

TRANSDANUBE TRAVEL STORIES



Foreword

The following stories were created in the course of the INTERREG project „Transdanube Travel Stories“ in the project period 07.2020-12.2022.

10 partners from seven countries, committed themselves to sustainable tourism in the Danube region and want to charge the European lifeline with new stories and experiences with new, innovative strategies.

With a total volume of 1.82 million Euros, the project built on the results of its predecessor, Transdanube.Pearls, which was completed in 2019. It was about developing innovative Danube narratives. Selected destinations and sights along an itinerary were linked to an experienceable story and promoted. The aim was to arouse interest in the Danube region as a tourism destination and to create a unique Danube memory.

The partners of the project were:

- Lead partner: Federal Environmental Agency Austria
- Danube Office Ulm/Neu-Ulm - representing the Danube.Pearls Network/Germany
- WGD Donau Oberösterreich Tourismus - representing the Danube.Pearls network/Austria
- Tourismusverband Linz - represents the Road of Emperors and Kings/Austria
- West Pannon Regional and Economic Development Public Nonprofit Ltd. - represents the Via Sancti Martini/Hungary
- Institute for Culture, Tourism and Sport Murska Sobota - represents the European Route of Jewish Heritage/Slovenia
- Croatian Association for Tourism and Rural Development „The Village Membership Club“ - represents Iter Vitis - The Ways of Vineyards/Croatia
- Association for promoting tourism in Oradea and its region - represents Réseau Art Nouveau Network/Romania
- Danube Competence Center (DCC) - represents the Route of the Roman Emperors and Wine along the Danube/Serbia
- DANUBEPARKS - Danube River Network of Protected Areas - represents the network of Danube protected areas/Austria.

Links:

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Réseau Art Nouveau :	artnouveau-net.eu
Danube Parks:	www.danubeparks.org

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Introduction

The Danube's many shades of blue

The introduction and summaries of the stories were written by Prof. Georg Steiner, Director of Tourism Linz.

An idealised river, renowned throughout the world via the melodies of Johann Strauss, the Danube can hardly complain of a lack of publicity and all the familiar clichés. But such overriding impressions also distort insight into deeper associations, into an understanding of this European river that should go far beyond the heady whirl of the waltz, Vienna, wine, the Wachau, and Sisi, the tragic Empress Elisabeth of celluloid fame. Besides this superficiality – which also ensures the Danube's success as a tourist attraction, especially cycling and cruise ship tourism – there is another factor warping the perspective onto the overall dimension of the Danube region. It relates to the many borders, cross-border tales and narratives propagating tourist programmes and the motivation to travel through multiple countries – a factor that has hitherto prevented diverse issues from being fully addressed.

Descriptions of the Danube in travel guides are almost all “course-oriented” or “biographical”. But we want to embark on a narrative excursion along the Danube that is literary, cultural, ecological, personal and political. The Danube is also the very region that can lead us to a deeper and more fundamental European narrative. In the Danube region, Europe can be found in all its manifestations – its philosophical and religious roots, its cultural diversity and, last but not least, the problems and challenges of our day, including climate change, migration, regional development, the future of our liberal democracy and of our growth-oriented economic system.

As part of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, the project “Transdanube Travel Stories” covers the entire Danube region, which consists not only of ten nations, but also the major tributaries of the Danube from 14 countries. The project endeavours to foster a feeling for the river in relation to six thematic categories – two in the upper reaches of the Danube, two in the middle stretch, and two in the Danube's lower course. The images and stories outlined here are intended to generate a dynamic in the leitmotif of the Danube that resounds and reverberates as in a symphony. We want these narratives to strike up a resonance in visitors and guests and so help to prevent the Danube from being reduced merely to a few hotspots and superficial impressions. We must free the Danube of its clichés.

Mankind's traces have been cropping up along the Danube for over 30,000 years; particularly in recent centuries, upheavals and human catastrophes on the one hand and the flourishing of cultural achievements on the other – all in the narrowest dimensions of space and time – transform a trip along the Danube into a magnifying glass of human highs and lows. The same experience applies to the river landscape, where the most brutal interventions have taken place while far-reaching protected areas of the highest quality have emerged. The Danube is divided between a state of violation and one of pre-human origin. Life along the river shows that diversity – whether ecological, economic or cultural phenomena – will not be suppressed in the long term, nor be able to proliferate unchecked. The Danube is thus also a symbol and an appeal to the culture of humanism, tolerance and wisdom: namely, that progress for the land and its peoples should be accomplished in such a way that quality of life, peace and development may exist side by side in harmony.

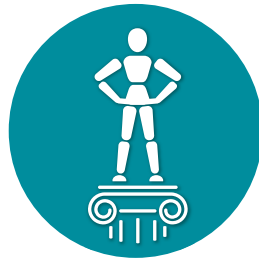
We shall discover “hidden places” and encounter contexts that not only make the history and culture of the Danube region accessible, but also elucidate our contemporary issues; contexts demonstrating that art and culture are not just for prestige, pomp and circumstance, but that beauty and sublimity have always contributed to making human life more tolerable, better and richer. All these contexts and phenomena will yield travel experiences that are worthy of the name. Sightseeing alone does not do justice. It's about encounters, it's about cuisine and music, it's about people and customs; it's about getting back to nature and sounding out multiple dimensions with all our senses. The Danube is neither a nature reserve nor a tourist leisure and pleasure ground. It is a living environment for people, and every journey should make this a palpable reality. It's not about perfection but about improvisation. It's about surprise and emotion, rather than quasi-industrial procedures that mass tourism tows in its wake every now and again.

The image of a symphony should always be our guide: forte and pianissimo, allegro and adagio, nature, culture, cuisine, architecture, folk culture, joie de vivre, but melancholy too, religion, and spirituality. The Danube is as many-faceted as its shades of blue.



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“Cultural harvest” along the Danube:

**Art, music and architecture – a look at formative eras and
their influences, wealth, splendour and landmarks**

(by Andreas Rathberger-Reiter and Roland Kastler)

Summary

“Cultural harvest” along the Danube: art, music and architecture

Vienna is undisputedly something like a magnifying glass if we're looking for an overview of all cultural developments and phenomena in the Danube region. However, this trail along the upper half of the Danube follows a history that starts out from prehistoric traces, continues through the Middle Ages and the Baroque era to the 19th and 20th centuries and shows that everything originated along the Danube that is, or at least reflects, the very essence of Europe. The journey launches out in Ulm and continues via Regensburg, Linz, Krems and Vienna to Hungary, Romania, Serbia and back via Croatia to Murska Sobota in Slovenia. Nowhere else have so many ethnic groups lived together, and still do, whose reciprocal fertilisation, even if under compulsion, bequeathed a cultural richness that has made the Danube into a treasure trove of human culture and ways of life – whether for reasons of religion, or individual identity, or simply for the demonstration of power, as has haunted us alarmingly once more particularly in modern history in the figures of Stalin or Tito.

Starting in Ulm, where the so-called “Lion Man” sculpture suggests a kind of mysticism or perhaps even a religion of more than 30,000 years ago, in the Middle Ages we subsequently encounter the “Holy Roman Empire”, which was founded on a Catholic universalism initiated by Emperor Charlemagne. The latter gave rise particularly in the Danube region to secular, ecclesiastical and monasterial structures and architecture which, in combination with Jewish influences reverberating from Regensburg to Hungary, shaped the region's identity and can still be seen today.

Furthermore, painting in the time of the Renaissance – even inspired by Chinese traditions – revolutionised the depiction of landscape in the form of the so-called “Danube School”. This arc was spanned further to include later art movements – Baroque, Belle Époque, Historicism, Art Nouveau and so forth. In Vienna, “blueprints” were created for the corporate architecture of the Habsburg Empire.

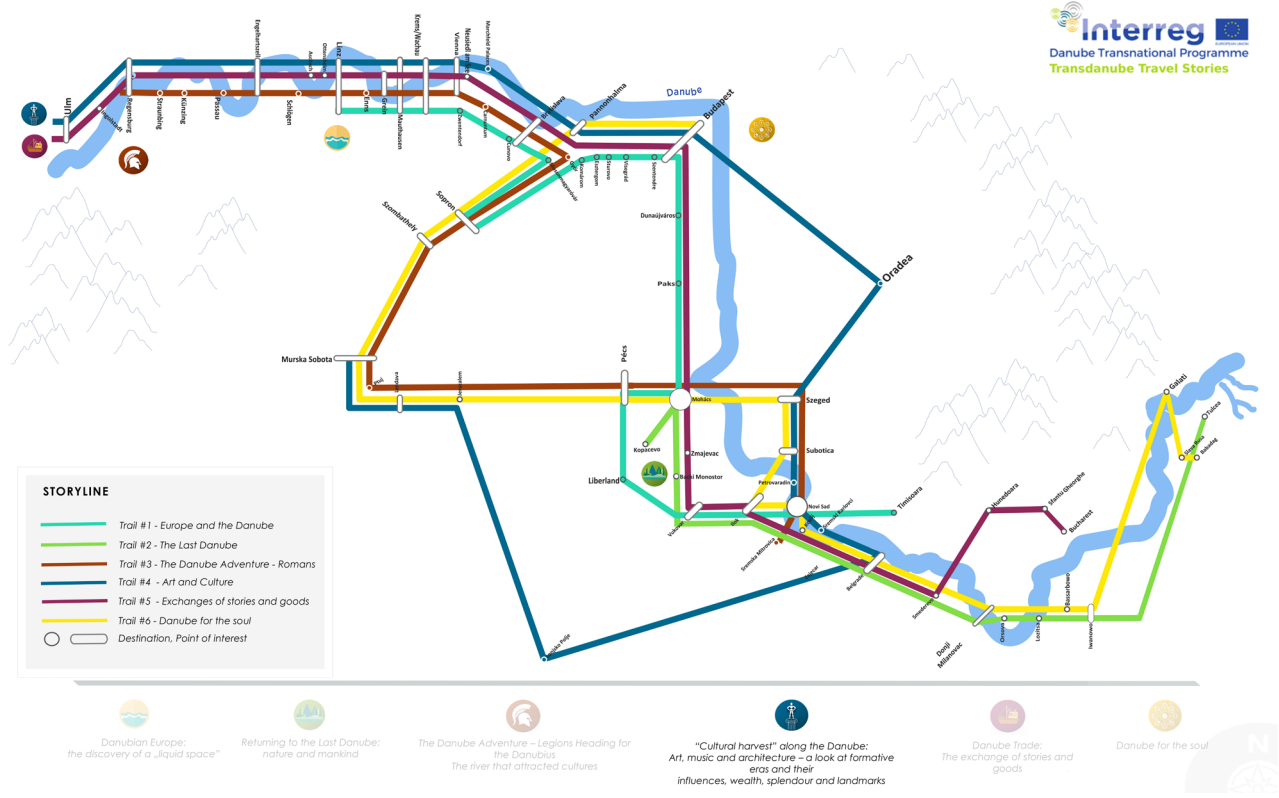
Hot spots of cultural history have always dynamised the Danube region down to the present day. Examples include media arts in Linz, the new Museum Mile in Krems, and the European capital of culture in Serbia, Novi Sad. Vienna continues to radiate its brilliance – the works of Sigmund Freud, philosophers and scientists, the First Viennese School in music, composers such as Mahler, Bruckner and Johann Strauss in the 19th century ... all of these prove that here the multi-ethnic heritage of the Danube region continues to yield a rich harvest.

Hungary as well can present a magnifying-glass view of Europe and the Danube – with the conversion to Christianity around 1,000 years ago, the constant partitions and fusions between Islam and Christendom, and the consequences of the Cold War, where Stalinist architecture, above all, left its traces.

Serbia and Romania were in their turn marked by the repeated fusions and divisions of Orthodox Christianity and Islam and affected by crucial impulses from Jewish life. Orient meets Occident: this defines many phenomena, whether architecture, cuisine, music or literature. The people and the ruling élites along the Danube were networked in all directions, hence the attributes that are attached to distinctive places: Belgrade as “Paris of the Balkans”; Sremski Karlovci as “provincial Rome” for the Serbs living in the Habsburg Monarchy; Petrovaradin as “Gibraltar on the Danube”, and Novi Sad situated opposite as “Athens of Serbia”.

Accordingly, a trip from the source of the Danube to the far reaches of the Balkans is a demonstration of the resilience of cultural achievements, but also a fascinating manifestation of what can be brought about by fusion and re-invention over the centuries when catalysed by so many diverse influences.

Summary written by Georg Steiner



Introduction

“Cultural harvest” along the Danube: Art, music and architecture

What experiences might a culture-focused tour of the Danube region have to offer?

Cambridge Dictionary lists three main definitions of the word “culture”:

1. *“the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time”*
2. *“music, art, theatre, literature, etc.”*
3. *“cells, tissues, organs, or organisms grown for [...] purposes, or the activity of breeding and keeping particular living things in order to get the substances they produce”*

It is easy to see how the first two definitions apply to what culture-focused travellers might experience along the Danube: first because the region has historically been home to an abundance of different ethnic groups, all of which have lived in close proximity to and interacted with one another (and the rest of the world) for centuries; and second, because those same, multi-ethnic crosswinds created a social, cultural and economic environment that favoured innovation and contributed significantly to the world’s great music, art, theatre, literature and architecture. This cross-fertilization of cultures – most famously epitomised by the city of Vienna – can be felt across the Danube region. The area boasts an undeniably rich culture with regard to the first two definitions, a wealth that explains the “gold” colour we’ve chosen for the Cultural Danube Trail in the context of our project.

But what of the third definition, the one referring to culture in the sense of an organism “grown for a purpose” that enables a harvest of what it “produces”? Did culture in the Danube region not have certain, sometimes lasting effects on places and people, on societies and the course of history? Could there not be what we might call a “cultural harvest”, that is something that could be experienced as a product of those processes?

Indeed, not only has life on the banks of the Danube and its many river-facilitated encounters had a profound effect on the culture of this region; those same cultural manifestations

have in turn shaped the identities, ideas and world views of the people living here. Part of this “cultural harvest” is a certain outlook on life, a shared history (for better or worse), a commonly-held sense of things being “in constant flow” – but also an enduring cultural and ethnic plurality that has at least partially defied and survived some of history’s most brutal efforts to impose the forced homogeneity of “nation states” on a multinational region.

The cultural experience of a distinct **Danubian Europe** – a region demonstrably more resilient than any of the empires that have risen and collapsed here, at once different from and connected to Atlantic Europe and Mediterranean Europe – is something all of Europe and every traveller can benefit from.

Where else could visitors find the world’s oldest flute, or listen to medieval choirs next to a 17th-century parliament building; where else could they find themselves entranced by a blend of modern technology and art – all part of an effort to revitalize a city that has changed identities at least once every century? In what other region could they discover Chinese influences in Renaissance paintings; discuss literature, philosophy and psychology in a historic coffeehouse; marvel at the art and lifestyle of Baroque country life; explore enmeshed notions of culture, religion and nation; stroll among the monuments of at least three fallen Danubian empires; discover the diversity of Art Nouveau art and architecture; travel from “Gibraltar” to “Athens” on foot; cross bridges between East and West before returning to the culture of everyday life with the river in a wooden house raised on stilts?

Join us on a trail that offers all of that and more. Let the river guide you through a veritable Aladdin’s cave of cultural wealth – a treasure trove at the crossroads between Orient and Occident.

“KultUrsprünge” – Wellsprings of human culture (Ulm/Ach- and Lonetal valleys, Germany)

Before delving into cultural harvests, we must first look at the origins of culture itself. How and when did humans in the Danube area develop early cultural concepts, and how did cultural identities and ideas travel and spread along the Danube?

An area not too far from the source of the river Danube has produced some of the earliest evidence of human creativity anywhere in the world. Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2017, a system of caves in the beautiful Ach River Valley came to scientific and public attention after ice age art, musical instruments, and anthropomorphic sculptures were discovered between their walls. The artefacts are between 33,000 and 43,000 years old. Some, including the celebrated “Lion Man” sculpture may be among the world’s oldest visual expressions of mysticism and perhaps animist religion. Considered evidence of early humans developing the ability to conceive abstract concepts and complex ideas of an afterlife, god(s) and/or demons, these early religions may well have motivated and provided context for the first music and art creations – the genesis of “culture” as we know it.

Also of interest is the nearby city of Ulm, which contributed significantly to the history of multi-ethnic settlement along the Danube river: between the 17th and 19th centuries, German-speaking, but also Italian, French and even some Spanish settlers collectively referred to as “Danube Swabians” (*Donauschwaben*) travelled east along the Danube in distinctive wooden river ferries known as *Ulmer Schachteln* or “box boats”, eventually re-settling the sparsely populated areas of the Pannonian basin previously devastated by the Ottoman-Habsburg wars. These unique communities maintained their languages, traditions and dialects over many generations and further enriched the already culturally diverse patchwork of cultures in the Danube region – that is, until they were nearly eviscerated by the radical nationalism and war, ideological conflict, genocides and displacements that ravaged East-Central Europe in the 20th century. A visit to Ulm offers visitors a chance to experience the history and

heritage of those settlers, providing insight into the spread of cultural identities and ideas throughout the multicultural Danube area.

The medieval cultural heritage of the Holy Roman (Danubian) Empire (Regensburg, Germany)

Having explored the emergence of early forms of cultural expression and the spread and intermingling of cultural identities throughout the Danube region, it is worth taking a look at how cultures evolved and grew with multi-cultural Danube empires throughout history, how multicultural influences shaped these empires and were shaped by them in turn. The city of Regensburg offers great opportunities to do just that.

First developed during the Early Middle Ages, the Holy Roman Empire has occasionally, if unofficially, been dubbed “the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation” and – in the tradition of 19th-century historians projecting “national” identities onto times long before modern nations were conceived as such – even identified as the “First German Reich”. At the time of its creation, the Holy Roman Empire was conceived as a universal secular power echoing the sacral universalism of the medieval (Catholic) Church.



In practice, it was a multi-ethnic, culturally very diverse network of cities, rural communities, monasteries, bishoprics and land-owning dynasties that connected large parts of continental Europe – a hotchpotch that used the Danube as its most important channel to Eastern Europe and the “Oriental” Mediterranean. Kings and emperors, traders, pilgrims and warriors, Jews fleeing persecution, settlers and enterprising merchants, missionaries, saints and less-than-saintly conquerors travelled back and forth along the Danube, importing and exporting ideas and cultural innovations to and from the Holy Roman Empire.

It is hardly a coincidence that Regensburg, with its strategic Danube location, became one of the Empire’s crucial economic, religious and political centres and – eventually – seat of the Perpetual Imperial Diet (*Immerwährender Reichstag*). Visitors to today’s Regensburg can still envision and experience the Danube’s significance and contributions to the Holy Roman Empire’s medieval cultural heritage. Famed for its curiously “Mediterranean” atmosphere and attitude to life, the city boasts its legacy as a former hub of a multi-cultural empire through architecture (UNESCO World Heritage Site: Old Town of Regensburg with Stadtamthof), music (medieval choral traditions and the Regensburg Early Music Festival), as well as its multi-religious heritage (part of the Jewish Heritage Route).

Reinventing a Danubian city through art, culture and technology (Linz, Austria)

Culture and identity have never been static in the Danube region. Life along one of Europe’s most important waterways, a vital channel for travellers of all kinds throughout history, has meant that people had to adapt to constantly changing economic and political circumstances – a factor that naturally influenced cultural expression as well.

The old Danube city of Linz has seen many changes and assumed many different roles through its long history. At various times it has served, alternately, as an important trade hub (Celtic iron and salt routes, medieval trade fairs), a glamorous residence for provincial noble families (Renaissance and Baroque old town), as a hub for religious Counter-Reforma-

tion activity (churches and former monasteries), as a military fortress protecting the Danube route to Vienna (maximilianic fortifications), as an industrial powerhouse (VÖEST, “Steel City”) and – most recently – as a city of culture and technology (European Cultural Capital 2009, Culture Mile along the Danube and Ars Electronica Center).



Each of these “reinventions” left their architectural footprint, making Linz the perfect place to get a sense of both the various roles a Danube city can hold and the cultural legacy of those roles.

Linz is also a great place to explore the ways in which culture is not just created in reaction to or as an expression of change, but can itself act as a catalyst and driving force for it. After all, the city’s latest incarnation as a capital of culture and technology – a stark contrast to its old image of a grimy industrial town – is the result of conscious decisions by policymakers and support from dedicated artists and innovators, who can be encountered here in person alongside the art and innovations they helped create.

River-inspired: The “Danube School” of Renaissance landscape painting (St. Florian Monastery and Krems, Austria)

As both an impressive natural phenomenon and an important waterway, the river Danube itself has featured prominently in art and culture, inspiring artists with its striking landscapes and the contacts it facilitated. One of the most obvious examples of this influence is the Danube School.

A circle of artists not just named after, but directly inspired by the Danube, the Danube School of Renaissance painting found its muse in both its beautiful riverside landscapes and the East-West flow of ideas – indeed, art historians have found influences from such faraway lands as China in the compositions of Albrecht Altdorfer and Wolf Huber. Travelers to St. Florian and Krems can immerse themselves in the work of this unique painting tradition, discover its close ties to both the river and the many cultures it connected, but also explore the social and historical context behind this unique and influential group of artists.



The ancient St. Florian Monastery is one of the oldest existing church structures in the entire Danube region. It is also a magnificent place to reflect on art, music and architecture. Its current, Baroque form dates from the early 18th century, when the massive complex was rebuilt to commemorate the integration of the Ottoman Danubian provinces into the Habsburg Empire. The transformation of the ancient monastery into a monumental architectural showpiece of new Baroque aesthetics gave significant impetus to similar projects along the monastic landscape of the Danube. The monastery also houses a prestigious art collection, including some of Europe’s most impressive extant illuminated manuscripts and works by the so-called “St. Florian School” of early 14th-century painters. The latter artists brought a number of exquisite pictorial innovations from the French and English courts to the East. St. Florian’s vast trove of early 16th-century Danube School Renaissance paintings culminates in a luminous painting cycle by Albrecht Altdorfer, a commission for the former Altar of Saint Sebastian.

Having encountered Altdorfer, often considered the father of modern European landscape painting, it seems more than appropriate to bask in the picturesque scenery of the nearby Wachau valley, which is also listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A trip to the old Danube trading city of Krems offers yet another opportunity to engage with the works of the cosmopolitan painters of medieval St. Florian: a visit to their only surviving murals, 14th-century paintings adorning the walls and ceilings of the ancient *Göttweigerhofkapelle* chapel. The once dominant, medieval Gozzoburg Castle contains even older frescos from the 13th century, many of them documenting the local “zigzag” style. The line between art and landscape does indeed seem to blur in the Wachau. Other must-sees include the State Gallery of Lower Austria and Kunstmeile Krems, an “art mile” of local galleries and museums. Both broaden our experience of specific innovations in art and iconography: creations fuelled and inspired by the Danube river, its landscape and the many influences it facilitated.

Music, modernism and coffeehouse literature in the melting pot of a Danubian monarchy (Vienna, Austria)
 If we are to appreciate the tremendous cultural richness of

the Danube region, particularly its current and historical diversity and multi-culturalism, we first have to look at how this pluralism impacted artistic creativity and cultural expression. Though the impact of this multi-ethnic melting pot can be felt throughout the Danube Region, it is most apparent in Vienna.

For several hundred years, Vienna served as the capital of an empire that – even in decline and in the face of destructive national conflicts – acknowledged eleven different national languages in its army regiments. Long before the Habsburgs, medieval Vienna was home to not only a Jewish quarter, but also a Greek quarter, as well as a number of merchants and people of various ethnic backgrounds along the Danube, with some hailing from as far away as the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. It is hardly surprising that this multi-ethnic metropolis developed a unique dynamic all of its own, one that not only fascinated celebrities like Mark Twain, who visited the city in 1897, but also inspired and shaped the many different ways in which people in Vienna expressed themselves through culture, art, literature and music.

Novelists, journalists and exiled revolutionaries famously debated ideas and world views in the city’s many coffeehouses, which – particularly around the turn of the century – fuelled a rich literary tradition that also absorbed and processed psychoanalysis pioneer Sigmund Freud’s ground-breaking new insights into the human mind.



Schönbrunn Castle, Vienna

© KP Häusberg / fotostrassenfoto

Fields of study including depth psychology, analytic philosophy, and phenomenology all have their roots in the vibrant intellectual, multicultural climate of fin-de-siècle Vienna.

Artists of the Vienna Secession and the Wiener Werkstätte developed their own distinctive variations of Art Nouveau style, drawing inspiration not only from all over Europe, but also from the Far East.

Finally, the famous composers that gave the “world capital of classical music” its reputation were also influenced by encounters with the multi-ethnic musical tradition(s) of the Danube region: Ottoman influences resound in the Turkish marches of Mozart and Beethoven and even in Strauss’s celebrated “Radetzky March”, just as Slavic, Hungarian and Jewish musical idioms found their way into the opuses of Brahms and Mahler.

Vienna is still unrivalled when it comes to experiencing the cultural fruits of the Danube region’s multi-ethnic heritage.

The cultural legacy of Baroque-era generals, emperors and art collectors (Marchfeld Palaces, Austria)

The word “culture” applies to more than just what is expressed through music, art and literature. The term also encompasses distinct ways of life, customs and traditions that groups of people have developed to fit their circumstances in time, space and society. Indeed, the powerful Danube has affected more than just the fortunes of simple fishermen, boatmen, and others earning their livelihoods from the river landscape. The Baroque era also saw it used as the backdrop and centrepiece of a particular lifestyle of the era’s rich and famous.

Shaped by the rivers Danube and Morava (*March*), the Morava Field or *Marchfeld* region boasts a uniquely mixed landscape composed of heath, steppe and floodplain forests, which for centuries was considered a particularly attractive spot for the great hunts organised by Austrian and Hungarian nobility. The *Marchfeldschlösser* or Marchfeld Palaces are a bevy of castles that some of the region’s wealthiest noblemen and generals used as elaborate hunting lodges; some were purchased and extended by emperors and empresses.

One palace, Schloss Hof, was purchased by Prince Eugene of Savoy, the Habsburg Empire’s most important general and politician in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The prince conceived it as a model estate that both reflected contemporary ideas and techniques for cultivating the land and also showcased his enormous wealth and sophistication, as it housed parts of his legendary art collection. Another palace, Schloss Eckartsau, shows how the lifestyle associated with these grand, Baroque hunting estates evolved and continued into the early 20th century. Charles I, the last Austrian Emperor, took refuge here at the end of the First World War, retreating one last time into this secluded, feudal world for several months until he and his family were forced into exile in 1919. Schloss Marchegg exemplifies both the decay and ruin some of these beautiful palaces saw in the later decades of the 20th century, but also the possibility of rebirth through culture: the palace – thoroughly renovated and revitalized since 2020 – will host the Lower Austrian State Exhibition in 2022.

The Marchfeld Palaces are a unique, memorable destination. They are also one of the best possible places to experience the Baroque splendour of an aristocratic lifestyle directly shaped by the Danube.

Houses of God overlooking the Danube: Religious architecture, culture and identity (Pannonhalma-Esztergom Region, Hungary)

Culture and art along the Danube have often been closely tied to religion and questions of ethnic or national identity. It is important to look at these sometimes inspiring, sometimes problematic interdependencies, as they have integrally shaped the character and culture of Southeast Europe.

The northwestern Hungarian cities of Pannonhalma and Esztergom boast two magnificent religious structures. Both “houses of God” have dramatic locations overlooking the Danube; both have histories and architectures inextricably linked with the river. Pannonhalma Archabbey and Esztergom Basilica are deeply rooted in the medieval genesis of the Kingdom of Hungary and the history of Hungary’s conversion to Catholic Christianity around that same time – events that defined Hungarian culture and identity and were



impacted in turn by Hungary’s Eastern and Western connections through the river Danube. The two sites are charged with both religious significance and Hungarian national meaning.

Known for its magnificent Baroque architecture, Pannonhalma Archabbey, a Benedictine monastery, also features the Millennium Monument, one of seven monuments erected in 1896 to celebrate the millennium of the Magyars’ settlement in 896. The church in Esztergom was conceived as a national basilica for the “revived” Hungarian nation of the 1830s and 1840s; its neoclassical architecture and awe-inspiring dome project national pride and confidence. All of these make Pannonhalma and Esztergom exceptional places for travellers interested in the cultural significance of religious and national identity, which are so often intermingled in the Danube region.

An architecture of constant change: The monuments of fallen Danubian empires (Budapest, Hungary)

Power struggles and other historical winds along the Danube contributed to the rise and fall of several empires, most of them multinational. Like the general shift in social and economic circumstances along the river, these political transformations have also had an impact on art, everyday customs and the cultural heritage of people in the region. This is particularly evident when it comes to architecture, where the monuments of fallen empires stand as testament not only

to the ideologies and self-conception of these states, but also to the fact that the shared cultural experiences of Danubian Europe have proven far more robust and enduring than any political or military regime.

The city of Budapest is a wonderful place to engage with this phenomenon. First developed from not one, but two important trade centres connected by Danube ferries at the time of medieval Hungary (“Buda” and “Pest”), Budapest became first the seat of an Ottoman Pasha and provincial capital for 150 years of Ottoman Turkish rule, then a major administrative hub and royal seat at the heart of the multinational Habsburg Empire. It eventually was made capital of a multinational, later national Hungary, which for several decades fell under the Soviet sphere of influence (also called the Soviet Empire) until 1989.



Square of heroes Budapest

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Each of these changing empires has its architectural and cultural marks, legacies, and monuments in Budapest. From the northernmost holy site for Sunni Islam and the “oriental” architecture of its famous public baths (a legacy of Ottoman bathing culture), to the Belle Époque, historicist and Art Nouveau monuments of the Habsburg Empire, to the oppressive atmosphere of the Stalinváros (“Stalintown”) tenement buildings – Budapest is a call to ponder how the mighty rise and fall.

At the same time, the multicultural dynamics of the Habsburg Empire infused Budapest with a creative, intellectually fertile atmosphere similar to that of Vienna: ethnic elements in the music of composers Liszt, Bartók and Kodály not only heralded the Hungarian national awakening, they also epitomised the musical emancipation of contemporary composers across the entire Danube region. Likewise, the unique social and cultural dynamics of the late Habsburg Empire fed into the development of unique schools of philosophy and – especially – mathematics, giving rise to a rich cultural and intellectual legacy worth exploring.

Fin-de-Siècle, Art Nouveau and Jewish heritage in Danubian Europe (Oradea, Romania / Szeged, Hungary / Subotica, Serbia)

One important clue for understanding art and culture in Danubian Europe is the question as to how cultural inspirations and trends not only spread, but were interpreted and adapted to prevailing geographic, social and economical circumstances in different areas of the Danube region. A look at the Danube’s vast and varied cultural output suggests that communication about innovations was never one-way from “centre” to “periphery”; it was rather a complex series of interactions and exchange within a creative network wherein all participants influenced one other without becoming completely alike. This is particularly evident if we consider the way Art Nouveau architecture spread throughout the Danube region, resulting in different, regional styles that suited the social and economic circumstances at hand. A closer look at the cities of Oradea (Romania), Szeged (Hungary) and Subotica (Serbia) offers valuable insights into these different variations.

Art Nouveau and fin-de-siècle architecture entered the provinces of Transylvania, Pannonia and Vojvodina in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The architectural styles were regarded as an expression of cultural connections to global trends and technical innovations from the glittering metropolises of a multicultural Danube Empire and beyond, but they also showcased the wealth and taste of confident local elites who saw no reason why their prosperous cities should not both adopt these innovations and contribute to their evolution with distinct local styles.

Modern Oradea has its genesis in the 18th century, when the fortress town’s military legislature created exemptions to the anti-Jewish settlement laws found in most Habsburg towns and cities at that time. Persecution of Jews in Poland attracted (mostly poor) Jewish migrants to Oradea, where they filled a structural need for skilled traders and merchants, eventually forming a prosperous new economic elite. This new elite – still perceived as ethnically and religiously different from the old, established, Hungarian elite – embraced different, modern architectural trends for their family residences, often as an expression of their own wealth and cultural refinement. The trend led to the construction of a number of fine buildings in the classic and late Art Nouveau, Hungarian Secession and Jewish Modernist styles. As the city’s more traditional, non-Jewish elites maintained their influence and more conservative tastes, the public buildings erected in Oradea around the turn of the century favoured Historicism over Art Nouveau, creating structures more akin to the Imperial-era buildings along the Ringstrasse in Vienna.

Szeged began the 19th century as a typical, prosperous trade city with a largely Hungarian population and few ethnic minorities. When old Szeged was almost completely destroyed by the catastrophic Tisza river flood of 1878, wealthy Hungarian investors contributed heavily to a massive rebuilding programme. The investors harboured something of a liberal, progressive spirit and – once they had established themselves – brought Art Nouveau architecture to Szeged, but without feeling the need to distance themselves from the older Historicist style. This ethnically homogenous elite created public buildings and representative squares boasting magnificent examples of both Art Nouveau and Historicist structures, with



some featuring a mix of the two known as “fin-de-siècle” architecture.

Nineteenth-century Subotica was ethnically more diverse than either Oradea or Szeged, featuring no clear majority but a mix of ethnic groups including Hungarians, Serbs, Croats, Bunjevaci and Roma. Consequently, the *Gründerzeit* – or economic boom period in 19th-century Germany and Austria before the great stock market crash of 1873 – saw an ethnically-mixed Subotican elite commission buildings in the modern Art Nouveau style, many of which show ethnically-influenced forms and even colours.

A visit to the cities of Oradea, Szeged and Subotica allows travellers to understand not only why, when and how Art Nouveau reached this part of Danubian Europe, it also gives insight into three completely different circumstances, exposing them to various manifestations of this cultural style and often distinctly regional interpretations of it.

