

# WARSAW ups its game

The Polish capital is changing and, as it does, so will perceptions, says **Rose Dykins**

Driving across Poniatowski bridge, the city's red and white crown-shaped stadium gleaming before us, my Ghanaian taxi driver Brown Eshun says: "When I moved here 18 years ago, nobody would have dreamt that people in Warsaw would be using Mercedes for taxis. It was a sad place, very grey, and people were poor. Now look at this – who would have thought? Poland is wonderful now." It is less than a month until the stadium's anticipated completion. Inside, the autumn sun streams through the retractable roof and casts shadows across the concrete arena, where jigsaw-puzzle pieces of turf will soon be slotted together. Some 58,000 seats are being dusted down, and things almost look ready for kick-off.

Outside, however, the entrance is merely scaffolding, and the area surrounding is mounds of dusty soil and stones. Since the contractors have already been fined €2.5 million for missing the June deadline, I ask my guide if it will be ready for its new D-Day, November 30. She replies: "It has to be." Throughout the Polish capital, preparations are under way for the UEFA European 2012 Football Championship, which the country will co-host with Ukraine next June. "All investment projects are either completed or in the construction stage," says Maciej Drewnowski, a specialist in the co-ordination and investment monitoring section of the secretariat for Euro 2012. This is evident when travelling along the city's main roads, which are

frequently choked with stationary trams and cars as building work takes place. The construction of a second metro line, to be opened in 2013, is particularly disruptive, as part of it is routed through the city centre.

"There are some road projects connected with Euro 2012, as well as the new Polnocny bridge, new tramways to the stadium, and renovations of Warsaw Chopin airport and the central train station," Drewnowski says.

The airport will be the gateway to the event for an estimated 29,000

## Preparations are under way for the Euro 2012 Football Championship

fans before each game. Michal Marzec, managing director for the airport,

says: "We already have sufficient infrastructure to accommodate the increased traffic, but we are still working to expand the airport's capacity." Its passenger capacity is ten million a year – the construction of Warsaw-Modlin airport, 35km north of the centre of Warsaw, will cater for another 1.8 million when it opens in mid-2012.

Warsaw Chopin airport recently gained two newly refurbished departure areas with a variety of shops and restaurants, while a 15-minute rail link between the terminal and the city centre is due for completion early next year.

While some projects seem touch and go, the organisers remain confident that Warsaw will cope with the pressures of being a host. "It's a huge event, but it's not the Olympics," Drewnowski says. "It's five football matches in Warsaw, 58,000 fans [at a time] for the stadium, and no more than 100,000 spectators [elsewhere in the city], most of them residents. We've had bigger events – when Pope Benedict XVI came in 2006, there were masses for more than a million people."

The benefits will be felt long after the event, not least by business travellers. Warsaw is the headquarters of the OSCE (Office

for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) and LOT Polish Airlines, and companies such as BT, LG Electronics and Legal 500 firm TGC Corporate Lawyers have offices here.

In terms of tourism, the city has had to contend with negative labelling, having been voted

## Organisers remain confident that Warsaw will cope with the pressure

"Europe's ugliest city" in a 2009 poll by Trip Advisor. But a visit to the

city's Uprising Museum puts this hasty judgment into context. The museum's 3D film, *Miasto Ruin* (City of Ruins), gives a harrowing explanation of why parts of Warsaw are lined with hurriedly built

concrete blocks – almost 90 per cent of the city was destroyed by the Nazis.

Linger too long around the perceived centre of town and you'll fail to see the beauty in the capital. Centrum is not the original centre, although many people consider this the hub of Warsaw thanks to the supremely dominant Palace of Culture and Science – a "gift" from Stalin during the Russian occupation, and a menacing symbol of oppression. While Warsaw has endeavoured to turn the image of the area on its head by filling it with theatres, cinemas, youth clubs and museums – Defilad Square, beside the Palace, will also be the site for Euro 2012's Fan Zone, with a giant outdoor spectator screen – you should not make your mind up about Warsaw on this district alone.

