



DIVING
INTO
THE



TH

Formerly a neighbourhood to be avoided, the Palace Quarter is now Budapest's most happening district.

TEXT BY **GORDON F. SANDER** : PHOTOS BY **GORDON F. SANDER**

A group of elderly pensioners exchange gossip in the venerable garden of the Hungarian National Museum, while some well-fed starlings bemusedly look on from the branches of hundred-year-old linden trees. The fragrant smell of freshly baked *palacsinta* (Hungarian crepes) wafts from a pastry shop, while the plaintive sound of a gypsy violin echoes off the walls of a hidden courtyard.

These are some of the disparate sights, sounds and smells one might find in the up and coming precinct of Pest, the Hungarian capital's eastern half, alternately known as Józsefváros, the inner suburb's original name, or its official moniker, District XIII, or simply the Eighth.

"Up and coming?" Until recently the average Budapest would have described the smallish, pie shaped slice of the commercial centre of this bifurcated, battered, and now booming city of two million people as "down and out." Ten years ago the quarter still had a mixed reputation and known for its red light district and thieves.

TURNAROUND

But that, as they say, was then – then being up until several years ago, when the city began cleaning up this ten-square-kilometre slice of lower Pest, including installing a video camera system that drove most of the district's disreputable characters away, while a wave of gallerists, retro clothiers and the like began pouring in.

Now the Eighth – and particularly its western half, also known as the Palace Quarter, or Palotanegyed, after the large number of stately homes built for the city's aristocratic and mercantile elite during the late 19th and early 20th – is rapidly transforming itself into Budapest's most happening neighborhood.

In fact, the Eighth has just about everything one needs to spend a long, entertaining, enlightening, cozy, and safely wild weekend.

As **Gyuri Byduas**, co-owner of Beyond Budapest Sightseeing, a tour company that specialises in revealing the hidden wonders of Josefkaros, put it, "When I moved here in 2005, everyone said, 'Don't live there.' Tourists were told to stay away."

"But," Byudas adds, "look now: it's the city's best part: a laboratory of art, architecture, and diversity."

COFFEE AND CULTURE

Amble down the pleasant, pedestrianised, shop-lined Krudy Gyuka utca until it opens into the spacious square Mikszáth Kálmán tér and duck into Lumen (Mikszáth Kálmán tér 2), a tiny, all white converted tailor-shop that also doubles as a photography gallery.

The cozy, avant-garde outpost is presided over by the friendly brothers Gergely and Peter László, who will be happy to serve you a cappuccino or two.

Now that you've got your mojo working, it's time to take on the Big Daddy of the district – the National Museum (Múzeum körút 14-16).

Invaded and occupied by, in

order, the Ottomans, the Hapsburgs, the Nazis, and the Soviets, bled white during the First World War, stripped of two thirds of its territory afterwards, pulverized by Allied bombers and Soviet tanks during the Second, as well as during the abortive 1956 Budapest Uprising, Hungary's history – and particularly the last century – forms a virtual continuum of sorrow. That long, sad, gripping story is on display in the vast halls of this sweeping 160-year-old edifice, designed by the great architect Mihály Pollack, from the coronation regalia used by 12th century King Stephen, later buried in Transylvania to hide it from the Hapsburgs; to the silk corset of beloved Queen Elizabeth, still bearing the stab mark of the Italian anarchist who murdered her in 1896; to the right hand of the hideous eight metre tall statue of Stalin that used to lord over Budapest in deepest darkest Soviet days.

Fortunately, this long, searing journey had a triumphant ending, in 1989, when the Third Hungarian Republic was declared, but how long it takes to get

THE 8TH COMBINES ART, ARCHITECTURE AND DIVERSITY.



there! By the time visitors reach the last of the memorabilia-lined historic rooms, each one faithfully recreating another era of Hungarian history – the one recreating the savage fighting that took place during the '56 Uprising in photos and video is particularly intense – one is spent. But one also feels closer to Hungary.

(I did come across one disturbing throwback to the district's hoarier days: all the museum guards – at least the male ones – carry side arms.)

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

If you're in the fin de siècle mood take lunch at the Muzeum's fabled namesake, Museum (Múzeum körút 12). Nothing trendy about this bellwether of the Budapest dining scene: it's been going strong since 1885. The eatery's high ceilings and tall windows make this a good place to meditate on all the history you've just seen.

