

# LATVIA

Half a century ago, Latvia's economy depended on fishing and agriculture, but the Soviets, who controlled the country from 1940 to 1991, imported heavy industry. Now, having shaken off Russia's dominance, Latvia is privatizing those industries. Meanwhile in Riga, the country's capital, entrepreneurs are launching service businesses, giving the town a boomtown energy housed in old art nouveau buildings. Despite ancient castles and churches preserved around the country—and beaches that were once favorites of Russian czars—Latvia sees relatively few tourists, and its artists and writers are unsung beyond its borders. Even so, Latvians are deeply proud of their centuries-old culture.

## **AFS & Your Experience**

AFS Latvia has been in existence since 1991. About 30 AFS volunteers in five chapters across the country work hard year-round to provide you with the most satisfying intercultural experience possible. During the school year, AFS Latvia hosts approximately 25 AFSers from as many as 15 countries.

AFS will be at your side throughout your intercultural exchange. Even before leaving your home country, you will participate in organized AFS orientations and have the assistance of experienced AFS volunteers. Once in your host country, you can rely on your local volunteer contact and other chapter volunteers to support you in your experience. Together we will ensure that you have an incredible experience abroad.

## **Landing in Latvia**

When you land in Riga, the capital of Latvia, you and your fellow AFSers will pass through customs and be met by AFS Latvia staff and volunteers.

## **Living in Latvia**

### **Lifestyle and Family Living**

Latvian traditions have formed strong bonds between three generations of family members. In most families where both parents work, it is the grandmother who assumes the main responsibility for maintaining the household and looking after the children. Latvian families like to spend a lot of time together.

Urban families frequently spend weekends in their summer homes in the country, and they will expect their AFSer to accompany them. Since urban apartments are often small and Latvian custom requires that guests be served tea or coffee, bringing a large number of guests home is considered impolite.

The Latvian population is made up of several ethnic groups, and their temperaments and family traditions can differ. In general, parents are protective of their children and expect them to help with the housework and to keep them informed about when they are going out and where they are going. Whether in the city or country, Latvians enjoy visiting families and friends on weekends.

While maintaining many traditions, Latvians also find that their lives are changing through technology, especially computers, mobile phones, satellite TV, e-commerce and banking services.

Latvian host families, like AFS host families worldwide, are not paid. They open their homes to students in order to share their community and culture as well as to enrich their own family lives.

### **Dress and Appearance**

Latvian teenagers like to dress casually; they wear T-shirts and jeans or corduroys. For special occasions more formal dress is expected: for girls a dress or blouse and skirt; for boys a jacket, slacks and tie. You should also bring a pair of good, comfortable walking shoes. For the winter months, you will need a warm waterproof coat, heavy boots, sweaters, mittens and warm socks. Students are not required to wear uniforms at school.

### **Diet and Meals**

Meat and potatoes are a major part of the diet. Other popular foods are: fried meat cutlets and pastries, as well as smoked fish (flounder, eel, herring, and pilchards), dairy products, eggs, and grains. Soups and sausages are also popular. In summer and autumn, fresh berry pies and tarts are abundant. Vegetarians are hard to place in Latvia. Fresh vegetables tend to be eaten in season only, although cabbage is a year-round staple. A typical meal might consist of *zirni* (brown peas served with a sauce made from ham) and *karbonade* (fried pork with mashed potatoes). Other favorites include pancakes filled with fruit or *biezpiens* (similar to cottage cheese) and *soljanka* (a hearty soup made with meat and red beets).

In Latvian families it is very important to sit together for a meal. According to Latvia's oral traditions, food was to be served by a virtuous hostess on a clean table with a generous hand. The male head of the household would cut the first slice of bread; members of the household would bow their heads out of respect for the leader. In quiet voices they would thank God and the giver. Bread was the fruit of work, which is holy in Latvian culture. It is considered inappropriate for individuals to request special foods, to prepare separate food for themselves or to raid the refrigerator.

