

HEDONISTIC BUDAPEST

Classic by day, cool by night, the Hungarian capital is an all-time thrill. Dive in!



Bargain *haute cuisine*, sprawling outdoor bars and pneumatic nightclubs – it's easy to over-indulge in Budapest. Luckily, the Hungarian capital's peerless thermal baths can erase the most grievous sybaritic sins. Cleansed of your excesses, there are Baroque architectural masterpieces, verdant hills and grandiose cafes to explore. Time to join the party...

By Ed Vanstone

WHAT TO SEE & DO

● Kick off in the heart of things – on the city's grand main boulevard, Andrassy Ut, which runs from downtown Pest through to the tranquil expanses of City Park (1 on map). You'll pass the imposing Neo-Renaissance Opera House (2), innumerable stunning facades and finally reach **Heroes' Square (3)**, where the archangel Gabriel lords it over the seven founders of Hungary.

● Time to wallow. There are around a dozen thermal-bath complexes in this city. For a trad Turkish experience, complete with coloured-glass cupola, visit Rudas (Döbrentei Tér 9; rudas.furdo.hu; entry £8.50; 4). To feel as if you're bathing in a cathedral, go to Gellért (Kelenhegyi Ut 4; gellertbath.hu; £13.50; 5). Our favourite? Neo-Baroque Széchenyi (Allatkerti Körút 9-11; szechenyibath.hu; £13; 6) – it has **18 pools, and a 10pm closing time for moonlight paddling**.

● While lolling in the steamy waters of Buda's baths is a great way to sweat off a hangover, earning one there is even more enjoyable. On Saturday nights, Széchenyi or Lukács (7) host **raucous 'sparties', attracting local twentysomethings and tourists** (take flip-flops and a towel; tickets £18; see lukacsbaths.com or szechenyispabaths.com/sparties). Expect cocktails, laser lighting, DJs and dancing.

● You'll see head-clearing splendour if you ride the funicular (£5 return; 8) up **Buda's Castle Hill for a circuit around the walls of the Royal Palace** (Szent György Tér 2; 9). Today, King Béla IV's 13th-century masterpiece houses the National Library (free); the Hungarian National Gallery (£4); and the Budapest History Museum (£4). Afterwards, head over to Fisherman's Bastion (10), a beautiful seven-towered terrace, for show-off snaps of the Parliament Building (11) on the banks of the Danube in Pest.

● At the Great Market Hall (Vámház Körút 1-3; piaconline.hu; 12), citizens bargain for meats, spices and veg at ground level, while the first floor hawks tourist tat and local grub. **Grab a crispy lángos (deep-fried flatbread) from the eponymous stall** and settle down at the Panoráma Bár to observe the throng.

● Frittering away a few hours in one of the city's palatial cafes is mandatory. Gerbeaud (Vörösmarty Tér 7-8; gerbeaud.hu; 13) has been **servng transcendent cakes amid a sea of dark wood and chandeliers since 1858**. For the best brekkie – and glitz galore – visit New York Café (Erzsébet Körút 9-11; newyorkcafe.hu; 14); or for a more sedate experience, try Centrál Kávéház (Károlyi Mihály Utca 9; centralkavehaz.hu; 15).

● When locals want to **escape the city hubbub, they head to Margaret Island (16)**, a chubby stretch of parkland that bisects the Danube.

Heat haze: from left, let off steam in the Széchenyi baths; breakfast like a king in the glitzy interior of New York Café; the impressive Hungarian Parliament Building; statue of King Béla IV, in Heroes' Square

Expect to encounter an army of joggers trudging the isle's periphery; skilled 'ultimate Frisbee' matches; and scores of infants mowing down their parents on pedal buggies.

