

RIVER CRUISING GUIDE

The Danube

Passau to Budapest, the Wachau and the places in between

GORDON SADLER TRAVEL

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About this guide

The River Cruising Guide is published by Gordon Sadler Travel. It breaks down what each waterway is truly like—the routes ships sail, the ports of call, and the best seasons to travel.

You might be drawn by a single landmark you've always wanted to see—like the Spanish Riding School in Vienna or the castles of the Rhine Gorge—and want to discover what else that river has to offer. You might simply be looking for fresh inspiration for your next journey, or you may have already booked and want to explore the details of the voyage ahead. Whatever brings you here, this guide helps you connect with the river itself, giving you the full picture before, during, or after choosing your cruise.

Truly Independent

We created The River Cruising Guide to offer an honest, inspiring, and completely impartial look at the world’s waterways. Whether you're planning your very first river cruise or have lost count of the rivers you've sailed, our goal is to give you genuine facts, beautiful imagery, and practical tips you can trust. Every line sailing a river is included—even those we don't book—and no one can buy a better ranking or a glowing review. It’s all about helping you explore with confidence.

First-Hand Insight

Wherever possible, we showcase our own photography, video, and personal notes captured during our travels on the rivers. We want to show you the waterways as they really are, not just how the marketing brochures portray them. For complete peace of mind and integrity, any imagery or commentary originating from an operator-sponsored trip is clearly marked.

This PDF is the first edition of the Danube section. The latest version is always at rivercruisingguide.co.uk. Itineraries change from year to year, so check the sailing you are considering.

In this guide

1. The Danube
2. Passau to Budapest
3. Places on the route
4. Featured location: the Wachau
5. Themes: wine, music, Christmas markets

RIVER

The Danube



Melk Abbey above the Danube

Europe's second-longest river, and the one most people mean when they think of a river cruise. The Danube runs from Germany's Black Forest to the Black Sea, past four capital cities. Most cruises sail the stretch between Passau and Budapest: baroque abbeys, vineyard terraces, Vienna and the Danube Bend, in a week.

The Danube is usually cruised in three parts. The upper river through Bavaria leads to Passau, where most cruises begin. The middle stretch, from Passau through Austria, Slovakia and Hungary to Budapest, is the classic week and the busiest river cruise route in Europe. Below Budapest the river runs through Croatia, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria, through the Iron Gates gorge and on to the Danube Delta on the Black Sea. That lower river is quieter, longer and needs more time. Since 1992 the Main–Danube Canal has linked the river to the Main and the Rhine, so a ship can sail all the way from Amsterdam to Budapest and beyond.

FROM MY OWN TRAVELS

I've sailed this stretch myself, heading upstream from Vienna to Passau in mid-autumn. What stayed with me most was an early morning on the top deck sailing through the Wachau Valley: crisp air, mist clinging to the water, and sunlight cutting through to illuminate the golden vineyard terraces in the Wachau.

Gordon Sadler, 2024

On a trip hosted by the cruise line

At a glance

Length	About 2,850 km; sources range from 2,850 to 2,888 km depending on where the river is measured from
Navigable	About 2,415 km
Source and mouth	Named from Donaueschingen in the Black Forest, where the Brigach and Breg meet; reaches the Black Sea through the Danube Delta in Romania and Ukraine
Countries	Ten: Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova and Ukraine
Capital cities on the river	Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest and Belgrade
Typical cruise	7 nights, Passau to Budapest, either direction or a round trip; Lower Danube cruises are usually 10 to 15 nights
UNESCO World Heritage on the classic route	The Wachau Cultural Landscape (2000); the Historic Centre of Vienna (2001); Budapest, including the Banks of the Danube, the Buda Castle Quarter and Andrássy Avenue (1987, extended 2002)



The Danube: the classic route and the Lower Danube

From Passau through Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania to the delta at Tulcea.

Map data: Natural Earth; GeoNames (CC BY 4.0). Test map, not to final style.

The Danube and its main cruise ports

When to go

January	Few or no sailings.
February	Few or no sailings.
March	Season opens late in the month. Apricot blossom in the Wachau from mid-March to mid-April.
April	**Best month.** Spring; apricot blossom in the Wachau; Easter markets in Vienna, Bratislava and Budapest.
May	**Best month.** Mild weather, long days.
June	**Best month.** Long days; summer music in Vienna, including large free open-air events.
July	Hot in the cities; Vienna's opera and concert halls largely close for summer. Low water is possible in dry summers.
August	As July. Wachau apricot harvest, mid-July to mid-August.
September	**Best month.** Grape harvest begins; the Vienna music season reopens.
October	**Best month.** Autumn colour in the Wachau; harvest and new wine.
November	Christmas markets open in mid-November; Christmas market sailings start in the second half of the month.
December	**Best month.** Christmas markets in Passau, Vienna, Bratislava and Budapest, usually until late December; short days and cold.

