

Blasts from the past

You're constantly reminded of Poland's chequered history as you travel through the country, says **Arundhati Basu**

TRAVEL OGGIE

Dusk fell just as I set eyes upon Warszawa. Meandering through the narrow lanes of its Stare Miasto, that is the Old Town, it was history that immediately leapt to my mind and haunted my imagination. Warszawa — I took a shine to Warsaw's Polish name — was imparted with an alien and romantic touch. Dark cobblestoned alleys, the beautiful castle and its old townhouses dressed up in mood lighting set the tone. As did the

old Belarusian man strumming his guitar softly and a man in a fur cap declaring himself to be a Mafioso while cajoling us to eat at his eatery, who all came together in a strange synthesis.

I had just been to Kraków, the city that's renowned for being home to the largest medieval square in Europe, dating back to the 13th century. An inevitable comparison between the two cities comes up, just as the Varsovians and the Cracovians have indulged in for centuries.

I leaned a little towards Kraków because of its

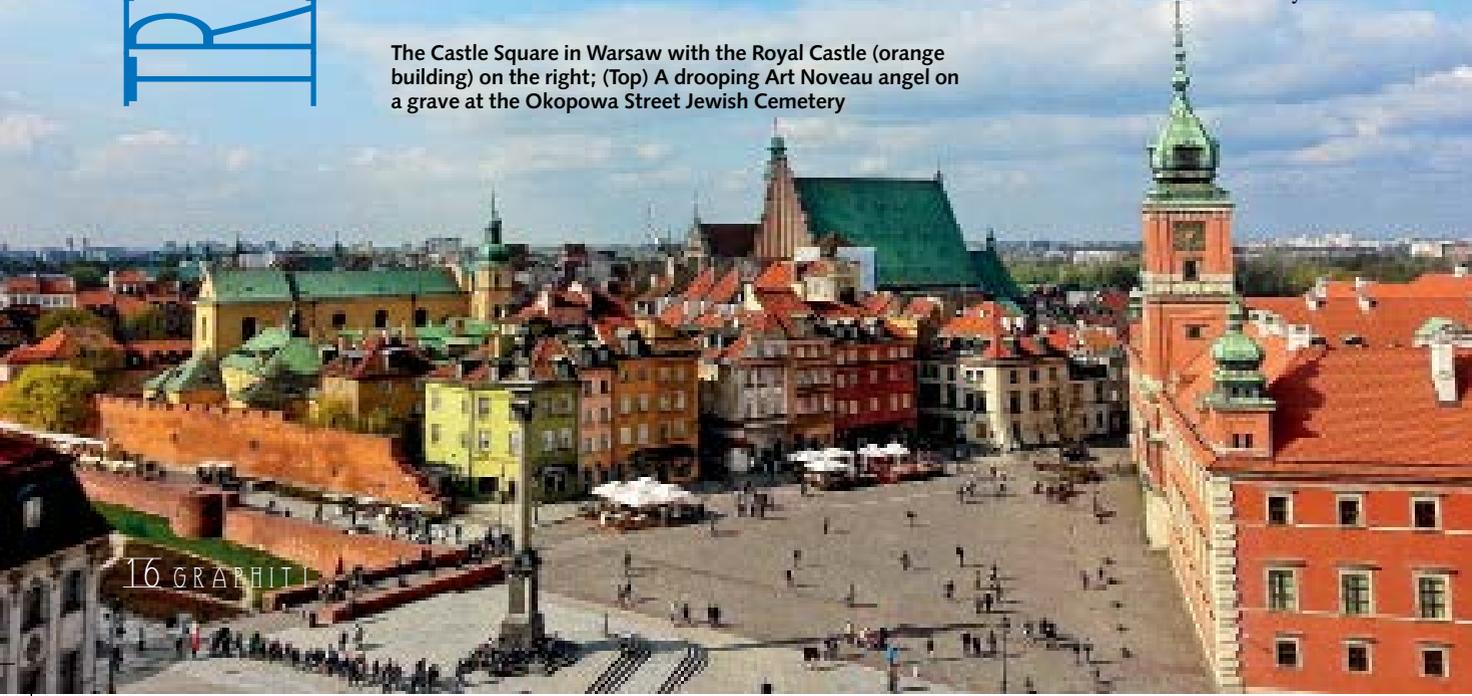


surviving heritage, most of it unspoil by WWII. Every alley and lane has old buildings, some darkened by the ages and almost unchanged. Sitting majestic on the coronation route between the Barbakan and Wawel Castle, the market square's points of pride are the Renaissance era Sukiennice, or the Cloth Hall, and the Gothic towers of Saint Mary's Basilica.

Beautiful women, in dresses and hats, sit atop horse carriages and beckon you to see the city with them. We did it differently and gave in to the singularity of a golf cart, manned by a Ukrainian fellow with a very limited English vocabulary. After a brief stop at Oskar Schindler's factory — the only original bit in the factory is Schindler's office — we hopped over to Kazimierz, which is Kraków's former Jewish quarter. Its peeling façades are disarming and home to many bohemian pubs, making Kazimierz the hippest hangout in the city.

