

WHERE IS THE DANUBE RIVER, ITS HISTORY, AND SOME OF THE FAMOUS CITIES LYING ALONG ITS BANKS?

The Danube (better known in Germany and Austria as the Donau) is the longest river in western Europe running from west to east. It extends about 1700 miles from its source at Donaueschingen in the Black Forest in South-West Germany to its multi-branch exit into the Black Sea in Romania. The following will give you the approximate path followed by the River-



Along its length you will find many famous cities including Ulm, Neuburg, Ingolstadt, Regensburg, Linz, Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest, and Belgrade. The River is steeped in history with artifacts from stone age settlements found along its banks dating back thousands of years. It was considered by the conquering Roman army to be the natural boundary between the Roman Empire and the barbarians living north of the river. In later expansions the Romans were able to push their conquests further into barbarian territory and held it via a string of fortifications known as the Limes connecting Cologne on the Rhine to Regensburg on the Danube. Anything north of the Limes and the Danube and east of the Rhine remained unconquerable territory.

We want in this article to discuss in some detail the history and other facts concerning the Danube and some of the towns and cities lying long its banks , mentioning several interesting facts, and also add some of our own observations acquired through years of travel to many locations along this famous river.

Let us begin our discussion at the source of the Danube and work ourselves down to its terminal point on the Black Sea. The Danube source is considered to be at **Donaueschingen** in Swabia. There the following monument indicates its origin-

Source Of the Danube at
Donaueschingen, Swabia



I first visited this site back in 1961-62 when I was a post-doc at the University of Freiburg in South-West Germany. Freiburg and Donaueschingen both border the Black-Forest famous for its Cuckoo clocks and Swarzwaldler Kirschtorte.

The first large town encountered after going about 75 miles down the river is **Ulm**. The town is famous for two things. The first is that it has the highest cathedral in the world topping out at 161meters. Also it is the birthplace of Albert Einstein. Here is an aerial view of Ulm-

VIEW OF THE DANUBE RIVER AT ULM ALSO SHOWING
THE WORLD'S TALLEST CATHEDRAL



Note the cathedral is where the Danube makes a sharp bend. When our family visited there in the 1970s my young daughter and I took the stairway up the top of the cathedral for a spectacular view of the city. Today I am no longer able to make such a

climb. The same would be true for climbing the comparable height of the Washington Monument in Washington DC. During my teenage years, living in Silver Spring, I would often climb this monument with friends in order to save the 10 cent elevator fare. The down elevator ride was free.

There are no other major cities encountered along the Danube for the next 100km although one can point out the small town of Donauworth where the so-called romantic road goes north through the medieval towns of Nordlingen, Dinkelsbuehl, and Rottenburg. Also a few kilometers further downstream the Danube reaches **Neuburg**. This is a beautiful small town with a long history. Here is a photo I took of the town-

NEUBURG ON THE DANUBE SHOWING DUCAL PALACE OF 1535



Behind the palace there are two famous catholic baroque churches [St.Peter(1641) and St.Ursula(1700)]. In addition there are many nice shops on this promontory overlooking the Danube. When visiting, my wife and I often go to a quaint cafe on the hill to enjoy the view of the Danube below.

Another 5km downstream one comes to a little farming village of **Bergheim**. I mention this dorf (German for small village) only because it is where my wife Sophia was born and raised before immigrating to the United States in her twenties. Here is a picture of the country church she was baptized in-

CHURCH IN BERGHEIM WERE MY WIFE WAS BAPTIZED



On one of our trips to Bergheim we stayed at an inn next to this church. It was a warm summer and there was no air-conditioning. So we had to keep our windows open. Unfortunately the church bell would gong every fifteen minutes with full multiple bell-ringing every hour on the hour. Needless to say one did not get much sleep that night. Sophia tells me that as child she would often go swimming in the Danube which was just a few hundred yards from her home. There was no bridge across the Danube at that time and place so they had to cross by ferry driven by the water's motion without other external help.

Another 15 km downstream takes one to the city of **Ingolstadt**. This old city already mentioned by Charlemagne in 806 is located about 100km north of Munich on the banks of the Danube. It used to have a famous university founded back in 1472 but which was later moved to Landshut and then to Munich in the early 18 hundreds. Mary Shelley's famous book "Frankenstein" was based on some fictional characters residing at this University. During the 30 years war in the early 1600s it was a catholic stronghold which was never conquered by the invading protestant Swedes. The famous catholic general Tilly died there during the siege. Today Igolstadt is mainly known for its luxury car Audi manufacturing base.

