

DEBRECEN

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History and general information

Debrecen is situated in the Eastern part of Hungary on the Great Plain. It is the second largest city (207,308 inhabitants in 2010) after Budapest (1,776,000 inhabitants, including the outskirts, 3,300,000), in a country of 10 million people. The territory of the city comprises 461.65 km², with a population density of 443/km². Debrecen is the capital city of the Hajdú-Bihar County but because of its university, monuments of historic significance, hospitals and international airport, it is the regional centre in the fields of science, technology, culture, health and transport. There are three other cities of historic and cultural importance in the region with their own city theatres: Nyíregyháza (119,000 inhabitants) 50 km away, Miskolc (165,321 inhabitants) 100 km away and Eger (56,330 inhabitants) 120 km away. We have to mention Oradea in Romania as well, with its Hungarian-speaking population, Hungarian-speaking university and theatre. It is now easily accessible from Debrecen (70 km, 1 hour), which is important because of the vivid industrial, tourist and cultural (among them theatrical) relations between the two cities and countries.

Budapest, the capital of Hungary, residence of all major administrative and cultural institutions, is 230 km to the West and can be reached in 2.5 hours both by train and car. It is not a rare phenomenon for the people in the Debrecen region to travel to the metropolitan city to attend its cultural programme, especially musical and theatre events.

The city and its region were already inhabited by various ethnic groups in ancient times as well as at the arrival of the conquering Hungarian tribes in the 9th century. The name of the city occurred first in 1235 as Debrezun. By the early 16th century, Debrecen was an important market town, serving trade between Poland and Transylvania; its merchants traded in wine, wheat, cattle and horses both to the west (Germany) and to the east (Russia).

During the Ottoman period in Hungary (1541–1693), Debrecen, located close to the border and without city walls, often found itself in difficult situations. It was under the rule of either the Ottoman Empire or the Catholic Habsburgs or the principals of Transylvania. This made its citizens open-minded and Debrecen embraced the Protestant Reformation quite early. The city has been called the “Calvinist Rome” because of the Reformed College founded here in 1538 and because for centuries it has been the most eastern headquarters of the Reformation. The citizens of the town were Hungarian Calvinists, called *cívís*, possessing strong puritan ethics and mentality. (The Roman Catholic Church was only offered permission to return to Debrecen in 1715.)

Debrecen has been declared the capital of the country twice in history – first during the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848/49 and again at the end of World War II in 1944. In 1849, the Hungarian revolutionary government moved from the Pest-Buda area to Debrecen. In 1857, the railway line between Budapest and Debrecen was completed. New schools, hospitals, churches, factories, mills were built, banks and insurance companies settled in the city. Debrecen began to look like a modern city. As a successor to the Reformed College, the new Hungarian Royal University was founded in Debrecen 1912.



The Main Square of Debrecen with the Great Calvinist Church. Photo: Csonka Zoltán, used with permission.

After World War I, Hungary lost two-thirds of its former territory and regional centres, and Debrecen once again found itself situated close to the border of the country. However, tourism offered a chance for development. Hortobágy, the largest natural grassland of Europe, owned by the city, became a tourist attraction.

During World War II, Debrecen was almost completely destroyed. After 1944, the new Communist government of Hungary nationalised the institutions and real estate of the city and private properties were also taken into the public domain. Half of the territory of Debrecen was annexed to nearby towns; the city also lost its rights over Hortobágy. In the 1960s and 1970s, the city began to develop again and since the political and economic changes in 1990, Debrecen has made serious and successful attempts to become a regional centre for international projects of science, innovation and technology, sport events, creating links between east and west.

Education has been a decisive factor in the history of Debrecen. There are more than ten high schools in the city, the Debrecen Reformed Theological Academy at the Reformed College and the University of Debrecen with seventeen faculties has 32,000 students out of which 3,500 come from all over the world. The city now has an international atmosphere. Many students keep staying on after having gained their degree. The university and the training hospitals employ approximately 7,000 high-qualified workers, but many find jobs at multinational companies settled in the city. And many people find jobs in the service industry.

Cultural infrastructure

The Great Calvinist Church (Nagytemplom) and the Reformed College (Debreceni Református Kollégium) are not only symbols of the city but stand at its very centre in terms of location, architecture, history and culture. The church and the main square also function as cultural sites, giving room for social events, concerts, high-profile dance and theatre performances, and street festivals. The Reformed College is a historic landmark, but serves as a cultural centre, too. It is the home of the theological academy, a high school and a museum possessing a collection of 17,000 items from the history of the Reformed Church and the College. Its library owns distinctive book rarities and is an important archives of the history of the city.

As one of the intellectual hubs of Hungary, Debrecen has established a network of cultural institutions that host all sorts of activities and organise thousands of programmes annually. All forms of art (music, fine arts, theatre and film) are well represented in the city. There are two key institutions at the core of activities: the Főnix Event Organizing NPO (Főnix rendezvényszervező közhasznú nonprofit kft.) and the Debrecen Community Centre (Debreceni Művelődési Központ).

