

The Great Rivers of Europe (06/12 to 06/27/2015)

Introduction

During our 14 day river cruise with Grand Circle Travel (GCT) we will be sailing through three countries, starting in Austria, traveling through Germany and finishing in the Netherlands. We will have visited at two cities in Austria, ten in Germany and one in the Netherlands. The cruise will have taken us 945.5 miles on the Danube River, the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal, the Main River and the Rhine River. In all, we will go through 66 locks; 19 going up to a maximum elevation of 1,340 feet and 47 coming back down to sea level. By river, there are 14 locks on the Danube, 16 on the Danube-Main-Rhine Canal, 34 on the Main and 2 on the Rhine. At the 1,340 feet elevation, we will have crossed the European divide. Our program director for the cruise was Marloes Mezzei from the Netherlands.

Day 1 & 2 – Travel Days

We left Charlotte airport on our flight to Munich Germany, transferred to a flight from Munich to Vienna. The trip was long, but uneventful. Both flights were on time and our luggage arrived with us.

However, our friends Arlene and Dick were not so lucky. Their flight from Burlington Vermont had mechanical problems and was delayed 5 hours. As a result, they missed their connection in Newark New Jersey to Vienna and had to take a flight to London and connect from there to Vienna. When travel problems start, they never end. The flight to London was delayed and they missed their connection to Vienna. They finally arrived in Vienna at 7:00pm, 11 hours after their original arrival time. And, wouldn't you believe, their luggage did make it with them. By the end of the following day they had their luggage and in spite of a horrible flying experience, all was now well and they were ready to enjoy the cruise.

That evening we met the captain and our program managers and got a briefing on our trip and specifically the next day's activities.

Day 3 – Vienna Austria

Having over slept, somehow the alarm got turned off on our clock, and with 25 minutes to get ready we arrived upstairs for breakfast at 8:00am. Following breakfast we got a briefing from our program manager and then headed out to explore Vienna. We started in a motor coach with a local guide and finish that tour on foot. Following the tour we decided to spend the rest of the day in Vienna on our own. We walked all around the city, stopped for an outside lunch, found ice cream and finished our day in Vienna at a sidewalk coffee café before heading back to the ship.

We did visit one attraction; the Treasury building where we viewed the crown jewels from the past. The jewels were mostly elaborate crowns, staffs, tapestry, robes, etc. and were mostly made with silk or linen with gold and silver threads. It had to have taken years to make some of these items.

Following directions we received from our program manager, we decided to take the metro back to our ship. Our only confusion was purchasing the tickets from the machines at all of the stations. Fortunate there were two local men behind us that showed us how to accomplish that. We had considered walking back. It's a good thing we didn't. No sooner did we get on the ship and it started to rain.

After taking a shower and getting ready, we then attended the captain's welcome cocktail party and dinner. During the welcome cocktail party he introduced the entire crew. The welcome dinner was multi course meal with wine. It was excellent! To top off our meal, they brought a birthday cake for Arlene. It was her birthday the day before. They did this with much fan fare by parading out the cake in a very conspicuous way throughout the entire restaurant. Arlene was embarrassed! Not only that, she received a kiss from the program director, the maître de and the captain.

All in all, it was a very good day!

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Day 4 – Melk Austria

Today was not as early a day. We went to breakfast at 9:00am and spent the rest of the morning on the sun deck as we sailed through the Scenic Wachau Valley. It was a cloudy day all day, but no rain. After lunch we docked in Melk Austria. Rather than taking a tour to the Melk Abbey, we decided to walk into Melk and do the Abbey tour on our own. Ten minutes after leaving the ship we were in downtown Melk (population 5,000) where we walked around the area. We then walked up to the Abbey, purchased tickets and took a self-guided tour through the Abbey. We spent a few hours in the Abbey and on the grounds. The scenery from the Abbey would have been beautiful except for the cloudy hazy day. But, we made the best of it. On the way back to the ship we made our mandatory stop at the Gelato (Ice Cream) shop. Thank god we are doing the walking!

Once back on the ship we had about two hours before the evening activities. We took advantage of the time by resting. Following Esther's short nap, we went to the "Port Talk", our activities for the next day, followed by dinner. We left the restaurant about 10:00pm and called it a day.

