

Małopolska heritage appreciated

Małopolska may literally be the “Lesser” Poland, yet it boasts an exalted status in the Polish cultural firmament. Visiting the region to discover the greatest Polish traditions and heritage has been a long-established rite of passage for schoolchildren. How about choosing it for a, perhaps extended, city break?

It is no coincidence that Kraków tops the ranks of favourite city break destinations. Enjoying the name of the Royal Capital City, it is a treasure trove of all forms of heritage able to build a modern cosmopolitan centre on centuries of creativity and education. Its success is proven by the numerous students, poets, painters, musicians, and other creative individuals who throng from all over the world to Kraków to work here, many in startups and the IT industry, and delight in its atmosphere.

Little wonder: Kraków is home to classy restaurants, friendly pubs, romantic cafés and bars serving international, exotic, and local food and beverages (craft beers brewed according to traditional recipes and mead are a must and a recommendation from the locals). Most of these are situated in the UNESCO-enlisted city centre: around Europe’s largest medieval market square and among the grid of streets surrounded by the Planty Garden Ring. Walking in them, you’re certain to chance upon Italian-style sights and atmosphere. The must-sees include St Mary’s Church in the Main Market Square with a large medieval high altar made by a German master sculptor from Nuremberg, the Renaissance Sigismund Chapel in Wawel Cathedral – the work of an Italian from Florence, Lady with an Ermine, Poland’s only Leonardo (another Italian) in the Princes Czartoryski Museum, and whatever you set your eyes on. Some suggestions include the University Quarter with the Maius and Novum colleges and the nearby St Anne’s Church, and the heart of everything Polish – Wawel Hill with its Royal Castle and Cathedral.

The walls of the castle command a view of the spires of the Church “on the Rock” that stands in Kazimierz: once a separate town, now an intrinsic part of Kraków. Kazimierz with its seven synagogues was the hub of Jewish life for centuries. Its rich Jewish heritage lets you follow the entire history of European Jews, from the first merchants to the horror of the Holocaust. Here and in Podgórze, on the other bank of the Vistula, Steven Spielberg filmed Schindler’s List in authentic locations, including the ghetto and Oskar Schindler’s Enamel Factor, now a museum. The Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau is only 40 miles away. This piece of Małopolska’s heritage was recognised by UNESCO in just the second year of its World Heritage List.

There are many World Heritage Sites in Małopolska. One of them is Wieliczka, home to a salt mine that is one of the longest operating industrial establishments in the world and an immeasurable source of wealth for former Polish kings. Wieliczka and the nearby Bochnia salt mine welcome visitors to their subterranean corridors and spacious chambers, where numerous stunning works of art can be admired.

The lush central plain of Małopolska is framed by higher lands. In the north, a Jurassic plateau with magnificent jutting rocks attracts tourists to the “Eagles’ Nests” – an array of ruined and restored castles and watchtowers connected by walking and cycling trails. Do not miss the Ojcowski National Park lying on the outskirts of Kraków: it may be small but is full of historical heritage mixed with nature, to mention a cave that served as a legendary hideaway to Ladislaus the Elbow-High, King of Poland. Have we mentioned delicious local food? This is your place to taste the fabled Ojców trout, which tastes best with a glass of local white wine.

The other edge of the central valley rises to much higher altitudes, reaching well over 8,000ft. The Tatras, just over 50 miles away from Kraków, are awe-inspiring rocky mountains with unique wildlife, including bears, chamois, and marmots that can be spotted by the characteristic dark tarns (mountain lakes) reflecting the surrounding dwarf pine trees and the white-grey rocks. The Tatras are also a ski resort; it is the



winter capital of Poland and the pride of Polish highlanders, who cherish their amazing culture, embracing everything from the unique architectural style, via the characteristic costume, to the local dishes.

The belt of the Beskidy Mountains stretching between the Tatras and the Vistula Valley offers marvellous opportunities for backpacking, trekking, and cross-country skiing. Rafting down the Dunajec between the sheer faces of the Pieniny Mountains is an unforgettable adventure, and locals now offer boats and canoes for rent to cross the Dunajec Gorge and the nearby Czorszyński Reservoir stretching between two medieval castles atop their rocky promontories. Both the ruined and the inhabited one are enshrouded in legends, one reaching as far as Peru.

With its varied landscapes, rich heritage, creative artists, and industrious entrepreneurs, Małopolska has plenty to offer, including guided heritage walks, visits to spas, and a plethora of festivals. Just choose your preferred season and options, and visit Małopolska, the region that not only promises unforgettable impressions and experiences, but also delivers on its promise!

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