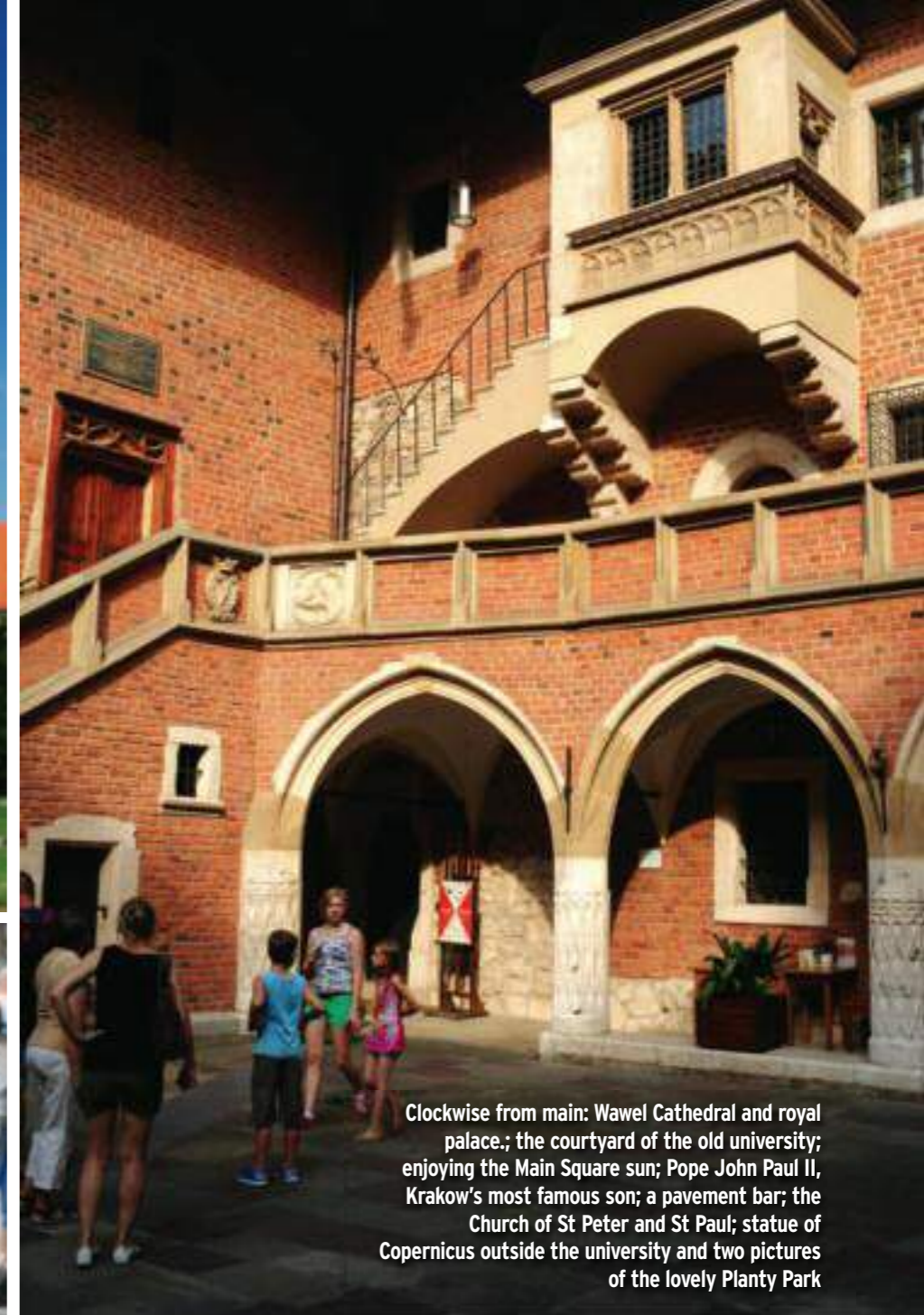
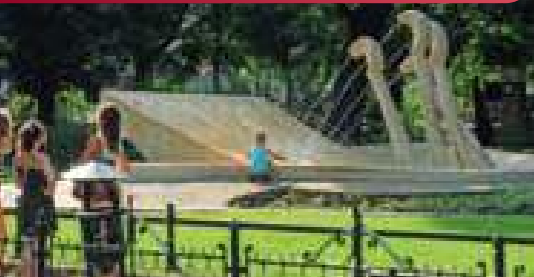


Krakow: City of light and darkness

Poland's elegant former capital boasts as much heritage as any European city – but is an hour's drive from the site of one of history's greatest horrors. **Norman Wright** reports

