

# Destination Hungary

Hungary (Magyarország) has always been a little different. Ever since the Magyars secured this kidney-shaped island in a sea of Slavs over a thousand years ago, they have been going about their business as they deemed fit. Even the Soviets couldn't push their full plans through here, with the stalwart Magyars managing to engineer their own form of socialism – the watered-down, not-so-spicy 'goulash communism'.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Hungary, forever a country with an eye to the West (and a foot firmly planted in the East), quickly embraced capitalism and all its trappings. The economy boomed, open-plan malls magically appeared like mushrooms after a rain on the fringes of every sizeable town, and mobile-phone ownership went through the roof. Magyars began borrowing for homes and new cars (the old Trabant no longer cut it), and, unlike their Slavic neighbours, did so via cheap foreign-currency loans.

The health of Hungary's economy largely depended on foreign markets, and the government let spending spiral out of control. Then came the credit crunch. Average Hungarians were hit hard, finding themselves exposed to rising debt payments as the forint devalued against the euro and Swiss franc. In late 2008 global institutions – led by the International Monetary Fund – lent Hungary US\$25 billion to help it out of the tight spot, but it remains to be seen whether the bailout will bring the failing economy back from the brink.

In recent years, the growing frustration normally kept at bay behind closed doors began to spill out onto Hungary's streets. Peaceful demonstrations turned into full-blown riots, most notably on the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Uprising, when Budapest became a battlefield between protestors and police. Hungary's nationalist movement gained new momentum in mid-2007 with the formation of the Magyar Gárda (Hungarian Guard), the strong arm of the far-right Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom (Movement for a Better Hungary) party. Dressed in black and proudly displaying nationalist emblems, the militant group is a disturbing sight on Hungary's streets for many Hungarians. Even though membership is small (below 500), support for the Gárda from the likes of a former defence minister and several churchmen has raised concerns.

Through it all most Hungarians have gone about their business as only Hungarians can – with a large dose of reality mixed with fierce pride for their homeland. Slowly the focus is turning from quantity to quality: boutique hotels are popping up in Budapest and Balaton; world-class restaurants are spreading out from the capital to smaller enclaves; and superior thermal retreats are replacing dated communist-era eyesores. Despite the rising tide of commercialism, Hungary's roots remain firmly entwined with its folk traditions, as a trip to any part of the country will testify to. Thankfully Hungary has held on to the one factor that makes it special – being Hungarian. What that means is different for every person, but the good thing is Magyarország likes to be different. It's been so for generations, and we hope it doesn't change.

## FAST FACTS

Population: 10.045 million

GDP per head: US\$13,900 (at purchasing power parity US\$19,240)

Inflation: 6.7%

Unemployment: 7.4%

Size: 93,030 sq km

Internet domain: .hu

Number of mobile phones per 1000 inhabitants: 1100 (302 in 2000)

Suicide rate: 42.3 men and 11.2 women per 100,000 people, surpassed only by Belarus, Russia and Lithuania

National anthem: 'Himnusz', with the music composed by Ferenc Erkel and the lyrics written by poet Ferenc Kölcsey

Number of cinemas in 2007: 400 (down from 1960 in 1990)

# Getting Started

A trip to Hungary actually requires very little advance planning. Free tourist literature abounds, maps are excellent and readily available, and staff at tourist offices, travel agencies, hotels, train stations and so on are generally helpful and knowledgeable. In fact, almost anything can be arranged after you've arrived. However, a little planning never goes amiss and it can be of great value if you have special interests or are keen on a particular activity.

## WHEN TO GO

Hungary has a temperate climate with three climatic zones, so there is a certain amount of variation across the country: Mediterranean in the south, Continental in the east and Atlantic in the west.

Although it can be pretty wet in April and May, spring is just glorious throughout Hungary. The weather is usually mild and tourist crowds are small. The Hungarian summer is warm, sunny and unusually long, and the resorts can get very crowded in late July and August. If you avoid Lake Balaton and the ever-popular Mátra Hills, you should be OK. Cities come to a grinding halt in August, which Hungarians traditionally call 'the cucumber-growing season' (because that's about the only thing happening here).

Autumn is beautiful, particularly in the hills around Budapest, in the Northern Uplands and around Lake Balaton. In Transdanubia and on the Great Plain it's harvest and vintage time. November is one of the rainiest months of the year in certain parts of the country, however. Winter is the least attractive season: aside from being cold and often bleak, museums and other tourist sights close or cut their hours sharply.

