

# Getting Started

A trip to Hungary actually requires very little advance planning. Free tourist literature abounds, maps are excellent and readily available, and staff at tourist offices, travel agencies, hotels, train stations and so on are generally helpful and knowledgeable. In fact, almost anything can be arranged after you've arrived. And as most experienced travellers know, the problems that occurred to you at home usually turn out to be irrelevant or sort themselves out once you're on the road.

But all this applies only if you have unlimited time and budget, you don't have an interest in a particular activity, type of architecture or kind of music, and you'll eat or drink anything set down in front of you. If you have to watch what you spend or want better value for your money while travelling, you will benefit greatly from careful planning. And if you have specific interests, you'll certainly want to make sure that the things you came to see and do will be possible when you visit.

## WHEN TO GO

Hungary has a temperate climate with three climatic zones so there is a certain amount of variation across the country: Mediterranean in the south, Continental in the east and Atlantic in the west. The main tourist season is discussed in Directory (p365).

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

There are no particular items of clothing to remember when packing – an umbrella in spring and autumn, perhaps, and a warm hat in winter – unless you plan to do some serious hiking or other sport. In general, Hungarians dress very casually – their summer fashions and beachwear are daringly brief, even by Continental European standards – and many attend even the opera in denim. Men needn't bother bringing a tie; it will never be used.

A swimsuit for use in the mixed-sex thermal spas and pools is a good idea as are plastic sandals or thongs (flip-flops). If you plan to stay in hostels, pack a towel and soap. Bedclothes are usually provided, though you might want to bring your own sleeping sheet, as well as a padlock for storage lockers.

Other items you might need include:

- a compass to help orient yourself while rambling (or even while driving)
- a torch/flashlight if you intend on camping or visiting caves
- an adaptor plug for electrical appliances that don't have a standard two-pin European plug (eg, an immersion water heater or small kettle for an impromptu cup of tea or coffee)
- a universal bath/sink plug (a plastic film canister sometimes works)
- sunglasses and sun block, even in the cooler months
- premoistened towelettes or a large cotton handkerchief to soak in fountains and use to cool off in the hot summer months
- a Swiss Army knife (or equivalent), with such essentials as a bottle opener and strong corkscrew (don't forget to pack it with your check-on luggage, though)
- binoculars for trekking, bird-watching or viewing detail on churches and other buildings
- photocopies of important documents (passport data page, credit cards, travel insurance policy, air/bus/train tickets, driving licence etc), with a copy left with someone at home

See Climate Charts (p368) for more information.

Without taking regional differences into consideration, every season has its attractions in Hungary. But do yourself a favour and drop the 'romantic' notion of a winter on the *puszta* (Great Plain). Aside from being cold and often bleak, winter sees museums and other tourist sights closed or their hours sharply curtailed.

Although it can be pretty wet in April and May, spring is just glorious throughout Hungary. The weather is usually mild and – a boon for independent travellers – the crowds of tourists have not yet arrived.

The Hungarian summer is warm, sunny and unusually long, and the resorts can get very crowded in late July and August. If you avoid Lake Balaton and the ever-popular Mátra Hills, you should be OK. As elsewhere in Europe, Budapest and other Hungarian cities come to a grinding halt in August, which Hungarians traditionally call 'the cucumber-growing season' (because that's about the only thing happening here).

Autumn is beautiful, particularly in the hills around Budapest and in the Northern Uplands. In Transdanubia and on the Great Plain it's harvest and vintage time. November is one of the rainiest months of the year in certain parts of the country, however.

## COSTS & MONEY

Hungary 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 bunk down in private rooms, eat at medium-priced restaurants and travel on public transport, you should get by on €30 a day in the provinces without too much scrimping, though Budapest will cost you closer to €40 a day.

Travelling in more style and comfort – restaurant splurges with bottles of wine, a fairly active nightlife, stay in small hotels/guesthouses with 'character' – will cost about twice as much (€60 in the provinces and €80 in the capital). 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 €20 a day.

For information about discounts, see p369.

## TRAVEL BOOKS

Travellers writing diary accounts usually treat Hungary rather cursorily as they make tracks for 'more exotic' Romania or places beyond. A few classic – and very personal accounts – are still available in bookshops, libraries or on Amazon.com.

