

Chapter 7

CENTRAL EUROPE

7



sauce, or Mazurian crayfish and cognac stew. **Known for:** formal service; great views of Market Square; beautifully decorated dining room. **📍 Average main:** zł95 **📍 Rynek Główny 19, Stare Miasto** **📞 012/429-57-12.**

Cool Places to Stay

Grand Hotel

\$\$\$ | **HOTEL** | Without question, this hotel around the corner from Kraków's main square is the most elegant address for visitors to the city and the one most accessible to the major sights. **Pros:** great location; charming public areas. **Cons:** some rooms may be noisy, especially on weekend nights; a bit too old-fashioned for some. **📍 Rooms from:** zł819 **📍 Ul. Sławkowska 5-7, Stare Miasto** **📞 012/424-08-00** **🌐 www.grand.pl** **🛏 64 rooms** **🍳 Free Breakfast.**

Hotel Copernicus

\$\$\$\$ | **HOTEL** | Hotel Copernicus is a tastefully adapted medieval tenement house on the oldest and, arguably, the most charming street in Kraków. **Pros:** oozes history and charm—inside and out; lots of modern amenities. **Cons:** on the pricey side; some quirks (like tubs and no showers, or vice versa, in some bathrooms). **📍 Rooms from:** zł1150 **📍 Ul. Kanonicza 16, Stare Miasto** **📞 012/424-34-00** **🌐 www.hotelcopernicus.com** **🛏 29 rooms** **🍳 Free Breakfast.**

★ Hotel Gródek

\$\$\$ | **HOTEL** | Hidden away from the noise in a cozy cul-de-sac next to the Planty Park and the Dominican convent, this boutique hotel is one of Kraków's finest. **Pros:** loads of character; great location; free and fast Wi-Fi. **Cons:** on the pricey side; sauna but otherwise limited amenities. **📍 Rooms from:** zł870 **📍 Ul. Na Gródku 4, Stare Miasto** **📞 012/431-90-30** **🌐 www.hotelgrodek.com** **🛏 23 rooms** **🍳 Free Breakfast.**

Hotel Podewils

\$\$\$\$ | **HOTEL** | This luxurious boutique hotel, housed in a sophisticated 18th-century building with Baroque features, is located on the edge of the Old Town, and conveniently opposite the Gdańsk Główny train station. **Pros:** completely renovated historic structure; rooms facing the river have great views; nice marble bathrooms. **Cons:** not all the rooms are equally nice; no restaurant in the hotel (just a breakfast room); rooms can be cold in winter. **📍 Rooms from:** zł320 **📍 Ul. Szafarnia 2, Stare Miasto** **📞 058/300-95-60** **🌐 www.podewils.pl** **🛏 10 rooms** **🍳 Free Breakfast.**

Le Regina

\$\$\$ | **HOTEL** | This luxurious boutique hotel—a remodeled 18th-century palace—is an oasis within the busy capital with a superb location at the north end of the Old Town. **Pros:** deluxe service; hotel very central but peaceful and quiet. **Cons:** expensive rates; some overpriced extras including breakfast and valet parking. **📍 Rooms from:** zł820 **📍 Kościelna 12, Stare Miasto** **📞 022/531-60-00** **🌐 www.maisonleregina.com** **🛏 61 rooms** **🍳 Free Breakfast.**

★ Polonia Palace Hotel

\$\$ | **HOTEL** | When this hotel opened in 1913, it was the best address in Warsaw, and following decades of faded glory it underwent a large-scale restoration, reopening in 2005 in a condition that once again became worthy of its name. **Pros:** excellent location; excellent breakfast. **Cons:** busy reception; expensive extras (room service, in-room Wi-Fi). **📍 Rooms from:** zł690 **📍 Al. Jerozolimskie 45, Centrum** **📞 22/318-28-00** **🌐 www.poloniapalace.com** **🛏 206 rooms** **🍳 Free Breakfast.**

Slovakia

East of the Czech Republic and about one-third as large as its neighbor, Slovakia became an independent state on January 1, 1993. Although they speak a language closely related to Czech, the Slovaks had managed to maintain a strong sense of national identity throughout their common statehood as part of Czechoslovakia. In the end, it was the Slovaks' very different history that split them from the Czechs, and it's this history that makes this a unique travel destination.

