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# DANUBE RIVER CRUISE

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## Tuesday, December 9, 2014 Day One, DFW misty 50's

We started out at 4:30 PM taking dogs to The Big Dog House for their two week vacation. An easy drive to airport and check in at the Hyatt Regency right in the airport for a relaxing night before tomorrow's two change flight into Prague, Czech Republic. Geri has asked what the room number is at least three times! We ate in the hotel restaurant (*an experience I would recommend you forego food's not bad but priced as if it were made of platinum*) and once back in the room we called Helen to see if she was ready and she was at a knitting meeting!?



View from room in DFW

Anyway, she is excited, they are leaving at 5:30 AM for the airport. She and her friend Rhoda are flying to London and then on to Prague. Even though they start earlier and only have a single change of planes, they will get to Prague about 3 hours after us.

## Wednesday , December 10, 2014 Day Two, DFW misty 40's, Minneapolis 18, overcast, snow on ground, Amsterdam 40's rainy.

Up at 6:30, left room by 7:30 and caught the 7:40 shuttle to terminal. As we reached terminal E, Geri went into pocketbook to get wallet for a tip. NO

WALLET! I explained to driver and he said go ahead and get tickets and he would go back to hotel. I also called the front desk and explained that wallet was in room. After tickets, Geri proceeded to the gate and I went back downstairs praying all the way. I hear a horn beeping, it's our driver! He had the pocketbook, needless to say he got a bigger tip than we had planned. We had an Einstein bagel and coffee all was good.

Trip to Minneapolis was uneventful and on time. Of course, gate for next flight was eight miles away, okay, it was far. We took one of those little people



carriers and it still took about ten minutes. Flight out to Minneapolis to Amsterdam was on an Airbus A330. We had the very first two seats in the plane, not counting the pilot's seat. Seat fully reclined into a bed and all positions in between. There was a TV screen that extended out for viewing. I watched Guardians of The Galaxy, glad I didn't pay to go see it. Geri

watched a TV series show. As an aside, there was snow on the ground in Minneapolis and it was the first and only time we saw snow on this trip.

## **Thursday, December 11, 2014**

### **Day Three, Amsterdam-40's, rainy;**

### **Prague-35, cloudy.**

Arrived in Amsterdam on time (6:35 AM) and had about a 15 minute walk to KLM (*Royal Dutch Airlines*) gate that also involved passport control station. We still made the gate with 35 minutes to spare even though layover was only 65 minutes. Plane was an embraier 190. Pretty small, but only three of us in first class, so a lot of room there.

Prague at last, 9:15 AM local time and "only" 15 hours travel time. Medium length walk to baggage area, only one bag out of three on carousel! Here we go again, seems we can't travel to Europe without having a bag or two missing. After filling out forms and collecting our one bag (*the one with the least stuff in it- making room for stuff we might buy*), we proceeded out of terminal and met the Viking representative. He directed us and three other couples to the bus and a 20 minute ride put us at the hotel. Orientation with our local Viking rep, Katarina, I gave Katarina the lost luggage information and off to our room. By the way, kudos to Viking, NOT!!, they never did follow up on the luggage and for all they know it is still missing.



View from room, rooftop garden with herbs for the kitchen.

After a bit of rest, we decided to go to dinner. Since Helen and Rhoda, were due in about the same time, it was no surprise to find them in orientation. They joined us for dinner but as we were finishing up, I noticed Rhoda was asleep in the chair, so we sent the two of them to bed.

One of our bags came to the room after three hours, it had been picked up by another passenger in Prague due to looking similar. Still no sign of the other.

## Friday, December 12, 2014

### Day Four, Prague - 35 to 40, partly cloudy.

Up pretty early for breakfast. It is buffet style, but the selections far exceed Marriott. No waffles however! Geri wanted to use curling iron, I plugged in adapter, but warned not to leave it long, since it wasn't a transformer. Well, in one minute, the plastic end melted off the curling iron, Geri tried to use and almost set hair on fire. Guess we'll have to buy a 220 volt curling iron for visits to Europe! The 110 model went into the trash along with a small portion of Geri's hair. if you read the journal from our trip to Scotland, you may see a similar story.



