

Amsterdam to Budapest River Cruise

08/21/17 – 09/07/17

Choosing a River Cruise:

The conception of this trip happened a few weeks after we got back from our trip that toured England and Scotland. We had been discussing taking another cruise. The idea of a cruise satisfied Carol's biggest concern, and that was where are we going to eat. A cruise takes care of that question. As we started to look for different cruises, as always, we started looking at ocean cruise, and our favorite cruise line is Azamara, so I started to look on their website for our next adventure. About the same time, both Carol and I saw an advertisement for river cruises. I thought what a wonderful way to see Central and Eastern Europe and still be on a cruise.

Choosing Tauck:

As we started doing our research, we found that there were dozens of different river cruise lines. As we read the reviews we kept on seeing [Tauck](#) as the highest rated river cruise and tour company. So, we started looking at Tauck. Of course, I did a cost analysis and found that while Tauck was more expensive, it was ALL inclusive. It included, taxes, gratuities, tours, meals, drinks (even the good stuff), and anything else you could imagine. The only thing it did not include was laundry, which was our only expense on the ship. If you took a look at the other river cruise lines, and include all of the items that Tauck includes, they are actually all pretty close in cost. So, our decision to use Tauck came down to the excellent reviews and the fact that we did have to be "nickel and dimed" for every little drink and tour. It turned out to be a great decision. We booked our [Tauck River Cruise from Amsterdam to Budapest](#) 16 months prior to leaving.



ms Esprit

Choosing our Flights:

One thing that Tauck did that wasn't absolutely perfect was to give us a deal on our flights. Tauck did offer airline flights included, but it was about 30% higher than the actual cost of our flights. This is probably just a safety net for Tauck, because we booked our cruise 16 months before we left, and airlines only book 330 days before the flights. I tracked the flight costs for months before I actually booked the flight to see what flights that I would like and to see when it was the cheapest to book the flights. We ended up flying United and Lufthansa. United to Amsterdam and Lufthansa home from Budapest. I was really looking forward to flying Lufthansa from Frankfurt to Seattle, because it was on a 747, which I had never flown on before. Plus, I booked seats on the upper deck of the 747. We have two personal "rules" when we go to Europe:

1. Stay for at least three weeks. Why spend all the money to fly to Europe for only a week or two.
2. Fly Business Class. If we are going to be stuck in an airplane for 10-18 hours, we want to be comfortable. Also, I want to start my vacations in Seattle and not have to decompress my body after a long flight.

Extended Stay in Budapest:

We decided to spend three extra days in Budapest on our own. We were able to book this through Tauck. While it was a little more expensive, it was at a great hotel ([Boscolo Hotel](#)), centrally located, and included



limousine service from the hotel to the airport, three days later. One more advantage to Tauck. Our scheduled pick up was at 4:00 AM, and when we got to the lobby to leave the Boscolo Hotel the limousine driver was waiting for us holding a sign, saying "Tauck". Tauck continued to make the trip seamless and just plain easy!!!!

08/21/17:

We successfully made it to Amsterdam through our connection in Chicago. The flights were good, but we didn't realize that domestic first-class flights do NOT have a movie on United flights. If you download the United App, you can always watch the movies on your tablet or cell phone, but that was the biggest issue that we had to face on our first flight. I know that you are all saying, "poor baby", you had to endure a first-class flight without a movie. Your right, I actually had to just read.

Amsterdam:



I expected to get to the airport and get picked up with another 2-6 Tauck couples and be bused to the ship. Not true, Tauck had a driver waiting just for us, and he took us straight to the ship in a Mercedes, a very nice touch. I will say that the walk from the plane to the baggage claim area was a very long walk. I would guess that we walked about a mile to claim our bags. Fortunately getting through customs and walking to the area

where the driver met us was just a quick five-minute walk.

We arrived at the ms Esprit, checked in and dropped our luggage. After checking in with the Tauck Cruise Director, Carlos, we got directions and walked about three miles to the Anne Frank House for a tour that we had booked a few months ago. We had reservation 2:30, but arrived at about 1:45. There was a very long line, but the folks at the Anne Frank house did a very good job of informing the folks in line that you couldn't be in line unless your reservations were within the next 15-20 minutes. So, we had to jump out of line and jump back in at about 2:10-2:15. It was incredible what the Dutch Jews had to endure, just to survive. Other than the incredible hardship that they had to suffer through there were very steep stairs from one floor to another, which were more like a ladder than a stairway. They had to be perfectly quiet during the day and use no lights during the night. They had only one sink and one bathroom for all of the people that were hiding. The Anne Frank Museum did do a very good job of managing the crowds and presenting the information, although it was very crowded in every room and the process of moving through the rooms was slow. The Anne Frank Museum was a must see, and I am glad we made the reservations in advance and made the effort to see the museum, even though we had just finished a 16-hour flight earlier that day. As we walked out of the museum, we knew that we had a three mile walk back to the ship. Fortunately, Carol saw a CAB and we were able to forgo the extra exercise. It was well worth the cost, as we were starting to wear-out.

