

APPENDIX 4: USER-VALUED REVIEWS (MOST ‘THANKS’ VOTES)/

Transcripts of TripAdvisor headings and reviews: most thanks received per rating category (Excellent; Very Good; Average; Poor; Terrible). Additional 2 x ‘terrible’ reviews, receiving more votes than highest amounts in other categories.

Note: all transcripts are transcribed as they appeared on TripAdvisor, except where minor typological/grammatical correction improves sense/legibility

'Excellent' rating review

53. Important visit (7 thanks)

The site is a must-see and is definitely worth it, but I think that's fairly obvious so instead I'm going to go into tips and logistics instead. I'd searched forums and looked for information before I went about the best way to get there and whether to do a tour or take the train or take a bus. I pieced together the information that I gathered and I think I got it pretty right, so wanted to share that to make it easy for others, as well as a couple of suggestions about things I would do differently next time.

First up, don't do a half-day tour. I'm normally fairly quick going through museums and read fast, but I spend 7 hours here. Half a day just wouldn't have been enough. I went on my own and was glad I did.

I'd been deciding between a bus and a train but in the end chose the train for 2 main reasons. I wanted to get there when the site opened to try to avoid crowds, and there was a train that left really early - at about 5:55am - and that's the one I took. It was scheduled to arrive at about 7:40, and then with a 20 minute walk to the site, that got me there pretty much right when it opened at 8am. There was a large school group there but few other visitors. Yes the bus is cheaper but they didn't seem to go that early and information was hard to find. The other reason I chose the train was because I had done a Jewish walking tour the day before and my guide said he always recommends the train because that's how the prisoners were transported there so it feels a bit more authentic. The train was on time and comfortable. Tickets were easy to purchase and not expensive.

At the site itself I just walked around on my own. If doing this I suggest buying a map of the site to help orientate yourself, and heading straight for the "popular" rooms like where the hair, glasses and prostheses are, and the one with the scroll of all the names. These are really poignant but they fill up later in the day with large groups and it can become a bit of a crush which means you lose some of that time to stand and reflect. I can't comment on whether the tours are worthwhile or not because I didn't do one, but the ones I saw were very large groups and I'm not sure that there was much time to really look at things properly. I'm sure they would have had some interesting stories however to help bring the site to life. I didn't buy a map to begin with and found myself kind of wandering aimlessly.

The other mistake I made was not taking with me a train and bus timetable. It meant that when I was ready to leave I didn't know whether the train, bus or minibus was coming first and had to just take a punt and choose a stop to wait at. I chose wrong and had to wait about half an hour for the bus.

Last tip: Definitely go to Auschwitz II-Birkenau. There is so much to see there and it is much more spread out and quiet so you can really walk around undisturbed and reflect. Because of this I found I got more out of this part than the Auschwitz I site which was unfortunately just a bit too crowded, even in late October.

‘Very Good’ rating review

98. Haunting and informative (8 thanks)

We toured Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II Birkenau in Feb. 2014. Everything seems untouched by time. It is important to read up on the subject before arriving. We had a tour guide that had a very rehearsed script. There were no pauses for questions, which is a downside on such a poignant site. This is an important place to see and the information, pictures, and artifacts presented throughout are presented with clarity. There was one important omission, however. The lack of information about the death of the homosexuals at the camps was a great omission. The tour guide, again, was quite rehearsed to raise the questions about the actions of the individual officers who worked at the camps. While the guide was important to point out what each building contained, and to set the atmosphere of each area of the camps we toured, it is also important to read about the facts of the Holocaust beforehand. Go, and expect to cry. On a practical note, there are ATMS and toilets (which cost 10 zloty). There are vending machines and a small kiosk to buy snacks, but no restaurant.

'Average' rating review

188. The Museum traded honesty for Polish reputation, to its discredit (11 thanks)

I just got back from the Museum at the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. One is not able to visit the camp without a guide, provided by the State-owned museum.

