

Budapest Today

There was a moment in 2010 when the Hungarian economy rebounded with a boost from exports, and observers thought just maybe Budapesters might stop whingeing. But people here 'take their pleasure sadly', a bizarre arrangement there's even a phrase for, and it was pointed out that unemployment remains high (more than 10%), the city is still torn apart by Metro 4 construction and mass protests at every public holiday, and everyone holds a mortgage in Swiss francs, which now cost a fortune in forint to repay.

Best on Film

Moszkva tér (Moscow Square; 2001) Comic tale of Buda teenage boys in 1989 oblivious to the events taking place around them.

Ein Lied von Liebe und Tod (Gloomy Sunday; 1999) German romantic drama set in a Budapest restaurant just before the Nazi invasion.

Children of Glory (Szabadság, Szerelem; 2006) The 1956 Uprising in Budapest through the eyes of a player on the Olympic water polo team.

Zimmer Feri (1998) Set on Lake Balaton; a young practical joker takes on a bunch of loud German tourists.

Best in Print

Prague (Arthur Phillips; 2002) Young expat American who wants to live in more bohemian Prague focuses on life in Budapest just after the changes in 1989.

Under the Frog (Tibor Fischer; 2001) Amusing account of two members of Hungary's elite national basketball team in Budapest from WWII to 1956.

The Paul Street Boys (Ferenc Molnár; 1906) Satirical turn-of-the-century novel about boys growing up in the tough Józsefváros district.

The Invisible Bridge (Julie Orringer; 2010) Epic saga of a Hungarian-Jewish family during WWII.

Change of Guard Part I

The big news from Budapest: after two decades and five terms of office for SZDSZ (Alliance of Free Democrats) liberal Gábor Demszky, the electorate voted in a new mayor in 2010, only its second since the end of communism in 1989. He's István Tarlós, Fidesz (Federation of Young Democrats) chairman and FOV – 'friend of Viktor' (Orbán, head of the Fidesz-led coalition government that won national elections the same year and brought him back as prime minister after eight years in opposition). As his final act, Demszky made the Dalai Lama – he of the 'you-only-live-twice' school – an honorary citizen of Budapest. Oh dear. There goes any business with China for a while.

Change of Guard Part II

Orbán has moved quickly to lay his scent. He has changed the constitution – Hungary is no longer 'the republic of'. He has tried to get criminal charges brought against his predecessor, Ferenc Gyurcsány. He has passed a controversial media law and been read the riot act for that in public by MEP Daniel Cohn-Bendit known as 'Danny the Red' for his revolutionary activities in Paris in 1968 – as Hungary took control of the EU presidency at the start of 2011. To add to his misery, the right-wing nationalist Jobbik party ('Jobbik' is a kind of pun on the word 'right') garnered over 16% of the vote in the national elections and its uniformed militia wing, Magyar Gárda (Hungarian Guard), has been accused of bullying and intimidating Roma people in villages of the northeast. And those rumours about Orbán's Roma ancestry just won't go away. Oh double dear.

Name-Change Game

Tarlós too has been leaving his mark. While there is no cash to get Demszky-style legacy projects like Lágymányosi – ooops, Rákóczi – Bridge up and running, he's begun playing the name-change game. It's been nothing like the one played after April 1989, when names were changed – some 400 in fact – with a determination that some people felt was almost obsessive. But the more than two dozen involved this time around are highly visible. Ferihegy International Airport is now Ferenc Liszt International Airport; II Moszkva tér (Moscow Square; including the metro stop) becomes Széll Kálmán tér; V Roosevelt tér is Széchenyi István tér; VIII Köztársaság tér (Republic Sq) is now known as János Pál pápa tér (Pope John Paul II Sq); Lágymányosi Bridge becomes Rákóczi Bridge; and a nameless little park on the Buda side of Margaret Bridge has become Elvis Presley tér. We are not making this up. Apparently the King dedicated a spiritual song called 'Peace in the Valley' he sang on national TV in the US in January 1957 to the people of Hungary and asked viewers to send money for the refugees in Austria. Who said Magyars don't have elephantine memories?

Smoke-Free at Last

And in a move that shocked even those who supported the legislation, Hungary outlawed indoor smoking in all public places, including restaurants, bars and clubs, from the start of 2012 (though there was a three-month grace period to the start of April). Offenders now face a fine of 30,000Ft. Who would have thought it possible in this nation of butt fiends?

Moving Forward

Despite what some locals might suggest, Budapest is moving along just fine, thank you. The clubs – especially the outdoor 'garden clubs' – heave throughout the week, there's often a queue at the Gellért and Rudas Baths, and you won't get a table at the Ruzswurm on Castle Hill in a month of Sundays. Another restaurant in Belváros has been awarded a Michelin star, and the city looks great, with newly pedestrianised streets planted with lime trees and nonpolluting lighting installed. A long, long time ago, the man they call 'the greatest Hungarian', István Széchenyi, wrote: 'Many people think that Hungary was. I like to believe that she will be!' Wake up, *magyar barátokom* (my Hungarian friends), and smell the coffee. You've arrived.

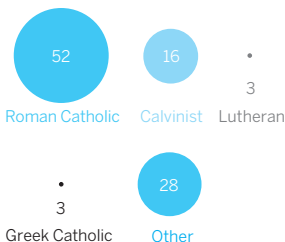
if Budapest were 100 people



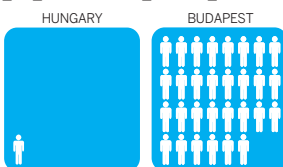
92 would be Magyar (Hungarian)
3 would be Roma
5 would be other

belief systems

(% of population)



population per sq km



1 icon = 110 people