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STARRING: EAGLE-OWL AND NIGHT ANIMALS

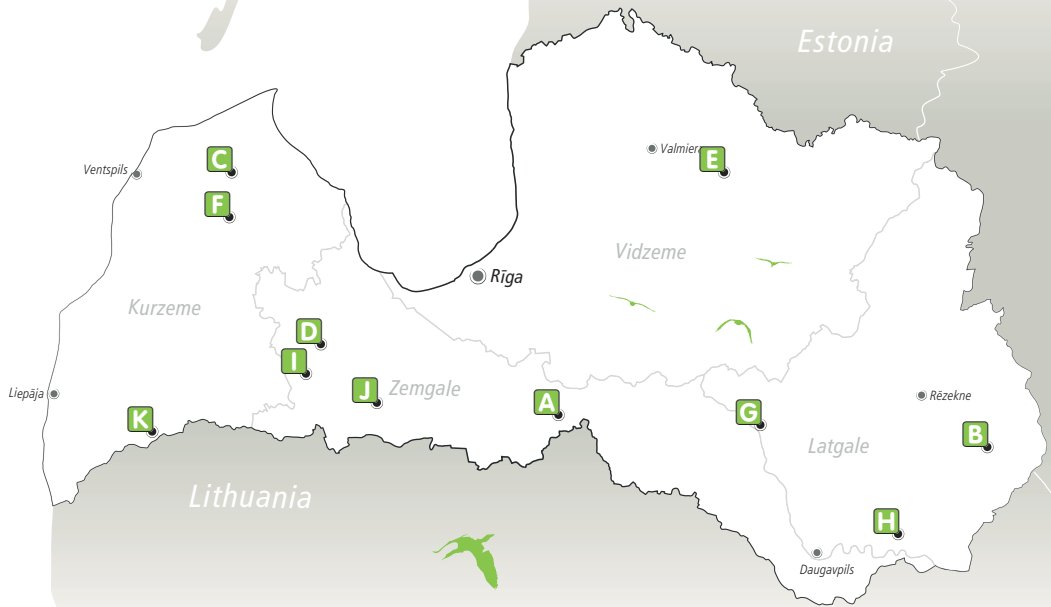
SOUND: NIGHT SILENCE LIGHTS: MOON & STARS DRESS DESIGN: MAMMADABA



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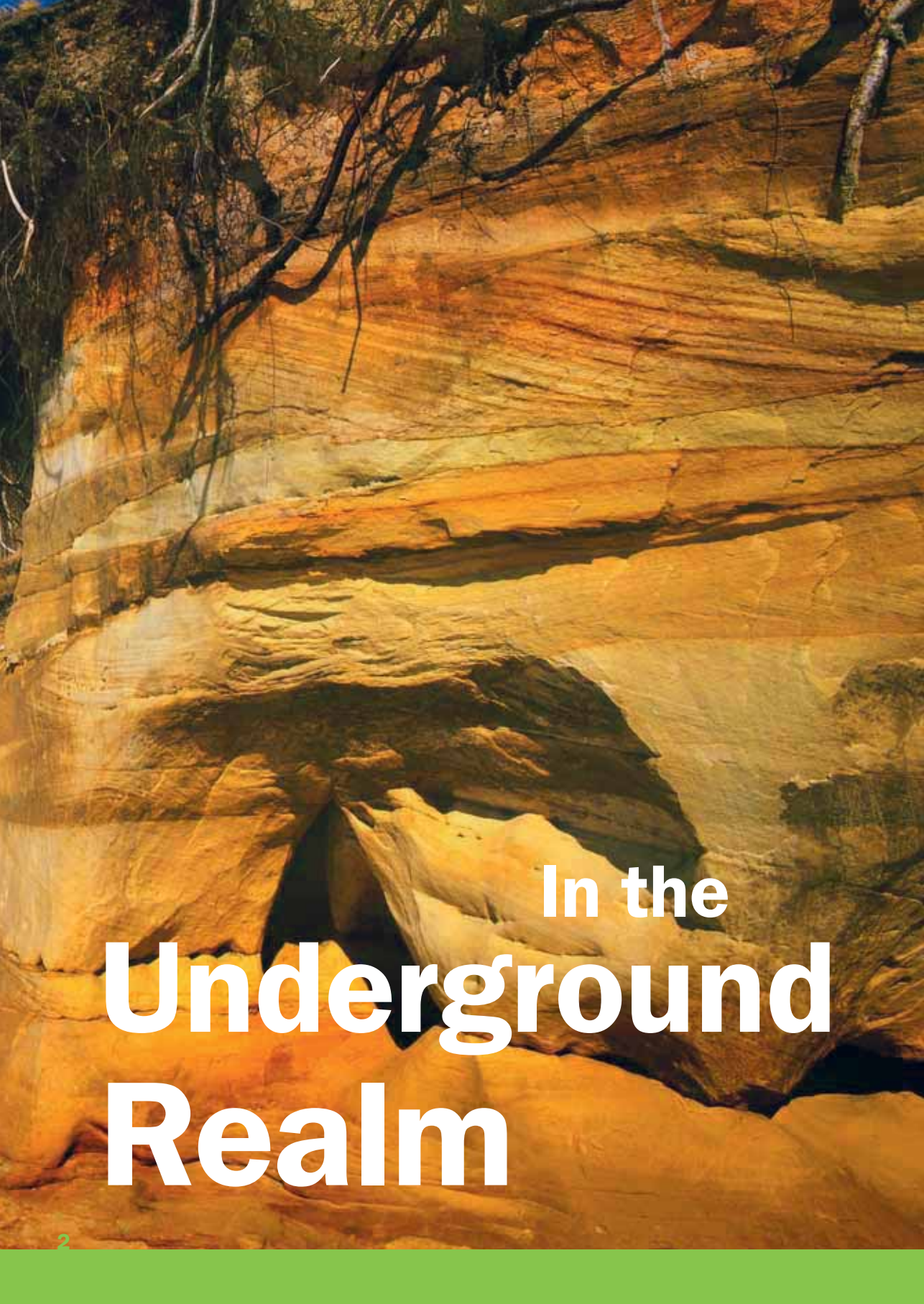
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In the
Underground
Realm

A Hint of Mystery

Deep underground, where the Sun never shines, there is a world entirely different and strange to us – the realm of cold and dark underground waters, formidable caves and rocks in twisted shapes made over a long course of time.

People have always viewed the dark underground and its secrets with certain distrust, yet as everything unknown, the underground realm entices and is hard to resist. It is hardly a coincidence that there are so many stories and legends about caves that often bear the name of the devil or hell. We have Velna ala (*Devil's Cave*), Velna ceplis (*Devil's Brazier*), Velna kancele (*Devil's Chancery*), several Elles (*Hells*) and Ellītes (*Little Hells*), Elles kalni (*Hell's Hills*) and Elles kambari (*Hell's Chambers*). We do fear the descent, but just a little, and we go down into the caves, the underground – a strange, dark world completely unknown.



There are many mysterious and fearsome places on Earth where the ground can suddenly give way under your feet, or open up, producing a fiery river. It is no surprise if we hear about it in the news from places far away. Yet there are places in Latvia where the riverbeds of rivers long gone can be seen underground, or lakes that swallow large masses of water along with fish in it, where the bottom may suddenly cave in, taking along a horse, a sauna or even a small barn.

We walk past holes in the ground, filled with water or covered with brush, without thinking much of them – after all, they have always been there. But what if they were created by a meteorite?

And it does happen even here in Latvia too that the ground suddenly ceases to exist beneath our feet – such is the vastness of the mysterious underground realm.

And who knows – perchance there is a kernel of truth in legends about sunken castles?

Caves are underground cavities sufficiently large for one person to go into, although some sections of caves are so small that not even a dog could get through. A cave is at least two to three meters long, usually deeper inside than at the entrance.



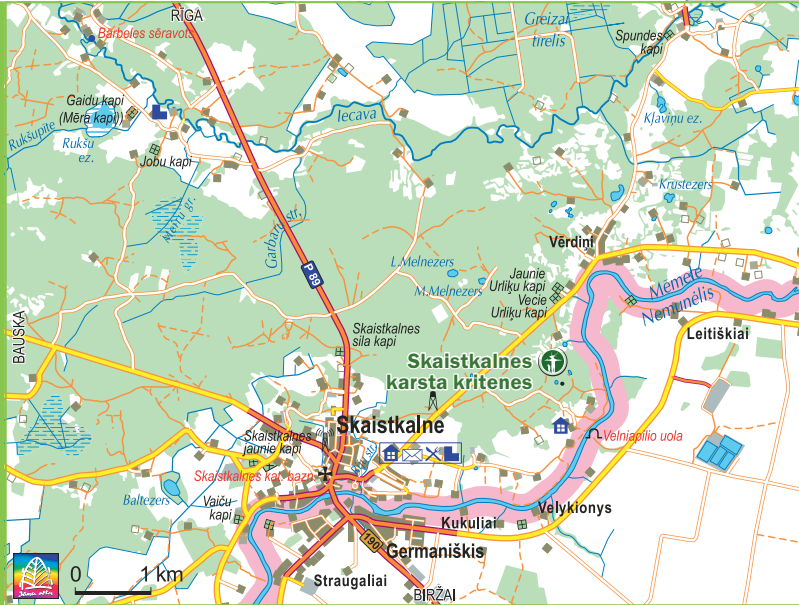
When the **Ground**
Caves In
Under Your **Feet**

Skaistkalne Sinkholes



Skaistkalnes pagasts
Vecumnieku novads

Rīga – 75 km
Bauska – 35 km



Natural landmark “Skaistkalnes kritenes” (*Skaistkalne Sinkholes*) of 100 ha in area is listed in the European Union network of protected areas Natura 2000. Many unusual phenomena can be observed in Latvian forests, including complex geological phenomenon landscape karstification.

Beautiful Hills, Splendid Church

Skaistkalne is a beautiful area seated along the banks of the picturesque Mēmele River, near Latvia’s border with Lithuania. Skaistkalne, Land of Beautiful Hills, is quite a befitting name for the place. If truth be told, the name originates from the Latvianization of the name of the first landlord, Schonberg, yet it does seem to suit the area best. The climate here is also pleasant – this is the driest and warmest area in Latvia. It is known for significant deposits of gypsum and the magnificent building of the largest Catholic church in Zemgale, the Assumption of Mary Church, which has by now has become the second most popular shrine with Catholic pilgrims after Aglona Basilica.

Skaistkalne Catholic Church, rising atop the high banks of the Mēmele River Valley, is visited by thousands of pilgrims and tourists each year. The history of the building and rebuilding of the church is long, twisted and connected to many legends. Originally, there was a small oakwood church built here around 1666, which was rebuilt into an edifice unusually large and richly decorated for the area, dedicated to the Assumption of Mary. This monumental two-towered basilica had no rivals in Latvian architecture of that time, in terms of size and artistic quality of decorations. The intricate woodcarvings of the church, particularly striking on its twelve-meter-tall altar, chancery and organ, are in the Baroque style. Unfortunately, the two church towers, each the size of a five-story building, were destroyed at the end of World War II and have not been rebuilt since. Nevertheless, the church has lost none of its importance.