## COSTS & MONEY

Hungary is no longer the bargain-basement destination for foreign travellers that it once was, but it is still cheaper than most Western European countries. If you bunk down in private rooms, eat at medium-priced restaurants and travel on public transport, you should get by on €35 a day in the provinces without too much scrimping, though Budapest will cost you closer to €50 a day.

Travelling in more style and comfort – restaurant splurges with bottles of wine, a fairly active nightlife, staying in small hotels/guest houses with 'character' – will cost about twice as much (€70 in the provinces and €100 in the capital). Those putting up at hostels or college dormitories, and eating street-stall food like *burek* (pastry with filling) for lunch and at self-service restaurants for dinner, could squeak by for around €20 a day (€35 in Budapest).

For information about discounts, see p373.

See Climate Charts (p371) for more information.

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- checking the visa situation and your passport expiry date (p380)
- organising a good health-insurance policy (p375)
- a few words of Hungarian, and a phrase book – a little goes a long way (p397)
- swimsuit, plastic sandals and towel – for that mandatory thermal-spa visit
- a stomach for heavy food and great wine (p51)
- ear plugs, or a penchant for tacky music – there's no escaping it in bars, restaurants and cafes

## TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

In general, many Hungarians are largely unaware of their impact on the surrounding environment, but this is slowly changing. For example, in recent years recycling banks have been employed by local governments in the country's bigger towns and cities. As a traveller, it is impossible not to have some effect on the Hungarian environment as well, but there are a number of ways to minimise the impact.

### Getting There & Around

Getting to Hungary by train or bus from most parts of Europe is a relatively easy exercise. Naturally it's more time-consuming than plane travel, but your carbon footprint is a fraction in comparison. If you do fly, consider offsetting your carbon emissions (for example on [www.climatecare.org](http://www.climatecare.org)).

Within Hungary, the public transport network connects even the smallest towns and villages. Trains travel the length and breadth of the country, and where they don't go, buses do. Almost all sizeable towns and cities employ local transport options. The flat topography of Hungary makes getting around by bicycle a highly viable option; bicycles can also be transported on some trains. Unfortunately, finding establishments that rent bicycles can prove problematic, so it's best to bring your bike with you. Lake Balaton is one exception – over the summer months, bicycle-rental spots pop up like mushrooms after rain.

### Sleeping & Eating

It's easy to avoid the large, generic hotel chains in Hungary and opt for smaller, family-run establishments, therefore ensuring your forints go directly to the local community. Additionally, agrotourist accommodation, private rooms and *pensions* (see p368) are further alternatives.

Fruits, vegetables and flowers are readily available at town markets throughout Hungary; much of it is locally grown and free of chemical sprays.

## TRAVEL LITERATURE

Travellers writing diary accounts usually treat Hungary rather cursorily as they make tracks for 'more exotic' Romania or places beyond. A few classic – and very personal – accounts are still available in bookshops, in libraries or on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).

- *Between the Woods and the Water* (Patrick Leigh Fermor) Describing his 1933 walk through Western and Central Europe to Constantinople as a young man, Fermor wrote the classic account of Hungary.
- *Under the Frog* (Tibor Fischer) An amusing account of the antics of two members of Hungary's elite national basketball team from the end of WWII through the 1956 Uprising.
- *Danube* (Claudio Magris) A colourful account of the author's journey through Central Europe, following the path of the Danube; written a handful of years before the fall of the Berlin Wall.
- *The Hungarian Girl Trap* (Ray Dexter) Insightful personal account of life in modern-day Budapest for an expat who, like so many others, fell in love with a beautiful Hungarian girl.
- *Hungary & the Hungarians: The Keywords* (István Bart) Subtitled 'A Concise Dictionary of Facts, Beliefs, Customs, Usage & Myths', this book will prepare you for (and guide you through) just about everything Magyar – from ABC (a kind of greengrocer under the old regime) to Zsolnay.
- *Stealing from a Deep Place* (Brian Hall) Sensitive but never cloying, the author describes his tempered love affair with the still-communist Budapest of the 1980s while completing a two-year cycle tour of Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria.

