

# A Hungarian adventure

Europe is a haven for accessible cities full of charm, history and architecture. **Graham Anderson** visited Hungary's capital, Budapest, and was won over by the city's cuisine and cultural offerings.

Jeno Juhasz, an enterprising and larger than life Hungarian rugby player, drove us from the airport to a grand Budapest hotel in the London black cab he imported for novelty-value taxi rides. It is, as far as my exhaustive research can tell, the only wheelchair accessible vehicle for hire in Budapest. We arrived at Hotel Corinthia in central Pest, the level east bank of the River Danube. The hotel facade and interior are grand indeed and we checked into an accessible room that has two marbled bathrooms (one fully wheelchair accessible), a spacious lounge area and big comfy beds. Hotel Corinthia also boasts its own sumptuous Royal Spa, though sadly this is out of wheelchair reach.

The day started with an extensive buffet breakfast featuring smoked catfish and varieties of Hungarian sausage. We trundled 500m to Andrassy Avenue, a stylish boulevard running between the city centre and City Park. The main streets in Pest have wide pavements with haphazard dropped kerbs at most junctions and crossings, but outside the central shopping area many restaurants and shops have one or two large doorsteps. At one of Pest's major intersections, Oktogon, we boarded a tourist bus. The £20 ticket for the hop-on hop-off Big Bus service allowed two days travel on accessible modern buses to many interesting sites: Heroes' Square, Great Market, Chain Bridge, Royal Palace, Margaret Island and Citadel Hill in Buda, a viewpoint overlooking the sweeping curve of the Danube. A river cruise and walking tours were also included with the ticket.



The tour commentary described a complex history of occupation and rebellion, and revealed that 80% of the city was destroyed during World War II. Fortunately, the Hungarian State Opera House survived and has been restored to its former elegance. For about £8 you can pay for a private box for two people and watch a stirring performance of Ferenc Erkel's *Bank Ban*, by the Hungarian National Opera. (with English captions thankfully). Once over a large step at the entrance, a small backstage lift gives access to the fine auditorium. Wheelchair access to the Opus Jazz Club in the modern Budapest Music Centre is easier once the ramp is found. We had a good view from our table on the mezzanine, but oddly there was no lift to reach the toilets on the lower level.

From Hotel Corinthia's door, accessible trams run to Margaret Island, a 2.5 km long, 500 metre wide, popular landscaped park in the middle of the Danube. Enjoying the March sunshine we ventured along to the northern tip,

then searched among ugly tenements on the Buda bank for a corral of 19th century buildings that includes Restaurant Kehli, a family restaurant serving traditional Hungarian cuisine since 1899. But you don't have to come this far across the city to find fine restaurants. Just along Erzsebet Street from Hotel Corinthia there's the opulent New York Cafe, with its fountain and extraordinary gilded statuettes and frescos reminiscent of the 'Belle Epoque'. And a bit further on, lurking behind an unpromising hotel facade, there's Cafe Astoria Restaurant, which serves a fine lunch.

Known as the 'City of Spas' Budapest has three thermal baths with disabled facilities. The Gellert and Lukacs Baths are temporarily closed for refurbishment, so I visited the Szechenyi complex in City Park. The disabled changing cabin was too small and there was only one hoist serving the general pool only, not the thermal pools. But this was a small disappointment as the city offers so much more. If you are prepared to tackle a few accessibility challenges, then Budapest is a city to savour.

**Graham Anderson C6/7**

**For further information** about some of the places mentioned in Graham's article, visit: [www.corinthia.com](http://www.corinthia.com) [www.londontaxi.hu](http://www.londontaxi.hu) [www.opera.hu](http://www.opera.hu) [www.bigbustours.com](http://www.bigbustours.com)