



CULTURE COURSE

Thermal Baths & Budapest Spa Culture

10 Chapters

Philip Osztromok

Generated with Claude

Contents

Chapter 1	City of Baths	2
Chapter 2	Ottoman Baths	6
Chapter 3	Spa Boom	10
Chapter 4	Széchenyi	14
Chapter 5	Gellért	18
Chapter 6	Other Baths	22
Chapter 7	Bathing Etiquette	26
Chapter 8	Science and Cure	30
Chapter 9	Spa Culture	34
Chapter 10	A Day in the Waters	38

Thermal Baths & Budapest Spa Culture

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · Why Budapest Is a City of Baths

Few capital cities can claim to sit on hot water. Budapest does: springs rise along the edge of the Buda hills, and the people who lived there, from the Romans onward, built baths around them. This opening chapter explains where the water comes from, how long it has been used, and the three lenses the course uses to read the baths: as medicine, as habit and as social life. Figures, names and dates are from general knowledge and flagged for checking. Nothing here is medical advice.

Where the Water Comes From

Budapest lies where the hills of Buda meet the flat land of Pest, along a line of geological faults (check the geology). Rain and snow soak into the limestone and dolomite of the Buda hills, sink deep, are heated by the earth, and rise again along the faults as warm, mineral-rich water (check the depth and the temperature range). Many springs emerge close to the Danube, which is why so many of the famous baths are on the Buda side, and why the Széchenyi bath in Pest needed a deep well instead (see Chapter 4).

- **The numbers.** The city is often said to have over a hundred springs and several dozen thermal baths (check the current count and what counts as a "bath").
- **The title.** Budapest is often called the "city of spas" or "city of baths", a phrase that dates from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (check when it began to be used).
- **The water.** It is warm to hot, rich in dissolved minerals, and differs from spring to spring (see Chapter 8 for what is in it).

Roman Roots at Aquincum

The Romans founded the military camp and civil town of Aquincum in what is now the north of Budapest, in the first century (check the date), and used the local springs for baths. Remains of bath buildings, with heating systems under the floors, can be seen at the Aquincum site and nearby (check which remains are visible and what is in the museum). The Roman baths are the first sign in the record that the springs were used for bathing and not just drinking.

The Roman and the medieval phases are less well documented than the Ottoman one, which is why the course starts its long story of surviving buildings with Chapter 2.

A Short Timeline

Roman period

Aquincum and its baths, first to fourth centuries (check).

Medieval period

Bathing continued, and hospital baths were attached to religious houses (check the evidence and the places).

Ottoman period

The domed bath-houses that still stand, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Chapter 2, check).

Nineteenth and twentieth centuries

The spa boom and the big complexes, Széchenyi and Gellért among them (Chapters 3 to 5, check).

Three Ways to Read a Bath

A bath in Budapest is more than a pool. The course looks at each one through three lenses, which often overlap:

1. **Health.** Bathing as treatment, with a doctor's recommendation and a long tradition of prescribed cures. This is the oldest argument for the baths and the one most open to debate (Chapter 8).
2. **Habit.** Bathing as a regular, ordinary activity: the morning swim, the weekly visit, the retired regulars. A bath is a neighbourhood fixture as much as a monument (Chapters 6 and 7).
3. **Social life.** The place to meet, play chess, hold a party or simply sit in warm water in conversation (Chapter 9).

The same bath can sit under all three. A visitor often meets only the third, a doctor the first, and a local the second.

A British comparison

Compare the Roman Baths at Bath, a town built around a hot spring, and the Victorian public baths of Scottish cities such as Edinburgh. Bath is a historic monument that visitors look at, whereas Budapest's baths are still mostly in everyday use (check the comparison).

Sources and How to Check Them

- **Buildings.** The baths themselves are the best source; many are open and keep original rooms (see Hungarian Architecture for the main buildings).
- **Museums.** The Aquincum Museum for the Roman period and the city's own museums for later periods (check the names and what is held).
- **Operators.** The baths' own websites give current rules, but they also sell tickets, so read them as promotion as well as information.
- **Medical sources.** Treat health claims with care and ask a doctor before relying on any (check).

A personal note

The author stays at the Danubius Gellért when visiting Budapest, so this course is partly written by a regular visitor, not a neutral observer. Chapter 5 looks at that bath in detail. Where a personal view enters, the course says so.

Check the details

The count of springs, the depths and temperatures, and the Roman dates are easy to misstate. Verify before quoting. Opening times, prices and rules change often and are not given in this course.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain in a few sentences why thermal springs rise along the Buda side of the Danube.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Describe the evidence that the Romans used the springs, and say what we do not know.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Pick a bath, spa or pool you know and say how health, habit and social life each apply to it.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Springs:** rise along faults at the edge of the Buda hills (check)
- **Romans:** Aquincum, baths with underfloor heating (check)
- **Timeline:** Roman, medieval, Ottoman, nineteenth and twentieth centuries
- **Three lenses:** health, habit, social life
- **Caution:** health claims are not medical advice

Thermal Baths & Budapest Spa Culture

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · The Ottoman Baths

The oldest bath buildings still in use in Budapest date from the Ottoman period, when Buda was under Turkish rule. Their domes, octagonal pools and shafts of light through small glass lenses give them a look found nowhere else in the city. This chapter describes the period, the main baths that survive, the layout of a hammam and how the baths were used. Names, dates and details are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

The Ottoman Period in Buda

The Ottoman Empire took Buda in 1541 and held it until 1686 (check the dates), a period of around a century and a half. The Turks found the hot springs and, as bathing was part of daily and religious life for them, built bath-houses (hammams) around them. Some were new; others adapted earlier buildings (check which). The baths served the garrison, officials and the town's population, and some were attached to a pasha or a mosque (check the details).

