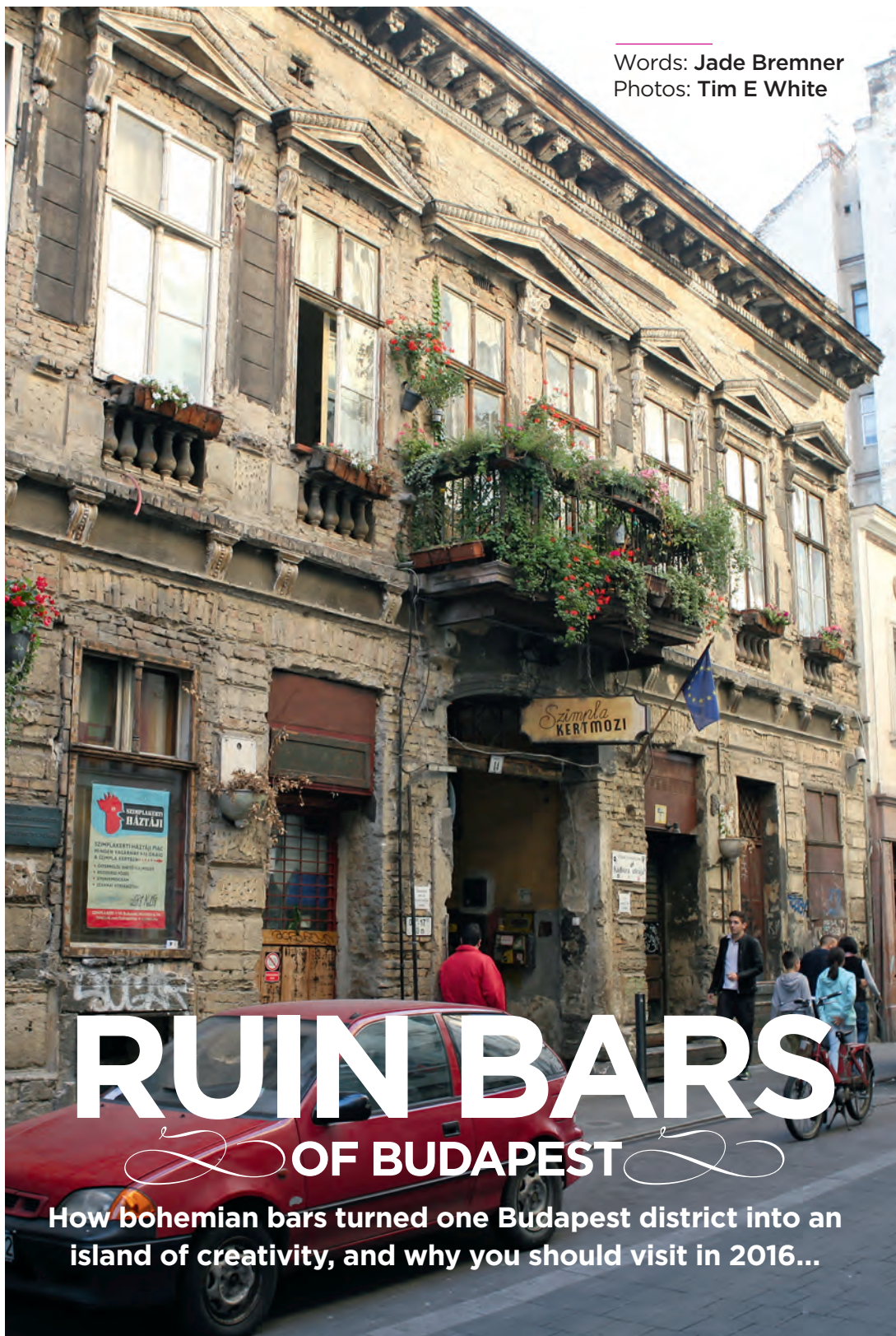


Words: Jade Bremner
Photos: Tim E White



RUIN BARS

OF BUDAPEST

How bohemian bars turned one Budapest district into an island of creativity, and why you should visit in 2016...