Sinkholes

Let’s try to look into the processes hidden from our eyes, because they are happening at least 50 meters below the ground. Karstification is an unusual geological process. Water washes away soluble bedrock (dolomite, limestone, gypsum, sandstone, saltpeter), creating cavities underground – funnels, wells, gauges, canals, cracks. As these cavities grow larger, the day comes when the upper layers of the ground have nothing to lie upon and cave in into the emptiness – that is how sinkholes



are created, which may be small and difficult to notice, as well as deep and dangerous. Of course, this process requires not only soluble bedrock but also water that must be constantly in motion. Usually sinkholes are no more than ten meters deep, and they may come in all kinds of shapes. Some sinkholes are very large in area that descend a few inches every year, so no one ever notices. But a sinkhole may also form in the blink of an eye, the small sauna and the large barn are gone before you can say Jack Robinson.

The shape of sinkholes may vary greatly, depending on the thickness of bedrock and the area affected. Although karst processes under the ground are all over the world, there are not many places where the most characteristic surface features thereof can be observed – sinkholes and karst lakes. In Latvia, there are comparatively many such places. There are sinkholes near Salaspils and Baldone, near Klintaine in Rīteru Valley, where the small Klintaine River suddenly disappears underground before reaching the Daugava. There are also sinkholes near Allaži, Straupe and Līgatne, and in several places along the Daugava banks. In Gaujiena, Alkšņupe River is believed to eat up water. And there are also lakes known for suddenly having no water in them – gone with all the fish therein.

Where Did the Barn Go? And the Barrel?

Imagine for a moment that you are sitting in a pretty dandelion meadow that all of a sudden is set to motion, and as you jump to your feet, a huge hole in the ground appears right before you. Good for you if you are still standing on the ground. Not all are so lucky. There are many stories in Skaistkalne about horses, goats or apple trees suddenly swallowed by the ground.

On one side of Slimnīcas Street, there is one of the oldest sinkholes in the area – Šķūņa (Barn) sinkhole, also known by the name of Baznīckalna (Church Hill) sinkhole. The sinkhole formed on November 10, 1923 when it was about 13 meters wide and at least three meters deep, becoming deeper yet after that. The sinkhole formed right at the door of a barn after crop threshing there the day before and where a locomobile was placed – a large and heavy piece of machinery that can only be viewed in museums these days. Next morning, there was already a rather large hole in the ground there, which was slowly expanding and into which hay bales, barn walls and part of barn roof all tumbled in. Senior citizens say that later on, another get-together was held in Skaistkalne to remove the remains of the barn, and even photographs were taken that day, showing the destroyed barn and a church with two tall towers far in the background. Now there is a small pond at the bottom of the sinkhole, which goes completely dry every three to four years, but after a while there is the pond again there, and just as suddenly. Trees have grown on the steep walls of the sinkhole, casting spooky shadows on the still surface of the water below.

Skaistkalne residents were quite alarmed, and a few new sinkholes formed in the area later on. In 2003, a farmer placed a huge four-ton barrel in his garden to water the plants on hot summer days. But one morning the barrel was gone, as were cabbages and carrots, all sucked down into a large sinkhole. The farmer was not particularly distressed by the disappearance of the cabbages and carrots, but losing the barrel did upset him, which is why he called neighbors to help him get it out of the hole. But retrieving the barrel was impossible, and it still remains there on the bottom of the

So what is the karstification process all about?

Dictionaries – the Wikipedia, for one – give the following definition: karst topography is a geological formation shaped by the dissolution of a layer or layers of soluble bedrock, commonly known as a sinkhole.

The name of the phenomenon in Latvia – karsts – has a dual meaning, because karsts much more often than not means hot. The notion takes its name from the mountainous region of Karst in Slovenia, where this geological phenomenon is quite commonplace.

Karstification is also characteristic of several areas in Latvia, and there are particularly many sinkholes in the vicinity of Skaistkalne, including Latvia's largest ones.

sinkhole, hence the name of the hole – Mucas kritene (Barrel sinkhole). Further across the field, two new houses are being constructed. Everything has been checked, the houses are safe and there are no cavities under the ground there. And yet, just a short while ago, in 2008, a new sinkhole formed near a small stream flowing along Kalna Street, and it was named Strauta (Stream) sinkhole. Initially it resembled a sort of well, some 12 meters deep, then land continued to cave in, and now there is water at the bottom of the wide and deep sinkhole.

Holes in the Wood

Driving from Skaistkalne toward Kurmene, take the turn to the forest road that goes to the guest house “Krastmalas”. You may want to spend some time at the “Latvijas valsts meži” (*Latvian State Forests*, state-owned forest management company) information poster to decide which path to take. There are also indicated paths that one can ride on a bicycle. You will see sinkholes large and small, covered with trees and filled with water or boggy, in the shape of a funnel or bowl, all kinds of them. Some are just small holes, and if it were a different forest, they could be taken for an odd surface peculiarity, but near Skaistkalne, karst processes are the main suspect behind all changes to the surface of the ground. No one has really registered all sinkholes in Latvia, while Lithuanians have counted some 9,000.

Why Skaistkalne?

Scientists, of course, took interest in the phenomenon of Skaistkalne, but it is still impossible to predict when and where Earth will remind once again how little we know about the processes going on under the frail upper crust. And that makes us a little warier about our great wish to transform nature. At least in Skaistkalne it did – the idea of building large gypsum quarries was eventually rejected. Who knows how it could affect the complex processes going on under the ground.

As to why Latvia’s mightiest sinkholes have formed in and near Skaistkalne, scientists say that this may be explained with a unique underground process characteristic

of only this region – underground water streams that flow from the Iecava to the Mēmele. Both twisty rivers are just a few kilometers from each other, and the water level in the Mēmele here is several meters lower than that in the Iecava. It is due to this difference that the Iecava gives part of its water to the Mēmele. The unusual water movement pattern may be the reason why karst lakes and the deepest sinkholes in Latvia have formed here. Karst lakes – Mežezers and Mežmalas Lake – have comparatively constant water levels, while a few other karst lakes do as they please – one time they may be almost dry, then full of water. Inexplicable, mysterious and interesting.



Velnapils on the Lithuanian Side of the Border

Opposite the nature reserve “Skaistkalnes karsta kritenes” (*Skaistkalne Sinkholes*) on the right bank of the Mēmele, on the left bank, already in Lithuanian territory, lies Velnapils (*Devil’s Castle*) – Europe’s largest dolomite-gypsum outcrops with a sinkhole atop the riverbank.

Here the underground water movement that causes karst formation can be viewed in cross-section. The outcrops along the Mēmele banks are part of a nature reserve. Across the river on the Latvian side of the border, there is an interesting gypsum threshold at the road that goes under a wildflower meadow. Where it goes is anyone’s guess – the underground realm is full of secrets.



A close-up photograph of a tree trunk with a large, circular, hollowed-out section, surrounded by moss and lichen. The hollowed-out section is the central focus, showing concentric wood grain patterns. The surrounding bark is rough and textured, with patches of bright green moss and lichen. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures and colors of the forest floor.

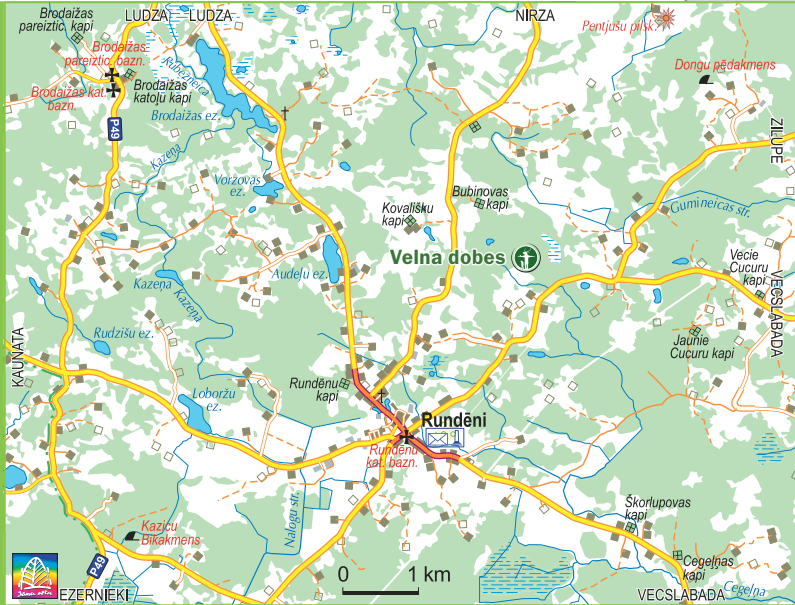
Devil's Work
in Rundēni
Forests

Rundēni Devil's Ridges



Rundēnu pagasts
Ludzas novads
and
Lauderu pagasts
Zilupes novads

Rīga – 300 km
Zilupe – 25 km
Ludza – 30 km



Rundēnu Velna dības (Valna dūbes in the Latgalian dialect, Rundēni Devil's Ridges) is a very unusual natural monument of unclear origin: unique hills with tops the shape of a funnel, occupying an area of 3.71 hectares altogether. Velna dības are located on Latgale Plateau some 3–4 kilometers northeast of Rundēni, near the Rundēni-Lauderi Road.

Since 1997, Velna dības has been on the list of Latvia's protected geological and geomorphologic objects. In essence, Velna dības is five to seven holes of unclear origin, some of which are filled with water, others overgrown with trees or bushes, and all are covered with a veil of mystery.



Origin Veiled in Mystery

Usually there are many exciting stories to be told about unusual places. Traces of what the people call “devil’s work” can be found all over Latvia. We have Ellītes (Small Hells), Velna alas (Devil’s Caves), Velna akmeņi (Devil’s Stones), Velna ezeri (Devil’s Lakes) and Velna dobes (Devil’s Ridges), too. Most probably, the latter are attributed to the devil because the holes are situated atop hills, and their appearance is quite unusual.

So how did they come about? Perhaps they were created by a meteorite that bumped off the ground, creating the largest hole, which is 150 meters long, 90 meters wide and 15 meters deep, now filled with water. Then the meteorite went on bouncing, creating the other holes in the ground, each smaller than the one before it, as if it were thrown by someone skipping rocks. This theory is supported by the elongated shape of the holes and the fact that all of them have steep slopes on one side and gentle slopes on the other. Or perhaps it is more likely that the unusual holes are a peculiar phenomenon created by glaciers. And then again, maybe they are thermokarst surfaces that formed during the last ice age, when underground lakes froze up or ice blocks were melting underground. Yet another version is that the holes were created as underground water bodies froze up, because ice takes up more space than water. This causes tension underground, which may result in an explosion removing the bedrock over the water body and creating a large hole.

Alas, there can be no one answer. In the 1970s, scientists from then USSR Academy of Sciences, geologists from the Baltic countries, Karelia and Moscow, went to examine this unusual place, but there is no reliable information about what they found here, only various versions. One thing that the scientists all agreed on was that Rundēni Velna dobes was a unique natural phenomenon and should be protected by the state.

Many Wolves and Huge Mushrooms

A well known fact: that which is mysterious becomes the subject of legend and lore.

