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Danube River Cruise on the Avalon Artistry

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By

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In the summer of 2008 I was excited to try a new cruise experience – sailing the Danube through parts of Hungary, Austria, and Germany on the Avalon Artistry. After sailing on 18 different ocean cruises I had some questions about my first river cruise:

- How would this cruise compare to my previous ocean cruises?
- Will I be comfortable on a much smaller ship? Will I miss all of the features of the bigger ocean cruise vessels?
- Will the shore excursions be interesting? Is a river cruise really one of the best ways to see Europe as advertised?

I answer these questions and more in my trip report below. Sailing on the Artistry was one of my best cruises ever! I rate in my descriptions each part of the trip on an “A to F” scale. I generally gave high marks to everything (grade B or higher).

Itinerary

Fri/Sat: fly from Denver, Colo to Budapest, Hungary. Stay at a Budapest airport hotel Saturday night.

Sun: private tour of Budapest in the morning, set sail on the Avalon Artistry in the late afternoon

Mon: cruising the Danube, arrive Vienna, Austria 6 pm

Tue: Vienna, Austria

Wed: Durnstein, Austria (a.m.), Melk, Austria (p.m.)

Thu: Linz – Passau, Austria (bus tour of Salzburg, Austria)

Fri: Regensburg, Germany

Sat: Nuremberg, Germany

Sun: Disembark, fly from Nuremberg back to Denver, Colorado

Cruising the Danube

One of the most enjoyable features of the cruise for me was watching the scenery go by as we sailed up the Danube. I awoke at 6 a.m. most mornings and went outside to take pictures of the beautiful surroundings. We saw old churches, castles, and small towns amidst the lush greenery of the river valleys we sailed through.



During selected parts of the journey our cruise director Hans described the sights to us from the top “Sun Deck”. For an ex-engineer like myself I also marveled at how the river “locks” worked. We passed through 26 locks in all on our 7 day journey – the lock would raise or lower our ship to the next water level so we could continue sailing.

This sailing part of the cruise was the most relaxing to me. It reminded me of cruising the quiet waters of the inside passage in Alaska, only on a smaller ship and closer to the shore. Grade A

Shore excursions

While this cruise had its share of quiet times sailing the Danube, it was an active cruise, too. At every stop we had a choice of one or two shore excursions. In this section I describe the excursions I took. Some of the tours were included in the cost of the cruise (I label those “included”) and some were at an additional cost (I label those with “fee”).

On many of the excursions Avalon gave us radio receivers. Each tour participant received a headset and the guide’s comments were broadcast to the headset. Often our tour group was large (over 30 people) and having the headset allowed me to hear the guide even if I was outside of normal hearing distance. This was an innovative way to take a tour that I hadn’t experienced before.

Vienna Concert (fee)



We arrived at our first stop, Vienna, on Monday night. Here I attended the “Sounds Of Vienna” classical music concert. The presentation was in the Kursalon Wien concert hall, a setting where famous composers

Johann Strauss and Johann Strauss II performed in the 1800's. The concert also featured a male and a female opera singer along with a classical dance pair.

The sounds from the small orchestra were amazing as the musicians played many famous pieces from Mozart, Strauss, and others. The orchestra did not have a conductor; the Avalon program explained "this special style of music-making goes back to the time of Josef Lenner and Johann Strauss, who both led their orchestras from the position of first violin."

I was hesitant to attend the concert at first. Back home I am more comfortable at an NFL football game than a classical concert! But the quality of the performances and the easily recognizable tunes made this a very enjoyable evening for me. Grade A.

Walking tour of Vienna (included)

On Tuesday morning we took our first "included" excursion - a good basic walking tour of the historic district of Vienna. The best features of the tour were:

1. A knowledgeable local guide, Thomas, who told us interesting stories.
2. Gazing upward inside of the huge St Stephens gothic cathedral, one of the most impressive cathedrals I have seen.



Other than St Stephens, the tour did not go in depth on other historic sites in Vienna. We were allowed an hour and a half to explore on our own. Vienna was a fascinating city to visit; I would have liked a longer tour with more sites visited so I rate this excursion a Grade B.

Schonbrunn Palace near Vienna (fee)



Thomas was again our guide for the Tuesday afternoon tour of the summer residence of the Hapsburgs. Schonbrunn is a 1,441 room palace, one of the largest in Europe. This was a very interesting tour that provided a glimpse into the everyday life of the Hapsburgs, Austrian royal family in the 1800's and early 1900's.

