

# GDANSK PARTNERS

*David J. Whyte “Wizzed” his way towards Lech Walesa International Airport and Gdansk on Poland’s Baltic coast to find out just what this central European country is all about*



Sierra Golf Club

Over the past decade Scotland has seen a steady influx of Polish people coming to live and work here and most welcome they are too!

These friendly, hard-working people have made a sizeable contribution to the Scottish economy and, if I may say, brought a ray of sunshine into our oft-times lacklustre service industries.

I sometimes wondered in an absent-minded sort of way, though, just how they got here. In an old Trabant driven across Europe loaded down with mattresses, goats and chickens? Or maybe a horse-drawn cart with pots and pans dangling off the back? No! They come by Wizz Air, the ultra-modern low-cost carrier that serves most of eastern and central Europe.

Before I say anything further, I must apologise unreservedly to any Poles who might take offence at my utter ignorance of their nation. Not at all familiar with the

country or culture, I really did not have a clue what to expect when I was invited to come and play golf there.

Golf and Poland are two words I have never seen nor heard in the same sentence. From the airport en route to the first golf outing I was struck by how pleasantly well-ordered and appealing everything appeared, almost Alpine in character, tidy little apartments and amicable looking people strolling in the early autumn sunshine.

Regarding golf, I presumed I’d be shuffling round tracks akin to our most basic municipal. How far could this be from the reality that now lay before me? Sierra Golf Club is a half-hour drive from Gdansk; the clubhouse is a citadel of fine taste, comfort and modernity with Sky Sports showing the latest golf tournament and a tolerable selection of beers and wines behind the bar.



Sierra Golf Club

## AWE-INSPIRING

If that had created a good first impression, the golf course was even more awe-inspiring. The flagpoles were made from the finest mahogany. Well, maybe not – but a quality wood trimmed in brass with a hefty feel in the hand.

The rest of the course furniture would grace the most upmarket of upmarket garden centres while banks of flowerbeds and shapely shrubbery embellished the shapely fairways. Dainty bridges crossed water hazards and high-spouting waterfalls gave it an Edwardian English country estate appeal. This was a veritable Capability Brown knockoff! After the round we freshened up in our spaciouly modern apartments overlooking the golf course and dined in style at the Sierra Clubhouse.

“Maybe Sierra is a one-off,” I grumbled to myself as we drove off in search of more Polish encounters. There are only 25 golf courses in the entire country. We were

touring those around Gdansk near the country’s northern coast.

This area is ideal for a short golf break, with the courses all within around an hour’s drive of Gdansk. You could plan as we did to play three courses in three days. First, though, we sampled the culture and cuisine of the somewhat unimaginatively named TriCity, more inspiringly called Trjmiasto in Polish and made up of the three adjoining urbanisations of Gdansk, Gdynia and Sopot.

Overlooking the sandy coasts of Gdask Bay, this is where Poles take their seaside holidays. We strolled along gracious avenues and beachside boulevards. Even in late September it was warm and cheery. In Sopot we stopped at a waterfront eatery called Bulaj and enjoyed a cavalcade of delicious fish dishes the likes of which would grace the finest Michelin-starred restaurant. I began to wonder why Poles would ever want to leave the place.



Gdansk Golf and Country Club, Poland



## LABYRINTH

The City of Gdansk is a labyrinth of mediaeval tenement buildings fronted by ancient docks and a glittering new marina. One of Poland’s oldest cities, Gdansk has a history that stretches back a thousand years and I was surprised to learn that one of Aberdeen’s most illustrious sons played a role in it.

The young Robert Gordon graduated from Marischal College in 1689 and soon afterwards left the city to travel far and wide, finally settling in Gdansk. Here he started business as a merchant trader and soon became quite wealthy. By 1692, he was rich enough to donate a large sum of money to his old college and by 1699 he was providing low interest loans to landowners throughout Aberdeenshire. Finally returning to Aberdeen in the 1720s, he donated his considerable fortune to the building of a hospital with the added remit of helping educate and care for the city’s young men. The hospital developed into Robert Gordon’s College, finally becoming The Robert Gordon University.

You can easily imagine the young Robert strolling round the antique streets of Gdansk, little changed since his day. There’s shopping on Amber Street (actually called Mariacka Street), a narrow conduit running from the river to the heart of the Old Town lined with amber-bejewelled shops and street sellers. Poland is famous for these molten golden globules, fossilised tree resin from primordial forests now buried deep underneath the Baltic Sea. Sizeable chunks often wash up on the beaches. At one time amber was as cheap as chips in Poland but nearby mines flooded and now it’s more scarce and significantly more expensive.

Apart from amber, Poland is remarkably inexpensive. Let’s be blunt: it’s cheap. In Gdansk you can buy a glass of beer for one solitary euro. You could have something to eat – albeit a snack – for 2 euros. A round of golf at the ultra upmarket, super-suave Sierra Golf Club sets you back a mere 50 euros – even cheaper if you book as part of

a package. And to polish things off, a half-litre bottle of the purest vodka in a supermarket will only set you back a mind-numbing 4 or 5 Euros. To a Scotsman, Poland was beginning to add up.

## INSIGHTS

The cultural highlight of Gdansk was a visit to the newly-opened Solidarity Museum next to the once infamous Gdansk shipyards. The building, inaugurated only a week before our visit, offers a riveting insight into the struggle of Lech Walesa and the Polish Shipyard workers and their bid to wrest free from Communist oppression and years of austerity. Their efforts ultimately created a remarkable domino effect that brought down the Berlin Wall and indeed eventually Communist USSR. This is one of the best museums of its kind I’ve encountered and worth a few hours of your

time rather than the flying visit we had scheduled.

Getting to golf, Sand Valley is yet another excellent golf course that does exactly what it says on the tin. Built on a geomorphic basin of sand, the fairways snake and shimmy between rivulets of bunkers. Now, I’m generally not in favour of the term “Inland Links”, but I have to admit Sand Valley fits that description perfectly. This is as challenging as any seaside setup on the east coast of Scotland, with the added impetus of some willfully small greens especially on the Par 3’s that are devils to hit and hold.

Once again, I was highly impressed with the standard of golf course, the welcome and the wonderful villa we had to stay in. We dined in the nearby town of Elblag, allowing

**CONTINUED / Overleaf**



Sopot Beach, Poland



Gdansk old town, Poland