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# In the Role of Medieval Miners...

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When preparing an Erasmus trip, you first need to select an attractive destination for the excursion. You must also keep on mind that the destination should not be too far away from Prague (or any other of our university cities). Then you need to plan the programme of the day or the weekend. The very best trips are usually those combining a visit of an attention-grabbing destination and its monuments or other places of interest and an event on which the students can actively participate.

Especially popular are tastings (most often of beer or wine), participation in various workshops, games, or proactive visits of sights such as exploration of an old mine or a cave with the borrowed miner/caver equipment such as torches, helmets or boots. One of the best-liked has been for many years for all Charles University Erasmus and International Clubs the visit of the UNESCO protected town of Kutná Hora and its medieval mines. In the winter semester 2014/15, the trip was organised by the Erasmus Club of the Faculty of Arts.

Back in the middle ages, the nowadays regional town of Kutná Hora used to be a proud and wealthy royal city, the second largest and most important municipality in Bohemia after Prague. It had grown ever since the discovery of silver ore on the grounds of Sedlec Monastery in 1290 until the finding of the Americas and influx of less expensive silver and gold from these regions to Europe in big quantities. By then, in the middle of 16<sup>th</sup> century, Kutná Hora's miners were already digging for silver as deep as 500 meters below the ground – a very expensive and no longer a very profitable affair. Only a few decades later the silver (and copper) mines in Kutná Hora were by large closed down and the production of metal started to concentrate on lead and zinc only. The last mine in Kutná Hora was closed as late as in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Most of the medieval silver mines of Kutná Hora have been long flooded by water. Luckily, a small part of the labyrinth of the medieval mining galleries was discovered in 1967 by a hydro-geological exploration of the town. The gallery is situated approximately 22 meters below the ground. At present, the researchers believe it served primary as a medieval drainage gallery rather than a once-upon-a-time rich silver mine as people trusted back in 1960s when the complex of the underground corridors was first found. Be it as may, the “medieval silver mine” tour is well worth the visit. 250 meters of the gallery are accessible to visitors each year from April 1 till October 31.

The visitors walk through the mine in traditional white kirtles called perkytle in medieval Czech. Each of them receives also a helmet and a lamp for the duration of the excursion. The walls of the mine are adorned by marks left from the work of the medieval miners – you can find here traces of the hammer work – each miner had two mining hammers, chisel and sledge-hammer, and worked by hand only – as well as numerous tiny niches which once served to the miners for positioning of their pit lamps. Once passing through the lowest and narrowest point of the corridor and being showed what a total darkness does indeed mean, all visitors learn to appreciate the difficult job of the miners back in the middle ages. Suddenly, even those previously attracted to live in the long-past times decide that living in the present has plentiful benefits. One of them being a digital camera – allowing us to keep memories of visits such as the Kutná Hora medieval silver mine and our one-afternoon acting in the role of medieval miners.