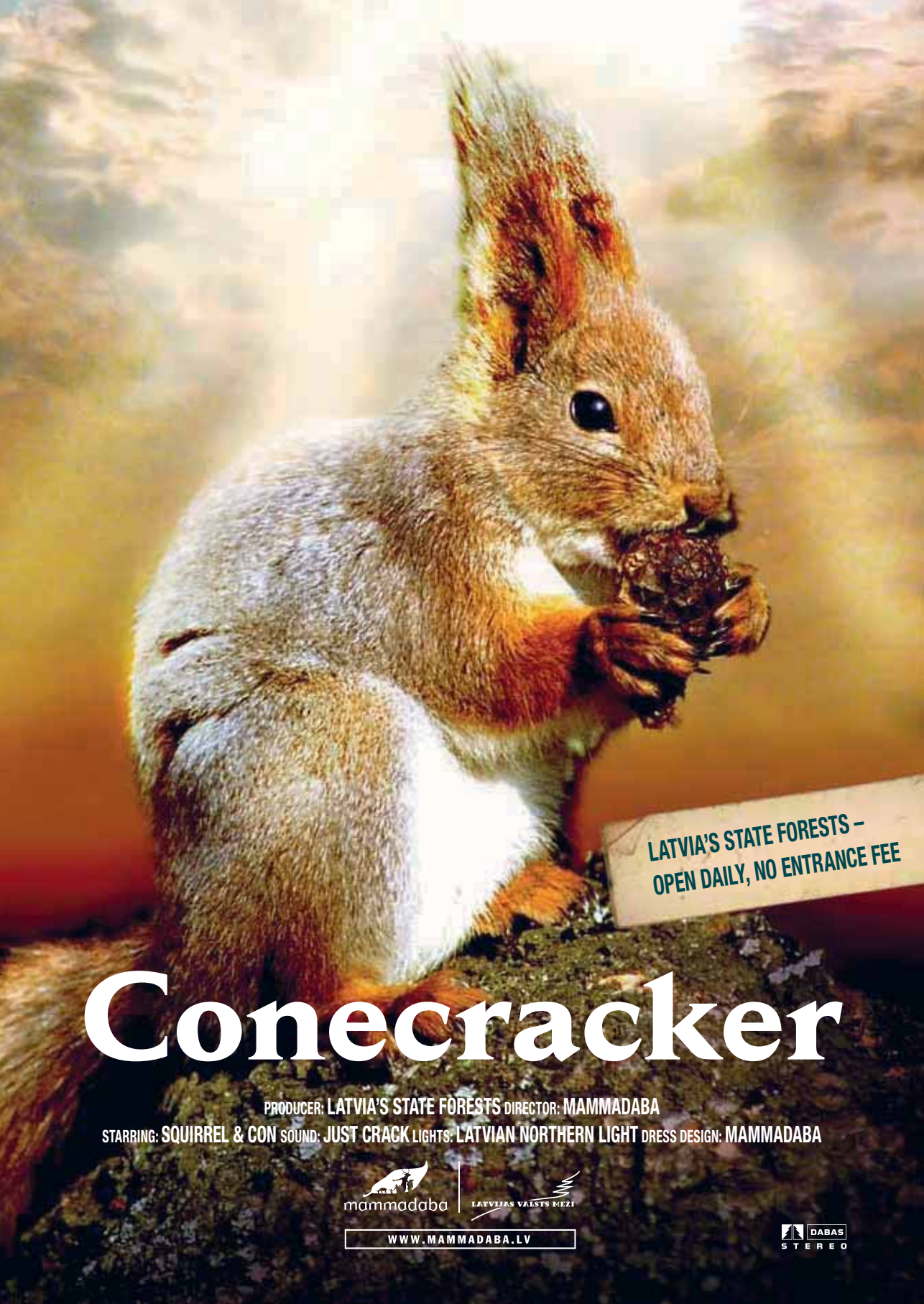
The locals tell stories about enormously huge mushrooms that used to grow near Velna dobes, and about uncanny forces that made people wander in the forest in the vicinity of the holes. Lake Dubins – one of the holes – is surrounded by trees and has a still surface, but it is said to be inhabited by fish with metallic fins, and people say mosquitoes live near the lake whose bite gives a man’s eyes a metallic gleam.

The lake is so overgrown with trees that you will never notice it there, even if you are just a few meters away, until you go tumbling down the steep shore of the lake. But then of course, there are people who just laugh at these stories, and say there is nothing to fear about Velna dobes.

And yet, why the name – Velna dobes?

Turns out, once these holes in the ground were inhabited by great many wolves, and people feared going near the place. A scary place, they say, so maybe that is why such a name? Another legend is that Napoleon’s soldiers dug the holes for their own needs – we will never know, and it may be difficult to check, if not impossible. And yet, all of this is very, very interesting!





LATVIA'S STATE FORESTS –
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Conecracker

PRODUCER: LATVIA'S STATE FORESTS DIRECTOR: MAMMADABA

STARRING: SQUIRREL & CON SOUND: JUST CRACK LIGHTS: LATVIAN NORTHERN LIGHT DRESS DESIGN: MAMMADABA



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Where the **Dark**
Swallows
the **Light**

Liepniekvalks Caves



Dundagas pagasts
Dundagas novads

Rīga – 150 km
Dundaga – 10 km
Ģibzde – 5 km



You will find Peldanga Labyrinth (Liepniekvalks Caves) if you travel down the Dundaga–Ģibzde Road, on the right bank of the Liepniekvalks stream, 0.5 km up the highway bridge near Liepnieki farm.



Caves have always stirred people's curiosity – a little mysterious, a little scary, and sometimes even dangerous. In the dank darkness, an underground stream can be heard a long, long way below, making its way up to the surface. And legends always have devils living in caves – after all, almost twenty caves in Latvia bear the devil's name.





While most of the Earth has been explored on the surface, the underground is still largely un-mapped, holding many secrets and treasures yet unfound. Speleology is a science that studies and explores caves and the related phenomena. Although we are not qualified speleologists, we too can enjoy the unusual sense of being immersed in the world of darkness and silence.

Just like many other places around the world, the banks of many rivers in Latvia have been eroded by constant water flow. Going from elevated areas to the sea, the streams dig deeper into the riverbed. The larger the difference between the river source and the river mouth, the faster the stream, and the greater the force with which the river erodes its banks. A river can cut its way not only through comparatively soft sedimentary rock but also the not-so-soft granite and other such rocks, even large boulders that are known as laukakmeņi in Latvia. However, for the eroded banks not to collapse, they have to be made of rather hard materials. In that case, the eroded banks stand along the river

for many decades, presenting cross-sections of the various layers of rock they are made up of, of lighter and darker colors, as if they were drawn with pastels. If the eroded bank is made of sedimentary rock, especially sandstone and limestone, underground water flows create caves.

Most caves in Latvia have formed in Devonian sandstone as a result of the suffusion processes; such caves are usually not very long. What does the word suffusion mean? It comes from the Latin word *suffusio* – digging from below, and it means that water flows over the course of time, washing out sand and peat particles out of the more porous underground rocks, gradually creating cavities – or caves.

Anna Brigadere wrote in “Maija un Paija”:

“Silvery grey trees overhang the yard with grey, low turf dike and gate. A small grey turf house on one side, a turf sauna on the other. At the house, there is a turf bench upon which the Turf man sits with a long disheveled beard, head in his hands.”

Care to see the underground realm of Turf man? Then see the film “Maija un Paija”, or come to Peldanga Labyrinth and see the caves where Gunārs Piesis shot several scenes for his film “Pie velēnu vecīša” (A Visit to Turf Man) in 1990.

Do you remember still?

**The dark has swallowed the light,
The moon has turned its dark side.
The leaves are black, no longer green...**

Liepniekvalks Caves

When in Dundaga, look for Liepniekvalks Caverns, also known as Pel-danga Labyrinth – one of the longest and most complex labyrinths of caves in Latvia.

The five-meter high and twenty-meter wide riverbank houses a complex system of underground caves with five entrances. The total length of them is 70 meters. The labyrinth is made up of one larger and two smaller bifurcated cavities, connected with tunnels. There are several pillars and sandstone columns in the cave. However, all sandstone caves eventually cave in, and this is what happened to Liepniekvalks Caverns.

From what we know, before Guntis Eņiņš and his team got down to cleaning out the caves in 1988, it was a true paradise for foxes and badgers. When debris was cleared, people could go and see the unusual underground kingdom, but these days it can only be viewed from the outside, because further inside they have caved in once again.

Yet there is much to see on the outside, too. Nature has painted a fantastic range of pastel shades here, where grey alone is in hundreds of shades. There are stripes of yellow, pink, grey laid out in raggedy patterns. Where the sandstone

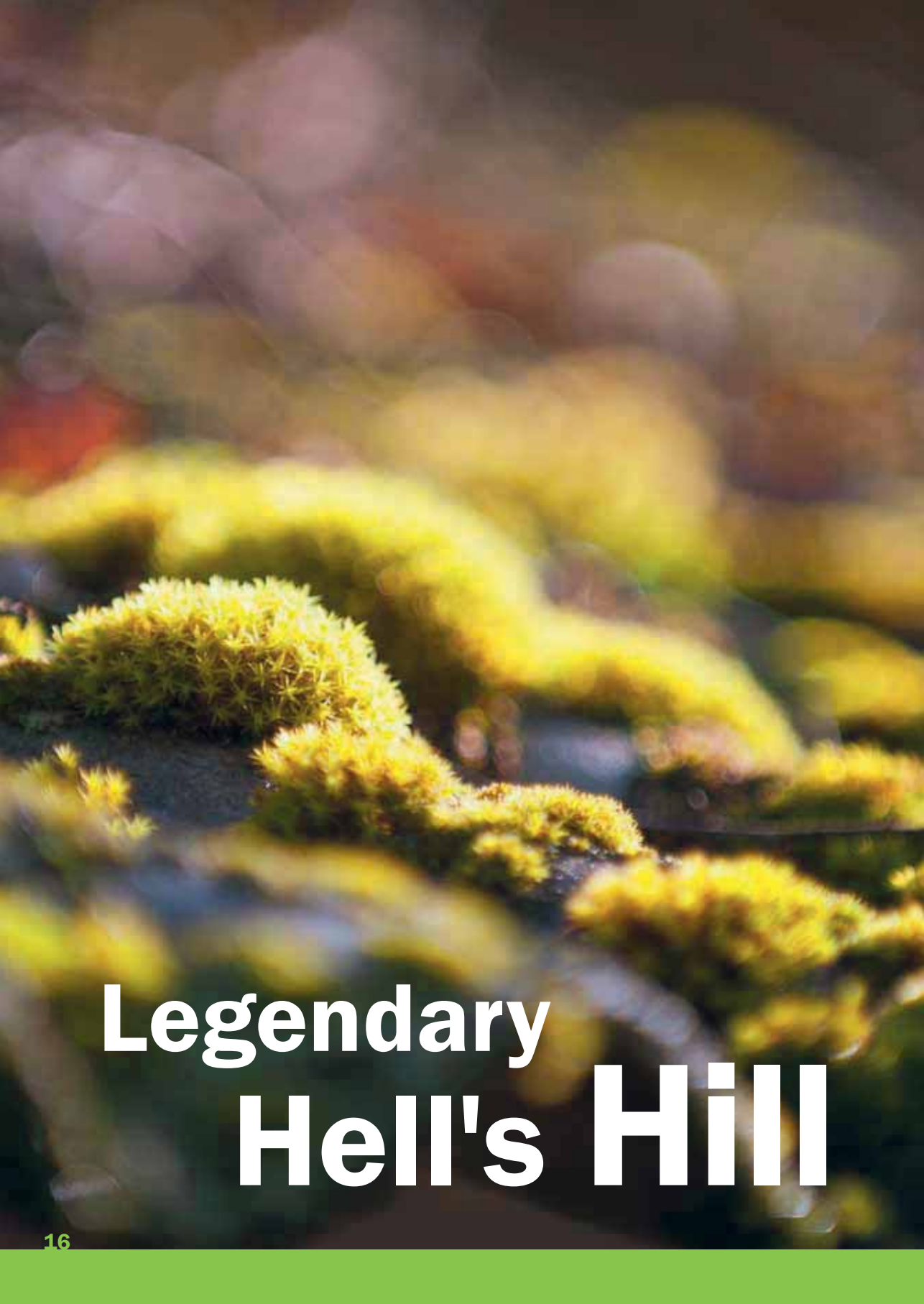
has held for longer, the ceiling is dark emerald green, almost black in spots. It is a little frightening here, and quiet! And if you happen to spot a bat sleeping in its usual posture, head down, you may well consider your visit to the underground realm a success.