- *Between the Woods and the Water* (Patrick Leigh Fermor) Describing his 1933 walk through Western and Central Europe to Constantinople as a young man, Fermor wrote the classic account of Hungary.
- *Stealing from a Deep Place* (Brian Hall) Sensitive but never cloying, the author describes his tempered love affair with the still communist Budapest of the 1980s while completing a two-year cycle tour of Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria.
- *The City of the Magyar or Hungary and Her Institutions in 1839–40* (Julia Pardoe) One of the best sources for early 19th-century Hungary in English, this three-volume part-travelogue, part-history by a British spinster is priceless for its vivid descriptions of contemporary events such as the devastating Danube floods of 1838.
- *Under the Frog* (Tibor Fischer) An amusing account of the antics of two members of Hungary's elite national basketball team from the end of WWII through the 1956 Uprising.

## HOW MUCH?

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

Bed in private room in provinces/Budapest from 2000/4500Ft

Cup of coffee in café 200-380Ft

Local English-language newspaper 395-590Ft

Dinner for two at good restaurant in provinces/Budapest 9000/15,000Ft

## LONELY PLANET INDEX

1L petrol 265-273Ft

1L bottled water 150Ft

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

Souvenir T-shirt 1500Ft

## TOP TENS

### Castles & Palaces

Hungary's most celebrated castles and palaces:

- Boldogkő Castle at Boldogkőváralja (p344)
- Sümeg Castle (p203)
- Hollókő Castle (p318)
- Eger Castle (p329)
- Zrínyi Castle at Szigetvár (p305)
- Jurisics Castle in Kőszeg (p183)
- Siklós Castle (p287)
- Esterházy Palace at Fertőd (p169)
- Royal Mansion at Gödöllő (p129)
- Festetics Palace at Keszthely (p193)

### Churches & Synagogues

Hungary's most beautiful houses of worship:

- Art Nouveau synagogue in Szeged (p263)
- Church of the Ascension in Sümeg (p204)
- Gothic Calvinist church and the Minorite church in Nyírbátor (p360)
- Abbey Church in Tihany (p208)
- Baroque Minorite church in Eger (p330)
- Baroque cathedral at Kalocsa (p247)
- Pécs synagogue (p297)
- Romanesque church at Óriszentpéter (p185)
- Gothic Old Synagogue in Sopron (p165)
- Romantic Nationalist synagogue in Szolnok (now the Szolnok Gallery; p227)

### Outdoor Activities

Among Hungary's top outdoor activities:

- Horse riding around Szilvásvárad in the Northern Uplands (p336)
- Canoeing or kayaking on the Tisza River (p231)
- Cycling in the Danube Bend area (p148)
- Bird-watching in the Hortobágy region (p239)
- Swimming in the thermal lake at Hévíz (p197)
- Riding the narrow-gauge railway from Miskolc into the Bükk Hills (p339)
- Hiking in the Zemplén Hills (p345)
- Sailing (or windsurfing) on Lake Balaton (p190)
- Caving in Aggtelek (p343)
- Fishing in Lake Tisza (p231)

- *Homage to the Eighth District* (Giorgio and Nicola Pressburger) A poignant account of life in what was a Jewish working-class section of Budapest during and after WWII by twin brothers who emigrated to Italy in 1956.
- *In Time of Trouble* (Claud Cockburn) An enlightening, often very funny, autobiography by the celebrated British journalist who spent several years in Budapest as a young man in the 1920s with his government servant father. The account of the aborted orgy by the banks of the Danube is classic.
- *Hungary & the Hungarians: The Keywords* (István Bart) Subtitled 'A Concise Dictionary of Facts, Beliefs, Customs, Usage & Myths', this book will prepare you for (and guide you through) just about everything Magyar – from ABC (a kind of greengrocer under the old regime) to Zsolnay.
- *Living in Hungary* (Jean-Luc Soule and Alain Fleischer) This lavishly photographed coffee-table book takes you into the country's finest and most elegant cafés, bathhouses, palaces, castles, hotels, restaurants and private homes.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Hungarian Home Page** ([www.fsz.bme.hu/hungary/homepage.html](http://www.fsz.bme.hu/hungary/homepage.html)) Reference site and search engine for everything and anything Hungarian

