

BLOG PART 3

Michael and Norma's camper travels in Europe 2014

LATVIA

Thursday 26 June

Latish start for leaving Lithuania, but got some important emailing done. Drove north through lots of pine forests and flat land across the open and unmanned border between Lithuania and Latvia to Liepaja, an industrial town where Tsar Alexander III built a major port at the end of the 1800s. It became home to the Tsarist Baltic fleet, centred on a suburban garrison city within a city called Karosta ("naval port").

In the outer suburbs we stopped to get some Latvian money, but were surprised to find the nation was in the middle of changing to the Euro, which was all we could get out of the ATM. We checked in the supermarket, and sure enough, prices were both in Euros and Latvian Lats. Norma thought the people were smiling and looked more cheerful than in Lithuania.

Karosta was a curious and interesting area to drive around (there is very little traffic). There are many large, impressive buildings of the Tsarist era throughout, many with a decaying grandeur but also many that are being restoring to their previous glory. There are also many once-colourful wooden dwellings in various states of disrepair, again with many being done up. The Karosta docks were bombed out by the Germans in WW2 and then turned into a restricted strategic base after the war by the Soviets. They secretly developed the base for hidden nuclear submarines during the Cold War. The Soviets, inevitably, built row after row and square after square of the worst kind of Russki apartment blocks. Several are now looking terribly decayed, but others are being stripped out and rebuilt in bright colours as what must be affordable housing. There are a few little hovels tucked away, but on the whole there is a sense of reinvigoration and rebirth in Karosta.



There are a couple of particular buildings that we stopped to look at. One is the former Soviet military prison, a vast, gloomy red-brick affair that was used as a detention centre until 1997. Bizarrely it is now being set up as an unlikely tourist attraction, where having gone through the rusty gates visitors can be shown round the cells by guides dressed as military personnel. We

looked from the outside but didn't do that, nor did we try the special attraction: a night in a cell, with regular checks and verbal abuse by guards in period dress, and disgusting latrines. Or you can book into solitary confinement. Sounds like fun.



Far more attractive but also something of an anomaly in the precinct is the beautiful Russian Orthodox St Nicholas Maritime Cathedral, with bulbous gold cupolas and ornate decoration. It looks like something taken from Red Square. After decades of bad times, it was restored as a church in the 1990s, and restorative work continues.

Hit the road and headed deep into the heart of inland Latvia along a generally boring road to Kuldiga, which spans a wide river where once salmon ran the rapids. Across the shallows is what looks like an artificial weir built in an arc, but it is mostly a dolomite shelf over which the water spills. It is promoted as the “widest waterfall in Europe”, at 249 metres from shore to shore, but it’s stretching a point to call it a waterfall!



Not far then to our camp for the night, Nabite camping, reached by a long dirt track but in a lovely location overlooking Lake Nabes Ezers. Quite calm by the time we arrived, a pleasant change from the bitterly cold wind we had encountered all day when out of the van. The prevailing temperature had been about 14 degrees all day, well below our comfort zone.



Friday 27 June

Blue morning, nice to see, and an easy run up to Ventspils and the Baltic coast. Ventspils is a major port and has been for a long time. It is in a strategic position and is ice free, and for such reasons was originally settled in the 12th century, then by the Livonian Order in the 13th, the Hanseatic League through the 16th and finally the USSR until the country’s independence.



We had a look first at the open-air fishing museum (among the pine trees, not in the water), essentially a skansen focusing on old fishing boats and fishermen’s houses. Very nicely done, as these things usually are. Many of the fishing boats appeared to have been rescued from the defunct fishing villages just up the coast we were to be visiting the following day. A slightly jarring feature was a fishing boat in this museum that was about three years younger than our own yacht *Cera*! A traditional windmill stood in the sun in an open field, with its typically complicated-looking gearing well reconstructed.

Into central Ventspils then, and we found it a very pleasant small town spread out along the river front, looking across to the industrial docks on the north side of the waterway. Cow sculptures are everywhere – apparently this stems from an international art project in 2002, when Ventspils decided to do cows. They vary from large (like the “travelling cow”, covered with old-fashioned luggage labels, and the flower cow), to small, quirky and colourful cows.