This was a period of war and of religious and political conflict. The course describes the buildings and their use, and does not take a side on the history around them.

The Baths That Survive

Rudas

The best-preserved Ottoman bath, below Gellért Hill by the Erzsébet Bridge, with an octagonal pool under a central dome (check the date of building and the later changes). It has been a working bath for centuries.

Király

A bath in Buda's Víziváros district, with Ottoman domes in its interior (check the history and who built it). It is smaller and quieter than the large complexes.

Veli Bej

Also called the Császár bath, part of the Lukács complex area, with an Ottoman core

Rác

A bath beside the Gellért area with an Ottoman origin, now part of the Gellért-hill

(check the name and the building). It was rebuilt in the twentieth century (check).

group (check the status and whether it is open).

Several other Ottoman baths were lost or turned to other uses, and some are ruins (check the examples). Only a few remain in use as baths, which makes each one an important survivor. See Hungarian Architecture for the broader story of the city's Ottoman buildings.

The Layout of a Hammam

An Ottoman bath followed a standard plan, based on movement through rooms of increasing heat:

- **The entrance hall.** Where bathers undressed and rested, sometimes with a fountain (check).
- **The warm room.** A transitional space, used to adjust to the heat.
- **The hot room.** The main room, domed and often marble-floored, with a heated central platform (görbe or göbektaşı in Turkish, check) on which bathers lay, sweated and were washed.
- **The pool.** In Buda, the thermal springs fed pools of warm water, which is a feature of the local type; a hammam elsewhere often had only basins (check the difference).
- **The dome.** Small round or star-shaped glass lenses in the roof let in light and kept the steam in.

A British comparison

The Victorian Turkish baths in Britain, such as those in Harrogate and Edinburgh, were modelled on the same idea, a sequence of hot rooms, though with a different style of building and a different set of customs (check the comparison).

How the Baths Were Used

For the Ottoman population the bath had religious and social roles: a place for ritual washing before prayer, for rest, for meeting, and for health (check each). Men and women used separate baths or separate times. The attendants washed and massaged bathers, a service that survives in

some form today. Local people in Buda also used the baths, both during the Ottoman period and after it.

- **After the Ottomans.** When Buda was retaken in 1686, the baths passed to new owners, and some were used by the military or by religious orders (check).
- **The long life.** Their continued use for centuries is the reason the buildings survive at all, since baths were rebuilt and adapted again and again.

Reading an old bath

A bath building that has lasted four centuries is layered. Ottoman domes sit under nineteenth-century additions and twentieth-century plumbing. When you visit, look for the oldest part, the dome and the central pool, and ask what is original and what has been rebuilt.

Check the details

Dates of building, names of Ottoman founders and the exact status of each bath are easy to misstate, and several baths have been renovated or closed. Verify before quoting or planning a visit.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Name two surviving Ottoman baths in Budapest and say what makes each distinctive.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Describe the sequence of rooms in a hammam and say what each is for.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain why the Ottoman baths survive when so many other buildings of the period do not.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Ottoman Buda:** 1541 to 1686 (check)
- **Survivors:** Rudas, Király, Veli Bej, Rác (check)
- **Layout:** entrance hall, warm room, hot room with central platform, pool
- **Dome:** glass lenses for light, steam kept in
- **Why they survive:** continuous use and repeated rebuilding

Thermal Baths & Budapest Spa Culture

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · The Nineteenth-Century Spa Boom

After the Ottoman centuries the baths of Buda continued in modest form. In the nineteenth century, as Budapest grew into a major city, they were rebuilt on a much larger scale. This chapter explains why: the rise of the water cure across Europe, the growth of a middle class that could pay for it, the new science of mineral waters, and a city government that saw baths as public investment. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged for checking. Nothing here is medical advice.

A Growing City

In 1873 the towns of Buda, Óbuda and Pest were united as Budapest (check the date), and in the following decades the city grew very fast, with new bridges, boulevards, public buildings and a population many times larger than before (check the figures). It became a second capital of Austria-Hungary, with the ambition to rival Vienna. Baths were part of this ambition: a city that wished to be thought modern and healthy built public baths and spa hotels.

The Water Cure

Across nineteenth-century Europe, "taking the waters" became fashionable. Towns such as Bath and Harrogate in Britain, Karlsbad (Karlovy Vary) and Baden-Baden on the continent, grew up around springs (check the examples). Doctors prescribed stays at spas for many ailments, and those who could afford it travelled for weeks at a time.

- **Bathing.** Immersion in warm mineral water, often at set times and temperatures on a doctor's advice.
- **Drinking.** Mineral water drunk in measured amounts at a pump room or fountain. Some Budapest waters were bottled and sold as medicinal drinks (check the examples, such as Hunyadi János, a bitter water).
- **Hydrotherapy.** A broader movement using water in various forms, including cold baths, wraps and showers, associated with figures such as Vincenz Priessnitz in Silesia and Sebastian Kneipp in Bavaria (check the details and what was claimed).

