



DESTINATION GUIDE EASTERN EUROPE

Discover the intriguing countries once hidden behind the Iron Curtain



Welcome to **EASTERN EUROPE**

*For the culturally curious who are after a new
experience, Eastern Europe beckons.*

With a captivating blend of rich history and vibrant cultures, Eastern Europe is an ideal destination for seasoned river cruisers or those seeking an off the beaten path experience.

Feel the echo of Soviet history as you sail along the romantic Danube River discovering the intriguing countries unveiled when the historic Iron Curtain was lifted, such as Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania.

Capital cities are home to magnificent museums, palaces and historic buildings and in the region's towns and villages, you will find warm welcoming locals eager to share their traditions.

Soak in Budapest's soothing thermal baths and experience the intriguing medieval castles of Vidin. Explore Belgrade's Ottoman and European treasures or see Bucharest's wide boulevards, the Arch of Triumph and the Palace of Parliament. Sip wines from Croatian vineyards and see a breathtaking display of Hungarian horsemanship.

A journey for culturally curious travellers, our Eastern Europe river voyages reveal the charms, cherished traditions and picturesque natural beauty of this incredible region that will forever leave a lasting impression.

We hope you enjoy this guide.



CONSTANTA ROMANIA



BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

Discover why our loyal guests **LOVE EASTERN EUROPE**

We know well that our Viking guests are discerning, experienced travellers who crave authentic experiences that provide them with a deeper understanding of the world. And so who better to explain what it's like to embark on an Eastern Europe river voyage than those who know us best—our past Viking guests.



TRADITIONAL HUNGARIAN MUSICIANS

“It’s hard to explain how special this was. Budapest was simply sublime, with rich culture, fascinating history, spectacular architecture and delicious food. And then once we hopped on board, the crew and I were equally as impressed with Viking’s beautifully appointed ships.”

Trevor C.

“We want to see Romania and the Black Sea and sites east of Budapest where we haven’t been before. I’d like to witness the subtle differences (and sometimes not so really subtle) between Eastern and Western European historic towns and buildings. We will be very interested to try the tastes of that part of the world too”
Robyn O.

“Had a great and interesting trip from Budapest to Bucharest. The included side trips were varied and interesting. Attention and service on board was first class. Would love to do another trip with Viking.”
Nancy T.

“On our river voyage, when we returned from a Budapest tour we were surprised with a wonderful Hungarian goulash for supper served by staff dressed in traditional Hungarian costume. So memorable and tasty.”
Au Chun C.

“Budapest has such history and beautiful architecture; the bridges across the Danube are spectacular; loved Szechenyi Thermal Baths and the Christmas markets.”
Peter F.



*“...Eastern Europe was like
stepping into a different world”*

Yukiko H

BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

10 Highlights of EASTERN EUROPE

Behold the grandeur of Eastern Europe's most historic treasures as you explore fascinating cities and towns along the Danube River. Here are some of the highlights you can explore while on your voyage.

1

CONSTANȚA, ROMANIA

On the shores of the Black Sea lies Constanța, a city steeped in history. A pleasant stroll along its boardwalk offers views over the Old Town, along which sits the iconic art nouveau building of the Constanța Casino. The towering minaret of the Grand Mosque presides over the city and a climb to the top rewards visitors with spectacular vistas over the ocean. Nearby, the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul is inspired by Romanian style architecture of the 17th and 18th centuries, featuring a Greco-Roman style of pressed brick and a 114-foot-high tower.



CONSTANȚA, ROMANIA



STAVROPOLEOS MONASTERY

STAVROPOLEOS MONASTERY

Communism changed the face of Bucharest and has left in its wake a city brimming with imposing socialist architecture. Dotted among today's cityscape are wonderful art nouveau buildings, ancient churches and monasteries that were rescued from the bulldozer. Visit the Stavropoleos Monastery, built in 1724 and famed for its beautiful interior, admire this fine example of Brancovan architecture and intricate detail of its décor. Services celebrate its musical heritage and play Byzantine music; the church's choir is recognised the world over and its library houses the largest collection of Byzantine music books in Romania.



LEPENSKI VIR, SERBIA

LEPENSKI VIR, SERBIA

Discover one of Europe's oldest settlements during a visit to the famous Lepenski Vir archaeological site. Founded more than 8,500 years ago along the banks of the Danube River, this important Stone Age find is often called the "first city in Europe." The site was discovered in 1960, unveiling several pristine sculptures representing human figures as well as tools made of bones and stones, and settlement ruins.

4

THERMAL BATHS, BUDAPEST

Soak up the restorative powers of Budapest's thermal baths and join locals in a centuries-old tradition. Ancient Romans discovered the benefits of bathing in the thermal waters that flow through Budapest. As the city grew, the spouting springs were treasured and preserved so highly that not even the Communist government forbade their pleasures. During your visit, you might mingle with the locals taking a soak or observe some bathers as they pass the time with a game of chess in the pool. So revered have these waters been that many have been sheltered within facilities that exude a temple-like aura.



Budapest Thermal
Bath excursion.

THE IRON GATE, SERBIA

Sail through one of Europe's most dramatic natural wonders, the picturesque stretch famously known as the Iron Gate. Meander through narrow gorges that slice through the Carpathian Mountains to the north and the Balkan Mountains to the south, and marvel at the towering white limestone cliffs draped with forest. Be on the lookout for ancient remains upon the dramatic walls. On the Serbian side, Trajan's Tablet was laid to mark the construction of a Roman military road; on the Romanian side, marvel at the enormous rock sculpture of Dacian king Decebalus.



5

IRON GATE GORGE

BABINI VIDINI KULI, BULGARIA

One of Bulgaria's oldest riverside towns, Vidin is home to the only entirely preserved medieval Bulgarian castle. Perched impressively on the riverbank, its striking pose, thick ring walls, stout towers and solid gates form a fortress known as Babini Vidini Kuli, which means Granny Vida's Towers. Around the castle rose a fairytale town of 25 minarets, domes and other charming architecture of the period. Though many of these features have been shadowed by today's city, Vidin retains its charms. Today it is largely an agricultural and trade centre renowned for its wines.

