

From Siberia to Iberia – part one.

Kraków and Katowice, February 2007.

Our second trip to Poland was almost as far from our first one as it's possible to get, and not just in distance; Kraków is situated in the far south of the country and in direct contrast to Gdańsk is placed squarely in Poland's "beer belt" so I was hoping for slightly more in the beer department than the multinational dross we'd had to suffer in Gdańsk...

I'd been searching for a good deal on a trip somewhere in Poland for a while and when I found it I knew it was one of those "once in a decade" offers - £27 return all-in from Birmingham and we were guaranteed at least one plane scoop as the flights were with Sky Europe, who we'd only flown with once previously one-way to Bratislava! With an offer like this we couldn't lose, even travelling in February when the weather in Poland is somewhat less than tropical, so I booked it immediately... this was the second cheapest return we'd ever done, the only cheaper one had been to Sardinia with Ryanair for £19 on a special offer...

Flying from Brum is a total treat to us as we're more used to getting up at just gone midnight for a 2+ hour slog along brain-sapping trunk roads to a far-flung airport which calls itself London when it's nowhere near it, opposed to the leisurely 40-minute trundle up the M42 we now had to look forwards to. It's always the bane of our first day in a place that we're totally knackered from lack of sleep and don't get to enjoy it properly and I can't really explain how good it felt to know we'd feel awake enough to enjoy the first day in Kraków!

Thursday 22nd February 2007.

A little bit of information goes a long way.

We had no flights in January so it meant double amounts of looking forwards to the first trip of the year which involved checking the weather forecast for Kraków regularly. Now I know Poland in February isn't the warmest place on earth but as we tracked the weather through January the temperature was hovering at a somewhat chilly yet bearable couple of degrees above during the day and a corresponding amount below freezing at night. However, as the trip edged closer, it seemed as if the weather was planning to try and freeze us to death as the temperature began to plummet from the lofty heights of +3 during the day first to freezing, then below, and by the time we were doing our final checks on the Wednesday evening the forecast predicted the thermometer wouldn't breach freezing point during our entire stay and might even nosedive to minus 19 on the Friday night... I packed my extra-warm fleece and tried not to remember how cold minus 27 had been in Czech a few years earlier when the train windows froze on the inside and we had snowdrifts inside the carriage...

We arrived at Birmingham airport via the shuttle bus from airparks and it was cold even here; the time was 05:30 and we shivered our way into the terminal before checking in behind a row of people carrying a whole variety of bobble-hats, coats and random other clothing which looked like cast-offs from Antarctic expeditions and a whole myriad of scarves, gloves and other cold-beating accompaniments – it looked like these people had been checking the weather forecast too and had come to the same conclusion we had – it was going to be bloody cold!

I'm not sure if I've said this before – I can't remember all the ranting I've done, there's just been too much of it – but despite its obvious advantages of relative proximity to our house Birmingham just isn't one of my favourite airports! No, I tell a lie, it's probably one of my least favourites in Britain owing to the lack of flight information whilst waiting in the cavernous departure lounge with no view of the planes outside (I don't know why, I just like to see what's going on!) and after its current refit yet more corporate homogenised "branding" being rammed down the throats of those unlucky enough to be waiting there for a plane which may or may not be outside – there's no way of telling! Basically, it's an airport for business people who aren't paying for their flights and are claiming back the branded junk they buy whilst waiting...

Our flight was on the screen but we began to get slightly unnerved as first flights before it, then after it, were all allocated gates; this wasn't a good sign and I remembered our only previous flight with Sky Europe had been almost an hour late! As the lounge filled to bursting point with a right old mix of businessmen and holidaymakers the time of departure came and went with still no news of our flight – nothing at all, not even "delayed" or "due in seven hours" – and our confidence in the plane actually departing moved from hopeful to dubious... suddenly, 15 minutes after it was due to have left, our flight was allocated a gate and there was a sudden mad stampede towards the door; I'm not quite sure why, as Sky Europe operate allocated seating and so there's no easyScrum or Riotscrum to get stuck into!

White out.

As we trotted down the passageway towards gate 40 the airport had one more trick in its "let's piss off the passenger" deck of cards; we were halted in mid-charge as the corridor was closed for disembarkation of another flight right across our path – just how stupid is that? – before we finally got to board the plane and eventually departed around forty minutes late. I was pleased to see that the plane was a scoop but less pleased to hear the usual colicky brat attempting to break the sound barrier with its screaming; I mean, what's the point of taking brats on planes? They hate it and so does everyone else who has to listen to their bawling, so why not just leave them at home until they're old enough to not piss off everyone within earshot – i.e.; all and sundry aboard?

The flight across was extremely tedious as a thick grey murk blanketed the whole of Europe and made looking out of the window less of an attractive option than it usually is, but it was cheered up by the cabin crew's atrocious English (I know, my Hungarian or Czech is much worse) which was compounded by the crackly PA system that sounded like it had been reclaimed from an old Soviet parade ground's scrapheap. We politely refused the snacks, scratch cards, expensive tat (I think they called it "duty free" or something like that) and various other ways of trying to bump up their margin on our paltry fares before the descent began and we wondered what the weather would be like at the other side of the murk we had just sunk into.

We were almost on the ground before we emerged from the cloud, although at first we didn't notice we had as everything was still white – yes, it was snowing, and snowing heavily! Our touchdown was as light as a feather and as we taxied towards the terminal I was amazed by just how heavy the blizzard was; snowploughs beavered away clearing the taxiways and blowers tried to stem the advancing white tide elsewhere. We disembarked into a full-on whiteout down slippery steps and onto a bus which slipped and slid us over to the terminal where the formalities were completed quickly and easily as we all thawed out in line.

Once through, we quickly headed out to find a café to acquire some change for the bus into

town. The awfully useful ticket machine (which would be much more useful if it accepted notes if the truth be told) in arrivals by the information desk told us that a day ticket would be 10.40złoty so we required a pocketful of change to feed into the machine. It took a good 20 minutes and a combination of coffee, cheap chocolate and more cheap chocolate before I staggered back under the weight of a mountain of shrapnel with which to purchase our tickets, a transaction which was remarkably easy, but didn't prepare us for the shambles which was to follow!

Bus to town? Where the fuck is the town, then?

We exited the airport into the dying snowstorm and saw that a good blanket of white stuff had been deposited over the region in a short space of time and it looked very nice indeed. After a brief bit of confusion with buses where we thought the shuttle to the train station was the bus into town (it's not very well labelled!) we found the bus shelter over to the far right-hand side of the approach road and slithered our way towards it armed with our 24-hour tickets – which was just as well, as I didn't see a ticket machine at the bus stop.

A No.192 bus soon pulled up and we climbed aboard. After about ten minutes we were due to leave, but not before the driver had fixed the door which kept opening and closing by itself; maybe we should have taken this as a sign and done the train instead, but we stayed with the by now very full bus which eventually lumbered off vaguely in the direction of the city. To surmise what happened in the next hour and a bit still baffles me, but basically the bus took a tortuous route around the city's ring roads before calling at the bus station (we thought it would go to the station next – it didn't) then stormed off over the river before terminating outside some random college-type building miles from where we wanted to be...

We had no option but to take the bus back into town, hoping to leap at the bus station, but we decided to make a snap decision when we crossed some tramlines and got off for an ex-Vienna Duwag E1 articulated tram on route 2 on which we took the short hop to the train station – 90 minutes after we'd got on the bus at the airport! Cheers then, the train would have taken 15 minutes, and we resolved to do the train on the return leg to give ourselves a chance of making the plane!

