

Destination Poland

Overrun countless times by marauding aggressors, subjugated to overbearing foreign rule for centuries, and now told their beloved vodka can be made from *anything*, the Polish nation has endured more than most. Yet Poland, a country crushed flat so many times it has become indestructible, is shaking off the last vestiges of forced slumber and rushing with great abandon into a modern 21st century.

This massive land in the heart of Europe has become the epitome of a changing continent. Now a member of the EU, it is enjoying the rewards – and experiencing the challenges – of this exclusive club. Money has begun to flow into the country, repairing roads, building shopping malls and beautifying streets, but the progress is laboriously slow for some. Poland still has an unemployment rate twice as high as some of its EU compatriots, and its young, educated citizens are leaving in droves for wealthier pastures.

Despite the country's rush to embrace the future, its past cannot be ignored, particularly when it confronts you at every turn. Warsaw may be embracing New World cuisine, café culture and clubs that never close, but you'll still encounter peasant women selling bunches of flowers in its beautifully reconstructed Old Town. Drive across the country's northern expanse and you'll stumble upon a string of 14th-century Gothic castles, the last remnants of the once powerful Teutonic Knights. Catch a no-frills flight to Kraków or Wrocław and you'll arrive in magnificent medieval centres. Or choose almost any major city – and too many small towns – and you'll bear witness to extermination camps, derelict Jewish cemeteries, and dark political prisons, terrible reminders from the last 70 years.

While the country's cities rapidly modernise, its countryside continues to retain its rustic allure. In Poland's southern reaches, dominated by tree-clad mountains, the cliché of horse-drawn carts transporting hay from the fields still holds true. Bucolic splendour spreads from the outskirts of urban centres as far as the eye can see, and pockets of primeval forest in the northeast shelter herds of wild bison. The clear waters of the Great Masurian Lakes prove irresistible to sailors and kayakers, and the long, sandy beaches of the Baltic coast provide ample opportunity for summer seaside sojourns.

It is, however, in this rural expanse that Poland's populist politicians gained a groundswell of support, which swept a conservative coalition government to power in 2005. Internally some saw it as a step backwards, and the then government's anti-gay stance, ultra-Catholic bent and draconian intentions drew a rash of opprobrious criticism. Externally, Poland's political moves in the last two years have also caused headaches; relations with Germany sank to an all-time low since the fall of communism, and friction with Russia rose to unsettling levels. However, elections in October 2007 changed Poland's political landscape once again, with the liberal Civic Platform party winning the majority of votes. Many breathed a sigh of relief, not least other EU leaders, who will now deal with the more pragmatic and pro-EU Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

Yet Poland and its people should not be judged by the actions of its politicians. Poles remain doggedly warm and generous despite the massive upheavals, something many visitors can attest to. Even if you protest profusely, you will be forced to polish off a bottle of vodka or two, eat

plate after plate of *bigos* (cabbage and meat stew), and join intense discussions on philosophy and politics, but it's comforting to know that it's all done with a love of life and an appreciation for the present, because no-one can be sure what tomorrow will bring. But don't take our word for it: spend some time here and you'll discover a unique land where East meets West and helpings of joy and sorrow have been served up in equal proportions. And you'll come away with new-found admiration for this unbreakable country.

FAST FACTS

Population: 38.9 million
(December 2005)

Area: 312,685 sq km

GDP (per head):
US\$15,900 (2007)

Inflation: 1.3% (2006)

Unemployment: 12%
(August 2007)

Number of lakes: 9000

Number of bison in the
wild: 700

Annual vodka spending:
US\$2.6 million

Proportion of popula-
tion who are practising
Roman Catholics: 75%

Proportion of population
who died in WWII: 20%
(UK 0.9%; USA 0.2%)

Getting Started

Poland is a user-friendly country that even the most disorganised traveller should find relatively easy to navigate. While a little bit of planning never goes astray, at least to pinpoint a few must-see attractions, no huge amount of advance planning is needed. Plus anything you forget to pack can be picked up in-country, and English is widely spoken in the main tourist areas.

