



A Scooping trip to  
**Riga, Latvia**

**October 2006**  
by Gazza.

## Rīga-more-ticks

After being enormously underwhelmed by Estonia's beer scene the previous year, I was determined to scoop some decent beers from a Baltic country somehow - and Latvia seemed to fit the bill perfectly. It was now easy to get to, courtesy of the budget airlines, and a bit of research indicated that there was a relatively thriving beer culture there; Latvians are the second-highest *by capita* consumers of beer in the world and - somewhat surreally - Latvia also holds the record for the world's drunkest man...

Apparently, this particular chap was found unconscious by the police and taken to hospital, where blood tests discovered that he had a blood alcohol reading of 7.22 parts per million - common medical thought had previously assumed that a reading higher than 4 ppm was a lethal dose, and so Latvia entered world history as having, as a citizen, the world's drunkest man! So come on, you stuffy academics, forget stuff such as the first man on the moon or the fastest boat ever - this is what people want to read about in the history books!

With this kind of enticement, how could we refuse? I quickly took advantage of yet another Ryanair sale and booked us flights from Liverpool for the grand total of £35 return each which, plus the parking, was still under £50 for all our travel - and Rīga is over 1,000 miles away! The essentials taken care of, I got down to the serious business of researching hotels and beer in Rīga plus anything else we might find interesting; I already knew that Rīga was once a member of the Hanseatic alliance - which, by now, I'm sure you think I'm obsessed with - which would, hopefully, mean some decent architecture for us to gawp at between pubs. The more I researched the trip the better it seemed, as Rīga also has a fairly large tram system operated, in the main, by superbly heritage Tatra T3's with some Polish Konstals assisting, along with a decently-sized trolleybus network and the usual diesel bus scenario; this should entertain us for a while, I mused, as I turned my attention to the beer scene.

I soon discovered that there was one brewpub - well, brew log-cabin with windmill - just to the south of the city which was run by the LIDO group; this pub-chain seems to have some from nowhere five years ago to be one of the largest pub/restaurant owners in Rīga, all of which seemed to serve their own beer brewed in the log cabin, plus other Latvian beers and excellent slap-up buffet meals - this sounded like the perfect type of bar for us as we're always trying to locate bars to eat at to assuage our loathing of pompous restaurants!

It soon became apparent that there were approximately 25 breweries in Latvia, with maybe six in Rīga, so we shouldn't be going thirsty during our three days in the capital as I'd also compiled a fairly long list of pubs and bars which served local beers and, very importantly for our "room beers", there seemed to be a good choice of supermarkets where, hopefully, we would find a decent range of beers to take back to the hotel to swell both our label collection and scoops tally.

The hotel was the last thing to book and I must admit I was struggling a bit; the Rough Guide's usually excellent suggestions didn't really inspire me and so I resorted to scanning the internet for suggestions. The excellent In your Pocket guide came to my rescue and I was immediately taken by the Kolonna, right smack-bang in the centre of the old town, which sounded an excellent proposition and would enable us to see everything the centre had to offer as well as being easy to get back to of an evening; the price was a little higher than we aimed for at around £50 a night B&B but, considering the location, it sounded a bargain and so I tried to book three nights starting Saturday 14th October... and was withered to be

informed that they were full on the Saturday! I knew Rīga was a honeypot for many low-expectation stag-night trips whose pathetic antics tarnish the UK's reputation everywhere they visit, but hadn't anticipated this outcome and now I had a decision to make - did we stick with a dual-hotel trip again, or did I find somewhere else?

I embarked on a frantic search for alternative doss and was fascinated by a Soviet-era eyesore called the Karavella; this 12-storey concrete monstrosity was located a tram ride to the North of the centre, close to the docks, but something about it made it sound like the surreal kind of place we'd like and so, anxiously hoping that I was doing the right thing, I booked the first night in the Soviet eyesore and the following two in the city-centre Kolonna. Well, that was it, we were now all sorted - and so all that remained to do was to continue the search for breweries and bars and to wait two months until the departure date came around, although three weeks before Rīga we had another country scoop in the form of a trip to Gdańsk, Poland, which I hoped would get us into the mood for Hanseatic gables and back into the zone of European beer scooping as we'd not been abroad since May, almost five months previous (if you ignore our Jersey trip as that's really the UK), and it's easy to loose the knack or Euroscooping...

Luckily for us, the irrelevant hand luggage size restrictions had by now been lifted, and we were able to utilise our faithful black rucksacks which felt a thousand times bigger than the tiny objects we'd been forced to lug around; put it this way, I was able to pack all my clothes and camera in the main pocket and not feel as if the whole thing was about to burst out all over the floor at any moment! The restrictions on liquids in luggage were still in place from the UK (although, bizarrely, not from Latvia) and so we were forced to abandon our complete wash kit for another trip and hoped we'd be able to find the requisite items easily once we were there, as neither of us felt like pouring yet more money into Boots' coffers by buying the stuff airside... Boots must love these terrorist alerts!

## Saturday 14th October 2006

### ***737 across the Mersey.***

We drove up to my Parents' house the evening before to try and normalise our sleep as much as possible but, even so, we were still out of the door at 03:00 heading for a very early 06:10 flight from Liverpool "John Lennon" airport - what the fuck has he got to do with airports, then? I honestly can't believe the shameless exploitation of a dead bloke's name in order to lure people to what is, basically, a drained marsh in the Mersey estuary with distinctly average public transport connections - and just don't get me started on the "yellow submarine" in the car park, either... I'd clamp the bastard and tow it away to be crushed if it were up to me, which it's probably just as well, it isn't... and, whilst I'm ranting, what does that crap "strapline" mean, "Above us, only sky" - what total shite! How many overpaid consultants did it take to come up with this steaming heap of pretentious, meaningless drivel? If I was being cynical I could say, in answer to the statement, "There's quite a lot above you, actually... birds, planes, clouds, space hardware, asteroids, alleged omnipotent beings - the list is endless - so your slogan is factually incorrect"; why didn't they simply choose a logo which "embodies" their "mission statement" such as "We help wankers on low-expectation trips to get there as cheap as we can". See, result, and I didn't charge a bean!

Phew, that's that rant out of my system, and I promise that the rest of this report will be written in a far more jovial style with absolutely no cynicism or slagging off of anything

whatsoever - and if you believe that then you must think you're reading What's Brewing... well, you can't be, as I haven't mentioned what nice people Greede King and W&D are yet!

OK, back to the matter in hand, eh? It soon transpired that we'd left the house half an hour too early as, after 40 minutes of cruising along the deserted anonymous dual-carriageways which encircle Runcorn (and there's a good reason for that), we pulled up at the entrance to the car park at 03:45! Despite having a "booked space", though, the main carpark in front of the terminal was full and so we had to use the new overflow long-stay one which, whilst still close, meant we'd get wet if it were raining when we got back and made the promise of a "guaranteed space" in car park 1 sound a bit hollow! Once inside the terminal, the time of day was brought home to us as almost nothing was open - shops, information desks, everything was in darkness - so, with nothing else to detain us (and having checked in online already) we went through security and waited for the flight to be called.

We set up base camp in a dingy corridor which led to the gates as our thinking was to be near the screens so, when the gate was announced, we could make a bee-line for it and be at the start of the queue - just in case we weren't pre-boarded as internet check-in passengers are supposed to be. The screen refused to impart any gen, however, and it wasn't until 05:40 that the gate number appeared on the list; surely they must have known before this, so why the delay in announcing it? Despite this shambles the boarding was completed in textbook fashion with brats and "check'n'go" passengers first and, for the first time in memory, we were the first people onto the plane and so had a free run at our preferred seats. After a check of passengers we were off, taxiing down towards the end of the runway, and our tedious 165-minute flight to Rīga...

...or that's what we thought! After sitting at the end of the runway for five minutes the captain came over the PA sounding a little irritated; "Sorry about this, but the groundstaff have offloaded the wrong bag and we have to return to stand for security reasons" - this is the first time in 115 flights I've ever seen this happen, but as Ryanair weren't personally to blame everyone just grumbled a bit as we turned around and trundled back to our gate. It soon became clear that one member of a stag party aboard (who weren't being too annoying, thankfully) had been denied boarding and his bag had been offloaded - only it wasn't his bag which had been jettisoned but someone else's! After ten minutes on-stand whilst the groundstaff rectified their cock-up we pushed back again and this time we were off, albeit with a 55-minute delay, into the hazy morning with a glorious orange sunrise just broaching the horizon.

### ***"Dedication, that's what you need!"***

The flight across to Latvia was mostly spent asleep; well, getting as much sleep as possible between irritating tannoy adverts for scratch cards, refreshments, some shite drinks in little plastic bags which allegedly contained "premium spirits" but still cost fuck-all, and a hundred other irrelevant announcements. The one amusing thing during the flight (apart from the stag tosser being denied boarding) was when Sue pointed out that the woman in front of me was an absolute spitting image of Princess Fiona from Shrek (in Ogre mode)... apart from the green skin and outlandish ears!

We eventually arrived 45 minutes late, which meant the time in Rīga was 11:30 being two hours ahead of the UK, and after passport control we indulged in a quick coffee to revive our flagging energy levels in a little cafe airside where Sue was most impressed by the revolving food display cabinet! We also found the extremely useful "Rīga in your pocket" guide in a

little information room by the toilets just after passport control which was free - or, at least, the bloke in there didn't ask for any money when I picked it up - and so, after confirming with the information desk that the 5-day public transport tickets had to be bought at "kiosks" in the centre of Rīga, we wandered across the car park to the bus stop from where the No.22 runs into Rīga every 20 minutes or so.

