

Helsinki to Riga

written by Marcus | 4 October, 2014



So we are now entering the Baltic States, familiar (albeit with hazy memories) to many Brits as being the place for several stag do's 10 or so years ago, drawn to the cheap beer and the promise of being able to shoot a machine gun in a KGB bunker. Hopefully there will be more to this part of the world though, as getting to explore the next few countries is part of the reason why we took such a big detour up through Scandinavia rather than making a bee-line for Istanbul.



Tallinn

23rd September to 1st October 2014

It's chilly getting off the ferry from Helsinki but thankfully

it's only a short ride to the home of Tiit and Signe who are our hosts in Tallinn. We're invited to make ourselves at home in a room that comes complete with a rowing machine and it's as much as I can do to hold Kirsty back from cranking out a quick 5k. Over dinner Tiit tells about his round the world sailing adventures that he embarked on just after getting married (leaving Signe at home for two years!). He's making up for it now by riding round the world with her on their fold up tandem, two weeks at a time. A couple of times a year they take on a section of the route then at the end find somewhere to store the bike and fly home. They can then fly back, pick up the bike and continue the journey. They enjoyed the Crimea last August but would hesitate to recommend going there just now.



Tallinn

We stay in Tallinn for two nights, only the second time we've stayed put in one place for more than a night during the trip so far, as this gives us a bit more time to explore the city. First the bike needs some TLC as a front pannier rack bolt snapped during the mountain biking in Nuuksio and the rack was being held together with a few trusty zip ties (never leave home without them). With the help of two bike shops, one to drill out the old bolt and re-tap the thread and another to provide the bolt and spacers it's all rock solid again. The other task is to visit the RMK, Estonia's state run forestry company. Tiit has told us that they provide free camping areas at various forests throughout the country so we call in and pick up some very useful maps. I'd forgotten my brother's business cards but put in good word while I'm there in case they need some forest management consultancy.



Tallinn

The old town of Tallinn is very picturesque with medieval cobbled streets, plenty of spires, steeples and a castle so we

spend an enjoyable morning taking a walk round and trying to dodge rain showers. There's a moment of panic at the Ukrainian Church when the door clicks shut behind us and we seem to be locked in. But a bit of brute force and a few hail Marys (in Ukrainian) later and I manage to release us back onto the street.



Tallinn old city walls



Tallinn

After a lunch of dumplings sold to us at a price based on the weight of the plate (now our favourite way to buy lunch) we

head over to the Sea Plane Harbour, another tip from Tiit. This is a great museum inside a huge concrete hangar housing lots of naval craft, ice yachts, mines and planes and we get to climb inside a Barrow-in-Furness built submarine which is not for the claustrophobic.



On board the Lembit submarine



Officer and able seaman

Estonia seems cheap compared to Finland, (but then so does buying gold), but gone are the days of 1 euro pints. However we do manage to get a very nice three course dinner for two with wine for 30 euros which is great value.

Leaving Tallinn is the usual battle with city traffic for half an hour or so. There are some cycle paths but they have forgotten to drop the kerbs at each junction so it's more comfortable to stay on the road. Once clear of the city we then have to battle a head wind on a bland main road. The road then rises gently to make it a little harder. Then someone decides it's a good idea to remove all of the tarmac for 10km. Suffice to say we are ready for our lunch stop when we finally get to Keila. Having somewhere to stay for the last three nights has been very well timed as all three nights were cold and wet, but now things have dried out and warmed up for us. Kirsty asks if I'd prefer a warm head wind or a freezing cold tail wind. Give me the tail wind and some extra clothing any day.



Estonian countryside

We had various options for the next few days: either head straight down across the country or head to the West coast and then onto the two islands, Hiiumaa and Saaremaa that sit next to the Estonian mainland or else head west and follow the coast of the mainland down to the Latvian border. The island option is very popular with cyclists but Tiit suggests it's not so good at this time of year so we opt for route number 3. Following the Baltic Sea has served us well so far.

