

Guide to ... Kraków

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Wawel Cathedral. Photo: Getty Images

Europe's most magnificent town square is just one attraction of Poland's second largest city, writes David Whitley.

STAY

Budget

The fairly new Hotel Maksymilian (36 Karmelicka, 341 44 93, hotelmaksymilian.pl, from 200 zloty) has perky personality and mystifyingly cheap rates that will probably go up once guide book authors find it. The Pergamin Aparthotel (26 Długa, 630 9165, enjoykrakow.pl, from 198 zloty) offers mid-range hotel quality at budget prices. Wooden ceilings and patches of exposed brick add splashes of character to otherwise bland rooms. En suite private hostel rooms are a good bet too. For example, the Deco (3A Mazowiecka, 631 0745, from 170 zloty) offers basic furnishing but 1920s character and charming art deco decor. The best deals tend to be with specialist sites such as Hostelworld (hostelworld.com).

Mid-range

Apartments and aparthotels are the way forward if you want value for money. Cracowdays Apartments (7 Ambrozego Grabowskiego, 604 460 860, cracowdays.com, from 308 zloty) throws in free printing, internet, tea, coffee and biscuits with smartly modern accommodation. If location is the priority, then the Venetian House Aparthotel (pictured, 11 Rynek Główny, 346 4670, venetian-house.com, from 235 zloty) is bang on the main square. The studios don't brim with charisma but have full kitchens, flatscreen TVs, DVD players and free wi-fi. The Kossak (1 Plac Kossaka, 379 5900, hotelkossak.pl, from 316.80 zloty) is the best value hotel — it's a genuinely smart four-star joint with engagingly colourful rooms and the bonus of a downstairs sauna.

Luxe

Andel's (3 Pawia, 660 0100, andelscracow.com, from 406.22 zloty) goes for a modern feel. Big windows and smart, stylish decor steer it well away from corporate cookie-cutter blandness. Hotel Unicus (35 Florianska, 433 7111, hotelunicus.pl, from 440 zloty) also has a touch of glam, with glittering silvery gold colours mixed in with the dark woods, bathrobes on the beds and iPod docks. The standard rooms are on the small side, though. To feel like you're sleeping in an alchemist's lair, the Wentzl (19 Rynek Główny, 430 2664, wentzl.pl, from 470 zloty) combines luxury with atmospherics. Every room is different but mod cons such as coffee makers are tastefully woven in whilst maintaining the building's character.

Lash out

If the budget will stretch, stay at the Hotel Stry (5 Szczepanska, 384 0808, stry.hotel.com.pl, from 765 zloty). It's atmospheric, sexy and just about every touch — from the marble-drenched bathrooms and heavy gnarled wood doors to the shimmering curtains — has the wow factor. The bubbling underground cellar pool is extraordinary, too. The 22-room Hotel Copernicus (16 Kanonicza, 424 3400, copernicus.hotel.com.pl from 580 zloty) is the closest challenger — it nails a mediaeval castle look whilst incorporating deep-set leather sofas and complimentary grapes on a platter. If facilities and super-comfortable beds — a letdown in many Krakow hotels — are your thing, head to the riverside Sheraton (7 Powisle, 662 1000, sheraton.pl, from 569.16 zloty).

SHOP + PLAY

To market

Right in the middle of the main square, the Cloth Hall dates back to the 14th century (although it has undergone a few rebuilds since then) and has long been the city's focal trading point. It still is, to a certain extent, today although the stalls inside almost exclusively sell jewellery, crafts and souvenir trinkets to tourists. Plac Nowy usually has a few disparate stalls around it but it comes to life at the weekends with the Sunday clothing market. Hala Targowa (3 Grzegorzewska) is the best of the bunch if it's a traditional outdoor market you're after, however, and it turns into a giant flea market on Sundays.