Thomas led us through 16 rooms in the palace, from dining rooms to bedrooms, telling stories of the Hapsburgs along the way. Maria Theresa, the Empress of Austria, gave birth to 16 children over a 20 year period. Her youngest daughter was Marie – later the queen of France Marie Antoinette. In some of the rooms there were paintings of the Hapsburgs as Thomas described how each room was special to the family.

At the end of the tour we were treated to "The Apple Strudel Show" in a small café that was part of the property. Each guest was given a strudel (excellent taste!) and a cup of coffee or tea. We were told the strudel recipe was over 300 years old as our host described the process to make this delicacy ("the

dough needs to be so thin you can read a newspaper through it" we were told, along with other tips). We were given an apple strudel recipe to make back home.

At the conclusion of the tour we had free time to explore the beautiful gardens behind the palace, and wander through the souvenir shops.

I thought this tour was well worth the time. The Avalon headsets were especially useful here as it was easy to lose sight of our tour guide as we walked through the winding halls of the palace. The headset allowed me to hear all of his narration despite the crowds. Grade A-

Walking tour of Duernstein (included)

Wednesday morning we sailed into Duernstein - one of my favorite moments of the cruise. I awoke early, 5 a.m., and went out on the open deck to be greeted by the beautiful scenery of the Wachau valley. I saw the sun rise over this wine producing region of Austria. As we sailed the Danube I was surrounded by greenery and vineyards, with picturesque small towns and old churches appearing along the way.



Duernstein Castle

We were only in Duernstein for a few hours. Our local guide Armen walked us from the ship to the center of town. As we approached we saw the wine vineyards this area is known for. High on a hilltop overlooking the city we could see the remains of an old medieval castle. This castle is famous because Richard the Lion Hearted, King of England in the 1100's, was imprisoned here for 3 months in a dispute with the King of Austria.

The other building that stood out in this town of 500 people was an old catholic cathedral – built when Duernstein was founded (the year 1019).

In contrast to the bigger cities we visited on the rest of the cruise, Duernstein gave me a taste of everyday small town life in Austria. The buildings we saw reminded me of fantasyland at Disney World – except this was the real thing!

I loved the setting of Duernstein and this informative tour. Grade A-

Visit of the Melk Abbey (included)

Wednesday afternoon we were taken by bus to the Melk Abbey – one of the largest in Europe. This tour did not start out well but improved as the time passed. Avalon gave us entry tickets to the Abbey and we were first led through a museum by an Abbey employee. Our time in the Abbey wasn't Avalon sponsored, so we did not have the benefit of our headsets.



Melk Abbey

Consequently it was difficult to hear the tour guide in our group of about 30 people. The museum was also very warm on this sunny day, and many of the items displayed were small with detailed, hard-to-read descriptions. It was difficult to get the most from the tour in our brief time in each room.

However the good part of our visit was the Abbey's spectacular setting and impressive architecture. The grounds were situated high above the Danube with wonderful views of the surrounding countryside. Some of the rooms of the Abbey, especially the church and large library, were even more impressive than what I saw at the Schonbrunn palace the day before.

Though difficult to hear at times, our guide had some interesting facts to share. We learned an Abbey is a monastery. Any monastery with more than 12 monks is called an Abbey (didn't know that!) The Abbey is a full time school, with 31 monks in residence as teachers.

In the end I thought this was one of the better "included" tours of the trip. Grade B+.

Salzburg and the Sound of Music Tour(fee)

This all day tour on Thursday was one of the best of the trip. We first experienced a scenic bus ride through the Alps to the Salzburg region. We listened to Sound of Music songs as we drove across the countryside. We saw tall peaks, rich blue lakes, and small picturesque towns on the hillsides. The scenery from the movie came to life before our eyes!

We first stopped at Mondsee - a little town in a serene mountain setting. The cathedral here was used in the wedding scene from the Sound of Music. Though not as large when I saw it in person as it appeared in the film, this church was nevertheless impressive. As I stood in the church I could picture Julie Andrews walking down the aisle as she did in the movie. Mondsee also had a large mountain lake, with the Alps surrounding the town. I said to a friend on the last night of our



Sound of Music Church

cruise, "of all the places I saw on this trip, Mondsee is the place I would most want to live".

Next we drove to Salzburg. There we had a 90 minute narrated walking tour, followed by 2 hours of free time to explore on our own. Our guide was very good as she described the different areas of this historic region. We saw areas where the Sound Of Music was filmed (the Marabell Gardens from the "do re me" song, the theatre exterior from the Salzburg music festival, the graveyard that was used as a model for the final climatic scene, and more). We saw Mozart's birthplace and a number of stores selling Mozart and Sound of Music memorabilia. This was another place where Avalon's wireless headsets were put to good use – I frequently loss sight of the guide in the crowded streets but could still hear all of her commentary thanks to my headset.

