

TEXT: MANISH DIKSHIT

POLAND

Not Poles Apart

In a country ravaged by the World Wars, the quest for beauty reveals a design culture that is not only striking but also heartening



Architect, designer and curious traveller, Manish Dikshit is the founder of Aum Architects. A frequent speaker at design schools, Dikshit has a vast portfolio of projects covering everything from family residences to townships.

Poland had been on my bucket list for a while and this Summer, I finally made it to this wonderful and elusive central European destination.

Poland has had a tumultuous history and an immense tale to tell of its horrific past. Forever sandwiched between two powerful, aggressive neighbours, it has had to rise from the ashes several times in the past millennium. From being the largest country in Europe, it has now had its population devastated in two World Wars and after.

From an architect's perspective, however, I was very amused by the variety of architectural styles appearing across the country and how they directly link to its history. Present day Poland has many works by the Dutch and several architects from other countries. It is, in fact, hard to find a building designed by a Polish architect.



Reconstructed after WWII, the port city of Gdańsk is a historic tourist location with narrow cobbled streets and elegant buildings.



POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews

From the traditional to the modern

The architecture in Warsaw, like in most of Poland, influences and reflects the history of Polish architecture. Warsaw's palaces, churches and mansions display richness and minute architectural details. Nearly every European style is witnessed, from Gothic Renaissance Baroque to the very contemporary styling of recent times.



Joseph Stalin Palace of Culture and Science



National Museum, Gdańsk



My first city of call was the capital city of Warsaw. It was Spring in Poland, perfect for boat rides and picnics in one of the many lovely parks around the city. I stayed with a friend who is a local designer with her partner architect, which made the experience a lot more interesting!

Some of the most impressive buildings in Warsaw were a mix of old and new styles of architecture.

The POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews is a post-modern structure in glass, copper and concrete, designed by Finnish architects, Rainer Mahlamäki and Ilmari Lahdelma. The core exhibition documents and celebrates the 1000-year history of the Jews in Poland and is a multimedia narrative exhibit. The cavernous entrance hall is the central feature of the building, with its smooth sprayed walls curving in a bulbous shape from the floor to the ceiling. The green tinted glass façade reflects patterns of light throughout the main entrance. Perforated copper and silk-screen glass panels printed with Latin and Hebrew text cover the exteriors.

Next in line is a very interesting and controversial palace of culture. Originally titled the Joseph Stalin Palace of Culture and Science, the structure's Art Deco façade and



Saxon Garden



Warsaw Old Town



Mariacka Street



Złota 44



Culinary Pitstop

The milk bars or Bar Mleczny are a reminder of the days when meat and vegetables were scarce and these state-run eateries served cheap food options, mostly starches, root veggies and dairy. Very inexpensive, they are mainly used by students these days, but back in the days of the war, they were a blessing for the locals.



Poznań



Long Market

clock face still dominate the skyline at 778ft, being the tallest building in Poland, to the distaste of many Poles who would rather forget the Soviet Era.

It is interesting to see another landmark building glaring at the palace from across the street — a glass and steel symbol of modernity called the Złota44. Designed by US-based Polish architect Daniel Libeskind of New York's WTC fame, the building is somehow symbolic of returning the skyline to the people of Poland.

The old town is a remarkable place. Almost completely destroyed during WWII, it has been rebuilt in a style inspired by the classicist paintings of Italian artist Canaletto. Food is another integral part of Polish culture. The place is full of cafes and restaurants, some of which are absolute hidden gems.

GDAŃSK

To reach our apartment on the famous Mariacka Street in the Gdańsk town of the Tricity metropolitan area,

SUSTENANCE

The traditional Borscht (beetroot soup) and Pirogi (dumplings) are a delight, especially after a tiring walk through the streets of the historic old town in Warsaw.





St. Mary's Basilica



Museum of the Second World War



Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre

UNDERGROUND GEMS
Influenced by the functional needs of a harbour town, every old building in Gdańsk has basements that now house fancy restaurants and cafes.



Sopot Pier



St. Mary's Church



St. Peter's and St. Paul's Church

Historical Hub

Our hotel was right in the heart of the Jewish ghetto, with many places like the St. Mary's Church, the St. Peter's and St. Paul's Church, Oscar Schindler's factory and the infamous Auschwitz concentration camp speaking boldly of Poland's unique past.

we began our long and scenic drive from Warsaw. The countryside is full of grasslands, farms, lakes and forests. Mariacka Street took me back to the Middle Ages — although some structures were destroyed during the war, some of the buildings are jaw-droppingly stunning. Unlike other Polish towns, Gdańsk doesn't have a main square, but a wide pedestrian street lined with charming cafes and stores, a lot of which sell the famous amber jewellery that is local to the region. Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot belong to the Pomeranian region in North Poland. It boasts of landmark buildings, old and new. Amongst all the churches, museums, the old town and the beautiful seaside, three structures caught my attention:

First is the Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre by Renato Rizzi. Built in 1989, the old theatre is a black windowless box structure. The brightly-coloured roof flanks open in two parts, each weighing 46 tonnes. During performances, they open within three minutes, exposing the theatre to natural elements.

Second is the Museum of the Second World War. Opened in March 2017, the unusual red brick building emerges out of the earth at an angle of 56 degrees, like the shaft of a stray rocket that could explode any moment. Designed by Polish architectural firm Studio Kwadrat, the structure features a glazed façade and roof that offers a clear view of the city centre. However, the museum exhibit is completely underground.

Third is the pier in the beach party town of Sopot, which is the longest wooden pier in northern Europe. Originally used for mooring, the white-fenced structure is now a popular tourist attraction because of its size.

KRAKÓW

My next set of unique experiences was in Kraków, the largest town of lesser Poland. As the cultural capital of Poland, Kraków is filled with old churches, monuments, the largest European market square, trendy pubs and art galleries.

The Wawel Castle enchanted me with its legendary sagas. Sitting on a limestone hill surrounded by water and marshes, the castle holds evidence of settlers from the Paleolithic age and echoes with the legends of dragons too. The interior architecture is just as grand as the outside. It is packed with rare art, hand crafted furniture and exquisite woodwork.

ZAKOPANE

My journey through this magnificent and diverse country brought me to my last stop — the hill town of Zakopane. Snow-covered mountain peaks are a favourite for skiing during Winter, while Spring offers surprisingly panoramic views. Having rented a traditional wooden chalet in the hills of Poronin, we stayed away from the hustle and bustle of the touristy old town.

Apart from the traditional houses and local cheese, the highlight was the thermal pools of Zakopane. They are fed by naturally occurring thermal water springs from the ground. The town uses the heat from this ground water to heat the entire town during the cold season.

All in all, Poland was an architect's dream. Kocham Cię Polsko.



Chalet in the hills of Poronin



Motława and Krantor



Wawel Castle



Bedzin Castle



Malbork Castle

Poland Unabridged

Throughout my epic journey of North, South and Central Poland, I was witness to lots of different styles of architecture, design and culture. I was also fortunate to view so many eras in just one country — from the dominant communist touch to the charming old towns of the golden ages and the modern Poland of today.