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Places



Pixelated history – Gemma Fullam at the Lech Walesa mural on the end of the block of flats in which he once lived

Baltic double bill is a hot ticket off the beaten track

A trip to buzzy, historic Gdansk and the spa resort town of Sopot leaves **Gemma Fullam** keen to discover more

Throw “Lech Walesa” in a word association game and the most likely response will be one of: shipyard, solidarity, Gdansk. Former Polish president Walesa, and the country’s non-violent struggle for unions, was one of the major themes of the 1980s. Reports from Gdansk invariably featured the Solidarnosc activist in the aforementioned shipyard, so what a surprise it was to travel to the port on the Baltic coast and find a gorgeous medieval city with a shipyard filled with buzzy bars and food trucks.

World War II began near Gdansk, then known as Danzig. It had been ceded (unwillingly) by Germany at the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. In 1939 Hitler, determined to annex it as it was of strategic importance and ethnically German, began the invasion of Poland by striking a Polish garrison from the SMS Schleswig-Holstein, ostensibly in Danzig harbour on a courtesy visit.

The infrastructure largely escaped the war unscathed, but in 1945, aerial bombardment by the Red Army, shelling by Polish forces and fire destroyed 95pc of the city. Within a year, two-thirds of its German inhabitants were gone. Then began a “Polonisation”, which aimed to erase

Germaness from the city and repopulate with ethnic Poles.

The new locals took an active part in the reconstruction, and once the rubble was cleared, a suite of options were on the table – leave the city in ruins as a warning to future generations; rebuild the city as it had been; rebuild in a Soviet style; or rebuild as it had been in the 16th century.

The last won out. The ersatz old town has its critics, but I was charmed. It’s atmospheric, vibrant and, crucially, feels very safe to explore, day or night.

My Polish weekend had kicked off – after a zippy flight from Cork airport – with a potted history of the area from Sebastian Malyszczuk, a Poland by Locals guide. Gdansk, which celebrated its millennium in 1997, is part of the Tri-City area that includes the municipalities of Sopot and Gdynia to the north, Gdansk being the oldest and largest of the three.

Sebastian dropped me at my base, Hampton by Hilton, built on an old cinema site, in the shadow of the world’s largest brick church, St Mary’s.

Its 14th-century 78m-high tower (the “Crown of Gdansk”) can be seen from most vantage points in the city, making it a useful navigation marker.

Having checked in, I venture out to Gdanski Bowke (gdanskibowke.com), a welcoming restaurant with excellent wine. On Sebastian's suggestion, I then go bar-hunting for a post-prandial Machandel, a traditional vodka served with a dried plum.

Next morning, fortified by eggs and coffee, and swaddled in layers, I rendezvous with Bozena, Sebastian's wife, also a guide. We begin at the Golden Gate; once part of the old city walls, it marks the entrance to Długa (Long) Street, one of the city's oldest, and the old town's main artery.

Some of Długa's buildings survived the bombardment of 1945; one that didn't,

Uphagen's House has been meticulously restored to showcase the life of an 18th-century merchant.

Similar tall, narrow houses that line the streets belonged to wealthy burghers of the Hanseatic League, a powerful community that forged and protected trade routes in Europe during the Middle Ages. Gdansk's strategic location, where Poland's main river, the Vistula, meets the Baltic Sea, made it one of the most important, and wealthiest, Hanseatic towns for over two centuries.

Reminders of the league's legacy abound; a ship motif, a classic Hanseatic symbol, appears on many buildings, while the red and white of Gdansk's flag were the



Clean and clear – the car-free Długa

league's colours too. Strolling wide, elegant Długa is made even more pleasurable by the fact that cars are restricted; only those with special permits are allowed into the old town. Nor is there a speck of rubbish to be seen.

Beside the old town hall we encounter one of Gdansk's most recognisable landmarks, the 17th-century Neptune's Fountain, which was restored to its full rococo glory in the 1950s.