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS





Clockwise from main: Wawel Cathedral and royal palace.; the courtyard of the old university; enjoying the Main Square sun; Pope John Paul II, Krakow's most famous son; a pavement bar; the Church of St Peter and St Paul; statue of Copernicus outside the university and two pictures of the lovely Planty Park

A PAVEMENT table in the main market square of Krakow as a golden evening melts into twilight is a grandstand for people-watching. Hundreds of locals promenade through the square. Street entertainers patrol, too – from a toff in evening dress and a top hat, but on impossibly high stilts, to a chap with a Clark Gable moustache playing gypsy violin. The ring of horses' hooves on stone paving precedes the next appearance of

one of the beautifully turned-out coaches taking visitors on a tour of the old town. The drivers and attendants are also immaculate. As dusk falls, youngsters appear at all the windows of a building across the square. They do their own people-watching, perching on the windowsills, before heading out into the throng for an evening out. The towers and facades of the Cloth Hall in the middle of the square and the churches and buildings around its edges are now lit up. It's a warm evening,

the food and wine are excellent and the atmosphere continues to buzz well into the night. In most other European cities a coffee or a beer, let alone an evening meal, would be at a premium with this sort of setting. Here it is surprisingly reasonable. Certainly prices are lower in the side streets but this is no Vienna, Berlin or Milan. The former capital of Poland offers as much history and architecture as any city in Europe. The Main Square itself is the

largest medieval square in Europe, measuring 229 yards by 231 yards. It was first laid out in 1257 and through a planning charter became the centre of a network of streets and squares in mainly square blocks radiating out to the city gates. In the centre, the much-remodelled Cloth Hall is bustling with market stalls in its ground-floor arcades along with tearooms and shops. On the upper floor are galleries of Poland's First National Museum. St Mary's Church is one of the

highlights of the square, with its amazing altar screen carved by sculptor Veit Stoss in the mid-15th century. It took him 12 years to complete and depicts the Virgin Mary surrounded by the apostles. The altar itself is 43 feet high and 26 feet across. The figures are nearly ten feet tall, carved from trunks of 500-year-old lime trees. Fifteen feet under the square is a relatively new museum where you can see the original square from medieval times. Archaeological excavations have revealed

much from the times when the square was at a lower level and was subsequently built over by later generations. Just outside the square is the Collegium Maius, one of the oldest medieval university buildings in Europe – Krakow University has survived for 600 years. Scientist Nicolaus Copernicus graduated here, and visitors and students mingle in the ancient passageways and courtyards. Around the outside of the old town is one of the most unusual municipal parks.



Clockwise from above: Market stalls in the Cloth Hall; elaborate carvings in the salt mine; an early book exhibit in the museum under the Main Square.; a gigantic salt mine chamber; our salt mine guide; a salt sculpture of a Polish King and the altar in St Mary's Basilica



Planty Park circles the town and offers several miles of trees, water and plants and pleasant, peaceful and flat walking.

Just outside the park ring, Wawel Castle, once the royal palace of the Kings of Poland, rises above the city on the hill overlooking the River Vistula. Next to it is Wawel Cathedral where Pope John Paul II worshipped as a young man.

Amid the centuries-old city and district of Krakow is a grim and poignant reminder of more recent

history – the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

More than a million Jews from Poland and all over Europe, Polish political prisoners, Russian prisoners of war, disabled people and homosexuals met their end in the gas chambers, at the notorious Gestapo execution wall, as a result of gruesome medical experiments, or were simply worked to death.

They were marched to the former army camp, sometimes for hundreds of miles, or

brought by railway cattle wagons to be either selected for work or to be immediately tricked into the gas chambers. Selection was often made personally by the camp doctor, Josef Mengele.

The camp has been preserved as a museum and memorial so that one of the most infamous acts in history cannot be forgotten or swept under the carpet.

Only an hour or so from Krakow, it is almost a duty to visit as you are so close. Curiosity also draws visitors there. Groups

are taken on a guided tour. Our guide was a local man of around 30 who had had relatives at the camp.

It was a hot day and there were many parties moving from hut to hut.

I was surprised that I just observed and absorbed the information the guide delivered in his very calm style. I just didn't experience much emotion during the four hours we toured. It was only later when I did a lot of thinking, lots of reading and in writing this article that I was able to

feel anger, horror, empty sadness and head-shaking incomprehension.

It's an uncomfortable place to visit, but everyone who can go there should, and I hope it continues forever and no generation in the future decides to forget.

