

Blissful *Budapest*

VegNews Travel Editor
Aurelia d'Andrea heads to Europe's
premiere spa town to relax, refuel, and
explore its unique culinary culture.



Have you ever dreamed of a pampering vacation built around languid afternoons at the spa, essential-oil massages delivered by a pair of practiced hands, and bottomless glasses of fresh-pressed organic juices? If the answer is yes, you aren't alone. For many of us, a rejuvenating escape remains the exclusive domain of the imagination—spas are prohibitively expensive, right? Add the cost of three vegan meals a day, and the feel-good fantasy seems even less tangible. Thankfully, the Hungarian capital of Budapest is the exception.

The dynamic European city rests atop a network of mineral-rich geothermal springs revered since Roman times for their soothing, healing properties. The Ottomans built the first generation of public baths, and a few centuries later, more grandiose spas were constructed to cater to a growing cadre of health-driven travelers. Today, Budapest's spas still charm with their

Parliament Building. From the living room window, I spot a flurry of noisy gulls soaring around its pointed Gothic spires, and watch fellow tourists converge in the square for the changing-of-the-guard spectacle. Million-dollar views for \$35 a night! Hotel rooms in the Parliament neighborhood start at \$40, but who needs room service when you've got your own kitchen to stock with vegan food finds?

9:30am I skip coffee in favor of something healthier at neighborhood veg spot Nemsüti Bisztró. Of the three daily juice specials, I go for the green. It's thick like a smoothie and tastes wholesome, just like the puréed vegetable soups, rainbow salads, and baked grain dishes also featured on the menu. I'm mesmerized by the vegan panna cotta and berry-topped chocolate mousse but decide to save my appetite for lunch. There's no room for an early morning dessert when grilled seitan

of-the-hot indoor baths. The composition of the water is supposed to be the most healing in all of Budapest, with the almost-magic ability to soothe arthritic joints, ease intestinal maladies, and support the recalcification of weakened bones. No wonder local doctors prescribe spa visits instead of trips to the pharmacy!

1:30pm Since discovering Napfényes Étterem on my first trip to Budapest, memories of Hungarian oat cakes and mashed potatoes, walnut-breaded seitan Kiev, and fried zucchini with gooseberry sauce have kept me awake at night. So glad to be back! The friendly waitperson guides me past the epic dessert case and its layered cakes topped with whipped cream, beyond the ice cream counter, and into the expansive dining room with its starched tablecloths and subdued

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architectural beauty in styles ranging from fanciful Baroque to majestic Art Nouveau, and with a favorable exchange rate, enjoying state-of-the-art hot pools, steam rooms, saunas, and pristine lounge areas is possible for the price of a glass of cabernet at a New York City wine bar.

While "the Paris of the East" isn't yet a world-renowned vegan destination, Budapest offers an array of edible options for herbivores, from raw organic to traditional Hungarian. Plus, the country is safe and friendly, with an easy-to-navigate city center and lively neighborhoods crammed with culture and history. Sound like your kind of vacation? Borrow a page (or two) from my travel journal, and get inspired to plan your own well-deserved escape to beautiful Budapest.

*Day 1:
Oh, happy day*

9am What luck! My Airbnb looks directly over the very castle-like Hungarian

cutlets and savory stuffed cabbage await.

10am Next stop: BikeBase, where a two-day bicycle rental costs approximately \$20 and includes a lock and a basket to haul the flea market treasures and edible goodies I intend to procure during the next two days. I wonder how many cans of mushroom pâté will fit inside? The friendly young owners speak perfect English and tell me to call if I get a flat so they can send a mobile repair unit out to save the day.

10:30am Pedaling across the Danube toward Lukács Thermal Bath, I stop to take in the fairytale-like views along the river. Upstream, it's rolling countryside; downstream, it's castles and bridges. Bucolic and urban, all at the same time.

10:45am At the spa, I hand over my credit card, and for the \$12 entry fee I'm given a waterproof wristband that works like a key for my locker and instructions for finding the upstairs changing area. I skip the outdoor pools and head for the hottest-

decor. She hands me a menu, but I don't need it because I'll take one of everything, beginning with the oat burger with sour cherry sauce, followed by fried seitan cutlets and layered Hungarian potatoes, and spelt-crust pizza with a thick layer of gooey vegan cheese. Pushing gluttony aside, I settle on stuffed cabbage—served in a savory broth and piled high with sauerkraut and vegan sausage—and a glass of the housemade lavender lemonade. I'll get the raw plate with pumpkin seed pâté and crispy flax crackers next time.

3pm I'm off to wander the old Jewish quarter and enjoy the public art installations. The cafés around Dohány Street Synagogue (aka, The Great Synagogue)—Europe's largest—are packed. At Ludovika Shop, I fall in love with a pair of adorable vegan flats that cost exactly three dollars more than my wallet holds. This is one of the few places in Budapest that doesn't take credit cards, but the woman behind the counter doesn't bat an eye when I ask if she'd shave a few *forint*



Day 2 means CsendesM
Vegan Bistro & Cafe for
dinner

vegetables, paprika vendors display their peppers in dried, powdered, and pickled form. I could spend hours here.

