

# Introducing Budapest

More cosmopolitan than Prague, more romantic than Warsaw and more beautiful than both, Budapest straddles a gentle curve in the Danube, with the Buda Hills to the west and what is essentially the start of the Great Plain to the east. With parks brimming with attractions, museums filled with treasures, pleasure boats sailing up and down the scenic Danube Bend, Turkish-era thermal baths belching steam and a nightlife throbbing until dawn most nights, the Hungarian capital is one of the Continent's most delightful and fun cities.

And the human legacy is just as remarkable as Mother Nature's. Architecturally, Budapest is a gem, with a wealth of baroque, neoclassical, Eclectic and Art Nouveau (or Secessionist) buildings. Overall it has a *fin-de-siècle* feel to it, for it was then, during the industrial boom and the capital's 'golden age' in the late 19th century, that most of what you see today was built. In some places, particularly along the Nagykörút (Big Ring Road) and up broad Andrassy út to the sprawling Városliget (City Park), Budapest's sobriquet 'the Paris of Central Europe' is well deserved. Nearly every building has some interesting detail, from Art Nouveau glazed tiles and neoclassical bas-reliefs to bullet holes and shrapnel scorings left from WWII and the 1956 Uprising.

At times, Budapest's scars are not very well hidden. Over the years, industrial and automobile pollution has exacerbated the decay, but in recent years the rebuilding and renovations have been nothing short of astonishing. Indeed, some people think



the city is tidying itself up a bit too quickly. When I first moved to the city in the early 1990s, a stylish local guidebook advised potential visitors to 'hurry up and come before Budapest turns into just another capital of just another nice social-democratic European country' (or words to that effect). 'As if, I remember thinking in those 'Wild East' days of rapid-fire change and disillusionment. 'Yeah, as if...'

It's true that in the process of reclaiming its well-deserved title of *világváros* (world-class city) over the past decade, Budapest has taken on all the baggage that such a process usually involves: faceless modern architecture, organised criminal activity, a mobile phone at the ear of every 'suit', an international fast-food outlet on every corner. Yet Budapest remains – and will always stay – Hungarian: exotic, sometimes inscrutable, often passionate, with its feet firmly planted in Europe but with a glance every now and then eastward to the spawning grounds of its people.

Budapest is fabulous, romantic and exciting at any time, but especially so just after dusk in spring and summer when Castle Hill is bathed in a warm yellow light. Stroll along the Duna korzó, the riverside embankment on the Pest side, or across any of the bridges past young couples embracing passionately. It's then that you'll feel the romance of a place that, despite all attempts – from both within and without – to destroy it, has never died.

## LOWDOWN

Population 1.75 million

Percentage of Hungary's population living in Budapest 18%

Time zone Central European Time (GMT + one hour)

Three-star double 12,500Ft to 25,000Ft (€50 to €102)

Coffee in a café 200Ft to 380 Ft

Bus/metro ticket 170Ft

Metro stations 40 on three lines

Budapest's ranking in terms of size among EU cities sixth (London, Berlin, Madrid, Rome and Paris come first)

Percentage of Hungarian women who would forgive infidelity 66% (rest of Europe: 54%)

Suicide rate 60.1 per 100,000 people (UK 15.1, USA 21.7)

No-no Clinking glasses when drinking beer (it is said that's what the Habsburgs did after executing the Martyrs of Arad in 1849)

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## BUDAPEST TODAY

How fares Budapest as the capital of one of the 10 ‘accession’ countries that joined the EU in 2004? Many people here will tell you that the question is irrelevant, that Hungary and its capital have not seen any changes at all. In some regards, that is true – Budapest today is what Budapest was yesterday and what Budapest will be tomorrow. In many other ways, the city has changed dramatically.

