



The Danube River is the second longest river in Europe after the Volga. It rises in the Black Forest Mountains of western Germany and flows for over 1,700 miles until it empties into the Black Sea. It passes through ten countries: Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldavia and Ukraine.

For centuries its banks formed the boundaries between the empires of Europe. And the waterway itself served as the great commercial highway that made the empires rich.

During the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, Greek ships were coming up the Danube and trading with the local tribes. And when the Romans replaced the Greeks, the Danube became the northern boundary for the Roman Empire.

The river was constantly patrolled by a Roman fleet. The Roman fortresses along the shores became major cities, including Vienna, Budapest and Belgrade.

For almost 3,000 years the Danube has been an important road for commerce. With so many hi-tech advances in modern transportation you would think that the Danube would lose its standing as a significant commercial route. But just the opposite is true. Since World War II, traffic on the Danube has been on the increase.



Constant dredging and the construction of a series of canals and locks have made the river more popular than ever.

And since the mid-1990s, the Danube has become a major attraction for river cruises with people

coming from all over the world to sail on it-- including me.

The cruise I chose started in the Hungarian capital of Budapest and returned back to Budapest eight days later. While the ship was on the river it made stops in Bratislava the capital of Slovakia, Vienna the capital of Austria, Dürnstein where Richard the Lionhearted was held for ransom, the one thousand year old Benedictine monastery at Melk, as well as Grein, Linz and Passau.

Boats that sail on rivers are different from those that sail on oceans and large lakes. River boats are designed with a shallow draft



which means they don't go down very deep into the water. Our boat has a draft of about six feet. Because a river boat is not subject to high waves and strong winds you end up with a much more comfortable ride.

Our boat, the Avalon Poetry, is operated by Avalon Waterways which is part of a Swiss company that's been taking people around the world for over 80 years.

Burghart Lell is the head of operations.

BURGHART LELL  
HEAD OF OPERATIONS  
AVALON WATERWAYS

*The boat itself is 127 meters long, 443 feet and the nice part is that it is on three decks and we have cabins on all three decks. The most important thing is that on the middle and the upper deck we have French balconies. The bridge itself is the heart of the ship. There's always some passengers who would like to walk outside and just get a shot of the landscape. So in the lounge*

we just have an aisle on the side and you have a space in the front where you could always be outside even when it's raining. And then we have built the lounge in such a way that it is the social center of the ship.

We have the bar in there, you can play cards, meet friends, have a chat. We have as a policy to give you very good food. We have in the morning a breakfast buffet, we have a lunch buffet, there's always a variety. I have to admit it's terribly decadent. Then we have a sit down dinner with one seating. The ship itself is stopping once, twice, or even sometimes three times a day in different places. You can walk off your calories. But there's always the possibility to go to the gym. In the gym we have some exercise equipment like bikes, rowing machines, and for those of you who really like to get a little bit of a treat you can get in the whirlpool and watch the landscape outside.

#### BRATISLAVA

One of the advantages of a river cruise is that most of the time the boat docks in what for centuries was the central part of the city. On our first morning we docked in Bratislava and went ashore for a tour of the old city.



Bratislava is the capital of the Slovak Republic and the historic center of the country.

Starting around 1500 BC a trading route known as the Amber Road linked the people of the Mediterranean with the population centers around the Baltic Sea. Bratislava was a major stop on the road.

The city's most important church is St. Martin's Cathedral. It opened in 1452 and was originally part of the city's medieval fortifications. Accordingly, the entrances to the building were placed in the side walls – a safer spot.

The relic chapel is said to contain the bones of St. John the Evangelist. During the Middle Ages, no matter what else a church had going for it, it was important to have some relics.

Relics brought visitors, and visitors brought

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money, and money was essential for the maintenance and expansion of the church. And the bigger the relics the bigger the money and the bones of St. John the Evangelist were big.

For almost 300 years, St. Martin's Cathedral was the site of the coronation of the kings of Hungary.

## Cruising The Danube

Next we visited the Castle. The high point of any tour of Bratislava is always the Castle. That's because it's on a hill that's over 300 feet above the river. You know sometimes a high point is just a high point. Construction on the castle began in the 9<sup>th</sup> century when the Slavs built a fortress to protect a crossing point on the river.

