

Budapest

On Ten Bucks A Day (Or Else!)

> By Dominick A. Merle

Being broke in Budapest does have an upside. For openers, it definitely makes your choices much less complicated, and allows plenty of time to stop and smell the goulash.

Through sheer clumsiness, I managed to lose all of my cold hard cash and credit cards on my first day here. I'll spare you and me the embarrassing details. My wife was traveling on business in the U.S. at the time and I didn't want to drag her into the same panic situation.

First things first: I notified my credit card company and was given an 800 number, which took me from Budapest to a multiple choice recording somewhere in Montreal, and then on to an outsource lady in Bangalore, India, who was interested in my mother's maiden name.

I explained my predicament, she proceeded to ask a few more "security" questions, put me on hold twice to the tune of depressing music, then cheerily advised me of my balance available. She was very pleasant, but I was in desperate need of money, not Miss Manners, so I hung up in frustration. Time to calmly analyze the situation: My hotel bill is paid through my lost credit card, including breakfasts. And I do have 7500 Hungarian forint currency. But that's only the equivalent of \$50. And I've got five days to go.

Aha! I'll simply ask the hotel to advance me some money and put it on my credit card. Sorry, they don't do that type of transaction, I was told, but they would be "more than happy" to charge any food or drink along with any purchases from their shops. (Wouldn't that make me a hotel prisoner for five days?) ▶



The Fort

القلعة



Old building in Buda

مبنى قديم في بودا

**My clear choice:
Survivor, Budapest style
Day 1**

A late full breakfast to tide me through lunch, carrying away an assortment of fruits and muffins and a large water bottle. Fortunately, the hotel backed onto Budapest's famed pedestrian street, the Vaci Utca so I joined all of the other tourists on the colorful trail.

But while many of them stopped for lunch at an outdoor patio of a five-star hotel along the Danube, I found a park bench instead and enjoyed my takeaway fruit. In fact, my bench had a better view of the Danube and the Buda side of the city across the river.

By mid-afternoon I needed a snack but the prices along the Vaci Utca were not within my budget, so I took a side street into a typical neighborhood. I found a tiny market where I could buy a Hungarian sausage sandwich and a drink for less than \$3, about one-fourth the amount of the same type of snack on the walking street.

There are nine bridges connecting the two sides of the city, Buda and Pest, four of them in the central core where I was staying on the Pest side. I walked across the Chain Bridge to the Buda side, then strolled alongside the Danube on what is often described as Budapest's most romantic

walk. Only I was alone, down to about \$47 dollars. And hungry again.

I crossed back to the Pest side via the Elizabeth Bridge, headed into another off-the-beaten track neighborhood and found a restaurant offering a dinner including a drink and desert for about \$10. It was too good to resist.

There was even a Gypsy violinist playing typical Hungarian music, whereas the violinists in the walking street restaurants were often playing "Hello Dolly" or "When The Saints Go Marching In," two tunes that seemed to be the flavor of the moment.

Day 2

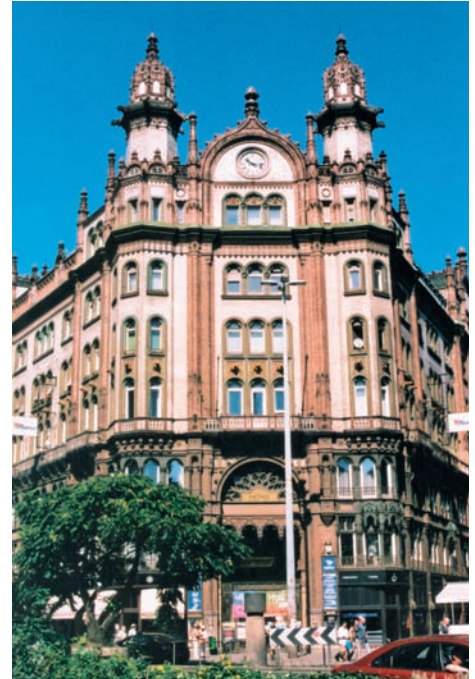
I'm actually beginning to enjoy this. I feel about 30 years younger, haven't had any junk food simply because I couldn't afford it, and there's a slightly giddy feeling of being in a foreign country far, far away and almost broke.

After the usual late breakfast and takeaway snacks, it was back on the walking street, which winds its way for several kilometers along the West side of the city. I sat on another Danube riverfront bench for some people watching. There were a number of walking tours, some of them led by English speaking guides.

Why not? I simply joined one group; they didn't know each other anyway and the

guide didn't seem to mind. I learned about the majestic Parliament Building and the castle on the Buda side, toured St. Stephen's Basilica, the city's largest church and was led into the Grand Central Market, the city's huge covered marketplace that dates back to 1896.

The market looked delicious---and cheap! ▶



Typical old architecture

معمارة نمطي



Hero's Square

ساحة الأبطال



St. Stephen's Basilica

كنيسة سانت ستيفن

Here I could have a hearty lunch at one of the many butcher shops for about \$2. I left the tour (one of the benefits of being a tag-a-long) and selected my deli delight, a roasted chicken sandwich on a huge roll. I checked out a restaurant on the second floor offering meal, drink and desert, all for less than \$10. This would be my dinner that evening.

End of another good day. But I'm now down to about \$25 with three days to go. I was definitely pushing the envelope.

Day 3

Back on the walking street with my snacks. It was a Sunday and the Chain Bridge was closed to vehicular traffic and transformed into a giant flea and food market. The sun was shining, bands were playing, everyone seemed to be smiling and I felt like a million bucks as I was slowly but surely going broke. I crossed over to the Buda side again and took a different trail.

On the way back across the bridge, I stopped at several of the food stalls...a drink here, a sandwich there and I was down to about 1500 forint or roughly \$10. I sat on my favorite five-star bench in front

of the posh Intercontinental Hotel on the Danube to consider my options.

A young man carrying an armful of leather belts approached me. "Very good...very cheap," he said. When I told him I had no money he at first seemed skeptical. Then, perhaps by the look in my eyes, he must have been convinced. He smiled and gave me a thumbs-up sign, as though to say, welcome to the club.

I grudgingly surrendered that night and phoned my wife. She arranged for some funds to be sent via Western Union to an office near my hotel. The money would be there the next day.

Day 4

Almost mechanically, I walked away from breakfast with some fruit and rolls-- just in case--and headed into the Western Union office with my passport in hand for identification. The money was there, more than enough to carry me through the next couple of days.

The panic was over, but the thrill was gone. Now I was merely Tourist No. 2466329. Would I like to do this again? Yes, but only in a city as friendly as Budapest. ■



Floral neighbourhood balcony

بيت تزينه الورد

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Budapest train station

محطة القطار في بودابست