The Incidental Tourist
By Greg Clarke

There are many ways for those fond of travel to tell they are getting old.

----------

There are many ways for those fond of travel to tell they are getting old. No longer able to doss in hovels they (we) now seek the comfort of beds with clean sheets. Trains with air-conditioning and somewhere soft to plant the derriere are far more preferable to sharing wooden bench seats with farm animals. None of this really occurred to me, however, until a visit to Krakow.

Krakow, Poland’s cultural capital, managed to avoid being ravaged by both the Tartars and the Nazis and the old town has almost enough Medieval and Renaissance-era buildings to make up for the once bomb-to-destruction Warsaw. The centre piece of the Stare Miasto (old town) is the Cloth Hall, set to the middle of an enormous cobble-stone square. Surrounding nearly every inch of this world of merchants and artisans are restaurants where you can sit at outdoor tables and watch happy wanderers, both Poles and fellow visitors, all day.

And in the weaving alleys, the arteries of this city, are back-street bars, cafes and galleries. Indeed, Krakow has as much old-world-meets-chic as the far more celebrated Prague and, in the countdown to Poland’s admission to the EU, this will no doubt become one of those destinations jauntily advocated as hip.

But should my thoughts drift to Krakow they can make me feel old, not hip. Krakow was the site of my first horse and carriage ride. And, now, I cannot escape the notion I have taken the leap from happy-to-get-lost-tourist, to the one following the well mapped and comfortable route: the horse and carriage ride may well be travel’s equivalent of qualifying for the pension.

But in Krakow, those carriages are hard to avoid. There are long lines of them, waiting as patiently as those queued at Lourdes, for customers with the right fistfuls of zloty.

Jan was my coachman and wore a bowler hat. His son, Joseph, only 14-years-old but a strapping meat and potatoes boy, came along for the ride too. The two horses had their hooves painted as black as the open-to-the-wind coach.

The route I took was a popular one and I was not the only one on tour. I smiled and nodded appreciatively whenever Jan pointed out the sites - Krakow has churches everywhere and Wawel Castle, the home of Polish kings, overlooks much of the old city. Yet the Jewish Ghetto seemed to pass before clip turned to clop. I was most aware of the other carriages, all of them were occupied by people older than me. Air-con and clean sheets folk.

Krakow has a large university population too. They bring a sense of vibrancy to this ancient city. From their seats at a café a table of twenty-somethings looked over the tops of their bottles of Polish beer to watch us pass. Later, as the horses and I negotiated a narrow laneway I could have, should I have been so inclined, reached from the carriage to those wandering with their nowhere-in-particular-to-go attitude, and wiped the insouciance from their unlined faces.

When we parked back in the square Jan asked me to take his picture and both he and son posed proudly. Afterward Jan offered, “You come my house”. At least those with a predilection for dossing might never get to try Mrs Galica’s wonderful meat and potatoes.