We took a three-quarter-hour boat trip, upstream past the extensive docks used by bulk carriers and downstream to huge coal loaders and tankers. Efforts have been made to cheer up most of the dismal Soviet-era dockside buildings by the use of



colourful paint on some of them and on machinery such as the cranes. Among goods to be shipped we saw timber, cement, sand and gravel and the ubiquitous coal. There is also a container wharf. But it all looked very quiet – there was only one large ship in the outer port, loading coal, but not a lot of action generally. There is a big vehicle ferry to coastal ports in Germany, and it pulled out while we were there.

On return shoreside we walked into the attractive little town centre, where we found an excellent market. Norma bought some very good strawberries, which were abundant in the market – but not something we have seen in supermarkets here.

We then visited the 13th century castle of the Livonian Order (very extensively remodelled and reconstructed), which contains a museum describing the history of the town and these parts. But it was a “modern”, and supposedly entertaining interactive display of the kind, which although well done, as usual we find less instructive than a more didactic presentation. The Soviets used the castle as a prison.

The camp site was a pleasant one, and our arrival coincided with that of a Brit couple who ended up next to us. They were due to take the ferry to Lubeck the next day, avoiding the long drive across Poland, on their way home. It was good to speak English for a little while – there are very few independent British campers up this way. Quite warm late afternoon, and we were able to sit out for an hour or so.

Saturday 28 June



Dawned bright again, a good day for our drive up the coast towards Cape Kolka and the spit of land that divides the Baltic Sea from the Gulf of Riga. This whole strip, and most of the hinterland, was zoned off as a high-security military base during Soviet times and the Cold War, and was out of bounds to civilians. We saw the first evidence of the Soviets quite soon. We turned inland from the coast road along a typically military road paved with concrete blocks, past a graffiti-covered ruin of a security post, and to a large collection of huge dead and decaying Soviet apartment blocks, windows black and blind, but now making comfortable havens for nesting swallows. These are the remains of military barracks, partly to house personnel associated with what was a major electronic spy base. Deep in the forest and dunes we came to an enormous radio telescope, its 32-metre dish being one of the biggest in

the world. It was one of an array built by the USSR in the 1980s for electronic spying on Western satellite communications. When they left in 1994 they took with them a smaller dish, but this one was too big to move.

The 600-tonne dish sits on a 25-metre tall concrete base, which in turn supports the mechanism that moves the dish – all looking a bit forlorn and rusty now. It is currently being restored for astronomy research by a group from the Latvian Academy of Sciences, but this work looks pretty desultory on casual inspection.

Further up the coast we took dirt roads off the (good) coastal road to visit a few of the fishing villages that were active before the Soviets moved in and kicked the occupants out. There were no real harbours, the fishing boats being pulled by capstans and horses out of the sea on to the beach. In 1995 a fish processing plant was tried and then abandoned. There is little evidence of that history now –

there are a few sad and deserted huts, but plenty new holiday villas and a few quite substantial new houses. The future is in redevelopment and tourism, which is why the coast road is so good now. The beach, soft fine sand, extends north and south as far as the eye can see, with only a few old pilings where jetties must have been one day. Overseeing the sea are a few rusting observation towers.

The region was the home of the Livs, of whom there are only a few remaining now. They were Finno-Ugric people who migrated to northern Latvia some 5,000 years ago. Although many Latvians are descended from this fishing tribe, only a handful live in Latvia now, mainly along the coast we are currently travelling.

We didn't get quite as far as the cape, because camp sites are few and far between in this region. The one we finally found had been highly recommended by our favourite bloggers on the basis of its peace and serenity, a glade deep in the forest and surrounded by pines. There are a few cabins there, and we shared the camp with a handful of tents, but no campervans. Facilities were basic to say the least, with an earth privy, and Norma surprised a lady by walking into what turned out to be a sauna where she was steaming.

The afternoon was very pleasant, and we were able to sit out in the sun and read for quite a while, until the sun disappeared behind the pine trees. This was the first evening for weeks we had not needed the heater.

