

# The Brits who moved to Poland

Up to a million Poles have come to Britain since their country joined the EU. But it's not all one-way traffic. **Helen Pidd** meets some of the thousands of British citizens who are building new lives over there

**I** could have bought four of these with what I made selling my semi in London," says Jim Parton, midway through a tour of the 50-room stately home he bought earlier this year in Piotrowice Nyskie, a tiny Polish village near the Czech border. Only five of the unheated rooms are currently even halfway habitable for Jim, his Polish wife Anna and their daughters Jozefina, two, and Henryka, one. There is a basic kitchen with a woodburning stove, a toilet, shower room, bedroom and living room, where Jozefina is camping out in a tent until there is time to buy her a bed. Anna, 33, is pregnant again, this time with twins, and it is not yet clear who will sleep where when they arrive in March.

Not that any of this fazes 48-year-old Jim, the kind of charmingly ramshackle character who, when you see a gigantic crack in the bell tower of his mansion and gently ask why he didn't get a survey done before buying the dilapidated property, says with a grin: "Because that would be no fun!"

Jim's chutzpah may be unusual, but his recent decision to swap life in the UK for an adventure in Poland is not. According to official figures from the British Embassy in Warsaw, around 2,500 Britons are currently living and working in Poland, but officials say the real figure is probably much higher – many incomers don't bother registering with the authorities when they arrive. And anecdotal evidence suggests

there has been a huge surge of Brits moving to Poland over the past year or two. "Just look at how many bars, restaurants and cafes in Warsaw are stuffed with expats," says Mike Judge, a property broker who is based in the city. "Go to any upmarket hotel lobby at 9am and you can't get a seat in the coffee bars for all the businessmen speaking English with architectural blueprints spread out on the table."

Of course, this reverse migration is still a relative trickle, and doesn't go far towards plugging the gap left by the estimated two million Poles who have abandoned Poland since it joined the European Union in 2004 – up to a million of them to the UK – but this reverse flow is interesting none the less. After all, why move to a country deemed by so many of its own to be inadequate? And isn't it, well, a bit grim?

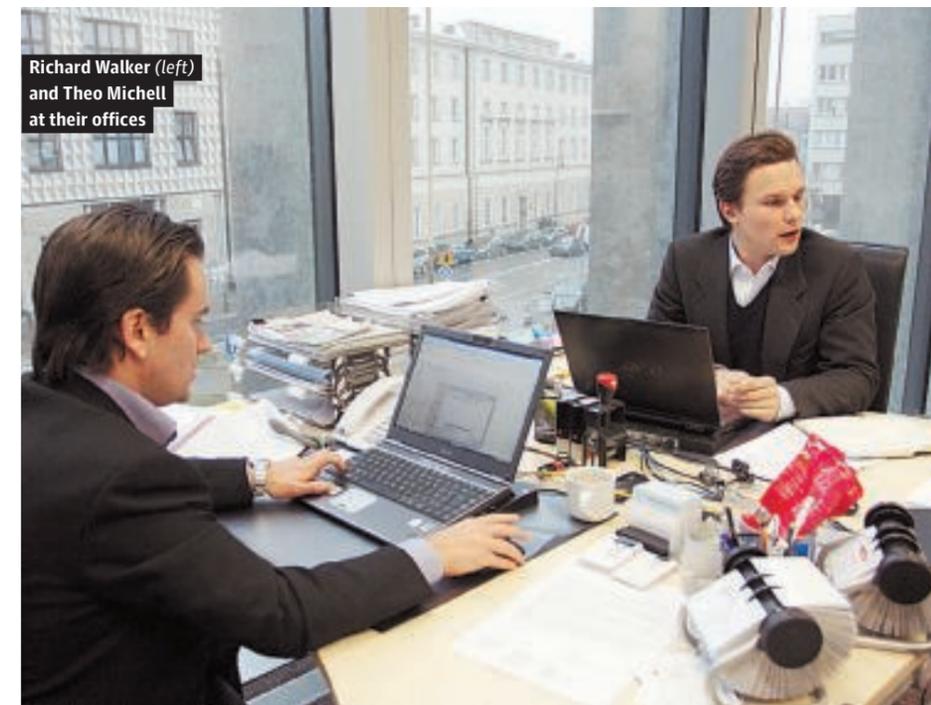
The answer to the second question is yes – and no. There is no doubt that communist town planning was not kind to many Polish cities, where the only green you will see is at traffic lights. But leave behind the big conurbations, with their monolithic tower blocks and multiple lane roads, and there are delightful villages and stunning landscapes. Some 28% of Poland is covered by forest, and there are almost 10,000 lakes, dozens of mountains and 23 national parks. And don't forget the dune-sheltered beaches on the northern coast.

