

History

Poland's history is an immense tale. Forever sandwiched between two powerful and aggressive neighbours, it has over the past millennium defended its freedom and sovereignty on innumerable occasions, only to be overrun and subjugated to occupation by foreign powers time and time again. It has gone from being the largest country in Europe to completely disappearing off the world map, and seen its population devastated in two world wars. Yet it is testament to the astounding resilience of the Polish people that Poland has not only bounced back from every crushing blow but also had the energy to hold strong to its own culture.

BEFORE THE POLES

The lands of modern-day Poland have been inhabited since the Stone Age, with numerous tribes from the east and west calling its fertile plains home. Archaeological finds from both the Stone and Bronze Ages can be seen in many Polish museums, but the greatest example of pre-Slavic peoples resides in Biskupin (p394); its fortified town from the Iron Age was built by the Lusatian tribe around 2700 years ago. The Celts, followed by the Germanic tribes and then the Baltic folk, all established themselves on Polish soil, but it wasn't until the coming of the Slavs that Poland began to shape itself into a nation.

SLAVIC ORIGINS

Although the exact date of the arrival of the first Slavic tribes is unknown, historians agree that the Slavs began settling the area between the 5th and 8th centuries. From the 8th century onwards, smaller tribes banded together to form greater conglomerations, thus establishing themselves more fully on the lands of the future Polish state. The country's name derives from one of these tribes, the Polanie (literally, 'the people of the fields, open-country dwellers'), who settled on the banks of the Warta River near present-day Poznań. Their tribal chief, the legendary Piast, managed to unite the scattered groups of the surrounding areas into a single political unit in the 10th century, and gave it the name Polska (later Wielkopolska, meaning Great Poland). It wasn't until the coming of Piast's great-great grandson, Duke Mieszko I, that much of Poland was united under one dynasty.

THE FIRST POLISH KINGDOM

After Duke Mieszko I converted to Christianity, he did what most early Christian rulers did and began conquering the neighbours. Soon the entire

TIMELINE

Before AD 500

Establishment of the first Polish town, Gniezno, by Lech, one of three mythical brothers who in legend founded the three Slavic nations (Poland, Ruthenia and Bohemia).

966

Polska's first recorded ruler, Duke Mieszko I, converts to Christianity, possibly as a political move against Otto the Great. It marks the date of the formal birth of the Polish state.

970s

Duke Mieszko I builds Poland's first cathedral at Gniezno, and a second at Poznań. The Catholic religion begins its long hold on the Polish people.

coastal region of Pomerania (Pomorze) fell under his sovereignty, along with Śląsk (Silesia) to the south and Małopolska (Little Poland) to the southeast. By the time of his death in 992, the Polish state was established within boundaries similar to those of Poland today, and the first capital and archbishopric were established in Gniezno. By that time, towns such as Gdańsk, Szczecin, Poznań, Wrocław and Kraków already existed. Mieszko's son, Bolesław the Brave, continued his father's work, even pushing the Polish border as far east as Kyiv. His son, Mieszko II, was less successful in the conquering department, and during his reign the country experienced wars in the north and a period of internal fighting within the royal family. The administrative centre of the country was moved from Wielkopolska to the less vulnerable Małopolska, and by the middle of the 11th century, Kraków was established as the royal seat.

When pagan Prussians, from the region that is now the northeastern tip of Poland, attacked the central province of Mazovia in 1226, Duke Konrad of Mazovia called for help from the Teutonic Knights (p451), a Germanic military and religious order that had made its historic mark during the Crusades. The knights soon subjugated the pagan tribes but then bit the hand that fed them, building massive castles in Polish territory, conquering the port city of Gdańsk (and renaming it Danzig), and effectively claiming all of northern Poland as their own. They ruled from their greatest castle of all, at Malbork (p448), and within a matter of decades became a major European military power.

KAZIMIERZ III & REUNIFICATION

Not until 1320 was the Polish crown restored and the state reunified. It was under the rule of Kazimierz III Wielki (Casimir III the Great; 1333–70) that Poland gradually became a prosperous and powerful state, despite concessions being made to Bohemia in the southwest and the Teutonic Knights in the north. Kazimierz Wielki regained suzerainty over Mazovia, then captured vast areas of Ruthenia (today's Ukraine) and Podolia, thus greatly expanding his monarchy towards the southeast.

Kazimierz Wielki was also an enlightened and energetic ruler on the domestic front. Promoting and instituting reforms, he laid down solid legal, economic, commercial and educational foundations. He also passed a law providing privileges for Jews, thus establishing Poland as a safe house for the Jewish community for centuries to come. Over 70 new towns were founded, and the royal capital of Kraków flourished. In 1364 one of Europe's first universities was established at Kraków, and an extensive network of castles and fortifications was constructed to improve the nation's defences. There is a saying that Kazimierz Wielki 'found Poland built of wood and left it built of stone'.

THE JAGIELLONIAN DYNASTY (1382–1572)

The close of the 14th century saw Poland forge a dynastic alliance with Lithuania, a political marriage that increased Poland's territory five-fold overnight and that would last for the next four centuries. The union benefited both parties – Poland gained a partner in skirmishes against the Tatars and Mongols, and Lithuania received help in the fight against the Teutonic Knights. Under Władysław II Jagiełło (1386–1434), the alliance defeated the Knights and recovered eastern Pomerania, part of Prussia and the port of Gdańsk, and for 30 years the Polish empire was Europe's largest state, extending from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

Eastward Advance Checked

But it was not to last. Threat of invasion became apparent towards the end of the 15th century – this time the main instigators were the Ottomans from the south, the Tatars of Crimea from the east, and the tsars of Moscow from the north and east. Independently or together, they repeatedly invaded and raided the eastern and southern Polish territories, and on one occasion managed to penetrate as far as Kraków.

Poland's Golden Age

Despite this, the Polish kingdom's power was firmly established and the country advanced both culturally and spiritually. The early 16th century brought the Renaissance to Poland and during the reigns of Zygmunt I Stary (Sigismund I the Old; 1506–48) and his son Zygmunt II August (Sigismund II Augustus; 1548–72), the arts and sciences flourished. This was Poland's golden age, which spawned the likes of Nicolaus Copernicus (p481).

The bulk of Poland's population at this time was made up of Poles and Lithuanians but included significant minorities from neighbouring countries. Jews constituted an important and steadily growing part of the community and by the end of the 16th century Poland had a larger Jewish population than the rest of Europe combined.

On the political front, Poland evolved during the 16th century into a parliamentary monarchy with most of the privileges going to the *szlachta* (gentry, the feudal nobility), who comprised roughly 10% of the population. In contrast, the status of the peasants declined, and they gradually found themselves falling into a state of virtual slavery.

Hoping to strengthen the monarchy, the Sejm convened in Lublin in 1569, unified Poland and Lithuania into a single state, and made Warsaw the seat of future debates. Since there was no heir apparent to the throne, it also established a system of royal succession based on direct voting in popular elections by the nobility, who would all come to Warsaw to vote. In the absence of a serious Polish contender, a foreign candidate would be considered.

Jews in Poland: a Documentary History, by Iwo Cyprian Pogonowski, provides a comprehensive record of half a millennium of Polish-Jewish relations in Poland.

1038

Under the rule of Piast Kazimierz I, the Polish capital is moved from Gniezno to Kraków. The southern city would remain the seat of royal Poland for the next 550 years.

1241–42

Mongol invasions leave not only Poland, but also much of Europe, in ruin. This leaves room for German settlers to move east into Poland, but also Poland to expand eastwards into Ukraine.

1364

Kraków University, Europe's second after Prague University, is established. It paves the way for higher learning in Poland.

1410

Polish and Lithuanian forces defeat the Teutonic Knights at the Battle of Grunwald. The decisive victory is a major turning point for Poland, ridding the country of the Teutonic threat once and for all.

1493

Poland's lower house of parliament, or Sejm, is established. The first Sejm consists of bishops and noblemen, and is largely present to keep an eye on the monarchy.

1541

Nicolaus Copernicus proposes that the earth orbits the sun, and changes the course of science forever. Poles say that Copernicus 'stopped the sun and moved the earth'.

ROYAL REPUBLIC (1573–1795)

From the very beginning, the experiment proved disastrous. For each royal election, foreign powers promoted their candidates by bargaining and bribing voters. During this period, no fewer than 11 kings ruled Poland; only four were native Poles.

Alliances & Expansion

The first elected king, Henri de Valois, retreated to his homeland to take up the French crown after only a year on the Polish throne. His successor, Stefan Batory (Stephen Bathory; 1576–86), prince of Transylvania, was a much wiser choice. Batory, together with his gifted commander and chancellor Jan Zamoyski, conducted a series of successful battles against Tsar Ivan the Terrible and came close to forming an alliance with Russia against the Ottoman threat.

After Batory's premature death, the crown was offered to the Swede Zygmunt III Waza (Sigismund III Vasa; 1587–1632), and during his reign Poland achieved its greatest extent ever, more than three times the size of present-day Poland. Despite this, Zygmunt is best remembered for moving the Polish capital from Kraków to Warsaw between 1596 and 1609.

Eastern Interlopers & the Deluge

The beginning of the 17th century marked a turning point in Poland's fortunes. The increasing political power of the Polish nobility undermined the authority of the Sejm; the country was split up into several huge private estates, and nobles, frustrated by ineffective government, resorted to armed rebellion.

Meanwhile, foreign invaders were systematically carving up the land. Jan II Kazimierz Waza (John II Casimir Vasa; 1648–68), the last of the Vasa dynasty on the Polish throne, was unable to resist the aggressors – Russians, Tatars, Ukrainians, Cossacks, Ottomans and Swedes – who were moving in on all fronts. The Swedish invasion of 1655–60, known as the Deluge, was particularly disastrous.

The last bright moment in the long decline of the Royal Republic was the reign of Jan III Sobieski (John III Sobieski; 1674–96), a brilliant commander who led several victorious battles against the Ottomans. The most famous of these was the Battle of Vienna in 1683, in which he defeated the Turks and checked their advancement into Western Europe.

The Rise of Russia

By the start of the 18th century, Poland was in severe decline and Russia had evolved into a mighty, expansive empire. The tsars systematically strengthened their grip over the flailing country, and Poland's rulers effectively became puppets of the Russian regime. This became crystal clear during the reign of

Stanisław August Poniatowski (1764–95), when Catherine the Great, empress of Russia, exercised direct intervention in Poland's affairs. The collapse of the Polish empire was just around the corner.

THE THREE PARTITIONS

As Poland languished, Russia, Prussia and Austria gained in strength. The end of the 18th century was a disastrous period for the country, with the neighbouring powers agreeing to partition Poland on no fewer than three separate occasions in a span of 23 years. The First Partition led to immediate reforms and a new, liberal constitution, and Poland remained relatively stable. Catherine the Great could tolerate no more of this dangerous democracy though, and sent Russian troops into Poland. Despite fierce resistance the reforms were abolished by force and the country was partitioned a second time.

Enter Tadeusz Kościuszko, a hero of the American War of Independence. With the help of patriotic forces, he launched an armed rebellion in 1794. The campaign soon gained popular support and the rebels won some early victories, but Russian troops, stronger and better armed, defeated the Polish forces within a year. Resistance and unrest remained within Polish borders, which led the three occupying powers to the third and final partition. Poland disappeared from the map for the next 123 years.

Polish Resistance & Resilience

Despite the partitions, Poland continued to exist as a spiritual and cultural community, and a number of secret nationalist societies were created. Since revolutionary France was seen as their major ally in the struggle, some leaders fled to Paris and established their headquarters there.

In 1815 the Congress of Vienna established the Congress Kingdom of Poland, but Russian oppression continued. In response, armed uprisings broke out, the most significant of which occurred in 1830 and 1863. An attempted insurrection against the Austrians also occurred in 1846.

In the 1870s Russia dramatically stepped up its efforts to eradicate Polish culture, suppressing the Polish language in education, administration and commerce, and replacing it with Russian. However, it was also a time of great industrialisation in Poland, with cities like Łódź experiencing a booming economy. With the outbreak of WWI in August 1914, the fortunes of Poland changed once again.

WWI (1914–18)

WWI resulted in Poland's three occupying powers going to war. On one side were the Central Powers, Austria-Hungary and Germany (including Prussia); on the other, Russia and its Western allies. Most of the fighting was staged in Polish lands, resulting in staggering losses of life and livelihood. Since no formal Polish state existed, there was no Polish

Legendary lover Casanova spent some time in Warsaw in the 1760s but was forced to flee following a duel with a Polish aristocrat.

The Ottoman Empire, though an ancient enemy of the Poles, was the only European power that never recognised the Partition of Poland.

1569

1573

1596–1609

1655–60

1683

1772

The Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania unite as a single state in an attempt to counteract the rising threat of the Moscow tsars. The union lasts until 1791.

Religious freedom is constitutionally established by the Sejm and equality of creeds guaranteed. Faiths such as Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Judaism and Islam are able to coexist relatively peacefully.

After 550 years, Kraków loses the capital crown to Warsaw. The city is chosen as the seat of Polish power because of its central location, and closer proximity to Vilnius.

During the Deluge, Poland loses over a quarter of its territory, cities are burned and plundered, the countryside devastated and economy destroyed. From a population of 10 million, four million succumb to war, famine and bubonic plague.

Jan III Sobieski leads a Polish force in a battle against the Ottomans at the gates of Vienna. His victory saves the city and its rulers from the Turkish threat, but in turn weakens Poland's own military defences.

First Partition of Poland at the instigation of Catherine the Great. Russia, Prussia and Austria annex substantial chunks of the country, amounting to roughly 30% of Polish territory.

army to fight for the national cause. Even worse, some two million Poles were conscripted into the Russian, German or Austrian armies, and were obliged to fight one another.

Paradoxically, the war eventually brought about Polish independence. After the October Revolution in 1917, Russia plunged into civil war and no longer had the power to oversee Polish affairs. The final collapse of the Austrian empire in October 1918 and the withdrawal of the German army from Warsaw in November brought the opportune moment. Marshal Józef Piłsudski took command of Warsaw on 11 November 1918, declared Polish sovereignty, and usurped power as the head of state.

RISE & FALL OF THE SECOND REPUBLIC

Poland began its new incarnation in a desperate position – the country and its economy lay in ruins, and an estimated one million Poles had lost their lives in WWI. All state institutions – including the army, which hadn't existed for over a century – had to be built up from scratch.

The Treaty of Versailles in 1919 awarded Poland the western part of Prussia, providing access to the Baltic Sea. The city of Gdańsk, however, was omitted and became the Free City of Danzig. The rest of Poland's western border was drawn up in a series of plebiscites, which resulted in Poland acquiring some significant industrial regions of Upper Silesia. The eastern boundaries were established when Polish forces defeated the Red Army during the Polish-Soviet war of 1919–20.

When Poland's territorial struggle ended, the Second Republic covered nearly 400,000 sq km and had a population of 26 million. One-third was of non-Polish ethnic background, mainly Jews, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Germans.

After Piłsudski (opposite) retired from political life in 1922, the country experienced four years of unstable governments until the great military commander seized power once again in a military coup in May 1926. Parliament was gradually phased out but, despite the dictatorial regime, political repression had little effect on ordinary people. The economic situation was relatively stable, and cultural and intellectual life prospered.

On the international front, Poland's situation in the 1930s was unenviable. In an attempt to regulate relations with its two inexorably hostile neighbours, Poland signed nonaggression pacts with both the Soviet Union and Germany. Nevertheless, it soon became clear that the pacts didn't offer any real guarantee of safety.

On 23 August 1939 a pact of nonaggression between Germany and the Soviet Union was signed in Moscow by their foreign ministers, Ribbentrop and Molotov. This pact contained a secret protocol defining the prospective partition of Eastern Europe between the two great powers. Stalin and Hitler planned to carve up the Polish state between themselves.

Marshal Józef Piłsudski's most famous quotation was: 'To be defeated and not to submit, that is victory; to be victorious and rest on one's laurels, that is defeat.'

PIŁSUDSKI – PATRIOT, SOLDIER, STATESMAN

Father of the Polish republic, military mastermind of the Miracle on the Vistula, and victor over the might of the Soviet army, Marshal Józef Piłsudski is revered in Poland as a patriot, soldier and statesman.

Piłsudski was born in 1867 in the Russian-occupied Vilnius region and joined the anti-tsarist movement while still a teenager. He spent many of his formative years in prison – first five years in Siberia, then a brief stint in Warsaw's Citadel before being sent to a jail in St Petersburg. After escaping from St Petersburg, he returned to Poland and began, with the help of *acquired* Russian funds, to develop the Polish Legions, the military force that fought under his leadership during WWI. At the end of the war Marshal Piłsudski entered Warsaw, took power on 11 November 1918, and proclaimed Poland a sovereign state. The Russian Revolution, however, had created a new enemy in the east.

In 1919 Piłsudski launched a massive offensive towards the east, capturing vast territories that had been Polish before the 18th-century partitions. A Soviet counteroffensive reached as far as Warsaw, but in the Battle of Warsaw in August 1920, the Polish army, under Piłsudski, outmanoeuvred and defeated the Red Army.

Once an independent Poland was safely back on the map and a modern democratic constitution had been adopted in 1921, Piłsudski stepped down in 1922. Disillusioned with economic recession and governmental crisis, he reappeared on the political scene in May 1926. In a classic coup d'état, he marched on Warsaw at the head of the army, resulting in three days of street fighting that left 400 dead and over 1000 wounded. After the government resigned, the National Assembly elected Piłsudski as president but he refused to take the post, opting instead for the office of defence minister, which he maintained until his death. There are few doubts, though, that it was Piłsudski who ran the country behind the scenes until he died in 1935. Despite his dictatorial style, he was buried with ceremony among Polish kings in the crypt of Kraków's Wawel Cathedral.

WWII (1939–45)

WWII began at dawn on 1 September 1939 with a massive German invasion of Poland. Fighting began in Gdańsk (at that time the Free City of Danzig) when German forces encountered a stubborn handful of Polish resistors at Westerplatte. The battle lasted a week. Simultaneously, another German line stormed Warsaw, which finally surrendered on 28 September. Despite valiant resistance there was simply no hope of withstanding the numerically overwhelming and well-armed German forces; the last resistance groups were quelled by early October. Hitler's policy was to eradicate the Polish nation and Germanise the territory. Hundreds of thousands of Poles were deported en masse to forced-labour camps in Germany, while others, primarily the intelligentsia, were executed in an attempt to exterminate spiritual and intellectual leadership.

The Jews were to be eliminated completely. At first they were segregated and confined in ghettos, then shipped off to extermination camps scattered around

One of the great myths of WWII is that Polish cavalry charged against German tanks in the opening stages. In reality a Polish cavalry regiment destroyed a German infantry division, and was then counter-attacked by German armour. Nazi propaganda tried to twist the event into a symbol of Polish backwardness.

3 May 1791

The world's second written constitution (the first was that of the USA) is signed in Warsaw, by then a city of 120,000 inhabitants. It places peasants under direct protection of the government, and thereby attempts to wipe out serfdom.

