

Leading lights

Tick off five countries in the heart of eastern Europe on a Danube river cruise, writes Kelly Ranson

Regular visitors to Budapest will tell you that seeing the city by night, from the river, is a must. And if you don't do it, you won't see just how beautiful Budapest can be. Boy, they were not wrong.

Pull out the nicknames – Paris of the East, Pearl of the Danube – because it's true, the spectacular view of the Hungarian parliament building glistening as you sail under the city's numerous bridges takes some beating.

The experience was made even sweeter on board luxury river cruise line Uniworld's refurbished *SS Beatrice* for its inaugural voyage along the Danube to Bucharest.

► BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

Budapest is already a popular European city to explore, and with plenty of culture and history, it would be a struggle to see it all in one day. Fortunately, it's the starting (or finishing) point of *SS Beatrice's* Highlights of Eastern Europe cruise, so guests have two days to see Budapest's two sides – the hilly side is Buda, while the flat one is Pest.

Uniworld kicks off its city tour in Buda (as a side note, all excursions are included as part of the cruise package) with a stop at Matthias Church, perched at the top of Castle Hill, and there's a chance to enjoy the



To make like a local, take the walking tour to the city's irresistible market halls and cafes

city's panorama from Fisherman's Bastion. But to make like a local, take the walking tour that gets right into the heart of the city's irresistible market halls and cafes. Think local honey, fresh fruits and spices aplenty.

With food in mind, the ship's prime mooring in the city centre means the expansive Great Market Hall is just a short stroll away. Arouse the senses and check out the three floors of souvenirs, produce, fruit and veg. For street food at its best, this is the place to sample the local *lángos*, a calorific but yummy Hungarian fried bread.

Looking for a more leisurely day to start the cruise? Budapest sits on more than 120 hot springs, so an afternoon can be very well spent over at Széchenyi Baths in the city's park. →



Budapest

➔ VUKOVAR, CROATIA

Leaving country number one behind, *SS Beatrice's* humorous Captain Jord Zwall says: "Once you leave Budapest, it's as if Columbus fell off the world."

And his description was spot-on. Within minutes of leaving the city, we sail past open fields and grass banks. By nightfall the only glimmer of light appears from bankside villages until our arrival in Croatia.

It's worth noting – and mentioning to clients – that a morning wake-up call may come quite early, courtesy of Hungarian customs. On some sailings, officials need to see you face-to-face with your passport, usually around 5.30am!

Eastern Croatia was severely hit during the conflicts of the 1990s, and in fact one town on the itinerary, Vukovar, offers a poignant reminder of its remarkable recovery. Our excursion took us past the town's water tower, which remains standing despite receiving more than 260 hits during the war of independence.

Although there are still bullet-ridden buildings, the region is now very much about farms, vineyards and a more relaxed way of life. Uniworld's excursions embrace the local lifestyle with lunch at a winery, dining with local fishermen and visiting an organic farm where the owners grind flour, make apple brandy and produce vinegar.

➔ BELGRADE, SERBIA

Belgrade has had a troubled past, and you have two very different ways to see it. Visit the Old Town and Kalemegdan Fortress, or opt for a more off-the-beaten-track bike ride through New Belgrade.

During our seven-mile cycle, there



ABOVE: Belogradchik, Bulgaria's 'Red Rock' region



From elegant architecture to echoes of communist rule, Bucharest offers a fascinating glimpse into the past

were stark reminders of the turbulent history, such as passing a fairground-turned-concentration camp and a derelict TV tower. It's harrowing, but is juxtaposed with the charm of

the Zemun area, which is set on the banks of the Danube and Sava rivers, where locals enjoy an afternoon walk or relax with a coffee in one of the many riverside cafes. Our local guide, Simon, said that while there are still many reminders of the city's darker past, he now sees a bright future for a thriving capital.

The midway point of the itinerary is made for lovers of scenic cruising. After a medieval welcome to the 14th-century Golubac Fortress, the afternoon is spent cruising Serbia's Iron Gates on the narrow stretch of the Danube that separates Serbia and Romania. You can relax on deck and admire the gorges, while learning about local history.

