



LEFT: Beautiful scenery along the Danube river on a European river cruise.
BELOW: Views from the all-suite vessel *Crystal Ravel*.



#DANUBERIVER

River renaissance

Joining a European river cruise offers an exploration of centuries' old culture and art as we go full steam ahead along the Danube river. *By Katrina Holden*



IT'S ONE OF THOSE PINCH YOURSELF moments. The layered, textured, golden swirls of Gustav Klimt's iconic Art Nouveau painting *The Kiss* are illuminated before my eyes, almost jumping off the canvas as I stare finally, in the flesh, at the original of an artwork I've admired and hung as a framed print for decades.

With the Crystal River Cruises small-tour group, I am walking the rooms of the historic former palace, Belvedere Museum, after-hours in Vienna. The gallery rooms, usually packed with tourists, are all but empty. We are ushered into the Marble Hall, a decadent palatial room constructed in the early 18th century, where we sit beneath the ornate ceiling fresco painted in 1721 and listen to a 50-minute private performance by the Schönbrunn Palace Orchestra. This intimate serenade is known as a Crystal Signature Event. In this refined setting we are witness to Austria's cultural identity of classical musicianship. The crescendo occurs when dancers perform *The Blue Danube*, the famous

waltz composed in 1866 by Johann Strauss II, whose Viennese house – where he wrote this very masterpiece – had been pointed out to us earlier that day. We all stand to ovation before descending down the Grand Staircase, exuberant as we are transported to our ship moored on the Danube.

For seven nights I'm sailing onboard *Crystal Ravel* with the five-star luxury cruise company, Crystal River Cruises, on its *Wonders of the Danube* itinerary from Passau, Germany to Budapest, Hungary. The new 106-passenger ship was christened in July 2018, so the design is fresh and contemporary. Crystal River Cruises has the highest staff-to-guest ratio of any European river line, with passenger needs well-attended. The all-suite, all-butler vessel is 135 metres long. Not only does it utilise the latest in navigation technology but its rooms are the largest of any river cruise line currently sailing the Danube.

Our butler Robert helps us settle in

ABOVE: The upper deck of *Crystal Ravel* allows you to take in 360 degree views. TOP RIGHT: St Matthew's gothic cathedral, Budapest. BELOW: View the original masterpiece *The Kiss* by Gustav Klimt at Belvedere Palace, Vienna.



I sit on the upper deck's couches to take in the vistas as we pass castles and historic buildings

quickly, explaining the particulars of our cabin, including my favourite feature: the electronic 'Crystal Clear' balcony window that lowers at the touch of a button. When sailing some days, I sit on the bed with the window down, watching the churning of the green waters and ducks paddling as we pass the sloped hillside vineyards of the famed Austrian Wachau Valley wine region. Robert asks my preferences, as all guests have their mini-bar regularly replenished with their favourite items as part of this all-inclusive cruise. My cabin has a walk-in wardrobe into which I promptly unpack all items, not bothering again with my suitcase for the next seven days. There's a bedside iPad; a full-size bathroom with double vanity; and an extremely comfortable king-size bed in which I'm lulled to sleep every night while the captain and crew transport us from port to port. Each transit day I eagerly part the curtains to take in my new surrounds.

It's my first river cruise and I meet several other passengers who are also embarking on their first river voyage. A salt-of-the-earth Australian couple from the Southern Highlands of NSW have cruised with Crystal seven times but are now on their first river journey. From Washington, I meet a couple in their 40s who have left their kids with parents for a getaway.

To be clear, a river cruise differs from the outset to an ocean cruise. For starters, the ship is significantly smaller and therefore has less room for certain amenities that many large ocean liners contain. There are no multi-room day spas, shops, scores of bars and restaurants, nor large auditorium theatres. Facilities have a more intimate feeling in their layout and design – except for the bedrooms, which are in fact larger than some standard European hotel rooms. *Crystal Ravel* doesn't want for cruise-holiday features, with a cocktail lounge, two dining areas, a spa, pool and fitness centre – all in scale with the size of the vessel. The outstanding cuisine

and wines at Waterside restaurant change daily, drawing inspiration from the local culinary specialties of the towns and vineyards we are sailing through.

