

SPIRIT & DESTINY

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20 PAGES OF MIND, BODY & SPIRIT

FEELGOOD BREAK

WHY LATVIA?

It may not be an obvious choice, but Latvia is a little bit different and refreshingly affordable. Jurmala, a town on the Baltic coast, has long-standing spa credentials, thanks to its healing waters and mineral muds. Back in the days of the Soviet Union, workers came to this coast each year, armed with a voucher for a two-week stay at a sanatorium, and Jurmala was so popular that direct trains ran from Moscow, 550 miles away. These days, wellness offerings include traditional treatments alongside all the modern therapies you'd expect from a 21st-century spa.

SPA ATTRACTION

The Amber Spa Boutique Hotel in Jurmala is a good base – a haven of calm just a short walk from a white sandy beach. Many of the treatments use seasonal and locally sourced produce, from a summery strawberry facial to a skin-nourishing pumpkin body wrap for autumn visitors. You can even get an amber massage, which harnesses the heat-absorbing power of these stones found in abundance on the Baltic shoreline.

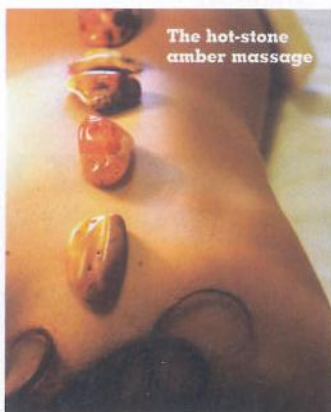
HOT AND STEAMY

Amber Spa also offers the chance to experience a *banya*, or traditional Russian steam bath. There are separate facilities for men and women, because everyone is naked, save for a pair of flip-flops and a conical felt hat to protect your head from the heat.

As in a Scandinavian sauna, the *banya* is a small, dark room lined with wooden benches, where water is thrown over hot coals to produce steam and raise the temperature to about 90°C. You can boost your circulation by beating yourself with a bundle of leafy birch twigs, or let a *poparshitsa* – a 'steam maker' – do the job for you. She'll give you a lemon

Baltic chill

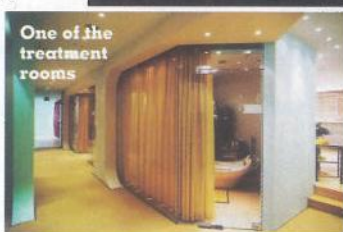
With windswept beaches, amber massages and Russian steam baths, a break in Latvia will put the colour back in your cheeks



The hot-stone amber massage



Clockwise from left: a house in Jurmala; Amber Spa; a felt banya hat; dentist's chair in the sanatorium's museum



One of the treatment rooms



Relaxing in the Amber Spa



Clockwise from right: Jurmala beach; Riga's oldest street; the cathedral



juice massage inside the *banya*, then take you into the tiled shower room to dump a bucket of cold water over your head!

It's a great place for bonding, and friends often spend hours here, alternating spells in the *banya* with snacking and sipping cold beer or *kvass*, a non-alcoholic drink made from fermented rye bread.

STEP BACK IN TIME

Not far from Jurmala, in the Kemer National Park, Amber Shore Sanatorium is still run along much the same lines as when it opened in 1972. The decor hasn't changed much, and the doors are still labelled in Russian, not Latvian, giving it a decidedly retro feel.

A museum gives an insight

into spa therapy through the ages, with photos of treatments from days gone by, and primitive-looking exercise bikes and sun lamps. Nearby in the grounds is a *dacha*, or holiday home, where government officials once stayed

for R&R – it's possible to rent it if you want to go back to the 1970s for the weekend.

A CAPITAL DAY OUT

Latvia's capital, Riga, is just 10 miles from Amber Spa. A Unesco World Heritage Site, thanks to its 800-year-old cathedral and its square, Riga is also famed for its gorgeous art nouveau architecture. Intricate statues, motifs and giant faces peer down from colourful facades as you pass by.

BLOW AWAY THE COBWEBS

Jurmala's 20-mile beach is idyllic for a contemplative coastal stroll. Or head back to Kemer National Park, with its woodland walks, sand dunes, lakes and the Great Kemer Bog. A raised boardwalk allows you to explore the bog without damaging its delicate ecosystem. Just don't venture off the path...

FACT FILE

• Flights from London Gatwick to Riga start at £128 return with AirBaltic.

Call 00371-67 006006 or visit www.airbaltic.com. Amber Spa's nearest train station is Bulduri, 30 minutes from Riga. Visit www.ldz.lv

• Double rooms at Amber Spa Boutique Hotel start at 60 lats/85 euros a night (about £73), including breakfast, access to the

Russian baths, pool and gym, and 10 per cent off spa treatments. Call 00371-67 755 330 or visit www.amberspahotel.lv/en

• Find out more about Amber Shore Sanatorium at <http://sanatorij.lv/en>
• For tourist information, visit www.latvia.travel/en