



Krakow is the third largest city in Poland with a population of 750,000. And for hundreds of years it has been one of the great cultural centers of Eastern Europe.

Krakow is a compact city with almost all of its major attractions within easy walking distance of each other. And the place to start a walking tour of Krakow is the Main Market Square. It is one of the largest medieval squares in Europe. For centuries it was at the center of the commercial routes used by traders working between northern and southern Europe. The square has been the city's commercial and cultural center for almost a thousand years. Today, dozens of shops, flower stalls, restaurants and cafes line the square.



The impressive houses and palaces that surround the square were once owned by Krakow's wealthiest merchants and royal families.

The palace at number 35 is now the Museum of the City of Krakow and houses an interesting collection of paintings and decorative arts that present the city's cultural history.

Two of the buildings have been turned into the city's most historic restaurant, Wierzynek. One room has a set of Gothic arches from the 13th century and the wine bar is in an ancient cellar.

In the center of the market square is the Cloth Hall. The original building was put up in the 1200s as a covered market where textiles were sold. It was replaced by the present structure during the 1500s. The building is still filled with shops only these days they sell folk art, leatherwork, amber and silver jewelry.

The arcades on the sides of the building are home to a number of cafes including the Noworolski with its slightly faded turn-of-the-century elegance and matching clientele.



Every hour, on the hour, a trumpeter opens a small window in the nearby tower of St. Mary's Church and plays a short tune. After a few notes there is a pause, then the music continues. The tradition commemorates a time when a watchman began blowing his trumpet to warn the town that the Tartars were attacking. As he started to send the signal he was hit by an arrow. It took a few moments to find a replacement and continue the alarm. Hence, today's brief pause.

WAWEL HILL

When prehistoric tribes were looking for a nice place to live they always preferred a spot that was easy to defend, higher than the surrounding area and near a source of fresh water—Wawel Hill overlooking the Vistula River is a perfect example and people have been living on it for over 10,000 years.

For centuries Wawel Hill was the spiritual and intellectual center of Polish culture. The Wawel Cathedral has been here since the year 1000. To the left of the entrance is the Gothic Chapel of the Holy Cross. Its walls are covered with a series of rare medieval frescoes. The chapel also contains the tomb of King Kazimierz Jagiello, one of the great heroes of Polish history. In 1973, a team of sixteen scholars opened the tomb to study its contents. Within a short time they all died. The word around town was that King Kazimierz put a curse on them for disturbing his rest.

At the center of the Cathedral is the shrine of St. Stanislaus, who was the bishop of Krakow in the 11th century.

Boleslaw the Bold, who was the king at the time, abducted the wife of another man and smuggled her into the palace. The bishop decided to punish the king by ordering the suspension of mass whenever the king entered the Cathedral. The king decided to punish the bishop by chopping him up into small pieces. Then the bishop punished the king by becoming the patron saint of Poland.

The Bishop's tomb is the nation's alter—the place where the coronation ceremonies for Polish kings have taken place for centuries.



In the Cathedral's tower is the Zygmunt Bell. It was cast in 1520 from eleven tons of copper and tin. It's only rung on important religious and state occasions but you can climb up the tower and touch its clapper. Legend says that when you are holding the clapper of the Zygmunt Bell you are holding its heart, and at that moment all the affairs of your own heart will be resolved.

As far as matters of the heart are concerned, I'm OK on love, but I wouldn't mind a quick check of my cholesterol. Actually, getting up the tower is a mild stress test in itself but the reward is a magnificent view of the city.

Next to the Cathedral is the Wawel Castle, which was built in the early 1500s. It was the time of the Italian Renaissance, and what was going on in Florence was being felt in Krakow. It was Krakow's Golden Age.

The Royal Apartments contain an unusual collection of 16th century tapestries that were produced by the finest artists of Antwerp and Brussels. One group presents the story of Noah and his ark. Another illustrates the story of the Tower of Babel. The detail is extraordinary. The tapestries of the time were great works of art and were used to cover the walls of every important room. Noble families would have a collection of tapestries and continually change them in accordance with the seasons, holidays and important state events.

The royal household was the center of cultural life, and like the powerful families of Italy they were constantly commissioning great works of art. One reason for the strong Italian influence was King Zygmunt's wife, Princess Bona Sforza. The princess was a member of one of the richest and most influential families in Italy.

The architects who designed most of Wawel Castle came from Italy, and they used Italian masons and sculptors to execute their designs. You can feel the Italian style throughout the building. Queen Bona influenced the court at Krakow in many ways—the architecture, the art, the music, the clothing; even the food showed her Italian preferences.

