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### Rediscover the Jewish Heritage of Gdansk and the Tricity, Poland

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The historic city of Gdansk, one of Poland's prettiest seaside cities, has a rich heritage and history that makes this city the perfect place to visit. The city is served by Europe's network of railways and is easily accessible if you are planning a visit as part of a wider exploration of Europe. I would recommend Europe Rail, as I had the best experience. When you visit Gdansk you are not only visiting one city but three. Gdansk is made up of three cities known as the Tricity, which include Gdansk (the largest), Sopot and Gdynia. All three cities have so much to offer.

The beautiful city of Gdansk (or Danzig in German) played a major role in perhaps two of the most important events of the 20th century in Europe. In 1939, Germany's invasion of Poland began here, then exploded into World War II and the Solidarity movement that became the first opposition movement to participate in free elections in a Soviet-bloc nation. For centuries since medieval times Poland was home for Jews, a center for their vibrant culture as well as the site of the greatest tragedy of humanity. Many Jewish merchants came to Gdansk from Lithuania in the 15th century. Before World War II many Jews emigrated, while many of those who remained in Gdansk were murdered by the Nazis in the concentration camp of Stutthof.

The New Synagogue in Gdansk, the only synagogue in the city, was built in 1927 and was primarily used by Jewish refugees from Russia and Wielkopolska. It also served a small number of Gdansk Jews as well. After it was damaged in 1938, the Jewish community sold the property to the city of Danzig (now Gdansk) in a bid to stave off further destruction. It was promptly turned into a furniture warehouse, and the ploy did save the building from the fiery fate suffered by most of the region's synagogues. Amazingly the Torah scrolls survived the war and were returned to Gdansk's surviving Jewish population following the war.



The New Synagogue, Gdansk – New York Jewish Travel Guide

Today, the Jewish Community is the only place in the Tricity where services are held as well as being the social hub of about 90 members that are currently registered as official members of Gdansk's Jewish community center. The community is responsible for the synagogue (New Synagogue) and Jewish Cemetery in Chelm, with plans to take over the running of the Sopot Jewish Cemetery in the future. There is a small but very interesting exhibition on the ground floor telling the story of the Jewish community in Gdansk pre-World War II and their extermination. A new exhibition on the first floor is due to open in the spring displaying articles recently recovered during a dig at the Stutthof Concentration Camp, where many of Gdansk's pre-war Jews were tortured and executed.



The New Synagogue, Gdansk – New York Jewish Travel Guide

The community's president, Mychal Samet, told *The New York Jewish Travel Guide* that "many more are believed to live in the area, either unaware of their heritage or afraid to reveal it." He added that weekly Sabbath services are held in a small synagogue, or study hall, in the building, which also houses the community offices and dining room. The inside of the synagogue building needs some urgent renovations and repair. In addition, Mychal said, "a great deal of funds are needed to renovate the structure, and the inside, which will serve both as a center of Jewish life and as a place where local non-Jews can learn more about Poland's rich Jewish heritage. Gdansk is a special place, and it is home to one of the only synagogues still standing in this part of Poland," he said. "It is our responsibility and we must preserve it." While a Jewish revival has powered a slow-but-steady rebirth of Jewish life in large cities like Warsaw or Wrocław, a phenomenon that has been widely documented, Gdansk is still catching up





The New Synagogue, Gdansk – New York Jewish Travel Guide

Of historical importance is the Great Synagogue, one of the largest synagogues ever built in the city. It opened on September 15, 1887 and was demolished by the Nazis in May 1939. This huge synagogue was a rectangular building known for its large dome flanked by two impressive towers capable of holding up to 2,000 people (the main chamber holding 1,600 and a women's area for an additional 400). It boasted impressive stained glass made up of several Stars of David, huge chandeliers, tables of the Decalogue set on two stone lions, a huge organ. By the start of the 20th century the Great Synagogue was an important center of Reform Judaism, a fact that made it a magnet for rabbis from around the world and exemplified by the opening inside of a Museum of Judaica, containing many rare and ancient artifacts. In 1933 the Nazis took over the city government, leading to several unsuccessful arson attacks on the building, including in August 1938 an assault that led to the damaging of its Torah scrolls. Soon after the building's most precious items were sent away for safekeeping to Jerusalem, Vilnius, Krakow and the United States.

Today, there are no realistic plans to rebuild it. Much of the site of the synagogue is vacant; part of the land is held by the new Gdansk community, and part belongs to the Office for State Protection. On the remainder of the property, however, a theatre has been built known as The Gdansk Shakespeare Theatre; it opened in September 2014.