A “Gibraltar on the Danube”, an “Athens” of national liberal culture, a Serbian “Rome” (Novi Sad, Petrovaradin and Sremski Karlovci, Serbia)

Throughout the 19th century, Danubian art and culture developed in a field of tension between the conservative, imperial multinationalism of Austria-Hungary and the reformist liberal nationalism embraced by the merging bourgeoisies of most nations within the Habsburg Empire. Anyone wishing to understand their impact on culture would do well to visit Novi Sad, Petrovaradin and Sremski Karlovci in modern-day northwest Serbia. For more than two centuries, these three towns sat at the heart of “Austrian Serbia” between the Danube and Sava rivers; the area grew politically separate and culturally distinct from the first Ottoman-controlled, then semi-independent and eventually independent Principality and Kingdom of Serbia centred on Belgrade. Together, these three places represent three very different aspects of multinational imperialism, national liberalism and the conservative, national-religious power of the Orthodox Church, all of which shaped cultural developments in this part of Danubian Europe.

Conquered by Austrian forces under the command of Habsburg general Prince Eugene of Savoy in 1692 and 1716, Petrovaradin Fortress, nicknamed “Gibraltar on the Danube”, became the largest defensive structure along the military frontier. Controlled directly by the military rather than local civil authorities, its architecture is a testament to Imperial ambitions to dominance over the Danube, as it literally overshadows the civilian settlement on the other side of the river.

Historically situated opposite Petrovaradin on the other bank of Danube, Novi Sad was declared a “free royal city” and rapidly became the largest urban community of Serbs in the Habsburg Empire. Home to a civilian, liberal-national bourgeoisie, Novi Sad turned into a cultural and intellectual touchstone of the Serb nation – for a long time outshining anything Belgrade had to offer – earning it the moniker “Athens of the Serbs” in the 19th century. Indeed, the local Mat-

ica Srpska cultural club and library, which still exists today, played an important role in the codification of the written Serb / Serbo-Croat language under Austrian patronage.



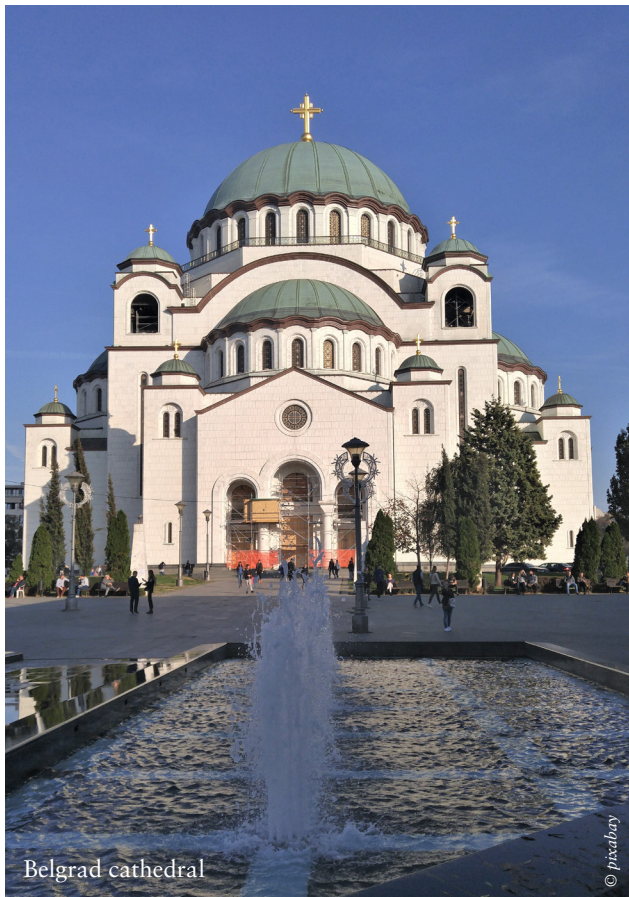
The nearby town of Sremski Karlovci is where the “Treaty of Karlowitz” sealed the Habsburg conquest of previously Ottoman-controlled territories along the Danube in 1699, but its significance goes far beyond that: Besides building a chapel on the spot where the historic agreement was negotiated, the Habsburgs also established Sremski Karlovci as the seat of an orthodox archdiocese. Hints of the dual role this archbishop held as both spiritual and political head of the Austrian Serbs can still be felt in the Baroque style atmosphere of the town’s church and cathedral district, but also with a look at the richly endowed Museum of the Serbian Orthodox Church, also called the Treasury, located in the summer residence of the Serbian Patriarch. Sremski Karlovci was regarded as the provincial “Rome” of Orthodox Serbs living in the Habsburg Monarchy.

Orient meets Occident: Cultural encounters between Grand Viziers, a Paris-style bohème and “Titoslovakia” (Belgrade, Serbia)

Scholars and historians often point to the significance of the river Danube as a connecting link between cultures – its role as a “bridge” between Orient and Occident, East and West.

Be it Latin-speaking Western Europe and the Greek-speaking East during the Middle Ages; the Catholic Habsburg Monarchy and a Muslim Ottoman Empire in the early modern period; or capitalist and communist spheres of influence in the second half of the last century. The river has always connected people and maintained everyday economic and cultural contact at some level, even in times of “Cold War” and “Iron Curtains”.

Located directly on the Danube, the easternmost stop on our cultural route is a place that served as precisely this kind of bridge for many centuries – a city that changed its primary affiliation so many times that it is impossible to call it either Western or Eastern per se: Belgrade.



Belgrad cathedral

© pixabay

While Ottoman *türbe* mausoleums in the city’s fortified Kalemegdan district make it easy to imagine when Belgrade was an important stronghold for the Empire’s Danube territories (the end of that reign is immortalised in the popular Austrian song “Prinz Eugen, der Edle Ritter”), the architecture of the city’s elegant, late 19th-century boulevards and bohemian Skadarlija quarter reflect the Kingdom of Yugoslavia’s strong cultural and political affinity to France and Western Europe in the 1920s, when Belgrade was known as the “Paris of the Balkans”. Also remarkable are the post-1946 buildings, monuments and museums built during the second Yugoslavia (also locally referred to as “Titoslavia”), which show a communist aesthetic marked by a distinct regional flair – a reflection of the state’s political and ideological attempt to find its place “between East and West” –, and the Temple of Saint Sava and the nearby Karadorde Monument (both substantially renovated between 2001 and 2019), which show the growing importance of Orthodox, Eastern cultural aspects for post-communist Serb identity.

All of this makes Belgrade a perfect place for travellers to immerse themselves in the cultural East-West dualism of Danubian Europe, which can just as easily be interpreted as a boon to or a handicap for cultural self-expression.

Back to where it all started: Folk culture and life with the river (Lonjsko Polje Nature Park, Croatia)

Returning to the dictionary definition of culture as “the way of life [...] of a particular group of people at a particular time”, it is worthwhile to imagine the immediate ways in which living with the Danube, a region once dominated by the river’s many tributaries and dense floodplain forests, impacted the everyday lives of villagers, fishermen and farmers and – in some cases – continues to do so today. There are a number of places along the Danube where this close connection between nature and culture can still be felt.

One of them is situated alongside one of the river Danube’s most important tributaries. The floodplains of the Sava river – particularly the alluvial forests, wetlands and pastures



Red deer Javna ustanova Park prirode Lonjsko Polje

© danubeparks

protected by the Lonjsko Polje National Park – offer a rare glimpse of unspoilt nature and wildlife, but also of the sturdy and beautiful Posavac horses traditionally bred in this region. The area features traditional villages with centuries-old, wooden houses raised on stilts, offering insight into the region’s lifestyle and traditional folk culture.

What better end to our trail than a look at where it all started, with authentic forms of everyday culture and architecture shaped by people living immediately by and with the river. Experience the rich culture along the Danube and its tributaries!

The journey back: Reflecting on aspects of Danubian culture(s) (Murska Sobota/ Lendava, Slovenia)

A journey back towards the northwest offers a chance to stop at Murska Sobota (Slovenia) and Lendava (Slovenia) – both wonderful places to reflect on the aspects of Danubian culture(s) we encountered on our trail. A user-directed app developed by our partners at the Jewish Heritage Route can guide visitors to sites that form the legacy of local Jewish communities, including a synagogue and an old Jewish cemetery in Lendava. Murska Sobota boasts several examples of Art Nouveau architecture along with a number of other impressive secular and ecclesiastical structures (Evangelical Church, Murska Sobota Castle, Rakičan Castle).

Visitors completing our trail come away with countless new experiences and ideas – an inspirational treasure trove that echoes that of the many merchants, missionaries, conquerors, artists and artisans, kings and migrants who travelled Danubian Europe in times past. To visit this unique river connecting East and West is to immerse oneself in untold cultural richness, wealth and diversity. May that experience be our own “cultural harvest”.



Castle Murska Sobota

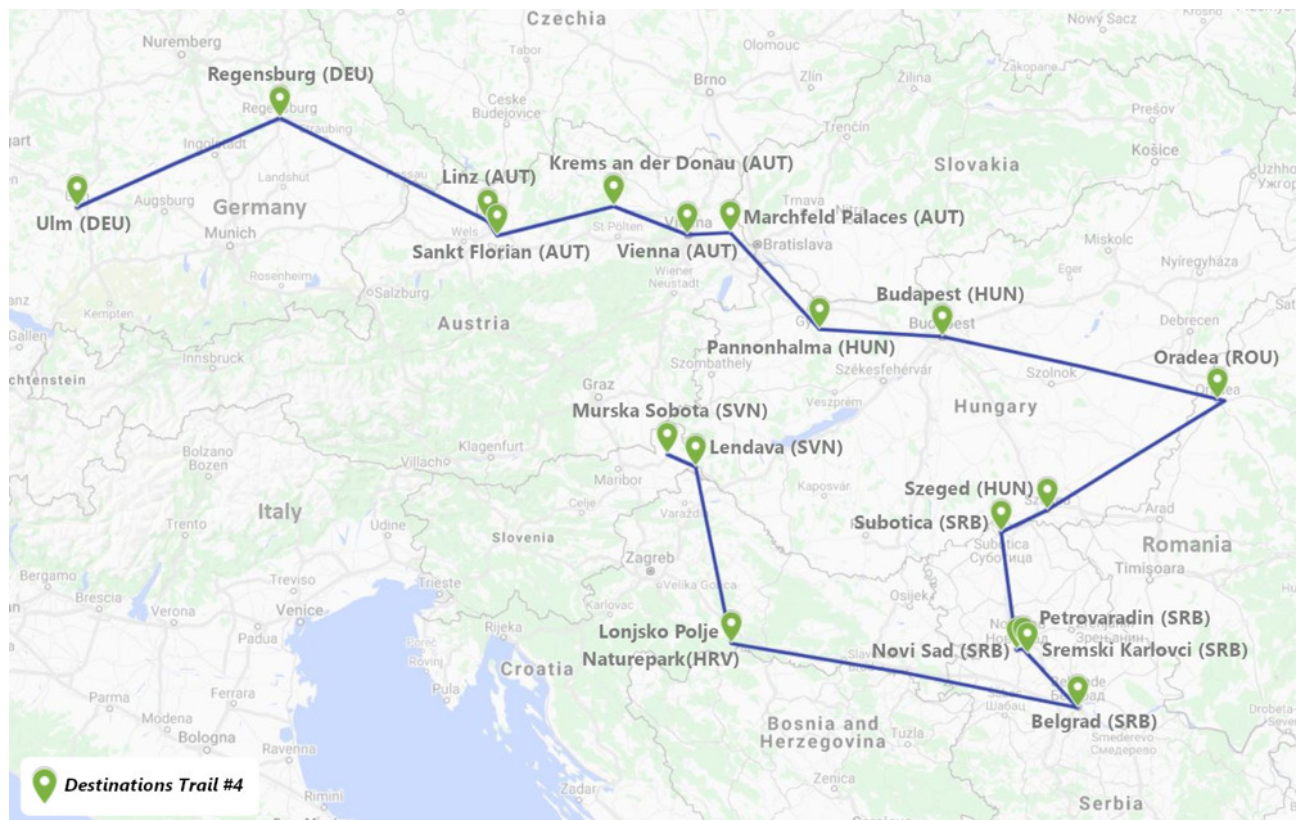
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Appendix

Trail destinations & points of interest

Our project partners suggested destinations for the route, which were then supplemented by the author’s own suggestions. The final list of selected destinations is marked in bold in the following list. All these cities represent several aspects of the present narrative.

The author suggests visiting additional points of interest along the route between the cities, since they illustrate certain thematic aspects of the trail. Some of them stand for lesser-known, hidden places that want to be discovered.



“KultUrsprünge” – Wellsprings of human culture (Ulm/Ach- and Lonetal valleys, Germany)

Exploring the “wellspring of culture”: ice-age caves and artefacts in the Ach- and Lonetal valleys

Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2017, the prehistoric caves of the Aichtal and Lonetal valleys came to scientific and public attention after ice-age art, musical instruments, and anthropomorphic sculptures were discovered in their walls. The artefacts are between 33,000 and 43,000 years old. Some, including the celebrated “Lion Man” sculpture, may be among the world’s oldest visual expressions of mysticism and perhaps animist religion.
Ideas for experiences: guided cave tours, hikes, museum visits (Urgeschichtliches Museum Blaubeuren / URMU museum of prehistory), workshops

Multiculturalism and art: Danube-Swabian Central Museum (DZM), Ulm

The Danube-Swabian Central Museum (DZM) sheds valuable light on the history and nearly-lost culture of these communities. Exhibits include ethnographic artefacts and recorded interviews, but also paintings and other artworks by artists with a Danube-Swabian background. A veritable treasure trove of culture in all its manifestations.

Ideas for experiences: A chance to meet Danube-Swabians, artist-led workshop, culinary experience with an opportunity to sample Danube-Swabian specialities

Experience culture as an expression of civic pride and wealth: Theater Ulm, Germany’s oldest existing municipal theatre

Guided tour of Theater Ulm, Germany’s oldest existing municipal theatre. See a performance (ideally a play that fits our theme).

The medieval cultural heritage of the Holy Roman (Danubian) Empire (Regensburg, Germany)

Witness the architecture of a medieval Danubian metropolis – Regensburg’s Old Town

Regensburg Cathedral, Stone Bridge, Old Town Hall and “Perpetual Diet”, medieval towers and squares ...

Explore the Jewish heritage of a medieval Danubian metropolis

Document Neupfarrplatz, gothic synagogue, Mikveh, “City Map: Jewish Heritage uncovered” by Jewish Heritage Route

Hear the musical legacy of a medieval Danubian metropolis

Regensburger Domspatzen, Tage Alter Musik old music festival, Cantabile Regensburg choir ensemble, etc. – concerts in the cathedral

Reinventing a Danubian city through art, culture and technology (Linz, Austria)

Experience the many faces of a changing city

Architectural vestiges of Linz’s various different “incarnations”: its Renaissance and Baroque Old Town, churches and former monasteries, maximilianic fortifications, VÖEST, Culture Mile along the Danube, Ars Electronica Center

The rebirth of a “dirty industrial town” through art and culture: the legacy of “Linz ’09”

Encounters with young artists and contemporary art ...

Culture and technology: experiencing innovation

Examples of the connection between cultural and technological innovation; Lentos Art Museum, Ars Electronica, Brucknerhaus, Musiktheater; meet with music students or the director of the Linz music university; concerts, etc...

The “dark side” of a cultural capital

“Hitler’s Linz”: Adolf Hitler’s project and attempt to create a city of mausoleums and museums through a Europe-wide programme of purchasing and stealing art. The project led, among other things, to cruel exploitation at the granite quarries of Mauthausen concentration camp.
Special guided tour that includes visits to the Brückenkopfgebäude bridgehead buildings, Nibelungen Bridge, “Hitlerbauten” residential buildings, etc.

River-inspired: The “Danube School” of Renaissance landscape painting (St. Florian Monastery and Krems, Austria)

St. Florian Monastery – explore “Danube School” painting with a special guided tour that includes a non-public art collection

Baroque architecture and art celebrating Habsburg conquests along the Danube; patronage of composer Anton Bruckner at the Monastery of the Canons Regular of St. Augustine’s Order; a look at the St. Florian Monastery art collection including illuminated manuscripts, an enormous Bible from the end of the 11th century, early 14th-century works by the so-called “St. Florian School” of painters (a group of artists credited with bringing pictorial innovations from the French and English courts to the East), and a vast collection of “Danube School” Renaissance paintings from the early 16th century, culminating in Albrecht Altdorfer’s monumental masterpiece: a commissioned cycle of paintings for the former Altar of Saint Sebastian.

Krems and the Wachau – see the landscape that inspired the Danube School and other Danube-related innovations in art and iconography

Breath-taking views of the nearby Wachau valley, murals by the French-inspired St. Florian School of painters in the 14th century (Göttweigerhofkapelle), medieval Gozzoburg castle with its Italian-inspired 13th-century frescos, State Gallery of Lower Austria and Kunstmeile Krems “Art Mile”.

Music, Modernism and coffeehouse literature in the melting pot of a Danubian monarchy (Vienna, Austria)

Delve into the world of Viennese coffeehouse culture with readings from literature, philosophy and psychology

Special readings from books and texts by Viennese novelists, poets, philosophers and psychologists, organised and held in the unique atmosphere of historic coffeehouses.

The world at home – at home in the world: explore the multicultural influences and innovations of Viennese Modernism and Art Nouveau

Combining visits to Vienna’s grand ethnographic collections (Weltmuseum, MAK) with other experiences related to Viennese art (MAK, Wiener Werkstätte, Secession, Belvedere, artists Schiele, Klimt, Otto Wagner, etc.

A new, more personal experience of the “musical capital of the world”

Not just with classical concerts at the Vienna State Opera etc., but also in private concerts, guided tours and personal talks with dramaturges and composers with expertise, insights and – occasionally – a humorous, personal touch to share.
A presentation of Danube-related songs and compositions including “The Blue Danube” and “Danube Mermaid” by Johann Strauss II, “Drunt in der Lobau” by Heinrich Strecker, Danube references in operettas such as “Countess Maritza”, “Drei von der Donau”, etc. Possible museums of interest: Haydnhaus, Mozarthaus, Beethoven Museum, Johann Strauss Apartment, Schönberg-Haus Mödling, Haus der Musik

The cultural legacy of Baroque-era generals, emperors and art collectors (Marchfeld Palaces, Austria)

Schloss Hof: Prince Eugene, Maria Theresia and the Splendour of a Danubian Baroque country manor

Schloss Hof: Explore various aspects of Baroque architecture and life, including the palace and its gardens, as well as a working manor farm, authentic cuisine in the kitchens, etc.

Waning days of a feudal world: Schloss Eckartsau as the hunting lodge of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and final refuge for Emperor Charles I (“The Last”) of Austria-Hungary

Eckartsau Palace: Site visits offer a vivid glimpse of everyday aristocratic life at that time, as the rooms have been kept exactly as they were left when the Imperial family departed for exile in 1918, including decorations from their last Christmas, etc.

Marchegg Palace: the changeable fate of a Marchfeld palace

Marchegg was founded as a medieval castle town by Ottokar II, King of Bohemia when Austria was part of Bohemia. Later, a Baroque residence of the aristocratic Salm and Pállfy families, the castle saw complete decline and near ruin in the 20th century. It was only recently renovated as part of preparations for the Lower Austria State Exhibition, which it is set to host in 2022.

Houses of God overlooking the Danube: Religious architecture, culture and identity (Pannonhalma–Esztergom Region, Hungary)

Exploring monastic tradition, Baroque splendour and wine culture: Pannonhalma Archabbey

Pannonhalma Archabbey: Baroque architecture in dramatic surroundings, library, wine cellar, St. Martin’s Basilica; the project partner Via Sancti Martini offers a special experience through wine tasting.

The spirit of 19th-century Hungarian Revivalism: Esztergom Basilica

Esztergom Basilica: a classicist “national basilica” built 1838–1846 on the site of an early capital of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary. The city was destroyed by Mongols in 1246. Experience the acoustics of this massive building through music, perhaps an organ concert?

An architecture of constant change: The monuments of fallen Danubian empires (Budapest, Hungary)

Delve into the legacy of an “Oriental” Danubian empire: Ottoman Budapest

Tomb of Gül Baba and Rózsadomb (Rose Hill), legacy of Bektashi philosophy, Ottoman bath culture, a visit to one of Budapest’s famed “Turkish Baths” ...

“Imperial” monuments and Hungarian cultural revival in Habsburg-ruled Budapest

Historicism and Art Nouveau architecture, Hungarian State Opera House, Royal Palace, Széchenyi Chain Bridge, the Gothic Revival architecture of the Hungarian Parliament Building, former Imperial Navy river gunboat SMS Leitha ...

Monumental architecture of the Communist Soviet Empire – “Stalintown”

Special guided tour of Stalinist architecture in the Dunaújváros (former “Stalinváros”) district

Experiencing a philosophy of change: Budapest schools of music, thought and mathematics

Meeting with university philosophers and mathematicians, visiting concerts, permanent exhibition at the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music (lisztmuseum.hu), the Zeneakadémia (kodaly.hu) museum, Bartók Emlékház ...

Fin-de-siècle, Art Nouveau and Jewish heritage in Danubian Europe (Oradea, Romania / Szeged, Hungary / Subotica, Serbia)

Oradea – Explore a blend of Art Nouveau and Jewish Heritage

Classic and late Art Nouveau (Apollo, Stern and Moskovits Mitza Palaces, Art Nouveau Museum)
 Hungarian Secession (Black Eagle Palace; distinctive Hungarian take on Art Nouveau with particular emphasis on Asian and Far-East inspiration)
 Jewish Modernism (Poynár House, Ullmann Palace) versus traditional, non-Jewish elites’ more conservative (“eclectic style”, not Art Nouveau) public buildings.
 (project partner: Art Nouveau European Route, Oradea)

Szeged – cultural innovation through a natural disaster, the “phoenix” of Art Nouveau

Magnificent fin-de-siècle architecture and impressive public squares (Széchenyi tér, Kárász utca, Klauzál tér, Dóm tér, magnificent buildings in Historicist and Art Nouveau styles)
 Expansive and beautiful religious structures: Votive Church, Church of St. Nicholas or Serbian Orthodox Church (18th century) and New Synagogue (fourth largest synagogue in the world, combining aspects of Historicism and Art Nouveau – “fin-de-siècle” style)
 (project partner: Art Nouveau European Route, Oradea)

Subotica – Art Nouveau in Serbia’s most multi-ethnic city

Synagogue, Catholic and Orthodox churches, but also public buildings (City Hall, historic theatre demolished in 2007 despite protests and rebuilt ...

A “Gibraltar on the Danube”, an “Athens” of national liberal culture, a Serbian “Rome” (Novi Sad, Petrovaradin and Sremski Karlovci, Serbia)

Exploring architectural manifestations of a Danubian empire – Petrovaradin Fortress

Guided tour of Petrovaradin’s underground tunnels and lunch / dinner at a fantastic fish restaurant overlooking the Danube.

A visit to the Danubian “Athens of Serbia” – Novi Sad

A look at Matica Srpska and a special presentation / guided tour on the codification of the written Serbian / Serbo-Croat language under Austrian patronage, along with the cultural importance of the Matica Srpska cultural club and library.

The cultural legacy of Austro-Serbian Orthodox archbishops – Sremski Karlovci

Special guided tours or other experiences at the Cathedral of St. Nicholas / Patriarchate Court.

Orient meets Occident: Cultural encounters between Grand Viziers, a Paris-style bohème and “Titoslavia” (Belgrade, Serbia)

A closer look at Belgrade’s Eastern architectural heritage

Ottoman Kalemegdan Fortress, Türbe of Ottoman provincial governors, references to siege and conquest by Prince Eugene, medieval Orthodox Saint Petka Church, modern Serbian Orthodox Temple of Saint Sava and other monuments reflecting a Soviet cultural and political orientation – best experienced with a special guided tour?

A closer look at Belgrade’s Western architectural heritage

Sculptures by Ivan Meštrović at the Kalemegdan Fortress and 19th-century boulevards and public buildings, “Paris of the Balkans”, Skadarlija.

The “third way”: cultural echoes of the second Yugoslavia and its “bloc-free” ambitions between East and West

Museum of Yugoslavia and Tito Mausoleum

Belgrade musical heritage between “East” and “West”

Serbian National Theatre, Madlenianum Opera and Theatre with ballet ensemble, Balkan pop phenomenon / Balkan disco – best experienced by visiting performances, concerts, etc.

Belgrade cuisine between East and West

Special lunch / dinner in Skadarlija

Back to where it all started: Folk culture and life with the river (Lonjsko Polje Nature Park, Croatia)

**Riverside life and folk culture –
the traditional villages Krapje and
Čigoč**

200-year-old wooden houses with beautiful carvings, raised on stilts on account of flooding. Experience the traditional music and food of riverside communities. If possible, meet with fishermen or boatmen whose lives are closely entwined with the river and hear their stories.

The journey back: Reflecting on aspects of Danubian culture(s) (Murska Sobota, Slovenia / Lendava, Slovenia)

**User-guided app developed by the
Jewish Heritage Route exploring
the legacy of local Jewish commu-
nities**

Lendava Synagogue and old Jewish cemetery; Art Nouveau architecture in Subotica; Evangelical Church, Murska Sobota Castle, Rakičan Castle

About the author

Andreas Rathberger-Reiter



Dr. Andreas Rathberger-Reiter studied history at the Universities of Vienna, Swansea and Jerusalem from 2001-2013 with a special focus on Eastern and Southeastern European history. After completing his doctorate, he switched from academia to tourism and has since worked for Reise-paradies Kastler GmbH, where he is responsible for historical and cultural-historical study tours, as well as for trips to Southeastern Europe and the British Isles. For him, dealing with history and traveling are two great passions, which can be wonderfully combined especially in the Danube region with its fascinating multicultural, multiethnic history.



Danube Trade:

The exchange of stories and goods

(by Jörg Zenker, coordinator / copywriter)

Summary

Danube trade: the exchange of goods and stories

Apart from military and religious movements, eventually followed by tourism, the Danube region has always attracted – and been dynamised by – trade. Trade has inspired the cultural and regional exchange of goods and people in the Danube region: raw materials have been exploited or processed there, markets developed, businesses founded, and people brought together ... The Danube is one of Europe's oldest trade routes, providing ample material for cross-border stories, encounters and experiences. Merchant families have expanded across countries through marriage and business relations; trading practices, currencies, payment systems, and even culinary specialities have spread in the region through trade. But the Danube has also seen the darker sides of trade – namely in the form of human trafficking, drugs, prostitution, and organised crime. The Danube writes countless stories. These include the shrewdness, rapacity, smuggling, and of course the honourable trade in the Alemannic source area of the river; a “live-and-let-live” philosophy in the Catholic/Baroque Bavarian-Austrian region of the Danube; and the bazaar mentality that still characterises trade in the Balkans and fascinates tourists.

Merchants have brought cultures together and have had a formative influence on them. Families – many Jewish families, too – have acted as patrons of arts and culture and have built impressive private and commercial buildings for many generations. Along the Danube, you will come across stories about merchant dynasties of the Buddenbrooks type. However, some of the most fascinating and most dramatic family stories were written not by trade, but by love, separation, success and failure.

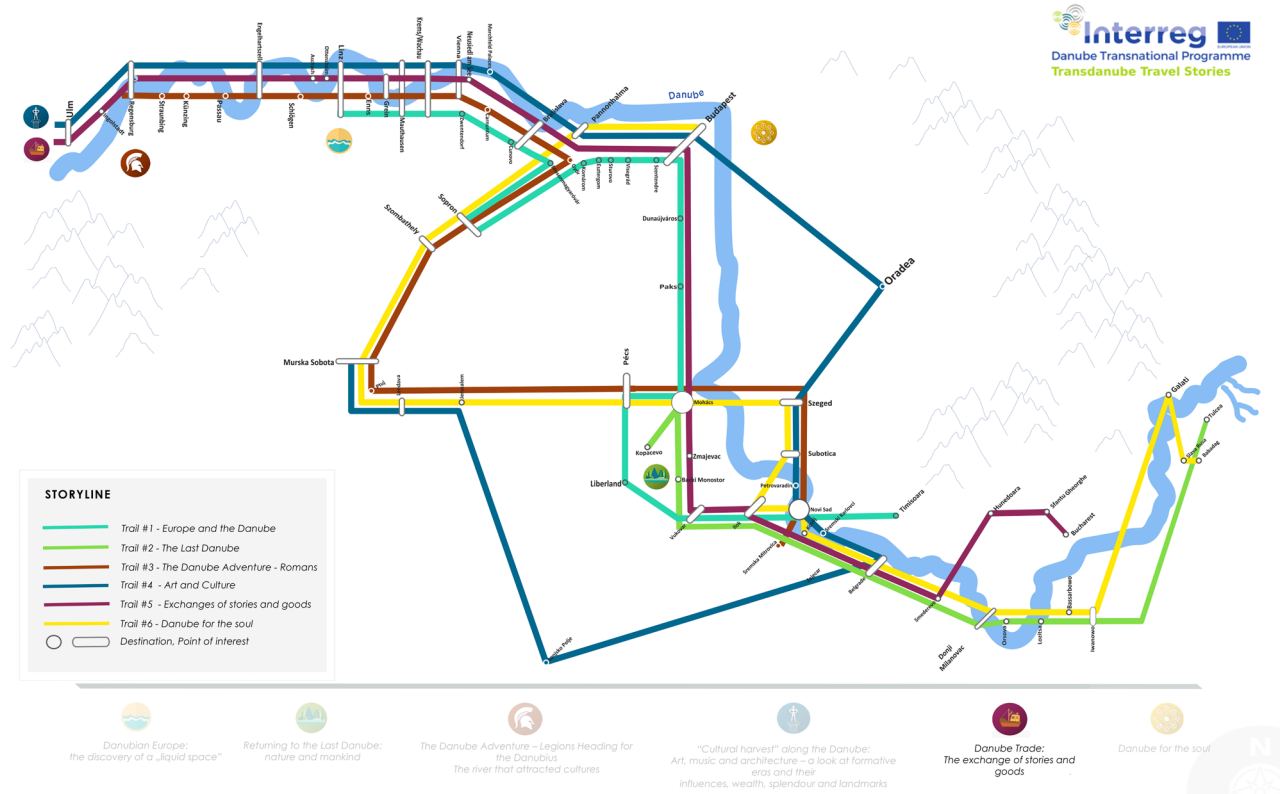
Today, the first steps of business are increasingly made in digital form. In the old days, on the other hand, business relations were primarily established through charm, esprit, cultural and ethnic exchange, or simply through the magic of wealth. Trade also took the shape of meetings and gatherings



Danube specialities at the international Danube Festival in Ulm

at markets, celebrations of culinary and cultural traditions, and political conventions like the Perpetual Diet of Regensburg or the Vienna Congress. Businessmen were always present at such events to establish relationships or fathom their options for new markets.

Summary written by Georg Steiner



Geographical scope

Trail #5 is one of six interconnected, themed routes in the Transdanube Travel Stories project. Each route follows a specific section of the Danube. Trail #5 encompasses a long section of the river including destinations and points of interest in Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia and Romania.

The Danube is one of the oldest trade routes in Europe. As early as the Dark Ages, traders used rafts to convey furs and other goods to faraway places. The Romans regarded the Danube as a "wet limes" marking the boundary of their empire to the north, but also as a channel for commerce.



Traditional „Ulmer Schachtel“ on the Danube

© Donatbairo Ulm/Neu-Ulm

Danube Trade: The exchange of stories and goods

A story fit for a storyboard

New routes mean new approaches. While there is little sense in reinventing the wheel, it is possible to change it a little, bend it into a new shape. Our Danube project is similar in that sense: while we cannot force it in an entirely new direction, we can shift perception of it, or find ways to shed light on its tremendous historical significance. This route looks at the merchants who travelled the Danube throughout centuries.

Merchants have traditionally known a great deal more about distant cultures and countries than other professions, particularly merchants of the past. Earlier times saw large groups flocked together in taverns, listening to incredible new tales of other lands and customs, most of them told by a trader. Ulm, where our trail begins, was home to some 21 guilds in the Middle Ages. The largest of them was the merchant guild. These were rich men, of course, but they could also boast another kind of wealth: that of worldly experience. Merchants and tradesmen also gathered in other at cities along the trail including Regensburg, Budapest, and Bucharest. The diversity of cultures along the river's shores makes the Danube region an especially rich one for stories. Modern-day travellers also want to hear those tales; in that sense, they are not so different from the travellers and tavern-goers of bygone times.

Profit-seeking

How much might an 18th-century merchant stand to profit, for example, if he had purchased wine in Smederevo to sell at the well-known wine market in Ulm? While closing the sale he might have told the purchaser about Smederevska Jesen, the famous wine festival, as a way to promote his product, reinforce his relationships and perhaps even eventually raise his prices – a “win” in more ways than one. Profits have a ripple effect, affecting nearly everyone and everything around. The effect is there even when the only real benefit is a good experience, as we expect to have with our trip. Sustainable thinking is the wave of the future. How can we travel in a way that leaves no traces? How can we benefit from something and give back at the same time? This kind of thinking goes beyond the profit-centric “art of the deal” to focus on intercultural exchange.

Merchants in the Danube region obviously had ample opportunities to broaden their horizons, as their movement from country to country, city to city shows. Another fascinating aspect is the Ottoman-influenced bargain culture seen mostly in the Balkan Peninsula, which stands in contrast to the more fixed-price culture found on the western section of the river.



Wine, an important commodity

While markets named after their historical focus (e. g. pig market, fish market, thread market) appear in communities from Regensburg to Linz, cities such as Sfântu Gheorghe in the east feature vestiges of the traditional bazaar. Historically, the goods sold at these locations varied not only by the region, but also according to the trade routes to which they were connected (Prague, Venice, etc.). Two goods in particular – wine and iron – appear nearly everywhere along the route, as does steel as we approach the modern era. But this is also a story of salt, snails, slaves, soldiers, clothes, grain, and more.

