

## Esztergom

Esztergom is a small city (30,000 inhabitants) in **northern Hungary**, about 60 km north-west of the capital Budapest. It lies in Komárom-Esztergom county, on the **right bank of the river Danube**, which forms the border with Slovakia there.

Esztergom is the seat of the primate (see Prince primate) of the Catholic Church in Hungary. The **Esztergom Christian Museum**, housed in the Primate's Palace, has the largest ecclesiastical collection in Hungary. Its cathedral, Esztergom Basilica is the largest church in Hungary.

One of the newest sights of Esztergom is the **Mária Valéria bridge**, connecting Esztergom with the village of Štúrovo (Párkány) in Slovakia. Originally it was inaugurated in 1895, but the retreating German troops destroyed it in 1944, and it was rebuilt in 2001 with the support of the European Union.

The **basilica**, that might be considered the symbol of the town is the greatest church in Hungary, **stands on the ruins of the old Saint Adalbert Church** founded by the first king, Stephen I. **It was built** according the plans of Pál Künchel, János Pach and József Hild **between 1822 and 1869**. Ferenc Liszt wrote the **Esztergom Mass** for this occasion. The classicist church has enormous physical features: the height of the cupola is 71,5 meters with giant arches and the enormous altar-piece of Michelangelo Greigoletti. To the side, in the Saint Stephen chapel, the glittering relics of Hungarian and other nations' saints and valuable jewellery can be seen. To the south, on display is the **Barkócz Chapel**, the one that remained from the middle ages. The builders of the Basilica disassembled the building into 1600 pieces, and built into the new church in its original form. **The treasury** gives home to the **masterpieces of medieval goldsmith work**. The western European masters' hands are praised by such items as the crown silver cross that has been used since the 13th century, the artistic goblets, Francesco Francia's processional cross, the upper front of the well-known 'Mathias-calvary' which is decorated by golden figures as well as several other items. Apart from these filigrees the treasury gives home to an enormous **collection of traditional Hungarian and European textile art**, including such items as chasubles, vestments and robes.

The sound of the bell hung in the southern tower can be heard from kilometers away. From the top of the large cupola, visitors can see a **breath-taking view**: to the north, east and south the ranges of the Börzsöny, Visegrád, Pilis and Gerecse mountains rule the landscape, while to the west, in the valley of the Danube one can see as far as the Small Plains.

The winding streets of the town, with its church towers create a historical atmosphere. **Below the Basilica**, at the edge of the mountain stand the old walls, bastions and rondellas – the **remains of the castle of Esztergom**. The remains of one section of the regal palace and castle that had been built during the Turkish rule had been buried in the ground up until the 1930s. **Most parts of the palace were explored and restored** in the period **between 1934 and 1938**, but even today there are archeological excavations in progress. Passing through the narrow stairs, alleys, under archs and gates built in Romanian style, a part of the past seems to come to life. **This part of the palace** was built in the time of Béla III. With his wife, Lajos VII's daughter arrived French architects, who constructed the late-Roman, early-Gothic building at the end of the 12th century. In the **chapel** frescoes of the 12th-14th centuries, while on the walls of the mottes, some of the most beautiful paintings of the early Hungarian Renaissance can be admired. From the terrace of the palace one can admire the landscape of Esztergom. Under the terrace are the houses and churches of the **Bishop-town section**, or 'Víziváros' (**Watertown**) and the Primate palace. Opposite the palace is the Saint Thomas hill, and surrounded by the mountains and the Danube. The walls of the castle still stand on the northern part of the Basilica. From the northern rondella one can admire the view of Párkány on the other side of the Danube as well as the Szentgyörgymező, the Danube valley, and the So-called 'Víziváros' (Watertown) districts.

