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Warsaw, Krakow ... which is in pole position?

Krakow and Warsaw both have plenty to recommend them, so which to choose for a cool urban break? Experts from each city argue their case

Jamie Stokes and Dana Dramowicz
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Friendly rivalry ... Warsaw's old town and the Alchemia bar in Krakow. Photograph: Getty; Alamy

Krakow



Jamie Stokes, managing editor of the Krakow Post (krakowpost.com): OK, so Guardian readers want to know which city they should choose to visit in [Poland](#). You and I both know that the capital is a dreary, grey place with zero charm. Krakow is much lovelier, but how can I make them understand?

Warsaw



Dana Dramowicz, editor of Warsaw Life (warsaw-life.com): It appears that your time living in the granny capital of Poland has clouded your judgment. While

Krakow clings to its past, endlessly patting itself on the back for ancient achievements, Warsaw is speeding forward, creating a thriving metropolis of business and culture. Warsaw has loads more to offer. And while we may have more traffic (after all, this is a proper city, instead of just an expanded village), it is hardly the "big smoke".

Krakow, JS: OK, I'll give you that – Krakow is compact compared with the Warsaw sprawl. The reason you have all that traffic is because the few things worth seeing are so scattered. In Krakow, if you're not willing to walk the 30 minutes it takes to get anywhere, you can take one of our fabulously modern trams. The last time I was on a Warsaw tram it was so old the driver had to keep getting out to feed the horse.

Warsaw, DD: How could I forget about your revolutionary tram technology! In Warsaw, though, we do have this other modern marvel of science called a subway. In two years, we'll have a new metro line connecting the east and west corners of the city. The brand new National Stadium (stadionnarodowy.org.pl) on al. Ksiecia J.Poniatowskiego, will open in June, in preparation for the Euro 2012 football championship (that seems to have passed you by as well). By 2016 our already extraordinary collection of private galleries and national art museums will be joined by a cutting-edge Modern Art Museum (artmuseum.pl). I think I'd be correct in thinking the most exciting new additions to Krakow's public spaces are a pair of renovated roundabouts?



Rynek Underground, Krakow.

Krakow, JS: We have some stuff going on underground too. The archaeology museum, the size of three football pitches, is under our main square (that would be the largest and most perfectly preserved medieval square in Europe). If the thousand years of history above ground aren't enough, you can get in a lift and go back another millennium: Rynek Underground, (mhk.pl/oddzialy/podziemia_rynku). It is probably the most startling museum in Europe right now, with its glass-bottomed footbridge over medieval architecture dating back to the 12th century. The other thing we keep underground is the wildest, hippest pub and club scene in Central Europe. I'd love to enumerate the subterranean drinking and raving dens in cellars within a kilometre of the city centre, but nobody really knows. I'll just mention the Nic Nowego bar (ul. Sw. Krzyza 15, +48 12 421 6188, nicnowego.com) and Alchemia (ul. Estery 5, +48 12 421 2200; alchemia.com.pl), a pub with Narnia-style wardrobes and live music, and leave it at that. There are what, two or three great partying places in Warsaw?



Hydrozagadka club, Warsaw.

Warsaw, DD: Hardly! We locals like to start our weekend at a *pawilony*, a series of secret bars hidden behind ul. Nowy Swiat. All doors are unmarked, and nearly every bar is a tiny, two-floor enclave with no more than 10 tables (try Pewex or Klaps for a little more space). For live music and DJs, I go to clubs such as Hydrozagadka (hydrozagadka.waw.pl) on ul. 11 Listopada, 1500m2 Do Wynajecia (1500m2.blogspot.com) on ul. Solec, or Cafe Kulturalna (kulturalna.pl) on Plac Defilad. At some point, a shot of vodka and a slurp of herring (costing less than £1) must be ingested at the communist-style Przekaski Zakaski bar on the corner of Krakowskie

Przedmiescie. And if we're still standing, we head to the best after-hours party in Poland, Luzztro (luzztro.pl) to dance well into Sunday afternoon.

For a calmer adventure, Warsaw has several new, interactive museums. The Chopin Museum (chopin.museum) and the Copernicus Science Centre (kopernik.org.pl) are popular with families, and the Warsaw Rising Museum (1944.pl) tells the incredible story of the Polish resistance during Nazi occupation.

Krakow, JS: We've got museums and galleries coming out of our ears: the National Museum on al. 3 Maja (muzeum.krakow.pl) alone has 21 branches in Krakow, including the newly renovated gallery of 19th- century Polish art and the new Schindler Factory museum on ul. Lipowa (mhk.pl/oddzialy/fabryka_schindlera) in Oskar Schindler's original premises.

