

EASTERN EUROPE BY TRAIN

1. Berlin to Budapest



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www.johnbiggs.com.au

After our Captain's Choice tour of South America, when we saw their advertisement for a 24 day tour of Eastern Europe by private train, there was no question: we signed up. It was necessarily a group of 104, rather than our previous more manageable and get-to-know group of 30, but that number was needed to make the hiring of trains viable.

Berlin

We take a cruise on the River Spree. The Spree, with attendant canals, wanders through the



heart of the city, providing a different view of Berlin from the usual one. The commentary is in German and when I ask if the guide could just give a few names of the magnificent buildings he is describing in English, just the names, he snaps in perfect English: 'We do not give commentaries in English.' Duly chastened, we return to our hotel, the

Ritz-Carlton. Close by is the towering Potsdamer Platz with a viewing platform reached by the fastest lift in Europe: in 20 seconds it whisks you to a Google Earth view of Berlin.



Having seen Berlin by air and water, next day we see Berlin by fire. Names dimly remembered from childhood become disturbingly real. After World War II, 90% of the city's buildings were rubble – and even today there is still rebuilding to be done, with some bombed sites left as memorials. We are taken to a Third Reich Exhibition. Why the 'Third' Reich? Hitler saw the First Reich as the Roman Empire, the Second that of Kaiser Wilhelm when in the 1870s Germany had at last become a unified country; the Third Reich was Hitler's own Empire, in his view the greatest of them all.

The Holocaust Memorial comprises 2,711 blocks of concrete near the Brandenburg Gate. Each block is an individual, different from any other, each becomes increasingly taller towards the middle of the design. As you walk in from the outside, you at first see what is happening which is not very much, but as you walk in you gradually become lost, unable to see where it ends. Just so did the Jews feel as discrimination intensified into mass murder. Near the previous Gestapo headquarters, built in the Nazi's favourite 'Intimidating' style of architecture, is a preserved wall of what was an underground prison and torture chamber but is now an open trench displaying photographs taken by the Nazi's themselves. The Reichstag fire, almost certainly started on Hitler's orders but he blamed the communists, disabling the left wing vote and enabling him to achieve power. Kristallnacht in November 1938, in which 2,000 synagogues were razed and countless Jewish homes and businesses smashed, was a turning point in both international and internal relations. Germany was condemned internationally, while internally, Kristallnacht was the trigger for mass deportations, murders and eventually for the Final Solution of the Jewish 'Problem'. Even the



ailing Kaiser Wilhelm, a once admirer of Hitler, admitted he was 'ashamed to be German' after Kristallnacht.



One photograph on the wall stands out: a Nazi officer, pistol in hand, laughs delightedly as an old man he has just shot tumbles into a mass grave (unfortunately, that photo was blurred, here is one of an unsmiling murderer). Later, in Poland, at Auschwitz and Birkenau, we are to see at first hand what the Final Solution meant. Hitler's own final solution occurred in his massively protected bunker, soon after marrying his mistress Eva Braun. They both drank cyanide and while he still could, before it had its effect, he shot her then himself, just to make sure. Goebbels, in the same bunker, poisoned his six children then himself and his wife. We see the remnants of this gruesome bunker at the edge of a residential car park. Our guide assures us that there is incontrovertible proof that Hitler died there, despite rumours that he'd fled to South America.

Hitler's suicide occurred just as the Allies were smashing their way into Berlin; each demanding a share of the city. It was agreed that the Western sector would be given to the Americans, British and French; the lion's share to the Russians, who quickly decided they wanted the lot. As West Berlin was an island in a Red sea, the Russians easily blockaded the city, preventing supplies by land. The massive Berlin Airlift supplied West Berlin for a year. The Russians gave up the blockade but isolated their sector with the Berlin Wall; two walls actually, leaving a No Man's Land in between. Any East German jumping the Wall was a sitting duck against the white-washed walls in the bright glare of searchlights. Today, what remains of the Wall is covered with artistic graffiti.



The Wall fell in 1989 because Gunter Schabowski, the Minister for Propaganda, fluffed his lines. The dreaded Honecker resigned as Chancellor of East Germany after a visit by Gorbachov; they couldn't stand each other. Post-Gorbachov, the East Germans demanded 'socialism with a human face'. Daily visits by Easter Berliners to West Berlin were discussed. Schabowski returned from holidays and hadn't been briefed about details, so when asked when the Wall would be opened, he replied: 'Well, er, immediately I suppose.' The guards at the gates were as overwhelmed by the rush as department store clerks on Boxing Day sales. Simple as that.

