

The Best of Budapest

In 1994, I answered an advertisement in the local newspaper in my native Montréal that read, “Seeking a young, well-connected, Hungarian-speaking student for intriguing artistic project.” The job was indeed intriguing and artistic: I traveled to Budapest for the summer to help prepare for Canada’s participation in the 1996 Expo. The trip started my career as a journalist and, ironically, brought me back to the country my parents had escaped—as young journalists—some four decades earlier.

The country I saw that summer—and had occasionally seen as a child—was drastically different from the one my parents knew. They lived in a Hungary that had already lost two-thirds of its territory during World War I. By 1941, the country was plunged into World War II, after which followed the failed 1956 revolution against the Soviet occupation. To this day, bullet holes from the armed insurrection can still be seen on the facades of buildings.

While in Hungary, I searched the archives for the old articles that my father had published in the midst of that revolution. “I pick up my coat am back on the street again,” read one of the coded articles, published just days after he had fled the country, “The rain no longer bothers me, nor does the autumn sadness. I do what needs to be done. I increase the pace, because there is much that lies ahead.”

I walked the streets of Budapest that summer and saw a city that was blessedly starting to emerge from the shadows of its past. My Expo gig introduced me to many Hungarian personalities—artists, curators, government officials, and more—and while a few still held onto the mentality of communist Hungary, many were visionaries trying to break creative barriers and introduce change. Hungary was in the midst of a fierce, lively period of transformation after decades of communist rule.

My summer ended on a slightly disappointing note when I heard—over the radio in a taxi, no less—that the government had cancelled the Expo project. But while the Expo never happened, Hungary is still eager to move beyond a difficult century and reconnect with the world. After all, this country enjoyed a glorious early history. Budapest once rivaled its neighboring Vienna under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and enjoyed a flourishing cultural life. In May 2004, Hungary became a member of the European Union and now has an opportunity to be an influential European nation.

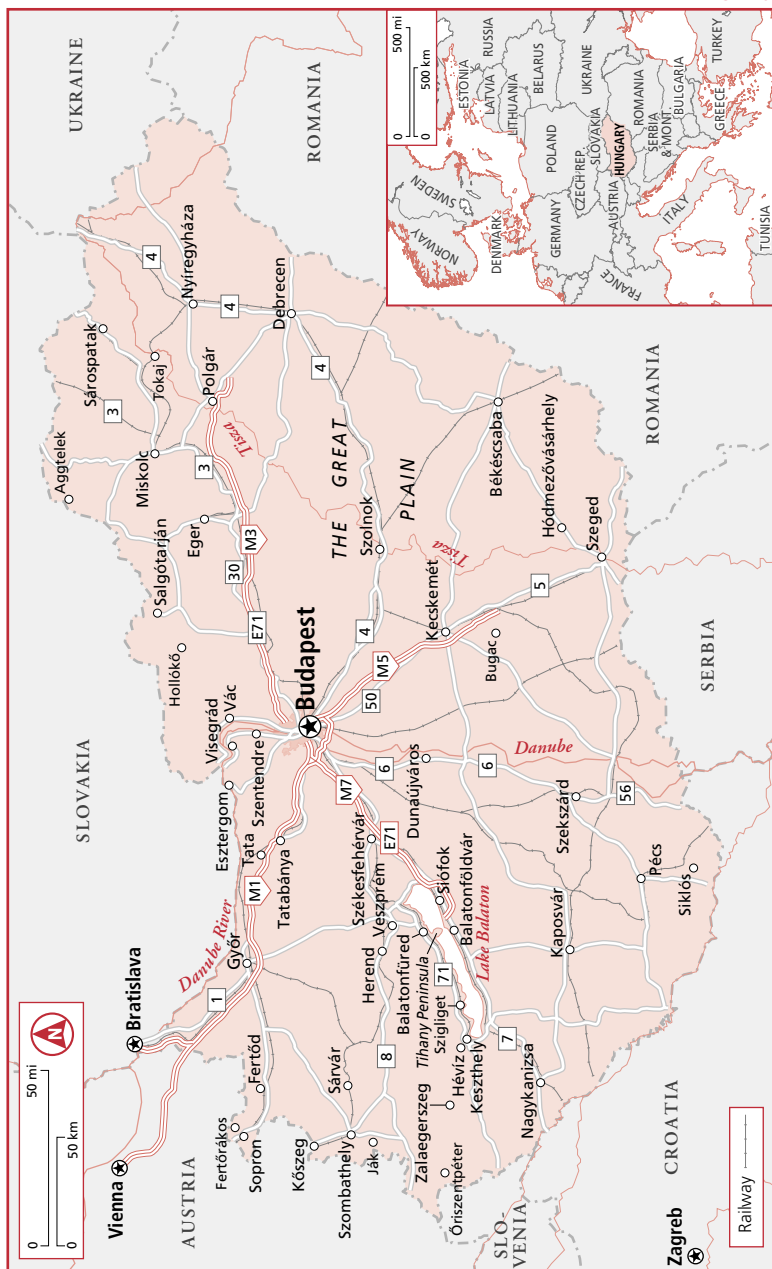
Living and working in Budapest today, I see a buzzing culture that is becoming more and more dynamically European. A vibrant young generation is proof of this. While the political elite continue to argue about the past, the youth are concentrating on the future. They’re becoming multi-lingual, they’re creating new film festivals and fashion shows. The scene they’re developing is vibrant and fun—if a bit secretive and clique-ish. While it might take some time to enter into their world, it’s a fun journey in the end. They are playing catch-up, living off the seat of their pants.