Sources: Danube (Wikipedia); List of tributaries of the Danube (Wikipedia); Wachau Cultural Landscape (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Historic Centre of Vienna inscribed on List of World Heritage in Danger (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Budapest, including the Banks of the Danube, the Buda Castle Quarter and Andrássy Avenue (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

ROUTE · 7 NIGHTS

Passau to Budapest

A week on the Danube from Bavaria to Hungary, through Austria and Slovakia, with three capital cities and the Wachau valley. It is the most popular river cruise in Europe and a good first river cruise.

This is the river cruise most people start with, and it is easy to see why. In seven nights the ship travels from Passau on the German border, through the Austrian Danube and the Wachau valley, to Vienna, Bratislava and Budapest. The distances are short, the sailing is calm, and most days begin with the ship already moored in the middle of a town.

The first half of the week is the quieter part: Passau's old town on its point between the rivers, then Linz, then Melk Abbey and the Wachau. The best sailing of the week is usually here. This is a stretch to enjoy from the ship: itineraries cruise the terraced vineyards between Melk and Krems in daylight, letting you soak in the Danube's finest scenery straight from the top deck. The second half is the big cities. Vienna normally gets a full day; Bratislava is small enough to see on foot in a morning; and the arrival into Budapest, past the Parliament building, is one of the great river approaches in Europe.

The route runs in both directions and as a round trip, and the ports included vary from operator to operator. The stops listed here are the ones that come up most often. Check the itinerary of the sailing you are considering; we can help with that.



Passau to Budapest: the usual stops

The week, stop by stop

- DAY 1 **Passau** Most itineraries
  Embarkation. Some ships board at Vilshofen, about 20 km upstream, and sail to Passau the next day.
- DAY 2 **Linz** Most itineraries
  Often a base for full-day excursions to Salzburg or Český Krumlov rather than a visit to Linz itself.
- DAY 3 **Melk** Most itineraries
  Some ships moor at Emmersdorf on the opposite bank and take passengers to the abbey by coach.
- DAY 3 **The Wachau** Seen from the ship
  Sailed in daylight between Melk and Krems on most itineraries; worth being on deck.
- DAY 3 **Spitz and Weissenkirchen** Some itineraries
  Occasional mooring for wine tastings and walks.
- DAY 3 **Dürnstein** Most itineraries
  Often a short stop combined with Melk on the same day.
- DAY 3 **Krems** Some itineraries
- DAY 4 **Vienna** Most itineraries
  Usually a full day; some itineraries stay into the evening or overnight for a concert.
- DAY 5 **Bratislava** Most itineraries
  A compact old town, explored on foot.
- DAY 6 **Esztergom** Some itineraries
  Short stop or passed at the start of the Danube Bend.
- DAY 6 **Visegrád** Seen from the ship
  Seen from the river on the Danube Bend; occasional stops.
- DAY 6 **Szentendre** Reached by coach
  Usually reached by coach from Budapest rather than by ship.
- DAY 7 **Budapest** Most itineraries
  Usually a full day, often with an evening sailing past the floodlit Parliament. Disembarkation on day 8.

Days are typical. Many itineraries sail the other way, from Budapest to Passau, and many are round trips from Passau, Vilshofen or Budapest that stop at the same places in a different order. The order of Melk and Dürnstein, and whether Linz, Esztergom or Krems is included, varies by operator and by sailing date. Longer versions start further upstream at Regensburg or Nuremberg, which brings in the Main–Danube Canal.

Who sails this route

These cruise lines sail the classic week, or a close version of it that passes through Passau, listed alphabetically. The guide is independent: lines do not pay to be included, and the list includes lines we do not book with.

