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Europe Trip, Visiting Central Europe (E26A-1)

Hungary – Budapest and Day Trips

In 2020, I returned from a trip to Central America just in time for COVID to hit the fan, canceling plans for a Central Europe trip I was going to take that summer. That same year, I started breaking bones in my feet, which led to a diagnosis of Charcot Foot and my permanently wearing medical boots. Because I enjoy city-hiking my way through overseas trips, I thought such trips were behind me. But I've been able to resume more cautious city-hiking, putting it to the test in recent years with explorations of El Paso, Kansas City, San Antonio and Oklahoma City. For this trip, I put it to the test with that long-planned trip to the Central European countries of Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia.

After a brief stopover in London, I headed for Budapest, Hungary. I first visited Budapest back in 2007 on a day trip out of Vienna. The day trip sucked, but what little we actually saw of Budapest was interesting, so I made plans to target it for a longer visit someday.

Budapest was the biggest of the three central European capitals I was visiting, but my hotel was nicely located, putting everything I was targeting in the city within walking distance. It was also just a couple blocks from a primary shopping/restaurant area, so I had plenty of dining options for my six-night stay.

With six nights, I had five days for sightseeing. I divided my plans to areas west, east, south and north of the hotel, which left me with time for a day trip someplace outside of the city.

Budapest settlement dates back to Roman times, and later the development of two cities – Buda on the west side of the Danube River and Pest on the east (and a third city, Óbuda, which doesn't get the same attention). Buda became a royal walled city on Castle Hill, and would become the capital of the Kingdom of Hungary from 1361 to 1873, when Buda, Pest and Óbuda were unified into Budapest. Budapest would become a co-capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was dissolved in 1918 after World War I when Hungary terminated that union.

Hungary sided with Nazi Germany in World War II, but when it believed Germany would lose, it tried to change sides, only to be occupied by German forces. The Soviet army "liberated" Hungary at the end of the war, resulting in Hungary becoming a communist country behind the Iron Curtain. A 1956 uprising against Communist rule failed, but Hungary became a western democracy in 1989 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, Hungary is a member of the European Union and NATO. Museums and historic sites in Budapest reflect this long history.



I got a great picture of central Budapest as we were approaching its airport. All of my sightseeing destinations in the city appear in this photo, so I guess you don't have to look at the rest of them.



A major restaurant and retail district was located off Vörösmarty Square just south of my hotel. On the square itself were a number of booths serving up Hungarian street food, crafts and sweets every evening to decent crowds.

I've noticed in my travels all over Europe that locals generally make much better use of their city centers during evenings and weekends than we see in most American cities.



Buda Castle – more of a palace, actually – dominates the south end of Castle Hill. It was substantially restored after World War II damage (the Nazis used it as their headquarters during their occupation), and some restoration work continues. Parts of the castle and its grounds can be toured, and it houses two museums, including the very good Budapest History Museum/Buda Castle Museum.



The east end of the Széchenyi Chain Bridge was a couple blocks north of my hotel. The bridge crosses the Danube River, leading to a park at the base of Castle Hill. There, you can hike up Castle Hill or take a ride up on a funicular. A couple Viking longships are docked just upstream (left) of the bridge. Longship river cruises have become popular on the Danube River.



The history museum had a section that focused on the history of the castle itself and a bigger section that focused on about 1500 years of Budapest history from early settlement to the post-Communist era. It also featured a small exhibit on prehistoric times and Ice Age animals once found in the area.



Buda Castle's Lions Court



Sándor Palace, next to Buda Castle, is the official residence of the Hungarian president



The top tourist draws at the north end of Castle Hill include the Matthias Church (the Church of Our Lady of Buda Castle) and the Fisherman's Bastion at Holy Trinity Square. The church can be toured for a small admission fee, and features the tomb of Béla III, King of Hungary.

A small fee is now also charged to go on top of Fisherman's Bastion, originally built as part of Castle Hill's fortifications. It offers excellent views of the Danube River and central Budapest.