**Hungarian National Tourism Organisation** ([www.hungary.com](http://www.hungary.com)) Without a doubt the best single website on Hungary and should be your first portal of call

**Hungarian Youth Hostels** ([www.youthhostels.hu](http://www.youthhostels.hu)) An excellent site for tracking down budget accommodation across Hungary as well as for practical and background information about the country

**Inside Hungary** ([www.insidehungary.com](http://www.insidehungary.com)) National news and a myriad of excellent links on everything from business to culture

**Hungary.hu** ([www.hungary.hu](http://www.hungary.hu)) Government portal with key data but not always as up-to-date as it should be

**Museums in Hungary** ([www.museum.hu](http://www.museum.hu)) A complete list of every museum in the land currently open to the public

**Travelport** ([www.hotels.hu](http://www.hotels.hu)) A great source of information for accommodation to suit every pocket

Check out [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com) for summaries on Hungary, links to Hungary-related sites and travellers trading information on the Thorn Tree.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### IN THE WAKE OF THE LAKE

One week

Combining the highlights of Transdanubia and the Lake Balaton regions will give you a taste of Hungary's historical wealth and natural beauty. From **Budapest** (p63) make your way through the rolling **Pilis Hills** (p144) and turn off for **Esztergom** (p144), Hungary's holiest city. The road continues west along the Danube to **Győr** (p155), an industrial city surprisingly rich in historical buildings and monuments. From here you can detour south to **Pannonhalma** (p160), whose awesome abbey is on Unesco's World Heritage List, or carry on westwards via Hungary's own 'Versailles' at **Fertőd** (p169) to delightful **Sopron** (p162). Next head south to **Kőszeg** (p181), so pretty it's called the nation's jewellery box, and then make your way southeast via **Sárvár** (p177), where Hungary's 'Dracula' had her nip and suck, to **Sümege** (p203) and its dramatic castle. Lake Balaton is just 20km south; follow the scenic northern coast road past the coastal settlements of **Badacsony** (p198), **Tihany** (p207) and **Balatonfüred** (p210) to **Veszprém** (p214), the 'city of queens'. From here you can make your way back to Budapest and, to be fair, stop at **Székesfehérvár** (p220), the 'city of kings'.

This 545km trip has something for everyone: castles, historic churches, palaces, thermal spas, rolling hills and Hungary's biggest lake. For the most part it's an easy drive, and you could do it in a few days. But with so much to see and time to recharge on the Balaton, we'd recommend at least a week.



### OVER HILL & BEYOND DALE

One week

Hungary's uplands to the north are hardly what you could call dramatic. But they have a gentle beauty all their own and nestling within the hills are important historical towns and traditional villages. From **Budapest** (p63) head north to **Vác** (p137), arguably the most attractive town on the Danube Bend, and then on to **Balassagyarmat** (p313), the capital of the traditional Palóc region. Continue due east to **Szécsény** (p315), site of a pivotal battle and a delightful manor house. Dip down through the rolling Cserhát Hills to **Hollókő** (p317), a 'museum town' of Hungarian traditions. From here the road winds through the eastern Cserhát and foothills of the Mátra Hills to **Gyöngyös** (p322), where you'll start an almost tortuous drive through the hills past **Kékestető** (p326), Hungary's highest point, and scary **Recsk** (p327), site of what was once Hungary's most brutal forced-labour camp. Lovely baroque **Eger** (p327) awaits you at the end of the high road. For a taste of Hungary's 'lowlands' – the Great Plain – head southeast via **Tiszafüred** (p230) and **Hortobágy National Park** (p238) to **Debrecen** (p233), nicknamed 'Calvinist Rome', the country's second-largest city.



You'll get both the 'ups' and the 'downs' of northern and eastern Hungary – the so-called Northern Uplands and the Great Plain – on this 345km trip. There's plenty to do – from exploring historical cities like Eger and Debrecen to wine-tasting in Gyöngyös and bird-watching in the Hortobágy region.

## ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

### FORGOTTEN CORNER IN MIND

Three days

Hungary's northeast corner, encompassing parts of the Northern Uplands and a region appropriately called the Northeast, is an area often overlooked by travellers and all the more attractive for it. For a good overview of the region, start in **Miskolc** (p337), Hungary's third-largest city, and head north to **Aggtelek** (p342), gateway to an enormous karst cave system and a Unesco World Heritage Site. From here head east via **Boldogkőváralja** (p344), site of a 'Disneyesque' hilltop castle, to **Sárospatak** (p348), renowned for its college and castle. Then continue on to **Vásárosnamény** (p362), the gateway to traditional villages and sights of the Northeast, including **Tákos** (p362) and **Csaroda** (p362) to the east, and **Tarpa** (p362), **Szatmárcseke** (p363) and **Túristvándi** (p363) to the south. Once back on the main road, carry on to **Nyírbátor** (p359), famed for its Gothic churches. Head west, stopping briefly at **Máriapócs** (p361) and **Nagykálló** (p359), pilgrimage sites for the Catholic and Jewish faithful respectively, before reaching the Northeast's regional centre and your destination, **Nyíregyháza** (p355).

For a look at how things used to be – when the world was governed by the seasons and powered by the horse – this is the ideal itinerary. At 415km, with relatively few major centres and places to stay en route, it's a trip that could be done in just a few days if you plough straight through. But you might like to pause and, well, smell the roses.



## TAILORED TRIPS

### MIXING WINE & WATER

Nothing beats a glass of wine and nothing beats a sauna and/or soak after one glass too many. So why not combine the two – wine and water – and indulge and detox as you go?

**Eger** (p327) is home to Hungary's famous Egri Bikavér (Eger Bull's Blood) and Pinot Noir and boasts thermal baths of its own. A mere 8km to the southwest is **Egerszalók** (p334), a hot spring set to become one of northern Hungary's biggest spas.

The celebrated **Tokaj region** (p345) nestling in the foothills of the Zemplén Hills to the northeast is awash with sweet wine and sweet water. You won't find much thermal water in these parts but there's swimming in the Tisza River, and the curative waters of the Cave Bath at **Miskolctapolca** (p340) and the Végardó recreational complex in **Sárospatak** (p348) are only a hop, skip and plunge away.

**Sopron** (p162) is one of the most important wine regions of western Hungary and the surrounding hills produce such notable red wines as Kékfrankos and Merlot. Here you'll also find the large **Lóvér Baths** (p169), a great place to relax after a night on the town. To the southeast, on the way to Lake Balaton, is the **Somló region** (p58), which has two great and indigenous grape varieties: Hárslevelű (Linden Leaf) and Juhfark (Sheep's Tail).

The northern shore of the Balaton – particularly around **Badacsony** (p198) – produces some of Hungary's finest wines, notably Olaszrizling (Italian Riesling) and Kéknyelű (Blue Stalk). Swimming in the lake from Badacsonyytomaj is pleasant but if you want to 'take the waters' in what is one of the world's largest thermal lakes, head to **Hévíz** (p197).

The **Villány-Siklós region** (p57), in southwest Hungary, is home to the nation's best reds: Kékoportó (Blauer Portugieser), Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. They are almost always big-bodied Bordeaux-style wines that are high in tannins. Should you have over-indulged, get thee to the spa town of **Harkány** (p290), a short distance to the west, where everything centres round the cure-all thermal baths.



# Snapshot

At the end of its first full year as a fully-fledged member of the EU (May 2005), Hungary was at something of a crossroads politically, economically and, at the risk of sounding overly dramatic, historically.

Parliamentary elections loomed in May 2006, and incumbent prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány of the socialist MSZP party was still trying to convince the electorate of the benefits of adopting the euro. Gyurcsány succeeded Péter Medgyessy in August 2004 when the government's popularity was at its lowest in three years, having curbed salary increases, cut housing subsidies and raised some taxes. But it remained a hard sell. For one thing, it was going to require a longer wait than anticipated for all those riches from the 'drunken uncles' in Brussels; in May 2004 Medgyessy had been forced to push back the proposed adoption date (2008) by two years when it became clear he could not reduce the budget deficit by 2.5% as required by the EU in time. Now Gyurcsány faced the same unattractive choice: scale back social programmes established during communism or delay adoption of the euro yet again – thereby eroding the benefits of joining the EU in the first place.

By late 2005 inflation had been contained at 3.5%, down from double-digit figures 10 years before, and annual growth remains a respectable 4%. The unemployment rate nationwide hovers just under 6% but that figure is deceptive. While the rate is only about 5% in Budapest, it is as high as 20% in the Northeast.

