



# SELF-DRIVE THE MILITARY HERITAGE AND ENVIRONMENT OF KURZEME



The NATURA 2000 system was established by European Union member states to protect a large series of environmental territories. In Latvia's case, the system includes territories that were protected before it was set up, as well as 122 new territories. Each EU member state establishes its own system of territories, and these are then joined in the central system. NATURA 2000 territories are of European importance and are environmentally protected. Along this route, the most interesting NATURA 2000 territories include the Zvārde Forest Park, the Embūte Nature Park, the Ziemeļe Nature Reserve and the Nature Park of the Ancient Abava River Valley. While in these territories, please be gentle with environmental, cultural and historical values. Keep the "interests" of birds in mind when bird-watching.

## ROUTE

During the Soviet era, Latvia was the western border of the USSR, and that made it a strategic location in which lots of military resources were concentrated. During the Soviet occupation, there were more than 1,000 Soviet military units in Latvia, and they controlled some 600 facilities equalling to more than 10% of the territory of the Latvian SSR. In other words, Latvia was behind the Iron Curtain for nearly half a century. Border guard posts, tank bases, aviation bases, military airfields, storage facilities for weapons and munitions (including nuclear missiles), military espionage facilities and other, similar entities were mostly centred on the shore of the Baltic Sea, where there was a special frontier regime. It was just 20 years ago that people were allowed to be on the beach only during sunlight and in very limited areas. Sand on the beach was always ploughed, and giant spotlights lit up the shoreline to seek out border regime violators who were more imagined than real. There were border guard towers all along the shore, with military personnel monitoring every step that local civilians took. Along the roads in the seaside regions, there were guard posts which one could pass only with special (and temporary) passes.

Several unique objects have survived since the Soviet era. The Irbene radio telescope, for instance, has no analogue in a radius of several thousand kilometres. By contrast, the unique Skrunda radar station, alas, was blown up, and Soviet submarines were cut up into scrap. This is a route for active hikers and bicyclists who like to look at natural and human landscapes and are interested in the twists and turns of Latvian history.

**Season:** April – October  
**Type of vehicle:** No restrictions  
**Beginning and end:** Rīga, but you can start anywhere, because this is a circular route  
**Length:** ~ 700 km  
**Duration:** 4 Tage  
**Difficulty:** Relatively easy  
**Road cover:** Paved and earthen roads

**Route:** Rīga – Dobele – Īle – Zvārde – Saldus – Skrunda – Vaiņode – Liepāja – Ziemeļe – Ventspils – Irbene – Tukums – Rīga  
**Note!**

- Bring maps at a scale of 1:200,000 and 1:100,000
- Some of the military facilities have no improvements, and some are partly closed. There are sites that can be dangerous to tourists, and these must be viewed from the outside (the and symbol is used to denote these sites). The main purpose of this tour is to learn about Latvia's military past and history, not to crawl into former fortification systems and objects. You are responsible for your own safety!
- If guides are available, be sure to make use of them.

### Information:

[www.celotajs.lv](http://www.celotajs.lv), +371 67617600  
[www.saldus.lv](http://www.saldus.lv), +371 63807443  
[www.liepaja.lv](http://www.liepaja.lv), +371 63480808  
[www.talsi.lv](http://www.talsi.lv), +371 63224165  
[www.pavilosta.lv](http://www.pavilosta.lv), +371 63498229  
[www.tourism.ventsplis.lv](http://www.tourism.ventsplis.lv), +371 63622263  
[www.zemgaleitourism.lv](http://www.zemgaleitourism.lv), +371 63707255  
[www.visittukums.lv](http://www.visittukums.lv), +371 63124451

**Emergency services: 112**

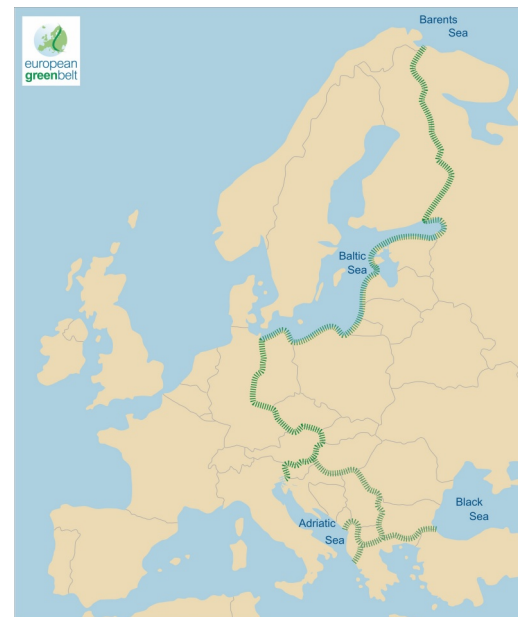


## MILITARY HERITAGE



Military secrets have always been carefully protected and hidden. It's no surprise that little is known about the military presence in Latvia all the way up until 1994, when the Russian forces were withdrawn. The Country Traveller database of military heritage lists various objects and provides information about what they were in Soviet times, what happened, there, and how the presence of the military affected the lives of local residents. There are photos with each object, and each object is on the Google map which shows its location from a satellite image. Nearly each object has a story, joke or legend told by eyewitnesses. If you have your own story or review of a location, please send it in, and we'll be happy to publish it!

