The Republic of Latvia was founded on November 18, 1918. Despite occupations and rule by the Soviet Union (1940-1941, 1945-1991) and Nazi Germany (1941-1945), Latvia has been continuously recognized as a sovereign state since 1920. On May 4, 1990, the Singing Revolution was crowned by the Declaration of Independence, which initiated a transition period. On August 21, 1991, Latvia regained full independence. Re-establishing international diplomatic ties and joining the United Nations followed suit. Latvia was admitted to the WTO in 1998 and became a member of the European Union and NATO in 2004.

The name "Latvija" comes from the ancient Latgallians, one of four Indo-European Baltic tribes, who along with Couronians, Selonians, and Semigallians formed the ethnic core of today’s Latvian people.

NATIONAL HOLIDAY
November 18, the date of the proclamation of Latvia’s independence in 1918.

GEOGRAPHY
Latvia is the central country of the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and is located in northeastern Europe on the east coast of the Baltic Sea. The country’s geographic coordinates are 57°00’N latitude and 25°00’E longitude. Latvia’s territory consists of fertile lowland plains and moderate hills, with most of its territory around 100 meters above sea level. The country has vast forested areas, an extensive network of rivers, thousands of lakes, and hundreds of kilometers of virgin seashore lined by pine growths, dunes, and white sandy beaches.

LOCATION
Latvia is bordered by Estonia to the north, Russia to the east, Lithuania to the south, and the Baltic Sea to the west. The country’s strategic location has made it an international crossroad for trade, commerce, and cultural exchange since ancient times. Vikings followed the ‘Amber Road’ through Latvian territory along the Daugava River to reach Byzantium and the Mediterranean Sea. Today, Latvia has become the Eastern border of the European Union and a busy transit crossing due to its ice-free ports, railways, and Riga airport.

THE COAT OF ARMS
Latvia’s coat of arms combines the traditional heraldic symbols of Latvian statehood and national identity – three stars, the sun, the sea, and oak leaves. Latvia’s historical districts of Kurzeme and Zemgale are represented by a red lion, while Vidzeme and Latgale are depicted by a silver griffin.

THE FLAG
The maroon-white-maroon flag of Latvia is one of the oldest in the world and dates back to a battle near Cēsis in the 13th century. According to a legend, the flag originated from a white sheet used to carry a mortally wounded Latvian tribal chief from the battlefield. Soaked with his blood on two sides, the warrior’s sheet was hoisted as a banner and led his soldiers to victory.

FACT SHEET ON LATVIA
Republic of Latvia
LATVIJAS REPUBLIKA
Latvian: Latvija
Lithuanian: Latvija
Estonian: Läti
German: Lettland
French: Lettonie
Spanish: Letonia
Russian: Латвия
Swedish: Latvia
Chinese: 拉脱维亚
Japanese: ラトビア
Arabic: لاتفيا

COUNTRY CODE: LV
CALLING CODE: +371
INTERNET TLD: .LV (.EU)
TIME ZONE: EET (UTC+2) EEST (UTC+3)
WEIGHTS AND MEASURES: Metric

Area: 64,589 sq km or 24,937 sq miles
Regions: Kurzeme, Zemgale, Vidzeme, Latgale
Total national border length: 1,862 km
Length of Latvia’s Baltic coastline: 494 km
Largest lake: Lubāns, 80.7 sq km
Deepest lake: Drīdzis, 65.1 metres
Longest river within Latvian territory: the Gauja, 452 km

Largest river to flow through Latvian territory: the Daugava, with a total length of 1,005 km (352 km within Latvian territory)
Highest point: Gaiziņkalns, 311.6 metres
1 km = 0.62 mile; 1 m = 39.37 inches
NATURE

With over 44 percent of its territory covered by forests, a vast network of free-flowing rivers, and thousands of lakes, Latvia is one of Europe's best-preserved havens for a wide variety of wildlife. Over 27 thousand species of flora and fauna thrive in natural settings that are still relatively undisturbed by man. Many rare species, such as the black stork and lesser spotted eagle, make their homes in Latvia's mixed forests, marshes, and meadows. There is also an abundance of otters, beavers, lynx, and wolves in Latvia, as well as a great concentration of deer, elk, fox, and wild boar. Bird-watching is particularly rewarding in Latvia, especially in the coastal areas and wetlands during annual migration periods.