### HOW MUCH?

Cheap/good bottle (75cl) of wine in supermarket 750/2500Ft

Bed in private room in provinces/Budapest from 3000/6000Ft

Cup of coffee in a cafe 250-500Ft

Local English-language newspaper 400-600Ft

Dinner for two at a good restaurant in the provinces/Budapest 9000/15,000Ft

# TOP PICKS

Slovenia

 • Budapest  
**HUNGARY**

## HUNGARIANS YOU SHOULD KNOW

- Béla Bartók (p47)
- Matthias Corvinus (p27)
- St Stephen (p25)
- Lajos Kossuth (p29)
- Franz Liszt (p47)
- St Margaret (p95)
- Cardinal József Mindszenty (p155)
- Sándor Petőfi (p48)
- Ferenc Rákóczi II (p29)
- József Rippl-Rónai (p45)
- István Széchenyi (p179)

## HISTORICAL STRUCTURES

- Széchenyi Chain Bridge in Budapest (p92)
- Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest (p100)
- Minorite church in Eger (p333)
- Esterházy Palace at Fertőd (p177)
- Gödöllő Royal Palace (p138)
- Hortobágyi Csárda (p248)
- Benedictine Abbey Church at Ják (p185)
- Pannonhalma Abbey (p169)
- Sümeg Castle (p212)
- Art Nouveau New Synagogue in Szeged (p265)

## FREE-TIME PURSUITS

- Bird-watching in the Fertő-Hanság National Park (p177)
- Canoeing or kayaking on the Tisza River (p239)
- Caving in Aggtelek (p346)
- Cycling around Lake Balaton (p195)
- Fishing in Lake Tisza (p239)
- Hiking in the Zemplén Hills (p347)
- Horse riding at Hortobágy (p248)
- Sailing on Lake Balaton (p197)
- Swimming in the thermal lake at Hévíz (p205)
- Wine tasting in the Villány region (p293)

- *The City of the Magyar or Hungary and Her Institutions in 1839–40* (Julia Pardoe) This three-volume part-travelogue, part-history by a British spinster is priceless for its vivid descriptions of events such as the devastating Danube floods of 1838.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Hungarian Home Page** ([www.fsz.bme.hu/hungary](http://www.fsz.bme.hu/hungary)) Despite some links being out of date, this web portal is still a useful address listing a plethora of Hungarian home pages.

**Hungarian National Tourism Organisation** ([www.hungary.com](http://www.hungary.com)) Without a doubt the single best website on Hungary; it should be your first portal of call.

**Hungary.hu** ([www.hungary.hu](http://www.hungary.hu)) Government portal with key data, but not always as up to date as it should be.

**Inside Hungary** ([www.insidehungary.com](http://www.insidehungary.com)) National news and a myriad of excellent links on everything from business to culture.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Includes summaries on Hungary, links to Hungary-related sites and travellers trading information on the Thorn Tree.

**Museums in Hungary** ([www.museum.hu](http://www.museum.hu)) A complete list of every museum in the land that's currently open to the public.

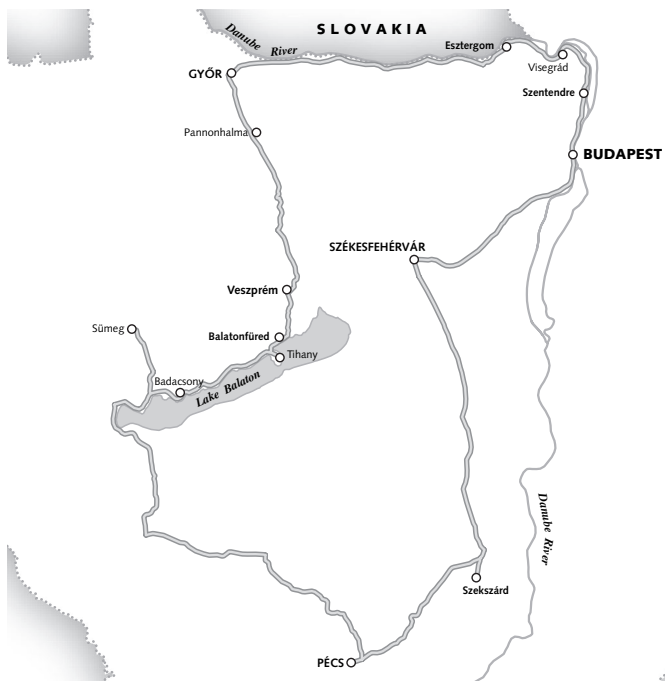
# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### GO WEST

### One to Two Weeks

Combining many of the highlights of the west of the country will give you a taste of Hungary's historical wealth and natural beauty. From **Budapest** (p71) head north through the Danube Bend region to the former artists colony of **Szentendre** (p141) and historical **Visegrád** (p149), before arriving at **Esztergom** (p153), Hungary's holiest city. The road continues west along the Danube to **Győr** (p163), an industrial city surprisingly rich in historical buildings and monuments. From here, head south to **Pannonhalma** (p169), whose awesome abbey is on Unesco's World Heritage List, and onto **Veszprém** (p223), the 'city of queens'. The scenic northern coast road of Lake Balaton, and its settlements of **Balatonfüred** (p219), **Tihany** (p215) and **Badacsony** (p207), is your next port of call. Make a quick detour to **Sümege** (p212) and its dramatic castle before turning south again to **Pécs** (p295), the jewel of the south. Return to the capital, but take time to sample the sublime red wines of **Szekszárd** (p281) and Hungary's 'city of kings', **Székesfehérvár** (p229), along the way.



