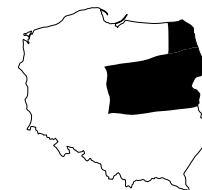


Mazovia & Podlasie



Travel only 30km from Warsaw's Old Town and you enter another Poland. Women bend double in fields, horse-drawn carts and tractors transport produce to market, wooden bridges and dirt roads await EU intervention, and castles and cathedrals dominate towns. Of course it's not all R&R (rural and rustic) in Podlasie and Mazovia (Mazowsze in Polish), but the locals do a good job of convincing you otherwise.

Mazovia's rolling landscape and rural bliss have a deceptively long history, but the telltale signs are easy to spot if you know where to look. Once a duchy, this province is dotted with castles, cathedrals and palaces, the biggest of which reside in the riverside towns of Plock and Pułtusk and the quiet village of Nieborów. Łódź is Mazovia's reigning capital, with more going for it than meets the eye. It's the country's second-largest metropolis and would easily win 'Poland's Ugliest City' if such a competition was held, but if you take the time to discover its palaces, art galleries and 19th-century redbrick textile factories, you'll be happy you made the effort.

Podlasie is the verdant green lungs of Poland. Aside from a few patches of urbanisation, this large province is a bucolic paradise of farmland, forest and lakes. Its four national parks are splendid – Narew and Biebrza for their marshlands and birdlife; Wigry for its peaceful lake, pockets of forest and Augustów Canal; and Białowieża for its primeval forest and king of Polish fauna, the bison. Humans also play their part, supplying a couple of splendid skansens (open-air museums of traditional architecture) at Nowogród and Ciechanowiec, a touch of Muslim culture in Kruszyniany and Bohoniki, and Jewish heritage at Tykocin.

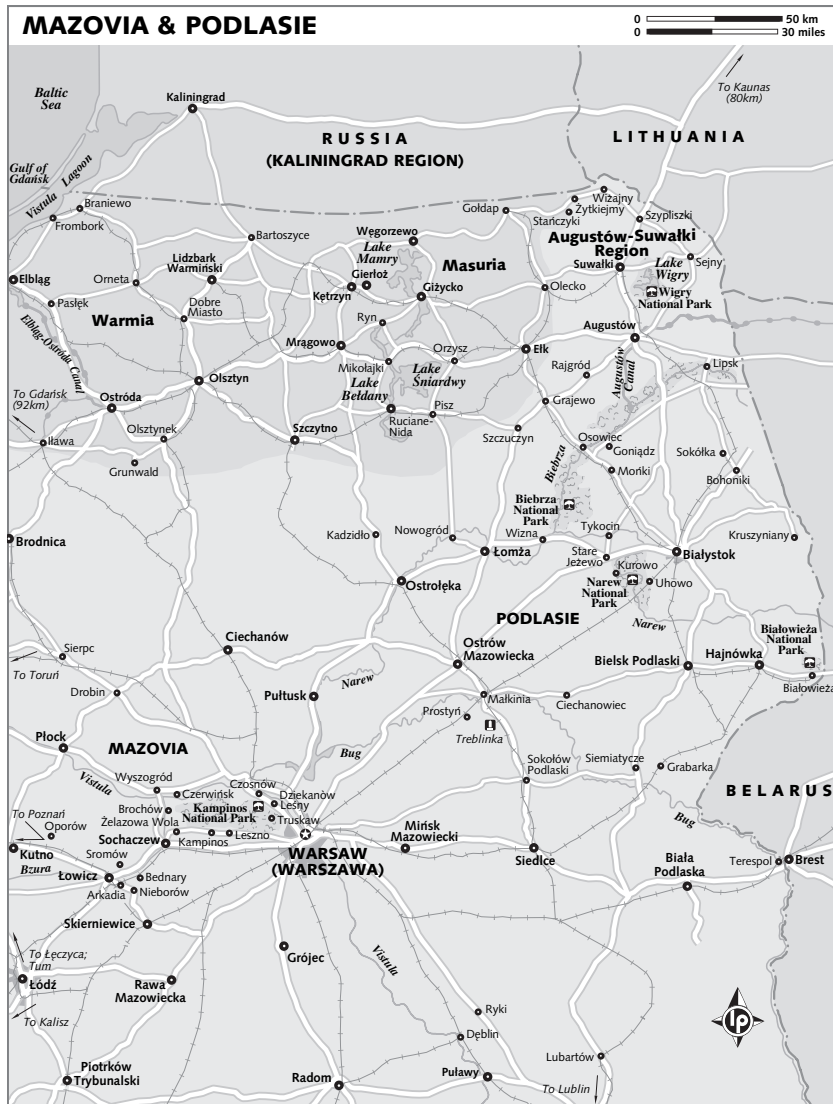
HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvelling at the ugly streets and hidden gems of **Łódź** (p122)
- Harking back to a time when romance was all the rage at **Nieborów & Arkadia** (p131)
- Wondering how **Plock** (p134) got hold of so many Art Nouveau treasures
- Exploring the last remnants of Poland's Tatar culture at **Kruszyniany & Bohoniki** (p145)
- Searching primeval forest for a glimpse of the rare European bison at **Białowieża National Park** (p147)
- Relaxing the mind and exercising the body kayaking the **Rospuda** (p158) and **Czarna Hańcza** (p154) rivers



■ POPULATION: NINE MILLION

■ AREA: 76,118 SQ KM



WESTERN MAZOVIA

ŁÓDŹ

pop 768,000

As Polish cities go, Łódź is about as strange as it gets. For starters, its name is pronounced 'Woodge'. Secondly, Łódź looks as though

it's been dropped from a great height and left to lie where it fell – visually it could politely be called gritty. Thirdly, behind the obvious grime is a treasure-trove of delights: palatial mansions, Art Nouveau buildings, progressive galleries, gigantic 19th-century redbrick factories, and a creative energy that has not only reached Poland's stage, but the world's.

History

Although the first account of its existence dates from 1332, Łódź remained an obscure settlement until the beginning of the 19th century. In the 1820s the government of the Congress Kingdom of Poland – eyeing up the town's advantageous position at what was then the border of Russia and Prussia – embarked on a programme to industrialise the country, and Łódź was selected as a new textile centre.

Enterprising industrialists – Poles, Jews and Germans alike – rushed in to build textile mills, closely followed by thousands of workers. The wealthy mill owners built opulent palaces (the Historical Museum of Łódź, right, and the Cinematography Museum, p126, currently fill two), while workers occupied drab suburbs around the centre. By the outbreak of WWI, Łódź had grown a thousandfold, reaching a population of half a million. It had become Poland's second-largest city, a title it still holds today.

Following WWI the city's growth slowed, mainly because of the loss of the huge Russian market, but industrial sectors such as machinery and chemistry continued to expand. WWII was both cruel and kind to the city – the Nazis created Poland's first Jewish ghetto here but Łódź escaped major destruction. Today it continues to be Poland's textile capital, although production is dropping.

Orientation

Ul Piotrkowska is Łódź's 3.6km-long north-south backbone. Most of the city's tourist sights, hotels and restaurants are on or near it. The heart of Jewish Łódź lies to the north-east of ul Piotrkowska, and Manufaktura to the northwest. The main train station, Łódź Fabryczna, and the central bus station are next to each other, a few blocks east of the northern end of ul Piotrkowska. A second train station, Łódź Kaliska, lies 1.5km west of Piotrkowska, while a third, Łódź Widzew, is 5km east of Fabryczna.

Information BOOKSHOPS

EMPIK ul Piotrkowska (☎ 042 631 1998; ul Piotrkowska 81; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-7pm Sun); **Manufaktura** (☎ 042 664 8548; ul Jana Karskiego 5; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-7pm Sun) Good range of foreign newspapers and magazines.

Księgarnia Oxpól (☎ 042 630 2013; ul Piotrkowska 63; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat) Books in English.

INTERNET ACCESS

Mega Net Café (☎ 042 636 3376; Al Piłsudskiego 5; per hr 2zł; ☎ 11am-11pm) On the 3rd floor of Silver Screen.
Silver Zone (☎ 042 639 5800; Al Piłsudskiego 5; per hr 2zł; ☎ 11am-11pm) Comfy seats and fast connections.

MONEY

Bank Pekao (Al Kościuszki 47)

POST

Main post office (ul Tuwima 38; ☎ 24hr)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Cultural Information Centre (Centrum Informacji Kulturalnej; ☎ 042 633 9221; www.cik.lodz.pl in Polish; ul Piotrkowska 102a; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) The place for cultural events info.

Tourist Information Centre (Centrum Informacji Turystycznej; ☎ 042 638 5956; www.uml.lodz.pl; Al Piotrkowska 87; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat May-Oct, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat Nov-Apr) General tourist information; has a number of free booklets in English, including *Jewish Landmarks in Łódź*.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Eurotravel (☎ 042 630 4488; Al Kościuszki 22; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Youth travel, domestic and international bus tickets, Eurolines.

Fabricum (☎ 042 636 2825; www.fabricum.pl; ul Wigury 7; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Offers guided tours of Łódź, its surrounding region and Poland. Specialises in tours of Poland's Unesco sites.

Orbis Travel (☎ 042 636 6126; ul Piotrkowska 68; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) General travel.

Sights

UL PIOTRKOWSKA

The ramrod-straight ul Piotrkowska is the very heart of Łódź and, aside from Manufaktura, the only section of the city to have enjoyed the well-needed rejuvenation in recent years. Mostly pedestrianised and lined with some of Poland's finest Art Nouveau façades, it's a pleasant street to wander. It also contains the lion's share of the city's shops, restaurants, pubs, open-air cafés and galleries, and is bedecked with bronze stars in honour of Poland's cinematic elite (see boxed text, p124).

HISTORICAL MUSEUM OF ŁÓDŹ

Housed in the magnificent palace of the Poznański family is the **Historical Museum of Łódź**

HOLLY-ŁÓDŹ BOULEVARD

Ul Piotrkowska began life in the 19th century as the road to Piotrków Trybunalski (hence its name), then the major town of the region. By the beginning of the 20th century Piotrkowska was an elegant boulevard, lined with Art Nouveau buildings and expensive restaurants, but in the wake of WWII it became a gloomy, grey street of soot-blackened façades and a handful of half-empty shops, much the same as city streets all over communist Poland. Its revival began in the 1990s, when the Piotrkowska Street Foundation was created by a group of local artists and architects with the aim of turning the derelict street into a lively European city mall. It has also become a sort of homage to locals done good, with statues and stars dedicated to the city's famous sons and daughters.

In front of the famous Hotel Grand is the **Aleja Gwiazd** (Avenue of the Stars), a series of bronze stars set in the pavement in imitation of Los Angeles' Hollywood Blvd, each dedicated to a well-known name in Polish film. Nearby, in front of the house (No 78) where the eminent Polish pianist Artur Rubinstein once lived, is **Rubinstein's Piano**, a bronze monument much loved by snap-happy tourists. A few paces down the street is **Tuwim's Bench** (at No 104), another unusual monument, this one created in memory of local poet Julian Tuwim. Touch his nose – it's supposed to bring good luck. The last of the series is **Reymont's Chest** (at No 135), showing the Nobel prize winner in literature, Władysław Reymont, sitting on a large travel trunk.

Although the northern half of ul Piotrkowska is pedestrianised, public transport is provided by a fleet of **bicycle rickshaws** (*riksza*); for around 4zł they will whisk you from one end to the other.

(Muzeum Historii Miasta Łódź; ☎ 042 654 0323; ul Ogrodowa 15; adult/concession 7/4zł, free Sun; 🕒 10am–4pm Tue & Thu, 2–6pm Wed, 10am–2pm Sat–Mon). More like a prince's residence than a businessperson's home, the museum's opulent interior is a clear indication of the Poznańskis' wealth: it's bedecked with elaborate dark-wood wall panelling, delicate stained-glass windows and a suitably grand ballroom. Despite the exhibitions taking a back seat to the building, they're interesting all the same, covering Łódź' history, the Łódź ghetto, and famous citizens including pianist Artur Rubinstein, writer Jerzy Kosiniński and poet Julian Tuwim. All three, of Jewish origin, were born in Łódź and deservedly have their own room(s) in the palace.

MUSEUM OF ETHNOGRAPHY & ARCHAEOLOGY

Forever with its eye on the former market place of Plac Wolności (Liberty Sq) is the **Museum of Ethnography & Archaeology** (Muzeum Archaologiczne i Etnograficzne; ☎ 042 632 9714; Plac Wolności 14; adult/concession 6/4zł, free Tue; 🕒 10am–5pm Tue, 11am–6pm Thu, 9am–4pm Wed & Fri–Sun). Most displays are fairly standard, featuring archaeological finds from the Stone Age to the Middle Ages, but the money collection on the 1st floor is worthy of note – as late as 1991 the government was still producing 1,000,000zł bills. The bridal party on the top floor is by far

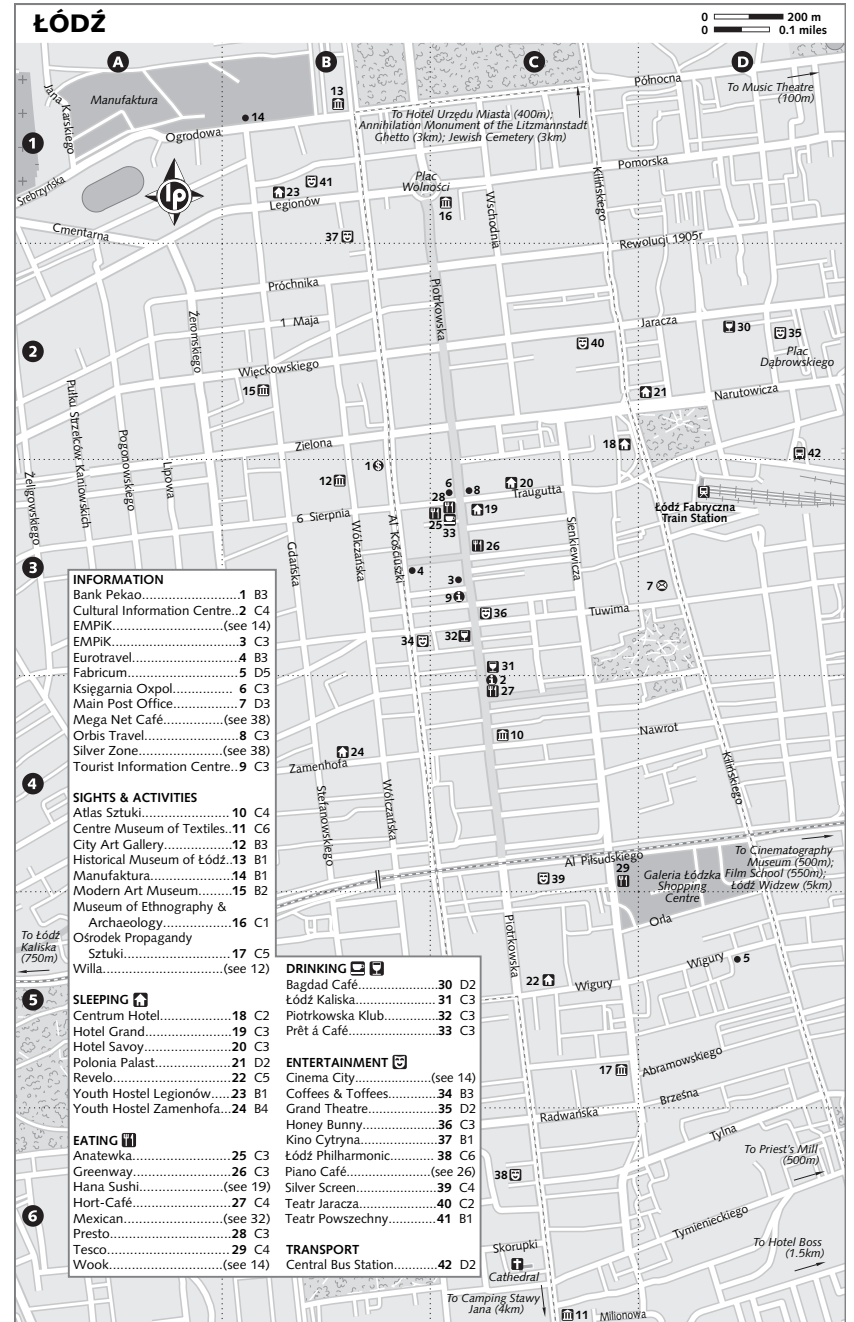
the most engaging ethnography display, with the groom dressed in spiffy orange-and-green pants and the bride weighed down by a heavy headdress of flowers.

MODERN ART MUSEUM

Contemporary art lovers should make a detour two blocks west of ul Piotrkowska to the **Modern Art Museum** (Muzeum Sztuki; ☎ 042 633 9790; ul Więckowskiego 36; adult/concession 7/4zł, free Thu; 🕒 10am–5pm Tue, 11am–5pm Wed & Fri, noon–7pm Thu, 10am–4pm Sat & Sun). It contains an extensive collection of 20th-century paintings, drawings, sculpture and photography from Poland and abroad, as well as many works by contemporary artists. There are also works by Picasso, Chagall and Ernst (not always on display).

CITY ART GALLERY

Near the Modern Art Museum is the **City Art Gallery** (Miejska Galeria Sztuki; ☎ 042 632 7995; ul Wólczńska 31/33; adult/concession 4/2zł; 🕒 11am–5pm Tue–Fri, 11am–4pm Sat & Sun), housed in a fairytale 1903 Art Nouveau villa that once belonged to German industrialist Leopold Kindermann. While the building itself lacks colour, it's well worth a look for its attractive flower motifs, tree-trunk columns and wrought-iron work. Contemporary works by Polish artists are normally the focus of the gallery's temporary exhibitions.



CENTRE MUSEUM OF TEXTILES

Those wishing to dig a little deeper into Łódź's past should take a gander at the **Centre Museum of Textiles** (Centralne Muzeum Włókiennictwa; ☎ 042 683 2684; ul Piotrkowska 282; adult/concession 8/4zł, free Sat; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue, Wed & Fri, 11am-7pm Thu, 11am-4pm Sat & Sun). It's appropriately located inside Ludwig Geyer's gorgeous White Factory, the city's oldest textile mill, dating from 1839. The collection consists of machinery ranging from early looms to contemporary devices, photos and paintings of the city in the heady years of the 19th century, and fabrics, clothing and other objects related to the industry. Unfortunately everything's in Polish, but it's easy to decipher from the displays how the city progressed into such a powerful industrial town.

CINEMATOGRAPHY MUSEUM

If you only have time for one museum in Łódź, make it this one. Housed in the palatial home of 'Cotton King' Karol Scheibler, the **Cinematography Museum** (Muzeum Kinematografii; ☎ 042 674 0957; Plac Zwycięstwa 1; adult/concession 5/3zł; ☎ 10am-3pm Tue-Fri, 11am-3pm Sat & Sun) is in fact two museums in one. The basement and 1st floor are devoted to Polish cinema, and contain props, film posters, archaic camera equipment such as a 120-year-old photo-plasticon (a device that displays stereoscopic 3D photos), and temporary exhibitions connected to the city's illustrious cinematic past. Everything changes, however, once you reach the ground floor – here the wealth of 19th-century Łódź is plain to see. Room after room is filled with extravagant boiserie (elaborately carved wood panelling), dreamy ceiling frescoes and elaborate ceramic stoves. The 'Mirror Room' is a particular delight, with three crystal mirrors and angels coated in 24-carat gold, while Antonio Salviati's *Turkish Woman* mosaic, which graces the 'Office' stove, would sit comfortably in the finest museums in Paris, London or New York. You may recognise some of the fittings – the palace was used as a backdrop in Andrej Wajda's *Ziemia obiecana* (The Promised Land; 1975) because of its pristine condition (it survived the war as the Gestapo Chief's residence).

