Past and presence – below, the imposing and informative Palace of Culture and Science. Opposite, Michelle Kapuscinska, a professional “nose” at Mo61 Perfume Lab.
IN POLE POSITION

Warsaw is fast emerging as a must-see city break, thanks to a thriving food, design and culture scene.

WORDS YVONNE GORDON  PHOTOGRAPHS MATTHEW THOMPSON
“S" tart with the base, then choose the flavour,” says the waiter, who is talking us through the drinking chocolate menu. The “bases” are milk, dark, bittersweet and white and the choice of 12 flavours to add includes blackcurrant, rose petals, chilli and caramel with sea salt. After this, there’s whipped cream, ice cream, rum or a liqueur.

We’re in E. Wedel in Warsaw (Szpitalna 8, +48 22 827 2916; wedelpijalanie.pl), an old-time café with red and gold walls, dark wood furniture and chandeliers. This “chocolate lounge” has been here since 1894, part of the famous E. Wedel chocolate brand, but in the surrounding streets there are buildings of all eras, from eye-catching Communist architecture to smart, glass-fronted boutiques and shopping centres.

Warsaw, Poland’s capital, has emerged from a mixed history into a city thriving with creativity, designers and talented chefs. As with the drinking chocolate, you can pick a base and explore the city from there — whether you are interested in historical themes such as Frédéric Chopin’s story (the composer grew up here); the city’s Jewish and Second World War history; the legacy of the more recent Communist era or the innovative design and dining scene.
SLEEP AT …

HISTORIC Dating back to 1913, the Polonia Palace is among the city’s most iconic and a fantastic city-centre location. Doubles from 275 PLN. (Al. Jerozolimskie 45, +48 22 318 2800; poloniapalace.com)

DESIGN His Boutique Hotel’s 19th-century building was once a Soviet Union embassy. Now, it’s all Egg chairs and striking artworks. Doubles from 360 PLN. (Ulica Poznańska 15, +48 22 553 8700; hisboutiqueapartments.com)

CHARMING In Old Town, the quirky Castle Inn has themed rooms, from the sleeper-car inspired Orient Express to an Escher boudoir. Doubles from 200 PLN. (Ulica Świętojańska +48 22 425 0100; castleinn.pl)

ART DECO Previously, Hotel Rialto was a tenement house but has since been restored to five-star glory. Rooms from 434 PLN. (Wilcza 75, +48 22 584 87 00; rialto.pl)

BOUTIQUE Another ex-tenement property, Aparthotel Stalowa 52 nails post-industrial chic with flair. Rooms from 180 PLN. (ul. Stalowa 52, +48 22 618 27 32; stalowa52.pl)

of today. And, like the chocolate, it is by mixing the rich selection of flavours, areas and experiences that you get a full taste of the city.

A good first base to explore is the Old Town with its Medieval architecture, including cobbled alleyways, city walls and a moat. Although the town dates back to the 13th century, it was destroyed during the Second World War and meticulously rebuilt from the rubble, gaining UNESCO World Heritage site status in the process. The Market Place is surrounded by 17th-century merchants’ houses, while St John’s Archcathedral has the crypts of dukes, kings and presidents. Also in the Old Town, the attractive Royal Castle was reconstructed over 13 years from 1971.

For coffee, head to the charming Shabby Chic coffee and wine bar (Piwna 20/26; +48 572 715 041) to watch the world go by or book dinner at Karminik (Piwna 4a, +48 22 468 0664; karminik.waw.pl) for Polish slow food dishes of roast duck, salmon or steak and an impressive vodka menu.

From the Old Town, take a stroll along Krakowskie Przedmieście, the city’s grand boulevard of palaces, churches and mansions, where you’ll pass the Presidential Palace, the elegant Bristol Hotel, the University of Warsaw and the Baroque Church of The Holy Cross, where Chopin’s heart rests in an urn, according to his wishes. Drop into Zapieczek (Krakowskie Przedmieście 55, +48 22 692 7204; zapieczek.eu) for hand-made pierogi –
traditional Polish dumplings filled with meat, vegetables or cheese.

Nearby, Nowy Świat is a lively street popular with visitors for its shops, cafés, bars and restaurants and is pedestrianised at weekends. However, head over to Plac Zbawiciela (Saviour Square) to get a caffeine fix with the locals. Or, in the French-themed Charlotte (Plac Zbawiciela, +48 662 204 555; bistrocharlotte.pl), breakfast is served until midnight and baskets of breads and pastries are accompanied by huge jars of homemade preserves – white chocolate, strawberry and orange. It’s a popular spot – even on a weekday at 4pm, there’s a queue for a table.

Mokotowska is Warsaw’s “designer” street, though with more Polish designers than international

Opposite, clockwise from far left, fragrance shop Galilu; Manal Hamood Al-Hammadi on refreshments; humble yet hearty dishes at Prasowy restaurant; the fashion designer Robert Kupisz; the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, and Natalia Barszcz taking time out in Łazienki Park. Above, pink-toned façades in Old Town.

fashion brands and prices in the hundreds of euro rather than the thousands. Punctuated by salons, florists and patisseries are showrooms of designers such as Robert Kupisz who mixes rock, street and grunge styles (Mokotowska 48/204, +48 506 170 801; robertkupisz.com) and the simple, elegant pieces of jeweller Ania Kruk (Mokotowska 46, +48 887 600 101; aniakruk.pl).