Go shop

Krakow doesn't really have one particular shopping street but the most interesting shops in the Old Town, pictured, tend to be found at the southern end. Grodzka, for example, has a good mix of fashion, jewellery and crafts among the souvenir tat. If you want something special and distinctly Polish, go for amber. The Amber Room (2 Wislna) sells pricey handmade amber jewellery — mark in the "present for someone special" category. The Likus Concept Store (13 Rynek Główny) inventively takes over a cellar complex in the main square, with a wine bar and upmarket deli sitting alongside the designer clothing on the racks.

Live music

The attempts to keep Jewish culture alive in Kazimierz often seem very tourist-focused. The "Jewish" restaurants rarely serve kosher food and very few Jews live in Krakow nowadays. But the klezmer gigs at Klezmer-Hois (6 Szeroka, 411 1245, klezmer.pl) have quality if not total authenticity. For classical music in an atmospheric setting, try one of the daily 7pm concerts at St Adalbert's church in the main square. The schedule is unashamedly populist, going from Vivaldi and Bach to Morricone and Williams. Piano Rouge (pictured, 46 Rynek Główny, 431 0333, thepianorouge.com) on the other side of the square is an excellent bet for live jazz.

Nightclubs

Wielopole 15 is often known simply as "The Complex" and it's four clubs in one. None have entry fees, so you can merrily stumble between them. Lubu-Dubu has a communist theme and plays party hits all night, Kitsch is a shameless, shambolic meat market that always seems like a great idea after a certain amount of alcohol. Playground is home to booming techno and Caryca is the classiest of the not particularly sophisticated quartet. Baccarat (13 Stolarska, +48 695 116 760, baccaratclub.pl) is more luxuriant, with excellent cocktails, clearly pricey furniture and beautiful people strutting under the mirrorball.

SEE + DO

Icons

Wawel Hill (422 5155, wawel.krakow.pl) is home to the Royal Castle complex — for which there is a bewildering array of ticket combinations available. If you've got time for just one option, go for the State Rooms. The cathedral is also here and it's something of a cluttered masterpiece. In the centre of the Old Town, the main square (Rynek Główny) is arguably the most magnificent in Europe. It is a huge expanse, surrounded by and containing glorious buildings. A few clicks out of the centre, the Wieliczka Salt Mine (278 7302, kopalnia.pl) is an extraordinary underground maze of salt-hewn chapels, statues and lakes.

Culture

Krakow was the setting for Schindler's List (or Ark, if you prefer the book). Last year, Oskar Schindler's enamelware factory (4 Lipowa, 257 1017, mhk.pl) was turned into a museum about World War II Krakow and the German industrialist's attempts to save members of the Jewish population. It is tremendously good, using eyewitness accounts, multimedia technology and a reconstructed ghetto to tell the tale. The Museum of Contemporary Art (263 4001, mocak.pl) has recently opened on the same site.

On foot

Most are happy aimlessly ambling through the old town, but if you want a set route, the Planty Park follows the path of the former city walls. This green belt takes in churches, an outdoor photography exhibition and offers great views of Wawel Hill and Castle, pictured. Further west, Las Wolski has more than 400 hectares of forest for hiking. To swot up on Krakow's Jewish history and the efforts to retain Jewish culture in the city, See Krakow (397 3624,

seekrakow.com) has a three-hour Schindler's List walking tour that includes Kazimierz and the World War II ghetto. It finishes at Schindler's factory and costs 60 zloty.

Follow the leader

A visit to the Nazis' infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp is sobering and horrifying, but the memories of what you see will stick with you forever. Cracow Tours (430 0726, cracow.tours.pl) will take you there if you don't want to take the train and make your own way round. The same company offers tours that follow in the footsteps of the former archbishop of Krakow, Karol Wojtyla, better known as Pope John Paul II. You can also take a figurative look behind the Iron Curtain by hopping in an iconic Trabant car and taking a Viator's (viator.com) trip to the Soviet-planned — and rather odd — city of Nowa Huta.

