

Science VISION

DANUBE

Europe's Amazon



DANUBE - Europe's Amazon



■ A film by Rita & Michael Schlamberger

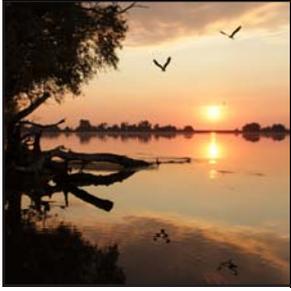
From its romantic shores, its wild nature to its baroque art, the fascination of the Danube is inescapable.

“It felt like we were deep in the Amazon basin. There were ancient, impenetrable forests and large, pristine wetlands all along the Danube’s banks,” says Michael Schlamberger, who spent more than two years filming on location. “Then, filming in the Wachau, Vienna or Budapest, we were back in Europe. It’s this incredible contrast between wilderness and civilization that makes the Danube so unique.”

As the Danube flows through its various landscapes, it transforms. Influenced by weather and climatic extremes, it is in constant motion. Floods and drought determine life on the great river just as much as the seasons. They influence migration, mating and breeding, as well as hunting and hibernation. Wherever the Danube flows, it impacts nature and people's lives.

Never before has the nature of this mighty river, that has helped form the contours of Europe, been captured so exquisitely as in this two-part series, “Danube – Europe's Amazon.” Directed by Rita and Michael Schlamberger, it is a co-production of ORF, ScienceVision Film Productions, NDR and BR, in association with ARTE and ICPDR.





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“Danube – Europe's Amazon” follows in the wake of Michael and Rita Schlamberger’s multi-award-winning “Ol' Man River” - about the Mississippi - and “Zambezi”, both two-part specials. This latest offering, like their previous films, is an elaborate river portrait—in this case of one of the greatest rivers of Europe.

An epic journey of discovery into the continent’s unknown wild lands, “Danube – Europe’s Amazon” shows how the river’s famous currents helped sculpt the incredible landscapes, and it links them together.



■ From the Black Forest to the Black Sea

Napoleon called the Danube the “Queen of Europe’s rivers,” and rightly so, because, even though the Volga is geographically the longest river on the Continent, no other river in the world reigns over as many culturally and historically diverse cities and landscapes as the Danube.

Originating in Germany's Black Forest, it travels almost three thousand kilometres to the delta on the Romanian/Ukrainian Black Sea coast.

Passing through ten countries and four major cities, the Danube is the most international river in the world. It is a lifeline that connects a succession of spectacular river landscapes: the karst landscape of the Swabian Alps, the endless expanse of the





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heat-shimmering plains, the snow-capped peaks of the Alpine foothills and the majestic canyons of the Iron Gate. And finally a unique river delta where the Danube forms the largest reed bed on earth.

Despite the Danube's importance as a modern waterway for transportation, it still retains the charm of a bygone era, and is full of mystery.

Uniquely, the Danube officially starts where other rivers end: at the river mouth. Here, the old lighthouse of Sulina marks the beginning of this great river.



■ The Sea of Mosquitoes

Seventy million tons of alluvial deposits – the equivalent of ten Great Pyramids - flow annually into the Danube Delta. Originating mostly from the Alps, through a process of erosion by frost, heat and glacier-abrasion, the silt, mud and gravel travels two thousand kilometres from the mountains and arrives at the shores of the Black Sea as “Europe's newest country”.

The Delta is a unique European water wilderness where everything is in permanent motion. Tons of sand and silt constantly move about, building sandbars and islands. Subsequently, the wide river branches into three major tributaries and countless smaller ones.





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This complex labyrinth hosts the largest pelican breeding colony outside Africa and attracts hundreds of thousands of birds to hunt in the fish-rich waters.

The camera crew spent more than two years filming the different seasons on the Delta. For the filmmakers it was both an animal paradise and a nightmare. “It was hard to believe that we were still in Europe,” recalls Rita Schlamberger. “We sat in a camouflaged hide on a sandbar in the middle of nowhere between Romania and Ukraine, trying to film hunting pelicans at sunrise. We spent whole days sitting motionless on the soggy ground to avoid disturbing the birds, hoping that the water wouldn’t rise and the weather would stay dry.

Because it is unclear where the Ukrainian border begins out here, our Romanian guide left us and went straight back to his village by boat so he wouldn’t get into trouble.”

The marshland provided another challenge: mosquitoes. “The locals call the delta ‘the sea of mosquitoes,’ and not without reason.

From dawn until dusk the aggressive insects were everywhere—even in our tent. Bug spray didn’t work against the swarms. And we had to keep as still as possible, otherwise we ran the risk of scaring the birds away.”





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■ The Dry River

Despite the power of the Danube, it is difficult to pinpoint where it starts. The official source of the Danube is a precious and elaborate man-made spring in a historic park in the Black Forest.

But where the river actually begins is a question that remains unanswered. Deep underground between the Black Forest and the Swabian Alb, a thousand-year old battle rages between the waters of the North Sea and the Black Sea. This is the site of Europe's central watershed. All the water must flow into the Danube – or into the Rhine.

In limestone rock the Danube disappears. For more than 200 days a year it is “swallowed” by the earth, seeping through sinkholes, fractures and crevices.