Proceeding down the Danube one comes next to **Regensburg** . This city is located at the northern most part of the Danube and was founded as the frontier fort Castra Regina by the Romans in 179AD during the reign of Markus Aurelius. It was from this point that the Romans constructed a line of forts known as the Limes which eventually reached the

city of Cologne (Castra Colonia) on the Rhine. Regensburg is also the place where the famous Astronomer J. Kepler died in 1630. Most of his income came from casting horoscopes for the local princes in Prague and Linz. Also Regensburg is known for its young boys choir (Dom Spatzen) at St.Peters Cathedral (completed 1520) and its famous Stonebridge (started in 1135 and partially blown up by the retreating German troops at the end of WWII). Here is a picture of these two famous landmarks-

REGENSBURG SHOWING ST.PETER'S CATHEDRAL (1520) AND ITS FAMOUS
STONE BRIDGE(1135) ACROSS THE DANUBE



When the stone bridge was first built it was the only bridge across the Danube between Ulm and Vienna. It was used by the crusaders on their way to Jerusalem. During World War II Regensburg was the home of Messerschmidt aircraft, producer of fighter aircraft for the axis powers .The city came under heavy bombardment in August of 1943.

The next major city along the Danube on our downstream trip is **Passau** at the German-Austrian Border. It lies at the junction of the Inn and Ilz rivers with the Danube. Several years ago it experienced major flooding not seen since the fifteen hundreds. During the the middle ages it was known for its weaponry manufacturing capability and today is well known for the research being done by their economics and computer branches at the University of Passau. Many of you have probably heard about river cruises along the Danube. Well this is the place were the larger pleasure crafts start on their way to Vienna and Budapest and beyond.

After Passau one reaches **Linz** in Austria. The Romans had a camp there called Lentia. Linz was a big trading center during the middle ages connecting Prague with Villach and the Mediterranean at what is now Trieste in Italy. The Alps are less of an obstacle in this

region for trade routes then they are in Germany. Linz was also the town Adolph Hitler grew up in until his move to Vienna.

Half way between Linz and Vienna one finds the small town of **Melk**. Here is located the famous Benedictine Monastery shown in the following picture-

THE MELK BENEDICTINE MONASTERY FOUNDED IN 1089



We visited there about twenty years ago and were very impressed especially with their extensive library of antique books dating back to Gutenberg. In 1926 an American book collector bought a Gutenberg Bible from this Benedictine monastery for the unheard of price of 106 thousand dollars. They used the money to help renovate the monastery. Today this bible would bring in over ten million at auction.

The next town reached on our downward journey along the Danube is **Vienna**, the capital of Austria and the seat of Hapsburg Empire from 1485 until 1918. It has a population of 1.8 million people making it the largest city found along the Danube. Vienna itself was a former Roman fort (15 BC) known as Vindobona . The city is rich in history and the arts especially in music. At one time or another W. Mozart, L.van Beethoven, J.Brahms, F.Schubert, G.Mahler, A.Salieri, and Johann Strauss Jr lived and composed music there. The three best known musical compositions originating in Vienna are Mozart's 41st Symphony Jupiter, Beethoven's 9th Symphony and Strauss's Blue(actually not so blue) Danube Waltz. In architecture Vienna is second to none as can be seen by looking at the Schoenbrunn palace or their opera house. Here is a picture I took of the latter back in 1994-

VIENNA OPERA HOUSE



The city has a large park known as the Prater. In it you will find the famous 212 ft. diameter Riesenrad (Ferris Wheel) of 1897. You may recognize it via the movie “The Third Man”. My family and I have often ridden this wheel always enjoying the view of Vienna it provides. Finally one should mention their coffee houses. These were introduced shortly after the defeat of the Ottoman Turks at the walls of Vienna in 1683. The story goes that the Turks in their rapid retreat left behind sacks of roasted coffee beans which started the whole coffeehouse business. My wife also always enjoys the confectionary and pastry shops located around the city. She is especially fond of Sacher Torte.

A few more miles downriver brings one to **Bratislava** (German Pressburg) a city of 450,000 inhabitants. It has changed its nationality many times in its existence. The ethnic mixture before the World Wars was about half German and half Hungarian. At the present it is the most prosperous part of Slovakia (eastern part of the former Czechoslovakia). With the aid of outside partners such as Volkswagen, IBM, Hewlett Packard, and Kraft Foods it has become an economic powerhouse. Tourism is also expanding due to its many historical sites. Here is a photo of a group of tourists visiting downtown-

TOURISTS IN BRATISLAVA, SLOVAKIA



The next big city one encounters along the Danube is **Budapest**, the capital of Hungary. It is the second largest city found along the Danube with 1.7 million inhabitants. Settlements along the River's banks date back to prehistoric times. The Romans built the city of Aquincum there in 106 AD. In the ninth century the territory was invaded by the Magyars whose offspring are today's Hungarians. The city is spread out on both sides of the Danube as shown in the following photo-

