

# Viking Danube Cruise

## May 2017

May 01: Emails from our upcoming European trip

Hi Friends,

We're off again on Wednesday, and the drill has become routine: drive to Vegas and fly off to somewhere distant, over an ocean or pole, sitting with knees to chest in steerage in a huge airplane and eating food we wouldn't eat at home. But it's a lot better than what people had to do to cross the globe 100 or more years ago.

This time it's to Europe to cruise the Danube, starting from Amsterdam and ending in Bucharest. We'll be aboard the Viking Aegir, and there is a nice video "Viking Longships Tour" at the bottom of <https://www.vikingrivercruises.com/ships/longships/viking-aegir.html>.

We elected to let Viking arrange our flights, which is good and bad. Good is that they're responsible for getting us there and home, so if something goes wrong we have someone to turn to. The bad is that they don't fly out of St. George, so our route is unnecessarily long: drive W to Las Vegas before flying E to Atlanta and then on to Amsterdam; we could have flown E from St. George to Denver, to Atlanta, and on for many fewer hours of travel. So it goes.

A big plus to this river trip is that we'll unpack once, live in the same room on a ship that will quickly become home, making short day trips into towns along the way. So the pace should be good, and that's become very important. I've preloaded my Kindle and have the entire BBC WWII series (12 DVDs) on my travel laptop.

A publicity photo of a Viking Longship and our itinerary are attached.

We depart Bucharest on May 26 and arrive back home on the 27th. We'll be home for another whole two weeks before heading off again, this time in our motorhome for the summer.

So look for an email Thursday evening Amsterdam Summer Time, after we board our ship and settle in. This is only Europe so I don't expect to write so much or to take so many photos.

I'm told there is free internet (surely slow) throughout the ship, so that won't be an issue. As always, we love to hear back from you — but don't return our photos. On our next trip internet will definitely be an issue, so deleting them this trip will be good practice.

- John

PS: we just today booked another cruise — aboard the Royal Clipper once again — for mid-June 2018, in the Mediterranean and Adriatic Seas, starting in Rome

and ending in Venice. Anyone want to join us? Rooms officially go on sale later this week.



*[Itinerary not included here; it will be on each day.]*

---

May 04: Hello from Amsterdam

Hi Friends,

The flights were uneventful with a short layover in Atlanta, so were grateful for no strikes, cancelled tickets, or 9-hour layover. We slept very, very poorly (sleep in a broom closet for comparison) but we'll catch up tonight, starting early. It was nice to be met in Amsterdam by uniformed people holding VIKING signs and directing us to a taxi to take us to the ship. By 3:00 we were settled in and had had a snack lunch (it included salmon!) and then went for a short walk along the Rhine. A brisk wind at 54° kept us from going far, so we can hardly say we saw Amsterdam.

My previous trip to the Netherlands was 40 years ago when I brought my bike (a custom touring cycle made in England) and peddled around the country for a month. I recall the incredible network of bike paths and the simple (crude, even) 1-speed heavy workhorse Dutch bicycles. It's still the same — I don't think I saw a derailleur or a bike with intact paint, and heavy chain guards, fenders, and luggage rack are standard. What a civilized country!

Our "Viking longship" is LONG and thin; I'm guessing the length is 12X the width. Every cabin has windows, but because we're on the lowest deck, sea level is chest high. If a duck swam by I'd be looking up at it. The cabins are very small but serviceable (the bathroom is half again the size of the one in our motor-home) and we'll be fine in ours, although I wish we had a little balcony or even full-length windows. I visualize spending most of my time in the lounge or on deck (once the sun comes out).

A big plus is that we could completely unpack our suitcases, store them under the bed, and will live out of the same room for three weeks. It's tiring moving to a new hotel each night and live out of your suitcase, so this aspect of the cruise is a luxury.

Shipboard facilities are modest: a lounge, buffet area, outdoor cafe on one deck, a restaurant on the deck below, and a sun deck above all (which we'll check out on a warmer day). I'm in the lounge (photo), my new home for the next three weeks.

Wifi is strong, free, and available throughout the ship — at least docked in Amsterdam. We're told that that will not be the case when we're away from a city, and especially in remote stretches in Serbia, for example.

Dinner was five stars, and with open seating we expect to meet new friends each night.

We "sail" at midnight. Windmills tomorrow.

- John

### Photos

Me writing to you in the Lounge. That's my fifth cup of coffee. You can't make out the Rhine in the background.

Bicycles along the Rhine.

Our route.





May 05: Windmills of Kinderdijk

*[This morning we sail to Kinderdijk, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, for a tour of this ingenious network of windmills and other flood management devices. You learn why the windmills were built and see how they work, plus you enter a working windmill for a tour of its mechanisms and living quarters. Return aboard for lunch and an enjoyable afternoon of Dutch diversions: sample handcrafted Dutch cheeses and jenever, a distilled juniper liquor, and try your hand at sjoelen (Dutch table shuffleboard). We cruise through the night.]*

Hi Friends,

[I'll begin each day with the official itinerary.]

We awoke at 6:30 local time — 11:30 pm the night before back home in St. George — when our room became lit thru our basement windows. We have to tell ourselves it's morning, not almost midnight, and get on with the day. I've become pretty good at fooling myself and changing timezones. The ship is heading up-river, but there's little vibration and no sense of motion. And we can't see any motion unless we stand up to look out our basement window. My childhood home in Detroit had a finished basement, with little basement windows at ground level, and you had to stand on a step stool to look out; this reminds me of that.

But the lounge has floor to ceiling windows (and tea and coffee) and expansive views. The river we were on was lined with a flood wall so we mostly saw that, but beyond we glimpsed villages and church steeples — and the odd windmill. We saw over the wall from the lounge, but we'll get the best view from the sun deck, but not until it warms up. Once we hit the Rhine we could see farther.

Beside the ultra-limited view, our room is too small. There's one foot of space around the bed and a narrow shelf to put things on running the length of the room. It was the only room available when we booked it but I wish I'd booked earlier or done this trip another time when a better room was available. It's not comfortable to be in, and I think I know why the lounge is full.

Our morning stop today was to see windmills. Actually we spent most of the 90 minutes in the gift shop and workshop and 10 minutes inside the actual windmill, but it was interesting. I thought windmills were primarily to grind grain, but here they drained the low polders, the fields which are roughly 6 feet below sea level. If they weren't drained, rainwater would flood them because there is nowhere for the water to drain to, so they have to pump it up and out to rivers that drain to the sea to keep from drowning. These particular windmills were built in 1738 and they're now a UNESCO site. I was impressed by the massive-ness of the wood gears and the main vertical drive shaft. We were issued little audio devices so everyone could hear our guide properly.

It was not quite 50° with a light wind and everyone was bundled up. This is as cold as a cold winter day in Borrego Springs. What the heck!

Then we had the rest of the day aboard ship to do not much (eat and then eat again), so except for a nap we were in the lounge watching the riverbank slowly pass by. The scenery alternates between pastoral and industrial. Barbara has been bird watching with binoculars. A negative of being in the lounge is that some people use their outside voice inside and it easily get too noisy to enjoy being there.

We're the typical age aboard. There's three couples perhaps 40 but everyone else looks retired. It's not a spry crowd. It is a well-traveled crowd, so a popular topic is places you've visited. We're picking up travel tips. And we can hold our own in the "where have you been" category.

Breakfast and lunch are buffet and dinner either buffet or off a menu, and it's all open seating. On our Norwegian cruise everyone was assigned a table and we felt lucky to be assigned a table with an interesting couple to talk to, but it was the same interesting couple the entire trip. This is infinitely better; we sit with different people each meal, and so far everyone is friendly and happy to chat. Dinner included caviar and chateaubriand and met our expectations.

- John

### Photos

Our room-ette (cabin) facing the high window. The long ledge at left is very useful.

Our cabin facing the door with the bathroom-ette to the left.

Our ship (not a keeper but it's the only shot I have so far). The large dark area toward the bow (left) are the floor to ceiling windows in the restaurant and lounge. No one is on the upper "sun" deck.

Windmills. I needed a fish-eye, which I don't have, to take photos inside.