1793

Second Partition of Poland, with Russia and Prussia strengthening their grip by grabbing over half the remaining Polish territory. Poland shrinks to around 200,000 sq km and a population of four million.

1795

Third Partition of Poland. The country ceases to exist completely, and only becomes a republic after the end of WWI.

1807

Napoleon Bonaparte establishes the Duchy of Warsaw after crushing the Prussians on Polish soil. After Napoleon's defeat at the hands of the Russians, the duchy returns to the Russian and Prussian fold.

1810

Birth of Frédéric Chopin, Poland's most beloved musician and a perennial favourite around the world.

1815

Congress Kingdom of Poland is established at the Congress of Vienna. The Duchy of Warsaw is swept away and Poland once again falls under the control of the Russian tsar.

Auschwitz – The Nazis and the Final Solution is a BBC documentary that attempts to deal with the horrific events at Auschwitz.

A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, by Yitzhak Zuckerman, is a detailed narrative of this heroic act of Jewish resistance.

the country. Almost the whole of Poland's Jewish population (three million) and roughly one million Poles died in the camps. Resistance erupted in numerous ghettos and camps, most famously in Warsaw (see boxed text, p99).

Soviet Invasion

Within a matter of weeks of the Nazi invasion, the Soviet Union moved into Poland and claimed the country's eastern half. Thus, Poland was yet again partitioned. Mass arrests, exile and executions followed, and it's estimated that between one and two million Poles were sent to Siberia, the Soviet Arctic and Kazakhstan in 1939–40. Like the Nazis, the Soviets set in motion a process of intellectual genocide; see below for more information.

Government-in-Exile & Homegrown Resistance

Soon after the outbreak of war, a Polish government-in-exile was formed in France under General Władysław Sikorski, followed by Stanisław Mikołajczyk. It was shifted to London in June 1940 as the front line moved west.

The course of the war changed dramatically when Hitler unexpectedly attacked the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. The Soviets were pushed out of eastern Poland by the onslaught and all of Poland lay under Nazi control.

MASSACRE AT KATYŃ

In April 1943, German troops fighting Soviet forces on the eastern front came across extensive mass graves in the forest of Katyń, near Smolensk, in present-day Belarus. Exploratory excavations revealed the remains of several thousand Polish soldiers and civilians who had been executed. The Soviet government denied all responsibility and accused the Nazis of the crime. After the Communists took power in Poland the subject remained taboo, even though Katyń was known to most Poles.

It wasn't until 1990 that the Soviets admitted their 'mistake', and two years later finally made public secret documents showing that Stalin's Politburo was responsible for the massacre. Meanwhile, in the summer of 1991, further mass graves of Polish soldiers were discovered in Myednoye and Kharkov, both in central Russia.

The full horror of Katyń was finally revealed during exhumations of the mass graves by Polish archaeologists in 1995–96. Soon after their invasion of Poland in September 1939, the Soviets took an estimated 180,000 prisoners, comprising Polish soldiers, police officers, judges, politicians, intellectuals, scientists, teachers, professors, writers and priests, and crammed them into various camps throughout the Soviet Union and the invaded territories. On Stalin's order, signed in March 1940, about 21,800 of these prisoners, including many high-ranking officers, judges, teachers, physicians and lawyers, were transported from the camps to the forests of Katyń, Myednoye and Kharkov, shot dead and buried in mass graves. The Soviet intention was to exterminate the intellectual elite of Polish society, and eliminate the driving force and the leadership of the nation.

No-one has been brought to trial for the atrocity, as Russia states that Katyń was a military crime rather than a genocide, war crime, or crime against humanity.

The Führer set up camp deep in Polish territory (see boxed text, p492), and remained there for over three years.

A nationwide resistance movement, concentrated in the cities, had been put in place soon after war broke, to operate the Polish educational, judicial and communications systems. Armed squads were set up by the government-in-exile in 1940, and these evolved into the Armia Krajowa (AK; Home Army), which figured prominently in the Warsaw Rising (see boxed text, below).

Amazingly, considering the Soviet treatment of Poles, Stalin turned to Poland for help in the war effort against the German forces advancing eastwards towards Moscow. The official Polish army was re-formed late in 1941, but was largely under Soviet control.

The Tide Turns

Hitler's defeat at Stalingrad in 1943 marked the turning point of the war on the eastern front, and from then on the Red Army successfully pushed westwards. After the Soviets liberated the Polish city of Lublin, the pro-Communist Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN) was installed on 22 July 1944 and assumed the functions of a provisional government. A week later the Red Army reached the outskirts of Warsaw.

When God Looked the Other Way, by Wesley Adamczyk, is a gripping and terrible tale of a Polish family deported to southern Siberia in WWII.

THE WARSAW RISING

In early 1944, with German forces retreating across Poland in the face of an advancing Soviet army, the Polish resistance (AK; Armia Krajowa) in Warsaw was preparing for the liberation of their city. On 1 August 1944, orders were given for a general anti-German uprising, with the intention of establishing a Polish command in the city before the Red Army swept through.

The initial rising was remarkably successful and the AK, creating barricades from ripped-up paving slabs and using the Warsaw sewers as underground communication lines, took over large parts of the city. They hoped to control the city until support came from both the Allies and the Soviets. But none arrived. The Allies were preoccupied with breaking out of their beachhead in Normandy after the D-day landings, and the Red Army, which was camped just across the Vistula River in Praga, didn't lift a finger. On learning of the rising, Stalin halted the offensive and ordered his generals not to intervene or provide any assistance in the fighting, instead allowing the Germans to break the back of any potential Polish resistance to a Communist takeover of the country.

The Warsaw Rising raged for 63 days before the insurgents were forced to surrender; around 200,000 Poles were killed. The Nazi revenge was brutal – Warsaw was literally razed to the ground, and, on Hitler's orders, every inhabitant was to be killed. It wasn't until 17 January 1945 that the Soviet army finally marched in to 'liberate' Warsaw, which by that time was little more than a heap of empty ruins.

For the Poles, the Warsaw Rising was one of the most heroic – and most tragic – engagements of the war. The events of the rising are commemorated in the Warsaw Rising Museum (p99) and the Monument to the Warsaw Uprising (p93).

1830

1863

19th Century

1903

1914

11 Nov 1918

First of a series of insurrections against the ruling Russians, known as the November Insurrection. Within a year the rebellion is defeated, and executions and deportations of Poles to Siberia begins.

January Insurrection against Russian rule. The insurgency is ruthlessly crushed, and Russia abolishes Congress Poland, or the Kingdom of Poland. Polish lands and its citizens are incorporated directly into the Russian Empire.

At the end of the century around four million Poles, from a total population of 20 to 25 million, emigrate to avoid harsh Russian rule. Most go to the USA, thus laying foundations for the large Polish communities that exist there today.

Warsaw-born Marie Curie wins the Nobel prize for physics. She is the first woman to win the acclaimed prize, and becomes the first person to win two when she is awarded a second in 1911, this time for chemistry.

Start of WWI. The occupying powers – Germany and Austria to the west and south, Russia to the east – force Poles to fight each other on Polish soil.

Founding of the Second Republic, so named to create a symbolic bridge between itself and the Royal Republic that existed before the partitions. The new republic's borders are not fixed until 1922, after the end of the Polish-Russian War.

Winston Churchill observed that 'Poland was the only country which never collaborated with the Nazis in any form and no Polish units fought alongside the German army'.

Warsaw at that time remained under Nazi occupation. In a last-ditch attempt to establish an independent Polish administration, the AK attempted to gain control of the city before the arrival of the Soviet troops (see boxed text, p37), with disastrous results. The Red Army continued its westward advance across Poland, and after a few months reached Berlin. The Nazi Reich capitulated on 8 May 1945.

At the end of WWII, Poland lay in ruins. Over six million people, about 20% of the prewar population, lost their lives, and out of three million Polish Jews in 1939, only 80,000 to 90,000 survived the war. Its cities were no more than rubble; only 15% of Warsaw's buildings survived. Many Poles who had seen out the war in foreign countries opted not to return to the new political order.

POSTWAR: SOVIET CONTROL

At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin agreed to leave Poland under Soviet control. They agreed that Poland's eastern frontier would roughly follow the Nazi-Soviet demarcation line of 1939. Six months later, Allied leaders set Poland's western boundary along the Odra (Oder) and the Nysa (Neisse) Rivers; in effect, the country returned to its medieval borders.

The radical boundary changes were followed by population transfers of some 10 million people: Poles were moved into the newly defined Poland while Germans, Ukrainians and Belarusians were resettled outside its boundaries. In the end, 98% of Poland's population was ethnically Polish.

As soon as Poland formally fell under Soviet control, Stalin launched an intensive Sovietisation campaign. Wartime resistance leaders were charged with Nazi collaboration, tried in Moscow and summarily shot or sentenced to arbitrary prison terms. A provisional Polish government was set up in Moscow in June 1945 and then transferred to Warsaw. General elections were postponed until 1947 to allow time for the arrest of prominent Polish political figures by the secret police. After rigged elections, the new Sejm elected Bolesław Bierut president; Stanisław Mikołajczyk, accused of espionage, fled back to England.

In 1948 the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), henceforth referred to as 'the Party', was formed to monopolise power, and in 1952 a Soviet-style constitution was adopted. The office of president was abolished and effective power passed to the first secretary of the Party Central Committee. Poland became an affiliate of the Warsaw Pact.

Bread & Freedom

Stalinist fanaticism never gained as much influence in Poland as in neighbouring countries, and soon after Stalin's death in 1953 it all but disappeared. The powers of the secret police declined and some concessions were made

You can find a library of wartime photographs chronicling the horror and destruction of the Warsaw Rising at www.warsawuprising.com.

The website www.polishroots.org/genpoland/polhistory.htm shows how Poland's borders have shifted over the past 200 years since Partition.

to popular demands. The press was liberalised and Polish cultural values were resuscitated.

In June 1956 a massive industrial strike demanding 'bread and freedom' broke out in Poznań. The action was put down by force and soon afterward Władysław Gomułka, a former political prisoner of the Stalin era, was appointed first secretary of the Party. At first he commanded popular support, but later in his term he displayed an increasingly rigid and authoritarian attitude, putting pressure on the Church and intensifying persecution of the intelligentsia. It was ultimately an economic crisis, however, that brought about his downfall; when he announced official price increases in 1970, a wave of mass strikes erupted in Gdańsk, Gdynia and Szczecin. Again, the protests were crushed by force, resulting in 44 deaths. The Party, to save face, ejected Gomułka from office and replaced him with Edward Gierek.

Another attempt to raise prices in 1976 incited labour protests, and again workers walked off the job, this time in Radom and Warsaw. Caught in a downward spiral, Gierek took out more foreign loans, but, to earn hard currency with which to pay the interest, he was forced to divert consumer goods away from the domestic market and sell them abroad. By 1980 the external debt stood at US\$21 billion and the economy had slumped disastrously.

By then, the opposition had grown into a significant force, backed by numerous advisers from the intellectual circles. When, in July 1980, the government again announced food-price increases, the outcome was predictable: fervent and well-organised strikes and riots spread like wildfire throughout the country. In August, they paralysed major ports, the Silesian coal mines and the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk.

Unlike most previous popular protests, the 1980 strikes were nonviolent; the strikers did not take to the streets, but stayed in their factories.

SOLIDARITY

On 31 August 1980, after long, drawn-out negotiations in the Lenin Shipyard, the government signed the Gdańsk Agreement. It forced the ruling party to accept most of the strikers' demands, including the workers' right to organise independent trade unions, and to strike. In return, workers agreed to adhere to the constitution and to accept the Party's power as supreme.

Workers' delegations from around the country convened and founded Solidarity (Solidarność), a nationwide independent and self-governing trade union. Lech Wałęsa, who led the Gdańsk strike, was elected chair.

It wasn't long before Solidarity's rippling effect caused waves within the government. Gierek was replaced by Stanisław Kania, who in turn lost out to General Wojciech Jaruzelski in October 1981. However, the trade union's greatest influence was on Polish society. After 35 years of

In 1944 Stalin was quoted as saying 'fitting communism onto Poland was like putting a saddle on a cow'.

Learn more about the communist years at www.ipn.gov.pl, the website of the Institute of National Remembrance.

August 1920

Poland defeats the Red Army in the Battle of Warsaw, known as the Miracle on the Vistula. The decisive battle helps to secure large portions of land that once resided in what is now Belarus and Ukraine.

1 Sep 1939

Nazis use the Gleiwitz incident – a staged attack on a German radio station by Germans dressed as Polish soldiers – as grounds for invading Poland. The invasion on 1 September starts WWII.

17 Sep 1939

The Soviet Union fulfils its side of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a blueprint for the division of Eastern Europe between it and Nazi Germany, and invades eastern Poland. Within a matter of weeks the country is swallowed up by its old enemies.

19 April 1943

Start of Ghetto Uprising in Warsaw. The Jewish resistance fighters hold out against overwhelming German forces for almost a month.

1 August 1944

Start of the Warsaw Rising. The entire city becomes a battleground, and after the uprising is quelled, Warsaw is systematically razed.

Feb–Aug 1945

Poland's borders are redrawn. The Soviet Union annexes 180,000 sq km to the east, while the Allies return 100,000 sq km of Poland's western provinces after centuries of German rule.

The Polish Revolution: Solidarity 1980-82, by Timothy Garton Ash, is an entertainingly written insight into a 16-month period that undermined the whole communist system.

restraint, the Poles launched themselves into a spontaneous and chaotic sort of democracy. Wide-ranging debates over the process of reform were led by Solidarity, and the independent press flourished. Such taboo historical subjects as the Stalin-Hitler pact and the Katyń massacre could, for the first time, be openly discussed.

Not surprisingly, the 10 million Solidarity members represented a wide range of attitudes, from confrontational to conciliatory. By and large, it was Wałęsa's charismatic authority that kept the union on a moderate and balanced course.

The government, however, under pressure from both the Soviets and local hardliners, was loath to introduce any significant reforms and systematically rejected Solidarity's proposals. This only led to further discontent and, in the absence of other legal options, more strikes. Amid fruitless wrangling, the economic crisis grew more severe. After the unsuccessful talks of November 1981 between the government, Solidarity and the Church, social tensions increased and led to a political stalemate.

MARTIAL LAW & ITS AFTERMATH

When General Jaruzelski unexpectedly appeared on TV in the early hours of the morning of 13 December 1981 to declare martial law, tanks were already on the streets, army checkpoints had been set up on every corner, and paramilitary squads had been posted to possible trouble spots. Power was placed in the hands of the Military Council of National Salvation (WRON), a group of military officers under the command of Jaruzelski himself.

Solidarity was suspended and all public gatherings, demonstrations and strikes were banned. Several thousand people, including most Solidarity leaders and Wałęsa himself, were interned. The spontaneous demonstrations and strikes that followed were crushed, military rule was effectively imposed all over Poland within two weeks of its declaration, and life returned to the pre-Solidarity norm.

In October 1982 the government formally dissolved Solidarity and released Wałęsa from detention, but the trade union continued underground on a much smaller scale, enjoying widespread sympathy and support. In July 1984 a limited amnesty was announced and some members of the political opposition were released from prison. But further arrests continued, following every public protest, and it was not until 1986 that all political prisoners were freed.

COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM

The election of Gorbachev in the Soviet Union in 1985 and his *glasnost* and *perestroika* programmes gave an important stimulus to democratic reforms all through Eastern Europe. By early 1989 Jaruzelski had softened his position and allowed the opposition to challenge for parliamentary seats.

Semifree elections were held in June 1989, in which Solidarity succeeded in getting an overwhelming majority of its supporters elected to the Senat, the upper house of parliament. The communists, however, reserved for themselves 65% of seats in the Sejm. Jaruzelski was placed in the presidency as a stabilising guarantor of political changes for both Moscow and the local communists, but the noncommunist prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, was installed as a result of personal pressure from Wałęsa. This power-sharing deal, with the first noncommunist prime minister in Eastern Europe since WWII, paved the way for the domino-like collapse of communism throughout the Soviet bloc. The Party, haemorrhaging members and confidence, historically dissolved itself in 1990.

Free Market

In January 1990 the government's finance minister Leszek Balcerowicz introduced a package of reforms to change the centrally planned communist system into a free-market economy. His shock-therapy economics allowed prices to move freely, abolished subsidies, tightened the money supply, and sharply devalued the currency, making it fully convertible with Western currencies.

The effect was almost instant. Within a few months the economy appeared to have stabilised, food shortages became glaringly absent, and shops filled up with goods. On the downside, prices skyrocketed and unemployment exploded. The initial wave of optimism and forbearance turned into uncertainty and discontent, and the tough austerity measures caused the popularity of the government to decline.

LECH WAŁĘSA'S PRESIDENCY

In November 1990 Wałęsa won the first fully free presidential elections and the Third Republic of Poland was born. During his statutory five-year term in office, Poland witnessed no fewer than five governments and five prime ministers, each struggling to put the newborn democracy back on track.

After his election, Wałęsa appointed Jan Krzysztof Bielecki, an economist and his former adviser, to serve as prime minister. His cabinet attempted to continue the austere economic policies introduced by the former government but was unable to retain parliamentary support and resigned after a year in office. No less than 70 parties contested the country's first free parliamentary elections in October 1991, the result of which placed Prime Minister Jan Olszewski at the head of a centre-right coalition. Olszewski lasted only five months, falling prey to a no-confidence vote, and was replaced by Hanna Suchocka of the Democratic Union in June 1992. Suchocka was the nation's first woman prime minister, and became known as the Polish Margaret Thatcher. Her coalition government managed to command parliamentary majority, but was in increasing discord over many issues, and failed to survive a no-confidence vote in June 1993.

Mad Dreams, Saving Graces: Poland, a Nation in Conspiracy, by Michael T Kaufman, is a trip through the dark times of martial law and the gloomy period up until 1988 – as readable as it is informative.

1947

Despite Stanisław Mikołajczyk – the government-in-exile's only representative to return to Poland after the war – receiving over 80% of the popular vote in elections, 'official' figures hand power to the communist government.

1953

Ruling communists arrest Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, the primate of Poland's Catholic Church. He is first imprisoned then placed under house arrest in the Bieszczady Mountains. Wyszyński is finally released three years later.

June 1956

Poland's first industrial strike, at Cegielski factories in Poznań. Around 100,000 people take to the streets; the Soviet Union crushes the revolt with tanks, leaving 76 dead and over 900 wounded.

1970

West German chancellor Willy Brandt signs the Warsaw Treaty, a document that formally recognises the country's borders. Brandt famously kneels in front of a monument to the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

1978

Karol Wojtyła, archbishop of Kraków, becomes Pope John Paul II. His election and triumphal visit to his homeland a year later dramatically increase political ferment.

November 1980

Solidarity, the first noncommunist trade union in a communist country, formally recognised by the government. Its membership numbers 10 million (60% of the workforce), a million of which comes from the Party's ranks.

Communist Comeback

The impatient Wałęsa stepped in, dissolving parliament and calling a general election. His decision was a gross miscalculation, with the postcommunist opposition succeeding in swaying public opinion with accusations of mismanagement and indifference to the social cost of reforms by the Solidarity-led coalition. The pendulum swung to the left, and the election resulted in a coalition between the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and the Polish Peasant Party (PSL), both reformed Communist parties from the pre-1989 era.