● Three offbeat transport methods provide the best way to explore Buda's rolling hills. Ride the BKV cog train (bkv.hu; £2.50; 17) 3.5km up to Széchenyi-hegy (hill) and wander through the park to the **Children's Railway, staffed by kids aged 10-14 (their attempts at military salutes are adorable)**; gyermekvasut.hu; £1.50; 18). Alight at 527m János-hegy and ascend to Elizabeth (Erzsébet) look-out for incredible views over Budapest and its satellite towns, before taking the chairlift (Zugligeti Ut 97; £1.50; 19) down the hill. >

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WHERE TO STAY

Casati Budapest Hotel (Paulay Ede Utca 31; 00 36 1343 1198, casatibudapesthotel.com; 20). This central chi-chi boutique hotel has four stylish room options – classic, cool, natural and heaven – all with minimalist designer furniture and a soporific neutral colour scheme. The adjoining modern-art gallery is worth a peruse. Doubles from €61, B&B.

Brody House (Bródy Sándor Utca 10; 00 36 1266 1211, brodyhouse.com; 21). Once the residence of the Hungarian prime minister, Brody is now a hip members' club/gallery/boutique hotel. The huge common area – where breakfast is served, art exhibited and emerging bands debated – is a great place to sit, chat and gawp at Budapest's boho 'n' beautiful clique. Doubles from €71, B&B.

Buda Castle Fashion Hotel (Uri Utca 39; 00 36 1224 7900, budacastlehotelbudapest.com; 22). Fisherman's Bastion may be two minutes' amble from this stylish four-star, but the hotel is still wonderfully tranquil. Spacious rooms, vast beds and a bountiful breakfast make it one of Buda's best sleeps. Doubles from €74, B&B.

Danubius Hotel Gellért (Szent Gellért Tér 1; 00 36 1889 5500, danubiushotels.com; 23). Guests at this colossal building get free access to the adjoining Gellért baths via a private elevator. It's all vintage rooms (no fancy tech here), attentive staff and a mature clientele in awe of the faded '30s grandeur. Doubles from €95, B&B.

Boscolo Budapest Autograph Collection (Erzsébet Körút 9-11; 00 36 1886 6145, boscolo.hotels.com; 14). The ritzy New York Café (see previous page) doubles as this five-star's bar and restaurant. Opulent rooms come with period fittings; ask for one with a balcony looking out over the city. Doubles from €105, room only.

Four Seasons Hotel Gresham Palace (Széchenyi István Tér 5-6; 00 36 1268 6000, fourseasons.com; 24). Routinely found on best-hotels-in-the-world lists, this Art Nouveau paragon was restored to full *fin de siècle* glory in 2004. The mosaic lobby under a glass cupola is dazzling, the service impeccable and the fifth-floor spa – with portholes affording views of the Chain Bridge – divine. Doubles from €288, B&B.

WHERE TO EAT

Tom George Italiano (Október 6 Utca 8; 00 36 1266 3525, tomgeorge.hu; 25). Book ahead to secure a table at this cool Italian, populated by a young and boisterous crowd. The pasta dishes are excellent and the cocktails almost tasty enough to tempt you away from Hungarian reds. Mains around €7.

Cafe Kor (Sas Utca 17; 00 36 1311 0053, cafekor.com; 26). Historical photos of the city adorn the walls at this central institution – equally good for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Ask the gorgeous staff to recommend one of the locally sourced specials (garlicky roasted pike perch, perhaps), or choose from the pan-European options. Mains around €8; cash only.

Chess Restaurant (Dob Utca 63; 00 36 1882 3080, chessrestaurant.hu; 27). Pristine black-and-white tiles and a piano soundtrack complement the cuisine at this Italian-French-Hungarian bistro. The sea bass with black gnocchi and mango cream is great. A fantastic date-night spot. Mains around €10.

Múzeum (Múzeum Körút 12; 00 36 1267 0375, muzeumkavehaz.hu; 28). The epitome of 19th-century elegance, Múzeum flaunts an original Venetian mirror and walls daubed by the revered Hungarian ceramicist Zsolnay. Specialities amid the trad Hungarian fare include goose-liver *pâté* and an array of *pálinka*, the nation's fruity favourite spirit. Mains around €11.

Taverna Dionysos (Belgrád Rakpart 16; 00 36 1318 1222, dionysos.hu; 29). Ignore the slightly naff faux-Grecian decor at this popular taverna, and dine outside on the terrace, with its panorama of Gellért Hill. Savour seafood or opt for meltingly soft *souvlaki*. Mains around €11.