A-ROSA	From Passau
Amadeus River Cruises	Passau to Budapest, either direction, and round trips from Passau
AmaWaterways	Vilshofen (near Passau) to Budapest, either direction
APT	Nuremberg to Budapest via Passau; also longer voyages from Amsterdam
Avalon Waterways	Vilshofen (near Passau) to Budapest
CroisiEurope	Passau to Budapest
Emerald Cruises	Budapest to Munich, boarding or leaving the ship near Passau
Riverside Luxury Cruises	Passau to Budapest, either direction, and longer round trips from Passau
Saga River Cruises	Regensburg to Budapest via Passau, either direction
Scenic	Munich (from Passau) to Budapest, either direction
Trafalgar	Budapest to Passau, either direction
Travelmarvel	Passau to Budapest with time in Munich, either direction
TUI River Cruises	Passau to Budapest, and round trips from Budapest calling at Passau
Uniworld	Passau to Budapest, either direction
Viking	Passau to Budapest, either direction; also from Regensburg
VIVA Cruises	Round trips from Passau, taking in Vienna, Budapest and Bratislava

Checked in November 2026 against the lines' own published itineraries and those of their agents. Itineraries change from year to year; check the sailing you are considering.

Places on the route

1. **Passau** Germany
2. **Linz** Austria
3. **Melk** Austria
4. **The Wachau** Austria
5. **Spitz and Weissenkirchen** Austria
6. **Dürnstein** Austria
7. **Krems** Austria
8. **Vienna** Austria
9. **Bratislava** Slovakia
10. **Esztergom** Hungary
11. **Visegrád** Hungary
12. **Szentendre** Hungary
13. **Budapest** Hungary

GERMANY · DAY 1, MOST ITINERARIES

Passau



Passau sits on a narrow point of land where the Inn and the little Ilz join the Danube, and many classic Danube cruises start here. The old town was rebuilt in Italian Baroque style after a fire in 1662, and St Stephen's Cathedral holds what the city describes as the largest cathedral organ in the world. The Veste Oberhaus fortress looks down from the hill opposite.

FROM MY OWN TRAVELS

The organ recital at Passau cathedral is a must. The power of the organ is amazing.

Gordon Sadler, 2024

On a trip hosted by the cruise line

Good to know

- Three rivers meet here: the Danube, the Inn and the Ilz.
- St Stephen's Cathedral was rebuilt from 1668 after the city fire of 1662.
- The cathedral organ has 17,974 pipes and 233 stops; the city calls it the largest cathedral organ in the world.
- Midday organ concerts are held in the cathedral in season.



Passau old town and St Stephen's Cathedral above the river in summer

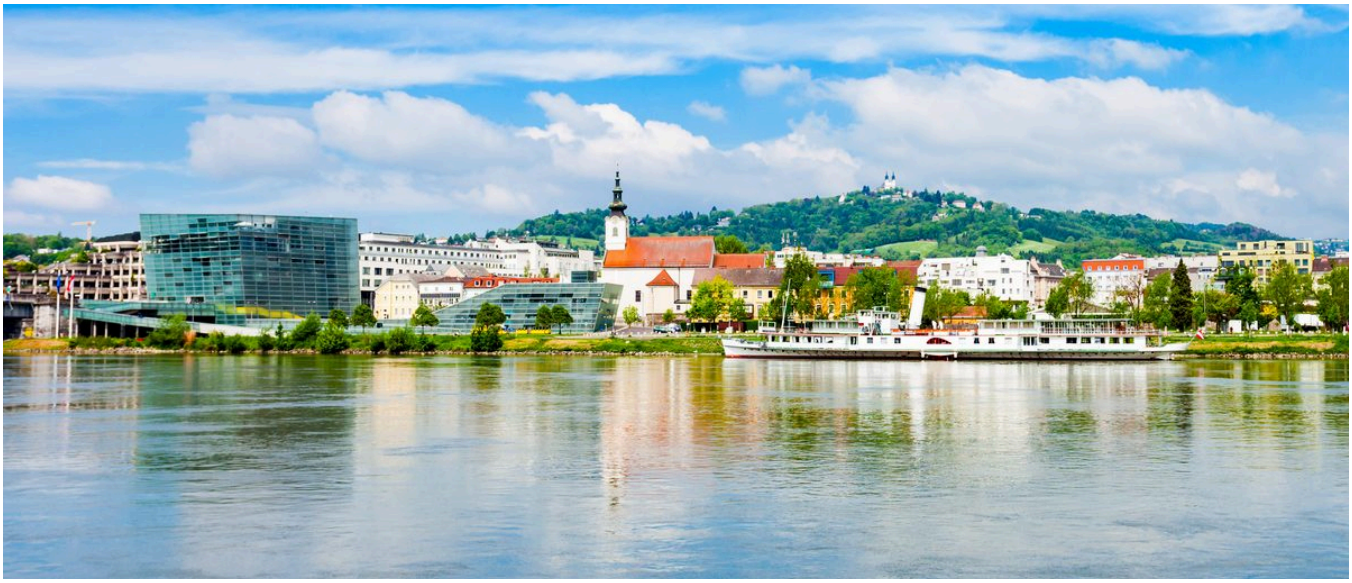


Panorama over Passau old town and the rivers from above

Sources: St. Stephen's Cathedral, Passau (Wikipedia); St. Stephen's Cathedral (Passau Tourism); Danube (Wikipedia).