AERIAL VIEW OF BUDAPEST

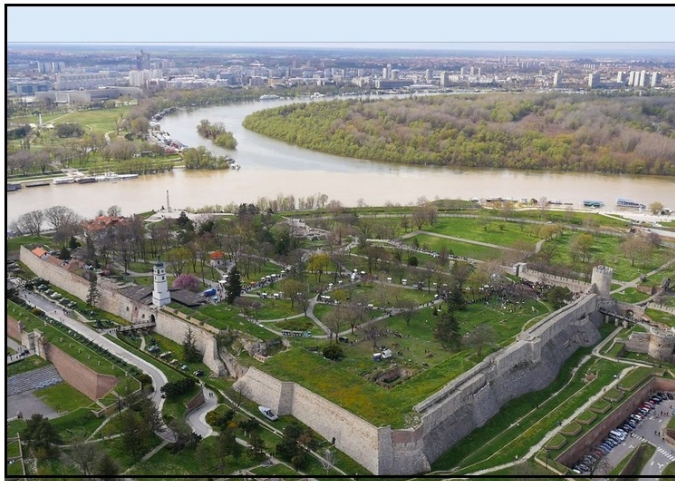


There are several bridges shown plus an island which has been turned into a recreational park with swimming pool facilities. The main commercial and financial districts plus fancy apparel stores are found on the Pest side of the river while an impressive white stone fortress and a large gothic church with a fancy colored tile roof are found on the higher elevated Buda side. The city has produced many distinguished scientist who

immigrated to the United States. These include aerodynamicist Theodore von Karman, nobel prize winner Eugene Wigner, discoverer of uranium chain reactions Leo Szillard , and father of the hydrogen bomb Edward Teller.

After Budapest the Danube turns in a south-easterly direction. Some 200 miles downstream one arrives at **Belgrade**, Serbia. This city of 1.3 million inhabitants was the capital of the former Yugoslavia and remains so for Serbia. The city has a violent history being completely destroyed numerous times in the last millennium including extensive damage during WWI and WW2. The Romans founded the city of Singidunum there during the first century AD. The Ottoman Turks conquered Belgrade in 1521 and held on for about 300 years in constant conflict with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A huge tourist attraction at the city outskirts is a fort located at the junction of the Danube and Sava rivers. Here is a photo-

BELGRADE FORTRESS AT THE JUNCTION OF THE
DANUBE AND SAVA RIVERS



On our 1988 Balkan tour we passed through Belgrade and saw many interesting sites including graves of some of the 16th century Ottoman officials. We also visited Tito's Mausoleum (House of Flowers) with its permanent live honor guards.

After Belgrade the Danube turns again in an easterly direction forming the boundary between Bulgaria and Romania. Approximately 120 miles down from Belgrade the Danube enters a huge gorge known as the **Iron Gates** where the river narrows to just 200ft. The gates are located at the Serbian-Rumanian border. Here is a photo-

THE IRON GORGE ALONG THE DANUBE



Cave artifacts believed to be 12 thousand years old have been found there. Today river cruise ships traverse the gorge with ease although in Roman and Ottoman times it was considered a most dangerous passage requiring local guides.

There are no additional major cities encountered after Belgrade for the remaining 400 mile trip to the Black Sea. There is a small bridge across the Danube at the town of Ruse. We passed through Ruse on an earlier bus tour from Sofia, Bulgaria to Bucharest, Romania. In the middle ages the territory of Romania was known as Wallachia. During the 15th century it was ruled by a particular viscous individual Vlad the Impaler (1428-1476). His Romanian name was Vlad Tepes. He also had the moniker of Dracul (dragon or devil). Here is the only extant painting of him-

VLAD THE IMPALER(1428-1476)



He was reluctant to pay tribute to the Ottoman Empire and as a result had multiple skirmishes with them. During these conflicts with the Ottomans and also the German settlers living in the northern part of the country (Transylvania) he would make it a point to impale on stakes hundreds of his adversaries to die horrible deaths. When the Turks heard of this and saw that there was someone even more cruel than they were, the Ottomans never again attempted a full scale invasion of Wallachia. An interesting sidelight is that the Irish author Bram Stoker published the book "Dracula" back in 1897 using Vlad Tepes as his role model for the main character.

The Danube finally enters a large delta and breaks into many branches with only the town of Sulina lying along one branch of the Danube and at the Black Sea. There is no major tourist development other than a few hotels in the delta catering to bird watchers. In the late 1970s and early 1980s a 64 km long canal was dug between the Danube at Cernavoda and Constanta at the Black Sea. This for the first time made ship navigation from the North Sea all the way to the Black Sea possible. Unfortunately the canal was dug via forced labor under the dictatorship of N. Ceausescu, leading to the deaths of several thousand underfed and overworked workers.

U.H.Kurzweg
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Happy Father's Day
Gainesville, Florida