

HUNGARY & THE CZECH REPUBLIC: BIRDS & MUSIC FROM BUDAPEST TO PRAGUE

SEPTEMBER 8-23, 2018

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**Dates differ slightly from those that appear in our 2018 catalog.*

The world-class cities of Budapest and Prague provide the setting for a Birds & Music program rich in natural history and culture.

Widely regarded among the world's most beautiful cities, Budapest and Prague are majestic centerpieces of a tour that combines the passions of birding, sightseeing, and music. This trip is timed for the onset of the fall season, when the summer crowds have departed, bird migration is in full swing, and the weather is mild. This is a multi-themed departure designed for those who desire a vacation that promises both natural history and cultural rewards. Unique to this trip is the opportunity to attend two classical music concerts and revel in a private chamber orchestra concert.

Our tour starts in Hungary, where our activities will focus on the outstanding birding and pleasing scenery of Kiskunság and Bükk national parks, home to steppe grasslands, alkaline lakes, marshes, ponds, beech forests, and a diversity of resident and migratory birds. Among the many possibilities are a number of Central and Eastern European specialty birds, including Ferruginous Duck, Great Bustard, Purple Heron, Black Stork, Pygmy Cormorant, Caspian Gull, Montagu's Harrier, White-tailed and Imperial eagles, Red-footed and Saker falcons, Ural Owl, and a range of waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls, and terns. During one evening spent in the Bükk Mountains, we'll enjoy a special performance by a professional gypsy music group.

Our time in Hungary will conclude in the cultural bastion that is Budapest. With knowledgeable local guides we'll wander narrow cobbled streets and lovely promenades, discovering the city's Baroque and Classicistic architectural riches. Highlights include the dramatic Buda Castle, grandiose Matthias Church, Fisherman's Bastion, and the sprawling Hungarian Parliament Building. We'll cruise the famous Andrássy Boulevard, lined by palaces and villas, ending at Heroes Square. In the streets of the Jewish quarter we'll see Europe's largest synagogue.

Birding in the Czech Republic will take us to the Šumava Mountains in the German border region, where exquisite scenery reveals ancient spruce forests, moors, meadows, and mountain streams—the realm of Black and White-backed woodpeckers; Northern Shrike; Crested, Coal, and Marsh tits; Goldcrest; Black Redstart; Mistle and Song thrushes; Fieldfare; Hawfinch; Eurasian Bullfinch; and many others. On the cultural front, we'll visit Třeboň and Český Krumlov, beautiful medieval villages with official UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

In the eyes of many, Prague is one of Europe's most charming cities. The city center offers a wonderful mix of architectural styles, from Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque to Neoclassical, Art Nouveau, and Cubist. The medieval lanes of the Old Town and the Castle District offer marvelous sights, with the Charles Bridge spanning the banks of the Vltava River. While exploring the narrow

streets of Prague in a silent corner, we might be surprised to find a hurdy-gurdy player performing only for us, providing a special taste and insight into European musical heritage.

In combining birds, music, and other cultural attractions, this multi-themed program assures a travel experience unlike most any other.

September 8, Day 1: Departure from Home. Flights from the United States bound for Budapest, Hungary depart in the late afternoon or evening and arrive the following day. Note: Those concerned about the travel time getting to Hungary are encouraged to arrive a day early so as to be rested and better able to enjoy our activities. Upon request, the VENT office will be happy to assist with early arrival hotel and airport transfer arrangements.

NIGHT: Aboard aircraft in transit to Budapest

September 9, Day 2: Arrival in Budapest and Transfer to Hotel. Participants arriving today at the Budapest Ferenc Liszt International Airport (airport code BUD) will be met on arrival by our local operator for a transfer to the Forster Hotel, located in the village of Bugyi, 18 miles south of Budapest. Bugyi is a charming little community of about 5,000 residents. Situated off the main highway system, this location places us close to nature and our first major birding area of the trip – nearby Kiskunság National Park.

For participants who are not arriving at the Budapest airport today, a single group transfer to Bugyi will be arranged from a central meeting point in Budapest this morning. Details including the location and time for this transfer will be provided with your final departure materials.

Less a palace than a quaint country inn, our home for these next three nights features tastefully appointed guest rooms and a dining room with a “woody” feel where traditional Hungarian dishes are served. Following check-in, we will have the remainder of the afternoon to relax before meeting the other trip participants. In the late afternoon we will likely enjoy a short optional birding walk around the hotel’s beautiful grounds where towering shade trees, park-like open spaces, and a water feature attract a variety of birds. Along paths lined with oaks, sycamores, and chestnuts, we will encounter our first European birds including widespread residents such as Common Wood-Pigeon, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Great and Blue tits, Short-toed Treecreeper, Eurasian Nuthatch, Black Redstart, Eurasian Robin, and Eurasian Blackbird. Our survey of the area may also produce migrant songbirds like Spotted Flycatcher and Common Chiffchaff, or perhaps a Wood or Willow warbler.

This evening we will gather at 6:00 p.m. for a formal trip welcome and orientation followed by dinner.