Trendsetters

Trends usually revolve around novelty and products. In that respect, merchants have not only been innovators, but also a source of new ideas and fresh inspiration. Have a look at where some of the world's best-known inventions saw the



light of day, including Budapest, birthplace of the Rubik's Cube. Trace the path the product took to Germany (though this particular modern commodity was not ferried along the Danube.)

"We crave for new sensations but soon become indifferent to them. The wonders of yesterday are today common occurrences."

Nikola Tesla

Role in heydays and decline

Every city has its heyday and low point, and these often go hand in hand with the ups and downs of commerce. Ulm enjoyed particular prosperity in the 14th century, when medieval consumers craved its reputable, high-quality products. Similarly, steel production in Smederevo brought an influx of people to the city, making it an important Danube port.

Dynasties

"A person should always teach his son a clean and easy trade, and pray to the One to Whom wealth and property belong, as there is no trade that does not include both poverty and wealth."

Jewish proverb

Jewish communities faced legal restrictions and hostilities that made a strong international network all the more imperative. Many of these families have branches in a number of metropolises along trade routes. The Kiechels in Ulm, the Runtingers in Regensburg ... every one of these cities is home to a number of families that have traded goods for centuries, from generation to generation.

One obvious way of connecting cities and conveying their history of trade is to tell the story of one of these merchant dynasties. There are of course drawbacks to that approach: something that might seem easy to convey to a tourist might be hard to find in reality. Even if we were to pinpoint a family that was as widely ramified as required in our case, it would be like finding a needle in a haystack. Especially as we would want to cover as many eras as possible.

This is where a bit of creativity could come in. Tourists could be introduced to a fictional family whose life and fate would be entirely plausible in real life. This would be a family that never produced famous people, but whose members bore witness to every important event in our cities. This kind of creative dodge could simultaneously offer a glimpse of real life in different periods.

It's a never-ending narrative incorporating one of the main tenets of Hollywood magic: an event that is not true, but might as well be or is even better than true. This kind of historical fiction is also the stuff of a number of legendary novels, including "Buddenbrooks", Thomas Mann's masterpiece chronicling the decline of four generations of a wealthy merchant family from 1835 to 1877. The acclaimed publication won its author the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1929. Imagine beginning the route with the story of a family that lived in the Danube region. To start with, we would need a family name. If a solo traveller or family is doing the tour, the story could even adopt their last name. An individualised approach might increase the appeal. Genealogy is fascinating, even when the family is fictional. Like any good theatre play, the important thing is to simply inhabit a situation, a stage, sometimes just a feeling. Artistic license guides the rest. What is crucial is that the name and family story are the only fictional elements of the information along the trail. The fic-

tion should serve to illuminate genuine, lived history. What follows is a brief attempt at such a story: public domain

Merchant Johann Leberecht “Steiner” (surname can be changed) was born in 1829 and died in 1902. The history of his family can be traced as far back as the 12th century and is documented in a number of papers, receipts, diaries, and parish registers. Johann himself penned a four-volume chronicle of the Steiner family history, complete with a meticulous index that makes it easy to identify every city and location along the trail. Originally from Wessobrunn, Bavaria, the Steiners enjoyed a brisk business trading a variety of different goods including wine, salt, and – for a short time – even pianos.



Merchant Johann Leberecht

Johann’s death in 1902 did not mark the end of the Steiner story. His descendants – though decidedly less prosperous in recent decades – can be found all over the region.

That was the introduction, to (possibly) be continued. Individual fictional family members could give accounts of history from their individual points of view, but we do not actually need a long story; only a few short “bites” to pique travellers’ interest.

Another opener could be the following (italic font to indicate fiction): *Elisabeth Steiner, a niece of Johann L., fell in love with a Jewish merchant from Pest. Though the couple faced many obstacles, they eventually married in 1875. Elisabeth moved to Hungary ...*

This fictional tidbit would be followed by facts: Jews comprised nearly 60 percent of all Hungarian merchants in the second half of the 19th century, and it was many years before they could enjoy the same rights as Christian Hungarians. Though a number of important institutions resisted this lifting of legal restrictions – including the Catholic Church – the community’s sterling reputation as traders and a belief that they would eventually make the country more wealthy contributed to their acceptance.

Many Jewish sites can still be found in Budapest today, among them Nagy Zsinagóga, the largest synagogue in Europe. Located in Dohány Utca (Tobacco Street), it also called the “Tobacco Temple”. That same building complex also includes the Magyar Zsidó Múzeum (Hungarian Jewish Museum), built where Zionist movement founder Theodor Herzl’s parental home once stood. And so on ...

Visitors are given a glimpse of Jewish history, the trading tradition, the problems and joys of life. They have the option of delving deeper into the topic (e. g. by visiting the museum), immersing themselves in the Jewish way of life (e. g. in the synagogue) or taking a walk back in time (e. g. with a stroll down Tobacco Street). They are given the opportunity to be part of the narrative with each city, era and location they visit.

This family produced all kinds of characters: from scammers and inventors to scoundrels, heroes and humbler types, so the story is always colourful and partners at the particular points of interest have room to be creative. There are a number of easy ways to link that fictional family with experiences or particular institutions.

Money, money, money

The sole purpose of trade is profit. The profit margins for trade could be remarkably high, particularly for those who



bought in Bucharest and sold in Ingolstadt, for example. This profit motive is a crucial part of the story and should always be kept in mind.

This particular section – as one might guess from its rather musical heading – is focused on the hard currency itself. Money, money, money changed hands a number of times en route from A to B or B to A, and the coins jangling in pockets were not always what one might expect. While currencies always varied from era to era, country to country, different coins were used even within a country, especially within what is now Germany. A trip from Ulm to Ingolstadt in the 17th century would also have been a journey through many different territories, each with their own coinage. Coins are a fascinating part of the story and help shift perception, allowing visitors to see the area in a new light.

One famous example is the Guldenthaler of Ulm, minted in 1704. French and Bavarian troops besieged the city during the War of the Spanish Succession. In April 1704, the conquering commander demanded at first 265,106 Gulden, then another 150,000 just seven days later. The demand had to be met by the 25th of April. Should the citizens refuse to pay, the troops would sack the city of Ulm. Ulmers ultimately prevented destruction by hastily melting all the silver they could find. This so-called “siege coinage”, used as a kind of emergency currency, is notable for its distinct square shape along with the desperate inscription *DA PACEM NOBIS DOMINE 1704* (“Oh Lord, give us peace,” 1704). An inscription on the reverse tells us the coin’s origin – *MONETE ARGENT REI P(ublicae) ULMENSIS* (Silver Money of the Free Imperial City of Ulm –), pictured along with the city’s coat of arms. This is only one example of different currencies circulating within a single city. There are many more historical examples.

Each of the three German cities mentioned above had its own minted currency at some point in history. The fact that Ulm had so many different coins (and even a bill) is a hopeful sign that we might find a sufficient number of other interesting currencies at different points along the trail. No problem if not – our main focus here is facilitating a kind of time travel, something that is also possible with more easily attainable money from another time period.



How might we benefit from the intrinsic fascination with money, this love of the numismatic? We hand it directly to visitors! One could imagine a purse filled with reproductions of various coins, a helpful app or even a simple sheet of paper with pictures of coins.

Those coins can tell stories, as we saw with the square Guldenthaler, but they can also be used to *buy* stories at the various points of interest in Danube cities. Much like the fictional family narrative, this currency works as a means of capturing travellers’ attention. The purse is akin to a time machine; the coins are like buttons taking you to the year inscribed on their surfaces.

While every city would of course require its own purse, its contents point beyond just the city and its bygone currencies. We should always encourage visitors to move further, whet their appetite for the next station on the trail, create a spark of curiosity and fan the flames.

The more cross-reference between the stations, the better. An example would be if the traveller – let’s say the new merchant – were also able to find one coin from another city, perhaps the next city on the trail. If the concept appeals to that particular visitor, then their journey will continue.

Go with the (cash)flow – purchase possibilities

The narrative provides a number of options for spending money from the purse. The story continues as soon as the visitor sets foot at the destination. It would open with a connection to the fictional merchant family, followed by a glimpse of the location's trade history. An example would be a photo station at what was once a significant marketplace, perhaps with a backdrop that shows the area in its heyday. Visitors can pull out their phones and shoot a selfie of themselves standing at that same spot 150 years ago. Beside them is a black-bearded man attempting to sell them a recalcitrant pig. This is one idea of the kind of experience we are looking for. Here is another: a visitor notices an 1850 coin in their purse, one connected to a specific point of interest. What real value did a guilder have in the mid-19th century? While it's difficult to convert to euros or other contemporary currencies, various charts estimate a guilder's buying power to be between 12 and 15 euros, depending on what you aim to buy. Other interesting topics include the average income at a specific place and point in history. We should note here that the coin should only serve to arouse interest and encourage visitors to explore on their own, as too many facts can be overwhelming. The draw of this trail will be its ability to be both engaging and informative at the same time, appealing to the visitors' need for action, experience, and intuitive exploration.

The sheets of paper (or app) present three options for spending the money: A, B, or C. It's up to the institution behind the point of interest to fill in the content for those three options. A guilder, for example, can be used to buy A) two chickens (1 chicken = 24 Kreuzer, 1 guilder = 60 Kreuzer in southern Germany at that time, so someone who drives a hard bargain could afford up to three chickens); B) 60 eggs; or C) a trip to a nearby restaurant for good food and drink. The game might go on to explain the positive or negative impact of your purchase. What's important here is the new dimension that the coin opens, along with the real purpose of it: buying power.

“A person should always divide his money into three: one third in land, one third in commerce, and one third at hand.”
 Jewish proverb



Conclusion:

A purse filled with old coins and currencies lends itself to a number of different narrative approaches to trade, era and history. One could even explore the Roman Empire if the money is virtual (i. e. on the mentioned app), true to the saying *PECUNIA NON OLET* (Money does not stink).

“If I had Strasburg's arms, Augsburg's charms, Nuremberg's esprit, Venice's mastery and Ulm's money, I would be the wealthiest man in the world.”

15th-century saying

Zest for life

Other vital aspects of Trail #5 include its festive tradition and overall exuberant zest for life. One of the three options for spending money might be a visit to a local, season-appropriate festival. Festivals are closely tied to trade and should definitely be included on this route.

The Perpetual Diets convening in Regensburg – with one session in Ulm and one in Bratislava – attracted merchants from all over, and the atmosphere of these could easily be described as festival-like in medieval times. Interesting sights in



Regensburg include the former assembly hall of the Perpetual Diet of Regensburg, but the route also covers a number of village folk- and wine festivals along the way. Examples include the Volksfest in Neu-Ulm, the Urfahrner Markt fairground in Linz, the Donaufestival (Danube Festival) in Krems, the annual Busójárás celebration in the town of Mohács or the yearly Gator Fest in Zmajevac. Why not immerse oneself in a festival, past or present? How much was a ticket 100 years ago, and what attractions did it have in store?

Forging links

This connection to the next city on the trail would ideally be more than our foreign coin. In the best case, we could incorporate a real story from the actual history books. As mentioned, iron works can be found all along our route. Philipp Jacob Wieland – founder of Wieland-Werke AG, now a multinational market leader in semi-finished metals with branches on most continents – began his career as a humble bell founder. As a travelling apprentice on his three-year-and-one-day journeyman period from 1817 to 1820, he resolved to visit every important bell foundry in Europe. He travelled on foot from Ulm via Linz and Bratislava to Ofen (German: Buda; now Budapest), where he stayed to study under a bell founder by the name of Müllner for four weeks. Wieland's fascinating travelogue "Ich sehnte mich danach, die Welt zu sehen" ("I Longed to See the World") gives a vivid first-hand account of the "Sau Winckel", a dance fest celebrated by the people of Ofen and Pest. As he notes in his description of the two villages in 1817, "Ofen also has beautiful nature and warm baths (...) Pest is very lively, a gathering place for many different nations, but very muddy." (p. 44)

Stories like these – of people with humble beginnings who eventually became some of Ulm's most prosperous, highly taxed citizens – are in themselves fascinating, and a closer look at these wandering apprentices is always worthwhile. They aren't just a historical phenomenon, either. Some 2,000 apprentices journeyed as the COVID-19 pandemic hit, with many travelling far beyond Europe in their three years of work and study. So where do they go and where do they stay along the way, what are their customs? How do they describe other parts of the world, how do they envision their future?

These black-clad travellers can still be seen wearing loose ribbon ties – the colour of which indicates their profession – and the guild mark on their belts. Historically, their coin purses looked a bit like ours as we follow the trail: filled with a multitude of local currencies.

The connecting link between places is usually not hard to find. After all, exchange is a definitive trait of all trading cities. Take, for example, an event just before the turn of the millennium: the traditional, once grand but later unfortunately dilapidated Café Gerbeaud at Vörösmarty tér 7 in Budapest has reopened after extensive renovation, its splendour restored. Renowned for its Rococo-style ceiling stucco, glistening chandeliers and fine wood furniture, the coffeehouse has been at the pulsating centre of the city since 1870. Hungarian Romantic composer Franz Liszt sipped coffee in its walls, as did Empress Elisabeth of Austria, Queen of Hungary.

Café Gerbeaud founder Henrik Kugler's travels as a confectioner journeyman took him to eleven European capitals. After years under the stewardship of Kugler and his successor Émile Gerbeaud, the coffeehouse was nationalised in 1948. Then, in 1995, a hairdresser from Ulm bought the crumbling coffeehouse and restored it to its former glory. Admittedly, Erwin Franz Müller's days as a practicing hairdresser were long behind him: "Drogerie Müller", the billionaire entrepreneur's eponymous drugstore chain, is one of the most important in Europe. The Müller success story has close ties to the Danube region. As of 2019, the chain had 87 stores in Austria, 83 in Croatia, 38 in Hungary and 18 in Slovenia. But it all started in 1953, with a hairdresser in Ulm opening a business.

On September 3, 1991, the company's founder fulfilled a long-awaited dream: an impressive Müller department store opened in Ulm's Hirschstrasse, one of the busiest pedestrian zones in Baden-Württemberg, Germany. Seven years later, on October 16, 1998, in Budapest, Müller celebrated 140 years of Café Gerbeaud. He had just managed to reopen the illustrious Hungarian institution. Six weeks later, he was awarded the "Golden Sugar Loaf" in Frankfurt, the food industry equivalent of an Oscar. Müller's empire is one of the top employers in Austria and is widely regarded as one of the most



family-friendly companies. In 2018, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz distinguished the company founder with the Great Silver Medal of Honour for Services to the Republic of Austria, one of the country's highest awards. Müller also owns Kozmo, a Croatian grocery retailer. A visitor stands in front of one of Müller's stores – perhaps in front of the entrepreneur's much-yearned-for department store in Ulm – and pulls a 500-D-Mark note from his or her (possibly virtual) purse. In 1998, when the coffeehouse opened in Budapest, it was the second largest banknote in Germany. Depending on the story and its associated links, that visitor might work out how many kilos of roasted coffee they could buy in the department store. A pound cost 7.52 D-Marks at the time.

But the note itself also has a story to tell. Take a closer look at the bill! The man with the fur collar and pageboy haircut is not Gérard Depardieu. He, too, is from Ulm – a man by the name of Hans Maler zu Schwaz. Or so one assumes from the image seen here: a portrait painted by Maler himself.

A signature indicates that Maler was born around 1488 in Ulm. He was court portraitist to the Kaiser in Innsbruck and died in Schwaz, Austria, sometime around 1526. A visitor might pass the city on their travels through the Danube countries. Though the portraitist of course rendered the Habsburgs (three paintings of King Ferdinand I, four of Anna of Bohemia and Hungary, ...), he also painted a number of merchants, especially and including the upper-bourgeois Fugger family. His paintings are also featured in the Louvre.

The dark side of commerce between the Black Sea and the Black Forest

There are, of course, many ways to view trade through a more critical lens, and it is high time we did. Where Danubian waterways once saw slaves conveyed from one end to the other, the modern equivalent is prostitutes – including many human trafficking victims. More than 90 percent of the women in German brothels are actually from Romania, and this type of trafficking should be included in the debate as well. One of the fundamental tenets of trade consists in the win-win situation facilitated by the exchange of goods and currency. But where do these “commodities” come from, where do they go? Few bother to ask. And yet the closer we

look at this particular kind of story, the more concerning it gets. So maybe the euro, the forint or the leu in our purse are the currencies we focus on the most. While there *is* a chance of change in the present, the story of human trafficking could also be told through historical events. One dark Danube tale from the Roman Empire is its enslavement and sale of Thracians to richer provinces. Another 19th-century story involves the sale of prisoners to benefit Franz Ludwig Schenk von Castell, a wealthy Swiss nobleman near Ulm. The so-called “Malefizschenk von Oberdischingen” built his own penitentiary and profitably populated it with prisoners from all over southern Germany and Switzerland – this is yet another business model where the suffering of human beings has lapsed into obscurity. So, there are enough stories, both frequently-told and other, forgotten ones. All are true, none is all black or entirely white. Let's tell them!

Narrative elements of the story

- Genealogy – intriguing, even if it is fictional
- Numismatics – fascinating facts about various currencies
- Dealing – compare prices and goods throughout history
- Love and fear – your fictional family suffers, but also enjoys life
- Cultures – connect with unfamiliar mentalities and customs
- Indulgence – eat and drink, but also learn
- Critical thinking – insight into the darker sides of commerce (slaves, fraud, ...)

Conclusion

Each of the stories visitors are presented with on the trail should catch their attention, engage them at the emotional level. Each of them should spark a desire to travel to places on the route, but they should also be customisable to wherever the interested travellers find themselves, if this is the only stop on their journey. The Danube region with its diverse trade routes is a wonderful setting for this kind of story-rich experience.

We need new ideas, new approaches, new courage!
“I don't care that they stole my idea. I care that they don't have any of their own.”
 Nikola Tesla

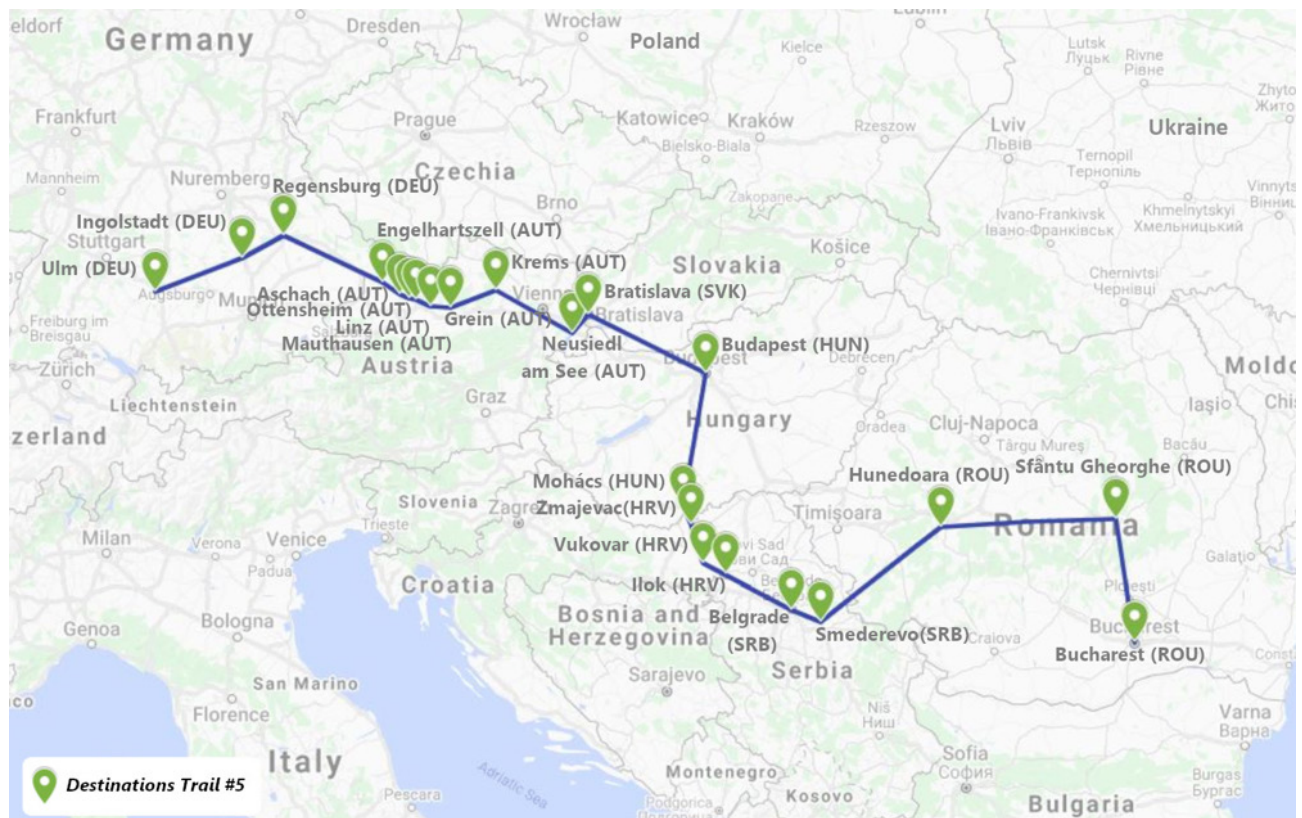
Appendix

Trail destinations & points of interest

Our project partners suggested destinations for the route, which were then supplemented by the author's own suggestions. The final list of selected destinations is marked in bold in the following list. All these cities represent several aspects of the present narrative.

The author suggests visiting additional points of interest along the route between the cities, since they illustrate certain thematic aspects of the trail. Some of them stand for lesser-known, hidden places that want to be discovered.

- Germany: **Ulm, Ingolstadt, Regensburg**
- Austria: **Engelhartszell, Aschach, Ottensheim, Linz, Mauthausen, Grein, Krets, Neusiedel**
- Slovakia: **Bratislava**
- Hungary: **Budapest, Mohács**
- Croatia: **Zmajevac, Vukovar, Ilok**
- Serbia: **Belgrad, Smederevo**
- Romania: **Hunedoara, Bucharest, Sfântu Gheorghe**





Ulm

The historic town hall: long before its current purpose, the Renaissance-era building was a market and meeting place for traders. Butchers peddled their cuts in an eight-metres-tall market hall.

Ulm's squares retain the flair of their lively former marketplaces. A few still bear the original name. One example is the Weinhof: once the largest wine market in Swabia, it now sees the annual Schwörrede, a ceremonial speech and public accounting by the mayor on the balcony of the Schwörhaus (Oath House).

The Schwörrede is a festive, tradition-steeped occasion that citizens of Ulm treat as a holiday. Another age-old event known as the Fischerstechen ("fishermen's joust") has been held every four years since the 15th century. The joust has entertained many a historical ruler, some of whom wrote vivid accounts of the event.

The area's brisk trade is as far-ranging and diverse as it was when the merchants' guild was the largest of Ulm's 21 guilds. The Wieland-Werke, to name just one example, is the largest manufacturer of semi-finished metals in the world.

Ingolstadt

Today's fifth-largest Bavarian city is home to Bavaria's oldest university. Rich in student joie de vivre and home to a number of well-regarded restaurants, it also boasts a lively theatre scene.

Visitors interested in Ingolstadt's rich Danube trade history should certainly pop into the Stadtmuseum (City Museum), but also the Spielzeugmuseum (Toy Museum). The interactive children's museum highlights an interesting collection of toys but also sheds light on the trade of that particular commodity.

The Audi factory is the current driving force of the economy and underscores Ingolstadt's success in shifting waterway-based trade to the road.

The Audi Museum Mobile offers insights into that development.

Regensburg

The city boasting Germany's most picturesque Danube bridge – a stone crossing over which traders pushed their goods-laden carts as early as the Middle Ages – had its own mint early on.

Famed 17th-century astronomer Johannes Kepler links it to Ulm, the city we just mentioned. Ulm features the so-called Kepler kettle, a cauldron-like boiler Kepler cast to aid in measurements and calibrations. The caldron gave merchants and buyers a standardised way to measure their goods. The Regensburg house where Kepler died is also still there, along with a vivid account of his life. We'll be hearing from him again when we get to Linz.

Merchants flocked to the city during the Perpetual Diet, a veritable who's-who of 17th century European life.

Regensburg also marks the end of the historic Bavarian Iron Route, a onetime major transport channel that links numerous industrial and cultural monuments in Bavaria. It was along this route that metals and semi-finished products from the Upper Palatinate were conveyed to Regensburg.

Linz

Markets are also fairs, which generate sales but also fun and thrills. The most popular in Linz is the Urfahrner Markt, a biannual fair featuring rides, firework shows and a number of other attractions.

Passionate shoppers should head to the Linzer Landstrasse, Austria's busiest shopping boulevard outside of Vienna. Cruise past Linz's massive harbour complex for a look at Europe's largest graffiti gallery – the factory buildings of Mural Harbor. For further glimpses of the river's historic trade, look no further than the nearby Danube ports of Engelhartzell, Aschach, Ottensheim, Mauthausen and Grein.



Krems

Krems, like a number of other cities on our route, had its own medieval mint. While its autumnal Donaufestival satisfies our need for exuberant expression and joie de vivre, much of its commerce comes from the cultivation and harvesting of grapes. Austria's white wine capital also has its own 150-year-old viticulture school. Kunsthalle Krems is a former tobacco factory turned exhibition hall; the Mauthaus (former duty house) and Salzstadel (historic salt store) in nearby Stein bear witness to a centuries-old trade tradition.

Neusiedl am See

Like Krems, Neusiedl am See is a vineyard town. Another significant economic driver is metal processing, a sector it shares with many other cities along our route. Its lido, a popular leisure destination in the summer months, draws visitors from Vienna and southern Germany alike.

Bratislava

Bratislava charged a toll beginning in the 11th century. This city was an important business and trade hub in the second half of the 19th century. The reception building once used for the Bratislava-Tyrnau Railway gives some idea of this transit infrastructure's flair; it was soon joined by railway connections to Vienna and Pest. Dominating the cityscape is the castle featured on the Slovakian euro. Coin collections at the Slovak National Museum bring medieval trade to life.

Budapest

Bridges represent connections, and thus also stand for trade. The famous Széchenyi Chain Bridge of Budapest, a suspension bridge, reflects the iron trade mentioned in the description of our route. Near the Liberty Bridge is the Great Market Hall, which was the nation's leading trading centre until 1932. Budapest's colourful history and joie de vivre can also be experienced in the famous Budapest thermal baths.

Mohács

Folklore and joy abound at Busójárás, the annual celebration of the Šokci. Glance at the signs for an idea of the town's multilingualism and multiethnicity, both past and present: Hungarian, German and Serbian are practically everywhere you look. The Battle of Mohács in 1526 marked yet another turning point in the history of trade along the Danube. A number of memorials in and around Mohács commemorate the consequential massacre.

Zmajevac

This village in the Baranja region is an important wine-growing area in Croatia. The unique, centuries-old, so-called "gators" are little houses, often partially buried or tucked into a hillside. Most are surrounded by a brick wall and have a wine cellar. The annual Gator Fest on the last weekend of September is a testament to the people of Zmajevac's zest for life: it is widely considered the wildest, most fun-filled wine festival in the Danube region.

Vukovar / Ilok

The important Port of Vukovar is an interesting place to consider trade along the Danube. Borovo was the former Yugoslavia's largest shoe factory. Mostly abandoned and significantly damaged in the war, only a few of its halls still stand. They are testament to the gut-wrenching end of the former Tito state. Wine and fishing dominate trade in Ilok. The area is known for its white wine.



Belgrad

Where gates are thrown open, trade begins. The Belgrade Fortress is considered the gateway to the Balkans. More than 30% of Serbs work in the city. The Nikola Tesla Museum focuses on physics and the biography of one of Serbia's most successful export geniuses. Another must-see is Knez Mihailova Street: Belgrade's main pedestrian and shopping zone is protected by law as one of the oldest and most valuable landmarks in the city.

Smederevo

This historic town, about the size of Ulm, is where the river Jezava meets the Danube. The city's exciting history, with its changing allegiances to Serbia, the Ottoman Empire and the Archduchy of Austria, has always been a place of pronounced cultural diversity and lively trade. The city is now home to the largest steelworks in Serbia. Metal processing is a major economic driver here as well. Master works from Smederevo's renowned artisan blacksmiths enjoy wide appeal. Wine cultivation is important for the region, as is its Smederevska Jesen, a much-loved wine harvest festival. Also linked to this wine-growing tradition is Villa Obrenović, a summerhouse of the royal Obrenović dynasty.

Hunedoara

Hunedoara marks the precise mid-point between Timișoara, capital of Banat, and Sibiu, capital of Transylvania. Unlike many of the aforementioned towns, its main cultural influence is not German; Hunedoara's influences are predominantly Romanian and Hungarian.

The historic train line between Hunedoara Castle and Zlaști is currently being developed for tourism. The old steel mill, once one of the most productive in the country, is worth seeing.

Bukarest

Hanul lui Manuc is the only surviving caravanserai. Built in 1808 by an Armenian merchant, it is now a hotel and restaurant. This is where Orient and Occident meet. Also interesting is the city's Zambaccian Museum in the former home of Krikor Zambaccians, likewise an Armenian. The businessman and art collector was a living lesson in the merger of joie de vivre and business acumen. The Jewish Museum highlights the conclusion of many Jewish merchants' journeys from Ulm to Bucharest.

Sfântu Gheorghe

The town of Sfântu Gheorghe near Tulcea is another must-see. 120,000-year-old archaeological sites at Enisala, Murighiol, Garvăn and Sarinasuf push the door to the past wide open. Yet the region's true heyday came in the 19th century, when it became a busy hub for trading such commodities as clothing, rushes, snails and fish. One of its main exports to the West is black caviar. Other highlights include the bazaar, not least on account of its unique, Budapest-made clock. Szekler National Museum is a veritable showcase of cultural diversity.

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The Danube Adventure – Legions Heading for the Danubius

**The river that attracted cultures.
Or: A realm of thriving culture without borders**

(by Guido Pinkau, coordinator/copywriter)

Summary

Roman legions on the Danubius – the river that attracted cultures



Roman games in Ptuj

©Ptuj Tourism, Public-Institute-Dino Kusačević

In 2021, the Roman *limes* was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This recognition by the World Heritage Organisation, extending from Regensburg or, more precisely, from Eining all the way to Hungary, provides the coordinates for this trail. The trail follows the course of the Danube where the river once marked the Roman border and acted as a line of orientation. It leads through Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Serbia. But the Danube was already an axis of development and infrastructure prior to Roman times.

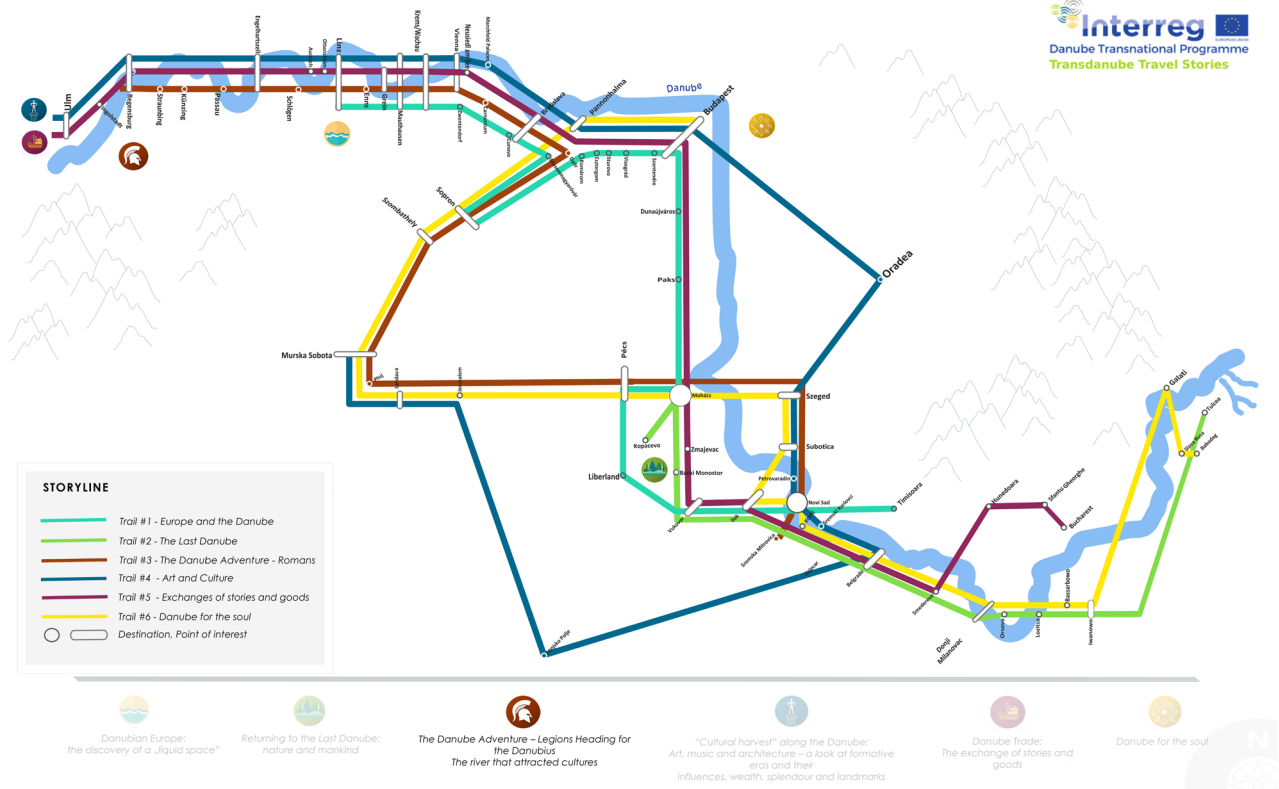
Traces of human settlement go back 70,000 years. Archaeological treasures have been found and presented to the public in the Wachau region (e.g. Venus of Willendorf, 40,000 years old) and in Serbia. They prove that, from time immemorial, the Danube has always been the central European axis for economic and cultural activity. The Romans brought a great deal of culture with them, but also prospered from Celtic and Germanic customs and techniques. Their main concern was the art of living and surviving along the Danube.