Onyx (Vörösmarty Tér 7-8; 00 36 3050 80622, onyxrestaurant.hu; 30). Celebrated for its six-course Hungarian Evolution menu (€70), which upgrades Budapest staples into flavourful nouveau cuisine, Michelin-starred Onyx has set a new standard in the city at a comparatively affordable price. Mains around €30.

Szimpla Kert (Kazinczy Utca 14; szimpla.hu; 31). The daddy of Budapest's unique *kerteks*

Night on the tiles: The Four Seasons Gresham Palace's mosaic-lined lobby; goose-liver *pâté* is a traditional Hungarian delicacy; the grungy-glam ruin pub Szimpla Kert

(garden/ruin bars renowned for their quirky rustic decor). Szimpla is a phantasmagoria of derelict cars, bathtubs, belly dancers and live bands spread over a labyrinth of rooms.

Doblo (Dob Utca 20; budapestwine.com; 32). This classy wine bar is perfect for romantic evenings – all exposed brickwork and candlelight.

Boutiq Bar (Paulay Ede Ut 5; boutiqbar.hu; 33). The best cocktails in Pest are found at this sharp-lined bar. Also try the Unicorn – a Hungarian favourite made from more than 40 herbs and aged in oak casks.

Cinetríp (cinetríp.hu; €18). Bathing, dancing and acrobatics in a fug of steam and neon in unique locations – it doesn't get much more hedonistic than Cinetríp's weekly parties.

WHERE TO SHOP

Eventuell gallery (Nyáry Pál Utca 7; eventuell.hu; 34). Run by a creative community of freelance designers, here you'll find beautiful handmade textiles, jewellery and clothes.

Alexandra (Andrássy Ut 39; alexandra.hu; 35). The best way to spend a rainy day in Pest: head to this bookshop, pick up *Prague* by Arthur Phillips (set in Budapest) and a fine Tokaj wine, then bed down in the gilt-laden cafe. ■

Ask the local



Regina Papp is the editor-in-chief of Welovebuda.pest.com, which provides personalised tips to the city's residents and visitors

'Budapest's ruin-pub phenomenon began some 10 years ago when a **downtown apartment building destined to be demolished was spiced up with a beer tap**, a couple of decrepit couches and old-school telephones serving as door handles. The concept blossomed, and ruin pubs are

now a key part of the city's allure. The oldest and largest is Szimpla Kert (see 31), but nearby Fogasház (Akácfa Ut 51; fogashaz.hu; 36) and Instant (Nagymező Utca 38; instant.co.hu; 37) also warrant exploration (the latter is on **Nagymező Street, the Shaftesbury Avenue of Pest**). Mitigate your hangover the morning after with coffee at Csendes (Ferenczy István Utca 5; 38), a trendy cafe/bar full of vintage movie knick-knacks and contemporary art. Then sample **caramelised hazelnuts coated in chocolate and sprinkled with ginger** at Rózsavölgyi chocolatier (Királyi Pál Ut 6; rozsavolgyi.com; 39), before hunting for antiques at Ecséri flea market (Nagykőrösi Ut 156; 40).'



Get me there

GO INDEPENDENT

The Hungarian low-cost airline **Wizz Air** (0907 292 0102, wizzair.com) has daily flights to Budapest from Luton; one-way fares start at €30. Alternatively, try **BA** (0844 493 0787, ba.com), which flies from Heathrow from €132 return. Or **Ryanair** (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com), which flies from Stansted,

Manchester and Bristol, from €22 one way.

GO PACKAGED

BA (0844 493 0722, ba.com) has a three-night package in Budapest, staying at the four-star Danubius Hotel Gellért, from €259pp, B&B, including flights from Heathrow. **Expedia** (020 3564 3904, expedia.co.uk) offers four

nights at The Four Seasons Gresham Palace from £520pp, room only, including Heathrow flights.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The official website of Budapest Tourism is **budapestinfo.hu**. For insider tips as well as general information about the city, see **welovebudapest.com**.