Where does the water go? Does the Danube's course flow through a narrow labyrinth of caves and end in a huge underground lake? Cave divers have tried to trace the perilous subterranean artery in order to answer these questions – in vain. Geologists predict that one day, the young Danube will flow into the Rhine.





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■ The Tisza Flower

Occasionally, in late May and early June, a very special event occurs on the river Tisza, the longest tributary of the Danube in the Hungarian plains. Almost exactly from 7pm until darkness, masses of mayflies hatch on the water surface.

The insects, approximately 10 centimetres in length, suddenly swarm by the millions and fly across the river to mate, forming meter-high, white walls of insect bodies.

"After two hours it's all over and the mayflies die and fall into the water. We were very lucky to have witnessed this because they only appear every five or six years in these numbers. It was just incredible," recalls Rita Schlamberger.



■ On the Highway of the Cranes

October. The first visitors from the Arctic reach the typical steppe landscape of the Puszta between the Danube and Tisza rivers.

Here, millions of migratory birds stop over on their journey to their winter home. Geese and cranes land on the great Hungarian plain in a grand spectacle that has been taking place for generations.





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Exhausted from their long journey they remain here gathering strength until the first frost forces them to continue their flight south. This year, their stopover has been cut short. An early north wind has brought icy Arctic air and the temperature has dropped way below freezing. Overnight, the first layer of ice has formed on the water.

“The winter was extreme last year. Temperatures dropped below minus twenty degrees for weeks and the Danube was completely frozen from Vienna to the Black Sea. What we filmed was an extraordinary event because something like this happens only once every forty years,” says Michael Schlamberger. “All shipping traffic came to a halt and all the tugs and barges were trapped in the ice. Ice-breakers had to be used to free them.

It was like being in the Arctic, and this has given the Danube a spectacular new and unfamiliar face in the film.”



■ Swimming Pigs

Flooding is a constant theme of the Danube and its tributaries. Although vital for the survival of the jungle-like riparian forests, for many people living on the river it is life-threatening. Rising waters can cause a tremendous amount of damage within hours.





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Modifications to the river, such as straightening as well as the installation of dams, have proven unsuccessful. Recent flood disasters have shown that the powerful current is still an irrepressible force of nature.

But there are exceptions. In Croatia, tucked away in the natural riverine forests is the village of Igo. Here, the water level of the Sava, a water-rich tributary of the Danube, can rise by ten meters overnight. But there is no human intervention. They have learned to live in harmony with nature and the waters are allowed to rise and subside naturally, occasionally flooding the pastures. And the animals have adapted too.

“We heard that there are pigs on the Sava, which swim and can even dive for their food. It is an old domesticated pig breed called the Turopolje Pig, and they roam wild in the woods. They love floods, wading and swimming in the water for hours, eating mussels and water chestnuts. They often dive completely under water,” said Rita Schlamberger, and continued: “we filmed for days, following them through the forests of the Sava floodplains.

It was touching to see how these pigs behave in the wild because they have such a highly developed sense of social behaviour.”





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■ The Blue Danube

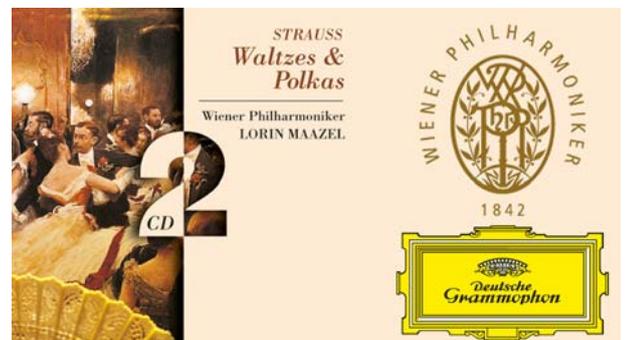
No other river is connected with European culture and landscape as much as the Danube. And probably no other river is as inextricably associated with music. Inevitably, “the best orchestra in the world,” the Vienna Philharmonic, and Johann Strauss come to mind.

“Integrating this great musical legacy into the film was a joy,” says Michael Schlamberger. “The Vienna Philharmonic and ‘The Blue Danube Waltz’ have inescapable emotional power that will be immediately recognized in all the countries where the film will be aired.”

“The Blue Danube” is one of the highlights of the Vienna Philharmonic’s New Year’s Concert, and so too it is a highlight of our Danube film – “whereas we would normally see ballet dancers from the Vienna State Ballet waltzing gracefully to the music, in ‘Europe’s Amazon,’ it’s frogs!”



Wiener Philharmoniker im Musikverein; Foto: Richard Schuster



Wiener Philharmoniker; Sommernachtskonzert Schönbrunn; Foto: Richard Schuster





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“Danube – Europe's Amazon” reveals the unknown side of a world-famous river that has shaped a whole continent.

Over a period of two years, the ScienceVision team travelled 90,000 kilometres and spent 350 days on location, returning with over 400 hours of material. Only two hours will be included in the finished film.



Part 1: From the Black Forest to the Black Sea
Part 2: Forest, Flood and Frost

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In association with ARTE and ICPDR.



(2x 51 min, 5.1 & 2.0, HDTV, 1080p, 16:9)





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