08/22/2017:

The next day we had a guided tour of the Rijksmuseum, and a wonderful two-hour canal boat tour with lunch. As part of Tauck's schedule they always try to give us some free



time at every stop. After the canal tour and lunch, we had about two hours to do what we wanted on our own. So, Carol and I then took a 15-minute walk to the original Heineken brewery for a tour, and of course several tastings. The tour was very "touristy" and reminded me of a poor mans Disneyland ride. Not worth the 18 Euro per person, even with the two pints of beer which were included. I will say that the view from the top of the building was spectacular.

In an effort to be more efficient with the cruising speed and timing, we were taken to the Reich Museum by bus, while the ms Esprit (our ship) cruised down the Rhine river and met us after the canal tour and lunch. We had to endure (I say farcically) about a 90-minute bus ride in a luxurious Mercedes Benz bus to catch up with the ship. So far it looks like the Tauck cruise company is fantastic!!!!

08/23/17:

The morning started as were cruising the Rhine to **Cologne**. How wonderful it was to wake up to the quiet hum of the engine and the gentle slapping of the water against the hull. We leisurely got up and had a wonderful breakfast.

Morning Routine: Carol and I are creatures of habit and love to establish standard routines. Our normal routine, which only varied by the start time of our tours, was for me to get up 30 minutes before Carol, get ready and head to the Bistro at the stern of the ship. I would have a Cappuccino and some fruit. Carol would join in the Bistro for her first and my second Cappuccino. We would then take a leisurely stroll the length of the ship (It was 535 feet long) to the main dinning area, where Carol would have her Eggs Benedict, two eggs and extra hollandaise sauce. I would break from routine and have what ever looked good. We were advised at the orientation meeting that Tauck expects us to gain one pound for every day we are on the cruise. If we didn't, Tauck didn't feel like they were doing their job.

After breakfast, while still cruising down the Rhine, we got a lesson on the history of the German language. I thought English was hard, wow, German can be very difficult. We learned that some words can have over 25 letters. I am very thankful that the German educational system makes learning English a requirement, Also I am embarrassed that the U.S. does not, strongly encourage learning a second language.

Once we docked in Cologne we started with a great tour of the Cologne Cathedral and the city center. We also received a wonderful tour of the Roman-German ruins. The Romans were in Cologne about 2000 years ago.

As with many of the European cathedral, the Cologne Cathedral is constantly being refurbished. They say that cathedral will have about 2,000 people attend on any given Sunday. The way that the churches are supported in Germany is from a "church tax", which is 3% of what you pay in income tax. If you don't pay the tax, you can't attend the church. This is diametrically opposed to our vision of "separation of church and state". This was really difficult to wrap my head around that concept. It seems to negate any chance of evangelism.

The Cologne Cathedral was started in the 1200's and took a little over 600 years to build, and then about 20-30 years to fix it after WWII. The history of the Cologne Cathedral is fascinating, with it being both religious and politically motivated. It was a perfect of example of "Money and Power talks".





In the Roman museum there was a beautifully preserved mosaic from the Roman ruins, which was uncovered only a few decades ago. It is in great condition for being 2,000 years old. As Cologne was digging tunnels for their subways, they uncovered another 2.4 million artifacts from the Roman era.

Tauck, as a surprise, and after the tours of the Roman ruins, we crossed the street and had a beer tasting and little German style snack. Wow, even more beer. This trip is just getting better and better!!! It turns out that Tauck has many little extra surprises during the entire trip.

This evening we had a very special dinner. It was a little more formal than usual, which meant that I wore long pants and a long sleeve knit shirt, instead of a short sleeve shirt. The dinner was a six-course meal in a very European style, very slow and enjoyable, this was the entire evening. We always had a choice of three or four main courses and a couple selections for starters (appetizers) and deserts. We have a couple friends that would have liked more food, in terms of quantity, but better quality and less food is becoming a mantra for us. While the individual dishes are not huge portions, they are really good quality, and the ship's chef worked hard to focus on local cuisine to enhance our travelling experience. I will have to admit that I was never hungry during the entire trip. The new comment in jest was, "Something must be wrong we haven't eaten in almost two hours."

08/24/17:

As with many cruising vacations the ship will cruise during the night so that we can be docked and ready to go at the next city. That said, we cruised all night and arrive at **Rudesheim** bright and early.

Once we arrived in Rudesheim we took a leisurely one-hour walk (hick) up a hill to see a view of the entire valley. The end goal was to visit the Siegfrieds Mechanisches Musikkabinett, an eclectic collection of mechanical musical instruments. The owner of the museum started collecting the musical instruments about 1950. Each instrument that he collected did not work when he got it, but he completely overhauled each one to its finished condition that you see today, and they all worked!!! They also had a replica of the wood shop that was used to overhaul the instruments. It had fantastic looking old hand woodworking tools, many of them I have in my own collection.



After visiting the Siegfrieds Mechanisches Musikkabinett we had a very entertaining lunch in a local German restaurant with an old-world ambiance, and a pretty good three-piece band with singing and general German “beer hall” feel to the restaurant. They introduced us to a couple traditional German dishes that were considered to be a national dishes of Germany.

