

City's spirit shaped by harsh history



Rick Steves

Every Nov. 11, local Poles gather in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Piłsudski Square in Warsaw to honor Poland's Independence Day.

The ceremony itself is filled with somber commemorations and highly-structured military salutes — reminders of the country's harsh history and enduring spirit of resilience. The capital, Warsaw, is a reminder of this as well.

Along with hosting the country's seat of government, Warsaw is the country's cosmopolitan business hub. Travelers seeking Old World quaintness should head for Kraków; but for today's Poland, visit Warsaw. It's a 21st-century city with a dark 20th-century story.

In fact, most of Warsaw's past has been hard. Since becoming Poland's capital in 1596, it has seen wave after wave of foreign rulers and invasions — and currently, it's going through a demographic shift, as hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees are becoming citizens. It's a big talking point in modern Warsaw, and yet another fascinating chapter in the city's history.

Warsaw's darkest days came during the Nazi occupation of World War II.

First, its Jewish residents were forced into a tiny ghetto. They rose up ... and were slaughtered. Then its Polish residents rose up ... and were slaughtered. In retaliation, Adolf Hitler ordered the block-by-block destruction of the city.

As the smoke cleared and the Nazis retreated, the Soviets marched in and claimed the pile of rubble that was once Warsaw. It would be 45 more years



Poland's last king built Łazienki Park as a summer residence and place for his citizens to relax. Poles today still come here to do just that. **ADDIE MANNAN**

before the Soviets would leave and the Poles could freely govern their capital and their country.

After the war, the Poles almost gave up on re-creating old Warsaw, but ultimately they decided to rebuild, constructing a city of contrasts. Now, painstakingly restored medieval lanes border pedestrian-friendly parks and sleek skyscrapers.

Today's Warsaw is safer, wealthier and happier than ever. You'll encounter stylishly dressed locals, sophisticated shopping boulevards and thoughtful museums covering World War II, Jewish history, hometown composer Frédéric Chopin and Polish art.

The city has two historic districts: the

13th-century Old Town and the 15th-century New Town. Both are nearly complete 20th-century reconstructions, right down to the higgledy-piggledy charm of the colorful buildings.

The countless restaurants in the historic district provide a good introduction to Polish cuisine — and the national drink, vodka. Many traditional dishes — herring, cold cuts, pickles, steak tartare — pair naturally with chilled vodka. Poles don't sip their vodka. It's a bottoms-up beverage; "that way it only stings once."

For me, the pleasure of Warsaw is just connecting with its big-city people, who are as warm and charming as small-town folk. Poles love Americans

— they think of us as big brothers and sisters from across the Atlantic. When the communist government gave the people a small shot at representative government in 1989, the "get out the vote" poster showed Gary Cooper from "High Noon" — holding not a gun, but a voting card.

Remnants of Warsaw's earlier magnificence show up in huge, idyllic Łazienki Park. It's sprinkled with Neoclassical buildings, peacocks and young Poles in love. Poland's last king built the park in the 18th century for his summer residence and as a place for his citizens to relax.

A monument to Chopin, Poland's great Romantic composer and favorite son, graces the park's rose garden. Even though

Chopin left Warsaw for Paris, his final wish was to have his heart brought back to his native Poland. And so it was, after his death in 1849. It now lies buried in a pillar in Warsaw's Holy Cross Church; the rest of him is interred at Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.

Locals still proudly celebrate the composer's music. On Sundays, huge crowds fill Łazienki Park for Chopin concerts that take place in front of his statue — and smaller odes to the composer pop up all across town. When I was last in Warsaw, I went to an intimate, salon-style concert hosted at a hotel. The pianist, seated at a baby grand under a lovingly lit portrait of Chopin, closed his eyes as if to channel all his heart into

his fingers flying across the keys. I, along with the rest of the music lovers in attendance, swooned.

I was reminded how, before recorded music was even imaginable, lovers of culture all over Europe would gather for concerts just like this, where musicians would share the great music of the day. And it felt so appropriate that Chopin is still celebrated by resilient, culture-loving Poles right here in the middle of Warsaw, a city that refuses to die.

Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European travel guidebooks and hosts travel shows on public television and public radio. Email him at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.

CELEBRITY TRAVEL

Japan, moon on bucket list for Moore

By **Jae-Ha Kim**
Tribune Content Agency

Thurston Moore is best known as the singer-songwriter-guitarist for the rock band Sonic Youth. But he's also an acclaimed author, whose "Sonic Life: A Memoir" documented his life and time in the group. Touring is part of the job, but it was his travels with his family that he vividly remembers.

"When I was a wee child, my family took a trip to Key West and we climbed up to the top of some old lighthouse," he recalled. "The perimeter of it had a chain-link fence around it prohibiting people from falling off the edge. I thought that was rather controlling. I climbed over it and prowled around the edge until my father spotted me and yelled for me to come back, and I did. I was wondering why he was so angry. I climbed back over to the safe side and got a bit of a wallop."

