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TRAVEL WITH 

Kraków, inside out

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A couple heads towards Wawel Hill. (Matt Munro/LPI)

From snowy walks through a fairytale castle to warming hot chocolate and cherry vodka, embrace and escape the cold on a winter's break to Poland's second city.

Sugar and spice and all things nice

With its higgledy-piggledy streets and cobbled alleyways, Kraków is a city that lends itself to afternoons of contemplation in tucked-away cafés. Hours can tick by sitting at a window, hands warmed by a cup of hot

chocolate, watching people in thick fur coats and hats wending their way through the wintry mists of the city.

A walk through Kraków is like following a fairytale trail of breadcrumbs - around every corner a new place offers something sweet, from gingerbread biscuits to cranberry fritters to poppyseed cake. 'In Kraków, we believe sweet things help to keep out the cold,' says Arek Liskiewicz, a university student and a waiter at Pod Aniolami restaurant (ul Grodzka 35; podaniolami.pl), where the baked dense apple cake is a specialty.

Inside a 13th-century building, the restaurant's thick, stone walls are the colour of butterscotch. The tweeting of a caged canary punctuates the evening chatter that fills the warm room. I take my slice of famed apple cake, served with a pool of custard, to a spot by a roaring hearth spitting crackling flames. In times gone by the premises were occupied by local goldsmiths, who used the fireplace to melt precious metallic nuggets before thwacking them into shape on an anvil that now hangs from the cellar ceiling.

The sugar trail takes me next to the Wedel Chocolate Lounge (ul Rynek Główny 46; wedelpijalnie.pl) overlooking the city's grand square - a place seemingly transplanted from a turn-of-the-century novel. Waitresses in starched aprons make their way around a room filled with cushioned banquettes, its white walls rising to a vaulted ceiling that cocoons customers from outside chills. I join them for a treacly glass of hazelnut hot chocolate before making my way out, passing shelves stuffed with be-ribboned pralines as the bittersweet aroma of cocoa dust catches in my throat.

Following the maze of back streets to Café Camelot (ul Sw Tomasza 17; 00-48-12-421-0123), its glass panes misted with condensation, I realise how Hansel and Gretel must have felt when they found their gingerbread house. Walking through the door is like opening the window on an advent calendar: the walls are painted a vivid raspberry, and wintry draughts are kept at bay by thick red curtains across stone doorways. At a snug table next to an old-fashioned black iron stove I drink a Moulin Rouge tea - a mélange of rooibus, strawberry, raspberry, hibiscus and rosebud, chased by a shot of Wisniowka (cherry vodka): as sweet as something 40 per cent proof can be.

Bask in an eternal summer

Kraków's white-grey winter gives it the look of a city cloaked in pigeon feathers, but at the Franciscan Church (pl Wszystkich Swietych 5, south of the Old Town Square, opposite the Archbishop's Palace) I find a palette worthy of a bird of paradise. One of the city's 120 religious buildings, the 13th-century church has a stunning art nouveau interior designed by Stanislaw Wyspianski. When the church was renovated in 1895, the Polish artist covered the walls in a blaze of colour, painting over-sized water lilies and pansies in purple, green, yellow and orange. Looking at the vivid panels, I am transported to a sun-drenched picnic on the edges of a bluebell wood. Bright, winter light is filtered through an extraordinary stained glass window, which depicts the bearded figure of God surrounded by vibrant flames of turquoise and inky blue.

Wyspianski's imaginative designs also decorate the windows of Kraków's historic St Mary's Basilica (Rynek Główny 4, entrance from side of Plac Mariacki), the imposing Gothic church adjacent to the main market square. Inside, the vaulted ceiling rises above me like a giant Fabergé egg, its cerulean blue panels overlaid by hundreds of golden stars. The church's interior is a gloriously assembled patchwork of styles: blazing pink and red stone panels dotted with gilt-cloaked religious figurines and an imposing organ, heavy with pewter-grey pipes.

Music to warm the soul

It's midnight as I walk down Kraków's main street, the Florianska. Like everyone else I am wrapped up against the night's chill, but still the cold penetrates. By the time I reach Piec Art ((ul Szewska 12; piecart.pl), my eyelids feel laced with ice. The faint strains of saxophone bubbling up through the ground tell me I am in the right place and I walk down a narrow flight of stairs to emerge in a redbricked cellar. A group of men in jeans

and biker boots are huddled around a table with tumblers of vodka in hand, listening intently to the music.

The jazz played by the three-piece band is soft and seductive, threading through the shadows like a curlicue of cigarette smoke. Sometimes, the barman tells me, this place gets wild and full of people who dance into the early hours, but this evening, the jazz is reflective, lapping like a tide at the edges of the night. I take a candlelit table in the corner and watch as the room fills, chattering voices accompanying the instruments like a percussion.

