

# The Pearl of the Danube

FOR TRAVEL WRITER MELISSA CHEAH, BUDAPEST PROVIDED PLENTY OF WARM MEMORIES FOR HER CHILLY WINTER SOJOURN TO THE HISTORY-RICH HUNGARIAN CAPITAL.

The hashtag I decided upon a couple of weeks ahead (finally caved and jumped on the millennial bandwagon) for my trip was #MyWinterSojourn. Oxford defines *sojourn* as a temporary stay, but it can mean so much more than that. It is that ineffable joy every traveller gets when waking up in a new city, a place ripe for exploration. It is the wondrous thrill of discovery in new surroundings. It is the bittersweet sorrow of leaving a new home for a familiar one.

Call it a favour of fortune or fate, but I could not have picked a better place for my maiden winter adventure, as Budapest turned out to be one of the most evocative and visually stunning cities I have ever visited.

There is mesmerising beauty in almost every corner of the Hungarian capital. Architecturally, the modern metropolis is a treasure trove with an abundance of Baroque, Neoclassical, and Art Nouveau buildings – enough to leave any person gaping in awe at every turn of the street. Not one to shy away from its past, Budapest wears its history proudly and gallantly. Take a walk down its streets and go *vis-à-vis* with the bullet holes and pockmarked buildings from World War II and the 1956 Uprising.

## A MEMORABLE STAY

There are boutique hotels, and then there's the Pest-Buda Hotel. It is the first hotel in Budapest, established in 1696, and rightfully, the pioneer of hospitality in the friendly city. Almost

three-and-a-half centuries later, they have not lost their *je ne sais quoi*. Located on the historical streets of Buda in the Castle District, the stylish Pest-Buda Hotel is a stone's throw away from the city's most beloved historical monuments such as the Fisherman's Bastion, Matthias Church, and the Royal Palace. Firmly rooted in its heritage, the family-owned hotel has preserved the original baroque roof, in spite of a recent renovation in 2016. Their attention to detail is something I noticed right away: the complementary colour tones of their logo (warm neutrals with a pop of signature red hue) is reflected in the hotel's reception, room decor (accented by an adorable fire-engine red SMEG fridge), personalised labels on their wine glasses and coffee cups.

The Atelier Suite is the *pièce de résistance* of the 10 rooms at Pest-Buda, and for good reasons. The journey to the suite included a private terrace overlooking the spires of Matthias Church, and the moment the door was unlocked, I was too busy fawning to hear it close behind me.

The incredibly spacious attic-designed room boasts sturdy wooden beams with slanted floor-to-ceiling windows, ingeniously fitted with automated blinds (as is all the lighting). I circled the room to find a sumptuous king-sized bed with down comforters, a European-style bathroom with limestone walls, a rainforest shower by Hansgrohe, organic L'Occitane toiletries, and in the centre of the room, the most glorious bathtub. Truly the stuff dreams are made of.

The next morning, breakfast comprised warm croissants, a knob of cold butter, homemade strawberry jam and marmalade, peppermint tea, freshly squeezed orange juice, and people-watching from the cosy warmth of the Pest-Buda Bistro. As I tore a piece from the perfectly flaky pastry, I was reminded of the joy that comes from the simple things in life. There is a lot to love about Pest-Buda and checking out from it might have been one of the most difficult things on my trip!

**HUNGARIAN DINING**

Among my circle of friends, I am notoriously known for planning my vacations around food experiences. I do my homework by spending an inordinate amount of time combing through the Internet to ensure I pack in an authentic taste of wherever I am visiting. My research led me to believe that Budapest is a regional powerhouse when it comes to gastronomic excellence and it certainly did not disappoint.

In the 15th century, invading Ottoman Turks introduced a new spice to the country – paprika. While the rest of Europe remained lukewarm towards this flavourful red chilli pepper



