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August 13, 2009

## 36 Hours in Warsaw

By DENNY LEE

DOES [Warsaw](#) really have the ugliest architecture in Europe, as a TripAdvisor poll recently stated? Sure, a gray cloud seems to hover permanently over the city's concrete parks and Soviet-era flats. But in the five years since Poland ascended to the European Union, a colorful injection of money and culture has given Warsaw an unmistakable glow. Luxury hotels sparkle with the spoils of privatized industry. Central Warsaw is awash in electronic billboards for Coke and other iconic Western products. And once obscure artists are basking in the reflected limelight. Luckily for visitors, it will be several years before Poland adopts the euro, and the zloty remains a largely depressed currency. So while Warsaw may not be the prettiest city, it remains one of Europe's cheapest.

### Friday

**4:30 p.m.**

#### **1) CRISP COBBLESTONES**

Most sightseeing tours of Warsaw start in Stare Miasto, or Old Town, and a cab ride through the drab and ashen city makes it clear why. With virtually all of Warsaw flattened by the Nazis, the new castles and pastel-colored burgher houses of Old Town lend the city a historic texture that is otherwise missing. But don't linger. While you might stumble upon a cool art exhibit in Castle Square, the crisp stonework and fresh paint feel a bit Disney-esque. So before the magic wears off, dip into Lody (Ulica Nowomiejska 7/9; 48-22-635-73-46; [www.lody-warszawa.pl](http://www.lody-warszawa.pl)), a popular ice cream parlor, and savor one last lick.

**8 p.m.**

#### **2) NO PIROGIES**

Poland isn't known for its gastronomic delights, so it's no surprise that its swankiest kitchens borrow heavily from foreign cookbooks. One of the more fashionable spots these days is [KOM](#) (Ulica Zielna 37; 48-22-338-63-53; [www.komunikat.net](http://www.komunikat.net)), a fusion restaurant opened by Kai Schoenhals, an American, and his wife, Katarzyna Figura, a Polish actress. Housed in a pre-war telephone exchange, the restaurant serves globetrotting dishes like foie gras tacos with a pear-mint chutney, and grilled fillet mignon with a fig sauce. The cocktails are worldly, too. Dinner and

drinks for two, about 240 zlotys (\$82 at 2.9 zlotys to the dollar).

**11 p.m.**

### **3) BE FABULOUS**

To experience Warsaw's economic uprising, follow the limos and BMWs to the Champagne-fueled bars of the city center. Expect gobs of hair gel, surly bouncers and aspirational names like Platinum (Ulica Fredry 6; 48-22-596-46 66; [www.platinumclub.pl](http://www.platinumclub.pl)) and Cinnamon (Plac Pilsudskiego 1; 48-22-323-76-00), the latter on the ground floor of a glassy office building designed by Norman Foster. The velvet rope can be brutal, so show up before midnight. Cinnamon may have lost some of its luster, but don't tell that to the Paris Hilton wannabes dancing on the tables.

**Saturday**

**10:30 a.m.**

### **4) FACTORY FASHION**

Warsaw's bohemian heart has shifted across the Vistula River, to the working-class district of Praga ([www.warszawskapraga.pl](http://www.warszawskapraga.pl)), where old buildings still bear bullet scars. An early incubator was Fabryka Trzciny (Ulica Otwocka 14; 48-22-619-05-13; [www.fabrykatrzciny.pl](http://www.fabrykatrzciny.pl)), a former factory where artists and musicians mingle, though more in the evening. Emerging photographers make their mark at Galeria Luksfera (Ulica Zabkowska 27/31; 48-22-619-91-63; [www.luksfera.pl](http://www.luksfera.pl)), while product designers showcase their wares next door at Magazyn Praga (48-22-670-11-85; [www.magazynpraga.pl](http://www.magazynpraga.pl)), a raw space that blurs the line between gallery and store. And for homegrown fashion, Green Establishment (Ulica Wilenska 13; 48-22-670-41-32; [www.gestablishment.com](http://www.gestablishment.com)) makes its own line of playful dresses and T-shirts that sums up Praga's street-chic style.

**1 p.m.**

### **5) OLD-STYLE GRUB**

Milk bars — the no-frills, Communist-era canteens that serve Polish staples like pirogies and borscht — may be going the way of bread lines. But the few that remain are cherished institutions, not only out of nostalgia, but for the low prices. [Bar Zabkowski](#) (Ulica Zabkowska 2; 48-22-619-13-88) is a yellow-and-blue time capsule favored by senior citizens and students who line up along a narrow window for cabbage soup (2.40 zlotys) and pirogies (from 4.20). The babushka-like cashier even keeps an English menu under the register. If the fluorescent lights and plastic plants are too dreary for your taste, skip back to the west bank of the river to the newly renovated Bar Bambino (Ulica Krucza 21; 48-22-625-16-76; [www.barbambino.pl](http://www.barbambino.pl)), which looks like a milk bar designed by Starbucks.

