

Workplace Country Guide

Latvia

Insights for studying, volunteering, interning, researching or working abroad

This guide gives you a snapshot of the social and cultural norms you'll encounter in Latvia, with a focus on workplace behavior. Read it to build a basic understanding of the culture and how you might navigate it from both the local and North American Perspective. Enjoy!

This guide includes:

1. Small Talk
2. Non-verbal Communication
3. Displays of Emotion
4. Dress, Decorum & Punctuality
5. Preferred Management Styles
6. Hierarchy & Decision-making
7. Gender, Religion, Class & Ethnicity
8. Business & Personal Relationships
9. Favoritism & Patronage
10. Workplace Conflict & Feedback
11. Motivating Local Colleagues
12. Bonus Tips

Country Guide Exercises

Put what you've learned into practice!

To view detailed map [CLICK HERE](#)



Capital	Riga
Population	1.8 million
Language(s)	Latvian, Russian
Religion(s)	Lutheran 36.2%, Roman Catholic 19.5%, Orthodox 19.1%
Ethnic Group(s)	Latvian 62.7%, Russian 24.5%, Belarusian 3.1%, Ukrainian 2.2%, Polish 2%, Lithuanian 1.1%, other 1.8%, unspecified 2.6% (2021 est.)



Local Perspective

1. Small Talk

I want to make a good first impression with local colleagues. What topics should I discuss during friendly conversations?

There are no hard and fast rules regarding topics for initial meeting in Latvia. As in North America, opening topics could be the standard nonessential statements about the weather, how good it is to be in Latvia, how far Latvia has progressed during the past few years. Topics to avoid include alleged discriminations against minorities, generally from Russian sources. Subtle subdued humor always is helpful.

In general, there is hardly any difference between a North American and a Latvian in an average and normal situation. If in doubt about how to act in a situation in Latvia react as you would in a similar situation in North America.

North American Perspective

It is best to stick to general topics of introduction in first meetings. Latvians can be reserved and will probably not divulge a great deal of personal information immediately, so while subjects like family and work will not offend, do not be surprised if the conversation does not go very far on these subjects at first.

Latvians are very proud of their country. Good introductory topics could focus on questions about Latvia and asking your new acquaintance's opinion on important places to see, cultural events to attend such as opera and theatre and a bit about general history.

Never interchange "Latvian" for "Russian". Latvians were part of the Soviet Union and most Latvians, especially of the older generation, speak Russian, but Latvians are a distinct ethnic group with a language that belongs to an altogether separate family of languages, a different religious background with its own set of traditions and distinct cultural personality.

Latvian humor can be hard to detect at first because it takes time to understand the dry wit that is often steeped in cultural references not well known to outsiders.

Want more advice on small talk?

Check out this Quick Guide:

[Peach & Coconut Cultures:
Navigating Small Talk Around the World](#)





2. Non-verbal Communication

I don't want to make a faux pas. Which non-verbal communication norms should I be aware of?

Local Perspective

Latvians all differ from one another. Previous exposure to foreigners is a factor in determining peoples' level of comfort with touching and gestures.

Latvians, like North Americans generally have a very strong sense of space and will generally stand a few feet from the other person. Distance can be even greater when speaking or dealing with strangers. Each person's degree of comfort with touching and their preference for personal space varies.

Eye contact is important but not necessarily as a measure of person's trustworthiness. Latvians will not necessarily maintain constant eye contact, but will not feel comfortable if a person refuses or is reluctant to make eye contact.

It is customary to shake hands, more than in North America, with both men and women when greeting the person. According to the rule of etiquette, the older person or a woman is the first to extend the hand, but most often the rule is not followed. In certain cases, notably among intellectuals and artists, men and women will give each other a kiss on a cheek. While talking, men generally do not touch other men. This rule also applies for contact between men and women and among woman.

There are some gestures that are considered rude such as waiving a pointed index finger or persistent pointing at someone. Latvians make relatively little use of gestures and at times find a lot of gesturing distracting or even annoying. Latvians are aware that people of other cultures use more gestures.

Normal tone of voice and directness are the norm.

North American Perspective

Perhaps the most unique feature of Latvians is their reserve. This reserve can be downright disturbing for those non-Latvians who tend to be full of smiles and small talk. Latvians generally do not engage in small talk with people they do not know well and they do not feel uncomfortable about long silences in conversations with strangers.

