

# Around Town

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## Seeing things differently

Alternative guided tours show another side of the capital, offering insights that even surprise and delight local residents. **Ágnes Sólyom** strays off the standard tourist track.

### Budapest Beyond Sightseeing

With their affectionate tours of the Hungarian capital's notoriously gritty District VIII, Budapest Beyond Sightseeing has become the best-known alternative tour-guide company in the city. The group was founded in 2007 by a young group of social workers and others interested in celebrating the hidden beauty of District VIII while seeking to oppose stereotypes. Budapest Beyond Sightseeing

takes their 'corporate social responsibility' seriously, and they have won EU and local recognition for their organised clean-ups and workshops fostering better appreciation of the city. Perhaps the most important 'social work' they do is bringing people together through their tours, which allow visitors an opportunity to meet local people and get acquainted with their everyday lifestyles.

These tours are provided in English, but also in Hungarian, as

many Budapest natives can learn from them too. The guides are well educated – from graduate students to PhDs – and all show a real love for their subject.

While they do other worthwhile tours around the city, Budapest Beyond Sightseeing has a heavy focus on District VIII, which has historically been, and remains, one of the poorest inner-city neighbourhoods. These tours show hidden historical and architectural treasures of the neighbourhood nicknamed 'Nyócker', but they also pay attention to the people who live there now. Two of their tours embody this philosophy:

### 'Socio-Cultural Walking Tour'

This is a look at the Roma culture of District VIII and a disadvantaged

neighbourhood that contrasts strongly with the more upscale 'Palace Quarter' nearby. The three-hour tour includes a visit to the home of a local Roma family involved in the music business, as well as other sights and experiences designed to counter anti-Roma stereotypes that are unfortunately so common in Hungary. *Ft15,000 for one; groups Ft4,000-Ft7,500 per person, depending on group size.*

### 'Juice of the Eighth District'

Forgoing the better-known Jewish Quarter in District VII, this alternative Jewish Budapest tour focuses on District VIII. Run with the cooperation of Bálint Ház, the Jewish Community Centre, this tour visits hidden synagogues and other signs of an existence that remained under the radar in the face of oppression that goes back centuries. While the Jewish population here was decimated during the Holocaust, this tour shows a resilient commu-





Meeting odd requests  
Photos on this page  
from Underguide



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the story of the capital – the guide fills in the details with history, real people and urban legends. Each tour weaves art history into the story of the city, and each is researched extensively, with the goal of bringing Budapest alive.

Tours are available in English, German and Hungarian. Because the tours leave on a regular basis, it's easy and relatively inexpensive to join a group. Some tours are seasonal, so do check before showing up at the meeting point. Interesting offerings include:

#### 'Secret Gardens and Squares Downtown'

One of the most popular tours takes visitors through the inner courtyards in the centre of the city. Discover hidden jungles behind 100-year-old gates and entrances: fairytale gardens become visible as you enter residential buildings and private gardens that are normally not open to the public. Take a three-hour journey through these gardens under the guidance of a professional landscape architect. *Wednesdays 10.30am. Meet next to the statue on V. Kammermayer Károly tér. M2 Astoria. Ft6,000.*

#### 'Budapest – the City of Waters'

A two-hour walk covers the bathing culture of the Turkish bathhouses as well as the city's watery heart, the river Danube. Learn about legends connected to the Danube, fish markets of the medieval town and turn-of-the-century drinking cures. There is also an opportunity to make comparative water tastings and to sample thermal water. *Fridays 10.30am. Meet at the ornamental well on XI. Gellért tér. Tram 18, 19, 47, 49. Ft5,000.*

#### 'Budapest's Records – the City of Superlatives'

The tallest, the thinnest, the oldest, the best and the worst: learn about Budapest by looking at its extremes. You'll discover lesser-known sights such as the oldest

graffiti and the narrowest house in the capital. Major sights on the tour include the city's oldest church, Europe's largest synagogue on Dohány utca and Budapest's oldest bridge, the Lánchíd. *Tue, Sat 10.30am. Meet at V. Széchenyi tér. Tram 2. Ft5,000.*

