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Reality check

ELISE RANA GETS A GLIMPSE OF STALIN'S DREAM IN WHAT WAS TO BE POLAND'S FIRST SOCIALIST TOWN.

You don't have to be mad to work here, but it helps. In fact, to join Crazy Guides, the more unhinged you are the better, according to founder Mike, a wise-cracking, chain-smoking young entrepreneur with spiky bleached hair and a passion for the bizarre. So what does that say about us — having come to Kraków, one of Poland's most beautiful cities, then paying money to leave it in favour of a giant Communist housing project? Nowa Huta is a place with cult appeal, to say the least. An Orwellian vision made real, this masterful example of communist town planning is one of only two socialist-realist 'ideal cities' ever to have been built. A back-handed gift to Kraków from Stalin himself, Nowa Huta (New Steelworks) was to be the antidote — or punishment? — for the over-educated, politically subversive, fervently religious elements that made Kraków a threat. Despite the questionable suitability of the site (raw iron ore had to come, conveniently, all the way from Ukraine), 'Lenin Steelworks' (its original name) would be a model



for industrial progress, its happy workers housed in brand new self-contained units, glorious in their uniformity. What better mode of transport to arrive in, then, than a Trabant 60S1, the ultra-cheap, rattling piece of tin that more than symbolises the 'bad old days' of Communism that Mike wants us

to experience? Today we're lucky, Mike tells us — the car manages the trip without erupting in clouds of brown smoke or breaking down completely. As we unfold ourselves from its cramped confines, only our blood circulation has suffered so far. Grey concrete looms around us in every direction, but before we can begin exploring we must stop and

experience the warm welcome and hideous interior design of Restaurant 'Stylowa' (Stylish). Over coffee and cigarettes, Mike shows us old photographs of Nowa Huta from the time of its construction, workers' faces bright with hope and positivity as they toil to build their dream community. On a map, he shows us the part of the plan that never quite became reality: an enormous leisure area with parkland, an open-air stadium and an artificial lake. Mike was still a child when communism collapsed, but he recalls with wry pleasure how the most prized objects among his eight-year-old peers were nothing more than empty cans. "They were something colourful and a symbol of the West — we got them from flea markets, out the back of the big international hotels, or in hard currency stores — they were like a little paradise." When, in 1989, he and his mother made their first visit West (to Italy, to see the Pope), Mike returned with a bagful of cans for his friends. "I emptied them all over my floor and I felt rich. Of course, a month later everything had changed and you could buy them in the shops whenever you wanted." Outside, however, it's difficult to determine how much things have actually changed. A lone BMXer rides hunched around the desolate expanse of the main square. The Lenin statue that once stood there, protected from eager vandals by armed guards, was sold in 1989, and is currently somewhere in Sweden sporting a pink paint job and a pair of earrings. An incongruously cheerful sign hangs in the window of a milk bar, the cheap canteen restaurants that have all but disappeared from Krakow. Otherwise, the streets are deserted, it is freezing cold and

the sky is the colour of iron filings. "It's so fucking grey and depressing — this is absolutely perfect," says Mike, clapping his hands together with a chuckle. "Even I feel like killing myself." Entering the 'desert of blocks', the view is dizzyingly similar in any direction, each unit identical: rumour has it that all it takes is a tank at each entrance to transform any unit into an instant fortress, complete with underground atomic shelter. Today it may look more like a prison than a citadel, but beyond the rundown housing estate aesthetics there's some true historical significance to be glimpsed. Built as a monument to socialism, Nowa Huta became a centre for everything it was supposed to quash: resistance, religion and revolution. Hailing mostly from the agricultural south of the country, Nowa Huta's new settlers were deeply religious people who battled against communist doctrine for 20 years and eventually won their right to build a church. "It's grey now but you can imagine people arriving here with hope, believing the miracle."



his act to reveal some true affection for the place. "It's grey now but you can imagine people arriving here with hope, believing the miracle," he says, gesturing up to the Renaissance-inspired architecture buried under the grime. Convinced that in a few years the place will be full of cafés, he's even planning to buy a flat here in one of the blocks. "Everyone told me I was crazy to bring tourists here — 'show them the Old Town and market square, they're beautiful, Nowa Huta is ugly'." "Yes, it's ugly — but it's real. This is modern history." Then Crazy Mike re-emerges to tell us about his plans to include his mother's flat as part of the communism tour. "I'll buy an old Russian TV and some '80s furniture, put them in there and people can pay to sit and drink coffee with her. The stupidest ideas I have will be the most popular. People love real things — if you sell them right." ■ Crazy Guides tours from Kraków to Nowa Huta cost 99 PLN (approx. £17). Call +68 888 68 68 71 or email mike@crazyguides.com to book. Elise Rana travelled to Kraków with Escape2Poland (www.escape2poland.com).

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ELISE RANA/TNT IMAGES