Agriculture, urban culture, urban development – for example in Regensburg or Carnuntum – and ultimately philosophy were discovered, practiced, and fostered along the Danube.

In particular, viticulture has its roots here, from the Wachau all the way to Serbia. The Danube formed the hub of trading routes converging from North and East (e.g., the Amber Road) and leading further southwards via Sopron, Szombathely, and Ljubljana, all the way to Aquileia in Veneto. While Emperor Marcus Aurelius in the second century AD resided in Carnuntum and was an intellectual still grounded on the spiritual world of the Roman gods, the final period of the Roman world along the Danube was increasingly shaped by Christianity.

Leading religious personalities like St Florian, who died a martyr, and most notably St Martin and St Severin came to be pivotal figures in a world of dissolution and decay. Following the Roman Trail along the Danube opens up an astonishing perspective of achievements in logistics, architecture and culture. Roman culture was neither domineering nor exclusive; it was open to mixing with other cultures, to progress and friendship across its own borders. In this respect, the trail shows that “borders” are transitory and ultimately remain fluid. The Danube as a fluid border was therefore always a connecting force as well.

Summary written by Georg Steiner



The Danube Adventure – Legions heading for the Danubius

The Roman period on the Danube spanned more than 450 years. During this epoch, a coherent system was built to defend the Imperium Romanum to the north, a border that went down in history as “Danubian Limes”. By definition, a border is a dividing line. The *limes* was intended as a division of the north and south and was in fact a military frontier. But was it actually an insurmountable barrier? Or was it open for border crossers, cultural exchange, and for new culture to emerge?

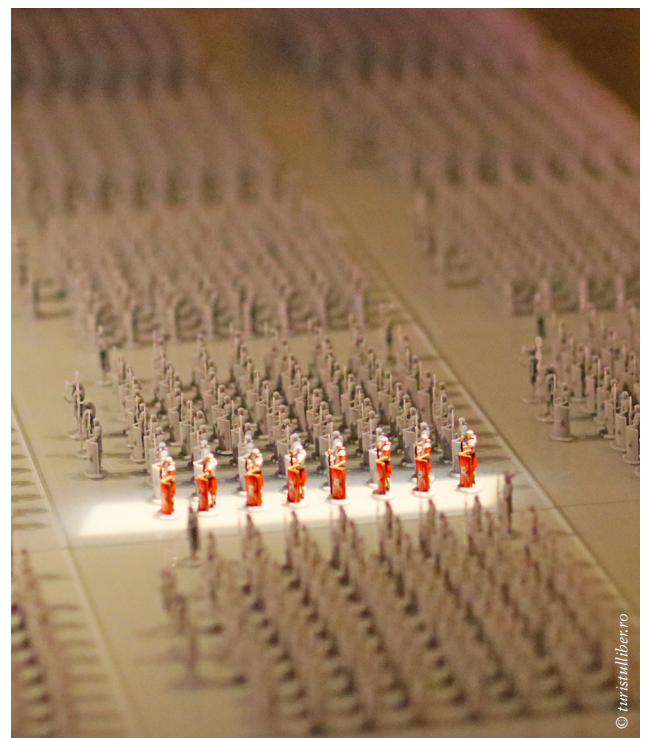
The Danube (Lat. *Danubius*) is a flowing band that stretches from west to east across 2,888 kilometres. It flows through ten European states, and if you include water-bearing rivers, the number of “Danube states” is even higher. The route on which we shall follow in the Romans’ footsteps takes us from Germany to Serbia, through six countries with very diverse cultural histories, albeit always connected by the Danube. In modern-day united Europe, the borders are more permeable or almost non-existent, and yet each of these countries is still surrounded by its own border. Until not so long ago, when disembarking a Danube cruiseship in Budapest, you had to queue with your passport at the ship reception and were scrutinised by stern-looking officials, but a lot has changed for the better.

“Borders? I have never seen one. But I have heard they exist in the minds of some people.” (Thor Heyerdahl). The Romans certainly did not think in such enlightened, humanistic terms when they decided to secure their empire to the north and looked for suitable places to build facilities that would serve this goal. Basically, one only has to look at a map of Europe to understand why the course of the Danube was regarded as an ideal natural border for this very purpose, since it divides Europe into northern and southern parts. Which is what the Romans probably did when they resolved to make the Danube an essential part of their *limes* – the “wet *limes*”, as it were – which was supposed to demarcate and protect their empire from the barbarians. They no doubt saw several natural advantages in doing so. When their scouts reconnoitered the river for securing measures, they were quick to realise that swampy areas, wide valleys and raging rapids surrounded by dense forests would offer excellent conditions for defending the empire and stopping peoples from the north from advancing further.

The Alpine region had already been incorporated into the Roman Empire in 15 BC and was now to be extended into the Alpine foothills. Campaigns against Germanic tribes living in the north began under the rulers Drusus the Elder and Tiberius.

The aim was to extend the Roman Empire to the Elbe (Lat. *Albis*). However, after several battles had been lost, this plan had to be abandoned and it was decided that the Danube would be the border east of the Rhineland. In 179 AD, Regensburg, or *Castra Regina* at the time, became a river fort of the Roman legion at the northernmost tip of the Danube.

The provinces *Noricum* and the adjoining *Pannonia* in the east were established and there were many small territorial shifts within the empire. Today’s Vienna (*Vindobona*) and nearby *Carnuntum* initially belonged to *Noricum* and were later assigned to *Pannonia*. That period saw a number of peaceful shifts of borders within the provinces.



How the Roman culture shaped the Danube region

It is often claimed that the Roman expansion into the Danube region marked the birth of culture in the Danube Basin, but such a statement should be uttered with care, because the Romans certainly did not settle in an entirely uncultured area.

Since prehistoric times, the Danube had been an important landmark for early settlers such as family clans and groups “out of Africa” who decided to “go West” and travel upstream from the Black Sea in search of a new homeland. In a word: the Danube Basin was a destination for migrating settlers early on in history. The river was a lifeline that offered freedom of movement. The settlers acquired “the art of living and surviving on the Danube”, which makes the Danube a river of explorers and discoverers.

First settlers in the Danube region

The earliest evidence of human settlements in the area between Regensburg and Zaječar was found in the Wachau region: while the significance of the small female figurines „Venus of Willendorf“ and „Fanny of Galgenberg“ is still not quite clear, their age is estimated at 30,000 to 40,000 years (only archaeologists have the power to determine this sort of age). One thing is certain: Ice Age art is a great cultural heritage and the ladies from the Wachau region are two particularly fine specimens; in fact, they are the oldest known Palaeolithic representations of the female body. Older still – namely around 70,000 years old – is the evidence of early human existence found in the Gudenus Cave near the city of Krems. Finds made at the foot of Hartenstein Castle, 15 km west of Krems, prove that Neanderthal people hunted here and found shelter in the cave.

The Romans of what is now Upper Austria were in direct contact not only with Germanic peoples, but also with the Celts. The latter did not form a tribe as such but were scattered in clans along the Danube, unlike Germanic tribes. They willingly and peacefully accepted the Roman sovereignty and even worked closely with the Romans. However, they also left behind a cultural heritage of their own, which



Roman Fort Oberranna, Danube Upper Austria

can be studied in Mitterkirchen in the Marchland plain (Upper Austria), for example, where a Celtic settlement from the Hallstatt period (800 to 450 BC) was reconstructed.

There were also large Celtic settlements in the region around Ptuj (Lat. *Poetovio*), now Slovenia, where the Roman Emperor Vespasian was elected in 69 AD. *Poetovio*, as Ptuj was called at the time, was the largest Roman settlement in the territory of modern Slovenia and is believed to have had a larger population (up to 40,000) than Ptuj has today (24,000). Visitors can now experience the Roman city of *Poetovio* in the archeological park, guided for example, by a costumed “Roman” explaining the Roman way of life.

The Roman cultural heritage

The Romans were particularly good at forming their new borderland and its hinterland in terms of culture. Unlike in the far north, where a long wall was erected in Scotland under Hadrian, it was not necessary on the Danube to build a continuous wall or rampart. Rapids, wide and swampy valleys formed a natural barrier. Nonetheless, the Romans built city walls with magnificent gates (Regensburg), forts with adjacent military and civilian towns (Passau), trading posts such as Enns, and vibrant cities like *Carnuntum*, thus intro-

ducing Roman life to the Danube region. Or think of the impressive necropolis of Pécs with an Early Christian cemetery (UNESCO World Heritage Site), or the massive fort, magnificent villas, temples and burial grounds of *Felix Romuliana* in Zaječar, Serbia! All these sites line the Danube like a string of pearls and offer a deep insight into Roman history and everyday life on the river. They are witnesses of early urban culture, which continues to have an effect today.

Emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius also lived in the legionary camp of *Carnuntum*, where he found the peace to contemplate far from his beloved Rome. The metropolis on the Danube had about 50,000 inhabitants and boasted a harbour, an amphitheatre, bathhouses and magnificent city villas. Ancient *Carnuntum* offered classy life far from home. Every year in June, the “Roman Festival” is an excellent opportunity to visit the minutely reconstructed Roman quarter and enjoy the food and culture of ancient life. Ptuj, too, celebrates “Roman Games” for four days each year. If you ever get invited, do accept.

Wine – a cultural asset

Invitations often include delights such as wine. Naturally, it was the Romans who introduced wine to the region of beer drinkers (Regensburg). The Romans despised beer in general and regarded it as a drink of barbarians. According to Pliny, *cerevesia* from Germanic tribes was best used to pamper facial skin with its foam. Further east, in *Pannonia*, the “watered grain” (*sabaia*) was not particularly popular either. Roman legionaries were still tempted to drink it because there was plenty of it, because it was cheap, and because inebriation was guaranteed. That’s why they were prone sometimes to cross the border and visit barbarian pubs or breweries.

The only solution was to procure and grow some wine from home. On the river bank opposite from Künzing, for example, lies the market town of Winzer. It is yet to be proved that wine was already cultivated so far north on south-facing slopes before the 9th century, but why wouldn’t it have been? After all, the Romans put up their camp in the immediate vicinity.

The Romans were no doubt the fathers of the great success of Austrian wines today – particularly wines from Lower Austria (the Wachau region, the Kamptal valley, etc.), Vienna, and Burgenland. The same can be said of viticulture in Hungary, formerly Serbia.

In Roman times, *Carnuntum* and all other settlements, camps and towns along the Danube were supplied with high-quality wines.



Roman games in Ptuj

The Lower Danube has a longer history of wine. Wine first came here from Greece and other eastern parts. In Serbia, for example, the history of wine goes back to the Thracians and Greeks. In the 3rd century, Marcus Aurelius Probus introduced viticulture outside the Apennines, which had been forbidden by Domitian in 92 AD. This was the basis for the meteoric rise of wine. The fact that Probus lived in the imperial capital of *Sirmium*, modern-day Sremska Mitrovica in Serbia, may have been helpful. In Zaječar, after a visit to the palace complex of *Felix Romuliana* and to mosaics of Dionysus amidst vineyards, one can discuss the Dionysian and Bacchanalian principles over a glass of wine.

A Roman wine trader in Passau

Whether for inebriation or for feasts – the wine merchant Publius Tenatius Essimus from Trento made sure that Romans in the northern regions of the Empire and their guests received good quality wine from their homeland. He settled in Passau and introduced the wine trade, which was not always lucrative, across the Alps. The Brenner Pass, now an artery of tourism and cross-border trade, was the route on which this industrious man transported wines from Italy and most probably from Southern France and Spain to Passau, the “city of three rivers”. From there, Publius Tenatius Essimus would take his wines via the Inn and Danube rivers to the Roman provinces of *Raetia* (adjoining in the west) and *Noricum*. This is how a vast number of amphorae filled with wine reached the banks of the Danube from the south.

Tenatius Essimus died at the age of 57, but had clearly understood the advantages of rapid transportation by ship. His name has stood for profitable entrepreneurship and clear-sightedness ever since he left home to build a new future in foreign lands, keen to cultivate contacts across borders. His story is a success story from the *limes*.



The Danube, an impenetrable barrier?

The Danube itself was the central transport axis. Paved roads were built parallel to it, as well as roads leading from the Danube to the north and south. Remains of these can partly still be seen along hiking trails in some forest areas (e.g. in the Wachau region).

At this point a question posed at the beginning comes up again: Was the *limes* an impenetrable barrier? No, it was not. On the one hand, there were plenty of gates that functioned as passages for troops on their way north. After all, the – political – goal to expand the empire had not been abandoned yet. Moreover, there was a lively civil exchange. “Barbarians” visited Roman towns and settlements to meet the foreign rulers and do business with them – and vice versa. It is safe to assume that many a love affair arose in the process. Pubs on either side of the river were meeting places for lovers and for the occasional drunken brawl. Celts north of the *limes* even worked for the Romans and took on higher administrative tasks.

In terms of economics, the Amber Road was particularly important to the Romans, who regarded amber as a highly coveted commodity. Amber was also known as the “gold of the north”, or as “tears of the sun goddess” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* II, 340–366), and was traded at a high price. Drinking from amber vessels was pure luxury, and many rich women in Rome dyed her hair with amber. According to Pliny the Elder, the coast of Germania from where amber was introduced was about 600,000 paces (i.e. about 900 km) from *Carnuntum* in *Pannonia*. He complained that a small figurine of amber was more expensive than a slave. His geographical description clearly shows that there was a connection between the Baltic Sea and *Carnuntum*. Then the road ran further south through Sopron, Szombathely, Ptuj, Ljubljana and all the way down to Aquileia in Veneto, Italy.

The Amber Road evidences that the *limes* was not a border in the sense of a protective bulwark where armed soldiers would stand and ward off anyone who wanted to enter the empire. It was rather an open frontier for cultural and economic exchange. Border posts collected customs duties. Merchants and their helpers reached the Baltic States across the

Baltic Sea and used the Danube region for business and as a welcome resting place on their onward journey south. Many personal contacts were established, which has no doubt left us with descendants across the entire Danube region.

Today, the Danube region would be called a Europe’s melting pot of cultures. Whether in prehistoric times, in the Roman period or at any other time in the course of the centuries, people have come together along the 2,888 km of the Danube’s banks. Strangers became friends, people passing through settled down, migrants found a new homeland and enriched it with their own cultural heritage, and they still do today.

One of the most popular saints of Europe, Saint Martin, was born in the Roman city of *Savaria* (now Szombathely, Hungary) in 316 AD. He left the city in his youth, but *Savaria* always cultivated his legacy nonetheless. Saint Martin spent his whole life in the spirit of love, mercy, humility and courage, and by the time he died as bishop of Tours in France, he was worshipped for his thaumaturgic feats. To this day, humanist values of the European identity including rightfulness, tolerance, solidarity, and the sharing of intellectual, spiritual and material resources are linked to his name. His example goes beyond borders and generations; it pervades the history and intangible heritage of our continent and could be our guiding principle in finding a common European ethic. The most important message we can draw from the life of Saint Martin for the 21st century is that common values are precious, and that we need to share them across Europe.

The Danube welcomes new cultures, feeds on them and connects them, rather than separating them. Cultural bridges across the river and cross-border exchange have yielded a special breed of people in the Danube region. They are cosmopolitan and interested in the foreign, in the new. Even decades under the heavy Iron Curtain could not change this. This is epitomized by Vienna, a key United Nations location outside New York.

People who were sent to the Danube at the time of Rome’s rule or who came on their own initiative were as varied as their motives. There was, first and foremost, the army of legionaries, who were obliged to their employer and went



Roman head at Danube loop Schlögen

wherever they were sent. They were loyal subjects who hoped to become citizens of Rome or of their own country at the end of their service. But there were also those looking for challenges, or those who simply took a chance. Just think of the wine merchant of Passau, or those who took the long way from the Adriatic to the Baltic Sea on the Amber Road and cultivated contacts, traded and enjoyed the hospitality along the Danube and its hinterland.

Roman life on the Danubius

Another Roman who controlled the fate of his empire from *Carnuntum* near *Vindobona* (Vienna) was Emperor Marcus Aurelius. A large equestrian statue was erected in his honour in Tulln on the Danube, the birthplace of painter Egon Schiele (1890–1918). Marcus Aurelius can justifiably be called the philosopher among the Roman rulers. He was an emperor who abhorred the narrow mind. He taught us that “the best revenge is to be unlike your enemy”, and asked: “When you have done good and another has been its object, why do you require a third thing besides, like the foolish — to be thought to have done good or to get a return?” (Marcus Aurelius, “Meditations”, Book VII, 73). He rejected Christianity completely and preferred to live in the spiritual world of Roman gods instead, and yet he made Christian principles such as charity his own. Apparently John Stuart Mill called him the “crowned apostle of philanthropy”. His thoughts did not come to Marcus Aurelius in the beloved gardens of his birthplace, Rome (26 April 121), but on the banks of far-away Danube.



In the era of Marcus Aurelius, another very special legionary was to become important for the *Lauriacum* legionary camp in Enns – Aelius Marcellus. According to the inscription on a statue dedicated to Hercules and excavated in Enns, he was the administrator of the largest lime kiln battery on the Danube and beyond. This is to say that he was in charge of a project that was of utmost importance to camp construction. A look at the production numbers reveals that great things were achieved here. The amount of lime produced in the twelve lime kilns in *Lauriacum* (Enns) was only exceeded by industrial production in the 20th century.

Aelius Marcellus was an early innovator in the Danube region in terms of economy and craft, but who exactly was he? Born around 145 in Upper Italy, he started to train as a legionary recruit in Aquileia around 168. Thanks to his knowledge of calf-burning, he would often be exempt from the onerous duties of “ordinary” legionaries as a specialist of the legion (*immunis*). This was quite a relief for him, since duties such as standing sentry, patrolling, cooking, cleaning and especially latrine fatigue were not exactly popular.

After stations in Ločica ob Savinji in Slovenia and *Salona* (Solin) in Dalmatia, Marcellus fought under Marcus Aurelius against the Macromanni. After the fighting, he returned to the *Lauriacum* (Enns) camp in *Noricum* with the legion. He was only able to visit the capital, Rome, for a short time, because he was required as chief of the largest lime kiln battery of the empire on the Danube.

Aelius Marcellus remained on the Danube after completing his 24 years of service. *Lauriacum* became a home for him and his family. His son took over the work in the lime kiln and thus continued the family tradition. Perhaps in retirement Aelius Marcellus had more time to spend with his friend Seccius Secundinus, who had also retired from the legion and ran a tavern in the camp. He always trusted in his god, Hercules, to whom he dedicated an altar.

Others were inspired by the Christian faith. One of them was Saint Florian of Lorch (3rd c.–304), who is now the patron saint of Upper Austria and the fire brigade. He chose to withdraw to *Helium Cetium* (now Sankt Pölten) as a retired offi-

cer of the Roman army and commander-in-chief of fire fighters. He had achieved a great deal in the service of the Empire but had turned to the Christian faith, which was to become his undoing. In the era of Emperor Diocletian, the persecution of Christians flared up again, leading to the martyrdom of Florian of Lorch when he fell off the bridge at *Lauriacum*. But it was not at the hands of the Emperor’s soldiers that the holy man died (they probably realized how special he was): in fact, an infuriated stranger pushed him into the river.

Saint Martin of Tours (316–397) was born in *Savaria* (now Szombathely) to a Roman military tribune and came into contact with Christianity as a child. According to his father’s will he underwent Roman military training. His wish to be discharged from the service at an early age was denied, and it was not until he had completed his obligatory 25 years of service that he could devote himself fully to his vocation, the spreading of the Christian faith. After his baptism, he withdrew as a hermit, but as his discipleship grew, he built the first western abbey in Ligugé, France, in 361. Saint Martin was a helper in times of need who is also said to have performed many miracles and whose ascetic hermitism made him an ideal monk. Devotees can now follow his work along the pilgrimage stations of the Via Sancti Martini cultural trail.

“Faith turns straw into a rope”, said Saint Severin of Noricum (410–482). He was probably born in Italy to distinguished and educated parents. After his training as a monk, he first came to *Pannonia*, but was mainly active between *Carnuntum* and Passau. From the “city of three rivers” he visited Künzing and Schlögen on a regular basis. He performed numerous miracles and organized and helmed the withdrawal of legions from *Noricum* to *Lauriacum* at the close of the Roman era on the Danube when the advance of Germanic tribes became ever more pressing.

Before he died on 8 January 482 in *Favianis*, Severin of Noricum predicted the final withdrawal of all Romans from the banks of the *limes*. This is what actually happened six years later, which is when the body of the saint was also taken to Naples, unharmed, as though still alive. However, the Romans’ withdrawal was not a complete one, as previously assumed. Many Romans remained on the banks of the Danube,

where they had found their new home. Nevertheless, the year 488 marks the end of the Roman era on the Danube, the end of 450 years of Roman rule.

Emperor Gaius Galerius Valerius Maximianus (c. 250–311 AD) was less devout during his lifetime, but tried to balance this out shortly before his death. He had a funerary temple built near Zaje ar, now Serbia, in memory of his mother Romuliana. Here, near his mother’s birthplace , the *Felix Romuliana* was built as a monument to her deep faith in the ancient pantheon. Although discredited as an instigator of the persecution of Christians, he, the son, changed his mind when he fell ill and felt that death was approaching. Shortly before his death, Gaius issued an edict of toleration, allowing Christians to practice their religion and formally calling for churches to be rebuilt. A rather coarse man throughout his life, he thus paved the way for church culture along the Danube. Today, the Danube states look back at a long tradition of profound religiosity. The ringing of the bells of parish churches, cathedrals and monasteries is part of the sound of the river.



The Danube, a river of European freedom

It was quite a feat for the Romans to build the *limes* and rule for over 450 years. However, the Danube’s love of liberty was not restricted by the *limes*, because the people on its banks always found a way to overcome barriers.

Cultures met and still meet on the banks of the Danube. A brief encounter can become a lasting relationship. Foreign influences are received with great interest and always enrich the heritage and cultural life. In a word: the Danube is a river where cultures meet.

Many of the historical events described here come to life during visits to excavation sites and preserved ancient buildings. The above-mentioned figures from Roman times prove that the Danube region has always invited friendship. Attempts to prevent friendship politically, sometimes including even armed conflict, have failed not least because of the positive stubbornness of the population living on the river, from the river, and with the river. In the years of the pandemic (2020/2021), people along the river have found it hard to accept that another attempt was made to separate them by closing borders. They demanded that borders open at least for local traffic. This culture of encounter, rapprochement and exchange was inherited from the Romans. In a word: the river Danube is a melting pot.

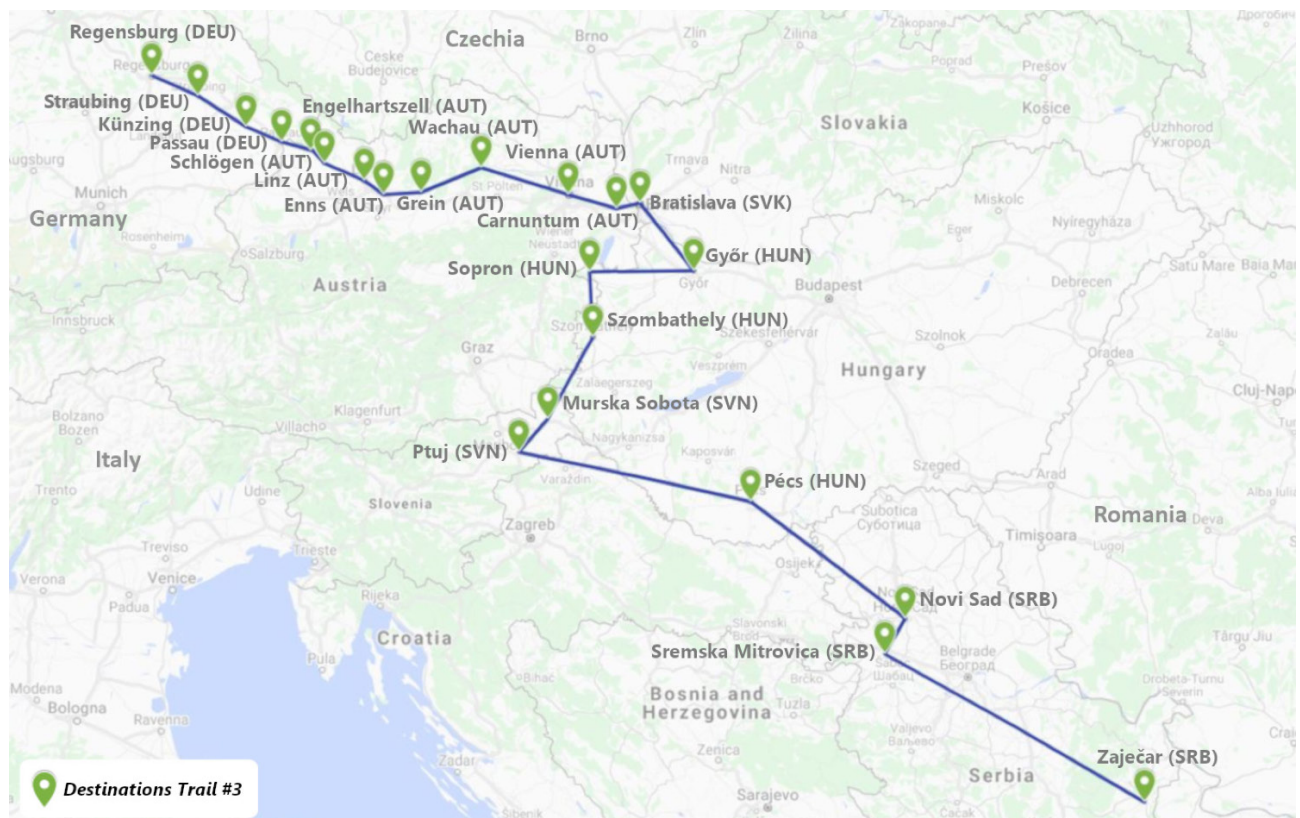
Almost all sites on the Danube at which Roman archaeological remains were found want to be discovered during a stroll or hike or bicycle tour through the beautiful landscape. Many sections of the river have not been straightened or built over yet but are still in their original, unspoilt state. Many scenic outposts must have been reconnaissance posts of Roman legionaries. An excursion into nature is therefore also an excursion into the long history of the banks of the Danube. The Danube is a river where every breath you take contains a whiff of history. Its views have charmed us and helped us find our inner peace for generations.

Appendix

Trail destinations & points of interest

Our project partners suggested destinations for the route, which were then supplemented by the author’s own suggestions. The final list of selected destinations is marked in bold in the following list. All these cities represent several aspects of the present narrative.

The author suggests visiting additional points of interest along the route between the cities, since they illustrate certain thematic aspects of the trail. Some of them stand for lesser-known, hidden places that want to be discovered.





A) Points of interest (POI)

B) Things to do

**Regensburg
(Germany)**

A) *Porta Praetoria* and Roman Museum
B) Drink beer like the Romans.

**Straubing
(Germany)**

A) Roman treasure of Straubing at the Gäubodenmuseum – Sorviodurum (Straubing): a former military camp and Roman Danube port with a civilian settlement.

**Künzing
(Germany)**

A) Quintana Museum

**Passau
(Germany)**

A) Roman fort Boiotro; historic district; history of the Passau wine merchant Publius Tenatius Essimnus.
B) Guided tour and personal conversation with the city archaeologist; Roman snacks; you might even persuade a confectioner to create a Roman cake or chocolate; current wine growing in Passau (Passau winery).

**Engelhartszell &
Oberranna (Austria)**

A) Roman castle of Oberranna; landscape along the Danube water gap.
B) Experience the nature in one of the most beautiful parts of the Upper Danube; Engelhartzell Abbey.

Schlögen (Austria)

A) Roman bath and Roman park Schlögen, Sankt Agatha, natural sight: the Schlögen Meander.
B) Hike to the scenic outpost overlooking the Schlögen Meander.

Linz (Austria)

A) Schlossmuseum; Römerberg excavation sites.

Enns (Austria)

A) Museum Lauriacum and excavations of Roman lime kilns; the story of Hercules in the lime kiln and the foreman Aelius Marcellus.
B) On the trail of the Roman kiln master.

Grein (Austria)

A) Roman rest areas on the Danube Cycle Path. There are 20 of these rest areas in Upper Austria. Each offers information about the Roman era along the Danube Cycle Path, as well as power to recharge your batteries.



Wachau (Austria)

- A) Roman watchtowers in the Wachau region (Bacharnsdorf, church of St. Lorenz, Rosatz-Windstallgraben, St. Johann im Mauerthale, Favianis fort in Mautern, Augustianis fort in Traismauer including a detour to the Roman Museum in Tulln); Venus of Willendorf and Fanny of Galgenberg.
- B) A short hike in the Dunkelsteinerwald forest near Mauternbach to the remains of a Roman road; hike to the Gudenush caves; hike to the summit of Buchberg from Spitz. Heurige taverns: Heurige go back to the Roman wine culture. Meet the winegrowers, e. g. the Riede vineyard on Galgenberg south of Stratzing (which is where Fanny of Galgenberg was found). Excursion to the LOISIUM wine centre in Langenlois.

Wien (Austria)

- A) Roman Museum at Hoher Markt with remains of the floor heating system of a tribune's house; Albrecht Fountain with an allegory of the river god Danuvius and the city of Vindobona; excavations on Michaelerplatz.
- B) City walk along the Roman path; modern-day street layout on the old Roman ground plan.

Carnuntum (Austria)

- A) Carnuntum is an extraordinary Roman town structure on the limes connected to the Amber Road.
- B) Roman life and culinary delights: eat like the Romans!

Bratislava (Slovakia)

- A) Devín Castle
- B) Experience the landscape and taste the famous currant wine of Devín.

Győr (Hungary)

- A) During Roman times, the settlement of Arrabona was a military camp located in the present-day urban area of Győr (the German river name Raab derives from Arrabona); remains of the fort on Széchenyi Square.

Pécs (Hungary)

- A) Pécs, called Sopianae in Roman times (2nd century), later Quinque Ecclesiae (“Five Churches”), was an important centre in Pannonia and the capital of the province of Valeria. Remains of that period: Roman ruin in front of the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul; the early Christian cemetery from the late Roman period (necropolis of Pécs, 4th century) is a UNESCO World Heritage Site; burial chambers similar to Roman catacombs with motifs from the Old Testament, probably created by wandering Roman artists; mausoleum with wall paintings and a marble sarcophagus. The impressive visitor centre (Scene István tér, Pécs) offers access to several burial chambers and monuments from the period of the World Heritage Site.

Sopron (Hungary)

- A) Sopron boasts the Roman city of Scarbantia, ruins of the forum and the Scarbantia Fóruma Museum. This was an important Roman place on the Amber Road.
-



Szombathely (Hungary)

A) In Szombathely, the Roman Colonia Claudia Savaria, structural remains and partial reconstructions of the magnificent former settlement can be seen in the István Járdányi Paulovics Ruin Garden. It is safe to assume that this was the oldest Roman town in Hungary and that it owed its wealth in particular to the fact that, like Sopron and Carnuntum, it was connected to the Amber Road (visit the north and south gates through which the Amber Road led, the ancient street pavements, the reconstruction of the Iseum temple, as well as burial grounds).

Szombathely is also the birthplace of Saint Martin of Tours (c. 316/317–397).

B) Explore the beautiful countryside from here, hiking to Murska Sobota (Slovenia), where the Romans also passed through for sure.

Murska Sobota (Slovenia)

A) A Roman temple is said to have stood in Murska Sobota on the site of the Cathedral of St. Nicholas in the 2nd/3rd centuries (see the Roman tombstone of Viator in the cathedral). Visit the regional museum in the castle as well.

Ptuj (Slovenia)

A) Slovenski quare boasts one of Slovenia's oldest open stone collections from the Roman period. Also see the five-metre-high Mithras Memorial Stone (2nd century) in memory of Marcus Valerius Verus (mayor of Ptuj), which was used as a pillory in the Middle Ages, and an archaeological park under construction. "Roman Games" are held each year for four days.

Novi Sad (Serbia)

A) Petrovaradin: Under the Romans, the Cusum bastion was built on this site in the 1st century. It was destroyed in the 5th century during the invasion of the Huns, but was then expanded in the 18th century into the present Petrovaradin castle complex. You can still visit parts of the catacomb system. Also see the Museum of Vojvodina with an overview from the Stone Age to the 20th century.

Sremska Mitrovica (Serbia)

A) Sirmium, once a Celtic, then an Illyrian settlement, was conquered by the Romans in 14 AD and grew to become the capital of the Roman province of Pannonia. It was also a seat of bishops. Emperor Marcus Aurelius had a headquarter in Sirmium during the Macromannic Wars. Claudius Gothicus (214–270), Roman Emperor from 268 to 270, spent most of his life here. In 296, under Maximus Thrax, the Romans launched campaigns against the Sarmatians from the city. During the reign of Emperor Diocletian (290), the palace of Sirmium also became the imperial residence of Galerius, Licinius, and Constantine the Great, and developed into one of the four capitals of the Roman Empire. Constantine lived in Sirmium for 500 days between 317 and 324. Visit the City Museum.

Zaječar (Serbia)

A) Approximately 7 km southwest of Zaječar is the Galerius Palace of the ancient Felix Romuliana, which became a World Heritage Site in 2007. Galerius was a Caesar under Diocletian from 293 to 311, had it built as a retirement residence and named it after his mother Romula, who had been born in the nearby province of Dacia; his tomb and that of his mother can be found on the Magura hill. The complete curtain wall has been preserved, including 20 mighty towers up to 15 m high, which reflect the imposing character of the fortification.