### Discover hidden jungles behind 100-year-old gates

#### 'The Secret Language of the Decorations of Budapest Buildings'

Anyone who enjoys looking up at the façades of central Pest may be interested to learn the messages behind the cherubs, atlases, caryatids and ornate carvings. They can reveal information about the building's original owner, the

owner's profession and even the world views at the time of construction. Admire statues and whimsical decor overhead while you gain the tools needed to decipher the secrets of these ragged old building fronts on a two-hour tour. *Check for times. Meet in front of the Museum of Applied Arts (Iparművészeti Múzeum) IX. Üllői út 33-37. M3 Corvin-negyed. Ft5,000.*

*Reserve online or by telephone: 06 70 942 6123, 06 30 429 1165 both mobiles/imaginebudapest.hu/info@imaginebp.hu.*

#### Budapest Underguide

Two creative women who describe this city as their perpetual playground created Budapest Underguide seven years ago with the goal of giving a local view of the city, the kind you might get if you were visiting a friend.

Their 20-plus staff of guides, who can lead tours in more than ten languages, seek to develop a rapport with their charges, and visitors are made to feel at home shortly after arriving.

Budapest Underguide prides itself on meeting odd requests and customising tours that intelligently incorporate 'must-see' sights into itineraries that are also tailored to the client's wishes. Their standard packages include several tours aimed at locals and long-term



nity – and it includes a visit to a living room-synagogue that is still in operation. *Ft15,000 for one; groups Ft7,500-Ft5,000 per person, depending on group size.*

*Join or arrange tours by appointment: 06 20 332 5489 mobile/www.beyondbudapest.hu/beyondbudapest@gmail.com.*

#### Imagine Budapest

Started by a group of art, art history and architecture students, this relatively new company offers a variety of thematic tours that seek to provide an alternative view of the city and its many surprises.

Imagine Budapest's tours use physical sights as the backdrop for





**Paying a call** A local home in a Budapest Beyond Sightseeing tour

residents, who can uncover a host of surprises in the city they call home. They also run discovery games.

Other tours cover such popular themes as gastronomy, design and responsible travel. And Budapest Underguide also arranges nightlife tours and special seasonal tours. Some of their more interesting off-beat tours include:

#### **'GoLocal Day!'**

This is a non-touristy, walking tour that Budapest Underguide personalises to fit guests' own interests, whether that be antiques, party life, Jewish heritage, local wines or most any other aspect of the city. Major sights are usually included in the four-hour trip, but the real benefit of this tour is the chance to see lesser-known aspects of the city. Interact with locals and learn the urban legends that are part of Budapest. *Book in advance. €79 for one to four persons, each additional person €19.*

#### **'Budapest Delicatessen'**

This four-hour gastro-tour combines sightseeing with the classical flavours of Hungary. You'll not only look at the Great Market Hall, you'll also get to sample its 'winter salami', deep-fried *lángos* and stuffed cabbage. Later there's a visit to a 'ruin bar' in the Jewish Quarter to sample *pálinka*; a visit to a butchers for sausage or offal; and dessert at one of the excellent local cake shops. *Book in advance. €119 for*



*one; €49 per person for four or more. XII. Várfo utca 12 (06 30 908 1597 mobile/underguide.com/budapest@underguide.com*

#### **UniqueBudapest**

UniqueBudapest offers thematic walking tours that either take visitors to places off the beaten track or provide the lesser-known stories of well-known places. Their goal is to go beneath the surface of the capital, and even Hungarians or long-time residents can be surprised when a UniqueBudapest tour reveals how little they know about their surroundings.

The tours are meant to be more like strolls with a local person, who adds context to the scenery with the help of pictures and stories. UniqueBudapest guides strive to find the balance between giving information and entertaining.

