

LONG WEEKEND

KRAKÓW

While it still bears the scars of WWII, the sobering tale of Kraków's Jewish communities is being expertly told in sites across this beguiling and resilient city

WORDS: Chris Peacock. **PHOTOGRAPHS:** Jon Attenborough

A cold, listless sky hangs over a rain-soaked Plac Bohaterów Getta, where dozens of eerily empty chairs are arranged in a grid across a city square. This memorial would seem incongruous if it wasn't for its location — at the heart of one of the Second World War's major Jewish ghettos. It was from this central square in Kraków's Podgórze district, south of the Vistula River, that thousands of Jewish men, women and children were rounded up and sent to the Płaszów and Auschwitz concentration camps to be killed. The chairs represent furniture and other possessions hastily discarded by their doomed owners before they were herded into waiting trains.

This simple but sobering memorial of 70 vacant bronze chairs — one for every thousand Kraków Jews killed — is one of the many poignant reminders of the city's turbulent history. From the ruthless 13th-century sacking by the Mongols to the stifling rule of communism, Kraków's story is one of subjugation and tragedy, but also resistance and revival. And few chapters are as inspiring as the current regeneration of Podgórze, transforming it from a crumbling, post-industrial wasteland into a thriving modern hub of art galleries, quirky cafes, boho bars and restaurants.

But unlike many emerging neighbourhoods or fashionable enclaves, Podgórze still bears the scars of its horrific history and is far more than merely a place where Kraków's artists, musicians and students gravitate. To walk through Podgórze is to not only bear witness to Kraków's gentrification but also confront its deeply troubled past.

At the southern edge of Plac Bohaterów Getta, on the corner of Targowa street, sits an assuming white townhouse, easily overlooked if it wasn't for the inscription, 'Apteka Pod Orłem' (The Eagle Pharmacy) above its entrance. The chemist had been the only non-Jewish business allowed in the ghetto, and its owner, Tadeusz Pankiewicz, is regarded as a hero for helping save countless Jewish lives by secretly supplying aid in the form of food, medicine and falsified documents.

Part of the Kraków Historical Museum, the pharmacy has been recreated to appear as it did during Nazi occupation. The exhibits depict everyday life in the ghetto, based on Pankiewicz's own testimony, and tell extraordinary ➤



Wawel Castle, viewed from St Mary's Basilica. **Opposite:** Local guide Andrzej Czapliński wrapped up warm on a cold Polish morning.



Tradition: Visit the Malopolska village of Lipnica Murowana, outside Kraków, on Palm Sunday to watch locals compete to build the tallest palm, made from wicker twigs and decorated with ribbons and flowers. The current record is 115ft

From left: Auschwitz concentration camp;
Weimar chamber light show, Wieliczka Salt Mine

tales of bravery, luck and survival. It seems unthinkable now that through these windows Pankiewicz and his staff bore witness to tragedy on an unimaginable scale as the ghetto and most of its 15,000 inhabitants were ultimately wiped out.

While many of the ghetto remnants are hidden among its transforming urban landscape — I find small portions of the ghetto walls framing a children's park — a former factory at the infamous address of 4 Lipowa street shines a stark spotlight on the past.

Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory is today an immersive museum charting the dark days of the war with chilling but absorbing displays, evoking what life was like for Kraków's citizens during its ruthless occupation. Walking through the factory rooms and corridors where Schindler employed, and subsequently saved around 1,200 Jews, innocuous, everyday objects are interspersed with distressing reminders of the horror of Nazi rule.

Blood-red flags emblazoned with black swastikas hang like oppressive drapes. Faded monochrome photos show SS soldiers laugh and jeer as they shear the side-locks off a nameless Jewish man. A tram carriage has the words 'Juden Verboten' (Jews Forbidden) stamped on its side, while a white-tiled room is patterned with swastikas.

Upstairs, Schindler's factory office keeps its wartime appearance, complete with the wooden desk and Bakelite telephone of Herr Direktor, while sitting opposite is one of the museum's most symbolic installations, the Survivors' Ark. Here a large case displays thousands of enamelled pots, tins and plates manufactured by Schindler's Jewish workforce for whom the factory became an unlikely sanctuary from the horrors of the camps.