St. Vitus Cathedral

Second lost bag showed up after being AWOL for 15 hours, it was wet on the bottom, which means that it been left on the TarMac in Amsterdam, since that is the only place we had seen rain to this point.

Did walking tour of Prague today. Actually, we were bussed first to Prague Castle where kings and emperors of Austro-Hungarian Empire resided. We walked the grounds and entered a beautiful cathedral ( St. Vitus) where coronations were held from the days of Holy Roman Empire to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Currently, it is the home of the president and prime minister and other governmental officials.



The bus then took us through the neighborhood of the Palace area, probably the most expensive area in Prague.

The next phase of the tour took us along the Vltava River (*aka in German as the Moldau*), which is longest river in Czech Republic. We walked the length of Kampala Island, which had been created when a long canal was dug for numerous mills. This led to the Charles Bridge, oldest in Prague, used only for foot traffic. It was full of tourists, tourist traps, and pickpockets. We finally ended up in Old Town Square where the Christmas Markets were. Prague has 1,200,000 inhabitants and most were there! A bit of exaggeration but for a Friday it was jammed. I know the picture on left doesn't look too crowded, but this was the backside of the market.

Pastries, sausages, and drinks were available at the numerous kiosks around the square. Geri ate a blintz with strawberry filling and I bought a kielbasa for Helen and I, not sure what Rhoda ate. Geri and I returned to the hotel while H & R decided to explore.

Dinner in the hotel again, but tomorrow we'll hit one of the numerous pubs in the old town square area. I think I was asleep by 10:00.

## Saturday, December 13, 2014

# Day Five, Prague - 45-50, Sunny



Tree in Square in Prague

After a late start, Geri and I wandered through the area towards the Palladium mall. This was a huge shopping center with about five floors above ground and two below. We found a 220 volt curling iron! From now on we will take it to Europe and perhaps save Geri's hair!

Back to Christmas market to buy the famous pastry cooked over charcoals with vanilla, almonds, etc.

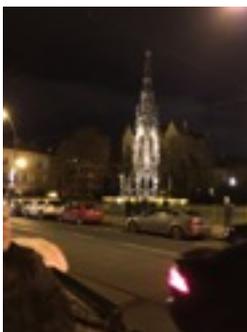
Neither Geri nor I thought they were that good ( *we found out later that Helen and Rhoda felt the same* ).

Joined up with H & R for a dinner in a pub at the town square, the place was quite small, with only about 10 tables, but we were lucky that one was available ( *considering the crowds* ). The food was excellent, varied and plentiful. Geri had chicken Alfredo with linguini and I had fish and rice. The lager was a local Czech dark one, that was excellent.



One of displays at market

After dinner, we went back into the market to see the lights. There were so many people in the square, but the tree was lovely as well as the other displays as you can see in photo of angel.



One of sights on carriage ride

Rhoda treated us to an hour carriage ride, where we travelled over a large part of Old Town. The ride was



pleasant and the driver pointed out city hall, library, etc. Great view of Charles Bridge all lit up for the night as well as the old buildings along the Vltava River. By the time we got back to hotel, it was almost 10:00 PM, well past my bedtime and we needed to prepare for leaving tomorrow.

## Sunday December 14, 2014

### Day Six, Prague - 45-50, Rain

We ate early and got our luggage prepared for trip to Nuremberg. Lunch from a Chinese takeaway was not very good and eaten in hotel lobby not much ambience as well. Of course, Katerina was no where to be found and never did return my lost luggage information nor ever ask if it was found, so much for customer service.

Ride to Nuremberg was about 4 ½ hours with one rest stop at an autobahn rest area, where the main restaurant was a McDonalds of all things. It rained throughout the entire trip. Our guide did try to entertain us with information about Nuremberg both ancient history and more modern.



Rainy day on Autobahn

We were the last group to arrive for the boat, at about 5:00 PM and had to rush with unpacking to make orientation at 6:15. The cabin is nice but has limited drawer space for clothing and the like. It was a two room suite, but the one room cabins had drawer space in an area next to cubby holes which was just an open space in our suite. HUH?? So, we had clothes piled up in various places and used small desk drawers as well.

