

Viking's Danube River Cruise

By no means are we experienced “cruisers” as this was our first “cruise” experience. However, if you’ve never experienced a river cruise or you want specific info on Viking’s Danube cruises you may find this article useful. This review applies to river cruising in general and specifically to the 8-day “Romantic Danube” Cruise from Regensburg to Budapest (although the “Danube Waltz” cruise is similar). Both go downstream and disembark in Budapest but start at different locations with slightly different stops in between. Here are the ports for each cruise (this is also documented on the Viking site):

- Romantic Danube:
 - 2 days in Regensburg
 - 1 day in Passau
 - 1 day in Krems
 - 2 days in Vienna
 - 2 days in Budapest

- Danube Waltz
 - 2 days in Passau
 - 1 day in Linz
 - 1 day in Krems
 - 1 day in Vienna
 - 1 day in Bratislava
 - 2 days in Budapest

Viking offers the reverse routes as well (embarking from Budapest) but the stops are the same. Logic might indicate that it’s better to go downstream (ending in Budapest) resulting in less transit time, but I can’t say that that is a big factor. The more important consideration is whether you want to do an extended stay before or after the cruise and where to spend that time. In hindsight, I wish we would’ve done the “Waltz” because we were underwhelmed with Vienna and spent 2 full days there. Vienna is a huge city, and we preferred the smaller, quainter stops. We would’ve missed the stop in Regensburg (which we enjoyed) but the “Waltz” adds stops to Linz & Bratislava with only 1 day in Vienna. We’ve heard Bratislava is a beautiful village, and we were sorry we missed it.

In a nutshell, River Cruising entails 2 main activities: 1) On board entertainment & dining, and 2) Off-ship excursions. One fallacy of river cruising is that you will sit up on the top deck enjoying coffee or an adult beverage while taking in the beautiful scenery of the European countryside. While you will do some of this, most of your cruise time is at night when you can’t see too much. Because of this, we emphasize creating a list or spread sheet of all your stops and the times that you will be sailing. That way, you can take advantage of as much daylight time on the deck while sailing. The Viking crew will be happy to provide this information once you start the cruise.

Let’s first talk about the on-board activities. While Viking offers some type of evening show or presentation, most of your entertainment centers around dining, drinking, and socializing. The Viking shows aren’t bad, but you’re not going to go home and brag to your friends how great they were. Instead, you will talk about the food, drink, and service. Viking does a great job in this area. Each dinner offers a reasonable variety. If you don’t like what you order (which is a rarity) they will gladly

accommodate you with something else. The food and service are simply fantastic. We went with a group of 5 couples, which made it really fun to enjoy the experience. If you are not going in a group, you may want to seek out an opinion from someone that has travelled as a single couple. The perspective may be a little different.

In addition to the food, the drink package is an option to consider for those who enjoy an adult beverage. Viking provides wines and beers as part of the package, but if you want to enjoy a premium wine or cocktail you may want to upgrade. The cost is \$25 per person, per day. We are not big drinkers, but it was nice to try the different high-end wines with dinner and maybe a mimosa with lunch or a brandy at dinner without having to worry about the cost. Even if don't save money on the drink package, the convenience may be worth it.

Now about the excursions. You will spend about ½ of your daytime hours (or more) on some type of excursion, so it's important to do some research ahead of time. In our case, we primarily stuck to the included (free) tours that are available in the morning for each port. This is a good way to get familiar with the area, but I wish we would've done a little more research. For example, in Vienna, a wine tasting at a vineyard outside the city might have been a little more enjoyable than the congestion of the downtown area on the free tour. Had we done a little google-searching, we might have thought of that ahead of time. Also, I would suggest searching for things like "things to do in Regensburg/Krems/Passau", to give you other ideas. The only "paid" excursions we did were the Mozart & Strauss concert in Vienna and the e-bike ride in Vienna. Both of those excursions you could probably do on your own and save a little money, but I think it was worth it to use the Viking option. We loved our bike-tour guide. The route was along the Danube and lasted about 2.5 hours. For the concert, Viking reserved the entire venue and provided bus transportation. It was a very pleasant evening. One thing that is a little confusing is that the concert is advertised as a "Krems" excursion (on the Regensburg to Budapest route), but it's really in Vienna. You will cruise down from Krems that evening during dinner and then dock in Vienna to take the bus to the concert. Our favorite free excursion was the Gottweig Abbey tour. Fantastic views of the surrounding area, so make sure to take that in. One excursion that we wished we had done was "Hike the Passau Hills". We are active hikers and that would have been a good way to burn off some of those calories we took in with the great food. We heard the views on that hike were worth money.

