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Living

Danube River cruise offers choices and chances

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📷 **STEVE HAGGERTY / COLORWORLD**

The House of Parliament, fronting the Danube River in Budapest, Hungary, seems every bit the fairy castle when seen at sunset from the deck of the Scenic Pearl.

by **Anne Z. Cooke**, TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

VILSHOFEN, GERMANY - Delayed at the airport in Nuremberg and thoroughly frazzled, we checked and rechecked our watches as the miles ticked by, with the Danube River and our Scenic River Cruises ship, the Pearl, nowhere to be seen.



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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 said. "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 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 Capt. Gyula Toth.

The next day was not 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 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 fish pond - 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 Capt. 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 had 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 of 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," Toth said 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 choices: walk into town, ride the bus, join a guided tour, or admire the landscape from 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 for being too far and having too many tourists) and Cesky Krumlov, in the Czech Republic.

Vienna offered a variety of choices, ranging from sightseeing and the Lipizzaner horses to museums and a piano recital at the Liszt Music School. Our dressiest evening added a touch of class, with wine and an opera recital at the Palais Liechtenstein. On-ship events included a Viennese waltz performance and beginners' lesson, and a folk dance group and band.

On my first Danube River cruise - about 20 years ago - I spent entire days on the top deck, watching valleys give way to mountains and return to valleys. With few organized excursions and even fewer cruise ships going by, it was a "Huck Finn" coming-of-age moment.

But the Pearl, with my family in tow, was much more in the moment. The kids immediately invented a competitive "spot the ships" game that awarded points for each sighting, a list that included Tauck Tours' Joy, A-Rosa's Silva and Bella, Ama's Prima, Scenic's Jasper, the Jane Austen, Emerald's Sky, Prinzessin's Sisi, two Uniworld ships (we missed the names), and three Viking River Cruises ships.

From a basket of memorable moments, I'd pick Durnstein for history and Cesky Krumlov for crafts. Built on steep terraces, tiny Durnstein is unique. But its standout feature is the hike uphill to the ruined castle on the rocks. For me, seeing the place where in 1192, England's King Richard I, returning home from the Third Crusade, was imprisoned for two years, put the Crusades on the map.

In Cesky Krumlov, our sunny day wandering through this 13th-century restored Czech hamlet soon became a Tiffany-meets-Disneyland adventure, with dozens of sparkly stores on cobblestone streets. Built astride the Moldau River and bypassed in every major war, the town is now a designated UNESCO Heritage site, making it (for all you film-location managers reading this) a set just waiting for a story.

Talking to Toth about working with Scenic Cruises produced another surprise. On the Danube, captains have just one task: steering.

"Our union rules don't permit us to do anything except navigate," he said. "My duty is to deliver the ship and the passengers safely and on schedule." He paused and thought it over. "See them, over there? That's why steering is harder than it used to be," he said, waving to three cruise vessels, each from a different company, going the other way. "There are dozens of cruise ships now, and more on the way."

The result is a critical shortage of experienced employees, from cruise directors to dining room waiters. Forced to hire beginners, service levels now vary from ship to ship.

A few travelers couldn't avoid comparisons. "We booked it because it's advertised as a luxury cruise," said Richard Holway, chairman of TechMarketView, a U.K. firm. "But not by our standards. We're very disappointed. The cabin and excursions are fine enough, certainly. But the service doesn't compare with Silver Seas, where the staff greet you by name, ask after you every day, and your waiter keeps an eye on you throughout the meal. These fellows don't even notice when you try to get their attention."

But most passengers gave it an enthusiastic thumbs-up. The fact that the waiters, new hires from Romania and Bulgaria, were inattentive didn't matter. They were thrilled to be vacationing on a famous river and fascinated by new places and cultures. They liked the meals and praised the all-inclusive pricing. Even disappointed travelers eventually softened up.

"We've had a very good time," said Janice Holmes, who had to move from one cabin to another when a mysterious leak soaked her rug, not once but twice. "These things happen, but you can't let it bother you," she said, waving goodbye. Words to live by, for sure.

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