

Trekking in the Tatras



Armies of nuns, mountains of snow, mountains of cakes, churches, cathedrals, palaces, a conspiracy to make Europe larger, elected kings, the curse of Stanislaw, dragon's dens, rivers, ice and adventures on Soviet transport; Poland has it all.

Lines on maps

The ridge-top path that divides the two states; to the left Slovakia, the right, Poland
View from Beskid Mt (2012m) on Kasprowy Wierch Mt (1987m), Tatra National Park, 2005

**Where Slovakia meets Poland;
Postcards from trekking the ice-trails in the Tatra Mountains National Park**

May 2005

Trekking the ice-trails

We're staring at a wall of ice.

It's a kilometre long and from here, though it starts shallow enough, from here it looks like it curves up to become near vertical. The few specs climbing it are making achingly slow progress, like ants glued to a massive wall of white paint. But this wall is cold, stingingly cold, and my fingers are still hurting from crawling partly on all-fours up the snow covered scree slope behind us. Now, from a rocky pinnacle high above the stillness of a solid corrie glacier, it's decision time.

This is ice-hiking in the Tatra Mountains, on the border where Poland's mountains nestle up against Slovakia's. We're at about 1800m and there's just over 300 to what I'm thinking is the summit. I say thinking, because looking at the map is demoralising, and we're trying to avoid it. It's late morning and we're only a couple of hours in to an eight hour hike. It's clear that we were both wildly under-dressed for the conditions from walking on the lower slopes, but what's not clear is whether we can actually complete this at all.

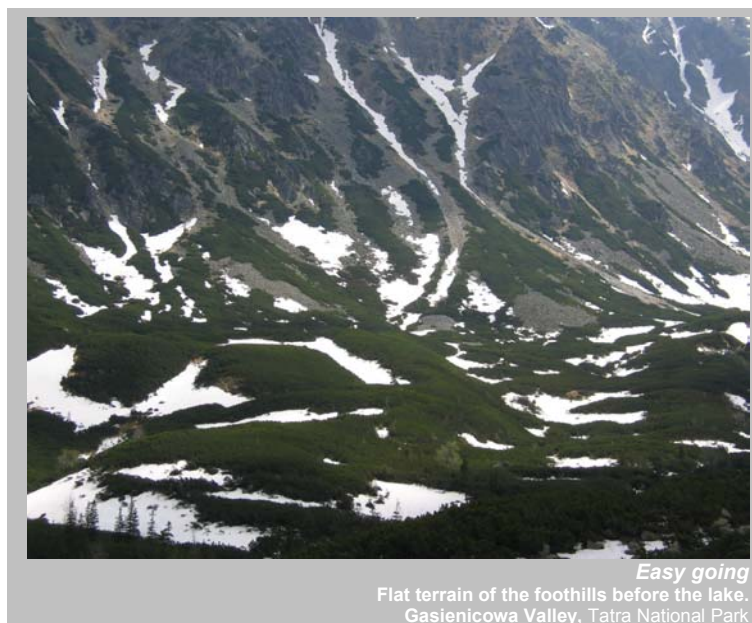
While debating this, another group clad head-to-toe in Gore-Tex, crampons and space-age climbing gear romp passed us, their walking poles providing elegant stabilisers in the snow. As if that's not enough, a few of them have skis strapped to their backpacks, ready for the trip down. The ants are still climbing slowly but off to the left we pick out a few snowboard tracks from some of the early morning's hikers.

The main problem is the state of the snow. There are other problems, like the fact that we're wearing shorts, have no waterproof clothing, are using factor 4 (instead of 24) as our sunblock, and don't have enough food or water for the trip. But the immediate problem is the state of the snow.



Daunting outlook

A one kilometre wall of melting snow and ice covered moraine above a corrie glacier. Snowboard tracks weave down to the left of the climb
Tatra National Park



Easy going

Flat terrain of the foothills before the lake.
Gasienicowa Vallev, Tatra National Park

We're in the last days of May and the snows should have melted completely, but the falls in February were heavy this year, and all the northern slopes are still covered. Deeply covered. But it's not stable. Think of the type of crushed ice you get in a good margarita: that's what we're walking on. Now I wouldn't begrudge anyone a good margarita, but it's different underfoot, and if we move on then we have at least five more hours of it to look forward to. Around the lower lake it was uncomfortable, but the worst that could happen would have been a plunge into another meltwater-filled

corrie (unpleasant, but not really life-threatening), but the hundred meters of scree our group just crawled its way through was sheer, unstable and half covered in ice. The track wasn't even well marked, which means we could have easily been clambering nowhere. Also, where some of the granite has warmed up, it's melted pockets of snow underground, leaving hidden micro-icebridges that from time to time take one of your legs up to your waist. Twisted ankles seem inescapable, but the sharp concealed rocks could do a darn side worse.

