

# Condé Nast Traveler

JULY/AUGUST 2019

*The  
Cruise Issue*

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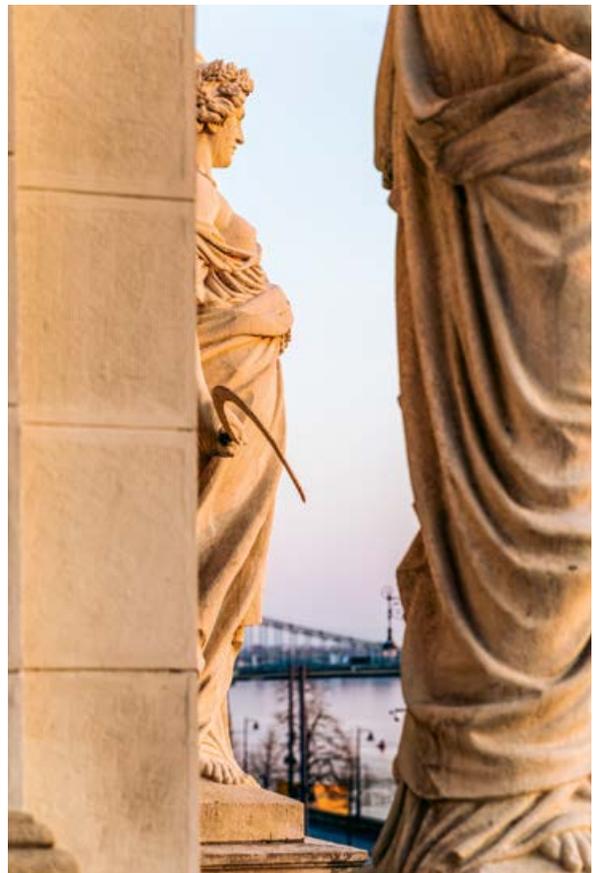
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# AGAINST THE CURRENT

THE DANUBE IS ONE OF EUROPE'S LONGEST RIVERS, FLOWING THROUGH COUNTRIES ONCE SHAPED BY EMPIRES. GLIDING WEST FROM HUNGARY TO AUSTRIA REVEALS A REGION LOOKING TO THE FUTURE. BY MARK ELLWOOD.  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALESSANDRA SPAIRANI







URING A WEEK of sailing down the Danube from Budapest to eastern Austria, one day stands out. It's close to the end of the voyage, and the ship is breezing through a particularly idyllic stretch. The craggy banks are studded with bursts of greenery and the occasional boxy church. The view, and the weather, have drawn most of the passengers to the roof deck for lunch. It's sunny but crisp; the air is a little damp from the river, and most folks have grabbed one of the heavy woolen blankets strewn about. Lunchtime—a quick buffet of cold cuts and Alpine cheeses, including an addictively tangy, spicy cream cheese—offers a brief interlude between visits to two classic Austrian towns, Melk and Krems, which bookend the day.

Melk is famed for its past, when the Baroque abbey on the hilltop made the village an imperial seat. Still a working monastery, it resembles an elaborate, rather stiff gingerbread house teetering high above the Danube. Krems has a storied history too, and the hills nearby are renowned for producing superb grüner veltliner, but there's something else far more contemporary. On the outskirts of the town, as if idling and ready for takeoff, sits a spaceship-like silver building. It's the new home for the State Gallery of Lower Austria, its twisty, zinc-plated skin sparkling in the spring sunshine.

In a region long defined by wistful nostalgia—what Mitteleuropa calls *sehnsucht*—this new museum is thrillingly incongruous. It's easy to see why the past casts such a powerful shadow over the Danube Valley. After all, this was the seat of the Habsburg Empire, where for centuries the river hummed

with merchant ships, generating the wealth that built the countless castles, palaces, and parks that still remain—not to mention that sumptuous abbey. During the last century, though, this chunk of Europe was pummeled into a pale, submissive replica of its former self: by revolutions, wars, financial crises, and, in some parts, Communist rule. The Danube itself fell under competing controls, West versus East; boats no longer freely shuttled up and down. No wonder, then, that the surrounding land began to default to nostalgia, to those easier, happier times of Sacher torte and Strauss. Yet that gleaming gallery in Krems is a promising hint that the choke hold of history is finally loosening. Sailing along the Danube's eastern reaches, a fresh, forward-looking energy is evident everywhere.

