

Cruising Europe's Waterways

Many years ago, my daughter, Laura, and I stayed at a castle hotel overlooking the Rhine Valley. Viewed from our tower room, the River Rhine far below was a non-stop stream of commercial activity, with barges and boats of all sizes. Among them were a few slim, elegant river cruise ships, and I dreamed of the day I could experience one of those Rhine River cruises.

Well, this year that opportunity finally arrived, and from the sundeck of the *Viking Danube*, I was able to point out to my husband the 1,000-year-old castle hotel Auf Schönburg, affectionately known in our family as “Laura’s Castle.”

Five days earlier, along with fellow cruise ship passengers, we’d toured a similar castle, Kaiserburg, perched above the city

of Nuremberg. However, it wasn’t a convivial castle hotel but a strong, impregnable fortification that had been the seat of power overlooking the intersection of medieval trade routes. And it was back in the 17th century that the colourful Christkindlesmarkt (Christmas market) first began below in the broad market square in front of the great church. Over the years, it’s become world-famous and is now considered the largest Christmas market in Germany. During Advent, hundreds of wooden booths with traditional striped canopy roofs fill the square and all the wide streets leading into it. The historic Beautiful Fountain (circa 1390), adds an ethereal touch, with its illuminated filigree spire towering almost 20 metres above the glow of the little shops.

However, there’s also a sinister side to Nuremberg’s history,

as some of our fellow travellers discovered on the optional Second World War tour, which visited the site of Hitler’s Nazi rallies, a war museum and the site of the Nuremberg Trials.

At this point, we were sailing on the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal, referred to as the RMD, which links the three rivers. It hadn’t taken long for us all to adapt to the rhythm of the cruise. We started each day with an extensive breakfast buffet, then set out on a guided walking tour of the port city, followed by lunch aboard, with a choice of the dining room or a buffet in the lounge. The afternoon disappeared quickly — another tour, free time ashore, or sailing to the next port. Then it was cocktail hour and the daily preview of the next port with Michael, our enthusiastic program director, who made everything sound like so much fun.

Afterward it was the evening meal in the dining room, which soon grew to become a major event as the chef featured regional and local dishes. Open seating allowed us to mix and mingle, and semicausal dress enhanced the friendly tone. We fit right in, for most passengers were 50-plus couples. Many were experienced travellers who had tried ocean cruises but now preferred the more intimate and friendly atmosphere of river cruising.

Seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites enroute

The next day, we docked at the charming city of Bamberg. Our guide proudly shared that the medieval city centre of her town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the medieval street layout still exists. As we wandered along the winding



1,000 year old Auf Schönburg, now a lovely castle hotel. (Right) *Viking Freya* sailing past the city of Boppard, on the Rhine River.



Historic Nuremberg.



A river cruise through Bavaria and beyond offers beauty and history to spare **BY WENDY & ROB LINDSAY**

Photography, Lindsay Editorial; (right) courtesy of Viking River Cruises

cobblestone streets, every one of us had to stop for a photo of the wonderfully ornate Old Town Hall, built in the middle of the Regnitz River over the Obere Bridge. Apparently, back in 1440, the prince-bishop refused to give the citizens land for it and this was their creative solution. From one part of the bridge, you can also spy Little Venice — the fishermen’s section of the old city built on former sandbars in the river. Many of us also popped into one of the brewery-pubs to taste the unique Rauchbier (Smokebeer), whose dark and heavy taste is wildly popular with the locals.

Optional bus tours inland add variety

While we were in Bamberg, our ship had sailed on, negotiating more RMD locks. When our tour buses caught up, the hospitality staff were waiting on the sundeck to greet us with Welcome Back signs. This was so typical. From beginning to end, the congenial crew went out of their way to make our cruise happily memorable. In the lounge, the bartenders quickly learned everyone’s favourites, and the ladies enjoyed the way our tall, good-looking maître d’,



The historic heart of Bamberg is an UNESCO World Heritage Site. (Below) *Käthe Wohlfahrt Christmas Village* in Rothenburg — the largest shop of its kind in Europe.



Zoltan Beres, welcomed us with, “Hello, darlink” (much as fellow Hungarian Zsa Zsa Gabor might have). Some of us also wondered if the captain had been chosen for being photogenic as well as a good navigator.

Würzburg brought a different experience. Here, we all toured the elaborate prince-bishops’ palace — which some said had rooms to rival Versailles (interior photography was not allowed). Some of us took an optional bus tour inland for lunch, touring and shopping in the medieval walled town of Rothenburg. En route, our bus followed the scenic Romantic Road through charming rural villages and rolling wooded hills.

Walking into Rothenburg was like entering the Middle Ages as there were authentic buildings at every turn. Here, it’s Christmas year-round at the Käthe Wohlfahrt Christmas Village — the largest of its kind in Europe. The multilingual clerks help shoppers discover the magic of a traditional German Christmas with decorations and toys that are regionally handmade — there’s not an import in the place. There were wooden pyramids and arched nativity scenes originally designed by miners, amusing little smoker-men with incense cones inside sending fragrant smoke out through a pipe or open mouth, and of course, the famous nutcrackers in all shapes, colours and occupations. Attention to detail was evident in every intricate piece. Here and at the Christkindl markets, there is much pride in local crafts.

