

# Welcome to Poland

*Chic medieval hot spots such as 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.*

## A Thousand Years

Poland's roots go back to the turn of the first millennium, leaving a thousand years of twists, turns, kings and castles to explore. WWII history buffs are well served. Tragically, Poland found itself in the middle of that epic fight, and monuments and museums dedicated to these battles – and to Poland's survival – can be seen everywhere. There's a growing appreciation, too, of the rich Jewish heritage. Beyond the affecting Holocaust memorials, synagogues are being sensitively restored, and former Jewish centres such as Łódź and Lublin have 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 centuries. Fabulous medieval castles and evocative ruins dot hilltops around the country, and the fantastic red-brick fortresses of the Teutonic Knights stand proudly in the north along the Vistula. Simple but finely crafted wooden churches hide amid the Carpathian hills, and the ample skills of the highlanders are on display at the many skansens (open-air ethnographic museums).

## Heart-Warming Food

If you're partial to good home cooking, the way your grandmother made it, you've come to the right place. Polish food is based largely on local ingredients such as pork, cabbage, mushrooms, beetroot and onion, combined simply and honed to perfection. Regional specialities, including duck, goose and trout, keep things from getting dull. As for sweets, it's hard to imagine a more accommodating destination. Cream cakes, apple strudel, pancakes, fruit-filled dumplings and a special 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 ideal for kayaking and canoeing – no experience necessary. Local outfitters are happy to set you up for a couple of hours or weeks.



## Why I Love Poland

By Mark Baker, Writer

I first travelled to Poland as a student in the 1980s and was touched by the humour, wit and kindness of people living under difficult circumstances. Over numerous return trips, I've been able to dive deeper and try to understand the culture, often formed in a crucible of torturous history. These days, what I'm impressed by is the verve and energy of the people as they've created arguably Central Europe's greatest post-communist success story. And then there's *kiełbasa* (Polish sausage), *pierogi* (dumplings) and quince-flavoured vodka. What more could you ask for?

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