

Coasting AROUND



Andrew Eames heads out of Warsaw to explore the attractive Baltic coast

It's fair to say that Warsaw is not a particularly attractive place. Mauled by history, and in parts too hastily rebuilt, the Polish capital isn't very appealing for travellers looking to extend their stay once the business week is done.

Fortunately, there are alternatives, and very good ones at that, but until the start of this year they were simply too distant to make a weekend jaunt worthwhile. Now, though, thanks to a new high-speed rail service operated by 200km/ph Pendolino trains (branded Express InterCity Premium or EIP), you can reach the likes of Krakow, Wroclaw and Gdansk in a couple of hours, and for a reasonable price. My 350km journey to Gdansk cost the same as the 27km Heathrow Express (£21.50 second class, tickets via intercity.pl) – and that included a free drink and wifi.

I'd chosen Gdansk partly because I'd read some intriguing accounts of how unexpectedly handsome

it was, despite its association with shipyards and the Solidarity strikers who triggered the collapse of Communism. I also wanted to escape to the seaside after Warsaw's dehumanising concrete and steel, and I'd heard that just around the shore from Gdansk was the posh beachside enclave of Sopot, where the *politburo* (the executive committee of the Soviet Union's Communist Party) used to go on holiday.

Warsaw's Central Station is one of the *politburo*'s last big gestures, and a pretty empty one at that – a monolith of modernist concrete, it was built to impress Russian leader Leonid Brezhnev when he visited in 1975. The platforms are reminiscent of an underground car park, so the Pendolino, when it arrived, was a relief – new, bright and comfortable.

I don't know much about Poland's countryside, so I spent much of the journey watching the landscape fly by. It is initially flat – huge expanses of cereals – and

then morphs into undulating hills with lakes and orchards, criss-crossing the Vistula river. Not long before we arrived, we passed a giant fortress sitting by the water – Malbork castle, the 15th-century home of the Teutonic Knights. This should have given me a clue of what was to come.

Unlike Warsaw Central, Gdansk station looks just like a city gateway should look – a majestic temple to travel. But what lay beyond was not what I expected. Downtown Gdansk is rather like Delft; a chunk of Dutch Renaissance architecture airlifted on to the Baltic coast.

The heart of the city is all gabled, cobble-streets and pastel-painted, with red-brick Gothic towers dominating the skyline. At street level, there are gargoyles, engravings, delicate pieces of plasterwork, leaded glass and arched gateways leading to nests of pedestrian-only passages and waterside

promenades. The area is buzzing with smiling people – particularly noticeable after lugubrious Warsaw – and street musicians; Gdansk is home to an excellent music academy.

There is a simple explanation for the city's sense of otherness compared with the rest of Poland. Gdansk's history is complex, but in essence it was a Hanseatic trading city, modelled on Germany's Lubeck, and settled by Dutch, Germans and British, among others. For much of its history, it has been self-governing and independent, a bit like Venice. The Germans called it Danzig, and it was still German-speaking right up until the Second World War, when it was actually used by Hitler as an excuse for invading Poland.

I'd booked a room at the Radisson Blu (radissonblu.com/hotel-gdansk) on Dlugi Targ, otherwise known as Long Market. The city's main

Above: Sopot



Above: Gdansk

rectangular square, it is lined with restaurants and with boutiques selling polished Baltic amber in all sizes and prices. Here, a Dutch Baroque façade conceals the Radisson's modern interior, where Scandinavians, Germans and Brits convene for meetings.

According to general manager Michael Saling, the main topics of discussion are usually shipbuilding and outsourcing – the latter because the region has developed a flourishing line in providing accountancy and systems management at competitive prices to overseas corporations. Evidently, there has been a quiet boom in what Poles call the Tri-City (Gdansk, Sopot and neighbouring Gdynia) since 2012, partly thanks to a favourable impression given to international fans during that year's UEFA European Football Championship (co-hosted by Poland and Ukraine).

It's about time something good happened here. Thanks to its German backstory, Gdansk was largely destroyed by the Red Army at the end of the war, and has had to be painstakingly rebuilt. The process is still ongoing and, just across the river from the hotel, there are still some ruins of big old brick granaries from the city's trading past.

That riverside was the original Hanseatic port, but now its focus is leisure, with boats offering tours

around the newer port or across to Hel, which, despite the name, is a popular beach resort two hours' sailing time across the bay. Alas, for me, time was too short for Hel, but I did savour Gdansk's waterside promenade instead, having a succulent bouillabaisse in the Targ Rybny Fishmarkt Restaurant (6C Targ Rybny Ulica, tel +48 583 209 011, targrybny.pl) and a lip-smacking freshly brewed beer in the microbrewery on the other side of the water, the Brovarnia Gdansk (brovarnia.pl).

Towards the docks, marked out by old cranes posing rhetorical question marks against the sky, I found two key locations associated with Lech Walesa, the co-founder of the Solidarity movement, former Polish president, and Nobel Peace Prize winner. One is his former workplace – still a humble shed – and the second is his new office inside the hulking new rust-coloured Solidarity Centre. Opened last year, its exhibition charts the rise of the movement, the oppression it faced, and the far-reaching impact it had (1 Plac Solidarnosci; entry £3; ecs.gda.pl).

After a day in Gdansk, I headed out to Sopot (local trains run every few minutes) to find myself amid elegant turn-of-the-century villas and a long boutique-lined street down to Europe's longest



wooden pier, sticking out from a big curve of beach. People come here to look decorative amongst the swans (the Baltic is brackish, not totally salty) and, although Sopot has the reputation of a party town, I found it endearingly old-fashioned. Mind you, it was early in the year for crowds.

The 90-year-old Grand hotel (refurbished by Sofitel) is where the celebrities stay, and photos on the wall show an unlikely mix: Vladimir Putin, General de Gaulle, Prince and Shakira. Its restaurant, with big windows overlooking the beach, feels like an ocean liner at rest.

I, however, had my lunch in a new place that reflects the region's renewed burst of life – the art café Zatoka Sztuki (14 Al F Mamuszki; tel +48 785 881 390; mcka.pl) in a prime position at the back of the beach, filled with sunglasses trend-setters. The menu, however, was quite traditional: borscht soup that tasted almost fruity, and meat- and vegetable-filled *pierogi* dumplings, at £3.50 for a plateful, good value for a beach venue.

The next day, I made my exit from Gdansk by plane rather than train. The airport was delightfully uncrowded and calm; a fitting ending to a fine weekend.

■ Wizz Air serves Gdansk from London Luton, Liverpool, Doncaster Sheffield, Glasgow and Aberdeen: wizzair.com. See pomorskie-prestige.eu for dining recommendations and poland.travel for further information.

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