

Voyage



It's not as well known a destination as the Rhine further north, but the lovely Danube river has a lot to offer. *Catherine McGregor* takes a Uniworld cruise that includes the chance to see three countries for the price of one.

"Yodel-lay-ee-dee!" As yodels go, it didn't sound great – but in my defence, it was my first-ever attempt. I was in a yodelling workshop, quickly learning that the singing style Heidi uses to call her goats in from the mountains isn't as easy as it might seem. It's all in the diaphragm, apparently.

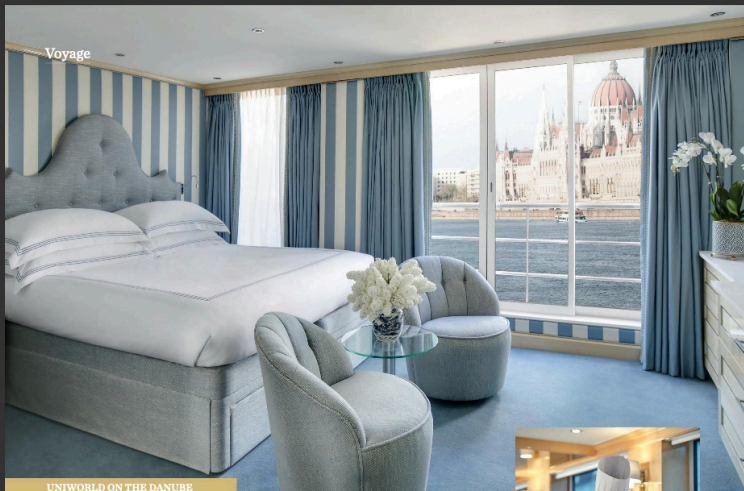
Though a bit embarrassing at the time, the yodel class remains a personal highlight of a recent seven-day journey with Uniworld Boutique River Cruises, aboard the *S.S. Beatrice*. The cruise itinerary begins in Nuremberg and ends in Budapest (or vice versa), taking in the musical, cultural and culinary treasures of the central Danube region – from oompah music, sausage and beer to fine wine, gourmet dining and live music by Mozart and Strauss.

Later that evening we piled into a coach for an excursion to a private beer hall, complete with giant pretzels, tankards of foaming lager and a spectacularly talented Bavarian musical group. Giant alphorns, tinkling cowbells, *dirdnls* and *lederhosen* – you name the German stereotype, the concert had it. While traditions like the

Go with the flow
S.S. Beatrice on the river;
afternoon tea in Wolfgang's
bar and lounge.



Blue Danube



Voyage

UNIWORLD ON THE DANUBE

Verdict

• What to pack

For those joining the bike ride, your workout kit or at the very least a pair of shorts and sneakers. And if you're tossing up whether to bring your tablet or laptop, it might help to know that internet service is both excellent and free – a nice side-benefit of staying so close to land.

• My favourite meal

I'm a sucker for a great buffet, and the S.S. Beatrice's is one of the best I've had. Running the gamut from the virtuous to the indulgent (perfectly roasted rib eye beef with a side of Käseplatte, the German version of macaroni cheese? Yes please), lunch on board each day was a real highlight of the trip.

• My favourite experience

While seeing the great capitals of Austria and Hungary was a thrill, exploring the charming smaller cities of southern Germany turned out to be just as exciting. I'd barely heard of Regensburg before the trip, but after wandering its beautifully preserved medieval streets I fell in love with the place and vowed to return someday soon.

schuhplattler (the knee-slapping dance) can look a little ridiculous to modern eyes, we left the show with a whole new appreciation for the skills, and the pride, behind this region's centuries-old folk culture.

What life is like on board the S.S. Beatrice

Experiencing authentic Bavarian culture first-hand is a lot of fun, but it's hardly representative of the full Uniworld experience. Perched at the very top echelon of river cruising, Uniworld ships are widely recognised as among the most luxurious ways to explore Europe's riverways. The S.S. Beatrice is one of Uniworld's nine Super Ships, a select fleet within the main brand that offers an even higher level of excellence and luxury. The S.S. Beatrice was awarded the designation five years ago, following an overhaul and refurbishment that added new design elements including a grand central staircase, the signature feature of all Uniworld Super Ships.

A sister brand to the Red Carnation chain of small hotels, Uniworld is known for decorating each of its ships in a unique style. The S.S. Beatrice is no exception, though compared to some of Uniworld's more flamboyant vessels – all gilt-edged furniture, plush velvet and over-the-top Murano glass – this ship is a study in restrained elegance. Blue and white decor gives it the look of a high-end superyacht, with light wood and large windows adding to the airy, open feel.

Those inviting public spaces certainly come in handy if you're booked into a classic stateroom. Uniworld ships are fairly small – people refer to them as "floating boutique hotels" for a reason – and so are the staterooms, which on the S.S. Beatrice measure 14 square metres. Some guests I spoke to said their stateroom felt a little cramped, particularly the bathroom. Due to a brief mix-up, I was initially shown to a stateroom, and while it was as beautifully appointed as everything else on the ship, I admit I breathed a sigh of relief when I was moved to a 21-square-metre suite. There are no open-air balconies on any of the ship's staterooms or suites, but you'll find French balconies –



sliding floor-to-ceiling windows with a discreet safety barrier in front – on all but the lowest-tier rooms.