*May 06: Friends in Cologne*

*[You have a morning tour of Cologne, including a visit to the Dom, Germany's largest cathedral and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. After your tour, spend the rest of the day and evening exploring Cologne on your own: There are Roman ruins, interesting neighborhoods and wonderful museums like the Fragrance Museum and the Chocolate Museum. As always, your Program Director can help you plan your free time. We depart at midnight.]*

Hi Friends,

We began the morning with a guided tour of downtown Cologne. Our group was a manageable size (about 15), the communication devices really work (we don't have to gather close to hear), and our guide was funny and informative, so it was a good use of two hours. We saw the cathedral, which was built at an average rate of 9 inches a year for 600 years (a creative use of statistics). It's dirty on the outside (this is an industrial town) and relatively undecorated on the inside (contrast with a Spanish cathedral for the other extreme), but huge and wholly impressive. My favorite was the tomb of the Three Wise Men. Now, I've written quite a bit about the Star of Bethlehem and the Wise Men, so I have an idea of what we know and more importantly don't know about them, and I wish I could say I was in awe of the honor of standing in front of their tomb (which, by the way, is a resplendent gold monument), but that would be "an alternative fact". Let me say it reminded me of when my young son Jack and I were in the Tyrolean Alps in search of the grave of Pinocchio, and leave it at that. (Sadly Pinocchio's wooden bones still lie in an unknown grave awaiting discovery by future archaeologists.)

The tour ended in a shopping district in "old town" downtown. Barbara most definitely didn't like the crowds and because Cologne was flattened by the Royal Air Force during their dispute with the Third Reich, it doesn't look very historic. But it was nice to be out on a sunny day; the temperature reached 70°.

At lunch we met my best friend from high school and his wife. Herr Doktor Hortmann (who is on this mailing list) was an exchange student from Germany in our senior year ('64-'65). I was flattered that even though he's a dozen times smarter than I am, he found me interesting enough to pal around with. At one time we thought of going into the slide rule export-import business, which gives you an idea! Apparently we anchored the ultra-nerdy end of the social scale. Anyway, we had a bratwurst/sauerbraten lunch and spent the afternoon together. Michael arranged for me to purchase a SIM card for my iPhone so I can make phone calls and access the internet when we're off the ship for a modest fee as opposed to what Verizon would extort, and I'm glad to have that. We see each other an average of once every few years so I appreciate that they drove to Cologne to meet our ship so we could spend an afternoon together.

The evening ended with a wonderful classical music performance (piano, and violin wandering among the audience) in the lounge as the sun set behind the Cologne cathedral across the Rhine as seen from our longship.

- John

Photos:

The Cologne cathedral on the far bank of the Rhine. Note the steeply pitched roofs at left, very common in Germany.

The interior of the cathedral. If you enlarge the photo you can see a gold casket at the far end.

That gold casket contains the mortal remains of The Three Wise Men — we're told. At one time pilgrims came from all over the known world to marvel at it. Herr Hortmann chatting with Ms Foster over a bratwurst.







.....

May 07 (Sun): Rain on the Rhine

*[Cruise past hilltop castles along the Rhine, stopping in Koblenz to visit Marksburg Castle, the only Rhine fortress never destroyed. After your tour, continue cruising this stunning stretch of the Rhine, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Pass the Lorelei Rock, which marks the river's narrowest point and is named after the legendary Rhine maiden who lured sailors to their demise. Lunch and dinner are served aboard your ship.]*

Hi Friends,

There was no internet service last night, so our connection varies unpredictably from slow but adequate to none at all. Yesterday's email went out when we awoke at 6:30 this morning.

Yesterday's beautiful weather with sunshine at 70° was an anomaly. This morning we awoke to drizzle and 50°, so that determined my day: catch up on Facebook and start an ebook while watching the scenery drift by. Barbara braved the weather to tour Marksburg Castle and stayed dry between light showers. Things that caught her eye were overly-decorative metal door bolts, drainage channels that led directly outside (minimal sanitation), and intricate patterns of roofing tiles.

Between lunch and dinner we cruised the Rhine Gorge, so we looked up to see the scenery, just like from our cabin! The shore was mostly greenery punctuated by the occasional traditional small village and rare small Industrial area. The local economy is based on wine (Rhine wine!) and tourism — both good

activities. The Gorge is 300-600 feet deep with steep sides that are forested or were cleared for grape vines.

Drizzle was intermittent all day with a high of 57° and fog, so it was not a day for photography. We passed several dozen castles, some surprisingly high up the hillside, and a dozen small towns that escaped Allied bombing and retain their old timbered houses and stone churches intact. I began another book by Yuval Herari, "Homo Deus," recommended by my friend Herr Hortmann; like the first, it's slow going because I have to stop and mull it over every few pages.

The food is great and I don't know how to develop a strategy to not over-eat. This morning I determined to have only muesli with fruit, like I usually do at home, but the smoked fish, sausages, flavored fried potatoes, and fresh-baked rolls lured me away. There will be time enough for muesli when we return home. My favorite dinner appetizer so far is two types of caviar atop smoked salmon and cream cheese. I must see if Costco carries that. There is unlimited complimentary wine (not 2-Buck Chuck) with dinner (can't turn that down!) and we have vouchers for more whisky and scotch than I'm likely to drink after dinner (but I'll give it a go). The last two nights we ate in the cafe upstairs which has great food although a more limited selection, but in the main dining room it is too loud to think, let alone talk, and we appreciate the quiet and the chance to converse normally with our table-mates.

We left the Rhine at dinner time and entered the Main, which is narrow and has a series of locks. And we're back in flat country.

- John

Photos:

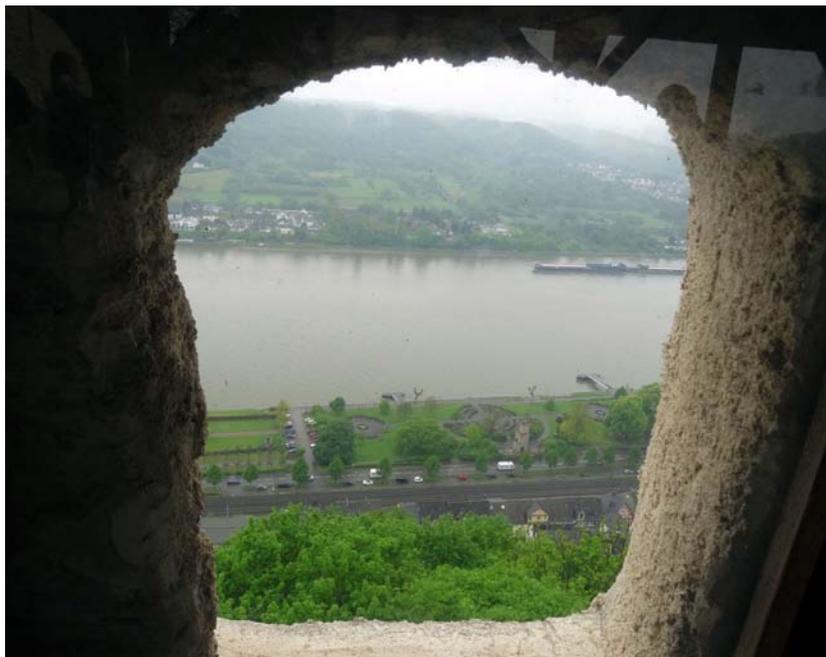
View along the Rhine in a break in the rain before entering the Gorge.

Marksburg Castle from the Rhine.

Ornate door dead bolt in Marksburg Castle. Barbara couldn't figure out how much of the complexity was decorative vs. functional.

View of the Rhine valley out a gun port. The Danube may (or may not) be Blue, but the Rhine is brown.





May 08: Miltenberg on the Main

*[The morning is spent sailing along the beautiful Main River as it winds its way through the Spessart region, home of the actual Snow White. After lunch, we stop in Miltenberg, known for its half-timbered houses and Germany's oldest inn. Join our walking tour that concludes with free time for you to explore. Back on your ship, learn about the region's glassblowing traditions during a live demonstration. We sail through the night to Wurzburg.]*

Hi Friends,

Until mid-afternoon we sailed nonstop up the Main, passing through a lock every other hour, watching the scenery pass by. Mostly we saw forested or park-like riverbanks and occasionally a small town. I'm always impressed by the way Germans cluster their houses into compact settlements and leave the space between them open, as opposed to our custom of building continuously along the roads so there is little open space; they do it better, in my opinion. And with few exceptions Americans haven't built with bricks for more than half a century, but brick houses are common here, although they may be more than half a century old.

