

YOUNG HEART BEATS IN OLD KRAKOW

Medieval Polish city of castles, churches, and museums rocks at night

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, December 18, 2005

By RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

KRAKOW, Poland - This city is a place of ancient ambiance - of a hilltop castle and tall, Gothic spires, of giant flagstone marketplaces and underground basement cafes.

And, apparently, of impromptu techno dance parties. Given by a grandmotherly politician on a weeknight. From a double decker bus that pulled onto the town's 13th-century main square.

Welcome to Krakow, a place that embraces its substantial historic and cultural heritage, while at the same time not afraid to get down and boogie with one of the hardest nightlife scenes in Europe.

Nestled in southern Poland, the city of 800,000 is the former home of Pope John Paul II and the seat of the Solidarity union movement that helped bring down communism.

Long before that, though, it was the cultural and political soul of Poland for centuries. It was home to the country's early kings who used their resources to build a beautiful city - one of the few to survive World War II intact.

As a result, visitors are treated to a living, breathing medieval city.

It's nothing like you might expect from a post-communist nation: no drab peasant country filled with rows of gray concrete tenements. (Though these can be found in the suburb Nowa Huta, where the communists installed a giant steelworks.)

Instead, I was greeted by a castle on the banks of a shimmering river and cobblestone streets that twist past Gothic and Neoclassical churches built by Italian architects lured here with promises of cash.



Ryan E. Smith enjoys the lively streets in Krakow's Old Town. (RYAN E. SMITH PHOTOS)



Krakow's Main Market Square, one of the largest in Europe, is lined with cafes, vendors, and pigeons.

The city is a reminder of a lost time, yet vibrantly alive. It's the kind of place that erects a statue of a particular dog for being the most loyal ever, just down the street from one of the legendary dragon - breathing real fire at regular intervals - that was slain by the town's mythical founder, Krak.

Filled with tourists but not overrun, Krakow is packed with regular people enjoying a sunny day on the banks of the Vistula River or padding about the lush Planty gardens on the site of old fortifications.

Krakow's heart is the Old Town, a bustling car-free district filled with a dozen museums and nearly 20 churches. Dating back to the 13th century, it is home to the Main Market Square, one of the largest in Europe. It's a huge area lined with cafes, perfect for sitting down with a drink and catching up with an old friend.

Not a day passed when a friend and I weren't drawn to this corner of the city, whether it be for a plate of pierogies or simply for a leisurely walk.

There was plenty to see: rows of vendors selling tchotchkes, pockets of musicians, each with their favorite corner to perform folk tunes, and seemingly endless numbers of pigeons, just waiting for you to turn your head so they could steal a scrap of bread from your hands.

Tradition is everywhere. Every hour, a trumpeter plays a mournful tune four times from a tower in St. Mary's Church. It's a musical symbol of the city and, as legend has it, a reminder of the guard whose throat was pierced mid-note by an enemy arrow as he tried to warn the town of a Tatar invasion.

A little weird, maybe - just like most things in the city.

Like the huge bones chained to the wall outside the Wawel Cathedral, part of the giant castle complex that is Poland's answer to England's Westminster Abbey. Generations of kings, queens, and the nation's brightest lights in literature, art, and politics are buried here in the country's former capital.

In this case, the enormous bones are supposed to be the remains of Krak's dragon. In actuality, they are remains of a woolly rhinoceros, a mammoth, and a whale, but who cares?

The rest of the Wawel complex can take hours to explore. The royal residence itself dates back to the 1500s and was designed by an architect from Florence. Inside, you can tour the treasury and armory, though most of the crown jewels were sold off or stolen over the years.

The state rooms are another story. Their high ceilings look down upon scores of opulent tapestries and paintings, and, in one case, are adorned with 30 intricately carved heads representing people from all parts of society. (They are all that remain of an original crowd numbering 200).

From the top of Wawel hill, one has a dazzling view of everything from the river below to the Kosciuszko Mound a couple of miles away. The city's peculiar practice of erecting such mounds to honor leaders goes back to the 7th century.

