

# BCRPVPA River Cruise Blog from Amsterdam to Budapest July 2022 by Janise Johnson

Just over year ago I read an article in this very newsletter about a potential river cruise through Europe. Like so many, I was missing my travel days, so after quick conversation with my husband, Darrel, we signed on.

As a first time river cruiser I can't imagine a more relaxing, enjoyable way to explore a new area. In addition to the scenery, we were fortunate to meet and travel with a terrific group of BCRPVPA members and their friends. The warm welcome they extended us made the trip even more memorable.

The cruise itself was truly an ABC Cruise. Everywhere we went there was 'Another Beautiful Cathedral, Castle, Church, or Community'. So many, in fact, they quickly become a blur. I can tell you I now know the difference between gothic and baroque styles of architecture. Although my preference leans towards the plainer, less ornate gothic style. I hope you can enjoy the trip with us in my travel blog.

## Day 1: Arrival Day

Here we are on the first day of our cruise. It was a bit of a flight adventure getting here as we left home in a torrential rainstorm only to get to the airport to learn our flight was delayed for two hours. This got us into Toronto at the same time that our connecting flight was scheduled to leave. We were only to discover it had also been delayed two hours. Then as boarding time approached, we had two gate changes within ten minutes of each other. This caused a surge of people, including the pilots and crew, through the terminal. Fortunately, most people took this in stride as delays were pretty much expected.

On arriving in Amsterdam, we hopped on the train and headed into town where we walked to our hotel, the Ibis Styles. Our room was a very clean and comfortable European double. Yes, we would stay here again. From there we were able to walk to our cruise ship, the Emerald Star.

And a pretty ship she was. A long sleek 135 metres in length and only 11.34 metres wide. She has two levels of staterooms, each with wall to wall windows that open halfway to the floor. The best viewing area is on the top level of the ship where, other than the pilot house, was all deck space. An additional outdoor space was on the second level in the bow, directly in front of the lounge\bar area. The dining room was immediately below this space and tucked away at the rear of the ship was a swimming pool. All was bright and spotlessly clean.



## Day 2: Amsterdam-Cologne



This morning we did a canal cruise on Amsterdam's outer canal where we saw some very expensive private homes and many exclusive houseboats. Many of the other buildings contained very pricy apartments, making the city an expensive place to live. The four-story buildings that are leaning were meant to be temporary accommodations for the workers who rebuilt the city after it was destroyed by fire. They were poorly built and not intended to remain for the several hundred years that they have stood. We then returned to our ship to set sail.

The first section of our trip took us through the Netherlands to the Rhine River. This was our cruising and relaxation time as we had some distance to our first stop at Cologne. It was also our opportunity to become acquainted with the other 54 (out of a possible 180) mostly Canadian, American and British guests on board. We spent our time on the top deck simply enjoying the cruise as we meandered through the flat but picturesque countryside. This is where we were when the Cologne Cathedral came into view.



Once we docked, we bussed to the old core of Cologne. This proved to be a bustling centre of tourism with its colourful buildings and its many pubs. There were lots of young travellers here. The Cathedral itself was as stunning as expected. It's 155 metre tall spires towered above everything around it. The building was a 13th century gothic design with high arched ceilings and long narrow stained-glass windows. It was a good introduction to what was yet to come. From here we made our way back to the ship where we continued on through the night to the Rhine Gorge.

## Day 3: The Rhine Gorge

This was the fairy tale cruise day as we travelled through the Rhine Gorge. I made a point of being up early so I could watch the approach to this area and before long I saw the first castle up on the hill side. From there it seemed as though there was one around every bend, nestled on the hillside above a small Bavarian style village. Some of these castles date back to the 12th century and many are now private residences or youth hostels. We passed the famous

Lorelei Rock where sailors were said to have been lured into the treacherous rocks by an enchanting siren; and the impressive Pfalz Grafenstein Castle, a former stronghold. It was truly a passage into history.

That afternoon we arrived in Budesheim, a town with a vibrant wine-growing heritage. For the activity of the day we chose to walk through a local vineyard to explore this section of the Rheingau wine region. The 'walk' consisted of a steady uphill climb which included at least a hundred stairs. Once at the top though, the views of the valley were breathtaking. Also, at the top was the Niederwald monument commemorating Germany's unification in 1871. The walkdown was much easier. Next time, I will take the chairlift!