When you find yourself sitting at the bank of the narrow stream, listening to its tireless murmur and watching colors play on the sandstone wall, you feel how many mysteries there are in nature.



When Going to See Caves in Latvia:

- * Keep in mind that sandstone caves are not eternal, that they may cave in, which is why entering caves alone is not recommended.
- * Only use electric flashlights.
- * Do not make fires in caves.
- * Do not draw anything on the walls, or damage them otherwise.
- * Do not disturb the hibernating bats.
- * Do not make noise in caves, do not disturb the peace and quiet of the underground – also for your own safety.
- * Do not leave trash in caves or at cave entrances.



Legendary Hell's Hill

Hell's Hill



Jaunpils pagasts
Jaunpils novads

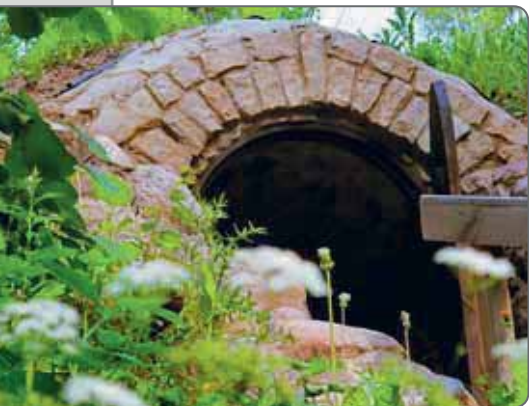
Rīga – 100 km
Jaunpils – 15 km



Take the road from Jaunpils to Viesate, it will take you into a forest a few kilometers after the Veclauki Village. Turn right along a small forest track that will take you to Elles kalns (Hell Hill), one of the most mysterious and legendary sites in Zemgale province.

Elles kalns is a complex of artificial caves with underground passages 30 meters long, covered with vaulting arcs made of boulders. This may be the only such site in Latvia. In the spring of 2010, the cave was fully restored in cooperation with the state-owned joint-stock company "Latvijas valsts meži" (Latvian State Forests), and now it is an attractive recreational area.





But studies of historic evidence make it more likely that a cruel joke was played by a certain von Recke. This cannot be verified because Jaunpils archives were destroyed during the 1905 revolution. But the cruel baron, dubbed Velna Reke (Devil Recke), is still remembered for his impetuous and evil deeds – there are also other stories, no less gloomy. For instance, von Recke used to watch farmers work from a window through a spyglass. If someone had a straight back, flogging was imminent.

A figure of a devil atop Jaunpils Castle is said to have seen all this. On wintry nights, the hollow and spooky “Oooohh-hh!” can be heard, if one listens closely.

Other legends say that the obese baroness wanted a cool place to hide on sweltering summer days, and ordered the cave to be built. Or others yet – that the baroness liked the

place for her tomb, but the devil scared the builders away by taking down at night what they had built by day, and the baroness changed her mind. And that, of course, is when the devil settled here ...

Legends say that Elles kalns was once occupied by the devil himself, but then he moved to a better place, leaving his lair empty.

The Baron of Lauku muiža (Lauki Manor) did not like this though. He ordered a cave to be built, where a servant was imprisoned for committing a crime. The man was not allowed to wash, cut his hair, beard and nails. Moreover, he was not allowed to leave the cave, except at noon and midnight. Local women and children, seeing such a filthy and scrawny figure, began to tell the tale of a demon living in the forest. That is when the landlord took his guests and hunting pals to Elles kalns to show them the “devil”.





The story that a tunnel once connected Jaunpils Castle with Elles kalns is yet to be verified – there is quite a distance between them. As well as who would have used this tunnel – clearly not the plump baroness.

What is certain is that the hugely popular Medus balles (Honey Ball) dancing events were held here in the 1910s.

What Else to See in Jaunpils

- * The Livonian Castle, built in 1301, is well preserved and currently makes the cultural and historic center of the town of Jaunpils, as well as a church with a richly decorated altar and chancery.
- * The famous larch alley leads to Kartavkalns nature trail. When you ascend the castle mound, you may try to imagine how the ancient Latvians used to live here – Kartavkalns Hill is said to have been the place of a major camp site, and it may be that it was Babote, mentioned in chronicles.
- * According to legend, there was a castle atop Kartavkalns Hill, a castle so tall that it could be seen from anywhere in the region. But the castle sank in the ground, entrusting its name to an old tree. If someone finally guesses the name of the castle, it will rise again along with all the people within. It is said that on clear Midsummer nights, revelers can be heard celebrating “Ligo!” in the castle under the ground.
- * The abandoned Strutele Manor can still be seen standing proudly, now covered with moss and weeds. The father of the dainas, Krišjānis Barons, was born in a farmer’s house near the manor, and baptized in Strutele Church. Strutele Manor Park has 30 foreign trees, and the most beautiful pyramid oak in Latvia.



Cycle Paths

Wind in Hair

Riding a bicycle, enjoying the freedom of movement and the warm breath of wind in your hair, one may happen to recall what physicist Albert Einstein once said:

“Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving.” Indeed – although the bicycle has changed in the course of time, as well as our very lifestyle, from time to time even the laziest of us wish to feel the primordial joy of unencumbered movement. That is when it is time to pull out your old good bike and go wherever it takes you.

Or wait – better yet, choose some of the existing cycle paths. Of course, it may be some special cycling lane near Riga, but if you have a bit more time on your hands, go somewhere further, where cycle paths wind through forests, along a river or round a lake, where birds are singing, squirrels are hopping in trees, and where you can find facilities for cyclists. All you have to do is to figure out which province you want to see – Vidzeme, Kurzeme or Latgale. They are all truly beautiful, and cyclists are welcome in either of them!

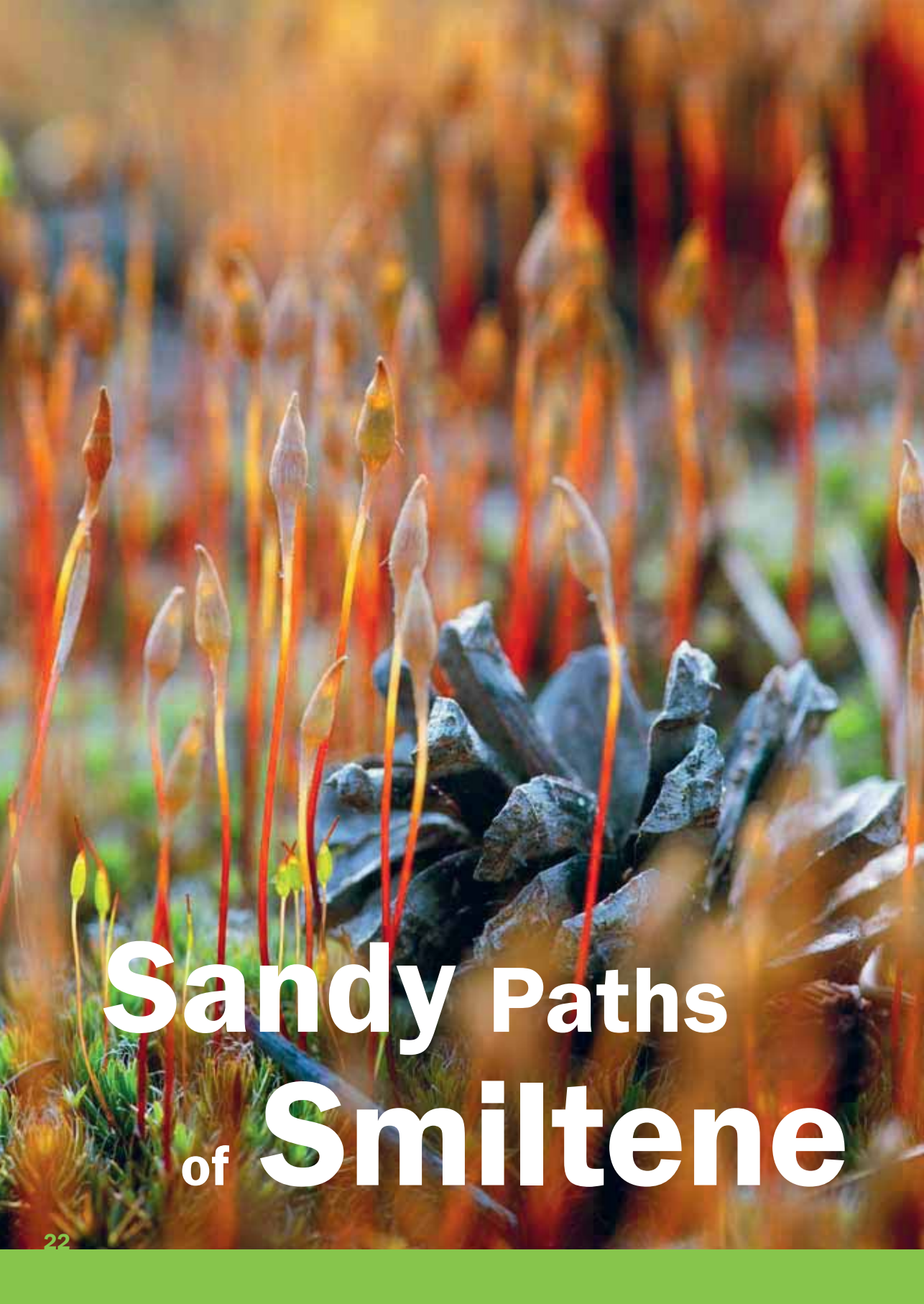
Irish writer Iris Murdoch:

“The bicycle is the most civilized conveyance known to man. Other forms of transport grow daily more nightmarish. Only the bicycle remains pure in heart.”



Keep in Mind

- * Bicycle is a vehicle – the rider must observe all relevant traffic rules.
- * Cyclists must have a valid bicycle license, which can be obtained by successfully passing a traffic rules and safety test.
- * Your bicycle must be in proper technical order, equipped with brakes, horn, reflectors. If you are riding on the roadside after dark, the bicycle must be equipped with a white light in front and a red light at the back.
- * Riding on a road or along the roadside is permitted from the age of 12.
- * If you are using a crosswalk to cross a road or street, you have to dismount from your bicycle and push it along.



