Latvia 2014 Crime and Safety Report

Theft; Stolen items; Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Financial Security; Fraud; Cyber; Drug Trafficking; Other; Floods; Winter weather

Europe > Latvia; Europe > Latvia > Riga

1/31/2014

Overall Crime and Safety Situation
Latvia is a relatively safe country in which the overall crime and safety situation has remained static for several years. Visitors to Latvia generally experience a safe and secure environment. Riga enjoys many public parks and a boisterous Old Town. Nevertheless, these hubs of activity often contain large numbers of intoxicated visitors and locals as well as others intent on taking advantage of them, especially at night.

Crime Threats
Most incidents affecting American citizens involve property crime and occur in public parks or Old Town Riga. Non-confrontational property crimes of opportunity, such as pickpocketing, swindling, and bag snatching, occur during daylight hours. Crime statistics tend to trend higher during the summer months due to increases in tourism and associated crimes of opportunity.

Latvia is not immune from credit card fraud, yet concerted efforts by law enforcement have helped reduce the number of incidents. Local authorities have cracked down on notorious establishments. As a result, incidents of scams and fraud at these places have decreased over the years.

East European organized crime syndicates are active in cyber-crime, narcotics, prostitution, and other illicit enterprises. Prostitution occurs on a small and localized scale.

Overall Road Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions
Major highways are in good repair; however, road conditions change quickly due to extreme weather, usually in the form of snow, ice, or severe cold. Secondary roads may suffer disrepair with potholes, poor lighting, and a lack of proper signage. Visitors should exercise extra caution while driving during the winter months, as snow accumulation and long periods...
of darkness make it difficult to see other vehicles and pedestrians, especially at intersections and crosswalks. Roads in the cities are well maintained, and drivers are generally courteous. Road conditions in rural areas vary from good to poor. In the cities, the streets are often narrow but generally well-lit. Speeding and drunk driving are often contributing factors in vehicle accidents. It is recommended that pedestrians use reflectors and reflective clothing, which are available in all major Latvian supermarkets, during the dark winter months. Pedestrians should walk on sidewalks and cross streets at crosswalks or intersections whenever possible. Public transportation is relatively safe and widely available in the cities.

**Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence**

Political violence is infrequent. Demonstrations relating to particularly sensitive social topics have turned violent in the past, resulting in arrests and disruption. During the past year, two demonstrations took place in front of the Embassy. Both were small in scale and peaceful. Anti-American sentiment is minimal.

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

There are no known indigenous terrorist organizations in Latvia. With its inclusion in the Schengen Zone, the ease with which undesirable elements can enter Latvia has increased; however, its terrorism threat is consistent with most of Europe.

Civil Unrest

The Riga supermarket tragedy in November 2013 prompted the resignation of the Prime Minister and the fall of the country’s government. The ensuing process of transition and government formation was peaceful and marked by several large, but non-violent, demonstrations. Latvia’s conversion to the Euro as its official currency on January 1, 2014, was calm and orderly.

**Post-specific Concerns**

Environmental Hazards

Spring floods regularly impact the southeast region along the Daugava River basin. The long hours of darkness and harsh winter weather can create hazardous driving conditions. Travelers are advised to check local weather conditions prior to traveling during the winter months.

Industrial and Transportation Accidents

The worst accident in Latvia’s recent history occurred when the roof of a shopping center collapsed in Riga on November 21, 2013. Scores were injured and more than 50 people
killed, including several firefighters who were assisting in rescue efforts. The ripples of the collapse on the political and social fabric of the country are still being felt and will continue to be for some time.

Drug-related Crimes
The amount of illegal drugs entering Latvia and/or transiting to Russia is estimated to be growing. Cocaine, heroin, and synthetic drugs are the most frequently seized. Drug cartels have used Baltic banks for money laundering operations. Latvian officials are working closely with U.S. and international law enforcement to curb the flow of illegal narcotics and its proceeds into and through Latvia.

Police Response
Latvia’s police force is proficient and capable, though response times can be lengthy. Senior officers benefit from training abroad in areas of community policing and racial sensitivity. Municipal police officers are high-profile and abundant throughout the public parks and in Old Town Riga. Camera technology is used to reduce police response times and identify potential criminal incidents.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment
In the unlikely event that a foreign visitor is detained or harassed by the police, the individual should comply with police instructions. However, a request for an interpreter and to contact the individual’s respective embassy should be made immediately.

