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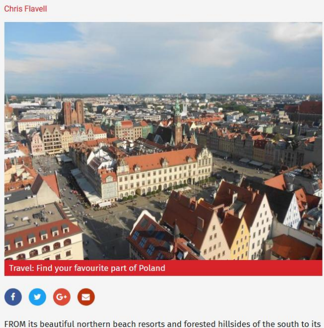
Travel: Find your favourite part of Poland

Chris Flavell



Travel: Find your favourite part of Poland

FROM its beautiful northern beach resorts and forested hillsides of the south to its harrowing histories and vibrant city living, Poland doesn't easily fit into one particular box for holidaying Brits.

Exploring the main areas of this fascinating country, so often the borderland and fighting ground between political ideology dividing east with west, it quickly becomes clear that it's the complexity that makes Poland one of Europe's often overlooked destinations, particularly for UK travellers.

Disturbing histories of hopeless death and destruction now sit side-by-side with tales of hopeful resurrection and regeneration. It's a country that has much to offer with its focus firmly set on the future but without forgetting its tumultuous past.

Additionally, the pound's recent drop to the Euro has had British holidaymakers seeking an alternative destination where their money with go further. With that in mind, Poland surely has to be on any shortlist.

But that is simply an added bonus to the wide range of holidays this country seems to offer. From historic city adventures to beach breaks and mountainside spa retreats, all you have to do is decide the type of trip you want and you can bet Poland can provide.

Wroclaw:

Poland's simple, family-friendly city break.

Pulling up to Hotel Patio, just off Wroclaw's market square, we are met by a man and woman crouched down on the pavement outside.

The man stands up and takes a photo. The woman smiles and quickly consults the map in her hand.

As the man moves away our taxi driver points, smiling, and says "do you see? It's a gnome!"

Sure enough, as we pass and carry our bags into our accommodation for the next two nights, there is indeed a bronzed, miniature statue of a gnome sleeping in a bed, his head slightly shinier from all the rubbing.

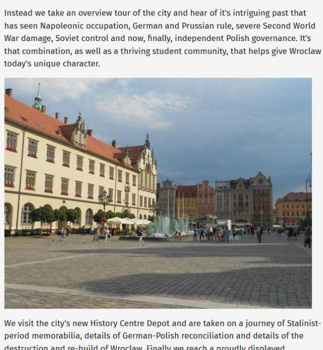
It's a strange start to our time in Poland's western city, just a few hours from Berlin across the border, but it's a quirky moment that hands us an early glimpse into this fun-packed city dubbed the nation's meeting place.

Our guide around Wroclaw soon tells us the tale of the gnomes, now numbering up to 400, and how each has been placed in an array of locations to commemorate the founding of the anti-Communist underground Orange Alternative movement.

Now tourists can grab themselves a gnome map and spend a care-free day paying a visit to as many as they can manage.

Over the next few days we see tour groups halting quickly to take photos of the gnomes and watch children leading their parents on a mad-cap adventure through the streets.

Instead we take an overview tour of the city and hear of it's intriguing past that has seen Napoleonic occupation, German and Prussian rule, severe Second World War damage, Soviet control and now, finally, independent Polish governance. It's that combination, as well as a thriving student community, that helps give Wroclaw today's unique character.



We visit the city's new History Centre Depot and are taken on a journey of Stalinist-period memorabilia, details of German-Polish reconciliation and details of the destruction and re-build of Wroclaw. Finally we reach a proudly displayed exhibition on the role the city played in the Solidarity movement that spread across the country and eventually helped see the end of Communist control.

Relics from the city's time under the German Empire, then known as Breslau, still stand today, most notably the Max Berg-designed Centennial Hall. We tour its echoing halls and marvel at the concrete dome high above. The venue is still used to host concerts and sporting events today.

Any visit here should be combined with a trip to the city's contemporary art museum in the regenerated Four Domes Pavilion just next door.

