

a tale of two cities

BARCELONA v BUDAPEST

We check out two destinations for your hen and stag weekends

by Kate Roberts

FOR many couples, arranging a hen and stag weekend is a major part of the wedding plans. Low cost airlines have opened up the possibility of spending a day or two in European cities with the chance to take in the local culture and enjoy a new

experience. Brides and Grooms has looked at one of the most popular destinations and compared it to a more recent arrival to the hen/stag scene to help you decide whether to venture abroad for a last taste of freedom before the big day.

BARCELONA

is a vibrant, metropolitan city in the Catalan region of Spain. Just two and a half hours by air from London airports it is served by many no frills airlines with flights available from around £25 each way plus tax if you book your tickets early. A short bus ride takes you and your party to Place de Catalunya the busy central square and main transport interchange.

Choose a hotel near the Ramblas, the bustling main thoroughfare which leads from the main square down to the harbour and you can enjoy the myriad free entertainment of the pavement artists and market stall holders who set up on the central pavement. The Ambassador on the Pintor Fortuny offers a good mid price hotel choice with double rooms from around £90 per night.

Innumerable tappas bars and eateries serve traditional Spanish food with seafood and tasty meat or vegetarian dishes alongside options for the more adventurous; fish head stew anyone? Don't be put off by the occasional unusual dish as the standard of cuisine is generally high and even the fussiest will usually enjoy patatas bravas and a slice of Spanish omelette.

Bars are lively and stay open late with many open late into the night. The cosmopolitan atmosphere and the close proximity of the bars and night life to the hotels



make Barcelona a relatively safe city for getting around. Drinks are a little cheaper than at home but a night out can still be pricey.

If your party wants to take in the sights this is a city that has loads to offer. The Gaudi designed unfinished Sagrada Familia dominates the landscape and a visit is a must to marvel at the nature inspired architecture. Two hop-on hop-off city bus tours provide a great way to see Barcelona and with an English commentary provided through head sets they are informative and fun.

A tour of the nou camp, home to Barcelona's famous football club is top of the list for many stag groups while the hens are more likely to be found hitting the shops.

In complete contrast to Barcelona the Hungarian city of Budapest is being cited as the new in-place to celebrate pre wedding. Again easily accessible by no frills air lines at a comparable cost it seemed worth checking out the city to see whether it can cope with the exacting standards of our hens and stags...



main courses in the best restaurants such as the seventies inspired Menza costing around £4 Budapest offers great value for money. Drinks too are very cheap with glorious cocktails at under £3 and a bottle of fine Hungarian wine at around £5. Bars and clubs never seem to close and although the music is a little out of date the welcome is warm and the atmosphere friendly.

So what else is there to persuade tourists to visit this intriguing city? A trip to the Gellert open air thermal baths is amazing. Even with winter temperatures dipping way below zero the baths are a haven of calm in a bustling city. Brave the

BUDAPEST is actually two cities separated by the river Danube. Buda is the older more affluent city with the castle district and its rich Baroque style architecture while Pest is the commercial city with shops and less inspiring buildings.

From the airport take a taxi to the hotel for under ten pounds. The Mercure group of hotels are a popular choice with rooms from an incredible £30 a night. Clean and comfortable though they are, the décor is dated, reminiscent of the 1970s, a theme which seems to recur in this former communist city which is trying to drag itself into the 21st century. Reminders of the political and economic struggles are easy to find with bullet holes still visible in many of the buildings. Bars and restaurants situated in the labyrinth of underground bunkers and cellars now create an atmospheric setting to linger over dinner and a glass or three of Hungarian wine.

Menus also provide an interesting insight into the Hungarian way of life and a reminder of the stark poverty suffered under the communist rule. Meat is the staple here with no part of the animal going to waste, so if you don't fancy lung stew or tripe be careful how you order. The food is actually very tasty with stews and tender braised meats particularly good. Paprika features heavily as do delicious sweet pancakes flambéed in brandy. Vegetarians are likely to struggle unless they are happy with the numerous fish options. With hearty

communal changing rooms which bear a striking resemblance to the wash rooms in 'One flew over the cuckoo's nest' and get past the strange labour intensive system that gives you a locker key that bears no relation to the locker number your clothes are in you will find yourself relaxing in beautiful neo classical style roman baths. Spend the day chatting to friends or join the old men playing chess as their heads bob above the water.

A cruise of the Danube is another highlight especially by night when the bridges between the two cities are lit up and reflected in the water.

Whether Barcelona or Budapest is the right choice for you depends on how seasoned a traveller you are. Barcelona is easily accessible and many locals speak English so it is easy to plan your own itinerary. The streets are safe and well lit and the transport system easy to understand.

Budapest in contrast is still a city where a tour guide will make your stay much more enjoyable. The winter cold means that many treasures are hidden behind closed doors and finding the best restaurants and bars should not be left to chance. Groups of women in particular will benefit from the services of a specialist company who can arrange extras such as a trip to a very reasonably priced spa and guide you through the intricacies of the language so that you don't miss out on local delicacies.



FOR MORE DETAILS...

BARCELONA

Spanish tourist board on www.tourspain.co.uk/

BUDAPEST

Budapest specialists Janna Mercereau of Hen Nation on janna@hennation.co.uk or Josey Walker jwalker@budapestweekends.co.uk