

after dark: BUDAPEST

Vanessa Murray gets in touch with the nocturnal soul of Budapest, central Europe's party heart.

The River Danube separates the two parts of the city – west-bank Buda and east-bank Pest. Photo: HNTO.

BUDA IS LIKE A GARDEN, PEST is like a factory,” say the locals in Budapest, capital of Hungary. The pretty central European city is loved for its crumbling post-Communist grandeur, folksy culture and pocket-friendly prices. Yet, partying here in the non-political sense is a relatively new concept – from 1949 to 1989 the country was part of the Eastern Bloc and uncontrolled gatherings were forbidden. Now, the new generation of Hungarians, or Magyars, live it up like lab rats on caffeine, with an art-infused nightlife that’s possible to see any day of the week.

6.00pm

Downtown Budapest is the perfect place to start the evening’s festivities. It’s relatively small with a vibe that swings from modern to kitsch, and cosy village to grand metropolis. If you’re here in summer, make the most of the late evening sunshine at venues like Gödör, a relaxed outdoor cafe, nightclub and art space set below street level. Gödör has an outdoor stage offering free concerts and an ancient amphitheatre feel. Whatever the weather, it’s the perfect place to ease yourself into a long night ahead. They also rent bikes for free so if you’re planning on covering a bit of ground, you could consider hiring one. But be warned: Buda is no Amsterdam. The lack of bike lanes, cobblestoned streets and left-hand driving make cycling here a bit of an adventure. Thankfully, there are also public buses, trams, trolleys, taxis and an underground metro service – Europe’s first. The beer’s pretty good, too.

Gödör
Erzsébet Square, District V, Pest
www.godorklub.hu



The parking lot outside of Gödör.
Photo: Vanessa Murray.

8.30pm

A hop, skip and a bike- or taxi-ride away, and you’re in the hip and happening District IX. Try Cölkxpõn, a bar-cum-teahouse-cum-tent where music, theatre, dance and visuals take centre stage. It’ll give you a taster of the Sziget Festival, one of Europe’s largest events, which is held every August on the island of Óbudai in the Danube. The Cölkxpõn crew run a tent there every year. Performances at Cölkxpõn start around 9 or 10pm. Don’t be surprised if someone asks you to take your shoes off and let loose during a gig – visitors are encouraged to immerse themselves in a ‘collective spiritual experience’.

Cölkxpõn
www.cokxponambient.hu



Cölkxpõn.



Locals getting down at A38.
Photo: Mark Somay.

10.30pm

Head across the river to A38: a decommissioned 1968 Ukrainian stone-hauling barge. It’s now a floating restaurant and terrace bar by day and kick-arse club by night. Think jazz, blues, electronic, hip-hop, reggae and even classical. There are more than 20 types of the native plonk on offer – a potent fruit brandy called pálinka that’s got an alcohol content of 37–86 per cent. Knock a couple back before moving onto better-known evils like beer. Or try the bar’s own flaming cocktail creation, ‘Massive Attack’. It’s enough to, er, sink a ship.

A38
Just south of Petöfi Bridge, District I, Buda
www.a38.hu



A warm night under the stars at Dürer Kert.
Photo: HNTO.

12.00am

There’s just one catch about this next spot: it’s officially in Outer Pest. Leafy, quiet District XIV, to be precise. Though the neighbourhood is quiet the bars are anything but. Dürer Kert ticks two of the nightlife must-dos in Budapest: 1) It’s a kertek (garden) bar. 2) It’s a romkocsma – a ruined pub temporarily established in a dilapidated building earmarked for demolition. This one is in a former university arts faculty next to City Park, and has a large lamp-lit garden. Inside the vibe is student sharehouse/art studio. Cheap drinks, foosball, table tennis, darts, a lucky dip of live music and the likelihood of meeting switched-on young locals make the hike worth it.

Dürer Kert
Ajtósi Dürer sor 19–21, District XIV, Pest
www.durerkert.com

hungary



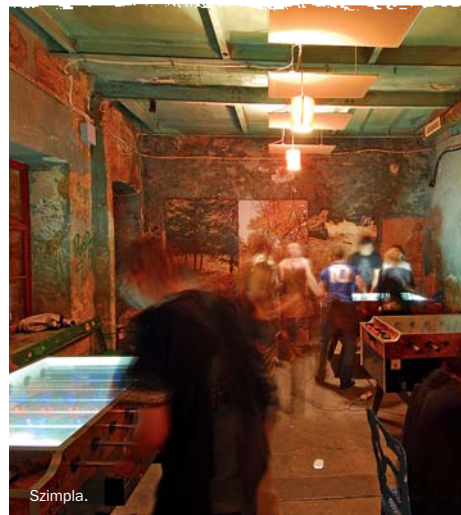
Instant – one of Budapest's famous romkocsma, or ruined pubs.
Photo: HNT0.

1.00am

Ready to get into the thick of things? Head to Szimpla: the first and most renowned of Budapest's romkocsmas. It's located in District VII, which was home to a flourishing Jewish community before World War II. This area is notably neglected and run down, meaning that Szimpla is infused with a near-lethal dose of shabby chic. Listen to local gypsy bands, play backgammon or eat pizza by the slice.

Szimpla

Kazinczy utca 14, District VII, Pest
www.szimpla.hu



Szimpla.

2.00am

If you're still not ready to call it a night, get over to District VI, Budapest's cultural centre. Think wide, sycamore-lined boulevards, cafes on sidewalks, the Opera House and a club called Instant. Another feather in Budapest's burgeoning romkocsmas cap, Instant is made of two houses decorated to the eyeballs with the trappings of an enchanted forest. The biggest of the ruined pubs, it boasts 23 rooms, six bars, two gardens, three dance floors, multiple art exhibitions and pumping music. Now's a good time to try a 'simple' toast in Magyar, the local language – Kedves egészségere!

Just two doors down is Vakpóni Bisztró, the last stand for those – locals and travellers alike – who can't face the thought of bed before sunrise. The DJs spin progressive electro while the patrons get crazy under a giant disco ball, in between resting up on the long, white couch. If you get there and the shutters are closed, bust on in because this is where the party's at. You won't regret it.

Instant

Nagymező utca 38, District VI, Pest
www.instant.co.hu

Vakpóni Bisztró

Nagymező utca 40, District VI, Pest
www.vakponi.hu



*Photo: Vanessa Murray.

GET PLANNING

Get There

KLM Royal Dutch Airlines flies from most Australian capital cities to Budapest from A\$1,823.

www.klm.com.au

Go with a Group

Intrepid Travel runs a 15-day trip in central Europe that starts in Vienna, Austria, and finishes in Budapest, Hungary. Costs from A\$2,385.

www.intrepidtravel.com

Get Informed

Check out www.gotohungary.com for more information about Budapest.