

Pummeled by the Mongols in 1241, the Turks in 1541, and the Soviets during World War II and the 1956 revolution, Budapest has witnessed its share of hard times. Today, the capital of Hungary is thriving. Theresa Agovino reveals the hidden pleasures of her hometown, in the midst of a modern renaissance.

# BUDAPEST

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE BY THERESA AGOVINO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS PFLAUM / VISUM

**B**eautiful Budapest has always flaunted a plethora of charms:

inspiring architecture, a rich musical tradition, lively nightlife, and flavorful cuisine. Then there is the Danube—while the river rambles through many countries, in Budapest it positively preens.

It flows past the city's towering Citadella fortress, grandiose palace, magnificent Parliament building, and beneath the splendid Chain Bridge as it separates urban Pest from more suburban Buda. There is a symbiotic relationship between the Danube and the landmarks of Budapest that is truly special. ¶ Forty years of communism

KNOWN BY SOME AS THE PARIS OF EASTERN EUROPE, BUDAPEST'S OFFERINGS ARE MANY. PARKS, CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL SITES, AND MUSEUMS ABOUND IN THIS ANCIENT AND RESILIENT CITY.

dampened the city's exuberance, but the political changes in 1989 ushered in a new vibrancy. Buildings are being refurbished, new stores and restaurants are mushrooming, and service is improving. "Sajnos nincs"—"Unfortunately, no" once was a

common response to customer requests. Now the greeting is a smile and "Segíthetek?"—"Can I help you?" ¶ **Day One** ¶ Budapest's older hotels have seen better days, so choose the Kempinski Hotel Corvinus Budapest. The excellent service, tastefully appointed rooms, and central location more than compensate for its prosaic personality.



## DAY ONE

Your entire visit involves plenty of walking in a city that can get hot and sticky, so dress lightly and take a short walk from the hotel to Gerbeaud, one of the city's grandest old coffeehouses. Once a relaxing part of Hungarian life, only a handful of coffeehouses survive the modern bustle. Tarry here over coffee and *pogácsa*, the local version of a scone, and savor the view of one of Budapest's busiest squares.

Back at the hotel, take a *licensed* taxi (City or Fő cabs offer regulated, reasonable rates) to Statue Park, an outdoor graveyard museum of communist-era monuments. Have the cab wait while you peruse the larger-than-life figures. Now reduced to kitsch, these were once scattered all over town as reminders that Big Brother was watching.

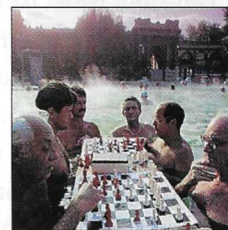
Stride across the Chain Bridge, and take the funicular up to the Castle District. Walk through the stone and wrought-iron gate to Royal Palace, home to the National Gallery. Hungary isn't known for its painters, but you can't miss the enormous, eerie canvases by Kosztká Tivadar Csontváry. When Pablo Picasso saw Csontváry's work, he exclaimed, "I did not know there was another great painter in our century besides me."

Exploring the palace grounds, you'll find three statues of St. Stephen. His image is everywhere because the beloved king was canonized for bringing Catholicism to Hungary. Yet another cast of him on horseback resides near your next stop, the Matthias Church on the other side of the district. The church's tall spire and colorful tile roof are signatures of the Budapest skyline, but it is the interior that truly impresses. The walls, pillars, and ceiling are covered in geometric and floral designs in hues of rose, turquoise, and amber—atypical of most Catholic churches and evocative of Hungary's Turkish occupation.

Fisherman's Bastion lies outside Matthias Church. A white rampart of turrets and stairs, it looks like an ancient fortress but was actually built in 1905 as a viewing station. Join the tourist horde besieging it. The vista is inspiring.

Nourishment is in order. Light meals are spotty in this heavily touristed area, so have a salad, omelet, or sandwich at Café Miró, a funky paean to the artist. Indulge in dessert at the "Ruszwurm" Cukrászda: The cake is as good as this diminutive establishment is charming.

