Hungary *for* something

The adults take a back seat on Budapest's Children's Railway

A family tradition - pastry chef Augusta Auguszt

Ashley Booth (right) with the team at coach operator Homm: Balázs Tóth, Károly Homm and Timea Blaga

Tour wholesaler Ashley & Newey focuses on the UK – and one other destination – Hungary. Stuart Render travelled with A&N owner Ashley Booth to Budapest and discovered why he's passionate about showing groups what the country has to offer

The Libegő carries us serenely over the tree tops. A glance behind us reveals the urban architecture of Budapest, glinting in the sunshine. Ahead of us, the Libegő stretches out, disappearing into the distance as it carries us onwards to the summit of János hill, the highest point in Budapest.

Libegő is Hungarian for chairlift, and this particular example, more than 1,000 metres in length, has been carrying visitors up and down the hillside for nearly 45 years. Built in 1970 it takes around 15 minutes to raise its passengers the 262 metres between the lower and upper stations.

Arriving at the summit, there's an opportunity to take a moment to look down over Budapest. Straddling the River Danube, the city looks magnificent, with the majestic Parliament Building mirrored in the river's calm surface.

Budapest grew up as two very separate parts – Buda, the hilly section to the south of the Danube, and Pest, the newer, business district.

In the 14th century, Buda became a royal town, while Pest developed into a prosperous trading centre. It wasn't until the magnificent Chain Bridge – a copy of its smaller, older sister that crosses the River Thames in Marlow - opened in 1849 that Buda and Pest were able to start the process of merging together. In 1872 the three separate settlements of Pest, Buda and neighbouring Óbuda ('Old' Buda) were united into the one city.

The city's turbulent history has seen it under the control of the Romans, Turks, Austrians and Germans. In February 1945 it fell under communist rule as Soviet troops took control. In the autumn of 1956 political turmoil and economic hardship fuelled popular uprisings.

In 1989, the wave of revolution sweeping through central and eastern Europe brought an end to the communist era.

However, although it's nearly 26 years since the iron curtain fell, the effects of communist rule remain evident, not only in the excellent transport infrastructure, but also in the way the period affected local people.

We have a date with someone whose remarkable family history, and the equally remarkable history of the family business, is inextricably linked to the effects of war and political ideology.

But before we can make the meeting, we have to get down off the János Hill, and some rather famous children are going to help us do just that.

The children are in charge

I'm travelling with Ashley Booth, the owner of Darlington-based tour wholesaler and tour management company, Ashley & Newey.

While the company specialises in organising and managing UK tours, it's Ashley's own love for Hungary that has seen the company develop its tours to both Budapest and to nearby Lake Balaton.

As we take the gently sloping path that leads away from the upper terminus of the Libegő, and make our way down through the wooded slopes of János Hill, Ashley reminds me why Hungary is so important to him.

"I first visited Budapest on holiday in 1977," he says. "I was greeted by glorious sunshine, friendly locals and high standards of living. I was smitten. Since then I've learnt the language and now have a flat in Budapest. I've always wanted to share what the country has to offer through our coach holidays. With my own knowledge of the destination, our tours to Hungary, which I always lead, capture the authenticity and 'off the beaten track' experience that holidaymakers aren't likely to find on a typical package holiday.

After 15 minutes or so we turn a corner and find ourselves at János-Hegy, a station on Budapest's famous Children's Railway (www.gyermekvasut.hu/english)

The idea for a railway staffed mostly by children originated in the former USSR. The first railway opened in Gorky Park in Moscow in 1932. At its

different?

Lake Balaton is the largest lake in Europe and makes a welcome contrast to Budapest

breakup, 52 children's railways existed in the USSR. The Budapest railway, which is now believed to be the world's largest children's railway, opened in stages between 1948 and 1950.

Ashley explains the background.

"The original plan was for the railway to be staffed almost entirely by members of a Communist youth organisation called the Pioneers," he says. "The children, aged between 10 and 14, were those who had done well at school. That principle remains in place today."

Children are supervised by an adult during their training and then, when ready, entrusted with the running of the service. There are seven stations along the seven-mile line, the trains normally being hauled by diesel locomotives. On selected days a steam engine is pressed into service.

It's not long before we hear the rumble of a diesel engine as our train rounds the bend at the far end of the station and comes to a stop in front of us. The engine driver is always an adult, but our attention is captured by the sight of a small boy, looking resplendent in full company uniform, standing in the open doorway of one of the carriages.

We climb aboard and watch as the boy, with an adult female supervisor close behind him, blows his whistle and gives the right-away to the train driver. The boy, and his minder, then make their way through the carriage, checking tickets.

At each station, a smartly turned-out child stands on the platform and salutes as the train arrives. It's a remarkable sight.