The Science and the Doctors

In the nineteenth century chemists began to analyse the springs and list their mineral contents, and doctors wrote guides recommending particular waters for particular conditions (check the Hungarian figures involved). This gave the baths a scientific authority, even when the claims were stronger than the evidence (see Chapter 8 for what modern research says). Hungarian medical writers also promoted the springs abroad.

A British comparison

Harrogate's Royal Baths and Pump Room, and the Victorian bath-houses in Edinburgh and Glasgow, belong to the same wave of faith in water treatment. In Britain the habit faded sooner as bathing at home became common, whereas in Budapest the public bath stayed a living habit (check the comparison).

The Big Bath Complexes

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the construction of the large baths that are now the city's best known (check each date):

Széchenyi

A vast complex in the City Park, fed by a deep artesian well, opened in the early twentieth century (see Chapter 4).

Gellért

A hotel-and-bath complex on the Danube in Art Nouveau style, opened just before the end of the First World War (see Chapter 5).

Lukács and others

Older baths rebuilt and enlarged, some with new medical departments and treatment rooms (see Chapter 6).

See Hungarian Architecture for the buildings as architecture. Here the point is the purpose: they combined bathing halls, treatment rooms, swimming pools and, often, a hotel, designed to be used by large numbers of people.

The Role of the City

The city council and the state played a large part, buying springs, commissioning buildings and later running the baths as public institutions (check the arrangements and the institution's name). Ownership has changed several times since (see Chapter 10 for the present position). The idea that the baths belong to the public as well as to those who run them is an old one and still shapes debate about prices and access.

Why it matters

The nineteenth-century boom set the pattern for today: large, grand, city-run baths with medical departments, open to ordinary residents as well as visitors. The Ottoman baths gave Budapest its springs and its domes, but this period gave it its scale.

Check the details

Dates of unification, opening years, names of doctors and chemists, and claims about cures are easy to misstate. Verify before quoting, and treat all cure claims as historical, not medical.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Give three reasons why the baths of Budapest were built on a larger scale in the nineteenth century.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Distinguish bathing, drinking and hydrotherapy as forms of the water cure.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare the fate of Victorian public baths in Britain with those in Budapest, and suggest one reason for the difference.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Budapest united:** 1873 (check)
- **The cure:** bathing, drinking, hydrotherapy
- **Science:** chemical analysis and medical guides (check)
- **Big complexes:** Széchenyi, Gellért, rebuilt Lukács (check dates)
- **City role:** buying springs, building and running the baths

Thermal Baths & Budapest Spa Culture

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · Széchenyi: The Great Bath of the Park

If one bath stands for Budapest, it is the Széchenyi, a yellow Neo-Baroque palace in the City Park with steaming outdoor pools in front of it. It is one of the largest bath complexes in Europe (check) and is on many visitors' lists. This chapter covers how it came to be, the well that supplies it, the building, the pools, and how it is used today. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged for checking. Nothing here is medical advice.

A Bath in Pest

Most of the springs of Budapest are on the Buda side of the Danube. Pest, the flat eastern half, had no natural hot spring close to the surface, so a bath in the City Park (Városliget) needed a deep well (see Chapter 1). The idea of a large bath there was raised in the later nineteenth century, as the park and the city developed, and the engineer Vilmos Zsigmondy is the name usually linked to the drilling (check the details).

- **The well.** Drilling began in the 1860s or 1870s and reached hot water at a depth of over a thousand metres (check the dates, the depth and the temperature). It took years, and the first well was followed by a second later (check).
- **The water.** It is hot, mineral-rich, and used both in the pools and for drinking cures (check the composition, see Chapter 8).
- **The name.** The bath is named after Count István Széchenyi, the nineteenth-century reformer, though the connection is a naming tribute (check).

The Building

The main building was designed by Győző Czigler, and after his death completed by Ede Dvorák and Ádám Kiss, opening in 1913 (check the architects and the year). It is in a Neo-Baroque style, with a central dome, ornate facades and a courtyard planned around outdoor pools. See Hungarian Architecture for the style and the architects. Later extensions in the twentieth century added more pools and treatment rooms (check).

The outdoor pools

The indoor baths

Three large pools in the courtyard, including a swimming pool and a warm leisure pool, open all year, steaming in winter (check the number and the temperatures).

A large set of indoor thermal pools of different temperatures, with steam rooms and saunas (check the number).

Treatment section

Medical departments offering massage, physiotherapy and other treatments by appointment (check what is available and the arrangement).

The Chess Players

A well-known image of Széchenyi is the group of men playing chess on floating boards in the warm outdoor pool. This is a local habit that tourists have discovered (check the history of the custom). It shows the bath as a social space as well as a place of treatment, one of the three lenses of Chapter 1.

A British comparison

There is no British equivalent of a huge steaming open-air thermal bath in a city park. The nearest are the Roman Baths and Thermae Bath Spa in Bath, and the old Victorian lidos. Széchenyi is better compared to a swimming lido with the heat and mineral water added (check the comparison).

