

Cruise through history along the Danube

Phil Reimer

The Starphoenix

Saturday, May 17, 2014

When it comes to the number of ocean cruises vs. river cruises, I am a relative river newbie. So when I first boarded the Viking Kvasir in Budapest for its 15-day cruise along the Danube, Main and Rhine en route to Amsterdam, I had some apprehension about the length. That soon disappeared.

Before 1992, I'd never have made this trip. That's when the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal was finished, the dawn of a new era for river cruising because ships were then able to cruise from the North Sea to the Black Sea. While it's impossible to cover 15 days in this space, most of my journey is detailed at portsandbows.com. Carrying 190 passengers, the Viking Kvasir is the maximum length for the locks: 135 metres. I soon discovered that most passengers are curious, knowledgeable and interesting. After all, you're not on a river cruise for the gambling or big-stage entertainment. This is a comfortable, smooth-running, well-designed ship that helps teach European History 101 over two weeks.

It doesn't take long to find something in common with fellow passengers or staff. A waiter from the Czech Republic was all over the World Hockey Championship. Adela Kolmanova, the maitre d' from Slovakia, was insistent that I see Cologne Cathedral in Cologne - joking that she wouldn't allow me back on board if I didn't. New friend, Mitch from Pittsburgh, compared NHL notes with me every morning.

The three major cities on the route were Budapest, Vienna and Amsterdam. Others included Bratislava, Nuremburg, Cologne, Regensburg and Passau, plus tinier towns like Melk, with its one major attraction - the Benedictine abbey - and even smaller communities like Kinderdijk, with its 19 Dutch windmills.

I was ready for the appetizer that this cruise is: a Coles Notes version of Europe, just enough knowledge to decide when and where you want to return.

I had my favourites. On the river, it was Danube and Wachau Valley, which runs from Krems to Melk. The Danube wanders and history is in the small communities that dot the shore. Castles, abbeys and traditions all floating by as program director Marianne van Hoogdalem kept us up to date on what to expect around the next bend. Durnstein's Kuenringerburg Castle, now a pile of rubble, had its moment in history when Archduke Leopold was insulted after the Crusades by Richard the Lionheart, who was imprisoned in the castle until a handsome payoff three months later enabled him to return to England.

The Middle Rhine ran a close second to the Wachau Valley. Budapest was my favourite city. Buda and Pest - pronounced "Pesch" - are joined by the Danube, with Buda on the hill providing a great view of Pest across the river. Coming from Pest, you cross the Chain Bridge and take the funicular to the top. The Royal Palace and Matthias Church are there, along with interesting shops, and restaurants that serve Hungarian goulash, paprika-laced dishes and dumplings.

Pest is more modern and must-sees are the Central Market, over a kilometre long

and one of the finest in Europe. Also Heroes Square, where you'll find heroes, museums, a city park, a zoo, water sports and one of the largest bath houses in Europe with many thermal pools. If your ship docks in Pest, it's only a few blocks to shopping and nightlife.

River cruising is highly personal. The Viking Kvasir staff went a long way to making the experience unique. Ship management is visible all the time. Have a problem and they find you. Ask for advice on where to eat, shop, visit and they respond with enthusiasm. I was sick for a few days and had more attention than I deserved. When I finally emerged, my stateroom attendant Dani said: "You look great today." That made my day.

Visit portsandbows.com, sponsored by Expedia CruiseShipCenters, for daily updates on the latest cruise news, best deals and behind-the-scenes stories from the industry. You can also sign up for an email newsletter on the site for even more cruise information. Phil Reimer may be contacted directly at portsandbows@gmail.com.

© The StarPhoenix (Saskatoon) 2014

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2014 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#). All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#). All rights reserved.