In fact, few people move to Poland for the scenery. Like many of the Poles who have pitched up in the UK and Ireland in the past three years, a good number of the Brits who have moved to



Jim and Anna Parton, with their daughters, at their stately home

PHOTOGRAPHS MARTIN RUTKIEWICZ/EASTWAY



Richard Walker (left) and Theo Michell at their offices

Poland are primarily motivated by money. This might sound a little odd when you consider that the average monthly wage in Poland is just £595, but start your own business, or arrange to be paid in sterling, and you can be rich in Poland – something that looks set to continue with the new, enterprise-friendly government led by Donald Tusk.

The first influx of fortune-seeking Brits arrived shortly after communism collapsed. Then, high-earning, experienced business people were flown in to head up the outposts of western firms, to teach Poles how to make money in a capitalist country.

Some 18 years later, many of these British bosses have gone home, having passed the capitalist baton on to Poles, but there is still serious cash to be made, particularly for entrepreneurs such as Richard Walker, 27, from Chester, who moved to Warsaw in March 2006 to work for the commercial property developer Jones Lang Sasalle. After six months, Walker set up his own rival company, Ethel Austin Poland. He was soon joined by a former colleague, Theo Michell, 34, originally from south London, who moved to Warsaw earlier this year.

The business has been going for only a year, but already the pair have amassed a property portfolio worth €30million (£21.6m). You only need to visit the gelled-back duo at their swish new headquarters to see how well they are doing: they occupy a small but impressive office at Warsaw's flashiest address, the Norman Foster-designed Metropolitan building on Pilsudski Square. They have no qualms about foreigners snapping up property and claim Poles don't either. "They are overwhelmingly positive about it," says Walker. "Warsaw is changing so quickly and everyone is out to do well here. There isn't the discrepancy between locals and expats that you get in places like Dubai." One wonders if all the families in the grim blocks of flats on the outskirts of the city, living on subsistence wages, would agree with Walker. But certainly all the Poles the Guardian spoke to for this article seemed remarkably generous about the British invasion, such as it is.

For our interview, Walker and Michell suggest a sleek coffee bar on the ground floor of the glit-

tering glass building, which the Polish photographer later tells me is a well-known haunt for young women looking to catch the eye of rich foreign businessmen. Not that Walker or Michell are in the market for any of that: both persuaded their girlfriends to up sticks and join them when they moved.

Warsaw was not, both admit, an easy sell. Michell's fiancée, Brid Carr, a 33-year-old architect from Donegal, says her reaction on hearing her beloved's business plan was: "If only it was somewhere like Barcelona."

This is a common theme: most Brits in Poland admit that it was far from their dream destination. "I came here nine years ago purely for the job," says Jo Raskin, 40, the Warsaw-based director of Bell English Language Teaching, which has six schools in Poland. "I became an English teacher to work in sunny places in southern Europe, and I had this vision of Poland as being grey and cold."

Warsaw, with its bitter winters and traffic-choked streets remains cold and grey – Phil Jones, a 30-year-old IT worker, recalls an occasion when he blew his nose and ice came out during the winter of 2005. But over time, Raskin has fallen for Poland. And she is not the only one. She reports an increase in applications from Brits who want to teach English. "There is a steady stream of people wanting to work here. We pay more than English teachers would get in many other European countries. I know for sure that they earn more than some schools pay in London, pound for pound," she says. >>>



Language teachers Jo Raskin (right) and Sue Holmes

Her colleague, Sue Holmes, a 42-year-old from Crewe, agrees that an English teacher can live handsomely even on the basic Bell salary of the equivalent in zloty of £500 net per month. “You can afford to live right in the centre of town,” she says. “And get a cleaner,” Raskin chips in, “and really enjoy yourself. Warsaw is very cultured – you can go to the opera for £15.”

But both agree that life has got more expensive as the zloty has strengthened – there are currently around 4.96 zloty in a pound; when Poland joined the EU in 2004, the exchange rate was 7.13 zloty to the pound. The days of 50p pints are over: half a litre of lager in Warsaw now costs around 10 zloty, or £2. The Ethel Austin duo say a new flat in Warsaw now costs the same as one in Liverpool, putting it well out of reach for any Pole on an average wage.

Ray Bridgeford, 47, an Edinburgh-born businessman, runs Sense, one of Warsaw’s trendiest restaurants. He says prices have rocketed since it opened five years ago. “Salaries have trebled and the cost of food has doubled,” he says. Plus he is having a nightmare recruiting. “All the best waiting staff have gone to the UK,” he says. “When we advertised for staff five years ago, we received 600 applications. I am currently looking for waiting staff and have only had six people interested.”

Raskin thinks that Poland has a lot to offer Brits however. “Poland is one of those countries where being a foreigner is a good thing,” she says. “Particularly if you are male, you get a lot of attention. I have seen so many average blokes come over here and get a nice Polish girl with almost no effort at all.”

