

Banská Štiavnica – Historical Centre and Landmarks

Criteria: Banská Štiavnica and its surroundings is an outstanding example of a medieval mining town and a mining centre that, with the end of the mining and the Mining and Forestry Academy moving to Hungary, lost *raison d'être* of its existence. Having become vulnerable, it lost also its atmosphere and urban structure.

Date of inscription: 1993

Location: central Slovakia, N 48°27'29", E 18°53'07"

Nearest larger town: Zvolen (32 km north-east of Banská Štiavnica)

Transport: By car – The Road R1 turnoff, connecting Nitra with Zvolen, will take you direct to the town. If you approach Banská Štiavnica from Zvolen, the turnoff is approximately 12 km away; if you approach from Žiar nad Hronom, the turnoff is approximately 15 km away. From the turnoff for R1, it is about further 20 km to drive, and the road takes you through a valley, along the primary road no. 51.

By train – Banská Štiavnica is approximately 240 km away from Bratislava. Changing twice, the journey takes about four hours. The travel from Košice is similar (the distance being 260 km); please allow for extra thirty minutes or so.

By bus – Changing once, it takes approximately three and a half to four hours when travelling from Bratislava, and as much as five hours when travelling from Košice. There is a better connection from Zvolen, the distance being approximately 30 km, and the journey takes about 45 minutes.

Opening hours: During the main season, heritage sites are open daily from 9 am to 5 pm, outside the main season they are closed on Mondays.

Admission: Entry to each place of interest is approximately up to €5.

Web site: www.banskastiavnica.sk, www.banskastiavnica.travel, www.muzeumb.sk, www.bajkomktajchom.sk



The New Castle in Banská Štiavnica

As with numerous other medieval mining towns, Banská Štiavnica, too, is nestled at the foot of hill, in this case the mountains Štiavnické Vrchy. Looking at the satellite map, you will notice the town is situated in the middle of a basin surrounded by mountains, in fact in a caldera (a volcanic crater), formed millions of years ago as a result of a collapsed volcano. The magma, that had reached the surface from the depths of the Earth, brought with it also silver and gold. As early as the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, people mined and extracted ore here, the tradition surviving till the Middle Ages. A document dating back to 1156 refers to this region as a “land of mines” (in Latin *terra banensium*). In mid thirteenth century, miners from Tyrol settled in here, with the town being granted privileges to mine ore. From this era (precisely

from 1275), comes the first town's coat of arms. The town, nestled at the foot of the hills called Glanzenberg and Paradajz, became the first mining town in Slovakia.

Old Castle and Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary

Since its beginnings, Banská Štiavnica has been an affluent town, the testimony being two churches dating back to the first half of the thirteenth century. The first stood on a plateau, below the hill Paradajz. Throughout

the centuries it has been rebuilt, becoming a town castle whose role was to safeguard the town against Turkish invasions. Towering over the town, the former castle and fort is today called the **Old Castle**. In the town, on the foundations of the second church, the Roman basilica of St. Nicholas, stands today the **Church of the Assumption of Virgin Mary**, called *Nemecký* (German) by the locals. The road linking the two churches had first been lined with detached, solitary houses. In the following years, however, the gaps were filled with other houses, giving rise to terraces as we know them today. Today's town plan is, virtually, identical with the plan of the Medieval Banská Štiavnica.

View of the Old Castle with the Holy Trinity Statue and the Gothic Church of St. Catherine to the right





View of the inner part of the Old Castle. Photo by Jozef Petro

Holy Trinity Square

Having in mind its location at the foot of several hills, Banská Štiavnica is formed by narrow, meandering lanes and small squares. Reminding more of a street than a square, the **Holy Trinity Square** and its immediate surroundings could be considered the centre of the town. It is lined with exquisite two-storey high buildings, once owned by affluent townspeople and merchants; numerous frescos and ornaments of the windows and facades all testify to the town's riches. Decorating the middle of this prolonged square and built as a tribute to plague victims, the **Holy Trinity Statue**, dating back to the eighteenth century, catches everyone's eye. The **Mining District Court**, still called by the locals *Berggericht*, i.e. by its German name (the highest mining court institution that had its seat here from the end of the eighteenth century) dominates the square. Since 1860, it has been

the home for mineralogical collections of the Mining Academy, including headquarters and lecture rooms. *Berggericht*, as known today, was found in the sixteenth century, by linking two detached bourgeois houses. It is still the home to the mineralogical collections. If you want to learn more about the shafts where silver and gold were mined, this is a good place to start with. In *Berggericht's* court, there is an entrance to one of the three shafts that are open to visitors in town and its immediate surroundings. The **Mining Tunnel Michal** is short (only 75 metres long) and is ideally suited for the first encounter with the life of the Medieval miners. Not far from it, in *Kammerhofská Street*, by the Guesthouse *Kachelman*, there is the **Mining Tunnel Glanzenberg** that will take you about 40 metres below the Earth's surface, on the trail

On the Holy Trinity Square, the Holy Trinity Statue will attract your attention straightaway.





