



# Building on the **Past**

**John Oates** explores the Latvian capital of Riga, and finds a city that's gradually getting used to the idea of making itself accessible to all...

**I**n Soviet times there were no disabled people,” said my guide, Inga Karlštrēma – a Latvian art historian and writer. Referring to an infamous official comment regarding the Paralympics, what she meant was that people with disabilities were routinely ignored and marginalised in the USSR.

She was showing me around the streets of Agenskalns, an up-and-coming suburb of Riga just southwest of the old town, explaining why much of the city is still playing catch-up with disabled access.

### Cobbles and culture

Riga’s problems with access go back much further than the 20th century. The old town is a delightful medieval core of winding streets, impressive churches, and squares that come to life in summer, but the combination of cobbles and narrow pavements can make it hard going for anyone with limited mobility.

If you can tackle the cobbles, then there’s a lot to enjoy. Riga boasts some of the most attractive architecture in the Baltics and has long been the most cosmopolitan city in the region, its mercantile history clearly evident in attractions such as the much-photographed ‘Three Brothers’ – a well-preserved row of one building each from the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries.

Another popular stop on the tourist trail is the House of Blackheads. Outwardly a grand building with stepped gables, it was once used by a guild of unmarried merchants named in honour of their Moorish patron saint. You’d be hard-pressed to guess that it’s actually a reconstruction, however, the original having been reduced to



The cobbled streets of Riga’s old town



A grand wooden building in Agenskalns

ruins during WWII – a conflict that saw most of Riga’s Jewish population murdered and ended with Latvia’s annexation to the Soviet Union.

### Local produce

Impressive though the old town is, there’s plenty to explore further out where it’s easier to get around, owing to the typically wider and flatter pavements. The Centrs (‘Centre’) district north east of the old town has one of the greatest collections of art nouveau buildings anywhere in the world, which combined with the medieval old town helped Riga secure UNESCO World Heritage status.

Having previously explored the district before, I headed straight for the frothiest examples of this ornate style, which you’ll find on Alberta iela (‘street’) and Elizabetas iela in the form of buildings designed by Mikhael Eisenstein (whose son Sergei became the noted film director of *Battleship Potemkin* fame). His buildings are covered with riots of symbolic plasterwork and look fantastic on a sunny day, if slightly over-the-top.

I also wanted to make time for Riga’s famous Central Market, close to the Daugava river that runs through the city. It’s iconic for inhabiting five enormous hangars that once housed German Zeppelins, but is very definitely aimed at locals rather than tourists. That said, it’s still a great place to pick up Latvian staples like rye bread, honey and (in the right season) mushrooms. The market’s level surfaces and wide aisles make it easily navigable for wheelchair users, though there’s no accessible toilet.

### Hemp and handicrafts

My next destination was the Agenskalns district, a short bus ride southwest from the Central Market, which is known for its

wooden buildings, most of which date back to the 19th century. The area is currently undergoing a process of regeneration centred on the Kalnciema Quarter, a collection of wooden buildings arranged around a courtyard. I arrived just as the Quarter’s popular Saturday market was in full swing. As well as a dedicated ‘slow food’ section featuring producers from all over Latvia, there are regional treats aplenty on offer, such as rye bread baked in maple leaves.

One traditional food I’d heard about but hadn’t previously tried was hemp butter, which I found on sale at one of the Kalnciema stalls alongside hemp seed with honey and hemp seed pesto. “Latvians have been eating hemp for centuries,” the stall owner told me. “We normally have it on dark bread, but you can also use your imagination.”

Alongside the ingredients for sale were plenty of places serving lunch, including burgers from Riga’s most famous restaurant, Vincents. It wasn’t all food though – I chatted at one stall with a woman named Dace Grandava who designed woollen hats (€25) with interchangeable pom-poms (€2 each), and bought a glass decoration made to a traditional Latvian design from another. You see these shapes everywhere in Latvia, on everything from traditional costumes to adverts for the tourist office, consisting of grids of interlocking lines, each design with its own particular meaning.

### A wooden city with a stone heart

Agenskalns is a good place for tourists to explore, but in the absence of large museums and other obvious landmarks, the best way to see it is with a guide, which you can arrange through the Kalnciema Quarter.

Inga Karlštrēma began by showing me a

few parts of the Quarter I hadn't yet seen, including an art gallery where one side was made up of floor-to-ceiling windows. Now an appealing exhibition space, it was previously used for storing wood to heat the houses. Inga explained how during the 90s, when the former state-owned buildings reverted back to becoming private property, prices in central Riga rose quickly. Speculators bought up the wooden buildings, then knocked them down to build properties that were more profitable. There were once about 12,000 wooden buildings in Riga but that number's now down to about 4000, with most of those outside the centre – but people are thankfully now seeing the potential of these historical structures.

"Riga was a wooden city with a stone heart," Inga told me. At one time brick buildings were only allowed within the city walls; suburban structures had to be built from wood, so that they could be burnt down to prevent them from being taken by opposing armies. This actually happened several times, including one notorious attempt to deter Napoleon. His army actually took an alternative route to the city, making the self-inflicted devastation completely unnecessary.

### Bringing history to life

My visit to Riga concluded with a beautiful walk through streets lined with trees resplendent in the shades of autumn, listening while Inga pointed out various features that helped make more sense of what I was seeing. She showed me the typical layout of a plot, for example, comprising one building on the main road and another set slightly back; the latter would be the home of the landowner, the former rented from them.

It was fascinating to hear her talk with such passion about the area, and to see an array of historical images displayed on her iPad – drawings, paintings and photographs that really helped bring the surrounding history to life. Towards the end we stopped at a spot now occupied by incongruous tower blocks, where she showed me postcards of sledging competitions held there in the 19th century.

Those historical images got me thinking about how Riga had changed, and highlighted how it was slowly improving its provision for disabled visitors. To highlight one example, the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia – one of the city's biggest attractions – is due to move into a more accessible building in 2015. There may still many challenges, but at least it can no longer be said that there are 'no disabled people' here.

### Make it happen

■ Many of the most affordable flights to Riga from London airports leave very early in the morning. John stayed overnight at the Holiday Inn Express in Luton, arranged through Holiday Extras ([www.holidayextras.com](http://www.holidayextras.com))

■ You can more information about the Kalnciema Quarter at

[www.kalnciema.lv](http://www.kalnciema.lv); it's reasonably flat and easy to get around, but like the Central Market, there's an absence of accessible toilets.

■ The buses in Riga have buttons by the midpoint door, so that people in wheelchairs can signal for the driver to extend a ramp.

■ The Latvian disability organisations Sustento ([www.sustento.lv](http://www.sustento.lv)) and Apeirons ([www.apeirons.lv](http://www.apeirons.lv)) can both provide limited information in English about disabled access throughout the country.



A 1910 watertower in Agenskalns