



Austria's lush Wachau Valley provided narration-worthy scenery as travelers sailed the Danube from Germany to Hungary. Photos by Nicole Pensiero

First-time river cruise won't be the last

Nicole Pensiero For South Jersey Times

I was a few hours into my overseas flight from Philadelphia to Munich when I finally got around to opening the Frommer's Easy Guide to River Cruising that I had picked up a few weeks earlier. And there it was, right on page six: the Danube River listed as the best itinerary for a first-time river cruiser.

Lucky guess, then, for myself and my traveling companion, who was flying from California to Germany for our seven-night, five-country European adventure. Longtime friends who have lived on opposite coasts for decades, we thought a river cruise might be a great way to enjoy quality "girlfriend time" and see as much of Europe as we could in a week.

A river cruise, we figured, would have less of a party-hearty vibe than an ocean cruise, with a stronger focus on cultural enrichment. It was traveling through Europe, after all — with its myriad cathedrals, museums, and distinctive customs.

And the Danube river cruises we looked into seemed to offer more city exploration time and fewer castle visits than those sailing down the equally popular Rhine.

We opted for a Viking River Cruise because it was the most widely recommended — everyone I knew who'd traveled with Viking raved about the

experience — and its year-round options are plentiful. Only 20 years after its establishment, in fact, Viking has become the "Big Kahuna" of the river cruise industry, capturing about 60 percent of market, and, from what Frommer's explained in its travel guide, revolutionizing the business in the process with the introduction of its trademark "longships."

Designed with a snub-nose, rather than a traditionally pointed bow, these ships come with a partially windowed, open dining area that allows passengers to enjoy fresh air with their food — a novel idea at the time. And Viking was one of the first river cruise lines to offer all outdoor-facing cabins, as well as "green advances" such as hybrid diesel-electric engines.

Each Viking longship is identical — something I'd have to be reminded of whenever we'd pass another Viking ship that I'd think was so much longer than ours, the Egil: each longship

SEE TRAVEL, B6



The charming city of Cesky Krumlov in the South Bohemia region of the Czech Republic is bisected by the Vltava River and dominated by a 13th-century castle.



Prince's nine-song album includes a raw version of "Purple Rain." TNS file photo



MUSIC

Early collection is gold from Prince vault

Chris Riemenschneider
Tribune News Service

The first royal jewel from Prince's legendary vault has been unveiled: Warner Bros. Records announced plans to release a collection of solo-piano recordings made in 1983, just before he broke.

The nine-song album, "Piano & a Microphone 1983," will arrive Sept. 21 on vinyl, CD and digital formats. It's just one of three albums of unreleased recordings announced for the fall, but it's likely to gain the most attention given its intimate nature and an already fabled reputation among diehard collectors.

Known to bootleggers as "Intimate Moments with Prince," the collection was recorded at the now-bulldozed "Purple House" in Chanhassen, Minnesota, in late October 1983, just a month before filming of "Purple Rain" began.

The tracklist includes raw versions of the song "Purple Rain," the 1984 B-side "17 Days," the "1999" LP deep cut "International Lover" and "Strange Relationship," the latter of which would not be made public until 1987 on the "Sign o' the Times" album. It also features a cover of Joni Mitchell's "A Case of You," which he performed on piano at First Avenue on Aug. 3, 1983, the night he recorded "Purple Rain" and two other tracks

that would wind up on his landmark album. "A Case of You" did later wind up on his 2002 collection, "One Nite Alone."

There are also three unreleased originals in the set, including one that's sure to raise a few eyebrows, "Cold Coffee & Cocaine," which the exhaustive fan site PrinceVault.com says is sung in his frilly "Jamie Starr" voice and was probably intended as a song for the Time. The other two are "Wednesday" and "Why the Butterflies."

Curiously, the collection also includes a performance of "Mary Don't You Weep," a 19th century spiritual song that has been plucked from the album to run over the

SEE PRINCE, B7

Snap Shots

Attending the “Ocean’s 8” premiere in New York City are **1.** Gigi Hadid, **2.** Adriana Lima, **3.** Rihanna and **4.** Dascha Polanco. Photos by Evan Agostini, Invision. “SnapShots” compiled by Mark Voger for South Jersey Times

TRAVEL

FROM B5

is 443 feet long, has 95 staterooms, and accommodates 190 guests and 50-some crew members. Much smaller than even a mid-sized ocean liner, our longship — launched in 2016 — never seemed small though, and came complete with a sun deck, shuffle-board court, full-service bar/lounge and even a small library.

As we quickly discovered, the Danube — Europe’s second longest river — is quite calm, and surprisingly narrow in spots. Most of the time, we didn’t even feel like we were on a ship, even when we were moving along at quite a pace. So anyone who’s avoided going on an ocean cruise because of potential sea-sickness, will find river cruising delightful.

River cruising is increasingly popular in Europe and I was amazed at how many other ships we passed along the way: everything from an ultra-posh Uniworld ship; to one operated by Philadelphia-area based Gate 1 Travel. But Viking ships seemed to dominate, offering a horn-blow greeting whenever we passed one another.

CONTINUALLY GROWING LINE

At our first group briefing on-board, our program director — a charming, funny and well-versed young German named Oliver — asked how many passengers had traveled with Viking before. Dozens of hands shot up, which surprised me, as Viking cruises are not exactly inexpensive. But this continually growing cruise line (which christened 14 longships in one day in 2014) offers many online (and on-ship) specials, including a \$100 match certificate sold only on-board for a future cruise. And, as we quickly discovered, the overall European river cruise experience was worth every penny.

