

The mining town: from mining to boomtown

UNESCO World Heritage Erzgebirge/Krušnohoří Mining Region: the success of a new type of town

Mining triggered a huge settlement process and still shapes the appearance of the region to this day. Between 1460 and 1560, 31 towns were founded or granted free mining town status – 16 in Saxony and 15 in Bohemia. The largest of these mining towns became hubs for business, education and culture.

First “Berggeschrey”: the silver rush in Freiberg

Settlement began straight after the first discovery of silver in 1168. The oldest and later the largest mining town in the Erzgebirge was founded nearby: Freiberg. Its name refers to the core feature of a mining town: the freedom (“Freiheit”) of its inhabitants. With their sights set on reaping financial success, the princes of Saxony and the landed nobles granted “Bergfreiheit” (“mining freedom”) i.e. the right to search for ore deposits. The historical centre is full of examples of the rich architectural, cultural and religious legacy of silver. Visitors need only look at the castle and markets, the “Oberbergamt” (mining authority), the town houses, workers’ houses, and the Romanesque cathedral to gain an impression of this. The cathedral’s “Golden Gate” is considered the first figural portal in German art history. Highlights inside the cathedral include the “Bergmannskanzel” (miners’ pulpit) and concerts played on the famous Silbermann organ. Every June, the Mining Town Festival and its miners’ parades attract tens of thousands of visitors, who marvel at the living customs.

Second “Berggeschrey”: The mining town as an economic and cultural boomtown

Large silver deposits were discovered near Schneeberg and Annaberg-Buchholz in the 15th century. The deposits were so rich that Schneeberg was appointed a “Freier Bergstadt” (free mining town) in 1481 to attract more people. A prominent building from this time is the late Gothic hall church of St. Wolfgang (1516-1540), which houses the Reformation-era Lucas Cranach altar. The church is also known as the “Bergmannsdom” (miners’ cathedral), and is the destination of the annual miners’ parade march on “Bergstreitag” (Miners’ Dispute Day, 21 July). Since 1498, mining associations have commemorated this successful strike against wage cuts. Today, Schneeberg is called the “Baroque town of the Erzgebirge”. After a major fire in 1719, the town was rebuilt – at the time, it was the world’s largest cobalt producer.

Annaberg-Buchholz, the first planned mining town, was built directly above the mines and displays many different architectural styles. When visitors let their gaze wander in the old town, they see an urban geography that ranges from the Renaissance to the Wilhelmine founding period. It is a great experience, both above and below ground: In the silver mine “Im Gößner”, directly beneath the old town, you can take a trip back to the 15th century. During this time, the mining administrator and clerk, Adam Ries, published the first arithmetic book in German and with Arabic numerals. This made accounting and administration much easier, and caught on across Europe. The late Gothic hall church of St. Anne’s is visible for miles around. With its delicate curvilinear rib vaulted ceiling, it the symbol for mining culture par excellence. On the miners’ altar, visitors can admire the oldest depictions of Saxon mining in a work dating back to the Reformation period. The “Annaberger Kät”, one of the oldest folk festivals in Germany since 1520, developed from a church festival after Whitsun.

Ideal town planning: The first Renaissance town north of the Alps

Unlike earlier times, when mining towns tended to grow up in rather haphazard fashion close to the pits, planned settlements were typical of the 16th century. When Marienberg was constructed from 1521 onwards, it was the first time that Renaissance principles of an ‘ideal town’ were realised north of the Alps: a central square with a right-angled arrangement of

streets and blocks of houses. The market square with town hall and town houses, the “Bergamt” (mining authority), the “Fürstenhaus” (royal residence) and the late Gothic hall church of St. Mary’s (1558-1564) are all fully preserved. Visitors can learn all about architectural geometry on a tour of the tower of the town hall or of St. Mary’s.