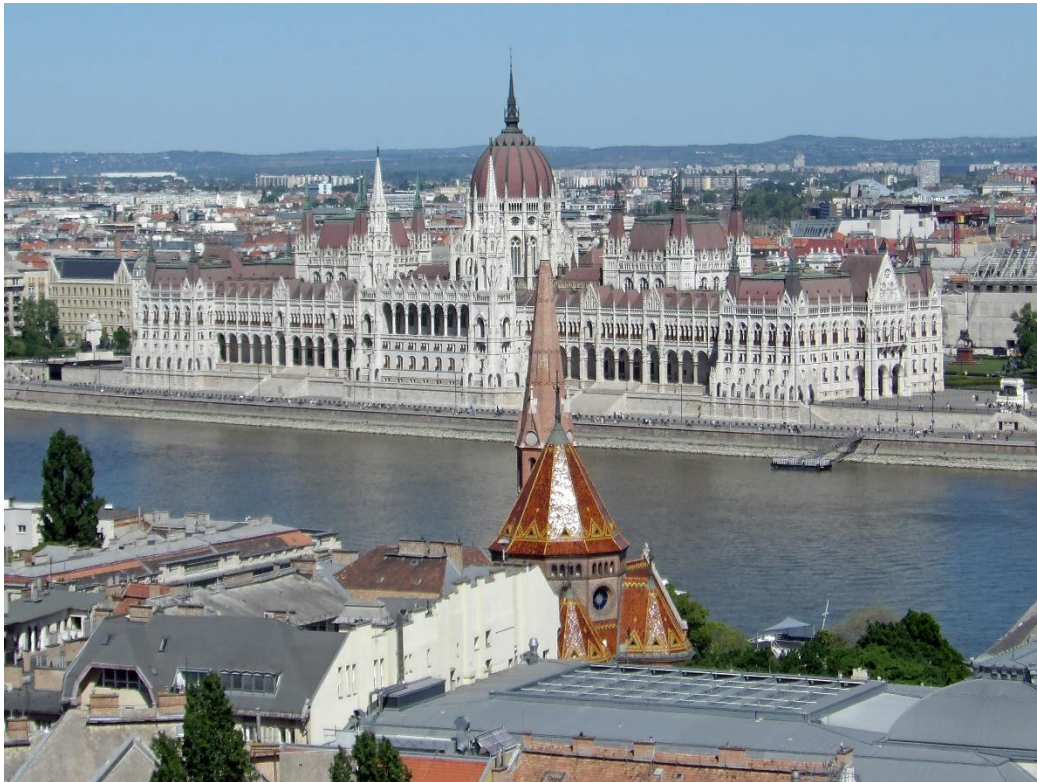
Inside Matthias Church



Matthias Church and the Fisherman's Bastion, as seen from the east bank of the Danube River



View looking north from Fisherman's Bastion



View of the Hungarian Parliament from Fisherman's Bastion



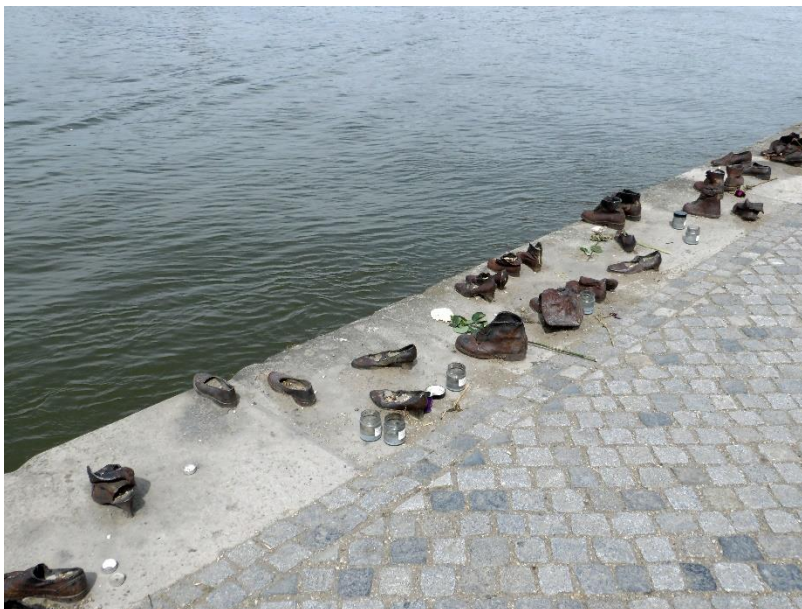
One of the quirkier Castle Hill attractions is the Labyrinth, a cave system in the hill. As part of its claim to fame, this is where Hungarian King Matthias (the church was named for him) imprisoned Vlad III a.k.a. Vlad the Impaler a.k.a. Vlad Dracula after capturing him in Transylvania, which was part of Hungary at the time. (Today, Transylvania is part of Romania.)