Day 4: Miltenberg - Wertheim, Franconia



Today has been the day of locks. We are now on the Main (Mine) River, and we have a total of 76 locks to travel through before arriving in Budapest. Last night we awoke with a start when we felt a large jolt caused by the boat bumping against the sides of one of these locks. Our ship at 11.45 m wide and the locks at 12 m in width, make for a narrow fit. The next day we were informed that the upper deck would be closed for the next few days as we have some very low bridges, many associated with the locks, to sail under. Some of those bridges felt like just an arm's length away.

We disembarked from our ship in Miltenberg, a very picturesque Bavarian village. It gives a glimpse of life in medieval times due to the 15th-century half-timbered buildings. It really did feel like going back in time. The best way to describe it was like being in a Bavarian calendar. After doing a walking tour through the town, we climbed up to the castle overlooking it (Not nearly as challenging as yesterday's climb). As always, it paid off as the view over the community was stunning.



It was while touring Miltenberg that we were first introduced to 'stumbling stones'. These are small brass 10 cm square plaques imbedded in the cobblestone. Each plaque has been engraved with the names and dates of the Jewish people who disappeared during WWII and have been placed in front of their former residences. They are called stumbling stones as they are raised slightly above the cobblestones so they will be noticed. We saw them in every community we visited.



While we were here the Emerald Star continued to Wertheim as it had numerous locks to make its way through. As a result, we were bussed to Wertheim where we rejoined the ship.

Wertheim was another Bavarian style community but is much less a 'museum' and more of a lived-in community. Our visit was short before hopping back on the boat. That evening we were entertained by a Zither player, one of five in the country. His lively music kept us spellbound.

Day 5: Wurzburg, Franconia

Another very busy day had us up at 7am and out the door by 8:30 am. A tour of the Prince Bishop Palace left us both somewhat overwhelmed. It is a huge building that was partially destroyed during WWII but has been meticulously rebuilt. The most fascinating part to survive the bombings was the grand entrance with its magnificent staircase. This wide, curved

staircase is covered by a vast arched ceiling that is about 5400 square feet in size. It is beautifully decorated with a fresco that is said to be the largest painting in the world. From there we toured some of its lavish rooms including those where Bonaparte and Maria Antoinette slept.

During the war, people had the foresight to protect many of the historical pieces in the palace by removing and hiding them. The beautiful, intricate chandeliers were placed into wine barrels full of melted butter. Once the butter solidified, the glass was completely protected.



This visit was followed by a tour of the city market. As the city was destroyed during the war, most of the buildings are new but some of the old ones still stand. We were told that the prewar city was on par with Florence.

After lunch we joined the hike up to the Old Bishop's Residence, the Marienberg Fortress, which was a castle in itself. While we did not have time to explore its museum, we did get some fabulous city views and a walk across the 500 year old Main Bridge.

Now, as we shut down our day, we are sailing through another lock along this route and again gently bumped the side of the lock, giving us all a bit of a jolt.

#### Day 6: Bamberg

This city is another UNESCO World Heritage-listed city and is one of the largest and most complete medieval centres in Europe. It has around 2,400 listed heritage buildings on its streets. Unfortunately, saturation is starting to set in. Every place we visit has so much to see and explore, just not enough time to do more than take a quick look. This community deserves much more time as there are so many places to visit.

Following our tour, we hiked up to the old Bishop Prince's residence where we visited the cathedral and the tomb of the bishop prince and his queen. Afterwards we had some free time to wander. As the temperatures are starting to rise and our feet are getting sore, we decided to try the Bamberg's famous smoke beer. It is a very dark beer and does have a smoky flavour to it which was different but not too bad at all.



#### Day 7: Nuremberg

This is another city with so much history. We started today with a bus tour of the city, including the site where Hitler's Nazi

Party held its annual rallies and the site of the subsequent post war trials. As a consequence, to its significance in the War, about 75% of the old city was reduced to rubble by the Allied bombings. It has been the old beautifully restored.

We continued with a walking through the courtyard of the 11th century Imperial Castle. The only thing lacking here were the knights in suits of armour. From there we walked into the old town's large, busy market square where vendors were selling everything from vegetables to crafts.