Down on the lower slopes there was a procession of people three-wide

and all in fine spirits, but by the snowline they've gone, and along with them all but the Gore-Tex-clad pros. Dangling my feet over the edge of the pinnacle I inspect my soft boots; they've done me well in the jungles of Indonesia, deserts of Pakistan and most recently the bush of South Africa, but all those were flat, and the smooth worn rubber that glints back at me just makes me feel stupid; another city-kid well out of his zone.



Ribbons in the snow
- the main path at 2000m around the corrie glacier beyond the pass (day 1)
Tatra National Park



Glacial lake
- before the steep climb begins
Tatra National Park

Do the maths; realise there's little chance of completing the trip today (dauntingly far to go), but we head off anyway. We'll start the climb and do a progress check at the first rocky outcrop. If that goes well (ha! -if that goes at all) we'll try and make for the second.

The snow here is deep and there's a gentle incline towards the corrie. It's uncomfortable. The ice is cold around my knees and the path narrow. In fact 'path' is over-egging it. We're traversing a thirty degree slope and following trace of compacted snow from previous walkers. Progress on the lower slopes had been fast, with the added satisfaction of overtaking everyone else, even after the elderly groups retired at the restaurant. Here it's another story. It's slow and painful. No-one is talking. Just concentrating on breathing and trying to find footholds. Every tenth footstep slips helplessly as the ice gives way, sliding tiny debris a few meters further. I can't help but look up and up, and up, and think that a loose footing there will throw more than a few snowflakes at the guy behind.

We take time out on the rocky outcrop for chocolate.

It's tough and unpleasant, but not dangerous enough to turn round – though I can't help thinking about the frog in water analogy: you know, you drop a frog in hot water and it leaps out, you place it in cold and gently warm the pan till it's boiling and it never knew what happened. If I'd just been transported here from scratch would I continue to climb? Ha! Not a chance.

We make the second outcrop without speaking much.

The guy beneath me lunges for the rock and pulls himself up the downhill facing side, probably the toughest, way on, and I can tell from the focus in his face he's passed the point of caring. The next girl takes a lot longer to get here. It's taken more than 15 minutes and the outcrop's less than a hundred meters below us.



View from the top
Corrie glacier beneath the pass: Tatra National Park

Up above there's nothing. Now the horizon is false too.

Climbing again. Ever smaller steps.

Regular rests.

None of the groups are talking.

Higher up, as the angle steepens, the snow is littered with small chunks of granite that have slid down from the exposed scree slope above. They make for some slightly warmer handholds, but it reminds me just how dangerous this is. One of the hikers on the scree above dislodges another couple with the unmistakable click-click of falling rocks. They slide into the snow before they reach us. I'm focussed entirely on the large outcrop of bedrock that will act as a resting point. The final few meters hurt even more, but clinging to something solid is gratifying. It's over. Below the ants are still crawling and I find myself feeling jealous of the snowboarders, now conscious that as a route down this looks little more inviting than it did as a climb up.



The southern path
the main path continues south, climbing over the corrie wall, heading to Slovakia.
Tatra National Park



Signposts
Trail signs on the edge of a lower melted corrie glacier
Tatra National Park

Over the next ridge is the pass between two of the mountains and the sort of place that begs several squares of chocolate. Three paths meet, and along with them, quite a few other trekkers. To the right, a group trekking in full ice-gear (pictured) have probably come from the upper cable-car station, and to the left two paths (also pictured) give high and low routes down to the corrie glacier lakes. The high route is marked as 'tough' and the contour's on the lower route look soft. (Time for a hint in case you're ever trekking in Poland: pay neurotic attention to the signs and warnings. Aside from the last death-inducing ice-climb, nothing on the whole route we're taking (not even the previous sliding scree slopes, or the smooth edged ice around the lake) was marked as anything other than 'normal'. This clearly suggests

that even simple trekking maps are designed for those still doing their national service, and take for granted that as soon as you leave the car you'll be using crampons, ice picks and climbing Alpine-style with ropes. Having only returned to Europe from the US a couple of weeks before – where even the coffee in Starbucks comes with massive warning signs because, shockingly, it is Hot! – I can't help find this a little odd).