Finally we were in the centre but, despite the transport system's best efforts, we were still hours too early to check into our hotel. The snow of earlier had relented into a light drizzle and was making steady inroads into the impressively thick layer of the white stuff which still covered everything in the city although by the time we'd had a perfunctory wander around the main square (which was *huge*) we decided to see if we could get into our room early. We were able to check in but, as the hotel is relatively well-to-do, a porter grabbed our bags before we could fend him off despite them only being our usual small rucksacks! He wasn't getting any złoty out of us that easily though and, after showing us to our large and well-appointed room, he was dismissed empty-handed.

Off to a poor start – as usual!

After unpacking the rucksacks into our amazingly beige room - which was rather luxuriously fitted out and was an absolute bargain for the £40 a night we'd paid for it - it was time to dip our toes into the water of beer scooping Kraków style. On paper, at least, Kraków seemed to be a bit of a beer paradise with a brewpub, two micros, lots of larger brewers nearby and some decent bars in the city and so I was in a particularly confident mood as we took the customary

Konstal 105N tram on route 8 to the Smolki stop and strolled on along ulica Kalwaryjskiej in the direction of Relakspol's brewery tap where, if my dodgy Polish translation could be believed, we should find all of the brewery's beers on draught ripe for the scooping...

... so imagine, if you will, my absolute witheredness when we arrived outside the bar to find it in total darkness with absolutely no sign of anything happening inside – or having happened for a long time! My earlier optimism evaporated into the slushy evening and I wondered if the rest of our stops would be as much of a blow-out as this one as we did the only move possible from out in the snowy suburbs and took tram 8 back to Plac Wolnica in the former Jewish suburb of Kazimierz where I hoped against my growing feeling of bleakness that we would score some beers from the city's other micro, Stary Kraków, which brewed ales instead of the customary lagers and sounded very interesting indeed – if the bar was still open, that was!

As we wandered through the lanes of Kazimierz towards the Szynek bar I decided to have a look in a shop we were passing for some “room beers” – after all, we had three nights in the hotel and I was hoping for one or two micro-brewed beers to jack up my pitiful Polish beer tally. Most shops in Gdańsk had offered the usual multinational crap such as Żywiec, Tyskie and the “aromatised” (whatever that means) Dog in the Fog swill but our experience in Kraków so far had been much better; we'd already picked up some scoops from a supermarket by the station and, by the looks of the beer range in this shop, we might be on for a few more.

Near-perfect poise and elegance - and bloody nice too.

The shop seemed to have a superb selection of beers for a typical Polish corner shop and the range included some common Belgian and German beers as well as the usual Polish suspects, but as my eyes traversed the shelf I suddenly locked onto a massive winner; Stary Kraków Amber ale! I picked the bottle from the shelf almost reverently and admired the impressive label but was interrupted in my adoration of my scoop by the arrival of Sue clutching another bottle, this one from the brewery I thought I'd never tick after finding it's brewery tap closed – Relakspol! By the time we left the shop we were clutching the Stary Kraków bottle and no less than three Relakspol winners, and I was feeling a whole lot better about my scooping possibilities in Kraków.

We were soon outside the Szynek bar which, according to snippets of gen I'd read on the net, served all three Stary Kraków beers - two of them on draught - and good food too. Obviously I was well up for the former (despite having two of them in bottle by this point) but we were absolutely famished and some filling Polish food was just the kind of thing we were after, but first we stopped to fuss a tabby cat outside who must have had the loudest voice I've ever heard on a cat! With our fix of feline sated, we entered the tiny café and found it empty; this was maybe a blessing as I doubt 20 people could squeeze into this cosy little place!

The owner appeared and was very welcoming but didn't seem to speak any English; this was a good sign as it suggested that we weren't in your typical tourist-tat bar but somewhere used by the locals. I shifted into my (very) basic Polish cum Czech (I've been to Czech quite a bit and can get by in Česky which is very similar to Polish!) and managed to order a half-litre of Stary Kraków ciemne (dark) on draught, a bottle of the golden, and some food from the short but very traditional menu. I'm not sure where the landlord thought I came from, but he withstood my verbal destruction of his native tongue with great stoicism and went out back to get our food.

I began with the bottled golden, not quite sure what to expect, but with high hopes for these top-

fermented beers. It was pale, subtle in aroma, and had a lovely soft, malty, grainy flavour with some drying hoppiness and then a long malty finish which lingered on my tongue long after I'd swallowed it; this was an excellent start to our scooping and was already the best Polish beer I had scooped thus far (maybe with the exception of Żywiec porter) – although, judging by Sue's lavish praise, the dark could be even better? It had the advantage of being from tap and from my first sniff I could immediately tell I was going to like it; there was no sweet, flabby, caramelly flavours but instead a toasty, roasted and full-bodied brew... very dark brown, it had a roast and caramel aroma which led into a bitter, rich, meaty ale with lots of complexity; malt, liquorice, roast, nuttiness, bitter hops and toffee all fought for tongue-space but in a very polite way with the flavour being an example of near-perfect poise and elegance not brute force and clumsiness. To say I liked it would be an understatement and it received the stratospheric score of 4!

Must try harder.

Our food soon arrived and that too was of high quality, with my Zurek soup and Sue's mushroom and cabbage Pierogi being just what we needed after a long afternoon with only a few bars of – admittedly good – local marzipan to sustain us. We then polished off the remaining beer before reluctantly making a move as we still wanted to try the brewpub before it became too busy at the weekend, but not before adding to the bill an unopened bottle (try doing that in Polish!) of the superb ciemne! We bid the extremely sociable landlord good evening and then, feeling very happy with our first visit of the trip, stomped back past the beer shop to Plac Wolnica where we could catch a tram back into the centre and then onto CK Browar.

After changing trams at Wawel, noting the huge castle over the road in the process and also noting just how cold it was getting, we arrived at the stop for the brewpub – but were unable to find it - but after a few minutes of confusion we worked out that Polish addresses are done by building and so the pub was further away than we'd anticipated. We were soon clattering down the steps into the vaulted tunnels which served as the CK Browar brewpub and after seeing how busy it was we selected a table just outside the main room where I hoped the waitresses would find us...

They did, eventually, and I ascertained that we had two beers to scoop, jasne (pale) and ciemne (dark), as the others were variations of wheat beer – no need – one particularly repulsive specimen even containing ginger; now that's what I call my idea of a nightmare beer, a ginger-wheat! I feel nauseous at the mere thought of it... anyway, to the beer; neither was particularly impressive after the superb Stary Kraków brews we'd had in Kazimierz, with the jasne being a reasonably hoppy hazy yellow brew with some graininess and more hop dryness in the finish and the ciemne a dryish, deep brown and fairly nondescript fluid with a disconcerting hint of sileage to the aroma – honest!

We'd soon worked out that despite having three nights in Kraków this would be our only visit here; a nightclub was blaring out a thudding *fum-fum-fum* from it's door just along the corridor and the beer wasn't particularly inspiring, so we supped up and stumped up the stairs into the breath-catching cold outside where it was definitely minus lots and the snow which had resisted the showers earlier had now frozen into something with the consistency of drop-forged metal. We shivered along through the city centre, across the enormous main square which was beautifully lit, and thence to our hotel and I don't think I've ever been so pleased to see something as beige as our room (no offence, Phil) complete with it's radiators blasting out the therms to unfreeze our chilled limbs!