In the centre of it all is the historical clock on the Church of Our Lady. This clock, built in 1509, still works and at noon of every day the Imperial Electors come out and file past the emperor. We stood and waited for it and quickly learned to not stand near any of the vendors as they are brisk about telling you to move along.

After dinner this evening the captain informed us that we would be leaving the Emerald Star at our next port of call, Regensburg. The Danube River was too low for us to continue to Passau, so we were given several options as to what we wanted to do. A few of us chose to leave the cruise at Regensburg, while others chose to leave on their pre-scheduled deportation day. Most of us chose to add an additional two nights to the cruise and be transferred to the Emerald Sky. Needless to say we were all disappointed to be leaving this ship and crew.



The Captain then surprised us with a fun celebration. Once we entered the highest lock on the Main/Danube, he opened the top deck for us. With glasses of blue champagne in hand we stood in awe as the ship was slowly lifted to a height equal to about three stories. The walls on either side of the lock were inches from the ship and towered massively above us. I should mention here that while watching all this, we BCPVPA people got together for a photo and spontaneously broke out in the singing Oh Canada. It did receive a lot of laughs and head shakes. Just as we were reaching the top of the lock, we were sent back downstairs because once again as the guard rails were dropped as we headed under yet another very low bridge.



#### Day 8: Regensburg

This morning consisted of a walking tour through this incredible old, stunning city. There is so much history here it is no wonder the area has become a university town. The students get to live in the history. One of the sites we saw was part of the 2nd century Roman Wall that was incorporated into another building. And, of course, there is the beautiful gothic Cathedral of St. Peter with its 341 ft. tall spires and narrow stained-glass windows. Other points of interest were the house where Oscar Schindler lived

following WWII and the old salt storage warehouse that helped the old city thrive.

After the tour we wandered for a bit and made a point of walking across the Steinerne Brücke. From this 12th century bridge over the Danube the city comes into view. It is the kind of place that would be nice to just sit back and enjoy it.

Following our day here, it was back to the Emerald to start packing.

#### Day 9: Straubling

We cruised to Straubling during the night which left us time to do an extra excursion to Bodenmais. This is a mountain resort area known for its glassblowing. While the destination was just a distraction, getting out to see the mountain range that divides Bavaria and Czechia, and seeing countryside made the trip worthwhile. The cooler air was very nice.

Straubling was our final port and our farewell to the Empress Star. Some of the crew, Nick and Igor, will be transferring with us. Apparently, they are coming along to look after us. We will be joining the Empress Sky in Englehartzsol, Austria.

We were making good time along the highway for the first hour of our two-hour trip when the traffic slowed to a crawl. Our bus driver then turned off the highway onto a small country road and from there we seemed to be going in circles. We lost the second bus travelling with us in a village somewhere along the way, but it finally caught up with us as we passed through some pretty country. There was lush, well-maintained farms and forests all about us. We later learned that the reason for the diversion was to avoid going through the border control. It was a beautiful side trip.

During the trip some cell phones started pingging, indicating we were now in Austria. We passed nothing indicating the border crossing as we travelled through small towns. Finally, at about 4:00 pm we arrived at our ship.

Well, the Sky, while identical to the Star, is not the Star. It is packed with passengers and is so very much noisier. We didn't feel the same welcome from this crew that we did from the previous one, probably due to the volume of people. The Sky is just starting its cruise today and including us Star guests there are about 160 passengers onboard. Both Igor and Nick said, "Give it time". Our lovely room is identical to our previous one, just a couple of doors down the hall.

#### Day 10: Englehartzsol, Austria

##### Salzburg tour

It was an early 7am breakfast this morning as we were heading to Salzburg. This was an optional excursion we booked and having it today worked out well as there were no other activities planned. We were on the bus by 7:45 am for a 2.5-hour ride through very picturesque farmland and forested areas before arriving at this remarkable site.

The historical centre of Salzburg is a well-preserved gothic town with its palaces, cathedrals and buildings. All of this overlooked by the 11th century Hohensalzburg Castle. We had a fast-paced tour through the old town which included highlights such as the birthplace and the second home of Mozart, as well as his statue in the centre of the city's main square.

