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## The Best of Budapest

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It never occurred to me when living in Modesto, California that someday, I would live in Budapest, Hungary and have the opportunity to write this book.

After graduating with a doctorate in International and Multicultural Education in 2000 (with over 20 years of teaching experience at that point), it was time to make a major move. A year abroad seemed to be in order for me and my partner to revitalize our spirits before transferring to the east coast of the U.S. Our European travels eventually took us to Budapest during a cold spell, and we decided to hunker down and stay until spring. Back then, all an American had to do was leave the country for a day and return to refresh your Visa for another ninety days—we did this several times. Then we started teaching English at private schools; when we were told we could avoid work and residency permits if we had our own business, we started a private language school. It turns out we did need those permits after all, which cost us a trip to NYC and a wait in line at the Hungarian Consulate. We submitted our applications and were back in Hungary the next day.

After more than 6 years and several Visas renewals later, we're still here.

We've found teaching jobs at universities and several years ago opened up a bed and breakfast (BudaBaB; see p. 91). We've also seen Budapest and Hungary grow and evolve before our eyes.

In those days, Budapest was not on the travel radar, still considered too exotic, while many still did not realize it was no longer a Communist country. (People still ask us this question.) During our first year, Hungary had its third democratic election for Prime Minister. Each of the three elections put a different political party into control causing continual upheaval in the laws from one party's whims to the next.

Tourism has been greatly aided by the budget airlines, which have started to spring up in the last few years. Budapest now boasts fourteen budget airlines flying from destinations throughout Europe, with new ones in the works. With this, the hotel industry has blossomed. Boutique hotels and new 4- and 5-star hotels have been built or have taken over historic buildings, creating a wide offering of accommodations for all budgets.

Up until a couple of years ago, a new restaurant would open after extensive remodeling only to close within 6 months. This has changed with the influx of tourism, which has stabilized the business scene. Menus in English were once uncommon, and ordering an entrée was a grab bag surprise; tourism has changed all this and is changing customer services across the board. Shop clerks have had to be re-trained to deal with English-speaking tourists and to offer friendlier customer service. (For the most part, it is working.) Culturally, the country (and especially Budapest) continues to thrive, with nightlife, arts, and fashion scenes that are infused with more youthful exuberance than ever before, and an underground party scene that is well worth seeking out.

Since Hungary joined the European Union in 2004, those extended visits we enjoyed in 2001 are somewhat trickier for today's American traveler; the official EU law still allows 90 day visits, but then requires Americans to leave the EU for 6 months before returning. I hope that regardless of how long you are visiting, you enjoy yourself enough to extend your stay, just as we did.

## 1 The Best Little Adventures in Budapest

- **The Best Photographic Viewpoints in the City:** If you want to start at the highest point, you will have to go to János-Hegy or John Hill where the tower is 529m (1,736 ft.) high. On a clear day, you might just see the Tatra Mountains. The best way to get there is the chairlift (p. 156). The next highest vista is the Citadel on Gellért Hill. The bus only gets you so far, and then you hike up the rest, but it is worth the effort. This is where you will find the Lady of Liberty statue viewable from the Pest side. Castle Hill is of course an excellent viewpoint for photographs from both the front of the castle and Fisherman's Bastion. Margit Bridge, the side across from the island, has a breathtaking view of the river from where the bridge elbows.
- **Shopping the Courtyards of Budapest:** What travelers find confusing are the windows displaying interesting merchandise, but with no store in the vicinity to buy the merchandise. With a little investigative work, you will realize that the stores are often in the commercialized courtyards. Like little hidden shopping districts, the courtyards offer bargains and unusual items in locations seemingly known only by those in the know. The best courtyards to explore are those off the well-known Váci utca. Many designer stores are hidden away in nooks and crannies. See chapter 9, "Budapest Shopping" for some ideas of where to start, but

don't limit yourself to this district. These courtyards are all over the city.