The Latvian table will always surprise you. Foods vary from region to region, during different holidays and seasons and often symbolize traditions or beliefs.

### **School**

School runs from September through May. Classes are Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. There are 30 to 38 class sessions per week, and classes run 40 to 45 minutes with 10-minute breaks in between. Students are expected to attend classes regularly. There are two terms separated by a three-week vacation at Christmas. There are weeklong holidays in mid-October and at Easter.

### **Teen Life**

School is the center of student social life in Latvia. You can participate in extracurricular activities such as swimming, dancing, basketball, Tae Kwon Do, track and other sports. Local community organizations also offer activities including music, crafts and drama. Latvia is well-known for its choral singing and folk dances.

In winter it is very popular to engage in winter sports such as downhill skiing, snowboarding, skating and ice-hockey.

In spring and summer, when the weather is nice, teens like to engage in different outdoor activities, including skateboarding, football and volleyball.

On weekends, Latvian teens, like young people around the world, enjoy getting together with friends, going to parties, seeing a movie or just hanging out in the local café.

### **Language**

Latvian is the language of Latvia, which belongs to a Baltic branch of the Indo-European, non-Slavic non-Germanic language family. There is a big Russian community in Latvia, which is why Russian is widely spoken. Latvian teenagers enjoy learning and speaking English and will help you learn Latvian.

## **Spending Money**

Host families are asked to pay only for ordinary family events in which you are expected to join, but they may pay for some of your personal activities. When you do things with your friends or alone, such as going to a movie or taking special lessons, the expense is your responsibility.

Latvian young people seldom carry or spend large amounts of money. AFS recommends that US\$100 per month in traveler's checks or on a credit card should be sufficient to cover spending needs. The most popular bank cards are Visa and Maestro Card. Spending more than your peers may create a distance between you and them. It is wise to learn to spend as they do.

## **Safety and Support**

Like your country, Latvia can be a safe place if you are aware of potential dangers and act accordingly. Host families, as well as AFS Latvia, educate students to enable them to have a safe and rewarding experience.

During your stay, local AFS volunteers will be available to assist you as you learn to live as a Latvian. In the event of an emergency, AFS staff can be reached 24 hours a day by you in your host country and by your natural family at home.

For the welfare of participants, AFS worldwide has two rules: no driving and no use of drugs for non-medicinal purposes. Any student who violates either of these rules will be automatically sent home. AFS Latvia may have additional rules.

## **Health Precautions**

In addition to the precautions mentioned above, AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Latvia (which you can get from your government or easily find on the Internet) with your personal doctor, to determine what is best for you and your personal needs.

If you require any medical assistance during your stay, your host family or local volunteers will be ready to help find it. As an AFS participant your medical expenses are covered for illness or injuries incurred while on the program, exclusive of pre-existing, dental or visual aid expenses.

## **Documents**

You must have a passport that will be valid for six months longer than your intended stay. In addition to your passport, you also need a visa to enter and reside in your host country. Visas are obtained through the consular offices of your host country, and requirements often vary from consulate to consulate.

Consulates charge fees for their services, and obtaining your visa can be a complicated and lengthy process requiring a great deal of paperwork, patience and persistence. It is your responsibility to obtain your visa and pay the fees. However, AFS will let you know how to proceed and will provide you with the documents you need to apply for the visa.

## **Program Prices**

All participants are required to pay participation fee and do a mandatory fundraising. To get further information, please visit our website [www.afscanada.org](http://www.afscanada.org) or contact us.

The program price covers the following: round-trip international travel with your AFS group; travel in the host country to your host family; travel from your host family to your international departure point; AFS's medical plan; placement with your host; orientation in your home country and your host country; 24 hour emergency assistance in your home and host countries; a global medical assistance organization to support extreme emergencies; a network of trained volunteers who support you throughout your experience.