AUSTRIA · DAY 2, MOST ITINERARIES

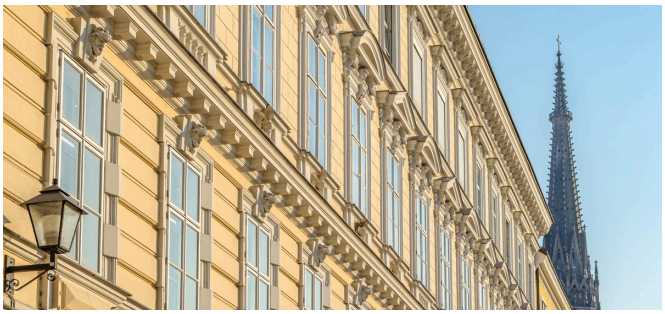
Linz



The capital of Upper Austria is a working river city with a strong modern arts scene; it was European Capital of Culture in 2009. The Hauptplatz is one of the largest town squares in Austria, the neo-Gothic Mariendom is the country's largest church by capacity, and a steep tramway climbs the Pöstlingberg for the view. Many cruise passengers use Linz as the base for a day in Salzburg or Český Krumlov.

Good to know

- European Capital of Culture in 2009.
- The Mariendom (New Cathedral) is the largest church in Austria by capacity, holding around 20,000 people.
- The Pöstlingbergbahn climbs to the 539-metre Pöstlingberg in about 20 minutes and is one of the steepest adhesion railways in the world.
- Home of the Linzer Torte, said to be the oldest known cake recipe in the world.



Ornate facade in Linz with the spire of the New Cathedral (Mariendom) beyond

Sources: Linz 2009 European Capital of Culture (Linz09); Linz Top Ten (Linz Tourismus).

AUSTRIA · UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE · DAY 3, MOST ITINERARIES

Melk



Melk Abbey, gold and cream on its rock above the town, marks the western gate of the Wachau and is one of the great Baroque buildings of Europe. Benedictine monks have lived here since 1089; the present abbey was built between 1702 and 1736 to designs by Jakob Prandtauer. The library and the view from the terrace are the highlights.

Good to know

- Founded in 1089, when Margrave Leopold II gave one of his castles to Benedictine monks from Lambach Abbey.
- The Baroque abbey was built between 1702 and 1736 to designs by Jakob Prandtauer.
- The library holds many rare medieval manuscripts.
- Some ships moor at Emmersdorf on the opposite bank and take passengers to the abbey by coach.
- The Melk lock, at the power station about 2 km upstream of the town, frames the abbey between its gates as ships pass through.

From the ship

Where ships moor	At the landing stages on the river below the town. Some ships moor instead at Emmersdorf, on the opposite bank, or further upstream, and take passengers to the abbey by coach.
Into town	About five minutes on foot to the main street. The old town is small: ten to fifteen minutes from one end to the other, on cobbles.
Up to the abbey	About 30 minutes uphill on foot, quicker coming down. Most cruise lines run a coach or shuttle to the abbey; a taxi is the alternative.
Busy days	In high season ships sometimes moor alongside each other, and you cross another ship's deck to reach the shore.

Visiting the abbey

A guided tour takes about an hour. It covers the former imperial rooms, now the abbey museum; the Marble Hall, with its painted ceiling; the balcony between the Marble Hall and the library, with its view along the Danube; and the library itself, two storeys of books and manuscripts. You then see the Abbey Church on your own: High Baroque, all gold and marble under a great dome. Photography is not allowed in the interiors.

April to October	Open daily, 9.00 to 17.30 (last admission 17.00), with or without a guide. The abbey park and its Baroque garden pavilion are open too.
November to March	Visits by guided tour only, at set times, mainly at weekends. Check before you go.

