

Danube Bend



The Danube, Hungary's dustless highway and the second-largest river in Europe, cuts a path through the hills to the north of Budapest. Over the millennia the unrelenting mass of the Börzsöny Hills on the left bank and the Pilis Hills on the right have forced the river into a handful of tight, bunched curves, creating arguably the prettiest stretch of the Danube.

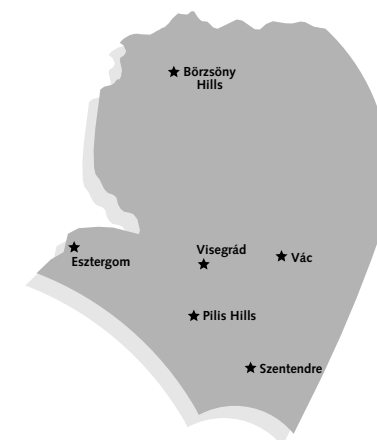
Of course places like this don't stay uninhabited for long. First the Romans then the Magyars decided the area needed to be settled and fought over, and this legacy of human endeavour is plain for all to see along the river's banks. Esztergom, for so many years the Pope's 'eyes and ears' in Hungary, is now a sleepy town with the biggest basilica this side of the Balkans, a mammoth edifice containing artwork and a crypt worthy of age-old bishops. Not far to the east is Visegrád, once the seat of Hungary's kings and queens; nowadays it plays host to the ruins of a 15th-century palace and hilltop castle, with a position so intimidating would-be attackers must have thought their generals suicidal.

The town of Szentendre is another kettle of fish altogether. Embracing newcomers and unorthodox religions, it sports more church spires than seems practical and lives quite well on a legacy of artists' colonies dating from the early 20th century.

And this is only to mention the highlights of the west bank. On the east, the atmosphere changes again. Vác, a small town with a big history, is a lovely spot with a Mediterranean feel and a laid-back attitude, but scratch the surface and you'll find a macabre crypt of bodies. To the north of Vác are the Börzsöny Hills, a wild stretch of nature and an outdoor playground.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Taking in the expansive views of the Danube Bend from Visegrád's medieval **hilltop citadel** (p143)
- Exploring Esztergom's **Christian Museum** (p147), with its incomparable collection of medieval art and sculpture
- Picking through the plethora of art galleries in **Szentendre** (p133) in hope of finding that perfect piece
- Soaking up the relaxed atmosphere in little-visited **Vác** (p137)
- Escaping the hustle, bustle and tussle in the lush green **Börzsöny** (p141) or **Pilis Hills** (p144)



History

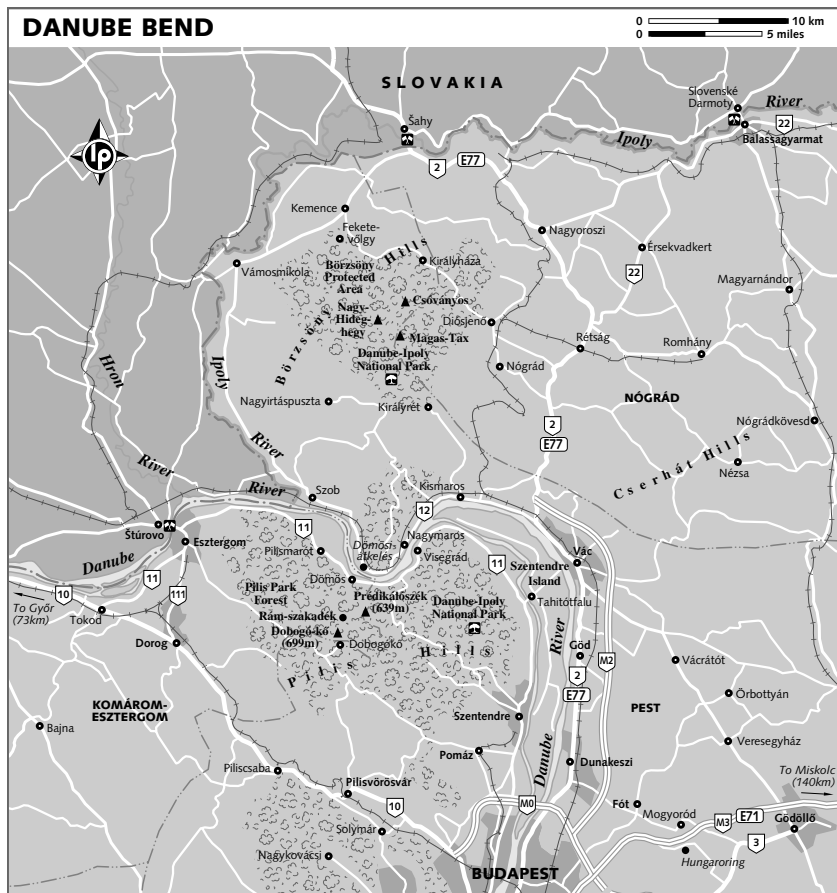
The Danube Bend may look either sleepy or overrun with tourists, but it has a rich and varied history. It was the northernmost region of Rome's colonies for centuries, and Esztergom was the first seat of the Magyar kings and has been the centre of Roman Catholicism in the region for more than a millennium.

Visegrád, Central Europe's 'Camelot', was the royal seat during Hungary's short-lived flirtation with the Renaissance in the 15th century. Szentendre has many of its roots in Serbian culture, and became an important centre for art and culture early in the 20th century. Vác, on the Danube's eastern bank, is not to be outdone by its western

counterparts. It was an important river crossing during Roman times and King Stephen himself thought the town valuable enough to establish an episcopate there in the 11th century.

Getting There & Around

Being so close to Budapest, the Danube Bend has good connections to the rest of Hungary. Regular buses serve towns on the western bank of the Danube, but trains only go as far as Szentendre with a separate line running to Esztergom; the eastern bank has the luxury of excellent bus and train links. The river itself is a perfect highway, and regular boats ferry tourists to and from Budapest over the summer months.



From May to August, one daily Mahart ferry plies the Danube to/from Budapest's Vigadó tér, departing at 9am and calling at Szentendre (one way/return 990/1485Ft, 10.40am) and Visegrád (one way/return 1090/1635Ft, 12.30am), before returning from Visegrád at 4pm. The service dwindles to weekends only in April, September and October. From June to mid-September two extra boats depart from Budapest at 10.30am and 2pm bound for Szentendre (one way 1400Ft), returning at 12.20pm and 5pm; in the last half of May and September only the 10.30am and 5pm services run.

On weekends and holidays from mid-May to mid-September, a hydrofoil service links Budapest with Visegrád (one way 1990Ft) and Esztergom (one way 2490Ft), departing at 9.30am and calling on Visegrád (10.30am) and Esztergom (11.30am). Slower boats leave Budapest's Vigadó tér in Pest at 7.30am daily from May to August and weekends and holidays in April, September and October, stopping at Batthyány tér in Buda, and going on to Vác (one way/return 490/735Ft, 9.50am), Visegrád (1090/1635Ft, 10.50am) and Esztergom (1490/2235Ft, 1pm). The return trip from Esztergom leaves at 4pm. From June to August a daily boat connects Esztergom with Visegrád (one way 1400Ft), leaving at 9am and arriving at 10.25am; boats return from Visegrád at 4pm.

SZENTENDRE

☎ 26 / pop 22,700

Szentendre is a town that has changed little in appearance since the 18th century. For some this is a blessing, and for others a curse; its cobblestone alleyways and skyline of church spires are indeed something special, but the hordes of tourists jostling you as you attempt to appreciate the scene can at times simply be too much. Either way you look at it, Szentendre is worth visiting – however brief – and if its architecture doesn't impress, its plethora of art museums and galleries should. Note that Szentendre is best avoided on weekends in summer, and between November and mid-March much of the town shuts down on weekdays.

History

Like most towns along the Danube Bend, Szentendre was home first to the Celts and then the Romans, who built an important

border fortress here called Wolf's Castle (Ulcisia Castra). The Magyars arrived late in the 9th century and established a colony here and by the 14th century Szentendre was a prosperous estate under the supervision of the royal castle at Visegrád.

It was about this time that the first wave of Serbian Orthodox Christians came from the south in advance of the Turks, but the Turkish occupation of Hungary over the ensuing centuries brought the town's peaceful co-existence to an end, and by the end of the 17th century the town was deserted. Though Hungary was liberated from the Ottomans soon afterwards, fighting continued in the Balkans and a second wave of Serbs, together with Greeks, Dalmatians and others, fled to Szentendre. Believing they would return home, but enjoying complete religious freedom under the relatively benevolent rule of the Habsburgs (a right denied Hungary's Protestants at the time), half a dozen Orthodox clans each built their own churches and gave the town its unique Balkan feel.

Szentendre's delightful location began to attract day-trippers and painters from Budapest early last century; an artists' colony was established here in the 1920s. The town has been known for its art and artists ever since.

Orientation

The HÉV commuter train and bus stations lie side by side south of the town centre at the start of Dunakanyar körút (Danube Bend Ring road). From here it's a short walk north along Kossuth Lajos utca and Dumtsa Jenő utca to Fő tér, the heart of Szentendre. The Duna korzó promenade along the Danube and the ferry to Szentendre Island are a few minutes' walk east and northeast, respectively, of Fő tér. The **Mahart ferry pier** (Czóbel Béla sétány) is about a kilometre north-east, off Duna korzó.

