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City of dreams

As a counterpart to the medieval spires of Kraków, Poland's communist authorities built their own vision of the urban ideal – **Nowa Huta**. *Dev Morris takes a tour. Photos by Tim White*



Most visitors to Kraków spend their time and money relaxing in the excellent pubs and bars of the old town. They might take a horse and trap around Rynek Główny, the largest medieval town square in Europe, or perhaps a tour of the magnificent old castle on Wawel hill. They might even venture into Kazimierz, the renaissance Jewish quarter. But if they were to take a train, a *Nazi*, or perhaps a *Nazi*, and travel just a couple of miles across the Vistula to the east of the city, they would come across a hidden gem.



Local guidebooks breezily compare **Nowa Huta** to the better parts of Paris, the Timur Mausoleum in Samarkand and even the Great Pyramid at Giza. Indeed, while it is essentially just a 'new town', a gift from a victorious Josef Stalin to the proletariat of Poland in the years of recovery after World War II, it is said that workers at the town's steelworks were constantly interrupted by visiting dignitaries who had come to wonder at this modern miracle of state planning. Charles de Gaulle came here, as did Jawaharlal Nehru. Fidel Castro famously refused even to visit old Kraków, demanding to be driven straight from the airport to **Nowa Huta**, as if to pay homage.

As we stream over the Vistula in Michał Ostrowski's scrambling-up Trabant, away from the tourist hordes of old Kraków, the city changes before my eyes. Gone are the towers of Wawel Castle, the street entertainers and the internet cafes. Instead I see a vista of greyed tower blocks, essentially local traffic and trees, lots of trees.

Ostrowski is the self-proclaimed president of Crazy Guides Commission Tours, a small company set on luring tourists away from the more traditional attractions of old Kraków and expose them to something a bit different. The Trabant is a car synonymous with the low-quality production of the communist era. Though not typical of Poland, where a copy of Fiat's Cinquecento ruled the road (a copy so poor, incidentally, that Fiat insisted its name was changed), it is a useful tourist ride for Ostrowski, its striking appearance and agricultural sound turning curious heads as it makes its way heroically and slowly through the early evening traffic.



At one stage there is a loud bang from the engine. Ostrowski laughs and warns me that the vehicles are prone to catching fire – and that I am the one sitting in the hot tank.

We pull up outside a large restaurant on the corner of a modest grey block. I can see through the windows that it is half empty and check the flyer – 'a real communist-style restaurant and "Milk Bar" canteen'. As we walk into the central square the grey block is put into context by its matching counterparts on three sides. These are impressive and beautifully proportioned buildings reminiscent of the Baroque period. They manage to avoid the concrete anonymity of

later high-rise constructions by being made of bricks recovered from war-damaged buildings elsewhere. Building regulations required structures above six storeys to have elevators – that had to be imported from Sweden and were very expensive – which limited the buildings to just five storeys. Originally gleaming white, their current drab greyness cannot wholly disguise their intrinsic grandeur.

Nowa Huta is one of only two cities planned from scratch to embody the socialist-realist vision of an ideal workers' settlement (the other is Magnitogorsk in Russia). Its primary function was to house workers from the new steelworks, so vital in rebuilding post-war Poland, but **Nowa Huta** – literally 'New Steel Mill' – was also intended to embody the triumph of an idea. Deliberately sited on prime agricultural land next to the beautiful old university town of Kraków, it is said that the communist regime wanted to humiliate intellectual, elitist, conservative Kraków which by just crossed the river. It was a dream commission for Poland's top architect: **Nowa Huta** enjoyed the full backing of Moscow – and therefore Warsaw – and no expense would be spared.



As we walk around the central square, the shops still retain incredibly intricate details, ornate ceilings and carved wooden counters. 'You can imagine,' says Ostrowski, 'all these peasants arriving from the countryside, volunteering for a new life, but bringing their pigs and their cows with them, just in case. Well, they had never seen such fancy.'

