

NORTH-EASTERN POLAND: STAYPOLAND E-BOOK

NORTH-EASTERN POLAND

(StayPoland regional e-book)

For each Polish region we have prepared a special regional e-book. It is a short guide that enables you to quickly familiarize yourself with a new territory. The best of each region is listed in order of importance.

There are five regional e-books and each of them has five sections:

1. introduction to region and sights,
2. map,
3. “must-see” tourist sights (13 featured locations in North-Eastern Poland e-book),
4. “explore!": tourist sights (25 places in North-Eastern),
5. information on what STAYPOLAND travel agency & reservation system can do for you in selected places.

Two important points:

- A great number of the place & activity recommendations are made based on our customers' experiences. Your comments are welcome. We are looking forward to your feedback at e-books@staypoland.com (best comments will be published).
- You will find the guide very practical. It enables the independent traveler to make the most of their trip to Poland. At the end of this guide we post information on what STAYPOLAND travel agency can do for you in every destination. For more details check: www.staypoland.com.

1. INTRODUCTION TO NORTH-EASTERN POLAND

provinces: 2 voivodeships: warmińsko-mazurskie (Warmia and Masuria), podlaskie (Podlachia)

area / population: 44,383 sq km / 2.6 million people

featured must-see places: 3 Polish must-see: Białowieża Forest, Elbląg-Ostróda Canal, Great Masurian Lakes
10 regional must-see: Augustów Canal + Czarna Hańcza, Biebrza National Park, Frombork, Gierłóż + Kętrzyn, Krutynia River, Lidzbark Warmiński, Olsztyn, Stork Trail, Suwałki Lakes, Święta Lipka

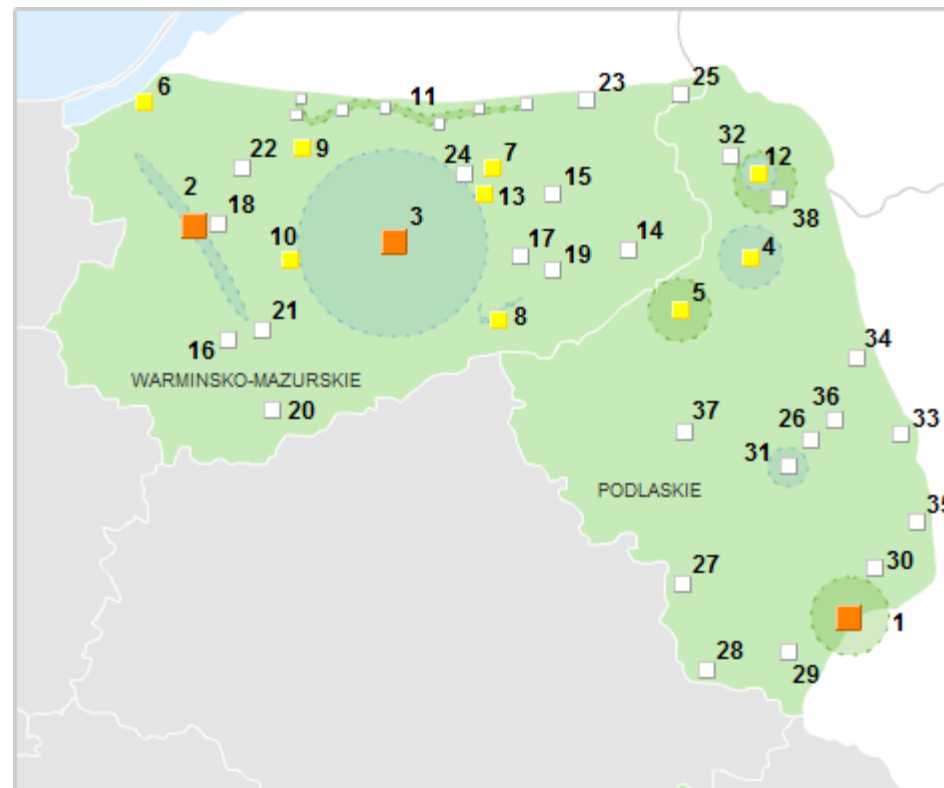
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explore!:

24 off-the-beaten-path: Białystok, Bohoniki, Ciechanowiec, Drohiczyn, Elk, Giżycko, Grabarka, Grunwald, Hajnówka, Łuknajno Lake, Kruszyniany, Morąg, Mrągowo, Narew National Park, Nidzica, Olsztynek, Orneta, Rapa, Reszel, Siemianówka Lake, Stańczyki, Suwałki, Tykocin, Wigry National Park (in text below listed by voivodeship)

UNESCO World Heritage:

1: Białowieża Forest



3. MUST-SEE PLACES

** BIAŁOWIEŻA FOREST NATIONAL PARK (1)

Prepare yourself for an ancient forest experience in Europe's most interesting and largest primeval wooded area, extending partly to Belarus. Shady green, the all-permeating breath of nature, rare species, and the king of the forest, the żubr (wisent/European bison). It is best to access the forest from the village of Białowieża.

++ Rezerwat Ścisły (a strictly protected area) can be entered only in small groups with a guide (7-km walk) or alternatively by a limited number of horse-drawn carts; Muzeum Przyrodniczo-Leśne (Forest Museum) and Szlak Dębów Królewskich (Royal Oaks Trail) – walk among oaks more than 400 years old.

+ Rezerwat żubrów (European bison reserve): here you are guaranteed to see the żubr; Park Pałacowy (Palace Park) remains even though the former palace of the Russian tsars burnt down, Orthodox św. Mikołaja (St. Nicolaus' Orthodox church); private open-air folk architecture museum, the Hwożna reserve (accessible from Narewka) & the Kosy Most observation tower, Miejsce Mocy (the Place of the Power: walk to see mysterious stones assembled for pagan ceremonies) ... and if you can manage it, the Belarusian village of Viskuli where the dissolution of the Soviet Union was signed, bringing the end of an era.

[min: 4 hours – best: 2-4 days – max: 5-7 days]

** ELBLĄG-OSTRÓDA CANAL (2)

Possibly the biggest technological wonder in Poland, this 19th century engineering feat is located among wonderful nature and intersects six lakes. Built in 1848-1876, it is 83.3 km long and its slipways today enable pleasure boats to 'float' over land in wheeled cradles.

++ Boat trip from Elbląg to Małydy (60% of the full boat journey, 6.5 hours), an unusual experience including all five slipways (return to Elbląg by train).

+ Complete boat trip Elbląg – Ostróda or Ostróda – Elbląg (11 hours); small canal museum in Buczyniec; enjoy the old town of the formerly thriving Elbląg (faded since the first half of the 20th century, still being rebuilt) and the local art gallery, pleasant lakes around Ostróda (Szelałg Wielki, Drwęckie Lakes) and a walk through the town between the harbor and the old Teutonic Castle.

[min: 7 hours – best: 1 day – max: 2-3 days (if you want to see more lakes). Boat trip must be booked in advance.]

** GREAT MASURIAN LAKES TRIPS / MIKOŁAJKI (3)

Masuria with its three thousand lakes is one of the most amazing areas in Poland. Mikołajki stands out from all other beautiful Masurian resorts as the liveliest place. Besides having modern amenities, it is also ideally situated in the middle of the Masurian boat trip routes.

++ Boat trips: North (to Węgorzewo 7.5 hours or to Giżycko 4.5 hours), South (to Ruciane Nida 2.5 hours) or East (Śniardwy Lake – the biggest lake in Poland 113.8 sq. km – cruise 2 hours); walking, dining and taking it easy; outing to the Łuknajno Reserve (see explore!).

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+ Sailing on the lakes; bike trip to the wild animal park in Kadzidłowo, renting a cottage for a longer stay.

[min: 1 day – best: 2-3 days – max: 5-7 days]

* AUGUSTÓW CANAL + CZARNA HAŃCZA RIVER (4)

Using Augustów as your base, there are two river explorations with a choice of trip durations. The more laid back option lasts 2-3 hours and takes you to some of the natural beauty and technological craftsmanship of the 112 km long Augustów canal (the locks were built 1824-1839). The romantic Czarna Hańcza canoe route starts from Lake Hańcza (this is the most ambitious route), meandering into the Wigry National Park before joining the Augustów canal. There is an alternative over-land shortcut between Lake Serwy and Bryzgieł.

++ One of the beautiful short boat voyages from Augustów (these days, a very popular direction is northwest to Lake Necko & towards the Rospuda river valley); very scenic canoeing along Czarna Hańcza – the length depends on your endurance and time (the best stretch is between Wigry and the Augustowski canal: Frącki-Jałowy Róg).

