

Warmia & Masuria



If ever two regions were ruled by water, they are Warmia and Masuria. This swath of land bordering Russia's isolated Kaliningrad is Poland's lakeland, riven throughout with rivers, canals, wetlands, swamps and ever-present lakes. It's an aquaphile's dream come true, with more water-bound fun than the rest of the country put together.

Watery action is centred on the Great Masurian Lakes. The region may not contain the thousand lakes that tourist brochures proudly proclaim, but who cares? The lakes' natural beauty is breathtaking, and there's enough space for all yachties to find their own sheltered bay. That's not to say there isn't any life here – in summer the resort towns are abuzz, and every harbour and wharf packed with locals and visitors.

Canoeists and kayakers will find ample opportunity to buff up their shoulder muscles. Aside from lake kayaking, there's the celebrated Krutynia River to explore, along with the lesser-known Łyna River. If you prefer less strenuous excursions, passenger boats ply the main lakes, and there's always the Elbląg-Ostróda Canal to experience.

Culturally, Warmia and Masuria have plenty to offer. The legacy of the powerful Teutonic Knights dots the landscape in the shape of redbrick Gothic castles, and Nazi occupation has left behind the secret bunker headquarters of Wolf's Lair and Mauerwald.

This is a place many locals only dream of visiting, so count your blessings you've made it this far. And however you choose to spend your time, you'll quickly realise that this is a beautiful spot, remote enough to be peaceful and developed enough to be accessible.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Kicking back with a coffee or beer in Olsztyn's **Old Town** (opposite)
- Letting your partner kayak you down the **Krutynia River** (p481)
- Slipping and sliding down (or up) the unique **Elbląg-Ostróda Canal** (p486)
- Wandering the halls of Lidzbark Warmiński's proud Gothic **castle** (p487)
- Joining the throngs in admiration of Święta Lipka's Baroque **Church of Our Lady** (p489)
- Exploring the **Wolf's Lair** (p492), Hitler's now-overgrown secret headquarters
- Sailing on the **Great Masurian Lakes** (p490)



■ POPULATION: 4.1 MILLION

■ AREA: 24,000 SQ KM

History

Despite being lumped together administratively today, Warmia and Masuria have always been separate entities with separate populations, and their histories, though broadly similar, are largely independent.

Warmia is imaginatively named after its original inhabitants, the Warmians, who were wiped out by the Teutonic Knights (see p451) in the 13th century. The Knights then set up a Teutonic province. For more than five centuries this was largely an autonomous ecclesiastical state run by Catholic bishops.

The Warmian diocese was the largest of four that were created by the papal bulls of 1243. Though administratively within the Teutonic state, the bishops used papal protection to achieve a far-reaching autonomy. Their bishopric extended from the north of Olsztyn up to the present-day national border, and from the Vistula Lagoon in the west to the town of Reszel in the east. Following the 1466 Treaty of Toruń, Warmia was incorporated into the kingdom of Poland, but the bishops retained much of their control over internal affairs, answering directly to the pope. When the last grand master adopted Protestantism in 1525, Warmia became a bastion of the Counter-Reformation. In 1773 the region fell under Prussian rule, along with swaths of western Poland.

Meanwhile, Masuria was dealing with its own upheavals. The Jatzvingians (Jaćwingowie), the first inhabitants, belonged to the same ethnic and linguistic family as the Prussians, Latvians and Lithuanians. For farmers they were unusually warlike, and caused plenty of headaches for the Mazovian dukes, as they invaded and ravaged the northern outskirts of the principality on a regular basis and even pressed as far south as Kraków. In the second half of the 13th century, however, the Teutonic Knights expanded eastwards over the region, and by the 1280s they had wiped them out too.

The region quickly became a bone of contention between the Teutonic order and Lithuania, and remained in dispute until the 16th century. At that time the territory formally became a Polish dominion, but its colonisation was slow. Development was also hindered by the Swedish invasions of the 1650s and the catastrophic plague of 1710.

In the Third Partition of 1795, the region was swallowed up by Prussia, and in 1815 it became a part of the Congress Kingdom of

Poland, only to be grabbed by Russia after the failure of the November Insurrection of 1830. After WWI Poland took over the territory, though not without resistance from Lithuania, but the region remained remote and economically unimportant. Warmia was finally restored to Poland after WWII, and the two halves became a single administrative zone.

THE OLSZTYN REGION

The Olsztyn region is principally Warmia and the land to the south of the region's main city, Olsztyn. Like its more famous cousin to the east, its landscape is dotted with lakes and sporadically cloaked in forest. There are several important architectural monuments here and relics of the bishops that once ruled the area. Of particular note is the castle of Lidzbark Warmiński and the church in Święta Lipka; more secular highlights include the impressive skansen at Olsztynek and the unique Elbląg-Ostróda Canal.

OLSZTYN

pop 174,000

After so many bruised and battered Polish towns, Olsztyn (*ol-shtin*) comes as a pleasant surprise. Its reconstructed **Old Town**, complete with gabled houses, cobblestone streets, and a refined, café-style culture (with plenty of bars thrown in – this is Poland after all), is as attractive as any in the country, and it's worth lingering for at least a day, exploring its historical sites. Nature is also close at hand; there are 11 lakes within the city borders.

The town was founded in the 14th century as the southernmost outpost of Warmia, and only came under Polish control following the Treaty of Toruń in 1466. With the First Partition of Poland in 1772, Olsztyn became Prussian (renamed Allenstein) and remained so until the end of WWII.

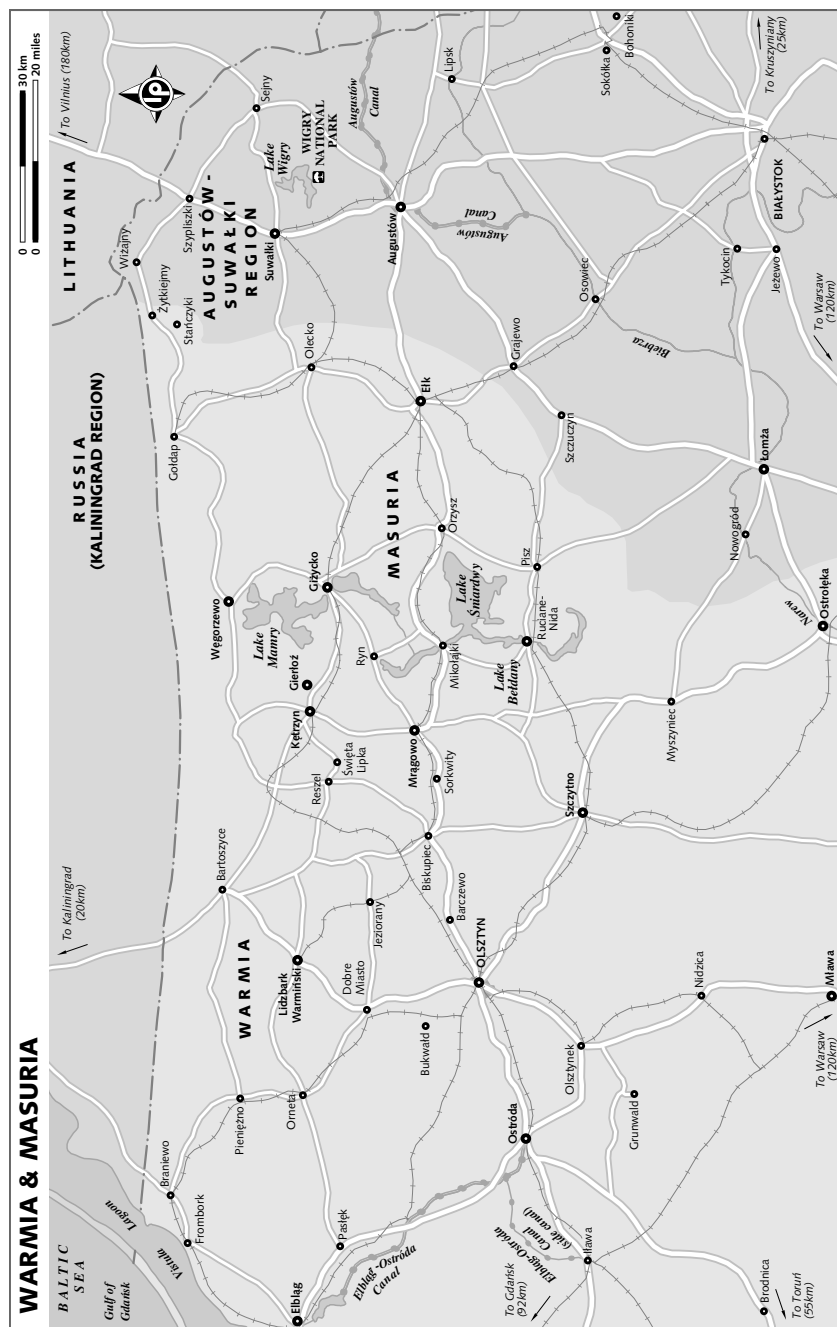
Information

Bank Pekao (ul Staromiejska 13)

Biblioteka (Library; ☎ 089 535 9781; ul Stare Miasto 33; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) Internet access on 1st floor 3zł per hour; also between 10am and 3pm Monday to Friday free internet access on 2nd floor.

