

# Taking the Plunge

GÉLLERT THERMAL BATH/SZECHENYI PUBLIC BATHS  
BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

Budapest has more thermal springs than any other capital city. Every day, millions of gallons of warm, mineral water gurgle up through a geological fault line, flowing into the city's hundreds of springs, and palace-like bathhouses.

Bathing culture in Budapest stretches far back in time. When the Turks ruled the city, from 1526 to 1699, they built a myriad of bathhouses with multi-chambered hot and cold pools similar to the ancient Roman-style *thermae*. Today, twenty-first-century Budapesters seek out the waters for the same reasons as the early denizens did—for health, hygiene, and social hangouts.

With so many bathing options at their feet, Hungarians would not be blamed for taking their spas for granted. But many are quite serious about getting in their healing dips—the national health plan, in fact, pays for regular visits: the thermal waters are plentiful in calcium, magnesium, alkali, sulfate, and other minerals that can ease the symptoms of chronic ailments, be it arthritis or eczema. And then there are all the mental health benefits that come from a good, long soak.

Among the most well-known spas is Gellért, which is attached to an opulent hotel built in 1918, and features an exuberant maze of hot, warm, tepid, and freezing cold pools. With its mix of declining art nouveau architecture and old-world elegance, the complex seems both trapped in time and vibrantly alive, with tourists and locals reclining in spaces lined with cerulean-blue tiles crafted by Zsolnay, Hungary's famed porcelain maker. In the City Park, meanwhile, is Széchenyi, a vast domed bathhouse that dates back to 1913 and boasts no less than 18 pools, as well as saunas and steam baths. It is a multi-generational amusement park of sorts, with three grand outdoor pools, where bathers can play chess on floating boards and kids frolic in jet-propelled whirlpools. Drawn from a depth of nearly 1,000 meters, Széchenyi's waters are said to be the hottest in the city—making the outdoor pool attractive in the depths of a Hungarian winter, when the heats rises off the water to form cotton-like clouds of steam around bathers.

