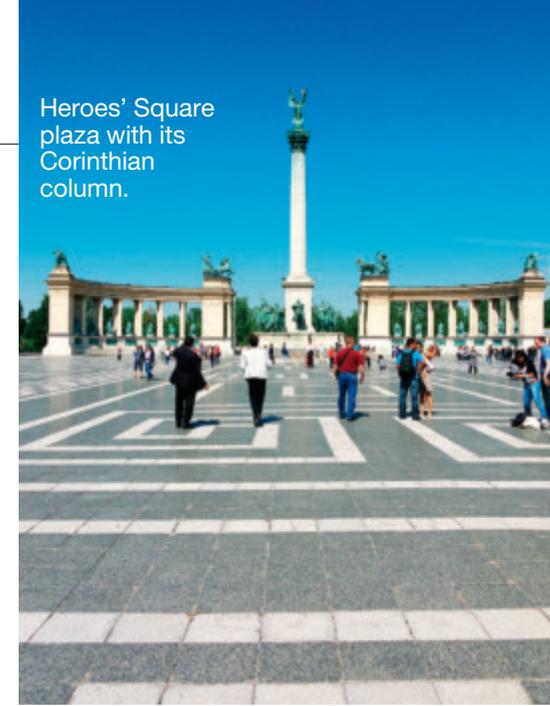




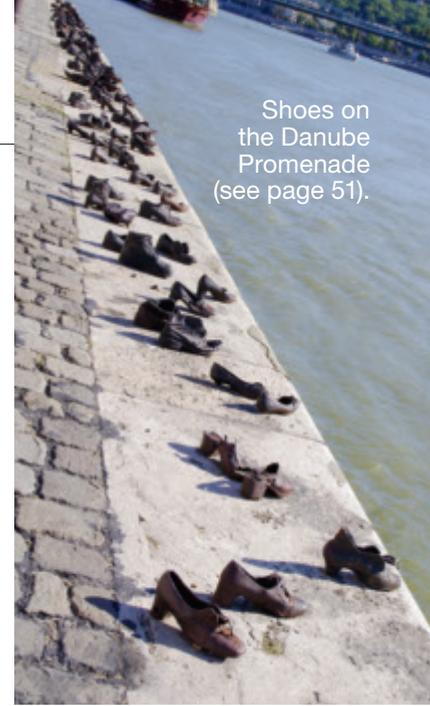
Fisherman's Bastion terrace, Budapest.



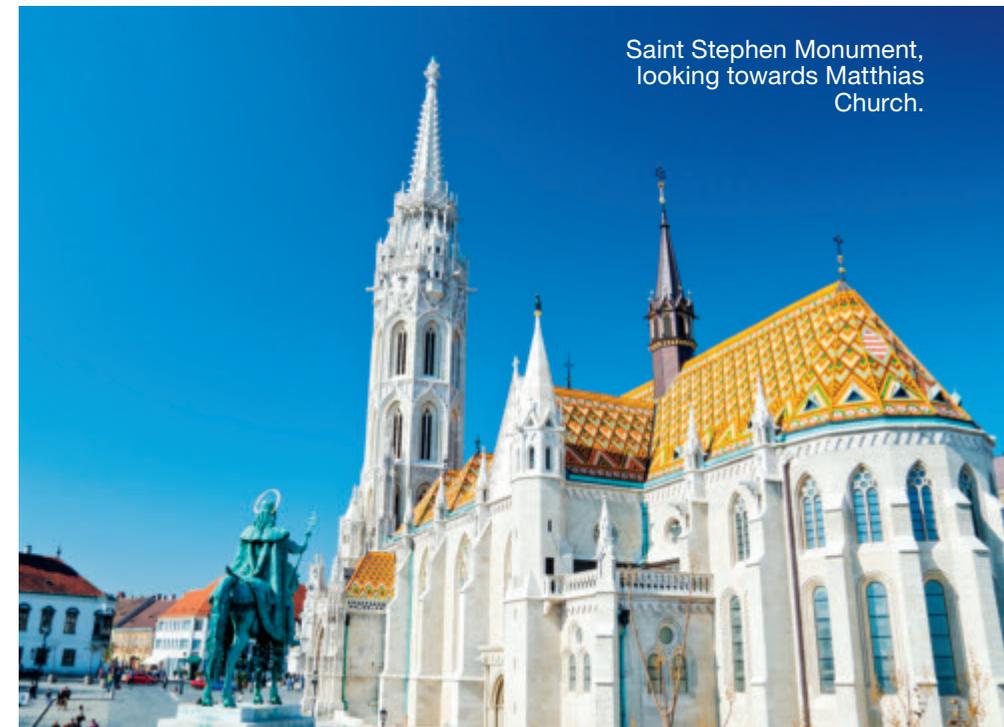
Budapest's Chain Bridge and the Houses of Parliament illuminated at night.



Heroes' Square plaza with its Corinthian column.



Shoes on the Danube Promenade (see page 51).



Saint Stephen Monument, looking towards Matthias Church.

The Danube River has been at the heart of European history for hundreds of years and inspired perhaps more music, poems, and legends than any other river. The second-longest river in Europe—only the Volga, in Russia, is longer—the Danube has been called “the most European of all rivers,” as it flows through or past 10 European countries. Our recent river cruise took us through four of those countries as we cruised west from Hungary to Germany.

