



City hopping



Kelly Ranson joins *Scenic Jade* on the Danube for a short, city-centric cruise that's enticing plenty of first-timers to the river

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | DANUBE

TOP
tip

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"A journey along the Danube is perfect for first-time river cruisers. My top tip would be to highlight that guests can tick off several iconic cities, such as Budapest and Vienna, during one trip, while only having to unpack once. A Scenic river cruise always features Freechoice excursions hosted by local guides, so guests can have a true experience of the destination they're visiting and can choose the day out that suits their interests."



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Classical concert at Palais Liechtenstein, Vienna; Bratislava; Scenic Jade passes the Hungarian Parliament in Budapest

PICTURES: Faye Lovelady; Shutterstock/Roman Sigaev



breakfast in Budapest, lunch in Bratislava and dinner in Vienna. OK, this isn't quite the itinerary for my four-night sailing along the Danube on board *Scenic Jade*, but I was able to take in the highlights of three countries – Hungary, Slovakia and Austria – and their not-to-be-missed beautiful capital cities, all in one short, hassle-free trip.

Europe's rivers may have hit the headlines in 2022 due to low water levels disrupting a number of sailings, but that hasn't weakened customer demand for river cruises, with guests being drawn to the smaller ships and the more relaxed pace.

In 2022, Scenic introduced its four-night, five-day Tastes of Imperial Europe cruise from Budapest to Vienna or vice versa, which has been a hit with travellers looking to try a river cruise for the first time, largely thanks to its short length and low lead-in prices.

Due to its popularity, Scenic has added the itinerary for 2023 sailings in April and September, and it is already about 40% sold.

SAIL IN LUXURY

Stepping aboard *Scenic Jade*, one of Scenic's five-star 'Space Ships', I instantly feel the contemporary vibe and friendly atmosphere.

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The public lounge areas are sleek and the majority of cabins are suites, with top-notch amenities and generous balconies with floor-to-ceiling glass panel doors that open up into the cabin creating even more space.

A great selling point for Scenic is its all-inclusive offering. All meals (including in-suite dining at any time), premium drinks, Wi-Fi, butler services, tours, transfers and flights are included in the price.

Dining on board ranges from casual options in the River Cafe to the more upscale Crystal Dining Room and Portobello's. During my cruise, Scenic weaved in regional flavours such as beef goulash and local river fish with classic plates.

A highlight for clients staying in a higher-category suite is an invitation to Table La Rive to sample a six-course tasting menu created by the ship's executive chef. As well as being very tasty, it is beautifully presented and carefully paired with wines for each course. ➤

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ABOVE: Heroes' Square, Budapest PICTURE: Shutterstock/waku

Entertainment includes quizzes and performances by local musicians who come aboard each night, but most people are happy sipping cocktails in the lounge as they chat to fellow guests. I particularly loved having my pre-dinner 'Hugo' cocktail (made with prosecco, gin and elderflower) after a day of sightseeing.

A TALE OF THREE CITIES

Ticking off three European cities in one hit is ideal, and during my cruise I was able to immerse myself in their cultures while still getting in some relaxing cruising time. This included passing through two of the Danube's locks, a procedure that's great to witness for the first time.

If you have clients who are dipping their toes into river cruising but feel unsure about joining a guided excursion, remind them that they are free to wander and explore under their own steam instead. As the ship docks in prime locations in the heart of the cities – only the stop in Vienna requires a short transfer by shuttle bus – sightseeing unguided is straightforward.

Budapest is a big-hitter with its famous landmarks perched along either side of the Danube. Clients can of course join a Scenic 'Freechoice' guided city tour (which is included in the fare as standard) to take in the likes of Heroes' Square, the Hungarian Opera House

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and Matthias Church and to enjoy the views across the city from Fisherman's Bastion. I'd recommend a stop at Central Market Hall for its three floors of food and souvenirs – plus a chance to sample the calorie-laden but oh-so-tasty local *lángos*, a Hungarian fried bread.

In Bratislava, I was able to get out of the city and get a real feel for local life by visiting the home of ceramic artists Jan and Anna Pečukovci. They opened up their doors to show us their workshops, which were adorned with plates, vases and sculptures, and we watched as Anna painted intricate floral designs onto a plate. They also fed us homemade marble cake and iced tea, and talked to us about life in Slovakia.

Vienna – a city full of magnificent buildings, classical music history, and coffee houses galore – is bursting with culture. Having visited the Austrian capital before, I decided to dip into a traditional cafe, Sluka, for a coffee and an apple strudel to satisfy my caffeine and sugar craving. In an attempt to burn off my sweet treat, I then opted for the strenuous climb up the 343 steps of St Stephen's Cathedral's South Tower to take in arguably the best view across the city.

Four nights, three countries, two locks – plus an abundance of happy memories of this short but busy stretch of the Danube to take home. **TW**

BOOK IT

Scenic's five-day Tastes of Imperial Europe voyage costs from £2,105 for a Vienna to Budapest sailing, departing on April 20, including flights and transfers. scenic.co.uk