+ Gabowe Grady village south of Augustów (Starowiercy – “Old Believers” sect community); wooden church in Studzieniczna; centre of Augustów; if you take the longer Czarna Hańcza tour then: Wigry and Suwałki Lakes.

[min: 4 hours – best: 7-12 days (shorter Czarna Hańcza loop) – max: 14-20 days (longer Czarna Hańcza)]

* BIEBRZA NATIONAL PARK (5)

The largest national park and the greatest bird paradise in Poland as well as one of the best in Europe. Rich wetland life (otter, beaver, wolf, elk) and scenic lowland countryside. 500 hiking trails, 135 boat trails, 3 cycling trails.

++ Awesome bird-watching in spring (when the waters rise) in Czerwone Bagna (Red Marsh); 18 km red trail around Czerwone Bagna starting and ending in Grzedy (includes the Wilcza Góra Observation Tower); 4 km red trail to/from Gugny in the southern part (Bagno Ławki).

+ Kayaking as far as you like from Lipsk up to Brzostowo, round trip by car; 19th century fortress in Osowo.

[min: 4 hours – best: 2 days – max: 4-6 days]

* FROMBORK (6)

Frombork is a very scenic Gothic city, connected with the life of Nicolaus Copernicus and as such, influential on human history. The great astronomer spent most of the later part of his life here, between 1510 and 1543. Here he made his observations that showed the Earth rotates around the Sun and not the other way round.

++ Large 14th century Gothic cathedral (great interiors, Copernicus' tomb, Baroque organ concerts); Copernicus Museum in Old Bishops' Palace; and his study up in Copernicus Tower; Belfry (Radziejowskiego) Tower: planetarium and the especially breathtaking view of the Vistula lagoon.

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+ Wieża wodna (Water tower): view, medicine history museum in Śpital św. Ducha (Hospital of the Holy Ghost), and St. Adalbert's (Wojciech) church.
[min: 3 hours – best: 5 hours – max: 1 day]

* GIERŁOŻ & KĘTRZYN (7)

The most interesting place near the town of Kętrzyn is the Wolf's Lair (Wilczy Szaniec) with its enormous WW2 bunkers where Adolf Hitler spent most of his time between 1941 and 1944 until an unsuccessful assassination attempt by Stauffenberg ("Valkyrie", starring Tom Cruise, is a movie about this assassination attempt). Kętrzyn also makes a good base for trips to Reszel and Święta Lipka.

++ Remnants of the impressive facilities built for the top brass of the Third Reich and the SS living quarters in Gierłoż.

+ Atmospheric old town of Kętrzyn (formerly Rastenburg) with a reconstructed Teutonic Knights' castle (now museum) and the quite interesting St. George's Gothic church.

[min: 3 hours – best: 2 days including more trips from Kętrzyn – max: 3 days]

* KRUTYNIA RIVER (8)

The Krutynia River is regarded as the best destination for kayaking or canoeing in Poland (along with the Czarna Hańcza River) and one of the finest means of exploring the beauty of Masuria. This gentle route starts in Sorkwity (west of Mrągowo) and ends in Ruciane Nida. The river is approx. 100 km long and flows through 50 small lakes.

++ Adventurous river tour.

+ If you have little time, visit just Sorkwity at Łampackie Lake (start of the kayaking route) and enjoy the lake views, English style castle and a Protestant church.

[min: 2 hours, best: 9-11 days for the entire kayaking route]

* LIDZBARK WARMIŃSKI (9)

The most impressive castle in the area. Founded by the Teutonic Knights, it later became a seat of the powerful Warmian bishops.

++ Gothic chambers; fascinating Grand Refectory; museum of Warmia; Rococo chapel; museum of modern Polish art; a collection of precious 17th-20th century Russian icons.

+ Remnants of the old town by the castle (walls and the 14th-15th century parish church).

[min: 1.5 hours, best: 2.5 hours, max: 6 hours]

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* OLSZTYN (10)

The best urban retreat in North-Eastern Poland. It is both a gateway to natural marvels in the vicinity as well as a destination in itself. Besides the cozy historical centre, there are 15 lakes located in the municipal area.