I'd discovered, via the comprehensive Rīga [public transport website](#), that 5-day [tickets](#) were available from kiosks - which kiosks we didn't yet know - with the tram and trolleybus version costing LVL2.80 - and, with the exchange rate being almost 1 to 1 with the GBP, this meant we'd only have to pay £2.80 for all our travel whilst in Rīga with the only extras being the bus to and from the airport. Public transport tickets are sold in a very old-fashioned way in Rīga with conductors patrolling the vehicles, doling out flat-fare 0.20Ls tickets; it's 0.20Ls whatever the distance, which means the airport trip is extremely good value, probably the best value I've seen in a long time since Praha put up its transport prices significantly a few years back. To get a rover ticket we now needed to find one of the mythical "kiosks" which, I assumed, were the standard little news sheds found all over the old Eastern Block and, going on previous experience in Czech and Poland, there should be no shortage of those!

Twenty minutes later we arrived in the centre of Rīga and alighted at the Stockmann department store for a quick gander inside; the conductress, helpfully, made a point of informing us that this was the stop we wanted and that was it - here we were - not sure of the best thing to do first! We needed to find a 5-day ticket for public transport but, seeing as we were outside the biggest supermarket in town, we decided to have a look inside at the beer selection to ascertain the potential for buying a whole load of scoops for our "room beers" that evening. Once inside, we were amazed by the sheer quantity of people within, and were going to give up and return later but my inquisitiveness got the better of me and we struggled through the milling crowds until we found the beer section; I sincerely hoped it would be worth the trouble we'd spent fighting through the crowds to reach it!

We'd not bothered to pick up a basket, having planned to only have a quick look at the beer range, but one scan over the bottles had my eyes popping; there must have been over fifty beers on offer, mostly Latvian with a sprinkling of Belgian, Russian and Lithuanian, and the lure of these massive scoops was simply too much for me as my scoops radar was spinning like a second hand on speed! Sue went off to find a basket whilst I perused the shelves, almost drooling with anticipation, and selected ten beers from the huge range available - I'd never expected that we'd be able to score around a third of the breweries in the country in one shop but, right before my eyes, was the proof - I chose beers from Piebalgas, Lāčplēša, Užavas, Tērvetes, Bauskas, Cēsu, Kimmel and Aldaris plus one Russian beer for good measure; thankfully, to help with my translation of the Cyrillic labels on the Russian beers, affixed to the neck of each bottle was a sticker with the translation in Latvian, which was a huge relief as Cyrillic isn't a speciality of mine! As you'd expect, we gave the stack of Abbot Ale a wide berth, despite it being 49p a can... is nowhere safe from Greede King?

We joined one of the queues - well, it'd be more accurate to describe it as a throng - and spent a good 20 minutes queuing to pay for our scoops - as Roy Castle would have said, "Dedication, that's what you need!", and it wasn't a particularly pleasant welcome to Rīga! We also bought some toiletries, water and marzipan for later on and, when we finally got through the checkout, our bags felt like we'd smuggled a hundredweight of lead into the country such was the weight of six bottles each, although the usual clinking of glass on glass was avoided, as the shop had kindly placed a stretchy mesh cover over each bottle! The whole haul of scoops had cost us around £5 which, all things considered, was a bargain of

monumental proportions and that was from a relatively expensive shop too - I had no idea how much bottles of beer might be should we chance upon a supermarket out in the suburbs by our hotel!

### ***The ticket kiosk.***

We staggered under the mammoth weight of our packs to the cluster of news kiosks which I'd noticed on the opposite side of the traffic-thronged multi-lane highway which separated the train station and Stockmann from the city centre and so, after following the crowd down the subway and observing a melee of locals dancing away to an old geezer playing an accordion, we reached the kiosks where I hesitantly asked for the ticket in Latvian, helped by a generous measure of pointing at a piece of paper with the ticket name written on it. The woman in the kiosk at first looked confused, but suddenly realised what we were after and pointed towards the tramlines disappearing into the distance and suggested "Opera station!"; this was just as much trouble as I'd thought we'd have and, at this point, I must admit I wasn't convinced we'd manage to buy one of the tickets and would therefore, by default, be on 0.20LVL singles all weekend!

We despondently stumped around to Opera tram station where I noticed a yellowish wooden shed standing at the nearest end of the platform; was this the fabled "kiosk" from which the mythical 5-day tickets were available, I wondered? As we investigated the wooden shack it became clear that this was indeed a Rīga public transport kiosk and it was inhabited by a woman of at least 70 years of age – "What chance do I have of getting tickets from her?", I wondered, as she was bound to speak no English and my Latvian wasn't really of conversation level!

With absolutely no hope of obtaining our tickets, I approached the tiny window and attracted her attention which, in itself, was no easy matter as she was pretty much deaf; I recited the name of the ticket and, holding up two fingers as confirmation, appended "two, please" onto the request and, amazingly, she nodded in agreement and tore off two tickets which looked to be the ones but - just as I thought it was all going too well and we were home and dry - she began gibbering at me in Latvian and pointing at the clock... it may seem obvious to anyone reading this and, looking back now at the evidence I concede that I may have been a little slow in comprehending the point, but standing outside a little wooden shed populated by a 70-year old woman rambling in a Baltic language isn't conducive, in my opinion, to grasping what's going on!

Suddenly, I realised what she was on about – when did I want the tickets to start? Grinning like an imbecile I unleashed a fusillade of "yes please" whilst pointing randomly at the clock, my watch and the floor; somehow she understood this haphazard combination of signals and handed over our tickets, correctly marked to begin today, just as a tram pulled in behind us at the station; thanking her profusely, we clambered aboard and immediately slipped the tickets into some clear plastic covers Sue had made for us to prevent them getting trashed by continually getting them out to show to the grippers.

### ***A likeable Stalinist Eyesore.***

We followed the progress of the tram on a map we found inside and saw that the Karavella wasn't really that far out of the centre, maybe 2km or so, and as we rattled along on the excellently unrefurbished Tatra T3 complete with trolleypoles – Rīga must be the first system I've seen without pantographs – I was impressed by the look of the city already with its tree-

lined avenues and varied architecture. We were soon alighting at Katrīnas iela where, just by the tramstop, was a Maxim supermarket; could we resist a quick peek inside just in case there were any more winners...? Of course we couldn't – after Sue had persuaded a feral cat, who bore a passing resemblance to Magus from the Cask & Cutler, to come close enough for a chin-rub!

We made a bee-line for the alcohol section (that sounds a bit dodgy, maybe I should re-write that...) and I was amazed to see even more scoops available for even cheaper prices than Stockmann; obviously, we had a finite limit on how many beers we could physically drink, so I rejected at least ten winners from breweries we already had beers from and went for Aldaris Porteris and another Tērvetes beer as they were supposed to be some of the best in Latvia. As we'd not tasted a beer yet I felt as if we should try as many as possible in order to come to a reasoned decision, but we now had 12 beers to drink and I was beginning to realise that the only thing that would curb our scooping in Latvia wasn't - as in many other countries - the lack of winners, but our own physical consumption limits! The checkout was staffed by a particularly sour-faced and miserable woman who moodily threw our bottles along the chute and took the money without a word; customer service, eh!

Walking up Katrīnas iela, weighed down by the continually chinking bottles in our packs, it was with considerable relief that the hotel soon hulked into view and, impressively, it was even uglier and more Soviet than the photos I'd seen had made it out to be – excellent! The reception area was nice enough, however, and the formalities were soon completed with a room on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor being our allocation; the higher the better seemed to be the rule with this kind of place (and the added advantage of that, once inside, our eyes couldn't be offended by it any longer!) and so, trying to appear Latvian to the group of English lads in reception so they didn't try to talk to us, we made one last Herculean effort and dragged the packs into the lift and then the short distance to the room; that was it, we were sorted!

Our room was everything we could have wanted for £34 a night; reasonably comfy beds, a fully-fitted bathroom (although it was absolutely tiny as well as being absurdly beige!) and – more importantly – a window (which opened fully!) giving amazing views over the docks and railway yards below, complete with hard-at-work shunting locos busy arranging huge trains with much clanking of metal on metal; I appreciate that most "normal" people wouldn't want this commotion going on outside their window, but we thought it was superb and gave an interesting comparison between the touristy old town and the industrial docks, leaving a much more encompassing view of Rīga rather than just the touristy bits.

### ***The ASBO generation on tour.***

After relaxing for a while and arranging the frighteningly-large stack of bottles we'd accumulated thus far, we decided it was time to head out and scoop a few beers in some of the bars I'd found on the net although, being Saturday night, we were keen to avoid the centre with the presumed throngs of pissed-up British tossers and so headed off, via another classic unrefurbished pair of T3's, all the way around the centre and alighted at the Latvian Rifleman's square where a mammoth Soviet-era statue of three greatcoat-clad comrades stood commandingly over the goings on beneath them.

We'd planned to have a quick meander around the old town as a kind of prequel to the intensive exploration we had pencilled in for Sunday but, predictably, as soon as we'd reached the riflemen statue the sky darkened as an ominous-looking black sheet of cloud hurried in to prevent me taking any decent photos. We made the best of it and had a quick

walk around the area, spotting our hotel for the next two nights in the process, but as the cloud cover increased and photography became more difficult we abandoned the walk and headed off to the Merķeļa iela tramstop, where we took a No.6 up to Tallinas iela for the first of our beery targets; the Brālis brewery tap.

As we traversed the old town making for the tramlines, we passed an “Oirish” pub which was packed with drunken Brits who were spilling out onto the pavement and acting like the complete wankers they were; What’s the point of spending money travelling to Latvia (and I imagine they wouldn’t have had the brains to find a cheap flight for themselves, and almost certainly booked via one of the “Stag weekend” companies whose packages I’d seen on the net for ludicrously inflated prices) and then drink multinational chemical-ade in a fake Oirish bar? They could have done that on their council estate back home...We hurried by, hoping no glasses, bottles or other missiles would come our way and the locals wouldn’t tar us with the same brush as these inbreeds for being English!