Part of the Great Moravian Empire in the 9th century, the Slovaks were conquered a century later by the Magyars and remained under Hungarian and Habsburg rule. Following the Tartar invasions in the 13th century, many Saxons were invited to resettle the land and develop the economy, including cultivating the region's rich mineral resources. During the 15th and 16th centuries, Romanian shepherds migrated from Walachia through the Carpathian Mountains into Slovakia, and the merging of these varied groups with the resident Slavs bequeathed to the region a rich folk culture and some unique forms of architecture, especially in the east.

Today, most visitors to Slovakia come for one of two things: the cultural capital of

Bratislava, with its charming Staré mesto (Old Town)—a beautiful city center set along the Danube that affords visitors a glimpse of the capital's former glories, though is surrounded by less appealing Communist-era high rises—and the soaring peaks of the Vysoké Tatry (High Tatras), which is set up perfectly to cater to tourists, especially hikers and skiers. Yet people often overlook Slovakia's many other charms, such as exquisite medieval towns like Spiš in the plains and valleys below the High Tatras, and the beautiful 18th-century wooden country churches farther east. Taking the time to explore a little farther afield in Slovakia is a very rewarding experience.

Old Town, Bratislava



Slovakia's Historic Heart

Since Slovakia joined the European Union in 2014, Bratislava has blossomed into a thriving, modern European capital. Yet it has still retained its charming Old Town. This historic center is perhaps best exemplified by two squares: Hlavné námestie, home to a landmark fountain and a ring of beautiful Gothic and Baroque buildings—look out for the Stará radnica (Old Town Hall), a mishmash of different houses built at various stages from the 14th century onward—and Hviezdoslavovo námestie, a lovely, tree-shaded promenade lined with grand buildings and odd sculptures. Other highlights include Michalská brána (Michael's Gate), the last gate standing from Bratislava's original 13th-century city walls; Primaciálny palác (Primate's Palace), a gorgeous Neoclassical building built for the Archbishop József Batthyány; and Katedrála svätého Martina (St Martin's Cathedral), the

coronation church of many Hungarian and Austrian monarchs; look for the golden crown and cushion on its spire.

Don't Miss

Bratislava's most striking Secession-style building, the Kostol svätej Alžbety (Church of St. Elizabeth)—better known as the Blue Church—is noted for its powder blue exterior, which extends all the way up to its 120-foot round tower.

Best Quick Bite

High-quality gelato is popular here, and if you have time for only one scoop, opt for Koun (pronounced "cone"). Paulínyho 1, Bratislava 📍 www.koun.sk

Getting Here

The Old Town is a 10-minute bus/tram ride (or a 20-minute walk) from the main train station.

Visit Bratislava.

🌐 www.visitbratislava.com

Bratislava Castle



A Picture-Book Fortress

With roots dating back more than a millennium—it was first mentioned in AD 907 for its role in a battle between Bavarians and Hungarians—the wonderfully imposing Bratislavský hrad (Bratislava Castle) was significantly rebuilt in the Renaissance style in the mid-16th century. It's this enormous, rectangular form with four stocky towers that you can see today, although it incorporates architectural features from throughout its history (and the dazzling white paint job is distinctly 20th-century handiwork). From the Old Town, walk up the (steep) castle hill and pass through one of the four entrance gates—probably Viedenská brána or Leopoldova brána—for incredible views of the town and the winding Danube below. The grounds are free to enter, so you can soak up the vistas as long as you like. You only need to pay if you want to head inside the castle, either for the

SNM-Historical Museum, which is a little sparse but does include access to the Crown Tower via a narrow passageway, or any of the regularly-changing temporary exhibits.