PRIEST'S MILL

Now a branch of the Modern Art Museum, the **Priest's Mill** (Księży Młyn; ☎ 042 633 9790; ul Przędzalniana 72; adult/concession 7/4.50zł; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue, noon-5pm Wed & Fri, noon-7pm Thu, 11am-4pm Sat & Sun) started life

in 1875 as a grand villa of the wealthy Herbst family. Although the owners fled abroad before the war, taking all the furnishings and works of art with them, the interior has been restored and furnished like the original, giving an insight into how the pre-WWII barons of industry lived. Once again, this 'home' was more like a palace, with red-carpeted stairwells, graceful chandeliers, elaborated wood panelling and, of course, an enormous ballroom for entertaining guests. It's 1.5km east of the Centre Museum of Textiles (a 20-minute walk along ul Tymienieckiego, or take bus 55).

JEWISH QUARTER

The industrial expansion of Łódź attracted Jews to the city in the 1830s and as early as the 1840s they accounted for around 20% of the population. Many settled in the northern half of the city, and by the time the Nazis invaded their numbers had grown to 230,000. In May 1940 the occupiers sealed off the northern part of Łódź to create one of the largest Jewish ghettos in Poland. Known as the **Litzmannstadt Ghetto**, after the German name for Łódź, around 200,000 Jews passed through its gates between then and August 1944; of these, 150,000 boarded trains bound for Auschwitz at Radegast Station. The station has now been turned into the **Annihilation Monument of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto** (Pomnik Zagłady Litzmannstadt Getto; ☎ 042 632 7112; ul Stalowa; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Thu, noon-8pm Sat & Sun May-Oct, 9am-5pm Mon-Thu, 10am-3pm Sat & Sun Nov-Apr), a powerful reminder of the horrors of the Holocaust. Three original cattle wagons used for deportations stand silently next to the now-defunct station, and original deportation lists (some headed with 'Zur Arbeit' – 'to work') line a long concrete tunnel nearby. When the Red Army liberated Łódź in 1945, only 880 Jewish survivors remained.

Only a few steps south of the station is the city's **Jewish Cemetery** (Cmentarz Żydowski; ☎ 042 656 7019; ul Bracka 40; admission 4zł; ☎ 9am-5pm Sun-Thu, 9am-3pm Fri May-Oct, 8am-3pm Sun-Fri Nov-Apr). Founded in 1892, it is the largest Jewish graveyard in Europe, with around 68,000 surviving tombstones, some of which are very beautiful. It is currently enjoying a partial cleanup, but the further you wander from the entrance off ul Zmienna the more overgrown and wild it becomes.

MANUFATURA

Izrael Poznański was a wise man. Not only did he have the vision and tenacity to build the second-largest textile factory in Łódź, he also built it within stumbling distance of his palatial residence (p123). At its peak, the enormous redbrick factory – a series of factories, in fact, constructed between 1852 and 1892 – employed 4000 workers and housed more than 80,000 spindles. Poznański died in 1900 but the factory lived on, churning out textiles through two world wars and communist occupation. The decades, however, took their toll on both the buildings and cotton sales, and in 1997 the spindles spun their last.

In 2000 French developers bought the site with an eye to transforming it into a cultural space for Łódź (and perhaps making a bit of dosh on the side). Work began in 2003, and by 2006 the factory was ready for public inspection. The result is **Manufaktura** (☎ 042 664 9260; www.manufaktura.com; ul Jana Karckiego 5), a massive shopping mall/entertainment venue containing a string of shops, restaurants, clubs and bars, along with a cinema and, in the future, a hotel. The restoration is impressive, with many factories restored to their former glory; some, however, still stand derelict and in stark contrast to their pristine surrounds. The only glitch in an otherwise exemplary job is the uncomplimentary modern steel-and-glass structure that fills the western end of the complex.

On the 2nd floor of the cinema is the excellent **Manufaktura Museum** (☎ 042 664 9293; ul Jana Karckiego 5; admission 2zł; ☎ 9am-7pm Tue-Fri, 11am-7pm Sat, 10am-8pm Sun), where more information on the history and renovation of Manufaktura can be gleaned.

Both the cemetery and monument are about 3km northeast of the centre. Take tram 1 from ul Kilińskiego or tram 6 from Al Kościuszki.

GALLERIES

Łódź has a healthy art scene, with more than two dozen galleries in and around the city centre; pick up *Łódź the City of Art* from the tourist office for a complete list. Some of the better-known:

Atlas Sztuki (☎ 042 632 7750; ul Piotrkowska 114/116; adult/concession 4/2zł, free Thu; ☎ 4-8pm Tue-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat & Sun) Focuses on Polish photographers, including the Łódź Kaliska group.

Ośrodek Propagandy Sztuki (☎ 042 674 1059; ul Sienkiewicza 44; adult/concession 4/2zł, free Thu; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat & Sun) Showcases local talent.

Willa (☎ 042 632 7995; ul Wólczńska 31; adult/concession 4/2zł, free Thu; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue, Wed & Fri, 11am-6pm Thu, 11am-4pm Sat & Sun) Housed in the City Art Gallery – another that presents local artists.

Festivals & Events

Łódź is blessed with festivals year-round; here are but two of the biggest:

Łódź Ballet Meetings A dance and ballet festival that includes both Polish and foreign groups, and runs for two weeks in May every odd-numbered year. Performances are staged in the Grand Theatre.

Camerimage (www.camerimage.pl) An international cinematography festival held over seven days in late November/early December (see p129).

Sleeping

The low number of foreign tourists visiting the city means that Łódź's hotel scene is aimed mainly at the business and trade-fair market, and few places have anything in the way of character.

BUDGET

Youth Hostel Legionów (☎ 042 630 6680; www.ylodz.pl; ul Legionów 27; dm 18-30zł, s/d from 45/70zł; ☎ ☎ ☎) It looks a bit rough from the outside, but inside standards at Legionów are above par for a Polish hostel. Choose from rooms equipped with radio, TV and private bathroom, or cheaper versions with shared facilities. There's a café on the premises, secure parking, a kitchen for guests and a 24-hour reception (although curfew is 10pm). Legionów also runs Youth Hostel Zamenhofa (ul Zamenhofa 13), which usually handles the overflow.

Hotel Boss (☎ 042 672 4889; www.hotel-boss.pl; ul Tatrzńska 11; s/d from 55/118zł; ☎ ☎) Boss is the choice of those with little money to spend on accommodation but who want to stay in a hotel. It's a bit of a soulless concrete box but some effort has been made to make the rooms feel homey. It's quite a hike from the centre – 10 minutes from central ul Piotrkowska on tram 7 or 13 – but comfortable and good value.

Hotel Urzędu Miasta (☎ 042 640 6613; ul Bojowników Getta Warszawskiego 9; s/d/tr 100/144/180zł) This hotel

is run by the city council and provides basic, characterless accommodation, but at just 500m north of Plac Wolności it's not a bad trade-off.

Camping Stawy Jana (☎ 042 646 1551; ul Rzgowska 247; camping per tent/person/car 6/6/6zł, s/d 35/70zł; (P)) Stawy Jana is part of a sports centre, and offers a choice between your own tent and heated chalets. It's 5km south of the centre on the Piotrków Trybunalski road. Take tram 5 from ul Kilińskiego, near Łódź Fabryczna station, to the end of the line and continue walking south for 500m.

MIDRANGE

Polonia Palast (☎ 042 632 8773; www.hotelpolonia.com.pl; ul Narutowicza 38; s/d 110/180zł, with private bathroom 150/225zł) 'Palast' (palace) is certainly stretching it – rooms are stuck in the 1970s, and in need of a makeover. But they're adequate enough, and Polonia's big attraction is its plum location, just a few minutes' walk from both ul Piotrkowska and the train and bus stations.

Hotel Savoy (☎ 042 632 9360; ul Traugutta 6; s/d from 119/249zł) Don't be fooled by the name: this hotel has nothing on the original Savoy. What it does have is a great location just off ul Piotrkowska, standard rooms in communist brown and beige (in both colour and character), and a handful of 'retro' rooms (singles/doubles from 199/299zł) with pseudo antique furniture. Forgo breakfast and save 20zł on the room price.

Centrum Hotel (☎ 042 632 8640; www.hotelcentrum.com.pl; ul Kilińskiego 59/63; s/d from 190/270zł; (P) ☒ ☑ ☒ ☒) Towering over the Łódź Fabryczna train station, Centrum provides grand views of the city from its upper-floor rooms. It caters to a business crowd, with facilities such as a gym and sauna, and rooms with high standards but little character. One room, the David Lynch Suite, rises above them all, though: it's where Lynch stays when in town for the film festival, and comes with office, kitchen and lounge.

our pick Revelo (☎ 042 636 8686; www.revelo.pl; ul Wigury 4/6; s/d 250/280zł; (P)) Revelo does an excellent job of mixing old and new in a beautifully preserved villa dating from 1925. Staff greet you dressed in 1920s outfits and lead you up dark wood stairs to immaculate rooms with period furniture, brass bedsteads, plasma TVs and thoroughly modern bathrooms. Downstairs is filled by the boutique hotel's quality restaurant and attached garden. With only six rooms, it's best to book ahead.

TOP END

Hotel Grand (☎ 042 633 9920; logrand@orbis.pl; ul Piotrkowska 72; s 289-379zł, d 339-449zł; (P) ☒ ☑ ☒ ☒) The old-fashioned Grand is the city's longest-running hotel, slap bang in the middle of all the action on ul Piotrkowska. Opened in 1888 at the peak of the textile boom, it was the city's top hotel, hosting such distinctive guests as Pablo Casals and Isadora Duncan. The public areas retain a turn-of-the-century atmosphere, but the rooms, while comfortable, are mostly modern and bland.

Eating

Tesco (Al Piłsudskiego 15; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-8pm Sun) Self-caterers can head for this supermarket in the huge Galeria Łódzka shopping centre.

Wook (☎ 042 633 2323; Manufaktura, ul Jana Karłowicza 5; dishes 4-6zł; ☎ 11am-11pm) Like Warsaw, Łódź loves Asian food. Here the flavour's Chinese, and while the prices look spectacular, the servings are actually quite small. No matter: order a couple and dig in heartily – it's surprisingly good Asian cuisine considering you're in the middle of Poland.

Greenway (☎ 042 632 0852; ul Piotrkowska 80; mains 7.50-9zł; ☎ 10am-1am) Part of a chain currently sweeping Poland, Greenway is an attractive, modern café-bar serving a range of appealing dishes such as Mexican goulash (with beans and sweet corn), Indian vegetable kofta and spinach dumplings. Vegetarians will jump for joy at the choices. A second Greenway is in Manufaktura.

Presto (☎ 042 630 8883; ul Piotrkowska 67; pizzas 8.50-26zł; ☎ noon-11pm Sun-Thu, noon-midnight Fri & Sat) Presto is a simple trattoria with a pizza list almost as long as ul Piotrkowska, and a few pasta dishes thrown in for good measure. What makes it stand out from the crowd? The pizzas are cooked in a wood-fired oven. Yum.

Hort-Café (☎ 042 632 4498; ul Piotrkowska 106/110; mains 10-20zł; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8pm Sun) Part bakery, part café, this homy little place serves pastries, cream cakes, milk shakes, ice cream, light meals, salads and crepes in a pot plant- and flower-bedecked space. There's an outdoor summer terrace.

Anatewka (☎ 042 630 3635; ul 6 Sierpnia 2/4; mains 20-30zł; ☎ 11am-10pm) This Jewish restaurant just off Piotrkowska is often packed with expats and young Poles eager to sample excellent duck and goose mains. The atmosphere is warm and convivial, and the dining experience is rounded off with live music most nights.

Mexican (☎ 042 633 6868; ul Piotrkowska 67; mains 20-40zł; ☎ 11.30am-2am) The only place in town with anything resembling Latin American food. Expect plenty of Mexican favourites such as burritos, enchiladas and tacos, and the occasional Tex-Mex option. There's live Latino music from 7pm Tuesday to Saturday.

Hana Sushi (☎ 042 632 3255; ul Piotrkowska 72; mains 30-150zł; ☎ 11am-11pm) Hana Sushi is the Grand's restaurant offering, with a minimalist look and serene atmosphere. Choose from a menu filled with maki, sushi, sashimi, tempura and the like, and watch the comings and goings on ul Piotrkowska through the floor-to-ceiling windows. A less formal branch is located in Manufaktura.

Drinking

Łódź Kaliska (☎ 042 630 6955; ul Piotrkowska 102; ☎ 10am-2am Mon-Thu, 10am-4am Fri & Sat, 4pm-4am Sun) Łódź Kaliska's reputation as a must-see bar extends as far as Warsaw and possibly further. It draws a broad cross-section of Łódź society with its open-door policy, and the unusual décor – stripped-back walls are covered in fun, semi-erotic photos from the bar's namesake art group – goes well with the dim red lighting and slightly seedy atmosphere. In summer the crowds spill out onto an outdoor terrace above the alleyway.

Bagdad Café (☎ 042 639 9799; ul Jaracza 45; ☎ 9am-midnight Mon-Wed, 9am-6pm Thu-Sat, 10am-midnight Sun) Housed in the basement of a crumbling mansion, the Bagdad is the place to head for a cheap, booze-infested night out. The city's top DJs regularly feature on the decks, a motley crew of students ram the place to overflowing, and in summer table football is all the rage out back.

CENTRE FOR CINEMA

Łódź is the centre of Polish cinema. Its **film school** (ul Targowa 61/63) – which in 1948 opened here rather than Warsaw because much of the capital lay in ruins – is famous throughout Europe, and has produced some of the world's greatest directors. The country's world-renowned trio – Roman Polański, Krzysztof Kieślowski and Andrzej Wajda – all studied here, as did Poland's lesser-known (but equally talented) lights Andrzej Munk (*Człowiek na torze*, Man on the Tracks; 1957), Jerzy Skolimowski (*Moonlighting*; 1982), and Marek Piwowski (*Rejs*, The Cruise; 1970).

The school, near the Cinematography Museum, can be visited throughout the year, but cinema lovers should time their visit with **Camerimage** (www.camerimage.pl), an international festival held over seven days in late November/early December. The festival celebrates the art of cinematography and is one of the biggest events on the city's cultural calendar, attracting both big names in the cinema business (David Lynch, Oliver Stone) and droves of mere mortals.

Pret á Café (☎ 042 632 9203; ul Piotrkowska 67; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2am Sat, noon-10pm Sun) Carrie Bradshaw and her cohorts would feel right at home in this café-bar/high-fashion store in an alley off ul Piotrkowska. The cool little corner of minimalist chic has framed designer dresses on the wall, fashion mags lying on the taupe leather banquettes, a minicollector for impromptu fashion shows, and a rack of fancy frocks to flick through.

Piotrkowska Klub (☎ 042 630 6573; ul Piotrkowska 97; ☎ 11am-midnight Mon-Sat, noon-midnight Sun) Easily recognisable by the two-storey, wrought-iron-and-glass drinking area that stands outside the front door, Piotrkowska Klub has great views up and down its namesake street. Inside it's more sedate, with wood panelling and cosy booths tucked into quiet corners.

Entertainment

Both the Cultural Information Centre and Tourist Information Centre (p123) have information on what's on, and can supply you with the monthly *042 Magazine*, which lists theatres, cinemas, art galleries and museums alongside upcoming events, concerts and club nights. It's in both English and Polish. The yearly *Łódź the City of Art* booklet is another great source of information. Otherwise go online to the Polish-only www.reymont.pl.

CINEMAS

As home to Poland's film industry, Łódź is well supplied with cinemas. These are the most convenient city-centre ones:

Cinema City (☎ 042 664 6400; ul Jana Karłowicza 5)

Brand-new cinema in Manufaktura with box-office hits.

Cinematography Museum (☎ 042 674 0957; Plac Zwycięstwa 1) Screens mainly independent films from

around the world, often free of charge. Children's films on Sunday.

Kino Cytryna (☎ 042 632 1859; ul Zachodnia 81/83) Mostly Hollywood blockbusters but a few art-house titles.
Silver Screen (☎ 042 639 5858; Al Piłsudskiego 5) Ten-screen multiplex with mainstream films.

CLUBS

Łódź is well known as Poland's centre for electronic music, but DJs regularly mix it up with hip-hop, house and drum 'n' bass. Aside from the clubs below, catch the best of the bunch at Bagdad Café (p129) and Łódź Kaliska (p129).

Piano Café (☎ 042 632 7114; ul Piotrkowska 80; ☎ 4pm-midnight) This small brick-cellar establishment is a drinking hole that welcomes all types and doubles as a gallery for local artists.

Honey Bunny (☎ 042 633 0914; ul Piotrkowska 90; ☎ 6pm-1am Wed & Thu, 6pm-5am Fri & Sat) The club to be seen at, with gorillas on the door and a bouncing dance floor.

Coffees & Toffees (☎ 042 637 6148; ul Tuwima 6/10; ☎ 2-9.30pm Sun-Thu, 10am-5am Fri & Sat) More relaxed than Honey Bunny, with comfy sofas and local and international DJs.

OPERA, THEATRE & CLASSICAL MUSIC

Grand Theatre (Teatr Wielki; ☎ 042 633 9960; www.teatr-wielki.lodz.pl; Plac Dąbrowskiego; ☎ box office noon-7pm Tue-Sat, 3-7pm Sun) The city's main venue for opera and ballet also stages festival events and visiting shows.

Łódź Philharmonic (Filharmonia Łódzka; ☎ 042 664 7979; www.filharmonia.lodz.pl; ul Piotrkowska 243; ☎ box office 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, from 10am Sun) Stages regular concerts of classical music every Friday and occasionally on other days of the week.

The city has many other theatres, of which the following are highly rated:

Music Theatre (Teatr Muzyczny; ☎ 042 678 1968; ul Północna 47/51; ☎ box office 11am-6.30pm Tue-Fri, from noon Sat, from 3pm Sun) Stages mostly operettas and musicals.

Teatr Jaracza (☎ 042 632 6618; ul Jaracza 27; ☎ box office 8.30am-7pm Tue-Fri, noon-7pm Sat & Sun) Among the most respected drama theatres in Poland.

Teatr Powszechny (☎ 042 633 5036; www.teatr-powszechny.lodz.pl; ul Legionów 21; ☎ box office 9am-3pm Mon, 9am-7pm Tue-Fri, 5-7pm Sat & Sun) Polish drama.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The **central bus station** (Dworzec Centralny PKS; Plac Sałacińskiego 1) is right outside Łódź Fabryczna

train station. There are buses to Warsaw (24zł, three hours, five daily), Płock (20zł, three hours, nine daily), and Łowicz (10zł, 1½ hours, hourly). Polski Express buses run to Warsaw airport (36zł to 39zł, 2½ hours, seven daily), Gdynia (57zł, seven hours, one daily) via Gdańsk and Toruń, and Kraków (53zł, five hours, two daily) via Częstochowa and Katowice.

TRAIN

The city has three train stations. **Łódź Fabryczna** (Plac Sałacińskiego 1), which is a few blocks east of ul Piotrkowska, is the main station but **Łódź Widzew** (ul Adamickiego) often has better connections to Warsaw (31zł, 2½ hours, seven daily). **Łódź Kaliska** (Al Unii Lubelskiej 3/5), to the west of the city centre, handles trains to Wrocław (42zł, four hours, up to five daily), Poznań (42zł, 4½ hours, four daily), Łowicz (11zł, two hours, two daily) and Kraków (46zł, 4½ hours, one daily).

Getting Around

Łódź' public-transport system is operated by **Miejskie Przedsiębiorstwo Komunikacyjne** (MPK; www.mpk.lodz.pl) and includes trams and buses, both of which use the same ticket system. A ticket becomes valid for a set length of time after you validate it in the machine on board, and remains valid for unlimited transfers between bus and tram lines. Tickets valid for 10/30/60/120 minutes cost 1.70/2.40/3.60/4.80zł; a 24-hour ticket costs 9.60zł.

Order a taxi through **MPT** (☎ 042 9191) or **Merc Radio** (☎ 042 650 5050). Bicycle rickshaws ply ul Piotrkowska and cost around 4zł to 10zł per trip (two passengers maximum).

