The gems of Gdansk

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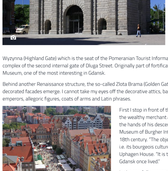
#amber #tourism #Gdańsk

Gdansk's Main and Old Town is one of the largest complexes of monuments in Poland. Most architecture and art treasures located in this area date back to the Gothic, late Renaissance and Mannerist periods.

A wooden frieze with gilded winged cherubs, town councillors' benches bedecked with intricate ritsnaya, a sandstone fireplace with polychrome bas-reliefs and, most notably, a timber ceiling vitrified by woodcarver Symphon Herle and decorated with 25 allegoric paintings in gilded frames by Izaak van der Blocke. The Great Council Hall in Gdansk's Main Town Hall, once the home of councillors' debates, is a work of art and one of the most beautiful interiors in Gdańsk. Its turn of the 16th century Mannerist décor was dismantled and taken out of the city in 1943, thanks to which it survived the war. The 14th-century Town Hall, bombed and burnt at the end of the war, was marked for demolition. Fortunately, it was possible to save it, and its reconstruction, which lasted over 20 years, is among the greatest achievements of Polish restorers. Today, the Town Hall is a very popular tourist destination by the city's past glory, which in the 15th–17th century was the most populous and wealthiest town in Poland. It was also the largest art, crafts and trade centre, as well as one of the main ports on the Baltic Sea.



Wojtynia (Highland Gate) which is the seat of the Pomeranian Tourist Information Centre. Right behind it is the Gothic-Renaissance complex of the second internal gate of Długa Street. Together with the gate houses the Amber Museum, one of the most interesting in Gdańsk.

I start my visit of the Town Hall in the basement and finish it at the viewing gallery of its 50-metre high tower (it is worth coming here on the hour, when the tower's carillon plays tunes on its 37 bells). In the sea of red roofs one can spot brick church towers. Intense midday sunlight brings out the decorative details of house facades from the shadows and amplifies the colours. In the maze of streets and houses one can catch a glimpse of blue meanders of the Motława River with boats moored to its banks. A navy blue streak of the Baltic Sea completes the horizon. The Town Hall is located at the crossing of Długa and Długi Targ Streets which form the so-called Trakt Królewski (Royal Route), the most elegant route of the Main Town. Although it is only slightly longer than 500 m, I spend an entire day walking through it (and even then it turns out that is not enough). The Route starts with the Renaissance gate

Behind another Renaissance structure, the so-called Złota Brama (Golden Gate), have rows of tall narrow houses with colourful, richly decorated facades emerge. I cannot take my eyes off the decorative attics, bas-reliefs, figures of ancient gods and heroes, heads of Roman emperors, allegoric figures, coats of arms and Latin phrases.

Gdańsk History Museum.

Most impressive is the Great Hall with its large formal paintings, a unique collection of tournament armour from the 15th century, ship models and panelling decorated with intarsia which reflects a wonderful golden glow in the afternoon sun. The most interesting exhibit is an 11-metre high furnace from 1545. Its 520 ceramic tiles feature European rulers and personifications of virtues.

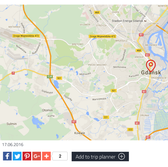
In 1633 a fountain of Neptune – the symbol of Gdańsk – was placed in front of the Artus Court, its replica, along with the rest of the court itself and the Monument of the Fallen Shipyard Workers represents Poland in the Mini-Europe Park in Brussels. Cast in bronze, the Roman god of the waters raises the stem of the fountain for fun. Since Neptune hit them with his trident and smashed them to smithereens, flakes of real gold have been added to the liquor.

From the east, the Royal Route is closed off by the mannerist Zielona Brama (Green Gate) with its four passages. Behind the gate I turn left to Długie Pobrzeże, a charming pedestrian street along the Motława River. It is dominated by a majestic port crane from the 15th century that was used to trans-ship goods and put up masts, and also served as a city gate. An interesting fact is that the driving mechanism made of immense wooden wheels, still in working condition, was originally propelled by men walking in it.

The crane is not far away from Maracka Street. Almost all houses here have preserved porches in the form of terraces raised above the street level, typical for Gdańsk's architecture. The stairs that lead from the porches to the street are decorated on both sides with exquisitely carved stone banisters. Wrought iron railings connect them to posts or large granite balls at the base of the stairs. Dragon and fish-shaped stone gargoyles also form an integral part of the street's architecture.

At the western end of Maracka Street stands St. Mary's church. From the pavement it is hard to see how enormous this temple is, but from the Town Hall tower it can be admired in all its glory. Built over a period of more than 150 years (1343–1502), the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is the world's largest brick temple (105.5 m long, transept – 66 m wide, belfry tower – 82 m high). It is a gem of the so-called Brick Gothic, a variety of the Gothic style, popular in the Baltic countries. It is referred to as the crown of Gdańsk. Its interior is a stunning, almost two metres thick walls and towers rise high above the rooftops. It is well-worth climbing the 400 steps to get to the viewing platform on the tower.

27 massive pillars support the temple's stellar and diamond vault, which is as high as 30 m. Over the centuries, the church received works of sacred art funded by wealthy families, fraternities and guilds. Despite being many of them have survived to this day, e.g. an oak-carved high altar by master Michael from Augsburg with a scene of the coronation of the Virgin Mary in its central part (1517), a stone Pieta by an unknown sculptor (c. 1410), a two-metre high sculpture of Wonderful Beautiful Madonna of Gdańsk in a brocade gown (c. 1420), a fifteenth-century astronomical clock and a powerful pipe organ.

