

# Budapest — *Relax in a ruin*



by Duncan JD Smith

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Duncan JD Smith's 'Only in Budapest' was the first book we discovered from the 'Only in' series of guidebooks on European cities. That was back in 2006, and since then we have extolled the merits of this series a number of times in *hidden europe*. The series now extends to nine titles, of which the latest — 'Only in Paris' — had a mention in the last issue of *hidden europe*.

The Budapest guide has been particularly successful with a third edition published last

month. It includes a lot of new material, so *hidden europe* invited Duncan JD Smith to give us a flavour of something novel from the Hungarian capital. Duncan is not noted for his conventionality, so it was no surprise when this dedicated urban explorer came back to us with a truly offbeat recommendation. "If you're looking to relax over a drink in Budapest," he suggested, "head for a ruin." We are pleased to present here an extract from the latest edition of 'Only in Budapest'.

From Castle Hill to Heroes' Square, Budapest is a city beloved by visitors for its architectural diversity. Splendid palaces, ancient churches, bath buildings, and imposing arcades all contribute to the feel of the place, even though some of these showpiece attractions are crying out for restoration. That is the reality of Budapest in modern times: Vienna it is not. But how many visitors would actually go out of their way to see a badly dilapidated apartment house, especially if it was of little apparent historical interest? The answer, surprisingly, is quite a few! Moreover, they are not looking for art and history but rather drink

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and entertainment in one of Budapest's so-called Ruin Pubs (*Romkocsmá*). The phenomenon of the Ruin Pub originated in the run-down Jewish Quarter of Pest in District VII, where lack of money, neglect, and an absence of gentrification has created an abundance of crumbling and sometimes abandoned late nineteenth-century apartment buildings. The cost of restoring such huge structures remains prohibitive but this hasn't deterred a new type of Budapest entrepreneur. Leaving the buildings almost exactly as they are, potential landlords of Ruin Pubs acquire a lease — and move straight in. All that's needed is a makeshift bar, a sound system, and some battered furniture from the local flea market and a Ruin Pub is born!

Against this unexpected but friendly backdrop, the city's youth are coming together to revel in the ruins, a beer in one hand and an opinion in the other — and visitors are more than welcome, too. The granddaddy of Ruin Pubs, Szimpla Kert at Kazinczy utca 14 (District VII), was the first to be opened and remains arguably the best of them all. Typically, the building's facade has been shorn almost entirely of its plaster exterior, victim to the elements and decades of little or no maintenance.

## INFORMATION

You can find out more about the *Only in* series by going to [www.Onlyinguides.com](http://www.Onlyinguides.com). All English-language titles in this series have hitherto been published by Christian Brandstätter Verlag. This third edition of the Budapest guide is unusual in appearing through Hungarian partner Kelet-Nyugat ([www.keletnyugat.hu](http://www.keletnyugat.hu)). Duncan is now hard at work on a book about London which is due to be published in 2014.

Similarly, its once imposing balustrades and spandrels are slowly crumbling away to dust. And yet this building remains a joyful and lively place. A row of bicycles are parked neatly outside, troughs of flowers are hanging from the rickety old balcony, and cheerful signs invite passers-by to step over the threshold.

Inside, the Szimpla consists of several rooms, as well as a large open-air garden, which together can accommodate hundreds of people. They come here to party well into the night, fuelled by a broad selection of beers, wines, and cocktails. It's another world, and little wonder that a reader survey conducted by respected travel publisher Lonely Planet placed Szimpla amongst the top five bars in the world. Only the A38 Bar on board a converted river barge moored on the city's Danube embankment proved more popular.

The Ruin Pub movement has subsequently expanded beyond the borders of District VII, taking the city's increasingly popular new bohemian culture with it (for a list of those currently in operation visit [www.ruinpubs.com](http://www.ruinpubs.com)). Nor does the burgeoning movement encompass only vacant lots. These days it includes other intriguing spaces, such as rooftops, a great example of which is the Corvintető at Blaha Lujza tér 1 (District VIII), which promotes itself as an underground club in the open air! And it probably needs to because much prime Ruin Pub real estate in District VIII, the former Roma Quarter (*Nyócker*), is in the process of being levelled and replaced by anonymous office blocks, displacing the local community in the process. To participate in a fascinating tour of what's left visit [www.beyondbudapest.hu](http://www.beyondbudapest.hu). ■

OPPOSITE: Inside the Szimpla Kert, the first Ruin Pub in Budapest (photo by Duncan JD Smith).