Meltwaters

Ice-cold streams burst out from under the lower corrie lakes, forming churning tunnels of spray that break the surface at the falls
Tarta National Park

The little known sport of unsupported tobogganing

Aside from the peaks, the whole landscape here is deep in snow and ice, and the only evidence of the paths are the traces of disturbed snow. With only a few other people across the landscape it's not clear exactly where the routes are (no doubt the elks are playing practical jokes again as there seem to be a couple more snow tracks than there are paths on the map), but we head off roughly along the right trajectory for the contour lines. Contour lines that somehow didn't seem to suggest the angle of the slope would be this steeeeeep! I fall again, planting my already saturated shorts deep in the snow. Here in the mountains they seem to have changed the scale of the contours compared to what you are use to back home. Rather than one line for every few feet, which I'm sure was the case for those Ordinance Survey maps we used on

Dartmoor, here they seem to be at intervals of more like ten meters, and as we edge down this stretch I'm conscious that it's proving almost as slow as climbing the wall on the other side of the pass.

At the next fall I slide forwards a few feet and it dawns on me that there really is more than one way to get down a mountain. The angle must be about twenty degrees and in this soft snow all I need to do is shuffle forward, gain a little momentum, and wweeeeeeeeeeeee-eeeeeeeeeeeeee!



Blue ice

The blue halo of an ice sheet in a melting corrie next to the Slovakian border
Tarta National Park

The little known sport of unsupported ice tobogganing has begun to be explored, and that's just the start. To say that tucking your knees in and turning the rest of your body into a human luge is an uncontrolled descent down a mountain, is a comment only made by the uninitiated. It's surprising just how much steering control you can exert through digging in your heels and palms in on the side you would like to turn to, and there's even scope for an albeit modest amount of braking.



Graffiti in the snow
Tatra National Park

Three luge runs and two ski-less skiing episodes later, and I'm in the

well of the U-shaped valley, next to another melting corrie glacier. Fast, efficient and nothing broken - though it will take about an hour for feeling to return to the sled area [about the same time that I'll realise that that was the safe pocket I stashed credit cards and English money in; all of which will be really rather cold].

Time to press on to the more populated trails below, and the route back into the warmer forests below the snowline.

Warming up

The walk around the three corrie lakes and then over the ice-field takes another couple of hours, and the forests and foothills a few more. It's one of those exhausting, but deeply accomplishing feelings, although I'm still not quite sure when I'll be able to move my legs properly again.

Back in Zakopane the climate is different; everything seems to be on fire. Again. The town's obsessed with barbequing meat, and while I won't pretend I have the faintest idea what it is I'm being offered – and now eating – you have to admit it tastes good. First up was something claiming to be black sausage; a dauntingly high pile of what was apparently once a sausage, and has now been mixed up with barley, a few other grains and about an equal mass of oil. Then there was the more regular kielbasa sausage (a sort of rather fat frankfurter), and a shish kebab, which, being Poland, is spelt with



Barbeque time

Yet more grilled sausages, kebabs and knuckles of pork
Hills above Zakopane



Perogi – surely a favourite of Pope John Paul?

Russian dumplings at a trekker's food-stop:
Tatra National Park

enough zs, ys and ks to pretty much end a Scrabble game in one (Szaszlyk in case you're taking notes for the next Boxing Day party).

Now Poland clearly has many things going for it, but fashion sense isn't one of them; well not always at least. While the women continue to look just staggeringly beautiful, and somehow stay slender in spite of a diet which I'm starting to learn consist primarily of cakes, whipped cream and donuts; the guys seem to have an obsession with socks that borders on the unhealthy. At the grills tonight, slightly too-short-shorts, combined with mid-calf grey socks seem to be this season's fashion, although white socks are making a come back during the day in town. I'm suddenly thinking of early memories of my grandfather in the 1970s. Just as then, clearly now too this is a 'go anywhere' kind of fashion - ascending to the summit, plunging into knee deep snow, leading is city slicker girlfriend was one ardent follower who even managed to cap it off with a pair of 1970s open toed brown sandals. My grandfather would have been proud of him (and I'm already starting to understand his Easter European roots so much better), but what shocked me about the guy on the mountain was that he was twenty-five at most.

Welcome from Pope John Paul 2nd

It was only yesterday that the plane touched down at the surprisingly empty, but surprisingly modern regional Polish airport. As we landed at Pope John Paul 2nd airport in Krakow, a little car with a 'Follow me!' flashing light raced out to meet us, and the plane did as instructed, ending up in a sort of 'car park for planes' area at the front of the terminal. I love small airports; after Heathrow they're a delight, and there's always the added excitement that your luggage may take less than an hour to make the carousel.

There were a few nuns on the plane, along with a sizable contingent of orthodox Jews, and I couldn't help but think they're in the wrong place. If they make it to the football then they'll be in the Pope John Paul 2nd football stadium, if they walk around town they'll be on the Pope John Paul 2nd street (or two), and with the Pope's passing only a few weeks ago, you can't help but foresee a blight of PJP2 name badges springing up on just about anything that the city hasn't been banned from naming. (Wise words from Warsaw were issued a few days after his death to try and prevent the name of Krakow's most famous son being licensed to ice-cream vendors, sausage makers and maybe even sock manufacturers).