How It Works Today

- **Visitors.** A mixture of tourists and local regulars, and large crowds at weekends and in summer (check).
- **Evenings.** The baths hold special party nights in some seasons, a development of the last few decades (see Chapter 9 and check the current practice).
- **Ownership.** The complex is in public hands and run by a city-owned company (check the current operator).

- **Rules.** Details of tickets, lockers, swimwear and caps are covered in Chapter 7. Opening times and prices change and are not given here.

What Széchenyi shows

Széchenyi is a good case study for the course's themes: a grand nineteenth-century public project, still used for health, habit and social life, and now a major tourist attraction. Each of those uses affects the others, for example in crowds, prices and the character of the place.

Check the details

Drilling dates and depths, architects, opening year, number of pools and the operator are easy to misstate. Verify before quoting, and check the current rules before visiting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why Széchenyi needed a deep well while the Buda baths did not.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Describe the layout of the complex and say what each section is for.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Choose one of the three lenses from Chapter 1 and describe how Széchenyi illustrates it.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Location:** City Park (Városliget), Pest
- **Water:** deep artesian well, Zsigmondy (check)
- **Building:** Neo-Baroque, opened 1913 (check)
- **Parts:** outdoor pools, indoor baths, treatment section
- **Habit:** chess players, party nights (check)

Thermal Baths & Budapest Spa Culture

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · Gellért: Art Nouveau on the Danube

Where Széchenyi is a Neo-Baroque palace in a park, the Gellért is an Art Nouveau (Secession) hotel and bath standing at the foot of Gellért Hill beside the Liberty Bridge. It is the most decorated of the city's baths, with mosaics, columns, stained glass and a ceiling-high wave pool hall. This chapter covers the springs, the building, its wartime damage and rebuilding, and its present life as part of a hotel. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged for checking. Nothing here is medical advice.

The Springs of Gellért Hill

The hill above the bath is named after Saint Gellért (Gerard), the eleventh-century bishop who, according to tradition, was killed there (check the legend). Springs rise at its foot, and bathing has been recorded there for centuries, including in the Ottoman period at the nearby Rác and Rudas baths (see Chapter 2 and check). Earlier bath buildings on the site were demolished to make way for the new complex.

The Building

The hotel-and-bath complex was designed by Ármin Hegedűs, Artúr Sebestyén and Izidor Sterk, and built in the early twentieth century, opening in 1918 (check the architects and the year). The date is notable: the building was completed in the last months of the First World War, and soon after, the country's borders and fortunes changed (check). It is in a late Art Nouveau style with Baroque touches. See Hungarian Architecture for the style and the other Secession buildings of the city.

The indoor thermal bath

A grand hall with columns, mosaics and a high glazed roof, with pools of different temperatures at either end (check the layout).

The swimming hall

An indoor swimming pool ringed by galleries and decoration, the best known room in the complex (check).

The wave pool

An outdoor pool that produces artificial waves at set times, a feature that dates from the early period (check the history and whether it runs).

The hotel

A grand hotel attached to the bath, with its own entrance and guests' access to the baths (check the arrangement).

Damage and Rebuilding

The complex was heavily damaged during the Second World War, especially in the siege of Budapest in 1944 and 1945 (check the extent). It was repaired and reopened in stages after the war, and later restored in several rounds, with details changing in each (check the dates). The result is a building that looks original but has layers of repair, a theme from Chapter 2.

A British comparison

Compare the Art Nouveau Gellért with the Victorian Turkish baths in Harrogate or the Art Deco lido at Saltdean (check the examples). Each reflects the style of its time, but the Gellért is unusual in being a working thermal bath inside an operating grand hotel.

The Danubius Era

The hotel and bath are now part of the Danubius group of hotels (check the ownership and the status of the baths, which have had separate owners or operators at different times). Hotel guests have traditionally had access to the baths, and day visitors can buy tickets. Operations, ownership and renovation plans have changed over the years, so current arrangements need checking.

A Personal Note

Staying at the Gellért

The author stays at the Danubius Gellért when visiting Budapest, so this is a regular guest's view, not a neutral one. What stands out to a guest is the setting, the sense of a

grand early twentieth-century building still in everyday use, and the access to the thermal baths from the hotel. Readers should expect different experiences, and should check the current state of the hotel and baths, which have been renovated more than once.

What the Gellért Shows

- **Health, habit and social life.** It combines all three of the course's lenses in one building, with a hotel guest's rest cure, a local's regular swim and a visitor's sightseeing.
- **Conservation.** Keeping a decorated early twentieth-century building working as a bath is expensive and slow, a pressure discussed in Chapter 10.
- **Style.** A reminder that a bath is also a work of architecture and decoration, which is why it appears in Hungarian Architecture too.

