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There'll be a lot of Latvian guests in my living room

Anna Hanks, LOCAL CONTRIBUTOR

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It's never easy getting ready for a gazillion European houseguests to stay in your small Central Austin bungalow.

When your houseguests are some of the more famous people from the tiny post-Soviet county of Latvia — and you've just had uncomfortable unscheduled surgery — it makes things infinitely more interesting. One of the oldest jokes about South by Southwest Music Festival attendees is that "all these people are famous back home."

I once worked for a small newspaper in Riga, Latvia. When I met Latvian journalists Dace Volfa and Toms Grevins at SXSW 2006, I impulsively invited them to stay with me next time they came to town. I never dreamed they would come back. Twice.

I also never dreamed that this impulsive invitation would land me smack-dab in the center of this year's Latvian invasion of SXSW.

When I went to see Volfa and Grevins in Riga, it took me a long time to realize that the double-takes we got on the street weren't because of my American accent, but because of them.

Crawling into the back of a Riga taxi with my Texas twang doesn't merit much attention from the cabdriver. Getting in the back of a Riga taxi with Volfa means that driver sits up straighter and turns around several times to make sure it's really her.

With Grevins, who is on radio and TV, things are even more intense. This past summer, Grevins and I were biking to a music festival in a small Latvian town. A crowd of teen girls started shouting his name and running after him.

Strangely, Volfa and Grevins aren't the only well-known Latvian figures coming to SXSW. Volfa's former husband, also a radio and TV celebrity, will be here for SXSW, along with what about 60 Latvians, according to Grevins' estimate.

I can't help but wonder if I might be partly responsible for the number of Latvians at SXSW. Over the past two years, I've twice been allowed backstage at the Positivus music festival in Latvia. This year, the Positivus organizers are coming to SXSW. This might be because SXSW isn't so foreign when someone from Austin already has come to your festival and written about you!

Though there are a lot of Latvian "big fish" coming to SXSW, it seems they are small-fry in Austin.

While we have Latvian celebrities staying at the house, my most important guests are the Latvian group Instrumenti.

Instrumenti is a duo of two classically trained musicians who perform while dressed as pandas. They even wear costume panda heads on stage! They've been performing all over the Baltic States with a catchy single, "Life Jacket Under Your Seat."

Though I hope for the best for all my SXSW guests, I especially

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hope things go well for Instrumenti. They've had a lot of success at home, but they're coming halfway around the world just to play an early show at the out-of-the-way Karma Lounge, a setup that could easily lead to disappointment.

Our tiny house is at capacity, but I want my SXSW guests to be comfortable. I hope no one's air mattress springs a leak, that their borrowed sleeping bags are warm, and that my guests don't mind cleaning up after themselves while I'm recovering from surgery.

It's well and good to be famous in Latvia, but when you get to Austin, there is a good chance that you'll find yourselves helping with the dishes.

I'm just dying to see if Instrumenti does the dishes while wearing those panda heads!

Hanks is an Austin freelance writer.

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