Sunday 29 June

Clouds back in the morning after some rain overnight, and a bit drizzly to start with. While not as cold as it has been, Norma is finding the climate bad for her arthritis.



On up the coast road to Cape Kolka, where the Gulf of Riga meets the Baltic. Actually it's not as simple as this, because from the south-western tip of the Estonian island of Saaremaa extends a mass of shallow sand banks 20 nautical miles across the straits, and these have to be negotiated by big ships coming from the west long before they have to stay six nautical miles (10 km) offshore while rounding Cape Kolka on

their way down to Riga. A large lighthouse is visible about 3 nm away, on the horizon, and the ship turning point is further out again. These complications are compounded by the complex tidal streams, and we could see the effects from the shore: the seas driven by the easterly that started last night were breaking noisily on the east side of the cape, while the west side was relatively calm on the beach, but with whitecaps clearly visible for a long way off.

We walked round the cape, where masses of pine trees lie dead and broken on the beach, telling of a big storm a while ago. A wild and woolly place, and once totally closed off from the public eye by the Soviets.

A fairly easy drive down the east side of this region, Kurzeme, towards Riga, long stretches of pine-lined road, not as good a surface as on the other side. Passed several cafes near beaches, and a couple of small boat and yacht harbours. The rain had set in heavily just after we got back from our walk and continued during the drive, but there were lots of visitors to the stretch this Sunday, probably from Riga and out for a long lunch.

Approaching Riga we drove through the touristy suburb of Jurmala, a spa and beach resort, but the one-way system took us away from the seaside road. We did see one of the sights on this parallel inland route, however, many wooden houses, mostly well restored but with a few rotting away. The designs are quirky, with towers and interlocking eaves. The best-looking building among these was an orthodox church in bright blue paint with trimmings.

From there it was a rather complicated route to Riga City camping, a fairly basic site but convenient for the city. Still raining on arrival.

Monday 30 June

Rain in overnight again, and heavy in the early morning. While the rain falls, a few historical notes as preparation for our exploration of the city – when the rain stops!

Riga's history, quite obviously, is intimately tied to that of Latvia. In 1201 the pope caused German crusaders – to be known as Knights of the Sword - led by Bishop von Buxhoevden of Bremen, to take over Latvia from the pagan tribes and found a city, Riga. This soon became the major city in the German Baltic region. Latvia was conquered by Poland in 1561 and then by Sweden in 1629, bringing about nearly 100 years of peace and prosperity. But the Russians won the Great Northern War in 1721, and held the country until the end of WW1.

Out of that war came a declaration of independence in November 1918, but the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939 assigned Latvia, along with the other Baltic states, to the Soviet Union. Stalinist policy for the states, modelled on the great terror in Poland, was that the people should be subjugated by killing or deporting to Siberia all those with real or perceived connections to "foreign states". In Latvia about 17,000 nationals were shot as supposed "spies" for the country.

Then the Germans swept across eastern Europe and occupied Latvia in 1941. At that time Hitler's policy was to deport German Jews to the east, not necessarily to kill them, and huge numbers ended up in Riga. There were already Jewish ghettos in the city, and the inevitable result was that they became even more overcrowded. A Riga native with SS connections, Friedrich Jeckeln, therefore organised some of the earliest largest mass shootings of Jews. On a single notorious day in November, Germans – *assisted by Latvians* – marched 14,000 Jews into Rumbula Forest, just to the south of the city and shot them in pits dug by Soviet prisoners of war. In 1944 another massacre took place, mostly of Jews from a Riga concentration camp.

Following the Soviet "liberation" after WW2 the process of Sovietisation progressed apace, with rapid industrialisation and deportation of undesirables for slave labour in the USSR. In June 1987, however, 5,000 people rallied at Riga's Freedom Monument to commemorate the deportations of the previous Soviet era. In August 1989, in a movement that united all three Baltic States, two million Latvians, Estonians and Lithuanians linked hands from capital to capital to mark the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line. Latvia declared independence in August 1991 and was accepted into the EU in 2004. And as we found out only a couple of days ago, it has just joined the Eurozone as well.