I won't write about the camps or the tour without first addressing a key fact about the camps as they operated: Information about the camps and what was going on within them was limited and mixed at the time. In social contexts truth itself is elusive, and people sometimes choose to act on what would be convenient for them to believe instead of what actually seems likelier.

At the time the camps were operational, most people in the civilized world at least knew the serious speculation about what the camps were up to. Most European Jews at least knew the rumors about the camps, for example, and some chose to flee or join Partisan groups – but many others hoped against hope that the rumors were false.

Of course many people were able to be very clear about the truth, because they had less personally at stake than those deciding between risky flight or risky trust of authority. Jews living thousands of miles away found it easier to be honest with themselves than the Jews facing the terrible choice, and so were less likely to believe the lies about the camps.

Certainly the allied governments knew very clearly what was going on, but did not make liberating the camps a priority (partly to protect sources of intelligence, and partly to concentrate the war effort on closing the circle around the Axis powers).

The people of Poland who lived in the vicinity of the camps certainly knew. Polish leaders certainly knew. There are endless proofs of Polish collaborators.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau museums were first set up in the very early post-war period. Presumably by the Polish government that was set up in large part according to Stalin's wishes and according to the Bolshevik program, according to the shameful agreements reached in Yalta (without any members of the Polish-government-in-exile, who had been duly and legally elected prior to the simultaneous invasion by the Bolsheviks and Germans).

It's almost 25 years since the illegal government of Poland fell, and more than 65 years after the camps were liberated. But, unfortunately, the museum presents the history of the camps in a manner that is more in line with what one would expect from the late Communist government than with what one expects from a Parliamentary democracy.

I suppose that I came to the museum and the camp, in part, to see and hear an apology on behalf of the Polish people, for the role which a not-small number of collaborators played in the Holocaust. I do not deny that there were strong and decent Poles, or that Poles were victimized by both Nazis and Bolsheviks. But many Poles collaborated willingly. And, I would contend, with their eyes open – though the official line of the museum disagrees with me here.

Not only were Poland's collaborators ignored and glossed over in the tour, a great deal of “spin” was applied to make questions of collaboration go away. At every turn the exhibit and guide showed, underscored and drew attention to the efforts by the Germans to hide the truth from the wider world. The implication was that the Polish people at the time were only victims and had no idea what was happening under their noses. This claim was actually stated as a fact by our guide, though I don't know how many guides make this claim on their tours.

Of course, they want to have their cake and eat it too. They want to ignore the existence of collaborators, but to still have heroes. At every opportunity it was mentioned that this-or-that

[Contd. 'Average' rating review: 188].

photograph or proof of what was going on had been smuggled out by some brave Polish local. Given that, according to the museum, some locals knew what was going on and took decent action, it is an act of fantasy to wish that nobody else around knew what was going on at all.

The French at least recognize that they had villains in the Vichy government, even if impossibly large numbers of the French in 1950 claimed to have worked for the Resistance. It's like the overwhelming number of Americans who, when asked in the late '70s how they had voted in 1972 claimed to have voted McGovern. As Plutarch once said "hypocrisy is the honor that vice pays to virtue."

The museum maintained by the Polish government, however, is behaving in a similar manner to the Japanese government, vis-a-vis China and Korea in WWII. Each is maintaining silence about unspeakable crimes committed by their own people.

The sites themselves were sickening and overwhelming, and many others have written clearly about those things, with prose and poetry that I can't match. But some portion of the sick and disgust I am left with – I don't know how much or what the mix is – is disgust at the whitewashing done by the Museum and its staff.

‘Poor’ rating reviews.

211 A must see, but the support facilities need urgent attention (11 thanks)

Witnessing the concentration camps themselves is a must-do and should get a far higher score than I have given. My low score is because of my disappointment at the visitor facilities provided by the museum, which frankly made me cross.

We visited in winter, so the township of Oświęcim looked grey and melancholy, as were the camps. This felt right and especially because the bleak wind and cold reminded you exactly how bad it must have been to exist on hardly any food and wearing only light clothing. It really is a disturbing place to visit, but a site we felt was important to witness for yourself at least once in your lifetime.