Information

Game Planet (Petőfi Sándor utca 1; per hr 400Ft;

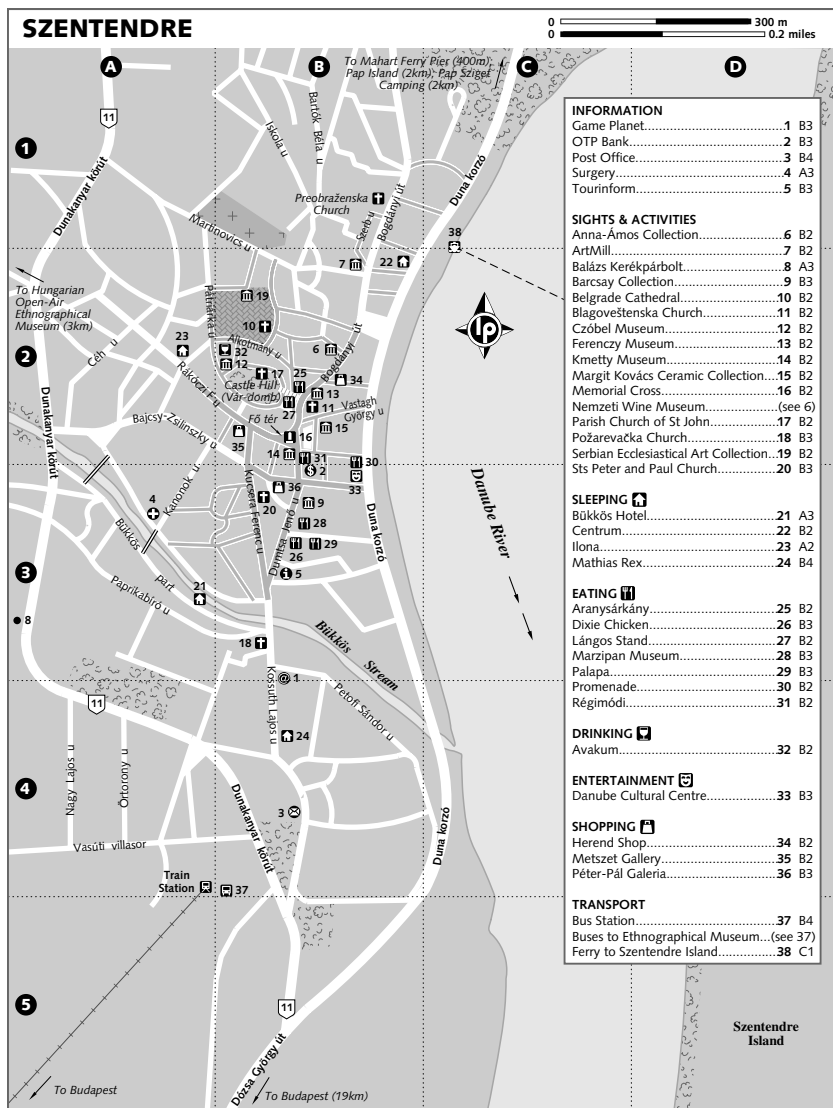
☎ 10am-10pm) Internet access.

OTP bank (Dumtsa Jenő utca 6) Has change machine and ATM.

Post office (Kossuth Lajos utca 23-25)

Surgery (☎ 312 650; Bükkös part 27) In case of medical emergencies.

Tourinform (☎ 317 965; szentendre@tourinform.hu; Dumtsa Jenő utca 22; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri



year-round, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun mid-Mar-Oct) Helpful centre with stacks of information.

www.szentendre.hu In Hungarian only.

Sights INNER TOWN

A good starting point on your tour of Szentendre is the **Požarevačka Church** (☎ 310 554;

Kossuth Lajos utca 1; admission 200Ft; ☎ by appointment), which you'll pass on the way from the stations. Dedicated in 1763, this Serbian Orthodox church has a lovely iconostasis inside (1742).

To the north, the **Sts Peter and Paul Church** (Péter-Pál utca 6; admission free; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun) began life as the Čiprovačka Orthodox

Church in 1753, but was later taken over by Dalmatian Catholics. The **Barcsay Collection** (Barcsay Gyűjtemény; ☎ 310 790; Dumtsa Jenő utca 10; adult/child 400/200Ft; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct), to the east, contains the work of one of the founders of Szentendre's art colony, Jenő Barcsay (1900-88).

Moving onto Fő tér, the colourful heart of Szentendre surrounded by 18th- and 19th-century burghers' houses, you'll find the **Memorial Cross** (1763), an iron cross decorated with icons on a marble base. The **Kmetty Museum** (☎ 310 790; Fő tér 21; adult/child 400/200Ft; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct) on the southwestern side of the square displays the work of the cubist János Kmetty (1889-1975).

However, the square's highlight is the **Blagoveštenska Church** (☎ 310 554; admission 200Ft; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), built in 1754. The church, with fine baroque and rococo elements, hardly looks 'eastern' from the outside, but the inside gives the game away. The small but powerful nave is lined with an ornate iconostasis and elaborate 18th-century furnishings. It is a sight to behold.

The **Ferency Museum** (☎ 310 790; Fő tér 6; adult/child 400/200Ft; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct) next to the Blagoveštenska Church is devoted to Károly Ferency (1862-1917), the father of plein-air painting in Hungary, and his three children: a painter, a sculptor and a weaver.

Descending Görög utca and turning right onto Vastagh György utca, you'll reach the **Margit Kovács Ceramic Collection** (Kovács Margit Kerámia Gyűjtemény; ☎ 310 244; Vastagh György utca 1; adult/child 600/300Ft; ☎ 9am-5pm Mar, 10am-6pm Apr-Oct) in an 18th-century salt house. Kovács (1902-77) was a ceramicist who combined Hungarian folk, religious and modern themes to create Gothic-like figures. Some of Kovács' works are overly sentimental, but many are very powerful, especially the later ones in which she became obsessed with mortality.

Castle Hill (Vár-domb), which can be reached via Váralja lépcső, the narrow steps between Fő tér 8 and 9, was the site of a fortress in the Middle Ages. All that's left of it today is the walled **Parish Church of St John** (Templom tér; admission free), from where you get splendid views of the town. Unfortunately the church entrance (which is early Gothic) is often locked, but you can peer through the bars at the frescoes which were painted by members of the artists' colony in the 1930s. West of the church the **Czóbel Museum** (☎ 310

790; Templom tér 1; adult/child 400/200Ft; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct), contains the works of the impressionist Béla Czóbel (1883-1976), a friend of Pablo Picasso and student of Henri Matisse.

Just north of Castle Hill you'll notice the red tower of **Belgrade Cathedral** (Belgrád Székesegyház; Alkotmány utca; adult/child including art collection 300/150Ft; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Mar-Oct, 10am-4pm Fri-Sun Jan & Feb), completed in 1764 and seat of the Serbian Orthodox bishop in Hungary. One of the church buildings beside it now contains the **Serbian Ecclesiastical Art Collection** (Szerb Egyházművészeti Gyűjtemény; ☎ 312 399; Pátriárka utca 5; adult/child 400/200Ft; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct), a treasure trove of icons, vestments and other sacred objects in precious metals. A 14th-century glass painting of the crucifixion is the oldest item on display; a 'cotton icon' of the life of Christ from the 18th century is unusual. Take a look at the defaced portrait of Christ upstairs on the right-hand wall. The story goes that a drunken *kuruc* (anti-Habsburg) mercenary slashed it and, told what he had done next morning, drowned himself in the Danube.

Bogdányi utca, Szentendre's busiest pedestrian street, leads north from Fő tér, where you'll find the excellent **Anna-Ámos Collection** (☎ 310 790; Bogdányi utca 10-12; adult/child 400/200Ft; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct), displaying the symbolist paintings of husband-and-wife team Margit Anna and Imre Ámos. Next door the **Nemzeti Wine Museum** (Nemzeti Bormúzeum; ☎ 317 054; Bogdányi utca 10; admission 100Ft, tastings 1600Ft; ☎ 10am-10pm) traces the development of wine-making in Hungary and charges quite a bit more to sample various vintages. Housed in a 19th-century industrial complex at the northern end of Bogdányi utca is the **ArtMill** (MűvészetMalom; ☎ 301 701; Bogdányi utca 32; adult/child 500/250Ft; ☎ 10am-6pm), Szentendre's bid to recapture its past as a serious centre for artists and the arts. Its extensive exhibition space is used for paintings, sculpture, graphics and applied arts, and its grounds are possibly the quietest spot in the touristy centre.

HUNGARIAN OPEN-AIR ETHNOGRAPHICAL MUSEUM

The collection of buildings at this **museum** (Magyar Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum; ☎ 502 500; Sztaravodai út; Tue & Wed admission free, Thu & Fri adult/child 600/400Ft, Sat & Sun 800/400Ft; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun

Apr-Oct), about 3km northwest of the centre, is Hungary's most ambitious *skanzen* (open-air museum). Situated on a 46-hectare tract of rolling land, the museum was founded in 1967 to introduce urban Hungarians and tourists alike to traditional Magyar culture by bringing bits and pieces of villages, farms and towns to one site. The plans call for some 300 farmhouses, churches, bell towers, mills and so on ultimately to be set up in 10 regional units, but so far there are only five regional units.

Highlights include the Calvinist church and 'skirted' belfry from the Erdőhát region of the Northeast, the German 'long house' from Harka outside Sopron, the curious heart-shaped gravestones from the Buda Hills and the lovely whitewashed façade of the thatched house from Sükösd on the Great Plain. Craftspeople and artisans do their thing on random days from late March to early November (generally on Sundays and holidays), and the open-air museum hosts festivals throughout the season.

