



The Unique Museums Of

POLAND

POLAND HAS ALWAYS
MIRACULOUSLY RISEN
FROM THE ASHES OF ITS
CHECKERED HISTORY,
EVER-CHANGING BORDERS,
RULERS, CAPITALS, MASSACRES,
THE DEVASTATION OF WORLD
WAR II, AND 44 YEARS OF
COMMUNIST OCCUPATION.

BY JULIE REKAI RICKERD

Today's country is a prosperous, sophisticated, culturally-rich free nation with a treasure trove of modern interactive museums, brilliantly reconstructed and decorated royal castles, and exquisite old churches and cathedrals.

Getting there on LOT Polish Airlines is a pleasure. With numerous flights from Toronto to Warsaw, its Dreamliner aircraft

bring back memories of the elegant service, legroom and tasty meals of yesteryear. In less than eight hours we were in Warsaw, ready to begin our adventures.

WARSAW

One of the great features we found was the ability to walk to all the sights. The ancient "Royal Route" is lined with foreign

embassies, including the Canadian, behind which we came upon a moving "memorial of thanks" dedicated to Canadian and Polish soldiers who fought side by side against the Germans. We stopped at the Church of the Holy Cross, the keeper of Frederic Chopin's 39-year-old heart, brought back from Paris to his homeland by his sister in 1850. Interactive benches outside the church describe his works and play one at the push of a button. In 2010, two crosswalks were painted on Emilii Plater to resemble piano keys in commemoration of Chopin's 200th birthday.

The Chopin Museum, located in the Ostrogski Palace, is a cornucopia of all things Chopin: his compositions, personality and legacy are showcased in 11 displays. Highlights are seeing the very last piano on which he played, his original manuscripts, letters and photographs of him with his illustrious artistic friends. Headphones allowed us to revel in recordings of his music throughout.

Our next walk took us to Warsaw's 700-year-old Old Town and the Royal Castle, both of which were razed to the ground during World War II. The astounding reconstruction's authenticity owes a great deal to 18th-century paintings by Canaletto documenting visuals of the area and the castle. Warsaw was a stopping point for many artists on their way to commissions at the Russian court in St. Petersburg. The castle's interior recreates magnificent spaces decorated with maps and fine paintings that include two Rembrandts, and majestic throne rooms. The walls of its Great Assembly Hall are embossed in gold.

The POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews took us on an extraordinary journey: from Jewish life in the Middle Ages to the present. In eight awe-inspiring galleries it showed us how and why Poland became home to 3.3 million Jews before the Holocaust.

There are superb recreations of Jewish homes, a multicoloured celestial canopy, a

synagogue and a Jewish street. Thirteen towns each demonstrate a different aspect of daily Jewish life. The years of 1939–45 reveal the horrors of the Holocaust: deportations, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and death camps.

After the devastation of war, Poles were confronted by new oppressors. We gained a panoramic view from the 30th floor of the Palace of Culture and Science, a 46-floor, 3,288-room "wedding cake" gift from Stalin that is now a living museum and home to four theatre companies, two orchestras, two museums, two public libraries, a swimming pool, a private university, and the Warsaw Tourist Information Centre. Much as we hated to leave Warsaw, Krakow beckoned.

KRAKOW

Once Poland's capital, Krakow is home to 16 universities, 45 convents and monasteries, 120 churches, seven synagogues and a castle. Its Jagiellonian University, founded in 1364, counts Nicolaus Copernicus and Pope John Paul II as alumni. The university's Maius College has a fascinating museum of scientific instruments. We admired the 14th-century "Jagiellonian Globe," used to determine astronomical coordinates, and the first globe to name America. We were also shown an



OPPOSITE TOP: POLIN The Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. Filip Nwiatkowski
BELOW: The European Solidarity Centre in Gdansk. Grzegorz Mehring
MIDDLE: The Amber Museum in Gdansk. Grzegorz Mehring
BOTTOM: The Main Square in Krakow. Pawel Kranz





ABOVE: The Wieliczka Salt Mine in Krakow. Rafał Stachurski

Arabian astrolabe from 1054; a set of cryogenic instruments; instruments for surveying and demonstrating physics and optics; and gold university scepters from 1406.

We explored the royal chambers, suites and towers of Krakow's 14th-century Wawel Castle. Highlights were the "Wawel heads" on the coffered ceiling in the Parliamentary Hall; the 136 Arras tapestries that survived World War II after being shipped to Ottawa for safekeeping; and Leonardo da Vinci's spectacular *Lady with an Ermine*.

In Krakow's Main Square, St. Mary's Basilica's altar is one of the finest in Europe. Its stunning polychrome measures 11 x 13 metres and was carved in limewood between 1477 and 1489. We climbed 200 steps to the top of a Basilica tower where a bugler plays every single hour, as happened in ancient times to warn citizens of approaching Tatars.

Ten kilometres from Krakow we visited the extraordinary Wieliczka Salt Mine. The underground complex has 2,400 chambers on nine levels ranging from 64 to 327 metres

in depth, connected with corridors 245 kilometres long. The mine's museum, on three levels from 64 to 135 metres deep, has 18 chambers connected by 1.5 kilometres of corridors. We discovered salt lakes, chambers with incredible religious sculptures, reliefs, and ornate chandeliers all created out of salt. There were replicas of horses that lived entire lives in the mine, transporting carts of excavated material and turning the treadmills.

GDANSK

More unique museums greeted us in Gdansk on the Baltic Sea. It was thrilling to walk through the shipyard where Lech Walesa's "Solidarity" movement began to dismantle Poland's communist regime. Walesa still maintains his office in the European Solidarity Centre next door, which is a modern, multimedia exposition of Poland's and other countries' fights for freedom.

Gdansk is the "World Capital of Amber." The Amber Museum in the city's historic

Dungeon Tower houses artifacts and jewellery commissioned by royalty, nobility, clergy and wealthy bourgeoisie. This fossilized resin of ancient coniferous trees comes in dozens of varieties, colours and degrees of transparency. At the Marine Station in Gdynia, on Gdansk's outskirts, is the Emigration Museum. Its interactive galleries trace backgrounds of 20 million Poles who emigrated from 1797 to now.

As this visit to Poland ended, we paused to appreciate the country's turbulent and tragic past, along with its people's resilience. 🇵🇱

TRAVEL PLANNER

LOT Polish Airlines (lot.com) flies daily from Toronto to Warsaw and serves the entire country with local flights.

Restaurants are ubiquitous and offer excellent Polish delicacies such as borscht (beet or white), savory and sweet pierogies, pork and everything duck. Fish dishes by the sea are a must. Polish vodka goes with everything.