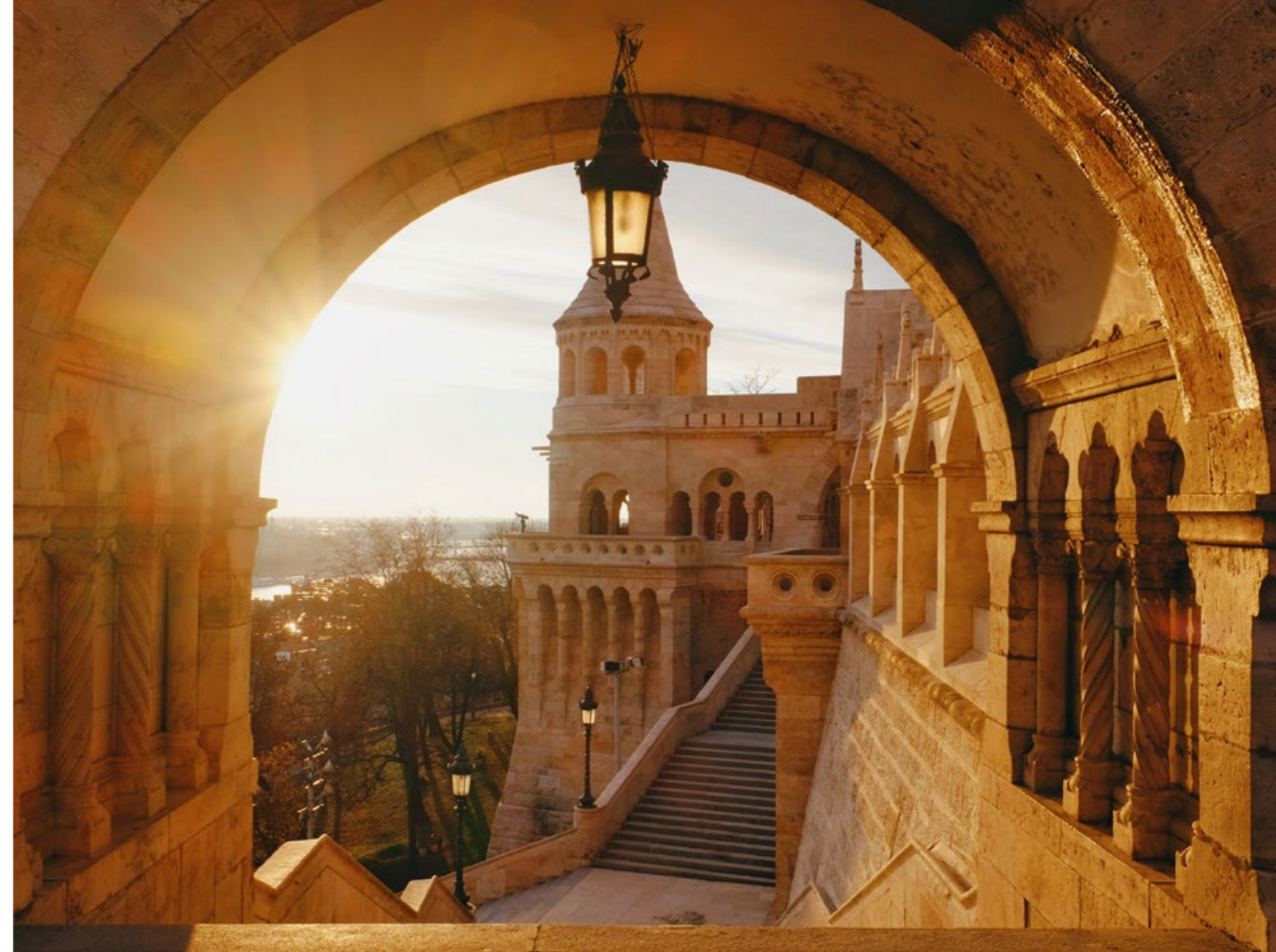
New York Café



Chain Bridge



Central Market, Grand Hall



Fisherman's Bastion

from the New World, Hungary quickly embraced it and paprika has since been a defining element of Hungarian cuisine. To say my palate was pleased while noshing in Budapest would be an understatement.

Nothing tempers the sting of cold weather better than a steaming bowl of paprika-packed goulash (*gulyás*). Rich and hearty, the stew-like dish consists of beef, a medley of veggies, and cubes of potatoes served piping hot, the only way to do its flavours justice. Try the national dish of Hungary at one of the plentiful bare-knuckled, home-style joints. Kék Rózsa (Blue Rose) is such a place, delivering both terrific cooking and a local hangout spot with great value-for-money food.

Several days in and it soon dawned upon me that traditional Hungarian food is splendid sustenance for a

wintry climate. The cuisine has plenty of warming paprika-hued goodness and is often finished off with cake as dessert. Putting my no-carbs diet on hiatus, I tucked into an array of dumplings, potatoes, and pasta; delighted to discover that they have been simmered with meaty stock, adding a savoury depth unlike any other to the simplest of dishes.

If you're in town, be sure to check out New York Café. Being exalted as "the most beautiful café in the world" is surely a hefty reputation to live up to, but this palatial eatery exceeds all expectations. Budapest is renowned for its grand café culture, and this stunning place once played an important role as a sanctuary for Budapest's literati community. Today, it remains as one of the most striking spots in town to get a caffeine fix with its gilded ceilings,

ornate columns, glass chandeliers, and oxblood velvet-upholstered chairs, an instant teleportation to a bygone era.

Another worthwhile place is ESCA. The new addition to the city's epicurean tapestry is helmed by Chef Gábor Fehér, who spent several years cooking in reputable Hungarian restaurants before graduating from the prestigious Le Cordon Bleu. Soon after, he returned to his home country and launched ESCA, a remarkable and intimate studio restaurant in the heart of the city. Come here for fabulously unusual pairings, prepared with culinary finesse. This is a small place, so a table reservation is highly recommended.