The Gdansk Shakespeare Theatre – New York Jewish Travel Guide

A powerful Memorial Plaque for the Great Synagogue of Danzig (Gdansk) expresses the Jewish community's patriotism. The inscription commemorates the 56 people who died fighting in World War I "for the fatherland." In 1939, faced with increasing Nazi persecution, Danzig's Jews shipped the contents of their synagogue to the United States for safekeeping. The fact that they included the cumbersome marble plaque indicated its importance to the community.

The Stutthof Concentration Camp, was the first and the longest–operating Nazi concentration camp in the territory of Poland. Built in 1939 and initially intended for approximately 3,000 people, this camp gradually became the place of torment and slaughter for over 125,000 prisoners from 26 countries, most of whom were tortured, forced to work or died in gas chambers. Now this concentration camp is memorialized by the State Stutthof Museum dedicated to the victims of the Nazis, comprising a gas chamber, crematorium, four shacks for the living quarters and the SS watchtower.





Stutthof Concentration Camp Memorial – New York Jewish Travel Guide

A very special place to visit is Sopot's Jewish Cemetery, as it is a strange site indeed, still retaining its original walls and entrance gate but having lost most of the monuments inside. Opened in 1913 in a peaceful 0.5–hectare site amidst linden and birch trees that survive to this day, the moss-covered cemetery was the final resting place of many local Jewish families. The surviving graves with inscriptions in Polish, German, Russian and Hebrew are dated between 1922 and 1936, the year that the last person was buried there, and included a rare monument to Jewish soldiers. The sign over the entrance gate reads in Hebrew, "This is the Gate to God." Partially renovated by the Polish Nissenbaum Foundation, the cemetery is listed as a registered monument and is closed for burials. The cemetery made international news some years back when some of the stones were vandalized by a Gdansk protest group claiming to be anti-fascist. A hastily prepared banner was placed by Sopot residents apologizing for the attack.



Sopot's Jewish Cemetery – New York Jewish Travel Guide





Sopot's Jewish Cemetery – New York Jewish Travel Guide  
The other local Jewish cemetery, in Chełm, covers an area of 2.3 hectares, and is one of the oldest in Poland. The cemetery survived the Holocaust era in good condition. It was closed in 1956 and seriously devastated in the following years. It remained in dilapidated condition. The land has been reclaimed by the Jewish community, which has roots in the community going back to at least 1694. There are very few original headstones still standing; sadly, the few remaining originals are hidden in brush at the back and only replicas dot the maintained part. Restoration of the cemetery is planned under the care of the local Jewish community and includes plans to return it to its original use.





The Jewish Cemetery of Chełm – New York Jewish Travel Guide

A touching memorial is the Monument to the Evacuated Children. During 1938 and 1939 it is estimated that the lives of some 10,000 Jewish children were saved thanks to the organizers of what would come to be known as 'Kindertransports.' These evacuations of children from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria and the Free City of Danzig to the United Kingdom saw children carried away from the Nazis by bus, train and ferry to live with new families in Britain. Four "kindertransports" managed to leave Gdansk/Danzig in the spring and summer of 1939, carrying a total of 124 children to safety. Sculptor Frank Meisler was one of them, and on May 6, 2009, his memorial to this exodus was unveiled outside Gdansk's Główny train station.



Monument to the Evacuated Children- New York Jewish Travel Guide

While in Gdansk, I was able to visit other beautiful sights of general interest. Here are some of the amazing places I would recommend:

Gdansk has one of the most iconic waterfronts in Europe. Take a stroll along Gdansk's beautiful harborfront, and you may just fall in love with this city. Pretty colorful buildings reflect against a river amidst a flurry of local street musicians and aromas from popular restaurants, while in the background one can spot boat cruises. See the colors of The Old-Town: The historic center of the city is a beautiful place to start your exploration, with some stunning architecture that's heavily influenced by Germanic and Polish tradition.





Gdansk's beautiful harbor- New York Jewish Travel Guide

Be ready for one of the most beautiful streets in Europe. Gdansk's Długi Targ is the main square, although it translates into English as 'Long Market.' Leading down to it is the Ulica Długa, or 'Long Lane.' Simply put, it is one of the most photographed streets and squares in Europe and is a feast for anyone's eyes. In this square, make sure to get a look at the wonderful Neptune Fountain and the original Fahrenheit Thermometer Monument. If you're wondering why it's here in Gdansk, well, Daniel Fahrenheit was born in the city and was the inventor of the Thermometer. The Golden House is a beautiful 17th-century building with a richly ornamented facade displaying 12 elaborately carved historical scenes. On the same street is the Uphagen's House an impressive, rococo-style house built in 1776 for a Gdansk merchant family and now part of Gdansk's Historical Museum. It houses a rich collection of textiles and garments, displayed in rooms fitted out with mainly original furniture. Last, don't forget to keep your eyes wide open for the hundreds of gargoyles that line the city streets – some scary, some imposing and some downright adorable and charming.





