

# Krakow, Cracow, So Good They Named It Twice!

By [rhodes](#)30/07/2011 11:59:00



Wawel Castle, Krakow

Krakow, once the capital of Poland, is a city wrapped in legend and rich in history and culture. Krakow is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and has Europe's largest market square and numerous historical houses, palaces and churches with magnificent interiors. The city has a fascinating and turbulent history which is evidenced by the remnants of the 14th-century fortifications and the medieval site

of Kazimierz with its ancient synagogues in the southern part of town and the Gothic cathedral where the kings of Poland were buried. An easy city to explore on foot, there is plenty of shopping, an array of excellent bars and restaurants and some of the finest museums and galleries to be found in Europe.

I've been fortunate enough to visit Krakow on several occasions, and could visit many more times without ever getting bored. Unfortunately my visits have always been in the winter, but I am determined to go back in the summertime when I imagine it would feel like a completely different city.

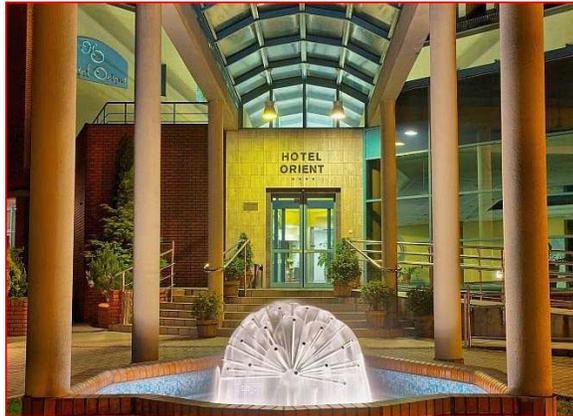
The Old Town is centred around the Rynek Glowny, which is dominated by the Cloth Hall in the centre of the square. There are stalls inside the hall, selling an assortment of local produce, as well as the usual overpriced tourist tat. There is a real sense of history in this square; St Mary's church, which overlooks the square, was built in 1220, and is definitely worth a visit; the Catholic Church certainly had a liking for gold.



I couldn't name every cafe or restaurant I visited, or pick a favourite but what I loved most was entering a doorway, descending stone stairs, (in winter, you find most of the restaurants round the old town tend to be in cellars) and finding a fascinating and flamboyant little world of colour, not to mention really nice, reasonably priced food. Of course there are lots of American

franchises such as Macdonalds, KFCs and Burger Kings, but in my opinion you would be mad to choose them over the local fare.

Public transport is easy to use, and inexpensive. The first hotel I stayed in was the [Orient](#), which is a 'Polish' four star establishment. It was quite far out of town and from what I could tell was used mainly by business people and coach parties travelling through. It was a pleasant hotel and my room was quite adequate for a short stay. The leisure facilities however left a little to be desired with the 'gym' consisting of two broken cross-trainers, a very wobbly running machine and a rickety old rowing machine. The pool area was very great but was used extensively by the local school children and the hotel's off-duty staff.



I much preferred the [Columbus](#) which, although only a three-star hotel, had nicer rooms and was on the edge of the Kazimierz, which is known for its night-life; so staggering back in the wee small hours after an evening spent in one of the small, but very atmospheric bars or restaurants is no problem.



Of course, it goes without saying that a visit to [Auschwitz](#) is a must. When I visited, it was thick with snow and around -11°C, but I think, even if it had been the height of summer, I would have felt the same bone chilling cold I felt that day. It takes around ninety minutes to get there, and there are numerous companies offering reasonably priced day trips. Auschwitz-1 is quite small and has mostly brick buildings that each house stories and photographs of the atrocities that took place there. However it is only at Auschwitz-2 that you grasp the enormous scale of what went on, with wooden huts as far as the eye can see, each of which were originally built to house around fifty horses but became home to about two hundred and fifty people. Then you follow the train tracks that led up to the gas chambers and even if you are not on any guided tour, you can still listen to the many true stories of individual acts of cruelty inflicted on the Jews as they arrived; some sent immediately to their death. There is a

moving memorial to the lost at the far end of the camp where the gas chambers were dismantled in a hurried attempt by the Nazi's to hide their crimes.



Back in Krakow, the Wawel Castle, which stands on top of a hill overlooking the river, was the original settlement. It houses a church; which although not as grand as St Mary's Church, is still worth a visit, as well as a museum and cafe.

If shopping is your thing, then you won't be disappointed. As well as the many local shops and boutiques around the old town there is the Galeria Krakowska – a modern shopping centre which is adjacent to the main train station and full of all the big high street names, as well as a supermarket. If shoes are your weakness you can shop till you drop; from small exclusive boutiques to large stores filled with boxes of very reasonably priced good quality shoes and boots. I bought some wool lined knee length leather boots for just £12.

As for safety, I had no qualms about walking anywhere in Krakow alone. The people are friendly, and the trams are well used at all times of day and night so it doesn't end up being just you and the 'odd-ball' travelling home late at night. The only time I ever felt a little uncomfortable was in the Kazimierz during the day. It tended to be quiet (probably because it was winter) and the streets are narrow and close together, so it was hard to get your bearings; but there is also a problem with homelessness in Krakow and particularly the areas around the Kazimierz. Saying that however, I never felt too uncomfortable to walk round on my own and on an evening it comes alive, blossoming into a very busy and cosmopolitan area.

Most of the restaurants in this area offer quality food and service and can be a fascinating experience. I visited one – [Singer](#) - where you sat at old sewing machine tables, and it was no bigger than my lounge, but the food was good and the atmosphere great. But as I said before the fun is in discovering these little places and never being quite sure what is behind those big wooden doors.



To sum up my experience of Krakow, I would say, that you would be mad to overlook it, in favour of a weekend break in Nice, or Barcelona, or the usual suspects. Krakow is a rich and varied city, which offers good reasonably priced food and drink, but something a little special on top. I love it.

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