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**in10**

# A capital idea ... a tale of two cities

## Book a brilliant weekend in Budapest and Bratislava

By David Gordon

IT'S my fiancée's fault. In conversation, she unwittingly set me a challenge of seeing two cities we'd never visited over a long weekend.

So, in true adventurer style, I got out a map of Europe to look for capital cities that weren't too far apart.

Budapest and Bratislava jumped off the page and I soon discovered we could fly into Budapest on a Friday evening, and stay there two nights before catching a two-hour train to Bratislava for another night before flying home.

The challenge was on! Budapest is a city of two halves. Buda on one side of the River Danube, Pest on the other.

The flat Pest side has the city centre with shops, restaurants and hotels.

The hilly Buda side is where you will find Fisherman's

Bastion, a panoramic viewing terrace with fairytale towers offering stunning views of the city. The upper part can be reached on foot, by buggy or a funicular train.

While the city has an excellent tram

system, we used the Big Bus Hop-on Hop-off tour bus to see many the sights. However, on foot is the best way to experience the city and soak up the atmosphere.

After a day sightseeing, entertainment is next on the list and Budapest does not disappoint.

From rooftop Igloo bars to "ruin pubs", the city caters for everyone. Ruin pubs are fascinating places, found in long-abandoned apartment buildings, particularly in the Jewish Quarter.

As the buildings were too expensive to renovate, they were left to decay until an underground movement moved in and turned them into entertainment venues.

One can be found in an old car service centre, another in a former supermarket. They are filled with mismatched furniture and art installations and are a truly unique experience.

Szimpla Kert was named as one of the top five bars in Europe recently.

However, if that's not your cup of tea, you might find it at one of the most beautiful cafes in the world. The historic New York café has marble columns, chandeliers, stunning murals and prices to match, but it is worth paying for the experience.

We stayed at the original Grand Budapest Hotel, the one on which the Wes Anderson movie was based. Now called the Corinthia, it's truly exceptional. From the ornate foyer to the executive



▼ Both cities have quaint cobbled streets and a variety of attractions such as the UFO tower, near left.

lounge, the guest rooms and ornate spa area, the hotel oozes sophistication.

The train from Budapest to Prague is a regular service takes around two hours. We crossed from Hungary to Slovakia, travelling from one of Europe's oldest and largest capital cities to one of the youngest and smallest.

The old town of Bratislava is beautiful, and completely pedestrianised so it's a pleasure to wander around. Some of the historic buildings date back to the 13th Century

and there is a hilltop castle as well as small cathedrals to explore. St Martin's Cathedral is worth a visit for the catacombs.

The city has a number of symbolic statues that are worth seeing. Cumil is the

statue of a man peering out of a manhole cover, Schone laci is a man with a top-hat, a well-known local character in the 19th Century.

An odd juxtaposition to the historic old town is just

across the river. The UFO tower is shaped as a flying saucer and houses a panoramic restaurant.

The full effect can be seen at night as the lights appear to hover above the river. The views from the top encompass the old town, and you can see parts of Hungary and Austria too.

Back in Old Town, a visit to the Grand Cru Wine Gallery is highly recommended. The host takes you on a taste-tour of Slovak vineyards and wine

varieties, accompanied by stories, chat and a really good cheeseboard.

Here, we stayed in the Hotel Avance, on the edge of the old town but only a few steps away from the riverside and the town square. The rooms are perfect and comfortable.

With an extra night tagged on, the trip could easily have become a three-city, and three-country trip as Vienna, capital of Austria, is a short trip away. Maybe that's our next adventure!

# 10 must-see attractions

## BUDAPEST

**FISHERMAN'S BASTION**  
Not only does this place offer one of the best views in the city, the place is an attraction in itself.

**THERMAL BATHS**  
There are dozens of Turkish baths around the city. The hot thermal waters are open all year round.

**BOAT TOURS**  
An evening cruise along the Danube offers a chance to see city's floodlit landmarks in full panorama.

**CUISINE**  
Paprika, meat and cabbage are staples in Budapest. For those with a sweeter tooth, try a chimney cake at the central market hall.



**HEROES' SQUARE**  
One of the city's most important landmarks, this colonnade has statues of revered Hungarian leaders and is very important to the country's history.

## BRATISLAVA

**BRATISLAVA CASTLE**  
Once the seat of the city rulers, this building now houses the Museum of History. There are amazing views from the 47m Crown Tower.

**ST MICHAEL'S GATE**  
This 14th Century tower houses the Museum of Arms. It is the only preserved gate of the city's historic fortifications.



**GRAND CRU WINE GALLERY**  
Discover the produce of local vineyards, and enjoy great conversation in this intimate city winery tucked away on Zamocnicka Street.

**LOCAL CUISINE**  
Visit a local restaurant. Traditionally hearty, dishes include pork, potatoes, dumplings, cheese and thick sauce.

**THE BLUE CHURCH**  
Described as one of the most beautiful pieces of art nouveau architecture in the world, this church is just a short distance from the main square.