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■ MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: Szczecin offers beauty in many ways



■ SCENIC: Szczecin in north west Poland

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Beautiful idea for city break

By ABI PARKES

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ALONG with the start of a New Year comes all the customary promises for a new you.

Everyone is busy making vows to lose weight, get fit and look beautiful. It can all get a bit tedious.

But what about combining your dreams for a new look with an exciting visit to explore a new city. And in the process save yourself a packet.

Health tourism is a rapidly growing economy and one such destination where you can benefit from cheaper prices is Szczecin in north west Poland.

On the Baltic Sea this is a city full of history. It has been part of Denmark, Sweden and under German occupation. And only became free of communism 17 years ago following years of strikes and protests.

Although the majority of the city was destroyed by allied bombing in the Second World War, it still has plenty of grand historic architecture to discover, which in places sits bizarrely alongside more modern blockwork.

There are impressive universities, museums and monument buildings and a clever walking trail has been devised to take tourists around the main places of interest such as the Pomeranian Dukes Castle where you will also find the cultural and tourist information centre.

Among other intriguing relics in this city is the world's oldest cinema. Unfortunately it doesn't have many original fixtures and fittings but dating back to 1909, the Pioneer is in the Guinness Book of World Records as the oldest functioning cinema.

Just opened in the city is Poland's largest atomic shelter. Left almost untouched since German occupation, it is an eerie reminder of a cold past. Walking alongside German propaganda, gas masks and radiation suits, it is staggering to think this dark place once played home to thousands of people.

Away from the history and culture of the city you can retreat from the hustle and bustle to one of Szczecin's many parks. A quarter of the city is occupied by green space and another quarter is occupied by lakes, reservoirs and the Oder river.

Spring and summer is a fantastic time to visit and this year the city plays host to the Tall Ships Races in August.

One of the best places to appreciate the city is from the water. Boat trips take you up river where you can see the ship yards busy at work. It was in these yards in 1970 where the first strikes took place to protest against the communist regime. This was followed by mass protests and a devastating loss of lives and injuries. It was not until 1980 when an agreement between the striking workers and the Government led to the Solidarity Movement.

Vibrant

It makes a fascinating and vibrant city break destination but if someone had suggested to me travelling to an eastern European country for dentistry treatment or even cosmetic surgery I would have gasped in horror at the suggestion.

I don't feel I need the cosmetic surgery quite yet but if it is something you are looking at, this could be a place to consider.

The health and beauty treatments are second to none and after seeing the surgeries first hand, I was amazed at what they had to offer. It is easy to find an immaculate surgery boasting all the latest technology and equipment. I was stunned to see patients lying back watching the TV in pristine rooms as they received a filling. A little different from our NHS.

Some dentists are paper free, working solely from computers where they can call up records, including

plans of teeth and work undertaken, at the click of a button.

The standards appeared to be extremely high and the costs are amazing with three white fillings costing around £60.

Beauty treatments are equally cheap. With a massage costing 60 zloty, or £10, and an intense facial costing £25, or 150zloty. You could indulge yourself for your complete stay and it would hardly hit your pocket.

There are plenty of first rate beauticians. One small one where I can specifically recommend the oxygenating facial is The Philosophy of Beauty.

You can find information, read up on surgeries and book medical and beauty treatments at www.healthandrelax.pl

When the sun goes down there is still plenty to excite. The nightlife buzzes with trendy and chic bars and nightclubs where you can dance the night away and taste some of the famous Polish vodka. Among the ancient tipples to try is Starka vodka which is made in the Szczecin distillery Polmos.

With hearty and delicious soups, the food was excellent. The only problem we found was the service in restaurants. Whether we were just very unlucky but everywhere we ate out, while it was incredibly tasty, the service was terribly slow. It could be worth making the most of the excellent food and service in one of the first rate hotels.

The Novotel offers expert service and is well placed to discover the highlights of Szczecin. It is only five minutes from the main bus and train stations and very close to some excellent night spots including The Rocker Club, Can Can and City Hall.

FACT FILE

ABI flew to Szczecin from London Stansted with Ryanair — visit www.ryanair.com — and travelled to London with First Great Western — www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk

She stayed at the Novotel in the heart of the city visit — www.orbis.pl

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