

POLAND: Bridging East & West

11 days

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Day 1 Arrive in Krakow

Arrival in Krakow.

Krakow is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. It was originally the home of the Polish royalty (between 1038 and 1596), before the capital was moved to Warsaw. The cobblestone streets, majestic churches (almost 100!), and old world charm make Krakow an unforgettable destination.

Overnight in Krakow.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Krakow: City Walking Tour

Krakow is very compact, and the whole central region with its cobblestone streets is full of well-preserved architecture, Gothic churches and splendid museums. On our sightseeing tour (largely on foot at a leisurely pace) we visit Wawel Hill with the Royal Castle, Market Square, and the 16th century Renaissance Cloth Hall. We continue onward to Jagiellonian University and St Mary's Church with the Wit Stwosz altar. This was designed in 1489 by Wit Stwosz of Nuremburg and is the finest sculptural work in Poland.

We then stroll down the hill from the castle complex and enter the Old Town, one of the most famous old districts in Poland and the centre of Poland's political life from 1038 until King Sigismund III Vasa relocated his court to Warsaw in 1596. The entire medieval old town is among the first sites chosen for the UNESCO's World Heritage List. The district features the centrally located Rynek Glowny, or Main Square, the largest medieval town square of any European city. There is a number of historic landmarks in its vicinity, such as St. Mary's Basilica (Kosciol Mariacki), Church of St. Wojciech (St. Adalbert's), Church of St. Barbara, as well as other national treasures.

While in Krakow, we'll also have a walking visit of Kazimierz, once an independent town governed separately from Krakow until the late middle ages. Later, it became known as the Jewish Quarter of the city and was finally transformed into a center for Krakow's beatnik bars and cafe culture.

Overnight in Krakow.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Oskar Schindler Museum & Wieliczka Salt Mines

This morning we visit the Oskar Schindler's Factory Museum. The story of Oskar Schindler and his employees is one which has been well-known since the book and film by Thomas Keneally and Steven Spielberg (whose film 'Schindler's List' was shot almost entirely in Krakow). Individual histories of Krakow's wartime inhabitants guide visitors through the exhibit which covers the war of 1939, everyday life under occupation, the fate of the Jews and the city's underground resistance using vast archival documents, photos, radio and film recordings, period artifacts and multimedia.

After a break for lunch featuring Polish specialties,* we'll embark on a truly unique adventure: a descent into the Wieliczka Salt Mines. This isn't your average mine tour. Prepare to be amazed as we journey 5 kilometers (3 miles) beneath the earth's surface, exploring a world sculpted entirely by salt.

We'll wander through a labyrinth of salt-formed caves and grottoes, each with its own unique character and charm. Our descent will lead us to a mesmerizing subterranean lake, its surface reflecting the eerie glow of the mine lamps. And, perhaps the most awe-inspiring sight of all, we'll visit a chapel adorned with intricate sculptures, all carved entirely from the surrounding salt.

The scale of this operation is truly staggering. The Wieliczka Salt Mines boast 11 levels of galleries, stretching an incredible 300 kilometers (186 miles) in total. Over 700 years of continuous mining have yielded a staggering 20,000,000 tonnes (22,000,000 tons) of rock salt.

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But the history of the Wieliczka Salt Mines goes beyond mere extraction. Local legend tells the tale of Princess Kinga, a Hungarian princess whose lost ring was miraculously found within a block of salt mined here in the 13th century. This discovery is said to be the origin story of the mines themselves.

Return to Krakow.

* Because of the fullness of our day, and because past travellers indicated a desire for some independence for dinner while in Krakow (and an earlier night), we include a light lunch instead of dinner today.

Overnight in Krakow.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 4 Krakow - Oswiecim (Auschwitz) - Czestochowa - Lodz

Today we embark on a poignant journey to Oswiecim (Auschwitz) and Brzezinka (Birkenau), the former Nazi concentration camps that now serve as a haunting memorial to the 1.5 million victims of 28 nationalities who perished here. As we walk through the camp's somber grounds, our knowledgeable guide will reveal the compelling history of this site, sharing personal stories and anecdotes that bring the past to life. This emotional experience will leave a lasting impression, reminding us of the importance of tolerance, compassion, and humanity.

