



Focus on LATVIA School Program

Half a century ago, Latvia's economy depended on fishing and agriculture, but the Soviets, who controlled the country from 1940 to 1991, imported heavy industry. Now, having shaken off Russia's dominance, Latvia is privatizing those industries. Meanwhile in Riga, the country's capital, entrepreneurs are launching service businesses, giving the town a boomtown energy housed in old art nouveau buildings. Despite ancient castles and churches preserved around the country—and beaches that were once favorites of Russian czars—Latvia sees relatively few tourists, and its artists and writers are unsung beyond its borders. Even so, Latvians are deeply proud of their centuries-old culture.

AFS & Your Experience

AFS Latvia has been in existence since 1991. About 30 AFS volunteers in five chapters across the country work hard year-round to provide you with the most satisfying intercultural experience possible. During the school year, AFS Latvia hosts approximately 25 AFSers from as many as 15 countries.

AFS will be at your side throughout your intercultural exchange. Even before leaving your home country, you will participate in organized AFS orientations and have the assistance of experienced AFS volunteers. Once in your host country, you can rely on your local volunteer contact and other chapter volunteers to support you in your experience. Together we will ensure that you have an incredible experience abroad.

Landing in Latvia

Arrival orientation

When you land in Riga, the capital of Latvia, you and your fellow AFSers will pass through customs and be met by AFS Latvia staff and volunteers. Some students are met by their host family the same day and have their arrival orientation at the local level the next day. Others are taken straight to the camp and only later to their host families. During this 24-hour orientation, you will get to know some local AFSers, learn about AFS, its mission and history, AFS policies and requirements, culture shock and the adjustment process, realistic expectations, safety and support issues.

Post-Arrival Orientation

Two weeks after your arrival, you will go to a five-day Post-Arrival/Language camp at the regional level, which will help you develop basic Latvian language skills and prepare you for life in Latvia. You will have a chance to meet other AFSers from around the world, ask questions and learn about AFS in Latvia as well as about Latvian culture, economics and politics. You will be asked to perform in a talent show and represent your home country. Following that you will return to your host family.

Living in Latvia

Lifestyle and Family Living

Latvian traditions have formed strong bonds between three generations of family members. In most families where both parents work, it is the grandmother who assumes the main responsibility for maintaining the household and looking after the children. Latvian families like to spend a lot of time together.

Urban families frequently spend weekends in their summer homes in the country, and they will expect their AFSer to accompany them. Since urban apartments are often small and Latvian custom requires that guests be served tea or coffee, bringing a large number of guests home is considered impolite.

The Latvian population is made up of several ethnic groups, and their temperaments and family traditions can differ. In general, parents are protective of their children and expect them to help with the housework and to keep them informed about when they are going out and where they are going. Whether in the city or country, Latvians enjoy visiting families and friends on weekends.

While maintaining many traditions, Latvians also find that their lives are changing through technology, especially computers, mobile phones, satellite TV, e-commerce and banking services.

Latvian host families, like AFS host families worldwide, are not paid. They open their homes to students in order to share their community and culture as well as to enrich their own family lives.

Students are generally placed in urban areas such as Riga and Daugavpils, Liepaja, Ventspils, Cesis, but there is also a possibility of rural placement.

Dress and Appearance

Latvian teenagers like to dress casually; they wear T-shirts and jeans or corduroys. For special occasions more formal dress is expected: for girls a dress or blouse and skirt; for boys a jacket, slacks and tie. You should also bring a pair of good, comfortable walking shoes. For the winter months, you will need a warm waterproof coat, heavy boots, sweaters, mittens and warm socks. Students are not required to wear uniforms at school.

Diet and Meals

Meat and potatoes are a major part of the diet. Other popular foods are: fried meat cutlets and pastries, as well as smoked fish (flounder, eel, herring, and pilchards), dairy products, eggs, and grains. Soups and sausages are also popular. In summer and autumn, fresh berry pies and tarts are abundant. Vegetarians are hard to place in Latvia. Fresh vegetables tend to be eaten in season only, although cabbage is a year-round staple. A typical meal might consist of *zirmi* (brown peas served with a sauce made from ham) and *karbonade* (fried pork with mashed potatoes). Other favorites include pancakes filled with fruit or *biezpiens* (similar to cottage cheese) and *soljanka* (a hearty soup made with meat and red beets).

In Latvian families it is very important to sit together for a meal. According to Latvia's oral traditions, food was to be served by a virtuous hostess on a clean table with a generous hand. The male head of the household would cut the first slice of bread; members of the household would bow their heads out of respect for the leader. In quiet voices they would thank God and the giver. Bread was the fruit of work, which is holy in

Latvian culture. It is considered inappropriate for individuals to request special foods, to prepare separate food for themselves or to raid the refrigerator.