This 690km trip has something for everyone: castles, churches, palaces, thermal spas, rolling hills and Hungary's biggest lake. It's mostly an easy drive, and you could do it in a week. But with so much to see and time to recharge on the Balaton, we recommend two.

## OVER HILL & BEYOND DALE

**One to Two Weeks**

Hungary's uplands to the north are hardly what you would call dramatic. But they have a gentle beauty all of their own, and nestled within the hills are important historical towns and traditional villages. From **Budapest** (p71) head north to **Vác** (p145), arguably the most attractive town on the Danube Bend, and then on to **Balassagyarmat** (p316), the capital of the traditional Palóc region. Continue due east to **Szécsény** (p317), site of a pivotal battle and a delightful manor house. Dip down through the rolling Cserhát Hills to **Hollókő** (p319), a 'museum town' of Hungarian traditions. From here the road winds through the eastern Cserhát and foothills of the Mátra Hills to **Gyöngyös** (p324), where you'll start a challenging drive through the hills past **Kékestető** (p328), Hungary's highest point, and scary **Recsk** (p329), site of what was once Hungary's most brutal forced-labour camp. Lovely baroque **Eger** (p330) awaits you at the end of the high road. It's then onto sprawling **Miskolc** (p340) and the traditionally sweet wines of **Tokaj** (p348) before a quick stop at **Nyíregyháza** (p358) en route to **Debrecen** (p242), nicknamed 'Calvinist Rome', the country's second-largest city. For a taste of Hungary's Great Plain head west through **Hortobágy National Park** (p248) to **Tiszafüred** (p239) and eventually back to Budapest.

You'll get both the 'ups' and 'downs' of northern and eastern Hungary – the so-called Northern Uplands and the Great Plain – on this 650km trip. There's plenty to do – from exploring historical cities like Eger and Debrecen to wine tasting in Tokaj and bird-watching in the Hortobágy region.



# ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

## SOUTHERN TRAILS

### One to Two Weeks

The southern reaches of Hungary contain relatively few major attractions and plenty of minor ones, but no matter their size, most are overlooked by travellers. Be the odd one out and make a beeline from **Budapest** (p71) to **Jászberény** (p237), home of the legendary Lehel Horn, and then turn south to **Szolnok** (p235), a working-class city and capital of the Central Plain. Continue south through **Körös-Maros National Park** (p276) to sleepy **Szarvas** (p273), whose arboretum is among the best in Hungary. **Békéscsaba** (p274), with its leafy avenues and church spires, beckons to the southeast, from where a detour to the medieval castle and thermal baths of **Gyula** (p276) is mandatory. Cross the plain to **Szeged** (p263), arguably the finest city in the region, but pause long enough to appreciate the folk art – particularly pottery – of **Hódmezővásárhely** (p269). After wandering the architecturally rich streets of Szeged and dining on spicy fish soup, head north to **Ópusztaszer** (p269), the famed spot where Árpád held the first assembly of the Magyar chieftains, and onto **Csongrád** (p271) and its traditional fishers' cottages. **Kecskemét's** (p252) splendid Art Nouveau buildings are only a short drive away, as is the legendary horse show at **Bugac** (p257) in Kiskunság National Park. From Kecskemét, head southwest to **Kalocsa** (p257) and **Baja** (p260), two towns close to the Danube, then cross the mighty river to **Mohács** (p286), site of Hungary's famous defeat at the hands of the Ottomans in 1526. Finish with wine in hand in **Szekszárd** (p281).

Take the time to discover Hungary's southern expanse on this 685km trip through the Southern Plain. Quiet rural towns, Art Nouveau architecture, regional folk art, legendary battle sites and remote national parks await you in this unspoiled corner of the *puszta*.



## TAILORED TRIPS

### UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Hungary counts a total of one natural and seven cultural sites on the Unesco World Heritage List.

