

Great Plain



Like the Outback for Australians or the Old West for Americans, the Nagy Alföld (Great Plain) holds a romantic appeal for most Magyars. The image of shepherds guiding their flocks with moplike Puli dogs and cowboys riding five-in-hand across the prairies comes as much from imagination (and the nation's poetry and painting) as it does from history. The Great Plain covers some 45,000 sq km east and southeast of Budapest, encompassing half the nation's territory, but only about a third of the population. At times the unending fields with sporadic tree stands can feel numbingly monotonous and be uncomfortably hot. But there's no arguing the spellbinding potential of big-sky country, especially around Hortobágy and Kiskunság National Parks.

Not as one-dimensional as it might seem, the Great Plain is also home to cities of graceful architecture, winding rivers and easygoing afternoons. Szeged is a centre for art and Art Nouveau gems, while its neighbour Kecskemét is a small city packing a big architectural punch. Further east, day-trip opportunities abound from Debrecen, Hungary's second city. With terrific bird-watching, a huge thermal bath resort, and horse riding and horse shows to seek out, it should be easy to create your own memories of the plain.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sampling the namesake meat-filled pancakes with paprika sauce in a hundred-year-old inn after horse riding or bird-watching in **Hortobágy** (p247)
- Spending the day taking pictures of the Art Nouveau palaces in culture-filled **Szeged** (p263)
- Attending a street festival on the pretty pedestrian squares of **Kecskemét** (p252)
- Feeling the earth shake as a Hungarian cowboy rides by 'five-in-hand' at the *puszta* horse show in **Bugac** (p257)
- Soaking in the thermal baths beneath the only castle on the plain, at **Gyula** (p276), near the Romanian border



