

WorldDenver Presents:

STAYCATIONS

a new way to travel the world without leaving your home

BON VOYAGE FROM BUDAPEST

For our final installment of Staycations, the WorldDenver Express has landed in the heart of Europe. At fewer than 100,000 square km, with a language that follows no rules and a tumultuous history, Hungary is an enigma unto itself. Attractions range from the hippos in the Budapest Zoo that bathe in artesian waters from the spring of Széchenyi Thermal Bath—creating an environment similar to the Nile—to the Children's Railway, where youth can train to become conductors, workers, and inspectors on this 11 km railway. Beneath the city of Budapest lies a hidden subterranean world, a maze of over 200 caverns resulting from a large number of geothermal springs in the area. One of the caverns holds a labyrinth, located right beneath the Castle Hill in Budapest Old Town. The 6-mile long Budavari Labirintus has served as a shelter for prehistoric people, a cellar and a prison in medieval times, a military hospital during World War II, and a command post during the Cold War. The Labirintus finally became a museum until a police raid in 2011 where it was subsequently closed for undisclosed reasons.

CULTURE

Vajdahunyad Castle is nestled within the shady trees, pebbled paths, and placid ponds of Budapest's City Park. It may look distinctly Baroque, but it's not quite what it seems as the Vajdahunyad Castle is an homage to a castle by the same name in Transylvania. When it was first built, it was made of cardboard as a temporary exhibit for the Hungarian millennial exhibition in 1896, but the attraction was so popular it became a permanent fixture. Stone and brick, statues, and thousands of agricultural artifacts later, when the castle was finished in 1908, it became the home of the Hungarian Agricultural Museum. The collection has been destroyed not once, but twice since its opening 100 years ago—first in WWII and again about 10 years later, when the freedom fighters of the Hungarian uprising of 1956 tore through the hall of antlers and taxidermy displays.

Scattered across a dozen palatial halls, the museum showcases Europe's largest collection of agriculture, covering everything from centuries-old butter churns and livestock breeding in the 15th century to Hungary's prodigious grain yields in the 19th century. Farming, hunting, fishing, and viticultural equipment abound, as do hundreds of antlers, horns, hooves, and fur displayed alongside stuffed birds and mounted bears.

Known as "The Hall of Hunting" with beautiful vaulted ceilings and stained glass windows, this top floor feels like the church of a long lost deer deity. Gentle echoed footsteps and hushed whispers of visitors lend a quiet respect to these relics of the hunt. Experience the awe for yourself in this virtual tour of the Mezőgazdasági

Múzeum.

CUISINE

Legend says Hungarians eat more than 500 grams of paprika per year and while paprika is synonymous with Hungarian cooking, giving distinctive flavor to goulash or chicken paprikash, this traditional paprika is fairly sweet, as opposed to the smoked style often enjoyed in the West. When the Ottomans ruled in the 16th and 17th centuries, they introduced pepper chilies to Hungary, as well as Turkish Baklava, from which strudels evolved and spread to the rest of Central Europe—most notably Austria, where the apple strudel became a national treasure. In Budapest, visitors can stop by Strudel House and watch dedicated bakers freshly prepare the paper-thin strudel dough in an open kitchen. The fatty layers of strudel's ethereal dough have years of history, passion, and care baked in. The delicacies prepared in Strudel House are based on an original recipe, using the finest ingredients including high protein Hungarian wheat flour, and all are hand-made in an authentic environment so that guests can experience the inimitable preparation process that sets these pastries apart. Unique to Hungary is the savory cabbage strudel, buttery bundles filled with spring cabbage, famously spoken of by Nora Ephron in terms reserved for mystical experiences, calling it "divine," "heavenly," and "life changing." We won't give you a hard time for using store bought dough, but make sure that your cabbage is fresh from the garden (or as close to as possible) and give this recipe a try!

COCKTAIL

At the end of a long day, one might land in a no-frills *kocsma* filled with beer-swilling old timers, an elegant cocktail lair, or one of Budapest's quirky ruin pubs jammed with tourists. If you don't know what to order, the bartender will reach for a distinctive, round-bellied bottle, filled with an inky, amber-tinted liquid called Unicum. With roots that delve back to the late 18th century, it's one of the most revered national drinks in Hungary, and is largely savored as an aperitif or a digestif in shot form. Produced by Budapest based beverage company Zwack, it's an herbal liqueur comprising a secret blend of more than 40 herbs and spices aged in oak that began in 1790, when Holy Roman Emperor and Hapsburg ruler Joseph II had a bout of indigestion. Dr. Zwack, royal physician to the Imperial Court, whipped up a herbal remedy for him. Upon drinking it, Joseph II supposedly exclaimed, "*Dr. Zwack, das ist ein Unikum!*" The "unique" elixir subsequently spread in popularity, and the Zwack company was founded in 1840 by József Zwack, an entrepreneurial descendant of the visionary doctor. By 1895, Zwack was producing over 200 liqueurs and spirits, exporting them from a distillery that's still in use today.

Present day Unicum encapsulates the story of Hungary politically and socially since the Hapsburg Empire to the present day, giving it a special place in most Hungarian hearts and stomachs. Unicum can be found in most liquor stores, and in this cocktail recipe, is gently sweetened with vermouth and curaçao. Try it for yourself to enjoy with a cabbage strudel or after a hearty bowl of goulash.

CONCLUSION

Over the past year, the WorldDenver has been thrilled to bring you a glimpse into travel from the comfort of your own home as we faced an unprecedented pandemic and isolation. We have delighted in the delicacies of the world, explored some of the most iconic locales, traveled from museums to mountaintops, and launched into space for International Women's Day. As travel begins to reopen, we encourage you to keep up with WorldDenver's Citizen Diplomat Excursions. We have just announced our trip to Central Europe this fall! We hope you will continue to seek out the culture, cuisine, and cocktails wherever you travel, and that you remember we are all connected through a diverse and shared history. We cannot wait to see where you go next!

~ Megan Maher, International Programs Coordinator, Staycations Author