NIGHT: Forster Hotel, Bugyi

September 10-11, Days 3-4: Kiskunság National Park. Lying an hour south of Budapest, Kiskunság National Park is a natural history jewel of Hungary, a vitally important reserve whose myriad habitats host a great many birds year-round. We will have more than two days to explore this dynamic region, visiting several unique areas within the widely spaced park.

Created in 1975 and declared a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, Kiskunság National Park extends across a broad area between the Danube and Tisza rivers. Rather than a single vast area, the park consists of nine individual territories spread over 115,000 acres, encompassing a remarkable collection of habitats including alkaline plains, sandy lowlands, steppe grasslands, and agricultural areas as well as aquatic habitats such as salt lakes, the backwaters of the Tisza River, and a series of bogs and marshes. Interestingly, the park is inclusive of the region’s centuries-old pastoral traditions, which satisfies the needs of both wildlife and those who practice agriculture here.

On the first day we will spend time in the northern part of the park where we’ll seek the magnificent Great Bustard. Not only is this area the stronghold for the species in Hungary, but in most of Europe as well (other

sizeable populations exist in Portugal and Spain). At this time of year, the birds are less widely spaced and tend to feed in small flocks amid the fields and agricultural lands south of Bugyi. We will explore fishponds for the scarce Ferruginous Duck, Garganey, Common Pochard, Green-winged “Common” Teal, a variety of herons and egrets, White-tailed Eagle, Eurasian Marsh-Harrier, Caspian Gull, Eurasian Penduline Tit, Bearded Reedling, and many others. The nearby marshes and grasslands attract shorebirds and migrating raptors. These northern steppes are home to a small ground-squirrel called Souslik, the primary prey of many raptors – a sampling of which includes Short-toed and Imperial eagles, Common and Long-legged buzzards, and the rare Saker falcon. Montague’s Harrier is regular here, and with luck, Pallid Harrier is possible as well.

On the second full day we will visit the park’s alkaline lakes to view waterfowl and shorebirds. Among the many possibilities are a range of birds whose migratory pathways take them right through Hungary. Some shorebird species are scarcer in mid-September than in August, but we have chances for observing lingering individuals of the earlier migrants and excellent opportunities for viewing some of the later migrating species. Among the many possibilities are Green and Wood sandpipers, Little Stint, Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, Spotted Redshank, and Common Snipe. During this season, Nocturnal Eurasian Stone-Curlews gather in small groups prior to migrating, and with a bit of luck, can be found resting in the surrounding fields.

Migrating landbirds will also be in evidence. Among the more widespread species, we’ll encounter resident and migrant birds alike including European Roller, European Bee-eater, Red-backed Shrike, Whinchat, White and Western Yellow wagtails, Corn Bunting, Sky Lark, and many others.

We will also have the opportunity to visit a viper farm located in the park, where we will be introduced to the very successful breeding program of the endangered and elusive Hungarian Meadow Viper (*Vipera Ursinii Rakosiensis*). We can study them closely as we learn about their ecology, conservation efforts and status.

NIGHTS: Forster Hotel, Bugyi

September 12, Day 5: Tiszaalpar Marshes; Transfer to Bükk National Park. This morning, our last in the Kiskunság area, we’ll take more time to continue our exploration of Kiskunság’s various environs. Top on the list will be a visit to the productive Tiszaalpar marshes, renowned for their tranquil setting and productive birding. Standing atop a small church hill, we will scan an oxbow lake where waterfowl, Eurasian Spoonbill, Great and Little egrets, and migrating shorebirds, hawks, and swallows may be seen. The elegant White-tailed Eagle is regularly seen here, and at times may be seen harassing clusters of waterfowl. Nearby, Long-eared Owls may be seen at a day roost, and from a safe distance we can watch these beautiful birds as they sleep after a night of hunting.

At some point, we’ll take to the road and transfer to our next destination, the Bükk Hills and lovely Bükk National Park, where we will spend the next three nights.

On our way north-east we will cross the extensive grasslands and agricultural country in and around Hortobagy National Park, areas where we’ll watch for Imperial Eagle and other raptors. The Imperial Eagle is a beautiful but uncommon bird of prey that ranges widely across native grassland steppe and other open areas. With persistence we have a good chance to spot one or more individuals as we make our way toward the national park. The beautiful Red-footed Falcon gathers in groups here as well, and we should be able to admire them in all plumages as they hunt insects over the grasslands.

We’ll reach our delightful hotel in the Bükk area this afternoon. For those looking forward to a taste of local cuisine, it is worth pointing out that the dining experience here is highly regarded.

NIGHT: Nomad Pension, Noszvaj

September 13-14, Days 6-7: Bükk National Park. Situated in the Bükk Mountains in northeastern Hungary, Bükk National Park was founded in 1976 as Hungary’s third and largest national park. It is known for its

beautiful and remarkably varied landscapes containing karst formations, rolling hills, meadows, and beech forest. Here, where the mountains meet the plains, Bükk National Park presents lovely woodland scenery, which adds a pleasing visual bonus to our birding endeavors.

Our accommodations are set amid gently contoured hills carpeted by a mixed deciduous forest. In reality, the elevation here is only a thousand feet or so, but the wooded surroundings lend a deceptively higher elevation feel. Meanwhile, the hotel itself is a study in charm – featuring individually styled guest rooms, public areas adorned with antique furniture, and ample grounds with views onto the encircling hills.