Similarly the administration buildings at the entrance to the giant steelworks, known locally as the 'Vatican' and the 'Doge's Palace', were built as beautiful 'palaces' in the Italian style, so as to instil civic pride in the steelworkers. While the steelworks expanded relentlessly under a series of managers eager to impress the powers that were with record-breaking production figures, ambitious plans for a town hall and central spine were left unfinished as the original vision faded following Stalin's death in 1953. Increased demand for housing coupled with reduced funding from Moscow, meant that the concrete high-rise developments so common in cities across Europe, east and west, were enthusiastically embraced in **Nowa Huta**.

Politicians from the steelworks got so bad that one Japanese scientist was moved to declare the area 'unfit for life'. Ostrowski giggles at the planners' idea of workers sunbathing and swimming at the 'beach lake' just half a mile from the factory. 'But they did do it, you know?'

This prompts a quick, darting assessment of his audience's sensibilities, before Ostrowski decides it is probably safe to indulge in a spot of rugged Mack hanczar dating from the early 1950s, in which residents of **Nowa Huta** adorned their Nazi capers at nearby Anaschwiez by surviving the gas chambers, and proving immune to the otherwise deadly Zyklon B. 'What's going on?' barks the SS guard. 'Why aren't you dead like the others?' 'Ah,' replies one of the men drinking beer and playing cards through a haze of cigarette smoke, 'we're from **Nowa Huta**.'



Today, there are a few residents drinking coffee in the autumn air. The restaurant is filling up and the place seems bright, almost cheery. Even the waiter raises a smile, though his cigarette still hangs defiantly from his mouth. I wonder about what it must be like in the depths of winter. 'Even better,' declares Ostrowski. 'So much better. Much more how tourists imagine Stalinist towns should look like. That's good for business.'

But as I gaze down the grand boulevards, radiating like spokes from the central square, I see abundant vegetation and even the odd street café. This is not Paris, whatever the guidebooks might claim, but the trees lining the streets are new plantings and this constitutes the greenest part of modern-day Kraków. Based on the neighbourhood community units of Twentieth New York, this was an ambitious exercise in social engineering. Planning would ensure there would be no traffic jams in **Nowa Huta**, communal gardens would provide safe play areas and children would not have to cross roads to go to school. Each block would provide its residents with kindergartens, shops and pharmacies. Oh, and nuclear fallout shelters.

Perhaps this is why Ostrowski began these tours of **Nowa Huta**. Over a beer in the communist Milk Bar I ask if he wants people to see beyond the grim caricature of life behind the Iron Curtain so prevalent in the West. 'Well, first and foremost it's a business,' he says, candidly. 'It's a fun way to earn a living and I have a wife and... well, who knows?' But yes, he admits, there is something worth holding on to in **Nowa Huta**. 'For some reason the communist governments spent millions rebuilding old parts of Warsaw and Gdansk after the war. Tourists have next to no exposure to Poland's post-war history, which is so rich and recent.'

The social mix of **Nowa Huta** was also a good thing, he suggests. There is increasing pride in the architecture and in the cultural and class diversity that the district stood for. One cynic I come across asserted that 'socialism distributed poverty equally,' but Ostrowski insists there is still some hankering after the relative social harmony of the past. Workers came from all sections of society and from all parts of the country to build **Nowa Huta**. Teachers lived next to steelworkers, mechanics next to doctors. 'If you could afford a second-hand Toyota from East Germany then you were rich,' explains Ostrowski, 'but let's face it, the differences aren't as great as today.'

Indeed, the area has struggled at times to adjust to the new market forces that arrived with the collapse of communism and the loss of state subsidies. Now streamlined under the Mittal Steel Company, the Tadeusz Sendzimir Steelworks employs only a fraction of its peak workforce of 20,000. Tourism in old Kraków has offset this somewhat, but the social cohesion of the past is breaking down and the future of **Nowa Huta** is uncertain: decline or regeneration?



But Ostrowski is also eager for the tourists milling around craft shops on the other side of the Vistula to understand **Nowa Huta**'s impressive political heritage. Can **Nowa Huta** be set in the same historical ferment as Salsmaguet, the Winter Palace or the Bastille, as some have suggested? Certainly, its pivotal role in anti-government demonstrations ever since its inception has secured its reputation as a centre of defiance and political strife. A 20-year battle to build a church in this bastion of socialist realism involved not only the future Pope John Paul II, but bushwacked grandmothers battling seasoned militia in the streets.

