

180 degrees

AROUND THE WORLD WITH WINDSTAR CRUISES

WET + WILD

The magic artistry of
Vietnam's water puppets

HUGH ACHESON:
Fresh and Delicious

NOVA SCOTIA:
Fiddlin' Tradition

GDANSK:
Floating Gold



CONTRIBUTORS



Mark Cardwell is a Quebec City-based freelance journalist whose work has appeared in more than 100 newspapers and magazines across North America, Europe, and beyond. A husband and father of two teenage boys, he equally loves wandering city streets and hiking remote trails. His old sedan should have a bumper sticker that reads, “This car stops at all historical monuments.”



Claudia M. Caruana, who lives in New York, visits her family in Malta frequently and feels quite at home walking in the Gozo countryside. She was always fascinated by watching the women sitting at their doorsteps working on bobbin lace or knitting sweaters and was always asked to sit and chat. Caruana is the author of *Taste of Malta* (Hippocrene Books).



Chris Owen is a travel writer from Orlando, Florida, who shares frank advice about cruise vacations. Owen’s perspective combines the working knowledge of a certified travel agent, journalistic experience and a love for cruising. He reports daily on his blog, *ChrisCruises.net* and contributes to Fox News, Gadling, Examiner, LATimes, Cruise Radio, and others.



Kevin Revolinski has lived abroad in such places as Italy, Panama and Guatemala, writing for Rough Guide guidebooks, *Caribbean Travel & Life*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Wisconsin State Journal*, as well as a memoir, *The Yogurt Man Cometh: Tales of an American Teacher in Turkey*.



Theresa Russell has explored Alaska by land and sea, making it a point to try out the local brew wherever her destination. Her work appears in books, magazines, newspapers and online. She is the editor of *Tripwich*, an online magazine with an emphasis on fun. She never turns down an opportunity to cruise or visit Alaska.



A former TV reporter, Houston-based **Richard Varr** has written for *USA Today*, AOL Travel, the *Dallas Morning News*, *Porthole Cruise Magazine*, *Islands*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Good Sam Club’s Highways* and *AAA’s Home & Away*. Richard also wrote the *DK Eyewitness Travel Guide to Philadelphia & the Pennsylvania Dutch Country*.

