

pa.press.net, Updated: 26/08/2010 10:14

# Strawberries and steam in Latvia

As I wandered around the smart hotel in my dressing gown and slippers, scents of wild strawberry puree and salt wafted from my skin.

This wasn't the result of a fight with a smoothie maker, but the after-effect of a detoxing fruit body scrub at the Amber Spa hotel in Jurmala, Latvia.

Knowing little about the tiny Baltic republic of Latvia, a former Soviet state that is now part of Europe, I took a gamble, following in the footsteps of a friend who had visited its capital, Riga.

She'd spoken of its world-famous art nouveau architecture, craft markets, buzzing atmosphere and Bohemian spirit, describing it almost like a mini-Berlin, though it's known as the Paris of the Baltics.

While the chance to explore a new city is always alluring, I also wanted to take time to de-stress and unwind. Latvia is famous for its spas and rehabilitation centres and the rates are said to be much cheaper and the spas less crowded than those offered by some of its Western European counterparts.

Amber Spa hotel is only a 20-minute drive from Riga, has a beautiful coastal setting and boasts an extensive list of beauty therapies, treatments and personalised holistic programmes.

Amber stone massage and mud treatments are the signature therapies available, alongside medical practices such as kinesiology, colonics and food allergy testing.

The intriguing list of products used includes locally-sourced herbs, buckwheat, birch juice and chocolate. Should I play safe and go for a classic or opt for the obscure with an Algologie herbal wine and chocolate body wrap or the traditional Russian Baniya (Russian baths)?

Affluent Jurmala is the largest resort city in the Baltic and a popular destination for Latvians and holidaymakers from across the region and further afield looking to benefit from its natural treasures.

The nearest beach to Amber Spa is only a five-minute walk through the forest. A scenic jog, stroll or cycle are on the doorstep and there are nature trails, aromatherapy walks and entertaining beach volleyball tournaments.

Coming in to land at Riga International Airport, over the Baltic Sea, I understood how the natural elements are the region's real attraction. The sea, sandy beaches, river and dense pinewoods were all packed together, just metres below our plane.

In my hotel room, I was intrigued to find a complimentary punnet of tiny, tasty berries, looking not too dissimilar to small strawberries. Not so savvy on the latest health kicks, I guessed they might be goji berries.

Though eager to start selecting my spa treatment, a note from the hotel caught my eye. It detailed the weather forecast, upcoming events in Jurmala and suggested I have a vacuum body massage with lymph drainage.

Though grateful for the recommendation, which promised to help get rid of fat deposits, it sounded too complex to comprehend at bedtime. So I polished off the last of the red things and indulged in that age-old therapy - sleep.

Next morning, over an amazing buffet breakfast at the hotel's fine dining restaurant, which included Latvian curd, cold meats, muesli, salmon and German black bread, as well as cooked breakfasts, I learnt that the red berries were locally-picked wild strawberries and not the latest antioxidant or super fruit.

### advertisement

## Do you live near me?



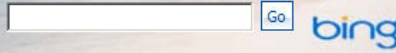
### Related videos

<b>SPAIN</b>			
Music: North Spain	Music: Ireland	Nomads of Niger	
Globe Trekker Posted 9/8/09	Globe Trekker Posted 9/8/09	Globe Trekker Posted 9/8/09	

### MSN Travel's top five searches

#### Rising destinations:

- Tirana, Albania
- Izmir, Turkey
- Tel Aviv, Israel
- Split, Croatia
- Ljubljana, Slovenia



### Advertising feature



#### BA Egypt

From holidays for foodies to breaks on motorbikes, must-see natural wonders to amazing animals, find it all in Canada.

### Latest articles

- Sexy feast
- Billionaire playgrounds 2010
- The other Ibiza
- World's most exclusive hotels
- Where to stay in British Columbia

### Poll

Have you visited a British beach this summer?

- Yes
- No

Vote

Vote to see results

### Today on MSN

- Then and now: 80s pop stars
- Decoded: new number plates
- Quirky ways to get married
- September's top new games
- Foods that boost brainpower

### Top video



Tornado destruction

Watch footage of some terrifying tornadoes tearing across the country.

Windows Internet Explorer 8  
Smarter browsing with Internet Explorer 8

NEW

Download Internet Explorer 8 for MSN

Get it now, FREE

### Watch TV shows



Why do couples cheat? Find out in this documentary



Incredible story of rare identical quads

### Weather

London, England 21°C Clear

Wednesday 19/8

Thursday 20/9

Hotmail Free e-mail services

### Try Windows Live

Hotmail Free e-mail services

Messenger

It's clear that guests of Amber Spa are not expected to follow a strict diet and exercise regime, but rather base their selection on informed choices and individual needs.

Before my spa experience, there was time for a walk into the centre of Jurmala, once considered the St Tropez of the former Soviet Union. It was the closest state to Western Europe but still essentially Russian.

Passing traditional wooden residences, typical of the area, I was soon strolling down the sophisticated main street, lined with little shops, hotels and cafes.

It was market day and stalls were selling Latvian wares including amber jewellery, hand-knitted woollen mittens and local delicacies including freshly-foraged mushrooms and jams made from wild strawberries.

The Jurmala City Museum is worth a visit to see how the resort established itself and also the history behind its wellbeing culture.

I'd always suspected that the Baltic people, unlike us British, are far more accustomed to letting go and tapping into the powers of Mother Nature to maintain a healthy mind, body and spirit - taking mud baths and brisk dips in plunge pools, having massages, baring all and sweating together in saunas and steam baths.

However, I admit to being rather uncomfortable with the idea of stripping off in front of strangers. I'd generally prefer to lie back in the safety of my own private luxury for an hour, being preened by a professional, with soothing music lulling me into a state of calm.

