

Gdansk




Gdansk: history in the making

As soon as I arrive in Gdansk, the biggest of the Tri-City destinations, I can see why it's also the best-known. Długi Targ – a medieval marketplace edged by pastel-hued townhouses with sculpted gable roofs – is an immediate crowd-pleaser. You have to walk slowly here – not because of the cobbles, but because people constantly stop short, struck by a photogenic fresco or fountain (or to avoid the street performer who wanders around with a yellow python draped across his shoulders).

What's really remarkable – snake aside – is that almost everything is a reconstruction, built again after World War II left 90 percent of the city in ruins. At first, I find myself constantly wondering what's original – from the dragon-shaped drains to the gilded lions – but soon realise that it's all part of a beguiling cultural tableau. Peppered with Flemish-Dutch, Italian and French influences (but little German), the architecture here is a lesson in the politics of rebuilding a city and an identity.

Whenever it was built, the Old Town is a delight, with its copper spires, imposing city gates and endless *lody* (ice cream) kiosks. Ulica Mariacka wins the title of prettiest street, lined with





From the dragon-shaped drains to the gilded lions, Gdansk's Old Town is a beguiling cultural tableau

handsome merchants' houses and stalls scattered with amber trinkets. After an AeroPress coffee at Drukarnia (no.36), I head to St Mary's, one of the biggest brick churches in the world and home to an exquisite 15th-century astronomical clock. According to grisly local myth, the clockmaker was blinded to ensure he'd never build another one (an occupational hazard of astronomical clockmakers, if you believe a similar rumour in Prague).

For lunch, local dumpling mecca Pierogarnia Mandu is a mere 10 minutes' walk away. There's always a queue here, due in large part to its superb *pierogi*, hand-pinched at warp speed by headscarved women in the tiny kitchen. The sour-cream-slathered *pierogi ruski* are particularly good, but the portion I'm given is immense. "What happened?" jokes the waitress, hands on hips, when I only manage seven out of 10.

Gdansk also has some excellent museums, from the National Maritime Museum to the striking new Museum of the Second World War – a reminder that the first



Opposite Around Gdansk.
Left The History Museum's clocktower rises above Długi Targ. **Above** Making pierogi



salvos were fired at nearby Westerplatte. But for me, it's the shipyard that really makes an impression. An extraordinary strike here in 1980, led by Lech Wałęsa, saw 17,000 shipbuilders lay down their tools to create the groundbreaking union, Solidarity. The rust-red European Solidarity Centre tells the story of how it helped create the modern Poland that we know today.

A 15-minute drive out of town, the suburb of Zaspá reveals how things have changed since then. Its vast, Soviet-era apartment blocks are now concrete canvases, spray-painted with deep-sea divers, rockets and trippy polka dots. From here, I head to neighbouring Wrzeszcz. Hard to pronounce it may be, but the suburb is fast becoming Gdansk's coolest district.

Wajdeloty street in particular is impeccably hip – as evidenced by places such as Fukafe, a quirkily decorated vegan café – while nearby Garnizon is a sign of things

to come: The once-abandoned 19th-century military barracks is now being transformed into an ambitious cultural hub. Amid landscaped lawns, its red-brick buildings host a concert hall, restaurants and the sleek craft brewery Stary Maneż.

I end up at arty multi-tasker Sztuka Wyboru, a café/bookshop/gallery/concept store showcasing work from Polish artisans. Its livewire owner, Magda, takes me on a tour of the complex, starting with an elegantly abstract sculpture of the female anatomy. "This place used to be so male; we needed to bring some balance," she claims. Gdansk, Magda says, is changing fast, especially in areas such as Wrzeszcz. "Ten years ago, there was nothing here. Now, at last, everyone's starting to look beyond the Old Town."

