

Danube River

*“Rivers are roads that move
and carry us whither we wish
to go.”* ~ Blaise Pascal



A preferred travel route by rulers since ancient times, this picturesque “River of Kings” carves a winding path through ten modern-day European nations with landscapes characterized by vineyards, forested slopes, wine-producing villages, majestic cities, and imposing fortresses. The Danube River is the second longest in Europe after the Volga. It rises in the Black Forest Mountains of western Germany and flows 1,780 miles east through the heartland of Austria, then Slovakia and Hungary before flowing into Croatia, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria where it finally empties into the Black Sea.

During Roman times, the Danube was the northernmost boundary of the Roman Empire. Like a string of pearls, Roman port cities and castles lined the Danube. Most are still present today. The river played a vital role in the settlement and political evolution of central and southeastern Europe. Its banks, lined with castles and fortresses, formed the boundary between great empires, and its waters served as a vital commercial highway between nations. This trade corridor along the Danube gave rise to two major empires, the Austrian and Hungarian. They merged under Austria, becoming the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867.

Throughout history, humans have attempted to alter the course of Europe’s major rivers. Twelve hundred years ago, Charlemagne dreamed of connecting the Rhine, Main, and Danube Rivers into one watercourse between the North Sea and the Black Sea. Though a connecting trench was created, the challenges were immense and the project never proceeded. In 1992, this dream was realized with the opening of the Main-Danube Canal. This canal created a 2,200-mile-long waterway which passes through 15 countries and unites hundreds of inland ports. While the Canal is an artificial waterway, it by no means detracts from the natural beauty around it. On the contrary, natural splendor and engineering marvels combine to create the Danube’s unique majesty.

Budapest, Hungary

Budapest, Hungary’s capital, is bisected by the Danube river. Budapest was the largest city on the Roman Danube and was famous for its luxurious spas. Its 19th century Chain Bridge connects the hilly Buda district with flat Pest. A funicular runs up Castle Hill to Buda’s Old Town, where the Budapest History Museum traces city life from Roman times onward. Trinity Square is home to 13th century Matthias Church and the turrets of the Fisherman’s Bastion which offer sweeping views of the city and the river.

Bratislava, Slovakia

The capital of Slovakia, Bratislava is set along the Danube River by the border with Austria and Hungary. The pedestrian-only 18th century Old Town is known for its lively bars and cafés. Perched atop a hill, the reconstructed Bratislava Castle overlooks Old Town and the Danube. Over the centuries, Bratislava has been part of the Moravian Empire, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the U.S.S.R. When Czechoslovakia split in 1993, Bratislava became the Slovak capital, joining the EU in 2004.

Vienna, Austria

Vienna, Austria's capital, lies in the country's east on the Danube River. Vienna was a major Roman city with temples, paved squares, theaters, and arenas. Its artistic and intellectual legacy has been shaped by residents including Mozart, Beethoven, and Sigmund Freud. The famous waltz, *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* (1867), by Johann Strauss became the symbol of imperial Vienna. The city is also known for its magnificent, extravagant Imperial palaces.

Dürnstein, Austria

Dürnstein, a small village on the Danube River, is a well-known wine growing area since the 18th century. The fertile soil, enriched by the Danube for millennia, combined with a remarkable climate, created one of Austria's best winegrowing regions. In the castle above the town, King Richard I, the "Lionheart", of England was held captive by the Duke of Austria, after their dispute during the Third Crusade. Nearby is the stunning Melk Abbey, a Benedictine abbey located on a rocky outcrop that overlooks the Danube River.

Passau, Germany

A German city on the Austrian border and an ancient Roman colony, Passau lies at the confluence of the Danube, Inn, and Ilz Rivers. Known as the Three Rivers City, it is overlooked by the Veste Oberhaus, a 13th century hilltop fortress. The Old Town is known for its stunning baroque architecture. The city was rebuilt in this style after a devastating fire in 1662.

Regensburg, Germany

Regensburg, a Bavarian city on the Danube River in southeast Germany, was the site of an important Roman fort at this most northerly point of the Danube. The city is known for its well-preserved medieval core, built when Regensburg became a Free Imperial City and an important trade center. The Stone Bridge, still standing with its 16 arches, was built across the Danube in the 12th century. This bridge opened major international trade routes between northern Europe and Venice, thus beginning Regensburg's Golden Age.

Nuremberg, Germany

Nuremberg, the second largest city in Bavaria, is located on the Pegnitz River and the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal. The city expanded dramatically in importance in the middle ages due to its location on key trade routes. Over the centuries, it became the unofficial capital of the Holy Roman Empire, center of the German Renaissance, and location of the International Tribunal which held to account many major Nazi officials. Nuremberg offers a pedestrian-only zone in Old Town, and is a main destination for shopping, including year-round Christmas stores.