

Hungary for More:

# Two Days in Budapest

The Paris of the East, the pearl of the Danube – no-one can quite agree on the best moniker for Budapest. What isn't in doubt is that you should go. With parks brimming with attractions, museums filled with treasures, pleasure boats sailing up and down the Danube, Turkish-era thermal baths belching steam, and a nightlife throbbing till dawn most nights, the Hungarian capital is one of Europe's most delightful and fun cities to visit.

## WINE & WATER

Start the day by drowning yourself in coffee and diving into the cakes at **Gerbeaud** (V Vörösmarty tér 7-8; [www.gerbeaud.hu](http://www.gerbeaud.hu)), the most famous of all the famous cafés in Budapest. Founded in 1858, it has been a fashionable meeting place for the city's elite since 1870.

You'll need the caffeine to make it up to your first stop of the morning. **Castle Hill** (Várheg), a 1km-long limestone plateau towering 170m above the Danube, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Below it is a 28km-long network of caves formed by thermal springs that were supposedly used by the Turks for military purposes, as air-raid shelters during WWII and as a secret military installation during the Cold War. You can visit the caves via the **Buda Castle Labyrinth** (Budavári Labirintus; [www.labirintus.com](http://www.labirintus.com)).

Stop for a breather and take in the incomparable view from the **Fishermen's Bastion** (Halászbástya), a neo-Gothic masquerade that most visitors (and Hungarians) believe to be much older. Next up, make your way to the **House of Hungarian Wines** (I Szentháromság tér 6; [www.winehouse.hu](http://www.winehouse.hu)) for a crash course in local viticulture. With over 700 wines on display from Hungary's 22 wine regions and up to 50 to try, 'crash' may soon be the operative word.

You'll need a sit-down after all that study, so take lunch in the courtyard garden of **Rivalda** (I Színház utca 5-9), an old convent next to the Castle Theatre. Fully restored, ride the **Sikló** funicular railway to the bottom of the hill and make your way to **Gellért Hill**.

The hill is home to a **fortress** that became redundant as soon as it was finished and the **Independence Monument**, erected in 1947 in tribute to the Soviet soldiers who died liberating Budapest in 1945. More importantly for you, the hill is also home to thermal spas that make use of the hot springs gushing deep below. Soaking in the Art Nouveau palace of the **Gellért baths** (XI Kelenhegyi út), open to both men and women in separate sections, has been likened to taking a bath in a cathedral. The pools have a constant temperature of 44°C and the water, high in calcium, magnesium and hydrogen carbonate, is good for pains in the joints, arthritis and blood circulation.

If you like the idea of dining on the high waters but remaining tethered to the bank (just in case), the international cuisine at **Spoon** (off V Vigadó teér; ☎ 411 0933; [www.spooncafe.hu](http://www.spooncafe.hu)) is for you. Alternatively, book a table at fabulously stylish **Menza** (VI Liszt Ferenc tér 2; ☎ 413 1482; [www.menza.co.hu](http://www.menza.co.hu)), set on Budapest's most lively square.

Spend the rest of the evening debauching yourself at one of the *kertek* - the beer gardens that open at night in the warmer months. The venues change from year to year so check the Pestside website ([www.pestside.hu](http://www.pestside.hu)) before you leave home. One of the main drinking strips in town is übercool **VI Liszt Ferenc tér**, where you'll have to duel to the death for a spot under the plane trees.

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## IN THE COMPANY OF OLD COMMUNISTS

For the sake of argument, let's say you wake up late and in the mood for some post-party Hungarian comfort food. Brunch on the terrace of the **Soul Café** (IX Ráday utca 11-13; [www.soulcafe.hu](http://www.soulcafe.hu)) should see you right.

From here it's a hop, skip and a jump to **Margaret Island**. The 2.5km-long island in the middle of the Danube was always the domain of one religious order or another until the Turks arrived and turned what was then called the Island of Rabbits into – appropriately enough – a harem, from which all 'infidels' were barred. It's been a public park open to everyone since the mid-19th century. The island is not overly endowed with important sights and landmarks but it's a lovely place to head on a hot day. Choose to stroll, cycle, swim or simply kip in the sun.

When your lounging is done, slope off to **Le Jardin de Paris** (II Fő utca 20). The restaurant is housed in a wonderful old townhouse abutting an ancient castle wall and – there's a clue in the name - has a delightful garden.


Cross the Danube in time to leap on the 3pm bus to Szoborpark from Le Meridien Budapest Hotel on V V Deák Ferenc tér. Your destination is the socialist Disneyland of **Statue Park** (cnr XXII Szabadkai út & Balatoni út; [www.szoborpark.hu](http://www.szoborpark.hu)). Home to more than 40 busts, statues and plaques of Lenin, Marx, Béla Kun and 'heroic' workers that have ended up on trash heaps in other former socialist countries, Statue Park is a truly mind-blowing place to visit.

Back in town, you have two choices. Check the schedules at the **Liszt Academy of Music** ([www.zeneakademia.hu](http://www.zeneakademia.hu)) and the **State Opera House** ([www.opera.hu](http://www.opera.hu)) – if there's a performance on at either, don't miss the opportunity to go along. If you're out of luck, your ears' loss is your stomach's gain. Book a table at **Malomtó** (II Frankel Leó utca 48;

 336 1830; [www.malomto.hu](http://www.malomto.hu)) for memorable modern Hungarian and international dishes. Its major draw is its unique position at the foot of a tiny lake filled with water lilies and croaking green frogs – a seat on the terrace in the warmer months is not just recommended, it's mandatory.

## SLEEPING


### Budget

Green Bridge Hostel ( 266 6922) Outstanding hostel in terms of comfort, location and reception, with free coffee thrown in throughout the day.

### Midrange

Hotel Astra ([www.hotelastra.hu](http://www.hotelastra.hu);  214 1907) Small boutique hotel in a centuries-old townhouse.

### Top End:

Four Seasons Gresham Palace Hotel ([www.fourseasons.com/budapest](http://www.fourseasons.com/budapest);  268 6000) Breath-taking 179-room hotel created in the long derelict Art Nouveau Gresham Palace .

For more reviews of Budapest accommodation, check out the Sleep section on [www.lonelyplanet.com/accommodation](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/accommodation).

By Amanda Canning

For the complete guide to Budapest grab a copy of Lonely Planet's *Budapest* guide, available online at [shop.lonelyplanet.com](http://shop.lonelyplanet.com).

