

Going Deep in Poland

Make a Connection With the Local People

by Jim Kane of Culture Xplorers

"Ah, like Jimmy Carter." Gardon, a rural sheep farmer near Krynica, and I had just exchanged names. Maggie, the sister of my Polish friend Marcin, was acting as translator. "Philadelphia, the city of twin love," he followed, after hearing where I was from. "That's right," I acknowledged, "the city of brotherly love."

Gardon's knowledge of U.S. affairs impressed me and I let him know it. This led to more commentary on former U.S. presidents and, when known, their religious denominations. "Bill Clinton, elected twice; Richard Nixon, a Baptist."

Gardon's toothless grin was as welcoming and warm as the sun on our backs. "Would it be alright if I took some pictures? The green in your cap and shirt look great with the green of the hay and your field." He seemed pleased and told us about the time, years ago, when a Swedish man had painted him while tending his flock, just on the other side of a hill to which he pointed.

Maggie was having trouble translating at Gardon's increasingly animated pace. For now, I was quite content to watch them and listen to him weave together anecdotes for this Philadelphia photographer who had appeared out of the blue and his young Polish translator.

As travelers we search for authentic experiences on our journeys. Too often, we fall into the thinking that the more remote the destination, the more authentic.

The best way, in my opinion, to experience the "authentic" in travel is to make a genuine connection with the people of the country visited, to bring home names of new friends and stories of shared time together. Achieving this kind of authenticity has little to do with how far away or



A violinist makes wonderful music in the streets of Krakow, Poland
Photo: Jim Kane

untouched the destination. It requires digging deeper, not going farther.

The following rules of thumb can help create opportunities for interaction, even when we can't travel with local friends:

Traveling Rules of Thumb

- 1 Eliminate the language barrier. If you don't speak the language, hiring a local translator, even for one or two days, can make a huge difference to your experience.
- 2 Talk to strangers. While respecting local mores, common sense, and courtesy, approach people when possible and ask questions: about what they do, what they are selling, what the symbols on their clothes mean, what is it that they are eating, etc. Most people are thrilled to share with interested strangers. In fact, they'll likely be just as curious about you!
- 3 University towns make great places for conversations. Generally, students come from all over the country to attend. Everyone is "new" in that sense and therefore more open to starting a discussion with other new visitors. As a bonus, many university students around the world learn English as a second or third language and are happy to have the opportunity to practice with native speakers.

④ Visit local festivals or celebrations. Not only are foreigners rare at such events, with everyone in a festive mood, starting a conversation with someone is easy and often very rewarding.

During this trip to Poland I went to the "Festival of the Bean" in Zakliczyn, a small rural community about an hour and a half south of Krakow. The harvest festival was an unforgettable day.

While photographing the children's folk dance troupe performing on stage, a woman approached and asked me some questions about my camera. She seemed as startled to learn that I wasn't Polish as I was to find out that she was the director of the festival. Soon she introduced me to Stanislaw, the leader of the children's troupe and organizer of another folk dance festival in the nearby town of Czchow. Everyone was delighted at a foreigner's interest in their small corner of the world and extended me tremendous hospitality and access.

During a break in the conversation, Marcin and I sampled a few of the dozens of food stalls, each with its own bean dish: bean borscht, bean stew, bean salads, bean candies, just to name a few—all washed down with a glass of cold Zywiec beer (fortunately, not made of bean).



Pigeons in Krakow's main plaza delight locals and visitors alike.
Photo: Jim Kane

During our meal, the message came that the mayor was waiting to see us in his office. We looked at each other and laughed, but the messenger was serious. Once in his office and dis-

playing an appropriate gravitas, we were each handed a heavy plate of regional specialties as the mayor gave an exhaustive history of the town and its people. Visitors came and went and introductions were made with vertiginous speed. (Of course, I kept the card of the director of the region's prune festival—a sure bet for next year!)

Outside, our best surprise of the day was waiting. Stanislaw had assembled the kids in front of their bus for one last song—in my honor.

It is no surprise that for me Poland is as much about Marcin's family and friends as it is about great vodka and fertile farmlands. It is as much about Gardon the sheep farmer, Lezek the folk art collector, Karol the birdseed vendor, Jacek the Gorale boat captain, and Stanislaw the accordionist as it is about Krakow and Warsaw, bigos and flacki, Solidarity and bison.

For me, Poland has become personal, accessible, and above all, authentic. ✧



Jim Kane is the President and co-founder of Culture Xplorers. Having lived in 6 countries and traveled through 40 more, Jim now creates immersive trips to Latin America with a focus on people. Through festivals, home-stay opportunities, living traditions and positive impact projects, Culture Xplorers promotes genuine interaction between travelers and locals. Visit Jim & Culture Xplorers at www.culturexplorers.com

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