6



FORTRESS IN BELOGRADCHIK, BULGARIA

NOVI SAD, SERBIA

A European Capital of Culture, Novi Sad is Serbia's second largest city. The Petrovaradin Fortress dominates the skyline and offers stunning vistas over the city, while the nearby historic neighbourhood of Stari Grad is home to many of the city's lively cafés, restaurants, museums and shops. Notable museums in Novi Sad include the Museum of Vojvodina, which houses collections and exhibits that showcase Serbian culture and life since ancient times. The Pavle Beljanski Memorial Collection features one of the most extensive collections of 20th-century Serbian and Yugoslav art. Marvel at the varied baroque, neoclassicism and secession styles as your guide regales you with stories of its time, when the city was ruled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Savour the sweet and salty delight, uštipci (fried dough balls) at Novi Sad's green market.



NOVI SAD, SERBIA

WINE TASTING IN ILOK, CROATIA

Ilok's vineyards have helped to firmly cement Croatia's position on every oenophile's map. For more than two millennia, the town has been producing some of the region's finest wines, thanks to its superior soil and the climate of the surrounding hillsides. In the town, wine cellars can be found on every street, providing ample opportunity to sample a hearty vintage, and the remains of a Roman fort with evidence of a water supply system can still be seen. The 15th-century Ilok Castle presides over the medieval town, offering magnificent views of the Danube.

8



Ilok Wine
Tasting excursion.

ILOK, CROATIA

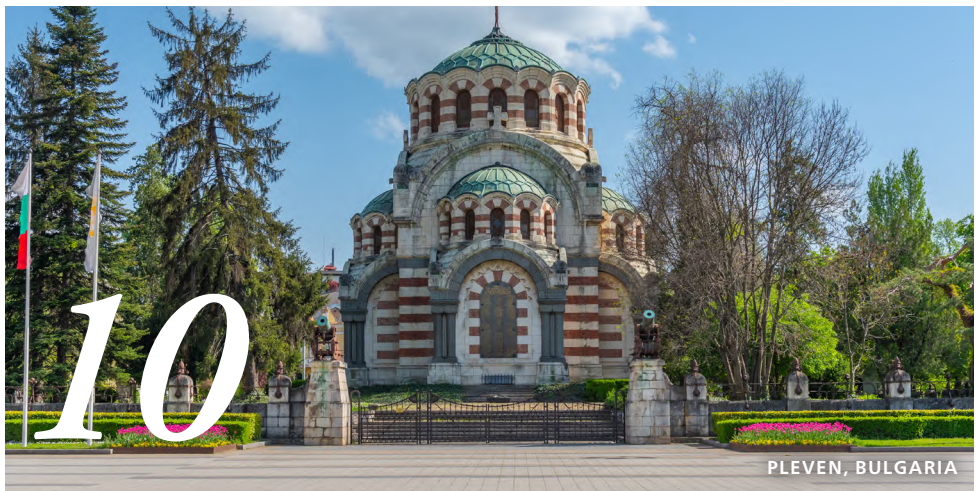


NIKOLA TESLA MUSEUM, SERBIA

Get a glimpse into the mind of scientist and inventor Nikola Tesla at a museum dedicated to his life and work. Located in a residential villa, the museum is home to the world's largest collection of documents, photos and technical exhibits related to Tesla, as well as a golden sphere containing his ashes. Enjoy a one-hour Privileged Access tour where you will view a short video about Tesla, browse the historic documents and various personal items on display, and observe authentic working models of his machines. Then, admire Tesla's ingenuity during an interactive demonstration of the famed Tesla Coil, a device that produces high-voltage, low-current, high-frequency AC electricity.

PLEVEN, BULGARIA

Pleven is surrounded by limestone hills in an agricultural region of the Danubian Plain. It was a stronghold of the Bulgarian Empire and has more than 450 places of architectural and cultural significance. It was a key fortress during the Ottoman Empire and became an important trade centre from the 15th to the 19th century. Several museums and monuments in the town are dedicated to the Siege of Pleven, fought during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878.



Explore the Capitals of **EASTERN EUROPE**

Words by Faith Campbell



"Several parts of the Delta look like the Amazon," says guide Cosmin, as our small boat whips down a narrow tributary of the Danube River. We're about 10,000 kilometres from the South American rainforest and the thicket of green crowding the water looks nothing like the Romania I expected. The trees fall away and we're zooming across a broad lake under cartoon clouds. "Look to the right!" shouts Cosmin over the engine and all 10 of us do. "Glossy ibis flying! Squacco heron flying! A king cormorant on the dry branches of that tree!"

It's day four of Viking's Cruises' Capitals of Eastern Europe itinerary and I get a crick in my neck spotting pelicans, swans, terns and coots. I blink and miss the azure kingfisher that darts in front of the boat. We've detoured from

our route sailing from Bucharest, Romania, to Vienna, Austria, to spend a few hours touring the Danube Delta, about 5800 square kilometres of UNESCO-protected biosphere reserve. Cosmin, who's from Transylvania, cracks Dracula jokes ("The real vampires of Romania? Mosquitoes") as Ric, a guest all the way from Iowa, makes notes and peers through binoculars. "I'm about 120 away from seeing 5000 bird species worldwide," he tells me later. "When I signed up for the cruise, this trip was the clincher." For Ric and his wife, Betty, it's all about the birds; for couples I meet from Palm Springs, Louisiana and Melbourne, and families travelling from Sydney, Northern California and Nashville, the voyage is a chance to check out places they've never been. Over 17 days aboard the 190-guest longship Viking Rinda, we'll visit

Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia and Slovakia and spend a couple of days in Budapest, Hungary.