See Getting Around (opposite) for information on buses to the museum.

Activities

Pap Island (Pap-sziget), 2km north of the centre, is Szentendre's playground and has a grassy *strand* for sunbathing, a **swimming pool** (adult/child 500/250Ft; ☎ 8am-7pm May-Sep), and **tennis courts** and **rowing boats** for hire.

Bicycles can be rented from **Balázs Kerékpárbolt** (☎ 312 111; Előd utca 2a; 1 hr/day 500/3000Ft; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat); take the hourly ferry across to Szentendre Island to enjoy kilometres of uncrowded cycling paths. Canoes and motor boats can be rented from **Dunabogdány** (☎ 390 086) for 2000/7000Ft per day, respectively; boats are delivered to a place you request on the river, and a minimal fee is charged for the delivery.

Sleeping

With Budapest so close, there's no point overnighing here unless you plan to push on to the rest of the Danube Bend. There are, however, a couple of worthwhile options.

Ilona (☎ 313 599; Rákóczi Ferenc utca 11; s/d 5000/6600Ft; ☎) A perfect little *pension*, with plenty going for it: superb central location, locked parking, inner courtyard for breakfast and rooms in very good nick (although on the small side).

Centrum (☎ 302 500; www.hotelcentrum.hu; Bogdányi utca 15; s/d from 9000/10,000Ft; ☎) This quaint *pension* occupies a beautifully renovated house, a stone's throw from the Danube. Rooms are bright, large and filled with antique furniture; breakfast is optional.

Bükkös Hotel (☎ 312 021; Bükkös part 16; s/d 8500/11,000Ft; ☎) Bükkös is a hotel with a touch of style about it that has warm and cosy rooms; ask for one overlooking Bükkös stream. The town centre is a very short walk from the front door.

Mathias Rex (☎ 505 570; Kossuth Lajos utca 16; s/d 8500/12,500Ft; ☎) This relatively new *pension* has rooms so clean they border on sterile. The décor is modern and minimalist and an inexpensive cellar-restaurant occupies the basement.

Pap-sziget Camping (☎ 310 697; www.pap-sziget.hu; camp sites per adult/child/tent 1000/600/2000Ft, bungalows 12,000Ft; ☎ May-mid-Oct; ☎) This big, leafy camping site takes up most of Pap Island, some 2km north of Szentendre. Motel and *pension* rooms are very basic, as are the bungalows; facilities include a small supermarket, a snack bar and a restaurant. See Getting Around (opposite) for information on getting here by bus.

Eating & Drinking

Aranyársarkány (Golden Dragon; ☎ 301 479; Alkotmány utca 1/a; mains over 2000Ft) It may sound Chinese but this place serves superb Hungarian and Austrian dishes and is big on steaks. Laura Bush has graced this place with her presence, so it must be good.

Promenade (☎ 312 626; Futó utca 4; mains 1500-2500Ft) Vaulted ceilings, whitewashed walls and a wonderful terrace overlooking the Danube are all highlights of this, one of Szentendre's best restaurants. The menu is a selection of Hungary's favourites and a smattering of international cuisine.

Palapa (☎ 302 418; Batthyány utca 4; mains 1000-1500Ft; ☎ 5pm-midnight Mon-Fri, noon-midnight Sun) This colourful Mexican restaurant, which serves all the Mexican favourites, is the perfect place for a change from heavy Hungarian fare; there's also garden seating.

Régimódi (☎ 311 105; Dumtsa Jenő utca 2; set menu 1800Ft) The best of the tourist traps in the centre. With a menu heavy on poultry, there are enough vegetarian, fish and game dishes to keep everyone satisfied. Choose a table on the main square or the quieter back terrace.

Marzipan Museum (☎ 311 931; Dumtsa Jenő utca 12; ☎ 10am-7pm May-Oct, 10am-6pm Nov-Apr) This is a good place to stop for cake and ice cream, and kids will love the marzipan creations inside the museum (adult/child 300/200Ft).

Avakum (☎ 500 145; Alkotmány utca 14) Dive into this place, a cellar bar near Castle Hill, to escape the tourist hordes and rehydrate.

For a quick bite to eat, try the food stalls at the bus and HÉV stations, the small **lángos stand** (lángos from 200Ft; Váralja lépcső) halfway up the steep steps from Fő tér to Castle Hill or **Dixie Chicken** (Dumtsa Jenő utca 16; burgers from 240Ft), a standard fast-food joint with the added bonus of a salad bar.

Entertainment

Danube Cultural Centre (☎ 312 657; Duna korzó 11/a) This centre stages theatrical performances, concerts and folk dance gatherings and can tell you what's on elsewhere in Szentendre.

Shopping

Szentendre is a shopper's town – from souvenir embroidery to the latest fashions – and although prices are at Budapest levels, not everything you see is available in the capital.

Péter-Pál Galeria (☎ 311 182; Péter-Pál utca 1; ☎ 10am-6pm Thu-Sun) For ceramics and lace, try this place.

Metszet Gallery (☎ 312 577; Fő tér 14; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sun) This shop has wonderful old engravings, prints and a handful of maps.

Herend Shop (☎ 505 288; Bogdányi út 1; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) If you don't make it to Herend (p218), you can pick up an expensive piece of porcelain here.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

See Getting Around at the beginning of the chapter for more information.

BUS

Buses from Budapest's Árpád hid station, which is on the blue metro line, run to Szentendre at least once an hour throughout the day (241Ft, 30 minutes, 16km). Onward service to Visegrád (302Ft, 45 minutes, 23km, eight daily) and Esztergom (606Ft, 1½ hours, 48km, hourly) is good.

TRAIN

The easiest way to reach Szentendre from Budapest is to catch the HÉV suburban

train from Batthyány tér in Buda (160Ft, 40 minutes, every 10 to 20 minutes). Remember that a yellow city bus/metro ticket is good only as far as the Békásmegyér stop; you'll have to pay extra to get to Szentendre. Also, many HÉV trains run only as far as Békásmegyér, where you must cross the platform to board the train for Szentendre. The last train leaves Szentendre for Budapest at 11.10pm.

Getting Around

Any bus heading north on Rte 11 to Visegrád and Esztergom will stop near Pap-sziget Camping (opposite); ring the bell after you pass the Danubius hotel at Ady Endre utca 28 on the left. Between 14 and 17 buses daily leave bus stop No 7 (located at the town's bus station) for the Hungarian Open-Air Ethnographical Museum.

Ferries run hourly to Szentendre Island (5am to 7.30pm daily from March to October) and cost 130/65Ft for an adult/child one way.

You can also book a **taxi** (☎ 311 111) in town.

VÁC

☎ 27 / pop 35,000

Lying to the east of the Danube, Vác is generally forgotten by the majority of visitors who cling to the more tourist-orientated towns on the far side of the river. This is quite unfortunate, for this unpretentious town, with its quiet ambience, multitude of churches and rich history, has something to offer most people. And it has one distinct advantage over its west-bank counterparts – glorious sunsets over the Börzsöny Hills, reflected in the Danube.

History

Unlike most Hungarian towns, Vác can prove its ancient origins without putting a spade into the ground: Uvcenum – the town's Latin name – is mentioned in Ptolemy's 2nd-century *Geographia* as a river crossing on an important road. King Stephen established an episcopate here in the 11th century, and within 300 years Vác was rich and powerful enough for its silver mark to become the realm's legal tender. The town's medieval centre and Gothic cathedral were destroyed during the Turkish occupation; reconstruction under several bishops

in the 18th century gave Vác its present baroque appearance.

No more than a sleepy provincial centre in the middle of the 19th century, Vác was the first Hungarian town to be linked with Pest by train (1846), but development didn't really come until after WWII. Sadly, for many older Hungarians the name Vác conjures up a single frightening image: the notorious prison on Köztársaság út, where political prisoners were incarcerated and tortured both before the war under the rightist regime of Miklós Horthy and in the 1950s under the Communists. Today you'd scarcely be aware of it as you enjoy the breezes along the embankment of the Danube, a more prominent feature here than in the Bend's other towns.

Orientation

The train station is at the northeastern end of Széchenyi utca, the bus station is a few steps southwest. Following Széchenyi utca toward the river for about 500m will take you across the ring road (Dr Csányi László körút) and down to Március 15 tér, the main square. The Mahart ferry pier is at the northern end of Liszt Ferenc sétány; the car and passenger ferry to Szentendre Island is just south of it.

