

The weekend: Budapest

Pootling along the Danube, strolling in sculpture parks and sipping Pilsner in bohemian beer gardens,

John Malathronas finds a spring break that hits the spot



The Széchenyi Chain Bridge, built in 1849, with the Parliament building beyond

See
and
do

The boat trip: Sail the Danube Bend

WHY? A jaunt on one of the river's most scenic stretches.

WHAT? Setting off from Vigadó Square on the Danube embankment, this 11-hour trip takes you nearly 90km up the Danube past the 'bend' – a U-shaped kink in the river – before returning to the city. Highlights include sailing under the Széchenyi Chain Bridge, the cathedral city of Vac and the baroque city of Esztergom.

MONEY SAVER Book directly with Mahart, the main boat operator, instead of through a hotel. Many offer the same cruise with Mahart at inflated prices.

LAYOVER The trip includes a 2.5-hour stay in Esztergom, enough time to wander among the medieval streets, visit the Great Basilica – the largest church in Hungary – and climb up to the cupola for a view of the Pilis Mountains opposite.

NEED TO KNOW The boat runs daily, except on Mondays, from May to August, and just on Saturdays in September. For the rest of the year, Eurama (eurama.hu) operates a Saturday one-way service, returning from Esztergom by bus. *Vigadó Tér; mahartpassnave.hu; £9.50 Esztergom return.*

The postcard view: Castle Hill, Buda

WHY? The classic Budapest panorama.

WHAT? The Danube river splits the Buda and Pest sides of the city. In bustling Pest, Art Nouveau buildings sit side-by-side with crumbling Communist-era leftovers, while sleepy Buda's harmonious streets are lined with pristine Austro-Hungarian residences. Stay at a hotel in Pest, but cross the Chain Bridge into Buda to take in the colourful facades, the Matthias Church and the best views of the city from Castle Hill. It's here you'll find the 19th-century Fisherman's Bastion, a series of turreted lookouts that offer that perfect photo of the river and Pest.

BEST TIME You'll get the best skyline pictures in the afternoon, when the sun is behind Buda instead of Pest; or at dawn to capture the soft glow of sunrise behind Pest.

MONEY SAVER The lower bastion (open 24/7) is free and the view is stellar, so save the £2 for the top bastion unless you simply have a penchant for climbing towers. *Buda Hill; fishermansbastion.com; lower level free, top level £2.*

Map ref **1**

The Communist past: Memento Park

WHY? Cold War-era sculptures.

WHAT? Instead of destroying their Communist statues, erected between 1946 and 1989 while the country was behind the Iron Curtain, Hungarians banished them to the outskirts of Buda, 13km southwest from Deák Square. This open-air museum features 42 statues of once-glorious leaders, including Lenin and Marx, intermixed with captivating sculptures of common workers and soldiers.

MONEY SAVER Instead of paying around £22 return for a taxi, plus £4 admission, get the 11am once-a-day Memento Park Direct Bus Transfer from Deák Square. The £14 return price includes entry and a guided tour, saving £12. *Balatoni út corner Szabadkai u; mementopark.hu; £4.*

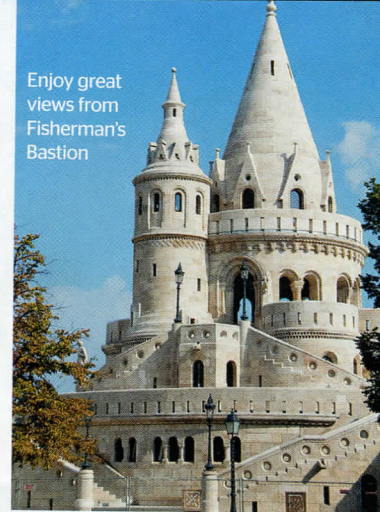
The architecture: Parliament tour

WHY? A marvel of Hungarian 'national' architecture.

WHAT? You'll have seen the Neo-gothic Parliament building in every photo of Budapest, and captured it yourself from Castle Hill. But don't miss out on the extravagant interior – its 691 rooms have been painted as if covered in an elaborate tapestry. Marvel at the Central Hall, where ceremonial guards watch over the Crown of St Stephen under a grandiose gilded dome.

MONEY SAVER EU citizens get a £7 discount off the entry price if you take your passport with you.