NAVIGATING THIS REGION by river, of course, is a natural choice: The wide, deep waterway has been the seam stitching life together here for centuries. The pace is unhurried, on land or on the water; after all, sailing westward, from Budapest to Vienna and beyond, a ship must battle the Danube's current. It glides just fast enough to keep the deck breezy. Each night, as the ship leaves its mooring near sundown, passengers gravitate again to the roof, sitting quietly to watch as a city recedes—at least until nightfall adds extra bite to the air.

There's a distinct rhythm to this journey that's unlike an ocean cruise. Pulling back the curtain every morning reveals a view from the enormous window of each stateroom aboard Crystal Cruises' all-suite *Crystal Ravel* that is different from

Above from left: Mandla café in Bratislava; a deluxe suite on the *Crystal Ravel*. Opposite: Budapest's Széchenyi Chain Bridge. Previous spread, clockwise from top left: A Bratislava door; a porthole on the 55-stateroom ship; Wesselényi Street in Budapest; the Danube from an onboard bedroom; PaUZa home goods and Castle Garden Bazaar, both in Budapest; *Crystal Ravel's* pool

the one the night before. Just a few feet away, the new destination appears as if conjured from nowhere. Take Vienna, where the Danube splits into several winding tributaries that snake through the city's center. In springtime, the river here feels like a lifeline, its banks studded with bars, hotels, and urban beaches—well, patches of sand packed with hopeful-looking deck chairs. Such sunny openness is a stark contrast to the Vienna that visitors encountered just 20 years ago. Though it was never formally behind the Iron Curtain, this city still sat close enough to its fringes to feel the oppressive weight. “Vienna was a cul-de-sac on a Cold War map,” explains Simon Winder, author of *Danubia*, a travelogue of the region, who first began visiting in the 1990s. “It was a road to nowhere, and so introverted that outsiders weren’t welcome.”

With the ship moored in the city overnight, there’s a chance to delve deeper into how Vienna has changed since then. Economic inertia and nostalgia for its days as the capital of an empire helped save old palaces and factories from demolition (there was neither much income nor many incomers). Those grand buildings were mothballed until better times arrived—and thank goodness, too, says Lena Hoschek. A rockabilly brunette with a punky neck tattoo, she is Austria’s most successful contemporary designer. Standing in her wood-paneled studio, a former knitting factory, Hoschek is surrounded by racks of her retro, wasp-waisted clothes—think Wes Anderson meets Vivienne Westwood. Her staff sits

EACH NIGHT, PASSENGERS GRAVITATE AGAIN TO THE ROOF TO WATCH AS A CITY RECEDES—AT LEAST UNTIL NIGHTFALL ADDS EXTRA BITE TO THE AIR

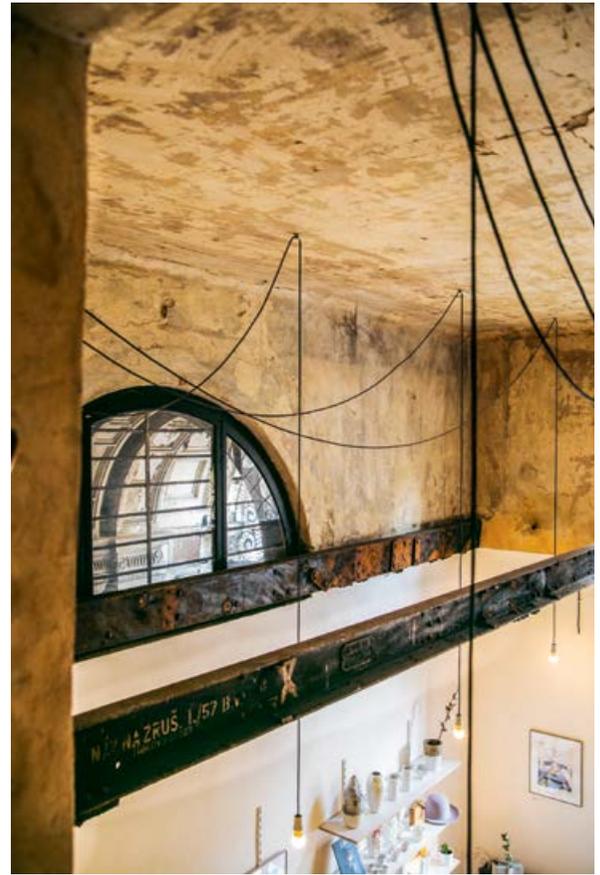
nearby at giant desks; customers who order bespoke designs come here for fittings or consultations, using the dressing room originally built for the knitting firm’s house models. “When the old and the new clash, that’s when you get a great vibe,” she says, throwing up her hands and looking around her showroom. Hoschek could be talking about her clothes or about Vienna. She likely means both.

