

# Budapest subterranea

## beneath the Hungarian capital



by Duncan JD Smith

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**M**any visitors to Budapest arrive by train from Vienna. Although logic might suggest that these trains should terminate at one of the railway stations on the west of the city (so in Pest rather than Buda), they actually circle through the suburbs and end their run at Keleti Pályaudvar, one of the Hungarian capital's eastern railway stations. And it is here at Keleti that all the grand trains terminate. The

ABOVE: the extensive ruins of the Roman civilian settlement of Aquincum were uncovered in Óbuda during the late nineteenth century (photo by Duncan JD Smith)

services from Berlin, Venice, Moscow, Sofia and Salonika all run to Keleti.

Many are the travellers who change trains at Keleti. Some of them will appreciate the feelings of Jonathan Harker, the young Transylvania-bound solicitor in Bram Stoker's epistolary Gothic novel *Dracula* who paused at Keleti on his journey east. Located sublimely on a bend in the Danube, with the Buda Hills (Budai-hegység) on one bank and the Great Hungarian Plain (Nagy-Magyar-Alföld) stretching away on the other, Budapest is indeed, as Harker put it "a wonderful place".

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*Buda-Pesth seems a wonderful place, from the glimpse which I got of it from the train and the little I could walk through the streets. I feared to go very far from the station, as we had arrived late [...] The impression I had was that we were leaving the West and entering the East.*

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*from Bram Stoker's 'Dracula' (1897)*

Unfortunately for Harker, as for so many folk who change trains at Keleti, there was little time to explore. But he tarried long enough to realise that Budapest was very different from Vienna. Despite

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being little more than two hundred kilometres south-east of the former Habsburg stronghold, Budapest looks much more to the East. This is hardly surprising when one considers that the nomadic Magyars, the ancestors of modern Hungarians, probably originated in north-west China. The city on the Danube has been conquered by wave after wave of invaders sweeping in across the Carpathian

Basin — among them the Huns in 409, the Mongols or Tatars in 1241, and the Ottoman Turks in 1540.

Although Jonathan Harker did not stray far from Keleti it is interesting to note that he was able to tap so quickly into Budapest's Oriental heart. Maybe he happened upon the Uránia National Film Theatre (Uránia Nemzeti Filmszínház) on nearby Rákóczi út, which at the time served as a music hall. The building's Venetian Gothic façade conceals an interior enlivened with Asiatic elements. Although this hybrid architectural eclecticism might have been familiar to Harker, he would

surely not have realised that such stylings (often used in conjunction with Hungarian folkloric motifs) were used by some *fin de siècle* architects in Budapest as a way of surreptitiously expressing national cultural identity, at a time when Hungarian affairs were subject to close Habsburg scrutiny.

#### CAVES AND CAVERNS

There is another dimension to the Hungarian capital that Harker could not possibly have seen. This is subterranean Budapest, tucked away not only beneath the city's famous Castle Hill (Várhegy) but also under quiet suburbs, and alongside busy roads and railway tracks. Whether revealed or concealed these subsurface locations speak just as eloquently about the city's history as their above-ground counterparts.

Budapest's earliest settlers arrived in the fourth millennium BC and settled on the riverbank in Óbuda, north of Castle Hill. An Iron Age community was later based here but there is nothing of that to be seen today. Although the same goes for Gellért Hill (Gellért-hegy), south of Castle Hill, where during the fourth century BC the Celtic Eravi tribe built their *oppidum*, it is easy to see what drew early settlers to these hills on the west bank of the Danube. There is a series of caves fashioned by thermal springs, strung out along a fault line where the hills join the plain. And it is the recuperative waters from these springs that have drawn people to Budapest for two thousand years.

One of these caves, opposite the entrance to the venerable Gellért Thermal Baths (Gellért Gyógyfürdő), is where a mediaeval hermit made a home for himself, dispensing cures based on the

therapeutic waters that percolated up through the rock. In the nineteen twenties the cave was converted into a chapel for pilgrims by the Paulites, the only monastic order of purely Hungarian origin. Known as the Cave Church (Sziklatemplom) this unusual place of worship consists of a series of water-formed tunnels, enlarged by the hand of man and fitted out with altars and pews.