I talked to others in our travel group who broke off from the walking tour and explored on their own. A few took the funicular up to the Hohensalzburg Fortress overlooking the city for great views and a

delicious lunch. A 93 year old gentleman and his wife told me that the walking was too much for them, so instead they discovered a sightseeing bus that visited the highlights of the city for a small fee.

Overall I really enjoyed our Salzburg tour for the combination of breathtaking scenery, detailed narration by our guide, historic sites, and seeing places in person where the Sound of Music was filmed. Grade A.

Danube Gorge/Weltenburg Abbey (fee)

On Friday I took two tours during our visit to Regensburg, Germany. The first was the best – a visit to the Weltenburg Abbey and the Danube Gorge. Our guide Michael gave us lots of interesting facts about the area during our 40 minute bus ride. I learned that the current Pope, Benedict XVI, was a college professor in Regensburg and still owns a house here with his brother. The Pope lived in Regensburg longer than any other place and considers it his home town. On his last visit to Regensburg in 2006 on his “day off” the Pope took the Cardinals accompanying him on this same Weltenburg Abbey/Danube Gorge tour. I figured if it is good enough for the Pope, it must be the best tour in this area!

The Weltenburg Abbey had an interesting church. We spent 15 minutes in the church admiring the gothic architecture and innovative design. The church had a bright feel to it because of hidden windows throughout the building.



After touring the church, we were treated to dark German beer and a pretzel at the Abbey’s brewery – the oldest monastery brewery in the world (dating back to the year 1050). I am not much of a beer drinker but just had to sample this brew – it was sehr gut!

We then took a 20 minute boat ride through the scenic Danube Gorge. This section of the Danube we would not see from our Avalon river boat.

The huge stone walls of the gorge were impressive.

I liked this tour mainly because of the expert commentary from Michael – the best guide we had all week. He was good at giving us interesting information and at the same time not overwhelming us with facts. The bus ride (40 minutes each way) seemed long for such a short visit to the Abbey. Grade B+

Walking tour of Regensburg (included)

On Friday afternoon I took a walking tour provided by Avalon of the historic Regensburg area. The most impressive parts of the tour were the massive gothic cathedral in the center of town (St Peters), remnants of an old Roman fort dating back to the year 179 AD, and the medieval Stone Bridge (built in 1275) – one of the first bridges constructed across the Danube. At the end of the walking tour Avalon arranged for us to have free German Sausage and a beer or soft drink at the oldest sausage factory in Germany. This was a special treat I enjoyed very much. Grade B+.

Nazi history (fee)

On our last day of the cruise I took an interesting tour of the Nazi sites in Nuremberg, Germany. We first visited the Zeppelin Field where the Nazi party had its big rallies. From the review stand Adolf Hitler viewed hundreds of troops. It was eerie to stand on the exact same spot as Hitler did during the rise of the Nazi party in the 1930's.



We then drove to the Congress Hall – a partially constructed Nazi stadium intended to be a bigger version of the Roman Colosseum. Inside Congress Hall was a museum telling the story of the rise and fall of the Third Reich. As I entered the building I was given an audio wand; I punched in the number at each display and heard an audio commentary describing the scene. The museum also featured Nazi films from the 30's. The museum presented the emergence of Hitler in a very detailed presentation.

To conclude the Nazi portion of our tour we were taken to the courthouse where the post war Nuremberg trials were held. The trial room seemed smaller than what I had seen in newsreel footage. Our guide Heinz told us this was the only courthouse in Germany that survived the war – one reason the Americans picked it for this historic trial. Here we saw a presentation on the proceedings which included film of the actual trial. Sitting in the same room and watching the newsreel footage made this historical trial come alive before our eyes.

Finally we were given some free time in the historic section of Nuremberg to explore. I saw yet another historic church (St Lorenz) which was impressive.

As a student of history I found the detailed tour of the Nazi regime disturbing yet fascinating, and quite a contrast to the scenic tours we had earlier on the trip. Grade A.