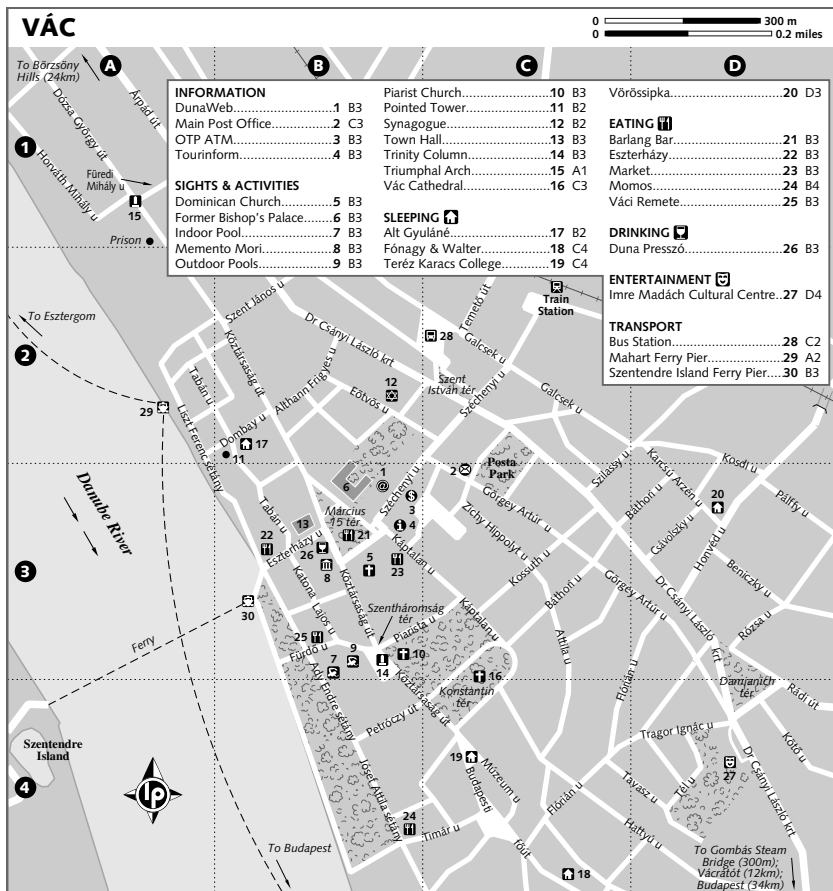
Information

DunaWeb (☎ 301 571; Széchenyi utca 8; per hr 400Ft)

Internet access directly opposite the OTP ATM.

Main post office (Posta Park 2) Off Görgény Artúr utca.

OTP ATM (Dunakanyar shopping centre) Just around the corner from Tourinform.



Tourinform (☎ 316 160; vac@tourinform.hu; Március 15 tér 16-18; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun mid-Jun-Aug, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat Sep-mid-Jun) Overlooking the main square.

Sights

Március 15 tér has the most colourful buildings in Vác, although the square itself looks like a building site; excavations are currently underway to unearth ruins dating from the 13th and 14th centuries. The **Dominican church** (Fehérek temploma; ☎ 305 988; Március 15 tér 19; adult/child 300/150Ft; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), with temporary exhibitions by local artists, is 18th-century baroque, as is the magnificent **Town Hall** (1764; Március 15 tér 11). Note the seals held by the two figures on the gable – they represent Hungary and Bishop Kristóf Migazzi, the driving force behind Vác's reconstruction more than 200 years ago. The building next door at No 9 has been a hospital since the 18th century. Opposite is the former **Bishop's Palace** (☎ 319 494; Március 15 tér 6; admission 100Ft; ☎ 2-6pm Wed-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun mid-May-Oct), parts of which belong to the oldest building in Vác; it's now used as a school and temporary exhibition space.

North of the main square is the **Triumphal Arch** (Diadalív-kapu), the only such structure in Hungary. It was built by Bishop Migazzi in honour of a visit by Empress Maria Theresa and her husband Francis of Lorraine (both pictured in the arch's oval reliefs) in 1764. From here, dip down one of the narrow side streets (such as Molnár

utca) to the west for a stroll along the Danube. The **old city walls** and Gothic **Pointed Tower** (now a private home) are near Liszt Ferenc sétány 12.

If you climb up Fördő utca near the pool complex, you'll reach tiny Szentháromság tér and its renovated **Trinity Column** (1755). The **Piarist church** (Piarista templom; admission free), completed in 1741, with a stark white interior and marble altar, is to the east across the square.

Tree-lined Konstantin tér to the southeast is dominated by colossal **Vác Cathedral** (Váci székesegyház; admission free), which dates from 1775 and was one of the first examples of neoclassical architecture in Hungary. This imposing grey church designed by the French architect Isidore Canevale isn't to everybody's liking, but the frescoes on the vaulted dome and the altarpiece by Franz Anton Maulbertsch are worth the look inside. There's a display of stone fragments from the medieval cathedral in the crypt, but it is normally closed; Tourinform can arrange tours.

If you continue walking south along Budapesti főút, you'll reach the small stone **Gombás Stream Bridge** (Gombás-patak hídja; 1757), lined with the statues of seven saints – Vác's modest response to Charles Bridge in Prague.

Near the bus stop is the town's newly renovated 19th-century **synagogue** (Eötvös utca 5). The interior is yet to be finished, but when complete it will be used as an exhibition hall.

THE MUMMIES OF VÁC

Through sheer forgetfulness and perfect micro-climatic conditions, Vác became the very proud owner of its own crypt of mummies (minus the curses).

Between 1731 and 1801 the original crypt of the Dominican church functioned as a place of burial for the general public but, for reasons unknown, it was later bricked up and promptly forgotten. The micro-climatic conditions underground were perfect for mummification – a cool temperature year-round and minimal ventilation allowed the bodies and clothes of the deceased to remain in exceptional condition for centuries. When renovation work on the church began in 1994, the crypt was rediscovered and a total of 262 bodies were exhumed over the ensuing months 166 of which were easily identified through church records. It was a veritable gold mine for historians; the clothing, jewellery and general appearance of the corpses helped to shed light on the burial practices and way of life in the 18th century.

The majority of mummies now reside in the vaults of the Hungarian National Museum in Budapest (p94) but three – a man (who has a disturbing likeness to Michael Jackson), woman and baby – are on display in the **Memento Mori** (☎ 316 160; Március 15 tér 19; adult/child or student 400/200Ft; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). It also showcases some colourfully painted coffins, clothes and jewellery of the deceased, a registry of those buried and a brief history of the church and its crypt.

Activities

The Vác **Strandfürdő** (Szentháromság tér 3) has **outdoor pools** (adult/child or student 600/360Ft; ☎ 7am-7pm Jun-Sep) and an **indoor pool** (adult/child or student 600/360Ft; ☎ 6am-8pm Mon-Fri, 7am-8pm Sat & Sun Oct-Apr, 6am-8pm Mon-Fri, 6am-7pm Sat, 7am-5pm Sun Oct-Apr) on the southern edge of the 'beach', accessible from Ady Endre sétány.

Sleeping

Alt Gyuláné (☎ 316 860; Tabán utca 25; s/d without bath room 6000/8000Ft) This exceptionally friendly *pension* (it's more like overnighting with nice relatives) makes a perfect base for exploring the eastern side of the Danube region. Rooms are very cosy, there's a fully equipped kitchen and private garden for guests; bikes are rented.

Fónagy & Walter (☎ 310 682; www.fonagy.hu; Budapesti főút 36; r 9500Ft; ☎) Fónagy & Walter is another *pension* from the 'homely' mould – rooms are lovingly prepared, the hosts love to sit and chat, the wine selection from the private cellar is outstanding and the outdoor grill may be fired up just for you.

Other recommendations:

Vörössipka (☎ 501 055; okktart@netelek.hu; Honvéd utca 14; r 8000/12,000Ft; ☎) Most business-like of Vác's hotels, with newish rooms.

Teréz Karacs College (☎ 510 045; Budapesti főút 2/8; dm 1024Ft; ☎ Jul & Aug) The most central of six colleges.

Eating & Drinking

Barlang Bar (Cave Bar; ☎ 501 760; Március 15 tér 12; dishes 1000-1500Ft; ☎ to 11pm Sun-Thu, to 1am Fri & Sat) With its fluorescent lighting and red booths, Barlang looks as though it would be more at home in New York than Vác. Its international menu is appealing, as are the medieval wine-cellar surroundings.

Duna Presszó (☎ 310 569; Március 15 tér 13) Duna is the quintessential café: dark-wood furniture,

chandeliers, excellent cake and ice cream, the occasional drunk, and good for coffee during the day and something stronger at night.

Vác's colourful, lively market is to the southeast of the main square.

Also try the following:

Momos (Timár utca 9; mains 1500-2000Ft) Huge terrace overlooking parkland and the river; excellent for fish and anything from the grill.

Eszterházy (Eszterházy utca; ice cream 100Ft; ☎ 9am-8pm) Perfect spot for refreshments on your stroll along the Danube.

Entertainment

Imre Madách Cultural Centre (☎ 316 411; Dr Csányi László körút 63) This circular centre can help you with what's on in Vác, such as theatre, concerts and kid's shows.

Concerts are occasionally held in Vác Cathedral, the Dominican church and at the arboretum in **Vácrátót** at 7pm on certain Sundays in June, July and August (tickets 1600-2000Ft).

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Car ferries (1100/300/300/240Ft per car/bicycle/adult/child, hourly 6am to 9pm) cross over to Szentendre Island; a bridge connects the island's west bank with the mainland at Tahitótfa. From there hourly buses run to Szentendre. See Getting Around (p132) for more information.

BUS

Buses depart for Árpád híd station in Budapest frequently (363Ft, one hour, 30km). From Vác count on up to 18 services Monday to Saturday to Vácrátót (182Ft, 30 minutes, 14km), at least a dozen to Balassagyarmat (605Ft, 1¼ hours, 45km) and between two and eight to Diósjenő (363Ft, 50 minutes, 25km) and Nógrád (241Ft, 30 minutes, 20km). You can also reach Salgótarján (1150Ft, 2½ hour, 95km, four daily).