Don't Miss

While you're at the castle, take time to explore the beautiful Baroková záhrada (Baroque Garden) and take a stroll through the woods around the castle walls.

Getting Here

It's a short but steep walk up from the Old Town to Bratislava Castle. Trams 44 and 47 spare you the climb, and drop you off right by the entrance gate; you can pick them up from just outside the Presidential Palace.

📍 Zámocká 2, Bratislava 📞 02/204-831-10 🌐 www.bratislava-hrad.sk 🚰 €12

Banská Štiavnica



A Medieval Town Frozen in Time

Since the 11th century, this little town has earned its wealth from mining, and today it's essentially one large mining museum. German miners arrived here to exploit rich gold and silver deposits, and their success is apparent in some of the town's remaining monuments, such as the golden Trinity column on Trinity Square. At the Slovenské banské múzeum you can view some of the town's original mining machinery from the early 13th century and take a trip down into a pit mine. You can also explore two castles: the New Castle (Nový zámok), a six-story Renaissance fortification built in the 1500s, and the Old Castle (Starý zámok), built above town in the early 13th century. Just outside of town lies the charming late-baroque chateau Svätý Anton.

Don't Miss

Romantic Bojnice Hrad (Bojnice Castle), dating from before 1175, has all the necessary elements of a fairy-tale palace: multilevel turrets with decorative spires, ornate parapets, and a sparkling moat. The interior is beautifully restored and furnished in 12th-century style, and it's just over an hour's drive northwest of Banská Štiavnica.

Getting Here and Around

Banská Štiavnica is accessible by train from Bratislava, but it's twice as fast to drive.

Bojnice Hrad. ☒ *Zámok a okolie 1, Bojnice* 📧 bojnicycastle.sk ☎ From €11 ☺ Closed Mon. in Apr., May, and Oct. Closed Mon. and Tues. Nov.–Mar.

Slovenské banské múzeum. ☒ J. K. Hella 12, Banská Štiavnica 📧 www.muzeumbansk.sk ☎ €14, guided tour in English €20 📞 Reservations essential

Hiking or Skiing in the High Tatras



Mythic Mountains

A visit to the Vysoké Tatry (High Tatras) alone makes a trip to Slovakia worthwhile. Although the range is relatively compact—just 32 km (20 miles) from end to end—its peaks seem wilder and more starkly beautiful than those of the Alps. The highest is Gerlachovský štít, at 8,710 feet, though some 20 others exceed 8,000 feet, and the best way to see them is on foot or on skis. From spring to autumn, a reasonably fit person of any age should have little trouble with any of the well-marked walking trails. Be sure to wear proper shoes with good ankle support. In winter, the entire region is crisscrossed with cross-country skiing paths, as well as several dedicated downhill ski slopes. The ski season usually lasts from the end of December through April, though the best months are January and February.

Stay Here

Grand Hotel Praha. There are a few main resort towns in the Tatras, but Tatranská Lomnica has a near-perfect combination of peace, convenience, and atmosphere. Moreover, the lift behind the Grandhotel Praha brings some of the best walks in the Tatras to your doorstep. ☒ *Tatranská Lomnica 8, Vysoké Tatry* ☎ 44 290 13 38 📧 www.tmrhotels.com/grandhotel-praha

Best Restaurant

Bilikova chata. Take a break with a warm beverage at this rustic and cozy restaurant and hotel just before you reach Hrebienok. ☒ *Hrebienok, Starý Smokovec* ☎ 949 579 777 📧 bilikova-chata.sk

Getting Here

Poprad is the gateway to the mountains. There are regular trains from Bratislava and Košice, as well as twice-weekly Wizzair flights from London.

