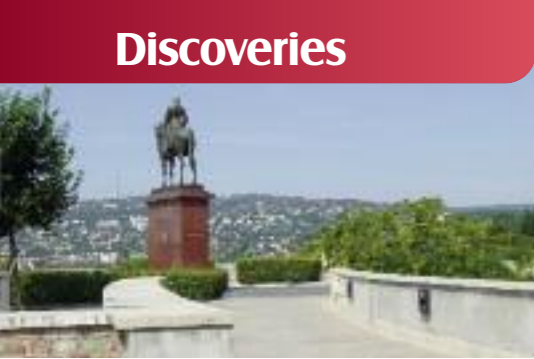


Budapest's
spectacular lightshow
at the start of an
adventure

Cruising the Danube

A river cruise covering four continental capitals highlighted the delights but also the dark side of modern Europe. **Norman Wright** was on board



Clockwise from main picture: The beautiful Danube from the ramparts of Fisherman's Bastion; The wonderful tiled roof of Matthias Church; Two typical villages in Austria's Wachau Valley; One of many river cruisers that ply the Danube; Bratislava's old city; Fisherman's Bastion overlooking the Danube; Castle Hill in Budapest

TWILIGHT CREPT up on the domes and roofs of Budapest and, as the clear blue sky darkened to star-studded midnight blue, thousands of lights on the bridges and classic buildings along the banks of the River Danube flickered on. The boats that passed in both directions were also extensively lit by this time, and it was a romantic and exotic moment as our river cruiser slipped away from its mooring in the centre of the Hungarian capital and headed upstream bound for

Amsterdam. Everyone on board was on the open deck as the captain steamed slowly, showing us the classic view from the guidebooks and those river cruise TV ads. Nothing beats being on deck for real, though, armed with a glass of champagne, feeling a gentle breeze as the evening cooled and hearing the soft slap of water on the bows. Gradually, as our boat left the heart of Budapest in its wake, people began to head down to the bar where a Hungarian trio was striking up a stirring gypsy violin tune. We

stayed on under the stars just enjoying seeing the now-dark banks slipping past and savouring the motion of the boat and the exciting smell of water and cooling countryside. It really did feel like the start of an adventure. After spending the first night aboard in Budapest we had the whole day to explore before our dramatic dusk departure. A morning coach tour meant we saw all of the highlights of the newer city of Pest on the eastern side of the river and the medieval Buda on the western bank.

From the heights of Castle Hill in Buda you get a great view of the city and the river. From the coach drop-off point the vista is across the city. After a short walk up the cobbled street lined with souvenir shops (tasteful) you get to Matthias Church with its tiled roof of many colours. It is worth getting a ticket to walk along the ramparts of Fisherman's Bastion overlooking the church, as from there you get a fantastic view of the Danube as it curves under the Chain bridge and past the domed Parliament

building. Further along Castle Hill is the Royal Palace, now the Hungarian national gallery and Budapest History Museum. From the bastion you can also see Gellért Hill with the enormous Liberty Monument. For all those imposing domes and magnificence, the most moving sight along the Danube promenade are 60 pairs of shoes on the river's edge. Cast in iron, they are shoes from children, men and women from all walks of life and a memorial to victims of Second World War fascism. The Arrow

Cross party in Hungary were supporters of Hitler's Nazi Germany, collaborating in sending thousands of Jews and political opponents to the death camps. They also forced citizens, mainly Jews they had rounded up, to remove their shoes and strip naked facing the river when they were shot in the back so they would fall in and their bodies be washed away. It is an atrocity that most of us probably wouldn't have comprehended before the recent round of executions in the Middle East. This simple memorial on the Pest



Clockwise from above: An impressive gallery in Vienna's Opera House; Melk Abbey; Passau's town hall; The Wachau Valley; A cloistered corridor at Melk Abbey; The wonderful painted ceiling at Melk Abbey; Waiting for the organ recital in St Steven's Cathedral, Passau; Evocative art in Vienna Opera House; Durnstein town with its ruined castle above; The courtyard and façade of Melk Abbey



bank near the Parliament Building gives you a jolt of horror that this sort of brutality could happen and is still continuing. There were further reminders later on. Our first morning of cruising was through gentle countryside with Hungary on our left and Slovakia on the right. Just after lunch we came alongside at Bratislava, the cobblestoned capital of Slovakia. At every stop there was a tour included in our cruise price. Normally it was a walking tour as the boat was usually tied up right in the middle of each town. There were

several coach tours. All of them were led by a local guide with commentary via your personal headset. There were some optional tours during the trip which cost extra; we only took a couple – a musical evening in Vienna and a Second World War tour of Nuremberg – as the inclusive tours were excellent. River cruising took a similar format to ocean cruising. There was plenty of excellent food, house wine included, a cruise director kept everyone well briefed on the next day's itinerary before dinner, and after dinner there

was a variety of entertainment. The dress code was informal and relaxed, and because there were far fewer guests you got more time to enjoy their company. The top deck was the place to watch the countryside drift by but it wasn't always available. As we approached a low bridge, we all had to go below as the wheelhouse lowered itself and the boat cleared the bridge. At one stage the deck was closed for a couple of days. This is dictated by water levels and changes from trip to trip. Our next capital city was Vienna after

