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16 things you probably didn't know about Poland, Europe's most religious country



Beach holidays in Poland? It's possible CREDIT: NADIYKA - FOTOLIA

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In some ways, **Poland** (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/poland/hotels/>) is a hugely familiar part of our landscape – a large country at the heart of our continent; Europe’s ninth biggest state (bigger than the UK); the far-foraging nation whose language is now the second most spoken in Britain. But how much do we really know about this colossal slab of the European landmass? With Theresa May having just paid the country a visit, it's the perfect time to consume a few nuggets on information about Poland.

1. The country's first ruler had a way with names

Modern Poland emerged from the debris of the First World War on the exact day the firestorm ended (on November 11 1918) – with Josef Pilsudski, a soldier-turned-statesman, taking charge of the post-conflict government. Poland had been a political football, kicked around by various stronger powers (particularly Russia, Austria and Prussia) for the previous 150 years – and the establishment of a proper Polish state was one of the “Fourteen Points” for a safer, happier planet drawn up by the soon-to-be-victorious Allies as the war neared its end. The new country was officially recognised when the conflict formally concluded in the Treaty of Versailles, in June 1919.

For all this, the history of Poland stretches back far further than 99 years. The man generally acknowledged as the first Polish ruler was Mieszko I, who occupied the throne from 960 to 992. He was the first Christian leader of the country, and the creator of the Piast dynasty. He also sired children who would go on to be known as Boleslaw the Brave (his successor) and Sigrid the Haughty (who may possibly not have existed. It’s complicated). And he may well been the grandfather of Britain’s own King Canute – he of the fabled bid to “turn back the waves”. Yes, it’s all a bit Game Of Thrones. Only real.



Krakow, one of the very first World Heritage Sites CREDIT: PAB_MAP - FOTOLIA

2. Krakow was a mould-breaker in 1978

The centre of Krakow

(<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/poland/krakow/articles/a-weekend-break-inkrakow/>) is widely acknowledged as one of Europe's greatest surviving examples of a

medieval city. What is less remembered is just how quickly Unesco moved to make this official. The heart of Poland's second city was included on the first list of World Heritage Sites, in 1978 (alongside Yellowstone National Park and the Ecuadorian capital Quito).

Unesco's accompanying explanation that "the 13th century merchant's town has Europe's largest market square and numerous historical houses, palaces and churches, with their magnificent interiors" rather stated the obvious, but it told no lies.

At a glance | The first 12 World Heritage Sites

- 1 L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Park, Canada
- 2 Nahanni National Park, Canada
- 3 Galapagos Islands, Ecuador
- 4 City of Quito, Ecuador
- 5 Simien National Park, Ethiopia
- 6 Rock-Hewn Churches, Lalibela, Ethiopia
- 7 Aachen Cathedral, Germany
- 8 Krakow's historic center, Poland
- 9 Wieliczka and Bochnia Salt Mines, Poland
- 10 Island of Goree, Senegal
- 11 Mesa Verde National Park, United States
- 12 Yellowstone National Park, United States

○ [View our selection of city breaks in Krakow](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/poland/krakow/krakow-city-breaks/?WT.mc_id=tmg_inar_comm-beach&utm_source=tmg&utm_medium=inar&utm_content=comm-beach&utm_campaign=tmg_inar_comm-beach)

https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/poland/krakow/krakow-city-breaks/?WT.mc_id=tmg_inar_comm-beach&utm_source=tmg&utm_medium=inar&utm_content=comm-beach&utm_campaign=tmg_inar_comm-beach

3. Warsaw does it bigger, but perhaps not better

Unesco's above-mentioned talk of "Europe's largest market square" revolves around the word "market". Rynek Główny, Krakow's central square, is certainly big (and lined with cafes. It is a splendid spot for an afternoon), at 40,000 square metres. But in terms of raw area, it is not even the largest square in Poland. That honour goes to Plac Defilad (Parade Square), which spreads out in the middle of Warsaw. This 240,000-square-metre giant is big – the biggest square in the EU, in fact. It is also, if we are being kind, rather drab – and if we are being rude, something of an eyesore, often deployed as a car park. The relocation of the city's Museum of Modern Art to the plaza – it is scheduled to fling wide its new doors in 2019 – is part of an attempt to make big also seem a little more beautiful.



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4. Warsaw also does old as new, but disguised as old

St John's Archcathedral is one of the most striking buildings in Warsaw. Its grand cocktail of red brick and coxcomb tower is a spectacle every camera should admire. It is also one of the oldest edifices in the Polish capital. Except that it isn't. It was founded in 1390 – but it was almost entirely destroyed during the Warsaw Uprising of August-October 1944, when Nazi Germany eviscerated a city which had the temerity to fight back. The church was badly damaged in the clampdown – and 90 per cent of it was deliberately demolished by the occupiers in the immediate aftermath. St John's was reconstructed once the war was over – but the church which rose from the ashes was not the one that, after much modification over the centuries, had stood in 1943. It was resurrected from a 17th century illustration, and now looks as it did in the 14th century – rather than the 20th.

It's not as old as it looks CREDIT: ANDREY STAROSTIN - FOTOLIA/ANDREY STARORSTIN

5. There is water, water, everywhere

Poland is home to one of Europe's great lake districts. That would be Masurian Lakeland, which ebbs across 180 miles and 20,000 square miles in the north-east of the

country. There are more than 2000 lakes in all, including Sniardwy – the largest in the country (13.7 miles long, 8.3 miles wide). It is a joy in summer, when you can hike on its banks.