Riga is now a large and important Baltic port city, with a UNESCO World Heritage old town centre. This year, apparently, it is the European Capital of Culture.

Rain stopped late afternoon, but restarted by evening.

Tuesday 1 July

Is this called summer? Rain steady all night and persisting. Decided to waterproof ourselves as far as possible and go walking in Riga anyway.

It took about half an hour to walk to and across the big main bridge over the River Daugava, in a strong wet nor-wester that prevented umbrella deployment and soaked us. The Daugava is a major waterway of strategic and commercial importance over the centuries, arising over 1,000 km away near the source of the Volga, in Russia. Two cruise ships came in today, dumping thousands of wet passengers on to the little streets.



After crossing the bridge we turned right into the old town and its (mostly) traffic free cobbled streets and alleyways. First sight of note was the huge Dome Cathedral, founded in 1211 and still the biggest church in the Baltic. Externally, it is a red-brick building with a mixture of Romanesque, baroque and Gothic architecture. During Soviet times services were forbidden and much of the ornate interior was stripped out.

More little lanes took us to St Peter's Lutheran church, thought to date back about 800 years. Being Lutheran, neither the exterior nor the interior are particularly ornate – not that you can get beyond some glass doors before the nave before you pay the substantial fee to enter and take a lift up the tower.

Nearby is a big square, Ratslaukums, looking a bit more open than some because its size meant its features and layout were not seriously impaired by the forests of colourful café umbrellas that line nearly old town square in Europe these days.

(Note entered later: see Tallinn by way of contrast.) Two nice buildings face each other: the ornate Blackheads' House, built for the eponymous guild of unmarried German merchants, and the columned Town Hall. Just off the square is the tourist bus parking, and there was the usual line-up. Protected by raincoats, ponchos and umbrellas, not all looked as happy as they might have done on finer days.



A rectangular black monolith is a relic of Soviet days, and holds the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, which is really the only museum we really wanted to explore. However, most of the square, including all the approaches to the museum, were taped off by police ribbon. Some hopeful workers were trying to scrape water off a square of red carpets. We were told that the President of Austria was visiting, access was restricted and the museum might open later – an hour, some time this afternoon? Who knows.



We went on through and out of the old town centre to the Central Market, which was interesting. It is housed in five enormous arched hangars, which used to be used for housing zeppelins in another town in western Latvia. The market sells everything, and we were especially interested in the fish section. There was a strong emphasis on preserved, mostly smoked, fish, prepared and presented in ways we had never seen before. The fresh fish was slightly more limited in range, but we bought some salmon scraps anyway for dinner.

It was still absolutely miserable weather, so we stopped for an early lunch before making the wet trek back home. At random we pulled in to a welcoming-looking bar-restaurant, which turned out to be a self-service operation obviously very popular with younger people, including both locals and tourists. We had pork scallops with a sour cream and tomato sauce, with side salad and chips, very good and inexpensive, with excellent draft Latvian beer (our first trial of it).

Then the walk back, having not really done our best by Riga, but ambient conditions were awful! On to the internet in the van, where the forecast seems generally favourable, so we don't have to jump on to a ferry south quite yet!

Another little political quirk here, shared with Estonia, is the unique status of some people as "non-citizens of Latvia", who comprise some 17% of the population. They are not "stateless", and have a passport-like ID card which allows travel throughout the EU. But they are under several restrictions in terms of public service jobs and social welfare. Most non-citizens are Russians, Russian speakers and Russian supporters who arrived during the Soviet era. Having passed tests such as language and acceptance of the Soviet occupation (which is not universally accepted among Russian Latvians) they can apply for Latvian citizenship, and many have done and are now doing, which has much reduced their number. But the situation is controversial in the EU and unique world wide.

Rain easing, and stopped in the late afternoon.