Looking back, we are pleased we went and especially at this time – 70 years since the end of the War.

I would like to see a far better visitors centre with adequate space for interactive multilingual exhibits and interpretation, given the huge numbers who arrive each day. A light tram or some other form of rapid transit (again with commentary) between the two camps would also be a better option than waiting in the cold for a bus. For us, the ticket hall was far too slow, the catering facilities were poor (hardly anywhere to sit in the winter), competing book stores confusing and cramped and the toilets were simply foul.

When we arrived (by car), having both museum staff and the competition waving madly to you to select their car parking seemed very odd, but I soon learned this was a common issue in Poland. It can be disconcerting when you are trying to locate the correct turning.

I know that Poland can do much better, having seen the excellent facilities at the salt mines by contrast. Of course, I don't mean that the place should be turned into some tatty tourist mecca or garden display and if funding is slow, obviously every penny must be spent on the challenges of conserving these fragile and horrible structures. However, the museum has over a million visitors a year and I think no one would object to paying a small fee to ensure that facilities are made the best they can be for future generations who still should come and bear witness to where these atrocities took place.

It really is too important to let decay and disrespectful not to provide world class visitor facilities.

'Terrible' rating reviews

229 Consider any visit to Auschwitz 1 (32 thanks)

Visiting Auschwitz is an act of pilgrimage to pay your respects at the site of mass murder. I prepared for my visit by appreciating that this would be a difficult day, which would cause me a great deal of emotional upset and many tears. However, having just finished visiting the camp, I have been left with a multitude of very strong emotions, but not the ones I expected to feel.

Firstly, I was shocked to see that development of the town of Auschwitz has encroached right up to the camp. The main road runs around its perimeter and the entrance to the camp is butted by a number of restaurants. These are in addition to the restaurant which is on the site itself and the couple of fast food snack kiosks which are also present. The camp isn't approached in respectful silence, but is rather like the entrance to a theme park.

Once inside, the camp is awash with guided tours which shepherd the visitors around the exhibitions in a hurried way. I opted not to take part in a guided tour, but still found it impossible to focus on the camp in the manner I wished because of the multitude of people intent on photographing every possible aspect of what was on view. As I stood in the gas chamber, trying to focus on the evil and suffering which occurred within, I could not concentrate for the noise of cameras. The young woman next to me took a selfie in the gas chamber itself.

There are no officials regulating the behaviour of visitors. As you enter and leave the camp, you will be aware of quite raucous conversation and a great deal of laughter and high spirits, particularly from the younger visitors. There was even laughter from people joking with each other as they wandered the camp.

Auschwitz 1 is the site of mass murder. It is a graveyard. It demands the utmost respect from visitors, and yet whilst the very name of Auschwitz must surely be synonymous with evil, inhumanity and cruelty, the memory of the dead is being desecrated by a great many of the visitors and, crucially, those who manage the camp now.

I visited Auschwitz 2 afterwards and found this to be far more moving for the simple fact that it is larger and has been less managed for visitors. I would strongly recommend anyone contemplating a visit to focus on Auschwitz 2 and not desecrate the memory of the those who were murdered at Auschwitz 1 by participating in the almost theme park experience which the authorities have shamefully allowed to propagate there.

236 Dismal, discarded, lacking humanity, the feelings amplified by the abhorrent spectacle (15 thanks)

It's a little before 6.00 o'clock in the morning and a church bell is tolling the town as we walk through the surprisingly narrow gate of what was the first Auschwitz concentration camp. Another was built outside the town, where the slaughter was elevated to an industrial scale.

"Work Brings Freedom' spelled out in an almost jaunty ribbon of ironwork rises above us. We walk in among the long low buildings. There is nothing about the buildings themselves that's particularly menacing. They could be workshops anywhere in the world. We had a building like this at my public school.

