

**HUNGARY: A SKETCH OF
THE COUNTRY, ITS PEOPLE
AND ITS CONDITIONS**

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Hungary: A Sketch of the Country, Its People and Its Conditions by Julius de Vargha

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A SKETCH OF THE COUNTRY ITS PEOPLE AND ITS CONDITIONS



BY

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1. The country.

The Hungarian Kingdom takes rank as seventh among the States of Europe, in point both of territory and of population. With an area of 324,851 square kilometres it exceeds in size such countries as Great Britain, Austria, and Italy: and the value of this extensive territory is enhanced by the mildness of the climate, the wealth of the soil, and the abundance of natural treasures.

Hungary lies in the centre of Europe, on the borders of East and West, a bastion of Western Europe projecting eastwards: the country indeed, for ten centuries of European history, played the part of a breakwater, against which the waves of Oriental barbarism dashed and were broken. With its sharply defined natural border, it has been destined by Nature herself to be an uniform State. From the point where, on the West, the Danube enters Hungarian territory, to the point where, in the South-East, it leaves the country, the long chain of the Carpathians forms a huge semi-circle round Hungary: while the southern frontier is formed by the Lower Danube and the Save, in a channel corresponding to the northern line of the Carpathians. Thereby the whole country assumes the form of an ellipse, the regular shape of which is only broken by the neck of land projecting on the Adriatic Sea.

Besides the external formation, the orological and hydrographical conditions impart a peculiarly uniform character to the territory of Hungary. The long chain of mountains forming the northern and eastern frontiers throws branches out as far as the great plain stretching over the centre of the country. The rivers too all display a centripetal tendency, hastening to unite with the mighty stream of the Danube, and then continue their course towards the Black Sea. This distinctly concentric character makes the various parts of the country interdependent, and welds them into an organic whole: while their products, owing to their manifold nature, as it were complement each other.

In geological respects, practically every stratum, from the earliest geological formations to the latest deposits of mud (clay) made by the rivers, is represented: though the latest formations, the diluvial and alluvial deposits, are the most preponderant. These

latter cover the surface of the small and great Hungarian Alföld (Lowlands), the greater part of the right bank of the Danube and of the district between the Drave and the Save, and provide that deep soil, rich in vegetable mould, in which is grown the Hungarian grain of unexcelled quality.

The chain of the Carpathians, one of the mightiest mountain ranges in Europe, offers a panorama strikingly rich in natural beauties. Though it cannot rival the wild masses of the Alps, and scarcely rises at all to the level of the regions of eternal snows, some parts of its long line rise to a very significant height, and many of its peaks exceed 2000 metres. Its highest peak on the North is 2663, that on the South-East, 2534 metres high.

The best known part of the Carpathians, which has recently been visited by large numbers of foreigners, is the High TÁTRA, which rises up in enormous proportions without any foothills at all. Its rugged, fissured granite rocks, covered with snow, that rise above a dark-green zone of thick pine forests, rank among the most enchanting natural beauties. At a great height deep, crystal-clear lakes, the so-called «starns», present glittering mirrors playing in light and shade. At every step bubbling streams, and in places mighty waterfalls roar and blend with the bleak stillness of the dark pine-forests. On the southern slopes of the TÁTRA a whole series of watering-places has been created, which attract pleasure-seekers longing to enjoy the delights of nature not only in summer, but, of recent years, in winter too. The gigantic rocky wall of the High TÁTRA protects the southern slopes from the north winds. After the winter snow has fallen, we get a long period of clear weather. A cloudless blue sky forms an enchanting canopy over the white snow-world: while the sun's rays are so hot, that visitors are able to enjoy all the beauties of winter in a summer warmth. The whole neighbourhood is alive; all kinds of winter sports are engaged in; swift sleighs and bobsleighs, skis and snow-shoes offer a variety of distractions that attracts even princely guests.

The Eastern Carpathians too abound in wondrously beautiful spots that surprise even the most experienced tourists: while, at the most southern extremity of that range the Danube offers a series of natural beauties with which not even the valley of the Rhine can vie. The lower reaches of the Danube, from BÁZIÁS to ORSOVA, are quite unrivalled in their majestic wildness. The mighty river, shut in by rocky passes, carves its way by sheer force, forming eddying whirlpools and rushing torrents in its rapid course. It was to Hungary and Hungarian engineers that Europe entrusted the glorious task of overcoming the dangers to navigation of this stretch of water and opening it to the traffic of the world.

All the mountains of Hungary do not belong to the system of the Carpathians. On the West three branches of the Alps enter Hungarian territory. One of these stretches along the shores of the Adriatic; a second extends east between the Save and the Drave; while the third flanks the long frontier line of the country between the Drave and the Danube, and after being intersected by the valleys of rivers and being reduced in many places to low-lying hills, ends at the Danube, in the neighbourhood of Budapest. This branch of the Alps stretching towards the East, near Visegrád faces the spur of the Carpathians which also extend right down to the Danube. This part of the river, the mighty stream of which is enclosed by wooded mountains, also offers a magnificent panorama.

That part of the country which extends along the right bank of the Danube, the Pannonia of the Romans, is generally speaking composed of gentle slopes and more extensive flatlands. Here are situated the two largest lakes in Hungary, the Balaton and the Fertő. The former occupies an area of 690 square kilometres and stretches 76 kilometres in length, from N. E. to S. W. Its banks are flanked by watering-places: and from the hills surrounding it rich vineyards smile down upon us. On the very edge of Lake Balaton rises the huge basalt cone of Mount Badacsony, which produces excellent wine: while in the background, other cones, which are also the outcome of volcanic forces, may be seen, each of them crowned with the ruins of a castle. The right bank of the Danube, the home of a culture that has lasted, practically without a break, for over 1500 years, is still the most cultivated district in Hungary. Its soil cannot indeed vie with the deep vegetable mould of the Lowlands (Alföld): but the long years of cultivation have not exhausted its fertility; and it still yields one of the largest averages of natural produce, a fact which testifies to a rational system of cultivation.

