

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Europe

Going with the flow

Danube cruise pleases despite less-than-perfect conditions

By ANNE Z. COOKE
Tribune News Service

Delayed at the airport in Nuremberg, Germany, and thoroughly frazzled, we checked and re-checked our watches as the miles ticked by, with the Danube River and our Scenic River Cruises ship, the Pearl, nowhere to be seen.

Gunter, meanwhile, hired to drive us to the dock in Vilshofen, for a nine-day Danube cruise and long-planned family vacation, calmly fiddled with the radio, tuning in a soccer match and then a music station. Finally he switched it off and sighed thoughtfully, gazed into the rear view mirror.

"The ship is waiting," he remarked. "No worrying. Like American movies say, only rolling with the punches."

Words to live by, indeed. With the Danube at flood levels, there was no way the 167-passenger Pearl was going anywhere that night. Arriving just as the welcome-aboard party ended, we managed to have a glass of champagne and a hurried handshake with Captain Gyula Toth.

Nor was the next day wasted. Though it rained on and off, the kids kept busy exploring the ship and biking for miles along the river path while I rescheduled excursions, piano concerts and museum visits. Joining a tour of Passau, we drew a law student for a guide, an amateur historian as entertaining as he was knowledgeable. By bedtime we'd met enough people to discover that another passenger and I had attended the same high school.

As for the Danube River, molten silver by moonlight, it looked as harmless as a backyard fishpond. Until the next morning when it reared up with a roar, rising another foot, flooding towns and fields, lapping at the undersides of bridges and thwarting cruise passengers.

It was then, still docked in Vilshofen, that I noticed Captain Toth had gone to ground.

"He gave a talk our first night, but after that, nothing," said New Zealander Janet Holmes, a veteran ocean cruiser, who was eager to get going. "I've always wanted to see the Danube," she said. "If



The Scenic Pearl awaits the return of its guests at the village of Durnstein, Austria.

they had a regular Captain's Table, like the big cruise ships do, we could ask him when we're leaving."

Hope sprang anew when Hotel Manager Miguel Rodriguez called a meeting. But when he announced that two other ships had hit a bridge, blocking our route, a muttered protest swept the lounge.

"Why can't we just leave? I paid for this and I want to go, or I want my money back," yelled a tough-looking character who said he'd been on 20 cruises and expected better. What he didn't realize was that river cruising is nothing like ocean cruising. Water levels change. The current never stops. Whirlpools gouge the river bottom, shifting sandbars. Tributaries deposit debris. Some low bridges are impassable. And the water can rise in minutes.

Or fall just as fast. A couple hours later the river levels dropped, the sun came out and the Pearl cast off, heading down-stream between

low mountains, beside rocky cliffs and past ancient castles and vineyards.

"It's like driving a car," said Toth when I finally found him in the bridge house, hunkered down and peering at the current. "You can't take your eyes off the road ... or the river ... for a minute," he said, gesturing to the first mate to take the helm while we talked. "You can't stop to look at a map, or even get a cup of coffee. I've been on the Danube for more than 20 years, from one end to the other, and there's always something new."

A slow start notwithstanding, we made it to every port on the itinerary. At Passau, Regensburg and Durnstein we had a choice: to walk into town, ride the bus, join a guided tour or admire the landscape from the seat of one of the ship's electric bikes. Full and three-quarter-day bus tours went farther afield; to Salzburg

KNOW & GO

The Pearl and the Ruby, sister ships, sail in 2017 on the Rhine and Moselle. A newer ship, the Jade, sails on the Danube between Nuremberg and Budapest on June 5 and 12. Category D cabins start at \$4,180 per person for two in a cabin and include a fly-free option for one airline ticket. Contact Scenic River Cruises, an Australian company, at (857) 201-0878. Or go to www.scenic.com.au for more information and prices.

(this earned a thumbs down as too far and too many tourists) and to Cesky Krumlov, in the Czech Republic.

