



# C R *Tis THE Season* U I S I N G

## *the Danube River*



BY MONICA FRIM • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN FRIM AND MONICA FRIM

Celebrated in stories, art and song, *the Danube* is reputedly Europe's most romantic river. Along its banks, thousands of years of history, culture and trade have been shaped and redefined by battles won and lost. Civilizations have come and gone leaving behind remnants of their stories in medieval fortifications, crumbling castles, sumptuous palaces, gothic churches and miles of bucolic fields and vineyards. In the frosty late November and December air, the cities, towns and hamlets that hug the river turn into winter wonderlands, aglow with the lights of traditional Christmas markets drawing visitors from around the world. To cruise the Danube at this time of year is one of the most enchanting ways to ring in the holiday season.

Salzburg, the city of Mozart and The Sound of Music, features more than one hundred churches, castles and palaces. Situated on the banks of the Salzach River (not the Danube), Salzburg is a pleasant side trip by coach from Passau, Germany.

The Danube is especially magical when the twinkling winter lights of its riverside towns and cities cast a welcoming glow over both land and water. Cities like Budapest, Vienna, Salzburg, Regensburg and Nuremberg are studded with iconic European Christmas markets showcasing traditional crafts, local cuisine and artisanal gifts in seasonally decorated huts and booths. As the aromas of roasted maroni (chestnuts) and spiced glühwein (mulled wine) waft in the wintry air, visitors get swept—and warmed—up in festivities and traditions adopted and adapted by people all over the world. Throw in a festive cruise aboard an enchanted ship and the holidays simply don't get any better.

I realized I would be in for a special treat the moment I boarded the AmaSonata, one



The AmaSonata at anchor.

of 20 ships in the AmaWaterways fleet. In the lounge, holiday-themed decorations and a buffet station laden with creamy soups, artisanal sandwiches, cakes and pastries—AmaWaterways' idea of a "light lunch"—greeted the early boarders in Budapest. The friendly AmaSonata crew was already in full attentive swing, serving champagne and greeting passengers with smiles and small talk before we were even shown to our staterooms.

"Get used to it," a fellow traveler remarked. He must have noticed my open jaw and saucer-sized eyes. "I've been on many river cruises with various companies. I

can vouch that this (he made a sweep of the ship with his hands) is the best." The travel industry seems to agree. Berlitz designated AmaWaterways' ships as the highest rated river cruise ships in Europe.

The majestic Hungarian Parliament building casts a burnished glow over the Danube River.



Abbey of Melk



The Austrian National Library in Vienna



AmaWaterways was also recognized as the 2016 Cruise Critics' Picks award for the "Best River Cruise Line." Accolades from repeat guests attest to the cruise line's high level of organization in that they leave no detail to chance.

From the ships' innovative designs, featuring double balconies in staterooms, to the public announcements that are heard only in public areas and, optionally, through closed-circuit in-room television channels, everything is pondered and perfected to make the cruising experience as easy, comfortable and rewarding for guests as possible. Free Wi-Fi in each stateroom, as well as throughout the ship, also raises the AmaWaterways cruise experience to a cut above other cruise lines.

On shore, excursions are geared toward individualized comfort and choice. At each port, guests may choose their walking tour category with color-coded cards that identify them as gentle, regular or active walkers. But there's no need to stick to the same category: if one day you're full of energy, but another you're sapped, you can choose the category that best matches your druthers that day. As

another option, you can walk and explore on your own, pedal a complimentary bicycle, or opt to stay on the ship where you can be as involved as you choose in shipboard activities.

The thing about river cruising is that it's just so easy and smooth.

There are no high waves and no additional fees for shore excursions, specialty restaurants or beer and wine. Once you've paid the all-inclusive cost, you can relax completely, knowing that all your needs will be met. During my week onboard, sailing from Budapest to Nuremberg, not once did I see an unhappy cruiser, complainer or cad. Perhaps cruise passengers are, in general, a happy lot, but, more likely, AmaWaterways deserves credit for finding innovative ways to pamper and please a clientele of varying interests and levels of fitness. Their themed cruises, in particular, cater to those who seek luxury, authenticity and whole-hearted immersion in local culture.

After wandering among market stalls much like the local folks, at dinnertime onboard you can partake in at least one regional specialty within a multi-coursed



Gingerbread house aboard the AmaSonata



Marzipan treats at a Christmas Market in Budapest



Lebkuchen at a Christmas Market in Vienna



Alpacas at the Thurn und Taxis Christmas Market at St. Emmeram Palace, Regensburg



Crowds pack the courtyard of St. Emmeram Palace in Regensburg, Germany. Here the Thurn und Taxis Christmas Market offers an exotic mix of alpacas and camels along with local crafts and sweets.

meal paired with local wines. But if your palate is less adventuresome than your sea legs, Californian wines are available along with a variety of artfully presented culinary options in the ships' restaurants. In Hungary, I couldn't help but choose the first thing I saw on the menu based on the interesting spelling alone: It turned out that my "Hortobágyi Húsos Palacsinta Paprikás Mártással" was a delicious pancake with minced chicken, bell peppers, onions and a pepper sauce that had just the right bite—not too overwhelming but spicy enough to tingle the taste buds—perfect after an afternoon of walking among the stalls of Budapest's Vörösmarty Square's Christmas market. With vats of goulasch, mattress-sized trays of cabbage rolls, sausages, kürtös kalács (hollow sugary pastries), marzipan balls, gingerbread cookies in the shape of treble clefs and violins, smoked ham hocks and an entire pig on a spit, the market stimulated the senses with abandon.

