

Some friends offered Ruth and I the chance go on a river cruise. We have gone on other trips with these folks before, so we called Maureen and Gomega local travel agency, and signed up. The Danube River was an obvious choice for a river cruise; the Danube is 1775 miles long, the second longest river in Europe. It also cuts through a historical and beautiful stretch of countryside. Frankly, the beautiful blue Danube itself is not all that imposing. It is not blue nor is it especially wide, only a couple hundred yards or less, but the Danube has been a barrier, a border, and a crucial trading conduit between Europe and Asia for millennia. There is a lot of history along that river. Adding to the attraction was the fact that Ruth had not been to that part of the world in fifty years; I had never been there at all. We chose to cruise with Viking. They specialize in older clientele, no one under 18, and do a lot of river cruising; they have over 70 river boats, mostly in Europe. Our cruise would feature a non-stop flight to Munich, then a bus to Regensburg, Germany, to start a cruise for a week down the Danube to Budapest, Hungary. We would spend a couple of nights there before flying home.

River cruising is dissimilar to the more familiar ocean cruising; there is more emphasis on shore rather than onboard entertainments. The boat is obviously much smaller than an ocean cruiser with only a couple hundred guests. Adding to the challenges of river travel, there are many bridges, some of them very low, and 14 locks along our scheduled route. Riverboats are very skinny, about 135 by 11.5 meters and of course are shallow draft - less than two meters. I am a 'boat guy' and found them fascinating. They are powered by twin double prop electric motors mounted on pods. They also have a powerful bow thruster. All the electricity for the motors is generated by a big diesel generator located in a soundproofed container below decks. The boats are not only astonishingly maneuverable but they are also very quiet. We made many trips and relocations during the night, and it was rare for us to notice them. The pilot house, located about a third of the way back from the bow could actually retract to allow the boat to go under the many low bridges. The boats have three levels of small staterooms with a dining area and lounge in the bow. Riverboats are for eating, sleeping, and moving up and down the rivers. You will find your entertainment ashore.

Our flight to Munich was as easy as a ten hour transcontinental flight can be; we left at the very civilized hour of 1600 and so had darkness most of the way there which makes sleeping easier. We were met by red jacketed Viking reps who rounded up folks who were on our cruise and steered us to the waiting bus. We had gotten word just before we left home that due to low water in the Danube our ship, the Tor Viking, would be unable to make it up river to Regensburg, our planned embarkation point, and would have to take a longer bus ride to Passau. Although our flight had landed in the morning, by the time we were able to board our boat we were glad to just have dinner and retire into our neat little cabin for some much-needed rest.



A typical Viking riverboat. Note the conning tower. Even with low water there was little clearance

I elected to take the two hour bus ride the next morning up to see the town of Regensburg. Ruth decided she would avoid the ride and stay with the boat in Passau – a good call. I did enjoy seeing the old town with its Roman ruins, 12th century bridge, and St. Peter's cathedral, the first of many cathedrals we would see. This place is very old, having been a Roman fort on the edge of the empire. It has had its ups and downs over the centuries but seems to be doing just fine in modern Germany. The tour took me to Weltenburg monastery whose brewery was founded in 1050. We had a beer and pretzel before taking in the chapel which had a magnificent painted ceiling which had been cunningly painted to make it appear to be a dome. We had to go outside and check to confirm that the chapel, in fact, had a flat roof. This, like all the other monasteries we visited, was a working monastery with resident monks still inhabiting the place and doing God's work as they have for over a thousand years. It was a very interesting day. Still, I had almost five hours cruising around Bavaria in a bus which is a long time.



Beer and pretzels in the monastery courtyard.



The illusional painted chapel ceiling

The week took on a routine. I am an early riser and would get up and dress before dawn, leaving Ruth to her slumbers. There would be a good coffee and a continental breakfast on the upper lounge waiting for me. I would enjoy some of each and often take a turn around the upper decks, watching the dawn. Ruth would join me at a reasonable hour for breakfast. Usually we took the standard tour to see the sights of whatever city we had arrived in that night. At the end of the day a group of us tended to sit at the same tables for the evening meal where we would share our experiences. The food was exceptional. After dinner we usually had an early retirement to our very comfortable bed. It was a nice cycle.

Our first Sunday was a walking tour of the lovely old city of Passau. There was a tour of the Romanesque architecture including the residences of the bishops who ruled this area like autocratic princes, sort of an authoritarian theocracy. We made a visit to St. Stephen's cathedral, which housed the largest (+17000 pipes!) pipe organ in the world. It was Sunday so we had to be discrete as there were services in progress but the worshipers were way on down the nave so did not distract them. We took time afterward to have a nice walk around the city. Passau became rich because of the nearby salt mines. Ruth was saddened to hear of the 'salt ponies' who hauled salt out of the mines. They were short sturdy ponies, but living always underground they became blind.



