



Lake Balaton & Southern Transdanubia

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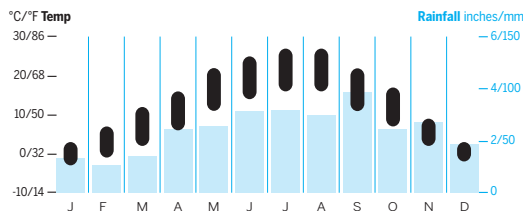
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Why Go?

Extending roughly 80km like a skinny, lopsided paprika, at first glance Lake Balaton seems to simply be a happy, sunny expanse of opaque tourmaline-coloured water to play in. But step beyond the beaches of Europe's biggest and shallowest body of water and you'll encounter the vine-filled forested hills, a national park and a wild peninsula jutting out 4km, nearly cutting the lake in half. Oh, and did we mention Hungary's most famous porcelain producer and a hilltop fairytale fortress? Then there's Southern Transdanubia, where whitewashed farmhouses with thatched roofs dominate a countryside that hasn't changed in centuries. Anchoring its centre is one of Hungary's most alluring cities, Pécs, where a Mediterranean feel permeates streets filled with relics of Hungary's Ottoman past and a headspinning number of exceptional museums. Beyond, a clutch of medieval castles enchant and vineyard cellars beckon you to wine-taste your heart out.

When to Go

Pécs



Best Places to Eat

- » Oliva (p172)
- » Mandula (p187)
- » Az Elefánthoz (p183)
- » Rege Café (p163)

Best Places to Stay

- » Bacchus (p153)
- » Kővirág (p157)
- » Mala Garden (p174)
- » Bonvino Hotel (p158)

Apr-May
Resorts open and Southern Transdanubia bursts with spring flowers

Jul-Aug Hot and humid but guaranteed sunny days and balmy nights

Sep-Oct Fewer crowds and mild temps; this may be the best time to visit

LAKE BALATON REGION

History

The area around Lake Balaton was settled as early as the Iron Age and in the 2nd century AD the Romans, who called the lake *Pelso*, built a fort at *Valcum* (now *Fenékpuszta*), south of *Keszthely*. Throughout the Great Migrations, Lake Balaton was a reliable source of water, fish, reeds for thatch and ice in winter. The early Magyars found the lake a natural defence line, and many churches, monasteries and villages were built in the vicinity. In the 16th century the lake served as the divide between the Turks, who occupied the southern shore, and the Habsburgs to the northwest. Before the Ottomans were pushed back they had already crossed the lake and razed many of the towns and border castles in the northern hills. Croats, Germans and Slovaks resettled the area in the 18th century, and the subsequent building booms gave towns such as *Sümege*, *Veszprém* and *Keszthely* their baroque appearance.

Balatonfüred and *Hévíz* developed early as resorts for the wealthy, but it wasn't until the late 19th century that landowners, their vines destroyed by *phylloxera* lice, began building summer homes to rent out to the burgeoning middle classes. The arrival of the southern railway in 1861 and the northern line in 1909 increased the tourist influx, and by the 1920s resorts on both shores welcomed some 50,000 holidaymakers each summer. Just before the outbreak of WWII that number had increased fourfold. After the war, the communist government expropriated private villas and built new holiday homes for trade unions. Many of these have been turned into hotels in recent years, greatly increasing the accommodation options.



Activities

The main pursuits for visitors to Lake Balaton – apart from swimming, of course – are boating, fishing and cycling. Motor boats running on fuel are banned entirely, so ‘boating’ here means sailing, rowing and windsurfing. Fishing is good – the indigenous *fogas* (pikeperch) and the young version, *süllő*, being the prized catch – and edible *harcsa* (catfish) and *ponty* (carp) are in abundance. Area licences are required to fish on the lake – ask at the various *Tourinform* offices on the lake for places to purchase them.

Lake cruises offered by *Balaton Shipping Co* (p147) are a fun pastime over the warmest months (June, July and August). Cruises usually last one hour (adult/child 1500/650Ft) and leave from nearly all towns on the lake, including *Keszthely*, *Badacsony*, *Tihany*, *Balatonfüred* and *Siófok*. Themed cruises for kids are also offered, along with sunset tours and grill parties.

The 210km designated bike path around the lake is prime for cycling. Most towns on the lake's shores have at least one bike-rental agent operating over the summer months. If you plan to tool around on two wheels, pick up a copy of the free cycling maps available from each town's *Tourinform* office. In addition to the round-the-lake path, various other shorter cycle routes exist in the Balaton area.

Getting There & Away

Trains to Lake Balaton usually leave from *Déli* or *Kelenföld* train stations in Budapest, and buses from *Népliget* bus station. If you're travelling north or south from the lake to towns in Western or Southern Transdanubia, buses are usually preferable to trains – departure times are more frequent and they serve more destinations.

Getting Around

Rail and bus service on both the northern and southern sides of the lake is fairly frequent. But a better way to see the lake up close is on a ferry run by the **Balaton Shipping Co** (Balaton Hajózási Rt; ☎284-310 050; www.balatonihajozas.hu; Krúdy sétány 2, Siófok). Ferries operate on the *Siófok–Balatonfüred–Tihany–Balatonföldvár* route, and from *Fonyód* to the *Badacsony*, up to four times daily from April to May and September to October, with many more frequent sailings from June to August. From late May to early September, ferries ply the lake from *Balatonkenese* to *Keszthely* and *Révfülöp* to *Balatonboglár*. There is also a regular car ferry between *Tihany-rév* on the northern shore and *Szántódi-rév* on the southern shore (from early March to late November). There are no passenger services from November to March.

Adults pay 1100Ft for distances of 1km to 10km, 1460Ft for 11km to 20km and 1660Ft for 21km to 70km. Children pay half-price, and return fares are marginally less than double the one-way fare. Bicycle transport costs 1000/1460Ft one way/return.

Car ferries charge 540/475/250/800/1550Ft per adult/child/bicycle/motorcycle/car.