

Our writer found the Polish city to be an unexpectedly pleasant surprise – and easy on her wallet

Krakow finally gets its moment



KRAKOW is finally having a moment. Blessed with fairytale cobbled streets, grand historical buildings and Europe's largest city square, Poland's most visited city is now an even bigger draw for families and couples alike.

After banning sales of alcohol after midnight a year ago, the stag and hen parties that used to blight the city have moved on. Krakow has as much appeal as the usual European big city hitters – but this appeal comes at a fraction of the price.

Choosing accommodation near the Old Town is a sensible move; but a cheaper place out of town on a tramline route is also an option as trams are inexpensive and regular. Use Google Maps to guide you; if in difficulty, the residents are invariably helpful, although few speak English. To me this is always a bonus: yes, tourism is very important, but people live and work here, so you get a real feel for a place.

Krakow is a walkable city and mainly flat. Circling the pedestrianised Old Town is Planty park, with narrow areas of grass and shady trees with benches so it's easy to forget you are in a city centre.

Newcomers make their way to the Rynek Glówny. In the centre you will probably find the outdoor market in full flow. There is some tat, but it's mainly interesting with home-made crafts, flowers and

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**Polish perfection:
Krakow is a
beautiful city and,
below, the Planty
city park**



food stalls. The old Cloth Hall is a bustling indoor market selling cloth and souvenirs. Underneath is a partial excavation of the medieval foundations, now the Rynek Underground Museum. There are lighting and sound effects that give you a true impression of medieval life.

Around the edge of the square are numerous cafes and restaurants, all with al fresco dining. It's a people-watching paradise.

I enjoyed several visits to the E Wedel Coffee Lounge, where its famous chocolate is served as a hot drink.

Two other places demanded repeat visits. At canteen-style Chimera, with small rickety wooden tables covered with colourful cotton cloths, lunch for two with a choice of three homemade salads and a fresh fruit juice is around €20. And I liked the smart Italian Mama Mia with tasty rosemary focaccia and fresh pasta.

For traditional Polish food, try the atmospheric basement bar C K Browar with good Polish beer on tap and delicious pierogi. It's busy, loud and fun.

If art is your bag, you can file up to see the famous Lady with Ermine by Da Vinci, but put off by the queue, I opted for modern art at Bunkier and traditional Polish art at Pałac Sztuki, which I stumbled upon, drawn by the superb architecture of the building that houses it.

In the Jewish District, you can visit the building where Schindler had his factory, made famous by

Steven Spielberg's Schindler's List. During the Nazi occupation in 1940, 68,000 Jews were expelled. But some remained. In 1943, 15,000 were rounded up, taken to a concentration camp, and shot.

Being the poorer part of town, it's a bit scruffy and has a lived-in, gritty feel. Many young creatives have set up shop here – and I enjoyed browsing in the smattering of independent gift and second-hand clothes shops. The old Singer factory, now a bar, uses the sewing machine tables for coffee or cocktail sipping. Inside, its dark interiors with dated furniture and old floor rugs is pleasantly atmospheric.

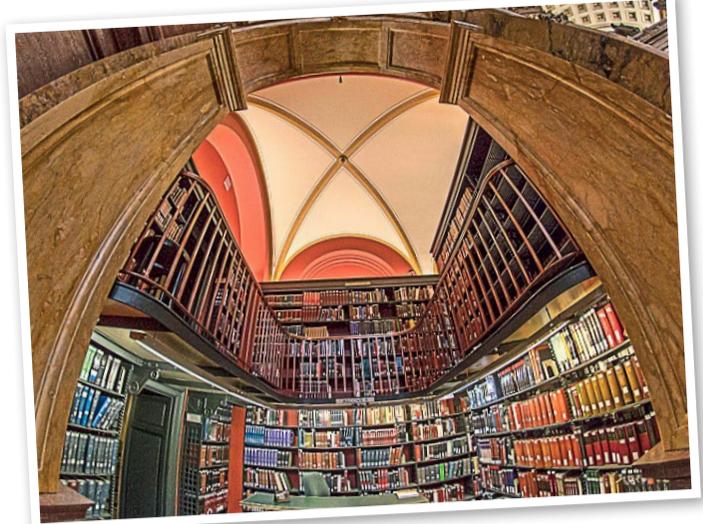
The Irish pubs – as with almost all Irish bars outside Ireland – often lack in authenticity. But if you are craving a Guinness, I did try Duffy's Bar. With sports and live music, it's worth a punt or even a pint.

