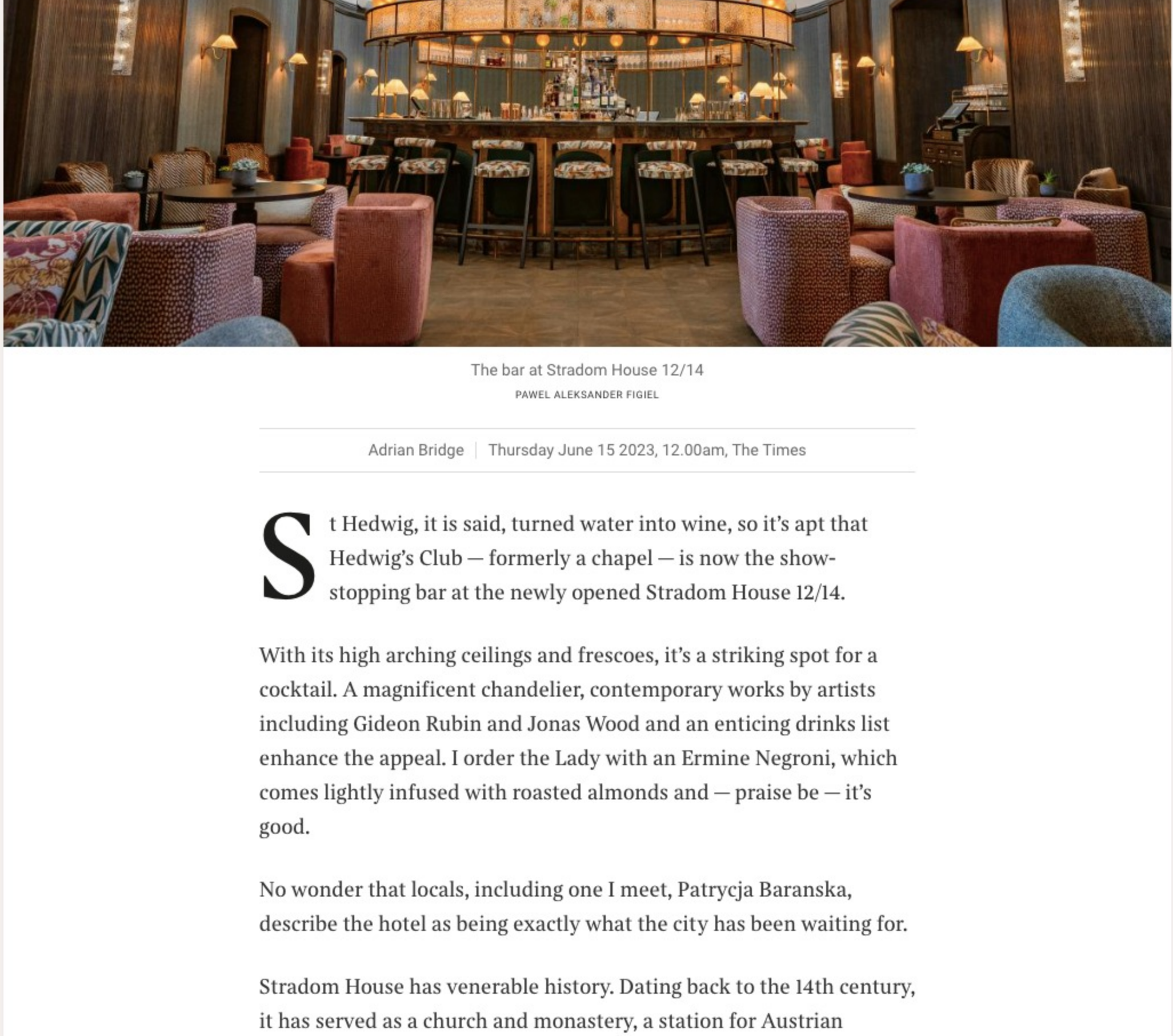


The hot new Krakow hotel inspired by Soho House

There's a bar in a former chapel, works by Polish artists on the walls and design inspired by the trendy members' club. Our writer is first in



