



TRAVEL

A Movable Feast

To truly dine like a Kaiser, take in three Habsburg capitals in one day

BY RICHARD ASHER

It's the decadence of proximity. In our tight-knit corner of Europe even the budget traveler can be a globetrotter. And while it felt indulgent dining in three capital cities in one day, don't think it meant rushing from one place to the next. The journeys are short and there's always time for a stroll. After all, in this corner of the continent, leisure time is taken seriously. To have breakfast in Budapest, lunch in Bratislava and supper in Vienna gives you a new appreciation of our neighbors along the Danube. And the closeness is more than geographical. With all three capitals once part of the Habsburg jigsaw, the cultural and historical ties are there to taste at every turn.

I grabbed a bus to Hungary's capital the afternoon before starting my tri-city challenge. It was a perfect autumn day, so I wanted to dump my gear quickly and explore. Fortunately that was easy, since my lodgings

at Brody House Apartments were just a couple of blocks away from the M1 underground line. Built in 1896, it was continental Europe's first metro. More tram than classic subway, no visitor should miss cramming into one of its dinky wagons at least once.

Technically two cities, Budapest is a place of visual contrast: On the western riverbank lies Buda, a steep hill of winding roads adorned with small townhouses and castles. On the other side is Pest: dead flat with enormous, grand boulevards. Connected by ornate bridges, they form one of the finest riverfronts in Europe. Vienna's engineered, razor straight stretch of outer district Danube has nothing on this.

DOWNRIVER COUSIN

Shared history is everywhere, if you look for it – most obviously in the Buda Castle, which is still largely as

The capital cities Budapest, Bratislava and Vienna have much shared history and a connection via the Danube.

Empress Maria Theresia envisioned it. And the name Ferenc József, (Franz Josef, Emperor of Austro-Hungary from 1848–1916) is etched into many a grand site, including Budapest's famous Chain Bridge.

But it's the subtler connections that are most pleasing: The system for numbering city districts and postal codes is the same as Vienna's. You'll find dance schools on nearly every street. There are elegant coffeehouses like the New York Café or Café Gerbeaud – think marble floors, frescoes, chandeliers, seats with *Gerbeaud* carved into the varnished wood, opulent golden ornaments and a lot of burgundy. Budapest has its own Urania, and even a luxurious opera house on Andrassy út, a tree-lined boulevard to rival the Ringstrasse.

The vibe, on the other hand, is a world apart. It may have roughly the same population as Vienna, but with its honking traffic, pressing crowds and pounding beats pouring out of sidewalk establishments, Budapest feels 10 times larger. Somehow, the majority of people I encountered seemed younger and more outgoing. Smatterings of communist brutalist architecture and the sooty film on the buildings give it a meaner, more urban edge – as do the heartbreakingly ragged people living on the streets.

THE NEW FRONTIER

I took a quick early breakfast at the sunny window table at Brody House Apartments. Careful not to overeat, I stuck to croissants, coffee and some spectacular homemade granola with honey and yoghurt. I was ready for the next stop: Bratislava! I caught the 9:40 Danubius from Nyugati Station, which follows the Danube around its picturesque bend westwards, at times reminiscent of the Wachau. Here, the river swells wide and the autumn colors are breathtaking.

As the train crossed into southern Slovakia, the lush landscape gave way to flat, largely treeless plains of withered corn. Most stations have both Slovak and Hungarian names – a nod to the turbulent history in these parts. Indeed, Slovakia was part of Hungary until 1918, with Bratislava (known then as Pozsony or Pressburg) even serving as the capital when Budapest was under Ottoman rule.

Despite its past importance, Bratislava, with its population of just 415,000, has none of the multistoried splendor of the much larger Budapest or Vienna.

It offers some true architectural eyesores in fact, like the colorless Hlavná Stanica station where I arrived. But the city has its own charm, with a well-preserved

PHOTOS FROM LEFT: DANIEL OLAH ON UNSPLASH, VISITBRATISLAVA.COM, UNSPLASH/CHRISTIANLOZAN

Travel Tips

Hourly trains connect Vienna and Budapest daily. Look for Sparschiene deals. But the bus is cheapest: Flixbus runs regularly from Erdberg to Budapest. oebb.at flixbus.de

For Budapest to Bratislava trains, try the international ticket office at Budapest's Nyugati Station - second class costs €9 (or 2,745 Forint). Prebooking on the clunky Hungarian rail website isn't advised: I was quoted three substantially different prices before eventually losing faith.