TRAIN

Trains depart from Nyugati station in Budapest almost every half-hour for Szob via Vác (346Ft, 34km), and three of these continue along the eastern bank of the Danube to Štúrovo, across from Esztergom, in Slovakia. Slow trains north to Balassagyarmat (up to 10 a day) from Vác stop at Nógrád and Diósjenő in the Börzsöny Hills.

From the last Saturday in April to the first one in October, **MÁV Nostalgia** (☎ 1-269 5242; www.mavnostalgia.hu; adult/child 1020/870Ft) runs a *nosztalgia* (vintage steam train) from Nyugati station in Budapest (departing at 9.40am) to Szob (two hours) via Vác and Nagymaros-Visegrád; the train returns from Vác at 5pm. But verify this service and schedule with MÁV Nostalgia, or check its website before making plans.

AROUND VÁC Börzsöny Hills

These hills begin the series of six ranges that make up Hungary's Northern Uplands, and – along with the Pilis Hills (p144) on the opposite bank of the Danube – form Hungary's 600-sq-km **Danube-Ipoly National Park**. There's very good hiking, but make sure you get hold of Cartographia's 1:40,000 map *A Börzsöny* (No 5; 800Ft), which is available from Vác **Tourinform** (☎ 316 160; Március 15 tér 16-18, Vác).

Nógrád, with the ruins of a hilltop castle dating from the 12th century, could be considered the gateway to the Börzsöny. Diósjenő, 6km north, is a good base for exploring the hills and has a few accommodation options, including **Diósjenő Camping** (☎ 35-364 134; www.patakpart.hu; camp sites per person/tent 750/750Ft, bungalows 5000-15,000Ft; ☎ May-Sep; ☎). It's rather disorganised and overgrown, but on the plus side the staff are welcoming. There are a variety of bungalows, and repairs were underway at the time of research. From here you can strike out west along marked trails to **Nagy Hideg** (864m) or **Magas-Tax** (739m). The Börzsöny's highest peak, **Csóványos** (938m), lies to the west of Diósjenő and is a much more difficult climb.

If you're under your own steam, take the beautiful restricted road from Diósjenő to Kemence via Királyháza; it follows the Kemence Stream almost the entire way – a great place for a cool dip or a picnic in summer. Just before you reach Kemence, there is a turn-off south to the beautiful **Fekete-völgy**, 'Black Valley', and **Feketevölgy Pension** (☎ 27-365 153; www.feketevolgy.hu; r 9200-14,000Ft; ☎), a peaceful oasis set well into the forest. Otherwise, head onto Kemence, a nondescript town with a few *pensions* and restaurants, Internet access and an ATM.

The southern end of the Börzsöny is bereft of any tourist infrastructure, aside from

the **Szent Orbán** (☎ 27-378 034; www.szentorban.hu; s/d from 15,200/16,900Ft; ☎) in the heart of the forest at tiny **Nagyirtápuszta**. The wood cabin-like rooms at this large, ecofriendly hotel are spacious and come with plenty of modern amenities; there's also a restaurant, with an extensive wine list. There's no public transport to the hotel and it often caters to conferences, so call ahead rather than turn up on the doorstep.

VISEGRÁD

☎ 26 / pop 1650

Situated on the Danube's abrupt loop, Visegrád (from the Slavic words for 'high castle') is the most beautiful section and the very symbol of the Bend. Most tourists, however, don't come here for the views (which are reason enough to visit) but rather to explore what remains of the town's history – its Renaissance palace and accompanying citadel.

History

The Romans built a border fortress on Sibirik Hill just a little north of the present castle in the 4th century, and it was still being used by Slovak settlers 600 years later. After the Mongol invasion in 1241, King Béla IV began work on a lower castle by the river and then on the hilltop citadel. Less than a century later, King Charles Robert of Anjou, whose claim to the local throne was being fiercely contested in Buda, moved the royal household to Visegrád and had the lower castle converted into a palace.

For almost 200 years, Visegrád was Hungary's 'other' (often summer) capital and an important diplomatic centre. But Visegrád's real golden age came during the reign of King Matthias Corvinus (r 1458–90) and Queen Beatrice, who had Italian Renaissance craftsmen rebuild the Gothic palace. The sheer size of the residence, its stonework, fountains and hanging gardens were the talk of 15th-century Europe.

The destruction of Visegrád came with the Turks and later in 1702, when the Habsburgs blew up the citadel to prevent Hungarian independence fighters from using it as a base. All trace of the palace was lost until the 1930s when archaeologists, following descriptions in literary sources, uncovered the ruins.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Váci Remete (☎ 302 199; Fürdő utca; mains 1500Ft) Váci Remete is more than inviting, it's a must: its shady terrace is backed by flower beds, there are views of the Danube and the wine selection is top-notch. Surprisingly, there's not a fish dish in sight, but the Hungarian specialities are complimented by a small selection of vegetarian choices.

Orientation

The Mahart ferry pier, just south of the city gate and opposite the Vár hotel, is one of two stops where buses from Szentendre or Budapest will drop you off. To the right of the Vár hotel are steps to Salamon-torony utca, which go to the lower castle and the citadel. There are also bus stops near the village centre and the car ferry is about a 1km south on Rte 11.

Information

OTM bank (Rév utca 9) Not far from Visegrád Tours.

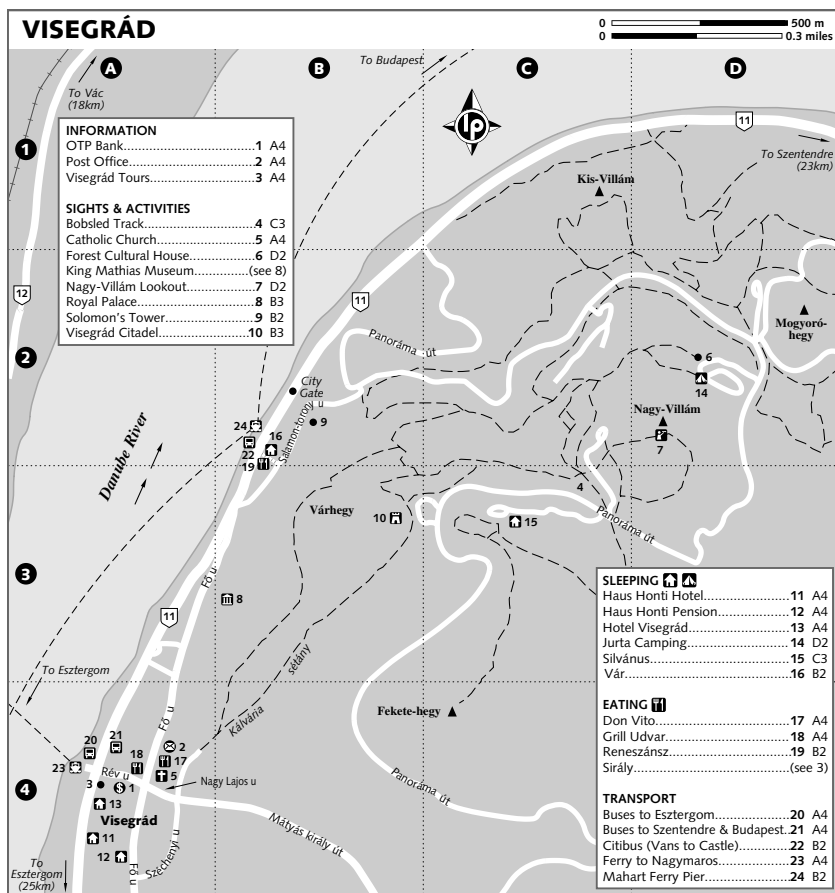
Post office (Fő utca 77; ☎ 8am-noon, 12.30-4pm Mon-Fri) In the village centre.

Visegrád Tours (☎ 398 160; www.visegradtours.hu; Rév utca 15; ☎ 8am-5.30pm) This office, near the ferry to

Nagymaros centre has limited information on Visegrád, but it's the only source in town.

Sights

A perfect place to start your tour of Visegrád is the **Royal Palace** (Visegrádi királyi palota; ☎ 398 026; Fő utca 29; admission free; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun), situated not far south of the Mahart ferry pier. The palace's foundations were laid in 1323 by King Charles Robert but it was King Matthias and his Neopolitan second wife Queen Beatrice who, in the 15th century, truly breathed life into the place. The Gothic structure was given a Renaissance makeover and the finished product was unrivalled in Europe at that time.



Once featuring a massive 350 rooms, the palace today is a shadow of its former self and only a small section has been reconstructed; the rest has been overrun with weeds and still lies in ruin. The handful of rooms that can be visited – the royal suites – are centred on the Court of Honour and its **Hercules Fountain**, a replica of the original Renaissance piece. Moving from room to room, you'll discover more reconstructions and replicas: a cold and clammy royal bed-chamber from the 1400s, a warmer kitchen, and the **Lion Fountain**, famed for its red marble. Also of note is the petite **St George's Chapel** (1366), but once again, it's not the original. The history of the palace and its reconstruction, along with architectural finds, including richly carved stones dating from the 14th century, is told in the **King Matthias Museum**, occupying one of the rooms.

If you walk back to the ferry pier and north up Salamon-torony utca, the first thing you'll see is the 13th-century **Solomon's Tower** (☎ 398 233; adult/child or student 500/300Ft; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun May-Sep), a stocky, hexagonal keep with walls up to 8m thick. Once used to control river traffic, it now houses many of the precious objects unearthed at the Royal Palace, such as the original pieces of the Hercules and Lion fountains.

