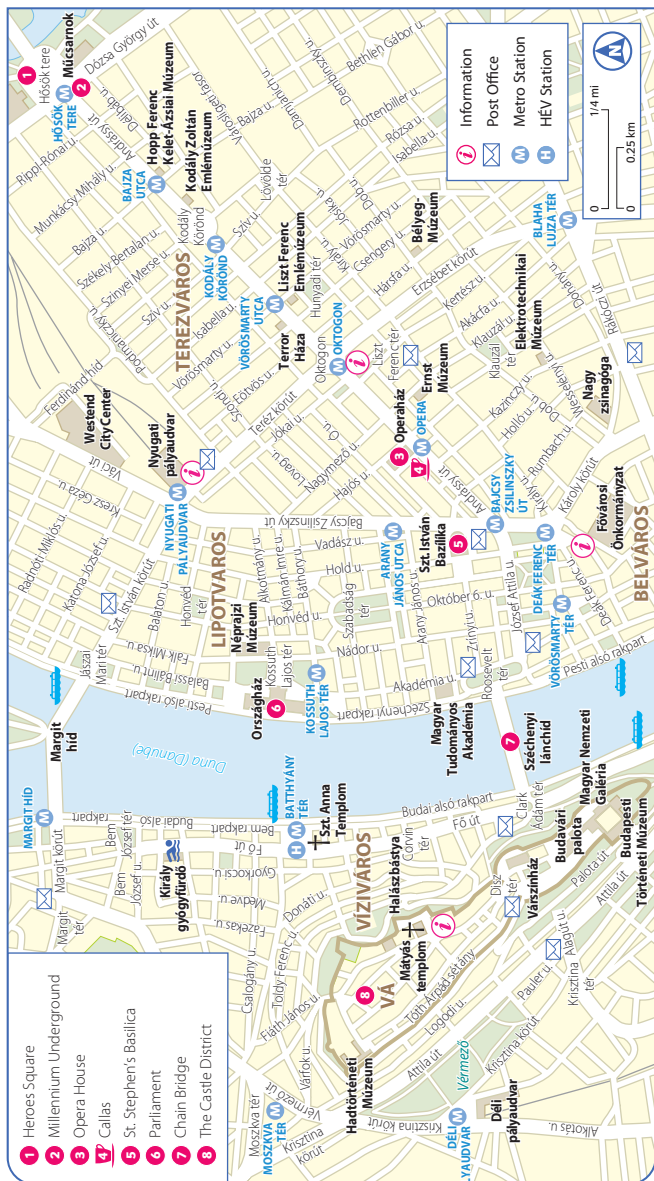


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# The Best **Full-Day Tours**



# The Best in One Day



**H**ere, I'm taking you on an action-packed tour that will leave you in awe of Budapest's architectural magnificence and magnitude. Particularly noteworthy is the architecture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Hungary had finally found peace and prosperity. **START: Take the M1 Millennium Underground to Hősök tere.**

**1 ★★★ kids Heroes Square (Hősök tere).** There's no better place to start getting your head around the turbulent history of Hungary than Heroes Square. The key protagonists are strikingly introduced as a series of imposing statues. The central column is guarded by the seven Magyar tribe leaders who, in 896AD, stormed into the Carpathian basin, comprising present-day Hungary and beyond. A statue of Árpád leads these seven heathen horsemen, and they appear to be kept in check by Archangel Gabriel, who presides over them from the top of the central column. The founding fathers are flanked by heroes including Szent (Saint) István, who converted Hungary to Christianity on Christmas Day in the year 1000AD, and all-conquering Kings Béla IV and Mátyás Corvinus, as well as perennial thorns in Habsburg Austria's side like Rákóczi and

Kossuth. Built in 1896 to celebrate a millennium of Magyar presence, nowadays Heroes Square is a popular place with skateboarders—oblivious to the significance of their country's heroes—and with right-wingers who use it as a backdrop for rallies. ⌚ 30 min. *Hősök tere at crossing of Andrassy út and Dózsa György út. Metro: M1 to Hősök tere.*

