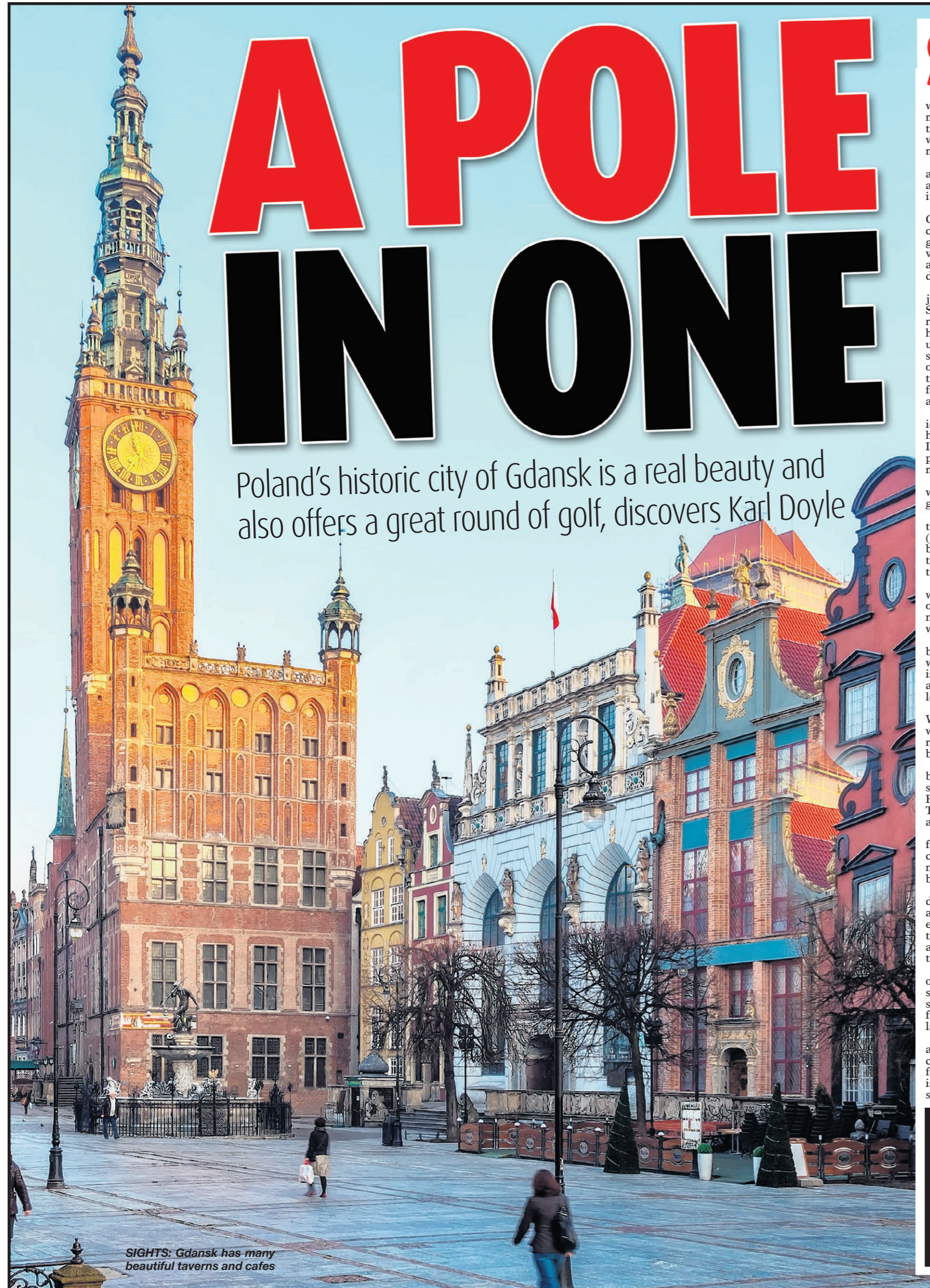




A POLE IN ONE

Poland's historic city of Gdansk is a real beauty and also offers a great round of golf, discovers Karl Doyle



SO MANY Polish people have come to Ireland over the last decade, but most of us know little about their home country's culture.

My recent trip, to what I believed would be an industrial city, taught me more than I was expecting – and the fact that I was surprised Gdansk was so beautiful was purely down to my own ignorance.

It's a mistake I won't make again, and more of Poland's great cities are certainly planned for my future itineraries.

But, yes, the industrial nature of Gdansk is a huge part of what the city is – and a visit to the shipyards gives you a unique insight into a vital piece of modern history. This, after all, is the birthplace of the downfall of communism.

Anyone of a certain vintage (let's just say you remember when Snickers were Marathon bars) will remember when Lech Walesa – a humble electrician and trade unionist who worked in Gdansk shipyard – said 'no' to his Soviet oppressors and organised strikes that caused cracks in the very foundation of Communist rule across Europe.

His Solidarity movement is idolised here and its fascinating history is celebrated at the shipyard. It wouldn't normally be something I put on my itinerary, but this is a must-see shipyard.

Staying at the Mercure Hotel, we were right in the thick of what this great city has to offer.

Our English-speaking Polish tour guide Agnieszka (www.tourguidegdansk.com) brought us on a two-hour walking tour, during which I got my first real taste of Gdansk's Old Town.

In glorious late summer sunshine, we strolled the storied streets – full of unexpected vistas that I would not have immediately associated with the city.