Spiš Castle



Sprawling Castle Complex

In the heart of Eastern Slovakia, looking down on the village of Žehra, lies one of the largest castle ruins anywhere in Europe. Spišský hrad (Spiš Castle) has been occupied by the overlords of the Spiš region since the 12th century, first the Kings of Hungary, then various Hungarian noble families, then the states of Czechoslovakia and Slovakia. The site's UNESCO-listed fortifications are mostly in ruins today, but in the section that has been preserved there's a museum of medieval history, featuring a collection of torture devices. The hilltop location affords a beautiful view of the surrounding hills and town; climb the 22-meter-high tower for an even better panorama.

Don't Miss

To the southwest of Spiš Castle, beyond the town of Levoča, lies

Slovenský Raj (Slovak Paradise), a wonderfully wild and romantic area of cliffs, caves, and waterfalls. It's a dream for adventurous hikers, with some gorges only accessible by narrow but secure iron ladders.

Best Restaurant

Visit family-owned restaurant U Janusa for a taste of Slovak culture as well as cuisine. Try one of the local specialties, such as bryndzové halušky (small potato dumplings with soft sheep cheese, bacon and chives). ☎ Kláštorská 22, Levoča ☎ 534 514 592 🌐 ujanusa.sk

Getting Here

A car is the easiest way to reach Spiš Castle. However, a bus does run from Poprad to the town of Spišské Podhradie, about an hour's walk from the castle. ☎ Žehra ☎ 053/454-13-36 🌐 www.spisskyhrad.sk 🎫 €8 🕒 Closed Nov.–Mar.

When in Slovakia

Bardejov

TOWN | Bardejov is a great surprise, tucked away in this remote corner of Slovakia. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is an exceptionally complete and well-preserved example of a fortified medieval town and possesses one of the nation's most enchanting squares. Indeed, Bardejov owes its splendors to its location astride the ancient trade routes to Poland and Russia. It's hard to put a finger on exactly what makes the square so captivating—it could be the lack of arcades in front of the houses, the high pointed roofs, or the colorful pastels and decorative scenes painted on the facades, which have a light, almost comic effect.

Shopping along the pedestrian square is quite pleasant. The Šariš (Icon Museum) houses a collection of icons from as early as the 15th century and paintings taken from the area's numerous Greek Catholic and Orthodox churches. Many of the icons depict the story of St. George slaying the dragon (for the key to the princess's chastity belt!). The legend of St. George, which probably originated in pre-Christian mythology, was often used to attract the peasants of the area to the more abstemious stories of Christianity. Pick up the short commentary in English when you buy your ticket; for more detailed information, purchase the Slovak/English book *Ikony* from the reception area. ☎ Bardejov ➔ 80 km (50 miles) north of Košice 🌐 tik.bardejov.travel.

Devínsky hrad (Devín Castle)

CASTLE/PALACE | Located on the confluence of the Morava and Danube rivers that form the border between Slovakia and Austria, just 10½ kilometers (6½ miles) west of Bratislava, lies this extraordinary ruined castle. Built on the top of a high crag, the enormous Devín Castle is one of the oldest in the region, first mentioned in written sources in

864. You can learn about the history of the castle and the village (all the way back to Neolithic times) in a fascinating exhibition within the castle walls. Enjoy the sweeping views from the top of the ruined Upper Castle, and take a snap of the famous **Maiden's Tower**, a tiny watchtower precariously balanced on a lone rock that has spawned countless legends of imprisoned women leaping to their deaths. In summer, there are kid-friendly medieval-themed events held in and around the castle. To reach Devín, take Bus 29 from Bratislava (30 minutes) or drive west out of the city on Devínska cesta. ☎ Muránska 1050/10, Bratislava ☎ 02/657-301-05 🌐 www.muzeum.bratislava.sk 🎫 €5 🕒 Closed Mon.