**Info:** [http://www.celotajs.lv/cont/wrth/military\\_lv.html](http://www.celotajs.lv/cont/wrth/military_lv.html)



European Green Belt

## The "Green Belt"

The military route in Kurzeme is part of the "Baltic Green Belt" project. The European Green Belt is an initiative that is managed by the World Conservation Unit. The Green Belt brings together national parks, nature parks, biosphere reserves, and transfrontier protected zones. Also part of the mix are unprotected natural territories along and across borders. The programme supports regional development initiatives that are aimed at protecting the environment.

The Green Belt crosses 23 countries and is approximately 8,500 km in length. It starts in the far North of Europe, passing through Central Europe along the borders of Slovenia, Hungary and Croatia, all the way to the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, the Ionian Sea, and the Adriatic Sea. It ends along the borders of Albania, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro and Turkey. The zone includes 3,272 protected natural territories in a 25-km buffer zone on either side of the Green Belt.

The Green Belt organisation is an important marketing instrument in Europe for existing and future protected territories in border regions. It organises initiatives that seek to establish strategic synergy with important economic goals such as tourism. More information about the Green Belt can be found at <http://europeangreenbelt.org>.

The "Baltic Green Belt" project will add territories in the East of Germany and in the territory of the former Soviet Union to the project.

More about the Baltic Green Belt and its activities can be found on the Country Traveller homepage [www.countryholidays.lv/](http://www.countryholidays.lv/)!



**POINTS OF INTEREST**

**Symbols:**

- Visit not possible/recommended!
- Warning - visit can be dangerous!

**Day 1: Rīga – Dobele – Saldus 130 km**

- 1** **The Skulte aeroplane** - of a rare monument in the village of Skulte. (23°59'19";57°10'19")
- 2** Along the way, you can hike **the Beberbeķi Nature Park**, which was established primarily to protect the "green zone" of Rīga.
- 3** **A memorial park to the Christmas Battles** - Ložmetējkalna Hill, the Tireļpourvs swamp, and the Mangaļi homestead where is an exhibit devoted to the battles, the so-called "German ramparts," etc. (23°53'42.9";56°59'18")
- 4** **The Dobele tank base and Gardene**. To the South of Gardene, one of the largest tank bases of the Baltic Military District was found in Soviet times. From the Dobele-Annenieki road, a paved army road turns off to the base, and it can still be used today. (22°56'22";57°1'54")
- 5** **The Īle partisan bunker**, established by anti-Soviet partisans in October 1948, has been restored in commemoration of the event and can be visited by any interested party. (23°46'8";57°8'53")
- 6** **The Zvārde base** - territory of more than 24,400 hectares was used by the Soviet army for aviation target practice. We recommend that you not wander off the roads. (23°10'52";57°4'57")
- 7** The Zvārde base is in **the Zvārde Forests Nature Park**.

**Day 2: Saldus - Liepāja 140 km**

- 8** **The Skrunda army base** is inaccessible and guarded, but it's worth mentioning, because the famous Skrunda radar station which was blown up after Latvia regained its independence was located here.
- 9** To the North-west and West of Skrunda are **the Skrunda Ponds**, which are important for migrating water birds which nest there. The ponds can be seen from the RĪGA-Liepāja highway.
- 10** Along the way to Vaiņode, you can take a look at **the Embūte Nature Park** - major natural and cultural monuments such as the Embūte castle hill, and ruins of a baronial estate, castle and church. The Courlandian warrior Indulis died here. You can view the Joda dam, meadows, **11** a viewing platform, etc. There are unmarked bicycle routes in the area.
- 12** **The Vaiņode airfield** was one of the largest military airfields of the Soviet army in the Baltic republics, but even before that, during the first period of Latvian independence, Latvian dirigibles were based here. *Tel.No. for the guide: +371 29229743.* (22°33'57";56°57'14")
- 13** **Liepāja: The Karosta Prison**. We don't want to describe this place – just go and take a look! *Tel. Nr. +371 26369470.* (22°30'19";57°4'24.9")
- In the evening:** Stroll from **14** the Northern breakwater of Liepāja (22°33'37";56°39'11") to the Northern forts (around 4.5 kilometres in each direction – see the next three destinations).
- 15** **The No. 3 coastal defence battery** is visually expressive because its positions and many of its elements were washed into the sea fully or in part, thus creating an unusual coastal landscape. Alas, this is an historical monument which must bow before the mighty strength of nature. (22°27'2";57°2'15")
- 16** **The No. 23 coastal defence battery** is easiest stop if you walk down the seashore, because one of its four positions is on the beach, rinsed by the waves of the sea. The other positions – the tower and other elements – are in the pine forest that is alongside the seashore. (22°27'41";57°1'54")
- 17** **The North forts** are on the edge of the sea and have been partly washed away. This is a small but very impressive part of Liepāja's unique **18** **fortification system**, which once encircled the entire town. The underground bunkers of the fort are on two levels, and if you can find a guide, take a look (tours are organised from the Karosta prison). *Tel.No. for guide: +371 26369470.* (22°27'41";57°3'31")
- 19** To the East of Liepāja is **Lake Liepāja** – one of the most important lakes for nesting and migrating birds along the shores of the Baltic Sea. More than 100 species have been spotted here. There are interesting viewing areas and landscapes if you walk or bike the system of dams along the South-western side of the lake (watch out – some of the area will offer extreme adventures, particularly during the summer!).

