



TRAVEL

Cruising Along the Blue Danube on AmaWaterways



By Richard Levy

Although I have traveled the world throughout my life, when I sat down to plan my summer vacation I suddenly realized that I have never taken a River Cruise and resolved to address this oversight. After carefully considering my options, I selected an AmaWaterways cruise, an easy choice, since the firm won 6 Travvy Awards in 2016. However, deciding *which* of their many interesting cruises to take was a real challenge! Given my Hungarian ancestry and love for music, I settled on “Melodies of the Danube.” This route starts in Budapest, the birthplace of my mother, where I could plan to arrive early to spend a few days exploring my heritage.



An AmaWaterway's River Boat makes its way up the Danube.

Our 7-day itinerary stopped in Bratislava, Slovakia, Vienna, the Wachau Valley, Durnstein, Melk, and Linz, in Austria; Passau and Vilshofen in Germany; and included six UNESCO World Heritage sites, ending in Vilshofen, a two-hour bus ride from Munich. My girlfriend and I thoroughly enjoyed our excursions to the idyllic villages and cities along the Danube. The food was exquisite, like dining on a floating Guide Michelin restaurant.

As we sank into our comfy bed each night, it was hard to believe we were not in a 5-Star luxury hotel or on a private yacht. The boat offers massage services, a hair salon, a fitness room and a heated pool on deck, among other amenities. The lounges double as performance space and feature floor-to-ceiling windows so you don't miss out on the spectacular views. With only 150 guests on board, we were able to relax and get to know our fellow passengers – a sophisticated, worldly and engaging group.

AmaWaterways offers state-of-the-art, sleekly designed riverboats, –the most highly-rated ships in Europe. Their luxurious staterooms feature lovely balconies where you can enjoy the passing scene



The AmaWaterway's River Boat, AmaSerena.

from the privacy of your room: gnarled fortresses, ancient castles, Baroque churches, Rococo palaces, vast vineyards, soaring mountains, rolling green hills and picturesque medieval villages. All from a perspective that only a River Cruise can offer.

The inspiration for countless artists and musicians throughout the centuries, the Danube was immortalized by Johann Strauss in the Blue Danube Waltz – the dance that captivated Europe in 1867. So mesmerizing was my seven-day vacation, that I braved separation anxiety and turned off my cell phone for the duration of the trip.

Nick, our Cruise Director, orchestrated every day of our tour like a maestro, while the crew and ancillary staff made us feel like family in every possible way. Local performers came aboard when we docked, to entertain us at night. We enjoyed a classical quartet, Austrian folk dancers and Gypsy musicians. Our ship even had a world-class pianist onboard who performed daily, throughout our stay.

AmaWaterways was founded in 2002 by river cruising pioneer Rudi Scheier, travel professional Kristin Karst and the late Brendan Tours entrepreneur, Jimmy Murphy who was also the co-founder of the U. S. Tour Operators Association. The cruise line won six gold awards during the 2016 Travvy Awards annual awards gala: Best River Cruise Line • Best Cruise Ships, River Cruise: AmaSerena, AmaBella • Best River Cruise Line, Asia • Best River Cruise Line, Europe. They are the only river cruise ever to be inducted into the Confrérie De La Chaîne Rôtisseurs, one of the world's most prestigious culinary organizations. And if that was not enough, they were recently inducted as a member of La Connétablie de Guyenne – the third oldest vinous brotherhood in Bordeaux.

Our award-winning Chef procured regional, seasonal fresh vegetables, fish and meat from local suppliers along the Danube at every stop.

Each guest was invited to a Chef's tasting dinner on one evening, for a meal that included three appetizers, two main courses, and assorted desserts- all paired with 3 astute wine selections. There were many entrees to choose from at every meal *and one night, when I just couldn't decide*, the wait staff graciously brought me both! The menu also included gluten-free selections. Some of the regional featured dishes were Bavarian Roast Sucking Pig, Beef Stroganoff, Viennese Weiner Schnitzel, Fisherman's Pot of Poached Fish and Herb-Encrusted Lamb Medallions.

