



# Berry nice!

Visitors to Latvia are sometimes taken aback by offers of dropping everything they are doing and heading off to go mushroom or berry picking in the countryside.

Latvians take their mushroom- and berry picking very seriously. Not only is this a seasonal pastime stretching back hundreds of years

but it is also seen as something Latvians should do; an integral part of the Latvian culture that has almost spiritual undertones.

**Around 30 per cent of Latvian mushrooms are edible and around two per cent are poisonous**

But as they often say on kids' TV programmes: *Don't try this yourself alone!* Mushrooms and berries can be toxic or even mind-altering





Photos courtesy of Latvian Country Holidays and Latvian Tourism Development Agency



and without knowing what to pick (and when), you might find yourself ending up in hospital if you do not have the expert eyes of a local accompanying you. Incredibly there are more than one thousand species of mushrooms in Latvia! To put the 'you need to know what

you are doing' into perspective, consider the fact that only around 30 per cent of these are edible and around two per cent are poisonous.

Fortunately, a high proportion of Latvians, particularly those who grew up outside of the main

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urban areas, know which berries and mushrooms are edible and which are not. It is something that Latvians learn as young kids.

Where is the best place to pick mushrooms or berries? Everywhere! Well, almost. Latvia is one of the 'greenest countries' in Europe and also enjoys one of the lowest population densities on the continent. Finding a patch of forest or meadow that remains untouched by human hands is easy and will bring you a sense of genuine empowerment as well as natural peace.







Ask friends to take you into the forest or alternatively spend a night in the countryside at one of the hundreds of Latvian guesthouses

and ask your hosts to point you in the right direction.

Remember though that Latvia's forests can stretch for dozens of kilometres in every direction and it is therefore very easy to forget yourself and get lost!

ly ticks, which are a genuine health concern.

### **Taste and health benefits**

Mushrooms are a good source of selenium, B vitamins, Potassium, and Vitamin D2, much of these essential to male reproductive health!

Mushrooms are also used as a garnish, in soups and even as (very tasty) gravies. Pickling mushrooms or berries ensures that you can enjoy their delights during the long winter months. The author of this feature actually detested mushrooms until he spent some time in Latvia. Now he can't get enough of them!

### **When should you pick mushrooms?**

There are autumn weekends when many Riga residents are conspicuous by their absence. Where can they possibly be? Chances are they have dusted down a pair of rubber boots, packed a pen knife, waterproof and wicker basket and headed off to the countryside to begin mushroom hunting. If you are in Riga between the end of August and the middle of October then you may well experience this phenomenon because this is the mushroom picking season.

### **Berry adventures**

Everything in this world has its time and season. For those reading this article who would like to explore the Latvian countryside and find berries, then June is the time for strawberries, July for blueberries, and cowberries and cranberries in August and September. If you venture near marshlands you may also come across cloudberries, which taste rather like tarts.



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International SV is a small, but unique restaurant located in a quiet area of Riga city center on Hospitāļu Street 1. It is five minutes away from the old town, not far away from Arena Riga and the main streets of the city – Valdemāra and Brīvības Street.



International menu, mini dishes, freedom of choice, original design and service philosophy create new culture of public catering.

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Photos courtesy of Latvian Country Holidays and Latvian Tourism Development Agency

Freshly plucked, the taste of berries can't be beaten, especially wild berries untainted by chemicals, packed full of antioxidants and with their natural scents still intact.

As is the case with mushrooms, you also need knowledge of which berries are edible and which are harmful so, if at all possible, go berry picking with a local who has this vital knowledge.

## Respect the countryside

In order to maintain Latvia's pristine countryside it is essential that mushroom- and berry pickers respect nature. Refrain from creating fire hazards that could potentially burn down a forest or meadow and actively avoid any form of degradation of the environment. If you pick a mushroom or berry and then decide it is not ready or safe to eat then make sure you do not trample the unwanted bounty underfoot – every species of berry and mush-

room is part of the intricately connected ecosystem and what might not be useful to human beings is sure to have its place with other creatures in the forest or meadows.

## Mushroom and berry tourism

Latvian Country Holidays offers mushroom-picking tours that include mushroom-picking trails, mushroom cultivation and mushroom cooking classes. They even throw in an expert mycologist to enable tourists to learn about Latvia's mushroom-picking traditions and of course to point out which types of fungi are edible and which are poisonous.

### Berry picking hotspots include:

Sala, near Jekabpils – the area adjacent to the Gustini fire safety tower  
Silene Nature Park, near Daugavpils  
Lake Lubans (also a top bird watching location)  
Rideli Mill on the Irga-Talsi highway

**Further information**  
[www.celotajs.lv](http://www.celotajs.lv)