In your own time

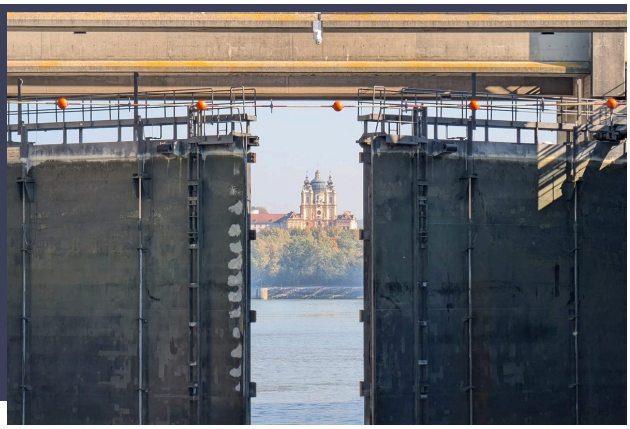
- Walk down from the abbey through the Hauptplatz and Rathausplatz, the two small squares at the heart of the old town.
- Allow time for the abbey park between April and October; it is easy to miss on a short visit.
- If your ship sails through the Wachau after Melk, be on deck: the stretch that follows is the finest on the Danube.
- Sailing upstream towards Passau, ships pass through the Melk lock just above the town. Look back as the gates open: the abbey is framed between them.

FROM MY OWN TRAVELS

Sailing away from Melk and entering Melk lock, I was at the stern of the ship and suddenly I had this image: Melk Abbey framed by the lock gates. The view was a highlight of the holiday, and the image has stuck with me as a fabulous reminder of this river cruise.

Gordon Sadler, 2024

On a trip hosted by the cruise line



The abbey framed by the gates of the Melk lock · Photo: Gordon Sadler, on a trip hosted by the cruise line

Excursions often offered

- Guided tour of the abbey, usually included in the cruise
- Artstetten Castle, offered by some lines as an alternative, from Ybbs
- Wine tasting on board as the ship sails into the Wachau



Aerial view of Melk Abbey with the Danube valley beyond



Baroque statues of Christ with the cross and two angels on the roofline of Melk Abbey

Sources: Melk Abbey (Wikipedia); Kraftwerk Melk (Wikipedia (German)); Danube station 7: Melk (Donaustationen); Wachau Cultural Landscape (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

AUSTRIA · UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE · DAY 3, SEEN FROM THE SHIP

The Wachau



The 40-kilometre stretch of the Danube between Melk and Krems, lined with vineyard terraces, apricot orchards, castles and wine villages. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the featured location for the Danube in this guide.

Good to know

- About 40 km of the Danube valley between Melk and Krems.
- Inscribed as the Wachau Cultural Landscape on the UNESCO World Heritage List in December 2000.



Steep terraced vineyards above a Wachau village



Terraced vineyards and dry-stone walls above the Danube

Sources: Wachau Cultural Landscape (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Wachau (Wikipedia); List of World Heritage Sites in Austria (Wikipedia).

AUSTRIA · UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE · DAY 3, SOME ITINERARIES

Spitz and Weissenkirchen



Two of the Wachau's best-known wine villages, a few kilometres apart in the heart of the valley. Weissenkirchen gathers round its tall fortified church on the hillside; Spitz sits beneath a vineyard hill of its own. Ships stop here occasionally, usually for a wine tasting or a walk among the vines.

Good to know

- Both are among the key wine villages of the Wachau.

Sources: Wachau Cultural Landscape (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

AUSTRIA · UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE · DAY 3, MOST ITINERARIES

Dürnstein



A tiny walled town with a big story. The blue and white tower of its abbey church is the best-known view in the Wachau, and the castle ruins on the crag above are where Richard the Lionheart was held prisoner in 1192 and 1193 on his way home from the Third Crusade. The climb to the ruins takes about half an hour and repays it with the view.

Good to know

- Richard I of England was held at Dürnstein from 21 December 1192 until March 1193, on the orders of Duke Leopold V.
- He was released on payment of a ransom of 150,000 silver marks; part of it paid for the expansion of the castle and town.
- The castle ruins are freely accessible all year.



Dürnstein from the river in autumn

Sources: History (Stadtgemeinde Dürnstein); The ruin of Dürnstein (Stadtgemeinde Dürnstein); Wachau Cultural Landscape (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

Krems



Krems closes the Wachau at its eastern end. It is one of the oldest towns in Austria, first recorded in 995, and its old centre is entered through the Steiner Tor, the one medieval gate to survive. The Kunstmeile gathers several art museums along one street, and Göttweig Abbey looks across from its hilltop on the far bank.

Good to know

- First mentioned in a document of 995.
- The Steiner Tor, built in 1480, is the town's only surviving medieval gate.
- Göttweig Abbey stands at 422 metres on the opposite bank.