Main post office (ul Piętniężnego 21)

Orbis Travel (☎ 089 535 1678; ul Dąbrowszczaków 1; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) Can help with accommodation and onward travel.

**PBK Bank** (ul Mickiewicza 2)

Pralnia (☎ 089 526 7677; www.automatica.republika.pl; ul Toruńska 1a; laundry loads up to 5.5kg 12zł, internet per hr 3.50zł; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 11am-3pm Sat) Laundry (!!!) and internet café.

Regional tourist office (☎ 089 535 3565; www.warmia.mazury.pl; ul Staromiejska 1; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri year-round, 10am-3pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug) Helpful and knowledgeable; stocks the handy *Warmia i Mazury* map (7zł), which has cycling and walking tracks, and waterways of the region.

Sights

The most important historic building in town is the massive, redbrick 14th-century **castle**. Despite its age, it's in excellent shape and now houses an art gallery, restaurant and open-air theatre, along with the **Museum of Warmia & Masuria** (Muzeum Warmii i Mazur; ☎ 089 527 9596; ul Zamkowa 2; adult/concession 8/5zł; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun Jun-Sep, 10am-4pm Tue-Sun Oct-May). Two rooms on the 1st floor are dedicated to astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus, who was the administrator of Warmia and lived in the castle for more than three years (1516-20). He made some of his astronomical observations here, and you can still see the diagram he drew on the cloister wall to record the equinox and thereby calculate the exact length of the year. Models of the instruments he used are on display in his former living quarters, and a set of narrow steps lead up to his toilet – a dark, uninviting place, but at least private. A third room was used as a chapel by the great astronomer, and traces of the original 14th-century ceiling pattern can still be seen above the alcoves. The rest of the 1st floor has displays of silverware and religious icons, and the 2nd floor houses temporary exhibitions, normally of a contemporary nature. The castle tower affords views of the town through narrow gaps in the brickwork.

The **High Gate**, the historic gateway to the Old Town, is the only remainder of the 14th-century city walls. Just to the west, on the quiet old fish-market square, is the **Museum of Warmia & Masuria main annexe** (☎ 089 534 0119; Targ Rybny 1; adult/concession 8/5zł; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun Jun-Sep, 10am-4pm Tue-Sun Oct-May), housed in the former *Gazeta Olsztyńska* newspaper building. The paper was famed for its outspoken politics under occupation, which swiftly led to the arrest and execution of its publisher in 1940 and the destruction of the offices. Reconstructed, the building now has exhibi-

tions about the city's and region's past, and the political role of journalism.

A block south is the **Rynek** (formally called ul Stare Miasto), which was destroyed during WWII and rebuilt in a grandiose style only superficially referring to the past. It's best seen at night, when the town hall is lit up with dazzling spotlights and half the population turns out for an evening drink.

The Gothic **cathedral** on the other side of the Old Town dates from the same period as the castle, though its huge 60m tower was only added in 1596. Here, as in the castle, crystalline vaults can be seen in the aisles. However, the nave has netlike arches dating from the 17th century. Among the remarkable works of art are the 16th-century triptych at the head of the left aisle, and a shimmering gold and silver altarpiece of the Virgin Mary.

For a dramatic look at the heavens, the **planetarium** (☎ 089 533 4951; www.planetarium.olsztyn.pl; Al Piłsudskiego 38; adult/concession 8/6zł) has shows and occasional temporary exhibits. Soundtracks in English, German, French and Russian are generally offered during two shows a day, at noon and 2pm.

Copernicus fans can get a bit more hands-on at the **astronomical observatory** (☎ 089 527 6703; ul Żołnierska 13), located in an old water tower out to the east of town. It was enjoying a much-needed renovation at the time of writing; check with the tourist office for observation hours and prices.

Activities**KAYAKING**

The travel agency **PTTK Mazury** (☎ 089 527 4059; www.mazurypttk.pl in Polish; ul Staromiejska 1; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) runs 10-day kayaking tours along the **Krutynia River route** (known as Szlak Kajakowy Krutyni). The 103km trip begins at **Stanica Wodna PTTK** (☎ 089 742 8124) in Sorkwity, 50km east of Olsztyn, and goes down the Krutynia River and Lake Beldany to Ruciane-Nida (p500). It's regarded as Poland's top kayak trip and few come away disappointed. Tours depart daily from May to October, and the price (around 950zł) includes kayak, food, insurance, lodging in cabins and a Polish-, English- or German-speaking guide.

You can also do the trip on your own, hiring a kayak (25zł to 40zł per day) from the Stanica Wodna PTTK in Sorkwity, but check availability in advance. You can use the same overnight bases as the tours but you can't

always count on cabins, so be prepared to camp. It's easier to secure a kayak and shelter in June or September than in July and August.

Brochures in English and German, with a detailed description and maps of the Krutynia route, are available at the Mazury office. Information in German is also available online (www.masuren-online.de).

PTTK Mazury also organises kayak trips on the river that slices through the heart of Olsztyn, the Łyna. Trips begin in Ruś 10km south of the town, and end as far north as the border to Kaliningrad. For a short taster of the river, rent a kayak from Camping 173 Dywity (opposite) and set out from the centre of town to the camping ground. The trip takes approx-

imately two hours, and pick-ups and drop-offs can be organised through the camp.

Festivals & Events

Summer of Arts (Olsztyńskie Lato Artystyczne, OLA; ☎ 089 527 0964; www.mok.olsztyn.pl in Polish) Poland's longest-running arts festival, held from mid-June to mid-September.

Olsztyn Blues Nights (☎ 089 527 0964; www.mok.olsztyn.pl in Polish) One of Poland's oldest blues festivals, held in mid-July.

Sleeping

PTSM Youth Hostel (☎ 089 527 6650; schronisko@ssmolstyn.pl; ul Kościuszki 72/74; dm/s/d 25/65/62z; P) This well-run hostel has a kitchen, bike hire and large rooms with private bathrooms that sleep up to six. Secure parking is available at the back.

Hotel Wysoka Brama (☎ 089 527 3675; www.hotelwysokabrama.olsztyn.pl in Polish; ul Staromiejska 1; dm/s/d 18/50/68zł) The 70-bed PTTK hotel is superbly located on the edge of the Old Town, actually occupying a section of the High Gate with its mid-sized dorms. The newer annexe has slightly scrappy private rooms and a handful of much nicer en suites. Predictably, it's crammed with backpackers in summer.

Polsko-Niemieckie Centrum Młodzieży (☎ 089 534 0780; www.pncm.olsztyn.pl in Polish & German; ul Okopowa 25; s/d 190/200zł; P) The Polish-German Youth Centre is ideally located next to the castle; you don't have to be Polish, German or a youth to stay here, though speaking some Deutsch would make things easier. Everything is appropriately shipshape and orderly, and there's a good restaurant on the premises.

Villa Pallas (☎ 089 535 0115; www.villapallas.pl in Polish & German; ul Żołnierska 4; s 150-210zł, d 180-240zł, ste 280-380zł; P) The best of several options east of town, this sophisticated villa is named for the Greek goddess Athena, whose statue makes up part of the mix 'n' match décor. Negotiate the maze of stairways to find refined, spotless rooms and some great suites (just ignore the red-vinyl sofas). A smart restaurant and small spa centre complete the look, and rooms are cheaper on weekends.

Hotel Kopernik (☎ 089 522 9929; www.kopernik.olsztyn.pl; ul Warszawska 37; s/d 190/225zł, ste 300-350zł; P) Done up in shades of blue you never knew existed, plus a few other cheerful tones, the Copernicus is a sprightly mid-class option away from the action to the south of the Old Town.

Hotel Pod Zamkiem (☎ 089 535 1287; www.hotel-olsztyn.com.pl; ul Nowowiejskiego 10; s/d 170/240zł; P) Set in a large historic villa, once the home of the influential Spert family, this is a stylish traditional inn with character in spades. Wooden beams, murals and lots of pine provide atmosphere, and the park setting puts you right by the castle and the Old Town. It's on a busy road so request a room at the back.

Camping 173 Dywity (☎ 089 512 0646; www.dywity.com.pl; ul Barczewskiego 47; camp sites per person/car/ tent 12/8/10zł, cottages 17-60zł; ☔ May-Sep) Dywity is perfectly situated on a peaceful, isolated bend of the Łyna River. There are tent sites aplenty, well-equipped bungalows that sleep between four and six persons, and bicycles and kayaks for hire. It's 10km north of Olsztyn and best reached with your own transport.

Eating

Bar Dziupla (☎ 089 527 5083; ul Stare Miasto 9/10; mains 5-12zł; ☔ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-10pm Sun) Dziupla takes on the milk-bar mantle to provide some of the best budget meals in the Old Town, including delicious *pierogi* (Polish dumplings) and *chłodnik* (cold beetroot soup).

Greenway (☎ 089 535 0640; ul Prosta 10/11; mains 7.50-10zł; ☔ 10am-8pm Mon-Thu, 10am-9pm Fri & Sat, noon-8pm Sun) Another branch of the popular Polish chain. Pick up a large portion of the usual offerings, such as Mexican goulash, enchiladas and spinach quiche. Grab a real fruit shake and head for the quiet outdoor patio at the rear.

