



Poland the 21st Century Land of Opportunity

By Anne Dean, Editorial Director, Living Abroad LLC

Poland is a country whose borders and inhabitants have been divided, and divided again, by their conquerors throughout its long and chaotic past. Now Poland has entered the new millennium with an open market and an optimistic attitude. The capital city of Warsaw is home to approximately two million citizens and a growing population of foreign nationals. Poland is now on the top-ten list of international assignment destinations.

Positioned in the heartland of Europe, Poland has historically played an important role between eastern and western Europe. Free from outside interference, it is the place to go if you're interested in seeing how a country can pick itself up and recreate itself. It is a versatile country where the capital and medieval old towns are surrounded by contemporary city buildings, and where horse-drawn carts deal with country roads in areas where the 20th century appears to have gotten lost. Poland is one of the largest countries (population 40 million) located in Central Europe and is bordered by Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine to the east, Russia to the north, Germany to the west and the Czech and Slovak Republics to the south. The capital city is divided by the Wisla River, which runs approximately north-south through Warsaw.

Poland is a parliamentary republic. Its official name, which dates back to the 16th century, is Rzeczpospolita Polska. The Polish population now enjoys a democratic sovereignty whose institutions are operated by a Parliament and a President. The Parliament is composed of the Sejm (Seym) with 460 seats and the Senate with 100 seats, each elected to a four-year term.

While Poland continues to establish a more assured footing on the path to democracy, its commitment to a free market economy is clear. The transition from a centrally administered economy to a capitalist market has progressed relatively smoothly when considered in light of neighbors such as Russia. Foreign investment and trade is steadily increasing. Recent reforms have included the decentralization of public authority and finance. It is currently instituting reforms in education, health care, and social security. Such reforms will enable it to fully adopt European Union policies. Poland did get approved as a member of the EU in June of 2003, to take effect in May of 2004.

Polish is the national language, with 98.9 percent of the population being native speakers. English is by far the most popular second language to learn in Poland. Assignees should, however, speak as much Polish as they can. Even if only knowing the greeting and courtesy phrases, they will be perceived as polite and educated. Language training for your employees relocating to Poland is a good investment.

Since the dissolution of the socialist governments of Poland and its influential neighbor, the former USSR, Poles now enjoy a great degree of personal freedom. Due to the influx of Western media and advertising influences, many of the younger Polish generation are proficient in more than one foreign language.

While Poles are considered outspoken and friendly, they are proud of their cultural heritage and it is a good source of conversation. They do not care for boisterous behavior or standing too closely to each other when talking. Being on time and behaving conservatively is accepted in both business and social occasions. Poles are also hard working, and prefer to deal directly with colleagues rather than going through an intermediary.

The Western market is beginning to make its presence known in Poland's fledgling market economy. In Poland, the business environment is still very conservative; the local market may seem to move slowly when compared to its Western counterparts. Although the Polish government has made it extremely convenient for foreign executives to both obtain information and begin negotiations in Warsaw, there is still protocol which one needs to follow in order to be successful in its business community. If your employees are involved in privatization, be prepared to have them spend some time dealing with numerous ministries to get the necessary paperwork for your venture approved.

When dealing directly with another company, one can essentially move forward with little or no government intervention. Polish counterparts are, in general, honest, hardworking and dedicated to building a successful economy. Most Poles are well-educated and share a strong work ethic. It is easy to find conscientious, bilingual nationals to fill your staff requirements, but you might have to invest in some skills training.

Entertaining at home is very common in Poland, although restaurants and cafés are common places for conducting business. If invited to a colleague's home, note that it is customary to bring a gift. Appropriate presents include flowers, chocolates or an alcoholic beverage (cognac and vodka are both popular choices). Punctuality is appreciated, but being five minutes late to a gathering is socially acceptable. Toasting is an important part of each meal, and "Cheers," or "na Zdrowie" is an expression worth learning. If assignees wish to abstain from drinking entirely, tell them to be polite but firm in their refusals. Smoking is commonplace in Poland; it is even acceptable to smoke throughout a meal. However, it is always advisable to respect the host's wishes.

