



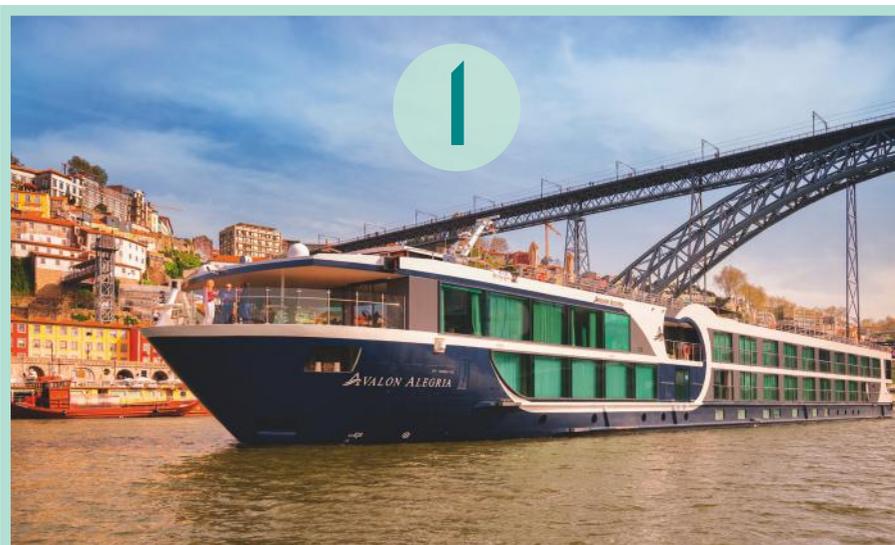
# of the BEST

## NEW DOURO CRUISES

A flurry of new ships on Portugal's river of gold means more reason to sell a sailing, writes **Lesley Bellew**

**N**ew ships are arriving thick and fast on the Douro to keep up with demand for the Unesco-listed river valley, the world's oldest wine region. As ships must be small enough to navigate the river's locks and bridges, they are usually custom-built to accommodate about 100 guests, rather than the typical 150-190 guests on vessels on other European rivers – so Douro cruises sell particularly quickly.

The addition of new ships and a longer season, now from March to December, have helped with capacity. Ships usually share a similar layout, but several lines offer extras that could be the clincher – from all-inclusive drinks or complimentary tours to evening entertainment and themed sailings.



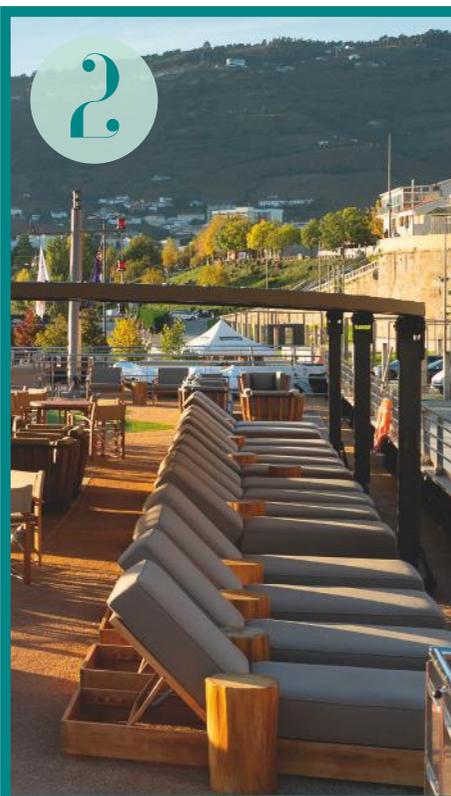
1

### WEALTH OF WELLNESS

Passengers who want to keep up their wellness routine while on a river cruise can join fitness classes and go cycling or kayaking from Avalon Waterways' newest ship, the 102-guest *Avalon Alegria*. A fitness room, hiking maps, Fitbits, walking poles and fitness bands are all free to use. Choose to eat in the Panorama Bistro, alfresco Sky Grill or elegant glass-walled Dining Room, where 'Avalon Fresh' food options enhance the focus on a healthy lifestyle. The vessel features 14 Deluxe Staterooms and 37 Panorama Suites with floor-to-ceiling windows that open to create a balcony.

