

Poland's showcase of communism becomes offbeat tourist draw

by Jonathan Fowler

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Clad in a dirty blue overall, the young man planted his feet squarely on the floor of the stifling bus, raised his megaphone and hectoring the passengers: "You stinking capitalists!"

Headed by the aging 1960s bus, the rattle-trap convoy of communist-era vehicles, which also included a couple of Trabant and Lada cars, lumbered off to the heart of what was once the showpiece of the People's Republic of Poland.

Nowa Huta is a mostly working class community on the edge of Krakow, in southern Poland, and home to 200,000 people -- a large slice of the overall population of 780,000.

It is only a short ride from the spires and tourist-trap cafes of Krakow's picturesque Old Town.

But with its grid of streets lined with Stalinist concrete buildings fronted by neo-classical colonnades, it might as well be on another planet.

Even its name is a turn-off for potential visitors: Nowa Huta means "New Steel Mill," in honour of the vast complex which was long its raison d'etre.

A handful of enterprising young Poles, however, decided that Nowa Huta was the ideal spot for tourists to get a taste of life before the fall of communism in 1989.

As their company's name, Crazy Guides, suggests, their goal is partly tongue in cheek.

Bartek Nowak, the megaphone-wielding twenty-something on the bus, spent much of a four-hour tour playing the role of an unfriendly communist-era tour guide.

As the convoy passed a brand new shopping mall on the edge of Nowa Huta, he harangued a party of British teenagers and teachers.

"Dirty, stinking capitalists built this. They took away the fields where our workers used to be able to rest after work and think about Marxist-Leninist ideology," he yelled.

"Think what your parents missed by not bringing communism to Great Britain!" he continued. "We are going to show you the workers' paradise, so you can see the happiness around you."

Nowa Huta was the brainchild of Stalin and the new communist government he installed in Warsaw as Poland, which was trying to recover from the destructive Nazi occupation, fell under barely-concealed Soviet control after World War II.

Construction began in 1949, drawing Poles from across the country into a melting pot where they toiled under vast propaganda posters, received political education and were encouraged to follow the example of "Stakhanovite" workers who vastly exceeded targets such as the number of bricks to be laid in a day.

Nowa Huta's new housing blocks, theatre, sports stadium and artificial lake were meant to symbolise the bright future heralded by communism.

The initial goal was to house 100,000 people. For many, moving in to an apartment with running water and indoor toilet indeed represented a massive contrast with their previous life.

The district was meant to overshadow middle-class Krakow, the former seat of the kings of Poland and an important cultural and religious centre which was the home of the future Pope John Paul II.

As the visit drew to a close, Nowak slipped out of character to explain that the tour is about more than playing to the gallery and trying to paint communism as pure kitsch.

"The goal is to help people avoid the same old tourist route. We want to show people something more like the real world," he told AFP.

Wiktor Bruchal, 21, who was born in Nowa Huta and who had only joined the company the day before, added: "Architects come here because they study this, but not so many ordinary tourists. They don't know what they're missing!"

"This is a relic of the communist period. You won't see anything like it in Poland," he said.

Tour participants were treated to lunch in a local restaurant called the Stylowa -- which is only "stylish" if you are a fan of unchanged 1960s vinyl decor -- as the waitresses slapped down plates of ravioli-like cheese pierogis, which were often the only thing on the menu as shortages struck during the dying days of the old regime.

"You get what they have, just like in communist times," said Nowak.

Later, after a walking tour taking in the old Lenin Square -- today named after Ronald Reagan -- the visitors headed to an apartment which has remained stuck in the communist period, with its linoleum floor, cream-yellow-brown wallpaper and cough-inducing Eastern bloc cigarettes.

There, Staszek Cempa, a former steelworker who has lived in the area for 30 years, recounts beatings and repression faced by strikers who turned Nowa Huta into a symbol of resistance to the regime in the 1980s.

"It was a hard life," he said mournfully.

Paul Webster, a sociology teacher from Conyers school near Stockton in northeast England, said he had wanted his students, who were not even born when communism collapsed in Europe, to get a hands-on feel of the period.

"It is more interesting for them than reading it in a book. It brings it to life," he said.

Student Edward Stephenson, 16, agreed, saying: "It opened my eyes!"

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Michal Ostrowski, owner of "Crazy Guides" travel agency, poses next to his Trabant in Nowa Huta, communist era district of Krakow. Nowa Huta is a mostly working class community on the edge of Krakow, in southern Poland, and home to 200,000 people -- a large slice of the overall population of 780,000. (AFP/File/Pawel Ulatowski)