

The Best of Poland

1 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- Sip your coffee on Kraków's Main Square (Kraków). Superlatives don't do justice to Kraków's main square, the Rynek Główny. It's said to be Central Europe's largest town square and is reputed to have the most bars and cafes per square meter than any other place in the world. Even if that's not the case, it's still one of the most jaw-droppingly beautiful spaces you'll find and the perfect spot to enjoy a cup of coffee or a glass of beer and watch the world go by. And don't forget to listen for the bugler on top of St. Mary's Church at the top of the hour. See p. 121.
- Reflect on history at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp (Oświęcim). The word "best" is clearly a misnomer here, yet a visit to the Nazi wartime extermination camp that came to define the Holocaust is one of the most deeply affecting and moving experiences you will have anywhere. Give yourself at least a few hours to take in both camps (just a couple of miles apart). Auschwitz is undeniably horrible, but it is at Birkenau where you really grasp the scale of the tragedy. See p. 146.
- Shop for souvenirs along Gdańsk's Długa Street (Gdańsk). As you stroll Gdańsk's main pedestrian thoroughfare, it's hard to believe this stunning port city was reduced to rubble in World War II, so historically sensitive was the reconstruction. Amber-philes will think they died and went to heaven. It's not surprising when you consider that the Baltic Sea (where amber comes from) is just a block away. Still, the quality and choice is overwhelming. There's even an amber museum if the shops don't have what you're looking for. See p. 231.
- Look for bison in Białowieża (Białowieża National Park). Better put this under your "Most Unexpected Travel Experiences," too. Who would have imagined that part of Poland's eastern border with Belarus is primeval forest that's home to Europe's largest surviving bison herd? Both children and adults alike will enjoy touring the pristine national park. See p. 275.
- Visit a wooden "Peace" church (Jawor and Świdnica). Few visitors to Poland have heard of these two massive 17th-century wooden Protestant churches in southwest Poland. Congregations had to build the churches from wood because of strictures on Protestant worship at the time by the Catholic Habsburg rulers. The churches' size, grace, and stunning beauty all testify to the builders' faith and their remarkable engineering skills. See p. 193.
- See the miraculous icon of the "Black Madonna" (Częstochowa). The first Pauline monks starting coming here to the Jasna Góra Monastery in the 14th century. Over the years it evolved into Catholic Poland's most important pilgrimage destination and place of worship, drawing millions of Poles and other people from around the world

every year. Authorship of the miraculous Black Madonna icon is traditionally attributed to Luke, and the painting is said to have made its way here through the centuries from the Holy Lands, to Constantinople (now Istanbul), to the Ukrainian city of Belz, and

finally to Częstochowa in 1382. The monastery allows the painting to be viewed for only a few hours each day, and getting a glimpse of it among the throngs is not unlike trying to see the Mona Lisa at the Louvre. Still, it's very much worth the effort. See p. 106.

2 THE BEST HOTEL SPLURGES

- **Królewski (Gdańsk).** Rooms to die for just across the canal from Gdańsk's Old Town. Number 310 is a corner room with views over the city in two directions. The breakfast room looks out over the river through little round windows, creating the illusion of being on an ocean cruise. See p. 235.
- **Hotel Carska (Białowieża National Park).** A hotel fit for a tsar—in this case, Russia's Tsar Nicholas II. A must for fans of unusual hotel design, this hotel/restaurant occupies a refurbished railway station that was built to welcome the tsar and his family in the 19th century. The waiting room has been converted into an upscale restaurant, but you may not want to ever leave your room. See p. 278.
- **Pałac Bonerowski (Kraków).** Kraków's latest entry in the five-star category is a jaw-dropper: a sensitively restored 13th-century town house just off the main square. Many period elements, including original stonework and carvings, have been preserved in the spacious rooms. See p. 134.
- **Jaczo Lodge (Suwałki Landscape Park).** This lovely cluster of stone and timber houses is hemmed in by woods

and the pristine water of Lake Jaczo. The owners are architects who have meticulously designed every space, from the luxurious rooms to the rose bushes and fruit trees in the garden. See p. 272.

- **Grand Hotel Starny (Zakopane).** Beautifully restored turn-of-the-century manor hotel that will whisk you away to the stylish 1920s and '30s with its elegant lobby and cocktail bar. The hotel recently added a luxury spa, with indoor pool and Jacuzzi. See p. 153.
- **Pałac Paulinum (Jelenia Góra).** This elegant 19th-century palais was originally the home of a Silesian textile baron; now it's a stunningly renovated luxury hotel, but thankfully without the ultra-luxury price tag. See p. 199.
- **Grand Hotel (Sopot).** Step back in time to the Jazz Age 1920s, when summering in Sopot meant you had really arrived. The Grand attempts to recapture some of that glamour with sumptuous period interiors, high-class service, and a location right on the beach. See p. 244.
- **Stary (Kraków).** Eye-catching, upscale renovation of a former palace just off the Rynek Główny. Amenities include two indoor pools and a salt cave. See p. 135.

3 THE BEST HOTEL BARGAINS

- **Hotel Karmel (Kraków).** This lovely family-run inn, tucked away on a quiet street in the former Jewish quarter of

Kazimierz, is a total surprise. From the warm and smiling receptionist at the front desk to the parquet flooring and

- the crisp linens on the beds, everything about this place says quality. See p. 137.
- **Premiere Classe (Warsaw).** This French-run chain came up with the novel idea of offering clean, modern rooms the size of a cubicle for a fraction the price of other hotels. Sure, the rooms are microscopic, but the beds are big and comfortable, the bathrooms are clean, and the hotel location is just a couple of tram stops from the main sights. See p. 74.
 - **Castle Inn (Warsaw).** A restored 16th-century inn that's clean, priced to please, and has a wacky, theatrical side to boot. The effects are created by bold colors and an eclectic blend of antique and modern furnishings. See p. 71.
 - **Pensjonat Szarotka (Zakopane).** This quirky, 1930s mountain chalet is the perfect place to try to tap into Zakopane's funky, artistic past. The squeaky stairways, the cozy little reading room with a fireplace, and the evocative black-and-white photos on the wall will remind you of your grandmother's house. See p. 154.
 - **U Pana Cogito (Kraków).** One of the best hotel bargains in Kraków is a remodeled former rectory about 15 minutes by foot from the city center. The modern rooms don't have loads of personality, but they are spotlessly clean and quiet. See p. 138.
 - **Wenecki (Częstochowa).** A bargain hotel offering inviting, even beautiful, rooms with hardwood floors and big comfortable beds. The reception is welcoming and the overall effect is actually much nicer and more comfortable than the most expensive hotels in town. See p. 108.
 - **Olimpijski (Katowice).** This might be better filed under "most memorable sleeping options" for the hotel's location—in the belly of Katowice's futuristic flying saucer building, the Spodek.
- Come here if you've ever wondered what a night on Star Trek's USS Enterprise might be like. See p. 112.
- **Liburnia (Cieszyn).** A cross between a business hotel and a boutique at prices you'd expect to pay at a pension. The mattresses are thick and comfortable and the cotton-thread count in the sheets is well above the average at this price point. The in-house Italian restaurant is one of the best places in town to eat. See p. 115.
 - **Hotel Savoy (Łódź).** A likeably run-down, turn-of-the-20th-century hotel that feels perfectly in sync with Łódź's "seen better days" aesthetic. Don't expect a charming boutique; this is a pure time-warp property (the kind of hotel that might appear in a 1950s detective novel). See p. 103.
 - **Tourist Information Office (Tarnów).** The Tarnów city tourist information office rents out the rooms above the office at some of the cheapest rates you'll find in the whole country. See p. 160.
 - **Pensjonat Sioło Budy (Białowieża National Park).** This is homestead living for those wanting a taste of rural life but without forsaking clean toilets, hot showers, and espresso. The owners, folk history enthusiasts, have fashioned four traditional chalets around a garden of apple trees, flowers, ferns, and fluttering butterflies. See p. 278.
 - **Kamienica Gotyk (Gdańsk).** Ordinarily, you'd expect to part with a fortune to enjoy the hotel's setting in Gdańsk's oldest house and on its loveliest street. Breakfast on the petite patio in the shadows of St. Mary's Church adds to the sense of history. See p. 237.
 - **Vincent Pensjonat (Kazimierz Dolny).** An enchanting, family-run pension, situated about 5 minutes from the center of town. See p. 180.

4 THE BEST LOCAL DINING EXPERIENCES

- Piwnica Świdnicka (Wrocław). At first glance, this pub looks like a classic tourist trap; but it's actually an excellent traditional Polish restaurant serving big plates of classic dishes. See p. 190.
- U Kucharzy (Warsaw). It's perhaps an ironic comment on Polish cooking that one of the capital's best restaurants is actually in a hotel kitchen. The chefs ladle out their creations straight to your plate from their cast-iron cookware. If you're a kitchen voyeur, book a table in front of the mega-burners to watch the chefs prepare Polish mainstays up close and personal. See p. 75.
- Alfredo (Szkłarska Poręba). Proof that in Poland you can never judge a restaurant by its cover. If so, you'd never dream of stopping at this tiny mom-and-pop and you'd end up missing some excellent home-style Polish cooking. See p. 201.
- Pawłowicz (Warsaw). A take-out-only, hole-in-the-wall operation that draws a constant flow of customers looking for the city's best doughnuts (pączki) and pastries at bargain prices. See p. 78.
- Bolków Hotel Restaurant (Bolków/Jawor). The restaurant at the tiny Bolków Hotel specializes in home cooking done well, including big plates of roast meats served with mounds of mashed potatoes. The desserts are homemade, and the throwback atmosphere to the 1920s is fun and inviting. See p. 195.
- Ciągoty i Teśknoty (Łódź). Perched between two ghastly apartment blocks, this small, unassuming restaurant is an oasis of '50s jazz and fresh flowers. The menu is perched somewhere between home cooking and haute cuisine, with salads, pierogi, and pasta dishes, and some seriously good entrees. Take a taxi to get there or risk never finding it. See p. 104.
- Wierzynek (Kraków). This esteemed eatery has played host to visiting dignitaries, celebs, and heads of state since way back in 1364. The cuisine is an imaginative take on traditional Polish cooking, with an emphasis on local treats such as wild boar, quail, and venison. See p. 140.
- Dawno Temu Na Kazimierzu (Once Upon a Time in Kazimierz) (Kraków-Kazimierz). Finally, a Jewish-themed restaurant in Kazimierz that doesn't feel like a kitschy tourist trap. The interior is relaxed and intimate and the food is great. See p. 140.
- La Rotisserie (Warsaw). For those in the know, this is one of the capital's most inviting splurge options. It helps to be a foodie to know some of the terms on the menu, but everything is great, so just point to an item and relax. For great value, try the 5-course Sunday Linner (a play on "lunch" fused with "dinner"). See p. 74.
- Hacjenda (Poznań). This is rumored to be the best place in Poland to try czernina, a soup made from duck's blood and bits of offal. They also do a good roast duck, if blood soup isn't on your list of must-tries. See p. 213.
- Ke Moro Original Gypsy Restaurant (Tarnów). Quite likely Poland's only restaurant to specialize in Gypsy (or Roma) cuisine. The food is great—mostly spicy versions of roast meats and hearty stews—but the warm atmosphere is the deal maker, with a Gypsy folk band on tap some nights. See p. 161.
- Kawiarnia Naleśnikarnia (Jelenia Góra). What a surprise to find this excellent creperie—with fantastic concoctions of

- chocolate, nuts, and whipped cream—right on Jelenia Góra's handsome town square. See p. 200.
- **Karczma U Zagłoby (Częstochowa).** A regional award-winning restaurant and a serious contender for best food in central Poland. The perfect spot for exquisite renditions of beet soup (*barszcz*), potato pancakes, pierogi, and much more ambitious cooking. See p. 109.
 - **Fantasmagoria (Katowice).** Easily the best restaurant in town and possibly all of this part of Poland. Excellent and inventive home-style cooking that takes equal inspiration from Ukrainian and eastern Polish classics, mixed with more modern notions of using local ingredients and a fresh presentation. See p. 112.
 - **Knajpa U Fryzjera (Kazimierz Dolny).** Wacky Jewish-themed tavern restaurant with hearty dishes featuring roast meats and stews. The atmosphere is festive, with lots of alcohol to accompany the excellent cooking. In nice weather grab a table out back and drink long into the night. See p. 181.
 - **Muzealna (Zamość).** Handsome and memorable restaurant set in three brick Renaissance cellars that look like they've just stepped out of the 16th century. The traditional Polish cooking is superb. See p. 177.

5 THE BEST PLACES TO GET PIEROGI

- **Leniwa (Toruń).** Leniwa means “lazy,” but the genial folks here are anything but in making some of the best pierogi in the country. Sample the various types of sweet and savory dumplings at bargain-basement prices. Popular with locals, so be prepared to wait. See p. 223.
- **Ciepłe Kluchy (Warsaw).** Not far from the Royal Castle, a lovely cobblestone lane leads to this vaulted-ceilinged chamber. The menu has all the usual suspects and a bunch of hard-to-find varieties. Dudy, pierogi stuffed with a variety of pork innards, stand out as the connoisseur's choice. See p. 78.
- **Pierogarnia U Dzika (Gdańsk).** Pierogi used to be widely dismissed as dowdy peasant food, but no longer. Now they are all the rage. This is an upscale pierogarnia—literally, pierogi restaurant—located just a couple minutes' walk from the town center. The menu includes the usual fillings plus a few inventive variants. Pierogi “Wileński” are padded with delicious buckwheat and bacon. See p. 239.
- **Pierozki U Vincenta (Kraków).** This tiny and inviting pierogi joint in Kazimierz serves every style of pierogi imaginable. The house special, “Vincent,” is stuffed with minced meat and spicy lentils and served with fried onions and bits of bacon. Other concoctions include Moroccan-inspired couscous pierogi and “Górale” (highlander) pierogi stuffed with sheep's cheese. See p. 142.
- **Domowy Przymaki (Kraków).** Informal lunch counter, with excellent pierogi (try the fruit-filled varieties). Just a few minutes' walk from the main square and the best-value lunch for miles around. See p. 142.

6 THE BEST GIFTS TO BRING BACK HOME

- Amber (Gdańsk). What is it about this ossified pine tar resin that's so mesmerizing? Gdańsk grew wealthy over the centuries on the amber trade, and the demand today is as strong as ever. Gdańsk, on the Baltic (the source of amber), is the traditional home of the stuff, but you'll find amber at shops all around the country. Just be careful to buy the genuine article—fakes abound. See p. 240.
- Salt from the Wieliczka Salt Mine (Kraków). This might be the most famous salt mine in the world. For years, salt was to Kraków as amber was to Gdańsk: the goose that laid golden eggs, and kept laying and laying. Salt is not nearly so important for Kraków these days, but the resplendent Wieliczka Salt Mine is reminder of how valuable a commodity salt once was. See p. 144.
- Bison grass from Białowieża (Białowieża National Park). This is an especially long, fragrant grass that grows near the Białowieża National Forest. Despite the name, the bison don't actually graze on it. You'll find a blade of bison grass in every bottle of Żubrówka Vodka, which might be the most practical way to buy (or consume) it. You can even make your own "bison grass" vodka by referring to the instructions on the package the grass is sold in. See p. 277.
- Gingerbread (Toruń). Gingerbread comes in all shapes and sizes, and usually comes well wrapped for the long trip home. Toruń is the country's gingerbread capital, and Toruń gingerbread is sold all around the country. See p. 222.
- Smoked sheep's cheese (Giant Mountains/Zakopane). The closer you get to the mountains, the more likely you are to see mountain people lined up along the road to sell their little rounds of smoked sheep's cheese called Oscypek. It's considered a delicacy and the recipe goes back some 500 years. Buy several different types to see which ones you like best. The salty cheese goes especially well with beer. See p. 156.
- Vodka. Poland is known for the quality of its vodkas. Among the most popular brands, Belvedere and Chopin are considered the highest quality. In addition, you'll find a range of flavored vodkas. Żubrówka is slightly greenish due to a long blade of bison grass in every bottle. Miodówka, honey-flavored and easy to drink in large quantities, is also worth a try. See p. 28.

7 THE BEST COMMUNIST-ERA EXPERIENCES

- Visit the Palace of Culture and Science (Warsaw). Warsaw's landmark Socialist-Realist palace is the granddaddy of all Communist architectural icons. Universally loathed yet at the same time thoroughly riveting, you won't be able to take your eyes off it. Tour the museums inside or take an elevator ride to the top to look out over Warsaw. Part of the fun are the ever-present guards, ready to bark *nie dotykać* (do not touch!) the moment you get close to any of the exhibits. See p. 83.
- Eat at a milk bar (all over the country). Every visitor to Poland eventually has to have his or her "milk bar" experience. A milk bar—the milk refers to the fact that no alcohol is served—has no direct

American or Western European equivalent. “Cafeteria” sounds too sterile, and “greasy spoon,” well, too greasy. But that’s the idea, at any rate: heaping steam tables of mostly meatless Polish specialties that you line up for and point to. Not bad tasting and great value.

- See a concert at the Spodek (Katowice). Katowice’s retro futuristic “Flying

Saucer” building may be the coolest rock concert venue ever built. It’s the city’s best representative of the “Brussels Expo ’58” style of design inspired by 1950s-era science and science fiction that influenced so many architects behind the Iron Curtain at the time. Performers like Robbie Williams, Pearl Jam, and Sir Elton John have all played here. See p. 111.

8 THE BEST WAYS TO ACT LIKE A LOCAL

- Drink beer from a straw. This inexcusable practice is especially popular among women, but occasionally you’ll see Polish guys doing it as well. The idea is to sweeten the beer first with fruit juice, usually raspberry juice, and then sip it leisurely like a cocktail. Watch out for the consequences, though. Polish beer is unusually strong, and drinking through a straw only heightens the effect of the alcohol.
- Get in line for ice cream. Poles are loony for lody (ice cream). Part of the attraction comes from Communist days, when ice cream was one of the few pleasures accessible to most people. Part of the attraction is also, well, because it’s ice cream and it tastes great. Each city has its own ice cream stand of choice. The best strategy is to scout around and see where the longest lines are. See p. 27.
- Eat sushi. That doesn’t sound Polish at all, yet the country is currently experiencing sushi mania, and some seriously good sushi joints are springing up all over. The Poles’ love affair with fish is understandable. After all, Poland is right on the Baltic Sea and dishes such as herring have been part of the local cuisine for centuries. For some of the best sushi in the country, try the Sakana Sushi Bar in Wrocław or Edo Sushi Bar in Kazimierz. See p. 190 and p. 140.
- Feed breadcrumbs to the pigeons. You’ll see the young and old alike at nearly every big square in every Polish town tossing breadcrumbs to flocks of pigeons. And they are the bane of city officials around the country trying to fight the onslaught of unwanted fowl. The problem is so serious that officials in Kraków even considered dynamiting the birds. But as the old saying goes—if you can’t beat them, might as well join them.
- Go mushroom picking. Mushroom picking is a popular autumn pastime for all Poles. The best strategy for success is to get up early to scour the forest floors for the fungus of choice, usually chanterelle, porcini, and milk caps. One caveat: Don’t try this if you’re not experienced at sorting out the edible from the poisonous varieties. If you’re staying in the countryside, simply ask your host to arrange a mushroom hunt for you. Most likely, they will have an aunt or cousin who knows the best place to land a bagful of mushrooms for your morning omelet.
- Go shopping at a farmer’s market. Most Polish cities will have a central market filled with goodies such as fresh fruits and vegetables, cheeses, breads, and meats. Often, these will also have a little pierogi stand for a quick bite. They’re the perfect one-stop shop for a picnic

lunch. Check out the Hala Mirowska in Warsaw or the Hala Targowa in Wrocław. See p. 90 and p. 187.

- Hang out at a Sphinx restaurant. Poles seem to love chain restaurants, and in nearly every city and town of any size you'll find a Sphinx, usually right at the heart of the main square. It will invariably

be packed, although there's no accounting for the restaurant's popularity. The mix of vaguely Middle Eastern entrées, like shish kebab, is only average at best, but the mood is always festive. And your local Sphinx can be a lifesaver if you're starving and there's no other place around.

9 THE BEST DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH

- Łódź. On the outside, Poland's second-largest city (pronounced "Woodge") appears cold and gray, a former industrial powerhouse that has gone through some tough times and looks it. But the more you find out about the place, the more fascinating it gets: The center of Poland's film industry, enormous pre-war Jewish population, biggest shopping mall in Europe, active culture calendar, great art museum. The list goes on. See p. 97.
- Kazimierz (Kraków). Next to Kraków's glamorous Old Town, Kazimierz, the city's former Jewish ghetto, looks positively derelict. And that appears to be its secret charm. What else could explain Kazimierz's increasing popularity among Kraków's ultra-cool and arty set? After admiring the handsome buildings of the Old Town, come out here to party and let your hair down—and see what really makes Kraków tick. See p. 127.
- Tarnów. The small city of Tarnów east of Kraków came late to the tourism party, but is making up for lost time with the friendliest tourist information office in the country as well as some decent museums and the occasional blockbuster exhibition. If Kraków's crowded streets get a little too much to bear, head to Tarnów for a respite before it too becomes too popular for its own good. One nice surprise is a Western-style horse-riding ranch in the vicinity

that's happy to set up greenhorns for the day. See p. 157.

- Katowice. Cool in the way that Cleveland is cool, or in the U.K. maybe the way Glasgow or Manchester is cool. This big industrial city's charms are hard to pin down, but there is definitely something there. Maybe it's the retro-futuristic flying-saucer building—the Spodek—or all of the other Communist-era architecture around. Or the fact that it feels authentic and there are absolutely no other tourists around. The wags at the local office of Katowice, In Your Pocket have tried to carve out a kind of anti-cool image for the city, calling it a needed antidote to overly prettified and touristed Kraków. See p. 109.
- Nowa Huta (Kraków). It's hard to make a Socialist-era housing project next to a steel mill sound like something you might want to see on your vacation. But this planned 1950s community is undeniably cool. Architecture and urban planning buffs will be drawn to the plans and designs of housing designed especially for the workers' state. Irony of ironies, they even named the main square after union-busting, anti-Communist U.S. president Ronald Reagan. See p. 129.
- Praga district (Warsaw). Not too many years ago, Warsaw's rough and tumble Praga district, on the other side of the

Vistula River from the heart of the city, used to be a no-go zone. The low rents, though, attracted the artistic crowd and now it's emerging into the capital's coolest neighborhood. Don't expect

anything quite like Kazimierz in Kraków yet, but several good restaurants and clubs are up and running and the future promises to bring more. See p. 86.

10 THE BEST OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

- Hiking in the Tatras. Zakopane is the jumping-off point for hundreds of miles of gorgeous hiking trails. You can try one of the 2,000m (6,560-ft.) assaults on the peaks, or a more leisurely stroll along breathtaking valleys carved out by tiny mountain streams. For more ambitious climbers, plan a whole-day outing to cross the peaks into Slovakia in summer. See p. 151.
- Biking in the Giant Mountains (Szkłarska Poręba). Szklarska Poręba has evolved into the mountain biking capital of southern Poland. More than a dozen decent trails, catering to all skill levels, fan out from the town in every direction. Some of the trails are all-day affairs, while others are shorter and oriented more toward recreational cyclists or families with children. Pick up a free cycling map from the tourist information office. See p. 198.
- Rafting the Dunajec River (near Zakopane). The Dunajec River marks the country's southeastern border with Slovakia. It winds through a picturesque gorge in the Pieniny Mountains east of the Tatras that makes it absolutely perfect for rafting. The season runs from April through October, and on a sunny afternoon this can be a fabulous day out, especially for kids. It's less white-water rafting and more of a slow, gentle float down the river on group rafts manned by Górale mountain men kitted out in their traditional folk garb. The boating center on the Polish side is at Sromowce Kąty, not far from Zakopane. See p. 152.
- Kayaking in northeastern Poland (near Olsztyn). Rivers and canals crisscross the lake districts of northeastern Poland, allowing you to drift from marshland to woodland, with plenty of bird watching in between. You can paddle for one day or seven; there are plenty of routes—rated from kid-friendly to daredevil—to choose from. See p. 264.
- Downhill skiing (Giant Mountains, Tatras). Poland is not the first country that comes to mind when you think of skiing in Europe. But in the south of the country, in the mountainous areas near the Czech Republic and Slovakia, there are several excellent ski resorts and some very good downhill runs. The country's longest ski run is at Szklarska Poręba in the Giant Mountains. The most popular resort is Zakopane in the Tatras. Both have good infrastructures with lifts and ski rentals. See p. 199 and p. 152.
- Swimming in the Baltic (Sopot). A beach holiday in Poland? It doesn't seem possible, but yet, thousands of people flock to resorts like Sopot in the summer to dip their toes (quite literally, given the temperature of the water) in the Baltic Sea. There are miles of sandy beaches and the water is clean and refreshing. Pity that the surf temp rarely rises to above tolerable, but that's really part of the charm. See p. 243.

11 THE BEST MUSEUMS

- Museum of the Warsaw Uprising (Warsaw). When you're done walking through the exhibitions and watching the startling documentaries filmed during the fighting in 1944 on display here, you'll understand a lot more about the Poles' resolve to preserve their nation. Just the photos alone of Warsaw's total destruction will leave you in awe that a modern city actually exists here. See p. 84.
- Museum of Zakopane Style (Zakopane). This low-key museum is dedicated to the fine woodworking craft of the early Zakopane architects of the late 19th and early 20th century. No stunning high-tech visuals, just beautifully carved furnishings and a wonderful aesthetic feel. They took the log cabin and made it a palace. See p. 151.
- Museum of Technology (Warsaw). Don't expect cutting-edge technology or hands-on interactive exhibits. Instead, you'll find a sprawling collection of dated technology—from bicycles with wooden wheels to early transistors dating from the 1950s. Fans of retro design will be especially engaged. It's a time capsule of sorts you shouldn't miss. See p. 82.
- Galicia Jewish Museum (Kraków-Kazimierz). The main exhibition here features contemporary and often beautiful photographs of important Jewish sites throughout southern Poland taken by the late British photographer Chris Schwarz. Schwarz spent 12 years traveling throughout Poland using photography as a way of trying to preserve the country's rapidly disappearing Jewish heritage. The effect here works beautifully. See p. 128.
- Czartoryski Museum (Kraków). Members of the noble Czartoryski family were gifted art collectors, and this collection is one of the finest in central Europe. Two international masterpieces are on display: Leonardo da Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine* and Rembrandt's *Landscape with the Good Samaritan*. See p. 124.
- Gingerbread Museum (Toruń). The town of Toruń is famous for two things: the birthplace of Copernicus and gingerbread cookies. At this privately owned museum, you not only learn the secret ingredients of great gingerbread but get to make your own. Good fun and great for kids. See p. 221.
- Roads to Freedom Exhibition (Gdańsk). An inspiring and sobering history lesson of the anti-Communist struggle in Poland. The mock-up of a typical empty grocery store in late 1970s, grainy news reels, interactive displays, and documentary films keenly capture the atmosphere of the times. See p. 230.
- Łódź Art Museum (Łódź). A must for fans of modern art, the collection includes works by Marc Chagall and Max Ernst. Skip the first two floors and head straight for the museum's prize pieces on the third floor, including several of the young rake Witkacy's amazing society sketches from the 1920s. See p. 102.
- Amber Museum (Gdańsk). A must for all fans of the beautiful ossified pine resin that helped make Gdańsk wealthy. On six floors of exhibits, you'll learn everything you'll ever need to know about amber; if you're thinking of buying some amber while you're in Gdańsk, you might want to stop here first for an educational primer. See p. 229.
- Museum of Cinematography (Łódź). International film fans will want to stop here to pay tribute to Poland's panoply of great directors, including Roman Polański, Andrzej Wajda, and Krzysztof Kieslowski, all of whom studied and worked in Łódź. See p. 102.
- Ethnographic Museum (Tarnów). A rare and fascinating exhibition on the history and culture of Europe's Roma

(Gypsy) population, it traces the emergence of the Roma from parts of modern-day India some 1,000 years ago to their arrival in Europe and subsequent (mostly tragic) history. See p. 159.

- Pharmacy Museum (Kraków). One of the biggest and best old-style pharmacy

museums in this part of the world, with fascinating exhibits of potions and leeches and concoctions that show just how far modern medicine has come. See p. 124.

12 THE BEST CASTLES & CHURCHES

- Wawel (Kraków). This remains Poland's pride and joy and the country's number-one tourist attraction. The original castle dates from around the 10th century, when the area was first chosen as the seat of Polish kings. For more than five centuries, the castle stood as the home of Polish royalty. See p. 126.
- Malbork (Malbork). This castle, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the biggest brick castle in the world, is silent testimony to the power and influence the Teutonic knights once had in this part of Poland. See p. 253.
- Książ Castle (Wałbrzych). The 400-room Książ Castle is the biggest castle in Lower Silesia. It was originally laid out in the 13th century by members of the early Polish nobility but was refurbished and rebuilt several times down through the centuries, resulting in today's baroque-renaissance-rococo-neoclassical mish-mash. See p. 192.
- St. Mary's Cathedral (Kraków). Kraków is a city of churches, and this is its signature house of worship, right on the main square. The elaborately carved 15th-century wooden altarpiece is the biggest of its kind in Europe. The rest of the interior is similarly impressive, but the highlight of the church is not on the inside, it's the forlorn bugler in the high tower, playing his hourly dirge. See p. 125.
- Synagogue (Zamość). An unexpected and beautiful reminder of the size and vitality of the pre-World War II Jewish community in Zamość. Nearly every southern Polish city had a sizable Jewish community before the war, but very few synagogues of this quality have survived. See p. 176.
- St. Mary's Church (Gdańsk). This enormous red-brick church is reputedly the largest of its kind in the world. Its nave and 31 chapels can hold more than 20,000 people. The church endeared itself to the people of Gdańsk in the years after the imposition of martial law in 1981 when members of the Solidarity trade union sheltered here. See p. 232.
- St. Elizabeth Church (Wrocław). Wrocław was so thoroughly rebuilt following World War II that it's only in the city's solemn red-brick churches, like this one on the northwest corner of the main square, that you really see something of pre-war Breslau (and witness the surviving scars of the war). See p. 186.
- Kłodzko Fortress (Kłodzko). This fortress has played an important strategic role for centuries, straddling the traditional borderland first between the Polish and Bohemian kingdoms, and then later Prussia and Austria. The present massive structure dates from the middle of the 18th century. Napoleon, early on, shattered the fortress's illusion of invincibility by capturing the structure in 1807. During World War II, the Nazis used the fortress to hold political prisoners. Today, it is the region's leading tourist attraction for the labyrinth of underground tunnels once used for troop mustering, hiding, and escape if necessary. See p. 202.