Check the details

Architects, opening year, wartime damage, the wave pool, the ownership arrangements and what is open at present are easy to misstate and change often. Verify before quoting or planning a visit.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the Gellért complex and say how its style differs from Széchenyi.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain what happened to the building in the twentieth century and what that means for how "original" it is.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Think of a hotel or spa you have visited and say how it combines health, habit and social life, as the Gellért does.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Location:** foot of Gellért Hill, beside Liberty Bridge
- **Style:** Art Nouveau (Secession), opened 1918 (check)
- **Rooms:** thermal hall, swimming hall, wave pool, hotel
- **History:** damaged in the Second World War, restored in stages (check)
- **Today:** Danubius hotel with baths (check the arrangement)

Thermal Baths & Budapest Spa Culture

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Other Baths: Lukács, Rudas, Király, Veli Bej

Széchenyi and Gellért are the famous names, but many visitors and most locals use the smaller baths. Each has a character of its own, shaped by its building, its neighbourhood and the people who go there. This chapter looks at four of them and at some of the habits that have grown up around the city's baths: women-only and men-only days, night bathing and the seasons. Names, dates and details are from general knowledge and flagged for checking. Nothing here is medical advice, and opening rules change often.

Lukács

The Lukács bath in Buda, near the Margit Bridge, has been a bath site for centuries, with Ottoman and earlier roots (check the history), and was enlarged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is known as a bath used by locals, with a medical section and a reputation as a place where artists, writers and intellectuals gathered in the twentieth century (check the claim). A courtyard wall displays plaques left by grateful bathers, a sign of its role as a place of treatment (check the details).

Rudas

Rudas is the best-preserved Ottoman bath (see Chapter 2), with its octagonal pool beneath a dome. Later parts were added, including a modern wellness section and a rooftop pool with a view of the Danube and the city (check the current features). Its pattern of use is distinctive and has changed over time:

- **Traditional days.** Historically it has had separate days or hours for men and women, a pattern kept in some form (check the current schedule).
- **Mixed and night sessions.** Mixed evenings and night bathing have been added in recent decades, with swimwear required in the mixed sessions (check).
- **Its reputation.** Rudas has had a long association with a certain social set, and some of its sessions have been popular with specific communities (check and avoid stereotyping).

Király

The Király bath in Víziváros is smaller and quieter, with Ottoman domes in its core (see Chapter 2). It is often described as a good bath for people who want to avoid the crowds (check). It has in recent years been restored and its opening arrangements have changed (check the status).

Veli Bej

The Veli Bej bath, near the Lukács and the Császár complex, has an Ottoman origin and was rebuilt in the twentieth century (check the name and the history). It is a small bath that has been reopened after closure (check the status). Names of baths in this area are often confused, since the Veli Bej, Császár and Lukács lie close together, so check the specific bath when planning (check).

Lukács

Locals' bath, medical section, artists' reputation, courtyard plaques.

Rudas

Ottoman octagonal pool, rooftop pool, men's and women's days, night sessions.

Király

Small and quiet, with Ottoman domes in the core.

Veli Bej

Ottoman origin, rebuilt, small, easily confused with neighbours.

Habits and Seasons

- **Regulars.** Many Budapest residents have a favourite bath, a favourite day and even a favourite spot. Retired residents often go early in the morning, a point from the "habit" lens of Chapter 1.
- **Single-sex and mixed sessions.** Rules differ from bath to bath and from day to day, and have changed over time. Chapter 7 covers what to check.
- **Winter.** Outdoor pools are popular in cold weather, and steam rises from the water on frosty days.
- **Night bathing.** Some baths offer evening and late sessions, a development of recent decades (see Chapter 9 for the party side).

A British comparison

The role of the Lukács and Rudas as neighbourhood baths is closer to the old Edinburgh and Glasgow public baths and the local pools of Scottish towns than to a tourist attraction. Single-sex days at a Budapest bath resemble the women's hours that many British Victorian baths once kept (check the comparison).

Choosing a bath

The famous baths suit a first visit and the quieter ones suit a second. If you want to see how Budapest actually bathes, choose a smaller bath on a weekday morning, and expect the rules, language and routines to be less explained for visitors.

Check the details

Which baths are open, their sessions, mixed and single-sex days, and who runs them change often, and the names of the smaller baths are easily confused. Verify before quoting or planning a visit.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose two of the four baths and say how they differ in character and use.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain why single-sex and mixed sessions at the same bath can create confusion, and how a visitor can avoid it.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Plan a first-time morning visit to one of the smaller baths, listing what you would check beforehand.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Lukács:** locals' bath with a medical section (check)
- **Rudas:** Ottoman pool, rooftop pool, separate and mixed sessions (check)
- **Király:** small and quiet, Ottoman domes
- **Veli Bej:** small, rebuilt, easily confused with neighbours
- **Habit:** regulars, early mornings, winter bathing, night sessions

Thermal Baths & Budapest Spa Culture

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Bathing Etiquette and the Practicalities

The practical side of a visit puts many people off: how the ticket works, where to change, what to wear, what the attendant does, and what not to do. This chapter sets out the usual arrangements and the habits of regular bathers. Rules differ from bath to bath, change over time, and are not given here as fact for any one bath on any one day, so each point is flagged for checking. Prices and opening times are deliberately left out. Nothing here is medical advice.

Tickets, Lockers and Cabins

- **Tickets.** Entry is usually by ticket for a set period, with different prices for different parts of a complex, weekdays or weekends, and extras such as massage. Many baths sell tickets online as well as at the door (check each bath).
- **Wristband.** A common system gives you an electronic wristband or card that opens a locker or cabin and records extra purchases, which you pay for on leaving (check, and keep the band safe, since losing it can bring a charge).
- **Lockers or cabins.** A cabin is a small private changing room that you lock; a locker is a shared changing area. Which you get depends on the ticket and the bath (check).
- **Valuables.** Leave unnecessary valuables at the hotel, and use the locker or safe provided (check what is available).

