

32 Travel

Cruises

A journey down the Danube into history

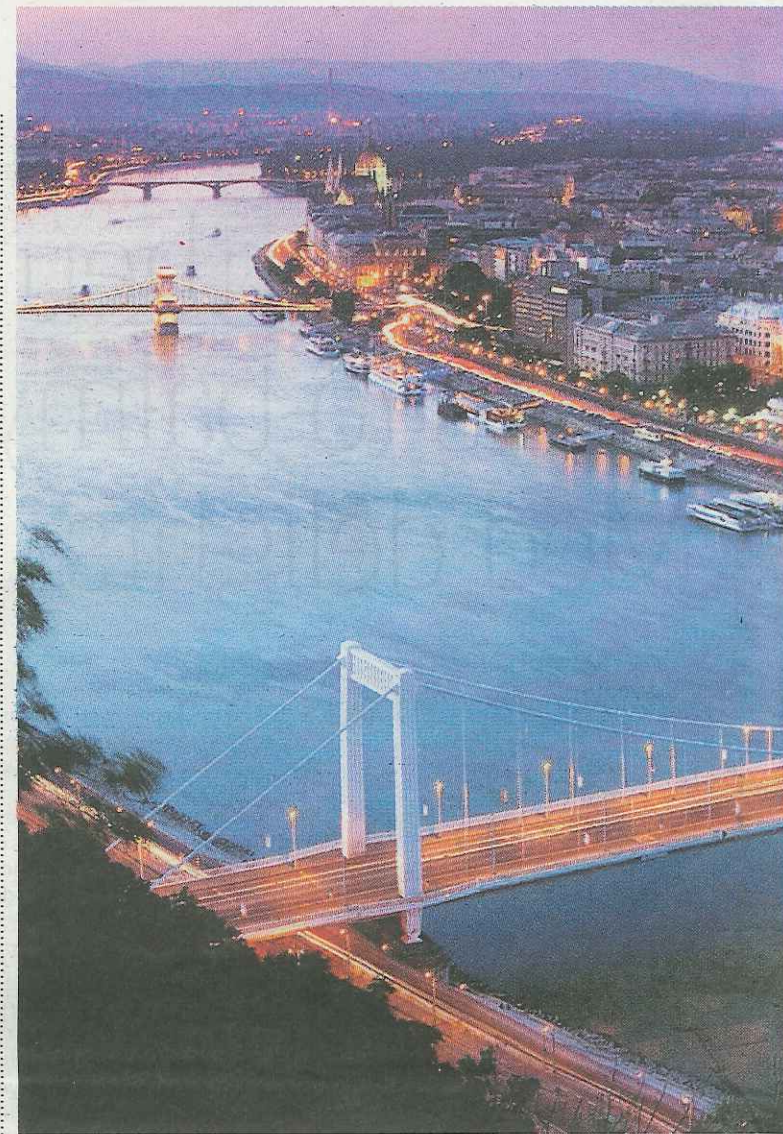
Cruising through five countries in seven days, **Caroline Phillips** encounters breathtaking beauty — and the shadows of war

I'm on the *MS Amadolce*, a riverboat cruising down the Danube past Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania — from Budapest to Bucharest in seven days. On board it's like a comfortable floating United Nations. There are Australian ambulance drivers, octogenarian Florida widows, jolly Puerto Rican insurance salesmen (we're soon all sharing dining tables). In the evenings a Serbian classical pianist plays Hungarian melodies. There are Romanian gypsy violinists, and an infant Bulgarian who performs with a kiddies' folk dance troupe.

It's a jolly mix — just like the excursions that are arranged for us. Soon after Budapest we stop at Mohács, Hungary, where we cycle through the beautiful flood plains, past fishing lakes and impossibly yellow fields of sunflowers, stopping at the

White Stork Museum (yes, there is such a place). Our next destination is Pécs, still in Hungary (its fifth largest city), where we visit a traditional glove-maker amid the city's fine Baroque architecture. The lovely hand-stitched gloves come in cerise and pistachio and are designed for horseriding and palace parties; apparently George Clooney and Angelina Jolie have placed orders.