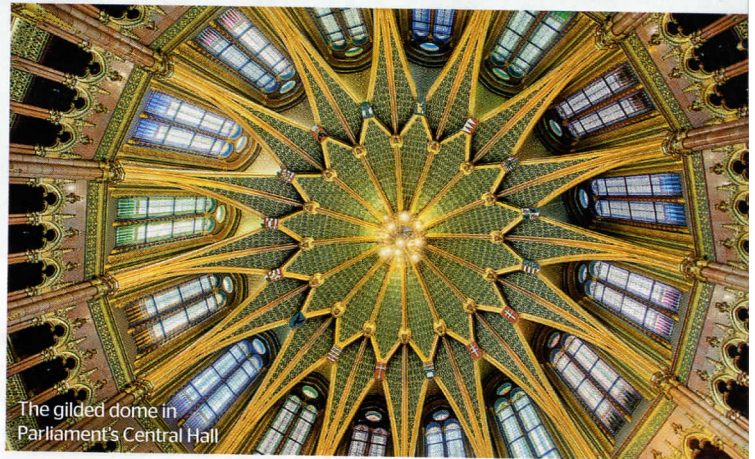
LANGUAGE SKILLS English tours run five times daily, but the building is sometimes closed, so check the website before visiting. *Kossuth tér 1-3; parlament.hu; £12. Map ref 2*



Enjoy great views from Fisherman's Bastion



The opulent Gellért Baths



The gilded dome in Parliament's Central Hall

The spa: Gellért Baths

WHY? Hot-tub hopping amid Art Nouveau splendour.

WHAT? Natural thermal springs bubble beneath Budapest, and public baths have sprung up over the centuries to take advantage. None is more lavish than the multi-domed Gellért, featuring four plunge pools set among opulent twisted columns and wall-to-wall ceramic mosaics.

BAROQUE BATHS Although magnificent, Gellért can feel a bit like a haven for well-off tourists. For more authenticity, opt for Széchenyi Baths (*szechenyibath.hu; from £10*). Plenty of tourists know about it, but locals love it too, so it's busy. You'll often see men playing chess in the pool.

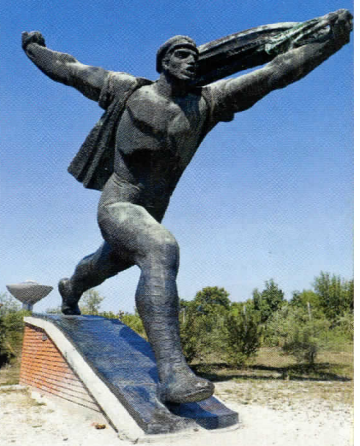
MONEY SAVER Swim caps are obligatory; bring one along or you'll have to buy one on the spot for £2.50.

BEST TIME Visit on weekdays for more space and to save a few pence. *Kelenhegyi út 4; gellertfurdo.hu; from £11. Map ref 3*



Paprika for sale – a popular ingredient in Hungarian cuisine

Learn about the country's Communist past at Memento Park



Locals playing chess at Széchenyi Thermal Baths





New York Cafe



Spiler



Kölevés



Szimpla Kert 'ruin pub'

Eat

The best nightlife is in Pest, but there aren't long strips of restaurants that you can just browse before choosing, which means it's better to decide in advance where to eat. We tried 10 places, and these were our favourites.

Top end New York Cafe

WHY? Historic 19th-century cafe, formerly the centre of the city's intellectual life.

OUR REVIEW Splurge out on dinner and feel like an extra in the staging of an operetta. The quality of the food matches the decor but, as the portions are not Central European-size (ie they're smallish), you'll need three courses to fill up.

WE LOVE The sumptuous decor that creates a Belle Époque time bubble.

WE DON'T LOVE The occasional tourist groups on the mezzanine floor gawping and taking photos.

TIP Save space in your stomach for the New York Cake Selection at £10 – a trio of New York, Crunchy Peanut and Opera cake. *Erzsébet krt. 9-11; newyorkcafe.hu; mains from around £16.*

Map ref 4

Mid-range Kölevés

WHY? Jewish-Hungarian fusion cuisine.

OUR REVIEW In the Jewish quarter, this thoroughly modern restaurant wows with inventive versions of Hungarian staples, such as game, although it also has some surprisingly good vegetarian options. Try venison with porcini polenta or duck tartare.

