

OFF WE GO
The guard blows
a whistle;
Budapest, right;
through the
woods, below



On track with the railway children of Budapest

Hungary's charming line run by youngsters marks its 70th anniversary this year. Olivia Greenway takes a magical journey

The girl in the ticket office looked extraordinarily young – about 10 was my guess. “That will be 700 forints (£2), please,” she said in perfect English.

My Hungarian guide confirmed she was indeed 10. I was in the hills above Buda and had just bought a ticket for the Children's Railway. Unsurprisingly, because it's largely run by

generations; in fact next Wednesday marks 70 years since the start of the construction of the railway on April 11 1948.

There had been snowfall overnight and the ground around our starting point, Huvosvolgy, really was deep and crisp and even. We waited on the platform for the train to arrive, stamping our feet in the freezing air. Young boys in smart navy-blue uniforms passed us on the platform. They work on the railway one day in 15, from 7am to around 5pm in winter; it's a 12-hour day in summer.

The Children's Railway runs for nearly seven miles (11km), climbing into the forest and makes six stops.



Back in the late Forties it was known as the Pioneer Railway, a project instigated by the Hungarian Communist Party as a means of getting young people from the city to the camps that they ran for two months every summer. Attendance was compulsory and children spent

two weeks away from their families, learning about the party. Our narrow-gauge train arrived and we photographed the engine. (They have a steam engine during summer weekends.) All the children who work on the railway are aged between 10 and 14. (The driver is an adult and

childlike demeanour. Our carriage was spotless (“We clean the train,” Bence told me later) with old-fashioned, polished, wooden slatted seats and windows that slid open. When we travelled they were snapped shut to keep out the cold, but mercifully the carriage was heated and toasty warm.

Bence checked everyone was on board, a whistle was blown, and we were off. Levi clipped our tickets, old school style with a metal contraption, smiling shyly, and we sat back to enjoy the journey, passing through lovely clusters of dark wood trees – beech and spruce, I suspected.

I thought about the children's summer camps both our city guides had spoken about separately the previous day. Now in their late 40s, they attended the camp during the communist era. Surely it was awful?

“I hated it,” our first guide told me. “I don't like being with people I don't

know.” Our other guide had a different view. “I really enjoyed it and looked forward to it every year. We had singing exercises and went exploring. It was fun to be with children of my own age.”

Our train reached its first

there are a few adult supervisors.)

Nearly everyone wants to work on the railway, but only a few are chosen. In fact, that's why it was continued when communism ended: the children love it. They have to be good at their school studies, reliable and well-behaved. They also have to undergo training every weekend for four months before they start.

Our guards Bence (14) and Levi (13) were positively angelic: moving to secondary school when they are 13, not 11 as in the UK, might be a reason for their seemingly

ESSENTIALS

◆ The writer took tram 61 to the end of the line at Huvosvolgy, where she joined the Children's Railway. On disembarking, she took the cog railway tram number 60 to the terminus at Varosmajor, where there are connections back into downtown Budapest. For the full timetable and pricing, see gyermekvasut.hu (click on the “English” tab).

◆ Wizz Air (wizzair.com) offers fares from London Luton to Budapest from about £50 return. For other flight options, see flight comparison websites skyscanner.com and momondo.com.

◆ The Children's Railway can also be incorporated into a more substantial rail-themed tour of the central Europe region. Experience Grand Imperial Cities is a 13-day escorted tour run by Great Rail Journeys (01904 521936; greatrail.com) which costs from £2,095 per person. Includes travel by train from London and stops in Vienna, Budapest, Prague and Berlin. For those wanting to travel independently, GRJ Independent (01904 734356; greatrail.com/grj-independent) offers a 12-day trip from London from £1,475 per person including accommodation in four-star hotels in four cities and rail travel.



Ten quirky train journeys around the world: telegraph.co.uk/tt-quirkytrains

stop and four young Americans climbed on board. Levi consulted with Bence and they were asked to pay 600 HUF (£1.70) each. He reached into a waist-level black leather box strapped around his neck and issued them with tickets, exchanging them for the bank notes.

As our train chugged along through the fairyland forest outside, I had a quick chat with our guards. In the summer, when the train is very busy, they both have more work to do.

People got on and off at each stop to go hiking, while Bence sold postcards and fridge magnets. Levi was proud of the fact the train runs in all weathers; every day in the winter apart from Monday.

We were nearing the end of our 45-minute trip at Szechenyi-hegy. From here, it was a short walk downhill to the cog tram back to the city.

Before I left, I was keen to hear about the boys' plans for their future. Levi wanted to work in IT, but Bence planned to continue to work on the railways; this experience had made him more determined to fulfil his ambition. I waved to them as I walked away from the train. Job done, they both snapped out of serious work mode and waved back.

I enjoyed my short journey through the forest; it had been a peaceful step back in time. And like much in life it had shown that nothing is ever quite black or white.

