

Trip Journal

Viking River cruise, "Romantic Danube", from Budapest to Nuremburg, 2019 with two day extension in Budapest, traveling with friends Ruth and Phil.

Tuesday May 28

Fly Logan to Amsterdam to Budapest.

Arrive circa 2:00 p.m in torrential cloudburst.

Luggage gets soaked coming off plane. Fortunately, only minor dampness to clothes.

Wed May 29

We holed up in the hotel, the New York Palace, and attended a brief indoctrination by the Viking concierge, then made dinner reservations at Veritas Winebar, which is a 3 minute walk away from our hotel. For dinner we shared a platter of assorted cheese, salami, sausage and hams. Then we shared duck with sweet potatoes, and breaded pork cutlets with homemade potato salad, and a bottle of Egri Bikaver. The food was delicious, the wine was very delightfully drinkable with a lovely blood red color (it means "bull's blood") and the prices were very reasonable; our entire dinner came to 18000 HUF, or about \$62 including everything. Then we crashed. The room is enormous, with a shower and separate extra deep marble tub, so I took a bath before going to bed at 10:00.

Thur May 30

Breakfast at the NY Cafe was scrumptious, very lavish with millions of choices. The New York Palace is a late 19th century building, very ornate with gilded and decorated walls and painted ceilings and rather rococo throughout. Service is impeccable; our coffee cups are never empty and there is someone assigned to stir the scrambled eggs so they stay uniformly hot.

We asked our waiter how to say "cheers" in Hungarian, and mentioned that we do some Hungarian folk dances. Somehow the word got back to the cafe's manager of guest relations, Benjamin, who came to our table, chatted with us, and offered to give us a tour of the cafe's many function rooms and bars. The New York Cafe is the most expensive restaurant in the city. His tour lasted 20 or so minutes, and he finished by offering us a tasting of four of the kinds of palinka carried by the bar. Turns out the New York Cafe was voted most beautiful cafe in the world in 2013.

After breakfast we wandered locally for awhile, going as far as the Jewish Synagogue. It is still raining lightly and very cold — low 50's — so we made it a short walk.

In the afternoon we decided to head for the Hilton and the Faust wine cellar, first to look at ruins of an old cloister, and then to do our tasting of Hungarian wines. 9 wines — three whites, three reds, a semi-sweet white, a very sweet white, and a call-back. They were all excellent and the experience was well worth it. By the time we were done and back to the hotel it was time to get ready for dinner.

Dinner was at Rezkakas. We started with a pear palinka, then a pate assortment that was fabulous, then rack of lamb and duck confit, plus a bottle of Egri Bikaver, with a traditional Hungarian cottage cheese and fruit dessert. Dinner was superb, and, at around \$150 for two with the wine and drinks, pretty reasonable for an outstanding restaurant.

Friday May 31

Time to check out and head for the ship. At breakfast, we ran into Benjamin and the next thing we knew, the flautist who was serenading the diners breaks into the Anniversary Waltz and Benjamin brought us a dessert plate with a candle and the words "Happy 50th anniversary" written in chocolate. Quite a treat! The New York Palace is definitely the most beautiful hotel we have ever stayed in, and the Cafe the most beautiful cafe we've ever been in.

We boarded the bus to transfer to the Viking Var, after waiting in the lobby for two hours (the difference between 11 a.m. checkout time and the bus). We chose not to walk around because most of the attractions we were interested in were too far for a walk there and back and still be in time for the bus. In retrospect we should have done the walk all the way to the ship, which was docked near the Chain Bridge and hence Parliament and St. Stephen's Basilica. Instead, the bus got stuck in traffic and took an hour to arrive (a leisurely walk would have taken less). Matters were not made any better because on Wednesday night, the day we arrived and the day of the rainstorm, a Viking river ship had collided with a small tourist boat and the boat capsized and sank. There were major dredging operations going on looking for remains of the accident.