The Vistula River is to the south. As well as a stroll along the bank and maybe a visit to Wawel Castle, you can take a boat ride. I went in a six-passenger launch and the friendly pilot gave a guided talk in Polish. Fortunately, a fellow passenger with good English cheerfully translated for me.

There is almost too much to see and do here in a week – you have to cherry pick according to your interests. I feel I've only scratched the surface, but my appetite has definitely been whetted for more.

TRAVEL FACTS

Fly Dublin to Krakow direct with Ryanair from €238 return (ryanair.com). Cassidy Travel has seven-night holidays to Krakow in October from €338 per person (room only) including flight from Dublin, see cassidytravel.ie.



THE last time I visited Washington DC was 25 years ago and while it was rich in history, it didn't quite have the buzz of New York or the cool vibe of L.A. Fast forward to 2024, and the transformation is remarkable.

The true charm lies in its rich history and its knack for surprising and delighting visitors. Nowhere else can you walk in the footsteps of past presidents, dine at the same places they once frequented – even proposed – and visit the quiet spots where they found solace away from the public eye.

The city seamlessly blends its historical heritage with a fresh, modern energy, inviting visitors to explore hidden neighbourhoods and experience a vibrant, trendy side that's both hip and fun.

Nestled in a serene corner of DC, the Omni Shoreham Hotel is one of the capital's most distinguished grand hotels, with old-world elegance, luxurious suites and rooms, sprawling gardens, and rich, pretty interiors that transport guests to a bygone era of refined elegance.

Its history is steeped in significant moments that have shaped the country's political landscape. Built in 1930, the 834-room hotel has played host to a who's who of American political figures, including every sitting president since Franklin D Roosevelt, numerous inaugural balls, and was the chosen location for the first meeting of the US Navy Seals in the hotel's swimming pool.

We checked in to our spacious and comfortable suite which instantly felt like home. The beds were very comfortable and the interiors were a mix of modern and classic, from the marble bathroom to the cosy sitting areas, ensuring ample space to relax and unwind. Elegantly decorated throughout, the hotel has an atmosphere of timeless luxury.

We breakfasted every day in Robert's Restaurant, which offered a first-class selection of choices ranging from fresh yoghurts and homemade granola to waffles and a full American breakfast. Staff were cheery and service was brilliant.

Conveniently located just a block from the Metro, the hotel offers easy access to all of DC's attractions. For those looking to enjoy some downtime, the options are plentiful: take a dip in the award-winning outdoor

heated pool, unwind with a Pilates class, try a spot of Tai Chi, or, for the more active, hit the indoor gym.

One of the hotel's standout features is its setting amid 11 acres of lush gardens, making it feel more like a resort than a typical city hotel. This was a major plus, especially when we wanted to escape the bustling city and crowds after a day sightseeing.

Its proximity to Rock Creek National Park – which is twice as large as New York's Central Park – provides the perfect set up for unwinding and connecting with nature.

The hotel also has bikes you can hire if you want to explore the area on wheels.

On our four-day trip, we hit the ground running – well, on two wheels to be truthful – with a Monuments and Memorials Bike Tour by Unlimited Biking. Pedal or e-bikes are offered for a three-hour tour which takes in The White House, the Lincoln, Jefferson and FDR Memorials, Washington Monument, and the National Mall and Tidal Basin to name a few.

The tour was brilliant, had regular stops during which the guide shared stories not often found in history books, and gave us plenty of time for pictures.

Next stop was a visit to the Wharf, one of newest waterfront developments in DC. After a quick tour of the open-air Municipal Fish Market, which dates back to 1805, jet lag hit, so we recharged and enjoyed lunch at Mi Vida, which offers a delicious menu inspired by street food and traditional Mexican home cooking.

The International Spy Museum, a favourite haunt of the intelligence community, has been on all our bucket lists for years and it didn't disappoint.

There's plenty of immersive experiences where visitors can delve in to the world of espionage and hear real-life stories of spies – we only had the afternoon but could have easily spent a whole day exploring.

For dinner, we stayed in the Wharf area and ate at Moonraker, a swanky, rooftop hideaway with 180-degree views on to the Anacostia river. Its Japanese-inspired menu offers light bites and sushi, the food was exceptional and cocktails were fabulous.

The following morning, with DC's museums being quieter on weekdays, we decided to visit a couple of the 11 Smithsonian museums located around the