Until recently, Wroclaw was largely unknown to the outside world. Rather odd you might say. As the country’s fourth biggest city it boasts a range of historical treasures; remnants of quite a turbulent history. Throughout the years, the city held numerous different names and was part of four separate countries. It was only added to Poland after the Second World War. However, Wroclaw’s days of anonymity are quickly coming to an end. It entered the spotlight as one of four Polish cities hosting Euro 2012. It’s the country’s most popular destination for foreign investors and home to the Polish branches of several multinationals. In 2016 it will become Europe’s Capital of Culture. Time for BBT Online to take a closer look.

Text and Pictures by Jonathan Ramael

Wroclaw is an old city with a young heart. Built on 12 islands and connected by 120 bridges, its history goes back more than 1,000 years. Wroclaw’s skyline is riddled with gothic spires and its cobblestone streets are flanked by buildings made in the distinctive styles of all the empires it once belonged to. It’s mostly young people populating the streets and squares. Wroclaw is a major university town, home to 135,000 students, good for a rich cultural scene and a vivid nightlife. More than 70 different festivals are organised here every year and more and more international conferences and festivals are finding their way to South-West Poland. Although almost completely destroyed during WWII, Wroclaw’s entire city centre was beautifully restored. Most major sights were preserved and in recent years, several interesting MICE venues hit the scene.

The City

Wroclaw’s main attraction is its massive Market Square, the second largest of its kind in Europe after Krakow’s. Bordered by colourfully painted step-gable facades, it serves as the fun-filled beating heart of town. There’s always something going on here: various street artists, kids chasing soap bubbles, horse carriages, countless bars and terraces, one or two clubs and of course the marvellous city hall. The hall was built in the 13th century and it’s construction lasted 250 years, which makes it look like it was patched together from different bits and pieces. Several small alleyways filled with little restaurants run through the complex. Inside, you’ll find a museum and a beer cellar, home to the oldest bar in town. Wroclaw’s Market Square is truly one of Europe’s hidden gems. You could spend an entire day here just people-watching.

More interesting views can be found along the river promenade to Cathedral Island, the oldest part of town where – you guessed it – a lot of churches and other religious buildings await your coming. The biggest one of them is the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, offering nice panoramic views over the city. The river itself is used for short sight-seeing cruises and a multitude of water activities during summer. If you’re a hopeless romantic, you’ll be glad to hear...
Wroclaw sports its own love-bridge here. Bring your locks!

Wroclaw’s most valued piece of art and one of its main attractions, is the impressive Raclawice Panorama: a huge painting on 114x15m of canvas, depicting a Polish victory over Russian forces. A special, cylindrical building was raised just to showcase this epic achievement. As you walk along its length, you’ll see various scenes depicting the battle. Real items like scrubs, tree trunks and weapons were added around the painting, achieving the illusion of art and reality flowing into each other.

Less impressive, but very funny and peculiar are Wroclaw’s Dwarves. You’ll find these little bronze figurines all over the city streets. More than 150 of the jolly little midgets have been placed up till now. They’re more than just funny looking. They’re a direct tribute to the Orange Alternative Movement, a surrealist local art community playing a key role in the anti-communist protests of the eighties.

A visit to the university campus is a must when in Wroclaw. Many of the university buildings are very old and have been restored to their former glory. The baroque main hall (Aula Leopoldina) is especially marvellous, decorated with colourful frescos and marble sculptures.

The MICE Venues
Wroclaw’s most impressive venue is the Unesco World Heritage Centennial Hall and its adjacent Conference Centre. The hall was built by Max Berg in 1913, boasting the biggest dome since the pantheon in Rome. Today it’s used as a unique venue for trade fairs and concerts, capable of accommodating 4,310 seated delegates (of course the capacity is much bigger for concerts). The new state-of-the-art conference centre next door comes with two big halls with a total capacity of 3,000 people and several smaller meeting and conference rooms. Outside of the Centennial hall lies an artificial pond containing 33 water jets and 800 lights, where spectacular music- and lightshows (made by a Belgian company) are held every night.

A brand new venue on an even bigger scale is of course the beautiful Wroclaw Municipal Stadium, built for the Euro 2012 Championship. It can seat 44,000 people for football matches and events. It comes with 30 VIP Skyboxes, 1,554 business seats, a 2,500m² business club/VIP area for dinners and
events and 10 meeting rooms, all of course looking out over the pitch. www.stadionwroclaw.pl

We’ve visited several hotels in Wroclaw, but The Granary Boutique Hotel was our favourite. This 5-star venue is housed in a real 16th-century granary in the city centre, just 500m from the Market Square. It offers 47 luxurious and contemporary suites and three meeting rooms.
www.thegranaryhotel.com

The Wojanow Palace is perfectly suited for those looking for a venue outside of the city. Located in a peaceful park about 1,5 hours from Wroclaw, the palace’s history goes back 400 years (although the venue was reconstructed after a fire). The rustic rooms are divided into several buildings. There are multiple restaurants available on site, as well as several big meeting rooms and a large wellness centre. Watch out for the holiday periods though, there were a lot of families with kids around when we were there.
www.palac-wojanow.pl

A final venue, also on the countryside, is the Adoria Vineyard run by Mike Whitney, a Californian married to a Polish wife. The winery caters to Poland’s finest hotels and restaurants, and the bottles can of course be tasted and bought on the premises. Even more interesting is the fact that the venue can be privatised for events and dinners. We had our wine accompanied by generous and very tasty traditional Polish dishes. www.adoriavineyards.com

If you want to find out more about Wroclaw, contact Convention Bureau Wroclaw (www.convention.wroclaw.pl) or Poland Convention Bureau (www.poland-convention.pl). For a great MICE overview of the city, check this well-made video called ‘Wroclaw – The Meeting Place’: www.youtube.com/watch?v=td_1em57mek.