

## OUR RIVER CRUISE ON THE LEGENDARY DANUBE

Last November, My wife and I and I took a river cruise on the “blue” Danube from Budapest to Nuremberg and as a bonus stayed two nights at the conclusion in the magical city of Prague in the Czech Republic.

The Danube is Europe’s second longest river, flowing over 1700 miles through 10 countries from Germany’s Black Forest to Bulgaria and the Black Sea. On our 7-day cruise through Hungary, Austria and Germany we observed historic castles overlooking the river and passed through some of Europe’s most scenic landscapes, such as the river bend near Passau and the rolling hills of the Wachau wine region.

Because our cruise took place as the Christmas season was approaching, the theme was the Christmas markets so famous in Europe. Dating from medieval times, these are now well established in all of central Europe. We visited and shopped at Christmas markets in the large public squares of Vienna, Linz, Nuremberg and Prague where they sell tree ornaments, toys, small gifts, jewelry and clothing accessories.

While shopping many of our fellow travelers munched on the many varieties of sausages (wurst) and quaffed them down with glasses of *Glühwein*, mulled red wine, heated and flavored with cinnamon and other spices.

### BEGINNING IN BUDAPEST

After an overnight flight from Charlotte we boarded the AMAWATERWAYS’ MS Amalegro, which was docked on the Danube River on the Buda side of Budapest. Although the late November day was somewhat dreary, the view was stirring of this great river and the historic Hungarian capital city, sometimes called “the Paris of the East,” straddling the Danube. Arriving a couple of hours before the welcoming orientation, we immediately found a taxi and for about the equivalent of \$5 we were off to the town center.



There we visited Europe’s largest and arguably its most beautiful synagogue (built in Moorish Revival Style) on Dohanyi Street. Next, we toured the attached Jewish Museum and the very impressive memorials to the Hungarian Jews who perished in the Holocaust and to Raul Wallenburg, the Swedish ambassador who helped save those more fortunate.

The next morning we toured this historic city and learned of its rich heritage of Roman, Hun, Ottoman Turk, Hapsburg Austrian and Jewish culture and architecture.

On the Buda side we were impressed by the Matthias Church with its colored tile roof and 13<sup>th</sup> century neo-Gothic spire. We also enjoyed walking on the cobblestone streets of the castle district and seeing the panoramic view of the river and city from the castle.

On the Pest side, we traveled down Budapest's great boulevard, Andrassy Ut, saw the State Opera House, Museum of Fine Arts and Heroes Square with its impressive array of statues of Hungary's founders and kings. Less impressive were the blocks of Communist era drab housing developments so strikingly juxtapositioned with the imperial architecture of the Austro-Hungarian Empire era. We also saw several of the thermal and medicinal springs for which Budapest is so famous, and on our next trip to Budapest we plan to soak in them.

## AUSTRIA

No city is more associated with the Danube than Vienna; it was here that Johann Strauss, known as the Waltz King, composed his most famous waltz, The Blue Danube.

Vienna is a truly imperial city with its great architectural monuments dating from the heyday of the Hapsburgs who ruled Austria from 1278-1918. Our tour of Vienna was partly by motor coach and partly on foot.

We rode down the Ringstrasse, Vienna's most famous boulevard past such architectural masterpieces as the former Ministry of War, Museum of Fine Arts and the Vienna State Opera. Our walking tour began at St. Stephen's cathedral in the city center, and continued along elegant pedestrian streets lined with upscale boutiques and pastry shops. After viewing the Hofburg Palace and Maria Theresa Square, the tour ended at the Christmas market in front of the elaborately decorated city hall.

For me, Vienna's highlight was the optional evening excursion to the Augsberg Palace to attend a chamber orchestra concert. In this chamber room the six-year-old Mozart sat on the lap of the Empress Maria Theresa at concerts, and performed as a young adult. The acoustics were superb. Although I have heard many famous violinists in the U.S., none of their music ever sounded as good as the music we heard in this room.



We made two more stops in Austria. In Melk we toured the Benedictine Abbey with its magnificent Baroque church (left) and exquisite library. Afterwards, we walked around this quaint and scenic town. The next day, while our ship was docked in Linz, I took an optional all-day excursion to Salzburg, one of the world's most beautiful cities located at the base of the Alps.

In Salzburg we saw the birthplace of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and also stopped at the nearby village of Mondsee where some of the scenes from the “Sound of Music” were filmed.