Weather permitting, you might prefer to dine alfresco at Épitész Pince, the reliable restaurant situ-

ated in the courtyard of the near by Almássy Palace, which also serves as the headquarters of the union of Hungarian architects, at Ötpacsirta 2. Order the "basement style" pork chops. Afterwards visit the Almássy's elegant neighbor, the Szabó Ervin Library, at 1088 Szabó Ervin tér 1. One of the Eighth's great

survivors, the resplendent library, dating from 1890, is also the public archive of the city of Budapest.

Looking for a vintage jacket? There's a good chance you'll find it in Iguana, a retro clothier on the corner of Krúdy Gyula and Horánszky utca

(Krúdy Gyula utca 9). It also has a nice selection of faux-Audrey Hepburn bags.

For dinner head down into the shadows of Horánszky utca (not to worry: those cameras are watching) until you come across the A.P.A. Art Center and Café (Horánszky utca 5). A former pipe factory, the A.P.A. offers artist residencies in converted studios. The

THERE'S A COOL,
TIME-WARP
QUALITY HERE.



WHERE TO STAY

Unsurprisingly, the resurgent Eighth has its own brand new boutique hotel, the Palazzo Zichy Hotel (Lorinc pap ter 2), a fine one. A converted turn of the century mansion, one of three Hungarian Art Nouveau domiciles built for the wealthy Zichy family, this sleek four star, 80-room hostelry, located on a small square in the heart of the Palace Quarter, boasts a soaring atrium, a cool duplex bar-cum-business center, and refreshingly, no attitude.

Grandeur of the more venerable kind is on offer at the nearby Danubius Hotel Astoria (photo at left), at 19 Kossuth Lajos, on the northwestern corner of the district. The Astoria opened in 1914, and has been in continuous operation ever since, through war and peace, depression and revolution. Until recently it also looked it. However, the lavish establishment, a favourite with period film directors with its shimmering chandelier and posh appointments, has recently been restored to its original Austro-Hungarian magnificence.

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center also contains a laid back bar and a surprisingly large courtyard restaurant filled with heavy duty looking – and drinking – artist and intellectual types.

Try the Anya salad, the house specialty, with chicken and sesame. The somewhat more-creative-than-thou denizens tend to keep their own counsel; however, like anywhere, a smile and a few words of actual Hungarian hastily acquired on your flight in will work wonders.

Step outside. Isn't that a Lada parked there? To be sure, one of the cool things about the Eighth is its time warp quality. One moment you think you're back in New York in the 80s, the next you're back in the 60s – the Hungarian 60s, that is. And isn't that Michael Curtiz, the Budapest-born film director of *Casablanca*, approaching out of the gloaming?

The Eighth's other cultural monolith – the opulent Museum of Applied Arts (Üllői út 33-37) was commissioned by Emperor Franz Joseph as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire's 1896 Millennium Celebrations, the museum is the masterwork of Ödön Lechner, the father of the Hungarian Nouveau or Secession Movement. At first blush the most astonishing aspect of this out-of-this-world building, with its gold and green cupola and arcaded courtyard surrounded by cloisters designed in Indian-Oriental style, is its exterior. But the museum's cornucopia-like holdings, which cover the decorative arts from the 14th to 20th centuries, are no less dazzling. Dive in.


Unwind over lunch at Darshan udvar, a restaurant-cum-exotic wares emporium at Krúdy Gyula utca 8. Set within an equally otherworldly faux-Mongolian courtyard, this newcomer to the district includes a health food shop, an "ethno clothing" outlet, and a Buddhist bookshop.

If it's Saturday it's probably too late to shop. Most Budapest stores tend to close at 2 pm on Saturdays. Instead, check out the flea market in the courtyard of Spring Art, next to Lumen. Buy a cup of tea and join the line of bargain hunters as they sift and sniff through the diverse antiques, memorabilia and wares on offer.

For some down home Hungarian Jewish cooking try Horánszky utca at Fülemlé (No. 5). Arguably the Eighth's top eatery, this intimate restaurant offers savory dishes like crispy leg of goose with potato latkes with sour cream sauce amidst a warm, prewar atmosphere.

Now it's time to get down. If jazz is your thing, sashay over to the hotsy-totsy Budapest Jazz Club (Múzeum utca 7). Order a gin and fizz at the welcoming front room bar and listen to Budapest Bossa Nova and other cool combos do it to at this showcase for local and foreign bebop founded in 2008.

Still in the groove? Boogie over to Corvintető (1 Blaha Lujza tér) a mammoth bar-cum-danceteria on the fourth floor of the hulking old Corvin department store. This new hipster in spot features a 30-metre bar manned by a squad of quick-fingered professional "mixer boys and girls," a biomorphic light display and a 600-square-metre rooftop terrace where you can listen to top local DJs spin while waiting for the sun to rise. ●

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