ŁOWICZ

pop 30,300

For much of the year Łowicz (*wo-veech*) is a town close to slipping into a permanent coma, but when Corpus Christi (Boże Ciało) comes around it's the place to be. It can also boast a long and important connection to the Catholic Church – it was for over 600 years the seat of the archbishops of Gniezno, the supreme Church authority in Poland – and is a regional centre for folk arts and crafts, although you'll see little of it outside Łowicz' museum.

For information visit the **PTTK office** (☎ 046 830 9149; Stary Rynek 3; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun).

Sights

The vast 15th-century **Łowicz Cathedral** (☎ 046 837 6266; Stary Rynek 24/30) dominates the Stary Rynek (Old Town Sq). Originally Gothic, it underwent several renovations and is now a mishmash of styles, including Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo. It isn't particularly attractive, but the locals seem to love it and bus in from around the country for Sunday mass. Twelve archbishops of Gniezno and primates of Poland are buried in the church.

On the opposite side of the square is **Łowicz Museum** (☎ 046 837 3928; Stary Rynek 5/7; adult/concession 7/4zł, free Sat; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun, closed days following public holidays), housed in a 17th-century missionary college designed by prolific Dutch architect Tylman van Gameren. The former priests' chapel, with its fading Baroque frescoes (1695) by Italian artist Michelangelo Palloni and finely carved ivory tusks, is the museum's highlight. The 1st floor comes a close second, with archaeological finds from the region such as Stone Age tools and more tusks, this time from mammoths. Colourful folk costumes, painted Easter eggs, traditional wooden furniture and photos of old farmsteads make interesting browsing on the 2nd floor. In the back garden of the museum are two old **farmsteads** from the region, complete with original furnishings, implements and decoration.

Festivals & Events

Corpus Christi (which falls on a Thursday in May or June), a feast in honour of the Holy Eucharist, is celebrated with gusto in Łowicz. It is marked by a large procession that circles the main square and the cathedral, and most of its participants dress in brightly coloured and embroidered traditional costumes and carry elaborate banners. This is the most solemn celebration of Corpus Christi in the country, and it's the best time to visit Łowicz and get a real feel for the devout Catholicism of rural Poland. The procession starts at around noon and takes roughly two hours to complete the whole circuit.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Aneta (☎ 046 837 0448; aneta@lowicz.com.pl; ul Forwstańców 36; d/tr 45/60zł; d with bathroom 80zł) In a former workers' dormitory built from prefabricated panels, the small, basic rooms of this hotel are not the stuff of luxury, but will do in a pinch. It's about 1.5km south of the centre.

Hotel Zacisze (☎ 046 837 3326; www.zacisze.dt.pl in Polish; ul Kaliska 5; s/d/tr 95/135/165zł; ☎ ☎) Located 300m south of the Stary Rynek and back from the road, this is a fairly comfortable place with basic rooms, '70s architecture and '80s music. It has its own reasonably priced restaurant, helpful staff with a little English, and a covered swimming pool.

Getting There & Away

The bus and train stations are side by side, about a five-minute walk east from the Stary Rynek. There are fast trains to Warsaw's Zachodnia station every two hours (20zł, one hour) but the train connection to Łódź is surprisingly slow; there are two trains daily between Łowicz and Łódź Kaliska station (11zł, two hours). You're better off taking the bus (10zł, 1½ hours, hourly).

AROUND ŁOWICZ

Nieborów & Arkadia

pop 1500

It's hard to imagine anything of interest in the tiny, rural villages of Nieborów (*nyeh-bo-roof*) and Arkadia, 9km southeast of Łowicz. But hiding among the tree groves are two perfect backdrops for a Jane Austen novel.

Designed by Tylman van Gameren for Cardinal Radziejowski, archbishop of Gniezno and primate of Poland, the late-17th-century **Palace of Nieborów** is a classic example of Baroque architecture. In 1774 Prince Michał Hieronim Radziwiłł bought the palace, and he and his wife Helena set about cramming it with as much furniture and works of art as they possibly could. An imposing library was added, and an informal, English-style landscaped park, designed by Szymon Bogumił Zug, was laid out next to the old Baroque garden. A majolica (a type of porous pottery) factory, the only one in Poland at the time, was established on the grounds in 1881 and operated on and off until 1906.

In the 1920s the palace underwent its last important transformation, when a mansard storey was added to the building. The palace remained in the possession of the Radziwiłł family right up to WWII, after which, fortunately undamaged, it was taken over by the state and converted into a museum.

More than half of the palace rooms are now occupied by the **Nieborów Museum** (☎ 046 838 5635; www.nieborow.art.pl; adult/concession 15/6zł; park only 6/4zł, free Mon; ☎ 10am-4pm daily Mar & Apr, 10am-6pm

daily May & Jun, 10am–4pm Mon–Fri, 10am–6pm Sat & Sun Jul–Sep, 10am–3.30pm Tue–Sun Oct, closed Nov–Feb). Part of the ground floor features 1st-century Roman sculpture and bas-reliefs collected by Helena, and highly unusual black-oak panelling from the late 19th century. The stairwell leading to the 1st floor, with its ornamental Dutch tiles dating from around 1700, is worth the entry fee alone.

The whole 1st floor was restored and furnished according to the original style and contains a wealth of *objets d'art*. Take note of the tiled stoves, each one different, made in the local majolica factory, and don't miss the two late-17th-century globes in the library, the work of Venetian geographer Vincenzo Coronelli.

The **French garden** (🕒 10am–dusk), on the southern side of the palace, has a wide central alley lined with old lime trees and is dotted with sculptures, statues, tombstones, sarcophagi, pillars, columns and other stone fragments dating from various periods. Many of them were brought from Arkadia. The **English landscaped park** (🕒 10am–dusk), complete with stream, lake, ponds and fishers, is to the west of the garden, behind an L-shaped reservoir.

With its overgrown ruins, peeling pavilions, temples and follies, **Arkadia** (adult/concession 6/4zł, free Mon, parking 8zł; 🕒 10am–dusk) is a romantic, pagan enclave in a sea of Catholicism. The landscaped park was laid out by Princess Helena Radziwiłł in the 1770s to be an 'idyllic land of peace and happiness', but after the princess's death the park fell into decay. Most of the works of art were taken to Nieborów's palace and can be seen there today, and the abandoned buildings fell gradually into ruin. Nowadays, the air of decay only adds to the charm of the place. Tree-shrouded ruins are dotted throughout the park, including a red-brick **Gothic House** (Domek Gotycki) perched above **Sybil's Grotto**, a 'Roman' aqueduct, and the impressive **Archpriest's Sanctuary** (Przybytek Arcykapłana), a fanciful mock ruin dominated by a classical bas-relief of Hope feeding a Chimera. The focus of Arkadia is **Diana's Temple** (Świątynia Diany), which overlooks the lake and houses a display of Roman sculpture and funerary monuments. It and the Archpriest's Sanctuary are the only two structures in the park to have enjoyed any kind of renovation.

Combined, the graceful palace and fanciful park make an excellent excursion from Łowicz – bring a picnic and spend the day.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Arkadia is on the southern side of the Łowicz–Skierniewice road (No 70), 4km southeast of Łowicz; Nieborów is on the same road, a further 5km beyond Arkadia. Where the main road bends sharply to the right at Nieborów, keep going straight on – the palace is 300m ahead, on the right.

Slow trains from Warsaw (Warszawa Śródmieście, Warszawa Zachodnia and other commuter stations only, not Warszawa Centralna) to Łowicz stop at Mysłaków (12.50zł, 1¼ hours, seven daily), the last stop before reaching Łowicz. From the station it's a 10-minute walk to Arkadia, and another 5km (around 50 minutes' walk) to Nieborów. Warsaw–Łowicz trains also stop at Bednary, which is 4km from Nieborów.

There are up to 11 buses daily between Łowicz and Skierniewice, stopping at both Arkadia and Nieborów (both 4zł). The last bus to Łowicz from Nieborów leaves at 4.37pm; from Arkadia at 4.40pm.

Sromów pop 800

Sromów (*sro-moof*) is a tiny rural hamlet with one big attraction – a private **Folk Museum** (Muzeum Ludowe; ☎ 046 838 4472; adult/concession 5/4zł; 🕒 9am–5pm Mon–Sat, noon–5pm Sun), founded by skilled artisan and passionate crafts collector Julian Brzozowski.

Set in a garden full of folksy statues, the museum is housed in four buildings, two of which feature animated tableaux of historic scenes and village life – a country wedding, a pageant of kings, a Corpus Christi procession in Łowicz, and the four seasons on the farm. A chapel featuring a dozen life-sized figures has been built next to the museum to commemorate the pope's visit to the region in 1999. The figures are all carved from wood and painstakingly painted and costumed. The animation, with synchronised music, is driven by concealed rods and shafts powered by 28 electric motors. All this is the result of 50 years of dedication and work by Mr Brzozowski and his family. Although a little kitsch, it's unique and fascinating and kids will love it.

The other buildings house a collection of about 30 old horse carts and carriages, assembled by the owner from the surrounding villages. Other exhibits include traditional paper cutouts, regional costumes, folk paintings, decorated wooden chests and embroi-

dery. If the museum appears closed (as it sometimes is during quiet seasons), ask at Mr Brzozowski's house across the road, and he or someone from the family will open it and show you around.

Though only 65km from Warsaw, the village and surrounding area are very rural – there are old wooden houses, a few thatched roofs, cows grazing on the roadside and chickens foraging everywhere.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Sromów, 10km northeast of Łowicz, is hard to find even on detailed, large-scale maps. Driving from Warsaw, follow road No 2 (E30) towards Poznań. The minor road to Sromów is on the right, about 16km after Sochaczew and 8km before Łowicz. The turn-off is marked by a petrol station and a small sign ('Sromów – Muzeum'); Ruzski is also signposted. The museum itself is about 3km from the main road; take the first turn on the left.

Public transport is difficult. Sporadic buses from Łowicz to Rybno will let you off on the Rybno road, 1km from the museum.

ŁĘCZYCZA & TUM pop 15,500 & 500

Łęczycza (*wen-chi-tshah*) may not look like much today, but from the Dark Ages to the 16th century this ordinary town played an important role in planting Poland's Catholic roots. Remnants of its illustrious past can be seen in its small castle and classic Romanesque church.

Łęczycza's 1500-year history began in the 6th century, when a stronghold was built 2km east of the present town site. By the 10th century a Benedictine abbey was established, and one of the first Christian churches in Poland was built. In the 12th century a monumental Romanesque collegiate church replaced the former one, and the settlement expanded. It was burned down by the Teutonic Knights in the early 14th century, and the town was then moved to its present location, where a castle and defensive walls were erected.

During the next two centuries Łęczycza prospered, becoming the regional centre and the seat of numerous ecclesiastical synods. Later on, however, due to wars, fires and plagues, the town slid into obscurity. In the 19th century the defensive walls and most of the castle were sold for building material.

The surviving structure was restored after WWII and turned into the **Łęczycza Museum** (☎ 024 721 2449; ul Zamkowa 1; adult/concession 6/3zł, free Thu; 🕒 10am–5pm Tue–Fri, 11am–5pm Sat & Sun). A modest archaeological section fills the basement, the highlight of which is fragments of Tum's church, while the upper level contains period furniture, medieval weapons, and an ethnographic section that features regional artefacts, mostly woodcarving.

The original site of Łęczycza grew into an independent village and was named **Tum**. The stronghold fell into ruin but the collegiate **church** was rebuilt. It's Poland's largest Romanesque church and a fine example of the architecture from that period. Although rebuilt several times, it has essentially preserved its original 12th-century form. It's a sizable defensive construction with two circular and two square towers, and two semicircular apses on each end, all built from granite and sandstone. The interior retains Romanesque features but is influenced by later Gothic remodelling, especially in the aisles. The Romanesque portal in the porch (the entrance to the church) is one of the finest in Poland. From the same period are fragments of frescoes in the western apse. If the church is locked, get the keys from the priest's house, 100m east of the church, on the opposite side of the road.

Directly opposite the Romanesque church is another fine example of religious architecture, this time in the form of a **wooden Orthodox church** (note the telltale onion-shaped dome).

Sleeping & Eating

Zajazd Senator (☎ 024 721 2404; ul Ozorkowskie Przedmieście 47, Łęczycza; d/tr 100/130zł) On the Łódź road, 1km from the centre, it offers large rooms and a decent restaurant for such a small hotel.

Stara Prochownia (Łęczycza; pizza 11–15zł; 🕒 noon–10pm) Housed in the only building left standing in the castle grounds, this is a charming spot offering wood-oven-baked pizzas. It's decorated with black-and-white photos capturing Łęczycza in a bygone era and a hotchpotch of wooden furniture, and there are also outdoor tables. If only they could stop providing plastic cutlery.

There's nowhere to stay or eat in Tum.

Getting There & Away

The train station is on the southern outskirts of Łęczycza. Hourly trains run daily north to

Kutno (6.50zł, 35 minutes) and south to Łódź (9zł, one hour).

The bus terminal is close to the castle. There are plenty of buses to Łódź (12zł, one hour) and several to Kutno (25km).

Tum is only 30 minutes' walk through the fields from Łęczyca.

OPORÓW

pop 1000

The village of Oporów (oh-po-roof) lies well off the main tourist routes, but it's worth visiting for its diminutive Gothic **castle**. It's one of the few castles in Poland to have survived almost in its original form.

The fortified residence was built in the mid-15th century for Władysław Oporowski, the archbishop of Gniezno. Though it changed owners several times during its history, it underwent only a few alterations and today still retains its original simplified structure. The more important changes were the 17th-century wooden ceilings on the 1st floor, covered with Renaissance decoration, the enlargement of the windows and the construction of the terrace at the entrance.

Well restored after WWII, today the castle houses the **Oporów Museum** (☎ 024 285 9122; adult/concession 8/5zł; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun), which features a collection of exquisite furniture and paintings, French pistols and more medieval weaponry, and other objects dating from the 15th to the 19th centuries. The majority of exhibits are not directly connected with the castle's history, but were acquired from old palaces and residences in the region. A walk along the castle's parapets provides views of the surrounding moat and fine **park** (admission free; ☎ 8am-6pm).

Oporów is best visited using your own transport.

PŁOCK

pop 128,000

Most of Mazovia's mid-sized cities hold little interest for the average traveller, but not Płock (pronounced pwotsk). Dramatically perched on a cliff high above the Vistula, this pretty town has a long, varied history and a spruced-up old centre. It also can boast the remnants of a Gothic castle, a glorious cathedral, and the finest collection of Art Nouveau in the country.

Płock was a royal residence between 1079 and 1138 and the first Mazovian town to be

given a municipal charter (in 1237). Its city walls were built in the 14th century and the town developed as a wealthy trading centre until the 16th century. The flooding of the Vistula in 1532, when half the castle and part of the defensive walls slid into the river, was merely a portent of further disasters to come, and the wars, fires and plagues that struck the town – and the region – in the following centuries brought its importance to an end.

Information

Bank Pekao (ul Kwiatka 6)

EMPIK (☎ 024 262 4916; Plac Narutowicza 5; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat) Small section of English mags 'n' rags.

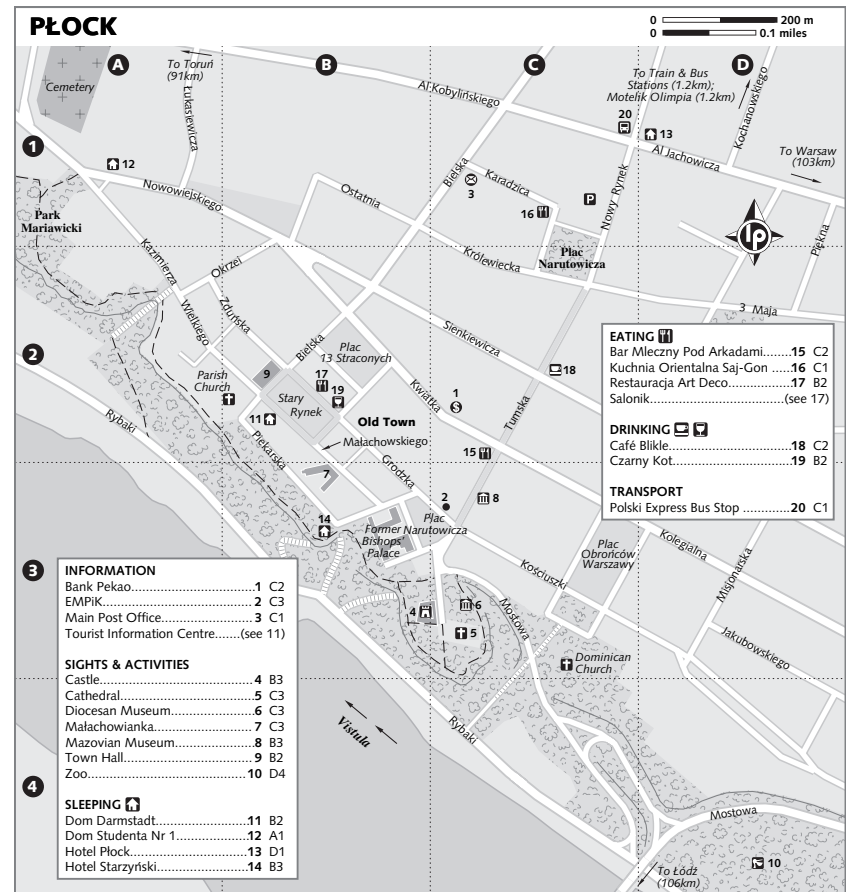
Main post office (ul Bielska 14b)

Tourist Information Centre (Centrum Informacji Turystycznej; ☎ 024 367 1944; cit.plock@ump.pl; Dom Darmstadt, Stary Rynek 8; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat, 10am-2pm Sun May-Sep, 9am-4pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) Provides a wealth of information on the town and its region, and has free internet access.

Sights

After the large oil refinery and petrochemical plant on the southern side of the river, the dominating feature of Płock is two redbrick towers, the **Clock Tower** (Wieża Zegarowa) and the **Noblemen's Tower** (Wieża Szlachecka) – the last vestiges of the original Gothic **castle** that once protected the city. While both are impressive, it's the neighbouring **cathedral** (admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5.30pm Sun & public holidays) that will draw most people's attention. And rightly so. Despite losing most of its 12th-century Romanesque character during numerous transformations, it remains an imposing structure. The interior, topped with a Renaissance dome added in the mid-16th century, boasts a number of tombstones and altarpieces from various periods, and tasteful Art Nouveau frescoes. The royal chapel (at the back of the north aisle) holds the sarcophagi of two Polish kings, Władysław Herman and his son Bolesław Krzywousty, who lived in Płock during their reigns. Both are in immaculate condition (the tombs, not the kings).

Take time to note the bronze doors at the southern end of the cathedral – copies of the original 12th-century doors commissioned by the local bishops. The originals disappeared in mysterious circumstances and reappeared in Novgorod, Russia, where they are today. The magnificent doors depict scenes from



the Old Testament in extraordinary detail. The bronze relief in the tympanum above the doors shows the Adoration of the Magi, with a model of the cathedral (symbolically offered as a gift) below.

Next to the cathedral is the **Diocesan Museum** (Muzeum Diecezjalne; ☎ 024 262 2623; ul Tumska 3a; adult/concession 4/2zł; ☎ 10am-3pm Tue-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun May-Sep, 10am-1pm Wed-Sat, 11am-2pm Sun Oct-Apr), housing a large collection of manuscripts, paintings, sculpture, vestments and tapestries. Naturally the overriding theme here is Catholicism, but the curators have had the good sense to include nonreligious items, such as the Charter of Płock from 1237, Stone Age archaeological finds, ceramics and coins from across the globe, and medieval weaponry. A few select

pieces steal the show, though – look for the delicately gilded 12th-century ciborium from Czerwińsk and a 1st edition of Adam Mickiewicz' *Pan Tadeusz* (see p51). Guided tours are available for 10zł, but are normally only in Polish.