The **Watertown section** was named after **being built on the banks** of the 'Kis- and Nagy Duna' (Small and Great Danube). Its fortresses, walls, bastions and Turkish rondellas can still be seen by the walk on the banks of the Danube. By the northern end of the wall, on the bank of the 'Nagy-Duna', an interesting memorial is put, a stone table with Turkish writings commemorates Sultan Suleiman's victorious siege of 1543. The narrow, winding streets within the walls hide the **remains of Turkish Jamis, and baths**. Along the delightful streets of the Watertown, surrounded by **Baroque and Classicist buildings** stand the **Primate palace** that was designed by József Lippert (1880-82). The world-famous Christian museum, founded by Bishop János Simor is located in this building. It houses a rich collection of Hungarian panel **pictures and sculpture of the Middle Ages** as well as Italian and western-

European paintings and handicrafts. This is where one can admire the chapel-like building of the late Gothic 'Úrkoporsó' from Galambszentbenedek that is decorated by painted wooden sculptures, and also, the altar-piece of Tamás Kolozsvári from the 15th century, the altar-pieces of M.S (1506) the gothic altars of the Felvidék, handicrafts of Italian, German and Flamand artists from the 13th – 17th centuries as well as gobelins and faience and porcellaine collections.

The building of the **Balassa Bálint Museum** that was built in Baroque style on medieval bases and is located in Víziváros (Watertown), served as the first town hall of Esztergom county after the Turkish had been driven out of the region. The **parish-church** in the centre of the Watertown, which was built by the Jesuits between 1728 and 38, and the single-towered Franciscan churches are also masterpieces of Baroque architecture.

The **Cathedral Library** standing in the southern part of the town, which was built in 1853 in accordance with the plans of József Hild is **one of the richest religious libraries of Hungary**, accommodating approximately 250,000 books, among which several codexes and incunabula can be found, such as the Latin explanation of 'Énekek Éneke' from the 12th century, the 'Lövvöldi Corvina' originating from donations of King Matthias, or the Jordánszky-codex, which includes the Hungarian translation of the Bible from 1516-1519. Along with Bakócz and Ulászló graduals, there is also the Balassa Bible, in which Balassa's uncle, Balassa András wrote down the circumstances of his birth and death.

The main sight of the nearby 'Szent-Tamás hegy' (**Saint Thomas Hill**) is the **Baroque Calvary**, with the Classicist chapel on the top of the hill, which was built to commemorate the heroes who died for Esztergom. The hill was **named after** a church built by Bishop Bánffy Lukács in memoriam the **martyr Saint Thomas Becket**, who had been his fellow student at the University of Paris. The church and the small castle the Turkish built there were destroyed a long time ago. On its original spot, the top of the hill, the narrow winding streets and small houses that were built by the masters who were working on the construction of the Basilica at the beginning of the previous century, have an atmosphere that is similar to that of Taban in Buda. At the foot of the hill are the swimming pool and the Classicist building of the **Bath Hotel**. This is where Kossuth Lajos stayed in 1848 on one of his recruiting tours. On the southern slopes of the hill there is a Mediterranean, winding path with stairs that lead to the Baroque Saint Stephen chapel.

The main square of the town is the **Széchenyi square**. Of the several buildings of Baroque, Rococo and Classicist style, there is one that catches everyone's eyes: the **Town Hall's building**. Originally, it used to be the single-floor curia of Vak Bottyán, the Kuruc general (1689). The first floor was constructed on its top in 1729. The house burnt down in the 1750s. It was rebuilt in accordance with the plans of a local architect, Antal Hartmann. Upon its façade there is a red marble carving which presents the coat of arms of Esztergom (a palace within the castle walls, protected by towers, with the Árpáds' shields below.) On the corner of the building the equestrian **statue of Vak Bottyán** (created by István Martsa) commemorates the original owner of the house. The **Trinity-statue** in the middle of the square was created by György Kiss in 1900. In Bottyán János Street, near the **Town Hall**, there are well decorated Baroque houses. This is where the Franciscan church is located which was built from 1700 to 1755. Opposite this building is the Baroque palace which used to belong to the Sándor Earl family.

