

# Poland's salt mines full of beauty, history

10:08 PM, Sep. 10, 2011

www.thenewstar.com

Labor Day is over, and it's back to the salt mines! Too bad, it's not the salt mines of Wieliczka! When [my friend](#) John Milonski sent me photos of Wieliczka's salt mine extraordinaire, I found them mesmerizing. Since I have not been to Poland, I decided to learn more about this strange place located about 20 minutes outside of Krakow.

From travelers who have been to Krakow, I already knew the city to be one of the crown jewels on Europe's short list of most beautiful [medieval](#) places to visit. Because it was able to escape the bombing raids of World War II, it is a much more popular destination than Poland's capital city of Warsaw. Travelers always say Krakow reminds them of Prague — but without the tourists and the high prices.

After a busy day of exploring the rich history of the city, a favorite past time is kicking back at one of the city's multitude of outdoor cafes surrounding the largest medieval square in the world and awaiting the centurion's hourly trumpet call from St. Mary's Church. This 24-hour-a-day "all-is-well" reminder dates back seven centuries. True to tradition, the bugler always cuts off the last note abruptly as a tribute to honor to the 13th century watchman killed by an arrow to the throat as he warned the city that barbarians had come to steal their salt!

Yes, you read that correctly: I said salt. You see, in ancient times, salt was more valuable than gold. The ability of salt to preserve food has always been considered one of the foundations upon which civilizations were built. Salt allowed the transport of food, which allowed people to be mobile. They could leave home, go exploring, learn new ideas, conquer nations, etc. The ability to [travel](#) was (and still can be) life changing, but there was one challenge: salt was difficult to obtain.

Salt was a very precious commodity. Travelers had to travel far and wide across the lands to get it. Salt routes were created to move this highly valued trade item. Some of the world's greatest cities were built from taxes derived along these salt roads. In short, the power of salt to the ancients cannot be underestimated, and, according to history, it totally created and destroyed empires.

Poland was lucky: it had salt mines.

By the 16th century, its salt mines had become the state's greatest source of wealth. About a third of the total income of the country was derived from the salt mines of Wieliczka. What they did not make from the trading of salt, the Polish government obtained from the severe fines they imposed on traders who did not stop in Krakow on

their way to other parts of the region. In the [Middle Ages](#), salt brought the entire world to Krakow. Then, someone discovered sodium chloride in the ocean water — and salt rock lost its value!

Yet, for the curious travelers of today, I would like to suggest: there is still gold waiting to be discovered in the salt mines of Poland!

Located 1,000 feet below the earth, the most talented of Wieliczka miners spent hours creating an amazing world of salt art. Chiseled out over generations, this mine is a museum of carvings, sculptures, altars, a chapel and reception room where weddings and concerts are held today, and chandeliers made from rock salt have been dissolved to look like glass! The highlight of a three hour tour into the bowels of the Wieliczka Mine is said to be the Underground Cathedral. In rock salt, figures and wall decorations — like the Last Supper and other biblical scenes — have been honed to look like granite.

You really should check it out online; it will simply take your breath away! To think that ax- swinging miners — common laborers back in the 1200s — created such a stunning visual masterpiece in salt is truly amazing. It is no wonder that UNESCO placed the Wieliczka Mine on its list of heritage sites to see.

Call me at Monroe Travel Service and let me send you a free brochure of escorted tours that include Poland and the opportunity to see this stunning salt mine at Wieliczka. For a taste of something unique, go a little Bohemian next year and enjoy the "grittier" side of travel. Why not travel to Eastern Europe?

Contact Dianne Newcomer at [dianne@monroetravel.com](mailto:dianne@monroetravel.com), Monroe Travel Service, 1908 Glenmar St., 323-3465 or 800-365-3465.