Art Nouveau aficionados will wet themselves upon entering the **Mazovian Museum** (Muzeum Mazowieckie; ☎ 024 364 7071; ul Tumska 8; adult/concession 8/4zł, free Thu; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun May-Oct, 10am-3pm Tue, 10am-4pm Wed-Fri, 10.30am-4.30pm Sat & Sun Nov-Apr), not far north of the Diocesan Museum. Housed in an Art Nouveau residence dating from the early 1920s, the museum exhibits entire rooms (bedrooms, living rooms, dining rooms, studies, all perfectly colour-coded) of the splendid design on the

1st and 2nd floors. There are too many exquisite pieces to mention, but keep an eye out for the Henry van de Velde 12-piece dinner set, the Klingsor gramophone, and vases by Villeroy & Boch. The 3rd floor contains fanciful porcelain sculptures, stained glass from around the turn of last century, and a few paintings by the likes of Józef Mehoffer and Vlastimil Hofmann.

To the northwest of the castle and the cathedral stretches the **Old Town**. The dominating architectural style here is 19th-century neoclassical, particularly along ul Grodzka, the Old Town's main thoroughfare. At the northern end of Grodzka is the **Stary Rynek** (Old Town Sq), formerly the heart of 14th-century Płock; today it's lined with renovated 18th- and 19th-century houses and dominated by the neoclassical **town hall** (Ratusz). A short walk southeast of the Rynek is **Małachowianka** (ul Małachowskiego 1), the oldest high school in Poland (1180) and still in operation. Its basement contains a small **museum** (☎ 024 366 6600; admission free) featuring Romanesque and Gothic reliefs; opening times are sporadic so call ahead or check with the tourist office.

From the Old Town, you can return to the cathedral by a path that follows the cliff-top – a pleasant walk with great views over the Vistula all the way along. To the east of the road bridge is the **zoo** (Ogród Zoologiczny; ☎ 024 366 0511; ul Norbertańska 2; adult/concession 5/3zł; ☎ 9am-7pm May-Sep, 9am-6pm Apr & Sep, 9am-5pm Mar & Oct, 9am-4pm Nov-Feb), which has a picturesque wooded setting above the river. It's home to Poland's largest snake collection.

Sleeping

Dom Studenta Nr 1 (☎ 024 366 5415; ul Nowowiejskiego 6; dm 30zł) Płock has three student hostels, including this year-round option just to the north of the old town. The simple, adequate rooms with shared facilities sleep three to four persons.

Motelik Olimpia (☎ 024 262 8426; ul Dworcowa 46; s/d 80/100zł; 📍) The big advantage of this basic 11-room motel is its location directly opposite the train and bus stations. There are also a garden and barbecue for guests.

Dom Darmstadt (☎ 024 367 1922; www.dd.pokis.pl; Stary Rynek 8; d 120zł) Ideally situated above the Tourist Information Centre in a historic townhouse, Dom Darmstadt is a quiet, cosy place with three double rooms (book in advance) sharing one bathroom and a kitchen.

German speakers can avail themselves of its library of 1500 German books.

Hotel Płock (☎ 024 262 9393; www.hplock.plocman.pl; Al Jachowicza 38; r 140zł; 📍) The Płock looks dire from the outside, but once you're through the front doors things begin to improve. Its rooms are spacious and comfy, although the décor is something your grandma might choose (floral-patterned sheets, wallpaper and carpet). The hotel has its own brewery in the basement.

Hotel Starzyński (☎ 024 366 0200; www.starzynski.com.pl; ul Piekarska 1; s/d from 210/260zł; 📍) This communist-era hotel perched on the edge of the cliff above the Vistula has quirky but appealing décor, reminiscent of, but not quite, Art Deco. Rooms are bright and modern, and the more expensive ones have superb views over the river, as does the hotel restaurant.

Eating & Drinking

Bar Mleczny Pod Arkadami (☎ 024 262 9521; ul Tumaska 5; mains 4-8zł; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun) If ever there was an archetypal milk bar, this is it. Pod Arkadami has managed to survive the political and economic upheavals of the past decades to retain an air of the communist days, with simple Polish fare, even simpler décor, and a steady stream of customers both young and old.

Kuchnia Orientalna Saj-Gon (☎ 024 268 7700; Plac Narutowicza 1; mains around 10zł; ☎ 11am-9.30pm) It looks dodgy, but locals flock here in droves for quick, cheap Asian food.

Restauracja Art Deco (☎ 024 268 5751; Stary Rynek 17; mains 15-40zł; ☎ 11am-11pm) Set in the middle of the sunny side of the Stary Rynek, this place has the comfiest outdoor tables on the square, and a menu of Polish favourites ranging from *czernina staropolska* (ducks'-blood soup) and a *pierogi* (dumpling) platter to roast duck, roast pork, and potato dumplings with pork crackling.

Salonik (☎ 024 268 5771; Stary Rynek 19; mains 20-40zł; ☎ 11am-11pm) Sister restaurant to Art Deco and similar in style, Salonik specialises in fish and Polish classics, but there's also a touch of French and Italian to the menu and vegetarians will be happy with the options. The *fin-de-siècle* décor includes sewing tables with foot pedal still attached.

Czarny Kot (☎ 0661 376 486; Stary Rynek 25; ☎ noon-midnight) The musically themed 'Black Cat' lazily occupies one corner of the Old Town's main square and provides comfy

sofas and a small terrace for coffee- and beer-drinking guests. Enter on most Friday and Saturday nights and you'll be treated to live jazz and blues.

Cafe Blikle (☎ 024 268 3457; ul Tumaska; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) An offshoot of Warsaw's famous café, this is the spot for cakes, coffee and ice cream.

Getting There & Away

The train and bus stations are nearly 2km northeast of the Old Town. At present only one train operates out of Płock, to Kutno (16zł, one hour) at 6.53am, but this may soon stop.

There are frequent PKS buses to Warsaw (25zł, two hours), two a day to Gdańsk and one a day to Toruń. Polski Express buses run to Warsaw (30zł, 1½ hours, up to 15 daily) and Toruń (30zł, two hours, eight daily), leaving from opposite Hotel Płock. For Gdańsk, catch a bus to Toruń and change there. Other operators, such as Ekobus and Baracuabus, also travel to Warsaw and often underbid PKS and Polski Express.

NORTHERN & EASTERN MAZOVIA

PUŁTUSK

pop 19,200

A sleepy town with a splendid castle and the longest market square in the country, Pułtusk (*poow-toosk*) is a fine place to stop for a few hours if your travels happen to lead you this way.

Today Pułtusk is just another dot on the Polish map, but the town's history is long and varied – its roots date back to the 10th century, making it one of Mazovia's oldest towns. It enjoyed its golden age in the 15th and 16th centuries, when it was the residence of the bishops of Płock and an important trade and cultural centre. In 1806 Napoleon's army fought one of its toughest battles in the campaign against Russia here, and in 1944 Pułtusk was on the front line for several months, during which time 80% of its buildings were destroyed.

Sights & Activities

The town's historic core, set on an island, is laid out around a 400m-long cobbled **Rynek**.

It still operates as a market place on Tuesday and Friday, when stallholders selling local farm produce and piles of junk overrun its northern half. In the middle stands the 15th-century brick tower of the town hall, today a **Regional Museum** (☎ 023 692 5132; adult/concession 4/3zł; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun). The so-so collection of archaeological finds (many from inside the castle grounds) is rather lame, but the views from the museum's tall tower certainly aren't. Nearby, at **house No 29**, Napoleon recuperated after the Battle of Pułtusk.

The northern end of the square is bordered by the **collegiate church** (*kolegiata*). Erected in the 1440s, the church underwent the usual architectural makeover every few centuries, and contains a dozen Baroque altars, Renaissance stucco decoration on the nave's vault, and aisles with original Gothic features. Note the 16th-century wall paintings in the chapel at the head of the right-hand aisle.

At the opposite end of the square stands the **castle**. Built in the late 14th century as an abode for bishops, it was rebuilt several times in later periods. It's now a plush hotel and conference centre. A cobbled road leads around the east side of the castle to a little harbour on the Narew river where you can hire **rowing boats** (15zł per hour) and **kayaks** (10/60zł per hour/day) and organise **boat trips** (30 minutes/one hour 75/150zł).

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Baltazar (☎ 023 692 0475; www.hotel-baltazar.com.pl; ul Baltazara 41; s/d/tr 100/120/150zł; 📍) Hidden away at the end of a minor road, 1km north of the Rynek (signposted), this family-run hotel is an attractive, modern alternative to the Dom Polonii, with bright, spacious rooms and friendly service. Bicycles and kayaks are for hire, and there's a restaurant on the premises.

Dom Polonii (☎ 023 692 9000; www.dompolonii.pultusk.pl; ul Szkolna 11; s/d/tr/ste 250/330/390/530zł; 📍) Housed in the restored and much-converted castle, Dom Polonii offers atmospheric accommodation in sepia-tinted rooms redolent of past elegance, with creaky parquet flooring and archaic plumbing. There are cheaper rooms in other buildings in and around the castle grounds (singles/doubles from 140/220zł).

Pułtusk has a very weak culinary scene. The best restaurants are inside the castle, but they can be disappointing for what you pay. For lunch, try the riverside Taverna.

Getting There & Away

Pultusk lies on the road from Warsaw to the Great Masurian Lakes. There's no railway in town, but there are regular buses to and from Warsaw (14zł, 1½ hours, half-hourly). Pultusk's **bus station** (☎ 023 692 2967; ul Nowy Rynek 3) is just off the main road through town, about 600m southwest of the Rynek.

TREBLINKA

In a peaceful clearing, hidden deep in the Mazovian pine forest, stands a granite monolith; around it is a field of 17,000 jagged, upright stones, many engraved with the name of a town or village. Beneath the grass, mingled with the sand, lie the ashes of some 800,000 human beings.

Treblinka, the site of the Nazis' second-largest extermination camp after Auschwitz, is another name that will forever be associated with the horror of the Holocaust. Between July 1942 and August 1943, on average more than 2000 people a day, mostly Jews, were gassed in the camp's massive gas chambers and their bodies burnt on huge, open-air cremation pyres.

Following an insurrection by the inmates in August 1943, the extermination camp was completely demolished and the area ploughed over and abandoned. The site of the camp is now the **Museum of Fighting & Martyrdom** (Muzeum Walki i Męczeństwa; ☎ 025 781 1658; admission incl museum 2zł; ☎ 24hr). Access is by a short road that branches off the Małkinia-Sokołów Podlaski road and leads to a car park and a **kiosk** (☎ 9am-7pm Apr-Oct, 9am-4pm Nov-Mar) that provides information and sells guidebooks. Across from the kiosk, the ground floor of a white building houses a small **museum** (☎ 9am-7pm) with factual yet chilling explanations of the camp (for example, gas chambers could hold up to 5000 people at one time) and a handful of the personal belongings of prisoners found at the site.

It's a 10-minute walk from the car park to the site of the **Treblinka II** extermination camp, alongside a symbolic railway representing the now-vanished line that brought the cattle trucks full of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto. The huge granite monument, 200m east of the ramp, stands on the site where the gas chambers were located. Around it is a vast symbolic cemetery in the form of a forest of granite stones representing the towns

and villages where the camp's victims came from. Unlike Auschwitz, nothing remains of the extermination camp, but the labels on the plan showing the original layout speak volumes: 'Building for Sorting Gold and Valuables'; 'Storehouse for Victims' Property (Disguised as Train Station)'; 'Barracks Where Women Undressed, Surrendered Valuables and Had Heads Shaven'; 'Approach to Gas Chambers'.

A further 20-minute walk leads to another clearing and the site of **Treblinka I**, a penal labour camp that was set up before Treblinka II, where remains of the camp, including the concrete foundations of the demolished barracks, have been preserved.

Getting There & Away

Treblinka is about 100km northeast of Warsaw, a two-hour drive away. Take Rte 8 towards Białystok, and 15km north of Wyszaków turn right on road No 694 (signposted Ciechanowiec). When you reach Małkinia (26km from the main road), take the first turn on the right (again signposted Ciechanowiec), then go right again immediately after the railway (road No 677 to Przewóz). You cross a rickety wooden bridge over the Bug River, then cross a railway line to reach Treblinka village (4km from Małkinia). Continue for another 4km through the hamlet of Poniatowo; the entrance to the site is the first turn on the right after you cross the railway line again.

Małkinia lies on the Warsaw-Białystok railway line; there are hourly trains from Warszawa Centralna every two hours, and more frequent ones from Warszawa Wilenska station (14zł to 22zł, 1½ hours). There are no buses to Treblinka so your only option (other than an 8km walk) is to take a taxi from the train station; reckon on paying between 60zł and 120zł, depending on how long you want the taxi to wait.

SOUTHERN PODLASIE

Southern Podlasie (pod-lah-sheh) fills a large swath of northeastern Poland, hogging much of the country's border with Belarus. More than any other region in this vast country, it is here that the influence of foreign cultures can be felt the strongest. The closer you get

to the last dictatorship in Europe, the more onion-shaped Orthodox domes you'll see and Belarusian language you'll hear. You'll also be witness to remnants of 17th-century Tatar settlement (see p145). Jews, who once populated the region, have left traces of their presence too (see p142).

Despite its rich cultural make-up, the main attraction here is nature. Podlasie literally means 'the land close to the forest', a moniker it has for good reason. This part of the world was once covered in primeval forest, and while much of it has fallen to the woodcutter's axe, a rich pocket still remains within the Białowieża National Park. Southern Podlasie is also home to unique lowland marches, which fall under the protection of the Biebrza and Narew National Parks; both offer excellent kayaking opportunities.

BIAŁYSTOK

pop 292,000

Białystok (byah-wis-tok) is Podlasie's metropolis and a large, busy city for these parts. Attractions are few, but its close proximity to the region's national parks makes it a good base, and the mix of Polish and Belarusian cultures gives it a special atmosphere found in no other Polish city.

The city may have been founded in the 16th century but it didn't begin to develop until the mid-18th century, when Jan Klemens Branicki, the commander of the Polish armed forces and owner of vast estates – including the town – established his residence here and built a palace. A century later the town received a new impetus from the textile industry, and eventually became Poland's largest textile centre after Łódź. The textile boom attracted an ethnic mix of entrepreneurs, including Poles, Jews, Russians, Belarusians and Germans, and by the outbreak of WWI Białystok had some 80,000 inhabitants and more than 250 textile factories.

During WWII the Nazis practically destroyed the city, murdering half its population, including almost all the Jews, and razing most of the industrial base and central district. Postwar reconstruction concentrated on tangible issues such as the recovery of industry, infrastructure and state administration, together with the provision of basic necessities. As you can still see today, historic and aesthetic values receded into the background.

Information

Bank BPH (Rynek Kościuszki 7)

EMPIK (☎ 085 743 5068; ul Sienkiewicza 3; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat) Some English-language books, magazines and newspapers.

Main post office (ul Warszawska 10)

Piramida Café (☎ 085 742 1818; ul Grochowa 2; per hr 5zł; ☎ 8am-midnight Mon-Fri, 9am-midnight Sat & Sun) Internet access.

Tourist Information Point (Punkt Informacji Turystycznej; ☎ 085 732 6831; ul Malmeda 6; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Plenty of information on the region; gives advice on obtaining a Belarus visa.

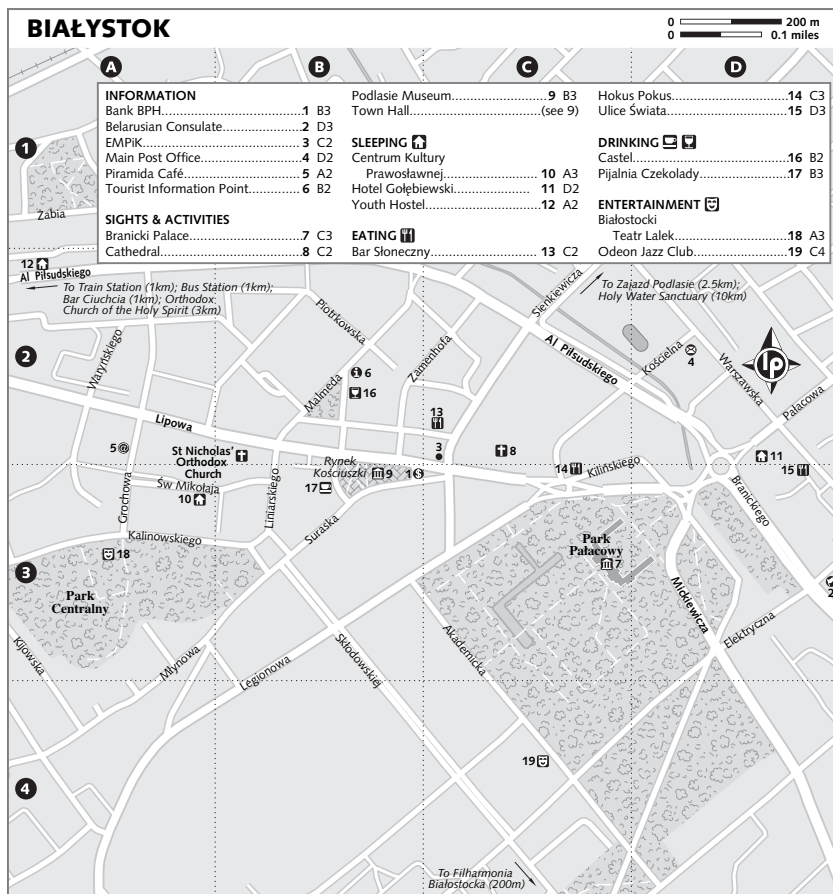
Sights

The centre of the city is marked by the triangular Rynek Kościuszki, the former market square, with its 18th-century **town hall** in the middle. The town hall was rebuilt from scratch after the war and now houses the **Podlasie Museum** (Muzeum Podlaskie; ☎ 085 742 1473; Rynek Kościuszki 10; adult/concession 4/2zł; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), which features a modest collection of Polish painting on the ground floor, including some important names such as Malczewski and Witkacy, and archaeological finds from a Viking village unearthed near Elbląg.

In Park Pałacowy to the east of the square stands the former residence of Jan Klemens Branicki, **Branicki Palace** (Pałac Branickich). Branicki, once a contender for the Polish crown, built the palace as a residence that would rival the king's in importance and luxury after losing to Stanisław August Poniatowski in royal elections. Burned down in 1944 by the retreating Nazis, the palace was restored to its original 18th-century shape, but the interior, which is off limits to the public, was largely modernised. The landscaped gardens are free to wander, however.

Across the road from the palace is a strange merger of two churches: a small 17th-century **old parish church** and, attached to it, a huge mock-Gothic **cathedral**. The latter was constructed at the beginning of the 20th century as an 'extension' of the former, the only way to bypass the tsarist bureaucracy that officially forbade Poles to build new Catholic churches.

It's worth making a detour outside the central area to the modern **Orthodox Church of the Holy Spirit** (Cerkiew Św Ducha; ☎ 085 653 2854; ul Antoniuk Fabryczny 13), 3km northwest of the centre (bus 5 from ul Lipowa in the centre will let you off nearby). Begun in the early 1980s, this monumental building is the largest Orthodox



church in Poland. The huge, central, onion-shaped dome is topped with a large cross (weighing 1500kg) symbolising Christ, while 12 smaller crosses around it represent the apostles. The spacious interior boasts a spectacular main iconostasis and two smaller ones on either side, and a fantastic giant chandelier. The church is locked, except for daily morning services and Sunday Mass, but enquire at the **church office** (kancelaria kościelna; ☎ 8-11am & 3-5pm Mon-Fri) in the house behind the church, and somebody may open it for you.

Sleeping

Youth Hostel (☎ 085 652 4250; www.ssm.bialystok.ids.pl; Al Piłsudskiego 7b; dm 23-33zł; ☎ year-round; (P)) This modern hostel is housed in an old-style villa,

incongruously set amid concrete apartment blocks (it's tucked away from the street behind block No 7). It offers accommodation in pine bunk beds in wood-panelled dorms of six to 16 beds, with kitchen and 24-hour reception.

Zajazd Podlasie (☎ 085 675 0586; www.hotel.podlasie.pl; ul 27 Lipca 24/1; s/d 120/135zł; (P) (A)) About 2.5km northeast of the centre, this purpose-built hotel comes with crisp, modern rooms and no-nonsense functional décor. There's also a restaurant on site and a bus stop in front of the main doors – take bus 3, 6 or 18 northbound from ul Sienkiewicza, or bus 18 from the train station.