We passed several campgrounds, and since we spend half the year in a campground (actually resort) these were of more than passing interest — as they passed by. We have no idea how these riverside RV parks compare with others inland, but the main difference we noted is that most campers have a permanent (or semi-permanent?) tent porch attached, which at least doubles the living space. We would just put out lawn chairs on a plastic pad, but we can believe the weather here requires something with walls, windows, and a door. We didn't see recreation facilities, like a swimming pool. And of course the "caravans" are smaller than what we have back home. But we shouldn't draw conclusions or generalize from such brief "sail-bys".

Meanwhile I'm making good progress in my book by Herari — and annoying Barbara by reading to her from it while she's trying to read her own book.

In the late afternoon we stopped at the charming small town Miltenberg, and took the 90-minute walking tour down the cobbled main street. It looks just like a classical German town should. Much of it was destroyed in the 30 Years War and rebuilt from the 1650s on, so it's quite charming.

I wanted to ask at the Tourist Bureau for directions to Snow White's grave, but Barbara wouldn't let me.

Now we sail on through the night.

- John

PS — everyone should have emails dated May 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, and now 8. I plan to send one a day. Internet aboard our ship can be very erratic. I'm compressing the photos 5X more.

Photos:

Entering a lock. There's only about 18 inches of clearance on each side of our 443-foot boat, so there's much speculation on how the captain manages to miss scraping the walls, but he does. Or has so far.

A Campingplatz on the Main. Enlarge for the best view. It looks like campers, or at least the attached auxiliary rooms, may remain there permanently.

View off the bow as we head upstream through rolling country. No one is outside on such a gray day.

View out our basement window #1: I said we look up at ducks, and so we do — or would if they were closer.

View out our basement window #2: a village. Here the flood wall along the river isn't so high, so we can see the buildings.

Street scene in Miltenberg. Note that everyone is wearing coats (Barbara is in red at left).

I love German bakeries and wish I could buy one of each item to take home.









May 09: Würzburg

*[After breakfast, tour Würzburg's Bishops' Residenz, one of Germany's largest and most ornate baroque palaces and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Then enjoy scenic afternoon cruising. Or, instead of touring Würzburg, join an optional full-day journey along Germany's "Romantic Road" to Rothenburg, which features a turreted city wall and impressive Gothic and baroque architecture. Rejoin your ship for dinner.]*

Hi Friends,

We elected to remain on board with almost a dozen other folk who didn't take either of the two organized tours. We have no interest in an ornate baroque palace or a long drive, and instead enjoyed an eerily quiet lounge where we could read and gaze out the window at the scenery passing close by. The Main is at places only a few hundred feet wide and there I could easily have tossed a coin to shore. Mostly we passed by gently rolling farmland punctuated by the occasional village. Barbara had out binoculars, searching for birds (ducks, geese, and LGBs).

We pass under many low bridges with only a foot or two of clearance. The Sun Deck (also called the Fog Deck and the Rain Deck) has been cleared of all furniture and even the railings folded flat so they don't get scraped off, and the Deck is closed for four days until we reach the Danube. Maybe by then we'll see the sun; with a high of 52° today this would be a chilly mid-winter day in Borrego Springs, but we were prepared with sweaters and windbreaker / jacket. The sun came out briefly so that's a hopeful sign.

We see virtually no rooftop solar panels and no rooftop solar water heaters. Don't know why not.

After lunch we window-shopped along the main shopping streets of Würzburg. Würzburg was obliterated on the night of March 16, 1945, by the Royal Air Force, so the buildings are modern and it's not a quaint or even especially interesting city, but we enjoyed getting out and there are always interesting things to see — including such exotic world-famous shops as Subway, McDonalds (2), Dunkin Donuts, Starbucks, but no Taco Bell.

Nothing much else to report. The sky cleared after sunset!

- John

[Mike Rath points out a new essay by the historian I'm enjoying so much; it gives the flavor of his writing:

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/08/virtual-reality-religion-robots-sapiens-book> ]

Photos:

A typical scene out the window where farmland meets a village.

This is why there are locks — there used to be falls that were unnavigable. In Würzburg they still exist but are controlled. There are no old buildings along the riverfront (or anywhere else).

Barbara couldn't pass us the Euro Store — "Alles für ein euro". This is where she can get serious about shopping.

A Muesli Shop — what an idea. It fits right in alongside the butcher and baker ... and muesli maker. There were all kinds of muesli inside. I should have brought an empty spare suitcase.

We don't know what this is about. Some strange German custom, perhaps. They're doing road construction in front.

We had a glimpse of the "Sun Deck" of our ship where everything is flattened down, including chairs, railings, and the canopy, to clear low bridges.







---

May 10: Bamberg

*[Sail through the morning; after lunch we visit Bamberg, with its medieval city center, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Your walking tour includes a visit to the magnificent 11th-century cathedral, reworked in late Romanesque style in the 13th century, and the picturesque city hall built on a tiny island in the middle of a river. Take some free time to enjoy Bamberg and perhaps try some of the town's distinctive smoke flavored beer before returning aboard.]*

Hi Friends,

[Compressing photos really helps! I can send 6 very-compressed photos in 4 minutes vs. 4 semi-compressed photos in 25 minutes (if they go at all). And the quality loss is quite minor. So now I have to take more pictures.]

The sun is out! We didn't know it did that in Germany. It's still a bit chilly (high of 60°) but I'm looking forward to switching to shorts tomorrow.

All morning we continued up the Main, which in this stretch is no more than 200 feet wide, so we were often only 30 feet from shore. Other than the occasional village or field the bank is lined with greenery, so Barbara watched for birds with binoculars and bird book. It was very comfortable and relaxing.

After lunch we took the 90-minute guided walking tour of Bamberg. Bamberg has never been destroyed in a war, so the buildings are old and the streets downtown are crooked and narrow. They have rebuilt continuously so little is truly ancient, but it was a pleasant walk to walk around without being bundled up. We hit the shopping district after the tour and Barbara found the local ein euro store, but no souvenirs today. For the first time I used a trekking pole (walking

stick) when there was nothing especially tricky about the surface because we were starting and stopping so often. I'm getting gold quicker than expected.

The town has an extensive network of bike lanes separated from car traffic and pedestrians, and we saw a lot of cyclists. It looks so civilized! But the town is more compact than American towns so cycling works better. We occasionally see an electric bike and saw one electric bike shop.

We were warned off the "smoked" beer by our guide.

We sailed onward once again at dinner-time. Nuremberg tomorrow and then the Danube.

- John

Photos:

Postcard scene along one of the rivers (not the Main) in Bamberg. We're told these houses mostly date from the 1700s.

Graffiti (done with a stencil). I understand they're no longer welcome in the USA.

A "stumble stone" — a brass marker in the sidewalk to commemorate the place where a person, often Jewish, was killed or deported during World War II. On this spot a French soldier was shot for trying to escape on March 23, 1944. Enlarge to read.





.....

May 11: Nuremberg – and a Problem

*[After breakfast, disembark in Nuremberg and visit the ruins of Zeppelin Field, the Nazi parade grounds of the 1930s; then see the Palace of Justice, site of the infamous Nuremberg Trials. Spend free time exploring Nuremberg's Old Town, or*

*join an optional World War II tour that includes the illuminating Documentation Center Museum. We depart just before dinner.]*

Hi Friends,

This morning we took the Nuremberg 90-minute walking tour. Although the official schedule says we “visit the ruins ...” it was a drive-by; the bus slowed as we passed the Field and the Palace. That’s not my definition of “visit” but I’ve been here before, so it wasn’t a bitter disappointment. (If I hadn’t been it would have, and others were.) Then to the Castle on the hill, the least unique part of town (name a German town that doesn’t have a castle), but we got a good view, and then walked down to the main square where we were released for an hour free time to shop. I really like Nuremberg — or at least the main square and adjacent shopping district — but an hour was enough.

I should have taken the optional WWII tour. Next time.

Then all 190 of us to lunch of the super-delicious local sausages in a medieval restaurant (reconstructed after the Ninth Air Force was finished with the place, I’m sure). But quite nice. A local beer with lunch was a nice touch.

