On the Banks of the Danube

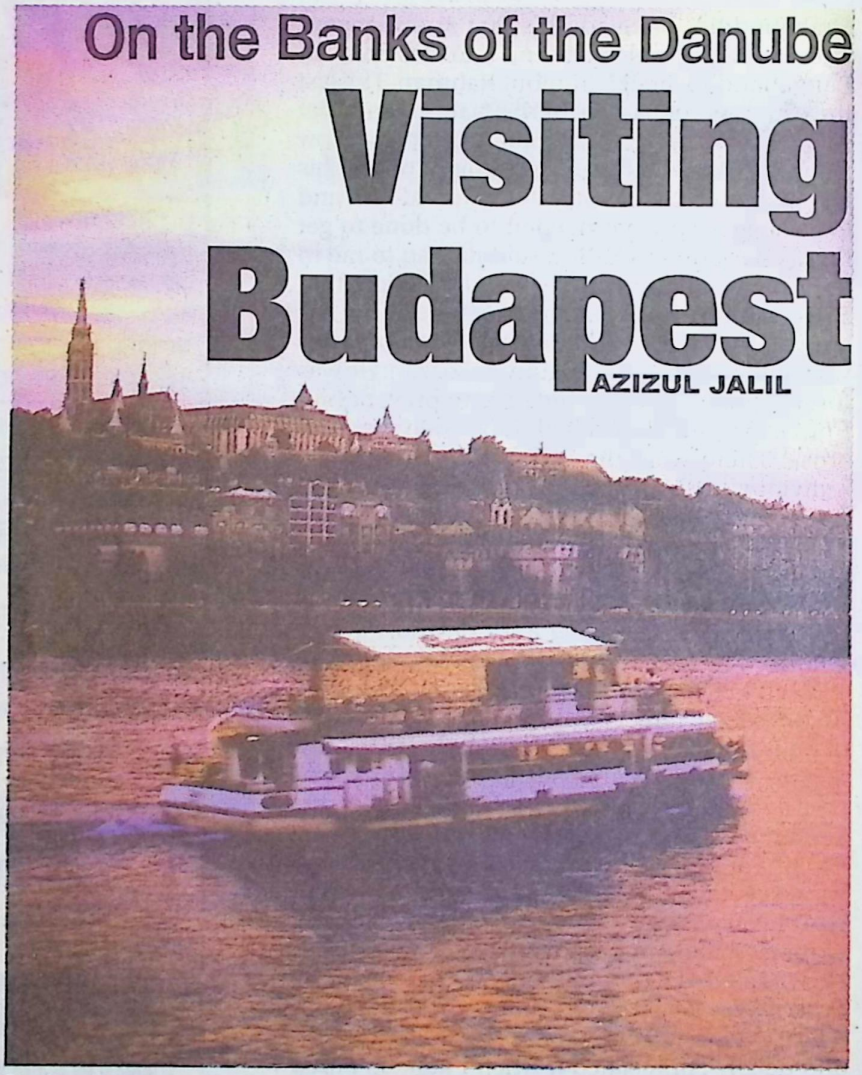
Visiting Budapest

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"Before my eyes the Danube follows its eternal course and the gleam of the evening sun is caught by its waves."

Gustav Mahler (1880-1911)
Austrian composer

Of the cities we visited during our tour of Eastern Europe with our friends, in the spring of this year -Berlin, Budapest, Vienna and Prague, we especially liked Budapest. While all these cities have long and interesting history and old-worldly charm, Budapest had special attractions, which is difficult to explain. It is a captivating city with fascinating architecture in both its old and new buildings, fine people, and arts, crafts and music and of course the Danube river, uniting or separating depending on your outlook, the twin cities of Buda and Pest. Here history has always been a series of catastrophes but due to the indomitable spirit of its people, it has been able to recover every time in a forceful manner and retain its originality. The city was practically destroyed during the Second World War but today it is fully rebuilt in its unique tradition, form and beauty



The Royal Palace on the Danube

Johann Strauss, king of waltz, wrote the music "Blue Danube" about one-hundred and fifty years ago. During my first visit to Vienna thirty years ago, I went naively to the Danube River to see how blue it was. Alas, I saw a river without any shade of blue in the water. This time, when I revisited the river in Budapest and Vienna it was still the same- minus the blue that Strauss had written about. Some people in Budapest jokingly say that Strauss, who loved wine, was heavily under its influence when he attributed the colour to the waters of the Danube. But it remains a beautiful river, witness to a lot of romance, tragedy and history on its shores. It is the second longest river in Europe.

The Danube passes through many great cities including Belgrade and Vienna. It also passes through Budapest, the capital of Hungary. On one side is the city of Buda, which is one third of Budapest and on the other side is the city of Pest, which is two-third. These two became one city in 1872. Right on the river in Buda situated on a rugged hill is one of the biggest and most impressive royal palaces in Europe. At night, the palace, the churches, other public buildings and many beautiful bridges across the Danube, including the Chain Bridge are illuminated. At the top of the hill, from the Fishermen's Bastion, one can get a panoramic view of the surroundings and of the Danube delicately curbing between Buda and Pest. According to legend, at times of imminent external aggression calls would go out to fishermen who would come to the fortified Bastion to watch out for the enemy and defend the city. We took an enjoyable lunch cruise on the river and saw the magnificent Parliament and many other fine old buildings on the riverbank.

While the Danube, originally called Duna or "the great river", brings many benefits for agriculture, communication and trade, it also often brings deadly misery in the form of high floods. The Hungarians are stoical people and they clean up and reclaim their magnificent buildings and palaces of extraordinary architecture and squares from the ravages of the river. They have similarly, with courage and fortitude, rebuilt their proud national monuments like the beautifully decorated neo-gothic Parliament