We discovered Poland by accident. Visiting Berlin, we wanted some beach, looked at the map, saw the Polish coast, thought the idea of a desert in Leba sounded rather cool, and so it began.

With the aid of Google Translate, we found a *noclegi* in Międzyzdroje, Booking.comed Leba, destroyed a typical Polish hire bike, and spent a night in Gdansk. We found a sun-dappled arbour in Oliwa Park and we had to come back. Four months later, back we were, moved by the history of Gdansk, and enjoying chocolate massages in a small spa in Gdynia. And it went from there. We've now probably spent visits to Poland totalling about 5 months. Indeed if the Polish Tourist Office is recruiting UK ambassadors....

When we tell people we're visiting Poland again, they say “Why Poland?”. We say, “Why not Poland?”

Polska Jest Piękna. Lakes, mountains, forests, long sandy beaches, bison, caves, waterfalls. The Tatras are our favourite mountains anywhere, especially as we can't afford the Alps. In the misty forests of the Bieszczady and on the paths around Śnieżnik Kłodzki we felt we'd wandered into something from Tolkein. And there's not many

You make your countryside accessible. We learnt to walk properly in Poland. Coloured route marks and timings for different destinations, with PTTK's at civilised gaps along the way, gave us the confidence to set out when we might otherwise not been brave enough.

And there is always the hope of the unexpected. Where else would we have been able to share ice cream at 1600m with about a hundred other people in the shadow of a space station as we did in the Karkonose mountains, or suddenly come across models of Shrek, Red Riding Hood Snow White and others as we did in the fairytale garden in Międzygórze?

We experienced great kindnesses in Poland. Alek let us stay in his guest house in Rabka 5 nights for free after a burglary back in London when we were deciding whether we needed to go home. The computer on which I'm writing this is a gift from Joanna, a Polish host we couchsurfed with in Poznan after the same burglary. A family who made space in what was the family room (there was only one room) in a small PTTK on the top of a mountain after seeing our looks of despair when we (my daughter and I) were told there was no room at the inn.

And it's not only people we've met in Poland but Poles in London. Say it quietly for fear of offending other people we've met on our travels, but Poles are our favourite people. Olga who after two hours invited me to be part of her art retreat, followed by leisurely art and wine-filled afternoon conversations; Basia a residential carer who shows amazing care for her clients and never fails to make us smile with accounts of her bicycle journeys and breakdowns in the Suffolk countryside. And what can I say about Mamuśka, the legendary Polish restaurant in Elephant and Castle in South East London, where I shared Polish passion laced with good humour watching Poland v Switzerland in the 2016 European Championships.. That day Łukasz Fabiański became an experience not just a person.

Poland has changed us. Ola's chocolate massages in Gdynia inspired my wife to train as a masseuse, the mini-mountains of the Gorce around Rabka got us climbing (well walking upwards). Looking over sheer edges helped me with my fear of heights. John and Ola in Sejny made us realise meals don't have to include meat and digging trenches with them prepared me for cutting down a 6 metre tree when we got home. It may not be much to you but I wasn't that sort of boy – before.

Very few places in Europe are as easy to get around or where travel is as cheap. We have plotted journeys the length of Poland with e-podroznik, buses arriving to the minute of the time shown on the timetable. Speaking of travel would of course be incomplete without mention of Polish railways, which are of course unique. Apart from the fact that they often take longer than the auto equivalent, where else in the world would the guard have come into a carriage with a mother and a small child, bark at the passengers and two tough-looking men stand up and made space for them without a word?

And there's the culture. In Poland you believe in it, and it's not always found in the obvious places. We enjoyed the jaw-dropping and moving Wielicka Salt Mines, the Warsaw Uprising museum and new Jewish Museum in Warsaw, the Panorama and Modern Art collection in Wrocław but there are also fascinating city museums in small places such as Biecz, (as well as its amazing black and white tower), there are not many countries where you find an exhibition of Picasso drawings in a small and sleepy border town, as we found in a converted synagogue in Sejny or a new age festival in the middle of the countryside, miles from anywhere, with films from the Ukraine and a theatre company performing a fire show covering the first 5 books of the Bible, added excitement provided by the dog which ran in and out of the performers' legs whilst they held a burning pole above the audience, a few metres away, on grass made slippery by the evening dew. And also the home-made liquor at the festival . We had some doubts about sharing a bottle with so many, but then again reckoned that any germs would not have survived that strength of alcohol. It made Zubrowka look like Kubus.

We also discovered ethnography In Poland. The Ethnographic Museum in Krakow made me , an previously unreconstructed fine art snob, realise that art was also about what we wear, what we make, what we sing. We've seen children dance, adults wave sticks at each other. And we love the Nebraskans.

Important for us is the history and religion we discovered in Poland. Controversial and complicated subjects, we know, but, for better or worse, the Polish experience, especially in the times we're living in, has lessons which we can learn from. In the Peace Church in Świdnica we saw what could be achieved by faith informed by creativity and ingenuity despite state restrictions and conflict. I reflected on simple peace and devotion over many years in a small wooden church in Grywald. We were strongly affected as we stood next to the then slightly cracked Solidarity Memorial and outside Lech Walesa's office in Gdansk. We were overwhelmed by the inexpressible as we walked through the Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre centre, deeply moved by the non-Jewish voices speaking on behalf of the otherwise voiceless who lost their lives in the Holocaust. Never again. All stories with disputed narratives and all with cracks but nevertheless reflecting a reality and we have to decide together and as individuals what we're going to do with them.

As well, we've backpacked the length of the Polish coast, taught English conversation with nuclear scientists and crash investigators near Jelenia Góra, kayaked to the edge of our relationship on the Czarna Hańcza river, went to Hel on a train (English joke), enjoyed coffees and a beer or two in numerous town squares, hunted for gold in Książ, experienced Sahara-like dunes, paused at Westerplatte to reflect on the first of many shots in World War 2, had trout straight from an open fire and a sauna on the edge of a waterfall in Międzygórze, discovering the deepest, darkest Hot Chocolate in Warsaw. shared in the silence, seeing the *znicz* as we walked through a Kraków graveyard near midnight on All Souls Night and learnt that Polish people might think you're stupid rather than friendly if you smile all the time.

Poland for us is summed up by Agnieszka who, at 4 am in the pouring rain, took us deep into the countryside near Białowieża hunting bison. The night before, again in the rain, she showed us bacteria which glows in the dark. We didn't find any bison but Poland for us is a place where you hunt bison , in the rain, at 4 am., a place where special things have happened and we've done stuff we've often not done anywhere else. Agnieszka had her reward when, after three years waiting she came across a wolf in a clearing on her final morning in Białowieża. We're still waiting for our own wolf sighting. Another reason to come back.

People, especially Polish people, ask me: “Why Poland?”

And I answer: “ Polska jest piękna”; lakes, mountains, forests, long sandy beaches, bison, caves, waterfalls and, we must add, the culture, the history and heroism, the art, churches, the vodka, sausage (of course), but, most of all, most of all, the people.

“Why not Poland?”