

DANUBE



A river cruise with a dash of va-va-voom

Trisha Andres puts her best foot forward during a new action-packed itinerary on the Danube

As he twirled me around the wood-panelled ballroom at Vienna's Palais Eschenbach, my dance partner Martin Kreml assured me he had not done this before. Strauss was playing, the gilded room was bathed in light and Martin, dressed in a black tailcoat and white shirt and bow tie, looked – and acted – the part.

Our dance instructor nodded approvingly. I tried to smile despite my tight corset. I was glad I hadn't knocked Martin over with my floor-length hooped skirt.

"We don't normally do the waltz at our dance company," he said. It transpired that he, and the other young men in the class, were dancers with a Bratislava ballet ensemble, on loan from the Slovak State Opera to teach guests on the recently launched Avalon Passion how to do the waltz.

This wasn't the only diversion on offer during this activity-led Danube cruise from Linz in

Austria to Budapest. We were giving Avalon Waterways' Active Discovery tours a test run ahead of the programme's launch next summer. We could learn how to milk cows or mow grass with a scythe, hike a Second World War smugglers trail, explore an ice cave, take an archery lesson, visit a salt mine or join a cookery class. On this cruise there was even a chance to participate in the annual Vienna City Marathon (which one American passenger did).

The bid to attract a younger demographic appeared to be working: most passengers were in their sixties, with a sprinkling of 40- and 50-somethings; the rest were young in spirit.

I felt more au fait with the next organised tour. On day two, guides Thomas Freyer and Max Balga brought bikes, to take us cycling in Vienna. After whizzing past a statue of Mozart in the Burggarten (palace garden), St Stephen's Cathedral and the impressive Hofburg Palace, we made our way to the Prater, a large park, where a

spectacle stopped us in our tracks. Vintage cars, horse-drawn carriages and tractors adorned with flowers trundled along in slow motion like in an old film – all part of a floral parade to celebrate the Prater's 250th anniversary.

As we hit the Ringstrasse, a three-mile ring road known for its architectural beauty, I noticed the absence of traffic. The streets were closed for the Vienna marathon, with access to cyclists only. It was a treat to glide freely down the Ringstrasse, stopping to admire the opera house and grand buildings.

Back on board, staff proffered cold towels and fresh juice to the returning cyclists. My Panorama suite, at 200 sq ft, was a modest but comfortable affair with floor-to-ceiling windows opening on to a Juliet balcony. The window-facing bed meant I could wake up to river views. Public spaces were also nicely appointed, with neutral-toned contemporary decor. I found the Panorama Lounge's nooks and crannies equally conducive to curling up with a book or meeting new friends for tea or cocktails.

A cycling tour took us past medieval houses painted in blue, yellow and pink

I eschewed cooking and walking for more cycling, this time in the picturesque Wachau Valley. Our Dutch guide, Peter Gevers, led us from Dürnstein to Aggsbach, past medieval houses and merchants' taverns painted in blue, yellow and pink. The river glimmered in the sun and the air smelt of freshly cut grass and ripe fruit. Gevers pointed to a wooden crate labelled "Marillen". "That means apricots," he said, taking one from the crate. "The Wachau apricot is the champagne of fruit, one of the few Austrian products protected as its own brand within the EU."

Meals on board were substantial. There's a main restaurant if you want a three-course meal, while the Panorama Bistro offers a hot and cold buffet. That evening we tucked into a 12-course dinner featuring tapas-sized plates of smoked trout fillet, schnitzel, goulash soup, beef roulade and fillet of pike-perch.

The sun was setting as we dined. Distracted, I accepted a second plate of cheese and apricots that neither I, nor my now too-tight waistband, really needed. My seat neighbour invited me to dance. I took a chance and found myself moving effortlessly: feet pivoting forward and back, 1-2-3, 1-2-3. Soon I was dancing as if I'd always known the steps.



Trisha Andres at Vienna's Palais Eschenbach, right; beside the Danube, top

Avalon Waterways offers a nine-day Active Discovery cruise from Linz to Budapest with departures between July and October 2017. From £2,391pp including flights and home pick-up service. Waltz lessons are optional, from €89/£75 (0800 668 1801; avaloncruises.co.uk).