Private tour of Budapest with Agnes Antal (independent – fee)



I arrived the night before my river cruise started. The next morning would present a perfect opportunity to see Budapest! The Avalon portion of our trip had not yet begun, so I arranged for a private guide to show me and two traveling companions around. Though an internet search I found an excellent guide – Agnes Antal (website www.tourguide.hu) Agnes gave us a wonderful 6 hour tour of her home town of Budapest. Agnes shared with us local history, personal antidotes, all the while skillful driving around the winding streets of

Buda and Pest. We visited many of the top attractions – St Stephens cathedral, Mathias church, the statue on the hill, Heroes' Square, and more. Agnes added her personal touches, such as treating us to a delicious Hungarian pastry at one of her favorite shops. Grade A

Tour summary

The tours I took were amazing and really enhanced the cruise experience. If you take this cruise I would encourage you to purchase the optional tours like I did. These tours only added a little to the overall cost (most were around \$50/person with the highest being \$89/person).

The ship – the Avalon Artistry

The Artistry, built in 2004, is the oldest ship in the Avalon fleet. The Artistry sparkled throughout like a new ship. I noticed each morning members of the housekeeping staff were up early polishing the windows and vacuuming to keep the ship looking its best.

In this section I will review life onboard during my one week stay on the Artistry

Dining

The food on the Artistry was as good as the dining I have experienced on the large cruise ships – a pleasant surprise! I liked the breakfast buffet each morning, with flexible hours from 7 to 8:30 am most mornings. I arrived when the buffet opened each day and was first in line for the “made to order” omelet station. The fresh omelets I had were my favorite breakfast treat. There were also various cereal, fruit, pancakes, and pastries to choose from. Lunch featured another buffet. One day for lunch the vegetable lasagna was delicious! Lunch also had two or three entrees to choose from, a salad bar, a choice of two soups, and a wonderful dessert buffet. Dinner had a set menu most nights (you had a choice of three entrees as part of a 4 or 5 course meal). Wine was included with dinner each night – a unique feature of Avalon compared to other river cruise lines.



I found the best food of the week was at dinner. The chicken I had, in particular, was very fresh and tender. The desserts I tried were all delicious (the chocolate mousse was my favorite). One nice feature at dinner was the “second helpings”. On most nights there were leftovers from the main entrees, and the wait staff would roam the dining room offering seconds to whoever wanted them. A shrimp appetizer one night and a roast beef dish were the only disappointments.

I especially liked the “resort casual” dress code for dinner. There were no formal nights. This allowed me to pack light, leaving my suit, dress shirts, and tie at home.

The Artistry did not have specialty restaurants and nor a separate buffet like the big cruise ships have, but the dining room food was great all week. Overall dining grade: A.

My Stateroom (101 on deck 1)

I was surprised at how roomy my stateroom was. At 172 square feet it is comparable to rooms I have had on ocean cruises (I once sailed on NCL with a 132 sq ft stateroom, on Royal Caribbean with 160 sq ft, and Disney’s smallest



stateroom at 188 sq ft). I liked that there was ample closet space and drawers. A desk with an electrical outlet was handy for my laptop.

The bathroom was a decent size. One negative: the shower was very small. At 5'10" the shower was a tight fit for me – I can imagine taller guests would have more of a problem.

My stateroom attendant Lubica was prompt cleaning the room twice a day; she always had a cheerful "Good morning or Good afternoon sir!" greeting for me.

The plugs in the main part of the room were European standard 220 volts. When I found the adapter I brought would not fit the reception desk was able to supply me with a converter that did work. The bathroom did have a 110 volt outlet (standard in the U.S.) and that was handy to charge my camera.

My room on deck 1 had a window only. The water level came up to just below the window for most of the cruise but sometimes the water was half way up the window.

The deck 2 staterooms had small French balconies – not big enough for sitting but they did have sliding doors so you could open the doors and look out over the scenery.



View from my stateroom window

If I were to take another Avalon Artistry cruise I would try to get a stateroom on deck 2. The size and features of my deck 1 stateroom were fine, but I think the bigger sliding door windows on deck 2 staterooms would be worth the additional cost. In addition as I mention below the wireless internet access on deck 2 was much better. Grade B+

Internet Access

The Artistry had two public internet terminals for use in the lounge area. For the most part the internet access was functional from these terminals – up most of the time but a bit slow. A few times the internet was down as we sailed under the low bridges of the Danube.

The ship also had wireless access. From my stateroom on deck 1 I never could get the wireless to work. A friend with a laptop on deck 2 reports she was able to get wireless access from there most of the time. One night I did bring my laptop up to deck 3, next to the lounge, and had good internet connectivity.