One side note about the excursions. I would suggest picking the excursions based on your preferences, not the preferences of your group. You will have time to socialize with your group during and after dinner. Don't select an excursion just to go with the flow. You will spend a lot of money on this trip so spend time on the excursions that you and your spouse enjoy. At the end of your morning excursion, you can go back to the ship to take advantage of a free lunch, but we suggest staying and having lunch in the local village. Not only does this give you some variety in your menu for the week, you'll also get to experience the local traditions.

With respect to the cost of the trip, there can be a wide variance. We decided to spend some time in Prague on the front-end and Budapest on the backend. This was a one-time trip for us we and didn't want to let costs cut into our enjoyment. However, if your budget is limited, I would suggest taking advantage of the airfare specials offered by Viking. These airfares will require you to fly in the day of embarkation and fly back as soon as the cruise completes. In our case we took the cruise in early July. This is an off-peak time so the cruise fare was somewhat reduced along with the airfare. The airfare was

advertised at \$600 from the US, which is a great rate. However, because of our pre & post excursions, changing the flight reservation caused the airfare to go up to ~\$2000 per ticket. That was simply the market rate at that time, so I had no complaints. It's just something to consider. Also, if you do decline the Viking discounted airfare you may want to book your flights directly with the airline. It shouldn't cost you any extra and communication is a little more direct (although Viking will be happy to book your flight changes as well).

Another option that can vary the price considerably is the room type. There are 2 high-end suite options (Explorer & Veranda) that I'm sure are great rooms but probably not for the price conscious. The other 3 other options are the most common:

- Standard - 1st floor
- French Balcony – 2nd or 3rd floor
- Veranda Stateroom – 2nd or 3rd floor

The Veranda Stateroom has a small walk-out balcony with 2 chairs. The French Balcony does not really have a balcony – just a sliding glass door with a screen so you can get some fresh air. The standard room just has a small window that cannot be opened as it's just above the waterline. All 3 of the room types are the same size although the Veranda is advertised as having more square footage because of the walk-out balcony. We stayed in the Veranda, but in hindsight was probably not worth the extra cost since we rarely used the balcony. I'm sure we would've been happy with either of the other 2 options. Also, you'll pay a slight premium for the 3rd floor over the 2nd floor which I don't think is worth it either. In summary, if you're on a tight budget the standard room will be sufficient. But if you're a little claustrophobic and need some fresh air, go with the French Balcony on the 2nd floor.

One note about our pre-excursion to Prague. Prague is about 2 hours north Regensburg, so we flew directly to Prague from the states and shared an AirBnB with some of the other couples in our group. Prague is a fantastic place to visit and would highly suggest it if you can fit it in. My wife and I also did a side trip to a national park in Germany called Saxon Switzerland (see picture below), which had great hiking and views (note that this is NOT near Switzerland the country!). It's only about 2 hours by car north of Prague and near Dresden. Except for that side trip we would not have needed a car in Prague. To get from Prague down to Regensburg we rented a van that fit 8 people at a cost of about \$200, or \$25 per person. You could also take a train down to Regensburg. Regarding lodging in Prague, the natural inclination is to stay in Old Town. However, this is probably the most touristy area of Prague and is very busy. As an alternative, New Town & Lesser Town might be better options. Note that very few places in Prague have air conditioning so if you're staying in July or August be prepared. In the evenings it will probably cool down, but it could get a little uncomfortable during the day without A/C.

Let me mention one nice adventure in Prague. From our condo in New Town, we took the train up to the Prague Castle and enjoyed a nice morning there. Instead of taking the train back down to Old Town we walked down thru the castle gardens and continued on to the Jewish Quarter (in Old Town). On the way, we stopped at the Hanau Pavilion which overlooks the river. It's not well advertised, but your map app should get you there. Have a drink and a light lunch and enjoy the view – very nice! From there, it's a short walk down to the Jewish Quarter & Old Town.

In closing, here are some pictures from our journey along the way. Hope you enjoy!



The Bastei Bridge in Saxon Switzerland, Germany, 2 hours north of Prague.



The Astronomical clock, a "must see" in Old Town Prague. A very popular area when the clock chimes.



