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How I spent under £200 on a weekend in one of Europe's most affordable cities

There are few more apt places for a November break than this charming Polish port

By Sophie Dickinson

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November is city break season: one last holiday hurrah ahead of a long winter; the chance to explore some European bolthole before launching into Christmas in earnest. This year, however, doesn't feel like the time to splurge.

The Post Office recently listed [Poland](#) as Europe's third cheapest country for city breaks – ahead of Eastern European rivals like Latvia and Hungary – and a friend of a friend had mentioned Gdansk as both an attractive and affordable option. I was largely in the dark about the country's fourth largest city, but a little research revealed charming, medieval streets and plenty of cultural sights; that, plus the £39 Ryanair

flight was enough to sway me. By the end of the trip, it had become much more than a budget destination: it's now one of my favourite cities in Europe.

After an early morning start (and an hour-long delay on the runway), I arrived in Gdansk just after lunchtime. I was prepared for freezing walks across an ex-Soviet urban sprawl, wrapped up in layers of jumpers and scarves. Instead, I was met with autumn, distilled: the city is framed by a national park, resplendent in ochre and gold; the city-centre buildings are capped with matching, rust-coloured rooftops.



City-centre buildings are capped with rust-coloured rooftops | CREDIT: Sophie Dickinson

It transpired that I was staying in the art school, something the £30 a night [Pokoje Gościnne](#) (“Guest Rooms”) didn’t exactly make clear when I booked. Happily, the rooms didn’t feel like an offshoot of Central St Martins, instead resembling a friend’s cosy spare digs – perfectly serviceable, with an ideal, central location.

To capitalise on that location, I spent my first day lurching through ancient archways and wandering the waterfront, which is lined with more of those copper-topped, five-storey buildings. The city was destroyed during the Second World War (Danzig, as it was known by the Germans, being the first real battle site), so its Dutch Renaissance architecture is all actually a modern replication. The result feels like a combination of Newcastle and Amsterdam, its cheerful jumble of amber shops, cafes and bars providing distraction to young families and stoic elderly couples alike.

By the early evening, the crowds were thinning out, and I took this as a sign to go for dinner. I had been recommended [Restauracja Kos](#), a family-run restaurant that was decorated with a confusing mixture of old film prints and oversized stuffed toys. I ordered far too much: six *pierogi ruskie* dumplings – stuffed with warming potato and cottage cheese – and a smoky walnut salad. The food, plus a tart, lemon-and-gin cocktail, came to a very reasonable £18.



Pierogi ruskie are among the most popular types of Polish dumplings | CREDIT: Sophie Dickinson

Keen to save money wherever I could, I utilised the city's [tourist card](#). Priced at £11, it allows entry into a whole host of museums, galleries, and even the zoo, although some organisation is needed to take full advantage. Note that most museums are free to visitors on Mondays anyway; others are closed on Tuesdays or at the end of the week.

Another prudent financial decision was to join a [free walking tour](#) (tips are appreciated, of course). On my second day I was guided around the city by [Greg Lipski](#), who – after a hearty breakfast at [Drukarnia Cafe](#) – provided me with the storied history of the place, from the staggering wealth of 14th-century Hanseatic knights to even wealthier modern-day oil refiners.



Free walking tours are a great way to soak up the history of a city | CREDIT: Aldo Pavan

We wandered around the vast, white-walled St Mary's Basilica (the port city, being connected to the rest of Europe, became Protestant long before the Reformation had any hold on the rest of Poland). Ancient city walls gave way to crumbling Nazi bunkers – now [nightclubs](#) – and then eventually to the gates of the shipyard, the site of the Solidarity strikes in the 1980s. The industrial action eventually led to the downfall of the Soviet Union, but began with protests over the rising cost of food prices a decade earlier. It all adds a layer of relevance to a Gdansk city break right now.

The still-working site is a sprawling, industrial scatter of cranes, dry docks and swiftly-modernising apartment complexes. Opposite the famed entry gates is a gleaming, glass office for Intel, the computer company. It's worth touring the admittedly very dull-sounding Health and Safety Hall to take a look at where the strikes eventually came to an end, before exploring the [European Solidarity Centre](#) itself. It's a hulking, rust-coloured monolith that houses a permanent exhibition about the movement, a gloriously-designed public library and, naturally, the former office of electrician-turned-President Lech Wałęsa.



The European Solidarity Centre in Gdansk: A hulking, rust-coloured monolith | CREDIT: Iain Sharp

The museum is modern and interactive, all tactile exhibits and touch screens. At the foot of the building, a group of schoolchildren were lined up for a photograph, beaming and yelling “Solidarność!” as the camera flashes. Greg is a guide here, too – a woman told me I’m lucky to have him with me, as he recounts tales of day-long queues for groceries during the Seventies and the optimism of elections once the strikes concluded.

Afterwards, we ate together at a [milk bar](#), a cheap, government-subsidised canteen. It felt rather like a school dinner: two distinct scoops of mashed potato, boiled, cubed carrots and a layered omelette were presented to me on a tray. For just over £2.50, it’s school dinner prices, too. Greg admitted that a considerable proportion of the older generation miss the certainty of the Communist life, with its guaranteed job and government-provided flat; these still-operating cafes are like a final gasp of the Soviet era.

