

Pécs: European Capital of Culture 2010

Terry Martin

October 22, 2008

Located in Hungary's southernmost province, forty kilometres from the Danube and Dráva rivers, Pécs boasts a remarkably mild climate, which helps explain why the Romans were drawn to it nearly two thousand years ago. People from sundried cultures have been gravitating to the city ever since, leaving a patchwork of architectural monuments in their wake. The organic assembly of aqueducts, churches, mosques and public squares reflects Roman, Turkish and Christian influences. The effect is oddly Mediterranean.

With a Christian heritage dating back to the fourth century, the city features a necropolis considered to be the most significant of its kind outside of Italy. Containing richly ornamented tombs and painted burial chambers, the Necropolis of Sopianae has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The city's cultural significance is also reflected in its university; the first ever to be founded in Hungary, it dates back to the fourteenth century. Combining historical depth with youthful exuberance, Pécs is regarded as Hungary's most important creative center outside the capital. The surrounding sun-drenched hills also produce some of the country's best wines.

Eager to excell as a European Capital of Culture, Pécs has launched an ambitious development program that will enhance city's existing cultural assets and create new ones. One of the biggest projects currently under construction is a new multipurpose event center called "Opus 2010". Located near the city center, the facility will primarily be used as a venue for classical music concerts by visiting groups and local ensembles such as the Pécs Philharmonic orchestra. When completed the performance hall will provide seating for 999 people, a number that some say was chosen for its "magical" significance. Expected to cost about HUF 6 billion (US\$ 32 million), the building is also being designed to double as a conference centre.

Another major construction project underway in Pécs is a new library and knowledge centre that has been dubbed "The Hive". Slated to cost some HUF 4.5 billion (US\$ 24 million), the center will integrate the resources of three separate libraries – those of the city, the county and the local university. Aside from acting as a "knowledge hub" for students and researchers, the Hive will serve as the living room of the city, a key venue for events associated with Pécs's tenure as a culture capital.

Pécs's year in the limelight is expected to yield many other benefits as well. Parks and squares are undergoing a thorough renovation, helping to restore their original Mediterranean flair. An entirely new cultural quarter is being created around the famous Zsolnay porcelain factory. And tourism and transportation infrastructure is being overhauled to accommodate the anticipated inflow of tourists.

The millions of dollars being spent on Pécs is a tribute to Europe's collective history. It's also an investment in Hungary's future as a European Union member state. Beyond the immediate benefits, being a European Capital of Culture is sure to raise Pécs's profile as an international tourist destination well beyond 2010.