We cap our city walk by ending in the Four Temple Quarter. Famous as an area where different religions worship side-by-side, it now boasts a fine array of modern bars and eateries.

Another two family-friendly sites that Wroclaw offers is the Africarium based at the city's zoo and the Hydropolis museum of water.

First we tour the Africarium complex and journey through various eco-systems and the animals that inhabit them - from baby hippos to majestic manatees. Breeding programs and educational visits make it an important centre of not only Wroclaw but for the whole of Poland.

The near-by Hydropolis is awash with interactive displays about the role water plays in our world. Brilliant for younger members of the family, the site is both educational and packed with fun activities. A highlight on our last evening was a slow night-time walk to Cathedral Island, the oldest part of the city based just north of the town square among the maze of islands that divide up the river Odra.

First we'd strolled through market square one last time and dropped into one of the many bars with its own underground brewery. Ale of all varieties was served up both to those on the benches up at street level as well as others huddled in the tiled cellars below. It's truly a beer-lovers paradise.

THE "WIELICZKA" SALT MINE GET IT NOW

We leave and follow the banks of the Odra, skirt the edge of Sand Island and head into the calm of Cathedral Island.

Gas lanterns light the narrow cobbled streets and the distinctive illuminated towers of the Cathedral of St John the Baptist glow from the shadows.

It's a calm, beautiful end to our time in fun Wroclaw. I'm already imagining my next visit and the friends I want to entice to Poland's meeting place.

Travel facts: Staying at: Hotel Patio, Kielbasnicza Street 24.

History Centre Depot (zajezdnia.org), Centennial Hall (halastulecia.pl/en), Four Domes Pavilion (pawiloncztrechkopul.pl/en), Afrykarium (zoo.wroclaw.pl/en), Hydropolis (hydropolis.pl/en).

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Krakow:

Dining delights among one of Poland's most historic locations.

It doesn't take long to realise that fine dining and the fine arts are where Krakow stands out from the crowd.

With 24 Michelin-recommended eateries and more food and culture festivals than any other city in Poland, this really is the place to indulge.

Every taste and every budget is catered for, be it delicately prepared dishes and opera in the old town or the hipster hangouts and street food vans of the Kazimierz district.

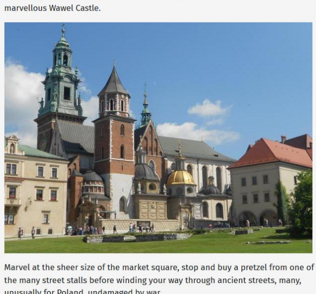
Yes, its historic sites are as vivid and as harrowing as ever, but there's far more reason to come to this part of Poland than ever before.

We find this out quickly on our first evening when we eat at the popular 'Szara Ges w Kuchni' restaurant that overlooks the market square.

We eat duck and soup dishes and try a Polish wine from the region's ever-growing produce. It's traditional Polish cuisine but with an artistic, modern twist - each plate more beautiful than the next until the dessert tops the lot.

Straight away I'm convinced I could spend days just trying the different restaurants and the craft ales that are now giving vodka a challenge as the nation's favourite tipple.

That said, as tempting as that may be, everyone should spend a day visiting the former capital's historical town centre, a UNESCO Heritage site, as well as the marvellous Wawel Castle.



Marvel at the sheer size of the market square, stop and buy a pretzel from one of the many street stalls before winding your way through ancient streets, many, unusually for Poland, undamaged by war.

Wawel Castle is the perfect introduction to the countries ever-changing history. Artworks and tapestries adorn the walls, each telling a different story of the castle and the different rulers that resided in its halls. It's worth the visit for the view over the city and the winding river beyond.

Quickly in-tune with Poland after our blast of history, we decide to eat a traditional lunch and stop at CK Dezerter for locally brewed beer and delicious pierogi, the stuffed dumplings that would quickly become a highlight of the trip.

