

Hungary – people, culture, language

A guide for businesses

The country

Colourful cultural heritage: a distinctive language and unique traditions of music and dance bear witness to Hungary's rich and lively culture. Romans, Ottoman Turks and Austrian Hapsburgs have all left their traces on Budapest with its distinctive riverside panorama, a vivid mix of Roman amphitheatres, ancient Turkish baths and elegant Art Nouveau buildings.

Hungary today: Hungary's graceful capital Budapest is listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage City and has a lively arts, cafe and music scene. In the countryside you will find majestic plains, resort-lined lakes, Baroque towns, horse markets and rustic villages. The Danube once divided this ancient world; today it connects modern Europe. Canals linking the Rhine, Main and Danube provide a great waterway from the North Sea to the Black Sea.



Above, The Hungarian parliament building on the Pest side of Budapest.
EPA PHOTO / ATTILA KISBENEDEK

Key sectors: energy, machine, automotive, electronics, and pharmaceutical are the main sectors. There are growth opportunities in retailing, IT and telecommunications. Hungary is now a country looking for high-tech niche products and services.

People

■ **Population mix:** the Magyars (pronounced 'Mojors') are the majority; there is also a strong Roma base and a minority mix from the surrounding countries. 5 million Magyars live outside Hungary, 2 million of these in Romanian Transylvania.

■ **Religion:** Hungarians have a pragmatic view of religion. Of those declaring any affiliation, the split is broadly two-thirds Catholic, one-third Protestant. Churches are rarely full except on Saints' Days.

■ **Humour:** Hungarian humour is considered by many outsiders to be dark and somewhat morbid – which often means it does not translate well into other languages!



Above, Children from a local Kindergarden and their teachers entering the famous Budapest Zoo.
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Did you know..?

■ Two British men (Clark and Clark) designed and constructed the Chain Bridge linking the two parts of the Hungarian capital, Buda and Pest.

■ Hungary has produced the highest per-capita number of Nobel Prize winners worldwide, and two Hungarian scientists were part of the Manhattan Project that led to the development of the atomic bomb.

■ Hungarian inventors and innovators have discovered and invented many everyday items, including the ballpoint pen, matches, antiseptic and the telephone exchange.

■ Hungary was the first football team to defeat England at Wembley. They won 6-3 in 1953.



Above, The Chain Bridge over the Danube.
EPA PHOTO / ATTILA KISBENEDEK

Business culture and etiquette

■ **Formality:** Hungarian business culture is somewhat reserved, formal and polite, and feelings are not outwardly displayed. Hands are shaken on meeting and separating, even in informal social situations among friends.

■ **Titles:** 'Engineer' (*Ing.*), 'Doctor' (*Dr.*) and 'Director' (*Direktor*) are important and should be used where known. Owing to the very high science and technological base of Hungary, many people you meet will be 'Doctor'. Always use titles and surname until a) you know the person, b) they give you permission to use their first name, or c) they use your given name first.

■ **Names:** In Hungarian convention, surnames come first (Smith, John). In the larger cities, however, Western convention is sometimes followed. This can cause confusion with business cards! To overcome the difficulty, the surname is often printed in capitals. Alternatively, business cards may be double-sided, with Hungarian and Western conventions on each side.

■ **Conversation tips:** To avoid causing offence, it is wise to steer clear of conversations involving Russia, Comecon, or any of Hungary's past wars. Undue displays of wealth are also considered vulgar and are unlikely to impress.

Language

■ **Official language:** Hungarian (also called Magyar). Hungary is often described as a cultural and linguistic island in the centre of Europe. The Hungarian language is completely dissimilar from the languages spoken in neighbouring countries (German, Romance and Slavic).

In fact, it is a member of the Ugric branch of the Finno-Ugric languages. It has been influenced by a number of other languages, including Turkish, German, Latin, French, and several Slavic languages.

■ **Other languages:** English is now the principal business language, particularly in the capital Budapest. German, however, is the most widely-spoken foreign language in Hungary. All Hungarians over the age of 30 learned Russian at school for many years, but few retain any ability to speak the language and fewer still like to do so.



Above, A general view of Budapest with Hungarian parliament building on the far bank (Pest side). The parliament was built according to the plans of the famous local architect Imre Steidl between 1885 and 1906. EPA PHOTO / ATTILA KISBENEDEK

Basic Hungarian phrases

The positive impression you will make by learning to speak a few basic Hungarian phrases cannot be overestimated. Below are some commonly-used phrases – if you are interested in learning the Hungarian language, you can search for quality-assured trainers and courses at www.blis.org.uk.

	Hungarian	Pronunciation
Hello	Szervusz/szia	Servus/see ya
Good day/ morning	Jó reggelt kívánok	Yaw reggelt kivanok
Good evening	Jó napot kívánok	Yaw noppawt kivanok
Goodbye	Viszontlátásra	Vee-sawnt-la-tak-shro
Yes / no	Igen / Nem	Eegen / nem
Please / thank you	Kérem / Köszönöm	Kayrem / kusunum
Excuse me	Bocsánat	Bochsanat
My name is...	Vagyok...	Vodawk...
What's your name?	Hogy hívják?	Hawd hvyak

Food and drink

■ Hungarian food is very rich, and red meat is frequently used as an ingredient. Goulash (*gulyás*), bean soup with smoked meat (*jokai babeles*), and beef stew (*pörkölt*) are national dishes. The most distinctive element of Hungarian cuisine is paprika, a spice made from the pods of chilli peppers. Though paprika is not native to Hungary (it was imported either from Spain, India by way of the Turks, or the Americas), it is a fixture on most dining tables in Hungary and an important export. Among Hungary's spicy dishes are *halászlé*, a fish soup, and *lecsó*, made with hot paprika, tomato, and sausage.

■ Drinking is an important part of social life. Hungary produces good wine and fruit brandies, as well as excellent lager beers. Coffee is traditionally taken very strong and black, although other forms including cappuccino are now widely available. Tea will have lemon, honey or rum added (never milk).

■ Gratuities – it is customary to leave a tip of 10-12.5% in restaurants, cafes and bars, and a service charge is sometimes added to your bill. Never leave the tip on the table, as this is considered rude: just tell the waiter/waitress what to keep when settling the bill.

Festivals

Budapest Spring Festival (March): Hungary's major celebration, a two-week cultural extravaganza of local and international performances, conferences and exhibitions.

Budapest Film Festival (February): premieres new Hungarian films.

Busójárás (February): the nation's top Mardi Gras.

Sopron Festival Weeks (June/July): showcasing ancient music and dance performances.

Nagykálló (August): a folk arts festival and one of the biggest and best events of the year.

Debrecen (September): Hungary's top jazz festival.

Signposting and resources

■ **BLIS Professionals** (www.blis.org.uk/professionals) – an on-line, quality-assured database of translators, interpreters, language trainers and cultural consultants in your area. You can search for BLIS providers offering Hungarian language services to companies in the East Midlands.

■ **Resources** and organisations for more information: Euro Information Centre www.euro-info.org.uk
Hungarian Chamber of Commerce www.mkik.hu/eng
Hungarian Embassy www.hungaryweb.co.uk
British Embassy in Hungary www.britishembassy.hu

Sources

Research and text: Central European Development Agency (CEDA) www.consultceda.co.uk
Language Network Northern Ireland www.ln-northernireland.com
Regional Language Network East Midlands www.rln-eastmidlands.com
Foreign & Commonwealth Office www.fco.gov.uk
Photographs: European Commission www.europa.eu.int

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