WHEN TO GO

A country this size has enough going on to make it a year-round destination, but most people visit when the weather is warmer, from May to October. The tourist season peaks in July and August, when schools and universities are on holiday and most Polish workers and employees take their annual leave. It's a time when things can get very crowded, particularly in tourist hot spots such as the Baltic beaches, Great Masurian Lakes and Carpathian Mountains. The likes of Kraków and Warsaw can also seem overrun with visitors during the peak.

Naturally, in July and August transport becomes more crowded too, and can get booked out in advance. Accommodation may be harder to find, and sometimes more expensive. Fortunately, a lot of schools, which are empty during the holidays, double as youth hostels, as do student dormitories in major cities. This roughly meets the demand for budget accommodation. Most theatres are closed in July and August.

If you want to avoid the masses, the best time to come is either late spring/early summer (mid-May to June) or the turn of summer and autumn (September to October), when tourism is under way but not in full flood. These are pleasantly warm periods, ideal for general sightseeing and outdoor activities such as walking, biking, horse riding and canoeing. Many cultural events take place in both these periods.

The rest of the year, from mid-autumn to mid-spring, is colder and darker. This doesn't mean that it's a bad time for visiting city sights and enjoying the cultural life as it's no less active than during the tourist season. Understandably, hiking and other outdoor activities – aside from skiing – are less prominent in this period. Most camping grounds and youth hostels shut up shop at this time.

The ski season runs from December to March. The Polish mountains are spectacular, but the infrastructure (hotels and chalets, lifts and tows, cable cars, transport etc) is still not well developed. Zakopane, Poland's winter capital, and the nearby Tatra Mountains have the best ski facilities.

COSTS & MONEY

Though not the bargain it used to be, Poland is still a relatively inexpensive country for travellers. Just how inexpensive, of course, depends largely on what degree of comfort you need, what hotel standards you are used to, what kind of food you eat, where you go, how fast you travel and the means of transport you use. If, for example, you are accustomed to hire cars and plush hotels, you can spend as much as you would in Western Europe.

A budget traveller prepared for basic conditions and willing to endure some discomfort on the road could get by on a daily average of around US\$35 to US\$40. This amount would cover accommodation in cheap hotels and hostels, food in budget restaurants, travel at a reasonable pace by train or bus, and still leave you a margin for some cultural events, a few beers

and occasional taxis. If you plan on camping or staying in youth hostels and eating in cheap bistros and other self-services, it's feasible to cut this average down to US\$25 per day without experiencing too much suffering. Cities are more expensive than the rural areas, with Warsaw and Kraków being the most expensive.

In general, Poland's admission to the EU has yet to have a marked effect on prices countrywide. In major centres, such as Warsaw, Kraków and Gdańsk, there has been a slight rise in costs across the board, but not to the extent seen in Western Europe.

READING UP

You will get far more out of your visit if you read up on the country before you go. There's no shortage of English-language books about Poland, though most deal with language, culture and customs rather than actual travel experiences.

The evocative writing of Bruno Schulz in *Street of Crocodiles* captures life in his small village of Drohobych (now in Ukraine) before WWII. His descriptions are gorgeous and quite brilliant.

In *The Bronski House*, accomplished travel writer Philip Marsden accompanies exiled poet Zofia Hinska on a return to her childhood village, now in Belarus. It's a magical retelling of life among the landed gentry of eastern Poland between the wars.

Ted Simon's account of his 2400km walk from Germany to Romania via Poland in *The Gypsy In Me* is a tale of travel through postcommunist Eastern Europe and a moving personal quest for family origins.

On Foot to the Golden Horn, by Jason Godwin, follows the journey of three friends on their walk from Gdańsk to Istanbul soon after the fall of communism. Although a tad dated, the book is a great snapshot of the time.

