

Budapest

by boat

If you've never been to Budapest, try to arrive by boat. Not that there's anything wrong with flying in or rumbling along on asphalt, but the views as you sail into Hungary's capital are gob-smackingly sublime.

On a warm spring morning, with a Tiffany blue sky as our backdrop, we glide silently up the River Danube as one of Europe's most spectacular cities unpacks its treasures.

It's a fitting end to our Avalon Waterways river cruise, which started in Vienna three days ago. Having already passed countless medieval villages, I'd assumed we'd filled our

cup of pretty. But they saved the best for last, and as we inch slowly up the Danube, past extravagantly filigreed churches, castles and spires, we turn into hyperactive paparazzi, keen not to miss a shot.

It's true that Budapest isn't the shy and retiring type. But then she has a lot to flaunt. And you are, after all, getting two cities for

 By Sharon Stephenson





Selected photos courtesy of Martin Haughey.



the price of one. On one side of the Danube is the older, hillier Buda region, while the more modern, low-lying Pest stretches across the river's eastern flank. The two were totally separate until 1873 when they were united to form Hungary's capital.

If architecture is your thing, the best is to be found in Buda, particularly clustered around the sprawling UNESCO-listed Castle District. If you're feeling particularly energetic, you can walk across any of the nine bridges that link Buda and Pest, although a cable car also does a brisk trade plying tourists up and down the craggy hills. We, however, crowd into a bus which, fortunately, we live to regret.

"Hungarians see stop signs as just another excuse to curb their fun," laughs our guide Anna, responding to our collective gasp as we once again narrowly avoid an accident.

It is with some relief that we alight at the 11th-century Matthias Church, whose schizophrenic design reflects its turbulent history. Built in 1005, the elaborate church suffered at the hands of Turkish invaders who used it as their main mosque during 150 years of occupation. Later, during World War II, tanks rammed through the main gates, the elaborately tiled roof was burned and the church was used not only as the German officers' main kitchen but also as a stable for their horses.

Stroll a little downwind to the Fisherman's Bastion, the viewing terrace whose seven towers represent the seven Magyar tribes who settled here in 896. Taking its name from the guild of fishermen who were responsible for defending this stretch of the city walls

in the Middle Ages, this is one of the best viewing spots in the city.

If you can, try to time your visit outside the peak summer tourist period. Sadly, we aren't so lucky, but in an effort to avoid the crowds we seek out the narrow cobbled lanes that bisect the Castle District like arteries. That's how we chance upon a clutch of slightly odd but compelling museums, including the Museum of Music History, the Telephone Museum, site of the world's first telephone exchange, and the Marzipan Museum, where, as the name would suggest, everything from Budapest's famous Chain Bridge to a life-size statue of Michael Jackson has been created in marzipan. Things get even stranger at the Golden Eagle Pharmacy Museum, where we learn that sperm whale vomit was once given to people suffering from depression.

By now we're suffering from museum fatigue, so we figure it's time for a soak at the famous Gellert Baths, one of the city's oldest open-air bathing facilities. It's not for nothing that Budapest is known as the City of Spas: the locals have been 'taking the waters' ever since it was discovered 2,000 years ago that the hot thermal springs gushing from the ground helped everything from sore muscles and period pain to depression (whale vomit not working? Try a long soak in the hot, mineral-rich waters). And while their politics may have varied, one thing the successive waves of Romans, Turks and Austrian invaders agreed on was the value of a steamy communal bath.

The Gellert is one of 12 spas dotted around Budapest, and it's odd to wallow in warm medicinal waters under elaborate frescoes



ceilings and spouting gargoyles. It isn't the most relaxing experience I've ever had – thanks to the grumpy old German blokes and groups of screaming school children – but my travel-weary body is thankful for it.

Great cities are forged from tragedy as well as triumph, and Budapest has seen more than her fair share of blood and bullets. The Turks strutted their stuff here in the 16th and 17th centuries, then Austria took over for the next 200 years, while the 20th century saw the country lurch from one hideous regime to another.

“So many invaders came to Hungary but then forgot to go home again,” says our guide Anna, pursing her lips to indicate exactly how she feels about her country's bloody history. She suggests that one of the best insights into the 20th century's dark days can be had at the House of Terror. So I catch the efficient metro to this museum, just metres from Andrassy Avenue, where gracious apartments line the leafy street. I'd been warned about the stories of thousands who were persecuted and killed during the rule of the Nazis and, later, the Soviet-installed communists, but it's still a pretty confronting experience.



The museum is set inside a former secret police HQ where grisly exhibitions and video footage demonstrate how prisoners as young as 15 were tortured and hundreds were killed in the basement. I admit to having to shield my eyes from some of the exhibits but, as Anna says, it's useful to see how the country has been shaped by its brutal history.

For another take on history, we brave the speed-loving drivers to visit Memento Park, 10 kilometres southwest of the city, to where the giant statues of former war heroes were banished after the Iron Curtain fell in 1989.

“It's not about honouring dictators, it's about remembering our past,” says my taxi driver.

With more than 40 oversized monuments, the park provides a walk through some of the country's most brutal history, including statues of Lenin, Marx and Engels, and a pair of



bronzed boots, a replica of the remains of an eight-metre Stalin statue that was cut off at the knees and toppled during the 1956 rebellion. As the park's architect once said: “Only democracy is able to give the opportunity to let us think freely about dictatorship”.

I'd been warned that no one comes to Budapest to lose weight, and a glance at the numerous cafés proves that correct. Fattening cakes are one of Hungary's greatest gifts to the world, and I carb load with creamy, nutty tortes and sugar-dusted strudels that I know at some stage I will have to work off. But not being a fan of stick-to-the-ribs goulash (the country's other contribution to global cuisine), I decide there are worse ways to fill my daily calorie allowance.

Such as with Tokaj, the local sweet wine that they've been perfecting since the 12th century. I am introduced to this delicacy at a 'ruin pub', one of the pop-up-style bars that entrepreneurial youth open every summer in the most unlikely places, such as abandoned tenement houses and decrepit courtyards. By chance we stumble upon Szimpla Kert, or 'simple garden', where an old Trabant car takes centre stage. Ruin pubs are beloved by Budapest's young and beautiful, and although we fit into neither category we're welcomed with open arms.

It's the perfect end to our stay in this low-key but astonishingly beautiful city. 🇵🇪

The writer travelled as a guest of Avalon Waterways (www.avalonwaterways.co.nz) and Cathay Pacific (www.cathaypacific.co.nz).

Hungry in Hungary?

If you want to know what Hungary tastes like, venture no further than Budapest's Central Market, which first opened its doors on 15 February 1897. Today it remains a fantastic food market, which specialises in paprika, commonly referred to as Hungary's Red Gold.

Paprika is the spice of life for Hungarians and the backbone of Hungarian cuisine. Check out hundreds of small tins decorated with fiery emblems to denote the strength – mild, hot or very hot.

When you're done with the paprika, wander the aisles of fresh fruit and vegetables, cheeses, cured and fresh meats and calorific cake and biscuit displays. Then head upstairs to the small food and wine bars to sample smoky, creamy goulash and a slice of creamy torte.