Ashley tells me that the children still see it as a huge honour to be chosen to work on the railway. Their pride shines through, although watching them carry out their duties in such a clinical and well-drilled way does bring to mind the country's not so distant past.

A coaching hotel

We leave the Children's Railway at the southern terminus at Széchenyi-Hegy. But we're not off the János Hill yet.

A short walk brings us to the northern terminus of another of Budapest's fascinating mix of transport attractions, the Cogwheel Railway.

Opened in 1874 it's the third oldest railway of its kind in Europe. It takes around 25 minutes to reach the lower terminus, a journey that takes you through one of Budapest's prettier suburbs.

The terminus, at Városmajor, is opposite the Hotel Budapest, the hotel we're using on this visit and that Ashley uses for his tours.

Built in 1968 to a circular design, the classic four-star hotel has 289 rooms. Many famous landmarks, including the royal palace, can be seen by guests from their windows.

The hotel serves contemporary European and traditional Hungarian dishes, and hosts traditional live gypsy music for guests to enjoy on their first and last evenings. There's free coach parking in front of the building.

The hotel is part of the Danubius Hotels Group (www.danubiushotels.com), a company with a portfolio of more than 40 four-star properties across Hungary, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia. The group also operates the Danubius Hotel Regents Park in London.

"The team here understand our guests' needs," says Ashley. "The hotel is also conveniently located on a main tram line giving easy links into the heart of the city centre. The transport network here is easy to use. We give guests an inclusive travel pass which makes it easy for them to get around on their free day."

Wonderful pastries

Leaving our encounter with part of Budapest's fascinating public transport system behind us, we head for our meeting with one of the city's oldest businesses.

Auguszt (www.auguszt.hu) is a confectioners that's been run by the same family of pastry chefs for nearly 145 years. However, those 145 years, during which their manufacturing method hasn't changed, have seen the family face significant challenges.

Elek Auguszt opened a small shop in Buda in 1870. In the Second World War, his grandson, Elemer Auguszt, was called up to be a soldier, ending up as a prisoner of war in Russia for three years. His skills as a pastry chef proved invaluable to his captors, undoubtedly saving his life.

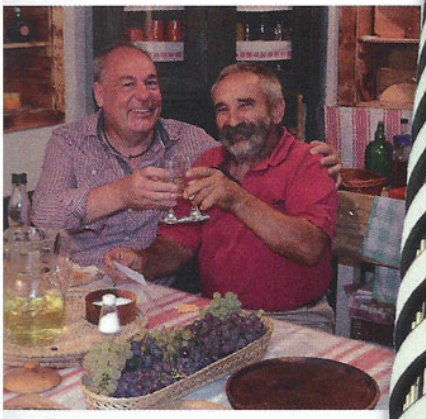
In 1945 the original shop in the city centre was destroyed by a bomb. The Auguszts reopened their business in 1957 only to have everything taken from them by the communists. In the 1980s, as life in the country became more liberal, they opened a small outlet near Moscow Square. This often saw queues lining the adjacent street.

After the fall of communism in 1989, the family used the money received through reparations to buy land and re-establish themselves. Today, the

business is thriving with two city centre shops. However, today we're heading to the company's third outlet.