Orientation dragged on a bit, these guides and program directors love to talk, it seems. There are 183 of us on board and we barely fit in lounge area, in fact a few folks were standing. Mario, the program director, loves to hear his voice and repeats stuff quite a bit, but he really wants us to have a good time.

Dinner was quite good, I had Red Snapper, which makes two days in a row with fish and rice. Geri thinks if I keep it up, I'll lose weight instead of gaining it, probably not going to happen.

## Monday, December 15, 2014

### Day Seven, Nuremberg - 45-50, Cloudy

We must have been very tired from the previous day's journey because I didn't hear the alarm and we awoke at 7:12. The tour was to leave at 7:30 and we decided that a late breakfast would be fine. So, we slept a bit more, after all we're on vacation.



Inside a lifting lock

So, we breakfasted at 9:00 as they were shutting down and Geri went back to bed while I explored the ship. It isn't very big, four decks, three with cabins and a sun deck on top.

In the early afternoon, we found hot dogs and had a snack.

The ship pulled out of port before the folks from the tour returned (they'll meet us after the first three locks on the canal) and I watched in fascination as we went through the first lock ( *there will be 25-26 of them* ). This was a lock to raise the ship as were the next four or five.

During dinner, we went through one that lowered us and next remainder of the night we continued to proceed through lowering locks. The canal connects the Rhine and Main rivers to the Danube. This had been a dream of Charlemagne in 793 and had been worked on periodically since, but the modern lock system was completed in 1992 almost 1200 years after its conception. This enables shipping to enter the Rhine in Holland on the North Sea and travel all the way to the Black Sea and of course out into the Mediterranean.

Dinner with Helen and Rhoda, food was average and service very poor. This does not seem the norm, but the chef's recommendation - scallops - were

both poorly done and there were three very small ones as the entire course. I had chateaubriand and it was prepared fine and was tasty. Our table had no food while all those around us were finishing dessert and one even had coffee. After Geri and I had left for our room, Helen and Rhoda and our dining companions complained to the maître d'. Of course, the maître de tried to say it was a normal rotation and the waitress blamed the chef who blamed the Maître de and the waitress. We had excellent service the rest of the week, but the food was often average.

After visit with Helen, who found our room despite all efforts to hide its location from her, out for the count

!

During night, I awakened to find us entering the top of a lock and descending. Ship doesn't stop at all but slowly moves forward and down.

## Tuesday, December 16, 2014

### Day Eight, Regensburg, 40-50, overcast

The countryside coming into Regensburg was lovely farmland with low rolling hills. The town was one of best preserved in Germany, since they surrendered early in 1945. The city dates back to Roman times and continues to have many Italians (30% according to guide) still living there. It was one of the last city-states to be absorbed into Holy Roman Empire.

After a leisurely breakfast, though the normal serving for pancakes was one half a cake (?!?!?!?) so I had to ask for double portions, we went on a



Narrow streets are the norm in these cities.

walking tour. Our guide walked too fast, and then when she stopped, she spent too long just standing. She was very knowledgeable, however, it was an overload of information and she often repeated facts as many as three, four times.



St PETER'S IN REGENSBURG

We visited St Peter's with high spires overlooking the town and it was there that our guide cut us free to visit the city and the Christmas markets. The markets were a disappointment compared to the main one in Prague.

The tour left us at St Peter's and Geri and I found an Italian pizzeria and had lunch there. We actually had decent pizza in a German city and I heard our waitress speak German, Italian and to us, English. We then wandered several blocks of narrow streets connected by passageways which led into and out of courtyards. We were back on board about 2:00 PM and actually took a nap. I guess the excitement is too much for us old farts.

## **Wednesday , December 17, 2014**

### **Day Nine, Passau, 40-50, partly sunny**

Such a lovely Bavarian town! The old part of the city is on a peninsula between the Inn and Danube rivers. The fortress for the city actually is on far side of Danube. I crossed the river to view the old section from there. However, the climb up was about a million steps and I decided I could only go half a million so I just admired it. The cliff face overlooking the town (which I would have had to climb was almost straight up and the trail zig-zagged up.