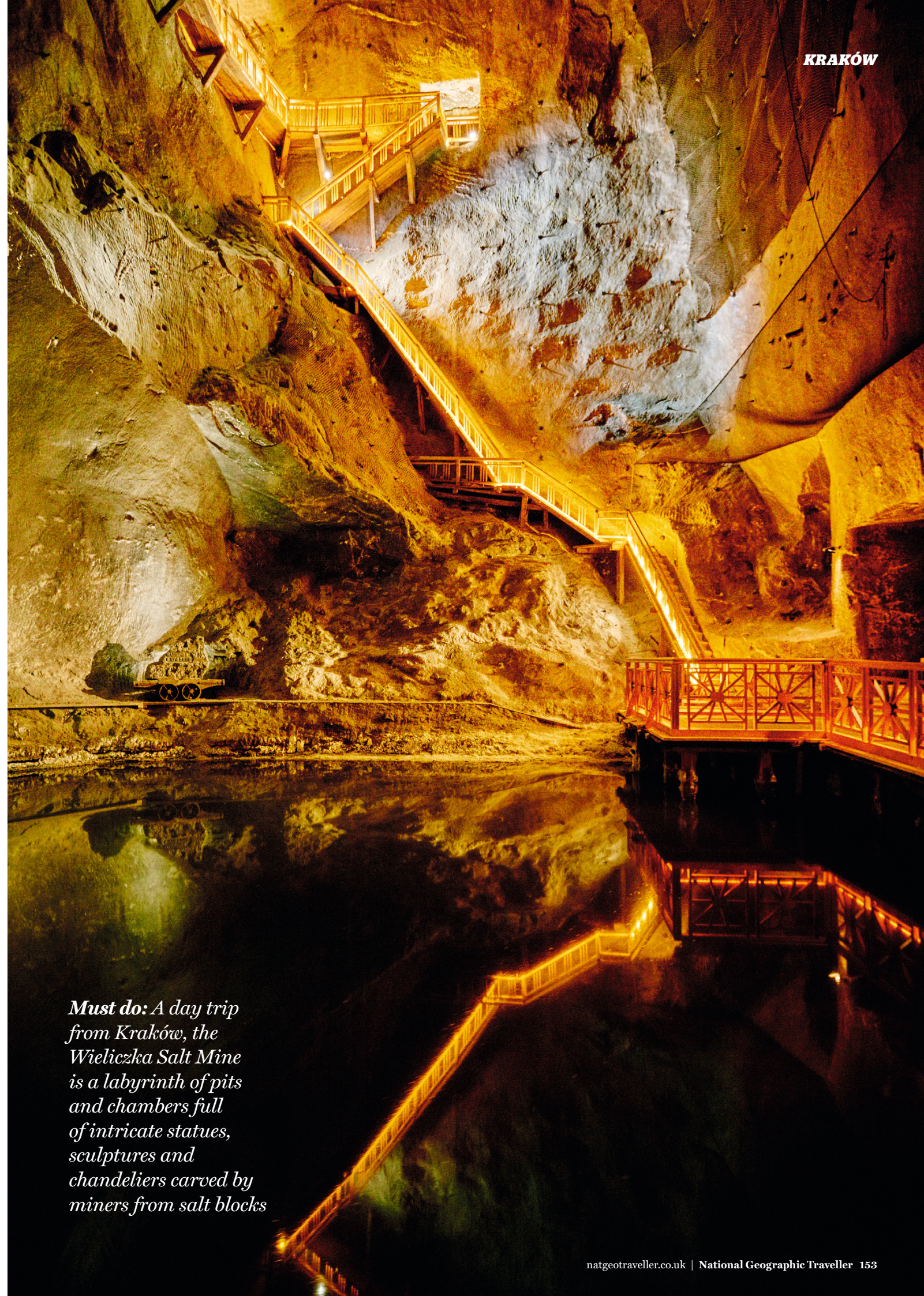
Over the Vistula

While much of the Oscar-winning film *Schindler's List* played out in Podgórze, director Steven Spielberg quickly realised during filming that hardly any of its original architecture remained, so he headed over the Vistula River to Kazimierz, with its medieval streets and cobbled squares. It was here Kraków's Jewish community had thrived for 500 years before it was practically wiped off the map during Nazi occupation.

