If you do only one thing when you come to Krakow, go to Wawel Hill.

Stand in the open courtyard atop the hill, and through the surrounding architectural clutter—for the hill is like an eccentric collector's living room, crowded with all manner of exotica—millenniums of Polish history and legend press in on you.

There are, of course, the well-known glories of this Jurassic-era plateau: the 14th-century Wawel Cathedral, burial place of Polish kings, where John Paul II served as cardinal before becoming pope; the squat 16th-century Renaissance castle that, over the centuries, barely survived the plunder of Russians, Austrians, Swedes and Germans; and the cave by the River Vistula below, where legend says a Polish boy named Krak killed a man-eating dragon, allowing the town to be founded.

Artifacts unearthed here date back 50,000 years. And in one of the strangest claims made for the hill, it is said that one of Buddha's stones is buried 30 feet below the surface. Visitors stand above it, absorbing its reputed positive energy. I just got cold.

Perhaps it was my sense of the darker edifices on this remarkable hill. Standing in front of the castle is a gray, barracks-like building. It was built by the Nazis, whose governor in Poland, the vile Hans Frank, had his headquarters in the castle. Five stone plaques jut out from the building; chiseled clean now, they once displayed the swastika. A little "dictator's balcony" is perched on the second floor, from which Hitler reputedly addressed his troops when he visited the city.

Visible from the hill, on a street toward Main Market Square, is the building, four houses down from the base of the hill, where Oskar Schindler had an apartment. And along this same street, Jews were marched to the ghetto before being sent to their death 37 miles west in the extermination camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau.

All of this, and more, can be seen with a single 360-degree turn on the cobblestones.

Krakow is the loveliest and most searing of Poland's cities. Unlike Warsaw, which was literally leveled by the Nazis and then made ugly by communist reconstruction, this city survived its occupiers. And in ways that Warsaw simply cannot, Krakow bears witness to the Polish past.

And the future. For Krakow is not simply a museum. It is home, for instance, to 50,000 students and Europe's second-oldest university, Jagiellonian University, founded in 1364. Bustling with the country's new capitalism, the streets are alive with the restaurants, bars, shops and cultural events that serve the young and the increasing number of tourists who are exploring this great and compact Central European city.

For me, however, Krakow remains an absorbing history lesson with new discoveries every time I visit. The first time I came, I admired the 16th- and 17th-century Flemish tapestries in Wawel Castle. On my second visit, a Polish friend pointed out some of the restitching on the tapestries. They were plundered by Russians who cut them up to make them fit on the walls of their Moscow homes and were only put back together when they were returned to Poland in the 1920s.

The first time I came, I visited St. Mary's Church in the main square, with its stunning altar, carved in the 14th century, with local people serving as models. But somehow I didn't hear the trumpeter who plays on the hour
from one of the church's two spires, the notes always ending abruptly. The original trumpeter warned the
townsmen of an invasion only to be cut down by a Tatar arrow as he played.

Krakow, about 2 1/2 hours by express train from Warsaw, is a great day trip from the capital but rich enough to
sustain a much longer visit. Properly explored, the city demands at least a few days to absorb its treasures,
particularly Wawel Hill, the university and the Main Market Square, with its Cloth Hall market, magnificent
churches and one of the city's best restaurants, Wierzynek, which has wonderful Polish cuisine, including bigos
(sauerkraut and sausage) and pierogis (Polish dumplings). Make sure to stop in.

A little off the beaten track is Krakow's largest private modern art gallery, Gallery Starmach, a pristine
postmodern space hiding behind a castle-like edifice on Ulica Wegierska. The gallery, always interesting, is
installing a series of provocative exhibitions on the history of modern art in 20th-century Poland, as seen
through the progressive works of several preeminent painters here.

