



By Kalpana Sunder

THERE is something fascinating about walking straight in to the belly of a city, especially when it's a sensory overload. The Central Market is made of five old, gargantuan Zeppelin hangars, each cavernous space selling dairy, fish, meat, vegetables and fruits.

There is the dark *rupmaize* or the black rye bread, the sour bread, mounds of farmer's cheese and yoghurt, geometric piles of pumpkins and tomatoes, berries and purple plums, pig snouts and sprats, slivers of salmon and mounds of smoked meat, a local delicacy. Babushka housewives, red faced matrons and leggy Latvian brunettes, all shop here. A dour lady butcher waves me away as she sees my camera.

Riga, the capital of Latvia, used to be a wealthy Hanseatic port and grew into a cosmopolitan city where the women wore fox furs and their perfumes were even envied by the Parisians. Cobble streets, buildings in a harmonious mish-mash of styles, the sound of saxophones and violins waltzing down windows — Riga's old Town is atmospheric. With attractive Nordic features, boots and skin tight clothes, fashion loving blondes tiptoe with élan on the medieval cobbled streets. There is the House of Blackheads where the bachelor merchants and sailors used to live. This was destroyed by the Soviets and was rebuilt to coincide with Riga's 800th anniversary. At night, there is a play of lights on the building set to haunting music.

There are echoes of the past everywhere. The somber Museum of Occupation has Nazi and Soviet uniforms, a re-creation of Russian labour camps called Gulags where thousands perished, heart-breaking exhibits like notes scribbled and thrown from a railway wagon by a deportee to his girlfriend and prayer and music books found in detention camps. The oldest remaining City Gate — the Swedish gate, used to be home to the city executioner — every time a head rolled, there was a red rose on his window! Shutterbug tourists photograph the gaping bullet holes scarring the Latvian Radio House. There is the brown brick Academy of Sciences, an example of Soviet architecture that looms above the skyline. We drive past Hotel Latvija which used to be bugged in the Soviet regime.

Today, nearly half the population in Riga is Russian. But visible everywhere is the Latvian pride in their city and its monuments. For a country of more than two million, there are more than 2.5 million folk songs or *dainas*, which give this country the reputation of being a Singing Nation. My guide Margita Jumite remembers the time when they were suppressed and values the freedom that's still a novelty and therefore, precious.

Even going to the church was not allowed during the Soviet rule. Today, there are some awe inspiring Lutheran and Catholic churches with spires and steeples with golden roosters and weathercocks and Russian orthodox churches with gold domes. There is the Riga



Riga, the stylish capital of Latvia, is a hidden wonder

IN EUROPE'S LITTLE PARIS

Cathedral built by the founder of the city, Bishop Albert of Bremen in 1290 and boasting the largest pipe organ. We take an elevator to the top of St Peter's Church for some panoramic views of the terraced roofs and gabled garrets fighting for space, the green boulevards and the sinuous Daugava River winding through the city.



Pumpkins of all colours and sizes on sale with other vegetables at Riga's Central Market, which is very popular with the locals.

Legend has it that the architect of the church had to climb the steeple with a glass of champagne and when he threw down the glass, the number of pieces denoted the centuries that the church would last!

Margita takes me to the Freedom Monument which has survived Soviet occupation. Locals place flowers in the colours of the Latvian Flag around the base. Earlier, they could have been deported to Siberia for this 'crime'!

There is a new resurgence of down-and-out areas of Riga. I walk down Spikeri Creative Quarter, a warehouse area now gentrified into stylish restaurants like Merlin's Beer Bar and a spanking new Concert hall. There is the Berga Bazaars, which used to be a cabbage patch and now is a village with upmarket boutiques and swish restaurants like the Garage (an erstwhile car garage). There is also a new spirit in design that I see in boutiques like Rijlika, where linen, wood and pottery are interpreted with flair. Everywhere you find golden amber,

the fossilized resin of ancient trees that has washed up the Baltic coasts for millions of years.

Riga is also a green city with public parks and boulevards lined with linden and oaks, filled with benches, ponds and flower beds where the local denizens play chess, walk, jog, watch birds and have picnics in the summer and ski in the winter. Latvians love flowers and almost everyone carries a small bouquet home.