Ask Cruise Director Leonard (who sipped a Virgin Mary while giving a talk on the legend of Dracula the day before) and the highlight of our itinerary is sailing through the Iron Gates on day seven. Chairs on the sundeck fill up by midmorning as we glide along. With Serbia on the left and Romania on the right, the landscape shifts from verdant forest to high, craggy escarpments. I'm unclear whether "Iron Gates" refers to the hydroelectric plant and its two locks (the river was dammed here in the 1970s) or to the towering gorge walls but Leonard's commentary – tales of dragons in caves and a love affair between the sun, moon and river – makes the latter more appealing. When the giant stone face of King Decebalus appears (he's taller than Rio's Christ the Redeemer), carved into rock on the Romanian side like a silent sentinel, I'm convinced.

"Welcome to our charming and lovely town. We have one bank, one church and one school." Nikolai, the guide who greets us in Donji Milanovac, not far past the Iron Gates, is disarmingly tall and endearingly frank, "After the political and religious problems, our best years are to come." It's hot and quiet walking the few blocks to the church, past small grocery stores, neat gardens with huge, blousy hydrangeas, a handful of restaurants and the school, where Nikolai was once a student. A craft market is set up by the river and women hang hand-embroidered tablecloths and blouses on fences; I board the ship with bottles of homemade cherry brandy and plum rakia.

"I like how relaxed it is," says Amy, who's here with her husband, Bill, to celebrate his birthday

(the crew serenades him on the big day).

We're having an early lunch on the ship and share a table at the indoor-outdoor Aquavit Terrace, one of two dining spaces; our waiter remembers Amy likes iced tea and that I'm into the veggie burger and sweet potato fries. The American couple is already planning a trip to South-East Asia and a voyage on the Seine. "Our kids are grown, our job is done," says Amy happily. Days later I'll bump into them in a Budapest bar.

When I'm not too tired after a tour or another 20,000 steps a day, I plonk down in the lounge, which is always packed with curious guests. One night, Leonard tells us about growing up in communist Bucharest and his experience of the 1989 Romanian revolution and on another, a Serbian writer does a neat job of unravelling the geopolitics of the region in simple terms.



IRON GATES, ROMANIA



BELGRADE, SERBIA

Sore feet are momentarily forgotten (and Viking Rinda's only bar gets busier) when local folk musicians and dancers come aboard.

In Pécs, Hungary, an ancient city that's said to have been deemed so pretty by a World War II pilot that it escaped bombing, guide Andras tells us that the country's inflation is the highest in the EU. "Yeah, it's high but it's good to be the best at something," he says wryly. Wandering the old town, he compares 19th-century Hungarian composer Franz Liszt to Harry Styles and points out the colourful Zsolnay porcelain roof tiles that might have charmed that fighter pilot; famous all over Hungary, they've been manufactured in Pécs since 1853. There's free time before we get the bus back to the port of Mohács so I buy a honking great cheese burek, take pictures of pastel-painted buildings and sit in the grand main square.

Sailing from Mohács to Budapest, my boyfriend and I hang out in our Scandi-elegant state room with its balcony and wall of glass doors and watch small beaches covered in vibrant umbrellas and sunbathers pass by. Holiday huts face the water, with tinnies tied up at boat ramps and humble piers. Anglers sit still beneath the beating sun; two women wave from a canoe. Viking Rinda is barely louder than a humming fridge thanks to its hybrid engines and, even from bed, I can hear crickets, birds and the fishermen chatting. At dinner in the restaurant, we look for Ken and Chavonne from California, who are on a father-daughter schoolies adventure before she leaves home for college. I eat most of the bread basket while deciding, as I do almost every night, to order the

three-course menu of local specialties (such as the spiced trout fillet in Bulgaria and chocolate coconut cake – čupavci – in Croatia).

For almost two weeks I'm surprised every day – by another beautiful town I hadn't heard of; by a hike in Serbia's Đerdap National Park; on a bike ride in Belgrade that's broken up by a dip at the city's man-made beach; when I buy a pair of slippers and the shoemaker phones his son to help translate his thanks into English; and by the easy comfort of Viking Rinda and watching life unfold on the river. But Budapest I know. When our fellow guests head off on optional excursions to the thermal baths and Jewish Quarter, we slip into the crowd at the Great Market Hall for lunch, crisscross the river's bridges and hang outside a tiny bar with a rockabilly band playing inside.

After dinner, not long before the ship pulls away from the dock, Leonard urges everyone to join him on the sundeck. The long summer afternoon finally fades to night and both sides of the shore, Buda and Pest, begin to light up. The fairytale monuments of the Castle Hill district emerge from the gloaming and as we drift by the Hungarian Parliament building, fancy as a wedding cake, it glows gold against the blue sky. Just when it feels like the show's over, Leonard tells everyone to turn around. In two days exploring on foot, bus, bike and funicular, none of us has seen Budapest like this: captured in one perfect frame, all its lights shining on the inky Danube River.

*Words by Faith Campbell.
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One Day in **BUCHAREST**

Known as the “Paris of the East” for its stunning architecture and rich cultural tapestry, Bucharest is a city that promises to captivate. Here’s how you can make the most out of a single day in this remarkable city.

MORNING:

Exploring the Heart of the City

Start your day with a hearty Romanian breakfast. Head to Caru' cu Bere, one of the oldest and most famous restaurants in Bucharest, located in the Lipscani district. Here, you can enjoy traditional dishes like scrambled eggs with telemea (a type of Romanian cheese) and fresh pastries.

After breakfast, take a stroll through the Old Town (Centrul Vechi). This area is a blend of old-world charm and modern architect, featuring cobblestone streets, lively cafes, and historical landmarks. Don't miss the Stavropoleos Monastery, a beautiful example of Brâncovenesc architecture, finished with intricate frescoes and wood carvings.

MID-MORNING:

Historical and Cultural Highlights

Next, make your way to the Palace of the Parliament, the second-largest administrative building in the world. This colossal structure is a testament to Romania's history and the vision of former dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu.

