

HUNGARY

Food, festivals and fine wines

With ancient castles, ornate palaces and thermal spas, Balaton is a vacation hotspot

CLAUDIA CAPOS
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

BADACSONY, HUNGARY—The violinist smiled ingratiatingly as he approached our table on the outdoor terrace of Kisfaludy Haz, a popular watering hole for Hungarians and foreigners vacationing on Lake Balaton.

“May I play something for you?” he asked our friend Peter Lubke. Peter turned to me, inquiringly. “How about Hungarian Rhapsody?” I ventured.

The man flashed his white teeth, pleased with the prospect of a handsome tip. He nodded to his three compatriots and tucked the violin under his chin. A rapid-fire burst of notes, mostly in tune, assailed us like that first peppery bite of chicken paprika.

The melody pulsed down the hillside past glimmering green vineyards and rustic “borozos,” or wine bars, where Hungarians were boisterously celebrating the weekend with plenty of spirit, and spirits.

The fragrance of chestnut tree blossoms perfumed the air around us, and a light breeze fanned our faces while we sipped Dreher Classic beer. Puffy clouds hovered over the blue waters, framed by dark, brooding volcanic hills — a cool moonstone set in tarnished silver. This was Lake Balaton at its best.

It was now 4 p.m. — time for “kave” and pastries. Peter, who is German but has been coached on local gastronomical customs by his Hungarian wife, Agi, ordered a typical Hungarian dessert with a typically undecipherable Hungarian name: gundel palacsinta dioval csokolademartassal. Translated: thin sweet crepes filled with creamy marzipan and topped with chocolate sauce. True ambrosia.

During our two-week stay at Lake Balaton, Doug and I savoured our fair share of Hungarian food, fun, festivities and fine wines. Little wonder that Balaton — central Europe’s largest freshwater lake, stretching 80 kilometres from east to west — has earned the moniker “Hungarian Sea” and a reputation as a premier vacation spot.

Every summer, families congregate at its sandy beaches, shady waterfront parks and colourful arcades to swim, sail, shop and eat gelato. Many resort towns have names beginning with “Balaton,” which makes navigating a bit confusing. But each has its own attraction — a restored castle, a medieval fortress, Roman ruins, a thermal spa, sea caves.

We chose Keszthely, a tree-canopied city and cultural centre on the lake’s far western tip, as our home base. When we arrived on the first evening of the Pentecost holiday, the main square was packed cheek-to-jowl with food stalls selling goulash, fried potatoes and beer, and a marathon was in full swing.

The following morning, we wandered through the ornate Festetics Palace to get a taste of the opulent lifestyle enjoyed by the city’s 18th- and 19th-century aristocracy, and then window-shopped along the Kossuth Lajos Street pedestrian mall.

That afternoon, we headed to Lake Balaton and sauntered out on the strand, past a man playing an accordion and children feeding swans, to admire the shoreline view.

Once we got our bearings, we ventured forth in our rental car each day to explore neighbouring cities



DREAMSTIME PHOTO

Sumeg Castle is a magnificently restored 12th-century fortress, complete with authentic stocks in the courtyard.

Hungary looks like what Western Europe should look like, without the high cost

within a 160-kilometre radius. We discovered that Hungary’s country roads are well-maintained and wind through vast grain fields and quiet farming villages with storks nesting atop telephone poles.

Our favourite town was nearby Heviz, home to the world’s largest natural peat-mud thermal lake and the famous Festetics Furdohaz. The sprawling spa complex, with its peaked-roof pavilions and broad sundecks overhanging the mercury-coloured water, is a balneotherapy centre offering massages and other curative treatments.

On our first visit, the smell of sulfur engulfed us as we entered the spa’s lobby, purchased three-hour passes and changed into our bathing suits in the co-ed locker room. From an outside deck, we descended into the geothermal-heated mineral water. It felt like warm champagne.

Men and women, each encircled by a colorful foam pool noodle,

floated around us like “dodolles” (puffy white potato dumplings) in a goulash soup kettle. After soaking and sunning, we dressed and walked into the shop- and café-lined town to indulge in chocolate gelato.