Day 1- 2: Budapest –We boarded our lovely ship, the AmaSerena, in Budapest harbor. After a welcoming dinner, we took a “Budapest Illumination Cruise to see the magnificent Parliament building, castles, cathedrals, palaces, fortresses and bridges lighting up the night as their reflections made the Danube come alive. On deck, the “Blue Danube Waltz” beautifully underscored this amazing light show.

The next day we took a walking tour of Budapest and I bought a few small sacks of fresh paprika or “Hungarian Gold,” in the Great Market Hall. (My mom sprinkled it on everything she cooked.) I took an enlightening half-day walking tour of this beautiful, historic city.

Upon our return to the ship we enjoyed a festive performance of Hungarian Gypsy music and dancers. That night, we silently cruised down the shimmering Danube under a full moon. If you listened carefully you could almost hear “The Blue Danube Waltz” echoing in the breeze as our long, sleek ship glided past the shores of the Danube, the second

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TRAVEL

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longest river in Europe. (The longest is the Volga in Russia which has no song and it's not blue.)

Day 3: Bratislava –We took a lovely walking tour of Bratislava, the historic and beautiful capital of Slovakia. Once back on board, we headed for Vienna. After dinner, we went ashore to a local old tavern for an authentic traditional Viennese wine and music evening.

Day 4: Vienna –We spent the morning walking through Vienna, the city of Classical music and incredible architecture, accompanied by our guide. In the afternoon, we explored on our own and took a time-out at the famous Belle Époque Sperl Kaffeehaus. American Johannes Diodato opened Vienna's first kaffeehaus, in 1685, following the Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683, when Turks had to leave quickly, without their treasured coffee beans. The Johannes Diodato Park is dedicated to his memory. * After dinner, we attended a private "Mozart & Strauss Concert" at a small palace in Vienna. It was beyond wonderful.

Day 5: Durnstein & Wacchau Valley – Dürnstein is one of the most famous attractions in the area, wandering through the fairy tale Medieval village

of Dürnstein in Austria is like traveling back in time. The ancient Dürnstein Castle Fortress, where Richard the Lion-Heart was imprisoned, towers over the town. On his way home from the Third Crusade, unlucky Richard was captured just before Christmas, 1192, trying to sneak through Austria in disguise. He spent most of his captivity at Dürnstein, until he was ransomed in February, 1194. The Old Town is paved with cobblestones and shaded by thousands of apricot trees. We visited an apricot shop and devoured a few apricots that had been preserved in apricot brandy. Yum!

Upon our return to the ship, we relaxed on deck with a glass of Austrian wine and took in the views as we glided past one of the most famous landscapes in Austria, the beautiful rolling green hills and picturesque villages of the Wachau Valley wine country.

Day 6: Linz & Salzburg –On day 6, there was so much to do and see in Linz and Salzburg that we had a choice between three excursions. I decided to spend the day in the Baroque city of Salzburg, Mozart's birthplace and the city where *THE SOUND OF MUSIC* was filmed. The other two options were also compelling: a tour of the Austrian Lake

Districts or a tour of Cesky Krumlov. Austria's Lake District has 76 crystal-clear mountain lakes nestled among storybook villages. Cesky Krumlov is a town that also dates back to the Middle Ages, located just across the border in the Czech Republic and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

We thoroughly enjoyed our time in Salzburg. It is difficult to overstate the charm of this city, filled with numerous Baroque mansions, churches and fountains. We toured the home where Mozart was born in 1656, visited Residenz Place, where he performed some of his first concerts as a child and took the funicular up to the Hohensalzburg Fortress, one of the largest in Europe. However, I was sorry to miss the alternate excursions and look forward to exploring these areas when I return.

Day 7: Passau & Vilhofen –Passau, the Baroque "City of Three Rivers," and one of Germany's most beautiful, is located in lower Bavaria. The majestic fortress of Veste Oberhaus sits high on the mountain above, overlooking the city. Fifty-two churches serve a population estimated at 50,000. St. Stephen's Cathedral is the most imposing and is home to the world's largest pipe organ. Napoleon described Passau as "the most Italian city north of the Alps."

In the afternoon, we sailed to our last destination, the charming German town of Vishofen, also in Bavaria where, after dinner, we enjoyed an authentic Bavarian Folk and thankfully, there was no shortage of the amazing Bavarian beer.

