



The Great Plain & Northeast Hungary

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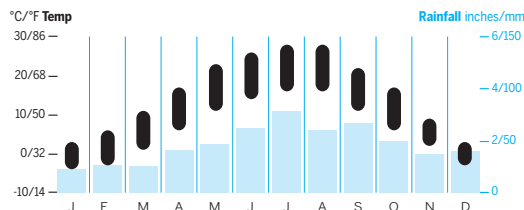
Why Go?

Like the Outback for Australians or the Wild West for Americans, the Nagyalföld (Great Plain) holds a romantic appeal for Hungarians. Many of these notions come as much from the collective imagination as they do from history, but there's no arguing the spellbinding potential of big-sky country, especially around Hortobágy and Kiskunság National Parks. The Great Plain is home to cities of graceful architecture and history. Szeged is a centre of art and culture, Kecskemét full of Art Nouveau gems and Debrecen is the 'Calvinist Rome'.

By contrast, if you want to experience village life – steeped in folk culture, replete with dirt roads, horse-drawn carts and tiny wooden churches – Northeast Hungary is the place to go. The best way to explore is to hire a car, motorbike or bicycle and head out from the capital, Nyíregyháza, a spa town with all the creature comforts.

When to Go

Szolnok



Apr–May Wet, maybe, but spring is glorious, with grasslands coming to life and everything in flower

Jul–Aug Warm on the *puszta* (plain) but this is the time for outdoor pursuits and Debrecen's festivals

Sep–Oct Excellent bird-watching in the Hortobágy while the Northeast dons its autumnal colours

THE GREAT PLAIN

The Great Plain – also known as the *puszta* ('deserted' or 'abandoned') – covers some 45,000 sq km, encompassing half the nation's territory but only about a third of the population. The Central Plain, the smallest of the Great Plain's three divisions, stretches east-ward from Budapest to the Tisza River. The biggest attraction here is Lake Tisza, Hungary's second-largest lake and a water-lover's paradise.

The Hortobágy region of the Eastern Plain is where the myth of the lonely *pásztor* (shepherd) in billowy trousers, the way-side *csárdák* (inns) and Gypsy violinists was born – kept alive in literature and fine art. The horse and herding show at the national park re-creates this pastoral tradition.

The Southern Plain, spanning the lower regions of the Danube and Tisza Rivers, holds the lion's share of the Great Plain's more intriguing towns and cities, including Kecskemét and Szeged. Bugac, in Kiskunság National Park, is one of the best places in Hungary to learn about life on the plain.

History

Five hundred years ago the Great Plains was not a steppe but forest land at the constant mercy of the flooding Tisza and Danube Rivers. The Turks chopped down most of the trees, destroying the protective cover and releasing the topsoil to the winds; villagers fled north or to the market towns and *khas* (settlements under the sultan's jurisdiction). The region had become the *puszta* and home to shepherds, fisher folk, runaway serfs and outlaws. You'll find few fortifications outside Gyula on the Great Plain; the Turks required they be destroyed as part of the agreement of retreat. In the 19th century regulation of the rivers dried up the marshes and allowed for methodical irrigation, paving the way for intensive agriculture, particularly on the Southern Plain, but flooding still occurs.

Tiszafüred

☎59 / POP 10,800

This may not be the 'Lake Balaton of the Great Plain', as tourist brochures put it, but Lake Tisza (Tisza-tó) on the Central Plain offers outdoors enthusiasts a quiet, laid-back alternative. Few visitors came to town before the 1980s, when they dammed the Tisza

River and opened more than 127 sq km of lakes to holiday-makers. Tiszafüred, on the northeastern edge, is recreation central. Bungalows, camping grounds and eateries line the shore; the small town core has little more than a few restaurants.

Sights

Pál Kiss Museum

MUSEUM

☎352 106; www.museum.hu/tiszafured/kisspal; Tariczky sétány 6; adult/child 300/150Ft; ☉9am–noon & 1–5pm Tue–Sat) Housed in a beautiful old manor (1840) and surrounded by parkland southeast of the Tourinform office, this fine old museum has a collection focusing on the everyday lives of Tisza fisherfolk and the work of local craftspeople, especially potters.

Potters' Houses

HISTORIC BUILDING

The area south of the main square (Piac tér) is a patchwork of traditional thatched cottages. One of them houses the **Gáspár Nyúzó House** (Nyúzó Gáspár Fazekas Tájház; ☎352 106; http://www.museum.hu/museum/index_hu.php?ID=460; Malom utca 12; adult/child 300/150Ft; ☉1–5pm Tue–Sat May–Sep), a former potter's residence with antique potting wheels, drying racks, furniture and plates in pale primary colours and patterns of stars, and birds and flowers unique to the region. In the same district ceramic artist **Zsóka Török Nagyné** (☎06 70 521 4460, 353 538; <http://www.tiszafured.hu/info.php?id=55>; Szőlősi út 27; ☉8am–5pm Mon–Fri) has her studio; call ahead before setting out.

Activities

Swimming and sunbathing on the narrow lake's sandy strip are popular activities; the beach is ringed by food stalls, drinks stands and a changing pavilion. If the lake is too cold for you, Tiszafüred's **Thermal Bath** (Tiszafüredi Gyógyfürdő; ☎352 911; www.termal furdo.net/furdo/tiszafuredi-strand-es-gyogyfurdo-tiszafured; Fürdő utca 2; adult/child 1100/800Ft; ☉10am–6pm Sun–Fri, noon–8pm Fri & Sun) has four open-air and covered pools, as well as a sauna and a wide range of spa services.

To the west of the beach is a series of boat-rental stands (open 10am to 8pm June to August), where you can get outfitted with a canoe or kayak (per hour 600Ft), paddle boat (per hour 1000Ft) or 5HP motor boat (per hour 4000Ft).

In addition to boat rental both **Albatrosz Kikötő** (☎06 30 234 5108; www.albatrosz kikoto.com; Tiszapart) and **Horgászcentrum**