In order to keep costs low and provide good service, AFS utilizes a network of volunteers and staff in 50+ countries around the world. Volunteers need training, support and assistance from professional staff in each country. Other expenses you will normally need to pay in addition to

the program price: passport and visa fees, required inoculations, expenses for eyeglasses, contacts and dental care, school uniforms (where applicable) and personal spending money. Your housing and food are provided by your host family as part of their commitment to our program.

## **Country Information**

### **Geography and Climate**

Latvia is about the size of Ireland or Sri Lanka. It is the second largest of the Baltic states but one of the smallest countries in Europe. It lies on the eastern Baltic Sea and is bordered by Estonia to the north, Lithuania to the south and Russia and Belarus to the east. Its topography is characterized by low rolling hills, shallow valleys, many small lakes, forests, dramatic seascapes and a rich variety of wildlife.

Latvia has a maritime climate, which is generally temperate but changeable. Winter temperatures average about  $-4^{\circ}\text{C}/23^{\circ}\text{F}$  but can fall below  $-21^{\circ}\text{C}/-4^{\circ}\text{F}$ . Summer temperatures average  $15^{\circ}\text{C}/59^{\circ}\text{F}$ .

### **Population**

The population is approximately 2.5 million; Riga has a population of 860,000. Fifty-two percent of the population is Latvian and 35% is Russian. Other ethnic groups: Belorussian, Ukrainian, Polish, Lithuanian, Jewish and others.

### **Government**

Until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Latvia was considered by the USSR to be part of its nation. Now an independent country, Latvia is a democratic parliamentary republic. Legislative power is in the hands of a single chamber parliament—the Saeima, consisting of 100 deputies. Parliamentary elections take place every four years. The president signs laws, chooses the Prime Minister (who heads the government) and performs representative functions.

### **Religion**

Ethnic Latvians are predominantly Roman Catholic or Lutheran. Ethnic Russians are predominantly Russian Orthodox.

## **Launching Your AFS Experience**

Evaluations by previous participants support our belief that those students who prepare prior to leaving home have the best experience. In order to get ready, first make every effort to learn some key Latvian and Russian words and phrases so that you arrive with at least some basic knowledge of both languages.

To familiarize yourself further with life in Latvia, make use of your local library and/or the Internet. A lot of general information is available about Latvians and their culture.

In addition, AFS Latvia will provide you with a special packet of country-specific information before you leave home.

Latvian people will be curious about your home community. You may be surprised to find out how much they already know about your country. Therefore, it is also helpful to be as informed as possible about current events in your community and country.

### **How to Apply?**

You first have to fill out the Preliminary Application form that you can find on our website at [www.afscanada.org](http://www.afscanada.org). If you don't have access to Internet, call us at (514) 288-3282 or 1-800-361-7248 and we will send you the document by mail.

### Curiously Latvian

- ☀ The color of the Latvian flag is a particular dark red or crimson tone that is referred to as “Latvian red” by the rest of the world.
- ☀ Latvian Pride :
  - A singing country
  - A seafaring nation
  - Untouched nature
  - Amber
  - Ice-hockey
  - Riga, called a city of inspiration and part of UNESCO’s World Heritage List
  - The White Stork—symbol of good fortune and an indicator of the quality of the environment

### Quick Facts

Country data	Size	64,589 sq km 25,190 sq mi
	Population	2.42 million
	Official language	Latvian
	Government	Parliamentary democracy
	Currency	Lat or Ls 1 Lat = 100 santims
Useful website	<a href="http://www.latinst.lv">www.latinst.lv</a> <a href="http://www.latviatourism.lv">www.latviatourism.lv</a> <a href="http://www.riga800.lv">www.riga800.lv</a> <a href="http://www.inyourpocket.lv">www.inyourpocket.lv</a>	
AFS Latvia website	<a href="http://www.afs.lv">www.afs.lv</a>	