



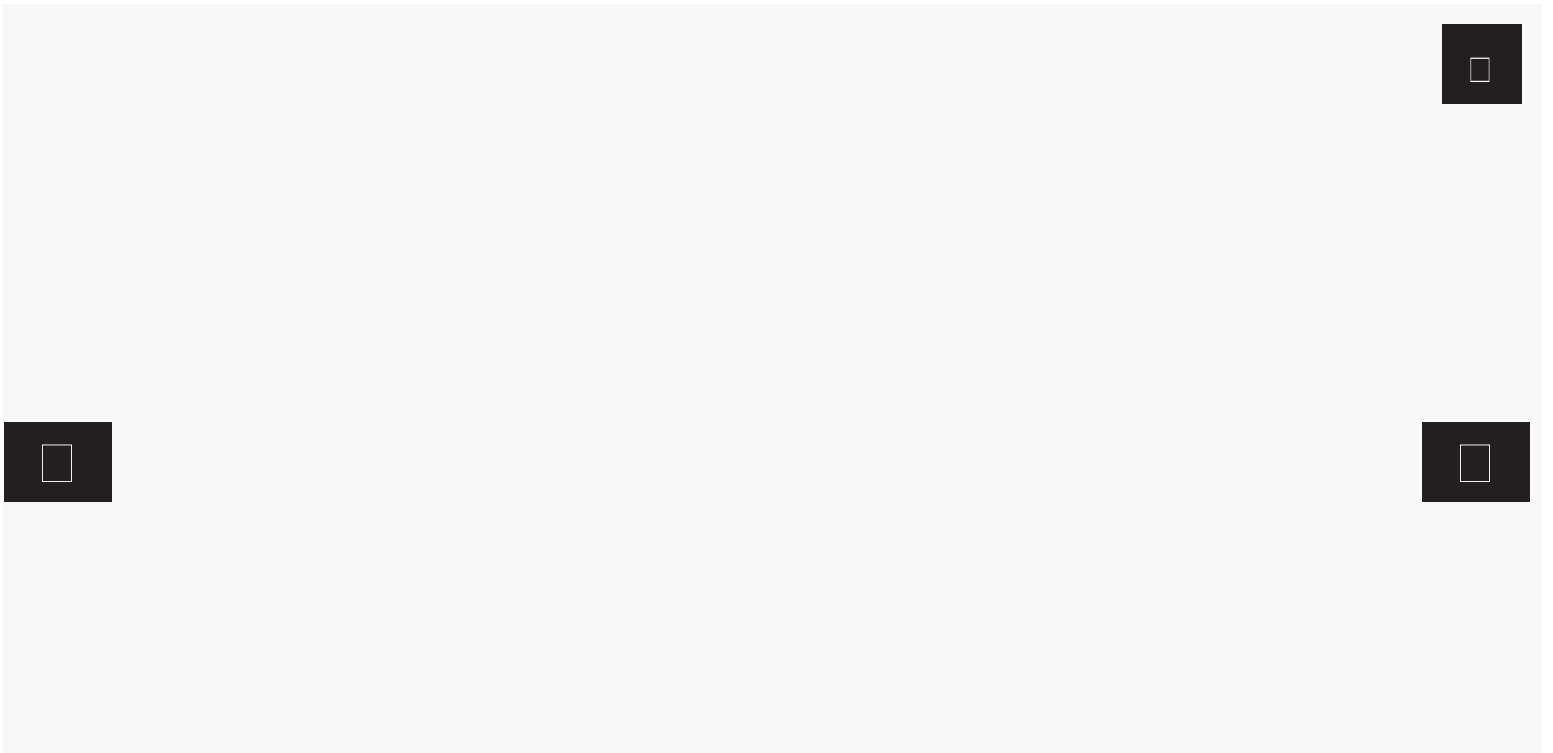
Travel

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Danube River cruise offers choices and chances



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1 of 4 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. (Steve Haggerty/TNS)

Rivers rise and fall, low bridges make routes iffy, and the wait staff might not be veterans, but a European river cruise can still enchant.

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.

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

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Words to live by, indeed. With the Danube at flood levels last summer, 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.



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If you go

The Pearl and the Ruby, sister ships run by Australia-based **Scenic River Cruises** (scenic.com.au) sail in 2017 on the Rhine and Moselle. A newer ship, the Jade, sails on the Danube between Nuremberg and Budapest. Category D cabins start at \$4,180 per person for two in a cabin and include a fly-free option for one airline ticket. The 2018 cruise brochure is now available.

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.

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 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.

When we learned 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. The current never stops. Whirlpools gouge the river bottom, shifting sandbars. 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.

eyes on the river

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“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; to Salzburg (this earned a thumbs-down as too far and too many tourists) and to 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.

The kids immediately invented a competitive “spot-the-ships” game that awarded points for each sighting. From a basket of memorable moments, I’d pick Durnstein for history and Cesky Krumlov for crafts.

In Cesky Krumlov, our sunny day wandering through this 13th century restored Czech hamlet soon became Tiffany-meets-Disneyland with dozens of sparkly stores on cobblestone streets.

Shortage of staff

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 going the other way, each with a different outfit. “There are dozens of cruise ships now, and more on the way.”



The result is a critical shortage of experienced employees, from cruise directors down 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."

But most passengers gave it an enthusiastic thumbs-up. 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 mystery 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.

Anne Z. Cooke

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