Warszawa's charm lies in the story it tells. Of

The Castle Square in Warsaw with the Royal Castle (orange building) on the right; (Top) A drooping Art Nouveau angel on a grave at the Okopowa Street Jewish Cemetery



The Tatra mountains mark Poland's border with Slovakia and (inset) a Goral, or Highlander in full finery

the immense resilience of a country which was wiped off the world map for 123 years. Split between the Austro-Hungary, German and Russian empires after its last king abdicated in 1795, Poland was reunited and became a kingdom again only in 1918. And it got marked in the pages of times gone by as the

European theatre of the two world wars.

The Old Town and New Town in Warszawa are separated by the Barbakan, an impressive bastion that at night looks straight out of a fairytale — but it's a fairytale with a darker side. Standing tall in the Old Town is the Royal Castle that belonged to the Dukes of Mazovia and the historic townhouses painted in pretty pastel shades. Also, there's the tall Corinthian column shooting out into the sky in the square, from which King Sigismund III Vasa (who moved the capital from Kraków to Warszawa in 1596) gazes down at the city around



NOT TO SCALE

MAP BY NIKRATAN MALITY

in Warszawa. There's the Okopowa Street Jewish Cemetery, a vast 83-acre wooded area that's dotted with mass graves from the Warszawa Ghetto. The cemetery also has the most ornate graves — it's difficult to forget the Art Nouveau angel drooped mournfully over a tomb. A not-so-loved feature of the cityscape is The Pałac Kultury i Nauki (the Palace of Culture and Science), a gift from the Soviet Union. It reminds the Polish people of the era when the Russians dominated their country.

Intrigued by the idea of a salt mine that boasts of a 400-year-old chapel, where bungee jumping takes place above underground salt lakes and windsurfing happens across still water, we headed for Wieliczka, a town in the Kraków Metropolitan Area. We descended 800 monotonous steps into Wieliczka Salt Mine that stopped operations in 1996 because of low salt prices and mine flooding. A grand sight in its subterranean chambers is the Chapel of Saint Kinga, built in 1896 entirely out of salt, including some stunning chandeliers.



him and St Kazimierz Church. All these were reduced to ruins during WWII. You can't help but offer a silent salute to the Polish people who painstakingly restored the city using original bricks from the rubble with 18th century paintings as reference.

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(Left) St Mary's Basilica in Krakow and (right) a typical scene in the mountain town of Zakopane

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- **How to get there:** The best bet is to fly via Europe or the Middle East.
- **Where to stay:** A top-notch hotel today is Blow Up Hall 5050 (www.blowuphall5050.com), with a futuristic tone, in Poznan. The hotel hands out iPhones to guests during check in and boasts of strictly 21st-century technology.

A scenic slice of Poland is to be had on the Tatra Mountains, its natural border with Slovakia. The view of snow-capped mountains mesmerised me and I was equally enchanted as I traced the silhouette of Mount Giewont with my eyes. It is said to be shaped like a Sleeping Knight who, it is said, shall rise from his sleep if the nation is in need though there's been many moments during Poland's stormy history when he should have turned up.

At the foot of the Tatras is a beautiful town called Zakopane, renowned for its wooden architecture and eccentric

highlanders called Góral in fascinating costumes and a nifty ski jumping facility. My pick would, however, be the Oscypki or smoked, grilled cheese that's served with cranberry relish.

But the one place that leaves an indelible mark on the mind is Auschwitz-Birkenau. Auschwitz-Birkenau was the largest and the most efficient of all the Nazi concentration and extermination camps built in occupied Europe. The statement made by the driver who drove us there was driven home later when I returned home. "This is the one thing that will never leave you now," said Lez as we entered Oswiecim (Auschwitz's Polish name).

For us, children of another era and another world, the Holocaust is a cruel event in history. But the magnitude of it hit me when I walked in through the gates of Auschwitz I, the arch of which is inscribed with the German slogan, 'Arbeit Macht Frei'. Translated it means 'Work Makes You Free'.

At the time I was reading a book by

Laurence Rees called *Auschwitz: The Nazis and The Final Solution* (it is also a notable BBC documentary). Rees' interviews with the survivors of from the death camps kept running through my mind as I walked through the brick barracks. "It was death, death, death. Death at night, death in the morning, death in the afternoon. There was death all the time." Lines such as these from a Soviet POW reverberated in my mind.

Words cannot capture the anguish that runs through you as you enter one particular room. It's filled with personal belongings of the camp prisoners — spectacles, piles of hair that was used to make socks for the U-boat crew, chopped pigtailed, shoes, prosthetic legs, shaving brushes and suitcases with the names of their owners chalked on them — that room gets to you.

About 1.9 miles from Auschwitz I is the extermination camp of Birkenau that started operations in October 1941. Today, when you stand in front of the Birkenau gatehouse, on the very tracks on which millions of Jews were transported here in claustrophobic, wooden box cars, it all feels surreal. To the innocent eye, it appears like a quiet compound with beautiful birch trees swaying in the wind. Yet the serenity is an illusion when you know the horrors that it witnessed. Every visitor has a different reason for entering Auschwitz-Birkenau. There is no right or wrong reason. Just a very emotional one. ◆

Photographs by author

The Railway tracks through the gatehouse of the extermination camp of Birkenau

