



WORDS ELISABETH KING

## WARSAW SPRUCES UP TO LURE THE TOURIST TRADE

WARSAW has always been the Cinderella of Polish tourism in comparison to its more glamorous rivals - Krakow, Gdansk and Wroclaw. Yet sitting in the Belvedere Restaurant, tucked into the Orangerie of the Royal Bath Gardens and easily the city's most sumptuous restaurant, you could easily imagine yourself in France or Germany. Until the food arrives, of course. You can choose from the international menu, but don't or you will regret it. The Polish menu sizzles from entrees such as beef loin tartare with marinated milk cap and boletus mushrooms to mains of roasted royal sturgeon with buckwheat blinis, sour cream and red caviar.

Food isn't the only lure of the Polish capital; culture has also become a magnet in attracting visitors. Warsaw has hitched its wagon to its most famous son - Chopin. Over 100 million zlotys (\$36 million) was allocated to celebrate the bicentennial of the composer's birth this year. A large chunk of the funds was sunk into lasting legacies, such as building projects near Chopin's birthplace at Zelazowa Wola and the new Chopin Museum, which opened in February and claims to be the world's most advanced musical museum.

There's still plenty of Soviet-style architecture in Warsaw but there's no need to give more than a passing glance to these grey reminders of the grim era of Communist rule. Another major change since the Russians left is that it's also much easier to get to the Polish capital these days, thanks to the dramatic increase in the number of flights from other major European capitals.

Many new hotels have sprung up to fulfill Warsaw's desire to become a leading player in the EU economy, even though Poland has yet to adopt the euro. That's a good thing, too, as it keeps prices lower for locals and tourists. About seven years ago there

was a flurry of luxury hotel openings, including the Hotel Rialto, Warsaw's first member of the Design Hotels group, and the InterContinental Warszawa, Poland's tallest hotel. But I love Le Regina, a boutique hotel located in a former aristocrat's palace. The exterior is Old World but the decor is chic contemporary. It's also home to one of the city's most celebrated and expensive restaurants - La Rotisserie - and eating langoustines on the patio in summer is a rare treat.

Most visitors come to Warsaw with some knowledge of its tragic past. Warsaw was pulverised by the retreating German army in 1944, following the Warsaw Uprising - two months of bitter street fighting by Polish resistance fighters. This heart-rending story is movingly told at the Warsaw Rising Museum, which added a new 3D film in

War II, the first section of the city to be rebuilt was the Old Town market square, Rynek Starego Miasta. Whatever the time of day, you find yourself wending your way back to the Rynek with its Renaissance facades, coffee shops and bistros. At night, the ochre facades are lit up by art-directed lighting and you can almost feel the spirit of Chopin as a street musician strikes up a waltz.

Fukier is a centrally located restaurant that rates a Michelin recommendation, features a celebrity list that includes Margaret Thatcher, Jacques Chirac and Claudia Schiffer and is famous throughout Poland for its wine cellar, lavish decor and modern Polish cuisine. I dined like a queen on foie gras on chola bread and duck roasted Polish style with Antonov apples. Reservations are mandatory.

The remodelled Royal Castle is a triumph of Italian Renaissance architecture.

*The sumptuous apartments offer a centuries-long look at Polish rulers, from fur-clad warlords with Asiatic features to westward-looking aristocrats.*

early August to commemorate the 66th anniversary of the city's doomed attempt to liberate itself.

The Communists rebuilt the city's Royal Way, which runs for several kilometres from the Royal Castle in the Old Town to Wilanow Palace, but not splendidly enough for today's more affluent Polish tastes. Warsaw's civic authorities are constantly lavishing more money on this grand boulevard, which is now almost Western European in look and feel, with boutiques, cafes and an eclectic people mix of casual students and business people holding the latest model mobiles to their ears.

The Royal Castle forms the nucleus of the Old Town, which dates back to the 13th century. Immediately after World

All visitors gasp at the restored white and gold ballroom and then gasp again in the Canaletto Room, where 23 paintings by Bellotto, the nephew of Canaletto, depict the gardens, landscapes and cityscapes of 18th century Poland.

Wilanow - the palace at the other end of the Royal Way - offers even more insight into Poland's heyday as a great European power. Built for King John III Sobieski, who led the army that defeated the Turks at the gates of Vienna in 1683, the palace was the only major historic building that survived World War II intact. The ornate gardens and parks border the Vistula and, inside, the sumptuous apartments offer a centuries-long look at Polish rulers, from fur-clad warlords with Asiatic features to westward-looking aristocrats such as

Stanislas Augustus, who built the dream-like Palace Upon the Water in Warsaw's Lazienki Park, the largest in the city at a massive 76 hectares.

U Kucharzy means 'the chefs' and there they are churning out Warsaw's best steak tartare in the converted former hotel kitchen of the Europejski Hotel. It's a delight to watch them strain, stir and chop other dishes, too, from duck with red cabbage to rabbit in cream sauce. The food is modern-with-heritage but the decor has been left distinctly shabby in this most trendy of eateries. Nice touch.

There are plenty of restaurants in Warsaw that serve the sort of fusion food you can get around the corner in any Australian city. But I prefer to stick with Polish food all the way. Restauracja Polska Tradycja is a revitalised historic manor lit by candelabras where you feel like a Polish noble of yesteryear as you tuck into roast duck, roast carp, wild boar and other traditional Polish rib-stickers. Another expensive by Polish standards (about \$70 a head with wine) restaurant is the Restaurant Wilanow, adjacent to the palace, where you can enjoy chilled borscht or Polish pancakes on the terrace and the same view that enticed King Zygmunt III to make Warsaw the Polish capital in 1596.

Wine drinking has become trendy among younger Poles. I spent a lot of time - for fashion and food reasons - at the ultra-trendy Likus Concept Store, which sells designer labels from John Galliano to Viktor & Rolf. A major feature is the Vinoteka 13 Wine Bar, which serves wines from all over the world, including Australia. The emphasis is on Italian bottlings, so I went for a Sicilian wine, not least because not only had the sun come out but it was fairly beating down. "It's global warming," said the barman. Whatever. The vino from sunny Italy and the pasta from the bar menu made Warsaw feel positively Mediterranean. 🍷



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