The landscape feels quite British with small forests and large arable fields. We pass a few villages with an odd mix of wooden houses and soviet era apartment blocks. There are a lot more buildings in a state of disrepair than we've seen so far and very occasionally we get passed (very slowly) by the classic symbol of soviet technology, the Lada. But on the whole Estonia feels just as European as many of the other countries we've been to so far. It may be our first country

where Lidl hasn't made itself known, but I'm sure that can't be long coming. In the meantime the supermarkets are stocked with mostly familiar foods, just served slightly differently. For instance you can buy your dairy products (milk, yogurt, mayonnaise etc.) in plastic bags which sounds like a recipe for disaster if we had tried to squeeze it into our panniers. Thankfully pasta is also sold in bags as we'd got tired of having a pannier maraca created by the boxed pasta sold in Sweden and Finland.



Lada

For the 1st night after Tallinn we stay at a free RMK campsite in Nova and find a covered eating area, fireplace, well

stocked wood pile and basic loo. It sits between the sea and a lake that up until 100 years ago was also part of the sea so is effectively brand new. We also have the place to ourselves.



Nova camp site

From Nova we head out along a coast road that is signposted as Eurovelo route 10. The Eurovelo system is a great idea in theory as it aims to provide several long distance routes across Europe from top to bottom, all the way across and around various seas and scenic areas. The trouble is that in practice it only exists online and signs on the ground are few and far between at best. Estonia, however, is leading the way and has made a point of signing the routes that pass through it as best it can. So a little ring of stars with a 10 points us onto a road that quickly degrades to a bumpy unsurfaced track. We make allowances for this hoping that it should provide a nice view of the coastline but we stay in the woods with trees between us and the sea. 12km later we emerge back

onto tarmac and make more rapid progress down to Haapsalu and decide to be more wary of the Eurovelo route. Haapsalu used to be a popular resort with the Russian Tsars who enjoyed the rejuvenating effects of the famous mud baths. We keep clean and instead stop for lunch and watch the local fishermen hooking dozens of fish out of the sea. Maybe they were all just stuck in the mud?



Fisherman at Haapsalu with the little polar bear

There is a shortage of RMK sites on this section of coast so we wild camp next to a derelict building on the edge of the

Matseltu National Park after clearing the area under the tent of frogs. This park is a huge service station for migrating birds but most of them will have passed through by now so we are only woken up by a few geese who must be straggling and the swans who seem to leave it a bit later before heading south.

We make our way down to Parnu via a main road with the wind now behind us and blowing strongly. I'm a lot happier. But the road seems to miss any of the villages along the way so is a bit like riding on a bypass. It's sunny and warm so Parnu lives up to it's title of being the 'Summer Capital of Estonia'.



Parnu beach

After another wild camp by the beach we turn onto the A1 and pass a sign asking us to thank the EU for refurbishing this section of road. And we do thank them wholeheartedly as it's

now a beautifully smooth stretch of brand new black asphalt. It's also our first encounter with the Via Baltica which is the main route between Helsinki and Budapest so we have to share the fresh tarmac with quite a few large trucks. Being a Sunday there aren't too many and almost all of them are courteous enough to give us a wide birth so it's hardly the M25. After a while we get to turn onto a smaller road running parallel with the A1 and we finally find some real Estonia and get to ride through several villages and small towns as we approach the Latvian border. In one town we follow a sign to the shop and find a building that looks nothing like a shop and looks nothing like being open. But peering through the door we find it's both and the shop keeper is proud to demonstrate his English by explaining what all the things he is selling are: "This is cheese, this is ham..." which we thank him for.

Our final night in Estonia is spent at the RMK site Krapil. It's huge with dozens of plots, fire places and tables as apparently up to 40,000 people visit this area each year. Again we have the place to ourselves.

It's a short walk to the nearest village of Treimani so we go for a stroll and are met at the village shop by a large and friendly dog who proceeds to show us the sights including the little wooden church with traditional Estonian net curtains and a garden containing bizarre, giant wooden figures. The dog leads us back to the shop where we say good bye and head to the tent to cook supper. The stove goes on then goes off. My estimation that we had one more day's worth of fuel is one day out, so we retreat to the roaring fire I've built to ponder how to heat up our pasta. It's probably a few km to the nearest petrol station and it'll probably be shut. We could have a cold supper of muesli and bread. Of course the answer is right in front of us and so we have a slightly smoked flavour pasta cooked nicely on the fire. We finish the evening practicing the fine art of marshmallow roasting as Kirsty had

spotted a pack of Haribo's finest earlier that day.





