

Gdansk to the music of time in a historic Polish city

Famed as the centre of Solidarity's resistance against Poland's communist authorities in the early 1980s, Gdansk is today a scenic and beguiling place suffused with youthful energy, writes **Isabel Conway**

I am walking on hallowed ground in the port city of Gdansk that straddles Poland's Baltic coast. This is where two of the 20th century's most important historical events began – the outbreak of World War II and the end of the Cold War.

Those of a certain age will remember grainy black and white TV images backed by industrial greyness, hulking steel cranes and communist repression. Lech Wałęsa, the charismatic Gdansk shipyard electrician with a bushy moustache, was the face of Solidarity, the first trade union in any communist country. Within a decade, Wałęsa and his followers' immense bravery and tenacity would change the course of European history.

On a recent first visit to Gdansk, I pay my respects first at the birthplace of Solidarity. The size of a small town, only a couple of decades ago the Gdansk shipyards employed more than 17,000 workers. In a capitalist world today, that number has shrunk to 1,200: having fallen victim to change and cheaper ship building labour costs elsewhere, its main business is carrying out repairs.

To pass empty warehouses and massive dilapidated ship building barns is akin to a pilgrimage. Those famous gates, where the world's press once camped to record a seismic shift in the world order are still hung with symbols of Polish resistance; a banner bearing the name of Solidarity, the national flag, a framed photo of the Polish Pope John Paul II, a picture of the Black Madonna and bunches of plastic flowers, reminders of the important connection between Catholicism and politics in Poland.

Workers no longer pass through the gates of the former Lenin Shipyard. Instead, tens of thousands of visitors file by photographs of fallen and imprisoned shipyard workers, those who died and were jailed and tortured by the military and police.

The European Solidarity Centre's permanent 'Roads

to Freedom' exhibition is housed in a building whose design resembles a tilting rusted ship. The award-winning museum traces how the Solidarity movement forced the first cracks in a system that would come crashing down, bringing about the collapse of communism and the birth of a free Poland in 1989.

My guide, Izabela Daszkiewicz, gives voice to her nation's emotional attachment to the past. We stop to watch a crackling old television newsreel. "That's General Wojciech Jaruzelski announcing the imposition of martial law in December 1981, crushing the hopes of millions of Poles hoping for democratic change," she says. "I cried because they were showing a man with big black thick framed glasses instead of cartoons. My parents also cried, but for a different reason."

Another exhibit in the Roads to Freedom exhibition is a mock-up of a grocery shop from the Soviet era – spiralling food prices were the catalyst for those first shipyard workers' protests. And it's as you'd expect: lumps of lardy bacon, a few stale loaves, a wilted cabbage or two on mostly empty shelves.

"I remember my mother buying one banana a month," Izabela says. "I was well into my teens before I saw a can of Coca-Cola; we heard a consignment of coffee had just arrived, there was such excitement, my parents sent me to the shop. I queued for ages, but when it was my turn they said I was too young to buy coffee and I was sent away."

Izabela who is 45, also remembers a time when citizens had to collect three kilos of newspapers to receive one roll of toilet paper.

Compact old town

It's unimaginable nowadays that life could have been so harsh in prosperous cosmopolitan Gdansk, a city that is both beguiling and easy to navigate on foot with its gloriously compact old town.



Sopot beach has the longest wooden pier in Europe



Mariacka street in Gdansk: the street is lined with jewellers selling amber



Sopot: the Baltic city is one of Poland's premier tourist destinations

At the crossroads of sea and river route waterways of the Vistula and Motława, most of the city was bombed to smithereens during the Soviet advance of 1945, though you'd never know that walking her ancient cobbled streets. The World War II museum conveys the unique tragedy of the last war and visitors are confronted with déjà vu – a realistic recreation of bombed-out streets, like those shown daily on television since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Drawing heavily on the Dutch renaissance, the gabled architectural style of old town Gdansk is reminiscent of Amsterdam, but free of the Dutch capital's window prostitution and sex shops.

With Poland-based guide Michael Gannon from Co Roscommon (toursbylocals.com), who knows all the local characters and stories plus the best shops on

Mariacka street for splurging on amber like Amber Art on Ul Długa street, we check out Long street, the Golden Gate, Neptune's Fountain and other landmarks.

