

I saw the best of Europe on an Imperial Danube cruise



Justine Tyerman, 61, is a New Zealand journalist, travel writer and sub-editor. Married for 36 years, she lives in rural surroundings near Gisborne on the East Coast of New Zealand with her husband Chris.

Sitting on the deck of a sinking ship, drinking French rosé and rearranging the deck chairs to get a better view of the sunset as the theme song to Titanic played quietly in the background is one of the more bizarre experiences of my life.

Far from exhibiting panic, the 180 passengers were intrigued as the MS Beethoven descended at a rate of a half a metre a minute alongside another ship, sinking at precisely the same speed.

We were having an animated conversation with our new shipboard friends from the United States about Jim's days as a speech writer for JFK during the Cuban missile crisis, Ilse's work as a gold assayer, and America's apparently constant need to deliver other countries from strife. As the ship went down, Jim talked of the many 'Strategicstans' and 'Tragicstans' that seem to necessitate US intervention. Having met at a tennis match in Florida only 18 months earlier, they were in their 60s but still dewy-eyed and holding hands.

The sun was setting over the Danube as the 110-metre long, 11.4-metre wide French-owned ship entered Gabchikovo Lock in Slovakia - the largest of the four we negotiated on our eight-day river cruise - and began descending at an impressive speed.

Within minutes, we slipped from the warm glow of the golden pink sunset into the cool, grey gloom of the gigantic, concrete-walled shaft. Half an hour later, the lock doors opened, we emerged 20 metres lower, and continued our satin smooth cruise towards Vienna, bathed in the soft light of summer dusk.

It was the last of our eight happy days on the CroisiEurope Imperial Danube Cruise through Austria, Hungary and Slovakia, beginning and ending in Vienna.

The itinerary provided the perfect mix of relaxation, sightseeing and entertainment for us as novice cruisers, with informative guided tours of Vienna, Melk Abbey and Dürnstein in Austria, Bratislava and Sturovo in Slovakia, and Kalocsa, Puszta, Budapest and Esztergom in Hungary.

At the gala dinner that evening we met up with our regular tablemates, three lively girls from Picton, Marlene, Lynne and Aileen, the only other Kiwis on the ship. Marlene and Lynne had known each other for 50 years while Aileen had joined them "quite recently", just 20 years ago. They had travelled together since the 1990s.

Bottles of French Grenache Syrah and Merlot arrived at the table delivered by our charming young Hungarian wine waiter Konrad while our Hungarian waitress Csilla, whose smile and sparkling blue eyes were so infectious I just wanted to hug her, served the first of four delicious, elegantly-presented courses - Duck Foie Gras in a Gingerbread Case with Compote of Damson and Brioche.

Raising our glasses to toast fine company and a happy week, we shared highlight-of-the-cruise, a variation of the highlight-of-the-day tradition my husband Chris initiated when our children were young.

As a lover of history, I was enthralled with all the excursions that covered the fascinating Habsburg dynasty and 640-year era of the Austro-Hungarian Empire which ended in 1918 - the magnificently ornate winter and summer palaces in Vienna, and 18th century baroque Melk Abbey with its glorious gardens

Chris relished the energetic hike to the castle above Dürnstein, a jewel of a village in the verdant apricot and grape growing Wachau Valley, the most picturesque part of the cruise. Steeped in history, the castle acquired fame as the place where the English king, Richard the Lionheart was held prisoner in 1192, by Duke Leopold V of Austria after their dispute during the Third Crusade.

Marlene, Lynne and Aileen loved the Mozart and Strauss concert complete with opera singers and ballet dancers at Vienna's gorgeous Auersperg Palace, our visit to a ranch on the vast prairie lands of Puszta in Hungary where whip-cracking Cuman horsemen put on a thrilling display of their superb horsemanship, and the "Pearl of the Danube", Budapest by night where many historic buildings and bridges were illuminated in a dazzling show of colour and light.

Others chimed in with their highlights. Budapest was a winner with its magnificent cathedral, churches, castle, Fisherman's Bastion, theatres, baths, Parliament buildings, markets and grand Heroes' Square with statues of the leaders of the seven tribes that founded Hungary in the 9th century.

Many were fascinated by the little Hungarian village of Kalocsa, where we saw brightly-coloured hand embroidery, a traditional house with hand-painted flowers on the walls and a museum devoted to the growing of paprika, highly-prized as a major export and the key ingredient in the goulash, the national dish.