Refreshed from my walk, I donned my robe and slippers and headed to the spa for an intense sports massage. Not the most relaxing, but it loosened knotted muscles and straightened me out.

I couldn't resist trying the Russian banya too. A commonplace activity for Russians on a Sunday afternoon, it usually consists of a dry space to sit and relax, eat, drink and chat as well as a wet area with sauna, cold pool, showers and treatment rooms. Men, separated from women, often play cards and even broker business deals in the banya, while women socialise and beautify themselves.

On entering the banya, it was soon apparent that if I was going to have the authentic experience, I would have to bare all.

For most of the afternoon I took strict instructions from the burly but rather endearing manageress, or "poparshitsa", which literally means "steam maker".

I was told to shower, don a special felt hat to protect my head from the intense heat, and sweat it out in the steam room before taking the plunge into the cold pool.

I repeated this several times, and during one session in the steam room the poparshitsa batted me down from head to toe with aromatic oak besoms (bundles of twigs) which contain phytoncides in the leaves to open my pores and stimulate circulation.

Unable to speak Latvian, I was unprepared as she then marched me over to a corner of the banya where a large container of icy water was poured over me from a great height. My senses were certainly awakened!

Between sessions in the wet room, I was served salad, gherkins, potatoes with dill, herring, fresh cranberry juice and herbal tea.

Dessert wasn't quite what I expected - I was taken into a side room where the poparshitsa slopped wild strawberry puree all over me and massaged it into my skin. It smelt divine but I felt a bit like a living, breathing smoothie!

Still covered in fruit, I was wrapped in a plastic sheet where I stayed mummified for five minutes before being allowed to rinse off. Afterwards my skin felt amazing and smelt great too.

R&R was just the ticket but Riga beckoned. The capital can easily be reached by a short taxi ride or train from Jurmala. By day it's worth heading straight to the colourful Art Nouveau or Old Town areas as they are not to be missed.

Riga is said to be the art nouveau capital of Northern Europe. The ornate buildings bear countless figures and faces, with all sorts of expressions worked into their facades. It's said that these buildings 'scream, cry and laugh at you'.

It's no surprise that Old Town Riga is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The city is such a pretty patchwork of colourful roofs and walls.

## Advertisement



**Save up to 80% on train tickets**  
thetrainline.com sells tickets for all UK routes. You can also book your **Eurostar** and connecting tickets to many European destinations from as little as £65.

## Latest discussions

### Local places to see in Glasgow or around?

2 messages by 2 authors  
Last post on 01 September 2010 07:54:54

### Christmas in Nice, France?

1 messages by 1 authors  
Last post on 01 September 2010 00:13:14

### The most boring places on Earth

1010 messages by 785 authors  
Last post on 31 August 2010 12:03:41

### UK's Most Romantic Place

3 messages by 3 authors  
Last post on 31 August 2010 09:44:00

### Best European Destination

2 messages by 2 authors  
Last post on 30 August 2010 08:35:49

[Browse All Message Boards](#) | [Show All Discussions](#)

## Subscribe to our free newsletter

## Most popular

[Top rated](#) | [Most viewed](#) | [Most e-mailed](#)

- ★★★★☆ Turkey
- ★★★★☆ An amazing and enchanting tour of New Zealand
- ★★★★☆ Train steams to rescue of commuters
- ★★★★☆ Enjoying Scotland's rugged landscape
- ★★★★☆ Maltese delights

## Check flight times

Is your flight running on schedule?

Enter flight number



## Popular searches

- Car hire
- Great hotels
- Cheap flights
- The best villas
- Cheap holidays
- London hotels
- Book a cruise
- Flights
- Egypt holidays
- Tenerife



Instant messaging

SkyDrive  
Free 25GB storage

Mobile  
Mobile e-mail & IM

Photos  
Edit & organise

msn mobile

MSN now fits  
in your pocket

msn mobile

Enter your mobile number  
and we'll text you the link for  
free.

Your mobile #

To learn more, click here.

Old Town also boasts the largest concentration of quirky, artisan cafes, bars and nightclubs in Riga.

Fascinatingly, during the summer in Latvia, twilight arrives at midnight and the sun is back in the sky by 4am. The republic celebrates the longest day or 'white night' with a national holiday and numerous festivities.

If you are prepared to go with the flow like I did in the spa, you'll learn that Latvia really is Europe's hidden gem.

#### Key facts

:: Best for: Groups of ladies wanting to relax and pamper at the reasonably priced natural spas.

:: Time to go: Summer for various festivals and to make the most of the coast.

:: Don't miss: Stepping back in time with a visit to a former Soviet state dacha (a summer holiday residence frequented by the Russian Politburo) in Jurmala.

:: Need to know: Free bike hire and value for money taxis in Riga are both sponsored by Air Baltic.

:: Don't forget: Comfy shoes.

#### Travel facts

Tori Mayo flew with Air Baltic to Riga and stayed at Amber Spa, Jurmala, where room rates for B&B start at 80 euros for a standard double room, and 140 euros for a junior suite. Wellness programmes start at around 110 euros per person per day, including three hours of treatment. Five-night B&B packages in August start around 425 euros.

Amber Spa reservations: 00371 67755 330 and [www.amberspahotel.lv](http://www.amberspahotel.lv).

Regent Holidays, an Eastern Europe specialist, offers three nights' B&B at a three-star hotel in Riga from £345 in August, including return Air Baltic flights ex-Gatwick. Regional connections ex-Manchester and Glasgow start around £90.

Regent reservations: 0845 277 3317 and [www.regent-holidays.co.uk](http://www.regent-holidays.co.uk).

Rate this page: Poor  Excellent

Your rating helps other users gauge the value of a page



Print



E-mail



IM