

Viking River Cruise

Amsterdam to Budapest

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By Dr. John Howard

We found our home for the next 14 days... a long, sleek, low-profile ship totally different from any ocean-going cruise ship we've traveled on. 128 passengers from mainly English-speaking countries (USA, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada) with a crew of 40. Comfortable cabins, nicely appointed, with big picture windows. The ship — and all the river cruisers — were low-profile because of the hundreds of bridges on our route along the Danube, the Main, the Danube-Main Canal, and the Rhine rivers. (The captain's bridge on the top deck could actually be lowered to be flush to the deck when we approached some of the lower bridges.) The Viking Neptune has a nicely appointed and comfortable lounge where the passengers assemble for daily briefings, a handsome restaurant which featured a salad bar, richly stocked with tasty choices, including champagne if you so desired, and OPENSEATING — a feature we liked for it helped us meet many interesting people. The service was excellent, with a pleasant - and witty - crew from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Rumania, and Germany. They all spoke English comfortably. The soups were exceptional. Each lunch and dinner menu offered a choice of at least two main dishes, several desserts, and any beverage of choice. The food was good, presented hot and fresh. The ship featured another practice much enjoyed by many of the passengers — a 6:00 am early-bird breakfast (hot rolls, fruit, coffee and tea, etc.) and a pajama parade as people sought it out before dressing for the day's scheduled shore excursion.

Budapest! Made me think of "My Fair Lady." A surprisingly sophisticated city bisected by the Danube River. Budapest became the capital of Hungary in 1873 when the cities of Buda, Obuda, and Pest were merged. Roman ruins dating back 2000 years mark the early origins of the city. The overlook of the city from the heights in Buda show the city at its best. There are castles, monuments, museums, many churches, theaters, and cafes galore. The Parliament Building is magnificent. We opted for a tour of the countryside to a horse farm and Hungarian luncheon some 60 miles from the city. The horsemen gave us a show of riding bareback reflecting their Magyar heritage. It was interesting, but we would not recommend it as the best use of time in a city full of options.

We traveled mostly at night. The ship was very quiet and the rivers were placid, making for an extremely smooth voyage. We would arrive at most destinations in early morning, enjoy breakfast, and then take the day's planned shore excursion. We were delighted with each stop ---- from Bratislava in Slovakia all the way to Amsterdam. Each city offered history, pride in architecture, an introduction to the devastation wrought by the bombing of WW II and the care with which buildings were restored, and - without fail - pleasant people. The cities were clean. There was little visible advertising to clutter the landscape. It would be difficult to single out one city as better than the others. Only Nuremberg and Cologne in Germany, the most heavily bombed during the war, lacked the feeling of antiquity and architectural charm, and they, too, had restored their cities with loving care.

The docking. It was fascinating to watch as the captain maneuvered the ship into its assigned dock each day. The Neptune is a LONG ship, requiring a lot of river's edge for docking. Often another ship was already berthed at our assigned spot and we would watch the captain edge us alongside, put a gangplank between the two ships, and we'd

exit by walking through the reception area of the other ship to the shore. (In Amsterdam, there were four ships side-by-side. It made an interesting exit and gave us a glimpse into the other cruise ships. Clearly there are degrees of elegance.)

The locks! One of the features, unique to this cruise, was passing through 68 (!) locks en - route. We were offered a schematic which showed a profile of the river and the locks required to travel the entire distance. The Danube naturally flows from West to East. The Rhine flows from East to West. The profile of the country through which the rivers flow shows the watershed (the highest point from which water flows downhill) to be nearly 1332 feet above sea level. The ships had to be lifted, or lowered, as necessary, and the lock system was designed to accomplish it. The locks were narrow – the ship often scraped the side as we tied onto cleats to keep us steady. The deepest locks — three of them — were 80 feet deep and it was quite a spectacle to stand on deck and look up the height of a 10 story building and then watch as the water was pumped into the lock and the ship (imagine the total weight!) climbed the wall the full 80' before the gate was opened and you entered the river at the higher elevation. The Main-Danube Canal, the principle connection between the Rhine and the Danube was not completed until September, 1992, just 13 years ago, after 30 years of construction. The canal, between Bamberg on the West and Kehlheim on the East, is twice the length of the Panama Canal. To witness these locks and their operation was a unique experience.

We arrived in Cologne, Germany, when the Pope made his first trip, as Pope, out of Rome. It was a day when nearly half a million young people were invited to the city for a Youth Conference and it was astonishing to see the seemingly endless parades of young people, carrying their national flags, crossing the bridges, singing as they marched, heading for the Cathedral. It was, unfortunately, the only day of heavy rain on our 16 day outing, and many of the visitors to the city were thoroughly drenched. It proved impossible to get into — even close to — the famous cathedral but it was all the more spectacular when surrounded by a sea of people.

We were treated to an unusual reception as we entered Amsterdam harbor on the last day of our cruise. It was the SAIL day in Amsterdam, held every five years, and there were literally thousands of ships on parade, in extremely close quarters, coming our way as we inched into the harbor. Many three and four-masted tall ships dominated the scene, but there were fine yachts, rubber dinghies, many small motorboats, galore. Most of them were crowded with people, most of them holding a glass in their hand, much singing and shouting. It was a site to behold. It meant that there were many too many people in Amsterdam to enjoy our planned cruise of the famous canals. We did fight the traffic, however, and it was easy to envisage the city on a quieter day. The city is famous for its emphasis on bicycles and we must have seen several hundred thousand of them. The bike paths are forbidden territory for pedestrians and the biker always gets the benefit of the doubt if there is a collision.

The total experience. Every one of the cities we visited was special. My particular favorite is Bamberg in Germany, essentially untouched by the war with more than 2000 protected buildings in this World Heritage city. Marvelous! Vienna is, of course, Vienna, and many of our shipmates attended a concert there, highlighting their cruise. Ruth and I particularly enjoyed Regensburg, also well preserved and dating from the Roman era, 2000 years past. We met our good friends, the Wolfgang Zenkers, there, enjoyed a marvelous Bavarian luncheon with them, sampled the local brew, loved walking the streets. The Captain's Farewell Dinner was excellent and well presented. It was an

emotional moment as we said our good-byes to a crew we'd come to know rather well in just two weeks. And saying good-bye to new friends, exchanging e-mail addresses, was equally moving. We loved the cruise. We recommend Viking River Cruises without reservation. We think we've discovered a favorite way to travel.