Packed with a bizarre mix of gleaming office buildings and grey, Communist-era apartment blocks, **WARSAW** (Warszawa) often bewilders backpackers. Yet if any city rewards exploration, it is the Polish capital. North of the lively centre are stunning Baroque palaces and the meticulously reconstructed Old Town; to the south are two of Central Europe’s finest urban parks; and in the east lie reminders of the rich Jewish heritage extinguished by the Nazis. Warsaw became the capital in 1596 and initially flourished as one of Europe’s most prosperous cities. In 1815, however, the Russians conquered the city and, despite a series of rebellions, it was not until the outbreak of World War I that this control collapsed. Warsaw again became the capital of an independent Poland in 1918, but the German invasion of 1939 meant this was to be short-lived. Infuriated by the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, Hitler ordered the total destruction of the city, leaving 850,000 Varsovians dead and 85 percent of Warsaw in ruins. Rebuilding is an ongoing process. The main sights are on the western bank of the Wisła (Vistula) River where you’ll find the central business and shopping district, **Śródmieście**, grouped around Centralna station and the nearby Palace of Culture. The more picturesque **Old Town** (Stare Miasto) is just to the north. There are plenty of good private hostels, mainly in Środmieście, most offering free internet, breakfast and free/cheap laundry services. Hotels tend to be pricier than elsewhere in Poland.