The old city is sandwiched between the Golden Gate on the west side and the Green Gate, which is straddled by beautiful waterways and quays where the locals stroll on leisurely days off.

The city was pummeled during WWII and much of the architecture was destroyed – but plenty still remains and what was damaged has been lovingly restored.

When you think of cities with buildings, churches and meandering streets such as this you think of Prague, Vienna or Paris, but the Old Town in Gdansk is a match for anything those cities have to offer.

There is an abundance of fountains, gothic churches, stunning colours and arches, and there's also no end of places to rest your weary bones and watch the world go by.

Cafes, bars and restaurants are dotted along the pavements as you amble around taking in the gorgeous buildings, so your appetite or thirst needn't panic – the Poles, after all, know how to have a good time and enjoy life's finer offerings.

Similarly, the less well known town of Olsztyn demands a visit. Much smaller than Gdansk but with the same snaking, cobbled streets, it's a feast for the senses and even more laid-back than its big sister.

Towering over the cute taverns and quirky, gothic buildings is the centrepiece of the town – the wood-fortified Ordensburg Castle, which is over 700 years old. A late evening strolling around here had that

TRAVEL FACTS

For more information on Poland visit:
• www.poland.travel (Polish National Tourist Office in London),
• www.prot.gda.pl (Pomorska Tourist Board),
• www.mazury.travel (Masuria Tourist Board)

hunger and thirst awake again, so we toddled off to the most local of local restaurants – Karczma Jana on the banks of the River Lyna. I could not recommend this quirky haunt highly enough if you want to really sample local cuisine.

Incidentally, we stayed at the Willa Port Hotel, which is perched beautifully overlooking a lake, where you can watch the local boaters do their thing.

Although it's not the first place you'd think of for a bit of holiday golf – Spain and Portugal being the 'big daddies' in that regard – all that is changing, and changing considerably.

When I first travelled to Poland to play golf the general reaction was "seriously? Golf in Poland?" But many golfers are becoming aware of the quality product that's available there – and the price-savvy among us are cottoning on to the value that's on offer, too.

There's also the added kudos of giving the old "been there, done that" yarn at the nineteenth hole.

We managed to play Sand Valley, Sierra, Gdansk and Mazury golf clubs, and all three are more than worthy of the (thankfully modest) green fee. We began at Sierra, with its elegant and beautifully manicured fairways and rolling countryside. The courses seemed to be designed to get stronger as it went along, with each hole getting progressively more difficult and challenging. The whole place whispers 'classy' in your ear.

Gdansk GC, otherwise known as Postolowo (www.postolowo.com), is one of the country's oldest and is just a half-hour from the airport. A



TOUR: Lech Walesa's workshop in the shipyard, guide Angieszka, and the interior of one of the city's churches



real challenge, it features mature trees framing each hole, but they're always ready to devour your ball. Water is a key feature, so bring some spares!

Deep into the beautiful Lake District is the majestic Mazury Golf Club, where the staff seems uncannily eager to ensure you enjoy your game. There's a real buzz about this place as they seek

to get younger golfers to take up the old game, and that desire to please translates to the course, too. You will not regret losing a couple of Titleists on this impressive track.

Finally, there's Sand Valley – probably the first choice for most golfers travelling to the region.

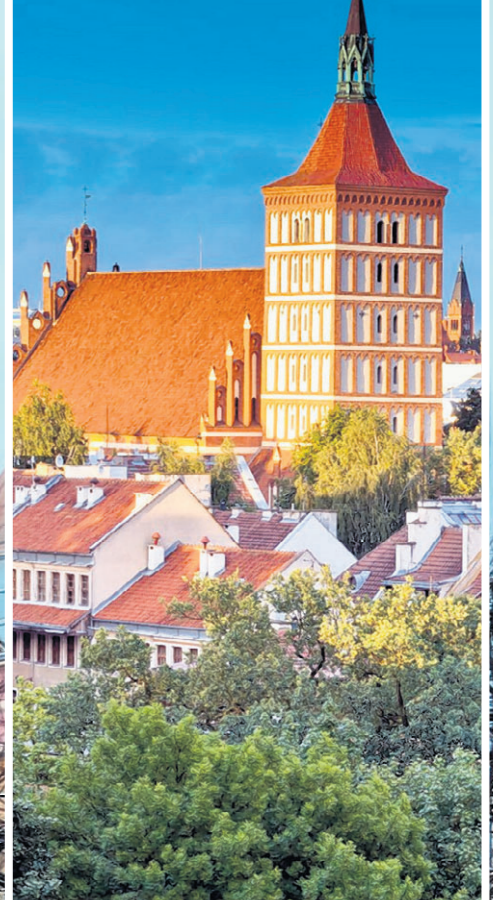
The course is top quality in all aspects – from when you step on to the first tee to when you walk off the 18th green, probably bewildered at the challenge you've just overcome. Anyone serious

about playing a real challenge of a layout must play here – it's that simple. Impeccably maintained, it will bring out the best in your game.

It also makes for a great base camp for golfers with its beautifully furnished 'golf lodges'. Special packages are available (www.sandvalley.pl) to allow you to stay in these spectacular abodes, many of which feature steam rooms, Jacuzzis, barbecue pits and even their own swimming pools.

Do you know what? Forget about just visiting – I could retire here.

BELLS: Cathedral in Gdansk's scenic Olsztyn quarter



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SIGHTS: Gdansk has many beautiful taverns and cafes