Then, I recrossed and wandered through the town. The Christmas market was bigger than those in Nuremberg and Regensburg and more varied in shops. It is still not as grand as the one in Prague. I made a small purchase of a snack for Geri and I, but did not see anything so spectacular that I had to have it. Perhaps, if Geri had been with me, there would have been a different perspective!



Christmas market in Passau

The cathedral in town was quite impressive and the organ could be heard outside. I almost tagged along with one of the tours from our boat (there was a 5 Euro fee otherwise), but since I could hear the organ anyway decided against it. Once again the streets were narrow with passages that went through courtyards from one street to another. It is easy to get lost, but since I was between two rivers, eventually going down would lead to one or the other.

Later, Geri and I walked down to the point of the peninsula, where you could see where the third river, the Ilz, joined. There was a nice park there and a good view of the low hills surrounding the city.



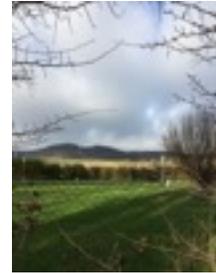
Confluence of three rivers

We took a small walk along the banks of the Inn River, before walking through town to get back to ship. Weather was cool but not completely unpleasant. I've only had my long underwear on twice and probably only needed it in Prague the first day.

## Thursday, December 18, 2014

## Day Ten, Melk-Wachau-Vienna 45-50, partly Sunny, windy

We arrived in Melk, Austria, home of a famous Abbey, this was a short 2 hour stay, and I decided to just walk up to the town instead of taking the tour which was too early in the morning. The scenery along the Danube at the point was very beautiful.



Since it was sunny, I had a nice 35 minute walk to about halfway to the village. Many of our fellow travelers were heading back so I decided to forego the market, which I learned later was a good choice since it was one of the smallest so far. However missing a visit to the Melk Abbey was probably a mistake since everyone said how beautiful it was. Helen and Rhoda, of course, did go up to see it. It was a bus ride to the top and it was early and I was lazy, but I do rue it now.

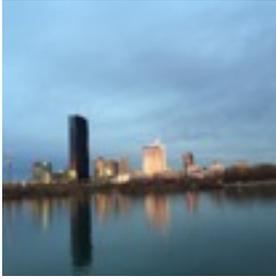
We then headed down the Wachau Valley probably the most scenic part of the Danube of our trip. This was about the only time we travelled by daylight to enjoy the sights. I understand that in order for us to see city sights, we have to travel at night to get there, but another day of scenic travel would be nice.



View on Danube in Wachau Valley

This would lead us to Vienna. The day was nice and the scenery was semi-mountainous on both sides of the river. At one point we went 15-20 miles without seeing a bridge, I guess if you lived on one side and wanted to visit someone on the other, you had to either own a boat or drive quite a ways. There

weren't too many houses along this section so perhaps it wasn't such a big deal.



Vienna at dusk

We arrived in Vienna just after dark and the lit up city was grand. Helen and Rhoda went on an optional excursion to hear an opera as did many others so dinner was much quieter and we got to sit with and meet two new couples. We have been sitting mainly with two couples (the women are sisters) and they all went to the musical option. After dinner, I went topside for a view of the lights of the city which was jewel-like. We will be here all of tomorrow and we have a tour of the downtown scheduled, so we'll see quite a bit more.

## Friday, December 19, 2014

### Day Eleven, Vienna 55-60, Sunny, windy

We took the combo riding/walking tour of Vienna in the morning and our guide was a young woman who was interesting and very excited to be showing us her city. This was a half day tour with one hour free time at the end in the center city.

We drove around the Ringstrasse (Ring Road) which circles palaces, churches and government buildings within the Innere Stadt (Inner City). The architecture is stunning and was built by various Hapsburg rulers.



As the walking tour progressed we went through the Hofberg Palace, which was four sided that surrounded a huge courtyard.

