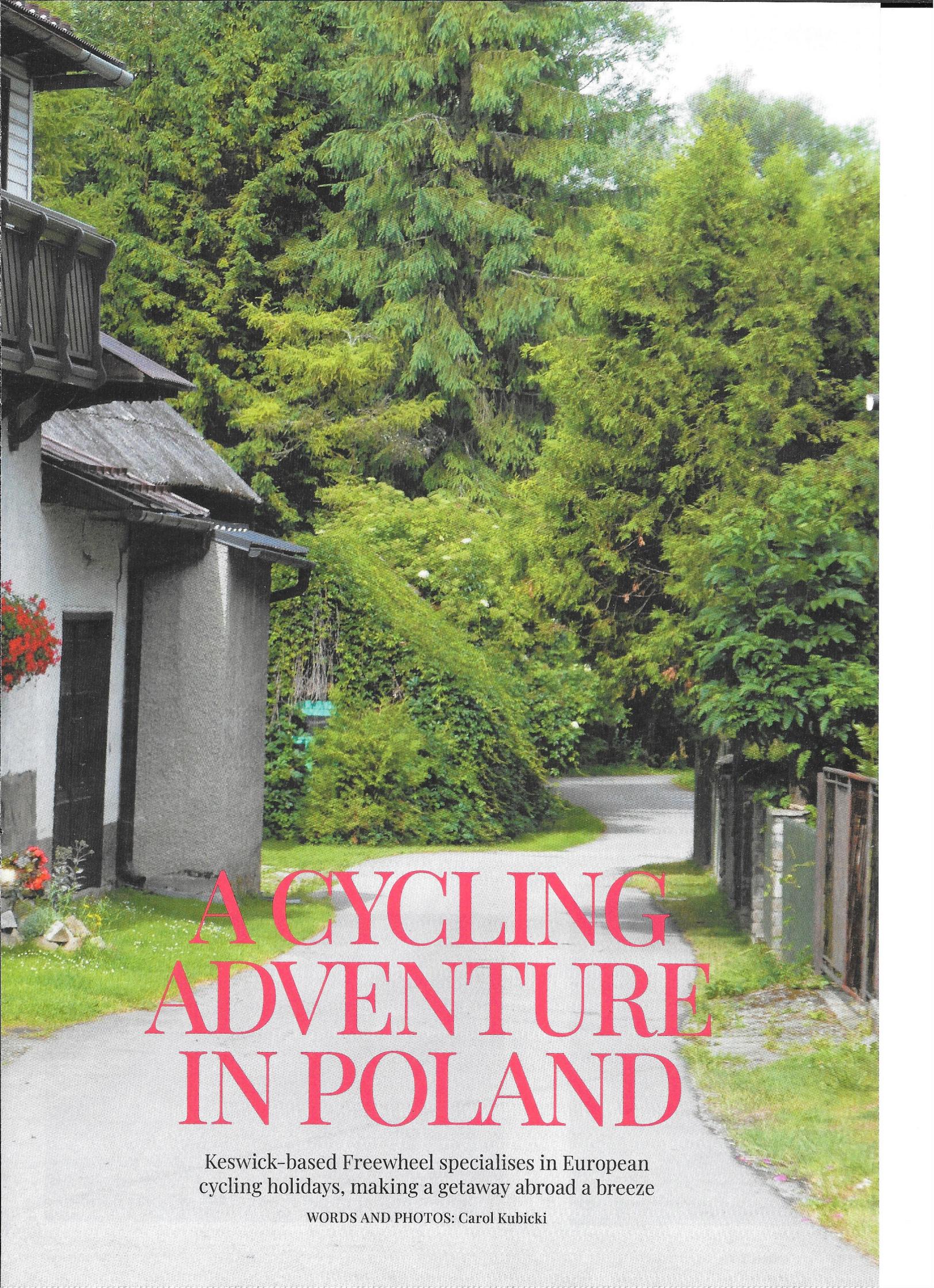




Idyllic cycling along country lanes



A CYCLING ADVENTURE IN POLAND

Keswick-based Freewheel specialises in European cycling holidays, making a getaway abroad a breeze

WORDS AND PHOTOS: Carol Kubicki

Peddalling hard up a relentless incline, passing sun-baked wooden farmhouses, each more charming than the last, our destination of Zakopane, in southern Poland, remained somewhere beyond the next rise. This was not the laidback freewheel along the Dunajec valley the holiday brochure promised, and I began to wonder, as the sweat dripped onto my legs, if I was fit enough for six days of cycling.