**Dramatic statues and monuments—reminders of Hungary's volatile past—impart a grand scale to Budapest's popular parks and squares.**



**1. KEMPINSKI HOTEL  
CORVINUS BUDAPEST**

Erzsébet tér 7-8 H-1051; Tel: 266-1000; Fax: 266-2000. (The country/city code for Budapest is 36-1.)

**2. GERBEAUD**

Vörösmarty tér 7; Tel: 118-1311.

**3. STATUE PARK**

Balatoni utca; Tel: 227-7446.

**4. NATIONAL GALLERY**

Royal Palace; Castle District; Tel: 175-5567.

**5. MATTHIAS CHURCH**

Szentháromság tér 2; Tel: 155-5657.

**6. CAFÉ MIRÓ**

Úri utca. 30; Tel: 175-5458.

**7. "RUSZWURM" CUKRÁSZDA**

Szentháromság utca. 7; Tel: 175-5284.

**8. GELLÉRT BATHS**

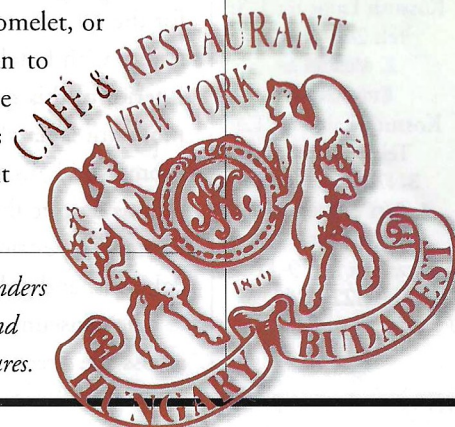
Szent Gellért tér 1; Tel: 166-6166.

**9. BUDAI VIGADÓ**

Corvin tér 8; Tel: 117-2754.

**10. KACSA**

Fő utca 75; Tel: 201-9992.





Meander along picturesque cobblestone streets lined with two-story pastel baroque buildings—a feast for the eyes. Many house Hungarian handicrafts shops carrying porcelain, pottery, embroidered clothing, and tablecloths. Don't ignore Tóth Árpád sétány, the less-traveled, tree-lined, and shopless street farthest from the Danube. Go ahead and peek into courtyards. And visit two small museums: the Golden Eagle Pharmacy and the Museum of Commerce and Catering. Each offers whimsical displays and an enthusiastic welcome for the few people who drop in.

Now relax Hungarian-style. Take a cab to the Gellért Baths. Lounging in the thermal spring-fed baths beneath Budapest is a favorite local pastime. The Gellért tubs are lined with royal blue mosaic tile. Still, even though the Hungarians call this a spa, it is a proletarian experience. Don't expect a fluffy white bathrobe, and bring your own toiletries. The prim may need time to adjust since privacy is nonexistent. Women are handed tiny aprons. Wear it and announce you are a tourist. Men don modesty cloths. Baths are open to both men and women but on different days. Massages are given in big open rooms, but feel so good you won't notice the company. Ask for a dry massage: Water massages consist of being soaped up and hosed down, and leave you feeling like a car being washed at a charity fundraiser.

Take the 4/9 tram back to the hotel to change for dinner. Tonight you'll attend a performance by the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble at Budai Vigadó. The music, costumes, and dancing are so cheerful you'll leave smiling. Dinner at nearby Kacsá will further that mood. Kacsá means "duck," and

that's what you should eat in this romantic spot. Complement your meal with a bottle of Hungarian red wine such as an Egeri Bikavér. Toast each other and the evening with a glass of *pálinka*, the local aperitif.

### Day Two

Breakfast at the hotel, then walk over to the Parliament building for the 10 a.m. tour (check availability with hotel concierge). The interior of this spiky, neo-Gothic monolith is dazzling. The 700 rooms and halls avoid being ostentatious despite the abundance of frescoes, tapestries, carpets, marble columns, and gold leaf accents.

