

# LATVIA UNBOUND RIGA & ITS SURROUNDINGS

MONDAY 9 – SATURDAY 14 SEPTEMBER 2019 (6 DAYS)

LECTURER: PETERIS STUMBURS

£1870

- **Leisurely visit to Riga, the most handsome of the Baltic States' capitals**
- **Stunning Rundale Palace in western Latvia included**
- **A day enjoying the spectacular Autumnal Gauja National Park**
- **Very comfortable hotel located in the heart of the old historic centre**
- **Excellent local guide will provide insights into the Baltic States – their past, present and future**



Latvia, Rundale Palace & Gardens

## OVERVIEW

It is a remarkable testament to the spirit and tenacity of the Latvians that their country exists at all. Its origins are many and varied: Baltic and Finno-Ugric tribes settled what is now Latvia and Estonia in pre-Viking times; then in the early 1200s German knights arrived, initiating a period of foreign dominance which lasted until the late twentieth century. These Teutonic knights created the Livonian Order, introduced Christianity and controlled all the land until their power was eventually broken, replaced by a new entity, the Duchy of Kurland in the late sixteenth century. There then began a long period of varied external dominance as the Swedish, Polish and Russian kingdoms all sought to control this agriculturally wealthy area, absorbing the long established and much disliked German-speaking, land-owning elite within their ranks.

From the eighteenth century Russia was the controlling power until the fall of the Romanovs in 1917. Briefly independent between the two World Wars, in 1940 Latvia became a satellite state of the Soviet Union, which it remained until, with the other Baltic States, it dramatically regained independence in 1991. It is a fascinating story hardly ever told beyond the shores of the Baltic.

Since those momentous events, Latvia has been transformed in a most positive fashion. It has embraced democracy, strengthened its ties with the west and developed a remarkably confident and successful tourism business. Riga is the most handsome of the three Baltic States' capitals and it offers visitors an unspoilt, yet elegant and sophisticated base from which to explore handsome towns and cities and unspoilt countryside.

The centre of Riga is compact and elegant, built on the banks of the River Daugava, still navigable and a living link to its past as part of the great Hanseatic League of trading cities. The old Medieval street pattern hosts churches, civic buildings and noble palaces of great interest and charm. In the early 1900s a remarkable school of Art Nouveau took hold and the results, still surviving and well preserved, are a surprise. There are also many small and excellent museums which allow one to be stimulated without being overwhelmed or exhausted.

The Latvian countryside is unspoilt and full of surprises. The country palace at Rundale is one of the great unknown treasures of the Baltic States. Built for the Duke of Courland, lover of Empress Anne of Russia, it was designed by her court architect, Rastrelli. It is a stunning ensemble where the palace, contents and surrounding gardens will enchant even the most jaded eye. In contrast, the Gauja Valley National Park hosts medieval castles guarding the eastern approaches to Riga. In autumn it is one of the wonders of the Baltic with its stunning colours.

We stay at the **5\* Grand Palace Hotel**, Riga's finest. It is ideally situated in the centre of the old historic district, within easy walking distance of all the major places we shall visit. Riga has many good restaurants and the quality of the food is excellent.

## ITINERARY OUTLINE

**Day 1:** Monday 9 September – We fly from Gatwick to **Riga**, arriving in the evening. Latvia is two hours ahead of UK time. We transfer by coach into the city and check into our hotel.

**Day 2:** Tuesday 10 September – After breakfast we walk through the historic centre to the delightful **Central Park** where we embark on a gentle **Canal and River Cruise**. This will be the ideal introduction to the city. Pausing for lunch (not included) we spend the afternoon exploring the old central area. This is dominated by a series of fine brick-built churches, old merchant houses with characteristic stepped gables and winding cobbled streets. Riga's Romanesque **Cathedral** is early thirteenth century and its austere interior betrays the strong Lutheran presence in Latvia – decorative excess is not much found in the local churches. However, the dominant church is **St Peter's**, where its three-tiered spire is the city's much admired symbol. We have a group dinner in a local restaurant – wine, water and coffee are included with all group lunches and dinners.

**Day 3:** Wednesday 11 September – The Duchy of Kourland (Courland) was created in the sixteenth century from the fertile lands of western Latvia. It was 'absorbed' by Russia under Peter the Great through a dynastic marriage between his niece, Anna and the last local duke. When Anna became Empress of Russia in 1730, she presented the duchy to her court favourite, Ernst Johann von Burin. He celebrated by commissioning a series of palaces of which the most famous is **Rundale**, where we spend the day. It is quite simply, sumptuous. The original design was commissioned from the Imperial favourite, Bartolomeo Rastrelli, the architect of the Winter Palace in St Petersburg. However, the usual over gilded interiors of his Russian work are not to be found at Rundale as the Duke spent a long 'exile' in Siberia under Empress Elizabeth. When he was restored to his Duchy under Catherine the Great, a more restrained style was in vogue, hence the palace's remarkable beauty. The palace and surrounding grounds have now been fully restored and it is all quite amazing. After our visit we have lunch at the palace, followed by time in the wonderful gardens. We return to Riga and the late afternoon and evening will be free.

**Day 4:** Thursday 12 September – We travel to the **Gauja National Park**, a steep sided river valley, heavily forested and famed in northern Europe for the beauty of its autumnal colour. The original German settlers built several castles here to defend their borders. On arrival we visit **Sigulda Castle**, a thirteenth century Livonian Order fortress and stroll round the surrounding settlement. On the opposite side of the river valley (to which we cross by cable car) we travel to **Turaida Museum Reserve** where the principal building is the Bishop of Riga's restored thirteenth century fortress. It contains an atmospheric museum and in the surrounding park we shall find a series of buildings that chart the development of local architectural styles. We have a group lunch in an atmospheric local restaurant and the evening will be free.

**Day 5:** Friday 13 September – We resume our exploration of Riga with a visit to the recently refurbished **Latvian National Museum of Art** before continuing to the part of the city famed for its Art Nouveau buildings, including a visit to the **Art Nouveau Museum**. After a break for lunch (not included), the rest of the afternoon will be free for your own explorations. Our final group dinner will be in an excellent local restaurant.

**Day 6:** Saturday 14 September – We visit the newly opened **Art Museum** in the old **Riga Stock Exchange** building. Though the collection is not large, it is very well chosen and displayed - in fact, a delight. There will be some free time for lunch (not included) after which we return to Riga airport for our flight home to Gatwick.

**Peteris Stumburs**, who will be our local guide, has worked for CICERONI before. Born in Latvia, he works as a freelancer in a variety of areas including travel. His personal experience of his country is a vivid reflection of its history and his insight into the transformation of Latvia and its neighbours in recent years is sure to be of great interest to all of us.

## PRACTICALITIES

**Price** £1870    **Price without Flights** £1695    **Deposit** £275    **Single Supplement** £240 (Double Room for Sole Use)

**Hotel** 5 nights with breakfast at the 5\* Grand Palace Hotel

**Flights** Air Baltic

Outward: **BT654** Depart London Gatwick **1725**, arrive Riga **2205**

Return: **BT653** Depart Riga **1550**, arrive London Gatwick **1640**

**Price includes** 2 dinners & 2 lunches with wine, water & coffee, all local transfers, entry fees & gratuities, services of our local guide, Peteris Stumburs & tour manager, Stephen Brook

**Not included** Travel to/from Gatwick, 2 dinners & 2 lunches



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