Unemployment and inflation are down, real income and tourism figures are up (OK, the most visible new arrivals are British lager louts with big mouths and thirsts but they spend money). *Fapados* (‘wooden bench’ – ie budget) airlines like SkyEurope, EasyJet and Wizzair have landed in Budapest and are now winging Mr and Mrs Kovács and their 1.3 kids to Corsica for a 10-day holiday. Budapest is being redeveloped – putting on a very bright new face in some parts – and property prices are booming. The once canyonlike gap between Hungary and wealthy Western European nations is rapidly closing, and people in Budapest are spending more money than ever on home-entertainment centres, mobile phones, travelling and even food. The world is one big oyster and all that is missing is the cocktail sauce, right?

Wrong. And why? Because Hungarians are *still* not happy. They were not happy under socialism – they were the ones who electrified the barbed-wire fence separating themselves from Austria in the first place – and they weren’t happy four years later when a poll taken in mid-1993 found that a full 76% of them were ‘very disappointed’ with capitalism and their living standard. A full dozen years, at least one car, a couple of foreign trips and a fair few more hot meals later, a survey carried out by the public-policy think tank DEMOS Magyarország has found that the vast majority of Hungarians remain *elégedetlen* – something like ‘not enoughed’ but meaning ‘dissatisfied’ or ‘disgruntled’ – as ever. Only 36% – the lowest in the EU and less than half the EU average of 73% – said they were satisfied with their quality of life.

Enough is enough already, will the Magyar ever be happy? Probably not if history repeats itself; we know this all too well from their art, their music, their *honfibu* (p11), and that disgruntledness goes back centuries. But why? Well, anyone who has lived here for any length of time knows that it’s part of the social fabric, it’s in the blood.

### HOT CONVERSATION TOPICS

- Gyurcsány vs Orbán – Socialist schoolmaster or arrogant neo-con?
- *Kertek* – Who is charging the most extortionate rent for this year’s hottest (or, rather, coolest) ‘gardens’?
- M4 – Is the last metro line just a figment of the collective imagination?
- Property prices – Who is buying up Budapest this month? The Spanish? The Irish?
- Reality shows – How far will the likes of the ‘humiliating’, the ‘sadistic’ *Benne leszek a tevében!* (I’m Gonna Be on TV!) and the trashy *Való Világ* (Real World) go?
- Road works – Won’t Budapest look great when it’s finished?
- Travel – Thailand for the beach or Kenya for the wildlife? Decisions, decisions...

## CITY CALENDAR

Every season has its attractions – and its limitations – in Budapest. For details see p186. Countless festivals and events are held in and around Budapest each year. The following abbreviated list gives you a taste of what to expect, but get hold of the HNTO’s annual brochure *Events Calendar* for a complete listing. To ensure that your trip does not coincide with a public holiday, when most *everything* will be shut up tight, see p189.

## JANUARY

### NEW YEAR’S DAY CONCERT

[www.hungariakoncert.hu](http://www.hungariakoncert.hu)

This is an annual event usually held in Pesti Vigadó on 1 January to herald in the new year.

### INTERNATIONAL CIRCUS FESTIVAL

[www.maciva.hu](http://www.maciva.hu)

This biennial (2008, 2010 etc) event is held under the big top of the Municipal Great Circus in late January.

## FEBRUARY

### OPERA BALL

[www.operabal.com](http://www.operabal.com)

This very prestigious event is held annually at the Hungarian State Opera House.

## MARCH

### BUDAPEST SPRING FESTIVAL

[www.festivalcity.hu](http://www.festivalcity.hu)

The capital’s largest (200 events at 60 venues) and most important cultural festival takes place at venues throughout the city.

## APRIL

### NATIONAL DANCE HOUSE MEETING & FAIR

[www.tanchaz.hu](http://www.tanchaz.hu)

Hungary’s biggest *táncház* (p131) is held over two days at the Budapest Sportaréna.

## MAY

### BUDAPEST EARLY MUSIC FORUM

[www.festivalcity.hu](http://www.festivalcity.hu)

A festival focusing on ancient music – classical music as it was played when first composed at the Ferenc Liszt Music Academy and at churches around Budapest.