North of the tower, a trail marked 'Fellegrvár' turns southeast at a fork and leads up to **Visegrád Citadel** (☎ 398 101; adult/child or student 800/350Ft; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm daily mid-Mar-mid-Oct, 9.30am-5.30pm Sat & Sun mid-Oct-mid-Mar), sitting atop a 350m hill and surrounded by moats hewn from solid rock. Completed in 1259, the citadel was the repository for the Hungarian crown jewels until 1440, when Elizabeth of Luxembourg, the daughter of King Sigismund, stole them with the help of her lady-in-waiting and hurried off to Székesfehérvár to have her infant son László crowned king. (The crown was returned to the citadel in 1464 and held here – under a stronger lock, no doubt – until the Turkish invasion.)

There's a small pictorial exhibit in the residential rooms on the west side of the citadel and two smaller displays near the east gate: one on hunting and falconry, the other on traditional occupations in the region (stone-cutting, charcoal-burning, beekeeping and fishing). However, the real highlight is just walking along the ramparts of this eyrie, admiring the views of the Börzsöny

Hills and the Danube, which are arguably the best in the region.

If you're walking to the citadel from the village centre, Kálvária sétány, a trail beginning from behind the 18th-century **Catholic church** (Fő tér), is less steep than the trail from Solomon's Tower. You can also reach it by minibus (p144).

Activities

There are some easy **walks** and **hikes** in the immediate vicinity of Visegrád Citadel – to the 377m high **Nagy-Villám Lookout Tower**, for example. Across from the Jurta camping ground is the sod and wood **Forest Cultural House** designed by Imre Makovecz; it's set up to educate Hungarian children about nature and the environment.

A 750m **bobsled track** (bob-pálya; ☎ 397 397; Mon-Fri 280Ft, Sat & Sun 320Ft; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun Apr-Sep, 11am-4pm Oct-Mar), on which you wend your way down a metal chute while sitting on a felt-bottomed cart, is on the hillside below the lookout.

Sleeping

Visegrád Tours (☎ 398 160; Rév utca 15) can arrange private rooms (single/double from 4000/6500Ft), or strike out on your own along Fő utca and Széchenyi utca.

Silvánus (☎ 398 311; hotelsilvanus@mail.mata.v.hu; s/d from €67/96; (P)) Silvánus is easily the best option in town if you're looking for a hotel with extras. Count on spotless rooms, extensive views, a terrace restaurant and bar with conservatory, an indoor pool plus a sauna, squash courts and tenpin bowling. Rooms with views of the Danube River cost more.

Haus Honti (☎ 398 120; Fő utca 66; hotel s/d €40/50, pension s/d €30/35; (P)) This friendly and hospitable establishment has modern hotel rooms near Rte 11 and more simple *pension* rooms on quieter Fő utca. Bicycles are also available for rent.

Jurta Camping (☎ 398 217; Mogyoróhegy; camp sites per adult/child/tent or car 650/400/500Ft; (P)) About 2km northeast of the citadel is this nicely situated camp ground near meadows and woods. It is, however, far from the centre, and the shuttle service is infrequent (p144).

Also worth recommending: **Vár** (☎ 397 522; varhotelvisegrad@axelero.hu; Fő utca 9; s/d €40/50; (P)) Small, old-fashioned rooms in a lovely renovated building. Its 100-year old cellar is a treat.

Hotel Visegrád (☎ 397 034; hotelvisegrad@visegrad.urs.hu; Rév utca 15; s/d €50/60; (P) (♿)) Modern, warm dark rooms with balcony and partial views of the castle or the Danube.

Eating

Sirály (☎ 597 088; Rév utca 15; mains 1500-2000Ft) This is a flash, popular restaurant with tourists and locals alike. It has big bay windows and an enormous terrace facing the Danube.

Don Vito (☎ 397 230; Fő utca 83; pizzas from 500Ft; ☞ Apr-Oct) Big, bright, new Don Vito is an attractive pizzeria-cum-pub, with outdoor seating and a convivial atmosphere in the evening.

Grill Udvar (Rév utca 6; pizzas & mains 500-1000Ft; ☞ 10am-9pm) This simple place is good for a quick sit-down meal with no fuss involved. On hot, stuffy days its small covered courtyard is a blessing.

Renezánsz (☎ 398 081; Fő utca 11; mains 2000Ft) Renezánsz is the epitome of the tourist trap; busload after busload of tourists file through its doors to be greeted by a medieval banquet and men in tights with silly hats. But in the right mood, it can be quite a hoot.

Getting There & Away

BOAT
Hourly ferries cross the Danube to Nagymaros (280/280/1050Ft per person/bicycle/car) from around 5.30am to 8.30pm. The ferry operates all year except when the Danube freezes over or fog descends.

BUS & TRAIN

Buses are very frequent (423Ft, 1¼ hours, 34km, up to 14 daily) to/from Budapest's Árpád híd station, Szentendre (302Ft, 45 minutes, 25km) and Esztergom (302Ft, 40 minutes, 25km). No train line reaches Visegrád, but you can take one of two dozen daily trains to Szob (658Ft, 65km) from Nyugati station in Budapest. You'll need to get off at Nagymaros-Visegrád, and then hop on the ferry to Visegrád.

Getting Around

Citibus (☎ 397 372; up to 6 people 2000Ft) operates a taxi van service between the Mahart ferry pier and the citadel via the Nagymaros ferry pier and Jurta Camping on request from April to September.

AROUND VISEGRÁD

Pilis Hills

Directly to the south and southwest of Visegrád are the Pilis Hills, an area of rolling hills blanketed in oak and beech woods. Once the private hunting grounds of Matthias Corvinus, it's now Budapest's outdoor playground, criss-crossed by a lot more hiking trails (including Hungary's first, laid in 1869) than roads. The entire region, which covers 250 sq km, falls within the scope of the **Danube-Ipoly National Park**; the Börzsöny Hills (p141), north of the Danube, make up the rest of the park.

A good starting point for exploring the hills is Dömös, 6km west of Visegrád. From close by, marked trails lead to **Prédikálószék** (Pulpit Seat), a 639m crag for experienced hikers and climbers only, and to **Dobogókő** (699m), a much easier ascent of about three hours via the **Rám-szakadék** (Rám Precipice). Some of the best bird-watching in western Hungary is in these hills. A *Pilis és a Visegrádi-helység*, the 1:40,000 Pilis and Visegrád Hills map (No 16; 800Ft) from Cartographia, outlines the many hiking possibilities for the entire area.

In Dömös you'll find an excellent river beach and **Dömös Camping** (☎ 33-482 319; www.domoscamping.hu; camp sites per adult/child/tent/car 780-830/580-620/700-830/350-420Ft, cottages 9900-12200Ft; ☞ May-mid-Sep; (P) (♿)), with tent sites and well-equipped cottages that sleep up to four.

At Dobogókő there's an excursion centre with further trails mapped out, or you can catch a bus to Esztergom (241Ft, 40 minutes, 20km, four or five daily) or to the HÉV station in Pomáz, two stops before Szentendre.

Alternatively, you can take the small ferry (400Ft; runs on demand) across the Danube from Dömös to Dömösi átkelés (on the train line two stops from Nagymaros-Visegrád), then climb to the caves that are visible on the hillside and hike back into the hills behind Nagymaros.

ESZTERGOM

☎ 33 / pop 28,785

Esztergom, 25km west of Visegrád and 66km from Budapest via Rte 11, is one of Hungary's most historical cities and, as the effective 'capital' of the Danube Bend, well worth a visit. For more than 1000 years it has been the seat of Roman Catholicism; the archbishop of Esztergom is the primate – the

highest ranking cleric – of Hungary. The country's first king, St Stephen, was born here in 975, and it was a royal seat from the late 10th to the mid-13th centuries. As a result, Esztergom has both great spiritual and temporal significance for Hungarians.

History

Vár-hegy (Castle Hill), towering over the city centre, was the site of the Roman settlement of Solva Mansio in the 1st century, and it is thought that Marcus Aurelius finished his *Meditations* in a camp nearby during the second half of the 2nd century.

Prince Géza chose Esztergom as his capital, and his son Vajk (later Stephen) was crowned king here in 1000. Stephen founded one of the country's two archbishoprics at Esztergom and built a basilica, bits of which can be seen in the palace.

Esztergom (German: Gran) lost its political significance when King Béla IV moved the capital to Buda after the Mongol invasion in 1241. It remained the ecclesiastical seat, however, vying with the royal court for power and influence. Esztergom's capture by the Turks in 1543 interrupted the church's activities, and the archbishop fled to Nagyszombat (now Trnava in Slovakia) to the northwest.

The church did not reestablish its base in this 'Hungarian Rome' until the early 19th century. It was then that Esztergom went on a building spree that transformed it into a city of late baroque and, in particular, neoclassical buildings.

Orientation

Esztergom lies on a high point above a slight curve of the Danube across from the Slovakian city of Štúrovo (Hungarian: Párkány), to which it is linked by the Mária Valéria Bridge. The centre of Esztergom today is Rákóczi tér, a few steps east of the Little Danube (Kis-Duna), the tributary that branches off to form Primate Island (Prímás-sziget). From the square Bajcsy-Zsilinszky utca leads northwest to Castle Hill; to the southwest of Rákóczi tér is Széchenyi tér, the town centre in the Middle Ages and site of the rococo town hall.

Esztergom's bus station (Simor János utca) is beyond the street market, 700m south of Rákóczi tér. The train station (Bem József tér) is another 1.2km further south.

Mahart boats dock at the pier just south of Mária Valéria Bridge on Primate Island.