Tauck Suprose:

One of the venues that Tauck offers on the ms Esprit is a small 12-person dinner in their Bistro. It has a limited menu and you have to make reservations in advance. So, we tried it on the last night. The focus was on French cuisine. The food service was exceptional. It was a six-course meal, and while the courses were small, you did not go away hungry, as a matter of fact Carol and I were very full. After dinner, the waiter gave me a cake with "Happy Anniversary" on it. I told him that it was not our anniversary, so he called the cruise director to make sure it wasn't supposed to go to someone else. The cruise director somehow found out that I had just retired and wanted to help me celebrate. They also left me a card and a gift in our room when we got back from dinner. I asked how Carlos (the cruise director) how he found out that I had just retired and he said that he had spies all over the ship listening for this kind of information. A very unexpected touch!!!! I told Carlos that he is making it almost impossible to even try another cruise-line other than Tauck. He replied, “That is Tauck’s goal!!!!”

08/25/17:

Today we spent the entire day cruising the **Rhine River** to the **Main** (pronounced Mine) **River**. We will be going through about 30-40 locks during the day. During our entire trip will go up 1200 feet in elevation through the locks, and back down most of the 1200 feet to Budapest. I was able to capture a few time lapse videos of the locks. During the day of cruising there were two different opportunities to be entertained by lecture from our tour guides. They were informative and very enjoyable.



08/26/2017:

Our next stop is at **Rothenburg**, a total touristy town, but really worth the visit. We had to take a 45-minute bus ride to get to the outskirts of Rothenburg, but as usual Tauck had a tour guide narrating the entire time and telling us stories about the country side and the history of the area. Rothenburg is an absolutely delightful little town that they have tried to keep as Medieval looking as possible. It also has the "mother ship" of all Christmas stores, the Kathe Wohlfahrt's Christmas Shop and it is open all year long. There are very few cars that are allowed in Rothenburg and absolutely no buses or big trucks are allowed in the city center. This meant about another 20-minute walk to get to the city's main square.





We started the tour of Rothenburg with a visit to the "Craftsman's House". This was a house that was actually lived in until the 1960's, but was kept in authentic character of the 1200-1300's. If you were over 5'8" tall you were ducking constantly. The rooms were multi-purpose and very small. The kitchen and dining room was also used family gathering and spinning wool and may have had a loom in the corner. The attic was filled with items of seasonal storage, like sleds, horse tackle and seasonal tools.

After the "Craftsman's House" then went to the Museum of Torture. This was a museum that showed all sorts of different methods torture that were employed during this time period. The different tortures all specific purposes for the crime that was committed, or alleged to have been committed. It could be as a punishment, a method of coercion, a way to shame someone, and/or a method to scare the devil out of you. The methods were creative and usually connected to the crime. There were very clear laws, with specific punishments, and sometimes it was up to the local magistrate to be creative and give out the punishments. As an example, the "Bow Tie" picture below was used to lock up two argumentative women together until they stopped fighting. The museums words, not mine!!



We then took a short walk back to the town square for a pizza in an Italian restaurant. I was hoping for Brat and Beer, but Carol said we were having pizza, which was actually pretty good. Another Tauck "special touch" was that they gave us money to have lunch on our own, and they were quite generous with the stipend.

Since we had lunch across the street from Kathe Wohlfahrt's Christmas Shop we had to visit it. There were all sorts of ways to separate the tourist from their money, and they were NOT bashful about the prices, but it was entertaining and fun to visit.

We spent the rest of afternoon walking around and enjoying Rothenburg.

A walk back to the bus and a 45-minute ride back to the ship, where Kus, the bar tender, met me with a tall ice cold glass of Perrier. Another Tauck touch was that Kus always

knew what I wanted to drink and when I wanted it, I rarely had to ask. The day finished with our best meal on the ship so far, it was great!!!

08/27/17:

Next stop Bamberg for a walking tour. Today and tomorrow we visited two very different and yet the same types of cities. Both Bamberg and Nurnberg were very important Medieval cities of great importance. At one point in time Bamberg was the seat of the Holy Roman Emperor. Yet during WWII Bamberg was barely touched, while Nurnberg was 90% destroyed.



Bamberg has about 85,000 inhabitants, and about 11,000 are student at the University of Bamberg. There are the old buildings, 700-800 years old and there are (relatively) new buildings that are only 200-300 years old. It is very walkable and nice city to visit, although your visit will see most of the city in just a few hours. Tauck treated us to a wonderful stop for a beer tasting and Brat sampling. The pictures below are of the city hall, which was built in the middle of the river, because they couldn't decide which side to build it on.

They have a very modern sculpture, just called the "Face", but it was later discovered that the meaning of the top half of the brain that was missing was because the sculptor thought that the people of Bamberg were empty headed. By the way, I am the person in the front, not the face in the back.



