

The Spirit of Gdansk

story and photos by Peggy Sijsterwerda

“This place is a secret,” our tour guide, Izabella, tells us. “Not many tourists know about it.” We climb a grassy hill and behold an amazing view of the historic port city of Gdansk: stately red-roofed buildings, a few skyscrapers, patches of green. In the distance, cranes reach for the sky, symbols of the city’s shipbuilding history as well as its important role as a seaport. Just beyond, miles of sandy beaches line the Baltic Sea, earning this region its nickname: the Jewel of the Baltic.

Gdansk has been on my list of places to visit for a while, and I’m happy to be here with my husband, Peter and our son, Ross. We stand on the fortified hill known as the Fort of Gora Gradowa, perhaps in the very spot Napoleon admired the city of Gdansk after capturing it in 1807. Besides its amazing views, the fort serves to remind visitors of the city’s strategic value to neighboring aggressors. Indeed, over the centuries Gdansk has been a key player in the tug-of-war military games that have cascaded across the continent.

The city has been a turning point in history more than once over the years, yet has emerged a vibrant, modern metropolis with lots to see and do—surprising perhaps considering Poland escaped Communist rule barely 25 years ago. Yet Gdanskers, like all Poles, have great pride in their heritage and tradition, and in spite of its turbulent history, the city has retained plenty of charm and spirit. In fact, it’s the spirit of Gdansk and its people that will capture your heart.

ON THE FARM

After an eight-hour drive in our rental car from Berlin—next time we’ll fly—we arrive in Gdansk and start searching for the farm where we’ll spend our first two nights. I found Osrodek Tabun online while researching Gdansk, and it looked too good to be true: an affordable and charming brick inn and restaurant surrounded by countryside just 15 minutes from the city center. It also offers horseback riding. It sounds perfect!



St. Mary’s Cathedral, the largest brick church in the world, towers over the Gdansk skyline and holds 25,000 people.

Unfortunately, it’s a little hard to find without a GPS. After driving around in circles about an hour, we find someone who directs us to the correct street. Peter, Ross, and I pull in the gate about 10:30 p.m., yet it’s still light out. Thankfully, Agate, the owner’s daughter, is waiting for us and shows us to our cozy rooms. Before going to bed, we head outside where a warm campfire glows and have a welcome glass of wine as our long travel day edges slowly into night.

The next morning we awake to the sound of rain pouring down. Wouldn’t you know? We only have one chance to go riding, and today is the day. Ross opts out, but Peter and I are game, and after a delicious, hearty breakfast, we put on rain gear and head to the stables. Agate is surprised to see us, but willing to take us for a trail ride. Fortunately, the rain softens a bit, and Agate leads us on trails through a lush forest with a lake in the center. The land is a municipal park and perfect for a trail ride.

Our horses are a little antsy, and twice my horse bolts while we trot. Whoa, Nel-

lie! I’m not sure if it’s due to his spirited bloodlines, the rain, or the fact that I’m wearing boat shoes instead of boots (what was I thinking?). The good news is I don’t fall off and the horse comes to a stop when I pull on the reins. After the horse takes off a second time, I ask Agate if we can walk the rest of the way and relax and enjoy the peaceful forest.

Around two in the afternoon we dine in Tabun’s restaurant. Typically in Poland your main meal is lunch, and in the evening you generally eat a lighter meal. I love my soup, a traditional Polish soup called Zurek, which has potatoes, different kinds of sausage and pork, and hardboiled eggs. In my notes I write: “tangy, salty, earthy, hearty, smoky, bold, rich.” Pretty amazing. Afterwards we go shopping at a nearby hypermarket, a European-style Walmart, which offers everything from electronics to clothing to groceries. You’ll often find aisles of spirits as well, so we buy a bottle of Polish vodka and some wine, as well as a GPS so we can find our way around Gdansk.

That night we sit around the camp-

fire again and meet a family from Norway, roasting sausages, which they graciously share with us. Yum. Now I know why they call them Polish sausages! The husband, a ship captain, regales us with stories about his life on the sea while his Polish wife listens. Their kids come and go while we sit and talk. I love the relaxed vibe at Tabun and would recommend a stay here to anyone, especially families.

TENACIOUS SPIRIT

The next day we head into the city center, where we’ll stay at the Radisson Blu, a contemporary hotel housed in an historic building right on the main square. After dropping off our bags, we meet our tour guide, Izabella, to get an overview of the city.

Of course, everyone knows Gdansk is where the Solidarity movement was born. In 1980 a shipyard strike led by Lech Walesa and a handful of workers eventually brought about the end of Communism and ushered in a new age of democracy in Eastern Europe and beyond. But the path wasn’t an easy one.

An exhibit called “Roads to Freedom” depicts the harrowing journey and the brave men and women who suffered under the Communist regime. Visitors enter into an underground bunker, greeted by a dimly lit replica of a grocery store from the 1970s. The shelves are empty except for a few loaves of stale bread. An ugly pair of women’s shoes is available to purchase.

Adopting the role of shopkeeper, Izabella says in a whisper, “Take it. You can trade these for what you need on the black market.” It’s hard to fathom that Polish people couldn’t buy basics like milk and eggs as recently as the 70s, and my respect for their tenacious spirit grows.