The many faces and experiences at Budapest's most famous ruin bar, Szimpla. Tourists can sit in a painted Trabant car, while a temporary art exhibition graces the walls. On Sunday, the bar turns into a farmers' market where locals sell organic produce from the nearby area



Out of the wreckage of Budapest an icon has risen. It may not be a state museum or fancy art gallery, but Budapest's ruin bars are now one of Hungary's most-loved attractions. While these grottos of peculiar décor and art may be new to wide-eyed tourists, the truth is locals have been visiting ruin bars for more than a decade. These welcoming watering holes have helped form a district of creativity and liberalism.

Less than 15 years ago Budapest's Jewish Quarter (district VII) was avoided by many, its derelict buildings standing as a reminder of World War II. Things started to change when a young entrepreneur named Ábel Zsendovits rented an empty ruin in 2002 and named it Szimpla (meaning 'simple'). It became *the* place in town for artistic types, DJs and creatives to meet.

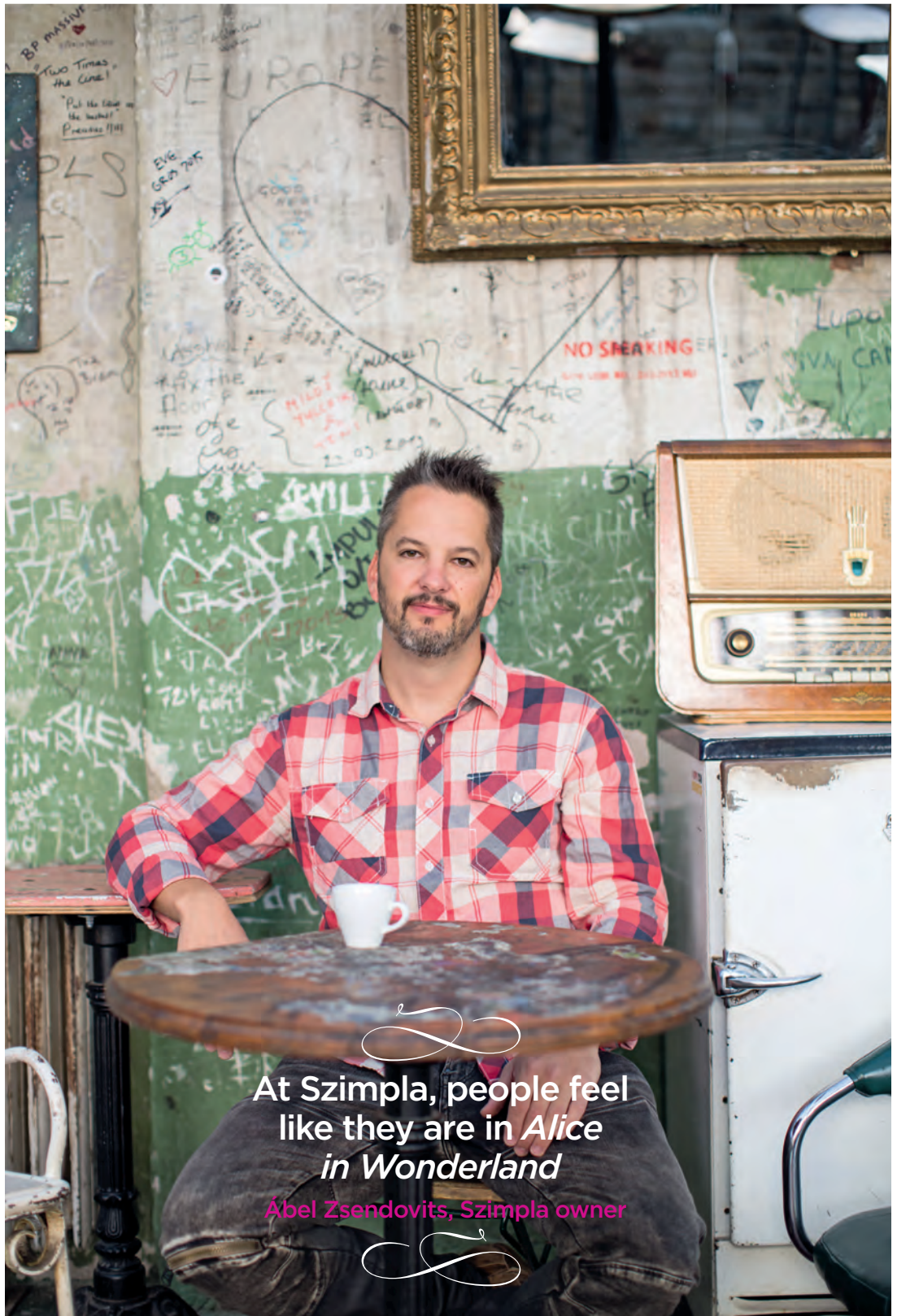
As we walk towards Hungary's most famous pub through a quiet street with boarded-up properties and graffiti covering the doorways, local guide Attila Höfle explains how Budapest's district VII was an eerie place a decade ago. "Nobody would come here; it was a ghost town in the centre of the city," he says.