Grasalkovičov palác (Grassalkovich Palace)

GOVERNMENT BUILDING | This grand Rococo-style summer residence was built in 1780 for Count Anton Grassalkovich, advisor to Empress Maria Theresa (who was crowned in Bratislava in 1761). Today, it's the official residence of the President of the Slovak Republic so it isn't possible to see inside, but come at 1 pm any day of the week to witness the ceremonial Changing of the Guard. You can also head around the back of the palace to explore the lovely Prezidentská záhrada (Presidential Garden), a public park that's an oasis of manicured lawns, sculpted hedges, and gorgeous flower displays. It also has a number of avant garde sculptures, including the playful *Fountain of Youth* by Slovak sculptor Tibor Bártfay. ☎ Hodžovo námestie 2978/1, Bratislava ☎ 02/578-881-55 🌐 www.prezident.sk.

Košice

TOWN | In Košice you leave rural Slovakia behind. Though rich historically and with an interesting old town square, Košice is a sprawling, modern city, the second largest in Slovakia after Bratislava. Positioned along the main trade route between Hungary and Poland, the city



was the second largest in the Hungarian Empire (after Buda) during the Middle Ages. With the Turkish occupation of the Hungarian homeland during the 16th and 17th centuries, the town became a safe haven for the Hungarian nobility. The town square is dominated on its southern flank by the huge tower of the Gothic Dóm svätej Alžbety (Cathedral of St. Elizabeth). Begun in the 15th century and finally completed in 1508, the cathedral is the largest in Slovakia. Inside the church is one of Europe's largest Gothic altarpieces, a 35-foot-tall medieval wood carving attributed to the master Erhard of Ulm. Most of the great Hungarian leader Francis Rákóczi II's remains were placed in a crypt under the north transept of the cathedral (he left his heart in Paris). ☞ *Košice* ➔ 100 km (62 miles) southeast of *Levoča*, 402 km (250 miles) east of *Bratislava* 🌐 visitkosice.org.

Kostol svätého Jakuba (*Basilica of St. James*)

CHURCH | The church is a huge Gothic structure begun in the early 14th century but not completed until a century later. The interior is a breathtaking concentration of Gothic religious art. It was here in the early 16th century that the Spiš artist Pavol of Levoča carved his most famous work: the wooden high altar, which is said to be the world's largest and incorporates a magnificent limestone relief of the Last Supper. The 12 disciples are in fact portraits of Levoča merchants. A tape recording in an iron post at the back of the church provides detailed information in English. Note: on Saturday afternoon the cathedral is often closed for private wedding ceremonies; it's best to plan a visit before noon. ☞ *Nám. majstra Pavla*, *Levoča* ➔ 90 km (56 miles) northwest of *Košice*, 358 km (222 miles) northeast of *Bratislava* 🌐 www.chramsv-jakuba.sk.

Where to Eat and Drink

★ Albrecht

\$\$\$\$ | **FRENCH** | One of the city's most elegant fine dining experiences, Restaurant Albrecht near Bratislava Castle serves sumptuous, strictly seasonal French cuisine using the highest quality locally sourced ingredients; menus often list individual farms and producers. Head chef Jaroslav Židek is known for his elaborate, multicourse tasting menus, but you can also order the dishes à la carte: opt for the tuna ceviche to start, the lamb back with sheep-cheese ravioli for main, and the plum dumplings to finish. **Known for:** multicourse tasting menus; great value lunch menu; five minutes by taxi from the Old Town. ☞ *Average main:* €30 ☞ *Mudroňova 4237/82, Bratislava* ☎ 902-333-888 🌐 www.hotelalbrecht.sk/restauracia ☺ Closed Sun.

★ Kláštorňý pivovar

For a great-tasting, great-value beer, you won't beat the home brew at this popular brewpub—it's just €3.70 for a whole liter of Monastic Beer served straight from the tap. Enjoy it with tasty Slovak pub food like grilled sausages, baked pork knuckle, and *halušky* (potato dumplings with sheep's cheese). ☞ *Námestie SNP 469/8, Bratislava* ☎ 907-976-284 🌐 www.klastornypivovar.sk.