From here, a short walk will take you to the National Museum of Romanian History. The museum houses a vast collection of artifacts,





NATIONAL VILLAGE MUSEUM
IN BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

including the Romanian Crown Jewels and the Pietroasele Treasure. It's a great way to immerse yourself in the country's rich history and cultural heritage.

LUNCH:

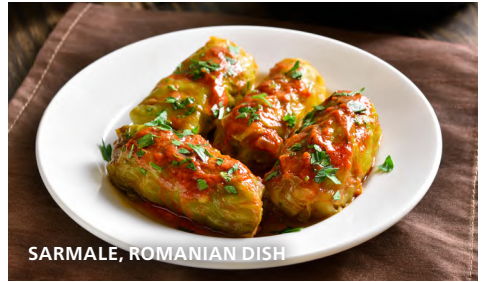
Savoring Romanian Cuisine

For lunch, head to Hanu' lui Manuc, another iconic restaurant located in a historic inn. The menu offers an array of traditional Romanian dishes, such as sarmale (cabbage rolls stuffed with meat and rice) and mămăligă (polenta). Pair your meal with a glass of Romanian wine or a locally brewed beer for a truly authentic experience.

AFTERNOON:

Parks and Relaxation

After lunch, take a break from the hustle and bustle by visiting Cismigiu Gardens, Bucharest's oldest and most charming park. Here, you can rent a boat and paddle around the lake, stroll along the tree-lined pathways, or simply relax on a bench and enjoy the serene atmosphere. If you're a fan of art, make sure to visit the National Museum of Art of Romania, located in the former Royal Palace. The museum boasts an impressive collection of European and Romanian art, including works by El Greco, Rembrandt, and Brâncuși.



SARMALE, ROMANIAN DISH



NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF ROMANIAN HISTORY

EVENING:

Modern Bucharest

As the day winds down, explore the more contemporary side of Bucharest. Head to the Herastrau Park, the largest park in the city, which surrounds the picturesque Herastrau Lake. The park is home to the Dimitrie Gusti National Village Museum, an open-air museum showcasing traditional Romanian village life. For dinner, visit a modern eatery like The Artist, known for its innovative cuisine and stylish ambiance. The menu features a fusion of Romanian and international flavours, with dishes that are as visually stunning as they are delicious.

Explore the less predictable **SIDE OF EUROPE**

Words by Kerry van der Jagt



Watch out for the lone horseman, warns guide Albena Darakchieva as she leads us through a fissure in the Belogradchik Rocks. Engulfed by thick fog we step across the threshold and enter a world of soaring sandstone pillars and animal-shaped boulders.

Following the trail ever upwards, we pause to inspect fairy chimneys, to gaze down upon fortress walls and to take in views of the army of stone figures spread across the mountainside. Here, on the western slopes of the Balkan Mountains in the far north-west of Bulgaria, the Belogradchik Rocks form a 30-kilometre belt of sandstone and conglomerate rocks. Forged under the sea more than 240 million

years ago, the red-hued rocks have been sculpted by natural forces into human and animal forms – the Horseman, the Madonna, the School Girl, the Dervish – each figure associated with a legend. To the Romans, Byzantines and Ottoman Turks, these rocks were a strategic stronghold within which to build their fortresses; to our small group on a shore excursion from Viking Lofn they are as unexpected as if we've docked on the far side of the Moon.

I'm in Bulgaria as part of an 11-day "Passage to Eastern Europe" cruise along the Danube River from Bucharest, Romania, to Budapest, Hungary, and I'm making new discoveries every

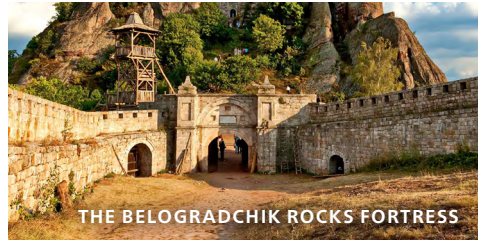
day. It seems the famous gladiator and rebel leader Spartacus was born in the region of modern-day Bulgaria not Rome, and that I can eat seven Romanian doughnuts in one sitting. All this and it's only day three.

With a name meaning the Norse Goddess of Comfort, Viking Lofn carries just 190 passengers with a crew of 53. While the Danube's entire journey from the Black Forest of Western Germany to the Black Sea in Romania and Ukraine covers 2850 kilometres, we'll be tracing a still substantial 800 kilometres of it in what is referred to as the Lower (eastern) Danube.

Our voyage passes through five vastly different countries, where the landscape changes rapidly, morphing from raked vineyards to dramatic cliffs to Soviet-era villages with each bend of the river. My interest in the breakup of both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia (and love of Balkan sweets) has led me this way before but only by plane, train and automobile. By cruising upstream from Romania through Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia and Hungary I'll gain fresh insights while sidestepping the crowds of the better-known European hotspots. And unlike the broiling heat of the recent summer, I've chosen to travel in mid-autumn, where the only thing burning is the colour of the chestnut trees.

BUCHAREST, ROMANIA: The real Paris of the East

If Eastern Europe is the less predictable cousin to the West, it makes sense to travel with a cruise line well-versed in its nuances. Founded in 1997, Viking offers destination-focused journeys designed to help guests untangle the mysteries and histories of the cultures they travel through. Throw in expert guest lecturers, a curated reference library, regional cuisine and optional privileged access to places otherwise



difficult to visit, and it's easy to see why Viking is billed as the Thinking Person's Cruise Line. We board in the Romanian capital of Bucharest, where the Scandinavian-style design and paired-back elegance of the Viking Lofn is immediately obvious, but over the coming days it's the depth and variety of excursions I grow to value the most.

A "Sights and Flavours of Bucharest" tour leads us around the city on a progressive dinner, where traditional dishes are served with a side of architecture. We start at Becker Brau brewery for beer and appetisers before moving to a classic art nouveau-style inn in the Interbelic district for a hearty main served with matching wines.

