

The Salt Town Wieliczka

Now it rates amongst the fastest developing towns in the region of Małopolska (Lesser or Minor Poland). Apart from the city of Wieliczka, which is the main city of the Wieliczka county (powiat), the Borough (gmina) comprises 29 villages. The mayor of Wieliczka, Artur Koziół, is steadily implementing a programme of sustained development for the town and borough, speeding up investment in tourist facilities. The close vicinity of key road hubs, the approaching construction of a new motorway, beautiful local monuments and new investment plans proposed by local authorities attract new inhabitants to settle in the Salt Town.

The history of Wieliczka dates back to the Middle Ages and is closely tied with the oldest salt company on the Polish soil. For centuries, Magnum Sal was the source of the country's wealth, constituting the economic foundation of its culture. Today, it is the most popular tourist attraction in Poland. The Latin term Magnum Sal (Great Salt), from the Polish equivalent of which the name of the town was derived, was first documented in 1123-1125 by Giles, a papal legate. Wieliczka was granted its charter based on the Franconian settlement law in 1290 by Prince Premysl II, who confirmed a foundation document issued a year earlier by Henryk IV Probus, Duke of Silesia.

According to a legend, Wieliczka owes its fame to a discovery of salt resources made by Kinga, the patron saint of salt miners and queen of Boleslaus the Shy, King of Poland. This Hungarian princess and daughter of king Bela IV ordered miners to find her engagement ring which she had dropped into a salt mine in Maramarosz, Hungary. After the nuptials, the queen pointed to a place where a well should be driven. The first piece of salt rock that was excavated contained her ring, which had travelled miraculously along with rock salt deposits to Wieliczka. The current shape of the mine excavations formed over several hundred years of subterranean exploitation, spreading over nine levels that reach 327 metres deep. This underground town is made up of some 300 kilometres of galleries and 3,000 chambers. Only a 3.5 kilometre section is accessible to tourists: it is located 64 to 135 metres deep and is visited yearly by more than a million tourists. Nearly half of them are visitors from distant countries.