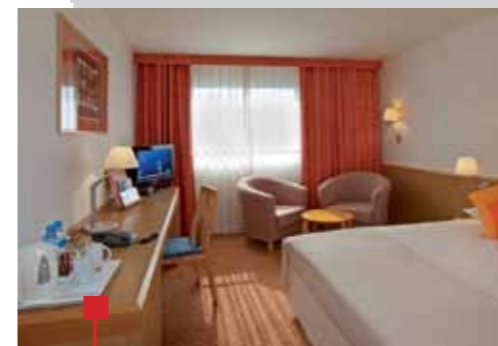
Two tram stops away is the Royal Mile, the city's cultural backbone. Starting from the colourful Old Town, a UNESCO heritage site rebuilt



Warsaw National Stadium



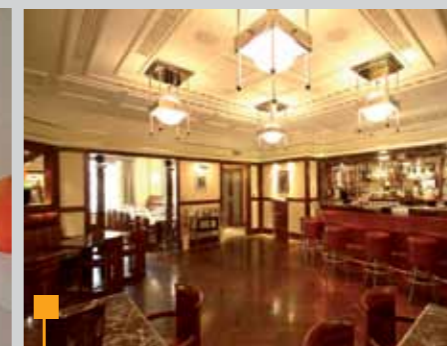
ROBERT HARDING/ROSE DYKINS



### WHERE TO STAY NOVOTEL

The 733-room Novotel is not only one of the largest hotels in Poland, but one of the most central in Warsaw – it's positioned at the intersection of the two main roads, Al Jerozolimskie and Marszalkowska. Curving red and orange sofas, tangerine lighting and modern art inject energy into the lobby. Standard rooms have queen-size beds, free wired and wifi internet, flatscreen TVs, tea- and coffee-making facilities and decent bathrooms. The largest of the 14 meeting rooms holds 600 delegates theatre-style, and a vibrant restaurant serves international cuisine. On the top floor is a 24-hour gym with large windows and a sauna that looks on to the new stadium.

- **Ul Marszalkowska 94/98; tel +48 225 960 000; novotel.com**
- **Rooms from 302zł (£61)**



### HOTEL RIALTO

A beautiful five-star boutique hotel, each of Rialto's 33 rooms and 11 suites are individually designed. The lobby's French doors and stained glass features are adorned with Rennie Mackintosh-style squares, indicative of the building's pre-war, art deco style. Rooms have antique furniture, parquet floors and luxurious bathrooms with Venetian mosaic walls.

There is a top-floor gym, sauna and cold plunge bath, two conference rooms with saucy paintings by Tamara Lempicka, a 1930s restaurant and bar, and a cosy cigar room – smoking has been banned since 2010 but you can sit back with a cognac. Wired/wifi internet access is 59zł (£12) for 24 hours. There is free wifi in the lobby.

- **73 Wilcza Street; tel +48 225 848 700; rialtowarsaw.com**
- **Rooms from 518zł (£105)**



### HYATT REGENCY

Located near Lazienkowski Park, the Hyatt Regency's 250 rooms are spacious, warm and chic. Entry-level rooms are 32 sqm with a queen bed, bath and separate shower, and wired/wifi internet access costs 50zł (£10) for 24 hours. Upgrading to a Deluxe room gives you access to the Regency Club lounge, offering free drinks, snacks and internet.

Meeting facilities include a ground-floor stately ballroom that holds 400 people for cocktails, and there is a 16-metre swimming pool, a sauna, a steam room, a spa bath and a gym. Venti Tre restaurant serves Mediterranean cuisine, and the hotel has its own casino, which claims to be the biggest in Poland.

- **23 Belwederska Avenue; tel +48 225 581 234; warsaw.regency.hyatt.com**
- **Rooms from 910zł (£185)**



to replicate how it looked before the bombs struck, and extending down to Lazienkowski Park, it is lined with innovative museums, grand classical buildings such as the Presidential Palace, Royal Castle and Warsaw University, and plenty of cafés, bookshops and restaurants. It's also close to many of the city's lush, relaxing parks – a quarter of Warsaw remains green space.

Cross the Vistula river to the Praga district, meanwhile, and you'll find a bohemian vibe, intriguing pubs, converted factories such as Fabryka Trzciny, now an arts centre, and the old Koneser vodka distillery, which hosts cultural events and conferences.