A short walk from the Holy Trinity Square, there is the Statue of the Immaculate Virgin Mary; the detail is on the picture. Photo by Jozef Petro

long 450 metres, running right below the streets of the town. The first written mention of the shaft, visited by famous personalities in the past, dates back to 1560. In 1751, Francis Stephen of Lorraine, the husband of the Empress Maria Theresa, “tried his hand at mining”. This event, along with visits of other personalities of the Court in Vienna, are commemorated by plaques. The last of the Austrian rulers and yet another famous personality was Franz Joseph I. who paid a visit to the shaft in 1852.

The lower part of the Square of Holy Trinity completes the **Gothic Church of St. Catherine**, dating back to the fifteenth century. The locals call it *Slovenský* (Slovak) as, since 1658, the masses are held in the Slovak language. Right next to it stands the **town hall**, originally a Gothic house used for meetings of town’s aldermen right from the start. Throughout the centuries, it has been several times rebuilt, finally acquiring the look and feel of an eighteenth century edifice.

From this era is also the statue situated right by the town hall. Some 200 metres of the Church of St. Catherine, on Kammerhofská Street no. 2, there is **Kammerhof** (a German word, meaning Chamber Court), in the past one of the most significant buildings in the town. In fact, it is a complex of several partially Gothic buildings that were amalgamated in the sixteenth century to form a compact unit from which the works in the mines were run.

Today, it is a museum devoted to the history of mining in Slovakia.

Banská Štiavnica enjoyed the greatest economic prosperity throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, during which a large number of Renaissance buildings were built, and gold and silver mining experienced its golden age. The local miners could not possibly know that, in 1521, Hernando Cortés conquered the Aztec Empire and, in the aftermath, took over

Gothic Church of St. Catherine



their land rich in great deposits of silver. In the following decades, the Spanish established mining of silver as an industry in Mexico and Peru, securing markets for exporting it to Europe. As a result, price of silver dropped, and mining silver ore not only here but also in Kutná Hora became unprofitable. A sparkle of hope brought the first usage of gunpowder in the mining industry worldwide as it happened in 1627 in Banská Štiavnica. This enabled to quickly finish off the mining ore deposits exposed on the surface, with further work continuing in mines. However, it was rather challenging as groundwater was flooding the shafts. Besides, there was a need to develop new ways of mining and new technologies. For this reason, in the eighteenth century, Banská Štiavnica became the centre of learning for mining specialists all over the Austrian Empire. To support this concept, the Mining Academy was founded here between 1762 and 1764.

If you head from the Statue of Holy Trinity uphill, in a few minutes you will reach the already mentioned **Old Castle**, a result of

altering the original Roman basilica that stood here in the first half of the thirteenth century. At the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the basilica was rebuilt, becoming a Gothic church that, in the first half of the sixteenth century, underwent another alteration, becoming an anti-Turkish fort. This was happening during the times when, after the Ottoman victory in the battle of Mohács in 1526, the Turks occupied Budapest and the whole of the Lower Hungary, launching raids across the Upper Hungary (present-day Slovakia) from here.

New Castle

Another significant heritage property in the town, visible from far and wide, is the **New Castle**; from one of the hills there is a fine view of it from the Old Castle bell tower near the Old Castle. It is a Renaissance fortress, built at the

The New Castle is towering over Banská Štiavnica. Photo by Jozef Petro

Turks in Slovakia

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Central Europe, including Hungary, Austria, Bohemia and Moravia, was going through turbulent times, marked by an expansion of the Osmani. After the Osman sultans took over the Balkans, they started looking westwards, choosing Vienna as the next aim as for their expansion. In 1526, near the Hungarian town of Mohacs, the army of the Osman sultan Suleiman I fought against the army of Louis II Jagiellon, the king of Bohemia, Hungary and Croatia. The battle in which Louis II Jagiellon was conquered, dying during the retreat, opened for the Osman Turks the gate to Hungary. They captured and occupied Budapest and Lower Hungary, i.e. present-day Hungary,

later on launching raids across Slovakia from the Hungarian lowlands, leaving a deep scar in the memory of the Slovaks. This is evident from legends about the Turkish thread that are still alive, at least in books, fairy tales and movies based on them, even if these events took place almost 500 years ago. The victory of the Turkish army at Mohács made happy not only the Turks as the Habsburgs could be happy about their "defeat" as well because the dead of Louis II Jagiellon made the Czech and Hungarian throne free and, in the aftermath, Ferdinand I – Ferdinand Habsburg became the king of Hungary and Bohemia. Thus, the Habsburgs joined the European ruling elite, determining the destiny of Europe until as late as 1918.





View of Calvary, towering over the town

beginning of the second half of the sixteenth century to safeguard the town folks against the Turks. It was part of an extensive signalisation system, built across the hills of central Slovakia, based on so-called *hlásky* (*vartovky*), i.e. stone or wooden towers that used smoke signals to alerted one another to the coming danger. As these towers have not survived (except for a stone tower called *Vartovka*, about 20 kilometres away from Krupina), the New Castle in Banská Štiavnica is one of the rare witnesses of the seventeenth century anti-Turkish defence system.