Our trip began in Budapest, the fascinating Hungarian capital formed by the unification in 1873 of the cities of Buda and Óbuda, on the west bank, and Pest, on the east. We met our fellow passengers for the first time over the first of many sumptuous dinners in our ship's dining lounge. The ship accommodated just 148 passengers, and that's one of the many things we like about river cruises: fewer passengers and the chance to get to know most of them. All our tablemates at dinner that first evening were

keen on seeing more of this historic city, for few of us had visited it before.

The next day, our pre-arranged tour buses and guides showed us the highlights of Budapest. In Pest, our first stop was Heroes' Square, a large impressive plaza celebrating national heroes and freedom fighters. A towering Corinthian column at the centre honours Saint Stephen, the first king of Hungary. At its base, Prince Árpád and six other Hungarian tribal princes are powerfully depicted, larger than life, in bronze. It seemed a fitting

place to start. From here, running in a straight line for a mile and a half (2.4 kilometres), is the avenue named Andrassy, modelled after the Champs-Élysées in Paris. With its many art galleries, parks, squares, shops, and sidewalk cafés, Pest is a pleasant city to explore on foot.

Linking Buda and Pest is the historic Chain Bridge, built across the Danube (by Scottish stone masons) to link and unify the two cities. Completed in 1849, the Chain Bridge—the first of over half a dozen bridges that

now link the cities—has come to be the folk symbol of Budapest.

Across the river in Buda, our buses wound their way up Castle Hill, the oldest part of the city. Following our tour guide, we passed many tempting sidewalk cafés and shop windows filled with colourful, intricate embroidery—definitely worth a second look later from inside. To the delight of photographers, we came to Matthias Church with its colourfully tiled roof and the mounted statue of King Stephen be-

side it. However, the highlight was the spectacular view from the Fisherman's Bastion terrace out over the Danube and the city beyond. We could clearly see our ship docked between the Chain Bridge and the Parliament Building.

During free time that afternoon, we wandered along the riverbank to get a closer look at the gleaming white edifice that is one of the largest parliament buildings in Europe. The ornate neo-Gothic facade was originally based on London's Houses of Parliament, but

Photos: Lindsay Editorial (terrace); Fotolia/Artur Bogacki (bridge).

Photos: Dreamstime/Arna Todero (square and Assawin Chonjitt (church); Lindsay Editorial (shoes).



Bratislava Castle.



Rubberneck.



Main Square in Bratislava.

over the 18 years of its construction, elaborate ornamentation was added, including the intricately carved statues of 88 Hungarian princes.

Nearby, a row of shoes along the edge of the river caught our attention. These shoes, replicas from men, women, and children, are a silent, sombre monument to the Jewish people who were brought to the edge of the Danube in 1944 and 1945 by fascists, ordered to remove their shoes, and then shot, their bodies falling into the river.

After dinner, we made our way up to the sundeck for what turned out to be one of the most memorable experiences of the entire trip. On the right bank, the Houses of Parliament had been lit up, bringing the riot of sculpture and ornamentation we had seen in the daylight into a majestic play of light and shadow. High above on the left bank, the Fisherman's Bastion and Castle Hill were now bathed in a splendid sea of light. Arching between the two were the lights of the Chain Bridge.

As our ship weighed anchor, refreshing gentle evening breezes wafted across the top deck. The captain sailed our vessel the length of the lit cityscape, turned, and, as we started upstream to begin our Danube journey, gave us a second look at the splendidly lit scene around us. What a lovely way to discover why Budapest is rightly known as the Pearl of the Danube.

Slovakia

The next morning, some 150 kilometres (about 90 miles) upstream, we entered the first and largest lock on our journey.

Over 275 metres (900 feet) long and 34 metres (112 feet) wide, the Gabčíkovo lock lifted us 19 metres (62 feet) in about a half-hour. The Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Waterworks was originally conceived before 1977 as a much larger hydroelectricity-generating project involving both Hungary and Czechoslovakia. However, Hungary eventually dropped out, citing environmental concerns, and Slovakia continued on its own. The ensuing dispute between the two countries went to the International Court of Justice in The Hague and the conflict continues to this day.

We would pass through many other locks in the days and nights to come, 15 more on the Danube alone, raising our ship about 157 metres (515 feet). While we normally “locked through” singly, most of the locks on the Danube could accommodate up to four cruise ships at a time.

That afternoon, we docked in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, which is both an old and a new country. Slovakia has a long and tumultuous history of invasions and occupations and secured independence from the former Czechoslovakia as recently as 1993. As our ship docked, we could see Bratislava Castle, the hilltop fortress affectionately referred to as the upside-down table (for its four corner towers) that has become the folk symbol of the city. Naturally, it was the first place we headed.

Although its museums and galleries were closed, the fortress afforded a superb view over the historic city centre and its many fine baroque buildings. Thirty minutes later, we were

walking through a narrow ancient gate into the historic district. Lovely little squares and amusing bronze statues popped up among the shop-lined streets. A city favourite is the bronze statue of the head and shoulders of a jovially grinning hard-hat worker standing in a manhole; he's been nicknamed Rubberneck (Cumil), and it's considered good luck to rub his head. Numerous shops selling embroidery, lace, crystal, and amber made the souvenir bargain-hunters happy, with prices reportedly lower than what lay ahead in Austria and Germany.

Austria

Vienna, the Austrian treasure house of music, art, history, and architecture, was our next stop. It's been said that anyone wishing to understand Vienna needs to find out something about her history, but anyone wishing to *enjoy* Vienna needs only to open his or her eyes. Our guided city walk was through streets lined with magnificent buildings from the past. One street took us by a stable of the famous white Lipizzaner horses. Another street was filled with