Along with 13 walking tours, UniqueBudapest also offers an interactive sightseeing game, called the Budapest Code, which



**Jewish District VIII Budapest** Beyond Sightseeing: here and on the opposite page, upper right

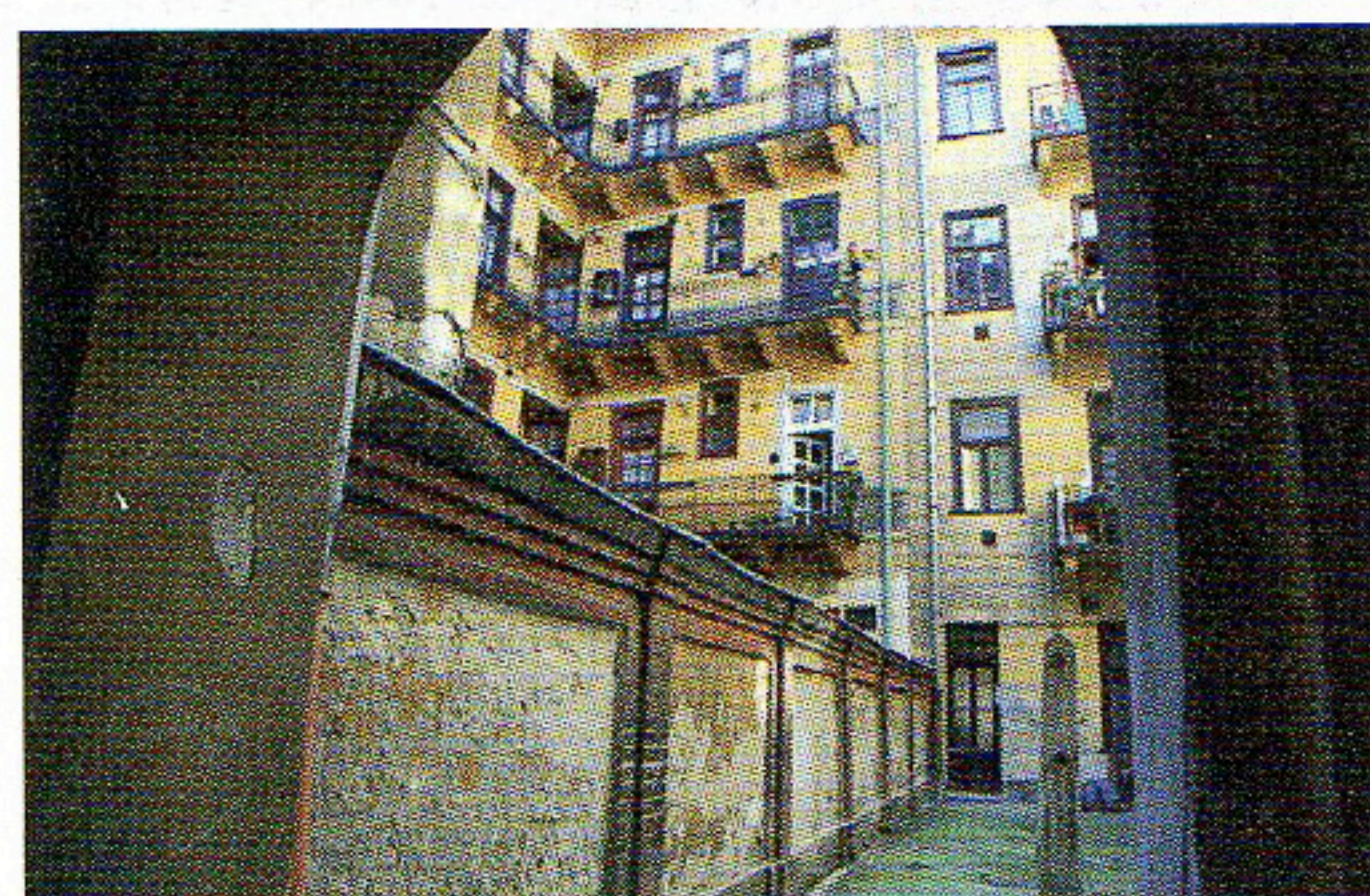
sends participants to important locations in a treasure hunt of the city that's designed as a team-building exercise. Tours are run on request with a minimum of two persons, with larger groups being cheaper per person, and they can be arranged in English, German, French, Russian, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Romanian. Anyone interested in a tour can register via email or phone. All entrance tickets are included in the price. Many of their tours focus on more mainstream sights, like downtown Pest, the Jewish Quarter, Budapest's own Art Nouveau style and the city by night. But UniqueBudapest also has some quirky tours, including:



#### **'Deluxe tour'**

This stylish tour takes window-shopping to a new level. See the city's grandest department store, built a century ago and recently restored, as well as other magnificent old shops – then meet the forces of fashion today. This three-and-a-half-hour journey gets you

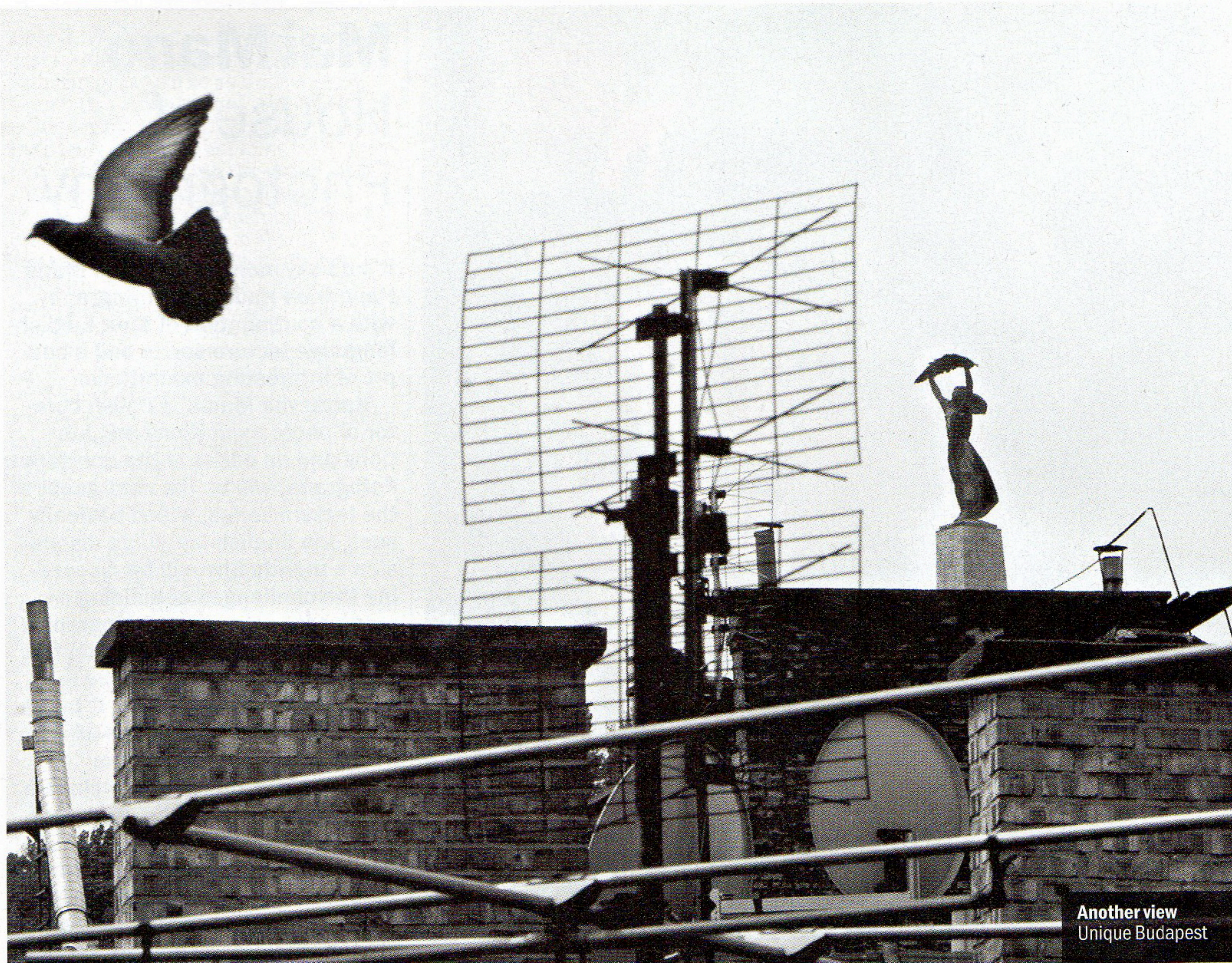




into the showrooms of the young Hungarian designers who are creating contemporary clothing, hats and shoes. You'll also meet the 'Hungarian Nose', the world famous perfume maker in his own shop. *Book in advance. Ft4,500-Ft8,000 per person, depending on group size.*



**Kodály Method?** Unique Budapest visits the Franz Liszt Academy



**Another view**  
Unique Budapest

### 'Kayak tour'

From April, UniqueBudapest runs a tour of the sights along the Danube as seen from a sea kayak. Expert guides make sure that you're safe and dry – and guide you past historic riverside buildings, bridges and islands over the course of four hours. *Book in advance. Ft14,000-Ft16,000 per person, depending on group size.*

### 'Liszt tour'

Set up for Franz Liszt's 200th birthday in 2011, this three-and-a-half-hour walk looks at the mark the composer left on the city – and the parts of the city that touched him. *Book in advance Ft4,500-Ft8,000, depending on group size. 9am-5pm. (06 20 380 0313/06 30 568 6662 mobiles/www.uniquebudapest.com).*

## Mainstream tours

**When you just want a basic tour to see the main sights, these companies can get the job done.**

### Bikebase

This friendly shop, a hub for rentals, repairs and sales of bicycles, is our favourite choice for two-wheeled tours. Order a customised trip 24 hours in advance or find out when their next group trip is going. Previous itineraries have included sojourns to Szentendre or a visit to the Ferencváros stadium by football enthusiasts – Bikebase can research any type of tour you like. Riders can also choose from a range of bicycle models to match the nature of their trip. With sufficient warning, guides can investigate specialist subject areas and incorporate them into the tour. They open for business on March 15. VI. Podmaniczky utca 19 (269 5983/06 70 625 8501 mobile/www.bikebase.hu). Tram 4, 6/trolley 72, 73. Prices & times vary according to tour. Minimum 24 hours advance booking required.

