

Introduction

Welcome to Cracow, the former capital of Poland and still today the country's cultural and educational heart. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, with Europe's largest medieval town square at its centre, the city is home to hundreds of historical and cultural sites, as well as 25 universities and other higher-education institutions, serving over 170,000 students.

We would like to provide our international guests with some information about Cracow and its history, as well as advice on what to see and do.



Historic sites

The royal castle on Wawel Hill (① on map), in a strategic position overlooking the Vistula River, was the seat of Poland's kings until 1609. It is worth visiting the splendid Renaissance arcaded courtyard and the castle's cathedral, where kings, poets and other national heroes lay in rest. Walk from the castle down the Royal Road to reach the main market square (②), established 750 years ago and for centuries the city's commercial hub. Today the 13th-century Cloth Hall at its centre still houses a busy tourist market.

From the square, walk down Florjanska Street to reach the Florian Gate (③), the only remaining medieval entrance to the city. Just beyond it, you will find the

15th-century Barbakan, a small fortress that served as part of the city's historical defensive walls. From here, the Planty park takes a circular path around the whole old town.

Religion

Poland is one of Europe's most religious countries, with a population that is around 90% Catholic. Cracow's most famous church, St Mary's Basilica, is located on the market square (②). According to legend, its distinctive uneven towers were built by two competing brothers - one of whom eventually murdered the other! The church houses a famous 15th-century alterpiece, created by the German sculptor Veit Stoss. Nearby, the Franciscan Church on All Saints Square features beautiful stained-glass windows by the famous Polish artist Stanislaw Wyspianski. Opposite stands the Bishop's Palace, home to Karol Wojtyla for two decades before he became Pope John Paul II.

Before the Holocaust, Poland was also home to the world's largest Jewish population. Cracow itself contained over 60,000 Jews before WW2, roughly 25% of the city's residents. Sadly, very few remain today, but traces of their memory can be found throughout the city, particularly in the old Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, which contains seven synagogue buildings. Among them, the Old Synagogue and Remuh Synagogue can both be found on Szeroka Street (⑤). The latter is the only functioning synagogue in the city, and behind it can be found a Jewish cemetery dating back to the 16th century.

Museums and Galleries

Particularly worth seeing is the recently opened museum at Oscar Schindler's former factory (Lipowa 4), which features an impressive permanent exhibition telling the tragic story of Cracow under Nazi occupation during WW2. Beneath the market square is another new museum, using archaeological findings to bring the city's long history to life. Cracow is also close to the Nazi death camp Auschwitz, which can be reached by bus (90 mins, 12 PLN) or train (2 hours, 9.20 PLN) from the main stations (⑥).

Bunkier Sztuki (Plac Szczepanski 3a) and the new MOCAK Museum of Contemporary Art (Lipowa 4) are among the city's many art galleries.

Learning

Cracow is regarded as Poland's primary seat of learning. Most famously, it is home to the Jagiellonian University, which, having been founded in 1364, is the second oldest university in Central Europe and among the 20 oldest in the world. To learn more about the university's history - including its most famous alumnus, Nicholas Copernicus - visit the gothic 15th-century Collegium Maius (Jagiellońska 15, ⑦).

Food

For a quick lunch around the market square, try Glonojad (Plac Matejki 2, ⑩), Chimera św. Anny 3) or Camelot (św. Tomasza 17). Krupnicza Street (⑧) also contains a number of good restaurants for lunch or dinner. For traditional Polish food in one of the most beautiful cellars in the city, try Pod Aniołami (Grodzka 35).

Szeroka Street in Kazimierz (⑤) houses various restaurants serving traditional Jewish-style food. More modern Israeli cuisine can be found at Hamsa (Szeroka 2). For a true Cracovian late-night food experience, try a *zapienkanka* (melted cheese and mushroom baguette) from one of the hole-in-the-wall takeaways in the rotunda on Plac Nowy (⑨), also in Kazimierz.

Cracow is also famous for its cafe culture, with hundreds of coffee houses dotted around the city. For traditional Polish cakes and coffee, try Cukiernia Chichowscy (Starowiślna 21). The English-language bookshop Massolit (Felicjanek 4) also has a nice small cafe.

Nightlife

Cracow has a lively nightlife, in particular the underground pubs and bars in the city's many cellars, such as Piwnica Pod Baranami (Rynek Główny 27, ②) or Święta Krowa (Floriańska 16). The city is also well known for its jazz bars, including Harris (Rynek Główny 28, ②) and Kornet (Kraśińskiego 19).

The Jewish quarter of Kazimierz is a popular alternative night hub, with activity centred around Plac Nowy (⑨). To sample the typical bohemian style of the area, try Alchemia (Estery 5), Singer (Estery 20), Miejsce (Estery 1) or, if the weather is good, the garden at Mleczarnia (Meiselsa 20).

Practical Advice

Local currency: Polish zloty (PLN) (rough exchange rates as of December 2016: 1 EUR = 4.45 PLN, 1 GBP = 5.22 PLN, 1 USD = 4.20 PLN)

Airport transfer: The set fare for taxis from the airport to the city centre is 89 PLN and the journey takes around 25-35 mins. A much cheaper option is to take a train from the Kraków Airport train station, which can be reached on foot directly from the passenger terminal. The trains run every 30 mins and take you to the main train station (⑥). A ticket can be purchased for 8 PLN from the machine on the platform or the conductor on the train (in either case have some loose change handy), and the journey takes around 20 mins.