Fragrance shop Galilu (Mokotowska 26, +48 22 121 9932, galilu.pl) stocks high-end perfumes by Diptyque and Malin+Goetz but at Mo61 Perfume Lab (Mokotowska 61, +48 601 652 593; mo61.pl), shelves are filled with rows of dark bottles and you can create your own fragrance, guided by trained experts. Start by choosing a base such as sandalwood or white tea, then add a floral heart such as daisy, and finally an aromatic “head” such as pink pepper or ginger – and take it away in a hand-luggage-friendly 30ml bottle.

If you have time, take a trip across the River Vistula to the up-and-coming Praga area on the city’s east side. When Communism ended in Poland in 1989, artists moved into former factory spaces. 

SMART FLIERS

AERLINGUS flies from Dublin to WARSAW four times per week.
EAT AT ...

FINE DINING  Poland’s first restaurant to get a Michelin star, Atelier Amaro serves up culinary art with a series of creative amuse-bouches and a tasty five- or eight-course menu option. The weekly menu is based on nature’s calendar and chef Wojciech Modest Amaro searches and forages for unusual ingredients. (Agrykola 1, +48 22 628 5747; atelieramaro.pl)

WINE  With wine bottles and glasses stretching up to the ceiling, the focus at buzzing restaurant Kieliszki - Na Próźnej (“Glasses on Próźna Street”) is on balancing what’s on the plate with what is in the glass, with vino from small European winemakers matched with dishes based on Polish traditions. (Ulica Próźna 12, +48 501 764 674; kieliszkinapraznej.pl)

BUDGET  State-run during the Communist years, “milk bars” provided simple, nourishing and protein-rich food to workers for a good price. These Soviet-era canteens are still popular. Although Prasowy has been renovated, prices are still rock-bottom – for example, tomato soup with pasta is around 2.50PLN (approx 60 cent). (Marszalkowskiej 10/16, +48 666 353 776;prasowy.pl)

DRINK AT ...

COCKTAILS  Pies Czy Suka is a creative space selling craft cocktails plus furniture and design items. There are regular exhibitions and its inventive cocktails use unusual ingredients such as Genever (Dutch gin), Gouda cheese and orange, combined to make The Flying Dutchman. Don’t be surprised to see molecular foam in your drink. (Ulica Szpitalna 8a, +48 501850114)

LIVELY  Jars are the theme at Sloik. Rows of the colourful glass containers nod to the method of preserving products in them, and both food and drink here is served in jars. This cocktail bar and restaurant is loud, but house cocktails are creative, such as the Black and Chilli with vodka and chilli syrup. (Ulica Ziłota 11, +48 600 396 688; restauracjasloik.pl)

Below, Jerzy Uroczek at former Soviet canteen, Prasowy, pictured top left. Far left, a beetroot cocktail at Bar Studio, and ace chef Wojciech Modest Amaro.
3 MUST VISITS ...

HISTORY Don’t miss the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews which tells the story of Jews in Poland over 1,000 years, not just during the Holocaust. You can travel through the different time periods via a series of excellent galleries and multimedia exhibits. The museum was named 2016 European Museum of the Year. (Anielewicza 6, +48 22 471 0301; polin.pl)

OUTDOORS In good weather, head to Łazienki Park for 76 hectares of gardens, paths and extravagant structures such as a historic bathing pavilion, palaces and temples to admire. The highlight is the free, open-air Chopin concert every Sunday at noon and 4pm during the summer at the Chopin monument. (Ulica Agridy kili 1, +48 22 506 0028; lazienki-krolewskie.pl)

CITY VIEWS A gift from the Soviets in the 1950s, Art Deco-style high-rise the Palace of Culture and Science was disliked by locals at first but is now a cultural hotspot. There are some impressive Socialist Realism features but don’t miss the 30th-floor viewing deck with city views. (Plac Defilad 1, +48 22 656 7600; pkin.pl)

Clockwise from top left, taking a load off in Łazienki Park; electric dreams at the Neon Museum; the Palace of Culture and Science is a Warsaw high point.

 SMART TIPS

- MUSIC Drop in to the international open-air festival Jazz na Starówce (Jazz at the Old Town) at the Old Town Market Square for free concerts every Saturday at 7pm between July 2 and August 27. (Old Town, +48 501 140 523; jazznastarowce.pl)

- FOOD The Saturday Breakfast Market, at Żoliborz and Praga, is an excellent source of traditional Polish food, with everything from fruit and vegetables to dairy, meats, cheeses, preserves and delicious pastries. As well as outdoor dining, there are children’s workshops, a playground and free Wi-Fi. (Saturdays 8am-4pm, also Sundays in Mokotów, +48 508 121 891; targsnadianowy.pl/en)

- For further details on Warsaw see warsawtour.pl, for more information on Poland, visit poland.travel.

Starting a creative zone. At Soho Factory (Mińska 25; sohofactory.pl), the PRL Museum (+48 606 225 525; adventurewar.wav.pl) tells the story of Communist times with a selection of typical household items and at the Neon Museum (+48 665 711 635; neonmuseum.org) there’s a colourful collection of neon signs saved from around the city. Moreover, don’t miss Warszawa Wschodnia restaurant (+48 22 870 2918, gesler.sohofactory.pl/en) in a large former industrial space. In the 24/7 zone (a 24-hour kitchen), diners on stools can watch as chefs cook food around the clock, or choose the restaurant next door for Polish specials. Spend a few days in Warsaw and you’ll come across stories, buildings and traditions from all eras and you’ll just start to understand all the history and culture that makes the city unique. No two areas are the same but, at the heart of each, you’ll find a rich blend of flavours and layers to whet the appetite.