++ Leisurely walks around the Old Town (the Main Square, cafés, pubs) and across the Łyna River.

+ Castle of the Warmia Bishops (a very interesting Museum of Warmia and Masuria, also Copernicus-themed exhibits); St. James' parish church (splendid vault); astronomy observatory in an old water tower; the new Planetarium; and a glass of beer by Ukiel Lake (in the evening, to recover).

[min: 2 hours – best: 8 hours – max: 2 days]

* STORK TRAIL (11)

Allegedly every fourth stork on Earth, of which there are 160 thousand, nests in Poland. The highest stork concentration is in Masuria. The ubiquitous presence (May-August) of these elegant birds of luck makes this region even more beautiful. The official Stork Trail stretches to the Russian border.

++ Visit Żywkowo (5 farmsteads and up to 50 stork nests).

+ Go along the whole trail: Żywkowo, Toprzyny, Lejdy, Szczurkowo, Lwowiec, Duje, and Brzeźnica.

[min: 1 hour – max: your entire holiday, because if you stay in Masuria the storks will be nearby almost all the time]

* SUWAŁKI LAKES (12)

Probably the least visited of the most beautiful landscapes in Poland. Close to Lithuania and Russia, this is a wonderful countryside with plenty of lakes, forests, small rolling hills and a very romantic feel. Do come to cycle or at least drive around, it is really worth it.

++ Hiking/cycling from Smolniki: around Lake Jaczno or to Lake Hańcza (start of kayaking the Czarna Hańcza, the deepest lake in Poland) or to Gulbieniszki and Cisowa Góra (place of ancient pagan rituals).

+ Observation point in Turtul + a walk to Wodзилki: molenna (Old Believers' church) and banya (steam bath open to the public); post glacial stones in Bachanowo; Góra Zamkowa (Castle Mountain) near Szurpiły: remains of the Jatzvingian Baltic tribe fortress, conquered by Teutonic crusaders in 1283.

[min: 3 hours – best: 5 hours – max: 1 day]

* ŚWIĘTA LIPKA (13)

An important centre of Marian worship, Święta Lipka is charmingly located between two lakes in the middle of nowhere. It is one of the most beautiful Baroque architectural sights in Poland and a must-see in Masuria.

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++ Church of Our Lady (1687-1693): amazing frescoes, stucco work, 19m high altar, miraculous holy lime tree (święta lipka), plus an organ with 5,000 pipes and moving figures (frequent short concerts).

+ The cloisters around the shrine.

[min: 1 hour – best: 2 hours – max: 6 hours]

4. eXPLORE! PLACES

WARMIA-MASURIA (WARMIŃSKO-MAZURSKIE) VOIVODESHIP

ELK (14)

This provincial town of 50,000 inhabitants is a fairly good base for discovering the less visited lakes of Eastern Masuria. There are several good or acceptable hotels, a seasonal narrow-gauge railway, plus several hiking, cycling and kayaking trails.

GIŻYCKO (15)

A popular holidaymakers town between Lakes Niegocin and Kisajno, and one of the best locations for anyone fond of sailing or on the way to the northern part of Masuria. The most culturally interesting sight is the Boyen fortress, built in the 19th century and largely destroyed in 1945. The remnants of the ninety military buildings are still impressive.

GRUNWALD (16)

In 1410 the combined Polish and Lithuanian forces defeated the Order of the Teutonic Knights at Grunwald – one of the largest and most influential battles of the Middle Ages. Nowadays, there is a memorial and a museum. If you happen to be there around July 15, do not miss the historical reenactment.

ŁUKNAJNO LAKE (17)

This natural reserve is a favorite outing from Mikołajki. Especially in the spring and summer, it is a veritable waterfowl paradise – and it reputedly has the biggest population of wild swans in Europe.

MORAĞ (18)

This small old town still retains something of its pre-war Prussian character (called Mohrungen at that time). The local highlight is the Dohna Palace housing the museum of German philosopher J.G. Herder, who was born here in 1744.

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MRAĞOWO (19)

Mrągowo on the shore of Czos Lake is known for its country music festival (Piknik Country) held every July. Hiking, cycling, general recreation and a trip to the stag reserve in Kosewo (good for kids). There are many good hotels and a laid-back holidaymaking atmosphere. If you are around in the winter, there are two ski lifts on a gentle slope of Góra Czterech Wiatrów ("the mountain of four winds") with an impressive view of Czos Lake.

