

Going Underground:

Two Days in Kraków

Glorious Kraków! Poland's best-preserved medieval city! A vibrant and cosmopolitan university town! But an underground city? From the Podgórze ghetto and the Wieliczka Salt Mines to the bars beneath Rynek Główny, there's an underworld here that's waiting to be discovered.

TYRANTS AND TRABANTS

Any trip to Kraków should begin with a saunter through the **Stara Miasto**. Soak up the atmosphere – and the daylight – over breakfast at **Europejska** (Rynek Główny 35; www.europejska.pl) or head straight underground for the basement café at **Likus Concept Store** (Rynek Główny 13).

Suitably satiated, make your way south to **Wawel Hill** (www.wawel.krakow.pl) and its castle. Let the crowds queue for the Royal Apartments and instead take in the views from the parapets before heading into the **Dragon's Cave**. Clamber down the 135 steps into the dank grotto and ponder its inhabitant's undignified end. The fire-breathing bully was lured from his lair with a sulphur-soaked sheepskin; he ate it, thought his stomach was on fire, rushed to the river and drank until he exploded. Evacuated of its tyrant, the cave became a spot for assassinations. It even served as a seventeenth-century stag venue – an inn and brothel, frequented by the king himself, allegedly. All this is hard to imagine as you stumble through the chilly den before emerging on the banks of the Wisła.

From the cave, stroll south along the riverbank till you reach the Powstanco W Śląnskych bridge. To the south lies **Podgórze**, the former WWII Jewish ghetto. There you'll find the famed **Schindler Factory** (Lipowa 4;

not open to the public) and the **Eagle Pharmacy** (Plac Bohaterów Getta 18), now a museum dedicated to the harsh realities of life in the ghetto.

Back on the north bank, grab some lunch at **Pod Temidą** (Grodzka 43), a socialist-era milk bar. It looks like a works canteen, the menu is in Polish, but it's all good, cheap stuff; expect *pierogi*, soups and *bigos* (meat and cabbage stew).

Next, hop into your pre-booked vintage Trabant for a Crazy Guides (☎ 0888 68 68 71; www.crazyguides.com) tour of **Nowa Huta**, the 1950s "workers' paradise". This unforgettable trip down Communist-era memory lane includes a visit to an apartment decorated in the contemporary style. Tours are 'authentic', which means the car is as likely to break down as not – so allow a full afternoon for this trip.

Made it back to town? Hop off in **Stara Miasto**, where you can settle into an evening of subterranean delights. Have a meal in the atmospheric vaulted cellars of either **Smak Ukraiński** (Kanonicza 15; www.ukrainska.pl), serving Ukrainian borscht and dumplings, or **Restauracja Galicja** (Starowiślna 7; www.galicja.com) for modern Polish specialities, including game.

Next, head for a cellar-dwelling jazz club, such as **Jazz Club U Muniaka** (Floriańska 3; www.umuniaka.krakow.pl) or **Piec' Art** (Szewska 12; www.piec.krakow.pl). Or hit the pubs and clubs: try **U Kacpra** (Ślawkowska 2), a typically Krakówian place – dark, subterranean and heaving; or **Midgard** (Szpitalna 38; www.klubmidgard.pl), a cavernous underground hangout with snazzy sofas, a big dance floor and international guest DJs.

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SALT MINES AND SALT BEEF

Today, you're heading out of town. Hop on a bus at Starowiślna and make the 15km trip southeast to the **Wieliczka Salt Mine** (www.kopalina.pl). Dispel any thoughts of dank, dark tunnels – salt mines are dry and healthy places. In fact, there's a sanatorium here, 210m below ground.

The two-hour tours start with a giddy descent down 380 wooden steps to a depth of 135m. (Thankfully, a lift whisks you to the top at the end.) From here you enter a series of chambers, many containing statues hewn out of the grey-green rock salt by the miners. Highly polished, the statues look remarkably like marble.

The real showstopper is the ornately decorated **Chapel of the Blessed Kings**, a staggering 54m by 17m, its tiled floors, statuary and reliefs are all carved out of salt. It took 30 years to create, was completed in 1927 and is still used for (occasional) religious services and concerts.

The tour ends with a display of mining artefacts, the inevitable souvenir stalls and a basic restaurant.

Back in the city, head for **Kazimierz**, the old Jewish quarter, centred on Szeroka. Shabby and derelict for decades, the district has undergone a Renaissance in recent years. The heart of this redevelopment is Plac Nowy, a lively spot filled with bars and pubs.

Take time to stroll through the neighbourhood. Relax over a coffee and some much-needed daylight in the terraced gardens of **Eszeweria** (Józefa 9). And enjoy a meal in the atmospheric surroundings of **Klezmer Hois** (Szeroka 6; www.klezmer.pl), where authentic borscht, Jewish caviar and kosher vodka are served up nightly along with live music.

Later, head for the bars around **Plac Nowy**. We particularly recommend **Singer** (Estery 22). One of the first café-bars to open in this area, its shabby-chic look – complete with tables made from the eponymous sewing machines – has been an inspiration for boho

bars across town. It's the perfect spot to reflect on your underground Kraków experience.

SLEEPING

Budget:

Nathan's Villa (www.nathansvilla.com; ☎ 422 3545) Brightly painted dorms and a friendly atmosphere come as standard, as does a free breakfast, laundry and Internet access. There's a pub in the cellar, to boot.

Midrange:

Hotel Eden (www.hoteleden.pl; ☎ 430 6565) Located in three restored 15th-century houses, comfortable Eden offers Poland's only working *mikveh* (Jewish ritual bathhouse). There's also a sauna and mini-spa with therapeutic salt treatments and the inevitable cellar pub (Ye Olde Goat).

Top End:

Hotel Copernicus (www.hotel.com.pl; ☎ 424 3400) On one of Kraków's most picturesque cobbled streets, Copernicus is among the city's finest hotels. Wooden-beamed ceilings and marble bathrooms make for a sumptuous atmosphere.

For more reviews of Kraków accommodation, check out the Sleep section on www.lonelyplanet.com/accommodation.

By Judith Bamber

For the complete guide to Kraków grab a copy of Lonely Planet's *Best of Kraków* guide, available online at shop.lonelyplanet.com.