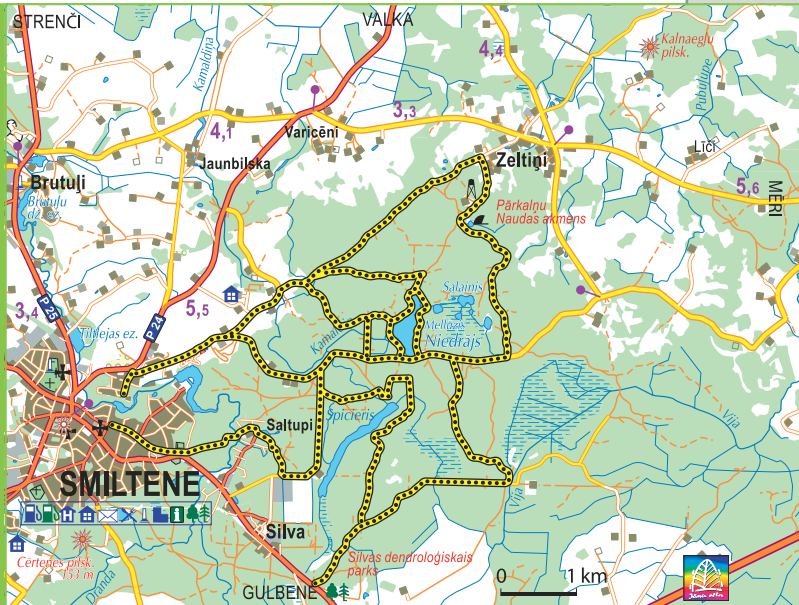
Sandy Paths of Smiltene

Smiltene Cycle Paths



Smiltene
Smiltenes novads

Rīga – 130 km
Valka – 40 km
Valmiera – 20 km



Smiltene and Its Environs

The quaint little town of Smiltene in northern Vidzeme is situated on the banks of the River Abuls. The environs of the town are very hilly, the terrain has formed some 12,000 to 14,000 years ago as the glaciers retreated north. Now these hills are home to a charming town, which has many interesting places to see in its environs.

Excavations have established that people have been living in the area already at the beginning of the second millennium. In 1359, German knights built a castle on the steep banks of the Abuls. Back then, Smiltene was part of a region ruled by the famous Latvian Lord Tāļivaldis, historic chronicles of 1427 mention Smiltesele – a town near the castle, populated by craftsmen and merchants.

The city has a complex history, and it has suffered greatly in the course of many wars; the town was nearly wiped out during the Northern Wars. Life returned to the town at the end of the 18th century, and at the beginning of the 20th century the town was flourishing after the Smiltene Manor had been ruled by the Lieven family for one hundred years. Thanks to the Lievens, a hospital was built in Smiltene at the beginning of the 20th century, as well as a steam-powered sawmill, a power plant at Lake Tītleja – the first power station in Latvia, and a narrow-gauge railroad to Valmiera.

The development of Smiltene continued after the Republic of Latvia was proclaimed. In 1920, Smiltene was granted the status of a city. After World War II, Smiltene had to rise from ashes again, becoming an attractive town of one- and two-story buildings and many lush green gardens, blending perfectly with the environs and making use of the terrain. A walk in Smiltene is well worthwhile: the town center is 106.5 meters above sea level, and there are three great depressions in the town. It was once believed that they were created by a meteorite, but this has not been confirmed. There are three artificial lakes in the town: Teperis, Vidusezers and Tītleja, which, together with the other lakes in the vicinity, make the scenery even more pleasing to the eye. There are also many small rivers in the vicinity of Smiltene besides the Abuls: Dranda, Cērtene and Kamaldiņas, as well as many clear lakes: Niedrājs, Spicieris, Klievezers, Mellūzis, Salainis, Niedrītis, Bezdibenis, Zumers and Bezvārdis.

There is a well-developed network of paths and tracks near Smiltene and in the forests surrounding the town, and several roads. For cyclists, there are three bicycle routes to choose from, with varying degrees of complexity.



Niedrājs and His Six Brothers



Lake Niedrājs is located some five kilometers from Smiltene center. It has another six small forest lakes around it; a few hundred years ago, the lakes were interconnected with artificial canals, which were once passable by boat. Smiltene residents have been considering rebuilding the canals, which would make the environs of Niedrājs even more romantic.

Lake Niedrājs and the group of small lakes is a popular recreational area with Smiltene residents all year round: orienteering and Nordic walking enthusiasts, cyclists, skiers, anglers and swimmers.

The water in the lake is crystal clear, and there are always many swimmers. On the shores are beaches with barbecue pits, cubicles, toilets, and other facilities. A pergola right at the lake is good for an outing event in a larger group of friends. The beaches are easily accessible by roads that go through a beautiful pine forest, rich in berries and mushrooms.

Fortification on Cērtene Castle Hill

South of Smiltene toward Rauna, a national archeological monument is located in a hilly pine forest: Cērtene Castle Hill with a bailey and a dam on the River Cērtene, which is the largest hydro-technical facility at all of Latvia's castle hills. The river at the castle hill was dammed up with an impressive dam, providing water for a moat around the castle that was some ten meters deep.

This is the oldest evidence of Smiltene's past: the castle hill was one of the mightiest settlements in the territory of ancient Tālava. Cērtene Castle Hill is 153.5 meters above sea level, the hill is about 25 meters high on the riverside. The castle hill is surrounded by a moat 12 meters deep, there also used to be a dam. The moat is considered one of the greatest fortification objects at Latvian castle hills.

Cērtene Castle Hill is noted for its well thought-out design that makes good use of the terrain: the hill and the curtain walls are well-proportioned, there is nothing unnecessary, the lines are laconic and pleasing to the eye.

Now the castle hill and the environs are a pleasant area for walking and recreation.

The castle hill features a health track with various elements of nature and interesting tasks to solve. If you wish to learn all the secrets of the ancient castle hill, you may want to arrange a guided tour by calling the Smiltene TIC or guide Jānis Dings.

Unusual Inhabitants of Silva Arboretum

Silva Arboretum, three kilometers from Smiltene at the Gulbene–Smiltene road, is a protected area of national importance, an arboretum-park of 15 ha in area with more than 200 varieties of trees and shrubs. The first plantings were made in 1972 when balsam firs, red oaks, white spruces were planted here. Every year, rare flora are planted here.

Silva Arboretum is nicely laid out, almost its entire territory can be seen from hilltops: groups of trees, a birch clump, ponds and meadows. Although the initial idea – to make Spilva Arboretum a popular park, has not been fully achieved, it does have a special place in Smiltene residents' heart, and it has been given the status of a protected area of regional importance.

Money Stone and Pots of Gold

The cycle path that goes through the most mountainous area will take you to a hill 140 meters high, where, not far from Pārkalņi homestead, the enormous Naudas akmens (Money Boulder), also known as Zelta akmens (Golden Boulder) slumbers in the woods. The boulder is included in Latvia's list of protected natural landmarks.

Although only the top of the boulder is visible above ground, it alone is impressive enough – some 5.5 meters long and 5 meters wide. Its volume is difficult to determine because the boulder has never been dug out, but it may be one of the greatest in Latvia.

According to legend, the Swedes have buried a stash of golden coins under the Naudas akmens. It remained there for a long time, and no one was able to retrieve it. Then one Midsummer night a swollen-head came from Starti with a forged piece of machinery never seen in these parts, and dug out all the money.

It is said that even these days the locals have seen people who come with spades to find the treasure, but they never do – apparently they have never heard the legend and know not that the treasure is long gone.

Three Types of Cycle Paths

The wide and even roads around Smiltene are convenient for a drive, while the hilly, sandy and sometimes even boggy forest paths are good for cycling, active recreation and exploring. That is why there are marked cycle paths of various length and complexity in Smiltene and its environs, passing various tourist attractions and recreational areas. There are several public maps of the cycle paths in the town. The cycle path for recreational cycling is marked yellow, whereas cycle paths of greater complexity are marked red. The longest paths that go through the forests are 32 kilometers long, but one can choose the length of route according to his or her preferences and abilities.

The paths are also good for Nordic walking in the spring, summer and autumn months, and for skiing in the winter.



A scenic forest path with purple heather in the foreground and a tall yellow tree in the background.

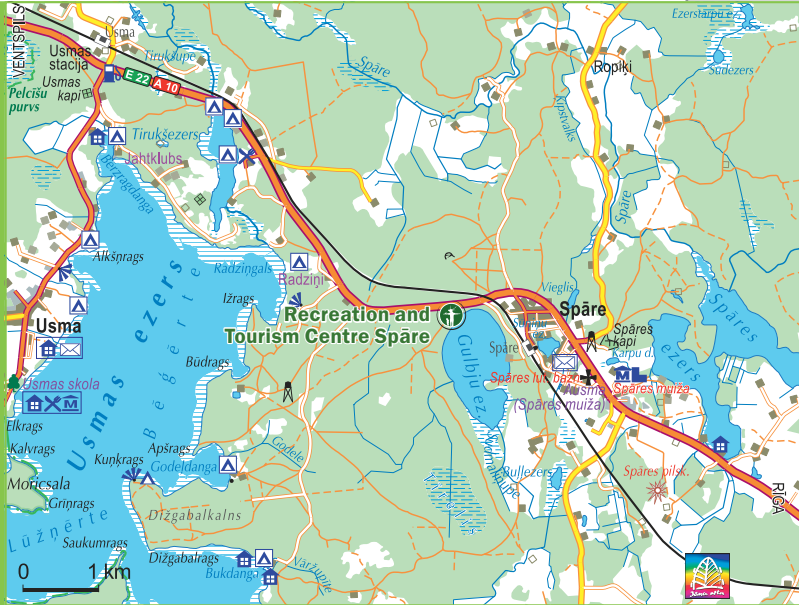
Bilberry Kingdom in Sp̄are

Recreation and Tourism Centre "Spāre"



"Dumbri", Spāre
Ģibuļu pagasts
Talsu novads

Rīga – 140 km
Talsi – 20 km



Did you know that there are about 5,000 known species of dragonfly (spāre in Latvian) in the world, and 54 in Latvia? But we will not talk about this beautiful winged insect here. There are several places in Latvia bearing the name of Spāre, and we will visit one where people can get away from urban noise and enjoy peaceful, pleasant, comfortable days in nature: at the recreation and tourism center "Spāre" at Lake Gulbju in Talsi Region.

"Spāre" has several advantages: it is a beautiful place that can be easily reached by car, people may spend some time here in pairs, large families or groups of friends can lodge in either the large house or one of the four smaller ones, or they may want to set up a tent or use the camping ground.

Weddings, seminars, parties and outings can be held here, "Spāre" also offers angling, boat rides and bathing in the lake, berry and mushroom picking in the forest, there are several cycle paths, and one can either take a bike or walk through the "bilberry paradise" to the observation tower that affords a magnificent view of Lake Usma and legendary Moricsala Island.

Seminars or other such events can be organized in the complex's conference hall with a fireplace that can seat 30–40 people, and the complex also offers lovely views of the lake. People may have various tastes and wants, but most will be content with what "Spāre" has to offer.

"Spāre" is also popular with hunters, as there are many game animals and birds to be hunted in the major forests of these parts, which is where many hunters have brought home trophies from.



Spāre Manor and Railroad

When your mouth is black from eating bilberries, or you think you may have had enough of picking mushrooms, it is time to get on a bicycle and go see the environs, exploring both cycle paths.

Spāre is the second largest populated place in Ģibuļi County between Lake Gulbju and Lake Spāre. The village started to grow rapidly at the end of the 19th century, when the Riga–Ventspils railroad was built. At the railroad station, Lielspāre (Great Spāre) village was built, whereas surrounding Spāre Manor, built in 1790, is the historic center of Vecspāre (Old Spāre). The manor is a one-story building with a high ground floor and interesting two-way stairs with a monogram forged into the handrail. The central part of the building was reconstructed in the 1960s to house a school. By the way, Spāre has one of the region's oldest schools, mentioned in the chronicles already around 1760.

