



## From Latvia With (Tough) Love

Posted in [Cover Features](#) » by [Nellie Huang](#) :: November 23, 2010

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I've had a woman scrub me rigorously in a Turkish *hammam* and a Thai masseuse twist my hip so hard I screamed like a baby, but it's a first to lay butt naked and have a Russian lady gleefully beating me with a bunch of birch leaves - all in the name of my wellbeing, apparently.

We are in [Amber Spa](#), a modern retreat in the Latvian beach town of Jurmala, to experience the traditional Russian *banya* at its most authentic. A charming town set within thick pine forests and autumn foliage, Jurmala is best known for its mineral waters, healing mud and Russian spa tradition. With the Baltic Sea just metres away, the relaxing atmosphere at Amber Spa is contagious. It's no wonder Jurmala has long attracted a loyal following of spa-loving Russians.

I am accompanied by three mates eager to kick back and unwind on a whirlwind weekend break. After our three-hour [Air Baltic](#) flight from Gatwick to Riga, we had arrived to a blazing 5°C - in mid-autumn. En route to Jurmala, just 20 minutes away from the capital city of Riga by car, we plotted plans for a quick dash to the Russian bath upon arrival.

My conversations with Latvian and Russian friends had always revolved largely around the *banya*. A bath tradition inherited from the ancient Scythians, it's still very much part of the modern-day Russian and Soviet Union nations' culture. Ask any particularly passionate Russian proponent of the practice and they'll tell you that even to this day, every single man, woman and child in the country visits it at least once a week.

"For us, the *banya* is not just about getting clean. It's believed to be very good for your health, particularly for your skin, joints and metabolism; it's also a social activity for friends to gather around and enjoy vodka while relaxing in the bath." Alla Sokolova, Amber Spa's General Manager explains. *Vodka in a sauna: surely a lethal combination?*

Stylish and tastefully designed, with an impressive array of modern treatments, the chic finish of the contemporary Amber Spa stirs up some serious doubts: Will a Russian *banya* experience here be anything like the real thing?

That afternoon, I met my therapist - a red-headed, middle-aged woman, with sweat dripping and face glowing like red tungsten. Jabbering in Russian, she demanded I strip off completely; not even my underwear was spared. I was led into the bath area where ladies sauntered around stark naked except for a *chapka* - a felt hat worn to protect the head from the heat. Inside the wooden-planked modern sauna, the intense heat was unbearable, and the air thick with sweat.

After motioning for me to lie down, my therapist - half my size but clearly double my strength - proceeded to hit me with birch twigs, working her way from my head to toe with a firmness that only occasionally threatened to edge towards brutality. I swear I caught a glimpse of her smiling sadistically as she pummelled me but as my friends and I were the only foreigners in the bath we couldn't help but snigger and stare in awe at the process.

Back in the washing area, my Russian therapist beckoned me to place my hands in a bucket of lukewarm water, before dumping a bucket of melt-off from the polar ice cap over my head. As if the tooth-rattling shock of the first bucketful wasn't enough, I was drenched with several buckets of ice water before getting massaged through mounds of soapy lather. As shocking as aspects of the treatments had initially been by the end of the day I was feeling refreshed and elated, and as light and giddy as a hot air balloon.



Jurmala's Amber Spa.

### Spa Treatments on Offer

The next day, I awoke still feeling rejuvenated and pleasantly light from the bath experience. Amber Spa did not disappoint: its Russian *banya* offered a truly genuine cultural experience - all the while providing a luxurious and comfortable environment.

A combination of elegant design, modern amenities and an unpretentious atmosphere, Amber Spa boasts a unique

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Nellie Huang is an independent travel journalist with a fierce passion for life. In her quest for adventure, she has climbed an active volcano in Guatemala, reconstructed a school in rural Tanzania, followed the trails of sea lions on the Galapagos Islands and scuba-dived with turtles in the depths of Borneo, Malaysia. Now based in Spain, she writes regularly for CNN Go, National Geographic Intelligent Traveler, Wend, Women Adventure Magazine, Rough Guides and Lonely Planet. Read about her travels on [Wild Junket](#) or follow her on Twitter [@WildJunket](#).