NIDZICA (20)

A fairly interesting reconstructed castle of the Teutonic Knights and, a few kilometers to the north, very picturesque sources of the Łyna River.

OLSZTYNEK (21)

One of the most beautiful open-air museums in Poland and the place to see original 18th-19th centuries wooden architecture from Warmia, Masuria and Lithuania. If you are interested in former Eastern Prussia, you might want to see the Olsztynek town fortifications and the little of what is left from the Hindenburg mausoleum, until 1945 commemorating the German victory over the Russians in 1914 (check the old photos on the Internet).

ORNETA (22)

This charming and small historical town has a 14th century St. John Evangelist and St. John Baptist church, very remarkable both for its size and interiors, and an attractive town hall.

RAPA (23)

An eerie place close to the Russian border, known for the 19th century tomb built for the Fahrenheids, an aristocratic Prussian family. The tomb is in the shape of an Egyptian pyramid, which is said to facilitate the mummification process of the bodies.

RESZEL (24)

Probably the best tiny medieval town in this part of Poland. It makes a pleasant stop, where you can walk around and enjoy the historical district with its original street plan. You can visit the castle (houses a good Polish art gallery and offers a splendid view from the tower), two old bridges and the huge parish church of St. Paul and St. Peter.

STAŃCZYKI (25)

Amid scenic setting, a curious pair of huge viaducts (31.5 m high, 150 m long) were built in 1910 by German engineers. They are the biggest of its kind in Poland, and the most striking thing about them, as a result of the unpredictable course of history, is that they have absolutely no practical use.

PODLACHIA (PODLASKIE) VOIVODESHIP

BIAŁYSTOK (26)

This provincial capital is not a frequent destination for the casual visitor, but it has the advantage as the only real urban centre in the area with some good hotels. Besides this, Białystok has several interesting churches, both Orthodox and Catholic, at least two of them are noteworthy and really large: Cerkiew Św. Ducha (Orthodox Church of the Holy Spirit) outside the centre and the Catholic Św. Rocha (valuable interwar modernist architecture). See the Branicki palace and gardens as well as the statue of Ludwik Zamenhof, the creator of Esperanto, born here in 1859.

CIECHANOWIEC (27)

One of the many good Polish open-air museums is on the border of the Masovia region. There are lots of original wooden cottages and other rural buildings, including a functioning water mill.

DROHICZYN (28)

If you are passing by, stop for a while in this small forgotten town dreaming of bygone days of glory when it boasted four monasteries. Look at the churches and glance out towards the Bug River from the Góra Zamkowa observation point. The Bug river reserve to the south-east is really quite photogenic, and you might consider taking a picnic basket with you.

GRABARKA (29)

The mystic and holy mountain is a pilgrimage point for people of the Orthodox Christian faith. There is a nunnery, miraculous fountain and a hill of wooden three-bar crosses, brought here by the pilgrims.

HAJNÓWKA (30)

Visit the contemporary Orthodox church of the Holy Trinity (Cerkiew Św. Trójcy, built 1982) – the interesting architecture was highlighted by the Lonely Planet guide to Poland, which has a picture of it on the cover. Another local attraction is a narrow gauge railway to the forest village of Topiło (a way to experience the Białowieża forest). If you have more time, you can visit several other peculiar villages (Nowe Berezewo, Czyże, Łokniki, Pasyнки, and Widowo) on the Tsar's Route (Carski Szlak or Carski Hostinec) between Hajnówka and Bielsk Podlaski. In the 19th century many Russian tsars passed these villages on their way to the bison hunting grounds in Białowieża Forest (30 km trip: hiking, cycling, car – as you like it).

NAREW NATIONAL PARK (31)

Playfully nicknamed as the 'Polish Amazon', the Narew meanders through a 45-km long swampy valley. The area is a habitat for 130 bird species and beavers. For humans it is advisable to take a boat from Kurowo.

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SUWAŁKI (32)

Probably the most absorbing thing about Suwałki is some 15 km to the north is the Cmentarzysko Jaćwingów, a huge archeological site of the Jacvingians, one the biggest Baltic pagan tribe living on the territory of present-day Poland. The burial mounds (kurhany) of Jacvingian princes date from the 2nd-4th centuries AD, and are up to 21 m wide. Next to this cemetery is a huge Soviet War cemetery.