Day 5 – Passau Germany

Following breakfast we enjoyed a scenic ride into Passau. Passau has a population of about 50,000. It was another cloudy day, but not cold and not windy. Passau is the only city in Germany that has three rivers flow together; the Danube, the Ilz and the Inn. The Danube and Inn are quite large, but the Ilz is a short river and hardly noticeable. Upon arrival we set off on a walking tour of the city with our program director. The culmination of the walk was St. Stephen's Cathedral. Churches and cathedrals seem to be the highlight of most of our tours. This church was special. It was a 17th century reconstruction of the original Gothic church. But, it had the world's largest pipe organ with 17,774 pipes and 234 resounding stops (whatever that means). The church put on a half hour organ symphony at 12:00pm each day. Since we really wanted to see the organ, we spend 8 Euros and went to the symphony. It's not my thing, but guess it was good. From the church we walked back to the ship for lunch.

After lunch, it was back out to walk around the city some more, and that we did, but not without finding a Gelato (ice cream) place. Again, we were successful at doing that. After the Gelato and on the way back to the ship we picked up a coffee which we drink on the ship's sun deck.

I was now time to get ready for our port talk and dinner. We sat at a table for six. It was the birthday of the women of the couple that joined us. So there was a parade with a cake to our table and singing happy birthday again. And, yes, we had two desserts.

After dinner it was back to the lounge for a contest. The contest was that the musician would play ten different songs/styles (fox trot, waltz, polka, etc.) and we had to guess the top three that would get danced to. We didn't win! We would have come close if Esther would have listened to my choices. Following the contest it was back to our cabin to load the day's pictures into my computer, sort the pictures and update this trip diary.

Day 6 – Regensburg Germany

Today after breakfast at 9:00am it was off on a walking tour. Regensburg is over 2,000 years old and is one of the best-preserved of the European medieval cities. It escaped most of the bombing during World War II. This day we had a local guide. She was an excellent guide, knew her facts and was full of interesting and funny stories. She was probably the best local guide we have ever had. We saw where the poor people lived, where the wealthy people lived, St. Peter's Cathedral, the Old Stone Bridge and the Sausage Kitchen.

The poorer people lived in modest home on the alleys (narrower streets). The rich people live in bigger homes on the wider streets. They also built these high towers as part of their homes. Other than the first three floors, the towers severed no value other than to outdo their neighbors. St. Peter's Cathedral took over 200 years to build and is noted for

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its stained glass windows. During the war the windows were removed and stored in a safe place. The Old Stone Bridge, which is undergoing repairs, was built between 1,135 and 1,146. The Sausage Kitchen has been in the same location since the 12th century.

After the walking tour we spent hours walking the city on our own. Not knowing where we were going, we seemed to always wind up back in the same spot. We did find time to have lunch at the Sausage Kitchen, and you guessed it, we also found time to stop at one of the many Gelato stores.

At 5:00pm we had a presentation on "Germany Since 1933". The presentation was made by a 26 year old guy that really seemed to know his stuff. It was very interesting and informative. Following the presentation GCT treated our entire tour group to dinner at the Alte Linde restaurant. It was a twenty minute walk. We sat at dinner with people that we had not yet met and had a great time. After dinner we walked around for a while and then back to the ship. After sitting on the sun deck for a short time, it was back to the cabin for the evening. We had blue skies and moderate temperatures all day. All in all, it was a great day!

Day 7 – Kelheim

There is not a natural connection between the Danube and the Main Rivers. In 1990 the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal connecting the rivers was completed. During the day today we left the Danube River and entered the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal and stopped for the day in Kelheim Germany.

Our day started after breakfast with a walk into town. Kelheim is very small, mainly one road and one cross road. We made our way to tour boats that sailed through the Danube Gorge. Yes, we were back on the Danube for this boat ride. We sailed through the gorge looking mostly at trees and rock formations. Like many things in Europe, the rock formations all had names like Napoleon's Suitcase, Peter and Paul, etc. At the other end of the gorge was the Benedictine Abbey. Since we were on a round trip through the gorge, we did not get off the ship to visit the abbey. Once back to Kelheim we slowly walked through the town and made our way to the ship. I forgot to mention, it was a rainy day! Although not a down pour, we were a little wet when we arrived back at the ship.

