

Beautiful Budapest

By John Maybury

Budapest was hopping for the holidays. Tourists (like me) had cancelled their Istanbul trips because of terrorist bombings there, and headed for the jewel on the Danube, often referred to as The Paris of the East.

Even so, I tried to keep a low profile until, on a bus tour, a Frenchman across the aisle jokingly asked if George Bush had sent me. That broke the ice. We then had a friendly conversation in which he revealed that he also considers his own president to be “an idiot.”

The sobering sight of machine gun-toting Hungarian soldiers guarding the British Embassy was equalled only by the sight of public buildings still pockmarked with bullet holes from the 1956 uprising against the Soviets. Budapest always has been steeped in conflict and upheaval.

During the Ottoman invasion, the Turks appropriated Hungary’s Esztergom Basilica for use as a mosque. They left the structure intact but decapitated the Christian statues inside to establish the supremacy of their own religion. (After the Communist era, Budapest moved the Socialist Realism-style statues to a park on the outskirts of town.)

Budapest occupies the site of the old Roman city Aquincum. The ruins are preserved haphazardly alongside a highway (and below an elevated section of the highway). An amphitheatre, aqueduct, grave markers, and public bath sit silently, fenced off, ignored by traffic flying by. Nearby are bustling Toyota and Suzuki plants, an Ikea store, and a Hewlett-Packard headquarters built by latter-day “invaders.”

“Opening the doors to successful expat living,” say the ads in Budapest’s English-language newspapers. Expat Relocation Center offers help with work and residence permits, visas, orientation tours, and home and school searches. The newspapers profile American, British, and French expats who fell in love with Budapest (or someone in Budapest) and ended up moving there.

Cell phones have invaded; Westel has 7.6 million mobile phone users in Hungary. (European cell phones generally operate on a higher standard than the American one; users enjoy better coverage, better service, lower prices, and goodies like text messaging.) According to Reuters, Hungarian privacy expert Attila Peterfalvia objects to Westel advertising that “If you see a good-looking girl or guy on the street, don’t hesitate to share the beautiful experience with your friends via MMS (Media Messaging Service).” Peterfalvi calls it a violation of privacy.

Hungarians are very strong on privacy and family; in the countryside, long, narrow family houses are added on to by successive generations (young folks live near the road, oldsters move to the rear). Arcades connect all units and protect them from hot sun and winter rain.

Budapest’s guidebook warns male visitors about the classic B-girl scam: An attractive woman approaches and suggests going to a bar for a drink; a few extra zeroes mysteriously appear on your bar bill and the bartender firmly escorts you to the nearest ATM for cash. “Always check the price of drinks before ordering,” the book says chummily. “And come on, be honest. Just how attractive are you? Do good-looking women normally stop you in the street and suggest going for a drink? Thought not.” Actually, of greater potential harm to a tourist is crossing a street when local hotshots drag-race to the next traffic light. Advice: Stay on the sidewalk until the smoke clears.

My Budapest stay, unmarred by invasions or B-girls, was not without its dark moments. On Christmas Eve I tried to catch some jazz. I circled three listings in the paper showing advertised gigs, and asked a cabdriver to take me to them. The first club was dark. So were the second and the third. Wild goose chase. I learned later that many events are cancelled around Christmas.

So I went walking instead. Trees along the main boulevards were strung with white Christmas lights. Several churches held special concerts, followed by midnight mass. First I caught an organ recital in a Christmas tree-lined cathedral, then a chamber music performance in a smaller church. At the stroke of midnight, Christmas, all church bells in Budapest began to ring. At the same time, all floodlights showcasing major monuments, palaces, and statues went out, leaving the suddenly darkened city awash in the sound of peeling church bells. Magic moment. In an altered state, I crossed the bridge over the Danube to my hotel.

The day after Christmas I visited a folk music center. Five bands played wild and crazy dance music (Irish, Jewish, and Hungarian) while people linked arms and danced in circles. After three hours, young women passed around platters of fried dumplings. Everyone went outside for a drink and a smoke, then came back in and danced some more. I got tired just watching. All this for only \$3.

One way to see Budapest up close is on a streetcar. Budapesters generally agree that their bustling city would come to a standstill without tuja, their affectionate term for the yellow trams that crisscross Budapest. In a recent Internet poll, Budapesters voted to keep tuja yellow. In times past, competing lines ran yellow, brown, and green cars. But yellow prevailed and has reigned supreme ever since (except for a pink Barbie-tram that operated briefly in the early 90s, covered with ads for the Barbie doll).

After each day of sightseeing in the freezing cold, I returned to the Gellert, a famous art deco hotel I had booked on the Internet for \$60 a night, including buffet breakfast and access to the pool. In the Turkish bath I had a brisk half-hour massage for \$15; Charlie the masseur kept saying "America good."

In the hotel restaurant, a waiter greeted me, "How are you?" "Hello," I said. "Well, I see that your Hungarian is very limited," he deadpanned. Although the menu listed "puppy seeds" and "green pees," I went for Hungarian specialties: thin, rolled pancakes and venison. Hungarians enjoy wild game. Even their statues show Hungarian royalty posing with hunting dogs or ducks. But all that meets the eye is not meat; Budapest's most whimsically named restaurant is Marquis de Salade.

On Christmas Eve, Hungarians traditionally eat fish: roast carp, fried pike-perch or catfish, fisherman's soup. On Christmas Day, they favor stuffed cabbage. And the second day of Christmas, it's chicken or turkey, seasoned with paprika. Christmas pastries called bejgli are made with walnuts or poppy seeds. Another Christmas treat is chocolate-covered marzipan and jellied fruit (see www.szaloncukor.hu). By New Year's they fall back on their mainstay, pork, washed down with red wine called bull's blood. The universal favorite of New Year's Day is drunkard's soup (cabbage soup), a hangover cure.

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