



WORDS ELISABETH KING

KRAKOW - WINTER TREATS IN POLAND'S CAPITAL OF CULTURE

POLISH expats working in other European countries have made it much easier and cheaper to fly to Krakow, thanks to budget airlines adding Poland's second largest city to their schedules. If you are in Europe during the festive season it's well worth making a detour, because the "capital of Polish culture" hosts one of the most intriguing Christmas markets in Europe.

A highlight is the famous Szopka Creches, featuring puppet plays that act out the Christmas story. At the close of the market, a major prize is awarded for the most beautiful creche and handmade puppets and it is a much sought after honour indeed to the competitive locals. The setting of Krakow's Rynek Glowny, the largest intact mediaeval square in Europe, with its historic townhouses, palaces and churches, is narcotically beautiful and there's plenty to buy, from Polish cakes to handmade toys and jewellery.

There's plenty to drink, too, including the Polish version of hot mulled wine - grzaniec galicyjski - which is also known by the easier to pronounce name, grzane wino. Krupnik, vodka flavoured with honey, is also a warming drink on a freezing day and has become a big hit with British stag parties who fly into Krakow for boozy weekends. Thankfully, most make the trip during summer.

The most atmospheric place to stay is the Hotel Copernicus, the only member of the prestigious Relais et Chateaux group in Poland. A three-storey townhouse dating from the 16th century, it has been restored sympathetically and very luxuriously. Visiting celebrities from Morgan Freeman to Vaclav Havel make a point of dining in the hotel's gourmet restaurant. And the property's namesake, the great astronomer, Nicolaus Copernicus, really did sleep here.

The hotel's sommelier also introduced me to Polish wine. It was a blended white style and he told me it came from

Zielona Gora, the wine capital of Poland. There are only a handful of commercially viable wineries in Poland and many of them come from this mediaeval town in western Poland which was once the German town of Grunberg and was part of Silesia. Winemaking ground to a halt during the Communist era but it's now back with gusto and the town stages Poland's biggest wine fest. This is not a new attraction thought up by the local tourist board but a tradition that dates back to 1852. "You should go if you are in Poland again during September," said my new friend. "It lasts for nine days and Bacchus is there with his followers and everyone dresses in traditional costumes". I made a mental note to follow up.

Krakow escaped the wholesale destruction that befell Warsaw during World War II because it was the base of

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the Nazi high command in Poland. The quirkily named ruler, Wladislaw the Elbow-High, built Krakow's magnificent Wawel Cathedral, where the bones of St Stanislaw rest amid a small labyrinth of ornately carved chapels. The neighbouring Wawel Castle, which was the major residence of the Polish kings until the early 17th century, is equally lavish with monuments and statues. The warren of cobbled streets around the Rynek Glowny houses courtyard cafes, over 300 bars and restaurants - many selling homemade vodka - museums and fusty boutiques.

You can buy the Polish beer brand Zywiec at Dan Murphy's. But why come to Europe's third largest beer brewing country, after Germany and the UK, and not sample a brewski on its home turf?

The big multinationals moved in after the fall of Communism and SAB Miller, Heineken and Carlsberg became majority owners in well-known beer brands such as Zywiec, Tyskie and Polska. Krakow Tours offers a three-hour tour of the huge Tyskie brewery, complete with samples. But the best place to sample dark, wheat and lager-style beers is Krakow's best micro-brewery, C K Browar.

If you arrive in Krakow by plane, the first thing you notice is that the city's airport is named after Pope John Paul II. The late pontiff lived on Kanonicza Steet and the city is often full of Catholic groups from all over Europe, wandering every street and byway with the slightest link to Krakow's most beloved local hero.

Krakow is full of girls who could be models in a minute in New York if they moved west and young men trying to

divert attention from their chiselled cheekbones with scruffy beards. There are tonnes of artists and street performers too - packing the colourful clubs in Podgorze, a former industrial area revitalised as Krakow's newest museum quarter. Last year, the new Museum of Contemporary Art opened in a renovated factory that once belonged to Oskar Schindler, who famously saved more than 1000 Jews from being sent to concentration camps.

