

Lake Balaton Region



Europe's largest expanse of fresh water is the 'Hungarian Sea', a vast lake covering 600 sq km. People flock here to enjoy the obvious – swimming, sailing, sun worshipping, fishing and unwinding. Yet the region's attraction extends far beyond the obvious.

Take the southern shore. Most of it is a forgettable tangle of tacky resorts popular with families, for here the water is at its shallowest and safest (the lake's depth averages only 3m). Yet Siófok stands head and shoulders above it all, a centre for hedonism whose reputation is beginning to make serious waves on Europe's summer party pond. It will please anyone with a penchant for dance beats by night and beach bumming by day.

The northern shore is the yin to the southern's yang. Here the pace of life is more gentle and refined, and the forested hills of the Balaton Uplands National Park create a wonderful backdrop. Historical towns, such as Keszthely, Balatonfüred and Veszprém, dot the landscape, and Europe's largest thermal lake at Hévíz is close at hand. Tihany, a unique peninsula cutting the lake almost in half, is home to an important historical church, while the hilltop fortress at Sümeg provides commanding views. Badacsony draws crowds with its lakeside location, robust white wines and cultivated slopes.

But still the best thing about the Lake Balaton region is the lake itself. Spend some time here and before you know it you'll have fallen under its spell, like so many artists and holiday-makers have over the centuries.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wondering how tiny **Sümeg** (p212) came to have such a striking hilltop fortress, let alone such impressive frescoes in its Church of the Ascension
- Taking a dip in the healing waters of the world's second-largest thermal lake at **Hévíz** (p205)
- Wandering the wild peninsula and poking around in the Abbey Church at **Tihany** (p215)
- Sailing, swimming, fishing and cycling in the **Lake Balaton region** (opposite)
- Discovering the **Kál Basin** (p210), a region of unspoilt beauty in the heart of a national park



History

The area around Lake Balaton was settled as early as the Iron Age and the Romans, who called the lake Pelso, built a fort at Valcum (now Fenékpusztá), south of Keszthely, in the 2nd century AD. Throughout the Great Migrations (see p23), Lake Balaton was a reliable source of water, fish, reeds for thatch and ice in winter. The early Magyars found the lake a natural defence line, and many churches, monasteries and villages were built in the vicinity. In the 16th century the lake served as the divide between the Turks, who occupied the southern shore, and the Habsburgs to the northwest. Before the Ottomans were pushed back they had already crossed the lake and razed many of the towns and border castles in the northern hills. Croats, Germans and Slovaks resettled the area in the 18th century, and the subsequent building booms gave towns such as Sümeg, Veszprém and Keszthely their baroque appearance.

Balatonfüred and Hévíz developed early as resorts for the wealthy, but it wasn't until the late 19th century that landowners, their vines destroyed by phylloxera lice, began building summer homes to rent out to the burgeoning middle classes. The arrival of the southern railway in 1861 and the northern line in 1909 increased the tourist influx, and by the 1920s resorts on both shores welcomed some 50,000 holiday-makers each summer. Just before the outbreak of WWII that number had increased fourfold. After the war, the communist government expropriated private villas and built new holiday homes for trade unions. Many of these have been turned into hotels in recent years, greatly increasing the accommodation options.

Activities

The main pursuits for visitors at Lake Balaton – apart from **swimming**, of course – are **boating** (p70) and **fishing** (p70). Motor boats running on fuel are banned entirely, so 'boating' here means sailing, rowing and windsurfing. Fishing is good – the indigenous *fogas* (pike-perch) and the young version, *süllő*, being the prized catch – and edible *harcsa* (catfish) and *pony* (carp) are in abundance.

Licences are required to fish on the lake – ask at the various Tourinform offices on the lake for places to purchase them. It's also possible to procure one from the **National Federation of Hungarian Anglers** (MOHOSZ;

☎ 1-248 2590; www.mohosz.hu; XII Korompai utca 17) in Budapest.

One of the big events of the year at the lake is the **Cross-Balaton Swimming Race** from Révfülöp to Balatonboglár in late July.

Lake cruises are a popular pastime over the summer months (July and August). Cruises usually last one hour (adult/child 1250/625Ft) or 1½ hours (1400/700Ft) and leave from all points on the lake. There are also themed cruises for kids, along with sunset tours and grill parties. Check www.balatonihajozas.hu for more details.

With the recent completion of the 210km designated bike path around the lake, **cycling** (p68) has become an attractive activity. Additionally, most towns on the lake's shores have at least one bike rental agent operating over the summer months. If you plan to do a bit of cycling, pick up a copy of *Két keréken a Balatonnál* (Cycling around the Balaton), a free map available from Tourinform offices that details the round-the-lake path, along with 13 other cycle routes in the Balaton area.

Getting There & Away

Trains to Lake Balaton usually leave from Déli or Kelenföld train stations in Budapest, and buses from Népliget bus station. If you're travelling north or south from the lake to towns in Western or Southern Transdanubia, buses are usually preferable to trains.

Getting Around

Railway service on both the northern and southern sides of the lake is fairly frequent. A better way to see the lake up close, though, is on a ferry run by the **Balaton Shipping Co** (Balatoni Hajózási Rt; ☎ 84-310 050; www.balatonihajozas.hu; Krúdy sétány 2, Siófok). Ferries operate on the Siófok–Balatonfüred–Tihany–Balatonföldvár route, and from Fonyód to the Badacsony, up to four times daily from April to May and September to October, with many more frequent sailings from June to August. From late May to early September, ferries ply the lake from Balatonkenese to Keszthely and Révfülöp to Balatonboglár. There is also a regular car ferry between Tihanyi-rév and Szántódi-rév (from early March to late November). There are no passenger services on the lake in winter, ie from November to March.

Adults pay 930Ft for distances of one to 10km, 1280Ft for 11km to 20km and 1430Ft