The bar at Stradom House 12/14. PAMEL ALEXANDER FIGIEL

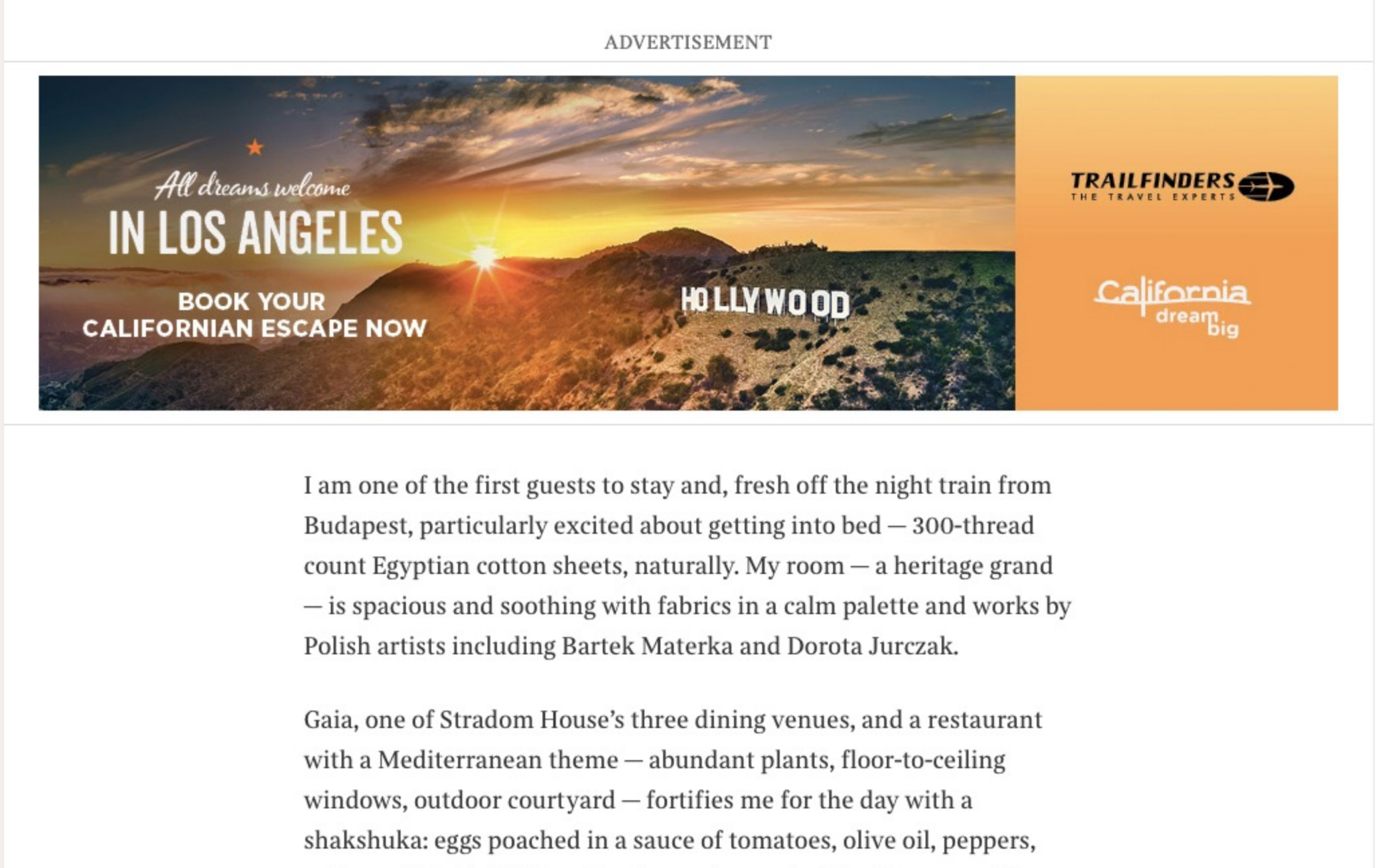
Adrian Bridge Thursday, June 15 2023, 12:00am, The Times

St Hedwig, it is said, turned water into wine, so it's apt that Hedwig's Club — formerly a chapel — is now the show-stopping bar at the newly opened Stradom House 12/14.