She introduced the court kitchen to potatoes, and tomatoes, which had recently been brought to northern Italy from the New World by Columbus. She also showed her palace cooks how to prepare cabbage. All three ingredients, potatoes, tomatoes and cabbage are now central to Polish cooking.

There is a dish of sliced cucumbers in sour cream dressing that is associated with Queen Bona. It reminded her of Italy, and every time she saw it she got home sick. The salad is called *Mizeria*, which means misery.

The castle also houses the world's largest collection of Turkish tents and banners much of which was captured when Polish troops broke the Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683.

Most students of history tend to think of the siege of Vienna as a military and political event, but for me it's most important as a gastronomic occasion. After the Polish saved Vienna by beating the Turks, a Viennese baker who had warned the city of the attack was rewarded with the exclusive right to bake a pastry that would commemorate the victory. He was also given the right to receive a royalty on each one baked. The baker decided to make a roll in the shape of the crescent that was on the Turkish flag to show that the Viennese could devour the Turks every day. And that's how the *croissant* came to be.

ARCHITECTURE

Starting in the 11th century, Krakow became interested in the quality of its architecture, and over the centuries it has been able to preserve examples from each of the most important periods. As a result, Krakow offers an outdoor text book for European architectural history.

An excellent example of the Romanesque style is the tiny St. Adalbert's Church in the center of the Market Square. It was built in the early 1100s. Romanesque buildings are massive with few windows. Semicircular arches are used for doors and



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arcades. Rectangular spaces are often topped with a half cylinder called a barreled vault. Poor old St. Adalbert's is slowly sinking into the earth. The original front door is now about three yards below the present street level.

The next architectural style to evolve is known as Gothic. Krakow's St. Katherine's Church is a good example. The Gothic style was popular from the middle of the 1100s to the end of the 1500s. The name Gothic was introduced by a group of Renaissance Italian writers who used it as an insult. Barbarian Gothic tribes had destroyed the beauty of ancient Rome, and they felt this new style was doing it all over again—so they called it Gothic. Personally, I disagree. I think many of the most beautiful buildings in Europe are Gothic.

One of the big problems facing medieval masons was how to support heavy ceilings over wide spaces. The earlier Romanesque solution was to use heavy stonework but that



Krakow, Poland

created a tremendous amount of pressure that pushed down and out and caused the buildings to collapse.

Krakow's St. Katherine's Church is an example of how Gothic architects solved the problem by using ribbed vaults that supported a ceiling of thin stone panels. The ribbing reduced



the weight of the ceiling. The round arches of the barrel vault were replaced by the pointed Gothic arches that did a better job of distributing the weight. That also allowed them to introduce large windows.

In addition, they developed the flying buttress—a series of half-arches that leaned against the upper exterior of the building and carried the weight of the ceiling. Gothic masons used these techniques to build larger and taller buildings than ever before. The story of technical achievement in European architecture is also the story of the Catholic Church looking for better ways to honor God.

Since the Golden Age of Krakow took place at the same time as the Italian Renaissance and Italian architects worked throughout Krakow, you'd think that the city would be filled with Renaissance churches. But, in fact, there is not a single Renaissance church in Krakow. That's because the Gothic movement of the 1300s was so popular and so many Gothic churches were built that no new ones were needed for over 200 years.

Isaac's Synagogue however is a fine example of Renaissance architecture. The objective of Renaissance architecture was to re-create the ancient classical culture of Rome and to illustrate harmony and balance in the design of the building—proportion was everything.

Isaac's Synagogue was financed by a man who comes with a legend. The legend says that Isaac started out as a poor man who had a dream about a great treasure and went searching for it all over Poland without success. When he eventually returned home he discovered that the treasure that he was searching for was hidden all along in the back of his oven. And he used part of the treasure to pay for this synagogue.

Today, the building houses an exhibition on Polish Jewry and shows films of Jewish life before World War II.

The next architectural style was the Baroque. It was the Catholic Church's response to the Protestant Reformation. The objective of Baroque architecture was to build a church so elaborate and so ornate that it overwhelmed the observer and made it clear that this was where God really belonged. Krakow's St. Anna's church is an excellent example of Baroque architecture. For a Baroque architect more was never enough.

After the Baroque came the Neo-Classical architecture. It was the architecture of the Age of Reason. A good example of the Neo-Classical in Krakow is the Slowackiego Theater—reminiscent of the opera houses in Paris and Vienna, its exterior is covered with heavily ornate sculptures. Neo-Classical looks back to the forms of ancient Greece and Rome.



