

# Budapest

## BUDAPEST'S PLAYGORUND

"So, where are you staying, Buda or Pest?"

"Err...Budapest."

The fact that we'd reached thirty years old and only realised the towns of Buda and Pest were split by the river Danube, we quickly realised this last-minute city break was going to be more eye-opening than we had intentionally planned.

Starting with an anxious ride on the 18th century funicular, we had serious doubts whether the old wooden cable car was sturdy enough to carry us to the top of Buda Castle Hill. Eager to experience authentic Budapest, we persisted, and any doubts soon disappeared with a sneak peak of the panoramic views waiting for us. Whilst being pulled backwards up the hill, we could see the infinite length of the Danube river. We watched the morning traffic weave its way over the historical bridges linking Buda and Pest, beeping at distracted tourists whose eyes and cameras were looking everywhere but the oncoming vehicles.

At the top, we instinctively shadowed the wave of tourists and for once, we were grateful to flock like sheep. Coming across the entrance to Buda Castle, our mirrored expressions confirmed that neither of us were aware this royal building even existed. Feeling like naughty school girls who'd been caught talking at the back of class, we shamefully lowered our heads and walked past the guards standing stiffly in their timber huts. It all suddenly felt very serious compared to the chaos of the roads below. We continued our route through narrow, pebbled streets leading us past bustling cafes; drawing us in with wafts of earthy coffee. Local shops tucked in-between small terrace houses, were adorned with brightly coloured scarfs, and stacks of patterned bowls and plates. The buzz of these city-like streets made you easily forget that you were hiking up to one of the highest viewpoints.

Our burning calves soon brought us back to reality, and we were grateful to finally reach the pinnacle – instantly stopping in awe. Our eyes scanned the Holy Trinity Square, admiring the enormity of white stone walls, castle-like towers and staircases that encased us. Tourists were scattered about observing local artists, weaving between walkways or queuing on the steps to Matthias Church. Despite the amount of people around, the open space provided a sense of calm. A gentle wind wove its way through admirers, silently showing their appreciation in smiles and nods.

The church's roof tiles caught our attention with pops of orange and turquoise showcasing an Aztec pattern. The colours were a bold contrast to the neutral buildings around and steered our eyeline to the spire protruding proudly above.. Nearby, stood Fisherman's Bastion itself - a Disney castle frozen by the White Witch of Narnia - completely magical. Like excited children discovering a new playground, we followed the staircases twisting up towards a mysterious locked door and onto the corridors extending from it.

Staggered platforms provided different viewpoints to the river and city below, as archways framed the perfect picture moment. Couples causally loitered nearby, biding their time to get that candid, caught-off guard moment. Clearly frustrated by those simply wandering pass and ruining their photo. We of course joined the loiterers, because, well to be fair, those spots did have the most beautiful backdrops of rooftop reds, clear sky blues and sunset pinks. But also, we had a lot of fun striking influencer inspired poses in the most non-influencer way!

As the sun began to set, the cool February breeze picked up. The smell of heated cinnamon filled our noses and our taste buds started tingling. Surprisingly, the sound of Taylor Swift drifted towards us, and following our senses we discovered an adorable one-manned bar, tucked away in a turret at the top of a staircase. We hadn't planned to stay so long at this one attraction, but the architecture and atmosphere captured us without us even realising.

The evening became darker and rows of fairy lights lit up the city, creating the most magical and hypnotising skyline. Knowing our cameras could never quite capture the soft glow of Budapest reflecting in the river, we simply sat and embraced the moment. It felt like the joy of Christmas had been extended with the crisp night air chilling my cheeks, and mulled wine warming me from my bobble hat to my boots. Dwindling crowds meant a quieter setting, and we smugly smiled at one another, cheering our successful and spontaneous first day.