Following the guided tour, we had a few hours to ourselves. Our first stop was at the Mirabell Gardens that surrounded the palace. It had immaculately kept hedges bordering the garden sections and flowers arranged in patterns on the lawns. My favourite part was the life size unicorn statue that I sent a picture of to our young granddaughter. From here we wandered through a riverside market as we headed towards the main centre. The view of Salzburg from this side of the river was postcard perfect. Once in town we sought out a restaurant where we could cool off with a drink and some food. It was a hot day. We never got into any of the buildings or up the hill to the castle, I so really hope to return sometime.

## Day 11: Passau Germany

We sailed upriver to arrive here last night, which means that even with the low water and change of ships, we are not missing any of our ports of call.

This is a beautifully preserved ancient city. Our walking tour this morning was highly informative. We learned this area was first settled in BC and then discovered by the Romans around 1100 AD. It has the old buildings, cathedrals and the Prince Bishop's castle. Weaving through the narrow, winding streets was like walking through a maze.

On the walls of some of the surrounding buildings marks have been drawn to show the height of the flood waters that have reached as high as the third floor. The area is very prone to floods because Passau is at the junction of the Danube and Inn Rivers. We then left the tour a bit early but not until after we listened to our guide tell a story of how the Bishop Prince opened his window one morning, expecting to see throngs of worshippers, only to see a single man standing there. It was Napoleon.



After leaving the tour we headed to the Cathedral of St. Stephen where we attended an organ concert. With its 17,000 pipes and 230 registers, it is the largest organ of its kind in the world. When the music started it filled the cathedral with a sound that resonated through your body. The sound was wonderful and finished far too soon.

Later that afternoon a small group of us decided to hike up to the fortress overlooking the city. The view of the city and the confluence of the two rivers alone were worth the hike. While wandering the fortress we discovered the castle's museum and decided to check it out. I am glad we did because it took us back in time to the knights of old. It contained many artifacts including weapons and furniture. Some of the artifacts were meant to be touched and proved to be very heavy, especially the sword and chain mail. The most memorable part of the fortress was walking into a small, dark room. The only light came from a small window with glass that

resembled the bottom of pop bottles. The room was very cold. This space was a replicate of what life would have been like for those who lived in them.

We made it back to the ship just in time to sail away. During the afternoon's port talk we learned that Nick, our activity director from the Star, is leaving us today for another ship. Sorry to see him go.



Day 12: Melk and Durnstein, Austria

Melk is a small community with the huge Melk Abby perched above it. The Abby's 2000 years of history has been beautifully preserved. There was so much to see that our tour of the building took over an hour. The cathedral itself is simply overwhelming with its sheer profusion of ornamentation. My favourite area of the Abby was its immense library.

The two-story high bookcases, with the sliding ladders, only gave us a glimpse of the 100,000 volumes contained here. Oh, to be a scholar and have access to them.

On the way back to our ship, we wandered through the cute town of Melk, and along the paths to the river. An energetic group of cyclists from our cruise then chose to bike the 35 km to Durnstein where they rejoined us.

Meanwhile the rest of us cruised through the Wachau Valley on the Danube. This was another castle studded area with everything from Cinderella style castles to the ruins of the fortress where Richard the Lionheart was imprisoned. Like the Rhine, this area is also renowned for its wine, except this wine is made from apricots. Rather than vineyards on the hillsides there are small apricot trees. Here at Durnstein some of us simply wandered this cute little town and discovered its apricot ice cream was just as delicious as its wine.



## Day 13: Vienna, Austria

This morning started with a bus tour of this beautiful city. The bus part lasted about an hour and then we did an hour long walking tour. There was so much history to see that by the end of the tour we are all getting overwhelmed. And boy is it hot! After exploring the streets for a while, we made our way to the shuttle bus as it was just too hot at 36C.

Later that afternoon, during the port talk, the Captain arrived to speak to us. I have come to learn this is never a good sign. He informed us that we would not be able to sail all the way to Budapest. The ship needed 6.5ft of water and there is only 4.5ft. The day after tomorrow we will sail as close as possible to Budapest and the rest of our tour will be by bus.

Following this news, however, we had the most amazing evening. Those of us who booked the concert headed back into Vienna where we attended the Imperial Waltz Show. This concert was held at one of the oldest palaces in Vienna which is now the Austrian Theatre Museum. Composers such as Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven have all performed in the hall we were in. Beethoven premiered his 3rd Symphony in this very room. From the architecture to the spellbinding music, this is by far one of the best excursions of the trip.



