

Wet and steamy in Budapest's baths

The city will inspire your senses in many ways, but, as **CAROLYN BANFALVI** discovers, the experience isn't complete until you've soaked in its thermal waters

BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

In Hungary, they say you can drill into the ground almost anywhere in the country and find thermal water. With 118 thermal outlets in Budapest alone, and an estimated 1,300 in the rest of the country, there's probably some truth in that.

The Romans were the first to tap these hot springs nearly 2,000 years ago, and bathhouses have been built here ever since. There are many modern spas, pools and wellness hotels in Budapest, but the unique attractions of the city are its historic baths, such as the domed, stone Rudas and Kiraly, built during the Turkish occupation, and the early-20th-century art nouveau Gellert. Budapest's bathhouses are a major differentiating point between it and other cities in Central and Eastern Europe (particularly Prague, which is a competitor for tourists).

For many Budapesters soaking in the baths has long been a daily habit, regarded as both therapeutic and a languorously luxurious communion with the pleasures of hot water.

And Hungarians aren't the only ones who appreciate the bathhouses and their spas. Thousands of foreigners come here every year to build a vacation around the pleasures of the city's waters.

Soaking in Budapest's waters is decadent, and addictive. Whether they are under Turkish-style domes, lined with tile mosaics, lit through stained glass, or surrounded by marble columns, the capital's historic baths are the grand dames of the Hungary's thermal spas.

Each has unique characteristics, and all offer daunting lists of services (massages, manicures, pedicures, mud baths and specific treatments for dozens of ailments).

While Budapest has become one of the business capitals of Central Europe, it is still a place where people place great importance on taking certain aspects of life slowly.

There's nothing like sinking into the green-tinted, slightly sulphurous thermal water of one of Budapest's bathhouses after a morning of museum-going, or wandering the cobblestone streets of the city's castle district.

Budapest will inspire your senses in many ways, but you can't say you've experienced the city until you've donned your bathing suit, grabbed a rough towel or a stiff white sheet from the attendant, and slowly, slowly descended into the hot waters of one of its bathhouses.

Here are five worth soaking in:

Kiraly Gyogyfurdo

Construction on this Turkish bath began in 1565, making it one of the oldest buildings in the city. But the current façade was added only in the 18th century and the bathhouse was partly rebuilt in 1950 after being badly damaged in the Second World War.

The stone building, with its metal dome topped with a Turkish crescent, retains much of its original Ottoman ambience. Sunlight breaches the dome through small holes to illuminate the dim central octagonal pool below. In all, the Kiraly has five thermal pools with temperatures ranging from 26 to 40 C.

The crowd at the indoor baths tends to be older, and nowhere is this more evident than at Kiraly, where it's not unusual for the youngest bathers in the crowd to be in their 50s.

Lukacs Gyogyfurdo

The neoclassical Lukacs, once a favourite of dissident writers and intellectuals from the 1950s to the early 1980s, looks like a mansion from the outside. Although thermal baths have operated on the site since the 12th century, the current building was built in the 1880s, when the baths were transformed into an internationally renowned healing centre. The bath's courtyard has marble and stone plaques from grateful patrons claiming the min-