Sources: Krems an der Donau (Wikipedia); Krems an der Donau (Niederösterreich Werbung); Krems (Falstaff); Wachau Cultural Landscape (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

AUSTRIA · UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE · DAY 4, MOST ITINERARIES

Vienna



For many people Vienna is the reason to take this cruise. The imperial city of the Habsburgs offers the Hofburg, Schönbrunn, St Stephen's Cathedral, the coffee houses, the wine taverns on the edge of town and, above all, music. Cruises usually allow a full day, and some stay into the evening so passengers can attend a concert.

Good to know

- The Historic Centre of Vienna was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2001.
- It was placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2017 over high-rise plans, and removed from that list in 2026.
- Many Vienna concerts and the State Opera pause in the height of summer.



The Vienna State Opera at night



The Neue Burg wing of the Hofburg on Heldenplatz

Sources: Historic Centre of Vienna inscribed on List of World Heritage in Danger (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Decision 48 COM 8C.3: Update of the List of World Heritage in Danger (removed property) (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

SLOVAKIA · DAY 5, MOST ITINERARIES

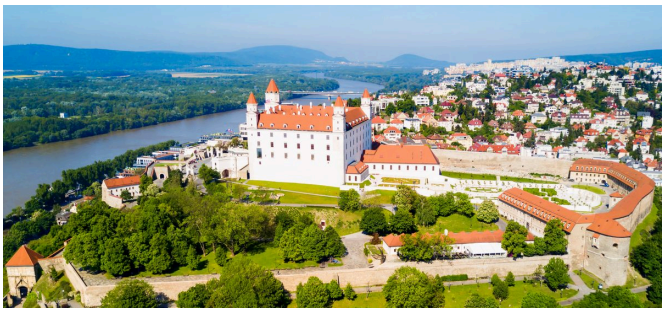
Bratislava



Slovakia's capital is small enough to see on foot in a morning. The castle stands square above the river, and the old town below is full of cafés, small squares and bronze street statues. For almost three centuries the kings and queens of Hungary were crowned in St Martin's Cathedral, whose tower still carries a gilded copy of the Hungarian crown.

Good to know

- St Martin's Cathedral was the coronation church of the Kingdom of Hungary from 1563 to 1830.
- Ten kings, one reigning queen and seven royal consorts were crowned there, including Maria Theresa.
- The 85-metre tower is topped by a gilded replica of the Hungarian crown weighing about 300 kg.



Aerial view of Bratislava Castle above the Danube



Michalská Street at dusk

Sources: St. Martin's Cathedral (Visit Bratislava); St Martin's Cathedral, Bratislava (Wikipedia).

Esztergom



Hungary's first royal capital and the seat of its Catholic Church, at the start of the Danube Bend. The vast basilica, the largest church in the country, stands on Castle Hill above the river, which here forms the border with Slovakia. The Mária Valéria bridge below leads across to Štúrovo on the Slovak bank.

Good to know

- Esztergom Basilica is the largest church in Hungary.
- Saint Stephen, Hungary's first king, was born in the palace on Castle Hill.
- The Mária Valéria bridge to Štúrovo reopened in 2001 after its destruction in the Second World War.



Esztergom Basilica on its hill above the Danube in autumn



The walls of Esztergom's castle hill with a modern white sculpture and the Hungarian flag

Sources: Esztergom (Wikipedia); Esztergom (Plizio).

HUNGARY · DAY 6, SEEN FROM THE SHIP

Visegrád



Visegrád sits at the tightest point of the Danube Bend, with the Upper Castle on the hill above giving one of the best river views in Hungary. In the fourteenth century this was a royal seat, and in 1335 the kings of Hungary, Bohemia and Poland met here for two months. King Matthias later built a Renaissance palace by the river, now partly reconstructed.

Good to know

- In 1335 King Charles I of Hungary hosted a two-month congress with John of Bohemia and Casimir III of Poland.
- The remains of the summer palace of King Matthias Corvinus and a medieval citadel survive.
- The Visegrád Group of central European countries was founded here in 1991.
- Not to be confused with Višegrad in Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the Drina.

Sources: Visegrád, Hungary (Wikipedia); Visegrád (funiQ).

HUNGARY · DAY 6, REACHED BY COACH

Szentendre



A colourful small town just north of Budapest, built largely by Serbian and other Balkan settlers in the eighteenth century and known since the 1920s for its artists' colony. Narrow lanes, Orthodox church towers, galleries and museums make it an easy half-day, usually reached by coach from Budapest.

Good to know

- Its Mediterranean townscape was created by Serbian, Dalmatian and Greek settlers in the eighteenth century.
- The Szentendre Artists' Colony was founded in 1926.
- The Hungarian Open Air Ethnographic Museum (Skanzen) is on the edge of the town.