Over the ensuing days, pre-breakfast walks around the hotel may reveal a wonderful suite of birds. In particular, this area is exceptional for woodpeckers, where up to seven species occur. Middle Spotted Woodpecker is regular while Black, Green, Syrian, Great Spotted and Lesser Spotted woodpeckers are all possible. Our time in the field will undoubtedly turn up a number of alluring resident species such as the handsome Eurasian Jay, elegant Long-tailed Tit, Great and Marsh tits, Common Chiffchaff, White Wagtail, Black Redstart, European Serin, Eurasian Siskin, and Hawfinch. Inside the national park we'll visit beech and oak woodlands to search for Black, Gray-headed, and White-backed Woodpeckers – the latter species typically elusive. We'll travel through picturesque valleys and visit an abandoned quarry to search for woodland birds like Firecrest, Goldcrest, and Coal Tit. Ural Owl inhabits the most undisturbed forests and we will make an effort to see this powerful predator one evening. We will also visit a woodland pasture with centuries-old oak trees and grazing Hungarian Cattle, an excellent hunting area for birds of prey. Syrian Woodpecker, Eurasian Treecreeper, Red-backed Shrike, Song Thrush, and Hawfinch are representative of the many species of birds we could see here.

On one evening we will have a traditional dinner in a wine cellar where we'll enjoy the opportunity to sample local wines including the famous "Bull's Blood of Eger." A special performance by a professional gypsy music group will include very entertaining traditional folk dance. Following dinner, we have the option to meet a bat researcher who has erected mist nets in a monitoring site located five minutes from the hotel. We have a very good chance to see several species of bats in the hand and hear as many details as we want about features of each species: the differences between their hunting methods, roosts, conservation status, etc. Participants on previous tours have greatly enjoyed this very interesting program.

NIGHTS: Nomad Pension, Noszvaj

September 15, Day 8: Nosvaj Farkaskö; Return to Budapest. After check-out and a final tour of the hotel grounds, we'll begin the return trip to Budapest. A short distance south of Nosvaj, we'll make a short stop to visit a rather remarkable cultural site, the historic "Farkaskö of Nosvaj." "Farkaskö" means cave-dwelling and this medieval site is a cave dwelling that was occupied for about four hundred years starting in the 1500s. What makes these dwellings so interesting is the fact they were cut from tufa, a form of limestone produced by precipitation of calcium carbonate in a shallow sea. The resulting rock formations, millions of years old, are porous and easily hewed. Featuring an assortment of rooms, alcoves, nooks, passages and "secret" entrances, the Farkaskö is like a fairy-land begging for exploration! After an hour or so exploring the tufa dwellings, we'll resume the trip to Budapest.

In the heart of one of the great cities of Europe, our hotel is situated overlooking the Danube River, the famous Chain Bridge, and the incomparable Hungarian Parliament Building. We will have lunch in the city followed by the remainder of the afternoon at leisure. A walk along the promenade above the Danube is one highly recommended option. This evening we will enjoy an elegant dinner cruise, passing many highlights of the city which are especially striking to see when lit at night.

Among the great sights of the Hungarian capital are the Parliament Building and Chain Bridge at night, when the majestic edifices are bathed in golden luminescence. Our hotel is centrally located so that we may gaze on these two structures, along with many other eye-catching landmarks by night. After dinner, we'll return to the hotel via the Chain Bridge, stopping frequently to take in the architecture and statuary of the bridge as well as the vibrancy of the city around us and the timeless river flowing below. An added attraction is the sight of

Black-headed Gulls hawking insects over the Parliament Building, their white underwings illuminated golden-yellow by the lights below.

NIGHT: St. George Residence Hotel, Budapest

September 16, Day 9: Budapest. Our final full day in Hungary will consist of a walking and driving tour of Budapest, the marvelous historic Hungarian capital. For this activity, we will be joined by a licensed guide who will provide interpretation as we move around the city.

Budapest, capital of Hungary, is a city of 1.7 million people and a major cultural center of Europe. The city spans both banks of the mighty Danube River and presents beautiful settings on either side. Buda, on the western side, features rolling hills, the Gellért Hill Citadel with its commanding city views, and the old town. Narrow cobbled streets lined with old houses, the grandiose St. Matthias Church, Fisherman's Bastion in Buda Castle, and the Royal Palace are all worth a visit.

The eastern side, called Pest, showcases Baroque and Classicistic architecture in the city's many houses, cathedrals, and plazas. Among the many architectural highlights here are the Széchenyi Bath House, Basilica of St. Stevens, Hungarian State Opera House, and the Chain Bridge. We'll also wander the streets of the Jewish quarter to see the beautiful orthodox synagogue, the oldest of its kind in Europe, and the Dohány Street Synagogue, one of the largest synagogues in Europe. The grounds of the latter feature the "Silver Willow," or "Willow of the Just," a stunningly beautiful sculpture that honors the Hungarian Jews who perished in the Holocaust.

This evening we'll have an early dinner in advance of our grand finale activity in Hungary – a private concert by a chamber orchestra in the beautiful concert room next door to our hotel.