Gdansk's Długi Targ 'Long Market' – New York Jewish Travel Guide

I recommend a visit to the Amber Museum located in the old prison tower. Gdansk is known for the production of amber, which is part of its heritage. Visitors will learn how amber was formed from the resin of trees millions of years ago, and will also view some magnificent sculptures and art made entirely from amber. Afterwards, enjoy shopping on Mariaka Street, a unique, one-block long cobblestone street where you can find the perfect gift made of amber jewelry.



Amber Moda Gallery by Mariusz Gliwinski, Sopot – New York Jewish Travel Guide

One of the most important sights in town is the Church of St Mary. It is the largest medieval brick-built church in Europe with the figure of the Virgin and Child and Astronomical Clock made by Hans Durunger in the 15th century. Another important sight on our way will be Oliwa Cathedral, built in the 14th century in Gothic style.

While not overcrowded like many cities, there are still places to go to get away from the urban life. If you want find a nice beach, visit Gdynia, a clean and sandy beach where you can sunbathe and also visit trendy cafés, bars, and museums.



Gdynia Beach- New York Jewish Travel Guide

And if you make your way down to Sopot, the most popular seaside resort, it has some incredible buildings such as the Krzywy Domek, which is the Polish for “Crooked little house”; bars; and cafes; it also has a half-kilometer-long pier, the longest on the Baltic Sea.





Krzywy Domek for "Crooked little house" – New York Jewish Travel Guide

And if you are into seeing the most incredible castles, then visit Malbork, which is the largest castle in the world (by land only). The castle is a classic example of a medieval fortress built back in the 13th century; it was the headquarters of the Grand Master of the order and is the world's largest construction made out of bricks, with about 30 million bricks, of which 4.5 million of them are in the high castle. This place takes you back in time and you can feel the history while walking in the different rooms or strolling outside the garden. Depending on the season, you can also try archery for an additional fee or view one of the knight's duel performances. And Malbork Castle has also been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1997.



Malbork Castle – New York Jewish Travel Guide

Poland is thought to have the sixth largest diaspora in the world with Chicago often cited as the second biggest Polish city after Warsaw. One of the newest and best museums in Poland is the Immigration Museum in Gdynia. There is housed in the historical building of the Marine Station, which was erected during the interwar period and beautifully restored. The museum details the journeys made by Polish people and explains the reasons why so many Poles have emigrated over the years. You'll also find some unusual art and real-life stories from Poles abroad.

**For more information:**

To plan a trip to Poland, contact the Polish Tourism Board or log on to: <https://www.poland.travel/en> and <http://visitgdansk.com/en/>

To travel via train, contact Rail Europe or log on to: <https://www.raileurope.com/>

**Story & photography** by Meyer Harroch – New York Jewish Travel Guide & New York Jewish Guide.com

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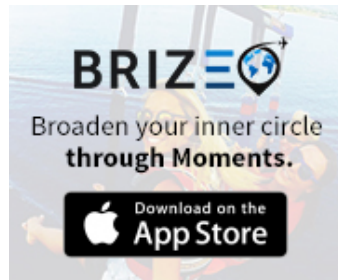


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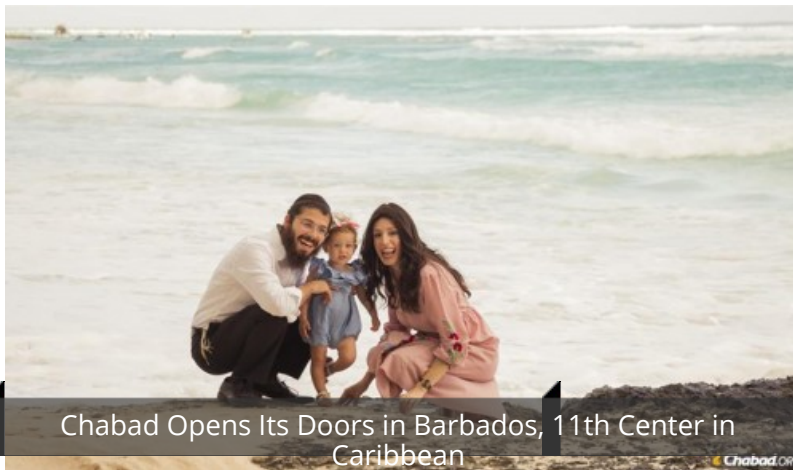
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