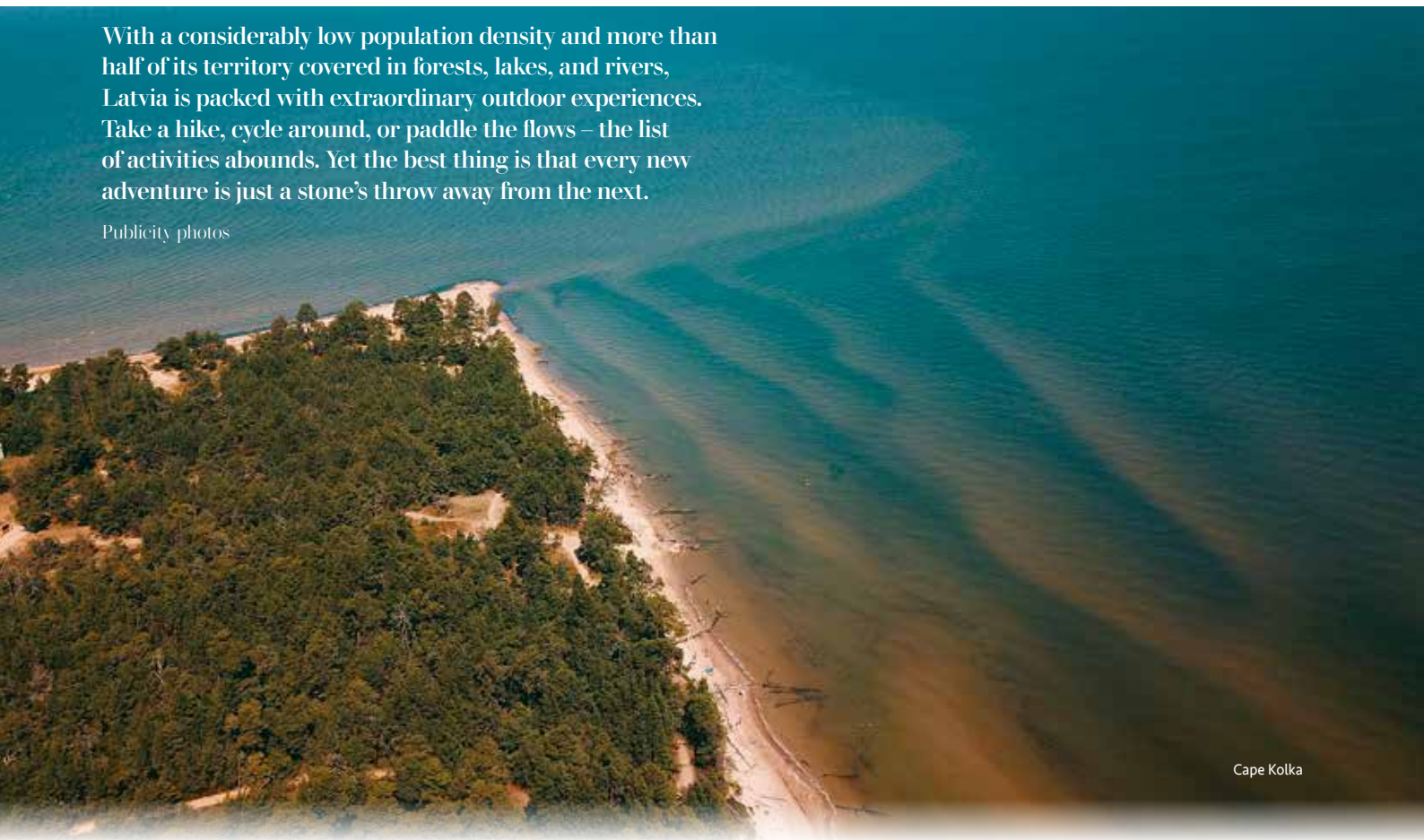


# CALL OF THE WILD

With a considerably low population density and more than half of its territory covered in forests, lakes, and rivers, Latvia is packed with extraordinary outdoor experiences. Take a hike, cycle around, or paddle the flows – the list of activities abounds. Yet the best thing is that every new adventure is just a stone’s throw away from the next.

Publicity photos



Cape Kolka

## COASTAL HIKING

Hugged by the calm waters of the Baltic Sea, Latvians are lucky to have a 500km-long coastline to flock to for some beach fun, calming walks with a view of the horizon, or a refreshing dip in bracing waters. Most of the shoreline is a wide, powder-soft sand beach largely occupied by wind-bent sand reeds and dunes behind which to hide from stronger breezes. The coastline also features many spectacular gems to stumble upon.

