

TRANSDANUBE TRAVEL STORIES

Danubian Europe: the discovery of a “liquid space”

(by Márton Méhes, coordinator)

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Summary

This trail along the middle section of the Danube invites you to discover a different Europe – namely Danubian Europe, which is obviously different from what Europe is like along the Rhine. On our passage from Linz to Novi Sad and Timișoara, the Danube reveals itself as a “liquid space” in permanent transition. It has run for many centuries between the West and East, where the aftermath of the most recent political transition is still palpable. The wounds and traces of fascism and communism have left a lasting imprint on societies and urban architecture along the river. On the other hand, surprising technological innovation and artistic creativity are forming a stark contrast to the past of the region. Its rich cultural diversity makes Danubian Europe unique in the world for all the treasures and turmoil that Mother Danube has gathered from the waters of her tributaries. You cannot step into the same river twice: the Danube and its neighbouring regions are in constant change, and they will change your mind as well.

Geographical scope

Trail #1 is one of six connected thematic routes within the Transdanube Travel Stories project. Each route covers a specific section of the Danube. Trail #1 focuses on **the middle section of the**

river, with destinations and points of interest (POI) in **Austria, Slovakia, Hungary** and **Croatia**, and side glances to the European Capitals of Culture, **Novi Sad** in Serbia and **Timișoara** in Romania.

What is the basic approach of this Danube expedition?

It is impossible to understand the whole of Europe without a deeper understanding of – and the desire to explore and grasp – Danubian Europe, or the Danube region, for that matter. Recently, the need for a **new narrative of Europe** has been on everyone's lips. This narrative is necessary to re-ignite people's excitement about Europe. It is plain to see that there are certain differences between the western and eastern halves of the continent, and understanding these differences is further complicated by the fact that the transition between these two parts is no longer marked by a physical border (unlike 32 years ago). Instead, boundaries in the Danube region are fluid. So far, so good. But hand on heart, can you put your finger on the differences? Are you familiar with the local conditions in different places? Can you join the dots between increasingly clichéd descriptions? Do you know the questions and concerns of locals? Do you know when, and how, they celebrate successes, and what makes them happy?

The history of Danubian Europe is the starting point for a multi-day expedition to what is probably the most famous river in Europe. The goal of the journey is to answer the question of how Europe came to be so many-faceted along the Danube. We want to understand how the people living on its shores think, see, feel and taste. We want to grasp and internalise Danubian Europe. We want to find concrete **evidence** of the specific character of Danubian Europe: concrete **places, events, people**, and **stories**. We shall immerse ourselves in seemingly familiar cities and landscapes that will turn out to be completely new and unfamiliar. We shall be tracing stories to their roots and be looking for hidden places. We shall learn first-hand from people along the Danube why they have different views from, say, people on the Rhine. We shall let ourselves get carried away by the river.

This trail **invites** participants **to discover** a different Europe – Danubian Europe, that is, which is obviously different from the rest of Europe, since it's a "liquid space". The **main question** of the expedition is: What makes the difference? What kind of evidence is there of a different, Danubian Europe? The **main goal** of the expedition is to identify and discover specific features of this "liquid space". The **methodology** is to find hidden places and background stories, to meet local people (witnesses of the past, contemporary artists, etc.), to taste diversity (not only in terms of food and drink), to think, sense, perceive, taste, and touch. The expected **outcome** is not just to acquire knowledge, but to better understand Danubian Europe. The trail is sure to change the mindset of fellow travellers, who are expected to overcome clichés and grasp broader connections and structures.

The liquid space – a pendulum between East and West

Danubian Europe has a particular characteristic that has evolved and manifested itself for centuries: the (middle) Danube region oscillates like a **pendulum**, or **ferry**, between the powers and influences of the West (Christianity, Euro-Atlantic partnership, etc.) and the East (Ottoman Empire, Soviet Union, etc.), thus forming a fluid boundary, or “liquid space”, as it were, between East and West.

But how does this oscillation make itself felt today? On our trip, we will be visiting Esztergom in Hungary, for example. This small town with its huge, domed basilica sits enthroned right by the river and is a holy place for Hungarians. This is where the first Hungarian king and founder of the state, Stephen I, was born and coronated, which reflects the deliberate decision of the Hungarians, whose roots were in the East, to adopt the Western, Christian culture. A few centuries later, the country was torn into three parts: two thirds were occupied by the Ottoman Empire, so the pendulum swung back towards the Orient; mosques still standing in Pécs and the remains of Turkish baths in Budapest bear witness to this development.

Around 1989, Hungary made a U-turn and chose to adopt the Western liberal-democratic world order. Today, almost all countries in the region are members of the EU. To better understand some of the current debates within the EU, one must understand the chequered history of the Danube basin. Hungary is an example of the region’s centuries-long wavering between East and West, which arguably started when King Stephen chose to embrace Christianity.