For my business a reliable, daily internet connection is essential. I found the Artistry setup acceptable. Other river cruises I was considering did not have internet access and that fact alone ruled them out from my consideration. The fee of 15 euros for 24 total hours, or 30 euros for the whole week was reasonable compared to the internet fees on the ocean cruises. The 24 hours of cumulative time I bought was plenty and saved me some dollars over the flat 5 euros/hour rate (I ended up using about 10 hours of internet time)

I did not see as many internet cafes in the towns we visited as I had on my trip to Italy in 2006, so I was glad I purchased the Avalon 24 hour internet package.. Grade: B.

Entertainment

The Artistry featured a lounge singer (Lazlo) on most nights that many of the passengers enjoyed. On selected evenings Avalon provided special entertainment. A Bavarian Beer Tasting was very popular on our last night onboard. One evening the crew put on a show for us that was fun. On the more serious side, on Saturday morning an expert on river lock technology gave us an informative presentation on the German river canal.

The Artistry did not have near the entertainment options of the big ships but I thought what was provided was good considering the small size of the vessel. Grade B

Cruise Director

Our cruise director Hans was great all week at answering questions and providing commentary on the different ports and scenery. Hans also efficiently coordinated all of the shore excursions. Each night before dinner he would give a "port talk" on the destination we would visit the next day, the excursions available, and ideas for exploring on our own. Grade A

Precruise hotel stay

After a long day of travel I stayed the first night at The Airport Hotel Stacio in Budapest. The hotel provided good basic accommodations. Some features of this hotel:

- My room was good sized and clean.
- The onsite restaurant was fine. My dining companions liked their Hungarian Goulash for dinner, and I had a tasty Caesar salad. A satisfactory breakfast buffet was included in the rate.
- The hotel provided a cable for free internet access which worked well.
- I prearranged with the hotel a driver to pick me up at the airport for no extra charge.

I give the Stacio a Grade B. If I were to stay in Budapest again I would try to stay in the downtown area closer to more restaurants and the tourist sites. I found the rates at the downtown hotels high during my stay because of a nearby Grand Prix race that weekend.

Not For Everyone

A River Cruise may not be the best choice if ...

1. You travel as a family with young children. Avalon has an age restriction of 12 and over. There are no triple or quad staterooms (all doubles). There is no children's programming onboard. If you have teens curious about history and different cultures, then a river cruise may be of interest to them. An Avalon representative told me of a successful "family reunion" cruise on one of their voyages, where several families with teens and the grandparents had a great time.
2. You have mobility issues. The Artistry had no elevator. I did not find the stairs to be a problem (being on the lower deck I had 2 flights of stairs to reach the restaurant; 3 flights for the sky deck). Some of the new river cruise ships do have elevators, but the ports aren't setup for

wheelchairs. For example, the cobblestone streets of Duernstein would be difficult to navigate if you had problems walking.

3. You view the ship as the destination. There are far fewer features on a river cruise vessel than a typical ocean cruise ship. No rock climbing walls, no lavish shows, no mini-golf courses, etc. On a river cruise the wonderful historical and cultural spots you visit along the way are the highlights, not the vessel itself.

Is a River Cruise right for you?

A River Cruise is a great choice if ...



1. You enjoy the style of a cruise vacation. River cruising has many of the same benefits of the big ocean cruises, just on a smaller scale. You only have to pack/unpack once, you are often transported between ports at night, your meals onboard are included in the price, etc.

2. You want to spend more time in port. A River Cruise often has more overnight stops along its journey, allowing you extra time to explore the interesting destinations you will visit.

3. You like organized tours or exploring on your own – you choose! Many of the historic towns of Europe and elsewhere were built along rivers. With a river cruise you are often docked right in the heart of the city. This gives you wonderful opportunities to explore on your own – getting on and off the ship is very easy. The shore excursions I took on this Avalon cruise were all of high quality – Avalon specializes in local guides in each port and that adds to the experience.

4. You like casual dress and flexible dining. There was open seating at all meals so you dined with whoever you wanted, or you could dine alone. The relaxed dress code onboard was a welcome change for me from your traditional ocean cruise – I did not pack a suit for this trip!
5. You want to experience destinations where the big ships can't go. River cruising opens up so many more destinations you can visit compared to an ocean cruise. The rivers of Europe are rich with scenery and history – perfect for the smaller river cruise vessels. Now that I have a taste of river cruising, I am very excited about the many new places I can see with this wonderful form of travel. The interior of China, the castles of the Rhine, the sights of Moscow and St Petersburg in Russia are just a few of the places I want to visit on future river cruises.

Overall Cruise Grade: A

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