

# Understand Budapest

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Lots of fun and escape games as Budapest gets on its (shared) bike and spanking-new – though costly – metro line.

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It's all about visitors who overstay their welcome – from the Romans and the Turks to the Germans and the Russians.

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Though Budapest's architecture runs the gamut from Gothic and baroque to modern, the show-stopper is Art Nouveau, known here as Secessionist.

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There's a whole lot more to Hungarian wines than ruby-red Bull's Blood and honey-sweet Tokaj.

# Budapest Today

There have been some good, some bad and some ugly happenings in Budapest in recent years. The city has welcomed all sorts of innovations, from modes of transport to a whole new world of fun and games. The economy coughs and wheezes, but it still breathes. And a national election has returned the old guard with more power than ever.

## Best on Film

**Kontroll** (2003) A dark, high-speed comic thriller set almost entirely in the Budapest metro in which assorted outcasts, lovers and dreamers commune.

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

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

**The Grand Budapest Hotel** (2014) 'Budapest' in name only (it was filmed in Germany), but the setting for this quirky film was inspired by the Danubius Hotel Gellért.

## Best in Print

**Prague** (Arthur Phillips; 2002) Young expat American who wants to live in 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.

## Capital of Nightlife

They say that good things come to those who wait. Long in its gestation but quick in its delivery, Budapest is now the crowned king (or would that be queen?) of nightlife in Europe. Clubs – especially the outdoor 'garden' ones – heave throughout the week in summer, 'ruin pubs' (a Budapest phenomenon that has been imitated elsewhere but never feels quite the same) are filled to the brim and everyone wants just one last shot of *pálinka* (fruit brandy).

Along with all the bopping and grooving, there's a new pursuit in town: the city is now the undisputed nerve centre of live escape games, innovative pastimes in which teams of players are locked into a set of rooms – often in disused apartment blocks – and attempt to set themselves free by working through a series of complex riddles. The choice of venues is amazing and there's a wealth of different games on offer.

## Old Guard, New Guard

In the current political environment, naysayers and whingers (and there are plenty of both here – Hungarians are said to 'take their pleasure sadly'; the fact that there's a phrase for it says it all) might be forgiven for conjuring up images of a fiddling Nero with a burning Rome as backdrop.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was returned to power in April 2014 with just 45% of the vote. But a series of changes in the election laws – including halving the number of MPs and allowing gerrymandering – transformed this into a two-thirds parliamentary mandate. 'Viktator' (as he is sometimes called in the opposition press) has been accused at home and abroad – often by EU officials – of too much nationalism, of politicising the judiciary and the central bank, and of stirring up ethnic tensions and suppressing media freedom.