

Planners are looking East, to a country that belies the gray stereotype of Eastern Europe, and combines the two faces of Europe in one trip.

The Hungarian Connection

By Edward I. Placidi

A new chapter has opened in East-West relations with the discovery of the Hungarian connection.

The Hungarian incentive connection, that is.

For the most part, Hungary is overlooked and unexplored territory among incentive travel planners. Yet a popular trend is emerging that is parting the Iron Curtain. Planners are offering qualifiers the two faces of Europe in one trip by combining a visit to a Western European country (sometimes two countries) with a visit to Hungary in Eastern Europe.

The reasons for looking East are varied. For winners who've been to Western Europe over and over again, it's something new, and they are curious and intrigued by an Eastern bloc country. Though lesser known than major Western European cities, Budapest, the Hungarian capital, is one of the great cities of the continent and probably the most cosmopolitan in Eastern Europe; while Hungary itself offers a distinctive history, culture, cuisine and folklore, with a variety of singular activities and excursions for planners to choose from. And warm and friendly people belie the gray stereotype of Eastern Europe. Hungary is also less expensive than its Western counterparts for a comparable program.

More often than not, Austria has been the other half of the itinerary, with the Austrian segment centering around Vienna—about three hours

by road from Budapest. Incentive travelers have taken in the sights of Vienna and then traveled the short distance to Hungary by bus.

Two groups that recently experienced an Austria/Hungary program launched their Hungary visit with two very different tacks. One planner turned the bus ride into a day-long sightseeing tour of the Austrian and Hungarian countryside of dense forests and lush farmlands. Lunch, and a short tour, was in a typical small Hungarian city, Győr, followed by a visit to a 12th-century Benedictine Monastery before arriving in Budapest. Bob Smith of Group

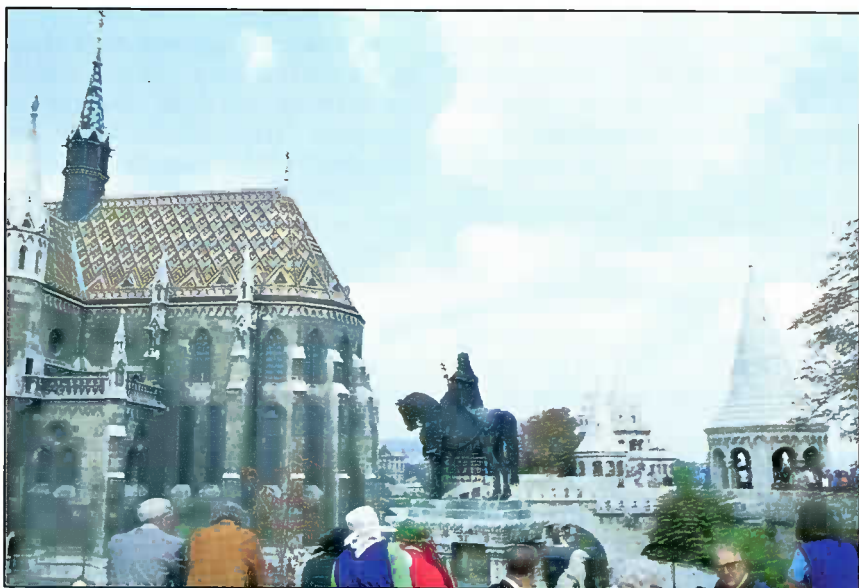
Travel Concepts took his incentive group direct to Budapest, but with a restroom and bar on board, the ride was a cocktail party on wheels.

Inside Budapest

Once in Budapest, there are a number of hotels of incentive quality that planners give high marks to, notably the Budapest Hilton, the Duna Inter-Continental, the Atrium Hyatt and the Forum. The Hilton, which has hosted more than its share of Hungarian incentives, is particularly suited to incentive travel with its sweeping view of the city and its integral location in the heart of the historic Castle Hill area. The Hilton connects with Matthias Coronation Church and fairytale-like Fishermen's Bastion, where the hotel has a restaurant and wine cellar; the remains of a Dominican Monastery and church tower built on the site in the 13th-century have been incorporated into the hotel.

Because Hungary is used as part of a two- or three-country program, stays have been only two to four days. Itineraries have revolved around sightseeing in Budapest, day excursions out of the city and been topped off by theme parties and a variety of dining and entertainment.

To the surprise of many incentive travelers, they find Budapest to be a city of plentiful and tasty cuisine and well-stocked shops. The shopping



Incentive winners storming the ramparts of Budapest's fairytale-like Fishermen's Bastion, beside the ornate Matthias Coronation Church.



The hills of Buda, bastion of Budapest's most historic district, overlook the Danube River and the neo-gothic buildings of Pest.



Budapest is a city of wide avenues, palaces, historic buildings and parks.

specialty is colorful and inexpensive handicrafts—embroidery, pottery, porcelain and crystal. And participants find the sightseeing tours dramatic, from Heroes Square, to ornate Matthias Church, to the ramparts of Fishermen's Bastion, to the Castle Hill district where former Hungarian kings resided.

"With its heritage of the Austria-Hungarian Empire, Budapest is a very impressive city of wide avenues, palaces, historic buildings and parks," explains George Gross of New Jersey-based Englewood Travel. "It's what one expects and wants Europe to be."

Englewood Travel recently handled several incentive movements to Hungary for the U.S. subsidiary of a German chemical company, BASF. In 1980, a small group of 16 elite dealers, some top executives of the corporation and their spouses toured the BASF facility in Germany and then went on to Hungary for several days. They enjoyed it so much that they decided to run an incentive program to Hungary for 1982 for all their dealers.