The next day, in need of the strong black coffee so beloved by jazz fans, I head for Alchemia (ul Estery 5, corner of ul Estery and Plac Nowy; alchemia.com.pl) - this club, café and bar in the Kazimierz district has a basement stage that attracts some of the genre's biggest names. In the morning, there's an offbeat, arty clientele: men in black polo-necks discussing philosophical issues. The tables are covered with lace, and a stuffed bird haughtily observes customers from behind the till. The air seems heavy with the imprints of long-ago Kraków residents who still stalk the rooms. 'There are no ghosts here,' says the manager Brunon Bierzenink, not entirely convincingly. 'Alchemia is haunted only by music.'

The historic inhabitants of the Benedictine Abbey in Tyniec (ul Benedyktynska 37; tyniec.benedyktyni.pl), which rises steeply from a riverbank on the southwestern outskirts of Kraków, never really left. Black-cowled monks have walked the courtyards of the working monastery since 1044, their footfalls crunching in the snow over nearly a millennium of winters. The quiet men may seem unlikely champions for the power of music, but the Abbey's Gothic church is a popular venue for organ recitals and concerts, and every day at seven o'clock the brothers sing vespers (evening prayer) in Latin. Their sombre voices weave together into an eerie melody, which drifts and echoes around the abbey's ancient walls.

Sample the salt of the earth

There are no elevators going down into the Wieliczka Salt Mine (nine miles southeast of Kraków city centre; kopalnia.pl), no soothing mechanised whir to ease my journey into its cavernous depths. Instead, I walk down several hundred wooden steps that twist and turn inwards like an Escher print, burrowing 135m into the coolness of the earth. Inside lies an eerie subterranean world of labyrinthine passages, lakes and caverns. Although the temperature is kept at a constant 14-16°C, the draughts that whistle through the shafts, and the lack of natural light, make it feel much cooler.

The salt mine has been producing salt for more than 700 years, and dates back to an era when salt was as valuable a commodity as oil is today. Through the centuries, the salt miners have carved out chapels and religious statuettes as they work, many of which survive intact as an extraordinary testament to their ingenuity. The Chapel of The Blessed Kinga is a vast, echoing space lined with detailed carvings in the salt walls,

including a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper. Intricate chandeliers hang from the ceilings, lighting up the gloom with crystals made from glittering shards of translucent rock salt.

A legacy of loss

A lonesome rabbi in a long black coat walks along Kazimierz's quiet streets bordered by brick walls paled pink by age. Founded in 1335 as an independent town, Kazimierz became home to Kraków's Jews after their expulsion from the main city in 1494. Today, it's imbued with an odd silence: a legacy of the extermination of the city's Jewish population under the Nazis. Before the war 60,000 Jews lived here; now, there are barely 200.

The 16th-century Remuh Synagogue (ul Szeroka 40; 00-48-12-429-5735) is the only active synagogue left in Kraków and its cemetery contains row upon row of tombstones inscribed in Hebrew, carefully restored after Nazi damage. Adam Libon, the synagogue's caretaker, tells me about his father, a 16-year-old Jew at the start of World War II - he was taken to three concentration camps before being rescued by factory owner Oskar Schindler, who took Jan to work in his Kraków enamelware factory. Jan survived, dying three years ago, aged 84. 'It is very sad that so many people had to leave here,' says Adam.

Pockets of traditional culture survive: across from the synagogue is Klezmer-Hois (ul Szeroka 6; klezmer.pl), a Jewish restaurant with lace tablecloths and sepia photographs of men with ringlets, who gaze down at us through the years.

Once upon Wawel Hill

Walking up the gentle snowcovered slope towards The Royal Castle, my breath a wisp of steam in the cold air, I am enveloped by the dream-like notion that I have been transplanted into a story by the Grimm Brothers. I almost expect to see a distressed maiden unwinding her long hair from one of the windows of the Gothic-era castle, with its onion-shaped domes and ochre-tiled roofs pressed against the winter sky.

Set at the southernmost tip of the Old Town, a limestone outcrop rising out of the cobbled streets and surrounded by the glistening waters of the Vistula River, it's easy to imagine fairytale royalty and mystical creatures in the grounds of Wawel Hill (wawel.krakow.pl). The castle has been the residence of Polish kings and queens for five centuries, and there's even a Dragon's Den - the damp cave beneath a line of turret fortifications is said to have housed a firebreathing beast that terrorised local residents in the city's early days. The ruler, Prince Krak, offered his daughter's hand in marriage to whoever could kill the dragon. Many died trying before a young cobbler struck upon a scheme to stuff a sheep with sulphur and leave it outside the animal's lair. When the dragon ate it, he became unbearably thirsty and went to the river to drink - and the

water caused his stomach to swell until it exploded. The dragon died. And the cobbler? He and his princess lived happily ever after.

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