- **Architecture Not to Be Missed:** Many people do not bother to look up at the top of buildings, missing much. Aside from the historic listings, Posta Takarékpénztár on Hold utca across from where Perczel Mór utca comes into it is one of my favorite buildings in the city (p. 183). It is now part of the National Bank. Move around so the trees don't obstruct your view. Párizsi udvar in the Art Nouveau style where Kigyo utca meets Ferenciek tere is sumptuous both outside and inside. Walk in the courtyard and look at the ceiling. On the korut, near Blaha Lujza is the New York Palace built in eclectic style with an emphasis on Italian renaissance and baroque. For something more modern, don't pass up the Lehel Tér market at the blue metro stop by the same name. It looks like a beached boat.
- **Riding the Trams:** With your transit pass in hand, tour the city and orient yourself from the windows of the city's many trams. Hop on a tram and ride it to the end of the line, get out, and take it back again. This is also an inexpensive hop-on, hop-off way to sightsee, checking out things that catch your eye along the way. Tram 4 or 6 will take you along the large ring road. Tram 2 at night provides a lovely view of Parliament, and of Castle Hill all lit up. Bus no. 15 gives a good overview of the city. See

“Getting Around” in chapter 4, “Getting to Know Budapest,” for details on public transportation.

- **Packing a Picnic for an Outing:** Any day when pleasant weather is in the forecast, people flock to one of the parks or Margaret Island to enjoy the fresh air and one another’s company. Families stroll along with their young children while young lovers enjoy each other’s company, and the older folks reminisce about the old and better times. A quick and easy way to pack a picnic is to pick up an already roasted chicken. See the tip on p. 152.
- **Taking a Walk in the Buda Hills:** It’s hard to believe that such a large expanse of hilly forest is right here

within the capital city. There are hiking trails aplenty; every Budapest native has a favorite. Ask around. See chapter 7, “Exploring Budapest,” for more about the Buda Hills.

- **Strolling through the Jewish District:** Budapest still has a large Jewish population. Pest’s historic Jewish neighborhood is disappearing at a sorrowfully rapid rate due to modernization, commercialization, and new construction. Run-down historic areas that once resonated with the magic and tragedy of the past have been bulldozed into oblivion. See “Walking Tour 4: The Jewish District” in chapter 8, “Strolling Around Budapest.”

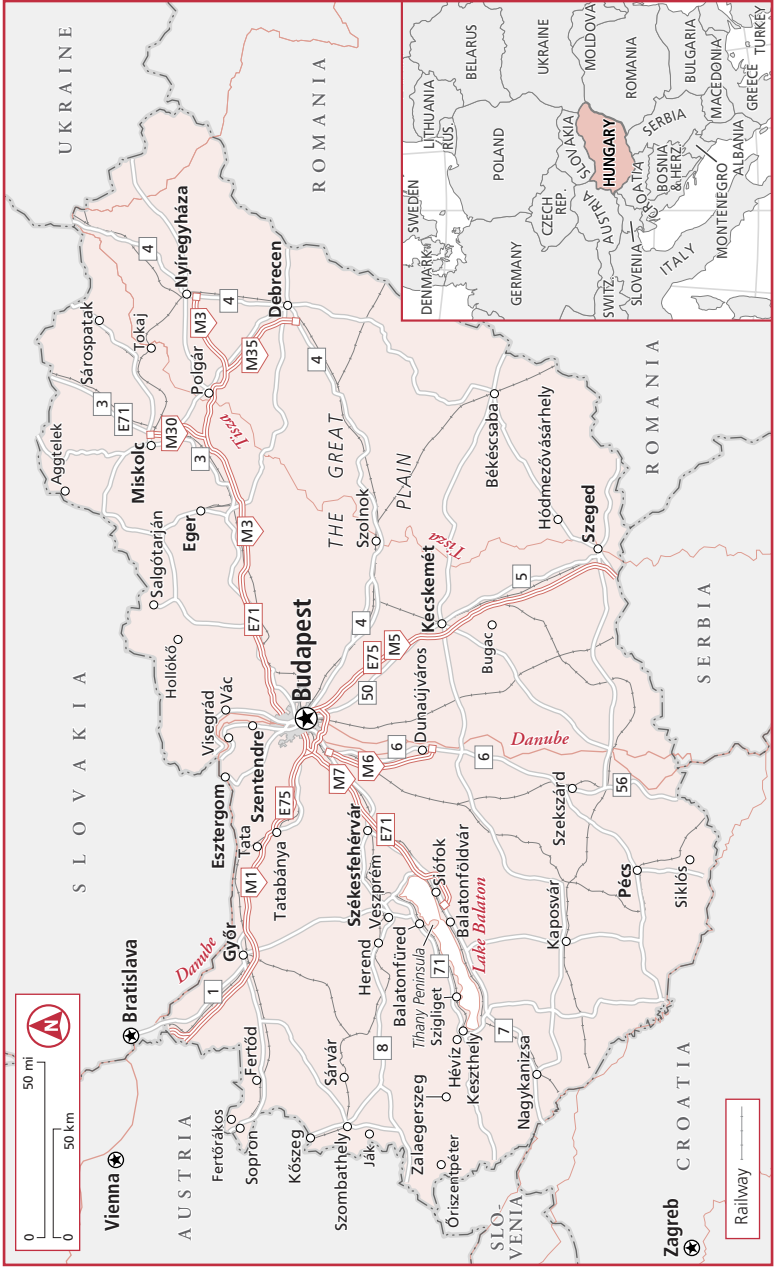
## 2 The Best Places to Enjoy a Sunset in Budapest