Knocking Tower

Among other heritage properties in close proximity to the New Castle, concerned with the mining tradition of the town, it is worth mentioning the so-called **Klopačka – Knocking tower**, a Baroque structure with a tower, built at

the end of the seventeenth century. Inside, there was an apparatus that summoned miners to work by knocking on wood.

Calvary

The **Calvary** completes visually the panorama of Banská Štiavnica. Situated at the edge of the town, it is a complex of Baroque buildings, dating back to the eighteenth century, comprising a church, a chapel, a staircase and sculptures placed out in the open. The Calvary stands on a steep hill called Scharfenberg. Building calvaries (*kalvária* is a Slovak term used for Golghota, i.e. the hill where Jesus Christ was crucified) or routes to crucifixion, loosely imitating the last journey of Jesus before he was crucified, was rather popular, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, among rich individuals, parishes or towns, as was the case with Banská Štiavnica.

Landmarks in the Town Vicinity

In the immediate vicinity of the town there is a number of monuments commemorating the fame of the mining traditions. These include mainly mining tunnels, shafts, headframes, heaps, waste rock, buildings and water reservoirs called *tajchy*.

The mining tunnels

In addition to two mining tunnels open to the public that are in the town proper, another publicly accessible tunnel is located about a kilometre of Banská Štiavnica, by a road to Levice. Called **Bartolomej**, it is part of the **Open-Air Mining Museum** consisting of two elements. The first one, an underground trail featuring the museum

collections, is devoted to the history of mining gold, silver and other ores in Slovakia. Here, you can view various structures and machinery, used in mines in the past and, later on, collected. The second element of the museum comprises underground collections, i.e. the mining tunnel Bartolomej. During a ninety-minute tour you learn about how ore used to be mined between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, you can inspect the only preserved machinery in Slovakia used for pumping water from the mines, with the use of horse power.

Some five kilometres of the mining tunnel Bartolomej, there is the village of **Štiavnické Bane**, once the centre of the mining industry that too is inscribed on the UNESCO Heritage List. Once, there were mines here, as well as administrative buildings; the majority of the population having found employment in the

Lower Church, part of the Calvary Baroque complex





Example of a fresco from the Calvary Lower Church

mining industry. The village as it is known today came into being by an amalgamation of two independent hamlets and, until as late as 1948, it was called *Piarg* (a mishmash of the German word *Berg*, meaning mountain).

Another mining tunnel accessible to the public is in the village of **Hodruša-Hámre**, approximately 15 kilometres westwards in the direction of Banská Štiavnica, in the complex of the Mining Open Air Museum. There are several mining factories, mining tunnels and other small heritage properties referring to the mining past. Among the former is the **Hornohodrušský banský závod (Mining Factory)**, comprising the **Middle Mining Tunnel**, part of the **Mine of Starovšechsvätých (All Saints)**. Mentioned as early as the fourteenth century (gold was mined here till the fifties of the twentieth century), it is

open to the public by prior appointment. On the UNESCO List there are 20 individual buildings in the village (i.e. shafts, mining tunnels, water reservoirs, the knocking tower).

Water reservoirs (*Tajchy*)

Tajchy – a derivative of the German word *teich* (a lake) – are artificial lakes, water reservoirs, for storing rain water that was later transported via artificial channels to the mines to move mining machinery. First water reservoirs of this kind were established in the sixteenth century, with the majority coming into being as late as the first half of the eighteenth century, when the shafts were gradually becoming deeper, meaning the miners usually came across water so the mines had to be pumped out. Originally it was manpower and horsepower that were used to service the machinery for pumping water. However, this did not suffice in greater depths and so a complex system of employing water energy was developed. Rainwater was stored in artificial reservoirs, called *tajchy*, that were linked with each other through collecting channels and drives. From there, water was transported to individual mines as the need arose, becoming the source of energy to move the special pumping machinery. Out of 60 water reservoirs built, there are 24 left, providing water recreation for the local community.

The most famous and, at the same time, the largest reservoir of this kind is **Počúvadlianske lake**, known as Počúvadlo, situated approximately 15 kilometres south-west of Banská Štiavnica. From there, it is possible to climb the mountain **Sitno** (1,009 metres above sea level), the highest peak in the mountains Štiavnické Vrchy. Sitno, too, is inscribed on the UNESCO List. As early as the Bronze Age, there was a prehistoric settlement here, and the archaeological excavations confirmed that as early as the eighth century BC, ore had been mined, and copper processed, here. A castle stood on this spot in the thirteenth



Mountain Sitno

century and, in the sixteenth century there was a tower here, part of the anti-Turkish defence system. A legend has it there were knights of Sitno hiding in the area who would allegedly save Slovakia in its time of need.

Another popular water reservoir is situated at the edge of Banská Štiavnica, right above the Open Air Mining Museum. Established in mid eighteenth century and called **Klinger**, you can reach it from Banská Štiavnica via a popular walking trail.