With Kazimierz's rich Jewish history almost ended by the war, the area fell into decline during the deadening years of communism. But in the 25 years since Spielberg filmed here, Kazimierz and its Jewish culture has been undergoing a revival and, like Podgórze, it's today a bohemian centre of restored cafes, candlelit bars and converted warehouses, as well as being home to cemeteries and the poignantly silent shells of synagogues ransacked by the Nazis. These now stand as sites of pilgrimage.

As you arrive into Kazimierz via Szeroka street, you're greeted by a stone monument paying tribute to the tens of thousands of Kraków's Jews killed by the Nazis. I enter the adjacent white-walled gate leading to the 16th-century Remuh Synagogue — almost completely rebuilt after the war and now one of only two active places of prayer in the district.

Chandeliers illuminate dilapidated limestone walls, while a wrought iron-enclosure surrounds a small platform for Torah readings, sombrely elegant for all its plainness. It's joined to a cemetery, in which numerous tombstones were either smashed to pieces or callously used as paving stones by the Nazis. After the war, the ruined tombstones were collected and cobbled together to form a poignant 'Wailing Wall' on the eastern side of the cemetery. I see a solitary pilgrim standing facing the wall, his aged head bowed silently in contemplation of the fragments of forgotten lives before him. ►



Must do: A day trip from Kraków, the Wieliczka Salt Mine is a labyrinth of pits and chambers full of intricate statues, sculptures and chandeliers carved by miners from salt blocks



Clockwise: Industrial Restaurant & Bar, Podgórze; back street, Tarnów; enjoying a *zapiekanka* in Plac Nowy



But there's far more to this neighbourhood than its memories. A new generation is breathing life into Kazimierz's streets and squares and nowhere is this more palpable than buzzing Plac Nowy, at its heart. Kraków's main square, Rynek Główny, may be blessed with the city's postcard sights but Plac Nowy has emerged as the beating heart of Kraków's sub-culture — the antithesis of commercialised Old Town and its tourist-filled bars.

By day, Plac Nowy appears little more than a drab concrete square filled with stalls offloading everything from secondhand clothes to Soviet-era memorabilia. But now, after dark, the square has transformed into the hub of Kazimierz's nightlife, with Kraków's young upstarts crowding its bars, clubs and restaurants. Everyone from hungry workers to skinny-jeaned students lines up at the square's parade of hole-in-the-wall food outlets to feast on local staples such as *zapiekanki* — Poland's answer to pizza, comprising halved baguettes laden with mushrooms and cheese.

If Plac Nowy is the hipper alternative to traditional Rynek Główny, then the nearby city of Tarnów is the crowd-free antidote to Kraków's well-trodden tourist trails. Malopolska's second city, Tarnów may be overshadowed by Kraków in size and stature but it has many of the same historical, cultural and architectural charms.

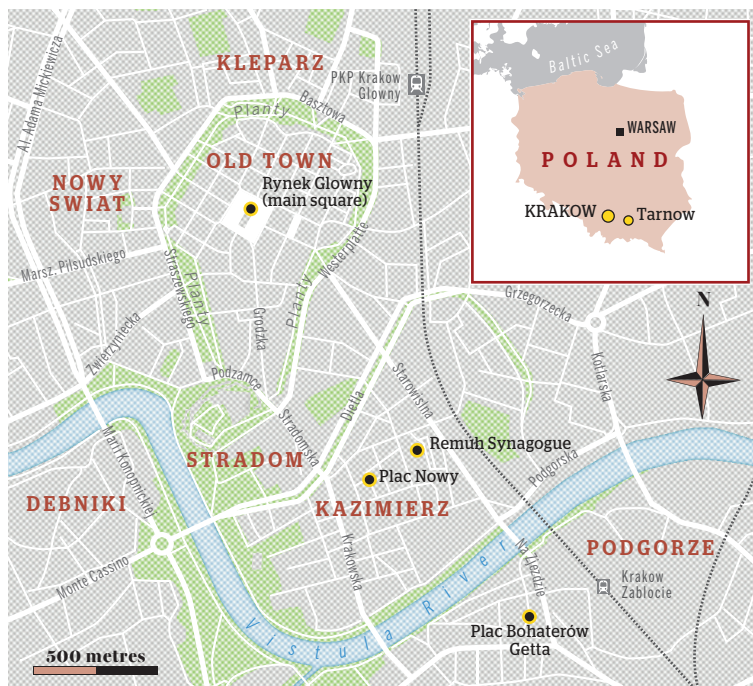
Following local guide Pawel Rybak, I explore its Old Town, replete with ornate Renaissance buildings, Gothic cathedral and cobblestoned alleys. We head into the former Jewish district where almost half of the town's pre-war ➤

