

# The Best of Budapest

It never occurred to me when living in Modesto, California that someday, I would live in Budapest, Hungary or, even more incredible, be a writer for Frommer's having the opportunity to write two editions of this book and chapters for others.

After graduating with a doctorate in International and Multicultural Education in 2000 (with over 22 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, but no longer, all an American had to do was leave the country for a day and return to refresh your visa for another 90 days—we did this several times. We started teaching English at private schools for the fun of it; 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 flying back to Hungary the next day.

After more than three annual visa renewals, we were able to apply for our long-term residency visa, so 8 years later we're still here.

During the first year, we both found university teaching positions and by our third year opened up a bed and breakfast (BudaBaB; p. 83). I am still at the university, but Ron retired from his university position to run the B&B. Budapest and Hungary have grown and evolved before our eyes.

In those days, Budapest was not on the travel radar, still considered too exotic, while many 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 was greatly aided by the budget airlines, which started to spring up in our first 6 years here, but with all of the economic woes, many have dropped Budapest along with other cities from the destinations to which they fly. During the upswing, the hotel industry blossomed. Boutique hotels and new 4- and 5-star hotels were built or took over historic buildings, creating a wide offering of accommodations for budgets from average to luxurious, but the last couple of years there have been poor occupancy numbers.

The restaurant scene also has been in flux during these difficult economic times. It is not uncommon for a restaurant to suddenly close without warning. The Hungarian Restaurant Association had predicted that 30% throughout the country would meet their demise, but it has not been as grave as that. Menus in English were once uncommon, and ordering a meal was a grab-bag surprise; tourism has changed this, but sometimes there is something lost in translation, so what you get is not what you thought you ordered. 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. Some districts, however, are

implementing laws forcing restaurants to close at 10pm or 11pm for noise control. Each district is autonomous in this law creation.

Since Hungary joined the European Union in 2004, those extended visits we enjoyed in 2001 are no longer valid for most travelers; the official E.U. law still allows 90-day visits, but requires Americans in particular (as well as Canadians and Australians) to leave the E.U. for 6 months before returning. E.U. visitors have no restrictions on their length of stay. I hope that regardless of how long you are visiting, you enjoy yourself enough to extend your stay, just as we did.

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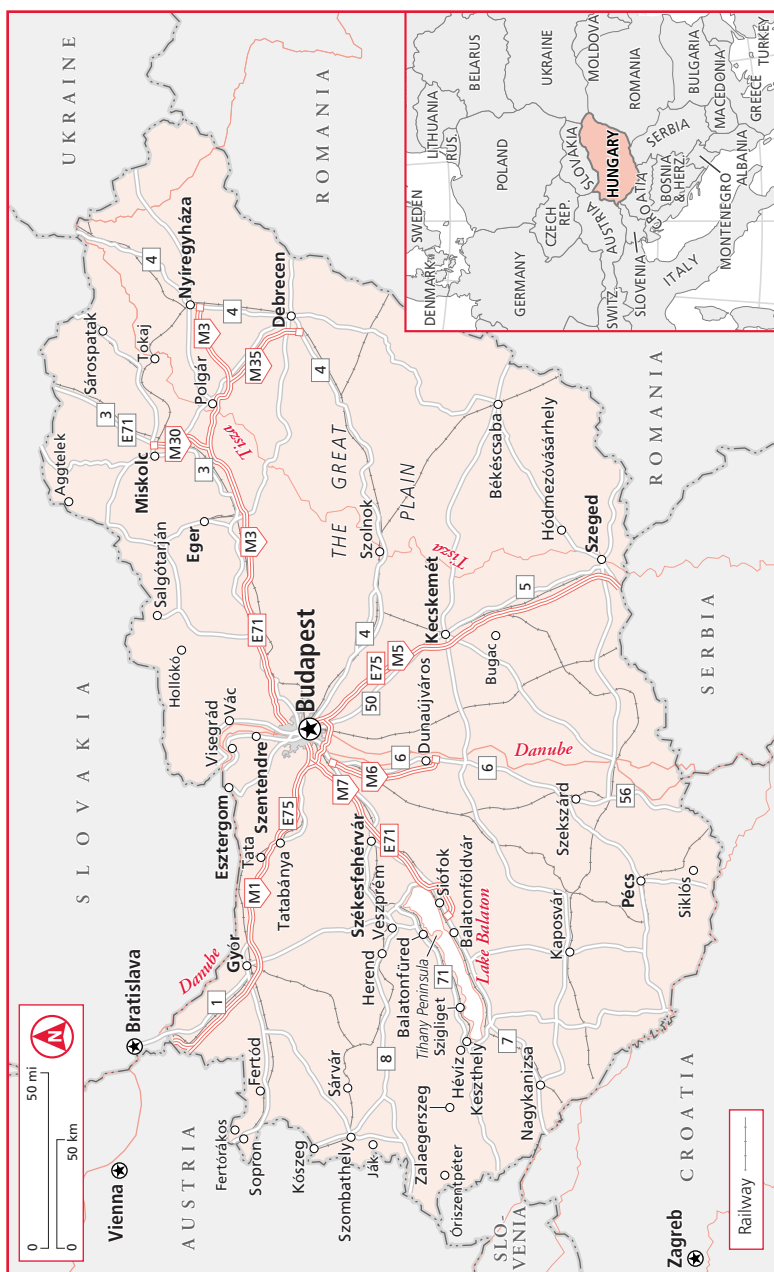
## 1 THE BEST LITTLE ADVENTURES IN BUDAPEST