Handmade crafts—from straw, wood and ceramic ornaments to aromatic hangings of dried oranges, limes, bay leaves, red peppers and figs—vied with beautiful pottery, ceramics, chunky jewelry and handmade wooden flutes.

Of course no visit to Budapest is complete without a tour of its iconic attractions. Once two separate cities, Buda on the higher right bank towers over Pest on the lower left. Buda's cobbled streets and medieval courtyards lead through the old town, past the ancestral home of Harry Houdini, to Matthias Church, founded in the 13th century but almost totally destroyed by the Turks in the 17th century. The current neo-Gothic building with its multicolored roof dates largely from the 19th century. Nearby is the fortification known as Fisherman's Bastion, as local fishermen were once responsible for its defense. Together with the Royal Palace, these lofty buildings offer great views of Pest and the Danube River.

In Pest grand avenues such as Andrásy (modeled after Paris's Champs-Élysées) showcase a patrician past along with some of the city's most admired cultural attractions. Here stand the State Opera House and many historical museums. But Pest's grandest building is undoubtedly the Hungarian Parliament Building, a symbol of the pomp and opulence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that once ruled vast regions of Europe.

At night the illuminated monuments and buildings twinkle like fairy dust. The ship sails a special illumination cruise up and down the river and under the famous Chain Bridge, draped like a pearl necklace over the Danube. Ahead, the locks of the Gabčíkovo Canal, the first of 25 canals between Budapest and Nuremberg, provide that evening's entertainment. As water enters the lock, it lifts the ship until the water levels inside and outside the front gates are even. Then suddenly the gates drop like a guillotine so the ship can go forward—past Bratislava and its majestic "Hrad" (Castle) and on to Vienna.

The epitome of castles, culture and cuisine, Vienna is famous for so many things that it would take an entire book just to list them. Here Johann Strauss penned his famous waltzes, Mozart composed *The Marriage of Figaro*, Sigmund Freud developed psychoanalysis, and Gustav Klimt

pioneered his version of modern art. The city boasts more than 100 museums along with scores of monuments to world renowned writers, musicians, artists, scientists and rulers. This is the home of Wiener Schnitzel (breaded pork cutlets), the famous Sachertorte (a rich chocolate cake with a layer of apricot jam and served with clouds of whipped cream) and the 2,000 coffee houses that serve it.

Vienna was laid out to be the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, ruled for more than 600 years by the

Habsburgs. After World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was reduced to a small republic, annexed by Germany in 1938, occupied by Allies in 1945, and declared newly independent in 1955. Today, Austria is the richest country in the European Union and, arguably, the most romantic. One need only wander among the grounds and halls of Schönbrunn, the 1,441-roomed summer residence of the Habsburgs, to get a taste of the grandeur and romance that still characterizes the city. Schönbrunn's Christmas Market is somewhat understated given its location in front of the grandest palace in the country. Pretty, quaint and atmospheric, the market centers on a giant Christmas tree surrounded by vendors' stalls laden with handcrafted toys, ornaments and local crafts. It's one of many markets in the city, each with differentiating festive characteristics. At Karlsplatz, merry-go-rounds and organ grinders join vendors with collections of handmade objets d'art, while



The courtyard of Vienna's Schönbrunn Palace

In Budapest, the Fishermen's Bastion provides a scenic window onto the Danube and surrounding city.

the Maria-Theresien-Platz Market is as festive as Vienna's creatively lit city streets. Grandest and most picturesque is the Christkindlmarkt at the illuminated Rathaus Square. In the evening, thousands of lights evoke glamor and glitz, as revelers stroll among the exquisitely decorated stalls.

Contrasting with the pageantry of Vienna's Christmas markets are the tiny traditional markets of hamlets and villages scattered throughout the region. In the town of Melk a handful of shops and market stalls sell the ubiquitous Glühwein along with crafts and ornaments. But the most breathtaking draw lies atop the town on a rocky cliff overlooking the Danube. Founded in the 11th century, Melk Abbey is one of the Danube's most recognizable landmarks. An imposing Benedictine Monastery, the current Baroque building dates mostly from the 18th century. Its famous library holds more than 100,000 books and has inspired the writings of Paulo Coelho, Isabel Allende, and Umberto Eco.

As we pushed towards Germany, the onboard revelry grew as guests engaged in friendly onboard competitions and participated in old world traditions such as leaving shoes in the hallway overnight for St Nicholas to fill with a treat or searching for the Christmas pickle (you'll have to take the cruise yourself to learn about this old European custom). As the food choices expanded, so did our waistlines, aided by a seemingly endless parade of sweets—from decadent tortes to traditional tarts and pastries. By the time we hit Passau and Salzburg, we were practically seasoned gourmands, able to distinguish between genuine handmade Mozartkugeln and the mass-produced variety; some of us even knew what Kaiserschmarren were! (spoiler alert: a sugary egg dish.)