The visit starts as you walk through the gate with the chilling message above Arbeit macht frei (Work makes you free).

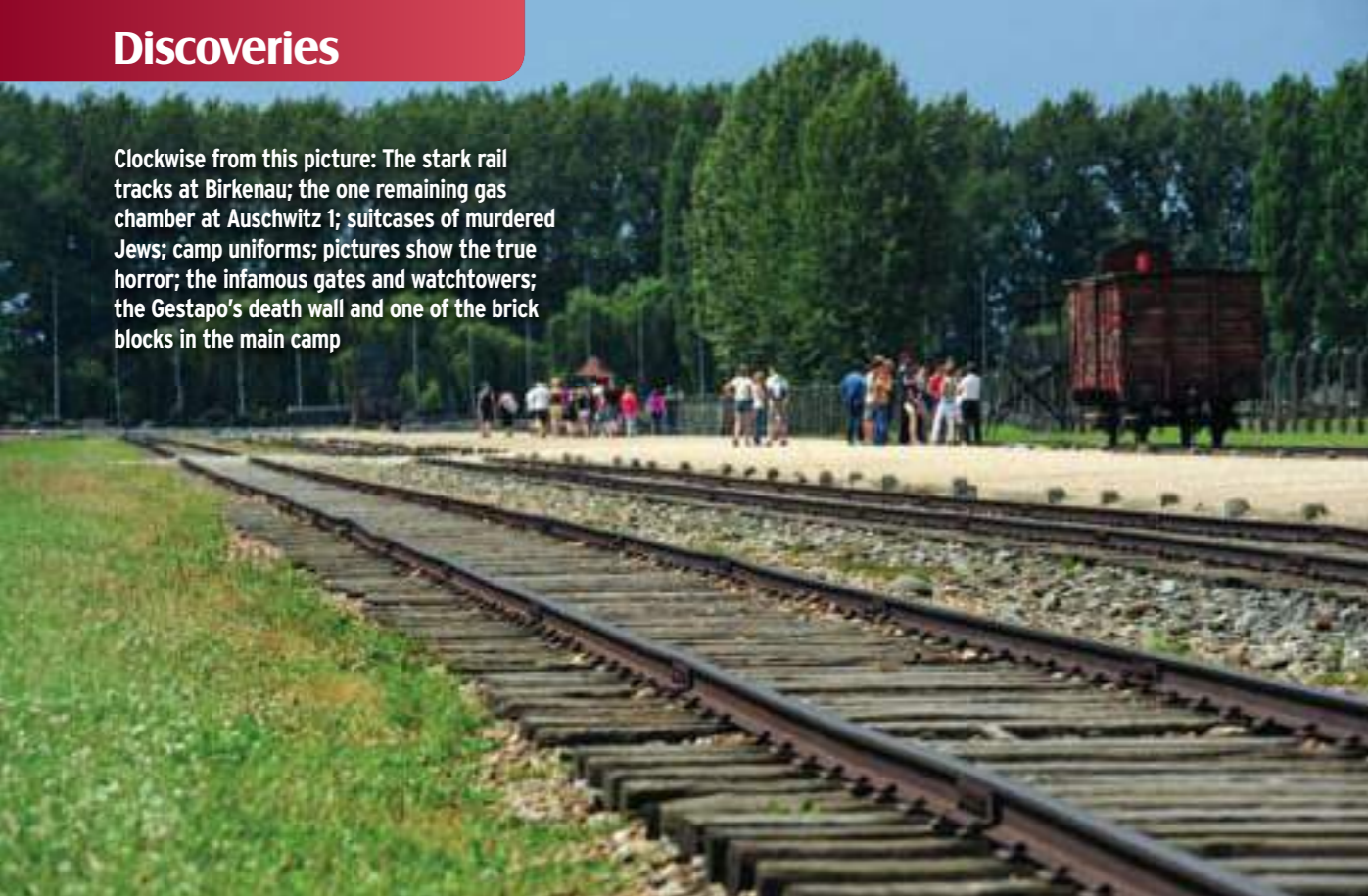
The stark machine-gun watch towers and the lonely barbed wire-topped perimeter fences testify to the absence

of freedom. In this part of the camp – Auschwitz I – the blocks are brick-built. You see accommodation that is grim and then you see punishment cells that are inhuman... tiny rooms where after a day's work prisoners were packed in so tightly they had to remain standing.

Block 11 was the Gestapo headquarters with torture cells and at the side of it the death wall where thousands were shot.