Throughout our tours, we found our local guides to be engaging and spontaneous. Small, digital lightweight personal audio headsets made it easy for all of us to follow our guides as they spoke and our shore excursions were free, which is not the case with many other river cruises.

Recognizing that passengers have varying levels of endurance, tours are tailored for gentle walkers, brisker walks and tougher hikes. For the more adventurous traveler, the ship carries 25 bikes that guests may use, at no additional cost, to explore on their own or as part of a guided bike tour.

On May 4, 2016 AmaWaterways announced that its ships have taken the top ten spots in the second annual edition of the *Berlitz: River Cruising In Europe* travel guide. "AmaWaterways has helped to redefine European river cruising. The company fully owns, operates and markets its own river ships, all of which are new-builds," wrote Douglas Ward in his review. "... AmaWaterways spends considerably more on high-quality food ingredients and wine and on hotel crew

service training than any other river cruise company."

Ama Waterways has also been recognized for excellence by numerous other Travel publications, including: *TravelAge West's* WAVE – Editor's Pick Award for "Best Overall Cruise Line for River Cruising". "Best Onboard Dining," "Best New Ship – *AmaSerena*," *Conde Nast Traveler's* counts AmaWaterways among the "Top 20 River Cruise Ships."

Travel+Leisure includes AmaWaterways among their "top five" rankings in their annual "World's Best Awards."

Luxury Travel Advisor gives them their Award of Excellence for "Best River Cruise Company."

Travel Weekly give AmaWaterways their "Gold Magellan Award for its ships" and "Overall River Cruising."

After seven magical days, Vishofen was our final destination. We took the bus to Munich and caught a flight to Berlin where we spent a few days sightseeing, before heading home. And though we were sad for our spectacular vacation to end, we are already looking forward to our next AmaWaterways cruise.

*<http://europeofdiasporas.eu/points-of-interest/johannes-diodato>

Photos courtesy of AmaWaterways

ARTS & CULTURE

The Arts at Mount Vernon Presents Encore Performance of Dreamgirls

August 5, 2016, 7 PM at the Mount Vernon High School

JULY 26, 2016 MOUNT VERNON, NY – The Arts at Mount Vernon will present an encore performance of the stage musical *Dreamgirls* on August 5 and 6 at 7:00 p.m. and August 7 at 3:00 p.m. in

Mount Vernon High School's auditorium. The production was produced and directed by Evelyn Collins, the district's Director of Arts & Gifted and Talented Education, and features 30 students from Mount Vernon,

Thornton, and Mandela/Zollicoffer High Schools as cast and stage crew.

"The spring performance was so well received that we decided to offer the public one more opportunity

to catch this outstanding show," said Director of Arts & Gifted and Talented Education Evelyn Collins. "The students worked very hard and I know they will once again deliver for their audiences."

Tickets are available at the box office one hour before performances. For more information, email ecollins@mtvernoncsd.org.

EYE ON THEATRE

Nearly Purrfect



By John Simon

If you love cats, as millions of Americans do, but probably even if you don't, you will embrace the revival of the musical "Cats," which in 1982 and beyond, ran for 7,485 performances. A hit in 1981 London, its text is based on T. S. Eliot's collection of poems, "Old

Possum's Book of Practical Cats," humorous verses theoretically aimed at children, although a bit more apt for adults.

To showbiz-musicalize the *Practical Cats* was quite a challenge to Andrew Lloyd Webber and his co-producer Cameron Mackintosh, but judging from all those performances and the mostly mixed but mainly positive reviews, it was a case of the cats getting more than our tongues: a good deal of our hearts and something



The Company of CATS on Broadway - Photo by Matthew Murphy

too, for our minds.

There were two big problems for the creators. One, how to translate four-footedness into only half that supply of feet, and two, how to make a musical where there couldn't be much plot. But both problems were solved. The second by endlessly polymorphous, irresistible choreography from Gillian Lynne (now somewhat refurbished by Andy Blankenbuehler) and a largely captivating score by Lloyd Webber and, mostly, T. S. Eliot.

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