NIGHT: St. George Residence Hotel, Budapest

September 17, Day 10: Travel from Budapest to Třeboň, Czech Republic via Austria. Our tour of Budapest continues for a couple more hours this morning, highlighted by a cruise up the length of magnificent Andrássy Boulevard, lined by palaces and villas, before culminating with an arrival at Heroes Square. Heroes Square is one of the premier landmarks of Budapest, featuring a spacious plaza partially ringed with statues depicting the lineage of kings since the founding of the first Hungarian state in the 11th century.

The second half of the tour commences in the late morning as we transfer from Hungary to the Czech Republic. This will be our lengthiest transit of the trip, requiring about five hours along a route that takes us across a slice of eastern Austria to the border of the Czech Republic.

The countryside of eastern Austria is fairly scenic, characterized by vast expanses of agriculture broken by pockets of mixed deciduous and coniferous woodlands. Occasionally we'll pass through small towns and villages while a few centuries-old castles and palaces may be seen from afar. We will skirt the city of Vienna but will not enter the city center for any sightseeing activities.

Our accommodation for the next two nights will be the Hotel Zlata in Třeboň, situated on historic Masaryk Square.

NIGHT: Hotel Zlata Hvezda, Třeboň

September 18, Day 11: Třeboň. Located in the South Bohemian region of the Czech Republic, Třeboň is a small city of about 8,000 residents. The focal point of the area is the Vltava River, lined on either side by the city.

As with many of the settlements of the region, Třeboň was established in the medieval period, early 12th century, and reached its heyday in the 17th century under Habsburg rule. Today, Třeboň is an established and popular tourist destination. Masaryk Square, with its Renaissance and Baroque architecture, is the city's best known site and encompasses the Town Hall, Plague Column, Fountain, and to the east, the Hradec Gate – all many centuries old. Třeboň is situated in a natural basin, and outside the city, ancient trees, medieval fish ponds, and peat bogs are preserved as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

We will spend much of the day birding around several of the ponds, many dating from the early 1600s, and walking the embankments among the trees. We expect to encounter a nice selection of birds this morning, most of which are alluring resident species. The majestic White-tailed Eagle has a well-established breeding population in the pond areas (man-made lakes of varying sizes), as do Mute Swan, Red-crested Pochard, Great Crested and Eared grebes, Middle Spotted and Gray-headed woodpeckers, and Marsh and Willow tits. Other species we may encounter in this area are representative of multiple habitat-types including Tufted Duck, Common Kingfisher, Gray Wagtail, Eurasian Nuthatch, and Common Chiffchaff. On the mammal front, Eurasian Otters are sometimes seen around these ponds as well and Roe Deer are seen in the adjacent fields. Later in the afternoon we will have some free time to explore Masaryk Square on our own.

NIGHT: Hotel Zlata Hvezda, Třeboň

September 19, Day 12: Třeboň to Šumava Mountains via Český Krumlov. This morning we'll leave Třeboň and make our way west toward the Šumava Mountains on the Czech-German border. Rather than making the trip directly, our itinerary includes a short birding stop at a lake outside the town of Český Budejovice, and several hours visiting the amazing medieval city of Český Krumlov.

Situated on the Vltava River north of the Austrian border, Český Krumlov is a beautifully restored medieval city containing Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque elements. Its main feature is a 13th century castle around which the rest of the town is constructed. Český Krumlov is an outstanding example of a small central European medieval town whose architectural heritage has remained intact, thanks to its peaceful evolution over more than five centuries. It is for this reason that it received UNESCO World Heritage Site status in the early 1990s.

As a visit here is a main cultural attraction of the tour, we will spend several hours exploring the Old City including the shops, cafes, and winding streets that serve as attractions to visitors far and wide. If the weather is good, we'll be able to sit outside and enjoy a Bohemian beer or afternoon tea or coffee. Between the castle and the Old City, the river tumbles over a weir, creating an artificial rapid that mimics perfectly the effect of a fast-flowing boulder-strewn stream. Despite the presence of our fellow man, the area is excellent for birding. A short vigil here should produce superb views of the lovely Black Redstart while Gray and White wagtails are also possible. Additionally, White-throated Dippers are occasionally seen at the base of the weir.

At some point we'll say goodbye to the delightful city and set a course for the Šumava Mountains, with an accompanying moderate gain in elevation. Proceeding northwest, we'll witness a transformation of the landscape from rolling hills to low mountains blanketed in coniferous forest interspersed with cultivated fields. The scenery here is simply beautiful.

Our hotel, in the village of Zdikov, features individually appointed suite-style rooms that lend an authentic air of charm and intimacy.

NIGHT: Schlosshotel Zamek, Zdikov

September 20, Day 13: Šumava Mountains. Running along the German border in the South Bohemia region of the Czech Republic, the Šumava Mountains exist as a forested mountain stronghold. Unlike the celebrated high peaks of the Alps, the Šumava (partially encompassed within Šumava National Park) are a rather low and gently contoured range that nevertheless protect the most extensive forest remaining in Central Europe. As the density of humans is low here, the Šumava today is a wild and beautiful bastion for birds and other wildlife.

Underscoring the range's biological importance, since 1990 it has enjoyed the status of a U.N. Biosphere Reserve.