With its high arching ceilings and frescoes, it's a striking spot for a cocktail. A magnificent chandelier, contemporary works by artists including Gideon Rubin and Jonas Wood and an enticing drinks list enhance the appeal. I order the Lady with an Ermine Negroni, which comes lightly infused with roasted almonds and — praise be — it's good.

No wonder that locals, including one I meet, Patrycja Baranska, describe the hotel as being exactly what the city has been waiting for.

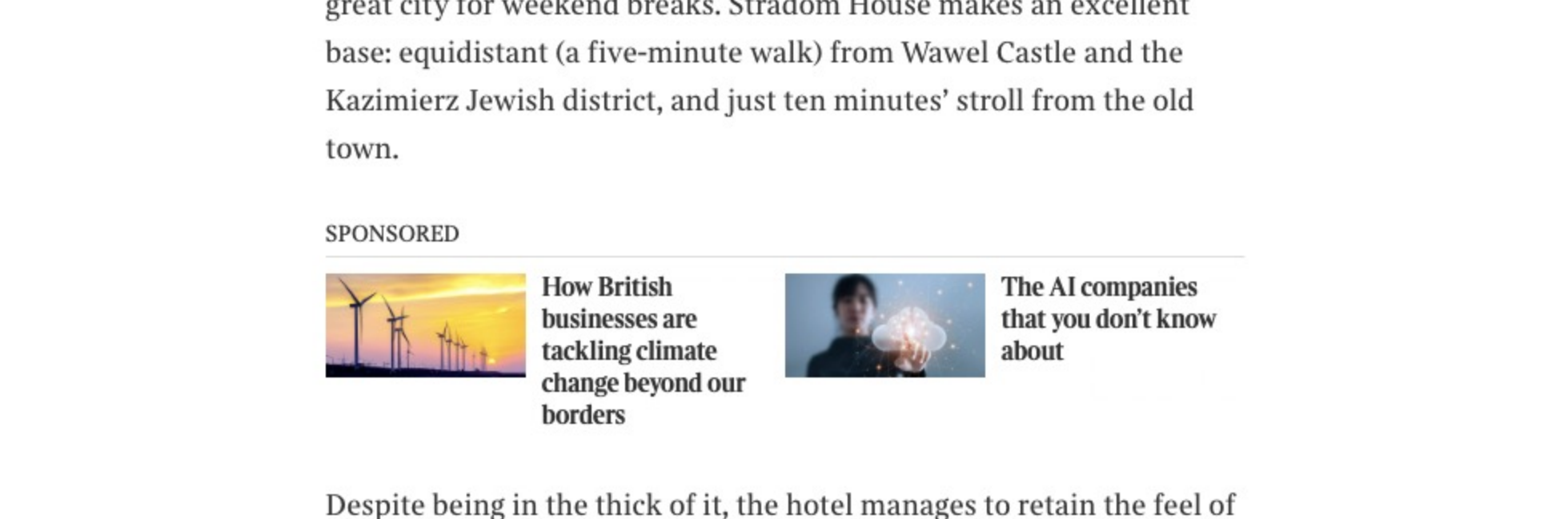
Stradom House has venerable history. Dating back to the 14th century, it has served as a church and monastery, a station for Austrian soldiers, a hospital for wounded troops from the First World War and, in the communist era, it was used as social housing. From the outside it's grand, a worthy neighbour to the medieval, baroque and Renaissance treasures that characterise Krakow. But the building was in a sorry state — derelict and deserted — when in 2017 it was bought by Angel Poland, a property developer that specialises in designer residences, offices and hotels.



