

TRAVEL TIMES

BY MARCI MANNIS



Rich Experiences Await in a Country with a Huge Heart

Hungary



ing; Marshland) were actually 2 separate cities that officially united in 1873. There is still a distinct difference between Buda (and) Pest that has

remained over the centuries, including a geographic divide between the hilly topography of Buda and the flat vistas of Pest.

It was a joy to experience an area of our world so foreign to me, yet so familiar to my friend (and now my official tour guide) on this ten-day adventure trip! After resting our heads at the glamorous Gellert Hotel, famous for their spa baths and massages, we filled our first few days sightseeing at the countless landmarks within the city limits of Budapest. The most breathtaking site for me was the enormity of the Parliament Building. Over 300 meters long and 200 meters wide it is the most expensive building in Hungary. The Parliament is perfectly placed on the embankment of the Danube River, a river so vast it runs from the Black Forest in Germany to the Black Sea in Romania. I was in awe at the view at night when the lights of the Parliament building reflected off

When opportunity comes knocking at one's door, I am a firm believer in swinging the gates wide open. So when a friend of mine, whose native country is Hungary, invited me to join her on a group tour she was hosting to visit her homeland, I gleefully accepted.

Experiencing a virtually flawless flight into Amsterdam, it was only another short plane hop into Budapest, Hungary.

Crowned the "Paris of the East", this bustling city of over 2 million people has come a long way since the Communist Revolution in 1956. To give you an idea of how concentrated this city is, one fifth of Hungary's total population of 10 million live in Budapest.

Buda (A male name meaning; Old Town) Pest (A Slavic name mean-

small artist's colony located in the Danube bend. With a population of 22,000 this military academy town is bustling with tourists and merchants selling their Hungarian trinkets and art. Two must-see destinations in this quaint little town were the well-known Margit Kovács Sculpture Museum and the one and only Szabo Marzipan Museum.

The next city we toured was the very small community of Visegrad—a storybook looking town of only 200 people where the homes are sprinkled high up on the hillside.

After filling up on an authentic Hungarian lunch at the Renaissance Restaurant, we made our way back to the center of Budapest to stroll the Pedestrian Mall – Váci Utca and vast indoor market. It was this area that seemed to be the pulsating heart of the center of the city. It was recommended by our friend and faithful tour guide to seek out the deep fried bread at the indoor market. I was determined to sink my teeth into this Hungarian treat and after circling the large market, finally found the stand tucked away on the top tier. For under \$5.00 I can honestly say this was my favorite meal of the trip. It was simple, yet sinfully delicious. Though the fabulous Foie Gras I consumed throughout the trip, (definitely a delicacy worth indulging in), ran a close second!

As our tour progressed we visited several more distinct towns outside Budapest. The city of Sopron, about a four-hour drive from Budapest, is the only area in Hungary with a virtually intact medieval nucleus. Sopron was founded around the second century AD by the Romans, and to this day is considered Hungary's 14th most important town. Practically touching the border of Austria (3 kilometers to Austria and

the Danube.

Budapest is filled with museums, churches and synagogues that date back to what feels like the beginning of time. In the course of the two World Wars, Hungary was repeatedly bombed, resulting in many of its architectural treasures either being completely destroyed or in dire need of renovation. The pride and determination of the Hungarian people have driven them to rebuild and refurbish a majority of these cultural landmark jewels.

One of Budapest's most imposing historical monuments is Europe's largest synagogue – The Dohheim Street Synagogue built in 1859. There is a heaviness that fills the air in Hungary from the hardships that the people endured – it almost seems palatable in certain areas. One of those areas was inside this holy place of worship where the German Nazis ended up taking refuge for their own safety.

Venturing outside the city limits of Budapest was the second leg of our trip, beginning with the town of Szentendre, a

60 Kilometers to Vienna) this City became known by the 5th Century for its trade and military purposes.

What struck me about each town-ship we spend time in was how different the energy felt amongst the locals and how I was able to imagine what it might have been like to live in the olden days because of how little appeared to change according to the town's walking tour guides.

A short drive from Sopron was the lovely Szidonia Castle Spa Hotel. Guests can choose from a plethora of spa packages to suit their needs. In all of my travels I have never seen such a variety of treatments offered under one castle roof! One of the country's trademark libations is the Tokaj wine. So it was no surprise to find on the menu – a Tokaj jelly body wrap, peel and bath! That is pampering at its finest.

Last, but certainly not least was our final stop on the tour—the progressive city of Pécs. This 200-year-old town is situated at the southern foot of the Macek Hills, and is the 5th largest city in Hungary. Due to the almost perfect balance of the Mediterranean climate, the region produces some of Hungary's best wine.

Pécs, a Slavic word meaning five churches, will be dubbed "The Capital

Cultural City" of Europe in 2010. So it is no surprise to find there is a buzz to Pécs that is distinct. The first inhabitants to this area were the Romans and it later became the first city to build a university. There is so much to see in Pécs—from the world renowned Zsolnay Museum to the Champagne Factory located in (and under!) the heart of the city.

It was the perfect place to end our travels by toasting with champagne in the evening and with wonderful wine the next day at one of the local vineyards not far from the city limits.

Discovering Hungary's cities, villages and people was educational, but also extremely moving. To learn about the rich and tumultuous history of this Eastern Bloc country was enlightening, but it was walking through the streets and seeing how the people have persevered and prospered amongst the reminders of harsh times that gave me insight into human nature at a much deeper level. Sharing the experience with friends from my homeland made it even more meaningful.

Hungary has heart, it has history, but most of all the people seem to have an insurmountable pride for their country's past, present and future.

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