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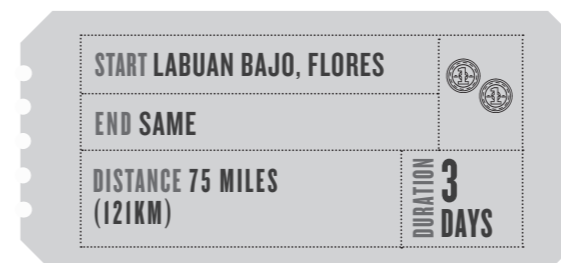



ASIA

AMAZING BOAT JOURNEYS

Komodo National Park

INDONESIA ●



 There are a dozen reasons to take one of these voyages through some of Indonesia's most stunning islands, assuming you even need a reason at all: who doesn't want to glide idly past uninhabited islands, bathe in azure water and hike to stunning viewpoints? But in addition to all that, on your tour around the islands of Komodo National Park you might possibly catch sight of a dragon. While the chances are slim that you'll actually get eaten, you'll feel a bit like you're walking behind the professor in *Jurassic Park*, knowing that a hungry reptile might come crashing out through the bushes. Just don't laugh it off too much – male Komodo dragons can weigh as much as 200 lbs (90kg), and can run faster than you'd expect.

● RIDING THE WAVES

There are any number of ways to make the trip through the islands of Komodo National Park, from day jaunts to simple overnights to two-, three-, even week-long (or longer!) excursions that will make you feel like you've got all the time in the world. Many of the medium-length trips begin on the island of Flores, known for coffee and its quiet fishing lifestyle. The airport in Labuan Bajo is only 15 minutes from the



docks; you board your craft, and within moments the motors are humming and you're heading out to sea.

A common itinerary zips you to Manta Point for a swim with these giant underwater gliders, then a stop at Komodo's Pink Beach. Depending on the time of day, Pink Beach may or may not be pink – the colour comes not from the sand but from the sun's angle, the tide and the weather conditions. Without the pink, Pink Beach is just a typical beach; though pretty, it's one of the few stops that you might consider optional. From there, head to a nearby harbour, have dinner and watch as thousands of flying foxes (a fruit-eating bat) emerge from their daytime shelters and head off in search of food. This is not a 'tornado' of bats like some insect-eating, cave-dwelling bats create, but it's a beautiful scene and makes a lovely end to a day on the water.

Day two, done right, will include Komodo Island in the morning, as the lizards are most active and visible when they're hungry. You'll arrive at the dock shortly after breakfast, pay the Komodo National

Park fees and choose a viewing path: short, medium, or long. Though results vary because the animals are wild, chances are you'll soon be taking a selfie with (well, actually behind and a safe distance away from) the famed Komodo dragon. The jungle here is fascinating, filled with unique flora and birds, so even if you only see a few lizards, it's a lovely and interesting visit. Eventually the trail will circle back, and you'll end with the option to buy some T-shirts and souvenirs.

What happens next will depend on the weather, because while you can get up close and personal with the dragons rain or shine, the view from Padar Island's lookout peak just isn't quite the same if it's cloudy, rainy or obscured by fog. If the day is clear and bright, the boat will head here next, and you'll have an unrivalled view of Padar Island's perfect scalloped bays, with turquoise water surrounding green hills so beautiful they seem computer-generated. It's one of the world's greatest views, and your trip won't be complete without it.

On day three, you'll repeat the Komodo dragon



© MARTIN JANSSEN / 500PX

HEED THE RANGERS' WARNINGS
 Never venture out into the jungle on your own. Rangers are trained not only in seeing Komodo dragons (which are masters at camouflage) but also in defending against them. In 2017 a Singaporean tourist was badly mauled by a lizard when he tried to enter the Komodo National Park alone to avoid paying the entry fee.

