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posted: 7/10/2018 6:00 AM

Christmas markets add festive spirit to December cruise on the Danube

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Posted 9/18/2018 6:00 AM



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The Vili, one of Viking River Cruises ships, awaits shoppers returning from the Christmas market in Bratislava. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

The pastry chef aboard the Viking Vili had no fear of losing his job because of me. My pathetic attempt at making a gingerbread house during his lesson on board put my skills at the kindergarten level. His fanciful creations in the ship's lounge looked like they were conjured up by a Christmas elf employing Santa's magical powers.

Gingerbread houses, Christmas trees, caroling and concerts on board ships add extra spice to cruises on Europe's rivers during the month of December. But the biggest incentive to don winter coats and hats is

the Christmas markets in ports along the way. Almost every city has at least one filling municipal and cathedral squares in the weeks leading up to Dec. 25. For river cruise passengers, exploring these colorful open-air markets is like walking through a miniature Christmas village collectors place on mantels and sideboards across America.

Almost every river cruise line operating in Europe extends its cruise season into December to take advantage of the holiday glow. Cruises on the Danube rank among the most popular voyages. I was aboard Viking River Cruises on its Danube Waltz itinerary cruising from Budapest, Hungary, to Passau, Germany. Stops along the way included Bratislava, Slovakia, Vienna and Linz, Austria.

Each city's Christmas markets embraced the festive season by selling decorations, holiday novelties, food and mulled wine to warm heart and soul under twinkling lights on cold December evenings. Some added musical entertainment and carnival rides. Can one be too old to climb aboard a carousel?

Why cruise in December?

Yes, it can be cold, but as our cruise program director quipped, "There's no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing." Temperatures hovered in the 30s and 40s, warmer than back home in suburban Chicago. In Vienna, I lucked out with a 54-degree day and ditched my puffy coat.

December can be a cheaper time to travel. Air and cruise fares dip below those in peak summer season and major sightseeing spots draw fewer people. Even so, Christmas market cruises can fill up quickly. Only one cabin remained unoccupied on my ship. Fellow passengers seemed younger than on other river cruises I've taken, the average age skewing down by about a decade.



Passengers try their hands at making gingerbread houses during a lesson from the pastry chef aboard the Viking Vili. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

An infectious holiday cheer brought smiles to passengers and crew on board. One afternoon crew members donned Santa hats and reindeer headbands to lead passengers in a singalong that ended with a conga line winding through the lounge. An advent choir boarded the ship after dinner in Bratislava for an a capella performance. In Austria, costumed singers and musicians presented songs from "The Sound of Music" and ended the evening with Christmas carols -- "Silent Night" in three languages.

Passengers participated in trimming Christmas trees, personalizing globe ornaments with markers. The pastry chef patiently taught us the art of gingerbread house-making and to my envious eyes some structures turned out quite good.

Meals on board weren't overly holiday themed, but the Austrian and German dishes served on every voyage always seem Christmassy to me. Still, the kitchen crew made an extra effort to warm us up with a holiday glow. After a shore excursion one chilly afternoon the chef set up in the ship's reception area to welcome returning passengers with cheese fondue spread on slices of fresh bread plus cups of hot chocolate with an optional splash of rum or amaretto.

Another reason to cruise in December: shopping. Have holiday gifts to buy for family and friends back home? Bring an extra suitcase. Cities along the Danube offer shopping districts with brand-name stores as well as cute boutiques. And, of course, the Christmas markets present a bounty of items, some handmade.

About those markets: Almost all vendors take cash only, so keep an ATM card handy to withdraw local currency and stow both in an inside pocket to guard against pickpockets.

Unlike major attractions that draw mostly tourists, Christmas markets bring out residents, especially after work and on weekends. If you're game, you might interact over a glass of gluhwein.

After visiting two or three markets, the next few might seem just the same, but be on the lookout for one-of-a-kind finds and local food specialties.

Sightseeing and shopping

Like my fellow passengers, I divided my time between visiting the markets and seeing the sights in each port along the way.

I'd been to Budapest before and toured the Castle District on the Buda side and Heroes' Square in Pest. This time I booked the ship's excursion to thermal baths for a soak in indoor and outdoor pools of varying temperatures. Since the Middle Ages, the baths have remained a social gathering place for Hungarians from all walks of life, so this presented another opportunity to get up close and personal with the locals -- in swimsuits, of course.