The new government, headed by PSL leader Waldemar Pawlak, continued with general market reform, but the economy began to slow. Continuous tensions within the coalition caused its popularity to fall, and its running battles with the president brought further change in February 1995, when Wałęsa threatened to dissolve parliament unless Pawlak was replaced. The fifth and final prime minister of Wałęsa's presidential term was Józef Oleksy, yet another former Communist Party official.

Wałęsa's presidential style and his accomplishments were repeatedly questioned by practically all political parties and the majority of the electorate. His quirky behaviour and his capricious use of power prompted a slide from the favour he had enjoyed in 1990 to his lowest-ever level of popular support in early 1995, when polls indicated that only 8% of the country preferred him as president for the next term. Despite this, Wałęsa manoeuvred vigorously and, in a miraculous comeback, went close to achieving a second term.

POSTCOMMUNISTS IN POWER

The November 1995 election was essentially a tight duel between the anticommunist folk figure, Lech Wałęsa, and the much younger, one-time communist technocrat and SLD leader, Aleksander Kwaśniewski. Kwaśniewski finished ahead, but only by a margin of 3.5%.

Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, another former Communist Party official, took the post of prime minister. In effect, the postcommunists gained a stranglehold on power, controlling the presidency, government and parliament – a 'red triangle', as Wałęsa warned. The centre and the right – almost half of the political nation – effectively lost control over the decision-making process. The Church, much favoured by Wałęsa during his term in the saddle, also lost out and didn't fail to caution the faithful against the danger of 'neopaganism' under the new regime.

Balance Returned

By 1997 the electorate apparently realised things had gone too far. Parliamentary elections in September were won by an alliance of about 40 small Solidarity offshoot parties, collectively named the Solidarity

Electorate Action (AWS). The alliance formed a coalition with the centrist liberal Freedom Union (UW), pushing ex-communists into opposition. Jerzy Buzek of AWS became prime minister, and the new government accelerated the country's privatisation.

President Kwaśniewski's political style sharply contrasted with that of his predecessor, Wałęsa. Kwaśniewski brought political calm to his term in the post, and was able to cooperate successfully with both the left and right wings of the political establishment. This gained him a remarkable degree of popular support, and paved the way to another five-year term in office.

No fewer than 13 people contested the presidential election in October 2000, but none came close to Kwaśniewski, who won a sweeping victory, capturing 54% of the vote. The centrist businessman Andrzej Olechowski came a distant second, with 17% support, while Wałęsa, trying his luck for the third time, suffered a disastrous defeat, collecting just 1% of the vote.

TOWARDS EUROPE

On the international front, Poland had been granted full NATO membership in March 1999, while back home the September 2001 parliamentary election changed the political axis once again. SLD staged its great second comeback, taking 216 seats in the Sejm, just 15 short of an outright majority. The party formed a coalition with the PSL, repeating the shaky alliance of 1993, and former senior Communist Party official Leszek Miller took up the position of prime minister.

Poland's biggest move in the 21st century was its inclusion into the EU fold on 1 May 2004. The next day, Miller resigned due to a string of corruption scandals and amid mounting popular unrest over high unemployment and poor living standards. His replacement, respected economist Marek Belka, lasted until elections in September 2005, when the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party and the liberal-conservative Citizens Platform (PO) party swept to power. Combined, the two gained 288 out of the 460 Sejm seats; in comparison, SLD won only 55. PiS member Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz was nominated prime minister, and one month later another PiS member, Lech Kaczyński, secured the presidential seat.

POLAND TODAY

Unsurprisingly, Marcinkiewicz didn't last long, resigning in July 2006 over a reputed rift with PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński. Jarosław, the twin brother of the president, was quickly appointed to the position. The new prime minister soon set about upsetting both Russia and Germany, attempting to derail the EU's reform treaty, loading public media with his supporters, and alienating many young Poles with his national rhetoric.

Norman Davies' two-volume *God's Playground: a History of Poland* is beautifully written, easy to read and a perfect key to understanding 1000 years of the Polish nation. *The Heart of Europe: a Short History of Poland* is a condensed version, with a greater emphasis on the 20th century.

13 Dec 1981

April 1989

1990

1995

1997

1999

Martial law declared in Poland. It is debatable whether the coup is Soviet driven or an attempt by the Polish Communists to prevent Soviet military intervention. Martial law lasts until 22 July 1983.

Poland becomes the first Eastern European state to break free of communism. In so-called round-table negotiations, Poland's opposition is allowed to stand for parliament and Solidarity is re-established.

Not a great year for Polish Communists. The Party dissolves, the first democratic presidential election takes place, the country becomes a free market economy, and bananas become freely available.

Aleksander Kwaśniewski wins the presidential election over legendary figure Lech Wałęsa by the slimmest of margins (51.7% to 48.3% in a second round of voting), despite his adversary polling poorly in the lead-up to the election.

New constitution passed in October to replace the Soviet-style document in force since 1952 (though amendments had been made in 1992 to correspond with the postcommunist status quo).

Poland becomes a member of NATO. The country has come full circle, moving from the Warsaw Pact with the former Soviet Union to an alliance with the powers of the West.

However, his reign was short-lived – in a snap election in October 2007 Jarosław lost out to the more liberal and EU-friendly Donald Tusk and his Civic Platform party.

Despite the myriad reforms and coalitions, Poland is still floundering in the political and economic stakes, and looks as though it will for some years to come. But considering its tumultuous past, the country has found some stability, and is relishing its self-governance and peace.

1 May 2004

Poland joins the EU. Despite massive support, there is a fear that the country is swapping one foreign governing power for another, and EU membership will spark a wave of emigration, particularly by the young and well educated.

July 2006

Twin brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński occupy the presidential and prime minister seats respectively. Their nationalistic and conservative policies alienate many people.

October 2007

Donald Tusk's liberal Civic Platform party wins a snap election against Jarosław Kaczyński's conservative PiS party. Pro-EU supporters, both within Poland and across Europe, breathe a sigh of relief.

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Polish people are a resilient bunch – even the briefest glance at the country's history shows this to be true. They exude an age-old spirit of independence, and are remarkably adaptable and inventive, with each person forming their own solution for any dilemma, whether within the family or within the nation. This isn't always a good combination, as sometimes explanations on how things work in the country are not always forthcoming. This can be seen as indifference or an assumption of intelligence; knowing the Poles, it's probably a little of both.

Poles are not always realistic, and can be charmingly irrational and romantic at times. This penchant for dreaming could partly explain the country's astounding record in the fields of arts and science. They are often far more concerned with the present than the future, which is not always optimal (ie populist politics often wins the day). However this is changing, with a rising number of Poles taking an active part in the preservation of their cultural and natural heritage. For example, interest in Poland's Jewish culture is on the rise, and Polish people turned out in force to help save the Rospuda River (p158).

You'll rarely see Poles wearing bright colours or flashing a stranger a smile (the latter is seen as a sign of stupidity), yet at dinner, in a train carriage, or out in a group, they can be lively, boisterous, expressive, and ready to enjoy life to the fullest. Once you break the ice with most Poles, you'll find them warm and hospitable, and if you're lucky enough to make Polish friends, they will normally be extremely generous and open-handed. There's a traditional saying that 'a guest in the house is God in the house'. While they love jokes and are generally easy-going, they may suddenly turn serious and hot-blooded when it comes to an argument.

Homophobia is still rife in the country, and at times it can be shocking to hear homophobic comments loudly proclaimed in public, even by well-educated people. Officials have gone as far as to call for a psychological evaluation of the effect of Teletubbies' handbag-carrying Tinky Winky on the nation's children (he's a boy), although the matter has been treated fairly light-heartedly by most. Drinking in public is socially acceptable, and drunks stumbling around at 9am are a daily occurrence.

Not surprisingly, given Poland's history, the past, especially the events of WWII, still has a firm grip on the Polish national psyche. Every family has been directly affected by the Nazi occupation or communist regime, and there are physical reminders of terrible events in many towns and cities across the country. Entry into the EU is, even in a tiny way, helping to heal the wounds, with some Poles believing that the country is back in the European family. A fatalistic streak still haunts the population though, the result of Poland's past upheavals.

By and large, Poles are more conservative and traditional than Western Europeans, and the Roman Catholic religion plays an important role in this conservatism. For Poles, the Church's leading figure is still Pope John Paul II, who retains cult status in the country.

Polish men are passionate about handshaking, and always extend a hand when greeting friends, sometimes before a word is spoken. Women, too, often shake hands with men, but the man should always wait for the woman to offer her hand first. Older men may go so far as to greet a woman by kissing her hand; here, again, it's the woman who suggests such a form by a perceptible

By EU declaration, vodka can now be made of any agricultural material provided it is appropriately labelled. The ruling hasn't gone down well with the Poles, who argue that vodka can only be made from potatoes, grain and molasses.

rise of her hand. Flowers have a special place in Polish culture, and men love to give them to women. The rose was traditionally the flower reserved for special occasions, but there're no strict rules these days. What does still seem to be widely observed, however, is the superstition of presenting an odd, not an even, number of flowers. Flowers are especially important on name days, which is usually the Catholic feast day of the patron saint who shares your name, and less holy names have a date too. It's traditional for friends to give at least a single bloom on such days.

Poles aren't always strict about time. You may find yourself waiting a bit for your Polish friend to turn up for an appointed meeting; it's not rude, it's just the way it is. Likewise, if you are invited to dinner or a party in someone's home, don't arrive exactly on time or, God forbid, turn up early.

DAILY LIFE

Since the fall of communism, daily life in Poland has rapidly been converging with Western patterns. Shopping streets are now lined with high street brand names, TVs blare the latest American and German dramas and sitcoms, and no-one leaves home without their *komórka* (mobile phone). There is a huge appetite for self-improvement, and plenty of ambition to take advantage of the new opportunities offered by EU membership. City walls and lampposts are plastered with posters advertising courses in English, German and Russian, and diplomas in business studies and computer programming.

There is also a widening culture gap between the urban and rural communities. The old country ways are still very much alive in rural areas, where you'll see the family milk cow grazing by the roadside, people cutting and stacking hay by hand, and goods going to the market by horse and cart. Despite their urban existence, city dwellers still like to retain some connection with the countryside, and many escape to the hills or lakes at the weekends to enjoy a touch of rural lifestyle.

One habit that will probably never die is the country's devotion to the Roman Catholic Church. It plays a prominent role in the lives of most – Poland is one of Europe's most religious countries, with 75% of the population describing themselves as practising Catholics (the corresponding figure for France is 12%). On weekends many churches countrywide are filled to overflowing – even in Warsaw it can be standing room only, while in the countryside people, dressed in their Sunday best, use whatever means necessary (horse, cart, tractor, bicycle) to attend services. On weekdays Mass can still be half full. Even for nonreligious Poles, the Church remains important: it is the glue that binds many small communities together, and it has the eternal gratitude of the nation for leading the opposition against the communist regime.

Note that Poles don't appreciate intrusions during Mass, so unless you're there to pray, it's best to wait until it's over before entering a church.

ECONOMY

Since 1990, Poland has pursued a policy of economic liberalisation, and purely looking at the figures, it's paying off. The country's GDP has steadily risen since 2000, foreign investment is up (mainly through EU funds), exports are booming, and inflation is among the lowest in the EU. While the economy currently looks rosy, it may not be sustainable in the long term due to Poland's greatest economic hurdle, unemployment. The official figure sits at 12% but soars to 35% in some parts of the country and among Poland's youth.

Polish Customs, Traditions & Folklore (1996) by Sophie Hodorowitz Knab describes Poland's customs month-by-month, and is a useful resource for anyone wishing to understand the country better.

If you see a chimney sweep in Poland, the tradition is to grab another person's button, wait until you see someone wearing glasses, then make a wish.

POPULATION

Poland's population is one of the most ethnically homogenous in the world, with 96.7% of a population of just under 39 million claiming Polish ancestry. Of the remaining 3.3%, 0.4% is German, 0.1% Ukrainian, 0.1% Belarusian, and the final 2.7% is composed of a mixture of Russians, Jews, Lithuanians, Tatars, Roma (Gypsies), Lemks, Boyks and a dozen other groups. The smaller minorities barely rate a presence in Poland, as most groups total less than 5000 members.

The ethnic make-up is largely a result of massive migratory movements in Poland during the aftermath of WWII (see p38). However, Poland was for centuries one of Europe's most cosmopolitan countries, with quite a mixed and varied population. It was also home to the continent's largest Jewish community (see p35), but today Polish Jews only number between 5000 and 10,000.

Population density varies considerably throughout the country, with Upper Silesia being the most densely inhabited area, while the northeastern border regions remain the least populated. Over 70% of the country's inhabitants now live in towns and cities, compared with 30% in the 1930s. Warsaw is by far the largest Polish city (1.7 million), followed by Łódź (768,000) and Kraków (752,700).

SPORT

Like most European countries, *piłka nożna* (soccer) stands head and shoulders above other sports in Poland. Millions play the game, at least at a social level. The country's national team is, by European standards, fairly mediocre today, but in the '70s and '80s it was a force to be reckoned with, taking third place in the World Cup competitions of 1974 and 1982. At a national league level, Wisła Kraków (www.wisla.krakow.pl) and Legia Warszawa (www.legia.com in Polish) rank among the best.

Poles are also passionate about volleyball. Like its soccer compatriot, the men's national volleyball team was strong in the 1970s, capturing the World Championships in 1974 and Olympic gold in 1976. In recent years there has been a resurgence in the sport, with the men's team taking silver in the 2006 World Championships. Other sports on the fringes of nationwide support include basketball, cycling, athletics, kayaking and rowing. Poland's youth has discovered urban street sports in recent years; you'll encounter a rising number of teenagers on skateboards and bikes in the city centres, or trying their hand (and feet) at free running.

EMIGRATION & IMMIGRATION

According to rough estimates, between five and 10 million Poles live abroad, the result of two major episodes of emigration – one at the beginning of the 20th century and another during WWII. Emigration continued on a smaller scale after the war, particularly during the economic hardships of the '80s and '90s. The largest Polish émigré community lives in the USA; Chicago alone is reputed to be home to one million people of Polish extraction.

POLAND'S WINTER HERO

The winter sport of ski jumping has produced one of Poland's greatest sporting legends, Adam Malysz. At the end of the 2006–07 season, the quiet man from Wisła in the Silesian Beskids had won 38 World Cup competitions (the second-highest number ever), four World Cup trophies, and a silver and a bronze at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. He is also the only person to win three World Cup championships in a row.

The website www.soccerway.com/teams/poland lists every soccer club in Poland and provides a link to their individual websites.

Since Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, approximately one million Poles have left the country, mainly destined for the UK and Ireland in search of higher paying jobs, or a job at all. Of these, around 80% are under the age of 34, taking with them skills that are proving difficult to replace. The construction and computer industries are hardest hit, and many workers from Belarus have crossed the border to fill the manual labour shortage. Workers are also being tempted from Asia and India, and after the 2008 Beijing Olympics there should be a marked increase in Chinese labour – their skills will be required to prepare the country's inadequate football venues for the 2012 UEFA European Championships.

MEDIA

Poland has the largest and most diverse broadcasting market in Eastern Europe and the country has had freedom of press since the fall of communism. Its TV and radio broadcasting is regulated by state-run Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji (KRRiIT, the National Council of Radio Broadcasting and Television). In theory a politically independent organisation, KRRiIT has in the past few years been dogged by political scandal, most notably during the 2001 elections, when a number of its members were accused of falsifying laws and attempting to gain control over private media.

Around 300 newspapers are published in Poland. The country's largest-selling paper is German-owned *Fakt* (Fact), a tabloid-style daily with a readership of around seven million. In second place is *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Election Gazette), a liberal, opinionated newsprint owned by Polish publishing house Agora. Despite its highly independent slant, it has failed to escape political scandal (although it was the innocent party): in 2003 the paper was involved in an attempted bribery case, when Lew Rywin, a film director, allegedly solicited a bribe of \$US17.5 million from editor Adam Michnik in exchange for an amendment in a media bill in favour of the paper. Rywin was accused of working on behalf of then prime minister Leszek Miller. Other popular rags include the moderately conservative *Rzeczpospolita* (the Republic), and weeklies *Wprost*, *Gazeta Polska*, and *Polityka*.

Telewizja Polska (TVP; Polish Television) is Poland's public TV broadcaster, operating two national channels (TVP1 and TVP2), a range of regional services, and the satellite channel TV Polonia. Its main competitor is Polsat, a commercial operator; other private TV networks include TVN and French-owned Cyfra+.

Radio doesn't have the influence that broadsheets and TV has over Poles. Polski Radio is the country's public sender, with five national stations and 17 regional ones. Outranking it in the popularity stakes is RMF FM, a privately run commercial station; Radio Zet, Warsaw's first private radio after communism ended, is another nationwide broadcaster with a solid commercial agenda. The country's most controversial radio station is Radio Maryja, an ultra-Catholic broadcaster accused of xenophobic and anti-Semitic rhetoric. It's reputedly the fifth most listened-to station in the country, with almost 900,000 people tuning in on a daily basis. The station and its founder, Catholic-nationalist Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, frequently make political ties – in 2004 the station heavily backed the League of Polish Families (LPR), and in 2007 President Lech Kaczyński and Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński put their weight behind the station in the run-up to the October 2007 elections.

RELIGION

Poland is a deeply religious country, with 95% of the population identifying as Roman Catholics. Minority faiths, including the Orthodox Church, Protestantism, Judaism, and Old Believers, make up the remaining 5%.

POLAND'S CATHOLIC CHURCH TODAY

Following the collapse of communism in 1989, Poland's Roman Catholic Church moved swiftly to fill the vacuum left by the communist government, claiming land, power and the role of moral arbiter of the nation. When Lech Wałęsa became president he was the Church's most prominent supporter, and never went anywhere without a priest at his side.

The Church's interference in politics created marked changes in political priorities. In the early 1990s the crusade against abortion soared to the top of the agenda and pushed economic issues into the background. Abortion had been legalised in 1956 during the communist era, and served, in practice, as a common form of birth control. Even though only about 10% of the population supported a total ban on abortion, the Church achieved its aim and the parliament duly voted for an anti-abortion law, which was introduced in 1993. Moderates did manage to have amendments attached requiring that contraceptives be made available and that Polish schools begin providing sex education for the first time.

The Church also turned its attention to the younger generation, pressing for the reintroduction of religious instruction in schools. Voluntary religious education was introduced in primary schools in 1990 and became mandatory in 1992. A glut of young men studying for the priesthood led to a surplus of clergy, and priests became a new export item – many Catholic priests throughout Europe today are of Polish origin.

From around 1994, however, the Church began to lose some of its popular support, as a result of a gathering backlash against its early successes. The more liberal segments of the population began to feel a growing resentment at the compulsory religious instruction in public schools, the strong anti-abortion laws and the numerous privileges accorded to the Church, such as special treatment in the granting of electronic-media licences.

This unpopularity was compounded in 1995 when the Church contributed to the return to power of former communist politicians. This alienated a fair number of voters, who turned against the clerical militancy backed by Lech Wałęsa and voted instead for Aleksander Kwaśniewski in the 1995 presidential elections.