We will have today and the following morning to explore the nearby meadows, pasturelands, and Norway spruce forests in search of birds. Late September is well past the peak time of year for birding, but what we give up in diversity will be made up in quality. Rare woodpeckers such as White-backed and Eurasian Three-toed woodpeckers are home to the area as is the splendid Black Woodpecker. Northern Goshawk, Hazel Grouse, Eurasian Nutcracker, Northern Shrike, Crested and Willow tits, Firecrest, Mistle and Song thrushes, Fieldfare, Red "Common" Crossbill, and Eurasian Bullfinch are permanent residents as well. Along the streams we'll pay special attention for White-throated Dipper and Gray Wagtail.

Beyond birds, our time here will provide exposure to beautiful mountain scenery at a beautiful time of the year. Now, at the onset of autumn, we may be treated to some early fall colors and landscapes that most visitors to the region either bypass or ignore in favor of the cities.

NIGHT: Schlosshotel Zamek, Zdikov

September 21, Day 14: Šumava Mountains; Travel to Prague. This, the second to last day of the trip, will be easy with the morning spent around the hotel and nearby environs, followed by an afternoon transfer to Prague. Those craving more time in the field will have an opportunity to enjoy a final few hours of birding around the village while others may choose to take off for some personal time.

The quaint village of Zdikov sits amid a collage of habitats consisting of pasturelands, stands of coniferous trees, and hedgerows. With nature all around, the birding in the area is generally very good. By exploring the narrow lanes and paths that lead from the back of town into the surrounding countryside we are bound to enjoy a successful final outing. By this time in the trip, a number of the birds we'll likely encounter will seem like old friends, including Eurasian Buzzard, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Hooded Crow, Eurasian Jay, Great and Blue tits, and Eurasian Blackbird; on the other hand, more time in this foothill ecosystem will undoubtedly produce sightings of several species new to the trip. Representing the latter, we'll have chances here for Marsh Tit, Gray Wagtail, Blackcap, Eurasian Siskin, and Red "Common" Crossbill. In particular, we'll target the beautiful yellow bunting known as Yellowhammer, while also keeping an eye out for Eurasian Bullfinch, one of Europe's loveliest birds.

After lunch at the hotel we'll load up and prepare for the transfer to Prague, a trip that will take approximately two-and-a-half hours to complete. On the way, we will receive further exposure to the scenic Bohemian countryside. The first part of the route leads down the mountains where small farms and large pastures dot rolling hills swathed in Norway spruce. Moving north, we'll lose elevation and drop into extensive pasturelands of seemingly level contour. Approaching Prague, the highway parallels the Vlatava River for several miles prior to our entry into the city. We should arrive at the hotel in the middle to late afternoon.

With time to settle into our rooms and clean up, we'll reconvene in the early evening for dinner followed by a concert in one of the city's famous music halls.

NIGHT: Art Nouveau Palace Hotel, Prague

September 22, Day 15: Prague. Our final day in the Czech Republic will consist of a walking tour of Prague, one of Europe's most charming and beautiful cities. For this activity, we will be joined by a licensed guide who will provide interpretation as we move around the city.

Prague, capital of historical Bohemia and the modern-day Czech Republic, is a metropolis of 1.3 million people situated on the Vlatava River in the northwest of the country. Today Prague is a major political, cultural and financial center of central Europe. Fortunately, the city escaped much of the destruction wrought by two World Wars in the 20th century, and as a result, Prague's historic center was included in the UNESCO list of World

Heritage Sites in 1992. The revered city center offers a wonderful mixture of stunning architecture from Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque to Neoclassical, Art Nouveau, and Cubist. The medieval lanes of the Old Town and the Castle District offer a lot to see, with the Charles Bridge spanning the banks of the Vlatava River.

We will explore as much of the city as time allows, while maintaining a comfortable pace that allows for greater enjoyment of our activities. Among the many sights we'll see are: Prague Castle, the largest ancient castle in the world; the beautiful St. Vitus Cathedral; Charles Bridge, connecting Old Town with Lesser Town and regarded as one of Prague's most beautiful structures; the remarkable Astronomical Clock and the Gothic Týn Church in Old Town; the Old-New Synagogue in the historic Jewish ghetto; Wenceslas Square in New Town; and possibly the Prague Dancing House, a fascinating demonstration of artistic expression designed by Frank Gehry. And while exploring the narrow streets, we hope to find a hurdy-gurdy player performing only for us, providing a special taste and insight into European musical heritage.

This evening, our last together, we'll have an early dinner before attending a concert in another of the city's famous music halls.

NIGHT: Art Nouveau Palace Hotel, Prague

September 23, Day 16: Departure for Home. We will organize a group transfer to the airport this morning, but participants are free to depart Prague at any time.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 14 participants.

TOUR LEADERS: Balázs Szigeti and Rafael Galvez

Balázs Szigeti is a dedicated birdwatcher and the director of Ecotours Wildlife Holidays Ltd. Based in Budapest, he leads tours to most of Eastern Europe and Mongolia. Balázs speaks perfect English, has a great sense of humor, and has traveled widely in Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Americas. He is a gifted birdwatcher able to imitate many European bird calls...even a nightjar...no mean feat! Balázs is also a keen wildlife photographer.

