Ideal for an autumn break, Warsaw is one of Europe’s most vibrant yet overlooked cities. Domhnall O’Donoghue visited the Polish capital recently, and if asked to vote for his new favourite destination, he will happily go to the Poles.

PHOENIX from the FLAMES

It is the everyday apple that best illustrates the spirit of the Polish people. Being Europe’s largest producer of the fruit, they were recently faced with a crisis when old foes Russia imposed a somewhat guileful embargo on all food exports from the West, leaving the country with over two and half million tonnes of the stuff sitting idle.

Rather than being yellow-bellied and succumbing to the demands of Putin and his cronies, the fearless Poles took matters into their own hands instead and came up with a long list of inventive ways to use the excess produce. As a result, menus in their delicious restaurants are awash with apple-related recipes; charming cafés feature numerous baskets overflowing with the fruit; jams and chutneys are now as common as old shoe, while cider is currently the tippel-du-jour.

Similar to Ireland, Poland has often been cast as the underdog but it’s a role these foolhardy warriors are unwilling to play.

Overcoming obstacles is second nature to Poland, however. With a population of over 37 million people, Warsaw, the country’s capital and largest city, was left in complete ruins following the Second World War, but in the subsequent years, it has battled bravely to re-establish itself and is currently one of Europe’s best-kept secrets. It may not have the aesthetic beauty of Paris or Madrid, but Warsaw is still a fantastic and edgy destination with a wealth of diverse places to visit and experience, from first-rate museums to captivating outdoor spaces, not to mention a vast array of both modern and traditional eateries and bars. And, of course, it has many apples – lots of them.

As they say, an apple a day...
PLACES TO VISIT

PALACE OF CULTURE AND SCIENCE
Arguably Warsaw’s most recognisable building, the PALACE OF CULTURE AND SCIENCE (plak.pl) is a towering historical landmark that wouldn’t look out of place in New York. While impressive to look at, its story is a bittersweet one with the majority of locals viewing the 231-metre structure as an unwanted gift from the Soviets during the communism era of the 1950s. Despite frequent calls to have it demolished and free the city of such a glaring reminder of one of the city’s more difficult times, the Palace of Culture and Science has, luckily, survived and now boasts a cinema, theatres, museums and scientific institutions, as well as a viewing deck on the 30th floor that offers stunning panoramic views of the capital. Incidentally, when The Rolling Stones played here in 1967, instead of accepting a payment in local Zlotys, a currency difficult to exchange, Mick Jagger and friends opted for two wagons of Vodka. One would wager that in their swift transportation out of the city, no moss was gathered!

OLD TOWN
One of the most prominent tourist attractions in Warsaw is the OLD TOWN. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the picturesque area is rich in medieval architecture and charming squares with a cornucopia of cafes and restaurants dotted throughout. Look out for the mermaid in the Old Town Market Square. Just outside the walls, you’ll stumble across the birthplace of two-time Nobel Prize winner, MARIE CURIE. Now a museum (museum-msc.pl), followers of science will be in their, ahem, element.

WARSAW RISING MUSEUM & MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF POLISH JEWS
Another must-see is the WARSAW RISING MUSEUM (1944.pl), an interactive tribute to those who fought and died for independence during Nazi occupation. Opened on the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of fighting, the brilliant, if somewhat chaotic museum contains more than 800 exhibition items including a replica of a Liberator B-24 bomber as well as 1,500 photographs, films and sound recordings. Be sure to catch the short but impressive 3D film that gives a bird’s eye view of the city lying in ruins following the war; it will leave you with a lump in your throat. Recently opened and beautifully designed by Finnish architect Rainer Mahlamäki, the MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF POLISH JEWS (jewishmuseum.org.pl) immerses visitors in the world of the country’s Jewish community, from their arrival as travelling merchants in medieval times to present day.
CHOPIN MUSEUM
Composer and virtuoso pianist Frédéric Chopin, Warsaw’s most famous son, is celebrated at the CHOPIN MUSEUM (chopin.museum), which houses over 5,000 objects, including autograph manuscripts, first editions, correspondences and documents as well as paintings and sculptures. One of the many jewels in Warsaw’s crown, it’s sure to strike the right note with classical music enthusiasts.

LAZIENKI KRÓLEWSKIE PARK
The city’s reverence to Chopin is once again seen in LAZIENKI KRÓLEWSKIE (lazienki-krolewskie.pl), a truly stunning park found in central Warsaw. At its main entrance, stands a striking monument dedicated to the composer, beside which many outdoor concerts take place over the summer months. Venture further and you will encounter red squirrels, birds and beautiful peacocks, all of whom have made this enchanting park their home.

Other highlights include the breathtaking PALAC NA WODZIE (the Palace on the Water), MYŚLEWICKI PALACE, the LITTLE WHITE HOUSE and the BELWEDER, the one-time home of Polish presidents. Not only is Lazienki Królewskie fit for a president; it’s also fit for a king.

CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART AND THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Nearby, in Ujazdowski Castle, is the CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART (czow.art.pl), an atmospheric and edgy museum that showcases the work of both local and international artists, including our very own Ella de Burca. You really can’t go anywhere...!

Back in the city, the MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (artmuseum.pl), with its free admission, is a haven for lovers of visual arts, design and architecture. Miss it at your peril.

SOHO FACTORY AND THE NEON MUSEUM
Located on the former industrial premises of the pre-WWII munitions factory, the SOHO FACTORY (sohofactory.pl) is now a hotspot of art, fashion and culture. Its shining light, however, is the NEON MUSEUM (neonmuseum.org), a modest but unforgettable collection of electric advertising neon signs from the streets and buildings of Warsaw, perfectly exemplifying the city’s post-war era.

WARSAW’S NATIONAL STADIUM
Irish football enthusiasts are sure to be familiar with WARSAW’S NATIONAL STADIUM (stadionnarodowy.org.pl), specifically built for 2012’s European Football Championship. What fans might not know is that when the stadium isn’t busy hosting various sporting or music events, it is sending fearless tourists down a zip line, a ridiculously high cable that runs diagonally across the entire pitch. Not for the faint-hearted.
RESTAURANTS, BARS & CLUBS

There is, mercifully, far more to Polish cuisine than cabbage, stews and pierogi. In fact, the city is awash with top-notch restaurants that could proudly compete with the world’s best.

Be sure to try out OPASŁY TOM, run by former violinist and multiple Michelin award-winner, Agata Wojda. The delightfully delicious TAMKA 43 (tamka43.pl) and the elegant and sophisticated BRASERIE WARSZAWSKA (brasseriewarszawska.pl) will not disappoint either.

Meat-lovers, meanwhile, will find themselves in heaven after a visit to the BUTCHERY & WINE (butcheryandwine.pl), but be prepared to leave with a bulging stomach, while fashion-lovers can refuel the batteries at CONCEPT 13, an innovative restaurant located at the top floor of the newly opened, uber-fashionable VITKAC DEPARTMENT STORE (vitkac.com).

Elsewhere, SŁOMKI WARSZAWY (sloomkiwarszawy.pl) is one of the few examples on Warsaw’s culinary map that combines gourmet cuisine with its own pastry shop—well, the heavenly cranberry meringue alone is worth making the trek to the restaurant, while those looking for more traditional fare are sure to enjoy the menu at DAWNE SŁOMKI (dawneslomki.pl).

And should you want to wash all that sumptuous food down with a tipple or two, there’s an endless selection of bars and clubs scattered throughout the city for you to enjoy, but be sure to familiarise yourself with the bustling PARKINGOWA STREET and the vibrant PLAC TRZECH KRYŻY, beside which is the exclusive and late-opening DELITE CLUB (deliteclub.com), a deservedly popular spot with party-goers.

Aside from these two areas, the trendy NA LATO bar and the neighbouring SYRENI ŚPIEWA night club (syrenispiewa.pl) are the most definitely worth a punt. Incidentally, Syreni Śpiew lays claim to being the first whiskey & cocktail bar in Poland and, as you would imagine, has almost every drink under the sun. Fortunately for our lovers, it snows a lot in Warsaw.

WARSAW’S UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Opened in 1959, WARSAW UNIVERSITY LIBRARY (bwww.uw.edu.pl) is home to one of the largest and most beautiful public roof gardens in Europe and is the perfect resting place, not only for students or researchers, but also for Warsaw residents and tourists. Plant-lovers will find much to admire, and those looking for a great view of the city will not be disappointed.

RIVERVIEW FITNESS CENTRE

If you need a moment of respite, you’d be wise to take yourself to the 43rd and 44th floors of Intercontinental Hotel (riverview.com.pl), where you will find the RIVERVIEW FITNESS CENTRE, which not only lays claim to a swimming pool, sauna and jacuzzi, but also to breathtaking views of the city.

WHERE TO STAY

H15 BOUTIQUE APARTMENTS (h15boutiqueapartments.com) is an award-winning hotel steeped in history, whose stunning décor easily marries the past with the present. Built in the latter part of the 19th century, the building fell into the hands of the Soviet Union in 1934, then later taken over by Third Reich in 1941. The shadows of its tumultuous past are now effortlessly blended with contemporary art and design, resulting in a beautiful and luxurious accommodation. With welcoming staff and a central location, the chic and highly regarded H15 Boutique Apartments will leave you wanting to extend your stay by days or even weeks!

HOW TO GET THERE: Flights to Warsaw come courtesy of both Aer Lingus (aerlingus.com), who flies into the central Chopin Airport, and Ryanair (ryanair.com), who flies into nearby Modlin. Visit warsawairport.pl for further information.