Now the problem: the Main-Danube Canal, which is part of our route, is flooded because of too much rain, and the Viking longships won’t fit under some of the bridges. So we can’t go on. Fortunately Viking has run into this before and they have a solution — we swapped ships with a group traveling north that couldn’t fit under the same bridges. These sister ships are identical so this is possible and actually easy. We were bussed to their ship to continue the journey south while they were bussed to our ship to continue their journey north, and everyone is happy. We had our suitcases outside our door of the Aegir when we went to breakfast, and they were in our room in the Embla when we finished Nuremberg. We’re in the corresponding room and all is the same, once we unpacked.

Other than having to pack and unpack (not a big problem), we traded a free afternoon in Nuremberg for a 3-hour bus ride, and that was as “comfortable” as a 3-hour plane ride (same legroom, but a better view out the window). And we missed sailing the Canal, which definitely would have been interesting. So it goes. But we’re back on schedule with admittedly minor inconvenience.

So we arrived at our “new” ship the Embla on the Danube at 6:00, and immediately began steaming upstream (we’ve been going downstream) to our night’s destination, Regensburg. We’ll be on the Danube the next two weeks.

To other matters ...

Germany is a wealthy country and I’m continually impressed with its prosperity and cleanliness. St. George is similar (a big part of the reason we picked it), but too much of the USA is not.

I saw quite a few solar panels out the window this afternoon, so they are more numerous than I originally thought.

I’ve really had it with these 2-hour dinners. The plus is that we have interesting company who we enjoy talking to (or trying to) and the food is

usually excellent beyond belief. The negative is the slowness and the incredible noise from 180 people in one room trying to talk over each other. To duplicate our dinner, find some superb food and wine and take two full hours to eat it — space courses 40 minutes apart, no cheating — and crank up the sound so you can't talk to the person next to you without shouting. I'm ready to buy a sandwich in town and munch it in our room for dinner — but we don't even have a chair in our room-ette. Several times we've left before the desert we ordered was served just to escape.

Wifi on Viking ships is often a concept, not a reality. One needs to be patient to connect.

Enough for now. I'm in the lounge after dinner which has become crowded, and half the people are using their outside voices inside so i can no longer think. I really, really wish we had a room with a tiny balcony because that's where I'd be, instead of here with all these drunks.

- John

Photos:

Nuremberg from the castle. It all dates from about 1950.

A "Coffee Bike". I'm impressed.

Buying lebkuchen — the local specialty — in a lebkuchen store. It's a wonderful desert, similar to gingerbread.

Our new ship on the Danube as we approach it in our bus from Nuremberg. Note that the top deck is folded down.







.....

May 12: Regensburg

*[Arrive in Regensburg midday. After lunch, tour this wonderfully preserved medieval city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, including structures dating back to Roman times. Discover many 13th- and 14th-century patrician houses and see the splendid St. Peter's Cathedral. During free time, visit the Alte Würstküche (Old Sausage Kitchen), Germany's oldest restaurant. Dinner is served aboard before our evening departure.]*

Hi Friends,

We docked in Regensburg early this morning and are back on schedule, and on the Danube.

I forgot to mention something important yesterday: the sky was blue, the sun came out, and it was warm! 70°, so I was in shorts for the first time, and just a short-sleeve shirt. So today it's a bit cooler and cloudy to remind us that the sun isn't a regular here. We missed the one rainstorm that soaked others of our group while we had lunch.

We took a guided walking tour of downtown this morning. The city was never destroyed and is considered the best example of a medieval city. The existing buildings date from the 1200s but look half that age because it was fashionable several centuries ago to cover the timber frames with plaster and modernize their appearance. Streets are narrow and twisting, so it was a nice walk. A few highlights are in the photos below. We returned after lunch to complete the downtown tour on our own, and Barbara bought amber earrings.

I'll let the many pictures carry it from here.

We are now heading down the Danube.

- John

## Photos

The city was founded as a Roman fort in the 2nd century and this is part of the original defensive wall.

Typical street scenes (2). The unplastered tower in the second was built around 1250 and some of the buildings on either side are the same age although they definitely don't look it.

Otto Schindler lived here.

Kepler lived — and died — here. It's now a museum, closed weekdays (today is Friday).

A local speciality — and an easy-to-pass-up souvenir.

Fashion display in a department store - lederhosen. Did I mention we're in Bavaria?









.....

May 13: Leaving Germany

*[Arrive this morning in Passau, at the confluence of the Inn, Ilz and Danube Rivers. Your guided walk along the town's narrow streets takes you through Old Town and past traditional patrician houses. You'll see the New Bishop's Residence and visit the impressive baroque St. Stephen's Cathedral with its ornate interior. Inside, you are treated to a special concert played on the 17,000-pipe organ, considered Europe's largest church organ. Enjoy lunch aboard your ship, and return to the city for further exploration on your own before departing. We cruise through the night.]*

Hi Friends,

We took another guided walking tour, this time of Passau, but the old German towns we're visiting are beginning to all look alike, and we took only one photo on our short walk and didn't linger long. The town was leveled by a fire in 1662 and was rebuilt on the original foundations, so streets are narrow and twisted from the Middle Ages and the buildings date from the late 1600s.

The "highlight" of the morning was a 30-minute organ concert in the garishly over-decorated cathedral. To us it seemed like random organ music, discordant at times, and it was entirely forgettable. I once heard Bach's Tocatta and Fugue on the Canterbury Cathedral organ, and it was wunderbar, but this left our minds drifting. Apparently we're uncultured.

Lunch included smoked salmon and cheese quesadillas. I must make these at home! And we've been eating dinner at the Terrace cafe instead of the main

dining room since my rant; faster, infinitely quieter, a better view, but small menu choice (take it or leave it, but good).

Great news — they resurrected the top deck! We're past the low bridges, so they set up the long canopy, tables, and deck chairs, so that's where we plan to spend much of the rest of the trip. The few people up there were wrapped in blankets the crew provided (the high today was only 64°) but warmer weather is imminent. We took the afternoon off from walking around a medieval town to enjoy the upper deck and then (when we got too cold) the lounge. It was OK to just read a book while taking in the view.

We set sail before dinner, quickly leaving Germany and entering Austria as we continue down the Danube. BTW, the Danube is no more blue than my foot — it's coffee brown (the Danube, not so much my foot).

Tomorrow some typical shots of the Danube as we glide past forests and villages.

- John

Photos:

Passau street scene. Note the gummy bear store at left. We've gotten used to cobblestone streets — aren't they all? This is the widest street; many are too narrow for a car.

Inside the baroque cathedral, which is overdecorated X 10e4 with few windows.

Not my style at all. This is a composite of 3 photos so you can enlarge it to see the endless gaudy and tasteless decorations.

Barbara reading something on her iPad on the upper deck; the new part of town lies on the far shore of the Danube opposite Old Town.

I've wanted to get a shot of the stern of a barge for some time and finally got two. Barges are hundreds of feet long and very narrow (to fit the locks), and there are hundreds, probably thousands, of them hauling all sorts of cargo. At the stern is a little house with curtains in the windows and maybe some flower pots, and usually a car — sometimes two — on the roof. We're not sure how they get the car off — a ramp or crane?







---

May 14: A Monastery in Austria

*[After breakfast, visit the abbey at Melk, a 900-year-old Benedictine monastery featuring Austria's finest Italian baroque architecture. Rejoin your ship; cruise through the spectacular Wachau Valley this afternoon. Before dinner, you have time to explore the time-honored town of Krems and see the Steiner Tor, the last remaining city gate, or sample some local vintages from this famous wine-producing region.]*

Hi Friends,

I was a good boy this morning, and so as to not over-eat had only muesli for breakfast — no sausage, no salmon, no pastries — but that's the last time. The ship's muesli is excellent but the sausage etc. is better. Good intentions ...

I'm not fond of baroque architecture, and in fact I think it's horribly ugly, but this morning's tour of the monastery was OK. The building is actually a palace from the 1700s. A few dozen monks live in one wing and another is a school, and another is a museum. The monks teach school and work the large land holdings that have been given to the monastery. And they brew a brandy; I purchased a small bottle as we exited through the gift shop to support their noble endeavors. A highlight of the good museum was a large celestial globe from 1688, but poorly lit so it was hard to see well.

The sky was clear this morning, so after our tour I changed into shorts — and then it clouded up, cooled off, and drizzled all afternoon. So no sun deck, which we both were looking forward to enjoying as we continued down the Danube. And back to long pants.

It was pleasant to watch the scenery drift by — mostly forest with an occasional village. I understand that there's a bike path the length of the Danube

and at one time it would have been my dream to cycle it. Now I'm happy to know that others enjoy it.