Setting sail from Passau, Germany, on a warm spring day, our week-long itinerary included stops in five countries: Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic — which we traveled to by bus to visit a fairy-tale-like village — and onto tiny Slovakia, and finally, Hungary.

While the idea of seeing so much in only a week might sound daunting, it ended up feeling incredibly easy, with included city tours at each stop, as well as add-on side trips (some included, and others offered at an additional cost). Wanting to make the most of the experience, we didn’t pass up any of the included tours or side trips, even if it meant stepping ashore as early as 8:30 a.m.

River cruising in general is geared toward adults; in Viking’s case, adults 55 and up, although we met many people decades younger. A completely different experience from an ocean cruise, river cruising won’t appeal to folks yearning for a belly-flop contest, a slot machine (there were no pools or casinos), or a disco vibe in the lounge. River cruising puts the focus on daytime experi-



The Szechenyi Medicinal Bath in Budapest is the largest medicinal bath in Europe. The public “spa” offers both indoor and outdoor baths. Nicole Pensiero

ences, whether it be admiring the landscape as you pass through Austria’s picturesque Wachau Valley, or strolling through the cobble streets of Imperial Vienna.

Each evening featured entertainment (sometimes a local singing troupe or classical trio from whatever country we were visiting), and there was a briefing before each night’s dinner regarding our next destination, its history and culture. Some fun “extras” were offered on-board, too, like a lesson in apple strudel-making with the ship’s pastry chef, and a tour of the kitchen and wheelhouse.

With less than 200 fellow passengers, we met (and quickly bonded with) travelers of all ages, backgrounds and nationalities. We spent little time in our nicely-appointed cabin (though we did enjoy its balcony), and never once watched TV.

On-board dining was open seating (there is no room service). The communal vibe lends itself to getting to know people quickly. Meaning, if you’re not a social person, river cruising probably won’t hold much appeal.

But, for us, dining was always a highlight,

both for the cuisine (which was fantastic) and the conversation. There was a full buffet set up for breakfast, lunch and dinner, along with an a la carte menu you could also choose from. We had one fun-filled “special menu” night in Germany, complete with local delicacies, costumed waiters and live music. There was also a reservation-only, six-course Italian dinner at Manfredi’s Restaurant on the Aquavit Terrace at the front of the ship each evening; we were glad we didn’t miss it.

Along with dining room service, there’s a daily outdoor continental breakfast with extended hours, as well as a round-the-clock coffee/tea/hot chocolate station. While Viking offers a special add-on beverage package (with unlimited and premium spirits), the included beer, wine and soda provided at meals — along with an occasional purchased cocktail — worked out just fine for us.

What ultimately surprised me most was the overall laid-back vibe of the river cruise experience. Perhaps I’d seen too many Viking commercials on “Downton Abbey,” but I expected a bit more of a “stuffy” vibe —

and was pleased to find that’s not the case.

In fact, we were on a first-name basis with many of the crew members by the time we disembarked. Perhaps that had to do with the many customer-focused touches that made each day so memorable, like being offered a “treat” — say, a hazelnut chocolate candy or a shot of peach Schnapps — when returning to the ship from a day’s outing. And each night after dinner, you’d find the next day’s hour-by-hour itinerary, complete with historical, cultural or cuisine-focused tips, waiting in your cabin.

MASSIVE PARADE

Many of the highlights of our trip were the most unexpected. Example: a free afternoon in the Bavarian city of Passau led us to a massive parade celebrating the start of a beer festival. With so many boys and men donned in lederhosen, we felt like we’d stumbled into the set of “The Sound of Music.”

While some of our shipmates decided against the included full-day visit to the charming Czech village of Cesky Krumlov, a UNESCO World Heritage site, this medieval village provided the most dramatic vistas of our journey.

The next day, after our walking tour of Vienna, we spent another few hours there wandering around its city center and people-watching from a sidewalk cafe, before an optional evening Mozart concert that concluded, aptly enough, with a stirring performance of Strauss’ “Blue Danube.”

A three-hour visit to the Slovakian capital city of Bratislava was surprisingly fun, but the big-ticket experience came later that same evening, when we sailed into the dazzling Hungarian capital of Budapest. I’d been to this unique Eastern European city many years before, but there was nothing that could compare to passing under its many lit up bridges and seeing the Houses of Parliament illuminated in breathtaking splendor, as crew members handed out free Harvey Wallbangers.

In Budapest, we savored our second (and last) optional outing of the week — a side trip to the famed pre-World War I-area Szechenyi Thermal Bath (\$79 per person). There, after changing in to swimsuits in private indoor “cabins,” we mingled with hundreds of Hungarians and other tourists of all ages, enjoying the many cold, warm and hot thermal tubs, along with a massive outdoor pool.

Our final dinner that last night in Budapest ended with hugs and exchanged email addresses — as well as discussions with newfound friends about future river cruises. The phrase “trip of a lifetime” seemed custom-made for this adventure. But I still hope one day to do another.

For more information about river cruising, visitfrommers.com. For information about Viking Cruises, visit viking.com.

Nicole Pensiero is a South Jersey resident and a member of the North American Travel Journalists Association.

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