

Andreas Müller-Pohle's photography reveals unknown dimensions of a symbol of united Europe

by Dimana Trankova; photography by Andreas Müller-Pohle

Mountains divide people, rivers unite them — and the Danube is no exception. Any archaeologist will tell you that for thousands of years the Danube used to unite the peoples who lived along its banks. However, in the 1st Century AD the Roman legions arrived and Europe's second-largest river after the Volga became a dividing line between "civilisation" and the "barbarians."



Regensburg Budapest



# AND THE DANUBE FLOWS ON

TOC 2.97 - CONDUCTIVITY 362 - NITRATE 5.39 - PHOSPHATE 0.16 - POTASSIUM 2.54 - CADMIUM 0.08 - MERCURY 0.07 - LEAD 0.09



TOC 4.69 - CONDUCTIVITY 537 - NITRATE 0.55 - PHOSPHATE 0.50 - POTASSIUM 3.16 - CADMIUM 0.01 - MERCURY 0.14 - LEAD 0.07

Vukovar

For some 2,000 years the Danube has served as a boundary. Mediaeval chronicles detail how the Goths, Huns, Avars, Slavs, Proto-Bulgarians, Magyars, Russians, Pechenegs, Cumanians and Moguls crossed it; between the 15th and 19th centuries it formed the border between Christian Europe and the Ottoman Empire. Symbolic of the Cold War, in the 20th Century the banks of the only large European river that flows from west to east were divided between the democratic countries and those of the Communist bloc.

At the end of the millennium the only EU member-states on the Danube were Germany and Austria, but with Hungary and Slovakia joining in 2004, the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, and Croatia, Serbia and Ukraine's declared will for negotiations, the



TOC 3.37 - CONDUCTIVITY 400 - NITRATE 7.21 - PHOSPHATE 0.47 - POTASSIUM 1.71 - CADMIUM 0.01 - MERCURY 0.17 - LEAD <0.02

Kelheim

Danube soon seems likely to be a border only on paper.

"Every river unites and at the same time separates lands and nations. The Danube is the European river per se and for this reason it has become a symbol of the integration of Europe," says German photographer, philosopher and writer Andreas Müller-Pohle. Between July and November 2005 he traced the Danube from its springs in the Black Forest, in Germany, to its delta on the Black Sea. "I wanted to show the whole river, to build an overall portrait. So I chose about 30 sites – historical landmarks, large cities, picturesque spots, as well as some quieter

areas along its banks. I've been asked why I didn't concentrate on the unsightly stretches, such as the polluting industrial complexes along the Romanian bank. But this was not my concept."

Müller-Pohle took the pictures with his camera half-immersed in the river to capture both what is above and under the surface. In compiling the Danube River Project he selected 72 photographs from the 4,000 he had taken, as well as five hours of video and audio recordings of the hydrophone-recorded underwater sound of the river at Sulina, Romania.

In his photos the Danube and its banks reveal unexpected views — for example, the idyllic-looking plant roots in the water by Sigmaringen, Germany. Some are disturbing, such as the ripples in front of the lens which, due to the perspective, appear as if they are about to engulf the Parliament in Budapest, or the concrete pillars of the bridge in Novi Sad, Serbia, destroyed during the NATO bombings in 1999. The murky, still water at Drobeta-Turnu Severin, Romania, shows no trace of the bridge built by Emperor Trajan in 103-105 during his war with the Dacians. It was 1,135 m, or 3,723 ft, long and for nearly 1,000 years remained the longest construction of its kind in the world.



Tulcea



Ingolstadt

What did the camera spy along the Bulgarian stretch of the river? Vidin was a troubling sight. For years Bulgaria and Romania have talked about building a second bridge across the Danube — Vidin residents hope it will be the miracle that will rescue their city from economic stagnation. They shouldn't hold their breath, as the bridge is still in the planning phases. The only thing Müller-Pohle's camera saw was the Statue of Liberty on the shore and the ferryboats' rusting hulls underwater. From below, they look like magical islands ready to leave that god — and investor — forsaken place at any moment.

Ruse has had its bridge over the Danube — the only one connecting Bulgaria and Romania — since 1954. Until the fall of Socialism it was called the "Friendship

Bridge," but the view from the water is less than welcoming: In one of Müller-Pohle's shots, Ruse appears as little more than a strip of murky water topped by a scrap of sky.

Each photograph includes a small set of data along the bottom edge: the amount of pollutants found in the chemical analyses of the water — nitrates, phosphate, potassium, cadmium, mercury and lead. Müller-Pohle took water samples from every place he photographed. "Initially, I thought the river would become more polluted the closer to the delta I got," he says. "It is true that there was higher concentration of pollutants after Croatia, but if we look at the levels of the different elements, we'll see that not everything matches my hypothesis. The most nitrate content there was in Donauwörth,



TOC 4.20 - CONDUCTIVITY 389 - NITRATE 6.46 - PHOSPHATE 0.24 - POTASSIUM 2.26 - CADMIUM 0.04 - MERCURY 0.23 - LEAD 0.30

Iron Gate

TOC 4.42 - CONDUCTIVITY 443 - NITRATE 5.74 - PHOSPHATE 0.19 - POTASSIUM 2.86 - CADMIUM 0.04 - MERCURY 0.02 - LEAD 0.17

Sulina

Germany, and the biggest amount of mercury was in Vienna."

Müller-Pohle has presented his multimedia installation in several cities along the Danube. The exhibit has already visited Ulm, Belgrade, Regensburg, Ingolstadt and the Bratislava Month of Photography in 2007. You can visit it online at [www.riverproject.net](http://www.riverproject.net) or pick

up Müller-Pohle's book of 72 photographs entitled *The Danube River Project*. After its release at the beginning of the year, it was one of 22 titles to receive the Photobook Award 2007/08.

The Danube has no historical, cultural or symbolic equivalent, but Müller-Pohle's future plans again feature rivers. "The Danube

is part of a larger project. The next step will be to explore in a similar way the Pearl River Delta in Hong Kong, the city with the largest per square kilometre concentration of skyscrapers in the world. 

Vohburg



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## Endangered Rivers

**At World Water Week** in Stockholm in August, the WWF announced that the restoration of wetlands in the lower courses of the Danube could reverse the results of expected climate change. A series of studies conducted on rivers across four continents showed that the restoration of floodplains and wetlands along their shorelines offers better protection against flooding and secures more water in times of drought. More fishing opportunities become available

and bird colonies return. The marshy banks of the Lower Danube which were drained during the fight against malarial mosquitoes in the 20th Century suffered intensely from flooding in 2005. The restoration of 37 wetlands along the Lower Danube will cost 183 million euros. "Flood damages in 2005 amounted to 396 million euros, while direct benefits from restoration will likely earn 85 million euros annually," says Jamie Pittock, WWF water expert.