Young and old alike, Hungarians love to live, and you'll find lots of friendly locals hanging out in bars and bistros. Travel the countryside, and take a dip in a relaxing spa. See nature and wildlife at the Tisza Lake, eat exquisite Hungarian fish soup, and venture off to Lake Balaton—their little sea. Get to know Hungary and Hungarians.

1 The Best Little Adventures in Budapest

- **Discovering the Courtyards of Budapest:** Budapest's residential streets are truly enchanting, but it is inside the courtyards of the buildings that the city's greatest secret is held: Budapesters are villagers at heart. Fruit trees and flower gardens flourish, cats lounge in the sun, and jars of pickled vegetables line the window ledges. Nearly every apartment building in this city has an open-air courtyard in its center, where pensioners sit on the common balconies smoking cigarettes, gossiping, and watching the children race around the yard, dodging flower pots and laundry racks. The main entrance doors to many apartment buildings are left unlocked during the daytime hours. See chapter 8, "Strolling Around Budapest," for further wanderings.
- **Exploring the Neighborhood Markets:** There is scarcely a neighborhood in Budapest without its own outdoor produce market. Professional vendors mix with elderly peasants who are in for the day with a wagon of fresh-picked fruits and veggies. Produce is fresh and inexpensive. Shop for a picnic lunch or simply wander around soaking up the vibrant workaday atmosphere. See p. 194 for details on market shopping.
- **Riding the Trams:** Armed with your daily transit pass, get the lay of the land and more from the windows of the city's many trams. Board a tram and ride it to the terminus and back, or disembark along the way for a closer look around—a great and economical way to spend a rainy day. See "Getting Around" in chapter 4, "Getting to Know Budapest," for details on public transportation.
- **Packing a Picnic for the City Park:** On a nice summer day, it seems that all of Budapest comes to City Park to enjoy the weather and one another's company. Children of all ages fill the playgrounds and linger by the entrances to the amusement park, the zoo, and the circus. Bathers flock to the historic Széchenyi Baths. Mostly, though, people come to stroll, a time-honored pastime in central Europe. See "Parks, Gardens & Playgrounds" in chapter 7, "Exploring Budapest."
- **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 has the largest Jewish population of any city on the European continent (outside Russia). Pest's historic Jewish neighborhood, run-down but relatively unchanged, resonates with the magic and tragedy of the past. See "Walking Tour 4: The Jewish District" in chapter 8, "Strolling Around Budapest."

Hungary



2 The Best Places to Enjoy a Sunset in Budapest

- **From the Riverside:** Locals and visitors alike stroll along the Danube bank (Pest side) in the early evening, taking in the changing light over the shimmering water. Find a free bench, or venture out onto one of the bridges that span the Danube to enjoy a different view of the glorious river that snakes its way through the soul of central Europe. See chapter 7, “Exploring Budapest,” for more about Budapest’s bridges and riverside walks.
- **From the Ferris Wheel:** The beautiful old yellow Ferris wheel in Budapest’s amusement park will lift you gently up into the evening air. At the apex of the long, slow ride, you will have an astonishing view of the entire city and the falling sun. See p. 144.
- **From the Tower of Saint Stephen’s Church:** This is the highest point in Pest; from here, the only barrier to a vista of the horizon is haze or smog (on a bad day). For those who can handle it, the long, arduous ascent makes the view all the more pleasurable. If climbing doesn’t appeal to you, ride the newly installed lift to the top. See p. 131.