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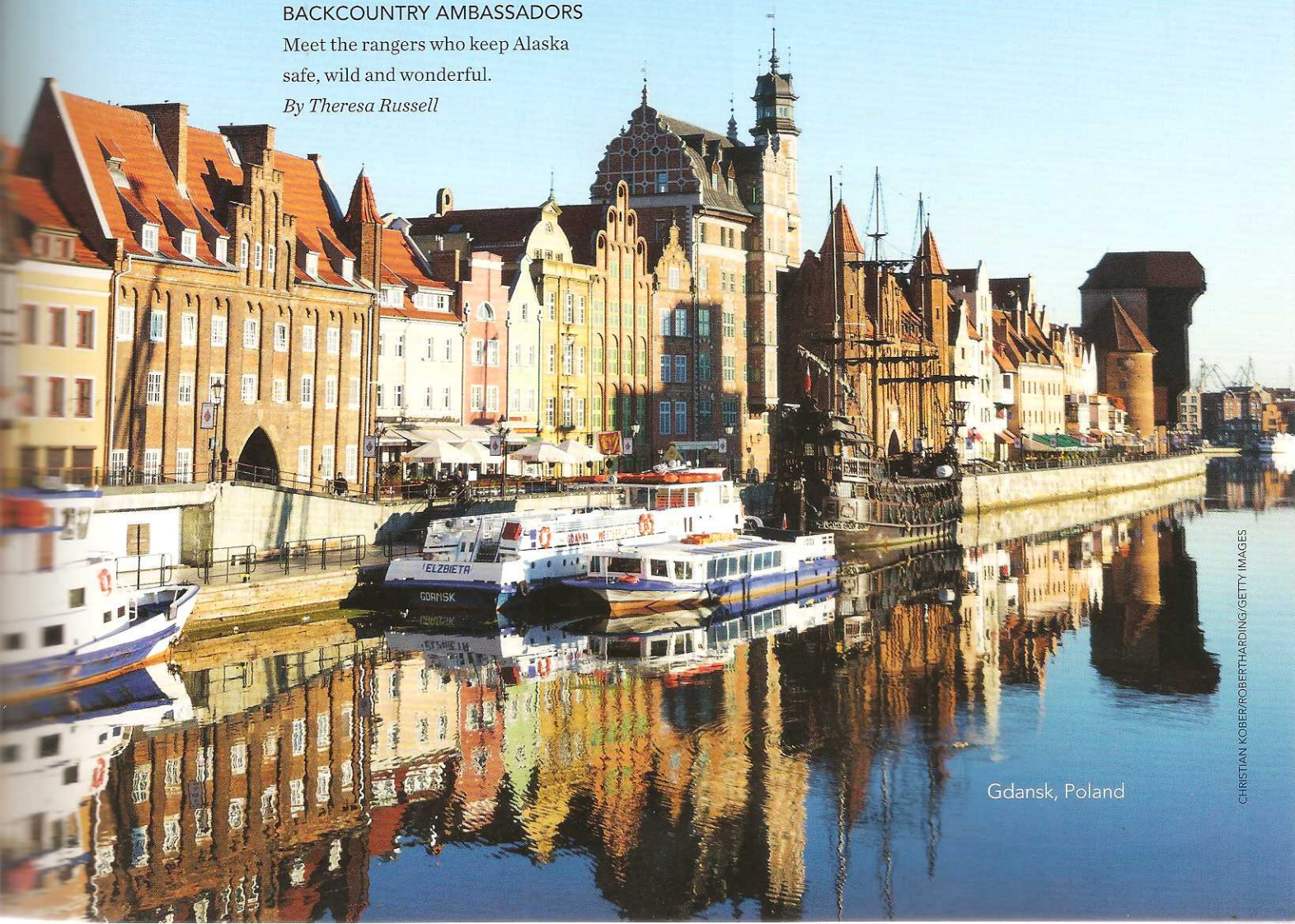
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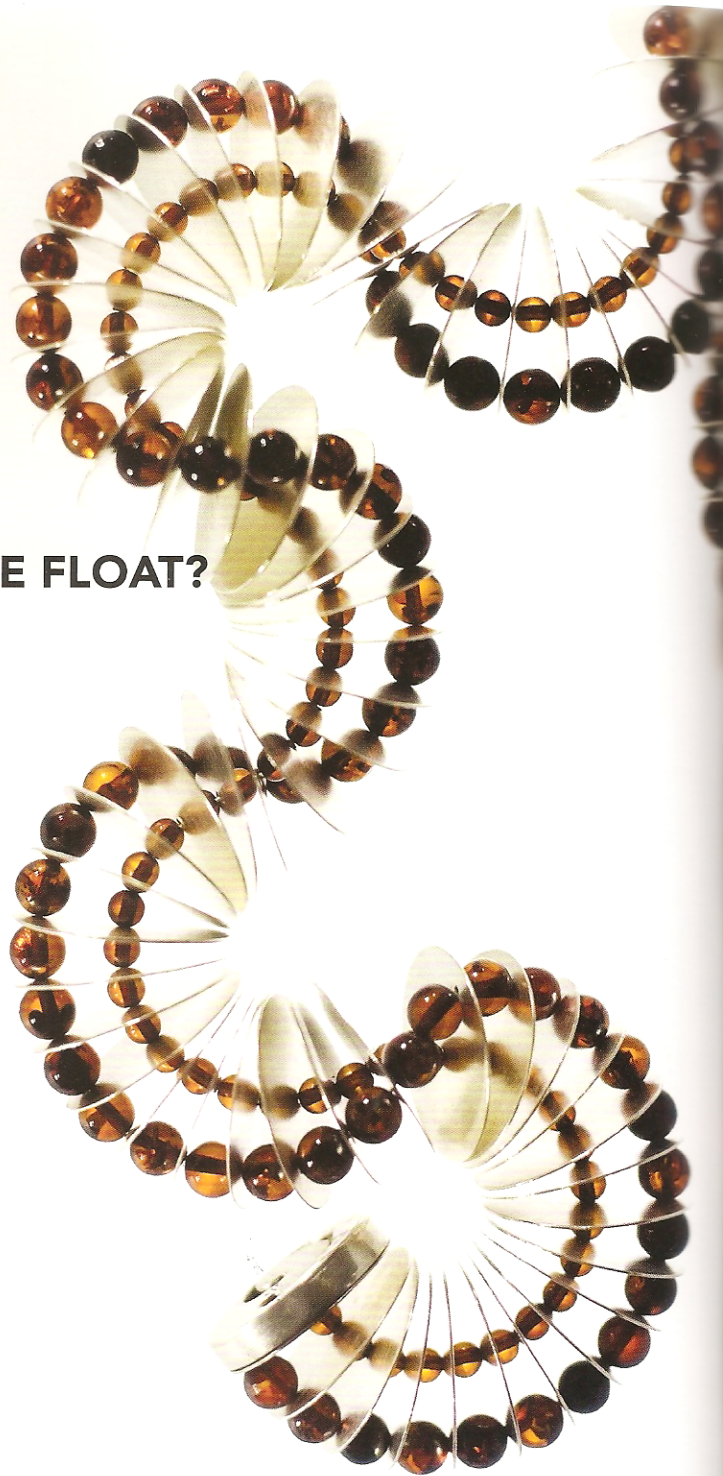