Despite there being little in the way of travel in *A Traveller's History of Poland* by John Radzilowski, it's still a fine read and a good introduction to the roller-coaster ride that is Poland's history.

Rising '44, by Norman Davies, provides an enthralling account of Warsaw's second uprising against the Nazis. The book's highlights are personal tales of Poles and Germans involved in the terrible battle.

For further background literature, look out for bookshops around the world specialising in Eastern Europe; **Polonia Bookstore** (www.polonia.com) in the USA, for example, stocks an extensive collection. Online, the **Instytut Książki** (The Book Institute; www.instytutksiazki.pl) has a wealth of information on Polish authors and literature in general.

HOW MUCH?

Double room in midrange hotel 200zł

Cinema ticket 16zł

1L of vodka 40zł

Tram ticket in Warsaw 2.40zł

100km bus trip 15-18zł

LONELY PLANET INDEX

1L of petrol 4.50zł

1.5L of bottled water 2.50zł

0.5L of Żywiec beer 5-7zł

Souvenir T-shirt 15zł

Zapiekanki (Polish pizza) 3.50zł

See Climate Charts (p505) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- your travel-insurance policy details (p510)
- a few words of Polish and a Polish phrasebook (p533)
- good walking shoes for urban and rural exploration
- a taste for vodka – Poles will expect you to join in
- a hangover remedy
- a smile, as you won't see many on the streets because smiling at strangers is seen as a sign of stupidity
- insect repellent in summer
- student card for cheap deals (p507)

TOP 10

Germany

Warsaw
POLAND

POLES YOU SHOULD KNOW

Poland's history is filled with famous figures, but we've listed 10 who will keep popping up on your travels.

- | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 1 Frédéric Chopin (p53) | 6 Adam Mickiewicz (p51) |
| 2 Nicolaus Copernicus (p481) | 7 Józef Piłsudski (p35) |
| 3 Marie Curie (p95) | 8 Jan III Sobieski (p32) |
| 4 Tadeusz Kościuszko (p33) | 9 Lech Wałęsa (p39) |
| 5 Jan Matejko (p56) | 10 Karol Józef Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II (p261) |

MUST-SEE MOVIES

Films are a great way to gain an insight into a country's character, or at the very least a nice way to spend an evening. Here are our 10 best films by Polish directors; most are in Polish (except for *The Pianist* and *Three Colours: White*) but are available with English subtitles. See p52 for more on Polish cinema.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 <i>Kanał</i> (Canal; 1957) Director: Andrzej Wajda | 6 <i>Przesłuchanie</i> (Interrogation; 1982) Director: Ryszard Bugajski |
| 2 <i>Nóż w wodzie</i> (Knife in the Water; 1962) Director: Roman Polański | 7 <i>Dekalog</i> (The Decalogue; 1987) Director: Krzysztof Kieślowski |
| 3 <i>Rejs</i> (The Cruise; 1970) Director: Marek Piwowski | 8 <i>Three Colours: White</i> (1994) Director: Krzysztof Kieślowski |
| 4 <i>Człowiek z marmaru</i> (Man of Marble; 1976) Director: Andrzej Wajda | 9 <i>Dług</i> (The Debt; 1999) Director: Krzysztof Krauze |
| 5 <i>Miś</i> (Teddy Bear; 1981) Director: Stanisław Bareja | 10 <i>The Pianist</i> (2002) Director: Roman Polański |

LITERATURE

The depth of Polish literature is immense. Here's a list of 10 of the best books, all of which are available in English. See p50 for more on Polish literature.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 <i>A Minor Apocalypse</i> (1984) Tadeusz Konwicki | 6 <i>Quo Vadis</i> (1905) Henryk Sienkiewicz |
| 2 <i>Ashes and Diamonds</i> (1958) Jerzy Andrzejewski | 7 <i>Solaris</i> (1961) Stanisław Lem |
| 3 <i>Dreams and Stones</i> (2004) Magdalena Tulli | 8 <i>The Peasants</i> (1924) Władysław Reymont |
| 4 <i>Pan Tadeusz</i> (1834) Adam Mickiewicz | 9 <i>Under Western Eyes</i> (1911) Joseph Conrad |
| 5 <i>Prawiek and Other Times</i> (1996) Olga Tokarczuk | 10 <i>View with a Grain of Sand</i> (1995) Wisława Szymborska |