Our second stop of the day was the town Krems and Barbara walked in for a look-see, but being Sunday everything was closed. The consensus was that there was too little to see to bother. I continued with my excellent book.

Dinner was "Austrian Sampler" and it included sausage, dumplings, schnitzel, sauerkraut, dark bread, local beer, etc., and chocolate cake. Quite good.

Tomorrow Vienna — maybe in the rain.

- John

Photos:

The monastery from the largest interior courtyard. We were so hopeful with that wonderful Utah-blue sky ...

View of the village of Merk from the monastery. We walked through the tourist town on the way back to the ship.

A typical view along the Danube. Mostly it's unbroken forests.





.....

May 15: Vienna

*[Today we tour the Austrian capital of Vienna. Ride along the Ringstrasse, which replaced the city walls in the mid-19th century. See some of the city's baroque architecture, including the world-famous Opera House, St. Stephan's Cathedral and Hofburg Palace. Return to your ship for lunch. The rest of the day is yours to further explore. As always, your Program Director can help you plan your free time. Or you may take an optional tour to Schönbrunn Palace, the "Versailles of Vienna," erected in 1778 and graced by a number of formal gardens, Grecian statuary, the world's oldest zoo and Roman ruins. After dinner, relax or enjoy an optional classical concert.]*

Hello Friends,

We walked our feet off in Vienna today (6 hours on them minus lunch) and earned a rest before dinner.

We docked at 6, and after breakfast took the guided tour. One hour was on a bus, passing historic buildings, followed by a 45-minute guided walking tour downtown. We saw the Opera House, the stables where they keep the Lippizan horses, a half-dozen palaces, a bunch of churches and one cathedral, the home of the Vienna Boys Choir, etc. I don't like to seem so negative — as if we don't appreciate where we are and how fortunate we are to be able to travel so — but Vienna isn't my town. I'll admit there is a unifying architectural theme that works and its all very classical and up-scale, but its over-decorated for my tastes which obviously are rather plebeian. We did enjoy sightseeing, and now that we've seen Vienna we don't need to see it again. But I would agree that it's probably a terrific place to live.

After our tour we walked to the Natural History Museum specifically to see the original Venus of Willendorf, which was discovered nearby a century ago. It's

the treasure of the museum, but the huge anthropology hall was wonderful and we slowly wandered through it. I really like how they took a classical building and put modern sensible exhibits in it. We followed the story from when we branched off the early apes to the bronze age. Well done! Then a half-hour in the meteorite hall — the greatest collection of meteorites I've seen anywhere, including many famous historic pieces and some important pieces I've never seen before. Again, very well done. After two hours of intense study we were museumed-out ...

... so we walked back 3.5 miles through town to our ship with a stop for lunch (and to rest our tired feet), arriving at our ship at 4:15, minutes before a brief rainstorm. We're happy to take the rest of the day off. Many of the passengers dressed up to attend a Mozart/Strauss concert or hear the Vienna Boys Choir, but we're too lowbrow for that and enjoyed a quiet evening reading in the lounge after a long dinner.

Impressions:

We're told there are 1,000 miles of bike lanes and bike paths within the city limits, and I believe it — there is a network separate from sidewalks and roads except on the narrow lanes downtown where there isn't room for even a sidewalk and then bikes go in the streets. There are also thousands of bikes you can borrow — the first hour is free — and drop off when you're through. Plus streetcars, busses, and a metro for a wonderful public transportation system. All very civilized.

The Viennese seem to really like their old royalty and we're heard about Maria Theresa and Franz Joseph ad nauseam on our tour. They seem overly-nostalgic for a golden past. But I'm just a visitor so what do I know. But it did seem a bit pathological.

We remain in Vienna tomorrow — and we have no idea what to do.

- John

Photos:

Barbara photographing the Venus of Willendorf. It was a pleasure to meet her. Venus from the back (her backside) for variety. She's 4.5 inches tall and 29,500 years old.

An exhibit in the Natural History Museum: a Cross-Magnon man hunts with an atlatl while Neanderthals crouch behind. The exhibits were up-to-date as of earlier this year. Sorry about the spotlights!

Three views of downtown Vienna. The architecture is highly uniform. Barbara appears in two.

A bike path between the pedestrian sidewalk and the street. This is the way it is on *all* streets in Vienna — a wonderful idea.







.....

May 16: Vienna #2

*[Enjoy a day at leisure in Vienna. Perhaps see an unrivaled collection of Old Masters and other spectacular art treasures at the Museum of Fine Arts, or visit the Albertina, with the most valuable graphic arts collection in the world. Maybe ride the Riesenrad, the world's oldest Ferris wheel, or go shopping for high-quality gifts inspired by the turn-of-the-century arts movement. A cup of coffee or tea and a slice of exquisite s achertorte are a must for any afternoon in Vienna. Later, rejoin your ship and sail for Budapest.]*

Hi Friends,

This is our second day in Vienna, and we basically took the day off. We walked a short distance through a residential district near our pier, and then spent the afternoon on the ship. We've seen enough museums in the last three years to not feel the need to go far out of our way to see more, and there are others still ahead on this trip. The optional activities were a choice between a tour of a palace or a ballroom dancing class (barf to both), but I figure we paid a lot to enjoy our ship and should do that.

Our morning wandering included Turkish and Austrian grocery stores. I'd rather visit a local grocery store than tour a palace — the palace means not much to me (none of my ancestors lived in one) but grocery stores are something I can relate to, and they tell me about contemporary life. I liked the bread selection, and I was astonished to see that prices for liquor (Jagermeister, Johnny Walker) were less than at CostCo back home.

There's a grocery store on every block because we were in a high-density apartment area. Two street scenes are attached. This is about 2-3 miles from downtown.

It was barely warm enough to enjoy the upper sun deck without a blanket, so we did. I'd imagined spending quite a bit of time up there but this was the first time we actually sat down with a book. The view was of the panorama, below.

Just before dinner we "set sail" down the Danube and left Vienna behind. We spent well over an hour up front watching the scenery (mostly forest) pass by. The river has gotten rather wide. While we sleep tonight we enter Hungary. This next week in eastern Europe should be the most interesting because it will be the most different.

To clarify my thoughts on Vienna, my objection is the palatial architecture which I don't find warm or welcoming, but it is unifying. Other than that it seems like a great city with much to recommend it. And once you're out of the central area it's like any other European city (as seen from our ship).

- John

Photos:

Bread in a grocery store — I wish we could find this dense stuff back home.

There's also a selection of more conventional white bread (but nothing as extreme as Wonder Bread). For breakfast aboard ship I've switched from muesli (that idea didn't last long) or eggs & sausage to the local dense dark bread with cheese and sliced meat — an open-face sandwich.

Street scenes. There is a uniform height to the buildings. In the first one I'm standing in the bike lane. In the second you can see the bike lane across the street, between the driving and parking lanes. If the two photos look similar that's because the neighborhoods are all cut from the same mold.

The view across the Danube away from downtown, where the architecture is varied and modern. The tall building does have a wavy right side — that's not the camera.







---

May 17: Budapest #1

*[The Danube River divides Hungary's capital city into the once separate towns of Buda and Pest. Explore both sides, starting with Pest's National Opera House and historic Heroes' Square. In Buda, walk along Castle Hill to Fishermen's Bastion and Matthias Church. Enjoy lunch aboard your ship, with the rest of the day to explore on your own. Return to your ship for a traditional Hungarian dinner.]*

Hi Friends,

Last night after I sent my email we crossed into Slovakia, and I could see city lights out the window as I read "Home Deus". We didn't stop, crossing into Hungary while we were asleep, so I won't claim to have been in Slovakia. We have quite a few countries to visit this next week.

This is the last day of the trip — for most of the people on the ship. We were surprised to learn that most people signed up for two weeks, Amsterdam to Budapest, and they were equally surprised that they could have signed up for three weeks ending in Bucharest. So tomorrow morning most of our new friends depart and new folk join us.

So we awoke in Budapest, where we'll spend today and until dinner tomorrow. BTW, they get upset if you pronounce it with an "s"; say "Budapesht". We're anchored in Pes(h)t with a dynamite view of Buda across the Danube.