This reserve will dissipate over time as genuine friendship emerges.

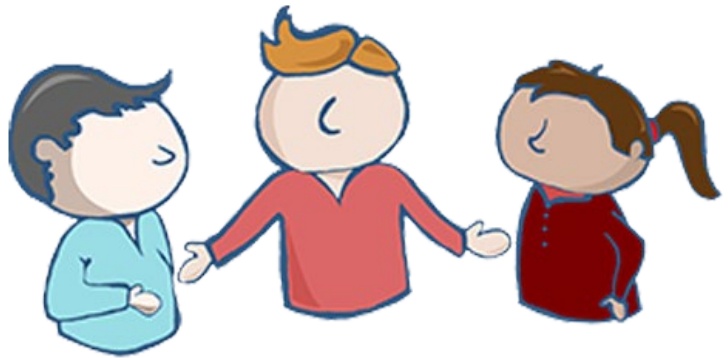
On a work level, this reserve is important to remember in planning events or determining how to get the information that you want. For example, roundtable type events will not work with a group that does not know each well since no one will want to speak up. This can be remedied by ensuring that the group has enough time to get to know each other before subjecting them to this type of event or by planning other events that don't force people to contribute if you cannot ensure that the group will know each other.

Want more advice on non-verbal communications?

Check out these Quick Guides:

[Non-verbal Communication: Intro](#) (4 pgs)

[Non-verbal Communication in Action](#) (23 pgs)





3. Displays of Emotion

How expressive is the culture?
Are public displays of emotion considered normal?

Local Perspective

The public display of affection or other emotions are acceptable, but not common. The public display of anger is considered undignified and ill mannered.

North American Perspective

Considering the typical Latvian reserve, it is not surprising that public displays of any kind of emotion are not very common. There are exceptions, however. When alcohol is involved in a gathering, emotions emerge and tears, affection and anger are accepted without question. Anyone who has been to a hockey game in Latvia can attest to the true depth of passion that Latvians can reach.





4. Dress, Decorum & Punctuality

How formal is the workplace culture? Are schedules strict? What attire is standard?

Local Perspective

Work styles and pace differ between workplaces but, generally, the pace is slower in Latvia. It is important to be clean and punctual. Latvians, like most Europeans, are more formal than North Americans. Men and women tend to dress more conservatively in the workplace both in summer and in winter, especially the older generation.

Supervisors and even colleagues are initially addressed by using Mr. or Ms. with the last name. Usage of first name comes later and often it is initiated by the more senior person. Younger generation Latvians, especially those who have travelled to North America, will more readily switch to the less formal forms of address.

Most workplaces have established work hours; punctuality and reliability are highly valued by colleagues and bosses. Flexible working hours are not common, but times are changing.

Deadlines are set with the expectation that they will be met but not to the degree the North Americans are used to. Overtime work in order to meet a deadline may be expected but most often it is no remunerated.

North American Perspective

One of the most striking characteristics of Latvians is their physical beauty and the attention they tend to pay to appearance. This will be impossible not to notice, especially in the summer months in Riga as young women don ever-increasingly revealing clothing.

Latvian women spend a good amount of time and money on beauty treatments, ranging from hairstylists through to special spa-type treatments. It should be noted that these treatments are more affordable than in North America. For the workplace, this means that good office clothes should be worn all the time. "Latvian casual" can be worn out, but this never translates as a pair of jeans and sneakers. Latvian women may dress casually on weekend or evenings but it is almost with an outfit that demands a pair of heels. Men should wear suits or similarly dressy clothes to the office most days and plan on wearing the best of casual clothes for evenings and weekends.

With regard to language, Latvians will use more formal language and would be unlikely to use first names in introductory meetings. In meetings with close colleagues, the atmosphere is more familiar and the meeting can resemble a gathering of friends, and it may even be possible that alcohol will be offered. For those that are not opposed to drinking on work time, the acceptance of alcohol will likely aid the discussions. Those that prefer not to drink can decline and if the pressure to drink mounts, a firm explanation that they do not drink should be sufficient reason for not participating.

Depending on the organization, the corporate culture can be anywhere from very western-style productivity oriented, usually the private sector but government agencies take a more laissez-faire attitude towards absenteeism and tardiness. This tendency is probably a leftover from the Soviet period when underemployment meant that many people did not have to put in long hours at the office, coupled with severe consumer goods shortages which made shopping itself a full-time job.

