

# Małopolska



It's a mystery why Małopolska remains relatively unexplored by international travellers. Pilgrims walk for more than two weeks to pray before the sacred *Black Madonna* painting of Częstochowa, but if they just kept walking they would find a range of surprising attractions, from the quaint to the downright quirky.

This is a region where you can be haunted by a friendly ghost in an underground chalk tunnel, explore the ruins of a castle once connected to another by a sugar-coated corridor, and meet townsfolk who quarrel over who has the right to bake rooster-shaped bread.

While the rest of the continent loudly extols its attributes, this eccentric pocket of Poland is a modest region that quietly polishes its treasures: Renaissance towns, cobblestoned laneways, sidewalk cafés, labyrinthine museums, opulent palaces, alluring castles and primeval forest.

Modern-day Małopolska began to form its complexion centuries ago, and its ancestry is still apparent today. The botanical and zoological interests of 16th-century aristocrats led to the establishment of vast natural estates; today, these are national parks. Ancient trade routes sliced through the region, bringing demographic diversity along with economic prosperity; today there are some 19 ethnic groups among the three million inhabitants. In 1569 the region accounted for almost half the country and now Małopolska is literally 'Little Poland'; it takes up a sizable chunk of the country with 22 districts blanketed over 57 cities and 2630 villages.

Turbulent tides of history, entrenched religious veneration and waves of cultural cosmopolitanism have added colourful layers to the character of Małopolska. The fact that it has maintained its modesty through it all is just another reason to experience it.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Joining throngs of **Black Madonna** (p216) pilgrims in Częstochowa
- Blushing as portraits peer down at you in Kielce's **Palace of the Kraków Bishops** (p218)
- Revelling in the distilled grandeur of **Pieskowa Skala Castle** (p210) in Ojców National Park
- Wishing you had a better phrasebook as you chat to a ghost in the **Chelm Chalk Tunnels** (p248)
- Commenting that 'they don't make them like they used to' at the fairy-tale fantasy of **Krzyżtopór Castle** (p229) in Ujazd
- Wondering why it happened at **Majdanek Extermination Camp** (p237) in Lublin
- Being dwarfed by ancient nature in **Roztocze National Park** (p257)
- Forgetting you're in Poland in the Italian Renaissance town of **Zamość** (p250)



## THE KRAKÓW– CZĘSTOCHOWA UPLAND

When Silesia fell to Bohemia in the mid-14th century, King Kazimierz III Wielki (Casimir III the Great, 1333–70) set about fortifying the frontier by building a chain of castles all the way from Kraków to Częstochowa. It is this 100km stretch that comprises the Kraków–Częstochowa Upland (Wyżyna Krakowsko–Częstochowska).

The plan worked; the wall of castles built on hilltops and ridges was never penetrated by the Bohemians. However, the 1655 Swede invasion destroyed many castles and changed the face of the upland. The conflicts of the turbulent 18th century completed the process of castle destruction, leaving some impressive ruins for the 21st-century traveller.

This upland region is also popularly known as the Jura, having been formed from limestone in the Jurassic period some 150 million years ago. Erosion left hundreds of caves and oddly shaped rock formations, which can still be enjoyed in Ojców National Park, most notably the 25m-high Hercules' club pillar at the base of resplendently restored Pieskowa Skała.

An excellent way to explore the upland is by hiking the Trail of the Eagles' Nest (Szlak Orlich Gniazd), which winds 164km from Kraków to Częstochowa past dramatic hills and countless castles. You needn't lug your camping gear – accommodation is never more than a day's walk away. Tourist offices in Kraków and Częstochowa can provide more information.

### OJCÓW NATIONAL PARK

Perhaps size doesn't matter after all. Ojców National Park (Ojcowski Park Narodowy) may be the smallest in Poland, but it packs two castles, several caves and countless rock-formations into its 21.5 sq km. The flora in the park is beech, fir, oak and hornbeam forest and the fauna a diverse mix of small mammals including badgers, ermines and beavers. This postcard-worthy park is one of the most beautiful areas of the Kraków–Częstochowa Upland.

### Orientation & Information

Most tourist attractions line the road running along the Prądnik River between Ojców and Pieskowa Skała. There is no direct bus

connecting these villages, but the flat 7km between them is well worth walking. The Trail of the Eagles' Nest also follows this road.

Before you embark on your quest, buy a map of the park in Kraków. There are a couple of versions, but Galileo's *Ojcowski Park Narodowy* (scale 1:20,000, 5.90zł from EMPiK) stands out for detailing every trail, road and rock.

The small **PTTK office** (☎ 012 389 2010; <http://ojcow.pttk.pl> in Polish; Ojców 15; ☎ 9am–3pm May–Oct) is in the car park at the foot of Ojców castle.

### Sights & Activities

The well-manicured village of Ojców is based in the national park, and is popular with day-trippers from Kraków. There are a couple of museums in town, but the true allure of Ojców is its access to the tourist trails running through the national park.

### CASTLES & MUSEUMS

If you can only do one thing in Ojców National Park, visit 14th-century **Pieskowa Skała Castle** (☎ courtyard 7am–sunset), one of the best-preserved castles in the upland and one of the brightest feathers in Poland's Renaissance cap. To find the Pieskowa Skała Castle, follow the path up the hill into the national park. After WWII (during which it served as a refuge for orphans) the castle was restored to its present glory. Truly an extension of the magnificence of Kraków, Pieskowa Skała Castle was rebuilt in the 16th century in imitation of the royal residence of Wawel and now serves as a branch of the Royal Wawel Castle Museum. Give yourself plenty of time to revel in the richness of the **museum** (☎ 012 389 6004; adult/concession 10/7zł; ☎ 10am–4pm Tue–Thu, 10am–noon Fri, 10am–6pm Sat & Sun May–Aug, 10am–4pm Tue–Sun Oct–Apr, closed Mon), which spans the Gothic 15th century, through the Renaissance and Baroque periods, right up to 19th-century Art Nouveau.

From the castle, the red trail along the road towards Ojców takes you to a 25m-tall limestone pillar; it's called **Hercules' Club** (Maczuga Herkulesa), despite obvious temptations to name it otherwise.

**Ojców Castle** (☎ 012 389 2044; adult/concession 2.5/1.5zł; ☎ 10am–4.45pm Apr–May & Aug–Sep, 10am–5.45pm Jun & Jul, 10am–3.45pm Oct, 10am–2.45pm Nov, closed Mon) was deserted in 1826, and has since fallen into ruin. The 14th-century entrance gate and octagonal tower are original, but there's little