During summer, the Twin City Liner ferry (from €20 one way, up to five trips per day) operates between Bratislava and Schwedenplatz. (01) 904 88 80 twincityliner.com

The ferry doesn't run from November to March, but there is a brisk train connection between Vienna Hauptbahnhof and Hlavná Stanica or Petržalka. A trip usually costs €16.60 - no pre-booking needed.

Budapest Accommodation & Breakfast

Brody Apartments
Paulay Ede utca 16
Budapest 1061

Brody House

Bródy Sándor utca 10
Budapest 1088
(+36) 1 266 1211
brody.land

Lunch in Bratislava

Reštaurácia Hrad
Námestie A. Dubčeka 1
Bratislava 85001
(+421) 911 132 929
restauraciahrad.sk

Dinner in Vienna

Plachuttas Gasthaus zur Oper
1., Walfischgasse 5-7
(01) 512 22 51
plachutta.at

Food is taken seriously in all three cities, with many sidewalk establishments, taverns and restaurants on every corner.



historic center overlooked by the great Bratislavský hrad (Bratislava castle) on its hill.

As I strolled through the peaceful ambassadorial district in the autumn sunshine, I discovered some beautiful houses replete with bay windows, turrets and gardens. I took it slow, with an hour until lunch on the terrace at Reštaurácia Hrad in the castle precinct, where I ordered *Domáce bryndzové halušky* (sheep cheese dumplings with bacon and chives). The view of the Old Town's red roofs was distracting, but no match for my oozing, marble-sized dumplings, which I wolfed down way too fast. They were delicious.

Next to the castle I discovered the national assembly, which might be the only one in the world to have a view into another country. Lower Austria's windmills spun away happily on the other side of the river, another reminder that this wasn't an international border until after 1918.

HIDDEN GEMS


Speaking of which, I was excited for the river trip back to Vienna. Taking the road or rail from Bratislava robs you of the reality that these two cities are naturally linked by Europe's most storied waterway. Luckily, I squeezed my trip in before the Twin City Liner closed down for the winter. Standing on the top deck of the speedy catamaran, the wind buffeting your face, is the right way to do it.

Along the bends between Bratislava and Vienna, I discovered two castles. Hrad Devin overlooking the point where the Morava River hits the Danube, guards the Slovak side of this border confluence. Then came the

ruins of Hainburg by the town of the same name, which is the only Austrian town you'll see along the way. After that, it's a long stretch of woodland, with just the occasional fishing hut and sunbather to break it up until planes descending on Schwechat start appearing overhead. In less than a quarter of an hour, you're whizzing along the Donaukanal. We reached Schwedenplatz right as the sunset.

After a day of foreign discovery, I felt eager to explore some new corners of my hometown's first district, which I so rarely frequent. It didn't take me long to stumble upon the church of Maria am Gestade, a gothic gem I discovered for the first time that evening. A stone's throw from Schwedenplatz, a cacophony of bells pealed into the twilight at seven o'clock. It was about the only noise to be heard on a Sunday evening - and a reminder that I was due for a *Wiener Schnitzel*.

It may be cliché, but at the end of a culinary expedition, it seemed only right to devour Vienna's fried calling card. After sitting down at the staunchly traditionalist Plachuttas Gasthaus zur Oper, I was welcomed back with a crispy, golden breaded sheet of veal and a sidekick bowl of perfectly tart *Kartoffelsalat* (potato salad) presented on a starched white tablecloth.

As I savored my *Radler*, I played the last 24 hours back in my head. The groovy grime of Budapest, the ambassadorial facades of Bratislava and the twists and turns of the Danube connecting the two with Vienna. There's no room for dessert, but I'm thoroughly content. The neighbors are cool, but it's also good to be home. 

PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK/EUGENIO MARONGIU, SHUTTERSTOCK/TRABANTOS, WIENTOURISMUS/PETER RIGAUD




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<https://www.unwg-bazaar-vienna.org>