Going up north along the Gulf of Riga is the stoniest section of the Latvian coast – the Rocky Seashore of Vidzeme. Around 20 km long and spanning from Vitrupe to Tūja, this is the most challenging of Latvia’s seaside hikes, perfect for those not afraid to break a sweat. Heading further north, the shoreline becomes smoother and surprises with many natural wonders such as the Veczemju Cliffs. These steep sunset-coloured sandstone cliffs fringe the coastline for several hundred metres. Another treasure along this side of the Gulf of Riga are the seaside meadows in Salacgrīva. A boardwalk zigzags through the meadows, allowing one to appreciate the fascinating fauna by getting right up next to it.

On the western edge of the gulf, the coast is peppered with cosy fishing villages such as Lapmežciems as Ragaciems. The smell of freshly smoked flounder wafts from small roadside kiosks and cafes. Looking like a sharp spike when viewing a map of the country, Cape Kolka is one of the most

enchancing spots on this side of the gulf. It is the place where the calm waters of the Gulf of Riga clash with the untamed waves of the open Baltic Sea. Further west, the pine-grove-hemmed coastline features beaches so secluded and deserted that they feel like a secret. Ask any local, and they will say that one of the most fascinating beaches is the one hugged by the 20-metre-high bluffs of Jūrkalne. For a unique souvenir, hunt for pieces of amber that tend to wash out on the coast in this area. Lastly, the perfect ending spot for a hike down the western coast is Akmeņrags Lighthouse – this red beacon has saved countless ships since it was built in the 19th century. Climb up its spiral staircase to enjoy the magical view.

For serious hikers who want to experience the Baltic Sea coast in all its glory, there’s the Baltic Coastal Hiking Route – it commences at the Lithuanian-Latvian border and stretches all the way to the Estonian capital for a total of 1200 km. If you have a tight schedule, the best option is the wide beach of Jūrmala, the resort city half-an-hour’s drive from the capital. Around the 1930s it was the most famous health resort in the region, with well-heeled clientele from as far as Moscow coming here to rejuvenate. Stretching for 26 kilometres along the Gulf of Riga, the city’s broad, sandy beaches are divided into 16 areas. Most have their own train stop, meaning you can halt your hike and head back to the city at any moment.

## FOREST AND BOG HIKING

More than half of the country’s territory is covered in forest, and the best way to experience it is the Forest Trail (*Mežtaka* in Latvian) – it’s a part of the European long-distance hiking route E11 and connects the forests and national parks of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The Latvian part of the trail is 674 km long and passes through the charming town of Kuldīga, the Abava River Valley Nature Park, and even has a stop at Riga Old Town. If you want to get off the beaten path, there’s the Nature Trail Route ‘Ezertaka’ that winds along the many blue lakes of the less-explored Latgale region of Latvia. With an approximate length of 1070 km, the trek is designed in the shape of the symbol for infinity and has been designed to include at least one lake on each hiking day. It’s not for nothing that the region is dubbed ‘the land of blue lakes’ – more than 1200 lakes can be found in Latgale. The territory around Rāzna Lake, the so-called Sea of Latgale, is so unique that it’s been designated as a national park.

Apart from Rāzna National Park there are three other national parks: the diverse Slitere National Park, where one can appreciate the coastal scenery of the western coast; the largest and oldest national park in Latvia – Gauja National Park – whose hilly landscapes and colourful foliage enchant Latvians so much that every autumn they are willing to sit in the ensuing weekend traffic jams. Gauja National Park spans over 90 000 hectares, and it has countless route options for every age and skill level. The park features not only such unique natural sites as the Ērgļi Cliffs and the Gūtmaņala Cave but many historical landmarks as well. Highlights include the reconstructed 9th-century settlement Āraiši Lake Castle and the lush 18th-century Ungurmuiža Manor. Due to its proximity to the capital city and its captivating wetland scenery, Ķemeri National Park is the top favourite walking site for locals. The most dedicated go there first thing in the morning to experience a magical sunrise in the middle of the marshes. While most of Europe’s bogs have disappeared, Latvia has several wetlands, many of which have been fitted out with wooden boardwalks and bird-watching towers. For a brief, few-kilometre stretching of the legs, consider the less-crowded Cena Moorland – it spoils with its serene bog landscape and majestic lake at the finish line. Want to experience the wetlands in all their glory? Consider bogshoeing, a new activity offered by several recreational agencies.



Gauja National Park



Cena Bog



Ķemeri National Park



Rāzna Nature Park