We passed other symbols of British imperialism, such as the quaintly-named “Dickens Pub”, before arriving at the tramstop and catching a pair of Konstals up to Tallinas iela. This was a far less touristy area of the city and comprised of some superb buildings alongside the usual Soviet concrete flats and all things in-between. We’d soon located Brālis and, after the obligatory photo, in we went to see if our first experience of Latvian beer would be a good one – from what I’d read it should have been, but I remembered our time in Estonia and hoped it wouldn’t be anywhere near as bland as that!

### ***An excellent introduction to Latvian pubs.***

We sat at a cute little table by the bar and I studied the taps with enthusiasm; there were four beers available, Tumšais (dark), Gaišais (pale), Senču (weaker pale) and Nefiltrēts (have a guess), which was near enough the full range of beer styles brewed in Latvia minus, regrettably, the increasingly rare Baltic Porter, a style seemingly in terminal decline throughout the region. I approached the bar with hesitation but the sociable barman and regulars soon made me feel welcome and so, within a few minutes of entering the pub, we had our first beers of the trip, the Tumšais and the Nefiltrēts, and the scooping trip was therefore officially declared in session! (Sorry about the piss-poor gag there).

The Nefiltrēts was a hazy golden brew with a sociable malty, bitterish, hoppy and quite tasty character with some bready notes in the bitter, malty finish; I was impressed no end with this beer and, although with hindsight maybe we should have started with the blander beers, already the quality of the brewing was way above what we’d found in Estonia – the relative lack of multinationals on the scene must surely be a major factor in this, I reasoned, as I supped appreciatively on the tasty, bitter, grainy brew.

By this time we’d decided that some food would be in order so we found some menus lurking on the bar and thumbed through them as we drank. Luckily, the menus had English translations (I say luckily as I’d left the Rough Guide and its menu reader section in the room – d’oh!) and we had great problems choosing from the delicious-sounding repertoire and had to send the waitress away twice as our indecision took hold! Eventually we ordered a Gulaš and chicken in mustard sauce and, to celebrate our victory over vacillation, we finished off the beers; the Tumšais wasn’t as good as the unfiltered beer and, to be honest, it was more to Sue’s taste being a dunkel in the style of Berlin – i.e; deep red and sweetish rather than my preferred Saxonian style of black and burnt to a frazzle! It was well-flavoured though, with a toffee/caramel taste with some dry bitterness to balance the sweetness and, overall, I

thought that it was reasonably balanced and well-brewed beer.

Our next two beers arrived just before the food and so we left them to warm up a bit (the beers weren't cold and gassy as such, but five minutes left standing made a positive difference) as we demolished the food. It was excellently presented and the portions were generous, but what amazed us was the flavour and quality; Sue's Gulaš was more of a beef stew but the hunks of steak were fat-free and tender with a lovely flavour, but the star of my plate was the mustard sauce - which was simply gorgeous - and I had to resist the temptation to lick the plate clean; as I scraped as much of the delicious beige goo as I could from the plate, and I smiled as I was suddenly transported back to childhood with my mum telling me not to "scrape the pattern off the plate"!

Eventually, we both sat back with a feeling of great contentment; this had been all we could have wished for in the food department and, as a huge bonus, the beer was good too! Our second round of scoops weren't as characterful as the first with the Gaišais being the unfiltered beer with a hefty percentage of the flavour filtered out, although it was still a gentle, malty, bitterish beer with some hop and a smooth, bitterish, balanced finish. The Senču had hints of phenols in the flavour and so I couldn't really reach an unbiased score on it but, had it been on better form, I reckon it'd have been like the Gaišais only less full-bodied.

### ***Back to Uncle Joe's eyesore.***

Sadly, time waits for no scooper, so we decided to get back to our waiting mountain of bottles which was worrying me slightly; had we become a bit carried away and over-stocked on scoops? Ah well, at 35p a bottle you can afford to, so we paid the bill (around 10LVL) and left the pub with a feeling of great satisfaction at finding such a good all-round bar at the first attempt. We took a pair of T3's southwards and succeeded – unintentionally – in scooping the loop of tram 6 at its southern end, before changing for a No.7 towards our hotel and the clinking mass of bottles waiting for us there.

This particular route terminated about half-way to the hotel and so, ever the public transport desperados, we took the Konstals around their loop at Ausekja iela (which was flange-screechingly tight) then leapt at the first station for a No.5 onwards to Katrīnas iela; dedication, that's what you need! Sue sat in a strange high chair which we'd noticed on trams earlier in the day, but was evicted by the ticket collector (with the kind of amused look presumably held in reserve for foreigners who sit in their seat) as it transpired that this high-chair was set aside for the inspectors... reading the label above it this became obvious, but we'd just not noticed it!

As with many transport systems, Rīga's vehicles play a little jingle before the next stop is announced and Sue suddenly worked out what it reminded us of – Carter USM's Shopper's paradise! Well, it sort of did, if you slowed it down and took it totally out of context... but there's a lot worse songs/bands to sound like and it wasn't half as annoying as the jingle played in Budapest, which you can download from their website for some illogical reason although I've no idea who would want to do such a mad thing... it was bad enough having to pit up with before every stop for three days!

Back at Katrīnas iela, and with no feral cats to delay us this time, we made straight for the Maxim supermarket where we just couldn't resist it and invested in two more beers (from winning breweries, it must be said) – Līvu Pilzenes and Latgales Gaišais - and stocked up on various snacks to eat with our beer including an unfeasibly large chocolate wafer and some

biscuity-cake things. I was amused to see that, a good five hours after our previous visit, the same despondent cashier was still glowering at customers from behind the till although at least she said something to me this time, even if I've no idea what it was and simply said "thanks" as we left, leaving her to enjoy the last two hours of her shift; what it is to love your job, eh? I thought I was bad...

Back in our room, we prepared for a mammoth scooping session; it was now around 20:30 and we had 14 bottles to get through between us, all 500ml, and I fervently hoped the beer was as good as the Brālis we'd supped earlier as, if not, this would quickly become another blandness survival course as we'd suffered in Gdańsk a few weeks earlier! So with the food ready, the window open to admit the ambient sounds of shunting and the standard Russian comedians in beige suits on the TV, the first bottle of beer was opened and our Latvian scooping campaign began in earnest.

### ***Scoop ticker fizzalistichoppyfeeling bloated.***

I'd arranged the bottles into ABV order so as to have - hopefully - a sliding scale of flavours and character all the way from Līvu Pilzenes (4%) to Aldaris Porteris (6.8%). The Līvu was, as expected, fairly nondescript with a dry, grain-sack flavour and some bitterness in the aftertaste although I've had a lot worse beers before and since! Next up was Piebalgas Senču (4%), a subtle, well-balanced and dry-ish pale beer; nothing exciting so far, but conversely nothing as bland as Gdańsk or Bratislava...

Lāčplēsis Plostnieku Pils (4.6%) was uncapped next, and this was another well-made - if not very exciting - pale lager with a biscuity, malty, toffee-ish malt flavour before a dry grassiness came through in the finish. Užavas Tumšais (4.9%) was next up and things were looking better on the flavour front; a deep amber brew, it was full-bodied with treacle toffee, malt and a complex, tasty flavour and finish including a variety of toffee and malt characteristics! I opened the next beer, Tērvetes Alus, with some anticipation as the brewery was supposed to be one of the best in the country and, happily, it turned out to be rather decent with a fresh hoppy aroma and taste over a dry malt body and a lemony, grassy and rather hoppy finish to round off a very complex and flavoursome beer; could this high standard be maintained, I wondered?

As we drank and flicked channels in the vain hope of finding something we could understand, or might want to watch if not, we noticed that the lights flickered every time the lift moved... amazing what you notice when you're scooping beers in a hotel 1,000 miles from home with nothing to watch, eh? Back to the scoops; the next one was Bauskas Premium (5.5%) which was another well-brewed and tasty beer with a rich red-brown colour and a sweet, nutty, treacle-toffee and malt flavour which lasted long into the full, malty, slightly chocolatey finish giving a very well flavoured brew – Latvian beer was surprising us with every bottle!

Lamentably, it couldn't last – although we should have guessed a multinational would be the culprit! Cēsu English Ale (5.6%, and I've a feeling they're owned by someone much larger) was a strange deep brown beer with a rubbery malt flavour (it did, honestly) with roast, toffee, some bitterness and a sickly caramalt finish ending unusual and too sweet, although I must admit again that I've had worse! According to their [website](#), it actually is an ale as it's top-fermented which makes it one of the only ones – if not the only one – in Latvia. I wasn't sure about the next beer, either, although it was unquestionably the most controversial brew we'd seen thus far in the trip; Kimmel Kiršu (5.5%) was quite obviously a cherry beer – although whether it was a proper fruit beer or some repulsive concoction produced from chemical

flavourings wasn't immediately obvious – although I had a suspicion which one it would be!

A nanosecond after the cap was removed I knew what I'd feared had come to pass, and it wasn't pleasant; the syrupy, artificial stench coming from the bottle was mirrored in the flavour which reminded me of that lurid, gloopy red stuff ice cream men used to liberally squirt all over ice creams in the 1970's although, being slightly more charitable, I've had worse Belgian fruit beers... which sort of puts it into perspective! I next uncapped Lāčplēsis Tumšais (5.8%) which, I was fervently hoping, would go some way to washing away the flavour of the last beer... thankfully, this marked a return to form and it was a reddish, notably bitter beer with sweetish toffee flavours, fading into a satisfying malty, toffee dryness with some bitter hop in the finish – this one wasn't far off being the first beer to score a 4 out of 5 for the weekend, but after some consideration I decided it wasn't quite good enough for that and so on 3 it remained.

