

AVALON WATERWAYS A WALTZ ON THE RHINE

By DOMINICK and SUSAN MERLE

WALTZING THE RHINE---We're at the midway point of a 13-day river cruise from Vienna to Amsterdam, a roughly 1,000-kilometer journey often described in ship circles as the "Mozart to Rembrandt" shuttle.

Unusual name for a restaurant



But instead of a shuttle, it's felt more like an unhurried waltz along the Danube, Main and Rhine, swirling past pretty little hamlets and rolling countrysides crowned

with castles.

Our ship, the Avalon Waterways MS Imagery, became our dance floor; our cruise director, Isabel Heimann, our master of

ceremonies, and our Austrian captain, Punisa Grbovic, our conductor.

Isabel operated with that cool Swiss-born efficiency most definitely required to handle the requests of 170 passengers, the majority from the U.S., Canada, the U.K, Australia and New Zealand.

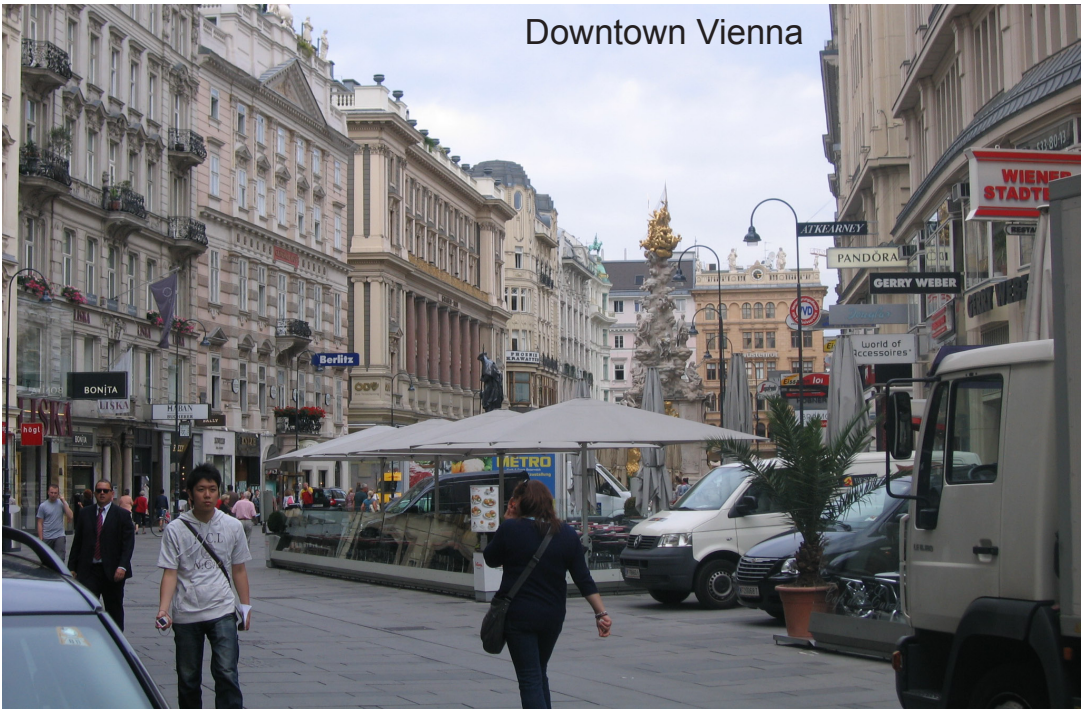
Captain Grovic was the epitome of the strong, silent type you'd like to have in charge. At one dock, when a tour bus was unable to snake through a construction site, I watched him whip off his captain's jacket and cap, quickly assemble

a fold-up bicycle and fast-pedal a few hundred meters to lead the bus through. He was welcomed back aboard with applause and responded with an "Aw, shucks" look.

The ship, built in 2007, contained 81 cabins and 4 suites on three decks, with a skydeck on top, which had only periodic use because of the number of locks we would pass through and low bridges we would sail under. As the engines were placed far from the cabins, it was a fairly silent ride on the three rivers.

While the world-famous cities of

Downtown Vienna



Grein's historic theater



Vienna and Amsterdam were our cruise bookends, a number of tiny hamlets with unfamiliar names stole the show.

Places like Grein, Austria, population about 3,000, where we were greeted by Carli, a bubbly Mary Poppins-like guide, umbrella, hoopskirt and all. Carli took us on a walking tour ending at the village square and its crown jewel, an

historic theater known as the Stadttheater, built in 1791.