No other capital city in the world is so riddled with caves as Budapest. Comprising approximately two hundred individual caverns, connected by many more kilometres of narrow galleries, some of them are open to the public. The Pál-völgy and the Mátyás-hegy caves in Óbuda, for example, are renowned for their displays of stalactites, and for containing one of the world's longest subterranean thermal lakes.

the Cave Church (Sziklatemplom) on Gellért Hill (Gellért-hegy) has been visited by pilgrims' since the 1920s (photo by Duncan JD Smith)



Only slightly less spectacular but of greater interest to serious speleologists is the nearby Szemlő-hegy Cave (Szemlő-hegyi-barlang). It was discovered in 1930 and first entered by a twenty two year old girl, the slender Mária Szekula, who was able to squeeze through the only visible opening, the “Tű foka” or Needle’s Eye. Less adventurous visitors will be reassured to learn that the cave is today entered by means of a specially cut adit.

What Mária found was a three hundred metre long cavern made up of fractures in the rock, opened up over three and a half million years ago by the action of warm water. The caves are laced with delicate, cauliflower-like formations of aragonite, as well as conical, grape-like accumulations of pisolite, as a result of which the cave was dubbed ‘Budapest’s Underground Flower Garden’. The constant temperature (10°C), dust-free air, and almost overbearing humidity has subsequently had a marked curative effect on those suffering from respiratory problems.

#### AMPLE WATER

Water also brought the Romans to Budapest, and the extensive remains from that period are a distinctive aspect of the subterranean city. Around 90AD they established a legionary camp as part of the *limes*, the defensive line of forts built along the Danube to guard the empire’s eastern border. The camp was centred in Óbuda on what is today Flórián tér, a junction of busy roads that carve deep into some rich archaeology. Most impressive are the camp baths (*Thermae Maiores*) the remains of which are shoehorned into a hole beneath a busy flyover. Shattered sculptural fragments from the site, including a soldier’s tombstone, are attached to the walls of a nearby underpass, juxtaposed between cigarette kiosks and shops selling cheap clothes. Few passers-by seem to notice this earliest tangible evidence for their home city.

The roads leading away from the camp were once lined with villas, one of which was discovered in 1958 by workmen digging foundations for a school. Now hemmed in by modern buildings, the meagre remains — known as the Hercules Villa — take their name from a mosaic depicting the eponymous hero dispatching the centaur Nessus, who is attempting to carry off his wife Deianeira.

Some three kilometres further north, and rather more impressive, lies the ruined civilian settlement of Aquincum, established alongside what is now the city's rattling HÉV light rail system. Derived from the Latinised version of the Celtic name *Ak-ink* (meaning 'ample water'), Aquincum became the capital of the province of Pannonia Inferior in 107AD, with the future Emperor Hadrian as its first governor. In amongst the ruined houses, courtyards, baths and shrines archaeologists have retrieved some beautiful Roman glass, as well as the remains of an unusual portable organ presented to the town's firemen's guild in 228AD (the site museum boasts a haunting recording made on a reconstruction of the instrument). On the opposite bank of the Danube stood the bridgehead fort of Contra Aquincum, the footings of which occupy a depression in Március 15. tér; it was from this unprepossessing site that the now sprawling commercial districts of Pest would eventually emerge.

After Aquincum fell to the Huns, Óbuda was not extensively settled again until 900, when the

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seven Magyar tribes arrived on the scene under High Prince Árpád. When the area was laid waste by the grandson of Genghis Khan, King Béla IV moved his people away from the vulnerable Danube floodplain, up to the security of Castle Hill. It was here in 1261 that the seat of the royal court took the name Buda, and the old Roman settlement area was demoted to Old Buda (hence Óbuda). This new found security, and two centuries of relative stability, enabled the Angevin and Luxembourg dynasties to transform Hungary into one of the greatest nations in mediaeval Europe.