Rafael Galvez has been birding and illustrating birds since childhood, a dual passion that developed when his family moved from Peru to South Florida. Always with a sketchpad in hand, he has traveled throughout the U.S., Latin America, and Eurasia in pursuit of birds. He served several years as a board member of the BirdLife International affiliate in the Republic of Georgia, developing educational and conservation programs. He gained knowledge of the Caucasus region while directing a series of records and documentary shorts on the ancient chants of the Georgian nation. During that period he also produced retrospective books and catalogs on the works of Russian realist painters. He has combined his love of art, education, and birds while collaborating in several publications, including a field guide to *Raptors and Owls of Georgia (Caucasus)*, which he illustrated and coauthored. After working with raptor research along the Black Sea, he returned to South Florida to spearhead a new phase for the Florida Keys Hawkwatch migration monitoring project, where he has participated as director. As chair of citizen science and IBA monitoring at Tropical Audubon Society in Miami, he has reached out to underserved communities by providing opportunities for the greater appreciation of birds and Florida habitats. Currently, he lives in Homestead, spends much time in the Everglades, serves on the Florida Ornithological Society's Records Committee, and is on the Leica Sport Optics Pro Staff. He loves sharing his passion for birds with audiences of all ages, and has been a guide and teacher for over 15 years. You can find some of his latest sketches and articles about painting in the field at his blog, GalvezBirds.com.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for this tour is **\$6,595** per person in double occupancy. This includes all meals beginning with lunch on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 16, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leaders and local guides. It does not include roundtrip airfare from your home to Budapest and return from Prague, extra hotel nights before Day 2 or after Day 15, meals before lunch on Day 2 or after breakfast on Day 16, transfers other than on

Day 2 and on Day 16 as specified in the itinerary, airport departure taxes, travel insurance, alcoholic beverages, phone calls, laundry, items of a personal nature (postage, telephone calls, emails), and passport fees.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$775**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The initial deposit for this tour is **\$500** per person. If you would like to pay your initial deposit by check, money order, or bank transfer, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. If you prefer to pay the initial deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard, Visa, or American Express at the time of registration. The VENT registration form (available from the VENT office or by download at www.ventbird.com) should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

PAYMENTS: Initial tour deposits may be made by MasterCard, Visa, American Express, check, money order, or bank transfer. All other tour payments, including second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc., must be made by check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). Full payment of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to the tour departure date.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Cancellation penalties and refunds are based on the following schedule: if cancellation is made 120 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$250** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made fewer than 120 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions. *We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance for your protection.*

<u>If you cancel:</u>	<u>Your refund will be:</u>
120 days or more before departure date	Your deposit minus \$250*
Fewer than 120 days before departure date	No refund available

*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person.

Upon cancellation of the transportation or travel services, where you, the customer, are not at fault and have not cancelled in violation of the terms and conditions of any of the contract for transportation or travel services, all sums paid to VENT for services not received by you will be promptly refunded by VENT to you unless you otherwise advise VENT in writing.

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.

EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES: In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES: In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will

do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

TRIP INSURANCE: We strongly recommend that you purchase trip cancellation insurance as soon as possible to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness. VENT recommends *Travel Insured International* as our preferred insurance provider. Check with your insurance agent regarding coverage you may presently have via other insurance policies that may cover illness during your trip. **Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available; however, stipulations apply, usually requiring the purchase of the insurance soon after registering.** Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as work-related cancellation, medical upgrade, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” clause among others. Contact *Travel Insured International* (800-243-3174 or www.travelinsured.com) prior to registration for details. Not all insurance providers provide the same levels of coverage. If you purchase insurance through a company other than *Travel Insured International*, please be advised that rules and stipulations may be different.

AIR INFORMATION: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. ***Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be responsible for any air ticket penalties.***

BAGGAGE: Soft-sided luggage is recommended. As a precaution against lost luggage, we suggest that you pack a change of clothes, toiletries, medications, important travel documents, optics, and any other essential items in your carry-on bag. Due to ever-changing circumstances in the government’s attempts to improve airport security, we recommend that you check the website of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for information pertaining to permissible carry-on items. Please check with your airline for restrictions and fees.

CLOTHING: This program is structured as mostly casual; a birding and natural history trip with strong infusions of historical and cultural highlights. We suggest you bring primarily field-type clothing, which will be appropriate for most occasions; however, a nicer “smart-casual” attire for evenings and when attending music performances in Budapest and Prague is essential. The following items are recommended:

- **Pants:** A couple pairs of pants are essential. Many people prefer lightweight pants made of cotton or other material, but denim, though not as comfortable, is certainly acceptable. Keep in mind that some of the mornings and evenings in the Czech Republic may be quite cool.
- **Field Clothing:** Outdoor stores such as Cabela’s and REI carry field clothing that many birders find appealing. Pants and shirts made of lightweight, yet durable materials with multiple pockets and ventilated seams are popular.
- **Shirts:** Several t-shirts, (long and short-sleeved), in addition to other comfortable styles suitable for warm weather.
- **Hat:** A hat for protection from the sun is essential. Consider bringing a lightweight wool cap or some kind of warm head cover for cool mornings and evenings in the Czech Republic.
- **Smart-Casual Attire:** For women this includes casual dresses or skirts/slacks. For men this includes khakis/slacks, open-collared shirts, and a sport coat. Some men may prefer to bring a tie for evening concerts, but it is not essential.
- **Sweaters and Coats:** Mostly warm weather is anticipated on this trip, but a sweater, fleece, or light coat will definitely be useful for cool mornings and evenings. You should also bring a warmer water-repellent jacket for our time in the mountains in the Czech Republic, and for being properly prepared in the event we encounter an early wet cold front.

