

# Kraków



Kraków, which celebrated its 750th birthday in 2007, is by far Poland's biggest drawcard, and it's immediately apparent why. As the royal capital for 500 years, the city was able to absorb much history and talent over the centuries and is today a treasure trove of Gothic and Renaissance architecture. Miraculously, this jewellery box emerged largely intact after WWII. As a result, no other city in Poland can boast so many historic buildings and monuments or such a vast collection of artworks, with some 2.3 million registered.

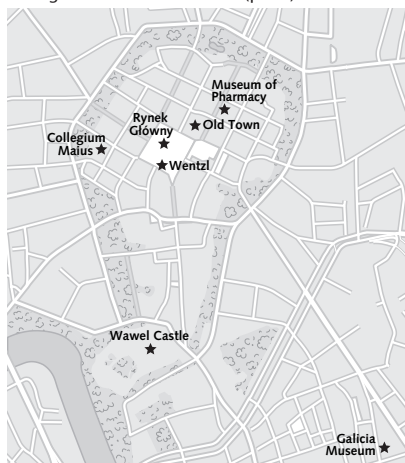
Wawel Castle is Kraków's centrepiece and a must-see, but most visitors will find themselves drawn to the Old Town, with its soaring Gothic churches and gargantuan Rynek Główny (Main Market Sq), the largest in the nation. Just outside the Old Town lies the former Jewish quarter Kazimierz, its silent synagogues reflecting the tragedy of the recent past.

Kraków is well endowed with attractions and diversions of a more modern variety, with hundreds of restaurants, bars and music clubs tucked away down its cellars and narrow alleyways. Though hotel prices are above the national average, and visitor numbers are very high in summer, this vibrant, cosmopolitan city is an essential part of any visit to Poland.

Give yourself at least several days or even a full week to do Kraków justice. This is not a place to rush through; the longer you stay, the more captivating you'll find it. And without even trying, you'll discover something pretty, old, curious or tasty around every corner.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoying an easy ride through Polish history at magnificent **Wawel Castle** (p169)
- Eyeballing odd elixirs and remedies at the wonderful **Museum of Pharmacy** (p184)
- Relaxing to the clip-clop of hooves on a tour of the Old Town from the back of a **horse-driven carriage** (p195)
- Getting down and, well, salty at the unique **Wieliczka Salt Mine** (p192)
- Meeting Copernicus face to face at the **Collegium Maius** (p183)
- Dining out on the views from and the fabulous cuisine at **Wentzl** (p202)
- Getting your head and feet around **Rynek Główny** (p172), Europe's largest medieval market square
- Witnessing both the sad past and hopeful future of Jewish Kraków at the **Galicja Museum** (p188) in Kazimierz



■ POPULATION: 752,700

■ AREA: 327 SQ KM

## HISTORY

The first traces of Kraków's existence date from around the 7th century, but the earliest written record of the town dates from 966, when a Sephardic Jewish merchant from Cordova called Abraham ben Jacob (Ibrahim ibn Yaqub) visited and referred to the town in his account as a trade centre called Krakwa.

In 1000 Kraków was made a bishopric and 38 years later the capital of the Piast kingdom. Wawel Castle and several churches were built in the 11th century and the town, which had sprung up initially around Wawel Hill, grew in size and power.

The Tatars burned Kraków almost to the ground in 1241 but by 1257 the new town's centre had been set on a grid pattern, with a large market square in the middle.

Kraków rose to new prominence in 1364 when King Kazimierz Wielki, a generous patron of art and scholarship, founded the Kraków Academy, what would later be called Jagiellonian University, the second university in central Europe after the University of Prague founded four years earlier.

Kraków's economic and cultural boom led to a golden age of expansion in the 15th and 16th centuries. Kraków became a member of the Hanseatic League, which attracted craftspeople. Learning and science prospered – Nicolaus Copernicus, who would later develop his heliocentric view of the universe, studied here in the 1490s – and the population passed the 30,000 mark.

But all was not well in the royal city. In 1596 King Zygmunt III moved the capital to Warsaw, although Kraków remained the place of coronations and burials. The Swedish invasions, beginning in 1655, accelerated the decline; by the end of the following century the city's population had been reduced to 10,000. In the Third Partition of Poland (1795), Kraków was made part of the Austrian province of Galicia.

The city enjoyed reasonable cultural and political freedom under the Austrian landlords; by the close of the 19th century it had become a major centre for Polish culture and the spiritual capital of a country that officially no longer existed. The avant-garde artistic and literary movement known as *Młoda Polska* (Young Poland) was born here in the 1890s, and it was here that a national independence movement originated. The latter would go

on to spawn the Polish Legions under the command of Józef Piłsudski.

By the outbreak of WWII the city had 260,000 inhabitants, 65,000 of whom were Jews. During the war, Kraków, like all other Polish cities, saw its Jewish citizens herded into a ghetto and transported to Nazi work and extermination camps; most of them would never be seen again. The city was thoroughly looted by Nazis but didn't experience major combat or bombings. As such, Kraków is virtually the only large Polish city that has retained its old architecture and appearance.

After the war, the communist government moved quickly to open a huge steelworks at the newly created suburb of Nowa Huta, just 10km east of the Old Town, in a bid to break the traditional intellectual and religious framework of the city. The social engineering proved less successful than its unanticipated by-product – ecological disaster. Monuments that had managed to survive invasions by the Tatars, Swedes and Nazis have been gradually eaten away by acid rain and toxic gas.

With the creation of Nowa Huta and other new suburbs after WWII, Kraków trebled in size to become the country's third-largest city, after Warsaw and Łódź. The historic core, though, has changed little and continues to be the political, administrative and cultural centre of the city.

## ORIENTATION

Virtually everything you'll need to see or do is conveniently squeezed into the compact Old Town, measuring roughly 800m by 1200m and encircled by Planty, a narrow parkland that was once a moat. At the centre of the Old Town is Rynek Główny (Main Market Sq) while at its southern tip sits Wawel Hill and its castle. Further south stretches the district of Kazimierz.

The bus and train stations sit next to one another just beyond the northeastern border of the Old Town; from here it's about 600m to Rynek Główny. John Paul II International Airport is at Balice, 11km west of the city centre.

## Maps

The free map from the tourist offices should be sufficient for a short visit. If you want something more detailed, one of the best is the 1:20,000 scale *Kraków Plan Miasta* (7.90zł), which is published by Copernicus, and includes a 1:10,000 scale map of the Old Town.