We continue our journey to Czestochowa, the spiritual heart of Poland, where pilgrims from far and wide flock to Jasna Gora (Luminous Mountain) Monastery. This revered site is home to the iconic Black Madonna, Poland's most cherished relic, said to have been painted by St. Luke the Evangelist himself. Legend has it that the icon was brought from Jerusalem and installed in the monastery in 1384. As we explore the monastery, we'll delve into the fascinating history and symbolism surrounding this sacred image.

Our final destination today is Lodz (pronounced "Wooj"), a city with a rich and diverse heritage. Once a small settlement, Lodz blossomed into one of Europe's largest textile industry centers in the 19th century, earning the nickname "a promised land" and "a city of many cultures." As we arrive in Lodz, we'll discover a city that proudly celebrates its multicultural roots, where people of different nationalities and faiths came together to build a thriving community. We'll have time to explore the city's unique character and enjoy dinner at one of its many restaurants.

Overnight in Lodz.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Lodz - Warsaw: City Tour

This morning, we journey to Warsaw, Poland's resilient capital, where a rich history and vibrant culture await. Upon arrival, we embark on a comprehensive city tour, exploring the meticulously restored Old Town, a testament to the city's determination and spirit. After being razed during World War II, Warsaw's citizens embarked on a remarkable reconstruction campaign, resulting in today's stunning UNESCO-protected site. As we wander through the cobblestone streets, we'll discover an impressive array of churches, palaces, and marketplaces, showcasing the city's fascinating history, spanning from the 13th to the 20th century.

Having shaken off its Soviet-era persona, Warsaw has emerged as a thriving business and cultural hub, proudly showcasing its true colours. Our sightseeing adventure begins with a scenic drive along the Royal Route, followed by a brief orientation tour of the city. We'll delve into the historic Old Town on foot, visiting iconic landmarks such as Castle Square and the Uprising Monument. Next, we'll cross the river to the Praga district, where we'll take in the panoramic views of the city. Our journey continues in the Jewish Ghetto area, where we'll visit the poignant Umschlag Platz and the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. This state-of-the-art museum tells the captivating story of Poland's Jewish community, which flourished for over a thousand years, through a multimedia narrative exhibition.

Overnight in Warsaw.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Warsaw Sightseeing - To Torun

As we bid farewell to Warsaw, we pay a poignant visit to the Warsaw Uprising Museum, a poignant tribute to the brave men and women who fought for Poland's freedom during World War II. Located in a former tram power station, the museum is a treasure trove of artifacts, personal stories, and historical records that bring the 1944 Warsaw Uprising to life. Explore the exhibits, which include weapons, love letters, and personal belongings of the insurgents, and gain a deeper understanding of this pivotal moment in Polish history.

Having delved into Warsaw's complex past, we journey to the enchanting medieval town of Torun, nestled on the banks of the Vistula River in northwestern Poland. This charming city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, boasts an astonishingly well-preserved medieval architecture, having miraculously escaped bombing during World War II. Stroll through the cobblestone streets and admire the stunning Gothic buildings, including the majestic St. Mary's Church. As we wander, the warm atmosphere of the old town envelops us, inviting us to linger at one of the many outdoor cafes and restaurants, where we can indulge in local delicacies and soak up the timeless charm of Torun.

Overnight in Torun.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Torun: Nicolaus Copernicus Museum - Gdansk

This morning, we delve into the charms of Torun, a medieval gem nestled on the Vistula River. As we wander through the UNESCO-listed Old Town, we're surrounded by the city's rich history and architectural splendor. Admire the imposing 13th-century Town Hall, one of the most impressive in Northern Europe, and explore the stunning churches and historic streets that preserve Torun's past glory.

Our journey continues at the Nicolaus Copernicus Museum, located in the very house where the renowned astronomer was born. Step into the world of Copernicus and discover an incredible collection of artifacts, including rare books, ancient prints, and intricate models of astronomical instruments. Gain insight into the life and work of this Polish genius, who revolutionized our understanding of the universe.

As we make our way to Gdansk, the 'Maritime Pearl of Poland,' we're enchanted by the city's captivating blend of medieval charm and maritime heritage. The city's skyline is dominated by towering, narrow buildings with peaked roofs and decorative facades, perfectly complemented by the cobblestone streets. The famous Gdansk Shipyards, where the Solidarity movement was born, are visible from many parts of the city.