Wednesday 2 July

Did stay stopped all night, and sunny with lots of white clouds in morning. First thing was a stock-up, and there was a large shopping centre close by including what turned out to be an outstanding Rimi "hypermarket". Got pretty much all we needed. Noted again what we have seen in much smaller stores, that most people do not use trolleys but are content with baskets for the day's needs. None of the overflowing huge trolleys you see at home!

Nightmarish drive out, disentangling ourselves from the one-way systems in Riga, but finally found our way to the Riga Motor Museum, currently housed in temporary premises while they do the old ones up. Refurbishment should be finished by next year. Had to be let in, and the only others there were a man and his small son.

So, it's now basically a well-lit warehouse packed with cars, not all with descriptions. But there is a very large number of significant and rare cars from the USSR, which I doubt can be seen together anywhere else. There was a tiny little twin-turbine streamliner that reached 311 km/h on Russian salt flats in 1963, the fastest Russian car ever at the time. There were two examples – one unrestored – of the Serpuhov motorcycle factory's S-3A, a basic two-seat car built from 1958 to 1970 for handicapped people with the single-cylinder motor behind the seats. These were given to handicapped people for free, and replaced when no longer serviceable. There was the custom 1950 ZIS 115S, armoured to Stalin's personal specs, of which 40 were built: with over 6 litres and weighing in at 7,500 kg!

Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the CPSU, was a passionate car nut. He had a 1966 Rolls Royce Silver Shadow which in 1980 he crashed, quite badly, in Moscow. The wreck is here to be seen – there are not many wrecks in motor museums! His main recreation, according to respected



historian Robert Service, was driving foreign cars given to him by world leaders “with flagrant disregard for public safety”.

There’s lots of other interesting exhibits. There’s a gorgeous 1914 Simplex race car, all 14.5 litres of it. There’s a 1938 Auto Union Type D with a V16 Type C engine that was built as a hillclimb car. It seems to have been one of the Auto Unions that were taken in 1945 to the ZIL factory for investigation then scrapping, but was saved and secured in 1976 by the then President of the AC of Latvia. He then had it completely “rebuilt” by Crosthwaite and Gardner, and the descriptive plate by the car concedes that



it is an “authentic copy”. Still very nice to see, a lovely race car – and it looks to me much smaller than they do in the famous pictures of these cars racing before the war at places like Donington and the Nurburgring. Perhaps it’s because we are used to seeing such huge crash helmets these days that the small unhelmeted heads of the heroic drivers of previous days make the cars look bigger.

Back to the real world for non-car people, and we drove a bit further out of town and Norma did manage at the last moment to see the peculiar tangled iron sculpture at the roadside that is the only indication of the existence of this memorial site. We suspect that the locals are not proud of this one: it is the memorial to the massacres in 1941 and 1944 in the Rumbula Forest that I mentioned on 30 June. A plaque mentions that the main sponsors of the site have been Latvian Jewish survivors in America, and other Jewish groups. A large menorah is the centrepiece of this now peaceful place among the trees. The sites of the pits dug for the massacred are covered by rectangular grassed mounds, each carrying a huge rock.



It was a fairly short distance then to yet another WW2 memorial site, this being the German Kurtenhof concentration camp at Salaspil. This, rather unusually, is a Soviet memorial, built in 1967. The camp was a labour camp, principally for Latvian and other political prisoners and other undesirables including Jews. Between 1941 and 1944 about

45,000 Jews from Riga and 55,000 others died here from exhaustion, starvation and the bitter winter conditions. They included women, children (many orphaned) and the old. There is no sign now of the 39 or so barrack buildings in which they were held, completely inadequate for the conditions.

Approaching the camp you are confronted by a massive sloping block with the inscription (in Latvian) “*Behind this gate, the earth groans*”. Walking under the block the view opens on a wide expanse of green grass, with a few immense – very Soviet-style – statues spaced around it. To some, these statues appear tasteless. But to us, they did represent quite well what went on here, albeit in very Soviet terms. There is a naked kneeling woman, hugging herself as she awaits the shot to the back of her head. There is a mother, proudly erect, shielding her child. A group of men has one shown as defiant, while behind him another helps a man who cannot stand. The first you come as you enter is a man lying face down but trying to rise, “unbroken” as its title implies. The posture is extraordinarily evocative of the painting in the Louvre-Lens of the French



soldier desperately trying to raise himself from the snow in Russia, and we are sure that the sculptor had this painting as his inspiration.



