

POLAND—The Hidden Gem of Central Europe

By Subhash Motwani, Founder and Director, Namaste Tourism

Poland is truly a hidden GEM of Central Europe which many refer to as Eastern Europe as it was one of the many countries that formed part of the Eastern Bloc and got freedom from the Communist regime in 1989.

Poland is surrounded by 8 countries with Germany to its East, The Czech Republic and Slovakia to its south, Ukraine and Belarus to the east and Lithuania along with Kaliningrad (a Russian Territory) to its north East. Hence, there are several countries that can be combined with Poland. Further north across the Baltic sea, one can also combine countries of

Scandinavia which is Sweden and Denmark. However, very few know that Poland has so much to offer that even a 2 weeks trip may not be sufficient to explore this extremely safe country which has played a major role in assisting its neighbours by accepting over 3 million refugees from Ukraine during the current Russia-Ukraine conflict.

With LOT Polish expanding its reach to West of India, starting twice weekly flights to/from Warsaw in Mumbai, it creates the shortest route to the European Union as the flight from Mumbai to Warsaw can be covered in less than 8 hours 25 minutes.

Warsaw—the capital was destroyed during WWII and 85% of its historic city centre was completely rebuilt and they very well know what conflicts and war can do to a nation. Poland was the first country to extend a helping hand to Ukraine when the conflict began.

Poland is the ninth largest country and only smaller than Germany and offers a lot in terms of exploring for travellers that too with great value for money as the currency in use is Zloty and not Euros and in the price of an 8 day trip of Western Europe you could easily spend 10 to 12 days in Poland. In terms of safety, it is a super safe country well connected by trains and buses across the expanse of the nation. From the tri-city in the north—Gdansk, Gdynia and Sopot to the largest brick castle in the world – The 13th Century Malbork Castle of the Teutonic Order, to the Masurian Lakes Region which boasts of over 2000 lakes in the North East, Poland is definitely a country that offers plenty of surprises. The 3 capitals of Poland include Warsaw – the national capital, Krakow – the cultural capital and Zakopane – the winter capital of Poland. Krakow located on the banks of the Vistula river is known for its Wawel Castle, the Jagellonian University – one of the oldest Universities of Europe where the famous astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus was a student in the 15th Century amongst other dignatories, to the largest concentration camp of the Nazi regime in Auschwitz and the Wieliczka Salt mine which is less than 20 minutes drive from Krakow, the city and surrounds are worth a visit. From Jewish quarters to Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory now turned a museum, there are

several hidden treasures that Krakow has to offer. In less than 3 hours you can reach the winter capital of Poland– Zakopane and the famous Tatra Mountain range which is a great destination all year round. A river raft across the Dunajec river can take you between the mountain range where you find Slovakia on one side and Poland on the other side. Not too far, there are amazing spa experiences to unwind after the trekking and hiking you intend to do in the Tatra mountain range in the summer or ski in winter in Zakopane as much know for the ski jumps as well as for its highlander cuisine and hospitality which is a wonderful cultural experience. No wonder, it was shortlisted as a destination for a famous Bollywood movie just as Warsaw and Krakow which have been interesting movie locations for several Bollywood and Hollywood movies in the past.

For the lovers of classical Music– there are the concerts of Frederic Chopin to enthrall you and to visit the underground bars and restaurants which are hosts to vodka and Polka parties is something which will definitely be on the bucket list of the Gen Z travellers. If you are looking for wildlife, there is the Bialowieza National Park in the East, designated a UNESCO site and home to the world's largest free living population of the bisons, a natural paradise.

Closer to the borders of the Czech Republic and Germany you will find the towns of Wroclaw, formerly known as Breslau where you will find a Harivanshrai Bachchan Square and the former capital city Poznan which is closer to Berlin than to Warsaw are worth visiting. For those who believe in spirituality, a trip to Poland is incomplete without a visit to the Jasna Gora Monastery in Czestochowa to see the miraculous painting of the Black Madonna. The famous gingerbread comes from the Copernician town of Torun, also known for its Gothic Architecture.

A visit to Poland is truly a pulsating experience and if you want to do the different this holiday season, Poland is waiting to be discovered– are you game for it? ♦

'The views expressed in the column are of the author, and may or may not be endorsed by the publication.'



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