It took a long time for the Polish Church to make up its mind about Poland's accession to the EU. Despite the Polish Pope John Paul II being in favour, the Church only lent its support to the government campaign to promote EU membership on condition that Poland's existing abortion law remain in place.

In past times, Polish territory spanned the borders between Rome and Byzantium, and the Catholic Church (Kościół Katolicki) had to share its influence with other creeds, particularly the Orthodox Church (Kościół Prawosławny). In 1596 the Orthodox hierarchy in Poland split with Russian Orthodoxy and accepted the supremacy of the pope in Rome. This created the so-called Uniat Church (Kościół Unicki), often referred to as the Greek-Catholic Church (Kościół Greko-Katolicki). Despite the doctrinal change, the Uniat Church retained its traditional Eastern rites and liturgical language.

After WWII Poland's borders shifted west, and consequently the Orthodox Church is now present only along a narrow strip on the eastern frontier; its adherents number a little over 1% of the country's population, yet it is the second-largest creed after Roman Catholicism. Orthodox churches are recognisable by their characteristic onion-shaped domes.

The Uniat Church has an even smaller number of believers (at most 0.5%), mostly Ukrainians and Lemks who are scattered throughout the country because of forced resettlement imposed by the communist authorities in the aftermath of WWII.

Poland's Muslim community numbers only 500, most of whom live near two of the country's three mosques at Kruszyniany and Bohoniki (p145). The mosques were built by the Muslim Tatars in the 18th century.

WOMEN IN POLAND

Polish women have generally always been independent, resourceful, forthright, and they have a reputation for beauty. Traditionally, their role in society was that of mother and homemaker, but this attitude has slowly changed over the past few decades and the country's younger demographic is no longer satisfied with this conventional view. Nowadays women have the same study opportunities as their male counterparts (since the early 1980s in fact), are well represented in the white-collar workforce, and more and more are entering male-dominated sectors, such as the police force. But prejudice dies hard: some employers can be reluctant to employ younger women, afraid they'll soon get pregnant, often the top jobs are reserved for men, and politics is almost solely a male domain. The Church's sanctification of the family – and women's traditional place in it – still strongly influences Poland's social fabric, although this is also diminishing, particularly in the younger generation.

ARTS Literature

In Poland, as in many Eastern European countries, literature holds a special place in the hearts of the citizens. It has served as the only outlet for resentment against foreign rule during occupation, and has often captured the spirit of a struggling country.

Poland's rich literary history dates back to the 11th century, but it wasn't until the 1500s that works in the Polish language gained a semblance of popularity. By the 1700s Latin literature had completely given way to Polish prose.

NOVELISTS

The Nobel prize for literature was first awarded in 1901, and it was only four years later that Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916) became the first of several Polish writers to be so honoured. Sienkiewicz took the prize for *Quo Vadis?*, an epic novel chronicling the love affair between a pagan Roman and a young Christian girl in ancient Rome. The book was the world's first 'bestseller' and has been translated into dozens of languages; a century after its first publication it is still in print. Novelist and short-story writer Władysław Reymont (1867–1925) became another Nobel prize winner in 1924 for *The Peasants* (Chłopi), a four-volume epic about Polish village life.

Between the wars several brilliant avant-garde writers emerged who were only fully appreciated after WWII. They included Bruno Schulz (1892–1942), Witold Gombrowicz (1904–69) and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (also known as Witkacy; 1885–1939). Witkacy, an unusual talent in many fields (including painting, literature and photography), was the originator of unconventional philosophical concepts, such as the 'theory of pure form', and creator of the Theatre of the Absurd long before Ionesco made it famous. Only in the 1960s were Witkacy's plays, such as *Mother* (Matka), *Cobblers* (Szewcy) and *New Deliverance* (Nowe Wyzwolenie), discovered internationally. Despite penning only a handful of books, Schulz is regarded as one of Poland's leading literary lights; his *The Street of Crocodiles* is a good introduction to his ingenious, imaginative prose. As a Jew caught in the maelstrom of WWII, he stood little chance of surviving the Nazi occupation.

The postwar period presented Polish writers with a conundrum: adopt communism and effectively sell out, or take a more independent path and risk persecution. Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004), who broke with the communist regime, offered an analysis of this problem in *The Captive Mind* (Zniewolony Umysł). Miłosz, a long-time émigré who spent the last 40

years of his life in the USA, occupies the prime position in Polish postwar literature, and the Nobel prize awarded to him in 1980 was recognition of his achievements.

Novelist, screenwriter and film director Tadeusz Konwicki (b 1926) is another remarkable figure of the postwar literary scene. A teenage resistance fighter during WWII, Konwicki's pre-1989 works had the communist censors tearing their hair out. He has written more than 20 novels, among which the best known are the brilliant *A Minor Apocalypse* (Mała Apokalipsa) and *The Polish Complex* (Kompleks Polski).

Stanisław Lem (1921–2006) is without doubt Poland's premier writer of science fiction. Around 27 million of his books, translated into 41 languages, have been sold around the world. Of the more than 30 novels he has written, the most famous is *Solaris*, which was made into a movie twice, the latest one starring George Clooney in 2002.

Look in the window of any large Polish bookshop and you will see the latest best-selling offerings from a younger generation of writers that includes Gdańsk-based journalist and novelist Paweł Huelle (b 1957), Olga Tokarczuk (b 1962) and psychologist and translator Magdalena Tulli (b 1955). Katarzyna Grochola (b 1957), whose pointedly humorous novels are about a woman's life in modern Poland, has been compared to Helen Fielding, author of *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

POETS

The 19th century produced three exceptional poets: Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), Juliusz Słowacki (1809–49) and Zygmunt Krasiński (1812–59). Known as the Three Bards, they captured a nation deprived of its independence in their romantic work. The greatest of the three, Mickiewicz, is to the Poles what Shakespeare is to the British, and is as much a cultural icon as a historical and creative figure. Born in Navahrudak, in what is now Belarus, he was a political activist in his youth and was deported to central Russia for five years. He left Poland in the 1830s, never to return, and served as a professor of literature in Lausanne and Paris. His best works, written while he was in

In *Solaris* (1961) by Stanisław Lem, a psychologist is sent to investigate a space station where the crew are haunted by figures from their past. Like all the best sci-fi, the story uses a futuristic setting to explore what it is to be human.

POLISH PROSE IN EXILE

A number of Polish émigrés have made a name for themselves outside the country's borders.

Józef Teodor Konrad Nałęcz Korzeniowski (1857–1924) was born into a family of impoverished but patriotic gentry in Berdichev, which is now in western Ukraine. He left the country in 1874 and, after 20 years travelling the world as a sailor, settled in England. Though fluent in his native Polish, he dedicated himself to writing in English. He is known throughout the world by his adopted name of Joseph Conrad, and his novels (*Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, to name but two) are considered classics of English literature.

Nobel prize winner Isaac Bashevis Singer (1902–91) spent his formative years in Poland before moving to the USA in 1935 in the face of rising fascism. Singer originally wrote in his native tongue of Yiddish, before translating his work into English for an American audience. Two of his most memorable stories are *Enemies*, *a Love Story* and *Yentl*; the latter was made into a film starring Barbra Streisand.

During the late '60s and early '70s, Ryszard Kapuściński (1932–2007) was one of Poland's only foreign correspondents, mostly covering wars and revolutions in Africa, Asia and the Americas. He went on to pen literary works of some standing, including *Imperium*, dealing with the last days of the Soviet Union, and *The Emperor*, covering the demise of Haile Selassie's Ethiopian regime.

Despite controversy surrounding the authenticity of some of Jerzy Kosiński's (1933–91) works, the author is known for his two highly regarded novels, *The Painted Bird* and *Being There*. Kosiński was born Jusek Lewinkopf in Łódź and emigrated to the USA in 1957.

The website www.polishwriting.net is a guide to around 20 contemporary Polish novelists whose works are available in English, and includes short biographies, interviews, articles and extracts from their works.

exile, have, not surprisingly, a strongly patriotic theme. Mickiewicz' most famous poem, known to all Polish schoolchildren, is the epic, book-length *Pan Tadeusz* (1834). It is a romantic evocation of a lost world of 18th-century Polish-Lithuanian gentry, torn apart by the Partition of 1795. There is an exhibition dedicated to Mickiewicz in Warsaw's Literature Museum (p91) and a first edition of the poem resides in Płock's Diocesan Museum (p135).

Polish literature's most recent Nobel prize was awarded in 1996 to Wisława Szymborska (b 1923), a Kraków poet little known beyond the borders of her motherland. The Swedish academy described her as 'the Mozart of poetry' with 'something of the fury of Beethoven'. For those intending to sample her work, a good introduction is the volume entitled *View with a Grain of Sand*, published in 1995. It's a selection of 100 poems, translated into English, that span nearly 40 years of her work.

Cinema

Though the invention of the cinema is attributed to the Lumière brothers, some sources claim that a Pole, Piotr Lebedziński, should take some of the credit; he built a film camera in 1893, two years before the movie craze took off.

The first Polish film was shot in 1908, but large-scale film production only took off after WWI. Little work produced between the wars reached international audiences; the country's greatest contribution to world cinema at the time was actress Pola Negri, a star of Hollywood's silent flicks of the 1920s.

During the first 10 years following WWII, Polish cinematography didn't register many significant achievements, apart from some semidocumentaries depicting the cruelties of the war. One such remarkable example is *The Last Stage* (Ostatni Etap), a moving documentary-drama directed by Wanda Jakubowska (1901–98), an Auschwitz survivor.

THE POLISH SCHOOL

Polish cinema came to the fore from 1955 to 1963, the period known as the Polish School. The school drew heavily on literature and dealt with moral evaluations of the war – its three greatest prodigies, Andrzej Wajda (b 1926), Roman Polański (b 1933) and Jerzy Skolimowski (b 1938), all attended the Łódź Film School and went on to international acclaim.

Wajda produced arguably his best work during this time, the famous trilogy *A Generation* (Pokolenie), *Canal* (Kanał) and *Ashes and Diamonds* (Popiół i Diament). Since then, the tireless Wajda has produced a film every couple of years, the best of which include *Man of Marble* (Człowiek z Marmuru), its sequel *Man of Iron* (Człowiek z Żelaza), and *The Promised Land* (Ziemia Obiecana), which was nominated for an Oscar.

Polański and Skolimowski began their careers in the early '60s; the former made only one feature film in Poland, *Nóż w Wodzie* (Knife in the Water), before continuing his career in the West. The latter shot four films, of which the last, *Ręce do Góry* (Hands Up), made in 1967, was kept on the shelf until 1985. He also left Poland for more receptive pastures, and while he gained an international following, it was nothing compared to the recognition Polański received. Polański's body of work includes such remarkable films as *Cul-de-Sac*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Chinatown*, *Macbeth*, *Bitter Moon* and *The Pianist*.

AFTER THE POLISH SCHOOL

Poland's filmmakers never reached the heights of the Polish School after 1963, yet they continued to make exemplary works. The communist era

produced a string of important directors, including Krzysztof Zanussi, Andrzej Żuławski and Agnieszka Holland, and in 1970 Marek Piwowski shot *The Cruise* (Rejs), Poland's first cult film. Krzysztof Kieślowski (1941–96), director of the extraordinary trilogy *Three Colours: Blue/White/Red*, started in 1977 with *Blizna* (Scar), but his first widely acclaimed feature was *Amateur* (Amateur). After several mature films, he undertook the challenge of making the *Dekalog* (Decalogue), a 10-part TV series that was broadcast all over the world. The postcommunist period has witnessed a rash of young directors, but none has yet proved to be of the class of Polański or Wajda.

More recently, Poland has produced a number of world-class cinematographers, including Janusz Kamiński, who was awarded two Oscars for his work on Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan*. Allan Starski is another Pole to win an Oscar for *Schindler's List*, this time for art and set direction.

Lesser known but perhaps no less talented are several other Polish cinematographers responsible for various acclaimed Hollywood productions, including Adam Holender (*Midnight Cowboy*), Andrzej Bartkowiak (*Verdict*, *Jade*, *Terms of Endearment*, *Prizzi's Honor*), Andrzej Sekuła (*Pulp Fiction*) and Piotr Sobociński (*Marvin's Room*, *Ransom*).

Music

CLASSICAL

The foremost figure in the history of Polish music is Frédéric Chopin (1810–49), who crystallised the national style in classical music, taking inspiration from folk or court dances and tunes such as *polonez* (polonaise), *mazurek* (mazurka), *oberek* and *kujawiak*. No-one else in the history of Polish music has so creatively used folk rhythms for concert pieces, nor achieved such international recognition.

Chopin was not the only composer inspired by folk dances at the time. Stanisław Moniuszko (1819–72) used his inspiration to create Polish national opera; two of his best-known pieces, *Halka* and *Straszny Dwór*, are staples of the national opera-house repertoire. Henryk Wieniawski (1835–80), another remarkable 19th-century composer, also achieved great heights in the world of Polish music.

A discussion of traditional Polish music cannot be complete without a mention of Oskar Kolberg (1814–90). The pioneering Kolberg spent much of his life recording songs and dances from across the country, and by the time of his death he had amassed a substantial collection. Unfortunately it was destroyed during WWII, but the collection was begun again in 1945.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Polish artists were beginning to grace the world stage. The first to do so were the piano virtuosos Ignacy Paderewski (1860–1941) and Artur Rubinstein (1886–1982), the latter performing right up until his death. Karol Szymanowski (1882–1937) was another musical

The Pianist (2002), the harrowing true story of a Warsaw Ghetto survivor, won three Oscars (including Best Actor and Best Director) and two BAFTAs for Roman Polański.

Check out the Polish Film Institute's website at www.pisf.pl for up-to-date information on the Polish film industry.

Roman Polański's Oscar-nominated debut feature *Nóż w Wodzie* (Knife in the Water; 1963) is a consummate piece of film-making. A tense battle of wits between two men over a pretty woman, it's set on a yacht on the Great Masurian Lakes.

THE CHOPIN TRAIL

There are several places in and around Warsaw that are associated with Poland's national composer, Frédéric Chopin.

- Chopin Museum (p97) – a small museum housed in the headquarters of the Chopin Society
- Holy Cross Church (p96) – where Chopin's heart is buried
- Warsaw University (p96) – from 1826 to 1829 Chopin studied at the school of music here
- Żelazowa Wola (p120) – Chopin's birthplace; the house where he was born has been restored as a museum

personality of the first half of the 20th century; his best-known composition, the ballet *Harnasie*, was influenced by folk music from the Tatra Mountains, which he transformed into the contemporary musical idiom.

In the 1950s and 1960s a wealth of talent began to emerge once more, including Witold Lutosławski, with his *Musique Funèbre* and *Jeux Vénitiens*, and Krzysztof Penderecki, with his monumental dramatic forms such as *Dies Irae*, *Ubu Rex*, *Devils of Loudun*, *Seven Gates of Jerusalem* and *Credo*.

Originally eclipsed by the aforementioned masters, Henryk Górecki developed his own musical language. His Symphony No 3 (also known as *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*), written in 1976, became a worldwide phenomenon in 1992 when it was recorded by Dawn Upshaw and the London Sinfonietta. The huge success of the third symphony shed light on the composer's other works, notably his String Quartets Nos 1 and 2, written for, and exquisitely performed by, the Kronos Quartet.

JAZZ

Jazz entered Polish airwaves in the 1930s, and the biggest name of the time was trumpet virtuoso Eddie Rosner. By the early 1950s it was relegated to an underground movement, when musicians would jam behind closed doors away from the eyes and ears of the ruling communists. Krzysztof Komeda (1931–69), the legendary pianist, became Poland's first jazz star and an inspiration to many musicians that followed, including Michał Urbaniak (violin, saxophone), Zbigniew Namysłowski (saxophone) and Tomasz Stańko (trumpet), all of whom became pillars of Polish jazz in the 1960s and remain active today. Urbaniak opted to pursue his career in the USA, and is the best-known Polish jazz musician on the international scene.

Of the younger generation, Leszek Możdżer (piano) is possibly the biggest revelation thus far, followed by several other exceptionally skilled pianists such as Andrzej Jagodziński and Włodzimierz Pawlik. Other young jazz talents to watch out for include Piotr Wojtasik (trumpet), Maciej Sikala (saxophone), Adam Pierończyk (saxophone), Piotr Baron (saxophone) and Cezary Konrad (drums).

POLISH HIP-HOP

Poland's music scene encompasses a broad spectrum of artists, playing everything from folk and jazz to punk and rock, but turn on any music TV and all you'll see is home-grown hip-hop. Whether it's thanks to the restrictions of the communist era or the current high levels of youth unemployment, since 1990 a whole generation has enthusiastically embraced the 'money, guns and hos' gangsta philosophy, and the recent worldwide commercial explosion of the genre has opened things up wide for Poland's many urban crews and posses.

Little of what you'll hear is revolutionary in a musical sense, but the point is that you'll hear it – hip-hop is firmly enconced in the mainstream in Poland. It's also virtually the only form of Polish-language music to make it out of the country, and while it's never going to outsell Eminem, you can already find Polish rap nights in clubs as far afield as London. Unsurprisingly, the heaviest presence is in Germany, where a large expat population and an equally active hip-hop scene provide a booming market.

Names to look out for include 52 Dębiec, Ascetoholix, ZIP Skład, WWO, Slums Attack, Grammatik, Fiz, Kaliber 44 and OSTR; tune into radiostacja (101.5FM in Warsaw) or pick up one of its compilation CDs to get a taste of what's hot in the scene. If you don't speak any Polish you won't make much sense of anything, but there's the usual sprinkling of American slang and you should at least recognise the term *kurwa* after a while – it is of course the f-word, proving that some things in hip-hop transcend national boundaries.

ROCK & POP

Unlike most countries, pop plays third fiddle to rock and hip-hop (see boxed text, opposite) in Poland. The country's first rock pioneer was Tadeusz Nalepa (1943–2007), who began his career in the late 1960s and went on to nationwide success. Other veterans of the rock-pop scene include Lady Pank, Republika, Budka Suflera, Maanam, Bajm, T.Love and Hey. Recent years have seen a rash of productions covering just about every musical genre and style from salsa to rap. Brathanki and Golec u Orkiestra are both popular groups that creatively mix folk and pop rhythms, and the likes of Wilki, Dżem and Myslovitz are currently keeping the country's rock traditions alive.

Architecture

Poland's architectural styles have basically followed Western Europe over the centuries. The earliest style to enter the country was Romanesque, which dominated from the late 10th to the mid-13th centuries. Its functional, austere style generally employed round-headed arches, semicircular apses and symmetrical layouts, all in sturdy stone. The remnants of Polish Romanesque are few, but there are some precious examples, including the collegiate church at Tum (p133).

