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NEXT STOP | KRAKOW

Poland's Second City Is First Choice for the Young

By DENNY LEE

TO find Pauza, an artsy pub in the medieval heart of [Krakow](#), slip past the rowdy British lads at the greasy kebab stands, step over the inebriated young woman splayed on the shiny cobblestones, and wait. A clique of trendy young Poles will clear a path to a soot-stained building on Ulica Florianska; follow them up a dark stairwell and open the unmarked wooden door.

The thumping electronic [music](#) may sound vaguely familiar, and the swirling psychedelic lights and photographic art are not exactly avant-garde. But if you came to Krakow — a compact city of 760,000 in southern [Poland](#) — expecting to run into boozy stag parties or old Polish men swigging rubbing-grade vodka in dank bars, you'll be pleasantly disappointed.

On a cool night this past fall, the crowd was sexy and self-possessed, with enough bell-bottom jeans, clunky belts and gorgeous blondes to populate a runway. The men were stylishly disheveled, with hip-hop hoodies and chiseled good looks. The women were chic and funky, with impossibly high cheekbones and long legs.

“There's a lot of creative energy here,” said Garrett Van Reed, 25, a writer from [Pennsylvania](#), who is part of a growing expatriate community that is turning Krakow into Eastern Europe's newest bohemian capital. “There's tons of artists and street performers. And there's always something going on in Rynek Glowny,” he said, referring to the picturesque main square. “You're constantly stumbling upon something new.”

That's easy to do when there are some 300 watering holes in Krakow's Old Town, many of them former World War II hideouts that only the local intelligentsia seem to know about. But word is getting out. The airline service into Krakow has increased dramatically in recent years, especially among low-cost carriers like easyJet, which recently added more than a dozen weekly flights to Krakow from cities like [London](#), [Belfast](#) and Newcastle.

And with the euro climbing against not only the dollar but other foreign currencies, too, younger travelers have another reason to flock to Poland's second city. At about 2.9 Polish zloty to the dollar, Zywiec beers are still under \$2, dinners rarely exceed \$10 a person and a hostel bed goes for \$15 a night.

“Krakow has exploded,” said Thymn Chase, 26, a musician and writer who moved to Krakow shortly after graduating from Skidmore College in 2003, and started *Lost in Krakow*, an English-language zine, which he first published in September to give voice to the growing expat community. A brooding man with a goatee and long hair, Mr. Chase embodies the backpacker-philosopher type who might have chain-smoked in [Prague](#) during the early 1990s. “Within a half-hour of arriving in Krakow, I knew this is where I wanted to be,” he said over a beer at Lokator, a new lounge on Ulica Krakowska. “Krakow has an incredible artistic atmosphere.”

In October, a dozen expats and Poles gathered at Mr. Chase's grungy apartment in Old Town. Sprawled on

beat-up couches and flea-market chairs, they were a motley crew — unemployed artists, Web designers, writers and musicians — eager to make their mark as cultural pioneers, colonizing a new frontier in Eastern Europe. “I’m in several bands here,” said Anna Spysz, 24, a pixieish guitarist from Austin, who wore a low-cut T-shirt, hip-hugging jeans and fake pearls. “It’s very easy to book a gig here. You don’t have the pressures of London, New York or Austin. And you don’t need two jobs to survive.”

The group chatted about their creative endeavors as they polished off six-packs of Tatra Pilsener, smoked hand-rolled cigarettes and, at one point, began scrawling existential messages on the walls. Then, at about midnight, they headed off to Kitsch, a multilevel pansexual club on Ulica Wielopole, where they danced until the wee hours.

Krakow’s pleasures, however, are not confined to after nightfall. Unlike in [Warsaw](#), which was largely destroyed during World War II, Krakow’s stone churches and castles — some dating back to the 10th century — remain gorgeously intact. Older Poles still talk about how the occupying Nazis had apparently rigged the entire city with dynamite, but fled before detonating a single charge.

As a result, Rynek Glowny, which ranks among the largest medieval squares in [Europe](#), looks pretty much the way it did in the Middle Ages. Dominated by the twin-towered St. Mary’s Basilica and the behemoth Cloth Hall, the market square is also surprisingly un-touristy, even when the stone-paved expanse is thronged with tourists. There are no Starbucks, no American Apparels.