Spāre Manor Park is one of the most beautiful manor parks in Kurzeme in terms of planning. 17 foreign tree and bush species still grow here, there is also a mighty oak with trunk 4.2 meters thick and a maple whose trunk is 3.5 meters in diameter.

You should also see Spāre Evangelic Lutheran Church, built in 1658 and now a state architectural monument. The current layout of the church building without the bell tower dates back to 1747. Legend says a pauper was walled up in a wall of the church.

Round Gulbītis

A seven-kilometer long cycle path goes around Lake Gulbju (Swan Lake). It is not very large, its area is 115.5 ha. Although there is plenty of fish in the lake (especially pike, roach, perch and tench), angling here is very complex due to the peculiar flora. That is why anglers have a high opinion of, say, a pike caught in Gulbītis (Little Swan), which is how the locals often call the lake.

The lake is unusual in having a kind of a double bottom: a layer of plants growing in the lake that is very thick and very popular with fish. Taking into account that the average depth of the lake is 2.5 meters, and the thick layer of water plants makes up about two-thirds of it, anglers are left little room for their maneuvers. That is why, although the lake is richly populated with fish, anglers do not catch much here. Yet this is not an obstacle to a true master, as proven by a record pike of 11 kilograms. As you continue pedaling, Gulbītis often is out of sight as the path goes twisting through a very change-

able and also very picturesque forest. A pine forest, known as melleņu paradīze (Bilberry Paradise), is followed by a section of deciduous trees that provide more shade. Hazels are likely to have many nuts this year, so be prepared to observe a squirrel on patrol, making sure that visitors do not grab all the nuts. You may also want to spend some time looking at the ripples on the lake and the reed, heather, bulrush, algae, water pineapples, rushes and other plants growing in and at the lake, before the path takes you to a field of meadowsweets. When the dizzying smell of the mowed grass and meadowsweets moves past the lake, it is replaced by the scent of yarrow. And do not miss the beach – Gulbju Lake is known for keeping the summer heat well after sunset.



Through Bilberry Paradise

You can also take the other path that first takes you to vast bilberry fields, which are characteristic of the forests in this area. If you press on, you will soon arrive at the 57-meter-high Ūdrkalns Hill, atop which there is an observation tower 26 meters high. Put these figures together and you will have a notion of how far you will be able to see if you climb the tower.

Ūdrkalns Tower was built by “Latvijas valsts meži” in 2007. Eyewitnesses still recall, with some horror, how men adroit as cats moved on top of the construction and how promptly the impressive tower was built. The tower is so stable that even the faint-hearted dare climbing to the top platform.

From the observation tower, you will be able to see Lake Usma, Stende, Mundigciems, in clear weather you will also see Talsi in the distance, and above all – forests, forests, forests everywhere – as far as you can see. Pessimists who are concerned about trees being felled in forests should be brought here regularly – they would certainly change their opinion, looking around from the tower.

Lake Usma, Shrouded in Mist

Usma Lake is one of the large lakes of Latvia, and there are three regions bordering on its shores: Talsi, Ventspils and Kuldīga. The name of the lake comes from the Līvi language, meaning Mist. Indeed, mornings and evenings are bound to be misty on the lake, and even locals say they sometimes get lost among the seven islands. The legend though tells a different story, that in the beginning the lake was a large black cloud that landed on the ground and became a lake after a small boy guessed its name.

The lake formed some 10,000 years ago, as did the sandy dunes on its shores, including Ūdrkalns Hill, and the multiple bays of the lake, which the locals call “dangas”.

Usma Lake has many islands. Viskūžu Island is the largest lake island in Latvia, whereas Moricsala is the most romantic and legendary.



Romantic Moricsala

In the past, Moricsala was called Zivju sala (Fish Island) until 1727, when the great-grandfather of writer George Sand, Maurice de Saxe (Sakšu Morics in Latvian), a contender for the crown of the Duchy of Courland (Kurzeme), hid on the island after he was defeated in battle.

Moricsala Nature Reserve is the oldest protected area in Latvia, it was established in 1912. Moricsala is noted for the fact that no economic activity has taken place here for the past 100 years, which is why the island's unique forests remain intact.

Almost the entire territory of the reserve is occupied by forests (oaks, lindens, maples). Strangely enough, on the neighbouring Viskūžu Island, pines are in the majority. The forests of Moricsala are also rich in herbaceous plants – *Corydalis cava* and *intermedia*, buckrams are protected species; altogether there are over 400 species of spermatophytes and ferns growing on the island. Moricsala reserve's fauna has not been studied as closely, but the island is known for being home to 222 butterfly species, some of which do not live anywhere else in Latvia or any of the Baltic countries.





Land of Lakes
Entwined
by the Daugava

Līvāni



Līvāni
Līvānu novads

Rīga – 170 km
Jēkabpils – 30 km
Preiļi – 35 km



In Latgale, all roads lead to a lake, large or small, or wind along the Daugava, taking you up a hill. So do the cycle paths. And each time you stop for a break, your heart will cheer at the beauty of Latgale surrounding you!

Cyclists are always welcome in Latgale. With the help of the European Union's project "Baltic Country of Lakes", 45 cycle paths have been marked in Lithuania, Belarus and Latvia, mostly in Latgale – a total of 753 kilometers. The paths were not built anew – they go along roads and walking paths, marked with the usual road signs or special markings in rural areas. This issue of Mammadaba looks into just a few routes, and there are many more besides. Cyclists may find the guide "Velomaršruti Baltijas ezeru zemē" (Cycling Routes in Baltic Country of Lakes) to be of assistance.



Town on Two Riverbanks

Līvāni is situated in a lovely area on the right bank of the Daugava. The River Dubna flows through Līvāni, forming a junction with the Daugava while in the town. This is also reflected in the town's coat of arms – a silvery hawk on a blue background, which symbolizes great ideas and high flight, and a silvery junction below – that of the Dubna and the Daugava.

Already in the 11th century, the place was a settlement of merchants and craftsmen, part of the Latgale state of Jersika. The history of the modern-day Līvāni begins in 1533, when the landlord at that time, von Lieven, built a manor here, which was named in his honor, Lievenhof.

In 1824, Līvāni was granted the status of a town. A school, a drugstore and a hospital were opened in the town. After the launch of the Rīgas–Oryol railroad in 1861, a period of rapid industrial development began in Līvāni, thanks to not only good traffic connections but also local commodities and inexpensive labor force – by the beginning of the 20th century, ten factories were built in Līvāni.

The development of Līvāni continued after the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia; in 1926 Līvāni was given the status of a city, also becoming the cultural center of the region.

Līvāni has churches of four denominations. St. Michael's Catholic Church is considered a true architectural gem.

Latgale Art and Crafts Center

Latgale Art and Crafts Center is located in an unusual place, on a peninsula between the Daugava and the Dubna. The center is located in a building comprised of two parts: a historic barn built of boulders at the time the area was ruled by von Lieven, and a modern glass-and-stone part – an interesting and modern feature in the face of the city.

The center offers information on the history of crafts in Latgale and houses weaving, ceramics and glass workshops where these trades are displayed and visitors are offered a shot at one they like most. The center is home to the longest traditional Latvian belt (94 m) with various symbols – just like the city itself.

Līvāni stands on the border between Latgale and Zemgale provinces. The Līvāni–Dignāja ferry connects the two banks of the Daugava, and offers the shortest way from Latgale to Zemgale.

Stikāni Arc



Cycle path (marked as No. 15 on maps and in nature) “Stikānu loks” (Stikāni Arc) is a popular weekend recreation area with Līvāni residents. The route is about 20 kilometers long, but one does not have to ride the entire length. The cycle path is perfect for those who like being in a forest, as the one that the path goes through is quite lovely. If you take the large arc, you will have to cross the Dubna River via a small bridge, which is perfectly safe even during the spring floods period, thanks to specific construction thereof.

Then comes a surprise – a recreational area right in the middle of the forest. Here you can go for a swim, make a campfire and rest after your journey. A little further on you will reach Silavu Lake, with a fine beach. Indeed, there are many great recreational options for Līvāni residents.

Arc of Lakes

If you take path No. 8, "Ezeru loks" (Arc of Lakes), it will take you to Velnezers (Devil's Lake), a natural landmark of national importance, some of the locals call the lake Čertoks or Čertaks. There are many legends about the emerald-green, mysterious lake.



Velnezers is just 12 km from Aglona, situated in Aglona Region's Šķeltova County, in Grāveru Forest. The lake is just 1.9 ha in area, but it is very deep – 18 meters in some places, and unusually clear – the bottom of the lake can be seen even where the lake is eight meters deep. The water also tastes unusually sweet. Some say that the lake has no bottom at all, others believe that it was created by a meteorite.

There are few water plants, and not much fish either, although you may spot a fat perch making its way through the green water. The shores of the lake are eerily quiet, because birds do not like it here. People have also never lived near the lake – they say it is hard to stay here for long – some magnetic force can be felt that makes people lose their way or just feel uneasy, wanting to leave.

Better go rest at Jazinka Lake, a couple hundred meters away and popular with anglers and bathers alike. There is a recreational area on the shore of the lake with a barbecue pit where a fire can be made, and the green-eyed Čertoks Lake nearby.

In the southern part of the lake, there used to be a meadow where horses were brought to graze. There was a hollow area amidst the meadow, and in the very middle, a hole the size of a bed. This hole was called Vēlna gulta (Devil's Bed). Young men used to sleep in the hole for a wager, yet none could stay in it all night long. Those who did manage to fall asleep later always awoke in a different meadow not far from Devil's Bed, as if the devil himself had come and thrown them out of his bed.

A close-up photograph of green grass blades, likely from a lawn or field, covered in small, glistening water droplets. The blades are vibrant green and show some texture. The background is softly blurred, creating a bokeh effect with light green and white spots. The overall mood is fresh and natural.

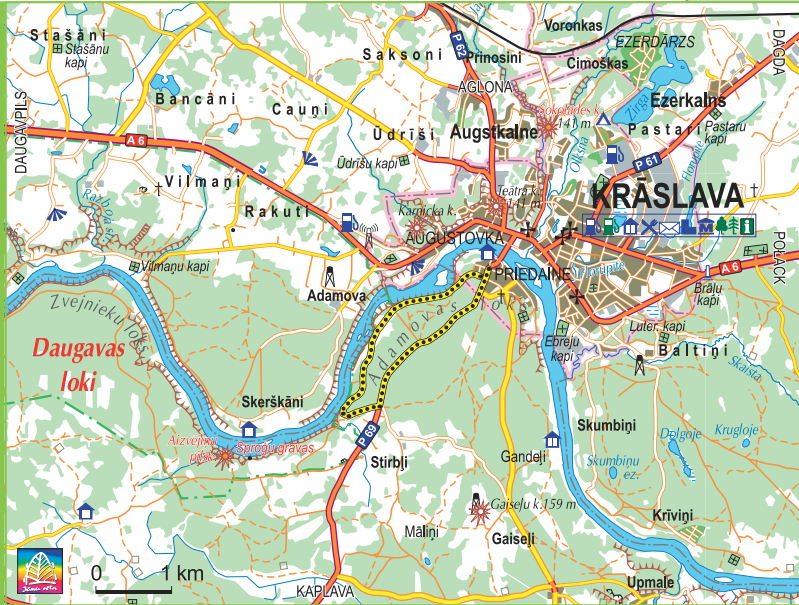
Saulkrasti Path

Krāslava



Krāslava
Krāslavas novads

Rīga – 265 km
Daugavpils – 45 km



The eight-kilometer-long “Saulkrastu taka” (Saulkrasti Path, marked No. 18) begins in Krāslava, where the Daugava makes one of its wide arcs. If you choose to ride this path, you will have a chance to view some of the most beautiful scenery along the steep bank of the river and climb the Priedaine Observation Tower. But first, visit the beautiful and ancient town of Krāslava.



