



PHOTOS BY CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The gem of the Amber Road

Gdansk enchants with its vibrant Old Town and pristine beaches

By Claudia Capos
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

GDANSK, Poland — Something magical happens as we walk beneath the massive brick archway of the Green Gate (Zielona Brama) leading into Gdansk's Old Town and emerge onto the Long Market (Dlugi Targ), a broad, cobblestone-paved square in the historic quarter.

Instantly, we are transported back to a time when the city was the gem of the Amber Road trade route, and its wealthy merchants were the envy of the Baltic's upper crust.

Above us, mythical stone gods and gnarly gargoyles peer down from fancy brick townhouses, which were restored after World War II to their original elegance. Standing side by side, the pastel buildings resemble giant glazed gingerbread cookies trimmed with white icing and licorice lace.

Tony shop windows sparkle with displays of ornate amber jewelry and hand-engraved lead crystal crafted by local artisans. Waiters at trendy outdoor cafes and restaurants beckon us to seats at umbrella-shaded tables. The aroma of cinnamon pastries wafts through the air, reminding us it's nearly lunchtime.

Street musicians serenade us at every step along the so-called Royal Route (Dlugi Targ and Długa Street), once the processional promenade for the king of Poland. A brass quintet pumps out polka music, and a string quartet plays Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons." In front of the main town hall, notable for its spire with a gold statue at the pinnacle, Doug and I watch two guys drumming on overturned white buckets. Their energetic performance delights the crowd of onlookers.

In recent years, Gdansk's enchanting Old Town, vibrant riverfront, interactive history and science museums, and pristine Baltic beaches have won it



From top: Colorful buildings add fairy-tale magic to Gdansk's Old Town, where there are tour boats on the Motława River, a carnival-like atmosphere on the riverfront, and amber jewelry to admire on Mariacka Street. In nearby Sopot, the Crooked House is a delight.

kudos as one of Europe's up-and-coming, family-friendly vacation destinations. In 2019, the city is observing the 80th year since the outbreak of World War II in nearby Westerplatte, so it's an opportune time to plan a visit.

Gdansk's early claim to fame is Baltic Gold, the richly hued amber that primitive tribes and contemporary craftsmen have been transforming into ornamentation and art for 6,000 years. During the city's Golden Age in the 16th and 17th centuries, Gdansk workshops fashioned precious works of amber for monarchs, sultans, nobles, and popes around the world.



The city's Amber Museum, housed in the medieval Długa Street gatehouse complex, traces amber's history from the Stone Age to modern times. Animated displays illustrate how amber was formed from the resin of pine trees 40 million years ago. Kids can peer through microscopes to see insects, and even a lizard, embedded in pieces of amber. The museum's upper floors display traditional and contemporary amber jewelry, sculpture, and decorative objects. Our favorites are a scale-model schooner, a Fabergé Millennium egg and a full-size electric guitar, all crafted from amber.



The best view of the Old Town is from atop the 269-foot-high bell tower of St. Mary's Basilica, purportedly the largest brick church in Europe. Climbing 409 steps up to the viewing platform is a bit challenging, but we are rewarded by a sweeping vista of the Motława River, the new Gdansk shipyards, and the Baltic Sea. Afterward, we stroll down Mariacka Street, just behind the basilica, to admire the amber galleries tucked inside elegant houses once owned by goldsmiths and merchants.

The riverfront promenade (Dlugie Pobrzeze), extending along the Motława River on the east side of the Old

Town, offers boundless possibilities for family fun. Young buccaneers and their parents can climb aboard a pirate ship for a swashbuckling cruise to Westerplatte and back. Families also can rent kayaks and mini motorboats decked out as pint-size convertibles and taxicabs. Large tour boats run regularly to the Hel Peninsula, famous for its sugar-sand beaches, and to Sopot, a high-end spa-resort town. The 164-foot-high Amber Sky panoramic wheel on nearby Granary Island provides nonstop thrills for kids of all ages.

Doug and I are curious to explore Sopot, part of the Tri-city metropolitan area that includes Gdansk and Gdynia, and we depart on a mid-morning cruise aboard the Smiltynė. En route to Gdansk Bay, we see the three crosses marking the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers, who were killed by army troops in 1970, and the place where the outlawed Solidarity reform movement held demonstrations that led to the fall of communism. We also pass the Monument to the Coast Defenders at Westerplatte commemorating the spot where the German battleship Schleswig-Holstein fired the first shots of World War II on Sept. 1, 1939.