Centrum Kultury Prawosławnej (☎ 085 744 3010; ckp@orthodox.bialystok.pl; ul Św Mikołaja 5; s/d 70/140zł; ☎) In a great location only a few minutes' stroll

from the city centre is this cultural centre, run by the Orthodox Church community. It offers quiet, nonsmoking guest rooms, some with private bathrooms, to all comers.

Hotel Gołębiowski (☎ 085 678 2500; www.golebiowski.pl; ul Pałacowa 7; s/d 196/217zł; (P) (A) (B)) The almost unpronounceable Gołębiowski is a business-oriented hotel, a faceless multistorey block concealing spacious modern rooms and a swimming pool, sauna and Jacuzzi complex. There's a 30% discount on weekends.

Eating & Drinking

Hokus Pokus (☎ 085 740 3026; ul Kilińskiego 12; mains 10-20zł, pizzas 10-25zł; ☎ 8am-11pm Mon-Sat, 10am-11pm Sun) Hokus Pokus doesn't quite get its décor right – chrome, sheepskin and stainless steel don't work well together – but its food is another matter. Excellent pizza, pasta, steaks and burgers keep locals coming back time and time again. It's family friendly and has top fruit drinks.

Ulice Świata (☎ 085 740 4161; ul Warszawska 30a; mains 10-20zł; ☎ 1-11pm) The menu at this attractive two-level place offers a huge range of dishes from all over the world, from African and American to Mexican and Mediterranean.

Pijalnia Czekolady (☎ 085 742 0647; Rynek Kościuszki 17; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-10pm Sat & Sun) Serving fabulous chocolate in the form of drinks, cakes and sweets, Pijalnia is a chocolate-lover's dream come true. Willy Wonka would be proud of its chocolate fountain, and there's outdoor seating overlooking the main square.

Castel (☎ 085 732 6865; ul Spółdzielca 10; ☎ 11am-midnight Mon-Fri, noon-1am Sat & Sun) Castel is a hugely popular bar with two distinct sections – a romantic, dimly lit interior and a boisterous outdoor terrace. Grab your drink at the bar, otherwise you'll be waiting all night to be served.

Białystok has many cheap and cheerful eateries, including **Bar Słoneczny** (☎ 085 743 5815; ul Sienkiewicza 5; mains 6-10zł; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, 11am-5pm Sun) and **Bar Ciuchcia** (ul Kolejowa; kebabs 8-11zł; ☎ 9am-10pm); the former has a large outdoor patio while the latter churns out excellent kebabs from a dinky steam engine in front of the train station.

Entertainment

Odeon Jazz Club (☎ 085 742 4988; ul Akademicka 10/1; ☎ noon-11pm Sun & Mon, noon-1am Tue-Thu, noon-3am Fri & Sat) The circular Odeon attracts a 30s to 40s

crowd with live jazz and blues on Friday and DJs spinning tunes from the '60s, '70s and '80s on Saturday.

Filharmonia Białostocka (☎ 085 732 2331; ul Podleśna 2; ☎ box office 10am-5pm Tue-Thu, 10am-7pm Fri) Holds concerts of classical music every Friday, as well as hosting special events and visiting orchestras.

Białostocki Teatr Lalek (☎ 085 742 5031; ul Kalinowskiego 1) One of Poland's best puppet theatres, it stages children's shows, such as *Pinocchio* or *Punch and Judy* as well as traditional Polish stories, at least three or four times a week.

Getting There & Away

The Dworzec PKS **bus station** (ul Bohaterów Monte Cassino 10) and Dworzec PKP **train station** (ul Dworcowa 1) are next to each other, about 2km west of the central area. You can walk to the centre in 20 minutes, or take bus 2, 4 or 28 to Rynek Kościuszki.

BUS

There are regular PKS buses from Warszawa (Warszawa Stadion) to Białystok (26zł, 3¼ hours, seven daily), and Polski Express buses from Warsaw airport (41zł, four hours, one daily). Buses to Augustów (15zł to 18zł, two hours) leave seven times a day, to Olsztyn (28zł, five hours) three times a day, and to Gdańsk (44zł, nine hours) once a day at 6.10am.

TRAIN

The main intercity rail services are to Warszawa (Warszawa Wschodnia station; 35zł, 2½ hours, every two hours), and Gdańsk (49zł, 7½ hours, two daily) via Olsztyn. There is one direct overnight train to Kraków (54zł, eight hours); otherwise a change in Warsaw is required.

AROUND BIAŁYSTOK

About 10km north of Białystok is the **Holy Water Sanctuary** (Sanktuarium Święta Woda), where a miraculous spring has been a site of pilgrimage since the early 18th century. In 1997 the nearby hill was declared a Monument to the Third Millennium, or the Mountain of Crosses, and all heaven broke loose. Crowds of pilgrims have rushed to visit the site, leaving crosses of every shape and size. There are now more than 10,000 crosses and the number grows with every year.

The site is next to the road to Sokółka, 2km north of Wasilków, opposite a yellow Pronar petrol station. To get there, take bus 100 from ul Bohaterów Monte Cassino opposite the PKS bus terminal in Białystok.

TYKOCIN

pop 1900

Like so many of the region's sleepy towns, Tykocin's (ti-ko-cheen) importance lies in its past. It started life as a stronghold of the Mazovian dukes, but its real growth didn't begin until the 15th century and was further accelerated after the town became the property of King Zygmunt II August in 1543. It was during this period that Jews started to settle in Tykocin, their community growing rapidly to define the town's character for the next four centuries. They also built the town's greatest monument, a 17th-century synagogue that miraculously survived WWII.

By the end of the 18th century Tykocin's fortunes had changed and the town gradually slid into decline. During WWII it lost all its Jews – half of the town's population – and then in 1950 it was deprived of its town charter, to become an ordinary village. It recovered its charter in 1994, but otherwise nothing has changed; only a few historic buildings survive as evidence of the town's illustrious past.

Sights

Tykocin's **synagogue** is one of the best-preserved in Poland, its four-square form dominating the western part of town, which was traditionally the Jewish quarter. This sober-looking edifice, erected in 1642, remained in use for religious services right up until WWII.

Renovated after the war, the synagogue is now the **Tykocin Museum** (☎ 085 718 1613; ul Koźca 2; adult/concession 5/3zł; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun). The interior, with a massive almehar (raised platform on which the reading desk stands) in the centre and an elaborate Aron Kodesh (the Holy Ark where the Torah scrolls are kept) in the eastern wall, has preserved many of the original wall paintings, including Hebraic inscriptions. Adjacent to the former prayer room is a small exhibition containing photos and documents of Tykocin's Jewish community and objects related to religious ritual, such as elaborate brass and silver hanukiah (candelabras), Talmudic books and liturgical equipment. There's an extension of the

museum in the **Talmudic house**, right behind the synagogue, which is used mostly for temporary exhibitions. Tours of the synagogue leave at 10am and 5pm and are included in the cost of admission.

At the opposite end of the town stands the 18th-century Baroque **Holy Trinity Church** (Kościół Św Trójcy). Two symmetrical towers linked to the main building by arched galleries overlook the spacious Rynek (called Plac Czarnieckiego). In the middle of the square stands the **Monument to Stefan Czarniecki**, a national hero who distinguished himself in battles against the Swedes. The statue, from the 1760s, is one of the oldest secular monuments in Poland. Next to the church is the squat **Alumnat**, the world's first hospice for war veterans, dating from 1633. It still provides food and lodging, but nowadays for tourists.

Sleeping & Eating

Dom Pod Czarnym Bocianem (☎ 085 718 7408; www.czarnyboecian.prv.pl; ul Poświętna 16; d 80zł) About 100m east of the Holy Trinity Church, the 'House Beneath the Black Stork' is a pleasant guest-house run by a local couple in a modern villa on the bank of the Narew River. There are five double rooms with en suite bathrooms. Guests have use of the kitchen for fixing snacks and meals and can use kayaks free of charge.

our pick **Kiermusy Dworek Nad Łąkami** (☎ 085 718 7444, in Białystok 085 718 7444; www.kiermusy.com.pl; Kiermusy; s/d 190/250zł, Manor 450–800zł, castle apt from 900zł; ☎ ☎) The 'Manor House on the Meadow' is a small, rural village of wooden houses and accompanying countryside inn. The inn is decorated in traditional Polish style, while the houses have a distinctive rustic look, although they're modern where it counts (kitchen and bathroom). About 800m from the manor house and connected by a raised wooden walkway through reedy marshes is a faux-medieval castle that also has accommodation. Food is served in the inn. It is 3km northwest of Tykocin, on the road towards the village of Nieciecie.

our pick **Restauracja Tejsza** (☎ 085 718 7750; ul Koźca 2; mains 10–20zł; ☎ 10am–8pm) In the basement of the Talmudic house (enter from the back), this basic eatery serves excellent and inexpensive home-cooked kosher meals, including some of the best *pierogi* in the country. There's also an outdoor seating area.

POLAND'S STORK VILLAGE

Storks are a common sight in towns and villages across Podlasie, where artificial platforms are carefully constructed for the lanky white birds to build their nests upon. But **Pentowo**, a collection of farm buildings 2km northwest of Tykocin on the road to Kiermusy, holds the title of Poland's Stork Village. In 1991 a hurricane ripped through the village, snapping many of the trees like twigs, and over the ensuing years storks began to nest in the broken treetops. Storks are notoriously inept at building their homes, so the locals decided to give these bringers of happiness and babies a lending hand, and eight platforms were built.

Today Pentowo can boast 23 nests and at times more than 70 birds. The best time to see nesting storks is between April and August – by the time September comes around they're on their long journey south to Africa.

Getting There & Away

Tykocin is served by hourly buses from Białystok (9zł, one hour); buses stop at the Rynek, 100m from the synagogue.

NOWOGRÓD

pop 2000

Nowogród (no-vo-groot) is similar in every way to all the other small, rural towns in the western reaches of Podlasie, except two – it has a notable skansen and direct access to the Narew River. The town's inhabitants, known as the Kurpie, are also special in their own way. They have developed a distinctive style of dress, music and house decoration over the centuries, but are best known in Poland for their paper cutouts and weaving.

Founded in 1927, **Skansen Kurpiowski** (☎ 086 217 5562; ul Zamkowa 25; adult/concession 6/4zł; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri, 10am–5pm Sat & Sun May–Sep, 9am–2pm Mon–Fri Oct–Apr) is the second-oldest museum of its kind in Poland, spectacularly located on a wooded bank overlooking the Narew. Like the rest of the town, it was destroyed during WWII and rebuilt from scratch. Most of the buildings, however, are genuine 19th-century pieces of rural wooden architecture collected from all over the Kurpie region. There are 34 buildings, including cottages, barns, granaries and mills with fine architectural detail and elaborate decoration. One close to the river offers snacks and drinks. There's also a collection of charming beehives, including some fashioned from hollow tree trunks.

Sleeping options include the modern **Hotel Zbyszko** (☎ 086 217 5518; www.zbyszko.com; ul Obrońców Nowogrodu 2; s/d/t 110/150/190zł; ☎ ☎), beside the Narew on the road out of town to Zbójna. It's perfectly placed for trips up (if you're fit) and down the river; kayaks are available for 25zł per day.

The skansen is best visited with your own transport, as you'll need to travel to Łomża, the nearest sizable town, to find a bus connection (four daily). The bus stop is on the Rynek, a few minutes' walk from the skansen.

BIEBRZA NATIONAL PARK

The Biebrza (*byehb-zhah*) National Park (Biebrzański Park Narodowy) is Poland's largest and longest, stretching more than 100km from close to the Belarus border to the Narew River near Tykocin. Established in 1993, it's a relatively new park but a very important one, protecting the **Biebrza Valley**, Central Europe's largest area of natural bog.

The varied landscape consists of river sprawls, peat bogs, marshes and damp forests. Typical local flora includes numerous species of moss, reed grass and a range of medicinal herbs. The fauna is rich and diverse, and features mammals such as wolves, wild boar, foxes, roe deer, otters and beavers. The king of the park, however, is the elk: about half of the country's population, around 500 animals, live within the park's borders.

Bird-watchers flock to the Biebrza to glimpse the 270 or so bird species (over half of all species recorded in Poland) that call the park home. Storks, cranes, hawks, curlews, snipe, ruffs, egrets, harriers, crakes, sandpipers, owls, shrikes and at least half a dozen species of warblers are the more common varieties, while the great snipe, the white-winged black tern and the aquatic warbler are more rare.

Information

Entry to the park costs 4/2zł per adult/concession and can be paid at the **visitors information centre** (☎ 086 272 0620; www.biebrza.org.pl; Osowiec; ☎ 8am–7pm daily May–Sep, 8am–3pm Mon–Fri Oct–Apr) by the park's headquarters, just along the road

from Osowiec-Twierdza train station. The helpful English-speaking staff will provide information about the park and its facilities. You'll be able to get details of where to stay and eat (or to buy food), and advice on the best spots for watching different bird species and how to get there. The centre provides information on where to find guides (35zł to 40zł an hour per group), kayaks (per hour/day 4/20zł) and canoes (5/30zł). The office is stocked with maps and brochures on the park, some of which are in English. The 1:100,000-scale *Biebrzański Park Narodowy* map (12zł) is among the best, with descriptions of half- and full-day hiking and kayaking trips in several languages.

Sights & Activities

The park can be broadly divided into three areas: the **Northern Basin** (Basen Północny), the smallest and least-visited area of the park; the **Middle Basin** (Basen Środkowy), stretching along the river's broad middle course and featuring a combination of wet forests and bogs; and the equally extensive **Southern Basin** (Basen Południowy), where most of the terrain is taken up by marshes and peat bogs. The showpiece is the **Red Marsh** (Czerwone Bagno) in the Middle Basin, a strictly protected nature reserve encompassing a wet alder forest that is inhabited by about 400 elks.

With over 200km of water trails crisscrossing the length of the valley, the best way to explore the park is by **boat**. The principal water route flows from the town of Lipsk downstream along the Biebrza to the village of Wizna. This 140km stretch can be paddled at a leisurely pace in seven to nine days. Bivouac sites along the river allow for overnight stops and food is available in towns on the way. The visitors information centre in Osowiec-Twierdza can provide maps and information. You can also hire a kayak for just a few hours or a day and cover part of the route; a handy two-hour stretch runs from Goniądz to Osowiec-Twierdza (kayaks can be rented from Goniądz' camping ground). Access to kayak trails costs 5.50zł for adults and 3.50zł for students and children per day on top of hire charges. The park is also connected to Augustów via the Augustów Canal (p156).

Despite its overall marshy character, large parts of the park can be explored relatively easily by **bicycle** and on **foot**. About 250km of signposted trails have been tracked through the

most interesting areas, including nearly 50km through the Red Marsh alone. Dikes, boulders and dunes among the bogs provide access to some splendid bird-watching sites. Several viewing towers on the edge of the marshland allow for more general views of the park.

One of the most celebrated festivals in the park's calendar is the **National Championships in Scything Boggy Meadows for Nature**, held on the second weekend of September. Teams from all over the country turn up with scythes in hand, all eager to be the quickest to cut 100m of bog meadow. It's both a fun day out and ecologically sound – if the grass was left to grow, birds would have trouble nesting in the meadows.

Sleeping

There are several bivouac sites within the park and more outside its boundaries. The three most strategically located are in Osowiec-Twierdza (2km from the information centre), Grzędę (a gateway to the Red Marsh) and Barwik (close to the great snipe's habitat). All three are accessible by road and have car parks. You'll pay about 5zł per person per night to pitch your tent. There are also five rooms (for up to 16 people) in the **hunting lodge** (per person 30zł) in Grzędę.

The nearest camping grounds and hotels to the park are in Goniądz, Mońki and Rajgród. Youth hostels in the region include those in Goniądz, Grajewo, Osowiec-Twierdza and Wizna; all are open in July and August only. There are also about 70 **agrotourist farms** (d 30-35zł) in the region – the park's visitors information centre can provide details, as can its website (most listings are in the Polish-language section).

Getting There & Around

Osowiec-Twierdza is 50km northwest of Białystok, and sits on the railway line between Białystok (10zł to 16zł, one hour, five daily) and Elk (9zł to 14zł, 40 minutes, five daily). The park office is just 200m from Osowiec-Twierdza station, and there are hiking trails and lookout towers within a few kilometres.

Having your own transport is a huge advantage, as you can easily access most of the park's major attractions.

NAREW NATIONAL PARK

Another marshland nature reserve, the Narew (*nah-ref*) National Park (Narwiański Park Narodowy) is just as interesting as Biebrza

but not as geared towards visitors. The park protects an unusual stretch of the Narew River that's nicknamed the 'Polish Amazon', where the river splits into dozens of channels that spread out across a 2km-wide valley, forming a constellation of swampy islets in-between.

The park encompasses an area of about 73 sq km, 25% of which is bog and a further 3% water. Predictably, the most abundant flora and fauna species are those accustomed to aquatic conditions, including the omnipresent white-and-yellow water lilies. Among the 40 mammal species, the beaver is the most characteristic inhabitant, numbering at least 260 individuals living in about 70 lodges. The area is a favourite ground for birds, with as many as 180 species identified in the park, including about 150 species that breed here.

Sights & Activities

The most interesting area is the northwestern part of the park, where the watery labyrinth of channels is most extensive. The best way to get a taste of the marshland is by **kayak or boat** (trails adult/concession 4/2zł). Paddling through narrow, snaking channels and ponds with water so crystal clear you can see fish and plants to a depth of 2m is a highlight of a trip to the park. The best time for bird-watching is either early morning or late afternoon, when water birds are most active.

The main starting points for exploring the park are the tiny hamlet of Kurowo and the village of Uhowo. **Kurowo** sits on the left (western) bank of the Narew, connected to the outer world only by a rough road, which rarely sees a passing car. The central point of this tiny place is a late-19th-century country mansion that houses the **Narew National Park Headquarters** (☎ 085 718 1417; www.npn.pl; 🕒 7.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) and a small exhibition on the park's natural history. Here you can pay the park admission (adult/concession 5/1.20zł), camp near the building (per person 2.50zł; toilets but no showers) and rent kayaks (per hour/day 5/30zł). There's no restaurant so bring your own food or time your visit to coincide with the **Podlasie Honey Feast** on the last weekend of August. It's the biggest party on the national park's calendar, with beekeepers and local folk artists gathering to promote their wares.

Uhowo, near Łapy at the southern end of the park, is larger. This is the home base of **Kaylon** (☎ 050 250 8050; www.kaylon.pl; ul Kolejowa 8), an agency that organises canoeing expeditions

through the park from May to September. It charges 150zł per day for a guide, 26zł for kayak hire, 32zł for a three-person Canadian canoe and 1.40zł per km for transport.

Getting There & Around

There's no public transport to Kurowo, so without a car or bike you'll have a bit of a walk. The starting point is the village of Stare Jeżewo, 28km west of Białystok, on the main road (No 8) towards Warsaw. It's serviced by frequent buses from Białystok (every two hours). From Stare Jeżewo, walk 500m south on the road to Sokoły, and turn left at the first (unsigned) crossroads. Follow this side road for 3km until you reach another crossroads where the sealed surface ends. Take the road to the right (south) for another 1km until you see a large brick granary where the road divides. Take the left-hand fork for the last 1km to Kurowo. It takes a bit over an hour, but it's a pleasant walk through a bucolic landscape.

KRUSZYNIANY & BOHONIKI

These two small villages, close to the Belarusian border to the east and northeast of Białystok, are noted for their timber mosques, the only surviving historic mosques in Poland. They were built by the Muslim Tatars, who settled here at the end of the 17th century.

Kruszyniany (*kroo-shi-nya-ni*) is the larger of the two villages and also contains the larger of the two mosques. Its green **mosque** (☎ 0502 543 871; adult/concession 3/2zł; 🕒 9am-7pm May-Oct, by appointment Nov-Apr) is an 18th-century rustic wooden construction, in many ways similar to old timber Christian churches. You'll find it hidden in a cluster of trees, set back from the main road in the central part of the village.