The
FLOATING
GOLD *of*
GDANSK

BY RICHARD VARR



Few things on Earth are as miraculous as Baltic amber.



HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A STONE FLOAT?

I'm in a jewelry shop along what was once Gdansk's Royal Way, just steps away from the bustling pedestrian Motława River waterfront near the 16th century Green Gate palace. I'm surrounded by necklaces, pendants and earrings studded with golden amber stones — many streaked in colorful natural patterns — when a jeweler catches my attention with a demonstration.

"Which of these bracelets is amber, and which of these is plastic?" asks Dominika Bielicka-Sobieska of the Millennium Gallery shop. I look them over and they are all beautiful — highly polished and cognac-colored, golden and ivory-toned, either of the four making a nice gift. But a closer look reveals a more natural earthen look to maybe two of them. "That one," I reply, pointing to a smaller bracelet with evenly shaped translucent stones. "That one is also amber, that's plastic and the other, I'm not sure."

She dunks them in a solution of 20 percent salt water. Three sink and the fourth floats. "Your first choice was right," she tells me. "As we can see, amber is so light it floats on the surface. Plastic and the artificial things go down. This is one way we can distinguish real amber from fakes, because if something is so precious, you can find plenty of imitations.

"The other way to distinguish is to light it up," continues Bielicka-Sobieska. "Amber burns like a candle, and plastic melts and smells bad."

AN ANCIENT PAST

These polished stones — many streaked with actual insect and plant fossils — are Baltic amber, often dominating shops and museums in the Gdansk area. An organic substance made mostly of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen, amber has been treasured for its appearance as well as its aromatic smoke when ignited. It's been burned as incense for its pleasant-

smelling aroma and purported health benefits, as it packs a small percentage of succinic acid which acts as an antioxidant and helps stimulate the immune system. "In ancient Greece, it was used as medicine," says Gdansk city guide Jacek Skibiński. "And there are claims that those sandpapering and working with amber never suffer any lung diseases."

More than 200 shades differentiate amber stones. Brownish and cognac-colored stones are the most popular, but white amber is the oldest, dating back 50 million years. Most Baltic amber dates back 40 to 45 million years, formed when resin gushed from



The medieval Green Gate of Gdansk guards the Old Town's main thoroughfare, Długi Targ.