Weranda Grill (☎ 089 527 6266; ul Kółtąta 15; mains 16-30zł; ☔ 11am-midnight) Meat lovers will flock to this large restaurant for a menu packed with loin chops, grilled ribs and sausages; vegetarians will be disappointed with a small selection of salads. A compromise is easy to find though; grab a beer and kick back on the enormous summer terrace along the banks of the Łyna River.

Różana Café (☎ 089 523 5039; Targ Rybny 14; mains 20-50zł; ☔ 11am-midnight) A well-translated trilingual menu, with just a dash of humour, introduces you to this refined selection of Polish dishes, while waiters in braces gently woo you with extras. The portions won't blow you away, but it's a good excuse to stick around for dessert or one last drink.

Self-caterers can head to **Supermarket Spożywczy** (Al Piłsudskiego 16; ☔ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-8pm Sun) on the ground floor of the new Alfa Centrum shopping mall.

OLSZTYN

INFORMATION

Bank Pekao.....	1	A3	Museum of Warmia & Masuria (Main Annexe).....	11	A3
Biblioteka.....	2	A3	PTTK Mazury..... (see 6)		
Main Post Office.....	3	B3	Planetarium.....	12	C3
Orbis Travel.....	4	B2	SLEEPING		
PBK Bank.....	5	B2	Hotel Kopernik.....	13	A4
Regional Tourist Office.....	6	A3	Hotel Pod Zamkiem.....	14	A2
			Hotel Wysoka Brama.....	15	A3
			Polsko-Niemieckie Centrum		
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES			Młodzieży.....	16	A3
Astronomical Observatory.....	7	C4	PTSM Youth Hostel.....	17	B3
Castle.....	8	A3	Villa Pallas.....	18	C4
Cathedral.....	9	A3	DRINKING		
High Gate.....	10	A3	Bohema Jazz Club..... (see 21)		
Museum of Warmia & Masuria..... (see 8)			Klub SARP.....	24	A3
			TRANSPORT		
			Bus Station.....	25	D1

EATING

Bar Dziupla.....	19	A3
Greenway.....	20	A3
Różana Café.....	21	A3
Supermarket Spożywczy.....	22	B3
Weranda Grill.....	23	A3

Drinking

Bohema Jazz Club (☎ 089 525 7051; Targ Rybny 15; ☎ 3pm-2am) Sidling up to Różana Café is Bohema, Olsztyn's best jazz club. It has a reputation for quality live jazz and well-mixed cocktails, and may also be the only basement club in Poland with a lift.

Klub SARP (☎ 089 535 9649; ul Kółkątaja 14; ☎ 11am-midnight) The riverside area around the southern end of the Old Town is a hotbed of pubs, clubs and restaurants, and SARP is a top contender. This split-level setup in a former granary is run by the local Association of Polish Architects and, with its blackened wooden beams and whitewashed walls, looks as though it's been transplanted from Tudor times.

Getting There & Away

The busy bus and train stations are both in a big L-shaped building on Plac Konstytucji 3 Maja. You can walk to the Old Town in 15 minutes or take one of the frequent city buses that drop you off in front of the High Gate.

BUS

Buses to Olsztynek (5zł, 50 minutes), Ostróda (5zł, 1½ hours), Lidzbark Warmiński (6zł, one hour) and Kętrzyn (14zł to 19zł, 2¼ hours) go at least every hour. There are regular departures to Giżycko (18zł, three hours, 10 daily), Elbląg (20zł, 2¼ hours, seven daily) and Gdańsk (26zł, four hours, six daily). Half a dozen fast buses run to Warsaw daily (32zł to 34zł, four to 4½ hours).

International buses serve a number of European countries. Among the most frequent are PKS' daily departure at 12.45pm to Kaliningrad in Russia (25zł, four hours) and 9.30pm Friday service to Vilnius in Lithuania (80zł, nine hours).

TRAIN

Six direct trains leave for Gdańsk daily (22zł to 34zł, 2½ hours), four of which go via Elbląg (24zł, 1½ hours). Four fast trains go to Warsaw (43zł, 3½ hours) daily and another four to Toruń (21zł to 34zł, three hours).

OLSZTYNEK

pop 7600

Around 25km southwest of Olsztyn, Olsztynek is a small town with one big attraction: the **Museum of Folk Architecture** (Muzeum Budownictwa Ludowego; ☎ 089 519 2164; ul Sportowa 21; adult/concession May-Aug 8/5.50zł, Sep 7/5zł, Oct 6/4.50zł; ☎ 9am-3.30pm

Tue-Sun mid-Apr–end-Apr, to 5.30pm Tue-Sun May & Tue-Fri Jun-Aug, to 6pm Sat & Sun Jun-Aug, to 4.30pm Sep, to 3pm Oct). Tucked away on the northeastern outskirts of town, this skansen features about 40 examples of regional timber architecture from Warmia and Masuria, and also has a cluster of Lithuanian houses. There's a variety of peasant cottages complete with outbuildings, various windmills and a thatch-roofed church. A number of buildings have been furnished and decorated inside, and it's been done really well.

Above the skansen's rustic restaurant is a small museum that is split in two; one half is filled with the usual collection of folk art and farming tools, while other contains a detailed account (in Polish) of Stalag 1B Hohenstein, a POW camp located on the outskirts of the village during WWII. Some 650,000 captured soldiers passed through the camp, consisting mostly of French, Belgian, Italian and Russian nationals.

The 14th-century Protestant church, on the pretty Rynek, was rebuilt after suffering damage in WWII and is now an **art gallery** (☎ 089 519 2491; Rynek 1; adult/concession 3/2zł; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun May-Sep, to 4pm Tue-Sun Oct-Apr). It's a good spot to see current folk art; displays include hand-painted ceramic tiles, fine lace work, and iconic wooden figures that run from comical to moving.

The area to the south and east of the town is popular with Poles for its lakes and horse riding. Agrotourist accommodation is common here, and information on them, and local activities, can be picked up at the friendly **tourist office** (☎ 089 519 2756; it@olsztynek.com.pl; Ratusz, Rynek; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) near the art gallery.

The train station is 1km northeast of the centre, close to the skansen. At least six trains run to Olsztyn (7.50zł to 12zł, 30 minutes) daily.

The bus terminal is 250m south of the Rynek, but many regional buses call in at the train station. You can travel from either to Olsztyn (5zł, 50 minutes, once or twice hourly), Grunwald (4zł, 30 minutes, up to eight daily) and Ostróda (7zł, one hour, seven daily). Private minibuses duplicate many of the local lines.

GRUNWALD

Grunwald is hard to find even on detailed maps, yet the name is known to every Pole.

Here, on 15 July 1410, the combined Polish and Lithuanian forces (supported by contingents of Ruthenians and Tatars) under King Władysław II Jagiełło defeated the army of the Teutonic Knights (see p451). A crucial moment in Polish history, the 10 hours of carnage left the grand master of the Teutonic order, Ulrich von Jungingen, dead and his forces decimated. This was reputedly the largest medieval battle in Europe, with an estimated 70,000 troops aiming to hack each other to bits.

The battlefield is an open, gently rolling meadow adorned with three monuments. Built on the central hill is the **Museum of the Grunwald Battlefield** (Muzeum Bitwy Grunwaldzkiej; ☎ 089 647 2228; adult/concession 6/3zł; ☎ 8am-6pm 1 May-15 Oct), which has a minuscule display of period armour, maps and battle banners. Its redeeming feature is a small cinema that plays scenes from *Bitwa pod Grunwaldem* (1931), a classic Polish flick about the battle. Five hundred metres from the museum are the ruins of a **chapel**, erected by the order a year after the battle, on the spot where the grand master is supposed to have died. All signs are in Polish, but the shop by the entrance to the battlefield sells brochures in English and German.

Frequently visited by Poles, Grunwald is essentially a memorial to this glorious moment in Poland's history, and nonpartisan foreigners may find it less interesting. The best time to visit the place is in July during the **Days of Grunwald festival** (www.republika.pl/grunwald), a medieval extravaganza with lots of stalls, tournaments, concerts and costumed characters, culminating in a huge re-enactment of the battle itself. Watched by almost as many people as attended the original skirmish, it's one of the biggest and most colourful spectacles of its kind in Poland, which is saying something in a country that's so marked by its Middle Ages.

Year-round at least four or five daily buses go to Olsztynek (4zł, 30 minutes) and Olsztyn (9zł, 1½ hours) from the battlefield, with another two or three departing the battlefield for Ostróda (7.60zł, 45 minutes).

OSTRÓDA

pop 33,500

Ostróda is one of the region's many lakeside towns popular with Poles but unknown to others. It's also the southern terminus of the Elbląg-Ostróda Canal, and if you take a boat

in either direction you're likely to spend a night here. Apparently Napoleon once ruled Europe from this deceptively sleepy place; he wouldn't look twice at it now, but the leisurely pace of life seems to suit holidaymakers.

For information on Ostróda and its surrounding lakes, head to the regional **tourist office** (☎ 089 642 3000; www.mazury-zachodnie.pl; Plac 1000-lecia Państwa Polskiego 1A; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Jun-Aug, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Sep-May) near the town's small castle.

Sleeping & Eating

The tourist office has an extensive list of agrotourist options in the region.

Hotel Promenada (☎ 089 642 8100; www.hotelpromenada.com.pl; ul Mickiewicza 3; s/d 120/180zł; ☎) The Promenada offers the best accommodation in town, close to the lake. Rooms are modern and clean, if a tad soulless; ask for one facing the lake, as the hotel is located on a busy corner.