About the author

Guido Pinkau



Born in Schleswig an der Schlei, Guido Pinkau was drawn to the Danube in 1984 to study geography in the three-river city of Passau. After several years as a research assistant at the Chair of Anthropogeography there and later working as a lecturer, he switched to his current profession as a study tour guide. Through this he travels to Scandinavia, Great Britain, East and South Africa as well as the USA several times a year.

However, he always returns to his home on the Danube and is intensively involved with the culture of the Danube region. One of his publications was therefore a travel guide to the Danube cruise from Passau to the Black Sea. In the future, he plans to continue to deal with the diverse cultural topics of the Danube riparian states and to pursue the question of a „Danube identity“.



Danubian Europe:

the discovery of a “liquid space”

(by Márton Méhes, coordinator)



Summary

Danubian Europe: the discovery of a “liquid space” between West and East

The story begins in Linz, Austria, and we shall tell it as far as Timișoara in Romania. On the way are Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, and Serbia, as well as two more European capitals of culture: Pécs and Novi Sad. At the heart of the Danube journey is Hungary with all the expansions, divisions, and upheavals seen by this region and caused by religions, ideologies, or claims to power that have repeatedly divided Europe and brought it together again. Whereas Europe along the Rhine can be experienced as a continuum, the experience here is more one of disruption, which has resulted in enormous richness in art, culture, religion, tradition and language. Danubian Europe has – quite literally – become a funnel of influences and therefore a region that has suffered a lot from wars, expulsions, and annexations, but it has also become a melting pot of cultural processes that we are proud of today since they underly its fascination.

It wasn't only the crusades in the Middle Ages and the constant conflict between Ottoman and Christian rulers that cost a lot of blood and suffering. In the 20th century, the region suffered particular turmoil, caused, for example, by the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire and the First and Second World Wars, with all their consequences. The Eastern European countries suffered greatly from the resulting division into communist and democratic worlds.

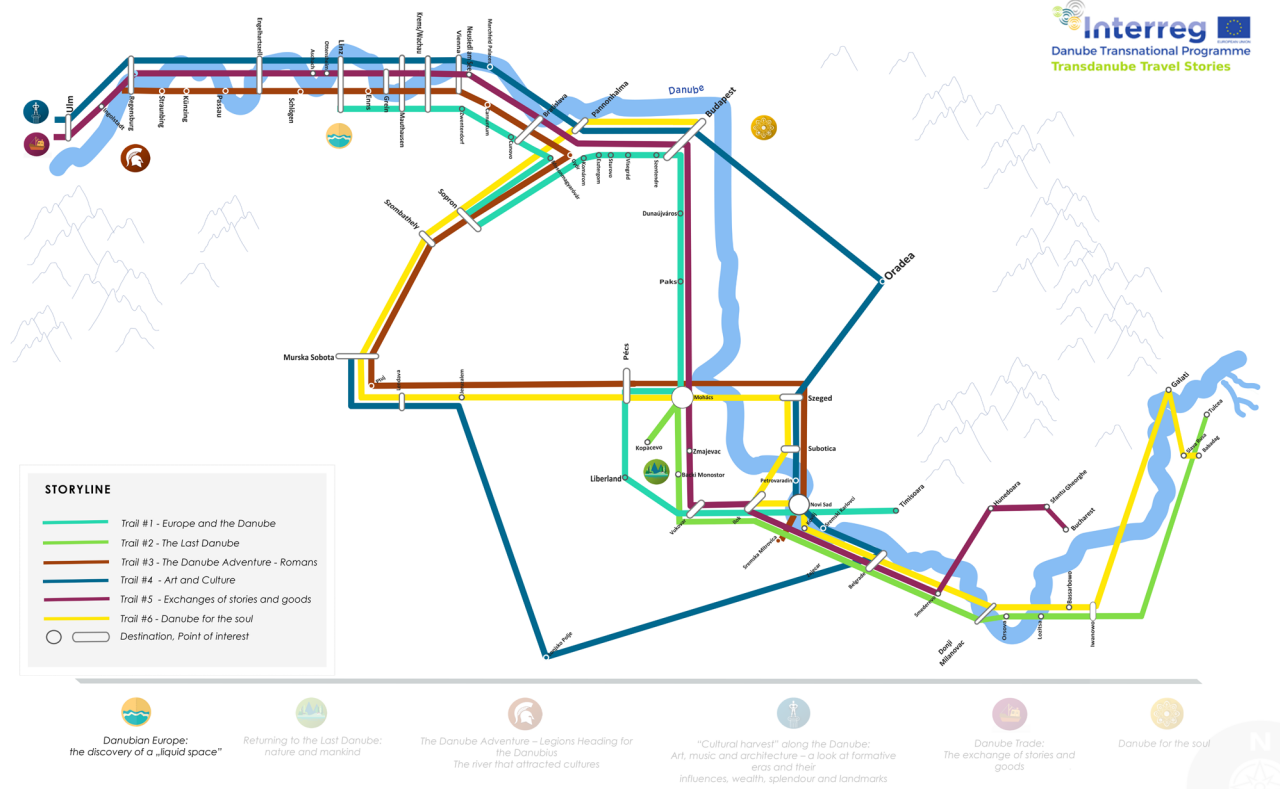
It is precisely in this space that Jewish life managed to flourish again and again in a formative, inspiring and innovative way, despite the most difficult conditions.

Only against this background is it possible to keep pace with current debates, often focusing on Hungary, on self-determination, the dominance of Europe, and the flow of refugees. Coming to terms with history in a systematic way has often been neglected. The transitions were too sudden, too unexpected, and sometimes too unpredictable. The fall of the Iron Curtain on the Austro-Hungarian border, for example, surprised most people.

Travelling along the Danube can help us make up for lost time. New connections emerge, not so much in the political arena as in the fields of business, science, art, culture, and creativity – areas that have always been a source of vitality. For it is always the people that shape a region. No region has had to accommodate a greater number of diverse nationalities and cultures, which often only found common ground after long phases of exclusion, combat and intolerance. This process of finding common ground still poses major challenges today. The roots of the conflict in the Balkans stretch back centuries, and they still feed this explosive region today.

Change, a constant theme in many cities and countries in the Danube region, can now be experienced in a particularly fascinating way. The European Capitals of Culture in this area are dynamic and impressive examples of this.

Summary written by Georg Steiner



Summary

This trail along the middle section of the Danube invites you to discover a different Europe – namely Danubian Europe, which is obviously different from what Europe is like along the Rhine. On our passage from Linz to Novi Sad and Timișoara, the Danube reveals itself as a "liquid space" in permanent transition. It has run for many centuries between the West and East, where the aftermath of the most recent political transition is still palpable. The wounds and traces of fascism and communism have left a lasting imprint on societies and urban architecture along the river. On the other hand, surprising technological innovation and artistic creativity are forming a stark contrast to the past of the region. Its rich cultural diversity makes Danubian Europe unique in the world for all the treasures and turmoil that Mother Danube has gathered from the waters of her tributaries. You cannot step into the same river twice: the Danube and its neighbouring regions are in constant change, and they will change your mind as well.

Geographical scope

Trail #1 is one of six connected thematic routes within the Transdanube Travel Stories project. Each route covers a specific section of the Danube. Trail #1 focuses on the middle section of the river, with destinations and points of interest (POI) in Austria, Slovakia, Hungary and Croatia, and side glances to the European Capitals of Culture, Novi Sad in Serbia and Timișoara in Romania.



Danubian Europe: the discovery of a “liquid space”

What is the basic approach of this Danube expedition?

It is impossible to understand the whole of Europe without a deeper understanding of – and the desire to explore and grasp – Danubian Europe, or the Danube region, for that matter. Recently, the need for a **new narrative of Europe** has been on everyone’s lips. This narrative is necessary to re-ignite people’s excitement about Europe. It is plain to see that there are certain differences between the western and eastern halves of the continent, and understanding these differences is further complicated by the fact that the transition between these two parts is no longer marked by a physical border (unlike 32 years ago). Instead, boundaries in the Danube region are fluid. So far, so good. But hand on heart, can you put your finger on the differences? Are you familiar with the local conditions in different places? Can you join the dots between increasingly clichéd descriptions? Do you know the questions and concerns of locals? Do you know when, and how, they celebrate successes, and what makes them happy?

The history of Danubian Europe is the starting point for a multi-day expedition to what is probably the most famous river in Europe. The goal of the journey is to answer the question of how Europe came to be so many-faceted along the Danube. We want to understand how the people living on its shores think, see, feel and taste. We want to grasp and internalise Danubian Europe. We want to find concrete **evidence** of the specific character of Danubian Europe: concrete **places, events, people, and stories**. We shall immerse ourselves in seemingly familiar cities and landscapes that will turn out to be completely new and unfamiliar. We shall be tracing stories to their roots and be looking for hidden places. We shall learn first-hand from people along the Danube why they have different views from, say, people on the Rhine. We shall let ourselves get carried away by the river.

This trail **invites** participants to **discover** a different Europe – Danubian Europe, that is, which is obviously different from the rest of Europe, since it’s a “liquid space”. The **main question** of the expedition is: What makes the difference? What kind of evidence is there of a different, Danubian Europe? The **main goal** of the expedition is to identify and discover

specific features of this “liquid space”. The **methodology** is to find hidden places and background stories, to meet local people (witnesses of the past, contemporary artists, etc.), to taste diversity (not only in terms of food and drink), to think, sense, perceive, taste, and touch. The expected **outcome** is not just to acquire knowledge, but to better understand Danubian Europe. The trail is sure to change the mindset of fellow travellers, who are expected to overcome clichés and grasp broader connections and structures.

The liquid space – a pendulum between East and West

Danubian Europe has a particular characteristic that has evolved and manifested itself for centuries: the (middle) Danube region oscillates like a **pendulum**, or **ferry**, between the powers and influences of the West (Christianity, Euro-Atlantic partnership, etc.) and the East (Ottoman Empire, Soviet Union, etc.), thus forming a fluid boundary, or “liquid space”, as it were, between East and West.

But how does this oscillation make itself felt today? On our trip, we will be visiting Esztergom in Hungary, for example. This small town with its huge, domed basilica sits enthroned right by the river and is a holy place for Hungarians. This is where the first Hungarian king and founder of the state, Stephen I, was born and coronated, which reflects the deliberate decision of the Hungarians, whose roots were in the East, to adopt the Western, Christian culture. A few centuries later, the country was torn into three parts: two thirds were occupied by the Ottoman Empire, so the pendulum swung back towards the Orient; mosques still standing in Pécs and the remains of Turkish baths in Budapest bear witness to this development.

Around 1989, Hungary made a U-turn and chose to adopt the Western liberal-democratic world order. Today, almost all countries in the region are members of the EU. To better understand some of the current debates within the EU, one must understand the chequered history of the Danube basin. Hungary is an example of the region’s centuries-long wavering between East and West, which arguably started when King Stephen chose to embrace Christianity.



This wavering, or oscillating between two riverbanks (the Hungarian poet Endre Ady has described Hungary as a “ferry country”) continues to this day, and can be found in almost all countries in the region. Just think of the heated European debates about the influence of Russia and China in Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary. Strategic investments such as the expansion of the Paks nuclear power plant on the Danube are being made with massive Russian participation, while China is building a new high-speed railway line between Belgrade and Budapest, and Turkey is investing in culture and education projects in the Muslim-majority part of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This complex and highly emotionally moving narrative is a history of movement, because people in the region have been in constant motion for centuries, whether by choice or not (consider immigration, settlement, exodus, flight, expulsion, land grabs, population exchange, emigration, guest labour, etc.). This movement, or transfer, has sometimes taken place from West to East (e.g. Danube Swabians, Saxons), and at other times in the reverse direction (e.g. guest workers from former Yugoslavia to Austria and Germany), like a pendulum, or ferry, and continues to exist today. In the last two to three decades, this movement has been reflected in phenomena like the “brain drain”

from East to West (e.g. doctors, computer scientists), as well as Western investment and company foundations in the East (car factories, technology companies, etc.). Both types of transfer contribute to innovation in the destination countries.

Regarded as a body of water, the Danube is the sum of its tributaries, which feed on other tributaries, streams and channels. Composed of countless sources in every nook and corner of Europe, this unique mixture of waters travels on to the sea, mostly calmly, but sometimes raging. The great diversity, knowledge, joy, sorrow and history of so many peoples, generations, cultures, languages, cities and landscapes – in short: the fluidity of this liquid space – is the (other) Europe that we want to discover!

Upheaval and transition

It has been 32 years since the decades-long **political division of Europe** into a democratic West and a repressive, communist East came to an end. Most of the countries of the former Eastern bloc are now members of the EU and NATO; many of them belong to the Schengen Area, and some have already introduced the euro as a currency. These results of the European **unification process** are undoubtedly a cause for celebration. To put it briefly: the last **major transformation** - the fall of the communist regimes and the transition to a new, democratic world - is formally as good as complete. However, the individual and collective transition in people’s minds has not kept up with this rapid development, resulting partly in disillusionment and deeply divided societies.

But Danubian Europe has also seen another kind of constant change: one gets the impression that neither the societies nor the cities ever come to rest. Everything is being restructured, reorganised, and rebuilt. Cities like Győr, Budapest, Novi Sad or Timișoara are now totally different from what they were like 20 or 30 years ago. Another, particularly vivid example of systematic social-urban change is a Danubian city that isn’t located anywhere near the former Iron Curtain: Linz. The capital of Upper Austria stands as an example of several cities along the Danube that are reinventing themselves with the help of culture.

Linz was once regarded merely as a city on the A1 motorway that you pass on the route from Vienna to Salzburg (without stopping over). It was the city of the voestalpine steelworks, an industrial city that didn't really have much to offer apart from dust. In addition, there was another serious image problem: Linz had once been the favourite city of the *Führer*, who wanted to make it the "Cultural Capital of Europe" and declared himself its "patron" immediately after the *Anschluss* in 1938. Yet in spite of this historical burden, it was far from clear that Linz would even want to change, since many would have preferred to simply forget the past. Ultimately Linz did indeed become the European Capital of Culture – albeit, fortunately, under completely different auspices - and was given the chance to tell its story to the whole of Europe: the event was opened with the exhibition "Cultural Capital of the Führer", which caused quite a stir among inhabitants. Today, the Danube embankment in Linz stands for innovation, creativity and networking in the Danube region, but also for the great historical contrasts and contradictions that make the region so unique. Located right on the embankment, the Lentos Kunstmuseum and the Ars Electronica Center epitomise this new profile of the city.

Leaving Linz, we realise that the city has indeed changed, and so has our view. Linz is the perfect prelude to our European expedition on the Danube: we need to take a closer, different look at Europe if we are to better understand the European nature on the Danube from Linz to Timișoara! No wonder



Unity Square in Timișoara
 (Temeswar)

that many cities in the region take their cues from Linz today - especially the European Capitals of Culture and the candidate cities. Linz has become an example of a deliberate, successful, continuous transformation.

Ups and downs of the 20th century

Europe's fate has always been decided on the river Danube. To put it another way: if past events had materialised somewhere else or differently, Europe would be a different continent today. Europe's history in this region has always moved between **heavy blows of fate** and **glorious moments** (with upheavals, turnarounds, revolutions, battles, etc.), whose repercussions can still be felt today. Despite all the heroic deeds and the love of **freedom**, however, there is an aftertaste of a predominantly **tragic history** which has left us with a few traumas and quite a few corpses, as the Czech author Jaroslav Rudiš has argued in his novel "Winterberg's Last Journey", describing Central Europe as a battlefield and morgue. Moreover, Europe's self-perception tends to be a negative one. It is sometimes diluted with (self-)irony and **sarcasm**, but isn't completely resolved, alas.

Especially the events of the 20th century have left deep scars that many people and societies along the Danube are unable to deal with. **Fascism and communism** have blurred the lines between perpetrators and victims in an unfortunate way; too many people are still personally affected today, while political parties try to make political capital out of past events.

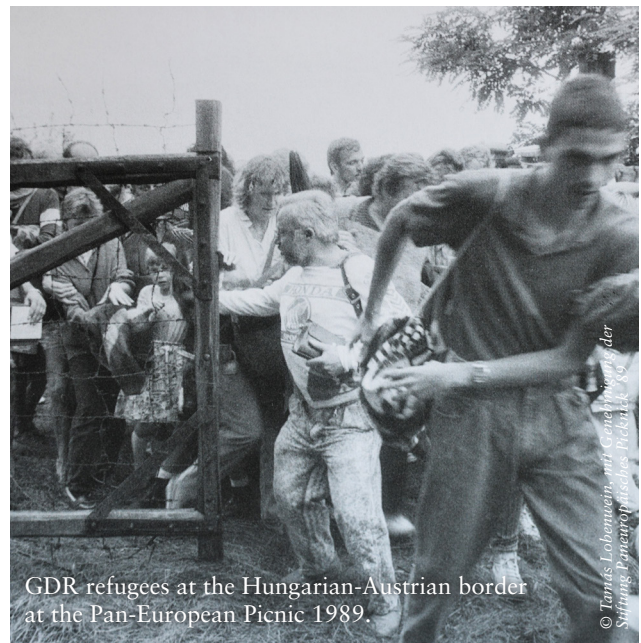
An absolute highlight of the 20th century awaits us on the so-called Iron Curtain Trail EuroVelo 13, Europe's cycle route along the former "Iron Curtain": the site of the so-called "Pan-European Picnic" of 1989 is easily accessible from the Danube on an e-bike. This place near the town of Sopron is on the list of European Heritage Sites and commemorates one of the most exciting moments in Europe's *annus mirabilis*, the turning point in the historical transition process that brought an end to the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. On 19 August 1989, the Pan-European Union, Eastern Bloc oppositionists and the Hungarian Democratic Forum organised a peace demonstration, the Pan-European Picnic, at the Austrian-Hungarian border north of Sopron.



The “picnic” was held under the patronage of Austria-Hungary’s last crown prince, Otto von Habsburg, and the author György Konrád – the latter under the protective hand of the Hungarian chief reformist and Minister of State, Imre Pozsgay. During the event, a gate in the border fence was to be symbolically opened for one hour. Participation in the event had been heavily advertised, including among GDR refugees stuck in Budapest, who had imagined their onward journey to the West to be too easy. They had come by the thousands, and when the gate was opened, almost 700 of them pushed across to the Austrian side without encountering any significant resistance. In the days that followed, border controls were tightened, but three weeks later, on 11 September, they were opened to GDR citizens without restriction.

On our journey of discovery through Danubian Europe, we will also encounter many places of 20th-century horrors. Examples include Mauthausen near Linz, or the lesser-known, circular Star Fortress in Komárom, Hungary, an imposing 16th- and 19th-century structure that served as a collection camp for Hungarian Romani deported in late 1944. The Star Fortress is a sad witness of the Europe-wide Roma Holocaust, which has been ignored for far too long: a large part of Romani deported from western Hungary was herded by Hungarian Arrow Crossers into the Star Fortress in Komárom in November and December 1944, where many of them starved or froze to death, while others were murdered by guards. In total, about eight to ten thousand internees from various ethnic groups, including prisoners of war, Hungarian Romani, Jews and political prisoners were held at the Komárom fortress in late 1944. The majority were then sent to various concentration camps in the “Third Reich”.¹

A systematic reappraisal of history has been neglected in most countries in the region during the past 30 years. The transition was too fast, the change too unexpected and sometimes unpredictable. But even today, most countries are still sluggish and inconsistent in their assessment of their role in history. In countries like Hungary, the transition from communism to democracy was a fluid one: in many cases, the old regimes supported the transition or even contributed to it. As a matter of fact, the supposedly orderly transition without bloodshed caused deep psychological wounds in society



GDR refugees at the Hungarian-Austrian border at the Pan-European Picnic 1989.

© Tamás Lohencsik - art. Cereza, www.under
 Suffering, peace of mind, P. D. K. K. K. K. K.

which become visible in the present political disunity. A special discovery tour of Budapest is recommended to those who want to better understand the region’s struggle with its own history: a look at their monuments and memorials illustrates the Hungarians’ self-image and view of the past, as well as their social discourse and controversies. Possible stopovers on this memorial tour include: the **Memorial of National Unity** (Trianon Monument of 2020 commemorating the 100th anniversary of the 1920 Treaty of Trianon); the **Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation** (a controversial monument to the victims of the German occupation, inaugurated in 2014 on Budapest’s Szabadság tér, or Liberty Square)²; the **Shoes on the Danube Bank** (a much-noted memorial on the Danube bank commemorating the pogroms against Jews towards the end of World War II); the **House of Terror** (historical museum designed as a memorial site to juxtapose fascist rule and communist dictatorship); the **Central Monument of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence** (contemporary installation erected to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the revolution); the **Memento Park** (where Marx, Engels, Lenin and many Soviet soldiers are gathered in an ironic postmodern presentation).

¹ Source: http://konfliktuskutato.hu/index.php?option=com_maps&view=map&event_id=344&tmpl=itr&Itemid=195

² Source: <https://memorialmuseums.org/staettens/druck/1567>



Creativity, innovation and the questions of the future

The Danube is the only river in the world whose kilometres are counted from the mouth, rather than the source. That is why its zero-kilometre stone isn't in the Black Forest, but on the Black Sea coast. Because it was impossible to agree on a point in the headwaters, the Danube was "turned around", as it were. There is always a way – this is the "Danubian" philosophy of life, a source of creativity and innovation in Danubian Europe. But the expedition will show that this spirit of renewal has long been more than the clichéd folkloristic notion of the cunning Eastern European. Today, the thriving region is a cradle of cutting-edge technologies, startups, design studios, creative industries and inventions, as its changeable history turns out to be a source of creative solutions. The expedition will also reveal a surprising amount of innovation and creativity in technology, in the arts, or simply in everyday life. Greater Bratislava, Győr, Esztergom and Kecskemét no longer only build cars, but are also accumulating know-how in adjoining colleges and universities. Novi Sad is a centre of the international gaming industry, of computer sciences and creative industries. As mentioned before, Linz has become a hub for futurologists who address questions of **technology, innovation and art** at the annual Ars Electronica Festival. Contemporary art is ubiquitous in this city, which aims high with the help of culture: for example, the annual

Höhenrausch project is a brainchild of the 2009 Capital of Culture year. It is a unique, multi-part art trail on the rooftops of Linz and in the attics of the former Ursuline convent, which now houses the OK centre of contemporary art.

New, **creative places** have mushroomed in many cities in the region, often in **old industrial sites** or decaying buildings converted for the purposes of art, culture and education. In Pécs, too, the creative power of contemporary art and the innovative power of sciences have joined forces. Examples include studios, contemporary galleries, the arts faculty in the Zsolnay Cultural Quarter, the new Szentágotthai Research Centre, and the Kodály Concert Hall, whose acoustics and architecture are praised across all of Europe. The Zsolnay Cultural Quarter is also home to one of the most modern planetariums in the region. The Zsolnay Cultural Quarter project stood out as a beacon from numerous projects of the 2010 Capital of Culture year: the quarter was built on the completely preserved site of the Zsolnay Porcelain Manufactory, a fairytale world of colourful gingerbread buildings with turrets, chimneys and a myriad of figures mostly from the heyday of the factory, which supplied majolica decorations, roof ceramics and statues to the entire monarchy and far beyond at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In Novi Sad, as part of the district project "Cultural Stations", the Svilara cultural centre (former silk factory) and the former Egység hunting club are precursors of the 2022 Capital of Culture programme. The so-called China Quarter, which used to be an industrial zone with small workshops and businesses, is now an impressive haven of alternative culture. It's a place where you can smell evergreen rock'n'roll spirit and listen to emerging garage bands and established musicians from the region and beyond. Underground bars, studios, alternative concerts, quirky exhibitions, small festivals and lots of graffiti ... an official part of the Capital of Culture project, the China Quarter will be relaunched as a cultural quarter with a new infrastructure, but familiar artists,³ bars and stages.

³ Source: <https://www.itinari.com/de/alternative-novi-sad-exploring-the-china-quarter-j4wl>



Separated, yet connected: contradictions and secrets

Perhaps you have read the Trieste author Claudio Magris's great Danube essay, an impressive and poetic description of "Central Europeans" on the Danube. Perhaps you have also heard of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, which has existed for a decade. And Richard von Weizsäcker famously said, referring to the East and West: "What belongs together will grow together." Important speeches, newspaper articles and poems regularly mention "the great European river", the "mother of Europe" even, i.e. the Danube as the very **definition of Europe**, alongside the Rhine. "**Rhein**" is a masculine German term representing the father. The austere, vigorous, Franco-Germanic river flows from south to north; it defines the west of the continent. "**Donau**", on the other hand, is a feminine German term denoting the mother. Flowing from west to east, the Danube is more emotional, troubled and multi-ethnic, representing the fluent transition of the continent to the east and beyond. The problem is that many interpret the relationship between Rhenish Europe and Danubian Europe as a fatal contrast, a great contradiction, when actually, for all their differences, they are more like Yin and Yang, i.e. two complementary sides of one Europe, with lots of separating, but also connecting elements.

Even the Danube itself has been a border and a bridge at the same time. The linguistic-cultural heterogeneity, constant movement and clashes on its riverbanks have made the Danube both a **border and a connection**. This **contradiction** is what makes the "other Europe" on the Danube so exciting, sometimes even mysterious. One and the same bridge would sometimes connect and sometimes separate entire systems, as the Nibelungen Bridge in Linz shows (more on this later on). The two small towns of Komárom and Komárno were once one town, called Komorn in German. This was the birthplace of Theodor Körner (1873-1957), Austria's Federal President from 1951 to 1957. The division of Komorn was a consequence of the Treaty of Trianon of 1920, which is considered a national trauma by many Hungarians and still affects the historical and political discourse in the country today. The great powers did not succeed at the time in finding a compromise acceptable to all parties concerned. Through the Tri-

anon decree, about two million Hungarians suddenly found themselves outside their own national borders – including in newly founded Czechoslovakia. The Slovak side of the river between Bratislava and Esztergom is still inhabited by a majority of Hungarians, including Komárno. The division was deep, because the border between the socialist brother states was as closely guarded as the Iron Curtain to the West. The political upheaval in 1989 made the border between Komárom and Komárno more permeable, and when Slovakia and Hungary entered the EU (2004) and later the Schengen Area (2007), a kind of "reunification" was achieved at European level without affecting the territorial integrity of the states.

Back in Roman times, there had been an important crossing at this spot of the Danube. Since 1892, the two districts/towns of Komárom and Komárno have been connected by the proud Elizabeth Bridge. To the west of the twin cities, a new road bridge was inaugurated in 2020, which has further strengthened connections and improved exchange.

Another symbolic bridge is the Mária Valéria Bridge, which connects Esztergom with Štúrovo in Slovakia. About 13,000 people live in Štúrovo, or Párkány in Hungarian, the majority of whom use Hungarian as a mother tongue but are bilingual nonetheless. People in Štúrovo claim that they have the better view of the basilica in Esztergom, which is true. The bridge was built in 1895 and blown up in 1944, but in spite of the





fact that it crossed the border between the two "friendly" socialist countries of Czechoslovakia and Hungary, the bridge was not re-erected until 2001. Instead, the piers protruded from the Danube for 57 years as a reminder of World War II. There is a project in Štúrovo that reflects the history of this bridge in a loving, cosmopolitan, and very creative way: the "Bridge Guard Residential Art" project. The bridge guard's former residence now hosts artists from all over the world, offering them an opportunity to be creative in a multicultural, historic place by the mighty Danube. The scheme was initiated by Karol Frühauf, a Swiss from Štúrovo, and his wife. The same goes for the annual AquaPhone festival, which uses artistic means to commemorate a touching story from Europe's dark, communist era: by the early 1950s, the bridge between Štúrovo and Esztergom had already been destroyed. It was virtually impossible to meet or get in touch with relatives or friends from the other side of the Danube. And yet people went down to the river on windless evenings to talk to each other, since the water carried their short, often encoded messages to the other riverbank half a kilometre away. Every year, the small AquaPhone performance festival refers to this phenomenon. It honours all fates whose secrets were once handed over to the Danube, as well as the human desire to talk to each other and people's ingenuity in overcoming borders and distances under difficult conditions.⁴

Exactly 22 years ago, the city of Novi Sad lost all its Danube bridges overnight when NATO forces intervened in the Kosovo war, flying thousands of sorties until early summer. In the



Novi Sad-European Capital of Culture 2021
new Svilara Cultural Centre

© Vladimír Velecký

process, many targets in Belgrade, such as the TV tower or the Ministry of Defence, were specifically bombed, while in Novi Sad the bridges across the Danube were destroyed. What symbolism! The Europe-wide debate about the necessity of the bombing raids is still going on today. In 2016, 17 years after the bombing, Novi Sad was selected to be the 2021 European Capital of Culture. The motto of the city's bid for the prestigious title was "For New Bridges", and it did indeed convince the European jury with its concept of promoting "the reintegration of the city and Serbia into the cultural life of Europe through the dialogue of cultures". The Capital of Culture aims high: it wants to rebuild the bridges, reinvigorate the city's multicultural tradition, and restore the European affiliation both locally and across Europe.

Unique worldwide – diversity of cultures and nature

The natural Danube landscape is known for its biodiversity - just think of the numerous reserves and national parks. There is also a unique **cultural diversity**. The Danube is unrivalled in Europe (and across the world) in terms of its diversity of co-existing ethnicities, cultures, languages, denominations and scripts. Like no other river, it stands for the oft-cited diversity of our continent, which is also its "unique selling proposition". At times, its cultures were at enmity with each other, and they still don't always get along, but they have always depended on each other. Ultimately no power, none of the nations prevailed permanently, or managed to rule for long. And so the many small languages and cultures "romp around" their **mother, the Danube**, like children, and there is always some quarrel and competition going on between them, although their individual identities merge. Jews, Germans, Roma, Lipovans, Chocats, Szeklers, Csangos ... all of these are more or less well-known cultures, languages and dialects in the Danube region practiced by Slovaks, Hungarians, Croats, Romanians, etc. and making up the diversity of Danubian Europe. Let us hope that they will last for a long time, because small ethnic groups, languages and dialects are just as endangered as biological diversity is in some places. The diversity of Bratislava is currently being rediscovered. Various layers of the city's history – its German, Austrian,

⁴ Source: http://www.aquaphone.org/2019_de.php



The synagogue in the Dohány street

© Visit Hungary

In search of Danubian diversity, a trip to the next Romanian European Capital of Culture, Timișoara, is also worthwhile. This city - just like Novi Sad – looks back on centuries of multiethnicity and multilingualism. Even today, Timișoara has three state theatres: a Romanian, a German and a Hungarian theatre - a clear proof of European coexistence in the Danube region.

The numerous minorities never had an easy life along the Danube. And what does “minority” mean, anyway? Jewish culture had been omnipresent in the Danube region since time immemorial when the incipient heyday of Judaism came to a tragic end with World War II. Nevertheless, the preservation of Jewish traditions, even the development of a new, active, self-confident Jewish life in cities like Vienna or Budapest clearly gives hope. The streetscape in Vienna’s Leopoldstadt or the cultural, religious and culinary life in Budapest’s Jewish Quarter are a good case in point.

and Hungarian character from the 19th century – are becoming more and more interesting to its old and new inhabitants. “Many realise”, notes author Michal Hvorecky, “that this is us. This is our heritage, after all, and our heritage is not a disadvantage, but an advantage. Our Jewish heritage, too, since large parts of the city used to be Jewish. What of all this are we?” Accordingly, there are thematic city walks on offer, such as “Traces of our Jewish Past” or “Traces of our Hungarian Past”. It’s a bit like the local cuisine: a very successful and balanced mixture of different influences. Just like the Danube’s waters flow together from so many different tributaries, the cuisine is composed from the overall culture of this region.⁵

The cuisine of the Slovak capital is as Central European as its history. Food in Bratislava is Central European food. Differences testify to the great variety, rather than the contrast. No wonder that certain dishes from Vienna to Lviv or from Bratislava to Ruse exist in different variations, with different names and slightly different spices.

In Pécs, too, cultural diversity is reflected in the cuisine: the Krédli inn offers specialities from the German (or “Swabian”) minority in the Pécs region, and the “flat restaurant” Kóstolda (which roughly translates to “Tastery”) is one of a kind: in a flat, Romani women have set up a small restaurant where they prepare Roma specialities. A conversation with the cooks is included in the visit!

Living together with the scattered groups of Romani and Sinti people is also an inherent part of the Danube region. Their share of the population in Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Slovakia and Hungary is significant, but their participation in public life and decision-making mechanisms is dwindling. For many Romani families, everyday life consists of poverty and exclusion. They have been waiting for centuries for integration and a productive, promising coexistence. That is why it is important to look at positive examples in the region that not only give hope but should be seen as best practice for neighbouring countries. Examples include be the Gandhi High School, a model school in Pécs; the promotion of talent through scholarship schemes like those of the famous musician Ferenc Snétberger; the art and culture initiatives in several countries; and smaller successes achieved through individual efforts, such as the flat restaurant already mentioned. In the media, the misfortune of the Romani and Sinti is always impressively thematised, but Danubian Europe now also stands for many small, local initiatives. Granted, a lot more needs to be done, but we also need to acknowledge existing initiatives!