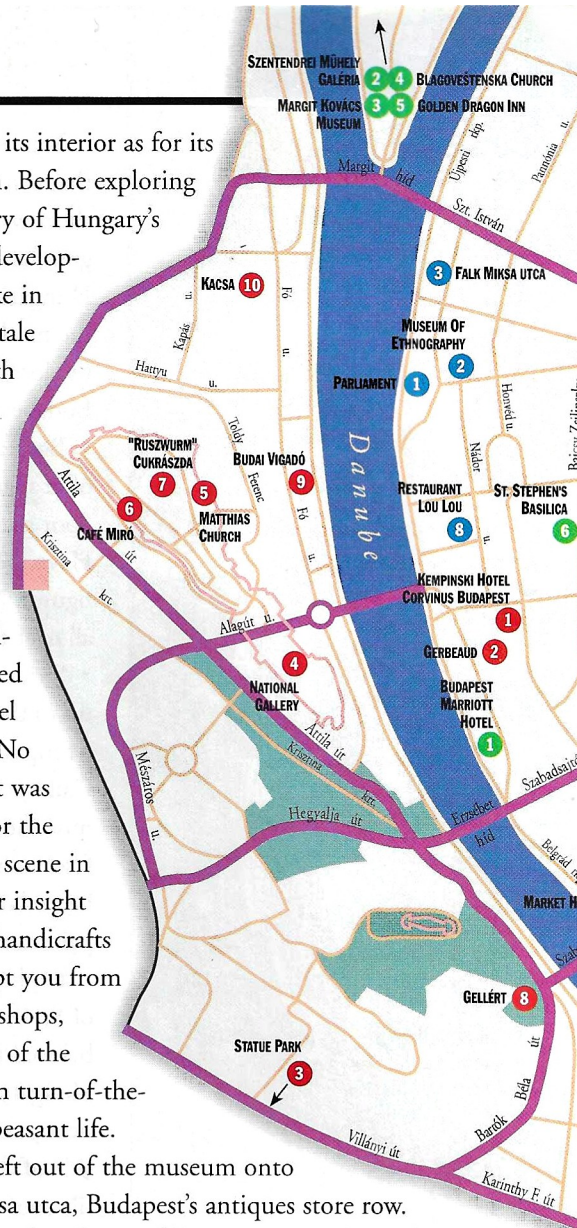
The Museum of Ethnography across the street merits a visit as

much for its interior as for its collection. Before exploring the history of Hungary's cultural development, take in the fairy-tale lobby with its white marble floor, pink marble columns, and a ceiling covered with pastel frescoes. No wonder it was chosen for the ballroom scene in *Evita*. For insight into the handicrafts that tempt you from so many shops, take note of the exhibit on turn-of-the-century peasant life.

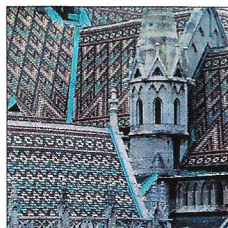
Turn left out of the museum onto Falk Miksa utca, Budapest's antiques store row. There's an abundance of furniture, porcelain, silver, and brass beckoning in these shops. Anna Antikvitás has a fine selection of linens and tapestries while Moró Antik is a must for military buffs.

Falk Miksa ends at Szent István körút, part of Budapest's major ring road. Take the 4/6 tram to Blaha Lujza tér for lunch at Café & Restaurant New York. This 103-year-old establishment, favored by writers in its heyday, is Budapest's most opulent café. Every inch is bronzed, gilded, mirrored, or carved. Marvel at the extravagant decor in between bites of goulash soup or veal stew. The *somlói galuska*—rum-soaked sponge cake smothered in nuts, fruit, chocolate sauce, and whipped cream—is fantastic.

Work off dessert by walking down Rákóczi út to Károly körút. Make a right, and after a few blocks you'll see the Great Synagogue, the second-largest temple in the world. The massive Moorish structure recently received a multi-million dollar facelift, so chandeliers and frescoes glisten. There's a small museum and a Holocaust memorial nearby.