Vienna offered a variety of choices, ranging from sightseeing and the Lipizaner horses to museums and a piano recital at the Liszt Music School. Our dressiest evening added a touch of class, with wine and an opera recital at the Palais Liechtenstein. On-ship events included a Viennese waltz performance and beginners' lesson, and a folk dance group and band.

On my first Danube River cruise, some 20 years ago, I spent entire days on the top deck watching valleys give way to mountains and back to valleys. With few organized excursions and even fewer cruise ships going by, it was a "Huck Finn" coming-of-age.

But the Pearl, with my family in tow, was much more in the moment. The kids immediately invented a competitive "spot-the-ships" game that awarded points for each sighting, a list that included Taucck Tours' Joy, A-Rosa's Silva and Bella, Ama's Prima, Scenic's Jasper, the Jane Austen, Emerald's Sky, Prinzessin's Sisi, two Uniworld ships (we missed the names) and three Viking River Cruises' ships.

From a basket of memorable moments, I'd pick Durnstein in lower Austria for history and Cesky Krumlov for crafts.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 31

The House of Parliament, fronting the Danube River in Budapest, Hungary, seems every bit the fairy castle when seen at sunset from the deck of the Scenic Pearl.

PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGERSTY, COLORWORLD/TNS



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The stone bridge over the Danube, built in 1146, connects the "new town" in Regensburg, Germany, with the historic old town on the opposite side. At rear is the Strudel Tower, so-named for the whirlpool eddies, called strudels, in the river below.

FROM PAGE 30

Built on steep terraces, tiny Durnstein is unique. But its standout feature is the hike uphill to the ruined castle on the rocks. For me, seeing the place where in 1192, England's King Richard I, returning home from the Third Crusade, was imprisoned for two years, put the Crusades on the map.

In Cesky Krumlov, our sunny day wandering through this 13th-century restored Czech hamlet soon became a Tiffany-meets-Disneyland with dozens of sparkly stores on cobblestone streets. Built astride the Moldau River and bypassed by every major war, the town is now a designated UNESCO Heritage site, making it (for all you film location managers reading this) a set just waiting for a story.

Talking to Toth about working with Scenic Cruises produced another surprise. On the Danube, captains have just one task: steering.

"Our union rules don't permit us to do anything except navigate," he said. "My duty is to deliver the ship and the passengers safely and on schedule." He paused and thought it over. "See them, over there? That's why steering is harder than it used to be," he said, waving to three cruise vessels going the other way, each with a different outfit. "There are dozens of cruise ships now, and more on the way."

The result is a critical shortage

of experienced employees, from cruise directors down to dining room waiters. Forced to hire beginners, service levels now vary from ship to ship.

A few travelers couldn't avoid comparisons. "We booked it because it's advertised as a luxury cruise," said Richard Holway, chairman of TechMarketView, a U.K. firm. "But not by our standards. We're very disappointed. The cabin and excursions are fine enough, certainly. But the service doesn't compare with Silver Seas, where the staff greet you by name, ask after you every day and your waiter keeps an eye on you throughout the meal. These fellows don't even notice when you try to get their attention."

But most passengers gave it an enthusiastic thumbs up. The fact that the waiters, new hires from Romania and Bulgaria, were inattentive didn't matter. They were thrilled to be vacationing on a famous river and fascinated by new places and cultures. They liked the meals and praised the all-inclusive pricing. Even disappointed travelers eventually softened up.

"We've had a very good time," said Janice Holmes, who had to move from one cabin to another when a mystery leak soaked her rug not once but twice. "These things happen, but you can't let it bother you," she said, waving goodbye.

Words to live by, again.



PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY, COLORWORLD/TNS

Once a tiny village and palace on the Moldau River (Mtava, in Czech), Cesky Krumlov could well have been the model for Disney's Magic Kingdom. Now a bustling destination for vacationers from five continents, its narrow cobble streets are lined with dozens of gift, craft, food and souvenir shops.