FOOTWEAR: We recommend a good trail-walking shoe or light hiking boot when in the field. Athletic shoes are acceptable but will not keep your feet dry and can become soiled from muddy conditions. A good walking shoe (such as an athletic shoe), may be preferred when not in the field and for our days in Budapest and Prague. Footwear to accompany smart-casual attire should be considered.

LAUNDRY SERVICE: Laundry service may be available for an extra charge at some of the hotels where we stay; however, you should bring enough clothing to get you through the trip in the event laundry service is unavailable.

EQUIPMENT: One of the most important aspects of having an enjoyable travel experience is being prepared with proper equipment. The following items will come in handy during your trip to Hungary and the Czech Republic:

- **Daypack** – good for carrying extra clothing, field guides, supplies, and optical equipment during all land excursions.
- **Notebooks and pens**
- **Travel alarm clock**
- **Polarized sunglasses with good UV protection**
- **Sunscreen, lip balm, skin lotions**
- **Personal toiletries**
- **Cameras, lenses, memory cards, and extra batteries**
- **Collapsible walking stick** – a highly recommended item for those who have trouble walking.
- **Folding stool** – a recommended item for those who have trouble standing for more than 10 or 15 minutes at a time and can come in handy on walking tours. The typical folding stool is small, lightweight and portable, consisting of three aluminum legs connected by a central bolt, with a sturdy but pliable material seat.
- **Tissue packs**

BINOCULARS & SPOTTING SCOPES:

Binoculars – We strongly recommend good binoculars of at least 7x35, 8x42, 10x40, or 10x42 magnification. We recommend that you do NOT bring mini-binoculars of any kind. Some people like “minis” because they are small and lightweight; but they have an extremely small field of view and very poor light gathering power. Trying to find a bird in your binoculars using minis is like trying to read a book through a keyhole. You will be very frustrated, and even if you do manage to get the bird in your binoculars before it flies, you will have a poor view. You will find that 7x35 or 8x42 binoculars are compact and light enough.

Spotting Scopes – Your tour leaders will have scopes available for group use throughout the trip. We will do considerable birding alongside extensive marshes and pastures, during which scopes are optimal for desired views of birds. If you have a scope and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so. Our local operator also has a limited number of scopes available for rental.

CLIMATE & WEATHER: The climate in Hungary and the Czech Republic is traditionally characterized by warm-to-hot summers and cold winters. The spring and autumn are transition times when the days are often mild and crisp, but punctuated frequently by overcast conditions accompanied by rain. June is generally the rainiest month of the year while July is usually the warmest. This tour will operate in the last days of summer-onset of autumn, when peak summer temperatures likely will be behind us. At this time, high temperatures in Budapest will be in the upper 80s (°F) with lows in the 50s/low 60s; the Czech republic is a little farther north, and high and low temperatures could be 5-10 degrees (°F) cooler, especially in the mountains. In the event of a region-wide heat-wave, highs could reach into the mid-90s even at this season. Temperatures will likely be a few degrees higher in the cities of Budapest and Prague than in the surrounding country. Overall, we will likely experience a diversity of weather conditions ranging from clear, dry and beautiful to overcast and rainy.

CONDITIONS: Your trip to Hungary and the Czech Republic will be a multi-faceted and enriching travel experience combining “serious” birding with a strong emphasis on historical and cultural features. Most days will be dedicated to birding and natural history pursuits amid scenic landscapes; however, the program’s historical/cultural track includes one day of city tours in each of Budapest and Prague; attending a private

chamber orchestra performance in Budapest and two concert hall music performances in Prague; experiencing stays at an array of hotels, inns, and lodges; visits to medieval villages; and sampling regional cuisines and wines. For the city tours we will be joined by licensed local guides who will provide expert interpretation.

Physical demands will be easy to moderate but please bear in mind that our city tours of the Hungarian and Czech capitals will involve a moderate amount of walking and standing, especially in Prague. We emphasize that no one will be subjected to physical demands that exceed their capabilities. All walking will be done at a slow pace. This part of the world is not known for exceptional cuisine, and this should be taken into account.

Special Note: This tour provides exposure to the natural history and architectural, historical, and cultural riches of two of Eastern Europe's most evocative and interesting countries. It is not a birding program exclusively; on the other hand, the music component of this tour is offered in the spirit of enjoying a signature experience of two world class cities and should not be construed as a technical course or "mechanical" study workshop. The musical performances we'll attend will be determined by who is playing at the time, as opposed to seeking a particular venue or performance. Anyone considering participation on this trip should strongly consider these points before registering. Moreover, although we will explore Budapest and Prague as described, these remarkable cities contain far more attractions to see and experience than our time allows. Participants with an interest in enjoying more of either city or visiting other parts of either country should come early or stay after the tour ends.