**4 p.m.**

### **6) THE NEXT BERLIN?**

Reports of Warsaw's up-and-coming art scene may be exaggerated, especially from the looks of the Raster gallery (Ulica Hoza 42/8; [www.raster.art.pl](http://www.raster.art.pl)). But this ragged space, tucked on the fourth floor of a crumbling apartment house, is nurturing rising names like the photographer Aneta Grzeszykowska. The other big spot in town is the Foksal Gallery Foundation (Gorskiego 1A; 48-22-826-50-81; [www.fgf.com.pl](http://www.fgf.com.pl)), which represents Robert Kusmirowski and others. The contemporary art scene, however, will get a big jolt when the four-year-old Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (Ulica Panska 3; 48-22-596-40-10; [www.artmuseum.pl](http://www.artmuseum.pl)) moves into its shiny headquarters. But that's not until 2014, so pop inside its temporary digs in the city center, which has a cool bookstore run by Berlin-based Pro qm ([www.pro-qm.de](http://www.pro-qm.de)).

**6:30 p.m.**

### **7) SKYLINE PLUNGE**

For a pre-dinner workout that doubles as sightseeing, swim a few laps at the RiverView Wellness Center in the [InterContinentalHotel](http://www.riverview.com.pl) (Ulica Emilii Plater 49; 48-22-328-86-40; [www.riverview.com.pl](http://www.riverview.com.pl); entrance, 150 zlotys). Floating 43 stories high, the aquatic aerie affords terrific views of the Palace of Culture and Science ([www.pkin.pl](http://www.pkin.pl)), the controversial gift from Stalin that towers over Warsaw like a gorgeous insult.

**8 p.m.**

### **8) KITCHEN STADIUM**

There's something slightly disturbing, yet deliciously entertaining about seeing a raw hunk of beef butchered into a glistening mound of steak tartare. Housed in the labyrinthine kitchen of the fabled Europejski Hotel, [U Kucharzy](http://www.gessler.pl) (Ulica Ossolinskich 7; 48-22-826-79-36; [www.gessler.pl](http://www.gessler.pl)) turns upscale Polish cooking into a spectator sport. Even the décor is suggestive of a cooking show, with aged white tiles, chef toques and wooden block tables that face the sizzling pans and flaming grills. Other freshly slaughtered dishes include veal brain on toast, stuffed beef and baked perch. Dinner for two, with drinks, about 280 zlotys.

**10:30 p.m.**

### **9) PARTYING POLES**

The city's not all high heels and loafers. To party underground, hop a taxi back to Praga, where a rundown courtyard (Ulica 11 Listopada 22) is home to three alternative clubs. One is Klub Saturator (48-504-35-37-72; [www.saturator.art.pl](http://www.saturator.art.pl)), which has three scrappy floors packed with artsy types in vintage sneakers and funky hats lounging on mismatched sofas. A skip away is Hydrozagadka (48-504-11-10-59; [www.hydrozagadka.waw.pl](http://www.hydrozagadka.waw.pl)), which draws an eclectic mix that might include Web designers and musicians. The night's still young. Warsaw parties late on weekends and one of the most debauched dance floors these days is [Klub 55](http://www.klub55.pl) (Plac Defilad 1; [www.klub55.pl](http://www.klub55.pl)). This smoky club, which is squirreled inside the Palace of Culture, draws a good-looking crowd that likes to dance and strut. Warning: the action doesn't pick up until 3 a.m.

## Sunday

11 a.m.

### 10) ART OR OBJET

For a more studied view of Warsaw's cultural revival, stroll the stately grounds of the Center for Contemporary Art (Ulica Jazdów 2; 48-22-628-12-71; [www.csw.art.pl](http://www.csw.art.pl)). Housed in the reconstructed Ujazdowski Castle, the museum is showing its much-anticipated international collection, 20 years in the making. The collection spans 110 artists (90 of them Polish) and includes marquee names like Jenny Holzer and Nan Goldin. Or, if you'd rather browse for one-of-a-kind treasures, bring your leftover zlotys to Bazar na Kole (Ulica Obozowa 99), an outdoor flea market on the east side of Warsaw that sells oddities like rusty World War II helmets, Prussian lamps and other reminders of a recent Soviet past. Get there early or miss the boat.

**LOT Polish Airways** ([www.lot.com](http://www.lot.com)) has nonstop flights from [Kennedy Airport](#) to Warsaw, and a recent Web search found daily low fares of \$738 to \$1,443 over the 30-day period starting Aug. 20.

Taxis are plentiful and cheap, though rates are unregulated, so it's a good idea to ask before getting in.

Hotels in Warsaw tend to cater to [business travelers](#), so expect room rates to drop on weekends.

For aerial views, a great location and modern rooms, the [InterContinental Warsaw](#) (Ulica Emilii Plater 49; 48-22-328-88-88; [www.warszawa.intercontinental.com](http://www.warszawa.intercontinental.com)) rises to the occasion. The three-legged skyscraper has 404 spacious rooms, a sparkling pool on the 43rd floor and several good restaurants. Rooms typically start at 105 euros, about \$154 at \$1.47 to the euro, but have been as low as 48 euros (\$70) online.

[Mamaison Hotel Le Regina Warsaw](#) (Koscielna 12; 48-22-531-60-00; [www.mamaison.com/leregina](http://www.mamaison.com/leregina)) offers boutique elegance at the edge of Old Town. The 61 rooms occupy a Gothic palace that was once the U.S. Embassy, and has a Roman-style pool and French restaurant. Rack rates start at 330 euros, but online rates can be as low as 80 euros.