## JUNE

### DANUBE FOLKLORE CARNIVAL

[www.dunaart.hu](http://www.dunaart.hu)

A pan-Hungarian international 10-day carnival of folk and world music and modern dance, held in Vörösmarty tér and on Margaret Island.

## BRIDGE FESTIVAL

[www.festivalcity.hu](http://www.festivalcity.hu)

Also known as the Budapest Fair, this day-long festival of music, dance and street theatre is held on the city’s bridges and by the river.

## FERENCVÁROS SUMMER FESTIVAL

[www.festivalcity.hu](http://www.festivalcity.hu)

Local groups perform music and dance in the streets of Budapest’s district IX from mid-June to mid-July.

## BUDAPEST FAIR

[www.festivalcity.hu](http://www.festivalcity.hu)

Citywide ‘Budapesti Búcsú’ of concerts and street theatre marking the departure of Soviet troops from Hungarian soil in 1991.

## MUSEUM NIGHT

[www.museum.hu/events](http://www.museum.hu/events)

Two dozen museums across town throw open their doors at 6pm and don’t close to the very wee hours.

## AUGUST

### FORMULA ONE HUNGARIAN GRAND PRIX

[www.hungaroring.hu](http://www.hungaroring.hu)

Hungary’s prime sporting event held in Mogyoród, 24km northeast of the capital.

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## SZIGET MUSIC FESTIVAL

[www.sziget.hu](http://www.sziget.hu)

Now one of the biggest and most popular music festivals in Europe, held on Budapest's Hajógyár Island. The island becomes a festival city complete with camping and service facilities.

## CRAFTS CELEBRATION

[www.nesz.hu](http://www.nesz.hu)

Prominent craftspeople from around Hungary set up kiosks and hold workshops in the Castle District over a three-day period. There's also folk dancing and music.

## JEWISH SUMMER FESTIVAL

[www.jewishfestival.hu](http://www.jewishfestival.hu)

Showcases Jewish culture through exhibitions, gastronomy and a book and film week.

## SEPTEMBER

### BUDAPEST INTERNATIONAL WINE FAIR

[www.winefestival.hu](http://www.winefestival.hu)

Hungary's foremost winemakers introduce their wines to festival goers in the Castle District. Children's activities available.

## CULTURE IDENTITY

With some 1.75 million inhabitants, Budapest is home to almost a fifth of the national population. The overwhelming majority are Magyars, an Asiatic people of obscure origins who do not speak an Indo-European language and make up the vast majority of Hungary's 10.083 million people. The population density of Budapest is 3333 people per sq km against a national average of 109 per sq km.

No exact breakdown exists, but the ethnic make-up in the capital reflects the national one. According to the 2001 census just over 92% of the population is ethnically Magyar. Minorities include Germans (2.6%), Serbs and other South Slavs (2%), Slovaks (0.8%) and Romanians (0.7%). The number of Roma is officially put at 1.9% of the population (or 193,800 people), though in some sources the figure is twice as high.

Life expectancy is very low by European standards: just over 68 years for men and almost 77 for women. The nation also has one of Europe's lowest rates of natural population increase – 9.76 per 1000 people, with a population growth of -0.26%. Sadly, it also has one of the highest rates of suicide (see boxed text, opposite). Currently 57% of all Hungarian marriages end in divorce.

Hungary is a highly cultured and educated society with a literacy rate of over 99% among those 15 years and over. School is compulsory for 10 years until the age of 16. About 65% of the population have completed secondary-school and 10% are university graduates, a quarter of which are in engineering and economics.

There are currently 19 universities and the most prestigious ones are largely based in Budapest, including the Loránd Eötvös Science University (ELTE; [www.elte.hu](http://www.elte.hu)), which was

## TOP FIVE UNUSUAL EVENTS

- Budapest Fair (June)
- International Circus Festival (January)
- Museum Night (June)
- National Dance House Meeting & Fair (April)
- Sziget Music Festival (August)

## OCTOBER

### BUDAPEST INTERNATIONAL MARATHON

[www.budapestmarathon.com](http://www.budapestmarathon.com)

Eastern Europe's most celebrated foot race goes along the Danube, across its bridges, through Margaret Island to City Park.