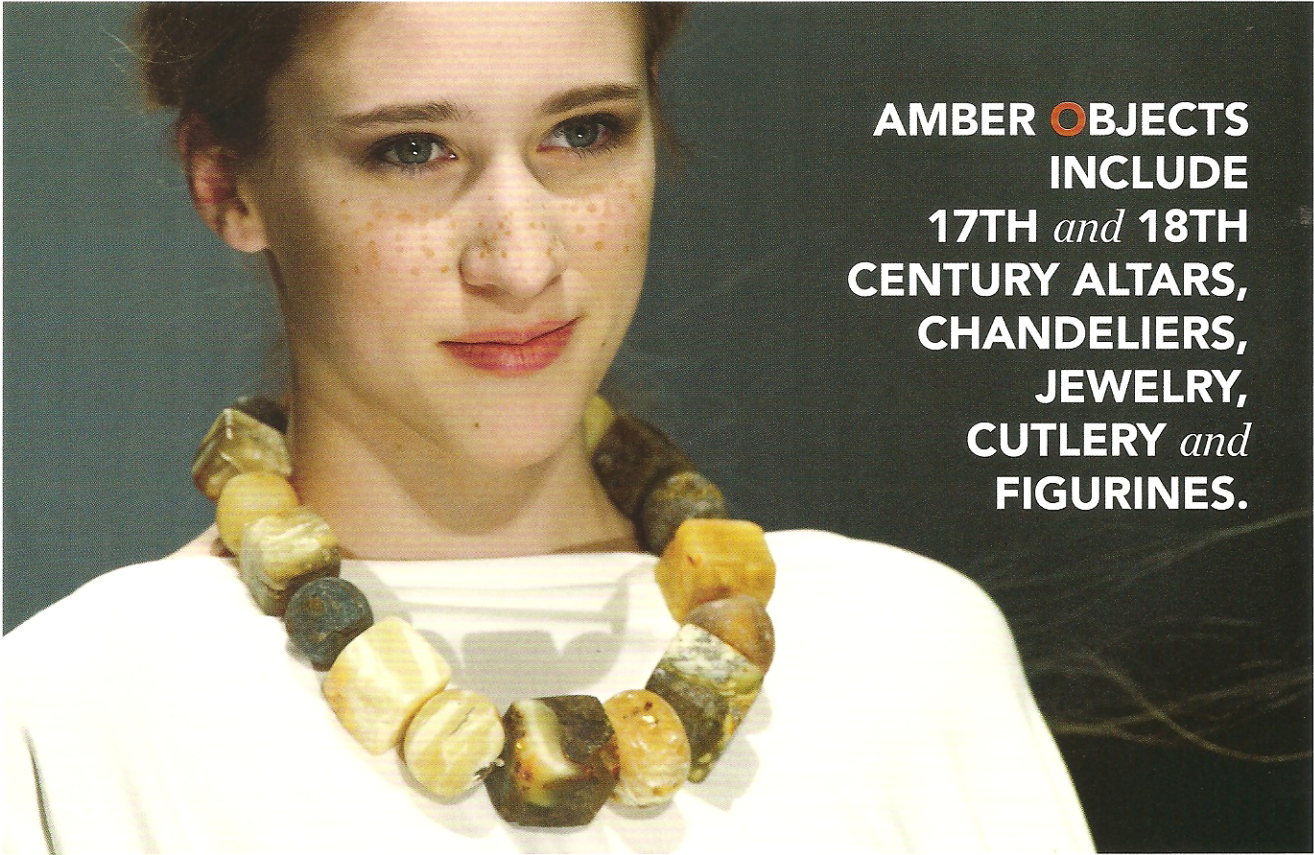
primordial trees, most likely during catastrophic events like storms or fire.

Scientists have used this stone to open a window on the distant past. Amber's hardened tree resin preserved specimens the way they were in ancient wooded forests along pristine seas. Insects and other small creatures unable to escape the sticky, oozing goo were soon immersed and preserved in their active poses. Some stones have prehistoric insects seemingly frozen in time, including mosquitoes — yes, like the one featured in the movie *Jurassic Park* and its sequels. Rock imprints provide a peek back when dinosaurs walked the earth. Samples of leaves, flowers, pollen, seeds and lichens, for example, also open a new world for research.

BRINGING THE BEAUTY OUT

Amber is found in more than 200 locations worldwide including the United States and Mexico, the Dominican Republic, China, Japan, New Zealand and Scandinavia. The most plentiful, however, has been Baltic amber, mined in Poland, Russia, Ukraine and Germany, thanks to large deposits sitting under the Bay of Gdansk seabed.

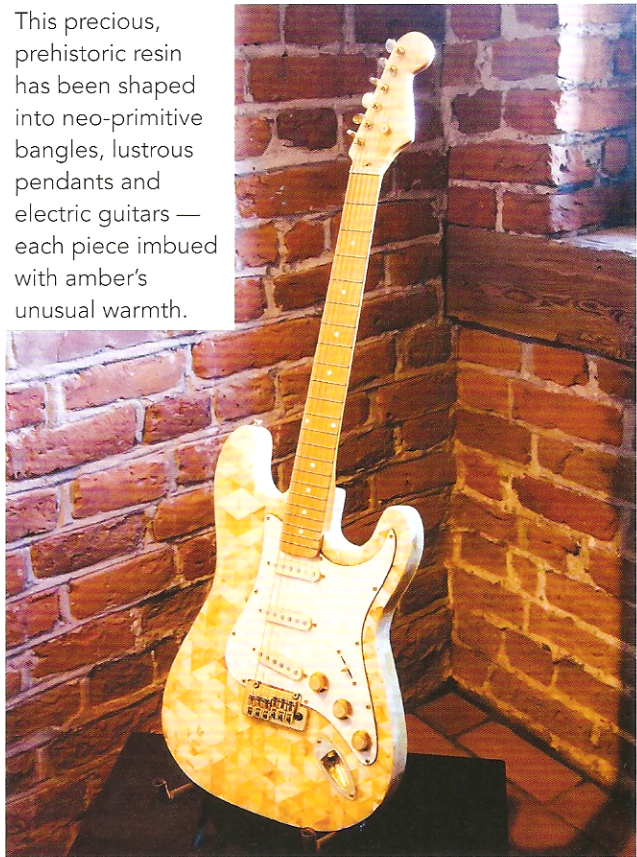
Strong currents and crashing waves often shake up ground deposits in the Baltic Sea, washing pieces ashore. "When you go to the beach after a storm, amber may look like a piece of wood," notes Bielicka-Sobieska. "But when you pick it up, it's very light." Those searching for amber in shallow waters use what look like fishing nets on the edges of long poles to scoop up the jagged stones where they settle with other debris.