It has been in operation ever since and is the oldest theater in central Europe. Everything is intact, just as it was constructed---the wooden flooring and seats, including some private stalls that could be locked and unlocked with a key, the stage and original curtain, a sequestered section

where prisoners could watch the performances, even a special box for Napoleon himself .

At one side of the theater was an outhouse-type toilet separated

only by a curtain. "The cheapest seats were right outside the curtain," Carli said with a giggle.

Today, the theater is used for travelling theater groups and local



Grein's Mary Poppins-like guide



Late for wedding

amateur groups, and also rented for the production of many historic movies. "We're pretty famous for such a little place," Carli said. "You might see me on your screen one of these days."

Regensburg, Germany, population 150,000, was our next surprise. Located on the banks of the Danube, it suffered only minor damage during WW II and has the largest collection of medieval buildings---more than 1,300 packed into the tiny old section---than anywhere else in Germany.

"Regensburg surpasses every German city with its outstanding buildings," said Emperor Maximilian back in 1517.

It hasn't changed much since then, but nobody is still listening because the city is usually bypassed by tourists who head for the better known and nearby cities of Nuremberg and Heidelberg.

We spent the better part of the day in Regensburg, walking the old and new sections and visiting St. Peter's Cathedral, seat of the Catholic Diocese of Regensburg.

And as luck would have it, the world-famous Regensburg Boys Choir was in dress rehearsal on the spacious altar for a photo session, and practicing at the same time.

The choir has performed for royalty all over the world, and now was giving a free off-the-cuff

concert for a group of river cruisers who just happened to drop in.

A magnificent thousand-foot stone bridge spans the Danube in the old section, and nearby is Germany's oldest restaurant, Alte Wurstkuche (Old Sausage House). We had a plate of its famous bratwurst with a side of sauerkraut.

MS Imagery on Danube at Budapest



Rhine Valley grape pickers



Leaving Regensburg, we arrive at the midway point of our cruise in Bamberg, where the MS Imagery shifts from the Danube to the Main. Our guide here grew up in the Australian Outback, moved to Germany a dozen years ago and now speaks English with an Outback-German accent.

A few times we even understood what he was saying. No problem, Bamberg was cozy enough to explore on our own.

Like Regensburg, Bamberg was also spared from the brunt of WW II bombs and its entire old city has

been declared a UNESCO World Heritage site. And while Regensburg flaunts its bratwurst, Bamberg boasts about its beer, with a dozen or so breweries producing 30 different varieties, including a smoked version.

Walking back to the ship, we passed a building that claimed to house Bamberg's most romantic restaurant. It was called Messerschmitt. A bit of an eye-opener, but you wouldn't forget the name, would you?

On the Main River now, our next stop was Wurzburg, a short stop

but long enough to enjoy a wienerschnitzel lunch in a quiet courtyard, then on to Wertheim and Miltenburg, noted for its preserved half-timbered houses that line its main street.

This area is also prime castle viewing and we saw many during our slow waltz on water.

Nearing the Rhine River, we stopped at Rudesheim, cute but a bit too touristy and overpriced. One gets the feeling that nobody really lives here, that when the

river cruisers leave, a string is pulled and all the shops collapse, and then pop up again when the next ships arrive.

Our next port on the Rhine was Cologne, which was practically levelled during the war and now is a modern city of about -million residents. By far the best shopping during our tour was here, with the best prices as well. Everyone returned to the boat with arms-full of packages.

And now for the last dance,



Avalon MS Imagery on the Rhine



Amsterdam. Rain and dark skies, typical weather for this time of year. Nonetheless we walked the city, dodging the daredevil bikers, strolling through the Red Light district at high noon and ending at the Rijksmuseum to view some of the paintings of the Dutch Golden Age headed by Rembrandt.

Red Light and Rembrandt, unusual eye candy to end a trip.

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TIPS

Most cruisers like to sit at the same

tables for lunch and dinner; better you do the same to avoid any uncomfortable territorial disputes. Guided walking tours are included at every port, or you can venture out on your own. Do a little homework on the optional fee tours; some are worth it, some aren't.

Try to arrive in Vienna a day or two before the cruise as the included tour will only give you a quick snapshot of this beautiful city.

We flew Air Canada (www.aircanada.com) from Montreal via Frankfurt.

For further information on Avalon Waterways river cruises try www.avalonwaterways.com)