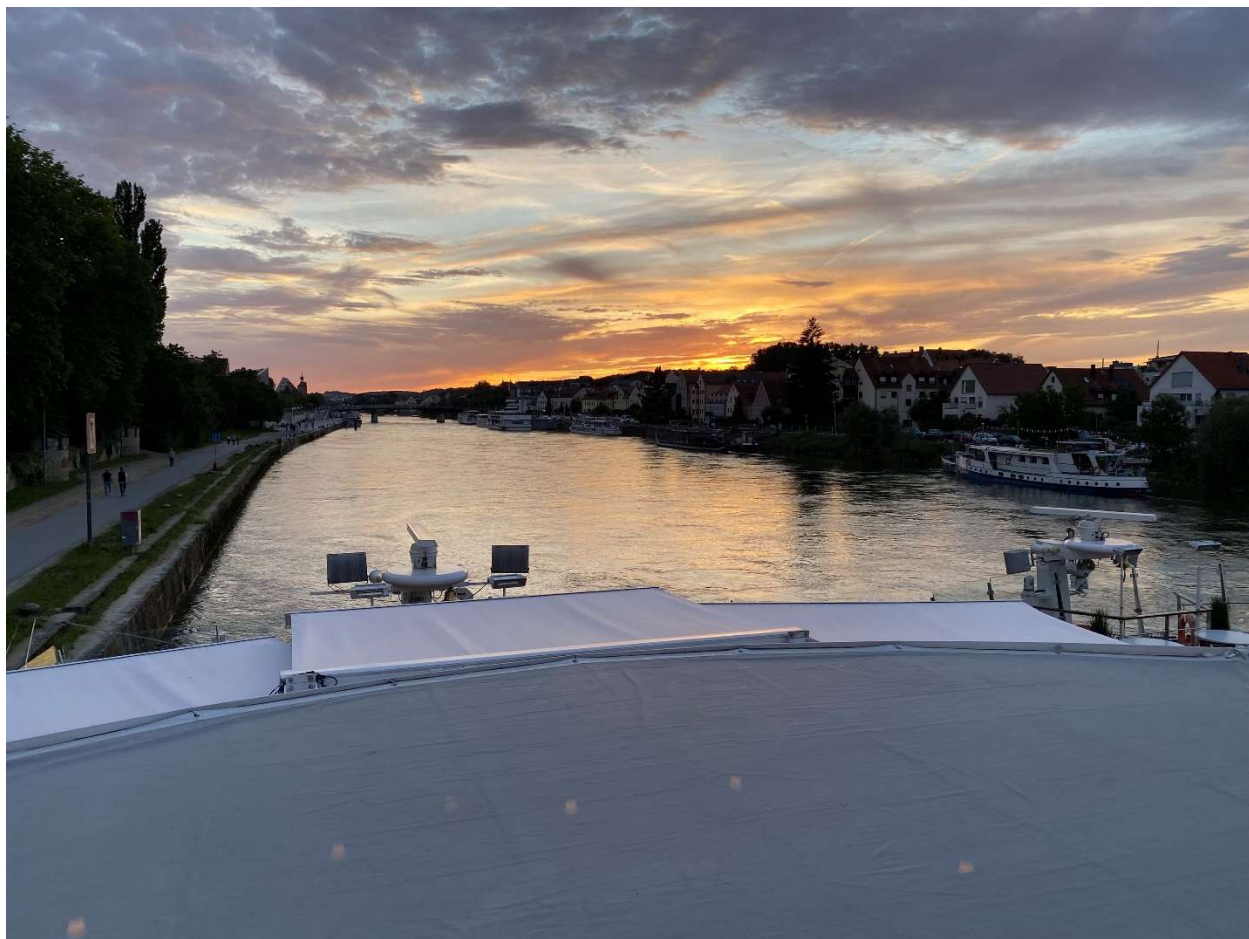
St. Vitus Cathedral at the Prague Castle in Lesser Town Prague



View from the tower at St. Vitus. 287 steps! An aggressive climb but the views are worth it.



View near Hanau Pavilion on our walk from Prague Castle to Old Town. Great place to have a cocktail & enjoy the view!



Sunset on the Danube



Just another castle...



The famous blue church of Durnstein (near Krems). No stop here, so have your camera ready as you sail by.



View from Gottweig Abbey



Another Danube sunset



Scenic spot between Vienna & Budapest



View from the Buda Castle looking over the Chain Bridge & Parliament building on the Pest side.



Looking up to the Buda Castle from the Chain Bridge