Camp fire cooking

Crossing into Latvia is our first land border since Germany and we're pleased that this time there are flags and signs so we know it's actually happening. We enjoyed Estonia but a return trip is definitely needed perhaps with either route option 1 or option 2 as we think we'd see a bit more on the islands or down the middle of the country compared to the coast.



Country number 10

We're back on the A1 again and it's a bit busier than the day before but the hard shoulder is also a bit wider for us to ride in. There are also a few oddities to keep us entertained along the way including some giant chairs, a tree entirely painted orange and a tankard the size of a house. Those crazy Latvians. The truck drivers must keep themselves well stocked up with food as we find ourselves on a 20km stretch through a forest without a single shop or cafe and lunchtime has been and gone. To keep ourselves fuelled we have to gorge on biscuits and chocolate until we eventually find a cafe who serves us hot soup and a beetroot based broth called borscht.



Giant chair on the A1 in Latvia



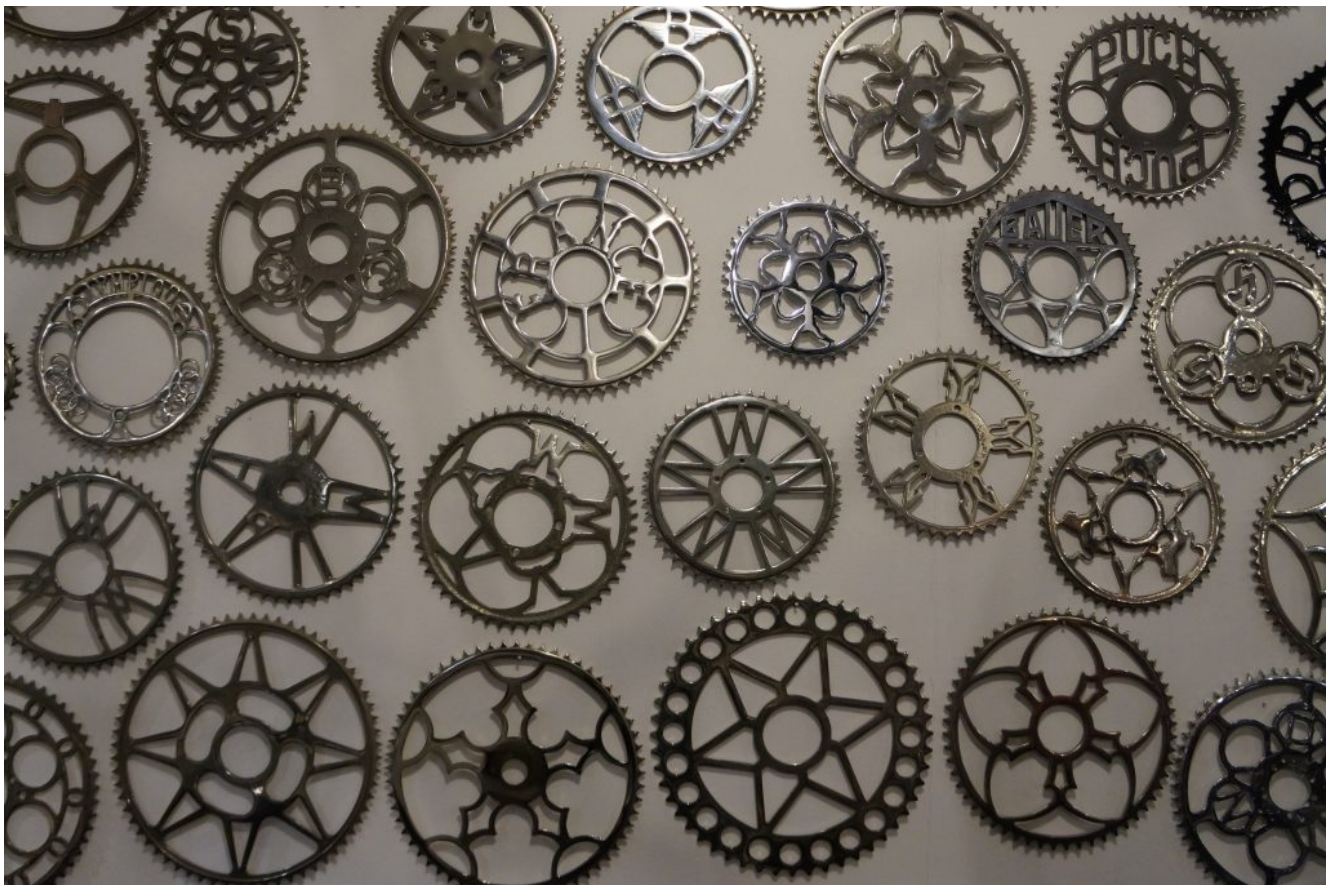
Orange tree on the A1 Latvia



Big tankard, tiny Marcus

That evening we make it to the town of Saulkrasti and stop at the tourist information for maps. Here we get a few good tips

for Riga, somewhere to camp for the night and also a recommendation to visit the local bicycle museum which is just down the road. This turns out to be an amazing collection of bikes in someone's shed behind a house containing several prop shaft driven Latvian bikes, a penny farthing with rope instead of tyres and hundreds of accessories and items of memorabilia. The chap who owns it all has spent 37 years collecting all the bikes and lovingly restoring them and to be fair he's done a fantastic job of it.



