

# Partying Latvian style

**Rishi Raithatha** learns that it's not what you know but who you know when it comes to Riga

Unlike my previous trips, I was not compelled to visit Latvia by a travel book unheard of by most people. The idea was simply to journey to a European city where alcohol would be cheap and plentiful, and where clubs would allow one to revel into the early hours of the morning. This was a mission of hedonism, and Riga fitted the bill perfectly.

Like most Eastern European countries, Latvia has changed hands many times over. During the Cold War, Latvia formed part of the buffer between the West and the USSR. Independence, albeit hard-won and somewhat bloody, was achieved in 1991. Aside from their participation at the 1992 Olympiad and a visit by the Pope in 1993, Latvia went quietly off global radar.

In 2004 Latvia, along with nine other countries, joined the EU and thus allowed in a stream of (mainly British) party animals seeking pastures new. Described by Lonely Planet as the "big boy of the Baltics", Riga certainly lives up to its funky, vibrant and magnetic atmosphere. Staying in Riga's Old Town – a UNESCO Heritage Site – meant that we were close to various clubs, bars and famous monuments, such as Riga Castle and the old parliament building.

Having friends in foreign cities is normally an advantage. But in this case, our local Latvian took us to a rather overpriced restaurant, whose

bill quickly set us back £13 each – a substantial proportion of our meagre budget for the weekend's booze fests. However, he did know which clubs and bars we should avoid, and told Latvian history much better than the



Pulkvedim, Riga's most popular club

guidebook.

Led by an over-exuberant Frenchman we met at the hostel, the first bar we visited was called Coyote. If you're thinking of the establishment in the movie 'Coyote Ugly', you've got it spot on: dangerously beautiful women dancing on the bar – something unheard of and sadly unseen back home. The downside of this wonderful place? The bar was for Latvians only – ethnic Latvians. Theoretically we were unwelcome.

Riga is one of the few capital cities

where the foreign population of the city outnumbers the native population. Latvian Russians – descendants of Russians who were encouraged to immigrate to Latvia during the Soviet era – dominate the capital and as such,

are much reviled in the country. Most ethnic Latvians, such as our friend, regard them as oppressors and colonialists who have no place in today's Latvia. The fact that Latvian citizenship can only be attained by passing a test on Latvian culture, history and language has rendered many people stateless amid a wave of resentment and backlash. And by making Latvian the only official state language, the government has further marginalised the Russian community. Nevertheless, by good fortune, we

managed to get into the bar despite the fact that three of us clearly looked neither Latvian nor Russian – an off day for the bouncer, perhaps. It was inside the bar that I was instantly eyed with disdain and caution for no apparent reason. One gentleman even came up to me and, having heard me speak in English, decided to shout all the English words he knew at me: sheer profanity. Impressed with his original and witty conversation, I gave him a thumbs-up and moved along. I had the distinct feeling that the rhetoric of disliking Russians may have been extended to any non-Latvians at all.

After a while of being mistaken for Moroccans and shunned by just about everyone but the cash-hungry bar staff, we made our hasty departure for Riga's most popular club, Pulkvedim Nevienš Neraksta (Nobody Writes To The Colonel), managing to enjoy the rest of the night without incident.

The next day, nursing splitting hangovers, we indulged in some sight-seeing. Discovering the Old Town was a delightful experience. The cobbled stone streets, medieval churches with their never-ending spires, the famous opera house, Riga Castle and timeless architecture gave Riga an effervescence to rival other European cities.

Although not an expert, the architecture reminded me of what I'd previously seen in Copenhagen and Krakow, reflecting Riga's blend of Scandinavian and Continental styles. Fortunately, the Old Town had been

preserved quite well by the Soviets, who managed not to blight it with their usual concrete monoliths. One could quite easily understand why UNESCO had bestowed such an award on a place so heavenly, and also why it needs this protection from the constant proliferation of bars and clubs springing up all over the place.

By the return journey I had understood that the manner in which British stag and lad parties pillaged this gem of a city is the reason for my encountering apprehensive locals. And despite that little incident, I left Riga quite satisfied.

Epitomising the Baltics, Latvia has much to offer any traveller, whether it's a boozy weekend you want, or that little bit more.

## TRAVEL INFO

Ryanair flies to Riga twice daily from London Stansted. Fares start at £40 return. Flight time is approximately three hours. The Latvian national carrier, airBaltic, also serves Riga from London Gatwick.