KRUSZYNIANY (33)

The presence of a Tartar community, dating back to the 17th century, is one of the surprises of the culturally diverse Podlachia region. Kruszyńniany has the bigger of their two surviving wooden mosques. Remember to try Tartar cuisine and visit the cemetery (mizar).

BOHONIKI (34)

The other Tartar mosque and cemetery is located in Bohoniki (10 km north of Kruszyńniany). If you are seriously interested in the history of Tatars in Poland, visit the museum in nearby town of Sokółka.

SIEMIANÓWKA LAKE (35)

This man-made lake surrounded by deep forests resembles the end of the world, which makes it no surprise that this was a filming location for "The Chronicles of Narnia". A touch of civilization is given by the sleepy railway station on the border with Belarus, a bridge, and an information board about the lake's role in the Hollywood blockbuster.

SUPRAŚL (36)

This small town belongs to Podlachia's off-the-beaten-path favorites: it is a good idea to stop at the Orthodox St. Basil's monastery (impressive church); see the wooden weavers' houses (domy tkaczy) and the eclectic Buchholtz Palace.

TYKOCIN (37)

A very pleasant little town. Set by the Narew River it has a drowsy triangular square with a fine Baroque church featuring an interesting polychromy, while a short walk away is the most beautiful Jewish synagogue (now a museum) in northern Poland. Other features are the monument of the White Eagle (the highest Polish order was awarded for the first time in Tykocin), the official European Stork Village of Pentowo and an unusual accommodation facility at Dworek nad Łąkami in Kiermusy, a few kilometers to the west.

WIGRY NATIONAL PARK (38)

If you are interested in the Czarna Hańcza kayak trail but do not have the time or inclination and yet want to see these crystal-clear lakes, then you have a choice of

around 50 of them in the Wigry National Park. The biggest lake, Wigry, is extremely beautiful and John Paul II visited it during his 1999 pilgrimage. There are many perfect hiking and cycling trails in the area. Do remember to visit the Camaldolese Monastery and the observation point in Bryzgiel.

5. WHAT CAN WE DO FOR YOU IN SELECTED DESTINATIONS

NORTH-EASTERN POLAND

- Reservations of 60 contracted hotels (1-4 stars) and guesthouses. Tourist information on an additional 300 properties.
- Car rental: we partner with 2 trusted local rental agencies. Larger car rental offer if you hire your car from either Warsaw (Central-Eastern) or Gdańsk (North-Western).
- Private tailor-made tours: for North-East of Poland it is advisable to book a self-drive tour (the natural reserves are best for independent travelers).
- Reservation of private villas and holiday homes in Masuria.
- 6 SPA hotels (5 in Masuria or Warmia: Bartoszyce, Łukta, Mrągowo, Ruciane-Nida, Wzgórza Dylewskie)
- Kayaking holidays, yacht charter, bird watching.
- On request we can also arrange a chauffeur-driven tour or a railway tour. Coach rental. Private chartered planes. (Your journey should start in Warsaw or Gdańsk).
- Professional support and consultancy before and during your tour: free restaurant and event booking; 24/7 emergency phone line during your stay in Poland; complimentary restaurant guides sent in advance to your postal address.
- Incentive and teambuilding programs in cities or in the countryside.

BIAŁOWIEŻA

- 2 hotels available online.
- 1 SPA hotel.
- Two-day private excursions from Warsaw.
- Cycling tours (available in German language).

BIAŁYSTOK

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- 7 best hotels in town available online.
- 20 car models available for rental.
- Convenient railway connection from Warsaw (train tickets purchase).

GIŻYCKO

- 3 best hotels in town available online.

ELBLĄG

- 3 best hotels in town available online.
- Reservations for the Elbląg-Ostróda canal voyage.
- A short stop at the canal during GRAND TOUR OF POLAND, our fixed-date Escorted tour.

ELK

- 2 best hotels in town available online.

KĘTRZYN

- 3 best hotels in town available online.

MIKOŁAJKI

- 3 of the best hotels in town available online.
- Option of reservation of private holiday villas.

MRĄGOWO

- 4 best hotels in town available online.

OLSZTYN

- 4 best hotels in town available online.
- Option of rail tour from Warsaw (train tickets purchase).

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