

Friday, 3 April

Changed planes in Frankfurt, a hellish airport so early in the morning. Expected efficiency, got inanity. Didn't help that Mo hit on the customs dude. We've always told them to keep mouths closed at customs/TSA, but she must have been punch drunk from lack of sleep.

Budapest airport was fine. Waiting outside for our pre-arranged pick up, it crossed my mind that we maybe should have taken coats. Cold! Temperatures were supposed to be similar to home, but this felt colder.

Good Friday noon traffic. Nora, our AirBnB host, met us outside the apartment, and brought us to the top floor via a teeny tiny elevator. She provided a quick set of instructions, suggested we try goulash and palinka, and breezed away. The apartment was two levels, with a kitchen, two bathrooms, laundry machine, all the necessities. Worked out fine. We each called a (hard) bed, but Satch couldn't make it work for her so she took the couch. Sleep sleep.



Awoke at 4ish and decided to walk. Ended up around the Oktogon area, full of shops, restaurants, gyro stands. Liszt memorials and statues everywhere, art nouveau architecture, people on their way home for the weekend. Extremely clean. Did notice a lack of eye contact on the street, not much talking. Much less cell phone use than at home. In a very general sense, I think this is a remainder from Soviet times. Keep to yourself.

Still cold and cloudy, and we were essentially jet lagged zombies. Which inevitably led to a not-so-good choice of restaurant. A woman on the street promised traditional Hungarian folk music in about 60 minutes, and the menu included a few things for the vegetarians.

One cool thing: they had these tiny bottles (two ounces?) filled with fruit skins/extract that they used to make our herbal tea. Satisfactory food. Best dish was the sour cherry soup. Also had the pasta with sauerkraut (not bad) and salad with goat cheese (fried and just eh). Goose crackling (not so good) and beef goulash (pretty good but not amazing) for the carnivores. Dessert was something called a floating island (sounded better than it was) and a traditional Hungarian cakey thing with chocolate (not bad). Scott and I ordered palinkas (like fruit-infused grappa but somewhat tastier).

Music finally did start, but, surprise, not Hungarian folk. This guy in a 70s blue suit played cheesy jazz standards on an electric piano. We were looking forward to that part. Oh well.

Saturday, 4 April

I woke up earlier than everyone else and ventured out to a small grocery store for bread, cheese, and some basics. By the time everyone woke, ate, dressed, and headed out (1:00), the sun had ducked behind clouds and a cold wind returned. Passed a chocolate store, required closer inspection: we each got a small piece. Prices were fairly inexpensive — not South or Central America cheap, but gotta love a strong dollar.

Passed a place called the Miniversum, a tiny HO scale model of Hungary and parts of Austria, complete with trains, interactive lights, etc. Our kind of geeky. So detailed --



mountain climbers,
ski lift, monastery,
hippies camping
out, outhouses,
chickens,
fountains,
accidents
galore, one guy
performing
CPR. Posters
explaining life
during
communism

spotted the walls. Fun
to push buttons that lit buildings
or cop lights or made things whirr.



Continued walking toward the Danube, and boom, there's the Basilica. Huge and grand. Family poll nixed paying to ride an elevator to the cupola base for a view. And the church itself was prepping for Easter services. So we crossed the street to a tiny restaurant/stand. Among the choices: Nutella pizza. They cooked the dough, spread on Nutella, cooked it a little more, and spread on more Nutella. Returned to the counter three times I think. Girls were very happy.

Passed a store filled with Hungarian folk dresses, and these were expensive. Kept walking.



So then we went into this square, just before the Chain Bridge. Crossing the street here is where I missed the double curb and fell. Couldn't get up, and the cars were coming ... the kids ran out and helped me back onto grass. Took a few minutes. I had twisted my ankle, but my automatic reaction (anger at myself) kicked in, and I immediately went into denial, and decided that we would continue walking. Yes, I'm an idiot, yes, I know.



So we crossed the bridge, slowly. On the other side (Buda), we rested by this cool sculpture that Satch did her best to violate while hundreds of motorcycles passed (some biker thing?). We crossed back over the bridge to the Pest side, and Marxe let me lean on her.

Came upon these super cool band bouncing dudes in a park. They strung a rubbery band (about 2-3 inches wide?) between two trees, and proceeded to twist, flip, jump up and off. Would have been awesome to try, which is exactly what this one obviously sotted, possibly homeless gentleman (in the red) believed as well. The guys were respectful and nice to him, though.



