

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Poland's historical jewel

A rich history and captivating beauty unfold during a visit to Northern Poland writes **Neil Geraghty**

Think of Pomerania and fluffy pooches instantly spring to mind, but yappy toy dogs are not the only attraction that this historic region of northern Poland has to offer.

It's a bright September morning and I'm walking along the banks of the River Nogat, a branch of the Vistula, Poland's longest river. The path is lined with elderberry and hawthorn trees laden with glistening berries, but at regular intervals the trees have been cleared to open up one of the most beautiful views in Poland.

Across the river lies Malbork Castle, the largest brick castle in the world, a Disneyesque extravaganza of rocket-shaped bastions and crenellated walls that houses an ornate medieval palace and lofty monastery topped by a fluttering Polish flag. The castle is built entirely from deep russet coloured brick and looks magnificent reflected in the river's mirror smooth

water. A solitary duck emerges from a reed bed and glides along the river casting ripples across the castle's reflection. It's a place to take your time over and for the next four hours I'm utterly captivated by the castle's beauty and fascinating history.

Malbork Castle was built by the Teutonic Knights, a Catholic order of Crusaders who, following their expulsion from the Holy Land in 1211, carved out a vast realm that in its heyday stretched from Germany to Estonia.

A clue to the wealth that gave rise to such an enormous castle can be seen in the palace which houses a museum devoted to Pomerania's most valuable commodity, amber. This was a highly prized treasure in Medieval Europe and the Teutonic Knights imposed

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Clockwise from main: Gdansk, Poland, The Old Harbour;

a strict monopoly on its trade. Over the centuries Pomerania's craftsman perfected their amber carving skills and by the time of the Renaissance were producing objects of exquisite beauty.

The museum is housed in a darkened hall where the amber's beautiful luminescence is highlighted by spotlights. I stop at a 17th century casket carved by the German sculptor Christian Maucher. The box is topped by reclining Greek goddesses and frolicking cherubs, with garlands of flowers, sphinxes and strange mythical creatures adorning the sides. The soft plasticity and varied

hues of the amber are extraordinary and the sheer exuberance of the decoration epitomises a golden age of Baltic trade that saw cities in Poland rival those of western Europe.

The port city of Gdansk was at the centre of the amber trade which continues to this day. A stroll down cobbled Mariacka Ulica transports you back to the 17th century and is lined with grand merchant's houses, many still home to amber dealers who display their wares in vintage glass cabinets. As you wander around Gdansk's delightful car free Old Town, you might be mistaken for thinking you're in downtown Amsterdam and this is no coincidence.

From the Middle Ages onwards a large Dutch trading community was resident in the city and during Holland's 17th century Golden Age, Dutch architects and engineers adorned the city with civic buildings sumptuously decorated with patterned brickwork, ornate gables and sculptures from classical mythology. And the Dutch weren't the only foreigners to leave a mark on the city.

Visiting English actors performing

Shakespeare became a big hit in early 17th century Gdansk. So much so that a theatre, closely modelled on London's Fortune Playhouse, was built, the only known Shakespearean theatre to have been built outside London. A campaign was started in the 1990s to rebuild the theatre and in 2014 it opened its doors on the exact spot of its predecessor. The theatre is housed inside a striking modern cultural centre designed by Italian architect Renato Rizzi.



One of the best views of the Old Town is from the Shakespeare Theatre's rooftop terrace but although Gdansk may look like a northern Renaissance jewel, most of it is an historic illusion. During the Second World War, 90 per cent of Gdansk was destroyed and the area is a faithful reconstruction of what was lost. Few cities in the world carry the weight of 20th century history more than Gdansk. Here the Second World War broke out when the Germans attacked Westerplatte, a fortified peninsula that protects Gdansk's port. Also in Gdansk's shipyards the Solidarity Trade Union movement was born in 1980, leading ultimately to the fall of Communism in eastern Europe. To commemorate these events two world class museums have been built that double up as international education facilities to promote world cooperation and peace.

