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DAY OUT | DISTRICT VII, BUDAPEST

Out of Darkness, New Life

By NICHOLAS KULISH

KIRALY STREET in Budapest has staked claim to the title of hip new spot with its restaurants and fine boutiques, but there's more to the city's once-gritty District VII than this one storied stretch. Cafes, bars, nightclubs and fashionable stores have sprung up throughout the dark lanes of the old Jewish Quarter, whose history and recent rise to trendiness evoke comparisons to the Lower East Side of New York.

The unpretentious restaurant and bar **Koleves** (Dob u. 26, 36-20-213-5999; www.koleves.com) epitomized the laid-back charm of the neighborhood one recent afternoon, with the stop-and-start melodies of a band practicing in the basement and an artist hanging his latest works on the walls of the dining room. It would be easy to get lost in the design flourishes like the cheese graters converted into perforated wall lamps or the chandeliers made of dozens of wineglasses, but the food, a mixture of Jewish and Hungarian dishes, demands attention.

Like an overzealous grandmother, Koleves stuffs you with delicious fare in huge portions. The savory roast goose leg at 1,880 forint, or around \$10.65, at 180 forint to the dollar, is a steal. With a cup of cappuccino, the matzo flodni — a Jewish layer cake made with apple, poppy seeds and matzo — is nigh irresistible.

Up the block, stop by the cozy shop **Concerto** (Dob u. 33; 36-20-268-9631) for an infusion of Liszt or Bartok and an Old World feel. The store, with its wooden beams running across the ceiling, looks like a small chapel for classical music but smells like a library with its stacks of second-hand vinyl records.

At the modish boutique **Latomas** (Dohany u. 20, www.latomas.hu), records are put to a different use, with shoulder bags made of old LPs sitting behind the cash register. Flying in the face of homogenized retail, the shop focuses on Hungarian designers; bring home a playful skirt or T-shirt by a local designer, Reka Ganczer.

The greatest monument to District

VII's Jewish heritage is the imposing Moorish and Byzantine-inspired **Dohany Street Synagogue** (Dohany u. 2). Completed in 1859, it is the largest synagogue in Europe. It also houses the **Jewish Museum**, built on the birthplace of Zionism's founder, Theodor Herzl. Behind the synagogue stands an affecting Holocaust memorial, a metal weeping willow inscribed with the names of families that perished in the Holocaust.

On a chilly afternoon, a rich, pudding-thick hot chocolate from **Bobek** (Kazinczy u. 53; 36-20-774-0103; www.bobek.hu) will rev any traveler up again. The owner, Roland Torok, maintains that it's the best in the city, and the amaretto or hazelnut blends under layers of whipped cream make it difficult to dispute his claim. Mr. Torok, 29, began working in his parents' cafe at the age of 6, and opened his bright green-and-pink neighborhood spot last year.

Today, District VII may be best known for its night life. A mainstay of the scene is **Szimpla Kert** (Kazinczy u. 14; 36-1-352-4198; www.szimpla.hu), an enormous space with rough concrete floors and furniture that looks as though it had been dragged from yard sales, including a bathtub modified by cutting out one side and adding a few cushions to transform it into a sofa. The site is host to everything from concerts to movies to a bicycle market.

The bar **Szoda** (Wesselenyi u. 18; 36-1-461-0007; www.szoda.com) is all about atmosphere, from the submarine-red lighting to the blown-up Japanese comics running across the ceiling. End the day on the dance floor in the basement where the D.J.s spin — if your feet can take it. ■





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