A compact city, Riga is easy to walk around and nothing is more than 15 minutes away. Outside the Old Town, trolley buses, trams and taxis are available. Hostels are available from £6 upwards for a bed in a dorm. Most hostels are located in the Old Town, making everything reachable by a short walk.

# I got back alive, can you believe it?

Worried about travelling alone as a woman in Africa? Don't fear, writes **Isabelle Hewitt**

Since September, I have spent time in Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal, three Francophone countries in West Africa. Because no woman is the same and Africa is such a diverse place, I limit this article to my own experiences of both travelling and living here.

It never occurred to me that people would worry as much as they do about women travelling in Africa. Lonely Planet doesn't have a special "Women Travelling On Their Own" guide to match their "Travelling with Children". The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) website doesn't have a section telling women exactly how to behave in public, but somehow, even my mother was surprised when I came back in December not only alive, but unmarried, not pregnant, not raped, HIV negative, and only one bout of food poisoning the worse. People seemed genuinely shocked.

Before this year, I had spent time in Central America and the Maghreb, and can honestly say that I have felt less leered at here in West Africa than in either of those places. Maybe this has come with age, maybe I hold myself taller, or perhaps I am more careful with my general way of being here.

The countries I have spent time in are predominantly Muslim. My instinct when packing was to bring clothes that would cover me up. Not head to toe, and not so that I'd overheat in the sweltering temperatures, but enough to avoid hassle. This involves no midriff baring, no skirts shorter than kneelength, as little cleavage as possible and a small, but present, sleeve.

Such deliberate planning it turns out was unnecessary. I could have survived with more cleavage showing or even sleeveless tops. But when I've needed to, I've felt able to command a little more respect than I might have done had I shown more flesh; it's easier to be indignant when someone asks you if he can accompany you to bed when it doesn't look like your t-shirt is about to burst its seams or the peach of your bottom is visible under your miniskirt.

While I don't hold with the view that women who wear short skirts and low-cut tops are asking for trouble, I do thoroughly believe that everyone should be aware of their environment and go along with the locally accepted way of being respectable. The only women I have seen wearing anything

vaguely indecent, particularly short skirts (showing your legs here is rare), are women in nightclubs who, though I have no proof, are probably prostitutes.

I started wearing a plain silver band on the ring finger on my left hand. I dislike doing this. Why should I feel the need to qualify myself with the existence of an (albeit imaginary) husband? I don't. I could say I was single. But even the presence of a fictitious spouse doesn't stop the endless flow of young men asking for my number, a date or, occasionally, my hand in marriage. While I have now probably found the best avoidance tactics – a friendly but firm refusal, accompanied by slight surprise at why I would ever give my number to someone in the street – I keep the pretence of the husband (and occasionally a child or two).

I have often found people asking me where my husband is (usually a not-so-subtle way of working

out if I have one). Whether or not I told them I was single/en couple/engaged/married/a nun, the fact that I was on my own never failed to elicit surprise. While many women in Europe don't think twice about travelling on their own, here people can't believe it. I was told by someone at one point that I wasn't allowed to go any further until my father picked me up. Errr, well he's not going to travel from London to Bamako just because you've decided I'm not safe. This is easy to avoid by saying your husband or male relation is back at the hotel or meeting you in 15 minutes. A doddle – apart from long-distance bus rides, when it is patently obvious you are on your own.

When I first arrived I was excited to be there and savouring seeing a whole new way of life. With hindsight, I was probably a little too chatty with people in the street. I dislike ignoring people, but have, since September, be-

come the master of the polite but firm tone that generally puts people off.

Where before I would sit in the front of taxis, not wanting to appear an unfriendly foreigner, I now always sit in the back. I have never experienced any problems, but a female Senegalese friend expressed a little shock and pointed out that it's better to be a bit unfriendly than to be perceived as too friendly or 'keen'.

Conversely, I always sit as close as possible to the front on coaches and buses and have, on occasion, taken the step of paying for the front two seats on a coach (equivalent to one car seat) after an unpleasant experience of having my leg stroked on a coach in Morocco. At least the driver's attention tends to be on the road.

Before leaving, people were endlessly giving me advice and telling me horror stories. Maybe I have been over-cautious in the way I behave here, but my feeling was that it is better to be safe than sorry. Ultimately, when the hairs on the back of your neck say there is something wrong, trust your instincts – they are probably more in tune with you and your surroundings than any amount of pre-departure advice.