The Labyrinth thus has a closer association with Dracula than Romania's Bran Castle – marketed as Dracula's Castle – does, which I visited in 2019, pictured here. There is scant evidence that Vlad the Impaler was ever at Bran Castle.



The Hungarian Parliament is home to the National Assembly of Hungary, and it is the largest building in the country. Its design was inspired by the Palace of Westminster in London, home of the British Parliament. There are a handful of statues and memorials on the parliament grounds, including the Kossuth Square Massacre Memorial related to the 1956 uprising. You can book a tour of the parliament, but these fill up fast. It also features a parliament museum, although that was closed the day I visited as preparations were underway for installing a new prime minister.



On my walk north along the Danube to the parliament, I stopped at the Shoes on the Danube Bank memorial. During World War II, Hungarian fascists had victims remove their shoes before executing them along the river's edge so their bodies would fall into the Danube and be carried away. Shoes were valuable during the war and could be sold. About 23,500 people, including 20,000 Jews, were murdered this way.



Nearby Liberty Square features this monument to the Soviet liberation of Hungary from the Nazis in World War II. I've come across similar monuments in other eastern Europe countries, which have since developed mixed feelings about these memorials. Some countries have removed them in recent years. Liberty Square also has statues of U.S. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush in tribute to their roles as communism fell in eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s.



The Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation stands on the edge of Liberty Square. Hungarians continue to attach pictures and biographies of victims at the site.

Idiots with selfie sticks take photos of themselves in silly poses in front of the site, indifferent to the solemnity of the memorial. Makes me wonder whether those in the selfies crowd bother to learn anything about the sites they visit, or if everything is just a stage for their selfies.



St. Stephen's Basilica was built in the latter half of the 1800s, and is a prominent Budapest landmark, popular with tourists although it is not particularly historic. It was named for St. Stephen I of Hungary, the first King of Hungary. His mummified right hand is on display in a reliquary inside the church.



The basilica is located near the west end of Andrásy Avenue, which leads through a historically ritzy neighborhood to Heroes Square and City Park. Along the way, it passes the Hungarian State Opera House, whose ornate lobby is open to the public.



In front of the opera house is more of the Stolpersteine Project, a.k.a. the Cobblestone Project. I've come across this in a number of European cities. Small concrete cubes are covered with brass plates that identify names and life dates of people associated with that location who became victims of Nazi extermination and persecution efforts. More than 100,000 of these have been installed across Europe.



Further up the street is the House of Terror, a museum focused on the activities of the Hungarian fascist Arrow Cross Party in World War II and later communist regimes in Hungary who used this building to detain, interrogate, torture and kill victims of these regimes.



Heroes' Square pays tribute to past Hungarian leaders, in particular those related to the establishment of the Hungarian kingdom. Its central feature, the Millennium Memorial, commemorates the thousandth anniversary of the Hungarian conquest of the area.



The square is flanked by two art museums, but I instead headed to the very good Museum of Ethnography, which focused on Hungarian folk arts, costumes and culture. There I saw this display of Hungarian rosemaling, er, decorative flower painting.



Budapest is famous for its thermal baths, and many people come to City Park for this, the Széchenyi Thermal Bath and Swimming Pool, the largest “medicinal bath” in Europe. A spring here produces 1.6 million gallons of hot water daily. The complex features several different indoor and outdoor pools, spas and steam rooms.

City Park also features a zoo and botanical garden, a circus, a biodome, walking paths, playgrounds, restaurants, a “castle” (built for an exhibit, not as a functioning castle), and a music venue.



When the Nazis occupied Budapest late in World War II, they walled off the Jewish part of town, creating a Jewish ghetto. After the war, most of the wall was removed, although a small section still stands, along with a nearby exhibit about Jewish life in the Budapest ghetto at the time.



The Dohány Street Synagogue was part of that neighborhood, and survived World War II during which the Nazis used it as a base for German Radio and then as a stable for animals. It is the largest synagogue in Europe, and one of the largest in the world.