Interiors were masterminded by Soho House's designer ADC Atelier. STRADOM HOUSE

The idea was to create a new kind of hotel in Krakow, a place with a home-from-home vibe, inspired by Soho House. It is no accident that the hotel's interiors — a fusion of heritage and hip — were masterminded by ADC Atelier, whose founder was behind the Soho House design, or that key staff, including the general manager, Lionel Valla, have worked at Soho House Berlin. The restoration has taken longer than expected, slowed by the discovery of a cemetery below the foundations, legal challenges and, of course, Covid. But in April Stradom House 12/14 — a member of Marriott's Autograph Collection — finally opened.

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I am one of the first guests to stay and, fresh off the night train from Budapest, particularly excited about getting into bed — 300-thread count Egyptian cotton sheets, naturally. My room — a heritage grand — is spacious and soothing with fabrics in a calm palette and works by Polish artists including Bartek Materka and Dorota Jurczak.

Gaia, one of Stradom House's three dining venues, and a restaurant with a Mediterranean theme — abundant plants, floor-to-ceiling windows, outdoor courtyard — fortifies me for the day with a shakshuka: eggs poached in a sauce of tomatoes, olive oil, peppers, onion and garlic. Of the other two restaurants, John Dory specialises in fish and Hedwig's Club offers tapas-style dishes such as crispy shrimp tempura and posh chicken nuggets. I like the natty staff uniforms: beige trousers, green-brown jackets and smart white trainers. They were designed by Tomek Wierski, who's behind the Polish fashion brand MISBHV, and one of several Poles brought in as part of the hotel's commitment to using local talent.

The engagement with the local community also extends to a Soho House-style membership scheme offering access to the hotel's pool, fitness zone and an Alexandra Soveral-influenced Sol Spa, masterminded by the holistic practitioner and aromatherapist Alexandra Soveral, which plays on Krakow's ancient ties to salt mining. The vast chapel loft suite, occupying 155 square metres, will attract top-end travellers. "This is my Mona Lisa!" Valla declares as he gives me a sneak preview. It will come with a private kitchen, dining area and a grand piano and cost £1,027 a night.

Krakow prides itself on being the cultural capital of Poland and it's a great city for weekend breaks. Stradom House makes an excellent base: equidistant (a five-minute walk) from Wawel Castle and the Kazimierz Jewish district, and just ten minutes' stroll from the old town.

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Despite being in the thick of it, the hotel manages to retain the feel of a retreat. As I settle into the courtyard for an early evening cocktail, Marcin Pienkosz, head chef of Gaia and a man who, like Valla, has worked at the Berlin Soho House, suggests a courgette salad and a ratatouille with slightly charred cauliflower that turns out to be sensational. "We want people coming here to share the food, share the love, share the emotions," Pienkosz says. The Briton in me can't quite go that far, but there's a richness to the experiences I have in Krakow that goes way beyond my expectations.

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Some of the stories moved me: of the time Pope John Paul II came to Poland in 1979, addressing millions and giving heart to those seeking to topple communism; of the pain still felt over the time Poland was wiped from the map of Europe; of the display in Wawel Castle of sculptures from the Lviv National Art Gallery, given temporary home to protect them here.

Krakow may be a city of past glories, but it is a living, breathing wonder, a place of new impulses, new openings and new possibilities.