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experience but on Rinca Island. Rinca, smaller but more wild, offers a good chance to see lizards if you didn't see them (or didn't see enough of them) on Komodo Island. From here, the boat will chug or sail its way back to Labuan Bajo, arriving in early to late afternoon. Longer voyages will see more, do more, stop more and explore more, but these highlights are the region's crowning glories.

2 LIFE ON BOARD

Tour operators vary widely. In most cases the tours will not include the Komodo National Park fees, but some of the higher-end ones do. Low-end tours will include a simple cabin room and three meals (simple but tasty Indonesian food), and may or may not have fans for cooling; they will not have English guides. Higher-end trips will include a cabin with air-conditioning, an English-speaking guide/captain, gourmet-quality food, and possibly dive or snorkel equipment. While most boats are motorised, you may want to opt for the quiet serenity of a sailing vessel.

Swim with giant manta rays in waters that seem too turquoise to be real off Manta Point.

If the sun and weather combine in the right way, see why Komodo Island's Pink Beach gets its name.

Watch flying foxes silhouetted by a coral sunset when the boat stops for the night.



3 OTHER ROUTES

Another route begins the voyage not in Flores but in Lombok, where you visit some island villages, view boat-making and see other tourist sites before embarking. On the way to the Komodo area, you'll likely stop at Satonda Island, a doughnut-shaped island with an ocean-filled crater in the centre.

4 MAKE IT HAPPEN

Tours depart daily, weekly, or several times monthly depending on the length and the package. You can book through any number of tour companies, but be careful in your choice as some operators are less than scrupulous. A round trip from Labuan Bajo on Flores is popular; the best time of year to go is March. All visits to the dragons must be done with a guide. **RB**

Take a selfie up close and personal with the world's largest lizard in Komodo National Park.

Hike on Padar Island to one of the world's most incredible scenic views.

Snorkel in crystal-clear water at Kanawa Island, seeing fish, turtles and coral galore.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Padar Island in the Komodo National Park; a Komodo dragon; a beach on Gili Air island. **PREVIOUS PAGE:** Boat moored at Kelor Island.



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EUROPE

AMAZING BOAT JOURNEYS



Danube Cruise

GERMANY TO HUNGARY

START PASSAU, GERMANY

END BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

DISTANCE 364 MILES
(586KM)DURATION
8
DAYS

No other river in the world runs by as many capital cities as the Danube, and cruising down this mighty European waterway along the stretch that links three of them – Vienna in Austria, Bratislava in Slovakia and Budapest in Hungary – is an itinerary like no other. With stylish travel practically mandatory as you voyage through some of Central Europe's most sophisticated cities, sign up for waltzing in Vienna and spa basking in Budapest. In between, take in views reminiscent of paintings by the Old Masters. Whether or not you

add on the Danube's fourth capital of Belgrade, Serbia, this will be a trip of a lifetime.

● RIDING THE WAVES

The scenes visible on a glide down this dignified river may remind you of the celebrated canvases of the continent's great artists or call up the strains of a waltz, given that some of Europe's most iconic artists took their inspiration from these landscapes. The Danube's dramatic vistas have sparked many a monumental work of art, from paintings by Albrecht Altdorfer to music by Johann Strauss.

Cruises tend to begin in opulent Passau, a German city made wealthy as a trade centre at a joining point for three major rivers, the Inn and the Ilz as well as the Danube. From the stunning church of Dom St Stephan, home of the planet's largest church organ, to the imposing fortress of Veste Oberhaus, it is a fitting point from which to embark on a trip that takes a



LEFT: DZIERWUL / SHUTTERSTOCK; PREVIOUS SPREAD: MATT MUNRO / LONELY PLANET

slice through a storybook Central Europe.

Soon after, the river surges into Austria. Stop in the capital of Upper Austria, Linz, with its haughty Habsburg architecture ushering you through its Old Quarter, studded by seminal buildings such as the Mozarthaus where Mozart himself once wrote a symphony.

