

HUNGARY: HORTOBÁGY

Hortobágy is not only part of Europe's Great Plains region, the largest uninterrupted natural grassland in Europe, but also the place of herdsmen who have preserved a very ancient way of life. The outstanding landscape of Hortobágy, known as puszta, in eastern Hungary is a unique example of the harmonious coexistence of people and nature. Through the considerate use of the land, both the diversity of species and habitat have been preserved. Traditional Hungarian domestic animals (nonius horse, Hungarian grey cattle, racka sheep, water buffalo, mangalica pig), as well as herdsmen, shepherds and horsemen are a regular part of the landscape.

Herdsmen – an age old way of life

The customs, festivities and gastronomy of Hortobágy herdsmen have endured through the centuries. 200 families still perpetuate the traditional way of life and there is now a famous centre for horse breeding which tells of the 300 years of the Máta stud. Visitors can discover more about this living heritage through the national herdsmen competition and the Hortobágy international equestrian days as well as through the herdsmen's museum.

Protected areas – Hortobágy National Park

The Hortobágy national park, encompassing 80 000 hectares, is Hungary's largest protected area. One of the most amazing sights in the park are its birds – flocks of migrating birds such as geese, cranes and shore birds can be spotted around the park. A major part of the national park is formed by natural habitats, alkaline grasslands and meadows, with marshes enclosed between them as a result of the water's shape.

Architectural attractions – Hortobágyi Csárda

Hortobágy used to be a commercial crossroads and today provides many related attractions. The Hortobágyi Csárda is the most valuable architectural monument of Hungarian catering trade. Dating back to 17-18th centuries, it was rebuilt several times and is now a folk baroque style building. The Csárda serves its guests with local dishes made from selected, organic ingredients.

The herdsmen's museum was used for storing the carts of the guests staying in the Csárda. Now it provides a comprehensive overview of the history, and of the natural and cultural treasures of Hortobágy, as well as of herdsmen traditions.



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Craftsmanship in action – Körszín museum

The Körszín (circular house) museum is unique for the tableau-like demonstrations of traditional craftsmanship. Different handicrafts can be bought here.

Flora and fauna – Hortobágy's rare breeds

The rare breed park is an open-air exhibition of traditional Hungarian domestic animals, such as the nonius horse, Hungarian grey cattle, water buffalo, racka sheep, mangalica pig. The Hortobágy visitor and educational centre exhibition presents the rich flora and fauna of the national park by means of interactive multimedia tools. The centre houses a tourist information office and handicraft workshops.

There are many other interesting activities for tourists like the Hortobágy international workshop for painters, the international workshop for creative art, the exhibition of Hungarian grey cattle breed history or the photo exhibition of the herdsmen's living heritage.

Fairs and events

The Hortobágy hosts a wide range of popular events, many of which relate to the herdsmen. There are 'driving-in' and 'driving-out' celebrations which relate to the herdsmen's activities and take place at the end of the fall and the beginning of the spring.

- » Herdsmen's festival – Hortobágy international equestrian days: for decades, the festival aims to preserve the noble traditions of Hungarian equestrian culture.
- » Hortobágy bridge fair: this outstanding event of livestock farming and the biggest animal fair is also a gathering place for craftsmen and professionals of folk culture.
- » Festival of the cranes: one of the most spectacular phenomena of autumn is the arrival of tens of thousands of cranes in Hortobágy that can be seen every October as they fly above the grasslands to their overnight roosting places.
- » Palace garden evenings: this one-week event awaits guests wishing to relax and amuse themselves with a wide, colourful variety of programmes. Traditional programmes like five-o'-clock tea, cooking competitions, organ recitals, concerts, theatre performances, exhibitions and sporting events are organised during this series of events.

Other events are held throughout the year like the national organic fair, the national manual harvesting competition, the national cooking competition of organic foods, the Debrecen turkey days, the international festival of military bands, and the Debrecen flower festival. ■