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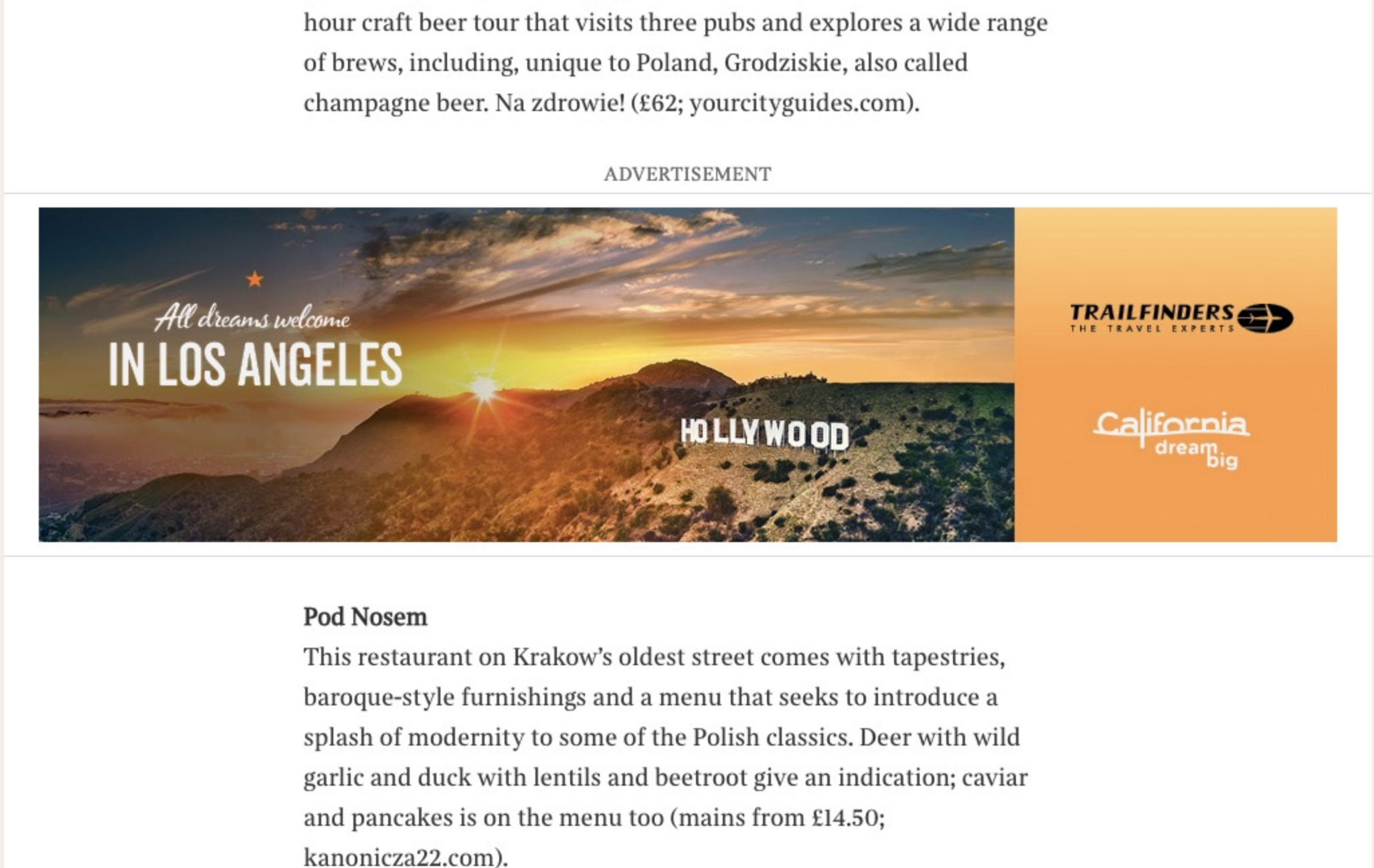
Adrian Bridge was a guest of Stradom House 12/14, which has room-only doubles from £150 (stradomhouse.com)

What to do and where to stay in Krakow

What to do

Star Miasto (old town)

The old town of Krakow, containing the largest medieval square in Europe, is something of a wonder in Poland — a vast collection of buildings spanning gothic, renaissance and baroque styles. Unlike other big cities in Poland, Krakow was undamaged in the Second World War and streets such as Florianska, part of the Royal Route, will transport you back to when the city was one of Europe's wealthiest and a key location in an empire that stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Treasures include St Mary's Basilica, the Cloth Hall, St Florian's Gate, Leonardo da Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine* at the Czartoryski Museum (£12.50, mnk.pl/oddzial) and the Jagiellonian University. The latter was established in 1364 and is one of the oldest in the world with alumni including Copernicus and Pope John Paul II.



