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**BON VOYAGE**

# A voyage like no other

A river cruise down the Danube river leaves a lasting impression on Arul John



The town of Krems, Austria, along the Danube River, as seen from the Crystal Ravel. PHOTO: ARUL JOHN

THE last time I travelled along the Danube in a riverboat was in 2002 during a tour of Austria. A few months ago, I had the opportunity to enjoy a 144km cruise along this river again, sailing from Nuremberg in Germany to Vienna in Austria. This turned out to be a much more memorable experience. Life on board the Crystal Ravel, a ship run by Crystal Cruises that can accommodate 160 passengers, was luxurious.

From the moment I boarded, I received personalised five-star service. Passengers were each assigned a personal butler and a cruise consultant, who made us feel like celebrities throughout our stay.

The welcome to my 17.5 sq m stateroom was a delight — a bottle of Saigerl Adele champagne. Within 30 minutes, I had popped the cork and, with a cry of "Bottoms up!", savoured the golden bubbles. The glowing feeling that came over me was a wonderful start to the trip. Champagne flute in hand, I took in my room and operated the electric curtain controls to take in the view from the large bay windows. The ship had left Nuremberg and was floating along the Danube river. On shore, castles whizzed by and stately homes and palaces appeared in the landscape; the scenes were like paintings by masters I had admired.

I luxuriated in my well-furnished room, which had a comfortable queen-sized bed and a minibar filled with top-quality wines and mineral water for guests to freely partake. When I felt like connecting with the world outside, I easily logged on to the Wi-Fi. Reception everywhere on the ship was excellent.

**Day excursions**  
The Crystal Ravel called at different ports each morning. I disembarked each time to take in the sights and soak in the life of each city. The daily guided excursions catered to different tastes. There were the usual museum and city

tour, as well as trips to unique locations. Passengers could also tour the cities on electric bicycles. In Dachau in Germany, I learnt about the horrors of the Nazi regime during a visit to the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site. In Passau, another German town, I learnt about Baroque architecture and found out the city is home to the world's only museum devoted to the dachshund, as well as to the largest pipe organ on earth.

In the Austrian town of Krems, I visited ancient monasteries and quaint shops that sold everything from trinkets to beer and apricot wines. At an apricot orchard, I discovered all the wonderful iterations of this little orange fruit — from juices to wines and soaps and even nail polish and lip balm.

At a converted Capuchin monastery in the town, I enjoyed a performance by violin ensemble Roddo Vienna, which treated us to a spirited rendition of classical music and pop hits by Abba and other singers.

The city of Vienna enchanted me with its culture and sophistication and the visit to its Museum of Fine Arts and Art Chamber enthralled me with its grand collections of paintings, tapestries, sculpture and even unusual items such as a bronze model of a galleon, complete with miniature moving crew and cannons.

### On board fun

After we returned from the excursions, our afternoons were filled with activities such as games and talks about the features of the cruise, such as the canal locks and the towns that we visited during our seven-day journey.

The cruise consultant and every member of the staff were walking encyclopedias of knowledge. We were entertained with stories about the history of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the origins of the wines we drank, the homelands of each staff member, and the best places for bargains at each port of call.

Travelling through the more than 100 locks of the Main-Danube canal, which links the two major rivers, was a highlight. The Crystal Ravel was just wide enough to go through each lock, and many times, it looked as if the sides of the boat would hit the walls of the locks. But our skilful captain and crew capably manoeuvred the boat through every lock — often to the claps and cheers of the passengers.

On board, we could swim in the pool, work out in the gym, or simply relax with a massage at the spa. At all hours, we could avail ourselves of drinks or snacks in the dining areas or in our rooms. Meals were an indulgence I looked forward to every day. The food and drink on board was exquisite.

Breakfast and dinner were wonderful mixes of Western and Asian delights. Cereals, bagels with cream cheese, salads, paella and risotto took pride of place beside fried rice, naan and noodles. The chefs delighted in customising dishes to order, and every meal was accompanied by glass (or more) of wine.

The Crystal Ravel sailing down the Danube River. PHOTO: CRYSTAL CRUISES



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A bronze model of a ship on display in the Museum of Fine Arts in Vienna. PHOTO: ARUL JOHN

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BON VOYAGE



A voyage like no other

CONTINUED FROM D7

On the second-last day, we were treated to an elegant six-course meal featuring a wide variety of cuisines from the countries we visited.

It was during this meal that I tasted caviar for the first time, a delicious treat I had often dreamed about.

I could not help but feel spoiled — so much food and wine and so little time — and thought of the numerous gym sessions I would need to work off the excess kilos I was gaining.

The football World Cup in Russia was on during the cruise. The matches were broadcast live on board, and after work, many of the staff members would join us in rooting for our favourite teams.

The passionate service and camaraderie between fellow travellers, as well as passengers and crew, was a memorable highlight.

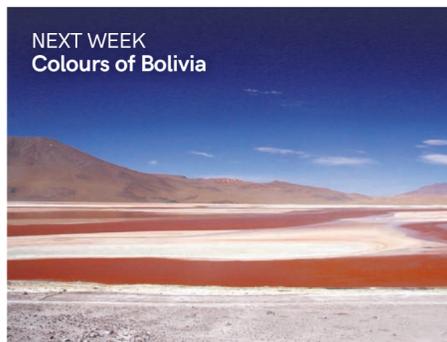


The Crystal Ravel entering a lock in the Main-Danube canal.

PHOTO: ARUL JOHN

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