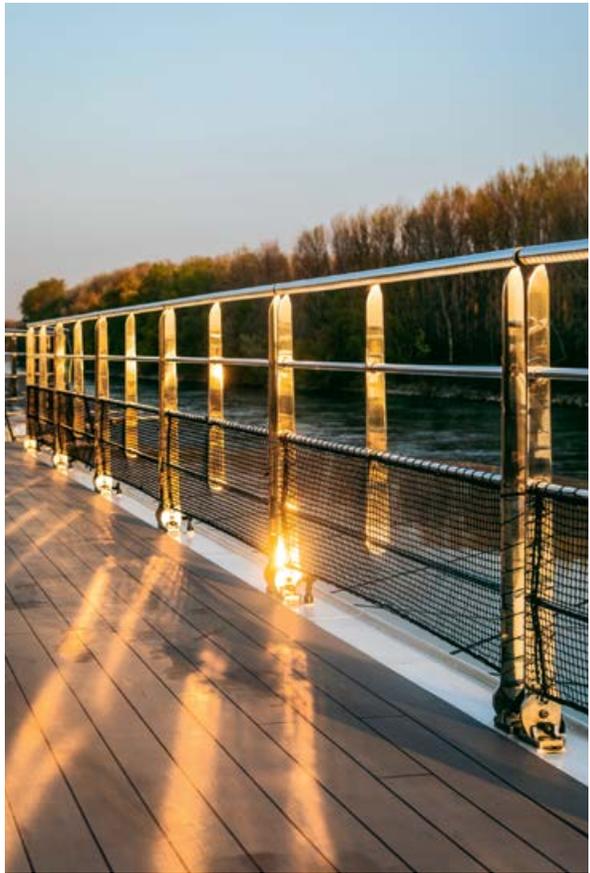
The workshop of milliner Klaus Mühlbauer is in Schwedenplatz, in the crook of the Danube that’s downtown. His family started a hat-making business here more a century ago. When Mühlbauer inherited it, he was determined to preserve what still set it apart—every hat was handmade at the atelier or by a milliner working from home nearby—but nixed the fusty, old-fashioned styles. Today his workshop on the bank of the river is full of wide-brimmed straw boaters and crushable, lightweight felt trilbies. Standing there, trim and sandy-haired, Mühlbauer fingers a few of the straw prototypes. “The collection is called Vienna because I want to make this city even more visible,” he says softly, in flawless English.

In Vienna, the ship berths outside the center, on a quiet canal—in stark contrast to where it starts the journey in Budapest, close to the main bridge in the heart of downtown, sandwiched between craggy Buda and low-lying Pest. That perch is near to Gellért Hill, where the past, quite literally,

*This page, from top:* Wild Flower Bar in Budapest; the sundeck on the *Crystal Ravel*. *Opposite, clockwise from top left:* A poster in Budapest’s Jewish quarter; Slávica, a gift shop in Bratislava; Kontakt café in Budapest; FACH, a café and bakery in Bratislava







looms large. It's a short walk up to the peak, where the muscular Soviet-era Liberty Statue stands, surveying the city, palm leaf in hand; it seems intended as part inspiration, part weapon. Right under her nose, locals have co-opted old spaces for new uses, leaving them almost unchanged from the outside. This repurposing began as Communism's grip first loosened in the 1990s, a cautious effort that resulted in the so-called ruin bars. Entrepreneurs rebooted abandoned buildings in District VII, once the Jewish quarter, as ad hoc drinking dens, squirreling them into the crumbling brick courtyards; they've become a contemporary signature of the city. Now other businesses have moved in, like Printa Design Shop, a printing studio, café, and shop selling T-shirts made on-site.