This wavering, or oscillating between two riverbanks (the Hungarian poet Endre Ady has described Hungary as a “ferry country”) continues to this day, and can be found in almost all countries in the region. Just think of the heated European debates about the influence of Russia and China in Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary. Strategic investments such as the expansion of the Paks nuclear power plant on the Danube are being made with massive Russian participation, while China is building a new high-speed railway line between Belgrade and Budapest, and Turkey is investing in culture and education projects in the Muslim-majority part of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This complex and highly emotionally moving narrative is a history of movement, because people in the region have been in constant motion for centuries, whether by choice or not (consider immigration, settlement, exodus, flight, expulsion, land grabs, population exchange, emigration, guest labour, etc.). This movement, or transfer, has sometimes taken place from West to East (e.g. Danube Swabians, Saxons), and at other times in the reverse direction (e.g. guest workers from former Yugoslavia to Austria and Germany), like a pendulum, or ferry, and continues to exist today. In the last two to three decades, this movement has been reflected in phenomena like the “brain drain” from East to West (e.g. doctors, computer scientists), as well as Western investment and company foundations in the East (car factories, technology companies, etc.). Both types of transfer contribute to innovation in the destination countries.

Regarded as a body of water, the Danube is the sum of its tributaries, which feed on other tributaries, streams and channels. Composed of countless sources in every nook and corner of Europe, this unique mixture of waters travels on to the sea, mostly calmly, but sometimes raging. The great diversity, knowledge, joy, sorrow and history of so many peoples, generations, cultures,

languages, cities and landscapes – in short: the fluidity of this liquid space – is the (other) Europe that we want to discover!

Upheaval and transition

It has been 32 years since the decades-long **political division of Europe** into a democratic West and a repressive, communist East came to an end. Most of the countries of the former Eastern bloc are now members of the EU and NATO; many of them belong to the Schengen Area, and some have already introduced the euro as a currency. These results of the European **unification process** are undoubtedly a cause for celebration. To put it briefly: the last **major transformation** - the fall of the communist regimes and the transition to a new, democratic world - is formally as good as complete. However, the individual and collective transition in people's minds has not kept up with this rapid development, resulting partly in disillusionment and deeply divided societies.

But Danubian Europe has also seen another kind of constant change: one gets the impression that neither the societies nor the cities ever come to rest. Everything is being restructured, reorganised, and rebuilt. Cities like Győr, Budapest, Novi Sad or Timișoara are now totally different from what they were like 20 or 30 years ago. Another, particularly vivid example of systematic social-urban change is a Danubian city that isn't located anywhere near the former Iron Curtain: Linz. The capital of Upper Austria stands as an example of several cities along the Danube that are reinventing themselves with the help of culture.

Linz was once regarded merely as a city on the A1 motorway that you pass on the route from Vienna to Salzburg (without stopping over). It was the city of the voestalpine steelworks, an industrial city that didn't really have much to offer apart from dust. In addition, there was another serious image problem: Linz had once been the favourite city of the *Führer*, who wanted to make it the "Cultural Capital of Europe" and declared himself its "patron" immediately after the *Anschluss* in 1938. Yet in spite of this historical burden, it was far from clear that Linz would even want to change, since many would have preferred to simply forget the past. Ultimately Linz did indeed become the European Capital of Culture – albeit, fortunately, under completely different auspices - and was given the chance to tell its story to the whole of Europe: the event was opened with the exhibition "Cultural Capital of the Führer", which caused quite a stir among inhabitants.

Today, the Danube embankment in Linz stands for innovation, creativity and networking in the Danube region, but also for the great historical contrasts and contradictions that make the region so unique. Located right on the embankment, the Lentos Kunstmuseum and the Ars Electronica Center epitomise this new profile of the city.

Leaving Linz, we realise that the city has indeed changed, and so has our view. Linz is the perfect prelude to our European expedition on the Danube: we need to take a closer, different look at Europe if we are to better understand the European nature on the Danube from Linz to Timișoara! No wonder that many cities in the region take their cues from Linz today - especially the European Capitals of Culture and the candidate cities. Linz has become an example of a deliberate, successful, continuous transformation.

Ups and downs of the 20th century

Europe's fate has always been decided on the river Danube. To put it another way: if past events had materialised somewhere else or differently, Europe would be a different continent today. Europe's history in this region has always moved between **heavy blows of fate** and **glorious moments** (with upheavals, turnarounds, revolutions, battles, etc.), whose repercussions can still be felt today. Despite all the heroic deeds and the love of **freedom**, however, there is an aftertaste of a predominantly **tragic history** which has left us with a few traumas and quite a few corpses, as the Czech author Jaroslav Rudiš has argued in his novel "Winterberg's Last Journey", describing Central Europe as a battlefield and morgue. Moreover, Europe's self-perception tends to be a negative one. It is sometimes diluted with (self-) **irony** and **sarcasm**, but isn't completely resolved, alas.

Especially the events of the 20th century have left deep scars that many people and societies along the Danube are unable to deal with. **Fascism and communism** have blurred the lines between perpetrators and victims in an unfortunate way; too many people are still personally affected today, while political parties try to make political capital out of past events.

