

HUNGARY *for golf*



A journey into the Hungarian countryside and then back to civilisation sees brothers Andrew and Paul enjoy a cultural and golfing treat in eastern Europe.

BY ANDREW MARSHALL

Golfers looking for an off-the-beaten track European golf destination may look no further. It is worth considering Hungary for various reasons, but our journey takes us to some of the most beautiful countryside views and ends in the strikingly historical city of Budapest. With its architectural delights, ornate bath houses, famous Tokaji Aszú dessert wines and laid-back café lifestyle, Hungary's World Heritage-listed capital has plenty to offer the golfing traveller.

The golfing scene in Hungary is still looking to emerge from the shadows of more popular endeavours such as soccer and well, weight-lifting. Hungary, if nothing else, has produced some of the most illustrious dead lifts in the history of the sport.

But still, golf is growing. According to the Hungarian Golf Federation, there are currently nine 18-hole courses and a handful of 9-hole courses within the country. Five of the best layouts include Hencse National Golf & Country Club, Old Lake, Pannonia Golf & Country Club, Royal Balaton and new-kid-on-the-block, which is also arguably the pick of the bunch, Zala Springs Golf Resort.

IN THE COUNTRY

Approximately a two-hour drive southwest of Budapest in the charming village of Zalacsány, Zala Springs is situated in the heart of an ancient winemaking region, with Lake Balaton, considered the largest freshwater lake in Central Europe, and the famous thermal spa of Lake Hévíz less than a half hour's drive away.

"You need a top quality golf resort to make it worthwhile for people to travel here, and you have to go a long way to find a better golf course than this one," says club manager Damian MacPherson, as we enjoy a glass of chilled local wine after checking in.

This master-planned golf and thermal spa resort set on a 160-hectare property alongside the Zala River showcases a Robert Trent Jones Jr. design 18-hole championship golf course, a five-star hotel, restaurant, spa, plus fully-furnished luxury apartments and villas. Other facilities include an excellent driving range with

© PICTURE COURTESY OF ZALA SPRINGS

Destination Focus

OPENING PICTURE: Aerial of Zala Springs.

THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Inside the barrel store at Laposa Borbirtok; Lake Hévíz; Zala Springs offers a range of accommodation options; The entrance to Lake Hévíz; Clubhouse terrace, Zala Springs; The 18th hole (558-metre, par-5), Zala Springs; View of vineyards and Lake Balaton from the terrace at Laposa Borbirtok.

12 covered and 70 open-air bays, an 18-hole putting green, a pitching green and practise bunker.

Coming from a lineage of the finest golf architects in the world, the younger Trent Jones – he is 78, in case one gets the idea that this is a spritely youth – has created more than 100 golf courses around the world.

Built together with Gary Ashfield of Golf East, a notable construction firm based in Germany, the venerable designer commented: "We are delighted to have the opportunity to create a truly memorable golf experience at Zala Springs, soon to become one of Europe's best golf resorts. Our design skilfully provides players of all levels with just the right combination of challenge, beauty and fun that will certainly be instrumental in

growing the sport in Hungary and beyond."

After our tour of the fine practice facilities, we were keen to get started on the main course.

"We have a rule here at Zala Springs that if you don't go to the range then you get a mulligan on the opening hole," says Damian with a wry smile, as we prepare to hit our drives from the yellow tees of the 495-metre first hole.

A testing double doglegged Par 5 with the fairway curving right then left to a blind green, this is not your typical warm-up hole.

Other memorable holes on this excellent Par 72, 6,351-metre course include the photogenic short Par 4 6th, with a creek snaking across the fairway, and the signature 167-metre Par 3 12th, requiring a full carry over a lake to a narrowly angled green.

The 18th is a challenging 558-metre Par 5 and a genuine three-shotter played to an elevated green. A scenic lake and fountain flanks one side and the beautifully appointed clubhouse beyond.

"Moving forward we have all kinds of concepts we want to introduce here," says Damian on the clubhouse terrace after our round. He did not even ask how we played but judging from the forlorn look

on our faces, he could tell we did not have an easy time. We made a mental check to spend a half-hour working out at the range next time.

"For example, all guests receive an attractively packaged Callaway golf ball with the Zala Springs logo on arrival. We also want our guests to have member's rights and to be able to play unlimited golf, and perhaps we will introduce a 'Meet and Greet' with a professional to provide tuition as you play."

This last astute statement was likely aimed at our direction. We felt somewhat appeased that we could contribute to the betterment of other golfers visiting Zala River for the first time.

"Another one of our aims is to familiarise our golfing guests with Hungarian wine culture since it is such a key aspect of the region," continues Damian, who then goes on to describe one of the most innovative and delicious round of golf ever imagined.

"For instance, every month we host wine dinners out on the course – combining golf with wine from one of the country's 23 wine regions. Guests drive in carts to the first green to enjoy a cold starter paired with the first wine, then it's off for a warm starter, another wine and some tee shots at the Par

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And they play this every month.

Staying on the subject of wine, but finally bidding adieu to Zala River, it is well worth a visit to Laposa Borbirtok – a wine estate situated along the southern mountainside of Badacsony, approximately 50km from Zala Springs.

This family-owned business produces mainly white wines, using traditional, local grape varieties typical of the Badacsony region's volcanic soils: Welschriesling, Rhine

Riesling, Pinot gris, Kéknyelű, Furmint and Juhfark are all bottled here.

There is nothing better than sitting on their terrace sampling excellent wines accompanied by cold delicacies from local producers while taking in the stunning scenery of Lake Balaton.