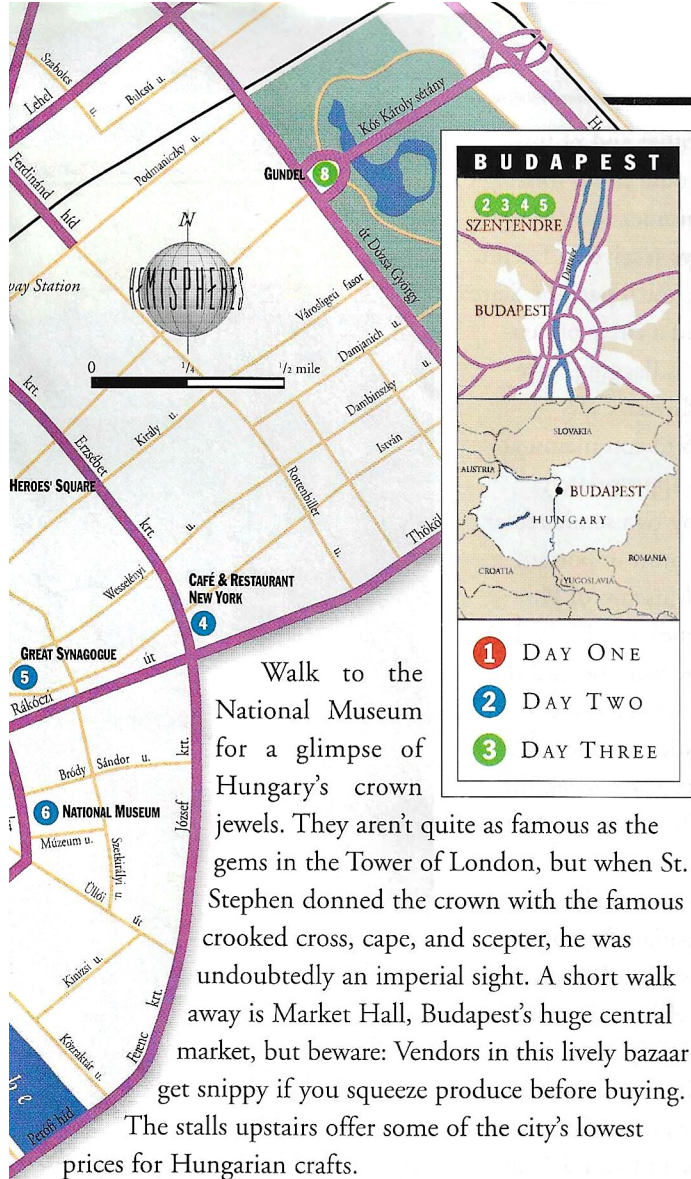


### DAY TWO



- 1. PARLIAMENT**  
Kossuth Lajos tér 1-3;  
Tel: 268-4811.
- 2. MUSEUM OF ETHNOGRAPHY**  
Kossuth Lajos tér 12;  
Tel: 332-6340.
- 3. FALK MIKSA UTCA**
- 4. CAFÉ & RESTAURANT NEW YORK**  
Erzsébet krt. 9-11;  
Tel: 322-3849.





Walk to the National Museum for a glimpse of Hungary's crown jewels. They aren't quite as famous as the gems in the Tower of London, but when St. Stephen donned the crown with the famous crooked cross, cape, and scepter, he was undoubtedly an imperial sight. A short walk away is Market Hall, Budapest's huge central market, but beware: Vendors in this lively bazaar get snippy if you squeeze produce before buying. The stalls upstairs offer some of the city's lowest prices for Hungarian crafts.