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- **The Best Photographic Viewpoints in the City:** If you want to start at the highest point, you will have to go to János-Hegy (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. 150). The next highest vista is the Citadella (Citadel) on Gellért Hill (p. 138). The bus only gets you so far, and then you hike up the rest, but it is worth the effort. This is where you'll find the Lady of Liberty statue viewable from the Pest side. Castle Hill (p. 52) is of course an excellent viewpoint for photographs from both the front of the castle and Fisherman's Bastion. The best view though is from behind the President of Hungary's office buildings (p. 173). Margit Hid (Margaret Bridge, p. 187), the side across from the island, has a breathtaking view of the river from where the bridge elbows.
- **Architecture Not to Be Missed:** Many people don't bother to look up at the top of buildings, missing much. Aside from the historic listings, Posta Takarékpénztár (p. 178) on Hold utca across from where Perczel Mór utca comes into it is one of my favorite buildings in the city; 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. The building has been sold, so it may not last forever. See it while you can. 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 (p. 209) 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 no. 4 or 6 will take you along the large ring road. Tram no. 2 at night provides a view of Parliament, and Castle Hill all lit up, but parts of the line are under construction. Look for details on public transportation in other parts of the book where they are covered indepth.
- **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 ready-made gourmet sandwiches. See the tip on p. 146.

- **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 activities in 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.”

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## 2 THE BEST PLACES TO STOP & SMELL THE FLOWERS IN BUDAPEST

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- **Margaret Island (Margit-sziget):** Sunrise to sunset, you can find a number of garden areas on the enchanting island in the Danube. During the summer months, the whimsical fountain, set within one of the beautiful garden areas, plays classical music while spraying water in time to the music. The island did not become a public park until 1908. Before that time only the leaders of the upper classes could set foot on it. Plebeians should take advantage and visit with a picnic. See p. 146.
- **Szabadság tér:** The name is Freedom Square in English. Surrounded by historical buildings, including the U.S. Embassy, this well-tended green space has gardens interspersed with pedestrian walkways. There are plenty of benches under shady trees for relaxing and even a small children's playground for a family rest stop. It is also home to the tall obelisk with a star on top, the last remaining monument to the Soviet Union's liberation of Budapest after World War II. See p. 178.
- **Szent István Park:** This attractive green park in the XIII district is often overlooked by visitors who don't even know it's there. It's a flowering oasis during spring and summer. To reach it, take tram no. 4 or 6 to Jászai Mari tér and

walk parallel to Margaret Island three blocks along the Danube to reach it. The gardens are open from 6am to 8:30pm.

- **Kodály körönd:** If you take the Millennium walking tour (See chapter 8, “Strolling Around Budapest”), you will discover the four pleasant garden areas, each with its own statue.
- **Jókai tér and Liszt Ferenc tér:** Where they are intersected by Andrassy út just past Oktogon, each has attractive flower gardens. The Liszt Ferenc side is always shaped like a giant valentine heart. If you continue down Liszt Ferenc tér, an umbrella of trees will shadow you as you walk along the winding path.
- **Nagymező utca:** Again, just off of Andrassy út in district VI, you will find an extended sidewalk with a planter built up from the ground filled with flowers. Beyond the flowerbeds is a modern, tranquil water fountain. Benches are provided for a rest stop, so give your feet a break and enjoy the views.
- **Hollán Ernő utca:** Just as the street starts off Szent István körút in the XIII district, there is a pedestrian street for one block. Like Nagymező utca, a new pedestrian area has been created complete with flowers and a water fountain decorated with colored lights.

### 3 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, admire the sunset, and just plain relax. 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’s rays as they fade into the horizon. For more on the thermals see p. 160.
- **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. See p. 146.
- **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. See p. 139.
- **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. See p. 179.
- **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. See p. 172.

### 4 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. 127.
- **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. 128.
- **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. 123.