We spend the afternoon in the Jewish quarter and make sure to go to Schindler's Factory, which hands us an introduction to the ghetto here ahead of a planned trip to Auschwitz.

Like many tourists who visit, the next couple of days are spent outside the city.

First we go to the Wieliczka Salt Mines and spend hours meandering our way through its eerie labyrinth of tunnels and chambers.

First we hear of the history of the site and the mass mining of salt for generations.

Next it's the salt carvings that begin to turn our heads. The mine boasts statues, monuments and the showpiece Chapel of St Kinga.

The mine can be reached by bus from the city centre at regular intervals so it's also worth stopping in the village that surrounds the site for a spot of lunch away from the crowds.

That evening we decide to head for Kazimierz and drink craft ales in an array of hipster hangouts. Imagine Berlin's east neighbourhoods but smaller and even more intimate. It's all chandeliers, book cases, retro furniture and cheap booze. Just sit on the table-lined streets and watch the students and artist who come here or go and hunt down some live music.

We head to one of the many street food stalls for hotdogs before picking our next haunt which will, of course, be just the right mix of care-free cool and deliberate, well-chosen style.

Our final day we are up early and take the local bus for an hour-and-a-half into the country to Auschwitz.

For some it's the shoes, for others it's the worn-away grooves in the gas chambers where the dying clawed at the walls.

For me it was the hair. Bundles upon bundles of human hair all tied and ready for distribution to German furniture factories.

Whatever it might be, they'll be something that gets to you at Auschwitz - the harrowing site that saw more than a million murders. First came the political prisoners, then Poles and gypsies, then the Jews and then more Jews after that.

The death camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau are kept now as a reminder of what happened as the Nazi 'Final Solution' to eradicate Europe of the Jews swung too easily into gear.

Questions of how it was even possible are soon answered as our guide walks us through each room, each cell, each individual part of a well-oiled, efficient death machine.

But the question of why it happened stays with you. I'm still asking it as our bus pulls away and the camp disappears again into the secluded forest that hid it all those years ago. It strikes me then that it's a sight not many got to witness. Those that entered rarely came out.

It's a sad, difficult but important trip to make while in Krakow.

Once back in the city we go for food at restaurant Pod Nosem in Kanonicza Street under the shadow of the castle we'd spent so long marvelling at a few days before.

Soon the only thing we're marvelling at is the Polish cuisine once more. Again we order a host of tradition Polish dishes, all washed down with white Polish wine.

Despite the emotional day, it's never long in Krakow before you're spirited away once more.

Later that night the main square is alive again with street theatre performers. Just the other side of the lit-up Cloth Market hall buskers compete for the crowd's spare Zlotys in front of the bustling, bright-with-life cafes and the city is all at once hopeful again and looking forwards and the only place you want to be.

Travel facts: Staying at: Hotel Golden Tulip, ul. Lobzowska (goldentulipkrakowcitycentre.com/en) Restaurants: Szara Ges w Kuchni, Rynek Gl 17 (szarages.com); CK Dezerter, 6 Bracka St (ckdezerter.pl/en); Pod Nosem, 22 Kanonicsa St (kanonicza22.com/en).

Other: Wieliczka Salt Mine (Wielicza-saltmine.com).

Bukowina Tatrzanska:

Relax among Poland's magnificent mountains.

From our large hotel room window we stand watching the steam swirl from the outdoor thermal pools. Beyond is the pine-covered hillside, the city quickly far behind us.

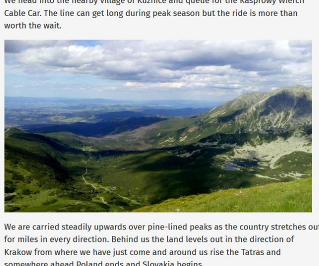
A two-hour coach journey from Krakow brings us to our next destination and with it the chance to rest our feet and minds after days of pounding the pavements.

We have headed south towards Poland's picturesque border with Slovakia and are soon checked into the spa resort of Hotel Bukovina.