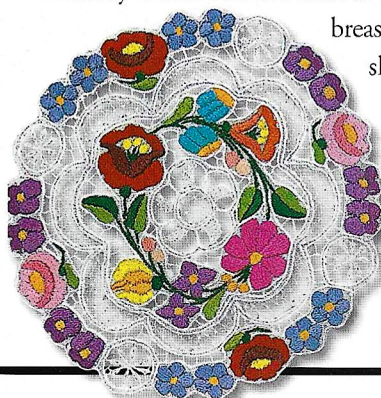
Grab the Danube-hugging No. 2 tram back to the hotel. Browse the kiosks lining the river, or walk on Váci utca, Budapest's upscale pedestrian shopping strip.

This country of music lovers counts composers Franz Liszt and Bela Bartók among its favorite sons, and evening concert options are plentiful. Though closed in the summer, the Opera House does open for special festivals on some nights in August. If something is being staged, definitely attend.

Afterward, take a cab to Restaurant Lou Lou. This cozy eatery is one of the best newcomers to Budapest's improving culinary scene. Entrées such as rack of lamb and chicken

breast fricassee have a Continental slant, but the desserts and wines are pure Hungarian. The warm cottage cheese doughnut with cinnamon

*From architecture to handicrafts, Hungarian design is artfully intricate.*



sauce is the perfect finale. A glass of Unicum should accompany your coffee. This strong, herbal-tasting liqueur is an acquired taste as yet undeveloped in most non-Hungarians. Locals swear it has medicinal value, and you wouldn't want to get sick on vacation.

### Day Three

Have breakfast at the Marriott Hotel on the Danube since this morning you're sailing to Szentendre, an artists' colony north of Budapest. Szentendre's narrow cobblestone streets are lined with squat autumnal-colored stores bulging with Hungarian treasures. Don't let the throngs deter you: The streets are busier than the museums.

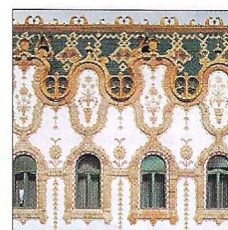
The Szentendrei Műhely Gallery on Main Square features artists still working in the town's two colonies, while the local museums are dedicated to artists from Szentendre's past. The art ranges from impressionist paintings by Károly Ferenczy to montages by Vajda Lajos. It is a unique experience to be in a town while simultaneously viewing it through the eyes of the artists who lived there. The Margit Kovács Museum is Szentendre's chief lure. Kovács' sculptures are simple but pack real emotional punch.

All the museums and shops are on three main streets, so getting around is easy. Take a minute to see the ornate black icon screen inside the Christian Orthodox Blagovestenska Church on the main square. Then lunch at the Golden Dragon Inn (reservations are a must). The dragon's bouillon is a tasty broth of mushrooms and quail eggs. Paprika sauce is a Hungarian staple, and here it's remarkably tasty. Try it on the quail steamed in Savoy cabbage.

Take the train back to Budapest. After arriving at Batthány tér, take the metro two stops to Deák tér. Change to the blue line, and go one stop to Arany János utca. You'll see the dome of St. Stephen's Basilica. Now more than ever, it is worth a visit because a major renovation is unleashing spiritual decor oppressed by years of grime. The basilica houses the mummified hand of St. Stephen that is paraded through the streets each year on August 20, the anniversary of his death. The holiday's real highlights are the Castle District craft fair and fireworks over the Danube.

Leaving the church, walk left toward Andrásy utca. Your ultimate

### DAY TWO



**5. GREAT SYNAGOGUE**  
Dohány utca 2;  
Tel: 342-8949.

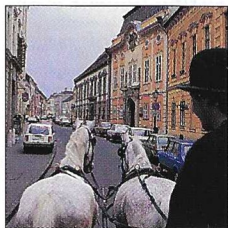
**6. NATIONAL MUSEUM**  
Múzeum krt. 14-16;  
Tel: 138-2122.

**7. MARKET HALL**  
Fovam tér 12;  
Tel: 217-6174.

**8. RESTAURANT LOU LOU**  
Vigázó F. utca 4;  
Tel: 312-4505.



## DAY THREE

**1. BUDAPEST MARRIOTT HOTEL**

Apáczai Csere János  
utca 4; Tel: 266-7000.

