

Blue Flag flies for another year in Vecāķi and Vakarbuļļi

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On Friday, 2 June, Blue Flags were raised at two beaches in Riga, Vecāķi and Vakarbuļļi, to demonstrate their compliance with international environmental quality standards.

This year's raising of the flag was 16th for the Vakarbuļļi beach and the 6th for the Vecāķi beach, pointing at the consistently excellent quality of these swimming locations. To receive a Blue Flag, swimming sites must meet 29 criteria covering water quality, beach management and services, safety, outdoor information, and education. As they seek to meet the Blue Flag criteria, swimming sites implement management that takes into account environmental protection and sustainable growth, with a strong focus on maintaining the quality of the environment and protecting biodiversity, thus guaranteeing safe recreation in a clean environment.

'The fact that Vecāķi has got its Blue Flag for the 6th time in a row, and Vakarbuļļi, for the 16th, is proof that Riga protects its valuable nature. All of Riga's swimming sites are safe for swimming, but the Blue Flag certificate shows that Riga seeks to do more to ensure that its water recreation areas are convenient, safe, and sustainably managed. I urge all swimmers to be safe in the water and to leave the swimming areas clean and tidy after themselves. The Baltic Sea is not just a beautiful beach, it is a great natural treasure, essential for Latvia's growth and survival. The Baltic is one of the world's youngest but most heavily used seas, and it is important for us to preserve and protect it. That's why this summer, Riga will also join a Baltic Sea clean-up initiative, which will launch on 31 August,' Selina Vancāne, head of the Riga City Council Housing and Environment Committee, said.

Jānis Ulme, the national coordinator of the Blue Flag Programme of the Foundation for Environmental Education, emphasised that all the criteria that have to be met for a swimming site to get a Blue Flag are closely related to what matters the most: cooperation between those that manage the beach and local residents, in order to leave a better environment for future generations.

This year, the Riga Blue Flag raising event in was held in conjunction with the European Union's LIFE Programme for the Environment and Climate Action, with the installation of large stands on the beaches of Vecāķi, Daugavgrīva, and eight other places in Latvia. Their purpose is to draw attention to the issue of litter on the coast, encouraging locals and beach-goers to be responsible during the beach season, to choose sustainable alternatives to the food packaging they take with them to the beach, to pick up and take away the waste they produce, or dispose of it in the nearest waste bin, to be aware of how long it takes for the waste left behind to decompose and of its impact on the coastal ecosystem. Large information stands are being installed at 10 locations along the Baltic Sea coast in Latvia. Unveiling the stand in Vecāķi, Inga Priede, adviser for environmental protection and local government affairs to the Minister of Environmental Protection and Regional Development, stressed the personal environmental responsibility of every guest of the swimming area, and making sure that the Latvian coastline is clean and tidy.

Riga's swimming facilities have seen improvements this year, making water recreation more comfortable and enjoyable. New changing stalls for people with functional disabilities have been installed in the Ķīpsala, Vakarbuļļi, and Daugavgrīva swimming areas. A new boardwalk with two recreation terraces, equipped with sun loungers and additional benches, has been set up in the Vakarbuļļi swimming area, for better access to this space. The Ķīpsala swimming area has got a new boardwalk with one recreation terrace, four sun loungers and four benches.

The Kleistu Street outdoor recreation area near the Hapaka Canal and the Buļļupe River outdoor recreation area near Birzes Street have been equipped with four new changing stalls, two new lounge benches, with repairs in its existing benches. Five double-sided benches have been installed in the Daugavgrīva swimming area, produced as part of the project 'Implementation of practical waterside management activities' of the Latvian Environmental Protection Fund, supported by the Latvian Association of Local Governments. This year, six double-sided beach benches are to be produced and installed in the Vecāķi swimming area.

In late 2022, improvements were completed at the Daugava waterfront in the Dārziņi neighbourhood, at Jāņogu iela 48 and on Zirņu Island. As part of the implementation of the ideas submitted by the neighbourhood's residence for the participatory budget project competition, benches, loungers, changing stalls, an observation deck, and a bonfire spot were set up. Zirņu Island now has a ramp with handrails leading to the recreation area, making it more accessible. The construction of the Vecāķi boardwalk, which will be the result of a participatory budget project submitted by the Vecāķi Association, is expected to be completed by the end of July.

Riga has a total of eight official swimming areas: Daugavgrīva, Vakarbuļļi, Vecāķi, Rumbula, Lake Bābelītis, Ķīpsala, Lucavsala, and Lucavsala Bay. The lifeguards of the Riga Municipal Police handle of the safety of swimmers at all the official swimming areas, and in the Kišezers Lake recreation area. For the second year in a row, a drone is used to ensure safety at Vecāķi, Riga's largest swimming area which stretches 800 metres along the sea coast.

For more details Riga's swimming sites, visit: <https://www.riga.lv/lv/rigas-pilsetas-peldvietas>

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