Esztergom also left a lasting impression. The first capital of Hungary under the Arpad kings, it was the birthplace of King Stephen who was crowned in 1001 as the first Christian king of Hungary. The huge basilica on the hill above the town, completed in 1822, took 40 years to build and is the biggest and most beautiful in Hungary with a dome modelled on St Peter's Cathedral in Rome. We drove across the Danube on the Maria Valeria Bridge to Sturovo in Slovakia which was bombed by the Germans in 1944 and only rebuilt in 2001. The girls were saddened at the ugliness of the soulless buildings erected during the Communist regime pointed out by our guide.

In Bratislava, the capital city of Slovakia, Jim's sharp eye for detail picked out the gargoyles on the rooftops as we toured the baroque palaces and town hall, St Martin's Gothic Cathedral, the royal castle and the old town beyond the 13th century Michael's Gate.



As the mouth-watering Crispy Fillet of Quail and King Boletus Mushrooms with Parsley and Port Sauce arrived at the table, we toasted French cuisine, our brilliant chef Kanavor, and the hard working, earnest young men and women who had put such a huge effort into looking after us all week and had endeared themselves to all.

Portuguese purser Sonia, who ran a super-efficient operation by day and in the evening was a star entertainer in the variety shows, deserved a special mention.

And behind the scenes, while we slept, our highly-competent Hungarian captain, Hegyi and his crew, ensured we avoided the many hazards on the busy Danube waterway and delivered us to the next port of call safely, and on time. I had a peek at our captain one day, purring at the controls of the MS Beethoven in the state-of-the-art bridge, a job he said he absolutely loved. After a week, alarmed at the puzzling shrinkage of my clothes in the wardrobe, I had discovered the need for temperance to cope with the seductive nature of the French desserts - so by the time the Terrine of Blue Cheese with Heart of Pear arrived followed by Baked Alaska, Flambé in Grand Marnier, I decided a spoonful of each was quite sufficient . . . that was the theory anyway.

The dinner table conversation then turned to the stress-free, relaxed nature of travel on a river ship, a major highlight for us.

My hyperactive husband, whose primary concern at the beginning of the cruise was whether he would get enough exercise, was spotted drinking a second or third ice cold beer at lunchtime and snoozing on the deck in the afternoons, normal for most, unheard of for him. By day four, relaxation also set in for me and sleep came in gentle waves, leaving my sentences unfinished on an open iPad.

Freedom from the necessity to navigate in and around cities, find accommodation, parking and food every day was bliss. And in a floating hotel, there was no need to pack and unpack every day which was a huge time-saver.

Marlene, Lynne and Aileen were always on for any fun and joined in quizzes, dance lessons and games with great gusto. Later that evening, there was a diplomatic incident when the Kiwi girls defected to the French contingent during a quiz. Aileen managed to win a bottle of bubbly for the French team which brought loud accusations of fraternisation with the enemy, especially when she ended up on the dance floor with the best dancer on the ship, a debonair Frenchman of course.

All up, it was agreed the CroisiEurope cruises were great value for money as all aspects of your lives as travellers were taken care of. The price (which equated to \$300 per day, per person twin share, with Earlybird bookings), covered accommodation in comfortable, surprisingly-spacious twin or double-bed serviced cabins with ensuite bathrooms and huge picture windows, three superb gourmet meals a day (French cuisine), full table service for lunch and dinner including a selection of French wine and local beer with meals, the best local guides in the business, music, dancing and entertainment in the evenings. Air-conditioned coaches with multi-lingual guides were waiting at the ports to take passengers right to the heart of the sight-seeing spots - no parking hassles, no need to pore over guide books to figure out where to go and what to do in a limited time-period, no risk of getting lost. Passengers were then delivered back to the boat in time for another splendid meal while the ship made its way to the next port of call.

I am reliably informed that not only are wine and beer included in the price for 2016, so too is an open bar for spirits, wine and beer, along with a wonderful selection of cocktails.

For those like me, dubious about open-sea sailing, river cruising is a soft option. The motion is 100 percent smooth with no sense of swell or wave movement at all.

But on a cruise, like any holiday, enjoyment is often measured by the calibre of the people you meet and the experiences shared. Marlene summed it up nicely: "We have so many happy memories of the river cruise not the least of which were the wonderful company and the fabulous crew who all went out of their way to make sure we were well taken care of."

Doesn't this sound like an incredible experience? Have you ever cruised before, and if so where? Let us know in the comments, we'd love to hear from you.

Justine Tyerman travelled courtesy of [Innovative Travel Company](#), the New Zealand representative for [CroisiEurope](#).

