

# DANUBE *dalliance*



Parliament buildings in Budapest, Hungary. PICTURES © Justine Tyerman

*The cruisy life on a river ship appeals to Justine Tyerman.*

**T**he sun was setting in a golden blaze over the Danube as the MS Beethoven slipped smoothly into the Gabčíkovo Lock in Slovakia — the largest of the four we encountered on our eight-day river cruise.

We were having an animated conversation with our new shipboard friends from the United States about Jim's days as a speech writer for JFK just after the Cuban missile crisis, Ilse's work as a watercolour artist and former gold assayer, and America's apparently constant need to deliver other countries from strife.

Jim talked of the many "Strategicstans" and "Tragicstans" that seem to necessitate US intervention. Having met at a tennis match in Florida only 18 months earlier, they were in their 70s but still dewy-eyed and holding hands.

A published author and historian, Jim was writing a spoof on the life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his relationship with Sherlock Holmes.

After an initial feeling of being adrift in a sea of strange faces and foreign languages, we met some remarkable people on our CroisiEurope Imperial Danube Cruise through Austria, Hungary and Slovakia.

Among the large contingents from Denmark, Russia, France and the United Kingdom, and a scattering from the US,

Australia and New Zealand, we became good mates with Jim and Ilse, two Scots, three Brits and three lively "girls" from Picton, Lynne, Aileen and Marlene, who had known each other for 48 years and travelled together for over 20 years.

At the magnificent French gala dinner on our last evening on the ship, we shared highlight-of-the-cruise, a variation of the highlight-of-the-day tradition my husband Chris initiated when our children were young.

As a lover of history, I was enthralled with the excursions that covered the fascinating Habsburg dynasty and 640-year era of the Austro-Hungarian Empire which ended in 1918 — the magnificently ornate winter and summer palaces in Vienna, and 18th century baroque Melk Abbey with its beautiful gardens.

Chris relished the energetic hike to the castle above Dürnstein, a jewel of a village in the verdant apricot and grapegrowing Wachau Valley, the most picturesque part of the cruise. Steeped in history, the castle acquired fame as the place where the English king, Richard the Lionheart was held prisoner in 1192, by Duke Leopold V of Austria after their dispute during the Third Crusade.

The Picton girls loved the Mozart and Strauss concert complete with opera singers and ballet dancers at Vienna's gorgeous Auersperg Palace, and the "Pearl

of the Danube", Budapest by night where many historic buildings and bridges were illuminated in a dazzling show of colour and light.

Budapest by day was also a winner with its magnificent cathedral, churches, castle, Fisherman's Bastion, theatres, baths, Parliament buildings, markets and grand Heroes' Square with statues of the leaders of the seven tribes that founded Hungary in the 9th century.

Ilse was fascinated by the height of the Gabčíkovo Lock and our visit to a ranch on the vast prairie lands of Pusztas in Hungary where whip-cracking Cuman horsemen put on a thrilling display of their superb horsemanship.

Many were delighted by the little Hungarian village of Kalocsa, where we saw brightly-coloured hand embroidery, a traditional house with hand-painted flowers on the walls and a museum devoted to the growing of paprika, highly-prized as a major export and the key ingredient in the goulash, the national dish.

Esztergom also left a lasting impression. The first capital of Hungary under the Arpad kings, it was the birthplace of King Stephen who was crowned in 1001 as the first Christian king of Hungary. The huge basilica on the hill above the town, completed in 1822, took 40 years to build and is the

biggest and most beautiful in Hungary with a dome modelled on St Peter's Cathedral in Rome.

We drove across the Danube on the Maria Valeria Bridge to Sturovo in Slovakia which was bombed by the Germans in 1944 and only rebuilt in 2001.

In Bratislava, the capital city of Slovakia, Jim's sharp eye for detail picked out the gargoyles on the rooftops as we toured the baroque palaces and town hall, St Martin's Gothic Cathedral, the royal castle and the old town beyond the 13th century Michael's Gate.

As the fourth course of the French-inspired feast and more wine arrived, delivered by our charming waiters and waitresses, I poured the girls exactly equal portions of their favourite Vin d'Alsace — an important rule I discovered at lunch on day one.

We toasted the hard-working, mainly Hungarian crew, and the fabulous French food and wine which we agreed were highlights for us all.

As first-time cruisers, the trip was a perfect mix of relaxation, sightseeing and entertainment. It was stress-free and great value for money as all aspects of our lives as travellers were taken care of. The price (\$280-\$307 a day per person twin share, depending on when you book) covered accommodation in comfortable, surprisingly-spacious twin