

Budapest – A Tale of Two Cities

[I traveled to Budapest twice – the first time in 1992, followed by a second trip in 1993]

In October of 1992 I began a business trip to Europe, starting in Madrid where I conducted technical workshops at the Esri European User Conference, and visited the old city of Toledo, after which I took a train journey to Barcelona and on to Zurich, Munich and finally Budapest. The journeys were very nice aboard a couple of luxury trains by the names of “Gottfried-Keller” and “Bella Bartok”. I arrived in Budapest near the end of the month where Gyorgyi, the director of the local Esri office, met me and took me to the Hyatt Atrium Hotel located near the center of the city on the banks of the Danube River. It was a lovely location with beautiful views of classic old buildings along the river and the historic “Chain Bridge” which was beautifully lit with brilliant white lights along its entire length.



Arrival in Budapest from Zurich



“Chain Bridge” over the Danube River

The next morning, Gyorgyi accompanied me to the “Newman János School” to attend a ceremony celebrating the opening of a new artist’s exhibition where students presented traditional folk music, poetry, and songs. One young 6-year-old girl played some lovely music from Polish dances on a “flute-a-phone” exceptionally well! (I remembered when I played the flute-a-phone in elementary school) At the end of the ceremony, as the “guest of honor”, I was requested to write something in the “schoolbook”.

That evening, Mr. Markus, the headmaster of the school invited Gyorgyi and me to join him for dinner at a very nice German restaurant in the old city. The food was excellent and at the end of the meal, Mr. Markus ordered glasses of a very traditional Hungarian pear liquor to celebrate my first visit to Budapest. After dinner, as I walked back to the hotel, I saw a car trying to drive down the middle of the tram tracks and it appeared they were in danger of being struck by an oncoming tram. But at the last moment, they stopped and reversed the car to get off the tracks. It made me wonder just how many times a car is hit by a tram! Before I retired for the night, I went to the Atrium Bar in the Hyatt Hotel for a popular local Hungarian beer called “Dreher”, and it was quite good. It was first brewed in 1845 and was a classic European Pale Lager. Meanwhile, old American rock-n-roll music from the 1950’s and 60’s was very popular in the bar.

The following morning, I went down to the hotel restaurant for breakfast, which turned out to be exactly the same every morning – cold meat, cheese, hard rolls, jam, butter, and thick, “syrupy” coffee that I had to dilute with milk and hot water! Then I walked to the city bus stop, boarded bus #81, and two stops later I was at the Newman Janos School where I conducted a GIS training class for the senior students. I couldn’t help noticing that all the teachers wore white lab coats for some unknown reason. Perhaps it was the official “uniform of the day”? For lunch, I joined the students in the school cafeteria for the Hungarian equivalent of Italian spaghetti which was spiced with plenty of paprika! Before the end of the class, the students gave me a special book about the history of Hungary as a gift. After the class that evening, Mr. Markus insisted upon taking me on a “quick” tour of some major tourist sites in the cold rain. He led me

along narrow cobble stone streets to several historic sites with a “painfully” delivered narration in very broken English, of which I understood very little. His intentions were very well placed, but it was a difficult time for both of us! Later that night we were invited for dinner at the house of one of the teachers who cooked a fantastic meal of traditional Hungarian goulash, along with homemade wine from grapes that were grown on his summer property at Lake Balaton. I think it’s always a special time when one is invited into someone’s home!

The next day was another cold and wet one as Gyorgyi took me around the old city to a few of his favorite historical sites, after I left my bags at the “Eastern Railway Station” where I would catch the train to Munich later in the day. (*Ironically, trains going west of Budapest depart from the Eastern Railway Station, while trains headed east of the city leave from the “Western Railway Station”!*) Among the sites we visited were several historic buildings that were built for the “1,000 Year Hungarian Millennium Exposition in 1896”, as well as the Hungarian National Museum where a 1200-year-old Hungarian royal crown was on display. Gyorgyi also insisted that we visit the world’s most elegant McDonalds in the old Western Railway Station, a historic 1890’s building that was filled with antique fixtures and lots of plants. It was a gorgeous place and indeed a very unique, one-of-a-kind McDonalds!



Old Western Railway Station



Elegant McDonald's in Western Railway Station

For lunch, Gyorgyi chose an old restaurant called “Pilvax Étterem” where we were told there was no “Goulash Suppe” available that day. But our server highly recommended the rump steak “Petrofi Style” grilled with lots of onion, garlic, and paprika. It was delicious, but we had no idea what the connection with the Hungarian poet Petrofi was! As we enjoyed lunch, a group of Italian tourists stormed out of the restaurant after being told there was no Goulash! On a side note, historically, the restaurant was the setting where the city’s zealous artists and intellectuals regularly got together to exchange opinions about life in Hungary under the Habsburg regime and later it became the center of the 1848 revolution that eventually led to the restoration of the Hungarian state.

