

PETER NOWAK ventures underground to explore Poland's Wieliczka Salt Mine, where ornate religious chambers share space with tiny carved gnomes — and a lick is hard to resist

A breath of fresh air, and history, in a Polish mine

WIELICZKA, POLAND

Welcome to the Wieliczka Salt Mine," says our tour guide, Darek, "where you can lick everything except me."

Our tour group chuckles, then we eye the walls curiously. Is he serious? I take Darek up on his offer and lick the wall — yuck! Pure salt. I can't for the life of me understand why cows find this appealing.

But it's easy to see the mine's appeal to tourists. In operation since the 13th century, it was inscribed in 1978 in UNESCO's first World List of Cultural and Natural Heritage Sites for its unparalleled illustration of the development of mining. Just 10 kilometres east of Krakow, the mine — hidden under the tiny town of Wieliczka — boasts nine levels reaching a depth of 327 metres, with 300 kilometres of tunnels, 3,000 chambers and several lakes. More than 700 years of continuous mining have created some stunning sights, and the mine — like most of Poland — is chock full of history, making it one of the country's most impressive tourist attractions.

Our tour begins with a lengthy descent by stairs to a depth of 64 metres, where it's a brisk 14 degrees year-round. Darek informs us that the majority of the wooden structures in the mine, from the stairs to support beams, are originals preserved — in some cases for centuries — by the regenerative quality of the salt. Indeed, descending into the mine from polluted Krakow is literally a breath of fresh air. It's some of the finest air you'll breathe, which is why asthmatics and allergy sufferers seek solace here; the mine also offers a rehabilitation and treatment centre on its lower levels.

Near the mine's entrance chamber, Darek introduces us to a statue of Nicolaus Copernicus, made of salt, of course. Poland's most famous astronomer — who first postulated the ridiculous notion that planets revolved around the sun, rather than the other way around — visited the mine some time in the 15th century. I can't help but wonder if the distinguished and revered Copernicus also gave in to curiosity,

and snuck himself a lick when no one was looking.

We follow the dimly lit tunnel into the Burned Chamber, so named because many miners died here over the years because of exploding gases. The mining of salt, Darek explains, causes methane to build up near the ceilings of excavations, and when combined with the open fire lamps miners used in earlier times — kablooey. The earlier miners took to using "penitents," men who would crawl on the floor in damp clothes with torches attached to poles to burn out the methane. The chamber houses several salt sculptures of these penitents to illustrate the point. "Smoking," Darek quips, "is obviously not permitted."

As we wind deeper into the mine, we trod down some more stairs, only this time our group is not alone — we're being watched. In a huge descending cavern, observant eyes peer out of the darkness — it seems a few gnomes have come out of their caves to watch us toil.

Or so the stories go, anyway: miners in the Middle Ages might have believed they shared their work space with gnomes, so over the years they became a superstitious lot. Believing they brought luck, Wieliczka's miners took to carving salt gnome statues in hopes they would bring good fortune to their dangerous profession. Several stand guard over this cavern.

A few tunnels farther on, a diorama of gnomes at work is on display. One gnome is chopping away with an axe, another is carting away a barrel. One stands facing us, with his arms wide open and a smile on his face. "That one is happy," Darek jokes, "because he has no job to do."

Perhaps the most amazing part of the two-hour tour comes near the end. Darek leads us onto the gallery overlooking the chapel of Saint Kinga — a huge chamber that evokes gasps of astonishment. The chamber, a fully functional Catholic chapel that looks like something from an Indiana Jones movie, was carved out of a humongous block of green salt in 1896, and is more than 50 metres long, 15 metres wide and 10 metres high, all at a depth of 300



PETER NOWAK

The chapel of Saint Kinga was carved out of a massive block of salt, complete with salt-crystal chandeliers and a rendition of *The Last Supper*.

metres below the surface. The floor has been chiselled and polished to look like ceramic tiles, reflecting light from the salt-crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling.

Religious iconography adorns every nook and cranny, including the main altar, which features salt figures of Saint Kinga and Saint Clement, the patron of Wieliczka parish. There are several side altars bearing more salt artwork, as well as bas-relief carvings of Bible scenes around the chapel, including a three-dimensional rendition of Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. And like everything in the mine, Darek is quick to point out, the artworks were created by miners, not artists.

From there, we move through more tunnels into the Weimar Chamber, which was flooded with brine in the 1960s to create a stunning underground lake. Alas, despite all the mine's history and natural wonders, its proprietors

couldn't resist the allure of tourist kitsch — a cheesy and pointless lightshow, accompanied by the blaring of melodramatic big-band music, is projected onto the walls of the chamber. Our tour group proves a touch jaded, and can't hold back a few snickers of derision.

At the conclusion of the tour, we emerge into several meticulously carved and well-lit chambers, which hold the restaurant and souvenir portion of the mine. After wolfing down some perogies and cabbage rolls, and picking up a souvenir piece of rock salt with a gnome perched atop, we get in the long line for the elevator. It's a real-deal mine lift: a tiny, two-level cage that fits about 15 people, and makes its ascent in absolute darkness. In the end, it's perhaps the best way to emerge from the pure air, back into a world without gnomes.

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GETTING THERE

The mine, open year-round, is about 10 kilometres east of Krakow. It can be reached via minibuses that run regularly from Krakow's main train station (and cost about \$5 a person).

It's best to avoid visiting in the summer, when the large numbers of tourists make the wait for the sole elevator interminable.

THE MINE

Despite being a popular tourist attraction, the mine's admission and guide system is somewhat convoluted. For more information, visit www.kopalnia-wieliczka.pl/english or call 48 (12) 278 73 75.

Admission prices seem to change regularly, but expect to pay between \$13 and \$15.

All visitors must be accompanied by a guide, and while group book-

ings are accepted, individuals must wait for a minimum number to assemble before being taken down — the mine promises a maximum wait of one hour.

Alternatively, you can hire a private guide for a group of up to 10 people for around \$100.

The mine also offers tours of sections not included in the standard tourist route. These must be booked at least two weeks in advance (visit the mine's website for details).

The rehabilitation centre offers 14-day treatments to sufferers of respiratory illnesses. Seven hours a day in the mine's treatment centre, under strict supervision by medical staff, including meals, costs around \$450.

The mine also offers accommodation in Wieliczka, starting at around \$800 for the 14 days.

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