On board, after unpacking, we joined a one hour walking tour of the areas surrounding the ship, including St. Stephens Basilica and the area surrounding the Budapest Eye. Then onto dinner. We each had the Hungarian-themed meal, a sausage and cheese sampler and chicken paprikas, and finished with drinks and music in the lounge.

Saturday June 1

We were up early for a four hour bus tour of Budapest, driving by Hero's square, with a long stop on Castle Hill, ending at the cathedral and Fisherman's Bastion for the views of Parliament. Then after an ice cream break we headed for the indoor market for an hour of shopping, then back to the ship around 2:30. Lunch was late and we had free time in the afternoon. In the afternoon we attended a presentation on available excursions for the rest of this trip, and another presentation on Mozart and Viennese coffeehouses. George, our program director, did an outstanding job describing the boy genius and interspersing bits of his music into the talk. It was amazing to learn about a piece of music he composed at the age of 7, and then hearing it! Laura said during this presentation, "Just think... here we are on the Danube, sailing to Vienna, listening to Mozart and having drinks with good friends. It doesn't get any better than this."

Dinner was incredible. We had amazing crab cakes for appetizers and Chateaubriand that melts in your mouth. After dinner we watched from the sun deck as Budapest lit up at night; then went to the bar and watched, with a rare single malt whisky as we transited one of the biggest locks on the Danube.

Sunday June 2

Another early morning start as we took a one hour bus tour of Vienna, then an hour long walking tour, and an hour of wandering on our own. We had the opportunity to remain in town and take a taxi (about 20 euros) back to the ship, but since it was Sunday and all the stores were closed, we returned with the tour bus. Once back, we walked along our section of the Danube and found a restaurant (the View) overlooking the river and had drinks. The rest of the afternoon consisted of a shower, chatting, and a presentation on tomorrow's itinerary.

Note about the weather: after cold rainy days in Budapest, we had sunny and high 70s here in Vienna. We'll see what the rest of the week brings.

After dinner we headed to the lounge. There were two excursions going on in the evening so initially things were quiet, but as people returned to the ship they joined the party until the lounge was 1/2 full and the energy level was incredible. A lot of people were dancing and singing along with Sylvia, who was rocking the crowd. I finally gave up at 11:45 since we had an early morning ahead of us, but apparently the party went on until after 1:00 a.m.

Monday June 3

We arrived in Krems and were immediately loaded onto buses for a very short drive to the morning's activity, a tour of the Benedictine Abbey at Gottweig. The Abbey is amazing, as was the tour. The Abbey has been in operation for over 500 years and is still working with the town to improve life. There are 14 monks who live in the Abbey and another 40 who work outside it, helping in schools, the local hospital and prison. Our tour guide Len was hysterical. After the tour, we had a wine tasting of the wines made at the Abbey and then had a chance to buy them in the gift shop, along with many apricot products made from fruit grown on the Abbey's land.

The afternoon was spent cruising the Wachau Gorge and seeing where all the grapes are grown to make, among others, the famous Gruner Weltliner wine. Lots of picture taking opportunities, including several castles. Then we had a high tea, and a lesson in making apple strudel. Next was the mandatory lifeboat drill, followed by another talk and then the Viking Explorer Society returning guests' cocktail party.

Dinner was smoked trout, curried prawns, and a fabulous moelleux au chocolat. After dinner we formed teams for a musical quiz; Sylvia would play some music while we danced to it, then we had to identify the country it was from, and answer one trivia question about that country. Out of a perfect score of 24, our team got 23 and took second prize (a bottle of the house bubbly). The winner with 24 got first prize (a bottle of the house bubbly). I think they were trying to unload the house bubbly :-). We even got to dance a fast Hasapiko and note it was from Greece.