The green grass is well kept and the trees majestic. The only way to comprehend what happened here is through the imagination. It's not difficult to close eyes and reinvent the scenarios we have seen countless times. The only difference is we can walk back through the gates and have a sobering yet chilling cup of coffee.

The forebears who stood here in 1944 would have found the gates closed, rifles trained on them, barked at by vicious thugs and savage dogs who could sentence you to death without any compunction. Because the camp is now a museum, there are signs that help the act of the imagination. The camp orchestra pictures, the do not do this or that on the order of death notices.

Inside the prison blocks are a series of displays that i find more effective than any words. Behind the panels of glass are gathered the possessions of those who perished here. There is something deeply effecting as we walk on through the silent rooms to be confronted by a mountain of hair, 80 feet long and 10 feet deep, some of the 7 tons shorn from the victims.

in another room, a sea of suitcases. battered, squeezed, crushed, and tossed onto the pile, bearing names of their owners, printed, painted or inked on the outside. But it's when you see the piles of children's shoes that it becomes very poignant.... discarded, dismal... abhorrent.

By the carpark, is a low building with a brick chimney sticking out of it. This was the armoury of the barracks converted into the first gas chamber At Auschwitz. WE walk in. It's a long low dark space, maybe a 150 ft long, 20 ft wide and 10 ft high.... the dimensions of a small nightclub. To cope with the enormous feeling of abandonment and desolation, we are suspended in another world. Its horrific.

I have always imagined this dreadful place to be utterly isolated in some apocryphal landscape, yet there are houses not a half a kilometre from the camp. To walk through is still an aseptic experience.... being here shocks and saddens. We agree, that the physical evidence of this horror should never be forgotten and left in situ forever.

The real troubling thought that never leaves you is that so many people were alive to the fact while the worse of this was happening. Civilisation is a crock.

239 Rushed, muddy, dated, confusing and just unorganised! (16 thanks)

This is the first thing I've ever rated as terrible. I left feeling more confused and frustrated than harrowed or sad.

My recommendation is to youtube "Auschwitz tour" there are plenty of long videos there. Get to the museum early. Just do the trip yourself and take the photos you want. This way you'll get more out of it. Alternatively get a private tour. Or you can get the normal tour but be prepared to take picture and run to catch up with the tour. Not to mention having loads of strangers in your photos.

I went there in winter low season and I am very glad I did so as it would have been like Disneyland and even more rushed then it was. I have been on some great tours like Jack Daniels factory that had a lot of passion and even okay ones like Melbourne Gaol. This wasn't a scratch on them, such a shame with a such an important museum. I planned to go it alone and just take my time as I've read before the guided tours are rushed. I got there went through the airport like security. Waited in-line for ages with 2 people serving only to get a free pass.

There are no available recorded headphone tours, nor are there any leaflets or even tour books you can buy to read about the rooms your walking through. There's more information about Auschwitz in the Washington D.C. holocaust memorial museum then there is in Auschwitz camp itself. Now and again you see a little plaque with 2 sentences of writing on it. Where's the toilet? At the beginning before the turnstiles, before the massive queue and before the airport security. Unable to use the toilet until certain times, kind of ironic in this place.

So I gave up, went all the way back to the beginning, waited in line and payed for the tour, got my headphones, now what? I am sitting on a wooden bench a bit clueless now hoping to go with the flock. There's a cinema room I notice the showing is at 12:30, oh wait on the screen also shows you your English tour is starting at...12:20. ENGLISH TOURS PLEASE. Follow them let the tour begin.

The headphones are in fact there so the tour guide can walk ahead whilst your still taking pictures, reading plaques, looking at amazing drawings and pictures of the place. What ends up happening is your looking at pictures, objects etc and the tour guides talking about the next thing so it's not really a tour until Birkenau. You're not allowed to take pictures in certain areas (which happens to be the most interesting things) they say its respect, suspiciously I believe it's because they want you in and out and taking photos of the interesting things will slow this group rotation process down.