DOCUMENTS: A passport valid for at least three months beyond your planned departure is required. We recommend that your passport be valid for at least six months beyond your planned departure. Please make sure that you have at least three blank pages in your passport for entry stamps.

Visas are not required for entry by United States and Canadian citizens for stays under 90 days. Rules and regulations pertaining to citizens of other countries may vary; please check with your local consulate or embassy.

CURRENCY & MONEY MATTERS: Your trip to Hungary and the Czech Republic includes most necessary expenses. You will want to bring enough cash to cover personal expenses not included in the tour, such as taxi rides, gifts, laundry, gratuities, meals on your own, and personal items. It is best to carry small denominations of cash as any places we visit may be unable to provide change for large bills. Note that some of the locales we will visit may not have a means for charging cards, and cash may be the only form of payment. While U.S. dollars may be accepted in more populous areas, it is always convenient to have a supply of local currency for such items. It is best to acquire local currency before leaving home, or at the airport or a bank upon arrival in Budapest.

Should you extend your vacation in either country beyond what is offered in the program, you'll want to obtain local currency. Please check with your bank and credit card issuer for more information regarding banking and the use of ATM and credit cards overseas.

The official currency of Hungary is the Hungarian Forint (HUF); the official currency of the Czech Republic is the Czech Koruna (CZK). You can check the latest currency conversion rate by visiting "XE-The World's Favorite Currency Site" at: <http://www.xe.com/>.

ELECTRICITY: The electrical current in Hungary is 230V (110-120V in the U.S.). Electrical outlets are one of the two European standard socket types: the "Type C" Europlug and the "Type F" Schuko. Both of these outlets are ungrounded with openings for two round pins. The electrical current in the Czech Republic is also 230V. Electrical outlets are of the "Type E" French socket type, identified by openings for two round pins spaced 19mm apart, and with a fixed grounding pin.

Many appliances now are dual-designed to operate on European electrical voltages, but you definitely should bring adapters and an all-purpose transformer if your appliances are not suitable for higher voltage or if there is any doubt.

INTERNET: WiFi is available at all hotels; at one location it may be limited to the reception area.

LANGUAGE: Hungarian is the primary language spoken in Hungary, although ethnic populations derived from surrounding countries speak their native language. Czech is the primary language spoken in the Czech Republic. Our local guides speak English.

TIME: Hungary and the Czech Republic are on Central European Summer Time (CEST), and are six hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST).

HEALTH: At the time of publication no major shots or inoculations are required for entry into Hungary or the Czech Republic. As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with the “routine vaccines,” including influenza, chickenpox (varicella), polio, measles/mumps/rubella (MMR), and diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT). Additionally, some health care professionals consider inoculations against hepatitis types A and B as standard. If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the trip safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

Those who are not fit for light to moderate physical activity, including those with physical disabilities that affect mobility and balance, heart or immune deficiencies, or other conditions associated with poor health, are advised not to join the trip. **Comprehensive optional travel insurance is available and recommended. This coverage is available through your trip cancellation policy, if purchased through *Travel Insured International*. Please consult your insurance agent or existing policy, if in effect, for the terms and limitations of your existing coverage. Refer to the section on Trip Insurance.**

Sun Exposure – The sun’s ultraviolet rays are damaging to the eyes and skin with prolonged exposure. Anytime you are outdoors you will want to protect your skin, including your lips, eyes, nose, and ears. Severe sunburn is potentially very painful and will affect your level of enjoyment. Always protect yourself when outdoors and be sure to bring an ample supply of high SPF sunscreen and lip balm. We strongly recommend the use of ultraviolet blocking, polarized sunglasses.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta Georgia. The CDC operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers’ Information Line at 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636), or you can check their website at www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel health).

SUGGESTED READING: A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend www.amazon.com which has a wide selection; www.buteobooks.com and www.nhbs.com which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and www.abebooks.com for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

Birds:

Mullarney, Killian and Lars Svensson and Dan Zetterstrom. *Birds of Europe – Second Edition*. Princeton Field Guides. Princeton University Press; Princeton, NJ, 2009. This is the most important natural history book for this trip. It is probably the best all-around field guide to the birds of Europe.

Mammals:

MacDonald, David and Priscilla Barrett. *Mammals of Europe*. Princeton Field Guides. Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1993.

Butterflies:

Tolman, Tom. *Butterflies of Europe*. Princeton Field Guides. Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 2002.

History:

A number of books exist on the histories of Hungary and the Czech Republic. While a person could research the topic indefinitely, the ones we've selected for this reading list are based on their thoroughness and "readability."

Cartledge, Bryan. *The Will to Survive: A History of Hungary*. Oxford University Press: USA, 2011.

Molnár, Miklós and Anna Magyar. *A Concise History of Hungary*. Cambridge University Press: England, 2001.

Pánek, Jaroslav and Oldrich Tuma. *A History of the Czech Lands*. Karolinum Press, Charles University, 2009.

TIPPING: Tipping (restaurant staff, porters, drivers, local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that tips are not expected and are entirely optional. Tips should be given directly to your tour leader; they should not be sent to the VENT office.

RESPONSIBILITY: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. Where this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on November 29, 2017, and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.