The city also offers a wide variety of hotels. Back in Centrum, a congregation of properties protrude defiantly from the apartment blocks below, challenging the Palace of Culture in stature, while arty, 1930s-style boutique hotels are located minutes away.

What's more, it seems as if the industry is beginning to prosper again after a tough couple of years. "Thank God the crisis is over," says Agnieszka Rog-Skrzyniarz, PR and communications director for Starwood in Poland, which has a Le Méridien, a Sheraton and a Westin in the city. "The occupancy level in 2009 was 60 per cent. It grew 4 per cent last year and 2011 has been very good."

One criticism of Warsaw's hotel market is that it could offer more budget accommodation.

"The five-star market is very mature," Rog-Skrzyniarz says. "There is definitely potential for two-, three- and four-star hotels." Existing five-star properties include a Hilton, Sofitel, Radisson Blu, Hyatt Regency, Intercontinental and Hotel Rialto.

Orbis, a Polish hotel chain operating under the Accor brand, will

Cross the river to the Praga district and you'll find a bohemian vibe

open an Ibis and Ibis Budget within two years, and is adding 800 rooms nationally by 2013 – 600 of which will be ready by Euro 2012. Higher up the scale, the Renaissance Warsaw Airport hotel, Marriott's third property here, will open in 2013, while Rezidor is transforming the Jan III Sobieski hotel, 1km from Centrum, into a Radisson Blu for 2015.

As a result of Euro 2012, it is estimated that Poland's economy will experience a 2.1 per cent growth in GDP (on 2009 figures) by 2020. Still, perhaps one of the greatest outcomes for Warsaw will be the chance to show people that it is a cosmopolitan capital, an innovative centre for culture and a green, not a grey, city.

■ Visit [wizzair.com](http://wizzair.com)



#### LE MERIDIEN BRISTOL

Celebrating its 110th birthday this month, one of the oldest Starwood properties in the world features Parisian art deco style and a mesmerising concentric circular mural on the lobby's ceiling. The 204 spacious rooms and suites are to be refurbished early next year, and the health club has a sauna, steam room, pool and fitness centre. Wired and wireless internet is 68zł (£14) per day, or free in public areas.

The chandelier-clad Marconi restaurant serves contemporary Mediterranean and Polish dishes, and the grand marble Column bar is open until 1am. The Florentine cake in the coffee shop, Café Bristol, is excellent and there are 13 meeting rooms.

■ **Krakowskie Przedmiescie 42/44; tel +48 225 511 000; [lemeridien.pl/en](http://lemeridien.pl/en)**  
■ **Rooms from 490zł (£100)**



#### POLONIA PALACE

The only hotel in the city to have survived the Second World War, Polonia Palace retains its classical charm. The Louis XVI-themed ballroom is the largest meeting space, holding 200 people theatre-style, but seven other conference rooms hold between ten and 72 banquet-style.

Standard bedrooms are 20 sqm and come with free water, a laptop safe and a minibar, while 45 sqm Executive rooms are spacious corner rooms with a free movie, fruit bowl and wired internet (in lower categories it is charged at 42zł/£8.50 per stay, regardless of length). There is a 24-hour gym, two saunas, a relaxation area and one treatment room.

■ **Aleje Jerozolimskie 45; tel +48 223 182 800; [poloniapalace.com](http://poloniapalace.com)**  
■ **Rooms from 387zł (£79)**



#### INTERCONTINENTAL

Standing next to the Palace of Culture, the 44-floor Intercontinental's top-level pool has floor-to-ceiling windows. There is also a large gym and luxury spa. Platter restaurant serves exquisite Polish dishes with modern influences, and Plus One bar feels like a cosy British library. The 404 bedrooms are homely yet contemporary, all with a separate bath and shower, large desk and iPod docks. Wired internet is 75zł (£15) for 24 hours. (Wifi will be installed from January.) Other facilities include a 41st-floor Club lounge and 13 meeting spaces including a 700-capacity ballroom.

■ **Ul Emilii Plater 49; tel +48 223 288 888; [warsaw.intercontinental.com](http://warsaw.intercontinental.com)**  
■ **Rooms from 588zł (£120)**

Visit [businessstraveller.com/ried-and-tested](http://businessstraveller.com/ried-and-tested) for reviews of Le Méridien and Hotel Rialto.