- **Underground Railway Museum:** Located at Deák metro underground,

this small exhibit shows the history of the tram lines in the city. See p. 165.

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## 5 THE BEST PLACES TO KILL AN HOUR IN BUDAPEST

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- **Central Hall Market:** Not only a good place to pick up souvenirs, but also a fun place for people-watching. The balcony overlooking the whole market is an experience you should not miss. See p. 209.
- **Castle Hill:** Ignore the tourist sights for an hour and just stroll along the side streets which wind around, allowing yourself to get lost while admiring the architecture of the area. See p. 52.
- **The Baths:** The Király and 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 more than 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 four 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 chapter 9, “Budapest Shopping.”

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## 6 THE BEST HOTELS IN BUDAPEST

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- **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. 67.
- **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 sumptuous building and there’s no need to do so with its pool, spa, and restaurants. See p. 66.

- **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 Buda-side apartment building. See p. 79.
- **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. 71.
- **Best Budget Hotel:** The accommodations at **Medosz**, VI. Jókai tér 9 (☎ 1/374-3001) are comfortable and clean and close to Oktogon and Liszt Ferenc tér. See p. 75.

- **Best Bed and Breakfast:** Without humility, I have to say it is my own **BudaBaB**, VII. Akácfa u. 18 (☎ 1/267-5240), where English is the first language, and which is perfectly located to start your touring or shopping expeditions within easy walking distance of public transportation just two blocks away. See p. 83.
- **Best 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; p. 67), with the Chain Bridge outside its door. On the Buda the **Hilton Budapest**, I. Hess András tér 1–3 (☎ 1/899-6600; p. 75), 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 **Hemingway**, XI. Kosztolányi D. tér 2. 1 (☎ 1/381-0522), you can dine on the terrace overlooking the lake or in the relaxing Cuban-feeling dining room that would make Ernest feel at home. Excellent service is the order every day, all the while being serenaded by live music at night. See p. 116.
- **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. 92.
- **Best Wine List:** At **Díó**, V. Sas u. 4 (☎ 1/328-0360), excellent service with outstanding food can be accompanied by wines with the aid of the sommelier. See p. 92.
- **Best Beer List:** You will have difficulty choosing from a multitude of 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. 104.
- **Best Wild Game:** At **Paprika Vendéglő**, VII. Dozsa György 72, 4½ blocks from Heroes Square (☎ 06/70-574-6508) mobile), you can relish the savory dishes of wild boar or venison. There are many other choices for the less adventurous. See p. 113.
- **Best Traditional Coffeehouse:** **Centrál 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. 119.
- **Best Nontraditional Coffeehouse:** For coffee or hot chocolate, **Aztek Chokolat Café**, at V. Károly körút 22 or Semmelweis u. 19. (☎ 1/266-7113), has a tremendous selection of both. See p. 121.
- **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. 120.
- **Best Rétes:** Melt-in-your-mouth strudel is available at the **Rétesvar**, I. Balta köz 4 (no phone), the alley on Castle Hill behind the nude woman statue fountain. Look for the red banner hanging outside the brick alleyway. See p. 121.

## 8 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 leading to the charming towns of Vác, 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 pleasant strolls along the Danube. See chapter 11, "The Danube Bend."
- **Vác:** A delightful town that took me 6 years to discover and I wish I'd done so 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. 239.
- **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., You first travel to Nagymaros, then take 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. 242.
- **Medve Otthon:** Visit the bears at the bear sanctuary, which houses 42 bears who were once stars in Hungarian movies then rescued due to mistreatment. You can feed them honey and kids can have their faces painted. It is just 1 hour from the city. See p. 62.

## 9 SOME OF THE BEST THERMALS IN HUNGARY

A vast area of Hungary sits over natural thermal springs providing mineral and curative waters to more than 1,000 wells that produce water of 86° F (30°C). The Romans used these waters to create public baths; in some areas, remnants have survived giving us a peek into their culture during that time.

Later, the Turks built thermals within city walls to have a place to bath during times of war. Arslan, the pasha of Buda, is believed to have started the construction of the **Király** thermal baths in 1565, making

it the oldest thermal in Budapest. It is one of the last tokens of Turkish history within the city. Its water is piped in from the **Lucas** thermals. Although the **Rudas** was believed to have been built in 1550, it was rebuilt by Pasha Sokol Mustafa in 1566, so making the Király the oldest in the city.

