

welcome to Poland



A Thousand Years

Poland's roots go back to the turn of the first millennium, leaving a thousand years of twists and turns and kings and castles to explore. History buffs of the WWII vintage are well served. Tragically, Poland found itself in the middle of that epic fight, and monuments and museums dedicated to its battles – and to Poland's remarkable survival – can be seen everywhere. There's a growing appreciation, too, of the country's rich Jewish heritage. Beyond the deeply affecting Holocaust memorials, synagogues are being sensitively restored, and former Jewish centres such as Łódź and Lublin have set up heritage trails so you can trace this history at your own pace.

Castles to Log Cabins

The former royal capital of Kraków is a living lab of architecture over the ages. Its nearly perfectly preserved Gothic core proudly wears overlays of Renaissance, Baroque and Art Nouveau, a record of tastes that evolved over the centuries. Fabulous medieval castles and evocative ruins dot hilltops elsewhere in the country, and the fantastic red-brick fortresses of the Teutonic Knights stand proudly in the north along the Vistula. At the other extreme, simple but finely crafted wooden churches hide amid the Carpathian hills, and the ample skills of the country's highlanders are on display at the region's many skansens (open-air ethnographic museums).



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Chic medieval hot spots like Kraków and Gdańsk vie with energetic Warsaw for your urban attention. Outside the cities, woods, rivers, lakes and hills beckon for some fresh-air fun.

(left) Kluszkowce, Carpathian Mountains (p185)

(below) Savoury items for sale, Kraków (p112)



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Heart-Warming Food

If you're partial to good home cooking, the way your grandmother used to make it, you've come to the right place. Polish food is based largely on local ingredients like pork, cabbage, mushroom, beetroot and onion, combined simply and honed to perfection. Regional specialties like duck, goose, herring and even bison keep things from getting dull. As for sweets, it's hard to imagine a more accommodating destination. Cream cakes, apple strudel, pan-cakes, fruit-filled dumplings and a special national mania for *lody* (ice cream) may have you skipping the main course and jumping straight to the main event.

Fresh-Air Pursuits

Away from the big cities, much of Poland feels remote and unspoiled. While large swathes of the country are flat, the southern border is lined with a chain of low-lying but lovely mountains that invite days if not weeks of splendid solitude. Well-marked hiking paths criss-cross the country, taking you through dense forest, along broad rivers and through mountain passes. Much of the northeast is covered by interlinked lakes and waterways that are ideal for kayaking and canoeing – no experience necessary. Local outfitters are happy to set you up for a couple of hours or weeks.