The building opened in 1893 and was the first building in Krakow to have electric lights. Even the curtain is a major work of art. And to witness a performance in the theater is like time tripping back to the late 1800s.

WHERE TO EAT

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MUSEUMS

There are over two and a half million works of art in Krakow and most of them can be seen in the city's public museums. Of special interest to me are those works which have a particularly Polish aspect to their history.

In the center of the main square is Krakow's National Museum which houses a collection of paintings and sculptures by 19th century Polish artists. It's small enough to get through in an hour and interesting enough to warrant your attention. At the time of its construction in 1883, Poland had been divided between Russia, Austria and Prussia. The museum became a site for the preservation of Poland's national heritage. There are a number of huge historical paintings that were used to illustrate important moments in Polish history. Their size was



key to impressing the viewers with the significance of the event.

The Ethnographic Museum in a former town hall has a collection of Polish folk art, including a selection of

special Krakovian Nativity Scenes. They are called *cribs*, but are actually representations of elaborate castles.

The tradition of Nativity plays and scenes outside a church goes back to St. Francis of Assisi in 1223. At first the figures were stationary and moved about in accordance with Gospel accounts. During the 1800s, artists and performers in Krakow developed Nativity puppet shows, placed them into the interior of the cribs and began touring the homes of the well-to do. A crib-makers guild was established. It consisted of bricklayers and carpenters who were looking for work during the winter months. In 1937, the city of Krakow began holding annual competitions for the best Christmas crib, and an extensive collection rests here in the Ethnographic Museum. Oddly, the primary material for the surface of the cribs is colored metallic foil, usually taken from candy and chocolate wrappers.



The Jagiellonian University is in itself a museum. This was the first university in Poland and was named after King Jagiello. Its original buildings date from 1364.

The students represent 10 percent of Krakow's population and give the city a youthful and slightly bohemian feeling.

During the 1400's the great astrologer Copernicus studied at the Jagiellonian University and the university's museum has a series of astrological instruments that belonged to him. Eventually he published a book *On the Revolutions of Heavenly Spheres*, which introduced the idea that the earth revolved around the sun. That notion was in direct opposition to the teaching of the Book of Joshua which said the sun revolved around the earth.

Copernicus was nervous about contradicting the Bible, but Pope Paul III thought the idea was interesting and in fact encouraged Copernicus in his work. Surprisingly, Martin Luther, who you would see as a supporter, called Copernicus a "fool" for challenging Holy Scripture. Once again proving you never



know who's going to turn out to be a pal.

The Archdiocesan Museum has a collection of religious art including the oldest surviving Polish painting. It is a picture of St. Agnes and St. Katherine painted in the 1200s. The museum also houses the room in which Karol Wojtyla lived before becoming Pope John Paul II.

THE ANCIENT TRADE ROUTE

Krakow's main commercial street is Florianska, which was originally part of the trade route between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. As early European trade routes developed, Krakow found itself situated at a key point, and for hundreds of years it maintained substantial commercial contact with the ancient Roman Empire. One of the commodities traded at the time was amber. Amber was thought to bring its wearer good luck, youth and longevity—it is Poland's national stone.

In medieval times each part of the town belonged to a different



VODKA



Krakow's Old Town is filled with bars that offer a wide selection of the national drink which is vodka. Szara on the Main Market Square is a small charming restaurant with a perfect bar for tasting vodka. Clear vodka served ice cold is the most traditional, but there is also an assortment of flavored vodkas. *Zubrowka* is flavored with grass on which bison feed. It has a slight herbal flavor. *Wisniowka* is made with sweet cherries. *Krupnik* uses honey. The flavored vodkas should be served at room temperature—chilling reduces their flavor.

There's also a popular local cocktail called the *flagship*. It's made by slowly pouring vodka over thick pomegranate juice. Interesting. The vodka goes down so quickly that you don't notice it. And the juice is so intense that it is the only flavor you sense.

craft guild and its members were responsible for maintaining the defensive walls and gates in their neighborhood.

In front of the Florianska Gate stands a structure called the Barbican. It was built in 1498 to protect the city from a Tartar invasion. The building was surrounded by a moat and connected to the city gate by a walled bridge that was unconquerable until the 1800s when modern artillery came into use. It is a good example of historic European defensive architecture.