As usual for a first day we were, by 22:00, absolutely knackered and so our already worryingly large stash of bottles only reduced by one rather than the planned five or so; GAB Kame Sutra was the rather crappy name of the beer selected – on the premise that the brewery was a scoop – although the beer was better than its moniker with a sweetish, toffee and caramel flavour which degenerated into a sweet, sticky mess before being salvaged by some dryness in the aftertaste. Not bad, but any beer now would have to go some to beat the reigning champion so far, Stary Kraków ciemne – and I doubted anything would.

Friday 23rd February 2007.

“What kind of a river?”

After a much-needed sleep we presented ourselves for the breakfast buffet at a late a time as we could manage without feeling as if we were wasting valuable exploration time. In keeping with the overall high quality of the hotel the buffet had plenty of food on offer, including the obligatory boiled eggs and what might be the Polish take on salad cream albeit not as repulsive as the UK version, so we filled ourselves up with as many rolls and assorted fillings as we could. The only downside to the affair was the table of predictably loud and annoying Yanks opposite who were certainly attempting to convince those Europeans still harbouring any kind of fondness for the USA that they may as well just join the rest of the world in disliking them and be done with it, although one of them took stupidity to new levels when commenting on a waterway in a city which they'd presumably paraded through like they owned the place; “What kind of river is that?” he queried, which even drew embarrassed glances from his colleagues. The sad thing is, he was being serious...

After trying – and rejecting - the repulsive “coffee” substance which tasted like some mulch of soil, bitumen and treacle toffee we decided to get ourselves together and go for a wander around the city. Immediately it was obvious that the heating in our room had done a sterling job in pumping out the therms all night long as it was, not to put too fine a point on things, bloody freezing outside; the pavements were like ice rinks from a combination of the remnants of yesterday's snow and frost from the -15°C of the night and so, wrapped up in hats, coats and other assorted heat-retentive materials we skidded our way towards the huge square, Długa Targ, to see what was happening there.

As we entered the square it didn't seem as big as all the guide books espoused it to be but, when we worked out that it stretched just as far past the enormous market hall plonked in the middle, we concurred that it was one big fuck-off expanse and it was quite a nice one too, considering its proportions, with handsome gabled houses around the perimeter and lots of other imposing buildings – along with the obligatory bloke-on-a-horse statue which I call “Tomislavs” after the statue of the king of that name outside Zagreb's main station – scattered around too. We obtained a map from the tourist information office hidden in the market hall and then went off to scoop some of the city's extensive tram system. Oops, sorry, I should have said “did some sightseeing from the warmth of the tram” in order not to appear to be a saddo, but I suppose it's too late for that now.

A forgotten bastion of the Worker's struggle.

Halfway through our tram scooping we noticed a supermarket and so, ever ready for some

“room beers” to bump up the tally, we decided to have a look – but couldn’t work out how to actually get to it owing to a particularly busy road blocking our path. We eventually had to cross the road by walking along the riverbank under the bridge and thus across a less busy section, but as a bonus we got some great photos of the Wawel with a light dusting of snow still clinging to it’s banks and roof. The supermarket yielded a few winners which cost us next to nothing so, with the scoops in the bag, we continued with our tram bashing... oops, city exploration.

Our next stop was the eastern suburb of [Nowa Huta](#) (literally, the new steel mill); this little-known place is home to the monumental steelworks (once the Lenin steelworks, now simply part of Mittal steel Poland) which ranks in historical importance alongside the Gdańsk shipyards as here, just as in Gdańsk, the workers of the [Solidarity](#) union defied the Stalinist oppressors and eventually won, ushering in the fall of “Communism” across Eastern Europe to the delight of property speculators, investors and banks everywhere. I suppose the real reason that Nowa Huta steelworks isn’t as well known as Gdańsk’s Lenin shipyards is the lack of a charismatic leader as in Lech Wałęsa – who could forget the images of the great man being carried on the shoulders of his comrades at the moment of the worker’s victory? In reality the same thing happened in Nowa Huta, it was just that Lech made more of an impression to the Western Media, obsessed as ever with “celebrities”, and so the Lenin steelworks faded back into obscurity until almost no-one now has ever heard of it or the earth-shaking events which unfolded here.

Apparently the works was unprofitable for years after Stalinism fell but, as was the case in Gdańsk, the government could not bring itself to unleash the same heartless capitalist axe on the place as that which fell on much of Poland’s other industries owing to the patriotic significance of the steelworks. Judging by it’s current name, however, it’s seemingly now been flogged off (or given away - who knows?) to the multinational combine of Mittal Steel and may eventually close for good; ironically, the worker’s struggle and Poland’s subsequent headlong rush to free enterprise may have brought the workers freedom from oppression but may, ultimately, lose them their jobs.

After a tram ride along the never-ending walls of the works we sighted at Nowa Huta’s main square, Plac Centralny, where we admired one of the finest examples of a Soviet planned city still in existence complete with rows of identical concrete flats and concrete utilitarian public buildings, but also the Solidarity monument standing proud at one edge of the square complete with flowers strewn at it’s base. After the obligatory photos we retreated to the warmth of a tram for the twenty-minute rumble back into the city centre via a typically grey and concrete eastern-bloc arterial road which anyone who’s done a bus in from Praha or Bratislava airport will recognise and cherish...

More history to see.

After a few hours more of riding on trams we decided that we should really take a look at some of Kraków’s WW2 heritage; I’d tentatively planned a visit to Auschwitz (or Oświęcim to give it’s Polish name) but knew that we wouldn’t have time and so, as some sort of substitution, a visit to the original Schindler’s factory was in order. Now I know some people may think that Schindler’s list was yet another made-up sentimental pile of American “holier than thou” shite, but it really is based on a true story; [Oskar Schindler](#) actually was a factory owner, and he actually saved hundreds of the city’s Jews by employing them in his factory where he ensured the ammunition made for the Nazi army was faulty. No-one really knows what made a rich Nazi party member and factory owner suddenly develop such a racial conscience, but whatever it

was he became a hero of the Jews and lived until relatively modern times.

Okay, that's the history lesson out of the way, so all that remains to say is that Mr Schindler's factory actually does exist and is now a museum dedicated to him although, as we don't really do museums and the standard touristy things, we made do with a look around the outside of the uninspiring structure; it's a strange feeling to be standing next to something so well-known and important in the fight against Nazism that, unless you knew what it was, you wouldn't give a second glance at as you hurried past on your way to something far more photogenic than a tatty concrete factory; history makes stars of the most unlikely things.

We returned to the tram via a small shop (another of the omnipotent "Alkohole" shops) where we found a couple of huge winners lurking in the fridge including the local big brewery's Baltic Porter! After acquiring some more scoops in the large (and well-hidden) supermarket in the shopping centre next to the railway station we briefly returned to the hotel to relieve our straining backpack of the weight of so many winners – we now had fifteen bottles waiting to be consumed – before embarking on another wander around the *Stary Miasto*.

Grandmother's milk bar.

With evening (and the temperatures) closing in rapidly we retreated to a strange sounding place where we would hopefully get some cheap Polish food. A *bar mleczny* is a vanishing Polish institution dating from the Soviet days and is basically a cafeteria where workers could get a good, filling meal at heavily subsidised prices. These days many are closing as their custom dwindles; the younger generation of Poles sees them as something harking back to the "bad old days" and has mainly turned instead to the standardised, homogenised, unhealthy yet heavily advertised corporate crap found on every street in the known universe. The one we were heading for wasn't really a traditional one as such but was part of a chain attempting to breathe new life into the milk bar by giving it an image of being owned by a homely grandmother rather than an all-seeing Russian tyrant.

