

THE FLOW OF HISTORY

The labyrinthine story of Eastern Europe is inextricably linked to its most important waterway, the Danube. Set sail down the famous river to take a voyage into the region's past.

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PHOTOGRAPHY HANS SCHLEIKER

Forged over centuries soaked in blood and scored by religion and imperialism, the history of Europe, particularly Eastern Europe, is almost inconceivably complex. The seat of empires from the Romans to the Soviets, it's a region that would take years of study to truly understand. There is, however, a thread that runs unwaveringly through Eastern Europe's history, not to mention its geography; a mythically blue line called the Danube.

Flowing almost 3,000 kilometres from its source in Germany's Black Forest to its delta at the Black Sea, the Danube is Europe's second-longest river (after Russia's Volga) and the world's most international waterway. After leaving Germany, it winds its way through Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova and Ukraine, crossing four capital cities and drawing water from a basin area that is shared by a total of 19 countries and more than 81 million people.

For millennia, the river has made a significant mark on the continent, not only in a literal sense but also in terms of shaping its nations, its prosperity and its way of life. It has served as the northern border of both the Roman and the Ottoman empires; it has been the lifeblood and principal trade route of some of Europe's most celebrated dynasties and cities; and

01 The Prague Astronomical Clock

02 Prague Castle

03 Vineyard at Wachau Valley

04 Wachau Valley in lower Austria offers the most scenic stretches on the whole of Danube.



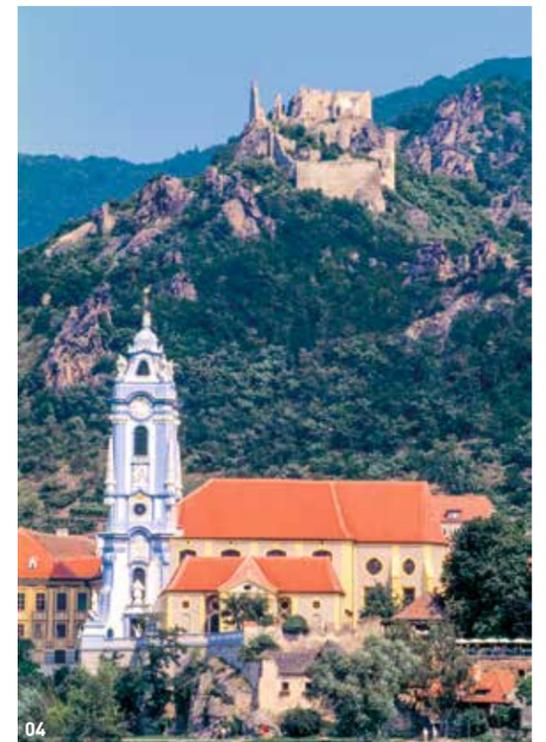
it has been both a source of life and occasional bringer of death for the generations of people inhabiting the many settlements that have lined its banks.

LEGENDARY BEAUTY

Today, these roles may have diminished, but the river's location and legendary beauty have seen it enthusiastically embraced for another use: tourism. Featuring an ever-changing landscape and direct access to an abundance of historically significant and picturesque towns and cities along its course, cruising the Danube represents arguably the most elegant way to see Eastern Europe. And nowhere does this ring truer than the passage between Regensburg, Germany and Budapest, Hungary, a stretch of river that packs in some of the Danube's most storied attractions within some 700 kilometres of leisurely travel.

Unsurprisingly, there is no shortage of tour companies vying for customers on this alluring expanse, but few come close to matching the credentials of Tauck. Founded in 1925 by Arthur Tauck, the American-born son of a German immigrant, the US-based company has been helping inquisitive travellers broaden their horizons around

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VIENNA IS A CITY SHAPED BY THE HABSBURGS, A MONARCHY THAT INCLUDED SUCH ICONIC FIGURES AS MARIE ANTOINETTE AND ARCHDUKE FRANZ FERDINAND.

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crowds on the stroke of every hour to witness the mechanised pageantry of “The Walk of the Apostles”.

