



Anoothi Vishal



Krakow in Poland is an unusual, astonishing European destination. The only town to have withstood the ravages of World War II in Poland, its beauty is haunting but the scars of the War still evident.

As the train pulls into Krakow, it is like entering a magical town. Eastern Europe is seriously underrated, Poland even more so, but a winter holiday in this old and once-ravaged country can be an experience of a lifetime—particularly if you are culturally (not to mention politically and scientifically) inclined.

Think Poland and you can't help but think of the horrendous happenings of World War II. No other country perhaps suffered as much during the shameful episode in the history of mankind—much of its population decimated, its beautiful cities completely destroyed and, finally, despite the great fortitude of its citizens

to face such odds, a political fate that no one seems to have wanted in the country. From the fires of the war to the sordidness of the Communist era.

Despite whatever you may have read and heard and however much you may have been prepared to see the scars that still remain in this part of the world, nothing really prepares you for Poland. History and politics are much closer here. As it is a stunning country that has come back from the brink so many times that it is now part of its essential makeup.

Krakow, the ancient seat of power, is a charming city that luckily escaped destruction by the Germans and the Russians and can rival the atmosphere of a Vienna or Prague. We have undertaken a comfortable train journey from Warsaw to this magnificent city and as we emerge



from the train station, it is to a winter wonderland. The landscape is dotted with snow and there are Christmas markets with their cheer and festivity, warming up the air. We stop to admire the Christmas decorations, woolly hats and gloves and immediately buy ourselves steaming glasses of spiced mulled wine and salty oscypek cheese that is being grilled fresh in love wood fires. Fortified, we are ready to walk through the city, passing through dimly-lit parks, clattering on cobbled streets, taking in the grand architecture all around and glimpses of the Vistula river.

The next morning, we walk to the main market square of Krakow The Rynek Glowny is one of Europe's grand piazzas; much bigger than some of the more famous city centres. Only Venice's San Marco compares in scope, but Krakow's is beautiful too. Various architectural styles stand intact in this town that luckily escaped WW II bombing—Baroque, Gothic, Renaissance.

The medieval Cloth Hall stands in the center of the Rynek, begun in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and that now houses a gallery,

an arcade of craft and souvenir stalls and the atmospheric 19<sup>th</sup> century Noworolski Café. You can pause for a hot coffee here, or just stare at the splendor of St. Mary's, one of Krakow's most famous, revered churches, also in the square, from whose high ramparts, every hour, a trumpeter sounds warning notes. A charming medieval tradition that transports you into another world.

That Krakow is quite the literary, scientific town is abundantly clear from its many statues. Pope John Paul and Copernicus, who first came up with the observation that the earth revolves around the sun and not vice versa are, of course, all around. But there are also others—The statue of 19<sup>th</sup> century poet Adam Mickiewicz stands on a pedestal in the main square, reminding us of finer things and culture, surviving the barbarity of the war.

If you are interested in history, you could take a tour of Auschwitz, the infamous concentration camp. But even otherwise, there are grim reminders of history.

The Kazimierz district, founded as a

separate town in 1335 by Casimir the Great, was a Jewish settlement. After the war only 1000 Jews survive in the town but the district is revamping itself as a chic destination, full of cafes et al, subverting its grim past. But in the Podgorze district, the grim scars of war are brought to us forcefully. A memorial in the Plac Bohaterow Getta (Heroes of the Ghetto) commemorates the Jews who were gathered here, with only the 20 kg of belongings they could carry to the death camps. The Plac memorial consists of 70 metal chairs, symbols of the abandoned furniture of the some 18,000 Jews, who were taken away.

Wawell castle, on the other hand, harkens back to more sylvan times. The castle and its cathedral, set in a gorgeous garden, complete with swans and peacocks, were the seats of power up until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, home to many kings and queens of Poland, some of whom lie buried in the royal crypts here even now. It's a quite, peaceful resting place—quite belying the traumatic history this part of the world has lived through. ■

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