A black monolith quietly emits the rup-tub, rup-tub of the heart sounds heard through a stethoscope. A line of small stone blocks represents the orphan children who died here, and rather sweetly it has become a custom for children's toys to have been left here in memory.

We thought this was a moving memorial site. But the Russian hypocrisy is extraordinary – the memorial was termed by the Soviets a remembrance place for the victims of fascism, their usual euphemism for Jews and others. But between the late 1930s and 1944 Stalin's Soviet system had destroyed the lives of millions of exactly these kinds of people in their own Gulag, under very similar conditions as would have been experienced here under the Nazis.



Back in the van, driving was quite relaxing after all this, and in generally fine conditions we headed off to the north-east, the Gauja National Park and the village of Turaida. In the "Museum Reserve" is a partly reconstructed red brick castle built for the archbishop of Riga in 1214. High on a bluff, this overlooks the River Gauja, which you can't actually see because of the thick trees. Also overlooking the river from on high are two unreconstructed castle ruins, those of Sigulda and Krimulda, strongholds of the Germanic Knights of the Livonian Order in perpetual conflict with the

Catholic Church in Turaida castle. Guards could glower at each other from their hilltops, over the river that wound between them. Turaida was fun to walk round, and had some good little displays in some of the rebuilt rooms.

The camp site for the night was on the banks of the River Gauja, and was attractive in its wooded setting, but was simply a strip of land alongside the road, expensive, and yet very poorly supplied with facilities – typical of most National Parks throughout the world. The rain had returned just as we left the castle, and continued into the evening. A thin young fox warily reconnoitred the scene for any pickings from the few campers there.

Thursday 3 July

Overcast and cool again for a day full of plans – several not to be fulfilled, as it turned out! Heading east along the main Moscow (!) road, we diverted north to the village of Ligatne. Our first objective here was to visit the Ligatne Nature Trails where, the tourist literature assured us, we could walk or drive round a nature park where deer and other local creatures were roaming in large open enclosures. Having found it eventually, the GPS coordinates in that literature being wrong, we were to be told no, the drive round had been closed for years, but we could still take the 5.5 km walk. Which did not appeal, on this cold and windy morning.

The next target of the day was essentially a suburb of Ligatne, known as the paper mill village, reached along a road by the river lined by steep red cliffs with caves deeply embedded. The paper mill was a major operation, starting in the 19th century, and the workers lived in lines of identical wooden cottages, now looking very tired. The terrain is scattered with derelict buildings that were once part of the industrial complex. The paper mill itself is a very substantial structure, but on enquiring whether

we could visit we were told by some ladies outside that it had been closed for some months and no-one was working there any more.

Nearby was once a secret Soviet bunker, a strategic hide-out in case of a nuclear threat, with a hot line to the Kremlin. Its main purpose appears to have been communications. To hide its presence the Soviets built a rehabilitation centre on top of it. Unfortunately we had missed the fact that it only opens (if indeed it does still open, which we were not sure about) at 3:00 pm, and we weren't going to wait around all day to see layers of concrete rooms with old radio equipment in them. The existence of the bunker was classified secret until 2003 but, interestingly, having wandered in for a look, the rehab centre is running perfectly normally, with patients in wheelchairs and using crutches, just as you'd expect.



Back down to the Moscow road after lunch, and along to Lake Araisi, just off the road to the north. Here there is a splendid reconstruction of a settlement established in the 9th century by an ancient tribe called the Latgallians. It is a fortified village built out into the lake, reached in period by canoes but now by a walkway built over the water. It was built entirely of timber, and after its abandonment large parts of it were preserved in the water, to be found by archeologists hundreds of years later. This was strongly reminiscent of the much bigger and older fortified Iron Age village that we had visited near Torun, Poland, in mid-June, and which had been similarly preserved.