Tuesday June 4

We were bussed into Passau for a walking tour of the town, culminating in a tour of the baroque church, St. Stephens (that makes three this trip: Budapest, Vienna, and Passau). The church in Passau is perhaps the most impressive of the three, and has the largest church organ in the world, with 17000 pipes in five banks (so the organist has to play 5 manuals), ranging in size from 1/2 inch to 33 feet, and able to produce frequencies from 16 HZ to 16000 HZ. Immediately after the tour we were able to attend an organ concert. The Bach Toccata and Fugue in D-major and the Purcell Trumpet Voluntary were spectacular, and it was a real experience hearing them in this magnificent baroque church.

There was an opportunity to remain in town but we chose to take the bus back, for lunch, since we had a 2:15 departure for the Bavarian Beer Fest.

After a short drive, we arrived at the farm in Passau for the Bavarian Beer Fest. We expected beer and music and maybe a little culture, but we were in for a delightful surprise. The visit actually started with a walking tour of the farm. The tour was given by one of the daughters of the family that has run the farm for 17 generations, or by our guide Stephanie, who was not actually related but, by her own words, is a member of the family, having spent more time there than at home.

The farm is incredible — 330 acres, devoted mostly to horses and riding stables. They care deeply about tradition and try to use all natural products from their own farm. They have a lumber mill and make all their own furniture from trees cut from their own forests.

After the walking tour, we assembled for the beer fest. Wow. We watched the traditional process of tapping a beer keg, then drank some of the freshest beer I've ever tasted. Plus, Laura, who has NEVER found a beer she liked, had seconds!! The accordionist played a polka and we danced, to the delight of the spectators. There was food — mostly, incredible pretzels with various dips. But then the “farmer” — the head of the farm — came out and danced a polka with Laura. Then he demonstrated a complex Bavarian men's dance which was aerobic and fast and very tricky, a Schuhplattler. He then called for volunteers to learn the dance, and I signed up. We spent 10 excruciatingly hot minutes learning the dance in a back room (and didn't entirely have it). Then we did a performance for the rest of the group. After that and a few more beers, we also signed up for some “games” which were a lot of fun. In all, it was a great experience and fun excursion.

We were late getting back to the ship, but managed to make the port talk and then dinner. After dinner was a presentation on other Viking trips, followed by music and dance.

Wednesday June 5

Another gorgeous day, sunny and 80s. At 9:00 we arrive in Regensburg and begin the walking tour from the ship. There are two options for the tour: the basic city tour, which lasts one hour 45 minutes, and an extended one that also talks about the Jewish history of the city, and takes an additional 30 minutes. We signed up for the longer tour and were very glad we did.

Regensburg is a beautiful city with roots reaching back 1000 years and more. It was mercifully spared during the bombings in WW2 and the old part of the city is now a UNESCO World Heritage site. We viewed the Roman parts of the city, the medieval parts and got a lot of history from our guide, who is very interested in history herself. But a highlight of the tour was the Jewish history part. She explained about the foundations for Hitler's support flowing from the economic stresses of WW1 and then the stock market collapse of 1929, and how candidate Hitler promised to fix things, create jobs, and make Germany a world power again. About how he only received 33% of the vote was originally made chancellor but with a president who vowed to keep him in control, and how when the president died he declared himself president and then suggested the simpler title “Der Führer”. Our guide talked about learning in school about the Third Reich at least three times, having to attend a nearby concentration camp, and what it was like to be a 13 year old who suddenly found herself in a room like a communal shower only to find it was a gas chamber, and that the next room on the tour was the furnace where they would burn the bodies. About how a bus load of 13 year olds was so chatty and noisy on the trip down, but dead silent on the ride back. Wow.

We finished the tour at the magnificent St. Peter's cathedral, and then walked back to the ship. We considered trying one of the famous Bavarian sausages with sweet mustard, but time was limited since the ship was due to depart at 12:45.

The afternoon was a relaxed one since we had no scheduled excursions; it was an opportunity to shower, do the Sunday NY Times crossword, and just relax before dinner. Before dinner we had our disembarkation meeting to learn the details of leaving on Friday.