CLIMATE

Latvia's weather features a temperate maritime climate, with mild summers, moderate winters, and frequently high levels of humidity and precipitation.

POPULATION

Latvians are the indigenous people of Latvia, and the Finno-Ugric Livs (or Livonians) are the only indigenous minority. Latvia's present ethnic mix is largely a result of massive post-war immigration, which has resulted in a decline in the share of ethnic Latvians from 77% in 1935 to 59% in 2009.

Population in 2010: 2,248,374
Urban: 66%. Rural: 32%

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE: LATVIAN

Latvian is a language of the Baltic group which belongs to the Indo-European language family. Its only linguistic relative is Lithuanian, considered to be among the oldest and least changed of all living Indo-European languages in the world. It is estimated that 1.5 million people worldwide use Latvian as their primary language. English and Russian are widely spoken throughout Latvia, while German, French, and the Scandinavian languages are also frequently heard.

GOVERNMENT

Latvia is a democratic, parliamentary republic. Legislative power is in the hands of the single chamber, the Saeima, which has 100 deputies. Parliamentary elections are held every 4 years. Latvia's head of state, the President, is elected by the Saeima for a period of 4 years. The President signs laws, nominates the Prime Minister to be approved by the Saeima, and performs representative functions.

EDUCATION

Latvia has traditionally had one of the highest per capita ratios of students in the world. The state guarantees free primary and secondary school education and offers scholarships for higher education. Foreign students from EU countries pay the same fees as permanent residents of Latvia, and degrees from Latvian educational institutions are recognized internationally. Doctorates can be received in the social sciences, natural sciences, law, as well as technical and humanitarian sciences. Latvia also has state-financed ethnic minority schools, where classes are taught in Belorussian, Estonian, Hebrew, Lithuanian, Polish, Roma, Russian, and Ukrainian.

LARGEST RELIGIOUS CONFESSIONS:

Evangelic Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Russian Orthodox. Since the 16th century Reformation, the Lutheran church has played a leading role in Latvia.

ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Latvia has proportional representation based on party lists and a 5% vote threshold. There is universal suffrage for Latvian citizens over the age of 18.

FOREIGN POLICY

Latvia joined the European Union and NATO in 2004. The country has been an active member both in promoting global security and prosperity as well as in reducing crises and conflict. Cooperation with its neighbors in the Baltic Sea region is a priority for Latvia, and development of strategic global ties is a goal.
THE CAPITAL, RĪGA
Latvia’s political, economic, and culture center is Rīga, where more than one third of Latvia’s population (703,000) lives and works. Rīga’s elegant Old Town and distinctive Art Nouveau architecture serve as a stimulating setting for a vibrant modern business and cultural life. Founded in 1201, this former Hanseatic League member is one of the oldest medieval cities in Europe and has been listed by UNESCO as one of the world’s most important cultural and architectural sites. As a star of the dynamic Baltic Sea region, Rīga has hosted NATO summit, world hockey championships, the Eurovision Song Contest, and many other large-scale international events. Rīga International Airport is one of the fastest growing travel hubs in Europe.

PORTS
Latvia’s three major ports – Rīga, Ventspils, and Liepāja – service a wide range of global shipping needs. Ventspils is one of the busiest ports in the Baltic Sea region and one of Europe’s leading ports in terms of cargo turnover.

PRODUCTION SECTORS
Information technologies, chemical and pharmaceutical industries, electronics, mechanical engineering, timber and construction, food processing, textiles, fishery, and agriculture.

TRADE
The countries of the EU remain Latvia’s main trading partners (77.8 % in 2009), followed by the CIS countries (13.9% in 2009). Wood and metal products, agricultural goods, machinery, electrical equipment, and chemical products are Latvia’s main exports.

