



Hidden in Hungary

SITTING ON A BEND ON THE BANKS OF THE DANUBE RIVER IN HUNGARY, PICTURESQUE SZENTENDRE IS A QUIET BEAUTY

Kalpana Sunder

A skateboarder in a football jersey whizzes past me. A man in a brown beret is lost in a book. It's a Mediterranean ambience — with sprawling sun dappled cafés choc-a-bloc with tourists and hip students. Cool greens, ochre and russets seem to compete with the colours of local art, the Bohemian setting transports us to another world... We could be on the Adriatic coast or even Montmartre.

A tangle of cobblestone streets and tidy houses with angels as window decorations, baroque churches, and Greek restaurants, all lie cheek by jowl. Picturesque Szentendre (named after St Andrew) lies on a Danube bend in Hungary, the region where this great river changes course, creating a triangle. It's a twenty-kilometre stretch where the river bends in an S-shape. There are clusters of towns in this picturesque area: Esztergom, Visegrad and Szentendre are the more popular ones; Vac is the lesser known beauty.

Szentendre has been at the crossroads of civilization for centuries: we see churches ranging from Serbian and Greek Orthodox to Catholic; it was inhabited by the Romans, who had a fortress and settlement in this area. When the Turks advanced on the Balkans many Serbian refugees arrived in this town. Its main square, Marx Ter, has a central memorial square built as a token of gratitude when Black Plague spared the city. It was erected by the town's wealthiest citizens who owned local vineyards and had formed a guild.

Surrounding the main square is an amphitheatre of medieval baroque and rococo buildings: the houses of Serbian tradesmen, with wrought iron balcony railings, who used the material from medieval Roman buildings for the construction of their homes.

Presiding over the main square is a Serbian church with an almost unpronounceable name: the *Blagovestenska* church, which has a distinctly

Eastern ambience. There are golden icons, painted religious scenes where the figures seem to be actually looking at you. Outside, the sun is up and art pieces on old ochre walls invite the passersby to spend some time browsing.

Setting out in any direction is exciting. Narrow streets like tributaries lead to cul-de-sacs and photogenic alleys; staircases lead to pretty-as-a-picture churches. There are stout peasant women with head scarves, handsome strapping Hungarian in folk dress, mingling with Western tourists with digital cameras and helmet-toting cyclists who have had an active morning, cycling the twenty-five kilometres from Budapest. Luscious desserts seem to be the trademark of every café here. Creamy pastries with berries and fruits and melt-in-your mouth cakes slow our progress through the town.

The main draw of Szentendre is that it's an artist's colony. Artists from all over Europe started flocking here in the 1920s because of its exceptional beauty and light and views over the Danube. There's an array of galleries, exhibitions, craft shops and souvenir shops. There's a museum dedicated to Hungarian artists, another to a world famous ceramicist Margit Kovacs who is known for the way she has converted everyday objects of peasant life into art. We see some plaques on old houses that mark the high floodwaters that ravaged the town in 1838.

There are some museums with signs outside, but the shopping totally distracts us! We walk down Bodganyi Utca, a street full of shops selling garlands of dried paprika, babushka dolls, ceramics, porcelains, crocheted laces and old Hungarian folk outfits. There's a popular marzipan shop with a bewildering variety of almond and sugar concoctions. It has a museum showcasing political figures, Walt Disney characters, busts of kings and queens, even the Hungarian Parliament House — all made out of marzipan. There is a long line of people waiting outside a café selling langos, a Hungarian deep fried version of a pizza with a sour cream and cheese topping.

It's a short drive to Vac (pronounced vahts) on the left bank of the Danube, a stunning Baroque

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

Getting there: Fly with Aeroflot via Moscow, Austrian Airlines via Vienna, or choose your own route by visiting skyscanner.net, expedia.com or other flight websites. There are no direct flights.

Currency: USD\$1 = 187 Hungarian forints

Best time to travel: May to September

town, and one of the oldest seats of the Catholic Church. It is a town that has been blessedly bypassed by mass tourism, we discover... Like many cities in the Middle Ages, the church was the *raison d'être* of this town. Vac was one of the first places to be settled by the Magyar tribes in 896.

Legend goes that a monk hermit and a prince came upon a wondrous sight in the forest — a deer with candles on its horns. On seeing this the prince decided to build a church here and this was the origin of Vac. We pass through a triumphal arch, or stone gate, built to welcome the Empress Maria Theresa. This town has a chequered history and has changed hands more than 40 times.

The main square is hemmed in by grand Baroque and Rococo buildings painted in a shade that's just short of gaudy, including the Town Hall and a church. There is the White Friar's Church here, under which excavations revealed a cache of mummies in a secret crypt.

Children play on archaeological digs in the centre and our guide swears that the local gelato is the best in Hungary. We admire the mammoth dimensions of Vac's Cathedral of the Assumption, inspired by Parisian architecture with its Corinthian columns and statues and expanses of green all around. Vac's promenade on the Danube and bike trail leading to other towns on the river seems to be a favourite with locals and tourists. Herons and cormorants patrol the waters as the dying sun envelops the flatlands as though on fire. It's on a day like this that one falls under a country's spell...

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STEPPING OUT: Hungarians enjoy the sunshine in traditional outfits