An absolute highlight of the 20th century awaits us on the so-called Iron Curtain Trail EuroVelo 13, Europe's cycle route along the former "Iron Curtain": the site of the so-called "Pan-European Picnic" of 1989 is easily accessible from the Danube on an e-bike. This place near the town of Sopron is on the list of European Heritage Sites and commemorates one of the most exciting moments in Europe's *annus mirabilis*, the turning point in the historical transition process that brought an end to the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. On 19 August 1989, the Pan-European Union, Eastern Bloc oppositionists and the Hungarian Democratic Forum organised a peace demonstration, the Pan-European Picnic, at the Austrian-Hungarian border north of Sopron. The "picnic" was held under the patronage of Austria-Hungary's last crown prince, Otto von Habsburg, and the author György Konrád – the latter under the protective hand of the Hungarian chief reformist and Minister of State, Imre Pozsgay. During the event, a gate in the border fence was to be symbolically opened for one hour. Participation in the event had been heavily advertised, including among GDR refugees stuck in Budapest, who had imagined their onward journey to the West to be too easy. They had come by the thousands, and when the gate was opened, almost 700 of them pushed across to the Austrian side without encountering any significant resistance. In the days that followed, border controls were tightened, but three weeks later, on 11 September, they were opened to GDR citizens without restriction.

On our journey of discovery through Danubian Europe, we will also encounter many places of 20th-century horrors. Examples include Mauthausen near Linz, or the lesser-known, circular Star Fortress in Komárom, Hungary, an imposing 16th- and 19th-century structure that served as a collection camp for Hungarian Romani deported in late 1944. The Star Fortress is a sad witness of the Europe-wide Roma Holocaust, which has been ignored for far too long: a large part of Romani deported from western Hungary was herded by Hungarian Arrow Crossers into the Star Fortress in Komárom in November and December 1944, where many of them starved or froze to death, while others were murdered by guards. In total, about eight to ten thousand internees from various ethnic groups, including prisoners of war, Hungarian Romani, Jews and political prisoners

were held at the Komárom fortress in late 1944. The majority were then sent to various concentration camps in the “Third Reich”.¹

A systematic reappraisal of history has been neglected in most countries in the region during the past 30 years. The transition was too fast, the change too unexpected and sometimes unpredictable. But even today, most countries are still sluggish and inconsistent in their assessment of their role in history. In countries like Hungary, the transition from communism to democracy was a fluid one: in many cases, the old regimes supported the transition or even contributed to it. As a matter of fact, the supposedly orderly transition without bloodshed caused deep psychological wounds in society which become visible in the present political disunity.

A special discovery tour of Budapest is recommended to those who want to better understand the region’s struggle with its own history: a look at their monuments and memorials illustrates the Hungarians’ self-image and view of the past, as well as their social discourse and controversies. Possible stopovers on this memorial tour include: the **Memorial of National Unity** (Trianon Monument of 2020 commemorating the 100th anniversary of the 1920 Treaty of Trianon); the **Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation** (a controversial monument to the victims of the German occupation, inaugurated in 2014 on Budapest’s Szabadság tér, or Liberty Square)²; the **Shoes on the Danube Bank** (a much-noted memorial on the Danube bank commemorating the pogroms against Jews towards the end of World War II); the **House of Terror** (historical museum designed as a memorial site to juxtapose fascist rule and communist dictatorship); the **Central Monument of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence** (contemporary installation erected to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the revolution); the **Memento Park** (where Marx, Engels, Lenin and many Soviet soldiers are gathered in an ironic postmodern presentation).

Creativity, innovation and the questions of the future

The Danube is the only river in the world whose kilometres are counted from the mouth, rather than the source. That is why its zero-kilometre stone isn’t in the Black Forest, but on the Black Sea coast. Because it was impossible to agree on a point in the headwaters, the Danube was “turned around”, as it were. There is always a way – this is the “Danubian” philosophy of life, **a source of creativity and innovation** in Danubian Europe. But the expedition will show that this spirit of renewal has long been more than the clichéd folkloristic notion of the cunning Eastern European. Today, the thriving region is a cradle of cutting-edge technologies, start-ups, design studios, creative industries and inventions, as its changeful history turns out to be a source of creative solutions. The expedition will also reveal a surprising amount of innovation and creativity in technology, in the arts, or simply in everyday life. Greater Bratislava, Győr, Esztergom and Kecskemét no longer only build cars, but are also accumulating know-how in adjoining colleges and universities. Novi Sad is a centre of the international gaming industry, of computer sciences and creative industries. As mentioned before, Linz has become a hub for futurologists who address questions of **technology, innovation and art** at the annual Ars Electronica Festival. Contemporary art is ubiquitous in this city, which aims high with the help of culture: for example,

¹ Source: http://konfliktuskutato.hu/index.php?option=com_maps&view=map&event_id=344&tmpl=itr&Itemid=195

² Source: <https://memorialmuseums.org/staettens/druck/1567>

the annual Höhenrausch project is a brainchild of the 2009 Capital of Culture year. It is a unique, multi-part art trail on the rooftops of Linz and in the attics of the former Ursuline convent, which now houses the OK centre of contemporary art.