After lunch, we rode the Metro to the Southern Railway Station and then by tram to the foot of “Castle Hill” where we climbed some steep stairs to the historic castle overlooking the Danube River and the city on both sides – which would have been a gorgeous view on a clear day, I’m sure! From the castle we walked to “Matthias Church” that was built in 1150 in the oldest part of Buda. Once again, the view of the Danube River, the old city of Pest, and the magnificent Parliament Buildings from the ramparts of “Fisherman’s Bastion” would have been spectacular on a clear day! Inside the church were gorgeous stained-glass windows in many lovely shades of blue that seemed to shine even on this damp, grey day. Nearby was the new Hilton Hotel that had been built beside some of the historic ruins of St Margaretha Abby, and the integration of old and new was beautiful. As we walked down along the old city wall, the golden yellow leaves from the maple trees seemed to “shine” on the dark, wet cobble stone streets, even on such a dreary, damp day. Soon we came to the National Gallery where there was a large display of Hungarian art spanning several centuries, from the 12th century through to the early 1930’s. One room was dedicated to very old paintings of “Altar Wings” on wood from the 13th century which had to be in the special “climate-

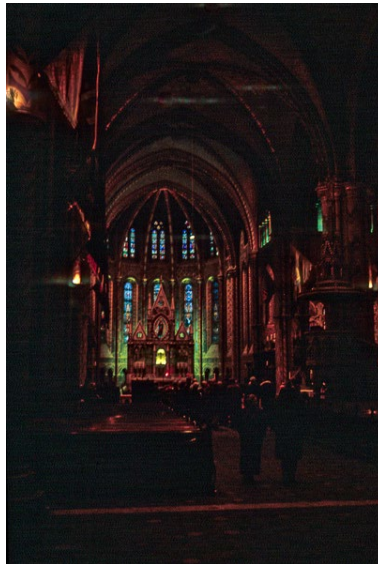
controlled” room since they had been hung in cold, damp stone churches for many hundreds of years before being moved to the gallery. It was a fascinating exhibition.



View of Parliament buildings from Castle Hill



Gyorgy at the National Museum



Inside St Margaretha Abby

Upon leaving the National Gallery, we walked down past the Technical University, across the river, and back to the central square. The rampart walls were covered with vines in beautiful red fall colors that were brilliant, even at dusk. Then Gyorgyi and I shared a beer in the Atrium Bar at the Hyatt Hotel before he took me by the metro to the Eastern Railway Station to retrieve my bags and board the EuroCity overnight train to Munich. I bid a fond farewell to Gyorgyi for his generous hospitality, stepped aboard the train, and made my way to my first-class sleeping compartment. As I settled in my seat, I noticed an old Russian train to Kiev sitting on the adjacent track. Not long after the train departed Budapest, the passenger in the next compartment paid me a visit. She introduced herself as “Shar”, originally from New York and now living in Essen, Germany after having married a German man who was now working in Romania for a year. She was a beautiful, tall black woman who was a well-known fashion model, and during our conversation she kept slipping into German occasionally. We had a great time talking about our travels around the world, and especially the time we had spent in Budapest. As the hour approached 11pm, we bid goodbye and I settled in for a pleasant night’s sleep, not even noticing the border crossings into Austria and Germany.

We arrived in Munich early the next morning at 6:00am in the enormous Hauptbahnhof (central train station), and as I stepped off the train, I couldn’t help noticing several old men buying small bottles of schnapps as soon as the food stands opened.