INTERNET RESOURCES

Experience Poland (www.experiencepoland.com) Offers a wide range of general information on travelling in Poland.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Check out the Thorn Tree bulletin board for fresh advice from travellers. The site also has general information and links to Poland-related sites.

Poland.pl (www.poland.pl) General directory site, an excellent place to start surfing.

Polish National Tourist Office (www.polandtour.org) Official site for general tourist information.

Polska (www.poland.gov.pl) Good, all-round site for tourists and businesspeople alike, run by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Travel Poland (www.travelpoland.com) Reliable online accommodation-booking service.

Warsaw Voice (www.warsawvoice.pl) Covers Poland's current affairs.

TRAVELLING SUSTAINABLY

Since our inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged our readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and enjoy the serendipitous magic independent travel affords. International travel is growing at a jaw-dropping rate, and we still firmly believe in the benefits it can bring – but, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

In general Poland is still suffering the side effects of communist ideals. As one environmentalist put it, under communism everyone owned Poland, so in effect no-one owned Poland. Therefore no-one took responsibility, or accountability, for nature. The idea of sustainable development and tourism is slowly catching on, and the opportunities to support both the local economy and environment are growing year by year.

For more information on the environmental issues facing Poland, see the Environment chapter (p68).

Getting There & Away

If you're Europe-based, it's easy to travel to Poland by bus, train or boat. Of course it may be a long journey, but there's nothing like a trip across the continent. If air travel is your only option, or you simply can't face sitting in a bus or train for a day, consider offsetting your carbon emissions (the respected www.climatecare.org can organise this for you).

Local Transport

Poland may be a big country, but there's no real reason to use air-bound transport. Electric-powered trains, which leave no direct carbon footprint and are a wonderful way to see the country, extensively cover Poland, and it's no more than a day's train ride from one Polish town to another. And if trains don't go there, buses do. Cycling is an alternative option for travelling the country, as bicycles can be taken on trains, thereby allowing you to avoid long, arduous stretches on two wheels. Almost every town and city has an extensive public-transport system, employing buses, trolleybuses or electric trams; normally it's a far more convenient way to see a place than by car.

Accommodation & Food

Poland's accommodation range is wide, so it's generally an easy task to avoid the large, generic hotel chains and choose smaller, family-run places, thus ensuring your tourist dollar directly benefits the local community. Environmental awareness, however, is still a work in progress, with only a handful of hotels providing a choice to opt out of daily towel service, and even fewer separating their waste for recycling.

Agrotourist accommodation, pensions and private rooms are also excellent alternatives, where you can be sure your money remains with the owners.

It's simple to pick up local produce in Poland – most towns and cities have market days where farmers from the surrounding areas sell their homegrown fruit, vegetables and flowers. Unless it's certified organic there's no guarantee it's free of chemical sprays, but there's a good chance it is. Under communism, most farmers were unable to afford chemical pesticides or fertilisers so were inadvertently organic producers, and there has been a major increase in organic farming in the past few years.

As for eating responsibly, European bison (p149) is sometimes seen on menus. It's legal meat, but, considering the animal's tiny population, it shouldn't be and you're best to avoid it.

Responsible Travel Organisations

There are a number of organisations in Poland working towards the development of sustainable tourism. They include the following:

Association for Ecotourism Development (www.ekoturystyka.org)

European Bison Programme (www.zbs.bialowieza.pl/zubr)

Institute for Sustainable Development (www.ine-isd.org.pl)

Polish Environmental Partnership Foundation (www.epce.org.pl)

WWF Poland (www.wwf.pl)

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

HITTING THE HIGHLIGHTS

Two Weeks / Gdańsk to Kraków

This route runs north to south – with a detour to the northeast of the country – and takes in Poland's top attractions.

