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EXPERIENCE

SLEEPING ALFRESCO IN THE THAR DESERT



Europe's largest public bath, Széchenyi, is also the only historic one on the eastern side of the Danube River.

Bath-hopping in Budapest

SOAKING IN THE CITY'S PAST AT ITS GRAND HEALING BATHS | By MARGOT BIGG

“My mother has a doctor's prescription for the Gellért Spa,” Blanka, the young woman running the guest house where I was staying, told me on my first night in Budapest. “She gets a massage there every week for very cheap.”

Spa culture has been an integral part of life in Budapest since the 16th century, although the tradition of public bathing in the region's thermal waters dates back to the Roman period. Today, there

are six major historical baths throughout the city, most of which are located just off the western banks of the River Danube. The baths are considered as therapeutic as they are recreational. Dips in the warm mineral-rich healing waters are frequently prescribed by local doctors—and subsidised by the country's national health system.

“Each bath is different,” Blanka explained, pouring me a shot of *palinka*—a local fruit brandy—

I giggled like a toddler, letting the stream carry me in circles until too dizzy to continue

before producing a tourist map and a highlighter pen. “The Rudas baths are beautiful, but women are only allowed in on Tuesdays and weekends,” she continued, circling the bath's location on the map before distractedly sweeping a fluorescent green trail along the western banks of the Danube. “And Király is very good... very traditional,” she continued. “But if you have to choose, go to Széchenyi. It's the most fun.”

The next morning, I headed to

the Gellért baths in Buda, in the western part of the capital. The waters of Gellért spring had been used for therapeutic purposes since at least the Middle Ages, the current bath complex dates back to the early 1900s (although much of it was rebuilt after being damaged in WWII). The main lap pool is housed in a glass-roofed hall flanked by twin rows of Corinthian columns. On one side of the pool, elderly bathers in disposable shower caps waved foam weights over their heads as a sprightly water aerobics instructor chanted instructions from the edge of the water.

Past this and through a maze of lockers was a periwinkle-hued room with ornately mosaicked walls, a nod to Gellért's art nouveau heritage. I descended into one of the two pools, claiming a bit of bench space between a cherub statue and a plaque that read "36°C", and soaked, until the pads of my fingers shrivelled.

The next day, I headed to Király on Ganz Street. The Turkish-style bath was established in 1565, when present-day Budapest was an Ottoman possession, and was rebuilt at the turn of the 19th century. I joined groups of Hungarian grandmothers, steaming away bouts of rheumatism while chatting quietly; "very traditional," as Blanka had said. I spent the



People come to Budapest's baths for health reasons, as well as to relax with friends, discuss politics and business deals, or play a game of chess.

following morning watching the winter sun filter through the multicoloured skylights, like pinpricks in the dome of the Rudas baths, creating kaleidoscopic designs on the surface of the octagonal tub.

My last day in Hungary was devoted to the Széchenyi baths, an ornate Neo-baroque complex with exteriors the colour of egg yolks. The structure dates back to 1913 and is considered the largest bath in Europe, with three outdoor pools and over a dozen smaller indoor tubs, steam rooms, and plunge baths. Despite the cool of winter, there were plenty of people

ATLAS

Budapest, Hungary



Budapest's first settlement was called Ak-Ink. In the language of its Celtic Eravisci inhabitants, it means "abundant waters".

in the outdoor pools. Local men declared checkmate across floating chessboards while European backpackers flirted in multiple languages. Shivering, I slid into the first pool I saw and doggy-paddled over to the "lazy river", a loop with an undercurrent that forces swimmers around in the aquatic version of a never-ending moving sidewalk. I giggled like a toddler, letting the stream carry me in circles until I was too dizzy to continue. Blanka was right—each bath I visited left me feeling relaxed and at peace, but Széchenyi was certainly the most fun. ●

Tips for Navigating the Baths

WHAT TO BRING

- **Swim or shower cap** If you plan to swim in the lap pools at Gellért or Széchenyi, you will need a swim cap, even with short hair. Disposable plastic shower caps are sold on-site.
- **Swimsuit** As most baths allow both sexes, proper swim attire is required (swimsuits or bikinis for women; swim trunks or briefs for men).
- **Towels & toiletries** The baths do not provide towels, shampoo, or soap (except for purchase), so it's a good idea to bring your own.
- **Water bottle** Although bottled water is sold at the baths, you can save money (and taste the mineral-rich waters) by bringing your

own bottle and filling it at the drinking fountains.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Electronic lockers/cabins** Visitors can choose from lockers in gender-segregated areas or pay extra for a private changing cabin. Lockers and cabins are opened using waterproof electronic wristbands.
- **Massages** Massage treatments can be booked ahead or upon arrival. Treatments are conducted by a therapist of the same gender and are clothing-optional.
- **Children** Children under 14 are not allowed at Király and Rudas. Most other complexes allow potty-trained kids to enter at parental discretion.

WHERE TO GO

- **Gellért** Daily 6 a.m.-8 p.m.
Entry From Forint 4,900/₹1,100 per day
Metro Szent Gellért tér
 - **Király** Daily 9 a.m.-9 p.m.
Entry From Ft2,600/₹585 per day
Metro Batthyány tér
 - **Rudas** Daily 6 a.m.-10 p.m.; Mon, Wed-Fri: men; Tues: women; weekend: both
Entry From Ft3,100/₹700 per day
Metro Vörösmarty tér
 - **Széchenyi** Daily 6 a.m.-10 p.m.
Entry From Ft4,500/₹1,000 per day
Metro Széchenyi fürdő
- Most baths allow men and women, but some have separate slots. Weekend prices are higher. Discounts for seniors and students available (spasbudapest.com).