

Go wild in Warsaw

Tamara Hinson celebrates Poland's 100th 're-birthday' with a weekend break to suit any budget

A park-filled paradise where sleek skyscrapers battle for space with riverside castles, Warsaw is Europe's most resilient city.

It was flattened during the Second World War, suffocated by rationing in the early 1980s and has, at times, been part of Russia and Austria – hence this year's celebrations of its 100th anniversary of independence.

Yet it remains tremendously good value. Whether clients are in search of a bargain or want to splash out on a five-star hotel without the usual five-star prices, there's a hotel to match, leaving them with plenty of spare spending money to explore the best of Poland's capital.

▶ SAVE

The best thing about Warsaw? It's wonderfully cheap. An Uber from Warsaw Chopin airport to its centre, a journey of around 20 minutes, costs just £4.

I arrive on May 3, Poland's Constitution Day, to find flags on every surface and fluttering from bridges spanning the beach-lined Vistula river.

Despite the public holiday, it's easy to keep costs to a minimum, making Warsaw ideal for budget breaks.

My first exploration is by bike, using the Veturilo bike share scheme. It has 366 stations across the city, and the first 20 minutes are free.

There's also a free

walking tour, where I discover the old town's Unesco status actually rests on it being a replica of the original. During the war, Warsaw was almost entirely destroyed, and authorities devised a plan: enlist locals to rebuild the old town, which was no mean feat considering so many of the population had been killed. An army of volunteers referred to old sketches, and today, this part of Warsaw is a symbol of the capital's rise from the ashes.

We stop by one of the high-tech Chopin benches – each in a location connected to the Polish pianist's life – and press the button to enjoy a free piano recital.

We're also shown one of

the few remaining milk bars, so called because these traditional eateries specialise in food made with cheap ingredients available even during periods of rationing: milk, cheese and vegetables. The food is delicious and cheap.

Afterwards, I head to the ivy-covered, riverside University of Warsaw Library for spectacular views over Warsaw. Its entire roof is covered with a series of multi-level gardens, connected by walkways leading to flower-filled hideaways and viewpoints.

Dinner is at Hala Koszyki, where dozens of restaurants are tucked into a historic market hall dating back to 1906. Tenants are eclectic: at Mango Vegan you'll find Palestinian street



TOP TIP
A Warsaw Pass gives free entry to top attractions and other discounts, from £26
warsawpass.com

RIGHT:
Chopin musical
bench

FAR RIGHT:
Hala Koszyki

BELOW:
Neon Museum



Wizz Air operates daily flights from Luton to Warsaw, with fares from £42 one way. wizzair.com

Super Break offers a three-night stay at the Hilton Warsaw from £319 per person for a September departure, including return flights from Stansted. superbreak.com/agents

Cox & Kings offers a three-night stay at the five-star Mamaison Hotel Le Regina, including flights from Heathrow and private airport transfers, from £495 per person. coxandkings.co.uk

➔ food, there's fragrant Thai cuisine at Tuk Tuk, and fantastic antipasti at Heritage. My advice? Enjoy a spot of people-watching with a stein of beer at the open-air Bierhalle bar.
Stay: Beds at the Warsaw Witt Hostel start from £9 a night. hostelwitt.com.pl

SPEND

Warsaw's Chopin benches are a reminder of how music helped residents through tough times, and across the river in the Praga district, once a separate town – take the Metro if you don't fancy cycling – I find a statue depicting a troupe of musicians.

After the war, these wandering bands provided a soundtrack to the city. They're long gone, but text the number on the monument to hear the songs they played.

This side of the river suffered less



We stop by one of the high-tech Chopin benches and press the button to enjoy a free piano recital

damage during the war. Wander Praga's streets and you'll find bunkers, bullet-riddled mansions and the onion-domed, 19th-century Metropolitan Cathedral of St Mary Magdalene.

Once a no-go zone, Praga is transforming in to Warsaw's hippest 'hood. Don't be afraid to explore (respectfully) beyond the apartment blocks' crumbling frontages. Many have leafy courtyards, often with

lovingly-tended shrines, and the area's slow gentrification has seen some of these courtyards' old stables turned in to cafes.

