

Boutique chic

Michelin-starred dining and suites that rival top-end hotels set the tone for the new Viva Boutique brand, writes **Jeannine Williamson**

As our bright red Citroen 2CV rattled past the Eiffel Tower, something unexpected happened. Instead of photographing Paris's most famous landmark, the tourists lining the streets turned their backs on it to snap pictures of us.

With the roof folded back on the head-turning vintage car, I suppose we did make quite a novel sight. It was a fitting reminder during a week spent exploring France with Viva Boutique, the new premium river cruise brand from Viva Cruises, that you can always discover even the most familiar places in a different way.

The two-hour excursion, available through Viva's partnership with a local operator, offers a charmingly fresh perspective on the city. With the heady scent of blooms spilling from the flower shops, we climbed the narrow streets in the bohemian artists' quarter of Montmartre. And swaying gently from side to side as we circled the Arc de Triomphe and motored through streets many cruise visitors never reach, our guide Nico handled the famously soft suspension of the quirky French car with practised ease. ➤

Exploring Paris in a
vintage Citroen 2CV

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DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | SEINE

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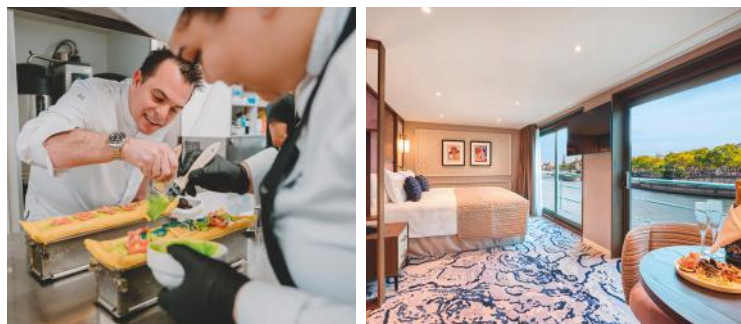
Michelle Daniels,
country
manager
for UK and

Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, Viva Cruises

"A big opportunity for agents is positioning *Viva Beyond* to clients who love river cruising but want something more contemporary and spacious. It has been designed for today's premium traveller, with over 50% of accommodation made up of suites, including the new Beyond Suites. The ship is well suited to guests who enjoy boutique hotels, value excellent dining and service, and want a relaxed, stylish atmosphere without moving into the luxury price bracket. Another selling point is our all-inclusive approach and consistent pricing model. Agents can book with confidence knowing fares remain the same from launch through to departure, and drinks, gratuities, Wi-Fi and dining are already covered. It creates a simple, transparent proposition that's easy to explain and helps clients feel confident they're getting genuine value from the outset."

BOOK IT

Viva Cruises' A Journey from Impressionism to Modernism, a seven-night cruise on *Viva Beyond*, starts from £1,975 per person, based on two sharing a Double Cabin, or from £3,995 for a Beyond Suite, departing April 28, 2027, including all onboard meals, drinks, one excursion, gratuities and Wi-Fi. viva-cruises.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *Viva Beyond* on the River Seine; a Beyond Suite; the ship's Moments restaurant kitchen **PICTURES:** Kristina Fendesack; Sarah Clark Photography

BEYOND COMPARE

Paris bookends three week-long Seine itineraries themed around art, culture and food. *Viva Beyond*, the first ship sailing under the Viva Boutique banner, will be followed next May in Italy by *Viva Unique*. In a market where 'premium' often translates into high pricing, the brand is positioning itself as an accessible alternative, combining upmarket touches with competitive fares and a generous range of inclusions.

The ship is moored within easy reach of central Paris and an overnight stay is built into the itinerary, meaning guests can effectively have both a river cruise and city break in one holiday. Following a comprehensive refurbishment, the vessel feels refreshingly contemporary. Soft blush tones, elegant furnishings and modern styling create an atmosphere that's sophisticated yet relaxed. With just 112 guests, service is warm and attentive, and crew quickly learn our food and drink preferences.

Accommodation is a standout selling point. Half the cabins are suites, which is an unusually high proportion for a river ship, but all cabins have thoughtful touches, such as swanky Dyson hairdryers. My spacious Beyond Suite – a new category for Viva – included a separate dressing room, complimentary minibar and optional in-room breakfast. Clients staying in these top-category suites also get exclusive perks, such as early check-in and a cocktail reception with the captain and hotel manager.

FRENCH FANCIES

Food plays a prominent role throughout. Alongside a main restaurant and casual French brasserie serving classics such as onion soup, croque monsieur and

boeuf bourguignon, all guests can dine in Moments, the intimate speciality restaurant with a menu created by Normandy-based chef David Goerne. His Michelin-starred restaurant at Manoir de Rétilval overlooks the Seine and, as an added treat, Beyond Suite guests are taken there for a chef-hosted private dinner.

Back on board, local flavours are celebrated through various culinary events, from elegant afternoon teas showcasing colourful French pastries to evenings featuring champagne, oysters and steak tartare.

ART OF THE MATTER

The focus on authentic experiences extends ashore. The included excursion on my sailing was to Auvers-sur-Oise, where Vincent Van Gogh spent the final weeks of his life creating some of his most celebrated works. The landscapes that inspired him remain instantly recognisable today, and it was poignant to see the tiny room where he died, having sold only one painting during his lifetime.

In Rouen, I explored independently, admiring the soaring Gothic cathedral immortalised by Monet, while Le Havre revealed a very different side of Normandy, with its striking post-war architecture that secured it Unesco World Heritage status in 2005.

By the end of my cruise, it was clear Viva Boutique has identified a sweet spot in the market. And just as that delightfully eccentric 2CV offered a fresh way of seeing Paris, Viva Boutique is driving its own distinctive route through the river cruise sector. With a new brand, transformed ship and memorable experiences, it is proving that sometimes taking a slightly different road can make for a very rewarding journey. **TW**

PICK THE PERFECT EXPERIENCE

Aside from one included excursion, other shore tours with Viva Boutique can be added, giving clients the freedom to pick and choose or explore independently. It's a selling point for clients who have done the standard city tours before and want something different, because they're not wasting money on excursions they won't take, or missing out if they decide to skip any. Agents can pre-book and earn commission, or clients can book as they go, tailoring each stop to their own interests.