Sigismund of Luxembourg became Holy Roman Emperor and as King of Hungary he made Castle Hill the site of a splendid royal residence. Even more resplendent were the embellishments

made by the Renaissance King Matthias 'Corvinus' Hunyadi, crowned King of Hungary in 1458. Tantalising remnants can be found deep in the cellars of the Budapest History Museum (Budapesti Történelmi Múzeum), which today occupies part of the most recent incarnation of the palace. A steep flight of stairs leads down to a maze-like vaulted Gothic undercroft, where it doesn't take much imagination to conjure up Matthias in his long lost library, accompanied by poet-musicians and wine-spouting fountains.



of the numerous major cave systems running beneath Budapest the Szemlő-hegy Cave (Szemlő-hegyi-barlang) is one of the most fascinating (photo by Duncan JD Smith)

THE OTTOMANS' LABYRINTH

Although Budapest enjoyed a golden age under Matthias his death in 1490 brought political instability. The burgeoning Ottoman Empire was quick to take advantage of the situation. The city was first ransacked by Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent,

following his routing of the Hungarians at Mohács in 1526; fifteen years later the Turks returned and occupied Castle Hill, making Buda the seat of

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as storage rooms and wells. The calcareous limestone and marl is easy to excavate and by connecting the chambers together the Turks created a subterranean fortress for themselves. It is possible to visit a part of this shadowy realm by means of an inconspicuous doorway on Úri utca — and it's an unforgettable experience.

Budapest's underground railway (Földalatti) is the second oldest in the world and runs underneath Andrásy út (photo by Duncan JD Smith)



Called the Buda Castle Labyrinth (Budavári Labirintus) the Ottoman tunnels have been restored as far as possible, after having been used as a Second World War air raid shelter and field hospital, a secret military installation during the Cold War, and even as the venue for Hungary's first waxworks museum during the 1990s. The word labyrinth is certainly applicable since the tunnels stretch in all directions for almost ten kilometres. The old casemates, which once facilitated the rapid deployment of Turkish troops, are now fitted out with a surprisingly effective series of tableaux representing Hungary's labyrinthine journey from prehistoric times up to the present day.

After the Habsburgs ousted the Turks from Budapest in 1686 they reconstructed the city in triumphant baroque style. Until the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy in 1918, Budapest was adorned with the trappings of a metropolis every bit the equal of Vienna. In some ways the Hungarian capital was more advanced than its Austrian counterpart, notably in the construction of an underground railway in Pest, the first of its type in continental Europe. Rendered on street plans as the M<sub>1</sub> it is known locally as the Földalatti, meaning 'under the earth'.

The railway does not run through a bored tunnel but is rather a 'cut and cover' trench, squeezed in above a main sewer (this accounts for the characteristically low ceiling height of just 2.85 metres). Inaugurated in 1896 the Földalatti was used to transport visitors out along Andrásy út to the City Park (Városliget), where an exhibition was being staged to mark the thousand year anniversary of the arrival of the Magyars. Concealing the railway below ground meant that the city's grandest boulevard, with its opera house and gentlemen's riding lane, need not be marred by the addition of an above ground tramway. Although the rolling stock has since been updated —

RIGHT: this magical Loire-style chateau in Budafok was once home to József Törley who produced sparkling wine for the Habsburgs (photo by Duncan JD Smith)

for originals visit the tiny Underground Railway Museum at Deák Ferenc tér — and the original station pavilions are long gone, the experience of travelling on the Földalatti is still much the same as it was when the technophobic Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph I as King of Hungary deigned to use it.

#### A SPARKLING SURPRISE

Whilst the Austrian emperor may have been non-plussed by Budapest's technological advances there was little doubt that he was impressed with their oenological achievements. Hungarian sparkling wine featured regularly on the best tables in Vienna during the twilight years of the Habsburg Empire, and the site of its production in the remote suburb of Budafok provides one last facet of subterranean Budapest. On Anna utca there stands a rambling Loire-style chateau, once home to József Törley, who in 1882 imported sparkling wine technology into Hungary from the French city of Reims. Identifying that the banks of the Danube were similar to the chalky limestone landscape of the Champagne region Törley established vineyards, and carved out a twenty-five kilometre long network of cellars in which to store and age wine. The excavated stone was used to build Budapest's matchless Parliament building. One tunnel is said to connect Törley's chateau with his factory, enabling him to make surprise inspections. On New Year's Eve 1899, just a few years after being knighted for his efforts by Franz Joseph, Törley predicted that a hundred years hence people would still be toasting each new year with his wines. It would delight him to know that his cellars in Budapest are currently used to store up to fourteen million bottles of sparkling wine each year. And that is certainly something worth toasting. ■

Duncan J D Smith is an urban explorer, travel writer, historian, and photographer. He is the author of 'Only in Budapest', one of a series of guidebooks by Duncan that probe the hidden corners of various European cities. Find out more at [www.duncanjdsmith.com](http://www.duncanjdsmith.com).