Taverna (Gen Roji 1; mains 15-30zł; ☎ 11am-11pm) Taverna occupies a lovely spot on a small lake inlet at the northern end of town. Its large wooden deck is the perfect place for a sunowner or a hearty Polish meal, and kayaks are available for the energetic at 5/25zł per hour/day.

Zakątek (☎ 0603 579691; ul Zarnieckiego 38a/51; per car/person/tent 4/4/4zł; ☎) This tiny, basic camping ground sits at the northern tip of the 18km-long Lake Szeląg, some 12km north of Ostróda on the 530 road to Dobre Miasto. It's pretty much all by itself with only the forest and lake for company, but the owner has had the good sense to supply a small shop, beer on tap and kayak rental (5zł per hour) for guests. It's best reached with your own transport.

Getting There & Away

The train and bus stations are next to each other, 500m west of the wharf. Nine trains run to Olsztyn (7.50zł, 30 minutes) and there are four daily trains to Toruń (19zł to 30zł, two to 2½ hours). For Warsaw (40zł, 3¼ hours) a change is usually required at Iława, but there is one direct train daily at 9.14am.

There are buses to Olsztyn (5zł, 1¼ hours, 10 daily), Olsztynek (7zł, one hour, seven daily), Grunwald (7.60zł, 45 minutes, two or three daily) and Elbląg (15zł, 1¼ hours, 11 daily).

From May to September a boat to Elbląg leaves daily at 8am (p486).

ELBLĄG-OSTRÓDA CANAL

The 82km Elbląg-Ostróda Canal is the longest navigable canal still in use in Poland. It's also the most unusual: the canal deals with the 99.5m difference in water levels by means of a unique system of **slipways**, where boats are physically dragged across dry land on rail-mounted trolleys (opposite).

The canal follows the course of a chain of six lakes, most of which are now protected conservation areas. The largest is the considerably overgrown **Lake Drużno** near Elbląg, left behind by the Vistula Lagoon, which once extended deep into this region.

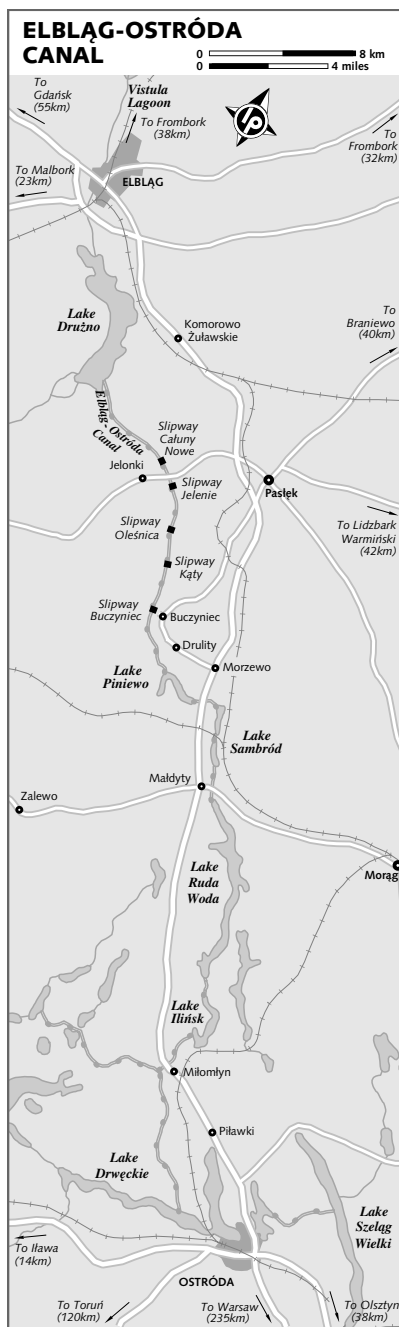
The five slipways are on a 10km stretch of the northern part of the canal. Each slipway consists of two trolleys tied to a single looped rope, operating on the same principle as a funicular. They are powered by water.

Boat Excursions

From May to September, pleasure boats operated by **Żegluga Ostródzko-Elbląska** (☎ in Ostróda 089 646 3871; www.zegluga.com.pl; ☎ 7am-7pm May-Sep) sail the main part of the canal between Ostróda and Elbląg. They depart from both towns at 8am and arrive at the opposite end at about 7pm (adult/under 18 85/65zł). Luggage and bicycles can be taken on free of charge.

If you don't feel like committing to the full 11-hour stretch, take the boat from Elbląg as far as **Buczyniec** (70/50zł, five hours), which covers the most interesting part of the canal, including all five slipways. This is a good solution for motorists leaving their vehicles in Elbląg as the company puts on buses to transport passengers back to Elbląg. There are no buses from Buczyniec on to Ostróda, but a taxi (100zł to 120zł) can be organised through the boat office in Ostróda – simply call ahead of time.

The boats, which have a capacity of 65, only run when at least 20 passengers turn up. You can expect regular daily services in July and August (sometimes two boats are required to meet the demand) and on hot summer days it may be an idea to reserve a place via phone or email. Outside this period there may be some days off. It's worth ringing Żegluga Ostródzko-Elbląska a couple of days in advance to find out about the availability of tickets and the current timetable status. Boats have snack bars on board, which serve some basic snacks, as well as tea, coffee and beer.



If you're not going to take the boat trip, but have your own transport and want to have a look at the slipways, head to **Buczyniec** between noon and 2pm to see the boats pass on their way north and south. There's a small **museum** (☎ 055 248 7092) here and you can see the impressive machinery that powers the trolleys.

LIDZBARK WARMIŃSKI

pop 16,500

Lidzbark Warmiński, 46km north of Olsztyn, is a rough and ready town with a massive Gothic castle. Its past is certainly more glorious than its present; it was the capital of the Warmian bishopric for over four centuries. In 1350 the bishops chose it as their main residence; a castle and a church were built and the town swiftly became an important religious and cultural centre. Copernicus lived here between 1503 and 1510, serving as doctor and adviser to his uncle, Bishop Łukas Watzénrode.

When the Reformation arrived in the 16th century, Lidzbark, along with most of the province, became a citadel of Catholicism, and it remained so until the First Partition of 1772. Deprived of his office, the last bishop, Ignacy Krasicki, turned to literature, becoming an outstanding satirist and all-round man of letters.

BARGING IN

The rich forests of the Ostróda region have attracted merchants from Gdańsk and Elbląg since medieval times, yet until the 19th century the only way of getting timber down to the Baltic was a long water route along the Drwęca and Vistula Rivers via Toruń. Engineers considered building a canal as a short cut but quickly found that the terrain was rugged and too steep for conventional locks.

In 1836 Prussian engineer Georg Jakob Steenke (1801–82), from Königsberg, produced a sophisticated design for an Elbląg-Ostróda Canal incorporating slipways, but Prussian authorities rejected the project as unrealistic and too costly. Steenke didn't give up, however, and eventually succeeded in getting an audience with the king of Prussia. With typical kingly shrewdness, the monarch approved the plan, not because of its technical or economic aspects but because nobody had ever constructed such a system before.

The part of the canal between Elbląg and Miłomłyn, which included all the slipways, was built between 1848 and 1860, and the remaining leg to Ostróda was completed by 1872. The canal proved to be reliable and profitable, and it cut the distance of the original route along the Drwęca and Vistula almost fivefold. Various extensions were planned, including one linking the canal with the Great Masurian Lakes 120km to the east, but none were ever built.

The canal was damaged during the 1945 Red Army offensive but was repaired soon after liberation and opened for timber transport in 1946. A year later, the first tourist boat sailed the route. It remains the only canal of its kind in Europe and continues to operate, though the timber boats are a distant memory.

Today there's little trace of the town that was reputedly the richest and most cultured in Warmia, but the castle alone is enough to justify a day trip.

Castle

This mighty square redbrick structure, adorned with turrets on the corners, is the most important sight in Lidzbark and one of Warmia's most significant cultural gems. Enter from the south through the palatial, horseshoe-shaped building surrounding Plac Zamkowy, which was extensively rebuilt in the 18th century. A wide brick bridge runs up to the main castle gate.

The castle was constructed in the second half of the 14th century on a square plan with a central courtyard, the whole surrounded by a moat and fortified walls. When the bishops' era ended with the Partitions, the castle fell into decline and served a variety of purposes, including use as barracks, storage, hospital and orphanage. Restoration was undertaken in the 1920s and within 10 years the building had been more or less returned to its original form. Miraculously, it came through the war unharmed, and today it is easily one of Poland's best-preserved medieval castles.

Most of the interior, from the cellars up to the 2nd floor, now houses the **Warmian Museum** (Muzeum Warmińskie; ☎ 089 767 2111; Plac Zamkowy 1;

adult/concession 8/5zł, courtyard & cellar only 2zł; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun Jun-Aug, 10am-4pm Tue-Sun Sep-May). The first thing you'll notice is a beautiful courtyard with two-storey arcaded galleries all round it. It was constructed in the 1380s and has hardly been altered since then.

The castle's two-storey vaulted cellar, cool on even the hottest of days, is largely empty aside from a few marble fireplaces and cannon barrels. The cannons once belonged to the bishops, who had their own small army – an essential ecumenical accessory at that time.