Just to the south of the central area is Kazimierz, the medieval Jewish quarter. Renaissance buildings here have
been converted into restaurants and shops. And one of seven synagogues, Remu'h Synagogue, now holds
regular services. It is, however, a revival without Jews, and some locals derisively refer to the area's remaking
as "Schindler Tourism" because Steven Spielberg's movie, "Schindler's List," was filmed here. Seventy
thousand Jews, 25 percent of the city's population, lived here when war broke out in 1939. Most were
exterminated and perhaps 200 Jews presently live in the city.

Still, wandering through Kazimierz, Hebrew and Polish writing on the walls, monuments erected from broken
headstones, I find the faded streets deeply affecting and am always startled by how quiet it is here compared
with the city's bustling Old Town. In the evening, a number of restaurants offer klezmer music and traditional
Polish-Jewish cuisine. There is a mournfulness to such meals, accentuated afterward by stepping out into the
night, but I return again and again.

Just as the Russians, Austrians and Germans left their brutal mark on Krakow, so too did the communist system.
Resentful of the city's intelligentsia and monuments, the authorities decided Krakow needed a proletariat and
built a huge, polluting steelworks plant nine miles from downtown. It blackened buildings across the city. The
building, now cleaned up and downsized, is surrounded by the suburban town of Nowa Huta, or New Town, a
blur of gray housing blocks. Polish director Andrzej Wajda--recipient of an honorary Oscar--depicted Nowa
Huta's construction and a kind of communist idealization of the worker in his 1977 film "Man of Marble."

Nowa Huta is not a usual tourist destination, but in a way it is another Krakow monument--to the last system's
lack of imagination. On a clear day, and there aren't too many, you can stand on a height in Nowa Huta and look
back at Wawel Hill. From the bitterly soulless to the sweetly sublime. That's Krakow.

**Update: Krakow**

**WHAT'S NEW:** Designated as one of Europe's cultural capitals in 2000, the city will be abuzz all year with
artistic events and exhibitions. A show of works presenting Christian themes in Polish folk art captures some of
the spirit of the occasion. It's at the Muzeum Etnograficzne (ul. Krakowska 46) until May 12; admission is free
on Sundays, otherwise $1. For a rundown on other festival events, check out www.krakow2000.pl.

**STILL A MUST-DO:** The Jewish Cultural Festival, scheduled for July 1-9. For the 10th year, the organizers are
putting on a full menu of music and dance events and workshops. One highlight is an open-air multimedia show
on July 1 based on the works of Martin Buber and other Jewish writers. In a city that was once home to one of
the biggest Jewish ghettos in Europe, this retrospective on Jewish culture is always poignant and dramatic. For a
program, visit www.jewishfestival.art.pl.
HOT HANGOUT: Insomnia (ul. Szeroka 10) is the kind of dance club you'd expect to see in London or Munich. This place keeps grooving to a house music beat till the wee-est of hours. And Pozegnanie z Afryka (ul. Uw. Tomasza 21) is a popular cafe known for its laid-back atmosphere and wide range of coffees. It's the best spot in town for chilling out in the late morning or afternoon.

COOL NEW HOTEL: Ester (ul Szceroka 20, telephone 011-48-12-429-11-88). Although one of the city's newest, this 56-room luxury hotel in the middle of the historic Jewish Quarter has all the Old World charm you can ask for. Doubles go for $90, including a hearty breakfast.

RELIABLE STANDBY HOTEL: The Grand (ul. Slawkowska 5-7, telephone 011-48-12-421-72-55). This 56-room, four-star gem has it all: elegance, calm, central location and a wonderful restaurant. Doubles go for $179 a night, including a breakfast fit for a bear.

HAPPENING RESTAURANT: Villa Decius (ul. Lipca 17 A). Although not new, this charming place set in an elegant 16th-century villa serves the tastiest Polish and international dishes in town. For two, dinner will run about $100.

BEST WAY TO GET AROUND: Since almost all the key attractions are concentrated in the close-knit old city, you can do all of your touring on foot.

TWO GREAT WEB SITES: Check out www.karnet.krakow2000.pl, which keeps an up-to-date list of what's new on the arts scene across the city. And www.globopolis.com/krakow will fill you in on the dining and hanging-out places of the moment.