

High Tatras



When you first see the snow-strewn High Tatras jutting out of the valley floor north of Poprad, you might just do a double take. This isn't Switzerland after all. Though the massif is only about 25km wide and 65km long, Gerlachovský štít (2654m) is the highest peak in the entire Carpathian range. The Tatras tower over most of Eastern Europe with some 25 peaks that measure more than 2500m. Photo opportunities at higher elevations can get you fantasising about a career at *National Geographic* – pristine snowfields, glacial lakes, crashing waterfalls, alpine meadows...

Down below, the pine forests took a beating in a serious wind storm a few years back, but the three main resort towns – Štrbské Pleso, Starý Smokovec and Tatranská Lomnica – still have a turn-of-the-20th-century feel. The forests to the east in the Belá Tatras suffered less damage and the village of Ždiar has a more folksy, local feel.

Some five million people a year come here to walk, climb, cycle or ski the 600km network of trails. Chairlifts, cable cars and a funicular reduce the effort required to get to higher elevations and the comprehensive system of *chaty* (mountain huts) along the upper trails provide convenient places to stay. Since 1949 most of this jagged range has been included in Tatra National Park (Tanap), complementing a similar park in Poland. But that hasn't arrested development (much to the chagrin of watchdogs such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature). A €250-million project is underway to add four luxury hotels and new ski runs by 2011.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Seeing the tiny wildflowers on the 2634m summit of **Lomnický štít** (p331)
- Enjoying a hearty goulash up in the alpine air at **Bilíkova chata** (p330)
- Staying among the atmospheric old log houses in **Ždiar** (p333)
- Soaking your aching hiker's muscles at the thermal pools at **Aqua City** (p326) in Poprad



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 052