Out-hiked by the nuns

- PJP2 count: 6.
- Number of Polish cakes: 2
- Bowls of zupa: 1

It's now Saturday and way too early to be up. Well before breakfast we're packed into the ever-growing line queuing for the cable-cars. The problem is there are only two cars, and by virtue of a parks authority not wanting more tourists, the status quo looks set to triumph for a good while longer. The other problem is that the little gondola cars were built in the 1930s, and they, along with the hut, cables, engines and supporting pillars, were only designed to take 20 people. All this makes for a potentially aging wait, as the queue advances at less than ten meters an hour. That experience yesterday was enough to scare us into walking up the mountain, but not fancying starting the day with an ice wall, being here only a couple of hours after sunrise seemed a reasonable price to pay. And it's going to plan as within forty minutes we're following the nuns into the cable-car tower.

Nuns. Lot's of them in Poland. Based on the admittedly short while that I've been in the country, it seems that about one in a hundred people are nuns. Even compared to rural Ireland they are present in staggering numbers, and I can't help but start thinking about this. If the maths hold true then that's about 380,000 in total, or a population larger than my university city of Bristol. And not just convents for these nuns. They're everywhere, out leading full lives and still finding the time to do His work. 'Have to admit it: I'm impressed.

And so it is, that sneaking discretely into the queue just in front of us is Action-Nun, who this month sports a light grey full length habit with matching headgear, but, tucked under the just slightly-higher-than-usual skirt hem, I catch a glimpse of the grip under a high-tech pair of hiking boots; this nun has seen some serious slopes.

Pushing sixty, we shuffle through the narrow corridor and the ticket-office, before the gate closes behind us and the disinterested girl dolling out tickets squawks into her microphone for the final time. Inside the waiting hall, which, interestingly seems to be taking about 25 people rather than the 20 listed on the safety card, there are two items that catch my eye. The first is a plaque, poster and photograph of PJP2, who apparently rode, and blessed the cable car (we are indeed following in great footsteps).

The second is a small section of the cable (emphasis on the adjective small), which begs the question of whether there is any relationship to the former. The cable is about 4cms thick and this 30cm slice holding together two small brackets looks impressively tough. The longer one wobbling around above our heads, given that it's a mile or two long in each direction (that's an awful lot of weight for four centimetres of twisted wire to take) is looking a lot less tough. Now understanding a little more about how PJP2 felt, I want to bless the cable too. I just hope that with his passing a couple of weeks ago the blessing hasn't been withdrawn.



Nuns on the run; getting ready for the trek, first of many
Dolina Jaworzynka Valley
Tatra National Park, Poland

Am still contemplating Popes, blessings and nuns when, ten minutes later, the gondola arrives and we shuffle in. To give a sense of the scale, it's about four times the size of my bath at home, and sinks progressively as we get in. Before I can wonder whether my bath would do the same if a quarter of the passengers here went and stood in it [later I concluded it would, though with less bounce], we're off, swaying out above the increasingly distant treetops below us. Another cable car station, more trees, one more PJP2 reference and the second car is taking us even higher, and swaying even more precariously; much to the delight of the children in the group who seem unable to distinguish between this and a roller-coaster. While the kids are yearning for the next swing, most of the adults seem to be gripping the safety straps rather tightly.

The summit is where Slovakia meets Poland, and today we're hiking along the ridge that divides the countries. Our



The sky expressway

(Left to right) Commemoration of the visit of Pope John Paul 2nd, the cable made in Austria in 1930, the two cars, passing each other on the higher sections on the way to one of the tallest mountains. Tatra National Park

starting point is 1800m and the going is easy, although there is a surprisingly large amount of snow even on the Southern facing slopes. With most major muscle groups from the chest down still un-recovered from the adventures of yesterday, this needs to be an easy day if there's any hope of me being able to walk by the middle of next week. So after the first amble to the nearest summit we head back for coffee, more Polish cheesecake and more side order of cream, from the sun-blocking variety. Thunderstorms may be forecast for later, but right now it's clear skies all round and burningly hot in spite of the chilled air that cannot be much above eight degrees. Half the hikers (including us) are sunburned before even starting.

After the second peak the crowd thins out and there are only a few walkers left. Again all are equipped slightly more seriously than us; Gore-Tex tops, gloves, mirrored glasses, state-of-the-art boots and waterproof trousers seem to be standard; while for the more adventurous there are snow-walking poles, helmets and skis to carry as well.

