

# Warsaw



Take a stroll through Warsaw's pristine Old Town and Royal Castle and you'd think the city had enjoyed a comfortable existence the past 200 years. But at the end of WWII they, and nearly the entire metropolis, lay in rubble and ruin. The fact that Varsovians picked themselves up and rebuilt almost everything is reason enough to pay the country's capital a visit.

Warsaw's unquenchable energy not only extends to construction. Today it is a thriving, dynamic and progressive city, the epitome of a Polish nation firmly fixed on the future. Its bar, clubbing and music scene is unmatched in the country, and its yearly calendar is filled with theatre productions, operas and art-house film premieres. If culture is your thing, then Warsaw is your place.

The city's museums are often testament to its terrible past; many, like the Warsaw Rising Museum, retell the devastation WWII wrought. But there are more light-hearted gems too, like the picture-perfect palaces at Łazienki and Wilanów. Shoppers will max out credit cards on handmade products, and diners can satisfy their hunger with quality Polish cuisine and an ever-increasing array of food from around the world.

True, Warsaw is an acquired taste, and the first impressions probably won't appeal – stepping off the train or airport bus at Warszawa Centralna train station and staring at the drab blocks lining Al Jerozolimskie may tempt you to hop straight back on. But the vibe and drive of Poland's greatest city is infectious, and if you give it a little of your time, you'll be richly rewarded.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Taking in Warsaw and beyond from the top of the **Palace of Culture & Science** (p97)
- Listening to first-hand accounts of WWII at the **Warsaw Rising Museum** (p99)
- Spending your hard-earned cash on **handmade products** (p115)
- Marvelling at the renovation work in the **Old Town** (p91)
- Taking in the regal splendour of the **Royal Castle** (p87)
- Tapping into the capital's **nightlife** (p112), whether it be bar hopping, clubbing, live jazz or highbrow entertainment
- Admiring Warsaw's palaces at **Łazienki Park** (p101) and **Wilanów** (p101)



■ POPULATION: 1.7 MILLION

■ AREA: 495 SQ KM

**WARSAW IN...****One Day**

What better place to start a tour of Warsaw than the **Royal Castle** (p87), a former Mazovian stronghold. Spend the rest of the morning exploring the back streets of the **Old Town** (p91), then head to the **New Town** (p92) for a spot of lunch. Let the food digest while wandering through the **Historical Museum of Warsaw** (p91) before crossing town to the **Warsaw Rising Museum** (p99). Wait until late afternoon to take in the view from the top of the **Palace of Culture & Science** (p97), then round the day off with dinner at one of many restaurants in and around **ul Nowy Świat** (p96).

**Two Days**

Begin with a wander down **ul Krakowskie Przedmieście** (p96) and **ul Nowy Świat** (p96), the upper section of the Royal Way. Stop for breakfast en route before spending a few hours exploring the cultural gems of the **National Museum** (p100). Lunch south of **Al Jerolimskie** (p99), then pass the early afternoon in the beautiful **Łazienki Park** (p101). With the rest of the afternoon, explore Warsaw's **markets** (p115) or **handcraft stores** (p115) and end the two days with dinner and drinks, and perhaps a jazz concert in **Akwarium Jazzarium** (p113).

**HISTORY**

Warsaw's history has more ups and downs than a jejunum. But like the very essence of the Polish character, it has managed to return from the brink of destruction time and time again.

The first semblance of a town only sprang up around the beginning of the 14th century when the dukes of Mazovia built a stronghold on the site of the present Royal Castle. In 1413 the dukes chose Warsaw as their seat of power, and things went swimmingly for over 100 years until, in 1526, the last duke died without an heir. The burgeoning town – and the whole of Mazovia – fell under direct rule of the king in Kraków and was incorporated into royal territory.

Warsaw's fortunes took a turn for the better after the unification of Poland and Lithuania in 1569, when the Sejm (the lower house of parliament) voted to make Warsaw the seat of its debates, because of its central position. The ultimate ennoblement came in 1596 when King Zygmunt III Waza decided to move his capital from Kraków to Warsaw.

The Swedish invasion from 1655 to 1660 was not kind to Warsaw, but it swiftly recovered and continued to develop. Paradoxically, the 18th century – a period of catastrophic decline for the Polish state – witnessed Warsaw's greatest prosperity. A wealth of palaces and churches was erected, and cultural and artistic life flourished, particularly during the reign of the last Polish king, Stanisław August Poniatowski.

In 1795 the city's prosperity was again shattered – following the partition of Poland, its status was reduced to that of a provincial town. When Napoleon rolled into town in 1806 on his way to defeat in Russia, things started looking up – the warring Frenchman created the Duchy of Warsaw and the city became a capital once more. The celebrations were brief however, as in 1815 Warsaw, and the rest of Poland, fell under Russian rule. The Varsovians rebelled against their rulers in 1830 and 1864, but the city remained in Russian hands until WWI.

After WWI Warsaw was reinstated as the capital of independent Poland and the urban development and industrialisation begun in the late 19th-century continued. By 1939, the city had grown to 1.3 million, of whom 380,000 were Jews who had traditionally made up a significant part of Warsaw's community.

German bombs began to fall on 1 September 1939 and a week later the city was besieged; despite brave resistance, Warsaw fell within a month. The conquerors instantly set about terrorising the local population with arrests, executions and deportations, and a Jewish Ghetto was swiftly built. The city rebelled against the Germans twice, first in April 1943 (see boxed text, p99) and second in August 1944 (see boxed text, p37). Both rebellions were ruthlessly crushed.

At the end of the war the city of Warsaw lay in ruins and 800,000 people – more than half of the prewar population – had perished.