Inside the synagogue. The synagogue complex also features the Heroes' Temple dedicated to Hungarian Jews who gave their lives in World War I, the Raoul Wallenberg Holocaust Memorial Park, and an exhibit focused on Budapest's World War II Jewish ghetto.



The Garden of Remembrance, which began as a pleasant urban greenspace outside the synagogue, became a cemetery with mass graves for the more than 2000 Jewish ghetto residents who died of cold or hunger during the winter of 1944-1945.



The massive and generally excellent Hungarian National Museum uses historical and archaeological artifacts to tell the history of the region from the days of the Neanderthals to the present day, with the displays organized in a generally chronological order. It is well worth visiting, but one could easily spend the better part of a day here.



The piano belonged to Liszt Ferenc, a Hungarian composer, pianist and conductor better known to people outside of Hungary as Franz Liszt.

Liszt popped up at various places in my Budapest visit, starting at the Budapest Ferenc Liszt International Airport where my visit started, a reflection of Hungary's pride in its native son.



Artifacts from Hungary's communist era



The museum also had a temporary exhibit on Atilla the Hun. He had established the center of his Hunnic Empire on what would become the Great Hungarian Plain. Although historical Huns and modern Hungarians are distinct peoples, Hungary has embraced Atilla the Hun as a legendary national hero and cultural icon. (But no, the name *Hungary* was not based on *Hun*.)



At the south end of my Budapest sightseeing was the Central Market Hall, a large collection of market stalls featuring local meats, cheeses, vegetables, baked goods and other items catering to both locals and tourists. If you want to get an authentic taste of Hungary, this would be a good place to start.



A few block to the north along the Danube River is Marcius 15 Square, site of the Budapest Inner-City Mother Church of Our Lady of the Assumption, the oldest church in Budapest and the home church to Franz Liszt. Beneath the square are the remains of Contra-Aquincum, a 4th century Roman garrison fort that guarded the narrowest crossing of the Danube River in that area. Some of the ruins, including the pictured Roman road, can be seen in the crypt-basement of the church.

The ruins of Roman Aquincum itself date back to the first century, and can be found in the Óbuda district of the city, although I missed them on my trip.



Probably the most prominent site in the city center that I skipped was the Citadel of Buda, which sits on top of the hill south of Castle Hill. I decided to take an out-of-town day trip instead.

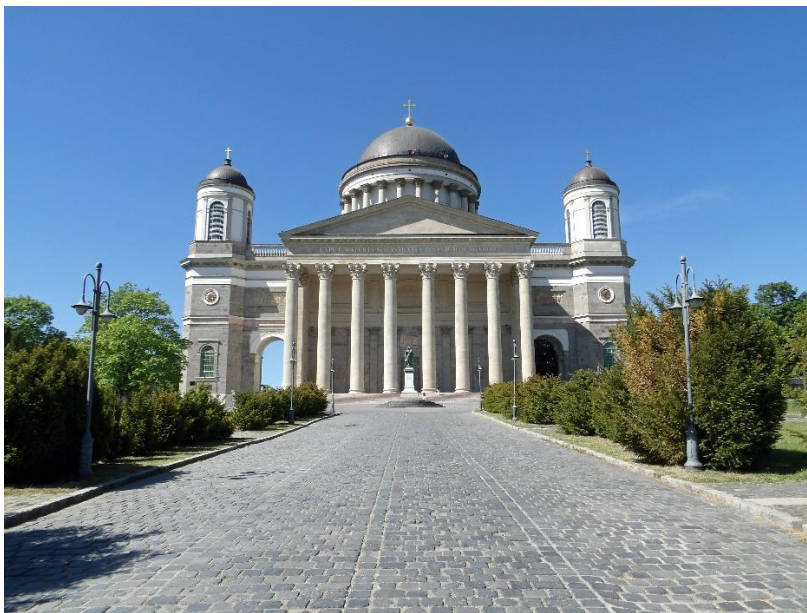


A-Széchenyi Chain Bridge; B-Buda Castle and museums; C-Matthias Church and Fisherman's Bastion; D-Hungarian Parliament; E-Liberty Square; F-St. Stephen's Basilica; G-Heroes' Square and City Park at the end of Andrassy Avenue; H- Dohány Street Synagogue and old Jewish Quarter; I-Hungarian National Museum; J-Central Market Hall; K-Marcus 15 Square, L-Citadel of Buda