Dessert sees us scoffing Romanian fried doughnuts inside a graceful Neo-Romanesque villa before a slug of sour cherry brandy warms our bellies for a stroll around the Old Town. This is my third visit to Bucharest, and I am still smitten by its Beauty and the Beast charm, where Beaux-Arts architecture and wide, French-style boulevards are tempered by brutalist communist buildings.

"At first glance, Bucharest is a difficult city to love," says our guide Catalin Calaceo, as she leads us on a morning tour of the city.

"But dig a little and you will find it has many treasures." There's been a lot of digging going on at Vlad the Impaler's former



15th-century court, now an archaeological site of medieval ruins. "Bran Castle in Transylvania is a fairytale," says Calaceo, "this is where the real Dracula lived."

Like all the best guides, Calaceo has a knack for showing the star attractions, such as the 300-year-old Stavropoleos Church, as well as making time for contemporary highlights like Carturesti Carusel, once an abandoned 19th-century building, now a stunning bookshop, art gallery and cafe. "Much of our Old Town was destroyed in the 1980s under communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu," says Calaceo, "so we celebrate what we have left."

I'm shocked to hear that Ceausescu's plans for a new Bucharest led to the destruction of almost one fifth of the city and the forced relocation of 40,000 people. Even more astonishing are Calaceo's stories about a group of defiant engineers who moved more than a dozen churches and other historic buildings along metal tracks to save them from demolition. "Rolling them a few metres each day you could hardly see them moving." We see the conclusion of Ceausescu's evil plan at the Palace of the

Parliament, more a testament to a madman than a "Palace of the People". With its 3000 rooms, nuclear bunker and retractable glass ceiling wide enough for a helicopter, it was Ceausescu's dream to build the largest, most lavish civic building in the world. "More like the world's stupidest building," says Calaceo with a sniff. After ruling Romania from 1965, Ceausescu – forever known as the Butcher of Bucharest – was overthrown, tried and executed on Christmas Day 1989. The building (second largest after the Pentagon in Washington) remains unfinished.

BULGARIA: OF FORTRESSES, fiends and fresh pies

An overnight sail brings us to Viden in northern Bulgaria, one of the country's oldest towns where we remain docked for the day. While some choose to explore the medieval fortress of Baba Vida, I've signed up for two, half-day tours designed to bring me deeper into rural Bulgaria. "Viden is the poorest region of Bulgaria," says our local guide Albena Darakchieva, wasting no time in painting a grim picture of a country still recovering from 50 years of Soviet rule. "More

than half of our people have moved away to bigger cities or emigrated." Driving through the foothills of the Balkan Mountains we pass ghost villages, where wooden houses huddle in forlorn groups, their shoulders slumped from the weight of Jack and the Beanstalk vines. Darakchieva points out an abandoned telephone factory, which reminds me of something I've seen in Chernobyl, and a derelict school where blackened windows stare back at me like rows of eyes.

"The nightmare began in 1944 when the Red Army invaded," says Darakchieva. "At first, it was thought the Soviets were liberators, but by 1946 they'd installed a communist regime, confiscated our land and forced our people to work in factories. My grandfather was so angry he pushed his tractors over a cliff." After the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Bulgaria transitioned to a parliamentary democracy, where elections were guaranteed and land previously confiscated was handed back. "But our connection to the land was long lost," says Darakchieva. On approach to the town of Belogradchick, Darakchieva's mood lifts, as we see new hotels and restaurants being built to support tourism that is growing around the rocks and fortress. Art galleries and museums are popping up and discoveries of Roman ruins is putting Belogradchick on the map.



"You coming here on ships is the best thing to happen to this region since the fall of communism," she says, leading us through the outer walls of the Belogradchick fortress.

Later that day, in a rustic farmhouse on the outskirts of Viden I'm welcomed by the kindly Yonovi family to join them for a cooking class. "We want to teach you how to make banitsa pie," says Niki Yonovi, guiding my hands to layer the filo pastry, "But we also want to charge you with positive energy from our land." Served hot, straight from the oven and drizzled with honey foraged from forest hives, it may be the most memorable pie of my life. Back on board our cultural immersion in this remarkable town continues, with a talk by students from the local high school and a dance performance by the Vidin Children's Ensemble.

SERBIA: Hikes, bikes and buttocks

From Viden we have a free morning, cruising through the Iron Gates Gorge, one of Europe's most dramatic natural formations. Excitement is high, and I'm not sure whether to enjoy the ever-evolving spectacle from my private verandah (with a celebratory glass of champagne) or from the sun deck (with a pot of tea and cake). I manage both. At just 132 metres at its most narrow it's a tight squeeze, with Romania's Carpathian Mountains on the north bank and the foothills of Serbia's Balkan Mountains on the south. We glide past the rock sculpture of the face of King Decebalus, our ship dwarfed by the soaring limestone cliffs, their chalky surfaces hung with garlands of orange, scarlet and gold foliage.

A few hours later I'm crunching through autumn leaves inside Serbia's Djerdap National Park, where fire salamanders dart between our feet and white-tailed eagles soar overhead.



DJERDAP NATIONAL PARK, SERBIA

Up we go, led by a national park guide to a scenic viewpoint, where we snack on Serbian sweets while absorbing the beauty of the Iron Gates from above. In the distance I spot Viking Lofn, a child's toy floating in a ribbon of blue. It's early evening when we cruise into Golubac, an after-hours tour of the illuminated fortress an appetiser before our speciality Taste of the Balkans dinner. I forgo the main onboard restaurant for a table for two on the Aquavit Terrace, a quiet indoor/outdoor alternative at the bow of the ship with 180 degrees of floor-to-ceiling glass doors. Meals aboard the rivership are a highlight, with relaxed three-course lunches and elegant four-course dinners, which also include regional specialities (who knew something called Transylvanian sour soup could have such a bite) and a range of classic "always available" Western favourites. Cruising overnight brings us to Belgrade, the former capital of the state of Yugoslavia, and today's Serbian capital, where, during an early morning stroll through Kalemegdan Park I come eye-to-rump with a set of naked male buttocks. No, no, not fleshy ones – that would be too much before my first coffee – but a 14-metre high sculpture known as The Victor monument, built to honour the victory of the Serbian army over the Ottoman and Austrian-Hungarian empires. Sans uniform, he is said to belong to "all people". The city is an easy walk from where we are docked, and with an 8pm

departure, I have time to explore further afield on an afternoon bike excursion followed by an impromptu dinner in Skadarlija, Belgrade's bohemian quarter.

