Landscape

The natural landscape of Poland can be broadly divided into three relief groups: lowlands, highlands, and mountains.

The eastern extremes of Poland are typical for eastern Europe, while the rest of the country is more like western Europe by climate, structure and the character of its vegetation.

Poland is a relatively low-lying country. 91.3 percent of its territory lies below 300 m above sea level.

The highest point is Mt Rysy in the Tatras (2499 m), while the lowest point is located west of the village of Raczki Elbląskie (1.8 m below sea level).

The highest-lying settlement is Gubalówka (today part of the municipality of Zakopane; 1125 m), the lowest-lying settlement is Żółwiniec (1.3 m below sea level).

There are three main mountain ranges in Poland: the Carpathians, the Sudetan Mountains, and the Góry Świętokrzyskie (Holy Cross Mountains).

The longest rivers are the Vistula (1047 km), Oder (854 km), Warta (808 km), Bug (772 km), Narew (484 km), San (443 km), Noteć (388 km), Pilica (319 km), Wieprz (303 km) and the Bóbr (272 km).
Poland has some 9,300 lakes with surface areas over 1 ha; they make up 1 percent of the country's territory. The largest is Lake Śniardwy (11,383 ha) in the Mazurian Lake District, and the deepest is Lake Hańcza (108.5 m) north of Suwałki.

The structure of the relief can be divided more specifically into a series of four distinct zones.

- To the north lie the marshes and the dunes of the Baltic sea

- To the south is a belt of morainic stretch with thousands of lakes, the southernmost border of which marks the limit of the last ice sheet.

- In the center of Poland is the third zone, which includes the central lowlands. This is the site of agriculture in places where the loess was deposited above the relatively sterile soils.

- The fourth zone is composed of the mountains and highlands to the south; though limited in size, it offers a most spectacular landscape. Along the southernmost border of the country are the Sudety mountains and the Carpathian ranges and their foothills.

Nature

Poland is a country of great biological diversity: about 75 thousand species of plants, 39 thousand micro-organisms and fungi, about 2750 vascular plant species and sub-species. Also, there are about 33-45 thousand animal species, living in about 360 types of ecosystems.

Because some changes in the natural environment caused by economic development occurred in Poland later than in the west of Europe, some species and habitat types which have disappeared in the West, still exist in Poland.

Also, the long tradition of nature protection in Poland has helped to save much of the great European primeval forest - Puszcza Bialowieska (Bialowieza Forest). There we can see how nature of Central Europe used to look like centuries ago.

The biggest animals in Poland are the European bisons. By the 18th century, the European bison was almost extinct, with only small herds remaining in the Bialowieza Forest and the Caucasus. At present, some 250 bisons range freely in the Bialowieza Forest. The entire bison population in Poland numbers about 660 animals. The species is now bred in most European countries - all European bisons around the world have ancestors from Bialowieza, and this is the only case in history when a species of this size has been saved by regeneration breeding.

There are also other places hardly touched by the civilization, like the wild and desolate Bieszczady Mountains with their spectacular pastures known as poloniny, and the inaccessible
flood plains along the Biebrza River, home to many rare bird species, sometimes found nowhere else in Europe.

National Parks in Poland constitute the biggest form of nature protection. The area of a national park, may not be smaller than 2500 acres. The park protects an area distinctive for its unique scientific, natural, cultural and educational values. A national park protects the entire nature and specific landscape features within its borders. The main task of a national park is to study and preserve the unity of natural systems of the area, as well as to restore the disturbed or extinct elements of a native nature. The park is open to visitors, but nature conservation is its main objective and has priority over all other activities.

There are 23 national parks in Poland with total area of ca. 780,000 acres, which cover approximately 1 per cent of the country's area. Polish National Parks are exceptional in Europe for their range of wildlife, their size and varying geographical interest.

Map

Apart from paper maps, there are several websites where you can browse a map of Poland online.

- www.mapa.szukacz.pl - digital map of Poland
- www.map24.pl - digital map of Poland, including satellite maps and route planner
- mappy.com - digital - digital map of Poland, including route planner
- www.maps.google.com - global satellite maps

Climate

Poland has a moderate climate with both continental and maritime elements. This is due to humid Atlantic air which collides over its territory with dry air from the Eurasian interior.

The average annual temperature ranges from 7 deg. C(44.6 F) in the hilly Pomeranian and Masurian lake districts and in the uplands to 10 deg. C (50 F) in the belt of the sub-Carpathian basins, the Silesian Lowland and the Wielkopolska Lowland.

For comparison, average annual temperatures in other European cities:

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The coldest area in July is the mountains, where the air temperature drops as the altitude increases (on average by 0.6 deg. C [33 F] for every 100 metres).

The hottest area is central Poland, with the temperatures exceeding 18 deg. C (64.5 F).

Hot days, when the temperature exceeds 28 deg. C (82 F) and over, occur from May to September. Their number increases the further you go from the sea. On average, there are only five such days at the Rozewie Cape and over 40 in the Sandomierz Basin and Lublin Upland.

The coldest month in Poland is January. Cold continental air flowing in from the east in January makes the eastern part of Poland one of the coldest areas in the country.

Sub-zero temperatures are recorded between November and March. The average annual number of frosty days ranges from about 25 along the lower Odra River and at the seaside to 65 in the Suwalki Lake District; in the mountains, it reaches 132 days on Mt Sniezka and 150 days on Kasprowy Wierch. The number of freeze days, typically in late spring and early autumn, ranges in the lowlands from 90 (at the seaside) to 130, while in the mountains it exceeds 200.

The lowest temperatures ever recorded in Poland were -41 deg. C (41.8 F) in Siedlce (in 1940). The highest temperature, +40.2 deg. C (104.5 F), was recorded near Opole in 1921.

**Temperatures**

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Overcast and precipitation

The number of cloudy days is between 60 and 70 percent. The most cloudy regions are the lake districts in the north and the Sudetes; the least cloudy are Wielkopolska and the Silesian Lowland. The average number of cloudy days a year, with the sky more than 80% overcast, is 120-160; for sunny days, with cloudiness below 20%, it is 30-50.

The heaviest precipitation in Poland was recorded in June 1973 in the Tatra's Hala Gasienicowa. One rainfall produced as much as 30cm of water. With Poland’s predominantly westerly winds, the highest precipitation occurs on the western slopes of mountains and hills.

The thickest snow cover was recorded in 1995 on the slopes of the Kasprowy Wierch Mountain - 3.55 metres.

In the Carpathians and Sudetes, the annual precipitation is 800-1400mm. In the lowlands and uplands, it ranges between 400mm and 750mm. Similar levels are recorded in the Pomeranian and Masurian lake districts. This is caused by the proximity of the Baltic Sea, from which humid sea air flows east. The lowest precipitation occurs in the eastern part of Wielkopolska and in Kujawy, a region lying in the rain shadow of the Pomeranian Lake District.
Geography

Time zone

Poland is in the Central European Time Zone. Central European Standard Time (CET) is 1 hour ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT+1)

Daylight saving time

Like most countries in Europe, Summer (Daylight-Saving) Time is observed in Poland, where the time is shifted forward by 1 hour; 2 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT+2).

Start dates:

2011 - 27 March
2012 - 25
2013 - 31

After the Summer months the time in Poland is shifted back by 1 hour to Central European Time (CET) or (GMT+1)

End dates:

2011 - 30 October
2012 - 28 October
2013 - 27 October