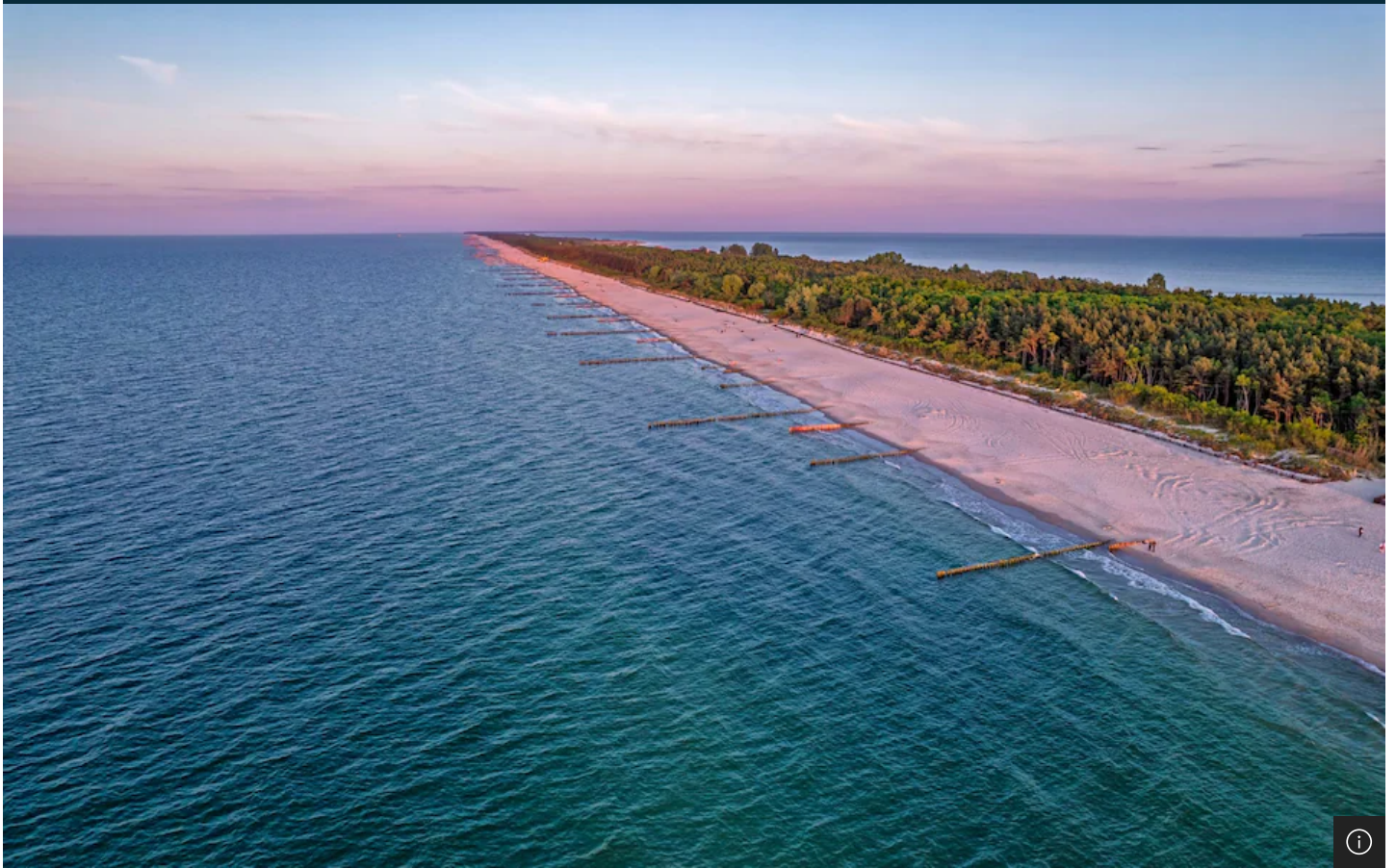



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Welcome to Hel, an unlikely slice of beach holiday heaven – in sunny Poland

Our writer discovered Poland's answer to the Scilly Isles, only with less Boden on display

By Orlando Bird

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So here I am in Hel, the Polish peninsula that launched a thousand puns. And you know what? Far from being the abode of the damned, it's beautiful. I'm bobbing around in the Baltic Sea – not the kamikaze mission you might imagine, at least in the summer – beneath a bright (if cloudy) sky. The temperature hovers in the mid-20s. Behind me, a silvery stretch of sand, as soft as icing sugar; ahead, Scandinavia.

