

# River rapid

A whistle-stop river cruise reveals a different way to sell the Danube, finds **Alice Barnes-Brown**

Even on a drizzly day, the neo-Gothic masterpiece that is the Hungarian Parliament – with its bright red dome, crown of arched windows and more ornate spires than I could count – took my breath away. It's a lot to take in, but the best way to get a good view of this Budapest landmark is from the top deck of a river ship, preferably with a flute of sparkling wine in hand.

Thankfully, that's exactly what a group of top-selling river cruise agents and I enjoyed on board the *William Wordsworth* during a Riviera Travel fam trip last month. In just two nights, we saw Budapest, Bratislava and Vienna – and much more in between.

## TASTER TRIPS

This was a glimpse of the line's growing crop of shorter sailings. Phil Hullah, chief executive of Riviera Travel, said: "We've put two more four-night Discovery itineraries on in 2025 [on the Rhine and Seine]."

Shorter-duration cruises sell well with the trade, because they give agents the opportunity to ask clients whether they've ever considered a river cruise."

The appeal of a taster cruise is clear. Passengers see multiple destinations at a lower price point – but experience just enough river cruise magic to get them hooked.

A few hours after leaving Budapest, we sailed through the historic town of Vác, just as sunset bathed its onion domes in golden light and a double rainbow stretched across the skyline. As I stood at my cabin's French balcony, with the Danube sweeping below my feet and a hot cup of tea in hand, it felt like I had the front seat to a fairytale.

## FINE FOOD

Post-sundown, I dressed to the nines for an onboard gala dinner. As a vegetarian, set menus sometimes play it safe, but that wasn't the case here as I was ➤

Hungarian Parliament, Budapest

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### AGENTS' views



"The cabins on the *William Wordsworth* are luxurious and a very good size. We always recommend a French balcony cabin, because watching the river and the countryside go by is as much a part of the cruise as the destinations."

**Toni Evans, operations director, Art of Travel**



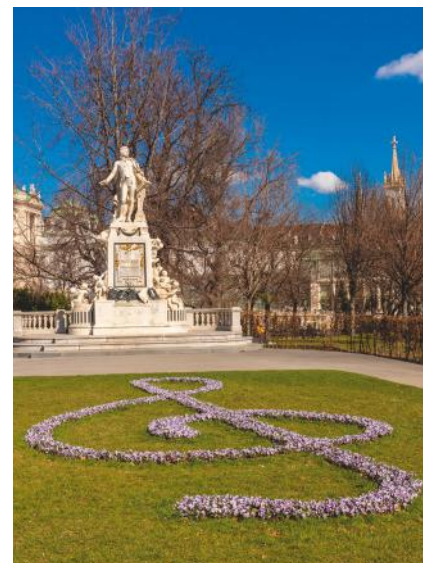
"I enjoyed the relaxed informality, the quality of service and the ease of visiting so many different destinations on one trip. I'd never been to Hungary or Slovakia – Bratislava was quiet and clean and a bit of a surprise."

**Zoe Franklin, sales manager, Travel Club Elite**



"It's opened my eyes to how relaxing river cruising is. I'm really surprised by how spacious the cabins, deck and public areas are. I've done a few ocean cruises and it's a very different vibe."

**Glenn Wright, regional sales manager, Millington Travel**



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Riviera Travel's *William Wordsworth*; Bratislava, Slovakia; Mozart statue, Vienna **PICTURES:** Charlotte Cumming; Shutterstock/Rasto SK, Julia Mountain Photo

served some seriously creative plates. A smoked tofu confit came in place of duck confit, followed by a mouthwatering mushroom wellington, with apricot sorbet floating in prosecco providing a palate cleanser. Dessert was a moreish molten chocolate pudding, smelling intensely of hot cocoa.

Bratislava brought more foodie delights on shore. The ship moored just across the Danube from the 'UFO', a disc-shaped Soviet-era construction that seemed to hover 90 metres above the river – but is in fact attached to a pillar of the Most SNP cable bridge.

I rode the lift to the top and admired the views from the windy observation deck: to my left was Bratislava Castle, a turreted fortress with distinctly baroque stylings, while to my right was the old town where architectural influences range from the Habsburgs to Zaha Hadid.

A wine-paired lunch at the UFO's restaurant awaited, so I could peer across these rooftops while tasting Slovakian wines. Like Bratislava itself, these were surprising and diverse, with the group sampling several glasses of buttery, red dunaj – which the Slovakian sommeliers were only too happy to pour.

Such is the renown of this region's wine, our Bratislava guide claimed there were 7,000 bottles of Slovakian fizz on board the *Titanic*. Apparently, some were recovered from the wreck and are still "of excellent quality" – though I'd recommend tasting a more recent vintage.

### CLASSIC AUSTRIA

Night fell as we drifted peacefully past Devin Castle, a ruin on the Austrian border, where a moonlit watchtower painted a romantic picture as I bid goodbye to Slovakia.

Vienna is known for its musical heritage – home to illustrious composers from Strauss to Mozart – so it's fitting that as we navigated the many locks and bridges that lead into the city, we were joined on board by local string quartet Ars Mundi. I couldn't help but lose myself in the symphony of violins and cellos, bringing myself back to the present only to applaud as we approached the bright lights of Vienna's Prater amusement park.

The next day, we disembarked on a bright spring morning in Vienna, feeling a little more enlightened and, with three European cities under our belts, much better-travelled than three days before. **TW**

### INSIDER INSIGHT



"One of the pillars in our strategy is to be the easiest and friendliest brand to work with. We're

trying to go for £106 million in trade revenue by the end of 2027, and our agent [feedback] committees are important – we get to hear the good, the bad and the ugly. We've introduced our new travel concierge, which means we can tailor-make packages better, and the Riviera Explorer e-learning module launched last October. It has three levels and participants get a certification at the end to say they're Riviera Travel experts."

**Vicky Billing, head of trade and partnerships UK and Ireland, Riviera Travel**

### BOOK IT

**Riviera Travel's** Budapest, Bratislava & Vienna: A Danube Discovery Cruise is priced from £1,199 per person for four nights on an all-inclusive basis, based on two sharing. Includes four excursions, luggage, flights and transfers, with departures in March 2026. [rivieratravel.co.uk](http://rivieratravel.co.uk)