Wet weather in Poland's Lake District CREDIT: IGORMARKIN - FOTOLIA

6. The River Oder is a cross-border gem

Germany and Poland are pretty good friends these days. One example of their warm relationship is the Lower Oder Valley International Park ([nationalpark-unteres-odertal.eu](http://www.nationalpark-unteres-odertal.eu)) (<http://www.nationalpark-unteres-odertal.eu>) – a protected tranche of land along both sides of the river that defines some of their border. Specifically, it unspools as a ribbon of wetland in north-east Germany (the state of Brandenburg) and north-west Poland (the province of West Pomerania), flanking the Oder (known as the Odra in Poland) as it starts its approach to the Baltic Sea. This is another haven for summer strolls. And for birdlife – like the rare (in Europe) black stork.

Wroclaw, on the Oder/Odra CREDIT: PYTY - FOTOLIA

7. There is a lovely lagoon for two

A short-ish hop further north, the Oder pours its soul into the Szczecin Lagoon – which is another Polish-German co-production. This vast inland water feature – which is separated from the Baltic by the islands of Usedom (also shared between the two neighbours) and Wolin (completely and utterly Polish) – boasts a set of glorious beaches. Like those found on the (Polish) island of Karsibor. Yes – it’s probably too cold for sun-bathing at present.

8. Poland goes to the seaside

Because it has lots of it. Some 328 miles of coastline along the Baltic, to be precise. There are marvellous beaches here too. Mielno, just north of the city of Koszalin, is a hugely popular resort area whose beaches, hotels and restaurants are thronged between June and August. There are other hotspots too – take a look at [visitpomerania.eu/beaches](http://www.visitpomerania.eu/beaches) (<http://www.visitpomerania.eu/beaches>).

The world's best countries - according to you

9. There are delights in the dockyard

Poland's (north) coast is also home to Gdansk, its fourth biggest city – and the port which played a prime role in the tearing down of the Iron Curtain. It was here, in the shipyards, that Solidarność (Solidarity) – the trade-union-cum-freedom-movement founded by firebrand and future Polish president Lech Walesa – was born in 1980. You can find out more about this at the European Solidarity Centre ([ecs.gda.pl](http://www.ecs.gda.pl/)) (<http://www.ecs.gda.pl/>) – although, if you are in what is a fascinating town, you may also want to seek out the Gdansk Shakespeare Theatre ([teatrszekspirowski.pl](http://www.teatrszekspirowski.pl/)) (http://www.teatrszekspirowski.pl), which is dedicated to The Bard, the urban sand of Stogi Beach – and the bars and cafes along Ulica Chlebnicka. If you fancy a long weekend, Ryanair ([ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) (<http://www.ryanair.com>) and Wizz Air ([wizzair.com](http://www.wizzair.com)) (<http://www.wizzair.com>) fly in from more than a dozen UK airports.

Gdansk CREDIT: BORIS STROUJKO - FOTOLIA

10. And many other unpronounceable cities you can fly to

Ryanair flies to Bydgoszcz, Rzeszow and Szczecin

(<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/galleries/ryanair-holiday-destinations-you-have-never-heard-of/>).

Good luck saying them correctly.

Pretty Bydgoszcz CREDIT: COPYRIGHT: ARTUR BOGACKI/ARTUR BOGACKI

11. It is ruled by a woman

There are fewer than 25 countries with a female (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/maps-and-graphics/mapped-countries-never-ruled-by-a-woman/>) leader, but Poland is one. Step forward Beata Szydło, prime minister since November 2015.

12. The Big Macs are cheap

Lovers of the McDonald's burger should flock to Poland. It is one of the 10 cheapest places on Earth to buy a Big Mac (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/maps-and-graphics/mapped-big-mac-index/>) (they cost \$2.30, compared to \$3.73 in the UK and \$6.35 in Switzerland).

They're cheaper in Poland

13. They love beer

Poland is populated by the world's sixth biggest per capita beer drinkers (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/maps-and-graphics/beer-consumption-per-capita-countries/>). The average citizen guzzles 99 litres per year. Only those in Czech Republic, Seychelles, Austria, Germany and Namibia consume more.

14. It is Europe's most religious country

Earlier this year Telegraph Travel mapped the world's most - and least - religious countries (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/maps-and-graphics/most-religious-countries-in-the-world/>), based on the results of three WIN/Gallup International polls, taken in 2008, 2009 and 2015. Each asked respondents whether or not they felt religious; for each country we included the most recent figures available. Poland stands out against the rest of Europe, with 86 per cent answering "yes". In Britain, the figure is just 30 per cent.



15. Bison roam

Bialowieza Forest, which straddles Poland and Belarus, is one of the last and largest remaining stretches of primeval forest in Europe. This ancient ecosystem is home to 800 European bison, which were once extinct in the wild but, thanks to successful breeding and reintroduction programmes, is making an unlikely comeback.

Poland's biggest beasts CREDIT: NATURECOLORS - FOTOLIA

16. There's an amazing underground attraction

The Unesco-listed Wieliczka salt mine, near the medieval city of Kraków, extends over 190 miles in length and drops to a depth of almost 500ft.

Wieliczka: a must-see CREDIT: PAVLO VAKHRUSHEV

Salt was first mined here in the Middle Ages but production stopped in 2007. Its interior chambers and passageways are now open to tourists, although the site has attracted visitors since the 16th century.

There are nine levels of galleries, with caves excavated from the granite-grey salt rock and brine lakes glinting in the subterranean gloom. A series of 66 steps carved in the salt form the descent to the Chapel of St Cunegond (pictured), a church measuring some 220,000 square feet and displaying chandeliers made out of rock salt.

Step aside Windsor Castle CREDIT: GETTY

17. And the world's largest castle

Poland has an impressive 16 World Heritage Sites. We've already mentioned Krakow, Warsaw, Wieliczka and Bialowieza Forest; others include the haunting former concentration camp at Auschwitz and Malbork, the largest castle in the world by area.

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