I must admit I wasn't expecting much in the way of authenticity, although the place was hidden away in the cellars of some obscure public building so well that I concluded that the only people who went there must be ones who really wanted to visit and therefore it wouldn't be full of tourists who had wandered by and decided to have a look inside. My first impressions weren't good with lots of garish tat scattered liberally around including what looked like a life-sized plastic grandmother figure, but we persevered and found ourselves in a large wood-clad room with lots of Polish voices and no English to be heard; a good start, then!

The menu was improbably small and exclusively in Polish (another good sign!) but with the help of our phrase book we'd soon worked out what to have and I rather hesitantly approached the twee thatched bar which was full of ladies in ludicrous costumes ferrying huge plates of food to the eager locals. With my best linguistic skills I ordered us two plates of *golabek* (stuffed cabbage, how very Polish!) and received a numbered ticket identical to those you get at supermarket deli counters! Our number soon appeared on the board and I returned to the table with two huge portions of food which turned out to be filling, tasty and rather delicious – and only cost around 50p each!

Feeling very replete we strolled back along the increasingly cold streets, avoiding at least two drunken blokes pissing extremely unsubtly in the street, and walked around the *Planty* gardens back to our hotel for an evening of beer scooping; we had an alarming amount of beers to drink

already and I really wanted to make a go of them that night, hoping that the standard would prove to be as high as the beers we'd had the night before in Szynek. On the way we passed a strange fountain made out of what seemed to be LED's which flashed away to the music it played to itself; yes, a fountain made of lights not water really plays music and entertains anyone who passes by with a rather limp light show!

Making a dent in the room beers.

We passed some impressive relics of the town walls on the way to the hotel and made a mental note to visit them before we left for home; it seemed that even though we had three days in the city there was simply too much to do and every day we found more things we wanted to see or do, which is usually the sign of an interesting place to me! We bought one more bottle in the little supermarket close to our hotel – the Stary Kraków amber, as their other offerings had been so good on draught the previous evening – as well as some bread and cheese to sustain us during the evening's consumption before ensconcing ourselves in the warm and cosy room with far too many beers than was good for us lined up begging to be scooped...

First up was one of the rare top-fermented Polish beers from the Belgian-owned Browar Belgia; this is a strange set-up owned by Palm which some of you might have drunk without even knowing; it allegedly brews King Cobra before shipping it to Rodenbach for fermentation, but I'm slightly sceptical about this gen if only because I don't believe multinationals can be *this* stupid, and Palm aren't really one of the rapacious kind of the species – yet. Anyhow, this particular beer – Frater, 5.4% - is brewed vaguely in the Belgian Abbey style (wonder where that idea came from?) but didn't really match up to expectations being a subtle, fairly fruity golden ale with some buttery tastes, toffee and malt, but overall it was lacking some guts.

Next up was local micro Relakspol's jokily-named Relax Pils (5.5%) which, despite the comical name, was a very serious lager with a good honeyed, toffee/malt and bitter balance, quite tasty and flavoursome and, more importantly, very moreish. Shuffling along the line - which we'd placed vaguely in the order we'd like to drink them – brought us to another local lad, Jędrzejów Strzelec Jasne Pelne (5.5%), which wasn't anywhere near as bad as I'd feared for a standard jasne and had a gentle, malty and most interestingly a vague herby bitterness coming through in the aftertaste.

Next... Jurand Chiller (6.4%) poured forth and immediately the strong aromas of honey (no doubt aided by honey essence or suchlike) gushed forth from the bottle which boasted of being a "Piwo miodowe", and the honey was a little too forward for my liking – and that was before I'd tasted any! As much as I wanted to dislike it, however, I couldn't help myself from grudgingly admitting that they'd made a pretty decent job of it; imagine drinking a sweet malty beer with loads of honey dunked in it and you'll get some of an idea of what it was like and, although it was slightly too sweet for my tastes, it still scored a respectable 3 points.

Quality took a downwards lurch next with the amusingly-named Boner Mocne (7.8%) from Browar Jerze – superb, or what? – but sadly this was a pale, boring, thin and slightly grainy brew with nothing to recommend it. A dose of Relakspol seemed in order to restore flavour but Bazyl Mocne (also 7.8%) let us down badly having a vegetal note to the alcoholic and slightly malty taste. Jabłonowo Imperator (10%) reinstated some credibility to the tasting by possessing a decent balance of flavour with malt, a strong bitterness, some alcohol and grassy hops.

I decided to play a trump card with the next beer; Stary Kraków Amber (4.8%) was as good, if

not slightly better than, the bottled Golden we'd had the night before and I was in paroxysms of praise about this gorgeous brew; full-bodied maltiness, toast, nuttiness with a full body and lots of complexity followed by some alcohol and bitterness and a long, multifaceted, toasted malt finish which earned it a score of 4 and joint beer of the week thus far.

Krajan Irlandzkie Mocne (6%) came next and I was struggling to describe this very unusual brew which was a kack-handed attempt at the Irish red style with lots of toffee, caramel and too much sweet maltiness for the thin body to carry off. Another Jurand brew subsequently fizzed open, the promisingly-named Kozlak Bokbier (7.8%), but it didn't live up to the honey beer as it was red, caramelly, but with little character to back up this early promise. We were nearing the end of our capacity but decided to tick a couple more to ease the pressure the following evening as we may be back late from Katowice, so Sue selected two more decent-sounding candidates from the still formidable row of bottles on our table.

Our last Relakspol beer, Krakówiak (5.5%), was first and was as good as the pils we'd had right at the kick-off; a copper brew, it was bitter, malty, toasted and a solid drinking beer with plenty of taste to keep the drinker interested – as if any modern drinkers care about such irrelevant things such as flavour; as long as their “beer” is over-carbonated, heavily advertised, full of disease-triggering chemicals and made in an industrial estate by computers and accountants then that's fine by them. Last, but certainly not least, was GAB Stout (5%) – another top-fermented brew – a near black beer, strong in roast grain, toasted malt, and with all the dryness, liquoricey notes and character a stout should have, this was a fitting end to an evening which had been a bit of an eye-opener to the quality of beers from this part of Poland.

Our one and only contact with what sounded like a stag party happened as we sat in our room, drinking the bottles and watching the “Brits” music awards on TV dubbed into Polish (I kid you not...) when we heard a burst of braindead singing wafting across the city from what I can only presume was a British stag party – or maybe it was something else? Thankfully this was our only experience of our fellow countrymen exporting our slobbish attitude to the rest of Europe – if indeed it was them – but more amusing was the Brits where the same (male) voice was used for every person, male or female, and the translation was done without any emotion; the celebrities were in tears and emotionally thanking everyone in the world for voting their shite song “best channel 5 advert music after midnight” or some other irrelevant category winner, but the Polish translator simply said, in his deadpan voice, “Djekuju!” (thank you) time and time again. Listening to the underlying British voices, we had to conclude that he wasn't actually that far off the mark with his translation...

Saturday 24th February 2007.

One massive tram system.

We had an early start as we were off to Katowice for dual purposes, and I bet you can guess what they were... yep, spot on, trams and brewpubs! I managed to buy two train tickets with no problems whatsoever – and they were even the right ones, too – before our slow-speed slog westwards to somewhere which isn't on many tourists' agenda of places to visit; true, Wizzair fly there from Luton, but most of the passengers, or so I'm told, simply board the laid-on coach to Kraków and bypass Katowice entirely which, depending on their fondness for concrete and being a bit-part in a Lowry painting, may or may not be a good thing.