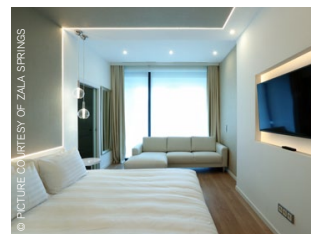
Another key attraction of the region is nearby Lake Hévíz, located in the spa town of Hévíz near the western end of Lake Balaton. Lake Hévíz is the largest biologically active, natural thermal lake in the world.

Widely used since Roman times, the bathing facilities at Lake Hévíz were first

established by Count György Festetics the First in the 18th century.

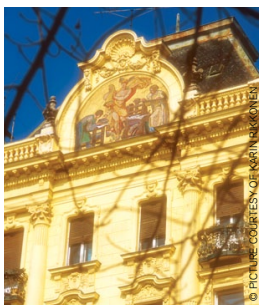
It is a unique experience to swim in the lake's turquoise waters carpeted with water lilies and a perfect place to relax and soothe aching muscles following a round of golf. All manners of health-related facilities are available in the complex including sauna, steam bath, ice cave, massage, beauty treatments and mud baths.

After a few day's golf at Zala Springs and exploring the local area, it is time for us to travel to Hungary's idiosyncratic capital to sample some of its attractions and activities.





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ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Men playing chess at the Szechenyi Baths; Architectural details and facades abound in Budapest; Szechenyi Chain Bridge and Royal Palace at night; View of Budapest from the Fisherman's Bastion (Castle District).

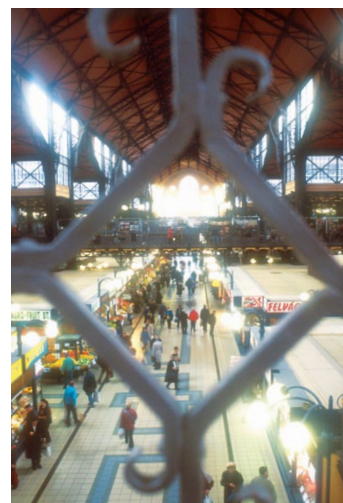
BELLOW, FROM LEFT: A Budapest tram trundles over Independence Bridge; The outside wave pool at night, Gellért Baths; Great Market Hall.



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© PICTURE COURTESY OF BUDAPEST SPAS LTD



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BUDAPEST

Budapest is a city made for exploring on foot and there are sights around every corner. From a decorative facade to a brightly-tiled gem of an art nouveau building, it is all there. What the city lack in medieval buildings, it more than makes up for with baroque, neoclassical, eclectic and art nouveau architecture.

The city is well known for its ornate bath houses and the Gellért Baths on the of the Buda side of the Danube River is arguably the finest of them all. Its main swimming pool surrounded by high galleries and marble columns decorated with colourful mosaics is a stunning example of neoclassical architecture.

As at most baths in Budapest, standard entry at Gellért includes access to the main indoor swimming pool, there is also an outdoor pool for warmer months, as well as medicinal thermal baths, sauna and steam room.

After visiting Gellért Baths, we head over to the Pest side to visit the wonderfully restored Great Market Hall at Nagycsarnok dating from 1897. Stalls are stacked with garlands of paprika, sausages, salamis, bacon, goose liver, goose breast and goose crackling.

There is also typical Hungarian drinks such as unicum (a herbal liqueur drunk as a digestif or apéritif), pálinka (a powerful brandy distilled from fruits such as pears, apricots or plums) and the legendary Tokaji Aszú dessert wines, which King Louis XIV (1638-1715) famously called "The Wine of Kings and the King of Wines."

Another great shopping experience is the Eszter Piac, one of the biggest and best flea markets in Central Europe. It is fascinating to wander along the labyrinth of passageways and stalls selling everything from 1940 Leica cameras and antique jewellery to Soviet army watches and old gramophone players.

As we wander the streets, it doesn't take us long to realise that Budapesters are keen coffee drinkers, with tiny glasses of strong espresso consumed throughout the day. Café life had been an essential part of the social scene in Budapest long before it had made an appearance in Paris or Vienna, and while many of the late 19th-century coffee houses in the city are long gone, some still uphold the fine tradition, retaining much of their period charm and elegance.

Take for example, Café Gerbeaud which has been a fashionable meeting place for the city's elite, on the west side of Pest's busiest square since 1858. Café Ruszwurm, established in 1827, is one of the oldest traditional café and confectionery in Budapest and the perfect place for coffee and mouthwatering pastries when visiting the medieval Castle District. Its specialties include famous cakes such as Dobos Torte, Esterházy and Goosleg.

When people think of Hungarian food, two things inevitably spring to mind: paprika and goulash. Traditionally a peasant dish, goulash is actually a soup served with beef, finely-sliced vegetables and plenty of paprika.

It was also favoured by royalty and greatly relished by Emperor Franz Joseph. It is at the heart of any decent restaurant menu, and indeed an invaluable part of life. As the Hungarian saying goes: "One may replace one's wife, but one cherishes goulash forever."

Goulash is traditionally accompanied with a bacon or pork crackling scone called pogácsa. Other typical restaurant dishes include cold soups, such as wild cherry or fresh tomato with vodka, game dishes, stuffed cabbage, goose liver pâté, and fish soup made with carp, sour cream and paprika.

Swarmed by the smells and sights and the golfing exploits that is remarkably enjoyable after that first round, we realised we had only carved out a little slice of Hungary in our journey. As we return across the continent, our dreams take us to Sopron, sited close to the border of Austria; Pécs, on the far southern tip, ringed by alpine hills; and Eger, just northeast of Budapest, and a mellow, historic city famous for its Bull's Blood wine.

Return, we shall ☺