



AllWays Traveller

Košice, Slovakia

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## Savouring time in Slovakia's second city and its region

**Košice is situated on the river Hornád at the eastern reaches of the Slovak Ore Mountains, near the border with Hungary.**

The city, which is Slovakia's second city after its capital Bratislava, has a well-preserved historical centre with buildings in Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, and Art Nouveau styles.

After centuries of prosperous importance as a major trading post, Košice suffered a steep decline during the two World Wars followed by 50 years of communist austerity and an uncertain aftermath.

The turning point came, in 2008, when Košice was designated the European Capital of Culture for 2013.

This has provided the incentive, and indeed a springboard, for the city to plan its resurgence as a visitor destination.

As a result, travellers are once again passing through this city and discovering the welcome that awaited those who did the same centuries before.

### **Ashley Gibbins**

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Marek Zalibera



### A sumptuous, sad and fascinating past



By Ashley Gibbins

**It is always good to know at least a little about a destination, where it has come from, what it has been through and where it is heading.**

This is particularly the case with Košice, whose position in eastern Europe has bestowed upon it a history that is grand and traumatic in equal measure.

Viera Nemcokova, our oh so knowledgeable tour guide got it right when she said "Košice has had a sometimes sad but always interesting history".

Košice, then part of Hungary, grew to prominence in the 13th century.

This was due to its strategic location on the international trading route that connected the Balkans and the Adriatic and Aegean seas to the Baltic Sea.



### The Košice Welcome Card

The one, two and three day *Košice Welcome Card* offers free entrance or discounted offers at museums, restaurants, wine shops and cafés in the city.

It also gives free travel on public transport.

The card is available from the Visitor Centre on Hlavná Street or at the Hotel Bankov.

### The European Capital of Culture

European Capital of Culture status has done wonders for Košice.

In the first place it gave a focus to the need - and potential - for the city to undertake a planned regeneration, rejuvenation and renaissance after years of repression as part of the one time Soviet bloc of Eastern European communist countries.

The European Capital of Culture is a city designated to be so by the European Union.

For one calendar year the designated city organises a series of cultural events with a strong European dimension.

Preparing for European Capital of Culture status can invariably be a catalyst for the city to establish partnerships that will develop cultural, social and economic initiatives of lasting benefit.

This has certainly been the case with Košice.

Public and private sector partners came together in a joint investment in infrastructure and events.

And though its time as Capital of Culture has come and gone, the legacy permeates the city in the arts, entertainment, culture and welcome the city now offers visitors.

[www.ec.europa.eu/culture](http://www.ec.europa.eu/culture)

## A wealthy, cosmopolitan city



The wealthy traders and merchants living here, or passing through, made the city a cosmopolitan centre of prominence and prosperity.

This was recognised in 1369, when Košice was granted its own coat of arms from Louis I of Hungary - the first of its kind.



The city's wealth, during the 14th Century, also provided the resourced needed to build the inspiring St. Elisabeth Cathedral.

By the 15th Century, Košice was one of the largest, richest cities in Europe and part of the Austria-Hungary Empire.

### Conflict and decline

A succession of conflicts in the region however, and the development of other trade routes took its toll on Košice and the city began a slow and gradual decline.

By World War One and the collapse of the Austria-Hungary Empire, Košice was a city that had seen far better days.

And the 20th Century offered little respite.

At War's end in 1918, the city first became a part of the Eastern Slovak Republic before quickly being absorbed into the new Czechoslovakia.

Within two decades the country faced German invasion and occupation, and the city was returned to Hungary.

Košice was 'relieved' by the Soviet Red Army, in January 1945 and became part of a democratic Czechoslovakia once again.

But three years later the Communist Party seized power, Czechoslovakia became part of the Soviet Bloc and endured 45 years of suppressed austerity.

In 1989 the so-named *Velvet Revolution* restored democracy to Czechoslovakia followed, in 1992, by the *Velvet Divorce* and the separating of the Czech and Slovak Republics.

With Slovakia now embracing Western Europe and the European Union, Košice saw the chance to regain economic prosperity and cultural prominence.

### European Capital of Culture

A pivotal moment came, in 2008, when it secured European Capital of Culture status, with the celebrations taking place in 2013.

This brought cross sector partners together with the one aim of making Košice a city that warranted a visit both during the year of culture itself and beyond.

The events, activities and initiatives that were rolled out during 2013 are the same that now provide much to enjoy during a short break to the city.

### The Eastern Slovak Museum

The Eastern Slovak Museum houses the *Gold Treasure of Košice*, one of the largest and the richest finds of gold coins.

This consists of 2,920 pieces of gold coins, ducats, double ducats, three golden medals and a renaissance golden chain.

Hidden for reasons unknown, the hoard was discovered in 1935 during renovation work at a building in Main Street.

### St. Elisabeth Cathedral (Dóm sv. Alžbety)



Construction of the gothic Cathedral started around 1380 and is one of the finest examples of its kind in Europe.