They trudge passed with a simple "Czesc!" looking somewhat other-worldly. "Czesc..." I pant back, confident that again the route is a little above my experience.



Clear air

Meteorological station on the summit above the cable car's final stop
Tatra National Park



Lines on maps

The ridge-top path that divides the two states; to the left Slovakia, the right, Poland
Beskid Mountain (2012m), Tatra Mountains, 2005



Off-piste

Making your own slopes, a skier finishes the climb, kits up and slaloms down a narrow vein of continuous snow just next to the final ascent to Beskid Mountain Tatra Mountains, 2005

The great thing about hiking here are the paths. Up at 2000m they oscillate from a two meter wide smoothed earth that almost satisfies your expectations for a road, through the most impressive one meter wide line of paved slabs, to the wafer thin ribbon traced across the 40 degree snow slope in front of us. This is on the melting south-facing side and the snow gives easily under each footstep which is followed by a trail of dripping slush. Off to the right the slope plunges into a venire of scree clinging to the side of the mountain and it seems reasonable that one tumbling tourist will be enough to send the whole lot plummeting into Slovakia. [We'll hear on the radio tonight of a pair of trekkers in the Tatras

hospitalised around this time from falling from a path exactly like this; sober reminders of how challenging the place is].

Three peaks later and I'm beat. There's little more I can do than dry out shoes and socks, lie back on the warm lichen-covered rocks, and watch the off-piste skiers kit up, ready to throw themselves over the edge of the narrowest of precipices to what presumably will be certain death. Too exhausted to even unwrap the chocolate I lie down and gaze at the mountains. Ahead, the next peak rises at about 70degrees and a few of the techno-clad extreme sports crowd are climbing up the zigzagging path that has been formed from larger blocks of scree. I can count three pairs, maybe four at a push, plus the two who've just walked passed. But there, about fifty meters above, and almost camouflaged in the grey of the rock, is the unmistakeable habit of Action-Nun, pushing ever higher. I'm impressed; even more beaten, but impressed.

PJP2 for lunch

- PJP2 count: 12.
- Number of Polish cakes: 2
- Bowls of zupa: 2

I
Day three and the PJP2 count has crept up to one every two hours. I was grateful that the cable car had been blessed, really I was, but I can't help think that over-use of anything does weaken its value. Having a cold dink and a potato cake or two in one of the open air cafes on the main street opposite another PJP2 poster, this time advertising his encyclopaedia. In an hour we'll be on the express bus to Krakow where I just know that the PJP2 counter will be on overdrive. Meanwhile it's time for a pancake and maybe just a little more cream.



Back down

Shadow of the cable car picked out in the tree tops of the pine forest, planted just over on hundred years ago to reforest the valley after steel production felled much of the region. Tatra National Park

The other expansion of the EU

It was a year ago this month that Poland, along with the other rapidly transforming accession states, entered the EU. The fact the government resigned the following day and the country plunged into another political crisis didn't really seem to phase anyone, at least not inside Poland. But on this trip I'm learning about an altogether different expansion of the EU. Europeans are getting physically larger; thanks to the Poles.

For a nation still with national service and a clearly hyper-fit population of twenty-somethings, there's a dramatic transformation that seems to take place to folk after their late thirties. They get larger; much larger. Although this may send an academic running for the latest text on gene-theory, the biology is much simpler, and it's rather tightly connected to diet. The main problem is the cakes; heaps of them, and almost without exception dusted with extra sugar and piled with extra cream. And the cakes are far from small in the first place. Back in the Polish Cultural Centre in London I was always surprised by the scale of the cheesecake (which seemed to be somewhat out of proportion with the plate – even when it was served on a dinner plate), but here such snacks dwindle into insignificance compared to what will land on your table should you be foolish enough to order pudding. Trust me, one between three is more than ample. And in case you missed the opportunity at dinner, then there seems to be no end of other occasions throughout the day when a few kilos of cake cannot be conjured up.

Thanks to Andrea I now know Poland is a country that only discovered vegetables relatively recently (the word vegetable is a derivation of 'Italian' after another one of the many foreign rulers who brought this verdant innovation with them). Thinking back to the last few meals (pieroge [dumplings] and goulash, pancakes and goulash, several zupas), I'm not quite sure how successful the innovation was in getting adopted, but at least greens are here, well, maybe on another page of the menu, eh?

And don't retreat to the salads looking for low carbs. Yesterday lunchtime's carrot and beetroot salads had both been grated and pulped with generous helpings of both sugar and cream, no doubt to out-sweeten the apple sauce, which itself outnumbered the generous serving of barbequed pork on my plate by a ratio of 2:1. Savoury cheese pancakes will be doused in sugar, all but the purest of breads iced with it and even beer sweetened with it (heavy servings of strawberry juice seems to be the only way to order draft if you are under thirty).