Begin with a day in the grand old port city of **Gdańsk** (p403), then head east to the **Great Masurian Lakes** (p490) for some water-based exploration (or relaxation). On the way to the lakes, stop at **Malbork** (p448) to see the celebrated castle.

From the lakes, it's an easy journey to **Białowieża National Park** (p147) and its primeval forest and European bison herds, before heading to **Warsaw** (p82). Spend at least two days discovering the capital city, then continue south to Poland's 'other capital', **Kraków** (p162), which merits at least another two days' exploration.

Kraków is a convenient base for day trips to two more top sights – the strange, subterranean world of the **Wieliczka Salt Mine** (p192), and the chilling Nazi extermination camp at **Auschwitz-Birkenau** (p357) in Oświęcim, 40km to the west. Spend the final two or three days hiking amid the stunning scenery of the **Tatra National Park** (p306).



This 1250km route takes in Poland's biggest sights, starting in the far north of the country and ending in the far south. By car it can be completed in two weeks, in three weeks if using public transport.

ALONG THE VISTULA**Four Weeks / Kraków to Gdańsk**

The Vistula is Poland's greatest river, winding its way from the foothills of the country's southern mountain range to the Baltic Sea. It passes through – or close to – a string of historical towns and imposing castles.

Begin upstream with two or three days at the former royal capital of **Kraków** (p162) and take a day tour to **Auschwitz-Birkenau** (p357) in Oświęcim. From Kraków it's 120km to **Baranów Sandomierski** (p228) and its beautiful Renaissance castle, and then only a short distance to **Sandomierz** (p224), a town with impressive architectural variety and few tourists. From here, it's worth taking a detour to the Renaissance masterpiece of **Zamość** (p250), one of Poland's finest historic towns.

Back on the path of the Vistula, stop in at picturesque **Kazimierz Dolny** (p241) before hitting **Warsaw** (p82) and indulging in its delights for a couple of days. Back on the road, call in at **Płock** (p134), Poland's art nouveau capital, then follow the river into Pomerania and through the heart of medieval **Toruń** (p436).

Soon after Toruń the river makes a sharp right and heads directly for the sea. In former times, the Vistula's path was guarded by one Teutonic stronghold after the next – today, these gothic gems silently watch the river pass by. You can see the Teutonic Knights' handiwork at **Chelmno** (p444), **Kwidzyn** (p447) and **Gniew** (p447), but the mightiest example resides at **Malbork** (p448), on the banks of one of the river's sidearms. End your journey at the port city of **Gdańsk** (p403), where river meets sea.

This road trip follows the Vistula River as it carves its way 2000km through Poland's lush landscape. It touches on some of the country's larger and lesser-known sights, and takes between three and four weeks to complete.

**ROADS LESS TRAVELLED****THE EASTERN MARCHES****Three Weeks / Kraków to Suwałki**

Poland's most popular sights lie along the Gdańsk–Warsaw–Kraków–Tatra axis that runs north–south through the country. To get off the beaten track, head for the eastern marches, borderlands running along the frontier with Ukraine and Belarus, where few visitors venture.

From **Kraków** (p162) head towards the southeastern corner of the country, stopping off at **Bóbrka** (p287), home to the world's first oil well. Make for **Sanok** (p274), with its skansen and icon museum, and devote a couple of days to exploring the remote **Bieszczady National Park** (p281).

Turn north, and take the back roads to the Renaissance town of **Zamość** (p250), by way of **Przemyśl** (p270) and its quirky Museum of Bells & Pipes. Continue to **Chelm** (p247), where you can explore the chalk tunnels beneath the town square, and then on to **Lublin** (p232).

