

Hungary for a break

There's nothing quite like the sense of smug self-satisfaction you feel when everyone raves about the newest, hippest holiday destination – and you stayed there first! Combine a cultural break in beautiful Hungary, with a relaxing spa-style hotel, and you have the unashamedly non-touristy Sostofurdo resort near Nyiregyhaza, Eastern Hungary...

Anyone wanting the luxury of a stay in a spa with a difference, in an area of natural beauty, and oasis of calm, would appreciate Sostofurdo. The area is practically untouched by tourism, which quickly becomes obvious following the quizzical looks you get when you arrogantly assume that everyone speaks English and try to ask for a cafe latte and Danish outside of the hotel.

Set in an outstandingly beautiful region, and surrounded by parks, lakes and stunning scenery, the Sostofurdo (salt water lake) development has recently been completely overhauled. The original Furdohaz or 'bath house' - which now forms a modern resort hotel - dates back over 200 years, to a time when the average Hungarian had no bath at home. Once a week, people would go for their weekly dip, sharing bath water and village gossip with each other. The mineral-rich thermal pool was only annexed to the main building in the 1950s.

Legacy of communism

During the time that Hungary was under communist rule, the buildings at Sostofurdo were sadly allowed to fall into disrepair, and it was only after the changes in 1990 that the squatters were evicted and the local community demanded action to redevelop the area. The previous owner of the resort spent nothing on its upkeep, so the task ahead of the Sosto Development Corporation was onerous to say the least. The finished result caters to the demands of modern Hungary, and has been designed to attract more cosmopolitan interest through links with UK travel agents 'Travellers Choice' in Oxfordshire.

The resort is situated in the Great Plain area of Hungary, which borders Romania and the Ukraine in the east. A few hours drive from Ferihegy Airport, the main trunk road takes you through the towns of Szeged and Debrecen, and across the river Tisza.

The resort itself is beautiful - the lakes, as we found out, are the favoured setting for wedding photos. It was really quite amusing watching the constant procession of brides through the parklands, at one point I counted four couples lining up for their turn! One of the local hotels carries out the ceremonies, and as we found out later, also holds raucous wedding parties. It was all great fun – the Abba song 'Money Money Money' sung in Hungarian must be heard to be believed...

The Furdohaz

The Furdohaz hotel is modern and clean, with facilities that include massage, heat and water therapies, and a small gym. There's the relaxing thermal pool, a compact Jacuzzi and a sauna. The pool feels just like a therapeutic bath, smells and tastes slightly salty, and as another bonus, it makes your skin feel like velvet. Use of the pool, Jacuzzi and sauna is free of charge to hotel guests. Massage is extra, but at a price of around £3, it won't break the bank. There are six consulting rooms, initially earmarked for private medical consultations, but now intended for beauty treatments.

Sostofurdo

A short walk from the hotel takes you to a Village Museum, showcasing architecture from five different ethnographic regions within the county, complete with Roma dwellings – in keeping with the local distaste of Roma culture, these are set firmly at the end of the village. In summertime the village holds craft demonstrations and really comes to life with stage performances, traditional dancing and other activities. There's also an open-air game park close to the hotels, shared by native wildlife – deer, boar and bird life with more exotic animals also roaming around such as giraffes, lions and tigers.

The local Irish pub is an absolute gem, although it may well be the least Irish pub I've ever visited. One of the menu items was "brains and brawn as us quests is like" which for some reason I was never tempted to try. If you don't fancy the Irish pub, there's a restaurant within the nearby Swiss Cottage hotel, and several more eating places dotted along the road back to Nyiregyhaza.

Staple diet

Something about Hungary that's worth mentioning is that most Hungarians just don't 'get' vegetarianism or healthy eating, as we know it in the UK. The resort is introducing veggie and 'lite' options to cater for spa visitors from abroad, but staff hadn't considered it until recently. The menus are predominantly meat-based, with veggies or salad as a side order – or for dedicated omnivores there's fried cheese or omelettes available. It's fair to say that the diet is very meat heavy although the desserts are delicious and Hungarian espresso coffee is to die for. They haven't quite got the hang of tea yet, but give it time.

A visit to nearby Tokaj to check out the wine cellars is an absolute must. The town is quaint and the vineyards are set on a volcanic hill, overlooking Lake Tisza, where the scenery from the hillside is stunning. The tour involves a good look around the cellars, a wine tasting session, and a chance to buy some genuine Tokaj wines, I recommend the Furmint and the Muscat especially. I came back through customs with a few bottles stashed about my person.

Hungarian people are sociable, hospitable and eager to please, especially if they think it's going to make you visit their country. Hungary is a relatively a poor economy with an average wage of just £120 per month, which is reflected in prices – the half hour massage cost me under £5, a full manicure and pedicure (in the smallest salon I have ever seen) was the princely sum of £4.50, and a meal with drinks can be had for £5 to £6.

The first planned package trip to Furdohaz is likely to be in December 2002 to coincide with the Christmas markets and celebrations. Hordes of jovial Father Christmases parade through the highly decorated streets of Nyiregyhaza on 6th December doling out sweets and chocolate to excited local children, marking the start of the 2-3 week long Christmas market season where eager merchants from across Hungary descend to undercut each other on everything from traditional leather goods to CDs, toys and authentic Christmas decorations. The place turns into a magical fairyland, combined with snow and the luxury of spa treatments and that gorgeous thermal pool on return to the hotel – it promises to be a wonderful pre-Christmas shopping tour and stress antidote!!