The Latvian table will always surprise you. Foods vary from region to region, during different holidays and seasons and often symbolize traditions or beliefs.

School

School is probably the best place for you to meet people and make friends during your time in Latvia. Public schools in Latvia may be either predominantly Latvian-speaking or predominantly Russian-speaking. Depending on the hosting location, AFS students may be placed in either type of school with students of about their own age. A counselor will help you select your courses, and your age and school record at home will have a bearing on your grade placement.

You will be required to take core subjects: Latvian language and literature as well as Russian language and literature (in Russian-speaking schools), history of Latvia and current affairs, math, a foreign language and physical education. Electives include a second foreign language, geography, basic computer science, physics, chemistry, biology, music and home economics. Students can specialize and choose related subjects.

School runs from September through May. Classes are Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. There are 30 to 38 class sessions per week, and classes run 40 to 45 minutes with 10-minute breaks in between. Students are expected to attend classes regularly. There are two terms separated by a three-week vacation at Christmas. There are weeklong holidays in mid-October and at Easter.

It is possible for you to obtain a transcript of your grades if you complete all academic requirements. No diplomas are given. Latvia is one of the few countries where you have the chance to learn two languages at the same time: Latvian and Russian.

Teen Life

School is the center of student social life in Latvia. You can participate in extracurricular activities such as swimming, dancing, basketball, Tae Kwon Do, track and other sports. Local community organizations also offer activities including music, crafts and drama. Latvia is well-known for its choral singing and folk dances.

In winter it is very popular to engage in winter sports such as downhill skiing, snowboarding, skating and ice-hockey.

In spring and summer, when the weather is nice, teens like to engage in different outdoor activities, including skateboarding, football and volleyball.

On weekends, Latvian teens, like young people around the world, enjoy getting together with friends, going to parties, seeing a movie or just hanging out in the local café.

AFS Activities

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Latvia will provide you with several others. Orientation camps always take place in different and interesting places in Latvia, such as near the Baltic Sea.

Orientations are a chance for participants to meet (often for a weekend or for a few days) and talk about expectations for the future program and experiences from their pasts. Orientations involve participating in group activities and self-examination. Sessions usually provide new information and ways of looking at things while also

allowing participants to share points of view. AFS orientations are social, interactive and educational, bringing together young people from many countries and helping them to better understand their own intercultural learning experiences.

AFS volunteers may organize additional activities for you during your stay including informal gatherings, picnics and weekend excursions. AFS Latvia provides a two-day sightseeing tour around Latvia. Also during your stay, you will have the opportunity to visit another of the Baltic republics, Russia or Finland at your expense.

There will be a two-day mid-stay orientation in January, at which you can catch up on friendships, ask questions and share experiences.

Right before you return home is the so-called End-of-Stay orientation, when you will get together with other AFSers. The End-of-Stay is about looking back at your exchange sojourn and sharing memories with other AFSers. It is also about thinking of the future.

Language

Latvian is the language of Latvia, which belongs to a Baltic branch of the Indo-European, non-Slavic non-Germanic language family. There is a big Russian community in Latvia, which is why Russian is widely spoken. Latvian teenagers enjoy learning and speaking English and will help you learn Latvian.

Travel

Although it is natural for you to want to travel while in Latvia, AFS is not designed as a tourist program. AFS offers the rare opportunity to be immersed in a culture and a country. It is likely, however, that you will have many opportunities to travel with your host family, school, community organization, local chapter or AFS Latvia. We strongly discourage traveling on your own or with friends.

Spending Money

Host families are asked to pay only for ordinary family events in which you are expected to join, but they may pay for some of your personal activities. When you do things with your friends or alone, such as going to a movie or taking special lessons, the expense is your responsibility.

Latvian young people seldom carry or spend large amounts of money. AFS recommends that US\$850 in traveler's checks or on a credit card should be sufficient to cover spending needs for an entire year. The most popular bank cards are Visa and Maestro Card. Spending more than your peers may create a distance between you and them. It is wise to learn to spend as they do.

Safety and Support

Like your country, Latvia can be a safe place if you are aware of potential dangers and act accordingly. Host families, as well as AFS Latvia, educate students to enable them to have a safe and rewarding experience.

During your stay, local AFS volunteers will be available to assist you as you learn to live as a Latvian. In the event of an emergency, AFS staff can be reached 24 hours a day by you in your host country and by your natural family at home.

For the welfare of participants, AFS worldwide has two rules: no driving and no use of drugs for non-medicinal purposes. Any student who violates either of these rules will be automatically sent home. AFS Latvia may have additional rules.

Health Precautions

In addition to the precautions mentioned above, AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Latvia (which you can get from your government or easily find on the Internet) with your personal doctor, to determine what is best for you and your personal needs.

If you require any medical assistance during your stay, your host family or local volunteers will be ready to help find it. As an AFS participant your medical expenses are covered for illness or injuries incurred while on the program, exclusive of pre-existing, dental or visual aid expenses.

