

Created by: Debra C. Argen
Budapest, Hungary



Budapest is an architectural dream, a cultural delight for the spirit, and a gastronomic feast.



I just returned from a trip with my mother, Victoria, to Budapest, Hungary – a most enchanting city. Budapest is made up of two parts, Buda, the hills, and Pest, the flat lands, divided by the river Danube. The city is an architectural dream, a cultural delight for the spirit, and a gastronomic feast. It is a city that enriches the lives of its visitors through its museums, opera house, theaters and thermal spas, its wines and gastronomy, and of course, by the charm of its people.

Since I had already stayed on the Pest side of Budapest, at the **Kempinski Hotel Corvinus Budapest**, 1051 Budapest, Erzábet tér 7-8, (www.kempinski-budapest.com) on a previous visit with my husband, Edward, which I very much enjoyed, for this trip my mother and I stayed on the Buda side, in the Castle District, at the 295-room **Hilton Budapest**, H-1014 Budapest, Hess András.tér 1-3, (hiltonhu@hungary.net). Our large rooms, which had wondrous daytime views of the river Danube, Parliament and the Pest side of the city, became almost magical at night, with the lights twinkling below. The Hilton Budapest is perfectly located to not only enjoy the view, but also to explore the Castle District. This was Victoria's first visit to Budapest, and it was wonderful to experience the delights of this charming city through new eyes.



This historic part of the city is mostly residential, and is very quiet. This is where the **Royal Palace** is, which also houses the **Hungarian National Gallery**, **Budapest History Museum**, **National Széchényi Library**, the **LudwigMuseum**, **Matthias Church**, I, Szentháromság tér, one of the most famous Catholic churches built between the 13th and 15th centuries, and the **Fishermen's Bastion**. We enjoyed walking along the cobblestone streets and exploring the antique shops, having a look at the landmark buildings, savoring a coffee or a tea in a little café, and soaking up the atmosphere. There are buses that drive around the Castle

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District and also go down to the Pest side. It is a quick taxi ride to go to Pest, or you can ride the funicular down to the beginning of the Chain Bridge, and walk over the bridge to Pest. Whatever your mode of transportation, Budapest is a very easy city to get around.



Since Hungary is famous for its wines, no visit to the Castle District would be complete without a visit to **The House of Hungarian Wines**, located at H-1014 Budapest, Szentháromság tér 6, (www.magyarborokhaza.hu). We enjoyed sampling some of their extensive collection of excellent wines in their wine cellar, and of course, bought some bottles to bring home to enjoy.



We continued the evening at the **Budavári Fortuna Restaurant**, H-1014 Budapest, Hess András tér 4, (www.miwo.hu/fortunarest), which is conveniently located across the street from the Hilton Budapest. We began by taking a tour of their Champagne Cellar, where they had several special bottles signed by celebrities including Antonio Banderas and Melanie Griffith. We enjoyed a glass of champagne in the cellar, and then went upstairs to enjoy a typical Hungarian dinner and Gypsy music in the restaurant.



In the mood for a game of chance, we went to the **Várkert Casino** on the Buda side. The casino offers not only table games, but also has slot machines as well, that take either Hungarian forint or US coins. Although we did not have any substantial winnings that evening, we did “win” by having a great time.

The next day we began our day exploring the Pest side, beginning at the **Central Market Hall**, an enormous marketplace, where you can buy everything from fruits and vegetables, to the embroidered table linens that Hungary is famous for, and of course, paprika.

After shopping, we were ready for a luxurious lunch, so we went to **Le Bourbon**, the restaurant at **Le Meridien Budapest**, 1051 Budapest, Erzébet tér 9-10, (www.lemeridien-budapest.com). This beautiful listed building, built in 1918, and formerly known as Adria Palace, once housed an insurance company, then later became the headquarters for the Budapest police, and finally in May 2001, had a grand opening as a grand hotel, Le Meridien. This elegant 218-room hotel, winner of the American Hospitality Sciences 5-Star Diamond Award 2003, features an atrium surmounted by a stained-glass dome, and a gracious white marble curved stairway covered in red carpet.