The next section of the adventure, through the verdant Wachau Valley, is perhaps the most scenic on the western course of the Danube. The fertile valley slopes yield Austria's best wines, and many cruises alight here for vineyard tours or an excursion to the vast Unesco-listed Benedictine monastery of Göttweig. This major religious complex has a history spanning most of the last millennium and is still a functioning monastery, sublimely located in wooded hills overlooking the river.

Your cruise understandably tarries in Vienna, undeniably one of Europe's loveliest and best-preserved baroque cities. Whether you are absorbing as much of the astounding architecture as possible – such as the grandiose Schönbrunn Palace, raised by the Habsburg Dynasty to rival Versailles – learning the steps of the waltz or sampling a Viennese coffee in the city's iconic cafes and coffee houses, your free time here quickly evaporates.

Downriver, the craggy castle of Devín announces your arrival into Slovakia. The waters here, now plied leisurely by tourist boats, were where residents of Eastern Europe once risked their lives to cross into the West during the Communist era. There is time enough to linger in the Slovak capital, Bratislava, its Old Town crested by a castle and centred on a cathedral where the monarchs of Hungary were once crowned.

In Hungary, you wind past Esztergom, a beautiful ecclesiastical centre capped by the country's largest cathedral, before arriving, after a week of cruising,



© ERIC NATHAN / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

into Budapest. As with Vienna, superlatives do not immediately come to mind that can describe the cosmopolitan breadth of this enthralling metropolis flanking both banks of the Danube with its domes and turrets. Budapest provides its own special places for contemplation, though. The city obligingly stands on some of Europe's best natural thermal waters: gravitate to one of the wonderful bathhouses here to relax and reflect on having completed one of Europe's most epic river trips.

④ LIFE ON BOARD

Whichever cruise company you select, this is high-end travel offering most of the trappings of luxury. There is comfortable, private on-board accommodation, invariably with suites available, and cruises include all meals. Extra costs could include wine tastings, cooking classes, live entertainment, beauty treatments and more. The real highlight, of course, is the easy access to shore points.

ABOVE AND RIGHT: At one of Budapest's restorative baths; looking down Fisherman's Bastion in Budapest. **PREVIOUS PAGE:** The renowned Chain Bridge over the Danube.



© JARDOMIR CHALABALA / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

⑤ BUDGET/LUXURY ALTERNATIVE

Many cruise companies feature the Danube as an itinerary; it's one of Europe's most popular river cruises. All are high-end, but despite the competition, prices vary substantially. The difference in quality between the lowest- and highest-priced options is not pronounced, but more expensive itineraries may include more interesting stops with better excursions.


⑥ MAKE IT HAPPEN


There is a cruise departing on this route almost every day during the spring, summer and autumn. The most famous operators include Viking River Cruises and Amadeus River Cruises, while the rising U by


OTHER DANUBE CRUISES


This is but one stretch of the Danube, which has its origins near Donaueschingen, Germany, and empties into Romania's Danube Delta, 10 countries and 1727 miles (2780km) later. After Budapest, the highlight section is the Iron Gates cliffs on the border of Serbia and Romania. To see the cliffs, take a longer cruise from Passau or begin your Danube adventure in Budapest.


Uniworld line is specifically millennial-focused. Any cruise can be booked via the operator's website. Check the details: operators find innumerable variations on the theme to distinguish their trips from those of rival companies. Passau is the typical starting point for cruises on this section of the Danube, and although some cruises offer out-and-back trips, going one-way allows for more time to enjoy the route as it traverses Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Hungary. **LW**


 Wander around Passau, a photogenic, historic city at the confluence of three rivers: the Inn, the Ilz and the Danube.

 Dine al fresco on deck while some of Europe's most quintessential scenery slides by.

 Explore Austria's Wachau Valley at the hilltop monastery of Göttweig.

 Learn to waltz in the city that invented the dance, Vienna.

 Enjoy a memorable first foray behind the old Iron Curtain by exploring Bratislava's beautiful Old Town, backed by wooded hills.

 Enter Budapest and end the cruise by luxuriating in one of the city's inviting bathhouses.