Šelštev – entrance building to the Mine Museum

In the center of the town stands a prominent building, the Šelštev, one of the main entrances to the mine in the past. Here miners gathered every morning in the call room. The commencement of work was announced by knocking on a rail hung above the door of the Šelštev, and later on by the ringing of a bell in the call room. The “Obergutman” (supervisor) verified the presence of miners and assigned them to their jobs. Before descending into the pit, each miner took his “mark” (number) from the “death clock” (a special board) and returned it to the same spot at the end of his shift, confirming his safe return from the pit.

Anthony’s Main Road

Anthony’s Main Road was dug out in the far-off year of 1500, and was named after St. Anthony of Padua, who protected miners against accidents in the pit. The old mining methods used in the narrow, more than five century-old shafts are displayed: manual digging, loading and transport of ore in carts. The picturesque setups reveal the very hard work once performed by miners.

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Underground Chapel of the Holy Trinity

At the end of Anthony’s Main Road, an underground chapel was dug out in the mid 17th century. The altar is decorated with a relief depiction of the Holy Trinity and statues of Saint Barbara and Saint Achacius - the patron saints of miners. The chapel was intended for miners, their prayers and pleas for strength to do their jobs and return safely from the pit. From here the miners descended into the depths of the mine through Attems’ Shaft, and had to walk down more than a thousand steps.

Descent along a blind shaft

After a little more than four hundred metres, our path ends above the entrance to blind shaft no. 20. The shafts were used as transport routes for ore and gangue, as laddered passageways for miners, and for ventilation purposes. Machine digging, drilling, blasting, loading and transport of ore is presented on the newer level I/20.

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Achacius level

A walk along a descending shaft leads us to the lowest point of our tour - approximately 100 metres below the surface (22 metres below the bottom level of Anthony’s Main Road). Along the path through illuminated shafts, various jobs in the mine are displayed: tracing, transport and separation of ore. After a short break on the bench and their lunch, these lunch breaks were filled with numerous anecdotes, jokes and even hoaxes. Another creature also liked to keep the miners company and teased them frequently. This was the pit elf “Berkmandlc”.

Attems’ shaft

Exhausted from a hard day’s work, the miners returned from the pit along the steps of Attems’ shaft. The tour ends here and visitors return to the light of day.

GOOD LUCK!
The Idrija Mine was the second largest mercury mine in the world. In its five hundred year history, 147,000 tons of mercury were extracted from cinnabar ore by burning, which is more than 13% of the total world production of this metal. As many as 3,122,000 flasks were filled with mercury and sold all over the world.

Mercury – Hg (Hydrargyrium) is the only liquid metal on the globe. When cooled to −38.9°C, it becomes solid as steel and can be forged.

Owing to its exceptional qualities, mercury had a wide range of applications – in gold and silver extraction, medicine, cosmetics, dentistry, the chemical and military industries, agriculture; its linear expansion quality was used in thermometers, and its conductivity in the electric industry.

Environmental awareness, the declining use and the falling prices of mercury are the reasons why, after five centuries of mining activities, the Idrija Mine has been shut down. Around 10% of the world’s mercury stocks have remained in the ore deposit. Mercury will be withdrawn from industry and sales in EU member states by the year 2011.

ABOUT THE IDRIJA MERCURY MINE

According to legend, mercury was discovered in Idrija around 1490 by a tubmaker who was soaking a wooden vessel in a stream. As early as in 1500, the Church of the Holy Trinity was built on the spot where mercury was discovered. In the same year, Anthony’s Main Road began to be dug and is still preserved today.

22. June 1508, rich cinnabar ore was discovered in the so-called ‘good luck shaft’ in the vicinity of Anthony’s Main Road. To commemorate this very important event, Idrija miners celebrate their own holiday and honour St. Achacius, whom they have chosen as their patron saint.

The Idrija ore deposit lies directly below the town, between the Idrijca River and its tributary, the Nikova Stream. The mineralized area extends over a length of 1500 m and a width of 300 to 600 m. Miners dug out more than 700 kilometres of shafts, and the deepest parts of the mine reached a depth of 400 metres.

The miners raised the excavated ore to the surface in carts, crushed it into small pieces and then burned it in the smelting plant at a temperature exceeding 600°C. The obtained liquid metal was poured into flasks – special iron vessels.

Mercury appears in the Idrija Mine in two forms: as native mercury (Hg) and as anode mercury (HgS), which is typically red in colour. Ore that contains no silver or gold is abandoned as it shrinks in the form of a hard crust, which is later, as a steam interior, was termed after Idrija.

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Anthony’s Main Road

breathtaking underground world of the Idrija Mercury Mine

Upon their arrival, visitors are shown a video film about the mine. Dressed in green-black overcoats and helmets, they are then taken on a tour of the underground world of the Idrija Mine in the company of guides. The tour of Anthony’s Main Road lasts one hour and thirty minutes.

Tour schedule:
Monday to Friday: 10.00 and 15.00
Sat., Sun., holidays: 10.00, 15.00 and 16.00.

Group tours should be booked in advance.

INFORMATION:
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Mob: 386 (0) 31 810 194
Website: www.rzs-idrija.si
E-mail: antonijev.rov@volja.net

The entrance to Anthony’s Main Road is through the entrance building in the center of the old town, only a five minutes’ walk from the bus station.