The last bottle we felt like drinking that evening had reached its turn for my heritage 1960's Greenall Whitley bottle opener to do its thing with it and, despite it being from a brewery owned by the quaintly-named Baltic Beverage Holdings (aka S&N and Carlsberg), I was hoping that it would be a suitable finale to an evening's (mainly) enjoyable scooping session which had certainly showed me that Latvia beer wasn't the bland, fizzy stuff that Estonians called beer. Aldaris Porteris (6.8%) was a reasonable attempt – probably as reasonable as the capitalists who own it would allow – at a Baltic Porter, with a strong, caramelly, bitterish and quite complex flavour which was backed by a slightly methsy alcoholic twang although the finish was multifaceted in its display of caramel, malt, toffee and bitterness characteristics. Overall, then, this had been a rather good and, at times, interesting introduction to Latvian beer and I was now looking forwards to the next two days with considerable enthusiasm!

### **Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> October 2006.**

#### ***So churches do have a use!***

We awoke to unexpected blue skies and sun, so decided that we'd have a spin on some of the tram routes before the weather spoiled our sightseeing again; the In your Pocket guide said that Rīga and London share a penchant for grey skies and so, eager to make the most of the good weather, we rushed down to breakfast where entertainment was laid on by a group of English thirty-somethings who had been "on the town" the previous night; one said to a particularly dumb looking comrade "Where did you get to last night?", to which the reply came "I did the tram to (insert shite Oirish pub here) but it went the wrong way!" – now sorry, but I'm sure the tram operated on the correct path for its route, and I have an inkling that the problem lies with the dullard being unable to read the destination on the front! Some of the routes are fairly long so he could have ended up a long way out...

Breakfast itself was decent enough with all the usual cheeses and breads – including some hotdogs, which I finished off – and we were soon checked out of our Stalinist eyesore and on a tour of some of the city's tram routes to see what we'd find. We took the No.5 to the end of its line at Milngrāvis and although there was nothing exciting there (we scooped the loop though!) some running alongside a railway for a while – and crossing it at one point on the level – as well as seeing the Aldaris brewery gates and its very own tram terminus made for some interest. We then scooped in the loop via the central markets (old zeppelin hangars), which we'd be visiting on Monday, before doing another long route out and back but the only

interesting matter was when the conductress tried to wake a woman who was totally dossed out – she tried a few times then, with a shrug of the shoulders, gave up and left her asleep!

Back in the centre, Sue persuaded me to take the lift up the tower of St Peter's church; initially I wasn't mad on the idea but, remembering the superb views from the church we'd been up in Hamburg, I agreed and soon we were gawping out at the rooftops of the old town from the confines of the tower being buffeted by a blustery wind which whistled through the wire mesh surrounding us and made the day feel a lot colder than it had been down at street level. Despite my earlier protestations I was pleased to have made it up the tower, as it gave a superb vista of all parts of the city including the spaceship-like TV tower, the central market, the railway station and all of the old town, much of which we'd not yet visited. After ten minutes in our lofty perch the freezing wind overcame us and we piled into the lift and were soon back at ground level where, happily, the weather was a lot more clement.

As we entered the old town proper a most amusing sight caught our eyes; an elderly woman – maybe in her 60's – was dancing to music from a little radio, although the description of dancing may be a little generous... I seem to remember she was just spinning around wildly and we half expected her to collapse in a heap after a few minutes! She was made of sterner stuff than we'd given her credit for, however, and she resolutely kept spinning until we grew tired of the spectacle and wandered off to see the architecture nearby, including the kakis (cat) house with black cats on its towers – there's a story about them being turned around so their arses faced the guild opposite after the resident was expelled, but I'll let you read that in the guidebooks as I've forgotten the technicalities! We also saw some real cats milling around the square below the cat house but, as booked, they weren't particularly sociable and despite Sue's best efforts we couldn't get them to say hello to us!

### ***Catch the pigeon!***

The next couple of hours was spent wandering around the old town, looking at the eclectic collection of buildings there, and generally making the most of the sunny weather by taking far too many photos (well, when they're free, can you have too many?) before we passed a nice-looking café where the thought of a reviving espresso and cake proved too much and so in we went. Inside, I ordered in my best Latvian (which seemed to go quite well – no raised eyebrows or hysterical laughing) and we retired to a table to study the map and decide what to do next.

Suddenly, I noticed something moving on the floor; it turned out to be a pigeon which had intelligently taken advantage of the rich pickings on offer inside a cake shop and had clandestinely entered the premises and was now scavenging crumbs from the floor! It waddled around, pecking at food debris as it went, and the owner seemed happy for it to do so – just wait until it shits all over the floor, I thought – and allowed it to forage unmolested until, as we were leaving, it must have noticed that the door was open, whereupon the pigeon launched itself into the air and I felt the turbulence from the clattering of wings as it surged past me out into the street!

Having narrowly escaped being struck by a disease-ridden avian, we decided that before we checked into the hotel it would be a good idea to see what the supermarket in the train station had beer-wise to bolster our remaining four bottles we were still lugging around; surely there couldn't be many more winners, surely we must have cleared up bottle-wise? Erm – no! When we eventually found the Rimi supermarket on the ground floor by the strange clock I was withered to see rows and rows of bottles... and a lot of them were scoops

too, including some new breweries!

We were reasonably restrained but still bought Tērvetes Senču (4.5%), Envils Gaišais (5%, although I now think this is a contract-brew), Kimmel Rīgas Stiprais (7%), Piebalgas Tumšais Lux (5.8%), Cēsu Porteris (6.2%), Gubernijos (Lithuania) Ekstra (5.5%), Tolstjak (Russia, owned by InBev!) Svetloje (4.5%), and Bruveris Ingver Gaišais (4.7%)... and that was being restrained, I promise! We also indulged in a large lump of cheese from the deli counter as we reasoned that it'd be a nice snack to eat with our beer later; how very Belgian! We'd no idea what it would be like, but the label insinuated that it would be in a Port Salut-style.

By now the time had reached half one and I reasoned that we had a decent chance of being able to check in and dump our recently acquired stash of bottles so, via tram 5 from Stockmann to our by now usual stop of Grēcinieku iela next to the Latvian rifleman monument, we made our way to our hotel for the next two nights, the Kolonna, right slap-bang in the centre of the action and opposite a LIDO pub - as well as a very tat-looking "Oirish" bar called Tim McShanes! "How can anywhere with such a shite name sell any beer worth drinking?" I ranted at the Oirish pub as we entered the hotel lobby...

### ***McDisneyland with a windmill... and a brewery.***

We were soon checked into our cavernous room where, after stashing one of the rucksacks and beers plus squashing several blood-laden mosquitoes, it was time for the only brewpub of the trip – and a very strange place it sounded from what I'd read. Apparently, the largest member of the LIDO pub chain was situated out to the southeast of the city and, for some reason, was the largest log construction for miles around and was topped, a */a* Ij in Amsterdam, with a windmill for reasons unknown... Not content with serving the biggest Latvian buffet in the city, the place also brewed the chain's beers on its in-house micro-brewery for good measure; this just had to be seen!

We took tram 4 to the central market then a 7 to the end of the line at Dole where, rarely, we were denied in scooping the loop as it doubled as a lay-over point and the same tram didn't come back straight away... we tried to stay on, desperados that we are, but were evicted by the conductress and so caught the next one back to the megalomaniacally-named Atpūtas centrs "LIDO" stop, and followed the sign down a road opposite towards the garish neon lights which, I assumed, signified the brewpub's location.

Before I go on, let me make one thing clear; LIDO isn't billed as a brewpub and, indeed, we saw no advertising for the brewery at all although I'm convinced that one is there somewhere. This place is first and foremost a Latvian theme bar and restaurant, albeit one which has the trappings of McDisney all over it; how else can I explain the moving dwarves in the entrance hall (and the fishponds!), the bloke in a raccoon suit prowling the carpark, the ludicrous windmill whose sails actually turn round (but I assume do nothing more useful) or even the little sheds (also made of logs) outside with animals imprisoned within for normals to stare at? Overall, it was a very surreal experience just getting into the place, and I wasn't sure at that point whether we were going to find any beer inside or just Budweiser, such was the tat quotient of the exterior!

A table was quickly obtained and we looked around with a degree of admiration; the inside had been finished to a rather decent level and resembled a German bar in parts with its vaulted ceiling and wooden tables, but the main attraction was the enormous buffet of food which looked, admittedly, rather attractive if not quite as home-made as the delectable plates

we'd enjoyed the previous evening in Brālis. Remembering what we were there for, I headed for the bar where I saw, with intense relief, the three LIDO beers on draught for 0.70LVL a 33cl glass – not too bad considering the tat-ness of the surroundings! I obtained the Gaišais and Specialnis, along with a bowl of garlic and lard-encrusted rye bread (Latvian beer snacks, before anyone asks), and triumphally bore my purchases back to the table.

A simple imagination task for you now; imagine the Garlic-iest thing you've ever tasted and double it... yes, double it... and you might get some idea of the tongue-searing potential of the bread I'd bought from the bar; its strength was overpowering to the extreme and my eyes were watering after just one piece of the allium-laden blockbuster although, luckily, I'd tried the beers first; the Specialnis was a deep amber, honeyed, malty beer, sweetish and full-bodied, with a rich malt and toffee finish – very good indeed! The Gaišais was a totally different beer and came out pale, crisp, dry, and remarkably bitter with plenty of good hoppy flavours which lasted well into the full-bodied crisp bitter, hoppy, malty aftertaste. Both beers were rather good, and I was pleased that the two different styles were distinct enough from each other, although maybe one criticism could be that the Specialnis was a touch sweet.