We received a bonus when the famous Lipizzan horses from the Spanish Riding School of Vienna walked from the training arena through the passage was to the stables, right in front of us. This might have been another highlight of the trip for Geri (remember the carriage ride above!!). The tour guide was really excited since she had been giving tours for some time and had only seen a horse or two poke their heads out of the stalls.



We then visited St. Stephens Cathedral with a marvelous spire and ornate furnishings inside. Free time on the square at the cathedral lasted about an hour and there was of course another Christmas market there. There were also a lot of shops as well, which may have been more interesting than the market. Rhoda had a friend who sings opera in Vienna (she had been in Philadelphia with the opera there before returning



Panorama of the far side of river at Vienna

market

I managed

before dinner, look at the photo album on the website for that.

home to Austria) and we met her on the square. She and Rhoda went off to catch up over a cup of coffee while Helen, Geri and I toured the

and shops around the square.

to get a photo of the sunset over Vienna just

We had the Captain's reception and farewell dinner just after the ship took sail for Budapest, hard to believe we are almost finished. Geri and I arrived early to dinner and were invited to serve ourselves from the kitchen. The cooks and the chefs were pointing out all the typical Austrian fare.

During dinner, on our way to Budapest, at about 8:00 PM, we passed by Bratislava, in Slovakia, it was all lit up and i guess we could count Slovakia as one of the countries we visited even if it was just on the border. I wasn't able to get a photo, since it was on the opposite side of the river .

## Saturday, December 20, 2014

### Day Twelve, Budapest 55-60, Sunny, Light Breeze

We arrived in Budapest about 7:30 AM and the ship need to get to dock and turn around for the next cruise starting tomorrow afternoon. We will be here all day and night and first impressions tell us that this is probably the prettiest city of the bunch. Followed closely by Prague and then Vienna.

We were able to see the sunrise over the Pest side of the river and illuminating the government buildings on the Western side or Buda side of the Danube. Many think it is two cities, but it has been unified into one since 1873.

The Pest side is hilly and has a bluff overlooking the river. It contains the palaces and churches as well as the home of the President. On the Buda side, which is a flat plain, the Parliament and home of the Prime Minister line the river.

Geri decided to spend day on board, so I went on the tour with Helen and Rhoda.

We first went on the Buda side and our guide described the various monuments to heroes of the past including those who revolted against the Communist government in 1958 which caused the Soviets to send in the army with tanks



Monument to Heroes on St Stephen's Square

to quell it. There was an artificial lake in the middle of the city with an outdoor ice skating rink which serves as a swimming pool in summer.



Chain Bridge

We crossed the chain bridge, one of earliest over the Danube (there are 17) which like all others in Budapest was destroyed by the Nazis as the Russians approached the city, all have been restored or rebuilt - the chain bridge was restored to earlier

specifications. This is a suspension bridge and the cables connectors look like links of a bicycle chain from which it gets its name.

On the Pest side we went up to the Palace compound that overlooks the city. The palace today is mainly the office of the President and one wing is being remodeled to be the office of the Prime Minister.

Along the way from the palace to Matthias Church, the guide pointed out a vehicle on the opposite side of the street. It was a Trabant (companion in German) which is always on the list of the worst cars ever produced. It had a two cycle engine and the best produced near the end of production generated 26 horsepower. The body was made of recycled materials molded into a plastic shell. Hungarians and others behind the iron curtain bought them because they were cheap and our guide was surprised to see one still in operation.

The Cathedral was great and there was a small group of young children practicing songs for a nativity play and the acoustics were great making their small voices very big.

We went out on the Fisherman's bastion where a great view of the Parliament building on the other side could be had. We wandered with Becky and Bill into a cafe and we all had coffee and cake - well not all, I had a Pepsi!

When I got back to the ship, I found that Geri had begun to pack and had made really good headway, she also had an abundance of photos of various points of interest which strangely had the word “Sony” on the bottom. This corresponds to the logo on the TV in our bedroom, is there a connection?