The tilting triangular tower of the World War Two museum is an unmistakable landmark on Gdansk's skyline. In its subterranean galleries the story of the war is told through often harrowing first hand accounts from heroes, victims and adversaries of the conflict. Especially poignant is a replica of a Polish high street from the 1930s with toy shop, pharmacy and record shop which sends mellow strains of jazz drifting out onto the pavement. As you leave the galleries you enter another replica of the same street at the end of the war which has now been reduced to a pile of rubble with a burnt out tank in the middle.

Widely considered as the most beautiful town in Poland, Torun is a popular day trip for visitors

from Gdansk but it's well worth spending a night there to explore the town's many attractions. Famous throughout Poland for its gingerbread, Torun's fine collection of Gothic townhouses with richly decorated orange brick facades often resemble gingerbread houses. In common with other historic Polish towns, at the heart of Torun lies a beautiful cobbled market square surrounded by atmospheric terrace bars and restaurants from where you can spot statues of some of Torun's best loved folk heroes. In the evening I have a beer close to a delightful fountain of a young man playing a fiddle surrounded by frogs. He's Torun's very own Pied Piper who legend has it led a plague of frogs out of the town by playing his violin. Next morning I stroll over the Vistula to a wooded island to see another one of Poland's most famous views. At this time of day the sun beautifully illuminates Torun's medieval city walls and Gothic churches. The Vistula here sweeps past the city in a majestic sweep and you can't help but contemplate the extraordinary history that this mighty river has witnessed over the centuries.

Check www.gov.uk for the latest travel advice before booking. Wizzair (www.wizzair.com) flies direct to Gdansk from Edinburgh and Aberdeen from £20 one way; for more information visit www.poland.travel/en; www.visitgdansk.com; www.visittorun.pl



Malbork Castle Poland

STAYCATION



Delights and

Packed my trainers but they were never used on my London break writes **Bernadette Fallon**

I haven't been to a hotel since Covid hit, back in the days when checking in for an overnight break was a nice treat but nothing remarkable. Now it feels as rare as spending the night on Mars.

We arrive at the door of London's Park Plaza to be greeted by a mask-wearing man and a hand sanitising unit. You have to show a hotel reservation or room key to access the building, the days of randomly wandering in are over. At reception we're given an information sheet on the changes made necessary by Covid - new opening hours in the bar, limited numbers for breakfast, mandatory masks and social distancing in all of the public areas. Bedrooms are serviced every third day unless otherwise requested and the spa, swimming pool and gym are closed. I remember the trainers I've packed specially for the treadmill and think - who cares about the gym, I'm finally back in a hotel.

Anyway, there's the option of running in the fresh air, with a local running map available from the concierge desk. And this would be a jog with a view. The hotel is located on Westminster Bridge, overlooking the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben, with the River Thames and South Bank spread out on the doorstep.

I'm not even sure why I'm thinking about running. I'm here to sample the Plaza's special afternoon tea, devised by the hotel's pastry chefs Domenico Camporeale and Alessandra Labarile - finalists in this summer's Bake Off: The Professionals. Anyone who watched it will be familiar with the eye-catching Granny Smith Apple and Egg Illusion concoctions, created with creamy compotes, mousses and gels, devised for the competition and now the centrepiece of their luscious afternoon tea. They are served alongside scones with cream, jam and caramel sauce, espresso 'martinis' with tiramisu, Kahlúa, chocolate, coffee and vodka gel and Gianduja, a mix of chocolate shortbread, hazelnut sponge, praline and gianduja cream.

The sumptuous sweet stand follows savouries including gin-marinated Scottish smoked salmon, cucumber sandwiches with mushroom duxelles, posh ham sandwiches, Somerset brie quiche and thick slabs of tasty pork sausage rolls. Running after that? Not a chance!

The tea costs £39 per person (£49 with a glass of champagne) on offer until 20 December. A child's version is also available for £15.

The view from our table was stunning - floor to ceiling windows

tasty treats

looking out to the river Thames, sunlight lighting up crisp linen tablecloths and glinting on silver cutlery. The ceiling, incidentally, is about 12 storeys high; the tea is served in the Executive Lounge.