At the same time, frequent absences from the office hide the fact that many Latvians work until 9:00 pm on a regular basis, and later when circumstances necessitate it. It is also important to note that due to the low wages, many workers have an additional job and many younger workers, even civil servants, are completing their university degrees while working, so absences from the office are a matter of necessity.



5. Preferred Management Styles

I want to be an effective manager.
What qualities are considered ideal?

Local Perspective

A superior is respected for their position in the organization and not necessarily for the level of experience in the industry or work at hand. Academic and professional skills are important. An approachable boss will be more trusted than one who puts a lot of distance between themselves and the staff. Still, being open to ideas by the subordinates is a new concept that is not yet readily understood and appreciated.

Staff is generally very quiet around a superior but not because there is little trust in that person. A superior who is not respected would not be told so directly, but it is most likely that their staff would talk amongst themselves.

North American Perspective

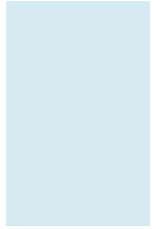
While Latvian work culture, especially in the private sector, resembles European corporate culture, and Latvians value education and experience in order to succeed, it is important to remember that the private and professional lives are quite intertwined in Latvia.

In the Soviet period, the state provided a long list of social benefits, mostly offered through employers. For example, it was not uncommon that employees ate subsidized or free meals at work and free or subsidized social events were organized by employers, even to the extent that employees received their vacations from the employer, meaning that husbands and wives usually vacationed independently of one another.

While these benefits no longer exist, there is a lingering mentality that one's social life can occur at work and that the employer should facilitate it. Therefore, when it comes to qualities of effective bosses, Latvians work for their bosses because they have to, but they will work most productively because they like them and the atmosphere created for them at work. The expatriate should be aware that social events at the workplace are as important as the work itself and make all efforts to participate and include their family as appropriate.

Expat managers will have to tread carefully if imposing new policies and remember that it is essential to ensure that the employees' needs are being met. For example, a new policy prohibiting absences from work would not allow people to get the errands done that they are used to doing. It might take

some time for employees to warm up to a new boss and even more time before that boss can expect to have an open dialogue with their employees. As a new boss makes their place in an organization, it will be important for them to get to know the staff through group events such as a dinner to a restaurant.





6. Hierarchy & Decision-making

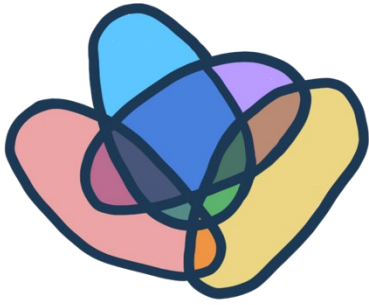
Is the workplace culture “flat” or more hierarchical? How are decisions made and by whom?

Local Perspective

In general, strict "pecking order" is observed, but times are changing. Quite often, committees are established to review the issues involved, but orders for action are the prerogative of the immediate boss. Discussions with supervisors for answers and feedback are acceptable, but more often than in North America, the boss may be tempted to imply "I am the boss and an order is an order to be followed without delay."

North American Perspective

The workplace tends to be hierarchical rather than team-oriented and ideas will flow from the top to the bottom. The boss will make the decisions and everyone else carries out the work.



7. Gender, Religion, Class & Ethnicity

Are cultural values around gender, religion, class and ethnicity visible in the workplace?

Local Perspective

- **Gender:** Latvians have always respected equality in the issues involving gender. Women have been highly regarded in business and politics. It is not uncommon for women to hold high positions in the government.
- **Religion:** There are no taboos in matters of religion. The main religions are Lutheran and Roman Catholic but there are others equally respected. In general, religion is not a vital part of a person's life in Latvia.
- **Class:** There are no class distinctions of society in Latvia. There are individuals who believe that they belong to the "elite class", but it makes no difference in the workplaces.
- **Ethnicity:** Ethnicity matters are somewhat important in Latvia due to the fact there is a large contingent of ethnic Russians who are not willing to accept the notion of a free and independent Republic of Latvia, the official language of which is Latvian. This is one area where discussions should be avoided.

North American Perspective

- **Gender:** This is a confusing subject for non-Latvians to understand. Newcomers will be surprised by the inordinate number of young women, working in positions of power. Most young women carry relatively little debt and combined with low housing costs, this allows them a great deal of autonomy before or without marriage.