We're moving at only ten knots, yet this is life on fast-forward; with just a few hours, it seems, in each country along the way. Tour guides, many of them with masters degrees, tell us about Milosevic and the security police in Serbia — where we're amazed by the many stark communist-era blocks in Belgrade. We pass through Iron Gates, the border between Serbia and Romania, sailing along a wonderful, narrow gorge between the Carpathian and





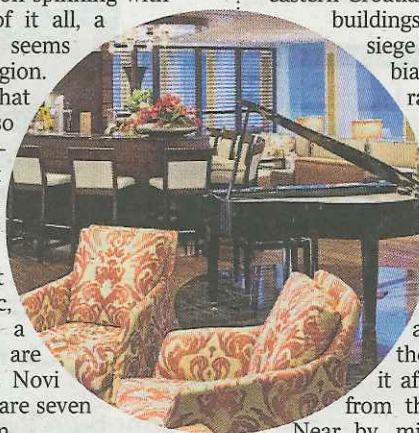
Budapest, capital of Hungary, where the AmaWaterways ships, right, set off

Balkan mountain ranges. From the deck we take in national parks, cliffs rising to more than 1,600ft, with trees clinging dramatically to rock faces. In the morning, we watch the sun rise behind forest-clad mountains tipped with mist.

We come to Ottoman remains, castles and fortresses. We discover that there's surely a law in the Balkans that you must smoke everywhere: in Belgrade if a local isn't puffing, it's only because he's lighting up. My head is soon spinning with the strangeness of it all, a confusion that seems apposite for the region. We are told that poverty is so grinding in Romania that the biggest source of income is European Union subsidies.

We learn that Tito was a Catholic, Communist and a Freemason. We are informed that in Novi Sad, Serbia, there are seven women to each man.

The Bulgarians, we discover, nod when they mean "no", while in Bucharest, at the end of the cruise, our guide says that buildings carrying red dots are the ones you must run from if there's an earthquake. As for Ceausescu's Palace of Parliament, even by the standards of dictators and psychotics, this one stands out: it's 37,000,000 sq ft, has 1,100 rooms and 2,200,200 sq ft of carpets. There are enough brocade curtains to cloak the Danube.



One of the joys of this trip — aside from only unpacking once — is that it gives you ideas for future holidays, and I feel envious as one English couple jumps ship to drive through the Carpathian mountains, where they planned to stay in village homes and see the country's painted monasteries and medieval castles.

But we bob along merrily, sometimes through territories where ethnic and religious rivalries still simmer. In Vukovar, eastern Croatia, we are shown smashed buildings that are the legacy of the siege in 1991 when 12,000 Serbian shells and rockets rained down for 87 days; 36,000 Serbs against 1,800 lightly armed Croats, we're told. The buildings look as if the war was yesterday.

There's a field of 938 white commemorative crosses at a mass grave and a barn "memorial" for the 261 people massacred in it after being marched here from the community hospital. Near by, mines are being cleared. "People still jump when they hear an airplane," says Domagoj Butkovic, a local.

The civil wars in these parts may be over, but the battle for tourists is going strong. It's both an informative and relaxing trip: in between excursions, I loll in my cabin to the soothing soundtrack of a chugging engine and gently lapping water, watching verdant riverbanks pass by. Five countries in seven days ... and plenty of memories along the way.

Need to know

Caroline Phillips was a guest of the river cruise operator AmaWaterways (0808-2235009, amawaterways.co.uk). Its full-board, seven-night Black Sea Voyage cruises along the Danube between Budapest and Rousse cost from £1,841pp. Wine and beer with lunch and dinner are included as well as guided tours, excursions and use of on-board bicycles. From Budapest the ship meanders past the vine-clad slopes of Pécs and on to cruise the border between Serbia and Croatia. After passing through the Iron Gates gorge, which divides the Balkan and Carpathian mountains, the cruise continues to the Romanian/Bulgarian border, and on to Bucharest.