The Főnix, in charge of the major cultural events and festivals of the city, is based at the Kölcsey Conference Center (Kölcsey Központ), one of the largest in the country, which was opened in 2006. Its large expandable conference/music hall hosts 750 to 1,100 people. It has presented a great number of national and international stars during the years in the fields of music, theatre and professional exhibitions. The Főnix Hall (Főnix Csarnok), opened in 2002, with a capacity of 8,500 seats, is a venue for national and international sports games as well as large scale theatre and dance performances and music concerts. The Főnix is also responsible for organising various large scale outdoor programmes and local and international festivals such as the famous Flower Parade (Debreceni Virágkarnevál), the International Festival of Military Bands (Nemzetközi Katonazenekari Fesztivál Debrecen), the Béla Bartók International Choir Competition and Folklore Festival (Bartók Béla Nemzetközi Kórusverseny és Folklórfesztivál), the Debrecen Jazz Days (Debreceni Jazznapok), the Poetry Festival (Költészeti Fesztivál) and the Days of Literature (Debreceni Irodalmi Napok). A spectacular venue for music and theatre performances is the renowned Open-Air Theatre at the heart of the Great Park (Nagyerdei Szabadtéri Színpad).

The Debrecen Community Centre can be found in six branches and a youth house in various neighbourhoods in the city. It also has a special enterprise the House of Traditional Handcrafts (Timárház – Kézművesek Háza). The multifunctional buildings of the Debrecen Community Centre are usually equipped with theatre halls (100–200 seats), libraries, exhibition spaces, movies as well as rooms for leisure clubs, family programmes and various other activities. Their basic function is to strengthen the communities.

In the field of visual arts, the Déri Museum (Déri Múzeum) has almost a hundred years of history. The museum also presents evenings of literature and theatre performances in its main hall (120 seats). In a separate building, there is the Ferenc Medgyessy Memorial Museum (Medgyessy Ferenc Emlékmúzeum), where the works of one of the most important Hungarian sculptors of the 20th century as well as temporary individual and collective exhibitions of local artists are on display. MODEM (Modern és Kortárs Művészeti Központ), an art gallery and centre of modern and contemporary fine art renowned not only in Hungary but in Central and Eastern Europe, was opened in 2006. It has a space of 3000 m² on three levels for exhibitions of thematic shows. MODEM also functions as a cultural centre, hosting and organising concerts, screenings of films, alternative theatre performances as well as seminars, conferences and courses of museum pedagogy. Its smaller branch, Múterem Galéria, hosts exhibitions mostly of local artists in a beautifully renovated old civic house.

Another key organisation of the city, the Debrecen Kodály Philharmonics (Kodály Filharmónia Debrecen), consists of two professional ensembles: the Debrecen Philharmonic Orchestra (Kodály Filharmonikusok Debrecen) and the Debrecen Kodály Choir (Kodály Kórus Debrecen). Both perform regularly in Debrecen, in other cities in Hungary and abroad. Let us mention some of the most popular musical venues in Debrecen. Bartók Hall (Bartók terem) is a marvelous place for classical concerts at the very centre of the city (500 seats). The main hall of the university (400 seats) and the Liszt Hall (Liszt terem) of the Faculty of Music (220 seats) also serve as sites for classical music concerts. Concerts also take place at the protestant Great Church (2000 seats) and the Catholic Szent Anna Church (Szent Anna Székesegyház, 200 seats). There are some outdoor places for music like the Main Square, Déri Square, the City Hall and the Open-Air Stage in the Great Park.

Theatre infrastructure

If asked about the theatre, most inhabitants of Debrecen would automatically mention the Csokonai National Theatre (Csokonai Nemzeti Színház), named after the first important poet and playwright of the Modern Age, Mihály Csokonai Vitéz (1773–1805), who was born and lived in Debrecen. Its main building in romantic style, built by the city in its very centre in 1865, is the embodiment of the notion of “theatre” for many. Its permanent company with artists, popular in the city, is featured in an average of 350 performances annually, attended mostly by intellectuals at least 4–6 times a

year. Families with small children would mention the Vojtina Puppet Theatre, too. And indeed, these theatres, the Csokonai and the Vojtina – the so-called official theatres of the city (subsidised jointly by the central and the local governments and operated and supervised by the municipality) – are at the core of the theatre field.

GRONINGEN

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History and general information

Groningen is the capital city of the Province of Groningen, situated in the north of the Netherlands. Speaking of this “north” a set of three provinces is meant: Friesland, Drenthe and Groningen. The three provinces together take up 27% of the surface of the country and represent a bit more than 10% of the Dutch population (which is about 16 million in total). The region is a relatively rural area in the highly urbanised Netherlands.

With 190,000 inhabitants (2010/11), the City of Groningen is by far the biggest city in the northern area. It is a relatively small and dense city with 2,500 inhabitants per km². Sixty kilometres to the West, Leeuwarden, the capital of the province of Friesland has about 98,000 inhabitants and 30 kilometres to the South, the capital of Drenthe, Assen, about 65,000. Almost as a consequence, the city of Groningen has become the cultural centre of the northern part of the Netherlands.

Groningen is one of rather many typical Dutch cities that experienced their most flowering time in the 17th century (the Dutch golden age), a period that can still be recognised in the canals around the inner city, the old houses of merchants, a number of almshouses the ruling patricians established and some big protestant (or made protestant) churches. As all Dutch cities north of the River Rhine, Groningen became a protestant city after the reformation, where the preachers were in power and consequently playing or watching theatre was forbidden till the mid-18th century. During several centuries all trade from the province of Groningen, especially in agricultural products, had to be done via the city, mentioned for this reason as a Stapelplaats (Stacking place).

The first written evidence of Groningen is to be found in 1040, when king Hendrik III gave the land and villa Gruoninga (Groningen) to the church. It gained a dominant central function for the region, in both economic and political sense. After 1500 Groningen lost its position as a city-state, but it grew seriously in the seventeenth century through trade in agricultural and livestock-products, as well as peat. In 1795 the old Republic of Dutch Provinces ended, to become a part of the French empire till 1814. From then on