Restaurant Directory GERMANY

<p>BAVARIA</p> <p><i>Yannis Bar & Grill</i></p> <p>09641-454857 Märktplatz 33 - 92655 Grafenwöhr Tue - Sun 5 pm to 3 am www.yannisbar.de</p>	<p>MAINZ/WIESBADEN</p> <p>Brauhaus Castel Germany's Finest Beer & Authentic German Cuisine Unit Parties for up to 200 guests Otto Suhr Ring 27 - 55252 Mainz-Kastel Tel: 06134-24959 • www.brauhaus-castel.de</p>	<p>MAINZ/WIESBADEN</p> <p>FRAU RAUSCHERT Apple wines & traditional Frankfurt-style meals Klappergasse 8, 60594 Frankfurt am 069 26957995 • www.frau-rauscher.com www.facebook.com/FrauRauscherFFM</p>
<p>THE CHINESE</p> <p>Neue Ambergstrasse 40 92655 Grafenwöhr Tel: 09641-9291988 09641-9297989 www.thechinese-delivery.com</p>	<p>ENCHILADA - FLOR MEXICO</p> <p>Enchilada - Restaurant Bay Mexicano Schützenhofstr. 3 65183 Wiesbaden Tel: 0611 450483-50 wiesbaden@enchilada.com www.enchilada.de</p>	<p>Sapo Rey</p> <p>Latin American Restaurant and Bar Klappergasse 25, 60594 Frankfurt am Main Telephone: 069 63198954 www.sapo-rey.com www.facebook.com/SapoReyFFM</p>
<p>PUNJABI DHABA INDIAN CUISINE</p> <p>Eat-in & Take-Out • Ph: 07031 6847041 Hours: 11:30-2:30, 5:30-11 Daily lunch special: €6.90 Hartwasen 1, 71068 Holzgerlingen (inside The Tennis Club)</p>	<p>PAPPELHAUS</p> <p>Steinmstrasse 2 - 55252 Mainz-Kastel 06134-5049669 Get our juicy Irish Angus Burger!</p>	<p>STUTTGART</p> <p><i>Kashmir</i></p> <p>Indian Speciality Restaurant Leönberger Str. 97 • 71229 Leonberg 07152/90 32 32 www.kashmir-restaurant.de</p>
<p>HOTEL BOHM</p> <p>Neue Ambergstrasse 39 92655 Grafenwöhr 09641 9369-0 • www.hotelboehm.de</p>	<p>Okinii</p> <p>Täunus Strasse 22 65183 Wiesbaden Tel. 0611-23835808</p>	<p>Neuer Pfeffler</p> <p>restaurant & biergarten Mediterranean & Swabian cuisine Schnarrenberg next to Robinson Barracks 0711 541 339 www.neuer-peffler.de</p>
<p>COURTYARD Marriott</p> <p>WIESBADEN NEUBADENSTADT Östing 9, 65205 Wiesbaden • T: +49 (0)6122 8010 reservations@courtyard-wiesbaden.de www.courtyard-wiesbaden.com</p>	<p>MAX-MUH</p> <p>Ulzstraße 26, 91522 Ansbach +49 (0)981 21418260 and Bürgermeister-Prechtl-Straße 22, 92637 Weiden Tel: +49 (0)961 20630300 www.maxmudmuh.de</p>	

Hotel Directory GERMANY

<p>Hotel Villa</p> <p>Just 3 Minutes from Rose Bannocks Amberg Str. 9 - 92640 Wiesch E-Mail: hotel_villa@mail.de Tel.: +49 (0) 9662/42070 www.hotel.villa-wiesch.de</p>	<p>Hotel Forsthaus by Garmisch</p> <p>Free Breakfast, Family Apartments, Hot Tub, Sauna, Dogs Welcome, American/German Owned. </p> <p>36 EUR/Person, Double Occupancy, Per Night. Tel: 08824-9120 • Email: hotel@forsthaus-oberau.de VAT Forms accepted! www.forsthaus-oberau.de</p>