



**THEIR HERITAGE**—The immense outdoor theater in Riga's Meza Park provides a stage where the Latvians' love of music finds expression.

By JACK GOLDFARB

**R**IGA, Latvia — The Latvians call their country Amberland because of the rich harvest of golden-yellow and orange-brown nuggets of amber—fossilized conifer resins older than the Alps and the Himalayas—which for eons have been washed by the sea onto the Latvian shore. On that shoreline, which curves around a vast gulf like a giant necklace, gleams Riga.

Riga has been the capital of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic since

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stopover for those journeying to other parts of the Soviet Union.

Riga is like a point of an isosceles triangle, for it is almost equidistant from Moscow and Leningrad. A routing through it by plane costs only \$16 more than the direct Moscow-Leningrad fare.

### Picturesque Old Town

The storied structures of Riga's picturesque Old Town on the right bank of the Daugava River testify to the city's past: mercantile warehouses, the reminders of Riga's association with the Hanseatic League, the "European Common Market" of the Middle Ages; the Livonian Ritterhaus, vestigial landmark of the 13th-century knighthood order, The Brothers of the Sword, who Christianized Latvia; the pointed domes of ancient Riga Castle and the green spires of the venerable churches, all monuments of the era when Poles, Swedes and Russians fought over this prized citadel; the baroque, red-roofed houses standing cheek by jowl in the cobblestone streets that bear names of the medieval trades pursued in them — Weavers, Artisans, Blacksmiths.

Nowadays, the turreted castle houses the headquarters of the Young Red Pioneers, while an old-time powder tower oddly merges with the present as a rotund sentinel outside the Museum of the Revolution.

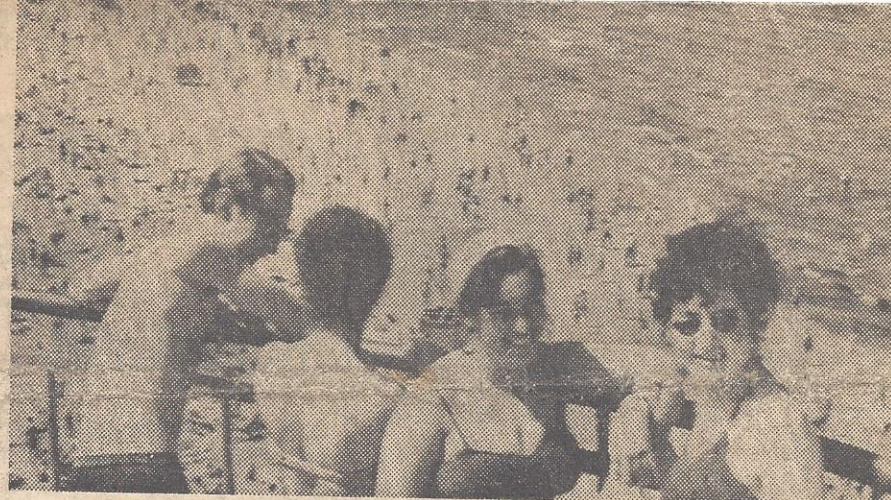
Alongside the nearby quays, merchant vessels take on fish, timber and furs, much the same cargoes as in Hanseatic times. But today, this major Baltic port of 700,000 people is also a manufacturing center, its machinery, textiles and telephone and radio equipment being much in demand throughout the Soviet Union.

### Cultural Attractions Abound

Despite the emphasis on industry, Riga abounds in cultural attractions. The city boasts 10 museums in such diverse fields as art, literature, popular science, fishery, history of medicine, folkways and Latvian history. Concert halls and an immense outdoor theater in Meza Park provide the stages where the Latvian love of music finds expression.

In Meza Park once every five years, a gigantic choir-singing festival takes place, with tens of thousands of singers and dancers performing before an audience of hundreds of thousands over several days. This century-old event is climaxed by a "Battle of Songs" which ends with awards and honors to the victorious ensembles.

Theaters in Riga present Government-sponsored productions of drama, opera, operetta and classical puppet shows. As



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in most principal Soviet cities, there is also an excellent ballet company.

About 14 million books are printed annually in this land of 2 million people, and thus Latvia claims to have the highest per capita book distribution in the world. Latvians have been known to buy up 30,000 copies of a new poetry book within a few days.

### Main Thoroughfare

Riga's main thoroughfare, Iela Lenins (Lenin Street), is a wide, bustling artery whose shop windows sparkle with probably the most colorful displays in the Soviet Union. The stores are tidy and brightly lit, and the local products, whether butter and cheese or wood and leather handicrafts, are of a high standard.

Up and down the roadway, blue and white trolley-buses, at a fare of 4 kopecks (about 4 cents), haul passengers past crowded cafes, modern office buildings, clusters of linden, fir and willow trees, bilingual electric signs flashing Communist party slogans in Latvian and Russian and, at one point, past a realistically sculptured Lenin, his overcoat unbuttoned, familiar cap in hand and seemingly about to go strolling among the crowds on the street named for him.

Just off Lenin Street is the stately Hotel Riga, where most foreign tourists are lodged. This first-class hostelry is operated by the City Council and has everything from a post office to a photography laboratory on the premises.

The hotel's restaurant offers a diversified cuisine, as well as such Latvian specialties as marinated eel, mutton in caraway sauce or jellied fish rolls, all preceded, accompanied and followed by the favorite local drink — Black Balsam, a potent fusion of vodka and balsam.

Here in Amberland, one might expect the potion to be called ambrosia, but one taste convinces you why it is not.

Most visitors prefer Riga in the summer, when they can share the city's most treasured possession: an expanse of fine white beach thickly bordered with towering pine trees. Jurmala, this lovely seaside playground, stretches for 15 miles along the Gulf of Riga and is one of the largest and most popular resorts in the Soviet Union. Holidaymakers flock to Jurmala from as far away as Odessa and Sochi on the Black Sea, no second-rate resorts themselves.

Tennis courts, yacht clubs, cinemas and dining places grace the scene at Jurmala, and one restaurant offers the privilege of being served by the holder of the title of "Best Waiter in the Soviet Union."

### Tranquil Waters

The Baltic waters off Jurmala are seldom rough, but when they are the beachcombers profit afterward. It is then when the pieces of amber are found strewn on the shore. These gems are particularly precious when very dark in color, and rare chunks with insects inside are the most prized of all.

Increasing its efforts to stimulate tourism, Riga now prides itself on a new railroad terminal with modern facilities and automated information systems, which Moscow's railway stations could well emulate. Recently modernized, too, were the city's airport, passenger-ship terminal and bus station.

What Riga needs most to attract foreign visitors is direct air links with cities abroad. An international highway enabling motorists to drive direct to the city from Finland and Poland would also make Riga more accessible.