Today, this area of Budapest is dotted with boutique shops, cafés, street-food outlets and 250 different bars, 30 of which are considered ruin bars and occupy derelict, abandoned, unassuming buildings. "People say Budapest is the new Berlin," says Höfle, who runs →



SZIMPLA

Look out for a new light show in 2016, projecting art onto the walls. There will also be even more installations next year, as the store on the ground-floor level will be moved into the basement to create more space. Plus, keep your eyes peeled for a Szimpla restaurant. "It will be the same style, but a higher level, with local food and producers," reveals Zsendovits. "It will be a little secret room of 200sqm with an interesting and undiscovered vibe." szimpla.hu



At Szimpla, people feel
like they are in *Alice
in Wonderland*

Abel Zsendovits, Szimpla owner

cultural tours to the city's most avant-garde hubs.

"District VII is like a year-round festival," explains Imola Elek, the owner of a colourful ruin bar named Kőleves Kert (Stone Soup Garden). "This area has changed a lot. Nowadays, it is full of young people."

JUNK-SHOP TAVERNS

Szimpla Kert, as the bar stands today, is housed in a classic 130-year-old property. The façade remains unaltered, with chipped bricks and plaster, ornate mini-balconies and original windows. Only a small brown sign alludes to what's inside – a world of secret rooms and carefully crafted installations. We step into the bar's notorious junkyard corridor, where road signs, guitars, a bass drum and mirror balls are hanging from the ceiling. Industrial piping snakes around the objects and guests sit on vintage chairs. Some peruse a jukebox, others relax in a cushioned bathtub.

"People feel like they are in *Alice in Wonderland*," says owner Ábel Zsendovits. "There's a huge team now running Szimpla, fixing and adding to the installations. And we let the people change the place, write on the walls, bring things to add to it like artwork and furniture. Szimpla is part of the community."

Adjacent to the corridor is a TV room with a dozen screens tangled in a mass of fairy-lit wires. We push buttons on a control panel and mechanical parts move, lights flash, a suspended hairdryer starts blowing. "The design is constantly changing and evolving," says Zsendovits, who has only one rule: "Everything in Szimpla has to be a reused item," whose purpose is then cleverly reimaged to give it a new lease of life. He points to a 1960s Orion radio behind us. "It's a vintage radio, but we put a new speaker in it, while under it is an old fridge we store luggage in."

In the building's courtyard, bikes and chairs dangle from a wire mesh and a painted Trabant car doubles as furniture. Unlike Berlin, East London or New York's Williamsburg, there's an unpretentious atmosphere, despite the hipster feel of →



FOGAS KERT

The bar is set to get a roof, so no matter the weather revellers will still be able to enjoy the courtyard. Fogas is also creating a special club for university students with a membership card that gets them cheap prices on food and drink. fogashaz.hu



Guests at Fogas Kert enjoy the bar's courtyard, as a DJ plays electro beats and live performances run through the night



When we started, we just had a room, a bar and two miniature speakers

Patrik Náda, owner of Fogas Kert



the place. People of all races and ages are drinking at high tables, and dozens of languages resonate in the air. “We run a full house every day,” explains PR manager Barna Vendely. “It’s a melting pot of culture. Tourists arriving straight from the airport with their luggage is a daily occurrence.” Now on most travel itineraries, Szimpla might as well be the Eiffel Tower of Budapest. It stands as a beacon for what the district has become.

CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE

Following Szimpla’s success 10 years ago, other ruin bars started to emerge, bringing energy and vibrancy back to depressed and neglected areas of the city. Each has a different personality and style. “I belong to that old generation of ruin bar owners,” explains Elek, who opened her seasonal Kőleves courtyard bar seven years ago. “The first bars were opened with enthusiasm. They were opened because they were fun, nice, cute places to hang out. Their owners still have the same mentality,” she says.

“When we started, we just had a room, a bar and two miniature speakers,” explains Patrik Náda, the owner of Fogas Kert, a huge courtyard ruin bar. “Initially, we asked everyone to bring their own furniture,” he smiles. “At the start, it was really hard to get people to come to this area of the city,” but six years later, his humble venture has turned into a mini-empire, including a beautiful restaurant with wrought-iron furniture, a vintage designer clothes shop, and a techno club – with bizarre elements including a mirrored room with strobe lights going off.

It’s obvious that design is hugely important to Budapest’s ruin bar scene. “We renew the design every two years,” explains events manager Adrián Fülöp, who helped to launch Instant, the city’s largest ruin bar, seven years ago. We chat at his venue under a giant owl attached to the wall and an installation with rabbits leaping through the air. “Instant started out like a squat party. Then we began collaborating with artists, sculptors and graphic designers,” he says. “At the →

WHERE TO REFUEL



Soul Food

It’s one of Europe’s best Creole street-food joints, and fittingly for the name, chef Peter Nagy really puts his heart and soul into it. Expect tangy jambalaya, steak sandwiches with meat marinated for 100 hours, and a moreish three-cheese sauce. You won’t find food like this anywhere else in Hungary. Dishes from €5. [facebook.com/soulfoodbp](https://www.facebook.com/soulfoodbp)



Ricsi's

Jewish street food at its best, dishes include Ashkenazi knish (puff-pastry stuffed with lamb or potato), *cholent* (traditional stew, usually cooked for 12 hours and typically eaten on Shabbat), and our favourite by far, the *tabbouleh* with succulent lamb, drizzled with lemon. Dishes from €2. [facebook.com/ricsistreetfood](https://www.facebook.com/ricsistreetfood)

Karavan

This outdoor street-food complex (in a heated tent during winter) sells homemade burgers and pizza, as well as mac-and-cheese and crepes, starting from the bargain price of €2.50, open until 2am at the weekends. streetfoodkaravan.hu



NEW YEAR'S AT INSTANT

If you're looking for a non-stop party to usher in 2016, this is the place to go – the party lasts for four consecutive days, until 12pm on January 1st, and will have the usual mixture of music to suit every taste. instant.co.hu



Instant started out like a squat party. Then we began collaborating with artists, sculptors and graphic designers

Adrián Fülöp, event manager



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moment we have a forest theme,” he explains, while pointing to the oddities before me. Instant has four dance floors and room for 1,300 revellers, who come to experience everything from drum-and-bass, minimal and dubstep to slam poetry nights, theatre performances and acoustic sessions. “There’s no doubt that ruin bar culture has helped to increase the art scene,” urges Fülöp. “There was always an artistic community in Budapest, but the ruin bars help to express this.”

“We try and give as much back to the community as we can,” agrees Szimpla’s Vendely, who runs a flea market, open-air cinema, and popular farmers’ market.

THE FUTURE OF RUIN BARS

Despite their efforts, the owners say survival hasn’t been easy. “Ruin bars are part of the city’s identity; they’re very unique,” explains Höfle. “On the one hand, ruin bars are great for the local economy. On the other hand, if you live here it can get very crowded and noisy.”