3 The Best Off-the-Beaten-Track Museums

- **Bélyegmúzeum (Postal Stamp Museum):** Generations of philatelists the world over have admired the artistic creations of Magyar Posta. Here you’ll find rack after rack of Hungary’s finest stamps. See p. 135.
- **Közeledési Múzeum (Transport Museum):** This vast and wonderful museum features large-scale models of all sorts of vintage vehicles—trains, motorcycles, bikes, early-model cars, antique horse buggies, and more. Kids adore this fabulous trip through history. See p. 144.
- **Varga Imre Gyűjtemény (Imre Varga Collection):** This small museum features the sensitive, piercing work of Imre Varga, Hungary’s best-known contemporary sculptor. Of particular note is the shaded garden where Varga’s forlorn, broken figures stand and rest on benches. See p. 139.

4 The Best Places to Kill an Hour in Budapest

- **A Bench on the Danube Promenade:** Find an empty bench on this heavily trafficked pedestrian walkway on the bank of the Danube. Sit back and drink in Budapest.
- **Margaret Island:** This lovely park in the middle of the river between Buda and Pest is beautifully maintained, with fountains, floral gardens, green fields, and the like. Find yourself a piece of green and settle down for a while. See p. 140.
- **The Baths:** There is no place quite like the city’s various baths to unwind. Budapest’s fabled thermal waters invite you to loosen up, slow down, and relax. See “Spa Bathing & Swimming: Budapest’s Most Popular Thermal Baths” in chapter 7, “Exploring Budapest.”
- **A Traditional Coffeehouse:** Imperial Budapest is long, long gone, but a few of the trappings still remain and are creeping back into existence. None is quite so pleasant as the traditional, ornate coffeehouse, a symbol of *fin de siècle* Budapest. Coffee and sweets are sumptuous, and customers may linger for hours without drawing unkind looks from the waiters. See “Traditional Coffeehouses” in chapter 6, “Where to Dine in Budapest.”

- **A Bench on Tóth Árpád sétány:** This is the perfect alternative to the Danube Promenade for those who prefer a quiet urban bench to one on a main thoroughfare. Tóth Árpád sétány is a surprisingly untraveled

street that runs the entire length of the Castle District on the Buda side (that is, the non-Danube side). See “Walking Tour 2: The Castle District” in chapter 8, “Strolling Around Budapest.”

5 The Best Experiences 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 “Exploring the Danube Bend” in chapter 11, “The Danube Bend.”
- **Visiting the Margit Kovács Museum (Szentendre):** The highly original works of Hungary's best-known ceramic artist are displayed in this expansive museum in a lovely village on the Danube Bend. Kovács's unique sculptures of elderly women and her folk-art-influenced friezes of village life are especially moving. See p. 222.
- **Hiking in the Hills Outside Szigliget:** You can hike up to the fantastic ruins of a 13th-century castle above this scenic little village in the Lake Balaton region, or go a few miles farther north and hike up into hills covered with vineyards. See p. 237.
- **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°F to 90°F (30°C–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. 239.

- **Climbing the Eger Minaret:** Eger, a beautiful, small city in northern Hungary, is home to one of the country's most impressive Turkish ruins: a 14-sided, 33m-tall (110-ft.) minaret. Those who succeed in climbing the steep, cramped, spiral staircase are justly rewarded with a spectacular view. See p. 246.
- **Exploring Pécs:** This delightful city in southern Hungary is home to one of Hungary's most pleasing central squares and some great examples of Turkish architecture. See “The 2,000-year-old City of Pécs” in chapter 14, “Southern Hungary: The Great Plain & the Mecsek Hills.”
- **Sampling Szeged's Fruit-and-Vegetable Market:** At the main open-air market behind the bus station, in this town near the Serbian and Romanian borders, local farmers sell their bounty of peaches, apricots, cherries, and pears in season, as well as fresh flowers, and, of course, dried paprika wreaths. See p. 262.