FINANCIAL SECTOR
The Bank of Latvia is the central bank of Latvia and a participant of the European System of Central Banks. Since Latvia joined the EU, more than 20 commercial banks have been operating in the country, offering a full array of banking services. Many banks have established an extensive network of ATMs throughout the country and offer international Internet and mobile banking services.

CURRENCY
Name: Lats
Code: LVL
Symbol: Ls
Latvia’s national currency is the lats, consisting of 100 santims. Banknotes have nominal values of 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, and 500 lats, while coins have nominal values of 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, and 50 santims, and 1, 2, and 100 lats. The lats was reintroduced in 1993 and has been one of Europe’s most stable and secure currencies.
**LATVIAN FOODS**

Among Latvia’s traditionally most popular national foods are caraway cheese, gray peas with bacon, bacon-filled pastries, and a special rye bread prepared according to ancient recipes. Latvian rye bread is a staple for most of the population, and a loaf of this delicious bread is one of Latvia’s most popular food “souvenirs.”

---

**"Jaņi" - THE MOST LATVIAN HOLIDAY**

In Latvia, the celebration of the summer solstice is the oldest and most beloved traditional holiday. The nearly three-day-long midsummer fest culminates on June 24, the day known to Latvians as Jaņi. Most leave the cities to gather with family and friends around bonfires, where special foods, beverages, songs, dances, and rituals enrich the celebration of the setting and rising of the midsummer sun.

---

**DISTINGUISHED INDIVIDUALS**

**WRITER:** Rainis (real name Jānis Plietkāns, 1865-1929), Latvia’s most distinguished and celebrated writer of poetry and plays, also named Latvia’s “Man of the 20th Century.”

**COMPOSERS, MUSICIANS:** Pēteris Vasks (1946) since the 1990s has been recognized as one of the world’s leading contemporary composers. Mariss Jansons (1943) and Andris Nelsons (1978) are two of the most celebrated conductors on global stages. The choirs State Choir Latvija and Kamēr… have been the winners of numerous international festivals and contests.

**PAINTERS:** Mark Rothko (1903-1970), born in Eastern Latvia, is considered one of the preeminent artists of his generation and viewed as the pioneer of Abstract Expressionism. Janis Rozentāls (1866-1916) and Vilhelms Purvītis (1872-1945), the most widely recognized and respected Latvian painters, founded the Latvian school of painting.

**SCIENTIST:** Viktors Kalnbērs (1928) was the first to perform full gender reassignment surgery in the former Soviet Union, and developed the technique that is still in use today.

**ATHLETES:** Jānis Lūsis (1939), the only Latvian athlete (javelin) to win all three Olympic medals – gold, silver, and bronze. Māris Stroombergs (1987), the first ever Olympic BMX champion. Artūrs Irbe (1967), an NHL veteran and member of the International Ice Hockey Federation Hall of Fame. Ineta Radēviča (1981), gold medal in women’s long jump at the 2010 European Athletics Champion, bronze at the 2011 World Championships in Athletics. Vadsims Vasiljevs (1982), silver medal in men’s javelin throw at the 2004 Summer Olympics.

**POPULAR MUSIC:** Raimonds Pauls (1936), composer and pianist who has written over 500 songs and compositions, many recorded internationally. Brainstorm, the most popular and widely touring Latvian pop band, founded in 1989. Instrument, a new electro indie-pop duo composed of two classically trained musicians, whose debut album was recorded at the famous Greenhouse Studios in Iceland.

---

For further information please contact the Latvian Embassy or Consulate in your country, or the Latvian Institute:

**Latvian Institute:**

Latvijas institūts, Pils iela 21, Rīga, LV 1050, Latvia.
Phone: (+371) 6750-3663
Fax: (+371) 6750-3669
E-mail: info@li.lv
Internet: www.letas.lv, www.latvia.travel
Twitter: @LatviaInstitute

**Photo credits:**


©The Latvian Institute, 2011