Exhibitions of the way the camp was organised followed, with uniforms, the

Clockwise from this picture: The stark rail tracks at Birkenau; the one remaining gas chamber at Auschwitz 1; suitcases of murdered Jews; camp uniforms; pictures show the true horror; the infamous gates and watchtowers; the Gestapo's death wall and one of the brick blocks in the main camp



poignant pictures of doomed inmates, piles of possessions – shoes, spectacles and suitcases – and a room full of human hair the Germans used to make blankets and other textiles.

Then, a gas chamber and crematorium ovens that were early experiments in extermination. At the time I just filed through, now I shudder as I look at the pictures. Next to the block with the prototype gas chamber is the house of the camp commandant, Rudolf Höss, and the gallows where he was hanged after

a war crimes trial. Mengele escaped justice by fleeing to South America. He evaded all attempts to track him down even by determined undercover efforts from the Israeli secret service Mossad.

The tour then takes a bus ride to Auschwitz 2 camp Birkenau. Like the Arbeit macht frei gate, this provides the other iconic image – the gate with the long lonely platforms where the trains of cattle trucks pulled in and Mengele made his evil selections.

Conditions here were even more

appalling. It was built as a death camp as the Nazis devised more efficient gas chambers. They tried to hide their crimes by blowing up the gas chambers as the Red Army approached at the end of the war. Enough of the camps and their grisly records remains to condemn them and this period of history.

Also close to Krakow is a lighter attraction, although it is in the depths of the earth – the Wieliczka Salt Mine. The salt has been extracted here for 750 years and in earlier times it was one of the cornerstones

“The camp has been preserved as a museum and memorial so that one of the most infamous acts in history cannot be forgotten”

in creating the wealth of the city. Now salt is produced by extracting it from water pumped out of the mine rather than by digging. Several hundred miners now work in the miles of chambers and passages to keep it safe for visitors.

Your tour starts by descending more than 200 feet down 74 flights of wooden

stairs. My knees were complaining by the time we got down them; you can go by lift if necessary and you don't have to climb out – there's a miner's cage lift for that.

Miners over the years have carved many incredible sculptures from the salt and have created vast cathedral chambers.

The salt has minor impurities that make

it grey but it is ideal for sculpting and, as long as it doesn't get damp, it will remain for hundreds of years. It's a really fascinating place to visit.

After the city, the depths of the salt mine and the horrors of Auschwitz-Birkenau, we headed for the Tatra Mountains and the mountain resort of Zakopane for a change of pace and cooler air than the summer heat in Krakow.

We were not alone. The resort is very popular for summer walking and winter skiing. The town has a bustling pedestrian



Clockwise from main: The mountain top at Kasprowy Wierch easily accessible by cable car. Smoklehouse producing smoked sheep cheese. View over Zakopane to the Tatra Mountains



Passport to Krakow

Getting there

■ Thomson Lakes and Mountains offers a twin-centre trip to Krakow and Zakopane. Either before or after your stay in Zakopane you can spend a few nights in the medieval city of Krakow. The hotels offered are either three or four stars. The price for a seven-night stay at the four-star Hotel Belvedere in Zakopane with half-board combined with the four-star Novotel Krakow Centrum with breakfast starts from £719 per person, including return flights to Gatwick to Krakow and resort transfers. Regional flights are available from most major UK airports at a supplement. Tel: 020 8939 0740, website: (www.thomsonlakes.co.uk), social media: @thomsonlakes facebook.com/thomsonlakes.

Where to stay

■ We stayed at the perfectly located Hotel Royal, Gertrudy Street, central Krakow, next to Wawel Castle and a short walk into the beautiful old centre. Website: (www.hotelewam.co.uk)
 ■ In Zakopane we stayed at the Hotel Belvedere. Website: (www.belvederehotel.pl).

Find out more

■ For more information on Poland, contact the Polish National Tourist Office in London. Tel: 020 8991 7070, website: (www.poland.travel).

main street with bars, cafés and restaurants. Around is stunning mountain scenery. Everywhere are families with boots, backpacks and walking poles, heading for the valley walks or the cable cars up to Kasprowy Wierch.

After perfect weather all week it was raining and cloudy when we got to the top. This didn't deter the walkers as they tackled the ridge path and the popular routes down to the bottom. However, after

an hour or so the tops of the mountains cleared and we ventured out of the café to a spot close by where you can step into neighbouring Slovakia.

We also visited one of the many roadside smokehouses where the local speciality smoked sheep's cheese is prepared.

The town and surrounding areas are hilly so won't suit everyone. If you don't feel up to the walking uphill, you can visit Zakopane on a day trip from Krakow.