The first two to be inaugurated – in 1987 – captured the country's considerable contrasts between its rural heritage and urban achievements. The settlement of **Hollókő** (p319) was the first village in the world to make the list for its traditional architecture and folk customs, while **Budapest** (p71) – in particular Buda Castle, the banks of the Danube and Andrásy út – was deemed worthy due to its impressive city landscape.

The variety of formations and combination of tropical and climatic effects in the caves at **Aggtelek** (p346) won Hungary its only natural site in 1995; it was extended in both 2000 and 2008.

Not to be outdone, the 1000-year-old Benedictine abbey at **Pannonhalma** (p169) was added a year later in 1996, closely followed by **Hortobágy National Park** (p248) in 1999.

This century, the wonderfully decorative early Christian tombs in the heart of **Pécs** (p295) made the list in 2000; the varied landscape and rural architecture surrounding **Lake Fertő** (p177) near Sopron was added in 2001; and the age-old viticulture of the **Tokaj** (p348) wine region was included on the list in 2002.

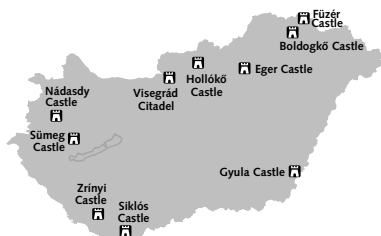


### WALLED FORTRESSES

Hungary is covered with crumbling ruins of castles once used as defence against invaders. Many suffered at the hands of the Ottoman Empire, and still more were blown to smithereens by the lordling Habsburgs. And yet others have managed to stand the test of time.

The Northern Uplands easily has the largest share of castles in the country. The tiny folk village of **Hollókő** (p320) is home to an impressive example, while **Eger** (p331) is dominated by a citadel with its roots in the 12th century. **Boldogkő Castle** (p347) sits impossibly atop a basalt mountain, and **Füzér Castle** (p356) has a commanding position over village and valley.

Elsewhere, **Nádasdy Castle** (p186) holds the dubious distinction of one-time home to the blood countess Erzsébet Báthory, while only a short drive away, imposing **Sümege Castle** (p212) rests high on a rocky limestone pinnacle. To the south, both the **Siklós** (p288) and **Zrínyi** (p308) fortresses remain largely intact, and the **Gyula stronghold** (p277) is the last remaining medieval brick castle left standing on the flat southern *puszta*. High above the Danube, **Visegrád Citadel** (p150) may be a shadow of its former self, but it still exudes plenty of power.





# The Authors



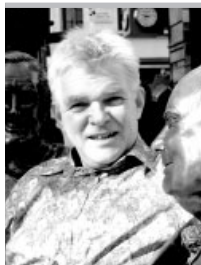
**NEAL BEDFORD**    **Coordinating Author, Destination Hungary, Getting Started, Itineraries, Environment, Danube Bend, Western Transdanubia, Lake Balaton Region, Directory, Transport**

With Hungary only a short train ride away from his adopted home Vienna, it was only a matter of time before Neal began exploring the country. Following the lead of so many Austrians, he started with trips to Sopron for cheap dental work – and even cheaper wine – but soon found himself expanding his horizons and heading for the likes of Lake Balaton, Budapest and the wide open *puszta* (plain). After dozens of trips, and a few travel guides on Hungary under his belt, he can safely say he's seen almost every corner of the country, but knows in his heart that Hungary will always remain foreign and fascinating.



**LISA DUNFORD**    **Activities, Great Plain, Northern Uplands, Northeast**

Ever since Lisa learned as a child that her grandfather came from Hungary, she's been hooked. It started with writing book reports in school and collecting folk costumes from family. But it moved on to a degree in international affairs, learning the language, and a year spent studying in Budapest. She travelled to the country often while working in nearby Bratislava and spent time researching family history in the Northeast. What she found were cousins and new and dear friends, who attended her wedding in the church where her great-grandfather was ordained. She returns annually to visit, explore and write about Hungary.



**STEVE FALLON**    **History, The Culture, Food & Drink, Budapest, Southern Transdanubia**

Steve, who has worked on every edition of *Hungary*, first visited Magyarország in the early 1980s and immediately fell in love with thermal baths, Tokaj wine and the voice of Marta Sebestyén. Not able to survive on just the occasional fix, he moved to Budapest in 1992, where he could enjoy all three in abundance and in *magyarul* (Hungarian). Now based in London, Steve returns to Hungary regularly for all these things and more, including *pálinka* (fruit brandy), Art Nouveau and the best nightlife in the region.

## LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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