As with all cruises there are situations that are out of their control, so in our orientation we were advised that “things happen” and we needed to be a little flexible. In Bamberg this was the situation. We were all supposed to meet at the “Face” (Pictured above) at a specific time to go back to the ship. The ship had cruised ahead, like in Amsterdam, and we were going to catch up with a nice bus ride through the country side. Well, the ship ran into some slow traffic in the locks and was delayed. So (another Tauck touch), the tour director handed out five Euros each and told us to go enjoy more of Bamberg, have an ice cream or beer and come back in an hour. The ship would be ready to connect with us then.

08/28/2017:

Nurnberg has great historical significance. This is the birthplace of the Nazi's and place where they celebrated every year from 1933-1938. While I have seen many documentaries about Germany and WWII, it was a little surrealistic to be standing in the Zeppelinfeld parade grounds where the Nazi's held their rallies. I understand that the rallies would last for 5-6 hours at a time and they all had to stand in the heat of late August, early September and attentively listen to every word that their Furher, Adolf Hitler uttered. About 90% of Nurnberg was destroyed in WWII



A short bus ride from Zeppelinfeld was the Documentation Center (Dokumentationszentrum in German), which was converted from the unfinished remains of the Nazi's Congress Hall. Today every German student is required to tour the Documentation Center and one of the Memorials of the concentration camps as part of their education.



A 20-minute bus ride through Nurnberg, and we arrived at the court house where they held the Nurnberg trials. Although the furniture had changed, we were inside the actual court room where they held the trials for the Nazi elite.



We spent the rest of the day in and around the Nurnberg central market, where we had lunch and just walked around. Unfortunately, the Nurnberg central market was being set up for a motor-cross event, and had much of it roped off and a temporary construction happening. It was a little disappointing to see the town center being turned into a circus. Since Nurnberg had mostly been destroyed by the allies, the buildings were pretty modern and they really exhibited the efficient German architecture.

08/29/17:

We didn't get to **Regensburg** until about 1:00 PM, so we are starting the day with a leisurely cruise from the Main-Danube canal to the Danube River. Last night the captain wasn't sure if there would be enough water in the river to allow us to pass all the way to Regensburg, but early this morning it was decided that we would be OK. Last night we were awakened up at about 3:00 AM. The ship was doing some excessive vibrating. This lasted about 45 minutes, and gave Carol a bit of concern. So much that she was planning on how to get out of the room and figure out what she wanted to take with her. We found out later that the ship had run into some shallow water and was scrapping the bottom, just a little. We seemed to make it through without any damage.

Regensburg and Nurnberg have a big competition on who makes the best Bratwurst. The picture below (green building on the left) is one of Regensburg's more famous places to get a good Bratwurst. This building has been around for 400-500 years and has been making Bratwurst there, with beer course, since it opened. The large beige building on the right was built for storing salt, and has been around for about 1200 years. Next to this building is the "Stone Bridge" which is the oldest all stone bridge in Germany.

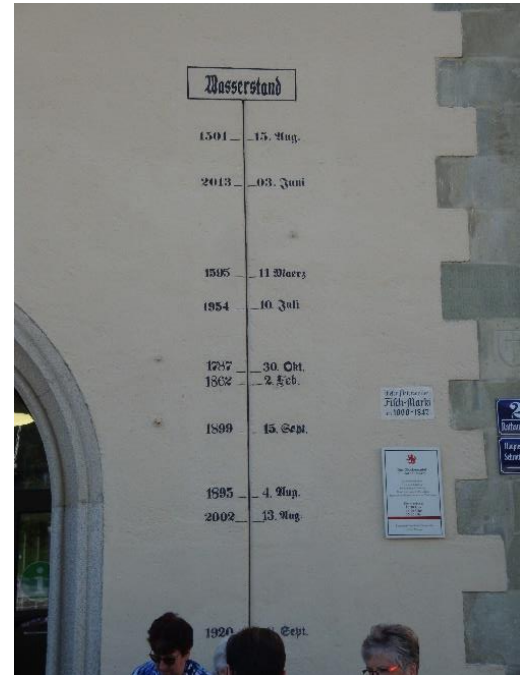


There were many fascinating buildings and history to see in Regensburg, but one was the Roman Gate that they integrated into an entrance of a court yard. This was built about 2,000 years ago and represented the Northern most post of the Roman Empire. I liked how they kept the gate and build a more modern wall around it. There were several old buildings in Regensburg, and the height of the building was usually determined by how much money the owner had. In some cases, the buildings were very high (4-6 stories), but the upper stories were just for show, and not used. It was the Medieval way of saying "Money Talks".



08/30/2017:

We arrived in **Passau** a little late, about 10:30 AM. We very quickly headed out for a tour of the city. Passau is located on the intersection of the Inn and Danube rivers. It is actually pretty small, in terms of acreage, but very important in terms of trade in the 11th and 12th centuries. It was just down the river from Salzburg, and the salt trade, which, as you know salt in the 11th and 12th centuries was like gold then. As you can imagine, when you are next to a river (or two), you are subject to occasional seasonal flooding. In the picture below, you can see the high water make for floods from different years. The note at the bottom of the photograph shows the tops of people's head (about 5'-8"). So, you can see that Passau periodically had significant flooding. Only the stone buildings would every survive. Many of the buildings actually never kept anything in the bottom floor to allow for the rising river and not have to deal with loses of personal items and/or inventory.