The hotel offers a base for hikers wanting to explore the Tatras, for skiing holidays in the winter months or just for those keen to get away from it all for a while.

However, before we surrender to the steam rooms, Jacuzzis and treatment tables, we have one must-do attraction to see first.

We head into the nearby village of Kuznice and queue for the Kasprowy Wierch Cable Car. The line can get long during peak season but the ride is more than worth the wait.



We are carried steadily upwards over pine-lined peaks as the country stretches out for miles in every direction. Behind us the land levels out in the direction of Krakow from where we have just come and around us rise the Tatras and somewhere ahead Poland ends and Slovakia begins.

We change cable car half way up and continue on again until eventually we reach the summit.

The view makes you feel perfectly insignificant and soon you realise what draws the adventurous to this little part of Poland. We stay a while and hike higher and take in the views as long as we can.

Other trips to the mountain lake of Morskie Oko can also be arranged for outdoor enthusiasts but instead we head quickly back to Bukovina to ditch dusty shoes and backpacks for swimwear and bathrobes.

With the pools open until 10pm we take the chance to swim under the stars. First we float in the large outdoor pool, the water warm but the air cool around us.

Next we head for the Jacuzzi room where a wide array of water jets massage each aching part of your back.

Finally, we end in the sauna facility. Like across much of Poland and Germany, It's mixed-sex and there is no swimwear here but let any inhibitions go and just follow the locals, some wrapped in towels, others less so. No-one cares.

We relax in aromatherapy steam rooms and work towards the dry heat of traditional Swedish wood saunas, all ended with an awakening dip into the ice-cold plunge pools.

After a spectacular breakfast buffet the next morning we simply do it all again, but this time break it up with one of the many massage treatments on offer and a cold beer in the bar.

The ever-growing numbers of spa-loving Brits can combine all of this with a city break in Krakow and still it wouldn't cost what some places in the UK charge. It's affordable and close to the city and our only disappointment is that we can't stay longer.

Travel facts: Staying at: Hotel Bukovina (hotelbukovina.pl/en).

Warsaw:

Discover Poland's stylish capital.

Warsaw has all the usual attractions you'd expect from a major European capital but it's the hidden extras that make it so memorable.

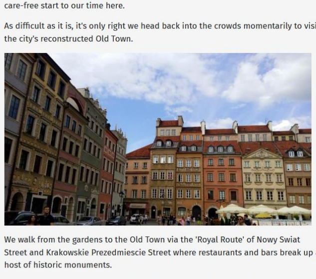
Unlike Poland's other cities, Warsaw is spread across a wide area rather than being centred by a traditional market square. This means it's easy to find unexpected highlights as you zigzag your way through its diverse neighbourhoods.

Our first taste of this comes on day one of a weekend break in the city. We start by wandering the beautiful Lazienki Krolewskie palace garden complex.

Though perhaps not the first on the list of tourist hotspots, it is the place that most captures the heart. Shaded woodland, shimmering lakes and royal buildings all seem a world away from the bustling city beyond.

Not many people will know it, but the population of red squirrels that live here is not afraid of people. We buy a bag of nuts and spend time holding them out in our hands as the squirrels make their way down from their branches and carefully pick the offerings out of our hands, some clambering over us first. It's a wonderful, care-free start to our time here.

As difficult as it is, it's only right we head back into the crowds momentarily to visit the city's reconstructed Old Town.



We walk from the gardens to the Old Town via the 'Royal Route' of Nowy Swiat Street and Krakowskie Przedmiescie Street where restaurants and bars break up a host of historic monuments.

Soon we're at the Royal Castle and then the Old Town and marvelling at the important reconstruction work that saw the city restored to its pre-war glory with the help of surviving original drawings. The work was completed in 1963 and so close to the original that it was granted World Heritage status in the 1980s.

We stop for lunch in the perfect spot overlooking the palace and Plac Zamkowy square in restaurant Sznyt Warszawski.

