

## Small Country, Big Attractions

Hungarians, in general, are unpretentious, direct and humble people. They often modestly describe their nation as just a small, little country. For instance, when comparing the Hungarian economy with the U.S. economy they will say, "Hungary – small country, small money". When comparing their mafia with Russia's they will say, "Hungary – small country, small mafia". However, a trip to Hungary allows for a variety of activities and there are many attractions in the capital, Budapest.

People expecting some old worn-down Communist city will be pleasantly surprised by Budapest, "The Paris of Eastern Europe". In the 1990's there was still a Communist aura, but now it feels like a Western European city. It will quickly become apparent that there was a great deal of wealth in the city before the World Wars and Communist rule. The Austria-Hungarian Empire helped facilitate much of this wealth before it was defeated in World War I. Thus, many of the elaborate buildings are over a hundred years and have deteriorated, but they still illustrate the beauty of the city.



The Danube River splits Budapest into two distinct areas. Buda is built on a hill looking over the river and contains many historical buildings; on the other side is the more commercial and modern Pest. Between the two sides on the Danube is Margit Island, which is off-limits to motorized vehicles and is designed to be a large, walking path. Connecting the two sides is a series of bridges with the most famous being the Chain Bridge. It's debatable which side has a better view. I like being on the Pest side, gazing at Buda's castle, but either side is deserving of a look.

The Castle Hill area is usually the premier destination for artists and tourists alike. Many artists will paint the various buildings throughout the winding streets of the Old Town. Tourists who visit the castle area can choose from a series of art, military and history museums, including the Hungarian National Gallery and the Budapest History Museum. Also in the area is Matthias Church, which is historically one of the most important church/mosque in Hungarian history. On the edge of the hill is the Fisherman's Bastion, which is a lookout area named for the fishermen who helped defend the castle wall in the Middle Ages.

The Pest side has some historical building, but is more vigorous and feels more modern. The Parliament, located directly next to the Danube, is modeled after Britain's and certainly is conspicuous. The State Opera House is one of Europe's premiere centers and can be viewed either via a tour or through a performance. St. Stephen's Basilica is the city's biggest and offers the best panoramic view of Budapest.

Close to the Danube is Vaci Utca, the city's main pedestrian walkway. During the day it is brimming with both locals and tourists due to its shops and restaurants. At night it is a popular place for attractive young Hungarian women to conduct the "buy the attractive woman a drink and then get overcharged" scam. This scam, coordinated with the local mafia, is popular in Eastern Europe and can cost men hundreds or even

thousands or dollars. Even Hungary (small country, small mafia) has some form of organized crime. So men leave your ego and money at home, you're not that handsome.

Moving northeast of Vaci Utca is the Heroes' Square and City Park area. The Heroes' Square is one large concrete slab where the May Day parades in Communist times were held. The Millennium Monument dominates the north side of the square. It honors Hungary's great leaders including the leaders of the seven tribes that banded together and settled in Hungary, marking the birthplace of Hungary.

The City Park surrounds Heroes' Square and has a variety of attractions. There is a zoo and a large area to go figure skating in the winter. In this wooded area is Vajdahunyad Castle, created in 1896 in honor of the city's millennium. Hidden near the back of the park is a market, which cost a quarter to get in, but has nearly everything including toys, electronics, magazines and food.



In the middle of City Park is the city bath, one of many attractive Turkish baths in Budapest. Some, such as Kiraly, are men-only and women-only and require a small loincloth, which is supplied. Others, like Szechenyi in City Park, are coed and require visitors to bring swimwear. The city bath pools inside range from cold, to lukewarm, to hot. Bathers can go to the outdoor courtyard and literally freeze in the winter, until they run into a hot bath in the middle. This is a beautiful scene as steam, due to the contrast in temperatures, rises from the baths, and there are many Roman figurines that spit out water. Also, many old men play chess on floating boards in the outdoor pools. Don't jump into the pool, they get mad.

After warming in the pool, run back downstairs into the standing-room only sauna, and after that cool off. The options are: jumping in a cool pool, sitting in an air-conditioned room, or grabbing ice shavings (it looks and feels like a broken glass window) which are sent down what looks like a laundry chute and then placing them on the body. Although, the ceiling is moldy and the water isn't entirely clean, Turkish baths are a popular way to relax.

The Communist Era, often referred to as the Old Era or the Socialist Era by Hungarians, is a large part of tourism. Many markets will have old Communist pins and medals for sale. Further, Statue Park just outside of Budapest has a series of grandiose



Communist statues that weren't destroyed after the 1989 revolution. Also, there are many statues in honor of those who died attempting to overthrow the Communists in 1956. The West had encouraged Hungarians to revolt, which they did, but no help from the West came. The radio station where the Hungarian revolutionaries desperately pleaded for

the promised assistance to arrive while Soviet tanks were rolling in, is now a museum. Another museum that illustrates Soviet, as well as Nazi, atrocities in great detail is the Terror Museum. A more distinct memory of the Old Era is Liberation Monument, which stands on Gellert Hill on the Buda side, and overshadows the whole city. Originally erected as a remembrance of Russian soldiers who died "liberating" Hungary, the Soviet star has now been removed.

The Old Era is indeed over. Although some Hungarians long for the security of Communism, Budapest has definitely changed and transformed into a vibrant city. The castle area in Buda allows tourists to visit historical Hungary. Pest has a great night-life and a modern big-city feel. The City Park as well as Margit Island allows people to relax. The Buda Hills are fantastic hikers and nature lovers. Hungary: small country – big attractions.