Inside the Cathedral is the medieval Altar of St. Elisabeth, the crypt of Francis II Rákóczi, the leader of the biggest anti-Habsburg uprising in the former Kingdom of Hungary, and a sundial from 1477.

The frescos and sculpting which adorn both the interior and exterior of the Cathedral, are the work of master Štefan, a local artist and date from the 15th century.

# A short break in Košice

By Ann Mealor

**The very impressive city of Košice has much to offer the visitor who is looking for a relaxing weekend break with good food wine and the opportunity to explore interesting narrow side streets and courtyards.**

On day one of your visit, get acclimatised by first strolling around the city.

The two main streets showcase interesting and colourful architecture and there is a small, but picturesque park with a large and elaborate water fountain.

Also to see of course is the magnificent Gothic cathedral and an array of shops that are tucked away inside rows of historical buildings.

Everywhere is exceptionally clean and tidy.

## Morning at the market

The first morning call should be to the colourful outdoor market which opens every day during spring and autumn.

Selling fruit, vegetables, flowers, home made food and other products, it is full of sound, smells, hustle and bustle.

## Coffee and cakes



Once you have finished browsing and sampling the local produce, head for a coffee shop.

Košice has a wonderful eclectic mix of quirky cafes, many in bohemian style, and very good places to sit, relax and watch the world go by.

Lattes, cappuccinos, Americano's, liqueur coffees and a range of teas and pastries are on offer at very reasonable prices - plus free wifi is available in most of them.

English is widely spoken, so you should have not problem ordering.

## On the craft trail

Hlavna Ulica (Main Street) has all the usual stores selling clothes, shoes, books, jewellery etc.

However, more interesting shopping can be found in the medieval part of town.



On the craft trail

The historic Crafts Lane is quaint and cobbled with small artisan boutiques and workshops running down either side.

As doors are kept shut, the shops can appear to be closed, but don't be afraid to try the handles and go in.

Once inside, you can see original metalwork, potters at their wheel, handmade pottery and beautifully designed cards.

Bread, herbs, leather bags and handmade jewellery can all be bought here and it is a pleasure just to browse.

## Lunch time

For a well deserved lunch break there any number of good quality restaurants to choose from, all serving a range of traditional Slovak, Italian, European, Hungarian or Mediterranean dishes.

I chose traditional Slovak dishes and really enjoyed them all.

*Bryndzove halusky*, a sheep cheese pasta, similar to gnocchi served with sour cream and chopped bacon and *Bryndzove pirohy* a ravioli pasta filled with sheep's cheese were delicious, filling and very good value.

## Where to eat and drink

### Villa Regia



Villa Regia is a charming restaurant in the centre of town and is the ideal place to sample Slovak fayre *writes Ann Mealor*.

Wooden tables, embroidered table clothes, wooden floors and ceilings, dried flowers and open brickwork all add to the traditional Slovak dining experience.

When dining here, I tried the mixed sharing platter of chorizo sausage (Klobasa) and stringy cheese (Nitovky). For the main course I ordered roasted filet of Pike Perch - everything was delicious, including the wines, which were from a local vineyard.

[www.villaregia.sk](http://www.villaregia.sk)

### Vinoteka Villa Cassa



If you fancy a night-cap, or an after dinner glass of red or white, take a stroll over to Vinoteka Villa Cassa *writes Ann Mealor*.

It has an excellent selection of regional wines that can be drunk on the premises then bought from the well stocked wine shop afterwards.

They also serve delicious olives, cheese and prosciutto.

Villa Cassa has a lively and friendly atmosphere and popular with locals, making it the place to make new acquaintances and find out more about the city.

[www.villacassa.sk](http://www.villacassa.sk)

## Wonderful people, wonderful wine



**If you are able to add a couple more days to a trip this will open up the Košice region of Slovakia, which offers a different layer of delights writes Ashley Gibbins.**

There are six UNESCO Heritage Sites and two national parks, the winemaking region of Tokaj, where we went, and a collection of castles and stately homes, and medieval towns,

Also to be seen are mountain ranges and a stunning collection of cave.

After the fine time in Košice city we headed off on a 90 minute drive to spend two days and one night in the Tokaj wine region of south eastern Slovakia.

This was equally as enjoyable with communities of wonderful people producing really wonderful wine - as their forebears have done for generations.

The area itself comprises seven communities and just 907 hectares of vineyards.

And apart from a small number of larger producers, the majority of these wine makers are single families making just enough wine to meet the needs of family and friends.

And for offering a glass or two or three, with a hand of friendship, to visitors like us.

### **Wine making through the centuries**

Tokaj wine has been produced in this region for over 800 years.

And since the middle ages, each year's vintage has been stored in a vast network of deep underground cellars, which were carved out of solid rock between the early 15th and late 17th Centuries.



These spread out from clusters of small entrances built into the hillside.

