

POLAND TRIP DOSSIER

June 18th to July 16th 2005

Fly from Birmingham to Krakow via Munich (Germany)

18th June. Fly to Krakow. Check into Hotel Astoria (ul. Jozefa)

KRAKOW

Miraculously, Krakow got through the war almost unscathed and its magical Old City has one of the best preserved medieval city centres in Europe, with dozens of churches covering almost every architectural period and surrounded by monasteries and abbeys.

WAWEL HILL - KRAKOW

Walking around Wawel hill, home to Poland's rulers for more than 500 years, you get a real sense of Poland's astonishing history and as you jostle for space with local tourists, staring in veneration at their national heritage, you start to get an idea of the deep national pride that most Poles have. The first cathedral to be built on this site was erected a thousand years ago and the Polish rulers lived and were buried here from that time until the capital moved to Warsaw at the end of the 16th Century.

AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

Poland was once home to one of the most vibrant Jewish communities in Europe but during the Second World War, the vast majority of the Jewish population was shipped to one of the Nazi 'extermination camps'. Now known as Oswiecim, Auschwitz was one of the largest camps and it is believed that between one and two million people perished here during the early 1940s. The camp has now been converted to a memorial and museum and although a visit is inevitably traumatic, it is well worth journeying out there to visit the poignant remains of this extermination camp. It is estimated, that in total, this death factory eliminated some 1.5 million people of 27 nationalities, including 1.1 million Jews, 10,000 Russians, 145,000 Poles and 20,000 Roma. It is now considered to be the largest mass cemetery in the world.

WIELICZKA SALT MINE

The Wieliczka Salt Mine, located in southern Poland near the city of Krakow, has been worked as a source of rock salt since the late 13th century. Over the centuries, miners established a tradition of carving religious sculptures out of the native rock salt and as a result, the mine contains entire underground churches, altars, bas-reliefs, and dozens of life-size or larger statues. The largest of the chapels, the Chapel of the Blessed Kinga, is an amazing sight, located 101 meters below the ground. It is over 50 meters long, 15 meters wide, 12 meters high, and has a volume of 10,000 cubic meters. The mine itself features over 200 km of underground passages, connecting more than 2000 excavation chambers on 9 underground levels extending down to 327m below the surface. It is no wonder that UNESCO have added this to their list of World Heritage Sites.

21st June. Bus to Zakopane. Check into Hotel Sosnica.

THE TATRA MOUNTAINS

The Tatra Mountains, which straddle the border of Poland and Slovakia, offer some of the most spectacular scenery in Europe with tall spiky peaks, deep gorges, limestone towers, open ridges and thickly forested slopes. The area is a hiker's dream. Zakopane provides a delightful base for some excellent hiking. At 1894 metres, Mt Gierwont is the most popular mountain top climbed on foot in the Tatras and is the symbol of Zakopane

24th June. Bus to Krakow, train to Torun. Check into Hotel Pod Orlem.

TORUN

Torun is famous within Poland for three things. The first is that it was the birthplace of the renowned astronomer Copernicus; one of Poland's many distinguished ancestors, and you can still see his house, which dates back to the 15th Century. The second is its delightful old town, a rich jumble of sumptuous old buildings in a range of architectural styles, painted in pastels and richly decorated. The last is its reputation for the delicious local ginger bread (piernik), which is mouthwatering and comes in a myriad of guises.

26th June. Train to Malbork, train to Gizycko. Check into Hotel Gosciniec Janter.

MALBORK CASTLE

In the early 13th century the Teutonic Order launched its first crusade in the territories around present day Malbork in an attempt to convert the local inhabitants to Christianity. A huge castle was built to house the knights and this remains remarkably well preserved still to this day. Situated on the edge of a river the impressive brick castle has had a number of functions in the intervening centuries – as a royal ‘hotel’ during the 16th and 17th century and as a prisoner of war camp during the second world war. It is now a museum and is a fascinating place to explore.

27th June. Boat to Mikolajki. Check into Hotel Mazur.

THE GREAT MAZURIAN LAKES

This ‘land of a thousand lakes’ is a sparsely populated area of thick forest, countless lakes and rivers, rolling woodland and traditional farmsteads. Although it is a popular summer destination for Poles it is easy to escape the hordes and you can spend wonderful days exploring some of the loveliest scenery in Poland. Mikolajki, the most attractive town in the region, is perched between two lakes with a wonderful harbour dotted with boats. Travelling from Gizycko to Mikolajki by boat is a wonderful way to see this truly stunning area.

29th June. Bus to Warsaw. Check into Hotel Mazowiecki.

WARSAW

Warsaw was site of one of the many tragedies of World War 2 – the fighting ravaged this majestic and beautiful city and almost the entire old historic centre disappeared under the barrage of bombs. Within years of the end of the war, however, the restoration effort started and for 14 years, from 1949 – 1963, a massive reconstruction took place with workers sifting the rubble to find any architectural fragments that could be put into the renovations. Walking around the Old Town Square, with its elegant Renaissance, Baroque and Gothic buildings, it is hard to imagine that fifty years ago; all that remained were the walls of two houses. Today the square is alive with open-air cafes, art stalls and street entertainment and is a fabulously atmospheric place to while away an afternoon.

2nd July. Fly from Warsaw to Birmingham via Prague.