EAT + DRINK

Cafe culture

The gigantic park-facing terrace at Cafe Bunkier (3a Plac Szczepanski, 423 0971) makes it a great spot to spend a summer afternoon — the coffee and cakes are good, too. Many times more kitsch is Chata (21 Krowoderska, +48 888 101 100, or log on to polskakuchnia.com.pl), which is done up to look like a log cabin, complete with fur draped over the wooden benches. It's a top place to find good-value Polish classic dishes, too. The pink-painted walls, vaulted roof, carvings and beautiful antique furniture give Camelot (17 Swietego Tomasza, 421 0123) its adorable fairytale feel — and it's popular with locals, expats and tourists alike.

Snack attack

The 12-sided roundhouse in Kazimierz's Plac Nowy is Krakow's post-beer munchies hot spot. It's the undisputed go-to place for Zapiekanki, — a Polish take on pizza, whereby the ingredients are smothered over a flaky half-baguette. Just around the corner, the tiny COCA (3 Kupa) offers up Sicilian favourites such as arancini (breadcrumb-coated rice balls that taste better than they sound) as well as less-adventurous pizza slices. Attached to an upmarket Old Town restaurant, the takeaway window at Chimera (3 Swietej Anny, 292 1212, chimera.com.pl) offers quality sandwiches, quiches and naughty cakes to those in hurry.

Top of the town

Two of the city's culinary heavyweights are neighbours on the main square. Wentzl (19 Rynek Glowny, 429 5712, wentzl.pl) is upstairs, offering imperious views plus an emphasis on fish and game dishes. Wierzynek (15 Rynek Glowny, 424 9600, wierzynek.pl) is the one for terrace-dining junkies, with a lavish four-course banquet costing from 164 zloty (\$52). If you've overdosed on central European fare, a taste of France at Cyrano de Bergerac (26 Slawkowska, 411 72 88, cyranodebergerac.pl) could be just the ticket. The brick-and-stone vaulted cellar setting plus tinkling piano complement the often rich Gallic delights on the menu.

By the glass

Kazimierz is the area for a lengthy bar hop, while Propaganda (20 Miodowa, 292 0402) is a great place to start. It pulls off the communist retro theme beautifully, right down to the old radios, bikes and posters on the walls. If you like a pivo or eight, House of Beer (35 Swietego Tomasza, +48 794 222 136) has pulled together 150 different microbrews from around Poland. Piwnica Pod Zlota Pipa (30 Florianska, 421 9466, pipa.com.pl) is a gorgeous cellar pub, most suited to quiet conversation — until you take them up on their vodka chess gimmick: each chess piece is a special shot glass.

Hot tip

Timing counts for a lot in Krakow. It's a hugely popular weekend destination for people around Europe, meaning that hotel prices and crowds boom between Friday and Sunday. If you can be there midweek then you're better off. However, if you're in Krakow at the weekend, be prepared to tackle the big sites early. Many attractions — especially those on Wawel Hill — are so popular that limited, timed tickets are issued. If you don't want to wait, reserve by phone or show up at opening time.

Getting there

Krakow isn't the simplest of places to get to and can't be done with just one stop. A combination of a full service flight to a major European hub — such as Emirates (emirates.com) via Dubai to London Gatwick or Rome — then a budget airline for the short hop to Krakow is probably the most economical bet. EasyJet (easyjet.com) flies there from Gatwick and Ryanair (ryanair.com) goes from Rome. Expect starting prices of about \$2500 all up.

Visas and currency

Australians don't require a visa to enter Poland, unless they're planning to work there. The currency is the zloty. \$1 = 3.2 zloty.

Calling Poland

Poland's international dialling code is +48 and Krakow's city code is 12. Add +48 12 to any seven-digit number listed above if calling from abroad. Other numbers are listed in full.

Further information

inyourpocket.com/poland/krakow and cracow-life.com.

David Whitley was a guest of Hostelworld and Viator.

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/travel/guide-to--krakow-20111020-1m9qn.html#ixzz1c0GFrnwm>