New, **creative places** have mushroomed in many cities in the region, often in **old industrial sites** or decaying buildings converted for the purposes of art, culture and education. In Pécs, too, the creative power of contemporary art and the innovative power of sciences have joined forces. Examples include studios, contemporary galleries, the arts faculty in the Zsolnay Cultural Quarter, the new Szentágothai Research Centre, and the Kodály Concert Hall, whose acoustics and architecture are praised across all of Europe. The Zsolnay Cultural Quarter is also home to one of the most modern planetariums in the region. The Zsolnay Cultural Quarter project stood out as a beacon from numerous projects of the 2010 Capital of Culture year: the quarter was built on the completely preserved site of the Zsolnay Porcelain Manufactory, a fairytale world of colourful gingerbread buildings with turrets, chimneys and a myriad of figures mostly from the heyday of the factory, which supplied majolica decorations, roof ceramics and statues to the entire monarchy and far beyond at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In Novi Sad, as part of the district project “Cultural Stations”, the Svilara cultural centre (former silk factory) and the former Egység hunting club are precursors of the 2022 Capital of Culture programme. The so-called China Quarter, which used to be an industrial zone with small workshops and businesses, is now an impressive haven of alternative culture. It’s a place where you can smell evergreen rock’n’roll spirit and listen to emerging garage bands and established musicians from the region and beyond. Underground bars, studios, alternative concerts, quirky exhibitions, small festivals and lots of graffiti ... an official part of the Capital of Culture project, the China Quarter will be relaunched as a cultural quarter with a new infrastructure, but familiar artists, bars and stages.³

Separated, yet connected: contradictions and secrets

Perhaps you have read the Trieste author Claudio Magris’s great Danube essay, an impressive and poetic description of “Central Europeanness” on the Danube. Perhaps you have also heard of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, which has existed for a decade. And Richard von Weizsäcker famously said, referring to the East and West: “What belongs together will grow together.” Important speeches, newspaper articles and poems regularly mention “the great European river”, the “mother of Europe” even, i.e. the Danube as the very **definition of Europe**, alongside the Rhine. **“Rhein”** is a masculine German term representing the father. The austere, vigorous, Franco-Germanic river flows from south to north; it defines the west of the continent. **“Donau”**, on the other hand, is a feminine German term denoting the mother. Flowing from west to east, the Danube is more emotional, troubled and multi-ethnic, representing the fluent transition of the continent to the east and beyond. The problem is that many interpret the relationship between Rhenish Europe and Danubian Europe as a fatal contrast, a great contradiction, when

³ Source: <https://www.itinari.com/de/alternative-novi-sad-exploring-the-china-quarter-j4wl>

actually, for all their differences, they are more like Yin and Yang, i.e. two complementary sides of one Europe, with lots of separating, but also connecting elements.

Even the Danube itself has been a border and a bridge at the same time. The linguistic-cultural heterogeneity, constant movement and clashes on its riverbanks have made the Danube both a **border and a connection**. This **contradiction** is what makes the “other Europe” on the Danube so exciting, sometimes even mysterious. One and the same bridge would sometimes connect and sometimes separate entire systems, as the Nibelungen Bridge in Linz shows (more on this later on).

The two small towns of Komárom and Komárno were once one town, called Komorn in German. This was the birthplace of Theodor Körner (1873-1957), Austria’s Federal President from 1951 to 1957. The division of Komorn was a consequence of the Treaty of Trianon of 1920, which is considered a national trauma by many Hungarians and still affects the historical and political discourse in the country today. The great powers did not succeed at the time in finding a compromise acceptable to all parties concerned. Through the Trianon decree, about two million Hungarians suddenly found themselves outside their own national borders – including in newly founded Czechoslovakia. The Slovak side of the river between Bratislava and Esztergom is still inhabited by a majority of Hungarians, including Komárno. The division was deep, because the border between the socialist brother states was as closely guarded as the Iron Curtain to the West. The political upheaval in 1989 made the border between Komárom and Komárno more permeable, and when Slovakia and Hungary entered the EU (2004) and later the Schengen Area (2007), a kind of “reunification” was achieved at European level without affecting the territorial integrity of the states.

Back in Roman times, there had been an important crossing at this spot of the Danube. Since 1892, the two districts/towns of Komárom and Komárno have been connected by the proud Elizabeth Bridge. To the west of the twin cities, a new road bridge was inaugurated in 2020, which has further strengthened connections and improved exchange.

Another symbolic bridge is the Mária Valéria Bridge, which connects Esztergom with Štúrovo in Slovakia. About 13,000 people live in Štúrovo, or Párkány in Hungarian, the majority of whom use Hungarian as a mother tongue but are bilingual nonetheless. People in Štúrovo claim that they have the better view of the basilica in Esztergom, which is true. The bridge was built in 1895 and blown up in 1944, but in spite of the fact that it crossed the border between the two “friendly” socialist countries of Czechoslovakia and Hungary, the bridge was not re-erected until 2001. Instead, the piers protruded from the Danube for 57 years as a reminder of World War II.

