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POLISH ECO-TOURISM: GETTING DOWN ON THE FARM

By George Albrecht

Poland is not only a beautiful and historical country to visit, its people are among the friendliest in Europe. What better way to see what Poland has to offer than to spend some of your time with a Polish family? And why not combine that with visit with some outstanding scenery and great home-cooked meals? You can do so by partaking in Poland's growing Eco-Tourism community and spending part of your vacation on a Polish farm. During a recent trip to visit friends in Warsaw, I allotted some extra time to do just that.

The green Eco-Sign pointing to the Plackowski's farm is small, so I missed it the first time I drove down the side road in Inwald. Heading up the hill toward their farm, the road turned from pavement to gravel, crossed over the railroad tracks, and then left the gravel behind. The last few hundred meters on hard packed dirt were negotiated without difficulty as my rental car stopped at the metal vehicle gate just dozens of meters from the forest.

Before I could exit the car and open the gate, a giant Saint Bernard was galloping toward me. Nora's bark was deep, but her demeanor was no different than her namesake's in Peter Pan. Fifty meters downhill, a woman stood outside the farmhouse entrance and beckoned me forward. I opened the gate, let the car roll forward, closed the gate behind me, petted Nora's gyrating body and proceeded to a spot next to the house. Because the Plackowskis, like many of those involved in Polish Eco-Tourism, have Internet access, we had been coordinating my arrival for weeks ahead of time. It had all worked out with precision.

Conversation between the lady of the house and me could have been problematic, for Mrs. Plackowski spoke no English and I spoke no Polish. But I was soon introduced to her three children—sons Bozydar and Mieszko, and daughter Dobramila. Translation problems solved! The two teenaged boys were quite proficient in English and had been the writers of the e-mails we had exchanged earlier. Their young sister was not so confident in her language skills, and decided to forego any translation attempts during my stay.

The boys showed me to my room downstairs, with typical large European windows and a patio view into their orchard. The lodging wing was new construction and my bedroom had two single beds, a storage closet, a writing table and a private bathroom with shower. Quite cozy. The boys asked if I required anything and if I would like to eat supper that evening. The information provided via their website mentioned that meals would be provided only on an "as needed" basis. I agreed that supper would be appreciated and they promised to knock on my door when it was ready.

It was late April and as I wandered the grounds, I noticed no other automobiles on the premises. I also wondered if Mr. Plackowski would make it back from the fields in time for supper. Both of those questions would be answered at the evening meal.

Bozydar knocked on my door and roused me from a sound nap. It was time for supper. He guided me upstairs where the rest of the family was gathered around the table. I took the remaining seat and soon the table was filled with steaming, homemade foods. However, Mr. Plackowski would not be joining us this evening, or, for that matter, any other evening that I was there. Over dinner, I learned that he was working in Germany to produce extra income for his family and his

definitive dream—a self-sustaining wellness center, his ultimate Eco-Farm. He was performing labor-intensive work in Germany (digging out dead grape vines on hillsides in Baden-Wuerttemberg) for a few weeks at a time, returning with extra funds to improve his environs and his family's conditions.

Once again through the language skills of her boys, Mrs. Plackowski related how she and her husband had purchased the farm (about 5-1/2 hectares, or roughly 13.5 acres) for \$500 (U.S. cash monies only, thank you very much) shortly after the Soviet Union fell apart. The house was a wreck, and they spent many nights on a mattress on the wooden kitchen floor, the only room in the house where the roof didn't leak and the floorboards weren't rotten. Little by little, through the family's industriousness and the bartering of services and goods, the house was repaired and expanded. Eventually, visitors came from locations throughout Europe to enjoy the tranquility of the Polish countryside, allowing them to add new quarters for even more visitors.

The ultimate goal (which they were still working toward) would be a health-oriented vacation spot where visitors could come for vegetarian cuisine, yoga and meditation classes, hiking trails, and water aerobics.

Besides the gracious hospitality shown to me by the Plackowski family, Inwald is situated in a extraordinary, centralized tourist location. It is only minutes from Wadowice, where I was fortunate to meet the city's Burmistrz [Mayor], Eva Filipiak, and present her with some mementos from Chicago Heights, Illinois—Wadowice's sister city and my hometown. And of course, I had to take time to enjoy

some of the city's famed Kremowka—the custard delights that were such a favorite of Wadowice's most famous son, Pope John Paul II.

Inwald is also about 50 kilometers (31 miles) south of the fabulous city of Krakow, with its centuries of history and culture. I meandered my rental car through the internal side streets of the city one morning, looking for the royal castle on Wawel Hill where many of Poland's great kings and notable citizens are buried. Becoming completely lost, I parked on the street and quickly dashed into the first place I saw, the Hotel Senacki. The counter staff was outstanding: in perfect English, they barely winced as they explained I was literally within a city block of the castle, and then offered me parking in the hotel lot for half the going rate. After visiting Wawel, I spent some leisure time meandering through the heart of Krakow. Of course, at the end of my sightseeing, I obliged myself to partake of the spectacular dining room menu back at Hotel Senacki.

Outside of Krakow, again an easy drive from Inwald, are the enthralling Wieliczka Salt Mines. An English-speaking guide, dressed in traditional mining uniform, took our group on a 400-step decent into the depths of the 700-year old mine. There one experiences the history of the salt trade and the importance of the mine through the centuries. One sees the labor-intensive methods required over the years, the crude but innovative machines developed to make mining more productive, and also appreciates how modern mining equipment changed the lives of those workers forever. The tour is capped off by visiting the elegant salt-carvings in the vast Princess Kinga Chapel.

The Plackowski farm was also well sited for visiting the sobering and dreadful Auschwitz/Birkenau Memorial. If inclined to visit this site,



Plackowski family at their Inwald home

one should devote a full day and must be prepared to observe the terrors that humans are capable of inflicting on one another. (<http://www.auschwitz-muzeum.oswiecim.pl/html/eng/start/index.php>)

In addition to these self-tours, Bozydar and Mieszko guided me into Beskid Maly [Little Beskidy] "mountains," where we visited numerous natural landmarks and man-made structures. This area provides numerous hiking, biking and riding trails through an area of forest, but not too steep summits. Automobile routes wind through numerous small towns and villages throughout the area.

The time spent on the Plackowski's Eco-Farm was relaxing, intercultural, informative, educational, inexpensive and most of all—lots of fun for this American of non-Polish heritage. On your next trip to Poland, see what a rewarding experience an Eco-Vacation can be!

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For Eco-Tourism locations visit <<http://www.poland.eceat.org>>.

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