

## Why go

Cracow is Eastern Europe at its most cultured and least discovered — and new direct flights make the city a hot option for a cool weekend away

By Peter Haff

If you are tired of Prague, are you tired of life? No, you are tired of tourists, of tourist menus, of tourist coaches, of tourist price hikes. What if there were a city just as beautiful, but without the people and the prices? What if it had always been tricky to reach, but now a no-frills airline had introduced a direct flight?

Yes, my jaded Praguers, there is such a place: Cracow, the ancient royal capital and intellectual epicentre of Poland. It is far more attractive than Warsaw, having remained unscathed through the second world war, and sits on the banks of the Vistula River, a medieval feast of towers, cathedrals and castles; a warren of beautiful cobbled streets; a maze of the pretty, the intricate and the ancient.

Cracow is what results when people work hard at university and don't give up the violin at Grade 5. Here is a city so cultured that its musicians and writers spill onto the streets — the only place in the world, surely, where the buskers outnumber the pigeons. In the bars, wild-haired eccentrics scribble out their life's works in longhand. Veteran jazz bands preside over corners of medieval courtyards, and symphony orchestras perform great works nightly in the concert halls. Even the waiters and waitresses in cocktail bars like to engage foreigners in philosophical discussions on the meaning of everything.

Not that the place is horribly serious. Quite the opposite, in fact. If one city could dispel the myth once and for all that Eastern Europeans don't know how to have fun, it would be Cracow. Remember to pack your dancing shoes.

You can knock off a visit in one action-packed weekend, or do what any sensible nonworkaholic would do and bunk off for a four- or five-day break. Then you would also have time to explore the beautiful mountains of Tatra National Park, a little more than two hours away, and perfect for an outdoor adventure.

So remember to pack some autumn layers and your hiking boots as well.



# Cracow

Town and country: chess by the Vistula, above; Zakopane, Poland's wintersports capital



## Six treats

- **Best bar** Stalowe Magnolie on Ul Sw Jana 15 with its smoochy velvet four-poster beds and excellent "choims".
- **Best trek** Linking up the eight mountain refuges of Tatra National Park. Something your mates have definitely never done. Details from the information centre.
- **Best snack** The poppy-seeded bagelsque breads served on the streets around the Old Town are far more delicious than they look.
- **Best folk tale** Once upon a

## Musts to see and do

You will have plenty of time to gawp at the pretty old town — your first duty on arrival is to book up your evenings.

Top-notch classical concerts at the **Filharmonia Krakowska** cost only a few pounds, and you can usually make last-minute bookings at the Cultural Information Centre, where they're super-helpful and have a super choice. You've just missed a Nigel Kennedy season, but at the end of this month, one of the Organ Days (October 23-30) probably merits an evening: there's nothing like a bit of solemn pipe-work to mark the drawing in of East European nights.

Then, balance the highbrow with some jazz — where? Simply follow the sound to one of the many, many toe-tapping, finger-clicking, hip-swinging bars around Market Square.

While we're there, the glorious **Market Square** will be your point of reference, your launch pad, from which you will conquer the rest of town: it dates from the

time, a nasty dragon threatened the peace of the town and the prosperity of Prince Crac. So someone slipped the monster a sheep packed with sulphur. Now, it is a great excuse for a firework display.

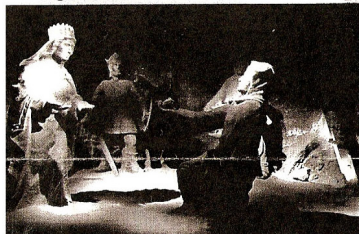
● **Best stained glass** In St Mary's Church on the east side of Market Square: 14th century and art nouveau all in one building.

● **Best hang-out** Kazimierz is the cool district at the moment — Ul Estery is well worth an evening's vodka crawl.

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## Cracow



Built to last: Cloth Hall; left, Wieliczka salt caverns

► 13th century and is as touristy as Cracow gets, but that still isn't too touristy. From here, opt for serendipity: explore the surrounding streets to be amazed how quickly you leave the tourists behind and discover a previously undiscovered bar/shop/courtyard/cafe.

Or you might opt for a more structured approach: for mind-bending modern art, aim for the **Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery**. Set in a concrete bunker, it makes a neat contrast to the ornate surroundings, even if, for the next month, it will be showing a British exhibition. Electric Earth is a collection of video-based works examining alternative ways of living and beliefs, man.

To see alternative ways of living for real, go to the spectacular **Wawel Castle**, which shows up the south of the Old Town. According to Hindu philosophers, one of Shiva's seven sacred stones happened to land here. The northwest corner of the castle courtyard is the

place to pick up the vibe: new agers and dowers congregate and chant there, ignoring a huffy official sign asking them not to.

After that, you must squeeze in a couple of out-of-town options. Half an hour by train from Cracow station is

**Wieliczka**, a 700-year-old salt mine: 30 of its 2,148 salt caverns are open to tourists, and, unless you're a slug, the two-hour trip is well worth the detour. The baroque salt statues, underground cathedral and dark lakes are impressive enough. The 10-piece brass band playing When the Saints Go Marching In, 130 metres below the earth's surface, is pure insanity.