Walking on, we passed a touristy craft market across from the Castro Bistro Restaurant, our destination. Immediately relaxed in the Bistro's homey, calm atmosphere. A great Hungarian band called Kispal es a Borz played over the speakers. Tried putting my foot up, but no help.

Palinka *did* help, a little. We also had vegetarian stuffed cabbage (really good), eggplant dip (smoky), beet root patties, spicy rice balls (really good), and a meat stew (pretty good).

Standing up at that point was hard. Ankle throbbing a lot now, but I thought walking it off would help. After 1/2 mile or so, Scott's rational voice won over, and we hailed a cab in front of the Opera House (pretty at night). At the apartment, the kids brought my ankle pillows and ice. Swollen like a grapefruit. Extra mad at myself.



Sunday, 5 April

We did nothing. Absolutely nothing. My ankle stayed raised, everyone else slept and read and watched stuff on the computer. Ate dinner at the closest place we could find that was open on Easter — Haveli Indian Restaurant, a couple blocks away. Really good, really cheap.

Monday, 6 April

Ankle swelling way down, so we got back in the saddle. Metro'd to the Vorosmarty ter by 10am, where a large market was in the prep stages. Scott saw this Rooster Testicles sign and got pretty excited. Still too early and cold for anyone's testicles, though, so we went into (sorry, but it's true) a Starbucks. Kids got muffins/hot chocolate/tea, I got a water.



Met up with a 30ish year old guy who was guiding our 2.5 hour walking tour of the Jewish quarter.

His grandmother had told him many stories of life as Budapest Jew during WWII, which he passed on to us. Adamant about Hungarians *not* being innocent in the Holocaust and talked a little about current anti-semitism, but most of the tour was spent discussing sites. He was fairly informative, working solely for tips.



Cool street murals. Rubik was Hungarian.



Dohany Street Synagogue, the largest in Europe

Nagy Synagogue, a couple blocks away cause you can never have too many synagogues



Art nouveau buildings by Jewish architects, all over Budapest





Tour finished and we were starved. The guide directed us away from the Yiddish-Italian place toward a Ruin Pub (an ancient pub that has been refurbished) advertising meat stuff and, specifically, vegetarian dishes. In reality, no veggies, they dropped Scott's food, and it was touristy expensive. We spent the entire meal watching a tennis match, trying to decipher the flags listed by the players. As usual, Satch kept us entertained.



Metro'd to the warm apartment. I took a short walk in the other direction and found these cool places. Tried to find groceries, but all closed for Easter Monday.



some sort of weird sculpture graveyard



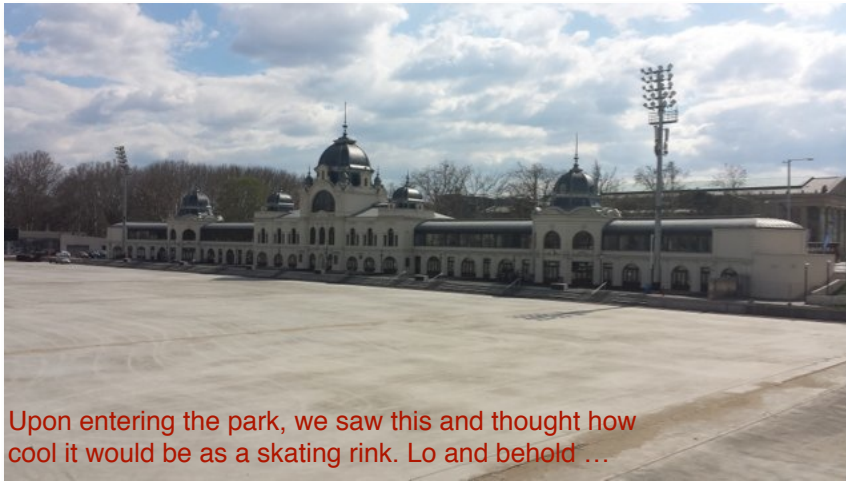
more art nouveau

Scott, Satch, and Mo went searching for food, promising to bring something back for Marx and me. Not enough money to pay, though, so Scott sent Mo and Satch back to the apartment while he waited in the restaurant. They found their way by asking people on the street where the Old Ram Music Pub was (our landmark across the street that never seemed to open). Arrived out of breath, and then ran back to Scott again. Adventures.

Tuesday, 7 April

We all slept laaate. Scott's foray the evening before left us forint-less. So he and I searched in the cold for a decent money changer. A supposed primo website showing the best changers sent us on not one, not two, but three wild chases. But we did get a chance to see the Nyugati pályaudvar, a train station in the grand European tradition. Later in the day we all

walked a mile in the direction opposite of city center toward the Budapest City Park, where there was a castle and the largest bath house in town.