### BUDAPEST AUTUMN FESTIVAL

[www.festivalcity.hu](http://www.festivalcity.hu), <http://bof.hu>

Cultural events at venues throughout the city until early November.

## DECEMBER

### NEW YEAR'S GALA & BALL

[www.viparts.hu](http://www.viparts.hu)

Gala dinner and ball held at the Hungarian State Opera House on 31 December.

founded in 1635 and moved to Budapest in 1777 from what is now Trnava (Hungarian: Nagyszombat) in Slovakia; the 200-year-old Semmelweis University of Medicine (SOTE; [www.sote.hu](http://www.sote.hu)); the Budapest Technical and Economic Sciences University (BME; [www.bme.hu](http://www.bme.hu)), established in 1782; and the Budapest University of Economic Sciences (known as 'Közgaz'; [www.bke.hu](http://www.bke.hu)). Budapest-based and English-language Central European University (CEU; [www.ceu.hu](http://www.ceu.hu)), founded in 1991 by philanthropist George Soros, has gained an international reputation in just over a decade.

Throughout history, religion has often been a question of expediency here. Under King Stephen I, Catholicism won the battle for dominance over Orthodoxy and, while the majority of Hungarians were quite happily Protestant by the end of the 16th century, many donned a new mantle during the Catholic Counter-Reformation under the Habsburgs. During the Turkish occupation in the 16th and 17th centuries, thousands of Hungarians converted to Islam – though not always willingly.

As a result, Hungarians tend to have a more pragmatic approach to religion than most of their neighbours, and little of the bigotry. It has even been suggested that this generally sceptical view of matters of faith has led to Hungarians' high rate of success in science and mathematics (p12). You'll never see Christian churches in Budapest full, even on important holy days. The Jewish community in Budapest, on the other hand, has seen a great revitalisation in recent years though mostly due to the influx of Orthodox Jews.

Of those Hungarians declaring religious affiliation in the 2001 census, about 52% said they were Roman Catholic, 16% Reformed (Calvinist) Protestant and nearly 3% Evangelical (Lutheran) Protestant. There are also small Greek Catholic (2.5%) and Orthodox and other Christian (1%) congregations. Hungary's Jews (though not always religious) number about 80,000, down from a prewar population of nearly 10 times that through wartime executions, deportations and emigration, with almost 90% living in Budapest.

## LIFESTYLE

In general Hungarians – and people from Budapest in particular – are not uninhibited like the extroverted Romanians or sentimental Slavs who laugh or cry at the drop of a hat (or drink). They are reserved, somewhat formal people. Forget the impassioned, devil-may-care, Gypsy-fiddling stereotype – it doesn't exist and probably never did. The national anthem calls Hungarians 'a people torn by fate' and the overall mood is one of *honfíbi* (literally 'patriotic sorrow', but really a penchant for the blues with a sufficient amount of hope to keep most people going).

This mood certainly predates what Hungarians call '*az átkos 40 év*' (the accursed 40 years) of communism. To illustrate what she saw as the 'dark streak in the Hungarian temperament', the late US foreign correspondent Flora Lewis recounted a story in *Europe: A Tapestry of Nations* that was the talk of Europe in the early 1930s. 'It was said,' she wrote, 'that a song called "Gloomy Sunday" so deeply moved otherwise normal people [in Budapest] that whenever it was played, they would rush to commit suicide by jumping off a Danube bridge.' The song has been covered in English by many artists, including Billie Holiday, Sinéad O'Connor and Björk, and is the subject of German film director Rolf Schübel's eponymous romantic drama (p24).