We had lunch in **Le Bourbon**, Le Meridien’s 120-seat restaurant, which has an elaborate menu that Executive **Chef Laurent Vandenameele** tempts the restaurant’s guests with innovative French-style cuisine. The day that we dined at Le Bourbon, we selected a menu of tender leeks with truffle vinaigrette

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and shaved Parmesan, followed by a roasted sea bass topped with thinly sliced potatoes, accompanied by French beans baked in an onion, and served with a parsley coulis with wasabi. The sea bass was perfectly cooked, buttery and flaky, and the potato “scales” were delightfully crisp. The parsley coulis and wasabi sauce was a nice complement to the fish. For dessert, we selected the milk chocolate ganache flavored with rosemary, atop a soft chocolate brownie with chocolate caramel. Although rosemary may sound like an unusual ingredient in a chocolate dessert, **Chief Patisserie Alain Lagrange** perfectly melded the flavors to create an exotic and simply wonderful dessert. For chocolate lovers, this dessert it is an absolute must try.

(See our Chefs' Recipes section of the magazine where Chief Patisserie Alain Lagrange shares his recipe for this incredible chocolate dessert.)

Refreshed after a wonderful meal, it was time to get a little exercise and to do a little shopping along Váci Street. Budapest is known for its porcelain, Herend and Zsolnay, and there are wonderful shops that sell not only antique porcelain but new editions as well. Also along Váci Street you will find designer shops, souvenir shops, and outdoor stands. Since we were there in December, they had a fabulous Christmas Fair on Vörösmarty Square. The fair had very good-quality handcrafted items for sale, as well as hot drinks and snacks.

For dinner, we decided to try the restaurant at the 362-room **Budapest Marriott Hotel**, H-1052 Budapest, Apáczai Csere János utca 4, (www.marriott.com/budhu), since we had enjoyed the view from the Buda side looking down onto Pest, it was the perfect place to have dinner looking up at Buda. We enjoyed a lovely meal of onion soup, farfelle with broccoli, sun-dried tomatoes and mushrooms, and for dessert we ordered the Hungarian pancake filled with plums and chocolate, accompanied by plum brandy. We enjoyed dinner overlooking the Danube with views of Buda and the Royal Palace.

Budapest is a city so full of cultural delights that it is hard to partake of everything that the city has to offer in only a few days, but we certainly tried! When we heard that there was a Monet and Friends exhibit at the **Szépművészeti Múzeum, Museum of Fine Arts**, 1146 Budapest, Dózsa György út 41, (www.szepmuveszeti.hu), (December 1, 2003 through March 15, 2004), we made sure that we went. They had a most impressive collection of important Monet paintings, as well as those by Sisley, Pissaro, Manet, and Renoir, among others. The museum also has a magnificent collection of permanent exhibits as well, including paintings by El Greco, Goya and sculpture by Leonardo Da Vinci. Our only regret is that we only had a short time to spend in the museum.

After a wonderful visit to the museum, we explored the City Park and Heroes' Square, where there are sculptures depicting the seven tribes, with the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in front of the monument.



Hungary is well known for its therapeutic waters, they have 1289 thermal springs, 39 health spas, 5 cave spas, 48 certified mineral water springs and 136 medicinal springs, 4 sources of medicinal mud and one mofette. We visited the **Széchenyi Spa and Swimming Pool**, 1146 Budapest, Állatkerti krt. 11, (spas2@mail.datanet.hu), built in 1913, it was the first spa in Pest and is one of the largest in Europe. They offer a variety of 15 pools and thermal baths, and offer special medical treatments, as well as massage programs.

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The day that we visited the spa, it was a very cold and windy day, but that did not deter the people from partaking of the outdoor pools, and even playing a game of chess in the water!



After the museum and the tour of the spa, we were ready for lunch at **The Gundel Restaurant**, H-1146 Budapest, Állatkerti út 2, (www.gundel.hu). This most famous restaurant, opened in 1894, takes its name from Károly Gundel, who took over the restaurant in 1910, and made the Gundel name synonymous with a high-quality culinary experience. The restaurant, which was reconstructed and reopened in 1992, maintains its elegant, turn-of-the-century atmosphere. The restaurant has an extensive collection of 19th and 20th century paintings by Hungarian masters, which contribute to its charm. The restaurant uses the famous Zsolnay porcelain to complete its ambience. Today under the ownership of Ronald S. Lauder and George Lang, the Gundel Restaurant continues to maintain its high standards, under the culinary direction of **Chef Kálmán Kalla**. The restaurant uses Tokay wines from the Gundel vineyards at Tokaj/Mád, and its red and white wines come from the Lauder/Lang vineyards from Eger.