When the Hungarians took over in 1526 they made it bigger. Then the Habsburgs of Austria improved it. The fortress was so impregnable that the Empress, Maria Theresa, had a special room where she kept the Hungarian crown jewels and, even more important, her collection of vintage baseball cards.

That evening we docked in Vienna and a group of us went ashore to attend a Classical Concert at the Kursalon.

### MELK

About 50 miles west of Vienna the Danube joins up with the Melk River. This is the spot that became the cradle of Austrian history.

In the year 976, the Babenberg family took control of the neighborhood and built a series of fortified castles. The castle at Melk was their most important stronghold and the place where they decided to bury their ancestors.



To make sure that their family burial site was cared for properly they set up a monastery inside the castle. The Babenberg's ruled for just over a hundred years, at which point the castle and the surrounding lands were turned into a Benedictine Abbey and the Benedictine monks have been living here ever since.

St. Benedict believed that nothing was more important than the worship service and the Melk Abbey church was built to honor that belief. The artwork inside the church is based on the theme that "without a just battle there is no victory":.

### GREIN

Our next stop was the picturesque little town of Grein. The stretch of water in front of the town was once a very dangerous part of the river. It was filled with rapids and rocks and took the lives of many boatmen. It was known as the Greiner Strudel.

The word "strudel" originally referred to a whirlpool or an eddy. But over the years its meaning has changed to include not only rivers but strips of pastry swirling around slices of baked apple, which is a considerable improvement.



The Greinburg castle that sits above the town is one of Austria's oldest palaces. It was built in the



## WHERE TO STAY

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1400s. The courtyard is three stories high and was used as the setting for great feasts and receptions. The most unusual room in the palace is a small artificial grotto with walls that are covered with a mosaic of pebbles from the Danube River. The palace also houses a nautical museum with models that illustrate the different types of ships and the rafts that once traveled the Danube.



The town of Grein and the family that originally built the palace got rich because they were granted the eternal right to collect tolls from boats traveling on the Danube. Apparently eternity took its toll – these guys are out of business.

### PASSAU

Our destinations for the next day were Passau and Linz. The German town of Passau is located at the meeting point of three rivers, the Inn, the Ilz and the Danube.



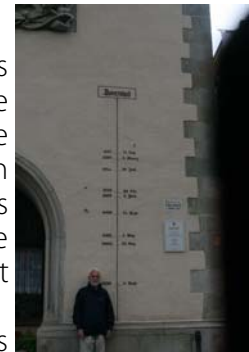
The old town sits on a narrow strip of land between the Inn and the Danube, which makes Passau feel

like parts of Venice.

And like Venice the streets are regularly flooded. The ground floors of many of the buildings have been given up and outdoor staircases built to lead up above the high water mark to the first floor.

The wall of the city hall has a series of markings that indicate the flood levels starting in the early 1500s.

Besides being one of the most beautiful towns in Germany, Passau is famous for its St. Stephen's Cathedral.



### LINZ

After Passau we headed to Linz. Linz is the third largest city in Austria and people have been living here for at least 3,000 years, though, most of them look considerably younger. The Old Town has preserved much of its baroque architecture.

The local café is the perfect spot for an after dinner coffee and a slice of Linzertorte which is one of the traditional pastries of Linz.

A Linzer Torte is an open pie that's filled with raspberry or red current jam and a dough that's made with ground nuts instead of flour. It's been an Austrian specialty for at least 400 years and some people consider it the oldest pastry

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recipe in the western world. In the middle of the 1600s a cookbook was published with four different recipes for Linzer Torte.



### **DÜRNSTEIN**

One of the most beautiful parts of the Danube River is the section that runs through the Wachau Valley---ancient castles, great vineyards and the town of Dürnstein.

The third crusades to the Holy Land took place at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century and featured a guest appearance by Richard the Lionhearted ruler of England. During one of the battles



Richard insulted Duke Leopold of Austria by insisting that the Duke take down his battle flag. Richard felt he was entitled to top billing. When the crusade was over and Richard was returning to England he had to pass through Leopold's neighborhood which included Dürnstein. In order to avoid being recognized he disguised himself as a

traveling tradesman. But he forgot to take off his royal ring. He was spotted, captured, and held in the castle of Dürnstein until he was ransomed for 100,000 marks.