Clockwise from far left
Hip Wajdeloty Street; a mural of the old brewery at Wrzeszcz; train interior; Pierogarnia Mandu





Clockwise Hop on an SKM train to explore; Sopot's record-breaking pier; Monte Cassino Street

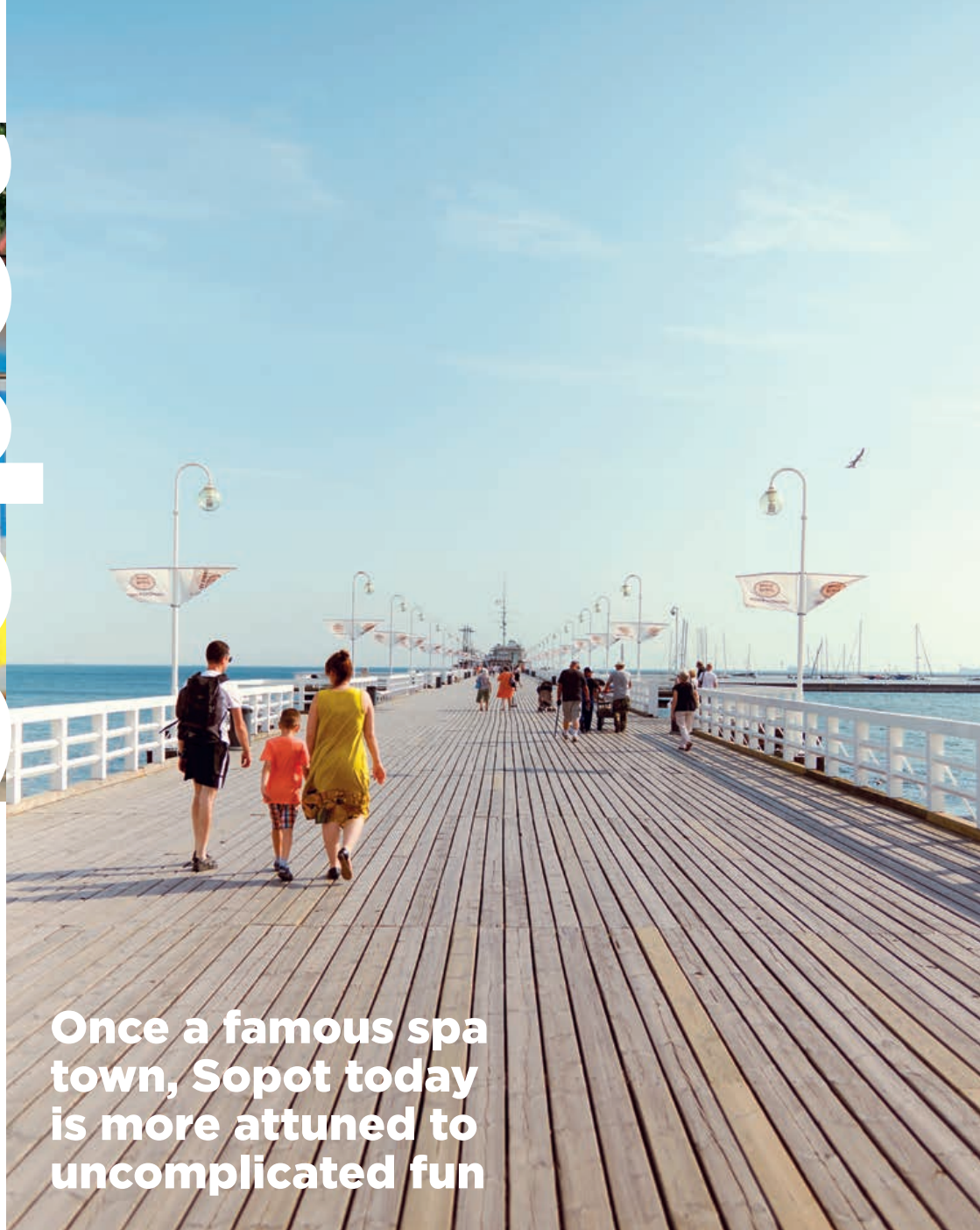
topos

Sopot: spas, bars and sea breezes

Stepping off the train at Sopot feels like entering another world. In its heyday, this was a famous spa resort, thanks to its mineral springs and salubrious sea air, but these days it's more attuned to uncomplicated seaside fun. Leading down to the seafront, Monte Cassino Street is alive with jostling crowds and café terraces, but the city's sleepy backstreets are another story, with their elegant Art Nouveau villas and air of faded grandeur.