GOthic

The Gothic style made its way into Poland in the first half of the 13th century, but it was not until the early 14th century that the so-called High Gothic became universally adopted. Elongated, pointed arches and ribbed vaults were characteristic of the style. Brick replaced stone, and the buildings, particularly churches, tended to reach impressive loftiness and monumental size. Gothic left behind countless churches, town halls and burghers' houses, but the mightiest examples are the Teutonic Knights' castles scattered across northern Poland. Specific examples of Gothic architecture include the magnificent Malbork Castle (p448), Wawel Cathedral and Castle in Kraków (p168), the Cathedral of St John the Baptist in Wrocław (p321), Gniezno's cathedral (p391), and many buildings in the towns of Lublin (p232) and Toruń (p436).

RENAISSANCE

In the 16th century a new fashion transplanted from Italy began to supersede Gothic as the dominant style. More delicate and decorative, Renaissance architecture focused on perfect proportions and a handsome visual appearance. In contrast to Gothic, brickwork was almost never openly shown. Much attention was paid to both detail and decoration, which included bas-reliefs, gables, parapets, galleries, round arches and stucco work. There are a number of Renaissance buildings in Poland – notably Wawel Castle and the Sigismund Chapel in Kraków (p168), and the castles at Baranów Sandomierski (p228) and Ogrodzieniec (p213) – though many of them were later 'adorned' by the subsequent architectural fashion, the Baroque. However the pearl of Renaissance in Poland is the town of Zamość (p250), which has remained relatively unchanged since the 16th century.

BAROQUE

As with the rest of Europe, Baroque entered Poland in the 17th century and swept almost all other styles aside. Lavish and highly decorative, it placed a strong imprint on existing architecture by adding its sumptuous décor, which is particularly evident in church interiors and the palaces of the aristocracy. The most prominent figure of the period was Tylman van Gameren, a Dutch

The Polish Way: a Thousand-Year History of the Poles and their Culture (1988) by Adam Zamoyski is one of the best accounts of Polish culture from its birth to recent past. It is fully illustrated and exquisitely written.

architect invited to Poland after the Deluge (p32). His finest masterpieces include Krasiński Palace (p93) in Warsaw, the Palace of Nieborów (p131), the Church of St Anne in Kraków (p183) and the Royal Chapel in Gdańsk (p414). Also worthy of note is the exemplary Baroque church in Święta Lipka (p489). In the 18th century Baroque culminated in French-originated Rococo, but this style didn't make much of a mark on Poland, which by then was swiftly sliding into economic and political chaos.

THE 'NEOS' & ART NOUVEAU

At the beginning of the 19th century, a more complex phase of architectural development started in Poland, which might be characterised as a period of the 'neo', or a general turn to the past. This phase comprised neo-Renaissance, neo-Gothic and even neo-Romanesque styles. The most important of all the 'neo' fashions, though, was neoclassicism, which used ancient Greek and Roman elements as an antidote to the overloaded Baroque and Rococo opulence. Monumental palaces adorned with columned porticoes were erected in this period, as well as churches that looked more like Roman pantheons. Italian architect Antonio Corazzi was very active in Poland in this period, and designed several massive neoclassical buildings, including the Teatr Wielki (Grand Theatre; see p95) in Warsaw, the town where neoclassicism left its strongest mark.

The second half of the 19th century was dominated by eclecticism – a style that profited from all the previous trends – but it didn't produce any architectural gems. More innovative was Art Nouveau, which developed in England, France, Austria and Germany, and made its entrance into Poland at the beginning of the 20th century. It left behind some gems, including the City Art Gallery in Łódź (p124), Płock's cathedral interior (p134), and the Hotel Royal in Kraków (p198). After WWI, neoclassicism took over again but lost out to functionalism just before WWII.

SOCIALIST REALISM & BEYOND

The postwar period started with a heroic effort to reconstruct destroyed towns and cities, and the result, given the level of destruction, is truly impressive. Social realism, the oppressive architectural style of the communist regime, entered Poland at this time; Warsaw's Palace of Culture & Science (p97) and Plac Konstytucji (p99) are classic examples.

Since the 1960s Polish architecture has followed more general European styles, though with one important local distinction: almost all major cities have been ringed by vast suburbs of anonymous concrete apartment blocks, a sad consequence of massive urbanisation and the architects' lack of imagination. In Poland's defence, it didn't have the necessary cash flow to accommodate aesthetic values. Nor did Poland receive external assistance from the Marshall Plan, which helped some other Western European nations to rebuild after the war. Only after the fall of communism was there a trend towards the construction of homes on a more human scale and modern-style architecture.

Painting

The country's first major painter was no Pole at all. Bernardo Bellotto (c 1720–80) was born in Venice, the nephew (and pupil) of that quintessential Venetian artist, Canaletto. He specialised in *vedute* (town views) and explored Europe thoroughly, landing the job of court painter in Warsaw during the reign of King Stanisław August Poniatowski (1764–95). An entire room in Warsaw's Royal Castle (p87) is devoted to his detailed views of the city, which proved invaluable as references during the re-

construction of the Old Town after WWII. Bellotto often signed his canvases '*de Canaletto*', and as a result is commonly known in Poland simply as Canaletto. Also on display in the castle are works by Marcello Bacciarelli (1731–1818), the king's favourite portraitist, who captured seminal moments in Polish history on canvas.

DEVELOPMENT OF POLISH ARTISTS

By the middle of the 19th century, Poland was ready for its own painters. Born in Kraków, Jan Matejko (1838–93) created stirring canvases that glorified Poland's past achievements. He aimed to keep alive in the minds of his viewers the notion of a proud and independent Polish nation, during a time when Poland had ceased to exist as a political entity. His best-known work is *The Battle of Grunwald* (1878), an enormous painting that took three years to complete. It depicts the famous victory of the united Polish, Lithuanian and Ruthenian forces over the Teutonic Knights in 1410 and is displayed in Warsaw's National Museum (p100). The likes of Józef Brandt (1841–1915) and Wojciech Kossak (1857–1942) also contributed to the documentation of Polish history at this time; Kossak is best remembered as co-creator of the colossal *Raclawice Panorama*, which is on display in Wrocław (p318).

The closing decades of the 19th century saw the development of Impressionism in Europe, but it was met with much reserve by Polish artists. Even though many of the first-rank national painters of this period, such as Aleksander Gierymski (1850–1901), Józef Chełmoński (1849–1914), Władysław Podkowiński (1866–95), Leon Wyczółkowski (1852–1936) and Julian Fałat (1853–1929) were in some way, or for some time, influenced by the new style, they preferred to express themselves in traditional forms and never completely gave up realism. This is particularly true of their Polish landscapes, an important part of their work.

On the other hand, the revolution in European painting influenced those Polish artists who lived and worked outside Poland, particularly those in Paris. Among them were Olga Boznańska (1865–1940), whose delicate portraits were painted with notable hints of Impressionism, and Tadeusz Makowski (1882–1932), who adopted elements of Cubism and developed an individual, easily recognisable style.

POST WWII

From the end of WWII until 1955, the visual arts were dominated by socialist realism. It was also a time when poster art came to the fore, building on a tradition dating back to the turn of the century. One of the most influential artists was Tadeusz Trepcowski (1914–54), who produced his best posters after WWII; his works, and those by other poster artists, can be seen at Warsaw's Poster Museum (p102).

From 1955 onwards, Poland's painters began to experiment with a variety of forms, trends and techniques. Zdzisław Beksiński (1929–2005) is considered one of the country's best contemporary painters; he created a unique, mysterious and striking world of dreams in his art. The career of Tadeusz Kulisiewicz (1899–1988) began before WWII, but he reached mastery in his delicate drawings in the postwar period, while Tadeusz Kantor (1915–90), who famously founded Cricot 2 Theatre, was also very creative in painting, drawing and other experimental forms. The work of Jerzy Nowosielski (b 1923) is strongly inspired by the religious iconography of the Orthodox Church; he has decorated the interiors of several churches, including the Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity (p146) in Hajnówka.

Poles who became household names include Antoni Patek (cofounder of watchmakers Patek Philippe & Co), Max Factor (the father of modern cosmetics) and the four Warner brothers (founders of Warner Bros).

For a comprehensive look at the last 100 years of Poland's poster art, log on to www.theartofposter.com.

POLAND'S SKANSENS

'Skansen' is a Scandinavian word referring to an open-air ethnographic museum. Aimed at preserving traditional folk culture and architecture, a skansen gathers together a selection of typical, mostly wooden, rural buildings (dwellings, barns, churches, mills) collected from the region, and often reassembles them to look like a natural village. The buildings are furnished and decorated in their original style, incorporating a range of traditional household equipment, tools, crafts and artefacts, and offer an insight into the life, work and customs of the period.

The concept of open-air museums emerged in the late 19th century in Scandinavia and became popular in Europe during the interwar period. Poland's first skansen was established in 1906 in Wdzydze Kiszewskie (p435), near Gdańsk, and focussed on Kashubian folk culture. The next, dedicated to traditional Kurpie culture, appeared in 1927 in Nowogród (p143), in northern Mazovia. Both were almost totally destroyed during WWII but later reconstructed.

There are currently about 35 skansens in Poland focusing on distinctive regional traits. They are sometimes called *muzeum budownictwa ludowego* (museum of folk architecture), *muzeum wsi* (museum of the village) or *park etnograficzny* (ethnographic park), but the term 'skansen' is universally applied.

Although most skansens have been established by reassembling regional buildings, there are also some small *in situ* skansens, including one in Kluki (p457) and another in Bóbrka (p287). It's hard to form a hard-and-fast 'skansen top 10' list, but at the very least you shouldn't miss the ones in Sanok (p277) and Nowy Sącz (p294).

Folk Arts & Crafts

Poland has long and rich traditions in folk arts and crafts, and there are significant regional distinctions. Folk culture is strongest in the mountainous regions, especially in the Podhale at the foot of the Tatras, but other relatively small enclaves, such as Kurpie and Łowicz (both in Mazovia), help to keep traditions alive.

Industrialisation and urbanisation have increasingly encroached on traditional customs, though. People no longer wear folk dress except for special occasions, and the artefacts they make are mostly for sale as either tourist souvenirs or museum pieces; in any case, they are not used for their original purposes. The growing number of ethnographic museums is an indicator of the decline of traditional folk art; these museums are the best places to see what is left. One interesting type of ethnographic museum is the skansen (open-air museum; see boxed text, above), created to preserve traditional rural architecture.

Despite the decline there's still a lot to see outside the museums and skansens. The Polish rural population is conservative and religious, which means that traditions don't die overnight. The further off the beaten track you get, the more you'll see. New folk art pops up in the country every now and then; the Folk Museum at Sromów (p132) has some prime examples. Traditions periodically spring to life around religious feasts and folk festivals, and these events offer the best opportunity to get a feel for how deep the folk roots go.

Theatre

Although theatrical traditions in Poland date back to the Middle Ages, theatre in the proper sense of the word didn't develop until the Renaissance period and initially followed the styles of major centres in France and Italy. By the 17th century the first original Polish plays were being performed on stage. In 1765 the first permanent theatre company was founded in Warsaw and its later director, Wojciech Bogusławski, came to be known as the father of the national theatre.

Theatre development was hindered during Partition. Only the Kraków and Lviv theatres enjoyed relative freedom, but even they were unable to stage the great Romantic dramas, which were not performed until the beginning of the 20th century. By the outbreak of WWI, 10 permanent Polish theatres were operating. The interwar period witnessed a lively theatrical scene with the main centres situated in Warsaw and Kraków.

After WWII, Polish theatre acquired an international reputation. Some of the highest international recognition was gained by the Teatr Laboratorium (Laboratory Theatre), which was created in 1965 and led by Jerzy Grotowski in Wrocław. This unique experimental theatre, remembered particularly for *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*, was dissolved in 1984, and Grotowski concentrated on conducting theatrical classes abroad until his death in early 1999. Another remarkable international success was Tadeusz Kantor's Cricot 2 Theatre of Kraków, formed in 1956. Unfortunately, his best creations, *The Dead Class* (Umarła Klasa) and *Wielopole, Wielopole*, will never be seen again; Kantor died in 1990 and the theatre was dissolved a few years later.

Among existing experimental theatres, the most powerful and expressive include the Gardzienice (p239), based in the village of the same name near Lublin, the Teatr Witkacego (Witkacy Theatre) in Zakopane and the Wierszalin in Białystok.

In the mainstream, the most outstanding theatre company in Kraków is the Stary Teatr (Old Theatre; p205). There are several top-ranking theatres in Warsaw (p114), including the Teatr Ateneum, Teatr Powszechny and Teatr Dramatyczny.

Polish theatre directors to watch out for include Jerzy Jarocki, Jerzy Grzegorzewski, Kazimierz Dejmek, Andrzej Wajda, Krystian Lupa and Maciej Prus.

Prominent among other forms of theatre are Wrocławski Teatr Pantomimy (Pantomime Theatre of Wrocław; p325) and Polski Teatr Tańca (Polish Dance Theatre; p385) based in Poznań.

The 2006 Miss World pageant in Warsaw was the first held in a European city other than London.

Food & Drink

Food has played a pivotal role in keeping the Polish nation on track. During the more than 120 years or so in the wilderness, when Poland ceased to exist politically, Poles found a source of unity in their language, their religion and their cuisine. And while many of the dishes are uniquely its own, this cosmopolitan country has borrowed heavily from the cuisines of its neighbours and nations further afield. The Jewish, Russian, Ukrainian, Hungarian, German and even Italian traditions have all left their mark.

For the most part, Polish food is hearty and filling – a favourite saying is *'Jedzcie, pijcie, i popuszczajcie pasa'* ('Eat, drink, and loosen your belt'). Food is rich in meat and game, thick soups and sauces proliferate, and potatoes and dumplings are abundant. Some of the preparations and tastes (such as the ubiquitous sweet-sour one) are unusual; favourite seasonings include marjoram, dill and caraway seeds.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Chleb (bread) has always meant more than mere sustenance to Poles. Bread is a symbol of good fortune and is sacred to many; some older people kiss a piece of bread if they drop it on the ground. Traditional Polish bread is made with rye flour, but bakeries nowadays turn out a bewildering array of loaves, including those flavoured with sunflower, poppy and sesame seeds as well as raisins and nuts.

Rye is a staple ingredient of another favourite Polish dish, *żurek*. This traditional soup is made with beef or chicken stock, bacon, onion, mushrooms and sour cream, and is given a distinctive, tart flavour through the addition of *kwas* (a mixture of rye flour and water that has been left to ferment for several days). It's often accompanied by hard-boiled egg or *kielbasa* (Polish sausage) and served inside a hollowed-out loaf of bread.

As Polish as *żurek*, but perhaps not as unique is *barszcz* (or *barszcz czerwony*), a red beetroot soup known in Russia as borscht that can be served as *barszcz czysty* (clear borscht), *barszcz z uszkami* (borscht with tiny ravioli-type dumplings stuffed with meat) or *barszcz z pasztecikiem* (borscht with a hot meat- or cabbage-filled pastry).

Pierogi (or 'Polish ravioli') are square- or crescent-shaped dumplings made from dough and stuffed with a whole range of fillings, including cottage cheese, potato and onion, minced meat, sauerkraut or even fruit. They are usually boiled and then served doused in melted butter.

Main dishes include the iconic *bigos* (see opposite), *goląbki* (cabbage leaves stuffed with beef, onion and rice and baked in tomato sauce), *golonka* (boiled pig's knuckle) served with horseradish and sauerkraut, and the ubiquitous *kołlet schabowy* (breaded pork chops). More elaborate preparations are *schab wieprzow* (roast loin of pork) – or preferably *dzik* (wild boar) – with caraway seeds and chopped marjoram rubbed into the skin before roasting, and *kaczka z jabłkami* (roast duck with apples).

Main courses are usually accompanied by *ziemniaki* (potatoes), which are served in many forms – boiled, roasted, fried or mashed. One of the more distinctively Polish recipes is *placki ziemniaczane* (potato fritters) – patties of grated potato and onion fried until crisp and often served with sour cream. Another traditional Polish grain is buckwheat, which is often served as a side dish in the form of *kasza* (or *kasza gryczana*; buckwheat groats).

Poles have always taken advantage of the abundant wild food that grows in field and forest and a favourite summer pastime, even for city folk, is

Poles wish each other *smacznego* (smach-nay-go), the Polish equivalent of *bon appetit*, at the start of the meal and end the same meal by saying *dziękuję* (djen-koo-ye) to one another, which means thank you.

The Polish street snack of choice is *zapiekanki*, the 'Polish pizza' made up of half a stale baguette split lengthwise and topped with melted cheese, chopped mushrooms and ketchup and best (or only) eaten after a heavy night on the town.

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

If there is one dish more genuinely Polish than any other, it's *bigos*. It's made with sauerkraut, fresh chopped cabbage and meat, including one or more of pork, beef, game, sausage and bacon. All the ingredients are mixed together and cooked over a low flame for several hours, then put aside to be reheated a few more times. As with French cassoulet, this process enhances the flavour. The whole operation takes a couple of days and the result can be nothing short of mouthwatering. Every family has its own well-guarded recipe as far as the ingredients, seasonings and cooking time go, and you will never find two identical dishes. One of our neighbours in southern Poland once let slip that the sauerkraut had to be rinsed no fewer than three times before adding it to the pot. This made all the difference to ours.

Because it's so time-consuming, *bigos* does not often appear on a restaurant menu and the version served in cheap eateries and cafés is often not worth its name. The best place to try *bigos* is at someone's kitchen table – if you ever happen to get such an invitation, don't pass it up. *Bigos* is at its most delicious when washed down with liberal quantities of vodka, so bring along a bottle.

gathering wild mushrooms and berries. The necessity in times past of making abundant summer food last through the long, cold winters means that Polish cuisine is rich in pickles, preserves and smoked fish and meat. The most famous Polish preserves are sweet and fragrant *ogórki kiszzone* (dill-pickled cucumbers), often sold from wooden barrels at fruit and vegetable markets.

There are regional specialities across the country – freshwater fish dishes in the north, aromatic duck preparations in Wielkopolska, large dumplings called *kluski* in Silesia that are often served with bacon (*kluski śląskie ze słoniną*) – but nowhere are specialities so well defined as in the Podhale region at the foot of the Tatras. Among some of the things to try here are *kwaśnica* (sauerkraut soup), *placki po góralsku* (potato pancakes with goulash) and the many types *osycpki* (smoked sheep's cheese) that come in oblong shapes with distinctive stamps on the rind. These are sometimes sliced, baked and served with *żurawiny* (preserved cranberries).

Mushroom-picking is almost a national pastime in the hills and forests of Poland in autumn.

DRINKS

Tea & Coffee

Poles are passionate tea drinkers. *Herbata* (tea) is traditionally served in a glass, not a cup, and never drunk with milk. Instead, a slice of lemon is added plus sugar to taste.

Kawa (coffee) is another popular drink, especially with the arrival of trendy international chains such as Starbucks and Costa in the larger cities. The traditional Polish way of preparing coffee is *kawa parzona*, a concoction made by putting a couple of teaspoons of ground coffee beans directly into a glass and topping it with boiling water. *Kawa po turecku* (Turkish-style coffee) is strong boiled coffee.