This one, the city's largest, is a massive 100-meter-high cone of soil covered in grass created in the 1820s for Poland's greatest revolutionary hero, Tadeusz Kosciuszko. It's a long hike from the city center, but the view from the top at sundown is spectacular.

Krakow serves as a great base for touring other sites around the region, as well. It is only a short train ride from the amazing salt mines of Wieliczka, a world heritage site that has been active since the 12th century. There are more than 180 miles of tunnels with underground lakes and an enormous chapel completely carved from salt - the room, stairs, statues, even the chandeliers. Think twice before you lick the walls, though; you're not the first to think of that.

The concentration camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau are about 45 miles to the east. Auschwitz is a fairly small, peaceful place these days. Wind whistles through the trees as visitors solemnly walk past and through the brick barracks that remain. But the rows of barbed wire, mountains of human hair in displays, and the still-standing crematorium leave no doubt as to the atrocities that occurred here during World War II.

In nearby Birkenau, fewer structures remain but the scope of the Holocaust becomes more apparent. This much larger camp held 100,000 people at its peak and had the capacity to kill 60,000 people a day. Between here and Auschwitz, between 1.5 and 2 million were exterminated.



The chilling gates to the death camp Auschwitz say: "Work will set you free."

If you want to see Krakow's successor as Poland's capital, you only have to sit through a three-hour train ride to Warsaw. The Old Town there, completely rebuilt after being leveled during the war, is lively and beautiful. But be warned, much of the rest of the city is filled with those gritty Stalinesque housing projects you were expecting in Poland.

Which makes you appreciate Krakow all the more - and invites you to enjoy it with all the more gusto.

Fortunately, Krakow knows how to relax. The city boasts the most concentrated number of bars in Europe, according to one guidebook.

Much of the development on this front is taking place in the old Jewish Quarter. For many, this section of town, called Kazimierz, is a trip back in time, not a hipster's paradise. It is home to several old synagogues but few Jews anymore. Most of the city's Jews were killed in the Holocaust or moved elsewhere.

One old cemetery has a wall of lamentation, where shards of tombstones destroyed by the Nazis with Hebrew writing and mystical symbols have been fitted together into a beautiful mosaic.



Shattered tombstones, destroyed by the Nazis, are fitted together to make a wall of lamentation at one Jewish cemetery in Krakow.

Now the area is targeted for tourists interested in the city's Jewish roots, which go back centuries. A variety of restaurants pays homage to Jewish cuisine and music, and numerous scenes from Steven Spielberg's movie *Schindler's List* were filmed in the area. (Oskar Schindler's factory was located nearby.)

The flip side for locals is that this is the heart of the revival of a club scene, such as the Singer Bar, where most tables are old sewing machines.

Most of the fun is distinctly Polish. The drink of choice is vodka - sometimes with a blade of Bison grass in it for a unique flavoring, sometimes mixed with apple juice in a drink called a tatanka.

The variety of cool bars in Krakow seems endless, from a cozy one called Propaganda - blasting

rebellious rock and roll and plastered floor to ceiling with the remnants of communism's jingoism - to the three-story club Lubu-Dubu, where teens hopped around to strobe lights and drank a fermented honey drink called mead.

(It's good stuff. During the Crusades Polish Prince Leszek the White explained to the pope that Polish knights couldn't participate in the crusades because there is no mead in Palestine.)

Perhaps the only challenge Krakow presents is mastering the language. It really was no trouble getting around - most sights are within walking distance, and there's a convenient system of trams, trains, and buses - but saying "thank you" was nearly impossible. Maybe it's because *dziekuje* looks nothing like "jencooya," which was, as best we could figure out, how to pronounce it.

Of course, when you've got a little Polish guy wearing a sombrero standing in the middle of the street advertising a restaurant with swings - as we saw most evenings - language is the least of your worries.

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

[< previous](#)

[next >](#)