

Southern Transdanubia



Southern Transdanubia (Dél-Dunántúl) is a region of calm, a place to savour life at a slower pace. It's only marginally touched by tourism, and touring through the countryside is like stepping back in time. The whitewashed farmhouses you'll pass, with thatched roofs and long colonnaded porticoes decorated with floral patterns and plasterwork, haven't changed in centuries.

This region has never been as important industrially as Western Transdanubia. It is thickly settled with small villages, and agriculture remains the mainstay for most people – from the fruit orchards of the Zselic region south of Kaposvár and the almonds of Pécs to the wines of Szekszárd and Villány-Siklós. The pleasant, almost Mediterranean climate helps: spring arrives early, summer is long, winter mild.

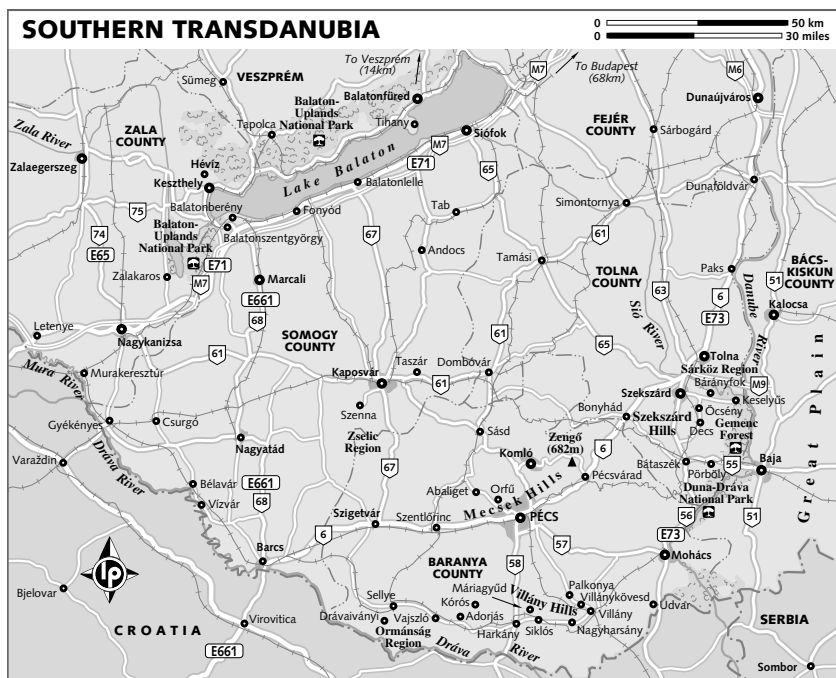
Southern Transdanubia has a lot to offer travellers. Top of the pops is Pécs. Art museums and theatres abound in a place that has been named a European Capital of Culture in 2010, and history is very much alive here. More Roman and early Christian tombs than you can shake a shovel at have been uncovered near the city's basilica, and a number of Turkish monuments have survived.

Many other towns here are worth visiting as well. Imposing castles dominate Siklós and Zigetvár, you can take advantage of curative thermal waters at Harkány, and visiting Szekszárd and Villány without tasting the local vintages would be criminal.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Viewing the wonders on exhibit at the Zsolnay Porcelain Museum and the Csontváry Museum in **Pécs** (p298 and p298)
- Sampling big, bold reds in the cellars of **Villány** and **Villánykövesd** (p293)
- Riding the **narrow-gauge train** (p285) through the Gemenc Forest in the Sárköz region
- Taking the waters at the thermal baths in **Harkány** (p292), especially in winter
- Exploring one of Hungary's best *skanzens* (open-air museums of folk architecture) in the delightfully rural village of **Szenna** (p308), southwest of Kaposvár





History

Southern Transdanubia was settled by the Celts and then the Romans, who built towns at Alisca (Szekszárd) and Sophianae (Pécs) and introduced grape-growing. The north-south trade route passed through here, and many of the settlements prospered during the Middle Ages.

The region was a focal point of the Turkish occupation; indeed the battle that led to the Ottoman domination of Hungary was fought at Mohács in 1526 and Pécs was an important political and cultural centre under the Turks.

Late in the 17th century the abandoned towns of Southern Transdanubia were re-settled by Swabian Germans and Southern Slavs, and after WWII ethnic Hungarians came from Slovakia and Bukovina in Romania as did Saxon Germans. They left a mark that can still be seen and felt today in local architecture, food and certain traditions.

SZEKSZÁRD

☎ 74 / pop 34,700

The wine-producing city of Szekszárd lies south of the Sió River, which links Lake Balaton with the Danube, among seven of

the Szekszárd Hills. It is the centre of the Sárköz folk region, but more than anything else Szekszárd is the gateway to Southern Transdanubia. In fact, you can actually see the region start in the town's main square (Garay tér), where the Great Plain, having crossed the Danube, rises slowly, transforming into the Szekszárd Hills.

Mild winters and warm, dry summers combined with favourable soil help Szekszárd produce some of the best red wines in Hungary. The premier grape here is the Kadarka, a late-ripening and vulnerable varietal that is produced in limited quantities.

History

Szekszárd was a Celtic and later a Roman settlement called Alisca. The sixth Hungarian king, Béla I, conferred royal status on the town and founded a Benedictine abbey here in 1061. The Turkish occupation left Szekszárd deserted, but the area was repopulated late in the 17th century by immigrant Swabians from Germany, and the economy was revitalised in the next century by wheat cultivation and viticulture.