When God made the local animals dig up the Daugava River, the rabbit took the lead, whilst the fox followed along and formed the banks with his bushy tail. On the other hand, the bear used his giant paws to dig up the river and toss the earth aside. Thus, the Daugava River has many bends, but its shores are hilly. God was angry at the animals for the outcome of the river, but the river remained as the animals “built” it.



Ancient Krāslava

The Daugava River banks in Krāslava Region have been inhabited since 3,000 B.C. Krāslava is seen as one of Latvia's oldest inhabited areas mentioned in written historical archives. The town itself was established sometime in the 900s on a castle hill on the banks of the Daugava–Dnipro waterway. The ancient Vikings called Krāslava – Dynasaiforgarðr, or “Daugava castle, from which we can begin setting sail”. In addition, the area surrounding Krāslava has a total of 36 historical castle hills.

Krāslava has a long and complicated history. The town was part of the Orthodox Principality of Jersika in the 13th century, as well as part of the Lithuania-Poland Empire and Vitebsk Province during the Czarist Era. The town was ravaged by the Livonian Brothers of the Sword, and has seen many wars and fires throughout its history.

In 1729, Krāslava was given village status, and that same year Count Ludwig Plater purchased the village. At the time, the village only had 47 buildings.

On Pils Street, visitors can see the Count Plater Manor, which revealed very exquisite wall paintings during its restoration. During its time, the Baroque-style manor housed a library with over 20,000 books. The town also features the Krāslava Catholic Church and the Alexander Nevsky Orthodox Church. Another notable historical object is the August Stone, which has the count's emblem and the year 1729 engraved on it. Polish-Lithuanian King Augustas II the Mighty once had a meal by the rock during a hunting trip in the area.

A walk on the town's Love Hill is a must for those romantic souls, where a monument to Jāzeps Karnīckis is located. Legend has it that the young Polish officer fell in love with the count's daughter, Emīlija. Even though the feelings were mutual, the count turned down the young officer. The two then decided that they had no more reason to live, however, only Karnīckis went through with the pact, and shot himself. The local population now calls the hill Love or Karnīckis Hill.



Priedaine Observation Tower

The Daugava River Valley in the Krāslava area features nine breathtaking river bends, as well as many ancient trees, stones and archeological sites. Various birds species like the Little Tern, Common Kingfisher and the Eurasian Oystercatcher inhabit the area. It is possible to view the river and Krāslava from the bluffs over the river, however, the awe-inspiring view from the 32-meter-high Priedaine Observation Tower is recommended. The tower is one of the highest in Latvia, and it is sometimes hard to believe that Latvia has such majestic scenery when looking at the surrounding area. When atop the tower, persons can see amazing views of the Daugava River and part of Krāslava. In the spring, persons can see flowers begin to bloom, but in the fall – the colors of autumn. On a clear day, it is also possible to see the Daugavpils TV tower and even Belarus.

Ulmanis' spot

The Priedaine Observation Tower is located right at the beginning of the “Saulkrastu taka” bicycle path. The path leads further into the local forests. A little further on, persons will arrive at the “Ulmanis' spot” recreation area on the banks of the Daugava River, named after former Latvian President Kārlis Ulmanis. The recreation area itself is stunning, with a beautiful old pine-tree in the middle, a fireplace, a small gazebo, and outdoor tables. It also has traditional Latvian swings for the kids, and those still young at heart. The Daugava River has also formed a small island in the area, which is perfect for fishing, enjoying the fresh air and scenery, as well relaxing as the majestic river flows by.



Šilovka Lake

Šilovka Lake, with its surrounding forest and terrain, is seen as one of the benchmarks of Latvia's landscape. The bicycle path no. 19 “Šilovka” begins on the Krāslava–Varnavičs road and leads through the “Augšdaugava” conservation area. The path itself follows along beautiful Šilovka Lake and pine forest. A recreation and swimming zone has also been set up at the beginning of the path, where Bruņinieku Creek begins its journey from the lake.

Nature park “Daugavas loki”

The “Daugavs loki” Nature park is located in the Daugava River Valley between Krāslava and Naujene in the “Augšdaugava” conservation area. The park is 129.9 square kilometers. The park was established in 1990 to retain the unique landscape, as well as to protect the park's flora and fauna and historical objects. The park also features eight large river bends of the Daugava River between Krāslava and Naujene.

Attention! Krāslava Region and the area surrounding Šilovka Lake is located on the Latvia-Belarus border, thus passports must be at hand at all times!



A detailed close-up photograph of a tree trunk's cross-section, showing the intricate patterns of its growth rings. The rings are concentric and vary in color from light tan to dark brown, with some showing signs of decay or insect damage. The texture is rough and cracked, with a central pith area visible.

For a **Free** **Latvia**

Īle Bunker



Īles meža iecirknis
Zebrenes pagasts
Dobeles novads

Rīga – 105 km
Liepāja – 145 km
Dobele – 25 km



Īle Bunker is a symbol and a reminder of those who refused to accept foreign occupation and stood against it.

The war was over, and life seemed to be becoming more peaceful, however, there were still many in Latvia who could not accept foreign occupation. They were former legionnaires, relatives of those who were exiled, victims of the brutal Soviet occupation, as well as Latvian patriots, who hoped that armed resistance would help rid Latvia of the Soviets. These persons looked for ways to fight against the new order and resist it, rejecting the new ideology.

Guerilla organizations in Latvia put forward national patriotic goals: renewing the independence of Latvia, creating a national and anti-communist interim government, and renewing the country's original Constitution. The national guerillas put forward their demands to the local occupation authorities, as well as carried out sabotage and assassinations. The local population supported the national guerillas, and supplied them with food, shelter in the winter months, as well as operated as go-betweens and agents, delivering to them valuable information. The national guerilla movement developed into a national movement against the Soviet occupation.

Initially, the Latvian guerilla groups were relatively large, some even up to a hundred fighters. However, later, smaller and more mobile groups were formed.



Īle Bunker

In October of 1948, in the forest surrounding the village of Īle, Latvian guerillas built a 9x6 meter bunker, which included a well, a stove, a modified bicycle that was used to create electric currents, as well as a storage area for food, and a toilet. The bunker had two exits – the main entrance and a reserve entrance. The bunker's total length, including the exits, reached 60 meters. It was later revealed that Īle Bunker was the largest of its kind constructed by guerillas in the Baltics at the time.

During the winter of 1948/1949, a local guerilla group led by young commander Kārlis Krauja, spent the winter in the bunker. The guerilla group was made up of 27 men, both Latvians and Lithuanians. These men joined the group for various reasons, some to avoid being conscripted in the Soviet Army, some who fought for the German Legion, as well as some who simply wished to fight against Soviet rule and ideology.

The name Kārlis Krauja was a code name. The commander's real name was Žanis Brizga.

The goal of the Latvian guerilla groups, also known as the "Forest Brothers", was to disturb the local Soviet authorities as much as possible. The guerillas attacked Soviet institutions, shipments of goods and money transfers.

The "Forest Brothers" were highly disciplined, and not just anyone was allowed to join. Someone already part of a guerilla group needed to vouch for a newcomer. There were secret codes used at Īle Bunker to access it. However, in the end, traitors were successful in infiltrating the group.

March 17, 1949, was a fateful day for the Īle guerilla group. The guerillas fought their final battle that day, after an infiltrator unmasked them. Troops from the Latvian Soviet Ministry of State Security (or Cheka) attacked the bunker. The Latvian guerilla group of 24 persons was overwhelmed, as the troops numbered 760. Even though the "Forest Brothers" had placed land mines strategically around the bunker, they were overpowered. After a heroic five-hour battle, 15 guerillas were dead, with 9 others (seven Latvians and two Lithuanians) captured and later sent into internal exile. Many of the deceased and captured guerillas were still young men, two of them not even 19 years old.

Krauja and two other guerillas were not in the bunker at the time of the attack. He was killed in a battle with Cheka agents in the town of Saldus in 1950.



According to Soviet archives, 1,075 guerillas were killed or captured in 1944, 6,016 in 1945, and 4,218 in 1946. The last known Latvian guerilla was Arnolds Spārns, who came out of the forests near the village of Priekule in 1959, 14 years after the end of the Second World War.



Where the Past Meets the Future

60 years after the tragic events – 2009, Īle Bunker was completely restored as an act of respect for those who fought against the Soviet regime. The bunker has become an interesting tourist attraction, which allows us to see first-hand one of Latvia's more tragic pages in history, as well as feel and understand the harshness of daily life as a Latvian guerilla.

The restoration of the bunker was a long-time dream of former Latvian guerillas Modris Zihmanis and the now deceased Alfons Kalniņš, as well as former Latvian guerilla signal woman, Biruta Rodoviča, who is now the head of the National Partisan Association's Liepāja Chapter. The bunker was also restored thanks to support from Gundars Freimanis and his family.

The Īle Bunker was restored with support from the joint-stock company "Latvian State Forests" (Latvijas valsts meži), with the interior arranged by the director of the Tērvete History Museum, Normunds Jērumis, and his team. Also, much hard work in digging up the bunker was put in by representatives of the political party "All for Latvia!" and students from Bēne High School. Harijs Fridemanis provided financial support for the project.