Another option is to make for the hills. Outside the train station, catch a private coach to **Zakopane**, Poland's winter sports capital. It's not exactly Courcheval, but it has a pleasantly hearty, red-cheeked feel to it and the mountainscapes easily repay the two-and-a-half-hour journey. Hop on the cable car at the bottom of the main

street, then walk the 1.8km up to Mount Batorowy Wierch. Take the chairlift down, or you will be too knackered for that organ recital.

- **Cultural Information Centre** Ul Sw Jana 2; 00 48 12-421 7787. Closed Sunday.
- **Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery** Pl Szczepanski 5a; 422 1052. Entry, £1.
- **Wawel Castle** www.wawel.krakow.pl
- **Wieliczka** www.kopalnia-wieliczka.pl. Tours in English £7.

## Getting there

This week, EasyJet starts flying from Luton to Cracow from £41. BA and Lot fly from Gatwick, with fares from about £99; Sky Europe flies from Stansted from £64. Gohop.com in Ireland has fares from €301 with Lot via Warsaw.

● **Best guidebook** Krakow In Your Pocket: updated five times a year, available locally, 90p.

## Getting around

Cracow is petite, so you can walk almost everywhere. Trams and buses cost about 35p a ride; tickets are sold at small pavement kiosks. Stamp them when you get on the vehicle, or you will be fined.

## Sound sleeping

No expense spared £££

● **Hotel Copernicus** Ul Kanonicza 16; 00 48 12-424 3400, www.hotel.com.pl. A beautiful hotel on a beautiful street with a beautiful rooftop bar. Doubles from £120.

● **Sheraton Krakow** Ul Powisle 7; 662 1000, www.sheraton.pl/krakow. The new five-star option, minutes from Market Square. Doubles from £88.

Middle of the road ££

● **Art Hotel Niebieski** Ul Filasacka 3; 431 2711, www.niebieski.com.pl. A petite three-star, 20 minutes from town. Bag a room with a view of the river and castle. Doubles from £63.

● **Hotel Senacki** Ul Karmelicka 28/10 B; 421 1161, www.senacki.krakow.pl. A 20-room historic hotel between the castle and the square. Doubles from £62.

On the cheap £

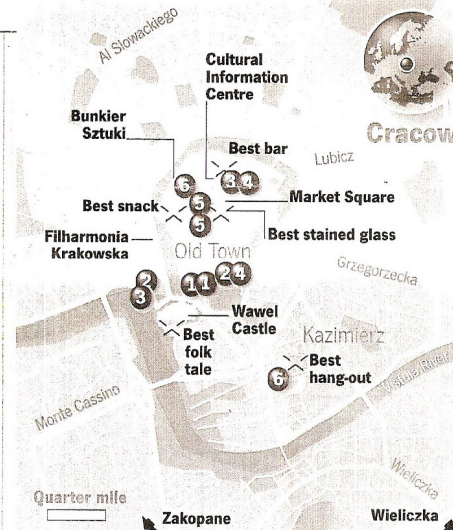
● **Dom Polonii** Rynek Główny 14; 422 6341. Cracow's biggest bargain: two doubles tucked away at the top of a four-storey house right on Market Square. Doubles from £40.

● **Regent** Ul Bozego Ciala 19; 430 6234. Spacious rooms in the heart of the colourful suburb of Kazimierz. Doubles from £40.

## Top tables

No expense spared £££

● **Hotel Copernicus** Ul Kanonicza 16; 424 3400,



www.hotel.com.pl. As plush as Cracow dining gets at still-reasonable prices: try the saddle of rabbit on black truffle for £9.

● **Senacka** Ul Karmelicka 28/10 B; 421 1161, www.senacki.krakow.pl. Polish staples in a pretty twin-beamed hotel. Mains from £7.

Middle of the road ££

● **U Bonera** Ul Florianska 15; 292 6033. One of Cracow's oldest cellars. A good fillet mignon costs about £5pp.

● **Cherubino** Ul Sw Tomasz 15; 429 4007, www.cherubino.pl. Hearty — what else? — Polish and Tuscan food, scooped among antique stagecoaches. Dishes from £3 each.

On the cheap £

● **Chlopskie Jadlo** Ul Sw Agnieszki 1; 421 8520. Traditional specialities include black duck, herring, smoked eel and

"military bean soup", all served to thigh-slapping folk music. More than you can manage: about £6pp.

● **Vega** Ul Szeroka 3; 431 0129. Stuffed aut-origines, asparagus, fresh salads and perfect fruit cocktails. Mains from £2.

## Ask the concierge

Monika Ogonek, Sheraton Krakow: "Sign up for a Communism tour at the hands of a crazy guide and his 1950s Trabant. Cracow has moved on a lot since the days of socialist Poland. This trip will show you just how much." (To book, call 0888 686871; £15 for two hours).

## Castles, tapestries and curios galore

Call 0870 60 747 49 for great deals on flights and hotels. Start collecting AirMiles today — see Travel for details.

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