CROATIA TO HUNGARY:

From conflicts to cowboys

To many, Croatia can represent little more than Dubrovnik, that over-touristed "Pearl of the Adriatic" in the far south of the country. But here on the Danube in the north-eastern town of Ilok we find ourselves inside a Baroque-style palace, built on the foundations of a 15th-century castle, with not another river cruise ship or Game of Thrones fan within sight. Known as Odescalchi Palace, this "Noble of the Danube" is now a museum, housing an exquisite collection of artefacts from the early Roman period, Middle Ages to modern times. The museum is normally closed on Mondays but has been opened today just for Viking passengers.

Afterwards, we descend 12 metres underground to the castle's 500-year-old wine cellar, where priceless bottles are still kept, some vintages famously served during the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and the wedding of Charles and Diana. Feeling like monarchs ourselves, we head to the tasting room to learn about local varieties such as Grasevina and Traminac. Cruising to Vukovar we have more sobering lessons to learn. Known as

“Croatia’s Hiroshima”, the town of Vukovar was under siege by the Yugoslav People’s Army and Serbian forces for 87 days from August 25, 1991, until the city finally fell on November 16, 1991. A total of 3000 lives were lost and the city was razed to the ground. While many buildings still carry the scars of bullet holes, it’s the war-damaged skeleton of the 50.3-metre-high water tower that moves me the most. Having suffered more than 600 direct hits it continues to stand proudly as the symbol of Croatian resistance. Taking a lift to the top, I look out beyond the Danube and think deeply about the suffering of war around the world, and how we never seem to learn from the past.

After Vukovar we have a free morning of cruising, where I happily while away the hours in my verandah stateroom. It’s comfortable and elegant, complete with Scandi-style decor of blonde, taupe and teal, queen-size bed and floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors. The light and bright theme continues through the public areas, including the library, restaurant, observation lounge and Aquavit Terrace, a casual, al fresco at the bow of the ship where breakfast and lunch can be taken. On river cruising days, the Viking Lofn’s sundeck is the place to be, with its panoramic views of daily life along the Danube River. For me, this is the pleasure of river cruising – lying in bed and watching the ever-changing scenery before pulling up in the heart of a town and stepping ashore. Today, only the promise of wild horses will drag me away.

As a long-time equestrian, I’ve been fortunate to see the Andalusian horses of Spain and the Lipizzaners of Vienna, yet for sheer excitement these two don’t come close to the power and strength of Hungary’s Nonius horse.

An excursion to Kalocsa brings me to a wide field in the Hungarian plains of Puszta, where I watch in awe (and a touch of terror) as bands of Hungarian cowboys or csikos, descendants of the nomadic Magyar warriors from the steppes of Asia, put these gallant horses through their paces. The finale is a “Puszta fiver”, where a rider stands on the backs of two horses at once while holding the reins and driving five more. With mud flying and the csikos’ blue tunics billowing, it is a moment seared forever on my horse-loving heart. By tomorrow we’ll be in Budapest, enjoying an included two-night hotel stay in a location ideal for exploring one of Europe’s most beguiling cities.

But for now, with my face and jeans splattered with mud, I’m happy, not just to connect with the cultural heritage of a little-visited part of Eastern Europe, but to play a part in its conservation. The writer travelled as a guest of Viking.

*Words by Kerry van der Jagt.
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City guide BRATISLAVA

Discover Bratislava, a charming city where history meets modernity, offering a blend of medieval architecture, cultural charm and picturesque landscapes.

Located in southwestern Slovakia, Bratislava stretches across both banks of the Danube River and is home to a variety of charming streets, verdant public squares and marvelous baroque palaces. Despite being the largest city in the country, it has a population of about half a million people, giving it a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. It is the only capital city in the world that borders two independent countries—Hungary to the south and Austria to the west. Its origins can be traced to Neolithic settlements dating back 5,000 years. Celtic groups arrived in the centuries that followed, then Romans, who lived there until the Slavs took over in the 8th century. The city was first documented in 907, and it is believed that its name is inspired by the Slav Duke “Braslav.”

MUST-SEES

Start your journey at the Gothic-style Universitas Istropolitana, which was founded by King Matthias Corvinus in 1465. Despite operating for only 25 years, it had a significant impact on the fields of mathematics and astrology. In the heart of the storied square, admire the Roland Fountain, which was built in 1572 to provide water to the local area. Legend has it

the statue of the knight atop the fountain—thought to be the city’s eponymous legendary defender—bows every year on New Year’s Eve. For examples of magnificent rococo and late baroque architecture, visit Grassalkovich Palace—the president’s residence—and Archbishop’s Palace, home to the city’s mayor.

The Gothic St. Martin’s Cathedral dates to the 12th-century. It is worth looking inside for a glimpse of beautiful, elaborately carved altars. A visit to Bratislava would not be complete without seeing its castle—the city’s most popular landmark. Standing protectively over the Old Town, the fort was originally constructed in the 15th-century Gothic style, and later transformed during the Renaissance in the 16th century. Visitors today will find it houses the joint Slovak National Museum—Museum of History, which features a sprawling collection of paintings, glassware and weaponry. At dusk, beautiful sunsets often draw in crowds, who take in the romantic atmosphere as they gaze upon pink and red hues with the imposing castle creating a fairytale backdrop behind them.