**2 ★★ kids Millennium Underground.** Take a ride on continental Europe's oldest metro, which opened in 1896 to coincide with the 1,000th anniversary of Magyar presence in Hungary. Get on at the Hősök tere stop and be whisked, just under street level, directly down the elegant Andrassy út (boulevard)—which I recommend you walk down on Day 2 (p 14, bullet **4**). Get off at Oktogon to see one of Budapest's several centers where Andrassy út meets the Nagy körút (the Great

*The central column in Heroes Square is guarded by seven Magyar tribe leaders.*





*Take a ride on continental Europe's oldest metro.*


Boulevard), or stay on one more stop to Opera. After London's underground system, this is the next oldest in the world and the stations in particular retain the fin-de-siècle feel. 🕒 **15 min.** *Entrance at end of Andrásy út at crossing of Andrásy út and Dózsa György út; on right-hand side of Andrásy út if looking from Heroes Square. First metro 4:36am, last 11:20pm. [www.bkv.hu/metro/metro1.html](http://www.bkv.hu/metro/metro1.html). Single journey ticket Ft 270. Metro: M1 to Hősök tere.*



*The Opera House.*




3 ★★★ **Opera House.** The Miklós Ybl-designed Opera House provides the sumptuous veneer to classy Andrásy út. If you can, I suggest you look now but come back and experience the Opera House in all its glory by catching a performance. Be warned that the super-steep cheap seats are not for sufferers of vertigo. The neo-Renaissance style of the exterior is all semi-circular arches and columns, and is symmetrically topped off by statues of idols of Hungarian opera, while statues of the two Hungarian musical greats, Liszt and Bartok, flank the main entrance. Step inside and the style changes dramatically to neo-classical with the walls and ceiling adorned by lavish works from leading Hungarian artists of the day, including Gyula Benczúr and Bertalan Székely. Exclusive Hungarian participation was deemed crucial in establishing the home of Hungarian opera, although the scary but magnificent-looking gold-plated, three-tonne chandelier was imported from Germany. 🕒 **15 min, 45 min if you take the tour, but check ahead as tours may be cancelled due to rehearsals. Andrásy út 22.**



 153-0170 for tickets, 332-8197 for tours. [www.opera.hu](http://www.opera.hu). Ft 2,600 (discount Ft 1,400). Tours at 3pm and 4pm daily, performances vary. Metro: M1 to Opera.

 ★★ **Callas.** This, the former ticket office of the neighboring Opera, which can be viewed through the large arched windows, has been superbly spruced up by the noted British designer David Collins in an engaging blend of fin-de-siècle and Art Deco. While Callas is a serious dining venue with a decent sushi bar, it also does great Hungarian and international breakfasts, homemade pastries and cakes, as well as sandwiches. *Andrássy út 20.*  1/354-0954. \$\$.

 ★★★ **St. Stephen's Basilica.** Building this Budapest landmark proved a job too far for defining Hungarian architects József Hild and Miklós Ybl, who both died during the prolonged 54-year construction. The project literally hit rock bottom when the dome collapsed in 1868, a year

after Hild's death. Architect József Kauser was called in and dragged Budapest's biggest church over the finishing line in 1905. A massive restoration project was completed in 2003 and the gleaming marble is the result of the application of 200kg of beeswax. Mathematically minded Hungarians love dealing in numbers and, like the Parliament's dome, Szent István's stands 96m/315ft high, as a tribute to the Magyar settlement of Hungary in 896. Had they arrived a few years earlier, perhaps the roof wouldn't have fallen in! The almost 1,000-year-old withered hand of St. Stephen, Hungary's first King, is displayed in the Szent Jobb Chapel. Another great Hungarian hero Ferenc Puskás, the talisman of the Magical Magyars and Real Madrid goal machine, was laid to rest here in 2006. An elevator is on hand to whisk you up to near the top for sweeping views of Buda and Pest.  1 hr. *Szent István tér 33.*  1/317-2859. [www.basilica.hu](http://www.basilica.hu). Free Admission to Basilica, tower Ft 500, Treasury Ft 400. Mon–Fri 9am–5pm, Sat–Sun 10am–4pm. Metro: M1 to Bajcsy-Zsilinszky út. M3 to Arany János utca.