Until this point I had assumed that Poland attracted three types of British tourist: history anoraks, marauding stags and people with a family connection to the place. I happen to fall into the third category – on my mother's side I descend from Polish Jews who left at the turn of the 20th century – so I was interested, but never quite interested enough. Holidays, I thought, were for the fun stuff: eating, drinking, lounging about, with an edifying hour of culture here and there. Give me Sicily! Give me Mallorca!

Then I read about Hel Beach, [recently voted one of the best in Europe](#). All right, it sounds unpromising. And, all right, it looks unpromising on the map, sitting near the end of a clawlike stretch of land that curls off Poland's northern tip, within 150 miles of the heavily militarised Russian province of Kaliningrad. But I was intrigued. What was a Baltic seaside excursion like? Could plucky Poland give the complacent Med a run for its money? Time to find out. The plan: to make my way up the country's Pomeranian riviera, with Hel as my final destination.

THE POLISH RIVIERA



If you're curious about Poland, incidentally, this is the time to go. Since the invasion of Ukraine, the Poles – who know a thing or two about Russian “peacekeeping” themselves – have taken in more than three million refugees. Many of the people leading this effort are involved in the tourist trade, which took a battering during the pandemic. For the British traveller, used to being cheerfully ripped off in Sorrento or Nice or Taormina, paying £2 for a beer – or £60 a night for a room in a four-star hotel – might seem almost insulting to the hosts. But visit Poland now, and you'll be doing some good.

The many lives of Gdansk

My trip started in the port city of Gdansk, an ideal base for exploring the coast, and one of Europe's unsung gems. It has had many lives: Teutonic stronghold in the Middle Ages, trading superhub during the Renaissance, amber El Dorado, German frontier town (by the name of Danzig), Stakhanovite shipyard during the Communist era, and birthplace of the Polish Solidarity movement (commemorated in an [excellent museum](#)).



Gdansk could easily be mistaken for Amsterdam | CREDIT: Sizun Eye/Getty

Today, you wouldn't suspect it had been through all that. After the Russians flattened most of the city at the end of the Second World War, residents reconstructed it to look as it did in more opulent days. With its canals and tall, pastel townhouses, the centre has

something of Amsterdam about it (a legacy of all that trade with the Dutch). The cobbled streets bustle – and, yes, the bars are wildly cheap. But I didn't spot many stag parties, besides a squad of senior British lads, presumably there before a second or third marriage. Prague – or indeed Krakow – it is not.

From Gdansk, you can be on a beach – Brzezno – in less than 15 minutes by car, train or bus. I spent a lazy morning swimming and tracking cargo ships as they traipsed across the horizon. The air was hot, the sky deep blue, and I shared the place with about five other people.

The main resort is Sopot, five miles north (with Gdansk and Gdynia, a little further up the coast, it forms what's known as the Tricity). It has been drawing crowds for a century with its fine blonde sands and pretty summer houses. Originally it was a spa town; now people come for the nightlife – but to keep things from getting too rowdy, my guide Sebastian told me, the momentous decision was taken a few years ago to force bars to close early... at 2am.



Sopot, home to Europe's longest wooden pier | CREDIT: ewg3D/E+ / Getty Images

The weather was, well, more British than it has been in Britain recently. I had been told to expect a 3:1 ratio of sun to rain, and that's what I got. In the evenings, there was a hint of autumn. Comforting. I wandered down the wooden pier (the longest in Europe) past families in shorts and T-shirts, adamantly ignoring the drizzle. On the beach, windbreaks went up.

We continued north, making a detour away from the coast to the Kashubia region. Culturally, this region is distinct from the rest of Poland, with its own dialect. Geographically, it's Poland's answer to the Lake District (there's even a literary connection: the German Nobel prize-winning novelist Gunter Grass identified as Kashubian). It is spectacular, a land of shimmering beech trees, lush fields and pristine lakes. Dive in, get out, sip a beer on the jetty, and repeat.