Beer & Wine

There are several brands of locally brewed Polish *piwo* (beer), the best of which include Żywiec, Tyskie, Okocim and Lech. Beer is readily available in shops, cafés, bars, pubs and restaurants – virtually everywhere – and is almost always lager. Not all bars chill their beer, so if you want a cold one ask for *zimne piwo* (cold beer). It is very popular among young people to drink *piwo z sokiem* (beer mixed with fruit cordial or juice) with a straw.

Poland doesn't have much of a tradition of wine drinking but that is changing – and fast. The average annual wine consumption, while small

at just 5.46L per head of population (compared with just under 60L for France), is growing by 10% to 15% a year, and wine could soon rival beer and vodka in popularity.

The country produces almost no *wino* (wine) of its own. Poles generally prefer seasoned and sweet wines, and their market is dominated by lower-priced products from Hungary and Bulgaria. Western European wines, particularly French, German and Spanish, are now widely available in shops and restaurants.

Spirits

The No 1 tippie in Poland – indeed, the one almost synonymous with the country – is *wódka* (vodka). And while the jury is still out on who actually invented the stuff – Poland or its old adversary to the east – most people agree that Polish vodka is superior to the Russian equivalent.

These days drinking habits in the cities are changing, with Poles increasingly turning to beer and wine instead of vodka. Yet, as soon as you go to a small town and enter the only local restaurant, you'll see those tipsy folk debating jovially over bottles of vodka. Old habits die hard; only Russians drink more vodka per capita than Poles.

Polish vodka comes in a number of colours and flavours. *Czysta* (clear) vodka is not, as is often thought in the West, the only species of the *wódka* family. Though clear vodka does form the basic 'fuel' for seasoned drinkers – *wyborowa* is the finest of the wheat-based clear vodkas and *żytnia* the rye-based ones – there is a whole spectrum of varieties, from very sweet to extra dry. These include *myśliwska* ('hunter's vodka' tasting not unlike gin), *wiśniówka* (flavoured with cherries), *jarzębiak* (rowan berries), *cytrynówka* (lemon), *pieprzówka* (pepper) and the famous *żubrówka* ('bison vodka', which is flavoured with grass from the Białowieża Forest on which the bison feed).

Clear vodka should be served well chilled. Flavoured vodkas don't need as much cooling, and some are best drunk at room temperature. While all vodkas were traditionally drunk neat (see below) and – horror of horrors – never mixed as cocktails, that too is changing and some experiments have been very successful indeed. Like beef and claret, *żubrówka* and apple juice – known as a *tatanka* (buffalo) – is a match made in heaven.

Other notable spirits include *śliwowica* (plum brandy), *winiak* (grape brandy) and Goldwasser, a thick liqueur laced with flakes of real gold leaf. *Miód pitny* (mead) is considered the oldest Polish alcoholic drink. It has a very delicate, sweet taste, as it is made using honey, water and yeast. *Krupnik* is honey liqueur.

DRINKING VODKA POLISH-STYLE

In Poland vodka is usually dunk from a 50mL shot glass called a *kieliszek*. It's downed in a single gulp – *do dna* (to the bottom), as Poles say. A piece of a snack or a sip of mineral water is consumed just after drinking to give some relief to the throat. Glasses are immediately refilled for the next drink and it goes quickly. Poles say, 'The saddest thing in the world is two people and just one bottle.'

As you may expect, at this rate you won't be able to keep up with your fellow drinkers for long. Go easy and either miss a few turns or sip your drink in stages. Though this will be beyond the comprehension of a 'normal' Polish drinker, you as a foreigner will be treated with due indulgence. If you do get tipsy, take comfort in the fact that Poles get drunk too – and sometimes rip-roaringly so. There's a reason that the French describe anyone well under the weather as 'drunk as a Pole'. *Na zdrowie* (Cheers)!

Poland has virtually no wine industry apart from a minuscule amount produced every year at Zielona Góra in Silesia.

Annual vodka consumption in Poland stood at 641.5 million litres in 2008, or just under 17L per head nationwide.

WE DARE YOU...

Adventurous diners can start as soon as they sit down at most very traditional Polish eateries. On the table in a large bowl will be a massive helping of *smalec*, what we (don't) like to call 'heart attack in a dish'. It's fried pork fat (not chicken, that is Jewish *schmaltz*) topped with crackling and spread on large hunks of bread. Nasty but oh-so nice. Other even less appetising-sounding entries on the menu, most of which are absolutely delicious, include *nózki w galarecie* (jellied calves' trotters), *flaki* (seasoned tripe cooked in bouillon with vegetables), *karp w galarecie* (carp in gelatine) and *czernina* (ducks'-blood broth with vinegar).

CELEBRATIONS

A deeply religious Roman Catholic country, Poland observes the most important feast days of the liturgical calendar with great piety.

The main meal on the night before Christmas begins with *barszcz wigilijny* (meatless Christmas Eve borscht) served with *uszka postne* (little mushroom packets). This is usually followed by carp in some form. It might be the standard *karp z masłem* (carp fried in butter) or even *karp po żydowsku* (Jewish-style carp), which sees the fish steamed with vegetables and served *w galarecie* (in aspic). But usually it's a more elaborate preparation such as *karp w szarym sosie*, where the fish is served with a delightful (but vile-sounding) 'grey' sauce of almonds, raisins, butter, caramelised sugar and sweet wine. The sweet of choice at Christmas is *piernik*, a dense honey and spice cake.

After *Rezurekcja*, the Easter Sunday morning Mass at daybreak, families traditionally go home to a brunch or early lunch of dishes and delicacies denied during Lent. Sometimes the meal begins with a *żurek wielkanocny*, which is a special Easter *żurek* with hard-boiled eggs and Polish sausage. This is followed mostly by cold dishes such as *szynka gotowana* (boiled ham), *kielbasa* and *pasztet* (pâté). Desserts include the bread-like *babka* ('grandma's cake') and *sernik* (cheesecake).

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

A *restauracja* (restaurant) is the main place for a meal with table service. They range from unpretentious eateries where you can have a filling meal for as little as 20zł, all the way up to luxurious establishments that may leave a sizable hole in your wallet. The menus of most top-class restaurants are in Polish with English and/or German translations, but don't expect foreign-language listings in cheaper eateries (nor waiters speaking anything but Polish).

Restaurants generally open around 11am (at 9am or 10am if they have a breakfast menu). Closing time varies greatly from place to place and from city to province but 10pm to 11pm is usually a safe bet in cities. In villages and smaller towns it may be pretty hard to find somewhere to eat after 9pm.

A Polish *bar mleczny* (milk bar) is a no-frills, self-service cafeteria that serves mostly meat-free dishes at very low prices. The 'milk' part of the name reflects the fact that a good part of the menu is based on dairy products. You can fill up for around 10zł to 15zł. Milk bars were created to provide cheap food for the less affluent and were subsidised by the state. The free-market economy forced many to close, but a number have survived by introducing meat dishes, upgrading standards and raising their prices.

Milk bars open around 8am and close at 6pm (3pm or 4pm on Saturday); only a handful are open on Sunday. The menu is posted on the wall. You tell the cashier what you want, then pay in advance; the cashier gives you a receipt, which you hand to the person dispensing the food. Once you've finished your meal, return your dirty dishes (watch where other diners

Flowers are *de rigueur* when visiting Poles at home and should always be swathed in lots of greenery and presented in uneven numbers (eg 11 or 13 roses).

TIPS ON TIPPING

Poles tip in an unusual way (well, for most of us anyway) in restaurants and cafés and never leave the money on the table, which they consider to be both rude and stupid. You should just tell the waiter how much you're paying in total. If the bill is, say, 45zł, you're paying with a 100zł note and you think the waiter deserves a gratuity of around 10% to 12%, just say you're paying 50zł or that you want 50zł back. And there is another important lesson to learn on the subject of tipping. When paying the *rachunek* (bill), do not hand the waiter a note and say 'thank you' at the same time. To a Pole, that means 'keep the change' – even if the bill was 18zł and you handed over 50zł. *Uwaga* (Be careful).

put theirs). Milk bars are very popular and there are usually queues, but they move quickly. Smoking is not permitted and no alcoholic beverages are served.

A *jadalnia* falls somewhere between a restaurant and a milk bar and serves (usually excellent) home-style dishes. They keep hours similar to milk bars.

In today's Poland, a *kawiarnia* (café) usually serves snacks and light meals along with hot and cold drinks. Generally speaking, the line between a café and a restaurant has become blurred. Cafés tend to open around 10am and close at any time between 9pm and midnight. Most cafés are smokers' territory and, given Polish smoking habits, the atmosphere can be really dense.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Vegetarians won't starve in Poland but (and it must be said) they may lose weight. The cheapest place to go is a milk bar, but many new restaurants and salad bars have vegetarian dishes on the menu and you'll actually find dedicated vegetarian and even vegan restaurants in cities and large towns. Typical Polish vegetarian dishes include the following:

knedle z jabłkami – dumplings stuffed with apples

knedle ze śliwkami – dumplings stuffed with plums

kopytka – Polish 'gnocchi'; noodles made from flour and boiled potatoes

leniwe pierogi – boiled noodles served with cottage cheese

naleśniki – crepes; fried pancakes, most commonly *z serem* (with cottage cheese), *z owocami* (with fruit) or *z dżemem* (with jam), and served with sour cream and sugar

pierogi – dumplings made from noodle dough, stuffed and boiled; the most popular are *pierogi ruskie* ('Russian pierogi' with cottage cheese, potato and onion), *z serem* (with cottage cheese), *z kapustą i grzybami* (with cabbage and wild mushrooms), *z jagodami* (with blueberries) and *z truskawkami* (with strawberries)

placki ziemniaczane – fried pancakes made from grated raw potato, egg and flour; served *ze śmietaną* (with sour cream) or *z cukrem* (with sugar)

pyzy – ball-shaped steamed dumplings made of potato flour

ryż z jabłkami – rice with apples

serem i z makiem – dumplings with cottage cheese/poppy seeds

Accompaniments & Salads

Potatoes are the most common accompaniment to the main course and they are usually boiled or mashed. *Frytki* (chips) are also popular, as are steamed *kasza gryczana* and various dumplings. *Surówki* (or *sałatki*; salads) can come as a light dish on their own or as a side dish to the main course. The latter variety includes the following:

ćwikła z chrzanem – boiled and grated beetroot with horseradish

mizeria ze śmietaną – sliced fresh cucumber in sour cream

sałatka jarzynowa – 'vegetable salad'; cooked vegetables in mayonnaise, commonly known as Russian salad

sałatka z pomidorów – tomato salad, often served with onion

surówka z kapusty kiszonej – sauerkraut, sometimes served with apple and onion

EATING WITH KIDS

Children are welcome in most restaurants and milk bars, but it's rare to find a high chair or special children's menu, so you'll have to make do with smaller portions of the adult menu. For more information on travelling with children, see p505.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Poles start off their day with *śniadanie* (breakfast), which is roughly similar to its Western counterpart and may include *chleb z masłem* (bread and butter), *ser* (cheese), *szynka* (ham), *jajka* (eggs) and *herbata* or *kawa*.

The most important and substantial meal of the day is *obiad* (lunch), usually eaten somewhere between 1pm and 5pm, either at home or in the *stołówka* (workplace canteen). *Obiad* is closer to a Western dinner, but the timing is more like lunch. You could say it's a dinner at lunchtime.

The evening meal is *kolacja* (supper). The time and menu vary greatly: sometimes it can be nearly as substantial as *obiad* but more often it's just sliced meats with a little bit of salad or even lighter – a pastry and a glass of tea.

COOKING COURSES

The most famous cookery school in the land (partly because he has appeared on his own TV programme) is **Kurt Scheller's Cooking Academy** (☎ 022 626 8092; www.schelleracademy.com.pl; 5th fl, ul Piękna 68) in Warsaw. It has day, weekend and holiday courses available of many flavours and descriptions. A course in 'Traditional Polish Cuisine' lasts about four hours and costs 170zł. An extended weekend course on the same subject is 420zł.

EAT YOUR WORDS

If you want to twist your tongue around a little Polish as well as some *pierogi*, turn to the Language chapter on p533 for a bit of pronunciation practice.

Useful Phrases

Table for (four people), please.

Proszę stołek dla (czterech osób). *pro-she sto-leek dla (chte-reh o-soop)*

May I have a menu?

Czy można prosić o kartę? *chi mozh-na pro-sheech o kar-te*

THE ART OF READING POLISH MENUS

A Polish menu is normally split into several sections, including *zakąski* (hors d'oeuvres), *zupy* (soups), *dania drugie* or *potrawy* (main courses), *dodatki* (side dishes), *desery* (desserts) and *napoje* (drinks). The main courses are often split further into *dania mięsne* (meat dishes), *dania rybne* (fish dishes), *dania z drobiu* (poultry dishes) and *dania jarskie* (vegetarian dishes).

The name of the dish on the menu is accompanied by its price and, in milk bars in particular, by its weight or other quantity. The price of the main course doesn't normally include side orders such as potatoes, chips and salads; these must be chosen from the *dodatki* section. Only when all these items are listed together is the price that follows for the whole plate of food.

Also note that for menu items that do not have a standard portion size – most commonly fish – the price given is often per 100g. When ordering, make sure you know how big a fish (or piece of fish) you're getting. To avoid surprises in the bill, study the menu carefully and make things clear to the waiter.

For all you'll ever want to know about Polish cuisine (plus recipes!), visit the Food and Drink chat room of the Polish Forums website at www.polishforums.com/polish_food_drink-f8_1.html.

What's the speciality here?*Jaka jest specjalność zakładu?**ya-ka yest spe-tsyal-noshch zak-wa-doo***What do you recommend?***Co by pan/pani polecil/ila?**tso bi pan/pa-nee po-le-cheew/po-le-chee-wa (m/f)***Are the side dishes included in the price?***Czy dodatki są wliczone w cenę?**chi do-dat-ki som vlee-cho-ne ftse-ne***Can I have the bill, please?***Proszę o rachunek?**pro-she o ra-hoo-nek***Food Glossary****barszcz** or **barszcz czerwony**

barshch cher-vo-ni

clear beetroot broth (borscht)

bażant

ba-zhant

pheasant

befszyk

bef-shtik

beef steak

befszyk tatarski

bef-shtik ta-tar-skee

raw minced beef accompanied by chopped onion, raw egg yolk and often chopped dill cucumber and anchovies

botwinka

bot-feen-ka

soup made from the stems and leaves of baby beetroots; often includes a hard-boiled egg
grilled beef (loin) steak
milk pudding
chilled beetroot soup with sour cream and fresh vegetables; served in summer only**bryzol**

bri-zol

budyń

boo-din'

chlodnik

khwod-neek

chilled beetroot soup with sour cream and fresh vegetables; served in summer only

ciastko

chyast-ko

pastry, cake

dorsz

dorsh

cod

dzik

jeek

wild boar

gęś

gensh

goose

gołąbki

go-womb-kee

cabbage leaves stuffed with minced beef and rice, sometimes also with mushrooms

grochówka

gro-khoof-ka

pea soup, sometimes served
z grzankami (with croutons)**indyk**

een-dik

turkey

kaczka

kach-ka

duck

kapuśniak

ka-poosh-nyak

sauerkraut and cabbage soup with potatoes

karp

karp

carp

kotlet schabowy

kot-let skha-bo-vi

a fried pork cutlet coated in breadcrumbs, flour and egg, found on nearly every Polish menu

krupnik

kroop-neek

thick barley soup containing a variety of vegetables and small chunks of meat

kurczak

koor-chak

chicken

lody

lo-di

ice cream

łosoś wędzony

wo-sosh ven-dzo-ni

smoked salmon

melba

mel-ba

ice cream with fruit and whipped cream

pieczeń cielęca

pye-chen' chye-len-tsa

roast veal

pieczeń

pye-chen' chye-len-tsa

roast pork

wieprzowa

vye-psho-va

pieczeń wołowa

pye-chen' vo-wo-va

roast beef

pieczeń z dzika

pye-chen' zjee-ka

roast wild boar

połędwica**po angielsku****pstrąg****rosół**

po-len-dvee-tsa

po ang-yel-skoo

pstrong

ro-soow

'English-style beef; roast fillet of beef

trout

beef or chicken (*z wołowiny/z kury*)
bouillon, usually served *z makaronem* (with noodles)

rump steak

roe deer, venison

roast loin of pork seasoned with prunes and herbs

herring in oil with chopped onion

herring in sour cream

steak

boiled beef with horseradish

hare

stewed beef rolls stuffed with mushrooms and/or bacon and served in a sour-cream sauce

mushroom soup

vegetable soup

cucumber soup, usually

with potatoes and other vegetables
tomato soup, usually servedeither *z makaronem* (with noodles) or *z ryżem* (with rice)

sorrel soup, usually served with

hard-boiled egg

rumsztyk**sarna****schab pieczony**

room-shtik

sar-na

skhab pye-cho-ni

śledź w oleju**śledź w śmietanie****stek****sztuka mięsa****zając****zrazy zawijane**

shlej v o-le-yoo

shlej v shmye-ta-nye

stek

shtoo-ka myen-sa

za-yonts

zra-zi za-vee-ya-ne

herring in oil with chopped onion

herring in sour cream

steak

boiled beef with horseradish

hare

stewed beef rolls stuffed with mushrooms and/or bacon and served in a sour-cream sauce

mushroom soup

vegetable soup

cucumber soup, usually

with potatoes and other vegetables
tomato soup, usually servedeither *z makaronem* (with noodles) or *z ryżem* (with rice)

sorrel soup, usually served with

hard-boiled egg

zupa pomidorowa

zoo-pa po-mee-do-ro-va

zupa szczawiowa

zoo-pa shcha-vyo-va

Among classic Polish cookbooks available in English is *Polish Cookery* by Marja Ochrowicz-Monatowa, the bible of Polish cookery and first published in 1911.

Environment

THE LAND

With primeval forest, sand dunes, coastal lakes, beaches, islands, caves, craters, a desert, and a peninsula called 'Hel', it's fair to say that the Polish landscape is varied.

Its neighbours are interesting too: Poland is bordered by seven countries and one sea. Its northwest border is the 524km Baltic coastline; in the west Poland shares 460km with Germany, to the south it borders the Czech Republic and Slovakia (1310km), and to the east it shares borders with northeast Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania and Russia (1244km).

The total area of Poland is 312,685 sq km – more than twice the size of Nepal and four times the size of the Czech Republic. Some 52% of the land is agricultural, and almost 30% is forested. Poland's landscape was largely forged during the last ice age, when the Scandinavian ice sheet advanced southward across the Polish plains and receded some 10,000 years later. Now there are five discernable landscape zones: the Sudetes and Carpathian Mountains in the south, the vast central lowlands, the lake belt, the Baltic Sea in the north, and the north-flowing rivers.

Southern Mountains

The southern mountains stretch from the Sudetes Mountains in the southwest, through the Tatra to the Beskids in the southeast. The Sudetes are geologically ancient hills, their rounded forms reaching their highest point at the summit of Śnieżka (1602m) in the Karkonosze range (p336). Poland's highest point is Mt Rysy (2499m) in the Tatras (p304), a jagged, alpine range on the border with Slovakia.

To the north of the Tatra lies the lower but much larger, densely forested range of the Beskids, with its highest peak being Babia Góra (1725m). The southeastern extremity of Poland is taken by the Bieszczady (p274), which is part of the Carpathians and arguably the most picturesque mountain range in the country.

