



1.

Enchanting landscape

The famous nineteenth-century Hungarian writer Mór Jókai wrote: "The Balaton region is a charming bride awaiting a groom, displaying new charms at every turn: the longer one views her, the prettier she seems, and laugh if you will, but I say the entire landscape is smiling." The Earth has worked for some twenty thousand years to give the landscape its character. Toward the end of the Ice Age countless earthquakes broke the sedimentary surface into a number of basins, and a system of numerous small lakes and fens gradually formed from the rainwater accumulating in the basins. Wind, rain and ice persistently wore down the walls separating the basins, ultimately resulting in the single Lake Balaton approximately five to seven thousand years ago. The former level and condition of the earth's surface is attested by fourteen extinct volcanoes on the northern bank: the basalt lava flow has preserved the conditions of that time. The edges of some of the oblong and conical mountains are decorated by enormous "basalt organ pipes." The four-kilometre Tavas Cavern, in which boating is a special experience, is a geological rarity near the town of Tapolca.



2.

Silky water

The Balaton is the largest freshwater lake in Central Europe. The pleasant warmth of the water soothes both body and spirit. It is not transparent like sea water, as the lake is shallow. The average depth is a mere three to four metres. Consequently, the water warms quickly to 20 to 22 degrees, and occasionally reaches even 28 degrees. The northern shore is deeper; the centres for water sports are here. The southern shore is favoured by families with children. Even the smallest children can play on the sandy, grassy beaches and in the shallow water. Still, the Balaton can sometimes be dangerous; an arrangement of warning lamps alert the entire lakefront of sudden storms. On such occasions you should leave the water, but don't go too far: viewed from a safe place, a Balaton storm provides a great experience. The water is perhaps at its prettiest at such times, when foaming white horses top the angry green waves.



3.

Summer, sun, fun - Siófok

The shallow southern shore is not only for families with small children. Lake Balaton is associated with summer, a place for the young, for unfettered fun and for meeting people. One of the centres of the region, Siófok, offers a colourful, rich variety of activities for all generations. Young people can dance and have fun at live concerts and discos, but lovers of light opera have also come to the right place, as it was the birthplace of Imre Kálmán, composer of The Csárdás Queen. A two-month light opera festival is held every summer in memory of the composer.



4.

Active recreation and sport

The Balaton tempts its visitors not only to bathe, but also to swim. Of the numerous cross-lake competitions, the swim across the Balaton between Révfülp and Balatonboglár has grown to become one of Europe's largest amateur swimming events. Sailing and windsurfing is permitted anywhere, and wake-boarding is possible at a number of points on the lake. Although motorboats are not allowed, there is machinery at Balatonfüred and Siófok making water-skiing possible. For those interested in sport, the sports centre at Balatonfűzfő is equipped with a swimming pool, tennis court, basketball court, soccer field, shuffleboard and a year-round bob track. Tennis and horse riding facilities are available at virtually every village or town, and you can ride round the lake on a specially built cycle path. Those preferring less active sports will also find something to their liking: fishing is possible over the entire lake - it is a pleasant experience to await a catch whether on the shore and in a boat, but even if sometimes nothing is caught, the landscape, natural beauty and tranquillity will compensate for everything.



5.

Curative waters

In the 19th century it was rumoured that the Balaton consisted entirely of healing waters. Although this claim was not true, it certainly had a basis in the fact that the prosperity of the spa culture of the region is attributable to the mineral water springs around Balatonfüred and the sulphuric thermal waters, at a temperature of 38°C, of the former volcanic crater near Hévíz. This lake, covered with India red waterlilies, is the world's second-largest thermal lake, with a depth of 36 metres at the crater. The curative water and mud from the lake is excellent for the treatment of motor ailments. The lake has been used for therapeutic bathing since 1756. Those in search of healing can also visit the baths of Zalakaros, Buzsák and Kehidakustány. For 300 years the cardiology hospital in Balatonfűred has been treating heart patients with the therapeutic effect of the mineral springs. The waters from the springs are recommended as a drinking cure for diabetes and digestive disorders.



6.

Keszthely - the cultural capital of the Balaton

Keszthely is the largest and oldest settlement on the Balaton shore is, and was already an important commercial centre in Roman times. The 14th-century Gothic parish church is a notable historical landmark in the town, and the nation's third-largest palace, the Festetics Palace, is also to be found here, with its 101 rooms, ornate façade, baroque towers, and the aristocratic, 86,000-volume Helikon Library of rare books. In 1797 György Festetics, the owner of the palace at that time, founded Europe's first agricultural college, the Georgikon. Everything worth knowing about the Balaton - its formation, flora and fauna, swimming and boating history, and 7000 years of archaeological and ethnographic mementos - can be found collected at the Balaton Museum. The city lido is the only island swimming pool on the Balaton.



7.

Treasure peninsula - Tihany

Of the Benedictine Abbey founded in Tihany in 1055, the only remains today are the crypt housing the tomb of King Andrew I - one of the most valued memorials of Hungarian architecture - and the founding charter of the abbey, the earliest surviving document in the Hungarian language. The 18th-century baroque church erected over the crypt is the venue of organ concerts every summer. Since 1952 official protection has been enjoyed by the Tihany Region Natural Landmarks, the wind-carved basalt cliffs, the hermitage dug into the volcanic stone, the cloisters of the 11th-century Basilite monks, and the almond trees and lavender fields of Csúcs Hill. The peninsula has more than a hundred geyser cones, the loveliest of which, "Aranyház" [literally, 'Golden House'], offers an unforgettable view of the Belső ['inner'] Lake, a favourite of fisherman, and the Külső ['Outer'] Lake, nesting place for tens of thousands of birds...



