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September 25, 2017 By Aaron Saunders – 1 Comment

The **Danube** is the quintessential river cruise experience. Lined with some of Europe's most historic and culturally-important cities, to cruise the Danube is to step back in time. Picturesque villages line its banks, with imposing castles and cathedrals rising up and falling astern as you cruise down this scenic waterway.



Sailing the Danube. Photo © 2016 Aaron Saunders

The Danube is also a busy river, with other river cruise ships and cargo vessels zipping past at all times. A vital European waterway, the Danube was finally linked in the 1990's to the **Main River** via the **Main-Danube Canal**. Now, it is possible to river cruise all the way from **Amsterdam** to the **Black Sea** in a single journey.

At first glance, the sheer number of Danube river itineraries can be overwhelming. This can be made even more complicated by the fact that the **Eastern Danube** is typically referred to as a separate region unto itself; everything east of **Budapest, Hungary** can be thought of as the Eastern, or Lower Danube.



Emerald Sky docked across from the Parliament building in Budapest. © 2016 Ralph Grizzle

We're taking a look at the **Upper Danube** – the region that stretches from **Regensburg, Germany** to **Budapest, Hungary**. This is the "classic" Danube river cruise itinerary. Some lines will offer voyages from **Nuremberg** to Budapest; or from Passau to Budapest. Others offer voyages that might sail one-way or roundtrip from the stunning city of **Vienna, Austria**.

In the table below, we've tried to pick similar itineraries leaving on similar departure dates. In some instances, this isn't always possible. Some river cruise lines don't offer shorter weeklong river cruises, so in that case, we've used the most appropriate itinerary available for the purposes of these price comparison tables.



Vienna's hidden Freyung Passage. Photo © 2015 Aaron Saunders

What's really interesting with some of these numbers is that longer, more expensive sailings can sometimes offer a better value in the long run. Even more interesting is the fact that the longest voyage on this table – **Tauck's** 12-night Danube river cruise – is *already sold out*, nine months in advance.

It is also worth considering the average per diem of these river cruises, purely on the raw cost of the cruise. **AmaWaterways**, which delivers a wonderful, semi-inclusive river cruise, is only \$41 dollars less per day, per guest than all-suite, all-luxury **Crystal River Cruises** is on an eight-day voyage down the Danube. Both are great options, but it is really going to come down to your own personal preferences in order to choose between these two companies.



CroisiEurope proves itself to be the price-leader on the Danube with its ultra-affordable voyages. © 2016 Ralph Grizzle

The price-leader on the Danube continues to be family-owned **CroisiEurope**. Aimed primarily at European travellers, adventurous North Americans will love the line's European styling and value-priced offerings. Don't expect anything lavish or luxurious like Crystal or **Scenic**, but do expect a very solid, uncomplicated river cruise at a price point that's tough to beat.

A look at some June 2018 voyages along the Upper Danube:

	AmaWaterways	Avalon Waterways	CroisiEurope	Crystal	Emerald Waterways	Scenic		Tauck	Unlworld	Viking River Cruises
Ship	AmaCerro	Avalon Luminary	ms Beethoven	Crystal Ravel	Emerald Sky	Scenic Jade		ms Joy	SS Maria Theresa	Viking Jarl
Rate	\$4,048	\$3,438	\$2,580	\$4,375	\$4,045	\$6,095		\$8,740	\$5,199	\$4,049
Sailing Date	June 2, 2018	June 17, 2018	June 15, 2018	June 21, 2018	June 22, 2018	June 25, 2018		September 12, 2018 ^A	June 8, 2018	June 10, 2018
Number of days	8	9	8	8	8	11		12	10	8
Cabin Category	Category C	Category A, B, P	Main Deck Suite	Petite Suite with Panoramic Balcony Window	Vista Deck Balcony B	Balcony BD		Cat 5	Category 3	Veranda B
Square Footage	170	200	140	188	180	205		225	194	205
Balcony	French	French	None	French	French	Step out		French	French	Step out
Per diem/per person	\$506	\$382	\$322	\$547	\$506	\$554		\$728	\$519	\$506
Port Charges	\$168 (\$21 per day)	\$168 (\$21 per day)	Included	\$175 (\$25 per day)	Included	Included		Included	Included	Included
Gratuities (on ship - non-compulsory)	\$136 (\$17 per day)	\$90 (\$11.25 per day)	\$90 (\$11.25 per day)	Included	Included	Included		Included	Included	\$127 (\$15.87 per day)
Gratuities (on shore - non-compulsory)	\$20 (\$2.50 per day)	Included	\$20 (\$2.50 per day)	\$20 (\$2.50 per day)	\$20 (\$2.50 per day)	Included		Included	Included	\$20 (\$2.50 per day)
Beverages	\$80 (\$10 per day)	\$80 (\$10 per day)	Included	Included	\$80 (\$10 per day)	Included		Included	Included	\$80 (\$10 per day)

Laundry	\$24 (\$3 per day)	\$24 (\$3 per day)	n/a	Included***	\$24 (\$3 per day); included for suites.	Included*	\$24 (\$3 per day)	Included*	\$24 (\$3 per day)
Optional Shore Excursions	all excursions included	\$100 (\$12.50 per day)*	all excursions included	\$300 (\$43 per day)	\$100 (\$12.50 per day)*	all excursions included	all excursions included	all excursions included	\$100 (\$12.50 per day)*
Incentive (links may have expired depending on end date of promotion)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	Fly to Europe for \$495pp. Source: Emerald Waterways	Fly for \$595. Shoulder season sailings (March, April, October & November) receive air from \$395-\$795 per person. All other sailings receive air from \$595-\$995 per person. Premium Economy is available for \$1,395 per person. Book & pay in full by October 31, 2017 and save an additional \$500 per couple. Source: Scenic	n/a	Economy air included for those who book by September 30, 2017. Pay in full by September 30, 2017 for an additional 10 percent discount. Source: Uniworld	Economy air from \$695 per person
Our Estimated Value of Incentive	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$1100 (\$137 per day)	\$1595 (\$145 per day)	\$0	** \$1,595 (\$199 per day), plus \$620 (\$77 per day) for paying in full by incentive end date.	900 (\$112 per day)
True Per Diem	\$559	\$439	\$336	\$617	\$369	\$409	\$731	\$243 with incentives; \$519 as-is.	\$394

Comparative summer 2018 pricing for river cruises on the Upper Danube. I looked for staterooms of equivalent size and features, namely those with French balconies or step-out balconies. Prices were obtained from cruise company websites and may not reflect current incentives. Additional charges were estimated in some cases, such as for laundry and beverages, and obtained from the cruise company websites. * Emerald Waterways and Viking River Cruises include at least one shore excursion in each port of call, with optional excursions for a fee. ** To calculate the value of included roundtrip economy air, I used Viking's \$1,595 per person published rate from select gateways in North America. *** Crystal River Cruises includes complimentary self-service laundry machines on all its river ships; pay-per-use service is can be arranged through suite butlers. *June 2018 departures with Tauck are sold out on the Danube itinerary we selected; the next suitable departure was selected.