The not-at-all-average Jim Parton met his Polish wife, Anna, at his London tennis club almost six years ago. Anna, who comes from near Katowice in south-west Poland, had come to the country to learn English and have an adventure. Stockbroker-turned-writer Jim was looking for something new after writing a few books “but not as many as I should have” and after waging a long campaign to win access to his eldest son, now grown up. They fell in love, married and around two years ago started thinking about buying a place in Anna’s homeland.

“Originally we were looking to buy a three-bedroom place in Poland for investment purposes,” says Jim, as he makes a pot of the nearest Poland gets to proper tea. “Then one day we saw a stately home and got hooked on the idea of buying one.”

At first Anna wasn’t desperately keen to return home when so many of her compatriots were getting a Ryanair plane in the other direction. The reaction of her new neighbours in Piotrowice Nyskie was one of bemusement, she says. But for the Partons, the prime motivation for moving was for their children. “Small children can have a free-range childhood here,” says Jim. “They can run around and see cows and pigs. Plus I can’t afford to engage in the education arms race in London, and all the state schools in my area are crap.” Jozefina and Henryka already understand Polish and English, and will attend the local primary, along with the as yet unborn twins when they are old enough.

Jim says he hasn’t sensed any animosity from locals. He can’t speak Polish yet, but he says: “People from the village keep popping round to see if there is anything they can do to help.” He has no regrets, he adds, about moving, though like many emigres he misses certain



Ania Rudawska and Nick Blunt in Wroclaw



Ray Bridgeford at the restaurant he runs in Warsaw



Phil Jones (left) and Stephen Riley in Warsaw

**‘Poland is one of those countries where being a foreigner is good. If you are male you get a lot of attention from women’**

things about the UK. He has managed to get broadband installed – Radio 4 streams from his laptop throughout our interview – and there is a jar of Bovril on the kitchen shelf. He really pines for the rugby, though. “Is there a team in Wroclaw?” he asks the photographer. He misses the variety of food you can buy and eat in Britain too. There do not appear to be any restaurants or shops in Piotrowice Nyskie, let alone one that sells Heinz baked beans or Marmite, though in Warsaw many expats admit guilty trips to the city-centre Marks & Spencer to buy horseradish sauce or chicken tikka curry paste.

Over in Wroclaw, Nick Blunt, a 24-year-old English teacher from Weymouth, says he misses “gravy powder and real ale”. Blunt moved to Poland in April to be with his Polish fiancée Ania Rudawska, 27, a Wroclaw native whom he met a few years ago when she was working in a bowling alley in Britain. “Nick was the first English guy I met who I could have an intelligent conversation with,” says Rudawska.

She says Polish people are happy when the British come to her country – just so long as they are not on a stag night. “We don’t like people coming here, getting absolutely drunk and screaming in the street,” she says. In fact you will rarely hear Poles trotting out any kind of “they come over here, they take all our jobs” line – perhaps partly because unemployment is at its lowest level in years (thanks in no small part to so many jobless Poles seeking work elsewhere in the EU).

Blunt and Rudawska are currently living with her parents, but are planning to move out when they get married next August. It is not necessarily easy to live well on a Polish salary, says Blunt who earns £400-£500 a month teaching English to Polish business people. “Food and drink is cheaper, but some things, such as clothes and electronics, are much more expensive,” he says. But the food is one of the things Blunt loves about his new homeland. “It’s great that you can still buy traditional produce that actually tastes of something. The meat is particularly good. In England all you can buy is Tesco plastic ham.”

Stephen Riley, a Glaswegian, moved to Warsaw a year ago, originally to do marketing for Celtic football club, which has two Polish players. “I love bigos,” he says – bigos being the ubiquitous cabbage and meat stew that is one of Poland’s national dishes. That, along with “being paid in pounds and being able to live well” is Riley’s favourite thing about Warsaw. He doesn’t feel too cut off from his friends and family – he can generally get a return flight to Glasgow Prestwick for £50, which is a lot less than it cost to get the train from London when he worked there.

Later on in the evening, in the Irish pub Bar Below in Warsaw’s central Srodmiescie district a gang of Brits have gathered to watch Arsenal v Tottenham Hotspur. Steve Whittle, 47, came to Poland 10 years ago to work for the advertising agency WPP and has never gone back. “Things are better here,” he says. “It’s cleaner, it’s cheaper, people have better manners. It’s safer – you see more policemen around central Warsaw than you ever do around central London.” Plus Poland is much a much better place to indulge in his great hobby: carp fishing.

Helen Maguire, 37, who moved to Warsaw six years ago with her property-developer husband, says Poland has so much to offer “You don’t realise it until you get here – but it’s the expat’s best-kept secret” ●