Arriving in Munich

From the train station, I took a bus to the Munich airport and proceeded to the Continental Airlines “Atlantik Lounge” where I could take a shower before the flight. Being able to take a shower after the overnight train ride was great, but I couldn’t find any soap or towels, so I ended up getting something that “looked” like a towel from an old cleaning lady. After the shower, I had a cup of coffee and a croissant in the lounge while I finished writing some postcards. Suddenly, I saw a man from Texas accidentally push the wrong button on the self-service espresso machine and “panic” when “two” cups of coffee overflowed into his “one” cup! The mess was quickly cleaned up by one of the lounge staff and all was well. By this time, boarding was called for Continental Airlines flight #37 to New York and a flight attendant showed me to my seat in the first-class cabin. I was seated next to a man who worked for Calvin Klein in New York and apparently travelled between New York and Europe every 2 or 3 weeks. As the flight attendants served us a glass of champagne, we had a very interesting discussion about the fashion industry, especially in light of my having met Shar, the black fashion model now living in Germany. After takeoff, I ordered a gin and tonic before a selection of “canapes” were served that included cream cheese and fresh grapes in puff pastry, smoked salmon, and prosciutto with chilled melon. This was followed by an appetizer of creamed curried chicken in puff pastry, along with a Waldorf salad and raspberry vinaigrette dressing, together with “pretzel” bread! For the main dish I chose the classic “chateaubriand” in peppercorn burgundy sauce that was sliced at my seat! After that, a silver trolley came by with a huge variety of European cheeses and fresh fruit, before we were served a warm dish of apple strudel with vanilla crème sauce for dessert! Finally, an hour and half later, I finished “lunch” with a cup of espresso and a glass of Amoretto! One could not have asked for a more sumptuous meal that was definitely first-class! Two movies and a couple of glasses of wine later, we landed in New York – one of the most pleasant flights I’ve had. Then I had just 30 minutes to make the connecting nonstop flight to Los Angeles and my return home.

My second trip to Budapest was in early July after a week of conducting GIS training classes in Prague. As I checked in at the airport in Prague for the flight to Budapest on Malev Hungarian Airlines, I was informed that I must pay \$52.00 USD in excess baggage for the two boxes of training materials that I would use in Budapest. The flight was a short hour and half on an old Russian Tupolev 134 aircraft and the service onboard was quite good. When I went to use the toilet, I found there was no light switch, rather there was a “skylight” in the ceiling that illuminated the facility! What a novel idea. Upon landing in Budapest, Gyorgyi met me at the airport, and we took a taxi into the city and checked into a lovely room at the Hotel Orion. That evening, I had roasted turkey breast with a sauce of fresh local berries, along with a cold glass of Pilsner Urquell for dinner in the hotel restaurant. After dinner, I took a long walk along the Danube River as the lights from the Parliament Building reflected in the water.



The Danube River at night

I spent the next day training Gyorgyi's staff in the latest version of the GIS software, which would continue for the next three days. That evening, Gyorgyi's partner Gabor invited me to dinner at a small traditional Hungarian "greasy spoon" café near the office. As we sat down, I noticed the café happened to be full of American "exchange students"! During dinner, Gabor and I had a very interesting conversation about the long and complicated history of Hungary. Then Gabor suggested that we go to the "Grösser Bier Café" beside the Danube River to watch the sunset. Not only was the sunset beautiful, but it was also a lot of fun to sit and watch people strolling by, who were watching the people in the café who were in turn watching the "strollers"! The next evening, I was on my own, so I decided to have dinner at the "Oldtimer Café" in the Hyatt Hotel. I started with delicious chicken paprikash crepes, followed by a wonderful roasted pork tenderloin in green peppercorn sauce, accompanied by a glass of Hungarian Pinot Blanc wine which complimented dinner quite well. Then my server suggested a trio of traditional Hungarian desserts, one of which was a custard with raisins in a white and dark chocolate sauce – amazing! Along with it came a small glass of "Tokaj", a traditional Hungarian dessert wine. *(In the US it is called "Tokay" and is usually considered a cheap wine)* Throughout dinner, I had a spectacular view of the historic "Chain Bridge" and the "Castle" atop the hill, both beautifully lit with thousands of lights! Meanwhile, a young lady played soothing classical music on the harp. Later, I stopped in at the "John Bull Pub", a delightful English pub around the corner from the Hyatt and sat at the bar with a pint of John Bull on draft. (Ironically, I have never seen John Bull beer in England!) After leaving the pub, I walked down "Vati Street" where all the young people, street musicians, and hookers were congregating. It was a fascinating scene, and at one point I came across a small crowd assembled around four young guys who were singing old Hungarian folk songs, and they were wonderful! But after a few songs the police came by and made it clear that the evening's entertainment was over, unfortunately. I approached the group later and found out they called themselves "The Hummingbirds". By this time, it was after midnight, so I walked across the bridge and back to the Orion Hotel.

