

TRAVEL

Hungary to change

Communist era falls away in Budapest

By JUDITH INGRAM
NEW YORK TIMES SYNDICATE

Budapest, Hungary, is at its best in the autumn when the end-to-end tourist buses go into hibernation and local residents reclaim their city.

The capital wakes up in a blue mist and basks in the golden light of fall afternoons; sunshine sparkles off the tiles of turn-of-the-century mosaics, and soft shadows hide the cracks and wrinkles of this aging but ever vain capital.

The city is peppered with lookout points. Good spots include the Erzsébet Lookout Tower atop Janos Hill in Buda, which can be reached by the chairlift — about 50 cents — that starts at Zugliffelt Road.

Lower in the Buda Hills is the Szechenyi Lookout on Evetke Street near the Szabadsag Hegy stop of the cogwheel railway, which runs up into the hills from Szilagy Erzsébet Parkway across from the Hotel Budapest.

Bus and cogwheel railway tickets cost about 20 cents. The closest lookout to the center of town is on Gellert Hill at the Liberation Statue.

This fall visitors can glimpse the last of the ideological communist-era statues, which are being removed from the sites they have dominated for up to four decades. Pre-World War II statues are being put back in their places of honor, emphasizing Budapest's nostalgia for the precommunist past.

Many streets now carry two names: the prewar one and the communist-era name, crossed out with a thick red line. Communist crews on the Chain Bridge are draped with gray cloth.

For a short time the two contradictory faces of the city will be on display simultaneously.

Events

The Festival Orchestra has existed since 1983 as a "dissident" ensemble that did not bend to the will of the communist-era arts management. Now the city, dominated by former dissidents, has adopted it as Budapest's official orchestra.

The orchestra, conducted by Ivan Fischer, opened its season Sept. 24 with a free concert featuring Minzart, Glinka, Britten and Brahms in the Great Hall of the Art Nouveau

Academy of Music. The season runs through May; tickets cost \$2 to \$10.

The two-week Budapest Fall Festival, packed with concerts, dance and theater performances, literary readings and art exhibits, opened Sept. 25 in Vorosmarty Square with a free rock concert by a popular group called Sziam.

The festival's emphasis on alternative culture is reflected in the venues, including the Medin Jazz Club, the grumpy Black Hole hard-rock club and the intimate Art Deco Arany Janos Theater.

The festival also includes the Budapest Chamber Opera production of Strauss' "Ariadne auf Naxos," percussion concerts by the Amminda ensemble, and performances by the Flemish Bosas and Leporello dance companies and the Blindman Brass Quartet.

Event tickets cost \$1.30 to \$8. Information and tickets for the festival as well as other concerts can be obtained at the Central Ticket Office, 1 Vorosmarty Square; telephone 117-6222.

The opera and ballet season is now open at the ornate Hungarian State Opera House, 22 Andrássy Ave., 153-0170, and started Sept. 26 at the modern Erkel Theater, 30 Kortársasag Square, 133-0540, where opera is performed in Hungarian.

Aside from Hungarian opera classics, the fall repertory includes "La Bohème," "Manon," "I Lombardi," "Tannhauser" and "Albert Herring," as well as the ballets "Anna Karenina" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

The Hungarian National Museum, 14-16 Museum Boulevard, 138-2122 — open 10 a.m. to 5:45 p.m. daily except Monday — features an exhibit on Elizabeth, wife of the Hapsburg Emperor Franz Joseph and Hungary's best-loved queen. Her clothing, china, furniture, letters and even her horse's shoes are on display through January. Tickets: \$8 cents.

A small but lovingly assembled exhibit on Roul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved the lives of thousands of Budapest Jews in 1944-45, is open to Oct. 31 at the Contemporary History Museum in the Buda Castle Palace, 17 Disz Square, 175-7533.



PHOTO COURTESY OF HUNGARIAN TOURIST

Crossing the bridge: The Buda side of the Elizabeth Bridge is a great point to view the ancient architecture and park-edged modern highways.

The museum is open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. until Nov. 1, then closes at 4 p.m. until March 14; closed Monday. Admission is 40 cents. Through February the museum is also presenting an exhibit of photos and documents on Hungarians in the New World.

Sights

At Aquincum visitors can explore the remains of a second- and third-century Romanarrison town. The ruins and museum are open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. until Oct. 31; closed Monday. Admission is about 40 cents. Aquincum can be reached via the H.E.V. train from Batthyany Square.

The Tomb of Gul Balu on Mec-

set Street on Rose Hill, a remnant of the 160-year occupation by the Turks in the 16th and 17th centuries, remains a place of pilgrimage for Muslims. It is the burial place of a devout dervish who died in 1541 during a thanksgiving service at the Maryas Church — which had been whitewashed and transformed into a mosque in just three days to celebrate the Turkish victory in the battle for Buda.

The tomb is open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. through October, then closes at 4 p.m. until May; closed Monday.