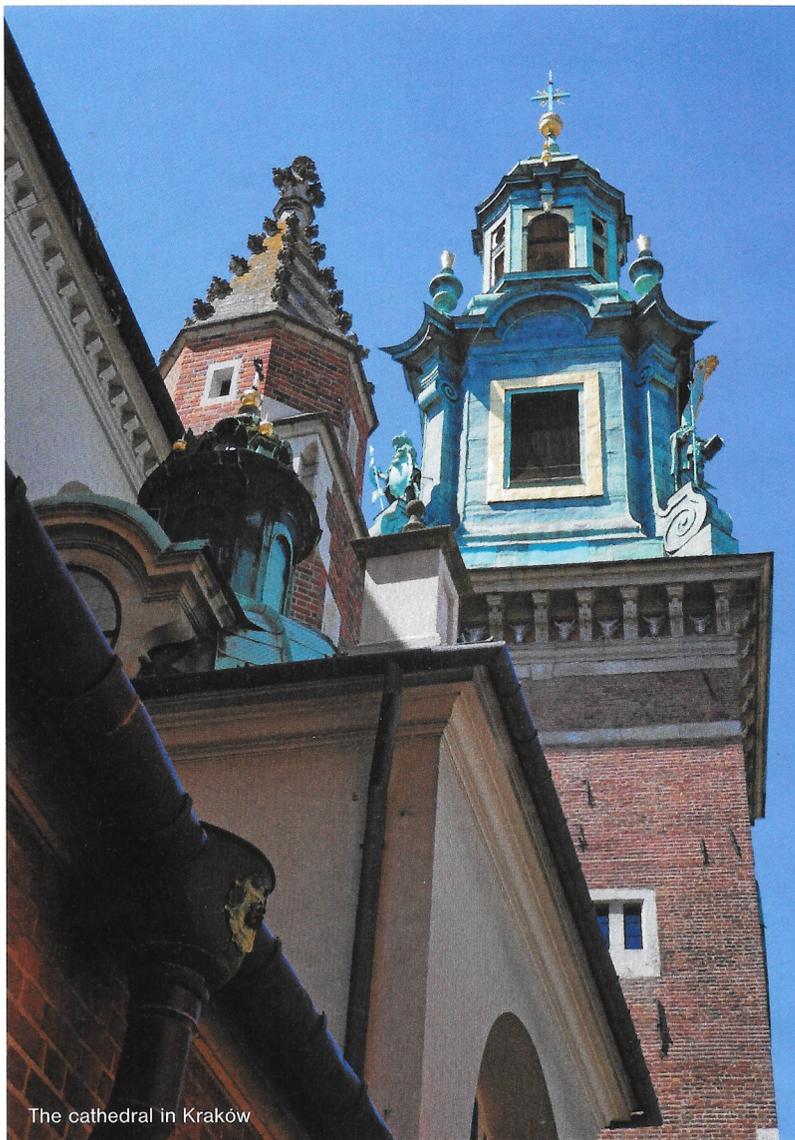
GREENER TRAVEL

Having used the Keswick-based company, Freewheel Holidays, before, my partner and I confidently booked their cycling trip to southern Poland. We would begin with two nights sightseeing in the historic city of Kraków before collecting hired bicycles.

You can fly to Kraków, but we prefer slower and greener adventures to airport queues. So, with bulging rucksacks on our backs, we left Lancaster railway station, picking up an overnight ferry in Newcastle. A sea-view cabin, a bountiful buffet, a sunset walk around the deck and nightcaps in the bar put us in a holiday mood. Before we knew it, we were climbing aboard a train in Amsterdam's bustling station.

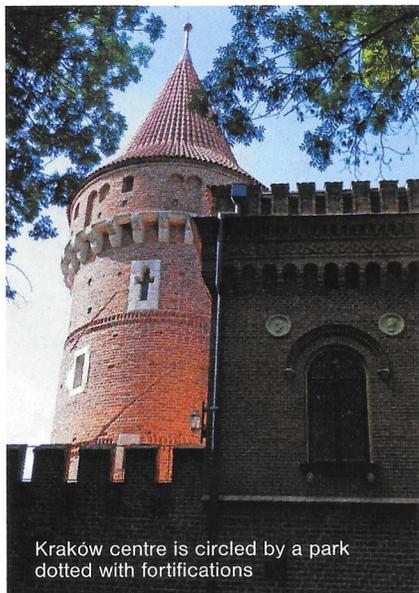
Picnic food (no buffet car), books and the ever-changing German countryside sustained us to Berlin. We stashed the rucksacks in our hotel and were soon eating our favourite German food, deep-fried potato pancakes (*Kartoffelpuffer*), served with apple sauce. They are greasy, unhealthy and delicious!

