

Travel

YVONNE GORDON



Going with the

flow

Sliding down the meandering Danube, an adventurous cruise creates waves of activity for *Yvonne Gordon*

From the 700m-high Dobogoko peak in the Visegrad hills in Hungary, the River Danube appears as a light blue slash of colour across the landscape, mirroring the sky and standing out from the green and brown of the hills before disappearing behind a mountain.

The Danube starts its journey in the Black Forest in Germany, flowing through Vienna in Austria, then Bratislava in Slovakia, before it comes here to Esztergom in Hungary, at the foot of the hills. I started my journey on the river in Vienna three days ago, to cruise to Budapest, stopping along the way for some adventures.

This point in the Danube is where it curves around an almost right-angle bend – we are viewing part of the curve from the hilltop – before it carries on to Budapest, Belgrade and finally the Black Sea, a total journey of 2,850km.

Here in the Hungarian hills, a sign at the viewpoint indicates the names of peaks opposite us, such as Szekreny-hegy, and towns such as Szob and Pilismarot. This is definitely not on the main tourist track but it's a peaceful spot with views that go on and on. Apparently on a clear day you can see as far as the High Tatras in Slovakia.

To get to the mountain top I signed up to join a group cycling trip in the hills. We've already biked 14km up the mountain over two hours. Even cheating with e-bikes, parts of the climb are challenging, but we cycle on mostly peaceful forest ways off the main road, apart from one last section where we meet cars.

We walk the last kilometre to this viewpoint on marked hiking trails, where a guide is waiting for us with some chimney cake, known locally as kurtoskalacs; a spit cake made with sweet dough, baked over hot coals and flavoured with ingredients such as

Continued on page 24 →

28

AS YOU LIKE IT
ENGLISH
ICONS
STAND OUT
IN THE
HEART
OF THE
COUNTRY



Left: luxe suites offer views of the Danube, top. Below: city stops take in landmarks such as Vienna's Strauss statue



Travel

→ Continued from page 23

cinnamon, perfect to replenish our energy after the cycling. Some people feel their energy replenished from the earth here – the mountains are of volcanic origin and it is said that one of the earth's heart chakras is here. Even the Dalai Lama has visited and blessed a rock.

As well as cycling, the other excursion options for the day are a hike in the same mountains; a wine tasting within Esztergom's basilica; or a traditional dance performance and tasting of palinka, the local fruit spirit.

The cruise itself, on a new Avalon Waterways ship, is designed to have a choice of options, from active adventures such as hiking and cycling, discovery activities including cooking classes and art, or classic excursions to museums and music performances. All the excursions are included and the best part is that you can mix it up, choosing adventure one day and culture the next. You can also organise your own itinerary at the stops – the boat has a dedicated adventure host who will provide maps and gear and arrange a picnic, while the ship has its own bikes for guests to use.

Back on board for lunch after the cycle, I open the floor-to-ceiling windows in my cabin, sliding them right across to create an open-air balcony. From here I can take in the view over the wide expanse of the river, which is fast-flowing and sometimes appears more brown than blue close-up. On the ship there's plenty to do with a rooftop hot tub, a giant outdoor chess set, sun loungers and a view of the basilica with its green dome.

We've only been on board four days, but the pace grows more relaxed as we cruise along. On our first day in Vienna everyone arrived on the ship and got orientated, with free time in the city before dinner on board, followed by an evening in Vienna with a string quartet concert at Belvedere Palace and a tour of the collection of work by the symbolist artist Gustav Klimt, who was born in a suburb of the city in 1862.

The next day I signed up for a cycle tour of Vienna, so we set off from right beside the ship in the morning, taking dedicated cycle paths along a graffiti-filled bridge into the city. We passed lots of junctions and crossings – for cars, trams and cyclists – as locals whizzed past us while we pedalled slowly along like typical tourists in wonder at our surroundings, stopping at intervals for information from our guide. We heard the history of the opera house, saw the Strauss statue in the Stadtpark, and navigated the streets of shops and coffee houses, passing the ornate Spanish Riding School with rows of horses and carriages waiting outside.

A cycling tour is an eco-friendly and leisurely way to get around the city, as the paths are mostly flat, although you need to avoid the traffic and fast-moving cyclists and try not to lose your guide. Thankfully we knew we were going to finish up at the giant Ferris wheel, which is visible from a long way away, so it's easy to stay orientated.

The Riesenrad is 65 metres high and dates back to 1897. Each gondola holds about ten people. It moves slowly, giving passengers a chance to take in the views during a gentle spin of 15 to 20 minutes. There are vistas of the city beyond and down over the rest of the Prater amusement park below.

Later, back on board ship, with everyone beaming after a good day, we swapped stories and photographs with those who took other excursions –



Vienna highlights include the Belvedere Palace, top, and the ornate Palais Ferstel passageway, above left. Back on board you can relax in the hot tub, above right, before exploring the streets of Budapest, right



“
Overall, although there is plenty of adventure, the river cruise is relaxed

including a cooking class and a horse and carriage ride.

Overall, although there is plenty of adventure, the river cruise is relaxed. There's free time in Vienna, Bratislava and in Budapest at the end (depending on your flight times), but it's also lovely to experience the quiet hills and nature on the hiking and biking excursions, in contrast to the buzz of the cities.

At Bratislava I sign up for a wine tour in the vineyards of Raca. I realise the pace will be quite relaxed when we are all handed a wine glass as we start walking. It's a sunny and warm day as we stroll the gentle hills and vineyards.

As we walk, we learn about the frankovka modra grape variety that grows on these slopes. In medieval times inhabitants of the Raca area used frankovka as a cure for rheumatism, fevers and throat pain, and as late as the 1930s doctors could still be seen harvesting grapes along with winemakers.

We taste the wines, starting with a rosé, and quickly learn how to say cheers in Slovakian – *na zdravie*. The vineyard we are in is 48 years old and this is one of six wine-producing regions in Slovakia. During the tour we also visit a small winery, where the winemaker Dusan Zitny answers our questions.

The nature excursions also chime with the subtle sustainability ethos on board the ship. It's great to see companies like Avalon recognising the need to preserve the natural surroundings of the world's rivers, and the company has linked up with the Ocean Cleanup, which also runs projects to get rid of plastics in rivers. Some initiatives on the ships include eliminating most single-use plastics, using LED lighting and having policies to reduce emissions, limit energy and use locally produced food and drinks.

Even some of the smaller touches, such as being able to fill your water bottle in the morning from a dispenser with vitamin-fortified water, take a bike and explore an area in an eco-friendly way, or eat a dish from the local area in the evening, all improve the experience and bring in elements of sustainability and responsibility to what is a lovely way to travel.

An eight-day Active & Discovery cruise on the River Danube with Avalon Waterways starts from €1,405 per person sharing, including all meals and excursions. There are similar itineraries on the Rhine, Rhone, Moselle and Seine for 2022 and 2023; avalonwaterways.co.uk