Shortly after we returned to the ship it was time for lunch. Following lunch we were scheduled for one of the highlights of the trip; the home hosted kaffelatsch. We were all put on buses and after a half hour ride arrived at our host's home. Karolina Peters was our host. Her husband was out of town, but he left instruction with her to show off all his goodies. He is retired and has many hobbies; antique tractors, racing cars, and many other mechanical devices. After touring the house, garages and grounds all 14 of us sat down for coffee and cake. Karolina was a great host and I believe we all had wonderful time (See pictures under "Kelheim").

Following our bus ride back to the ship it was time for dinner. Our program director had requested to join us for dinner this evening. We enjoyed dinner and Marloes' company. Following dinner there was a presentation on the canal which we found very interesting. It is now 10:50pm and bedtime.

Day 8 – Nuremberg

This morning we had a tour of the city by bus with a local guide. She pointed out many of the important buildings and locations during the Nazi era before and during World War II. We then stopped and walked around the Nuremberg's Old Town. After returning to the ship for lunch, we took the bus back to Old Town and walked around some more. Of course we stopped for Gelato along the way.

Dinner this evening was a Bavarian style buffet. It even included a stuffed pig. Following dinner we went to the lounge for an evening of "Liar-Liar". The program managers choose four words from the dictionary that no one had ever heard of. They then would each give their definition of the word. Only one definition was correct. We passengers were

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assigned one of nine groups to guess which definition was correct. The group that got the most correct was the winners. Well, no thanks to me, our group tied with another group with three of the four words correct. Since only one group could win, the tied groups had to guess the combined age of the four program directors. I suggested 140. The group went with 138. The other group that had tied us guessed 130. 140 was the correct combined age. We won a bottle of champagne which when split eight ways was one small glass. But we did have a good time. Following the game it was off to bed.

Day 9 – Bamberg

When we awoke this morning it was pouring rain. In spite of that, after breakfast it was off on our walking tour of Bamberg. To get to Bamberg we took a ten minute bus ride. When we got there, the rain had stopped. We walked around as a group with our program director explaining things as we went. I'm not sure I mentioned earlier, during our walking tours we have receivers with head phones. That way we can walk a distance from the program director and still hear what she has to say. Our tour lasted about one hour and fifteen minutes and we finished at the Imperial Cathedral.

At that point Dick and I found the WC (water closet; toilet in Germany) and we proceeded to walk around. Being a little cool it was time for coffee and pastry. I ordered a piece of crumb cake and wound up with the whole cake along with gigantic cups of coffee. We ate it! (See the picture under "Bamberg"). We then just continued walking around. Esther and Arlene kept popping their heads into stores while Dick and I people watched. It did shower briefly for a few minutes a couple of times and the umbrellas came out and the hoods on the jackets went over our heads, but nothing very serious. On the way back to the bus to the ship we stumbled across a Gelato place and of course we had to stop. We were back to the ship by 2:15 pm and the ship departed shortly after.

This evening after dinner we visited the lounge for horse racing. Five crew members were dressed up as horses. We could all bet 1 euro on as many of the five horses as we liked. The horses move one step each time a big die was rolled and landed on their number. The first horse that made six steps was the winner. Esther started race number one with a bet on horse four. Horse four won and paid five to one. The next race she bet on horse two. Horse four won again. In the third and last race she bet three Euros on horse four. It hardly got out of the starting gate. Arlene and Dick bet on horses one and three in all four races. Finally in the last race horse one won. It was a fun evening and we are now back in our cabin getting ready for tomorrow.

Day 10 – Wurzburg/Rothenberg

This morning after breakfast we took the bus for about one hour and fifteen minutes from the ship to Rothenberg. There we had a walking tour around the town, had lunch at a restaurant and had some free time until about 3:00 pm when we headed back to the bus and to the ship. Rothenberg was a medieval town that was not destroyed during the Second World War. It was a fun town to visit with lots of interesting buildings. The lunch was in quiet section of the restaurant basement. It was one of the best meals we have had on our trip. Rothenberg is now mostly a tourist city. Being a catering to tourist and being a Sunday, there were a lot of people in the around. Also, the stores were open which is very unusual in Germany on a Sunday. We of course found one of the coffee shops in town.

