

Cruise



A cruise down the Danube on the River Cloud offers guests a different perspective on both the architecture and scenery of inland Europe. Opposite: The ship's luxurious interior makes for a memorable voyage.

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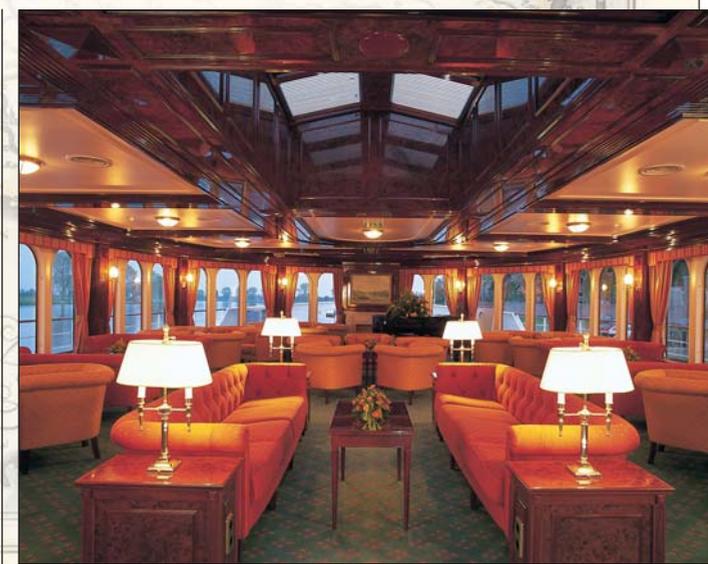
A meandering golf cruise down one of Europe's most famous rivers was just what one seasoned golfer needed for a change of pace

BY TED THOMAS

It sounded like the dumbest idea since the Cayman ball. A golf cruise? What, you roll around the high seas with 2,000 of your new best friends and whack multi-colored golf balls off the deck in the direction of Casablanca or Carnoustie? Or maybe you play putt-putt all day on the mezzanine deck. Or maybe you watch instructional videos as some retired pro explains the nuances of the flying elbow as it relates to your sand wedge and your slow-pitch softball delivery.

So, when my wife suggested that we take a golf cruise, I told her I'd rather learn bridge. She nastily called me a sick-o golfaholic, which was a rather apt comment because at that very moment I was TiVo-ing the pro-am practice round of the Manitoba Open from the Flin Flon Hunt Club. Then she threw a brochure from Kalos Golf at me.

"Check this out," she said. "The Danube River Golf Cruise on page four is for you. And for us. You get to play your stupid golf in places you've never been, and I get to see some great cities, visit historic museums and palaces, hear the Vienna Boys Choir, do some serious shopping — and we'll finally meet some people who know there's more to life than curing your case of the skanks or shanks or whatever disease it is that keeps you from sleeping."





I looked through the literature from Kalos Golf, a travel company based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Each year Kalos operates several golf cruises on the Danube, the Rhine and numerous other itineraries around the Mediterranean, the Iberian Peninsula, the British Isles, the Baltic, New Zealand, and other assorted exotic locales. And they all sell out like two years in advance.

Below: The cruise begins in Budapest, where the nighttime skyline reflects on the river.



My wife was right: The Danube Cruise — Budapest to Nurnberg with stops in between — seemed made to order for us. Ten days, including three in hotels and seven aboard the

River Cloud, which looked to be a Ritz on water. Six rounds of golf for me. Museums and all that historical junk for her. Golf carts or caddies at all courses. Your clubs always waiting for you. And best of all, one of the Danube dates fit my schedule perfectly, wedged between the President's Cup Better Ball and the Founder's Cup Eclectic Scratch Shootout Scramble Stableford at my home club in New Jersey. Book it!

Unfortunately, we decided to stop off in France for several days before flying into Budapest, and developed two serious cases of sticker shock thanks to the still-shrinking value of the U.S. dollar. After checking into our Paris hotel on the Rue de Universite on the Left Bank, we dropped into a corner café and had an Orangina, a pot of decaf tea and two baguettes, each barely the size of a golf ball. The tab: 28 Euros, which according to my mini abacus was about \$40 at the then-going exchange of \$1.40. At a golf club near Cannes, Pro v1s went for \$110 a dozen, with mortgages available, and the latest American-made drivers had price tags that began at 600 Euros, or about \$850. Long live ATMs.