*St. Stephen's Basilica.*





*The dome in architect Imre Steindl's Parliament.*

**6 ★★★ Parliament.** Architect Imre Steindl's mostly neo-Gothic extravaganza dominates Pest's waterfront and bucks the Gothic trend with the 96m/315ft-high dome at its center. While it was once the biggest Parliament in the world when it opened for business in 1896, the building has lost none of its opulence. The exceedingly long corridors of power, the grandiose gold-plated interior and red-carpeted staircases do nothing to instill any form of collective unity between the polarized politicians. While much like any Parliament, should you happen to enter the chamber after a debate, to which the opposition actually

shows up, you can almost feel the steam rising as you enter. Look out for the Hungarian crown, a gift from the Pope to King (now Saint) István (Stephen) in the year 1000 to thank him for signing up Hungary to Catholicism. Watch out for protestors outside calling for the current Prime Minister's head. 🕒 **1 hr for tour, 15 min viewing from outside, enquire ahead via internet as Parliament is closed when in session & turn up 10 min before the tour begins.** Kossuth tér 1–3. 📞 **1/441-4000. [www.mkogy.hu](http://www.mkogy.hu). Tour free for EU citizens, other nationalities Ft 2,640 (students Ft 1,320). Buy tickets at gate X. English tours at 10am,**

## Off the Beaten Track

**While Budapest is blessed with many outstanding sights,** I encourage you to step off the beaten path as and when the mood takes you. Budapest is visually impressive in every direction both deviating from and all along the main route of this particular tour, which features the not-to-be-missed element of the Hungarian capital. The magic of Budapest can also be found in tiny details such as the gargoyles or decorative motifs that adorn the plethora of striking late 18th- and early 20th-century buildings and hidden squares. I have written this guide with that in mind but I suggest you always take a little time to look up and around as you piece together the Budapest jigsaw.

12am, and 2pm daily. Metro: M2 to Kossuth Lajos tér.

### 7 ★★★ kids Chain Bridge.

This, the pick of Budapest's varied bridges, isn't just an architectural marvel but is the first permanent bridge that linked Buda with Pest, setting in motion their eventual unification. It's also still the best and most scenic way of traversing the Danube to get from Parliament and Pest's old town to the Castle District. The brainchild of István Széchenyi, an anglophile Hungarian Count who sought to bring rural Hungary into the modern age, he employed two designers to build the ornate bridge, each with the name of Clark: William, an Englishman, and Adam, a Scot. The Chain Bridge opened in 1849, during Hungary's War of Independence with Austria and fortunately survived an immediate botched attempt to blow it up, something that the more efficient Germans managed when retreating from occupying the city in 1945. It was soon rebuilt and reopened on its centenary in the original style. Come back at night when it and the Royal Palace are

*The Chain Bridge.*



*Funicular in the Castle District.*

both lit up dramatically. ⌚ 20 min. Connects Roosevelt tér with Clark Adám tér. Bus 16/105 or Tram 2.

### 8 ★★★ The Castle District.

Bombed, burnt, battered, and rebuilt many times throughout the centuries, the Royal Palace and St. Matthias Church dramatically portray Hungary's trials and tribulations. I suggest you wander the district at your leisure to soak up the history of the place and return later for a more in-depth tour. (See p 60 for a complete tour of this historically rich district.) ⌚ 2 hr. Bus 16 to Dísz tér.



# The Best in Two Days





**A**fter a hard day of major sightseeing on Day 1, take the plunge and relax in one of Budapest's world-renowned thermal baths, while still admiring its architectural beauty, then get out and about again to uncover some of the unique buildings that reflect the country's varied and troubled past. **START: Take the M1 or 'Millennium Underground' to Széchenyi Fürdő.**

**1 ★★★ kids Széchenyi Fürdő Baths.** The therapeutic waters of this neo-Baroque bathing bonanza will revitalize tired joints and set you up for a fulfilling day. That's providing you don't spend all your time being slow cooked in the hot pools, which will leave you seriously sleepy. Alternate between hot and cold pools, saunas, and steam rooms and take some time out in the medium-temperature pools or just chill out on a deckchair. The most luxurious pool is the outdoor semi-circular one, from which steam dramatically rises in the cold of winter as locals play chess. The whirly pool is great for kids. ⌚ 2 hr. *Come early to avoid the crowds, especially in summer.* Állatkerti körút 11. ☎ 1/363-3210. Ft 2,400 with locker, Ft 2,800 with cabin (partial refunds for finishing within

*Take a dip in the therapeutic Széchenyi Fürdő Baths.*



Vajdahunyad Castle.

