

# River cruising on the Danube

By Necee Regis | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT    SEPTEMBER 21, 2013



MICHAEL RUNKEL VIA GETTY IMAGES

## Cruise ship passing on the River Danube.

BUDAPEST — I arrive in the city on a cloudy evening, two weeks after the worst floods in central Europe in 500 years have invaded towns along rivers in Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic. The waters are receding but still above normal levels. As I board the Scenic Pearl, the ship that will be my floating hotel room for a weeklong cruise along the Danube River, the sky is spitting rain. Just my luck.

Jet-lagged, I trudge to my cabin — surprisingly modern and spacious (larger than some hotel rooms I've encountered) — open the curtains, and am astounded by a view of the Hungarian Parliament building, lighted and sparkling like a many-tiered tiara on the opposite shore.

I step onto my glass-enclosed balcony, push a button, and the top half of the window slides down and open. The air smells like the river, muddy and grassy, and the water, so close it

seems as if I can touch it, laps the ship as it rushes toward its own destination.

Rain? Who cares about a little rain? This feels like an adventure. Lucky me.

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“When you go on a tour, nothing runs perfect. There’s always hiccups. Whether things go wrong or not. It’s all part of the experience,” says Carol Feltham from Perth, Australia.

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It is still raining as we leave port the following day, so our safety check and life-jacket drill take place in the glass-enclosed observation lounge.

“The river isn’t deep. Even if we sink you can still grab your cocktail and go up on the sundeck,” says our energetic Romanian cruise director, Geanina Corendea. She is joking, of course, but it is reassuring for someone like me who wants the illusion of being able to swim to shore in case of an emergency.

**Fact:** The Danube is not blue. Even when record-setting rains haven’t churned the depths, the river is more brown-tinged-with-gray than blue. The second-longest river on the continent, the Danube originates in the Black Forest in Germany and empties into the Black Sea. My cruise will head upstream through Austria into Germany.

The Scenic Pearl is touted as a “space ship” and it does fit that description if, say, you outfit a space capsule with enormous glass doors and windows, and lay it on its side. At almost 443 feet long (135 meters), the largest length possible to fit in a lock, the vessel accommodates 167 passengers plus a crew of 50, making it feel intimate but not claustrophobic.

Scenic Cruises is an Australian company, so it makes sense that the majority of my fellow passengers hail from down under, along with a smattering of Canadians and Brits. The guests I meet are mainly retired or semiretired (most were 50 and older) travelers who say they chose the trip for its all-inclusive package. Once onboard, everything is included in the price: all meals, beverages, in-room service, entertainment, on-shore excursions and activities, airport transfers, and all tipping and gratuities. Even the items in the minibar are included. Eat a chocolate bar or slurp a cocktail; find its replacement in the morning. “It appeals to people because you don’t have to touch your wallet if you don’t want to,” says Doug Christie from Coochiemudlo Island, Australia.

Each morning, a printed itinerary outlines the program for the day, including the ship’s departure time, weather, local currency, dining options, the cocktail of the day, and tours available at our destination. In some cities, I join the tours; in others I amble off on my own.

In Budapest, I scramble into a van with a small group for an overview of the city, followed by hours lolling in the early-20th-century Szechenyi baths and swimming pools, a perfect antidote to jet lag. (If you ever want to see grown men wearing shower caps doing the dog paddle, this is the place.)

Going solo in Vienna, I wear out my shoes walking the Ringstrasse, exploring tucked-away neighborhoods and boutique design shops. My only worry? Missing the boat.

My favorite ship amenities are the custom-made, electrical-assisted bikes available for touring in both towns and countrysides. One morning excursion involves an almost 20-mile guided ride in Austria between Dürnstein and Melk. As we pedal our way through fields of Grüner Veltliner vines, I tarry behind the group to belt out a heartfelt stanza or two from “The Sound of Music.” It seems the right thing to do.