⁵ This paragraph including the quotations of Michal Hvorecky are partly based on: Márton Méhes: Mitteleuropäisches Menü in der Staubigen Bastei. Ein Tischgespräch mit Michal Hvorecký in Bratislava. In: Kulturführer Mitteleuropa 2016, Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe, Vienna

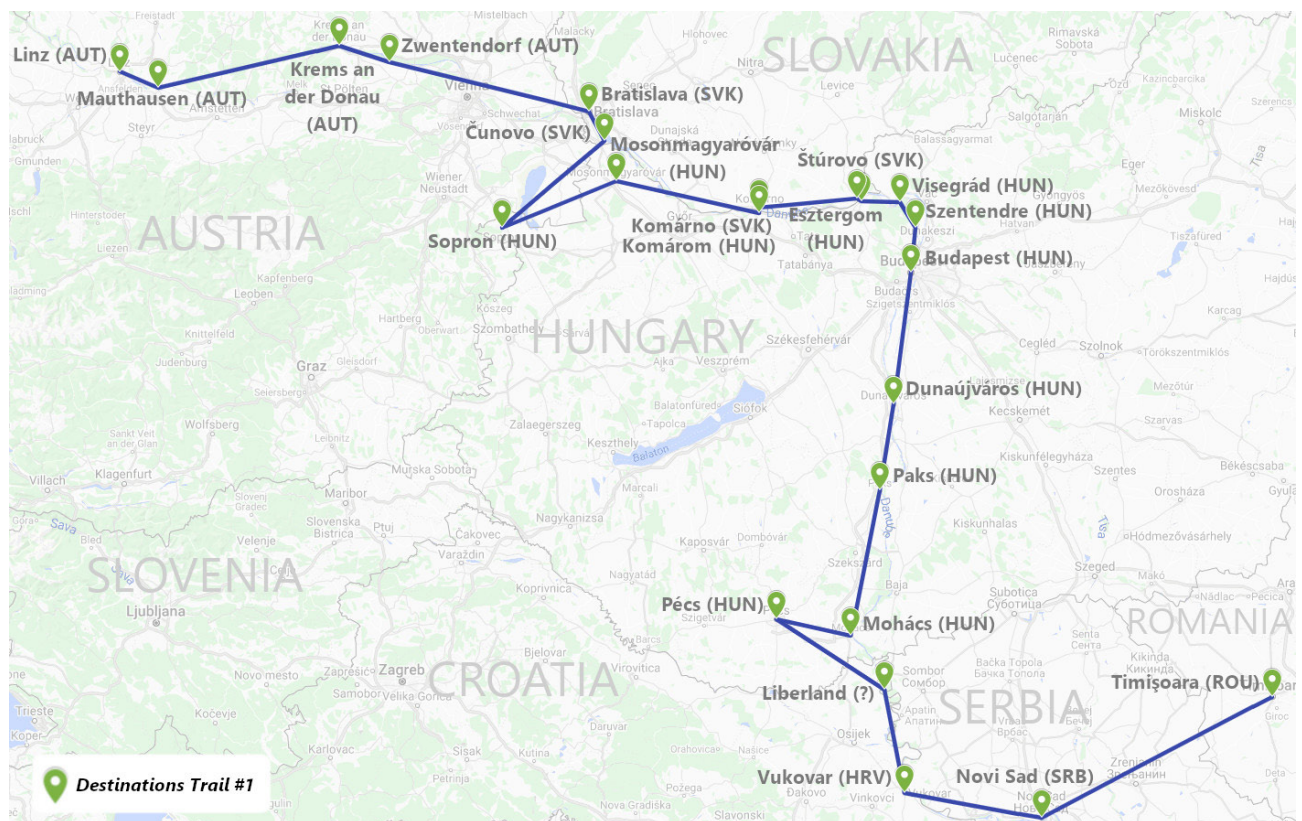
Appendix

Trail destinations & points of interest

Our project partners suggested destinations for the route, which were then supplemented by the author's own suggestions. The final list of selected destinations is marked in bold in the following list. All these cities represent several aspects of the present narrative.

The author suggests visiting additional points of interest along the route between the cities, since they illustrate certain thematic aspects of the trail. Some of them stand for lesser-known, hidden places that want to be discovered.

Linz – Mauthausen - Krems - Zwentendorf – Bratislava – Čunovo – Sopron – Mosonmagyaróvár – Komárom/Komárno – Esztergom/Štúrovo – Visegrád – Szentendre – Budapest – Dunaújváros – Paks - Mohács – Pécs – Vukovar – “Liberland” – Novi Sad – Timișoara





Linz (AT)

From the Cultural Capital of the *Führer* to the European Capital of Culture

Connections: European Capital of Culture, UNESCO City of Media Arts

Labels: upheaval/transformation, ups and downs of the 20th century, innovation/questions of the future

"Linz changes" was the motto of the European Capital of Culture Linz 09: the city on the Danube has made the great leap from the gloomy past of Nazism and grey industrial plants to becoming an innovative and creative future. European history is reflected in a single structure, the Nibelungen Bridge. Completed in 1940 as the bridge of the "Führer city", it separated occupation zones after the end of the war. Borders have always been crossed in Linz – and they still are, now that the city attracts creative, experimental and enterprising people. The Ars Electronica Center and Festival are just two cases in point.

Mauthausen (AT) – Krems (AT) – Zwentendorf (AT)

Today, the Mauthausen Concentration Camp memorial is a European place of remembrance and historical-political education.

Located in the heart of the picturesque Wachau region, Krems has developed into an international centre of culture and education on the Danube (Danube University, Kunstmeile Krems, Caricature Museum).

The small village of Zwentendorf on the Danube is known for the only nuclear power plant in Europe that was completed but never put into operation. Guided tours are offered at the plant, which is a perfect place for reflecting on civil engagement, democracy and sustainability in Europe.

Bratislava (SK)

Little-big Central Europe

Connection: project "Danube Pearls"

Labels: unique diversity, upheaval/transformation

Bratislava exemplifies the European transformation over the centuries: it was a coronation city of Hungarian kings in the monarchy era; it saw various stages of the Czechoslovak state materialise; since 1993, it has been the capital of independent Slovakia, where the economy is booming and growing faster than in many other regions of "old" Western Europe. Bratislava's inhabitants are rediscovering the historical diversity of the city: they are realising that the Jewish and Hungarian heritage is part of them. The cuisine is Central European, with many minor variations of dishes created along the Danube.

Čunovo (SK)

The Danubiana Meulensteen Museum is located on the peninsular end of a Danube embankment and is the first private museum of modern art in Slovakia.

Sopron (HU)

Pan-European Picnic at the Gateway to Freedom

Connection: European Heritage Sites

Labels: pendulum between East and West; ups and downs of the 20th century; separate yet connected

The international cycle route Iron Curtain Trail - EuroVelo 13 runs along the former Iron Curtain, which divided Europe into East and West for half a century. The site of the so-called Pan-European Picnic of 1989 on the Austro-Hungarian border near Sopron is now a European Heritage Site. It commemorates a turning point in the historic transition year of 1989. During the peace demonstration, some 700 GDR refugees crossed a border gate into Austria. The memorial park is ideal for meetings with contemporary witnesses, many of whom continue to live in Sopron.

Mosonmagyaróvár (HU)

Innovation and technology for young and old visitors at the FUTURA Interactive Science Adventure Centre.

**Komárom (HU)/
Komarno (SK)**

The Danube divides, the Danube connects

Labels: ups and downs of the 20th century, separate yet connected

The districts on the two banks of the Danube were separated in 1920 but were re-united in the course of the European unification. The newest Danube bridge was opened here in 2020. The two spectacular fortresses of Komárom tell of bright and dark chapters in the European history: the Star Fortress was a particularly sad site of the Roma Holocaust towards the end of World War II.

**Esztergom (HU)/
Štúrovo (SK)**

The voice of the Danube is the voice of the people

Labels: ups and downs of the 20th century, separate yet connected, innovation/questions of the future

The Hungarian King Stephen I was born and later crowned in Esztergom. His policies brought Hungary closer to the Christian Western world. You can reach Štúrovo in Slovakia via the Mária Valéria Bridge, which was rebuilt in 2001. The former bridge keeper's house is now an international artist residence. The annual AquaPhone festival recalls the voices of people who communicated across the water in times of separation. The inclusive Danube Museum in Esztergom brings together human, scientific and technical knowledge.

Visegrád (HU)

Central European alliance with a vision?

Labels: pendulum between East and West, upheaval/transformation, unique diversity

In 1991, the Visegrád Group was formed here, which today includes Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. The cooperation dates back to a summit meeting of the Polish, Bohemian and Hungarian kings in 1335. Visegrád Castle offers a magnificent panorama of the Danube Bend - a perfect place to learn more about the "V4" and reflect on its future role.

Szentendre (HU)

Connection: European Heritage Site

A picturesque small town exemplifying historically developed multiculturalism and multiconfessionalism, and boasting numerous small galleries and studios.

Budapest (HU)

Where there is truth, there is poetry? Monuments tell their stories

Connections: European Jewish Heritage Cultural Route, European Heritage Sites, UNESCO World Heritage Site, UNESCO City of Design

Labels: upheaval/transformation, ups and downs of the 20th century, innovation/questions of the future

Coming to terms with the past is a major challenge for the whole of Danubian Europe. Budapest's memorials and monuments offer their version of historic traumas and glorious moments. The Treaty of Trianon, occupation, revolutions, persecution, massacres, fascism and communism are retold and reinterpreted, but are often perceived very differently. Budapest is now a vibrant, diverse European metropolis where many cultures live together in peace. This is exemplified by its thriving Jewish community and by the way it deals with its Jewish cultural heritage.

Dunaújváros (HU)

Stalin's iron monster in the forest

Labels: pendulum between East and West, ups and downs of the 20th century, upheaval/transformation

The construction of "Stalin City" (Sztálinváros, now Dunaújváros) was very much in the spirit of communist planned cities built in Eastern Europe alongside a new industrial plant. Our discovery tour of socialist realist architecture ends in the forest, where the former open-air exhibition of the iron combine "presents" abandoned industrial colossi of the ironworks.¹

Paks (HU) – Mohács (HU)

The Paks nuclear power plant, a functioning counterpart to Zwentendorf, addresses questions of sustainability in the Danube region.

A battle that was lost in this place 500 years ago is a major Hungarian trauma and European drama. How does remembrance culture work here today?

Pécs (HU)

Kiss awake two thousand years of European history

Connection: Roman Emperors Wine Route, UNESCO World Heritage Site, European Capital of Culture 2010

Labels: upheaval/transformation, pendulum between East and West, unique diversity

Roman catacombs, Ottoman mosques, traces of the Renaissance, Habsburg architecture, Bauhaus and socialist modernism: Pécs is a (Central) European microcosm. The 2010 Capital of Culture programme brought a concert hall with multi-award-winning architecture and acoustics, but above all the resurrection of the Zsolnay Porcelain Manufactory, a fairytale world of colourful gingerbread buildings with turrets, chimneys and a myriad of figures.

Vukovar (HR)

Between war wounds and future prospects

Connection: Transdanube Pearls project

Labels: ups and downs of the 20th century, upheaval/transformation

Vukovar must not be reduced to the war, even if the city with its significant water tower, which was shot to pieces and later rebuilt, is a memento of the Yugoslav Wars. In the meantime, Vukovar has reinvented itself completely, boasting lots of culture from the Stone Age to contemporary art. The Vukovar Film Festival is dedicated to new productions from the Danube region.

„Liberland“ (HR/RS)

The cryptostate of "Liberland" is a small stretch of Danubian land between Croatia and Serbia that is unclaimed by either. It remains unrecognized, but the fact that it was proclaimed here should be seen as a warning that, while the 1990s Balkan Wars may be over, the border disputes are not.²

Novi Sad (RS)

New bridges to Europe

Connection: European Capital of Culture 2022, European Route of Jewish Heritage

Labels: upheaval/transformation, ups and downs of the 20th century, innovation/questions of the future, unique diversity

Just 22 years ago, during the Kosovo War, NATO bombed the Danube bridges in Novi Sad. In 2022, the city is going to be the European Capital of Culture under the motto "For New Bridges". Novi Sad is proud of its multicultural tradition, but is also trying to reinvent itself. The university, the gaming industry and festivals are high on the agenda in the young city. New creative spots are emerging through revitalisation of industrial sites.

¹ Read more here: Gábor Tenczer: Aus Stalinstadt in den Zauberwald. In: Kulturführer Mitteleuropa 2018, Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe, Vienna

² Read more here: <https://www.dw.com/de/mikrostaat-liberland-eine-donau-halbinsel-wird-unabh%C3%A4ngig/a-40009662>

Timișoara (RO)

Overcoming its own past and shining on Europe

Connection: European Capital of Culture 2023, European Route of Jewish Heritage

Labels: upheaval/transformation, ups and downs of the 20th century, innovation/questions of the future, unique diversity

The future European Capital of Culture 2023 is a place of multiethnicity and multilingualism. Romanian, German and Hungarian theatres in Timișoara are strong symbols of European coexistence in the Danube region. The city tells a European story of departure, dictatorship and revolution, and recently also one of cultural innovation.

About the author

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Danube for the soul

(by Dominik Heher, coordination/text)



Summary

Danube for the soul

This Danube trail stretches from Hungary to Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania. It presents us with impressive, shocking, sometimes heartbreaking witnesses of a past ranging from the Stone Age to the 20th-century Holocaust; witnesses reflecting the people's pursuit for dominance and exclusiveness, and their tolerance or intolerance in the realm of faith. Religions and their adherents have no doubt done a lot of good, but their striving for supremacy and their claim to exclusivity of faith has also caused a lot of grief. All of these can be found in the Danube region. The pre-Christian era was characterised by the quest for divinity and the desire to comprehend spiritual and supernatural phenomena. With the Christian faith came socio-cultural claims to power, exclusiveness and authority of interpretation. These went hand in hand with monuments, rituals, narratives, and historic figures such as saints, martyrs, and dynasties like the Habsburgs or Ottomans, who – invoking Catholic or Muslim creation myths – regarded themselves as divinely gifted powers. They could be very tolerant, or discriminatory against other ideologies. In any case, the synergy between secular rulers and religious structures yielded magnificent periods of art, and buildings such as domes, abbeys, and monuments. Art and public spaces in the Danube region reflect the fact that faith has been a source of meaning and a means of hegemony. Contemplation on the one hand and demonstration of power, pomp and representation on the other developed in the context of something higher, something supernatural that impressed people and gave them pride and orientation, or in fact frightened and humiliated them.

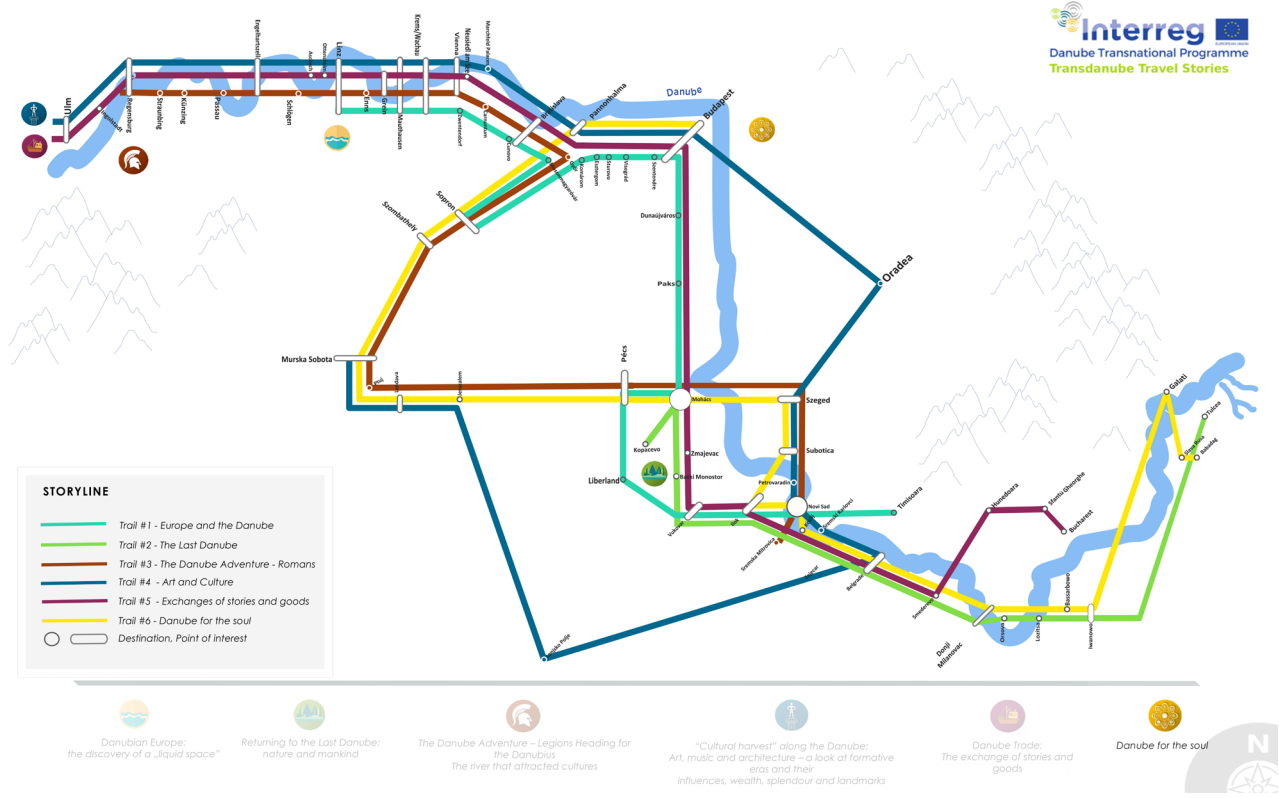
Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodoxy, Islam, and of course Judaism – all these religions solidified in the Danube region in such a way that not only individuals, ethnic groups and nations identified with them, but that entire states and territories split up and repeatedly reunited because of them. Rome and Byzantium met here as rivals in proxy wars. The 20th century saw unprecedented atrocities sparked off by atheist or alternative religious movements oscillating between National Socialism and Communism. The Danube region

and its inhabitants have always been at the heart of these developments. Faith brought exchange and relations, whether through pilgrimage, crusades, expulsion or resettlement. Which begs the question: Will capitalist and neoliberal Europe bring about a sense of togetherness and a new heyday, or will it cause alienation and hardship in the Danube region?

Make no mistake: The Danube for the soul is still out there! It takes the shape of impressive churches and monasteries, where spiritual life is characterised by retreat and contemplation; also the shape of historic buildings; the shape of the customs and rituals of numerous religious and ethnic groups; the shape of people who defy secularisation and adhere to their faith, and will continue to do so for generations to come ...

Against this background, any journey along the Danube shows that there are many shades of grey (or blue, as it were) between social commitment and social withdrawal, between personal reflexion and missionary zeal, between community building and marginalisation. That is to say that any journey along the Danube is a journey to a great number of – often forgotten – customs; a journey of self-discovery.

Summary written by Georg Steiner



Danube for the soul

The circular eyes of the squatting figures stare upwards as though seeking for help, while the downward-pointing corners of their fish-lipped mouths lend their faces almost exaggeratedly desperate features. It is as if these hybrid creatures, half-man, half-fish, had turned into stone the very moment they escaped the Danube, and wished nothing more than to be allowed to return. Since their sensational discovery, the intriguing sculptures of Lepenski Vir (POI), Serbia, have become icons of Stone Age art in the Danube basin. What might have driven people to create those stone sculptures, which still fascinate us today despite – or precisely because of – their crude features?

We cannot be sure what the figurines were supposed to embody. They were placed in the same spot in almost all houses and obviously had a cultic function. Perhaps they reminded their owners of mythical ancestors, or embodied guardian deities. The excavators, very much like loving parents, proudly chose such imaginative names as “Danubius” or “Water Fairy” for the most remarkable figurines, and it does indeed seem likely that the fish-like sculptures would have been associated with the one element that shaped the lives of the people of Lepenski Vir like no other: the river Danube. Like virtually every Mesolithic and Neolithic settlement in the Danube basin, Lepenski Vir was built directly on the riverbank, above a whirlpool in the river. The Danube provided food and protection, and especially the annual spawning migration of gigantic sturgeon must have seemed to the people to be a gift from higher powers. So why not introduce the life-giving stream to their system of faith? In fact, the deification of rivers can be found in many cultures. It is well known, for example, that Celts and Germanic tribes attributed a river god to the Danube whom the Romans appropriated in their pantheon under the name of “Danubius”.

The prehistoric realm of faith will always remain a mystery to us for lack of records. Yet there is every likelihood that such a realm existed. The oldest archaeological evidence of beliefs that could be regarded as cultic-religious can be found in the form of burials and funerary goods dating back approximately 120,000 years. So, the search for explanations for the inexplicable, the pondering over the supernatural,



has occupied mankind for quite some time. The relationship between man as an individual, society, and the transcendental has since assumed countless forms ranging from sincere personal piety to unscrupulous instrumentalisation. Even today, in our supposedly rational age that boasts of having pushed faith into the background, the search for spirituality remains a constant of human life that continues to generate new forms of expression.

A quest

In many ways, the Danube region resembles a laboratory in which not only the history of Europe but the entire spectrum of human behaviour, political organisation, and social upheavals can be observed – a microcosm, as it were. Travelling along the Danube with open eyes and an open mind will teach you a lot about the relationship between people and the supernatural. The Danube basin has always been a melting pot of the most diverse religions, a place of exchange, compassion and tolerance, but also a breeding ground for radical views and a battlefield where the heated controversy over true faith was all too often fought out with the sword.

The individual quest for spirituality never takes place under sterile laboratory conditions. It is always informed by experiences and expectations, and is in permanent interaction with contemporary discourses, living conditions, and power

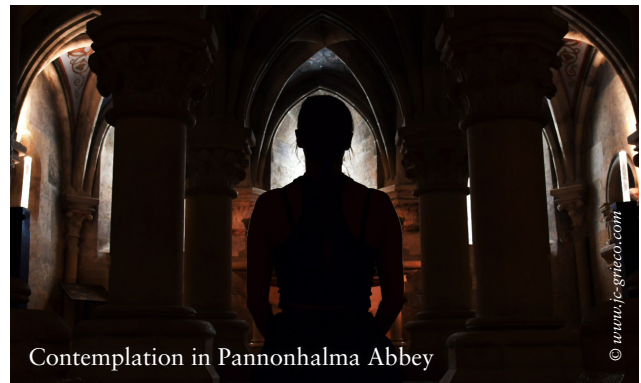
structures. As modern-day travellers, we come across past manifestations of faith in the form of monuments, rituals and stories. But we also often stumble upon traces of the lost and forgotten, and when we do, abandoned Roman temples will usually move us far less than decaying synagogues. Sometimes the reconstruction of the past has to draw on stories, photographs, or archaeological finds. Just think of the countless mosques and Muslim cemeteries along the Lower Danube, which were deliberately razed to the ground after the respective “war of liberation”.

The Danube region has brought forth its own religious practices, myths, legends, and artistic forms of expression, but also its own saints and religious luminaries, whose commitment to faith was – and still is – emulated by others. We shall meet some of them during our quest.

The journey is the reward

Buda, 1541: Everyone flocked to the burial of the great dervish Gül Baba. Even Sultan Suleyman and his generals were present. Only a few days before, the fortress of Buda had fallen into their hands. Yet Gül Baba could only savour this triumph in the name of Islam for a short time. He collapsed during the first Friday prayer and died. The world had lost a charismatic benefactor, gifted poet and leading religious figure. While the funeral was still proceeding, Suleyman decreed that Gül Baba must never be forgotten. He would declare him the patron saint of Buda and have his tomb turned into a magnificent pilgrimage site so that the faithful could continue to be close to him and cherish his work.

The tomb (*türbe*) of Gül Baba (POI) that Suleyman the Magnificent had erected on Budapest’s so-called Rose Hill is still a fascinating relic of the Ottoman rule and is now regarded as the northernmost pilgrimage site of Islam. The sultan probably had no idea at the time that he himself would soon become a subject of veneration. He died during a campaign near Szigetvár. His body was taken back to Constantinople, but his heart and other organs were buried near Szigetvár, where a pilgrimage centre developed very soon. Its remains were forgotten after the expulsion of the Ottomans and were only rediscovered a few years ago in the vineyards outside the city.



Contemplation in Pannonhalma Abbey

One might think that the human approach to the supernatural is primarily a spiritual one, and yet people long to see the invisible, to feel the intangible, and grasp the ungraspable (in the truest sense of the word). Statues of gods, images of saints, relics and ritual acts, but also pilgrimages to sites regarded as holy bear witness to this deeply human longing for the haptic and physically tangible. Take Islam, for example, where the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is a pillar of faith.

Pilgrimage has also always played a major role in Christianity. By the 4th century, the infrastructure was expanded in the Holy Land to accommodate pious travellers, including a souvenir industry and tourist guides. When Christianity spread across Europe (more on this later), many other sites of pilgrimage were established, while a trip to the Holy Land remained the ultimate objective. The land route to the East followed the course of the Danube approximately to Belgrade, then across the Balkan Peninsula to Constantinople. This was also the route the Irishman Coloman had in mind when he made his pilgrimage down the Danube in the early 11th century. However, his pious journey came to an abrupt end in Stockerau, Austria, where inhabitants suspected the stranger of being a hostile Bohemian spy and hanged him on a scrawny elder bush. When the corpse did not decompose and the shrub suddenly began to blossom again, it dawned on the Stockerauers that lynching the man had been an error of justice. Before long, the unfortunate pilgrim was a revered saint. Saint Coloman can be seen as an example of the risks people were willing to take in order to find, strengthen or display their faith on a pilgrimage.



When Jerusalem, which had already been under Muslim rule for centuries, (temporarily) closed its gates to Christian pilgrims, the crusade movement was born. The idea was plain and simple: pilgrimages, which had enjoyed great popularity before, would now become “armed pilgrimages”, or organised war tourism, as it were, with the aim of wresting Jerusalem from the pagans. From then on, pilgrims travelling east down the Danube with their sticks were increasingly joined by armed fundamentalists. Those unwilling to embark on the long journey to the Holy Land could opt to make a pilgrimage to “Jeruzalem” (POI) in modern-day Slovenia from the late 12th century onwards. The place, which is now located in the heart of a picturesque wine region, received its prestigious name from German crusaders who were grateful for their safe return. From Palestine, they brought an icon in reminiscence of real Jerusalem. A Baroque copy of the icon still adorns the church today.



This goes to show that man is riveted by anything haptic-sensual. Those striving to rid themselves from materiality and to approach divinity through asceticism and meditation were well-advised to resist as many temptations as possible and seek happiness in deserts, remote caves, or behind high monastery walls.

Watch or act?

Basarbovo, 1937: With every step Hrisat the priest took amidst the ruins he became more and more aware of how much work lay ahead of him. For centuries, the rock monastery had been a home to monks who had turned their backs on the hustle and bustle of the rest of the world in search of God. The ascetic Dimitrii, for example, had left his mark on the monastery over 300 years ago and had become its patron saint. Back in the day, there had been a thriving community in Basarbovo, but the last monks had left the monastery long ago. Hrisat was not in the position to compete with the great Dimitrii, but he did have a vision: he would settle here and sow the seed for a new monastic community.

Hrisat’s efforts were crowned with success. The rock-hewn **monastery of Basarbovo (POI)** near the Bulgarian Danube hub of Russe is now home to a vibrant community of monks. The same cannot be said of the nearby **rock monasteries of Ivanovo (POI)**, which are even more imposing. These may only be mere museums today, but they are just as spectacular witnesses of the hardships that some people are willing to shoulder in search of God.

Little seems as anachronistic in our globalised and networked world as the deliberate decision to retreat into solitude. And yet the longing for an introverted life makes itself felt in every one of us occasionally, for it seems to be an inherent part of human existence. It is no coincidence that most religious movements also apply techniques of meditation, asceticism and reflection on the self. The ideal of a *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life) had already been declared a maxim by Plato and Aristotle. Early Christian Egypt produced hermitism and the first monastic communities based on a military model. These two forms of contemplative life were to be exemplary for orders of the Latin Church and for the monastic traditions of the Eastern Church and had a massive influence on Europe for centuries. In times of crisis, monasteries both in the East and in the West proved to be bastions of culture and education and could be even powerful political players in spite – or because – of the fact that they sometimes took liberties with their own, self-imposed ideals of modesty. But their secular power and contemplative orientation would spell doom for a lot of western monasteries. Reformation put



an end to many of them, while others were secularised in the course of Enlightenment reforms or were given charitable or pastoral tasks. In the Eastern Church, monasteries were able to hold their own even under Ottoman rule and were celebrated after the withdrawal of the Ottomans as preservers of national identity. These include the Serbian monasteries on Fruška Gora south of the Danube near Novi Sad.

The call for secularisation only resounded later in the East. The prestigious **Kovilj Monastery (POI)** near Novi Sad was abandoned by its monks in 1980 after the communist government had deprived it of its means of existence through extensive expropriation. Thanks to the efforts of three monks, the monastery was given a new lease of life in 1990. Today, Kovilj is particularly famous for its choir, honey and rakia, but also for its social commitment. Since 2004, the monks have been running a rehabilitation centre under the project title “Zemlja živih” (“Land of the Living”), where monks and former victims support drug-addicted young people on their way back to normal life.

This illustrates that the *vita contemplativa* cannot always be strictly separated from the *vita activa*, i. e. active life. The latter includes work, politics, but also charitable activities, in short: interaction with other people. According to Christian interpretation, to fulfil these tasks of the *vita activa* is to please God and thus find salvation. Yet sometimes the Lord moves in mysterious ways, as even some saints were to find out. Saint Severinus, for example, had gone into the desert as a hermit, but then made a name for himself in the area between Passau and Vienna as a busy crisis manager and skilful refugee coordinator (presumably with no official mandate), while Roman rule was imploding in Noricum Ripense. Or take Saint Martin of Tours: born in Savaria (now Szombathely, Hungary), he eventually gave up both his famous officer’s coat and his Roman faith and retired as a hermit near Poitiers. However, the people of Tours made him return to active life by acclaiming him bishop. Apparently, the treacherous cackling of the geese had betrayed his hiding place, but it was his unblemished reputation that had driven the people into his arms. By the way, you can now make a pilgrimage in his footsteps along the Via Sancti Martini through half of Europe.

According to Christian understanding, missionary work was also considered honourable in terms of a *vita activa*. And so the circle comes complete, because faith could hardly be spread if it weren’t for the monasteries’ untiring efforts.

Everything flows

Pannonhalma, 1001: King Stephen and Queen Gisela took great delight in the monastery on Saint Martin’s Hill, which had just been completed. The King granted generous privileges to the Benedictines summoned from Bavaria, his wife’s homeland, and placed the abbey under the control of the Pope himself. The monastery was to become a bulwark of the new faith, the key to baptising Hungary, since most of his subjects were still pagans. Papal envoys had been tirelessly pointing out to Stephen for years that the Christianisation of Hungary was in his own best interest and that he would no doubt benefit from a good relationship with the Holy See. Only recently had the Pope sent him the long-awaited crown with which Stephen had had himself crowned the first Hungarian king. Now it was a matter of convincing the sceptics among his subjects of the benefits of the new faith.



Saint Martini Church in Szombathely

In fact, the **Abbey of Pannonhalma (POI)** on Saints Martin’s Hill near Győr turned out to be the engine of the Christianisation of Hungary. The Magyar horse people had migrated to Europe from eastern steppes relatively late and had long remained faithful to their gods. Stephen’s father Géza had been



the first to be christened, which apparently did not prevent him from continuing to sacrifice to the old gods, just to be on the safe side, so to speak. The Hungarian elite had plunged into a crisis after a number of disastrous defeats at the hands of German knights. Géza realised that the time had come to break up old clan structures and establish a monarchy following the Western example. To that end, the acceptance of Christianity was at least beneficial, or even indispensable. Under his son Stephen, the process of Christianisation and the establishment of a monarchy was concluded for the time being. Stephen introduced Hungary to the concert of Christian powers and was eventually canonised for his services to Christianity.



Pannonhalma Abbey

The Christianisation of Hungarians is only one of countless examples of how religions competed for the souls of people in the Danube basin. As is often the case, the only constant was change. Although it has to be said that the real dispute over truth only arose when the monotheistic religions claimed exclusivity. When the Romans ruled the Danube region, their pantheon offered identification figures for most of the subjugated peoples' gods. If there was no equivalent, new cults could simply be integrated, provided they were compatible. Because the Roman provinces were closely connected and the legions regularly relocated, local cults spread often throughout the empire. It is not at all surprising, therefore,

that in Savaria, now **Szombathely (POI)**, Hungary, we should find the renovated remains of a temple dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Isis. This must have been one of the largest and most important cultic sites in all of Pannonia. The Oriental cult of Mithras, whose traces can be found everywhere along the Danube, for example in Carnuntum, Aquincum (Óbuda), Nicopolis (Nikopol) or Durostorum (Silistra), also enjoyed great popularity.

Only the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity could not be squeezed into this mosaic. They stretched the Roman tolerance to its limits, and the rulers weren't reluctant to take drastic measures against the mulish troublemakers. But the rise of Christianity was unstoppable. Emperor Constantine the Great was openly sympathetic to the Christian God, regarded himself as some sort of apostle and allowed Christians to practise their faith. About 80 years later, Christianity was elevated to the status of the only permissible religion in the Roman Empire. Ecclesiastical administrative structures developed across the empire and churches mushroomed everywhere. The Danube region also underwent a profound Christianisation.

Back to the drawing board

Yet this stage victory of the cross was not yet its final triumph. The turmoil during the Migration Period heralded the decline of the Western Roman Empire, although at least its bankrupt estate was liquidated mostly by Christianised Germanic peoples (of Aryan denomination). The Hungarian "late adopters" mentioned before were an exception.

The Eastern Roman Empire, on the other hand, survived the crisis, but lost almost the entire Balkans to the pagan peoples of the Avars, Slavs and, later, the Bulgarians. So, it was back to the drawing board. The Danube region was now Christianised for the second time, but the circumstances had changed completely. This was no longer a matter of religious imperial reform, but one of convincing independent rulers of the benefits of the Christian faith. Moreover, Western and Eastern Christian views on true faith had by now drifted apart considerably. Rome and Constantinople engaged in a downright race for the souls of the Slavs in particular, who



Temple of the Holy Sava in Belgrad

had become the decisive factor in the middle and lower Danube regions. At the end of the day, Rome managed to proselytise the northern Slavs in Poland, Bohemia and Moravia, and to baptise the Hungarians (including Croatians), while Byzantine Christianity was adopted in the Russian region and along the lower Danube (and in present-day Russia, of course). The Serbs and Bulgarians founded strong and independent sister churches of Constantinople, which adopted essential features of Orthodox spirituality. The overwhelming **Temple of Saint Sava in Belgrade (POI)** still symbolises the orientation towards Byzantium today. While other buildings of the young Serbian state followed Western models, Saint Sava was given a Neo-Byzantine look with a dome and gold mosaics. One of the latter ranks among the largest mosaics in the Orthodox part of the world, covering an area of about 15,000 m². It was completed only recently, with expertise and capital from Russia. The centuries-old ties between the Orthodox sister churches are traditionally strong. Religion and politics are still closely linked today.

