

River Cruising

Twice as Nice

Stretch out while sailing along the Danube on AmaWaterways' new double-wide ship

BY TIM JOHNSON



ROOM TO ROAM:

From top, aboard the spacious *AmaMagna*, relax on the Sunset Deck, watch a movie in the cinema, and refresh in the ample suite showers.

IF HE'S NERVOUS about the tight squeeze, Capt. Jan de Bruijn doesn't show it. He has little more than 3 feet of leeway on each side of the ship, but to my untrained eye — watching from the sun deck — it looks more like just a few inches. Steering precisely from an open-air wing on the port side of the *AmaMagna*, de Bruijn pokes his head out, sticking it over the edge, the top of his clean-shaven crown almost touching the concrete wall of our 12th and final lock of the trip. His face is calm, but his eyes are laser-focused on the task at hand. He has been navigating on rivers across this continent for more than 40 years, but even an experienced captain such as de Bruijn has never seen a ship quite like *this* one, which AmaWaterways just launched in May.

Exactly twice the width of a typical river ship, the 72-foot-wide *AmaMagna* is unlike any other vessel currently plying Europe's fresh waters. With size comes luxury — both actual luxury and the luxury of extra space. "This is a floating boutique hotel," says Kristin Karst, executive vice president, co-founder, and co-owner of AmaWaterways, who's on board for the voyage.

Familiar Route, Different Experience

We'll be sailing for a week, cruising the Danube from Budapest to the Bavarian town of Vilshofen. It's my 11th river cruise and the itinerary is familiar, sailing west, ascending a series of 12 locks over a course of 375 miles, passing through four countries along the way. In Vienna, we'll see Hofburg Palace, once the heart of the Habsburg Empire; in Salzburg, Austria, filming locations from *The Sound of Music*. Shore excursions — included in the price of the cruise — include

local experiences too, such as tasting favorite Slovakian lagers and pilsners in Bratislava.

But while the route is well-travelled, the *AmaMagna* conveys a whole new way to experience these famous places. How it differs from other ships on the Danube — or the Douro, Rhine, and Seine — is striking from the moment I board. Karst and Rudi Schreiner (president, co-founder, and co-owner) envisaged a vessel that would attract small-ship ocean cruisers previously deterred from Europe's rivers by vessels' compact sizes. Most ships are limited in width by their need to pass through the narrow Main-Danube Canal to make their way to the Rhine, and designers have shrunk cabins and public spaces to make this work. To skirt that issue, the *AmaMagna* will remain exclusively on the Danube, with its much wider locks. As I walk through the public spaces, the feel is entirely different than a traditional river ship, with just so many places to *be*.

For starters, a cinema, with a massive screen flanked by twin lounges, comfy with faux-crackling fireplaces. The sun deck up top includes a swimming pool and hot tub (both rare on this river), as well as expansive lounge areas, from cushy couches near the bow to reclining deck chairs under a canopy toward the middle and back. A fitness center near the stern also impresses, with big windows that open and a next-door juice bar.

Plus, suites account for about half of the ship's 98 staterooms. Swinging open the door to my cabin, I'm slightly astonished. Like mine, all suites include at least 355 square feet of space, a full couch, a desk with a Mac computer, a giant TV, and a walkout



MICHEL VERDOURE (POOL, CINEMA), MICHAEL BURRELL/DREAMTIME (WEIGHTS), MIROSLAV PETRASKO (SHIP)



balcony that comfortably fits two chairs and a small table. Hallways, alcoves, and other public spaces feel airy and open thanks to the cruise line's decision to increase capacity only slightly — 196 passengers compared to about 150 to 160 on its other ships — while doubling the *AmaMagna's* size.

Culinary Choices

The ship has four restaurants: the main dining room; the Chef's Table, with its special multicourse tasting menu; Jimmy's Bar, a casual space that feels like a subterranean bistro in Manhattan, where meals are served family style; and Al Fresco.

I've never had a dinner quite like the evening I spend at Al Fresco, which sits on the top deck near the bow. It serves a fresh, veggie-focused menu, but you can easily feast on the view alone. Dining there, despite some good company and conversation at my table, I can't keep my eyes off the open windows, which give a unique indoor-outdoor feel as we round big bends in the river, passing the turrets and towers of centuries-old castles as the sky fades from blue to orange to pink to black.

All this attracts a different type of cruiser, says cruise manager Maddy Caldaruse. "Many guests have told me they've been waiting for a ship like this," she says on the last day of my cruise, adding that the profile of those on board is younger, wealthier, and more independent. Fewer attend the daily briefings or even the pre-organized tours, spending more time in their staterooms and charting their own course. "Everyone tells me, 'It's more than I expected.'"

That's true for me — especially on the last night of the voyage. Having cruised through that last lock, we settle into a spot in the middle of the Danube, surrounded by the town of Vilshofen. Grabbing a couple of bottles of Champagne, I join some friends in the hot tub, up on the sun deck. Sipping the good stuff, we settle in for the show. Tonight happens to be a festival night here, and as we enjoy our *Veuve Clicquot*, the bubbles in the hot water matching those in our fluted glasses, the sky lights up, colorful fireworks launching from a nearby bridge. Spectacular, yes — but just another night on the *AmaMagna*. 800-626-0126; amawaterways.com/amamagna

