

## TRAVEL

## A non-fan's guide to Poland

**W**HEN I told some of my friends that I was travelling to Poland a week before the Euro 2012 finals, they looked confused, then indignant — then angry. "But you know nothing about football," my brother Jamie shouted. "Nothing!"

I told him to relax; I had done some preliminary research — revisiting my *Footballers' Wives* DVD box set, and scouring the internet for pictures of Iker Casillas topless. Plus, I was travelling with a group of dedicated sports journalists who, I hoped, would make up for my ignorance about soccer.

We flew into the Northern city of Bydgoszcz on a sunny evening. The city is located between Poznan and Gdansk — making it an ideal place to stop off en route to Ireland's qualifying games.

After checking in to our hotel, we headed straight to Old Market Square, where sunlit beer gardens line the street edge and a grass football pitch stretches out into the centre. Here, Euro 2012 fans will be able to play friendly games of five-a-side, and watch matches on large TV

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stiff drinks under high-vaulted ceilings.

But our local haunt soon became Club Soda: a nightclub just off Old Market Square, where you can buy Flaming Sambucas and dance to Shakira till 4am.

The beer in Bydgoszcz is criminally cheap. In the specially erected fan zone outside the town centre, Irish supporters can buy pints for 5 zloty (approx €1.25). But it was the Polish vodka that stole my heart — and mind. I can recommend Zubrowka Bison Grass — a mild and smooth spirit that tastes great with a dash of apple juice.

There's a lot more to Bydgoszcz, however, than cheap beer and vodka. Sitting on the edge of a large, fir forest and nestling between the banks of the rivers Brda and Vistula, it's very picturesque. Bydgoszcz was once an industrial centre, so the city is filled with red brick watermills and granaries, which now house a range of museums, including the Leon Wyczolkowski Art Museum and the Old Mint.



**OVER THE MOON:** Kirsty Blake Knox is no soccer expert but she found plenty of attractions in Bydgoszcz, Poland, to keep Irish fans happy as they descend on the country for the qualifying games for the Euro 2012 finals, which kick off in Poznan

screens.

"It will bring this place alive," our tour guide Adam Krawczyk told us, "the Irish lads will love the Polish craic."

I woke up the next morning feeling a little groggy: those sports writers know how to have a good time. Thankfully, we began the day with a relaxing boat trip up Bydgoszcz Canal; bobbing up and down the locks we passed locals fishing and cycling along the banks. Back on dry land, we made our way to the hub of the city: Mill Island. Once known locally as the "island of flying daggers", this used to be a pretty dodgy area, but in 1995 it received a radical makeover and was given a rather more glamorous title; "the Venice of Bydgoszcz".

Surrounded by canals and with lush parks to sunbathe and picnic in, Mill Island is a great place to laze away a sunny afternoon. On the northern side stands the imposing DAG Bromberg Explozeum. This hulk of a building was once the Third Reich's largest armament factory. Today, tourists can take an underground tour before catching an impromptu concert in the nearby mini-amphitheatre.

Bydgoszcz is a university town, and is packed full of nightclubs and underground bars: from the uber-trendy to the discreetly sophisticated. Eljazz is located on Kreta Street, and is an alternative music venue that serves up

There are also plenty of pretty churches to discover. The Cathedral Church is a real gem; every inch is painted in bright, loud colours. Oranges, purples, golds; it almost looks like its walls have been plastered with a range of dazzling jewels.

Polish cuisine is a great mix of light dishes and hefty plates. Borscht, fresh vegetables and white fish sit along side schnitzels, pretzels and plenty of pork. We tucked into some delicious cauliflower dumplings at the Warzelnia Piwa — a restaurant overlooking the canal, before stopping

off at Cukiernia Sowa on Mostowa Street for some sky-high 99 cones called Loty.

Back on the Euro trail, we left Bydgoszcz and headed to Gdansk — where Ireland will play Spain. The 43,600-seat amber arena sits outside the city like a shiny, gold pebble. Unfortunately, we weren't able to get in.

"Blame UEFA," the security man shrugged. "They have the place locked down." So we wandered around outside the stadium as Adam told us about the 30,000-strong fan zone on Plac Zebran

Ludowych. With DJs playing until the early hours and constant football coverage, the place will soon be heaving with Irish supporters.

I left the lads nursing pints in front of the Town Hall, and wandered through Gdansk. Over 90 per cent of the city was destroyed by Allied bomb raids during WWII. Restoration of the historic centre began in 1948.

Looking around the city today, it can be difficult to comprehend the sheer scale of destruction. Everything is so delicate and pretty; curling

rococo skylines, intricate spires and terracotta tiles. But there is a notable absence of German and Prussian style buildings — revealing Gdansk's reluctance to acknowledge its Germanic past when it was known as Danzig.

At the end of Długa Street is the Prison and Torture House — home to two very different museums. The first tells the history of "Poland's Gold", aka amber. The other is a torture museum. With detailed drawings and descriptions of torture instruments such as the Spanish Boot (you

don't want to know) and Judas' Chair (you really don't want to know) this exhibition is not for the squeamish.

Having climbed to the top of the cathedral and mooched about the various art galleries, boutiques and tea shops, I returned to the boys, who looked in much better spirits. We hopped back on the minibus and sped back to Bydgoszcz.

On the minibus, our guide Adam told us he's involved with cheapdentist.ie; a discount site that specialises in "dental tourism". I was fairly unfamiliar with the concept and asked Adam to clarify. "You fly to Poland for a nice holiday, and you come back with some new teeth." I could vaguely remember hearing something about discount veneers that were available in Hungary. Adam frowned: "Polish teeth are much better than Hungarian teeth." We were offered a free consultation, but I don't think any of us felt like having our teeth cleaned on holiday.

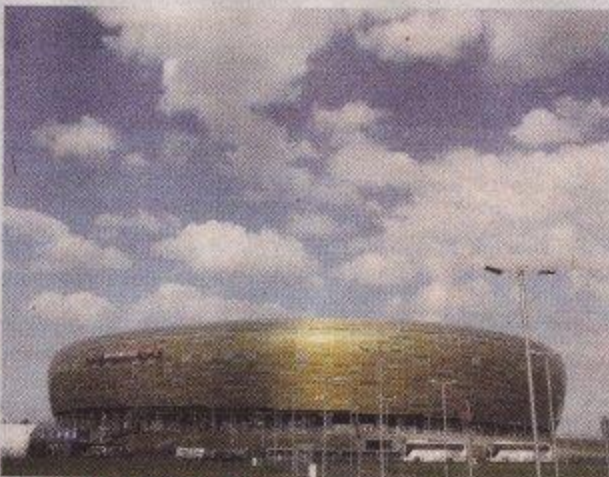
That night, as we played darts in a local bar, I realised, to my surprise, that I had begun to feel excited about the Euros. Okay, I still knew nothing about football, but it was impossible not to appreciate the atmosphere surrounding the tournament and the energy pulsing through Bydgoszcz.

All together now: "You'll never beat the Irish..."



## GETTING THERE

Ireland play Croatia in Poznan today (June 10), Spain in Gdansk on June 14 and Italy in Poznan on June 18. [www.Bydgoszcz.eu](http://www.Bydgoszcz.eu)



**GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY:** The football stadium in Gdansk