No visit to the Balaton area is complete without a trip to Sümeg. Slow-paced with an Old World patina, the town transports visitors back in time. On our leisurely drive north from Keszthely, we were joined by Fred and Roni Foreman, new acquaintances from Houston.

In Sümeg, we stopped at the Kisfaludy Vendeghaz for lunch under broad shade trees. Over bowls of peasant soup, Fred observed, “Hungary looks like what Western Europe should look like, without the high cost. I love the quaint villages, clean streets and neat architecture.”

Afterward, we took a taxi up the precipitous stone drive to Sümeg Castle, a magnificently restored 12th-century fortress crowning a high barren hill.

From the castle’s ramparts, red-roofed houses and green patchwork fields unfurled at our feet like a mo-



CLAUDIA CAPOS PHOTO

saic carpet. Inside, we browsed through displays of historical memorabilia and armaments.

The highlight of our Sümeg excursion was a jousting tournament,

JUST THE FACTS

ARRIVING Balaton is about 140 km from Budapest. Connecting flights from Toronto to Budapest’s Ferihegy Airport are available on Air Canada, British Airways, Delta, Lufthansa and other major airlines. Europcar, Avis, Budget and Sixt offer car rentals in the airport.

Trains and buses from the airport to cities along Lake Balaton run several times daily.

DINING Kisfaludy Haz Etterem, Kisfaludy Sandor Street No. 28, Badacsony. Enjoy a stunning panorama of Lake Balaton at this terrace restaurant, perched high above the vineyards in the famous Badacsony wine-growing area. Entrees range from \$10 to \$20. kisfaludyhaz.hu. Romai Pince, Domboldi Street No. 2023/1, Hevis.

The Roman wine cellar’s outdoor terrace overlooking Heviz and inside brick-walled grotto offer a charming setting to enjoy Hungarian specialties, such as goulash, roast duck and ragout of venison, along with local wines. Entrees run about \$10 each. romaipince-heviz.hu.

SLEEPING Hotel Helikon, Balatonpart 5, Keszthely. Situated on the shore of Lake Balaton, the hotel has its own beach and offers amenities, such as tennis, a pool and water sports. Prices for a double room start at \$152. hotelhelikon.hu/en. Hotel Kapitany, Toth Tivadar Street No. 19, Sümeg. Guests at this four-star hotel can gaze up at Sümeg Castle while they soak in the swimming pool or get a massage. Prices for a double room start at about \$103. hotelkapitany.hu.

DOING In Sümeg, the fun begins at 6 p.m. on Wednesday and Sunday with a jousting tournament in the underground arena beneath the Csarda at the base of Sümeg Castle hill and continues with an all-you-can-eat medieval feast.

Tickets are about \$25 per person. sumegvar.hu. In Heviz, relax and rejuvenate at Festetics Furdohaz’s thermal lake and indoor pools. Spa entry including a three-hour pass is about \$10, per person. spaheviz.hu.

WEBSURFING gyereabalatonra.hu, keszthely.hu/en

followed by a medieval feast in a vast underground complex below the “Csardo,” or tavern, at the base of the castle hill.

Costumed attendants handed us “palinka” (Hungarian schnapps) as we entered and slipped into ring-side seats at the arena to watch precision horse drills, stunt riding, jousting and hand-to-hand combat by knights wielding swords and knives. The antics looked a little like Conan the Barbarian meets World Wide Wrestling, but the show was entertaining.

Later, we took our places at long wooden tables in a candlelit grotto for a hands-only meal of blood sausage, roast duck, red cabbage and potatoes, washed down with copious amounts of wine. By the end of the night, people were dancing and singing in the aisles to an orchestra.

The four of us returned to Keszthely, where Doug and I bade goodnight to our friends. Before retiring, however, the two of us walked to the Bacchus Restaurant rathskeller for a last glass of wine, just to toast another fine day at Lake Balaton.

Claudia Capos is a freelance writer based in Brighton, Mich.

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