population lived. Today, only haunting relics of this once-thriving community exist, from an old bath house and battered synagogue *bimah* (an elevated platform) to a sprawling 16th-century cemetery — one of Poland's oldest and largest.

Entering through its iron gate (the original is at Washington's United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), the burial grounds seem abandoned, with overgrown shrubs and vegetation masking around 4,000 weathered gravestones. But this melancholy site is far from forgotten. A columned memorial built from one of Tarnów's fallen synagogues commemorates the slaughter on this site of 25,000 Jews. It's inscribed with the pensive Hebrew verse: 'And the sun shone and was not ashamed.'

As we head back into the centre, past new apartment blocks and buildings, Pawel points to an old house he lived in as a child. "All my friends left Tarnów as we grew up but I'm always here when they come back. I'm like a stone," he says with a wistful smile. "I'll probably never leave this place." Like Kraków, the city's landscape may change and evolve but the memories of its past will never leave.

Below: Mural by Kraków artist Szymon Szcelc within the remnants of the Old Synagogue in Tarnów



ESSENTIALS

Kraków

GETTING THERE

Kraków is well served by airlines including British Airways, EasyJet, Jet2.com and Ryanair. Kraków airport has a new passenger terminal and train station offering an 18-minute connection to the city centre. Alternatively take the 208 or 292 bus, or a taxi for around 80zł (£13.17). ba.com easyjet.com jet2.com ryanair.com
Average flight time: 2h 25m

GETTING AROUND

Kraków has an efficient tram and bus network. Tickets cost 2.8zł (46p) for 20 minutes; 3.8zł (62p) for 40 minutes. A two- and three-day Kraków Tourist Card (100zł/£17 and 120zł/£20.30) gives unlimited travel and free entry to museums. Most tourist attractions are in the Old Town, though, which is easily explored on foot. For trips to the surrounding Małopolska region, including Wieliczka, Tarnów and Lipnica Murowana, it's best to arrange car hire or transport with a local tour operator.

WHEN TO GO

Late spring and early autumn have less crowds and more pleasant temperatures of around 14C, which climb to 19C in July. June sees the colourful Lajkonik Pageant, and July the Jewish Culture Festival.

PLACES MENTIONED

The Eagle Pharmacy. mhk.pl/branches/eagle-pharmacy
Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory. mhk.pl/branches/oskar-schindlers-factory
Remuh Synagogue & Cemetery. 40 Szeroka Street. T: 00 48 12 429 57 35. Tarnow.it.tarnow.pl
Wieliczka Salt Mine. wieliczka-saltmine.com
Lipnica Murowana. lipnicamurowana.pl

NEED TO KNOW

Currency: Polish złoty (zł) £1 = 5.9zł.
International dial code: 00 48 12.
Time: GMT +1.

MORE INFO

Visit Kraków. krakow.pl
Visit Małopolska. visitmalopolska.pl
Polish National Tourist Office. poland.travel

HOW TO DO IT

Poland Active has tours from Kraków to Małopolska, including Auschwitz, Wieliczka, Zakopane and the Tatras. Its daily eight-hour Auschwitz tour costs 99zł (£16), including transport and guide. poland-active.com
Regent Holidays has three nights' B&B at the Radisson Blu Hotel Kraków with return flights and transfers from £460 per person, based on two sharing. regent-holidays.co.uk
radissonblu.com/en/hotel-krakow