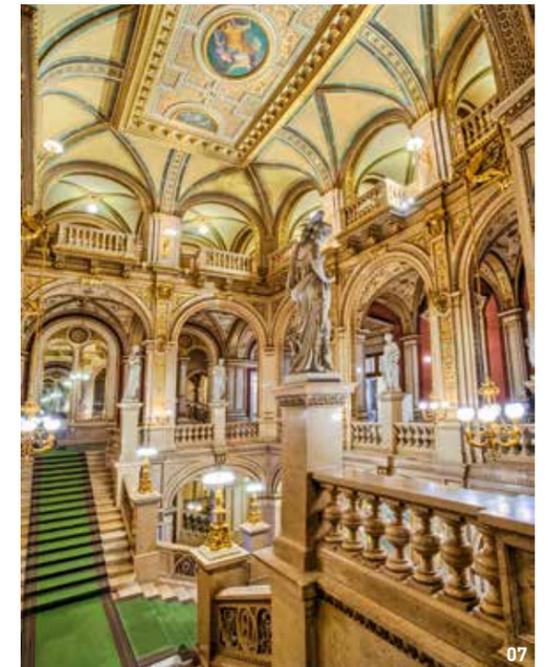
But while these attractions are invariably shared with hordes of sightseers and roving convoys of strangely ubiquitous Segway riders, we have the privilege of a private dinner far from the madding crowds at the 16th-century Lobkowitz Palace. The palace is part of the Hradčany hilltop complex that includes the 1,000-year-old Prague Castle and which overlooks the city from an unrivalled vantage point to the west of the Vltava River. The epic history of the location, particularly the struggles with the Nazi and Soviet regimes, are brought to vivid life by our host, the debonair Prince William Lobkowitz, while after dinner we are left to wander through the palace’s museum with its original scores and manuscripts by Beethoven and Mozart, and major works by the likes of Canaletto and Velázquez.

Leaving Prague and heading south, our cruise begins in earnest at the ancient Roman town of Regensburg, where an 800-year-old bridge, once used by Louis VII of France and his army on their way to the Holy Lands for the Second Crusade, spans the Danube and provides a fitting starting point for our voyage on the MS Esprit. Regensburg is filled with superb examples of medieval architecture and is typical of the historic towns dotting the Danube that we will visit over the next few days. These include Passau, Bavaria, home to St Stephen’s Cathedral with its breathtaking interiors and record-breaking church organ, and the quaint medieval town of Dürnstein, Austria, in the heart the verdant Wachau Valley wine region.

05 Vienna’s Schönbrunn Palace

06 The Hall of Mirrors of Schönbrunn Palace is listed as one of the Unesco World Heritage

07-08 Vienna State Opera House



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the globe for the past 91 years, and running one of the most luxurious and personalised river cruises on the Danube since 1992.

Our journey begins not on the Danube, however, but some 200 kilometres away in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic and one of the most striking examples of Eastern Europe’s post-Communist success. Known as “The City of 100 Spires” due to its proliferation of ornate steeples (although the actual count is closer to 500), Prague boasts more than 1,000 years of history, during which time it was the seat of the Holy Roman Empire and an influential power in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Occupied by the Nazis during World War II and controlled by the Soviet Union from 1948 until the Velvet Revolution of 1989, it is now the booming capital of the Czech Republic and a city replete with majestic landmarks and historical details.

The jewels in the city’s crown are the Charles Bridge, an almost impossibly ornate structure that dates back to the early 1400s, and the Prague Astronomical Clock, a 15th-century horological wonder in the heart of the Old Town that draws huge



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Enchanting as these destinations are, part of the attraction of a cruise is of course the journey itself, and the Wachau Valley offers one of the most scenic stretches on the whole of the Danube. As well as the lush expanses that play host to the region's many wineries, the river meanders past a succession of grand edifices that stand guard like stoic sentinels above its banks. These include the magnificent Melk Abbey and the ruined 12th-century castles perched high on rocky outcrops at Aggstein and Dürnstein, the latter of which held Richard the Lionheart after he was captured by Leopold V, Duke of Austria, in 1192.