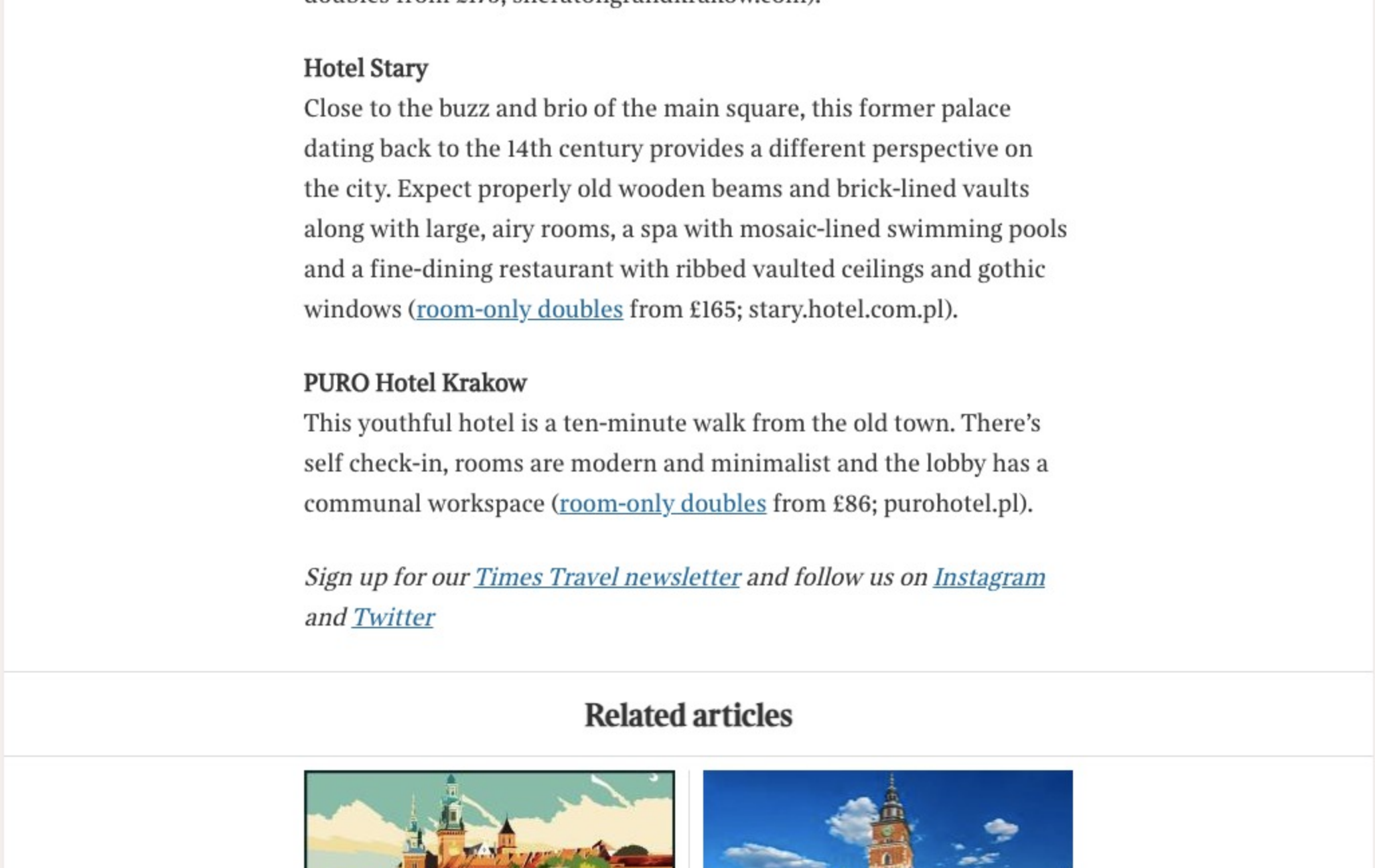
Wawel Cathedral, Krakow. GETTY IMAGES

Wawel Castle and Cathedral

On a misty day the castle complex on the hill rising above the city has a magical quality with spectacular views of the city. It contains a fine selection of the riches amassed over centuries by the Polish royals who lived here — from art treasures and tapestries to an extraordinary collection of tents captured from the Turks when they tried (and failed) to capture Vienna in 1683. There's also a magnificent sword once used in coronation ceremonies (£29; wawel.krakow.pl). A short walk away, the cathedral is the resting place of Poland's kings and queens, mixed in with Renaissance chapels and priceless religious works of art (£4.25; katedra-wawelska.pl).