There is a project in Štúrovo that reflects the history of this bridge in a loving, cosmopolitan, and very creative way: the “Bridge Guard Residential Art” project. The bridge guard’s former residence now hosts artists from all over the world, offering them an opportunity to be creative in a multicultural, historic place by the mighty Danube. The scheme was initiated by Karol Frühauf, a Swiss from Štúrovo, and his wife. The same goes for the annual AquaPhone festival, which uses artistic means to commemorate a touching story from Europe’s dark, communist era: by the early 1950s, the bridge between Štúrovo and Esztergom had already been destroyed. It was virtually impossible to meet or get in touch with relatives or friends from the other side of the Danube. And yet people went down to the river on windless evenings to talk to each other, since

the water carried their short, often encoded messages to the other riverbank half a kilometre away. Every year, the small AquaPhone performance festival refers to this phenomenon. It honours all fates whose secrets were once handed over to the Danube, as well as the human desire to talk to each other and people's ingenuity in overcoming borders and distances under difficult conditions.⁴

Exactly 22 years ago, the city of Novi Sad lost all its Danube bridges overnight when NATO forces intervened in the Kosovo war, flying thousands of sorties until early summer. In the process, many targets in Belgrade, such as the TV tower or the Ministry of Defence, were specifically bombed, while in Novi Sad the bridges across the Danube were destroyed. What symbolism! The Europe-wide debate about the necessity of the bombing raids is still going on today. In 2016, 17 years after the bombing, Novi Sad was selected to be the 2021 European Capital of Culture. The motto of the city's bid for the prestigious title was "For New Bridges", and it did indeed convince the European jury with its concept of promoting "the reintegration of the city and Serbia into the cultural life of Europe through the dialogue of cultures". The Capital of Culture aims high: it wants to rebuild the bridges, reinvigorate the city's multicultural tradition, and restore the European affiliation both locally and across Europe.

Unique worldwide – diversity of cultures and nature

The natural Danube landscape is known for its biodiversity - just think of the numerous reserves and national parks. There is also a unique **cultural diversity**. The Danube is unrivalled in Europe (and across the world) in terms of its diversity of co-existing ethnicities, cultures, languages, denominations and scripts. Like no other river, it stands for the oft-cited diversity of our continent, which is also its "unique selling proposition". At times, its cultures were at enmity with each other, and they still don't always get along, but they have always depended on each other. Ultimately no power, none of the nations prevailed permanently, or managed to rule for long. And so the many small languages and cultures "romp around" their **mother, the Danube**, like children, and there is always some quarrel and competition going on between them, although their individual identities merge. Jews, Germans, Roma, Lipovans, Chocats, Szeklers, Csangos ... all of these are more or less well-known cultures, languages and dialects in the Danube region practiced by Slovaks, Hungarians, Croats, Romanians, etc. and making up the diversity of Danubian Europe. Let us hope that they will last for a long time, because small ethnic groups, languages and dialects are just as endangered as biological diversity is in some places.

The diversity of Bratislava is currently being rediscovered. Various layers of the city's history – its German, Austrian, and Hungarian character from the 19th century – are becoming more and more interesting to its old and new inhabitants. "Many realise", notes author Michal Hvorecky, "that this is us. This is our heritage, after all, and our heritage is not a disadvantage, but an advantage. Our Jewish heritage, too, since large parts of the city used to be Jewish. What of all this are we?" Accordingly, there are thematic city walks on offer, such as "Traces of our Jewish Past" or "Traces of our Hungarian Past". It's a bit like the local cuisine: a very successful and

⁴ Source: http://www.aquaphone.org/2019_de.php

balanced mixture of different influences. Just like the Danube's waters flow together from so many different tributaries, the cuisine is composed from the overall culture of this region.⁵

The cuisine of the Slovak capital is as Central European as its history. Food in Bratislava is Central European food. Differences testify to the great variety, rather than the contrast. No wonder that certain dishes from Vienna to Lviv or from Bratislava to Ruse exist in different variations, with different names and slightly different spices.

In Pécs, too, cultural diversity is reflected in the cuisine: the Krédli inn offers specialities from the German (or "Swabian") minority in the Pécs region, and the "flat restaurant" Kóstolda (which roughly translates to "Tastery") is one of a kind: in a flat, Romani women have set up a small restaurant where they prepare Roma specialities. A conversation with the cooks is included in the visit!