On the other hand, chivalry is alive and well in Latvia. Manners that have long been displaced in North America are followed in Latvia, for example, men open the doors for women and pay for their dinners as well. The good manners are accompanied by a healthy dose of flirting as well. It is impossible to provide advice in this regard but it is helpful to know that mild flirtation is a norm, meaning that men make a habit of complimenting their female colleagues and women tend to expect to be complimented.

In general, men are expected to help women in and out of cars, offer a hand or arm while navigating cobblestone streets, insist on carrying all heavy bags and again, insist, on paying for everything. Non-Latvian women faced with such a situation should remember that these things are

cultural norms and that nothing is expected in return. Accept the offers of help graciously and a small thank you for dinner is much more acceptable than spending half of it fighting for the right to pay. You won't win and the host will feel uncomfortable.

- **Religion:** The younger generation of Latvians is not very religious in the traditional sense, except for the widespread adherence to pagan traditions and holidays, paganism being the indigenous Latvian religion. The summer solstice, for example, completely closes the capital for a couple of days and it takes the entire country the good part of a week to recover from spending an entire night awake, consuming solid amounts of alcohol and jumping over bonfires.
- **Class:** Economically speaking, a new middle class has emerged since the independence of Latvia, along with a small nouveau riche. Some members of these groups made their money by questionable means during the period of privatization in the 1990s. Others, especially younger people, have used their education and experience to gain lucrative jobs in the private sector and given low, controlled housing costs and freedom from large debt loads, are able to enjoy their salaries.

Young people, whether they have the means or not, like at least to look as if they are living well. Women invest a good deal of their salaries in looking good and dressing well. Most people own cell phones and use them without reserve and the plethora of designer stores in Riga provides some indication of the buying power of Latvians.

- **Ethnicity:** Ethnicity remains a difficult issue for Latvians. Sharing their country with an almost equal number of ethnic Russians for the good part of the century, the balance of power was turned on its head in 1991. During the Soviet period, Russians held most positions of power. With independence Latvians have emerged to run their country while Russians, with many exceptions, make up the bulk of service industries and grey economy. Most older Russians never learned Latvian, despite having lived most of their lives there. The Latvian government is struggling with this issue, imposing rigorous citizenship laws that demand a solid knowledge of Latvian and at the same time, exploring means to ensure that the next generation of Russians becomes bilingual and able to integrate themselves into the economy.

The shared history has produced a number of contradictions. Since Russian was so predominant, Latvians have incorporated a number of Russian words into their daily vocabulary. Interestingly and perhaps because the younger generation is more removed from the realities of the Soviet occupation and Stalinist period, young

Latvians find some aspects of the Soviet Union amusing, and as a result, some bars memorializing the Soviet period have sprung up and it would not be unheard of to see young Latvians celebrating, tongue-in-cheek, old Soviet holidays.

In addition, there are the many "foreign Latvians" as they call both Latvians who emigrated to a North America, during the Soviet period and the children of these emigrants. Foreign Latvians began returning en masse in the early years of independence and, for the most part, have been eagerly welcomed back. There are dozens of examples of foreign Latvians who have successfully taken up new lives in Latvia and they have undoubtedly contributed to the revitalization of the newly born nation. Latvia is one of few successful countries born out of the Soviet Union and some scholars give some credit for this to the involvement of the western educated and experienced foreign Latvians. However, the fact that one group grew up under the Soviet regime while the other lived under very different governments in the West has produced tensions as differences emerge.



8. Business & Personal Relationships

How defined is the boundary between personal and professional life? Should I focus on building personal relationships at work?

Local Perspective

Regarding business, relationships should be cordial, but, like in North America, the importance of the personal relationship is an open question, and will depend on circumstances and individual situation.

North American Perspective

The importance of establishing personal relationships with key colleagues or clients cannot be overstated.

Perhaps because Latvia is such a small country, most people tend to retain the same friends throughout their lives. Most Latvians spend their weekends away from Riga, returning to their home towns, allowing them the luxury of spending time with old friends.

In Latvia, friendship and loyalty are treasured. It may take some time to get to know someone but once you do, the friendship will be very deep. Latvian friends become very involved in each other's lives and very few circumstances will change that.