6 The Best Hotels in Budapest

- **Best Splurge Hotel:** The splendid, sprawling **Four Seasons Hotel Gresham Palace**, V. Roosevelt tér 5–6 (& 1/268-6000), has, in a short time, gained the reputation as Hungary's foremost hotel. The Art Nouveau architecture is exquisite, and the customer care and attention to detail will leave you feeling pampered. See p. 73.
- **Best for Business Travelers:** The **Kempinski Hotel Corvinus**, 7–8 V. Erzsébet tér (& 800/426-3135 in North America, or 1/429-3777), is the hotel of choice for corporate visitors, with conference facilities, a state-of-the-art business center, and an efficient staff. See p. 74.

- **Best for a Romantic Getaway:** Any of the pensions in the Buda Hills are suitable, but the **Vadvirág Panzió**, II. Nagybányai út 18 (& 1/275-0200), is particularly fetching, surrounded as it is by sloping gardens and terraces. See p. 88.
- **Best for Families:** Parents will appreciate the location of the **Hotel Liget**, VI. Dózsa György út 106 (& 1/269-5300), which is across the street from City Park's zoo, amusement park, and circus. See p. 85.
- **Best Moderately Priced Hotel:** The homey **Hotel Astra Vendégház**, I. Vám u. 6 (& 1/214-1906), opened in 1997, is perfectly situated in Buda's quaint Watertown neighborhood, just a 10-minute walk from the Castle District, and minutes from the Danube embankment. See p. 81.
- **Best Budget Hotel:** The accommodations at **Charles Apartment House**, I. Hegyalja út 23 (& 1/212-9169), are comfortable and clean flats—complete with bathrooms and fully equipped kitchens—in Buda apartment buildings. See p. 83.
- **Best Pension:** The charming **Gizella Panzió**, XII. Arató u. 42/b (& 1/249-2281), built into the side of a hill, has a lovely view of the valley in a quiet neighborhood that's relatively easy to reach by bus. The rooms are quaint and sunny. See p. 87.
- **Best Location:** This one is a tie between the only two hotels in Buda's elegant and timeless Castle District: The **Hilton Budapest**, I. Hess András tér 1–3 (& 1/488-6600; see p. 83), is a luxurious lodging right next door to the Matthias Church and the Fisherman's Bastion, while **Hotel Kulturinnov**, I. Szentháromság tér 6 (& 1/355-0122), is a modest guesthouse just across the square.
- **Best View:** You'll either see the full Pest skyline or overlook the delightful streets of the Castle District at the **Hilton Budapest**, I. Hess András tér 1–3 (& 1/488-6600), widely considered the city's classiest hotel. See p. 83.

7 The Best Dining Bets in Budapest

- **Best for a Romantic Dinner:** At **Ezüstponty**, XII. Némethölgy út 96 (& 1/319-1632), in the low Buda Hills, you can dine in the casual, elegant outdoor garden in summer, with live music at night. See p. 118.
- **Best Decor:** The huge branches of a wonderful old tree create a canopy under which guests dine by candlelight in the interior courtyard at **Kisbuda Gyöngye**, III. Kenyeres u. 34 (& 1/368-9246). See p. 119.
- **Best Wine List:** **Gundel**, XIV. Állatkerti út 2 (& 1/468-4040), the city's fanciest and most famous restaurant, complements its traditional dishes, which are prepared in innovative ways, with a fabulous and extensive wine list. See p. 109.
- **Best Wild Game:** At **Aranyszarvas**, I. Szarvas tér 1 (& 1/375-6451)—the restaurant's name means “the Golden Stag”—you can enjoy savory venison stew, pheasant, and wild boar. See p. 113.
- **Best Coffeehouse:** **Centrál Kávéház**, V. Károly Mihály u. 9 (& 1/266-2110), is the closest thing Budapest has to a certifiable classic coffeehouse. It is the central location for intellectuals, tourists, families, and more. Don't leave Budapest without stopping here. See p. 120.
- **Best Pastries:** Our favorite pastry shop is the century-old, utterly charming little **Ruszwurm Cukrászda**, I. Szentháromság u. 7 (& 1/375-5284), located in the heart of the Castle District. See p. 123.