## Day 14: Bratislava, Slovakia

Bratislava is another fascinating old city. Our young guide for this morning's walking tour was very knowledgeable about the city. That and his humour made the tour fun and interesting. Amid the beautiful buildings was the unexpected sight a bronze city worker looking up from a manhole imbedded in the cobblestone. This couldn't help but bring a smile to faces. Later, we tried a poppy seed strudel...yum. Then because it was another very hot day, 39C, we headed back to the ship until our afternoon outing.

This afternoon's tour started with a bus trip into the countryside where we visited a local home. Franca, our hostess, was very welcoming as she showed us her impressive vineyard and garden. From the street her home did not look very large, but it extended into her narrow acreage giving her a 5 bedroom house. She and her family run a winery, making their own wine. She treated us to her wine along with coffee and dessert.

Next, we tried our hand at egg decorating, another of Franca's many talents. It looks so much easier than it really is. I could not leave without purchasing one of her beautifully decorated eggs. During our time there, the conversation shifted to the effects of communism on her and her family. Franca was reluctant to speak about this but did suggest it was not all bad.

Later as we were heading back to the ship our guide answered many questions about the years of communism in Slovakia. She told us that many people felt as Franca did because during those years everyone had food, shelter and jobs. Our guide also told of how her family was forced to share their apartment with another family whom they never said more than 'good morning' or 'good evening'. Everyone was afraid that the other might be spying on them. We heard similar stories as we headed into Hungary.

#### Day 15: Budapest, Hungary

This morning we docked near Komarno which was our anchor point for Budapest. It is also where several more of the BCPVPA group left to continue their own travels. The end of the cruise was rapidly approaching.



From here we bussed the 60 km into Budapest. Once there we remained on the bus and toured Pest. This gave a good overview of the multitude of highlights in this city. Following the bus tour we continued with a walking tour of the main tourist section along the Danube, including the stunning parliament buildings which deserves much more time than we were able to give them. From there we walked through a square with a monument to the liberation of Hungary.

Many of the citizens felt this monument did not appropriately acknowledge the true history, especially that of Budapest's treatment of the Jewish people during the Holocaust. As a result, they started an impromptu memorial in front of the monument. It consists of pictures of people who went missing along with their actual belongings such as suitcases, shoes, lanterns, etc. This along with the bronze shoes on the edge of the Danube was a very powerful tribute.

After some free time to wander the St. Stephan's square we were once again loaded on our busses and bussed to Budakeszi, on the Buda side of the river. This was a resort style area where we had a Hungarian lunch. The restaurant's long narrow room was unique with the dried bunches of wheat, corn and barley hanging from the ceiling. Intermingled with them were wagon wheels, some made into lights. From here it was another bus trip back to the Emerald Sky.



Our final evening on the ship was a farewell party with a Hungarian folk group show. A fun way to say goodbye to our cruise.

#### Day 16: Departure Day

The final morning was an early rise as we all departed at different times. After final goodbyes to our new friends, some were bussed to the airport, while we were bussed to a hotel along the Danube. Fortunately for Darrel and me, we were able to walk the short distance from there to our hotel which in turn, was a very short walk to the St. Stephen's Basilica. We spent the early part of the day exploring this church, with its incredibly beautiful interior. We took the time to explore its treasury containing the church's artifacts, as well as time to take the elevator and stairs up its high tower. The views of the city made this well worth the time. All of this was done in 42+C temperatures. It was hot!



Early afternoon found us sitting along the St Stephen's Boulevard, cooling off with a beer, when Darrel pointed to a spot on the wall directly behind me. I turned and saw a bullet hole just above my shoulder. This truly made the history feel real!

Unfortunately, the downside of an extra two days on board the ships meant we had two days fewer to explore Budapest. This beautiful city is worthy of much more time and is one we would both love to come back to...in slightly cooler weather.

Our parting words and thoughts about our first river cruise...Marsha, one of our BCRPVPA organizers... where are we going next?

#### EDITORS' NOTES:

While Janice and Darrell experienced some inconvenience with their flights, the rest of our party flew direct on European flights and luckily experienced few delays or issues. Undeniably amazing food and drink!

Watch for the next BCRPVPA adventure with Tom McLean at Trip Merchant.