**2. SZENTENDREI MŰHELY GALÉRIA**

Fő tér 20; Tel: 310-  
139. (The city/country  
code for Szentendre is  
36-26.)

**3. MARGIT KOVÁCS MUSEUM**

Vastagh György utca 1;  
Tel: 310-790.

**4. BLAGOŠTENSKA CHURCH**

Fő tér 1; no phone.

**5. GOLDEN DRAGON INN**

Alkotmány utca 1/a;  
Tel: 311-670.

**6. ST. STEPHEN'S BASILICA**

Bajcsy-Zsilinszky utca;  
Tel: 117-2859.

**7. HEROES' SQUARE**

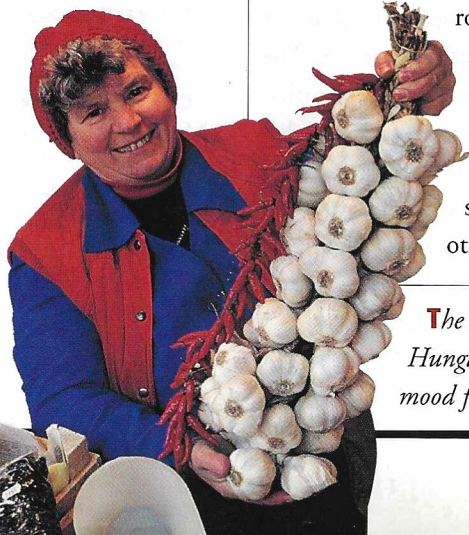
Andrássy utca.

**8. GUNDEL**

Allatkerti utca 2; Tel:  
321-3550.

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destination is Heroes' Square at the other end of this thoroughfare, but taking the metro would mean missing a stroll down one of Europe's grand promenades. Many of the buildings hugging the street have received a facelift, courtesy of Budapest's new prosperity. You'll pass the State Opera House, the Ballet Academy, and a circle of neo-Renaissance buildings. If your energy is flagging, take refuge in the refined interior of the Művész Café.

Heroes' Square was erected in 1896 to commemorate Hungary's 1,000th anniversary and is appropriately grand. Archangel Gabriel is rimmed by two semicircular colonnades with statues of Hungary's most important leaders. The square is flanked by the Museum of Fine Arts and the recently restored Műcsarnok exhibit hall. A walk around City Park, the oasis of greenery behind the Square, is preferable to either gallery. Stroll around a man-made lake and Vajdahunyad Castle, a replica of one in Transylvania, past the famous statue *Anonymous*, the hooded scribe, and the Ják Chapel. Then take the Metro back to your hotel.

Your last night should be especially memorable, so dine at Gundel. In 1992, noted Hungarian-American restaurateur George Lang restored this legendary establishment to the glory it enjoyed as a celebrated haunt for artists and politicians in the 1920s. The stylish art deco dining room evokes the period, but since it is summer, revel in the ambiance of the flower-cloaked patio.

Goose liver is a Hungarian delicacy, and Gundel's is sublime. Your meal won't be complete without a serving. Whether you order a traditional specialty like paprika chicken or opt for Continental fare, end your dinner with the famous Gundel *palacsinta*—crêpes stuffed with nuts, smothered in chocolate sauce, and flamed—and a glass of Tokaji Aszú, Hungary's renowned dessert wine.

You can ignore the lively strobe-lit interiors of Budapest's many discos and casinos: They are no match for a romantic view of the shimmering Danube. Arm in arm, enjoy a romantic stroll along the river. Once you've gazed at the glowing Citadella, Chain Bridge, and Royal Palace, their lights dancing in the Danube, it will be hard to turn your back on the scene. Make it easier: Promise each other to return.

**T***he Chain Bridge, the first built across the Hungarian section of the Danube, sets the mood for a romantic stroll along the riverbank.*