At Sopot, the Smiltynė docks at the Baltic's longest wooden pier, stretching an amazing 1,676 feet in length. We wend our way across the seaside plaza to Monte Cassino Street, a shaded pedestrian walkway lined with health spas, lively bar-restaurants, and all-too-tempting ice-cream parlors. We stop to take pictures of Sopot's most famous attraction: the Crooked House, a fairy-tale-inspired building with a fun-house-mirror facade.

At the palatial Sofitel Grand Sopot Hotel — whose notable guests have included world leaders, Hollywood starlets, and prominent sports figures — we sip cappuccino on the garden terrace overlooking the beach. Afterward, we kick off our shoes and walk along the shore where families are enjoying a weekend outing. With help from friendly residents, we find the SKM Sopot railway station, buy two one-way tickets for 6 Polish zlotys (\$1.50 US) and take the train back to the Old Town.

Food is a big draw in Gdansk, and eating is a daylong pastime. The morning begins with a sumptuous breakfast buffet of cold cuts, kielbasa, pickles, marinated herring, waffles with whipped cream, home-baked bread, and delectable pastries.

For lunch and dinner, families can find kid-friendly hamburgers, chicken tenders, and sandwiches at Gdansk's Hard Rock Café on the Long Market. When traveling abroad, however, we like to sample the local cuisine. So we saunter along the riverfront promenade, checking out the menus of restaurants specializing in fish, wild game, and Polish dishes with unpronounceable names.

One evening we dine on meat pierogis with mushroom sauce, wild boar with prunes, dumplings, and red cabbage at the Goldwasser restaurant. Another night finds us at the Barylka restaurant enjoying halibut in leak-and-caper sauce with potatoes and vegetables.

A highlight of our trip is a three-hour visit to the Museum of the Second World War, which offers adults and schoolchildren historical insights into the wartime experience of the Polish people. Multimedia exhibits trace the events leading up to the war, its devastating impact on Gdansk, and the aftermath of the conflict.

On our last day in town, we spend the morning at the National Maritime Museum, where we climb up inside a towering medieval wooden port crane and explore the crew quarters and engine room of the Soldek, the first steamship built post-World War II in the Gdansk shipyard.

When we return to the Qubus Hotel, a distraught desk clerk informs us we were scheduled to check out early that morning. Apologetically, we explain there is so much to see and do in Gdansk's Old Town that we simply lost track of the day and time. He nods understandingly.

For more information, go to www.inyourpocket.com/Gdansk.

Claudia Capos can be reached at capocomm@sbcglobal.net.

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER | CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT

I canceled my Expedia hotel room — where's my refund?

Q. On a recent visit to Porto, Portugal, I had an upper respiratory infection and canceled a planned stay in Segovia, Spain. Fortunately, I was within the 48-hour cancellation window, so when I contacted the Hotel Infanta Isabel, I was sure I would get my money back from Expedia.

Now the hotel is claiming that it didn't receive my e-mail and has refused to refund my stay. Expedia says it's unable to help me. Apparently, Expedia believes the hotel over me.

I would like Expedia or the hotel to refund \$174, the charge for two nights that I didn't use. Can you help me?

CAROL MCLAUGHLIN,
San Francisco

A. Expedia should refund your hotel stay. I'm looking at an e-mail from you to the Hotel Infanta Isabel that asked for a refund, sent within the 48-hour cancellation window. It appears the hotel claimed it never heard from you, even though you had evidence to the con-

trary — evidence that you shared with Expedia.

I'm not surprised that an online travel agency like Expedia would believe the hotel. After all, it's getting far more money from the hotel than it is from you. But I am a little troubled that it continued to believe the Hotel Infanta Isabel even after you showed it your e-mail.

Good thing you e-mailed the hotel rather than calling. Can you imagine what would happen if Expedia or the Hotel Infanta Isabel only had your

word? That's why I recommend always putting a request like this or any grievance in writing. It starts a paper trail, which is critical to getting a case resolved. You can forward your e-mail correspondence to an online agency, a supervisor — or a consumer advocate.

If you ever need to cancel a hotel room again, make sure you get a response from the hotel or online travel agency. Most important, get a cancellation number. That's the evidence of your cancellation. If you don't have a cancellation number, you don't have a

cancellation.

I think if you'd presented your e-mail to one of the Expedia executive contacts listed on my consumer-advocacy site, it might have changed its tune. A brief, polite e-mail might have done the trick.

I contacted Expedia on your behalf. It reviewed the correspondence between you and the Hotel Infanta Isabel. Expedia has issued you a full refund.

Christopher Elliott can be reached at chris@elliott.org.