The cellar walls are covered with a strange mould that feeds off the alcohol evaporated during the wine ageing process.

### **Perfect conditions**

This serves to keep the humidity between 85-90% and, being deep underground, the temperature remains a constant 10-12°C - the perfect environmental combination for storing wines.

The major annual events in Kosive are :

### **The Košice Food Festival**

June



The Košice Food Festival in the Botanical Gardens, brings together the best restaurants and hotels in Košice and well-known Slovak chefs, bartenders and sommeliers.

### **The Košice Wine Festival**

September

This annual festival, in the city's Botanical Gardens, brings together top winegrowers from Slovakia and internationally.

In particular there is the chance to savour excellent wines from the Tokaj, Eger and Eastern-Slovak regions.

### **Nuite Blanche (White Nights)**

The first week in October

Nuite Blanche is a festival of light that sees Slovak and foreign artists presenting outdoor contemporary art installations of music and light

The event makes for wonderfully entertaining night walks through the city centre.

### **The International Peace Marathon**

October

The Košice Peace Marathon, which has been run since 1924, is one of Europe's oldest and largest.

## The choice of royalty



Tokaj wines have long been favoured by Europe's elite and royalty including Louis XIV of France, who served it in the Palace of Versailles, and by the Russian Tzar's.

We were equally honoured to be able to drink Tokaj wine in the company - and in the cellars - of some of the families who now produce it.

The journey to each cellar, however, can be a somewhat precarious one with a steep climb down through a small, chilly, rudimentary lit tunnel leading into the equally dank and dark cellar.

### A family love affair

This is where a family's supply of wine for the year will be stored, in barrels for daily use and bottles for the best of the vintage.

There might be an electric bulb to see by, although the atmosphere is more usually enhanced by candle light.

And it is here, in one of the least salubrious 'wine bars' imaginable, that we enjoyed one of the most memorable experiences.

Each of the wines for tasting will be sucked, by capillary action, from its barrel into a glass tube with a bulbous end that holds the wine until it is poured.

Each family will devote much time and great care in growing their grapes and producing their wine - and will also take real pride in allowing visitors personal tastings.

With little English spoken by our hosts and even less Slovakian spoken by us, there was much 'umming' and 'air kiss' blowing, broad grinning and favourable nodding as we tasted the selection of wines from each of our hosts.

And deservedly so. Tokaj wine, which is white, and ranges from medium dry to sweet, is light, fruity, fresh and delicious.



### Open all night

While in the area we were also lucky enough to catch an 'open cellar night' in one of the villages.

Of the 26 or so cellars in the village, 17 took part in what was an extraordinary 'wine crawl, from one to another.

Candlelit, and with small wooden tables for guests, each participating cellar owner offered tastings of their wines, with local cheeses and meat, to friends and a few lucky visitors like us.

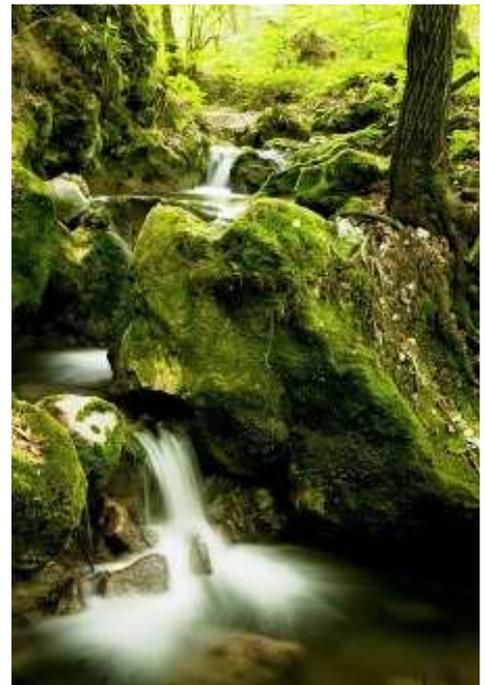
As the evening wore on and the wines flowed there was much merriment and good natured ribbing of us and the English football team (who had not fared well, to say the least, in the 2014 World Cup).

But our hosts would then search in mouldy corners to find that very special bottle of wine.

The 'travelling' band would arrive, cram in to a cellar and entertain with Slovak folk tunes on guitar and accordion.

While this evening was a simple get together for the villagers, it was an unforgettable and very special experience for us and one we felt privileged to be able to attend.

## A glimpse of the Košice region



Images by Project KUFOR

### More information

[www.visitkosice.eu](http://www.visitkosice.eu)

[www.kosiceregion.com](http://www.kosiceregion.com)

## A snapshot of Slovakia



### AllWays traveller and the International Travel Writers Alliance



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[www.allwaystraveller.com](http://www.allwaystraveller.com)



#### The International Travel Writers Alliance

The International Travel Writers Alliance is the world's largest association of professional travel journalists.

[www.itwalliance.com](http://www.itwalliance.com)

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Ashley Gibbins



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