As I mentioned before, Passau had the largest pipe organ in Europe, with 17,000 pipes. The organ had five different key boards that can actually all be played at the same time. We had the great opportunity to hear a 45-minute organ concert in St. Stephan's. The interior of St. Stephan's was unbelievable with its statues, paintings, mosaics and ceiling reliefs that all told many different stories from the Bible, or at least as the Catholic Church saw the stories.

We left Passau about 3:30 and started our cruise down to the Danube toward Austria. This afternoon we were treated to a presentation on Austria, which was very good and enlightening. It was actually the first time that I had heard the Hapsburg Empire mentioned. The Hapsburgs ruled parts of Germany, Austria, Spain and Italy, not

to mention interests in the Americas and China, for centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire.

Souvenir collecting is not part of our travelling. We tend to focus on experiences and getting to know the different cultures as much as possible. That said, I always try to pick up one trinket on the trip that represents the trip. On this trip I thought it would be great to find a nice looking German beer stein to put on my book shelf in my den. In Passau we had a very informative and delightful walking tour guide. She made the comment that people get beer steins for each Oktoberfest, and then just leave them behind, sell them or give them away. She pointed out a street that several shops with older beer steins from past Oktoberfest's, and you could usually purchase them for a good price. So, we wandered down the different streets and found a very nice glass beer stein with a pewter lid. That will be a good reminder of what we have done and seen.

08/31/2017:

We had an early morning stop today, or at least early for us, we left the ship at 8:30 for a tour of the **Melk** Abbey in Melk, Austria. Melk is just inside the Austrian border and other than the Abbey, which was established in the 900's, there isn't much else to visit other than the small town next to the abbey. The Abbey now has a private high school, with about 900 students total and only cost each student about 90 Euros per month. The library in the Abbey has over 100,000 books and 17,000 manuscripts. The church was absolutely stunning, with an estimated hundreds of pounds of gold leaf covering the many, many statues. This one, of many historical religious sites that we have visited. It uses tourism entrance fees and tour guides to help support the maintenance of the church. Also, to help support the revenue stream, they don't allow photographs in the church or library, but they are more than willing to sell the images to you in the gift shop. They did allow photographs on the grounds outside, the entrance to the Melk Abbey is shown below.



Back on the ship we had a very beautiful cruise through Austria and by 5:15 were in Tullin, where we disembarked and took a bus to Vienna for our special dinner celebration and to save time while the ship continued down the Danube River to Vienna. This evening was the gala affair of the cruise, and to call it “the gala affair of cruise” may have been a gross understatement. This evening was unbelievable, it was the best prom you have even seen, but on super steroids. This evening was incredible and totally “over the

top” for an extravaganza. Everything was elegant by any definition. We started with a walk through the interior of a very high-end mall and up three floors up to a waiting room complete with Champagne and appetizers. After about 15-20 minutes we entered a grand hall that was spectacular. It was easily had 35-40 foot ceilings painted in Viennese fashion. Dinner was magnificent and the service was perfect and well-choreographed. When I say choreographed, the servers would all wait to serve each table at exactly the same time. That meant that there were ten servers for each table and they all placed our plated on the table at the same time. Below is the evening’s menu and just our table for the evening. In the back ground you can see about a third of the other tables in the room. It was truly a magical evening. I have run out of adjectives to describe the evening.



09/01/2017:

Since we arrived in **Vienna** last night we were able to start the day slowly and leisurely. There was a choice of tours today; either the summer or winter Habsburg palace. We chose to tour the Schönbrunn Palace, the Habsburgs' vast "summer residence" built to rival Versailles. You could very easily see the similarities in the palaces, although Versailles was easily 3-4 times larger and grander. Don't get me wrong the Schönbrunn Palace was no slum. It had hundreds of rooms and a spectacular "backyard" garden, which included a huge grand fountain (See below).



Carol was instantly attracted to the fountain, which was about a 15-minute walk from the back of the palace. There was a ball room that really looked like a miniature "Hall of Mirrors" from Versailles. The main benefactor for the Schönbrunn Palace was Empress Elizabeth of Austria, or as she was known, "Sisi" Habsburg. She had a total of 16 children. Each child needed five rooms for themselves and at least 10 servants per child, each of which needed at least one room, if not more. The summer palace was about a four-mile carriage ride from downtown Vienna and the winter palace.

I will have to admit that one of the more disappointing and disturbing sights in Vienna was the amount of graffiti, which was on many of the buildings near the Daube canal. The Viennese architecture is so classic and well defined, it was sad to see them defaced.



