

Welcome to Budapest

*Straddling the Danube River,
with the Buda Hills to the west
and the Great Plain to the east,
Budapest is a gem of a city.*

The Hand of Man

Budapest's beauty is not all God-given; man has played a role in shaping this pretty face too. Architecturally, Budapest is a treasure, with enough baroque, neoclassical, Eclectic and art nouveau (Secessionist) buildings to satisfy anyone's appetite. Overall, though, Budapest has a fin-de-siècle feel to it, for it was then, during the capital's 'golden age', that most of what you see today was built. Nearly every building has some interesting or unusual detail, from art nouveau glazed tiles and neoclassical bas-reliefs to bullet holes and shrapnel scorings left over from WWII and the 1956 Uprising that still cry out in silent fury.

The Past Is Near

They say the past is another country, but it's always been just around the corner in Budapest. Witness those scars from WWII and 1956. There are sad reminders like the poignant *Shoes on the Danube* memorial, but ones, too, of hope and reconciliation – like the 'sword' of the former secret police building on Andrásy út now beaten into the 'ploughshare' that is the House of Terror, with both sides of the story told. And there's joy as much-loved concert halls get built and renovated, metro lines extended and busy streets pedestrianised.

Eat, Drink & Be Magyar

There is a lot more to Hungarian food than goulash and it remains one of the most sophisticated styles of cooking in Europe. Magyars even go so far as to say there are three essential world cuisines: French, Chinese and their own. That may be a bit of an exaggeration, but Budapest's reputation as a food capital dates largely from the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries and, despite a fallow period during the days of Communism, is once again commanding attention. So, too, are its world-renowned wines – from Villány's big-bodied reds and Somló's flinty whites to honey-gold Tokaj.

In the Soak

Budapest is blessed with an abundance of hot springs – some 123 thermal and more than 400 mineral springs, in fact, from 14 different sources. As a result, 'taking the waters' has been a Budapest experience since the time of the Romans. The choice of bathhouses is generous – you can choose among Turkish-era, art nouveau and modern establishments. Some people come seeking a cure for whatever ails them, but the majority are there for fun and relaxation – though we still maintain it's the world's best cure for what Hungarians call a *macskajaj* ('cat's wail', or hangover).



Why I Love Budapest

By Steve Fallon, Author

I love Budapest for all the right reasons – architecture (especially art nouveau), romance (particularly the views from the bridges) and sticky apricot jam (only on toast) – and some of the wrong ones, too (killer *pálinka*, rickety trolleybuses, and checking bodies out in the Turkish baths). When I first came to Budapest (by chance, as it happened), I was bowled over by an often sad but confident city whose history seemed too complex to comprehend, by a beautiful and expressive language that I considered impenetrable, and by a people I thought I'd never know. I stayed on to learn more about all three.

For more about our author, see p256.