After the training class the next day, I walked up Castle Hill to visit the National Art Gallery and one exhibit stood out from the rest. It was a large display of several bronze sculptures of nude men and almost all of them had a **very** shiny penis! Apparently, they had been rubbed by many people for "good luck"! As I toured through the gallery, I saw several tourists who were limping with unbuttoned shoes because of blisters. They were not very interested in art at that point. Then I made my way to the "Terrace Café on top of the gallery, and as I sat down with a cold beer in hand, the panoramic view of the city and the river was spectacular. In looking at the drinks menu, I spotted several interesting offerings, such as:

- "Soviet" Champagne
- Lingen-leaf wine of Debro

- Blue Frankish of Sopron
- Bull's blood of Eger
- HOME-MADE brandy
- Wine
- Canned Bier
- Sheese snack
- Flammy coffee

Although the menu looked very interesting, I decided to stay with my cold glass of beer. As the sun began to set over the city, I walked back down the steep stairs to the edge of the river and back to the Orion Hotel where I enjoyed a delicious dinner.



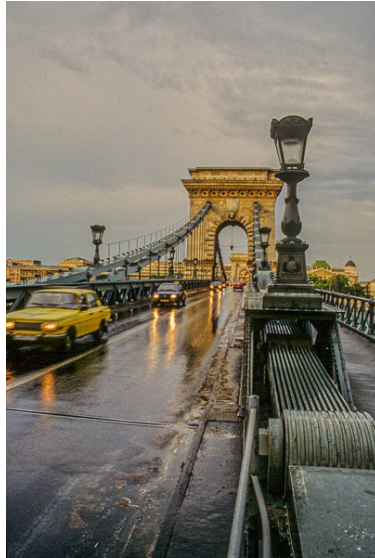
Views of the Danube River from Castle Hill

The next morning, I spent some time catching up with some work on my computer before joining Gyorgyi for a tour of the National Museum of Transportation. One part of the museum had a large display of incredibly detailed scale models of old steam locomotives, as well as a few of the actual engines, along with some typical old railway cars. One of the strangest rail cars was an old wooden box car with a small “cupola” on top at one end of the car with a wooden seat that was most likely intended for the “brakeman” since there was also a handwheel located beside it. In another part of the museum was a fascinating exhibit about how the Romans designed, surveyed, and built over 300,000 km of roads throughout Europe, some of which remain to this day – very impressive! On the second level of the museum was an extensive collection of antique cars and motorcycles, in particular, an old 1924 Soviet limousine that was the epitome of a heavy, black Russian car!



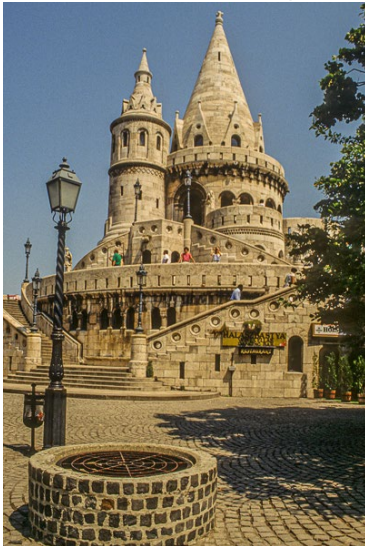
National Museum of Transportation

Outside the museum building were parts of the original “Chain Bridge” that was destroyed by the Germans in WWII. Of significant interest were the single spans of steel with their huge nuts and bolts that looked the same as regular nuts and bolts, except a hundred times larger, almost like they came from a giant’s workshop!



The “Chain Bridge”

For lunch, Gyorgyi and I had breaded turkey breast that was very similar to German “Jager schnitzel” and a cold beer to go with it at a lovely outdoor café in the park. All of a sudden, a strong wind blew, and we had to hold down the small table with one hand as we ate our lunch with the other hand! Not far from the park was a strange castle built by an eccentric Hungarian king in the style of several famous European castles. It had a fascinating collection of turrets, walls, and windows from a variety of historic periods and places! (*when I had visited in 1992 it was at night in the rain, so it was a real treat to finally see it on a warm sunny day*) Then we crossed a major road and past a famous bath house, a legacy from the earlier Turkish occupation of the country. Further on was “Heroes Square”, an enormous paved open area at the intersection of two major streets and the site of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier beneath a huge marble column topped by the angel Gabriel. It was surrounded at the base by stone statues of the Chiefs of the seven Magyar tribes that conquered Hungary in the 13th century. Around the perimeter of the square were statues of national heroes from many centuries of Hungarian history. It was really an impressive display.