- **From the Riverside:** As the sun sets, you will find many locals and visitors flocking to the riverside to enjoy people-watching, watching the sunset, and just plain relaxing. Depending on how busy your day was, you may either want to find a bench to sit on and unwind or take a stroll onto one of the bridges that span the mighty Danube, the second longest river in Europe. See chapter 7, “Exploring Budapest,” for more about Budapest’s bridges and riverside walks.
- **Széchenyi Thermals:** This thermal is open until 10pm. Relax in the hot spring waters while watching the end of the day’s sun rays as they fade into the horizon. For more on the thermals see p. 166.
- **Margaret Island (Margit Sziget):** This island, once called Rabbit Island, was home to the cloistered nuns’ convent founded by Princess Margaret, daughter of Béla IV, who

promised his daughter to the nunnery. Enjoy the flower gardens or the singing fountain as the sun sinks into the western sky.

- **Fisherman’s Bastion:** Sip a glass of wine in this romantic sunset spot. On Castle Hill, it overlooks the city on one side and St. Matthias Church on the other.
- **Academy of Sciences Park:** For a casual place to relax, sit in the park across the street from the academy and take in the engaging architecture, the river view, and a beautiful sunset on Roosevelt tér.
- **The Sculptural Grounds at Buda Castle:** There is a powerful statue called the Matthias Fountain. It is based on a legend of King Matthias, who, while on a hunting trip through the forest, came across a woman stranger, Ilona; she fell in love with him instantly, not realizing he was the king. He reciprocated the love.

# Hungary



### 3 The Best Off-the-Beaten-Track Museums

- **Bélyegmúzeum (Postal Stamp Museum):** Philatelists the world over have recognized the artistic creativity of the Magyar Posta creations. Here you'll find incredibly beautiful and well-organized collections of Hungary's finest stamps and those of many other countries. See p. 136.
- **Miksa Róth Memorial House:** This is the last home of the famed stained glass and mosaic artist whose work graces the Parliament and other places throughout the city and the world. It is truly an exceptional collection not to be missed. See p. 137.
- **Ráth Görgy Museum:** A personal collection of Asian art from different countries, each displayed in separate rooms, makes this Budapest museum a treasure trove of exotic collections, at Varosligeti fasor 12 (☎ 1/342-3916; www.hoppmuzeum.hu).
- **Holokauszt Emlékközpont (Budapest Holocaust Memorial Center):** Surrounded by modern architecture is the Páva Synagogue. The center has special exhibits and documents the Jewish history of Hungary during the Holocaust. See p. 132.
- **Underground Railway Museum:** Located at Deák metro underground, this small exhibit shows the history of the tram lines in the city.