Our train eventually trundled into the slightly grimy station which, as we walked out towards the city, looked as if the last fifteen years had simply passed it by. This was nothing compared to what we found outside the door, however, as a huge concrete walkway crumbled its way down to the slabbed expanse below which in turn led to a road buzzing with trams and people going about their business; I've seen some Soviet architecture in the last few years, some being quite appealing in a brutalist kind of way, but there was something about the hint of decay and desolation here which stripped it of any appeal it may have had, and the leaden skies seemed to magnify this feeling of grey desolation.

Glad of the practice I'd had thus far with my rudimentary Polish I was able to buy two day tickets from the ticket office on the desolate square below the concrete walkway with minimum fuss and we were soon on board the usual Konstal 105N tram heading out towards the outlying districts and it was whilst we were en-route we realised just how monumentally huge this tram system was (over 200km apparently); our journey which covered perhaps 25% of the distance across the map took almost an hour and made us wish we had a week just to make some serious inroads into scooping this spider's web of a tram network!

The line to Sosnowiec soon petered out into single track with passing loops; those who know their trams will know how rare and rateable this is, and I think it's the only true "inter-urban" tram system left in Europe now! We leapt at the terminal for another tram straight back into the centre but were delayed at one point by a car accident – well, it wasn't the cars which delayed us but the recovery truck which had inexplicably positioned itself across the tramlines whilst winching one of the cars aboard. The whole operation was made slightly comical by the recovery operative who limped around in a most exaggerated manner whilst taking what seemed to be hours to winch the car aboard his truck at a pace which would have made a mollusc embarrassed; eventually he completed the task, lurched aboard the vehicle, and staggered off allowing us to proceed back into Katowice centre.

"Like being in a Lowry painting".

After hitching a free ride in the glass lift at the side of the shopping centre by what passes as a main square in order to get some aerial photos of the centre we headed off in the opposite direction to sample a few of the other tram services. I won't bore you – as if I haven't already – with endless details of what trams we had and suchlike but the scene was set, as soon as we'd passed the Bierhalle brewpub in a huge shopping centre which included one of the biggest Tesco's I'd ever seen, by a derelict steelworks with rusting corrugated steel sheets tumbling down into the now silent production areas and a general air of dereliction hanging over the place.

One line in Chorzów we traversed was particularly fascinating as, in the way a scientist must stare at bacteria through a lens in his laboratory, we stared through the tram window in amazement at kids dressed in ragged clothes playing football on dirt patches whilst all around them the impression was of being a walk-on part in an unseen LS Lowry painting which could, with only an unsettling grain of imagination, have been the grim 1940's industrial landscapes of Salford or Manchester. The air was rich with the pungent sulphur reek of the "brown coal" which I'd been transfixed with on my first visit to the ex-East of Germany in 1991 and haven't really smelt since then; this was the Soviet Union back from the grave.

Feeling slightly uneasy at seeing Manchester 1940 resurrected in Małopolska we took one of the very rare Konstal 102Na articulated trams (I know this as the information is on the

company's website!) all the way back to the central station in a run which passed streetscapes ranging from traditional wooden houses – in all manner of repair – through the standard Soviet *panelacký* blocks of flats to more Lowryesque back-to-backs through all stops in-between. The journey took much longer than we'd anticipated, probably owing to us being much further out than we'd realised, and when we eventually arrived back in the city centre it was time to begin scooping the brewpubs I'd come for.

Haves and Have-nots.

We retraced our earlier move on tram 11 to the Silesia city centre stop opposite the bright lights and Western dreams of the shopping centre which, if the old pitgear and buildings were anything to go by, was a redevelopment of a mine, nowadays running full-pelt extracting not coal from the ground but brass from people's pockets. These citizens here were very different than those we'd seen in Chorzów; rather than ragged clothes, dirt patches and brown coal here were suits, fur coats and affluence in abundance giving rise to a nagging doubt that the "trickle-down" effect hadn't quite reached its full zenith in Katowice.

Once inside the shopping centre it's fair to say that – if you ignored the obvious language issues – you could be anywhere in Western Europe with several "brands" conspicuous by their presence. Passing all this (including a Bierhalle bar!) we took the escalators upwards and eventually found the brewpub with its strange glass vessels behind the bar and so, with time running worryingly short all of a sudden, we hurriedly found a vacant table and studied the encyclopaedic menu.

Alarmingly, eight beers were described with the help of pictures of frosty glasses running with condensation; there was no way we had time to drink eight beers, but luckily only four were available and of those two were wheat beers – pils and dunkel it was then! We allowed ourselves the luxury of some food to line our stomachs and sat watching some very strange stuff in the brewplant which looks nothing like any brewing process I've ever seen, although I suppose I've never seen it through a glass copper before!

The beers were better than I'd expected (well, they should be for over £1 a glass!) with the pils being a hazy golden brew with a surprisingly attractive hoppy, fresh and sappy bitterness leading to a tasty, characterful and overall hoppy aftertaste, whilst the dunkel was in the "Berliner" style being reddy, sweet, caramelly and too toffeeish for me although, as is normal with such beers, Sue liked it a lot more than I did! With our food scoffed and both beers drained we paid the bill – which I suspect is beyond the reach of most of those people we'd seen earlier in the day – and braved the capitalist hell of the shopping centre on the way to the tramstop. Somewhat predictably we just missed a tram and so had to wait ten minutes we didn't really have to spare until the next one arrived to whisk us past the train station to the terminus at Plac Wolności where the second brewpub in town, Spiż, was located.

The cashless brew-nightclub..

The map I'd culled from the internet was spot-on and led us to the brewpub within five minutes, although neither of us were prepared for what we found; as we entered the door we saw a bored-looking lass sat in a kiosk of the type you'd see in a cinema and I vaguely remembered Herbal and Fletch telling me about the cards you needed to buy beer. With a combination of bad Polish and English we managed to acquire two cards and load them with ten Złoty each which, I hoped, would be enough for the four beers we should find inside and so, clutching our

cards, we ascended the stairs and entered the pub proper.

Inside everything was black apart from various neon signs depicting this or that tacky drink and I must admit that if I had to choose one place I didn't think would brew then this would probably be very high on the list; why would somewhere like this, seemingly prostituted to multinational corporations, bother to brew its own beer? We stomped along towards the bar expecting to find only Tyskie and its ilk there but on the way we glanced to our right and saw, behind plate glass screens, a load of brewing kit which looked like it was used and not some fake installation as we'd experienced, for example, at Gerbeaud in Budapest: maybe we'd get the scoops after all?

The bar was worked by gorgeous young Polish girls who laughed at my attempts to ask for the beers and gently put me right with disarming smiles. Using the cards was as easy as – well – using a credit card; you order your beers in appalling Polish, hand over the card, the barmaid swipes it and charges the drinks to it (you can see what's going on via a screen on the bar) before handing the debited card and your beers to you!

Four beers were available; Miodowe (honey), Ciemne karmelovko (dark caramelised), Mocne (strong) and Jasne (pale) so we began with the honey and karmelovko as we only had 45 minutes to sup our beers and get back to the station and I wanted the two most interesting ones just in case we ran out of time for the other two! The honey was intensely flavoured, sweet yet not sickly, with dollops of luscious honey flavours throughout; I don't know if it's honey or honey essence which gave the flavour – being so strong I suspect some if not all essence – but it was certainly a lot better than I expected it to be from a brewpub in a nightclub... both Sue and I remembered visiting "Peaches" in Stockport when it used to brew and I can honestly say that Spiz beer is far, far better than Peaches ever managed to be!