I returned to the bar for a glass of the Medalus – honey beer – and another of the delicious Gaišais before we braved the self-service food melee. Happily for us, this turned out to be a relatively unstressful affair and we loaded our trays with potato salads, barbecued meats, chips, grey peas with lard and various other random Latvian staples before paying around £5.50 each for the huge portions we'd amassed! Ten minutes later, our plates cleared, we were totally stuffed and sat in our seats groaning for what seemed to be an age until the food began to digest... the remaining beer aided this process and, whilst we contemplated another round, it was decided to head back into town and try out a few other bars I'd found gen about, but not before Sue had discovered possibly the most hellfire seat ever to be seen in a pub – it was sort of like a train-type thing comprising of a table and two benches and, best of all, it was on wheels and it moved, too! Just how absurd is that?

### ***A real find.***

We took tram 7 back to the National Theatre stop and cut through the park to our first call of the evening, the Alus Arsenāls, which apparently had beer on handpump... predictably, the handpumps were false, but there was still a choice of four beers on draught and I chose the Užavas Gaišais (4.6%) and Bruveris Kviešcu nefiltrēts (4.5%) although, at the time, I didn't know that Kviešcu meant wheat and that Bruveris beers are distinctly strange!

The Užavas was a cracking brew, golden full and hoppy, with a distinctive maltsack flavour which turned more honeyed and biscuity with a balancing dry hoppiness the more I drank, whilst the Bruveris was a hazy, dry, phenolic fluid with more than a suggestion of lactic flavours and, unsurprisingly, didn't get finished whilst the Užavas was drained to the very last drop.

With two more scoops in the book, and time getting short as we had ten bottles in the room waiting for us, we wandered back towards the hotel with the aim of trying one more bar in the centre. However, as we stumbled over the cobbles along Pils iela, I noticed a sign in a café which seemed to suggest that the establishment sold beers from the Abula brewery – I'd never heard of them, so after a minutes' discussion as to what they might be, we gave in to temptation and tiptoed down the precipitous steps into a cosy cellar bar.

Well, it was cosy until we saw the huge TV which filled most of one end, but luckily the place

was almost deserted and so we waited at the bar... and waited... it must have been a good five minutes before the barman reappeared, but we'd seen the Abula taps and weren't leaving without a dose of what was in them! The barman spoke good English and we'd soon discovered that Abula brewery was located at Brenguļi to the east of Rīga and was a very small outfit indeed; the barman boasted that his bar was the only one in the whole of Rīga which sold the beers and so, feeling very chuffed with ourselves for spotting these massive scoops, we retired to a table with a glass of each of the Gaišais and Tumšais to see how they would stand up to the more commercial Latvian beers we'd sampled thus far.

The pale was a hazy yellowish brew, sweet and mellow, maybe a little too mellow for my liking but it was sociable enough although I'd add a few more hops, personally! The dark was better, with a sweetish caramalt taste, a lovely garnet red colour, and then a complex treacly and mellow, sweetish and malty finish. OK, so they weren't as exciting as I'd hoped they might be, but they were definitely decent beers and, as a bonus, oh so rare! With time marching on we decided against staying for a second round, although I'd have liked to try another glass to see if they improved with quantity, so we paid up and walked the short distance back to the hotel across the cobbled expanse of Doma laukums.

### ***More beers in the room.***

We'd been hoping for a better choice of TV channels than the rather tawdry selection we'd endured the previous evening, but it soon became plain that, if anything, the selection was even worse! Resigned to flicking between international news channels and Russian comedians in beige suits, we arranged the bottles into a meaningful order – trying to ignore just how many we'd acquired – and, as the room didn't come equipped with glasses to drink them out of, opened our pack of plastic half-litre vessels Sue had bought, with amazing foresight, from Stockmann on the first day. Without any pomp I de-capped the first bottle, Tērvetes Senču (4.5%), and the evening session was officially under way!

Although I'd read before we came to Latvia that Tērvetes was generally regarded as the best beer, I was beginning to dispute this claim as the evidence mounted; yes, it was perfectly drinkable and well-brewed with a fair amount of character, but it was just too "clean" for my liking and maybe too well-brewed; a sweetish, smooth, nutty malt beer which was good drinking but lacking that certain something was the result. A new brewery was next up (although now, after some research, I know that Envils is a wholesaler and I think the beer is brewed *for* them although I don't know who by), Envils Gaišais (5%), and this was another good all-rounder in the Latvian tradition with a smooth, toasty, malty flavour fading to a malty, sociable and quite soft finish.

We went Russian next with Starij Melnik Zolotsje (5.2%, owned by Efes, although we didn't know it at the time!) which, unfortunately, turned out to be a bland, malty, grainy fluid with some sweetness and a bland, boring grainy finish with more than a suggestion of adjuncts – and I repeat I didn't know it was Efes when these notes were written! Kimmel Rīgas Stiprais (7%) was duly opened next, a very malt-flavoured beer, dryish in body, reasonably tasty with the alcohol well hidden, and good drinking albeit with a surfeit of character for the relatively lofty ABV.

Piebalgas Tumšais Lux (5.8%) had reached the head of the queue and, despite not knowing exactly what was meant by the "lux" suffix, I hoped this would be a tasty dark beer. Happily I wasn't wrong, and flavours of sweet malt, treacle toffee and chocolate fought for space on my tongue, all in rather good harmony, with the only slight complaint being, as is usual for

Latvian beers, a tad too much sweetness for my tastebuds – although this didn't detract from the beer being a good, tasty, enjoyable beverage. A new brewery was next up, Latgales Mārtina (7%), but unfortunately my sweetness gauge was sent well into the red sector by this cloying, syrupy, rather industrial-tasting brew which didn't impress either of us much!

Our last beer of the evening was a bit of a double-edged sword; yes, it was a Baltic porter, but it was brewed by Cēsu, who I suspect are owned by a much larger company, and so I wasn't convinced it would be a classic of the style... my fears were well founded, sadly, as the beer was very bland, caramelly, dry and artificial in character; not the ideal finale to a night's interesting drinking it must be said, but what do you expect from (alleged) multinational running-dogs! We decided to leave the last few beers until the next evening and turned in for some doss, planning to scoop as many tram routes as possible on our last day and also, hopefully, find beers from as many of the remaining breweries we'd not yet scooped...

**Monday 16<sup>th</sup> October 2006.**

***An unexpected scoop.***

The hotel's website had promised breakfast would be served in the chocolate shop next door but, sadly, this was dark and empty (presumably it was being turned into another bar or something) and so we trooped over to the Tim McShane's Oirish pub over the road instead, where a piss-poor breakfast awaited us of dry bread, flaccid cheese, watery juice and some other crap we didn't bother to try... cheers then, we suddenly wished we'd stuck with the Stalinist eyesore where at least the breakfast was edible... on the plus side, I got a quick look at the beer taps and saw that there were actually some decent beers on, including – unbelievably - a few scoops!

Resolving not to bother walking over the road the following morning, we strolled along to our regular tram stop, Grēcinieku iela, from where a pair of T3's rattled us the short distance to the central tīrgus (market), five ex-zeppelin hangars looming above the river and railway station like the back of some mammoth Loch Ness monster! We explored the four main halls and found one to be meat, one fish, one vegetables and one other random stuff where, in a compelling scene, a woman was dispensing milk and cream to customers straight from large churns – into plastic bags, or whatever her patrons had brought with them!

We then took a walk around the rear of the hangars where the cheaper end of the market was conducted, with stalls seemingly everywhere and be-hatted locals stomping around in the cold morning air. As we passed some of the stalls (which were really just people with a few cardboard boxes full of goods) I suddenly noticed some 2-litre PET bottles of beer, and I didn't recognise the labels either – a quick look soon told me why, this was a beer from Alus Avots, one of our remaining scoops on the brewery list! With no price on the bottles, however, I was a bit reluctant to hand cash over not knowing the price and so we continued with our exploration of the open air market.

A few more stalls were selling beer but this was generally Starij Melnik (Russia) or Gubernijos (Lithuania) in big PET bottles, although we did buy one glass bottle of Brālis Inčukalna Pilzenes (4.7%) as we'd scooped the rest of their beers on draught and wanted at least one label for the collection! We must have walked past the Avots beer stall four times before I finally plucked up the courage to buy one of the huge bottles, which cost about

0.50LVL! We also investigated the market bar but didn't go inside as it looked a touch rough and, by the looks of things, sold only Gubernijos and Piebalgas – both dud!

### ***A morning on the trams.***

We took the huge bottle back to the hotel, as we didn't fancy lugging it around all day, and then embarked on a mammoth tram route scooping session in an attempt to ride as many as we could; we'd left it too late to have every one (although we came close) but we had a decent attempt at it anyhow! I shan't bore you – as if I haven't already – with a lengthy and tedious description of which trams we did where, but one amusing incident stands out, and so I shall regale you now with said amusing anecdote.

This incident involved two extremely drunk men (maybe going for the world record?) who slumped into seats a few rows in front of us and proceeded to doze out peacefully – until some nubile young lasses sat in front of them, at which point they went into full sextest mode and tried to chat up the girls, but unfortunately – being very pissed – didn't realise that to successfully get along with the opposite sex it's not a good idea to touch them up continually! The girls got very annoyed with them and, at one point, I thought fists were going to fly, but suddenly the sextests staggered off the tram and stumbled off towards some flats... we did the tram to its terminus and back out again and, when we returned, we could still see them lurching around in the distance! States!

