

Budapest

Story and Photos by Suzanne Wright

A drunken angel appeared at train station in Prague just as we were headed to Budapest.

It was early, early morning and cold. A dirty-fingered man in a tattered scarf appeared in answer to our prayers: who can help us with these ridiculously large suitcases. And though his English was limited and his breath smelled of alcohol, he politely led us to the platform. As we waited, snow tumbled from a slat in the arched ceiling overhead, huge flakes melting as they hit the gray asphalt. Suddenly our angel reappeared: the train is arriving on another platform and we must hurry. Wrangling suitcases nearly as large as he was, he got us to the right platform and into the right car, only then taking a tip.

“Prague is okay?” he asks with a shy smile.

Yes, yes it was.

But now we are off to Budapest and the sunrise seen through streaky windows is orange and magenta and violet. The landscape is stark, winter bleak. It’s a seven hour trip broken only by the occasional stop and the passport checks that occur as stern-faced bureaucrats come onboard in Slovakia and again in Hungary. It feels like a strange throwback and has an almost black-and-white quality to it. We are headed into Eastern Europe. Except that Hungary considers itself Central Europe, as several waiters, taxi drivers and tour guides point out (worldwide opinion varies on this matter, which can provoke prickly debate).

All we knew about Hungary before our arrival was that the Gabor sisters, Zsa Zsa and Eva, are from here, and maybe Ivana Trump (wrong, as it turns out; she’s from the Czech Republic), and that there are more hydrothermal and mineral springs here than anywhere else in the world (more on that later). The people of Budapest have played second fiddle to the more savvy travel marketers in Prague and bristle at the mention of the charms of the smaller city, rather like a younger sibling feels when compared to an older sibling who excelled at sports.

And, nearly to a person, the Hungarians we met seem to be wistful for what has past, for a glorious era no longer enjoyed.

“When we were part of the Astro-Hungarian empire...” begins one middle-aged man as he launches into a history lesson of wars and territory won and lost. Another man shows us a map of the former sprawling kingdom, punctuated with a “tsk, tsk” of the losses the country suffered in its land mass when it was vanquished. One might compare this rear-view mirror viewpoint to Southerners who still work in references to the Civil War in casual conversation. The country is equal parts bruised and arrogant. But still, we can’t help but feel the pain of a proud people.

And yet Budapest is unabashedly one of the most beautifully laid out cities in world. Located on the Danube River, Buda and Pest were separate towns until 1873, one on each bank, Buda in the hills; Pest flat as a pancake. Snow is cocooning most of the city, but we head to Heroes Square to see the grand monument of historic figures that marks the thousandth anniversary of the Magyar conquest. Magyars are natives of Hungary and Heroes Square is a massive expanse of pavement bookended by the Palace of the Arts on one side and the Museum of Fine Arts on the other. It's an impressive open space dominated by a column topped with the Archangel Gabriel and equestrian statues of the seven Magyar chiefs who conquered the territory.

Another grand space is the Central Market Hall, a colorful, indoor, neo-Gothic mall selling lacework, produce, baked goods, meats, souvenirs and liquor. Here, we chat with locals as we shop for snacks to take back to our hotel, the Intercontinental. Located on the Pest side of the city, the rooms feature commanding views of the Danube and the Chain Bridge. It's also close to the pedestrian shopping area, the Vaci Atca. At Lexus, an exclusive department store in a glorious art nouveau building, I purchase a furry and stylish hat with ear flaps: very czarist, very warm, very chic.

The snow is heavy as the afternoon stretches on, so we duck into Central Kavehaz, a coffeehouse with floor-to-ceiling windows and, blessedly, a non-smoking section. We have a late lunch of chicken with paprika and red wine, capped with a sour cherry strudel. Two smartly dressed older women chat us up, clucking with approval on our choice for tonight's dinner. Outside, the snow is turning to slush; inside, we while away a couple of hours, toasty and satisfied. This is the anti-Starbucks, a glorious place to people-watch.

We dress up in our finest for dinner at Gundel, one of the most memorable meals I've had in Europe—in the world, in fact. Our taxi deposits us at the door and we are whisked in, our coats slipped from our bodies seamlessly, like VIPs. Ronald Lauder, son of cosmetics maven Estee Lauder, has restored the restaurant to its former sumptuous grandeur after years of neglect. It is impeccable: not a tattered napkin nor a scratched chair nor marred wallpaper in sight. The art collection dazzles.

The food and service are equally impeccable, the pacing pitch-perfect. We behave like flushed 15 year olds, coquettishly flirting with the elderly musicians who play with great tenderness and rakishly return our smiles. From the many menus (including an elegant vegetarian option my friend enjoyed), I select a seven-course menu of new and traditional Hungarian dishes with wine pairings. I have ham and roe rolled in paper-thin deer, foie gras terrine with tokai, venison soup, catfish, beefsteak with cranberries and the famed crepe a la Gundel with chocolate sauce and orange ice cream. It is a ravishing evening.

Before we retire, we notice the Chain Bridge all lit up, a mesmerizing view we can see from bed, a magical end to a wonderful day. The next day, we head to the famed Gellert Baths, the oldest of the city's public baths. The springs that supply the Gellert with its healing water have been flowing for nearly 2,000 years, but we found the space rather dingy. Still, it is a must-see and a place where you will—literally—rub shoulders (and possibly, other body parts) with locals. In conversation, we learn that the inventor of the

Rubik's cube is from Budapest, but that he was swindled out of his rightful millions by (supposedly) cagey Asians who reproduced the colorful block without proper licensing.

"He was a bad, bad businessman," says a taxi driver.

We gawk at the garish spectacle that is Parliament, its girth dominating the riverside like a hulking behemoth. The building is, as one guide book says, "an expression of the country's robust self-confidence at the beginning of 20th century." Once the largest parliament building in the world, it was meant to echo the structures of London, but the neo-Gothic edifice is a bit of an architectural folly. Still, though it is clunky, you instinctually love it, mainly for its presumed pomp.

A more successful structure is the impressive synagogue, the second largest in the world after Temple Emmanuel in New York City. Located in the historic Jewish Quarter, Ludwig Förster's Byzantine-Moorish design, with its impressive onion-shaped towers, was restored after the sacrilegious damage done by the Nazis. While too large to heat in the winter for services, it is open all year. An inverted menorah, a weeping willow, in the courtyard is the poignant Shoah Memorial. Each of the willow leaves commemorates the name of a family murdered by the Nazis.

Our final dinner is at Kiralty ("king") restaurant, which features gypsy music and dance in a charming setting. I have the best salad of our trip, beef steak with bull's blood (red wine) and a plum tart with cinnamon ice cream. Afterwards, we meet up with Gregory, a 20-year old who looks a lot like actor Josh Harnett who works at the Intercontinental, at a local pub. He's brought a friend. The four of us sip beers and talk of our jobs, our dreams, our loves—lost, current and future—late into the night.

He is unabashed in his love of Americans and America, though he has never been. He is well-read and well-spoken and kind-hearted, though we are old enough to be his mother and grandmother, respectively. Before we leave, he quietly slips me a small teddy bear, a token to remember him by. I am surprised—and touched. He says he will miss our visits to the sauna, gym and pool.

Far from drunken, he's another angel, our angel of Budapest.

If You Go

Log onto www.budapestinfo.hu, www.gotohungary.com and www.hungarytourism.hu for general information about the country and the city. For reservations at the Intercontinental, call 1-888-IC-HOTELS or click on <http://budapest.intercontinental.com/index.html>.