Roxor

\$\$ | **BURGER** | Melt-in-the-mouth eco-farm beef, crunchy double-cooked fries, and crisp craft beers are the order of the day at this excellent burger joint. There are half a dozen burger options to choose from, including veggie mushroom and vegan patty ones; all are cooked medium as standard and served with tasty sides like rosemary or garlic fries, kimchi, and coleslaw. **Known for:** Bratislava's best burgers; homemade pineapple-curry mayo; a little way out of the Old Town. ☞ *Average main:* €15 ☞ *Šancová 19, Bratislava* ☎ 02/210-205-00 🌐 www.roxorburger.sk.

Zylinder

\$\$\$ | **AUSTRIAN** | With dishes based on traditional Austro-Hungarian recipes, this well-located café and restaurant makes a pleasant stop for lunch or dinner. Expect everything from traditional Austrian schnitzel and *tafelspitz* (boiled beef served with minced apples) to Hungarian beef goulash and *somlói galuska* (sponge trifle), as well as Slovakian specialties like *halušky* (small potato dumplings with sheep cheese, sautéed bacon, and sour cream). **Known for:** tasty beef broth with noodles; great location on Hviezdoslav Square; big portions and good value for area. ☞ *Average main:* €16 ☞ *Hviezdoslavovo námestie 19, Bratislava* ☎ 903-123-134 🌐 www.zylinder.sk.

Cool Places to Stay

Arcade Hotel

\$\$ | **HOTEL** | This 16th-century building on the main square is an ideal place to stay, with rooms and apartments varying in size, comfort, and cost, but each equipped with the basic creature comforts. **Pros:** atmospheric on-site restaurant; historic charm; free Wi-Fi. **Cons:** pet-friendly; no elevator. ☞ *Rooms from:* €138 ☞ *Nám. SNP 5, Banská Bystrica* ☎ 48 43 02 111 🌐 www.arcade.sk ➔ 18 rooms 🌞 Free Breakfast.

Hotel Bankov

\$ | **HOTEL** | Formerly a 19th-century spa resort, Bankov is now a peaceful respite surrounded by hiking trails in the cool hills a 10-minute drive outside Košice. **Pros:** nice summer terrace; beautiful building; luxurious touches unusual outside of Bratislava. **Cons:** not in town, so requires a car; can be busy with group events; cheapest rooms are not nearly as charming as the others. ☞ *Rooms from:* €84 ☞ *Dolný Bankov 2, Košice* ☎ 556-324-522 🌐 www.hotelbankov.sk ➔ 29 rooms 🌞 Free Breakfast.

Loft Hotel

\$\$ | **HOTEL** | Standing out from the Old Town crowd with its industrial-style decor incorporating exposed brick walls, distressed wooden floors, shabby leather sofas, and retro advertising prints, Loft offers a different kind of hotel experience. **Pros:** sixth floor rooms have gorgeous garden views; free snacks and wine for guests; popular Fabrika brewpub downstairs. **Cons:** industrial decor isn't to all tastes; underground parking is €20 a day; wood floors can be noisy. ☞ *Rooms from:* €85 ☞ *Štefánikova 864/4, Bratislava* ☎ 901-902-680 🌐 www.lofthotel.sk ➔ 111 rooms 🌞 No Meals.

★ Marrol's Boutique Hotel

\$\$\$ | **HOTEL** | A romantic boutique gem in the heart of the Old Town, Marrol's is set within a 19th century burgher's house and oozes period charm, with its opulent chandeliers, deep leather armchairs, and charming wood paneling. **Pros:** free minibar full of drinks; lovely plant-covered Summer Terrace; underground parking available. **Cons:** breakfast is nothing special; service isn't always with a smile; noise in corridors carries. ☞ *Rooms from:* €110 ☞ *Tobrucká 6953/4, Bratislava* ☎ 02/577-846-00 🌐 www.hotelmarrols.sk ➔ 54 rooms 🌞 Free Breakfast.