Most of the attractions are housed on the 1st floor, which boasts the main chambers; the vaulted **Grand Refectory** (Wielki Refektarz) is quite remarkable. The chessboard-style wall paintings, dating from the end of the 14th century, feature the names and coats of arms of bishops who once resided here. In stark contrast is a tiny room centred on a dank, dark pit off the beautiful chamber, once used as a prison cell. Exhibitions on this floor include medieval art from the region, such as some charming Madonnas and fine silverware. The adjoining chapel was redecorated in rococo style in the mid-18th century and is quite overbearing compared to the rest of the castle.

The top floor contains several exhibitions, including cubist and surrealist 20th-century Polish painting, a collection of icons dating from the 17th century onward, and spiffy army uniforms and evening gowns from the early 1800s.

Sleeping & Eating

There is no reason to stay here unless transport connections force you to. If you happen to require a bed for the night, try **Gósciniec Mysliwski** (☎ 089 767 5259; ul Spółdzielców 2B; d with/without bath 90/120zł; P), halfway between the bus station and the castle. This hunting lodge, complete with animal pelts and antlers adorning the walls, has passable rooms and its own restaurant.

Getting There & Away

The bus terminal occupies the defunct train station, about 500m northwest of the castle. Buses to Olsztyn (6zł, one hour) depart at least hourly, and are supplemented by private minibuses. There are five express buses a day to Gdańsk (22zł to 26zł, three to 3½ hours) and two to Kętrzyn (11zł, 1½ hours), passing Reszel and Święta Lipka on the way.

RESZEL

pop 5100

Like Lidzbark Warmiński, the big drawcard of Reszel (*reh-she*) is its castle. It easily dominates the tiny market town from a slightly elevated position, and is testament to Reszel's long history: the town began life as the easternmost outpost of the Warmian bishopric in the 13th century and remained a prosperous craft centre until the wars of the 18th century. Today it's quite the backwater, though its minuscule centre still boasts the original street plan and a fine parish church.

Sights

Reszel's tiny Old Town is centred on the Rynek and its low-key town hall, which houses the local **tourist office** (☎ 089 755 0097; Rynek 24; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat May–mid-Sep, 7.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri mid-Sep–May). One block east is the 14th-century brick **castle** (☎ 089 755 0216; ul Podzamcze 3; adult/concession 3/2zł), built at the same time as that in Lidzbark. It has retained much of its original form, except for the southern side, which was turned into a Protestant church in the 19th century, with a belfry and a jarring concrete gable added to the top. Today the complex is open to the public and houses a hotel, a restaurant, some function rooms and an **art gallery** (adult/concession 6/3zł; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun). Go to the top of the castle's massive cylindrical tower for some views over the red-tiled roofs of the Old Town.

The other main building in town is the 14th-century **parish church** (☎ 9am-6pm), a large Gothic brick construction with a tall square tower. It was refurbished and redecorated in the 1820s after fires that devastated much of the centre, and has a harmonious though not outstanding interior. If you'd like a birds-eye view of the town with the castle as a backdrop, ascend the church's **tower** (adult/concession 4/2zł).

At the entrance to the Old Town, when arriving from Kętrzyn, is the unusually massive brick **Fishing Bridge** (Most Rybacki), also known as the Gothic Bridge (Most Gotycki), built in the 14th century and recently so extensively restored that it looks like new. Don't be fooled by the name – you'd need a long line and a lot more river before you could actually catch anything!

Sleeping & Eating

If you're going to stay anywhere in Reszel, it may as well be the castle. The big suite-like rooms of the **Kreativ Hotel** (☎ 089 755 0109; www

HIGH STAKES

Reszel may have the dubious distinction of being the last place in Europe to sentence a woman to death as a witch. Where most such cases had died out by the early 18th century, massive fires in 1806 and 1807 incensed the townspeople here to such a degree that they accused unfortunate local woman Barbara Zdunk of sorcery and imprisoned her in the castle. The case reached the attention of Prussia's highest authorities and was referred to several courts and even to King Frederick Wilhelm II himself – incredibly, all of them upheld the guilty verdict. In 1811 Zdunk was burned at the stake, though legend has it that the executioner mercifully strangled her before torching the wood. Not what you'd expect from the Age of Enlightenment.

.zamek-reszel.com; ul Podzamcze 3; s/d/q 210/280/440zł; P) are big on atmosphere, with brick flooring, whitewashed walls, and large, comfy beds. Its vaulted **restaurant** (mains 9-30zł; ☎ 8am-11pm) takes over the central courtyard in warm weather.

Getting There & Away

Trains no longer call in at Reszel. The bus terminal is by the old station, a five-minute walk north of the Old Town. There are plenty of buses east to Kętrzyn (5zł to 6zł, 30 minutes), passing via Święta Lipka (3.50zł, 10 minutes). A dozen buses go to Olsztyn daily (12zł, 1½ hours). Two buses run west to Lidzbark Warmiński (9zł, one hour), one of them a fast service to Gdańsk (35zł, four hours).

ŚWIĘTA LIPKA

Polish Catholics flock to this tiny hamlet for one reason only – to visit its celebrated church. The origins of Święta Lipka (*shfyen-tah leep-kah*), which means 'Holy Lime Tree', are linked to one of Poland's most famous miracle stories. Apparently a prisoner in Kętrzyn castle was visited the night before his execution by the Virgin Mary, who presented him with a tree trunk so he could carve an effigy of her. The resulting figure was so beautiful that the judges took it to be a sign from heaven and gave the condemned man his freedom. On his way home he placed the statue on the first lime tree he encountered, which happened to be in Święta Lipka.

Miracles immediately began to occur, and even sheep knelt down while passing the shrine. Pilgrims arrived in increasing numbers, including the last grand master of the Teutonic order, Albrecht von Hohenzollern, who walked here barefoot (ironically, he converted to Lutherism six years later). A timber chapel was built to protect the miraculous figure, and was later replaced with the present building. It's perhaps the most magnificent Baroque church in northern Poland, a huge attraction and still a major pilgrimage site.

Church of Our Lady

Built between 1687 and 1693, and later surrounded by an ample rectangular cloister, the **church** (☎ 089 755 1481; www.swlipka.pl; admission free; ☎ 8am-6pm except during Mass) was built around four identical corner towers, all housing chapels. The best artists from Warmia, Königsberg (Kaliningrad) and Vilnius were commissioned for the furnishings and decoration, which were completed by about 1740. Since then the church has hardly changed, either inside or out, and is regarded as one of the purest examples of a late-Baroque church in the country.

The entrance to the complex is an elaborate wrought-iron **gateway**. Just behind it, the two-towered cream façade holds a stone **sculpture** of the holy lime tree in its central niche, with a statue of the Virgin Mary on top.

Once inside (appropriate clothing is required to enter), the visitor is enveloped in colourful and florid, but not overwhelming, Baroque ornamentation. All the frescoes are the work of Maciej Mayer of Lidzbark, and display trompe l'œil images, which were fashionable at the time. These are clearly visible both on the vault and the columns; the latter look as if they were carved. Of course Mayer also left behind his own image – you can see him in a blue waistcoat with brushes in his hand, in the corner of the vault painting over the organ.

The three-storey, 19m-high **altar**, covering the whole back of the chancel, is carved of walnut and painted to look like marble. Of the three paintings in the altar, the lowest one depicts the Virgin Mary of Święta Lipka with the Christ child, which is lit with subtle lighting for effect.

The pulpit is ornamented with paintings and sculptures. Directly opposite, across the nave, is a **holy lime tree** topped with the figure of the Virgin Mary, supposedly placed on the spot where the legendary tree itself once stood.

KĘTRZYN

pop 28,100

Like so many Polish towns, Kętrzyn (*kent-shin*) has a past far richer than its present. Today there's little to attract visitors – aside from its close proximity to the Wolf's Lair and Święta Lipka – but its history dates back to the 14th century, when the Teutonic Knights (see p451) founded a settlement here under the name of Rastenburg. Though partly colonised by Poles, it remained Prussian until WWII, after which it became Polish. The name derives from Wojciech Kętrzyński (1838–1919), a historian and scholar who documented the history of the Polish presence in the region.

Information

Kętrzyńskie Centrum Kultury (☎ 089 751 4765; it@ketrzyn.com.pl; Piłsudskiego 1; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon, 7.30am–3.30pm Tue–Fri) Small information office in the heart of town.

Sights

There are still some vestiges of the Teutonic legacy in the form of a mid-14th-century brick **castle** on the southern edge of the town centre. Today it houses the **Regional Museum** (☎ 089 752 3282; Plac Zamkowy 1; adult/concession 5/3zł; ☎ 10am–5pm mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 9am–4pm Tue–Fri, 9am–3pm Sat & Sun mid-Sep–mid-Jun). It has a static display dedicated to the town's history, plus temporary exhibitions and regular medieval demonstrations at weekends.

With its squat, square tower, the Gothic **St George's Church** (Kościół Św Jerzego), a bit further up the street, looks like the town's second castle from a distance. Its interior has furnishings and decoration dating from various periods, indicating a number of alterations over time. Of particular note is the fine pulpit, three tombstones in the wall near the entrance, and a painting depicting the Resurrection by Heinrich Königswieser, a pupil of Reformation artist Lucas Cranach the Younger.