As well as more space, the suites come with a complimentary mini-bar, Nespresso machine, evening snacks, free laundry service, and two charming and helpful in-suite butlers. Being out and about each day, I didn't have much need for the butler service, but it was clearly a godsend for many, including some limited-mobility guests who stayed on board while their travelling companions set off to explore on their own.

While suites offer an elevated level of comfort, the ship itself has plenty of amenities available to all. Below deck you'll find a laundry room and a small gym, up on the top deck, pre-breakfast yoga and exercise classes are held each morning. There's a coffee machine on each floor, an endless supply of candy in the lobby, and pastries and small plates available throughout the day at Schubert's, one of the ship's standout spaces. Wrapping around the ship's bow, the glass-enclosed, 18-seat cafe offers a more intimate atmosphere than the main lounge, along with fabulous 180-degree views of the river.

Taking in the sights, and tastes, along the Danube

Schubert's is especially popular in inclement weather. I presume, but since our sailing was blessed with perfect summer temperatures I spent most of my spare time outside. When the ship is sailing there's no better way to take in the scenery than from a top deck sun lounger, sunglasses on, drink in hand. And the Danube landscape really does deserve your full attention. Some of the loveliest scenery is on the stretch of river between Passau in southern Germany and the small town of Tulln in Austria, and it was tempting to stay on board to experience it by water. Instead, I joined a guided riverside cycle ride, crossing the German-Austrian border on two wheels (with a stop for a beer halfway through). I made the right choice: the easy 28-kilometre ride



Beatrice's Central European journey. Clockwise, from left: On the river, chef-led cooking class at Max's; hub of the ship, Wolfgang's lounge; Max's cooking class; the riverview suite.



UNIWORLD ON THE DANUBE



SOME OF THE LOVELIEST SCENERY IS ON THE STRETCH OF RIVER BETWEEN PASSAU AND TULLN.

along the famously beautiful Danube cycle trail was one of the most memorable parts of the trip. Luckily I still had an afternoon's sailing through the Wachau Valley to look forward to. A Unesco World Heritage landscape, the Wachau Valley's hillside vineyards, mountaintop fortresses and riverbank villages have remained largely unchanged for hundreds of years. That morning I joined a visit to a museum dedicated to the 3000-year history of shipping on the Danube – much more fascinating than it sounds – followed by a tasting of products made from the local Wachauer marille, an apricot variety of such high quality that it is protected as its own brand within the EU.

This part of Austria is also known for its grüner veltliner, the country's most famous grape varietal, and we tried it for ourselves back on the ship. Local wines, all selected by the onboard sommelier, accompany each dinner – generally a la carte, except when evening activities make buffet-style dining preferable. As with other Uniworld ships, the *S.S. Beatrice* has only one main restaurant, so there's generally no need to make any bookings – or to pay restaurant bills at the end. This is a true all-inclusive cruise, with the fare covering food, wine (except special bottles), bar service, gratuities and standard excursions. Dinner is wonderful, but for me it's at lunchtime that the *S.S. Beatrice* really shows its culinary chops. The buffet selection is top class, with lots of fresh vegetables and an ever-changing selection of local specialities. In Austria, we tried *schupfnudeln* sauerkraut, a surprisingly delicious mix of potato noodles with cabbage. In Hungary, there was paprika-spiked pork goulash with apple strudel to follow. Other than ice cream, absolutely everything is made in the ship's own kitchen – no corners cut here.

In just seven days, the *S.S. Beatrice's* Danube itinerary takes in three countries (four if you count Slovakia on the other side of the river from Hungary), two great European capitals, and a handful of smaller historic cities including Nuremberg, home to a splendid medieval old town as well as a darkly fascinating Nazi past. In Vienna, we spent the morning on a guided walking tour – Uniworld uses the QuietVox commentary system, keeping you in perfect audio contact even if you fall behind – followed by a full afternoon free to explore one of Europe's most spectacular capitals. In Budapest, we cruised under the famous bridges and into the centre of the city, then joined a tour that took us via tram and by foot around the main downtown sights, through the grand Central Market Hall, and into a cafe for coffee and yet more strudel. On our last night, the *S.S. Beatrice* sailed to an overnight mooring on the outskirts of the central city. As evening fell we sailed past the imposing Buda Castle, the citadel-topped Gellert Hill, and the enormous Hungarian Parliament, its bulk lit up in gold against the darkening night sky. From here, the Danube flows on through Eastern Europe, all the way to the shores of the Black Sea. But for me, it was time to bid farewell to the mighty river, and to the ship that introduced me to this fabulous part of the world.

On the *S.S. Beatrice* Clockwise, from above: Pointing a dog on the river at Wolfgang's; the onboard boutique; Jarno-to-table dining in the Austrian-styled cafe, Schubert's.



River Danube Trunk Show

Zimmermann crepe dress, \$650.

Kila Vargas Daphne cotton shirt, \$800.

Carhartt WIP Terrell shorts, \$115.

Cutter And Gross 1386 sunglasses, \$706.

Zimmermann crepe dress, \$650.

Loewe Bracelet Pouch bag, \$2650.

Acne Studios Morris jacket, \$760.

Le Monde Bery flats, \$640.

Paul Smith wool zuri jacket, \$2065.

Burberry suede bag, \$4491.

Row Katharina hiking trainers, \$557.

Three Graces London Nell cotton dress, \$1075.

Toteme organic-cotton jeans, \$490.

Lee Mathews Penny technical canvas skirt, \$399.

Toteme cotton-gabardine coat, \$1598.

Balenciaga T-shirt, \$995.