In the light of the crescent moon

While the Byzantine Empire was still struggling to survive in the Balkans, Islam began to gain a foothold in the Danube

basin from the 1260s onwards. The first Muslims did not come as enemies. The Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos granted a group of allied Oghuz Turks from Anatolia settlement areas in what was then the no man's land of Dobruja. Among them was the dervish Sari Saltuk, who was one of the first generation of Muslim missionaries in the Danube region. He was a member of the Bektashi, an Alevi dervish order that had been founded shortly before in Anatolia. The famous Sufi is described as charismatic, sociable and tolerant. From early on, his life was surrounded by fairytale legends, one being that he came to Dobruja with 40 companions on flying carpets. In some stories, the figure of Sari Saltuk even merges with the Christian saints George and Nicholas. In the Romanian **Babadag (POI)** ("Mountain of the Father"), an unspectacular *türbe* commemorates the fascinating dervish, which became a popular Muslim pilgrimage site visited even by sultans in the Middle Ages. Sari Saltuk is held in great esteem across the Balkans, as is also reflected in the fact that six other sites claim to be the saint's final resting place.

About a generation after Sari Saltuk's death began the Ottoman military expansion on European soil. Along with Ottoman conquests, the Muslim faith spread northwards in the Balkans and along the Danube. The Bektashi, who were also closely associated with the Janissary elite corps, continued to play a major role in the missionary work. Bulgaria was to remain under Muslim rule for almost half a millennium, Serbia for almost 250 years, and Hungary for 150 years. The rule of the High Porte went along with profound cultural and religious changes which are barely visible today. Virtually nothing remains of the once-rich Muslim heritage in modern-day Belgrade. Very much like Bulgaria and Hungary, Serbia was eager to erase the traces of an era that had persistently been stigmatised as a dark age of subjugation by a foreign power in a national "struggle for liberation". This reduced scruples about converting or demolishing Muslim places of worship and turning their cemeteries into building plots.

Belgrade is an example of how Islam was pushed back. Of approximately 80 mosques in the city, which must have seemed even to 19th-century travellers an almost surreal threshold to the Orient, only the **Bajrakli Mosque (POI)** has survived. Situated at the foot of the Kalemegdan Park, the domed structure with its massive ashlar block walls looks a little lost be-

tween the taller neighbouring buildings. In the 18th century, the “flag mosque” used to be the leading mosque in the city, with a flag hoisted on its minaret to set the tone for other Muslim places of worship. Today, the Bajrakli Mosque is the centre of Belgrade’s Muslim community.

Between protection and pogrom

It almost goes without saying that Judaism was also firmly rooted in a multicultural area like the Danube region. The Jews in Christian Europe were always in a precarious situation and were dependent on the protection of local sovereigns. However, they usually only enjoyed this protection if their presence was economically beneficial to their patrons. They constantly faced the risk of being expropriated or banished.

Life was easier for most Jews living in the Ottoman Empire at about the same time. In return for paying a poll tax, they enjoyed a higher status than their brothers and sisters in Christian empires. In 1470, Rabbi Isaac Zarfati even sent a letter to the German-speaking Jewish communities recommending that they settle in the Ottoman Empire. In 1492, when all Jewish subjects were expelled by the Spanish Crown (i. e. more than a hundred thousand people), they were welcomed with open hands by Sultan Bayezid II. The cities along the lower Danube can also look back on a great Jewish tradition. In the commercial metropolis of **Galați (POI)**, for example, Jews made up about one fifth of the population before the Holocaust, that is approximately 20,000 people. Today, the Jewish community numbers about 250 members. Only one of more than 20 synagogues has survived. The former size and wealth of their communities is still (or again) reflected in their magnificent synagogues, such as those of Constanta and of the factory settlement in Timișoara, but especially that of **Subotica (POI)**. The latter is the only synagogue in the world that was built in Art Nouveau style. It has only recently been restored to its former glory. It is a cultural monument of the highest order. But it is also too large for the needs of the city’s 250-soul congregation, which does not even have a rabbi and uses a modest room in the community centre for prayers.

It is almost impossible not to fall into a melancholic mood when you look at these former prayer houses. They used to

be beacons of a religious worldview and intellectual culture that had a decisive influence on Europe; now, they stand as memorials reminding us of one of the darkest eras of our continent. Traces of this crime against humanity can be found throughout the Danube basin, including in the Slovenian region of **Prekmurje (POI)**, which has been a paragon of multilingualism, multiculturalism and religious openness for centuries. Religious leaders stood out as examples for interfaith dialogue, and close contacts were kept between Catholics, Lutherans and Jews. Nonetheless, the Jewish community was also deported from this region in 1944: the abandoned synagogue of Murska Sobota was destroyed, while that of nearby Lendava was brought into use again for cultural events. Lendava is also home to the only surviving Jewish cemetery in the region.



Of course, the attempt to exterminate the Jews was not primarily religiously motivated. Like the Roman persecution of Christians, the partly forced Christianisation of “pagans”, and the mutual victimisation of Muslims and Christians, it was driven by power-political interests, deliberate sedition and the instrumentalisation of faith. And yet, despite all struggles for supremacy, the Danube region always remained a melting pot of minorities of any religious orientation. Even the duel between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, which has frequently been described as a religious war, conceals at first glance that the two seemingly monolithic giants were in fact colourful conglomerates, at least in the Danube region.



United in faith?

Ilok, 1456: It was clear to John that he would not recover. Here, in the Franciscan monastery of Ilok, amidst his brothers, he would breathe his last. He was at peace with himself. Throughout his life he had fought for the right faith, be it as an advisor to kings and popes or as a merciless inquisitor, preacher and religious warrior. He had always taken courageous action against those who defended Jews and Hussites and thus undermined Catholic doctrine. Hadn't he been one of the first to warn of the Turkish danger? His golden tongue had convinced thousands to take the cross and follow him down the Danube to defend Belgrade. Against all odds, the fortress stood the siege, but the victory claimed many victims. John escaped the bullets of the Ottomans, but not the rampant epidemic in the army camp. He knew that his hours were numbered, but he would take his leave pure in heart, for he knew that he had fulfilled God's mission.

John of Capistranus, the heroic defender of Belgrade, who died in the **Franciscan monastery of Ilok (POI)**, would probably be regarded today as a fundamentalist hardliner and radical preacher of hate. In fact, it seems his achievements were controversial even back in the day. Soon after John's death, voices were raised calling for his canonisation. But there were strong objections, arguing that John had been full of rage and anger in battle and had played up his own role, thirsty for glory. Apparently, the accusations were not entirely unfounded.

It was not until 200 years later that time was ripe for a new attempt. John's devotees had gathered supposed evidence of miraculous healings which, albeit disputed, seemed sufficient for a canonisation in 1690.

It is obvious that John's canonisation must be regarded against the background of the "Great Turkish War" (1683-1699). Seven years before John's canonisation, the onslaught of the Ottomans had crashed against the walls of Vienna for the second time. But in contrast to the defeat of 1529, the Sultan's army was now driven down the Danube by a Christian army. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, the Occident seemed to have gained the upper hand in the middle Danube region. When it came to fuelling the burgeoning enthusiasm for the fight against the Turks, the canonisation of the pugnacious war preacher Capistranus came in handy.

The inner-city **parish church of Pécs (POI)**, Hungary, is a wonderful example of how the human species uses places of worship to mark its territory: after the Ottomans had taken the city in 1543 on their advance up the Danube, they had converted the church of Saint Bartholomew into a mosque. Later, they demolished the building and erected a "proper" mosque in its place. When the Christians drove out the Ottomans in 1686, they in turn consecrated the mosque as a church. Despite several reconstructions, the building is still a bizarre hybrid today, bearing witness to the long Christian-Muslim tug-of-war on the Danube.

At the end of the long conflict, the Ottomans were forced to cede their territorial claims to Hungary including Transylvania and most of Croatia (roughly Slavonia), later also to the Banat. Naturally, the geopolitical chess game was accompanied by a constant mixing of populations. The areas conquered by the Christian armies, especially Vojvodina and Banat, became a magnet for Christian immigrants. In 1690, Serbs in particular left their Ottoman-controlled homes for the areas north to the Danube and the Sava. This migration movement, which Serbian historiographers have glorified as the "Great Migration", was led by Patriarch Arsenije III. Emperor Leopold I immediately granted the newcomers privileges and allowed Arsenije to establish a metropolis that would henceforth be responsible for all Serbian Orthodox subjects of the Habsburg Empire.

Christianity undoubtedly formed a strong bond in the "Wild Southeast" of the Habsburg Empire. The fact that the Orthodox and the Catholic churches were sometimes irreconcilably opposed on many issues did not matter at first, as long as they were united in the defense against infidels. In fact, the Serbian and Croatian frontiersmen justly earned a reputation as Habsburg's most loyal soldiers.

Very much like the Ottoman rule, the Habsburg rule entailed cultural changes that are still visible today across Vojvodina in the form of Serbian Orthodox churches executed in perfect Austrian Baroque style. Built in the 18th century, the **Church of St. Nicholas in Szeged (POI)**, Hungary, is a wonderful example of this cultural reference. It is hard to distinguish from Baroque Catholic churches with neo-classicist elements



from the outside and only reveals itself as a Serbian Orthodox church inside. But even the pompous interior decoration and the iconostases in Baroque and Rococo styles contrast strongly with Byzantine-Serbian models. The same goes for many other churches. In fact, most Orthodox churches in Vojvodina that were built in the same era have similar features. Other examples include the Cathedral of St. Nicholas in Sremski Karlovci and the Cathedral Church of Novi Sad from 1734, which was largely rebuilt in its old form after destruction in 1849.

However, we must not regard cultural appropriation as evidence of a smooth coexistence of confessions at eye level. As soon as the Ottoman danger seemed averted, the Viennese Court made occasional attempts to Catholicise the Serbian Orthodox population. Under the increasing pressure, many Serbs emigrated to Russia, while the metropolitans of Karlowitz promoted the consolidation of the Orthodox religion, but also of the Serbian language and culture, thus promoting a national identity. The Byzantine form language was reinvigorated in the search for this Serbian identity and past. Baroque churches were no longer much in demand.

The House of Habsburg was not exactly squeamish about its Protestant subjects, either. The situation in the Austrian Hereditary Lands came to a head during the 16th century, when many reformists were forced to emigrate to the Kingdom of Hungary, where they were granted more liberties. The Viennese court also indirectly encouraged the spread of the Protestant faith through its settlement policy in Vojvodina and Banat, which had been conquered by the Ottomans and were partly deserted. Looking for colonists, they recruited Hungarians, Slovaks and the German-speaking community, including many Protestant families. These, too, were more likely to be tolerated in the border region, but when the Ottoman danger was averted, the Slovaks became the target of Hungarian nationalism. Nevertheless, they continue to be a significant minority in northern Serbia. Their main church is in Novi Sad (POI).

The mosaic of peoples in the Ottoman Empire and its vassal states was about as colourful as Vojvodina. Clusters of various Christian churches, synagogues and mosques in commercial centres such as Galați or Brăila are still an expression of multiculturalism in the Danube region.

The “exotic” Lipovans continue to live in the Danube delta. Their roots are in the Russian Orthodox Church, but they were forced to emigrate after rejecting Patriarch Nikon’s reforms. They gradually left their homeland from the 1660s onwards. Most of these “Old Believers” initially settled in southern Bessarabia and in the Danube delta, whose inaccessible location provided protection from the state. Later, they also migrated to northern Dobruja. One of the Lipovans’ most important places of worship in the Delta is the **Uspe-
nia Monastery near Slava Rusá (POI)**, not far west of Lake Razim. Today, about 100,000 people still regard themselves as Lipovans, mostly in Romania and in Ukraine. They have succeeded in preserving not only their old faith but also their language and culture. Many Lipovan villages have bilingual town signs, and there is a Lipovan political party in Romania.

This is where both the Danube, Europe’s river of rivers, and our search for traces of faith in its catchment area end. The diversity of our continent is best – and most concisely – experienced during a journey through the Danube region, which reveals at a glance the abundance of religious currents that



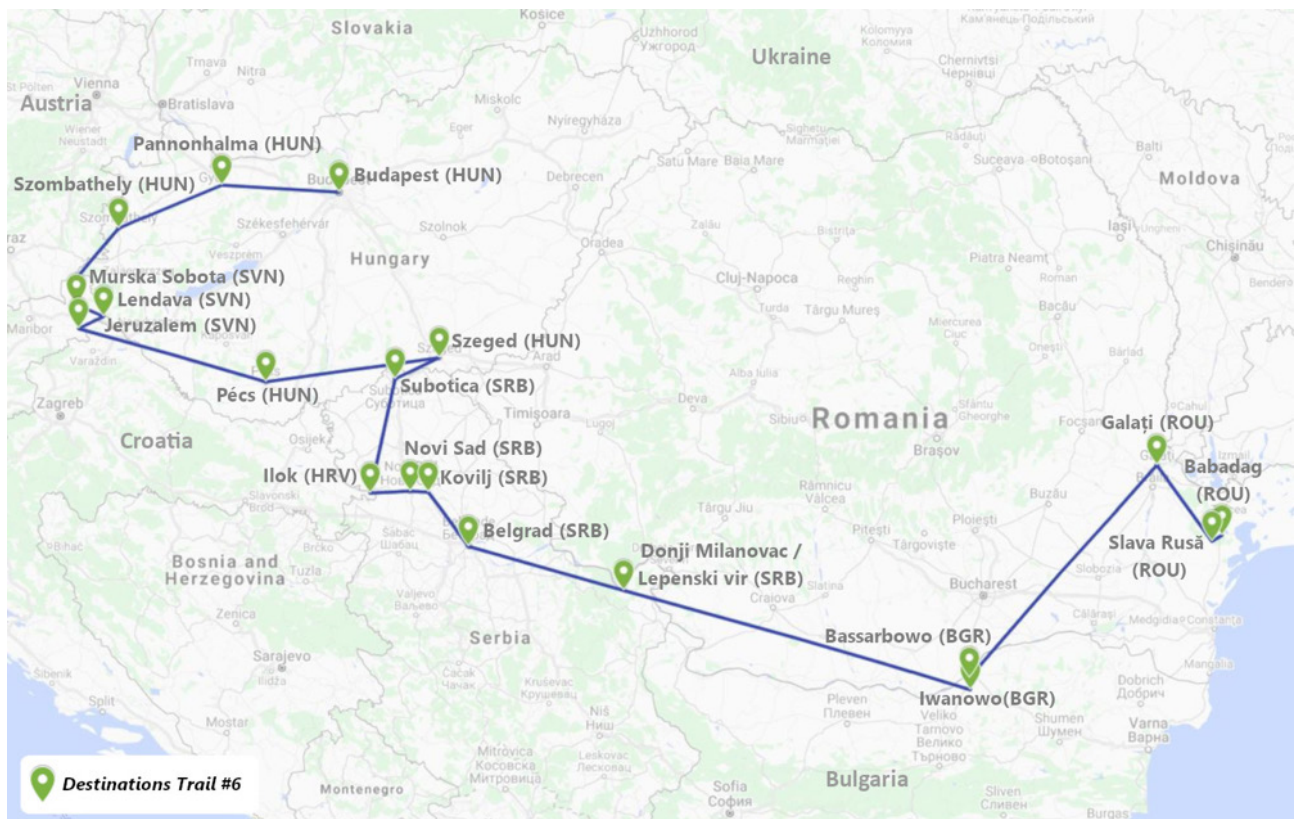
have left their traces. If one digs a little deeper and listens to the stories behind the monuments, the full spectrum of individual approaches to faith becomes graspable. There are many grey shades between social engagement and the retreat from the world, between personal contemplation and missionary zeal, between the creation of communities and the exclusion of others. As every journey is a way of getting to know foreign customs as well as oneself, a journey through the Danube region can be a wonderful opportunity to reflect on one's own spirituality and approach to faith.

Appendix

Trail destinations & points of interest

Our project partners suggested destinations for the route, which were then supplemented by the author's own suggestions. The final list of selected destinations is marked in bold in the following list. All these cities represent several aspects of the present narrative.

The author suggests visiting additional points of interest along the route between the cities, since they illustrate certain thematic aspects of the trail. Some of them stand for lesser-known, hidden places that want to be discovered.





Trail destinations and points of interest in geographical order (downstream)

Destination	Confession	Country
Budapest, Gül Baba Türbe	Muslim	Hungary
Pannonhalma Archabbey	Roman-Cath.	Hungary
Szombathely, Isis Temple	Roman pagan	Hungary
Murska Sobota, synagogue	Jewish	Slovenia
Lendava, Jewish Cemetery	Jewish	Slovenia
Jeruzalem, St. Mary's Church	Roman-Cath.	Slovenia
Pécs, Mosque of Pasha Quasim	Muslim/Roman-Cath.	Hungary
Szeged, Orthodox Church	Serb.-Orth.	Hungary
Ilok, St. John of Capistrano Church	Roman-Cath.	Croatia
Subotica, ghetto and Jewish heritage trail	Jewish	Serbia
Novi Sad, Slovak Church	Protestant	Serbia
Kovilj Monastery	Serb.-Orth.	Serbia
Belgrade, Bajrakli Mosque	Muslim	Serbia
Belgrade, St. Sava	Serb.-Orth.	Serbia
Lepenski Vir, excavation site with museum	prehistoric	Serbia
Rock monastery of Basarbowo and rock-hewn churches of Iwanowo	Bulg.-Orth.	Bulgaria
Galati, synagogue	Jewish	Romania
Babadag, türbe of Sari Saltuq	Alevi	Romania
Slava Rusa, Uspenia Monastery	Lipovan	Romania

About the author

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is a freelance exhibition curator and copywriter. Among other things, he curated the exhibition „Danube. People, Treasures & Cultures. From the Black Sea to Schallaburg“ at the Renaissance castle Schallaburg 2020, including an accompanying publication. As a doctor of Byzantine studies, he is well acquainted with the historical fate of Southeast Europe and the Danube’s mediating role between West and East. Moreover, from his home office in Ybbs, he watches the great river go about its tireless work every day.



Returning to the Last Danube:

nature and mankind

(by Eszter Buchert, coordination; Zsófia Joó, text)

Summary

Returning to the Last Danube: nature and mankind

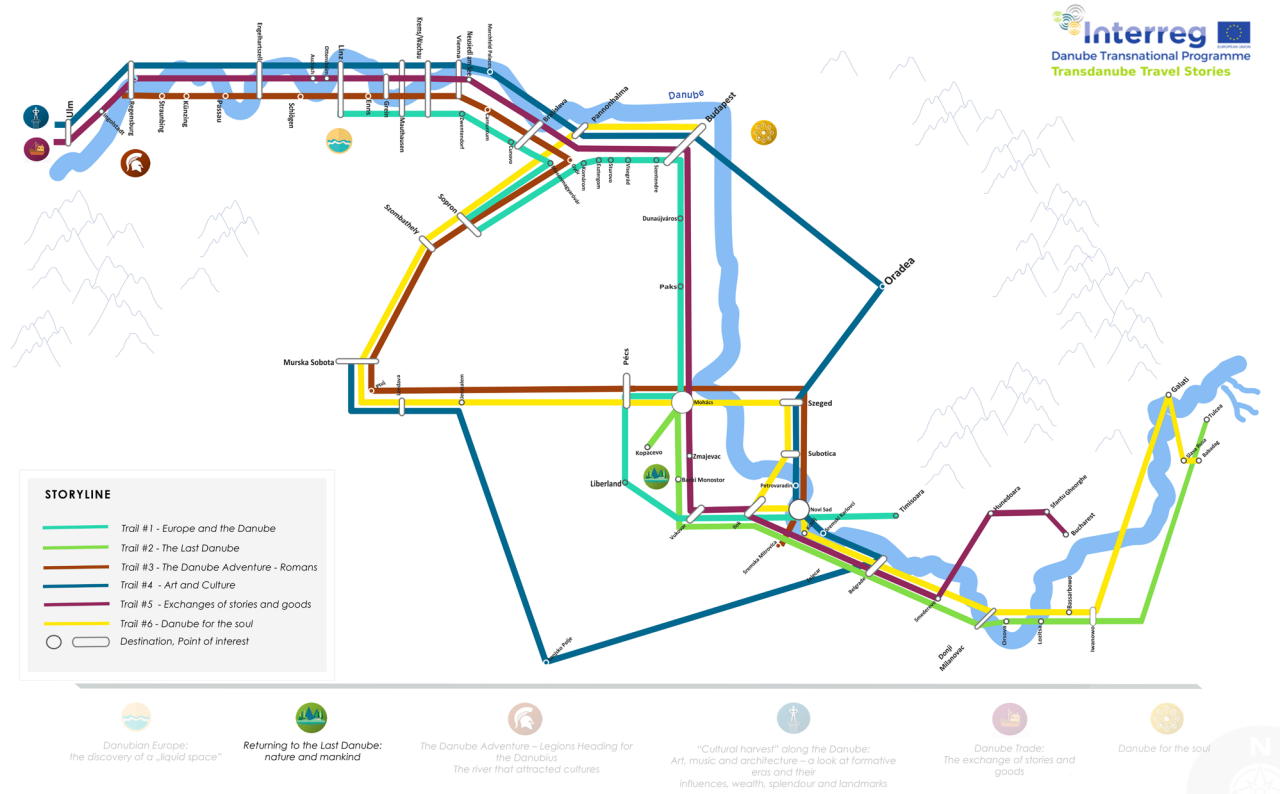
In the beginning was the Danube – thus begins this story, echoing the biblical account of the Creation. Water and nature have defined the landscape. But mankind has changed it, “cultivated” it, and, in the end, abused it. This is the scenario of this trail, which takes us from the triangle formed by the countries of Hungary, Croatia and Serbia to the grandiose estuary flowing into the Black Sea. It explores the fascination of the river landscape, but also the many problematic changes caused by human intervention – whether through power stations, urbanisation, or misuse and exploitation. The last section of the Danube forms the largest surviving natural wetland in Europe. Experiencing the Danube here means reconnecting with nature in its most primal form, and with our very selves. Here, the idea of border-crossing is a multidimensional one. Here, travel means winding down, coming to terms with the wilderness and with oneself. While cities are moving closer and closer to the river, people are becoming more emotionally alienated from nature than ever.

In the balance between man and nature, commodity has elbowed its way to the forefront. The closer the Danube gets to its estuary, the better this balance. For this is where we sense most tangibly that man is part of nature. In this stretch of the Danube, nutrition, movement and traditions are still in harmony with the river. The actual destination of tourists experiencing this section of the Danube should be sensing this synergetic unity and discovering it individually for themselves: the Danube as a mirror of a new symbiosis between man and nature, a mirror of all the senses. Nature as lived here is a great symphony scored with all forms of expression available to human emotion. The Danube Delta presents nature as it once was, and in its most consummate form – the world before mankind, as it were. A vast area of water and reeds, a spectacular landscape, a world of tranquillity and mystery teeming with countless forms of life – a great symphonic finale echoing out from this European river.



Thus, the lower part of the Danube signals a new intimacy with the river, with nature; also, the urgent message that we should be cultivating a sensitive, respectful and caring tourism that cherishes the values of nature. The Danube is neither a zoo nor a static exhibition. It is Nature herself, in all her multifaceted beauty, vulnerability, wildness, and diversity, but also in all her demands and tribulations, which not only have to be overcome but also to be understood and accepted in their significance. Herein lies the fascination of the “last Danube”.

Summary written by Georg Steiner



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Returning to the Last Danube: nature and mankind

Introduction

In the beginning was the Danube. One of Europe's most significant rivers has nourished, protected, enriched and connected various groups of people since as early as prehistoric times, forging a vital link between countries and nations. Its life-sustaining freshwater has served as a rich source of fish and shelter, with fertile lands, fruit-laden orchards and shady groves providing ample building materials along the shore. The mighty river runs a total of 2880 kilometres; its east-west course connects the two sides of the continent and once traversed the vast Roman Empire. An indispensable and profoundly impactful part of everyday life in countless regions, it has always been a steadfast European symbol of grandness, even eternity. Napoléon Bonaparte rather reverently referred to the Danube as "*Le roi des fleuves de l'Europe*", the king of Europe's rivers.

The Danube is a vital life source for the millions who inhabit its shores. To them, it means livelihood, homeland, traditions, a place to rest, reeds filled with singing birds – a peaceful, tranquil respite from the hustle and bustle of day-to-day life. For millennia, the river has inspired artists and poets, provided a secure trade route for merchants, and given rise to an improbably diverse range of culinary fish dishes. For whoever has been in some sort of contact with the Danube, it ultimately bears a unique, personal meaning and a multitude of bonds.

Adding to its cultural, economic, and historic importance is its incredible impact on the surrounding natural terrain. The Danube is a multifaceted, eternal, ever-renewing entity. Sovereign and seemingly inevitable, its currents have the power to shape and bend rocks, earth, and sand in their own image. Much more than a simple river, it encompasses racing mountain rapids, lowland floodplains and hundreds of islands, not to mention thousands of plant and animal species. Its waters are home to the great sturgeon, one of the largest river-dwelling fish on earth; Europe's oldest gallery forests can be found along its shores. Huge pelican colonies nest in the Danube Delta, and its oxbows serve as hunting grounds for white egrets and black storks.

Despite a great deal of human interference, sections of the Danube river system remain virtually untouched, its ancient

natural systems intact. Dozens of protected species have found a safe refuge in its ecosystem. So why, one wonders, has it lost so much of its appeal as a tourist attraction? It's been years since the Danube was among the most sought-after destinations in Europe, say nothing of the world, although it still has tremendous potential.



A look at the river along the direction of its flow reveals a number of opportunities for active recreation in unrivalled natural surroundings. Take the upper section of the river, for example, near the source of the Danube in Germany. Two headwater streams known as the Breg and Brigach converge near the town of Donaueschingen, where visitors can marvel at and explore the magical slopes of the Black Forest. Somewhat further down the river is the Danube Riparian Forest corridor between Neuburg and Ingolstadt, a birdwatcher's paradise.

Continue along the river across the Austrian border and you will find the breathtaking Donauschlinge bend, followed by the Donau-Auen National Park near Vienna, where curious travellers can learn about the fiercely-protected, last remaining major wetlands environment in Central Europe. Further along, in the Hungarian section, is Szigetköz, the island plain noted for its low-lying watery flatland and shallow shoals, but also the Danube-bend separating the Börzsöny and Visegrádi mountain ranges and Gemenc, the adventuresome, mostly forest-covered floodplain – all marvellous opportunities to explore this unique river habitat.

Other thrill-seekers might be tempted by what lies further ahead, in the legendary, pristine and – for many of us – known wilderness in the lower sections of the Danube beyond Hungary’s southern border with Serbia and Croatia.

The sprawling green oasis along these middle sections of the river offers a blissful haven for water birds and fishes. This extremely disparate range of habitats and vegetation including marshlands, floodplain forests and wet meadows shifts with the flood dynamics in Béda-Karapanca in Hungary, Kopački Rit in eastern Croatia and Gornje Podunavlje, a large protected area of wetland in the northwest of Serbia. At the same time the Iron Gates, a gorge on the river between Serbia and Romania, offers visitors a breathtaking reminder of the ongoing grappling between humankind versus nature – along with a dubious hint as to which of these forces will eventually win out. Other marvels include Persina, an island-filled realm almost completely unknown to tourists, and the Danube Delta. The majestic finale of the river’s nearly 3000 km long journey is a fantastic, 21-thousand-hectare wetland paradise. Visitors come to experience the largest remaining natural wetland’s unparalleled richness and diversity, to immerse themselves in the transient essence of Europe’s last unspoilt wilderness.



Reasons for the Danube’s current lack of local and European tourism are complex and call for more analysis than we can offer here. However, one important aspect is a shift in contemporary pleasure-seeking. Modern-day travellers seem more inclined to pursue exotic destinations, luxury hotels and bustling cities to wilderness, to choose the adrenaline rush of urban parties over adventures on the languid river flowing just a step away. While many know of the existence of the Danube, few know very much about it. And even less about its lower reaches.

I. The Lower Danube

The lower section of the Danube, in other words the reach from Hungary’s southern border with Serbia and Croatia to the delta, holds what so many seek in remote Asian mountains or hot African sands: the promise of a return to, and reconnection with, unspoilt nature, and with ourselves.

The Lower Danube represents an end in two senses of the word. It is the final section of a massive river system connecting ten countries, and yet it also constitutes the last remnants of a majestic wetland wilderness that once covered half the continent. Its largely wild, unspoilt nature is unlike anything one can find in Western Europe or along the middle and upper sections of the Danube, where human development and activity have had a dramatic, ecosystem-altering effect. A visit to this romantic, pristine world is a must for city-dwellers longing for tranquillity and regeneration, a spirit-boosting retreat.

Any journey along the Lower Danube involves a great deal of boundary-crossing, and not only in terms of geography. Travellers to this place find themselves transcending their own limits as well, moving beyond fixed mindsets and predetermined concepts of the world. The journey starts no later than your choice of destination and plans for getting there: with the decision to explore a watery wilderness as opposed to another decadent, empty, consumer-driven attraction. The moment you opt for regional transport over a globe-circling flight, browse rural tourist accommodations in lieu of five-star hotels, choose hiking boots and a backpack over high heels and a trolley bag, you have already transcended your



own, engrained boundaries. So many details, adventures and experiences beckon just beyond the confines of 21st-century life, and all lie squarely beyond the comfort zones of most city-dwelling people. These experiences are opportunities for personal growth, a chance to step out of an often alienating, largely technology-driven world.

The Lower Danube – the last of its majestic wetlands – is a call to slow down. Those of us accustomed to a globalised, non-stop, plastic-producing reality have only hidden, rare, special experiences to gain, the simple pleasures of times past. This is an experience that confounds usual concepts of luxury, giving perpetually stressed contemporary people a way to comfortably and immersively enjoy freedom, find balance, and relish the sights, smells and feel of natural treasures. Those familiar with the burn-out and apathy of the Internet Age can reconnect with nature, explore a wilderness with the power to re-establish that ever-longed-for – but so rarely attained – sense of emotional and mental well-being.

Yet in order to wholly understand what this invaluable region has to offer, we also have to look at the relationship between man – the motivating factor in tourism – and the river. We must understand the kinds of diversions and pleasures that 21st-century people seek as well as their desire to return to nature.

New proximity

In the beginning was the Danube – it is not without reason that this rephrased Biblical reference found its way into our introduction. The mighty river Danube is the lifeblood of this region's wildlife and history. Every life form and species, every habitat in its system has its source in the river itself. Prehistoric humans settled near it with good cause: the Danube offered protection. It meant a source of nourishment and drinking water, a sustainable way of life and a reliable waterway, but it also doubled as a line of natural defence, a buffer against enemy attacks and natural disasters.

This deeply entwined way of life and connection to the river continued as civilisation developed and is still evident today, with some substantial changes. With it came the advent of

agriculture and domesticated animal husbandry, hydro-powered mills, innovations in trade, warfare and architecture. Where the processes of nature remained dangerous or unpredictable, humans transformed the river and floodplain to better meet their needs.

Human beings and the river coexisted peacefully for centuries. While our ancestors had a healthy respect for nature, technical developments and a growing nothing-is-ever-enough mindset have fuelled our appetite for possession, our need to intervene in nature and its processes for our own gain.

Twenty-first century city-dwellers along the Danube have simultaneously grown **too close** to the river and **further from it than ever before**. Never have they been so disconnected. Suddenly a hillside view of the river no longer suffices; anyone who could afford it claimed a piece of the river for him- or herself. Houses, villas, bars, docks and industrial structures



have engulfed every metre of the river's shores, with some architecture boasting humanity's perceived sense of superiority directly on the water rather than simply next to it. This false sense of confidence has brought a rush of problems in its wake, from flushed-away homes to ruined existences, flooded roads and railway lines, prompting even more radical, drastic measures. Humans felt the last word was theirs, and aimed to prove it.



Sophisticated river regulation measures in the form of dams, dykes, sluices and power stations, a dramatic reduction of floodplains and forcing the Danube into a concrete bed have relegated this watery marvel to a simple urban construction. Most of its wilderness including the majority of its native wildlife has been eradicated, effectively decimating nature that dominated the land for millions of years. The remaining water bodies have been ransacked and violated, made little more than canals in many cases. Although the colours, ripples and sounds of the water continue to please eyes and ears, these sections are seldom a popular spot for strolls or picnicking. Most city laws and regulations favour commerce, mass tourism and urban development above all.

The river is a shadow of its former, majestic self, and few see its value for recreation or even nature. It is often perceived as just another body of water to be crossed, an impediment to the flow of urban traffic. Its overdeveloped shores have no remaining space; river-goers must content themselves with pontoons or barges when it comes to such simple pleasures as dangling a foot into the gentle waves or simply relaxing in their presence.

Ask the average Danubian city-dweller what kind of connection he or she has with the river and you are likely to hear something rather neutral. Many perceive the river as part of the city but nothing more, an element with no particular appeal nor any special connection to nature, for that matter. Few would describe it as a landmark of substance, a go-to attraction, a source of any kind of pleasure or recreation. Tell that same person about the magical wilderness and unparalleled beauty of the lower stretch of the Danube and their response will probably be one of surprise. Few people – even those living along the Danube’s upper sections – are aware of the Lower Danube’s natural splendour and tourism potential.