Hungarians are almost always extremely polite in social interaction, and the language can be very courtly – even when doing business with the butcher or having your hair

## A DUBIOUS DISTINCTION

Hungary has one of the world's highest suicide rates – 60.1 per 100,000 people in 2001, surpassed only by Russia and several other former Soviet republics. Psychologists are still out to lunch as to why Hungary should have such a high incidence. Some say that Hungarians' inclination to gloom leads to an ultimate act of despair (above). Others link it to a phenomenon not uncommon here in the late 19th century – as the Hungarian aristocracy withered away, the *kisnemeség* (minor nobility), some of whom were no better off than the local peasants, would do themselves in to 'save their name and honour'. As a result, suicide was – and is – not looked upon dishonourably as such, victims may be buried in hallowed ground and the euphemistic sentence used in the newspaper obituaries is: 'János Kádár/Erzsébet Szabó died suddenly and tragically.' About 60% of suicides are by hanging.

cut. The standard greeting for a man to a woman (or youngsters to their elders, regardless of the sex) is *Csókolom* ('I kiss it' – 'it' being the hand, of course). People of all ages – even close friends – shake hands profusely when meeting up.

But while all this gentility certainly oils the wheels that turn a sometimes difficult society, it can be used to keep 'outsiders' (foreigners and other Hungarians) at a distance. Perhaps as an extension of this desire to keep everything running as smoothly as possible, Hungarians are always extremely helpful in an emergency – be it an accident, a pick-pocketing or simply helping someone who's lost their way.

Like Spaniards, Poles and many other people with a Catholic background, Hungarians celebrate *névnap* ('name days') rather than (or as well as) birthdays. Name days are usually the Catholic feast day of their patron saint, but less holy names have a date too. Most calendars in Hungary list them, and it's traditional for men to give women – colleagues, classmates and neighbours as well as spouses and family members – at least a single blossom.

The gay and (less so) lesbian communities are quite active in Budapest but keep a relatively low profile compared with Western European capitals. Both groups can enter into domestic partnerships in Hungary, but such arrangements carry very few legal rights. The government is considering introducing partnership legislation similar to that of the UK.

By and large Hungarians tend to meet their friends and entertain outside at cafés and restaurants. If you are invited to a Hungarian home, bring a bunch of flowers (available in profusion all year and very inexpensive) or a bottle of good local wine (see p30). You can talk about anything under the sun – from religion and politics to whether the Hungarian

## HEAD OF THE CLASS

Hungary's contributions to specialised education and the sciences have been far greater than its present size and population would suggest. A unique method of music education devised by the composer Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967) is widespread and the Pető Institute in Budapest has a very high success rate in teaching children with cerebral palsy to walk. Albert Szent-Györgyi (1893–1986) won the Nobel Prize for Medicine or Physiology in 1937 for his discovery of vitamin C; Georg von Békésy (1899–1972) won the same prize in 1961 for his research on the inner ear; and Eugene Paul Wigner (1902–95) received a Nobel Prize in 1963 for his research in nuclear physics.

language really is more difficult than Japanese and Arabic – but money is a touchy subject. Traditionally, the discussion of wealth – or even wearing flashy jewellery and clothing – was considered to be gauche in Hungary. Do not expect (or ask for) a tour of the house or apartment; that is just not done here.

Although it's almost impossible to calculate (with the 'black economy' being so widespread and important), the average monthly salary in Hungary at the time of writing was 146,000/94,000Ft gross/net (or €599/386). The minimum wage is currently set at 57,000Ft (€224) per month but it will be raised to between 63,000Ft (€248) and 77,000Ft (€303), depending on educational achievement.

Hungarians as a whole are extremely fond of animals and Budapest has scores of *állat-díszhal bolt*, pet shops selling everything from puppies and hamsters to tropical fish. Budapesters are especially fond of dogs (you can't miss breeds indigenous to Hungary – the moplike *puli* herding dog, the sleek

*vizsla* or the giant white *komondor* sheepdog) – and people of all ages go gaga over a particularly friendly or attractive one.