Cloth dolls catch the eye at a market stall in Bratislava. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Crowds filled two Christmas markets within walking distance of our ship on a Saturday afternoon. A Nativity scene with large, colorful figures stood in front of St. Stephen's Basilica where a Christmas tree towered over an ice rink. Vendors in wooden huts sold Christmas ornaments, marzipan, Hungarian fry bread and steaming cups of mulled wine.

In Slovakia, sausages and potato pancakes simmered on stoves in a small market outside Bratislava Castle perched 300 feet above the Danube. Our excursion stopped for a view from the windy terrace then descended to the Old Town. We entered through St. Michel's Tower, the only remaining gate from medieval fortifications, and stared at the red-hooded bust marking the executioner's house. A walk on cobblestones past warmly lit cafes and shops led to the Opera House and a market where cloth dolls in folk dress caught my eye.

Before our stop in Vienna, an onboard lecture on Viennese coffeehouses included one I had not visited on past trips. While fellow passengers boarded buses for Empress Maria Theresa's Schonbrunn Palace and the Spanish Riding School, I strolled past Rolex, Dior and Tiffany stores on Kohlmarkt Street on my way to Café Central. A glass case overflowed with pastries. A reindeer head made from gingerbread mousse and baked apple called out to me.

Christmas markets were scattered across Vienna, one by city hall, another at Am Hof where raclette oozed onto plates and flutes of Champagne bubbled on a wooden bar. Outside Hofburg Palace, a few vendors sold high-end goods. I couldn't resist a jaunty made-in-Austria woolen hat. At my favorite market, outside St. Stephen's Cathedral where Mozart married in 1782, I had to have two wooden toy trains in letters spelling my grandsons' names.



Food and drink fuel shoppers at a Christmas market in Passau. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

That night, passengers traveled along city streets lit with holiday decorations to a small theater for a Mozart and Strauss concert just for Viking guests. Performers punctuated the show with comedy skits between presentations of classical music, including a few holiday tunes.

In Linz, Austria, streetcars streamed past Christmas market stalls on the Hauptplatz, one of the largest squares in Europe, but shoppers seemed so engrossed in the goods they barely noticed. My search for an Austrian gift for someone back home yielded only apparel from distant lands -- Peru, Nepal, China -- so I skipped shopping for a tour of the neo-gothic New Cathedral. Construction on Austria's largest church, holding 20,000, began in 1862 but delays during World War I held back completion until 1924. Oddly, its stained glass windows depict 20th-century scenes rather than stories from the Bible.

The Danube joins two other rivers in Passau, Germany, making it an important city for trade throughout its history. When it burned down in 1662 it was rebuilt in lavish baroque style. Rococo buildings built a bit later sport facades in pretty pastels.

St. Stephen's Cathedral, the largest baroque cathedral in northern Europe, also has one of the largest pipe organs in the world: 17,974 pipes. Passengers on earlier sailings listen to organ concerts, but sadly none take place in December. Instead, our tour group went to Café Simon for a demonstration of gingerbread making with samples of three flavors washed down with an orange and rum punch.



Pastry at Café Central in Vienna takes on a reindeer theme in the weeks before Christmas. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Refortified, I made my way back to the plaza outside the cathedral where bells sounding the hour reverberated around more than 70 rustic wooden Christmas market kiosks. Patrons stood around high tables scarfing down foot-long wurst sandwiches. I resisted the temptation of gluhwein stands to seek out something German-made for that someone still on my gift list. I found it inside a makeshift shop where a young woman was selling woolen hats and cute head wraps made by her German grandmother.

Just when passengers think they have seen their last Christmas market, those departing from the Munich airport find one more under the canopy between terminals one and two. Functioning as an airport city with corporate offices, a gym, shops and restaurants, Munich Airport is the only one in the world with its own brewery, the Air Brau. In December, 450 Christmas trees and more than 40 market stalls set up in the Munich Airport Center along with an ice-skating rink with skate rentals for those who want to do a few spins before their flight departs.

For once, I was glad mine was delayed.

• Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored by Viking River Cruises.

Viking River Cruises

The eight-day Danube Waltz itinerary between Budapest and Passau will be offered 10 times in December 2018. Fares begin at \$2,449 with extended stays in Budapest, Prague, Munich and Salzburg for an additional charge. (800) 304-9616 or vikingrivercruises.com.

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