In 2013, complaints from residents nearly prompted a 12am curfew for ruin bars, which owners believe would have crushed the ruin bar scene. The ruin bars joined together and showed the municipality that the economic benefits outweighed the disturbances. “We have to pay a new tax now, but at least we’re allowed to stay open,” explains Zsendovits. Yet, as ruin bars rent the spaces they are in, not everyone is convinced the troubles are over. “The ruin bar scene is unstable,” says Elek. “You never know. These buildings have owners – you don’t know what investor will come along and what ideas they will bring,” and she says. “The local government may have plans for an area.”

The bars’ pop-up and temporary feel is part of their attraction; who knows which ones will survive. “Probably a couple of ruin bars will disappear in Budapest,” predicts Elek. “Today, Szimpla is part of our national heritage,” says Vendely. “Our task now is to keep it safe.” One thing is for sure: the gentrification of the area is bringing a new kind of ruin bar. →

District VII is like a year-round festival

Imola Elek: ruin bar owner



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Horizont Japán Búza
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Keserű Mész
Meaning ‘Bitter Honey’, this is a strong, unfiltered, unpasteurised lager, bright yellow and opaque in colour, with a thick white head.



Távoli Galaxis
A drier and lighter IPA beer, the unique flavour with tropical fruity aromas comes courtesy of the Australian Galaxy hop.

A NEW BREED OF RUIN BAR

British ruin bar owners William Clothier and Peter Grundberg have lived in Budapest for 10 years and have watched the scene evolve. They recently opened Brody Studios and Brody House, reinventions of the archetypal ruin bar.

“It’s a shabby-chic members’ arts club where we offer cocktails, culture and social happenings within a bohemian environment,” says Clothier. For a fee, people can enjoy art events, live music and literary dinners with other people who have ‘matured’ since ruin bars first opened. AnKER’T is another space that has played with the traditional ruin bar concept. Housed in a former factory, the sleek minimalist monochrome design is an achingly cool hangout spot that holds events like upmarket fashion shows.

“I suspect that the original ‘ruinites’ are less excited about warm beer and sticky floors, and welcome more gourmet elements to the scene,” says Grundberg. “We have tried to bridge the gap between the boho crowd and those looking for something smarter.”

This view has split many ruin bar owners. “Lots of the ruin bars have stretched the concept of a ruin bar; they are getting fancier and fancier,” says Fülöp, with a hint of disdain. “They are not as underground. They have white walls and perfect angles... You could live in them.”

“But competition is healthy,” admits Náda from Fogas Kert. “The ruin bar scene is evolving and becoming more diverse all the time, as is the city,” agrees Grundberg. Organic and constantly moving, Budapest’s bohemian landscape will continue to grow if supported by the local community. “These spaces are symbols of free thinking and free spirits, a source of creativity,” adds Grundberg. “The community needs such things to help improve its prospects and make it a more attractive place to visit or live.” There’s no better time than 2016 to see it, and show your support. ■



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UNUSUAL DIGS



Street apartment

Mirroring the bright painted walls of the city, this colourful apartment is splashed with murals designed by Hungarian graffiti artists. Guests will find a dismantled Trabant-style vehicle and pinball machine in this fun flat. Sleeps six people, from €90 per night. airbnb.com



Skater's lair

Get on board with the recycling vibes of Budapest by staying in this little apartment with chairs and stairs made from decks, cupboard handles made of skate wheels and old records on the wall. Sleeps two to four people, from €46 per night. designapartments.hu



Design retreat

Sleek urban-salvage is the theme of this uber-cool hideaway, with treasures like vintage typewriters and travel cases strewn about the place. The owners will even let you borrow their bicycle so you can explore the city. Sleeps two people, from €73. airbnb.co.uk



Newer additions to Budapest's ruin bar scene include AnKER'T, housed in a former factory (top right), and Brody Studios (right and bottom right), offering an upmarket shabby-chic feel. Visitors to AnKER'T (in black and white) and a waitress serving popular Greek liqueur Metaxa





**HOW TO LEARN
MORE ABOUT
RUIN BARS**

If you'd like to delve a little further into Budapest's ruin-bar and cultural scene, book an informative tour with local guide Höfle Attila, who'll take you to see hidden street art, local design galleries, funky coffee shops and reveal the history of the city's cool bars. Tours from £25 per person. budapestflow.com

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