The Araisi village was built on a platform of logs, with small dwellings built also of cleverly interlinked logs, the whole place being surprisingly hard to move around while keeping your feet. Back ashore, the island village was overlooked by the ruins of a fortress of the Livonian Order, and back in the woods some illustrative Stone, Iron and Bronze Age dwellings had been put together. All in all, an interesting and enjoyable open-air museum site.

Finally, nearing the end of a busy day's touring, we came to the pretty little town of Cesis. We walked from where we parked the van through a lovely park, complete with lake and fountains – we have been impressed by how attractive the parks are in many of the Baltic towns, especially in Latvia, where everything is rather neat and tidy. In general, we have found Latvia to appear better off than Lithuania. This is possibly because of Russian money, but their approach to life is different to Lithuanian/Polish: they obey speed limits, stop for pedestrians at crossings and pedestrians expect them to do so, tend to smile more openly and seem to manage things more efficiently. In a word, there are more differences than we expected.

Anyway, above the park lies Cesis castle, once the seat of the grand masters of the Livonian Order, the Knights of the Sword. This is a partly reconstructed ruin of what was the huge keep, with only remnants of the outer baileys to be seen. There is work continuing. At the entry we were given candle lights to



see our way up the spiral steps of the main tower – it's quite tall, so Norma left the climb to me. The dim light is necessary, because the tight spiral is completely dark between the occasional light slits, but it's a bit Disney because there's no reason not to provide some artificial lighting, as is done in most castles. In any event, OH&S is not a prominent feature of most eastern European ruins!

Attached to the castle ruin is the “new castle”, a grand manor house, and a good new museum describes the history, life and activities of the region. This was another good castle visit.

Not far then to our camp site for the night, Camping Apalkalns, on the shore of Lake Raiskums. We had a terrific welcome from Juris, who learnt excellent English from his winter job in Davos and hung out an Australian flag just for us. Reasonable price, too, and excellent facilities including free site-wide wi-fi. We established ourselves in a lovely spot down by the lake, and resolved to stay a while and wait for the good weather that is supposed to be here by Saturday.



Saturday 5 July

Clear blue skies by 9:00 am, as forecast. A beautiful clear, warm to hot day – marvellous! So had a really relaxing day in the sun. Followed qualifying on the internet.

Norma on her second day of cleaning and preparing the little orange mushrooms that you see everywhere and a small tubful of which we had bought at a small market (for €5, which we thought was a lot).

Sunday 6 July



Nearly 30 degrees in the van at 7:00 pm.

Some high white overcast, but another generally lovely day. So continued our stay on this excellent site. Quite busy, but most of the tent people departed through the day, up here for the night only.

Walked up to the local village and the small shop that was open this Sunday morning. All the buildings are new or nearly so, and of high standard – obviously Riga money, likely originating in Russia.

Followed the exciting British GP, would have been good to watch.

Monday 7 July

Another quiet, dry night with a sunny morning. Checked out of this excellent site, the best of the trip so far, and drove cross-country northeast towards the coast. Stopped at the medium-sized town of Limbazi for some stocking up at a Maxima supermarket, extremely busy as it was, but nothing else in the region.

Took a minor road down towards the Baltic to see a stony beach with some red sandstone cliffs, but that turned out to be a tourist destination which would be a costly park for the day. A little further up the coast there were several parking/picnic places, and from one of these we walked through the dunes to a beach of fine sand extending miles in each directions, with several locals out enjoying the sun.

A little further up again we came to the outskirts of Salacgriva, getting close to the border with Estonia, and pulled off to a camp site behind a hotel near the beach. Looked better in the camp site brochure than it did in fact, but acceptable for a night stop.

Took a stroll down to the beach, again with the fine soft sand that lines most of this coast, and watched a couple of Finnish yachts come via a channel through the reeds to a small fishing and yacht harbour. There are not many such facilities on this coast. A thunderstorm came through, but missed us, and we had another sunny evening as the sun set (very late, about 10:30 pm) sideways over the sea.

Tomorrow we leave Latvia for the third of the Baltic States we had come to visit, Estonia. More to come.