After breakfast we took a 3.5-hour bus and walking tour that included monuments and the church next to the palace on the hill plus a drive through town. I'm still puzzling over why I reacted so negatively to Vienna, and I think it was the uniformity of architecture I don't care for. Here it is much more varied, although mostly classical (mostly rebuilt after WWII) and I appreciate the lack of strict regimentation. It's really a pretty upscale city, and like all the other cities we've visited on this trip it seems much more livable than a comparable-size US city (although you would have to live in an apartment). I like the trams, network of bike lanes, and overall cleanliness and prosperity. Europe seems so ... civilized.

After lunch I took a walk through a downtown shopping district while Barbara took an optional tour: food shopping at a huge indoor market followed by instruction in making crepes. She sampled a variety of Hungarian specialties — and skipped dinner.

The Hungarian language defeats me — there are few cognates and I can't even pronounce the words although they use a modified latin alphabet. Apparently the language resembles Finnish and is perhaps distantly related to Mongolian, but it has nothing in common with European languages I'm familiar with. It's a little disconcerting.

After dinner (a “farmer's plate” of cheeses and meats followed by Hungarian goulash, of course) our ship sailed a few miles up and back down the Danube to give us a view of the city at night — very nice. This is the first completely clear night of our trip and I'd be tempted to stargaze except we're in a city of 2 million and the sky is clear but bright — only Jupiter is visible.

Tomorrow is day #2 in Budapest — with new guests.  
- John

#### Photos:

We enjoyed the magnificent view of Buda and the palace across the Danube at breakfast, and had the identical view at lunch.

This is the same view with Barbara out of the way, shot through the dining room window. Note the clear sky!

The reciprocal view of Pes(h)t from atop Buda. The big building with the dome at left is parliament and our Viking longships are at right.

All European cities we've seen so far have public bikes for rent, and here are a few at a bike station in downtown Budapest.

Shopping area nearby. You can see a Burger King sign if you look for it. Our most visible export is trash food that eventually kills people.

The covered shopping area Barbara visited — and sampled many foods.

A happy lady who has just made her Hungarian crepe.

Parliament at night.









---

May 18: Budapest #2

*[After breakfast, disembark for a final free day in Budapest to explore a museum; do some shopping; ride the innovative, efficient metro; visit one of the Art Nouveau spas; or see the Great Synagogue and Jewish Quarter. As always, your Program Director can help you plan your free time. Enjoy a final evening in the bustling Hungarian capital.]*

Hi Friends,

Most of our friends departed in the morning and new passengers joined us in the afternoon. We now feel like old-timers — veterans, even — since we're among the two dozen or so select few who are “staying on board to see where the boat goes” as I put it. Our name necklaces (thanks again, Heidi) will get a new work-out and admiring comments from people who are anonymous without any.

Great news! The ship is not quite full, so we were able to upgrade from our basement cabin to one that not only is above water level, but is on the top deck. It has a chair, a full-length window we can actually see out — and a balcony! There's a short 360° video tour of cabin 323 at:

[https://www.vikingrivercruises.com/content/360/start.html?secure=true&panoId=vtc\\_9PRtrfVSok03hCSgSIFrNu](https://www.vikingrivercruises.com/content/360/start.html?secure=true&panoId=vtc_9PRtrfVSok03hCSgSIFrNu)

The purser quoted an upgrade price that was a little steep; I said I could afford only 40% of that — and he accepted. So I'm very happy. Never again a basement cabin aboard a ship.

After breakfast — with another grand view of the palace over our shoulder — we walked a half-hour to the Terror Museum. Other than a few hours of port call on the Black Sea last year neither of us has been in a former Iron Curtain country, so this seemed more relevant than another church, cathedral, or archaeological museum. We were prepared to be horrified and Barbara had some doubts, but it was basically disappointing — mostly posters and videos, some in English. I'll watch a few documentaries and get the same thing. The museum is in the building that formerly held the headquarters of the Hungarian NAZI party and following that the Hungarian secret police during the communist area (equivalent of the German STASI), and the one part that was interesting is the small concrete basement cells where prisoners were held before their inevitable execution. I'd give it 3 stars out of 5. There's more at:

<http://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/permanent-exhibition>

Then we walked a long loop back to the ship, pausing at a cafe to rest our feet, rehydrate, and people-watch. It's an interesting clean city and we both like it.

There were lots of unfamiliar faces at lunch as newbies board for the final week.

We're about to "set sail" well after dark (9:30) and get another wonderful view of Budapest at night. I may watch it from my balcony!

- John

Photos:

I have a fixation on bike lanes, and here's another way it's handled on a busy street — a dedicated red lane between traffic and parking. Note the green rental bike parking across the street. Ironically St. George was just voted a "bike friendly" city, but it has maybe 2% of what a comparable-size city would have in Europe. We see a fair number of electric bikes in Europe, but they're definitely a minority.

A holding cell in the basement of the former secret service ("the State Protection Agency") headquarters. What happened in that building is too grim to imagine and we're thankful we lived in peaceful, prosperous times.

Barbara having the time of her life — and a Coke — in Budapest. Ignore the KFC in the background — American's contribution to art and culture.





---

May 19: leaving Hungary

*[Sail into Hungary this morning, arriving in Kalocsa after lunch. Take a guided city tour followed by a short organ concert at St. Joseph Church. Then, you are treated to a performance of traditional Puzsta horsemanship. Return to the ship and enjoy a festive final dinner aboard as we depart for Budapest.]*

Hi Friends,

Last night after writing to you all I sat on our little balcony and watched the city lights of Budapest drift by as we resumed our trip down-river. Excellent! Now, the next afternoon, I'm on the balcony again. The high was 79° yesterday and 81° today so it's a perfect place to be.

The official schedule above makes little sense. We arrived at our first destination, the small city Kalocsa, before breakfast. We were bussed into town for an organ concert of classical music in the small overly-ornate cathedral; we had a half hour to admire the gilded statues and scroll-work while the music played. The first piece was Toccata and Fugue and the second was Ave Maria, so I enjoyed that \*much\* more than the dreary church music we heard last week. If asked I would have added some pieces by the Beatles, perhaps Lennon's "Imagine" ...

There was no city tour. We headed on to Puzsta for a 40-minute demonstration of traditional Hun horsemanship, and it was impressive: races, tricks, etc. Hungarians descend from Huns from the steppes somewhere to the east, so

horses have always been a significant part of their culture. And we sampled paprika brandy, and bread with paprika and onions on it — all quite good.

This was our first — and only — quick look at the Hungarian countryside, and it looks surprisingly prosperous. Western Europe had the Marshall Plan and 7 decades to recover from the war; Hungary and others behind the Iron Curtain have had 25 years and help only from the European Union, if applicable, so I was expecting things to be more primitive. The countryside we saw resembled Indiana — flat with big fields stretching off into the distance and neat houses with flowers around. But this is only a quick impression.

After lunch I stripped down and spent the warm afternoon on our little but very serviceable and more-or-less private balcony, beginning to restore my fading tan. I might have been on the sun deck above, but the wind was so fierce up there that the staff folded down the deck chairs to keep them from blowing into a jumble, so that was out. The balcony is shielded. I'll never again travel by cruise ship without a balcony.

The Danube here is wide, so the shore isn't often very near, and it's forested on both sides. Most of the riverbank is set aside as forest or parkland, so it's not terribly exotic. It could be the upper Missouri River, and the Danube here has probably looked just like this for 10,000 years. There's an occasional but rare summer home or hotel.

In the late afternoon we crossed into Croatia with a two-hour stop at customs to have all our passports stamped.

We're making new friends at dinner from among the new arrivals. We feel like veterans but don't flaunt our status.

Despite the official schedule we are NOT sailing toward Budapest. We're in Croatia, but only for a day. We dock before midnight.

- John

Photos:

Barbara trying to watch a movie on our little balcony, but the sun is too bright.

We passed the Paprika Museum by the cathedral and would have liked to have seen it but didn't have time to go in. We're told Hungarians only put paprika on "everything."

A Hun horseman cracking his whip as he gallops past the stands to start the show, which we video recorded. You can probably find the same on YouTube.

A nice house on the main road followed by two typical street scenes in the small city Kalocsa.

An apartment block left over from former times in the style called "Stalin-roccoco". Two scenes along the river. Almost the entire way today was forest, so these settlements are exceptional.

Paprika alcohol? I can't resist this! I brought home a small Barack (as in Obama).