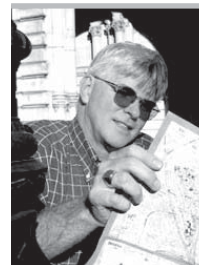
Waiting in the wings in late 2005 was Viktor Orbán, head of the centre-right Fidesz-MPP party. Orbán, who became prime minister in 1998 but was ousted as much for his arrogance as anything else in 2002, was pitted against Medgyessy, his nemesis and junior by just a year. And in a world turned upside-down the 'socialist' Gyurcsány, who cut his political teeth in the communist youth movement, ranked among the 100 wealthiest Hungarians and advocated the sale of the national carrier Malév and Ferihegy International Airport. The conservative Orbán meanwhile, opposed the sale of such state assets and backs an increase in social spending.

Amid all the wrangling a news item that seemed to go unnoticed in much of the Western press was the rejection by the Hungarian electorate in the December 2004 plebiscite to grant ethnic Hungarians living outside the borders – a total of 2.5 million, with an estimated 1.45 million in Romania alone – the right to hold Hungarian as well as Romanian, Slovakian, Serbian or Ukrainian citizenship. Many saw this as the final nail in the coffin of 'Greater Hungary' – the nation of the swollen borders that nationalists had dreamed of returning to throughout the 1930s and took the nation to the wrong side in WWII. In 1992 the late Prime Minister József Antall alienated people at home and abroad with his claim to be the 'emotional and spiritual' prime minister of the Magyar minorities in those countries.

## FAST FACTS

Population: 10.083 million  
 GDP per head: US\$10,400; GDP per head at purchasing power parity: US\$14,900  
 Inflation: 3.5%  
 Unemployment: 5.9%  
 Size: 93,030 sq km  
 Population identifying themselves as Roman Catholics: 52%  
 Internet domain: hu  
 Suicide rate: 60.1 per 100,000 people (UK: 15.1% per 100,000 people; USA: 21.7% per 100,000 people)  
 National anthem: *Himnusz*, with the music composed by Ferenc Erkel and the lyrics written by poet Ferenc Kölcsey  
 Number of government employees: 800,000 (20% of the total workforce)

# The Authors



## **STEVE FALLON** Coordinating Author, Budapest, Western Transdanubia

Steve, who has worked on every edition of Hungary, first visited Magyarország in the early 1980s with three things on his 'to do' list: visit a thermal spa, drink masses of Tokaj wine and buy fruit for friends in Poland whose children, born under the neofascist regime of General Wojciech Jaruzelski, had never seen (much less tasted) such 'exotics' as bananas. Having accomplished all three, he returned again and again, moving to Budapest in 1992, where he learned to love the Hungarian language, *pálinka* more than Tokaj and very hot thermal water – not necessarily in that order. Now based in London, Steve goes back to Hungary regularly for a fix of all three.

### Steve's Favourite Trip

The problem with getting into Budapest (p63) is getting out, but after a couple of days (and nights) of nonstop frolicking, I'm ready for something 'high'. The drive through the Mátra Hills (p322), Hungary's most picturesque upland area, fulfils all my requirements: wine at Gyöngyös (p322), thermal water at Parádsasvár (p326) and superlatives at Kékestető (p326; Hungary's highest point) and Eger (p327; Hungary's most beautiful town). If I'm feeling 'low', I head south to Veszprém (p214) and follow the northern shore of Lake Balaton via Balatonfüred (p210), Tihany (p207) and Badacsony (p198). I may not find many superlatives here, but there is plenty of wine and enough thermal water to float a ship at my destination, Hévíz (p197).



## **NEAL BEDFORD** Danube Bend, Lake Balaton Region, Great Plains, Southern Transdanubia, Northern Uplands, Northeast

Neal had visited Hungary many times from his home in Vienna for cheap dental work and even cheaper wine. However, taking advantage of the savings in Sopron and Budapest doesn't amount to actually seeing Magyarország. This soon became apparent on his first proper exploration of the country for Lonely Planet a number of years ago. After clocking up thousands of kilometres, avoiding mad drivers, horse-drawn carts and parking inspectors, Neal now believes he can truly say he's seen Hungary, but in his heart he knows this kidney-shaped country still holds some surprises for him.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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