The best way to integrate into Latvian life, both work and private, is to begin making friends. You may have to initiate the friendship since many Latvians will be too shy to start. Invite someone for coffee, ask for advice on going to the opera and take up all invitations to help you sightsee. If you happen to make one good friend, it is likely that you will be introduced to family and friends and eventually included in that social circle.



9. Favoritism & Patronage

Do personal relationships influence professional progression? Are family and work intertwined?

Local Perspective

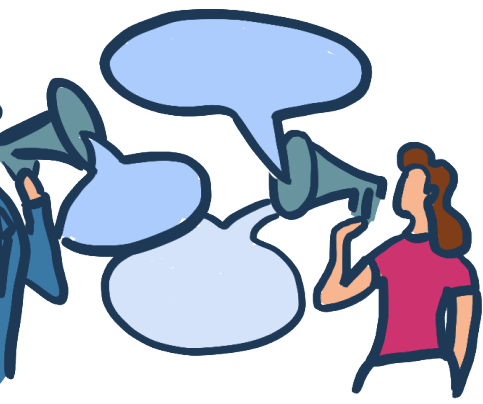
Generally speaking, Latvians, more than North Americans, loath the practice of favoritism in the workplace. However, they are fully aware that such practices take place.

North American Perspective

Some people might argue that the kind of merging of personal with the work life is unprofessional, perhaps even corrupt. These people would point to the influence of the old Soviet system which created a sort of cashless society in which one had to barter goods and services. In this kind of system, the more people you knew, the “richer” you were in your ability to acquire coveted consumer goods.

Most Latvians, having known such a system most of their lives, would find nothing wrong with it. Furthermore, petty corruption, such as buying your way out of a speeding ticket, is quite widespread and although people do grumble about it, they tend to accept it as a fact of life.

In this atmosphere, it is not surprising that special considerations are expected among friends and work colleagues. However, this may or may not be a problem for a non-Latvian working in Latvia since Latvians have a good understanding of international norms and would probably not expect special favors from a non-Latvian.



10. Workplace Conflict & Feedback

How is feedback and criticism handled in this culture? Is conflict considered normal?

Local Perspective

Concerning workplace conflict, private confrontation is acceptable but definitely not public. Latvians, in general, are not as open as North Americans to show their grudges. There are no definite rules or opinions on how to deal with these situations.

North American Perspective

If you have a problem in the workplace, confront the colleague directly but privately.

It might be difficult to know at first if a colleague has problems with you since a confrontation is unlikely. The problem would likely be expressed by silence, avoiding you and excluding you from the social aspects of work.



11. Motivating Local Colleagues

I want to encourage a positive and productive work environment. What motivates local workers to perform well?

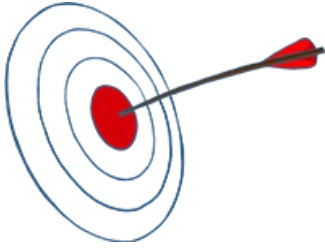
Local Perspective

Money and fear of failure would top the list of the motives, followed by a sense of loyalty and commitment. Job satisfaction or good working conditions have yet to be recognised as good motives for job performance.

North American Perspective

In the new economy, many factors will motivate a colleague to work well. People who gravitate to the private sector do so for the wages that tend to be more than double those for the civil service.

The many Latvians who remain within the civil service despite quite poor salaries do so for ideological convictions of contributing to their newly independent country and because the possibilities for advancement are great. It is a realistic dream to become a State Secretary or even enter the political arena at a national level at a very young age. Other civil servants recognize that the benefits of the civil service sometimes outweigh the low salaries, for example, there is a relatively more relaxed work environment, increased possibilities to travel abroad and perhaps greater career advancement in the long term.



12. Bonus Tips

A last word on integrating successfully into the culture.

Latvia and Its National Identity

Latvia is in a strategic position in Northern Europe. Its rich history dates back to the second millennium BC, when the Baltic people started settling in the region. Over the centuries, with invasions, occupations and interrelations with neighboring countries, Latvia underwent many changes in its political and cultural identity. One of those noticeable changes started when Latvia was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940. It remained under Soviet occupation for over 50 years, and that brought major economic and social changes, including industrialization and a move towards collectivization. The Soviet era also brought about changes to Latvia's culture and language. Russian became the dominant language in many areas, impacting greatly Latvian cultural and national identity.