Sources: Szentendre town guide (Irány Szentendre (town tourism)).

HUNGARY · UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE · DAY 7, MOST ITINERARIES

Budapest



Few cities look better from the water. Buda's castle hill and Fisherman's Bastion face the Parliament on the Pest bank, with the Chain Bridge between them, and most cruises arrive or leave in the evening when it is all floodlit. Allow time for the thermal baths, the coffee houses and the market hall if the itinerary gives a full day.

Good to know

- The banks of the Danube and the Buda Castle Quarter were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1987; Andrássy Avenue was added in 2002.
- The Széchenyi Chain Bridge opened in 1849.
- The Parliament is the largest building in Hungary.



A stone lion on the Chain Bridge



Fisherman's Bastion framed through an arch

Sources: Budapest, including the Banks of the Danube, the Buda Castle Quarter and Andrássy Avenue (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

FEATURED LOCATION

The Wachau

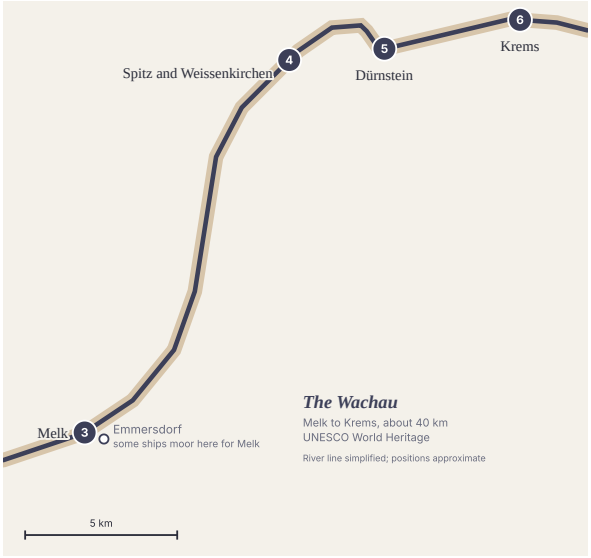


Illustration

Forty kilometres of vineyards, apricot orchards, abbeys and castles between Melk and Krems, and the stretch of the Danube that most river cruisers remember best.

Why the Wachau

Between Melk and Krems the Danube leaves the open country and runs through a narrow, winding valley. For about 40 kilometres the slopes on either side are terraced with vines held up by dry-stone walls, and the river passes a string of wine villages, monasteries and castle ruins that have changed remarkably little in centuries. UNESCO inscribed the valley as the Wachau Cultural Landscape in 2000, recognising how well it preserves the traces of its history in its buildings, towns and farming. From the deck of a river ship it is simply the loveliest part of the Danube.



The Wachau, between Melk and Krems

Seeing it from the river

Most Passau to Budapest itineraries sail the Wachau in daylight, usually on the same day as Melk and Dürnstein. Be on deck between Melk and Dürnstein. Look out for Schönbühel Castle on its rock near the start, the ruins of Aggstein high on the right bank, the vineyard hills around Spitz and Weissenkirchen, and finally Dürnstein's blue tower as the valley opens out towards Krems. Most operators make an event of it, with commentary from the cruise director and local food and drink served on board.

The wine

The Wachau is white wine country, best known for Grüner Veltliner and Riesling. Many growers belong to the Vinea Wachau association, which uses three names of its own on the label. Steinfeder wines are the lightest, at up to 11.5 per cent alcohol. Federspiel sits between 11.5 and 12.5 per cent. Smaragd, named after the emerald lizards that bask on the

terrace walls, covers the richest wines, made from the ripest grapes. A tasting in Dürnstein or Weissenkirchen is one of the most popular excursions on the river.

Apricots

The valley is just as proud of its apricots. The orchards blossom from mid-March to mid-April, and the fruit is harvested from mid-July to mid-August, when it turns up in jam, liqueur, schnapps and dumplings all along the river.

When to go

Spring brings the apricot blossom, early summer the long evenings on deck, and October the grape harvest and the valley's autumn colours. In winter the Wachau is quiet and the Christmas market cruises pass through it on their way to Vienna.



Terraced vineyards and dry-stone walls above the Danube



A castle on a rock above the Danube in autumn



Steep terraced vineyards above a Wachau village



Apricot trees in blossom among vineyard rows in spring

Sources: Wachau Cultural Landscape (UNESCO World Heritage Centre); Steinfeder, Federspiel and Smaragd (Vinea Wachau); Glossary: Smaragd, Federspiel, Steinfeder (Wine Spectator).

