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## A dark and fantastical Polish land

In [Poland](#) By Katie Hammel

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In the far west of [Poland](#) along the German border, the province of Lubuskie is like something out of a fairy tale.

It's one of the country's least populated regions. It's also the most densely forested, with half the land covered in deep green woodland and more than a quarter reserved as protected nature parks. In between the great expanses of green are sparkling blue lakes, medieval castles, picturesque villages, rolling fields of wheat and the occasional vineyard. It's a place where clichés like charming and bucolic are appropriate descriptors.

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People have inhabited Lubuskie for more than 1,000 years, and Germans and Poles have long sung the praises of its climate and clear air as a health aid. It's a convenient stopover on the train route between Berlin and Warsaw. All this – yet it remains one of the least visited provinces in Poland.



The province of Lubuskie is Poland's most densely forested. (Katie Hammel)

I started my trip in what's known as the Pearl of Lubuskie, the map-dot hamlet of Łagów. It looks like a setting out of one of Grimm's fairy tales: a string of 18th-century houses set on an isthmus between two lakes ringed

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by beech and oak forest, bordered by two medieval gates, the hamlet is watched over by the 14th-century Castle of the Order of St John, its tower poking up through the trees like a perfectly shaped chess piece.

Like many of the 20 palaces and castles in the region, the structure is now a hotel, the 14-room **Zamek Joannitów**. While the castle advertises itself as a luxury accommodation, the beech furniture is simple and hand-crafted, the rugs and tapestries well-worn and the beds predictably firm. Like, it feels like a treasured antique that just needs the dust blown off and a little polish applied.

I got my bearings from the castle's tower, which is open to anyone willing to climb four flights and a vertiginous ladder to the top, 35m above the village. Below, mist rose from the twin lakes on either side of the castle and plumes of wood smoke floated from the village's red-brick chimneys. Beyond the lakes, the forest spread as far as I could see, the occasional red and orange flare of autumn leaves interrupting the interminable green.

I looked down on the town's tiny main street, its 120m length lined with 18th-century tenement houses and capped on each end by 15th-century stone and brick gates that once marked the boundaries of the centre. It has grown since then, but not by much. The population of the town – including the houses beyond the gates – is a mere 1,500.



Łagów's tiny main street is capped on each end by 15th-century stone and brick gates. (Katie Hammel)

The Grimm brothers lived in neighbouring **Germany**, but locals say some of their famous stories have roots in this Polish region, passed down for generations before making their way west across the border. Standing at the top of Łagów's 700-year-old castle tower, it was easy to see a connection to those dark and fantastical tales, to imagine Hansel and Gretel skipping past the town's gingerbread houses and leaving a breadcrumb trail into the thick forest.

To explore the woods on my own, I rented a bike and pedalled out of town, past one of the gates where a stoplight controlled the non-existent traffic through a one-lane tunnel. The underpass was short enough that I could see the open road on the other side. As I reached the red stoplight, a single car pulled up to wait, forming the world's smallest traffic jam.

Outside the gate, the road curved around the shore of Trzesniowskie, the larger of the town's two surrounding lakes. It is 20km in circumference and one of the deepest and clearest of the region's 500 lakes, many of which are connected or close enough to portage between on the 200km-long **Lubuskie Water Trail**. Trzesniowskie's visibility can reach 15m, so divers come from around the country to explore its depths.



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Łagów as seen from the lake. (Katie Hammel)

Like the other nearby lakes, the two in Łagów teem with fish such as bream, pike and perch. The few small shacks along the shore were closed the morning I was there, but advertised low rental prices for paddleboats, kayaks and no-frills fibreglass motorboats. I imagined the lake swarming with activity during the summer, but being early October, the lake was empty – the still water reflecting the sky like a mirror. A lone fisherman was casting a pole from a wooden dock; the occasional “plonk” of his lure hitting the water was the only sound to break the silence.

I headed for the wooded trail that rings the smaller of the two lakes, Łagowskie, and took my time on the 10km ride through sun-dappled beech, oak and pine forest, stopping at a small pub, [Pod Lipami](#), on my way back to the castle for a lunch of fried perch, fresh from the lake.

The next day, a 105km-drive north took me deeper into Lubuskie and into the heart of Poland’s wine country. There are 400 wine producers in [Poland](#), but most plant only a few acres. One of the most respected is at the [Mierzecin Palace Wellness and Wine Resort](#), a renovated 19th-century palace set on 200 acres of beech forest, farmland and lakeside vineyards near the town of Dobiegniew.

It's one of 14 stops on Lubuskie's Wine and Honey Route, which offers travellers the chance to learn more about wine and honey production, taste local products and meet with producers. Poland is one of Europe's larger producers of honey and most is made by small apiarists like those found in Lubuskie. Visitors can also try Eastern Europe varietals such as sylvaner and zweigelt, which thrive in the colder climate. In most cases, it's the only chance to taste the tipples made at these wineries, as their small production means little or no distribution.

The winemaker at Mierzecin Palace, Piotr Stopczyński, spent seven years in California's Napa Valley perfecting his craft. Now his wines are served to the Polish president. The winery's rondo and regent, both dry, tannic reds, have won multiple awards at Eastern European wine competitions.

"Poland is not there yet," Stopczyński told me when I asked how local wines compare to those from France or Italy. "But every year we learn something." Like the Lubuskie region, the wines of Poland need a little bit of polishing to shine.



Vines at the Mierzecin Palace Wellness and Wine Resort. (Katie Hammel)

In addition to 66 guest rooms, a wine-themed spa, sprawling gardens, a winery and a restaurant, there's a large equestrian facility onsite that houses the palace's breeding studs. Horseback riding has always been a part of rural life in Poland, but now it's becoming part of tourism as well, with a growing network of riding trails crossing the countryside. The palace's horses lead guided rides through the woods and tours of the palace property in beautifully restored antique horse-drawn carriages. I chose to spend my final hours in Lubuskie on the back of a stately dark brown horse named Grand, riding through the shady forest, up gently sloping green hills and through the carefully tended vines.

Out in the woods, it was easy to forget that I was a short train ride from two of the largest cities in Europe. Despite the ease of the trip from Warsaw, Lubuskie, felt worlds – and centuries – away from Poland's capital, and with the thick forest obscuring most of the sunlight over the trees, it was just as easy to imagine something magical in the shadows of the Polish countryside.

### **Practicalities**

By train, Świebodzin is three hours from Warsaw (400km) or two hours from Berlin (175km). There is no car rental option in town, but taxi or a guide and driver can be arranged for comparable cost through local hotels. Łagów is 21km from Świebodzin and Dobiegniew is an additional 105km from Łagów. The Mierzecin Palace will arrange transit for hotel guests.