Between the two trips, a selective variety of excursions, theme evenings and activities were planned for the BASF winners—a little of everything incentive Hungary has to offer.

Paprika and Gypsy music

On the first trip, the BASF group experienced a Hungarian Goulash Party, a popular theme party with incentive groups, which is put on by the government. It's a folkloric show and

dinner introducing visitors to spicy Hungarian foods, wines and culture. Groups from many countries are at the show together, with the emcee narrating and telling jokes in different languages.

On the second trip (of three back-to-back movements of 130 people each), Englewood arranged for "something exclusively for our group this time," says Eva Gross. For this larger group, they set up their own tailor-made folkloric show and dinner in the luxurious ambience of the new Atrium Hyatt Hotel.

Other BASF dining events included a farewell splash at the opulent Cafe Hungaria, another popular spot with incentive groups. The turn-of-the-century restaurant, once the hangout of the literary crowd and newspaper people, serves up spirited gypsy folk-entertainment with Hungarian cuisine. On a Sunday, travelers strolled the lush gardens of Margaret Island which sits in the Danube River between the two sides of the city, Buda and Pest, and had lunch overlooking the greenery and flowers in the glass-enclosed dining room of the Thermal Hotel. Another lunch was served amid the turrets and towers on romantic Fishermen's Bastion with its view over the city, featuring a special Hungarian menu highlighted by hortobagyi—crepes filled with a meat preparation.

Group Travel Concepts' incentive travelers enjoyed a theme evening at the Gundel, also a popular and ritzy old restaurant. Another recent group was bused one evening the short distance to Zsambek for a typical Hun-

garian peasant wedding ceremony, with traditional food, costumes and atmosphere. Other groups have dined on paprika chicken at the Old Parliament and the Golden Barrel.

Outside Budapest

Excursions outside Budapest figure prominently in Hungarian incentives. The first BASF group took a cruise on huge Lake Balaton, with a buffet lunch including local fish in the garden of a "csarda," or country inn, with strolling violinists and swimming in the lake. Another group visiting Lake Balaton took in Szekesfehevar, the coronation and burial site of early Hungarian kings; the first-century town of Gorsium; lunch in a thatched-roof wine cellar; and a tour of a famed abbey at Tihany where the earliest known written words of Hungarian were discovered.

"A highlight of the (first) trip," says Eva Gross, "was the visit to the 'Ponaz' horse farm." Guests enjoyed Hungarian appetizers and wines as they watched an "exquisite display of horsemanship, something spectacular like the Cossack horsemen." Winners were also able to go horseback riding themselves or go for jaunts in buggies.

Excursions to farms in Hungary's "Pusztá" (or cowboy) horse country are popular with groups, and usually include a farm-style lunch and wine tasting at a wine cellar along with a stop at Lajosmizse, the bastion of the area's noted apricot brandy.

Other excursions Englewood arranged for the BASF groups were visits to Szentendre, an artists' colony of restored peasant homes with quaint courtyards and thatched roofs, known for its antique shops and winding streets; and Visegrad, boasting medieval churches and fortresses overlooking the Danube Bend.

The Bend is the one spot in the long course of the Danube through Hungary where the river bends—and where there are historic castles and fortifications at every turn. Englewood chartered a large steamer to cruise the Bend for the second BASF program. There was a wine-tasting party on board, musicians, dancing and guide giving lectures on Hungarian history and culture.

Along with the goulash, lake cruises



Quaint, multi-colored houses on cobblestone streets fill the historic Castle Hill area of Budapest where former Hungarian kings resided.

es and gypsy music, planners find that Hungary's hotels, restaurants and other suppliers provide the service, attention and comfort that winners demand—and all for less.

"We did the program at a lower cost factor than anywhere in Western Europe," claims group Travel Concepts' Smith. "Yet nothing was stinted; we gave them the best of everything for the money spent."

While Eva Gross agrees, she notes that any imported alcohol, foods or other items are at a premium price and can really jack-up costs. "Overall, though, for the same money you can give them more," she says, adding, "who can charter a large steamer in the West for 130 people which is big enough for 500?"

According to Smith, "Planning a trip to Hungary is no more difficult

than to anywhere in Western Europe."

However, Eva Gross had found that, "It can be more complicated to plan a trip to Hungary because you're dealing with a country where all goods you are used to are not available. It's not a consumer-oriented country like ours. It takes a lot of advance planning for luxury services."

For planning assistance, IBUSZ, the Hungarian Travel Bureau, in New York City, can help out. IBUSZ has put together some sample IT packages that may work as a basic framework for your program.

Including Hungary in your next European IT program could be the incentive twist you've been looking for. Consider Smith's comment:

"People have little idea what to expect in the East bloc; (influenced by) the media, they expect only dull personalities, no smiles, drabness. Instead, our group found Budapest to be a vibrant city and the Hungarians pleasant, happy people who were as colorfully dressed as people in the West. Our eyes were opened tremendously." □

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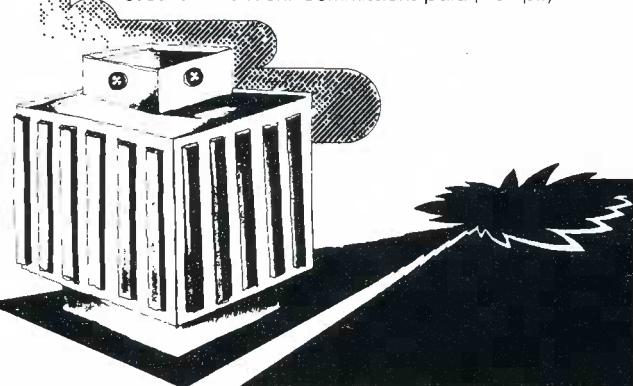
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