

Capitalising on communism

KATY CHANCE takes a Crazy Commie Deluxe Tour in Poland's Krakow, discovers a purpose for gherkins and finds a new Hero of the Month

CRAZY Victor is pumped. His animated enthusiasm is partly fuelled by his youth; partly by his passion about the subject matter; and partly by the bright pink energy drink he has just downed.

We are in Restauracja Styłowa (Stylish Restaurant) in the suburb of Nowa Huta, New Steelworks — a literal translation of the name of the “perfect city” designed on the outer periphery of downtown Krakow by Stalin and completed by Lenin in 1954.

As we sit at the plastic-clothed tables in smoky Styłowa, a high-ceilinged '60s restaurant that was a favourite among the communists and their “special friends”, Crazy Victor opens an original map of Nowa Huta, so folded and soft it feels like chamois.

“This place was to have schools, a hospital, a sports field — no church. And an artificial lake. With artificial fish, I think. It was to be paradise!” It even had a cinema. “But there was no James Bond. We had Potocznik Borewick. He got the girls from the Soviet Union and he wasn't 007, he was 07.” Those damn communists, always having to go one decimal point better.

The central square of Nowa Huta with its long, straight avenues remain, as do the blocks of flats. This is considered the poor side of town but is getting more expensive, although property is still very affordable. “I live here,” declares Crazy Victor. “It is becoming very fashionable!”

As the map indicates, there were no suburbs, just numbered sectors.

Crazy Victor pulls out his guide book: a laminated, bound collection of black-and-white photographs detailing the history of Nowa Huta, from breaking ground to bringing down Lenin's statue.

Prior to the 1930s there were peasant farmers, small villages and open land. One of the area's earliest residents was Crazy Victor's great-grandmother, whose picture has pride of place on the first page.

Construction took up to 14 hours a day with no machinery, little guidance and no proper plans. There are pictures of thin men with shovels sporting captions such as, “The enthusiasm of the first builders at Nowa Huta!” The brick-layers look jolly in a forced, get-me-out-of-here kind of way. In one photo, a farmer with horse is ploughing land in front of the steelworks' smoking stacks.

“All these promises of paradise were propaganda,” rails Crazy Victor. “Come to Nowa Huta with your children and get some fresh air. Ha!”

In between explaining the layout and purposes of the city on the map, and showing us pictures of people queuing for food in the '80s — “when everything was misery” — Crazy Victor is apologetically answering his cellphone. His girlfriend? “My professor! I am studying mixed media fine art.”

Most of the tour guides encountered in Poland are studying for PhDs in history. “I had too much history in high school. Now I don't even watch TV — I just get more and more pissed at the politics. I prefer art.”

Crazy Cyril, another Crazy Guides' employee (the boss is Crazy Mike), walks in with two people on another tour.



Apparently, Crazy Cyril's father lives in the country near where Lenin's statue used to lie unattended in a field after its toppling. Crazy Victor smiles: “He used to pee on it every day!”

We walk from the restaurant through the surprisingly handsome blocks of tenement apartments, many of which have basements that were once nuclear bunkers. The cement is that instantly recognisable communist grey, but the streets are wide and the blocks have grassed squares in between with concrete areas thick with skateboarding teens.

We avoid being dismembered by the trams and stand in the square, staring down the long, straight Solidarity Avenue — “the Champs Elysée of Krakow!”

Lenin Avenue was renamed Ronald Reagan Avenue with the demise of communism in the late '80s. Crazy Victor isn't convinced it was a great swap.

Then it's off to the Trabbie — a 1965 East German Trabant. The car is made of fibreglass, has a fabulous red and black striped, faux fur interior, a two-stroke engine and weighs 500kg. “If we can't find parking, we just pick it up and move it!”

Crazy Victor is tall for a Pole. His knees keep changing gear unexpectedly as we scream along Solidarity Avenue. “At least we are faster than the trams! And we make more pollution than the steelworks!”

The steelworks, now owned by Mittal, present a suitably ominous facade, architecturally impressive but in need of a good clean.

After the tour of the area by Trabbie, we head to the Crazy Communist Museum.

This is a flat in a Nowa Huta tenement block of the M1 variety. Flats came in M1, M2 and M3 types, depending on the number of rooms.

On the way, we stop at a corner shop and wait for Crazy Victor to return with supplies. As we walk there are young girls playing, a muzzled dog sitting patiently, mothers with prams chatting. Is it safe here, we ask, ever the South Africans. “Oh no! If it wasn't for me you would be robbed. But now — we follow the vodka!”

Crazy Victor hoists a bottle of Poland's finest, Wyborowa, above his head and we march briskly — not unlike the “endless parades of happy people” required of Nowa

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COMMIE DELUXE: Above, Crazy Victor in full flow; left, the Trabbie in front of Nowa Huta's steelworks. Pictures: ANDRZEJ SAWA

Huta under communist rule — up three flights of stairs to number 12.

A diluvian green door heralds the entrance to a flat of one bedroom, a kitchen, a bathroom and living room. In Paris, it would cost millions. At nearly 50m², it's a fabulous inner-city bachelor pad. However, five people were obliged to live in it under communism.

Now, it sits empty except when the Crazy Guides are forced, through pressures of work and their love lives, to use it as an in-town pied-à-terre.

In the living room, Jesus and Mary beam down from the wall, giving the finger to communism and its hatred for religion; the wall unit is all glass and '70s wood veneer lined with LPs and a rampant mackerel vodka decanter with matching minnow shot glasses. The kitchen has steel cupboards, an ancient stove and modern bin from which empty vodka bottles tumble — not arranged for effect, simply the remains of yesterday's booming business.

Crazy Victor pours us all vodka and puts down a plate of gherkins. As lemon is to tequila, so is gherkin to vodka in Poland.

Vodka makes gherkin palatable, and vice versa. Actually, by the third one, they make each other bloody delicious.

“Nazdrowie!” we cry, having been joined by Crazy Cyril and his two guests.

“This museum is not like other museums,” declares Crazy Victor. “Not only can you look at everything — you can buy it too! Into the bedroom!”

The bed is covered with T-shirts emblazoned with Nowa Huta motifs. They are the most expensive T-shirts in Poland (a mere 1150; the złoty goes a long way against the rand), but then turning communism into consumerism doesn't come cheap. The start-up capital for these tours included purchasing a flat, cars and lots of vodka.

Finally we troop back to the Trabbie. Crazy Victor's driving has improved considerably with a little vodka refuelling. We drive to Nowa Huta's only church, built during the late '60s, not brick by

brick but stone by stone — all of them smuggled in pockets from the river. “It is genuinely a people's church. Stalin knew it was useless to try and stifle religion here. He said it would be like trying to saddle a cow!”

In the fading light we share handshakes and the typical Polish three-kiss farewell. We promise to e-mail our nominations for him as Hero of the Month, then we wave goodbye to Crazy Victor as he takes the Trabbie up to full throttle and roars off to his girlfriend and another energy drink.

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■ The writer was hosted by the Polish Tourist Organisation and Dominirski Boutique Hotels www.polandtour.org, www.dominirski.com

■ For more on Warsaw and Krakow, two of Poland's greatest cities, read *The Weekender Travel & Food Journal* next week



RELIGIOUS GROUNDS: In the Commie Museum, Jesus and Mary beam down in defiance of communist control.



NAZDROWIE! Fish-shaped decanters, vodka, and a plate of gherkins, all '70s style.