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EUROPE

## White sands and vodka on Poland's Riviera

Discover galleries, cool bars and fabulous beaches along the country's Baltic coast

Norman Miller

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Gdansk Old Town  
ALAMY



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I am wandering around Hel, and it's certainly hot. The heat is coming from summer sun bouncing off silky white sand and from the flames beneath just-landed fish, wafting flavoursome smoke up into a shady canopy of trees. The waters of the Bay of

Puck (yes, really) twinkle winningly. Hel is, in fact, rather heavenly.

The Hel peninsula is a sliver of beach-fringed woodland a few hundred yards wide for much of its 20-mile length. It lies at the eastern end of the Polish Baltic Riviera not far from the historic city of Gdansk. Shame on the Poles for keeping this northern European alternative to the Med to themselves and canny Germans.

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## Shame on the Poles for keeping this Med alternative to themselves

At its heart is Sopot, aka the “pearl of the Baltic”. Although it rose to prominence as a 16th-century spa town for the well-to-do residents of Gdansk, Sopot began as a 12th-century fishing hamlet linked to the stupendous Cistercian abbey that still beckons a few miles away in Oliwa. Today this is complemented by a gallery of contemporary art.

The wealthy citizens of Gdansk began scattering pretty manors between Sopot's wood and shore in the 16th century. This process of gentrification received a Gallic boost when the Napoleonic army medic Jean Georg Haffner came by in 1823, and decided that the wide gorgeous sands deserved something more akin to a Riviera resort.

Haffner framed his vision of Sopot around the appropriately named Grand Hotel, built in belle époque style and overlooking Europe's longest wooden pier. Poking its wide boards 515m into the Bay of Gdansk, it's pleasingly unadorned by tacky kiosks, and provides a popular filming location and setting for events such as the slow food festival in June. Sopot does celebrate a more kitsch side, though, courtesy of Opera Lesna, an international song festival (second only to Eurovision), staged each August.

With tickets from just **£17** a

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Sopot's main thoroughfare is Monte Cassino street — commonly known as Monciak — reaching inland from the beachfront and thrumming with hedonistic crowds enjoying restaurants, bars and clubs. It's well worth heading off the main drag, though. My favourite coffee stop is Mlody Byron (the Young Byron), an old dark woody space inside the little Friendship Association building, where home-made cakes and snacks can be enjoyed in a sandy backyard scattered with quirky modern sculptures.

The best places to eat are also away from Monte Cassino. At Bulaj, the top Polish chef Artur Moroz has swapped swanky restaurants for an open-air beach diner whose laid-back vibe is married to sophisticated dishes washed down with his specially distilled vodkas, each as pale and smooth as the nearby sand. In the woods near the Opera Lesna amphitheatre, Delmonico Cut Steakhouse serves stupendous wagyu beef from a local herd of Kobe cattle.

Sopot benefits from being the middle link in the so-called Tricity, rather than a solo resort; it is flanked by medieval Gdansk and the historic emigration port of Gdynia in a long line along the coast, each town split by woods full of trails.



The beach at Sopot  
ALAMY

Gdansk hogs the limelight with its fusion of ancient and modern history, where squares ringed by ravishing old merchant houses contrast with the shipyards that gave birth to the Solidarity movement that freed Poland from communist dictatorship. That struggle is explored in the magnificent European Solidarity Centre, its rusting metal cladding cradling a soaring light-filled interior. For a handle on contemporary Polish creative enterprise, hit the Alternative 15 arts complex in a rough-edged warehouse beneath the shipyard cranes.

When not exploring Gdansk's historic heart, I pick up its literary threads. A liberal outpost for centuries when it was the "Free City" of Danzig, the town claims to have been the only place outside England where Shakespeare's plays were performed in his lifetime — the starkly modernist black-clad Shakespeare Theatre still carries the Bard's torch. There is also proud celebration of Günter Grass, the Nobel prize-winning author born here in 1927, when the town was under German rule. I toast *The Tin Drum* author with a glass of Goldwasser, a root and herb liqueur with flakes of gold, which washes down an excellent seafood lunch at the Fishmarkt restaurant near the bustling harbourside walkway.

Although less visited, Gdynia also has a magnificent museum and a famous literary son, Joseph Conrad, who is honoured by a fine monument on the seafront. The Emigration Museum, which opened in 2015, offers historical and human insight on the hot topic of migration. Carved from the old Gdynia

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during the 19th and early 20th century to seek freedom and fresh hope in the New World. It's an eye-opening and moving experience.

Gdynia is also renowned for art deco architecture, and after lunch at the swish Sztuczka restaurant — focusing on bold treatments of produce from the surrounding Kashubian countryside (chicken liver with plums; pork with roast peach) — I tick off Gdynia's famous buildings, from modern villas to towering office blocks.

After my architectural odyssey, I seek refreshment at a less well-known type of Polish edifice, Zakaski Przekaski (literally “appetisers and snacks”). These are small bars — some upscale; some wonderfully less so — dispensing cheap local vodka with Polish tapas. If you like the idea of a slug of ice-cool Hooch with *sledz* (pickled herring in oil), *kielbasa* (sausage) and *pierogi* (Poland's classic dumplings) for not much more than £1 to £2 each, they are brilliant. Komar Paliwo i Spoiwo (Abrahama 23, 4pm until late) provides a perfect example and is just behind the grey steel InfoBox. Decorated with communist-era mementoes and an old motorbike suspended from the ceiling, the vodka is as great as the snacks — after a few slugs, I even enjoy the Polish rock soundtrack.

I get a further taste of offbeat Polish decor on my final night in Sopot, when I swap the 19th-century luxury of the Grand Hotel for the wacky Lalala Arthotel. Here each room is decorated by Polish artists in sometimes freaky style — mine is an all-black goth-style mock-horror den, with walls covered in black fur and scary animal motifs.

I'm grateful to escape into the early evening sun, heading down to the town's quaint fishermen's quarter. I dip into a cramped

hut turned into a quirky showcase for maritime bits and bobs, then join locals queueing for fried seafood delights at Bar Przystan, a justly celebrated Polish take on a gourmet British fish and chip stand. Scoffing my nosh on the beach amid brightly coloured fishing boats. I watch the sun descend

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snouting about this place from the rooftops.

Need to know

Norman Miller was a guest of Wizz Air (0911 7522257, [wizzair.com](http://wizzair.com)), which flies from Luton to Gdansk from £78. He stayed in the Sofitel Grand Sopot ([sofitel.com](http://sofitel.com), 00 48 58 520 6000), which has doubles from £113 a night B&B and including access to the spa pool and sauna, and in the Lalala Arthotel ([lalala.lu](http://lalala.lu)), which has doubles from £29.

Further information Polish National Tourist Office ([poland.travel](http://poland.travel))





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Iwona Stephenson 3 days ago

The Guardian writes endlessly about visiting Poland just to see Auschwitz ...

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Mike TC 4 days ago

*"There is also proud celebration of Günter Grass, the Nobel prize-winning author born here in 1927, when the town was under German rule."*

What complete historical nonsense!  
Danzig had been a German city for 500 years until the end od WWI. It then became a Free City under League of Nations jurisdiction between 1919 and 1939. The population (which was 90% German)



were citizens of the Free City of Danzig during this period and therefore it was not under "German rule" when Grass was born in 1927.

Hitler annexed Danzig in 1939 and at the end of the war in 1945 the German inhabitants were expelled and the city was resettled with

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