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The Road to Hel Peninsula: a unique viewpoint in the Baltic Sea

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The irony of Chris Rea's "The Road to Hell" playing on the radio as I drive along Poland's northernmost peninsula isn't lost on me.

It's here, on the Hel Peninsula, that my friend Jules and I find ourselves: a 22-mile long sandbar that runs from the Bay of Puck to Hel, surrounded on either side by the Baltic Sea.

In fact, Hel (which means "empty or exposed place" in Polish) couldn't be further from the concept of 'hell'; its beautiful sandy beaches are a joy to behold, even in the depths of winter.

It's during the summer months that the town's 3,900-person population quadruples in size as visitors flock here from far and wide. But it's a completely different proposition out of season, save for the odd straggler.

First settled by the Goths in the 1st Century, throughout history, the Hel Peninsula has benefitted from its strategic location as the maritime gateway to the Polish port city of

Gdansk. During its peak in the 14th Century, the town was a prosperous fishing port and trading centre in its own right, before then reinventing itself as a popular seaside resort.

Abandoning the car on the outskirts of town, we wander into the woods and then onto the beach, past the imposing octagonal red lighthouse looming overhead. The contrast between the sea on either side of the spit couldn't be greater: to the north, waves crash relentlessly against the shore, while to the south the water is as flat as a millpond. Yet the same brooding, dark sky hangs over both, as if ready to unleash a biblical storm at any moment.

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Stopping at a van-come-beach-shack along the way, which looks like something straight out of California's surf scene, we order a couple of lemonades and kick back in the deck chairs to survey the landscape. A pair of young boys play nearby with their toy boat in a puddle left by the previous day's storm, without a care in the world.

Energised, we get up and stroll into town. Passing the temporary stalls selling all manner of souvenirs, from miniature plastic lighthouses to military surplus gear, we head along the main street, which has very much the feel of the Wild West.

A further walk along the promenade and we're at the "fokarium", or Seal Sanctuary, home to a group of Baltic grey seals, just in time for feeding hour. These obedient pinnipeds perform a host of impressive acts for our benefit, including rolling over and fetching hoops and footballs, all in return for a few sardines.

Before long, though, it's time to return to our quarters, stopping on the way for a couple of Polish beers on the beach as we look out across the Baltic. The sounds of the waves gently lapping the shore provide the perfect soundtrack for the evening.

Back at the Hotel Dom Zdrojowy, which emerges as a silver spaceship from the surrounding woods, like something from War of the Worlds, we retire to the spa to enjoy the facilities. Dividing our time between the pool, the hot tub, and the sauna, we recharge our batteries before hitting the town for a meal in one of the few restaurants still open on the Hel Peninsula at this time of year.

The next day we ship out to Gdansk, taking in a quirky monster truck park complete with an array of decommissioned aircrafts. Further on, there's another strange display of trolls

chasing a flock of sheep; we skirt through the sprawling urbanities of Gdynia and Sopot.

Keen to take in as many cultural sights as possible, we make a beeline for Gdansk's historic centre, where we wander the streets for a couple of hours before heading to the docks for a kayak tour of the city. Starting by the Lenin Shipyard, where the Solidarity movement strike began, we wind our way through Gdansk's main waterways, looking up at the history that surrounds us in the form of bridges, mills, and warehouses as we dodge the odd seafaring vessel or two. Barely 100 metres in, however, one of our party takes an accidental but quick dip; to their credit, they soldier on, completing the tour in sodden clothing.

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Bidding goodbye to our tour guide, we head to the European Solidarity Centre, where we learn about the history of the movement and the struggles Lech Walesa and the workers went through to achieve economic reform and free elections in the 1980s.

Finishing the museum tour on the roof, we look out over the city and admire the views of ubiquitous cranes, historical landmarks and high-rises that surround us just as the sun begins to set.

The evening is filled with karaoke and other such frivolities as we bounce from bar to bar, taking in the live street acts and soaking up the general atmosphere. The city is buzzing, with throngs of people lining the streets, the bars and restaurants a hive of activity.

The next day, we make our way to the Museum of the Second World War. Spending the next four hours immersing ourselves in harrowing accounts of the atrocities committed, we leave much better-informed about this significant historical event, yet feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the whole experience.

Repairing to the fourth floor restaurant, we enjoy a delicious (and very reasonably priced) plate of pork loin and chips, washed down with a beer, whilst listening to the gentle strains of the in-house guitarist and admiring the view. A fitting way to end our short but fun-filled trip to Gdansk and the Hel Peninsula.

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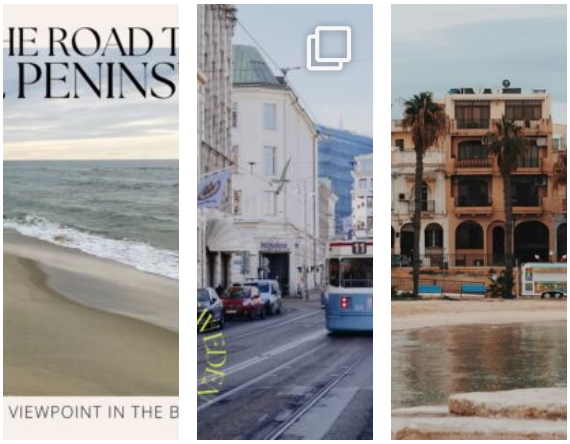

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