ADVERTISING





The road to Hel

But now Hel was beckoning. The 22-mile sand bar only became a tourist destination in the Nineties. Before that, it was a military base. It carried on fighting the Nazis after the rest of Poland had been taken, and remained fortified throughout the Communist years. Observation towers jut out from the pine forests, and there’s still a warren of underground tunnels, which have their uses for party-minded holidaymakers. As I found elsewhere during my trip, past and present have settled on a way to coexist in peace.

There are many ways to get there, including by bus (the 666, naturally) from Gdansk. But unless you’re schlepping a lot of beach gear, I don’t advise driving (as I did). Even on a Monday, the road to Hel was jammed with roof-racked cars. And once you’ve arrived, all you need is a bike. The peninsula is a haven for cyclists of all kinds, from smiling families in Breton shirts to Lycra-clad speed demons.

The Polish Riviera v The Med

Food

Pizza is weirdly plentiful in Gdansk, but you should try the local fare: pierogi (dumplings), fried oscypek (smoked sheep's cheese) and gołąbk...

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Resorts run from top to bottom: Kuznica, Jastarnia, Jurata. The inner side, facing the Bay of Puck, has become a surf outpost (documented in the Netflix film ‘Pod wiatr’ or ‘Into the Wind’), with a series of camping compounds lining the shore. Weathered Scandinavians with salt-encrusted dreadlocks sauntered around in flip-flops and boardshorts. I wanted to have a go at kitesurfing, but they’d been fully booked for weeks. So I watched, faintly envious, as the adrenaline junkies did their stuff, dancing like dragonflies across the sky.



A kite surfer off the Polish Riviera | CREDIT: Jadwiga Figula/Getty / Moment RF

Finally, at the very tip of the peninsula, comes the town of Hel itself. It's a proper seaside spot, a rackety jumble of holiday apartments, tat-touting shops and fish restaurants, all leading down to the harbour. The air is equal parts salt and waffles. I didn't encounter a single Brit, but the secret is certainly out among the Poles (and the Scandis, and the Germans). It was packed. I got chatting to Antoni, who had been coming with his family from central Poland for years. He told me the place had only grown busier during the pandemic.

Escaping the crowds

I didn't have to go far to escape the crowds, though. It's a 10-minute bike ride, along a track shaded by trees and edged with wildflowers, to Hel Beach – the beach. The clear light, along with the powdery sand (still turning up in my clothes) and the sense of being close to the edge of the world, reminded me of nowhere so much as the Scilly Isles, only with less Boden on display.

I clambered over the dunes, set up camp and went for a swim. This is the northern side of the peninsula, so the next stop is Sweden. I looked back to the beach. It was almost deserted – just a few kids kicking a ball around, and a man who looked like WG Sebald walking very slowly into the sea (he did come out eventually). The sun broke through the clouds while a cormorant wheeled, like a wind-up toy. I felt free.



A quiet corner of the Hel peninsula | CREDIT: Patryk_Kosmider/Getty Images/iStockphoto

I caught the boat back to Gdansk, a wonderful journey that shows you the full sweep of the coast. A couple of hours before my flight, I started getting messages from Britain. They painted a Boschian picture: flaming houses, scorched fields... I discovered that the runway at Luton – where my plane was supposed to land – had melted. The flight was cancelled. I won't go on about my Wizz Air ordeal, as [everybody seems to have had one of those recently](#). When, at last, I made it to Luton the next day, I stepped off the plane and was stupefied by the heat. None of the trains to London were running. Put me on the 666, I thought, and send me straight back to Hel.

How to get there

Orlando was a guest of the Polish Tourist Organisation, and guided by [Poland by Locals](#), which offers bespoke tours of Pomerania. He stayed at the stylish [Puro Hotel](#) in Gdansk (rooms from £65 a night) and the cosy [Lebunia Palace](#) in Kashubia (rooms from £64 a night), and flew with [Wizz Air](#).

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