What to Wear and Bring

Swimwear

Required in most pools, particularly in mixed sessions. Some traditional single-sex sessions or sections allow or expect a cloth apron or no swimwear (check each bath and each session).

Swimming cap

Required in lap pools and swimming sections, though not usually in thermal pools (check). Caps can be bought or hired at some baths.

Slippers

Towel

Useful for wet floors and often expected; some baths hire or sell them (check).

Bring your own or hire one; some tickets include one (check).

Nudity and Modesty

Practice differs. In some traditional sections, usually single-sex, nudity or a cloth apron is normal, and in the mixed sections swimwear is expected (check each bath, session by session). The simplest rule is to follow what the attendant and other bathers do, and to ask if unsure. Chapter 6 covered how single-sex and mixed sessions can vary. Respect for others' privacy matters: no photographs in changing areas or pools where people may be undressed.

Attendants and Tipping

- **Attendants.** Staff in the changing areas help with cabins, towels and directions, and in the massage section they carry out treatments (check).
- **Massage.** Often booked in advance or on arrival, with a fee set at the desk (check the arrangement).
- **Tipping.** A small tip is customary for personal service such as massage or help from an attendant. The amount is a matter of custom, not a rule (check current practice).

Hygiene, Safety and Manners

- **Shower first.** Rinse before entering the pools, as in any public pool.
- **Heat.** Thermal water can be very hot. Enter slowly, limit your time in the hottest pools, drink water, and leave if you feel dizzy (check any posted advice).
- **Health.** People with heart conditions, high blood pressure, pregnancy or other medical issues should ask a doctor first, since thermal bathing can be a strain (this is general caution and not medical advice).
- **Alcohol.** Avoid drinking before or during bathing, since it raises the risks.
- **Behaviour.** Keep voices low in the quieter baths, do not hog the seats, and keep to the swim lanes in lap pools.

A British comparison

Much of this will feel familiar from British leisure centres and Turkish baths: showering first, caps in lap lanes, and keeping quiet in the steam room. What differs is the heat of the water and the variety of rules from bath to bath, which is why checking each one matters (check the comparison).

A First-Visit Checklist

1. Choose the bath and check it is open that day (Chapter 6).
2. Check the session: mixed, men's or women's, and the swimwear rule.
3. Bring swimwear, a towel, slippers and a cap if needed, or check if they can be hired.
4. Bring a card or cash as the bath requires, and keep valuables to a minimum.
5. Keep your wristband or key safe.
6. Shower, enter slowly, limit time in hot water, drink water.
7. Ask staff if you are unsure, and follow other bathers' lead.

Check the details

Everything here varies by bath, session and date. Always check the bath's own current rules, and take medical advice if you have any condition.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain how a wristband system usually works, and one risk to watch for.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

List four safety points for thermal bathing and say why each matters.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Write your own packing list and pre-visit checks for a first visit to a Budapest bath.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Entry:** ticket and wristband for locker or cabin (check)
- **Bring:** swimwear, towel, slippers, cap if needed
- **Rules:** differ by bath and session; ask if unsure
- **Tipping:** small, for personal service (check)
- **Safety:** shower, enter slowly, limit time, drink water, no alcohol

Thermal Baths & Budapest Spa Culture

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · The Science and the Cure

The baths of Budapest have always been sold partly as medicine. This chapter asks what is actually in the water, what it has traditionally been used for, how the prescription tradition works in Hungary, and where the evidence stands. It is a historical and general account, not medical advice: anyone with a health condition should ask a doctor before relying on any claim here. Figures, names and findings are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

What Is in the Water

Thermal water is rainwater that has been heated deep underground and has dissolved minerals from the rock it passed through. Each spring differs, but the Budapest waters are generally described as follows (check the analysis of each spring):

Calcium and magnesium

Typically the main dissolved minerals, from the limestone and dolomite of the Buda hills (check).

Hydrogen carbonate

Gives the water its character as a hydrogen carbonate water, common in the Buda springs (check).

Sulphate and chloride

Present in some springs, and in higher amounts in others (check).

Other components

Some springs carry traces of fluoride, sulphur compounds or radon, a natural radioactive gas (check which springs, and the levels).

The water's temperature varies from lukewarm to very hot. A bath will often be a mixture of springs, cooled or heated to the required pool temperature (check).

Conditions Traditionally Treated

The baths have traditionally been used for conditions affecting joints, muscles and movement, and for general relaxation and recovery (check the list):

- **Joint and muscle complaints.** Arthritis, back pain and stiffness, with warm water used to ease movement (check).
- **Rehabilitation.** Gentle exercise in warm water after injury or surgery, which is a well-established use of any warm pool (check).
- **Circulation and skin.** Claims are made for these, with a weaker base of evidence (check).
- **Drinking cures.** Some waters were taken by mouth for digestive complaints (see Chapter 3, and check what is still done).