It's interesting to note that it took over two years to get the ransom money together. Richard was not very popular with his family. As a matter of fact, his brother John and Philip the King of France put some big bucks together and offered it to Leopold if he would keep him here for another year. But Leopold went with the original deal and released him at which point King Philip sent a note to John saying: "Watch out; the devil is loose."

Today, Dürnstein is at the center of one of the most important wine growing areas in Europe.

The ancient Celtic tribes that lived here 3,000 years ago were already growing grapes and making wine. But winemaking didn't become a big business until the monasteries got into it

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during the Middle Ages. The monks would teach the local peasants how to cultivate a vineyard. Then they would take most of the grapes and make wine.

Monasteries throughout Europe were making and selling wine, it was a big business, and six of the major players were right here in Austria.

The Wachau area is about 40 miles west of



Vienna, at a spot where the Danube cuts through a range of hills.

For a few miles, the steep northern bank

produces some of Austria's most famous wines. The hills are so steep that very little equipment can be used and there are places where the workers are roped together like mountain climbers. It's not an easy place to make wine.

### VIENNA

Our next stop was Vienna. Vienna is the largest city in Austria, and the nation's capital, it was home to the Hapsburg court, the imperial seat of the Holy Roman Empire, and the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.



The best way to see Vienna is by driving the Ringstrasse - Vienna's main boulevard. It circles the city center and is lined with museums, universities and public buildings. When the old city walls were taken down in the 1850's, it was the Ringstrasse that took their place.

The Opera House was one of the first buildings to be reconstructed after World War II. Vienna is known for its musical big-shots. At one time Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Strauss all lived and composed in Vienna.

Behind the Opera House is the Sacher Hotel, it's the home of the Sachertorte, Vienna's signature pastry.

The Albertina is an 18<sup>th</sup> century palace which now houses over 60,000 drawings and one million etchings.

The main attraction on this boulevard is the Habsburg Imperial Palace. It was the residence of Austria's rulers starting in the 1200s. Decorators loved it - it got remodeled every time a new ruler moved in.

The Graben was once part of the town moat into which the residents threw their enemies. Today it's Vienna's main shopping thoroughfare



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into which residents throw their money.

One of Vienna's most popular attractions is the Schonbrunn Palace. The Hapsburg family came to power at the end of the 1200's and hung onto it for almost 600 years. Schonbrunn was their summer place, and it was built to look like Versailles in France.

### BUDAPEST

The last day of the cruise was spent in Budapest, which is actually made up of three cities: Buda, Pest and Obuda.



These days Budapest is a peaceful, beautiful and culturally interesting city which has managed to hold on to much of its history while adapting to the needs of a modern capital.

The Castle Hill area is about 200 feet high and about 5,000 feet long and it holds an entire city district filled with historic houses. The capital of Hungary was originally a few miles up the river on a flat plain that was almost impossible to defend. During the middle of the 1200s, the Mongol Tartars invaded the town and destroyed it. So the next time a town was built in the neighborhood it was put up on a steep

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hill — Castle Hill. Good move—safer neighborhood.

The district also contains the Mathias Church. The original church on this site was put up in 1255 for use by the German residents of Buda. At the time it was known as the Church of Our Lady but people started calling it the Mathias Church after it was used for the first wedding of King Mathias in 1463.

Mathias used it again for his second wedding to Beatrice of Naples. And I'm sure if he had a third wedding it would have been here too. He loved getting married in this Church and he was getting a fabulous deal from the florist.

Next to the church is an equestrian statue of St. Stephen who converted to Christianity in the year 1,000 and became the first king of Hungary. There is a story that the number of legs connected to the ground on an equestrian statue is related to the way in which the rider died: one hoof raised means the rider was wounded in battle; two hooves raised means death in battle; and all four hooves on the ground means the rider survived all battles unharmed.

This is a popular story but not always true. It depends on when and where the statue was made and who made it.

Behind the statue is an area known as the Fishermen's Bastion. During the 1200s each group of tradesmen were responsible for defending a part of the city wall and this was

the part defended by the fishermen.

The spot has a great view of the Danube and Pest. The building that dominates the Pest bank is the Parliament.

When we finished our tour of Budapest we headed back to our boat where we

celebrated our last evening on board with a Gypsy Dinner.



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