---

May 20: If it's Saturday it must by Croatia

*[Wake up in Vukovar and have breakfast before your excursion to the Croatian city of Osijek. Inhabited since Neolithic times, this area has had several heydays under the Romans, the Ottomans and the Hapsburgs; now Vukovar is revered for its baroque buildings, parks and monuments. Return aboard for lunch and enjoy free time before an early evening departure.]*

Hi Friends,

As the schedule says, we awoke in Vukovar, a small city that was shelled to destruction in the civil war some 20 years ago and since rebuilt; it was hit harder (per square meter) than Stalingrad. We've heard the Croatian side of the war several times now, and it was "the war of independence" from an authori-

tarian and nationalistic regime; religion had little to nothing to do with it. There's so much history that I don't know!

Our 4-hour morning tour took us out of Vukovar and through the countryside to another small city where we heard a recital inside yet another church — this time piano and solo soprano. Nice, but I wouldn't have bought the CD. And we visited a B&B to sip plum brandy (slivovitz or rakia — ubiquitous in Croatia) and sample cake while chatting with the hostess about life during the civil war (she lost everything she had, and started over). Again we feel fortunate to have been spared the tragedy and misery of war.

Barbara shot many pictures of typical houses as we passed thru the countryside and the best are attached here. The young country looks surprisingly prosperous considering what they've gone through, but we understand unemployment is very high — a legacy of Soviet-style planning of the economy which left them producing little of value other than agricultural products.

We spent the afternoon aboard the ship, reading and lounging. We are, after all, on vacation. Barbara walked back into town but everything is closed.

At 5 a local 4-piece band played local instruments, including the tambour, in the lounge. Very energetic — and I might have bought the CD.

As we travel further down the Danube we encounter small countries and will almost visit one a day. Tomorrow it's Serbia. (Ironically we'll be back to Croatia for a week next summer as we sail with the Royal Clipper once again.)

- John

Photos:

*[Sending a batch of compressed photos that totals 2 - 3 mb works well — they reliably go in just a few minutes.]*

Vukovar (2): The city may be ancient but the buildings date from the 1990s when reconstruction began. A few still have bullet and shell holes.

Four houses we passed in our bus which seem typical.

The energetic band that performed for us in the lounge before dinner.







.....



---

May 21: Belgrade, Serbia

*[Wake up in Belgrade, capital of Serbia. Take a guided walk through the grounds of Kalemegdan Fortress, now a stately park; also see the Orthodox cathedral and stop at the Square of the Republic. Enjoy lunch aboard your ship before you have free time to explore Belgrade's gracious architecture or visit one of its many museums, like the Nikola Tesla Museum. Dine aboard your ship or experience some of Belgrade's nightlife. We depart very late this evening.]*

Hi Friends,

I awoke in the night to the sound of thunder and hard rain on our patio, but fortunately it ended at sunrise so we could do our scheduled 4-hour tour of Belgrade without getting wet. We took a bus tour of downtown and new districts, walked the grounds of the old fortress overlooking the river, and checked out the huge Serbian Orthodox church under construction. We ended being dropped off in the main shopping district downtown, and walked back to our ship to relax on the sun deck on a beautiful warm day.

It seems that churches and castles/fortresses are obligatory on our tours; ditto the main shopping district. It's a bit repetitious and the only photos we took were of typical buildings in the new and old parts of town. The Tesla Museum was too far to walk to it, so we gave it a miss.

Our main impression is that Belgrade is a full notch less prosperous than cities we've seen so far, including Croatia. Some districts are modern and clean, but too much is gray and dismal, and we saw abandoned buildings downtown. The photos can speak for themselves.

Also — almost no bike paths or bike lanes. That's a sign of a low level of civilization.

So I've been reading about the breakup of Yugoslavia and the NATO bombing of Belgrade. I remember when it happened but haven't thought about it since, so Wikipedia is filling me in on all I've forgotten or never knew. My history lesson today is of very recent history - 1991 - as well as the decades in the late 1500s when the Turkish invasion of Europe was stopped near here.

The Serbian language eludes me, and because we're here for only one day I'm not trying very hard to make sense of it. A novelty is that they use two alphabets interchangeably, Cyrillic and Latin, and you can switch between them as you like. Some signs use both.

Before dinner we heard a lecture by a local Serb historian who lamented the breakup of Yugoslavia and who put most of the blame on nationalist separatists from Kosovo and Croatia. That's the other side of the story. I'd like to know what happened but realize I'll never have the full account.

Dinner was "Taste of Serbia" — wonderful samples of regional foods. I won't guess how much weight I've gained this trip, but it's appreciable. My diet changes abruptly on Friday — but until then I live to enjoy the day!  
- John

Photos:

Three street scenes. We tried to be fair and not pick the grimmest areas to photograph, but some were considerably grimmer than these. Much of the architecture looks Stalinesque. Vienna is really nice in comparison. Damaged Ministry of Defense buildings struck by NATO in 1991 and left unprepared as memorials. We heard this evening that NATO was misguided, but that Milošević was "a madman". I wish I knew what the caption says. We caused quite a bit of damage to their infrastructure.





.....

May 22: Iron Gate of the Danube

*[Today, sail through one of Europe's most dramatic natural wonders, the picturesque stretch famously known as the Iron Gate. As you cruise through these spectacular narrow gorges that slice through the Carpathian Mountains to the north and the Balkan Mountains to the south, marvel at the towering white limestone cliffs draped with forest. Be on the lookout for ancient remains as you gaze upon the dramatic walls. On the Bulgarian side, Trajan's Tablet was laid to mark the construction of a Roman military road; on the Romanian side, marvel at the enormous rock sculpture of Dacian King Decebalus.]*

Hi Friends,

Most days we've docked early, sometimes before breakfast, toured a town, and set sail late, sometimes after we're asleep. Today was different — we sailed all day, and it was great.

We sailed the stretch of the Danube that is the boundary between Serbia and Romania, and it's quite narrow in places where we pass through a gorge. The Iron Gate is the most famous: limestone cliffs rise out of the river, and the road along the riverbank has many tunnels and bridges. It was very scenic, and I spent the entire day either on the deck forward with a view out both sides, or on my little balcony (where I could wear what I wanted) and see just the Serbian side. The weather was perfect (75°) and some people on the sun deck were in swim suits until a wind came up and drove everyone inside (except me on my protected balcony). I enjoyed this considerably more than touring yet another fort, church, and shopping district.

Most of the riverbank is forested nature preserves, but occasionally we passed a small farmstead, summer home, or town, and one small city. One place we would have liked to have stopped is a 9,000-year old archaeological site (small stone-age village) turned into a museum. We saw everything mentioned in the second URL below.

So it was a very relaxing, very pleasant day aboard ship. And I'm restoring my tan.

- John

<http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20111013-sailing-the-danube-through-romanias-iron-gates>

<http://cruises.about.com/od/danuberivercruises/ss/Iron-Gates-Danube-River.htm#showall>

Photos:

John at the bow taking in the scenery as we approach the Iron Gate.

A farmstead along the Danube in Serbia.

Tunnels and bridges as the valley narrows.

The Iron Gate of the Danube — very pretty.





.....

May 23: depressing Bulgaria

*[Arrive in the picturesque Bulgarian port of Vidin, and take an excursion to see Belogradchik Fortress, built right into the striking Belogradchik Rocks. See the fortress's amazing construction, begun in Roman times and greatly extended by Bulgarian tsars and the Ottomans, and enjoy breathtaking views. Enjoy lunch aboard your ship; then you have free time to explore Vidin's city center, Orthodox churches and the ruins of the city's once-grand synagogue. We depart during dinner.]*

Hi Friends,

We crossed the Serbia-Bulgaria border during dinner last night and docked later at Vidin. This morning we took the 4-hour guided tour of the local attractions, the first being a sandstone outcrop a 50-minute bus ride away. This is ironic — traveling nearly an hour to see a sandstone formation, as those of you who have seen where we live will well appreciate. But it has a fortress, first constructed by the Romans and more recently by the Turks, built into it — and that we don't have in Utah. So we admired the rocks, the remnants of the fort, the town nearby, and were bussed back to the ship. Then we walked into and around town for an hour.