Upon returning to our ship in Wurzburg, we had a short walking tour of the town. The main highlights were the bridge, which was similar to the Charles Bridge in Prague that had statues of Saints on both sides. It was a walking bridge and they served wine at one end of the bridge. Being a Sunday and serving wine there were lot of people on the bridge. It is apparently the thing residents do on the weekend. We also visited a museum that had a replica of the city after being bombed at the end of the Second World War. The city was devastated!

Since Arlene and Dick hadn't taken the walking tour of Wurzburg, we decided after dinner to walk around the town again. That evening we walked back on the bridge and around more of the city than we had seen earlier. Since the ship was sailing at 10:15 pm, we were back to the ship by 10:00 pm.

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An interesting point.... At the end of the walking tour earlier that day I took the ear piece from my receiver off of my ear. In the process I pulled out my hearing aid and it fell to the ground just missing a grate. I found the hearing aid but I couldn't locate the battery. On our walk back after dinner I figured I would go the same spot and look for the battery. Surprisingly, I found it!

Day 11 - Wertheim

We arrive later in the morning at Wertheim. At around 11:00 am we headed out on walking tour with our program director. Early in the day it was again raining. By the time we left it had either stopped or drizzled so little you could hardly feel it. Wertheim is a very small town with a population of about 24,000 residents. Following the walking tour we walked on our own until near lunch time and then went back to the ship for lunch. Following lunch it was back out in the town. This time Esther and Arlene wanted to visit the stores; shopping you know. Dick and I tailed along for period and went off on our own for periods only to meet up with the girls now and then. Both in the morning and again in the afternoon, we found the best coffee and pastry shops and had a coffee. No Gelato today!

In the evening following dinner the program directors arranged Karaoke. They had a book available songs. There were some songs I recognized but most of my oldies weren't in it. Esther and I got up to sing once. That was only because each of the program director's groups got up to sing a song. Being one of twenty or so people, that was not a problem. It turned out to be a fun evening. Following Karaoke, it was off to bed.

Day 12 – Offenbach/Heidelberg/Rudesheim

I got up early this morning and the sky showed some blue and it wasn't raining. Following breakfast we boarded our bus for Heidelberg. Other than what we saw from the ship and bus, we did not see any of Offenbach. From the ship it was an hour and a half bus ride to the 15th century Gothic castle in Heidelberg. We tour the castle and had wonderful views down to Heidelberg and the surrounding Odenwald Forest. At noon we again boarded the bus from downtown Heidelberg and a restaurant for an included lunch. After we finished lunch we had until 3:15 pm to enjoy the downtown on our own. This was really the first day we had to actually dodge the rain drops. It rained fairly heavy from time to time. At 3:30 pm we were back on the bus heading for Rudesheim. Our ship had traveled from Offenbach, on the Main River, to Rudesheim, on the Rhine River, while we were on our bus trip.

Rudesheim was our first port on the Rhine River. Once back to the ship we relaxed until dinner. Following dinner, just before 9:00 pm, we set out for downtown Rudesheim. It was about a mile walk to an area that had restaurants and night clubs. We walked around the area, which we enjoyed very much, and then headed back to the ship. We arrived back at the ship about 10:15 pm. We all agreed that Rudesheim was a worthwhile place to visit.

Day 13 – Koblenz

The MS River Adagio left Rudesheim at 8:30 am heading for Koblenz. The four hour trip was the most beautiful part of the Rhine River. The program directors explained the landmarks we were passing through most of this trip. The scenery was vineyards on steep slopes, small villages/towns, and many castles. We probably took more pictures these four hours than on any other part of the trip. The only down side of the day was that the weather was cloudy and with the wind created by the ship traveling; it was not the most comfortable on the sun deck. Most of the passengers stayed inside in the lounge. Having dressed warmly, we stayed on top most of the trip.

At 12:30 pm we arrived in Koblenz. Koblenz sits at the mouth of the Mosel River where it joins the Rhine. At 2:00 pm we were scheduled for a walking tour with our program director. We finished lunch about 1:30 pm and decided to go off on our own. Stepping out of the ship we discovered it had warmed up substantially and was starting to clear. After shedding some clothing we headed of the market place. It turned out to be a beautiful afternoon with our usual events;

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ladies shopping, men waiting, a coffee shop and of course a gelato shop. We made it back to the ship in time for a drink on the sun deck followed by dinner.