an overnight hop from Bratislava. We took the inclusive coach tour of the city's main sights then stayed in the centre to do our own thing, including a tour of the magnificent opera house and a coffee and slice of the famous rich chocolate Sachertorte on the pavement tables of the Café Landtmann opposite. After dinner on the boat we were whisked off for an evening of Mozart and Strauss music on an optional tour. The evening was not too highbrow, an essential part of a visit to Vienna. The next morning the boat seemed far

away from the previous three days and three capital cities. For the first time we were sailing through a steeper-sided valley dotted with ruined castles with terraced vineyards stretching up above little medieval towns. The Wachau Valley is one of the most picturesque on the Danube. Melk is one of those little towns and we stopped there for a tour of Melk Abbey with its towering views down to the river and back along the valley. During the night we crossed another border and woke up in Germany, in the

cobbled town of Passau. Our walking tour included the huge baroque cathedral of St Stephen's and a performance on the world's biggest church organ in which the organist seemed to use every one of the 17,974 pipes and all four carillons. Further on up the Danube is the river's oldest town, Regensburg. We were really enjoying the relaxed walking tours in these ancient Bavarian towns. Regensburg is almost 2000 years old and its Old Stone Bridge was one of the main crossing points of the Danube for 800 years. In fact, the



Clockwise from top: Tranquil scene in Bavaria; Sunset over the Main River from the deck; The iron shoes in Budapest - a sobering memorial; Mighty arches of Cologne Cathedral; Wurzburg's Fortress Marienberg; The windmills of Kinderdijk; Zeppelin Field at Nuremberg with Hitler's platform jutting out



knights of the second and third Great Crusades used it on their way to the Holy Land. Soon after Regensburg we left the River Danube as it winds off across southern Germany to its source in the Black Forest. We entered the canal that links to the Main River.

Until then we had been travelling upstream and rising in the increasingly frequent giant locks.

At some point on the 106-mile canal we crossed the European watershed and started to descend in the locks and head downstream. The Danube-Main Canal was

completed in 1992 and allows large boats to navigate from the Danube Delta on the Black Sea to the Rhine Delta on the North Sea at Rotterdam.

We joined many boats in the locks or met them coming the other way. There were plenty of cruisers like ours, or cargo boats ploughing determinedly past.

Our next port of call, Nuremberg, has plenty of medieval history but it was its 20th century role in the rise of the Nazi party that we concentrated our time there on.

First stop on our coach tour was the Zeppelin Fields, where a series of rallies in

the Thirties attended by thousands of Nazi party members built up momentum for Germany's eventual disastrous attacks on its neighbouring states.

The main stone stands behind the jutting platform where Hitler's fanatical speeches roused his supporters still remain, although their top structures were pulled down by the Allies and the swastika symbols blown up.

The original ground is a bit overgrown and the tarmac area in front of the platform is used for all sorts of events, from markets to motor racing. Hitler's

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ambitions for this sort of rally knew few boundaries as a visit to the Documentation Centre close by reveals.

The centre is in the Congress Building, a huge semi-circular construction which was intended to house offices and accommodation for party officials, with a vast central courtyard that could hold up to 50,000 people. The Documentation

Centre reveals plans the Nazis had to create even bigger parade and rally grounds for hundreds of thousands. It illustrates the story of the rallies and the way Nuremberg was used by Hitler.

Money to complete the Congress Building and the planned rally grounds was diverted to the war effort in 1939, so it remains a failed project. Nuremberg was

chosen to host the war crimes trials for its significance as the root of Nazism.

All Nazism's main figures who survived the final days of the war and who could be rounded up were tried in Courtroom 600.

It is still used as a court, and tours of the room and building are available when it is not sitting.

It is an eerie feeling to sit and look over at the dock where those who swaggered on the rally grounds a few years before met justice only 70 years ago. Most of them also faced the death penalty in the jail just behind the court buildings. It was a



Typical bikes and windmills at Kindersdijk near Rotterdam
 Below right: Buildings lean in the narrow streets of Wertheim ; Below left: Beautiful borders at Wurzburg's Residenz Palace



Passport to river cruising

- Several operators offer the Rhine, Main and Danube cruise we took. You can travel in either direction, go the whole way, which takes around 15 days, take shorter trips, head from Amsterdam towards Switzerland or take a River Moselle cruise
- Other popular rivers in Europe are the Rhone in the South of France and the Douro in Portugal
- Smaller Ocean Cruise ships also venture up river

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◀ fascinating day in Nuremberg, but also chilling. We joined the River Main near Bamberg, a really beautiful old town with narrow streets, crooked buildings and clock towers.

We called at Wurzburg, Wertheim and Koblenz, passing the castles and wine slopes of Bavaria and the Middle Rhine on the way to our last major stop at Cologne.

Again we were able to moor right in the centre and walk from the boat to tour the old city, including the amazing cathedral.

There was only one port of call now before Amsterdam and the end of our cruise and that was at Kinderdijk near Rotterdam for a walk around the windmill-dotted waterways that keep the fields drained and prevent flooding.

Our guide explained how the system works now and how it worked when the windmills were the only source of pumping power.

Our adventure across Europe was almost over.

After a farewell dinner we woke at the crack of dawn berthed in Amsterdam, the Dutch capital. The American and Aussie friends we had made on the cruise were staying in Amsterdam for a couple of days before taking in Paris and London to complete their holiday.

Most of them had visited Prague before joining the cruise at Budapest.

We all agreed it had been the most relaxing way of seeing so much... a real Grand Tour.