The Prescription Tradition

In Hungary, spa treatments have long been part of the health system, and doctors may prescribe a course of bath-based treatment, sometimes with partial public funding (check how the system works now, who qualifies and what is covered). Hospitals and clinics attached to the baths provide treatments such as medicinal baths, massage and physiotherapy by appointment. Treatments are given by trained staff, and are distinct from simply visiting the baths for pleasure (check). This is one reason the baths are seen as institutions of public health as well as leisure.

A British comparison

The NHS does not prescribe spa visits as a normal practice, though hydrotherapy pools in hospitals are used for rehabilitation. The Hungarian system treats the bath as a standard part of care in a way that has largely disappeared in Britain (check the comparison and the current Hungarian arrangements).

What Research Says

Reviews of the evidence on balneotherapy (treatment by bathing in mineral waters) generally report some short-term benefit for pain and function in conditions such as osteoarthritis and chronic low back pain, but the studies are often small and hard to blind, and it is difficult to separate the effect of the minerals from the effect of heat, buoyancy, rest and relaxation (check the current reviews and treat this summary with caution).

- **Reasonably plausible.** Warm water eases pain and stiffness and makes exercise easier, a general effect of heat and buoyancy.

- **Less clear.** That the specific minerals in the water have effects beyond this, whether through the skin or by drinking.
- **Weak or unsupported.** Broad claims that the waters cure a wide list of diseases, or detoxify the body, as sometimes found in promotional material.

Sorting evidence from belief

A useful test for any claim about the waters: is it about a specific condition, is there a study behind it, and does it distinguish the minerals from the warmth and rest? Where a claim fails that test, treat it as tradition or marketing. That does not make bathing worthless, since relaxation and exercise in warm water are worthwhile on their own.

Check the details

Mineral analyses, radon levels, the state of the prescription system and the research findings change and are easy to misstate. Verify against current sources, and take medical advice before using any bath for treatment.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe in a few sentences how thermal water acquires its minerals and why springs differ.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain how the Hungarian prescription tradition differs from visiting a bath for pleasure.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Take a claim from a spa advertisement and test it with the three questions from the "Sorting evidence from belief" box.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Water:** calcium, magnesium, hydrogen carbonate; some sulphate, chloride, radon (check)
- **Traditional uses:** joints, muscles, rehabilitation
- **Prescription:** doctors may prescribe treatment (check)
- **Evidence:** some short-term benefit, minerals unclear
- **Test:** condition, study, minerals versus warmth

Thermal Baths & Budapest Spa Culture

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Spa Culture: Chess, Parties and Everyday Life

The baths are also a place where people meet. This chapter looks at the social life of the baths: the chess players, the night-time party baths, the appearances of baths in books and films, the other spa towns of Hungary, and comparisons with the British tradition. It is the "social life" lens of Chapter 1 at full length. Names, dates and details are from general knowledge and flagged for checking. Nothing here is medical advice.

The Chess Players

The men playing chess on floating boards in the warm outdoor pool at Széchenyi (Chapter 4) are among the best-known images of the city. Chess has a strong place in Hungarian culture (check the history of chess in Hungary), and the habit of playing in the water is a local one, now watched by visitors. It shows several things at once: regulars with their own corner of the pool, a game that suits slow, relaxed time, and a custom that has become an attraction, which brings both interest and intrusion (check how regulars feel about visitors).

The Party Baths

In the last few decades some baths have held evening events with music, lighting and drinks in the pools, often known as "sparties" (check the origin of the word and how widely it is used). They draw young visitors and tourists and are a significant source of income (check). They are also controversial: some residents and regular bathers see them as a departure from the bath's character, while operators and visitors see them as a way to support the buildings and make them lively (check the debate). The course describes both views and takes no side. See Chapter 10 for the pressures on the baths.

Regulars' view

The bath is a quiet daily habit, and parties and crowds change its atmosphere (check how widely this is felt).

Operators' view

Events bring income that supports upkeep of large old buildings (check the finances).

Visitors' view

A distinctive night out in an unusual setting, though some find it crowded or commercial.

Baths in Literature and Film

Baths appear in Hungarian writing and in films shot in the city, from early twentieth-century novels to international productions that use the Gellért and Széchenyi as settings (check the examples, since I am not sure of specific titles). Their appearance in stories shows how deeply they sit in the city's image: a place of leisure, intrigue, rest and class mixing. See Hungarian Literature and Hungarian Film & Television for the wider context.

Other Spa Towns

Budapest is not the only Hungarian place of thermal bathing. Others include (check each):

- **Hévíz.** A town beside a large thermal lake, which is often said to be among the largest of its kind in Europe, used for bathing all year (check).
- **Hajdúszoboszló.** A spa town in the east with a large bathing complex, popular with Hungarian families (check).
- **Eger.** A baroque town in the north with thermal baths and a Turkish bath dating from the Ottoman period (check; see Chapter 2).
- **Others.** Many towns have a thermal bath, often built because a borehole for oil or gas found hot water instead (check this common story).

These places show that bathing is a national habit, not a Budapest speciality. The Hungarian holiday of a week at a spa is a long-standing custom (check).

Comparisons: Scotland and Bath

A British comparison

Bath, in England, is built around a hot spring and keeps its Roman bath as a museum, with a modern spa nearby that lets visitors bathe in thermal water. The comparison shows how

a spa town can turn into a heritage site. In Scotland the Victorian baths and the later leisure centres kept bathing as a public service, but the habit of a mineral bath as a regular social activity is much weaker. Edinburgh's Portobello and Glasgow's Victoria Baths show survivors of the older tradition (check the examples and the status). The Budapest baths remain both heritage and daily life.

