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HUNGARY

High End Value, Old World Ambience

By Lee Daley

Few cities rival Hungary's capital, Budapest, for its combination of romantic allure, architectural diversity and distinctive cuisine. Its three original cities of Buda, Pest and Obuda, united to form a single capital spanning both banks of the river Danube in 1873. Today, hilly Buda's well-preserved Gothic buildings and cobbled streets attest to its historic Middle Age origins, while across the river, the more commercially oriented Pest serves up a glorious cornucopia of cafes, museums, parks and shops. Seven roads and two rail bridges cross the Danube, connecting the two districts.

At dusk, the lights of the Castle and the city's bridges illuminate the blue Danube, at dawn, the sun's rays cast the ancient stones of Castle Hill in a golden glow, providing the perfect prelude to a breakfast of Hungarian hot chocolate and home-made apple strudel. When asked why travelers should recognize Hungary as such a great value, Maria Rachidi of New York's Hungarian Tourist Authority said; "You get the unspoiled old Europe experience in a unique place, where a great abundance of high end accommodations and services await you at prices 15 to 20 percent lower than comparable Western European cities."



Exploring Budapest

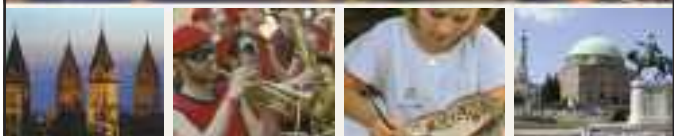
The best way to take in the entire city is to walk across the magnificent Chain Bridge from the Pest side. Take the funicular to the Castle District, a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site. Much of the area destroyed in World War II has been reconstructed as an original medieval city, including the Royal Palace. Among the cobblestone streets is the Rivalda Café, a former Carmelite monastery.

Long known as a destination for its healing waters, Hungary sits on one of the richest geothermal and medicinal water resources in the world. Several of Budapest's bathhouses serve as fine examples of neo-Baroque architecture. On the Pest side, the Szechenyi Baths (shown above), possibly the largest bathhouse in Europe, is worth a visit for its grand exterior and reception area with magnificent sculpture and murals.

Szechenyi's supra-Olympic-sized outdoor pool maintains consistent 100-degree temperatures year-round. Hungarians and



THE BRIDGE TO HUNGARIAN CULTURE



2010 — THE YEAR OF FESTIVALS
 Visit Pécs, The European Capital of Culture
 See more at www.pecs2010.hu

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Top Five Activities in Budapest

We asked Sofitel's Chief Concierge Barnabus Kovetsdi to give us his top five recommended activities in Budapest and he said:

1. Cross the Chain Bridge on foot to the Castle area. Once there, climb to the top of the Citadel for panoramic views of the city.
2. Stroll Andrássy Avenue on the Pest side. Dubbed the Champs Elysees of Budapest for its elegant, eclectic architecture, it ends at the grand Heroes' Square. From there a bridge leads to City Park with its zoo and fairytale castle.
3. Visit the Great Synagogue, also called the "Tobacco Street Synagogue," topped by Moorish minarets. The second largest in the world, its festivals attract worshippers from all over Europe.
4. Take in the Flea Market and the Great Market Hall, both runaway winners for value and atmosphere. Built in the Art Nouveau style, the three-story Great Market Hall offers a crash course in local spices and sweets. Try the soothing "pogasca" biscuits. On Saturdays, treasure hunters grab public transport to the Ecseri Flea Market where haggling may not result in a bargain, but always affords the chance of coming away with an errant Communist badge.
5. Meander along Váci utca, the pedestrian street chock-a-block with cafes and shops hawking designer goods to mod frocks alongside antiques and folk art. Higher prices abound but it's colorfully busy with worthy diversions such as the 17th Century St. Michael's Church. Chocolate Alert: At the end of the street is Vorosmarty Square, home to Café Gerbeaud, one of the most traditional café-confectioneries in Europe, an ideal place to refresh while enjoying an espresso and pastry. In warm weather, outdoor seating adds to the ambience. www.gerbeaud.com.

tourists alike attest to the healing waters' magical powers to ease the pains of arthritis and other chronic disorders.

Costes Restaurant on Raday Street now boasts Hungary's first Michelin star rating. Known for its fusion cuisine, the restaurant serves international and Hungarian dishes. Michelin has also bestowed its Bib Gourmand Award on four more restaurants in the city: 21, Arcade Bistro, Bock Bistro and Czalogany. The Bib Gourmand Award represents quality cuisine at reasonable prices.

Getting There and Getting Around

Malev Hungarian Airlines (www.malev.com) is part of the Oneworld Alliance. Lufthansa Airlines (www.lufthansa.com), a member of Star Alliance, also flies into Budapest via Frankfurt with connections from major U.S. cities.

The Budapest Card, a tourist discount card/travel pass good for 48 or 72 hours, offers unlimited public transportation, discounted entry to museums and sightseeing tours, spa discounts and many other benefits.

Accommodations

With an array of accommodations from five-star resort hotels to quaint pensions and hostels, the destination is attractive to all price ranges. The Pest side of the Danube provides the best access to a number of activities and sites that lie within walking distance. Staying near the Danube River at a hotel such as the conveniently located Sofitel Budapest adds an additional bonus with its nightly views of the Chain Bridge and

lighted watercraft riding the river. Visit www.sofitel.com

New on the hotel and spa scene, the five-star **Racz Hotel and Thermal Spa** is likely the largest destination spa in Central Europe. Ensnared in the lush greenery of an oasis park on the Buda side, the hotel's baths have long been a "hot spot" of "wellness" treatments for royalty. Originally built during the Turkish era in 1550, it still contains an ancient Hammam bath, now encompassing a modern thermal spa. www.raczhotel.com.

Pécs – European Capital of Culture in 2010

Calling itself "The Borderless City," the historic city of Pécs has been selected as the European Capital of Culture in 2010, sharing the title with Essen, Germany and Istanbul, Turkey. About 125 miles southwest of Budapest, Pecs is a comfortable three-hour train ride. Despite its distance from the sea, its location in the Mecsek hills near Croatia's border gives it a Mediterranean feel and climate.

Home to the University of Pecs, the city also hosts International Cultural Week every July. In celebration of its designation as European Capital of Culture, colorful festivals and programs are planned throughout 2010, many hosted by the historic sites and buildings of the city. Steeped in cultural heritage and surrounded by remnants of ancient Roman and Turkish occupations, Pecs spans the centuries with a multitude of contemporary art on display in its public spaces. For information visit www.pecs2010.hu

For information, call the Hungarian National Tourist Office New York office at 212-695-1221 or visit www.gotohungary.com

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