Documents

You must have a passport that will be valid for six months longer than your intended stay. In addition to your passport, you also need a visa to enter and reside in your host country. Visas are obtained through the consular offices of your host country, and requirements often vary from consulate to consulate.

Consulates charge fees for their services, and obtaining your visa can be a complicated and lengthy process requiring a great deal of paperwork, patience and persistence. AFS will help you obtain the visa and provide you with instructions regarding the required documents.

Program Prices

Please [contact the AFS office in your home country](#) for information about program price and scholarship possibilities and what the program price covers for the various program offerings. In most cases the program price covers the following: round-trip international travel with your AFS group; travel in the host country to your host family; travel from your host family to your international departure point; AFS's medical plan; placement with your host; orientation in your home country and your host country; 24 hour emergency assistance in your home and host countries; a global medical assistance organization to support extreme emergencies; a network of trained volunteers who support you throughout your experience.

In order to keep costs low and provide good service, AFS utilizes a network of volunteers and staff in 50+ countries around the world. Volunteers need training, support and assistance from professional staff in each country. Other expenses you will normally need to pay in addition to the program price: passport and visa fees, required inoculations, expenses for eyeglasses, contacts and dental care, school uniforms (where applicable) and personal spending money. Your housing and food are provided by your host family as part of their commitment to our program.

Country Information

Geography and Climate

Latvia is about the size of Ireland or Sri Lanka. It is the second largest of the Baltic states but one of the smallest countries in Europe. It lies on the eastern Baltic Sea and is bordered by Estonia to the north, Lithuania to the south and Russia and Belarus to the east. Its topography is characterized by low rolling hills, shallow valleys, many small lakes, forests, dramatic seascapes and a rich variety of wildlife.

Latvia has a maritime climate, which is generally temperate but changeable. Winter temperatures average about -4°C/23°F but can fall below -21°C/-4°F. Summer temperatures average 15°C/59°F.

Population

The population is approximately 2.5 million; Riga has a population of 860,000. Fifty-two percent of the population is Latvian and 35% is Russian. Other ethnic groups: Belorussian, Ukrainian, Polish, Lithuanian, Jewish and others.

Government

Until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Latvia was considered by the USSR to be part of its nation. Now an independent country, Latvia is a democratic parliamentary republic. Legislative power is in the hands of a single chamber parliament—the Saeima, consisting of 100 deputies. Parliamentary elections take place every four years. The president signs laws, chooses the Prime Minister (who heads the government) and performs representative functions.

Religion

Ethnic Latvians are predominantly Roman Catholic or Lutheran. Ethnic Russians are predominantly Russian Orthodox.

Launching Your AFS Experience

Evaluations by previous participants support our belief that those students who prepare prior to leaving home have the best experience. In order to get ready, first make every effort to learn some key Latvian and Russian words and phrases so that you arrive with at least some basic knowledge of both languages.

To familiarize yourself further with life in Latvia, make use of your local library and/or the Internet. A lot of general information is available about Latvians and their culture.

Although each participant's experience is unique, we strongly suggest that you speak with a recent AFS participant to Latvia. This person will be an excellent resource regarding living as a Latvian. If you do not know any alumni, please contact your local volunteer or national AFS office. In addition, AFS Latvia will provide you with a special packet of country-specific information before you leave home.

Latvian people will be curious about your home community. You may be surprised to find out how much they already know about your country. Therefore, it is also helpful to be as informed as possible about current events in your community and country.

If you have not already received a full AFS application packet, please contact your local AFS volunteer or national office to request one. We wish you a wonderful experience!

Curiously Latvian

The color of the Latvian flag is a particular dark red or crimson tone that is referred to as "Latvian red" by the rest of the world.

Latvian Pride

✦ A singing country ✦ A seafaring nation ✦ Untouched nature

✦ Amber ✦ Ice-hockey

✦ Riga, called a city of inspiration and part of UNESCO's World Heritage List

✦ The White Stork—symbol of good fortune and an indicator of the quality of the environment

How to Apply

To become a participant in this country's School Program, contact your nearest AFS office. To locate an AFS office, go to <http://www.afs.org/contact>

Student age (upon arrival) 15y 5m to 18y 6m

Country data	Size	64,589 sq km 25,190 sq mi
	Population	2.42 million
	Official language	Latvian
	Government	Parliamentary democracy
Currency	Lat or Ls	
	1 Lat = 100 santims	
Useful website	www.latinst.lv	
	www.latviatourism.lv	
	www.riga800.lv	
	www.inyourpocket.lv	
AFS Latvia website	www.afs.lv	

AFS program destinations are not always available to residents of all countries. If a program interests you, please contact your nearest AFS office to find out if it is an option for you. You can locate your nearest AFS office at <http://www.afs.org/contact>