**AMBER OBJECTS
INCLUDE
17TH *and* 18TH
CENTURY ALTARS,
CHANDELIERS,
JEWELRY,
CUTLERY *and*
FIGURINES.**



This precious, prehistoric resin has been shaped into neo-primitive bangles, lustrous pendants and electric guitars — each piece imbued with amber's unusual warmth.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: MICHAL FLUDRA/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; MACIEJ FICJAL/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; RICHARD VAIR; OPPOSITE PAGE: BOBIE STROUKO/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

My next stop is Poland's renowned S&A Jewellery Design, a factory producing high-quality amber stones and jewelry in the nearby Baltic port-of-call Gdynia. Craftsmen there start with jagged clumps of raw amber, not looking much different from rocks you might see along the seashore. "When we are buying, we are checking for insects inside," says S&A's Joanna Gesiarz, who's leading me on a tour. "You need special skills to know where to look for them." A strong amber aroma pervades the factory as sanders grind down the rocks and then polish them into precious rounded and oval stones, some with price tags reaching up to \$50,000 and more.

"Every single piece has to be checked under a light," Gesiarz continues. "It takes an experienced cutter and polisher to look at pieces of the raw amber and identify the possibilities because you can very easily ruin the piece." She shows me finished stones, both clear and cloudy, and some with swirls of leaves and debris forming distinct patterns. "We call that landscape amber because it reminds us of a landscape," she adds.