Arriving in Budapest, I learned that it is actually two cities, Buda and Pest, which stare at each other across the Danube. We met the rest of our fellow travelers — 78 in all — and the

intrepid Kalos staff at the traditional welcoming cocktail party at the hotel, which seemed to hang about 2,500 feet above the Danube. Most of the men were surprisingly low key, while all the wives already seemed to know which sites and shops they wanted to visit every day.

The next morning I took off to play the **Pannonia Club**, while my much-better half embarked on a full-day tour along the Danube, visiting countless museums, art galleries and the island of Szentendre, which she thought was famous for something but couldn't quite remember what at the end of the day.

Meanwhile, I expected the six golf courses on our rota to be about a six on my personal scale of one to 10. For sure, they would be the types of course you might find in Western Idaho or Eastern Arkansas, more cow pastures than fine links. I mean, who goes to Hungary and finds Merion?

Boy was I wrong. Back in the 1800s, the grounds of Pannonia were a weekend retreat for the Habsburg Family. Now, Canadian golf course architect Doug Carrick has turned the old Habsburg jousting grounds into a first-rate course — at least an 8.8 on my scale. Pan-



nonia has a strong links look and feel, and Carrick wisely eschewed the bulldozer as he marvelously worked the layout into the natural terrain. The bunkers are strategic, the greens rolling and true — and the overall condition was comparable to that of any course

The enjoyable course at Golf am Habsberg in Germany is routed through a scenic valley.



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The outstanding Pannonia Golf Club (above) weaves links-like through the Hungarian countryside. Below: the imposing Melk Abbey is one of the most-visited sites in Austria.



played on the PGA Tour. All of this means one thing: I can now add Hungary to the never-ending list of countries in which I have lost a new Titleist.

The next morning, after a visit to the gilded interior of the State Opera House and, later, to Heroes Square, we boarded the River Cloud and departed Budapest for the 20-hour cruise up the Danube to Vienna.

The River Cloud is my type of vessel, sturdy and steady and slow with no bouncing around. The accommodations were first-class, and the service superb. We opted for one of the six suites, and had a little sitting area and

a television — all the easier for me to watch my DVD collection of Jim McLean's golf tips. I still don't get his theory about the X-Factor. Anyway, we soon settled in for the afternoon on the top deck and had some good native red wine as we marveled at the idyllic scenery along the Danube.

By the way, remember all those songs about the Blue, Blue Danube? I'm sorry to tell you that the Danube no longer is blue. It is, in fact, of the same shade as perhaps the Monongahela. But it is still beautiful.

The captain hosted a lavish welcoming dinner — never go on a Kalos trip if you are a calorie counter — for his guests that evening, and by midnight I had met enough people to arrange my foursomes for the rest of the trip. The dinner conversation that first night was pretty much an organ recital, as men and women, sometimes in more detail than necessary, talked about their new knees and their new hips and their new faces. Later that night the wife asked me if she should have a facelift. I wisely pretended to be asleep.

On the deck that afternoon I had been wearing my blue 2004 Boston Red Sox World Series Champions hat — I wear the tan version on alternate days — and struck up a conversation with a guy named Milty who was wearing his Chicago Cubs cap with nothing else on it except the Cubs' logo because, as I needed him, the Cubs had not won anything for like a century. With that comment, Milty told me over and over again how he had made a putt to win a three-day member-guest at his home club in Chicago, and I repeatedly

told him how happy I was for him now that he had won a major. Such quick camaraderie comes pretty easily on a small cruise like this.

Much to my surprise, we slept easily throughout the night, and then took to the top deck again for the final two hours of the mid-morning cruise into majestic Vienna. The Vienna Boys Choir had just gone on holiday, but there was still plenty for us to see as local guides led us on a walking tour of the Ring Road and visits to the Hofburg Palace and St. Stephen's Cathedral. That night, Kalos arranged for a private concert recital at the Palais Palfy that featured some classical Strauss, various Austrian operettas and ballet dancing. It was exquisite, if you like that stuff.

But I had not played golf now for two whole days, a personal record, and I was getting anxious for some action. I had just read in one of the golf magazines that the latest big swing thought on Tour was to take the club-head two inches short of parallel on the back-swing, and I wanted to work on that move.