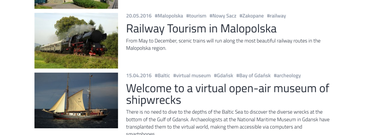


Of Gdańsk's countless churches, I am particularly fond of two. St. Catherine's Church from the first half of the thirteenth century stands out in the city's panorama due to its 76-metre high tower, especially its magnificent Baroque cupola, with its 50-bell concert carillon. The church also houses the Museum of Tower Clocks, the only one of its kind in Poland. The tower was used by famous astronomer Johannes Hevelius (1611–1687) for his studies. Hevelius, commemorated by a marble and jade epitaph and a gravestone in the presbytery, was also a long time superior of the Protestant community at St. Catherine's Church. The vault hides an interesting crypt which contains bones discovered under the church. But most impressive is the Renaissance oak baptistery decorated with intarsia and numerous mosaics, bas-reliefs, herms, caryatids, putti, and mascarons.

My favourite one is St. John Church from the 14th–15th century. To this day it bears the tragic traces of 1945, when almost the entire city was reduced to rubble. Its monumental interior – desolate, burned, stripped of treasures – is a poignant sight. Of the countless works of art created by amber craftsmen, sculptors, wood carvers, Mannerist and sailors, only some have survived. These include the main altar of sandstone and marble made by Abraham van den Blocke (1611), the gravestone of Nathanael Schroder made of sandstone, marble and alabaster (1668), a carved, polychrome stall of the Church Council (1672), a brass baptismal font (1668), and epitaphs from the 16th and 17th centuries.

In 1995, the Baltic Sea Culture Centre opened the St. John's Centre here. An area inside the church has been sectioned off to host concerts, plays and exhibitions. I arrive just in time to listen to rehearsals of The Magic Flute. Mozart's masterpiece sounds so delightful here that I decide to abandon my sightseeing schedule. Without regrets. I sit in the audience and let myself get carried away by Mozart's melodies.

NELLY KAMIŃSKA



17.06.2016

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There is no need to dive to the depths of the Baltic Sea to discover the diverse wrecks at the bottom of the Gulf of Gdansk. Archaeologists at the National Maritime Museum in Gdańsk have transplanted them to the virtual world, making them accessible via computers and smartphones.

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Copernicus in Olsztyn

Nicolaus Copernicus is most often associated with his home town of Torun or Frombork, where he did his research and was laid to rest. However, it is in Olsztyn, where he resided for several years, that he helped defend his compatriots against the Teutonic Knights.

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The Łańcut Castle

It is one of the most magnificent aristocratic residences in Poland. In the interwar period, it hosted the lives of Ferdinand I, King of Romania, Prince George, Duke of Kent, Ignacy Mościcki, President of Poland, as well as Mary Pickford, an American silent film star.

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30.11.2015 #urban tourism #aviation industry #Rzeszów #underground route #Podkarpackie region #tourism

A stroll around Rzeszów

Rzeszów, the capital of the Subcarpathian Voivodeship, combines a small-town charm with its role as the economic and cultural centre of south-eastern Poland.

07.10.2015 #piano #Chopin Piano Competition #Chopin #Żelazowa Wola #Warsaw #music #tourism

Chopin's Warsaw

"It transcends by birth, a Pole in his heart, a citizen of the world by virtue of his talent," is how Polish poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid described Frederic Chopin. The brilliant composer lived in Warsaw for over half of his life and his memory lives on in the places he lived and performed in.

30.09.2015 #Beskidy#w #tourism #palace

A palace that's alive

The baroque palace in Wieliczka is not a typical museum. Its door is wide open to scholars and artists, offering them a friendly place to work. The 18th-century palace garden invites you to have a picnic, lie on a deckchair and walk your dog.

23.08.2015 #Baltic #Sopot Pier #tourism

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The longest wooden pier in Europe is the pride of Sopot. The place buzzes with life in the summer when, besides lounging in deck chairs, you can listen to concerts, watch outdoor movies and shows or take part in sports competitions.

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Tricity getting even more beautiful

A modern marina suitable for hosting international sailing competitions in Gdynia, and a revitalized Granary Island in the heart of Gdansk's Old Town are likely to attract even more tourists to the Tricity, an urban area on the Polish coast consisting of Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot.

27.07.2015 #Bieszczady #vikings #archeology #slavs #science #Sopot #tourism #Wisłoki

Travels through centuries

We have a Troy in the Carpathians, a Roman trading post, and even a Viking village. Learn about Poland's archaeological attractions!

26.07.2015 #Zamenhof #Białystok #Esperanto #tourism

Zamenhof's Białystok

The idea behind the supranational Esperanto language was conceived in 19th-century Białystok, a city brimming with the sound of Polish, German, Russian and Yiddish.

18.06.2015 #museum #urban tourism #palace #Rogalin

Rococo and oaks

Following years of renovation work, the 18th-century palace at Rogalin near Poznan is now admiring visitors again. Its artistic value and picturesque setting in the Warta River valley make it one of Poland's finest palace complexes situated in a scenic park.

15.06.2015 #Poznań #Warta #Wielkopolska #Toruń #Vistula #tourism

Polish cities rediscover the riverside

Residents of big cities are returning to the riverside. In the spring and summer season, cultural and social life is shifting to the waterfronts.

09.06.2015

Monuments go full steam ahead

The Industrial Monuments Route of the Silesian Province offers an opportunity to see how to mine silver and coal, as well as how to brew beer and generate energy. It is widely considered to be the most interesting industrial tourism route in Poland.

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