

Seeing double



Ambassador Cruise Line's ships are agile enough to sail on both rivers and oceans, offering a two-fold sailing experience, says Jeannine Williamson

As we twist and turn down narrow side streets, I sway from side to side in the passenger seat of a vintage beer delivery van as it hurtles through Antwerp. The next minute, I'm walking through a room with a ceiling covered in upside-down glasses, watching portraits on a wall come to life and animatedly chat to each other. Admittedly, my small glass of Bolleke beer is empty, but I'm not imagining things.

I'm on the interactive tour of Belgium's De Koninck brewery, which recently toasted its 190th anniversary and is now the last remaining brewery in the city. In a country producing about 1,500 different beers, often served in special glasses such as the goldfish bowl-esque goblet used for Bolleke, it would be rude not to try some. The tour, including the virtually simulated van ride, is an immersive experience in more ways than one and I even get to try my hand at pouring beer – badly.

Antwerp is usually associated with city breaks, but I arrive on an Ambassador cruise; a hybrid sailing that's a

fascinating mix of sea and river journey. Indeed, this culture-packed city owes its extensive prosperity – seen in grand buildings, museums filled with old masters, and the glittering jewellery quarter that's the capital of the world's diamond trade – to the water. Antwerp's port is the second largest in Europe, but only smaller ships such as Ambassador Cruise Line's *Ambition* can sail up the River Scheldt to reach it.

FLIGHT-FREE CRUISING

The 1,200-passenger vessel, the line's second ship, joined the fleet last year. Ambassador's no-fly itineraries, primarily aimed at the 50-plus UK market, take advantage of the ship's diminutive size. I joined a pre-Christmas festive sailing that stopped only in Antwerp, but it will run again this December, this time with an extended itinerary. The 2024 'Festive Getaway' will combine sailing into Antwerp with a cruise along the River Seine to Rouen, the capital of Normandy, plus a stop at the pretty French fishing village of Honfleur – all on the same ship. ➤

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NICOLA HARPER,
head of distribution,
Ambassador Cruise Line

“The benefits of Ambassador’s smaller ships extend beyond being more intimate, accessible and friendly. They’re more nimble too, meaning they can reach incredible destinations that larger cruise ships can’t. For example, on our itinerary to the River Seine and Antwerp, guests will sail up the Seine to Rouen, which is 75 miles inland. Guests will also experience the quaint city of Antwerp with ease as the ship sails up the River Scheldt and berths right in the town centre.”



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Antwerp; De Koninck beer; Rouen; *Ambition* balcony suite

PICTURES: www.woodmonkey.be; De Koninck; SC Stock; Riccardo Sai

A walking tour of Rouen’s medieval quarter takes in the city’s most famous sights, such as Notre Dame Cathedral and a statue marking the spot where Joan of Arc was burned at the stake. Honfleur, at the mouth of the Seine, is so picturesque it’s been immortalised by artists such as Monet. Recommend clients stop in one of the waterside cafes and watch the world go by.

On my cruise, I had expected a shuttle bus to Antwerp’s city centre, so it was a wonderful surprise to wake up and find *Ambition* moored right in the heart of Belgium’s handsome second city.

GUIDED EXCURSIONS

There’s the option to sign up for guided sightseeing excursions in Antwerp and farther afield to Bruges and Brussels. Our morning tour, which disembarked straight off the ship and walked to Antwerp’s main square, provided a good overview of this cosmopolitan city. We hear about the legend behind the hand-shaped biscuits that gave Antwerp its name – a tale involving a Roman soldier who cut off the hand of a giant and threw it into the river – and its recent evolution as a fashion capital.

With the tourist office right next to *Ambition*’s docking spot, I later buy a 24-hour Antwerp Pass for €45. It’s well worth the outlay because it covers free entry into museums and attractions,

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including the De Koninck brewery, as well as public transport to get there.

Back on board, there’s no shortage of things to do. *Ambition* is a very comfortable ship, with a good range of cabins across six categories, including dedicated single rooms and suites with balconies that come with perks such as wine, daily canapés and optional breakfast in bed. As it’s an older ship – *Ambition* first set sail in 1999 and underwent a £43 million refit in 2019 – cabins are roomier than on many newer vessels.

My shipmates are a jolly bunch and it’s easy to get chatting to people in areas such as Grafton Street, an informal arts and crafts area, making Ambassador a great line for solo travellers. Daily themed trivia quizzes attract a big crowd, with plenty of banter and friendly competition. Plus, there’s bingo. The Purple Turtle Wine Bar is another popular gathering spot, and if your clients enjoy a tippie or two, recommend one of Ambassador’s reasonably priced drinks packages (which also cover tips).

When it’s time for some peace and quiet, I head to the library. Here, Emily Brontë fans can see a costume worn by actress Alexandra Dowling, who played Emily’s older sister Charlotte in the 2022 biopic *Emily*. It’s another interesting touch on a ship firmly aimed at the British market.

The food is very good, too. The included main restaurants operate on a traditional two-sitting basis at dinner; for more flexibility, head to the Borough Market buffet, where international dishes are served alongside favourites such as full English breakfasts and roasts. There’s also speciality dining, such as the excellent Indian fusion restaurant Saffron – good value for the £16.95 per person supplement – and the intimate Chef’s Table. While the latter isn’t cheap at £89, it’s an exceptional culinary experience. The multicourse tasting menu culminates in one of the most spectacular desserts I’ve ever seen. It’s one of the many highlights of this novel river and ocean cruise. **TW**

BOOK IT

Ambassador Cruise Line’s eight-night River Seine Experience & Antwerp round-trip cruise costs from £849, departing on October 19 from Newcastle Tyne and October 20 from Dundee, including all meals and onboard entertainment.
ambassadorcruise.com