Sunrise on the river.



Evening dining with fellow travelers

The boat's staff went out of their way to make the meals memorable. That evening they even put on an Oktoberfest style meal, dressing up in Lederhosen for the men and Dirndls for the ladies with options for classic German foods including, of course, pretzels and lots of beer.

The next day was one of my favorites: We spent the day cruising through a stretch of the Danube called the Wachau. Picturesque villages nestled beneath hills covered with terraced vineyards. Ruined castles of robber barons crouched on the tops of distant heights. The entire area is designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. That sounds really great, protecting places from modern encroachment. It also means that you cannot make any significant changes, freezing the area from improvements. There are no bridges on the 30 kilometers of the river, much to the inconvenience of the people who live there.



Wachau scenery. A modern home and an ruined abbey



Ruth enjoying the cruise

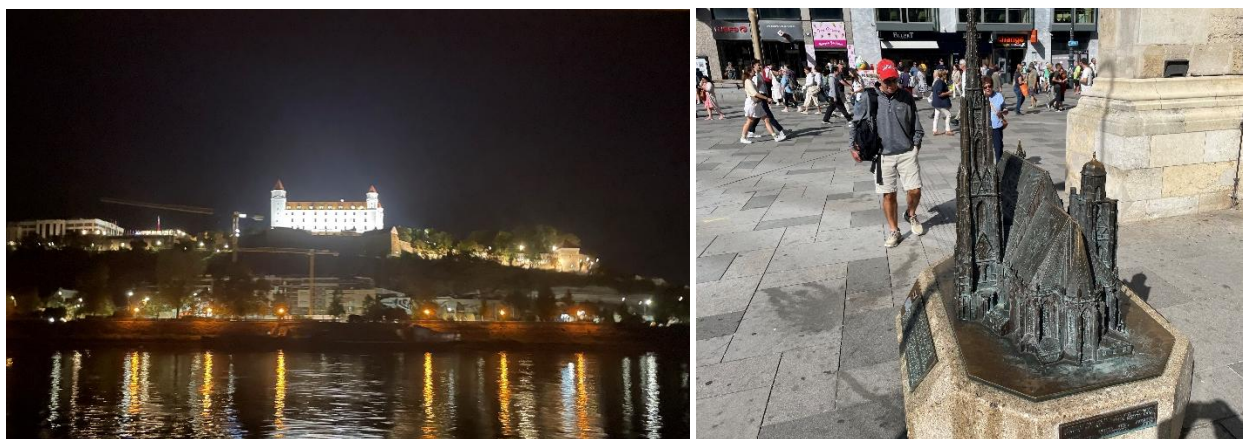
After our lovely cruise on a perfect day we moored in Krems, Austria where we got a tour of Gottwig Abbey, which we had seen from the river. This 900 year old abbey gave us a good feel for what it must have been like when the Abbey was the center of the area with its vineyards and apricot orchards, workshops and, of course beautiful church and buildings. The paintings and buildings looked fresher and more recent than some of the previous sites we had visited. In addition to the fabulous ceiling

frescos, there was marble statuary all around the halls. The abbey very much had the feel of a living and livable place. The monks work on the grounds and do work in the area as teachers and parish clergy.



'Sister Ruth'. Note hat. They positioned a mirror making it easy to photograph the ceiling fresco

That night we cruised down to the magnificent city of Vienna – what a view! We would explore this fantastic city for two days. The first day we toured the main attractions of the city center. Vienna was the capitol of a rather large empire for several hundred years, and the architecture reflects that. Many of the buildings are massive. Fortunately, Vienna was spared the worst of the bombing in WWII and did not have to endure Russian occupation for long, so the structures are still more or less intact. Vienna still has the somewhat indolent and hedonistic attitude of earlier times. Magnificent buildings such as the Schonbrunn Palace, finished in 1750, would dominate a lesser cityscape. But in Vienna it fits in the city naturally; all 1441 rooms and accompanying gardens of it. Perhaps the nearby museums give it some context. All in all Vienna delivered on its promise.



Coming into Vienna by night by boat – spectacular.

A model of St. Stephen's next to the cathedral

As our tour guide explained, Austria always lost wars but married well. The Hapsburgs built a series of dynastic marriage unions throughout Europe; often the Austrian half survived the marriage, resulting in an accretion of empires. St Stephen's (a common name) cathedral is a huge but somehow warm and welcoming church. Just before noon the sound of the cathedral bells cascaded all over the classic city. The Viennese have a metal model of the cathedral just outside of it for the blind to feel the structure, complete with braille descriptions; not because they are required to, but because they thought it was the right thing to do.

