

Danube River cruise offers choices and chances 1

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THE SCENIC PEARL, seen here at the dock where the Danube River makes a tight S-curve, at the village of Durnstein, Austria, a 10-minute walk uphill.

VILSHOFEN, Germany – Delayed at the airport in Nuremberg and thoroughly frazzled, we checked and re-checked our watches as the

miles ticked by, with the Danube River and our Scenic River Cruises ship, the Pearl, nowhere to be seen. Gunter, meanwhile, hired to

drive us to the dock in Vilshofen for a nine-day Danube cruise and long-planned family vacation, calmly fiddled with the radio, tuning in a soccer match and then a music station. Finally he switched it off and sighing thoughtfully, gazed into the rearview mirror.

“The ship is waiting,” he remarked. “No worrying. Like American movies say, only rolling with the punches.”

Words to live by, indeed. With the Danube at flood levels, there was no way the 167-passenger Pearl

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Agreed. The Danube cruises are truly memorable and most beautiful. The tour I took

was going anywhere, not that night. Arriving just as the welcome-aboard party ended, we managed a glass of champagne and a hurried handshake with Captain Gyula Toth.

Nor was the next day wasted. Though it rained on and off, the kids kept busy exploring the ship and biking for miles along the river path while I rescheduled excursions, piano concerts and museum visits. Joining a tour of Passau, we drew a law student for a guide, an amateur historian as entertaining as he was knowledgeable. By bedtime we’d met enough people to discover that we – another passenger and I – had attended the same high school.

As for the Danube River, molten silver by moonlight, it looked as harmless as a backyard fishpond. Until the next morning when it reared up with a roar, rising another foot, flooding towns and fields, lapping at the undersides of bridges and thwarting cruise passengers.

It was then – still docked in Vilshofen – that I noticed Captain Toth had gone to ground.

“He gave a talk our first night, but after that nothing,” said New

Zealander Janet Holmes, a veteran ocean cruiser, who was eager to get going. “I’ve always wanted to see the Danube,” she said. “If they had a regular Captain’s Table, like the big cruise ships do, we could ask him when we’re leaving.”

Hope sprang anew when hotel manager Miguel Rodriguez called a meeting. But when he announced that two other ships had hit a bridge, blocking our route, a muttered protest swept the lounge.

“Why can’t we just leave? I paid for this and I want to go, or I want my money back,” yelled a tough-looking character who said he’d been on 20 cruises and expected better. What he didn’t realize was that river cruising is nothing like ocean cruising. Water levels change. The current never stops. Whirlpools gouge the river bottom, shifting sandbars. Tributaries deposit debris. Some low bridges are impassable. And the water can rise in minutes.

Or fall just as fast. A couple hours later the river levels dropped, the sun came out and the Pearl cast off, heading downstream between

low mountains, beside rocky cliffs and past ancient castles and vineyards.

“It’s like driving a car,” said Toth when I finally found him in the bridge house, hunkered down and peering at the current. “You can’t take your eyes off the road – or the river – for a minute,” he said, gesturing to the first mate to take the helm while we talked.

“You can’t stop to look at a map, or even get a cup of coffee. I’ve been on the Danube for more than 20 years, from one end to the other, and there’s always something new.”

A slow start notwithstanding, we made it to every port on the itinerary. At Passau, Regensburg and Durnstein we had a choice: to walk into town, ride the bus, join a guided tour or admire the landscape from the seat of one of the ship’s electric bikes. Full and three-quarter-day bus tours went farther afield (thank you, Scenic, for the newest, plushest, sleekest buses ever); to Salzburg (this earned a thumbs down as too far and too many tourists) and to Cesky Krumlov, in the Czech Republic.