SHOPPING

Bratislava's Old Town is a shopper's paradise, featuring independent shops that offer locally made, artisanal products, from handmade jewellery to custom clothing. For a more contemporary shopping experience, head to Eurovea, a spacious mall along the Danube River. This modern complex boasts over 150 stores, a newly built cinema and a light and airy atmosphere spread across three levels.

GASTRONOMY

Slovakian food blends a mixture of influences from Central Europe with its own twist. It is renowned for being wholesome and delicious, with cheese and dumplings taking center stage in most meals. The national dish is bryndzové halušky, a beloved meal of potato dumplings with sheep's cheese that is often topped with sour cream and crispy bacon.

If you find you still have room for more, sip a local beer. With Slovakia's brewing scene gaining traction, you will find plenty of local pubs offering craft beers alongside traditional fare. Make your way to the Sladovňa, or House of Beer, a medieval pub in the heart of the Old Town to sample some of the city's best creations



GETTING THERE: Consider our 8-day *Danube Waltz* voyage itinerary, from Budapest to Passau or in reverse.



Eastern Europe: **SOMETHING FOR EVERYBODY**

Travel to places of historic significance, immerse yourself in cultural hubs brimming with art and music, or local gourmet delights. Here we share a selection of some of the intriguing experiences found along the Danube.

CULTURE

Immersing yourself into the rich traditions and customs of a new region is exactly what we believe travelling should be about. Experiencing a city as the locals do allows you to gain a greater understanding of the world around us and inspire a fresh perspective of how things are.

KALOCSA & PUSZTA

Visit one of Hungary's major cultural centres and attend a breathtaking display of traditional horsemanship in the city of Kalocsa. Travel to the Bakodpuszta Equestrian Centre. The people of the Hungarian Puszta region have long relied on horses for transportation, settlement and defence of their land. Many locals worry that their country's equestrian connection is being lost to a motorised world, so they hold fast to rural ways and to their four-legged comrades, elevating horsemanship to an art form. Witness the sometimes-acrobatic culmination of this long cherished relationship during a thrilling show.





CULINARY

Nothing reveals the nature and soul of a destination quite like food and wine do—they are after all an integral element of any culture. Exploring the culinary delights of a region can give you a unique insight into the life and traditions of the people who call it home. These itineraries will take you on a voyage of discovery to some of the world's most renowned food and wine destinations.

STRUDEL MAKING WORKSHOP

Novi Sad, Serbia

Learn how to bake your own strudel with a minced poppy seed filling and sample traditional food. Journey to Brkin Salaš, a traditional Serbian farm situated in a quaint village near the city of Novi Sad. Your talented chef will warmly greet you and welcome you to step inside a traditional kitchen and take a seat to watch a demonstration of this baked treat. Depending on the season, you may also get the chance to see how traditional ajvar, a roasted red pepper sauce—or sauerkraut—are made. While the strudel bakes in the oven, sample a taste of plum brandy, the national spirit made from the plum trees that grow throughout the region, paired with various delicious treats, such as dried plum filled with cheese and wrapped in bacon, or savoury cheese pie.

HISTORY

You can read about history in books, but travelling to the places where history was made gives a whole new perspective. If history is the central focus for your travel, these itineraries allow you to visit historically significant sites, immersing you in architecture, art and experiences that changed the course of civilisation.

CROATIA'S WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

Osijek, Croatia

Delve into recent history and discover the events that contributed to the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. From 1991 to 1995, the Croatian War of Independence was fought. Starting in August 1991, the 87-day Battle of Vukovar commenced. With your knowledgeable guide, you will visit the Homeland War Memorial Centre and view military equipment that was used by the Croatian army, including armoured vehicles, tanks and aircraft. After time to explore the open-air and housed exhibits, continue to the Ovčara Memorial House. Here, you may pay tribute to the Croatian veterans and civilians that lost their lives. Cap your tour with a stop at the Vukovar Water Tower.





PAINTING FARMING SCENES KOVACICA



CARPATHIAN BASIN

ART

From ever-changing street art and world-class museums to iconic opera performances, the world is home to countless cultural treasures just waiting to be discovered. For the traveller for whom the city's galleries and museums are the main drawcard, we take you to the heart of these destinations to uncover artistic and musical experiences.

KOVAČICA ART COLONY Belgrade, Serbia

Journey into the Pannonian Basin to learn about the Naïve Art movement. In the 1950s, Kovačica residents Martin Paluska and Jan Soko took brushes to canvas without formal training, and began to paint daily life around them. Perspective was not a concern for them, nor was realism. But the Naïve Art style that they created stuck and became a movement. Journey into the Carpathian Basin, past soybean and sunflower fields, where Slovaks, Serbs, Hungarians, Romanians and Slavs live in harmony side by side. Here, you will learn about the Naïve Art movement from an expert and browse the village collection.

ARCHITECTURE

Sometimes, one single building can become symbolic of a destination, with designs that can transport you through time. Whether old, new, ornate or minimalistic, stunning architecture is all around us wherever we go. We invite you to explore some of the world's architectural wonders

IVANOVO ROCK-HEWN CHURCHES & BASARBOVO MONASTERY Ruse, Bulgaria

See the fascinating rock-hewn churches of Ivanovo and visit the impressive Basarbovo Monastery. Join your guide and transfer by motor coach to the Basarbovo Monastery, an Orthodox monastery on the cliffs near the village of Basarbovo. Chiselled out of rocks, this spectacular sight is the only functioning rock monastery in Bulgaria. Next, visit the rock-hewn Churches of Ivanovo, a complex of monolithic churches sculpted out of solid rock, located in the Rusenski Lom Nature Park. View the 14th-century frescoes, a series of incredible examples of mastery in Bulgarian medieval art, inside this UNESCO World Heritage Site.



