

# A Polish SHINE

*Unlikely yet incredibly inviting, Poland represents  
a confluence of old and new Europe.*

*WORDS AND PICTURES BY DAVID J. WHYTE*

Over the past decade Scotland and the rest of the UK has seen a steady influx of Polish people coming to live and work here and most welcome they are too. These friendly, hard-working people have made a sizeable contribution to the British economy and if I may say brought a ray of sunshine into our oft-times lackluster service industries. I sometimes wondered in an absent-minded sort of way though just how they got here - In an old Trabant driven across Europe loaded down with mattresses, goats and chickens? Or maybe a horse-drawn cart with pots and pans dangling off the back? Not quite. They come by Wizz Air, the ultra-modern low-cost carrier that serves most of eastern and central Europe. And now here I am 'Wizzing' my way towards Lech Walesa International Airport and Gdansk along the country's Baltic coast to find out just what this Central European country had to offer.

Before I say anything further, I must apologise unreservedly to any Poles who might take offence at my utter ignorance of their nation. Not at all familiar with the country or culture, I really did not have a clue what to expect when I made my way east. Golf and Poland are two words I have never seen nor

heard in the same sentence. But from the airport en route to the first golf outing I was struck by how pleasantly well-ordered and appealing everything appeared; it's alpine character, tidy little apartments and amicable looking people strolling in the early autumn sunshine.

Regarding golf, I presumed I'd be shuffling round tracks akin to our most basic municipal. How far could this be from the reality that now accosted me at Sierra Golf Club only a half-hour from Gdansk. The clubhouse was a citadel of fine taste, comfort and modernity with Sky Sports showing the latest golf tournament and a tolerable selection of beers and wines behind the bar. If that had created a good first impression, the golf course was even more awe-inspiring. The flagpoles were made from the finest mahogany - well maybe not - but a quality wood trimmed in brass with a hefty feel in the hand. The rest of the course furniture would grace the most upmarket of upmarket garden centres while banks of flowerbeds and shapely shrubbery embellished the curvaceous fairways. Just to finish it off, dainty bridges crossed water hazards and high-spouting waterfalls give it an Edwardian English country estate appeal. This was a veritable Capability Brown knockoff! After

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a sterling round we freshened up in our spaciouly modern apartments overlooking the golf course and dined in style at the Sierra clubhouse.

"Maybe Sierra is a one-off!" I mumbled to myself as we drove off in search of more Polish encounters. There are only 25 golf courses in the entire country and we were touring those around Gdansk near the country's northern coast. This area is ideal for a short golf break with the courses all within around an hour's drive of Gdansk. You can easily plan as we did to

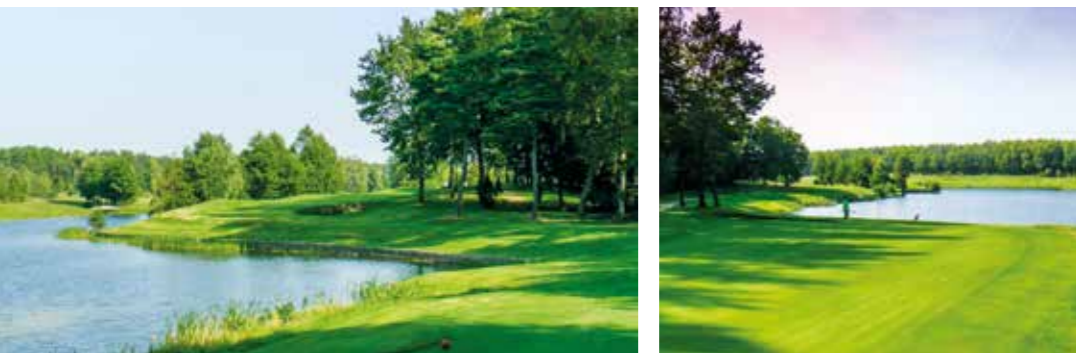
play three courses in three days. First though, we sampled the culture and cuisine of the somewhat unimaginatively named TriCity, more interestingly called Trójmiasto in Polish and made up of the three adjoining urbanisations of Gdansk, Gdynia and Sopot. Overlooking the sandy coasts of Gdansk Bay, this is where Poles take their seaside holidays. We strolled along gracious avenues and beachside boulevards. Even in late in September it was warm and cheery. In Sopot we stopped at a waterfront eatery called Bulaj

OPENING PICTURE: Sierra Golf Club

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Morning dew still settling in at Sierra Golf Club; Flagpoles that look like mahogany and trimmed in brass; Sierra's parkland estate reminds of an Edwardian era.