The Austro Hungarian Empire came crashing down when the First World War ended the age of empires, but that imperial residue still remains in the café attitude of the city. We took full advantage, sitting at a genuine Viennese coffee house and sipping melange coffee. On the second day, took a tour behind the scenes of the famous Spanish Riding School with the Lipizzaner stallions. Later we wandered about the city, enjoying the ambiance and of course, having more melange coffee and pastries.



Viennese buildings are art

Ruth enjoying the art of coffee and pastries in a café

The next day the boat left very early and made the transit down the river to Budapest, Hungary, passing under numerous bridges and passing by the Hungarian Parliament House, designed to be just a bit bigger than Britain's House of Commons. Hungary was a subtly different experience. For one thing, the language changed. No more of the familiar German. Hungarian is completely different from the Romance languages. Notoriously difficult to master, outsiders joke that the angels must speak Hungarian because it takes an eternity to learn it. Hungary suffered under Russian domination during the Cold War. In Bavaria the guides talked about the Romans, and impact of the Thirty Year's War and Napoleonic wars. In Austria, they talked of the Napoleonic wars and World War II. In Hungary, it was World War II and the 1956 uprising against the Soviets. Hungary suffered greatly in those conflicts. Budapest was essentially destroyed in the 1945 siege. Although the city has been wonderfully reconstructed, the shadow still remains.

Budapest, pronounced 'Budda Pesh', is a city split by the Danube. Buda is the western bank, Pest, on the flatter left bank. Buda has higher ground and is generally more expensive. This means that the Pest side, which has more room and is less expensive has grown and expanded. Both sides of the city are intriguing. Our tour on the first of our two full days in Budapest started in Pest, exploring the modern city with its many striking buildings. One advantage of river cruising is that your boat typically moors in the center of town, in this case only a few hundred yards down from the Parliament Building. We stopped to explore the iconic Hero's Square with its statues of Hungarian heroes of the past, starting with a striking sculpture of Magyar horsemen who conquered this region a thousand years ago. Although largely rebuilt in the last half century, the buildings were made in the classic old styles – as per the UNESCO Heritage Sites. One very subtle but very touching memorial was the 'Shoes on the Danube' memorial. Sixty pairs of iron shoes are positioned on the edge of the embankment at the edge of the Danube. The shoes are a wide variety of 1940 styles, boots, pumps, even little children's shoes. In 1944-1945 Jews were shipped out of Hungary as part of the Holocaust. Nazis would line people up and have them step out of their shoes. You see, shoes were valuable back then. Then the people were shot and the bodies fell into the river. It is a subtle but powerful reminder.



Hero's Square



Ruth mastering goulash

That night there was a Captain's cocktail party with farewell toasts and a final meal onboard the Tor. The next day, we had to clear out for the next group. Some of us were spending another day in Budapest and so would be relocated in the morning. Due to the low water condition in the Danube, the boat had to offload as much as possible and go upriver. People who were flying in for the upriver cruise would have to take a bus ride to get to the boat just as we did at the other end.

Once again Viking collected our luggage and put us on a bus that took up the steep bluffs to the Budapest Hilton located on the so-called Fisherman's Bastion next to St. Stephen's Cathedral. Later that morning we left our room and rode out to the charming village of Szetendre, an open air living museum. Szetendre is a recreation of rural Hungarian life ranging from the 1600's to the early 20th century. We saw typical livestock and local crafts including candle making and gingerbread – which we got to sample. Then we attended a class where some of us – including Ruth - helped prepare the Hungarian national

dish of goulash. It was delicious. Our trip to Szentendre ate up the entire day and we were glad to retire to our luxurious hotel room.

The next day, our last full day in Hungary, was spent near the hotel, which was fine as it was located in a busy, area chock full of things to do and see. We visited a pharmacy museum, and then toured the underground cavern hospital which was used in WWII and the Hungarian Uprising. The hospital included lifelike wax figures which were a bit unsettling. We were glad for modern medical facilities. Our lunch was an outdoor café called Jamie Oliver, a chef Ruth had heard of where we had an unusual and delicious pizza. The rest of the day was spent napping and wandering around the high ground of the Fishermen's Bastion admiring the architecture and admiring the views Budapest stretching out below us. That night we joined friends for a lovely dinner at a small Michelin restaurant for a final meal. We had to leave the next morning so the evening was an early one.



The view from the Hilton down to Budapest



Tom and Ruth cruising the good life.

Viking was typically efficient even at 0330 getting us to our Air France 0600 flight to Paris and then on to Houston, getting home in the early afternoon. It had been a wonderful vacation.