

by ALEXANDER WELSCHER



Photos: Liepāja 2027, Alexander Welscher

Paradoxical Port

Once sealed off from the public and shrouded in secrecy, Karosta will become one of the main stages of Liepāja's year as European Capital of Culture in 2027. The former military port is a unique part of the coastal city – a place where Latvia's turbulent history, monumental architecture, the Baltic Sea and a new creative life exist side by side.

Liepāja will be European Capital of Culture in 2027 – and is eagerly preparing for it. Latvia's third-largest city has big plans for next year, when it shares the honour with the Portuguese city of Évora. Nicknamed "the city where the wind is born", Liepāja has always been a refreshingly gusty coastal city on the Baltic Sea, with a cosmopolitan breeze, powerful

cultural flair, a creative atmosphere and a magnificent coastline. Boasting a unique identity of its own, Liepāja has a habit of making waves and punching above its weight – despite having only around 70,000 residents. This will most likely also be the case in 2027, when the seaside city presents its cultural programme under the slogan "(un)rest" and becomes the second

Latvian European Capital of Culture after Riga held the title in 2014. Many projects and events during Liepāja's cultural year will engage with Karosta – one of the most fascinating parts of the city. It is a rare place, full of contrasts and shaped by the constant winds of change in a European port city that has long stood at the crossroads of historical events.

Unique military heritage

Karosta is the largest historical military garrison in the Baltics and occupies almost one third of Liepāja's territory. It is a unique complex of military and fortification buildings on the shores of the Baltic Sea, with particular significance for the history and architecture of Latvia and beyond. Built as a city within a city, it has to a large extent remained one to this day. Karosta is both unusual and characteristic of Liepāja – a place where different periods, contradictions and ways of life coexist.

“Karosta is one of the most fascinating parts of Liepāja precisely because it cannot be reduced to one story. Its military heritage is very visible and an important part of its identity, but Karosta is also a living neighbourhood, where impressive late-19th-century military architecture coexists with the Baltic Sea landscape, nature, a strong local community and a growing creative life,” says Baiba Bartkeviča, Artistic Director of Liepāja 2027, adding that several projects will grow directly from Karosta.

Military heritage tourism expert Katrīna Seržante from the Latvian countryside tourism association Lauku ceļotājs echoes this assessment: “Karosta is a truly unique place, both historically and as a tourism destination. Its distinctive environment preserves many layers of Latvia's military history, while also telling the personal stories and destinies of people who lived through different periods. This heritage gives Karosta strong potential to offer visitors an authentic and

meaningful experience that is difficult to find elsewhere.”

A closed-off military area

The origins of Karosta and its vast territory stretch back more than a century. Construction began in 1890 on the orders of Tsar Alexander III, when the Russian Empire needed a new, modern naval base. Still known by its German name Libau at the time, Liepāja was chosen because it was close to the outer borders of Russia, had an ice-free port and a railway line connecting the city with the mainland of the Empire.

Conceived as a mighty seaside barrier to protect Russia's western borders from possible enemy attacks, the Port of Emperor Alexander III – its original name – was established in remarkably little time. In just 15 years, an imposing fortified naval port with piers and an artificial canal was created alongside a completely autonomous city with its own infrastructure, schools, power station, water supply and church. It covered an area of 20 square kilometres and was designed for 20,000 people.

Following a change in strategic plans, the vast complex of defensive fortifications was deemed the result of a tactical error just a few years after its construction. In 1908, the seaside fortress was ordered to be dismantled, but the concrete used to build Karosta was so robust that attempts to blow it up failed. Many of the enormous structures and labyrinthine underground bunkers survived almost intact, and their remains still stand today. Each holds secrets of its own.

During the 20th century, Karosta was used as a military

base by the Latvian army, Nazi Germany and the Soviets during the Second World War.

After the war, Latvia and Liepāja were forced to remain part of the Soviet Union. A Soviet naval base was established in Karosta, hosting nuclear submarines and a garrison with around 60 military units. Throughout the Soviet era it was a restricted territory, completely off limits to Latvians and even closed to Liepāja's civilian residents.

Entering a different world

The gateway to the former closed military site was – and remains – the metal drawbridge across the Karosta Canal, now named after Oskars Kalpaks (1882–1919), the first commander of the Latvian Armed Forces. Designed in 1906 by engineer Harald Hall to a blueprint drawn by Gustave Eiffel, it is one of the oldest steel bridges in Latvia. Its two identical trusses can each swing 90 degrees to allow ships to pass. For decades, crossing the bridge was possible only with special permits, while armed guards controlled traffic around the clock.

Once you cross the bright green bridge, a different world begins. History still lies in ruins in parts of Karosta, while the future has not yet begun everywhere in this seemingly surreal place of many contrasts. The former magnificence and pomp of the Russian Empire alternate with Soviet apartment blocks, detached houses with gardens and garage cooperatives. Rising in the middle of it all is St Nicholas Orthodox Cathedral of the Sea, with its glittering golden domes. The result is an extraordinary urban environment from both a historical and architectural perspective.

Among Karosta's most distinctive sites today are the former Karosta Prison, the Northern Breakwater (Ziemeļu mols) and the Northern Forts (Ziemeļu forti), unique monuments to the grandiose late-19th-century fortification plans. Slowly eaten away by the forces of nature and the Baltic Sea, the crumbling forts are now partially buried by dunes. Some have slipped and tumbled towards the water, where they stand dramatically on the shoreline, battered by the waves.

