

# Sopot, Poland - Twin Town to Southend-on-Sea, England

In October 1999, during Councillor Tony North's Mayoral year, Sopot officially became the twin town of Southend-on-Sea.

Sopot, on the Baltic Coast of Poland, has a long history, and is a vibrant and forward looking town, and is keen to forge business links with other European countries. Already the Sopot Mayor has played host to Members of Southend Borough Council and other Officers at the UK – Poland Local Government Officers Conference in April 2002, while the Southend Boys' Choir performed several concerts there at Easter 2002 and in April 2005. In 2003 Southend Borough Council sponsored two artists to come to Southend to take part in the Leigh Art Trail.



There have been a number of formal Civic exchanges between the towns, and Southend Borough Council is currently developing plans for a Twinning Association to further promote the link within the town.

## Some General Facts about Poland

Area:	312,685 sq km
Coastline:	2,888 km
Climate:	Temperate with cold, cloudy, moderately severe winters with frequent precipitation; mild summers with frequent showers and thundershowers.
Capital:	Warsaw
Highest point:	Rysy at 2,499 m
Natural resources:	Coal, sulphur, copper, natural gas, silver, lead, salt, arable land
Population:	38,633,912 (July 2001 est.)
Religions:	Roman Catholic 95% (75% practising), Eastern Orthodox, Protestant and other 5%
Constitution:	16th October 1997; adopted by the National Assembly 2nd April 1997; passed by national referendum 23rd May 1997
Currency:	Zloty
Internet Users:	2.8 million (2000)



## Sopot

Sopot is located in the north of Poland, on the Baltic Coast. It has wonderful hotels, beaches, pubs and restaurants, and is an attractive spot for summer holidays. Sopot is one of the smallest but also one of the most beautiful of Polish towns, with a population in the region of 41,000 (estimated in 2002). Surrounded by a large forest to the west and Gdansk Gulf to the east, it is only four hours by train from the capital Warsaw. During the summer there are more visitors than residents, coming from all parts of Europe.



## Sopot – Past

Archaeological excavations conducted in and around Sopot indicate that this region has been inhabited since the Neolithic or New Stone Age. Most artefacts are made of flint, although there are many clay utensils, including some decorated with the imprint of rope. There is no evidence of occupation during the Bronze Age, but from the early Iron Age, about 5th century BC, there are cemeteries characteristic of the proto-Slavonic settlements of the East-Pomeranian culture. Amber was mined in the area, and transported along the Via Regia to Rome. Indeed, during one of the excavations, 11 clay urns were found with examples of glass and amber necklaces, as well as other artwork. From the same excavation comes a cinerary urn with a sun and star engraved on its neck, the only example of its kind surviving. Further evidence of trade with the Roman Empire is evidenced by finds of Roman dinars, as well as a bronze coin of Antoninus Pius (found in 1903) and a silver dinar of the emperor Trajan (found in 1910).



The first mention of Sopot in documented form is dated 5th March 1283, when the Polish prince Msciqoj II gave Sopot to the Cistercian monastery, situated in what is now Gdansk. This was in compensation for having given other lands near Gniezno to the Teutonic Knights. The medieval settlements were situated on the escarpment occupied today by the upper part of Sopot, as until the 17th century, as the area below the slope was heavy marshland. Slowly the swamps were drained, and by 1714 several fishermen's cottages were marked on a map showing the space now taken up by the main square leading to the Pier.



The upper part of Sopot still flourished, with country houses and estates owned by noblemen and magnates. Also in this area were ironworks and powder magazines! In 1733 the country houses were destroyed when troops of the Tsar burnt down all the buildings in the area because one of the families had played host to a rival to the throne.