We also had a look at the Soviet war memorial, a typically Communist monument of huge soldier figures around an extremely tall concrete pole inlaid with stars; the large amount of flowers placed around the site spoke volumes for the number of Russians who live in Latvia and who, presumably, still yearn for the days of Mother Russia's embrace. A pair of T3's on route 4 took us to the terminus at Imanta where we took advantage of a sociable little café attached to the Nelda supermarket opposite the loop for coffee before raiding the beer shelves in Nelda; the range wasn't as comprehensive as the others we'd been to but, nevertheless, we came away with three bottles – Bruveris 10 Gadu Jubilejas alus (10<sup>th</sup> anniversary beer, how rare is that?!), Tērvetes Originales and Bauskas Tumšais.

A few trams later, we switched to trolleybus scooping and executed a complex move which involved crossing two bridges and scratching in a large one-way loop; the trolleybuses we had were old Škoda beasts with extremely loud traction motors and minimal suspension although we had a very generous driver to thank for the move coming together as, seeing us running for the bus, he held it for us when most drivers wouldn't have! We returned to rifleman's square in style on a trolleybus, terminating right under the towering figures, before taking our bottles back to the hotel and a quick planning meeting for the rest of the evening.

### ***Ever get that feeling...?***

Once again we took a tram from Grēcinieku iela, but this time we alighted at Merķeļa iela to have a look at a bar with a very unappetising name; the Stella pub sounded absolutely awful but, where it was, I suspected that only the improbably adventurous stag nights reached it (which is probably why they now have a new branch in Doma laukums) and the write-ups claimed it had a decent beer range... ah well, hey-ho here we go, and in we went... to find an appalling selection of multinational shite with only one Latvian beer! A quick about-turn and we were back outside again, vowing to trust our instincts in future on bars with crap names!

We then had a look at Alus Pagrabiņš at Raiņa 33 which sounded good – well, it might have

been, had it not been surrounded by scaffolding and under renovation! A short walk along Raiņa took us to Melnais Kakis where we descended the steps to the cellar bar which, according to the gen I had, boasted a better beer range than the upstairs bar, but we weren't prepared for the glowing green cat's eyes shining from all over the passageway down the stairs! Inside, we found a selection of four draught beers including Tērvetes (I'm assuming this was the standard Alus) and Bauskas Gaišais (a winner!), nothing like the large range I'd been expecting, but I wasn't going to turn a winner down at this point I the trip, was I? Both beers were very acceptable, with the Tērvetes being a tasty, malty, reasonably hoppy and bitter brew with a mellow toffee-malt finish whilst the Bauskas was sweeter, more buttery/toffeeish before some hoppy bitterness kicked in and led to a gentle malty aftertaste with more toffee.

Our next target was another new brewery – Lodiņa – available on draught at Citi Laiki, a ten-minute walk along Brīvības from the freedom monument. This was, apparently, a locals' restaurant and consequently was fairly busy when we arrived but, after checking the beer was on the bar, we secured a table and I joined a queue (!) to get the beers in. Guttingly, when I reached the bar, I was informed that the beer was off – despite the McSpoons-esque ploy of leaving the pumpclip on – and the alternative was Piebalgas. Despite this being a good beer, we were running a touch short of time and so, reluctantly, we abandoned the bar (trying to explain to the waitress who had just brought our menus that we were leaving as the beer we wanted wasn't on!) and headed back into the centre via an espresso to give us the stamina for the eight bottles waiting back in the room!

We had a look in the appallingly-named Dickens pub which, predictably, had nothing we would consider drinking (and no real ale on either, even if it is usually only Bombardier) and so set course for the hotel via the two pubs outside; even though I had read that Tim McShane's had 20+ beers on draught I'd assumed that this would simply mean 20+ examples of global crud, but at this juncture I feel it only right to prostrate myself at the feet of Mr McShane (should he exist and decide to issue writs against me for slagging off his pub without evidence) in forgiveness for doubting his propaganda as, amazingly, I'd seen the beer taps that morning and noticed they dispensed at least six Latvian beers, possibly more, in addition to the suspected multinational identikit fluids.

I chose two Bruveris beers, Melnais (7%) and Sarkansais (5.4%), which were both unusual brews in different ways – the Melnais (black) had a dark brown colour, a strong flavour, and some roast and sourness in the finish, whilst the Sarkansais (red?) had a distinct fruity flavour as if berries had been added to the beer and a sweetish, rather bland aftertaste. Our last bar of the trip was the Alus Sēta, part of the all-consuming LIDO chain, where we could at least be sure of some decent food and some of their quality beer to wash it down, so in we went and found the pub almost empty; result! It didn't take us long to obtain platefuls of food and a couple of beers – being very desperate, I had Aldaris Zelta whilst Sue got the better end of the deal with a glass of medalus – and we were soon contentedly munching away.

Suddenly, a stag party arrived; they sounded like they were from South Wales and, consequently, almost all wore rugby shirts! If the truth be told they weren't too obtrusive and took over the front corner of the pub and took the piss out of one of their number who bought an unfeasible amount of food! Not wishing to push our luck, however well-behaved they were being, we finished our drinks and headed back to the hotel to get stuck into the bottles; it was our final evening in the city and so we needed to finish off all the bottles we had lying around in the room, eight as far as I could remember, and as usual time was against us... as if we needed more pressure, we had an early flight too and needed to be on the 09:05 bus to

the airport, so a late night definitely wasn't what we wanted!

### ***The final scoops.***

After squashing yet another mosquito, who seemed to have consumed the blood of an elephant before hiding under our sink and therefore brought about a huge splat on the wall, I arranged the bottles in drinking order and saw that we did indeed have eight to drink, including Russian and Lithuanian brews, plus a winning brewery – Avots - in its vast 2-litre bottle! So, with the usual crap on the TV and sustenance in the form of a lump of cheese we'd bought from Nelda at Imanta, the scooping began for the final time on the trip.

Lithuanian Gubernijos Ekstra (5.5%) was first up, and was as crap as we'd feared it would be; piss-coloured, bland, ricey and blatantly industrial, even though I don't think the brewery is owned by any multinationals. Tolstjak Svetloje (4.5%, owned by InBev, although I didn't know that at the time or I'd never have bought it!) had a slight graininess but was basically another bland, slightly grassy beer with nondescript grain flavours. We were progressing well so far – around half of each bottle was going down the sink – but next up was a beer we had higher hopes for; Brālis Inčukalna Pilzenes (4.7%) had a malty flavour and grassy hoppiness, all a bit restrained, but a lot better than the previous two although that hadn't required much in the way of character to achieve...

We had two Bruveris beers next and, considering the strange flavours of their beers we'd sampled thus far, I wasn't particularly looking forwards to them! Happily, Bruveris seem to be able to bottle beer better than they keg it, and the Ingver Gaišais (4.7%) was a sociable, toffee-tasting, reasonably drinkable mellow malty beer. The 10 Gadu Jubilejas (4.5%) was similar yet even more mellow, malty and smooth, resulting in it almost getting a score of three and just falling short...

The huge 2 litre bottle was up next and we had no idea what to expect from it apart from not a lot; how wrong we were! Avots Trīs Jāņi (5%) had an amber colour with no hint of the plastic bottle in the aroma, just a sweet, malty, caramelly character which transferred itself into the flavour where it was joined by some nuttiness – this was far, far better than we had hoped it might be and we even had a second glass to celebrate... well, it felt wrong tipping almost two litres down the sink! Tērvetes Originālais (5.4%) was de-capped next and proved to be a malty brew, quite full-bodied, developing some bitter hoppiness in the solid, malty aftertaste. The honours of being the final beer of the trip was left to Bauskas Tumšais (5.5%), a red/amber, sweetish, caramelly, malty, good and very tasty beer with a sweet, gentle, treacle-toffee and caramalt finish which left a very satisfying taste in the mouth.

Our beers finished, we made a start on packing our clutter to give us an extra ten minutes in bed the following morning and, wishing we had another day to explore more of the city and clear up the tram routes, we reluctantly dosed out for the last time in Riga.

**Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> October 2006.**

***And three makes forty!***

We were up reasonably early to finish off the packing and, having extra time due to not bothering with the rubbish breakfast over the road, we had time to examine another Soviet-looking statue along the riverside near to the rail bridge. We then caught a tram around to

Stockmann and spent the 15 minutes waiting for the airport bus photographing the steady stream of trams which passed the station although, guttlingly, a rescue vehicle clanked around the tracks tantalisingly too far away to phot and vanished towards the market... d'oh!

The bus eventually arrived and was pretty wedged, although we managed to acquire two seats about half way through the journey. We were soon checked in, thankfully beating most of the waiting veg to the queue by seeing the staff setting up the Ryotscare hand baggage self-checkers, and wandered through to airside to see what the LIDO pub would be selling at that time of the morning.

First, however, we raided the duty-free shop and bought three bottles of winning Cēsu beers (still only 55p each!) along with some Latvian “champagne” and Kaliningrad vodka, plus a shot glass with Lenin printed on to enable me to drink the vodka in a suitably Soviet frame of mind! The LIDO pub is situated immediately above the check-in desks and, although the bar part doesn't open until around 10:30, the restaurant was in full swing and we obtained a delicious pork steak wrapped in bacon with cream-covered vegetables for not a lot at all; this was just what we required to fill us up as we'd not be home for another seven hours at least!

The plane arrived on-time and, after a scenic flight over the southern reaches of Scandinavia, we were on-stand at Liverpool 15 minutes early. A final piece of amusement occurred when we were pulled over to have our bags x-rayed (why?) and the fat Scouse security bloke charged with performing this operation was obviously working under duress as, despite seeing what he claimed was a “chain” in my bag and my denying there was anything remotely like that inside, he quickly became bored and ushered us out into arrivals – so much for security searching then, and I've still no idea what that “chain” thing was in my bag!