The social life of a bath

A bath's social role is easy to miss on a short visit. Look for who comes at what time, who talks to whom, what the staff know about the regulars, and how the atmosphere changes between morning, afternoon and night. These are the clues to whether it is a heritage site, a tourist attraction or a neighbourhood institution, and it is often all three.

Check the details

The history of the chess custom, the party baths and their economics, the literary and film examples, and the facts about other spa towns are easy to misstate. Verify before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the arguments for and against party baths, without taking a side.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Choose one other Hungarian spa town and say how it differs from Budapest.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Compare Bath with Budapest in terms of heritage and daily use.

Quick Reference

- **Chess:** floating boards at Széchenyi, now an attraction
- **Party baths:** evening events, debated by regulars and operators (check)
- **Other towns:** Hévíz, Hajdúszoboszló, Eger (check)
- **Bath, England:** heritage site with a modern spa
- **Social life:** who comes when, and why

Thermal Baths & Budapest Spa Culture

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · A Day in the Waters

This capstone draws the course together in a planned day, a way to choose between the baths, and a look at the pressures on them. The earlier chapters supplied the pieces: the springs, the Ottoman and nineteenth-century buildings, the famous and quieter baths, the etiquette, the science and the social life. Here they are put into practice. Everything is a suggestion to be checked against current opening rules, prices and conditions, and nothing is medical advice.

Choosing by Mood and Budget

For the grand and photogenic

Széchenyi for the open-air pools and the building (Chapter 4), or the Gellért for the Art Nouveau interiors (Chapter 5). Expect crowds.

For history

Rudas or Király for the Ottoman domes (Chapters 2 and 6).

For a local feel

Lukács or one of the smaller baths on a weekday morning (Chapter 6).

For a night out

An evening session or party bath, if you want it (Chapter 9, check).

Budget shapes the choice. Prices vary by bath, day and time, with weekends dearer than weekdays and cabins dearer than lockers (check). Combining a cheaper local bath in the morning with one famous bath later can be better value than two famous ones.

A Day in the Waters

A sample day, built from the earlier chapters (check all times and rules):

1. **Morning: a quiet local bath.** Go early on a weekday to a smaller bath such as Lukács or Király. Follow the first-visit checklist of Chapter 7. Take it gently, since the water is hot.
2. **Midday: rest and lunch.** Drink water and eat lightly, and rest before bathing again.

3. **Afternoon: a heritage visit.** The Ottoman domes of Rudas, or a look at Aquincum and its Roman baths (Chapter 1, check what is open).
4. **Evening: a famous bath.** Széchenyi or the Gellért, when day crowds thin, with steam rising in the cooler air (check the evening hours).
5. **Reflect.** Which of the three lenses, health, habit or social life, did each stop show most?

Do not try to do too much. Bathing is tiring, and several hours in hot water can be too much for some people. Spread it out, and stop when you feel unwell (Chapter 7, and ask a doctor first if you have any condition).

Pressures on the Baths

The baths face real pressures, which are debated and which the course describes without taking a side (check each):

- **Tourism.** Visitors bring income and crowds. Some locals feel priced out or crowded out of baths they have used for years (check how prices differ for residents, if at all).
- **Upkeep.** Old buildings, such as the Ottoman and Art Nouveau baths, are expensive to maintain and repair, and renovations can close a bath for long periods (check which are closed).
- **Water.** Springs depend on groundwater and on how much is drawn from it, and bath operators and city planners have to manage supply and temperature (check the position and any concerns).
- **Ownership and running.** Public, private and hotel-run arrangements differ between baths, and have changed over time (check the current ones; see Chapters 3 and 5).
- **Authenticity.** How to keep a place as a living neighbourhood bath when it is also a tourist attraction (Chapters 6 and 9).

A British comparison

Many British heritage sites face the same pressure between visitors and local use, from the Roman Baths at Bath to Edinburgh's Old Town. The question of who a place is for, and who pays for it, has no single answer in either country (check the comparison).

The thread through the course

Budapest's baths have survived for centuries by being useful: as places of healing, of habit and of company. The Romans, the Ottomans and the nineteenth-century city each added a layer and kept the springs in use. Their future depends on keeping that usefulness for residents while welcoming visitors, which is a balance and not a puzzle with one answer.

Check the details

Opening hours, prices, closures, sessions and ownership change often. Check each bath's current information before planning, and take medical advice if you have any health condition.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Plan a day in the waters for a particular kind of visitor (a history lover, a family, a first-time visitor on a budget), and justify each stop with a chapter.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Describe two pressures on the baths and give the strongest argument on each side of one of them.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

In a short paragraph, explain how the three lenses of Chapter 1 (health, habit, social life) have appeared in the course, with one example each.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Choose by:** mood (grand, historic, local, night) and budget
- **Day plan:** quiet local bath, rest, heritage stop, famous bath at evening
- **Pressures:** tourism, upkeep, water, ownership, authenticity
- **Lenses:** health, habit, social life
- **Caution:** check current rules; not medical advice