➔ VIDIN AND RUSE, BULGARIA

As the ship cruises on and ticks off country number four, Bulgaria, it's time to see yet another terrain. Belogradchik is Bulgaria's 'Red Rock' region, and it's a must to hike around the impressive rock formations, which are more than 200 million years old.

Staying in Bulgaria, next up is Ruse with its Belle Epoque-style buildings. Excursions here include a walking tour of the city's downtown area, a visit to a nature park to see where hermits

once lived and a trip to a monastery. Within a two-hour bus ride of Ruse is Veliko Tarnovo, described as Bulgaria's medieval capital thanks to its cobbled streets and Tsarevets Fortress, which has been masterfully restored.

➔ BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

The final stop is Romania's beautiful city, Bucharest. After disembarking, you'll bid farewell to *SS Beatrice* and the Danube and journey to the centre of the city (around an hour).

From its elegant, French-inspired architecture to echoes of communist rule, Bucharest offers a fascinating glimpse into the past. Post-cruise excursions include a city tour with a visit to the 'People's House', the second-largest administrative building in the world after the Pentagon.

And following a final day or two of exploration, sit back with a coffee and reflect on an itinerary that mixes top-billed cities with lesser-known towns, on a journey through the rich history and culture of eastern Europe. **tw**

✓ Tried & Tested

SS BEATRICE, UNIWORLD

The 152-passenger *SS Beatrice* was the first ship in the Uniworld fleet to be refitted to 'Super Ship' status, and its light wood panelling, blue and white decor and grand staircase, complete with a Murano chandelier, certainly add to the 'floating boutique hotel' feel it brands itself on.

Uniworld has reworked the former Captain's lounge and library to create two new dining areas, giving guests more choice. In the bow, Austrian-inspired Schubert's offers sharing plates throughout the day, while second venue Max's alternates between a steakhouse (£50 per person) and chef's table cooking class (£95). Mozart's remains the main restaurant, serving regional dishes such as Hungarian fish soup and Balkan mezze platters or salami and local cheese.

The lounge has been refreshed, with additional USB ports in all areas.

Finally, there are two new Royal Suites and a second Owner's Suite. Connecting rooms have been added.

Uniworld president and chief executive Ellen Bettridge says: "Customers wanted more suites and new dining venues, which is exactly what we have given them with the Super Ships."



Uniworld's Highlights of Eastern Europe cruise from Budapest to Bucharest starts at £2,999 per person for 10 days, including seven nights' accommodation in a river-view stateroom plus two nights' B&B and one lunch in Bucharest. All meals, unlimited beverages on board, onshore excursions, gratuities, port charges and transfers are included, for departures until October 8. uniworld.com



LEFT: 'People's House', Romania

A family experience!
DISCOVERY OFFER:
£704⁽¹⁾
discount
for children during
2018 school holidays

RV African Dream Ship built in 2018

SOUTHERN AFRICA

9-DAY SAFARI - CRUISE
South Africa • Botswana • Namibia • Zimbabwe

- Luxury outside-facing cabins with panoramic windows
- Land safaris in beautiful Chobe and Matusadona National Parks
- Feel one with nature on this unique cruise in Zimbabwe on Lake Kariba
- Deluxe lodge on the banks of the Zambezi River, with a private pool for each bungalow
- Marvel at the splendor of Victoria Falls
- All meals, drinks, transfers and game drives included
- Complimentary WiFi at the lodge

Cascades Lodge

(1) Discount of £704 valid per child from 7 to 16 years sharing the parents' accommodation (limited to one child per cabin) OR 15% discount per child staying in a room/cabin separate from that of the parents (offer limited to two children per adult). Price code: PROM7JAM. Offer valid until 31/12/2018, non-retroactive and not combinable with other offers, subject to availability and changes.

CroisiEurope Cruises 0208 3281 281 • resuk@croisieurope.com • www.croisieurope.co.uk

YouTube Facebook Twitter

CLIK