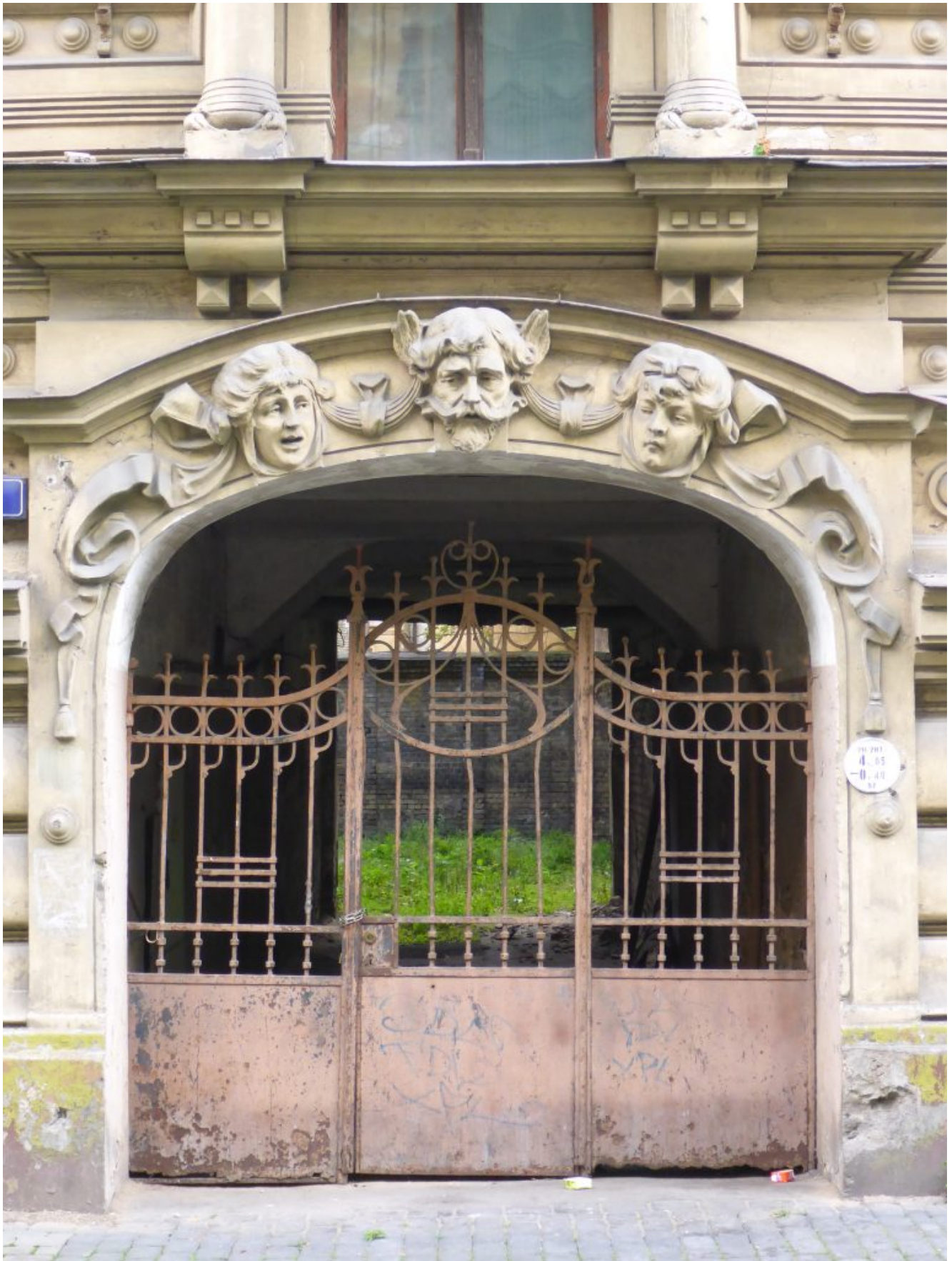


It's a short spin into Riga the next day and we have time to

investigate the Art Nouveau quarter with its elaborately decorated building facades. In fact a third of Riga is built in the Art Nouveau style so we see plenty more of it throughout the city.







While eating lunch in one of the many expansive parks we are interviewed by some students who ask us what typifies Latvia for us? Our answers are limited to what we've seen so far:

Beaches, forests, wooden houses, borscht. They are happy with all of these apart from borscht as apparently that's actually Czech. If they were to ask me now I'd add baking (Latvian biscuits and cakes are the finest we've had so far), knitting and folk dancing.



Freedom monument, Riga. Flanked by two further monuments to freedom and democracy: a McDonalds and a Costa Coffee.





Riga's finest dancing busker

Our hosts in Riga are Ruta and Gints both of whom enjoy short cycle tours and have a couple of spare rooms so are happy for people to stay who are riding through. Gints delights in serving us some 'Latvian National Drink': Black Balsam. When I first moved to Bristol my flatmate Rus had an 'Undrinkable drinks cabinet' and this surely deserves a place there. As well as Black Balsam, Riga has lots to offer and we're shown a lot of it on a free walking tour led by Philip. He takes us off the usual routes to give us a better feel for what the city is really like and some of its varied history. We are taken to central market, once the biggest covered market in Europe where anything and everything can be bought at bargain prices. Apparently it's popular with pick pockets too which was a bit concerning as the day before we'd left our bike locked up in a corner. When we got back to it everything was still in place but a passer by had told us we were lucky as by all rights our panniers should have been stripped off and sold for alcohol within minutes. We'd had further luck as the bike had also been parked below a popular pigeon roosting spot and they had left a few lucky droppings in strategic places including my saddle. Our thoughts on this are that the tandem is so big, cumbersome and unusual that it's not actually an obvious target for thieves but maybe in future we should be a little more cautious.

Central market is also a great place for lunch and we buy a selection of dishes in a cafe priced up by weight. For dessert we go for some cake and when I ask for a portion of some delicious looking apple sponge I'm told I can only buy the whole slab so I'm 'forced' to pay 1 euro for it, and 'forced' to eat the whole thing.





Central Market, Riga



Central Market, Riga



My cake's bigger than your cake

We have a look round the Occupation of Latvia museum but had been warned that it's not easy viewing. The Baltic States have

had a very rough history with the Nazis and the Soviets fighting over them like two dogs with a bone, some of the details are truly shocking so we're almost glad to be kicked out before we've finished looking round because they've decided to close an hour early.