WE LOVE The daily-changing breads and butters – all homemade.

WE DON'T LOVE That it's so popular with locals, which can make it hard to get in. Book ahead.

MONEY SAVER The bargain two-course lunch menu (vegetarian £2.50, non-vegetarian £3) runs out quickly, so be there before 12.30pm. *Kazinczy u. 37; kölevésvendeglo.hu; mains around £8.*

Map ref 5

Budget Spiler

WHY? Trendy Hungarian-American diner.

WHY? Originally a ruin pub (see 'Drink', right), this hip venue is now a tongue-in-cheek American-style diner, with an excellent beer garden in summer. Served by superfast waiters, tuck into good-sized portions from the half-Hungarian, half-American menu (paprika-salami flamed pies, BBQ chicken sandwiches), and the final bill will be a pleasant surprise.

WE LOVE Meaty, paprika-rich and filling, the goulash soup for £4 is the best-value main course in town.

WE DON'T LOVE On Friday and Saturday evenings it gets packed and very loud.

TIP Save your beer drinking for the ruin pubs – you won't find a better selection of Hungarian wines than here. *Király u. 13; spilerbp.hu; mains from around £5.*

Map ref 6

Drink

Try at least one 'ruin pub' – abandoned buildings turned into ramshackle bars. In summer, ruin pubs and other venues tack on glorious beer gardens, particularly around Liszt Square opposite the Opera.

Szimpla Kert

WHY? The original ruin pub, opened in 2002. It's so huge and cavernous that you'll always find a graffitied corner to lean on, or a hidden-away row of salvaged cinema seats.

WHAT TO DRINK The homemade fruit brandies ('palinkas') for £2 a shot.

Kazinczy u. 14; szimpla.hu

Map ref 7

Fogasház

WHY? An abandoned 1850s dentist practice transformed into several themed rooms (arcade games, golf, shisha bar) that, despite the neon lights and psychedelic ambiance, still look reassuringly decrepit.

WHAT TO DRINK Margaritas, mojitos and caipirinhas at £3 a pop.

Akácfa u. 49; fogashaz.hu

Map ref 8

Lokal

WHY? A turn-of-the-century apartment furnished so that it feels like you've gate-crashed someone's party. Tricky to find, but quieter and less touristy as a result. It's a good place to end the night.

WHAT TO DRINK Local Dreher Pils, £2 a glass. *Dob u. 18; lokalbar.hu*

Map ref 9

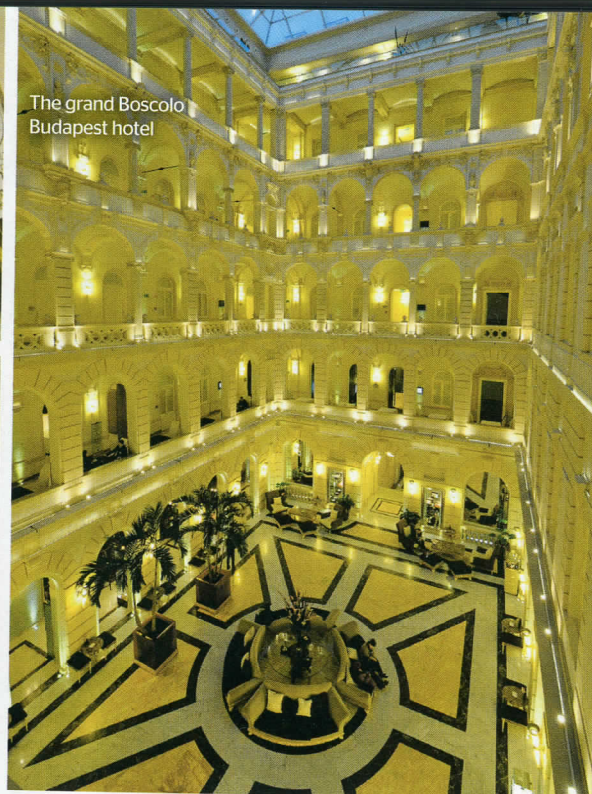




Delicately sweet local Tokaji wine



Decadent rooms at Gerlőczy



The grand Boscolo Budapest hotel

Sleep

Although Buda looks spectacular, it's dead after 6pm. That means it's far better to stay in Pest city centre – the area defined by the Danube and the semi-circle of the Grand Boulevard. We visited a dozen hotels to bring you a selection of the best.