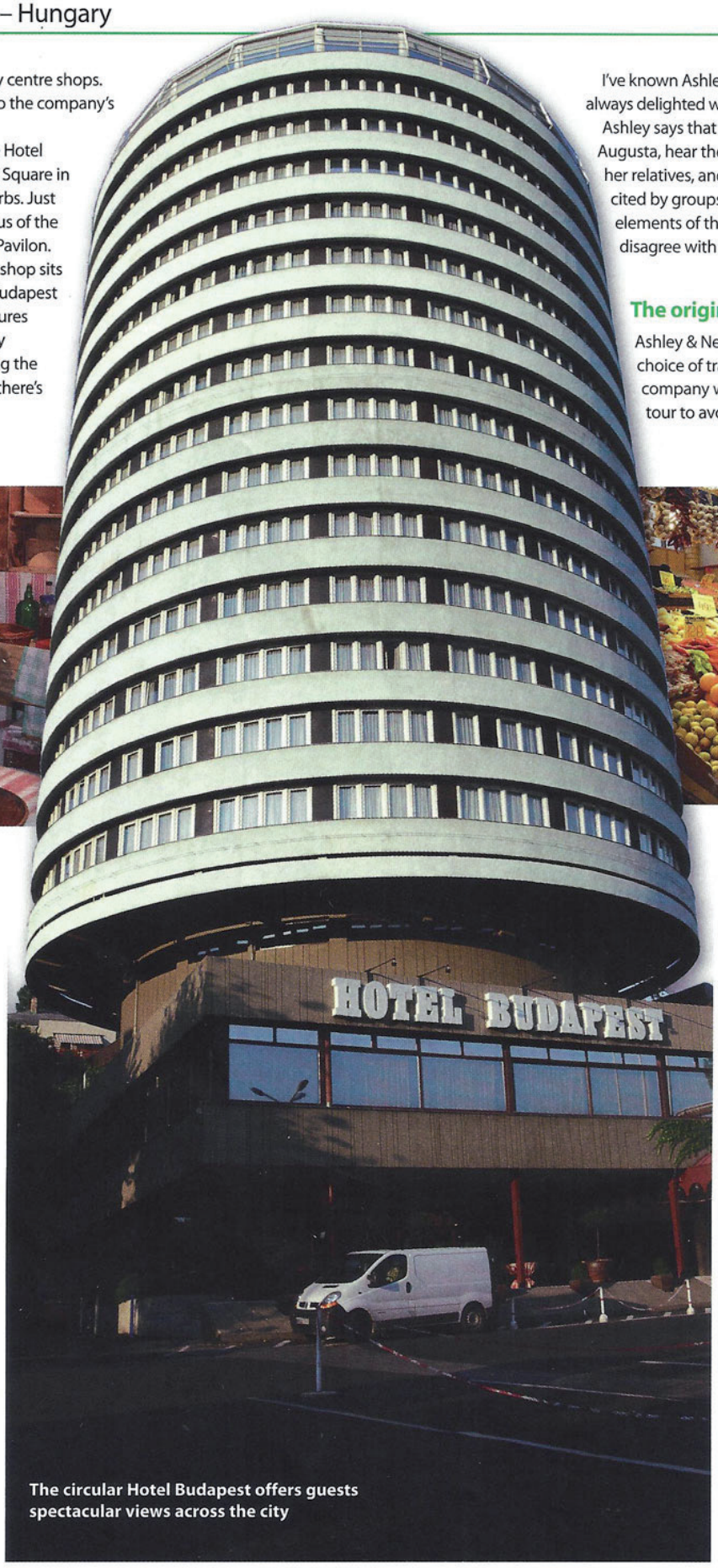
A 10-minute journey from the Hotel Budapest brings us to Farkasréti Square in one of Budapest's western suburbs. Just across the road from the terminus of the number 59 tram is the Auguszt Pavilon.

Opened in 2001, the cafe and shop sits within a converted, traditional Budapest house. The intimate interior features wood panelling, lined with many photos and other items reflecting the family's turbulent past. Outside there's a large tea garden.



Firm friends. Ashley Booth and József Horváth

Colour in Budapest's Central Market Hall



The circular Hotel Budapest offers guests spectacular views across the city

"Hello, I'm Augusta. Welcome to Auguszt."

Augusta is the grand-daughter of Elemer, and the current owner of the business.

"Would you like to try some of our pastries?," she asks. In short order we are tucking in to a range of delicious pastries. These include Krémes, the family's signature pastry, and a very popular Hungarian dessert.

Ashley explains that he brings groups to Auguszt Pavilon, rather than either of the two city centre shops, because of its more intimate atmosphere.

"This location, away from the main tourist areas, means there's more room for a group to enjoy what Augusta and her team have to offer," he says. "On a typical tour we spend a relaxing couple of hours here. Augusta will talk to the group, explaining the remarkable history of the family and the business. Then there's the opportunity to sample a selection of the wide range of pastries and confectionary. On a sunny day the group can sit out in the tea garden."

In 2002, TV duo The Hairy Bikers called by as part of one of their continental road trips.

Augusta is clearly proud of her family history.

"My relatives have faced huge hardship over the years," she says. "But each time, it was their skill as a pastry chef that saw them survive. I have three children – two boys and a girl – and they're already showing indications that they want to keep the family business going in the future.

I've known Ashley for many years now and I'm always delighted when he brings a group to see us."

Ashley says that the opportunity to meet Augusta, hear the stories of what happened to her relatives, and sample the pastries, is regularly cited by groups as being one of the memorable elements of the tour. This writer wouldn't disagree with that.

The origins of 'coach'

Ashley & Newey gives its customers the choice of travelling overland or by air. The company will also look at consolidating a tour to avoid an operator having to cancel because of low numbers.

But with Ashley Booth's clear commitment to detail, what happens to a group arriving by air?

On day two of my trip I find myself travelling with Ashley as he visits the local coach operator that he uses for guests that have arrived by plane. During the journey to the operator's premises he throws an unexpected question at me.

"Did you know that the origins of the word coach come from Hungary?" he asks. Seeing the surprise on my face, he continues.

"Kocs, pronounced kotch, is a village that lies about 40 miles north-west of Budapest. In the 15th century it's believed that it was here that superior horse-drawn wagons, carts and carriages were designed to carry people between Vienna and Budapest. The German-speaking Viennese called the horse drawn vehicle a Kotsche, which is how they heard the Hungarian town pronounced by its occupants. Eventually the French began to use the vehicles and translated the word to coche. The English version followed."