Kazimierz Jewish district

Over the past 25 years Krakow's once-vibrant Jewish Quarter has undergone an extraordinary transformation and is now once again a place of working synagogues, bookshops and a Jewish museum. There has been a modest revival of the Jewish community, now believed to number some 5,000. This remains a fraction of the 70,000 who lived in the city before the Second World War. Kazimierz (or Kazi as it is often called) is widely regarded as the coolest part of town. Tourists and Krakovians come here to chill, clink glasses, eat hummus and falafel and tune into the haunting melodies of klezmer; the soulful folk music once played by the Ashkenazi Jews of central and eastern Europe.



Wieliczka salt mine. ALAMY

Wieliczka salt mine

The salt mine of Wieliczka, six miles southeast of Krakow, has played a part in the city's economic life for 700 years. While no longer a working mine, it is a fascinating place to visit, principally to see the extraordinary chapel and statues of holy figures crafted from rock salt by miners seeking divine protection from the perils of their underground existence. These include St Joseph and the Madonna and child and a recreation of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (£24; wieliczka-saltmine.com).

Auschwitz-Birkenau

While you could never describe Auschwitz-Birkenau, located 43 miles west of Krakow, as an attraction, the site, complete with barracks, the belongings of camp inmates, the harrowing "Arbeit macht frei" (work sets you free) sign at the entrance and remains of the gas chambers can — and should — be visited. It serves as a terrifying reminder of the depths to which humanity can sink (free entrance; guide £15; auschwitz.org).

Craft beer tour

With an extraordinary number of bars serving very reasonably priced beer (£3 a pint), Krakow has long been popular with stag parties and visitors looking for fun. But for those thirsting for a more in-depth discovery of Krakow's booming brewing culture, there are tours that go well beyond your average pilsner. Your City Guides offers a three-hour craft beer tour that visits three pubs and explores a wide range of brews, including, unique to Poland, Grodziskie, also called champagne beer. Na zdrowie! (£62; yourcityguides.com).

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Pod Nosem

This restaurant on Krakow's oldest street comes with tapestries, baroque-style furnishings and a menu that seeks to introduce a splash of modernity to some of the Polish classics. Deer with wild garlic and duck with lentils and beetroot give an indication; caviar and pancakes is on the menu too (mains from £14.50; kanonicza22.com).

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Where to stay

Copernicus

Copernicus

The 1500s — Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus stayed here in the 1500s — and it still draws an illustrious crowd. Just below Wawel Castle, the hotel will transport guests back through the centuries without having to forgo 21st-century comforts. It's a member of the Relais & Châteaux hotel association with a fine-dining restaurant, L'Occitane amenities and a small swimming pool (room-only doubles from £155; copernicus.hotel.com.pl).

Sheraton Grand Krakow

This substantial but stylish Sheraton on the Vistula river offers a rock-solid five-star experience: neat spacious rooms in grey and four restaurants (one Italian), a large fitness area and swimming pool and a roof-top terrace with views of the castle and cathedral (room-only doubles from £175; sheratongrandkrakow.com).

Hotel Stary

Close to the buzz and brio of the main square, this former palace dating back to the 14th century provides a different perspective on the city. Expect properly old wooden beams and brick-lined vaults along with large, airy rooms, a spa with mosaic-lined swimming pools and a fine-dining restaurant with ribbed vaulted ceilings and gothic windows (room-only doubles from £165; stary.hotel.com.pl).

PURO Hotel Krakow

This check-in, rooms are modern and minimalist and the lobby has a communal workspace (room-only doubles from £86; purohotel.pl).

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