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Disney puts the magic in Central Europe tour



In Prague, Adventures by Disney takes travelers on a tour of Prague Castle in the morning and a cruise on the Vltava River in the afternoon.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Travelers on the Adventures by Disney tour in Central Europe spend a morning making pretzels at a bakery in Berchtesgaden, Germany.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Puppetry is a much loved art in Central Europe, as evidenced by the wares in a toy shop in the Czech town Cesky Krumlov.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Kids get up close to the Lipizzans and their riders on Disney's private tour of the stables at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

**By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent**

Sticking a pin in a puppet's head hadn't been on my to-do list during a swing through Central Europe last summer. But Disney has a reputation for the unexpected on its escorted tours.

Disney, you say? Everyone knows about its theme parks and plenty of travelers have heard of Disney cruises. Land tours? Not so much. But Disney has spent a decade putting its brand of magic into escorted tours and now has [Adventures by Disney](#) on six continents -- some for families, a few for adults only.

My nine-day journey through the Czech Republic, Germany and Austria had the typical elements of most escorted tours: guided walks in Prague and Cesky Krumlov, "The Sound of Music" sites around Salzburg and a stop at a castle

in the Alps. But what Disney does differently -- what sets it apart from other tour operators -- are exclusive, behind-the-scenes experiences and offbeat activities with a multigenerational appeal.

Insider access

The Disney name opens doors, and in Prague it pulled strings at the National Marionette Theatre. A donation made in the name of the man who created "Pinocchio" gave us off-hours access for a private marionette-making workshop. Dads fumbled with needle and thread while kids squealed over the antics of their homemade puppets. Days later, at the end of the tour in Vienna, we took a backstage tour of the marionette theater at Schonbrunn Palace to see how the pros make marionettes and why master puppeteers must spend years honing their craft.

Pretzel making appeared on the itinerary one morning in Bavaria. Disney arranged for a commercial bakery to stay open after the bakers finished their shift. Adults and kids got their hands gooey after the bakers showed us how to roll the dough and twist it into the perfect pretzel shape. Hint: It's all in the wrist. A quick bake in the oven and we each had a bag of warm pretzels to snack on as our motor coach set off for our next destination.

In Vienna, an after-hours tour of the zoo, the oldest in Europe, ended with a catered dinner in the emperor's pavilion. Most tours in Austria's capital include a stop at the Spanish Riding School, but ours ended with an exclusive, behind-the-scenes tour of the stables where we got to see the Lipizzans up close and talk to their riders about the horses and how they train them.

Ever dream of appearing on "Dancing With the Stars"? Disney arranged for one of the judges of Austria's version of the show to give us private waltzing lessons at his school next to the Hofburg Palace. Needless to say, none of us will be making the cut.

Offbeat attractions

In addition to these Disney-only experiences, we took in attractions open to anyone, some quite quirky. In Berchtesgaden, adults and kids donned overalls to tour the oldest working salt mine in Germany. No bland factory visit, we encountered a few mild theme-park thrills along the way: riding a miniature train into the dark mine, rafting across an underground lake, sliding on our posteriors down wooden chutes, zooming from one level of the mine to another below. The kids loved it.

The word "cool" had a double meaning on a hike through Eishole Ice Cave in the Alps. Inside, where the temperature averages 32 degrees, ice slowly melts and morphs into odd sculptures. After a tour of nearby Hohenwerfen Castle, we sat on the lawn for a falconry show, the birds swooping so low we felt the breeze from their wings on our faces.

In Salzburg, kids got a bit wet in the gardens at Hellbrunn Castle when trick fountains unexpectedly shot out streams of water to shrieks of laughter. We joined other tour groups for a strudel-making demonstration in Vienna, then feasted on thick slices washed down with Viennese coffee or hot chocolate. Several moms tucked the recipe in their tote bags.

Near the end of each day, we received a collectible pin made by Disney as a souvenir of that day's adventures.

Amusing all ages

Each Adventures by Disney has a minimum age requirement and a suggested age that varies depending on the itinerary. On the Central Europe trip kids can be no younger than 4 and Disney recommends they be at least 6. Tour group size also varies by itinerary. Central Europe maxes out at 40.

Family vacations mean keeping kids from being bored while giving adults a chance to unwind. Two invariably perky Adventure Guides accompany each tour and, while they do not act as baby sitters, they do lead a few separate activities for Junior Adventurers. While the adults had a history-laden tour of crowded Schonbrunn Palace, the guides took the kids to the palace's children's museum for some dress-up fun. One night the kids dined with the guides and let the grown-ups enjoy an adults-only dinner.

During long rides in the motor coach between destinations, cartoons and movies, among them "The Sound of Music" and "Miracle of the White Stallions," played on a video screen. The adventure guides told jokes and stories. One on my tour gave a moving account of growing up in East Germany and the changes her family faced after the Berlin Wall came down.

On one occasion, the guides staged a Central Europe olympics with the two sides of the coach pitted against each other in a series of wacky games that could be played with everyone safely buckled in their seats. Who knew unwinding a roll of toilet paper as it passed hand to hand could be so entertaining?

Speaking of toilet paper, the coach made frequent restroom stops.

While hotels on the tours are among the best in each city -- all three on the Central Europe tour rate five stars -- meals lean toward casual and kid-friendly. Some buffet, some family-style and some preordered so the kids -- OK, some adults, too -- don't get too antsy during European meal service that's often more leisurely than at home.

Free time is built into each tour to give families a chance to dine on their own, explore sites not on the itinerary, splash around in the hotel pool or just rest.

Even Pinocchio needs down time, no strings attached.

• *Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored by Adventures by Disney.*

Central Europe with Adventures by Disney

Details: Nine-day tour through Austria, Germany and the Czech Republic starts at \$4,999 adults, \$4,749 children younger than 12. Includes 17 meals, does not include airfare or gratuities for guides.

Info: (800) 543-0865 or adventuresbydisney.com/

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