The next day, we sped through vast Polish forests and crossed wetlands teeming with wildlife, stepping into Kraków on a hot afternoon. Our hotel was alongside the green parkland that rings Kraków's centre and this pedestrian-friendly area of winding paths helped us navigate the city. While swifts swooped overhead, we meandered under trees to the Wawel Castle complex and

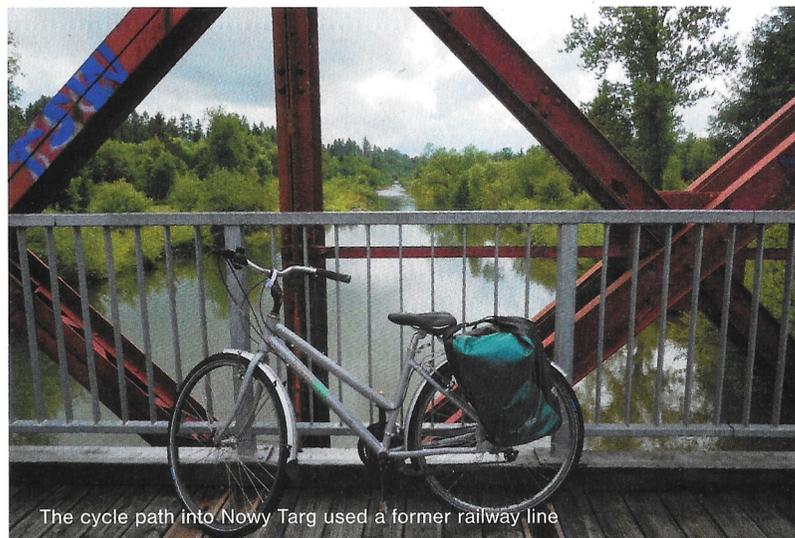


The cathedral in Kraków

‘With bulging rucksacks on our backs, we left Lancaster railway station, picking up an overnight ferry in Newcastle’



Kraków centre is circled by a park dotted with fortifications



The cycle path into Nowy Targ used a former railway line



The walls and turrets of 14th century Niedzica Castle

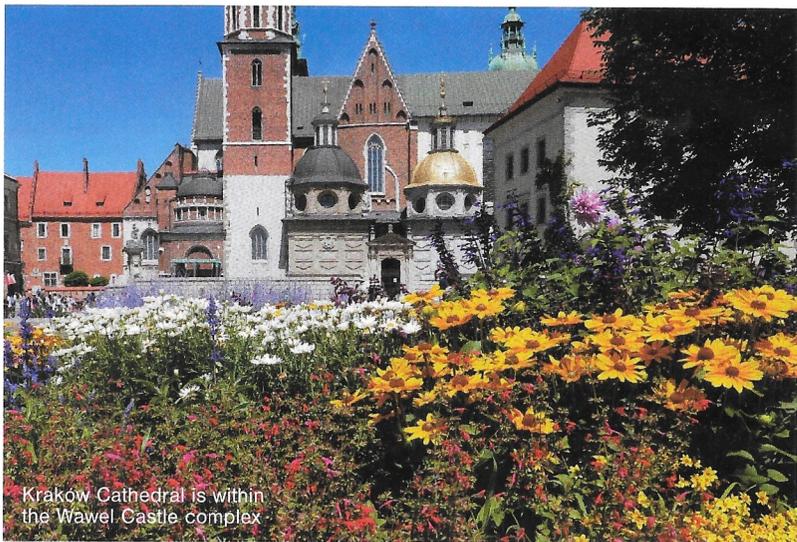
climbed the cathedral's bell tower for rooftop views. When we had walked enough, there were shady cafés and multitudes of ice cream shops around the impressive medieval square.

ON YOUR BIKE

Over a beer that evening, we met our local rep and fellow cyclists from across northern Europe. We were given road books, maps and GPX files and instructions for collecting our bikes the following day. Climbing out of the minibus in Poland's highest village, I breathed in the panorama of the Tatra Mountains. The River Dunajec, our companion for the trip, rises among these lofty granite peaks and tumbles down to the valleys lying below us.

Peddalling to Zakopane, I became acquainted with my bike and constantly leapt on and off, taking photographs of mountain views and rustic chalets. Checking in at the hotel, we were told the evening buffet had begun. We were half-board and surprised how early they eat in Poland. We parked our bikes in the garage, found our transferred rucksacks (we were last, so this was easy), showered, made a brew (the bulging rucksacks were full of teabags!) and joined the final 30 minutes of dinner.

The mountain resort of Zakopane is a tourist hotspot and we drifted through its shopping streets the next morning, finding bread and cheese for our daily picnic before whizzing up a mountain funicular. Once



Kraków Cathedral is within the Wawel Castle complex

again, too relaxed, we had coffee idly watching dark clouds gather over the Tatras. The downpour began as we tackled a long brake-testing descent, my least favourite cycling.

Then the sun reappeared as we left the road for effortless car-free paths through flower-rich meadows. The misery was forgotten in the company of singing yellow hammers and acrobatic swallows.

At a trackside café near Nowy Targ we bought drinks and received smiling

nods when we indicated we had our own picnic. This was the holiday we expected.