The karmelovo was an unusually sweet (again!) and quite dark brown brew with a strong caramel and toasted sugar flavour, not really my kind of thing, but well-made all the same. With 30 minutes remaining I did the right thing and ordered the remaining two brews and immediately got stuck into them for our time was running out. Mocne was a good beer with a mellow malty flavour with lots of creamy maltiness in the taste and a lovely nutty, grainy and melodious malty aftertaste which was very complex and rewarding. Thinking I'd just tried the best beer of the evening I took a gulp of the Jasne whereupon my eyebrows shot up a good inch; hops, hops and more hops was the verdict with bagloads of lovely fresh, zesty, citrusy hoppiness overlaying the base creamy malt flavour, leading to a very bitter finish with more citrus hops and a very good balance of malt and hop tastes.

Time was now short and so down the stairs we clattered and cashed our cards in at the desk (Sue had wanted to keep hers as a souvenir but they wanted it back!) and stomped off at as fast a pace as possible with beer sloshing around our stomachs as we went. We'd aimed to walk it back to the station but a tram was due and, ever the ones to claw every last metre from a day ticket, we took the Konstal 105N the short hop to the station where we soon found our train back to Kraków. Being another compartment train it didn't get too full and the journey passed quickly, despite us crawling along at around 40mph, before we squealed into Kraków Główny right on time; the wind was biting cold and we shivered and slipped along towards our hotel where we had a load of bottles waiting for us – just for a change!

On the bottles again.

Safe in our cosy room away from the icy blast of Siberia we rounded up the remaining seven

bottles of beer to drink, noticing that most of them were Baltic Porters; result! Obolon Ciemne (5.3%) “Deep Velvet” was first (I found out this is what all those Cyrillic characters meant when we got back, I can’t actually read it!) and this Ukranian beer was a decent start to the evening’s supping being a reddy-brown, caramelly, toffee-malt tasting brew which was quite “safe” yet tasty enough for a starter. Jurand Heban Czarne (5.4%) was next up and this was an unusual dark lager, more in the Saxonian Schwarzbier style than is normal, with lots of plain chocolate, roastiness and burnt grain rather than the usual toffee/caramel flavours I normally associate with *piwo ciemne*. The finish was of chocolate again with some sweet maltiness but overall I was very impressed with this brew and the brewery as a whole.

Another Ukranian beer was next in the form of Lwowskie Porter (8%) and this didn’t disappoint in the taste department with a reddy colour, lots of liquorice and alcohol, then a dryish, bitter, liquoricey and quite complex brew which ended strong, dry and aniseedy. Boss Porter (8.5%) followed but this wasn’t really in the same league as it’s caramelly flavours were drowned out by a tide of cardboard and it didn’t taste anything like as good as I imagine it should; a dodgy bottle, perhaps, or maybe the pasteuriser was turned up too high?

Krajan Pomorskie Porter (9%) came next and this was at least an improvement, with a rich and dry taste with maybe too much alcohol showing before a caramel and toffee aftertaste; not great, but not too bad. The local big brewer was next: Jędrzejów Strzelec Porter (9%) was much better than I’d expected from a large regional under the control of a big group and had lots of sweet treacle, caramel, malty and bitter flavours with a good warming burn of alcohol in the bitterish, caramelly aftertaste. Last but by no means least was a beer we’d had before but hadn’t been able to resist trying again, especially as the bottle had only been 50p, so we finished on Żywiec Porter (9.5%) which was thankfully as I remembered it; a smooth, well integrated beer with all it’s constituent flavours of dryness, toffee, bitterness, caramel, alcohol and charcoal well balanced and spun together, this must be the best beer Heineken brew in any of their subsidiaries?

As we worked our way through the beers we’d been watching something hellfire on the TV; the darts championship that Phil Taylor is in (the crap one with no-one decent in it) was being shown, dubbed into German, and we loved the commentary which continually referred to him as “Das Power” and shrieked “Hunderd und Achtig!!!” whenever 180 was scored; I don’t think I’ve ever enjoyed watching a game of darts that much in my life! After a quick check to make sure we’d not forgotten any bottles hidden in the depths of our wardrobe it was time for some well-earned doss in preparation for our final day in Kraków.

Sunday 25th February 2007.

Goodbye to the snow.

Sunday dawned clear and bright – the first day not to be either snowing or cursed with leaden grey skies – so we were checked out of the hotel early for a walk around the old town to get some photos in the short time we had before our evening flight back to Birmingham. The sun was out, the snow was finally melting, and the city looked so much prettier in the spring sunshine as we explored as much of the *Stary Miasto* as we could on-foot. Our problem was that we didn’t have a tram ticket to help with the exploration and weren’t planning to get one as, after our experience with the bus from the airport, we’d decided to take the half-hourly train back there and thus avoid any flapping.

We stopped in a café for an espresso and huge slice of *sernik* baked cheesecake (which was crumbly and delicious, totally unlike cheesecake I'm used to) and, after looking at the passing trams and glorious sunshine, we decided to just go for it and buy two tram day-tickets; after all, they were only £1.75 each and we had four hours to kill! I'll not bore you any more with the details of our frantic tram scooping, but we managed to get our money's worth out of the tickets and some of the rarer ex-Vienna Duwags and ex-Nürnberg MAN GT6's before we reluctantly arrived back at the railway station to take the airport train.

I bought the tickets in what was, by this time, my increasingly passable Polish and we joined the little plastic train for the 15-minute trundle (and it was a trundle!) along what seemed to be an abandoned freight line to a tiny station seemingly in the middle of a field which served as Balice airport's stop! A connecting bus took us to the terminal – we could probably have walked it quicker if truth be told – before joining the huge queue for check-in. A good forty minutes later we were finally through and managed to buy various vodkas to take home including Miodówka, a delicious honey vodka, and the famous Zubrowka which tastes as if it's got some strange herb infusion in it but, apparently, it's only extract of grass. I say "managed to buy" as during our last Polish trip to Gdańsk I'd spent ages choosing my vodkas but the matriarch behind the counter had simply muttered "no drink to UK" and refused to sell it to me!

Our flight was bang on time and after a tedious 150-minute flight in darkness (it's always better with something to look at!) we touched down at a comparatively warm Birmingham ten minutes early where many outward-bound travellers were shuffling around wearing hats and coats as if it were cold! We were soon through security and, despite the bus back to the carpark taking almost as long as I'd have taken to physically drive home, we were still in the house by 21:00 after a very interesting – if bloody cold – trip to a fascinating country and I was already running through the options for our next Polish trip...

Conclusions.

I must admit to having a soft spot for Poland; I like the people and I like the way it hasn't totally sold its soul to the capitalist tide just yet. I like the legacy of Soviet occupation in the form of acres of concrete buildings and, most of all, I like the combination of everything which makes a trip to Poland seem like you're going somewhere *different*, not just to another European country, and Katowice certainly fulfilled this with its concrete city centre, Soviet architecture, massive tram system and the feeling of being an extra in a Lowry painting, but I think the temperature being below freezing with snow on the ground helps in conjuring up the sentiment of being somewhere very unlike home. Kraków was an excellent place, don't get me wrong, but Katowice was enthralling and I'd definitely go back there again if possible.

