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A NEW YEAR GIFT

Fall in love with the 'Paris of the East'

Despite having never been, Budapest remained this idyllic, romantic city in my mind, a much fabled place on my list of weekend city breaks. Perhaps it was the guidebooks dubbing it the 'Paris of the East', or the friends who'd inter-railed gushing about the cheap beer, Art Nouveau architecture and bohemian cafe culture. Either way, I was slightly dispirited by the grey skies, Soviet-era tower blocks and countless Lidl's we saw en route from the airport.

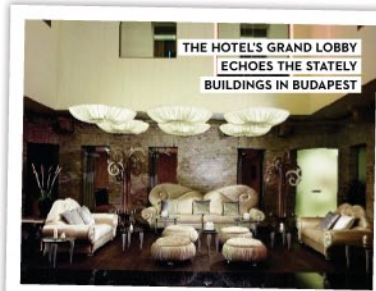
Luckily, with grand boulevards, and dramatic river views, the city really did rival the pomp of Paris. It's also a fascinating city of contrasts, divided across the River Danube - there's Pest with its cosmopolitan cafes and art galleries, and then Buda, which feels like a medieval village.

My base was the more modern Iberostar Grand Hotel Budapest, a newly opened boutique hotel in the 'Pest' area of the city; an intimate affair with an adult only policy and hip but kitsch decor. My room had a futuristic bathroom with glass walls and overlooked the statues, embassies and stately buildings of Liberty Square.

The spa with sauna, Turkish baths

and hot tub offered welcome respite after a day of sightseeing but Budapest is also famous for its own spas - the outdoor thermal baths dotted across the city. I visited the city's most famous, the Szechenyi Bath and Spa (szechenyibath.com), braving the freezing December temperatures for a dip in the 38°C water. With a backdrop of 19th century buildings, ornate fountains and steam rising off the water, it was the most atmospheric swim I have ever experienced.

Why it's hot As pretty as Paris, cheaper and less touristy than Prague, Budapest somehow feels relatively undiscovered, despite the short flight



time (around two hours) from the UK.

The cafe culture that blossomed in the late 19th century is still very much alive, especially in the lavish rococo tea room Gerbeaud (gerbeaud.hu/en), the 'Ritz' of Hungary. Come to ogle the intricate decor and even more intricate pastries, and stay for the ultra-thick hot chocolate and buttery apple strudel.

And if you like the underground vibe of London's hidden cocktail bars, you'll love the 'ruin pubs' - ad hoc watering holes that pop up in abandoned, dilapidated buildings. We danced and drank espresso martinis at Instant (instant.co.hu/en), a quirky club and bar in a disused apartment building.

Eating and drinking Local specialities goulash and grilled goose liver are a must-try - I tucked in at Spoon cafe (spooncafe.hu), an elegant boat-cum-restaurant in the Danube. Dine in the evening for the jazz pianist, and a view of the dramatically lit Royal Palace.

Local tippie pálinka is not for the faint-hearted - Hungarians drink it neat with their evening meal. If you do over-indulge, only street food will do the next morning - try lángos: giant,

crispy puffs of fried bread smothered with garlic and sour cream cheese. It'll be the greasiest, but most satisfying snack of your trip. For a break from overly hearty Hungarian cuisine, the Iberostar's restaurant is run by an ex-El Bulli chef, and serves an innovative take on tapas, plus a mean mushroom ravioli.

Budapest is packed with gourmet chocolate shops, but you can learn how to make your own at Chefparade cooking school (cookingbudapest.com) - I took home coconut and lime truffles, pralines and white grapefruit creams as edible souvenirs.

Photo opportunity Walking away from Pest and across the chain bridge to Buda, you'll feel like you've discovered a different city, with streets of medieval, baroque and 19th century houses, the Versailles-esque Royal Palace and adjoining fairytale castle. Climb along the castle walls for breathtaking views of the entire city.

Iberostar Grand Hotel Budapest from €85 per room/night based on two sharing (ibero-star.com). **Direct flights are available from easyJet and Malév from £100** (malev.com)