Strike out north through the rural backwaters of eastern Poland to the pilgrimage site of **Grabarka** (p152), with its hill of 20,000 crosses, before making for **Hajnówka** (p146) and **Białowieża National Park** (p147).

Then it's north again to the provincial city of **Białystok** (p139), which provides a base for visiting the wooden **mosques** (p145) near the Belarusian border and the mysterious wetlands of **Biebrza National Park** (p143).

Finish with a short trip to the lake resort of **Augustów** (p153). From nearby **Suwałki** (p157) catch a train back to Warsaw, or on to Vilnius in Lithuania.

This 1200km trip is most easily done by car (allow two to three weeks), but it's also possible by public transport (which will take about four weeks). It would also make an interesting bicycle tour (six weeks for the whole route).



WESTERN WANDERINGS

Three Weeks / Wrocław to Szczecin

Poland's western expanse is largely ignored by tourists more eager to sample the country's big guns such as Kraków and the Great Masurian Lakes. This is, however, a vibrant place with one lively town after another and a coastline lined with sandy beaches right to the German border.

Base yourself in **Wrocław** (p313) for a few days and avail yourself of its eclectic architectural mix, full cultural calendar and selection of day trips, including the splendid **Książ Castle** (p332). From Wrocław it's an easy step to **Zielona Góra** (p367), Poland's only wine-producing town, and then on to **Poznań** (p372), Wielkopolska's commercial heart and bustling main city.

Visit the eccentric castle at **Kórnik** (p386), only 20km southeast of Poznań, then move on to **Gniezno** (p389), the cradle of the Polish state. Spend a day exploring the town and its mammoth Gothic cathedral, then head north to **Biskupin** (p394), a reconstructed Iron Age village. The sizable city of **Toruń** (p436) is the next port of call, followed by a visit to the Gothic fortifications at **Chelmno** (p444).

From here, it would be easy to make for Gdańsk, but just as rewarding is an exploration of Poland's Baltic coast. Head northwest to dune-filled **Słowiński National Park** (p457) and then follow the coastline west towards Germany and the popular seaside resort of **Kołobrzeg** (p462). Continue west and pull up just short of the border at **Świnoujście** (p468), another of Poland's summer playgrounds. It's only a short trip south to **Szczecin** (p471), a busy port with a mishmash of architecture.

Covering 1200km of Poland's western expanse, this road trip hits some intriguing towns and the best of the country's sandy coastline. Allow two to three weeks by car, four weeks by public transport.



TAILORED TRIPS

UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Poland's numerous world heritage sites are mainly human-made efforts scattered the length and breadth of the country.

No less than four old town centres make the esteemed list. The painstakingly reconstructed centre in **Warsaw** (p91) is one, along with medieval **Toruń** (p436), Renaissance **Zamość** (p252) and the granddaddy of them all, **Kraków** (p172).

Poland is covered in castles, but none can compare to the magnificent example at **Malbork** (p448). The country isn't short of a church or two either, but the timber-and-clay Church of Peace at **Świdnica** (p329) and the sublime wooden churches of the Carpathian Foothills, including **Dębno Podhalańskie** (p303), **Haczów** (p287) and **Sękowa** (p291), will even wow heathens.

Within easy reach of Kraków is the pilgrimage site of **Kalwaria Zebrzydowska** (p259), the weird and wonderful **Wieliczka Salt Mine** (p192) and the Nazi extermination camp at **Auschwitz-Birkenau** (p357) in Oświęcim.

The newest addition to the list is Wrocław's **Centennial Hall** (p322), a landmark in the history of reinforced concrete, while more down-to-earth is the **Białowieża National Park** (p147), Mother Nature's only entry.



BEACHES & WATERWAYS

Water isn't the first thing to spring to mind when thoughts turn to Poland. But water aplenty there is, if you know where to look.