The Great Hungarian Lowlands (Alföld) are an enormous stretch of flat country with a surface of from 70 to 130 metres above the level of the sea. It occupies the central part of the country; to the South, it stretches right down to the frontier; and on the N. E., it penetrates a long way into the Carpathians. There are slight elevations scattered over the infinite expanse of flatland, above which, in the close heat of summer, the fairy-like phenomenon of the mirage may be seen hovering. Ever since the expulsion of the Turks, the depopulated Lowlands were mostly covered with pasture-lands and marshes. Its few inhabitants tended their flocks and cattle on the rich meadows: while the interminable rush-brakes of the flooded districts swarmed with myriads of water-fowl. Today the picture presented by the Lowlands is an entirely different one. Owing to the regulation of the rivers, the inundations

have disappeared ; ploughed lands stretch over the spots once occupied by pastures ; in the sandy districts we meet wealthy vineyards and extensive orchards ; and the confines of the more populous villages and towns are studded with white farm-houses.

The wide valleys and plateaus that skirt the Carpathians and the mountain ranges that in some places extend right into the heart of the country, into the large plains, are also well adapted for cultivation, in many parts for viticulture (the Hegyalja range that produces the world-famed Tokay wine is itself a spur of the Carpathians) ; but their natural wealth in wood, metals, and minerals predestines them as the home of industry, while the enormous water power available may also be employed for industrial purposes. The only things required are, capital and a spirit of enterprise.

Though the whole territory of Hungary falls within 44° and 49° (latitude) North, i. e. within the temperate zone, yet there are great divergencies between the various parts of the country in respect of mean, minimum, and maximum temperature. The mean annual temperature varies between 5·4° and 14·2° C. The highest mean temperature is in a little inlet of the shores of the Adriatic, in the neighbourhood of Fiume : while the lowest is to be found on the skirts of the Carpathians, particularly in the N. E. and N. The annual mean temperature is generally a high one in the Lowlands (Alföld), in the part of the Trans-Danubian district between Lake Balaton and the confluence of the Danube and Drave, and in the greater part of the territory lying between the Drave, the Danube, and the Save.

The monthly temperatures show considerable divergencies from the mean annual temperature. In January the temperature is highest in the western half of the country and lowers gradually towards the East. In July, on the other hand, it is highest on the sea-coast, and in the district between the southern frontier and the centre of the country on the right and left banks of the Tisza : though the greatest degree of warmth is to be found in the latter part.

In accordance with its situation on the Continent the climate of Hungary is characterised by extremes, — great heat in summer and extreme cold in winter. But enormous fluctuations have been observed in the same season, and actually in one and the same month.

In point of rainfall, there are great divergencies between the several parts of the country. At the foot of the N. E. Carpathians, there is an average annual rainfall of 1500 millimetres (59·055 inches) ; in the Carst (mountain) district near the Adriatic the average annual rainfall is more than 2000 millimetres (about 79 inches) : whereas in the Small Hungarian Lowlands it is only 500 millimetres, and in the Great Hungarian Lowlands (Alföld) about 600 millimetres. But even

this comparatively slight rainfall is not distributed uniformly : and it often happens that a long summer drought spoils the growth of late spring plants and vegetables. Yet the restorative power of Hungarian soil is wonderful : and crops that seemed completely done for have very often been entirely restored by one or two good showers.

Notwithstanding this fact, the dearth of rain in the Hungarian Lowlands (Alföld) is a great obstacle in the way of the complete success of agriculture, which depends in no small measure upon the existence of a large number of animals, a *conditio sine qua non* for which is the provision of fodder that requires an extensive rainfall. Until the regulation of the Tisza and its tributaries the Hungarian Lowlands were blessed with a far greater rainfall. The extensive inundations did much to produce rainfall and dew. Something should be done to remedy the defect by watering : only that all through summer there is not enough water in the fallen rivers to supply the ditches and troughs that would have to be used to feed the fields. Gigantic dams would have to be built among the hills to close the valleys and collect the enormous volume of water that rushes down in spring, when the snow melts, often causing the inhabitants of the villages that skirt the river banks to struggle desperately to preserve their goods from destruction by wave-beaten dykes.

A splendid field for the use of capital and technical genius is offered by the work of collecting all the waters that flow away, are wasted, and in many cases cause the gravest damage, and of supplying the Hungarian Lowlands with ditches and troughs for the object of watering the parched soil. A more profitable enterprise could scarcely be conceived : for it would transform the Hungarian Lowlands into the wealthiest land in Europe.

2. Historical Sketch. The political Status of Hungary.

The Hungarian Kingdom is one of the oldest states in Europe. With its present area, practically with the boundaries of its frontiers of today, it has existed, as a united National State, for over a thousand years.

The brave horsemen who founded a state at the foot of the Carpathians, started westwards from their home beside the Volga and the Don in the second half of the ninth century ; for their enterprise they replaced the ancient tribal organisation, with all its looseness, by a union of forces under the control of one leader, who later on assumed the dignity of a prince. In the history of Europe the Hungarians (Magyars) so feared for their gallantry and peerless military