The sheer diversity and density of [restaurants](#), bars, music venues and hangouts in Krakow is unmatched. You can have a civilised meal at Wierzynek (Rynek Główny, +48 12 424 9600, wierzynek.com.pl), which has been going since the 14th century; excellent sushi at Edo Sushi Bar (ul. Bozego Ciala 3, +48 12 422 2424, edosushi.pl) in the old Jewish quarter; great Mexican at Manzana Restaurant (ul. Miodowa 11; +48 12 422 2277, manzana.com.pl), or take your pick from Thai, Italian, French, Russian, Hungarian and, of course, Polish. You could eat at a different restaurant every night for a month and still not try them all. Try that in Warsaw and you'll quickly wear your legs down to disappointed stumps.

Warsaw, DD: Warsaw's culinary options reflect our vibrant city, from refined French cuisine at the Rozbrat 20 bistro (ul. Rozbrat 20, +48 22 628 0295, rozbrat20.pl), a bowl of aromatic Vietnamese pho noodle soup at Toan Pho on ul. Chmielna. We couldn't be more proud of our Polish culinary heritage either. A particular Varsovian speciality is steak tartare, popular at U Kucharzy (ul. Ossolinskich 7, +48 22 826 7936), which channels old-school, no-frills Polish charm. This is something Warsaw has perfected – taking time-honoured flavours and reimagining them for a modern audience. But I'm sure you guys in Krakow are quite satisfied with your greasy pork knuckle establishments.



Park Planty in Krakow. Photograph: Alamy

Krakow, JS: Sorry for the slow reply, when I saw your mention of pork knuckles (*golonka*) I just had to nip out and have one at Hawelka (ul. Rynek Główny 34, +48 12 422 0631). It's great Polish food – chunky meat, crispy fat and creamy sauces.

A stroll helps to burn off the regrettable calories. Fortunately we have the Planty – that tree-lined promenading circuit around the centre of the city that takes you from the ancient Florian gate and city walls down to Wawel castle and the Vistula river. I think you have the same river up there don't you? I forget, because you never see it – unless you brave the six-lane highway to get down to its sludgy, empty banks.



Lazienki Park, Warsaw Photograph: Alamy

Warsaw, DD: In Warsaw, not only can visitors explore the Old Town and Royal Route to the baroque Wilanow Palace (wilanow-palac.pl), there are plenty of green spaces, too. Need I remind you that Warsaw is the greenest city in Poland? Lazienki Park has the stunning Palace on the Water, outdoor Chopin concerts in summer and resident peacocks.

North-west of the city lies the primeval Kampinos Forest national park, a brilliant place for wildlife spotting (bison, lynx, and moose) with hundreds of kilometres of trails for hiking and cycling. You can even rent a horse-drawn sleigh in the winter. The most exciting wildlife you'll find in Krakow are the pigeons.

Krakow, JS: We hardly lack the green stuff. The monumental Kosciuszko Mound sits on the wooded hills overlooking the city, and Zakopane, the mountain resort in the Tatras mountains, is just 100km away, by bus or train. Much as we would love to have our ancient streets teeming with giant bison, bankers and advertising executives, I guess we're stuck with being the most relaxed, most cultured and most civilised place in Poland. You guys carry on with the money-making, the DJs and the iPads and we'll take it easy with a beer as usual.

• *Where to stay:* In Krakow's old town, *Hotel Wawel* ([ul. Poselska 22](http://ul.Poselska22.pl), +48 12 424 1300, hotelwawel.pl) has doubles from £85 a night. *Warsaw's hotels* include *Witt* ([ul. Emilii Plater 9/11](http://ul.EmiliiPlater911.pl), +48 603 632 588, hostelwitt.pl), a friendly guesthouse with a beer garden and rooms from £33 a night

Readers' tips

Krakow: Cafe Mlynek

Beautiful, cozy vegetarian restaurant with a candlelit, cozy atmosphere. You can relax in the stunning interior, while listening to the score from Amelie...

Posted by LittleC 3 Mar 2011

Krakow: Nowy Targ Market

Hala Targowa is a bit off the beaten track in Krakow - I found it by getting lost - but is a genuine market for locals, piled up with produce from nearby...

Posted by liketotravel 20 Feb 2011

Krakow: Kazimierz - a great literary place

Kazimierz is the old Jewish quarter of Krakow. With its labyrinthine streets and serene synagogues, the area evokes a blend of melancholy and hope - an...

Posted by alexfoster 20 Dec 2010

Krakow: Massolit Books and Cafe

Tucked away down a side street on the east side of Krakow is 'Massolit Books and Cafe'. If you ever wanted your favourite second hand bookshop to have...

Posted by Totskalini 7 Nov 2010

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