8.

Wines and wine regions

To get a complete picture one should also taste the flavours of the Balaton: the pike-perch, the tastiest fish in the Balaton and fish soup made from a variety of fish. Thanks to the large amount of sunshine and the volcanic soil, many outstanding, fragrant wines are produced in this region, predominantly dry white wines. Badacsony kéknellyű, szürkebarát ['greyfriar'] and olaszrizling go marvellously with the fish dishes. Five of Hungary's 22 wine regions are located around the Balaton. In Badacsony, the western basin of the lake, the trans-Balaton wine region and the South Balaton wine region, signs mark the wine trail connecting various cellars, making it easy for visitors to compare the various vineyards and vintages. And of course to dine and drink at an inn on a starry summer evening to the accompaniment of Gypsy music - these are the moments that are always pleasant to remember.



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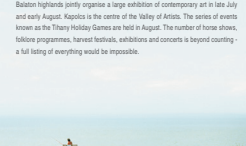
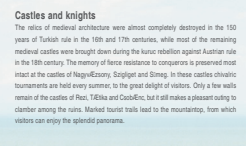
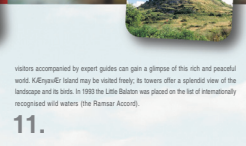
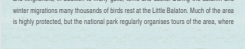
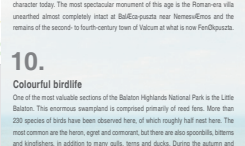
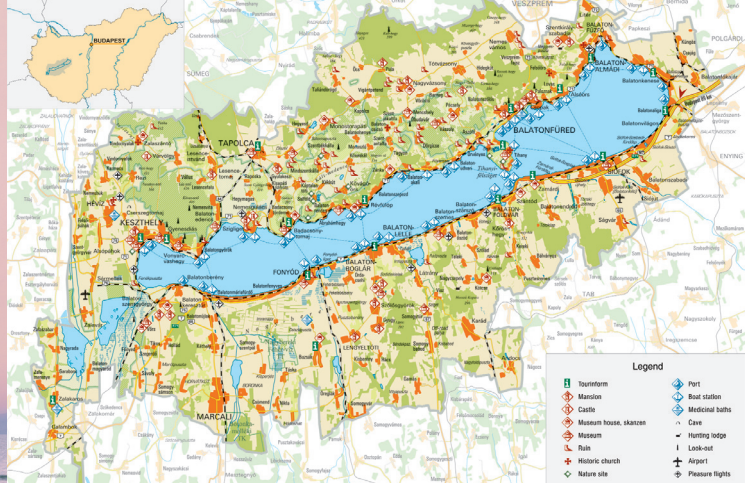
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9.

Remnants of the distant past

During their wanderings the original Hungarians, or Magyars, came to the Balaton region around 900 AD, but the area had been inhabited since the end of the Neolithic era. Traces of this are preserved in the prehistoric cave paintings at Lovas and the L'Endor Hill excavation at Ségvár. The Iron Age earthworks at Tihany and Balatonboglár, as well as numerous burial mounds and weapons of Celtic origin, are relics of these warlike tribes. The Romans occupied the Balaton region in the first century AD. It was they who introduced the vineyards which still give the landscape its defining character today. The most spectacular monument of this age is the Roman-era villa unearthed almost completely intact at BalEco-pusztá near NemesvEmos and the remains of the second- to fourth-century town of Valcun at what is now FEnEkipusztá.

10.

Colourful birdlife

One of the most valuable sections of the Balaton Highlands National Park is the Little Balaton. This enormous swampland is comprised primarily of reed fens. More than 230 species of birds have been observed here, of which roughly half nest here. The most common are the heron, egret and cormorant, but there are also spoonbills, bitterns and kingfishers, in addition to many gulls, terns and ducks. During the autumn and winter migrations many thousands of birds rest at the Little Balaton. Much of the area is highly protected, but the national park regularly organises tours of the area, where

visitors accompanied by expert guides can gain a glimpse of this rich and peaceful world. K/EnyauE Island may be visited freely; its towers offer a splendid view of the landscape and its birds. In 1993 the Little Balaton was placed on the list of internationally recognised wild waters (the Ramsar Accord).

11.

Castles and knights

The relics of medieval architecture were almost completely destroyed in the 150 years of Turkish rule in the 16th and 17th centuries, while most of the remaining medieval castles were brought down during the kuruc rebellion against Austrian rule in the 18th century. The memory of fierce resistance to conquerors is preserved most intact at the castles of NagyEzrsny, Sziliget and Simeg. In these castles chivalric tournaments are held every summer, to the great delight of visitors. Only a few walls remain of the castles of Rezi, T/Elka and CsobEenc, but it still makes a pleasant outing to clamber among the ruins. Marked tourist trails lead to the mountaintop, from which visitors can enjoy the splendid panorama.

12.

Wide variety of activities

In the city of Keszthely concerts and performances are held all year round in the city's theatre and the Festetics Palace, and increasing numbers of visitors and participants are also drawn to its Carnival parade. The summer programme of activities is unquestionably richer, beginning with the Balaton Festival in May First. The Siflok Gold Shell Festival in early July gives a taste of the colourful folklore and dance of the Hungarian and other ethnic groups of the region. The Anna Ball of Balatonfired, held at the end of July, is internationally renowned. Five villages of the Balaton highlands jointly organise a large exhibition of contemporary art in late July and early August. Kaposcs is the centre of the Valley of Artists. The series of events known as the Tihany Holiday Games are held in August. The number of horse shows, folklore programmes, harvest festivals, exhibitions and concerts is beyond counting - a full listing of everything would be impossible.