Our route takes us to the Green Gate, which bookends the Royal Way. Ostensibly a residence for Polish Kings but rarely used

Continued on next page

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as such, it connects the city with Granary Island, which once had over 300 granaries. Several buildings from the medieval trade boom still stand, but the most important is visible from Granary Island – the Gdansk Crane. Today, it's part of the Maritime Museum (nmm.pl), and most granaries have become hotels and apartments.

We duck out of the cold into the Amber Museum, located in the restored Great Mill, built by the Teutonic Knights in the early 14th century. It produced 200 tonnes of flour per day until the bombings of 1945. Amber, a fossilised tree resin, is known as Baltic gold, with Gdansk trading in the gemstone for over 6,000 years; the Amber Road went as far as Rome.

A well-earned lunch is next at Fino (restauracjefino.pl), a fine-dining spot in the old town whose philosophy is 'elevated traditional Polish'. I could've lingered long into the afternoon, but the European Solidarity Centre was next on our list, a museum and library. One of its most arresting exhibits are the plywood sheets upon which the shipyard workers wrote their 21 demands in August of 1980; these now have Unesco World Heritage status.

Myriad events led to the initial strike, not least the firing of Anna Walentynowicz, a crane operator who'd been accused of

anti-government activity. When management granted the workers' 21 demands after three days, Lech Walesa, was persuaded to continue in solidarity with other shipyards, triggering a chain of events that led to the formation of the Solidarity trade union and, almost a decade later, a Solidarity-led government. Walesa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983, and served as the president of Poland in the 1990s.

I part company with Bozena to enjoy dinner at Browar PG4 (pg4.pl) – a craft brewery and restaurant, a 15-minute walk from the old town. One burger and chips and a flight of beer later, it's back to the hotel and bed.

The next morning, it's off to Sopot with Sebastian. Known as the Jewel of the Baltic, Sopot has been a popular holiday destination since the 16th century, when rich merchants and diplomats built summer houses here. Various military manoeuvres in the 18th century resulted in the destruction of these fine houses and an ever dwindling population – until a French doctor from Napoleon's army saw Sopot's potential as a centre for balneotherapy.

He opened the resort's first bathhouse in 1823, following it the next year with a spa house offering health-promoting treatments. Haffner died in 1830, but his legacy survives and thrives in modern Sopot today, now a destination spa resort.

The five-star Sheraton Sopot is my lodg-

GETTING THERE

- Gemma visited Poland as a guest of Polish National Tourist Office, London (poland.travel). She stayed at Hampton by Hilton (hilton.com) and at the Sheraton Sopot (sheratonsopot.pl)
- Ryanair flies directly to Gdansk from Cork and Dublin airports. ryanair.com
- For info on sightseeing in the Tri-City, visit pomorskie.travel.
- For booking info on Uphagen's House and the Amber Museum, visit muzeumgdansk.pl. For the European Solidarity Centre, visit ecs.gda.pl.



ings for the night and to its right is the longest wooden pier in Europe (it's claimed that the iodine concentrations at the far end are twice as high as those on land) and the city. To the left is the Grand Hotel, built in 1927 and so famous for its casino that Sopot was dubbed Monaco of the Baltic.

Another reason to come to Sopot is the forest. In 1909, while enjoying one of the walking trails, Paul Walther-Schaffer, bandmaster at Gdansk theatre, came across a large woodland clearing with particularly excellent acoustics. The town council developed the natural amphitheatre and the first performance, the opera *Das Nacht-lager in Granada*, was a triumph in August of 1909. The Forest Opera has a capacity of 5,000 and hosts a yearly opera season as well as artists including Bryan Adams, Clannad and Elton John

The next morning begins with a round of the spa facilities, followed by a fine breakfast and a walk to the lighthouse, a Sopot landmark. My hunger is sated by an epic lunch of Dover sole and truffles in Grand Blue at the Grand Hotel (sofitelgrandsopot.com), which has something of a *Grand Budapest Hotel* vibe. It's all just lovely and I'm sad to leave, not least because there's so much more to see and do. Gdynia, for starters, and then there's Hel, a seaside town north of the Tri-City with a 14km beach.

Tri-City break? Don't mind if I do. Even if it's Baltic!

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