We had informed Freewheel we were two vegetarians but, at Nowy Targ and every other hotel, we were a surprise to the waiting staff. However, without exception, the kindness and hospitality was almost overwhelming, each chef producing a delicious vegetarian meal, without drama.

We rarely saw our cycling companions during the day, as everyone rode at



The spa town of Szczawnica was perfect for an evening stroll



In Stary Sącz we found this joyful painted ceiling

first drops fell, we were rolling our bikes into the hotel. The fairy tale continued when we were shown our room in a wooden chalet that Heidi would surely have recognised.

The Dunajec Gorge carves a winding route of white water between Poland and Slovakia. The playground of canoeists and rafting trips, it is home to black storks and we watched spellbound as one stood in the foam, butler-like in its glossy tuxedo plumage.

In the thick of tree-cloaked hills, half-shrouded in mist, we visited Červený kláštor, a former monastery restored as a museum. After being dazzled by the vaulted painted ceiling and sniffing the plants in the herb gardens, we grabbed a table in the cosy restaurant. In this shadowy space with small windows and mahogany furniture, we were

their pace (mostly faster than us) and often chose different routes to the same destination. Our evening meals, by contrast, were sociable as we exchanged travelling stories. For us, this was the perfect combination.

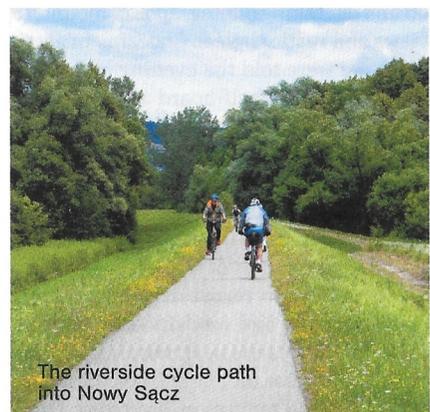
SOFT MORNINGS AND FAIRY TALES

As the weather cooled and mist lingered, we left our hotels on a soft morning, following the Dunajec on paths and lanes.

History has left its mark in this rural area and wooden churches, folk architecture and cultural sites

punctuated our rides. Parking our bikes at Dębno, a gate led us into an exceptional 15th century wooden church packed with paintings and icons hanging on its plank walls. Looking up, the ceiling was rich with intricate geometric and floral designs.

The walls and turrets of 14th century Niedzica Castle came into view above the trees as we followed a path winding around inlets and headlands along a reservoir shore. Built by Hungarians, this formidable stronghold is open to visitors. However, our day's quest was to beat the rain and, magically, as the



The riverside cycle path into Nowy Sącz



The rooftops of Kraków from the cathedral bell tower

delighted to find a Slovak speciality of crispy fried breadcrumbs surrounding a centre of soft tangy cheese. Served with chips, it was perfect stodge cycling food.

THE FINISH LINE

Feeling fitter and stronger, we chose a longer option on our penultimate day. Our reward was dedicated cycle paths and narrow country lanes through hamlets of traditional houses and farms. Chickens strutted among somnolent sheep and red squirrels climbed trees. We didn't enter an urban area until the afternoon, when we bumped along the cobbles of Stary Sącz to its airy market square. A bakery tempted us and we munched on fluffy, sweet Polish donuts (*paczek*) before pedalling by the convent and the papal altar built for the pope's visit in 1999.

We retraced our wheels back to Stary Sącz for our last day of cycling and sat in the sunshine of the art centre's terrace enjoying excellent coffee. 'Why are you in Stary Sącz?' asked our friendly waitress, astonished to meet foreign tourists and we had fun translating the sweet handwritten notes she placed on our saucers.

The sunshine seduced us and we potted around the town discovering colourful murals and market stalls, until we checked the time. We had a deadline with a minibus in Nowy Sącz and so rode rapidly through the riverside flower meadows and pools on our last stretch of the Dunajec.

We visited the town's showpiece market square, surrounded by elegant houses and full of floral displays, and found the nearby basilica before it was time to say goodbye to our trusty



The colourful square in Nowy Sącz

'Over a beer that evening, we met our local rep and fellow cyclists from across northern Europe'

steeds. I knew I would miss daily cycling. Back in Kraków, an evening of traditional food and *klezmer* music in the town's Jewish quarter was planned. Once again, two vegetarians were a surprise, but the onion soup and stuffed cabbage were a triumph. It was our last night with our cycling buddies and we shared our stories interspersed with soulful traditional folk music.

Walking back through buzzing Kraków, we reflected on our Polish cycling adventure, thrilled to complete the distance and encounter some of Poland's lesser-known attractions.

PLAN YOUR TRIP

Freewheel Holidays

freewheelholidays.co.uk

Newcastle-Amsterdam DFDS

ferry crossing

dfds.com/en

Rail Europe for train tickets

raileurope.com

For inspiration and practical ideas

seat61.com