Another example of how creative minds are breathing new life into old spaces can be found at Praga's Soho Factory. Part residential complex, part arts district, it's home to the Neon Museum, which has the world's largest collection of Cold war-era neon. I discover how, for Warsaw's residents, neon was more than a form of signage: after the Second World War, elaborate signs were used to light up the city, shedding its reputation as a crumbling concrete jungle.

Soho Garden is also where you'll find Warszawa Wschodni, founded by chef and restaurateur Matuesz Gessler. Head to this restaurant for delicious French/Polish cuisine served in a beautifully restored former ➔



➔ warehouse, complete with open kitchen and tinkling piano.

Before returning to Warsaw's centre, stop by Praga's Kościuszko Infantry Division Memorial, a Communist-style monument known locally as "five beers, please" due to the soldier's outstretched fingers. It's a tribute to the 1st Tadeusz Kościuszko Infantry Division which supported the Warsaw uprising during the Second World War.

Learn more about this period at the sprawling Warsaw Rising Museum (£5 per person). In a 3D cinema, I soar over post-war Warsaw to see the terrifying extent of its destruction, and in the gallery next door, I crawl through a replica of the sewers used as escape tunnels by survivors. It's a gritty, albeit essential, experience which leaves me in need of a stiff drink, so I head to another must-see – the Warsaw Marriott's Panorama Sky Bar, where I take in the city's transformed skyline, and raise a toast to the jaw-dropping resilience of Poland's capital.

Stay: Rooms at the Warsaw Marriott start from £86 a night. marriott.co.uk



The Adventure Warsaw tour features transport in a Nysa, the boxy Polish van first made in 1958

► SPLURGE


Next Friday (June 1) sees the opening of the Raffles Europejski Warsaw on Krakowskie Przedmieście, Warsaw's most prestigious street.

Not that Warsaw is lacking in luxury hotels. The nearby Sofitel has one of the city's largest swimming pools, while the 523-room Marriott is its first five-star hotel and first skyscraper. But the best views are from the 30th-floor viewing gallery of the art deco Palace of Culture and Science. It's a great way to take in the contrasting architecture, including the Ferrari showroom near the building's base, which was once a headquarters for the Communist party.

For a totally different perspective on the city, sign up for a four-hour tour with Adventure Warsaw (£38 per person). Your transport? Not a Ferrari, but a vintage Nysa, the boxy Polish van first produced in 1958. Don't fancy sharing? Splash out on a private tour, which covers everything from Jewish history to Warsaw's varied nightlife.

For dinner, head to the InterContinental Warsaw, home to one of the city's finest restaurants, Platter by Karol Okrasa. The cuisine is Polish with a modern twist, but not pretentiously so, although my mid-meal palate cleanser was served in a frozen stone. I enjoy my first boletus soup (made from a type of mushroom popular in Poland), and try to forget that I'm heading home tomorrow. On the plus side, I'm already planning my return.

Stay: Rooms at the Sofitel Warsaw Victoria start from £105 a night.

sofitel.com 

ASK THE EXPERTS



Gary Gillespie,
national sales
manager,
Super Break

"Warsaw isn't centred around an old market square like many European cities – it's much more spread out, with Gothic architecture set against modern skyscrapers. The restaurant scene and nightlife are also regarded as the best in Poland."

Simon Clifford,
Europe product
manager,
Cox & Kings

"Don't miss the fascinating Warsaw Rising Museum and the Neon Museum, which houses a fascinating array of neon signs from the Communist period. Afterwards, stop at Plac Zbawiciela (Saviour Square) for a Polish beer."



PICTURES: MARCIN W. CZECHOWICZ / WARSAW TOURIST OFFICE; RADEKORZEL.COM

ABOVE:
Platter by Karol Okrasa at the InterContinental Warsaw

LEFT:
Adventure Warsaw tour

FIND OUT MORE

- adventurewarsaw.pl
- freewalkingtour.com/warsaw
- koszyki.com
- mateuszgessler.com.pl
- neonmuzeum.org