

Travel Outlook

Some adjustments needed for washrooms, tour guides

Excursion to Poland

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Herald Special

In this article I would like to talk about some of the difficulties and oddities you can expect on a trip to Poland. As they say, forewarned is forearmed, and nowhere is this truer than in Poland.

Let me begin with the flight. If you take Lot don't expect luxury. You don't know what Economy Class is until you try Lot. The planes we flew on were Ilushin 62's, a Russian made plane that appears a little more fragile than is desirable for a trans-Atlantic flight. However, the service was excellent, the vodka flowed and the food was edible. I must also compliment the pilots; on the four flights I made on this trip the landings and take-offs were so smooth that they were almost imperceptible.

My warnings concern your fellow travelers - Poles on visits to Canada or back to Poland. I have never been so annoyed in my life as I was with some of these people. Whether it is because of the system or some inbred cultural blip, many Poles have this frustrating habit of pushing in front of you in line. It started at the airport in Montreal and continued for the seventeen days of my stay. I can remember only a few lines where someone didn't attempt to push themselves in front of me; these times were the exception, not the norm. It doesn't matter if you tell these people off; you can insult them to your heart's content in English or French and they will plead ignorance. My favorite instance of the "pushing through the line" phenomenon was at the airport in Gdansk, waiting to go through the security check. The security guards going over you and your hand luggage for domestic flights make Attila the Hun look friendly; there is no

insult to small, no insolence too great for these people. As I was standing at the head of a small queue waiting to be searched and annoyed, a woman stepped in front of me to go first to be rifled and insulted. I cannot imagine why anyone would be rushing into this. But then, there were many things I never understood in Poland.

If you take a domestic flight in the country (I do not advise this, it makes one too angry), be aware that the government has taken steps to ensure that nobody hijacks the plane. The security guard will take away anything in your hand luggage that remotely resembles a weapon, including any duty-free bottles of liquor you might be carting around. The guard going through my bags on my way to Gdansk took away the bottle of Glenlivet that three of us were depending on. She spoke no English and I nearly had a fit when she did this. I called for Mark, a fellow journalist on the tour who was of Polish origin, to come and get the Glenlivet back for us. It turned out that the bottle would be sent via the baggage compartment in case I decided to break the bottle and use it as a weapon. Okay.

We boarded the plane for Gdansk. This was on the second day of our guided tour and there were five Canadians and our Polish guide, Anna. Anna never warned us what to expect. As we filed into the small plane, a policeman or militia man in green fatigues and a beret was standing at the front of the plane, arms folded across his chest and legs planted solidly apart. He looked mean, and he had a holster with a gun in it and a long knife lay sheathed under the gun. After take-off we were told in Polish and French (not English) to make sure to call the

stewardess if we wanted to stand up, as the soldier had orders to take care of anyone who stood up without permission. And they thought someone would be silly enough to break the bottle and attack Mac the knife! Fortunately no one tried to go to the washroom without permission and we arrived in Gdansk without incident. After this, we called Lot "Air Militaire."

Another thing that will plague any tourist in Poland is the washroom situation. You will be expected to pay for using the toilets, in some places you pay a little more for toilet paper, and some unkept women will unroll bits and hand it to you. There is nothing quite as disgusting as having someone else handle your toilet paper! Despite the universal presence of these little women the toilets are astoundingly filthy in most restaurants. Some hotels are hardly up to snuff, at least in the public washrooms I never went into the public W.C.s which dot the major cities. I simply could not imagine how disgusting these would be. The

washrooms in our rooms at the Orbis hotels were wonderful, little islands of hygiene and cleanliness in the sea of filth. The amount you pay is only five or ten zloty, which is less than a penny Canadian; the problem is keeping enough coins in your pocket to satisfy the little tyrants by the bathroom doors.

The currency situation certainly needs to be clarified. The object of the Polish government is to get as much hard currency as possible. If you are a foreigner you will be expected to pay for hotel rooms, phone bills and airline tickets in your own currency. They know you are foreign, even if you can speak Polish you still must give your passport to reception upon checking in. There is no getting around this. The reason you would wish to get out of this situation is quite simple; if you are paying zloty which you exchanged at the black market rates (and you will exchange at these rates), your bills would be a quarter the amount you are paying.

Continued on page 8

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