**Latvia**

**Location**

Latvia’s location may be one of its best features. Located in northeastern Europe it has a west northwest coastal region that lies on the Baltic Sea and is flanked by Estonia to the north, Russia to the northeast, Belarus to the southeast, and Lithuania to the south. Latvia lies on 57 deg N latitude and 25 deg E longitude. Measuring only 64,589 square kilometers it is only slightly larger than West Virginia.

**Geography**

Approximately 42 percent of Latvia is covered in forests. This by far is its most prominent feature. Another 10 percent of the land is swamps and marshes inter mixed within forests. Less than half of the land is available for use as agriculture. Latvia is divided into three provinces, Kurzeme (west), Vidzeme (central), and Latgale (east). All three of these areas have a small percentage of land that can be used for agricultural purpose; however, erosion is of high concern.

The Latvian terrain is primarily low lying lands with high moisture content. The majority of the time they are in need of drainage and not irrigation. Some efforts have been made to improve the drainage of agricultural lands to improve production.

Latvia’s highest point is Gaizinkalns at 312m. The lowest point is the Baltic Sea at 0m. Latvia is home to many rivers the largest being the Daugava River stretching a total length of 1,020 kilometers. Latvians put an interest into hydro electric power by building several dams to make full use of the river network.
Climate

The climate in Latvia tends to be wet most of the time which coincides with the boggy land areas and drainage issues they experience. Due to having a large amount of coastline they experience maritime conditions. Latvia experiences moderate to mild winter and cool summer seasons.

History

Latvia was a volatile country in response to Marxism and experience riots in 1905. It was the stage for many executions and many Latvians fled to other lands to escape the tragedy.

Latvia experienced tragedy during and post World War I at the expense of Russia occupation. All assets that the country had previously obtained had been removed during the war and not returned. This left Latvia at a serious disadvantage for future prosperity. A large portion of the country had been devastated as a result of the war and they received no assistance for rebuilding. Even their most important industry was devastated because the timber was not safe for sawmills due to the large amount of bullets lodged in the trees.

Latvia made an impressive recovery by pooling all available resources and Latvian residents banded together to rebuild as an independent nation.

Important Dates

Some important dates in Latvia’s history

Year 1905- Violent response of workers due to the spread of Marxism.
November 1918- Latvian National Council proclaimed Latvia an independent sovereign state.

1922- First constitution established

1991- Admitted into the UN

**Population**

The population of Latvia as of July 2005 is 2,290,237 people. The age structure of ages 0-14 is 14%, 15-64 is 69%, and 65 and over is 16%. The median age is 39 years old. There are a slightly higher percentage of females to males. The death rate of 14/1,000 exceeds the birth rate of 9/1,000, which means the population is slowly decreasing. Latvia has a negative migration rate of -2 people per every thousand.

**Currency**

The Latvian currency was introduced in March of 1993 and has remained stable. Latvian currency is expressed as Latvian Lats, code as LVL. In 2004 the Latvian lati was worth .54 to one US dollar. This exchange rate is still current today.

**Education**

All children are required to attend primary school for at least nine years. After completion of that they have the option of secondary school or a trade school. Latvia has 18 universities and places of higher education. The literacy rate in the country is approaching 100%.

The most unique feature of the Latvian school system is it is ethnically segregated. Latvia is a melting pot of several different backgrounds which include Russian, Polish, Jewish, Lithuanian, Estonian, and Belorussian. There were previously several schools that combined
the groups by teaching multiple languages but those were quickly phased out because they were not blending the groups as was intended.

Language

The official language of Latvia is Latvian which approximately only 58% of people actually speak. Due to the melting pot of cultures Latvia also has several different languages and many are adept at speaking several of them. The languages and the percent of population the speaks it are Russian (38%), Lithuanian and other (4%).

Religion

Latvia is home to three main religions, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Russian Orthodox.

Agriculture

Under Soviet rule agriculture was socialized, limiting the number of farms for production. However, during this time Latvia was a major supplier of meat and dairy products to the Soviet Republics. Upon the collapse of the Soviet system in 1990 the output from Latvia decreased by more than 23%. The livestock in Latvia primarily consists of dairy, sheep and chickens. Also there is an abundant amount wildlife that is hunted as an industry as well. In what little arable land Latvia possesses they grow some grains, fodder crops, beets, potatoes, flax and sugar. Essentially these crops are used in country to support the livestock and not exported.
Latvia is rich in natural resources such as peat, limestone, dolomite, amber, hydropower, and wood. Many of these are utilized and provide industry for the country.

**Trade**

The majority of the exports from Latvia are destined to the former Soviet Republics with a small percentage going to the Netherlands and Germany. The main exports include wood and timber, metal products, and buses.

Latvian imports come from the former Soviet Union in the forms of oil, natural gas, machinery, and automobiles.

**Food**

Latvian residents rely on meat products whether it is fish or meat from the animals they produce. Bread is a very important and highly regarded item in their daily diet. Dairy products are very popular among Latvians at almost every meal. Also Latvians traditionally like to pick wild berries and gather nuts and mushrooms. A very popular drink in Latvia is of course beer. They have many small breweries and brew their own.

**Culture**

The Latvian culture is influenced by the past and ancient customs. Today Latvia boasts many museums and theatres to help them maintain this culture. Riga is the capitol of Latvia and
has been dubbed the undiscovered Paris. Riga is full of old world charm while maintaining a boisterous night life. During the summers Latvians soak up as much sun as possible and truly enjoy life at a moderated pace.

**Government**

The type of government in Latvia is parliamentary democracy. The capital city is Riga located in central Latvia in the low plains region. They have executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. Much like the United States all Latvian citizens of at least 18 years of age and older are able to vote.

**Transportation**

Modes of transportation in Latvia vary widely. They have railways, highways, airports, and waterways. As of 2004 Latvia was home to 50 airports.

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