We visit a bar called Black Magic to sample some Riga Black Balzams — the local tippie invented by a pharmacist, which is made of 24 herbs and is touted as a cure for everything, from a stomach ache to a cold.

Traditional Latvian restaurants offering pork ribs, potato and wild mushroom soup with pickled cabbage and fish stand alongside TGIF in Riga's Old Town. What I enjoy most is Riga's eclectic architecture which bears the imprint of the Poles, the Germans, the Swedes and the Russians. Walking around the extravagant Art Nouveau

area, I see why this city used to be called 'Little Paris'. Stylish balconies and windows greet you at every turn. Two names prop up with regularity — Konstantin Peksens and Mikhail Eisenstein, the local geniuses of Art Nouveau. There are the faces on the facades of the buildings that fascinate me. One building has two funny cats. Margita tells me that a wealthy merchant who was rejected for membership in the Great Guild, was so offended that he put statues of cats on the roof with their tails raised in the direction of the guilds!

Come night, Riga's old town becomes raucous with inebriated tourists and tightly packed tables in bars. The seedier side of Riga with its cheap beer, glittery casinos, nightclubs and blondes attracts stag groups from across Europe. Guna Caune, from the Riga Tourist Office talks about how the tourist inflow is increasing every year and how they are also developing Riga as a gastro-hub centering around 'slow' and healthy food. Riga's coat of arms is an open gate; it seems terribly appropriate now for a city on everyone's wish-list!

— Sunder is a Chennai-based travel writer.

At night, Riga's old town becomes raucous with inebriated tourists. Its seedier side attracts stags from across Europe.

Mumbai showers ignite memory of a distant Kolkata

NAGESH OHAL



Café Universal, a Parsi eatery in the Fort area of Mumbai, was an ideal getaway for an idle time with beer and pepper prawns.

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Nearly a hundred *samosas* (@ *dus ka paanch*) were sold within what would have been maximum 10 minutes. *Chaiwallahs* surfaced — hail their impeccable timing — just as the last of the *samosas* were being killed. Another coordinated pounce and steaming cups of coffee were poured out and gulped down in minutes.

Staring at the Taj made me yearn for a bite into a *teppanyaki* at the legendary Wasabi by Morimoto. How would 'Iron Man' Masaharu's glazed Japanese kebabs be different from the superlative ones I had in Connaught Place's Bonsai? Would his chef in a generous mood shave a truffle on my *sushi*?

A call from a friend broke my reverie. We were to meet at the press club. I sprang up and hit the road for VT, got drenched in a sudden shower and was stranded under the portico of the Regal cinema hall, waiting for my *Bombalyya* friends to rescue me.

Help came in time and I was shepherded to Alps beer bar a few paces from Bade Mian; the *kababiyans* were just setting up the shop, so we didn't hang on. Downing another pitcher — my third of the day — I was surprised to find out that Bombay, like Delhi, serves you *surma* if you ask for a fish finger or a fry.

A few swigs and a chicken fry, and we were ready to hit the trail to VT. A small taxi gave us a lift and for the first time I walked in, appropriately humbled by its dimensions, into the Old Lady of Boribunder to meet a fr-

riend who was to take us to the press club, a few hundred paces away.

Unlike the Calcutta version, the club looked swank but felt easy on our pocket. As we settled down on the terrace, I found out some things in life don't change, or if at all, change just a bit. My friend S, like his Calcutta years, still orders four drinks at a time, pours water into all four glasses — "Arre, you need to pour water to prevent the spirit from evaporating," he lectured me when I stole a cheeky smile during his exercise — and steadily finishes them one by one. The only thing time has changed: he has switched to gin and lime from Old Monk.

The corn and veggies tasted fresh and the fish fries were — *surmal* again — okay with my beer, another pitcher! S browbeat a teetotaler into sipping on Breezer (Jamalca Passion, or *Jamal ka passion*, as an attendant at an old office used to mischievously dub it). Our spirit hit a crescendo, fuelled by memories of yesterday and chitchats of today.