### Hop On Hop Off

This package is like getting your own private transit system, with a guide thrown in, for two days. The Hop On Hop Off tour company operates two bus lines – one that stops every half hour and one that stops every hour – as well as a boat line that stops every hour. Between 10am and 6pm during high season, the bus lines roll past major sights, which are described by a guide in English and 15 other languages. Stay on the bus for the full tour or jump off

whenever you like and get back on later. The same goes for the boat, which pootles between Vigadó tér and Margaret Bridge – clamber aboard any of the hourly boat rides when you like. The company goes to a total of 21 bus stops and three boat stops. Bus stops include the Castle District, Heroes' Square and other standard sights. One fee lets you use the transit for two days. VI. Andrassy út 2 (374 7050/www.hoponhopoff.hu). M1 Bajcsy-Zsilinszky út. Daily 8.30am-6pm. Hours may vary in early spring. Fee Ft4,500 per person.

### Personal Guides

Have your own guide lead you or your group through the major sights of the city, or take you on one of many basic tours: Jewish Budapest, Budapest by night, etc. You'll be driven around in an air-conditioned car. Parent company Multigo also arranges large tours that anyone can join. II. Frankel Leó út 51-53 (323 0791/www.budapest-tour.hu). Tram 17. Mon-Fri 9am-6pm. Fee €42 per person for four; €129 for one person.

### River Ride

Continental Europe's first amphibious touring coach, the River Ride bus takes you past major sights in the centre of town via roadway, and then dramatically plunges into the Danube to take in more watery ones. It's a bit gimmicky, but can be fun. V. Akadémia utca 1 (332 2555/www.riverride.hu). During March buses depart from V. Széchenyi tér (tram 2) at 11am, 1pm and 3pm; they are more frequent in April. Fee Ft7,500 adults; Ft5,000 children 6-14s.