The one thing that never came easy was choosing the day's excursions. In Passau, St. Stephan's Cathedral boasted one of the largest organs in the world, but Salzburg, the city of Mozart, was a mere two-hour drive away. With both cities known for fortifications, Baroque architecture and traditional





A turret of St Emmeram Palace in Regensburg.



At Regensburg's Thurn und Taxis Christmas Market, visitors can watch artists and artisans, such as this woodcarver engage in their crafts.



A festive arch greets visitors to the Christmas market at Vienna's City Hall.



## DIPLOMATIC CONNECTIONS

### THANKS

**AmaWaterways** for their sponsorship. With a fleet of 20 ships and itineraries in Europe, Africa and Southeast Asia, AmaWaterways is a leader in luxury river cruises. In addition to Christmas market cruises, the company offers special themed cruises for connoisseurs of art and wine. They are continually adding new itineraries and shore excursions. To book a cruise contact your professional travel agent or call **1-800-626-0126**.

For information: [www.amawaterways.ca](http://www.amawaterways.ca).

the Hohensalzburg Fortress to take in the whole city, I could almost imagine the hills that cradle the city coming alive with the sound of music.

Back on board, we headed full swing into the heart of Bavaria as we cruised toward Regensburg, our last stop on the Danube River. Regensburg is one of Germany's best-preserved cities, amazingly untouched by World War II. Founded as Castra Regina by Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius in AD 179, a foundation stone bearing that information survives embedded in the facade of a house built into the ruins of the city wall. The other ode to Roman times is the city's majestic city gate, Porta Praetoria, one of only two standing Roman ruins in Germany. The city boasts some of Germany's oldest medieval structures, including Regensburg's emblematic stone bridge and, reputedly, the oldest restaurant in the country, the Wurstkuchl, built in the 12th century to feed the bridge builders. Centuries unfurl in quaint squares and along cobblestone streets and alleyways lined with the patrician homes of merchants who indicated their wealth by the height of the towers on their homes.

On the southern fringe of the old town, St. Emmeram Palace, the ancestral palace of Princess Gloria of Thurn und Taxis, hosts an extravagant Christmas Market that looks as if it came straight out of a fairytale. Unlike other markets, this is a ticketed event with open-fire warming stations, an indoor café, steaming cauldrons of glühwein, artisanal crafts and giant modern artworks in glass, wood and metal.

Christmas markets, the choice was a toss-up. One could also pedal a ship's bicycle along the Danube to Erlau. You'd have to take this same cruise at least three more times to fit everything in.

In the end, I let the spirit of Mozart tug my sleeve with a bit of help from Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer, and my reminiscences of the 1960s classic Rodgers and Hammerstein movie, *The Sound of Music*. As I meandered among parks, palaces and Gothic churches, through narrow streets lined with Renaissance and Baroque facades, then rode Austria's oldest cable car to the top of

Regensburg



Nuremberg



Nuremberg Castle's Sinwell Tower



Penned llamas and rideable camels offer an exotic touch, while an amusement park with carousels, trains and other rides keep the young folks happy.

Although we leave the Danube at Regensburg, the cruise continues along the Main-Danube Canal to Nuremberg, a city that was almost totally destroyed in World War II. The historic buildings have since been rebuilt in their original styles using the same stones and footprint.

Hitler thought Nuremberg was the most German city so he erected massive propaganda buildings and held Nazi Party rallies here. The sites were later converted to park grounds, a storage area and a home for the Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra. After the famous Nuremberg Trials took place here, the city gained a reputation for tolerance and once again became a center for trade. It is now known for its trade fairs and traditional culinary specialties like Bratwurst and Lebkuchen, the latter made with local honey and spices from all over the world (a throwback to Nuremberg's location along the ancient spice routes). The whole gets washed down with Rotbier (red beer) or Weissbier (wheat beer).

At night, the illuminated Kaiserburg (Castle) tops the city like a tiara and looks particularly festive in winter. But a more immersive festivity takes place at Market Square, where the most famous Christmas Market in Germany epitomizes all we have come to associate with



Quaint half-timbered architecture in the city of Nuremberg

this centuries' old tradition. You won't find a single mass produced item in the almost 200 booths that stretch all the way towards the Nativity scene trail that leads to the Children's Christmas Market with carousels and a Ferris wheel at Hans-Sachs Square. Specialties like figures made out of prunes are some of the most popular items.

Though Christmas markets formed a unifying cruise theme, the Danube River gets the credit for introducing us to them. It may be Europe's most fabled river, but waltz king Johann Strauss got it wrong—the Danube is definitely not blue. He is to be forgiven for taking poetic license. Understandably, a musical work titled "On the Beautiful Brown Danube" (a direct translation from German) would have been less conducive to concert attendance—or dancing. But despite all the mud and sediment that give the Danube its sepia hue, for a cruise at Christmas—or any other time of year—it's perfect.