Sleeping & Eating

ourpick Zajazd Pod Zamkiem (☎ 089 752 3117; www.zajazd.ketrzyn.pl; ul Struga 3; s/d/tr/q 100/150/190/250zł; ☎) Set in a stylish 19th-century country house right next to the castle entrance, the Zajazd has just four rooms, each with four beds. The terrace restaurant is great in summer, and offers the usual Polish grub and

plenty of shade. Ask the owner about internet cafés in town; he may let you use his computer to check emails.

Hotel Koch (☎ 089 752 2058; www.masuren2.de; ul Traugutta 3; s/d 150/200zł; ☎) Rooms are a bit plain for what you pay here, but standards are generally high, bathrooms are nice and spacious, and there are plenty of amenities, including a restaurant and a 24-hour bar. Bicycles are for hire, and management can arrange bike, kayak and sailing trips in the Masurian area to meet the needs of guests and visitors.

Getting There & Away

The train and bus stations are next to each other, 600m southeast of the town centre.

BUS

There are buses which run to Giżycko (6.90zł, 40 minutes, eight daily), Węgorzewo (8zł, 55 minutes, hourly) and Olsztyn (14zł to 19zł, 2½ hours, 17 daily). For the Wolf's Lair, head to Gierłoż (2zł, 15 minutes) with city bus 1 (nine daily) on weekdays or the Zielona bus line at weekends from June to August (every hour). PKS buses to Węgorzewo via Radziejewo also pass through Gierłoż. For Święta Lipka (5zł, 20 minutes), take any bus to Reszel, Olsztyn, or Mrągowo via Pilec.

TRAIN

Three fast trains run to Gdańsk daily (43zł, 4½ hours) via Elbląg (36zł, three hours). There are four trains to Giżycko (6.50zł, 30 minutes) and eight to Olsztyn (14zł to 22zł, 1½ hours) daily.

WOLF'S LAIR

Hidden in thick forest near the hamlet of Gierłoż, 8km east of Kętrzyn, is one of Poland's eeriest historical relics – 18 overgrown hectares of huge, partly destroyed concrete bunkers. This was Hitler's main headquarters during WWII, baptised with the German name of Wolfsschanze, or **Wolf's Lair** (Wilczy Szaniec; ☎ 089 752 4429; www.wolfsschanze.home.pl; adult/concession 8/5zł; ☎ 8am–sunset).

The location was carefully chosen in this remote part of East Prussia, far away from important towns and transport routes, to be a convenient command centre for the planned German advance eastwards. The work, carried out by some 3000 German labourers, began in autumn 1940; the cement, steel and basalt gravel were all brought from Germany.

THE HIT ON HITLER

Hitler used to say that the Wolf's Lair was one of the very few places in Europe where he felt safe. Ironically, it was here that an assassination attempt came closest to succeeding. It was organised by a group of pragmatic, high-ranking German officers who considered the continuation of the war to be suicidal, with no real chance of victory. They planned to negotiate peace with the Allies after eliminating Hitler.

The leader of the plot, Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, arrived from Berlin on 20 July 1944 under the pretext of informing Hitler about the newly formed reserve army. A frequent guest at the Wolf's Lair, he enjoyed the confidence of the staff and had no problems entering the bunker complex with a bomb in his briefcase. He placed the case beneath the table a few feet from Hitler and left the meeting to take a prearranged phone call. The explosion killed two members of Hitler's staff and wounded half a dozen others, but the Führer himself suffered only minor injuries and was even able to meet Mussolini later the same day. Stauffenberg and some 5000 people involved directly or indirectly in the plot were executed.

Had the outcome been different, it could have radically changed the final course of WWII. A peace treaty between the Germans and the Allies in 1944 might well have saved the lives of some five million people and prevented the devastation of vast parts of Poland and Germany.

About 80 structures were finally built, including seven heavy bunkers for the top leaders: Martin Bormann (Hitler's adviser and private secretary), Hermann Göring (Prussian prime minister and German commissioner for aviation) and Hitler himself were among the residents. Their bunkers had walls and ceilings up to 8m thick.

The whole complex was surrounded by multiple barriers of barbed wire and artillery emplacements, and a sophisticated minefield. An airfield was built 5km away and there was an emergency airstrip within the camp. Apart from the natural camouflage of trees and plants, the bunker site was further disguised with artificial vegetation-like screens suspended on wires and changed according to the season of the year. The Allies did not discover the site until 1945.

Hitler arrived in the Wolf's Lair on 26 June 1941 (four days after the invasion of the Soviet Union) and stayed there until 20 November 1944, with only short trips to the outside world. His longest journey outside the bunker was a four-month stint at the Ukraine headquarters of the Wehrmacht (the armed services of the German Reich) in 1942, overseeing the advancing German front.

As the Red Army approached in 1944, Hitler left the Wolf's Lair and the headquarters were evacuated. The army prepared the bunkers to be destroyed, should the enemy have attempted to seize them. About 10 tonnes of explosives were stuffed into each heavy bunker. The complex was eventually blown

up on 24 January 1945 and the Germans retreated. Three days later the Soviets arrived, but the extensive minefield was still efficiently defending the empty ruins. It took 10 years to clear the 10km of mines within the complex; about 55,000 were detected and defused.

Today, the site has succumbed to Mother Nature; bunkers are slowly disappearing behind a thick wall of natural camouflage. It's best to pick up a site map or booklet (12zł), sold from stands in the parking area. If you're in a group organise a guide to show you around; English-, German- and Russian-speaking guides charge 50zł per 1½-hour tour, but you may be able to negotiate a lower price if things are slow. All structures are identified with numbers and marked with big signs telling you not to enter the ruins, advice that many people ignore, including some guides (bunker 6 appears the most popular to enter). Of Hitler's bunker (13) only one wall survived, but Göring's 'home' (16) is in relatively good shape. A memorial plate (placed in 1992) marks the location of Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg's 1944 assassination attempt on Hitler (see boxed text, above) and a small exhibition room houses a scale model of the original camp layout.

You can also continue 200m past the entrance towards Węgorzewo, and take a small road to the right signposted 'Kwiedzina (5km)'. On either side of this narrow path is a handful of crumbling bunkers that can be explored free of charge.

Whichever direction you head, it's worth bringing insect repellent in summer.

EXPLORING MAUERWALD

The Wolf's Lair may be the most famous example of Germany's wartime presence in Masuria, but it's not the only one. A second bunker complex, known as **Mauerwald** (☎ 089 752 4283; www.mauerwald.com in German; adult/concession 5/3zł; 🕒 8am-dusk May-Oct), was built 18km northeast of Hitler's secret headquarters. The 30 bunkers and accompanying buildings, which were occupied from 1941 to 1944, were home to a handful of the Nazis' top military commanders, including Field Marshall Paulus, General Guderian and Colonel von Stauffenberg (p493).

The bunkers are in general condition and range from small huts to solid two-storey blocks with 7m thick walls. Bunker 6 is the largest, and sports a wooden tower atop its roof that affords partial views of the surrounding bunkers (trees obscure most buildings). Unlike the Wolf's Lair, almost all of the bunkers can be entered, and it's a creepy experience exploring such dark, damp places. If you've a flashlight bring it along, otherwise hire one at the ticket desk for 2zł. Be sure to bring insect repellent too.

About 4km northwest of Mauerwald along the Masurian Canal are more solid concrete edifices in the shape of two unfinished **locks**. Begun in 1911 by the Prussians, these massive structures standing 21m high and 46m long were part of a series of 10 locks, planned to connect the Masurian lakes with the Baltic Sea. WWI halted work, but construction began again in 1934, only to be stopped once more by war. One of the locks is now used as an adult playground by **S-Borg** (☎ 087 427 4939; www.s-borg.pl in Polish), a local extreme-sports company that's set a rope bridge (10zł), swing bridge (15zł), flying fox (40zł) and giant swing (40zł) for the adventurous to play on.

For Mauerwald, take any bus between Kętrzyn and Węgorzewo and ask to be let off at Mamerki; the bus stop is about 300m north of the bunkers. To reach the locks, hop on a bus from Węgorzewo heading in the direction of Srokowo and tell the driver to drop you at Lake Rydzówka.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Wilcze Gniazdo (☎ 089 752 4429; s 70zł, d 80-90zł, tr 130zł; 📍) The former officers' hostel at the entrance to the complex has been refurbished to serve as a basic hotel, but it's certainly a lot more comfortable than the dank remains of the bunkers. There're also a snack bar and a budget restaurant on the site. Hotel guests can enter the bunker complex for free.

Getting There & Away

PKS buses between Kętrzyn (2zł, 15 minutes) and Węgorzewo (6.30zł, 45 minutes) stop here several times a day. You can also go to Kętrzyn by city bus 1.

WĘGORZEWO

pop 11,700

The small but busy town of Węgorzewo (ven-go-zheh-vo) on Lake Mamry is the northernmost lakeside centre for both excursion boats and independent sailors. The main town itself isn't quite on the lake shore but is linked to it by a 2km river canal.

It's less overrun by tourists than its southern cousins, except on the first weekend of August when the town hosts a large craft fair, which is 25 years old and attracts plenty of artisans from the region and beyond.

Information

PKO Bank (Plac Wolności 18)

Tourist office (☎ 087 427 4009; www.wegorzewo.pl; Plac Wolności 11; 🕒 9am-5pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 8am-4pm Mon-Fri mid-Sep-mid-Jun) Has information on lake and biking activities.