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The UK press delegation at Sierra Golf Club; Sopot Beach where Poles take their summer vacation; Sand Valley Villa.





ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Gdańsk Golf Club with its many water catchments; Gdańsk is among the longest courses in Europe; Gdańsk Old town and Amber Street; Gdynia Harbour.

BELOW, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Smiling now but for how long - David Whyte prepares to take off over Sand Valley; Sand Valley Golf & Country Club; Sierra Apartments.



and enjoyed a cavalcade of delicious fish dishes the likes of which would grace the finest Michelin-starred restaurants and at a fraction of the price. I began to wonder why Poles would ever want to leave the place.

The City of Gdańsk is a labyrinth of medieval tenement buildings fronted by ancient docks and a glittering new marina. One of Poland's oldest cities, Gdańsk has a history that stretches back a thousand years. There's shopping on Amber Street (actually called Mariacka Street), a narrow conduit running from the river to the heart of the Old Town lined with amber-bejeweled shops and street sellers. Poland is famous for these molten golden globules, fossilized tree resin from primordial forests now buried deep underneath the Baltic Sea. Sizeable chunks often wash up on the beaches. At one time amber was as cheap as chips in Poland but the nearby mines got flooded and now it's more scarce and significantly more expensive.


Apart from amber, Poland is remarkably inexpensive. In Gdańsk you can buy a glass of beer for one solitary euro; you could have something to eat - albeit a snack - for two. A round of golf at the ultra upmarket, super-suave Sierra Golf Club sets you back a mere 50 euros - even cheaper if you book as part of a package. And to 'polish' (pun intended) things off, a half-litre bottle of the purest vodka in a supermarket will only set you back a mind-numbing four or five euros. To a Scotsman, Poland was beginning to add-up very nicely.

The cultural highlight of Gdańsk was a visit to the newly opened Solidarity Museum next to the once infamous Gdańsk Shipyards. The building, inaugurated only a week before our visit, offers a riveting insight into the struggles of Lech Walesa. The former shipyard electrician and later President of Poland, Walesa's life was highlighted by his fight, together with shipyard workers, to wrest free from communist oppression and its years of austerity. Their efforts ultimately created a remarkable domino effect that brought down the Berlin Wall, and indeed eventually Communist USSR. This is one of the best museums of its kind I've encountered and worth a few hours of your time rather than the flying visit we had scheduled.

Talking of flying visits, the gregarious Finn who runs Sand Valley Golf & Country Club, Auntie (Antii is his real name) can arrange for anyone who is keen (or stupid enough) to take to the skies above the course in a powered Paraglider. Before you could shout "Fore!", the flimsy contraption is whirring across the 1st tee and up in the air. All was well for the first 100 feet or so but then the pilot, a wild-looking chap with Maori-style designs carved into his hair, insisted on climbing as high as was probably possible for such a flimsy contraption.

Getting back on terra firma, Sand Valley is yet another excellent golf course that does exactly what it says on the tin. Built on a geomorphic basin of sand, the fairways snake and shimmy between rivulets of bunkers. Now, I'm generally not in favour of the term, 'Inland Links' but I have to admit, Sand Valley fits that description perfectly. This is as challenging as any seaside setup on the east coast of Scotland with the added impetus of some willfully small greens especially on the par 3s that are devils to hit and hold.

Once again, I was highly impressed with the standard of the golf course, the welcome and the wonderful villa we had to stay in. We dined in the nearby town of Elblag allowing the chef to reign supreme on a medley of Poland's finest, washed down with multiple nips of neat vodka, which I soon realise is the Polish way of doing things. Early next morning I planned to play another quick 9-holes and when I woke up there was barely a trace of a headache indicating a vodka that is clearly of great purity and taste.

We were heading home but there was still time to fit one more round in. Postolowo Golf Club, otherwise known as Gdansk Golf & Country Club, is handy for the airport, a completely different prospect from the first two courses and perhaps the most challenging of all three. At first, it didn't look difficult but this fairly gentle parkland layout is sprinkled with plenty of water catchments that in practice makes for a stern test. This is also one of the longest courses in Europe at a staggering 7,766 yards (or 7,101 metres) off the tips. I would love to play Postolowo again to try and figure it out. Maybe we'll start with this one next time, and mark my words, there will certainly be one soon. 

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