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TRAVEL
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Bustling Budapest

MYSTIQUE MEETS CULTURE ON THE DANUBE

There is nothing like immediate history to stir the blood. It is within touching distance in Hungary, which over the centuries has been conquered by Turks, Habsburgs, Nazi Germany, and Soviet Russia. Here, the cultural heartbeat of Eastern Europe forms the modern, inquisitive traveler's triangle: **Budapest**, the city of Liszt; **Prague**, where Mozart lived and wrote *Don Giovanni*; and glorious **Vienna**, which was never behind the Iron Curtain.

But it is Budapest that wrings the soul.

On my way to lunch at Menza, the jolliest

café in the Liszt Ferenc Tér (square), I pass by gilded youth drinking crisp Hungarian white wine and eating sautéed foie gras under shady trees. I continue down Kertész Utca (street) past a line of perforations in the wall, where a plaque and tiny wreath of flowers have been laid. Jews were lined up here to be executed during World War II. At the great synagogue, there stands the extraordinary metal Tree of Life, the Holocaust Memorial (donated by the actor Tony Curtis, whose father was of Hungarian descent), which has written on it the family

names of some of the 400,000 Hungarian victims.

But today's Budapest is kicking up its heels. You'll find sushi at Tom George and White Heaven, wicked restaurants near St. Stephen's Basilica, a Louis Vuitton shop on Andrassy Út, and wonderful Varga statues of women with parasols in Óbuda. There is the vibrant Nagycsarnok food market, brimming with local produce and handsewn linen, and there's the Callas champagne bar by the State Opera House.

The Four Seasons Hotel Gresham Palace, converted from a 1906 luxury apartment building, is the best hotel in Eastern Europe. It is opposite the Chain Bridge, on the Danube, and has just undergone a \$110 million restoration. The sinuous curves epitomize the Art Nouveau–Secessionist movement crystallized when independent Hungary was born, at the turn of the century. Some of the pale-green-colored ceramics are from the original building; others were replicated. Zsigmond Quittner, Hungary's leading architect of the era, used the most talented decorative-crafts artisans

of the era to create the fantastical designs: Miksa Róth did the mosaics and stained-glass windows; Vilmos Zsolnay crafted the ceramic tiles; Gyula Jungfer designed the three wrought-iron "peacock gates." Later Róth and Jungfer collaborated on the spectacular interiors of the Teatro Nacional, in Mexico City.

In the middle of the Danube, travelers can frolic in the natural hot springs on Margaret Island. And in the hills of Buda, there is the mighty Royal Palace and the magnificent Matthias Church and the Fishermen's Bastion, and on a medieval, cobbled street, there is Café Pierrot, a restaurant that would not disgrace Manhattan. Ah, a New Europe indeed.