In the direction of the Kis Duna, the **downtown parish-church**, built by the architect Ignác Oratsek can be admired. A bit farther is the Classicist **Saint Anna Church**. The **orthodox church** at 60 Kossuth Lajos street was built around 1770 by Serb settlers in Esztergom. This town, with its spectacular scenery and numerous memorials, a witness of the struggles of our history, is popular mostly with tourists interested in the beauties of the past and art. However, the town seems to regain its role in the country's politics, and its buildings and traditions revive.

### **History:**

Esztergom is one of the most historic towns in Hungary. Throughout the **rich history** of our town, times of bright kings, significant events, rich palaces and churches were followed by the massacre of vicious battles, the raids of Tatar and Turkish hords – devastation, followed by reconstruction. **The history of the town accumulates the history of the whole country.** There is not a single decade in the millenial Hungarian history without reference to Esztergom's name. **Where has this historical capital disappeared?** Where are its once-famous monuments?

The answer to these questions lies in our vicissitudinous history. **Esztergom, as it existed in the Middle Ages**, now rests in the ground, **under today's town**, and can only be accessed via archeological explorations, since the **old town was destroyed during the 150 years of Turkish rule**. Its residents were killed or imprisoned. Consequently, at those times of terror, everybody tried to flee the region. Following the defeat of the Turkish, the **new settlers** carried away the remains, and **built a new town**.

The results of the most recent archeological excavations reveal that the Castle Hill and its vicinity have been inhabited since the end of the Ice Age (20,000 years). The **first people known by name were the Celts from Western-Europe**, who settled in the region in about **350 B.C.** Under their centre on the Castle Hill (oppidum) lay their expansive flourishing settlement until the **Roman legions conquered the region**. Thereafter **it became an important border province of Pannonia**, known by the name of Solva. The German, Franc, and Avar items found in the area reveal that these people settled in the period of the migrations that were caused by the fall of the Roman Empire. Within the borders of the town, remains of our founding ancestors were found.

The settlement that was founded gained significance after 960 when **Géza chose Esztergom his residence**. His son, Vajk, who was later called **Saint Stephen the First, was born in his palace** built on the Roman castrum on the Castle Hill in about 969-975. At the same location, Géza built the the first church in the memory of Saint Stephen's martyrdom. In 973 Esztergom served as the starting point of an important historical event. At the Easter of that year Géza sent a committee to the international peace conference of Caesar Otto I. in Quedlinburg. He offered peace for the previous crusades, and asked for missionaries. **King Stephen**, to replace the old regal residence, **built a palace** on the southern side of the hill and a **basilica** in the middle of the hill, for Saint Adalbert the leader of the Hungarian church, the archbishop of Esztergom. By that time, significant craft and merchant settlements had been founded. (According to our researchers, the town got its name after Esztrogin, a Bulgarian-Turkish settlement of leather armour makers.) **In 1000 Stephen was crowned king here**. From the time of his rule up to the beginning of the 13th century, the only mintage of the country operated here. At the same period the **Castle of Esztergom was built**, which served not only as the regal **residence until 1241** (the Tatar invasion) but also as the center of the Hungarian state, religion, and Esztergom county. The archbishop of Esztergom was the leader of the ten bishoprics founded by Stephen.

The settlements of regal servants, merchants, craftsmen at the foot of the Castle Hill developed into the **most significant town of the Árpád-age** – as being the most important scene of the economic life of the country. According to the Frenchman Odo de Deogilo, who visited the country in 1147, ‘...the Danube carries the economy and treasures of several countries to Esztergom’. The town council was made up of the richest citizens of the town, (residents of French, Spanish, Belgian, and Italian origin) who dealt with commerce. The coat of arms of Esztergom emerged from their seal in the 13th century. **This was the town where foreign monarchs could meet Hungarian kings.** For example, Caesar Conrad II met Géza II. (1147) in this town. Another important meeting was when the German Caesar, Frigyes Barbarossa visited Béla III. The historians traveling with them all agree on the richness and significance of Esztergom. Arnold Lübecki, the historian with Frigyes Barbarossa, calls Esztergom the capital of Hungarian people. (...“quae Ungarorum est metropolis”...)