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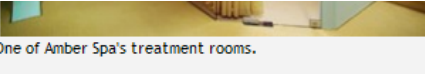
  
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One of Amber Spa's treatment rooms.

blend of traditional principles and modern techniques to match its friendly, inviting appearance. The spa prides itself on the use of natural products - local herbs, spring water, mud, amber stones, buckwheat and birch are all collected from the surroundings. A myriad of massages, body and face treatments are on offer - we tried out the revitalizing hydrotherapy, the cocoon wrap and the Russian Blanche De-stress Massage. By the end of the day, we were all buzzing dreamily from the treatments.

For those seeking to take a step further, Amber Spa's [Balans Programme](#) is a one-week plan designed to improve health and attain optimum balance. Therapy includes an initial diagnosis using bio-chemical testing and a personalized consultation with a doctor. Treatment is then carried out using a combination of detox diet, fitness and massage plans.

As co-founder of the Balans programme, Dr Suhorukov, says, "Wellness is the constant journey to understanding health." At Amber Spa, they strive to achieve just that.

### Luxury Spa with Rooms

We were fortunate enough to try out Amber Spa's newest addition: a 21-suite Euro-chic boutique hotel that aims at creating a welcoming relaxation space, free of high-design chilliness for spa users. Having just opened its doors in 2009, the cosy abode combines stylish, contemporary elements with warm colours and an intimate feel. To blend the hotel into its natural surroundings, architect Liga Gaile uses the pinewood elements in the hotel's exterior; while local interior designer Evgeniji Zakman softens the hard edges with the use of amber stone, Latvia's national gem.

The hotel is an interesting take on a spa with rooms, except that in this case the rooms are of a standard you could expect to find in a high-end hotel. All of the guest rooms tout ceiling-to-floor windows and a semi-transparent bathroom door. In my own room space was rather tight, but bright light filtering in through the window made up for it. No expense has been spared on the snazzy décor either: mahogany carpeted flooring, white linen curtains and the minimalistic all-white bathroom, in-room Wi-Fi and plasma TV screens struck just the right balance between classically comfortable and fashionably modern.

Contrary to most boutique hotels, the Amber Spa Hotel fuses its various facilities - restaurant, lounge bar, wellness centre and (surprise, surprise) a bowling alley - into the idea of an all-encompassing, modern resort. There is a refreshing coherence about the way it all fits together.

That night, we adjourned to its venerable in-house fine-dining establishment, [My Life Restaurant](#). The food is fresh and hearty and owes everything to the surrounding woods and waters. Giving a modern spin to traditional Latvian-Russian staples, the menu is strikingly refreshing. Here, Latvian appetizers reign supreme: the tender veal-filled cabbage rolls I ordered were so unfathomably flavoursome that I was tempted to order an extra portion. In the atmospheric ambiance, we devoured grilled-to-perfection sirloin steak, fresh herring with baked potatoes and the award-winning bread pudding.



Accommodation at Amber Spa.

By the end of our spa weekend, our physical knots had completely untangled and our mental health renewed. It might be the fresh air in Jurmala, the resort's lulling atmosphere or the extraordinary effects of the Russian *banya* - I had somehow managed to ditch the London grip and thrown myself into a hypnotic lullaby. Whatever the reason, it was most definitely worth getting spanked by a Russian woman. Who knows, I might just return the favour the next time I'm back...

*Air Baltic is Latvia's low-fare airline, with prices from Britain starting from £89 return including taxes. The airline flies daily from London Gatwick to Riga as well as the other Baltic States capitals, Vilnius, Tallinn and Stockholm. Air Baltic will soon be the first European airline to introduce iPads for inflight entertainment. For reservation, go to the airline's [website](#).*

*Double rooms at Amber Spa Hotel start from €85 per night including breakfast and Balans Club privileges (personal training studio, aerobics, swimming pool, traditional Russian baths + 10% discount on Spa treatments). Book [online](#) at or call +371 67 755 330.*

*To get to Jurmala, City Bus 22 runs between airport and Jurmala. One-way fare is 2 Ls and the journey is approximately 30 minutes. Minibuses also operate from Riga's Central minibuses station, departing every five minutes. Tickets cost 1.50 Ls.*

*For more information on Jurmala go to [www.jurmala.lv](#) or read more about Riga on [www.rigatourism.lv](#) and Latvia at [www.latvia.travel](#).*

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