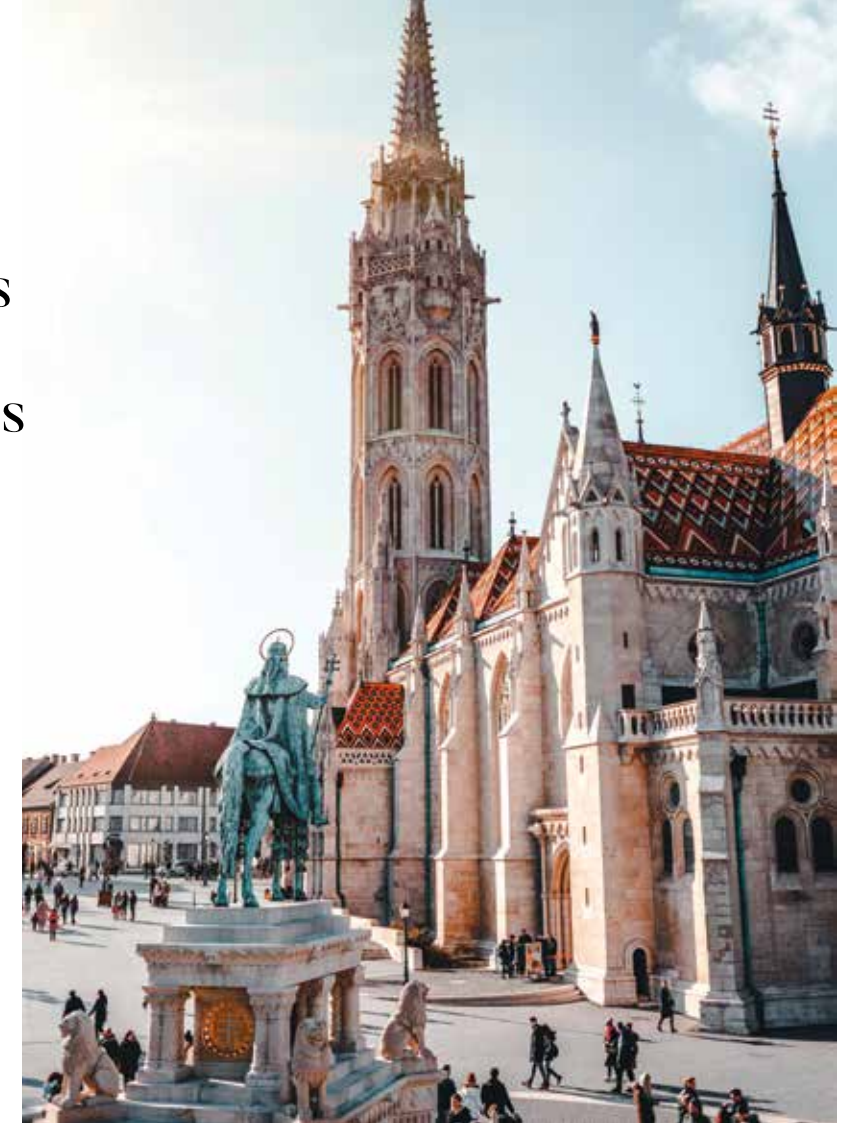
I sit on the extensive upper deck's couches numerous times to take in the vistas as we pass castles and historic buildings, watching as groups trade stories from their day in port. The sound system cranks Louis Armstrong's version of *Moon River* each time we sail away – sometimes leaving a lump in my throat as I recall our experiences, the people I have met and the memories I am forming.

Personally, I find the smaller ship size comes with some real advantages. There's no getting lost on board, roaming long corridors or studying ship maps. The motion is steady and the ship feels stable. There's little risk of sea sickness and I disembark with my land legs still intact, no swaying sensation rocking me onshore. Walking the corridors and into the chic Waterside restaurant or into Bistro Ravel, I'm continually greeted by name. We are also able to dock in small port locations on a regular basis – there are no days at sea, which means you make the most of your

location, disembarking daily to explore the cities and towns we came here to see.

Culture-loving holiday-makers will resonate with river cruising because it allows you to discover little gems of places you may never have otherwise stopped in. The hardest part is in fact choosing which shore excursions to take, as there's a broad mix of options appealing to history, culinary and art enthusiasts, all led by expert local guides. Most excursions also include free time so you can potter at your own pace.

In just one week, we sink our teeth firmly into European culture. In Passau, Germany, we stumble upon an annual festival in honour of the sausage dog (a symbol of Bavaria). A man in lederhosen is sitting on a float in a medieval town square, riding atop a giant artificial sausage dog with a huge pretend pretzel looped around the dog's neck. We are handed red balloons by a festival organiser and, through a mix of German and English, we realise we are invited to release the balloons with locals. We watch them waft upwards toward blue sky, past renaissance church spires and building facades.





TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE

For this Wonders of the Danube itinerary, Australian passengers can fly to Munich, Germany. *Vacations & Travel* travelled with Etihad Airways from Sydney to Abu Dhabi, connecting through to Munich.

etihad.com

CRUISING

From Munich, Crystal River Cruises can organise transfers for the two-hour drive to Passau to board *Crystal Ravel*. In Europe, Crystal River Cruises' itineraries visit 10 countries in some 47 ports.

crystalcruises.com

One day we traverse two countries, driving from the Austrian city of Linz to the UNESCO-protected ancient town of Cesky Krumlov, Bohemia in the Czech Republic. While classical music plays inside our coach, we pass by old farmhouses with vine-covered doors; mountains of pine trees and flowing streams; and white cherry blossoms. Our guide informs us that we are crossing former Iron Curtain territory, which before 1989 with its triple-steel fence, watch tower, dogs and mines, was once the most dangerous place on earth.

Another excursion sees us meeting Princess Anita von Hohenberg at Schloss Artstetten, a 13th century castle just outside Melk, Austria. Anita is the great granddaughter of Archduke Heir Franz Ferdinand, whose assassination in June 1914 sparked the start of WWI. It was here that the Archduke, his wife Sophie and their three children enjoyed family time in this summer residence. We receive a private reception from Princess Anita, who offers us a glass of champagne "because it lifts the spirits!", and we stand transfixed listening to the history of her ancestors and what happened to her family and fellow Austrians during the days of Nazi Germany in WWII.

In Vienna, we tour the beautiful city and see its diverse array of architecture, with postcard-worthy scenery at every turn. We view the balcony of the Imperial Palace from which Hitler declared the Anschluss of Austria in 1938. We visit the imposing Gothic masterpiece, St. Stephen's Cathedral, the construction of which started in the 12th century. We savour a traditional Viennese Melange coffee and local cakes at confectioners Demel, and Conditorei Sluka.

In the small Austrian town of Krems, we take a city tour and visit third-generation chocolatier Thomas Hagmann at his family's Hagmann Café-Konditorei where we



TOP: Schonbrunn Palace, Vienna. BELOW: Cesky Krumlov in the Czech Republic.

observe a chocolate-making demonstration. We wander the town's streets framed by pastel-coloured architecture and sidewalks planted with purple petunia flowers.

After each tour, we return to the warmth and cosiness of the ship, and it's surprising how quickly this floating five-star hotel comes to feel like home.

Our tour concludes in Budapest, where *Crystal Ravel* moors in prime position beneath the famous green Liberty Bridge, first completed in 1896 but rebuilt in 1945 after extensive damage during WWII. On our final evening we sail past illuminated historical buildings, with the Hungarian Parliament building, the Buda Castle and bridges across the Danube lit up like Christmas trees against the night sky. It's cold on the upper deck but a crowd of us gather, warmed by blankets and spiced tea with Grand Marnier the crew has prepared. We pass beneath bridges and hear the crowds gathered above our heads cheer.

The day comes for us to disembark and no-one is quite ready to leave. I chat again to the other first-time river cruise passengers who all say the cruise exceeded expectations and that they'll be planning another river jaunt. Perhaps the timeless croon of *Moon River* has crystallised their memories of the Danube too. 🎧



SCAN TO WATCH

With your smartphone's camera program open, simply hover your phone above this QR code to see a snapshot of this cruise. Your phone will activate a link to our site. Or visit vacationstravel.com/crystal-cruise-111/



Deluxe Superior
MV MARITIMO



Best Kept Secret Kvarner

OPATIJA - KRK - RAB - ZADAR - KORNATI
MALI LOŠINJ - CRES - OPATIJA

Small ship cruises along the charming Croatian coastline and islands on the lavishly designed, fully air-conditioned Deluxe Superior vessel Maritimo. For this trip all you will need is a few T-shirts and a swimming costume to spend seven unforgettable days sailing on the northern Adriatic Sea from one island to another. Relax and let the captain and his crew (especially the chef) take care of you.

SPECIAL OFFER	August 10th & 17th 2019
Main / Upper deck	€1875 €1688
Lower deck	€1515 €1364

Offer is valid for all reservations received up until July 15th, 2019 or until sold out. This special offer excludes all other promotions. Special offers are not cumulative. Reservations or requests need to quote 'special offer', otherwise the special offer rate will not be applied.