In the **beginning of the 13th century** Esztergom was the **center of the country’s political and economic life.** This is justified by the canon of Nagyvárád, master Rogerius, who witnessed the first devastation of the country during the Tatar invasion and wrote in his "Siralmas Ének": ‘...since there was no other town like Esztergom in Hungary, the Tatars were considering crossing the Danube to pitch a camp there...’, which was exactly what happened after the Danube froze. Our capital of the Árpád-age was destroyed in a vicious battle. Though, according to the certificates that remained intact, some of the residents (those who escaped into the castle) survived and new residents settled in the area and soon started rebuilding the town, it lost its leading role. **Béla IV, gives the palace and castle to the archbishops, and changed his residence to Buda.** He himself and his family however, were buried in the Franciscan church which had been destroyed during the Tatar invasion, and which had been rebuilt by himself. (1270). Following these events, **the castle was built and decorated by the bishops.** The center of the king’s town however, which is surrounded by wall, was still of regal authority. A number of different monasteries did return or settle in the religious center.

Meanwhile the citizenry had been fighting for maintaining or reclaiming the rights of towns, against the expansion of the church within the regal town. In the chaotic years **after the die out of the Arpad house,** Esztergom suffered another calamity: in 1304, the forces of Vencel I, the Czech king occupied and raided the castle. In the years to come, the castle was owned

by several individuals: **Róbert Károly, and then Lajos Nagy patronized the town.** In 1327, Kovácsi, the most influential outpart of the town, lying in the southeast, was joined to the town. The former outpart had three churches with mainly blacksmith, aurifex, and coiner residents.

**In the 14th and 15th centuries** Esztergom saw events of great importance and became one of the most influential **acropolis of Hungarian culture alongside with Buda.** Their courts, which were similar to the regal courts of **Buda and Visegrád, were visited by such kings and scientists, artists as** Lajos Nagy, Sigismund King Matthias, Galeotto Marzio, Regiomontanus, the famous astronomer, Márton Ilkus and Georg Peurbach, Pier Paolo Vergerio and Antonio Bonfini, King Matthias' historian, who, in his work praises the constructive work of János Vitéz, King Matthias' educator. He had a library and an observatory built next to the cathedral. As Bonfini wrote about his masterpiece, his palace and terraced gardens: '... he had a spacious room for knights built in the castle. In front of that, he built a wonderful veranda – loggia – of red marble, with a double balcony. To the front of the room, he built the chapel of Sibyls with pictures of each of them. On the walls of the knights' room, however one can find pictures of not only all the kings, but also the Scythian ancestors... he also had a double garden constructed, which was decorated with columns and a corridor above them. Between the two gardens, he built a round tower of red marble with several rooms and balconies. .. He had Saint Adalbert's Basilica covered with glass tiles... '. King Matthias' widow, Beatrix, lived in the castle of Esztergom for ten years (from 1490 to 1500).

The time of the next resident, **Bishop Tamás Bakócz** (-†1521) gave our town significant monuments. In 1507 he had Italian architects build the **Bakócz chapel**, which is said to be the most beautiful building of the Renaissance, the only one from the Middle Ages that endured over the centuries. The altar of the chapel was carved from red marble by Andrea Ferrucci, a sculptor from Fiesole in 1519.

**The Turkish conquest, the year 1526** marks the beginning of the decline of the previously flourishing Esztergom. In the battle of Mohács, the bishop died as well. **In the period between 1526 and 1543**, when there were **two kings in Hungary**, Esztergom was under siege six times. – once the forces of Ferdinand or János Szapolyai, at other times the Turkish attacked. Finally, in 1530, Ferdinand occupied the castle. He put foreign mercenaries in the