THEME

Wine



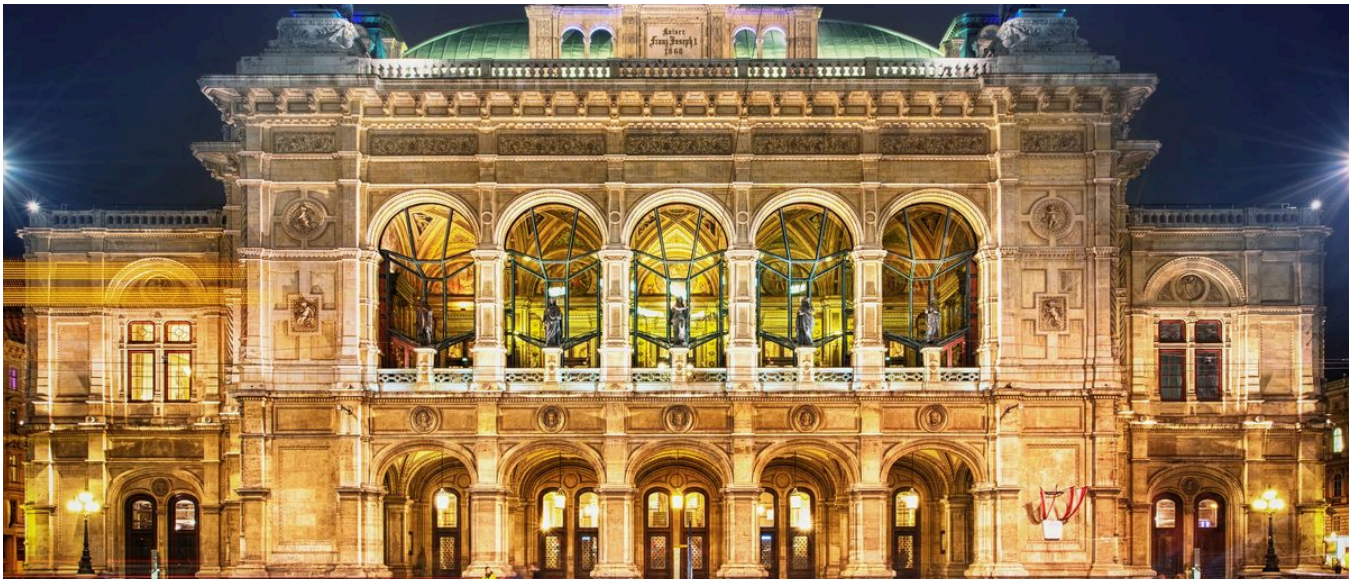
The Danube between Passau and Budapest runs through some of central Europe's best white wine country. The Wachau is the highlight, with Grüner Veltliner and Riesling grown on terraces above the river, and many itineraries include a tasting there. Vienna is one of the few capital cities with vineyards inside its boundaries; its Heurigen, informal taverns serving the grower's own new wine, are a favourite evening out. Hungary adds its own grapes further downstream. Dedicated wine cruises go further, replacing some of the usual excursions with vineyard visits and carrying a wine expert on board for tastings and talks.

Where	The Wachau, Dürnstein, Spitz and Weissenkirchen, Krems, Vienna
When	September, October

Sources: Steinfeder, Federspiel and Smaragd (Vinea Wachau).

THEME

Music



Vienna's musical history is the strongest reason many people choose this river. Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert and the Strauss family all worked in the city, and a classical concert in Vienna is one of the most popular optional excursions on the route. Some itineraries stay into the evening for it. In Passau, the organ concerts in St Stephen's Cathedral give the week a fine start. In June the city's summer season adds large free open-air events, among them the Vienna Philharmonic's Summer Night Concert in the gardens of Schönbrunn Palace and the Donauinselfest, a music festival on the Danube Island.

Where	Vienna, Passau
When	April, May, June, September, October, November, December

Sources: St. Stephen's Cathedral (Passau Tourism); Summer Night Concert Schönbrunn (Vienna Philharmonic); Danube Island Festival (Vienna Tourist Board (wien.info)).

THEME

Christmas markets



Illustration

The Christmas markets usually run from mid-November to late December, and in that season the classic Danube becomes one of the most popular winter river cruises in Europe. Passau, Vienna, Bratislava and Budapest all hold Christmas markets, and the ship moors close to the centre, so it is easy to see the markets in the evening when the stalls are lit. Wrap up warmly: the days are short and the weather can be cold.

Where	Passau, Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest
When	November, December

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