In search of Danubian diversity, a trip to the next Romanian European Capital of Culture, Timișoara, is also worthwhile. This city - just like Novi Sad - looks back on centuries of multiethnicity and multilingualism. Even today, Timișoara has three state theatres: a Romanian, a German and a Hungarian theatre - a clear proof of European coexistence in the Danube region. The numerous minorities never had an easy life along the Danube. And what does "minority" mean, anyway? Jewish culture had been omnipresent in the Danube region since time immemorial when the incipient heyday of Judaism came to a tragic end with World War II. Nevertheless, the preservation of Jewish traditions, even the development of a new, active, self-confident Jewish life in cities like Vienna or Budapest clearly gives hope. The streetscape in Vienna's Leopoldstadt or the cultural, religious and culinary life in Budapest's Jewish Quarter are a good case in point.

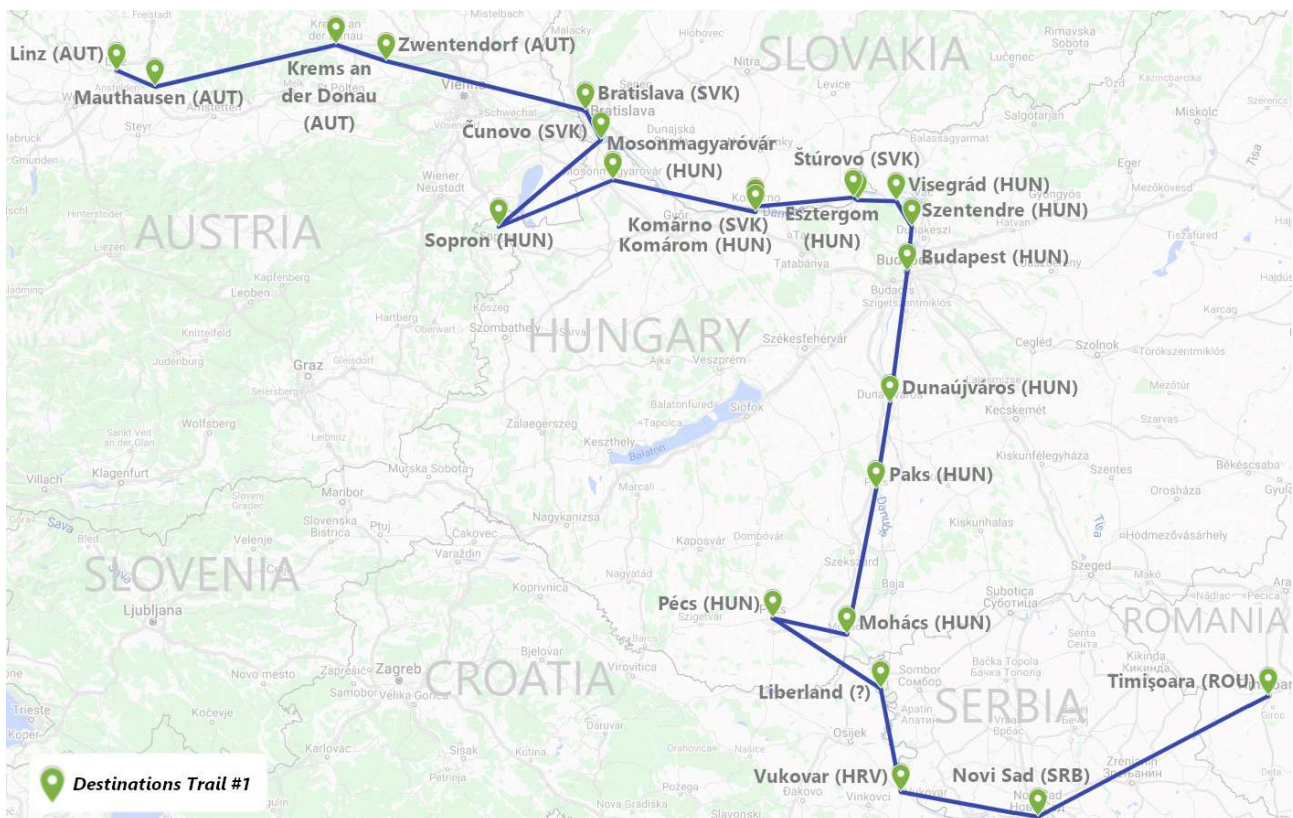
Living together with the scattered groups of Romani and Sinti people is also an inherent part of the Danube region. Their share of the population in Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Slovakia and Hungary is significant, but their participation in public life and decision-making mechanisms is dwindling. For many Romani families, everyday life consists of poverty and exclusion. They have been waiting for centuries for integration and a productive, promising coexistence. That is why it is important to look at positive examples in the region that not only give hope but should be seen as best practice for neighbouring countries. Examples include be the Ghandi High School, a model school in Pécs; the promotion of talent through scholarship schemes like those of the famous musician Ferenc Snétberger; the art and culture initiatives in several countries; and smaller successes achieved through individual efforts, such as the flat restaurant already mentioned. In the media, the misfortune of the Romani and Sinti is always impressively thematised, but Danubian Europe now also stands for many small, local initiatives. Granted, a lot more needs to be done, but we also need to acknowledge existing initiatives!

