

Danube Bend



The Danube Bend is pint-sized compared to many of Hungary's regions, but what it lacks in size it makes up for with an overabundance of natural beauty and a venerable wealth of human endeavour.

The region's name is highly literal, for the mighty river does indeed bend. With the unrelenting mass of the Börzsöny Hills on its north bank and the Pilis Hills to the south, the Danube is forced into a handful of tight, bunched curves, creating the country's prettiest stretch of the river. A boat trip here is a must, for there is no other way to truly appreciate Hungary's dustless highway, or see it in all its guises. The forested hills that rise on each side of the Danube are attractions in their own right; together they make up the Danube-Ipoly National Park, and nature lovers will find hiking paths aplenty.

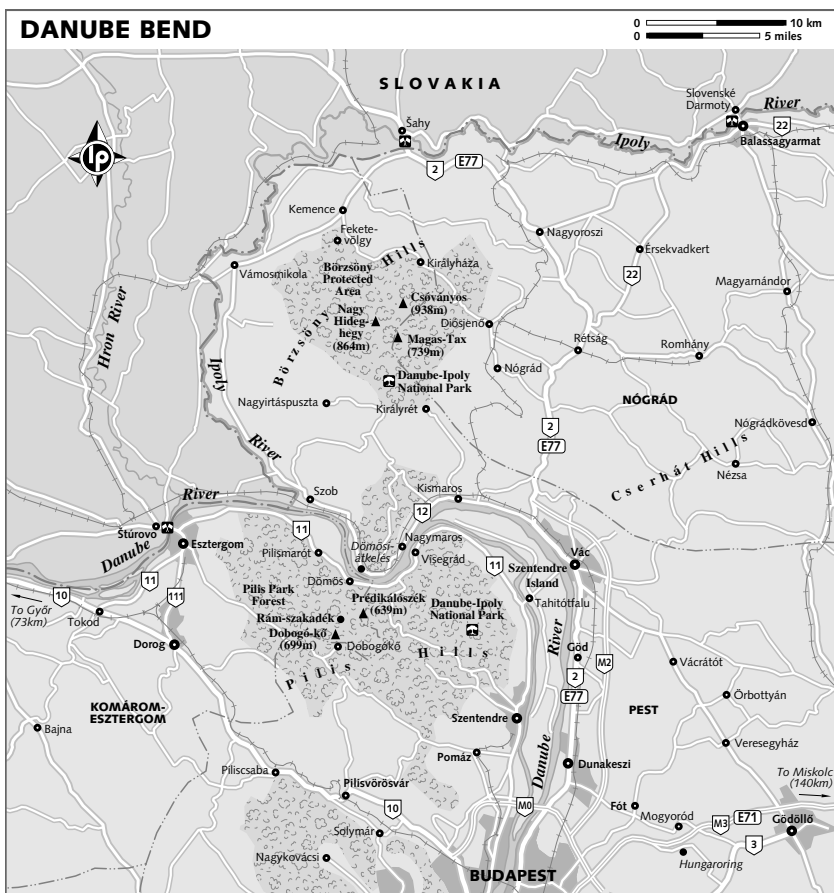
Four towns on the banks of the Danube vie for visitors' attention. Szentendre, for centuries a community open to new settlers, unorthodox religions, and artists, is today a tourist hotspot with cobbled streets and a profusion of church spires. Further round the bend is tiny Visegrád, once the seat of Hungary's kings and queens and today home to Renaissance-palace ruins and a forbidding hilltop castle. Esztergom, for so many years the Pope's 'eyes and ears' in Hungary, is now a sleepy town with the biggest basilica this side of the Balkans, while Vác is a lovely spot with a laid-back attitude and a macabre crypt of mummies.

All this, and all within easy reach of the capital. Sometimes size really doesn't matter.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Strolling the cobbled back streets of **Szentendre** (p141), where life remains untouched by the town's mass tourism
- Making a day of it on the Danube, cruising from town to town by **ferry** or **hydrofoil** (p140)
- Discovering the forgotten Renaissance splendour of the royal enclaves at **Visegrád** (p149)
- Climbing Castle Hill in Esztergom to explore the nooks and crannies of the town's massive **basilica** (p154)
- Picking a path for a pleasurable hike through the green hills of **Börzsöny** (p149) or **Pilis** (p152)





History

The Danube Bend may look either sleepy or overrun with tourists, but it has a rich and varied history. It was the northernmost region of Rome's colonies for centuries, and Esztergom was the first seat of the Magyar kings and has been the centre of Roman Catholicism in the region for more than a millennium.

Visegrád, Central Europe's 'Camelot', was the royal seat during Hungary's short-lived flirtation with the Renaissance in the 15th century. Szentendre has many of its roots in Serbian culture, and became an important centre for art and culture early in the 20th century. Vác, on the Danube's eastern bank, is not to be outdone by its western counterparts. It was an important river crossing dur-

ing Roman times and King Stephen himself thought the town valuable enough to establish an episcopate here in the 11th century.

Getting There & Around

Being so close to Budapest, the Danube Bend has good connections to the rest of Hungary. Regular buses serve towns on the western bank of the Danube, but trains only go as far as Szentendre with a separate line running to Esztergom; the eastern bank has the luxury of excellent bus and train links. The river itself is a perfect highway, and regular boats ferry tourists to and from Budapest over the summer months.

From May to September, one daily **Mahart** (www.mahartpassnave.hu) ferry departs Budapest's