I've always been pro-European, but now I fear for the effects of expansion for the first

time. They never expected this in Brussels, that's for sure. Maybe that's why the French voted 'Non!' to the constitution today? Maybe they've already seen where all this is heading.

The other thing that stands out about the food is the obsession with soups. From beetroot to raspberries, sausages to quails eggs, I defy you to give any self-respecting Polish mother a food product that you can't make into soup. It's a national obsession. And what the country may lack in vegetables, it certainly makes up for in its soup menus.



Mountains of sugar

Sweet apple sauce, beetroot salad and sugared carrots
Krakow

The nuns are back; and this time they mean business

- PJP2 count: dauntingly large and rising.
- Number of Polish cakes: 2
- Bowls of zupa: 1

My suspicion the nuns are planning something gets stronger inside the Castle. They've taken control of the ticket office inside Wawel, and although they're selling tickets to the cathedral (which belongs to the church rather than the state), there must be something afoot. As we approach the Sister behind the counter hurriedly pushes a bunch of papers (and rather large box of chocolates) out of sight before handing over some tickets. Maybe this is the trading-front to the secret conspiracy that's afoot. The sister in the next kiosk is also looking uncannily like Action-Nun from the cable car.

"Is beautiful"

This is Andrea's catchphrase, as in "on-your-left-is-beautiful-[insert item of furniture, tomb or artefact]-from-[insert date]-brought-here-by-[insert random name of foreign-born king]". She's rattling through periods from the early medieval to late-Soviet with impressive dexterity and a warm smile. As guides go Andre is certainly engaging, and with just a little concentration you can break through the heavy accent. She tells me she has been guiding for more than ten years and is from Krakow itself, proudly boasting of loving her job, and it's not hard to see why. The surroundings are as elegant as Europe gets and the stories of wars, invasions, occupations and saints are the blockbusters of European history. Andrea clearly enjoys the theatre of it all, managing the rhythm of her voice to deliver the punch-lines and the shocking news of another death, murder or banishment. Dressed in a glittery silver top,



Is beautiful
Andrea in the courtyard of the Palace
Krakow

silver shoes and silver nail polish (matching toes of course), with a silver shoulder bag and a white skirt. Like many women "a little over forty" (which is all I can tease out of her) her hair is dyed copper-red, but also includes a shock of silver at the front. Add a large pair of red sunglasses and a deep tan from guiding, and you get the picture.

"Now-this-way-we-enter-cathedral-look-is-beautiful-..." and she's off.



Cathedral
Carvings and relics around the altar of the Krakow cathedral.
Krakow

A thousand years of history; on the crossroads of Europe's invasions

It's fortunate Andrea knows her stuff so well. I'm hopelessly forgetful when it comes to European history and am just staggered by what I'm hearing. This most picturesque of Eastern European cities hides an altogether different story. Dipping into the past reveals the trauma of Krakow, a city that has been on the crossroads of invasions from the expanding Ottoman Empire in the South to conquering Swedes from the North; the Prussians, the Russians (a few times each), the Austrians; in fact, from what I can make out just about any country within about 1000ks seems to have had a pop at Poland. Yet the centre of Krakow, inexplicably, remains entirely untouched like a vast museum-piece still in its cabinet.

First up are the popes, the saints and the relics. Then it's 72 steps up to a 364kg bell "suspended-in-wooden-tower-because-weight-so-great-stones-would-crack". Then the elected kings (many of whom are still wrapped up in the crypt), women who are kings ("Queen-is-wife-of-king-so-if-queen-rules-we-call-king"), foreign kings (most of them from what I can make out) and strong kings (I can't see our royals ripping horse-shoes apart somehow). The founder of Europe's first university (also in Krakow of course) is buried in a tomb covered in carvings of medicine and science. Packed into the tiny cathedral is so much history that my head feels full by the time we emerge from the crypt into the sunlight. There's the story of the city as well; once the nation's capital before the Swedes moved it closer to home, and then there's the wiping of Poland off the map of Europe for 150 years.

"And-now-we-go-beautiful-Palace", says Andrea without breathing between sentences, racing off to the left in the direction of a large courtyard to repeat the process for the state rather than church. I'm exhausted again.