2 hr, 3 hr). 6am–10pm daily. Metro: M1 to Széchenyi Fürdő.

**2 ★ kids Vajdahunyad Castle.**

Looking at it now, it's hard to believe that this fairly authentic-looking folly was once made out of cardboard and dates back barely a century. Vajdahunyad Castle went up as a temporary structure as part of the Magyar millennium celebrations in 1896, depicting the various Hungarian architectural styles over the centuries. By 1908, Vajdahunyad had been transformed into a collection of stone replicas representing treasured creations from right across the Magyar realm. Particularly prominent are the ramparts facing the lake from Vajdahunyad Castle and Sighişoara's clocktower, both in present-day



Romania. 🕒 30 min. Metro: M1 to Hősök tere/Széchenyi Fürdő.

**3 ★★ Fine Arts Museum (Szépművészeti Múzeum).** The mighty Habsburgs who once ruled as far as Spain and the Netherlands acquired an astonishing collection of impressive art works, many of which found their way here. A tour de force in European art from the 13th to the late 18th centuries, lovers of Madrid's Prado gallery will see similarities with this collection, which is also particularly strong in Spanish masters, with El Greco, Velázquez, Murillo, Ribera, Cano, Zurbarán and Goya all represented. El Greco's *Annunciation*, painted in the late 16th century, is set to heavenly clouds and bright lights (it has a twin in the Prado set to an architectural background), while Velázquez's early work *Peasants Around a Table*, dated around 1619, magically preserves the time-honored tradition of getting stuck into conversation over a few drinks.

🕒 1½–2 hr. Come early when major temporary exhibitions are running. Dózsa György út 41. Overlooking Heroes Square. ☎ 1/469-7100. [www.szepmuveszeti.hu](http://www.szepmuveszeti.hu). Ft 1,200. Tues–Sun 10am–5:30pm. Metro: M1 Hősök tere.

**4 Walk up Andrásy út.** You are more than likely to have explored portions of this, the grandest of Budapest's boulevards on Day 1 when checking out the Opera House, but further examination is rewarding. Walking from Heroes Square (p 7, bullet 1) the first stretch is lined with luxurious villas, including Kogart, an arts center and restaurant. Further up, Andrásy út is traversed by Kodály körönd, a striking square of faded but ornately painted town houses. 🕒 30 min.

**5 Lukács Cukrázda.** Grab a coffee and a cake or snack at this tastefully restored coffee house that excels in freshly made cakes and pastries and is more laid back than most, being away from the madding crowd at Andrásy út 70. \$.

**6 ★★★ Terror House.** It's funny how both the Fascists and the Communists both favored this location on classy Andrásy út to do their worst. An address that seems to be cursed, this visually impressive museum caused controversy with its highly politicized opening in 2002. Seen by many as an affront to the re-spun

*The cutting edge museum at Terror House.*





*The Great Synagogue.*

Hungarian Socialist Party, which once ruled Hungary with an iron fist but has changed beyond recognition, on behalf of their archrivals Fidesz, it was even sponsored by the then Fidesz Prime Minister Victor Orbán. Cynics' claims are backed up by the fleeting coverage of Fascist Hungary and the much denser coverage of the red terror. However, the fascist Hungarian Arrow Cross Party ran the country for only a year, coming into power in 1944, but what a gruesome year that was, with the previously protected Jewish population being shipped off in droves to concentration camps. Politics aside, from the Russian tank that greets you; to the pictures of victims and their jailors; the industrial and dark classical soundtrack; film footage and interviews; genuine exhibits including Hungarian Nazi Arrow Cross uniforms; and the trip to the cells and gallows, I can't help but feel indignation. 🕒 1 hr. **Andrássy út 60.** ☎ 1/374-2600. [www.houseofterror.hu](http://www.houseofterror.hu). Ft 1,500. Tues–Fri 10am–6pm, Sat–Sun 10am–7pm. Metro: M1 to Vörösmarty utca.