Central Lowlands

The central lowlands stretch from the far northeast all the way south, 200km shy of the border. The undulating landscape of this, the largest of Poland's regions, comprises the historic areas of Lower Silesia, Wielkopolska, Mazovia and Podlasie. Once upon a time, streams flowing south from melting glaciers deposited layers of sand and mud that helped produce some of the country's most fertile soils. As a result, the central lowlands are largely farmland and Poland's main grain-producing region. In places, notably in Kampinos National Park (p119) to the west of Warsaw, fluvio-glacial sand deposits have been blown by wind into sand dunes up to 30m high – some of the largest inland dune complexes in Europe.

Fuel for the 19th century industrial revolution was extracted from the vast coal deposits of Upper Silesia in the western part of the lowlands.

THE WATER Lake Belt

The lake zone includes the regions of Pomerania, Warmia and Masuria. The latter contains most of Poland's 9300 lakes – more than any other European country except Finland. The gently undulating plains and strings of post-glacial lakes were formed by sticky clay deposited by the retreating ice sheet, leaving

THE ACCIDENTAL DESERT

Near Katowice in Upper Silesia lies Błędownska Desert (Pustynia Błędownska), the only desert in Poland.

Theories abound as to how this 32-sq-km patch of sand (with an average thickness of 40m) found its way to Poland. One theory attributes it to drifting sand and gravel in the ice age. Another is that Błędownska is the accidental child of urbanisation, perhaps born when its forests were stripped to provide wood to nearby Olkusz around the 13th century and developed further when the land was assaulted by mining. The more plausible explanation, offered by Polish folklore, is that a devil who was casually flying through the area with a bag of sand (and why not?), inadvertently tore it on a church spire and the sand that gushed from the bag formed Błędownska.

The size of Błędownska has decreased since successful revegetation efforts of the '50s and '60s. In the summer, the sand can reach temperatures of up to 70°C, but climatologists question whether Błędownska really qualifies as a desert. The German Afrika Korps reportedly trained in Błędownska under the notorious Nazi commander Erwin Rommel (the 'Desert Fox') before their deployment to Africa.

clay-rich soil that is now forested. The lake region boasts the only remaining *puszcza* (primeval forest) in Europe, making Białowieża National Park (p147) and the wildlife inhabiting it one of the highlights of the country.

Baltic Coast

The Baltic coast stretches across northern Poland from Germany to Russia (Kaliningrad region). The coastal plain that fringes the Baltic Sea was shaped by the rising water levels after the retreat of the Scandinavian ice sheet and is now characterised by swamps and sand dunes. These sand and gravel deposits form not only the beaches of Poland's seaside resorts but also the shifting dunes of Słowiński National Park (p457), the sand bars and gravel spits of Hel (p433) and the Vistula Lagoon.

Rivers

Poland's rivers drain northwards into the Baltic Sea. The biggest is the mighty 1090km-long Vistula (Wisła; p435), originating in the Tatra mountains. Along with its right-bank tributaries – the Bug and the Narew – the Vistula is responsible for draining almost half of the country and is known as the 'mother river' of Poland, given its passage through both Kraków and Warsaw. The second largest river, the Odra, and its major tributary, the Warta, drains the western third of Poland and forms part of the country's western border. Rivers are high when the snow and ice dams melt in spring and are prone to flooding during the heavy rains of July.

WILDLIFE Animals

There is a rich bounty of zoological and ornithological treasure in Poland. Its diverse topography supports a range of mammal species, including wild boar, red deer, elk and lynx in the far northeast, and brown bears and wildcats in the mountain forests. Rare bird species found in Poland include thrush nightingales, golden eagles, white-backed and three-toed woodpeckers, and hazel grouses, among 200 other species of nesting bird.

Of the 110 species of mammal and 424 species of bird known to inhabit Poland, 12 of each are considered threatened.

BISON

Białowieża National Park (p147) is home to hundreds of European bison, the largest mammal in Europe (bulls can reach almost 2m tall and 3m long)

Mt Rysy is reputed to have been climbed by Nobel prize winner Marie Curie and Russian revolutionary Lenin (on separate occasions). A red hammer and sickle symbol is painted on a rock where the latter is believed to have rested.

THE BISON – BACK FROM THE BRINK

The European bison (*Bison bonasus*) is called *żubr* in Polish and is the biggest European mammal, its weight occasionally exceeding 1000kg. These large cattle, which live for as long as 25 years, look pretty clumsy but can move at 50km/h when they need to.

Bison were once found all over the continent, but the increasing exploitation of forests in Western Europe began to push them eastwards. In the 19th century the last few hundred bison lived in freedom in the Białowieża Forest. In 1916 there were still 150 of them in the forest but three years later they were totally wiped out. By then, only about 50 bison survived in zoos throughout the world.

It was in Białowieża that an attempt to prevent the extinction of the bison began in 1929, by bringing several animals from zoos and breeding them in their natural habitat. The result is that today there are more than 300 bison living in freedom in the Białowieża Forest alone and about 350 more have been sent to a dozen other places in Poland. Many bison from Białowieża have been distributed among European zoos and forests, and their total current population is estimated at about 2500.

and a stoic survivor. In the 15th century, the bison teetered on the brink of extinction, despite King Sigismund's introduction of the death penalty for poachers. The last wild Polish bison was shot in 1919. A decade later, through breeding programmes in Białowieża National Park, the species was resurrected and – thanks to the Russian and German use of the death penalty to deter poachers – survived WWII. Breeding programmes have since been so successful that Białowieża National Park now contains the largest concentration of European bison in the world.

WOLVES

Grey wolves, the largest members of the canine family, are individually distinct animals who travel and hunt in hierarchical units. In the days of old, wolf hunting was a favourite pastime of Russian tsars. This, and diminishing habitats, drove their numbers into the red until wolves had all but disappeared in Poland a decade ago. After specialised legislation to protect them was passed in 1998, the wolf census conducted in 2001 revealed that the numbers are climbing. Though official numbers are higher, scientists estimate that there are around 650 wolves in Poland.

HORSES

Poles and horses go way back. Poland has a long tradition of breeding Arabian horses (see boxed text, opposite) and the Polish plains were once home to wild horses. Several species of wild horse have been preserved in zoos, including the tarpan, which is extinct in the wild. Luckily, Polish farmers used to crossbreed tarpans with their domestic horses. The small Polish konik horse is a result of this mix and has kept the tarpan genes alive. Konik horses are now being used to breed the tarpan back. The hucul pony is a direct descendant of the tarpan living in the Carpathians.

BIRDLIFE

The diverse topography of Poland is like flypaper for a range of bird species and ornithologists. The vast areas of lake, marsh and reed bed along the Baltic coast, and the swampy basins of the Narew and Biebrza Rivers, are home to many species of waterfowl, and are visited by huge flocks of migrating geese, ducks and waders in spring and autumn. A small community of cormorants lives in the Masurian lakes. Storks, which arrive from Africa in spring to build their nests on the roofs and chimneys of houses in the countryside,

are a much loved part of the rural scene. The expression 'every fourth stork is Polish' is based on the fact that Poland welcomes around one quarter of Europe's 325,000 white storks each year, most of which make their summer homes in Masuria and Podlasie in the northeast.

The *orzeł* (eagle) is the national symbol of Poland and was adopted as a royal emblem in the 12th century. Several species can be seen, mostly in the southern mountains, including the golden eagle and short-toed eagle, as well as the rare booted eagle, greater spotted eagle and lesser spotted eagle. The white-tailed eagle, supposedly the inspiration for the national emblem, lives in the Słowiński (p457) and Wolin (p467) National Parks.

Plants

Poland contains the only surviving fragment of the forest that covered much of Europe in prehistoric times. This primeval forest of Białowieża National Park (p147) is still home to majestic five-century-old oak trees and a range of flora that is, quite literally, ancient.

The most common plant species in Poland is the pine, which covers 70% of the total forested area, but the biological diversity and ecological resilience of forests are increasing because of the proliferation of deciduous species such as oak, beech, birch, rowan and linden. The forest undergrowth hosts more than 600 varieties of moss and 1500 varieties of fungi. There are also some 2250 species of seed plants in Poland.

In the highest mountain regions, coniferous forests of dwarf mountain pines are capable of resisting harsher climates, while the lowlands and highlands are hospitable for dry-ground forests and marsh forests. Distinctly Polish plants include the Polish larch (*Larix polonica*) and the birch (*Betula oycoviensis*) in the Ojców region. One third of all European plant species can be found in the Carpathians.

CONSERVATION AREAS

Currently 28% of Poland is forested and the majority of forests are administered by the state. Around 23% of the country is under some sort of protection as a national park, landscape park or other type of conservation area. The area of land that is forested is gradually growing and is anticipated to reach 30% by 2020 and 33% in 2050.

National Parks

There are 23 *parki narodowe* (national parks) in Poland, covering about 3200 sq km – around 1% of the country's surface area. Other than a concentration of six in the Carpathian Mountains, they are distributed fairly evenly and

POLISH ARABIANS

Many important international horseracing championships have been won by Polish-bred Arabians. Breeding Arabians commenced in the 16th century, when waves of external aggressors revealed the prowess of their steeds and captured horses were retained as prizes of war. Originally owned by ancient Slavic tribes, Arabian horses (known as 'oriental whites' in history and legend) were bred by the Polish aristocracy and became a coveted asset in European cavalry.

Poles have repeatedly shown their commitment to the breed by evacuating and hiding their Arabians during times of hostility. After WWII, only 25 mares and seven fillies remained in Poland, and many were lost or stolen during WWII. Today, beyond its success on the racetrack, the Polish-bred Arabian is loved for its courage and endurance, Polish qualities that have ensured the survival of the breed to the present day. Polish-bred Arabians are only sold for export during the annual auction following the Polish National Horse Show.

RSPB Birds of Britain and Europe is a chunky tome by Rob Hume, covering around 500 species with one bird per page. Bird-watching amateurs and aficionados will enjoy the revised 2006 edition.

Those interested in botany may want to peruse the 2007 hardcover *Atlas of Seeds and Fruits of Central and East-Europe Flora: The Carpathian Mountains Region* by Vít Bojnanský and Agáta Fargasová.

After the invasion of Poland, Nazis stole herds of tarpans and transported them into Germany with the intention of breeding the pure Aryan wild horse.

Keen ornithologists can get in touch with the Polish Society for the Protection of Birds via its website at www.otop.org.pl/.

A STORK OF GOOD LUCK!

In addition to their baby-delivery service, *bociany* (storks) are also known in Poland to bring good luck. For this reason, Poles will often place wagon wheels and other potential nesting foundations on their roofs to attract the white stork. Telecommunications companies even go to lengths to ensure that their structures are stork-friendly.

Storks are the heroes of many Polish legends and folktales. One story goes that when animals became too numerous in God's dominion, they were placed in a sack which God requested a man dispose of in the sea. As it always does, curiosity got the better of the humble human and after he took a peek in the sack, God zapped him into a stork so he could hunt for the animals that escaped in the commotion.

The black trimming at the end of the stork's wings (which can span 2m) are also the work of God. When the stork refused to graciously board Noah's ark like the other refugees of the animal kingdom, God tainted the tips of her wings as a melancholy mark of her arrogance. While the other animals were grateful to have been given a dry refuge from the floods, the stork longed for her former home in Africa and still wanders restlessly between Poland and Egypt, always longing for whichever one she's left.

therefore exhibit the range of landscapes, flora and fauna in the country. The parks have been administered by the Ministry of Environment since 2004.

No permit is necessary to visit the parks, but most have entry fees of between 4zł and 6zł, payable at the park office or entry points. Extra fees often apply for camping (only allowed in specific areas) and entry into various museums and exhibitions.

Białowieża (p147), the oldest national park in Poland, was established in 1932 and inscribed on the Unesco World Heritage List in 1979.

Landscape Parks

In addition to Poland's national parks, the *parki krajobrazowe* (landscape parks) also play a key role in conservation efforts. As well as their aesthetic contribution, landscape parks are often of key historic and cultural value.

The first landscape park was created in 1976; today there are more than 100. Suwałki Landscape Park (p160) spans 63 sq km of elegant land formations and truly charming lakes. The 7km walk around Lake Jaczno is definitely worth undertaking. This and other walks begin in the village of Smolniki, which along with other villages in the Suwałki region, offers a glimpse into traditional architecture.

Reserves

Finally, Poland has a number of *rezerwaty* (reserves) – usually small areas containing a particular natural feature such as a cluster of old trees, a lake with valuable flora or an interesting rock formation. Nine biosphere reserves have been recognised by Unesco for their innovative approach to sustaining various ecological elements. Zwierzyniec, in Roztocze National Park (p257), protects a range of animals including the bison and tarpan, and fauna such as fir and beech.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

The communist regime in Poland wasn't too concerned with protecting the country's environment; decades of intensive industrialisation turned rivers into sewers and air into smog. It wasn't until 1990, after the regime crumbled, that the Ministry of Environmental Protection was established to develop an environmental policy to clean up the mess. Today, Poland's environment is improving, but in some areas it still looks more grey than green.

Prize-winning children's book *Bocheck in Poland* by Josepha Contoski is a beautifully rendered story of the relationship between white storks and Polish people.

Łuknajno Reserve (p499) is home to Europe's largest community of swans.

National park	Features	Activities	Best time to visit	Website	Page
Białowieża	primeval forest; bison, elk, lynx, wolf	wildlife-watching, hiking	spring, summer	www.bpn.com.pl	p147
Biebrza	river, wetland, forest; elk, great snipe, aquatic warbler	bird-watching, canoeing	spring, autumn	www.biebrza.org.pl	p143
Kampinos	forest, sand dunes	hiking, mountain-biking	summer	www.kampinoski-pn.gov.pl	p119
Karkonosze	mountains; dwarf pine, alpine flora	hiking, mountain-biking	summer, winter	http://kpnmb.pl/	p336
Narew	river, reed beds; beaver, waterfowl	bird-watching, canoeing	spring, autumn	www.npn.pl	p144
Ojców	forest, rock formations, caves; eagles, bats	hiking	autumn	www.opn.pan.krakow.pl	p210
Roztocze	forest; elk, wolf, beaver, tarpan	hiking	spring, autumn	www.roztoczan.ski.pl	p257
Słowiński	forest, bog, sand dunes; white-tailed eagle, waterfowl	hiking, bird-watching	all year	www.slowinski.pl	p457
Tatra	alpine mountains; chamois, eagle	hiking, climbing, skiing	all year	www.tpn.pl	p304
Wolin	forest, lake, coast; white-tailed eagle, bison	hiking, bird-watching	spring, autumn	www.wolin.pl	p467

Environmental issues that have been hitting the headlines in recent years include the development of the Via Baltica Expressway and logging threats to the Białowieża Forest. Poland is also coping with global environmental concerns such as global warming, water shortage and pollution, and waste management.

Białowieża Forest

Currently only 17% of the immense Białowieża Forest is protected as a national park. The remaining 83% is administered at the state level and threatened by logging. Various organisations, with the Polish WWF at the helm, are working to extend the blanket of protection to the entire forest. They are campaigning for a 50% reduction in the amount of wood obtained from the forest, the reinforcement of the ban on felling trees more than 100 years old, and a dedicated approach to managing tourism in the forest.

Via Baltica Expressway

The Via Baltica is a road-transport project aiming to link Warsaw to Helsinki through the Baltic states. Proposed bypasses of this multilane freeway are fraught with controversy. While Polish authorities stress that congestion would be drastically relieved in the area and that bypasses would cause minimal damage (being a bridge over the valley rather than a ground-level highway), conservation groups are concerned about the irreparable damage the development would cause to protected lands and animal species.

Polish authorities gave the official go-ahead to the Augustów bypass in February 2007 – a move that will violate the Rospuda valley in northeast Poland. Relentless pressure from a network of Polish nongovernmental

Keep your eye on the Via Baltica issue via the Via Baltica website at www.viabalticainfo.org.

The website of the Ministry of the Environment (www.mos.gov.pl/kzpn) provides details on environmental protection, water management and national parks.

and international organisations (including Birdlife International, WWF and the Polish Society for the Protection of Birds), prompted the European Commission to request that the European Court of Justice issue an urgent order suspending the work. On 18 April 2007, the European Court ordered that Poland turn off its power saws. Authorities sought to recommence work in August of the same year, but their actions were again blocked by the European Commission requesting the European Court issue an interim measure to prevent it until it gives a final ruling on the issue.

Global Warming

Poland is ranked the 21st most polluting country in the world and the sixth highest in Europe, accounting for 1.2% of the world's carbon dioxide emissions. Though its per-capita emissions are not substantially higher than the European average, emissions per unit of GDP highlight the extreme inefficiency of the energy sector, with pollution concentrated around industrial sources. The area of Upper Silesia, for example, produces more pollutants than Warsaw. Polluted areas, referred to as 'ecological hazard zones', cover some 10% of the country.

Poland reduced its emissions by 30% in the decade leading up to the millennium. Its ambitious goal is to continue this trend with a further 30% to 40% reduction by the year 2020. The World Bank is assisting the country to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, though, ironically, the main benefactors are the major polluters themselves: big, fat, flatulent power plants. In its 2007 'Dirty Thirty' report, the WWF listed the 30 most polluting power plants in Europe – four of them were Polish.

Poland is a signatory to key environmental conventions including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol. Recent years have seen an escalation in pressure from the European community for Poland to honour its commitments.

Water Shortage & Pollution

Poland's natural water supplies are limited, with the figures for available water per capita among the lowest in Europe. At the same time, the utilisation of the country's water resources is inefficient, with high per-capita consumption.

The water supply of half the population is polluted, largely due to poor waste-water treatment. There are still some water-treatment practices remaining in Poland from the communist era. Only half of Polish households are connected to municipal sewerage systems, compared to over 90% in some European countries. Many industrial plants are known to discharge water directly into rivers without running waste-water treatment plants.

Added to this is the additional problem that the vast majority of Polish rivers flow into the Baltic Sea, a relatively stagnant body of water that is highly sensitive to pollution.

Waste Management

Poland is one of Europe's largest sources of industrial waste (mainly from coal mining and heavy industry), and less than 1% of it is treated. Only 23% of Poland's hazardous waste is treated, and treatment of municipal waste is also minimal; virtually all of it ends up in landfills. However, the environmental situation in Poland is improving. Issues like waste management are slowly, but surely, being addressed.

Activities

Poland is not widely known as a haven for adrenalin junkies, but perhaps it should be. Poles have been partaking in adventure sports and outdoor activities for decades and foreign travellers are starting to get in on the action. Tour operators are increasingly catering for the demands of adventurers from all over the world, offering steadily improving tourist infrastructure and serving up a wider range of adrenalin hits.

Increasing sports-extremism in Poland means that the country is up for almost anything these days. Keep your eye out for new adventure sports and activities in your travels. And if you prefer a more traditional approach, there are plenty of trekking and cycling options too.

Happily, despite an increased number of adventurers in Poland since its admission to the EU, it is still possible to trek, cycle, kayak or ski without coming across crowds of other people doing the same – for the moment.