Secure

On the surface Krakow, like Zakopane, seems crime-free. If you look hard you may find a few graffiti tags, there are a couple of homeless people sleeping in the park, but apart from numerous crimes against planning (although they're working on it, there's not yet any restriction on what sort of sign your shop can bolt onto its seventeenth century façade), the city seems like a place that crime forgot. There are police, of course, though they seem to be mainly directing lost tourists. Any real policing work is left to the guys in vans who patrol like tribal vigilantes. In Zakopane two of them, with forearms thicker than my waist, had burst out of a black car that drove onto the pavement where I was about to be standing, and swaggered into a pharmacy. Just one look at them would be enough to deter most shop-lifters, but in a country where police can be a tad lethargic in a moment of crisis, private security abounds. I haven't seen anything like this since South Africa, and with that in mind to move my wallet make a mental note when I get home to somewhere that at least pretends to be more hidden than the living room tabletop.



Cathedral

The bell that brings good luck, women kings resting and the clock-tower
Krakow

Communist-class travel; day 3 in Krakow

There are two major Soviet legacies in Krakow, at least two that I feel close to by now. East of the city centre, covering an area the size of a small town, is one of the ugliest, largest, most decrepit steel mills in Eastern Europe. It's appropriately coloured grey on the map and the numerous twisting railway lines that weave across it enforce the scale, just in case any enforcement were needed. "A gift from the Russians", says Piotr, "they thought Krakow looked too pretty so they gave us this". I love the blackness of Polish humour, especially when it picks on the Soviets. Along with much of the rest of Soviet industry it sounds like most of the works have fallen apart to the point of collapse, and with a climate and pollution lecture fresh in my mind from the week before in London, I'm not keen to think about what it is that the chimneys only 9kms from the historic centre are actually spewing out. "The pollution: that's why they covered beautiful-golden-dome at the palace in plastic". It's a vast scar on an otherwise flawless complexion.

The other Soviet legacy is the busses. The blue and white striped PKS bone-shakers, with their metal frame seats, rusting frameworks and peeling laminated panels. That's where I am now, sitting above the wheel and with an engine behind me that is both hot and choking. The suspension is crude and creaking. The brown and beige interior, just drab; and the pace achingly slow. It's something worthy of India twenty years ago, yet the narrow rusting bag rack could only be Soviet.

On the Krakow-Orbital (the expressway that is anything but that in the Monday morning rush-hour), a new Audi Quattro edges passed us and I'm jealous of the air conditioning. Anyways, ten minute's later and we are out of the city with a clear road ahead, and the chance for that groaning diesel engine to show what it's got; so we hit 30, then maybe even 40 before slowing for a slight hill. Looking at the dirt ground into the rubber matting on the floor, and hearing the creaking from what I'd venture is more than simply the interior panels, I'm glad that we won't be going that fast after all. The 65ks of fast road are destined to take an hour and a half. And from what they say about the trains, this is the best option.

Stripes and quilts

The agriculture is different here from Western Europe. Driving through the countryside you can see endless strips of thin fields rolling back from the roadside. Like houses in the Netherlands, a narrow frontage hides great depth and the ones we're passing now seem to be a uniform 20m wide by what I'm guessing is about 150m of depth. This is just scratching the surface though. From the air the whole countryside of the South was a patchwork quilt of smallholdings with every rural house surrounded by its own plot, and all the fields in between divided up for others to farm. For the first time I'm starting to understand this connection with the land. In the markets of Zakopane families were selling everything from picked mushrooms to smoked goats' cheese, but what strikes you as a product of the supermarket culture of Western Europe is the lack of uniformity. The mushrooms – sold by the grandfather in his pressed three-piece suit and elegant pink tie – were stuffed into jars of all shapes and sizes. The cheeses, unwrapped from the individual moulds, were all cranky, and the vegetables, odd shapes and sizes and looking rather lonesome. This is each family's produce, and still one of the pillars of the economy. In spite of the extremes of the continental climate, Poland's agriculture is massive and its soil rich. True, it's massive on a small scale - a million smallholdings each with little or no mechanisation compared to the neighbouring breadbasket of the Ukraine - but it's intensely productive and somehow the barter trade in villages ("my cucumbers for your mushrooms") works well. It probably worked well throughout communist rule too and protected Poland from the disasters of Stalin's five year plans for mass agriculture.

All the Polish families I know have this connection with the land, and their apparently clumsy use of the term 'farmer' is now making sense: Edyta and Marcin's parents pickle cucumbers, Radek's grow vegetables, Beata's keep goats, Agnieszka's have other livestock. We enter a small town and the bus chugs to a halt on an anonymous piece of wider asphalt that seems to be acting as a graveyard for even rustier PKS coaches. Our average speed is close to a fast cycle and there's another forty minutes till we get there. I don't really understand how the transport system is structured, but it seems that each town owns a corporation that owns its busses, and that upgrading is somewhat problematic. If there is an affluent town that breeds luxury air-con coaches, then the village our bus came from is at the opposite end of Poland. We pull back onto the road and continue our journey there.