The afternoon is spent first at the Warsaw University Library rooftop gardens which offer stunning views across the cityscape.

Next we head west to the Jewish quarter of the city and walk streets that would have been part of the infamous Warsaw Ghetto which imprisoned around 450,000 Jews during Nazi occupation. As many as 100,000 died of starvation and disease before deportation to concentration camps had even begun. Parts of the old wall can still be seen to this day and we make sure to visit Plac Krasinskich and the imposing monument that now marks the Warsaw Uprising in 1943 when the remaining ghetto population rose up in defiance and fought for three weeks before their resistance was crushed.

The day ends with more fine Polish food at Smaki Warszawy on the corner of Zurawia and Poznanska streets. Again more modern, creative dishes using traditional ingredients are enjoyed before we get to choose one of the many desserts on offer.

We're staying in the H15boutique apartments nearby which offer us a home-from-home. The high quality apartments come with a separate living space which makes it perfect for relaxing after a day exploring the sites.

The area and the accommodation is a perfect base for seeing the city, especially due to the nearby bar and restaurant scene.

Just a few streets across is the newly refurbished Koszyki Hall. The former market hall was transformed in 2016 and is fast becoming the city's social and culinary centre boasting dishes from across the globe.

Any trip to this part of the city has to be combined with a visit to the great tower of the Palace of Culture and Science, a gift from Stalin in the 1950s. It remains a controversial building for that reason but it does offer thrilling panoramic views.

The combination of Chopin - the city's favourite son - and the beautiful Lazienki Park gardens combine each Sunday with a performance in the park. We join the crowds and find a space on the grass and listen to the pianist bring the composer's work brilliantly to life.

Then we head over to the Praga district and explore the flea markets, independent bars and cafes of Warsaw's right bank as more of the city's hidden sites open up.

Taking a break from the restaurant scene that night, we head to the river boulevards along the Vestula River.

Street food vans and riverside bars offer the perfect place to relax as the sun goes down.

It's a city with so many things to see and do. Warsaw Uprising Museum as well as the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews are both also a must. It's worth buying the Warsaw Pass to queue jump and get free entry into a wide array of museums, shows and other attractions across the capital too.

However, it's the smaller, unexpected things that made Warsaw such a memorable place. See the usual sites but also make sure to take the time to listen to Chopin in the park, hand-feed red squirrels among the trees or eat and drink along the banks of the Vestula.

Travel facts: Staying at: Hotel H15 (h15boutiqueapartments.com) Restaurants: Sznyt Warszawski, Smaki Warszawy Other: Warsaw Pass (warsawpass.com)

Sopot/Gdansk/Gdynia:

Beach break on Poland's northern cost.

Sopot is where Poles come to party. Days at its long and wide sandy beach, evenings in the restaurants and bars that line the squares and streets leading away from the coast.

A short train ride from Gdansk brings us to this popular summer destination and we quickly check into our accommodation at Hotel Villa Aqua. The hotel is located close to the beach and the aqua park and a short 15 minute walk from the centre of town.

It proves the perfect base for not only seeing Sopot but also the region's other cities.

Spend a day by the beach, stroll along the pier or just try the many restaurants and bar on offer. Walk to the main square at night and drink and eat in the bars that line the busting hub of Monte Cassino street.

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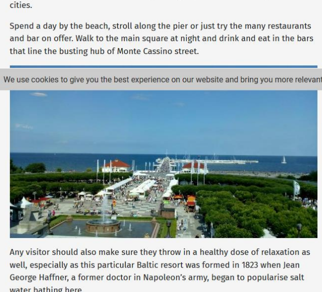

Any visitor should also make sure they throw in a healthy dose of relaxation as well, especially as this particular Baltic resort was formed in 1823 when Jean George Haffner, a former doctor in Napoleon's army, began to popularise salt water bathing here.

With relaxation in mind we head to the nearby Aquapark Sopot. We miss out the pools and waterslides and head straight for the spa facilities.