⁵ This paragraph including the quotations of Michal Hvorecký are partly based on: Márton Méhes: *Mitteuropäisches Menü in der Staubigen Bastei. Ein Tischgespräch mit Michal Hvorecký in Bratislava*. In: Kulturführer Mitteleuropa 2016, Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe, Vienna

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APPENDIX – Trail destinations & points of interest

Our project partners suggested destinations for the route, which were then supplemented by the author's own suggestions. The final list of selected destinations is marked in bold in the following list. All these cities represent several aspects of the present narrative. The author suggests visiting additional points of interest along the route between the cities, since they illustrate certain thematic aspects of the trail. Some of them stand for lesser-known, hidden places that want to be discovered.



Linz – Mauthausen - Krens - Zwentendorf – **Bratislava** – Čunovo – **Sopron** – Mosonmagyaróvár – **Komárom/Komárno** – **Esztergom/Štúrovo** – **Visegrád** – Szentendre – **Budapest** – **Dunaújváros** – Paks - Mohács – **Pécs** – **Vukovar** – “Liberland” – **Novi Sad** – **Timișoara**

Linz (AT)

From the Cultural Capital of the *Führer* to the European Capital of Culture

Connections: European Capital of Culture, UNESCO City of Media Arts

Labels: upheaval/transformation, ups and downs of the 20th century, innovation/questions of the future

“Linz changes” was the motto of the European Capital of Culture Linz 09: the city on the Danube has made the great leap from the gloomy past of Nazism and grey industrial plants to becoming an innovative and creative future. European history is reflected in a single structure, the Nibelungen

Bridge. Completed in 1940 as the bridge of the “Führer city”, it separated occupation zones after the end of the war. Borders have always been crossed in Linz – and they still are, now that the city attracts creative, experimental and enterprising people. The Ars Electronica Center and Festival are just two cases in point.

Mauthausen (AT) – Today, the Mauthausen Concentration Camp memorial is a European place of remembrance and historical-political education.

Krems (AT) –

Zwentendorf (AT) Located in the heart of the picturesque Wachau region, Krems has developed into an international centre of culture and education on the Danube (Danube University, Kunstmeile Krems, Caricature Museum).

The small village of Zwentendorf on the Danube is known for the only nuclear power plant in Europe that was completed but never put into operation. Guided tours are offered at the plant, which is a perfect place for reflecting on civil engagement, democracy and sustainability in Europe.

Bratislava (SK) **Little-big Central Europe**

Connection: project “Danube Pearls”

Labels: unique diversity, upheaval/transformation

Bratislava exemplifies the European transformation over the centuries: it was a coronation city of Hungarian kings in the monarchy era; it saw various stages of the Czechoslovak state materialise; since 1993, it has been the capital of independent Slovakia, where the economy is booming and growing faster than in many other regions of “old” Western Europe. Bratislava’s inhabitants are rediscovering the historical diversity of the city: they are realising that the Jewish and Hungarian heritage is part of them. The cuisine is Central European, with many minor variations of dishes created along the Danube.

Čunovo (SK) The Danubiana Meulensteen Museum is located on the peninsular end of a Danube embankment and is the first private museum of modern art in Slovakia.

Sopron (HU) **Pan-European Picnic at the Gateway to Freedom**

Connection: European Heritage Sites

Labels: pendulum between East and West; ups and downs of the 20th century; separate yet connected

The international cycle route Iron Curtain Trail - EuroVelo 13 runs along the former Iron Curtain, which divided Europe into East and West for half a century. The site of the so-called Pan-European Picnic of 1989 on the Austro-Hungarian border near Sopron is now a European Heritage Site. It commemorates a turning point in the historic transition year of 1989. During the peace demonstration, some 700 GDR refugees crossed a border gate into Austria. The memorial park is ideal for meetings with contemporary witnesses, many of whom continue to live in Sopron.

- Mosonmagyaróvár (HU)** Innovation and technology for young and old visitors at the FUTURA Interactive Science Adventure Centre.
- Komárom (HU)/
Komárno (SK)** **The Danube divides, the Danube connects**
Labels: ups and downs of the 20th century, separate yet connected
The districts on the two banks of the Danube were separated in 1920 but were re-united in the course of the European unification. The newest Danube bridge was opened here in 2020. The two spectacular fortresses of Komárom tell of bright and dark chapters in the European history: the Star Fortress was a particularly sad site of the Roma Holocaust towards the end of World War II.
- Esztergom (HU)/
Štúrovo (SK)** **The voice of the Danube is the voice of the people**
Labels: ups and downs of the 20th century, separate yet connected, innovation/questions of the future
The Hungarian King Stephen I was born and later crowned in Esztergom. His policies brought Hungary closer to the Christian Western world. You can reach Štúrovo in Slovakia via the Mária Valéria Bridge, which was rebuilt in 2001. The former bridge keeper's house is now an international artist residence. The annual AquaPhone festival recalls the voices of people who communicated across the water in times of separation. The inclusive Danube Museum in Esztergom brings together human, scientific and technical knowledge.
- Visegrád (HU)** **Central European alliance with a vision?**
Labels: pendulum between East and West, upheaval/transformation, unique diversity
In 1991, the Visegrád Group was formed here, which today includes Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. The cooperation dates back to a summit meeting of the Polish, Bohemian and Hungarian kings in 1335. Visegrád Castle offers a magnificent panorama of the Danube Bend - a perfect place to learn more about the "V4" and reflect on its future role.
- Szentendre (HU)** *Connection: European Heritage Site*
A picturesque small town exemplifying historically developed multiculturalism and multiconfessionalism, and boasting numerous small galleries and studios.
- Budapest (HU)** **Where there is truth, there is poetry? Monuments tell their stories**
Connections: European Jewish Heritage Cultural Route, European Heritage Sites, UNESCO World Heritage Site, UNESCO City of Design
Labels: upheaval/transformation, ups and downs of the 20th century, innovation/questions of the future
Coming to terms with the past is a major challenge for the whole of Danubian Europe. Budapest's memorials and monuments offer their version of historic traumas and glorious moments. The Treaty of Trianon,