7 ★★ **Great Synagogue.** With its onion domes, Moorish and Byzantine influences, Budapest's great

synagogue not only pioneered a new style of Jewish architecture, it also spawned the father of modern Zionism who was born here, Tivadar Herzl (p 55, bullet 1). 🕒 15 min. **Dohány utca 2. Metro: M2 to Astoria.**

8 ★★★ **kids Applied Arts Museum.** You might have encountered this remarkable-looking Art Nouveau masterpiece by Ödön Lechner, Budapest's answer to Gaudí, if you took the road in from the airport. Lechner, who also worked on the building's plans with secessionist sidekick Gyula Pártos, created a Hungarian take on the Art Nouveau movement, adding Hungarian folk touches and emphasizing certain eastern influences on Hungary. Accordingly, traces of architectural styles from as far afield as India can be detected, and the bright green and gold Zsolnay tiles that adorn the roof and dome are more Oriental than European. For a tour of the interior go to the dedicated Special Interest Art Nouveau Tour (see p 25, bullet 12). 🕒 1–1½ hr. **Üllői út 33–37.** ☎ 1/456-5100. [www.imm.hu](http://www.imm.hu). **Combined ticket, including temporary exhibitions, Ft 2,400. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm. Metro: M3 to Ferenc körút.**

*The impressive entrance to the Applied Arts Museum.*



# The Best in Three Days





**A**fter a lot of pacing the streets in Days 1 and 2, here we start with a coffee at one of Budapest's most luxurious coffee houses, followed by a spot of shopping, taking in everything from designer boutiques, folk art shops, and food markets. This tour also gives you the option of ending the day with a swim and a thermal bathe to soothe the joints after scaling the dizzy heights of Gellért Hill. **START: M1 to Vörösmarty tér or Tram 2 to Vigadó tér and walk for two minutes in the opposite direction of the river.**

**1★ Café Gerbaud.** Try morning coffee and cake at one of the plush-est of the city's illustrious coffee houses. Your biggest decision here will be to work out where to sit to take it all in. This is not the place I would choose to start the day every day—the ornate interior can be a bit over the top—but I find it tasteful enough in small doses to be an ideal treat. Coffee culture is about not only reading papers and devouring Gerbaud's renowned Esterházy and Dobos cakes, but legend has it that young men indicated their availability to well-heeled ladies of pleasure by tipping an excessive amount of sugar into their coffee. In summer, if the wealth of chandeliers, marble tables, fine wood paneling, and stucco ceilings gets a bit much, take to the terrace and sit out on Vörösmarty tér. ⌚ 45 min. Vörösmarty tér 7. ☎ 1/429-9020. 9am–9pm. Metro: M1 to Vörösmarty tér.

**2★★ kids Váci utca.** Even those who are not shopaholics can easily take in this relatively short shopping street and surrounding area. Starting from Vörösmarty tér, which often has something going on and hosts a Christmas market, you'll find most big international fashion brands from Zara and Mango to Jackpot and H&M. However, most of them offer a somewhat modest selection in comparison to other

international cities. Keep an eye out on the side streets for high-end designers. Souvenir shops also abound, though with steep price tags, but if you are into embroidered tablecloths and folk art, then you have come to the right place (see p 77). The shopping street continues on the other side of Szabadsajtó út, where the vibe is less frenetic. ⌚ 1 hr. *Walk through the underpass that connects the two sides of Váci utca. From Vörösmarty tér to Vámház körút. Metro: M1 to Vörösmarty tér (starting point).*

**3★★ Great Market Hall.** You may feel like you're walking through an Impressionist painting when the sunlight shines into this beautifully restored king of neighborhood