The grand Sopot Lighthouse is the spot to get your bearings, though the stamped certificate I'm given after the short climb up seems slightly undeserved. From the top, the city appears as orderly and neat as a model village, with its red-tiled roofs and chequerboard main square. A leafy promenade runs the length of its beach, bisected by Europe's longest wooden pier – my next destination, I decide.

An admission fee payable at the turnstile gives you access to, essentially, 511 metres of sun-



Once a famous spa town, Sopot today is more attuned to uncomplicated fun

bleached boards – albeit happily devoid of tourist tat. What you *do* get are white-painted benches and lungfuls of bracing Baltic air; the only signs of commerce are one restaurant and an enterprising local with a camera, touting while-you-wait Polaroid snaps.

Back on the seafront, I walk up the beach to locals' favourite Bar Przysiań, a no-frills spot in the dunes. A guy in the queue recommends the fish soup and fills me in on Sopot's history: "You know why it was never bombed or looted in the war? Because Hitler loved it here – he stayed





dessert, I opt for the owner's rose-petal liqueur instead. "It's really not that strong," he insists, pouring a final top-up.

Back in town, the revelry's just beginning. The friendly, antiques-filled bar Błękitny Pudel turns out to be a good place to start, while the nearby Młody Byron attracts an arty crowd. As the hardcore partiers progress to the brasher bars and clubs, I'm reminded of the T-shirts sold on the promenade that boast 'Sopot never sleeps'. I take that thought to bed with me.

Gdynia: a Modernist masterpiece

Arriving in Gdynia – a port city just north of Sopot – provides another space-time jolt. Its broad, breezy avenues of Modernist blocks stand in stark contrast to the old-world elegance of Długi Targ, which is possibly why Tri-City visitors sometimes overlook it. For design geeks, however, Gdynia is a marvel: a lesser-known cousin to the likes of Brasilia and Tel Aviv, transplanted to the chillier climes of the Baltic coast.

To get a handle on Gdynia's backstory, I head for the City Museum, which explains how this former fishing village became a Modernist metropolis.

Far left and top Grand Hotel and beach at Sopot.
Right Modernism in Gdynia.
Above Potato pancakes



going on. We're a young city, just 100 years old – really, we're just getting started."

Finally, I follow the coast to Orłowo – a 90-minute hike along the beach, edged by a swathe of beech forest. (I take a brief detour into the woods, spot a wild boar and turn tail; anyone with a bad sense of direction should stick to the beach.) Officially still part of Gdynia, Orłowo couldn't be lovelier, with its white-cube Modernist mansion blocks and sweetly old-fashioned pier. It's a balmy evening and half of the Tri-City seem to be here, from a girl who's brought her cat to the beach to a pair of newlyweds posing on the pier for golden-hour portraits. From here, the coastal cycle path heads all the way back to Gdansk; I, however, after a final ice cream, am taking the SKM.

✈ Wizz Air flies to Gdansk



PHOTOS: P KOZLOWSKI, ALAMY

MUZEUM

POLSKIEJ WÓDKI

POSKAKUJ WIEDZY!

Centrum Praskie Koneser
Plac Konesera 1
Warszawa

www.pvm.pl



MUZEUM POLSKIEJ WÓDKI

POLISH

VODKA MUSEUM

TASTE THE KNOWLEDGE!

Wydatek współfinansowany przez Unię Europejską ze środków Europejskiego Funduszu Rozwoju Regionalnego w ramach Regionalnego Programu Operacyjnego Województwa Mazowieckiego na lata 2014-2020