On a Sunday afternoon, there were sharply dressed mothers sipping tea, elderly couples looking at an outdoor photography exhibit, and clusters of students — the nation’s top colleges, including Jagiellonian University, are in Krakow — pecking on their laptops under the 230-foot-tall and Wi-Fi-equipped Town Hall Tower.

“The city center is for real people,” said Mark Bradshaw, 38, an expatriate from [Zimbabwe](#) who runs [Cracow-Life.com](#), a popular online city guide. “If you were in [Venice](#), every place is taken over by some big business. Here, you find student spaces that haven’t been driven out by corporations.”

The same ethos holds true for Kazimierz, an old Jewish district southeast of Old Town. A tightly packed warren of crooked cobblestones and peeling facades, its hauntingly preserved streets came to attention in 1993 as the setting for [Steven Spielberg](#)’s film “Schindler’s List.”

While Kazimierz still evokes its Jewish past, it is estimated that fewer than 200 Jews are living in the whole of Krakow today. The Nazis had corralled some 17,000 of its residents into a nearby ghetto before shipping most of them off to Auschwitz and Birkenau, about 40 miles west of the city. About seven synagogues remain, but they serve more as cultural attractions than houses of worship.

As with other former Jewish districts throughout Europe, Kazimierz has emerged in recent years as the city’s alternative artistic center. After languishing for decades, its dingy tenements and wooden doors have been pried open and are slowly being converted into gritty pubs and sleek restaurants, with names like Le Scandale and Propaganda.

The coolest joint may be Alchemia, a dark and smoky bar with wobbly furniture, wood plank floors and faded photographs. Like other nearby lounges, its fin de siècle décor was meticulously stage-crafted to evoke a lost

bohemia. Lurking in its shadows on a Saturday night were students studying by candlelight and moody artists nursing pilseners.

But then, around midnight, a gang of British louts stumbled in and ordered shots of krupnik, a honey-flavored vodka. Yes, the stag party has discovered Krakow, many of the revelers drawn by tour companies like Crazy Stag, run by Mike Ostrowski, a 29-year-old Pole. Offerings include "Communism tours" of Nowa Huta, a bizarre socialist-realist suburb 20-minutes outside Krakow, and gatherings in Soviet-era apartments where the entertainment might be a stripper in a hot pink bikini and where guests may end the night by shedding their clothes and tossing their underwear out the window.

WHILE such spectacles no longer raise an eyebrow in Prague and [Budapest](#), they feel somehow out of place in Krakow, a proud and overwhelmingly Roman Catholic city, where the local airport is named after [Pope John Paul II](#), who served as the city's archbishop before becoming pope. Indeed, scandalized by their growing presence, city tourism officials recently announced a campaign to discourage stag parties with advertisements spotlighting the city's rich heritage. (Whether church morality wins over the virtues of cheap booze remains to be seen.)

As evening fell on Rynek Glowny, the square was awash in a luminous golden glow, pigeons were replaced by swarms of young revelers, and the thumping of Polish electronic music echoed off the medieval stone walls.

VISITOR INFORMATION

HOW TO GET THERE

LOT Polish Airlines flies from Kennedy Airport in New York, with a connection in [Warsaw](#), starting at about \$950. Czech Airlines flies from Kennedy, with a plane change in [Prague](#), starting at about \$850.

WHERE TO STAY

Wielopole Guest Rooms (Ulica Wielopole 3, 48-12-4221475; www.wielopole.pl), just outside Old Town, was recently renovated and has clean, modern rooms. Doubles start at 320 zlotys, about \$110 at 8.9 zlotys to the dollar.

For million-dollar views at backpacker rates, try the Rynek7 Hostel (Rynek Glowny 7/6; 48-12-431-16-98; www.hostelrynek7.com). In a 15th-century building overlooking the main square, it has bunks starting at 55 zlotys, and doubles with shared baths for 150 zlotys.

WHERE TO DRINK

Alchemia (Ulica Estery 5; 48-12-421-2200; www.alchemia.com.pl). A dark and folkloric hangout in Kazimierz with live [music](#) and art shows.

Kitsch (Ulica Wielopole 15; 48-12-4225299; www.kitsch.pl). A mixed, gay-friendly club that parties all night.

Pauza (Ulica Florianska 18/5; 48-602-637-833; www.pauza.pl). A hard-to-find bar in Old Town that draws musicians and art-school students.

Piekny Pies, an eclectic pub popular with expatriates, students and a few local drunks, has closed, but will reopen at Slawskowska 3A next month.