For my out-of-town excursion, I booked a driver through Daytrip.com. Viator.com is a good site for booking day trips with groups, and with healthy feet I likely would have booked something through them. But I've been on day trips like that where someone with significant mobility issues joins the tour. Such tours often have schedules to keep, and they can't reduce the drive time, so people on the tour who are slow (or who are late getting back to the bus at some stop) result in sightseeing time being substantially cut at the next stop. For a lot of tourists, this may be their one "trip of a lifetime" to Europe, and while they're certainly sympathetic to the person with the mobility issues, they end up missing out on time they had planned to spend at the sites of the particular tour. As I am now the person with the mobility issues, I didn't want to be the person forcing that onto other people's sightseeing time. I had already made allowances for my feet on this trip – more days scheduled with less aggressive sightseeing plans than I used to make, and more downtime for my feet to recover.

Daytrip.com basically provides private drivers who pick me up at my hotel, drive me to the destination and turn me loose for some set amount of time to do with what I want. Then they take me back to the hotel. I used them four times on this trip, including for my Budapest out-of-town day trip to Esztergom.

Esztergom is a town on the Danube at Hungary's border with Slovakia. The drive to get there takes about an hour and passes through Danube-Ipoly National Park. Esztergom is one of the oldest cities in Hungary, and was the capital of the Kingdom of Hungary from the 10th century until the capital was moved to Buda in the 13th century. Esztergom Basilica on Castle Hill is the largest church in Hungary, and was built on the foundations of earlier churches that date back to 1001AD. St. Stephen I, Hungary's first king, was coronated here, and Hungary's original royal coronation artifacts are on display in the basilica's treasury. Esztergom Castle, built on the foundations of St. Stephen's original castle, is next to the basilica. In addition to touring the sites of Esztergom's Castle Hill, I explored the city's center, where I also got a late lunch before returning to Budapest.



Esztergom Basilica



Inside Esztergom Basilica. Visitors can also tour the crypt and treasury.



Esztergom Castle is operated as a museum



Széchenyi Square in Esztergom's historic city center. Here, the Holy Trinity memorial stands in front of the Esztergom Town Hall.

For my second use of Daytrip.com, I hired one of their drivers to take me from Budapest to my next destination, Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. A flight would have been ridiculously short, and taking the train would have been an all-day affair. Daytrip.com transfers between cities allow you to add some short (1-2 hour) sightseeing stops along the way. For my transfer, I added two sightseeing stops, giving me one more stop in Hungary.

Székesfehérvár seemed to me to be a nice complement to Esztergom. Székesfehérvár Basilica became the coronation site for Hungarian kings after St. Stephen's coronation in Esztergom. Over hundreds of years, 43 kings were crowned here, and 15 were buried in the basilica, including St. Stephen. However, the city was later captured and sacked by Holy Roman Empire invaders, and after that was under Ottoman Empire rule for 145 years. In 1777, Székesfehérvár Basilica was replaced by the Cathedral Basilica of St. Stephen the King, also known as Székesfehérvár Cathedral. The original basilica was torn down. The site of its ruins is now a Hungarian national memorial.



The ruins of Székesfehérvár Basilica. The site includes a small museum.



The Cathedral Basilica of St. Stephen the King, also known as Székesfehérvár Cathedral



This war memorial, nicknamed the *Country Apple*, stands in the middle of Városház Square, Székesfehérvár's main square.



I finished my visit to Székesfehérvár at Prohászka Park, where some of the old city walls are still visible.

And that also was the last of my Hungary sightseeing.

If all of these pictures are making you, um, Hungary, then stop by a Budapest chimney cake shop, and get a chimney cake or chimney cake-based ice cream “cone”.



Originating in Transylvania, a chimney cake, or kürtőskalács, is a traditional central European spit pastry, made by wrapping sweet yeast dough around a roller and roasting it over an open fire. I had something quite similar when I was in Prague, Czechia back in 2010. I tried a traditional Lithuanian spit cake, a šakotis, when I was in Vilnius, Lithuania in 2018, but that was much different than the chimney cake.