Our impressions: Serbia was a notch below Croatia and the rest of Western Europe in prosperity, and Bulgaria is a bunch of notches below Serbia. We knew this from our brief visit last year, but it's obvious — history hasn't treated them well. An irony here is that Bulgaria sat out WWII and wasn't in a civil war in the '90s. I don't know why it hasn't prospered like its neighbors, but it definitely hasn't. Sidewalks are in bad repair even on the "fancy" pedestrian mall downtown; buildings are lacking not only paint but plaster, and pieces are falling off; many factories are abandoned and falling apart; ditto a few houses and apartments; the architecture in general is Soviet Gray; there are few shops in the shopping district, they carry little, and there's not much to buy; unlike the rest of Europe there are few outdoor cafes and they're not busy; no bike lanes. It's dismal and depressing and I couldn't imagine living here. Our Bulgarian guide was embarrassed by the exterior appearances and assured us that the apartments are wonderful inside, but I'll take that under advisement. We learned that there is essentially no industry, that farms were returned to the people and are productive once again, that a good salary for a MD is about \$36,000/year, that the older people are utterly overjoyed to be rid of communism (the young ones don't know it); the dream of young people is to be far away.

We wish them well.

Back onboard, another ship was parked next to us so my wonderful balcony faced another balcony a few feet away, so it's back to the lounge to write and then the sun deck to read.

Now we continue down the Danube for a second day in Bulgaria.  
- John

Photos:

The communist era is seen as a nightmare and is definitely not mourned. One does not have to look far to find a house or building that is peeling or falling down. Here is a mixture of structures in good shape and not so good, for balance, and shops downtown.







## May 24: Bulgaria Day Trip

*[After breakfast, disembark at Russe for a full-day excursion to Bulgaria's former capital, Veliko Tarnovo. There you will see Tsaravets Hill and the ruins of the royal castle. During free time, shop for local crafts along Samovodska Charshia. Continue your venture to Arbanasi for lunch in a local restaurant and a guided tour of the Nativity Church with its intricate floor-to-ceiling murals and icons. Return to your ship for dinner.]*

Hi Friends,

Last night we sailed farther down the Danube and docked in Bulgaria again. The main activity was a long day trip by bus from 9 to 5:30 to see yet more castles and churches. (At breakfast I learned that I'm not the only one who is castle-and-churched out.) I might have stayed on the ship except (a) my balcony likely would have faced a ship parked alongside us, and (b) we'll never be back to Bulgaria again, so we might as well see what they want us to see.

I have mixed feelings — 4+ hours on a bus is too long unless there's something really, really special at the end.

When we arrived at Veliko Tarnovo we had the option of hiking around the ruins of the castle / fort or walking the shopping district, so we window-shopped. Lunch at a local restaurant. Then two interesting things: a house from 1640 that remains as it was then, decorated in the Ottoman style (it was different from anything we've seen so far) followed by a visit to a small Christian church from the same time that was decorated inside with large Greek-style icons floor to ceiling, something else we've never seen before. But no photography was allowed.

Now we're back from dinner and about to pack. In the morning we leave the ship and spend our last day in Bucharest, Romania, before flying home on Friday.

- John

Photos:

Street scenes in Veliko Tarnovo. The town is much more prosperous than Vidin yesterday, although still nowhere near Western Europe. These are more upscale structures than yesterday's.

The church interior, from a Google search for images.





.....

May 25: misadventure on the Danube; Day in Bucharest

*[Disembark in Giurgiu and proceed to the superior first-class Sheraton Hotel in the heart of the Bucharest for a 1-night stay. This afternoon enjoy a half-day tour of Romania's lovely capital city. See the Romanian Athenaeum, the Palace of Parliament, and the Arch of Triumph. Enjoy a final evening in Bucharest.]*

Hi Friends,

Last night we crossed the Danube and in 8 minutes moved from Bulgaria to Romania!

Last night, after writing to you all and finishing a bottle of the local rakia I fell backwards off my little stool and gashed my skull on a chair. There was much blood. The staff quickly called an ambulance and I was rushed (lights flashing with sirens) to the emergency room of the local hospital at our little port city and given a battery of tests including an ECG and even an MRI before Barbara put a stop to more testing (they were getting ready to X-ray something). Then four stitches. By this time our cruise director had arrived, and she assisted us in getting back to the ship by taxi. I'll wear a head bandage for the next week (and a hat over it!), and they had cleaned the blood off the carpet before we returned to our room at 1:30 a.m., so there's no lasting damage. Just to my pride.

Romania is a poor country, but all of this was paid by their health care system (it was an emergency) so no charge to us or to the ship! I don't know what to say, other than that I'm totally impressed.

So today we're in Bucharest. At 8:30 we departed the ship for the last time and boarded a bus for a 90-minute ride through the Romanian countryside — all farmland — and then another hour bus ride around Bucharest, looking at the sights out the window. That was just as well because it drizzled on and off all day with a rainstorm while we were having lunch. We toured an open-air museum of historical houses for 45 minutes, then more bus tour of town followed by an hour walk through the “historic” district. We arrived at our hotel at 4:30 after 5 hours on the bus and 3 off.

We're both tired from last night but I intend to stay up late so as to be even more tired tomorrow, which is a LONG travel day. I want to sleep on the plane!

Both the little port city and huge Bucharest are a definite contrast to Serbia and especially Bulgaria. Now we're almost back to Austria for prosperity. We're mightily surprised because when we visited the Romanian port city Constanta on the Black Sea last year it was poorer than Bulgaria, but not where we were today. I shot some random street scenes out the bus window between raindrops but gave it up because there's too much diversity in a city this size, and any simplification would be an over-simplification. In some areas it could be a modern US city; others have older-style architecture from the 1800s, but not much is truly old. We see some bad plaster but nothing on the scale of Bulgaria. Ditto some bad sidewalks, but not all. But there are also modern new buildings and districts that could be Denver.

One solid impression: traffic is far worse than Los Angeles — it's endless gridlock and we often drove blocks at a walking pace. In direct contrast to London, there are almost no busses — apparently they don't believe in them. And not a very extensive streetcar system. And almost no bike lanes or cyclists. They desperately need a plan; it must be awful to live here if you have to drive to work.

So after resting a bit we walked a block and had a nice dinner at an outdoor cafe, which is a fine way to end a trip to Europe. Now I'll catch up on Facebook while Barbara does something on her iPad.

Our alarm is set for 3:30 a.m. Like I said, it will be a l-o-n-g day: Bucharest - Amsterdam - Salt Lake City - Las Vegas - drive home. If we make our connections (one has me worried) we'll be home in St. George tomorrow night shortly before sunset. I'll send a final short email once we're home.

- John

Photos:

The Palace of Parliament through a rainy window. We were told this is the second largest building on earth, but that's not necessarily so.

A home built into the ground at the open air museum. These were used into the 20th century, and they look like a good idea — no big windows for views, but super insulation.

A church that Vlad the Impaler (Count Dracula) attended in the late 1400s.

That's his statue. Services are no longer offered there.

The view of Bucharest out the 9th floor window of our hotel. There are a variety of architectural styles including Stalinesque and modern, but little that is terribly old.

The cafe where we spent our last evening in Europe. Very civilized and romantic — but the traffic noise is terrific.





.....

May 26: Long Journey Home

*[After breakfast, check out of your hotel and proceed to the airport for your return flight.]*

Hi Friends,

We were up at 3:15 a.m. local time to transfer to the Bucharest airport for a 7:00 flight, so we were given a box breakfast of a sandwich, a green apple, and bottle of water. The Sheraton certainly went to no expense to feed us well. But it was too early to eat.

The flight to Amsterdam was uneventful. Our connection to Salt Lake City was delayed 90 minutes but that still gave us adequate time for our transfer on to Las Vegas, so all was well.

My plan to get little sleep prior to the flight so as to sleep on the flight didn't work — I just took one 45 minute nap and mostly watched Delta's movies. We should sleep well tonight. This was the only transatlantic flight where I wasn't miserable; actually it wasn't too bad. I think we had slightly more comfortable seats.

We picked up our car in Las Vegas and drove straight home, arriving at 8:20 MDT. From our hotel door to our front door was 25 hours of travel, and we've now been up for 27. We waited for the water to get hot to take showers. Tomorrow we unpack (and repack standard items for the next trip; some things stay packed).

So the trip is over and all is well. The house is as we left it.

As always, I'll post these emails at our travel site as one pdf in a day or two.

Our next overseas trip is a month in Vietnam in October, and I'll send you some more travel emails then.

Over and out.

- John

Photo:

Icebergs in the sea and the coast near Iqaluit from 38,000 feet. Hudson's Bay to the south is nearly completely ice covered, in case you were wondering.