TREKKING

Poland's mountainous areas can all be explored on foot. There are around 2000km of walking trails sliced through the country's national parks and many are well-signed and well-equipped with shelters. Nature's repertoire of heights, gradients, climates and terrains is showcased in Poland: trekking options range from week-long treks for the hardcore hiker to hour-long rambles for the ascent-adverse.

Carpathian Mountains

The Tatra Mountains in the south is the most notable region for trekking in Poland. The West and the High Tatras offer different scenery; the latter more challenging and as a result more spectacular. One of the most popular climbs in the Tatras is Mt Giewont (1894m). The cross at the peak attracts many visitors, though the steep slopes deter some. For information on Mt Giewont and various other hikes in the Tatras, see boxed text, p306.

The valleys around Zakopane (p306) offer walks of varying lengths for walkers of varying fitness (some take less than an hour). Similarly, trails around nearby Pieniny (see boxed text, p302) and the Bieszczady (see boxed text, p282) in the east offer terrific trekking experiences – even for those who prefer to stroll. Another great option is Beskid Sądecki (p291), which has convenient paths dotted with mountain hostels. Muszyna (p298) or Krynica (p296) are popular bases to access this region.

The lower Beskid Niski mountain range offers less arduous walks and less spectacular views; see boxed text, p290, for more information.

Sudetes Mountains

The Karkonosze National Park (p336) offers a sterling sample of the Sudetes. The ancient and peculiar 'table top' rock formations of the Góry Stołowe (p344) mountains are among the highlights of the Sudetes. The area is easily accessed from the town of Szklarska Poręba (p337) at the base of Mt Szrenica (1362m) and there is a choice of walking trails from Karpacz (p338) to Mt Śnieżka (1602m). Further south, the village of Międzygórze (p348) is another well-kitted base for Sudetes sojourns. Tourist offices in the region stand ready to point you to suitable trails and mountain hostels.

Two commendable, practical walking guides for the Tatras are *High Tatras: Slovakia and Poland* by Colin Saunders and Renáta Nározná, and Sandra Bardwell's *Tatra Mountains of Poland and Slovakia*.

SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR WALKING

To ensure that you enjoy your walk, put some thought into your safety before embarking on your adventure:

- Obtain reliable information about the conditions and characteristics of your intended route from local national park authorities
- Weather conditions can be unpredictable in Poland, so be prepared with appropriate clothing and equipment
- Pay any fees and get hold of any permits required from local authorities
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable walking for a sustained period
- Choose routes within your capabilities or not far beyond them
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about flora and fauna
- Be aware that terrain can vary significantly from one region, or even from one trail, to another

Other Regions

There are other tracks in the country that deserve a day or two if you are in the vicinity.

The Augustów Forest in the Augustów-Suwałki Region has 55 lakes and many well-paved roads and dirt tracks. Diverse wildlife can be found in various stretches of the forest. There are numerous bays and peninsulas to explore around nearby Lake Wigry in the Wigry National Park (p159) and the 63-sq-km Suwałki Landscape Park (p160) offers pretty views from its picturesque terrain.

There is also Kampinos National Park (p119) just outside of Warsaw with its famed sand dunes, Wielkopolska National Park (p388) in Wielkopolska, and the compact Wolin National Park (p467) in northwest Poland. The lowest (read: most foot-friendly) mountain range in the country is in Świętokrzyski National Park (p223) in Małopolska. In addition to these, Roztocze National Park (p257) offers a range of light walks through gentle terrain, and the landscape park surrounding Kazimierz Dolny (p244) offers some easy ambles.

Further Information

Your operators offering guided treks through areas like the Tatras and Sudetes are becoming too numerous to mention. When deciding which company to trust with your zloty and your spirit of adventure, perhaps let their level of environmental responsibility be a deciding factor.

Check national park websites (see p71) for more information on trekking and cycling routes, but things change, so ask in person before you assume a particular route is open.

CYCLING

Almost every region of Poland has bicycle routes, from small and comfortable circuits to epic international routes. It's possible to restrict yourself to the flat regions of the country and travel the rest by train, but if you're not deterred by gradients you can cycle some of the most riveting (and relatively unexplored) regions of the country.

Some epic bicycle adventures are waiting in the Bieszczady ranges (p274); these tracks will roll you through a montage of primeval forest and rippling meadows, opening up intermittently to postcard-perfect natural and architectural panoramas. The 70km Icon Trail near the village of Sanok rewards cyclists with old timber churches and castles. The Cross Border Cycle Route (p285) is a signposted route leading into Slovakia.

Information about environmentally friendly walking, cycling and horse-riding trails is available at www.greenways.pl and through the Polish Environmental Partnership Foundation (www.epce.org.pl), which promotes them.

There are some enchanting routes (starting in Narewka) through the northern part of the Białowieża Forest, including detours into parts of Białowieża National Park. Bicycles are strictly forbidden in the protected areas beyond the western and northern areas of the forest.

Cycling in the Masuria region is also rewarding; the town of Węgorzewo (p494) on Lake Mamry is a convenient base to access 18 marked routes ranging from 25km to 109km circuits. The Augustów Forest and the areas around Suwałki are also satisfying, though bike hire is difficult in the latter region so it may be better to arrive equipped.

The Sudetes are a jackpot for mountain-bikers. Stretching to the Czech border, Karkonosze National Park (p336) offers varied bike paths and is popular with Polish extreme-sports enthusiasts.

The region around Zakopane is fun to explore on wheels. Certain parts of the Tatra National Park are accessible by bicycle (p309). Designated cycling areas can change, so always check which routes are open before you set off.

Safety

Where possible, stay on marked cycling trails; travelling on national roads can be hair-raising and occasionally life-threatening. Motorists in Polish cities (with the exceptions of Kraków and Gdańsk) are rarely cycle-conscious, so don't expect too much consideration for your space and safety. When leaving busy cities, it is often wise to travel along rivers rather than roads, even if you have to traverse unpaved areas. Be extra cautious in winter – ice can disguise hazardous and uneven paths and potholes.

Bikes are sometimes stolen and vandalised in Poland. Use a reliable lock, even when storing your bike in buildings and travelling on trains. The countryside poses less threat than built-up areas, but better to be safe than cycle-less. Check that your accommodation is accessible by bicycle; some places may not be because of street layout, traffic density and road conditions. If you're storing your bicycle in your room, check that elevators can accommodate your bike, or be prepared for an upper-body workout.

Further Information

There are various laws concerning cycling in Poland that you should be familiar with before you pedal off. There are rules governing lights and reflectors, cyclists under 18, and drinking and cycling (don't mix them: a jail sentence can apply!). To familiarise yourself with road rules and regulations in Poland, check out **Rowery** (www.rowery.org.pl/bicycles.htm), an advocacy group trying to promote cycling in Poland and bring safety standards up to scratch. For more information on road rules see p524, and for general cycling information see p520.

Bring wet-weather gear – Poland can surprise you with long and heavy rains even in summer. Don't expect every bicycle shop to stock parts you need; basic parts for basic bikes are readily available, but if your bike is anything special expect that replacement parts will need to be ordered from afar.

The following websites may be useful for cyclists:

Cycling Poland (☎ +44 01536 738 038; www.cyclingpoland.com) A well-run cycling tour operator that caters for international tourists.

Cyklotur (www.cyklotur.com in Polish) Can help with parts and information.

EuroVelo (www.ecf.com) European Cyclists' Federation project to establish a 65,000km European Cycle Network throughout the continent. Five of the 12 proposed routes run through Poland.

Zielony Rower (www.zielonyrower.pl) Information about eco-friendly bike tours and tracks.

To find out more about Critical Mass gatherings (where groups of cyclists meet and ride together) in Poland go to www.rowery.org.pl/bicycles.htm.

SKIING & SNOWBOARDING

If you haven't skied before, perhaps Poland is the place to start, if only because you'll pay less here for the privilege than elsewhere in Europe. Accommodation in ski-resort areas can range from 30zł for rooms in private homes, up to the more luxurious 300zł hotel options. Ski-lift passes cost around 70zł per day.

Southern Poland is well-equipped for cross-country and downhill skiers of all abilities and incomes, though there's nothing budget about the scenery. Snowboarding's popularity is also increasing on the slopes.

The Tatras is the most well-equipped skiing area and the country's winter-sports capital of Zakopane is the most popular place to ski (p309). The slopes of this region, which peak at Mt Kasprowy Wierch (1987m), are suitable for all skill levels, and Zakopane has good equipment and facilities. As well as challenging mountains (like Mt Kasprowy Wierch and Mt Gubałówka, with runs of 4300m and 1500m respectively) the varied terrain around Zakopane offers flat land for beginners and plenty of time to learn, with a generous ski season extending to May.

Another centre of outdoor action is Szklarska Poręba (p337) in Silesia, at the foot of Mt Szczyrna (1362m). The city offers almost 15km of skiing and walking routes, and great cross-country skiing. The nearby town of Karpacz (p338) on the slopes of Mt Śnieżka (1602km) enjoys around 100 days of snow per year, and the town of Międzygórze (p348) also hosts ski-enthusiasts who are venturing out to the **ski centre** (☎ 074 814 1245; www.czarnagora.pl; 57-550 Stronie Śląskie) at the 'black mountain' of Czarna Góra.

The village of Szczyrk, at the base of the Silesian Beskids, has less severe slopes and far shorter queues than elsewhere in the country. Szczyrk is home to the Polish Winter Olympics training centre and has mild enough mountains for novice skiers and snowboarders. See Szczyrk's official website (www.szczyrk.pl) for information on ski routes, ski schools, equipment hire and tourist services.

CANOING, KAYAKING & RAFTING

Choices of where to kayak in Poland flow freely: the lowlands of Masuria, Warmia and Kashubia in Poland's north offer literally thousands of lakes and rivers to choose from.

Great Masurian Lakes

The town of Olsztyn is a handy base for organising adventures on water, particularly kayaking (p481). **PTTK Mazury** (☎ 089 527 4059; www.mazurypttk.pl in Polish; ul Staromiejska 1; 🕒 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) organises trips, equipment and guides; seek advice at the regional tourist office (p479). From Olsztyn it's possible to canoe the Lyna River to the border of Kaliningrad, or spend a couple of laid-back hours floating closer to the city.

The town of Olsztyniek (p484) is an under-utilised treasure offering access to some very attractive lakes and is home to a helpful tourist office that can help you explore them.

The most popular kayaking route in the Great Masurian Lakes area runs along the Krutynia River (p481), originating at Sorkwity and following the Krutynia River and Lake Beldany to Ruciane-Nida (p500). Some consider Krutynia the most scenic river in the north and the clearest river in Poland. It winds through 100km of forests, bird reserves, meadows and marshes. This is the queen of the Masuria rivers and arguably the king of kayaking spots.

A commendable tour operator is **Masuren Koch** (☎ 089 752 2058; www.masuren2.de), operating from Hotel Koch in Kętrzyn, which can arrange all manner of adventures in the region.

The Drawa Route is believed to have been a favourite kayaking journey of Pope John Paul II when he was a young man.

Augustów-Suwałki Region

In the less-visited and far cooler Augustów-Suwałki Region (p152), the lakes are not connected as they are in the Great Masurian Lakes, but the waters are crystal clear. The river to paddle in these parts is the Czarna Hańcza (p154), generally from Augustów along the Augustów Canal, all the way to the northern end of Lake Serwy. This route takes in the 150-year-old Augustów Canal, the Suwałki Lake District and the Augustów Forest. Numerous tour operators cover this loop, but it is also possible to do this and other routes independently.

South of the Masurian Lakes, the Biebrza River runs through the scenic splendour of the Podlasie region and through Biebrza National Park (p143). Lake Wigry in Wigry National Park (p159) offers surprisingly pristine paddling. The knowledgeable **Mr Bogdan Łukowski** (www.wigry.info/kontakt.html) can help organise kayaking excursions in this area. Also in Podlasie, **Kaylon** (☎ 085 715 5308, www.kaylon.pl) organises canoeing and kayaking adventures through Narew National Park.

Pomerania

The most renowned kayaking river in Pomerania is the Brda, which leads through forested areas of Bory Tucholskie National Park and past some 19 lakes. For more information go to <http://park.borytucholskie.info> (website in Polish).

The Drawa Route, which runs through Drawa National Park, is an interesting journey for experienced kayakers. Information on accommodation, kayak hire and routes through Drawa National Park can be found at www.dpn.pl.

Carpathian Mountains

The organised rafting trip to do in Poland is the placid glide through Dunajec Gorge (p301) in the Pieniny. There's nothing wet and wild about it, but it's a tradition that started in the 1830s, and the scenery hasn't lost a fraction of its splendour since.

HORSE RIDING

It's worth spending some time in the saddle in Poland – a country that has enjoyed a long and loyal relationship with horses (see p71). National parks, tourist offices and private equestrian centres are becoming more proficient in marking routes and organising horseback holidays along them.

The **PTTK** (Polish Tourist Countryside Association; www.pttk.pl) can assist with organising independent horse riding through its Mountaineering and Horse Riding subcommittee. There are many state-owned and private stables and riding centres throughout the country, from rustic agrotourism establishments to luxurious stables fit for a Bond film. It is also possible to organise riding tours of a few hours, or a few days, with the many private operators. The cost of undertaking these experiences varies enormously depending on duration and level of luxury. A down-to-earth horseback ride on a hucul pony for a week can cost around €700, while a weekend at a fine estate with access to steed-studded stables can cost upwards of €400. Shop around until you find something that suits your taste, ability and budget.

The following are notable places to ride horses in Poland:

Białowieża National Park (p147) Offers the chance to ride (or use horse-drawn carriages and sleighs in winter) on non-designated routes through forests.

Bieszczady National Park (p274) Has the 600km Transbeskidy Route, where you can ride a hucul pony; it is the longest horse-riding route in the country.

Kraków-Częstochowa Upland (p210) Has a 250km Transjurajski Horse-Riding Route that takes in castle ruins and the Błędowska Desert (see boxed text, p69).

For more horse-holiday information go to www.equineturism.co.uk/worldwidehorseholidays/poland.htm.

Lower Silesia (p361) Offers the 360km Sudety Horse-Riding Route.
Masurian Lake District (p490) Provides the opportunity to ride horses around the lakes.

SAILING, WINDSURFING & KITESURFING

There's an under-explored seafaring culture in Poland. It's possible to hire yachts or sailing ships complete with their own shanty-singing skipper. The Baltic coast attracts some sails, but the summer crowds testify to the sailing-suitability of the Great Masurian Lakes, which truly live up to their name. This sprawling network of lakes allows sailors to enjoy a couple of weeks on water without visiting the same lake twice.

You can hire sail boats and wind/kitesurfing gear in Giżycko (p495), Mikołajki (p498), Ruciane-Nida (p500) and several smaller villages.

Boat enthusiasts will get a particular thrill from boat excursions on the Elbląg-Ostróda Canal (p486) in the Olsztyn region. The 159km-long canal built between 1848 and 1876, has varied water levels (differing by almost 100m). An impressive system of slipways 'carries' boats across the dry land and drops them back into the water on the other side. There are few places in the world where one can travel by boat across 550m of land.

Baltic Sea sailing takes place on the bay at Szczecin (p471), shared by Germany and Poland. Sailors can visit Wolin Island and National Park (p467) when sailing this 870-sq-km bay. The bay in Gdańsk (p403) also offers access to sea harbours and quaint fishing towns.

The artificial Soliński Lake in the Bieszczady Mountains (p274) and Czorsztynskie Lake in the Pieniny Mountains (p299) are both sailable.

Windsurfing and kitesurfing are mostly done in the same areas that attract sailors, but the true heartland is Hel (p433) – the Gulf of Gdańsk between Władysławowo and Chałupy along the Baltic coast. The arbitrary dance of wind and currents constantly changes the shape of the enticingly named Hel Peninsula. The Great Masurian Lakes may be popular, but there's no place like Hel.

BIRD-WATCHING

Poland has an incredible range and number of birds to see. The winged residents of Polish nature reserves are a diverse bunch, particularly around the lakes and wetlands in the northeastern part of the country. See p70 for more information about the country's birdlife.

The bird-watching movement in Poland is not yet commensurate with the quality of bird-watching on offer; there are only around 3000 bird-watchers and ornithologists, mainly organised in university departments that study bird movements and trends. National park visitor centres, like that at Biebrza National Park (p143), can assist bird-watchers.

Specialised and foreigner-friendly bird-tour companies in Poland include the following:

Bird Guide (www.birdguide.pl) Specialising in tours through the Białowieża and Biebrza Forests.

Birds Poland (www.birdspoland.com.pl) Well-informed birding tours in the Białowieża and Biebrza Forests, the Baltic coast, the Masurian lake district and the Odra River valley.

HANG-GLIDING & PARAGLIDING

Hang-gliding and paragliding are taking off in Poland, particularly in the southern mountains. A popular place from which to glide is the Nosal in Zakopane. Enquire at tourist offices and tour operators in Zakopane (p307).

Parachute jumping over the Tatras is also possible. The **Bieszczady Extreme Sports Group** ([☎](tel:060710106) 060 071 0106; www.extremalne.bieszczady.pl in Polish) organises paragliding over the Bieszczady mountains.

For useful information on birding in Poland, including links to societies and clubs, go to www.fatbird.com/links_geo/europe/poland.html.

Where to Watch Birds in Eastern Europe by Gerard Gorman is an authoritative work with some information dedicated to bird-watching in Poland.

CLIMBING & CAVING

The Tatras offer climbing opportunities for beginner and advanced climbers. Contact the **Polish Mountain Guides Society** (www.pspw.pl in Polish) for further information and a list of qualified guides. There are more than 1000 caves in the country, but few are ready for serious spelunking. Bear's Cave (p349) in Kletno and Paradise Cave (p221) near Kielce are open to the public.

DIVING

Yes, diving. The fact that diving is possible in Poland is a little-known fact, but true all the same. The most popular place for scuba diving is the Great Masurian Lakes. Lake Hańcza in Suwałki Landscape Park (p161) in the country's northeast offers the deepest inland diving (108m) and some impressive vertical rock walls. **CK Diver** ([☎](tel:0874284362) 087 428 4362; www.ckdiver.suw.pl; ul Mickiewicz 9) in Giżycko can assist.

There is some impressive shipwreck diving off the Baltic coast (see www.balticwrecks.com for details about the wrecks) and winter can create a fine coat of ice for ice diving.

Water in Poland can be cold; if you go below 6m to 7m temperatures can drop to 3°C or 4°C. Visibility depends on the usual variables, but where pollution is particularly bad, visibility can be down 1m or so.

By international standards, the cost of diving courses in Poland is reasonable. Basic courses are around 1000zł (often plus equipment hire), with exams for the Open Water Diving Certificate incurring additional fees. Specialist courses are offered by some operators in fields such as shipwreck diving and underwater photography; these courses range from 400zł to 600zł. If you want to do a course, **Scuba Schools International** (SSI Polska; www.ssi-polska.com) has a strong presence in Poland. Alternatively, **PADI** (Professional Association of Diving Instructors; www.padi.com) has a list of certified operators through which you can do courses.

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