Bordering the Czech Republic the Malopolska area of Poland is predictably endowed with the highest concentration of breweries in the country, and some of them are pretty good too with Spiz in Katowice and Stary Kraków standing out in particular. In direct contrast to Gdańsk when we'd struggled to find enough beers to drink and had ended up with multinational junk (something I always try to avoid) in Kraków we didn't have enough time to drink everything that we could theoretically have bought in the many supermarkets around town – not that I'm complaining, obviously, but with few beers available in bars it does put you under considerable pressure to scoop as many bottles as possible during the evening!

Kraków is justifiably on the list of one of Europe's most beautiful and interesting cities (consequently being a tourist honeypot) and, as an added bonus, also has a pretty good beer scene locally although finding bars which sell it was still a problem; with the rise of "low expectation" (read stag night tossers who will drink anything as long as they've heard of it) tourism most bars seem to have gone with the safe option and stock the big Eurobrands in an attempt to draw in said knobheads to the exclusion of those who want to drink local beer. There are some places to find good beer, but nowhere near as many as sell industrially-made multinational crap.

Having said that, I'd still recommend a visit to Kraków for several reasons:

- It's a great place for a wander and to see some top buildings, view the Nazi legacy at Kazimierz and the Schindler factory, and experience a different culture
- It has a brewpub and some bars where good beer can be found as well as lots of shops where you can buy bottled brews from around Małopolska
- It's close enough to fascinating places such as Katowice and Auschwitz to make a break feel like a proper trip away.

As I mentioned earlier you're far enough east to feel like you're in a different country rather than simply different parts of a wealthy Europe as some countries further west seem to be and, if you like trams, then you're in for a treat, especially in Katowice, where elderly Konstal 102's stagger around amidst a sea of 105N's, and even Kraków has some interesting vehicles in the form of second-hand Duwags from Vienna (one is still in its original red livery) and also some ex-Nürnberg MAN GT6's.

Overall, Kraków is an interesting, different destination which, providing you're prepared to dig a little deeper than the standard tourist, will open up a wealth of intriguing possibilities and – more importantly – local beers! I'd recommend visiting in winter or early spring to avoid the plague of stag parties and, anyway, Eastern Europe always seems more at ease in the snow...

How to get there and get around there.

As usual, with the relentless eastward march of the low cost carriers bringing with them a biblical-like plague of stag parties, Poland is now a piece of cake to reach from the UK, and it has helped that a lot of the flights are priced for those Poles in the UK wishing to visit home. Most flights end up at Kraków's small Balice airport, 9 miles to the Northwest, which although having been modernised to cope with the hefty influx of tourists, still can't really cope with the numbers who pass through. It has all the amenities you might require such as ATM's in arrivals, ticket machines for the public transport system and train, a tourist information stand and all the usual cafés, shops and restaurants you'd expect.

Prices on flights to Kraków are, given the amount of competition, fairly reasonable and as long as you don't want to go out Friday and back Sunday in summer then it's possible to get a return for the standard £40-£50 mark although Sky Europe in particular have regular offers on the route. Below is a brief roundup – correct to May 2007 – of who flies where.

- easyJet fly to Kraków from Luton, Liverpool and Belfast (International),
- Ryanair go from Liverpool, Stansted, East Midlands and Prestwick,
- Sky Europe fly from Birmingham, Manchester and Dublin,
- Jet2 go from Leeds/Bradford.

Wizzair fly from Luton, Liverpool and Doncaster/Sheffield to Katowice's Pyrzowice airport which, unless you're going there, isn't really a great saving on flying to Kraków as Wizz aren't particularly cheap in the first place and neither is the bus to Kraków, although maybe flying into Kraków and back from Katowice is a move. As usual, check on the superb Skyscanner website to see almost all the relevant offers!

Getting out of Kraków's Balice airport wasn't one of our most pleasurable experiences I must admit; the 192 bus – which departs from the bus stop situated on the far right of the exit road as you exit the terminal - takes around 40 minutes to struggle through choking traffic and then it dumps you in the uber-Stalinist bus station which is situated just behind the *Dworzec Główny*, or train station to you and me. Personally I'd not bother with the bus, despite it being valid with the day ticket (more later) and invest 4 Złoty on the train instead; there's generally a bus waiting at the bottom of the stairs which will trundle you the few hundred metres to Balice's tiny station. This station (and train service) is very new and it shows, with shiny new trains and buses, but best of all it runs every half an hour and only takes 15 minutes to reach Kraków's main station. Save yourself the hassle of viewing endless ringroads and not knowing where the fuck you are on the bus and use the train - it's a damn sight easier and quicker!

In common with most ex-Eastern Bloc cities Kraków still has a comprehensive and frequent tram system (run by MPK, the city's transport company) which will take you to most parts of the city. A 24-hour Bilet czasowy (24 godzinny/hours) costs 10.40zł, a 72-hour one 25zł and a 48-hr for 18.80zł from the ticket machine in arrivals at the airport – which takes coins only - or from any of the plethora of kiosks scattered around the city; once stamped in the machines onboard vehicles it's valid on all public transport within the city for 24 hours and it's also valid on the airport bus if you're daft enough to use it. The tram system runs around the *Planty* inner ringroad and then radiates out into the suburbs although one line traverses the old town giving a ride through one of the oldest parts of the city (via Plac Wszystkich Świętych), although for saddos like me the tram stock itself is the most interesting bit being comprised of dull Konstal 105N's with some second-hand Duwags from Vienna (one is still in it's original red livery) and also some ex-Nürnberg MAN GT6's; fascinating, eh?

For those tram-heads who are reading let me suggest that you simply have to visit Katowice; it's absolutely enormous tram system is well over 200km in length and spreads out like a vast spider's web to neighbouring towns such as Chorzów and Sosnowiec. If you got the feeling of being a tourist in a spruced up city during your time in Kraków I guarantee you won't feel the same in Katowice, which is a gritty, down to earth and somewhat depressed former bastion of heavy industry and a tour round on the trams (again mainly Konstal 105N's with a few 102N's around) will have you feeling like you've regressed 50 years back into a Lowry painting complete with scruffy urchins playing football on patches of dirt; a tourist hotspot Katowice certainly isn't, but enthralling and utterly different than Kraków it is.

Trains leave from Kraków's main train station, just to the southeast of the centre, to all destinations around Poland although be warned that Polish trains aren't the fastest things on wheels and any journey is likely to take twice as long as you'd expect it to. Add to this some recent draconian cuts to the rail network to basically fatten it up for privatisation and it's not a rosy picture for the national rail carrier, PKP. Prices are cheap however; a return to Katowice was around 35 Złoty using the more comfortable Express trains (which don't go perceptibly faster, they just have proper coaches with compartments) although using the more basic *osobowy* local trains the ticket could be had for almost half this. It's possible to reach Warsaw

in around four hours or Oświęcim (Auschwitz) in 90 minutes and so, for local trips at least, I'd give the trains a thumbs up if only for their low prices and frequency. Be aware that there are no automatic machines as in most of Europe and you'll have to indulge in the quaintly Eastern-bloc habit of queuing for your ticket and also, as an added hoop to jump through, the clerks rarely speak any English...

Staying around there.

We played an absolute blinder by booking the [Hotel Pollera](#); it's close to the train station, tram stops, the main square and just about everything else in Kraków but on a quiet road (Ulica Szpitalna 30) and is full of character and history; the stained glass windows on the stair landings are very impressive as is the "Made in USSR" barometer in the ground floor corridor. Booking via the hotel's website you get a whole raft of discounts (booking online, weekend rates etc) and we ended up paying the equivalent of £40 a night for a double with a pretty decent help yourself breakfast thrown in too; maybe this is expensive for Poland (although Kraków isn't cheap) but we were more than happy with the room and it's facilities so I'd recommend it whole heartedly to anyone staying in the city. You're spoilt for choice with hotels; have a check on the excellent [hotel.de](#) site and you'll see what I mean, but the Pollera is a gem and I'd stay there again without any hesitation at all.