We motored out to the **Fontana Golf Club**, about an hour from Vienna, and what did we find but an absolute gem of a layout, again created by Doug

Carrick. But Fontana and Pannonia are as different as Pine Valley and Rancho Santa Fe. While Pannonia has a great links feel, Fontana is a flourishing real-estate development with ultra-modern facilities for many sports. It is also a burgeoning weekend family destination — the Austrian Hamptons. Thanks in no small part to bulldozers, Fontana is a superior golf course, with plenty of water and bunkers placed strategically over the well-shaped landscape. A former president of the USGA happened to be in my foursome this day, and after playing the course we both agreed that Fontana deserved at least a 9.

Back at the River Cloud, my lovely wife greeted me with a big smile. "Wait 'til you see what I bought today," she said. Ugh! In between visits to several palaces and museums and a special apple strudel demonstration and a big lunch, my wife had been a scratch shopper all over Vienna. I could barely squeeze myself into our room. "Stop pouting," she snarled at me. "You belong to a dozen golf clubs. I shop. It's an even trade."

The next morning she went on a search-

"We slept easily through the night and then took to the top deck again for the final two hours of the morning cruise into majestic Vienna."

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The modern amenities and course design at Fontana Golf Club contrast with the old-world charm of a Munich café (below).

and-destroy mission for any shop she had missed the day before, and I played the **Golf Club Schofs Schonborn**, regally nestled on the grounds of a 300-year old castle. On one hole you tee off in front of an Orangerie and take aim at a castle; on another hole you have to deal with a number of statues of long-dead members of various ruling families. I gave it

a 7.8, but the sumptuous lunch scored a perfect 10.

After golf we met the tourists back at the River Cloud and cruised up the Danube to Durnstein, certainly the most spectacular and picturesque town along the river. We visited the ruins of the castle fortress, 520 feet above town, where Leopold V held Richard the Lion-Hearted of England prisoner back in 1193, which, as I reminded Milty, was another year when his Cubbies didn't win.

The next day brought no golf, just a long and quiet cruise through the Wachau Valley with a stop to tour the famous baroque buildings of Melk Abbey. The two golf courses that followed on the itinerary were of the type that most of us had expected all the courses to be. **Brunnwies**, in Bad Griesbach, Germany, is a rolling Bernhard Langer design. Perhaps a 6.5, it's really just a nice walk in the park. In Regensburg, Germany, we played **Sinsinz am Minoritenhof**, whose front nine rolls through a serious mini-mountain that offers no level lies, while the more-difficult back nine moves flatly along the Danube. We gave Sinzing a 6.0. We gave the German beer at both courses a 375.4.

On our last night aboard the River Cloud, en route to Nurnberg, many of us spent several hours on the top deck watching our captain skillfully move his craft through the many locks that are on the Danube. If you think holing a 10-foot putt is difficult, try maneuvering a very large boat through a narrow channel that basically provides no room for error. In all, the locks elevated the River Cloud close to 500 feet during our voyage.

For our final round, we played a new Graham Marsh course called **Golf am Habsberg** in Velburg, Germany, just outside Nurnberg. Habsberg has a slight American feel with steep bunkers, enormous bent-grass greens and many treacherous collection areas that demand inventive means of escape. Milty was MIA for a half-hour in one of those pits. Overall, Habsberg exemplified the tug-and-pull of modern vs. classic styles that characterized the courses we visited. We rated the course an 8.3, with a 1.0 bonus for the late-afternoon rainbow.

After golf, my wife and I decided to pass on the farewell dinner and join Dottie and Jim from Chicago for a limo to Munich. Some last-minute shopping ensued before the four of us convened at the Hofbrau Haus for a few cold ones and a final night of storytelling.

"So, tell the truth, did you like it?" the wife asked me the next morning after I had paid her excess baggage charge of \$458 — she came with two bags, went home with six plus a new carry-on gizmo that contained a half-dozen dresses, eight blouses and a long black coat — and we had settled in our seats for the flight back across the Atlantic.

"Like it?" I said. "Listen, I'm going home with five invitations to play in member-guests all over the country. We go to Atlanta next month, then to Buffalo. We go out to Vancouver in September, then down to Lake Tahoe. Two guys asked me to play in the same tournament down at their club in Florida in December. And

Milty said he'd invite me to Chicago if the Cubs ever get to the World Series."

Well, some invitations are more realistic than others. ■

Ted Thomas plays golf around the world. This is his first article in *The Met Golfer*.



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