### 4 The Best Places to Kill an Hour in Budapest

- **Central Market Hall:** Not only a good place to pick up souvenirs, but also a fun place for people-watching. The second floor balcony overlooking the whole market is an experience you should not miss. See p. 215.
- **Castle Hill:** Ignore the tourist sights for an hour and just stroll along the side streets, winding around and allowing yourself to get lost in admiring the buildings.
- **The Baths:** The Király or Rudas baths are steeped in history and are the perfect way to relax while soaking in the history of the culture at the same time. See “Budapest's Most Popular Thermal Baths” in chapter 7, “Exploring Budapest.”
- **A Traditional Coffeehouse:** Coffeehouses are a cultural icon in the city, dating back over a 100 years. Enjoy a cup of coffee or tea and linger with a book or newspaper for as long as you like without feeling any pressure to leave. See “Coffeehouses: Historic & Traditional” in chapter 6, “Where to Dine in Budapest.”
- **Browse the Shelves in a Bookstore:** With three used English bookstores, there are many opportunities to find something that will catch your eye. Perhaps you will find that special book as a remembrance of your visit. See chapter 9, “Budapest Shopping.”
- **Art Factory Gallery and Studio:** Open to the public and located in the ABB Building at Váci út 152–156, it is small enough to enjoy for an hour or longer if you have the time. See “Shopping” in chapter 9, for more information.

### 5 The Best Day Trips Outside Budapest

- **Cruising the Danube:** There's nothing like a boat ride on a fine sunny day. From Budapest, head up the river to the charming towns of Szentendre and Visegrád along the Danube Bend. See “Railing through the Danube Bend” in chapter 11, “The Danube Bend.”

- **Visiting Szentendre:** Only 45 minutes outside the city by HÉV, this small Serbian village boasts a number of tiny museums, shopping opportunities, and wonderful views of the Danube. See chapter 11, “The Danube Bend.”
  - **Vác:** A delightful little town that took me 6 years to discover and I wish I had earlier. The center square is a mix of historic buildings with a modern square completed in 2006. The river walk is fantastically beautiful. See p. 247.
  - **Swimming in the Thermal Lake at Hévíz:** Even in the bitterest spells of winter, the temperature in Europe’s largest thermal lake seldom dips below 85° to 90°F (29°–32°C). Hungarians swim here year-round and you can too! If you’re here in winter, it’ll be a particularly memorable experience. See p. 262.
  - **Visit Esztergom:** Hungary’s seat of Catholicism, Esztergom is located 46km (29 miles) northwest of Budapest. St. István, the first Christian king of Hungary was crowned here on Christmas Day A.D. 1000.
- The cathedral has impressive views of the Danube and the rest of the city. See chapter 11, “The Danube Bend.”
- **Explore the Monastery at Pannonhalma:** Prince Géza founded the monastery in 969. This is where the gothic cloisters are housed as well as a magnificently ornate 19th-century library, with the most important collection of Hungarian historical documents. It sits on a hill between the forested slopes of the Bakony region and the low-lying *Kisalföld* (Little Plain), with a fantastic view.
  - **Sleepy Historical Visegrád:** Located 40km (25 miles) north of Budapest to Nagymaros, then a ferry to Visegrád, you can find the ruins of King Béla IV’s reign. The Citadel and the reconstructed Royal Palace are among the places worth seeing. See p. 249.
  - **Medve Otthon:** Visit the bears at the bear sanctuary, which holds 42 bears that were once stars in Hungarian movies then rescued due to mistreatment. You can feed them honey, and kids can have their face painted. It is just 1 hour from the city. See p. 40.