Berliners are fond of nicknames. 'The Rotten Tooth' is the remains of the tower of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church after it had been bombed in 1943. It is kept as a reminder and beside it, is a new Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. The architect, Egon Eiermann (Egon Eggman), must have taken his name too seriously, for the walls of the new church have been likened to egg-crates. A block away is 'Spaghetti', symbolising the four Allied powers trying



to cooperate over postwar Berlin but failing to connect. The picture shows all three: the Rotten Tooth, the Egg Crates beside it, Spaghetti in the foreground.

And up there in the sky is another nickname: 'The Pope's Revenge'. Throughout his rule, Honecker attempted to destroy every cross standing on buildings in Berlin. He also had built the highest monument in Berlin, the TV Tower, to impress the West (but they botched the job; the Swedes had to be called into fix it). The Tower has a glittering ball, and when the sun shines on it, its shape is cruciform.

To Honecker's rage, Christ's Cross still hovered over Berlin.



Checkpoint Charlie, once such an emotionally loaded name, is today just a pill-box at the junction of Friedrichstrasse, Zimmerstrasse and Mauerstrasse. Ah, Friedrichstrasse! So tame now, compared to its decadent glory in the '20s and '30s, when it was famous for its cabarets, Marlene Dietrich until she saw the light and refused to join the Nazis, and restaurants. When inflation hit something like 12,000 per cent, you paid for your dinner course by course, otherwise by the time you had finished your *apfel strudel*, your *harkapeter* (steak tartare) starter had jumped thousands of marks. But with such inflation, how did people afford to eat out? Simple: they spent their salaries immediately while their value held. And when their salaries had gone, some people placed signs on their front doors advising passersby that the bodies of those within were available at a price. Even the Nazis found this excessive and cracked down, reserving excesses of decadence for themselves.

Brandenburg Gate, Jack Kennedy, Barack Obama. A fierce controversy rages over what Kennedy's famous statement, '*Ich bin ein Berliner*', actually meant. It is supposed to mean 'I



am a Berliner' – now why would a US President want to claim that? – but some scholars say it means 'I am a jelly-filled doughnut' because Kennedy did not omit the indefinite article *ein*. However others say Kennedy was correct, *ein Berliner* means a jelly-filled doughnut only to nonBerliners. As we heard the story in Berlin, however, I accept the more interesting version. Barack Obama on his recent visit had the good sense to avoid the reference. Would

McCain have done so?

Prague

The Royal Hungarian Express is to be our means of transport for the next ten days, taking us through Germany, Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. Captain's Choice had deliberately allowed six seats per couple, so everyone can have a window seat travelling in the right direction. Our *maitre de* (if trains have such things) is the ebullient Andreas and his pleasant and attractive crew who regularly trundle tea, coffee, wine and beer through the carriages.

Meals are served in two restaurant cars can have a window seat travelling in the right direction. Our *maitre de* (if trains have such things) is the ebullient Andreas and his pleasant and attractive crew who regularly trundle tea, coffee, wine and beer through the carriages. Meals are served in two restaurant cars, where Hungarian reds and whites flow free and freely.

We board the train in the morning and look forward to a wonderful Czech dinner that night in the Old Town Hall in Prague but it is not to be. An hour out and we have to stop – the temperature is high-30s and a large bushfire has cut off the track: ‘I t’ink this only happen in Orstraya,’ Andreas chuckles. We sit for three hours, no toilets, for as Andreas explains, ‘Zere is no energy for the flushing. But no worrying, I feed you.’ We have a cold cuts scratch meal instead of our anticipated Czech banquet. We finally take a detour line and arrive in Prague late at night.



A walking tour of old Prague next morning, our guide the witty and knowledgeable Mark, a law student whose hobby is the history of architecture. So appropriate in Prague, which along with Budapest, Krakow and Vilnius, has blessedly been spared the wholesale destruction other European cities had suffered, first by bombs then by developers. The Soviet occupation and economic freeze had in fact preserved buildings that otherwise would have been ‘developed.’ Mark shows us different periods, from Romanesque through

Gothic, to Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo and Neo-classical.