The Florianska Gate, to which it was connected, is the longest section of ancient city wall still standing. During the 1800s, most of the great cities of Europe pulled down their ancient walls and gates to make room for commercial development.

But even then, there were people who wanted to preserve the ancient parts of their city and opposed the destruction of historic buildings. The lead player in Krakow was a professor at the University. When his cultural argument failed to impress the city government he came up with a highly imaginative line of reasoning. He pointed out that if the walls were taken down the north wind would blow through the city with such violence that respectable women of delicate breeding would have their skirts blown up subjecting them to the most immodest of circumstances.

The wall is still standing.



WHAT'S COOKING

The people of Krakow are serious about eating and drinking, and having freed themselves from the perpetual gastronomic boredom that was imposed on the city by communism, they have returned to their culinary roots.



Hawelka was established in 1876 as a shop dealing in high quality foods. Eventually it added a restaurant that specializes in traditional Polish dishes. A few examples:

Bigos is a hunters stew, often considered the national dish of Poland—game, smoked sausage, cabbage and sauerkraut.

Pierogi, boiled dumplings that come with dozens of different fillings from potatoes to cherries.

Barszcz, is a red borscht soup made from beets, and often served with a warm meat filled pastry.

Zurek, is a white borscht soup made from fermented rye, garlic and bread and served with white sausages.

Wierzynek is the oldest restaurant in Krakow. Records indicate that a magnificent feast was given here for King Kazimierz the Great in 1364. And it has remained a favorite restaurant for many famous people including George the Elder, Gerald the Uncoordinated, Fidel the Bearded and Mikhail the Bald.

Krakow's favorite street food is *obwarzanki*, a ring shaped roll sprinkled with poppy seeds.



Krakow has a great appreciation of sweets which are offered in cafes and coffee houses. My favorite was Camelot, which has an eat-in window.

They are well-known for their typical Polish cheese cake and apple cake. But don't waste your time going from café to café to find the best. Almost all apple cakes in town come from one family bakery.

And everyone in Poland seems to appreciate *Piszinger*, a half dozen or so layers of wafer with chocolate filling. It's Poland's gourmet answer to the Kit Kat.

JEWISH CULTURE

The first mention of Krakow in writing appears in the diary of a Jewish trader from Cordoba, Spain who came to Poland in 965 to buy salt, copper and silver. And there has been a relationship between Krakow and the Jews ever since. The old Jewish section of the city is called Kazimierz and was founded in the 14th century by King Kazimierz the Great



Kazimierz's Remuh graveyard is one of the oldest in Europe. Many of the tombs are marked with symbols that tell us something about the person buried below. Hands raised in prayer designate the grave of a member of a rabbinical family. Bowls and jugs are the symbols for people who worked in the synagogues. Snakes for doctors. A broken rose for those cut off too early.

In the center of the district is the Galicia Jewish Museum. Galicia was the name given to a region of Eastern Europe that at different times was made up of parts of Austria, Poland, Russia and Ukraine. But it was always a homeland for Eastern European Jews. The museum houses a collection of photographs by Chris Schwartz, an Englishman who founded the museum. Chris traveled from town to town in Jewish Galicia and photographed the relics of Jewish life that remained.

No. 14 Szeroka is the house where the daughter of a merchant was packed off to visit her relatives in Australia. Her luggage contained a dozen jars of skin cream produced by a neighborhood dermatologist. She used them to start what became a world-famous cosmetics business. Her name was Helena Rubinstein.

Almost every night, the restaurants in Kazimierz, offer concerts of Jewish music.

And every summer an extraordinary concert takes place on the streets at the center of Kazimierz. Experts on Jewish music come from all over the world. It is a festival that attracts an audience of over 10,000 people. It is a concert that celebrates life and the history of the Jews of Krakow, who have been part of this city's history for centuries.

TOP 20 THINGS TO DO IN KRAKOW

- No. 14 Szeroka
 - ◆ Helena Rubinstein's house
- Archdiocesan Museum
- Barbican
- Ethnographic Museum
- Florianska Gate
- Galicia Jewish Museum
- Isaac's Synagogue
- Jagiellonian University
- Kazimierz
 - ◆ Remuh graveyard
- Krakow's National Museum
- Main Market Square
 - ◆ Cloth Hall
 - ◆ St. Adalbert's Church
 - ◆ St. Mary's Church and Tower
- Museum of the City of Krakow
- St. Katherine's Church
- St. Anna's Church
- Slowackiego Theater
- Wawel Hill
 - ◆ Wawel Cathedral
 - ◆ Wawel Castle