## GERMANY

If you’d like to walk through an authentic medieval city, Regensburg is for you. Since the city was spared allied bombing in World War II, the old city looks as it did in 1500. In fact you will even have the opportunity to snack at the oldest sausage kitchen in Germany, said to date back to 1135. We walked cobblestone streets through narrow alleys and a variety of squares. A Huge Gothic cathedral dominates the town, but we also observed many Italian-inspired buildings dating to the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries and the remnants of an older Roman wall. More recently, Regensburg achieved fame as the home of the current pope, Pope Benedict XVI, and as the post-war home of Oscar Schindler (of *Schindler’s List* fame).



Our final port of call was Nuremberg. Although not on the Danube, it is accessible from the Main-Danube Canal, which connects the North Sea with the Black Sea. Since Nuremberg is the toy capital of Germany, many passengers were excited to visit the city’s famous Christmas market (see photo on left), the largest in the country.

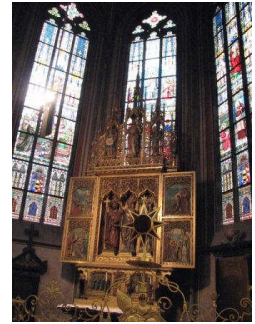
Nuremberg is as old as Regensburg but few original buildings remain. The old town has been reconstructed after being extensively damaged during World War II. Nuremberg was a prime target of the Allied Forces because of its infamous past as a center of Nazi power.

Hitler held his annual rallies at Zeppelin Field and the War Crimes Tribunal tried, convicted and executed key Nazi Germany leadership here. With the vivid descriptions by our excellent guide, we could almost see the soldiers marching and the prosecutors describing the atrocities of the accused and convicted.

## PRAGUE

After Nuremberg some of the passengers headed home, while a majority of the ship’s passengers, accompanied by the Amalegro’s cruise director, headed by motor coach for a two-night hotel stay in Prague. Prague was far and away the most colorful and exciting city on our itinerary. We only wished we had four days in which to see the city and experience more of its music, arts, food and shops.

We toured the 1,000-year old Hradcany Castle and St. Vitus Cathedral (right) and walked across the Charles River Bridge to view its ornate gargoyles and statues. In the evening Old Town Square was brilliantly illuminated and very festive.



Elliott and Sandra with our guide and local Rabbi in front of the Old-New Synagogue (completed in 1270).

We took a private tour of the old Jewish Quarter, with its Old-New and Spanish Synagogues, a Jewish cemetery dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and the very moving Holocaust memorial that displayed the artwork created by Jewish children in the Terezin concentration camp. Ironically, much of Jewish heritage in Europe was preserved because the Nazis gathered and archived Jewish artifacts from throughout Europe to create their planned museum in Prague to document “the disappeared Jewish race.”

### The MS AMALEGRO

A river cruise is quite different from an ocean cruise. Our ship, the MS Amalegro, was small, only 360 feet long by 38 feet wide, with only 75 staterooms. Amenities included a small exercise room, a massage room, and beauty salon. There were lots of lounge chairs on the sun deck, along with a walking track and outdoor whirlpool. We made ample use of the Lounge watching the scenery, conversing with other passengers, and enjoying evening entertainment, which included Hungarian folk dances; Sound of Music vocalists in Austria; and a German classical music quartet. Our ship had numerous bicycles available to use at ports of call, but because of the colder weather they went unused. The ship’s friendly and attentive staff numbered 41 and came from Germany, Holland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria.

The food on board was very good. The quality, variety and presentation of our meals left us satisfied and appreciative of the fine dining. We enjoyed a variety of fresh foods, cheese, salads, breads and pastries. There were always dinner entrees unique to the country we were in; for example, schnitzel in Austria and goulash in Hungary. We also enjoyed complimentary regional wines served with dinner. The preparation and presentation of meals were always first-class.

A river cruise provides an excellent way to learn about the history and culture of Europe without the hassle of packing and unpacking. However, we would recommend taking the trip in late spring or early Fall when the climate is better than in the winter. (It is best not to travel in the peak summer months to avoid the crowds of tourists.) We can only imagine how relaxing it can be at another time of year to sit on the sun deck and watch the beautiful scenery along the Danube and enjoy a glass of wine at an European outdoor café.

The MS Amalegro is owned and operated by AMAWATERWAYS, a California based company. Besides the Danube cruises, they offer river cruises in Spain, Portugal, Western Europe and Russia with very modern ships and a passion for good service and quality cruises. You can see AMAWATERWAYS' itineraries, dates and other information at their website [www.amawaterways.com](http://www.amawaterways.com). Then call us to book your cruise and receive a \$100 discount in our inaugural year of offering river cruises!

Elliott Feldman  
Costa Rica Tours, Ltd.  
[www.costaricatoursltd.com](http://www.costaricatoursltd.com)  
704.541.8680