The menu is extensive and well thought-out. For our lunch, we selected the Potato and Turnip Cream Soup laced with Shitake Mushrooms, the Green Salad Served with Goat Cheese toasted on Endive, the Goat Cheese Soufflé in Strudel Cup, the Penne with Vegetables in a Cheese Basket served with Stuffed Mushroom, Roasted Tomato and Porcini Mushroom Sauce, followed by the Classic Gundel Crêpe, a walnut filled pancake for dessert. Every dish was artistically presented and every bite divine. It was a very filling, but totally decadent and satisfying meal, enhanced by the Gundel Egri Cabernet Sauvignon, barrique 2000. This is the same wine that I had purchased at The House of Hungarian Wines. The Gundel Restaurant which has served heads of state and celebrities, made us feel like celebrities ourselves with its excellent service.

(See our Chefs' Recipesection of the magazine where Chef Kálmán Kalla shares a few of his recipes.)

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After satisfying our stomachs, it was time to satisfy our spirits again, so we took a tour of **The Hungarian State Opera House**, Pest VI, Andrásy út 22, (www.opera.hu). The opera house completed in 1844, and renovated in 1984, for its 100th anniversary, is a magnificent delight to the eye as well as the ear. This impressive building has red velvet seats, 24-karat gold boxes, and has white marble staircases covered with red carpet evoking another era. We would have loved to see the Nutcracker ballet performed later that evening, but the venue had long been sold out. As a word of caution, try to arrange for tickets in advance.

We did have the great fortune of obtaining tickets to a piano recital by Lantos István at the Concert Hall of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest V. Roosevelt tér 9. Mr. István performed Beethoven's Sonata D-dur Op. 10/3, Schubert's Sonata A-dur D. 120 and Liszt's Spozalzio, Funerailles, Nuages gris, Sinstre and 11. Mephisto valse. Mr. István is very a talented and engaging artist, and we very much enjoyed his performance.

After the concert, we had a late night dinner at **Cyrano Restaurant**, H-1052 Budapest V., Kristóf tér 7, (Cyrano@citynet.hu). This contemporary restaurant serves an extensive menu executed by Chef Pesti István. Our evening's selections started with a Fresh Mixed Salad with Seeds and a Balsamic Vinegar Dressing, followed by Aromatic Bean Puree with Goat Cheese, and for dessert, we had a wonderful warm chocolate cake with liquid chocolate center accompanied by vanilla ice cream and cherries; a perfect ending to a wonderful evening.



On our last day, we took a tour of **The Parliament**, V. Kossuth Lajos Tér 1-3. This spectacularly exquisite building is the largest Parliament in the world, and is home to the Coronation Relics of Hungary and the Crown Jewels. In addition to its rich history and beauty, the building has many interesting objects to view, from the Crown Jewels to the gold cigar holders in the hallways, where members of Parliament used to come out to have a smoke, then rest their cigars, before returning to the sessions.

We continued our tour to St. Stephen's Basilica, V., Szent István tér, the largest church in Budapest, with a 96-metre high dome. This neo-classical church began construction in 1851, and was completed in 1905. The basilica is the home of the relic of the mummified right hand of King St. Stephen, and is the greatest relic of the Hungarian people. This beautiful basilica has magnificent stained-glass windows and incredible

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acoustics for its 5,000 pipe organ.

Budapest is a city ready to offer luxurious accommodations with many hotels on the Pest side, including the 365-room **Kempinski Hotel Corvinus Budapest**, 1051 Budapest, Erzábet tér 7-8, (www.kempinski-budapest.com) the 398-room Hotel **Inter-Continental Budapest, Budapest V.**, Apáczai Csere J. u. 12-14, (www.budapest.intercontinental.com), and the 351-room **Sofitel Atrium Budapest**, Roosevelt tér 2, (www.sofitel.com).

Their luxury hotels continue to increase in numbers with the newly opened 414-room **Corinthia Grand Hotel Royal**, which had its grand opening on January 1, 2003, 1073 Budapest, Erzábet krt. 43-49, (www.corinthiahotels.com), as well as the **Four Seasons Hotel Gresham Palace Budapest**, that is scheduled to open in late March 2004, 1051 Budapest, Roosevelt tér 5-6, (www.fourseasons.com/budapest).

Alas, our time in Budapest had come to an end, and it was time to say good-bye to our Guide, **Katalin Till**, (tillkati@hotmail.com) who brought Hungarian history to life, and made sure that we did not miss out on anything during our short stay. Köszönöm, (thank you) Katalin, for a very memorable trip.

We headed to the airport to take **Malev Hungarian Airlines** (www.malev.hu) back to New York, with wonderful memories of Budapest, and a strong desire to return yet again to this charming city. Malev Hungarian Airlines offers direct service from New York to Budapest, as well as from many European cities. For more information on Hungary, please visit the Hungarian National Tourist Office at www.gotohungary.com, or www.hungarytourism.hu.

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