First a deep tissue massage helps ease away the tension before more steam rooms and saunas draw us in.

Sopot also offers the perfect base for exploring the tri-city region that includes sister cities of Gdansk and Gdynia.

First we venture back to Gdansk for a day walking its old town alleys, shopping for amber and eating at its riverside restaurants.

Our walking tour takes us first to the city's old shipyard. We stop at the gates of Lech Walesa's 70s rallies for Solidarity, the Soviet bloc's first independent trade union and a movement that would eventually lead to Poland's political turnaround in the late 80s.

We pass a piece of the Berlin wall which was donated to mark that first blow the city's workers made against Communism. Soon we're learning that it's a city that has never been far from a power struggle, be it the Teutonic Knights and Polish kings of the 13th century, it's time as Danzig under Prussian and then German control or its years behind the Iron Curtain and its workers' subsequent push for freedom.

We stop for lunch at Kubicki, known as the city's oldest restaurant on the banks of the Motlawa river waterfront. We relax in the plush surroundings and enjoy their traditional dishes before heading out again.

Our next stop for one final fix of history is Gdansk's Second World War Museum. Charting the events leading to war, the tragedies throughout and it's thought provoking conclusion. The museum works hard to highlight that, in the end, there really were no winners.

We cap the day with a final stroll along the beautiful street of Ulica Mariacka to admire the amber products.

The next day we head to the third instalment in this northern city trilogy - Gdynia.

It's Gdansk's calmer brother and we spend a morning strolling the harbour and beachfront before taking the funicular to a higher vantage point to admire views of the coastline and, with the day clear, the distant peninsula of Hel.

We treat ourselves to lunch at restaurant Szluczka. Champagne accompanies four artistic courses of cold rhubarb soup, spring rolls and hummus, pork belly and a berry meringue. It's a lunch menu that is not only sublime but also surprisingly affordable, which explains its popularity with locals, businessmen and women and tourists alike.

Finally we enjoy a tour of the English-made ORP Blyskawica naval battleship.

The site is one of Gdynia's proudest attractions and you soon come to realise that the draw here is not just the imposing hull, the war-time guns or intricate engine room, but the stories that accompany all of it.

Her eventful life as the flagship vessel of the Polish navy, the war years when the crew managed to get to England and play an important role during the Battle of Britain or the following Soviet years are all depicted in the display cases below deck.

Another must-see day away from the beach is the brilliant Malbork Castle.

Expertly rejuvenated and packed with tales of medieval conquests and hidden histories, it'll take most of the day to explore its many halls. Trains run regularly from Gdansk.

Archers test their aim, re-enactors fire cannons, show off birds of prey, and ramp up the medieval merriment for all ages to enjoy.

Visitors can get even further into the spirit of things by enjoying lunch at restaurant Piwniczka based within the castle's walls. Wooden tables and rustic food will have you daydreaming of a life in the Westeros world of Game of Thrones.

Visitors should take the time to queue for an audio guide and be prepared to lose themselves among the artworks and riches the castle has to offer.

Our stay in Sopot ends with an evening at the popular forest opera concert venue. Crowds make their way to the wooded amphitheatre to watch a variety of bands throughout the summer as the party by the sea goes on.

Cheap flights from the UK to Gdansk mean beach-loving Brits on a budget can reach Sopot's sand and the surrounding attractions easier than ever.

Travel facts: Visit www.pomorskie.travel for all details.

Staying at: Hotel Villa Aqua (villaaqua.pl).

Aquapark Sopot (aquaparksopot.pl), Second World War Museum in Gdansk (muzeum1939.pl/en), Forest Opera (operalesna.sopot.pl).

Restaurants: Restaurant Sztuczka and Kubiki Restaurant (pomorskie-prestige.eu).

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For more information on Poland, visit www.poland.travel or contact Polish National Tourist Office in London at London@pot.gov.pl.

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