As we explore Gdansk's marvellous Old Town, we stroll along the iconic Dlugi Targ (Long Market), lined with picturesque buildings, quaint shops, and lively cafes. Every step reveals a new treasure, from the majestic Neptune's Fountain to the impressive St. Mary's Church, one of the largest brick churches in the world.

Overnight in Gdansk.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Gdansk Area Tour

Its position on the Baltic has historically made Gdansk one of the most important port cities in Northern Europe, and tragically also the scene of a rather disturbing past. World War II was ignited by a dispute over the control of the city. By the end of the war the city lay almost completely in ruins. The German population was expelled and replaced by Poles as the city came under Polish rule and changed its name to Gdansk. However, the impact of its former German ties is still evident. Although most of the old buildings were damaged or destroyed in WWII, they have been painstakingly restored or rebuilt.

□ This morning we head out of town a short distance to visit the Oliwa Cathedral. This Holy Trinity, Blessed Virgin Mary, and St Bernard's Church was first erected as a Cistercian shrine back in the 13th century. Reconstructed in 1350 after a great fire, it re-emerged in the Gothic style, but many of the new fixtures were to be relatively short lived. The Gothic interior was extremely damaged in a 1577 fire and was replaced with the Baroque fixtures we admire today for their beauty and intensity.

□ The Oliwa Cathedral is perhaps best known for its massive, splendid organ. The organ is comprised of over 7,000 pipes and is decorated with movable angels and brightly painted stars. When built, the instrument was the largest in Europe. The main altar is also very impressive, and if the organ is in use, you're sure to be riveted by its magnificent sound!

While in Gdansk we'll also visit the European Solidarity Centre, a museum and library devoted to the history of Solidarity, the Polish trade union and civil resistance movement, and other opposition movements of Communist Eastern Europe.

The balance of the day is free to enjoy Gdansk. Gdansk is sometimes called the Amber Capital of the World; the surrounding area is the richest known source of this semi-precious stone, and the product can be viewed (and purchased, of course) in many shops in town. In order to maximize your free time in this interesting place, we do not include dinner this evening.

Overnight in Gdansk.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

Day 9 Gdansk - Malbork - Olsztyn

This morning, we embark on a scenic drive to Olsztyn, nestled in the heart of Poland's breathtaking lake district. En route, we make a thrilling stop at the majestic Teutonic Knights Castle in Malbork, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the largest brick building in Europe. This imposing 13th-century fortress, with its towering walls, grand halls, and intricate Gothic architecture, is a testament to the region's rich history and a must-see attraction.

As we continue our journey, the landscape unfolds like a canvas of rolling hills, sparkling lakes, and dense forests. We arrive in Olsztyn, a charming town surrounded by the pristine beauty of the Masurian Lake District. The crowning jewel of Olsztyn is its picturesque old town, encircled by a set of well-preserved fortified walls that whisper tales of the past. As we wander through the narrow streets, we'll discover a treasure trove of medieval architecture, quaint shops, and cozy cafes, inviting us to soak up the town's warm atmosphere.

Overnight in Olsztyn.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Olsztyn - Olsztynek - Warsaw

This morning, we bid farewell to Olsztyn and embark on a scenic drive back to Warsaw. En route, we make a fascinating stop at the Ethnographic Park in Olsztynek, home to the Museum of Folk Architecture, one of Europe's oldest and most captivating open-air museums.

As we wander through the park's picturesque grounds, we'll discover a treasure trove of traditional folk architecture, showcasing the region's rich cultural heritage. Admire the charming wooden houses, rustic barns, and historic windmills, each one telling a story of the past. Step inside the beautifully restored old homes, and explore the evangelical church, blacksmith, pottery stand, and windmill, each one offering a glimpse into the region's traditional way of life.

Be sure to check out the temporary exhibitions, featuring an array of traditional handicrafts and modern folk art from the region. From intricate woodcarvings to vibrant textiles, these exhibits showcase the region's enduring passion for traditional craftsmanship. After a captivating morning at the Ethnographic Park, we continue our journey back to Warsaw, filled with unforgettable memories of Poland's rich cultural heritage.

Overnight in Warsaw.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Departure

Departure from Warsaw, or continue to our tour of the Baltic States.

SZEROKIEJ DROGI!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast