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Peter Moore | 13 December 2020

11 things you must do in Kraków

With its fairytale spires, magical Old Town and buzzing BoHo quarters, Poland's former Royal Capital makes the perfect city break. Here's how to experience the very best of this medieval charmer.



1. Explore the magical Main Market Square



Bride and groom dancing in the Main Market Square (Peter Moore)

Kraków's enchanting Main Market Square sits in the centre of the old town and is the beating heart of the city. It is surrounded by some of Kraków's most iconic sights and offers a glorious vista at every turn.

The Renaissance-era Cloth Hall dominates the centre of the square. Traders have been selling their wares here for over 700 years, including salt from the famous Wieliczka salt mine. Often referred to as 'Europe's oldest shopping centre', today it is the place to go for colourful Cracovian crafts.

The towering St Mary's Basilica dominates the western edge of the square. Tiny Aldabert's Church, near Grodzka street, dates from the 11th century. And lining the square on all sides are handsome buildings built from the wealth of city's various epochs. The

restaurants here offer outside tables looking across the square and buzz until late into night.

The square is built on a layer cake of history. Most of the restaurants here have intriguing underground grottos – Piano Rouge, for example, boasts a jazz bar decked out in decadent red velvet and a niche where sultry singers belt out jazz standards.

Underneath the Market Halls you'll find **Rynek Underground**. Part archaeological dig, part high-tech museum, this must-visit attraction will take you on a fascinating journey through the city's history, from the very first settlers to the present day. You'll even find the remains of an 11th Century cemetery. See if you can spot the graves belonging to suspected vampires.

2. Start your day with a delicious obwarzanek



An obwarzanek held proudly aloft in the Old Town (Polish Tourist Board)

When in Kraków, do as the Cracovians do and start your day with a delicious *obwarzanek*. This scrumptious ring-shaped bread snack is cheap and filling and has been a local staple since the 14th century.

The little old ladies selling *obwarzanek* from street carts are as ubiquitous in Krakow as hot dog sellers in New York.

Obwarzanek are baked twice a day and then delivered to sellers across the city. At a paltry 2 zloty each – about 40p – they make a deliciously affordable snack.

Whatever you do, don't call them bagels! *Obwarzanek* have outlived kings, republics and various military occupiers for hundreds of years and have their very own protected geographical indication, recognising them as a protected regional food.

3. Go BoHo in Kazimierz, Kraków's buzzing Jewish district



A girl cycling through Kazimierz (Poland Tourist Board)

Founded as a royal town by Kazimierz The Great in 1335 this area just south of Wawel Hill developed into a thriving centre of Jewish life and culture in Kraków. It was all but destroyed during World War Two, but in recent years it has undergone a revival to become one of the city's hippest and most vibrant areas.

Start your visit with a tour of the area's most significant sights. **Remuh Synagogue** is one of two in Kraków still in use and the cemetery at the back has gravestones dating back to the 16th century. The squat **Old Synagogue**, also known as the 'Fortress Synagogue', is the oldest in Poland and now serves as a fascinating museum dedicated to the history and culture of Kraków's Jews.

When evening falls, the fun begins. While diners in the restaurants along Plac Bawol are serenaded by bands playing traditional Jewish

music, those venturing deeper into Kazimierz are treated to a cacophonous array of cafés, bars and restaurants to suit every taste. On a Friday night it seems like everyone in Kraków is there.

Finally, in the wee small hours, head to New Square for a tasty *zapiekanke*. Also known as 'Polish pizza', these toasted open-face baguettes are topped with sautéed white mushrooms, cheese and ham as well as a myriad of other choices. Starting at only 7 zloty (£1.40), they're the perfect way to finish a big night out.

4. Discover Communist chic in Nowa Huta



A Trabant outside the steel mill in Nowa Huta (Peter Moore)

Stark, brutal but still strangely beautiful, Nowa Huta is one of only two entirely planned Social realist cities built by the Soviet Union. With its towering apartment blocks, wide boulevards and vast parks it is the complete opposite of the medieval Old Town, but no less interesting.

One of the best ways to explore Nowa Huta is in an old Trabant with one of the knowledgeable guys from [Crazy Guides](#). The cars are a fun way to travel between the city's far-flung sights. And your guide will share their own first-hand experiences of life during Soviet times as they drive you around.

My guide, Maciek, skilfully coaxed his beautifully restored Trabant from the Boulevard of Roses and the Centralny Milk Bar to the Steel Mills on the edge of town. We finished in a 'model' apartment that the Crazy Guides have crammed with Soviet-era furniture and memorabilia to give visitors a Technicolor taste of life behind the Iron Curtain.

All while Maciek told me how his mother rested a wet cotton sheet over his cot to protect him from the tear gas that wafted into his family's apartment during the times of martial law.

5. Conquer Mound Kościuszko



Approaching Mound Kościuszko (Peter Moore)

Looking to stretch your legs and get a bit of fresh air? Then head to **Kopiec Kościuszki** (Kościuszko Mound), a hand-made hill that sits 326 metres above sea level, surrounded by parkland, just to the west of the Kraków.

The mound was built by Cracovians of all ages and classes to commemorate the Polish national leader Tadeusz Kościuszko. The summit is reached along a path that spirals around the mound and offers incredible views of the city and the Vistula River.

Don't forget to explore the red brick fort at the base of the mound, built by the Austrians in 1850s. Originally designed to be part of the city walls, it now houses a state-of-the-art museum dedicated to the life and exploits of Tadeusz Kościuszko.

A bus runs directly from the Old Town to Kopiec Kościuszki. But if you're feeling energetic, the 2.5 kilometre trail starting at the from the **Convent of the Norbetine Sisters** is a more spectacular and satisfying route. It winds its way up from the Vistula River through extensive parkland and is particularly beautiful in autumn when the leaves on the trees turn every imaginable shade of red, orange and yellow.

6. Uncover history at every turn on Wawel Hill



A view across the Vistula River towards Wawel Castle (E. Marchewka/Polish Tourist Board)

For a concise introduction to Polish history and culture, you can't beat **Wawel Hill**. This heavily fortified 228-metre-high limestone outcrop sits overlooking the Vistula River and is home to some of the most important buildings in Polish history.

In many ways, a visit to Wawel Hill is like walking through time. The impressive fortifications and towers have been extended and added to by everyone from the Jagiellonians to the Austrians. The cathedral is a mish-mash of architectural styles, each the whim of the various Polish kings and queens who are all buried there. And the Royal Castle is regarded as one of the most magnificent Renaissance residences in Central Europe.

Add to that an on-going archaeological dig uncovering the areas medieval past, a renaissance-style garden and orchard and rock

cave that was said to be the home of a ferocious, cow-munching dragon and you've got pretty much every period of Polish history covered.

7. Meet the Brotherhood of the Fowl at Celestat

Those who like their attractions quirky should head to [Celestat](#), a quaint museum dedicated to an ancient fraternity of sharpshooters known as the Shooting Society Fowler Brotherhood.

The Cracovian Brotherhood was formed when Kraków was granted city rights in the 1257. Their task was to prepare city residents to defend themselves in the event of an attack, but these days they are rolled out in their *kontusz* – a traditional outfit of Polish noblemen – to accompany dignitaries during important municipal and state ceremonies.

The museum is set in a Neo-Gothic palace on Lubicz Street, not far from the Central Railway Station. It houses weapons used to defend the city through the ages, painted portraits of each of the fraternity's

leaders – Chicken Kings, if you will – and gifts presented by similar societies around the world.

In pride of place is the fraternity's most precious relic – Srebrny Kur, the Silver Fowl of Celestat. It is crafted from silver, stands 41.5 cm tall and weighs 3.6 kilograms and is given by one Chicken King to the next to signify the transference of power.

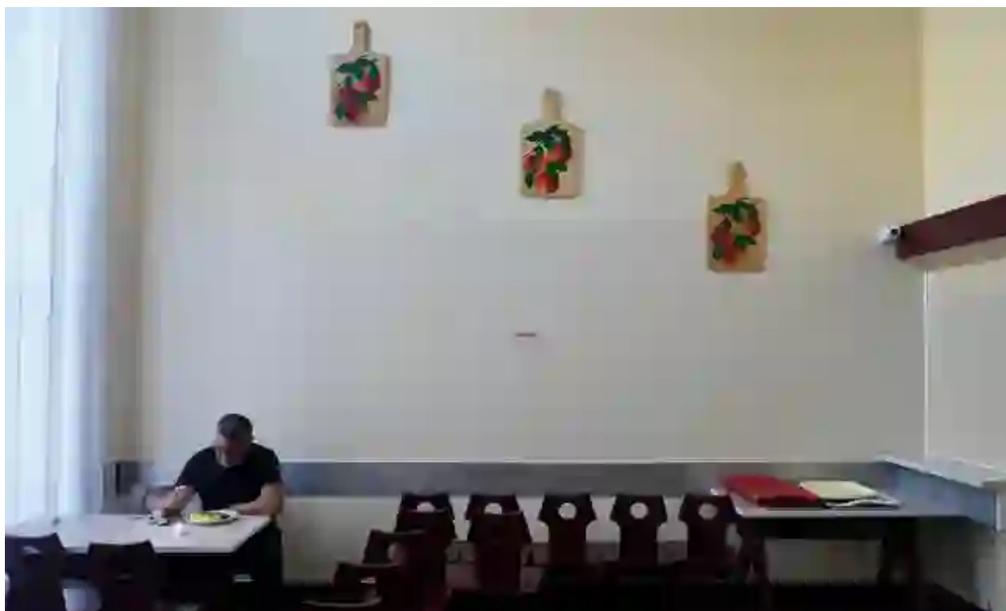
Judging by the portraits, they all seem extremely proud to have a mystical silver chicken sitting on their laps.