Upon entering the park, we saw this and thought how cool it would be as a skating rink. Lo and behold ...



The girls deemed Vajdahunyad castle and its environs Hogwarts



Anonymus Szobor, the first medieval Hungarian chronicler. Seemed like a creepy death statue to us.



Entrance to the Szechenyi baths



Szechenyi, a love or hate type of place. We took everything with a grain of salt and ended up having a really fun time.

Yes, the lines are silly (line to enter, line for towels, line for cabin, etc.) and it's completely unorganized, and fees seem fairly random, but then you get into the pools (21 of them!) and it's so much fun! We popped from cool pool to warm pool to hot pool, ahhh. Also outside pools, huge and warm, which feels neat against the (still) very cold air. So many people from so many different places. Less crowded on a weekday I think. One of the outside pools had this circular track within the pool where everyone runs in a circle and creates a whirlpool that you get completely caught up in. We laughed and laughed and had a blast.

The buildings are beautiful. With everywhere we've been in the world, never quite had an experience like this.

On the way out of the park, getting all cold again, we passed the Heroes' Square, stolid,



roomy, impressive. Dropped off wet swimsuits at the apartment, and walked the two blocks to the Indian restaurant again. Cheap and good!

Wednesday, 8 April

Tried to leave the apartment by 10am, made it by 11. Satch made yummy scrambled eggs for all. Family decision to metro instead of walk, and when we were changing trains, we exited by mistake — they let us back in. Made it to the Keleti pályaudvar (other giant train station), and exited into a chilly rain, pleasant for a day in the Kerepesi cemetery. One section near the front is dedicated to communists from the 1956 uprising. Everywhere else has beautiful sculptures, almost like an outdoor museum of death.



The orderly, sterile
Soviet section.





Through the rain to Nagy Vasarcsarnok, the great market hall. Purchased cookies from a bitchy woman, and later cheese and some meat from others. Way overpriced tschotschkies. Not so nice people. Touristy and bleh. Lots of linens, paprika, booze, and even paprika booze.



Back on the Metro, hurrying to Parliament because their webpage indicated spots open for the 3:30pm tour. But of course not. It lied. Didn't matter so much, though, cause the sun came out. It was wondrous. Not all that warm, but it was so nice to feel the sun

again. We sat/lay on benches in front of Parliament, and these two annoying people came and sat in the middle of us. We talked around them, and I think Satch farted at them, until they left.

On our way out of the plaza, we entered an underground memorial to the 1956 uprising, extremely interesting. We then noticed the bullet holes in the walls around the plaza, emphasized with rubber plugs, where the massacre took place.



Gelato time. Found this gelateria near the Basilica that creates flower petal ice cream cones. Girls approved.

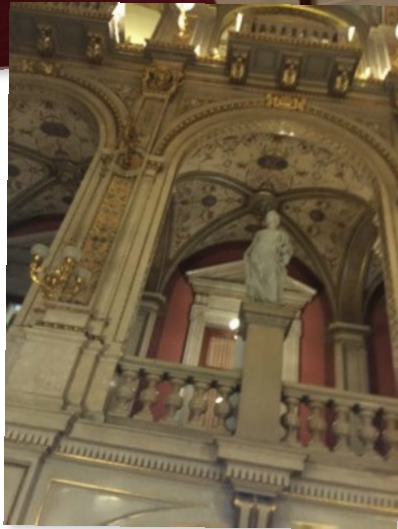
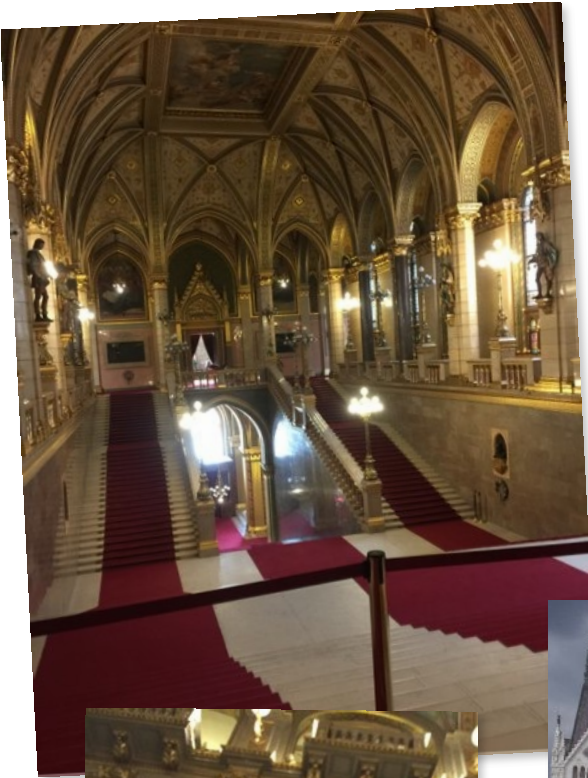
Metro'd to the grocery store and then to the apartment.