Dinner was a German buffet with an accordion and fiddle serenading us. The food was fabulous! After dinner we skipped the scheduled games in the lounge and began packing.

In the evening there was an announcement that there had been an accident and the lock we were waiting for was damaged. They would announce in the morning the extent of the damage.

Thursday June 6

At breakfast, we received the announcement that the damage to the lock was extensive and that we would not be able to sail on to Nuremberg. Since we were a one and a half hour drive from Nuremberg, the decision was made to leave that much earlier, bus to Nuremberg for the walking tour and now shortened free time, bus back to the ship for dinner, and then a revised schedule for departure to the airport would be forthcoming using busses to get us there.

The rest of the morning was spent on the ship, so we packed.

We began with a bus tour of the city, and ended at the castle. We opted out of the walking tour, which went from the castle down a long steep cobblestone path to the center of the old town; instead, we rode the bus down instead and had about 2 hours to explore the old town and shop. We had intended to get an outdoor cafe for beers but the weather, which had been in the 80s, suddenly turned windy and cold, in the mid-60s.

After holing up in shops and walking around a bit, we caught the bus back to the ship. Dinner was late and the captain's toast which was supposed to happen before dinner was moved to after dinner and followed by a Klezmer band that was good but not really Klezmer — they were mostly playing popular favorites in a Klezmer style.

Friday 7

Up at 4 a.m. to get bags out by 4:30, then a continental breakfast until the bus departed at 5:45. Flights were uneventful and we were home in time for rush hour traffic.

An interesting note: In Schiphol airport we went through a very quick passport control because it had been automated; you scanned your passport, it verified that it was current, and then took a picture of you and used facial recognition to ensure they matched. Then you just had to have a person stamp the passport. These lines moved really fast.

Overall impressions

This was not our favorite cruise. We were somewhat disappointed by the shortness of the extension in Budapest (from 3 p.m. Wednesday to checkout time Friday). Unfortunately, much of the time we could have been exploring was marred by rain. Friday was nice enough and in hindsight we should have checked out and then walked to the ship, which would have taken us by the Basilica of St. Stephen, the Houses of Parliament, and then allowed us to walk along the river enjoying the view.

Another disappointment was the lack of on-board ethnic-related entertainment. We had an accordionist on Thursday for the German buffet and the Klezmer band, but they were on the last night, when we had a very early departure the next day.

We were also disappointed that many of the stops were not as scenic and charming as we would have liked, and we had to be bussed into town and thus could not set our own schedule. We had too little time in Vienna since we didn't take any of the optional extensions. Passau and Regensburg were nice but we had very little time on our own to explore.

Highlights: the food was excellent, perhaps the best of any of our river cruises. The bar added rare whiskies, which were pricy if you ordered them off the menu (and they were only half-pours) but we had the beverage package so we could work our way through them all.

The New York Palace hotel was a highlight. The rooms were huge and the lobby and cafe were spectacularly gorgeous, and the hotel staff were great, especially the manager of guest relations who gave us the tour.

The organ concert in Passau, sitting in a magnificent baroque church while listening to this fabulous organ was incredible.

George, our program director, was great, and a highlight was his talk on Mozart, punctuated by playing bits of Mozart's music, was memorable.

And we had a highlight in Regensburg; not only was the town pretty and charming, but also our tour guide did a great job on the main part of the walking tour, but her half-hour presentation on Jewish history in Regensburg was fantastic.

And lastly, the optional Bavarian Beer Fest was a real highlight. They did a great job combining a walking tour, beer, and entertainment.

Weather

We need to be reminded that you can't trust the weather forecast. We didn't bring shorts and by mid-trip temps were in the 80s and it was hot. Then we failed to bring sweatshirts in Nuremburg, and we froze.

Crew

In addition to our Program Director George, many other members of the crew were fantastic. Our bartender Alejandro from Barcelona and Allen from Serbia were great; they learned our preferences and the service was superb.