After the tour of the Schönbrunn Palace we went back to the ship for lunch and then back out to the Vienna city center for shopping and more sightseeing on our own. It was a little crowded, but not unbearable. We were told about a famous Viennese pastry, called Sachertorte, and a famous restaurant that we could sample this pastry. We walked straight to the restaurant, only to find, a long line and probably a one hour wait to be seated. We chose to walk around and eventually found a little bakery that we could sample the Sachertorte. We purchased three or four different Viennese pastries and took them back to the ship to have after dinner that evening. We walked around just absorbing the atmosphere, looking at the different shops and eventually headed back to the ship for dinner.

Rain: In all of our travels we seem to only get one day of rain on each trip. Today in Vienna it started to rain when we got on the bus to town, but stopped when we got off. On the bus ride back to the ship it started to rain again, and stopped when we got off the bus. We had umbrellas, but being from Seattle, we didn't use them.

Today was Carol's Birthday, and it true Tauck fashion they found out and did a great job of taking care of her. Some little bird (or a really big looking gooney bird) must have told them. We had a very pleasant evening dinner with some of our new friends and then the crew did a great job of celebrating Carol's Birthday. First off, there was a sparkler fountain with a birthday cake for her after dinner. When we got back to the room after dinner there was two towels shaped like swans and made into a heart with a little gift and a birthday card, signed by the crew and tour guides. Once again Tauck does it with



class!!!! It is just one more, of many, example of how Tauck takes care of you and treats you very special.

09/02/2017:

We spent the morning sailing from Vienna to Bratislava, Slovakia. This is usually a one-hour drive, but we spent the morning sailing down the Danube. During that time, we had a very informative speaker talk to us about the post-communist era and the creation of the nation of Slovakia. It was an incredible journey from communism to democracy, and it is still developing.

Bratislava is the capital of Slovakia and a very delightful city. I would like to come back



and spend a week or two, just exploring the many twisted streets. This country was devastated by WWII, and the devastation continued with the occupation of USSR and communism. The people seems to be friendly, happy and very inviting. Our guide took us on a 90-minute walk of city, which included jokes, anecdotes, legends and history. She was great, and very qualified to give a tour, with a PhD in history.

At the end of the tour we were treated, yet again, to a special treat arranged by Tauck. We stopped a local coffee house and were treated with an espresso and a unique Slovakian pastry. Since the Slovakian pastry had Walnuts, I didn't try any (I am allergic to Walnuts, but only a minor irritation). Our Tauck tour guide was willing to have the chef make me a pastry without Walnut, or substitute the pastry with fruit or another

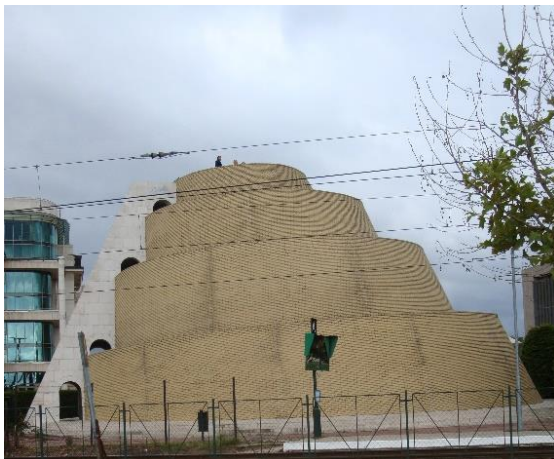
pastry. It was all that I could to say that it was not necessary. I ended up just enjoying the Espresso.

The also had a craft fair going on this weekend, which seemed to be all over the city. There were interesting exhibits, from iron workers to hand made lace to wood carvings to hand made pottery. It added a nice touch to our tour of Bratislava. I will have to say, that having travelled with Tauck for a little more than a week, I wouldn't have been surprised if Tauck had arrange the craft fair just for us.

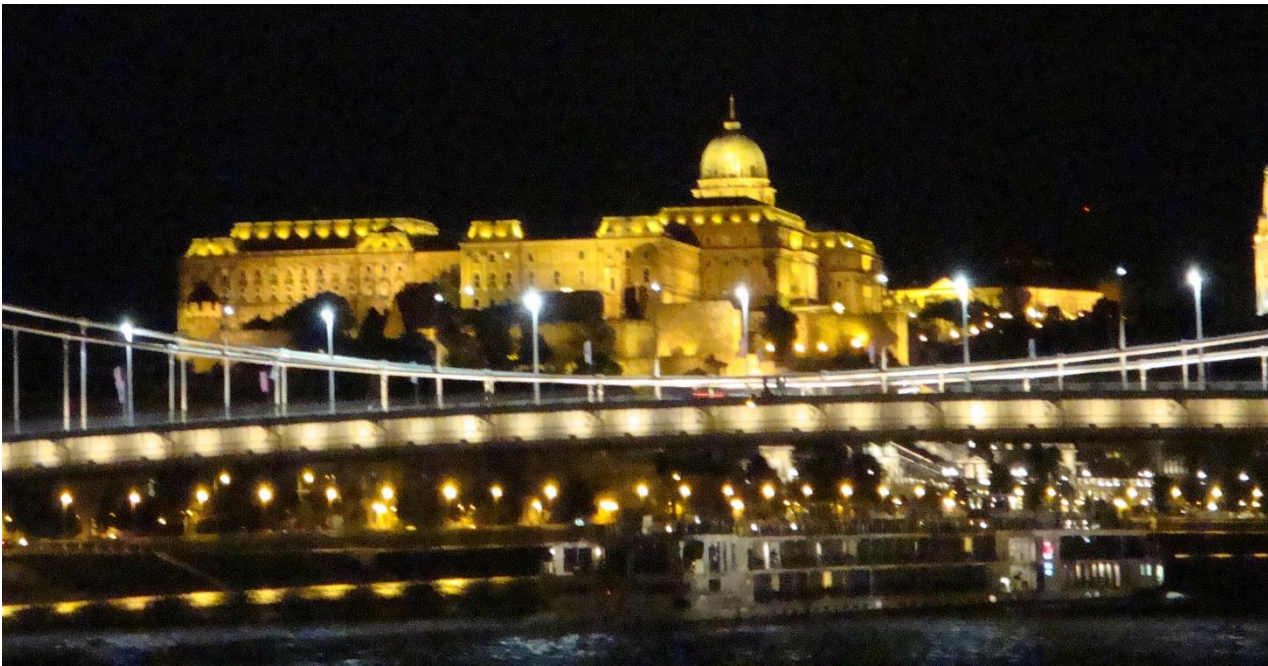
09/03/2017:

We arrived in Budapest pretty early, and after breakfast we took off for a guided bus tour of Budapest. In the history of Budapest, the year 1872 stands out as a milestone, for it was then that the three separate settlements of Pest, Buda and Óbuda (literally "Old" Buda) were united into one city with a population of more than 150,000. This was the city's golden age, and coincided with the Hungarian millennial celebrations in 1896 when the continental Europe's first underground railroad was opened. Our tour mostly was centered around the Buda section of Budapest. We took a driving tour of through the streets of Budapest, ending up with a long winding road to a hill top that was the center of Óbuda and the Fisherman's Bastion. Once again there was a street fair (no doubt set up for us by Tauck) that was selling used books. The high-light had to be the Fisherman's Bastion with it's gorgeous ceramic tile roof. From the Fisherman's Bastion we had a spectacular view of the Danube River and all of Budapest. We were allowed to wander the streets of Buda, on our own to absorb the culture and customs. Of course, just outside the Fisherman's Bastion and the Matthias Church was the Hilton Budapest Hotel and a Starbucks.

We got back to the ship in time for lunch, but then were invited for a two mile walk along the Danube River to a small structure called Babylon. It was about 2-3 stories tall and resembled what historians believe to be the Tower of Babel, of Old Testament Biblical fame. One of our Tauck tour guides was from Budapest and she led us on the walk to and from the Tower of Babel. During the walk we had a great discussion about Hungary, the economy and the history of the country. It was a very small group of six of us, so there was lots of opportunity ask questions and have a very enlightening conversation.



Back to the last night on board the ship. They had a farewell gathering and a typical very good dinner to celebrate. I took a few minutes and said good bye to my new friends and took some pictures of the view on the Danube of Budapest at night. Below is the Chain Bridge and Parliament at night. It was very spectacular and peaceful at the same time. I had the opportunity to just sit down and relax and enjoy the views.



09/04/2017:

We left the tremendous care of Tauck and were dropped off at the very luxurious, Boscolo Hotel. Some of the folks headed straight to the airport or train station for their next adventure, but we decided to stay an extra three days in Budapest. There were about 25-35 of us that extended our vacations in Europe by going to the Boscolo Hotel.

While the Boscolo Hotel is very beautiful, the personal care that Tauck gave us just didn't compare. We were dropped off about 10:30 and were informed, at check-in, that our room wouldn't be ready until about 3:00 that afternoon. It made it difficult to do anything in Budapest, we were kind of in limbo. We decided to have lunch at the hotel at the Famous New York Café with some of our new friends off the ship. Afterwards took a walk around Budapest to see what we could see and without getting too lost. During our walk we found the restaurant that we wanted to eat at that evening, the Aszu Etterem. The Tauck tour guide that I mentioned earlier, was from Budapest, and her fiancé was a chef in Budapest, so we asked him for a good restaurant recommendation. He supplied us with several good restaurants, one of which was the Aszu Etterem. We meandered back down Andrassy Utca (Street) to the hotel, and had about a five mile walk.



Later that evening we met up with some friends from the cruise, that extended their stay at the Boscolo Hotel, and had dinner at the Aszu Etterem. The Aszu Etterem served exquisite authentic Hungarian dishes. This was probably the best meal we had on the entire trip. The specialty was Chicken Paprika, and it was awesome. It was so good that Carol and I went back for a second dinner and our final night in Budapest.

As we made the transition from the cruise ship to the hotel, it was a little tough. Every morning, I got up a little earlier than Carol and went to the ship's Bistro for a Cappuccino. Carol would join me a little later and then we would head to the dining room for breakfast. At the Boscolo Hotel, our routine was about the same, but I had to leave our 4th floor room, walk across the very elegant lobby, down another royal stair way to the breakfast buffet, where Carol would eventually join me. Poor me!!!