That evening, Scott and I checked out a band at the Budapest Jazz Club. Nigun. Klezmer via experimental jazz. Talented players, but we were fine with only one set. Leisurely stroll back.



Thursday, 9 April

Yes, we can get moving by 8:45am. Promise of more gelato assisted the cause. Made it to Parliament for our 9:30 tour. Gorgeous building inside and out. Our guide explained how the House of Lords was abolished under Soviet rule, so now only one of the two chambers is still used.



Gelato reward,
and then we hopped on a bus that took us into Buda and up the hill.

Small craft market yielded a tricky wooden lock box for Satch and a nice scarf for Mo. Ate lunch outdoors at an overpriced cafe, but it was nice to sit and be warm. Walked to Halaszbastya, or Fisherman's Bastion, site of an amazing view and long benches, all the better for sleep. Sun! We could have paid to go into the Matyas Templom (Catholic church), but the kids weren't into it. Still beautiful from the outside.



Parliament, now across the Danube

Matyas Templom



We followed signs to a labyrinth, wherein a Vlad the Impaler exhibit and other wax figures tried to creep you out. Mo and I rested our feet (ankle) upstairs while Marxer, Satch, and Scott descended to the caves of Buda.



That evening, Scott, Satch, and I went to dinner at a little place down the street, called Ferdinand (Mo slept this time, and Marxer hung at the apartment).



Scott's favorite meal of the trip.

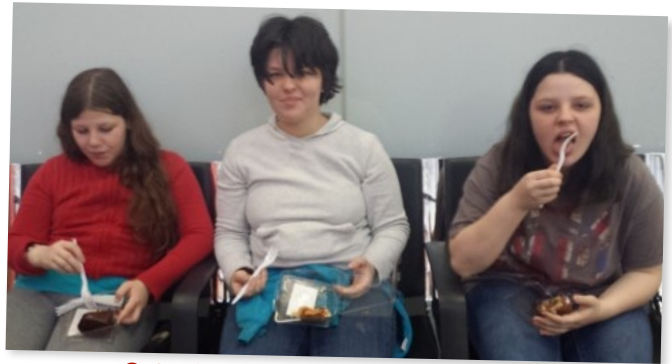
Friday, 10 April

All up to clean the apartment. Nora arrived promptly at 9:30 to get the key and prep for the next boarder. Cute puddle jumper for the hour ride to Vienna.

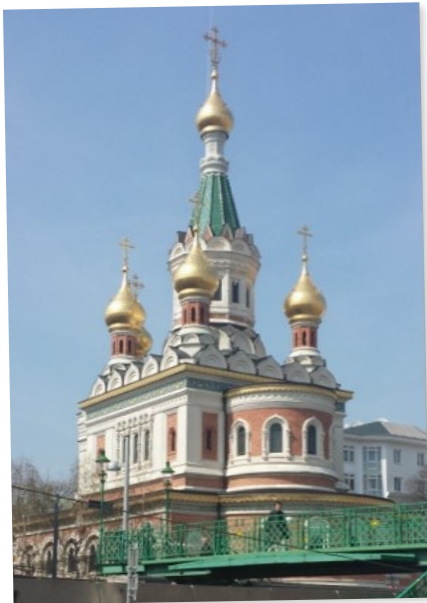


No problems until we arrived in Vienna, at which point I waited in a 30+ minute line to purchase Vienna cards, which got us discounts into museums for 48 hours as well as free metro/bus/tram. Girls didn't mind the wait — a Spar grocery sat right by the entrance to Metro.

Train into Vienna took 25 minutes, and let us off right at our hotel, where we found nice comfy beds and the concierge floor!



Cake from Spar eases any wait



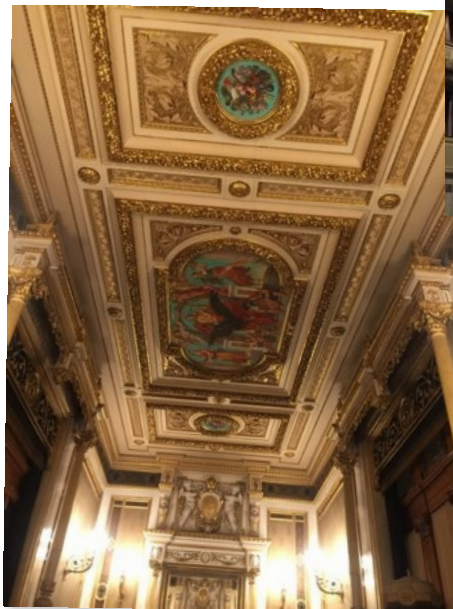
Church across from our hotel.