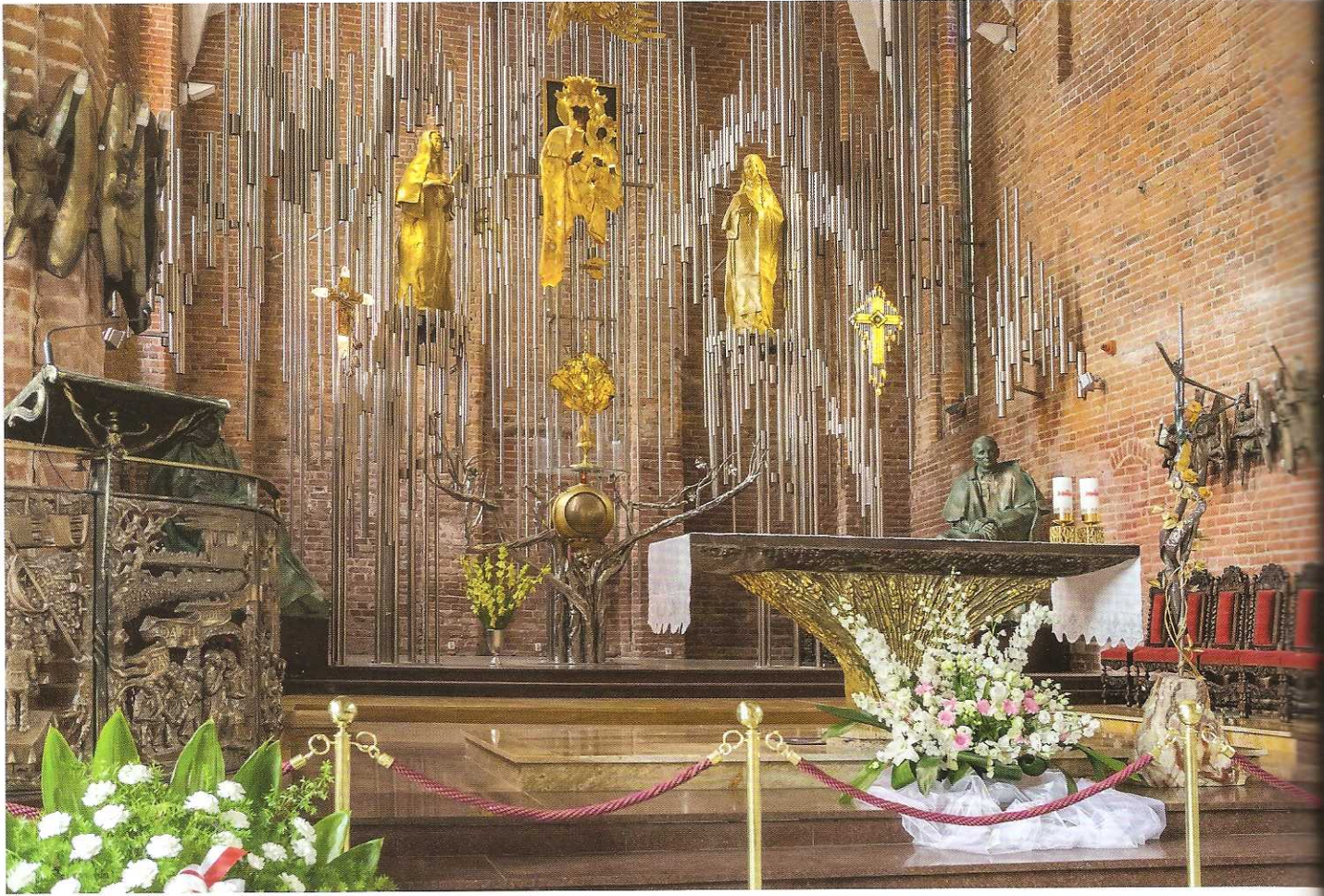
POLAND'S AMBER CITY

A stroll along Gdansk's central pedestrian street, through the Green Gate onto the Royal Way, brings me within a skyline of medieval architecture. The soaring brick tower of the Main Town Hall dominates the view just steps from the Neptune Fountain opposite Artus Court, a fraternity hall where model ships hang from the ceiling, and near the Church of St. Mary's colossal façade. "St. Mary is the biggest brick church in the world," points out the city guide Skibiński.

Farther along is the medieval Prison Tower, dating back to the 14th century and now home to the city's Amber Museum. Exhibits showcase amber stones under strong magnifying glasses, giving the viewer a close-up look at perfectly preserved insects, bird feathers, plant twigs and debris. Streaked vases, ornate jewelry boxes, carved beer steins and model ships formed by amber fill display cases. "Amber is the region's gold," affirms Skibiński. An amber-plated Stratocaster guitar particularly catches my attention.



St. Mary's Church and Mariacka Street



St. Bridget's amber altar

Where else in Gdansk to see amber? The Church of St. Bridget's amber altar, to be 36 feet tall when completed, features a white-amber train flowing from the figure of Virgin Mary and an amber monstrance encasing holy relics. In the 1980s, St. Bridget's served as a sanctuary for leaders of the Solidarity movement, born when shipyard workers, inspired by the election of Polish-born Pope John Paul II, led strikes against Communist rule. The movement led to the fall of the Iron Curtain, highlighted today at Gdansk's European Solidarity Centre through archival video, interactive exhibits and actual shipyard artifacts.

The Castle Museum of Malbork, the Teutonic Knights' 13th century stronghold south of Gdansk, has one of the world's largest collections of amber objects, including 17th and 18th century altars, chandeliers, jewelry, cutlery and figurines. "In medieval times,

they made jewelry, beads for rosaries and covers of books from amber," explains castle guide Jagoda Dyl. "And there are stories of people believing amber cured headaches, earaches and stomachaches, and they would rub amber liquid into their joints."

Gdansk's cobbled Mariacka Street, called "the Amber Fifth Avenue" by locals, is a shopper's delight with its string of amber workshops and stores. Galleries and shops sit side-by-side in townhomes fronted by elongated flowerpots sporting dragon-like gargoyles. And there's also no shortage of amber jewelers in Sopot, Poland's most popular resort town on the Baltic Sea with Europe's longest wooden pier.

It's hard to leave Gdansk without a timeless piece of amber. As I recall S&A's Gesiarz saying, "This is a piece of history of our planet we are holding in our hands. It's a mosaic created by nature." ◉



Windstar Cruises visits Gdansk on the *Baltic Delights* voyage.