The mosque's modest interior, made entirely from pine, is divided into two rooms, the smaller one designed for women, who are not allowed into the main prayer hall (unless they're a tourist). The latter, with carpets covering the floor, has a small recess in the wall, the mihrab, in the direction of Mecca. Next to it is the *minbar*, a pulpit from which the imam says prayers. The painted texts hanging on the walls, the Muhirs, are verses from the Quran.

The mosque is used for worship, and on the most solemn holy days there may not be enough room inside for all the congregation. Dress properly (no bare legs) and remove shoes before entering the prayer hall.

Kruszyniany's **Mizar** (Muslim cemetery) is located in the patch of woodland 100m beyond the mosque. The recent gravestones are Christian in style, showing the extent of cultural assimilation that has taken place, and are on the edge of the graveyard. Go deeper into the wood, where you'll find old tombstones hidden in the undergrowth. Some of them are inscribed in Russian, a legacy of tsarist times.

The **mosque** of **Bohoniki** is similar to Kruszyniany's mosque in its decoration and atmosphere, though the Bohoniki mosque is more modest and its new pinewood panelling has been left unpainted. It, too, can be visited; the keys are kept at the house across the road from the mosque. Bohoniki's **Mizar** is about 1km north of the mosque at the edge of a tree grove; walk to the outskirts of the village then turn left up a tree-lined dirt road. As in Kruszyniany, the old tombstones are further afield, overgrown by bushes and grass.

There is no accommodation or place to eat in Bohoniki, but Kruszyniany has both. **Dworek Pod Lipami** (☎ 085 722 7554; www.dworek.podlipami.pl; ul Kruszyniany 51; s/d 50/100zł; (P)), almost opposite the mosque, is a lovely manor house with comfortable rooms and incredibly friendly staff. Traditional Tatar food and drink from the region is served, such as *babka ziemniaczana* (potato cakes) and *barsacz* (hot beetroot juice). Only a few doors down is **Tatarska Jurta** (☎ 085 749 4052; ul Kruszyniany 58; mains 10-20zł; ☎ 10am-8pm), a restaurant that also serves traditional Tatar dishes and wonderful homemade cakes; you can even watch as your host does the preparation and cooking. Take some time to check out its authentic Mongolian yurt in the back yard, which is held together by camel-hair rope.

The two villages are 37km apart, each about 50km from Białystok, and are best reached by car. Visiting by public transport is not feasible.

HAJNÓWKA

pop 22,200

Set on the edge of the Białowieża Forest, Hajnówka (high-*noof*-kah) is the main gateway for the Białowieża National Park. The town itself won't hold your attention for long, but its tourist office is an excellent place to pick up information on Białowieża and activities in the region.

Information

Białowieża Forest Regional Tourist Office

(Centrum Turystyki Regionu Puszczy Białowiejskiej; ☎ 085 682 4381; www.powiat.hajnowka.pl; ul 3 Maja 45; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat May-Sep, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) Very knowledgeable and provides maps and booklets in English.

Sights

The **Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity** (Cerkiew Św Trójcy; ☎ 085 873 2971; ul Dziewiatowskiego 13) is the town's major (well, only) sight and arguably one of the most beautiful modern Orthodox churches in Poland. Begun in the early 1970s and fully completed two decades later, the irregular structure, covered by an undulating roof, supports two slender towers, the main one 50m high. The bold, unconventional design, the work of Polish architect Aleksander Grygorowicz, has resulted in a powerful and impressive building. Its creators have also done a good job inside. The icons and frescoes include the work of Jerzy Nowosielski, and the stained-glass windows are from a Kraków workshop.

The **church office** (kancelaria kościelna; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) is in the house next to the church. If you enquire there during opening hours one of the priests will show you around the church. Otherwise try to time your visit to coincide with the services (10am Sunday, 8am weekdays).

Hajnówka's only other attraction is somewhat less spiritual, but probably more famous. **Bar U Wołodzi** (☎ 085 682 4626; ul 3 Maja 34a) is known throughout Poland for its bizarre collection of communist memorabilia and dozens of Soviet uniforms. It was closed at the time of research due to the owner's poor health but hopefully it will reopen soon.

Sleeping

Most people simply pass through Hajnówka on their way to or from Białowieża, but if you have to stay the night head for the bright and modern **Hotelik Orzechowski** (☎ 085 682 2758; www.hotel-orzechowski.com.pl; ul Piłsudskiego 14; s/d/tr 100/140/180zł; (P)), southeast of the tourist office.

Getting There & Away

The train and bus stations are next to each other, south of the main road junction and roundabout in the middle of town. There are

THE TATARS OF POLAND

In the 13th century large parts of Eastern Europe were ravaged by hordes of fierce Mongol horsemen from Central Asia. These savage nomadic warriors (commonly, though confusingly, referred to in Europe as the Tatars) came from the great Mongol empire of Genghis Khan, which at its peak stretched from the Black Sea to the Pacific. They first invaded Poland in 1241 and repeatedly overran and destroyed most of Silesia and Małopolska, the royal city of Kraków included. They withdrew from Europe as fast as they came, leaving few traces other than some folk stories. Not long after, the empire broke up into various independent khanates.

By the end of the 14th century, Poland and Lithuania faced an increasing threat from the north, from where the Teutonic order swiftly expanded southwards and eastwards over their territories. As a measure of protection, Lithuania (which was soon to enter into a political alliance with Poland) began looking for migrants eager to settle its almost uninhabited borderland fringes. It welcomed the refugees and prisoners of war from the Crimean and Volgan khanates, offspring of the once powerful Golden Horde state ruled by the heirs of Genghis Khan. The new settlers were Muslim Tatars of a different tribal background.

The Tatars' military involvement in Polish affairs began in 1410 at the Battle of Grunwald, where King Jagiełło defeated the Teutonic Knights; in this battle a small unit of Tatar horsemen fought alongside the Polish-Lithuanian forces. From that time the numbers of Tatar settlers grew, and so did their participation in battles in defence of their adopted homeland. By the 17th century, they had several cavalry formations reinforcing Polish troops in the wars, which were particularly frequent at that time.

In 1683, after the victory over the Turks at the Battle of Vienna, King Jan III Sobieski granted land in the eastern strip of Poland to those who had fought under the Polish flag. The Tatars founded new settlements here and built their mosques. Of all these villages, only Kruszyniany and Bohoniki have preserved some of their Tatar inheritance, though apart from their mosques and cemeteries not much else remains. The original population either integrated or left, and there are only a few families living here today who are true descendants of the Tatars.

Of a total of some 3000 people of Tatar origin in Poland, the majority found homes in large cities such as Warsaw, Białystok and Gdańsk. Nonetheless, they flock together in Kruszyniany and Bohoniki for important holy days, as Poland's only mosques (apart from one built in Gdańsk in the 1990s) are here. And they usually end up here at the local Tatar graveyards, two of only three still in use in the country (the other is in Warsaw).

hourly buses from Białystok to Hajnówka (8zł, two hours).

From Warsaw, you can take a fast train from Warszawa Wschodnia to Siedlce, and connect with the slow train to Hajnówka (32zł to 42zł, 3½ to four hours, two daily). There's also one direct train from Warsaw to Hajnówka (31zł, 3½ hours), which runs on Saturday year-round and daily in August.

BIAŁOWIEŻA NATIONAL PARK

The Białowieża (byah-wo-vyeh-zhah) National Park (Białowiecki Park Narodowy) is the oldest national park in the country, and is famous as the place where the European bison was successfully reintroduced into the wild (see boxed text, p70). The park protects a small part of a much bigger forest known as the **Białowieża Forest** (Puszcza Białowiejska),

which straddles the border between Poland and Belarus.

The *puszcza* (primeval forest) was once an immense and barely accessible forest stretching for hundreds of kilometres, but is now reduced to an area of about 1200 sq km, distributed approximately evenly between Poland and Belarus. In the 15th century it became a private hunting ground for Polish monarchs and later for Russian tsars. During WWI the Germans exploited it intensively, felling around five million cu metres of timber. The gradual colonisation and exploitation of its margins has also diminished the forest's area and altered its ecosystem. Even so, this vast forest, protected for so long by royal patronage, has preserved its primeval core largely untouched, and is the largest area of original lowland forest left in Europe.

Soon after WWI the central part of the *puszcza* was made a nature reserve, and in 1932 it was formally converted into a national park. Today the total area of the park is 105 sq km, of which 47 sq km is strictly protected. It is included on Unesco's World Heritage List. Unfortunately the region of forest outside the national park's borders is still under threat of logging – see the Environment chapter (p68) for more details.

Orientation

The starting point for excursions into the national park is the village of Białowieża, 85km southeast of Białystok. It has information points, accommodation, food and several travel agencies that can organise visits to the Strictly Protected Area of the park.

The village straggles along for about 3km on the southern edge of the national park, centred on the rectangular Park Pałacowy (Palace Park), which contains the Natural History Museum. The tourist office and Hotel Żubrówka are at the southern entrance to Park Pałacowy; the youth hostel is near its eastern entrance.

If you're arriving by bus from Hajnówka, there are three bus stops in Białowieża: one at the entrance to the village, one just after Hotel Żubrówka (closest to the PTTK office), and one at the post office (closest to the youth hostel and museum).

MAPS

The 1:85,000 *Białowieża Forest & Neighbourhood* map by CartoMedia has English-language information, street plans of Hajnówka and Białowieża, and marked cycle and walking paths through the forest. It's on sale in bookshops in Warsaw and Białystok, and at the PTTK offices in Hajnówka and Białowieża.

Information

MONEY

Hotel Żubrówka (☎ 085 681 2303; ul Olgi Gabiec 6) Has an ATM right outside its entrance.

TOURIST INFORMATION

National Park Information Point (☎ 085 681 2901; www.bpn.com.pl; Park Pałacowy; ☎ 8am-4pm Tue-Sun May-Sep) A small wooden hut at the eastern entrance to Park Pałacowy; information is also available at the Natural History Museum.

PTTK Tourist Service (Biuro Usług Turystycznych PTTK; ☎ 085 681 2295; www.pttk.bialowieza.pl; ul Kolejowa

CROSSING INTO BELARUS

Those wishing to visit the Belarusian half of the Białowieża Forest can pick up a three-day visa at Hotel Żubrówka. The fee, however, is quite steep at US\$54 – US\$50 for the visa and US\$4 for compulsory insurance. A passport-size photo is also required, and it takes about three days to process the papers. Note that the border crossing at Białowieża is for walkers and cyclists only.

17; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat) Arranges guides, accommodation and bike hire (5/25zł per hour/day).

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Soon after your arrival check with a travel agency about visiting the Strictly Protected Area, as all visitors must be accompanied by a guide and it may take a while to arrange one or to gather a group to share the costs.

There are several agencies that organise trips. The major operator is PTTK Tourist Service, which organises English-, German- or Russian-speaking guides (165zł for up to three hours) for visits to the Strictly Protected Area, and trips by *bryczka* (horse-drawn cart) or sledge in winter (from 140zł for four people). Weekends are the best times to join English-speaking tours.

Other agencies with English-speaking guides:

Biuro Turystyki Ryś (☎ 085 681 2249; ul Krzyże 22)

Nature Tour (☎ 085 681 2007; naturetour@wp.pl; Park Dyrekcyjny 4/1)

Puszcza Białowieska (☎ 085 681 2898; bup@tlen.pl; Natural History Museum, Park Pałacowy)

Sights

STRICTLY PROTECTED AREA

Dating from 1921, the **Strictly Protected Area** (SPA, Obszar Ochrony Ścisłej; adult/child 6/3zł) is the oldest section of the national park, covering an area of around 4750 hectares, bordered to the north and west by the marshy Hwoźna and Narewka Rivers, and to the east by the Bielawiezska Primeval Forest National Park in Belarus.

The terrain is mostly flat, swampy in parts, and covered with mixed forest of oak, hornbeam, spruce and pine. Ancient trees reach spectacular sizes uncommon elsewhere, with spruce 50m high and oak trunks 2m in

diameter; some of the oak trees are more than 500 years old. The forest is home to a variety of large mammals, including elks, stags, roe deer, wild boar, lynxes, wolves, beavers and the uncontested king of the *puszcza*, the bison. There are about 120 species of birds, including owls, cranes, storks, hazelhens and nine species of woodpecker.

The SPA can be entered only in the company of an official guide, who can be hired through travel agencies (opposite). You can hike, or travel by horse-drawn cart or, in winter, horse-drawn sledge. The standard tour takes about three hours, but longer routes, including some of the more remote areas, are also available (around six hours, 330zł).

Hiking is probably the best way to get a close feel for the forest, and the most popular with visitors. The normal route follows an 8km trail, which takes about three to four hours. The reserve gets pretty swampy in spring (March to April) and may at times be closed to visitors.

PALACE PARK

At the end of the 19th century, **Park Pałacowy** (Palace Park; admission free; ☎ 24hr) was laid out around a splendid palace built for the Russian tsar in 1894 on the site of an ancient royal hunting lodge once used by Polish kings. The **Russian Orthodox Church**, outside the eastern entrance to the park, was built at the same time. The southern entrance to Park Pałacowy, beside the PTTK office, leads across a fish pond past a stone **obelisk**, which commemorates a bison hunt led by King August III Saxon in 1752. The royal bag that day was 42 bison, 13 elks and two roe deer.

The avenue leads uphill past a redbrick **gate**, which is all that remains of the tsar's palace – it was burned to the ground by retreating Nazis in 1944. The palace site is now occupied by the **Natural History Museum** (Muzeum Przyrodniczo-Leśne; ☎ 085 681 2275; Park Pałacowy; adult/concession 12/6zł; viewing tower & temporary exhibitions 6/3zł; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun mid-Apr-mid-Oct, 9am-4pm Tue-Sun mid-Oct-mid-Apr), which features exhibitions relating to the flora and fauna of the park (mostly forest scenes with stuffed animals and a collection of plants), the park's history, and the archaeology and ethnography of the region. The permanent exhibition can be seen only by **guided tour** (up to 25 persons 55zł), which adds flavour to an otherwise static museum but is a tad expensive

if your group numbers are small. The viewing tower provides terrific views over the village, and just north of the museum you will find a grove of 250-year-old oaks.

BISON RESERVE

If you don't have time for a guided tour of the SPA, get a close look at some of the wildlife in the **Bison Reserve** (Rezerwat Żubrów; ☎ 085 681 2398; adult/concession 6/3zł; ☎ 9am-5pm daily May-Sep, 8am-4pm Tue-Sun Oct-Apr), a park where animals typical of the *puszcza*, including bison, elks, wild boar, wolves, stags and roe deer, are kept in large, ranch-style enclosures. You can also see the *żubroń*, a cross between a bison and cow, which has been bred so successfully in Białowieża that it is even larger than the bison itself, reaching up to 1200kg.

Another peculiarity is the tarpan (*Equus caballus gmelini*), a small, stumpy, mouse-coloured horse with a dark stripe running along its back from head to tail. The tarpan is a Polish cousin of the wild horse (*Equus ferus silvestris*) that once populated the Ukrainian steppes but became extinct in the 19th century. The horse you see is the product of selective breeding in the 1930s, which preserved the creature's original traits.

The reserve is 3km west of the Park Pałacowy (4.5km by road). You can get here on foot by the green- or yellow-marked trails, both starting from the PTTK office, or by the trail called *Żebra Żubra* (Bison's Ribs). You can also get there by horse-drawn cart – ask at the PTTK office for details.

ROYAL OAKS

About 3km north of the Bison Reserve are the Royal Oaks (Dęby Królewskie), a score of ancient trees, some over four centuries old. There is a short walking trail that winds its way among the venerable trunks. Each of the trees is named after a Lithuanian or Polish monarch; the biggest tree of the lot is Stefan Batory – 5.1m in circumference, 40m tall and 450 years old.

To get here, take the motor road from Białowieża towards Narewka (it begins beside the PTTK office, and has blue trail marks) for 5km to a crossroads. Turn right; the oaks are 200m along the dirt road. You can also hike north from the Bison Reserve on a yellow-marked trail (3km). If you take a cart to the Bison Reserve, you can visit the oaks on the same trip.

A BOOST FOR BISON

Krzysztof Niedziałkowski, a project coordinator at the **Mammal Research Institute** (www.zbs.bialowieza.pl) in Białowieża, is no stranger to conservation programmes. For a number of years he has been involved in the European Bison Programme (EBP), a programme aimed at sustainable regional development with bison as the focal point. Author Neal Bedford spoke to him about the programme and its big, hairy mascot:

What's EBP's main goal? The idea is to improve the situation of the European bison, and ensure the long-term conservation of the species. But we also want to foster the acceptance of bison in local communities, and promote it as a symbol for the region.

How are you doing this? We're attempting to create a European Bison Land, which would be an area that encompasses most of the sites where European bison currently live and could live in the future. The bison would be used as a symbol at the tourist attractions within the Bison Land, thus increasing awareness of the animals and in turn environmental issues in general. We're also pushing for the development of ecological corridors.

Ecological corridors? They are natural corridors, such as meadows, rivers and valleys, that animals use for migration. The idea is to connect the areas where bison live in the north of Poland, namely Białowieża, Kruszyniany and Borecka Forest near the Masurian lakes.

Had much success? We haven't had so many bison in Białowieża Forest for the last 100 years. The forest is utilised more evenly, as the bison have more places to forage. There's also evidence of migration tendencies being observed. Recently, bison have established themselves near Mielnik, 80km south of Białowieża. As for regional development, local communities have created an association, which aims at creating a European Bison Land.

What's the current bison population? There are about 400 at Białowieża, 50 near Kruszyniany, and 60 by the lakes. Belarus has about 200 to 250, and another 200 or so live in the Bieszczady Mountains. The Bieszczady bison come from a different line, and we don't want to crossbreed them with those in the north.

How do you keep track of the beasts? Some have collars with tracking devices, but around 30 now wear GPS collars. We receive SMS from the bison six times a day, which tell us where they are, if they're moving, feeding, lying down etc. It's an expensive system, but it's the best because the bison aren't disturbed by human presence.

Any poaching in the forest? Of bison, rarely. Wild boar and roe deer are normally the main targets. There is a yearly culling of the bison though, where between 10 and 40 animals are killed. In my opinion it's not needed as the forest can sustain a larger population, but the Polish Ministry of Environment thinks otherwise.

Sleeping & Eating

Białowieża has a good choice of accommodation options, most of which are inexpensive. Apart from the places listed here, the road approaching the village is lined with dozens of signs advertising *pokoje gościnne* (guest rooms) in private homes (25zł to 35zł per person), and the regional tourist office in Hajnówka (p146) has a list of around 40 *agroturystyczne* (agrotourist) options in and around the town.

Youth Hostel Paprotka (☎ 085 681 2560; www.paprotka.com.pl; ul Waszkiewicza 6; dm 19-24zł, q/d 24/40zł; 📍) This friendly youth hostel is set in an old timber house behind the mustard-coloured school building. There are dormitories that contain between six and 12 beds each, a couple of doubles and quads, a kitchen, and a lovely big common room that has a roaring fire at one end. But best of all, there is a washing machine (10zł) for guest use!

Dom Turysty PTTK (☎ 085 681 2505; Park Pałacowy; d/tr/q 80/105/128zł) This 19th-century redbrick pavilion operated by PTTK has an excellent location in Park Pałacowy. It offers small, basic rooms with private bathrooms, and a bistro serving simple, cheap meals. Note that it's popular with school and student groups, so it can occasionally be busy and noisy.

Pensjonat Unikat (☎ 085 681 2109; www.unikat.bialowieza.com; ul Waszkiewicza 39; s/d/tr/q 90/100/120/140zł; 📍) If you can handle the décor – a bison's head takes pride of place above the central fireplace and deerskins are nailed everywhere – Unikat is a good option a few hundred metres east of the National Park Information Point. This 50-bed timber guesthouse has clean, functional and sizable rooms, and a fine restaurant.