Chambers

There's Oswiecim; Auschwitz and Berkenau. The two camps that saw the murder of more than a million Jews, Catholics and anyone who stood in the way of Nazism. What can you write? Anything feels amateur and hopelessly inadequate. I don't know what I was expecting, I don't know what I wanted to find, I don't remember most of what I learnt at school; but in the endless huts of that vast place it became real in a way it never could have been before.





In the Ikea-style

We pass the Ikea super-store on the Krakow road. In the exploding Polish tourist industry, which sees the battle for the air routes into Krakow making headlines again on tonight's TV news, apartments all around the historic centre are being reconditioned, renovated and reborn. Web pages bestow the virtues of the 'Ikea-style' furnishings, as the city launches itself into its new economy. This studio apartment is typical, just outside the old city wall and with the high ceilings of pre-Soviet architecture; it's been gutted and refashioned from a Swedish catalogue. It could be almost anywhere.

Melting

It's been quite warm since the mountains. Pushing 35 degrees in a city is fine as long as there's air conditioning you can run to for cover every few hours, but that's another part of the city's infrastructure that, like the new buses and their terminal, is yet to arrive. TV news heralds that it's been the hottest day in May since records began, and for once, the fact the map says it's raining in London for the bank holiday (I'm shocked of course) draws little comfort.

From communism to Pentium 4s

- PJP2 count: 6
- Number of Polish cakes: 3
- Bowls of zupa: 2

As Westerners we can't imagine what it was like growing up in Soviet Poland. Poverty, empty shops, queues and those winter marches of Solidarity around the Gdansk shipyards were my earliest memories of a TV packaged part of Easter Europe I never expected to visit. I also remember that my doctor and dentist were Polish, and so were several of the local restaurants, but I never made much of the connection. What we never knew was the denial of history, Moscow's determination to re-write the past, the murder of twenty thousand intellectuals by Stalin's armies to encourage loyalty to the East. For last generation, growing up in the drab uneasy Soviet monoculture, few could have dared anticipate its blowing apart fifteen years ago as the Soviet Union crumbled overnight.

In the wake of Lech Walesa's sudden presidency, the country launched into a decade's transformation from communism to the Pentium 4. A year ago this month, an entry into the expanded European Union that would see Poland's economy rocked again. From the little I can understand the measures have been brutal. Sudden transformation to a market economy, the old pension system abandoned, taxation levels plummeting, exchange rates fluctuating, and the wholesale handover of state assets to the market. Temporarily even nationalism seems to be being checked, though in next month's elections one populist farmer (currently in the top four in the opinion poles) is still causing headlines with the kind of fascist rhetoric that sends the liberal minded running for their history books. Unemployment may be high, but jobs are growing, a new middle class is thriving, infrastructure is expanding – more upgrades planned at the local airport again – and the market, rather than the mafia, seems to be taking control.

On the face of it the country is completing a near-miraculous transformation. And tonight, high up in the corridors of what from the outside looks like a reclaimed Soviet administration block is another part of that transformation. Music booms so loudly as it bounces off the stark walls of the old office staircase, that the lack of signs on the outside does not really matter. At least three separate clubs have taken over the place and made it their own, squatting on terms unclear to the casual tourist, but all pretty settled. Like most squats the décor is a little rough at the edges, and the mishmash of furniture looks like it's been reclaimed from the surrounding streets, but the crowd have made it theirs. With exclusively Western music, beer laced with strawberry juice and ten types of vodka behind the bar, it will be a long night. I wander off to the office that's been converted into a chill-out room.

And then there's

- The underground salt mine that's been working for 700 years, complete with rocksalt statue of PJP2.
- St Mary's in the market square; the most beautiful church I've ever seen. Its brightly painted medieval interior stretches up to the most richly decorated of ceilings. The altar is a massive screen with folding wings that explain the life of Mary and the stained glass explodes with colour.
- In the caves beneath the castle a young Polish woman being taken by surprise as her boyfriend kneels and proposes in a lair, legend has it was host to a dragon.
- Smoked cheeses and another bundle of kabanosi sausages.
- Old trams trundling around the outside of the old town walls.
- Wireless internet access inside the old town walls.
- Everything being so old that the 1800s-built theatre seems like a rather dull modern office block.
- Eastern Europe's oldest university.
- Buses that claim they are not going to Krakow, then mysteriously turn back and pick you up.
- A street packed with wedding shops, so many that I can't follow the maths that keeps them in business; there just ARE NOT that many people ABLE to get married.
- And another cold beer or two in that vast market square.

<ends>