New proximity has a twofold meaning. While on the one hand it draws attention to a certain sense of alienation, an unfortunate outcome of overzealous river regulation and exploitation, it also points to a more positive future outlook. It sheds light on a means by which tired, over-stressed modern individuals can find their way back to nature, and by doing so come to recognise the urgency of preserving these last pockets of untouched wilderness.

Over-worked, over-extended *Homo urbanus* (urban humans) urgently need a place to slow-down and regenerate, to recoup their connection to a life-giving, mighty river. And yet for all its downsides, this lack of connection is not entirely negative. It could also be seen as an opportunity to re-establish and redefine a new connection with a new basis. Thus the more exploitation-focused, suppressive approach could give rise to a more sustainable, humble attitude whereby human beings admit that preserving the last bit of wilderness in the Lower Danube goes hand in hand with offering and enjoying a human-scale, sustainable type of recreation in nature.

The Lower Danube is an exquisite location and the last remaining opportunity to foster this new type of consciousness, this novel approach to the wild. In it lies the hope that Europe might yet rediscover that “biotic highway”, that mighty channel connecting the lives, cultures, economies and futures of the entire region. An ideal scenario in which as many people as possible look to the riparian wilderness for adventure and recreation – and by doing so ensure the survival and protection of its habitats, iconic sights and as-yet-unexplored areas along the lower sections of the river – can only be attained via humble, respectful reconnection with the Danube’s wildlife and other natural marvels.

Lower Danube tourist attractions such as the vast, rich floodplains spanning Béda-Karapanca in Hungary, Kopački Rit in Croatia, Gornje Podunavje in Serbia, the breathtaking Iron Gates, the infinite-seeming island world and captivating wildlife of the Danube Delta are all unique, if vulnerable locations. Sustainable tourism in this case could mean visits to specific points of interest that can be accessed by means of local community transportation, with a focus on active recreational activity programmes, local accommodation and restaurants offering an answer to urban visitors’ unspoken questions. City-dwellers want to know how to return to themselves, so to speak, how to feel a stronger sense of connection to the Earth and nature and take it to a new level, how to find peace and slow the pace of life, restore their emotional well-being.



Return to nature and to ourselves

Recent decades have seen a number of social and economic changes (scientific-technological developments, expanding human horizons, and an accelerating consumer lifestyle), many of which have taken a toll on human physical health and overall well-being. The solution? The same “revolutionary” one that our ancient ancestors knew all along, with the research to support it: many of these harms can be offset by a return to nature, an encounter with the wild. Fresh air fuels both the body and the mind; sounds, shapes, scents and colours encountered in nature are tranquillizing, restorative, and energy-boosting. These experiences have a positive, regenerative effect on humankind, body and soul.

One thing is clear: man is a part of nature, man *is* nature, not an outside observer. It is only in recent centuries that this fundamental, millennia-old sense of oneness has fallen by the wayside. This alienation from nature – along with reduced opportunities to interface with the few remaining bits of nature we have left – has contributed strongly to rising stress levels, reduced concentration, caused creativity and motivation to lag, and sometimes come hand in hand with a rise in mental and physical disorders. The capitalist treadmill that is our modern, accelerated and globalised world – coupled with its focus on earning money, climbing career ladders and

acquiring possessions – can lead to burn-out, anxiety, sometimes even significant psychological disorders that can be observed in every nation, social class and demographic group. This overheated pace leaves people with almost no time to relax and regenerate, which is why it is no wonder that fewer and fewer people know what true, holistic rest and relaxation even mean anymore.

Few would deny that an outdoor stroll causes stress levels to drop. Even a simple walk outside can be an inevitable energy boost, offering an escape from the everyday grind. Joggers report feeling fresher after a short run, a rebound of creativity and mental agility. Outdoor activity can restore a sense of calm and balance, make a person able to relate to his or her environment in a more positive, focused way. We might also feel more emotionally and mentally present outdoors, in our natural environment, than at any other time.

Luckily, more and more city-dwellers seem to be consciously seeking out a reconnection with nature. This desire to re-live, re-discover or re-establish the ancient human-nature bond is far from exclusive to eco-tourists; it appears to be a larger, socially-driven need felt by a range of different kinds of people – a fact that speaks to Lower Danube’s many untapped possibilities and substantial tourism potential.

More and more people are looking for ways to escape and slow down, and yet few have even the faintest idea of where to start. Despite the skyrocketing number of exotic nature tourism destinations around the world, the wetland wilderness along the lower part of Europe’s second biggest river seems completely off the radar. The vast majority of tourists are oblivious to the Lower Danube and the many fascinating sights it has to offer.

The experience of hiking, cycling, pilgramaging or kayaking in Europe’s last wetland wilderness stands in stark contrast to empty, fast-paced weekdays. The Lower Danube can be a welcome relief from the artificial, bustling impulses of city life, offering an unparalleled, one-of-a-kind encounter with nature that is every bit as tranquil, harmonious, and enriching as the city is hectic.

Visitors to this area can enjoy such simple, yet unforgettable experiences as dining leisurely on a traditional fish dish, climbing a hill, dangling their feet in the cool waters of the river, relaxing on the banks and counting passing clouds overhead, enjoying the sound of lapping waves and the splashing of a stream. The Lower Danube is a chance to slow down, unwind, and take in your surroundings using each of your five senses.



Sunset in the Donaodelta

© Alma Codreanu Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority

The bicycle is a wonderful, sustainable tool that deserves no less than to be ridden in worthy surroundings. The beautiful, rolling Lower Danube offers the perfect opportunity to do just that. Cyclists have far more opportunity to listen to, absorb, and feel their environment than those travelling by car. Navigating a bicycle is a matter of slowness, passing lightly through verdant paths bursting with life. It involves the constant, mindful stringing-together of impressions and an awareness of your route, an interweaving of precious memories. It means taking the time to enjoy a coffee at a local bar, booking accommodation at a village bed and breakfast, sampling the local cuisine, resting for a few hours, allowing your senses to be overcome with the river's smells and sounds, its simple pleasures.

All that takes time and patience, for the Danube is a massive, quiet, slow-moving entity. It can take a while to adjust to that languid pace, to appreciate its slow flow rather than fight it. That and more makes it all but impossible to really travel the river in a motorised package tour, where quickly-passed kilometres are often lost ones – rushed encounters that are hard to recall in retrospect. For this reason and more, many see the bicycle as the key to adventure and one of the best ways to connect with the Danube and its environs.

The Lower Danube on two wheels

The best of the Lower Danube comes to those in hiking boots or paddling a boat or kayak, where the slow pace and prolonged contact with nature reveal life at its fullest. That said, boating and exploring on foot aren't the only ways to experience this incredible environment. Although cycling the Lower Danube takes serious determination, anyone who does it will have plenty of glorious adventures to show for it. The EuroVelo bicycle route is definitely worth a try, whether you're one of the ever-growing number of flashpackers (i.e. travellers in their 30s and 40s who were born to travel, actively seek out authentic encounters and have the budget to experience the best every destination has to offer), organising a family trip or, in some river sections, an older cyclist eager to enjoy the sights.

Danubian encounters

The Lower Danube is a unique destination, a place unlike any other when it comes to communing with nature and to active recreation, but also for up-close experiences of natural forces and processes. Unlike fully-booked hotels and overcrowded beach resorts, this living river and its abundant wildlife will never lose their appeal.

Yet each encounter is different. The Lower Danube can never be experienced the same way twice, which might explain why every single encounter with it feels so valuable. Travellers soon discover that the river will never be the same again. Reasons for this have to do with much more than the succession of seasons; they involve the magic of a changing wilderness, the ever-evolving, ever-transforming flux and flow of a mighty river, connecting everything. Seemingly endless reed beds, disappearing and reappearing islets, the sandy and



The Danube island Szigetköz

© Gyula Horváth

gravelly ground on the outskirts of settlements look different every time, bring fresh sights, new revelations and unique sounds to every single visitor. A traveller could return to the exact same spot year after year; he or she would find nothing of the permanence evoked by big-city concrete or stone edifices, only playful transience, tricks of nature.

But how could even a small pixel remain static if the larger view, a look at the Lower Danube as a whole, shows a much more varied picture? The nature in the Danube's lower reaches is splendid and incomparably varied – a diversity and richness mirrored by the multitude of cultures, art traditions, economies and ethnicities along its shores.

This wetland wilderness with its vast stretches of untouched landscape, abundant rare plant and animal species, astonishing array of habitats and potential experiences, might well be a grandiose **symphony** performed by a mighty orchestra. Pulsating with life, the monumental musical piece would tell of rapid streams finding their way down a mountain, of a young river winding between rocks, cutting through slopes, of mind-blowing depths and the pure, elemental force rushing across artificial dams and sluices. It speaks of cool shade, ancient trees weeping above waves, the endless sunlit peace of reeds brightened with birdsong, of the motionless charm of swampy oxbows, hundreds of animals and plants.

The symphony that is the Danube's lower reach tells of the last remaining wetland wilderness – a wilderness with bewitching qualities, one that can easily charm if given a chance. It strikes visitors with its power, liberates them from the dull weekday grind, transports them to a simpler, more honest world where human beings once lived in nature as part of nature, in symbiosis with this life-giving river.

Of course, not even the lower reaches of the Danube have remained completely unspoilt. Traces of human activity appear almost everywhere. Some parts of the Danube – especially those near cities – find it flowing past monstrous docks, industrial plants, or agricultural tracts. Valuable habitats are sometimes replaced by hybrid tree plantations or roads, crumbling ruins.

At the same time the last Danube wilderness – especially as we move towards its delta – sings of ever-changing, roaring floods with different sounds, delicious crops in fertile lands along the riverbank, fish teeming in slow-flowing bends ... all the value, the abundance the river has offered and continues to provide to this day.

Returning to the comparison of the Lower Danube's tales to nature's music – a monumental, orchestral concert –, visitors there encounter nothing less than an immersive, spiritual masterpiece, one best experienced with all five senses. To follow the course of the river is to witness the unfolding of three movements, each complete in its entirety yet characteristically different, all merging into a perfect symphony. These melodies complement each other perfectly, showing multiple facets of this vibrant, blue-and-green giant at once. A quiet, mysterious, softer *andante* at the heart of the Danube is answered by the swift *presto* of the Iron Gates gorge, followed by the mighty Danube Delta. Its tones dissolve in a flashy and ornate, superior *menuetto* climax, extending to infinity.

A naturalist, by contrast, might view the majestic river in terms of the diverse, yet obviously cohesive habitats along its terminal section. After the marshes, forests and floodplains of Kopački Rit, often called the heart of the Danube, comes the eye-catching Iron Gates region with its high cliffs and gorges separating the southern Carpathian Mountains from the

northwestern foothills of the Balkan Mountains, followed by a slow-moving section restrained by hydroelectric power stations. It first reaches Persina, then extends a fan of tributaries to the Black Sea, creating millions of small islands before finally depositing its load in the delta – a spectacular haven for plant and animal species.

Changeable and shifting, home to diversity as far as the eye can see, the last of Europe’s wetland habitats is an unrivalled natural marvel.

II. Jewels of the Lower Danube

Travellers seeking a way back to nature have three key destinations to look forward to, a succession of astonishing sights demonstrating the immense power and significance of the river. While **the Heart of the Danube** shows how man has co-existed with nature for centuries, **the Iron Gates** illustrate the constant, unbelievably forceful, elemental clash of water and rocks. Finally, **the Danube Delta** region reveals the area’s former natural state in its most complete form – the world before humans, now mostly lost.

The Lower Danube speaks to everyone. In it, we find a slower, more peaceful world – a glimpse of nature’s untouched face with enough attractions, sights and adventures to rival any mass-tourist hub. Its message is one of moderation and contemplation over uncontrolled consumption, human-scale pleasures over globe-trotting jaunts. Visitors come to appreciate slow processes over rapid ones, learn to rediscover themselves as opposed to chasing new stimuli.

The heart of the Danube – Gemenc – Béda-Karapanca – Kopački Rit – Gornje Podunavlje

Almost right at the geometric halfway point of Danube’s nearly 3000-kilometre-long course, around the entrance to the middle section of the river, lies a vast, continuous floodplain spanning three countries: Hungary, Croatia, and Serbia.

Owing to the recent boom in slow, considerate tourism – a development that has preserved this area’s natural wonders and authentic appeal – visitors to the heart of the Danube can enjoy its sights on foot, cycling, or with a little boat



Boki Danube

© Eva Horváth - Duna-Dráva National Park

ride. The region’s public transport options and rural tourist accommodations make it easy for nature-seeking travellers to experience stunning Kopački Rit and Gornje Podunavlje comfortably, at their own pace, and with the assistance of knowledgeable guides, while also learning about local, ancient, natural crafts and traditions.

The once-agricultural landscape began to change around the time of the Ottoman Empire, giving rise to the sprawling, pristine floodplains and forests we see today. Kopač Meadow (Kopački Rit) – the region’s true natural treasure, now a strictly-protected preserve – maintains much of the unspoilt Lower Danube as it appeared in ancient times. One of Europe’s best-preserved natural floodplains promises adventure, a journey through time that no self-seeking mass-tourist destination can offer. Visitors can opt to hike, cycle, even boat through a realm unlike any other, immerse themselves in seemingly endless fields of reeds with endless potential for unique, colourful experiences bound to thrill solo travellers and families alike.



Danube at the iron gate Djerdap National Park

© danubieparke

Clash of forces – the Iron Gates

There is no way to explain the magnitude of this most famous of Danubian gorges – it begs to be witnessed, dares an in-person encounter. The Iron Gates constitute the most amazing, picturesque section of the Lower Danube. Towering and majestic, they are also the most obvious evidence of the primal clash of water and rock, and the force with which water has been able to carve a way for itself. Austere and striking with steep walls and looming cliffs at both sides of the river, they are nothing less than awe-inspiring – a spectacular masterpiece of nature. While the Romanian side of the gorge is known as Iron Gates Natural Park, the Serbian part is known as Đerdap National Park. A Romanian-Yugoslavian hydroelectric power plant was built here in the 1970s

and 80s, effectively “taming” the Danube. The development raised the water level, creating the beautiful artificial Lake Đerdap. Unfortunately, the grand project prevented the free movement and migration of species – a side effect with a devastating impact on the local fauna and flora.

While the Danube has doubtlessly paid a huge price for river regulation efforts, this area in particular still has a number of natural and human-made attractions to offer. Both the breathtaking gorge and the spectacularly-scaled hydroelectric power station make this mysterious region a noteworthy, even must-see spot for any visitor.

A true nature show – Persina and the Danube Delta

The Lower Danube, as if only intentionally, saves its dizzying finale for the very end, where a majestic delta meets an enormous island world, an area braced by a forking river with millions of tributaries leading to the sea. The Danube’s estuary is the ultimate nature show, a place teeming with life where the diverse essence of the wetland wilderness, some of it still untouched, can be admired in its entirety.

Only few know that the area boasts not one, but two special destinations, both abounding with wild islands begging to be explored. Backpackers and cyclists would be loath to skip the Bulgarian section, a lesser-known but dazzling part of the river inhabited by a rich variety of protected birds and fish species. Exceptional cycling routes include the one along Rusenski Lom, the Danube’s last major right tributary before it meets the Black Sea. Rusenski Lom Nature Park is a veritable treasure trove of stunning attractions.

This unparalleled show of nature peaks as the river finally reaches the Black Sea. The Danube Delta, a vast expanse of water and reeds, is a spectacular place of breathtaking biodiversity – a world of peace and mystery teeming with untold life-forms. It is here that the monumental orchestra concert crescendos, where all themes collide into a single, fantastic final symphony trumpeting the majesty of nature. This is the Danube untouched by the rhythms of the modern world, a place where time abides other rules. Its calm and serenity are nothing short of awe-inspiring, an experience not to be missed.



Djerdap National Park

© danubeparks

III. Opportunities for sustainable nature tourism

The Lower Danube holds tremendous tourism potential, and its natural treasures will doubtlessly delight any hikers or holidaymakers who are receptive to them. While major plans and concepts designed to tap this potential are truly justified, the more important goal is to protect and preserve the exceptional habitat along the lower reaches of the Danube – and to facilitate what might, unfortunately, be our chance to experience it.

Mass tourism and consumer-driven holiday-making have had an incredibly negative impact on places around the world and typically come with a massive ecological footprint. Still, there is no reason to expect that fate of popular destinations drained of their uniqueness, originality and character is one that the Lower Danube will have to share. After all, there are other, increasingly popular ways that even large numbers of people can explore the wilderness while preserving the area's largely unspoilt state.

Dynamic trends surrounding ecotourism, slow-living and mindfulness have created the perfect framework for positioning the Lower Danube's natural treasures and underscoring their appeal. Holidays and tourist excursions relying on local resources, local transport, small businesses and village accommodation hold inevitable appeal for those interested in these mindful, eco-aware movements and will not harm the region's many sights. The area need not succumb to the dark side of contemporary mass tourism.

Enabling an opportunity to re-consider and reinforce our relationship with nature – not to mention building a sustainable nature-tourism concept – would considerably contribute to the physical and psychological well-being of humans. It is also the only way to prevent rampant exploitation of the region.

The danger is real. If infrastructure development and large-scale service and hotel investments are allowed at the outset, then those few remaining wilderness destinations – the essential heart and soul of the Lower Danube, still largely un-



Tail of Persin Island in Bulgaria

© danubeparks

lest and currently only accessible with meticulous planning – will soon disappear. New proximity means cultivating a gentle, respectful, caring type of tourism that protects natural values.

Enabling access to the Lower Danube's wildlife and natural treasures also provides an excellent opportunity to shape tourist attitudes. In contrast to the now typical tourist approach – one that involves wanting to instantly see, live and experience everything, in all its splendour, at the touch of a button – it presents an alternative form of exploration and discovery based on patience, humility and acceptance.

Nature is not a robot, not a zoo, and certainly not a static exhibition. The dazzling snapshots seen on social media platforms, brochures and programme guides take many days, weeks or months of work to create. One can hardly expect every individual visitor to be able to see what promotional images show on a single visit while also avoiding mud, insects, obstructive vegetation and poor weather.

Yet with proper education and expectations management, it is possible to emphasise the uniqueness and unrepeatability of such encounters with nature and the sheer grandiosity of the Lower Danube's many faces and constant changes, or even

to help create demand for them. In a world where nearly every individual is seeking something special and unparalleled, the value of one-of-a-kind, personal, intimate encounters and experiences could very well generate tourism in the entire region. Slow-paced tourism that enhances personal well-being, enables a true understanding of and full immersion in nature could ultimately satisfy a deep-seated, critical human need.

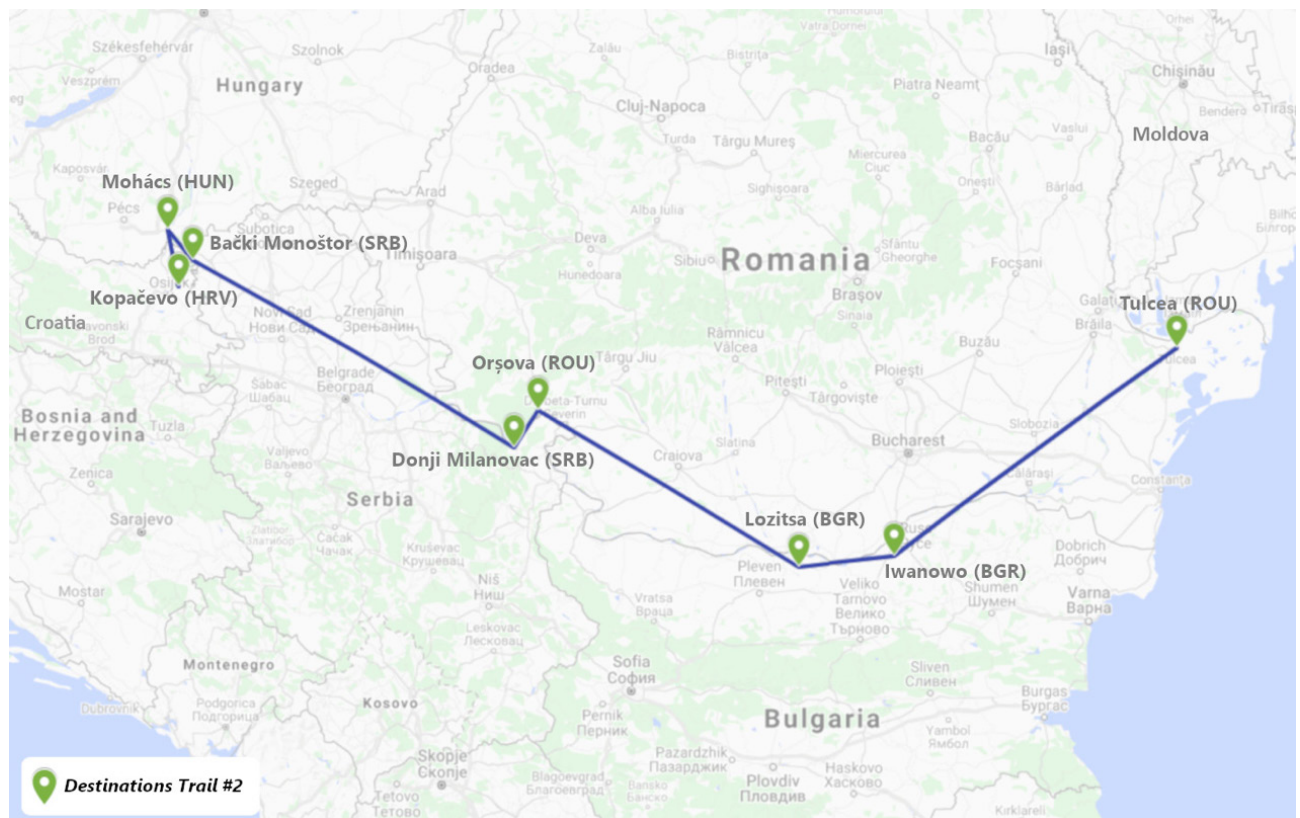
The Lower Danube wilderness holds something for everyone, tells her stories to anyone willing to listen. She says different things, in different ways, every time – and that is precisely what makes her so incredibly appealing.

Appendix

Trail destinations & points of interest

Our project partners suggested destinations for the route, which were then supplemented by the author's own suggestions. The final list of selected destinations is marked in bold in the following list. All these cities represent several aspects of the present narrative.

The author suggests visiting additional points of interest along the route between the cities, since they illustrate certain thematic aspects of the trail. Some of them stand for lesser-known, hidden places that want to be discovered.



The heart of the danube

A pristine wetland, treasure-trove of undulating reeds and vibrant natural life: the unique, romantic world of Kopački Rit (HR)

White Water-Lily Boardwalk & Interactive Exhibition

Curious nature-lovers eager to explore the wetland wilderness have several options here. The trail features educational signage with images and descriptions of plants, animals and information about the wetland habitat, enriching one's experience of the wetland eco-system.

Sakadaš tourist dock

Those eager to get to know the true, breathtaking wilderness of Kopački Rit are advised to take a water route instead. Docked on Sakadaš Lake is a silent electric tourist boat ready to guide visitors to the very heart of the Danube. The trip includes a slow glide through the "New Canal", past islands with a large cormorant colony. Kopački Rit is known for its bare trees full of cormorant nests.

Cycling in Kopački Rit Nature Park

This beautiful, 30-kilometre-long cycle route starts at Kopački Rit Visitor Centre and continues through one of the most verdant forests and striking river settings in all of Croatia.

Tikveš Castle Complex

It would be a shame to visit Kopački Rit without learning something of the area's history, particularly that of Tikveš Castle. Locals refer to the residence as "Tito's castle" on account of the late, former Yugoslav president Josip Broz, commonly known as Tito. The palace grounds were reputedly one of Tito's favourite hunting spots. A significant cult of personality developed around Tito, and locals take pride in Tito's visits to the area.

Educational trail "Stari brijest" (Old Elm)

Not far from the castle is the "Stari brijest" educational trail, named after a 300-year-old elm tree. Its respectable lifespan far surpasses that of any other elm tree in this forest or any other in the area.

Village Kopačevo

Kopačevo, a village located at the edge of Kopački Rit Nature Park, lights up the Baranja region in early autumn. The village's traditional Fishermen's Days in mid-September are the most visited September tourist event in the area.

Ethno-village Karanac

Karanac has an ancient feel – every house has its own history and unique story, one that involves a gradual passing from generation to generation. Its unique way of life has been kept far away from the hustle and bustle of urban life. Those on the lookout for slow, sustainable experiences are advised to eat here, go for a ride in the village's original country carriage and stay in one of its restful, authentically-decorated rooms.

Gornje Podunavlje (SRB)

The "Gornje Podunavlje", "Bagremara", "Obedska Bara", "Koviljsko-Petrovaradinski Rit" and "Deliblatska Peščara" nature reserves are intact natural beauties and a testament to our ability to keep natural treasures for future generations. A visit to one of these protected areas is a welcome reprieve from city life, an opportunity to spend active quality time in nature.

Monsters at the heart of the Danube: the legendary Busó Parade (HU)

Visitors admiring unique natural treasures in the lower part of the river might want to head across the border to Hungary for a day or two. This cultural attraction is an absolute must-see.

Busó Parade – Busó tradition – Busó Yard

The Busó Parade or ‘Busójárás’ is a world-famous folk celebration of the Šokac people in the town of Mohács, and dates back to the 18th century. According to legend, Šokac men fleeing the plunder and destruction of Ottoman troops abandoned Mohács to live on the moorland of Mohács Island instead. Returning to town at night, they crossed the Danube by boat and – dressed in terrifying masks and making as much noise as possible with instruments – drove the Ottoman soldiers from town. Though the procession itself is traditionally held in February, tourists visiting Mohács at other times can visit Busóudvar, a cultural centre devoted to the centuries-old carnival tradition. The museum offers a taste of the parade’s unique atmosphere and provides insight into local craftsmen’s year-round activities building up to the event.

Kanizsai Dorottya Museum

This ethnographic and local history museum dedicated to the town of Mohács and its surroundings offers a broad perspective on the region and its people. It is also the main museum devoted to the Croatian, Serbian and Slovenian minorities in Hungary.

Mohács Historical Memorial Site

This national memorial is not to be missed. On the 29th August 1526, a tragic day in Hungarian history, outnumbered Christian troops faced and were defeated by the invading Ottoman army in a fateful battle. Visitors to the seven-hectare area are treading on sacred ground. The memorial park is a living history book written in pain and dignity; vivid, tasteful symbols carved in wood and stone are harmoniously enhanced and enlivened by technological elements, including a number of virtual-reality films in the visitor centre. An interactive exhibition introduces the battle of Mohács and the fate of the Hungarian nation.

Kölked – White Stork Museum

Inhabitants of Kölked, located south of Mohács, have lived with storks for hundreds of years. Located at the fringes of the Danube floodplain, the village has always been a safe place for white storks to nest and feed. The White Stork Museum is the only one of its kind in Europe and an absolute delight.

Boki-Duna – fishermen’s outdoor exhibition

A perfect tourist highlight off the beaten path. This beautiful waterside area was once an overdeveloped bend of the Danube. An interactive, informative outdoor fishing exhibition offers visitors a glimpse of this spot as it existed 500 years ago. Peer into an ancient aquatic world.



Clash of forces – the Iron Gates

Prehistoric time machine – Lepenski Vir

Lepenski Vir, a Paleolithic site on the banks of the Danube, is proof that the local culture developed social relations, architecture and art more than six thousand years ago.

Golubac Fortress

Remains of the medieval fortified town of Golubac are located on the right bank of the Danube, in a very inaccessible place that marks the entrance to the Đerdap Gorge from the west.

Miraculous Tumane Monastery

Visitors travelling the shores of the Lower Danube near the gorges, a unique natural tunnel, have access to the Boljetin River Canyon.

Famous Boljetin

The path leading over the bridge at the upstream part of the Boljetin gorge continues straight onto an old asphalt road along the river. The road slowly unfurls under beautiful vegetation in the direction of Boljetin Hill. Once they have reached the canyon, visitors can opt to follow a well-maintained, slightly more demanding path to Viewpoint Greben, a renowned spot offering an unrivalled look at the power and mystery of the Danube.

Veliki Štrbac hiking trail

This trail leads through the most attractive part of Đerdap National Park and ends at Veliki Štrbac. At an altitude of 768 m, Veliki Štrbac is the highest peak of Miroč Mountain and provides a beautiful view of the Danube at its narrowest point.

Viewpoint Ploče

This viewing spot in Đerdap National Park consists of the smooth space just above Mali Kazan Canyon and a limestone plateau under the Veliki Štrbac summit. Ploče offers a unique view of the Danube and acquaints visitors with the Veliki Kazan gorge.

A true nature show – Persina and the Danube Delta

The “undiscovered land” of the Lower Danube, Persina Nature Park

Northern Bulgaria, particularly the Danube river valley in the central northern part of the country, is often terra incognita for tourists. It is also a vast, fascinating, hidden wildlife oasis. This preserved wetland shows evidence of commingling biodiversity and human existence, not to mention the area’s rich cultural heritage and remnants of its historical past. Though an island viewed from the Danube’s shore may look beautiful and harmonious, setting foot on those islands is a different sensation altogether. A wild island is sacred ground. Home to pristine nature, it is a place where time is in nature’s hands alone and people can do little about it. Of course, not all islands along the river are accessible and hospitable for visitors. Many resemble a flooded forest with climbing plants, marshes and very difficult terrain.

Walking and cycling in the Kaykusha Marsh

The Kaykusha Protected Area wetland is located right on the southern border of its territory and includes a stunning marsh.

Cycling in the vicinity

It is a unique experience to explore the area on bicycle. Before entering the Bulgarian port town of Ruse, why not take a turn into **Rusenski Lom Nature Park**! The river known as Rusenski Lom is the last major right-side tributary of the Danube before it meets (the still distant) waters of the Black Sea. The remoteness of its canyon appealed to monks, who founded cave monasteries there between the 12th and the 14th centuries. A number of churches and hermitages were carved into the canyon’s rocky sides.

Highpoint of the Danube nature show – the Danube Delta

Here the Danube hosts a world untouched by the rhythms of the modern world, one where time is governed by other rules. The calm, serene Danube Delta is at the end of the Danube, stretching into the Black Sea. It is here that the river ends its 2,860-kilometre journey from its source in Germany’s mountainous Black Forest. A varied, verdant landscape awaits: limitless expanses of reeds, lakes, channels, islands, tropical-looking forests with luxuriant vegetation and sand dunes, natural landscapes that seem pulled from the illustrated pages of fantastical storybooks.

Letea and Caraorman forests

No Lower Danube holiday is complete without a trip to the oldest nature reserve in Romania. Protected since 1930, these forests in the northern part of the Danube Delta are an absolute highlight. Grown among sand dunes and presenting in the form of 10–250-metre-wide strips (*hasmac*), their woods consist mainly of oak, grey oak, white poplar, swamp ash, silver lime and elm trees.

The strictly protected Sărături–Murighiol

Located near the Romanian village of Murighiol, this area is a must for birdwatchers.



Wild beaches of the Black Sea coast

This area boasts one of the Black Sea's most beautiful beaches. Visit to enjoy wide, long stretches of beach with fine sand, calm and shallow seas, but also sections of interesting vegetation and shells. The stunning, relaxing views these beaches offer will not be forgotten. Coastal areas interesting for tourists include those in Sulina, Sfântu Gheorghe, Gura Portiței and Vadu-Corbu-Midia – gorgeous spots with a number of attractive leisure options.

Travel channels on the Danube Delta by boat

A journey along this complicated system of channels is an experience of complete immersion in utterly pristine nature. Its beauty is simply breathtaking. This is a place where nature has the final word.

The Danube Delta Eco-Tourism Museum Centre

This museum centre is located near the town promenade along the Danube. It joins an art museum and an ethnography museum, a Muslim mosque and other area heritage buildings to form the cultural hub of Tulcea, the town at the gates of the Danube Delta.

Sfântu Gheorghe

This picturesque village along the Danube river's oldest tributary is located where the river converges with the Black Sea. Tourists can enjoy the settlement's authentic fishing traditions, take in surrounding sights and marvel at the natural landscape. Its brackish water habitats support a range of bird species attracted to the abundance of food. One can also find spectacular agglomerations of birds on the opposite side of the river, specifically on the sandy banks of Sahalin.

Mila 23

This is a typical fishermen's village in the Danube Delta. It is the main hub for eco-tourism in the Delta and one of the key starting points for journeys in non-motorised tour boats (*canotca*, a combination of a traditional lotca and a canoe). The tours offer an opportunity to participate in a traditional fishing activity (*pescaturim*) and learn more about Lipovan culture.

Măcin Mountains National Park "The tales of Măcin"

Travellers in the delta should not miss the oldest mountains in Romania. The Măcin Mountains are spectacular not for their height, but on account of their many historical sites and archaeological remnants. Other highlights include the area's natural treasures, which have geological, botanical and zoological significance. Măcinului Mountains National Park is a fascinating presentation and a true nature show, with its steppe at the base of the mountains, medium-height oak forests and bushes or rock formations at the peak, their shapes sculpted by rain and wind. The Măcin Mountains "Sphinx" is an elegant example.

About the author

Eszter Buchert



The Transdanube Travel Story was written by Eszter Buchert (coordinator) & Zsófia Joó (copywriter). Eszter Buchert was the director of Fertő-Hanság National Park at that time.

She worked as a research and monitoring coordinator, her task was to design and build up the ecotourism offer of the National Park. From 2004 she was the head of the Ecotourism and Environmental Education Department and from 2007 the deputy director of the National Park. Eszter Buchert has led several national and international projects on the Danube. She has been an active member of the DANUBEPARKS cooperation from the very beginning and for two years, also vice president of the DANUBEPARKS association. She knows the protected areas along the Danube from its source to the Black Sea, and has managed several extensive ecotourism projects in recent years.

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