Since its independence in 1991, Latvia's official language has been Latvian, a Baltic language. Russian is still widely spoken in Latvia. Latvia is a member of the European Union, NATO and the United Nations. It is an important player in regional politics and economics.

Latvian culture and art are a blend of its Baltic and Nordic heritage, with influences from Germany, Russia, and other neighboring countries. Folk traditions, including music, dance and costumes, are very much alive within Latvia as well as in Latvian communities established in other countries.

The Lifestyle of Latvians

- Latvia has a high standard of living, with a strong economy, well-developed infrastructures and a thriving technology sector. Financial technology and software development are popular, as shown in the advanced e-government systems.
- The Latvian people are hospitable, they enjoy going out and spending time with friends and family over good food and drink. Dishes like smoked fish, sauerkraut, and black bread are popular staples. Latvians love nature, many of them spending a lot of time away from the cities in the summer, enjoying outdoor activities.
- A special word should be said about the prominent place of the sauna in Latvia. Sauna has been part of Latvian life for centuries; women even gave birth in them. Nowadays, the sauna is often a main part of social events, even some

business events. If you're invited to a party, a good rule of thumb is to inquire about the nature of the party before you go. If in doubt, pack a bathing suit as it will be difficult to duck out of the sauna, nor would you want to. Men and women may sauna together. Typically, the sauna is not a quick part of an event; the festivities happen there, beer and all. Expect to come out a little wrinkly but cleaner than you have felt in your life.

Exploring Latvia

There is a lot to see and do in Latvia. One of the top attractions is the capital city, Riga, which is very interesting for its art museums, stunning architecture, historic Old Town and active nightlife. If you wish to explore natural sites while you are in Latvia, you will have a lot of choice. Many forests, lakes and rivers cover much of the country's landscape. Fascinating places like the Gauja National Park, the sandy beaches of Jurmala, the coastal town of Liepaja, the medieval castle ruins at Cesis and the stunning Rundale Palace are just a few. In their friendly way, Latvians will be happy to give you some advice as to how to spend your free time and enjoy yourself in their country.

Country Guide Exercises

Put what you've learned into practice!

After reading the *Workplace Country Guide*, solidify your understanding and chose exercises below that match your needs.

1. **Read the Quick Guide:** our culture theory is clean and simple.
2. **Do the exercise:** re-read the country guide (the real world is messy and complicated) while applying the culture theory.



How long are you going abroad for?

Less than a 2-week

More than a 2-week

MyWorldAbroad Certificate Program:

These exercises are integrated into our certificate program.

Surface Culture

Discover surface culture: sites, sounds and flavors

1. READ [The Culture Tree in Action](#) (30 minutes)
2. EXERCISE (*coming soon*) (30 minutes)



Small Talk

Learn to navigate small talk around the world

1. READ [Peach & Coconut Cultures](#) (30 minutes)
2. EXERCISE (*coming soon*) (30 minutes)



Non-verbal Communication

Learn to observe, interpret & use social cues

1. READ [Non-verbal Communication in Action](#) (30 minutes)
2. EXERCISE (*coming soon*) (60 minutes)



Culture Spectrum

Adapt to new behaviors in the workplace

1. READ [The Culture Spectrum in Action](#) (60 minutes)
2. EXERCISE (*coming soon*) (60 minutes)



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About Workplace Country Guides

Providing context for the above advice.

The contents of this guide has been reproduced and adapted with permission from the *Centre for Learning in Intercultural Effectiveness and International Assistance Policy*. Previously known as *Country Insights*, these are no longer being published and *MyWorldAbroad* has therefore adapted them for use by students and young professionals. The original contributors were diplomats and aid workers, as well as foreign born nationals who had experience working with North Americans.

The content is intended to provide a general overview of social and cultural norms and workplace environments in specific countries abroad. Contributors were asked to draw on as broad a base of experience as possible when formulating their answers. However, this content should still be understood as reflecting the subjective perspectives of individuals, rather than being a comprehensive analysis of the culture.

We welcome your comments and feedback about how to improve *Workplace Country Guides* and make it a richer and more accurate educational resource.

Share your advice about living in Latvia.

Have you lived, worked or volunteered in Latvia? Do you have Latvian heritage? Do you have further experience of the culture and insights to share? If you have in-depth experience of the culture, we'd love to hear from you. Submissions may be published as a Bonus Tip or other update to this guide.

Contribute your perspective!

[CLICK HERE](#) to share your insights and advice.



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