Sleeping & Eating

As the focus of activity is on the lake area, you won't find too many places to stay around the centre. There are dozens of pensions and larger leisure facilities spread out in the surrounding area, particularly in the lakeside suburb of Kal, but they can be tricky to get to and usually only open in summer.

Pensjonat Nautic (☎ 087 427 2080; www.nautic.pl; ul Słowackiego 14; s 110zł, d 190-210zł, apt 240-500zł; 📍) An excellent and versatile family guesthouse near the canal and the boat wharf. Rooms range from comfortable standard en suites with blue wood fittings to a pair of amazing apartments with their own kitchenettes and terraces. The restaurant here also comes recommended.

Camping Nr 175 Rusałka (☎ 087 427 2191; www.cmazur.pl; ul Leśna 2; camp sites per adult/child 9/7zł, cabins 100-180zł; 🕒 May-Sep) With its pleasant wooded grounds, a restaurant, and boats and kayaks for hire, Rusałka is a good place and well run,

though most cabins are pretty basic. It's on Lake Świącayta, 4km from Węgorzewo off the Giżycko road. Infrequent PKS buses go there in season; if you don't want to wait, take any bus to Giżycko, get out at the Lake Świącayta turn-off and walk the last 1km.

Getting There & Away

Trains no longer operate here, but the bus terminal, 1km northwest of the centre, provides reasonable transport to Giżycko (6.70zł, 55 minutes, at least hourly) and Kętrzyn (8.30zł, 55 minutes, hourly); buses to Kętrzyn via Radziejewo will drop you at the entrance to the Wolf's Lair. Several buses go to Gódup (8.70zł, 1½ hours) and two to Suwałki (15.50zł, 3½ hours). Four fast buses run directly to Warsaw (36zł, 5½ hours); book in advance in the high season.

From July to August, a boat sails from the wharf at Lake Mamry to Giżycko at 3pm (adult/concession 40/32zł, 2½ hours).

GIŻYCKO

pop 29,800

Positioned on the northern shore of Lake Niegocin, Giżycko (ghee-zhits-ko) is the largest sailing centre in the lakes, and the focal point of the seasonal tourist trade. It's not an aesthetically pleasing town, with a lake frontage more tacky than tasteful, but it's one of the few Masurian towns with a buzz and its huge fortress is worth at least an hour of your time.

The town started life under the Teutonic Knights (see p451) but was destroyed on numerous occasions by Lithuanians, Poles, Swedes, Tatars, Russians and Germans in turn. Today it's essentially a transport hub and provision base for the holiday homes and water-sports centres that have grown up outside the town, and for the hordes of lake-bound holidaymakers who arrive en masse in the short summer season.

Information

Bank Pekao ATM (ul Olsztyńska 15A)

Main post office (ul Pocztowa 2)

Orbis Travel (☎ 087 428 3112; ul Dąbrowskiego 3;

🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat)

Romix Internet (☎ 087 429 2997; ul Olsztyńska 11B;

per hr 4zł; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat)

Tourist office (☎ 087 428 5265; www.gizycko.turystyka.pl; ul Wyzwolenia 2; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun Jun-Sep, 8am-4pm Mon-Fri Sep-May) Loads of info on the entire lake region and free internet access.

Sights

Named after the then Prussian minister of war, General Hermann von Boyen, the **Boyen Fortress** (Twierdza Boyen; adult/concession fortress & museum 5/3zł) was built between 1844 and 1856 to protect the kingdom's border with Russia. Since the frontier ran north-south along the 90km string of lakes, the stronghold was strategically placed in the middle, on the isthmus near Giżycko.

The fortress, which consists of several bastions and defensive towers surrounded by a moat, was continually modified and strengthened, and successfully withstood Russian attacks during WWI. In WWII it was a defensive outpost of the Wolf's Lair, given up to the Red Army without a fight during the 1945 offensive. The fortifications have survived in surprisingly good shape, and some of the walls, bastions and barracks can safely be explored. One of the barracks houses a youth hostel at one end and a small **museum** (🕒 9am-8pm mid-Apr-mid-Nov) at the other. Inside the museum you'll find a scale model of the fortress and a few odd items, such as a section of wall painted with a Russian soldier, used as target practice by the Prussians.

Built in 1900 in neo-Gothic style, Giżycko's seven-storey **Water Tower** (☎ 087 428 5170; adult/concession 10/5zł; 🕒 9am-11pm) supplied the city with running water until 1997. Today the tall red-brick structure houses a café and an assortment of memorabilia related to the region, but its big attraction is of course the views it provides over the town and surrounding lakes.

Giżycko's working **rotary bridge** on ul Moniuszki was built in 1889 and is the only one of its kind in the country. Despite weighing more than 100 tonnes, it can be turned by one person, and is opened six times daily to allow boats through, closing to traffic for between 30 minutes and 1¾ hours each time. If you're travelling by car, circumvent the wait and take the long way round via ul Obwodowa.

Activities

YACHT CHARTERS

Giżycko has the largest number of yacht-charter agencies in the area, and accordingly offers the widest choice of boats. The town is also a recognised centre for disabled sailors, with regular national regattas, and many companies provide specialist equipment, advice and training.

One of a gaggle of options on the fortress peninsula, Zamek is a rather dire motel with bland rooms, but it manages the town's most central camping ground.

Eating

In the high season you only have to wander down to the waterfront to find dozens of temporary cafés, stands and snack bars catering for the holiday crowds. Outside these times you'll have to choose from the hotel restaurants and a handful of other year-round eateries in the centre.

Bar Hornet (☎ 087 428 1267; Plac Grunwaldzki 12; mains 8-25zł; ☎ 8am-11pm) The enterprising Hornet splits itself into two sections, a self-service cafeteria and a smarter sit-down restaurant. The only difference between them is the waiters, but it's nice to have a choice! The food's decent value anyway, with a fine selection of quick eats and a salad bar, and the wooden deck is good for warm evenings.

Grota (☎ 066390 1868; ul Nadbrzeźna 3a; mains 15-30zł; ☎ 11am-midnight) Restaurants on the marina may draw the crowds with their lake-front views, but Grota gets the locals' vote for its food. Wood oven-baked pizzas and a mix of Polish and German cuisine fill the menu, and there's seating along the canal in summer.

Kuchnia Świata (☎ 087 429 2255; Plac Grunwaldzki 1; mains 10-40zł; ☎ 11am-11pm Sun-Thu, 11am-midnight Fri & Sat) The only bar-restaurant worthy of the name in town. A varied menu (Polish to Chinese via Italian) and a massive summer terrace see it full most nights of the week.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Żegluga Mazurska boats operate from May to September, with extra services in July and August. There are two daily departures to Mikołajki at 9am and 3pm (adult/concession 48/35zł, three hours) via Rydzewo and Szymonka, and one daily trip north to Węgorzewo at 10.30am (40/32zł, 2½ hours). If you want to stay around town, you can take a spin around Lake Niegocin (25/20zł, 80 minutes) or an evening dancing cruise (50zł, two hours). The wharf is near the train station.

BUS

Next to the train station, the bus terminal offers hourly services to Węgorzewo (6.70zł, 55 minutes) and Olsztyn (18zł, three hours), and regular buses to Mikołajki (9.30zł, one hour,

nine daily), Kętrzyn (6.90zł, 40 minutes, eight daily) and Suwałki (16zł, two hours, seven daily). Two buses go to Lidzbark Warmiński (16zł, 1¾ hours), and up to 12 fast buses serve Warsaw (35zł to 48zł, five hours).

An international overnight bus to Vilnius (50zł, eight hours) leaves daily at 11.50pm.

TRAIN

The train station is on the southern edge of town near the lake. Trains run to Elk (9zł to 14zł, 50 minutes, five daily) and Olsztyn (17zł to 28zł, two hours, seven daily) via Kętrzyn (6.50zł to 10zł, 30 to 40 minutes), and three fast trains go to Gdańsk (46zł, five hours) and two to Białystok (33zł, 2½ hours). Trains to Warsaw (47zł, six hours) take a roundabout route – it's faster to go by bus.

Getting Around

Car hire is available from **Fiat Auto-Serwis** (☎ 087 429 4294; gizycko@elk.com.pl; Al 1 Maja 21; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri). It is in the northern part of town.

MIKOŁAJKI

pop 3800

Perched on picturesque narrows crossed by three bridges, Mikołajki (mee-ko-wahy-kee) is a lively lakeside town and second only to Giżycko in the popularity stakes. Tourism has all but taken over here, and its waterfront is filled to overflowing with promenade plodders and pleasure boats in summer.

Like most resorts of this kind, Mikołajki lives a frenetic life in July and August, takes it easy in June and September, and retires for a long nap the rest of the year.

Information

PKO Bank (Plac Wolności 7)

Tourist office (☎ 087 421 6850; www.mikolajki.pl in Polish; Plac Wolności 3; ☎ 10am-8pm Jul & Aug, 10am-5pm May, Jun, Sep & Oct) Excellent source of information.

Activities

BOAT HIRE

As in Giżycko, yacht hire is big business here in summer, and around 10 companies vie for the seasonal trade. The **Wioska Żeglarska** (☎ 087 421 6040; www.wioskazeglarskamikolajki.pl; ul Kowalska 3), on the waterfront, has sailing boats for hire, or staff may be able to advise you on other companies if it's booked out. See p495 for more information on yacht charters.