It is found nowhere else in Gdansk, however. The liberally-heated rooms at Pokoje Gościnne, in combination with more dumplings for dinner at [Pierogarnia](#), all felt decidedly generous. And the radical spirit lives on through the city’s commitment to housing thousands of Ukrainian refugees.



Symbol of Solidarity in the European Solidarity Centre, Gdansk | CREDIT: Alamy

My final day was spent at the amber museum, which has recently moved to a more central location, the interiors of which glitter like the inside of a jewellery box. And on Greg's recommendation I headed to the shopping centre, not something I'd usually stake out, except for the fact of its being built over a Teutonic canal – which now runs through the centre of the Guess and Adidas stores. I hurried around both before taking a taxi to the airport, which cost around £10 and took half an hour.

I was enamoured with Gdansk, messaging friends about its pastel-hued streets and planning a return trip. Best of all, the weekend only cost £183, which feels like an appropriately bold price for a quietly subversive city.

Ryanair flights were booked via [Kiwi](#); Pokoje Gościnne was booked via [Booking.com](#). Greg Lipski offers [tours across the 'three cities'](#): Gdansk, Sopot and Gdynia.

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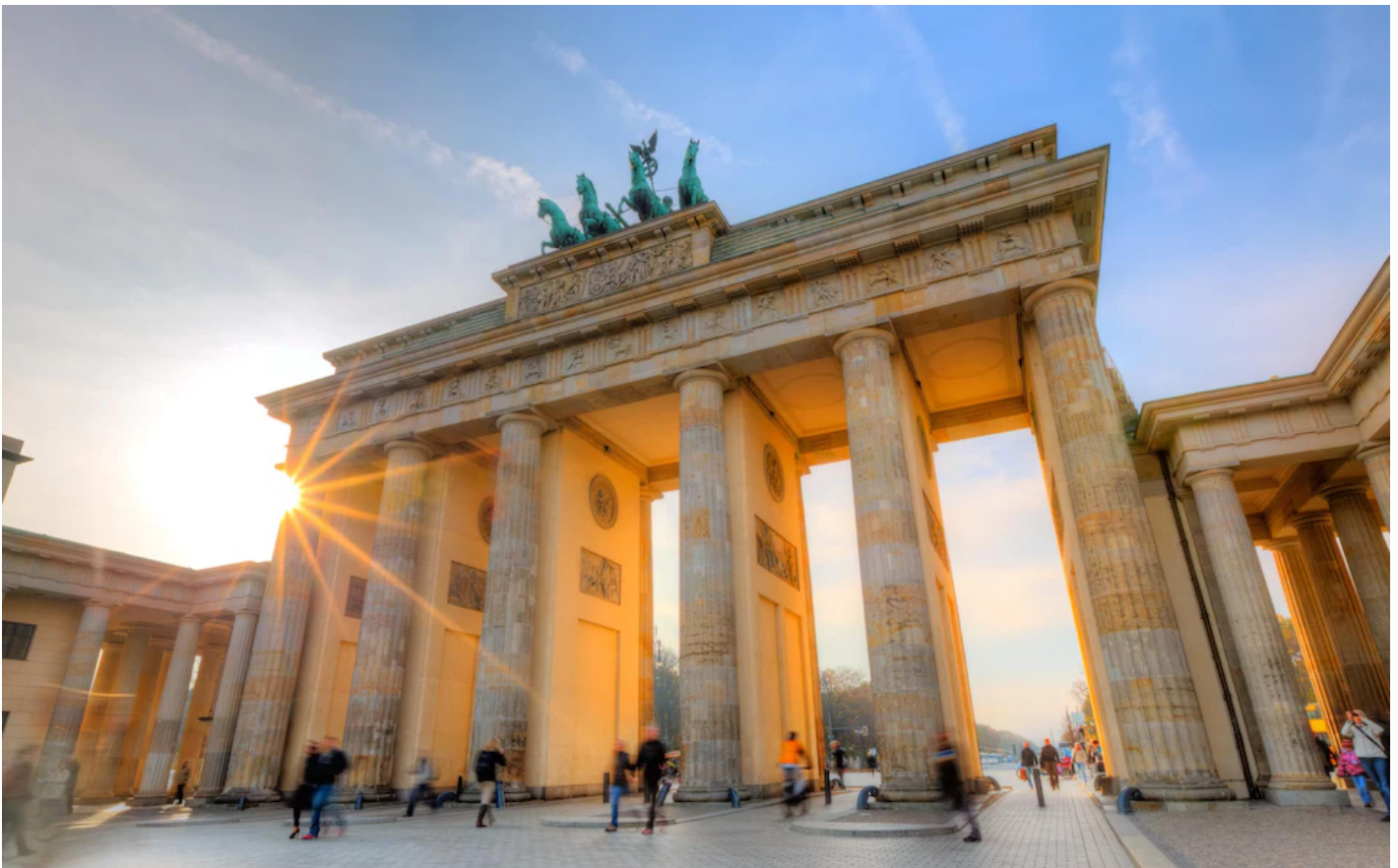
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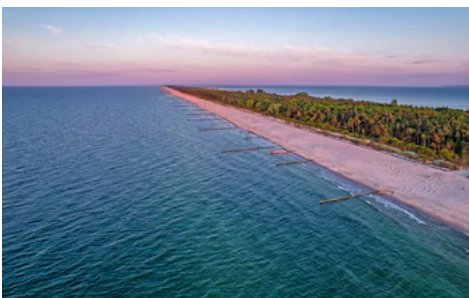
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