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25 things you need to know about Poland

When it comes to Euro 2012, Tom Galvin has a pair of hands as safe as Shay Given's... here's his insider's guide to going east for the Euros

1 FOODS Traditional foods worth looking out for include dumplings filled with pork meat, or cabbage and mushrooms, cheese and even fruit, and are called 'pierogi'. Barszcz is the traditional Polish beetroot soup and is delicious, even if you detest beetroot.

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2 Handy snacks

The great thing about Polish cities is the proliferation of snacks day and night from kiosks and small vendors. Look for 'zapiekanki' -- open pizza-style baguettes -- hot dogs made with traditional frankfurters, and traditional Polish sausages, called 'kielbasa'.

3 Beer food

Poles are more sensible with their drinking and many bars and beer halls will have food available to order. Try sausages served with horseradish, and an old favourite -- 'smalec'. Smalec is a pork fat spread and comes with a basket of bread. It's excellent for lining the stomach and well-advised if you're out for a long night.

4 Coffee

Starbucks operates widely but for a local chain, head for any Coffee Heaven outlet, which serves up the best coffee hands-down.

5 Water

Drinking water with meals is not common, and most Poles opt for tea or coffee. Opinions on drinking tap water vary, and because they do, don't.

6 Beer

Europe's third-largest beer maker and with over 70 breweries, Poland produces some great brew -- but beware, it is strong. In the Gdansk region, local brews include Hevelius Kaper, which comes in at a knockout 8.7pc, while 'Lech' is a manageable 5.2pc. Zywiec and Tyskie are also popular.

7 Vodka

There are hundreds of brands and varieties -- strictly speaking, only about 20 are worth the hangover. And if you stick to pure grain vodka you won't have a hangover at all. In the Gdansk region, you won't avoid the 'Gdansk vodka' called 'Goldwasser', which contains wee slivers of gold and is well worth a shot.

8 Drinking rules

There is a strict ban on drinking in public places in Poland and police can impose fines of up to 100zł (about €24); of more concern is that it is technically illegal to be drunk in public and you could end up in the drunk tank. You really don't want to end up in one, tied to a bed after being stripped, so be advised not to push your luck with Polish police.

9 ID

Cross the road at the wrong spot and the first thing police will ask for is a 'legitimacja' or an official ID. Always have some form of official ID.

10 Shops

If you plan on shopping, don't leave it for Saturday afternoons as many of the main stores close at 2pm. In general, weekday opening hours are between 8am and 7pm, with the shopping centres open until 9pm.

11 Getting around

Cities are well-served by buses and trams. The easiest way to manage travel is to buy a 24-hour ticket from a kiosk to encompass all modes (about 10zł). If a tram is to arrive at 11 minutes past the hour, expect trams to arrive bang on time.

12 Crossing the road

Seems obvious? Polish drivers don't stop at zebra crossings. Ever. Don't tempt them. And do remember to look right...

13 Mobiles and internet

Your mobile will connect to the equivalent of your domestic user (Orange, Plus GSM, and T-Mobile are the three biggest and most reliable) but remember to take a two-pin travel adaptor for charging.

14 Currency

Poland is not in the eurozone and the local currency is zloty. Roughly, 4zł is a euro, but this will vary. You shouldn't be paying more than 10zł for a local beer unless you are in a top hotel; 30-40zł should get you a decent plate of grub; between 2.5zł and 4zł per kilometre for a taxi at night.

15 Tipping

Tipping is not as expected as it is in Ireland or in the US, but it is appreciated. Never say 'thank you' when handing over the money if you do expect change because the waiter will assume they can keep it.

16 Paying

If you tender anything bigger than a 10zł note in shops you will almost always be asked for something smaller.

17 Smoking

Banned in pubs since November 2010 -- a pack of 20 Marlboro should cost around €3 or less.

18 Clubs

Many of the 'in' clubs in the larger cities will operate a strict door policy and in general, these places are for young, trendy poseurs. You certainly won't get in wearing an Irish jersey.

19 Toilets

There is no shortage of public toilets but expect to pay a nominal fee because they are manned and constantly cleaned.

20 Cloakrooms

In many bars and restaurants you are expected to leave your coat in the cloakroom.

21 Driving

Driving in Poland is a hair-raising affair for the novice and expect to have drivers come right up behind you constantly. There is a zero tolerance of drink-driving.

22 Phones

Numbers are all 9 digits and never start with 0. An 800 number is free; 801 is a reduced toll; any that begins with 70 is a premium number.

23 Health

Get your European health insurance card before you travel as it is recognised in Poland.

24 Pickpockets and scammers

The streets are generally safe in Polish cities, but pickpocketing is an issue, particularly on public transport and the pickpockets are masters.

25 Sensitivity

A few basics. It's Central Europe you are in, not Eastern Europe, which is composed of the states that followed the break-up of the USSR. Never, ever, use a smattering of German or Russian in jest.

Tom Galvin, is former editor of Polski Herald and author of *There's an Egg in My Soup: An Irishman in Poland* (O'Brien €7.99)

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