Hotel Białowiecki (☎ 085 681 2022; www.hotel.bialowieza.pl; ul Waszkiewicza 218b; s 130-190zł, d 150-220zł, ste 410-440zł; 📍) The rooms at the child-friendly Białowiecki are bright and modern and offer the same comfort level as the Żubrówka, but with a little less atmosphere. Many have balconies overlooking the garden. There's a play area at the back and bikes for hire (per hour/day 7/35zł).

Hotel Żubrówka (☎ 085 681 2303; www.hotel-zubrowka.pl; ul Olgi Gabiec 6; s/d 340/380zł, ste 500-900zł; 📍) More dead bison greet you upon entering Żubrówka, the town's plushiest hotel. Rooms are suitably comfortable and modern, and suites have open fireplaces. There's also a spa centre and sauna on site.

Camping Grudki (☎ 085 681 2484; ul Grudkowska; per person/tent/car 6/3/5zł) This small camping ground, about 1km south of Białowieża on the road to Grudki, occupies a peaceful spot among a grove of trees. There's hot water, showers and bike hire (per hour/day 5/20zł), but no cooking facilities.

There are good restaurants at the Unikat, Białowiecki and Żubrówka hotels, and also at the Natural History Museum (Restauracja Parkowa), but none compare to **Carska** (☎ 085 681 2119; ul Stacja Towarowa 4; mains 40-75zł; 📍 11am-10pm). This silver-service restaurant in the tsar's private railway station 1km south of the town, specialises in game, such as *szynka z sarny* (pickled wild-boar ham).

For cheap eats, there's a pizzeria across the road from Żubrówka, and a grill-bar beside the car park, behind the PTTK office. A number of small grocery shops are scattered throughout the town.

Getting There & Away

PKS buses run from stance No 2 at Hajnówka bus station (outside the train station) to Białowieża (4zł to 5zł, one hour, up to eight daily). The private company Oktobus also runs buses (seven daily) to Białowieża from the bus stop outside the prominent CTO store on Hajnówka's main street, ul 3 Maja.

There are also two buses daily direct from Białystok to Białowieża (12zł, two hours), run by KPO Victoria.

CIECHANOWIEC

pop 4900

Ciechanowiec (che-kha-no-vyets) would be of little importance to travellers if it weren't for its famous **Museum of Agriculture** (Muzeum Rolnictwa; ☎ 086 277 1328; ul Pałacowa 5; with guide adult/concession 10/5zł, without guide 6/3zł; 📍 8am-4pm Mon-Sat, 9am-6pm Sun May-Sep, 8am-4pm Mon-Sat, 9am-4pm Sun Oct-Apr). Set in the grounds of a former estate, it consists of an early-19th-century palace, stables, coach house and other outbuildings that are now exhibition halls. While these are attractions in their own right, it's the 40-odd wooden constructions that are the stars here, and collectively they constitute one of the country's finest **skansens**. The buildings, from across Mazovia and Podlasie, include the likes of simple peasant cottages, large manor houses, granaries, barns and working mills.

The guided tour takes you through the interior of several wooden houses, and you'll also be shown exhibitions featuring items such as old agricultural machinery, archaic tractors, primitive steam engines, peasants' horse-drawn carts and rudimentary tools. There's also a small botanic garden growing medicinal plants and a veterinary exhibition. The tour takes about two hours. Alternatively, you can do away with the tour and freely roam the grounds, but you cannot enter the buildings.

English- and German-speaking guides (50zł per group) may be available on the spot, but if you want to be sure call the museum in advance and book.

Sleeping

There's no better place to stay in town than the **museum** (r per person 50zł) itself. A number of beds are available in the palace and a few of the skansen buildings, such as the 1858 hunting lodge and the water mill. The standard

varies depending on where you stay, but the price remains the same.

Getting There & Away

The bus station is a few minutes' walk from the museum. There are eight buses daily from Białystok (17zł, 2½ hours), while from Warsaw (Warszawa Stadion) there are two fast buses (24zł, 2¾ hours) in the morning and one ordinary bus (18zł, four hours) in the afternoon.

GRABARKA

The **Holy Mountain of Grabarka** hardly means a thing to the average Roman Catholic Pole, yet it's the largest Orthodox pilgrimage centre in Poland. Remote from main roads and important urban centres, the 'mountain' (more of a wooded mound, really) lies 1km east of the obscure hamlet of Grabarka. The only town of any size in the region is Siemiatycze, 9km to the west.

The story of the **Grabarka crosses** goes back to 1710, when an epidemic of cholera broke out in the region and decimated the population. Amid utter despair, a mysterious sign came from the heavens, which indicated that a cross should be built and carried to a nearby hill. Those who reached the top escaped death, and soon afterwards the epidemic disappeared. The hill became a miraculous site and a thanksgiving church was erected. Since then pilgrims have been bringing crosses here to place alongside the first one, and today the hill is covered with around 20,000 crosses of different shapes and sizes.

A **convent** and a **church** are also hidden among woods on top of the hill. The 18th-century timber church went up in flames in 1990, but it was rebuilt in a similar shape to the previous one. The convent is more recent, established in the aftermath of WWII in an effort to gather all the nuns, scattered throughout the country, from the five convents that had existed before the war.

Grabarka's biggest feast is the **Spas** (Day of Transfiguration of the Saviour) on 19 August. The ceremony begins the day before at 6pm and continues with Masses and prayers throughout the night, culminating at 10am with the Great Liturgy, celebrated by the metropolitan of the Orthodox Church in Poland. Up to 50,000 people may come from all over the country to participate.

On 18 August the surrounding forest turns into a car park and camping ground. Cars and tents fill every space between the trees. Despite this wave of modernity, the older, more traditional generation comes on foot without any camping gear and keeps watch all night. The light of the thin candles adds to the mysterious atmosphere.

If you wish to experience this magical night, you have the same options – to pitch your tent or to stay awake. The commercial community is well represented, with plenty of stalls selling food and drink and a variety of religious goods, including CDs and cassettes of Orthodox church music.

Getting There & Away

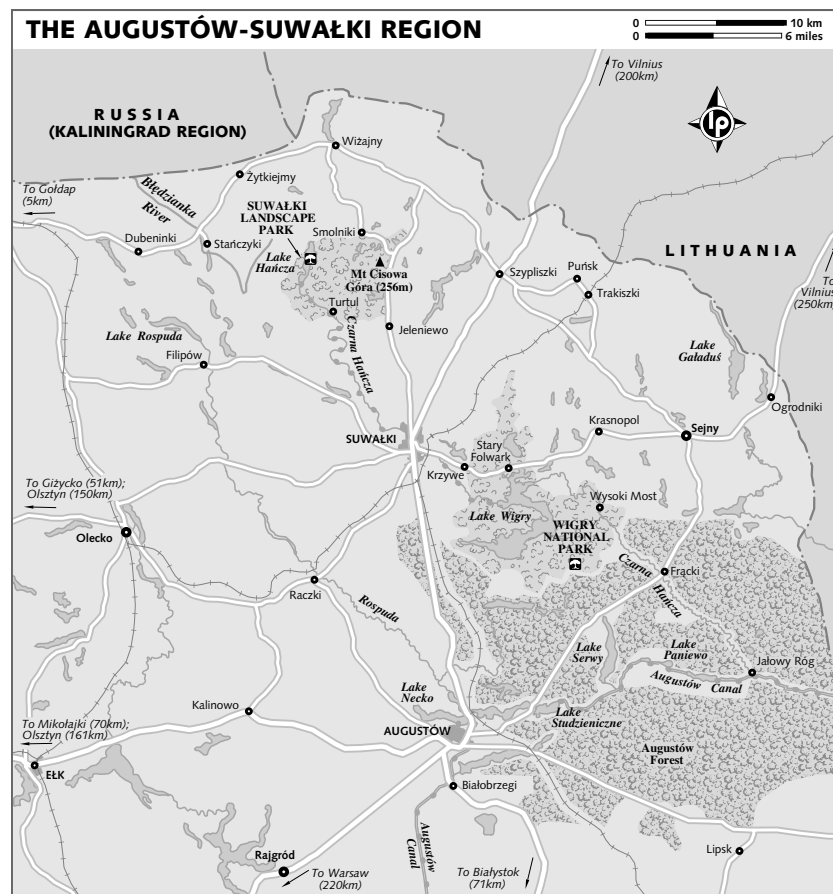
Sycze train station (more of a halt with an empty platform) is a short walk from the hill; trains between Siedlce (11zł, one hour, four daily) and Hajnówka (10zł, one hour, two daily) stop here. There is one train direct from Warsaw (28zł, 2¼ hours) at 7.13am on Saturday and daily around the feast of Spas.

From the Sycze train platform, it's a little over 1km to the holy mountain. There are no obvious signs to indicate the direction but the yellow trail heading south will get you there. If you are coming from Hajnówka, go left from the platform down the road. From there the road veers right, but follow the track straight into the forest – you'll come across the trail and signs as you go.

THE AUGUSTÓW-SUWAŁKI REGION

The northern stretch of Podlasie, known as Suwalszczyzna, is an area of outstanding natural beauty, with large swaths of pristine forest and, towards the very north, rugged hills and deep valleys. Its defining feature, though, is water: it is a notable lakeland region, with around 200 lakes, and its rivers and canals are among the most paddled in the entire country.

Like the rest of Poland, the modern population here consists predominantly of Poles, but it was for centuries an ethnic and religious mosaic comprising Poles,



Lithuanians, Belarusians, Tatars, Germans, Jews and Russians. Traces of this complex cultural mix can still be found, at least in the local cemeteries.

Despite its natural beauty and historical ethnic make-up, the region attracts few visitors from outside Poland's borders. It is therefore the perfect place to avoid the summer crowds that swamp the Masurian lakes to the west, find your own peaceful pocket and kick back for a couple of days.

AUGUSTÓW

pop 30,000

Augustów (aw-goos-toof) is a small but sprawling town straddling the Netta River as it enters Lake Necko. It's the gateway to

Suwalszczyzna and, with its close proximity to a number of natural wonders, it's a popular base for holidaymakers.

The town itself has retained little historical character due to WWII effectively resetting the clock – during a two-month battle in 1944 the town switched hands several times and 70% of it was destroyed. Its history, however, dates back to the time of King Zygmunt II August, who in 1557 founded the town and modestly named it after himself. Despite the strategic location, its development only really began in the 19th century after the construction of the canal bearing the town's name, and was further boosted when the Warsaw–St Petersburg railway was completed in 1862. Today Augustów largely survives on tourism,

booming in the summer and effectively dying in the winter.

Information

Atol tourist office (☎ 087 643 2883; www.augustow.pl in Polish; Rynek 44; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) Friendly and helpful, with information on the city and its surrounds.

Bank Pekao (ul Zabia 3)

Main post office (Rynek 3)

Wypożyczalnia Videomaniak (☎ 087 643 5339; ul 3 Maja 46; per hr 4zł; ☎ 10am-9pm) Internet access.

Sights

The most important (and pretty much the only) sight in town, the **regional museum** (Muzeum Ziemi Augustowskiej), is at two locations. The main section, featuring a small **ethnographic exhibition** (☎ 087 643 2754; ul Hoża 7; adult/concession 3/2zł; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun), is on the 3rd floor of the tatty, modern public library. There is also a more interesting section dedicated to the **history of the Augustów Canal** (☎ 087 643 2360; ul 29 Listopada 5a; adult/concession 3/2zł; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun), housed in a quaint, 19th-century wooden cabin in front of some council offices.

Activities

KAYAKING

Kayak trips are the best reason to visit Augustów, and while your arms may feel the strain, the scenery is well worth the aching muscles. Kayaking tours are organised by numerous local operators, including several hotels and hostels. They all run various routes on different rivers in the region, and can create personal itineraries according to your requirements and time availability. Alternatively, kayaks can be hired individually (20zł to 25zł per day), to head out on your own tour.

The **Czarna Hańcza River** is the most popular kayaking destination in the region. The traditional route normally starts at Lake Wigry (p159) and follows the river downstream through the Augustów Forest (p157) to the Augustów Canal (p156). The trip takes six to eight days, depending on how fast you paddle, and costs around 400zł. Various shorter trips are also available; for example, **Szot** (☎ 087 643 4399; www.szot.pl in Polish; ul Konwaliowa 2) organises weekend trips through arguably the most spectacular stretch of the Czarna Hańcza, the 25km journey from Frącki to Jałowy Róg (140zł).

Other rivers used for kayaking trips by tour operators include the Rospuda (four to six days; see boxed text, p158) and the Biebrza (seven to 10 days); some also offer trips to rivers in neighbouring Lithuania (seven days).

Other kayak operators:

Sirocco (☎ 087 643 0084; www.siroccokajaki.pl in Polish; ul Zarzeczne 3a)

Szekla Port PTTK (☎ 087 643 3850; www.szekla.pl in Polish; ul Nadrzeczna 70a)

BOAT EXCURSIONS

From May to September, pleasure boats operated by **Zegluga Augustowska** (☎ 087 643 2881; ul 29 Listopada 7) ply the surrounding lakes and a part of the Augustów Canal to the east of town. All trips depart from and return to the **wharf** (ul 29 Listopada).

Boats depart hourly from 9.40am to 5.45pm in July and August, and between 10am and 1.40pm the rest of summer. The shortest trips (15zł, one hour) ply Lake Necko and Lake Białe but not the canal. More interesting are the cruises further east along the canal system; the longest is currently a trip to Lake Studzieniczne (35zł, 3½ hours).

Festivals & Events

Augustów Theatre Summer Held in July and August.

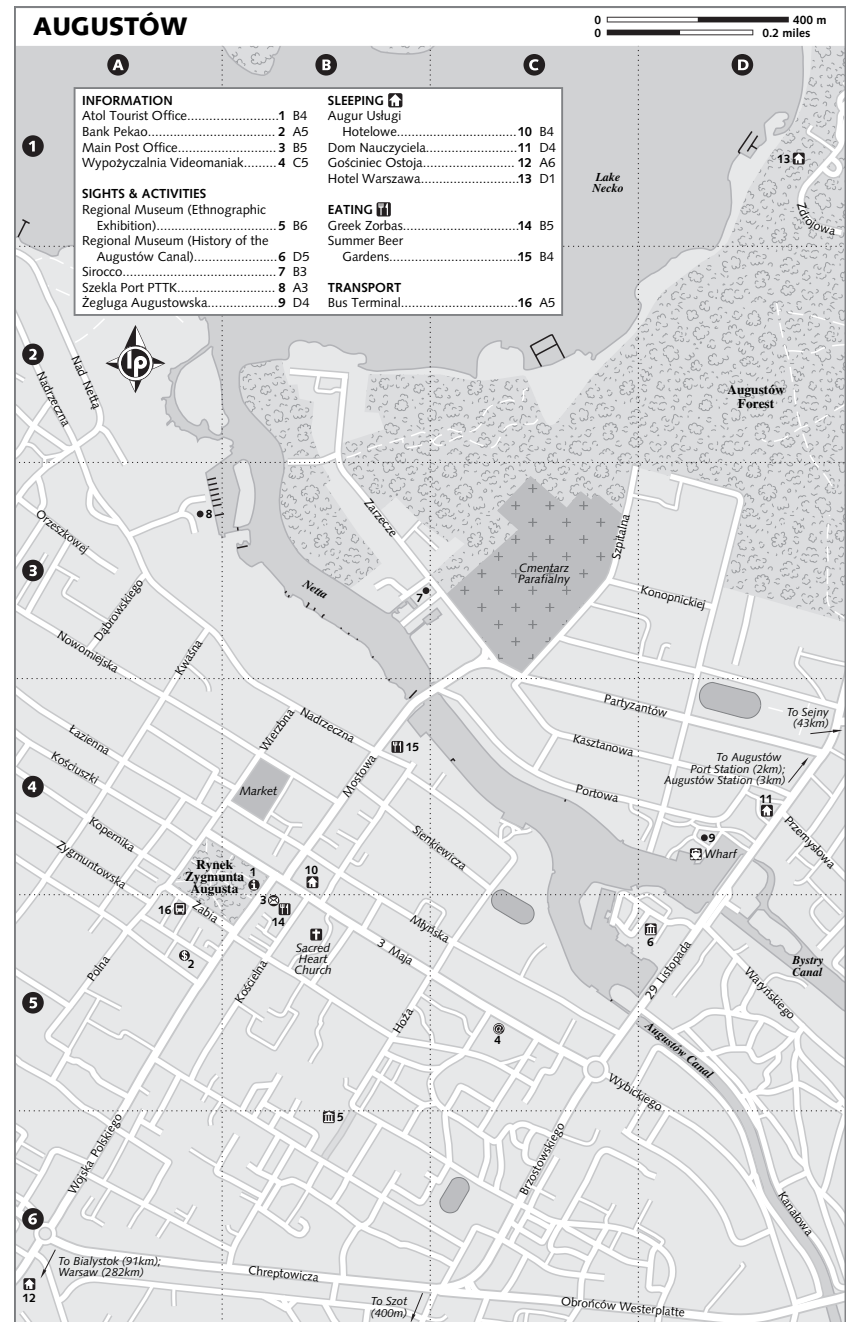
Polish Sailing in Anything Championships (Mistrzostwa Polski w Pływaniu na Byle Czym) Highly bizarre and entertaining open event for homemade vessels, held at the end of July on the Netta River.

Sleeping

There's a range of year-round hotels and hostels scattered throughout the town. Plenty of holiday homes open in summer to accommodate individual tourists.

Gościńiec Ostoja (☎ 087 643 0222; recepcja@ostoja.augustow.pl; ul Wojska Polskiego 53a; s/d 80/120zł; (P)) At the southern end of town, this family house provides excellent homey accommodation in a range of individually furnished rooms. It's spacious, the bathrooms are gleaming and breakfast is substantial – certainly enough to make up for minor niggles such as road noise, a lack of curtains, and being a fair walk to the lakes.

Augur Usługi Hotelowe (☎ 0508 738 725; www.augur.pl in Polish; ul 3 Maja 1; s/d/tr 80/120/160zł, 6-bed r 260zł; (P)) Self-catering accommodation bang in the centre of town. Rooms are plain but have en suite and TV, and share a communal kitchen; character comes in the form of a



stone-clad dining/function room and a small paved garden area.

Dom Nauczyciela (☎ 087 643 2021; www.dn.augustow.pl in Polish; ul 29 Listopada 9; s/d/tr 90/130/150zł; (P) (Q)) Right by the pleasure-boat wharf, the DN is a neat and very reasonable option with high standards. It has its own restaurant and a travel agency offering all the usual regional activities. Bikes are available for hire (per hour/day 4/30zł).

Hotel Warszawa (☎ 087 643 2805; www.hotel.warszawa.pl; ul Drogowa 1; s/d/tr/ste 260/360/430/650zł; (P)) The top digs near town, Warszawa is a quality three-star hotel with plenty of trimmings such as a restaurant, a bar, a sauna, bikes, boats and classic-car hire. Rooms are suitably comfortable and the entire complex is discreetly hidden among trees near the lake.

Eating

Augustów is fairly light on year-round restaurants. In summer, head to the semipermanent **beer gardens** (ul Mostowa), by the Netta bridge and strung out along the Netta River, for cheap food and drink in a festive atmosphere.

Greek Zorbas (☎ 087 643 2939; ul Kościelna 4; mains 10-27zł; ☎ noon-11pm) Unaccountably the most popular place in town, Zorbas is about as Greek as Pavarotti, but the meaty maestro would doubtlessly have approved of the pizza- and pasta-based menu, not to mention the token slabs of moussaka. Outdoor seating is available if the piped music gets too loud.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The bus terminal is on the southern side of the Rynek and handles roughly hourly services to Białystok (15zł to 18zł, two hours) and Suwałki (8zł, 45 minutes). There are five buses directly to Warsaw (33zł, 4½ hours); all come through from Suwałki and can be full. Three buses a day run to Sejny (10zł, one hour).

TRAIN

Augustów has two train stations, but both are a long way from the town centre. Augustów Port train station is convenient for some of the lakeside hotels, but fast trains don't stop there and it doesn't have a ticket office.

There are two fast trains, leaving from the main station, to Warsaw (46zł, 4½ hours) daily, going via Białystok. There are plenty of trains to Suwałki (6.50zł to 12zł, 30 minutes).