**Day 3: Liepāja - Ventspils 120 km**

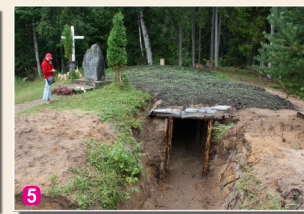
- A bike route via Liepāja:** **20** Diver training centre – **21** Naval officer centre – Northern breakwater – Northern forts (if you didn't take the hiking route cited above) – Fortress canal – Lunette with a view of Lake Tosmare – Central fort – **22** Submarine base (21°8'57";56°33'57") – **23** Stage – Karosta canal - **24** Kalpaks bridge.
- 25** **The Ziemupe zenith missile base** – just a few buildings, missile sites and a residential building are all that's left of the No. 158 zenith missile base these days. (22°14'10";56°54'21")
- 26** **The Ziemupe Nature Reserve** is on the shores of the Baltic Sea and was set up to protect the diverse shoreline biotopes that are found here. The Gray Dunes are located here, as are several forest biotopes. There is a range of rare and protected plants and animals here. Near the centre of Ziemupe, there is a well-appointed car park with educational information stands at the shore of the sea.
- 27** **The firing range at Skujnieki** was used for summer sports and firearms training back in the day. (22°42'11";57°12'38")
- 28** **The Cirpstene zenith missile base** was once a very important coastal defence object. It is a visually interesting and impressive territory near the shore. (22°37'15";57°18'10")

**Day 4: Ventspils – Tukums - Rīga 160 km**

- A bicycle route around Ventspils:** Seaside Open-air Museum – **29** Former Soviet coastal batteries (22°58'20";57°10'29") – **30** Zenith missile brigade and base – Army shoreline road – **31** Ventspils airport (former USSR aerodrome) (23°0'58";57°18'42") – Lemberg's "Hat" – **32** Army village for border guards, communications officials and zenith missile staff (22°45'29";57°18'31") – **33** Former military hospital (22°38'34";57°22'26") – Seaside Open-air Museum
- 34** **The Irbene radio telescope** was used for anti-espionage needs back in the day. Irbene was the site of various military units and objects, including the army village that has been abandoned now. *Tel.No. for guide: +371 63682541.* (22°34'17";57°20'18")
- 35** **The Lt Roberts Rubenis Battalion Museum** - restored settlement and bunker of the No. 2 Brigade of the Rubenis Battalion *Tel. Nr.: +371 26559172*
- 36** Further along the route, stop at **the Ancient Abava River Valley Nature Park** - one of the most expressive terrains in this part of Kurzeme. There are nature trails for tourists, and the Abava is enormously popular among water tourists.
- 37** **The Tukums airfield** is the site of countless legends from the Soviet era. The airfield is closed to public visitors at this time, but an aviation festival is held here late in August each year. (23°0'58";57°7'16")



The Skulte aeroplane



The Īle partisan bunker



The Skrunda Ponds



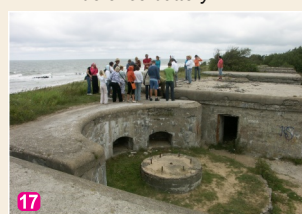
The Karosta Prison



The No. 3 coastal defence battery



The No. 23 coastal defence battery



The North forts



The Vitīgi meadows on the North-eastern shore of Lake



The firing range at Skujnieki



The Cirpstene zenith missile base



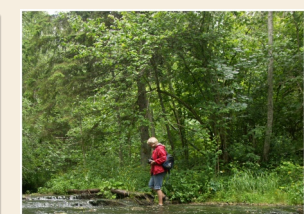
Army neighborhood for border guards



Former military hospital



The Irbene radio telescope



The Ancient Abava River Valley Nature Park



A former border control facility



Lauku ceļotājs  
40, Kalnciema str., Rīga, LV-1046, Latvia  
Phone: +371 67617600, Fax: +371 67830041  
lauku@celotajs.lv, www.countryholidays.lv

Photo: Lauku ceļotājs (Juris Smajlinskis)

www.countryholidays.lv