Information

Ágost Bajor Cultural Centre (☎ 313 888; Bajcsy-Zsilinszky utca 4; per hr 400Ft; ☞ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm & 5-10pm Sat, 5-10pm Sun) Internet access on one computer.

Atek Computers (☎ 501 320; atekcomp@axelero.hu; Bajcsy-Zsilinszky utca 5; per hr 500Ft; 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) In a small courtyard, this shop has Internet access on two machines.

Cathedralis Tours (☎ 403 603; fax 502 261; Bajcsy-Zsilinszky utca 26; ☞ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Useful for information and private rooms.

Gran Tours (☎ 502 001; grantours@freemail.hu; Széchenyi tér 25; ☞ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat Jun-Aug, 8am-4pm Mon-Fri Sep-May) Visitor centre run by the city of Esztergom.

K&H bank (cnr Rákóczi tér & Simor János utca; ☞ 8am-5pm Mon, 8am-4pm Tue-Thu, 8am-3pm Fri)

OTP bank (Rákóczi tér 2-4; ☞ 7.45am-5pm Mon, 7.45am-4pm Tue-Fri)

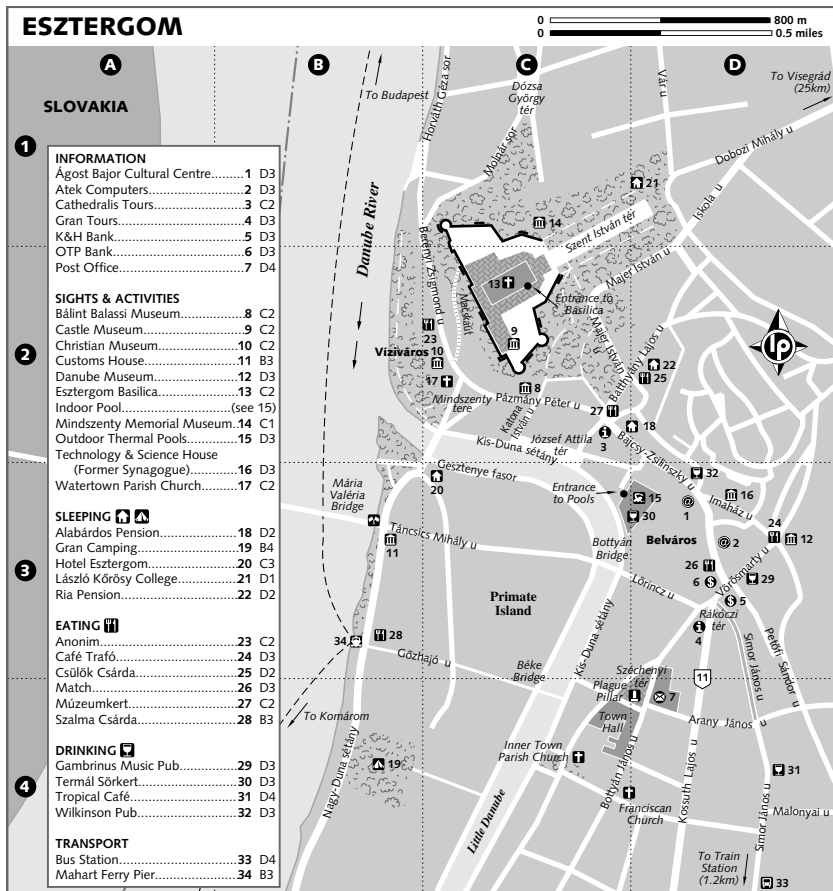
Post office (Arany János utca 2) Enter from Széchenyi tér. www.esztergom.hu Hungarian only, but with English-language links.

Sights

ESZTERGOM BASILICA

The **basilica** (Bazilika; ☎ 411 895; www.bazilika-esztergom.hu; Szent István tér 1; admission free; ☞ 6am-6pm), the largest church in Hungary, is on Castle Hill, and its 72m-high central dome can be seen for many kilometres around. The building of the present neoclassical church was begun in 1822 on the site of a 12th-century one destroyed by the Turks. József Hild, who designed the cathedral at Eger, was involved in the final stages, and the basilica was consecrated in 1856 with a sung Mass composed by Franz Liszt.

The grey church is colossal (117m long and 47m wide) and rather bleak inside, but the red-and-white marble **Bakócz Chapel** on the south side is a splendid example of Italian Renaissance stone-carving and sculpture. It was commissioned by Archbishop Tamás Bakócz who, having failed in his bid for the papacy, launched a crusade that turned into the peasant uprising under György Dózsa in 1514 (see p25). The chapel escaped most – though not all – of the Turks' axes; notice the smashed-in faces of Gabriel and other angels above the altar. It was dismantled into 1600 separate pieces and then reassembled



in its present location in 1823. The copy of Titian's *Assumption* over the church's main altar is said to be the world's largest painting on a single canvas.

On the northwest side of the church is the entrance to the basilica's **treasury** (kincstár; ☎ 402 354; adult/child/family 450/220/1000Ft; ☎ 9am-4.30pm daily Mar-Oct, 11am-3.30pm Sat & Sun Nov & Dec, closed Jan & Feb), an Aladdin's cave of vestments and religious plate in gold and silver and studded with jewels. It is the richest ecclesiastical collection in Hungary and contains Byzantine, Hungarian and Italian objects of sublime workmanship and great artistic merit.

The door to the left as you exit the basilica leads to the **crypt** (altéplom; admission 100Ft;

☎ 9am-4.30pm), a series of spooky vaults with tombs guarded by monoliths representing Mourning and Eternity. Among those at rest here are János Vitéz, Esztergom's enlightened Renaissance archbishop, and József Mindszenty, the conservative primate who opposed the former regime (see boxed text, opposite). It's worth making the tortuous climb up to the **cupola** (admission 200Ft; ☎ 9am-4.30pm) for the outstanding views over the city; the stairs leading up to it are to the left of the crypt entrance.

CASTLE HILL MUSEUMS

The small **Castle Museum** (Vármúzeum; ☎ 415 986; Szent István tér 1; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Tue-Sun Nov-Mar)

CARDINAL MINDSZENTY

Born József Pehm in 1892 in the village of Csehimindszent near Szombathely, Mindszenty was politically active from the time of his ordination in 1915. Imprisoned under the short-lived regime of communist Béla Kun in 1919 and again when the fascist Arrow Cross came to power in 1944, Mindszenty was made archbishop of Esztergom – and thus primate of Hungary – in 1945 and cardinal the following year.

In 1948, when he refused to secularise Hungary's Roman Catholic schools under the new communist regime, Mindszenty was arrested, tortured and sentenced to life imprisonment for treason. Released during the 1956 Uprising, he took refuge in the US Embassy on Szabadság tér when the communists returned to power. He remained there until September 1971.

As relations between the Kádár regime and the Holy See began to improve in the late 1960s, the Vatican made several requests for the cardinal to leave Hungary, which he refused to do. Following the intervention of US President Richard Nixon, Mindszenty left for Vienna, where he continued to criticise the Vatican's relations with the regime in Hungary. He retired in 1974 and died the following year. But as he had vowed not to return to his homeland until the last Soviet soldier had left Hungarian soil, Mindszenty's remains were not returned until May 1991. This was actually several weeks before the last soldier had been repatriated.

end of Castle Hill is housed in the former Royal Palace, which was built mostly by French architects under Béla III (r 1172–96) during Esztergom's golden age. The palace was the king's residence until the capital was relocated to Buda – at which time the archbishop moved in. Most of the palace was destroyed and covered with earth for defensive purposes under the Turks; excavations only began in the 1930s.

The museum concentrates on archaeological finds from the town and its surrounding area, the majority of which is pottery dating from the 11th century onwards. Other points of interest include some of the basilica's original ornate capitals and a fantastic view across the Danube to Slovakia. Outside are 15 enormous church bells no longer in use.

Northeast of the basilica, in the former Seminary building (Szeminárium), is the new **Mindszenty Memorial Museum** (Mindszenty Emlékmúzeum; ☎ 403 162; Szent István tér 4; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), which examines the life and times of one of Hungary's most controversial figures.

OTHER SIGHTS

Below Castle Hill on the banks of the Little Danube is **Víziváros**, the colourful 'Water-town' district of pastel town houses, churches and museums. The fastest way to get there is to walk down steep Macskaút, which can be accessed from just behind the basilica. An easier route is to cross the palace

drawbridge, walk down the grassy hill to Batthyány Lajos utca and then turn west onto Pázmány Péter utca.

The **Bálint Balassi Museum** (☎ 412 584; Pázmány Péter utca 13; adult/child or student 100/50Ft; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), in an 18th-century baroque building, has objects of local interest, with much emphasis on the churches and monasteries of medieval Esztergom. The museum is named in honour of the general and lyric poet who was killed during an unsuccessful attempt to retake Esztergom Castle from the Turks in 1594.

Just north of the Italianate **Watertown Parish Church** (Víziváros plébániatemplom; 1738), which is vaguely reminiscent of the glorious Minorite church in Eger, is the former **Bishop's Palace**. Today it houses the **Christian Museum** (Keresztény Múzeum; ☎ 413 880; www.christianmuseum.hu; Mindszenty hercegrímás tere 2; adult/child or student 500/250Ft; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Mar, 11am-3pm Tue-Sun Nov & Dec) – the finest collection of medieval religious art in Hungary and one of the best museums in the country. Established by Archbishop János Simor in 1875, it contains Hungarian Gothic triptychs and altarpieces; later works by German, Dutch and Italian masters; tapestries; and what is arguably the most beautiful object in the nation: the sublime *Holy Sepulchre of Garamszentbenedek* (1480), a sort of wheeled cart in the shape of a cathedral, with richly carved figures of the 12 Apostles (above) and Roman soldiers (below) guarding

Christ's tomb. It was used at Easter Week processions and was painstakingly restored in the 1970s.