The Old Town Square has a marvellous 14th century astronomical clock. On the hour, it chimes as Christ and the Apostles, Death, Lust, Greed and Vanity strut their stuff, to scuttle back inside their niches when a rooster crows. The Mayor was so thrilled with this masterpiece that to ensure there would be no other like it, he blinded the clockmaker, who in despair flung himself into his own massive driving wheels to be ground exceeding fine.



Many churches, museums and fine buildings are dotted around the Square, but on we march to the Jewish Quarter, with its own deep history. Its most famous son is that demoniser of bureaucrats, Franz Kafka. His presence is honoured in many places in Prague although he himself felt placeless: ‘A German amongst Czechs, a Czech amongst Germans, and a Jew to the rest of the world.’ Not to say faceless.



On the way to the astonishing Charles Bridge, we pass the home of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra. Along the balustrade are statues of famous composers. When the SS leader Heidrich was appointed to administer German-occupied Czech Republic, his office was upstairs in the Concert Hall, just below the statues, one of whom was Felix Mendelssohn. ‘I am

not working under the statue of a Jew!’ he shouted. Trouble was they didn’t know which statue was Mendelssohn’s. ‘Pull down the one with the longest nose and destroy it!’ Heidrich ordered. They did – but it was Richard Wagner’s statue, Hitler’s favourite composer.



The Charles Bridge, built by Charles IV in the 14th century, spans the Vltava and is lined with religious statues each side, with artists, musicians and entertainers occupying the spaces in between the statues, including the best traditional jazz band in Prague, who perform with the Castle as backdrop.

A statue of Smetana and his museum is at one end, the “Lesser Quarter” the other, the latter increasingly impressive as roads wind through monasteries and churches to the splendid Castle, where the Czech President has his offices. There is a constant guard outside the Castle, the changing of the guard on the hour a tourist attraction. The grounds are huge, as is the Presidential quarter. The Gothic Vladislav Hall is the largest of its kind, so large that knights used to joust and hold tournaments inside. In the grounds are St Vitus Cathedral, St Wenceslaus Chapel, St. George’s Basilica, amongst other buildings.



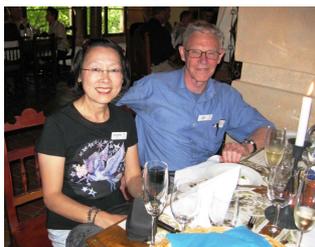
St. Vitus Cathedral took nearly 600 years to finish. The East End is



Gothic, the transepts and nave Renaissance and Rococo, the West End twentieth century quasi-Gothic, close to the original, but in a give-away the 1920s architects placed their own busts on the West Front. Was St. Vitus he of the distressing dance? I ask Mark. Yes, he replies. He came from Sicily and when in Rome was seized and tortured for being a Christian, causing neurological failure and the twitching associated with Sydenham’s chorea. But why did the Czechs name their Cathedral after him? Mass manic dancing, an hysterical reaction to dire events like the Black Death, was believed to be due to diabolical possession, and that praying to St. Vitus helped to exorcise the devils. Evidently in Prague, St. Vitus did his stuff and in gratitude the people named their cathedral after him. In the same courtyard is the 10th century Romanesque Basilica of St. George.



Our first dinner in Prague – having missed out on the banquet the previous night – is in a ‘typical’ Czech restaurant, which turns out to be very noisy, the food



cabbage and sausages, eaten with huge steins of beer. But all was sweet in the end, for the next night we had a superb dinner, with Czech folk singers, in a restaurant below the Castle. Salmon terrine, nice tender beef, and the ubiquitous strudel, peach and delicious, were washed down with as many glasses of very good Czech sauvignon blanc and an Argentinean merlot as one could wish for. Not that one was greedy, you understand.

