

Interpreting the land of song

Paul Hibberd describes a study trip to Latvia

'If you feel tired, overheated or your body is suffering from thirst after a randy night, but your soul agonises in self reproaches...!'

The interpretive panel at the world's most northerly vineyard – Sabiles in Latvia – certainly provoked our interest. Who could resist reading on after such an introduction?



Insects get big in Latvia – the Bee Trail, Lauma Park



The Witch's Trail, Gauja National Park

A bus full of British interpreters (seven based in Scotland and one 'border reiver' from Durham) had descended on Riga just as everyone else left the city for the St John's Day (summer solstice) celebrations. Refusing to take this personally, and impressed by everyone's connection with nature / desire to have a party, we set out on a week's exploration as part of the ARCH Network 'Innovation in Cultural and Heritage Interpretation' study trip.

We had an excellent week, generously funded by the Leonardo da Vinci programme, and hosted by Latvijas Dabas Muzejs (the Latvian Natural History Museum) and the Latvian Nature Guides.

One of the highlights was the invite to join the annual Nature Guides training camp. This year the theme was the nature-based St John's Day celebrations themselves. It certainly illustrated the strong connection with culture and land that exists for many Latvians. I think our nearest British equivalent would be the traditional Beltane celebrations, but it struck us that in Latvia the festival is very much a national event. Has the country's history of occupation made Latvians more determined to

celebrate their own culture? By the same logic, has our relatively peaceful recent history disconnected us from our native cultures?

As usual it was the personal interpretation, delivered with good humour and backed by a deep and passionate knowledge of the local stories, which made the experience so much more enjoyable. The nature guides' admirable ability to burst into spontaneous and unembarrassed song set them apart from most UK interpreters (well me at least!).

In case you were wondering, the conclusion to the panel at Sabiles was; 'Good wine is the safest way to make your life delightful and beautiful'

Cheers!

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The ARCH network organises trips that are open to anyone working in the natural and cultural heritage sector within Scotland.