The town was also instrumental in bringing about the fall of the communist regime. The defensive design of the town and labyrinthine nature of the steelworks meant that the authorities found it impossible to control the popular riots during the Solidarity protests of the 1980s. Police from other parts of the country found themselves confused and out-maneuvred by protesters with local knowledge, and 24-hour production at the steelworks ensured a constant flow of protesters as the workers emerged onto the streets at the end of every eight-hour shift.

The Trabant changes round up the main avenue to the entrance of the steelworks where Ostrowski, huddled behind the wheel, points to the sky ahead. He shows a story about a huge Solidarity banner that mysteriously appeared one morning flying from one of the factory's 3000 chimneys. 'All the workers pretended to know nothing about it, of course, and claimed to be too scared to climb up to get it down. By the time the authorities found a crew willing to remove it, the banner had been flying for a whole week!'

There also used to be a statue of Lenin, a one-time resident of Kraków, near the central square. It had been erected in 1970 to provide a focus for official visitors' floral offerings. It dominated the town for nearly 20 years, surviving graffiti and arson attacks, as well as an attempt to blow it up in 1979 which resulted only in slight damage to its foot. It was not until 1989 that the statue was sold off cheaply to a Swedish tycoon, where it now resides in a park near Stockholm sporting a pinstriped car and a cigarette. Lenin lost his name to the steel-works in 1954, but this went the same way as the statue, with the factory being renamed in 1989, this time after Tadeusz Sendzimir, the Polish inventor of a new steel-making process pioneered there.

But while the euphoria surrounding the collapse of Soviet hegemony in 1989 may have faded, there is still a groundswell of desire to hold on to the realities of the past. The rebranding of the central square after the Cold Warrior Ronald Reagan was, for some, a step too far, and is still a subject of controversy in the town, despite a compromise which incorporates both names.

On the way back, Ostrowski decides to take me to visit what I take to be his hobbyhorse: a meticulous recreation of a typical communist-era flat from the 1980s.

We walk up concrete stairs that probably seem chilly on the hottest days. Ostrowski opens a door onto the past, strikingly reminiscent of a British house from the 1960s, except this has an inside toilet and constant hot water. There is an old TV with one channel, a Soviet calculator the size of the TV and a discarded citizenship medal, bought recently for a few zloty in a local flea market. Ostrowski goes on to explain that families had to wait months or years to furnish their flats a piece at a time, only to end up with exactly the same furniture as their neighbours. 'Nothing changes though', he giggles, 'we've all buy the same furniture from Ikea.'

However, times have changed. No longer do children raid the bins of hard-currency hotels for useful soft-drink cans from the West to trade in the playground. Poland has joined the European Union and embossed capitalisms. But as we speed back towards the river and the tourist hotels, there are still no traffic jams in **Nowa Huta**. Old towns, known locally as 'apartments' because of their bubble-shaped windows and freezing winter temperatures, still stand up and down the centre of the main streets. This is a wisdom onto a different Poland. Above the noise of the engine, Ostrowski's phone rings and he answers curtly in Polish. It is important news.

'That was my wife,' he tells me, gravely. 'She says she is going to have a baby.' In Ronald Reagan Square there is talk of replacing the long-disappeared Lenin statue with one of Elvis Presley. While that may tempt a few more tourists to cross over the river from old Kraków, Michał Ostrowski, president of Commission Tours, will be hoping to drive as many of them as his Trabant can carry to experience the charms of **Nowa Huta** for either – perhaps now much more pressing – reasons.

HOW TO GET THERE

Numerous airlines offer direct flights to Kraków. For those flying from the UK, SkyEurope offer services to the city from London Stansted, Birmingham, Manchester and Dublin; www.skyeurope.com

Tim White was a guest of the Półki Hotel, 17 Piłsudka St, Kraków.

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www.crazyguides.com
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