This interview with Moore has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: What's the most important thing you've learned from your travels?
A: That your job as an artist is to bring intrigue, joy and respect to the people paying money to see you and hear what you've created.

Q: Where haven't you been yet that you'd like to visit?
A: I have some interest in South Africa. I'd like to explore the nonurban areas of Japan as well. The moon would be a cool trip.

Q: What are your favorite



Musician Thurston Moore hopes to further explore the nonurban areas of Japan. **VERA MARMELO**

cities?

A: Tokyo, Paris, New York City, Chicago, London, Stockholm.

Q: What is the best thing you did on a trip?

A: When my London band went to tour in Japan years back, it was the first time my wife, Eva, had been there and she had always dreamed of going. I booked an extra week where the two of us explored all these cool places — cemeteries, parks, neighborhoods, cafes, restaurants serving one style of dish, record stores, bookstores — places I never got to explore myself through the years as it was always just soundcheck, gig, interview, repeat, then off to the next country. It was a magical week and I hated to leave. We can't wait to return. And we will!

Q: What do you remember about the first and last Sonic Youth shows?

A: The first show using the name Sonic Youth was at White Columns gallery in downtown New York City. It was part of a nine-day festival of experimental music I had curated by invitation of the gallery. My recollection was that since establishing that name, the ineffable quality that would become our band was born anew. We had gigged round under various names — Male Bonding, Red Milk, The Arcadians — and I felt the

band becoming fractious as a couple of the founding members were questioning the future value of the group. I basically took over and named whatever was going to happen next as Sonic Youth. I had been the instigator from the beginning anyway, but it was always in the context of the band functioning as a sonic democracy. The final gig we played was some festival on a rainy stage in South America in front of thousands. It was fairly uneventful though, and we thought we might just be taking a break while our personal lives shifted, but we have not returned as a group since.

Q: What was it like living in New York's Lower East Side in the 1970s?

A: It was simply impoverished, which turned it into a somewhat lawless playground of both mirth and danger. In retrospect, I wouldn't want a child of mine to live in that environment, but I survived, many did not.

Q: Is there a place you didn't think anyone would recognize you, but they asked if you were Thurston Moore?

A: That happens too much. "Are you who I think you are?" "Do I know you?" Yes, my name is Ludwig Beethoven, what's yours?

For more from the reporter, visit www.jaehakim.com.

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Guests charged \$385 when heavy rain damages keypad

By **Christopher Elliott** | King Features Syndicate

My partner and I booked an Airbnb near Joshua Tree National Park, California, for my birthday.

On the second day, heavy rain caused the keypad lock to malfunction. We couldn't enter any information after the first digit.

We immediately contacted the host, who assumed that we caused the keypad to malfunction with incorrect passcode attempts. He sent a locksmith hours later. The locksmith suggested that the rain had damaged the lock, and the host gave us a manual key.

Two weeks later, Airbnb demanded \$385 for lock repairs, claiming that we caused the damage.

We provided video proof of the malfunction and texts where the locksmith cited weather, but Airbnb sided with the host.

How can we fight this unfair charge? We just want to clear our name and avoid paying for something we didn't break.

— *Paula Lee, San Francisco*

A: Airbnb should have dismissed this claim immediately. Its Terms of Service says that hosts aren't liable for issues beyond their control, so why not guests as well? When the locksmith attributed the problem to rain, Airbnb had all the evidence it needed to side with you.

Your case raises an interesting question, which I seem to answer with some regularity: Who really is Airbnb's customer? Are they on your side or on the host's side? In your case, it appears Airbnb almost reflexively sided with the host. In fairness, I've had cases where the opposite happened. But generally, Airbnb favors the host in my experience, and this is something that guests don't really understand. They think they're the

customers, but they aren't. You did everything right by documenting the issue with videos, texts and timely communication. You were patient — maybe a little too patient — and allowed the process to work. I would have escalated your case to a higher level a little earlier in the process. Airbnb often resolves disputes faster when you involve its executive team. Airbnb's managers read and respond to their emails, making it one of our highest-rated companies for customer service.

I'm troubled by your case. Based on the paper trail you furnished, it looks like you did absolutely nothing wrong. You handled the resolution process by the book and were polite and patient. It appears your host (who,

I should add, was also polite) wanted someone to buy a new lock after his stopped working. This is not how the system is supposed to work. If you'd pried the lock open with a crowbar, it would be a different story, but it looks like you just pressed one button.

I reached out to Airbnb on your behalf. A spokesperson acknowledged the case but declined to explain why the charge was initially upheld. Fortunately, after our inquiry, Airbnb struck the \$385 charge from your bill.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.