Eccentric Hungarian King's castle



Chiefs of the seven Magyar tribes

Later, I retreated from the crowd and found a delightful small outdoor café along the Danube River for a cold glass of German beer as I watched the sunset and clouds forming in the shape of a storm. When the clouds began to take over the sky, I rode the Metro to the center of the city – it happens that the Budapest Metro is the oldest underground railway in Europe that is still operating. Just as I reached the Hyatt Hotel, the storm suddenly burst forth with a loud clap of thunder and rain poured down. I barely made it to the front door without being totally soaked! That evening, I had a nice Weiner Schnitzel for dinner in the “Bierstube” bar at the Hyatt. (*while the schnitzel was good, it didn’t compare to what I remember having in Germany and Austria*) After dinner the storm had passed, so I walked across the Chain Bridge to the Orion Hotel. Along the way I was able to capture some beautiful photos of the old Parliament Buildings as the sun suddenly broke through the heavy clouds at sunset!



Parliament buildings and the Chain Bridge



Hyatt Atrium Hotel across the Danube River

The next morning, I took the hotel shuttle van to the airport to check in for the flight to Sophia, Bulgaria where I would conduct a GIS training class for staff at the National Geographic Center. Although I had a business class ticket on Balkan Bulgarian Airlines, I wasn’t able to access the airport business class lounge because the airline didn’t pay for it! So, my trip to Sophia was not off to a great start. After checking in for the flight, I bought a guidebook about Bulgaria in the airport gift shop. When I found that the hotel where I was supposed to stay in Sophia wasn’t listed anywhere in the book, I took that as a “bad sign”! I ended up sitting in the old airport terminal restaurant which looked like a “leftover” from the Soviet communist era – while the place was reasonably clean, it was very, very drab with faded lime-green table linens, as well as heavy, faded gold-colored curtains. (all the colors I detest) But the local Hungarian “Dreber Deluxe” beer was cold and tasty!

When I finally boarded the old Balkan Bulgarian Airlines A320 aircraft, along with a capacity crowd, I found myself seated next to two very cute little sisters who were probably 7 or 8 years old. They were traveling together with big red and white cards around their neck – unaccompanied minors. It appeared to be their first airline flight because they were so excited, but in a very quiet way. When dinner was served, the plane was still climbing, so the plastic trays kept sliding off their table. They were fascinated by all the little dishes of food, but they were getting frustrated by the sliding of the trays! So, I showed them how to position the edge of the tray so it wouldn’t slide. They seemed most appreciative in a quiet way – they were “darling” seat mates! However, I soon discovered that several economy passengers had been seated in the business class cabin due to overbooking of the flight. To make matters worse. They were served business class dinner while my two young seat mates and I were served the economy class meal! Either the flight attendants didn’t notice, or more likely didn’t care! Later, one of the flight attendants asked me “what would my children like to have for dessert”, and I had to respond, “they aren’t my children”. As the plane gained a higher altitude, a lady seated in front of me with a very young baby had to deal with the baby’s crying. But to their credit, the flight attendants came to the aid of the mother by pressing an ice cube on the infant’s ear – problem solved!

We finally landed in Sophia after a rather bumpy ride as the plane skirted around several strong thunderstorms. At the same time, I watched the radar display in the cockpit as it showed many yellow and red dots as we negotiated around the spots! (I couldn't believe the cockpit door was left open for the entire flight!) Arrival at Sophia airport was much like entering a third world country with all of its bureaucracy, crowds, and inadequate, rundown facilities. But I was pleasantly surprised to find that a visa was not required of US citizens, especially after the man in line in front of me from Britain had to pay \$70! However, it was the same old "crush of humanity" in the anarchy of Passport Control, which brought back some ugly memories of the hassles I had entering Yugoslavia many years before. A young lady in front of me had a small boy who was very tired and cranky, and she was having a very stressful time trying to keep him from pulling things out of her bag and throwing them into the crowd! At last, I reached the immigration counter and was asked just one question – "did you come from Budapest today"? (Duh!)

Having officially entered the country I went in search of my bags, and of course, there were no baggage carts to be found because the porters were the only ones that had them which made it necessary to "employ" a porter. Before employing his services, I asked "how much", to which he replied, "two US dollars", a reasonable fee. As we made our way through the tightly packed "welcoming committee" outside, I spotted an "ESRI" sign being held by a small, dark-haired man with a bushy mustache and he said to wait there while he went to get his car. Meanwhile, I realized that I only had a \$5 bill and when I handed it to the porter I said, "it's your lucky day"! So began my first time in Bulgaria, but it wouldn't be my last.

PHOTO GALLERY



Budapest and the Danube River



the "Talgo" train from Madrid to Barcelona



Barcelona railway station



St Margaretha Cathedral



National Gallery



Old Telephone booth

Scenes of Budapest – July 1993