Hungarians let down their hair in warm weather, and you'll see more public displays of affection on the streets than perhaps anywhere else in the world. It's all very romantic, but beware: in the remoter corners of Budapest's parks and on Margaret Island you may stumble upon more passionate displays.

## FASHION

In general, dress is very casual in Budapest – in summer, daringly brief, even by Continental European standards – and many people attend even the opera in denim. Men needn't bother bringing a necktie; it will be seldom – if ever – used.

Like everywhere, Budapest has its own fashion boutiques and home-grown designers. Keep an eye open for funky pieces from local talent Anikó Németh, high-fashion ready-to-wear and accessories from Paris-trained Tamás Náray, and Art Deco-inspired, very geometric designs from wunderkind Katti Zoób, whose spring/summer 2005 collection was showcased in the Magyar Magic – Hungary in Focus road show in the UK.

Judging from what's on offer in some of the used or 'second-generation' clothing shops such as Iguana (p149) and Ciánkáli (p148), the über-trend on the street is for retro (1950s to 70s) and fetishist (leather, military) foundation pieces and accessories. What the masses are going for is another matter. The high-street favourite (and very ordinary) Brussels-based C&A has launched three new stores in Budapest and Spanish fashion chain Zara, much beloved by the braces-and-bubblegum brigade, has opened a 2400-sq-metre outlet on V Váci utca.

## SPORT

Hungarians enjoy attending sporting matches and watching them on TV as much as they do participating (p138). The most popular spectator sports (p139) are football and water polo, though motor racing, horse racing – both trotting and flat racing – and even *sakk* (competitive chess) have their fans.

Football is far and away the nation's favourite sport, and people still talk about the 'match of the century' at Wembley in 1953 when the Magic Magyars beat England six goals to three – the first time England lost a home match. There are a dozen premier league football teams in Hungary, with four of them based in the capital (p140), including the ever-popular Ferencváros.

In water polo, Hungary has dominated the European Championships (12 times) and Olympic Games (eight times) for decades so it's worthwhile catching a professional or amateur match of this exciting seven-a-side sport (if for no other reason than to watch a bunch of guys in skimpy bathing suits horsing around). For details see p140.

The Formula 1 Hungarian Grand Prix (p9), the sporting event of the year, takes place near Budapest in August.

## MEDIA

As in most European capitals, printed news has strong political affiliations in Budapest. Almost all the major broadsheets have left or centre-left leanings, with the exception of the conservative *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation).

## WHERE THE FIRST COMES LAST

Following a practice unknown outside Asia, Hungarians reverse their names in all uses, and their 'last' name (or surname) always comes first. For example, John Smith is never János Kovács to Hungarians but Kovács János, while Elizabeth Taylor is Szabó Erzsébet and Francis Flour is Liszt Ferenc.

Most titles also follow the structure: Mr John Smith is Kovács János úr. Many women follow the practice of taking their husband's full name. If Elizabeth were married to John, she might be Kovács Jánosné (Mrs John Smith) or, increasingly popular with professional women, Kovácsné Szabó Erzsébet.

To avoid confusion, all Hungarian names in this guide are written in the usual Western manner – Christian name first – including the names of museums, theatres etc if they are translated into English. Budapest's Arany János Színház is the János Arany Theatre in English. Addresses are always written in Hungarian as they appear on street signs: Kossuth Lajos utca, Rákóczi Ferenc tér etc.

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## TOP FIVE MEDIA WEBSITES

- Budapest Week Online ([www.budapestweek.com](http://www.budapestweek.com)) Especially good for arts and entertainment.
- Budapest Sun Online ([www.budapestsun.com](http://www.budapestsun.com)) Similar to Budapest Week Online but stronger on local news, interviews and features.
- Hungarian Quarterly ([www.hungarianquarterly.com](http://www.hungarianquarterly.com)) Excerpts from the country's most scholarly journal in English.
- MTI ([www.mti.hu](http://www.mti.hu)) The government-funded Hungarian News Agency is an excellent source for up-to-date news and opinion.
- Pestsida ([www.pestside.hu](http://www.pestside.hu)) A positive favourite and useful in all respects, this website will have you culturally and politically fluent in Budapest-speak before you even arrive.

channel (MTV-1), though there is a public terrestrial channel (M2) and a public satellite one (Duna TV), a second private terrestrial channel (RTL Klub) and some 20 private cable and satellite channels nationwide, broadcasting everything from game and talk shows to classic Hungarian films. Most midrange and top-end hotels and *pensions* in Budapest have satellite TV, though mainly in German.

