

Krakow: Royal City, Holy City, City Of Arts

By Karen Dabrowska

Krakow, Poland's former capital and home of its numerous kings during the past 500 years, is a royal city with a magnificent castle on Wawel Hill. The adjoining cathedral with the royal tombs is one of the city's 140 churches. The city is also a city of around 30 museums and art galleries ranging from the Cloth Hall in the great medieval market square to the Manggha Centre of Japanese Art & Technology

on the south Bank of the River Wisla. Krakow is also the birthplace of Pope John Paul II. The Poles are a religious nation, there is no such thing as an empty church and the main churches have separate entrances for tourists and worshippers. Nicolaus Copernicus, who turned 15th century science on its head by postulating that the earth orbits the sun and not the other way



round, studied at the Krakow Academy now the Jagiellonian University, among the oldest in Europe which dates back to 1364. And there is also the home of the local 19th century magician Piotr Twardowski who made a Faustian pact with the devil: but much to the devil's dismay used his powers for good and was saved by the Virgin Mary when the demons came to claim his soul.

An international city, Krakow is easily reached by air, road or rail. A hotel or rented apartment in the centre of the old town is ideal for exploring the city on foot. All the main attractions are found within a mile radius from the main market square amid enticing restaurants, cosy coffee shops selling 'death by sugar' cakes and sweets and bric a brac shops with delightful souvenirs among them candles with amber embellishments and exquisite Christmas decorations. "It's Christmas here all year round", one shop keeper remarked enthusiastically. Stained glass decorations and



traditional amber jewellery are among the best buys.

The Wawel Dragon guards the entrance to the castle. In its heyday the beast terrorised the hill until it was vanquished by a young man who filled a sheepskin with sulphur.

The dragon ate it and drank so much Wisla water that it exploded.

The young man married the king's daughter and in fairy-tale fashion they lived happily ever after. The dragon's cave has 150 steps and takes visitors to the Wisla. Wawel Hill is ideal for

photos of the city and the river.

The royal chambers have been restored reflecting the splendour of the Renaissance-era. In the armoury is the jagged sword used in coronations from 1320. The cathedral is filled with lavishly decorated tombs including the baroque silver shrine of St Stanislaus Poland's patron saint. He was Archbishop of Krakow until he disagreed with the state and was beheaded in 1079.

Another famous church is St Mary's in the main market square with two towers of





different heights: the 69m tower holds church bells and the 81m tower is the watchtower. History is re-lived every hour when the bugle call suddenly stops in memory of the 13th century watchman who was killed by a Tatar arrow.

The main market square, a popular venue for open-air concerts and civic ceremonies has an impressive statue of Adam Mickiewicz the famous 19th century romanitic poet. Every year nativity scenes, the creations of local artists,

surround the statue. The competition for the best scene (szopka) has been held every year since 1937 and the winning scene can be admired in the Historical Museum until February. Next to the main square is the small square used for more mundane exhibitions and computer shows.

Kazimierz, the former Jewish quarter in the inner city suburbs, is also worth a visit. Among the synagogues is the city's Indian restaurant and many small Jewish restaurants where the

food is halal and the atmosphere relaxed and friendly.

There is no shortage of parks and gardens. Las Wolski 6km outside the city centre is ideal for forest walks, has a zoo in the centre and an earthwork mound built in the 1930s to honour the military hero Pilsudski.

There are plenty of tours to nearby sites like the salt mine, the 13th century Cistercian Monastery and the charming mountain town of Zakopane. Those eager for an 'overseas' adventure can take the night train to Lviv, the Ukraine's cultural capital which once belonged to Poland.