That night our onboard entertainment revealed another local craft with glassblower, Hans Ittig, from Wertheim. He humorously made his glassblowing town, and his shop, sound so appealing none of us missed the walking tour the next morning, despite it being our one rainy day on the cruise.

Over twenty castles along the Upper Middle Rhine

There was also a consensus in the dining room that daily walking tours were essential to balance those evening meals. Of course there was the option of staying aboard, but most everyone, including a few with canes, opted for the mental and physical stimulation of time ashore. A “leisurely” walking group was often offered, with a slower pace and no stairs. What we called the “quiet boxes” were a great asset for all of us: our guide’s voice was relayed to our receiver-and-earbud units, ensuring that we heard everything, even if we stepped out of earshot to take photos.

Early the next morning, everyone was out on the top deck as we cruised into the spectacular Upper Middle Rhine Valley. With cameras at the ready, we anticipated the string of castles, fortifications, vineyards and beautiful vistas that has attracted artists and poets over the centuries and made the section between Rüdesheim and Koblenz a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We were not disappointed. As one guidebook put it, “Seen from a cruise ship, the Middle Rhine is like a historical novel, in which a rapid succession of buildings and landscapes unfold in a seamless pageant of bygone

Koblenz's fountain traces 2,000 years of local history in a tower of intricately carved stone.



days.” Our first sighting was the castle ruins where Richard the Lionheart had been held captive waiting for his brother in England to raise his ransom. Soon the castles and fortress ruins were appearing left and right — some obviously restored as castle hotels, others only relics of past strength and glory. Then, above the little town of Oberwesel, we excitedly spotted a familiar sight — the aforementioned castle hotel Schönburg. Nearby, close to St. Goarshausen, the river narrows treacherously between steep cliffs. It’s the site of the Lorelei rock, which inspired the legend of a beautiful siren whose seductive song lured mariners to their doom on the rocks.

Christkindlesmarkt

Several scenic villages, such as historic Boppard, and twenty castles later, our ship docked in busy Koblenz. This day everyone explored independently. A short stroll down our side of the river brought us to the powerful statue of Emperor William I, who is credited with unifying Germany in 1871. Called “German Corner” it marks the spot where the Moselle River meets the Rhine. It seemed a popular gathering spot for river cruise ships from many companies and the riverside beer garden was popular. Wandering the cobblestone streets of the old town we came upon the fantastic city fountain that traces 2,000 years of local history in a tower of intricately carved stone.

Sometime during the night, we sailed past Frankfurt, and the next morning we awoke in Cologne. During our guided walk, we learned that Cologne was founded in 38 BC as an important Roman city. The continual discovery of Roman artifacts here has irked some locals as it’s delayed construction of a city subway for years. On the other hand, though, it’s made the excellent Romano-Germanic Museum one of the

TRIP PLANNING

This story highlights our experience on the Rhine River and Main-Danube Canal section of Viking’s Grand European Tour. The total trip visits five countries in 15 days between Budapest and Amsterdam.

Viking also offers the eight-day Rhine Getaway, which visits four countries as it sails between Amsterdam and Basel, Switzerland.

During the latter part of November and early December (Advent), both cruises have stops at Germany’s famous Christkindl markets.

We happily discovered that passengers flying KLM can purchase a \$34 access to the KLM Crown Lounge in both Toronto and Amsterdam. It was a quiet, relaxing way to begin our trip and offered complimentary drinks, a warm buffet, and access to Wi-Fi and office equipment as we waited to board.

best archeological museums in Europe. Next door stands the immense Cologne Cathedral, a Gothic masterpiece that took over 600 years to build. Affectionately called the *Dom* (Cathedral) by locals, it’s become the symbol of the city. Inside, the pillared stone walls of the chancel tower majestically overhead, banks of prayer candles flicker and ancient stained glass windows shimmer. Despite throngs of tourists, there’s a majestic peace to the place. As Christmas draws near, the cathedral square becomes the most impressive of all seven Christkindl markets in Cologne. As you leave the cathedral, the delicious aroma of oven-fresh gingerbread and the pungent fragrance of *glühwein* (spiced mulled wine) are on the breeze as shoppers happily hurry from booth to booth buying the traditional handmade gifts and goodies.

The next morning, we cruised into the Netherlands and our final stop at picturesque Kinderdijk. This tiny village has 19 operational windmills — some dating back to the 14th century. These are part of yet another UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Kinderdijk-Elshout mill network. Before there were modern electric pumping stations, windmills like these kept the flat farmlands of the Netherlands above water.

Our cruise ended the following day when our ship docked in Amsterdam. Like us, many took a couple of days to enjoy the many faces of this great city, where bicycles rule and canals abound. Our hotel, the DoubleTree, was only steps from Central Station, and thanks to our pre-purchased I-Amsterdam City Cards, we easily hopped on a tram to the Van Gogh Museum and the Rijksmuseum. Our City Cards also included a narrated canal tour. After cruising the historic canals, the tour boat headed out into the harbour past the Eye — the new ultramodern film institute — and by the river-cruiser docks. There sat the *Viking Danube*. We were all set to wave hello to the crew, whom we now considered friends, but were disappointed to find no one in sight. Dejectedly, we realized they were welcoming the new passengers who would replace us on the ship’s return cruise. ■

TRAVEL SOURCES

vikingrivercruises.com / iamsterdam.com / klm.com