*Café Gerbaud.*





*Tinned paprika displayed in the Great Market Hall.*

markets. However, it's far from a museum piece; many locals come here to shop for fresh food and it's bustling with life and color. The array of meat on sale shows just how thrifty Hungarians are, as they consider every part of the animal fair game for the pot. The carp and

catfish crammed in tanks on fish 'death row' downstairs are an uncomfortable sight for some, but hey, at least they're fresh. There are plenty of foodstuffs like paprika, salami, and goose liver to take home, and upstairs look out for folklore and handicrafts hidden among the mountains of tourist goods. There are plenty of nibbles to be eaten upstairs. ⌚ 30 min–1 hr. *Vámház körút 1–3.* ☎ 1/366-3300. *Mon 6am–5pm, Tues–Fri 6am–6pm, Sat 6am–3pm. Metro: M3 to Kálvin tér. Tram: 2/47/49 to Fővám tér.*

#### 4 Walk across Szabadság Bridge.

Buda and Pest are seamlessly connected by this bright green piece of intricate ironwork that joins the Pest's Great Market Hall and its neighbor the Budapest University of Economics (formerly the Karl Marx University) with the Gellért Hotel and the dramatic Gellért Hill of Buda. It was opened by Emperor Franz Joseph in 1896, who actually knocked the last rivet into it. ⌚ 10 min. *Starts where Pest's Vámház körút meets the Danube. Tram: 47/49 to Kálvin tér.*

*The Gellért Hotel.*



**5 ★★★ kids Gellért Hill.** This imposing hill that towers over the Pest waterfront of the Danube has been used to good effect to suppress forces for change. Italian missionary

Szent Gellért was reportedly rolled down the hill in 1046 to his death by revolting pagans. The Austrians then built a Citadel from which to lord it over the Magyars (*see p 19*).



To find the Gellért Statue **5A** walk upstream towards the Erzsébet Bridge where you will see the steps leading up. Gellért, who participated in spreading the gospel in 11th-century Hungary on King Stephen's request, met his end being tumbled down the hill (that was subsequently named after him) in a barrel filled with nails—possibly in one of those bum deals whereby your faith supposedly will save you. Ultimately, Christianity won through with Gellért canonized in 1083. The Gellért Statue captures the saint preaching defiantly but precariously on the edge of the hill. It dates back to 1904 and is the work of Hungarian sculptor Gyula Jankovits (1865–1920). Follow the path up and you reach the Citadel **5B** that the Austrians, smarting from the

Hungarian Revolution of 1848, built, replete with cannons galore, atop the hill pointing at the Hungarians below. There wasn't much use for it after they patched up their differences in 1867, although German occupying forces utilized it in World War II. The three-level bunker inside the Citadel has waxworks and photos chronicling the Siege of Budapest. Close by and at the peak of the hill, Budapest's very own statue of liberty, the Freedom Statue **5C**, ironically went up in 1947 as a tribute to the Soviet forces that liberated the city from the Nazis. Featuring a woman proffering the palm branch of triumph and not overtly Soviet-looking, it survived the cull of Communist statues from the capital. 🕒 1–2 hr.



*Relax in style at the Gellért thermal baths.*

**6 Cave Church.** On the way down, just before reaching the Gellért Hotel and Baths, check out this spooky church whose eerie passages dig deep into the hill. Don't be alarmed if a priest appears from nowhere! 🕒 15 min.

**7 ★★★ Gellért Baths.** After another hard day of pounding the streets, the Art Nouveau architecture of the Gellért thermal baths allows you to relax in style but also to see something special. Inside, the central pool is surrounded by Romanesque columns and lions spitting out water, and just for a moment you might expect Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra to dive in alongside you. At the end of the pool, the male and female thermal facilities are to the right and left respectively. This is where things start to get really colorful and heated, and I'm not just talking

about the design or decoration, nor the saunas and steam rooms. You can keep your bathing costume on, though many locals like to let it all hang out and dispense with their modesty cloths, although the authorities are said to be cracking down on that sort of thing. The plunge pool is so icy you feel the chill right through your bones, but the thaw of the warm pools is always close at hand. While the waters are supposed to sort out arthritis, blood circulation, and the spine, I say just enjoy them and come out feeling squeaky clean and purified. In summer, be sure to check out the outdoor pools and garden, which is a bit more suited to kids who can enjoy the artificial waves in the main outdoor pool.

🕒 2 hr. Kelenhegyi út 4. ☎ 466-6166. Ft 3,100. 6am–7pm. Tram: 47/49/18/19 to Szent Gellért tér. ●