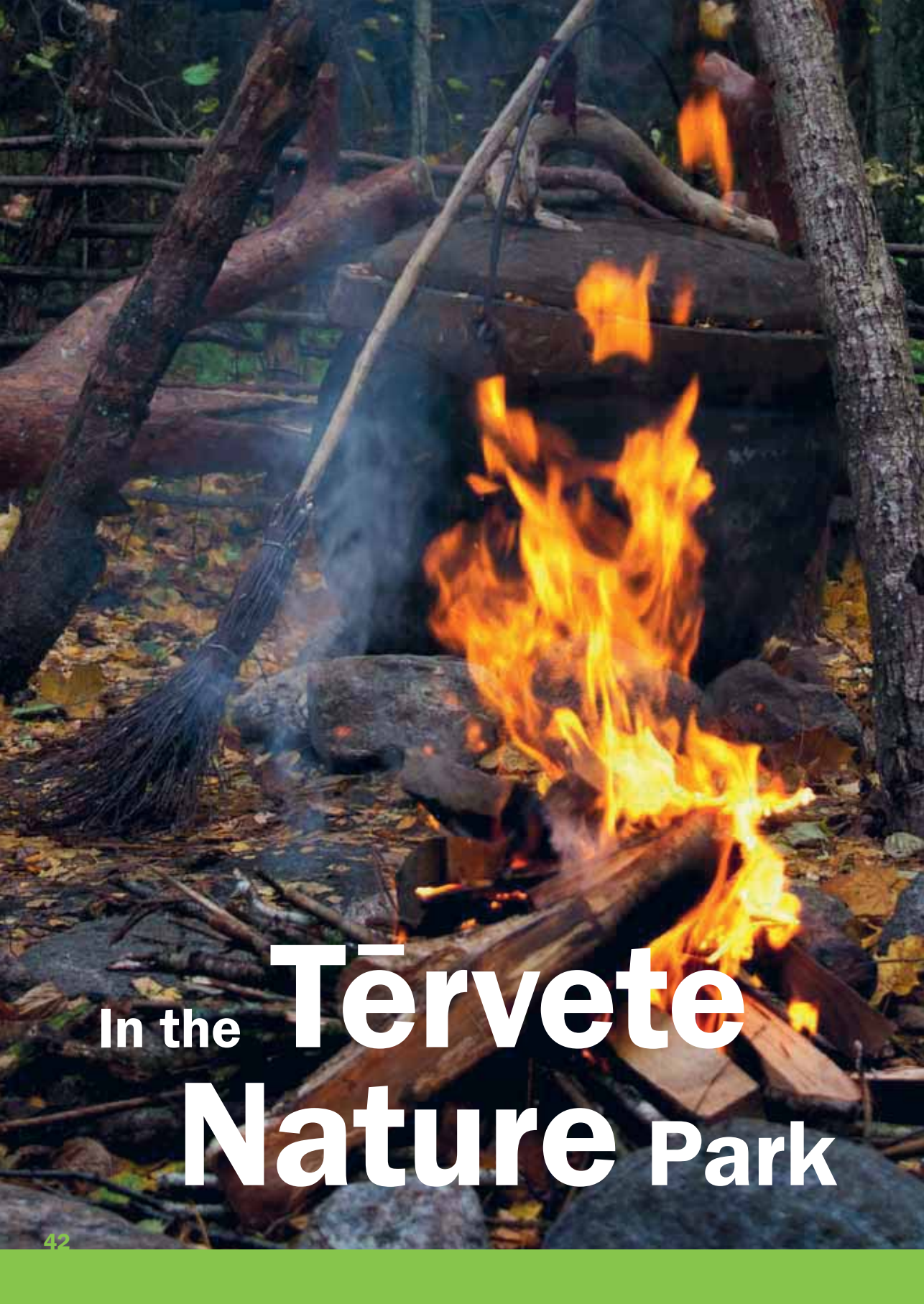
In 1992, members of the Home Guard, together with representatives from war veterans association "Daugavas Vanagi" and other patriotic organizations, dug up the bunker, which was destroyed by Soviet soldiers after the attack. The men also picked up the remains of the fallen soldiers and buried them at Virkus Cemetery in Dobele. In time, a white cross was erected at the site, as well as a commemorative stone and plaque.

In the mid 90's, work began to gradually restore the bunker, and it was completely restored ahead of the 60th anniversary of the tragic battle.

The Īle forest will always remember the footsteps of the heroic Latvian guerillas and their final battle. The forest can tell many stories of those who sought sanctuary in it, as well as their hopes and beliefs.

Say a prayer for them, oh, mighty forest!





In the **Tērvete**
Nature Park

Nature Park

The Tērvete Nature Park is a natural landmark which is unique to all the Baltic States. This area has been in the list of the sites under state protection since 1957, meaning that it has provided an ideal recreation venue for families with children for more than 50 years. The first wooden sculptures carved by the sculptor Krišjānis Kugra were set up in the early 1970s. Later they were joined by many more. The original nature trails created by the Tērvete forester Miķelis Kļaviņš have now converged with the present-day territory of the nature park. People truly appreciate this special, beautiful and attractive park, or else it wouldn't have 70 thousand visitors, big and small, every year. Sunny weekends in the golden autumn can attract up to four thousand visitors to the park. It is no wonder that the Tērvete Nature Park has been recognized as one of the most interesting and appealing sites in Latvia. In 2005, it was nominated as the most family-friendly location.



Exciting Encounters in the Fairytale World of Tērvete

Dwarf Lady will meet and greet visitors of the attraction park, take them to the Dwarf Wood, show the cottages of the little toilers and tell stories about their lifestyle and whim-whams.

Pine Forest Witch is the mistress of the Fairytale Forest, the Witch Pine Forest. She is a little good witch, who does not hurt anyone. On the contrary, she treats visitors to herb tea and tasty sweets shaped as hare droppings, plays with children and makes riddles.

In Mother Forest's realm, school children learn many things about the wood. Interesting, attractive and informative tours guided by Mother Forest will help you gain a deeper insight into the wood and nature and become more environmentally friendly.

Are you tired? No surprise there, as one day is not enough to walk all over and appreciate the area of the Tērvete Nature Park of 1350 ha, of which one third is occupied by the Fairytale World. No worries! The Fairytale Train, most loved by children, will take you to the Dwarf Forest, the Fairytale Forest and the children's playground whose sight gives the little visitors all power to play. In 2007, the Fairytale Train was recognized as the most successful tourism product.

Spīdīši of Anna Brigadere



Tērvete may take pride in the fact that the renowned writer Anna Brigadere (1861–1933) spent the last eleven summers of her life in Spīdīši, an old house with an interesting history. The house was built in 1840 and was once a watermill, a school and a home to foresters. In 1922, the house was given to Anna Brigadere as an award for 25 years of literary activity. Now Spīdīši houses the writer's memorial museum.

Residing in this place, Anna Brigadere wrote a number of significant works, including her famous plays and trilogy of recollections God. Nature. Work, deriving inspiration from the picturesque scenery of Tērvete. It was here that Annele, the main protagonist of the trilogy was running around barefoot. Today, Annele, Spīdītis and other fairytale characters created by Anna Brigadere continue living in the Tērvete Nature Park.

People of Tērvete for Tērvete

Baņi, the native house of the poet Valdis Grēviņš (1895–1968), is located in the northern part of the park. The popularly loved lyrics from the theatrical production Gösta Berling came from his feather:

No dawn, no sunset was in sight,
The eyes saw what was seen, that's all...

The building of the Tērvete Convalescent Home with its outer walls covered in stucco created by the sculptor Kārlis Zemdega is a national cultural monument. Built in 1932 as the Red Cross Convalescent Home, it was considered a very modern medical facility of the time. It seems, however, that the lovely scenery and the fresh pine forest air really helped the patients get better as well.

The historic centre still features the Lutheran Church of Tērvete and Kalnamuiža built in the times of Duke Jacob in 1614. Count Pahlen's chapel built in 1906 can be seen next to the church. The chapel has been entered into the list of art monuments.

Kristaps Helmanis (1848–1892), the renowned Latvian veterinarian and microbiologist who was a follower of Louis Pasteur, is buried in the graveyard by Kalnamuiža church.



The background of the cover is a photograph of a forest in autumn. The trees are covered in vibrant yellow and orange leaves, which are softly blurred to create a bokeh effect. In the foreground, a branch of a tree with fine, needle-like leaves is visible, also bathed in the warm autumn light. The overall mood is peaceful and scenic.

Aizvīķi Forest Park

Aizvīķi Forest Park



Aizvīķi
Gramzdas pagasts
Priekules novads

Rīga – 200 km
Liepāja – 60 km
Aizpute – 50 km
Saldus – 80 km



Open-air balls on Aizvīķi Castle Hill

The village of Aizvīķi is located in the farthest corner of Latvia near the Lithuanian border. This place has a very special atmosphere. Maybe this is because Straujinieki Castle Hill was a place where pagan religions worshipped the moon and the sun, as historians believe. Maybe, despite the various eras that have passed this place, there is still a spirit from a descendant left in one of the park's tree branches?

Historical events, castle hills, holy sanctuaries and beautiful landscapes – Aizvīķi, which is now a part of Gramzda County, is now a village of approximately 150 persons, which was once a very bustling town indeed. Once upon a time, grand outdoor balls were organized on the village's castle hill. The local population organized theatrical presentations, bazaars and even auctions here.



Aizvīķi Manor Park

In the 1870's and 80's, during the time Baron Korf administered the territory, a beautiful 36-hectare large Manor Park was created. Pine and fir trees were planted. Once the trees grew into a small forest, special paths were also made. When the Aizvīķi school was unveiled in 1879, the school's first teacher and nature expert, Kārlis Kiršteins, together with his students, planted various exotic tree species – European silver firs, eastern white pines, western larch, various types of beech trees, and silver birch. The park and its wonderful trees remain to this day. The park is now inhabited by various critters, including owls, birds and very rare forest bees. One of the feature trees of the park is an old elm tree. The park also includes various types of interesting pine-trees in all shapes and forms.

Some of the park's oldest trees have witnessed a rebirth of sorts. At one point, the park's maple trees looked like nothing could help them regain their past glory, however, with some care, the trees have been reborn and are beautiful as ever.



Forest Park

After World War I, the manor park was not cared for as when the baron lived in the village. In time, the park became overgrown and covered the ancient cult and ritual spots. During the Soviet-era, the area deteriorated even more, as hundreds of cows were allowed to graze in the park, with tractors also plowing through on a regular basis. Such things were unimaginable during the times of Baron Korf.

During the 20th century, storms also took its toll on the park, with many trees suffering storm damage. When the trees and branches were removed from the area after a storm in 1968, local forest ranger, Egons Ķeružis, began gradually cleaning and restoring the park, during which he uncovered the old pathways and terrain.

The forest ranger was a hard working and dedicated man, who together with another local forest expert, Viktors Šķersts, began to understand the value of the unique park. The men gradually renewed the park's paths, began to care for the neglected trees and even restored the park's Witch Pond.



Talent, Devotion and Hard Work

After retiring, the old forest ranger did not leave his cherished park. He built a house for himself at the edge of the park, and every morning kept busy caring for it.

One day, Egons decided to give wood carving a go, and went to work on a tree stump in the park. It turned out to be a hidden talent of his.

Henrijs Ķeruzis, the son of the park's caretaker, had this to say about his father: "It is not like my father did not do similar things previously. He built his own home and made his own furniture, however, he had never really carved anything. To be honest, it is not much of a surprise, because he never had the time, and he always had work to do and other things on his mind. Finally, he had some time to himself. My father learned how to carve all by himself. My father loved his forest, which he turned into a park. He was also very interested in local history, knew many local tales and legends, and it is likely this love for his forest gave him the strength to care for it day after day. The many sculptures that have been created over the years mark the park's historical sites – Witch Pond, Ghost Hill and the Dark Path.

On a crisp autumn night many years ago, the owner of the Pumpuri Farm was driving home on his cart from the Priekule Mill. When reaching Ghost Hill, the farmer's cart suddenly stopped. The farmer looked back and saw that a man dressed in black with a top-hat was sitting in his cart. The man asked for a drink from the farmer's flask. When the flask was empty, the man in black invited the farmer to come with him for a beer. The two carried on for a while, after which the farmer from Pumpuri Farm recognized that they have arrived at the old baron's chapel. The farmer became frightened, and ran away as fast as his legs could carry him.

The Paths Do Not Overgrow

During the 1970's, the sons of the old forest ranger began to help their father care for the park. Leons took a similar path as his father and became a forest ranger, Žerārs became a doctor and now practices at the local hospital in the town of Priekule, whilst Henrijs studied history and became the principal of Gramzde Grade School and the head of the Aizvīki Foundation.

Even though Egons Ķeruzis is not with us today, his work and spirit lives on in the park. The Ķeruzis brothers continue to look after and care for the park to this day. An association has been formed called "Aizvīki parks" with support from the joint-stock company "Latvian State Forests" (Latvijas valsts meži).

Persons visiting Aizvīki will enjoy a beautiful walk in the village's park, where the wood sculptures tell the local stories and legends, as well as true events that have occurred.



Back to Mother Nature!

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