occupation, revolutions, persecution, massacres, fascism and communism are retold and reinterpreted, but are often perceived very differently. Budapest is now a vibrant, diverse European metropolis where many cultures live together in peace. This is exemplified by its thriving Jewish community and by the way it deals with its Jewish cultural heritage.

Dunaújváros (HU)

Stalin's iron monster in the forest

Labels: pendulum between East and West, ups and downs of the 20th century, upheaval/transformation

The construction of "Stalin City" (Sztálinváros, now Dunaújváros) was very much in the spirit of communist planned cities built in Eastern Europe alongside a new industrial plant. Our discovery tour of socialist realist architecture ends in the forest, where the former open-air exhibition of the iron combine "presents" abandoned industrial colossi of the ironworks.⁶

Paks (HU) – Mohács (HU)

The Paks nuclear power plant, a functioning counterpart to Zwentendorf, addresses questions of sustainability in the Danube region.

A battle that was lost in this place 500 years ago is a major Hungarian trauma and European drama. How does remembrance culture work here today?

Pécs (HU)

Kiss awake two thousand years of European history

Connection: Roman Emperors Wine Route, UNESCO World Heritage Site, European Capital of Culture 2010

Labels: upheaval/transformation, pendulum between East and West, unique diversity

Roman catacombs, Ottoman mosques, traces of the Renaissance, Habsburg architecture, Bauhaus and socialist modernism: Pécs is a (Central) European microcosm. The 2010 Capital of Culture programme brought a concert hall with multi-award-winning architecture and acoustics, but above all the resurrection of the Zsolnay Porcelain Manufactory, a fairytale world of colourful gingerbread buildings with turrets, chimneys and a myriad of figures.

Vukovar (HR)

Between war wounds and future prospects

Connection: Transdanube Pearls project

Labels: ups and downs of the 20th century, upheaval/transformation

Vukovar must not be reduced to the war, even if the city with its significant water tower, which was shot to pieces and later rebuilt, is a memento of the Yugoslav Wars. In the meantime, Vukovar has reinvented itself completely, boasting lots of culture from the Stone Age to contemporary art. The Vukovar Film Festival is dedicated to new productions from the Danube region.

⁶ Read more here: Gábor Tenczer: *Aus Stalinstadt in den Zauberwald*. In: Kulturführer Mitteleuropa 2018, Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe, Vienna

“Liberland”

(HR/RS)

The cryptostate of “Liberland” is a small stretch of Danubian land between Croatia and Serbia that is unclaimed by either. It remains unrecognized, but the fact that it was proclaimed here should be seen as a warning that, while the 1990s Balkan Wars may be over, the border disputes are not.⁷

Novi Sad (RS)

New bridges to Europe

Connection: European Capital of Culture 2022, European Route of Jewish Heritage

Labels: upheaval/transformation, ups and downs of the 20th century, innovation/questions of the future, unique diversity

Just 22 years ago, during the Kosovo War, NATO bombed the Danube bridges in Novi Sad. In 2022, the city is going to be the European Capital of Culture under the motto “For New Bridges”. Novi Sad is proud of its multicultural tradition, but is also trying to reinvent itself. The university, the gaming industry and festivals are high on the agenda in the young city. New creative spots are emerging through revitalisation of industrial sites.

Timișoara (RO)

Overcoming its own past and shining on Europe

Connection: European Capital of Culture 2023, European Route of Jewish Heritage

Labels: upheaval/transformation, ups and downs of the 20th century, innovation/questions of the future, unique diversity

The future European Capital of Culture 2023 is a place of multiethnicity and multilingualism. Romanian, German and Hungarian theatres in Timișoara are strong symbols of European coexistence in the Danube region. The city tells a European story of departure, dictatorship and revolution, and recently also one of cultural innovation.

⁷ Read more here: <https://www.dw.com/de/mikrostaat-liberland-eine-donau-halbinsel-wird-unabh%C3%A4ngig/a-40009662>