

# The power of Gdansk

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History has been drawn to Poland's seaside city: It was where Solidarity was born, and where the first shots of the Second World War were fired. But travellers who bypass it are also missing out on a mellower side: sipping cool beer along a lively waterfront and strolling the cobblestone streets of a community rebuilt from the ashes

By CAROLYN CHAPMAN

GDANSK, POLAND -- None of this was here 60 years ago. Although that scarcely seems believable to me now as I walk along Gdansk's cobblestone streets lined with colourful Burgher mansions, big Gothic buildings with elaborate façades and the occasional church spire or tower poking out from the skyline. In 1945, piles of burning rubble filled these streets, which at the moment are packed with street performers, musicians, locals eating ice cream and tourists hunting for the perfect piece of amber.

Poland is my first stop on a two-month trip through Eastern Europe, where I keep returning because its complicated and often subjective history fascinates me. There's more to Poland than Warsaw, Krakow and Auschwitz, and this port city, a six-hour trip from the capital, attracts me with its colourful old town and lively harbour.

But Gdansk's biggest tourist draw -- its important role in 20th-century European history -- is also what nearly destroyed it.

In no other Polish city I've visited is the sense of history of the past century more immediate than in Gdansk -- where the Second World War began and where decades later the Solidarity movement was born in the now-famous Gdansk Shipyard. Now, the city is entering a new phase in its history with its entry into the European Union. But for once, it won't be tumultuous, violent or revolutionary. In fact, little is expected to change immediately for tourists, except that there will probably be more of them. Poland has been easily accessible -- and considerably cheaper than Western European destinations -- since the fall of the Iron Curtain. But while Gdansk gets its fair share of tourists, they don't seem to overwhelm the city -- even in the height of tourist season, hearing English spoken is rare. Thankfully, Gdansk has so far been spared masses of tourists arriving in buses.

It must be something about that rough salty Baltic breeze that draws the forces of history to Gdansk. Formerly known as the Free City of Danzig, it was once the biggest in Eastern Europe, and was continually being passed between Germany and Poland. Some of the first shots of the Second World War were fired here when on Sept. 1, 1939, Nazi Germany attacked Poland's military posts in the Westerplatte peninsula and the Polish Post Office in central Gdansk. A few years later, when Soviet forces arrived, they essentially reduced the thousand-year-old city to piles of concrete, with their bombs and guns.

History lives on here in the form of museums, memorials and monuments to the heroism of the past. The post office that was destroyed in the war and rebuilt in 1950 now houses a small museum devoted to the battle.

The Westerplatte peninsula today holds several shelled-out and burned bunkers, a small museum inside one of the surviving barracks, and an oversized Socialist Realist monument to the defenders of Westerplatte, who lasted for seven days in a battle that was supposed to be over in hours.

But the biggest miracle of Gdansk is the massive decades-long rebuilding process that the city underwent after the war. The debris was cleared away and the city centre -- Old Gdansk -- was successfully resurrected and painstakingly reconstructed to look like the Gdansk of 1450 to 1650, when it was one of Europe's greatest export centres. Another miracle is that it was the Communist government that restored the city.

It's a fact that's hard to believe as I walk along one of the city's oldest streets, ulica Długa (Long Street, originally laid out in the 14th century), which leads to the Gdansk's waterfront on the Motława Canal. This pedestrian thoroughfare holds old mansions, the Town Hall and ceremonial gateways at either end.

The eastern part of ulica Długa turns into a large open square, Długi Targ (Long Market), dominated by the Neptune Fountain -- one of Gdansk's most prized symbols, and probably the most photographed spot in the city. The statue of the sea god was erected in 1549 and was dismantled and rushed into hiding, along with many of the city's other most treasured pieces. It was only returned to its spot in 1954. Nothing that I can see now was even here in 1945, and Gdansk is now one of the most stunning cities in Poland.

A trip here, of course, would not be complete without a stop in the Gdansk shipyards. The Solidarity movement -- which helped to topple communism throughout Eastern Europe and shape contemporary Poland -- was born here.

It all started with the shipyard workers strike and citywide protests of rising

prices and poor living standards in 1970. The army intervened, bloody clashes resulted and 44 people died. A 42-metre monument of iron crosses and anchors to the dead workers now stands near the shipyard entrance marking the place where the first three workers fell.

The driving force behind the Solidarity movement was Gdansk's most famous resident, Lech Walesa, who was an anonymous electrician at the Lenin Shipyard, as it was known then. He started working as a trade-union activist, and went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize and become president of a new Democratic Poland. Walesa still lives in the city, but the long-unprofitable shipyards have changed since his days there. Ships are no longer built there, and the whole complex (best seen while cruising along the river to Westerplatte) is a desolate and empty place.

In fact, it's hard to believe that what started here at the Gdansk Shipyard eventually led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Like any other historical place these days, the shipyard has now been turned into a tourist draw to remind us of what happened.

This includes a fascinating permanent exhibition, Roads to Freedom, that tells of censorship, secret police and propaganda and recreates the sense of immediacy and hope that was prevalent during those world-changing months. Outside, the walls are covered with Solidarity graffiti and there are two gates symbolizing the workers' protests and their rejection of totalitarianism.

Ironically, the shipyard workers who brought down socialism were the ones who were hurt the most when the new free market system arrived. The shipyard was one of those classic big, inefficient, state-run companies destined to be downsized and shut down. There is talk now of turning the shipyard into a Solidarity centre, which would have archives of Solidarity documents, a centre for human rights conferences, and room for more exhibitions.

Gdansk today seems like a city that's gone through its share of history making and is now happy to anticipate the simpler things that come along with warm Baltic summers, like drinking cheap beer in a sunny café on the waterfront.

The waterfront is the liveliest area in the city, and I'm naturally drawn there. Gdansk has been known for its artisans since medieval times -- particularly its goldsmiths, jewellers and amber workers.

The waterfront promenade is packed with vendors selling amber, which comes in shades from white to gold-specked orange to green, although I was warned to watch out for ripoffs.

It's also easy to eat well for the equivalent of a few dollars down on the waterfront, and fresh fish is plentiful.

Many of the little cafés and snack bars have lists of what they have fresh for the day, which they usually serve fried -- just point and tell them if you want fries, salad and beer.

Central Gdansk is small enough to get everywhere on foot, and I could spend days exploring its cobble-lined streets like ulica Mariacka (St. Mary's Street), which was one of the most meticulously reconstructed and was traditionally home to writers and artists (called the "Polish Montmartre").

Today, the artists and writers have given way to some of the city's finest amber boutiques and terrace cafés, which attract wandering street musicians during the summer.

One of the largest brick churches in Europe, St. Mary's, dominates the western end of the street. The medieval structure took 159 years to complete and holds 25,000 people. Severely damaged during the war, it was packed with crowds when Gdansk came under martial law in the early 1980s.

Gdansk's biggest monument is the city itself. After its violent destruction came the oppression of the Communist regime. The pride of the city was at stake, and the decades-long reconstruction is a monument to the determination of the people of Gdansk to restore their city to its former greatness.

The reconstruction was rushed, and was not always done in the highest quality. Many buildings have only been historically reconstructed on the façades, and most need to be constantly maintained. Just the fact that they are there for us to see, however, is a miracle of history.