Where to Turn to for Assistance if you Become a Victim of Crime
For all emergencies, dial 112. English speaking operators are available. In addition, a special 24-hour tourist hotline has been established by the tourist police unit at +371-6718-1818. The operator can also advise where the victim may file a police report.

Various Police/Security Agencies
Latvia’s Ministry of Interior police forces include: State Police, Security Police, and Riga Port Police. The State Police are generally responsible for community policing, traffic, criminal investigations and public order. The Security Police focus on counterterrorism, protection, and intelligence. The Port Police control the Port of Riga. Municipal police agencies, including the City of Riga, operate within their jurisdictions similar to the State Police.
Riga’s tourist police unit, comprised of specially trained officers skilled in a variety of languages, has reduced the number of criminal incidents reported against foreign visitors in Old Town Riga.

Medical Emergencies

Contact Information for Recommended Local Hospitals and Clinics
For medical emergencies, dial 113 to reach the Emergency Medical Services Agency. Foreign visitors are advised to maintain private health insurance and medevac insurance as well. The following is emergency hospital information:
Pauls Stradins Clinical University Hospital
13 Pilsonu str
Riga, LV-1002
Telephone Number: +371-6706-9600
Clinic “Gailezers” (Part of “Riga Eastern Clinical University Hospital and Clinic)
2 Hipokrata str
Riga, LV-1038
Telephone Number: +371-6704-1001, +371-6704-1002

Recommended Air Ambulance Services
Latvia’s Emergency Medical Services Agency provides air ambulance capability and can be reached by phone at +371-6733-7000.

CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance
Please consult the CDC site for country specific health guidance:

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Crimes/Scams
Be skeptical of strangers asking for assistance to exchange coins for paper currency. This is often a scam that leaves the victim with a handful of Lithuanian coins that look similar to Euro coins but are worth only a fraction of the value.
Also, be aware of individuals, particularly young attractive women, asking visitors to buy them drinks. Scams sometimes occur in less reputable establishments, whereby the visitor is later
presented with an exorbitant bill based on a separate menu and then detained until the bill is paid, sometimes through physical intimidation.

Areas to be Avoided
The central market and the Old Town are popular areas with pickpockets. The underground tunnels linking Old Town to the bus station and nearby shopping mall are also particularly attractive to opportunistic criminals. Extra care should be taken to safeguard wallets and purses in these areas.

Best Situational Awareness Practices
Latvia's relatively safe environment should not mislead travelers to believe they are immune from crimes of opportunity. Visitors should exercise the same basic security precautions that they would while traveling in any major international city. The following basic security precautions can help reduce the likelihood of becoming a victim while visiting Latvia. Avoid dimly-lit parks and streets at night. If possible, travel in a group. Stay alert when navigating the streets as a pedestrian or driver. Park in well-lit and visible areas. Do not keep items of value, including bags or purses, in plain sight inside the vehicle. Use caution when using ATMs on the street, especially in Old Town.

Common sense security precautions such as safeguarding valuables and displaying good situational awareness helps visitors reduce their vulnerability to most criminal incidents. Avoid the open display of expensive items such as cameras, laptops, mobile phones, and jewelry. Do not leave personal property unattended and secure valuables at all times. Visitors are recommended to use radio-dispatched and metered taxi cabs such as Red Cab Taxi or Baltic Taxi. Common-sense precautions such as keepings wallets and purses secure and avoiding close contact with other passengers are recommended when traveling on public transportation. Consistent with normal safety and security precautions, visitors are recommended to avoid large demonstrations and protests.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation
1 Samnera Velsa iela
Riga, LV-1510
The Consular Section provides U.S. Citizen Services weekdays between 2:00 – 4:00 p.m. **Appointments are recommended**, except for emergency services (the arrest, serious illness, injury, destitution, or death of a U.S. citizen). Individual requests for morning appointments may be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Embassy Contact Numbers
Regional Security Office: +371-6710-7267
Embassy Operator: +371-6710-7000
Duty Officer: +371-2920-5708 (After hours only)
Embassy Website: http://riga.usembassy.gov/index.html

**OSAC Country Council Information**
There is no OSAC Country Council, though the Regional Security Office and American Chamber of Commerce share a collaborative relationship on security issues of mutual interest.