



Journey down the Danube turns into a history lesson

[By Jerry Farlow]

For someone who spent his school days in history class chewing on spitballs, taking a cruise down the Danube, which reeks of Western Civilization 101, was the farthest thing from my mind. But my wife, who has never chewed on a spitball in her life, perked my interest in the river and its checkered past.

After all, the soul of European history lies along the Danube. First it was the Celts who settled there in prehistoric times. After that came the Greeks, Romans, Vandals, Goths, Magyars, Huns and the Turks, to name a few. Their intentions ranged from expanding empires to pillaging cities and, of course, slaughtering infidels.

Today, the typical Danube traveler is not a conquering invader, but more likely a retired librarian from Cleveland, a teacher from Denver or even my wife and me, who decided on a Danube cruise after (what else) Googling “adventure travel” on the Internet. With a few clicks of the mouse, we booked a cabin on Viking River Cruises’ 150-passenger Viking Europe for a two-week, noncredit history class down the (alas, brown) Danube from Vienna to the Black Sea.

Before we started our adventure, however, we spent two days in Vienna.

Deciding how to spend two days in Vienna is a no-brainer: You stroll around the Ringstrasse, the 2.5-mile boulevard that encloses the historic city center, stopping for wiener schnitzel and cold beer at an outdoor cafe, then people-watching at Demels, a 200-year-old Viennese landmark where waitresses still wear the monasterial black coats and address you in the third person.

“And what would the lady like?” our waitress asked my wife. The lady went with the *caffè latte* and apple strudel.

The next day we were on the river.

BRATISLAVA, BORN AGAIN

In Communist times it was said that Bratislava was 35 miles downstream from Vienna on the Danube and a zillion miles downstream on the economic ladder. But times are changing. What we saw on our one-day walkathon in the city center were buildings being restored, spotless streets, modern buses, smartly dressed professionals and stores full of tempting goods.

“This could be the Paris of the East if the people were ruder,” my wife remarked.

BUDAPEST, PEARL OF THE DANUBE

After Bratislava, the Danube leaves Slovakia and enters Hungary, whereupon it turns south at historic Esztergom and heads for Budapest which, from the Danube’s vantage point, is the most beautiful city on the river, lined with gracious bridges, Buda Castle atop Buda Hill on one side and bustling Pest on the other.

After doing the motor coach tour of the city (in which visions of Buda Castle, Fisherman’s Bastion, Hero’s Square, the Chain Bridge, Roman baths and Gypsies still dance in my head), we spent our time checking out grocery stores, department stores, universities and any place that didn’t say “tourist” on the front door. The Budapest Grand Market is a bustling marketplace that gives a glimpse into the daily lives of ordinary Hungarians.



BELGRADE, SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO

We weren’t exactly sure how to mind our p’s and q’s in a place we bombed the holy bejesus out of six years before, so we kept mum on politics. Our guide broached the subject by saying Serbs were glad to get rid of Slobodan Milosevic, and that was the end of that.

When I travel somewhere, I generally come home with one thing I remember most, and my Belgrade memory was beautiful women. During Communist times it’s fair to say the Western media’s portrayal of Eastern Bloc women was less than flattering, so for me this trip was an eye-opener. The women we saw on the streets of Belgrade (and other Eastern European cities) looked like they had stepped from the cover of *Vogue*. How they managed to walk on cobblestone streets with 4-inch heels is beyond me.

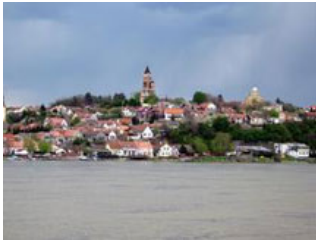
DAYS ON THE RIVER

The Viking Europe wends its way downstream between 10 and 15 mph, depending on the current, giving us a slow-motion, panoramic view of the Balkan landscape. When not ashore, we spent our time lounging on the sun deck, scanning for a medieval castle,



a Roman ruin or maybe a rusty Romanian barge piled with coal.

Occasionally we'd pass small villages of stucco houses. Often at the center of a village would stand an onion-domed mosque from the days of Turkish rule, now refitted as a church. Now and then, an old woman hoeing her garden would look up and wave.



VELIKO TARNOVO, BULGARIA

Day 10: We docked at Rousse in Bulgaria, the main Danube base of the Romans and Ottoman Turks, where we were taken by motor coach 40 miles south to Bulgaria's greatest attraction, Veliko Tarnovo, the ancient and picturesque capital of Bulgaria, whose nearby monasteries contain arguably the most outstanding frescoes in all Christendom.

At every port where the Viking Europe docked, we were met by a local tour guide, generally a young lady, who gave a running commentary of the region. A common theme was the cruelty of bygone Turkish rule. It became clear that people in that part of the world have very good memories. One guide, referring to a time when Turkish soldiers ravished local women, started to tear up and cry. You might say this is a normal reaction, but she was talking about something that happened over 500 years ago.

BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

It is said the Romanians built the capital of Bucharest 50 miles from the Danube to make it harder for the Turks to get there. In any case, getting to Bucharest by motor

coach, passing through the picturesque countryside, was half the fun. We saw tiny stucco doll houses and peasant-looking women sweeping streets with twiggy brooms. It wasn't Transylvania, but it was close.

"Romania is a blend of the old and new," our pretty blond Romanian guide, Carla, told us as our bus passed a Gypsy-looking wagon drawn by two horses.

Where the line of nutcase dictators intersects the line of despotic, paranoid tyrants, there alone stands Nicolae Ceausescu, the self-imposed and thankfully deposed "God of Romania."

We oohed and aahed our way through Ceausescu's House of the People, the second-largest building in the world, second only to the Pentagon, with quarries of marble and crystal and 50-foot, hand-woven, velvet curtains.

"People have mixed feelings about this place," Carla told us. "I was a little girl when Ceausescu was finally overthrown in 1989. I cried and cried," she said, referring to the almost God-like hold Ceausescu had on the populace.



CONSTANTA, THE BLACK SEA

The next day we arrived at the Romanian port of Constanta and the Black Sea.

"So, did you learn any history on this trip?" my wife asked as we completed our journey by dipping our fingers into the Black Sea. My observations probably won't make my old history teacher proud, but I learned if you tax half the world, as did the Habsburgs,

you can live pretty well; that Eastern European women are arguably the most style-conscious women in the world; and, according to one guide, yogurt was invented in Bulgaria.

IF YOU GO

Several companies offer riverboat cruises on the Danube. My wife and I took Viking River Cruises' Viking Europe, but information on other riverboats can be found at the following Web sites:

- Viking River Cruises, www.vikingrivercruises.com.
- Amadeus Waterways, www.amadeuswaterways.com.
- Avalon Waterways, www.avalonwaterways.com.
- Peter Deilmann, www.deilmann-cruises.com.
- Uniworld, www.uniworld.com.

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