You won't find too many youthful faces at the Restauracja Wierzynek, though. The oldest restaurant in Krakow, dating back to the 14th century, has an outdoor terrace which ranks as the most stylish place to pose on a summer's evening. But even if Krakow is in the midst of a

rare heatwave, ask for a table inside to admire the palatial interior of marble columns and burnished wood. Every visiting dignitary and actor from Steven Spielberg to Kate Moss comes here to sample the finest traditional Polish menu in the city - from light-as-air dumplings to game in season.

Also centrally located on the Rynek Glowny is the Jan Noworolski Cafe. A Belle Epoque jewel with a massive arcaded area that seats 300, it was confiscated by the Communist government after World War II. The enterprising Noworolski family claimed it back in the early 90s and gussied up the forlorn interior to its former glory. The liquid nitrogen ice cream is a tourist favourite and be sure to try a shot or two of the homemade vodka which comes in a huge array of fruit flavours. The krupnik here is renowned for its smoothness and quality, so a couple of shots to keep out the winter's chill is almost a tradition in Krakow.

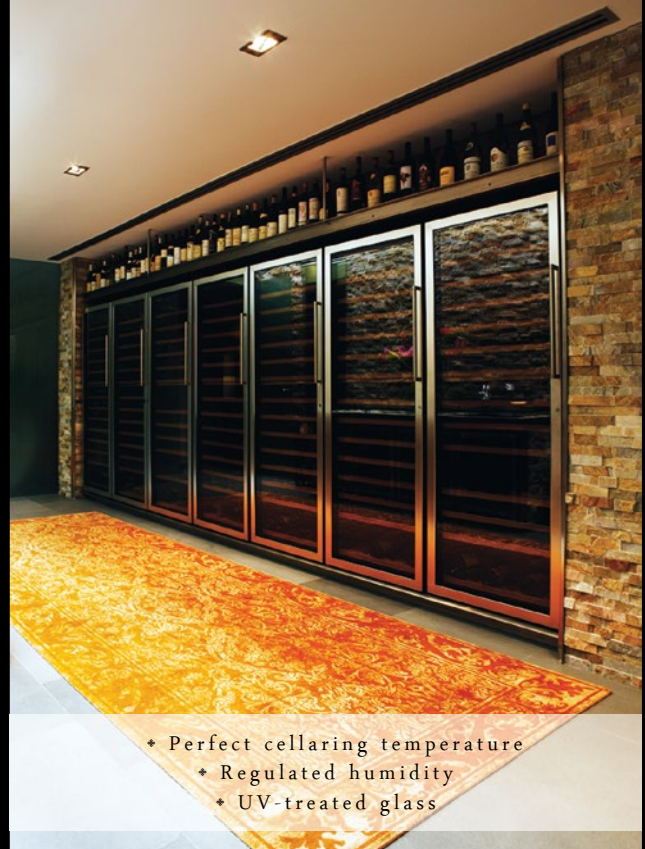
On the edge of the Old Town, you'll find the streets less crowded in the old Jewish quarter of Kazimierz, once home to 65,000 Jews before World War II. From here it was only a short journey to Auschwitz - one hour away by rail - and only 250 local Jews survived the Holocaust.

The once thriving quarter turned into a ghost town during the Communist era and the small terrace houses became dilapidated. Following the global success of the movie, *Schindler's List*, interest in Kazimierz soared. The long-deserted streets are now full of trendy bars such as the Alchemia and clubs playing Yiddish Klezmer music. Young Jewish people from all over the world and their local counterparts come here after dark to sing, carouse and debate in modern reinterpretation of the good old days. It's only fitting to come here and raise a glass with the old Jewish toast of "L'chaim" (to life). 🍷

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