Traditionally, the Polish work day begins at 8:00 a.m., and ends at 4:00 p.m. However, with the influx of foreign business, the hours in Warsaw are now changing to the more typical 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Grocery stores usually open from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., and other shops are open from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., with shops closing at 1:00 p.m. on Saturday. Except at the airport, not too many shops will be open on a Sunday.

Most banks in Poland are typically open during the week from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., and Saturday from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. There are now numerous ATM machines located in Warsaw, and other major cities. Credit cards are increasingly accepted in Poland. While most hotels, travel offices, restaurants and shops now accept credit cards, one should still expect to pay in cash at many places.

The Polish tend to eat earlier than most Westerners, although restaurants in the city centre often stay open later to cater to foreign nationals and native business people, many still close by 9:30 p.m. or 10:00 p.m.

Polish cuisine leans towards hearty, meat-based dishes. Visitors will often find beef and pork presented in a variety of ways. Various types of sausages as well as vegetables such as cabbage, mushrooms and beetroot are ubiquitous in Polish cuisine. Pierogies, or dumplings filled with meat, cheese or mushrooms, are a staple in Poland. Dishes which call for local, seasonal game are also popular; such meals

often feature wild boar, venison or bison. Characteristic seasonings include dill, marjoram and caraway seeds.

The Śródmieście district serves as both the physical centre of Warsaw and the cultural heart of the city. Above this area is the "Old Town," or Stare Miasto. The term "Old Town" is somewhat of a misnomer, since what one sees today is actually a meticulously restored version of the area that was destroyed in World War II.

The "Old Town" houses both the cathedral of the Polish Kings and picturesque Market Square, with all of its artists, cafés and galleries. The best approach to the "Old Town" is to stroll along Nowy Świat Street, where Warsaw's most upscale shops are to be found. This street has been converted into a pedestrian mall to encourage browsers. The centerpiece of the "Old Town" section is the Royal Castle, which has been painstakingly restored to its pre-war splendor. The Royal Castle is open to the public Tuesday to Saturday, from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and Sunday, from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Tickets must be purchased for guided tours through the castle except for Sunday, when visitors are permitted to view the castle unescorted.

On the right bank of the Wisła River is the suburb of Praga. This area contains the district of Saska Kępa, which is a residential area favoured by many foreign nationals. Saska Kępa is also known for its two popular and eclectic markets: Różycki Bazaar and Stadion Xlecia.

While there is a moderate amount of petty theft in major cities such as Krakow and Warsaw, Poland is relatively safe. Most of these lesser crimes occur aboard public transportation and in bus and train stations. Car break-ins and car theft are a real problem in Poland. Some useful tips are: make sure that when you park your car you remove everything visible in the car, don't leave keys, documents and/or the engine running even for short periods of time, and lock your doors when driving.

The roads in the cities, no matter how much they try to improve them, cannot keep up with the love the Poles have for their cars, and their frantic buying since 1989. Rural roads in Poland are poorly lit and maintained. Pedestrians and animals, as well as automobiles, use the roadways, which can make for hazardous driving situations as well as slow-moving traffic. Even though Polish laws are very strict concerning drunk driving, this factor still contributes to the high frequency of automobile accidents in this nation.

Poland may be the destination to which your expatriates, transferees or business travelers may be assigned, if so, they will require a passport and proof of sufficient funds. A visa is not required for tourist/business stay of up to 90 days. Visitors must register at hotel or with local authorities within 48 hours after arrival. For longer stays or more information, contact the Embassy of the Republic of Poland (Consular Division), 2224 Wyoming Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20008 (202/234-3800) or nearest Consulate General: Chicago, IL, 1530 North Lakeshore Dr., 60610 (312/337-8166), Los Angeles, CA, 12400 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 555, 90025 (310/442-8500), or New York, NY, 233 Madison Ave., 10016 (646/237-2100). Internet: www.polandembassy.org

Anne Dean is editorial director, Living Abroad LLC, Norwalk, CT. She can be reached at 203-221-1997 or e-mail, anne.dean@livingabroad.com.