KING'S RANSOM

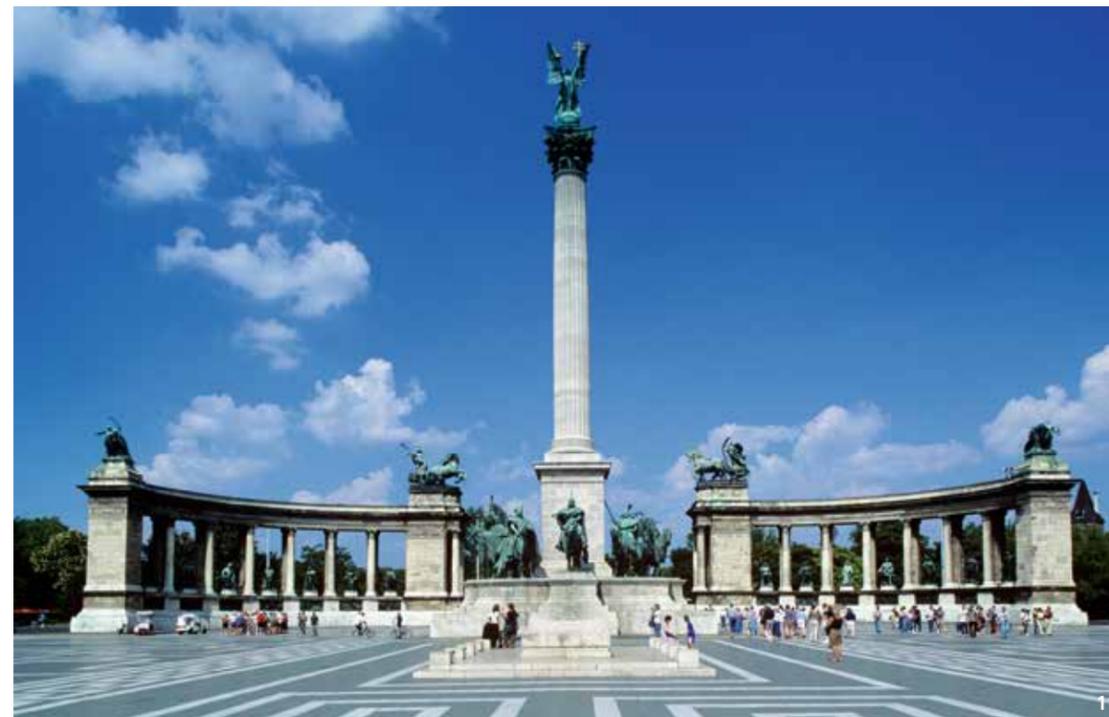
The ransom that secured King Richard's release ultimately paid for the construction of new city walls for Vienna, the next stop on the itinerary. It is here, from the Austrian capital, that the House of Habsburg ruled much of Central and Eastern Europe from the 15th to the early 20th century, and the dynasty's legacy can be seen throughout the city. From the baroque splendour of the 1,441-room Schönbrunn Palace to the sprawling Hofburg Palace and imposing grandeur of the Heldenplatz (Heroes' Square), Vienna is a city shaped by the Habsburgs, a monarchy that included such iconic figures as Marie Antoinette and Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

Vienna is also a city rich in arts and culture, with a museum district that would take days to fully explore, and buildings, such as the Kunsthistorisches and Albertina, that are as impressive as the collections they house. At its heart, however, Vienna is a city of music, and one that is inextricably linked to a certain Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (although the maestro was actually born in Salzburg). The State Opera House, the People's Opera House and the Burgtheater all offer sumptuous settings in which to enjoy an opera or a recital, while the Mozarthaus, where the composer lived from 1784 to 1787, is one of many monuments to the musical genius around the city.

After the imperial splendour of Vienna, the nearby Slovakian capital of Bratislava is rather drab in comparison, and we begin to suspect our voyage may have peaked too early, but such thoughts disappear like ripples in the Danube as we sail into Budapest. The Hungarian capital is often overshadowed by its counterparts in the region, but it is difficult to see why, as the city is both architecturally stunning and culturally rich. Neatly divided in two by the Danube, Budapest is comprised of Buda to the west and Pest to the east, two areas that are markedly different in look and character. To the west, the imposing Buda Castle dominates the skyline, while stately reminders of the city's role as one of the twin capitals of the Austro-Hungarian Empire abound.



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09 The Hungarian Parliament Building in Budapest
10 Széchenyi Thermal Baths
11-12 Heroes' Square



The soul of the city, however, can be found east of the river in Pest, home to the bohemian Jewish Quarter and major landmarks such as Heroes' Square and the enormous Széchenyi Thermal Baths. A convergence of historical grandeur and shabby chic, peppered with monuments to poets and thinkers, conquerors and kings, Pest is a microcosm of Central-Eastern European history. Embracing the future while preserving the past, it is a city where the scars of 20th-century oppression and genocide lie pressed between pre-Industrial Revolution empire-building and a vibrant contemporary cosmopolitanism like layers of bedrock in a river bed – a reminder that, like the Danube, the flow of history is perennial. ☺