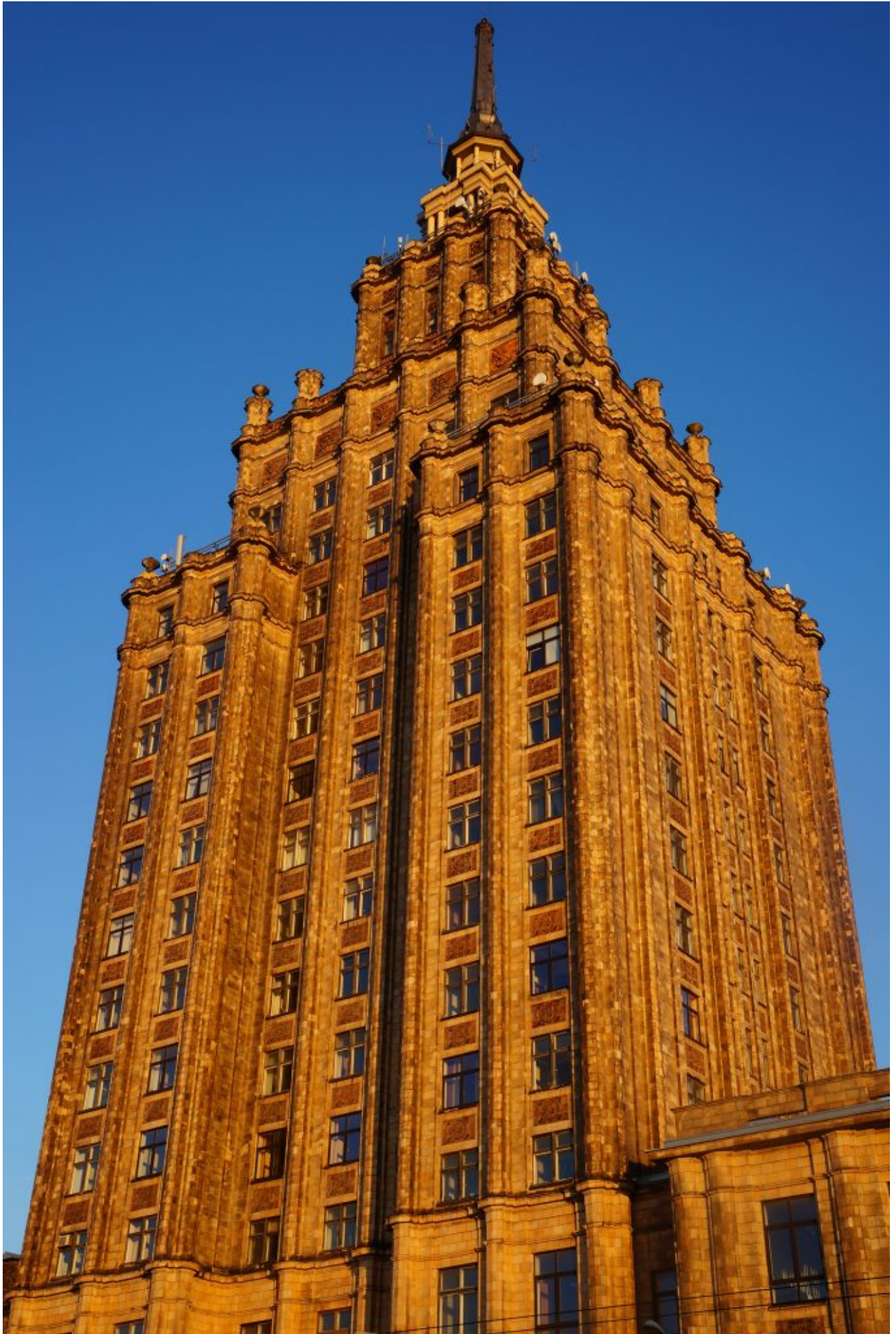


The Blackheads House, Riga



The Blackheads house

After watching sunset from the top of the National Science Academy building (a tip from another Warm Showers contact, Marika) we end up in the Folkklubb ALA which is hugely entertaining and popular with both tourists and locals who go there for good hearty food, live music and lively dancing. But you need to know the moves so we stay on the sidelines. It's been one of our favourite cities so far and well worth a visit.



National Science Academy, Riga



Riga at Sunset



Sunset over Riga



Dusk in Riga

From Riga our route is now taking us into the western Kurzeme region of the country following guidance from Gints that should get us onto some good roads to show us rural Latvia. Then it's down into the third Baltic state, Lithuania. So far we haven't seen a single UK stag do.



Black Balsam