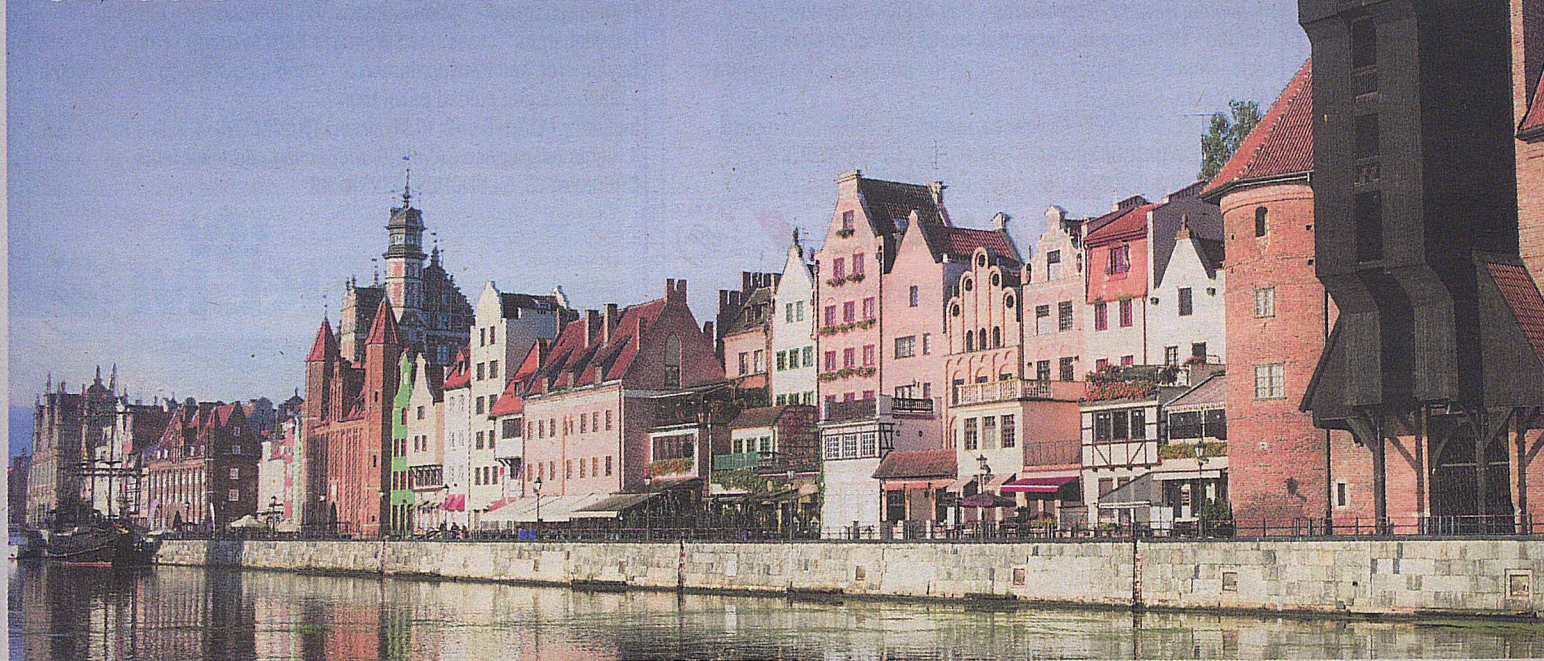


Thinking outside the traditional tee box



SIGHTS WORTH SEEING: The old town of Gdansk is laden with history and interesting things to see

GOLF IN POLAND

Jamesie O'Connor

WHEN the travel editor rang to say a five day golf trip had landed on her desk at short notice, and would I be interested, I was already packing the clubs. But rewind. Did she say Poland? Do they play golf in Poland? Time to find out.

We flew to Gdansk from Dublin with Ryanair, as guests of the Polish National Tourist Office. While our itinerary was packed — five courses in five days — the proximity of the airport to the centre of Gdansk allowed our host Bogdan, to give us a whistle-stop tour of the coastal resort of Sopot. A brief visit it may have been, but it was enough to give us a taste of what this bustling town has to offer. As we ambled past a myriad of busy cafes, bars and restaurants, towards the lavish Grand Hotel, one of the most expensive and luxurious in Poland, with its impressive facade looking out on the Baltic Sea, I could understand how the reports back on Sopot from Euro 2012 were so favourable.