Due to space in this book, it is not possible to cover the 150 hot water spas in the country, nor the 36 medicinal spas amongst them. Medicinal thermals are wellness establishments utilizing balneotherapy. **Balneology** is the scientific use of

bathing as a treatment for diseases. Goals for these treatments are to enhance the immune system, stimulate the circulatory process including lymph and blood circulation, accelerating cell activity, dilating tissue and vessels while activating the body's own healing process. Medicinal waters have been found to contain various amounts of sodium, magnesium, calcium, and iron, as well as arsenic, lithium, potassium, manganese, bromine, radioactivity, sulfurous acid, salt bromine carbonate, and iodine depending on the area. Not all thermal waters are created equal; it depends on the geography of the areas. Waters at different thermals will have differing compounds and ratios of minerals, while some may be missing a number of them. The medical treatments provided are dependent on the mineral contents of the water. With an increase in tourism, the term wellness has expanded from health wellness to being pampered. Some thermals or wellness hotels offer exotic treatments like a wine, chocolate, or honey massage for example. While this may lift your spirits at the same time as putting a bit of a strain on your bank account, these types of treatments are not intended to provide long-term health benefits. In this section, I will give an overview of some of the physical health wellness treatments available at the various thermals.

Budapest has been called the World's Spa Capital, so starting in the capital the **Király** thermal offers thermal pools of various degrees of increasing temperatures. The waters are believed to be especially healthy for degenerative illnesses of the joints, chronic and semi-acute arthritis, deformations of the vertebral spine, dislocation of vertebral discs, neuralgia, and calcium deficiency.

At the **Rudas**, in addition to the thermals, they have a complex for physiotherapy, a day hospital where they perform physical therapy services. Here you will find radioactive hot spring water with

calcium-magnesium-hydrogen-carbonate and other goodies. This water is used for treating the same medical problems as the Király.

The **Gellért's** waters are composed of similar qualities as the others. In addition to the ailments listed above, these waters are recommended for aortic stenosis and problems with blood circulation. The Gellért also has an **Inhalatorium** where they provide treatment for issues with asthma and chronic bronchial complaints. A doctor is on the premises where one can be diagnosed and prescribed a treatment plan all in one place. The Inhalatorium is separate from the thermals, but in the same building.

**Széchenyi** thermals are probably best known for the ubiquitous pictures of men playing chess in the pool. The waters here are proposed for the same bone problems as the other thermals, but they also have a "drinking cure". Drinking the waters is supposed to bring better health to your internal organs. It will definitely flush your colon in the process, so detoxification is on their list of treatments. With their expanded services, they offer a full-range gym with a trainer. Further information about location and hours of operation for the above can be found in chapter 7, "Exploring Budapest."

The second-largest spa in Hungary, the **Medicinal Spa of Bük** Termál krt. 2, Bükfürdő (☎ 94/558-080; <http://bukfurdo.hu>), is just 40km (25 miles) from **Sopron**. Although the list of water properties is longer than my arm, the basics include alkali hydrocarbonate, calcium, magnesium, and fluoride. Water treatment is indicated for cures of all bone and muscle disorders in addition to digestive, chronic gynecological and urological inflammations, and even gout. The drinking cure is recommended for chronic gastritis, ulcers, indigestion, and preventing osteoporosis. With a medical doctor on the premises, you can have an examination and treatment plan created for you on the spot.

Near Eger, is a small village called **Egerszalok** with medical waters and treatments, but no English. The address is Forrás utca 2 (☎ **30/476-5736** mobile phone only; [www.egerszalokfurdo.hu](http://www.egerszalokfurdo.hu)) in the northern part of Hungary, near the Lasko stream, at the foot of Bükk mountain. It is the country's youngest spa. The bath is fed by 2 thermal sources at a blistering 154–158°F (68°C) from a geyser. Curative effects are suggested for joint pain and bone problems. Admission is 1,000 Ft. Hours are summers only from June 15, Monday to Thursday 1pm to 11pm, Friday and Saturday 1pm to 1am.

**Hévíz Lake**, with its 47,500sq. m (11.74 acres), is one of the best-known spas in Europe. The spring supplies 20,000 liters of water every minute, completely refreshing the lake every 72 hours. In summer, the water is 91–95°F (33–35°C), but

never goes below 79°F (26°C) in winter. The inorganic mud combined with the highly organic fango from the bottom of the lake is used as a curative mudpack for rheumatism. See chapter 12, “The Lake Balaton Region and Sopron.”

Europe's only cave spa is the **Miskolc-Tapolca Cave Spa**, at Pazár sétány (☎ **46/560-030**). In the cave, the spa is a toasty 86°F (30°C). The medicinal area offers services for hydrotherapy, medicinal and refreshing massages, electrotherapy, and also offers a consultation by a rheumatologic specialist.. The rest of the area is recreational. It is open daily from 9am to 6pm, closed in January. A 4-hour pass for adults is 2,200 Ft or an all-day ticket is 2,700 Ft. Children 5 years and under pay 1,500 Ft or a family ticket for 3 people costs 1,700 Ft.