ROCK-HEWN CHURCHES OF IVANOVO

11 DAYS | 8 GUIDED TOURS | 5 COUNTRIES

PASSAGE TO EASTERN EUROPE

Bucharest to Budapest or vice versa

TYPICAL SAILING SEASON
MARCH TO NOVEMBER

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Eastern Europe's capital cities are home to magnificent museums, palaces and historic buildings. In the region's towns and villages, you will find warm welcoming locals eager to share their traditions. On this 11-day voyage, see Bucharest's 3,000-room Palace of Parliament and make banitsa bread with a home cook in Vidin. Explore Belgrade's Ottoman and European treasures and view the Danube's towering Iron Gate. Witness Hungary's daredevil Puszta horsemen and behold Budapest's grandeur.



Itinerary day by day

DAY 1-2 Bucharest, Romania

DAY 3 Ruse, Bulgaria

DAY 4 Vidin, Bulgaria

DAY 5 Golubac, Serbia

DAY 6 Belgrade, Serbia

DAY 7 Osijek, Croatia

DAY 8 Kalocsa, Hungary

DAY 9-11 Budapest, Hungary

CAPITALS OF EASTERN EUROPE

Vienna to Bucharest or vice versa

17 DAYS | 12 GUIDED TOURS | 7 COUNTRIES

TYPICAL SAILING SEASON - MARCH TO NOVEMBER

Discover the “City of Waltzes,” Austria’s elegant capital and European centre of classical music. In Bratislava, view grand palaces from the Hapsburg era. Delve into Budapest’s vibrant culture - Hungary’s enchanting capital straddles the banks of the Danube, with traditional hillside Buda on one side and modern Pest on the other. Be captivated by lesser-known gems as you visit towns and cities across the Balkans, such as Belgrade—one of the oldest cities in Europe. Explore Bucharest’s old-world charm, tree-lined boulevards and witness its socialist architecture. With visits to five capital cities, this 17-day voyage is sure to inspire.



Itinerary day by day

DAY 1-3 Vienna, Austria

DAY 4 Bratislava, Slovakia

DAY 5-6 Budapest, Hungary

DAY 7 Mohács, Hungary

DAY 8 Vukovar, Croatia

DAY 9 Novi Sad, Serbia

DAY 10 Belgrade, Serbia

DAY 11 Donji Milanovac, Serbia

DAY 12 Vidin, Bulgaria

DAY 13 Pleven, Bulgaria

DAY 14 Constanța, Romania

DAY 15-17 Bucharest, Romania



EUROPEAN SOJOURN

Amsterdam to Bucharest or vice versa

23 DAYS | 19 GUIDED TOURS | 8 COUNTRIES

TYPICAL SAILING SEASON - APRIL TO OCTOBER

Itinerary day by day

DAY 1 Amsterdam, The Netherlands

DAY 2 Kinderdijk, The Netherlands

DAY 3 Cologne, Germany

DAY 4 Koblenz, Germany

DAY 5 Miltenberg, Germany

DAY 6 Würzburg, Germany

DAY 7 Bamberg, Germany

DAY 8 Nuremberg, Germany

DAY 9 Regensburg, Germany

DAY 10 Passau, Germany

DAY 11 Melk, Austria

DAY 12-13 Vienna, Austria

DAY 14-15 Budapest, Hungary

DAY 16 Kalocsa, Hungary

DAY 17 Osijek, Croatia

DAY 18 Belgrade, Serbia

DAY 19 Golubac, Serbia

DAY 20 Vidin, Bulgaria

DAY 21 Ruse, Bulgaria

DAY 22-23 Bucharest, Romania

Journey through western Europe and sail Amsterdam's canals, see castles on the Rhine and behold the grandeur of Vienna. Cross through the Iron Curtain and celebrate folk traditions in Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania. These travel icons—and more—await you on a 23-day journey sailing the Rhine, Main and Danube.



EXPLORE MORE

See more of the world with our pre and post extension packages

MORE DAYS MEANS MORE TIME TO DISCOVER

Whether it is more time in an embarkation or disembarkation city or to visit a new destination altogether, we have designed extension programs all over the world to be the perfect complement to your itinerary.



3 NIGHTS BUCHAREST & TRANSYLVANIA

Encounter Romania's mysterious Transylvania and explore numerous castles, cathedrals and fascinating towns. This extension also features an overnight excursion to Braşov and tours of Peleş Castle and Dracula's Castle.



3 NIGHTS ISTANBUL

Discover where East meets West in timeless Istanbul and learn about its intriguing history during the Byzantine period. Visit important religious sites, such as the spectacular "Blue Mosque" and legendary Hagia Sophia, and delve into the rich history and culture of the Ottomans at Topkapi Palace.



3 NIGHTS VIENNA

Explore the city of Strauss, Freud, Mahler, Klimt and many other great fin de siècle thinkers, and experience the place that defined high culture for all of Europe. See Vienna's elegant architecture and enjoy local food, wine and Viennese hospitality.



2 OR 3 NIGHTS PRAGUE

Explore more of the Czech Republic's vibrant capital, the "City of a Hundred Spires". Visit Prague's many landmarks—Hradčany Castle, St. Vitus Cathedral, Charles Bridge and more.



2 NIGHTS BUDAPEST

Explore Hungary's legendary capital city, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Discover the Castle District, venture across the Danube along the Chain Bridge and indulge in some delightful local cuisine.



5 NIGHTS VENICE & ZAGREB

Discover the intriguing cities of Venice and Zagreb. Visit the iconic sights of canal-lined Venice, long renowned for its art and architecture. In Zagreb, learn about its important role in Croatia's struggle for independence. Experience more culture with stops in scenic Ljubljana and Graz.



2 NIGHTS AMSTERDAM

Explore Amsterdam's charming streets and neighbourhoods and enjoy the wonderful restaurants and varied attractions. Visit a wide selection of art museums, the Anne Frank House or take a canal tour by glass-topped boat.