**Book it:** An eight-day Vineyards and Villages cruise on *Avalon Alegria* starts at £3,357 per person, based on two sharing. The price is based on a July 22 departure and includes complimentary regional wine and beer at lunch and dinner, soft drinks, a happy hour with free drinks, tours and tips. Flights are extra.

[avalonwaterways.co.uk](http://avalonwaterways.co.uk)



2

### A NIGHT IN MADRID

Sailings on APT Luxury's 60-cabin *Estrela* are unusual, as they start with a one-night hotel stay in Madrid before passengers visit Salamanca and board the ship in Vega de Terron. *Estrela*, which means 'star' in Portuguese, was christened on the Douro last spring and its star qualities include one of the largest pools on a Douro ship, a sun deck with putting green, as well as entertainment that ranges from Portuguese folk music to language lessons and history talks. The two Owner's Suites have dual-aspect French balconies and a queen-size bed, while most other cabins have a French balcony with panoramic windows.

**Book it:** A nine-day Douro Delights cruise from Madrid to Porto on board *Estrela*, departing July 9, starts at £3,395 including flights, unlimited drinks, tours, Portuguese wine at lunch and dinner, and a night's hotel accommodation.

[aptouring.com](http://aptouring.com)

PICTURE: Tony Brown Photography

# DESTINATIONS

## CRUISE | DOURO

### 3

#### PRIME PORT STOP

Most river ships moor on the Vila Nova side of the Douro, alongside the port houses, but *Scenic Azure* (and its sister company's vessel, *Emerald Radiance*) has a quiet berth on the opposite Ribeira bank, so guests can walk into Porto without crossing the bridge. Better still, great-value deals on off-peak departures in November and December afford an opportunity for Christmas shopping, as Porto has so many boutique shops selling regional specialities. Each guest on the 96-passenger ship is invited to Portobellos Restaurant during the sailing for a five-course Portuguese meal and regional wines.

**Book it:** An eight-day Delightful Douro sailing from Porto on December 2 starts at £2,680 including flights, a choice of 10 excursions, Wi-Fi, tips and drinks. [scenic.co.uk](http://scenic.co.uk)



#### HEIGHTS OF LUXURY

### 4

*Riviera Rose* stands out with its distinctive double-height rear atrium that transforms into the Rio Bistro.

Here, seafood buffets and salads are served, while in fine weather, there's alfresco dining on the sun deck. It's a beautifully furnished spot with loungers and a splash pool. The five-star ship has 57 cabins including four with outside seating. The light and spacious main dining room features open seating and serves a four-course à la carte dinner.

**Book it:** The seven-night Highlights of the Douro Valley & Salamanca cruise, departing July 21, leads in at £2,549 including drinks, flights from a choice of UK airports and nine excursions. Tips are extra. [rivieratravel.co.uk](http://rivieratravel.co.uk)



### 5

#### STRIKING CERAMICS

AmaWaterways' elegant *AmaSintra* joined *AmaDouro* and *AmaVida* on the Douro in 2025. Most of the ship's 51 cabins have twin balconies, with beds facing the windows, to maximise the views. Marble bathrooms add to the sophistication. The onboard experience is rooted in local culture, from the Portuguese-inspired decor and contemporary ceramics in public areas to world-class wines served at meals. Guests can extend their trip with pre and post-cruise hotel stays in Lisbon.

**Book it:** *AmaSintra's* eight-day Enticing Douro cruise starts at £2,741, departing from Porto on December 25, including flights from Manchester or London. A three-night pre-cruise stay in Lisbon costs from £808. [amawaterways.com](http://amawaterways.com)



### 6

#### WORLD OF WINE

Uniworld offers an interesting cruise combination for wine lovers. The operator's Douro cruise on board *São Gabriel* can be combined with *Bon Voyage's* Bordeaux sailing to form a Wine Roads of France and Portugal 18-day themed voyage that visits vineyards, chateaux and quintas. On board the luxury vessels, there's a big focus on regional specialities, as well as olive oil, port and wine tastings, and lessons in how to make a Portuguese custard tart (*pastel de nata*).

**Book it:** The 18-day Wine Roads of France and Portugal cruise starts at £7,599, departing on August 9, which covers flights, all meals and drinks, including champagne. [uniworld.com](http://uniworld.com)



PICTURES: Paulo Dias; Alex Conrill-Jones/ACI Media; TM Studios Visuelle Medien