## **Sunday, December 21, 2014**

### **Day Thirteen, Budapest 40-45, Cloudy, Windy; Amsterdam 50-55 Rainy**

All things must come to an end. Helen and Rhoda had to be up early to catch a 5:30 AM bus to airport, so we had said goodbye the night before since we had a 10:15 bus. We had to be out of our rooms by 9:00 AM so we spent the next hour in the lounge chatting with fellow travelers. The public bathrooms on the boat had been broken for about 3 days so, this made it difficult for us after breakfast (*why they hadn't fixed them is anybody's guess, especially since a new cruise is leaving this PM*), but our maid was gracious and let us back in to us the bathroom.

The bus ride to the airport was about 25 minutes, giving us plenty of time to make our 12:45 PM flight to Amsterdam. Getting our tickets and checking luggage was a bit confusing, mainly due to language barriers, but a Viking Rep helped us. Going through security was not too difficult and then we had time to visit the Sky Priority Lounge and relax for about 45 minutes with free snacks, clean bathrooms, Wi-Fi, and comfortable chairs.

As we were making our way to the gate, Geri discovered that she didn't have her new windbreaker we had bought on board the ship. So, assuming that we



777-300ER our ride home

had left it at security, we went back and asked if one had turned up. After a few minutes, it appeared that it hadn't. On the way to the gate, I decided to go back to the lounge and ask and sure enough, it was there!

Flying over Holland, we could see miles and miles of canals, flooded fields, streams and ponds. In the airport, we had to go through

passport control to get to our gate, but this was not a lot of trouble except it meant another pass through security. ***{An aside here to mention that security in every airport and country is different, some want iPads in, some out, shoes on, shoes off, coats on, coats off - I wish they would agree on a protocol - maybe they have: make it as confusing as possible!}*** Our flight to Atlanta was due to leave at 4:45 PM and actually left at 5:15. Since our layover for connection was only an hour and a half to begin with, this made me nervous, but we still had an hour!

The flight fought fierce headwinds all the way and ended up landing another 15 minutes late, giving us 45 minutes to make our flight to Dallas. First, a 5 minute walk to passport control, 5 minutes in passport control. Another 5 minutes to go through yet again another security check. Then, ***{and I don't know why}*** we had to get our bags off the carousel and put them on another one if we are transferring planes. The Atlanta airport baggage handlers are among the slowest in the world, so it took 20 minutes to achieve this. We now have less than 10 minutes to make the flight, which is on the farthest concourse and required a train ride from concourse to concourse, six in all.

We missed the flight by 5 minutes and there are no more flights anywhere by Delta that night. While I turned to talk to the gate personnel, Geri thought I had taken off back the way we came and didn't see me go to the gate area. I thought she was right behind me and after several minutes getting a room for the night and new tickets for the morning, I turned to find NO GERI!

I looked up and down the concourse wing and finally had to leave the secured area and after a frantic 35 minutes, I rebooted my phone (which kept telling me no service) and saw that she had been trying to find me. She had gotten on the train and gone back a couple of stations, thinking that is what I had done and was now in concourse two away from where I was.

All's well that ends well, but I was petrified and so was she. I think we were so brain dead that we weren't thinking clearly and I was walking pretty fast to get to the gate. Geri can't keep up, but I normally look back and slow down for her to catch up. But, catching a plane isn't worth having a lost wife!

## **Monday, December 22, 2014**

### **Day Fourteen, Atlanta 40-45, Rain; Dallas 50-55 Sunny**

A quick trip to the Marriot in Atlanta and we bought some junk food and milk to tide us over and found our room. Our flight was at 7:30 AM so we wouldn't get much sleep and we don't have any luggage except our under-seat carryons. Fortunately, we have our medicines and some clothing (*of course, I have no clean underwear left*). I tried to take a shower since we had been on the road so long, and NO hot water or SOAP. I'm glad the room didn't cost anything.

Flight from Atlanta on time and smooth, all luggage made it with us and a call to the Hyatt eventually got us a van to take us back to the hotel to collect our car. As I was settling into van, Geri handed me my passport folio which I had left curbside while loading the luggage. God continues to look out for us!

Dog picked up and all luggage emptied and laundry started all by noon. I guess we'll sleep tonight!