

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 Human Touch

Budapest's beauty is not all God given; humankind has played a role in shaping this pretty face too. Architecturally, the city is a treasure trove, with enough baroque, neoclassical, Eclectic and Art Nouveau (or Secessionist) buildings to satisfy everyone. Overall, though, Budapest has a fin-de-siècle feel to it, for it was during the capital's 'golden age' in the late 19th century that most of what you see today was built.

The Past at Hand

They say the past is another country, but it's always been just around the corner in Budapest. Witness the bullet holes and shrapnel pockmarks on buildings from WWII and the 1956 Uprising. 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 and theatres are built and renovated, metro lines extended and busy streets repaved and pedestrianised.

Eat, Drink & Be Magyar

There's a lot more to Hungarian food than goulash, and it remains one of the most sophisticated styles of cooking in Europe. Magyars may exaggerate when they say that there are three essential world cuisines: French, Chinese and their own. But Budapest's reputation as a food capital dates largely from the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century and, despite a fallow period under communism, the city is once again commanding attention. So, too, are its excellent wines – from Villány's big-bodied reds and Somló's flinty whites to honey-gold sweet Tokaj.

In the Soak

The city is blessed with an abundance of hot springs. 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 *macskakaj* (cat's wail): a 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 – and some of the wrong ones, too – killer *pálinka* (fruit brandy), rickety trolleybuses and checking out bodies in the Turkish baths. When I first came to Budapest, I was bowled over by an often sad but confident city whose history seemed too complex to comprehend, by a beautiful but impenetrable language, and by a people I thought I'd never know. I stayed on to learn more about all three.

For more about our authors, see p256.