Exhibits about political repression continue in an adjoining room and feature multiple attempts by Gdansk citizens to fight oppression. Through persistence and fortitude, their efforts resulted in the fall of Communism in 1989 when Poland elected Lech Walesa president. Along the way many lost their lives, and at the nearby Gdansk shipyard three crosses stretch to the heavens, a monument to three of the



Ross stands at the shipyard gates.



The friendly bartender at Zaprzasamy preparing our tartare.



Osrodek Tabun offers cozy rooms, riding, and excellent cuisine.

The Spirit of Gdansk (cont.)

many victims killed in the crusade for freedom.

Next to the shipyard gate is the state-of-the-art European Solidarity Centre, currently under construction. Scheduled to open in 2014, the museum is a testament to our right to be free. Its goal is to promote democracy and independence, and it will be the new home of "Roads to Freedom," as well as archives, exhibits, and educational activities. Also under construction, the Museum of WWII—expected to open in Sept. 2014—will tell the story of Poland's role in WWII.

FROM THE ASHES

Besides history, Gdansk is also rich in culture. While 85 percent of the city was destroyed in WWII, its historic center has been artfully restored. At each end of the main square, known as Long Market, imposing gatehouses from the 16th and 17th centuries stand guard. By the Motława River, the Green Gate features four arches, under which buskers perform melodious music for passersby. Upstairs Lech Walesa still maintains an office, although he's retired now and spends little time there, according to Izabella.

In the middle of Long Market—which is actually a gently curving rectangle—a splendid statue of King Neptune atop a splashing fountain keeps watch over the city. Colorful Rococo-style burgher houses line the square, some with Gothic moldings and original porticoes. One mansion, Artus Court, is known for its 10-meter tiled stove, the tallest in Europe, built in the Renaissance using 500 tiles. Not far away is the Main Town Hall, rebuilt after being destroyed in WWII and now the home of Gdansk History Museum. Lushly painted ceilings and colorful frescoes, such as are found in the Red Room, contrast starkly

with an exhibit of black-and-white photos depicting the bombed-out city after WWII. Again I am struck by the effort and spirit required to lift Gdansk from the ashes.

At the end of the square, a former prison tower houses the Amber Museum, where you'll learn about the history of "the gold of the north," which has enchanted mankind since the early Romans. Gdansk is known as the World Capital of Amber, so it's fitting that this museum contains an extensive collection of amber and objet d'art. You can even try your luck at finding amber on a nearby beach. Peter, Ross, and I head to the coast late one afternoon for a treasure hunt and find a few tiny bits of amber as we stroll along the peaceful shore, relishing a taste of the region's natural beauty.

That night we take Izabella's advice and visit a locals' hangout called Zapraszamy, a block from Long Market. Inside a boisterous young crowd is drinking beer from straws and having a great time. No wonder it's a popular spot for youth: the prices here are rock bottom. One euro (about \$1.40) for a beer or shot of "wodka" and two euros for a sausage or other snack. We love the bar's vibe—newspaper wallpaper on the walls, servers in bow ties—and partake in a few tasty drinks and snacks. The vodka, served ice cold, is smooth and warms your soul as it goes down. Na zdrowie!

MARITIME HISTORY

The next day we visit the Polish Maritime Museum, which offers an informative look at Gdansk's role in maritime history. The museum, a short walk from the main square, has four components on both sides of the Motława River. A row of former granaries houses its permanent collections, including artifacts recovered by the

museum's archaeological team. Soldek, a cargo vessel docked outside, invites you to see firsthand what life aboard ship is like. A five-minute ride across the river brings you to the Maritime Culture Center, where sea-themed exhibits provide hands-on fun for kids.

Next door is Zuraw—The Crane, the largest medieval port crane in Europe considered by many the symbol of the city. Built in the 1400s, the crane represents Gdansk's great trading era and welcomes visitors to learn about its inner workings. The surrounding riverfront area abounds with restaurants and terraces, the perfect place to relax and watch the world go by.

We lunch across the street at Hotel Gdansk, a four-star boutique hotel right beside the marina. Before dining, we sit outside on the terrace and enjoy the warm sun. When clouds begin to intervene, handy blankets on the backs of the chairs offer a cozy option. The restaurant is housed upstairs in a 300-year-old building, where magnificent wooden beams on the ceiling make you feel transported to another era. The contemporary cuisine and gracious service brings you back to modern times, however, and we enjoy stellar dishes like spicy fisherman's soup, gravlax, liver paté, and spinach pirogis.

After lunch we stroll along the riverfront and think about the sailors who

embarked from Gdansk to travel the world. We feel blessed to be able to spend a few days in this beautiful city. Its proliferation of museums and attractions, pristine beaches and deep forests ensure the whole family will be entertained. Yet it's the city's remarkable transition from the rubble of WWII and decades of oppressive Communist rule to the lively modern city it is today that impresses me most of all. ▀

• For tourist information, visit www.gdansk.pl and www.gdansk4u.pl

• The Radisson Blu, Hotel Gdansk is a block from Long Market, walking distance to most attractions. Rooms are comfortable and start at \$100 a night. www.radissonblu.com/hotel-gdansk

• For a unique, affordable agri-tourism experience, stay at Osrodek Tabun, an idyllic farm about 15 minutes from the city center. Perfect for families, Tabun is located next to a beautiful wooded nature area and features five guest rooms and an apartment. A double room runs around \$55 per night. www.tabun.kuznia.net


• Tour Guide—I recommend Izabella Daszkiewicz. Contact her at gedanka@op.pl.

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