At dinner we sat with two ladies from Tuscan Arizona. We had a good time at dinner and since the weather was so great we decided to take another walk and invited the ladies from dinner to join us. One had a knee problem and didn't want to walk. The other came along. She invited a friend and off the six of us went. We walked quite a distance both ways from the ship and made it back to the ship about 15 minutes before sailing time. Upon returning, we sat on the sun deck for a while longer, watched as the ship left port and then it was off to our rooms for the night. All in all, it was a very good day!

Day 14 – Cologne

Our ship arrived in Cologne in the early morning before we were up. Cologne is the fourth largest city in Germany. After breakfast we had a walking tour with our program manager into the city. As usual, we were shown significant landmarks, including the Dome Cathedral. The cathedral had a spire that was over 500 feet tall. It was a very large church to say the least. Our walking tour ended at the old town marketplace in late morning. From there we were on our own to roam the city. One of the impressive things we saw was the train bridge. It has five or six tracks and carries 1,200 trains a day. That's a day, not a week or month. We saw as many as four trains on the bridge all at the same time.

As in other locations we visited, following our walking tour we walked on our own all around the old town section rarely missing a store. We had lunch at a café out on the sidewalk and continued to see if there were any stores we had missed earlier. Dick and I spent a lot of time standing on the street corners sightseeing, mostly watching the people, which I do enjoy.

We had to be back on the ship by 4:45 pm for our sailing to Amsterdam. We made that time with 15 minutes to spare. Back on board we sat up on the sun deck for a while, Esther did some packing and I watch the ship leave the dock. Then, it was dinner time. After dinner the crew put on a show in the lounge. For a bunch of amateurs, they did a pretty good job. Following the show it was off to bed getting the necessary rest for our last day in Amsterdam.

I forgot to mention....it was a sunny, warm day; probably the best weather day we have had on our trip.

Day 15 – Amsterdam

We got up and dressed this morning watching the scenery as our ship was still making its way to Amsterdam. At 8:00 am it was off to breakfast. Following breakfast we met up with our program director for a busy morning. At 8:50 am we were heading to the canal boat for a one hour tour through the canals. Probably the most interesting was the house boats that were tied up on both sides of the canals that people lived in. They are actually tied into the Amsterdam sewerage system. Costs are high in Amsterdam. Rents are about \$3,000 per month for 1,200 sq. ft. Even the house boats have to pay at least \$1,000 per month to tie up.

After our canal ride we had a short walking tour followed by some free time. We used our free time to get a cup of coffee. We sat down at an outside café. After 15 minutes of sitting and not being served we left. We walked to where we could get a takeout cup of coffee. While getting that coffee we learned that the prices were much higher in Amsterdam than they were in Germany. Although we didn't have one, Gelato was almost twice as much for a much smaller scoop.

Following our free time, it was back to the walking tour. This time we were walking through/touring the "RED LIGHT" district. Prostitution and marijuana are legal in the Netherlands. It is legal to buy and use marijuana, but not grow it. Does that make sense? Amsterdam is also friendly to gays and transvestites. Put all of the above together and it doesn't make for a very welcome sight. The area was full of less than appealing people and was dirty.

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Following the second portion of our walking tour we headed back to the ship. We could have spent the balance of the afternoon wandering the streets of Amsterdam, but figure we had seen enough. That coupled with the fact that we had to finish packing and get up at 4:00 am the following morning to get to the airport, we decided to come back to the ship for lunch, packing and some final relaxing.

Day 16 – Homeward Bound

Today we were up at 4:00 am. We left our luggage out by our cabin door at 5:00 am. We had breakfast and got the bus to the airport at 5:45 am. We arrived at the airport about 6:45 am, checked in and went through security and were on the plane to Munich by 8:50 am. Our connecting flight in Munich was on time and we arrived on time in Charlotte. After getting our luggage, clearing customs and getting our car, we were on our way home. After an hour drive and a short stop for a bite to eat, we were home about 7:00 pm. It was a long day!

Summary

We visited many towns, villages and cities. We saw lots of very interesting sights. We didn't have the greatest weather, but we also didn't have a lot of rain. Our last few days were very nice. A river cruise is still a good way to see the towns, villages, cities and sites on or near the rivers. Looking back, our favorite two stops were Bamberg and Regensburg. It has been a very good trip and we enjoyed spending our time with Arlene and Dick.