## Conclusions.

Go there!!! Go there before the multinational scum ruin it all!!!! Ooops, sorry about that, but despite the uninhibited ranting the sentiment is basically true; Latvia currently has a fairly interesting brewing scene with little (as yet) intervention by outside predators but, seeing what's happened in Estonia and just about everywhere else where the ex-Eastern Bloc has been turned into a giant cash till for Western corporations, I'd get there pretty damn quick before the big boys, currently dipping their collective toes into the Latvian waters, decide it's time to dive in – with predictable results; just taste the Cēsu or Aldaris beers against Piebalgas or Bauskas and see what I mean.

We only visited Latvia's capital, [Rīga](#), but it's an appealing place with a good mixture of old buildings, cobbled lanes, Soviet-era concrete monstrosities, leafy parks and huge brick churches; a wander around the old town is richly rewarding – it's bigger than you think – and then there's still the market and suburbs to see, and that's before you start on the trams and trolleybuses... Beware, however, if you're expecting Hanseatic glory in the manner of Tallinn or Gdańsk; yes, there are some castellated merchant's houses there, but the architectural mix is far wider than just stepped gables, although the overall impression is rather pleasurable and, in some parts, you could even be in Barcelona or Paris such is the variety of building styles.

It's a funny thing to say, I know, but if you're a proponent of scooping all your beers in pubs and bars then you're going to be slightly disappointed. The reason for this is that the range of Latvian beers in the majority of bars is limited to the larger brewers and to find the smaller

(and, in the main, better) boys you're going to have to know where to look – which is pretty standard nowadays, I suppose! Even when you do find a bar with micro-brewed Latvian beers available it's sometimes difficult to figure out exactly what they are apart from the brewery name; with most brewers making various strengths of pale beer it's not easy, in the main, to find the ABV or name of the beer on menus. Beer in bars costs around 1 to 1.50LVL for half a litre, and around 0.30 less for a 33cl glass.

This leads me conveniently into my fix for these problems; supermarkets! Now I don't mean popping into Asda or Tatscos for a few cans of Aldaris swill, but Rīga seems to be well endowed with supermarkets which sell a wide variety of beer from almost every producer in the country (minus the very small micros) at extremely cheap prices; expect to pay anything from 0.30 to 0.70LVL a bottle depending on the strength of your chosen beer and the supermarket you've bought it in; Stockmann is obviously more expensive than, for example, the small "Maxim" out by the Karavella. I'm sure it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that, if you had the capacity, you could easily scoop 100 Latvian beers from supermarkets, and that's without the extra Russian, Lithuanian, Belgian and Ukrainian brews too... oh yes, and Greede King Abbott at 49p a can!

The other bonus with bottled beer is that, as well as the nice labels you can soak off in the hotel sink, you know exactly what beer you've bought along with its ABV and all at a third of the price of a pub... the only thing is that you're going to have to sit in your hotel room and drink them which – admittedly - isn't a great deal of fun, even more so when the TV choice is as bad as we had in our two hotels! Saying that, if you have a companion with you, then it's a bearable option to spend the early evening scooping in bars and then retire to your room for some bottles... maybe this isn't your bag, but I'm only putting suggestions forwards... Put it this way; without room bottles we'd have scooped less than a half of what we did!

Language isn't really a problem – in Rīga at least – as the majority of the people we spoke to understood English to some degree and most seemed to speak it rather well. The words for please (Ludzu - "loodzu") and thank you (Paldies - "paldee-es") are easy to remember and, if you learn a few other bits such as a few numbers and beer (Alus - "aloos") then you'll be able to get by in most situations. Almost all the Latvians we met seemed sociable and friendly (apart from their queuing techniques!) and Rīga seemed a safe city to be in although, obviously, it pays to take the normal precautions such as not acting like a tourist and flashing money and flashy electronics around too much.

Overall, I'd recommend a visit to Rīga as it's a true "multi-faceted" destination; it's got a lovely old town to wander around, some excellent pubs, lots of beers (if you count supermarket shelves) and, for the sadder amongst us, a superb tram system worked mainly by unrefurbished Czech Tatra T3's along with some newer Polish Konstals in addition to a serious trolleybus (electric buses, in case you don't know) network. There's enough there for at least a long weekend, but it's a lot quieter midweek when the stag parties have gone home so maybe a "long midweek" is a better option! For more information about Rīga and Latvia, see the Rough Guide and In your Pocket websites or the city tourism portal.

### ***Getting there and getting around there.***

A few years back, the only way to reach Rīga was by flag carrier in exchange for handing over the equivalent of the foreign debt of a Central American republic. Nowadays, Ryanair fly from a number of their UK bases (Stansted, Liverpool, Dublin and Prestwick) whilst easyJet

have been rumoured to be adding the city to their destinations for a while (they currently only fly to Rīga from Berlin SXF). Latvia's national carrier, [Air Baltic](#), is part-owned by SAS and, therefore, not really a budget option but if you live near Gatwick then you might decide to cut your losses and pay the extra £50 or so to go from there. The other way used to be the overnight sleeper train from Warsaw; this is currently suspended, although rumours have said it may re-commence during 2007.

Rīga's [airport](#) (Lidosta) is [11km to the southwest](#) of the city and well served by bus [22](#) which runs every 20 minutes or so from 06:17 until 23:32 and goes to Abrenes iela via Stockmann for the bargain price of 0.20LVL and takes around 30 minutes. Bus 22A goes directly to the cathedral at around half-past the hour and costs 0.25LVL. All buses drops directly at the airport door, but pick up from the stand over the car park – as you exit the terminal, walk across the car park to the right-hand corner and you'll see the Perspex shelter at the corner of the approach road. Tickets are either bought from the conductresses on the vehicles (flat fare 0.20LVL mainly) or you can buy a bewildering array of 5-day, weekly and monthly tickets with further combinations of tram, trolleybus and bus from the little wooden huts which function as Rīga transport ticket sales kiosks; there's one at Opera station on the outward-bound platform; for an example, our 5-day tram and trolleybus ticket cost 2.80LVL.

Rīga's [public transport system](#) is, in common with most European cities, very efficient and comprehensive and uses a combination of buses, trolleybuses and trams which would enable you to get to most locations within the city should you so wish. The website of Rīgas Satiksme is very good (although it's a bit flaky sometimes) at listing timetables of the routes, although there are no decent downloadable maps of the system; there's a useful interactive map though with which you can zoom into any area of the city you wish and print out the required maps. The most useful tram routes for the beer scooper are the No.6 (direction Jugla) to Tallinas iela for the Brālis brewery tap, and No.7 (direction Dole) for the LIDO brewpub.

The centre of Rīga is surprisingly large so you'll be doing a fair bit of walking to get to most of the bars; strangely enough, the trams are little help with no lines running through the centre and the routes which run just to the north (5 & 7) only stops twice; at the national opera and at the national theatre leaving your only option as walking, although this isn't such a bad thing as it allows you to gawp at the buildings along the way, something which you sometimes miss when crammed onto a rush-hour tram. Unless you're a tram crank, I'd say the easiest thing – ticket wise – to do would be to simply buy 0.20LVL singles from the crew as and when you need them, but if you want to have a spin around the city to see more (and it's recommended) then £2.80 for five days isn't such a bad price for trams & trolleybuses; add an extra 1LVL for buses too.

### ***Hotel Gen.***

We stayed in two wildly differing places;

[Karavella](#), 27 Katrīnas Dambis iela. A huge Communist-era monstrosity a couple of kilometres north of the centre amongst docks and railway yards, this is a cheap hotel and perfectly adequate if all you're going to do is to sleep there and maybe drink a few beers whilst watching awful Russian comedians dressed in Beige suits cracking gags about something or other. Tram 5 goes within 5 minutes at Katrīnas iela - simply walk up the road opposite the stop past the Maxim supermarket - and it's cheap, too. The breakfast is served

in a small room on the 7th floor, is adequate, and is help yourself. The sounds of shunting in the railway yards continues 24/7 but is great if you like that sort of thing... we had a great view over the docks, river and railway and loved the contrast between the touristy centre and the industrial docks.

**Kolonna**, Tīrgoņu 9. Right smack-bang in the old town, opposite Alus Sēta, and aimed squarely at rich tourists, this is a nice new place with sterile if adequate rooms. The location can't really be bettered, although I'd think twice about staying there again as it's not really worth £50 a night IMO. Breakfast is supposed to be served in the chocolate shop next door, although this is currently being refitted and so you have to cross the road to Tim McShanes pub and suffer the paltry meal served there.

### **Brewery Gen.**

As I don't know my arse from my elbow with regards to Latvian brewers, the information here is mainly gathered from the usual sources; [Ratebeer](#), [Beer me!](#) and [this site](#).

- Abula, Brenguļu pagasts , Brenguļi, VALMIERAS RAJ
- [Aldaris](#) (Baltic Beverages Holdings), Tvaika iela 44, Rīga
- [Alus Avots](#) (Harboes Bryggeri) Maskavas ielā 231 Ķekāva
- [Bauskas](#) Alus Īslīces pag.Bauskas rajons, Imantas
- [Brālis](#) SIA"Alus Nams"Rīga
- Bruveris (Alus Tirdzniecibas Grupa) Podraga iela 1a Rīga
- [Cēsu](#) Alus Daritava, Aldaru laukums 1, Cēsis
- [Envils](#) Biķernieku str. 18 Rīga (*although I'm not sure they aren't just a distributor*)
- Gulbenes Alus, Darītava Dzirnavu iela 1 LV-4401 Gubene
- Incukalna Alus, Darītava Ojāri LV-2136 Inčukalns
- [Kimmels](#) Rīga, Rīgas Gatve 8, Rīga
- Krāslavas, Vitolu iela 4, LV-5600 Krāslava
- Latgales Alus, Dzirnavu iela 22, Daugavpils
- [Lāčplēša](#) Alus (Royal Unibrew) Lacplesi 11 Lielvārde
- [Lido Group](#) Krasta iela 76 Rīga
- [Līvu Alus](#), Ganibu iela 9/11, Liepāja
- [Lodina Alus](#) Bauska, Rīgas iela 39 Bauska
- Rezeknes alus SIA Atbrivošanas aleja 162 Rezekne
- [Piebalgas Alus](#) Gaujas iela 2 Jaunpiebalga
- [Tērvetes](#) Tišas Agrofirma, [Tērvetes](#) pagasts Dobeles.
- [Užavas](#) Alus SIA "Zaksi" Užavas pagasts Ventspils. Unpasteurised beer.