Be sure to see Tamás Kolozsvári's Calvary altar panel (1427), which was influenced by Italian art; the late Gothic *Christ's Passion* (1506) by 'Master M S'; the gruesome *Martyrdom of the Three Apostles* (1490) by the so-called Master of the Martyr Apostles; and the *Temptation of St Anthony* (1530) by Jan Wellens de Cock, with its drug-like visions of devils and temptresses. A free guided tour in English can be booked by ringing the museum in advance.

Cross the bridge south of Watertown Parish Church and around 100m further south is the **Mária Valéria Bridge**, connecting Esztergom with the Slovakian city of Štúrovo. Destroyed during WWII, the bridge only reopened in 2002. The bridge's original **Customs House** (Vámház) now houses an EU information office.

The so-called **Technology & Science House** (Technika és Tudomány Háza; Imaház utca 4) built in 1888, once served as a synagogue for Esztergom's Jewish community, the oldest in Hungary, and now contains a regional government office. It was designed in Moorish Romantic style by Lipót Baumhorn, the master architect who was also responsible for the synagogues in Szeged, Szolnok and Gyöngyös. Close by is the **Danube Museum** (Duna Múzeum; ☎ 500 250; www.dunamuzeum.hu; Kölcsey utca 2; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Mon May-Oct, 10am-4pm Wed-Mon Nov-Apr), with displays on – you guessed it – Hungary's mightiest river and life on it. With all the hands-on exhibits, it's a great place for kids.

Activities

Just east of the Little Danube are **outdoor thermal pools** (☎ 312 249; Kis-Duna sétány 1; adult/child 550/350Ft; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 8am-7pm Sun May-Sep) and stretches of grass 'beach'. You can use the **indoor pool** (☎ 6am-7pm Tue-Fri, 6am-6pm Sat, 8am-4pm Sun) throughout the year.

Esztergom is an excellent base for hiking, cycling and other outdoor pursuits. Ask Gran Tours for a copy of the free *Activities for Tourists in the Komárom-Esztergom Region*.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Contact **Gran Tours** (☎ 502 001; Széchenyi tér 25) or **Cathedralis Tours** (☎ 403 603; Bajcsy-Zsilinszky

utca 26) about private rooms (2500Ft to 3500Ft per person) or apartments (8000Ft to 12,000Ft).

László Kórosy College (☎ 400 005; korosy-koll@freemail.hu; Szent István tér 6; dm 2830Ft; ☎ Jul & Aug; ☎) This school dormitory just a stone's throw from the basilica opens its doors during the college's summer break.

Gran Camping (☎ 402 513; fortanex@t-online.hu; Nagy-Duna sétány 3; camp sites per adult/child/tent/tent & car 1100/600/900/1100Ft, bungalows 12,000-16,000Ft, d/tr pension 8500/9500Ft; ☎ May-Sep; ☎) Small but centrally located on Primate Island, this camping ground has space for 500 souls in various forms of accommodation, as well as a good-sized swimming pool. It also has a hostel, with dormitory accommodation for 2200Ft per person.

MIDRANGE

Ria Pension (☎ 313 115, 401 428; www.riapenzio.com; Batthyány Lajos utca 11-13; s/d 10,500/12,500Ft; ☎) This family-run place just down from the basilica has cosy rooms, a small sauna and bicycles to rent.

Alabárdos Pension (☎ /fax 312 640; Bajcsy-Zsilinszky utca 49; s/d 8500/11,000Ft) This *pension* has rooms arranged within a pleasant courtyard, and a covered car park. It's somewhat up a hill, off the main street.

Hotel Esztergom (☎ 412 555; www.hotels.hu/esztergom; Nagy-Duna sétány; s/d €41/63; ☎ ☎ ☎) This uninspiring block on leafy Primate Island has modern guest rooms, a rather fancy restaurant and a roof terrace. There's a sports centre with a tennis court, bikes for rent (600/4000Ft per hour/day) and hotel guests get to use a nearby swimming pool.

Eating

Anonim (☎ 411 880; Berényi Zsigmond utca 4; mains 1250-3500Ft; ☎ noon-10pm Tue-Sat) Housed in an attractive old townhouse in Watertown, 'Anonymous' serves small but excellent and very tasty dishes. The garden seating is a real plus in the warmer months.

Szalma Csárda (Thatched Inn; ☎ 315 336; soups 350-850Ft, mains 900-4550Ft; ☎ noon-11pm) Done up in HHK (High Hungarian Kitsch) – with lots of chillies and plates on the walls – Szalma is very popular with tourists. Opposite the Mahart pier, it may be just the spot for a provincial meal before sailing back to Budapest.

Café Trafó (☎ 403 980; Vörösmarty utca 15; coffee 150-400Ft; ☎ 7am-11pm) This little café opposite the

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Csülök Csárda (☎ 412 420; Batthyány Lajos utca 9; soups & starters 690-1490Ft, mains 1290-3220Ft; ☎ noon-10pm) The 'Pork Knuckle Inn' – guess the speciality here – is a charming eatery that is popular with visitors and locals alike. It serves up good home cooking (try the bean soup), the portions are huge and we remember a delightful winter Sunday in Esztergom long ago that began at the Christian Museum and ended with a Dreher-fuelled porky lunch here. Highly recommended.

Danube Museum is a leafy oasis with modern décor; a great place to take a breather, sit back and relax. We could spend all day here.

Múzeumkert (☎ 403 775; Batthyány Lajos utca 1; cakes 180-300Ft; ☎ 9am-midnight Apr-Oct, 9am-10pm Nov-Mar) This restaurant-cum-cocktail lounge called the 'Museum Garden' also serves some of the best cakes and pastries in Esztergom. It attracts a mixed crowd of tea drinkers and boozers.

Match (Bajcsy-Zsilinszky utca; ☎ 6.30am-8pm Mon-Fri, 6.30am-6pm Sat) In the centre of Esztergom, next to the OTP bank, is this branch of the supermarket chain.

Drinking

Wilkinson Pub (☎ 06 70 515 3583; Bajcsy-Zsilinszky utca 25-27; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Thu, 8am-2am Fri, 8am-3am Sat, 9am-10pm Sun) This friendly pub should be your first choice for a sundowner in Esztergom. It has a terrace overlooking busy Bajcsy-Zsilinszky utca.

Termál Sörkert (Kis-Duna sétány; ☎ 9am-10pm) The 'Thermal Beer Garden' in the outdoor thermal pool grounds is a great place to be on a balmy summer evening; its outdoor seating area is jam-packed with a young crowd trying to be heard over the music.

Gambrinus Music Pub (Vörösmarty utca 3; ☎ 11am-2am Mon-Thu, 11am-3am Fri, 3pm-3am Sat, 3pm-2am Sun) If you want to kick your heels up, head for this popular pub-bar with the retro Hungarian look (curios and 'antiqued' stuff) and canned music.

Tropical Café (☎ 417 354; Simor János utca 46; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Thu, 10am-midnight Fri & Sat, noon-8pm Sun) This pub by the bus station has

cheap beer and is popular with students from the nearby trade school.

Entertainment

For up-to-date entertainment information on what's on, check the listings in the bi-weekly freebie *Komárom-Esztergomi Est*.

Organ concerts take place in the basilica over summer, the Esztergom Chroniclers sometimes perform ancient Hungarian music at the palace, and a bunch of concerts and plays are held in the town from mid-July to mid-August. Check with **Gran Tours** (☎ 502 001; Széchenyi tér 25), the **Ágost Bajor Cultural Centre** (☎ 313 888; Bajcsy-Zsilinszky utca 4) or visit www.esztergominyarijatekok.hu.

Getting There & Away

BUS

From Esztergom there are frequent buses to Budapest's Árpád hid bus station (544Ft, 70 minutes to two hours, 45km, every 20 minutes) in Pest between 4am and 9.30pm Monday to Saturday, or 4.20am and 8.10pm Sunday, and a handful to Széna tér bus station (766Ft, two hours, 65km, four daily) in Buda. The buses to Árpád hid bus station go via Dorog (70 minutes) or Visegrád (two hours). Buses to Visegrád (302Ft, 45 minutes, 25km) and Szentendre (606Ft, 1½ hours, 50km) leave every hour or so between 6.45am and 9pm.

Other important destinations served:

Destination	Price	Duration	Km	Frequency
Balatonfüred	2060Ft	4hr	165	1 daily at 5am
Dobogókő	241Ft	40min	20	2-4 daily
Komárom	795Ft	1½hr	60	3-4 daily
Sopron	2300Ft	4hr	190	1 daily at 5am
Tata	665Ft	1hr 40min	55	hourly
Veszprém	1820Ft	3½-4hr	145	3 daily

TRAIN

Trains for Budapest's Nyugati train station in Budapest (512Ft, 1½ hours, 55km, up to two dozen on weekdays and 20 at the weekend) are frequent. To get to Western Transdanubia and points beyond from Esztergom, take a train to Komárom (512Ft, 1½ to two hours, up to six daily), where you can change for Győr, Székesfehérvár and Vienna.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'