisor.com/>

Movie schedule at Forum Cinema in Riga: <http://www.forumcinemas.lv/>

Tickets for hockey games and concerts: <http://www.bilesuserviss.lv/>

You can order travel books about the Baltics on-line. Riga-in-your-pocket had good suggestions too about places to visit, restaurants etc.