



Riga – what a gem!

Right at the edge of the Baltic Sea in the middle of the Baltic States lies Latvia, and on its shore its beautiful capital Riga. It was a spur of the moment idea when I decided to take WhizzAir up on their incredible offers and fly to the former Soviet Union and I didn't regret it one moment. Riga is a wonderful mix of former-Easter-Block charm and western openness and commerce (oh the shopping!) and you can make quite a few culinary discoveries on your way through the old cobbled streets of the city center.



My first recommendation is a tiny little chocolate shop called “Black Magic” with a stunning interior that will take you back centuries and make you feel like you’re on your way to becoming an apothecary – or a witch, depending on your preferences... The shop dates back to 1752 and also sells the famous Black Magic Balsam that is typical for Riga. But they also sell coffee and cookies there, although my personal highlight was the chocolate! Oh, the chocolate... I recommend the pistachio praline! And the one with caramel! Or try the one filled with mac the champagne! Or strawberries!!! Oh yes, the chocolate... You can get a small plate with an assemblage of different flavors for 4 – 6 Euros and they’re worth every cent!

If you prefer a meal with a bit more sustenance in a decadent yet affordable atmosphere then you have to check out the wonderful restaurant and cocktail bar “Cheers”! Not to confuse with the Boston version of course. The sheer fact that Cheers has the nicest waiters and the best brownie desserts ever is enough to love this place. Combine that with good music and yummy cocktails and you have a place to be at night. Plus you can get a full, three course lunch menu for just under 10 Euros and they put wonderful little gold powder on their delicious brownies and let you sit in oversized white chairs and on cozy sofas. It also happens to be one of the up and coming clubs and bars in Riga and is on its way to be THE spot to be on Saturday night –so remember the name! If you prefer your cocktails with a 360° view of the city you can always visit the “Skyline Bar” at the Radisson Blu. They charge you an entry fee on Thursdays and Fridays, but the cocktails are surprisingly affordable and very yummy. Plus the view is very hard to beat...



But there is a way to have the view without the cocktails: in the old city center, not far from my beloved Black Magic shop, is the ancient St. Peter's church that offers a similarly spectacular view. It also houses many interesting exhibitions and if you're lucky, you might even be able to catch a concert in its ancient walls. Riga St. Peter's Church also happens to be one of the oldest and most valuable monuments of medieval architecture in the Baltic States dating back to the 13th century!!! Needless to say it has been named one of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites in the late 90s.

Not far from the church is the old House of Blackheads, a medieval house dating back to 1334, which was built as a symbol of free medieval towns of the Hanseatic League. There actually is a German inscription on the front side of the structure between the impressive façade. If you're interested in historical architecture and have enough energy to venture a bit outside from the city center, you should definitely visit Riga's Art Nouveau quarter and maybe even take a guided tour there. Riga has around 800 art nouveau buildings, the majority of which are concentrated in the central part of Riga, especially in Alberta Street and the so-called Quiet Centre or embassy district, where every building deserves a look.

Most of them were built around the turn of the century and some house embassies while others house restaurants or quirky little tourist shops on the ground floor. The artwork on those houses is incredibly detailed and impressive and worth every step it takes to get to Alberta Street. Plus you might see one of the remnants of the Russian Empire on your way there: the biggest orthodox church in the city, Riga's Nativity of Christ Cathedral with its wonderfully golden domes and extensive murals on the inside.

And in case you're hungry from all the walking you've been doing, there's an "Index Café" just across from the Church with floor to ceiling windows, excellent coffee and all kinds of baked goods to refuel your sugar tanks. Or



you try one of Riga's many family restaurants called "Lido". They are all over the city and they offer tasty, hearty, Latvian food at low prices for tourists and citizens alike.



Last but not least, the one thing you cannot miss while in Riga is the extensive and quite impressive Central Market, one of the largest markets in Eastern Europe. It's always buzzing with life and offers a variety of goods ranging from fresh fruit and beautiful flower arrangements to homemade clothes and woodcarvings or nuts and seeds in all sizes and colors. It consists of five 240 meter long, 46 meter wide and 38 meter high halls surrounded by an array of stands and booths on the grounds and it's just behind Riga's central station, which is right around the corner from Old Town Riga. But be aware: the markets are always crowded with people and you would be well-advised to keep a close eye on your purse while you're roaming through the halls.

So look for a deal online, hop on a plane and fly east! And make sure to have plenty of space in your suitcase for all the wonderful things you will bring back from Riga!

(text and pictures: Carolin Schmitt)