Caught the Opera House tour

(while Mo slept on the grass outside), most of which was destroyed in WWII and subsequently rebuilt. Realized that's one of the reasons that I have never liked Vienna so much: reminds me of a Disney-fied version of an old European city because, like the Opera House, much of the city was rubble and, due to limited funding, the reconstruction imitated styles without recreating substance and detail.



Reconstructed, and sterile. Opera House



One of the only original sections of the Opera House

Walked past a neat looking museum on our way to the Kapuzinergruft (crypt), an absolutely amazing collection of Hapsburg tombs so intricately cast, you would think each took a lifetime to create.



Albertina Museum

From here, it was a long walk to the hotel, where the concierge lounge offered dinner-ish items. Scott and Mo went out for additional food, while the rest of us crashed.



Empress Maria Theresa's tomb

Saturday, 11 April

Breakfast in the concierge lounge and then hopped a tram to the Kunst Haus Wien and then the Museum Hundertwasser, both designed and featuring the work of Friedensreich Hundertwasser, this 20th century hippy graphic artist/architect/landscaper dude. Didn't believe in straight lines, level floors, or muted colors. Inverted form and shapes to create amalgamations of design.



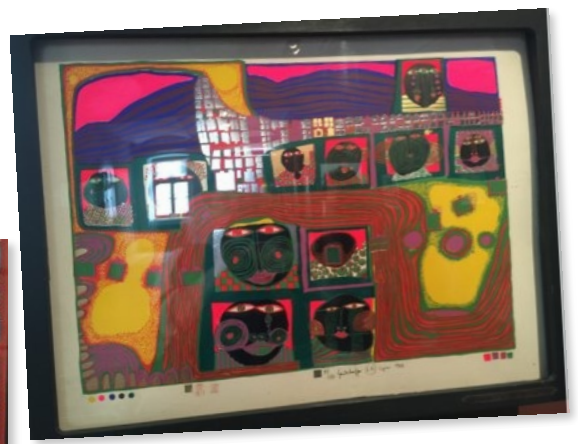
Austria's drinking age: 16



Kunst Haus



Model of a utopian town H. designed



As you can see, my kind of art.

Trammed it to Naschmarkt, the Saturday flea market filled with everyone's attic junk, as well as a selection of any and all imaginable foodstuffs. Marx found the

perfect Austrian folk dress (for anime cosplay), Scott a gyro, Mo cheese, me grapes, and Satch purchased five euros worth of dried fruit and nuts. More on that later.



Klezmer-like flea market band, singing about schlongs



Starting to drag, we made it (barely) to the Belvedere Castle grounds, but no farther. Crashed onto the grass. Took all our energy to get moving again. Pretty, though.



That night, Marx stayed in the room, while the rest of us went to dinner at the restaurant Mo and Scott liked the previous evening.





Satch starting to feel not so great, and Mo in her new scarf.

Later, Mo and I went in search of a dance club near the Opera. When we finally found it, and figured out how to enter, we realized it didn't open for another 90 minutes. I was too beat to stick around. So ready for bed.

Sunday, 12 April

Early rising to get the train to the first plane to the second plane to home. Satch started throwing up on the



Satch's parting gift to Vienna leaked through the trash bin

train and didn't stop until somewhere over the Atlantic (could it have been flea market dried fruit and nuts?).

Extremely annoying ticket agent at VIE who 1) wouldn't accept Scott was a United platinum member, 2) required luggage check to Frankfurt then checked it through to Dulles without telling us so that we were waiting at the Frankfurt baggage claim until we figured out what she did and then ran through the Frankfurt airport/security/etc. to get our connection, and 3) called Scott a liar. We overcame.

Then, great surprise! Boarding the plane in Frankfurt, I heard, "Hi Evie!" and there sat Carey, Brenda, Alexei, and Kristen, on their way back from Barcelona. How cool! So at least while Satch was being sick and sleeping, I had some company!

And that's it! Budapest is a really interesting city, and I'm really glad we visited.

PS: Satch was fine within a day.



Ahhh, nothing like a liter of Burning Hell



Obligatory family pic