One of the Shooting Society Fowler Brotherhood brothers (Peter Moore)

8. Feast on pierogis for a song in a traditional Polish milk bar



Dining at the Centralny Milk Bar in Nowa Huta (Peter Moore)

If you're keen to taste simple, hearty Polish food like grandma used to make, you can't beat a Bar Mleczny, or Milk Bar. Created during Soviet times to provide nourishing, affordable food for workers, Bar Mleczny remain some of the cheapest places to sit down and eat. And the meals are served almost immediately.

You'll find Bar Mlecznys dotted across Kraków. Milkbar Tomasza is just a block or so from St Mary's Basiica and offers paninis as well as

Polish classics like steamed pierogi dumplings, beetroot soup, potato pancakes, and huge, chunky pork knuckles. Bar Mleczny Targowy is a little further out of town and is popular with students. Both feel more like cafeterias than restaurants, but then that's part of their charm.

My favourite Bar Mleczny, however, was the Centralny Milk Bar in Nowa Hut. It overlooks the Boulevard of Roses and has kept much of its austere Soviet 'charm'. Even the staff are charmingly old school. I was told off by the ill-tempered server/cashier as I waited for my bowl of cut-price pierogis. Apparently, I was taking too many photos!

9. Go deep underground at the Wieliczka Salt Mines



The Chapel of St Kinga in the Wieliczka Salt Mines (Peter Moore)

The **Wieliczka Salt Mines** are a sparkling subterranean wonderland on the edge of Kraków. They have been operating since the Middle Ages and remain one of the Poland's most popular tourist

attractions. With its vast open caverns and 287 kilometres of tunnels, the mines have awed all who have gazed upon them, including Copernicus, Goethe and Chopin.

The salt mined here provided Kraków with much of its power and wealth. Known as white gold, it was Poland's most precious national asset and paid for most of the city's most impressive buildings. Today visitors can choose between the 'tourist' route and the more immersive 'miner's route,' descending between 65-135 metres along a sprawling network of underground galleries tunnels, pits and chambers.

The most impressive is sight is the Chapel of St Kinga, a massive hall carved into the salt and decorated with chandeliers, altars and statues, all carved from salt too. Concerts are often held here – a truly magical experience in these most atmospheric UNESCO World Heritage Site.

10. Discover magic of Christmas every day of the year



Christmas decorations in the Main Market Square (Polish Tourist Board)

With its fairy-tale spires and magical medieval squares, Kraków really comes alive at Christmas. The Main Market Square – and a few of the other smaller squares – are taken over by quaint Christmas stalls and the air is filled with the delicious aromas of gingerbread, bratwurst and mulled wine called *grzaniec*. If you're lucky, a blanket of snow will cover the ground but increasingly that is more likely late in the season.

It's also the chance to witness Kraków's other famous Christmas tradition – its **cribs**. Brightly coloured, intricate and displaying the highest levels of craftsmanship, the cribs feature traditional nativity scenes housed in models that reflect the city's most beautiful and interesting monuments. The steeples of St Mary's Basicilica is a popular feature of course, as are those of Wawel Cathedral and the

Town Hall Tower. But there are often references to other buildings like the Cloth Hall, theatres and city gates as well.

On the first Thursday in December, the cribs are carried in a spectacular procession through the Main Market Square and placed at the foot of Adam Mickiewicz monument. They stay here until the New Year, when the most impressive ones are bought by the Historical Museum of Kraków to be displayed year-round at the Celestat Museum.

11. Pay your respects at the Schindler Factory Museum



Schindler's Desk at the Schindler's Factory Museum (Peter Moore)

Many visitors to Kraków take the opportunity to visit **Auschwitz-Birkenau**, one of the most notorious Nazi concentration camps, about an hour and a half away. It is a harrowing and moving

experience and, understandably, not something everyone is comfortable in doing.

Thankfully, the newly opened **Schindler Factory Museum** in Podgórze offers a deep and respectful overview of this terrible time, but with the upbeat twist. The factory was owned by Oskar Schindler, a German businessman who saved over a thousand Jewish lives by employing them to work in his factory and keeping them out of the Nazi death camps. You've probably seen 'Schindler's List', the Steven Spielberg movie his story inspired.

There's only one room dedicated to Schindler in the museum – his office on the second floor. There's a desk and a plaster map of Europe. And a giant commemorative cube, featuring a wall of the enamel pots and the names of all those Schindler saved.

The rest of the exhibition is excellent too. It tells the story of life in Kraków during Nazi occupation in powerful and innovative ways.

Make sure you have a wander around the rest of Podgórze while you're there. It's one of Kraków's up-and-coming areas, with lots of new cafes and bars and restaurants as well as poignant reminders of its heart-breaking past. Like the last stretch of ghetto wall on ul Lwowska and Plac Bohaterów Getta, where sculptures of chairs, laid out in a grid, memorialise the furniture that was left abandoned here when the ghetto was liquidated in 1942.

*For more information about things to see
and do in Kraków visit the official Polish
Tourism Organisation website: [Poland.travel](https://poland.travel)*

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