Brewery and Beer gen.

Where to begin? The south of Poland is stacked full of breweries, both large and small, and the fruit of their labours can be found in many shops and supermarkets in the city. Finding the beers on draught in bars is far more difficult and a lot more exploration is necessary (with time we didn't have!) to unearth the pubs which doubtless exist outside of the tourist areas.

In the city are three breweries; the large Strzelec (Jędrzejów) which is owned by Royal Unibrew, the small [Relakspol](#) which brews mainly for the local market and finally the star of the show; [Stary Kraków](#) is a new micro which, relatively unusually for Poland, brews ales not lagers and makes a superb job of it too; all three beers we had were good, but two of them were simply superb and would stand up to comparison from the best of Europe.

Some recommendations for beer shops are listed below;

In the huge shopping centre by the station is a large supermarket with a surprisingly large range of beer, not all Polish, and including some decent small brewers' beers.

There's an Intermarche supermarket just along from the Hotel Pollera towards the city walls and this had Stary Kraków Amber Ale in bottle.

Any supermarket in the city (most are on the outskirts) will have a large beer range, but you have to ignore the miles of Tyskie and other multinational crap and find the small local beer section where some juicy whoppers will generally be found.

The excellent Spożywczy shop at Miodowa 13 in Kazimierz, on the corner of Bozego Ciała just along from the Szynek bar, stocks Relakspol and Stary Kraków brews plus a decent range of other stuff too.

On the way to the Schindler factory there's a small "Alkohole" shop on the corner of ulica Kacic which had some rare beers such as GAB, Boner and Strzelec Porter.

Pubs and Bars.

Kraków.

Szynk Bar, ulica Podbrzezie 2, Kazimierz. ()

Take tram 8 to Plac Wolnica and then follow a map into the heart of Kazimierz to find this tiny bar which sells the full range of Stary Kraków beers.

What a superb little place! This pub serves two Stary Kraków brews on draught (amber and dark) and has the golden in bottle too. The food is good, the atmosphere quiet and relaxed, and the landlord speaks no English; surely a sign of a locals' bar?

Beers:

- Stary Kraków Golden – Sociable, pale, subtle and grainy brew, soft and malty in character, with a good, malty, long finish. ()
- Stary Kraków Dark – Deep brown with a caramel nose, bitter and rich, full and malty with a toffee/malt character and some liquorice; very complex and flavoursome. Quality. (
)
- Stary Kraków Amber - Very impressive full-bodied, tasty, toasted and quite nutty, bitter and malty beer, full and complex, with lots of fruit, malt, bitterness and toasty flavours. ()

CK Browar, ulica Podwale 6-7. ()

Situated on the inner ringroad next to the Planty gardens. Tram 24 to Teatr Bagatela gets you there from the station.

Located in an old vaulted cellar you'd expect this to be a traditional brewpub but, sadly, it's far from it; there's an on-site nightclub and the beer isn't the best I've ever had with rather insipid jasne and ciemne plus various wheat beers. The atmosphere seems to be of a nightclub mixed with restaurant and it just didn't work for us at all.

Beers :

- Jasne – Very hazy, yellow beer with an averagely malty flavour, some graininess, then a dry finish with a touch of grassy hop but too restrained. ()
- Ciemne – Dryish deep-brown brew with a bizarre silage character. ()

Relakspol, Kalwaryjskiej 64 – South of the river.

Tram 8,10,23 or 40 to Smolki or Rondo Matecznego.

I'm not sure if the brewery's tap is permanently closed or not, but on our visit there was no sign of life whatsoever and so I include this more in hope than expectation.

There are a few other bars which serve Stary Kraków scattered around the centre; we didn't try

any of them but if you can't be bothered to hike out to Szynek (and you should!) then try Non-Iron sports bar at ulica sw. Marka 27, Lokal na Stolarskiej po lewej stronie on Stolarska ulica, or Espresso bar/ cafe at Biskupia 2.

Katowice.

This sprawling city runs into neighbouring ones so it's difficult to say exactly where it starts and finishes concerning breweries. What is known is that there are two relatively new brewpubs in the city, both quite close to the centre, but apart from that I know nothing.

Spiz, ulica Opolska 22. ()

Any tram to Plac Wolności then turn right into ulica Sokolska, first left into Opolska and then keep going until the place appears on your left after 300 metres.

See the write-up in the main text for a full description, but let me just say that this is one weird place; you need to hire a card from the booth at the door which you charge up with Złoty in order to buy drinks from the bar. The place is a huge nightclub with, bizarrely, the brewery upstairs alongside the bar, but the beers it produces are of surprisingly good quality with the standard Jasne being particularly impressive on our visit. Not the kind of place you'd expect to brew, but it does and makes a good job of it too.

Beers :

- Miodowe (honey) – Intense sweet honey taste, maybe real maybe not, but serious enough and a surprisingly good drink. ()
- Ciemne Karmelovko – An unusual sweet, caramelly and slightly toasty. ()
- Mocne (strong) – A mellow, malty, tasty brew with a lovely creamy character to the nutty, grassy and full-bodied finish. (  )
- Jasne (pale) – Excellent lemon jelly and malt flavoured brew, bitter and citrusy, then a complex and very hoppy finish. (   )

Bierhalle, Silesia City Centre mall, Chorzowska 107. ( )

Take tram 11 from the station (or Plac Wolności) to the Silesia city centre stop – the one after the huge Tesco's – and, on entering the garish monstrosity that is a shopping mall, turn left, pass the Bierhalle stand, then go up the escalators and you'll find the brewpub on your left; it's easier than it sounds, trust me.

A very new, shiny, modern, faintly plastic place which appeals to that social stratum of Katowice's society who can afford to shop in the garish beacon to Capitalism which is the Silesia city centre and, correspondingly, is full of the city's rich and affluent. The brewplant is glass so you can see the whole process although I'm not sure what this does for the requirement to keep the mash, for example, at a constant temperature... the menu lists eight beers but only three or four are generally available and, on our visit, they were a lot better than I

expected.

Beers :

- Pils – Hazy golden beer, hop and malt aroma, then a very impressive hoppy, bitter, sappy, very tasty and characterful brew. ()
- Dunkel – A “Berlin-style” brew with a soft toffeeish and caramelly character, not really my style but well brewed all the same. ()

Beer and Pub of the weekend.

We didn't visit that many pubs overall and so you'd assume the choice would be easy. Not so; both Spiż and Bierhalle brewpubs in Katowice were interesting in their own way and Spiż would normally be in with a shot of the title but, on the strength of our single visit, I'll give the award to the superb little **Szynk bar** in Kazimierz on the strength of it's excellent draught beers, sociable landlord and top food although had it been packed out then I'm not sure I'd have enjoyed it as much.

With regards to beer we had a right old mixed bag of 29 scoops during the weekend and a surprising number scored the respectable score of three on the Gazza scale including a couple of the Relakspol and Jurand beers plus some of the beers in the Katowice brewpubs which included an excellent Jasne in Spiż. Looking at the scores, however, there's only one winner on account of two of the brewery's beers getting a score of four and so the award for best beer (and brewery) goes to Stary Kraków and their excellent ales, with the **Ciemne** (dark) just shading it from the Amber; and, as a bonus, they were also just as good in bottle as on draught.