The Castle District, the area most visited by tourists, carries the most visible marks of Austria's 400-year domination over the city. Note the Gothic arches in inner court-

yards, and the outside walls topped with Baroque details.

To get a sense of Budapest's imperial grandeur at the turn of the century visitors should take a tour of the ornate, neo-Gothic Parliament building, all red velvet upholstery, gold gilding and intricate carvings.

Tours, \$6, organized by Budapest Tourist, 5 Roosevelt Square, 117-3535, take place Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 10:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., but call to be sure.

On Margaret Island is a 200-acre park where the ruins of a 13th-century cloister can be seen amid tall old trees and flowerbeds. In the northeastern part of the city the

City Park (Városliget) is the site of the fanciful Vajdahunyad Castle, displaying a composite of architectural styles. The castle, along with nearby Heroes Square, was built to celebrate Hungary's millennium in 1896.

Perhaps Budapest's best kept secret is the Kisvelli Museum, 108 Kisvelli St., Óbuda, 138-8569, which offers an eclectic collection in an 18th-century monastery and church.

The collection includes furniture-printing presses and 20th-century paintings and sculpture. There is also a 19th-century pharmacy with interesting-smelling concoctions in their original bottles.

Ships ahoy: Cruise around for discounts

By EVERETT POTTER
SPECIAL WRITER

All hands on deck! Once again, the cruise industry has gone overboard with discounts.

A savvy travel agent or a cruise-only agent will take one look at a cruise price and immediately slice off another 15 percent to 20 percent.

And last year's hefty discounts of 25 percent to 35 percent are back with a vengeance.

"We've seen a 35 percent drop in the cost of the average ticket in the last five years," says Mike Gross-

man, president of Cruises of Distinction, a New Jersey-based cruise-only travel agency.

"That's staggering. They can't go much lower because it's cheaper to lay up the ship."

In past years only consumers who booked very early or waited until the last minute could get a major bargain. Now it seems everyone has a chance.

With the economy in recession, the cruise industry has more than 100,000 berths that can only be filled by vigorous year-round discounting.

"Instead of waiting until the last minute, we now see some cruise lines selling their whole year at discount," says Larry Fishkin, president of The Cruise Line, a Miami-

based cruise-only travel agency.

Clients are now lured with various options. It could be a second week at sea for a rock-bottom price or a special two-passenger-for-the-price-of-one rate.

It could be a low standby fare offered three weeks before sailing.

"These options come and go. But a knowledgeable travel agent should be aware of them."

To attract more clients, some cruise-only agencies will consume part of their own profits by offering rebates — for example, slicing an additional 5 percent off their already-discounted price.

"The cruise lines may say that rebating doesn't occur, but it happens a lot," says Grossman of Cruises of Distinction.

"We sometimes rebate, but the cruise lines won't let us publish our lowest price. So we simply tell our customers to call us because our rates are often lower than our printed ones. It's a silly game and it obscures the real price from the consumer."

Many agencies routinely review all bookings, notifying customers about upgrades or fare drops and, when appropriate, even refunding money.

Because of a lack of manpower, some agencies can't do that. So it's up to the consumer to ask an agent if there are any additional deals.

The agencies are usually happy to oblige because it's in their interest to keep their customers happy.

But aside from offering discounts, how do the cruise companies compete?

"Novelty is a marketing factor in this business," says Fishkin of The Cruise Line. "Newness counts. A 4-year-old ship is considered old. People want to be on the latest vessel. Theme cruises are also popular marketing tools."

"People are looking for extra value," says Jo Kling of Landry & Kling, a cruise-only agency in Coral Gables, Fla.

So the company offers theme cruises for non-smokers, chocolate lovers, devotees of Scottish dancing and other special-interest travelers.

Industry sources say approximately 2 million people, or about half of all Americans who took a cruise last year, will take another one this year.

Some 56 percent of Americans opt to sail in the Caribbean.

But a new hot trend is travel to Alaska for those who want to see the wilderness up close. Next season the companies will offer more than 300 cruises in Alaskan waters.

For further information contact Cruises of Distinction, 450 Bloomfield Ave., Montclair, N.J. 07042; telephone (800) 634-3445.

Or contact The Cruise Line, 4770 Biscayne Blvd., Miami, Fla. 33137; telephone (800) 777-0707.

Or contact Landry & Kling, 1390 S. Dixie Hwy., Suite 1207, Coral Gables, Fla. 33146; telephone (800) 223-2026.



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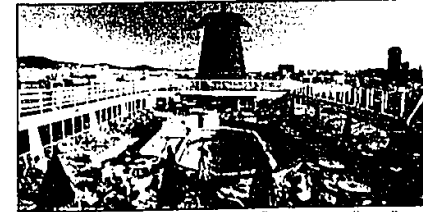


Photo courtesy of Cunard Princess

On the cheap: Cruises are so popular nowadays that discounts on package tours are almost a way of life for the industry.