The public Magyar Rádió (MR; Hungarian Radio) has three stations. They are named after Lajos Kossuth (jazz and news; 98.6AM), the most popular station in the country; Sándor Petőfi (1960s to 1980s music, news and sport; 94.8FM); and Béla Bartók (classical music and news; 105.3FM). Radio Budapest ([www.english.radio.hu](http://www.english.radio.hu)), the external arm of Hungarian Radio, broadcasts in English on 88.1FM and 91.9FM.

Juventus (89.5FM), a popular music station for youngsters, claims the second-highest audience in the country. Rádió 88 (95.4FM) plays the top music of the 1980s and 90s – just what students want. Danubius Rádió (98.3 and 103.3FM) is a mix of popular music and news.

## LANGUAGE

The Hungarians like to boast that their language ranks with Japanese and Arabic as among the world's most difficult tongues to learn. All languages are hard for non-native speakers to master, but it is true: Hungarian is a bitch to learn to speak well. This should not put you off attempting a few words and phrases, however.

For assorted reasons – the compulsory study of Russian in all schools until the late 1980s being one of them – Hungarians are not polyglots and even when they do have a smattering of a foreign language, they lack experience and are generally hesitant to speak it. Attempt a few words in *magyarul* (Hungarian), and they will be impressed, take it as a compliment and be extremely encouraging.

The best foreign language for getting around with here was always German; historical ties, geographical proximity and the fact that it was the preferred language of the literati until almost the 20th century have given it almost semi-official status. But with the advent

of the Internet and the frequency of travel, most young people now have at least a smattering of English while older people speak German. If you are desperate to make yourself understood in English, look for someone under the age of 25.

For obvious reasons, Russian is best avoided; there seems to be almost a national paranoia about speaking it, and many people revel in how little they know 'despite all those years in class'. Italian is understood more and more in Hungary because of tourism. French and Spanish are virtually useless.

For information on Budapest's English-language print media see p191.

With the sale of the state-owned TV2, Magyar Televízió (MTV) controls only one

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## QUIRKY LANGUAGE

Hungarian is full of what the French called *faux amis* – 'false friends' or misleading homophones that have the same sound but totally different meanings. Thus in Hungarian *test* is not a quiz but 'body', *fog* is 'tooth', *comb* is 'thigh' and *part* is 'shore'. *Fatál* – admittedly with an accent – just means 'wooden plate' and is a popular Budapest restaurant, and Apáthy is a less-than-enthusiastic family name. *Ifjúság*, pronounced (very roughly) 'if you shag', means 'youth'; *sajt* (pronounced somewhat like 'shite'), as in every visiting Briton's favourite *sajtburger*, means 'cheese'.

of the Internet and the frequency of travel, most young people now have at least a smattering of English while older people speak German. If you are desperate to make yourself understood in English, look for someone under the age of 25.

For obvious reasons, Russian is best avoided; there seems to be almost a national paranoia about speaking it, and many people revel in how little they know 'despite all those years in class'. Italian is understood more and more in Hungary because of tourism. French and Spanish are virtually useless.

## ECONOMY & COSTS

Two years after joining the EU, Hungary looks set to miss its target of abandoning the forint for the euro by 2010 as the government puts the upgrading of the country's highways and hospitals ahead of economic targets set by Brussels.

Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, who was re-elected in April 2006, bolstered his popularity by cutting taxes, increasing child support subsidies and pensions, and trying to bring the nation's as well as the city's overworked roads into the 21st century. All this spending by the government – more than 810,000 Hungarians, or 29% of the 2.8 million workforce are state employees – meant that Hungary was being run on borrowed money. The country would have to cut its budget deficit in half – to less than 3% of gross domestic product – to be eligible to adopt the euro as its currency. It would also have to slow down inflation, cut government debt, lower interest rates and keep the currency stable, according to EU rules.

Hungary's economy grew about 4.1% in 2005, the second-slowest rate after Poland among the eight Eastern European states that joined the EU in 2004. Still, the country's expansion outpaces growth rates in Western Europe as the Hungarian economy benefits from such exports as automobile engines made by Volkswagen AG's Audi unit and medicines made by Gedeon Richter Rt.

The country has attracted about \$47 billion of the \$192 billion foreign direct investment that flowed into the four biggest Eastern European economies since 1989, which is the highest per-capita level in postcommunist countries. Companies from places like South Korea are setting up shop in Hungary, which is set on becoming a world power in manufacturing consumer electronics.

Foreign companies pick Hungary for their factories because the workforce is considered flexible, skilled, highly educated and relatively inexpensive. Wages in Budapest are about 25% higher than the national average. The unemployment rate in the capital are around 3%, compared with 7.6% nationwide.

Budapest is no longer the bargain-basement destination for foreign travellers that it was even five years ago, but it is still cheaper by a third or even a half than most Western European countries. If you stay in private rooms, eat at medium-priced restaurants and travel on public transport, you should get by on €40 a day.

Travelling in more style and comfort – restaurant splurges with bottles of wine, a fairly active nightlife, small hotels/guesthouses with 'character' – will cost about twice as much. Those putting up at hostels or college dormitories, eating *burek* street food for lunch and at self-service restaurants for dinner could squeak by for as low as €25 a day.

For price ranges of accommodation in Budapest see p153 and for the average cost of restaurant meals see p92.

## HOW MUCH?

Litre of petrol 265Ft to 273Ft

Litre of bottled water 150Ft

Korsó (0.5L) of Dreher beer in pub/café 350Ft to 600Ft

Souvenir T-shirt 1500Ft

Street snack (kolbász sausage) 250 Ft

Cheap/good bottle of wine (75cl) in supermarket 600/2000Ft

Bed in private room from 4500Ft

Cup of coffee in café 200Ft to 380 Ft

Local English-language newspaper 395Ft to 590Ft

Dinner for two (with wine) at a good restaurant 15,000Ft

# GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

## National Government

Hungary's 1989 constitution provides for a parliamentary system of government. The unicameral assembly sits in the Parliament building and consists of 386 members (36 women at present, four of whom held ministerial portfolios within the government) chosen for four years in a complex, two-round system that balances direct ('first past the post') and proportional representation. Of the total, 176 MPs enter Parliament by individual constituency elections, 152 on the basis of 20 district lists and 58 on the basis of national lists. The prime minister is head of government. The head of state, the president, is elected by the house for five years.

For a party to win mandates in Parliament, it should obtain at least 5% of valid votes cast on regional party lists. In the most recent election (April 2006), only four parties were seated in the National Assembly: the ruling socialist MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party) in coalition with the liberal SZDSZ (Alliance of Free Democrats) with 210 seats and the centre-rightist Fidesz-MPP (Alliance of Young Democrats-Hungarian Civic Party) together with the conservative MDF (Hungarian Democratic Forum) making up the opposition (176 seats). Other parties are the agrarian conservative FKgP (Independent Smallholders' Party) and the xenophobic and ultranationalist MIEP (Hungarian Justice and Life Party).

## Local Government

Budapest is governed by a *fővárosi önkormányzat* (municipal council), whose 66 members are elected to four-year terms and whose leader is the *főpolgármester* (lord mayor). The current mayor, SZDSZ liberal Gábor Demszky, handily won his fourth term in office in October 2002 after his party and its coalition partners, the MSZP socialists, received almost 60% of the popular vote. The next elections are due in October 2006.

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