Reconstruction was begun in the middle of the 18th century, with many of the original houses being rebuilt, albeit in a more contemporary form. The beginning of the 19th century marked the next stage of development, when Jean George Haffner, the personal doctor of one of Napoleon's generals, reached Gdansk with the French army. Haffner was aware of the health-giving aspects of the seaside, and decided to buy some land of what is today lower Sopot to build a small health resort. In 1823 he built baths, and in 1824 a hard-surface road was built from Gdansk, and people could reach the resort more easily, which certainly improved his chances of success. Close to the pier Haffner built changing rooms, which later on became the Northern and Southern Baths. Sopot also gives the credit to the French doctor for its first seaside parks, particularly the carefully designed park on the southern side.



By the mid 19th century there were some 150 houses in the lower settlement, and there were more and more visitors, especially after 1870, when Gdansk linked its railway network to Warsaw and Koszalin. Even the pier was visited by ships carrying passengers from all along the coast, as well as further afield.



In 1875 the pier was repaired and two years later the community purchased the entire bathing complex, and was complete with arcaded galleries. It soon became a centre of social life, especially after 1888 when its own orchestra started to play there. As later additions saw tennis courts and a horse-racing course, Sopot really began to thrive.

The reputation of Sopot as a fashionable resort may have begun in the 1820's, but it was only really at the turn of the century that the Sopot spa was a place where international aristocrats, bourgeoisie and artists met, mainly from Poland, Germany and the Scandinavian countries. As soon as the status of 'town' was conferred in 1901, the principles of town-planning were introduced to formalise the rather piecemeal period of building. The municipality also decided to construct new and representative edifices to reflect the wealth of guests and visitors alike, and building continued for many years, and continues today.



In the period between the wars the everyday life of Sopot's citizens (numbering more than 30,000 in 1939) was influenced by great political changes. After the 1918 Versailles conference, Sopot came under the jurisdiction of Free Town Gdansk, but was occupied during World War II by the Nazis, and many monuments were erected to commemorate the resistance to these forces. However, the problems caused by this occupation were not solved by the change in the political situation, when the Red Army appeared in Sopot on 23rd March 1945. However, life goes on, and after the communist system collapsed in 1989, better days have come for the town.

## Sopot – Present and Future

In recent years Sopot has integrated fully with the economic structure of modern Europe. As a prelude to coming changes, the main street – Monte Cassino Street – was upgraded to a modern trading centre. A lot of money has been invested in restoring old buildings, some of them from the 18th century, and many new structures have been built. Further development plans include removing all residential buildings around the main street, and changing this into more trading space. In addition a lot has been done to renovate and build new hotels for the ever of tourists. They are attracted to the landscape, the sweeping bay and sandy beaches, the picturesque slope rising towards nearby Orlowo, and, of course, the pier. Quite a number of charming neo-baroque, neo-classicist and eclectic villas have survived, mainly from the 19th and early 20th century, and there are also many grand houses, decorated with towers, gables and verandahs.



Good conditions for investment have made Sopot very attractive, and over five thousand people have registered some kind of economic activity. This, and its beautiful landscape and many attractive old buildings, make Sopot determined to be one of the best tourist attractions in Poland.



Each year at the end of August, Sopot hosts a music festival, at which many different types and styles of music are performed at the Forest Opera, a beautiful amphitheatre set among the forested hills. Among stars who have played there are Chuck Berry, the Coors, Chris Rea, Whitney Houston and Bryan Adams. The Sopot Festival is broadcast live to the rest of Poland, and celebrated its 35th anniversary in 1998.

There are also art festivals, where visitors and residents can admire paintings, sculptures, prints, drawing and photographs. Sopot was never meant to be an industrial city, as its original layout as a health spa and the particular topography meant that there was insufficient room for heavy manufacturing. Most of its citizens are involved in the service industry, working in hotels, restaurants, repair businesses and shops. There is small scale production of toys, electronics, machines and food, and there are a few construction companies. Most of the trade goes on in the main street.



Sopot has only one supermarket, which has meant that the smaller shops and businesses still thrive.

For more detailed information on Sopot [www.sopot.pl](http://www.sopot.pl)

Other useful information

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