The Baltic coast is lined with a string of swimming beaches, starting at **Świnoujście** (p468) on the border with Germany and ending in the fashionable seaside resort of **Sopot** (p425). In between there's **Międzyzdroje** (p466), **Kołobrzeg** (p462), **Darłowo** (p461), **Ustka** (p460) and **Łeba** (p455), all of which offer clean, sandy seashores and a seaside lifestyle. Poking out into the Gulf of Gdańsk is **Hel Peninsula** (p433), with arguably the best beaches in Poland.

Heading inland to sweeter waters, the **Elbląg-Ostróda Canal** (p486) offers a unique boat trip, while the **Great Masurian Lakes** (p490) have all manner of water-bound possibilities. Further east, the **Augustów-Suwałki Region** (p152) has its fair share of waterways, such as **Lake Wigry** (p159), the **Czarna Hańcza River** (p154) and the **Augustów Canal** (p156).

Not to be outdone are the **Biebrza** (p143) and **Narew** (p144) national parks, which have gentle kayaking opportunities.



OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

With its wide-open spaces, pristine forests, thousands of lakes, long coastline and southern mountain range, Poland has plenty for the outdoor enthusiast. The question then is not which activity to pursue, but where, and for how long?

The tall peaks and forest-clad slopes of the Carpathian Mountains area almost has it all, with some of the country's best trekking options in the **Tatras** (p304), an extensive array of mountain biking for all experience levels in the **Bieszczady** (p274), gentle rafting in the **Dunajec Gorge** (p301) and skiing, snowboarding and snowman-building in **Zakopane** (p306). Not to be outdone, the **Great Masurian Lakes** (p490) come up trumps with the best sailing and kayaking opportunities in the country; here you can spend weeks exploring the region's sparkling lakes and plethora of tributaries. The rivers in this area also provide a chance to enjoy watery adventures; two of the most celebrated, the **Krutynia River** (p481) and **Czarna Hańcza River** (p154) can be found in the far north. Salt-water junkies can get a fix with windsurfing and kitesurfing along the long, thin **Hel Peninsula** (p433), while those who prefer to be in, rather than on, the water can explore one of the many swimming beaches that line the coastal expanse of northern and western Pomerania – **Kołobrzeg** (p462) is among the most popular spots to take a dip.

Less strenuous but equally rewarding activities are spread throughout the Mazovia and Podlasie areas. It's pure soul-food cycling through age-old **Białowieża Forest** (p147) and **Augustów Forest** (p157), which spread east to the Belarusian border. There are enough paths here to keep cycling enthusiasts entertained for days, but if getting around on two wheels isn't your thing, they can just as easily be enjoyed on foot. Budding ornithologists can avail themselves of the ample bird-watching possibilities at **Biebrza National Park** (p143), which contains riverscapes, peat bogs, marshlands and damp forests within its borders.



On the Road



NEAL BEDFORD *Coordinating Author*

A friend from university always said one drink is for girls, but I never bought into his philosophy. Still, two drinks seemed better than one at Wisłostrada, a rockin' arts and music festival on the banks of the Vistula in Warsaw. The next day I vowed to stick to one drink at a time.



STEVE FALLON In the forest on the way to Muczne in the Bieszczady I encountered two sooty charcoal-burners. It takes 24 hours for the sycamore and beech logs to burn and another day for the charcoal to cool. It's hot, dirty work and the guys wanted to drink. I wanted to burn. We compromised.



MARIKA MCADAM I was sorry to be leaving Kazimierz Dolny with its quaint architecture and quirky tradition of baking rooster-shaped bread. If I had to leave, I was going to take advantage of the fact that there was no-one around at 6.30am and ride out of there on a rooster.



TIM RICHARDS I had no idea that Poland could get so hot in spring, and was equally surprised by the old-fashioned charm of Kołobrzeg's beach. The beach chairs for hire, the fine white sand, and the beach vendor surreptitiously selling beer while chanting 'Tea! Coffee!' made for a fun break.

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