It is a strikingly surreal sight. When Latvia assumed complete control of Karosta following the final withdrawal of Russian troops in 1994, many military facilities were abandoned, vandalised and looted, while half-sunken submarines and vessels littered its waters. Karosta became largely uninhabited, with an abundance of military structures, many of them large and without any function. Retired military officers and their relatives, as well as civilian service personnel, were also left behind. Its population had always been kept secret. More than 30,000 Soviet servicemen used the base until 1991, when Latvia regained its independence.



BED AND BREAKFAST BEHIND BARS

Spend the night in Karosta Prison

Built in the early 1900s, Karosta Prison was initially used as an infirmary within the large military complex, but later served as a detention centre and disciplinary facility for naval sailors and non-commissioned officers – under different ruling powers and for people of various nationalities. Initially run by the Russian Empire, it was later used by the Latvian army, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

In 1997, Karostas cietums – as the red-brick building is known in Latvian – was transformed into what is now an unusual tourist attraction and is thought to be the only military prison in Europe open to the general public. It is a destination for fans of dark tourism. The cells and conditions of the former military detention facility remain authentic, and the dark, cold walls are still covered with inscriptions etched by former inmates. No one has ever escaped from it.

“Karosta Prison is one of the best examples of how military heritage can be transformed into an engaging tourism experience while preserving the authenticity of the historic site,” says Seržante. Visitors do not simply see exhibits and read about them, she adds, but can experience the atmosphere of the place and gain a much more personal understanding of its past.

Visitors can get a chilling taste of prison life during guided tours or take part in one of the immersive experiences billed as a “historical interactive reality show involving the audience”, with actors playing prison guards and guests subjected to interrogation, verbal abuse, physical exercise and punishments. Guests can also spend the night in a former prison cell – a rare and unusual accommodation experience.

For those feeling even more adventurous, an extreme night is available, where guests receive the bare minimum: “beds” consisting of thin wooden benches on the cold prison floor behind iron bars and basic prison food. “You will be able to step into the shoes of a prisoner on a dark and dismal night,” the prison promises. The haunted stay is not for the faint-hearted.

More information: karosta.lv

KAROSTA AT A GLANCE

1890 – construction began
20 km² – original complex
20,000 – people it was designed for
~1/3 of Liepāja – occupied by Karosta today
1994 – final withdrawal of Russian troops
2027 – Karosta becomes one of the stages of Liepāja's European Capital of Culture year.

A difficult rebirth

Karosta's rebirth as a fully fledged part of Liepāja was slow and difficult. For a long time, it remained a remote, socially segregated and neglected semi-residential area, earning a dubious reputation as a deprived and dangerous neighbourhood plagued by petty crime, alcoholism and violence. Those times are largely over. Karosta has undergone profound change and significant improvements over the years, although derelict buildings and a certain gloom remain in many corners.

Public perceptions among some Liepāja residents have also been slower to change, with traces of the former stigma of a risky, peripheral district still lingering.

The Liepāja municipality has undertaken various initiatives to engage local communities and cultural associations and shift Karosta's image from one of danger and ruins towards that of a retreat offering peace and greenery within an urban environment.

At the same time, the district has become a source of inspiration for the city's creative community, attracted by its turbulent history and diverse identity.

The Karosta Festival has been an annual fixture since 2019, opening up the "city within a city" through art, music and activities for families and children during the summer, while also addressing the challenge of heritage conservation.

Starting with Redan, new places of cultural interest, installations and artworks have been "opened" during the festival each year. Particularly popular have been the artists' workshops and exhibitions in the former Karosta water tower, which is usually



Karosta Prison is the only military prison in Europe open to tourists.

inaccessible to the public and for many years served as a summer residence for Latvian artists. Among them was project initiator Egons Peršēvics, who in 2020 created the monumental sculpture The Karosta Mermaid, inspired by a local legend and once exhibited in the sea near the Northern Breakwater.

Aiming to uncover Karosta's key sites and open them to both domestic and international visitors, Lauku ceļotājs has helped develop several tourism projects. Among them is a theatrical audio guide aimed particularly at school-aged visitors, helping them discover military history in a more engaging, understandable and emotionally involving way, according to Seržante. She sees considerable potential for Karosta in the growing niche of military heritage tourism. "I believe Karosta can be one of the places that makes a visit to Liepāja particularly memorable."

New European perspectives

The European Capital of Culture 2027 programme now aims to broaden the approach and create new perspectives by inviting

visitors to encounter first-hand Karosta's history, its life today and the transformations already shaping its future.

Some projects aim to turn the area from Karosta into Radosta – a creative harbour – by empowering local residents to take part in shaping their own living environment. Others will bring international artists to explore different perspectives on the neighbourhood, its surrounding nature and its multilayered history. Some will particularly involve children and young people who have grown up in the area.

"Karosta will be one of the places where visitors can experience how contemporary culture engages with complex heritage and becomes part of the life and future of a neighbourhood," says Bartkeviča. "You can come to Karosta because of its remarkable military heritage, but once you are there, you discover many other layers of the place. This combination of history, landscape, community and contemporary creativity is what makes Karosta such a distinctive place to discover."