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Danube River cruise offers choices and chances

Waterloo Region Record
By Anne Z. Cooke

VILSHOFEN, Germany — Delayed at the airport in Nuremberg and thoroughly frazzled, we checked and rechecked 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 sighing thoughtfully, gazed into the rear view mirror.

Castle
TNS
A classic cliff-side pile overlooking a slight bend in the Danube, this

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Danube River cruise offers choices and chances

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 travellers couldn't avoid comparisons. "We booked it because it's advertised as a luxury cruise," said Richard Holway, chair 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 travellers 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, for sure.

Tribune News Service

If you go

Contact Scenic River Cruises, an Australian company, at 857-201-0878. Or go to www.scenic.au for more information and prices.

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.

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