5pm Is it too early for dinner? CsendesM Vegan Bistro & Cafe closes at 6pm, so hungry or not, I'll make room for the three-course daily menu (\$6) with options such as green pea polenta with grilled vegetables; cheeseburgers with roasted potatoes and homemade ketchup; and cocoa and almond quinoa cake. I'm feeling indulgent, so I order a glass of regional *bor* (wine)—a rich, spicy red from the Villany region—and make a mental note to come back tomorrow after spa visit number three.

9pm Recently, Budapest has become known for its *romkocsma* ("ruin bars")—atmospheric social gathering spots built within abandoned urban spaces. I decide to spend my last night seeing what all the fuss is about. Szimpla Kert is accessed through an open passageway on trendy Kazinczy Street, which leads to a visually enticing courtyard decorated with colorful dangling lights and vintage furniture. House music thumps through the soundsystem, and the mood is upbeat and welcoming. I order a local craft beer and settle into a velvet chair that looks like it might have been a seat at an old cinema in a previous life. On the table sits a flyer announcing an organic pop-up market in this very space the following day, and, sipping the foam from my brew, I ask myself whether staying one more day might be feasible. The answer is an unequivocal *igen* (yes). **VN**

VN Travel + Beauty Editor Aurelia d'Andrea is contemplating the realities of a permanent spa vacation with a move to Budapest.

off the price tag. Sold to the brave haggler!

6pm Craving a caffeinated pick-me-up, I gravitate toward a covered arcade crammed with shops, restaurants, and the Blue Bird Cafe. I order an Americano before moseying to the dessert case. Between the meringues and brownies sits a magnificent sight: vegan chocolate cake. The server brings me a giant slice topped with whole preserved strawberries and tells me about the nightly karaoke in the downstairs lounge. I vow to return.

Day 2: Pampering & paprika

9am Many vegan restaurants in Budapest don't seem to open until lunchtime, with one notable exception: VegaCity. Here, early risers enjoy luscious smoothies and fresh-pressed juices accompanied by fabulous street-level views. I order a wheatgrass shot and mull the options before settling on a banana-date-cashew smoothie scented with vanilla (\$2) and a crumbly apple-filled pastry (\$2.50) that tastes like it was just pulled from the oven.

11am I'm all revved up on sugar and ready for today's excursion to Szechenyi Baths. Perched on the edge of City Park, the regal-looking complex exudes a distinct

glamour, looking more like a luxury hotel than a public spa. I'm overwhelmed by the size of this place—18 pools spread across 1.5 acres—and the epic menu of massage and pampering options, including pedicures, cellulite treatments, and facials. I go with a simple entry ticket (\$20) and aromatherapy massage (\$20), then join the legions of other relaxed and happy-looking people in the outdoor heated pool and enjoy the live entertainment: a pair of silver-haired men plotting their next moves on a waterproof chessboard.

2pm Szechenyi's on-site restaurant has a good selection of plant-based menu options marked with a "V," including risotto with seasonal vegetables and an intriguing chilled cherry soup, but I'm craving one of the cheap and tasty falafels at the local veg-friendly chain Hummus Bar. Of the 12 locations, I choose the spot near Parliament for its sunny terrace seating options and devour a messy sandwich (\$2.50) with gusto.

4pm Budapest's Great Market Hall is the destination for sourcing those compact, colorful tins of local paprika I love to give as gifts. Spanning three floors, the 119-year-old marketplace brims with homey smells wafting out of the downstairs bakeries and upstairs food stalls. Between the mesmerizing mounds of fruit and

Spas & Aaahhhs

Forget the unique vegan food, colorful markets, and dazzling cityscapes—Budapest’s thermal spas are reason enough to make a pilgrimage to the Hungarian capital. For a memorable day of relaxation and feel-good vibes, head to one of these beautiful oases in the heart of this charming metropolis.



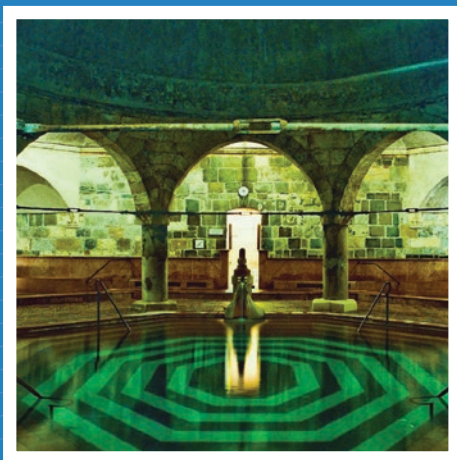
Gellért Thermal Spa

Constructed at the turn of the 20th century, Gellert claims the title of “most beautiful spa” in Budapest. Tiled pools flanked by Roman columns and statues lend a luxurious feel—and mud baths, foot massages, and hairdressing services are all available.



Lukacs Spa

The slightly institutional vibe of the lobby yields to simple bathing areas and lovely outdoor spaces complete with chaise lounges. Simple, serene, and far less crowded than other spas, Lukacs is ideal for those who seek a laid-back, pared-down experience without superfluous bells and whistles.



Rudas Baths

Newly revamped hot pools, steam rooms, and saunas give this spa a modern edge over its competitors. Try a hot soak followed by a dip in the ice pool before heading to the spa restaurant for a three-course vegan lunch (\$20, including entry to the spa).



Széchenyi Baths

Popular with tourists and locals alike, this sprawling complex has a bit of an amusement park ambiance.

Grab a map at the counter, and find your way through the maze of indoor and outdoor baths.