## 6 The Best Hotels in Budapest

- **Best Splurge Hotel:** The magnificent **Four Seasons Hotel Gresham Palace**, V. Roosevelt tér 5–6 (☎ 1/268-6000), has gained the reputation as Hungary’s foremost hotel. The workmanship of the recreated Art Nouveau architecture is breathtaking. Guests get the royal treatment, with customer care that will enamor you for a long time. See p. 75.
- **Best for a Romantic Getaway:** After entering the **Corinthia Grand Hotel Royal**, VII. Erzsébet krt. 43–49 (☎ 1/479-4000), you will not want to leave the gorgeous building and with the pool, spa, and restaurants, there is no need to do so. See p. 75.
- **Best for Families:** The accommodations at **Charles Apartment House**, I. Hegyalja út 23 (☎ 1/212-9169), are comfortable and clean flats with fully equipped kitchens in a Budaside apartment building. See p. 87.
- **Best Moderately Priced Hotel:** The jazzy **Cotton House Hotel**, VI. Jókai u. 26 (☎ 1/354-2600), conveniently located near the Opera House and Liszt Ferenc tér, will soothe the blues away. See p. 80.
- **Best Budget Hotel:** The accommodations at **Medosz**, VI. Jókai tér 9 (☎ 1/374-3001) are comfortable and clean and close to Octogon and Liszt Ferenc tér. See p. 82.

- **Best Pension:** The charming **Leo Panzió**, XII. Kossuth Lajos u. 2/A. (☎ 1/266-9041), is in a quiet apartment building with the perfect location to start your shopping expedition and transportation is right outside the door. See p. 81.
- **Best Location and Views:** This one is a tie between two hotels, one on each side of the river. On the Pest side, it is

the **Four Seasons Hotel Gresham Palace**, V. Roosevelt tér 5–6 (☎ 1/268-6000), with the Chain Bridge outside its door. On the Buda the **Hilton Budapest**, I. Hess András tér 1–3 (☎ 1/899-6600; p. 87), is a luxurious lodging right next door to the Matthias Church and the Fisherman's Bastion square.

## 7 The Best Dining Bets in Budapest

- **Best for a Romantic Dinner:** At **Gerlőczy Kávéház**, V. Gerlőczy u. 1 (☎ 1/235-0953), you can dine under the canopy of the leafy trees shading you, with excellent service, all the while being serenaded by live music at night. See p. 107.
- **Best Decor:** The legends of the benevolent King Mátyás are painted as murals on the walls with stained glass decorating the windows at **Mátyás Pince**, V. Március 15 tér 7–8 (☎ 1/266-8008). See p. 102.
- **Best Wine List:** **Gundel**, XIV. Állatkerti út 2 (☎ 1/468-4040), the city's fanciest, most expensive, and (we think) most overrated restaurant, nonetheless has an impressive wine list. See p. 120.
- **Best Beer List:** You will have difficulty choosing from the 10 draft beers or 50 bottled beers at **Mosselen Belgian Beer Café** at XIII. Pannónia u. 14 (☎ 1/452-0535). The food is also excellent making it a double treat. See p. 112.
- **Best Wild Game:** At **Paprika Vendéglő**, VII. Dozsa György 72., 4½ blocks from Heroes Square (☎ 06/70-574-6508), you can relish the

savory dishes of wild boar or venison. There are many other choices for the less adventurous. See p. 121.

- **Best Traditional Coffeehouse:** **Central Kávéház**, V. Károly Mihály u. 9 (☎ 1/266-2110), is the closest to the classic coffeehouse of the city's past traditions. Even today, it is the meeting place for intellectuals, tourists, families, and more. This is a Budapest must see. See p. 127.
- **Best Nontraditional Coffeehouse:** For coffee or hot chocolate, **Aztek Chokolat Café** at V. Karoly korut 22 or Semmelweis u. 19. (☎ 1/266-7113), has a tremendous selection of both. See p. 129.
- **Best Pastries:** Our favorite pastry shop is the **Művész Kávéház**, VI. Andrassy út 29 (☎ 1/352-1337). It has many traditional desserts such as somlói galuska, considered a national dessert, plus pastries, and an ice cream bar. See p. 128.
- **Best Rétes:** Melt-in-your-mouth strudel is available at the **Rétesbár**, I. Balta köz 4, the alley on Castle Hill. Directly across from Tourinform, look for the red banner hanging outside, in the brick alleyway.