**SEE THE SIGHTS, EXPLORE THE CITY**

It was admittedly a real challenge to wrest myself from my toasty warm bed



Matthias Church



Gellért Baths

to head outside into the wintry cold before sunrise, but passing that test paid handsome dividends as we caught the first light of day at the Fisherman's Bastion. Our time in Budapest may have been best captured, in fact, at the Castle Hill area, which offers some of the most impressive panoramic views of the Danube River, particularly from the terrace and the seven turrets (representing the seven Hungarian tribes). Historians believe the bastion served as a vantage point and was originally protected by neighbouring fishermen, hence its name. We woke up at the crack of dawn, made our way to a beautifully empty bastion, and explored the fortress. Some 15 minutes later, our view was made even better with the rosy blush of sunrise.

Of course, shopping features on many travellers' to-do list, and we indulged in a bit of this, too. Andrassy Út is Budapest's very own Champs-Élysées, where renowned brands such as Burberry, Louis Vuitton, and Gucci are located. Beyond the well-known luxe names, there are also several local designer brands making their mark in the famed avenue. Nanushka is one of them. The modern and versatile Hungarian brand delivers impeccable day-to-night apparel, effortlessly combining function with flair. From there, head on over to District VII, in the Jewish Quarter, where there is a cool collection of boutiques to explore, such as Szputnyik, a gallery-style space with white walls and wooden floors, a stylish place to find vintage fashion.

Shoppers can also check out the Great Hall at Central Market, an ideal place to find an array of goods. Built in the 19th century, this three-floor covered market has shops upon shops selling everything from grocery produce on the ground floor and souvenirs such as fridge magnets, to paprika, Zsolnay porcelain, *Palinka* (a potent, locally-produced fruit spirit with a minimum of 50% ABV), and even



St. Stephen's Basilica

canned *foie gras* on the first floor.

Taking in the sights of Budapest would be incomplete without getting a "glimpse of heaven" at St. Stephen's Basilica. The biggest church in the Hungarian capital was opened in 1906 after taking a full 50 years to complete. We paid a visit to the church on Christmas morning and stayed on longer than expected, simply because we were enamoured by every inch of the place. During our visit, the organ echoed through the grand hall and I swivelled my head, only to be utterly gobsmacked by the sheer magnificence on display. A fellow traveller who had just returned from a pilgrimage trip to Italy told me the reason for the opulence is found in the church's attempt to depict "a little glimpse of heaven on earth". I might not be able to verify the veracity of that, but whether you're religious or not, you'll want to believe heaven

exists the minute you step into this marvellous place of worship.

Spa junkies will find their own version of heaven here, too. Budapest has been known as the world's Spa Capital since 1934 for its bounty of 118 natural thermal springs, delivering 70 million litres of curative waters each day! Rife with thermal bathhouses all over the city, a trip here should not be counted as complete without visiting one of them. My favourite was the astonishingly pretty Gellért Baths, not least for its embellished columns and massive indoor pool. Marvel at the painted domed ceilings, mosaic floors, and acres of stained-glass windows, but stay on for the hot and cold baths, steam rooms and saunas, as well as a range of massages and mud treatments.

Even in winter, it was a delight to explore the city and take in the sights. Budapest is made up of two sides (Buda and Pest) which span across the



Pest-Buda Hotel

Danube River and are connected by eight suspension bridges. The oldest and most photographed is the Chain Bridge (Lánc Híd), which was opened for public traffic in 1849. It is a sight to behold come nightfall when the whole bridge is illuminated and sparkles with thousands of tiny lights. Before that, however, catching the setting sun behind the beautiful Hungarian Parliament building was an absolute treat. Taking 17 years to build and completed in 1902, this Neo-Gothic structure is the archetype of Hungarian architectural beauty and elegance. British politician-turned-broadcaster Michael Portillo memorably described it as "one of the most beautiful legislatures in the world, a cathedral of democracy." Head to Kossuth Lajos Square (in front of the building), or stand across the Danube river (Parliament is right on the Pest embankment) for the best view of the gorgeous building.

Hungary is an outstanding destination during any season, and I count it a privilege to have spent my Christmas holidays in its capital city. While en route to Budapest, my seat mate (a Swiss guy) and I began conversing, comparing passport stamps and sharing our travel itineraries when he nonchalantly remarked, "You know, a traveller is someone who is at home everywhere", which turned out to be sage advice for someone who is in a perpetual state of wanderlust. His words lingered on a week later as I watched the captivating city gently disappear into the clouds after take-off and realised while on my winter sojourn, my heart has found a home in Budapest, one to which I plan on returning very soon. ■



Street scene looking towards St. Stephen's