

# Settling in Poland

## *The first ten Steps*

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*February, 4th, 2008*



### **1. Don't be afraid**

Poland is a country civilized to 100%. Most rumors you may have heard west of the Odra river are simply rubbish. All houses are warm, comfortable and have water and electricity. You can buy the same stuff as anywhere else in Europe. There is a dense network of the McWorld companies. There are no hordes of thugs only waiting to beat up somebody. And the pickpockets, of course – after I had come to Poland, only once something was stolen from me – in Berlin-Schöneberg, Germany.

### **2. Find a flat**

Finding a roof above your head is maybe the first thing you want to do. If you don't speak Polish you will require somebody to help you translating. Gazeta Wyborcza, Polands largest newspaper has real estate ads each Tuesday. You can look for a flat faster in the web, e.g. on [www.gratka.pl](http://www.gratka.pl). If you prefer living with other foreigners, you might easily find someone to team up with in one of the hostels – especially in September/October. But I'm not sure whether the backpack nation will bring you closer to real Poland.

### **3. Leave your old life behind**

A big part of your life is going to start from scratch, so make sure that you are committed to this task. This means, don't stick around your new flat for too long – no matter how comfortable it is. Don't bring your TV, delete your computer games, or leave them where you came from. Don't bring too much stuff in general, in order to be flexible. Maybe not everybody likes this "Cortez burning his ships for motivation" approach, but it works.

## **4. Know your city**

To familiarize with your environment, going for a walk is the best thing you can do. Especially in one of the big cities, you should know more than one way home. There are some areas where buildings look very similar, and it's possible to get lost there. If you were not born with a sense of directions, prepare yourself a set of landmarks (churches, skyscrapers) to write in your city map, and that you can easily recognize. In Warsaw, all you need is a compass - you simply look for the Palace of Culture, and know exactly on which side of the city you are. But generally, it's better to get around without a city map or GPS, because these methods sometimes don't work, especially if you have been socializing heavily. In Poznan and Krakow all the important places are situated around the central market square. But in Warsaw, interesting places are spread out, so you will need to know before where you are going. Most tourist guides are OK for the beginning, but after you are through with the sightseeing you will require information from Poles to find the hottest locations.

## **5. Learn the language**

This is the most important point of my credo, and it is especially true for Poland. Many people will simply not know English or your native tongue. Furthermore, approaching people in their own language will open up many doors for you. Find yourself a good teacher and a coursebook. Learn the first 500 words at any cost, at best before you even cross the border. You can also look for a tandem partner for exercising or just to chat. Being able to do everyday communication and to understand people is more important than impressive grammar and writing skills. Unlike to Germans, Polish people like to compliment on your progress, which of course is a good motivation. While you may hear "your Polish is really good" after a few weeks already, you will know that you are really good the day when they stop mentioning that distinction.

## **6. Meet some people**

Good opportunities to get to know people are activities like dancing classes, sports and games. Many such things for people of any age in western Warsaw can be found in the Osrodek Kultury Ochota ([www.oko.com.pl](http://www.oko.com.pl)). Also, international web portals like [www.hospitalityclub.org](http://www.hospitalityclub.org) are quite active in Poland. Going for a beer with somebody is often a good start, but finding close friends will take time. As a rule of thumb, if you come on your own (as opposed to coming with a group of Erasmus students), you will spend more time on your own than at home.

## **7. Things are different**

Some things will not work in the way you expected. Don't be annoyed too much. Some things can

take considerably longer - supermarket queues, dealing with bureaucracy. Remember that you need a PESEL number for almost anything where your signature is required. Other things are simply disgusting, like buying train tickets. Maybe you'll sometimes think that nothing works out at all. This is normal at the beginning. If you find yourself homesick, you may be! But stand up and continue. (And also consider yourself warned that you may wake up one morning with a terrible headache, remembering a series of small clear drinks that you did not know well before.)

## **8. Learn the history lesson**

Poland has a very interesting and colorful history, that is in some ways very typically European. You should know a few famous Polish people from your field of interest – there are some for sure. There are also a few important but tragic chapters in history. If you are German, Russian or Austrian, you should at least know how many times your ancestors invaded the country. Usually, nobody will blame you for that. It just helps you to understand the people in your environment better.

## **9. Get around**

Poland has more to offer than your city. Take yourself time for weekend trips to different places. Generally, train services in Poland are good but not as fast as in western Europe. If you can, try to avoid the afternoon trains, which tend to be very crowded. In trains in Poland, it is very cheap to take a bicycle with you. I strongly recommend leaving the old town of Krakow before sunset - unless you don't mind sharing the place with hordes of tourists looking for cheap alcohol and sex.

## **10. Enjoy**

It is well-known that Polish people know how to celebrate. There are other non-standard things worth loving to find. I for instance love the atmosphere in Poznan, the music of Kayah, and the taste of Polish tomatoes (we made the Polish-German tomato contest, and German tomatoes got crushed). I also recommend the Klepsydra Bar at Nowy Swiat 22/28 pawillon 14 behind the gate. And the rest? You got to find this out on your own!