castle, and sent the chapter and the bishopry to Nagyszombat and Pozsony (that is why some of the treasury, the archives and the library remained intact). **In 1543 Sultan Suleiman attacked the castle** with an enormous army, and countless cannons. Following two years of heroic struggle of resistance, the foreign (Spanish, Italian and German) guards betrayed the castle. This was the period when the outskirts were finally destroyed. The damaged buildings were not rebuilt any more. All means were used to rebuild and strengthen the fortresses or to build new ones. At the same time, the eastern section of the Saint Adalbert Church and other significant buildings of the castle were devastated. **Esztergom was the centre of a Turkish sanjak** controlling several counties, and also a significant castle on the northwest border of the Turkish Empire – the main clashing point to prevent attacks on the mining towns of the highlands, Vienna and Buda. In 1594, at during the unsuccessful yet devastating siege by the walls of the Víziváros Balassa Bálint died in action, who was the first poet of our Hungarian lyre who gained European significance. The most devastating siege took place in **1595** when **the castle was reclaimed**. The price that had to be paid, however, was high. Most of the buildings in the castle and the town that had been built in the middle ages were destroyed during this period, and there were only uninhabitable, smothered ruins to welcome the liberators. From 1605 to 1683 the Turkish ruled in the castle, as well as the whole region again. Though the **Turkish** were mainly engaged in building and fortifying the castle, they also built significant new buildings including **Jamis, mosques, minarets, baths**. These instalments, along with the contemporary buildings, **were destroyed** in the siege of **1683** resulting in the **liberation of Esztergom**, - though some Turkish buildings prevailed up to the beginning of the 18th century. The last time the Turkish attacked Esztergom was in 1685. During the following year Buda was liberated as well. During these battles did János Bottyán, captain of the cavalry, later the legendary figure of the Rákóczi war of independence disappear. All that had been rebuilt at the end of the century was destroyed and burnt down during Rákóczi Ferenc's long lasting, but finally successful siege.

The destroyed territory **was settled in by Hungarian, Slovakian and German settlers**. This was when the new national landscape developed. In the area where there had previously been **65 Hungarian villages, only 22 were rebuilt**. Though the reconstructed town received its free regal right – its size and significance marked only the shadow of its old self. Handicraft gained strength: in around 1730, there were 17 independent crafts were operating in Esztergom. Wine-culture was also of major significance. This was also the period when the Baroque view of the downtown area and the Víziváros (Watertown) was developed. Its main



characteristic is the simplicity and moderateness of citizen Baroque architecture. The most beautiful buildings can be found around the market place (the Szécheny square). In 1761 the bishopry regained control over the castle, where they started the preliminary processes of the reconstruction of the new religious center: the middle of the Castle Hill, most of the remains of Saint Stephen and Saint Adalbert churches were carried away to provide room for the new cathedral. Although the major construction work and the resettlement of the bishopry (1820) play a significant role in the town's life, the pace of **Esztergom's development gradually slowed down**, and work on the Basilica came to a halt.

By the **beginning of the 20th century** Esztergom gained significance owing to its cultural and educational institutions as well as **being an administrative capital**. The town's situation turns on the worse **after the Trianon contract of 1920** according to which it becomes a **border town**, losing most of its previous territory. This was also the place where **the poet Mihály Babits spent his summers** from 1924 to his death in 1941. The poet's residence is one of the centers of the country's literary life. He had a significant effect on the intellectuals' life in Esztergom. One of the most important events of the 30's is the exploration and renovation of the remains of the palace of the Arpad period. This again put Esztergom in the center of attention.

**Following the Second World War**, Esztergom was left behind as one of the most severely devastated towns. However, reconstruction slowly managed to erase the traces of the war, with two of Esztergom's most vital characteristics gaining significance: due to its situation it was the **cultural center of the area**, (at its elementary, secondary schools and college **more than 8,000 students were educated**). On the other hand, as a result of the local industrial development it has become a vital **basis for the Hungarian tool and machinery industry**. Those traveling to Esztergom these days can admire the most monumental construction of Hungarian Classicism, the Basilica, which silently rules the landscape above the winding Danube, surrounded by mountains.

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**SOURCE:** Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esztergom>