ELSEWHERE IN BUDAPEST, the onetime grand hall of the Masonic lodge has been reborn as the restaurant of the new Mystery Hotel; screens showing trompe l'oeil video art line the walls below the centuries-old murals. As for the barge that bobs on the water across the river from the cruise-ship mooring, it looks at first like the Communist-era shipping tanker it once was. Come closer, though, and you'll see it's now A38, a concert venue and bar ideal for a drink at dusk as the sun sets over the water. Don't dawdle though: Its hard-rock programming is a reminder that some tastes in Budapest remain in the Soviet era.

The cruise ship leaves Budapest behind at dusk. It sails for a few circuits, back and forth, a chance to watch the floodlit buildings as night falls and occasional snatches of rowdiness—those ruin bars, no doubt—waft out onto the water. Something else comes into view as the ship pulls away: a few shoes on the bank—60 pairs, it turns out, cast in iron. This monument is intended to honor the Hungarian Jews murdered by a Fascist militia during World War II. They were ordered to remove their shoes before being shot and were told to stand at the edge of the water so that the current would carry their bodies away. The Danube is always front of mind here, and so, too, is history.

After World War II, the USSR commandeered this city, as well as a stretch of the river beyond. It was here that the Soviet regime oversaw one of its biggest infrastructure projects, the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros locks. Reaching them at breakfast time, they're nerve-racking to navigate: Concrete walls seem to loom over the ship, closing in. What's more, the locks are packed with vessels, bobbing perilously close together as the waters adjust. Once the gates release, the morning unfurls—another long, leisurely journey against the current, coasting upstream to the next port. For once, a new city hews slowly into view, the only one to appear during the day: Bratislava, Slovakia. The ship moors just minutes from the metropolis's cobblestoned heart, right under the glare of a futuristic bridge crowned with a flying saucer-like viewing deck. It's a restaurant, of course, but there's an unwelcome whiff of the watchtower.

The Slovak capital was transformed by Communist rule, its skyline redefined via a series of brutalist buildings that still jostle for prominence with the centuries-old city walls. The most impressive is the Hotel Kyjev, an uncompromising tombstone-like skyscraper dating back to 1973. It shuttered over a decade ago and lay untouched until last summer when local photographer Lousy Auber corralled a team of mountain climbers to rappel down its exterior, paintbrushes in hand. He oversaw its transformation into a Bridget Reilly-esque Op-Art mural.



Bratislava's independent mayor will likely champion similar projects. Matúš Vallo is an architect, urban planner, and Fulbright alum in his early 40s on a mission to attract a spate of forward-looking people to make the city their base. Kerim Hudson is one; the British designer behind local accessories label Pakta came here with his girlfriend, Hana Komanová, a Bratislava native who, like him, studied fashion in London. "People want to change the city for the better," Hudson says. "And because it's small, it's easier to have a bigger impact."

Another returnee is Jakub Dianiška, who also came back from London, where he worked as a consultant. Today he's standing behind the counter of his own café, Mandla, a sleek, closet-size espresso joint. Shaven-headed, with architectural glasses, he's a genial barista. "There's always been energy here, but it was suppressed and constrained by the regimes that ruled in the past. It was dormant," Dianiška explains. "But it's opening up because of our generation, who didn't live through the politics of the past. We want to change things." Walking back to the ship a few yards away, it seems like this region might finally be ready to follow his lead. 📍

## BUDAPEST TO VIENNA

Crystal Cruises offers a seven-night cruise on board the *Crystal Mozart* from April 3 to 10, 2020, from \$3,299 per person. [crystalcruises.com](http://crystalcruises.com)

*This page: St. Stephen's Basilica in Budapest. Opposite, clockwise from top left: A view of the Danube from the ship; flowers hanging over a wall in Krems; the top deck of the Crystal Ravel; housewares at PaUza in Budapest*