From here, we took a stroll along the famous Molo, apparently Europe's longest wooden pier, which stretches for over half a kilometre into the Bay of Gdansk. With the sun on our backs and a gentle breeze blowing, I'd have gladly lingered were it not for the draw of an afternoon tee time at the Sierra Golf Club, northwest of Gdansk, the city which along with Gdansk and Sopot makes up the "Tricity" conurbation.

After a leisurely lunch we headed for the first tee. From the off, the quality and conditioning of the course was first class, with the more undulating back nine in particular providing a stern but thoroughly enjoyable test of golf. The GPS on our golf carts, which removed some of the guesswork from club selection, was another modern touch, and overall, it was a seriously impressive introduction to what golf in Poland has to offer.

Accommodation that night was on site in the newly constructed Sierra Apartments, looking

play and stay, an option many of their Scandinavian visitors choose to take.

The next day brought us to Tokary Golf Club, currently a nine hole course but with a further nine under construction. Less polished than Sierra, it still had some really interesting and enjoyable holes, and from what we saw of the new course, is a place with plenty of potential.

After a lunch of traditional Polish dumplings, we headed back to Gdansk and our base for the evening, the Mercure Hotel. Seventeen stories high, it's ideally located offering unique views of both the picturesque Old Town on one side, and the historic Gdansk shipyards on the other. With a guided tour arranged, it was here our host Agnieszka took us first; the shipyards being the birthplace of the Solidarity movement through which Lech Walesa played a key role in bringing an end to Communist rule across Central Europe.

From there, it was a short walk to the Old Town, a place laden with history and plenty of sights worth seeing. What struck me walking around, however, was how beautiful a city Gdansk actually is. Extensively bombed during World War II, much of it lay in ruins 70 years ago. But as you go through the Golden Gate, part of what's called the Royal Way, there are photographs taken at the end of the war on display, and it's astonishing to see the city as it was then, and compare it to the way it is now.

The following morning, we had about an hour's drive east to the third of our golf courses, Sand Valley. Completely different to Sierra and Tokary, this is an inland links-style track, a concept many have tried, but more often than not in my experience, failed to pull off. Sand Valley however gets it spot on. Completely sand based, with generously wide fairways, heavily contoured greens, huge waste bunkers, and that rugged linksy look, the course is designed and maintained to play firm and fast. It has some

truly outstanding holes, was a blast from start to finish, and to a man, we all loved it.

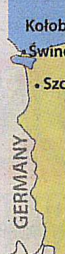
The lodgings at Sand Valley, a minute's walk from the clubhouse, comprised a number of newly built villas capable of accommodating anywhere from four to 12 people. This was a place I would definitely come back to, and I couldn't say enough about our hosts and the hospitality extended to us at Sand Valley. But, our schedule dictated we had to head further east, to the Warmia/Mazury or Masurian lakes region, so it was on to the town of Ostroda, and the four star Willa Port Hotel. Located on the shore of the Drzewickie Lake, the hotel was top class, with modern spacious rooms, excellent spa and leisure club facilities, good food, and even an American style pool table in the cocktail bar.

The golf course loomed large once more, so with the clubs packed, it was on to our penultimate round, further east at the Mazury Golf and Country Club, near the town of Olstyn. Designed by Martin Hawtree, water comes into play on two thirds of the holes. I didn't play as well as on the previous day, and a downpour didn't help, but again the course itself posed plenty of challenges.

We stayed in the nearby Hotel Marina Golf Club. Set on a small peninsula in Lake Wulpin-skie, this five star Scandinavian designed hotel has an abundance of activities either on site or close by. That evening, after a brief guided tour of Olstyn, capital of what they also call the Thousand Lakes region, we dined in a traditional local restaurant. Unsurprisingly given where we were, fish, duck and a traditional crab soup, were all well received. While I'm not much of a drinker, the vodka and beer were getting the thumbs up from my colleagues all week, and with an average round of five drinks costing about €12, a two and a half hour flight time, and reasonably priced green fees, a lot of the boxes were being ticked.

Our final day meant an early start, with a two hour drive back towards Gdansk and our last round at Postlowo Golf Club. At times, I could have been in South Carolina, given the beauty and similarity with a number of holes on this course. The fourth hole, a brilliant par five appropriately called *Where Eagles Dare* was my favourite of the week and I thought the back nine was simply stunning. It was a great way to end a hectic five days, and a very pleasant introduction to what's

“ Sand Valley has some truly outstanding holes and was a blast



CZECH REPUBLIC
For more information visit
www.polfish.com
www.rgfb.org.uk
Board)

Golf C
Sierra
Tokary
Sand V
Mazur
www.i
Gdansk
www.i

Hotels
Villa P
Marina
www.i
Sierra



COAS