Suddenly, everyone fell silent. Or rather, nothing could be heard. The rain beat down hard on the terrace and drowned all voices. I felt numbed as if frozen in a hypnotic trance but with all senses open to the onslaught from heavens. I had almost forgotten this experience during my four-year stay in Delhi. A shower in Mumbai transported me back to Calcutta and I realised that the two cities were kindred in soul and spirit.

Was I falling in love, so easily on the first day, with the Maximum City?

A shower in Mumbai took me back to Calcutta and I realised that the two cities were kindred in soul and spirit



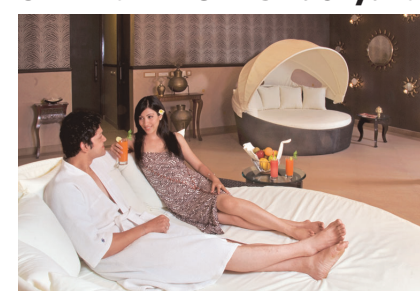
(Left) A bird's eye view of the old and new Riga from atop the St Peter's Church. The calm Daugava river winds through the city like a serpent. (Above) The Lutheran St Peter's Church that dates back to 1209. A brick masonry church, it survived the fire that damaged the most of Riga that year. (Below) The guide Margita shows off a bottle of the local drink, Riga Black Balzams, that is made with 24 herbs.



CHECKLIST

NIKITA PURI checks out the best holiday deals, must-visit destinations and hotel stays to savour

Unwind in Delhi's Backyard



If you're looking for a getaway from the humdrum life of the city without willing to travel far, then the Heritage Village Resort & Spa at Manesar on the National Highway-8 is a good option. A palatial resort styled on the classic Rajasthani haveli design set in 12 acres of greenery, the resort's big attraction is Spa Aruna, which offers a package of rejuvenative treatments, from aromatherapy to ayurveda. For details, send an email to sales@selehotels.in

If you're loaded like a maharaja, check out the luxury train journeys rolled out by Travel Corporation (India) Limited for domestic travellers on the Indian Maharaja-Deccan Odyssey. Opt for any of the seven-day, all-inclusive itineraries on the TCI site (www.tcin-dia.com). The train has 21 climate-controlled suites with telephone connectivity and personal valet service; spa and gym; master chef and well-stocked bar. The itineraries extend from Ajanta and Ellora to the Taj Mahal with halts at Udaipur, Ranthambhore and Jaipur.

Spanish Whirlwind for ₹109K

If you have wanted to visit Spain, this is the perfect time for it. Yatra.com has an eight-day, nine-night offer for ₹1,09,999 per person. Enjoy the sights in Madrid, go shopping in Valencia and visit vibrant Barcelona. You also get a chance to see Lonja, loved for its European architecture. Visit the Gothic Cathedral in Toledo and Church of Santo Tome. Also included is a Flamenco show. Return airfare, breakfast buffet, hotel stay and airport transfers are in the package.

Small Luxury, Big Discounts



Small Luxury Hotels of the World (SLH) is offering complementary nights and up to 20 per cent savings for a selection of city breaks, exotic beach getaways and countryside retreats if you book between now and November 14, for travel till November 15, 2011. Your options include Thailand, Germany, France, Italy and also the Americas. To know more and book a holiday, visit www.slh.com

Nine-Day European Package

Go across five scenic European countries on a package that will take you to Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, Cologne, Black Forest, Schaffhausen and Lucerne on a nine-day tour. It includes economy class return airfare, Schengen visa fee, accommodation, breakfast and dinner and local transport. Experience the beauty of Eiffel Tower and unwind at Disneyland. Visit www.yatra.com for details.

Kashmir is back in business and if you haven't booked your trip to the "paradise on earth", then log on to MakeMyTrip.com for an exciting four-night, five-day package at ₹29,999 on a twin sharing basis. The offer is valid till October. The cost includes return economy class airfare, accommodation, transfers and sightseeing, meals (breakfast/lunch/dinner) and all applicable hotel taxes.

If you have a package to share or discounts to publicise, email the details to nikita.puri@mailltoday.in