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A Tour of the Ruin Bars of Budapest

Tim

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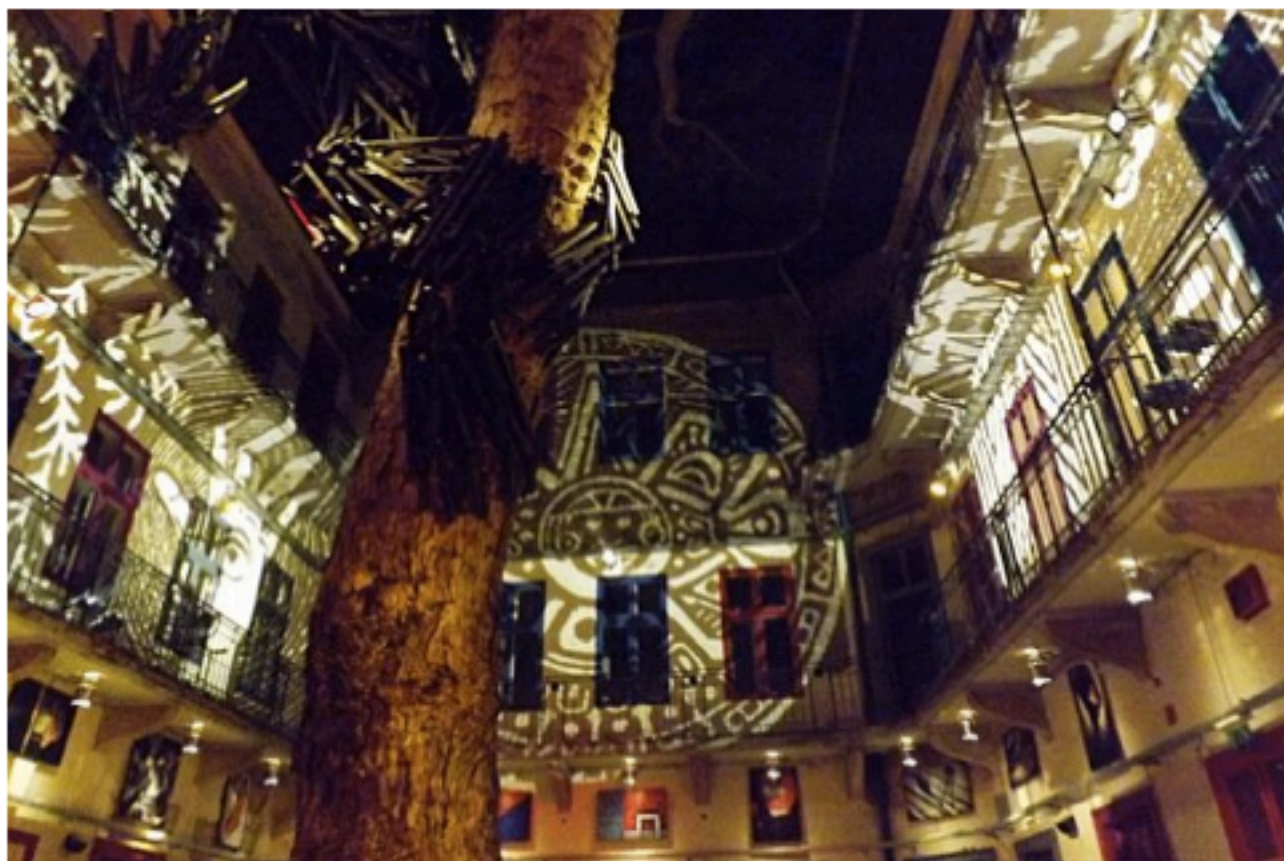
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Then we hit [Fogas Haz](#), an artsy place with exhibition space. The last one, [Instant](#), was the strangest, with odd sculptures hung across the courtyard, comical paintings on the walls, and what may be the most eclectic collection of castoff furniture in the city. All of them were great spots for people-watching, providing a healthy mix of locals and visitors. These are interesting places to work your way through Hungary's palinka and beer selections. Prices are in line with other Budapest pubs—very reasonable by our standards—and you can wander in and out of them without a cover charge unless there's a special show going on.

When daytime rolls around again, [Underguide](#) can pick you back up again, or see the [Hungary Tourism](#) site for ideas. If you get a chance, round out your sampling with a wine bar like the DiVino one right by the Basilica. They have hundreds by the glass to choose from and the prices are unbelievably good. As in less than \$3 a glass for some of them.

Want to visit some dive bars so divey that they're located in what were abandoned buildings? In Budapest, you can hit four or five of them in just a few blocks of walking.

When I was going to return to Budapest for the second time, I told my contact at Hungary Tourism I wanted to write about something different. I didn't want to tick off the tourist sites everyone is hitting on their hop on, hop off bus trip around the city. "I know just the right people to hook you up with," she said. Then she sent me a brochure for [Underguide](#), a company that promises to take visitors to the offbeat places, the little-known spots, and maybe down to the underbelly too.

Before I go any further, let me say that the people at Underguide were terrific. Three guides took me on three tours that were very different than anything I experienced the first time around. I'm talking the hills of Pest by steam train and chair lift and a tour under the city's main bridge connecting the two sides. To a head of Stalin hidden behind some weeds and the most opulent coffee house I've ever seen. In between, I got [Topsy Budapest tour](#) from a half-Jewish Germanic woman who speaks four languages, despite being half my age.

The Ruin Bars Multiply



The back story on the ruin bars is that they started opening up in abandoned (but interesting) buildings where nobody wanted to spend the money to restore them to their former glory. Some didn't have a roof (and still don't), while others had a big courtyard offering ample space for revelers. Set up a bar, get the toilets working, and you're set. Eventually some expanded to take over several adjoining buildings. The first ones were a success, others followed, and now they're a fixture on the nightlife circuit—even for the dreaded "stag parties" and "hen parties" crowds getting cheap flights from London and other European capitals.

Understand that it's not like these places are a big secret, some rave spot where you'll have to scatter if the police arrive. There are 16 of them listed on [Ruinpubs.com](#), all open to the public assuming you look decent and have ample forints in your pocket. They're just fun, funky spaces with lots of nooks and crannies where you can actually hear the other person talk if you want—or spots you can dance if you don't.

We started out at the original, Szimpla, in the same spot since 2004 and now an institution. I downed a \$2 beer and took in the cacophony of visual stimulation, including repurposed relics from the communist era. (Like cars that work better as tables than they worked as cars.) We moved on to [Doboz](#), which my guide dismissed as a "fake ruin bar" as I sipped some *palinka* fruit brandy. It was the least claustrophobic and the neatest if you're put off by the grunge. Matching chairs even, with no springs sticking out.