

Duncan J. D. Smith

ONLY IN **BUDAPEST**

A Guide to Unique Locations,
Hidden Corners and Unusual Objects

Photographs by
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2 Buda by Funicular

District I (Vár), the Buda Castle Funicular Railway (Budavári sikló) between Clark Ádám tér and Szent György tér on Castle Hill (Várhegy)

The lower station on Clark Ádám tér is reached by Tram 19 along the Buda embankment; Bus 16 from M1/M2/M3 Deák Ferenc tér



The Buda Castle Funicular Railway arriving at Clark Ádám tér

Visitors to Buda's Castle Hill can make their ascent by a variety of means, including bus as well as an elevator rising up from Dózsa György tér (next to the stop for Buses 5, 16 and 178 and Tram 18) to the south-west. For the healthy explorer the best method is by foot thereby offering an opportunity to explore the winding streets of the Víziváros district on the north-eastern slopes of Castle Hill. Translated as 'Water Town', due to its proximity to the river where fishermen's cottages and docks once existed, Víziváros is one of the city's oldest districts with medieval houses and Baroque churches still standing on its winding streets.

However, the most unusual means of ascent to the Castle District is by funicular or cliff railway (*sikló*). It takes just two minutes to

rise from Clark Ádám tér to the upper station in Szent György tér at the Buda Royal Palace (from where horse-drawn carriages await visitors who wish to travel in luxury) and affords wonderful views of the

15 Baths of the *Belle Époque*

District XI (Gellérthegy), the Gellért Thermal Baths, (Gellért Gyógyfürdő) at the Danubius Gellért Hotel, Kelenhegyi út 4
Tram 18 from M2 Déli pályaudvar, 19 along the Buda embankment, 47, 49 from Kálvin tér; Bus 7 from Ferenciek tere

During the early years of the 20th century thermal bathing became a craze across Europe and those cities blessed with natural springs were transformed as visitors flocked to take the curative waters. Boasting more thermal springs than any other city in the world, *fin de*

siècle Budapest was in the vanguard of European spa cities, becoming a renowned centre for both leisure and therapeutic bathing and boasting cures for up to forty different ailments. The city's old Ottoman-period baths took on a new lease of life (see no. 12) and at least one Budapest entrepreneur made a fortune for himself bottling and selling spa water (see no. 66).

The most tangible reminder of these times is the trio of elegant new thermal bath complexes (*gyógyfürdő*), built to satisfy and capitalise on the huge demand for bathing facilities in what became known as the *Belle Époque*, a brief Golden Age of elegant living prior to the First World War. Foremost amongst these are the Gellért Thermal Baths designed by three architects (Artúr Sebestyén, Ármin



Art Nouveau splendour at the Gellért Thermal Baths

Kiss from Dózsa György út (District XIV).

Noteworthy too is the monument to Béla Kun that once stood on Vérmező út (District I). Kun was the founder of the Hungarian Communist Party and leader of a shortlived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919 (known variously as the Republic of Councils, or Commune), the second Communist government to be founded in Europe after Russia itself. Following the First World War and the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy, Hungary had declared total independence

from Austria. However, faced with losing two-thirds of its territories under the Treaty of Trianon, the government of the newly independent First Hungarian Republic under Mihály Károlyi had resigned and handed power to the Social Democrats. They in turn made a coalition with Kun's new Hungarian Communist Party in an attempt to woo Soviet support against the dictates of the Western Allies. However, with support from Moscow not forthcoming due to the Russian Civil War, the anti-Communist Romanian army crushed Kun's ambitions and the former Habsburg Admiral Miklós Horthy (1920-44) took power as regent with a Christian-right coalition parliament. Hungary had begun its inexorable slip from short-lived Communism via right wing Conservatism towards a pro-Fascist regime.



Stand to! by István Kiss in Memento Park

The sculptor of the Béla Kun monument was Imre Varga, a favoured artist under the Kádár regime, who despite such an apparent handicap is now something of a household name in Hungary (see no. 62; Varga's Sculpture Museum is at Laktanya utca 7 in Óbuda (District III)). Before leaving Memento Park glance at the gift shop selling CDs of rousing Proletariat anthems that are played through a 1950s radio.

41 A Superlative Parliament Building

**District V (Lipótváros), the Budapest Parliament (Országház)
at Kossuth Lajos tér 1-3
M2 to Kossuth Lajos tér**

Of Budapest's many grand edifices the Hungarian Parliament Building (Országház) on Kossuth Lajos tér is the most recognisable. The seat of the country's National Assembly it is not only the country's largest building but also one of the oldest legislative buildings in Europe. With daily tours available it has become a popular tourist attraction, too, and warrants a place in every guidebook by virtue of its superlative statistics.

Construction of the Parliament dates back to 1873, when the towns of Buda, Óbuda, and Pest were merged to create the modern city. A new and representative Parliament building was required and an international competition staged to secure a suitable architect. The winner was Imre Steindl (1839-1902) and from the start his design was ambitious.

Work on the building commenced in 1884 and a thousand people were involved. Steindl's plan called for a colossal structure with a symmetrical façade and central dome, set majestically on the Pest side of the Danube so as to counteract the Royal Palace on the opposite



The Parliament on the Danube



A military band commemorates the beginning of the 1848 Revolution beneath the statue of Sándor Petőfi in Petőfi tér



Inside the Orthodox
Synagogue on
Kazinczy utca

prisoner, thus closing ignominiously the first chapter of Budapest's Jewish history.

Within a century Jewish traders had been enticed back yet again to work their commercial magic in the city, this time under the aegis of the wealthy Zichy Counts in Óbuda to the north of Castle Hill, where their imposing synagogue still stands (see no. 32). Meanwhile, across the river in Pest, predominantly Ashkenazi Jewish merchants and innkeepers were congregating around Király utca in what is now called Erzsébetváros (District VII), creating what would become the

style pioneered in the twenties and thirties (see no. 24). Typical is the bus station (1949) in Erzsébet tér (now a protected building) by István Nyíri, with its strikingly inclined roof, and the MÉMOSZ Architects' Trades' Union building (1947-50) on Dózsa György út, on the west side of City Park. The latter, designed by the MATI group that included Lajos Gádoros has a striking Le Corbusier-like glass façade. As a taste of things to come, this was Budapest's first building to contain an example of the Communist art form known as Socialist Realism, in this case reliefs depicting proud construction workers laying bricks and carrying

planks. Such works, although obviously propagandist, are by turns muted and accomplished when compared to the brutish giant Stalins and other revolutionary heroes that would be erected in the city's streets and squares during the same period, most of which were torn down after the fall of Communism in 1989 (see no. 17).

By the early 1950s, however, the Communist authorities had condemned Modernism as an embodiment of Western decadence and replaced it with a stripped-down neo-Classical style, which they felt harked back to a purer and less troublesome age. Thus, the stolid Town Hall (1952) by József Körner on Mechwart tér (District II) is a good example of what was now deemed acceptable, as was the School of Applied Arts (1953) by Zoltán Farkasdy at Zugligeti út 9 (District XII), its portico like that of a Greek temple. The style reached something of an apogee in 1955 with the Budapest Technical University (1955) by Gyula Rimanóczy, its façade adorned with reliefs depicting



Soviet-era sportsmen at the former People's Stadium, now the Ferenc Puskás Stadium