09/05/2017:

As I had mentioned before we spent an additional three days in Budapest after we got off of the Tauck cruise. This allowed us to see Budapest a little more in-depth. It is the first time that I had the opportunity to visit a post-Communist country. We had one guide sum up the Communist occupation with her description of the architecture, which in some cases was several hundred years old. She identified the older buildings and the new buildings erected between 1946 and 1989 as the "Beauty and the Beast". It was very easy to identify the difference. The older building has architectural character, while the Communist erected buildings were efficient, minimalist and with no real architectural appeal.

One example of this was a building, nicknamed the "House of Terror", which was the building and location that was used by the Nazi's and Soviet's for interrogation, torture, imprisonment and execution anyone they didn't feel was in full support of the current regime. This was an extremely enlightening and depressing exhibit. It was said that if you were called to 60 Andrassy Utca (Street), you would never be that person again. I expected that it would take one to two hours to tour the "House of Terror", but it was so overwhelming, we were there for almost four hours. They did a great job with video, interviews and documentation, and it was an eye opener of the Nazi and Communist reign.



After the tour of the House of Terror, we walk another 1-2 miles to the “Heroes Square”, which was to honor the heroes from Hungary’s history. It was a very large square with lots of open space. It was located at the North-East end of Andrássy Utca (Street), which was lined with the embassies of several countries, and offices of major corporations.



09/06/2017:

Our last day was spent on a walking tour of the Jewish quarter, the Jewish WWII museum and the Dohány Street Synagogue, which claims to be the second largest Synagogue in the world, at least by one measurement. Our tour guide was a little disjointed and scattered in her presentation, but it was still eye-opening. It was obvious that she was knowledgeable, but wasn't highly skilled organizing her thoughts.



Our last night in Budapest was with a very relaxing repeat dinner at the Aszu Etterem restaurant. Again, the food was spectacular and the service was personable and refined to perfection. We mentioned that we were at the restaurant the other night and that this was going to be our last night in Budapest, so they treated us to a very good after dinner liqueur. I believe it was called, Unicum Liqueur, but I reserve the right to be wrong. A very special and fitting end to our trip.

Hungary's currency is called a Forint, and the conversion rates is approximately 275 Forints to one US dollar. After dinner I had 200 Forints "burning a hole in my pocket" on the walk back to the hotel. So, we found a desert café that served gelato for 75 Forints per scoop. Two scoops of ice cream and a 50 Forint tip, and our Hungarian currency was all spent.

Ms Esprit:

I thought that I would take a little time to describe our ship. The ms Esprit is small ship that holds a maximum of 118 passengers, and on this cruise only 98 passengers. All of the ships that cruise through central Europe are very close to the same size because of the restrictions of the locks. Some of the cruise ships has as many as 160 passengers, which makes the rooms even smaller than ours. There was one main dining room, a small Bistro for sitting down and eating a meal. Also, there is large bar and meeting area. The ship also has a very small sauna, beauty salon, message room and gym. When I say small it is very small, so small that the sauna can only seat one to two people, the gym only has two or three stationary bikes and hair stylist needs to stand in the hall way if she has a customer. There is also the upper deck that has a walking path and plenty of room for just sitting around and viewing the sights as we cruise by.



Our room was only 150 square feet, but I understand that the ms Esprit went through an over-haul this winter and reduced the number of passengers and increased the small 150 square foot rooms to 185 square feet. I could just barely lay on the floor to do my stretching exercises without hitting my head on the bed with my feet against the door. The bathroom was so small that you had to go outside just to turn around. That said, we really didn't spend a lot of time in the room, other than sleeping.



As I mentioned earlier there were only four actual Tauck employees. The entire ship's crew were all employees of the same organization. This included the Captain, beck hand, hotel manager, housekeeping, chef, servers and bar manager. Regardless of who signed their paychecks, they all had the same great Tauck attitudes and customer focused Tauck values.

One of the more interesting characters on board was ship's security officer, Emmanuel. I asked Emmanuel what his duties were, ship board security, computer security, and/or passenger security. His answer was simple, "Yes". He was responsible for all security. He and Carol struck up a friendship, and Carol greeted him every day with a very distinct "royal wave". Emmanuel was great to talk to and was very vigilante in the performance of his duties, especially when we were docked.



The other notable crew members were the bar manager, Kus and Putu Ani, one of the servers. They both always had a smile and seemed to know what you wanted before you wanted it. They never said NO!!!!

Summary

Overall this was one incredible trip. Tauck was the absolute best I have ever experience. The weather was a little warmer that I would have liked, (75-85 F^o), but it was nothing to complain about. It barely rained in Vienna, about 15-20 minutes, but just while we were on the bus.

Regardless of the cost, I would recommend that everyone take a Tauck trip once in their lives. At the very minimum it is a "bucket list" experience. We know that there will be more Tauck trips in our future. We were so impressed that we have coined a new adjective when you received great service: You have just been Taucked!!!!!!

Now it's time to start planning the next trip!!!!