Top end Boscolo Budapest

WHY? The quintessential grand Budapest hotel.

OUR REVIEW On the Grand Boulevard itself, this is a much-photographed city landmark; the hop-on hop-off tourist bus stops just outside, so be prepared to be snapped when leaving. The common areas have been restored to their former marble glory, while the rooms, swathed in silk wallpaper and velvet cushions, are furnished to spoil.

WE LOVE The vividly coloured table lamps made from Venetian Murano glass.

WE DON'T LOVE That breakfast is a pricey £18. It's vast, delicious and filling, but still, for Budapest, that's expensive. However...

MONEY SAVER ...there is no cheaper breakfast alternative close by, so be prepared for a fair walk to dine at a cheaper café. Or save £3.50 off the cost by pre-booking breakfast online or at check-in. *Erzsébet krt. 9; budapest.boscolohotels.com; doubles £128; breakfast £18; free wifi.*
Map ref 10

Mid-range Gerlőczy Rooms de Lux

WHY? Art Nouveau mansion.

OUR REVIEW This glamorous boutique hotel parades its 1890s features with pride. A wrought-iron central spiral staircase stretches over three floors, overlooked by an imposing stained-glass skylight. The 19 rooms sport parquet floors, gold wallpaper, bathrooms with etched glass partitions and, on the upper floors, exposed walnut beams. Its ground-floor restaurant, facing an attractive square just off Kossuth Lajos Street, looks so French it doubled for a Paris café in Spielberg's 2005 film *Munich*.

WE LOVE The free mini-bar, with its daily refill of beer and champagne.

WE DON'T LOVE Breakfast is not included but it's compulsory, so you'll be charged when checking out, even if you don't eat it.

TIP Use the public-sharing cycle rank adjacent to the hotel to get around (daily access fee £1.50; usage fees at molbubi.bkk.hu). *Gerlőczy u. 1; gerloczy.hu; doubles £62; breakfast £9; free wifi.*
Map ref 11

Budget Cosmo City

WHY? A three-star hotel with flair.

OUR REVIEW With a location bang on Váci utca, Budapest's pedestrian shopping street, walk past Cosmo City and you might think it's simply a safe but dull option. Yet this hotel's combination of quality basics (the buffet breakfast with cold meats, jams and juices, complemented by cooked dishes upon demand) plus quirky details – the pink/magenta colour scheme of the rooms – is never boring, and the sum total makes for a memorable stay.

WE LOVE The free transfer from the airport if you book direct with the hotel.

WE DON'T LOVE That the website is often broken. Book on +361 799 0077 or via info@cosmohotel.hu.

MONEY SAVER There's usually a 'three nights for the price of two' deal if you book direct with the hotel.

Váci u. 77; cosmohotelbudapest.com; doubles £65; breakfast included; free wifi.
Map ref 12

What to expect



Average hotel room

£62^a

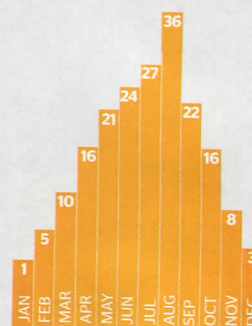


Average return airfare

£140^b



Average daily max temperature (°C) ^c



Getting from the airport

Taxi **£17** 45 minutes

Bus 200E **£1.60**

80 minutes; runs every 15 minutes; bkk.hu

Shuttle **£7.50** 50-80 minutes; airportshuttle.hu

Getting around

Buy a Travelcard (metros, buses, trams) from the BKK Customer Service desk at the airport, or a ticket machine at the main transport hubs. £4/24hr, £10/72hr.

Scam watch

Single men are targeted by women posing as tourists that need help finding a specific bar. Once there, they invite you in, where you'll be charged extortionate prices.

PHOTOGRAPHY: 4 CORNERS, ALAMY, GETTY, SHUTTERSTOCK

Average hotel price from Trivago.co.uk for all bookings from Feb 2014–Jan 2015. ^b Average flight price from Momondo.co.uk for all bookings from Feb 2014–Jan 2015. ^c Data from weather2travel.com