The Irishman, who also runs eco-nature tours to view rare European bison and other creatures, introduces me to Polish 'milk bars', cheap-as-chips cafeterias. We enter Turystyczny on Szeroka street, home to "good authentic food at reasonable prices", Michael says, pointing to a menu whose most expensive main dish is around €8.

"Their prices used to be much cheaper, they've increased them," he exclaims, treating a beggar who follows us inside to a bowl of soup.

Nearby, the gothic St Mary's Church is home to an enormous astronomical dial. The vast interior, which holds up to 25,000 people, came in useful during the

martial law era, when members of Solidarity sought shelter here from the security services.

In the maze-like old town, nearby Mariacka Street is one of its most photogenic streets. Amber is to Gdansk what chocolates are to Brugge, and this quaint, cobbled boulevard is lined with the city's most renowned amber jewellers.

Medieval spires

A few days later, we go in (vain) search of our own amber, the resin from the trunks of trees. Tons of amber washes up along the city's Baltic coast drawing hordes of amber hunters who comb the shores at the most optimum time at high tide after a storm in hopes



Gdansk: the old town is incredibly easy to navigate

While you're here...

Take a boat trip from the Gdansk quayside to visit a site of heroic resistance:

Westerplatte, the peninsula at the entrance to the port where World War II began on September 1, 1939, after Germany launched a battleship bombardment. Two hundred Polish soldiers, outnumbered eight to one by invading Nazis, held out for a week. The site with the bombed-out remains of the barracks and a small museum has been left virtually untouched.

Explore Tricity: Collectively, the cities of Gdansk, Gdynia and Sopot make up what's called the Tri-City, sitting along the Baltic Riviera. Sopot is a ritzy coastal town famous for its well-maintained beaches and nightlife, the Monte Cassino promenade groaning with fashionably dressed matrons walking their pooches and young holidaying families. Sopot boasts the longest wooden pier in Europe, stretching almost half a kilometre into Gdansk Bay. Gdynia has several museums, including an excellent one devoted to Polish emigration over the centuries. There's a marina, a cruise terminal and many cheap and cheerful fish cafés. You can reach these towns and coastal walks easily by train, tram or on rental bikes all the way from Gdansk. There's also a ferry from Sopot across the Bay of Puck to Poland's Hel peninsula, a very long narrow spit of sand that is popular with lovers of fresh air, seaborne activity and corny puns. Back home, there's no beating telling your friends to go to Hel!

Eating and drinking: one word – cheap. Incredibly so by Irish standards. A three-course dinner can be had for €15-€20; a beer is €2 and wine €3 a glass. No wonder the city was overrun by weekendend Scandinavians. Gdansk cuisine majors in fish from the Baltic sea and freshwater species creatively cooked (check out Fino, restauracjefino.pl). Marinated herring remains king of the table. Soups are aromatic and healthy. Delicious free range duck and goose are served at waterfront restaurants Kubicki (restauracjaskubicki.pl) and Filharmonia (restauracjafilharmonia.pl), and venison and wild boar from the forests of Pomerania show how far Poland has come from stodgy dumplings and sour cabbage soup. Don't forget to try the local cherry brandy and Goldwasser, a mix of 20 herbs and roots in which 23-carat gold leaves used to be sprinkled in the mists of time.

of finding some. Away from medieval church spires and leafy squares, we get lost between quaysides. It's busy here, with upmarket hotels, and waterfront restaurants and bars all full, while water taxis and rental pedal boats ply the canals on the Motława River Embankment. Its most iconic symbol, the Crane, is a wooden port crane that loaded and unloaded ships passing through the city's waterways.

Our last evening in Gdansk fittingly draws us back to the shipyards near Solidarity Square. Empty ship-building halls are now a huge weekend party venue lined with deckchairs, bars, dancing, DJ sounds, food trucks and even a practice hill for skateboarders. This vast landscape of piled-up ship containers and graffiti-covered warehouses, now teaming with life and youthful energy, seems to epitomise the hopes and dreams of Solidarity all those years ago. ■

Isabel Conway was a guest of the Polish Tourism Organisa-