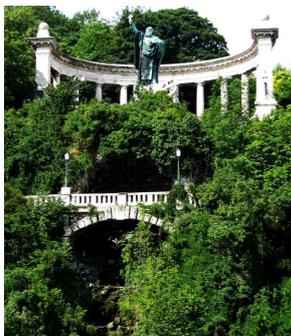
Budapest

Train travel encourages us to catch up with our reading, for which I am very grateful as my backlist is long. Which is not to say that what's going on outside our carriage window isn't interesting. Since leaving Berlin, we get the feeling that villages are self-sustaining. Each house has a large vegetable garden, with chickens scratching around and a cow or two. The centre of the village features an imposing church, presumably still part of people's lives, while in the background many villages have their own wind generators. In Germany at least, solar panels are widely used, and householders can sell their excess back into the national grid at very favourable rates. I scan passing petrol stations for prices: petrol is well over \$2 a litre, sometimes up to \$3. All of which brings solace to the Greenie heart, for while we are on Andreas's electric train our carbon footprint is minimal. Alas, in Russia all this is to change: there our train will be a dirty diesel, and petrol only a dollar a litre. Engines for hauling our Royal Hungarian Express are licensed for each country, for as we cross borders into Czech Republic and into and out of Slovakia into Hungary, we have to change engines and drivers.



In Prague, we had seen Prague Castle across the Vltava from our hotel room. Just so in Budapest. The Royal Palace, the pride of Budapest, glimmered under a new moon across the Danube from our hotel room.

The Palace is in the Buda plateau, overlooking the city of Pest across the river, Buda and Pest being linked by four major bridges. Buda is strewn with alleyways, churches, medieval nooks and crannies. We end up at the huge St Matthias Cathedral, unfortunately under repair. Just outside, on the cliff edge, is the Fisherman's Bastion, a colonnade on the site of a fisherman's market. Our guide Gabriel addresses a point that has bothered many on this trip: 'You wouldn't mind paying for toilets if you had seen them when they were free!' Paying itself is not the problem though, it's having the small change in local currency. To compound the difficulty only a few hotels change euros into local money.



Gellert Hill is where the rich live. It is also where the statue of Bishop Gerard stands, blessing the city of Pest across the brown Danube. This was extraordinarily generous of him. The Magyars were eastern pagan tribes who had occupied Hungary (the term is now identified with the Hungarian people) and held onto paganism much later than did most Europeans. Gerard set his heart on converting them but his efforts weren't appreciated; they shoved Gerard into a barrel spiked with long nails, and rolled him down the hill that now bears his name.

At the far end of Buda is the Soviet built Liberation Monument. Most Soviet statues have been relocated, but this one, a woman on a pedestal waving a palm branch for peace, was allowed to remain as it had become an accepted landmark. Behind her is a row of ordnance, hinting at the Soviet conception of procuring peace, as they currently are doing in Georgia.



The Heroes' Square, opposite Buda in Pest, contains the Millennium Monument, which marks the thousandth anniversary of the Magyar conquest. It relates the story of the conquest in a series of dramatic statues. But how do you capture in a single image such a massive, indeed overpowering, target? By taking the overall view, in which imposing detail is minimised, or by focusing on that significant detail? We choose the latter – these riders at the foot of the central column show the arrogance and might of the Magyar conquerors.



There is so much to Budapest; how can we see all of what there is to see? So many museums, including the KGB's House of Terror, the Holocaust Museum, so many churches, the Opera House (we miss the guided tour by twenty minutes) ... ? We walk past the magnificent Houses of Parliament, constructed when the Austro-Hungarian Empire made the electorate three times larger than it is now, but even then a huge cost to the economy. Today it is impossibly extravagant.

We visit the Central Market, a beautiful old building. The food, not to mention the handicrafts! Much larger than Victoria Market – it made me want to live in Budapest, to come back day after day, to try the salami and other meats, the different goulash, the many different types of paprika, the strudels, cakes ... We ate there, not choosing too well actually, which is another reason to come back. Discovery: rough wine, at a little over \$1 a plastic tumbler that on its own you would dismiss derisively, with peasant food is a different story. We buy some paprika and some cherry liqueur from a stall run by a nice lady. We want to make goulash on our return but the result is disappointing. We do what to the Magyars is unforgiveable; we tart it up with tomato paste and chilli powder, which is a great improvement. True goulash forbids tomatoes and flour, while most nonHungarian recipes recommend both. Quite right, in our experience.



A bus takes us past extensive Roman ruins, to the medieval village of Szentendre, with a Serbian population and an orthodox church. Some charming old buildings but disappointing after the build-up we were given – the local economy is clearly flogging off touristy things. That night however more than makes up with a

Hungarian farewell. We take a large boat up the Danube for a dinner with great Hungarian cuisine, gypsy music to liven things up and a thunderstorm to cool us down as we disembark.

In our next leg, we cross Poland in Andreas's train but near the Lithuanian border we have to change to a Russian, which takes us to Vilnius.