Sitting looking out is so much better than running I think to myself, slathering a scone in cream, jam AND caramel sauce. I wash it all down with two pots of Earl Grey, my friend is more adventurous with a pot of white tea with pomegranate and rose, followed by black tea with cherry. Tea is from local tea merchants Drury's in nearby Covent Garden, champagne is by Mumm and we even get to meet the chefs.

Stunning view - floor to ceiling windows looking out to the River Thames

Later I enjoy more stunning views of the river I'm not going to run along, from an 11th floor bedroom overlooking the Thames and Houses of Parliament. Big Ben is wreathed in scaffolding and red lights twinkle from the tops of cranes. It's a wonderful vista - the London Eye lit up in pink neon along the river, the boats bobbing past, London buses on the bridge. All rooms, we're told, are completely sanitised for safety and some accessories have been removed. It does feel a bit barer than pre-

Clockwise from main: Park Plaza tasty treats; city view; Domenico and Alessandra from Park Plaza Hotel

lockdown days, there are no cushions on the couches, and a couple of rather forlorn-looking empty lamp tables. Next morning, I take a walk along the South Bank before breakfast - still not running, but the trainers are coming in useful. There are definite signs of the Covid effect - cafes and shops closed, but it's not all bad news. Nearby attractions the London Eye, London Aquarium and Shrek's Adventure are open, though with limited capacity and for pre-booked tickets only - the hotel is also offering a 2-for-1 ticket promotion. 'Open for business' signs in restaurants, postcard racks placed bravely on pavements, luxury afternoon teas up and running in hotels. It's great to support them as the country stumbles back onto its feet. Not running yet but walking at least.

Domenico and Alessandra's Afternoon Tea £39 per person/£49 with a glass of champagne, £15 per child (under 12) until 20 December. Superior twin room at the Park Plaza Westminster Bridge from £130. Merlin Entertainment package from £151 per night for a family studio room; for more information and booking visit Parkplaza.com or phone +44 333 400 6112. Bernadette Fallon is a travel writer and publishes her stories on Travellingwell.com

48 HOURS IN

The Great Glen



Friday, midday
Check into Rokeby Manor (doubles from £100, <https://blacksheephotels.com/>), a tastefully refurbished old dame reclaiming just inland from Loch Oich. Hardwoods, original floors and period touches abound.

12:30pm
Ease along to Fort Augustus for a hearty lunch at the Lock Inn. It overlooks the flurry of Thomas Telford locks that connect Kytra with Loch Ness.

2pm
Check out those Caledonian Canal locks, remarkably sturdy and graceful creations, each 180ft long and 40ft wide, capable of lifting or lowering vessels of all sizes 40ft. It's still very much in use.

4pm
Amble down to the shores of Loch Ness and make a cursory attempt to spot the monster - you never know - before recovering with a coffee at the lochside Boathouse. Snare a window table and you won't need to pay for a boat trip.

7pm
Back at Rokeby dinner is in Emily's Byre, a charmingly rustic restaurant housed in the old cow byre. Their Scottish-Indian fusion menu features a divine daal and kedgerree spiced with Scottish salmon.

Saturday, 9am
Get wet with Active Highs. They offer a flotilla of watersports, including canoeing on Loch Oich. Paddle down to the romantic ruin of Invergarry Castle - think Urquhart without the tourists.

1:30pm
Stay on the water with lunch on the Eagle, a surreally converted Dutch barge. Opening times are as eccentric as the décor, but if you get in you won't forget your visit.

2:30pm
Take a hike on the Great Glen Way, which handily snakes off west nearby in search of Fort William. Highland massifs glower above as the sun sparkles off Loch Lochy.

7pm
Settle into the Old Pines, a wee oasis nestled in seven acres of craggy Scots Pines. Fine Scottish produce - treated with the respect it deserves - stars.

Sunday, 9am
Savour a life-affirming stroll along the banks of the River Garry, or catch a game of shinty at the pitch opposite the hotel.

Robin McKelvie

A car or a bike is the best way to explore the Great Glen. Tourist information www.visitscotland.com