### **Pub Gen.**

Marks out of five are in brackets for beers and pubs.

**Brālis krogs**, Tērbatas 101. (4)

Brewery tap of Brālis, this wood-panelled bar is far enough from the centre to avoid English tourists, meaning you get the “real” experience, including the prices! The food is superb too and great value, as is the beer, which should include the delicious Nefiltrēts Alus.

Take tram 6 to Tallinas iela, turn left, and Brālis is down the next turning on the left, approximately 20 metres on the right. Only five minutes from the tramstop.

*Beers :*

- Tumšais - Red/brown, caramelly, dryish balance to the sweet caramel taste. (3)
- Gaišais - Gentle, malty, biscuity and slightly bitter brew. (2)
- Nefiltrēts - Hazy pale beer, bitterish and hoppy. Characterful. (3)
- Senču - Unfortunately, a phenolic twang to this pale, bitterish beer. (1)

### LIDO Atpūtas centrs, Dzirnavu iela 76 / Krasta iela 76 (depends who you believe!) (2)

Surreal huge log cabin-type structure theme park which feels nauseatingly Disney-esque in it's tweeness with a working windmill (well, the sails go round) to crown it, this place is billed as a Latvian restaurant and somewhat downplays it's role as Rīga's only brewpub but I'm convinced the beer is brewed there and the buffet is about as extensive as it's possible to get – two massive platefuls cost us just over £10.

Take tram 7 (direction Dole) to the Atpūtas centrs “LIDO” stop and take the first right towards the river; it's signposted and, at night, just follow the garish neon lights! 5-10 minutes from the tramstop.

*Beers :*

- Gaišais - Pale, dry, crisp, bitter and quite hoppy beer. Full, tasty balanced finish. (3.5)
- Specialnis - Deep amber, honeyed, sweet and malty with a full body. (3)
- Medalus - Honey beer; rich and sweet, tasty and mellow, a very rich beer. (3)

### Alus Arsenāls, Arsenāls iela. (2)

Cellar bar close to the castle, this pub has five fake handpumps which dispense a variety of Latvian beers for low-ish prices for the centre. It's really a restaurant, so if you want to drink then you might have to sit at the bar.

From tram 5 & 7 at National Theatre, it's a five-minute walk across Jēkaba laukums with a map! Or, take Pils iela from Doma laukums to the square at the end, then bear right around the bottom end and you'll find the road on your left after a short distance.

*Beers :*

- Užavas Gaišais - Golden, full, hoppy, maltsack beer with honey and biscuity hints; excellent drinking beer and close to a score of 4. (3.5)
- Bruveris Kviešcu Nefiltrēts - Hazy, dry, with some off-flavours. (1)

### **Margarita Café**, 24 Pils iela. (3)

By day a café, by night a cosy cellar bar with a huge obtrusive TV on one wall, this tiny place has the distinction of being the only bar in town to serve beer from Abula, a micro brewer located to the east of Rīga in Brengūļu.

From Doma laukums take Pils iela towards the castle and it's almost immediately on the right just as you leave the square; the precipitous steps just inside the door lead down to the bar.

*Beers :*

- Abula Gaišais - Hazy pale beer, smooth and mellow, could do with a bit more guts. (2)
- Abula Tumšais - Sweetish, red, caramalt-tasting beer with some complexity, rather like a Berlin dunkel. (3)

### **Melnais Kakis (Alus Ordenis)**, Raiņa Bulvaris 15. (2)

Don't go into the ground-floor pub but instead head down the steps, past the eerie glowing green cat's eyes, to find the "beer embassy" with it's four draught beers including Tērvetes and Bauskas. The food looked good too, and the general atmosphere is relaxing and beery.

The pub is not far from the freedom monument on Raiņa Bulvaris.

*Beers :*

- Tērvetes Alus - Decent tasty, malty, fairly hoppy yet sweet beer with a balanced finish. (3)
- Bauskas Gaišais - Good sweetish, toffee-laden, slightly bitter and hoppy with a mellow toffee and hop finish. (3)

### **Tim McShane's**, Tirgoņu 10. (2)

Although this sounds like any other "Oirish" pub in town, Tim's actually has a rather good beer list of 20+ on draught which includes around 6 Latvian beers – maybe more – and has two rare beers from Bruveris on tap. Not too bad inside either, although quite where the Irish connection comes in I've no idea; hanging Guinness signs and pictures of twee scenes around the walls doesn't make an Irish pub IMO... well, I suppose it is 1,200 miles from Ireland, and the beer list gives it a "get out of jail" from all this assorted tat on the walls. Beware of stag tossers, it's on the "circuit", but actually a lot better than it should be for where it is if you get my drift. It's all relative, of course.

Opposite the Kolonna hotel on Tirgonu, just off Dom square, right in the heart of the old town.

*Beers :*

- Bruveris Ingver Sarkansais 5.4% - Strange fruity beer, tastes like it's got fruit in it! (1)
- Bruveris Ingver Melnais 7% - Unusual dark brown beer, strong with a roasty, sourish finish. (2)

### **Alus Sēta**, Tirgoņu 6. (2)

Another of the LIDO chain, this sociable place manages to serve huge buffet meals to the hungry masses – here mainly tourists instead of Latvians – but beware, the beer range doesn't seem to include all the LIDO beers as only the Medalus was on during our visit with a few other Latvian brews on draught including, strangely, Aldaris Zelta.

Almost next door to Tim McShane's above.

*Beers :*

- LIDO Medalus
- Aldaris Zelta - A slight hoppiness, very average taste, some hop oil in the dry finish. (2)

### **Citi laiki, Brīvības 41 (3)**

This cosy, bustling place has Lodiņa alus - well, they had a pumpclip, but no beer - although I assume this was a temporary absence and it should be back. They also have Piebalgas.

Easy to find - walk up Brīvības past the freedom monument for 500 metres and the pub is on the left.

*Other bars if you're desperate for scoops.*

**Pie Vecā Kapteiņa** (By the Old Captain), 2nd floor, Rīga rail station. Has a couple of beers - Didn't try.

**Alus Pagrabiņš**, Raiņa 33. Good list of draught beers - When it's not closed for refurbishment, maybe!

**Red Fred**, Dzirnavu 62. Has it's own beer from ? - Didn't try as it sounded well tat !

**Stella Pub**, Lāčplēša 35. 12 beers on draught... and 12 of them are shite. Don't bother; as crap as it sounds! There's also a new branch on Dom square which we didn't bother to look in.

**Dickens Pub**, Grēcinieku 9/1. Real ales? - A crap selection of the commoner Latvian beers. No real ale on our visit, either.

**Citi laiki**, Brīvības 41 – have Lodiņa alus - They had a pumpclip, but no beer - although I assume this was a temporary absence and it should be back. They also have Piebalgas.

**Sveiks, Šveik!**, Stabu 23 - Užavas, Bauskas on draught - Didn't visit.

**Krievu Sēta**, Ķengaraga 3 – Russian beer - Didn't visit.

### **Supermarket Gen.**

These seem to be the best bets for scooping a whole ruck of winners whilst in Latvia; we visited four and found 75% of the country's breweries represented, most with a good range of bottles beers not seen in any bars. With bottles at around 40p each, it's rude not to...

**Stockmann**, 13 Janvāra 8, close to the Station. Massive place which sells almost everything including a huge range of beers - not all Latvian, there are Belgian and Russian here too - for reasonable prices. Open 09:00-22:00.

**Rimi**, Stacijas laukums 2 (ground floor of the rail station complex). Another large supermarket with a complementary range of beers to the nearby Stockmann so a visit to the two will be richly rewarding in terms of winners! 07:00-00:00.

**Maxim** have a lot of outlets around the city, but the one we visited was a little one close to the Karavella hotel on Petersalas iela - tram 5 to Katrīnas iela and it's right there. A large range of beers for the size of the place, open 08:00-22:00.

**Nelda**, by Imanta tram terminus (route 4). A long way out of the centre, but they sell the rare 10th anniversary beer from Brālis amongst others. Also has a nice cafe next door with a decent range of beer and cheap food.

### **Gazza's beers of the weekend.**

Not an easy choice, this, with quite a few beers being of a good standard (nothing scored higher than 3 although a few came close to a 4), but in the end a beer from the brewpub came out on top, mainly due to being unfiltered.

1. LIDO Gaišais, draught at the surreal brewpub. Pale, dry, crisp and well-hopped with a honeyed malty body and a good finish; almost scored a 4! Good.
2. Bauskas Premium Alus (4.9%), in bottle. Rich red beer, sweet and full-bodied, with a complex flavour including treacle toffee, maltiness and grainsack giving a multifaceted and tasty beer, good drinking.
3. Užavas Gaišais (4.6%), draught in Alus Arsenāls. Golden, full, hoppy, bitter and with a lovely maltsack flavour with honey and biscuit then a dry, malty, hoppy and bitter finish; quality session beer with lots of flavour. Unpasteurised, as is all their beer.

The Pub of the weekend award goes to **Brālis' brewery tap**, for it's unforced quality in both food and beer and being an all-round top place.