For shorter-term excursions, **Port Rybitwa** (☎ 087 421 6163; www.portrybitwa.pl; ul Okrężna 5) hires out low-powered motorboats (from 85zł per hour, 425zł per day) from near the town's swimming beach. The owner can suggest plenty of DIY excursions on the connecting lakes.

Sleeping & Eating

The centre of town is largely reserved for 'proper' hotels. In the outer areas, small pensions (50zł to 80zł per person) do a roaring trade and dozens of private rooms (30zł to 50zł per person) become available in summer; the tourist office can provide a full list. There are plenty of places for food along the waterfront, and enough year-round restaurants to keep you from starving if you happen by out of season.

Król Sielaw (☎ 087 421 6323; ul Kajki 5; s/d/tr 80/150/180zł; ☎) Rustic beams and twee crafts provide the usual touch of colour in these very reasonable rooms. The country theme continues in the unpretentious fish restaurant downstairs. The location is supremely central and the lake is only a block away.

Pensjonat Mikołajki (☎ 087 421 6437; www.pensjonatmikolajki.prv.pl; ul Kajki 18; s/d from 120/180zł, ste 360zł) This lovely, timbered modern villa offers some superb lake views to the select few who book earliest. Otherwise you'll have to settle for the views from the private terrace, which aren't that bad either.

Hotel Mazur (☎ 087 421 6941; www.hotelmazur.republika.pl; Plac Wolności 6; d 200zł; ☎) Stylish and refined, the Mazur dominates Mikołajki's main square – unsurprising, considering it used to be the town hall. Luckily, you don't have to dabble in politics to enjoy the discreet rooms and ample facilities. The hotel also offers car rental for 100zł to 140zł per day.

our pick **Hotel Zamek Ryn** (☎ 087 429 7000; www.zamekryn.pl; Plac Wolności 2; s/d/ste/apt 345/395/550/650zł; ☎) This brand spanking new hotel fills one of the largest 14th-century Teutonic castles in Europe, completely dominating the town of Ryn. Its facilities include a heated indoor pool, a sauna, Turkish baths, a restaurant, a wine cellar and a nightclub. Rooms are modern but a tad small, while apartments are massive (as is the medieval banquet hall). Ryn is 17km north of Mikołajki and connected by regular daily buses (6zł, 40 minutes).

Camping Nr 2 Wagabunda (☎ 087 421 6018; www.wagabunda-mikolajki.pl; ul Leśna 2; camp sites per person/

car/tent 12/10/12zł, cabins from 145zł; ☎ May-Sep) The Wagabunda is the town's main camping ground. It's across the bridge from the centre and a 600m walk southwest. In addition to the camping area it has plenty of small cabins that vary in standard and price, and bicycles, boats and canoes are available for hire.

Restauracja Prohibicja (☎ 087 421 9919; Plac Handlowy 13; mains 15-340zł; ☎ 11am-midnight) Of all the gin joints in all the world, Mikołajki is the last place you'd expect to find a gangster-themed bar-restaurant. If you fancy sleeping with the fishes, there's also a fistful of hotel rooms upstairs. Despite the name, alcohol is sold over the counter, and it's all family-friendly, of course.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

From May to September, boats leave Mikołajki for Giżycko (adult/concession 48/35zł, three hours) at 10.30am and 3pm and Ruciane (40/32zł, 2½ hours) at 10am and 2.20pm. Round trips on Lake Śniardwy (25/18zł, 1½ hours) sail on a regular basis, and there are also combination routes available (eg Mikołajki-Lake Śniardwy-Ruciane-Mikołajki; 62/50zł, five hours).

BUS

The bus terminal is in the centre, near the Protestant church. Buses to Mrągowo (6.20zł, 40 minutes) run every couple of hours; change there for Olsztyn (15zł) or Kętrzyn (10zł). Ten buses go to Giżycko daily (8zł, one hour) and there's one service to Suwałki (15.50zł, 1¾ hours). Six buses depart daily to Warsaw (35zł to 50zł, five hours) in summer.

TRAIN

The sleepy train station is 1km from the centre, on the Giżycko road. It handles just a few trains a day to Elk (11zł, 1¼ hours) and Olsztyn (14zł, two hours).

ŁUKNAJNO RESERVE

The shallow 700-hectare **Lake Łuknajno**, 4km east of Mikołajki, shelters Europe's largest surviving community of wild swans (*Cygnus olor*) and is home to many other birds – 128 species have been recorded here. The 1200- to 2000-strong swan population nests in April and May but stays at the lake all summer. A few observation towers beside the lake make swan viewing possible.

A rough road from Mikołajki goes to the lake, but there's no public transport. Walk 3.5km until you get to a sign that reads 'do wieży widokowej' (to the viewing tower), then continue for 10 minutes along the path to the lake shore. The track can be muddy in spring and after rain, so choose your shoes wisely. Depending on the wind, the swans may be close to the tower or far away on the opposite side of the lake. Accommodation is available near the lake at **Folwark Łuknajno** (☎ 087 421 6862; www.luknajno.pl; s/d 120/180zł, camp sites per person/tent 10/15zł; 📍), a lovely country house with its own restaurant and pier on Lake Śniardwy. Bicycles and canoes are available for rent.

RUCIANE-NIDA

pop 4900

Ruciane-Nida (roo-*chah*-neh *nee*-dah) is the southernmost base for the Great Masurian Lakes. As the name suggests, it consists of two parts: Nida, an unremarkable collection of apartment blocks, and the tacky main lakeside resort of Ruciane, 2km northeast. The halves are linked by Al Wczasów, which runs through woods and is lined with holiday homes. About 1.5km north of Ruciane is the Śluza Guzianka, the only working lock on the Great Masurian Lakes.

The town's biggest drawback is its location; it's surrounded by forest and set on the banks of two lakes, **Lake Guzianka Wielka** and **Lake Nidzkie**. There's also lots of quality accommodation options here, making it a grand base for exploring the region. To the southeast is the **Pisz Forest** (Puszcza Piska), a vast area of thick woodland. There are no marked trails, but dirt tracks and paths crisscross the woods; most are OK for bikes.

Sleeping

our pick **Klasztor Wojnowo** (☎ 087 425 7030; www.klasztor.com.pl in Polish & German; Wojnowo 76; s/d 35/70zł; 📍) At the southern edge of tiny Wojnowo village, 6km west of Ruciane-Nida, stands a former Old Believers cloister overlooking a small lake. Its living quarters now house accommodation in the form of three basic rooms with shared facilities, and hearty home-cooked breakfasts are available for 10zł. Even if you're not staying, pop in and take a peek at the gorgeous religious icons.

our pick **Knajpa u Targowiczan** (☎ 087 425 7073; www.galkowo.pl; Galkowo 46; s 50-80zł, d 70-120zł, apt 200zł; 📍) A peaceful rural setting, renovated

farm cottages with simple, stylish rooms, camp-fire sites, a superb restaurant only a minute away, and horse riding and walking options on your doorstep – what more do you need? The occasional raucous party? Got it. Targowiczan is located in Gałkowo, about 10km west of Ruciane-Nida.

Ośrodek Wypoczynkowy NBP Guzianka (☎ 087 424 0600; www.guzianka.pl in Polish; ul Guzianka 7; s/d/tr/cabins 84/156/234/312zł; 📍) This large complex, owned by the National Bank of Poland, is an excellent place for families, with playgrounds, tennis courts, private beaches and bicycle rental. Rooms are modern and comfortable, and cabins sleep up to four. It's about 2km north of the station, near the Guzianka lock.

Hotel Nidzki (☎ 087 423 6401; www.hotel.nidzki.oit.pl in Polish & German; ul Nadbrzeżna; s/d/tr/apt 200/235/292/675zł; 📍 📺) Rooms at the three-star Nidzki are a little overpriced for the facilities they provide, but it's their balcony views over Lake Nidzki (particularly at sunset) that makes them worth the money. The hotel restaurant is the finest in town and its terrace is a wonderful spot for an early-evening tippie.

PTTK Camping No 7 (☎ 087 423 1012; Al Wczasów 17; camp sites per person/car 10/6zł, cabins 44-80zł, d 100zł, apt 130-150zł; 📍; May-Sep) The resident PTTK site is close to Nida and has just about every type of accommodation you could think of, making the most of its tree-lined setting.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

One daily Żegluga Mazurska excursion boat operates to Mikołajki (adult/concession 36/27zł, two hours, 2.10pm) in summer, with a second going via Lake Śniardwy (40/32zł, 2½ hours) and continuing on to Giżycko (74/54zł, 7½ hours, 10.30am). Four boats a day depart for round trips south around Lake Nidzkie (18/14zł, one hour). Local rival **Faryj** (☎ 087 423 1006; www.faryj.pl in Polish) does similar routes, including a Lake Nidzkie tour (10/8zł, one hour) and Mikołajki (40/30zł, 1½ hours).

BUS

There are nine buses to Mrągowo (8zł, 45 minutes) daily and five to Mikołajki (8zł, 35 minutes). One or two buses go as far east as Suwałki daily.

TRAIN

Very few trains pass through Ruciane-Nida; you're better off relying on the bus.

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