AROUND AUGUSTÓW Augustów Canal

Built in the 1820s, the Augustów Canal (Kanał Augustowski) is a 102km-long waterway connecting the Biebrza and Niemen Rivers. Linking lakes and stretches of river with artificial channels, it's a picturesque route marked with old locks and floodgates. No longer used commercially, it's experiencing a renaissance as a tourist attraction and kayak route.

The canal begins at the confluence of the Netta and Biebrza Rivers and flows for 33km north to Augustów through low and swampy meadows. It then continues eastwards through a chain of wooded lakes to the border with Belarus, where it extends into foreign territory for another 19km. This eastern part is the most spectacular, and should be included in your itinerary however long you plan to spend in the region.

A remarkable achievement of 19th-century hydraulic engineering, the canal was built by the short-lived Congress Kingdom of Poland. It was intended to provide the country with an alternative outlet to the Baltic Sea, since the lower Vistula was in the hands of a hostile Prussia. The project aimed to connect the tributaries of the Vistula with the Niemen River and to reach the Baltic at the port of Ventspils in Latvia.

The Polish part of the waterway was designed by an army engineer, General Ignacy Prądzyński, and built in just seven years (1824–30), though final works continued until 1839. The Russians were meant to build their part from the town of Kaunas up to Ventspils around the same time, but the work was never completed.

The Augustów Canal ended up as a regional waterway, and though it contributed to local development, it never became an international trade route. Its route includes 28km of lakes, 34km of canalised rivers and 40km of canal proper. There are 18 locks along the way (14 in Poland), whose purpose is to bridge the 55m change in water level. The lock in Augustów itself has an extra twist to its history: badly damaged in WWII, it was rebuilt in 1947 – in a completely different location!

The whole Polish stretch of the canal is navigable, but tourist boats from Augustów go only as far east as Lake Studzieniczne – the locks beyond this point are inoperative. By kayak, you can continue to the border. Contact

tour companies (see p154) for information, tour options and kayak-hire conditions.

Augustów Forest

The Augustów Forest (Puszcza Augustowska) stretches east of Augustów as far as the Lithuanian–Belarusian border. At about 1100 sq km, it's Poland's largest continuous forest after the Bory Dolnośląskie in Lower Silesia. It's a remnant of the vast primeval forest that once covered much of eastern Poland and southern Lithuania.

The forest is mainly made up of pine and spruce, with colourful deciduous species such as birch, oak, elm, lime, maple and aspen. The wildlife is rich and diversified, and includes beavers, wild boar, wolves, deer and even some elks. Birds are also well represented and the 55 lakes abound in fish.

The forest was virtually unexplored until the 17th century, but today it is crisscrossed by paved roads, dirt tracks, and walking and cycling paths. Despite this, there are large stretches that are almost untouched, and if you want to get firmly off the beaten track in Poland then this is a great swath of nature to do it in.

You can explore part of the forest using private transport; roads will take you along the Augustów Canal to the border. Many of the rough tracks are perfectly OK for bikes and horses, and on foot you can get almost everywhere except the swamps. The Atol tourist office in Augustów (p154) can provide information on accommodation and bike rental, including brochures on cycle routes in the forest. A good general map with all roads, tracks and tourist trails in the forest is the detailed *Puszcza Augustowska* map (5zł, scale 1:70,000).

SUWAŁKI

pop 69,300

Suwałki (soo-vahw-kee) is the largest town in the region, and while a pleasant enough place to visit, it lacks the lakes and forests that popularised Augustów. There's also little in the way of tourism infrastructure, so if you view it as a gateway to the surrounding countryside rather than a destination in itself, you're pretty much on the right track.

The town first appeared on the map at the end of the 17th century as one of the villages established by the Camaldolese monks from Wigry. The small multinational community

grew slowly; at different times it included Jews, Lithuanians, Tatars, Russians, Germans and Old Believers, a religious group that split off from the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century. Only the last are still present in Suwałki.

Information

Bank Pekao (ul Kościuszki 72)

Post office (ul Sejneńska 13)

Tourist office (☎ 087 566 5872; www.sirt.suwalki.com.pl in Polish; ul Kościuszki 82; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat May-Sep, 8am-4pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) Very helpful and well informed on the region's attractions; free internet access.

Sights

It might seem a bit grim as an attraction, but the local **cemetery** gives a good picture of the town's ethnic and religious history. It actually consists of several separate cemeteries for people of the different creeds – the religious tolerance of the community not extending to shared burial grounds.

You'll notice straight away the large size of the **Jewish cemetery** – at the beginning of the 20th century Jews made up half the town's population. Their cemetery was destroyed in WWII and only a memorial stands in the middle, assembled out of fragments of old grave slabs. The tiny **Muslim graveyard** is the last remnant of the Tatars, but the graves are now hardly recognisable.

At the back of the **Orthodox cemetery** is the **Old Believers' graveyard**; both are largely wild and unkempt. A dwindling handful of Old Believer followers still congregate on Sunday morning at the **church** (molezna; ul Sejneńska 37a) on the opposite side of town. The simple timber church dates from the beginning of the 20th century, but the icons inside are significantly older. Except for during Mass, you have little chance of seeing them. Within the graveyard mix you will also find a Catholic and a Protestant cemetery.

The main thoroughfare of the town, ul Kościuszki, retains some 19th-century neo-classical architecture. Here you'll also find the **Regional Museum** (☎ 087 566 5750; ul Kościuszki 81; adult/concession 5/3zł; ☎ 8am-4pm Tue-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun), which presents the little that is known of the Jatzvingians, the first settlers in this area. Its annexe, the **Museum of Maria Konopnicka** (combined ticket adult/concession 7/4zł), is dedicated to one of Poland's best-loved authors and poets.

Activities

The **PTTK office** (☎ 087 566 5961; ul Kościuszki 37; ☒ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) operates kayak trips down the Czarna Hańcza (p154) and Rospuda (below) Rivers, and hires out kayaks (22zł per day) if you would rather do the trip on your own. **Forma-T** (☎ 087 563 7119; ul Noniewicza 93; ☒ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) offers the same services but has newer kayaks.

Sleeping & Eating

Suwałki has a decent enough range of accommodation, but don't feel you have to stay in town – this is prime agrotourism territory, and the tourist office and local travel agencies will happily set you up with a rural idyll for a few nights.

Hotel Hańcza (☎ 087 566 6633; www.hotelhancza.com; ul Wojska Polskiego 2; s/d/tr 95/145/180zł; (P)) You wouldn't expect much from this huge block in the southern part of town, but actually it's not a bad choice, with lake views

and two budget restaurants. It is alarmingly popular with school groups in June and July, though.

Hotel Suwalszczyzna (☎ 087 565 1900; www.hotel.suwalszczyzna.pl in Polish; ul Noniewicza 71a; s/d 140/170zł; (P)) Tucked away behind an unpromising façade, both the hotel and its ground-floor restaurant offer some of the best standards in town. The collection of framed, signed football shirts on the stairway suggests either an abiding passion for soccer or an unusual preponderance of sporting guests.

Restauracja Rozmarino (☎ 087 563 2400; ul Kościuszki 75; mains 10-25zł; ☒ 9am-midnight) Never has so much been crammed into so little space with so few negative results. As pizzeria-cum-piano bar-cum-art gallery-cum-restaurants go, this is an amazing place, boasting a two-tiered rainbow-coloured summer garden for live music, a menu that looks like a newspaper, and unusual treats such as crab claws and ostrich balls to shake up the usual Italian suspects.

THE ROSPUDA RIVER

At 102km in length, the Rospuda River is the second-longest river in the Suwalszczyzna region. Being in the firing line of the Via Baltica Expressway (p73), it's the most talked about waterway in the country.

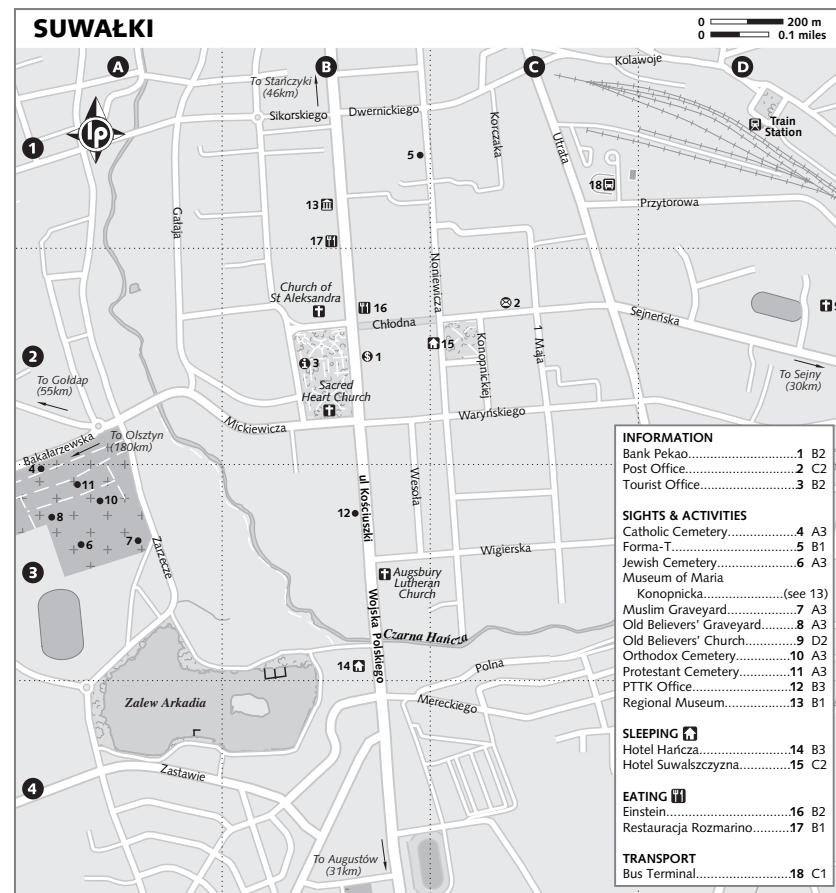
The idea of running a massive concrete road through the middle of the river and its surrounding valley seems like madness. Putting aside the fact that it is part of the European Natura 2000 Network, and therefore protected under EU law, this unique wetland is home to a number of protected bird species such as the lesser spotted eagle, white stork, black woodpecker and hazel grouse, and more than a dozen rare orchids. Wolves, deer, foxes and beavers all use it as a natural migration corridor.

Of its 102km, just over 70km can be paddled (a six-day trip), from Lake Czarne near the Russian border to the town of Augustów. The river's flow changes as it progresses south: its upper reaches are similar to fast-flowing mountain streams, while further down it slows to a meander, weaving through tightly packed reeds. At its final stretch, before it enters Lake Necko, the river begins to widen and forested banks replace the reeds. One-day kayak trips, which start in the town of Raczkki and end at Lake Necko, are run out of Augustów (see p154) or can be organised through **Bogdan Łukowski** (www.wigry.info/kontakt.html).

Not everyone thinks the Rospuda needs protecting, including some residents of Augustów. Hwy 8, the main road connecting the Baltic states with Poland (and Europe), passes directly through the town, and at times traffic congestion is horrendous. The Via Baltica would relieve Augustów of its traffic problem, making roads safer and cutting back on pollution.

The Rospuda and Via Baltica is therefore a highly contested issue, with both sides unwilling to back down. An alternative route suggested by NGOs and roading consultants, which would send the expressway northwest to Raczkki and then northeast to Suwałki, thus circumnavigating Rospuda's protected area, is a highly viable option, but the government and Augustów locals are opposed to it because it will delay the project even further.

The Via Baltica is currently on hold. At the end of 2007 the Regional Administrative Court in Warsaw cancelled the environmental consent for an Augustów bypass, claiming the project did not fall into line with Polish nature conservation legislation. The Polish government continues to search for possible solutions to enable the project to proceed.



Einstein (☎ 087 563 0773; ul Kościuszki 82; mains 12-30zł; ☒ noon-midnight) Dine with the great physicist (his portraits and theoretical equations plaster the rich-red walls) at this modern eatery in the heart of town. The menu contains regional cuisine with a few European options thrown in to keep things contemporary. A cheap lunch menu is available during the week.

Getting There & Away

The train station is 1.5km northeast of the centre; the bus terminal is closer to the central area. Trains are useful mostly for longer journeys, with four daily departures to Białystok (18zł to 31zł, 2½ hours) and two to Warsaw (46zł, five hours); see p519 for information on travelling on to Lithuania.

Frequent buses run to Augustów (8zł, 45 minutes), Sejny (7zł, 45 minutes) and Białystok (25zł, 2¾ hours).

AROUND SUWAŁKI Wigry National Park

On the northern fringes of Augustów Forest is arguably the most beautiful lake in Podlasie. At 21 sq km, **Lake Wigry** is also the largest in the region and one of the deepest, reaching 73m at its greatest depth. Its shoreline is richly indented, forming numerous bays and peninsulas, and there are 15 islands on the lake. The lake is the dominating feature of **Wigry National Park** (Wigierski Park Narodowy), a small park to the east of Suwałki whose dense forest belt and plethora of smaller lakes make

it a popular destination for kayakers, cyclists and hikers. The Czarna Hańcza River flows through the park, connecting with the Augustów Canal further downstream. The park's wildlife is diverse, including wolves, lynxes, eagle owls and black cormorants; the beaver is the park's emblem.

Access is easiest from the Suwałki–Sejny road, which crosses the northern part of the park. The **park headquarters** (☎ 087 566 6322; www.wigry.win.pl; 🕒 7am–3pm Mon–Fri, also 9am–5pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug) are on this road, in Krzywe, which is 5km from Suwałki.

There are marked trails throughout the park, leading to some truly remote corners. You can walk all around the lake (49km by the green trail), provided you have three days. Lakeside camping grounds along the trail are located within reasonable day-long walking distances. The *Wigierski Park Narodowy* map shows all the necessary detail and is available at the park headquarters.

The park's attractions are not restricted to nature. Spectacularly located on a peninsula in Lake Wigry is a former **Camaldolese monastery**, built by the death-obsessed Camaldolese monks (p190) soon after they were brought to Wigry by King Jan II Kazimierz Waza in 1667. The whole complex, complete with a church and 17 hermitages, was originally on an island, which was later connected to the shore. It has now been turned into a hotel and restaurant, providing an atmospheric base for exploring the park.

Train lovers can get a fix riding the **narrow-gauge train** (☎ 087 563 9263; www.augustowska.pl; adult/concession 20/14zł; 🕒 10am, 1pm & 4pm Jul & Aug) that skirts the southern fringes of the park from Płociczno-Tartak to Krusznik. The trip takes about 2½ hours, passing through lush forest and providing views of Lake Wigry.

The park headquarters runs various lodges and camping grounds in the reserve itself, and there are several agrotourist farms nearby. The monastery peninsula is arguably the most atmospheric place to overnight. Here you'll find a few options, including **Dom Pracy Twórczej w Wigrach** (☎ 087 563 7000; dom@wigry.org; s/d 120/160zł; apt 300zł; 📍 🚲), with accommodation in the former monks' hermitages, and **Drażba** (☎ 087 563 7045; wigry6@op.pl; r 60zł; 📍 🚲), a friendly homestay with kayak and bicycle hire.

The Suwałki–Sejny road is serviced by regular buses. If you want to go directly to the monastery, take the bus to Wigry (four daily buses in summer).

Sejny pop 5000

Sejny, 30km east of Suwałki, is the last Polish town before the Ogrodniki border crossing to Lithuania, 12km beyond. The town grew around the Dominican monastery, which had been founded in 1602 by monks from Vilnius. The order was expelled by the Prussian authorities in 1804 and never returned, but the proud two-towered silhouette of their **church** still dominates the town from its northern end. It dates from the 1610s, but the façade was thoroughly remodelled 150 years later in the so-called Vilnius Baroque style. Its pastel interior has harmonious Rococo decoration.

At the opposite, southern end of the town is a large **synagogue**, built by the sizable local Jewish community in the 1880s. During the German occupation it served as a fire station and after the war as a storage room. Today it's an art gallery operated by the **Borderland Foundation** (Fundacja Pogranicze; ☎ 087 516 3400), focusing on the arts and culture of different ethnic and religious traditions from the region.

Hourly buses run from Sejny to Suwałki (7zł, 45 minutes).

Suwałki Landscape Park

About halfway between Suwałki and the Lithuanian border is a cluster of pristine lakes and rugged hills that collectively make up the Suwałki Landscape Park (Suwalski Park Krajobrazowy). It was the first nature reserve of its kind to be established (in 1976), and covers 63 sq km. A healthy portion of the park is either lakes (26 in all, totalling 10% of the park's area), patches of fine forest (another 24%) or peat lands (10%), making it a perfect place for walking or cycling.

The village of **Smolniki**, 20km north of Suwałki, is probably the most convenient base for the park. There are several marked trails passing through the village, and a handful of accommodation options; enquire at the Suwałki tourist office (p157) for details or contact the **park office** (☎ 087 569 1801; www.spk.org.pl in Polish; Turtul; 🕒 8am–7pm Mon–Fri, 9am–5pm Sat Jul & Aug, 8am–3pm Mon–Fri (Sep–Jun)) on the southern edge of the park for more general information.

The Smolniki neighbourhood is rugged, largely wooded, and dotted with a dozen small lakes, and there are three good viewpoints in the village, which allow you to enjoy some of this landscape. One of the numerous walking options is an hour's walk west to **Lake**

TROUBLED WATERS?

The two bridges at Stańczyki were designed by the Italians and built by the Germans, in what was then the territory of East Prussia, as part of the Goldap–Żytckiejmy railway track. The first bridge was constructed between 1912 and 1914; 12 years later the second, identical bridge was built parallel to it, just 15m to the south. Construction was interrupted by WWII, but the northern line was used until late 1944, when the Red Army dismantled the tracks and took them to the Soviet Union, leaving the bridges inoperable.

You don't need to be an architect to realise there are a lot of unanswered questions surrounding the bridges – it's unclear why anyone in their right mind would build not just one but two massive structures in such an awkward part of such a remote area, just to prop up an underused railway line (three services a day hardly justifies the massive effort involved). It all seems a far cry from the customary Prussian pragmatism.

Perhaps the authorities were seduced by the monumental classical form of the design itself – the bridges are undeniably attractive. Sadly, the structure isn't as solid as it looks, and the increase in tourism threatens to destroy both the bridges and the riverbank on which they stand. Bungee-jumping has already been banned here, but, unless a conservation plan is put in place, Stańczyki's bridges may soon be lost once again.

Hańcza, the deepest lake in the country. With its steep shores, stony bottom and amazing crystal-clear water, it's like being up in the mountains.

If you travel between Smolniki and Suwałki, it's worth stopping in **Gulbieniński** at the foot of **Mt Cisowa Góra**. This 256m-high hill, just off the road, is cone-shaped and provides a fine view over the surrounding lakes.

The 1:50,000 map *Suwalski Park Krajobrazowy* (10zł) is good for exploring the area. It has all the hiking trails marked on it and good sightseeing information in English on the reverse.

Stańczyki pop 200

Deep within the Romincka Primeval Forest Landscape Park (Romincka Puszcza Park Krajobrazowy), close to the Russian border, is an unusual sight – a pair of disused **railway bridges** rising out of the woods. Linking the

steep sides of the valley of the Błędzianka River, 36m above water level, these two identical, 180m-long constructions were built as part of the Goldap–Żytckiejmy train line. With their tall pillars supporting wide, elegant arches, they have the air of a Roman aqueduct. Now unused and without tracks, the bridges look like huge, surreal sculptures in the middle of nowhere.

You can walk on the top of both bridges and go down and look at them from below – it's really a weird sight. For a long time almost unknown and forgotten, they are now becoming an attraction, and a car park with some basic facilities was built and is attended in summer.

There are two daily buses from Suwałki (9zł, 70 minutes) in summer. Alternatively, there's access from the Goldap–Wizajny road, serviced by about six buses daily. Get off at the Stańczyki turn-off and walk 1.5km, and you'll see the bridges on your left.

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