On days when the schedule involves several hours of daytime cruising, the landscape becomes the entertainment as the river twists past small towns, colorful fish camps, mountaintop castles, and crumbling fortresses. Each passenger is provided with a GPS-guided tour system, so we can tune in to learn about what we are passing.

“This is old and ancient and different. I’m loving it. It’s something on everyone’s bucket list,” says Jacqueline Horrocks, a travel agent from Lower Beechmont, Australia. “It’s suited to a 55-plus age group where you still want to travel but don’t want to be packing and unpacking a suitcase every day.”

For a ship with limited space, dining options are orchestrated to provide a surprise or two along the journey. The main dining room, a window-lined area at river level, offers a nightly buffet (with the option to order from an à la carte menu), and occasionally features “themed” menus when passing from one country into another. (Goulash in Hungary; “maultaschen” noodle pouches filled with spinach in Germany; sausage salad and pretzels in Bavaria. In addition, passengers can sign up for an intimate dining experience in Portobello, an area in the upper lounge that is transformed nightly into a fine dining Italian restaurant. (I’m still dreaming about the silky pappardelle with truffle sauce, dusted with tangy fresh ground cheese.) One can also dine once at Table La Rive, featuring a five-course “chef’s choice” degustation menu.

**Fact:** There are nine locks on the Danube in Austria. Here’s where I admit that locks are a mystery to me, feats of engineering that I don’t understand but accept and celebrate like moon landings and the Internet on my phone.

When entering the lock, there is nothing better than ascending to the sun deck to observe the proceedings. In some cases, only inches separate the ship from the lock walls. Posted

pictographs (black hand within red circle with slash) speak a universal language: Don't touch! Oh, how can we not? The walls are cool, damp, and rough.

Once in the lock, the vessel slowly rises to the level of the river ahead. There is patience involved in river travel, especially in the locks, a sense of time passing, anticipation, and the possibilities lurking around the next bend. There is always a next bend, and that's why, for me, the river itself is what draws me to a cruise; the river with its relentless currents that carry barges and ships and people and dreams. The vessel's enormous windows, so close to the surface, make one feel not only on the river but also part of the river, creating an intimacy unlike other big boat experiences.

"What impresses me is the quiet. I woke in the night and thought we were in a lock. I pulled the curtains open and we were still moving," says Lesley Maloney from Perth, explaining her response to her first river cruise. "I'm so delighted. I might sign up for the Russian cruise to St. Petersburg."

Fact: A river cruise is not a floating casino, spa retreat, or venue for extravagant nightclub shows, circus performances, and Broadway hits. The star attractions are the cities and villages where we hop off to explore the local food, architecture, arts, and culture. Some evenings, the schedule features live performances in a destination city, as when we are feted with an exclusive classical music and dance concert in the ornate Palais Liechtenstein in Vienna. Sitting feet away from the Vienna Ballet, performing in full tutu regalia while an orchestra plays Strauss's "Blue Danube Waltz," one could almost imagine the exuberance of pre-fin de siècle Vienna.

Onboard the Pearl, the spa is modest, with two stationary exercise bikes. There is a wellness area for massage, and a hair and beauty salon. The entertainment is basic, as when Hungarian musicians and dancers offer a lively and interactive folk program. Otherwise, the lounge features a nightly performer with an electric piano and synthesizer who could best be described as having attended the Bill Murray School of Lounge Singers.

"Celebrate good times/ Come on!"

Still, I discover that if you are traveling with a bunch of Aussies, you're bound to have a good time, no matter what the entertainment.

I also learn a fair amount of slang while dancing the late evening away. (The greeting, "How are you?" is "Hey ya goin'?" And, "Cheers big ears!" is an acceptable Australian toast.)

"I think the people who go on tours and trips are the kind who enjoy the company of other people," says Feltham, my new dancing partner. "I'd rather go on a holiday than buy a new

lounge chair.”

*Necee Regis can be contacted at [neceeregis@gmail.com](mailto:neceeregis@gmail.com) and [www.necee.com](http://www.necee.com).*

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